

On A Burmese River From the Note Book of Aleister Crowley

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In November 1901, I was in Madras, endeavouring to get to Calcutta by sea, en route for the Expedition to K2, described last summer in these pages. It was by no means an easy business to get aboard the *Dupleix*. A cyclone was raging in the Bay of Bengal, and the *Dupleix* had been beaten back down the coast, so that I was a day late in getting on board. The cyclone continued with a good deal of vigour for the next two days, but, on the third day, the weather somewhat abated, and the rest of the voyage to Calcutta was pleasant enough.

The ascent of the River Hooghly was most fascinating, especially to one of my *zigzag* temperament. The course taken by the ship was more like that of a figure-skater than anything else. On arriving at the landing-stage I was, much to my surprise, met by my friend Lambe. I had informed him of my arrival, it is true, but I had not the least idea that he would trouble himself to meet me, much less that he would drive me off to his bungalow and put me up for a month. The Anglo-Indian is indeed hospitable. It must be remembered that our previous acquaintance had only been of some twelve hours' duration.

Of course, Calcutta represents civilization and, consequently, nothing of interest can happen. The time I spent there was filled up with tennis and cricket, billiards and Ping-Pong, while every Saturday we went off to the racing.

Pleasant as was life in Calcutta I did not find it agree with my health very well, fever being continuous, or nearly so. I managed, however, to get through a fair amount of work, and spent two of three hours a day in learning Hindustani. I also intended to learn some Tibetan, but could not get a munshi in Calcutta, and I had to content myself with private work. I consequently decided to go and look up Allan (the Buddhist Monk who visited England in 1908) in Burma, and to combine that with some sort of shooting or exploring trip, my particular wish being to cross the Arakan Hills from the Irrawaddy to the sea.

Mr. Edward Thornton accompanied me to Burma. He was anxious to get a change and some sea-air, and promised himself great opportunities for sketching. The voyage was very pleasant. On arrival at Rangoon I got a sharp attack of fever. The next day, however, I was quite well enough to go to see the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, which has been so often described, though justice can never really be done to it. On the

whole, I think that the Burmese system of architecture is by no means an artistic success. Everything is exquisite in detail, but the grand comprehensive grasp of true mastery is lacking—a great contrast to the temples of Southern India, whose towers are decorated with thousands of images, so that nowhere is a line apparent. Yet, while each of these images is beautiful in itself and in its proper place, there is a subtle curve of the most exquisite delicacy visible to the inward eye, a curve whose grandeur and restraint are nowhere equalled, save in the very finest monuments of Greek and Egyptian art. But there is none of this in the Shwe Dagon and the hundreds of pagodas that cluster around it. The sense of repose is everywhere lacking.

Rangoon, to the stranger, is an exceedingly dull town. I looked up several of the authorities to obtain facilities for my projected journey; in particular, I got a letter to the Forest Commissioner of the District, on whom I relied to get my elephants. On the 25th January we left by train for Prome late at night. We took one servant, named Peter, a Madrasi boy. I asked him his religion, and he said that he was "a free man, a Roman Catholic." Some people's ideas of freedom are peculiar. Needless to say, he was a scoundrel of the first water.

On Wednesday morning we arrived at Prome, and immediately went on board the Steam ferry *Amherst*. It is a five hours' journey to Thayetmyo, where we arrived in the heat of the day, after a very pleasant journey, thanks partly to the beauty of the scenery, but perhaps more to the geniality of the Captain. We got three Bullock carts for our transport, and started the next morning, stopping at Natha for lunch after a pleasant journey of ten miles. After lunch, however we next went to Kyoukgyi.

