

5: Khun Chang asks for Phim's hand

[I/82]

Khun Chang was smitten. Ever since the day of the recitation, the fair, gentle Phim was going round and round in his head all the time.

Morning and evening, day in and day out, he yearned to see her face. Even asleep he was drunk on fantasies and babbled. This went on for a month.

Whether sitting up or lying down, he had no peace of mind. He lay on the bed hugging a pillow with eyes closed. When he got up from sleep he felt groggy. He did not feel like eating.

Nothing sour or sweet passed through his stomach. His heart thumped. If someone spoke to him, he did not hear. He was obsessed with Phim.

None of the servants scattered around the house dared to face him. One day before sunrise, I-Krim was standing happily on the stairway.

Just before first light, Khun Chang blearily poked his head out of the window. He thought he could dimly hear the voice of gentle Phim, so he went and opened the door.

He peered around but saw nobody so returned to his bed and moaned, 'Oh Phim, your skin is like the moon!' I-Krim thought he was calling her so she answered him and went in.

Khun Chang was overjoyed to hear a sweet voice in reply. With still bleary eyes, he threw on some clothes. I-Krim crawled up to the mosquito net.

Khun Chang embraced her, laughing with joy. 'My darling, why did you come just before dawn?' He hugged her, kissed her, and caressed her belly. 'Why are you taking fright and wriggling around?'

I-Krim was happy that the master loved her. She did not push him away or say anything. She lay still and let him have his will. Khun Chang fondled her up and down.

In ecstasy, he squeezed her breasts, surprised to find they hung so very long and pointy, not at all like the lovely Phim who entranced him. He stopped and asked, 'Who's come here in disguise?' [83]

I-Krim replied with a happy smile, 'It's me, I-Krim, master. You called me. I was afraid of being beaten if I didn't give in to you. Why do you now accuse me of disguising myself?'

Khun Chang froze dumbstruck. 'Wha-wha-what is this? I call for Phim and get I-Krim! Well, one good thing, you got here in no time.

I-Krim, I called out to Phim but you came. I was feeling randy – no time

to look at the face. Well, a bird in the hand¹...' He grabbed her and caressed her feverishly.

Wonders burst into the river. The boat pitched and yawed. Spume broke over the gunwales, splashed against the housing, and streamed down from the upper decking over the sides.

Khun Chang was carry away with ecstasy. He caressed Krim and beamed at her, but his heart was fixed on Phim. He lay back in his mosquito net with a grin on his face until dawn broke.

I-Krim straightened the betel tray with a smile on her face. Khun Chang walked over to wash his face at the window. His mood blackened.

He put betel in his mouth and stood with mouth open and chin resting on his chest, completely engrossed in thoughts of her. He left his ruan and went to pay his respects to his mother, Thepthong

Thepthong saw Khun Chang's gloomy face and felt his mood was out of the ordinary. She raised her hands to stroke him.

'You seem out of sorts. Your face is as black as a sooty pot or a grimy neck. You're wasting away like a skinny bamboo. Tell me, don't hide things from your mother.

What's the problem? You're too gloomy by a long way. Do you have a headache or eye ache? Why don't you answer me?'

Khun Chang wanted to reply to his mother but he could not. He was bottled up with misery. Instead, he burst into loud sobbing.

He wiped the tears with his hand and said, 'I'm enormously miserable. I feel like my chest is infected and swollen with pus. I feel like a bo tree was felled across my body, [84]

shattering my bones. I'll ache for a hundred years without relief. If things get worse, I might die. Only you can save me.

I've been unhappy since Kaen Kaeo died. I grieve for my dear wife enormously. I cry all day. I've been a widower now for more than a year.

I have heaps of silver and gold. But there's no way of knowing whether this will stay or disappear. How can I check on it when there's nobody to take proper care of it?

There are millions of women but I can't find one suitable to be mistress of the house, to live together, and to help look after the property. I've been all over Suphan looking.

The only one is Phim Philalai, daughter of Siprajan, from the big house at Maids Landing. We've been in love for a long time.

