

4: Phlai Kaeo becomes the lover of Phim

[54] As the golden rays brightened the sky, novice Kaeo thought longingly of gentle, lovely Phim. He washed his face and quickly put on his robe

wrapped in novice style¹, and tied a belt around his waist.² All ready, he picked up his almsbowl and went out. He looked into every lane, alley, and bush. Before long, he arrived in Suphan

and came to the village of Patron's Landing. As he walked, he glanced around courteously. He saw a bench set out for almsgiving but unattended, so he paused and stood with composure, taking his bearings.

Phim was inside with Saithong preparing food for almsgiving. No monk had come yet.

Phim opened the window and saw a novice standing with eyes lowered. The color of his close-fitting robe made his skin seem to shine like moonlight.

Phim's heart was gripped and unsettled by a magical³ force. She put on a shawl, picked up the basin of alms, and stepped down the stairs with Saithong.

The door opened with a creak. Novice Kaeo raised his face and saw Phim walking gracefully towards him. Her eyes met his and she realized it was *him*.

She ducked and hid behind Saithong. 'Oh! I'm not going down. Seeing his face makes me shy.' She passed her basin to Saithong,

and hid behind a wall. Saithong edged forward, breaking into a smile. Novice Kaeo blew a love mantra towards Phim,⁴

making her tremble with passion. She could hardly restrain herself from rushing down. Saithong put down the basin of alms and raised her hands to wai him.

He unhitched his almsbowl from his shoulder. 'I'm late because I

¹ *hom dong*, left shoulder covered, right open, sash across chest; see matichon dictionary

² see Matichon dictionary for style

³ The Thai implies a combination of knowledge and magical power.

⁴ In fact there was no need for him to do this. She already had a crush over him, as obvious from the descriptions in the previous two verses. KP noted that blowing love montra on a woma who loves the man already is bound to be successful every time (KP:56).

have come a long way. There were rows of other houses offering alms but I went past them and came specially here. [55]

I'm worried. At last night's recitation, the sponsor of the episode rushed off. Maybe she's angry with me. I'd like a chance to explain. I'd also like to talk to you.'

Saithong repressed the disquiet in her heart, and invited him to come to the house after taking his midday meal. She placed food in his almsbowl and then returned up the stairs.

He went outside the fence and hid in order to spy for Phim. She showed her face and saw him far away outside the fence.

He hugged his bowl close as if he was hugging something else. Phim smiled, hid her face, and disappeared. He walked off with a spring in his step and his mind full of her.

The farther he got from the house, the more his heart seemed to be bursting. He looked back over his shoulder again and again. 'If I'm late, Saithong will be kept waiting.' He hurried to Wat Palelai.

He went to offer some food from his almsbowl to the abbot. He knelt down, took off his upper cloth, and waited attentively on the abbot. After eating, he went back to his sleeping quarters and moped.

Phim too was feeling more and more mixed up. She watched Saithong putting alms in the novice's bowl and taking her time. 'What is she hanging around for?'

She beckoned Saithong into the bedroom, and spilled out her suspicions in an urgent whisper. 'What took you so long down there? I saw your mouth chattering away with him.'

Saithong replied, 'I didn't say anything. It's getting late. Let's have lunch. Afterwards we can relax and spin some cotton. In the afternoon I'll take you to bathe.'

'Food isn't going to pacify me. If you don't tell me, I'll keep bothering you all day. I saw you standing there, all smiles, and speaking together for a long time. Why won't you tell me?'

'There's nothing. Do you want me to make something up just to tell you? If there was something, I'd tell you so you don't feel bad against me. He just said that he came a long way to get here. That's all. And then he was going back.'

'Okay. That's it. Don't tell me. I'll probably find out in time because these things don't stay hidden.' She did not eat with Saithong but left the room in a huff.

They ate separately. Phim then took her spinning wheel into the room and sat spinning with a group of the servants [56] until 2 p.m.

Each made their own spindle of thread. Saithong chivvied Phim to hurry up so they could go for a bathe and cool down in the afternoon.

Phim said, 'I don't want to go.'

Saithong tried to calm her down and bring her round. 'Let's go to the landing, I have something to tell you.' 'Don't kid me. Why would you tell me anything? You're keeping it all to yourself.'

'I'm het-up, see? Don't provoke me.' 'You refuse to go for a bathe just to show me you're angry. What am I keeping to myself? Come on! Is that novice making a pass at *me*?'

'I'm not going, see. Don't go on and on. There's not enough time. It'll be too late.' Saithong walked slowly and gracefully out of the room with all the servants in tow.

I-Tai, I-Phrom, I-Sompaen, and I-Taen followed Saithong to the landing where they bathed, dived, played hide and seek, and chased one another around.

All through the afternoon, novice Phlai could not get lovely Phim out of his mind. He knew from Saithong

that Phim by now would have gone to the landing. He thought, 'I'll go so we can meet.' He put on his novice robe, crept down the stairway and went to Suphan.

He reached Phim's village, went straight to the landing, and spied from the bushes. 'These people are all servants. I don't understand.'

He saw Saithong washing herself on the riverbank. He threw some earth and coughed to get her attention. Saithong quickly came over, and they stole away to hide from the others.

They sat down in a good spot surrounded by bushes and in the shade of a big sok tree. Sprays of flowers bloomed overhead.

Novice Kaeo said with a smile, 'Please forgive me. Don't think I'm being too pushy. I'm feeling mixed up beyond reason. I've had to put up with this torture for days.'

I can't concentrate. I can't relax. I can't get over feeling wound up. It's important for me to come and see you. I want to put my life in your hands.

I feel like a rabbit that wants to have the moon. He's stuck on the ground because he can't fly. What he wants is so far away in the sky, he pines so much his body is wasting away

Only Indra could put him out of his misery by letting him romp with the heavenly rabbit in the moon. Little Phim is like the rabbit in the moon. Saithong is like Indra.

I'm counting on you. Don't abandon me. Maybe the two rabbits can taste the joys of heaven together. If you're kind, I'll be enormously grateful until the last day of my life.

Please help! Please make me happy. Get me out of this darkness and gloom. Bring me back to life. Save me from an early grave. I'm not

using words lightly.

I'll help and support you from today until the end of your life. I'll always remember what I'm saying here. Once I decide something, I don't forget and I don't go back on my word.'

