

# The Scene

## Clenched Fist Elegance

by Jack Goldfarb

"SOMEWHERE east of Suez," and a jet hour west of Bangkok, Rangoon has rolled out the welcome mat once again for visitors, who have had to forego Burma's exotic attractions for years and are now again quoting Kipling's *"the temple bells are callin', and it's there that I would be — By the old Moulmein Pagoda lookin' lazy at the sea —"*

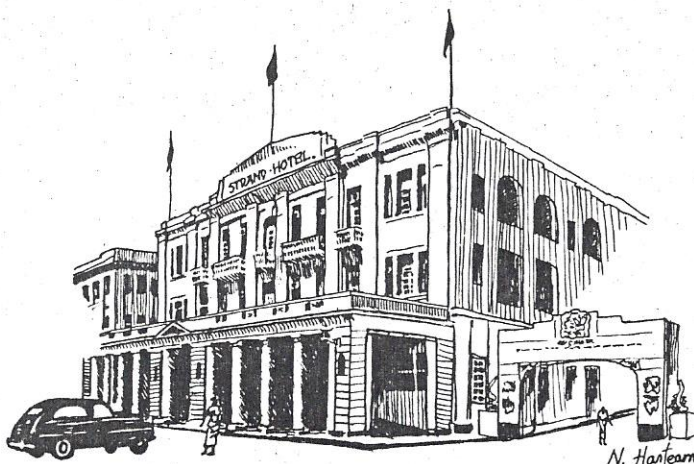
Across the sea (actually the Gulf of Martaban) from village-quiet Moulmein, lies Rangoon with its more memorable pagodas and its comparatively more cosmopolitan atmosphere. Capital and gateway city of Burma, seaport home of a million and a half Burmese, Indians and Chinese, Rangoon has three great landmarks. One of the world's largest and oldest (2,000 years old) shrines and an object of worldwide Buddhist veneration, the golden-spired Shwe Dagon Pagoda, its crown magnificently encrusted with diamonds, dominates the Rangoon skyline. The second landmark is another majestic pagoda, the Sule, which from the dead center of the city, recalls Rangoon's glorious past. The third is a charming 75-year-old hotel at the waterfront area.

"STRAND HOTEL," reads the sign on the glistening white, three-story, colonial building overlooking the Rangoon River, the punctuation mark after the "L" quaintly evoking images of long-gowned ladies and ramrod straight gentlemen with waxed mustaches.

John Darwood, a British taipan who operated out of Rangoon and is credited with doing much of the work of propelling Burma into the twentieth century by introducing electricity and urban transit systems, had the

idea that apart from incandescent lamps and trolley cars, his adopted city needed an elegant hostelry it could be proud of. In 1901, he constructed a 60-room hotel across the street from his family mansion on the corner of Strand Road and Lewis Street. He later got a knighthood for his labors.

Before long, patrons were flocking to the Strand. Through the colonnaded entrance passed a parade of upcountry plantation owners in starched cotton suits, mustachioed Punjabi merchants in colorful turbans, pipe-puffing Englishmen in the British Empire's administrative service and uniformed regimental officers — and their wives. They mingled with transients on a Rangoon stop-over who, to go to The Strand, only had to step down the gangplank of their ocean-



going vessels. These liners sailed up to the Gulf of Martaban from the Bay of Bengal. Other lodgers in The Strand were carried to Rangoon on the paddle-boats of the old Flotilla Line which navigated the Irrawaddy to and from Mandalay.

Dinner always occasioned the most graceful hours of community in those days. In the dining room ceiling fans with wooden blades hummed unceasingly. They gave a contrapuntal balance to the measured rhythm of conversations, which were always variations on familiar themes — the health of the year's rice crop, last year's monsoon, and how to tell authentic Burma jade.

After dinner, more sprightly melodies perked up the place. A Filipino band played the latest Charles-

tons, Suzie Qs and tangos in the spacious ballroom, while other sounds filtered into the lounge: the gurgle of glasses filling with British gin and tonic water at the bar, the clicking of colliding balls in the Billiard Room.

As Rangoon prospered into one of the most important trading towns in Southeast Asia, one could see from the balustraded balconies of The Strand elephants stacking logs of teak on the wharves and cheroot-smoking dockhands taking a break from endless sacks of rice for the markets of the world.

The Strand expanded with the years. In the twenties, the hotel was renovated and its capacity enlarged by the acquisition of the large Darwood mansion across the street. Sir John's stately ancestral home and birthplace became an annex of the hotel above whose wide doorway a sign went up saying, "STRAND HOUSE."