PART TWO

The next day we resumed our journey; I walked most of the way and shot some partridges and pigeons for lunch, which we took at Leh-Joung; this is not a bungalow, but a village. We went on in the afternoon to Yegyanzin, where we had the good fortune to meet Carr, the Forest Commissioner of the District, and his assistant Hopwood. Unfortunately he was unable to give me any elephants, as they were all in use; but told me I ought to have no difficulty in getting coolies and probably ponies if I required them. We combined forces and had quite a nice dinner together. One does not realize how nice Englishmen really are until one meets them in out-of-the-way places. The following day we went off again and arrived at Mindon at 2:30 p.m. The road had become very bad, and in the springless bullock-cart travelling was by no means pleasant. In fact, after two or three big jolts we agreed to take turns to look out, and to give warning if a particularly frightful jolt

seemed imminent, but for all our precautions, I was badly let in on one occasion. The road had become level and appeared to be the same for the next 200 yards, so I turned back to light a pipe. Without a word of warning, the driver swung his oxen off the road into an adjoining paddy field, at least three feet below, and we got the nastiest shaking of our lives. The last seven miles were particularly irritating, however, as there was little or no shade, and it was out of the question to relieve oneself by walking for more than a short distance.

On arrival at Mindon, we summoned the headman and told him to get men for the cross-country journey to Kyaukpyu. He seemed to think it would be rather difficult, and was evidently not at all pleased with his orders, but he went off to obey them, and in the meanwhile sent round the village shikari so that I might go out after buffalo the next day. I accordingly started at 6:45 next morning for the jungle.

It soon began to get hot, and a double .577 is not the kind of toy one wants to carry on a fifteen-mile tramp. As a matter of fact, I probably did nearer twenty miles than fifteen, as I was going eight hours with very little rest. We went up and down hills repeatedly, but the wild buffalo was shy, and, as a matter of fact, I did not the whole day see anything whatever shootable, except some small birds which I took home for dinner. In the afternoon we went off bathing together in a delightful pool directly under the hill on which the bungalow was situated. I took down the shot gun with the intention of killing a big paddy bird which we saw from the bank. These birds are valuable on account of the aigrette. I fired, but my shot did not seem to hurt him and he flew off. I resigned the gun to the Burmese boy, and had just finished my bath when the impudent beast came back. I hastily signalled for the gun, and putting on a topi and a towel round my waist proceeded to stalk him across the ford. I suppose I must have presented the most ridiculous spectacle that one can imagine. Thornton, at any rate, said he had not laughed so much for years, and I dare say that the paddy bird laughed too; but I got the best laugh in the end, for after about ten minutes' infinite pains I got a close shot at him which put an end to his career. That evening we tried to eat roast parrots, but it was a total failure. I am told, however, that parrot pie is quite a good dish. Well, I don't like parrot, so there will be all the more for those who do.

AN EXCITING ENCOUNTER

The next day I summoned enough energy to go for a stroll. I was very anxious to show Thornton a beautiful view of hill-side and river, which I had come across on my way home. We set out, he being armed with a sketch book and kukri, which he would always carry about with him, though I could never understand the reason; if he had been anti-

pating the day's events, I should not have troubled to enquire. At the edge of the hill weariness overtook me; I sat down, pointing to him a tiny path down the hill slope which he was to pursue. He was rather a long time returning, and I was just about to follow in search, when I heard his cooley; in a couple of minutes he rejoined me. I was rather surprised to see that his kukri was covered with blood. I said "I knew you would fall over something one day. Where have you cut yourself?" He explained that he had not cut himself, but that an animal had tried to dispute the path with him, and that he had hit it on the head, whereon the animal had rolled down the steep slopes toward the river. I could not make out from his description what kind of animal it could possibly be, but, on examining the tracks, I saw them to be those of a nearly full-grown leopard. We did not retrieve the body, though it must have been mortally wounded, otherwise Thornton would hardly have escaped so easily.

The headman had returned, and told us that he could not give us coolies to cross the Arakan Hills. No-body had ever been there, and it was very dangerous, and everyone who went there died, and all that sort of thing. But he could give us men to go about twenty miles, and no doubt we should be able to get more coolies there. I thought there was more than a little doubt; and, taking one thing with another, decided it would be best to give up the idea and go instead back to the Irrawaddy and down the Mindon Chong; we consequently hired a boat of the dug-out type, about 35 feet long and just broad enough for two men to pass; over the middle of the boat was the usual awning.