Saithong turned her face away and said, 'I'm not listening to this. You'll get our backs caned for sure, Kaeo. I've never acted as a go-between before. All your hopes will be in vain.

The authorities⁵ are terrible. If we put a foot wrong, the scandal will be as loud as a *khon* dance. If I plead your case but she doesn't soften up, I'll be putting myself at risk and I don't want to do that.

She'll shout at me, and I'll get my back caned. You'll just be dancing outside the curtain. I shouldn't do it. I won't do it and suffer the consequences. I'm not the person you should be asking, novice Phlai.

Be a bit considerate to me. You talk as if Phim will play the game so easily. Be kind to me. Don't make me ashamed. I'm dying and you're the murderer.

All that stuff about Phim being like a rabbit in heaven is very clever. You talk loads about relying on me. But I've never seen two rabbits in the moon.

If Indra went to the aid of a miserable rabbit, he'd be a laughing stock all over the world. And the moon would be tarnished by the romping. I'm too scared, novice. Don't try to persuade me.

I won't get the meat to eat or the skin to wear, only the bones hung around my neck. If you get Phim, you'll be all smiles. But it's me who'll get the shouting and the shame.

It's like killing a snake but not getting to eat it curried because some hawk or crow swoops down and snatches it away, just like that. From now on, stop thinking and hoping. This is not something you nibble. One bite and you die.'[58]

'What a pity you have no sympathy. Every day I do nothing but think and hope. My love isn't about to wane. You're abandoning me half way.

When a banana flower is picked, it still hangs on by a thread of stalk. I'm relying on you so please do something. If I get Phim, would I abandon you? It's like broadcasting rice.

Even if the rain doesn't fall and the river runs dry, it's not a complete waste. You may not get to eat it, but you give alms to the birds.

If you do me a favor, and I then come to live in your house, it won't

⁵ *than munnai*, the overseers

be for nothing. I'll repay you before long. I'll share everything with you on par with the fair and lovely Phim.

Silver, gold, food, everything. I'll share half-half, equal parts. Be kind to me, Saithong. Please persuade her. When I've got Phim, I'll bring you a reward.⁶

One chang for Saithong. I won't bargain even for one fuang less. This evening, you must talk to her. I'll wait to hear at almsround tomorrow.'

'Are you really in love or just pretending? One chang seems a bit heavy. I'm afraid that once you have her, this reward will vanish, and no amount of shouting and demanding will have any effect.

If you're really sincere in what you're saying, novice Kaeo, you have to be ready to pay up on delivery.⁷ Keep your word faithfully. Tomorrow, come for the news.'

Novice Kaeo got the message. He took his leave and went back to the wat. Saithong returned home with the servants following along behind in a throng.

After sunset, a haloed moon shone as bright as daytime.

Saithong invited Phim to see it. 'The surface of the moon is so bright tonight. Dazzlingly beautiful. It looks like molten silver. Why does the moon care so much for the rabbit, it keeps him there?

He won't go anywhere in a hundred years. Why is he imprisoned up there? Since we saw him, I don't know how many thousand days have passed. Looking at the moon makes me scared.

It's like one of we two sisters. The rabbit in the moon doesn't have a partner so he stays in the sky and doesn't go anywhere. [59] But the rabbit in the forest gazes at him all the time.

I have loved you and brought you up with care. Now you have grown up to be big and bold. I'm like both a relative and a slave. Your mother helped me. I'm afraid of punishment, afraid of shame. I feel sorry for myself.

It's a pity to go through a whole life without knowing what it is to have a husband and children. It's like a brilliant, unblemished gold ring which just lacks a crowning gem.⁸

I can accept the hardship because I love you. If I didn't, I would probably have roamed all over the place, got myself arrested and killed,

⁶ literally *sinbon*.

⁷ Lit: offer a dog, offer a pig. Prem 49: you must be prepared to hand me the pig when I hand you the cat

⁸ bit guessed, needs help.

or else might have survived unscathed. That's the way things go.

All this trouble is because of you, because you haven't made your own household yet. I have to go on looking after you. The fate of parents is to get older every day.

The trees on the riverbank fall down eventually. I mention this because I'm worried what will happen if mother Siprajan passes away. Everything will be scattered.

Young men will sneer that this girl has no father or mother. I think about this day and night. It makes me sad. What do you think should be done?

If you get married while your mother is still alive, then the wealthy line will seem to continue unbroken. How many years do people live? What do you think about what I'm saying?

Phim listened without being knocked off course one bit. She answered the arguments of her companion: 'I don't think about this at all, Saithong.

As a woman it's normal that a man will come to ask for our hand, for better or worse. A mother makes every effort to bring up her daughter with the aim of setting her up in a household.

Well, we are said to be gentlefolk. Mother is wealthy enough for her children not to be ashamed with the neighbors. Doing something hasty without mother would be disobedient and would bring shame on her.

If it turns out mother dies before I'm married, that's fate. Doing something hasty without her would be a mistake.⁹ It's not as if I don't have men who like me.

If you're ugly, cancerous, leprous, or just no match for you friends, then there won't be any petitioners. But if you're good-looking and have money, they come after you without a break.[60]

A fruit is raw before it gets ripe. It's better to avoid the sour and enjoy the sweet. Just a dab of powder is enough to make one fair and pretty. Why are you so impatient about this all the time?

When there's a big problem it's like having a fire in your chest. If you cover it up, it shows in your face. If I had a craving just like hunger for food, then what you are saying would be relevant.

It's relaxing to admire the moon together, but if you say things like this it makes me unsettled. If you want my face to stay fair, don't bother me with such words. I don't like it.'

'Here, who's bothering you to have a husband? I'm thinking of you,

⁹ cooking the medicine wrongly

not acting as a go-between. In the past I've never been impatient. Did I ever say anything about this before?

You're yawning. Why not go to sleep.' She took Phim's hand and led her inside. She hugged her and fanned her. 'Go to sleep. I'll sing you a lullaby.

oh have pity on the poor young boy
why does he roam like a vagabond
trying to forget that he fell in love
now far from home, from everything fond

hopes dashed, love was not what he thought
hoping for a sweetheart, finding only heartbreak
so he ran away to wear the robe
ordained but tortured, weary with heart ache

the wat and her home are so far apart
so far away yet he goes to seek alms
sees her, returns to his lonely cell
thinks of nothing but her tender charms

the sad little novice comes afternoon
hides at the landing, pines and mopes
no one to talk with, no one to share
came such a distance, carrying only hopes

wasting away with love's dire grief
how long must he suffer, mortify
Oh gentle Phim, go to sleep, go to sleep.
La la, la la la, dear novice Phlai

Are you asleep? Then I can get some sleep too.'