¹ One of the *Sayings of Phra Ruang*, an early-Bangkok collection of proverbs and didactic sayings attributed to a legendary hero-king, runs 'Having iron in the house is like a knife, having a slave in the house is like a wife.' Khun Chang alludes to this saying with the words, 'You're like a knife in the house.' (Red:661)

She's begging me to ask for her hand in marriage. She's worried she's pregnant and will be shamed in front of the neighbors. She bothers me about it morning and evening till I'm irritated. I feel utmost pity for her and cannot ignore this.

Mother, please do something kind for your son. Please go to ask for her hand. If her mother doesn't consent, I'll abduct Phim from their house.

But if she's agreeable, I'm ready to make a generous settlement so there will be no shame with the neighbors. Once she promises for sure, no need for delay. There are good days in the waxing phase of this month.

We must take the most auspicious one.² I'll enchant some beeswax for you to put on your lips.³ Mother, please have mercy on me. Today would be a good day to go.'

Thepthong listened to Khun Chang, not believing a word. She replied, 'Young Phim is very beautiful,

more than anyone else in Suphan province. You look like a Lawa's cloth sidebag.⁴ It will be a waste of effort to try. Let me make a comparison to help you understand.

Phim is as elegant as the moon. You're like a field turtle down below wanting to have the moon far away in the heavens. Do you really think you can get her, my son? [85]

You have heaps of gold and silver. Redeem somebody.⁵ Listen to your mother. Go to the city of Ayutthaya and choose a pretty thing who suits you,

someone with a slender figure like a kinnari.⁶ Stop being miserable. With all your silver and gold, you can get a good one, no problem. Why go begging after someone who doesn't want you?

In the past you and Phim knew one another as playmates. Even when she was a child, she used to give you tongue-lashings. She talked about your bald head all the time. Everybody knows that. Her speech is too overbearing. I don't like it.'

Khun Chang replied, 'But when we're man and wife, won't she be afraid to talk to me like that? Kids play like kids, and I'm not bothered about what happened then.

² Literally, must take the best trap, an astrologers' term (Red: 661).

³ So that her words will be persuasive.

⁴ In other words, shapeless, bulging, untidy.

⁵ Debt and slavery were closely interrelated. People could sell themselves into slave status to raise money, or be forced into slavery because of inability to pay a debt. This line uses *chuai*, a technical term for making a payment to release someone from debt slavery (perhaps to be their own slave). (Red: 661)

⁶ A mythical creature, half-bird, half-human.

But now we're grown up, there are manners. If we live together and are intimate with one another, love will drive away the bad things you're afraid of. Don't worry about this side of things.

I'm concerned for Phim. I've promised her, with my word as my bond, that we'll be married within three nights.

Phim said that if I don't come to ask for her hand, she can't face life and she'll hang herself. If she passes away, do you think I'll want to carry on living?

I'll split my head open with a cleaver and chop my whole body into pieces. I'm in a desperate state and you're not being kind to me, mother. I don't know who else to turn to.'

He lifted his mother's foot and placed it on his head. He rolled around weeping and punching his bald head with his fists. He staggered off in floods of tears.

Thepthong shouted after him, 'You're like a naughty schoolkid who won't listen to the teacher. You sound off with these lies about being her lover and seeing her for a long time.

You don't think. Take a look at yourself, you airhead. You think you're cute but you look like a basket of kapok. I don't see how anyone will go for you. And Phim Philalai is a beauty.

She's got the soft slender figure of a kinnari. Is she going to couple with a pig or a dog and make the neighbors gossip? You're a big liar, all guesswork.

I don't want to walk over there and get a headache and sore feet for nothing. You pretend to cry and plead, but you're a big fibber. Go to your ruean. Get away from me.' [86]

Seeing his mother's mood, Khun Chang got up and left. He went into his own ruean, opened the mosquito net, and threw himself down on the bed.

'Oh my soft gentle Phim. When will I have you lying beside me on the bed as a couple? My chest feels it's on fire. I'll pummel my body to death without stopping crying.

I've never loved anyone like loving Phim. You are beautiful – beautifully graceful, beautifully good, beautiful in every way – looks, manners, coquettishness, so perfect.

Me? I look terrible, ugly. My head looks as if a herd of elephants trampled across it. If I came across a rishi or a monk or a brahman, I'd have him transform me to be like Rama,⁷ the triple king.

Then when I walked past her and she saw my face, the radiant Sida would go off with me. But this body of mine is an ugly mistake. Nothing good about it at all. Terrible!