PART THREE

The next morning we started down the stream, always through the most delightful country and among charming people. Everyone knows, of course, that all the villages in this part of the country are strongly fortified with pallisades of sharpened bamboos. The voyage down the river was exceedingly pleasant and the shooting delightful. One could sit on the stern of the boat and pot away all day at everything, from snipe to heron. Our Burmese boys and the kites had great rivalry in retrieving the game. The kites seemed to know that they would not be shot at. I had another slight attack of fever in the afternoon, but nothing to speak of. We tied up at Sakade for the night. There was no dak-bungalow near, and one does not sleep in a Burmese village unless necessity compels. And yet—

By palm and pagoda enchanted, o'er-shadowed, I lie in the light
Of stars that are bright beyond suns that all poets have vaunted,
In the deep-breathing amorous bosom of forests of Amazon might

By palm and pagoda enchanted.

By spells that are murmured, and rays of my soul strongly flung,
never daunted; By gesture and tracery traced with a hand dappled
white,

I summon the spirit of earth from the gloom they for ages have
haunted.

O woman of deep red skin! Carved hair like the teak! O delight
Of my soul in the hollows of earth—how my spirit hath taunted—

Away! I am here, I am laid to the breast of the earth in the dusk of
the night,

By palm and pagoda enchanted.

The early hours of the morning in the winter are bitterly cold, and
the river is covered to a height of several feet with a dense white mist
which does not disappear till well after sunrise.

I kept very quiet the next day, for repeated attacks of fever had be-
gun to interfere with my digestive apparatus. Just at nightfall, however,
two deer came down to drink at the riverside. It was rather dark for a
shot, and the deer could hardly be distinguished from the surrounding
foliage, but the men very clearly and silently held the boat, and I let fly.
The result was better than I expected. I hit exactly where I had aimed,
and the deer dropped like a stone. Needless to say we had a first-class
dinner. We slept at Singoun that night. There were a great many jungle
fires during this day and the next. The next morning we started again
early, and I resumed my bird shooting. On the first day I had several
times missed a Brahman duck and was somewhat anxious to retrieve my
reputation. Quite early in the morning I got a very fair shot at one; it
shook its wings in derision and flew off, landing about a hundred yards
down stream. We floated down, and I had another shot with the same
result; for the next shot I went on shore and deliberately stalked the
animal from behind the low bank and got a sitting shot at about ten
yards. The disgusted bird looked around indignantly, and flew solemnly
down stream. I, even more disgusted, got back to the boat, but the bird
was a little too clever this time; for he made a wide circle and came fly-
ing back right overhead. I let fly from below and it fell with a flop into
the river. The fact is that these birds are so well protected that it is
quite useless to shoot at them when the breast is not exposed, unless a
lucky pellet should find its way into the brain. So on the next occasion,
having noticed that when disturbed they always went down stream, I
went some distance below them, and sent two boys to frighten them
from above. The result was excellent right and left, and I consoled my-
self for my previous fiascos. We stopped the night at Toun Myong.

After a delightful night, we went off the next morning and got to
Kama on the Irrawaddy, whence we signalled the steamboat which took

us back to Prome, where we stopped the night. The next day we spent in visiting the Pagoda, Thornton doing some sketching and I writing a couple of Buddhist poems. We went off in the evening for Rangoon. The next day we drove about the town but did little else; and on Monday we paid off Peter. The principle on which I had dealt with this man was to give him money in lump sums as he wanted it, and to call him to give an account of all he had spent. He made out that we owed him 37 rupees by this said account. I made a few trifling corrections; reducing the balance in his favour, and including the wages due to him (which he had not reckoned) to 2 rupee, 4 annas. He was very indignant, and was going to complain to everyone from the Lieutenant-Governor to the hotel-keeper, but I think he was rather staggered when I told him that as he had been a very good servant in other respects I would give him as backsheesh the bottle of champagne and the three tins which he had already stolen. He appeared very surprised at my having detected this theft. Whereby hangs a tale. On leaving Rangoon I gave him a list of all the provisions, with the instructions that when he took anything from the store he was to bring the list to me and have that thing crossed off. Needless to say on the second day the list was missing; he, of course, swore that I had not given it back to him. Equally needless to say I had kept a duplicate list, which I took very good care not to show.

