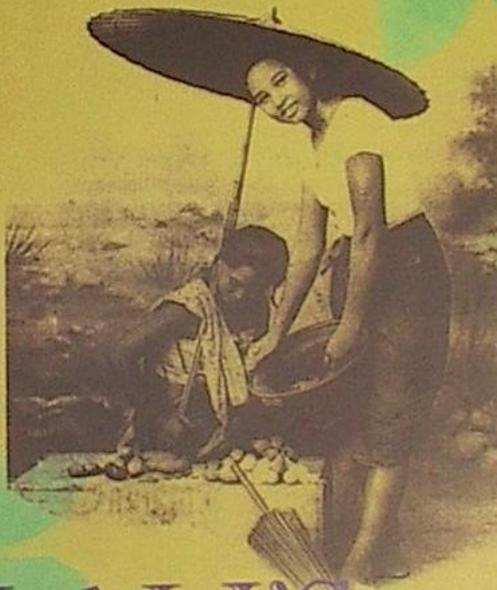


KEN ALBERTSEN



LALI'S
PASSAGE

Burmese beauty escapes from brothel
to Native American hills of California

LALI'S PASSAGE
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- *the story begins here* -

Preamble.....

The Diamond Buddha was not made of diamond any more than Thailand's Emerald Buddha was made of emerald. The latter was sculpted from green jade, whereas the Diamond Buddha was crafted from a tortoise-sized chunk of flawless clear crystal. According to legend, it first appeared at the small Mahabrahmani temple in northern India where Tilopa gained enlightenment. Tilopa, the originator of the Kagyu branch of Mahayana Buddhism, was an anomaly in that he had no guru. In other words, he had no spiritual teacher as was so common among holy men of those times. India, 800 years ago, was a land where ascetics were as common as migrating birds. Tilopa, who grew up tending cows, attained spiritual enlightenment while solemnly walking through the seven gates of the temple - a feat that comprised most of the night. The next morning, villagers found what was to become known as the 'Diamond Buddha' within the uppermost shrine room. Tilopa had left.

At various times during the ensuing centuries, sightings of the Diamond Buddha were reported. At the dawning of the fifteenth century, it was said to have found a home in central Ceylon, at an altar near the relic of Buddha's tooth. It somehow disappeared under nefarious circumstances and was believed to have been spirited to Southeast Asia by Dravidian pirates. The most reliable sighting since then was made by a wandering monk who visited the Khmer kingdom in what is now Cambodia. During his time of seclusion there, he wrote a letter dated 2105 (A.D. 1562), wherein he claimed to have seen the Diamond Buddha in a secret chamber within the Prasat Baboun temple close to the Angkor Wat complex. When an earthquake collapsed the temple years later, no evidence of the Diamond Buddha was reported to have been found in the rubble.

1. One Hundred and Eighty One years Later

General Hiruma was pacing around his field tent like a lion with his tail burnt off. British shells were falling within his perimeter. He re-read the de-coded dispatch from Regional Command with disdain; "We regret that you cannot hold your position STOP Your request to retreat has not been approved STOP Troop transport planes will arrive at nightfall to evacuate wounded STOP All other infantry should hold position STOP Wounded soldiers should carry no gear as planes are laden with return fuel and are limited by weight STOP.

It was that last sentence that angered the General the most. He spit each word out as if they were maggots caught in his mouth. He could self-inflict a wound to gain entry to a medi-vac plane - that was no problem. It was the demand to 'carry no gear' that burnt his biscuit. It so happened the general had painstakingly pilfered quantities of valuables during his campaign through northern Burma, and he wasn't going to let those efforts amount to naught.

As for doing the honorable thing and leading a strategic fighting retreat over land with his men: "The monsoon is only half gone" he barked to his assistant, "and there's no way in hell that I'll direct my men to roll ox carts through endless muddy troughs - with those damnable British bulldogs nipping at our heels."