⁷ Hero of the Ramakian, the Thai version of the Ramayana.

I'm no good at courting. I was built for wrestling and that's all I know. But I don't have to stay here with my face buried in the bed, torturing myself.

It's late in the afternoon and the sun is easing. Phim will go out to romp in the water along with the servants. I'll take my retinue and go down there.

Through the power of the merit I've accumulated, I should be able to bribe someone. Nine or ten chang, who cares! Invest a little to achieve success.'

No sooner had the thought come to him than he got up and looked at the sky in dismay. 'Oh, mother! Damn! It's rather late.' He called his servants who came up in big crowd.

He got up and sat down in a turmoil. He grabbed a bag and put in five chang of cash. He threw on a yok and an upper cloth. He doused himself in sandal oil so the scent permeated the air.

He cinched his waist with a belt, making him bulge and balloon out, quite out of keeping with his lower cloth. His chest hair straggled down to his belly. He quickly marched down from the house.

The servants followed behind in a bunch. Khun Chang saw several people watching them. He scolded the servants to follow their master attentively. 'I'll thrash your backs till you wail!'

Reaching the landing where Phim bathed, he turned and whispered to the servants [87] to hide in the bushes and watch from a distance. 'If someone comes, don't let them see you.'

Khun Chang hid in the *chingchi*⁸ bushes. He unfolded a cloth and wrapped it round his head. He waited for Phim with his face beaming and gleaming like a lotus leaf.

Phim and Saithong were indoors embroidering silk on a frame. As the sun began to drop, they set off to bathe.

The servants went along in a band. At the landing, they changed clothes, gaily went down into the water, and scrubbed themselves clean.

I-Ma, I-Mi, I-Si-Siat, and I-Kiat went off to play hide-and-seek together. Some ran off, some gave chase, and others just stayed put.

They ran around noisily playing the-cat-went-courting and hide-Nang-Jan-chirping.⁹ They chose I-Kok to bend over double, jump into the water, and come up.

Then I-Ma, I-Mi, I-Si-Siat, and I-Kiat dived in the water and I-Kok chased after them. I-Rak with a big tummy was not so nimble. I-Kok pounced on her every time.

⁸ *Capparis micracantha*.

⁹ Guess there are names of kid's games in this line.

Ai-Hong went to squat in a clump of wild sugar.¹⁰ Her head stuck out with a vacant look, laughing as she pee-ed.¹¹ Khun Chang lost his temper and hit her with a stick. Ai-Hong pointed out to him,

'Look, there's Mistress Phim on the riverbank, washing herself. Really, really big breasts.' Khun Chang scolded, 'Don't talk about her, you old crab.'¹²

Ai-Hong spoke back brightly, 'I thought from the time we came down here, you shouldn't let love get you all tensed up. This body here costs just one chang.

It's shaped like a double-ended drum.¹³ I've got a charm a teacher gave me. Just now in the water, I raised my eyebrow and made her fall over. She turned over on her tummy twice.'

I-Kok chased after I-Rak, grabbed for her leg but missed and got the end of her cloth. They plunged under the water wrapped together, and came up with eyes bulging, shaking off the water.

I-Rak spewed out enough water to fill a big bowl, crying 'Horrors! I almost had it there.' She lay on the ground and her lower cloth slipped off. [88]

Ai-Hong rocked back and forth, clapping her hands. 'It looks like the mouth of a horse fish. Horrible!' She threw back her head and shook with laughter.

On the riverbank, Saithong and Phim laughed so much they could not stand up. Khun Chang got up feeling irritated. Phim's cloth slipped from under her armpits.

Khun Chang saw her round sculpted breasts. His hands itched. His face froze. He stared. He stood on tiptoe, shifting his body back and forth like a tukkae. 'Oh mother, today I die!'

Phim and Saithong called the servants, 'Let's go. The sun is dropping.' They all climbed up and trooped off with the mistresses in front and servants behind.

Khun Chang came out from the *chingchi* bushes followed by his noisy gaggle of servants. He caught up with Phim on the path, and walked beside her, shoulder-to-shoulder, with a broad smile on his face.

Saithong and Phim stepped off the path and let Khun Chang walk on ahead. As he passed them, he pretended to recite a love poem¹⁴ within their hearing.