As she sang, Saithong fanned Phim. She opened her arms to hug her with a sweet smile.

'Oh Saithong, how did the novice get into the lullaby? You went down just to give alms. Have you fallen for him? [61]

When I asked you this morning, you wouldn't reply. I didn't get it then but now I do. You must have met him again when you went bathing, and hit it off. Did you get carried away in the water? Is that why you were later than other days?

Don't sleep near me. Go outside the mosquito net. I don't want to interpret your dreams tomorrow morning. You're going to get mixed up about today. You'll scare me by talking in your sleep and trying to hug me.'

Saithong listened with her face drawn. 'Heaven forbid! How come it turned out this way? Really hateful of me. I made a mistake. Now I'll tell you the whole story.

When I went to bathe today, novice Kaeo came and hid in the *nom maeo*¹⁰ bushes at the back. I was annoyed. Hey, this is terrible. Are you fooling around and making fun of us.

Even if I didn't tell earlier, I'm not sorry about it. I met him by luck. I've got nothing against him. But while I was giving him alms, something was strange. He was talking away with me, but his eyes were somewhere else.

His mouth was smiling at me, but he was only pretending to look me in the eye. Even while giving a recitation, he still makes eyes. I can't look into his face.

Really, it's true. When I met those sharp eyes, it quite took my breath away. I'm a grown-up but it made me feel shy. He's a smart fellow.

He said to me: the other lady won't say hello to me. Maybe because I'm poor and down on my luck. When we were both tiny, we were playmates and saw a lot of one another.

But because of troubles, I had to leave our home in Suphan. Even so, she should at least say hello, just a few words. These days, I'm desperate. I can't hide it. This house is a long way, it takes a night.

If it wasn't necessary, I wouldn't have made the effort to come. In Kanchanaburi there are wat all over the place. But I couldn't stay away, like a cock lured into a trap. I made the effort because of love.

I felt so humiliated I couldn't talk about it. Was it right for you not to acknowledge him? I couldn't bear it so I barged in and said hello. Shrugging him off was, well, it's up to you.

Besides, your mother Siprajan is a good friend with his mother Thong Prasi. That's well known, for better or worse. So please be kind to novice Kaeo, the poor man.

Even if you don't accept this business about being in love, he asked to see your face and talk, just once. [62] He asked me to plead with you to say yes. He means well. He's taking a risk to create something important.

On the day of the recitation, he felt he saw a sign. In his own heart,

¹⁰ [Rauwenhoffia siamensis]

he was absolutely dead certain that he could fly in the air, walk on the clouds, pick up the stars,

and swallow them. He woke up with the taste still in his mouth. He thought this meant something was possible. So he ventured off on his almsround in a random direction, desperate to find out how things would turn out, for better or worse.

He'd set out at first light to get here. He asked me to plead with you. I tried to put him off several times. But he kept on at me to persuade you.

I was at a loss. I didn't know what to think. But after some careful thought, it made sense. He could be fooling around and playing tricks. But why did he trek from Kanchanburi to Suphan?

On the day of the recitation, he saw a sign. If he can somehow make your heart dream too, perhaps you could be a happy couple. Don't reject him out of hand.'

As she listened, Phim was falling into the trap and setting her heart on love. Since her eyes met those of novice Kaeo, it felt as if a diamond had been implanted in her body.

Even without Saithong's attempts at persuasion, her mind was already bent on love with no wish to escape. She had been thinking of the novice day and night. Saithong's words pleased her.

But her feminine instinct made her conceal how she felt. She kept her feelings inside and put on a sullen face. She left a long pause before turning to reply.

'I thank you from the bottom of my heart, dear Saithong. You have always loved me and protected me. You carried me around so I didn't have to touch the dust. You taught me everything so considerately.

How to sit, stand, sleep, lie – everything. Even what *not* to look at while we're out walking. Now there's someone after me, you're there to be my protector. I can put my life in your hands.

But why are you offering me the novice on a plate? Whether it will be for better or worse, it's tempting. But is there something else behind all this?

You and novice Kaeo hatched this whole thing up. Isn't that so? That's how I got involved. Who belongs to who is not the point. Why are you leading me to dream?[63]

It's not as if every other man in the world has died. People will sneer and gossip about me all over Suphanburi. I won't know where to hide my face.

You're in love with him, so let it be you alone. I'll help you cover it up. I'll keep it to myself. Don't doubt me.'

‘Oh what a pity, dear Phim. You’re really thumping me around. I feel bruised all over. You’ve never made fun of me like this before. Really, my darling, this time it’s me or the novice.

Am I a slave who wants to be on par with her mistress? I know the difference between salt and phimsen.¹¹ Do you think the novice doesn’t too? Why would he rush to get his boots dirty? Even if I put myself on offer, I’m poor.

I’m like this lead ring – no use as the setting for a diamond. Fortune does not favor me. My body is wrinkly. If I’m worked up over this, it’s because I love you.

I can see you looking down in the mouth. I can sympathize and I can’t stand around doing nothing. Why should I have any more to do with this affair? Enough! I’m not going to discuss it any further.

Remember your dream? You got the golden lotus because of *me*. If I take offence and don’t help you, let’s see if it ends in tears.

In future, if you want to consult me about this, I still won’t go and tell your mother. I’ll leave you in torture for a bit, until swallowing rice is like swallowing medicine – brings tears to your eyes.

For better or worse, I’ve been in hot water before. I cradled you from infancy to teenage. Don’t hide things. It’ll all come out in time. If things are not how I say, then I’m not Saithong.’

‘Ha, ha! What a real laugh. Don’t go on. I’ll give in to you readily. I should not object. Even though I’m not in the wrong, I’m the one mother will beat when she finds out.

Now. How many chang has he offered you as reward for you to stick your neck out and be so insistent? Is it really true what you say that the novice is good? Where did you get such assurance

that you believe it body and soul? Did he promise not to abandon me – really, or just so you would agree to talk with me? In the future I may get hurt.

