

## The Family Circle.

## A STORY OF KAREN LIFE.

BY MISS L. ROSE.

The southern part of Burma is traversed by broad rivers and the level plains along their banks extend inland for miles. In the south-eastern part of the country, a long range of hills rises abruptly from the plain. They are covered with a tangled, impenetrable growth of majestic trees, entwining vines, and coarse grass, taller than a man's head.

A number of years ago a clearing had been made near the foot of one of these hills. Clumps of bamboo had been left here and there, and near them were little houses for which they had furnished the material. Far above the roofs of these houses, tall cocoa and betel-nut trees waved their long, graceful leaves and below were hundreds of banana trees in all stages of growth.

One of these houses stood at the edge of the plain, quite apart from the others. It was built high up on bamboo posts, and two women were under the house busily at work. The younger was pounding rice with a rude, primitive contrivance. A huge, wooden hammer was fastened horizontally across a block which served as a fulcrum. Under the hammer was a great bowl hollowed out of solid wood. This held the paddy, or unhusked rice. The young woman would step with one foot on the short end of the hammer; the weight of her body raising the long end to which the pounder was attached; then, as she jumped lightly off, it would fall with a heavy thud on the paddy in the bowl. To keep up this movement for any length of time was hard work, and the woman stopped and sat down on the beam of the rice-pounder to rest. Her mother, with a large, shallow tray of basket work, was winnowing the rice which she had threshed. She gave the tray quick little jerks which sent the kernels flying upward in a body. They always got back to the tray, while the particles of chaff fell over the edge. Several fowls were moving unconcernedly about the two women, looking for stray kernels of paddy in the thick dust.

After watching the older woman in silence for a while, the other said:

"Oh, my mother, there are not three baskets of paddy left in the bin!"

The mother let her tray rest on her knees.

"Well, Lah-thee," she said thoughtfully, "three baskets will last you and me some time, besides we have our pigs." And she looked at an old sow and her litter that were grunting over some yams and banana skins only a few feet away. "See, there are nine good, fat young ones, besides our three big pigs."

"But, mother," the voice was impatient, "we can't live on clear meat, and as for the rice lasting, of course it can't last a year. Here it is hardly past the middle of dry season. Three months yet before we can plant rice!"

"My daughter," the mother began, after a short silence, "I cannot like to have you raise the paddy alone. I wish there was some other way for us to live."

"I can do it," the other answered with determination. "I have not helped Oungmyat all these years without learning how to raise paddy. If I had not had the fever all last rains we should have plenty of rice now."

"Thu-gyee says," resumed the mother, "that he will give us all the paddy we need if we will let him use our field."

Lah-thee got up and energetically "shoo'd" the fowls.

"Mother, you know Thu-gyee said that because he is sorry for us. He has been kind to us ever since we came to his settlement, and now that Oungmyat is dead he wants to help us. That field would yield him scarcely more than we should need, and there is nothing we can do to pay him—his daughters do all the weaving for the family. It would be different to accept help from him if he were our kinsman. Mother, where do you suppose all our relatives are?"

"I don't know," she replied, mournfully. "All dead, perhaps. Killed by those wicked Burmans in Thagaing." After a moment, she exclaimed, "Oh! where is my pretty boy, my youngest! He would care for his poor, old mother and sister." Her voice quivered and the tears started.

Lah-thee had unintentionally turned her mother's thought to this, her greatest sorrow. She could say nothing to comfort her, so she resumed her work in silence.

Aunt Kyan, as she was called in the little community, stepped out from under the house, and, shielding her eyes with her hand, looked out across the plain. She had often stood there and watched in that same attitude and seen nothing but the hard, baked ground, covered here and there with withering bushes and scorched grass. But this afternoon she called out:

"Oh, Lah-thee."

"What, my mother?" came the response and the noise of the pounder ceased.

"Has not Thu-gyee got back from Myoo Ogh?"

"Yes," the daughter answered. "He came last night. Why?"

"There is an elephant coming."

"An elephant!" The young woman came out and stood beside her mother. "Sure enough that is an elephant, but it cannot be Thu-gyee's for I saw him driven up the hill just since the sun was overhead."

"Who can be coming to our village," said Aunt Kyan, with an excited tremor in her voice; "no elephant besides Big Po has been here for years."