¹⁰ *Khaem*, a sort of reed.

¹¹ speculative

¹² More of a pun, because 'there's *mother* Phim' 'Don't talk about my *mother*, yours was a *samae* crab.'

¹³ Don't get this

¹⁴ *Phleng yao*, literally long song, often a poem in the form of a love letter.

'Oh, heavenly montha¹⁵ flower by the flowing leat...'

Ai-Hong thrust her neck out and continued her master's verse:

'...I saw you and took you for a sweet,

Palm fruit rippling in syrup for me to eat...'

As Khun Chang walked past,

Phim burst out angrily, 'You mother! You old baldie, shiny pate!' She took a short cut to the house with the servants following.

Khun Chang's face puckered in the beating sun. He stopped far from his compound. First he told his servants to take their time, wander around, and avoid going home.

Then after a bit, he told them to keep quiet and walk in an orderly fashion to the house of Siprajan.

At the gate, he enquired from a servant who told him her mistress was in. 'Please be kind enough to tell her that we are here.'

The servant climbed the stairway up to the house, sat down and relayed that Khun Chang had come to visit the mistress. [89]

Siprajan came to the window and saw Khun Chang. Her heart sank. His forehead was damp and shiny with running sweat. 'Why did he come like this in the sun?'

She invited him up to the house. 'You've been out in the sun. You look drawn and drenched in sweat. There's water for washing.' She bustled around shouting at the servants.

Khun Chang stepped up to the verandah, knelt down and entered the big house. He sat on a mat and raised his hands to wai Siprajan.

She reciprocated and invited him to take betel. Once he had taken, she asked, 'Why did you come in the hot sun?'

Khun Chang coughed and spluttered without a word coming out. Gradually he managed to mumble something. 'This is all beyond me.' He lowered his face and sat there saying nothing.

Siprajan watched Khun Chang struggling to mumble something. She asked over and over what the matter was.

'What is it that's making you talk in circles? Get it off your chest. No need to be hesitant, we're not formal here. What have you come for?'

Khun Chang lowered his body onto the pillow and said, 'Please, first, my dear lady, this is all beyond me. I have nobody to talk to.'

Kaen Kaeo died many months ago. I have heaps of silver and gold but there's nowhere to keep it. It's getting stolen, which is not good. One pair of eyes is not enough to watch over it.

¹⁵ Talauma candolei, a bush of the Magnolia family with large, fragrant, light yellow flowers.

Today many chang disappeared, and this was not money that was buried or in chests. They broke the lock and took it in broad daylight. Cloth also gets stolen from time to time.

If there was someone to look after all my property, silver, and gold, I would hand over lands, house, and servants, and make her the mistress of the house.

I would not mind a penniless widow¹⁶ as long as she had manners and would not cause shame with the neighbors. I need someone to help look after things, run things, and give advice. Someone like Phim Philalai.' [90]

As Siprajan listened to Khun Chang weaving his story, greed rose in her breast, and she could hardly stay still. She burst out, 'If you have silver, why should you go without gold.

Just select a good person, someone meticulous who knows how to look after things, manage your affairs, and hold onto your servants and lands.

Someone just like yourself, Chang. Find a good wife who is a suitable match, who won't make you ashamed in front of people in the street,¹⁷ and who can talk nicely in the manner of gentlefolk.

Someone equal in social rank, who knows how to sew and embroider. But around Suphan, I don't see anyone on equal standing with Chang.

In truth, young Phim is almost an adult, but her status is no more than middling, comfortable, not like some in Ayutthaya.'

Khun Chang's face brightened into a smile. 'Finding someone else like Phim would be impossible. I think constantly of having her as my partner.

When I consulted my mother Thepthong, she was reluctant to agree. Because we used to play together like brother and sister, she thought it was not good, too close.

At the cremation of our fathers, I consulted her on having this childhood friend as my bride. But my mother was afraid you wouldn't consent so she didn't come to see you.

If you don't think this is improper, I'll get some senior people to come and talk with you. I'll hand over cattle, buffalos, lands, silver, gold, and cloth.'

Phim and Saithong were listening in the next room growing angry and agitated over what their mother was saying. 'That old baldie!' 'What a liberty!' 'How demeaning!'

