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FOREWORD

THE SMALL southeast Asian country of Burma, half a world away, is little known to Americans. These fifteen folktales are offered by way of a pleasant introduction. There are fifteen folktales for several reasons, but one is because fifteen is a typical Burmese sum. The Burmese people reckon not by dozens but by tens, and factors or multiples of ten. They use the decimal system with consistency. Things are counted or grouped in sets of 5's, 10's, 15's etc., whether it is hen's eggs, teacups or tennis balls.

A nation's folktales can tell you a lot about a country and the people. I think that Burmese folktales do. Though no two of these tales are very much alike, they reveal qualities that many Burmese people have: a directness, almost bluntness, yet restraint and courtesy. Also, you come on unexpected

things, like surprise endings and surprise characters. You don't expect Mr. Industry to be a failure and Mr. Luck to win the hand of the Princess, but that happens. It wouldn't come as a surprise to you if you were Burmese, however. Nor, if you were Burmese, would you be surprised to read that Master Thumb's staunch friend is the Rain, and his mortal enemy is the Sun.

Only some of these tales are funny, like "The Four Deaf Men," or "The Drunkard and the Opium-Eater." But many of them have humor. If humor were lacking these wouldn't be Burmese tales, for Burmese people enjoy laughter. They have a keen sense of the ridiculous; they delight in preposterous, incongruous situations, and are able to laugh at themselves. They enjoy broad slapstick and quiet humor, as in "The Case of the Calf and the Colt," and the little opening tale, "The Greedy Stallkeeper and the Poor Traveler."

A type of tale included here in several variations is one in which there is discord or argument. The Burmese way of coping with conflict in real life is essentially as the folktales portray it. The parties in a dispute voluntarily seek out an individual with a cool heart and a wise head; in the folktales, it is the wise rabbit, the village headman or the Princess Learned-in-the-Law. True to Burmese Buddhist tradition, their decisions must be directed at the reestablishment of harmony, rather than at establishing guilt or meting out punishment. And the individuals who brought the dispute to the arbiter must go away feel-

ing satisfied, as in "Partnership" and "The Bee-Hunter and the Oozie."

The tales in this collection come from the area around Mandalay in Central Burma. They were selected expressly for young readers and are being published for the first time in the United States. These tales appear among several hundred others in two of Dr. Htin Aung's scholarly books: *Burmese Folk Tales and Burmese Law Tales*, Oxford University Press, London.

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September, 1967