As they stood eagerly watching the elephant's approach, the man in the howdah on the great animal's back was looking out from under the thatch-covering with quite as much eagerness. An almost naked, dark-skinned man sat on the elephant's broad neck, one foot hanging behind each big, flapping ear. He guided the elephant by kicking the back of one of its ears, or if that was not enough, by poking it with a short, stout stick, provided with an iron knob at the end. When the man who was watching from the howdah saw the two women, he asked the other to drive up to them. "They may be able to direct us," he said.

This man, who came so unexpectedly to Aunt Kyan's jungle village, proved to be her own nephew, Moun Ling, of whom she had always been very fond; but of whom she had known nothing since she, with her daughter and son-in-law left Thagaing, ten years before, to get away from the Burmans there. Neither had Moun Ling known anything of her until he chanced to go to Myoo-ogh some two weeks before. There he heard that his aunt was living in a hill settlement some eight hours' cart-journey away, that her son-in-law had died the year before, and that now she and her daughter had no one to care for them except Thu-gyee, the head man of the village. When Moun Ling heard this news he immediately decided that he would give his aunt and cousin a home. He said to himself: "Now that Oungmyat is dead, it is my place to be a son to Aunt Kyan. I have a good house and three large fields, so I can easily provide for my aunt and for Cousin Lah-thee, too." So he had hastened home and made arrangements for an enlarged household; then putting the largest howdah on the elephant, and getting one of the young men of his village to accompany him, he started for the hills to find his aunt.

It was a happy meeting and there were many questions to be asked on both sides. Aunt Kyan was delighted with the prospect of living with her nephew, but the Burmans—she was afraid of them.

"Why, Aunt," Moun Ling said, "we have nothing to fear from the Burmans now, they are not allowed to harm us."

"Not allowed!" Aunt Kyan fairly sprang to her feet; "who can prevent the Burmans from doing anything?"

Then Moun Ling patiently explained to her that a strange people from far away, a people much stronger and wiser than the Burmans, had come and conquered the country, and made the Burmans obey their laws. The poor woman, who had known almost nothing of what went on in the world outside her own little village, listened eagerly.

"Oh," she said, "Why didn't these people come before, so the Burmans would not have killed my husband and taken away my boy. The wicked Burmans! I do not want to go to live near them again."

Her nephew told her that very few Burmans were left in Thagaing, most of them having gone to towns on larger rivers, where they could trade with the foreigners. "So, my aunt, there is nothing to dread. You

are going home with me, and let us start to-morrow."

Aunt Kyan's few arrangements were easily made. Thu-gyee bought her field, her pigs and chickens, and the little paddy she had left. He paid her in rupees, the first silver money she had ever seen. Her house was left to be pulled to pieces as the neighbors needed fuel. Her few movables were packed into the old cart, drawn by her two strong buffaloes that would hereafter help to plough Moun Ling's fields.

When all was ready and the great elephant crouched down to take on his riders, Aunt Kyan could not be persuaded that it was perfectly safe to step on his leg and then up on to his back. No, she would ride in the cart.

"I know my good old buffaloes, I do not know your elephant," she said. And so they started on their journey, the elephant ahead with steady ponderous swing, the cart behind rattling and joggling over the rough ground, till Aunt Kyan almost wished herself on the elephant.

A few days later Moun Ling was out in a little canoe on the river that flows by Thagaing. As it was the dry season and there was no work to be done in the fields, he was spending this day in fishing. Presently he noticed a boat coming up the river. It was a queer looking craft, different from any he had ever seen.

"It cannot be a Burmese boat," he thought, "it lies too low in the water and has no high, ornamented stern." Then on a nearer view: "This is a stranger. The oarsmen are all sitting down. No Burman ever builds a boat with seats for his oarsmen. And they have a roof over them, too. It isn't thatch, it looks like white cloth. What can it be made of?"

While Moun Ling was thus wondering about the strange boat, one of the rowers called to him in his own language, so he quickly paddled alongside. Just then a man stepped out to the deck. His appearance startled Moun Ling. He had a white face and a bushy beard, and his clothes were even stranger than his face. But Moun Ling remembered hearing vague descriptions of the foreigners, and being a sensible, cool-headed man, he was not afraid of this remarkable being.

The white man was a missionary to the Karens and was now travelling about among their villages. This boat, which he had built himself, was especially adapted to a missionary's use. Part of its widest space was enclosed by a thatched roof and matting walls, and in this little house he and his wife lived for weeks at a time during their jungle tours. She was now with him, and together they were trying to reach all the Karens in that vicinity. They were now on their way to the village of Thagaing, and had called to Moun Ling to inquire if they could reach it by noon. After looking at the sun, he said he thought they could, and he gave them directions for finding his house.