Phim opened a window and pretended to call a servant: 'Ai-Phon! Where have you got to, you bald, hairy ape? There's work still to do, but you pay no attention.'

¹⁶ guess, it may be a misprint.

¹⁷ Literally, Khaek and Thai who come and go.

Bald-headed old Phon replied, 'What's all the confusion, mistress?' He came out of his hut with his head gleaming, and strode up the stairs. [91]

Khun Chang heard Phim's abuse and felt ashamed in front of the servants. He quickly took leave of Siprajan and stumbled down from the house.

Old Phon passed him in the middle of the stairway, stepping aside with his body trembling. Khun Chang held his head up high, and said awkwardly through bared teeth, 'Long time no see, not even once.'

Old Phon raised his shaking hands to wai. 'In the past, I sinned because of a cockfight.' Khun Chang ignored him, swept past, and stumbled off clumsily with his face drawn.

In the west, the last rays of the sun disappeared behind the big mountain. A moon of great power moved across the sky in its brilliant celestial carriage, pulled by ten thousand heavenly maidens, past the rain clouds, round the rim of Mount Yukhanthon.¹⁸

The world was bathed in the sublimely beautiful moonlight of this majestic, haloed celestial body.

Little Phim yearned for Phlai Kaeo. For many days there had been no sign of him, morning or evening. She went to consult Saithong who was older and wiser.

'Phlai Kaeo has disappeared for many days now. I'm disappointed because he made promises and things are not turning out as he said.

I can't blame you alone. I must blame my own heart for being too easy. I was taken in by his eloquent words and his good looks, and now I've wasted my love.

I don't know what to do. I'm hurt, worried, heart-broken. If he's honest and straight, he shouldn't be so evasive. He should come round to show his feelings.

Whether hot or cold, we could at least talk. But if he doesn't come, what should I do? I don't know who to turn to. Do you have any idea, Saithong?

Then that Khun Chang dared to come and see mother. He jumped right in and asked for my hand, just like that. Mother's inclined to agree. She's bowled over by his wealth. [92]

Are we just going to sit around here waiting? Oh Saithong, I don't think I can go on living. Please think of something and tell me what to do.'

Saithong hugged her tightly and comforted her. She lifted Phim's chin and helped wipe away her tears. 'Don't be sad. The time Phlai said has not yet

¹⁸ One of the mountains surrounding Mount Meru, the centre of the universe in the *Three Worlds* cosmic geography. (See Reynolds and Reynolds, 276-8.)

passed.

He means to love you till his dying day. He's not just trying to lure you as a plaything. He made many promises.

Perhaps he's sick, or too tired, or is tied up by important matters. Perhaps word has got to the abbot. That would be messy. Perhaps this is why there's no sight or sign of him.

No need to be upset and impatient. Tomorrow I'll go to find him and clear up any doubts, for better or worse. Don't torment yourself.

If he's well and has no commitments, I'll bring him here. So lighten up, stop going round in circles, or else you'll waste away and lose your figure.

Powder your face and wait for Phlai Kaeo. Tomorrow evening the fever will disappear.' With these comforting words, she fanned Phim to sleep.

Saithong left Phim sleeping, went to her own bed, and slept soundly. She woke promptly as dawn broke.

In the early morning sun, she got out of bed, rinsed her mouth, washed her face, and went to see Siprajan.

She sat down and said, 'Last night Phim had a very strange dream which seems bad and is rather worrying.

In the dream she was asleep at midnight in some other house, when it caught fire and collapsed to the ground. She was burnt and blistered by the fire.

Phim is very shocked, almost out of her wits, not knowing what it means. I'm going to Wat Palelai to tell everything to the abbot.' [93]

Hearing the story of the dream, Siprajan burst out, 'Go quickly, quick quick. Don't wait. Tell the abbot the whole story from beginning to end.

Take along some betel and pan. Oh, dear Phim! And lots of sweets and fruit. Soon it will be late. Go in time for his morning meal.'

Phim smiled broadly. 'Mother doesn't know.' She peeled betelnut, rolled pan leaf, put in lots of sweets and oranges, along with rice and bottle gourd curry – only good things.

Saithong left the room to bathe. She put on a black silk upper cloth with a colored lining, and hurried down from the house with the servants in tow.

