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*Burma and
the Karens*

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PREFACE

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The object of this book is to present and to explain to the reading public, and to those who are in authority, the condition of the Karens, the position they occupy, and their aspirations as a nation second in importance of the indigenous races of the province of Burma. It is their desire to have a country of their own, where they may progress as a race and find the contentment they seek. It is this contentment which gives a man or a nation that satisfaction and good-will and creates that patriotic feeling so essential to the well-being of the nation. Self-respect in a nation begets respect from other nations and races. What a grand thing the achievement of their ambition will be for the Karens, and what praises and blessing will be showered upon those who shall have made it possible. The Karens will then be in a position to show sincere respect to other races, especially to the Burmese, with whom they have been at variance, and in turn the Burmese will find them worthy of respect and esteem.

The thirty years of my life which I have devoted to serving my own people, in the course of which I have had the opportunity of exchanging ideas with those officials and non-officials who represent the opinion of other races, have furnished me with varied experience, and I am emboldened to write this book in the hope that it will stimulate in the reader an interest in the Karens as a race--as a nation which will have to be reckoned with in the struggle for self-determination or for what the present Reforms Scheme may have in store for the province. It has been truly said: "To remove misunderstandings is the real road to abiding peace among men." Some of the statements or comments in this book may displease a few individuals for there is truth in the

Burmese saying: တည့်လွန်းလို့ မခံနိုင်။ (too straight a truth is hard to bear). Should any of my intimate and highly esteemed Burmese friends with whom I have associated and co-operated for many years chance to read this book, I wish them to understand that it is not the expression of my own personal relations with them, but that it represents the feelings of the Karens as a race towards the Burmese in general.

I beg to acknowledge my indebtedness to Major Enriquez, from whose most interesting work *A Burmese Wonderland* I have quoted freely, and to the copyright-holders of Mr. Donald Smeaton's *Loyal Karens of Burma* from which fairly extensive extracts will be found in the following pages, and lastly to Sir Frederick Whyte from whose able discourse in his little book *India, a Federation?* quotations have been made. I also wish to express my thanks to those who have made contributions to Chapter VI.

BURMA AND THE KARENS

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CHAPTER I - A GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST

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"They stood aloof, the scars remaining,
Like cliffs which had been rent asunder;
A dreary sea now flows between.
But neither heat nor frost nor thunder,
Shall wholly do away I ween,
The marks of that which once hath been."

Coleridge

To gauge the present-day attitude and social status of a nation a knowledge of past history is essential. The Past not only makes the Present more easily comprehensible, but it also enables one to conjecture what the future may hold in store. Just as the physician takes into consideration the family history and previous illnesses of the patient in forming his diagnosis, so must the student of history have some knowledge of past events to guide his opinion.

Whether the Karens originally migrated from Southern China, a contention which is supported by the traditions and physiological appearance of the people, or were the earliest inhabitants of Burma, only to be conquered by more powerful invaders, is not an important point, since the writer is concerned only with the Karens as they are found in Burma to-day. The position of the Karens before the advent of the British was that of a subject race in true Oriental fashion. They were treated as slaves, hence, they made their homes on the mountain-side or on tracts of land far away from the towns and larger villages occupied by the

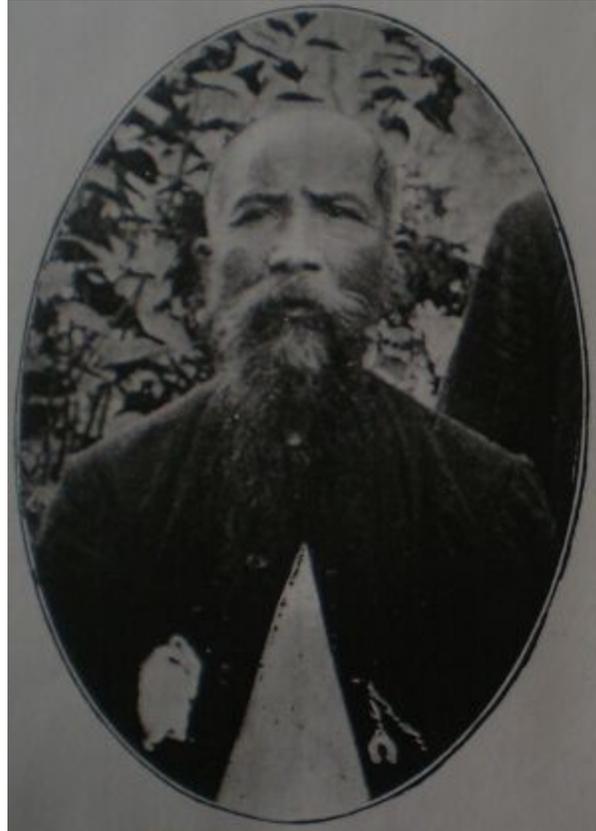
Burmans. High stockades surrounded those Karen villages, and sure death was the fate of all intruders.