"All of you go there," he said, "and tell my wife that I want her to cook rice for you this afternoon. I will catch enough fish for all, and will be at home before the sun is low."

Mr. and Mrs. Ward smiled at the thought of a native dinner for themselves, but thanked Moun Ling, and accepted his generous invitation for their Karen crew. "We, ourselves, will 'eat rice' here in the boat."

As soon as they reached the village, Mr. and Mrs. Ward put on their large, pith hats and went on shore. Then there was an amusing spectacle. The natives who had gathered to see the strange boat now scattered as fast as they could run, some to the woods, others up into their houses, drawing in the ladders after them.

The missionaries walked along the deserted village paths, until they came to the house which they thought must be Moun Ling's. There in a little square hole in the matting wall they saw the wrinkled face of an elderly woman. It was Aunt Kyan, who had said she did not believe those were evil spirits, or wild beasts either. She was going to look at them, anyway.

Mrs. Ward, looking up with a pleasant smile, said:

"Will you not come down and talk with us? We will not hurt you."

Aunt Kyan turned quickly to those inside.

"There! They are people, and they talk our language. I am going to see them."

Many persons were watching through cracks in the walls of all the houses near, and when they saw Aunt Kyan venture and receive no harm they came one by one till the missionaries were surrounded by a curious group asking all manner of questions.

"Do you eat like other people?"

"Are you born white, or do you do something to change your color?"

"Is your skin white all over, like your face and hands?"

"Do those things on your feet come off, or do you have to sleep in them nights?"

These and many other inquiries had to be answered before the people cared to listen to what the missionaries came to tell. At last Mr. Ward got the men interested, while Mrs. Ward sat down under a banyan tree and told, to the women about her, the Gospel story. They listened quietly for some time. Then Aunt Kyan interrupted.

"How do you know about this Jesus Christ? Did you ever see him?"

"No," Mrs. Ward answered, "He lived long ago. But we have a book that tells us about him, and how to be good and loving like him."

Aunt Kyan's face began to shine with interest.

"Is that the book that our old men used to say would be brought to us sometime, the 'white book' that was lost from us because we were so wicked? It must be! They always said that people from far away would come and bring it back to us, and now you have come and brought the book."

Mrs. Ward had heard of this tradition among the Karens, and was interested to talk to Aunt Kyan about it. After the others had left to go and cook the afternoon meal, the old woman told her whole story; first, how she and her husband had hoped the "white book" would come before they died. They had never kneeled to the Burman idols, or even made offerings to the evil spirits, as most of the Karens did, for they had been told that there was one great God, and the "white book" would teach them how to worship him.

"Now," she said, "my husband is dead and cannot hear you tell about the great God. The Burmans killed him when they carried away our little son. They took my boy because he was so pretty," she sobbed, "he had such strong, beautiful limbs. They said they wanted him for the king's palace, but, oh, I don't know where he is."

As soon as the company of men around Mr. Ward began to disperse, his wife stepped up, and, putting her hand on his arm, said, excitedly: "I have something to talk with you about."

When Mr. and Mrs. Ward arrived in Burma, ten years before, they had heard of a little boy seven or eight years old whom an English officer had taken from a party of Burmans, believing that he had been stolen. Nothing could be learned of the boy's home, and as he was a bright, interesting boy, Mr. Ward took him to bring up. The only name he had was "Poo-tha," which means simply "the child," a common pet name for the youngest of the family. Mr. Ward called him Isaac. He had been with the missionaries ever since and was now a fine, intelligent young man and was so worthy of confidence that he had been left in charge of the mission compound during Mr. Ward's absence.

Three weeks later the missionaries returned to the city and Aunt Kyan was with them. As they passed along the streets from the river to their house, the old Karen woman's wonder at everything she saw was beyond expression.

"Why!" she exclaimed. "So many people! Do you know them all?"

The buildings of the foreign merchants were marvellous to her. With wide open eyes she said:

"What big houses! It must be that the people in the city have large families!"

Then her face grew sad. "I hoped I might find my boy, but I never can find him here."

The missionaries smiled but said nothing. Aunt Kyan's curiosity and astonishment were amusing to Mr. and Mrs. Ward, but when she arrived at their home and found in Isaac her long-lost boy, they had to turn away with tears in their eyes.

Aunt Kyan spent the rest of her life with them, happy in the love of her son and in a knowledge of the precious "white book."