She reached the wat and took all the servants to pay respects at the big kuti so that nobody would be suspicious. Then she told the servants,

'Go to the wihan and collect the phikun flowers¹⁹ which have bloomed and fallen on the ground all over the place.' The servants went off and Saithong took charge.

¹⁹ *Mimusops elengi*, a tree whose small white flowers have a lasting fragrance. Often found in wat.

She went to offer rice, curry, and sweets to the abbot, hiding the betelnut, pan leaf, and tobacco to give to novice Phlai.

He was arranging oranges and various dried fruits for offering. Saithong waited for a good moment. All the monks were sitting around eating in a circle.

When they finished eating and went to their rooms, Saithong purposefully looked to see nobody was around, and popped into the novice's room.

She gave him the betelnut, pan, and tobacco, and spoke to him in a rush. 'Little Phim has been waiting for you for many days. She's desolate with worry.

This evening, you must go to see here. She waits and waits but all in vain. It looks as if you seduced her for your enjoyment then threw her away to be miserable.

She's suspicious and uncertain. She doesn't know the real reason why you're late. She asked me to come and find you, Novice Phlai, to see if you're sick or have some other difficulty.

Yesterday when we went to bathe, that vile Khun Chang acted very crudely. [94] Then when he walked past her, she lost her temper and poured all sorts of abuse on him.

After that, he went to see mother and said funny things. He dared to ask Siprajan for her hand. He thinks everything will fall into his lap.

That's why I've come. Phim said she can't stand it. She said I'd acted as a go-between. I persuaded her to give herself to you, and now she's heart-broken.

You said all kinds of good things. She looks as if she's falling apart. She thinks I deliberately made her suffer. The poor thing is in a pitiful state.

She's worried she's tainted now, and you're easing away. She's anxious about the future. Bad news spreads far and wide.

Now Khun Chang has come to ask for her hand, and she doesn't know what to do. She's your lover and she intends to be your wife, but she can't talk to you when she needs to.

So she asked me to come and find out what's up. She suspected there was something wrong from the start. You said you wouldn't make her suffer shame. What can be done?

Are you going to face up to this or just save yourself? Don't hesitate. Tell me now. You're happy because you're far away. But I'm close to her so I'm the one suffering.

It's like trying to fry peas with sesame. When the sesame's hot, the peas are not ready. By the time the peas are cooked, the sesame is ruined.

Staying here at the wat is like playing outside the stage. I'm at the house so I'll get all the blame. Think what to do and tell me. It's late now, almost time I must go.'

Novice Phlai smiled knowingly to assure her. 'Everything you say is true. I made a promise to you.

Soft gentle Phim and Saithong are the two most dear to me, equally. I'll fight to the death. My heart is pledged and will never weaken. Don't imagine my love will fade.

Let's talk this through slowly, Saithong. You're my elder. There's no need to be cross. Keep the matter quiet. Don't let it get out and reach the ears of others. [95]

Every day I long for my darling. I can't get her out of my mind. The problem is the abbot. He makes me study and practice recitation,

from after breakfast until midnight, the third watch, or beyond. The night I went to see Phim, the abbot reprimanded me, beat me, and tied me up.

You're worried about getting beaten because of me. But you gave an undertaking already, so please see it through. I'll repay you, don't worry. Please plead my case with Phim.

The day I can escape the eye of the abbot, I'll come straight away. I've kept my word many times in the past. Don't be suspicious of me.'

With these words, he blew a love charm. 'Please be my supporter, Saithong. Is your mouth sour?'²⁰ Have some betel.' He enchanted it and gave it to her.

Saithong put it in her mouth and chewed. The love charm multiplied itself a hundred thousand times and descended through her. A wave of desire made her nerves tingle and hair bristle.

'Poor people have to put up with nothing but hardship. While you're having fun, I'll be sitting quietly in my room. I'm like a banana leaf for wrapping sweets.

People unwrap and eat the sweets without caring a fig about the banana leaf. Because I'm poor I have to go through misery in order not to lose both of you.'

'Make merit first and see the results later, Saithong. First things first, tell her I'm a good person.

As for your earlier complaints, please be less angry. Forgive me. Every night I feel concern. Where did you get beaten? Let me open your shoulder cloth to see.'