Am I going to give myself to somebody just because I fear you’ll be angry? When I look at this carefully, I don’t see the point. [64] If I trust in novice Phlai’s word, I’ll end up shamed. The more I think, the more I’m confused, and wary.

If he doesn’t keep his word and abandons me, what can I do, Saithong? Best to go slowly, think carefully, ask questions, take precautions.

If he’s true to his word, he must bring a betel tray to ask for my hand. If he just wants to be my lover, I fear it’ll end badly. We are born for one life, it’s not permanent. Be careful. If I make a mistake,

¹¹ pogestemon patchouli, borneol, crystallized herb like smelling salts.

I've had it.'

'Oh Phim, my dear gentle sister. Don't be afraid. I'm not like that. Why are you worried and reproachful? I love you to the bottom of my heart.

If he was not good, would I drag you into giving yourself to him and being tarnished? I think he's a perfect match for Phim, my angel. You should be a couple.

If we compare you in rank and wealth – people do such things – you're much the same. The scales are pretty evenly balanced in all ways.

In looks, you're both lovely – young, bright-faced, like the sun and the moon. If you marry, I'll earn merit.

And you can enjoy one another, every night and day – making eyes at one another, sitting side-by-side on a bed, fanning one another when it's hot.

My job will be to furnish and decorate your home. Mattresses and pillows kept neatly on the bed. Folding panels to act as screens.

A fine, silky-looking mosquito net trimmed with gold, beautiful and neat, hung with tassels and flower garlands. The spittoon and betel tray set out in a row.

A cosmetic set in gold decorated with gems and glittering little mirrors. I'll depend on your merit. You'll eat and sleep happily with nothing to bother you.

Don't be hesitant. You two should be a couple. Be agreeable, not suspicious. I'll cushion you like a pair of shoes. That I promise, darling Phim.

If novice Kaeo doesn't keep his word and things turn out differently, you would not want me around. You'd shout at me, beat me, and send me off to the kitchen

to carry water and pound rice all day long. You'd drive me hard and never give me a break so I'd feel my body was chopped into pieces. If I lead you astray, why should you keep me?

Tomorrow morning, novice Kaeo will come to beg alms. Dearest, come down to give with me. I will make arrangements with him to meet you in the fields

so he can talk with you just a little while. Accept his love and make a firm decision. Afterwards you can pretend to be unhappy every day. If you do it well, nobody else will come near you.

Go to sleep, my dear one. It's late. Let me give you a hug.' She stroked Phim to sleep, repeating the novice's name over and over until Phim gave in. The moon moved across the sky and disappeared completely.

Dawn brightened the sky and bathed the whole earth in gentle early sunlight. Birds twittered, strutted, and took flight.

The wind wafted a soft golden dust of fragrant pollen. Novice Kaeo inhaled the refreshing scent and his thoughts harkened back to her.

‘If I sit around, the sun will get too bright.’ He got up, came to the window, washed his face, put on his robes, and descended the stairway.

Arriving at Phim’s house, he composed himself and meditated to give himself confidence, hoping that Phim would come down.

Phim and Saithong were in the house preparing food, tobacco, betelnut, pan leaf, and medicine to place in the novice’s bowl.

Fearing mother would see, they wrapped things and hid them under the basin. ‘Why is novice Phlai slower than on other days.’ Phim opened the window and saw him.

She hid and nudged Saithong. ‘Look. The little novice is as composed as an abbot. I’m not going. I’m scared.’ They smiled and giggled together.

Saithong advised her to go down. Phim cradled the basin, [66] hid behind Saithong’s back, and timidly stepped down the stairway.

She crouched, put the basin down, and paid her respects. She could not look into his face. So nervous, she almost overturned the basin, and put in tobacco, food, betelnut, and pan leaf into his almsbowl, all mixed up.

With face bowed and heart thumping, she went back up the stairway and sat hiding behind the room door. Saithong glanced around to check there was nobody.

She whispered to the novice, ‘After the midday meal, not too late in the afternoon, I’ll bring darling Phim out to the field. Hurry back to the wat and then come quickly. Where is it, novice? Give me the money now.’

He smiled and replied, ‘I haven’t forgotten the agreement we discussed. If the cottonfield is a success, I’ll reward you.

If I get her but do not give to you, you can create an uproar at my kuti. I’ve ordained to study and to gain merit. I observe the precepts. I won’t go against my word.

Wait here a bit. I’ll take leave. I’ll come around to the field, not too late.’ Saithong crept away glancing around carefully. Novice Kaeo went to Wat Palelai.

Phim and Saithong had their meal feeling very cheerful. Then they

went to talk with mother.

‘Today I’m going to the north field. The cotton bolls have burst and a lot has been scattered around and wasted. I want to take a look with my own eyes. I don’t trust the servants.

They steal and sell it off to buy snacks, the whole lot of them. I saw it with my own eyes just recently. I tell them off but they’ve no scruples.’

Siprajan scolded the servants and all their forebears: ‘Those thieves have stolen too much from me. You go off and look Phim, quick, quick.

If you catch them, beat them with a big stick. Make them cry out like a Chinese pork vendor. It has come to my ears many times that those tricksters not only steal but speak badly about me.’ [67]

Phim listened to her mother and shouted to summon all the servants. They arrived in a rabble, hoisted baskets, and bumped into one another descending the stairway.

Phim and Saithong went down from the house and hastened to the field with the throng of servants in tow.

They halted and sat down by some *krathum*¹² bushes. ‘We’ll stay here. You lot go off. Don’t laze around and play about. Do a proper job. Come back here at 4 p.m.’

I-Mao, Tao-Hap, I-Phlap-Thet, I-Tan-Pret, and I-Khwai picked up their baskets and carried them far from their mistress’ eyes. While picking cotton, they sang the wild chicken song.

After the midday meal, novice Kaeo slipped away downstairs, slung some clothes in a bundle on his shoulder, and cut across to the *wihan*. He was feeling happy.

He spoke to senior monk Mi: ‘I’m running away from the abbot. Please allow me to disrobe, and reordain me when I come back.’

The monk agreed to do it. ‘Off you go. Bring me back some betelnut and tobacco.’ Novice Kaeo prostrated, took his leave of the monk, and disrobed.