Many stories have been told of Burmese cruelty to the Karens, and of Karen retaliation, in which the latter figured more as sinners than saints. Love of independence is inherent in all hill tribes, and the Karens are no exception. It figures prominently in their war-songs and in the national poems handed down from generation to generation, and a Karen will forgo many things for the privilege of having his own way or being left alone. The Karen God-tradition, so firmly believed in and strongly adhered to, was: "Our younger white brother to whom God temporarily entrusted the Book of Silver and the Book of Gold is coming back to return them to the elder Karen brother." So, when news was received that the white brother had arrived in Burma, there was no little stir in Karendom. Adoniram Judson gained the first Karen convert to Christianity in Ko Tha Byu (1828) who lost no time in spreading the gospel among his people, declaring that the long-lost "Book of God" had been brought back by the white brother, and that the Karen God-tradition was fulfilled. Consequently, a number of young men from different parts of the country went over to Arakan, and later to Moulmein, to find the Missionaries who had brought the gospel of Christ and to learn more about the truth, which it was their intention to preach among their own people. Thra Myat Kai of Kozu, the maternal grandfather of the writer, was one of them. The lot of the Karens under Burmese rule had been hard enough, but when the Burmans, made anxious by the rumours of war to be declared between Burma and Great Britain, heard that the Karens were taking

up the Christian religion, they proceeded to make life unbearable for the new converts to Christianity. Persecution, religious and political, began in earnest. Karens were caught and thrown into prison, suffering untold agonies, and a few were crucified. One man, by the name of Klaw Meh was nailed to a cross, the abdomen ripped open with intestines hanging down, which the crows were picking while the poor man writhed in agony in an impossible attempt to drive away the crows. His voice gradually grew weaker until at last he died a martyr on the cross like his Master, Jesus Christ, whom he had lately embraced. The Rev. Dr. T. Thanbyah, M. A., D.D., who died only six years ago, was a witness of the scene, and whenever he had occasion to make the railway journey between Rangoon and Bassein, as the train neared Yegyí Station, he would look out of the carriage window and cry like a child. For, it was near the railway station that Thra Klaw Meh was crucified.



REV. T. THANBYA, D.D.



REV. THRA SHWE ME

There were countless instances, but to recall them is certainly not pleasant. The cruelties and oppression practised by the Burmese for generations past cannot be easily effaced from memory, and a generation or two ago Karen mothers used to still the cries of their children by saying "A Burman is coming." Even to-day, you may hear a Karen bitterly remarking: "In olden times we were ground down by the Burmese; but now, though enjoying equal rights under British Government, since almost all the Subordinate Officials in Government service are Burmese, we are really as much harassed as before."

If there is a nation which can easily adapt itself to changed conditions and circumstances it is the Burmese. This characteristic of the Burmese, incidentally, recalls the

opinion of a travelled American: "If an Englishman puts himself out to please a man he can do it better than any other man on earth." A Burman is an adept in pleasing others when he chooses; unfortunately, a Karen is not, otherwise his lot would be far better than it is to-day.

Some years ago the writer had the pleasure of driving up to Kozu Village from Bassein in the company of a Deputy Commissioner, new to the station, to witness the presentation of a Union Jack and a gun by the Commissioner of the Irrawaddy Division to the Karen villagers for having supplied the largest number of soldiers (over fifty in number) just prior to and during the Great War. On the way, in the course of conversation, the Deputy Commissioner asked "Don't you think the Karens live too much on past history?" The answer was that the Karens have tried very hard to "live down" past history, but unfortunately they are being constantly reminded of it. The Deputy Commissioner was assured that it would not be long before he would personally see for himself the truth of the statement.

A few days later there was a football match between a Karen team and a Burmese team. The game was hotly contested (as it always is when Karens play against the Burmese). The Burmese were the first to score, and the play, though fast and exciting, was being cleanly fought. But when the Karens equalised, some members of the Burmese team began to resort to foul tactics, and with the incitement of the crowd in which the Burmans outnumbered the Karens by more than ten to one, the game became very rough. And when the goalkeeper of the Burmese team, on obtaining possession of the ball, deliberately kicked an attacking