That evening I was again down with fever, and found myself unable to take any food whatever. I called in the local medico, who fed me on iced champagne, and the next day, I was pretty well again. Thornton in the meanwhile had gone off to Mandalay. I was very sorry not to be able to go there with him, but my time was very short: as I did not know when I might be summoned to join Eckenstein to go off to Kashmir.

On the 12th February I went on board the Komilla for Akyab, where Allan was now living. In the course of the day the sea air completely restored me to health. On the 13th we were off Sandaway, which did not appear fascinating. On the next day we put in at Khyouk-pyu, which I had so vainly hoped to reach overland. It has a most delightful bay and beach, its general appearance recalling the South Sea Islands; but the place is a den of malaria. We had not time to land as the captain was anxious to get into Akyab the same night. We raced through the Straits, and cast anchor there about 8 o'clock—just in time.

I went ashore with the second officer and proceeded in my usual casual manner to try and find Allan in the dark. The job was easier than I anticipated. The first man I spoke to greeted me as if I had been his long-lost brother, and took me off in his own carriage to the Monastery (whose name is Lamma Sayadaw Kyoung) where I found Allan, whom I now saw for the first time as a Buddhist monk. The effect was to make him appear of gigantic height, as compared to the diminutive Burmese,

but otherwise there was very little change. The old gentleness was still there.

PART FOUR

I ought to have told you when talking of Ceylon, the delightful story of Allan's adventure with a krait. Going out for a solitary walk one day with no better weapon than an umbrella, he met a krait sunning himself in the middle of the road. Most men would have either killed the krait with the umbrella or avoided its dangerous neighbourhood. Allan did neither; he went up to the deadly little reptile and loaded him with reproaches. He showed him how selfish it was to sit in the road where someone might pass, and accidentally tread on him. "For I am sure," said Allan, "that were anyone to interfere with you, your temper is not sufficiently under control to prevent your striking him. Let us see now!" he continued, and deliberately stirred the beast up with his umbrella. The krait raised itself and struck several times viciously, but fortunately at the umbrella only. Wounded to the heart by this display of passion and anger, and with tears running down his cheeks, at least metaphorically speaking, he exhorted the snake to avoid anger as it would be the most deadly pestilence, explained the four noble truths, the three characteristics, the five precepts, the ten fetters of the soul; and expatiated on the doctrine of Karma and all the paraphernalia of Buddhism for at least ten minutes by the clock. When he found the snake was sufficiently impressed, he nodded pleasantly and went off with a "Good-day, brother krait!"

Some men would take this anecdote as illustrating fearlessness, but the true spring is to be found in compassion. Allan was perfectly serious when he preached to the snake, though he is possibly a better man of science than a good many of the stuck-up young idiots who nowadays lay claim to the title. I have here distinguished between fearlessness and compassion; but in their highest form, they are surely identical.

They managed to give me some sort of a shake-down, and I slept very pleasantly at the monastery. The next morning I went off to breakfast on board to say good-bye to the Captain, who had shewn me great kindness, and afterwards took my luggage and went to Dr Mung Tha Nu, the Resident Medical Officer, who welcomed me heartily, and offered me hospitality during my stay in Akyab.

He was Allan's chief Dayaka; and very kindly and wisely did he provide for him. I walked back with Allan to the Temple and commenced discussing all sorts of things, but continuous conversation was quite impossible, for people of all sorts trooped in incessantly to pay their respects to the European Bhikku. They prostrated themselves at his feet and clung to him with reverence and affection. They brought him all

sorts of presents. He was more like Pasha Bailey Ben than any other character in history.