He grabbed his lay clothes, shook them out, and put them on. He set off with long strides and soon reached the field.

He hid in the bushes peering out until he saw Saithong. He greeted her with a friendly smile. ‘Have you been here long?’

She glanced up to see him, no longer in his robes but still standing at

¹² Mc: *excoecaria agalloch*, *mitragyna hirsuta*

a distance. She smiled softly and said: 'We came after the morning meal and have been waiting a while.'

He peered around, seeing nobody. 'Do you think she's not coming, Kaeo?' There was a rustle and thump in the bushes. 'If she's late, you may miss one another.'

You cannot stay here by the path. Go and hide over there. That low *krathum* bush¹³ is suitable. I'll bring Phim to talk with you.' [68]

Saithong crept away and disappeared from sight. Peering ahead of him, Phlai made for the lush bush.

Near the bush, he detoured to avoid some thorns, and crept through a gap in the thick foliage. There was his darling Phim.

She was sitting plaiting a flower garland, and looking lovely. Her whole body seemed to be blooming. She looked like a beautiful angel dancing gracefully on air.

He wanted to say hello but love choked the words in his chest. He had never felt like this before. His mouth trembled and his heart wavered. He could not think what to say. He moved his lips but was dumbstruck with shyness.

Love overcame fear. He moved gingerly to sit near her, and greeted her with a smile. She started and her body stiffened with shyness.

'Did you come from home a long time? It's a pity you have to come to pick cotton. You have masses of servants. It's tough to come along with them.'

The strong wind and fierce sun will hurt your fair face. You must be tired and stiff from walking. How good of you to make all this effort.

I followed you here because I love you. Did Saithong tell you that? Since the day of the recitation, I've really been thinking of you, without a break.

I don't get a wink of sleep, all night. I feel a fire is licking after me, without escape. I'm sick with grief and lonesomeness. How is it with you?'

Phim felt her chest was shaking with fear. She turned her face away, shy and dumbfounded. She had never had such a conversation.

She shifted farther apart. Her face trembled. She glanced this way and that without meeting his eyes. She did not say a single word.

'What's this, darling of my eyes? You don't say anything. Are you cross? Have you forgotten everything, my beauty? Think back to the past. [69]

When we were kids, we played together, all sorts of ways. We loved

¹³ interpetiolar stipule

one another very much. Remember playing “house”? I took you and ran away from Khun Chang.

He followed and picked a fight with me. He hit you by mistake and you cried. Why are you shy with me now? Please speak to show friendship, just a couple of words.

It’s a waste of effort to hope Saithong could convey my message to you. Why are you afraid? I won’t do anything against your will. I won’t hurt you, believe me.’

Phim knew what Phlai was saying about the past was true. She turned to look at his face.

Because they had once been close neighbors, the sound of his voice came back to her. Her fear receded and her trembling heart calmed. She replied, ‘Honestly, I had forgotten you.

But I recognized you on the day of the recitation. But I’m a woman. I could not greet you first. That doesn’t mean I dislike you, just I’m worried that people will gossip.

I know you complained to Saithong that I didn’t greet you. Were you so angry that now you want to complain to my face? Here, why have you disrobed? Where are you going that takes you through the forest to our field?

Have you finished your study? Or have you disrobed to go home? Or have you fallen in love with Saithong? Go and look for her over there by the big *matong* tree.’

Phlai Kaeo replied: ‘I came here for a reason. I knew you’d be here. I decided to run away from the abbot.

If I go back and get found out, I’m not concerned. I’m not afraid of being punished. Let me tell you the whole story, from then until now, clearly and honestly.

I could not help¹⁴ missing you. I could not stay with my mother. I was unhappy, incredibly unhappy. I felt like a blazing bonfire.

I had the idea of leaving my mother and being ordained. As quick as I could I went to a wat elsewhere. But Suphan is a long way, at least a night’s travel. I had to make the journey on my own.

I met Phim but no smile, no greeting, so I became even more unhappy. [70] I met Saithong which gave me a channel, and so I sent a message to my darling to ease my heart.

We met face-to-face when you gave alms but you were still very nervous and wouldn’t greet me. Today we meet with nobody around. I want to offer my friendship to gentle Phim.

¹⁴ speculative, lit: pen kusun don: charity inspires

I'm not making things up to gain something. In truth my mind is full of a million things. I want to be with you and cherish you. This isn't just a lust which will fade and disappear.'

'It's a pity you and others still scold me. With an old playmate, you should be more considerate. Now you seem bent on destroying further friendship. If I object, you'll take offence.

Because we're old friends you think you can snag me as a lover. I don't know what I should think. You seem to think we've been in love for ever. You're fantasizing, no doubt about it.

It's not proper. I forbid it, Phlai Kaeo. This time, let it go. Don't do it again. We've been sitting too long. The servants will come back. I'll say goodbye.' She stood up immediately.

Phlai Kaeo calmly tried to pacify her. 'Your dislike is based on a misunderstanding. Please think again. Sit down. Don't rush off. I'm not making things up to seduce you.

I'm deeply in love and I'm hugely miserable. I feel there's a mountain weighing on my chest. I've prayed to Brahma, Indra, the moon, the whole lot of them, everything in the heavens.

If they don't turn to give me some help, I'll surely die. I cannot expect anything from anyone. Except you, my darling, my love. You can ease the burden in a trice.'

'You speak eloquently, pouring out your heart. If I were naïve, I'd be carried away. Such pleading words can bowl someone over. You thought out what you were going to say here, right?

This is just the beginning of love, and you can already die for it. You're telling me you'll never desert me until your dying day. You braved the forest because of love. You live in constant melancholy.

Human beings are too full of lust. We should not let desire rule belief. It's like food. The hunger always comes to an end. We have to add something salty or sour.

Or boil, or curry, or fry, or grill. Raw or cooked. Any and every way. Anything eaten too often, we get tired of it.[71]

Just think. Even you couldn't bear eating only one thing. Love-making is thrilling. When it's brand new, you want to entrust your lives to one another.

It's like the clothes we wear. Something newly bought seems beautiful. But when times are hard, we have to wear the same thing, day in day out.

Then if we get something new for a change, we put it on and strut around showing off. It makes us feel good.

