

The Apostasy of MOUNG PYU

A Story Concerning the Queer Admixture of Religions and Peoples in India

By W. A. FRASER

Illustrated by A. Lismer

THE four trails that lead out like a Maltese Cross aboard the world never got beyond the land of the simple life. And this is a simple account of MOUNG PYU's crusade for spiritual betterment for himself and the three hundred villagers of Mindak, in Burma.

MOUNG PYU was born a Buddhist; he sat at the feet of the Talopins and imbibed theological wisdom from the sacred book, the Vini. The Deputy Commissioner of the District took a fancy to the dark-eyed, yellow-skinned little Burman, and had him placed in a government school. Then MOUNG PYU got a clerkship and after a time he was made Deputy Assistant Magistrate of the third grade, and Woon of his own village, Mindak.

What MOUNG PYU thought, Mindak thought; and when MOUNG PYU advised, Mindak concurred. Even the Chief Commissioner at Rangoon knew this; and whatever there was to be settled or adjusted in Mindak District was encased in large, official blue envelopes, tied with red tape, closed with the awful seal of the British Raj, and sent to MOUNG PYU. There was never any worry after that. The Chief Commissioner sighed with satisfaction; the Commissioner of Aracan nodded his old head in wise appreciation; the Deputy Commissioner got the *kudos* (glory) of it all; and MOUNG PYU, Deputy Assistant Magistrate of the third grade, adjusted the unpleasantness.

He was a dapper little man with his jacket of white cloth, his gay silk putsoe that had been made in the hand looms of Mandalay, and the white handkerchief wound jauntily about his heavy black hair, the two ends sticking up like the wings of a bird—this was the insignia of a village elder, and MOUNG PYU was that in excelsis.

Under MOUNG PYU's rule Mindak was Utopia. The Buddhist priests, the Talopins, waxed sleek in content; and the little pagoda on Tiger Hill had been regilt with pure gold leaf, till its slender tapering form rose from a dark emerald setting of mangoe tree, and padouk, and tamarind, and penciled the blue sky a gleaming plinth of reflected sunlight. This had come from the purse of MOUNG PYU. He could not forever be sending away the little bags of rupees that so mysteriously appeared upon his writing table, so he exercised the little devil of corruptive influence that was in the silver discs by putting them to work for the spiritual progress of his people.

Poh San, who had been Woon before MOUNG PYU, had kept all these little gifts that are the *dustoor* (perquisites) of native officials, and had married six wives. At the last, when the shadow of Nirvana threw a chill over the soul of Poh San, he prepared a little cave temple in the soft rock of Tiger Hill, placed in it a square-toed, alabaster Buddha, and died full of honour and sanctity. That was Poh San's way, which was the way of all rich, good Burmans. But MOUNG PYU beautified the pagoda and repaired the priests' *zyat* (dwelling), and married but one wife; and after a time she died, and left two little girls with MOUNG PYU.

The religion that the Talopins taught was mystical, altogether simple and beautiful. It was a sin to take life, because all life was one under different forms; so MOUNG PYU ate not even an egg, lest the spirit of some ancestor might have come back to assume the feathered garb of a fowl. And the Vini read that liquor—so much as might cling to the point of a knife—was harmful; so MOUNG PYU drank milk, and water, and the milk of coconuts, and pondered over the wise sayings of Gaudama Buddha.

THE religion of the sahibs that were down in Phrang he judged of entirely by the canons of his own faith. The sahibs ate the flesh that had carried life, they drank the forbidden liquor; they also did other things that the priests said were wrong and evil in the eyes of Buddha Gaudama.

But it happened that even in the eyes of the Talopins there was one godly

person of the white man's faith, a woman, "Craig Memsahib." She was a Baptist missionary from America. Her husband had died in harness in Burma, some years before, and she had gone on in a simple, Christian spirit, after the manner of Christ himself. All through Aracan were children whose fathers had been white men, and who had gone back to their own country. Craig Memsahib gathered these half-orphaned ones into her train of poor followers whenever she could. It was a glad sight to see her wandering about the districts, from village to village, with her devoted children. When they were small she had them placed in schools; the larger ones she took with her.

Craig Memsahib came many times to Mindak; and because of his knowledge that she was indeed a holy woman, MOUNG PYU commenced to listen, at first with doubting curiosity. But as gently as a soft hand opens a flower, Craig Memsahib discovered for the Woon the beautiful truth of a life as Christ would have it. He began to see that the Talopins taught all of the flesh life, or of nothing; all was of the earth, and returning to earth, a chain of existence leading to nothing but the end of everything.