The Brits ruled the air and had the luxury of provision drops along their path. All they had to do was mark their position with colored smoke and, like magic; dry crackers, tinned ham and ammo would get parachuted right into their laps. Hiruma's dog-tired Japanese troops didn't even have decent motorized transport any more, and barely enough bullets to kill dogs for dinner. His men would get rape crazy every time they came upon a Burmese village. That, along with forcing the local men to work as slaves, and pilfering valuables didn't endear his troops to the locals. "No wonder the peasants scatter through the countryside as we approach their villages," the General grinned sardonically. "That would never happen in Japan. We would stand and defend our women's' honor with our last drop of energy."

He ordered everyone out of his tent except Captain Yoshida. Yoshida was the son of his best friend from his home town. "I'm going to get us home aliveand with honor." Hiruma said to his protegee after the room cleared. "Not only that, we'll both be very rich. Your father will be proud of you." He paused to bask in what he assumed was the young man's admiration. "Here is the plan: I want you to get three strong Burmese men and bring them here. If any of my staff asks what you are doing, tell them you are carrying out direct orders from Regional Command." He waved the paper dispatch at the young man.

The General instructed his staff regarding the evacuation of wounded by plane. Foremost in his thoughts, however, were his plans to hide the commandeered wealth - valuables that he had collected during the past weeks of his column's retreat.

A few days earlier, he had a crew dig a gun emplacement within a nearby monastery. He personally picked the foxhole site, not only because it rested alongside a temple platform, but because of the riches that might lay beneath that mass of rock. He had swept aside protests by the few monks who were still straggling around - finally resorting to having them run off the temple compound by fixed bayonets. As soon as the foxhole was dug, he had two soldiers dig a lateral tunnel - to see what they could find under the Buddhist shrine that sat in the middle

of the platform. It was well known that valuables were buried in such places. No one was fooled when the general insisted they were looking for buried explosives. Two hours later a soldier, slathered in mud, came to the command tent to report that nothing of value had been found.

An hour after that, Captain Yoshida returned with three local men.

"Tell those betel-chewing boys to grab those sacks and let's go," the General ordered. The dark skinned men, their wrap around cloths thinly veiling spindly legs, strained to lift the two hefty sacks. The young Captain held back, then relented and grabbed one end of the second sack - while cursing the General under his breath for not thinking to get four workers instead of three.

He looked over to see the Burmese porter at the other end of the load flash his red-stained teeth. Yoshida didn't know whether he was being treated to a smile or grimace.

By the time the men arrived at the temple site, drizzle had turned to rain and gusts of wind were flaying the tops of the palm trees. The three workers were soon basted in mud as they pushed the bulky sacks deep within the narrow tunnel that ran under the temple platform. "Maybe they think we're adding spiritual offerings to their pagoda in supplication for our bad deeds," General Hiruma quipped while wiping his nose with his sleeve.

The Captain was stone faced. "No use trying to explain to them. There's the language barrier to overcome."

"Hey, these miserable peasants won't even be alive in a few minutes any way," The General added sardonically. When the workers emerged, the General ordered the tunnel opening closed and the foxhole filled in. He then turned to Captain Yoshida and ordered him to execute the workers. "Shoot the brown bastards!" he called out as his orderly hesitated. The General drew his sword and held it high over the Captains head. "Shoot, or suffer for not obeying orders!"

Yoshida drew his revolver and shot two of the workers. Then, thinking that the General would in turn slice his head off when all the workers were killed, turned to aim the gun squarely at the General's chest. The general drew his samurai sword and brought it to task swiftly. The Captain stepped back in horror as he saw his own severed hand and pistol in the mud. The General lunged forward to finish him off but slipped and fell. Yoshida scrambled to where his lifeless hand lay, picked out the gun and emptied its magazine into the General's forehead. Bits of cranium and brain colored the saturated soil. He dropped the gun, grabbed the stump of his wrist to squeeze it shut but he'd lost too much blood. He staggered a few paces then collapsed. The next morning, a group of monks found four bodies cold on the ground - two locals and two uniformed Japs.

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