That intended-to-be-eternal love is the same. Once it's old, you can't drag yourself to look at it. If you do look, you turn away every time. It's reduced to a cloth for bathing. No need to take care of it.

Wash and wash, bash and bash, until it's shreds, rags for wiping up, nothing left. Even sewing the bits back together wouldn't bring back the old fabric as it was before.

It's like a man and a woman saying they'll die together. But how long does that sentiment last? Tongue and teeth are together all the time. Sometimes they get in one another's way

It's like you coming to pour out your heart. Your talking in the hope I'll soften up. I think I do care for you a little. I won't reject your feelings completely.

Go to my mother and ask for my hand. If she's kind enough to fall in with your intentions, I'll consent and make no objection. Even if it was another man asking for me

and mother gave me over to him, but he were not to my liking, I'd tell her to kill me rather than force me against my will. I wouldn't beg for mercy.

If you ask my mother, I'll be happy to have you as husband. But chasing after me to be your lover scares me. People will find it sinful and won't be happy.

You followed after me because of love. That's plainly obvious. So why waste time. Don't carry on with this conversation.

It'll be a pattern that gets repeated into the future. Another thing, the servants will come and see. When it suits you, whatever day, come and ask for my hand, as it should be.

The sun is going down, and evening is coming. Go back to the wat. I'll go home. Don't hang around. If evening comes, I'll be annoyed. If you have more flights of fancy, I'll be embarrassed.' [72]

'What a pity, darling of mine. Why rush to chase me away? I love you enough to beat myself to death. I held off today only because I was meeting you.

To go away until I can come and ask for your hand, still not knowing whether we will be a couple – and what if she does not consent – every day apart from you will be meaningless.

With days passing and so many other diversions, you'll forget me, my beauty. Even if we run into one another in the middle of the road, you'll hardly know me, not like before.

If you have definitely decided to love me, don't run away from it. Let me entrust my heart to you. Please be kind. Just this once, don't be stubborn.

You made a comparison about the human heart – that lust has no

limit, in the same way that we never stop hungering for food. That's the nature of people in general.

A bit of this and a bit of that are delicious. But then what about rice?¹⁵ Passion is unruly, fervent, because love is arousing.

When clothes are old, sad and threadbare, we shouldn't wash them again and again because it will make them worse. But a cloth with a gold thread catches the eye. You don't find such a thing by peeling open a sesame seed.¹⁶

Such a cloth is not easy to make. Before it can be worn, a lot of effort and cash has gone into it. Even when it's old, we try to take care of it well.

We store it carefully in a fragrant chest. Then when there's a suitable occasion like a big festival, we take it out and unfold it so the cloth can be admired and the fragrance is pleasing too.

Even if we have many other new cloths, we still wear this one even though its pattern fades. Let me say goodbye. It's nearly evening. I won't force you even though I'm reluctant to be parted from you.'

He stroked and kissed the end of her sabai. 'Let me enjoy this a bit. Don't be upset. It's very attractive. Suits your fair complexion. Did you weave it yourself or buy it somewhere?'

She tugged the sabai away from him. 'Don't waste your praise. Mother gave it to me. You're acting like a bully with no consideration. What is this, Kaeo? It's not proper. [73]

You love me and want some result. Because we're in the middle of nowhere, are you going to force yourself on me? You don't want to marry, but you'll risk creating a scandal. You're in too much of a hurry.

If you get what you want, I'll be depressed and unhappy and we won't be friends. Give it up, Kaeo. Let it be. You'll have me eventually, don't doubt it.

But it's like being so hungry you eat uncooked rice. It's hard and tasteless, and you have to spit it out. If you go on, you'll annoy me. Let's part.'

'Gentle Phim, have a care. You're killing my love at the first try. Please calm down and stop accusing me. Accept my feelings. Don't shrink away.

¹⁵ This whole passage is a bit chaotic, perhaps intending to give some impression of Phlai's passion, perhaps because of editing out in the C19 rewriting. The idea here seems to be that we like to eat different tastes, but rice is a constant.

¹⁶ Literally, it's not Ta-Bua peeling a sesame seed

I love you honestly with a heart of love. I'm not forcing myself on you.' With rising passions, he pushed her hand away and tugged the end of the sabai.

'Stop punishing me, please. Don't be so angry and protective. Your breast curves beautifully like molten silver. Let me caress it a little. Don't shrink away.'

He embraced her and lifted her onto his knee. 'Why are you pushing and trying to slip away?' He tried to loosen and peel away the cloth. She hung on with a firm grip.

'It's a pity you don't listen. Are you going to kill me here in this field? Making love to me in the middle of nowhere will make people talk. I don't think this is loving me.

It's wrong because we're not married. You should make it official, arrange a bridal house for me, then I'll consent and stop my objections.

My body is not something that's for sale, something to be laid out in the middle of nowhere. Please consider what's fitting first. Go home, Kaeo.

If you go without food, then you die. But you don't die from going without making love.' She lowered her face onto her knees, wai-ed him, and pleaded to be let down.

He tenderly kissed and stroked her hair, then admired her face. 'You are so lovely, so fair, so soft, soft. Your eyes are almost in tears. Please give me a little smile, my darling.

I'm touched by your pleading to let you go, but I love you so I don't want to be apart. Lugging my love away from here will be torture.'

[74]

He snatched her hand and pressed it to his chest. 'Darling, my heart is trembling. Take note of this, in the evening I'll come to the house to find you.'

He lifted her chin and kissed her. He hugged her tightly to his body, feeling her full, firm breasts budding against him. He caressed all over her body.

He took her hand and looked at her fingers. 'So beautiful, these ten fingers, so sensual.' She kept her face pressed on her knees and said nothing. 'I'll say goodbye, Phim, please turn your face nicely.'

The sun was dropping and the shadows lengthening. I-Tao-Hap, I-Phlap, and I-Phli returned from picking cotton with baskets well stuffed. They sang songs as they came.

Saithong wanted to warn Phim that the servants were coming along

the road, so she cried out to the couple: 'Let's go, let's go, it's almost evening.'

Phim wai-ed Phlai Kaeo. 'They're coming! Please go. They'll see us. Do you want to kill me alive? Have mercy. Go, quick, quick!'

Phlai embraced her on his lap, still reluctant to let her down, but as the sound of the servants came close, he was forced to stand up, hide behind a tree, and escape away.