Just before the outbreak of World War II the British, who had fought three wars in the nineteenth century to subdue the ordinarily affable but fierce-in-battle Burmese, raised the political status of Burma from that of a sub-province of India to that of Crown Colony.

Came the Japanese invasion, which saw a two-month siege that ended with British forces being driven from Rangoon in early 1942. The city was severely battered. Later, during the Occupation, Rangoon again came under fire — this time from Allied bombing missions. The Strand buildings sustained heavy damage. They were in fact a target, for the Japanese had used them to house the Imperial Navy's command headquarters.

Soon after the war's end and the British return, Burma was granted full independence. That was in October 1947. That same year restoration work on The Strand was completed under the aegis of a British shipping firm which had come to be the hotel's new principals.



When the present Revolutionary Government of Burma came to power more than a decade ago the STRAND HOTEL. was nationalized along with most other business enterprises. The annex and former mansion of John Darwood was sold by the state to the Australians for use as an embassy. Extra rooms were then added on to the original hotel building to make up for the reduced capacity. As it turned out, the expansion was not yet called for. The 1960s were lean years for The Strand. The Government's enforcement of a rule restricting tourist visas to 24 hours made The Strand the most forlorn hotel in the world. Occasionally, the gloom was broken by the presence of diplomats, expatriate technical advisers and their families, and of course the few travelers whose itinerary permitted (or required) an overnight stop.

AS SOON as Burma started issuing longer-stay tourist visas five years ago, a new wave of tourists began arriving. Today, six airlines, including the government airline of the People's Republic of China, fly into Rangoon. Only one, Burma Airways, takes them up Kipling's celebrated road to Mandalay. Many of those who go to Burma are seasoned travelers who have seen most of Asia—and the world, except perhaps China and Sikkim. In the STRAND HOTEL., these veteran tourists—accustomed to the hyper-modernity of hotels elsewhere—display genuine pleasure at finding themselves in a septuagenarian hotel that has successfully retained its old-world sense of dignity and elegance.

And so today the stately dining room of The Strand is once more filled with guests.

In the lonely years of the 60s, when Burma was almost totally a shut-in state, the *maitre d'* had all the time to spend for reminiscences. Now business has become so brisk he has to be on his toes. Perhaps always mindful of the Burmese proverb "A hungry man is an angry man," he seems to be perpetually urging on the maroon-sashed waiters, who artfully balance bowls of mulligatawny and platters of chicken *biryani* as they weave their way around the tables.

The hotel's staff is genuinely concerned with the guests' littlest comfort. But there is one inconvenient rule which forbids any male who is

not wearing a shirt and tie from entering the dining room, bar and lobby after 5 p.m. Even though Rangoon's summer temperature can be excruciatingly hot, the rule is absolutely inflexible. It has its logic, though. A few years back a brawl broke out in the bar. It horrified the management which had no memory of anything like that ever happening in The Strand. The glaring fact they saw in the brawl was that the combatants were all in T-shirts. It pointed out that collared and cravated guests seem less prone to pugnacity. And so the rule was made. True enough, there has never been a scuffle since. Perhaps as an added precaution, soft dinner music is played nightly in the main lounge to keep the patrons further tranquillized.

There isn't a single TV set in The Strand; in fact the age of the picture tube has yet to come to Burma. Some of the amenities in the hotel are so antiquated that they have come full circle and look like the latest things in the current nostalgia fad in the West.

There is, for instance, the WRITING ROOM., an extremely cozy and silent sanctum, appointed with comfortable chairs and polished desks with separate red and black inkwells and pens. A "Lost Property" cabinet off the lobby displays articles left behind by forgetful guests. Among these are precious jewelry and a number of neatly-pressed handkerchiefs which have been waiting—some of them for over twenty years—to be claimed. The collection, scrupulously catalogued and kept clean, is an impressive monument to the honesty of The Strand staff.

THE STRAND's aura of venerability is felt by the guest even before he inks the register. The book invites him to flip it back and see the stream of great names who have stayed there. In the lobby the cane chairs and brass flowerpots are as hushed as the desk clerks and *longyi*-skirted bellboys who go about their tasks ever so unobtrusively.

Outside, also in *longyi*, rickshawmen and taxi drivers wait for passengers to take for a ride through the tree-lined streets of Rangoon and, possibly, for a first glimpse of Burmese Socialism, which is the child of an exotic marriage: that of the gentle voice of the Buddha and the