"They brought him onions strung on ropes
And cold boiled beef and telescopes,"

and at any rate gifts equally varied and not much more useful. The Doctor looked in in the afternoon and took me back with him to dinner. Allan was inclined to suffer with his old asthma, as it is the Buddhist custom (*non sine causa*) to go out of doors at six every morning, and it is very cold till some time after dawn. I wish sanctity was not so incompatible with sanity and sanitation!

The next day after breakfast Allan came to the Doctor's house to avoid worshippers, but a few of them found him out after all, and produced buttered eggs, newspapers, marmalade, brazil nuts, bicarbonate of pot-ash, and works on Buddhism from their ample robes. We were able, however, to talk of Buddhism, and our plans for extending it to Europe, most of the day. The next four days were occupied in the same way.

On Sunday I went aboard the S. S. Kapurthala to return to Calcutta. The next day we anchored outside Chittagong, a most uninteresting place. I was too lazy to land. Two days later I got back to Calcutta. Getting my mail, I busied myself in preparing for the great journey.

It was now definitely settled that our expedition should meet at Rawal Pindi. I only took one day off, when I went to Sodpur snipe-shooting with a friend of Thornton's, with whom I was now staying; Lambe having gone off to Australia.

I left Calcutta late at night and arrived at Benares the next day. On Sunday I went to the Ganges to see the Ghats, and I also inspected the "Sex Temple," which after all compares unfavourable with the more finished productions of the late Mr Leonard Smithers. The Temple of Kali, was, however, very interesting. Three months earlier I should certainly have sacrificed a goat (in default of a child), and I suppose by this time I may consider myself a pretty confirmed Buddhist, with merely a metaphysical hankering after the consoling delusions of Vedanta.

I however visited no less a person than Sri Swama Swayan Prakashan Raithila, a Maharaja who has become Saunyasi. After some conversation, he promised me that if I would return the next day he would show me a Yogi. He made a curious prophecy on the spiritual plane which was in a certain sense fulfilled without the torturing language which he used too much; but the prophecy which he made on the physical plane went somewhat astray.

PART FIVE

The Maharaja (Sri Swami Swayan Prakashan Raithila) said that the expedition would succeed "after some trouble." The trouble turned up all right, I wish I could say as much for the success. In the evening I went to nautch, and am compelled to concur in the usual European opinion as to dullness and lack of music; but for all that there is a certain fascination. One feels that one could dream away many years listening to the cacophonous instruments and the tuneless voices of the dancers, and in watching the dull and decent movements of her shapeless and overclothed body and limbs. The next day I was entirely lazy and went off to Agra on the 12th.

On the 13th I went over Agra fort, which was very beautiful in places, but on the whole vulgar and depressing. There is too much of the thing altogether; and although it is well worth one visit, I cannot imagine any-one paying two. The next day was devoted to the Taj Mahal. The first impression is one of extraordinary beauty, though perhaps not of any great fascination. There is no human quality in the building. Very soon indeed, one becomes aware that it is inhabited by loathsome and disgusting larvae. The feeling of deep disgust pervades one, so that whatever beauty there may be in the building (about which I am not at all sure) is entirely discounted.

The central hall, however, containing the sarcophagus, is less objectionable. In the evening I went again to see a nautch, and this time I must confess that the sensation was most unpleasant. Perhaps I was in a different mood. The dancer was certainly far less talented than the one in Benares; but it may be that the novelty of a first visit masks one's critical faculties and prevents the entire badness of the whole thing from appearing. The next day, Munshi Elahi Baksh, the astrologer and geomancer, called on me. His geomantic method was interesting. He obtained the "Mothers" not by points drawn in the sand or on paper, but by throwing little brass dice, four on a string, each side of which had one of the four possibilities of arranging points from two to four in number in two lines, one combination on each face. He had two such strings, and by putting them together, one obtained four figures, every possible variety being thus represented. He then proceeded in the ordinary way known to Westerns, though he gave different names to the figures, and attributed different qualities, though usually rather sympathetic: Puer, for example, he attributed to Saturn.

