



OF BAREFOOT DENTISTS . . . AND RICH YOUNG RULERS

Viv Grigg

He came for a visit to give some money. And he stayed. For two years now he has lived in this slum repairing children's teeth.

He first came to give a gift to a woman named Prateep who had begun a kindergarten for the children of the slum. The children with the rotting teeth.

Dentists cost a lot of money. Three hundred baht per tooth to be exact. And these children eat a lot of sugar.

Prateep had developed a school from her kindergarten. This was illegal because, of course, squatters are illegal. They don't exist. Legally, that is. But the children's teeth hurt.

When she won the Magsaysay award, the officials made her legal. They gave assistance too. And so were added some day care centers. And she was able to organize the people to help them get rights to the land on which they were living—at least for twenty years. That was an amazing feat.

But the children's teeth still hurt. So when a dentist came to give a gift. . . .

He is Burmese. But it is a Thai slum—and very large at that. Thousands upon thousands of families living in plywood and galvanized iron huts over the stagnant swampy waters of Bangkok.

His round face concentrates intently over a small lathe. On his table lie a dozen dentures.

His name in English is Vivian. That's my name too, so there is a certain kinship. His real name is Thaung Lin.

Over on his dentist chair sits a squatter enjoying his trip to the dentist—the joy of getting front teeth. Two lads look over his shoulder as he grinds a new denture to shape on the makeshift table. He pours water out of the bottle into the makeshift sink and quipped, "We don't have the proper

equipment—just make do with what we have"—words of a man who understands what it means to love the poor.

"My parents were rich so I was able to study. I was selected by a British dental surgeon to be one of a handful he trained. He was very gifted. He taught us how to use local materials because nothing could be imported. This drill was made from an old sewing machine motor—made it myself."

He holds the new denture in front of him with pleasure. Contentment and meaning in his work are a skilled craftsman's job. Then he stands and shapes another mold. There are many that want help.

It is late at night.

He stops to talk. Seven years of training dental technicians is not wasted. He dips a scalpel into a dark bottle and paints his mold. Perhaps over these next months he can train a number of slum workers. They don't need to be educated; just gifted with their hands and with a desire to learn. When it's set up he'll move on and start something new.

"How do you support yourself?"

"The foundation gives me Bt1000 per month (about \$50) for living expenses. . . ." Here lies the heart of workers among the poor—they desire nothing for themselves. They have no plans for mansions or for security—in the sense that many view security. They make no provision for old age. And perhaps they are foolish in that, but only such sacrifices—which they do not even call sacrifice—are sufficient for fruit to come from their lives.

". . . and the children's families pay for the cost of the dentures as they are able. That's the issue: dentists charge Bt 300 to make a tooth. It costs only Bt 35 at the most. Perhaps I can work with the rich at times and earn enough to help the poor more."

Miss Prateep fought for some of the squatters to be relocated. She is also in a dangerous position. She was able to get land for the squatters to be relocated on, which they can own for twenty years.

"I can also make artificial eyes. Here's an example: it is very complex. You have to build

it up layer by layer painting the different colors, the veins, the pupil.

"That is what I want to do. I want to pass on these skills. I don't want to keep them for myself, I want to use them, pass them on."

And the Creator looks on a creative Buddhist lover of the poor. Elsewhere he looks upon a thousand easy-going middle-class, careless Christians. They read his words about the poor, but will not go. And they ask for his love.

Are we not shamed, outdone by this barefoot dentist? What other motivation do we need to go and walk with him into the needs of the poor?

"And the rich young ruler went away sorrowful, because he had great possessions."

Viv Grigg has lived among the squatters for some years. He catalyzed a New Zealand mission and currently leads an American Protestant missionary order called SERVANTS Among the Poor. These are workers who give their lives to incarnating Christ in the midst of the slums of the cities of the

Third World. For information on training for urban poor work, write to: SERVANTS Among the Poor, 127 N. Madison #109, Pasadena, CA 91101.

Correction.

The author of the article "Too Much Separatism?" in the March issue is Dr. Margaret E. Harrison, specialist in Latin America and lecturer in geography at The College of St. Paul and St. Mary in Cheltenham, England. For correspondence with Dr. Harrison and information concerning her research on urban missions in South America, use the following address: Dr. Margaret E. Harrison, School of Geography and Geology, The College of St. Paul and St. Mary, The Park, Cheltenham, Glos., GL50 2RH, England.