

Bibliographic Data

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Article Title Not Every Needy Poor a Thief, Nor Every Hag a Witch!
Title (Book/Series) **The Guardian Magazine**
Issue and Volume Vol.4, No.1 (January 1957)
Edition
Place/Publisher
Distributor
Ed. Date January 1957
Pagination 37-38
Annotation
Subject 1. SHORT STORIES
Key Words

A Short Story

"NOT EVERY NEEDY POOR A THIEF, NOR EVERY HAG A WITCH!"

by

KYI MAY KAUNG

MY cousin is a writer of novels and short stories in Burmese. He is inclined to be absent-minded and shy. In fact, as regards absent-mindedness he is not unlike me. He is very generous and although he gives the impression of knowing very little, he knows a great deal. He does not seem to notice very much things that are happening around him, but actually he is quite observant and sensitive.

One evening last year he came to see us, a thing he rarely does, and told me this story. He said he had thought of writing it some time; but, generous as always, he said he did not mind if I wrote it in English.

I wondered and I still wonder sometimes, what it was that prompted him to relate the incident. I must have said I wanted to write a short story very much but did not know how to begin, or perhaps I said something about not having had any interesting experiences to write about; for he said in his usual excited way, "Oh, it's quite easy, there's really nothing to it" and added, "Though whether the product is good or not depends on many things.— You can write it in the first person, you know the sort of thing— I—I—I,—that sort of short story," and he began telling me about an experience of his as he sat at our tattered, untidy desk.

"I don't suppose you were old enough even to hold a pencil then," he began, "It happened in the summer of 1948. My sixteenth birthday had come and gone, leaving as a souvenir only a new fountain pen Mother gave me as a birthday present. It was a good pen brand new, gold-nibbed and a Parker 51—so popular at the time. Mother said it was quite inexpensive too; but I knew better. Can you think of a better present for me when I was mad about writing. I spent my spare moments laborously scribbling descriptions, character studies, and sketches of everyday incidents which might have passed unnoticed although

they were full of meaning for those who could see—

"A few days after my birthday, one fine Sunday morning, Mother suggested a picnic at the Inya lakes. We were then living in cramped rooms in town which must have given way at the seams (if they had any) with a number of relatives staying with us. It was just like Mother to think of others. We gathered our change of clothes, a few ground sheets, some cooking vessels and all of us walked to the lakeside. The weather was calm, and not too hot, and now and then a pleasant warm breeze blew across the still lake, rippling its surface. The sky was the bluest of blues and there was not a single cloud. The lake reflected its colour, giving it a deeper, greener shade. We found a lovely place on a tiny peninsular, covered with mango trees, jutting out into the lake. As we walked along the water's edge our feet sank into the soft damp soil and left patterns of footprints

Kyi May Kaung is a young lady-writer who has already made brilliant debut in this magazine. This story, tasted first by "K", was described by him as of "almost Chekovian human interest".

behind us. We spread out the ground sheets in the shade of a tree and the whole family went for a swim. I had my new pen with me."

"What for?" I asked. "What for? of course, to write down any ideas and thoughts that I might be able to use later on?" he replied.

"Before I went into the water, I placed it very carefully on a tree stump.

"After an exhilarating swim we came up and dressed and I forgot all about the pen at the sight of the steaming coconut rice and chicken curry Mother and Daw Daw Gyi were spooning on to clean banana leaves. We sat in a circle on the sheets and ate. Daw Daw Gyi took a second helping; and all of us, even Grandmother followed her example. We all ate heartily and talked quite a lot between mouthfuls.

"There were the usual pie-dogs hanging around waiting for scraps of meat or bones. They were skinny creatures and you could have counted their ribs. I tossed a bone to one and immediately all of them came nearer, with wagging tails and pleading eyes as friendly as you please. 'Now you've done it!' Mother exclaimed, 'Now you'll have to give them some more.' As she scolded me somebody threw a stone into their midst and they dispersed yelping more out of habit than because they were hurt. I watched a grey dog run down the bank, and it was then that I saw a little old woman quattung near us. She was poorly dressed, her longyi had patches in it and her clothes were not very clean. She wasn't too thin, but she was very short and hunched, as though she had been coughing for years and thus acquired the posture. Her hair was a mixture of grey and light brown and it seemed she had not oiled it for a long time. I thought she must have been about sixty years old, but I am not sure for when you are young most people seem old. She was looking at us steadily, but her eyes did not plead for food. Instead she seemed to want to join us, talk to us and for a little while be as happy as we were; or perhaps she once had sons and daughters as strong and as healthy as us; or, maybe, one of us reminded her of some friend or close acquaintance of hers. Probably, she had been quite well-to-do when she was younger and looked at us remembering that life. Whatever her thoughts were she continued to gaze at us, and after a time I turned around to finish my lunch.