Phim stood up immediately. 'How are the cotton bolls, you girls. The sun is setting so it's time we went.' She left the bushes and walked off.

Saithong walked beside her with a smile. She nudged Phim and whispered teasingly: 'Dear Phim, what happened today? Your back and shoulder are dirty.'

Phim smiled back out of the corner of her eye. 'Don't speak so loud that they can hear.' Then, for Saithong's ears only, 'I'm happy enough to fly away.'

Yesterday I seemed upset all the time. Now I've found a friend to die for. But don't say anything. Nothing happened. Just a little speck of dirt.'

Saithong smiled quietly. Phim gave her a sideways glance with green eyes. They returned home followed by the servants carrying the cotton. [75]

They all went up into the house as dusk gathered and shadows lengthened. By the time the cotton bolls were stored, darkness had fallen.

Saithong led Phim into the bedroom and they lay on a pillow whispering happily. Saithong teased her, 'Now lovely Phim, how was it today, don't hide things.'

Phim gave her a cool look, and rolled over onto her side. She was upright. She pinched Saithong and said: 'Because you'd advised him what to do,

as soon as we had spoken a couple of words, he jumped all over me, just like that. Did you intend to make me ashamed, Saithong? I wanted to cry out loud enough to shatter the field into pieces.

I felt very hurt and I burst into tears. We went two rounds with me bent over and him trying to make me raise my head. He tried to pull the clothes off me. I'd rather die than go on living.

Really, he wanted to jump on me for fun. I can't see the point of feeling resentful. Today I'll take a knife and kill myself to overcome the shame.

I was thinking that you brought me up but, strike a light, this is

what you do to me. I'll blurt everything out to mother, then I'd like to see your face, Saithong.

Luckily, in the thick of it, the servants came. Any later, one would be two already. When we talked, you were all complaints that I wasn't cooperative and it had been a waste of effort to raise such an ungrateful person.

All he wanted was to impale me on his sword.¹⁷ It's shameful to be killed by a wooden sword.¹⁸ He even wants to prolong matters. He says he'll come back at midnight tonight.'

She slammed the door shut, closed the window and barred it with cross-battens. She sat still, gripping a knife, looking angry enough for blood to drip from her eyes.

'If he comes today, have no doubts. If I don't stab myself, you can call me that terrible Phim. Leave the room. Don't tell anyone. Tonight, I'll wait to dawn without sleeping.'

Saithong soothed Phim. 'Don't be so angry. Examine your heart first. Love makes the heart feel hot, uptight, bursting.[76]

Phlai Kaeo is a young man and very virile. He can't restrain his love. He's infatuated, aroused, carried away because he has never been with a woman.

My darling, listen to me. Men have very little shyness. But a woman, even when stirred up with lust, still has to use her guile.

Don't rush to think all this is crude. What he's saying is not far from the truth. His promise for the future is still there. You must think things over carefully.

Phlai Kaeo is a virgin, of that there's no doubt. You too are a virgin, and beautiful. Up to now, nobody has touched you.

You have just met Phlai Kaeo. With only this, do you want to drive him away? You don't have to let him fondle you a second time if you think you'll feel tarnished.

Suppose you find someone else who excites you but then run into the old flame, you won't know where to put your face. A bad deed sticks with you until death. My darling, don't snap this off too hastily and leave yourself alone.

Stop worrying for now. If you don't go to sleep, you'll wake late tomorrow and your mother will be concerned. Phlai wouldn't dare come.

Get some sleep, so I can too.' Saithong walked to her room and went to sleep. Phim continued to mope and moan.

¹⁷ literally, cut open with an acid sword, *dap krot*

¹⁸ *dap thonglang*, erythrina fusca, a toy wooden sword

‘Oh my darling Kaeo. Have you forgotten me already? Are you so angry you’ll chuck me away and leave me lonely?’

If you don’t love me, better not to love me from the start. Now I’m gloomy. Will you come? You promised you’d come to the room where I sleep.

It’s one o’clock already, Kaeo. You haven’t come, and my heart feels empty.’ As she lay pining, the moon sank out of sight, and Phim fell asleep.

Phlai Kaeo arrived at the wat in the evening but did not reordain. He waited for the auspicious time to make a move shortly before midnight.¹⁹ [77]

The moon slid across a star-spangled sky. Phlai stood gazing at the shining clouds and the glitter of the milky way. He dressed and prepared himself.

He made [astrological] calculations for the iron spear²⁰ and big spirit,²¹ the sun and moon, with precision born of expertise, setting his mind at ease. Feeling brave and determined, he strode off in the given direction.²²

At Phim’s house, he put a spell on rice and scattered it around to make everyone sleep soundly. He uttered an incantation which unlocked doors throughout the house.

He rolled a mortar to stand on and climb up into the house. Nothing stirred. He tiptoed straight to his goal and entered Phim’s room.

A lamp lit up the room and its many contents: a low food table;²³ a betel tray; a beautiful cosmetic set; an impressive stool with a carved pattern;

a double mirror; handsome gold ornaments; several betelnut sets made from *nak*; and a curtain strung across the room,

made from lovely silk embroidered with gold displaying Phim’s workmanship. It depicted the story of Sin Suriya taking Nang Rattana across the wide ocean²⁴ and then becoming separated.

¹⁹ at the end of the second *yam* which I think is 9-12 pm.

²⁰ *lao lek*, an inauspicious period

²¹ *phi luang*, an inauspicious direction

²² assuming the calculations indicate an auspicious direction.

²³ *tok*

²⁴ actually wide water. Need to check this story

Rattana carried Singhara through the forest to the sala of the rishi of the ten *thamma*. She paid her respects and begged the teacher

to let Singhara remain there to recover. She took her leave and went to stay with her two brother princes at their grandparents' house, where she gradually relaxed.

The embroidery showed Phra Sin traveling day and night in search of Nang Rattana without finding her, and staying in the garden of Thao Kuta.

'My darling, you are very clever. No mistakes. The skill is excellent.' He carefully drew the curtain, walked forward, opened the mosquito net, and saw Phim's sleeping face.

He kissed and stroked her while she slept. 'You smile as if inviting me to share your pillow. So delicately pretty. Lovely smiling cheeks. Eyes so beautiful when you peep at me admiring you. [78]

Neck slender and cute. Fingernails long and polished to look just beautiful. Breasts full and firm. Faultless. In need of tender loving care.'