Saithong was taken aback and pretended to be cross. 'What is this, pulling at my clothes to peek at my breasts? Are you a sham monk? This novice is too lustful.'

²⁰ A standard question when offering betel.

At that moment, elder-monk Thai was returning from almsround. He heard a muffled female voice. He spied through a gap in the wall and saw them pulling at each other's clothing. [96]

'A round waist and big breasts like balloons! Blimey, she's a meal for the novice. Young Kaeo is bad, but daring too – in broad daylight, not afraid of anyone!

This is improper behavior in the monks' quarters. I'll tell the abbot to come after them.' Still, he watched for a long time, feeling excited, and then walked away in agitation looking straight ahead.

Some distance from the abbot's quarters, he shouted out 'Novice Kaeo has a woman!²¹ Oh Lord Abbot, I saw him bothering a woman. They're tugging at one another's clothes!

The abbot gnashed his gums, rolled his eyes, and quivered in anger. He got up, seized a walking stick, and strode shakily over. He opened the door with a crash.

Just in time, Novice Kaeo and Saithong ducked behind a water jar. The abbot loped around, thrashing about with his stick, shouting at the top of his voice, 'You lousy rascal! You lousy slut!'

Saithong slid down a trapdoor and hid. The abbot cried out, 'I'm sick of this misbehaving! You were attending to me in every way up to the midday meal.' The novice ran round and round evading him.

He jumped out of an open window and galloped away, his robe streaming behind him. The abbot ransacked the kuti, finding nobody. Still in a rage, he bellowed,

'Ugh! That dog-faced novice and his ghost woman have defiled our kuti.' He sat down to pound some betelnut, but the pestle remained motionless while he scolded until his heart was content.

Saithong slipped down the trapdoor and scurried away from the abbot and the kuti. She turned to find novice Phlai had disappeared and had no way of knowing whether this was good or bad.

She stopped in the middle of the wat and straightened herself out. Still worried about the abbot, she wanted to get away. She called out to the servants, 'I-Mi! Quick, I'm going.'

The servants recognized their mistress' voice, gathered up the phikun flowers in a cloth, and were ready in an instant.

Saithong said, 'I-Mi, take one basket and hurry back to the house. Go up to Siprajan's ruean and smile brightly.' [97]

Siprajan saw Saithong coming. 'Why were you so slow going to the wat? You came back very late? Wherever you go, you take such a long time? Did

²¹ This line uses *si fai*, lighting a fire, the wat term for such misbehaviour (Red:662).

the abbot interpret the dream as good or bad?’

Saithong replied, ‘I was slow because the abbot was taking his meal and we had to wait however long he took. He went off on almsround for ages.

His advice is that this a very bad omen for Phim. She must be very wary for the next three days. After that he says things will be fine.’

She took her leave, went up to her room, and huddled whispering with Phim. ‘Novice Phlai says he’ll fight to the death. His promises are all sincere.

He’ll find a way to disrobe and come. Even if there’s a sword waiting to cut his throat, he won’t retreat. He’ll come soon, as promised. Please listen to me and don’t be downhearted.’

Novice Kaeo had fled from the abbot and could not return. The more he thought, the more he felt confused. ‘I’ve been at Wat Palelai for a long time.

Yet I’m certainly not yet expert in various branches of knowledge. There’s still Wat Khae²² which is said to be excellent. My mother Thong Prasi told me a long time ago that the abbot named Kong is a good man.

Also he was a good friend of my late father. I’ll go to Suphan and find him. I want to study further and be knowledgeable. Yet I’m also concerned about Phim to the depths of my heart.

If I run away and break my word, she’ll complain. I value honesty, but if I disrobe now, my knowledge is not yet powerful. I must stifle my longing for her.’ Having made up his mind, he threw his robe across his shoulder and hurried off.

He left the fields and made for the path through the dense trees. He reached the elephant enclosure²³ and made enquires about the wat. People pointed the way and he hurried to the sala without stopping.

An elder-monk sweeping the wat turned with a start on seeing him. Novice Kaeo asked him, ‘Please be straight with me. Where is Abbot Kong?’

Elder On pointed out the way, ‘Beyond the three kuti, there’s the scripture hall.’ Novice Kaeo happily rushed across.