"When I looked again she was standing up; she looked even frailer than when she was sitting. Presently she was walking towards us. Daw Daw Gyi leaned over the plates, 'I wonder why that old woman is loitering around,' she said to Mother. 'I haven't the least idea,' Mother replied. 'But you'd better be careful about your things; you never can tell what

these people are up to,' she added. Then she must have suddenly thought of my usual carelessness in leaving things lying about, for she turned to me and asked, 'where's your fountain pen' I thought it was as usual in my Shan bag, clipped on to my note-book. But with a jolt, I suddenly remembered leaving it on the tree stump. I told Mother, and everybody at once said I had better go quickly and find it. I washed my hands quickly and ran. The trouble was there were five or six stumps and I was not sure on which I placed my pen. I searched carefully, but my pen was not on any of them. I looked even in the grass, in case it had dropped off. But there was not a trace of my precious pen.

"By this time they were beginning to wonder what had happened to me, and they followed quickly. I had to tell them I couldn't find my pen. They all said 'I told you so!' and Mother talked to me severely: 'You must learn to be more careful. Will you never learn to look after your own things? She asked irritably.

Then somebody mentioned the old woman, and Grand-mother said 'I didn't like the look of that woman at all'—I asked them, all in vain, as to what the old lady would do with a pen even if she did steal it they set off to find her and soon found her squatting on a grass slope near by. Mother, Grand-mother and my three aunts demanded the return of the pen. They told her one should not steal, and all sorts of other things as well. Their voices became high pitched as they got angry and they kept asking for the pen, where she had hidden it, and more than once they told her not to tell lies. They completely bewildered the old woman and finally I had to cut in and say it didn't matter so much; that after all I could write with my old pen. It took some time for me to calm them down and make them let the old woman go her way. When she had gone they were still grumbling about people's dishonesty.

"The rest of the afternoon was no longer pleasant; for any of us. Mother kept reminding me of my

carelessness. The others went for a ride in a punt and I was left to myself. I did not think the old woman could have stolen it; but I felt very sorry about the loss; especially because it was Mother's present to me. At the same time I could not prove to myself that she was innocent.

"At about four o'clock we got ready to go home and just then my brother came along. He had my pen with him. He had seen it lying on the stump and had casually picked it up and kept it safe for me in his pocket when he went into town. When they saw it Grand-mother, mother and our three aunts stopped talking about the old woman. But as for myself I wished to run after her and ask for her forgiveness, but she was nowhere to be seen and I was rooted to the ground where I stood. I sometimes wonder whether they would have accused her if she had come dressed in silks and satins, with gold bracelets and diamond ear-rings!"

8th December, 1956.

စ စ စ စာစောင်

စ—သုံးလုံးမဂ္ဂဇင်း (လစဉ်ထုတ်)

၃-နှစ်မြောက်၊ မတ်မတ်မားမား ပြည်ကြိုက် ဂုဏ်တက်လျက်ရှိသည်။

လစဉ်စောင်ငွေ ၅၀၀၀ ထုတ်ဝေရောင်းချသည်။

ငံစုံ၊ ရုပ်စုံ၊ နှစ်သိမ့်စရာ အဆင်အပြင်များဖြင့်—

စ—သုံးလုံးတိုင်းပြည်ပြုစာပေများအဖြစ် သီးသန့်ဂုဏ်ယူ၍

စ—သုံးလုံးအဖွဲ့ဝင်တို့ကိုယ်တိုင် ပြုစုရေးသားစီစဉ် ထုတ်ဝေပါသည်။

- လက်တွေ့ နိုင်ငံရေးသဘောသရုပ်များ။
- အမျိုးသား စီးပွားကုန်သွယ်ရေးပြဿနာများ။
- တိုင်းပြည်ပြု လူတိုင်း၏ဘဝသာယာမှုများ။
- အမှုမှန်အခြေမှန်ဝတ္ထုများ။
- အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးဝေဘန်ချက်များ။
- သာသနာတော်နှင့် အမျိုးသားစာရိတ္တအခြေခံများ။

အကျိုးလဲရှိရမည် — အကြိုက်လဲတွေ့ရမည်။

စာပေအရေးအသားနှင့် ကဗျာအနုတွင် စံပြုမှုသစ် တည်ထွင်ထားပါသည်။

တစောင်ပြား ၅၀။ ကာလပိုင်းအတွက် (၆)လ၊ ၃ ကျပ်။ (၁၂)လ၊ ၆ ကျပ်။

စာတိုက်ခစာနှစ်အတွက် ပြား ၄၀။

တအုပ်ချွင်းကြည့်လိုသူများ စာတိုက်ခပါ တစောင်တိုး ၅၅ ပြားပို့မှပေါ။

စ စ စ စာစောင်

အမှတ် ၄၂၀—ကုန်သည်လမ်း၊ ရန်ကုန်မြို့။