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*Twilight
over
Burma*



MY LIFE AS A
SHAN PRINCESS



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With a foreword by
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Crossing the Namtu River on a one-car ferry.

The meandering river had carved a cove that was filled with clear, calm water. Large-leaf teak trees provided shade along the gravelly bank. Sao held his younger daughter, Kennari, as she splashed and played. Thusandi had to prevent Mayari from following the water buffalo's example and venturing out of the cove into the swiftly flowing river.

The winding, one-lane road to Namhsan proved to be less enjoyable. "Are we there yet?" was the question asked by one or the other child after each of the hundreds of hairpin curves the driver had to negotiate. During the four-hour-long ascent, they encountered a few trucks and two mule trains carrying tea from the Palaung Hills to brokerages in the valleys. When they reached the altitude where tea bushes thrived, the scenery changed. Well-groomed tea plantations in place of jungle covered the hill-sides, and white pagodas reached toward the blue sky from every mountaintop in sight. They saw many Palaung villages from a distance but only passed through one, which reflected the relative wealth of the tea-growing hill tribe. The houses appeared more permanent than in the valleys, constructed of wood instead of bamboo. The Buddhist monastery was the largest and best building in the village, indicating the religious devotion of its inhabitants. Thusandi had seen Palaung women before, and she marveled once again at their colorful costumes and heavy silver jewelry adornments. Their caps, dark blouses, and heavy skirts were well suited for the cool temperatures; Thusandi reached for the children's cardigans.

The town of Namhsan itself kept company with the clouds. Situated on a mountain plateau, it was peaceful and cool, away from the steaming valley and from the politics of the lowlands. The Prince of Tawngpeng and his Anglo-Burmese Mahadevi had not lost their rambling palace in World War II. It was built on the highest point in the town and was comfortable and large enough to accommodate their many children and occasional guests. Every room had a fireplace, and even during the hot season they were all in use.

The biggest attractions of Namhsan were the numerous gable-roofed Buddhist monasteries and a modern tea factory. It was run by a solitary Englishman who, with a small staff, dried and roasted tea leaves for sale in the Shan states and in Burma. The area did not produce enough tea for export, though the quality was excellent. Mr. Brown, the English manager, was primarily a trained forester and timber expert; tea was his hobby. He



The Prince of Tawngpeng in Namhsan, surrounded by his Palaung people.

was also a passionate hunter and felt that Namhsan was a perfect location for him. The Palaungs were even stronger believers than the Shans in not taking life, so there were no hunters to compete with him. Plenty of wild-life roamed these hills: big cats, wild pigs, rhinoceros, bears. He showed Sao and Thusandi huge tiger tracks outside his bedroom window. They were fresh; the tiger must have been there the previous night without rousing the avid hunter or his dog. Sao and Thusandi disappointed the Englishman when they showed more interest in the tea factory than in his hunting stories.

Back at the Grand Haw, the Prince of Tawngpeng presented Thusandi with a large tiger skin, pierced in many places by spears and pellets from a muzzle-loading gun.

"Thank you very much," she said looking somewhat puzzled.

"You know we don't kill," he said, "but my villagers had no choice. This tiger ate three of them, not far from here."

Surprised and shocked, Thusandi asked, "How could that happen?"

"The tiger stalked them when they were picking tea. He first killed a child, then he came back for an old man. My people knew that he would return again when he was hungry. So they armed themselves and went after him. But they didn't get him until he took one more victim, a young girl."

"How terrible!" Thusandi said. "Tell me, why didn't Mr. Brown go after the tiger?"

"He would have if he'd been here. But he was on home leave when it happened. He was actually quite disappointed that he missed the man-eating tiger."

"They are very rare," Sao said. "I've only heard of one in Hsipaw State, when I was a young boy."

"Why do they become man-eaters?" Thusandi wanted to know.

"I'm not an authority on this," Sao said, "but people say that tigers who are too old to hunt sometimes stumble onto easy prey—people. And once they feast on humans, they'll come back for more."

Thusandi wasn't sure that she wanted the tiger skin, but she could not offend her host by refusing to accept his gift.

After a few days of relaxation and long walks through the Mahadevi's extensive flower gardens, Sao invited Thusandi for a jeep ride. He wanted to see if they could reach the Palaung village of Punglong, which was actually located in Hsipaw State, from the Tawngpeng side. His host had discouraged him, saying that after a certain point only mules could manage the terrain. However, Sao decided to see for himself. A few years ago, he had approached Punglong from the Hsipaw side, with Thusandi, to open the new road to Punglong. He had helped his Palaung villagers build it by themselves so they could transport their tea to the markets down below by truck rather than by mule and horse.

After about ten miles, the gravel road narrowed and assumed a steep downhill course. Soon it turned into a winding path, hugging the side of the mountain. Sao ignored Thusandi's pleas to stop, turn around, or do anything other than continue. "It's got to get better," he said as he inched ahead, clutching the steering wheel. He was wrong. A forbidding cliff around the next curve put an abrupt stop to forward progress. Sao carefully examined what was ahead and admitted, "I give up. This is only suitable for goats—and fools. But look—that's Punglong over there." He pointed at a large village that was nestled on the side of the next mountain.

SHAN STATE

Showing cities, towns, and locations mentioned in the text



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the British during their period of rule of having conducted “divide-and-rule” tactics by deliberately isolating the Shans and other minorities from mainstream Burmese politics. While that may be true, it is also true that the various hill peoples in central Burma’s periphery have throughout history tended to perceive the Burmans as arch-enemies and untrustworthy. The British did little more than take advantage of this already existing, centuries-old animosity.

Burma is a country where many different nationalities reside—Kachins, Karens, Kayahs (or Karennis), Chins, Pa-Os, Palaungs, Mons, Myanmars, Rakhines, and Shans. Burma, as we know it with its present boundaries, is a British creation rife with internal contradictions and divisions. Northern Burma has experienced civil wars among the multitude of ethnic nationalities. It has suffered invasions by the British, the Japanese, and Chinese warlords, causing dislocation and the growth of insurgent militia throughout the hill country. Every Burma leader over the past two centuries has been confronted with but unable to control the various conflicting forces in Burmese society that constantly challenged its authority.

The Rakhine (or Arakanese), the Chins, the Kachins, the Lahus, the Lisus, the Akhas, and some smaller groups are of Tibeto-Burman stock. The origin of the Karens, the Karennis, and the Pa-Os is disputed, while the Mons, the Was, and Palaungs speak Mon-Khmer languages. Sao Kya Seng’s people, the Shans, on the other hand, are not related to any other ethnic group in the country. They comprise 7 percent of the population according to the 1931 census, the last proper census taken in Burma. The word *Shan* is actually a corruption of Siam or Syam, and is the name given to them by the Burmans. The Shans call themselves “Dtai” (sometimes spelled “Tai” or, across the border in southwestern China, “Dai”), and they are related to the Thais and the Laotians, whose borders they share.

The origin of the Thai peoples, as they are collectively called, is still a question of academic controversy, but according to the most reliable and scientifically documented theories, the cradle of their race is to be found in Yunnan and Sichuan in southern China. Chinese historians mention a Thai tribe called “Great Mung,” which inhabited the western part of Sichuan around 2000 B.C. Thai historian Luang Vichitra Vadhakarn states that the Thais began migrating toward Southeast Asia in 69 B.C. to escape harassment by the northern Chinese.

The last unified Thai state in southern China was the kingdom of