To undo the sleeping spell, he blew on her. 'Please don't think I'm here to deceive you. My love, wake up now.'

With a little touch, Phim started from a deep sleep. She turned over and peered upwards to see Phlai Kaeo's face.

She glanced around in fright. 'What? You got in here even though the door is locked. Here, this is forcing yourself on me. It's not polite. You got no satisfaction in the middle of the field, so now you come to the house.

But that's not all that's hateful. You almost, very nearly, shamed me with my friends. I fight you off and ask you to go to my mother, but you gloss it over and change the subject.

Do you think this is love to practice housebreaking? Don't try to patch things up. I'm angry beyond belief. In the field you jump on me and make me ashamed – itchy cotton fiber all over my body.

Your rough hands tugging at my clothing is so crude. You're a good-looking fellow, attractive as a husband. But I'm afraid of being in a house with you. I might not die but my back is likely to be dripping with blood.

Just grabbing my hand or holding my arm, you hurt me. You have sharp fingernails that draw blood. Just your stroking leaves scratches. Please go away at once. I'm not interested.'

'Oh my beauty, my perfect darling, now I've come, please don't chase me away. I'm ready to fight to the death. I don't care for my life. Darling, please don't go on so.

I was wrong so I came to apologise. Simmer down. Don't think I'm crude. I admire your beauty and I caress you with a good heart. It was you, poor dear, who tried to get away with no need.

My fingernail scratched you accidentally when you swiped me away. You were shoving, pinching and hitting out. I'm sorry you got scratched.

I came here because I love you. I was afraid you were unhappy because I hurt you. Where is the cloth that's torn, I'll sew it back together.²⁵ [79]

Give me your hand and let me look. Does it hurt a little, or more than my arm? Let me kiss where it hurts.' He stroked her sensually.

'Who asked you to come here? Even if my hand does hurt, I don't need you to take care of that. The wounded can look after themselves.

You come and grab my arm so easily. You're not shy about playing husband-and-wife. This is a house not a field. I'm not afraid because here I have the neighbors as witnesses.

If you carry on like this and don't leave this room, I'll scream out loud. Release my arm. I'm angry. This isn't right. You can't do what you did in the field.'

'If you have no mercy, kill me. Go on, cry out, loud and clear. Fetch a knife and slash me. Don't think I'm afraid to die.

Make a racket so your mother catches us. I'll stand my ground and not run away. I want to hug you, be close to you, whatever my dearest darling will allow.'

He embraced her tightly. 'Don't squirm. You can't get away. Your two cheeks are smiling happily. May I kiss one? Please have mercy.'

He stroked her a bit, kissed her a bit, caressed her ardently. 'These cheeks and breasts, did you buy them?' 'Strike a light! You're playing with me as if I'm your war-slave. You don't listen to me at all.

However much I pinch, you don't hurt. And my fingernail has broken clean off. Ow! Don't do anything big. Hit and cut as much as you like, I don't mind.

Breaking my fingernail shows you don't love me really. Even with one chang of money, you can't find love equal to that fingernail.' He smiled sweetly, moved closer, and hugged Phim to his chest blissfully.

He pushed her down on the pillow. He put his face against hers, whispering softly. He pushed and rocked her to and fro. Dark clouds gathered in the sky above.

²⁵ She didn't mention anything torn, probably something edited out.

Storm winds howled. The clouds, dark and heavy with rain, swirled, tossed, rolled and tumbled around the sky. The first gust of rain broke from the heavens. Nothing endured throughout the three worlds. [80]

Phim's heart was thronged with love, and her body overwhelmed with sensuality. They lay close together on her bed with faces touching.

She did not want to move from his side. She fanned him, hugged him, whispered sweet nothings, mopped his sweat with her sabai, and mixed fragrant water²⁶ to cool him.

She begged him to eat some sweets. She set up tables on both sides of the bed, and happily gave him betel and tobacco. They whispered sweet-talk,

back and forth, kissing and hugging, on fire with love's ten thousand passions. Neither was interested in sleep.

Moonlight gave way to the chariot of the sun, driven by the god-king from his jeweled throne to put out the light of the stars.

Birds sang. Cock crows echoed around. Flowers bloomed on the touch of dew. The caress of bees wafted the pollen. The sun's chariot raced to soar into the sky.

As the light spread in all directions, Phlai's heart skipped a beat. He said sweetly, 'Leaving lovely Phim is terrible. Parting is like dying.

When evening comes and the sun goes down, I'll come back for sure. Have no doubt. Stay here, I'll say goodbye. My heart will break any minute.'

Phim sighed and softly sobbed. She hugged Phlai with great yearning. 'You came to lie here to make my heart ache.

Emotion makes us silly. I'm in love but it won't be an easy love. From now on I'll be miserable from morning to night. When will this agony end?

You love me, I love you, Phlai Kaeo. But this is like planting a tree and then cutting it down. It's torture. Will this love break because we're far apart?

Will mother hit me and Saithong scold me? Who can I talk to? My chest feels as if I'm lying in a bonfire. When you're far away, how will you know what's happening?

If there's some unhappiness at the house but you're away at the wat, I won't be able to come and find you. At night, Kaeo, please come back. Seeing your face every night will lift my heart. [81]

²⁶ krajae and juangjan

Phlai Kaeo comforted and caressed her. 'I love you. I don't want to be apart and unhappy. But the cock is crowing and I must get away. Don't be worried. I'll come to see you every night.

At sunset I'll escape to come and caress you. I'll come to your room and drive away your misery and sobs. Parting from Phim is like being shot. Come and send me off just beyond the house.'

He tenderly lifted her up and carried her to the door, his face pale and streaked with tears in the dim moonlight. 'This is like karma, suffering and pain in the heart.'

The sky was already turning golden, but he could not leave. He sat down, racked with longing. They kissed and hugged, getting carried away.

'Go inside and close the door, my darling. Don't be sad.' He got up and left. His feeling of love did not diminish with distance but multiplied a hundredfold. He kept looking back, and kept pining more.

Little Phim forlornly closed door. Phlai Kaeo stilled his heart and went away from the house. At the wat, he evaded the abbot, and went to pay respects to the senior monk to reordain him.

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