All this came not as it may be told in a day, or a moon, but in many moons; and in the end MOUNG PYU gravely announced that all his people—the people of Mindak, now were Baptists. He had read and pondered, and come by a more beautiful truth than was in the Vini, or in the shaven-headed craniums of the yellow-robed Talopins, and his people would now profit by his discovered blessing and become Baptists.

THIS wholesale conversion of three hundred Buddhists brought prayers of thankfulness from the simple Christian woman, Craig Memsahib.

But, unfortunately, the fame of it came to the ears of the Reverend Beldon Hobbs, of Phrang. He was clergyman of the Church of England, the Established Church, which means first claim on all things spiritual. In addition, the Reverend Beldon

Hobbs was many other things akin to arrogance. He was large, and pompous, and doled out religion as alms, holding that he had full vicarage from the Lord for the salvation of all peoples. So he blustered, and went in righteous indignation to the Deputy Commissioner—the Church and the State were inseparable. That three hundred souls, bound in allegiance to the British Raj, should come under the dominion of a church that was no church at all, was, according to Hobbs, altogether an outrage. They might as well turn dacoits at once.

Just at that psychological moment a serious calamity occurred. The brave little Craig Memsahib died, ministering to the people of a village stricken with cholera. The metamorphosis of Buddhistic Mindak had not been quite completed, for the villagers were to have been baptized, *en masse*, when Craig Memsahib arrived, bringing an ordained Baptist minister, the Reverend John Blackmar, from Phrang. Now she was dead, and MOUNG PYU, dreading the spiritual dominion of Reverend Hobbs as something worse even than the power of the Talopins, took the matter in his own hands, and dipped the obedient villagers, declaring that now they were indeed of the faith of the holy woman they had all revered.

Then came the Reverend Blackmar too late for this baptismal function. He was a zealous, narrow-minded little man—a stickler for tenets and observances, and religion according to prescribed method. He meant well, but he didn't know. To him the Buddhists were pagans, benighted worshippers of graven images. He used to say these things, honestly enough, but without understanding. So he reprimanded MOUNG PYU for his assumption of ministerial power, and explained that becoming a Baptist was not a haphazard affair.

MOUNG PYU was wise enough to know that neither the Reverend Blackmar, nor the Reverend Hobbs, nor even the holy teacher, Craig Memsahib, was Christianity itself. But the manner of faith that had won MOUNG PYU was the sweet, Christly, love-religion of Craig Memsahib; and this other repellent, formal dogmatism that was of the little sharp-nosed minister drove MOUNG PYU into revolt, and he declared, with Burmese vivacity, that if they were not now Baptists they were indeed not Baptists at all.

So the Reverend Blackmar preached to the big, pink-clustered padouk tree, whilst the villagers went down to the many-caved temples in Tiger Hill with offerings of rice and sweetmeats to the alabaster Buddhas; and in the end the conscientious minister went disconsolately back to Phrang, sorrowing over the instability of the Oriental.

The little pilgrimage to the cave temples had been solely a polite intimation to the minister, and not a real re-apostasy, for the Woon was still disturbed in his mind over the incompleteness of Buddhism.

BY this time the Reverend Beldon Hobbs had harassed the Deputy Commissioner over the Woon of Mindak's apostasy, and through him the Commissioner; and the Commissioner, with repugnance in his soul, had memorialized the Chief Commissioner. The correspondence, with notes and comments, had all come back as weapons of offense to Padre Hobbs. So he went up into the land of Mindak with a flaming sword, bearing an order from the Deputy Commissioner that he was to have carriers, and transport, and boats, and whatever else his sweet will desired. That was essentially Padre Hobbs's way—the repellent, enforcing method, so unlike the love manner of Christ and Craig Memsahib.

He had gone by boat from Phrang to Oung; and from Oung it was two days' travel by jungle path to Mindak. But when the men of Oung refused to convey him to Mindak, because a pair of man-eating tigers had made a preserve of the jungle bordering the trail, Padre Hobbs showed his order to the village Headman, and explained that the latter would lose his place, and the village would be fined, and



"MOUNG PYU stepped from the steamer as Mr. White, the most extraordinary Metamorphosed Oriental."

Drawn by A. Lismer.

*MOUNG PYU (pronounced Pu) translated is Mr. White.