The abbot got up and came out to the terrace. Novice Kaeo paid his respects and crawled up to him. [98] The abbot asked, ‘Where have you come from, young novice?’

Kaeo replied, ‘I’m the son of Khun Krai who died. My name is Phlai Kaeo, a loyal fellow. My mother is Thong Prasi.

She told me to seek you out as a teacher, so I came to Suphan and asked

²² A wat on the west bank of the Suphan river in the northeast of the old town of Suphan. It is probably an Ayutthaya-era wat, which was abandoned for a long time, and revived after the Second World War. See Manat Ophakun, ed., *Prawat wat khae* (History of Wat Khae), 8th printing, 1 August 2001. To attract visitors, the wat has recently built a ‘House of Khun Phaen’ in the compound.

²³ The enclosure was on the west bank of the Suphan River, by the old bridge (now on Malai Maen Road). See Manat Ophakun, ed., *Prawat wat khae*, p. 30.

for details. May I request to study knowledge further here.'

The abbot said, 'Oh yes! Right, I haven't forgotten. I used to be a good friend of Khun Krai. I'm still disappointed that he died without putting up a fight.

He'd lost his knowledge. Why didn't he come to see me? If anyone dared come after me, there'd be no match. I'd cut him down and be famous for stabbing a Lao.

Even if they raised an army of ten thousand from all over the land, I'd tie on a **mystic** cloth and defend myself famously. Before even one night passed, they'd flee, waving white flags, and abandoning thoughts of victory!

I'm very disappointed. I miss him every day, like losing my own right eye, you could say. I'd even intended to entrust him to handle my funeral.'

He turned to look at Phlai. 'You're a puny thing, not tough looking at all. Yet you made it the long way through the forest from Kanburi to Suphan to find me.

Is Thong Prasi well? We're all scattered far apart in different places, and never know if one another is sick or anything. Stay with me. I'll give you knowledge.

I have a duty to Khun Krai who has died. You're exactly like him. Don't worry, I'll teach you the texts from beginning to end. I won't let you get killed like your father.'

Novice Kaeo said, 'My father was not at the end of his powers, and had no thought of retreat. He'd drunk the water of allegiance and had no thought of rebellion.

He was ready to fight to the death to uphold the honor of a family line of soldiers. He would never go back on his word. **Knowledge** is something that deteriorates like everything else. The king did not support him, so he depended on his own merit.

If father had had a bad thought towards the land, or cast aside his honor totally, there would be trouble. For that reason, they cut him to dust. Your Honor, don't feel bad about it. [99]

As for my mother Thong Prasi, she gets older and older but she's still strong, not ailing, and has not lost her memory. She's happy and well.'

The abbot said, 'Oh, Thong Prasi's getting old, is she? I haven't seen her face for about ten years. You stay here. I'll teach you the military arts.

Honor must be preserved without fail. Because your father wasn't careful, he became dust. You're tired from walking through the forest. Go to stay in the kuti next to the central hall.'

Novice Kaeo took his leave and went to the room where there was a bed, mattress, and pillow. His thoughts turned to soft gentle Phim, and he grew

sad.

In the evening, the longing worsened. He lay in his room thinking only of her. At the last rays of the sun, he crawled into the inner room

to fan the teacher and service him in other ways so that he would be well-disposed towards the novice. The abbot began to instruct him immediately:

how to make an army go to sleep; how to capture soldiers; how to call up spirits; how to enchant cloth with power to fight courageously; love charms; disguise; invulnerability; undoing locks and chains;

all the arts of war; all knowledge for overcoming enemies; how to calculate auspicious times for everything; how to enchant tamarind leaves to become wasps and hornets;²⁴

expertise in covert war tactics; how to be the commander of over a hundred thousand troops; how to conduct any war anywhere; breath to induce love;

how to stun people or turn them mad; how to have the strength of a lion; how to escape; how to draw others' protective powers; and how to raise spirits to whisper everything.²⁵

He learned all branches of knowledge, old and new. He repeated them to know by heart. He thought of Phim, but did not go to her, because he had fallen in love with studying knowledge.

²⁴ At Wat Khae, there is a massive old tamarind tree, possibly 500 years old, now legendarily associated with this line.

²⁵ As a sort of secret service, spying on the enemy and providing intelligence.