Above I have spoken of the dice as brass, and that is what they looked like; but he told me they were composed of "electrum magicum" as described by Paracelsus, prepared correctly by mixing the seven metals during the conjunction of their corresponding planets.

The same night I went on to Delhi, where I arrived the following morning, and immediately sat down to literary work, as I wished to finish up everything I could before joining the party, being afraid that afterwards there would be very little time. On the 19th I gave myself a little holiday and went to see the fort. With me was "Major Graham, D.S.O." who had just conducted a convoy of Boer prisoners to Ambala. I put him down as a prize fool; but I was wrong, as I heard afterwards that he had managed to let in the Hotel and the Bank for quite a lot of money. However, his manner was very fine and noble.

The Audience Hall in the fort is a very delightful and restful place. Unfortunately two or three of the rooms have been whitewashed by the prudish stupidity of the inevitable Briton, it being considered that some of the pictures were calculated to make the young person blush. I pass over the appalling depth of immorality which such prudery invariably implies; but what are we to say when we hear that a perfectly innocent room was also whitewashed "in order to secure artistic uniformity"? Surely stupidity could not go any further. I spent the 20th March in writing an essay on cosmic problems from a mathematical standpoint.

PART SIX

On Saturday I went off to Oakley, magar-shooting. Maiden, the proprietor of the Hotel, came with me and provided most admirable tiffin. I lent him my Mauser, and relied myself upon the .577. After getting permission from the Engineer in charge of the Canal Works, we put off in a small boat and rowed up the stream. Very soon we saw a fine big crocodile on the banks; but as they are very suspicious beasts, and slide into the water at anyone's approach, we determined to try a long shot. I crawled into the bow of the boat, and while the natives held the boat steady loosed off at about 130 yards. The shot was either a very good one or a very lucky one; for the magar was certainly mortally wounded by it. We rowed rapidly up to the beast to find him lashing about in a couple of feet of water and bleeding profusely. I had almost certainly shot him through the heart.

Unfortunately this is of very little use with these reptiles. We got up as close as the natives could be persuaded to go. There certainly was some risk if we had gone quite close in, but we ought to have ventured near enough to drive a boat-hook into the mud between him and the deep water, but they could not be persuaded to do this, and there was no time for argument. Maiden sat up in the middle of the boat and fired fifteen Mauser cartridges into the struggling crocodile, which I think was a proceeding of doubtful utility. He persuaded me, however, to fire a couple more cartridges myself, which I did, right down the beast's throat. The second shot very nearly led to a catastrophe, as our craft

was not at all steady, and the recoil of the heavy express sent me an awful cropper backwards on to the gunwale of the boat. Luckily, no harm came of it. I was now more anxious than ever to get hold of the beast or to pin him with the boat-hook, but though his struggles were gradually ceasing, nothing we could do was any good; little by little he slid off the shallow into the deep water and sank. After hunting about for twenty minutes we gave it up as a bad job.

Rowing slowly up the stream, we soon caught sight of another fine beast, though not quite so big as the one we lost. I took, however, an extraordinarily careful shot at it, and had the good luck to smash the spine. Every-one thought I had missed, but I swore that was impossible. Certainly the beast did not move as we rowed towards it. I sent the natives on to the bank, and after an infinite display of funk, they ventured to catch hold of its tail; of course it had been shot stone dead. We got the body on board and rowed back to tiffin. A further excursion in the afternoon produced nothing; so we gave it up, and after a cup of tea drove back to Delhi with our prize. In the evening Maiden asked me round to his house to meet some people who were interested in what they called the "willing game." (The rules are that you must not set about doing anything, but sit down and wish it were done.) The conversation, however, soon degenerated into a lecture on Buddhism. I got carried away by my subject, and preached the Good Law for four hours on end, and I am afraid bored my hearers immensely. The following day (Sunday, 23rd March) I went off by the mail, intending to meet the party at Rawal Pindi; but, as luck would have it, they were in the train; so of course I got into their carriage and was introduced to the other four who were with Eckenstein.

The "K 2" expedition had begun.