

10: Phlai Kaeo gets Laothong

[I/170]

Saen Kam Maen, the district head of the big village of Chomthong, and his beloved wife, Nang Si Ngoen Yuang, had loved one another for a long time.

They had a daughter, Laothong, who they had brought up protectively to become a flourishing and totally lovely young lady, now at the end of her fifteenth year.

She was as radiant as a lotus on the water's surface. She had not felt the harsh afternoon sun, and her face was without mole, freckle, or other blemish. Her shoulders were wide, and her waist slender as if cinched, and gently rounded.

No man had touched her because her two proficient and worldly-wise nursemaids, Nang Wiang and Nang Wan, looked after her, hidden away in the bedroom.

When Nai Phlai Kaeo came to attack, some villages escaped and hid in the forests and hills, while many were hunted down and rounded up.

The only exception was Kam Maen's Chomthong which survived because Phlai gave it protection, and so the place was still densely populated.

As the warring had now subsided and peace returned, Phlai Kaeo would soon return to Ayutthaya. Ngoen Yuang and her husband reflected on the merit of the army commander.

'Hundreds of villages and thousands of cities felt his wrath. Many had to flee, kicking up the dust. Others were captured. Men and women fell dead. Only our village has cause for happiness because he held off.

Now he's going to return to the southern city. We don't know what he'll do. If we just sit around waiting and doing nothing, he might sweep all of Chomthong village away with him.¹

That would mean ruin for every household.' The two discussed what to do. 'Our daughter Laothong is very dear to us.

But we must give her to the army commander as a token of our respect. He looks as if he'll love her. Even if our child goes to the Thai capital, she should be able to hold her head high and not feel ashamed. [171]

If the army commander accepts her, then we won't have anything to fear from the Thai army. Our people won't be scattered to the winds. They'll be happy.'

The two agreed and summoned their beloved Laothong. Wiang and Wan

¹ People were one of the main spoils of war

came along and sat close beside her. The two parents caressed Laothong.

‘Now, our darling Laothong, you’re a beautiful virgin girl. Soldiers have come from north and south to fight around here. Rice, betelnut, and everything else is running scarce.

Hundreds of villages and thousands of cities have felt their wrath. It may be beyond our ability to hide you. Soon the army units will return to the Thai capital. We think they may round up people here.

Property will be destroyed, husband separated from wife and wife from husband, with not a stitch on their backs. I’m afraid this is how it will be.

Their army commander looked after us and stopped his men chopping us down. That’s why we still enjoy each night and day. But I’m worried now that he’s leaving.

There’s an ancient saying about digging a pond but not eating the fish yet. Leave the fish alone so they are lulled into a false sense of security. Don’t damage the lotus in the pond.

Make sure the water is not murky. Left to themselves to feed, the fish will multiply. In the same way, they’re leaving us alone, doing nothing. But when they leave, they’ll corner us.

There’ll be no way to escape. We must deal with this thorn before it pricks us, not allow ourselves to be trodden underfoot like grass. You’re like a candle.

Your old father and mother feel we’re in a dark thorny forest and can’t see a way out. But there’s one ray of light, and that’s your radiant beauty. We put a lot of thought and effort into bringing you up.

When you were tiny, you depended on your parents. Now your parents are old, they must depend on you. We will give you to him to love.² My dear child, don’t be upset.

He’s a top soldier and skilled fighter. He should do well, without a doubt. You will be able to depend on him in the future. Chiang Mai and Ayutthaya [172]

will probably be at war with one another for some time yet. People will come from this way and that to trample all over us. You’re a fair and attractive girl.

If you stay in Chomthong, everyone who comes will swarm all over you, trying to court and seduce you, and very likely you’ll end up as someone’s wife.

So, tough or easy, the rest of your life will be far away. This way nothing bad will happen to our darlin. He’s a young lad and you’re a young girl, roughly the same age. Your fate should be good.

Wan and Wiang will go along to protect you and look after you until death. As for servants, we’ll give you what we can. Don’t let your face cloud

² Literally, to caress all over

over and start crying.’

Laothong raised her two hands above her head and burst into tears, writhing around and trembling all over.

She embraced the feet of her mother and father with tears flowing down her face. She wiped them away but they welled up and fell again. She pleaded forlornly,

‘My lord and master, do you no longer protect this child? If you hadn’t sheltered me so closely, I wouldn’t exist.

You washed and fed me, morning and night. You never failed to look after me and answer my every need with compassion, and that’s why I’m still alive today.

I had meant to die at your feet, to repay my debt of gratitude to mother until death. Every night I think that I’ll not be far away even if I have a husband.

But those thoughts were useless and my hopes are dashed. I’ll have no chance to repay you. We’re all together now, but soon I’ll go, and when will I come back to see you again?

It’s hard to be forced to leave you. If I could be close and just see your face passing by each day, that would be enough, and I wouldn’t be upset.

But this is miles away, and for years! It’s like the other end of the earth, of the whole three worlds! I’ll truly be wretched all the time. I don’t know when I’ll be able to come and visit. [173]

I won’t know whether you’re hurt, sick, dead, or alive. Day in, day out, I won’t see your face. Who’ll help me get over problems and dangers, like you used to do with such kindness and sympathy?

Even if he loves me a lot and is good to me, even if he tries to look after and please me in every way, having a husband is not the same as the mother and father who brought me up.

He’s a stranger, truly, mother. Why should he care about me? If I displease him, he won’t pay me any attention. It’s not as if he’s still a kid.

I’ll just have to close my eyes and follow the torch, and when I bash into something and break my neck I won’t feel a thing. He’ll already have a nice wife and kids, so I’ll run into jealousy over everything.

How can I respond? The Thai have sharp tongues. They’ll gang up to put me in my place. If I talk back, they’ll get angry.

Being a minor wife has hundreds of problems. You can’t open your mouth to argue. The husband will get along fine with them. If he goes on loving me, then I can just about survive.

But he can’t keep watch the whole year round. There’ll be times when he’s not around. Then they’ll bully and intimidate me with words. If I’m stubborn, my head will flow with blood.

And it won’t only be the mistress. The servants will try to trample me

down too. When he comes back, they'll make up stories and if he believes them he'll beat me too.

So I'll be crushed whichever way, reduced to the level of a servant fighting with the other servants. The more I think about it, the more my heart sinks. I was born for nothing if I can't be me.'

Saen Kam Maen and Ngoen Yuang felt dejected. Both feared that what their daughter was saying was right. Their hearts shivered and their tears fell.

But to overcome the village's problem, they suppressed their own feelings. They embraced their daughter and tried to console her. 'We've looked at your horoscope. Nothing will happen, my darling. Your fate is to be gentlefolk.

I've already looked it up in the manual. It says this year you'll have a partner. Your horoscope is the same as that of the beautiful Sida [174]

at the time she was kidnapped by the ten-faced giant.³ Ram followed and attack them fearlessly. Eventually she came back to Ram. Don't worry. You will have someone to depend on.

Only at the very beginning will you have a rough time, but only a little and not heavy. From then on it will be plain sailing, with no worries.

You were born with this fate. So please stop crying and go to take a bath. In the evening we'll go over there.' The maids and servants

consoled her and took her away. They filled a bowl with water, changed her clothes, applied krajae and sandalwood, and powdered her face to look fair.

They swept her hair into a neat chignon, decorated it with waving golden flowers, inserted a beautiful jeweled hairpin, tucked in shimmering golden aubergine flowers,

and hung chains of diamonds and crystal. She wore a breast-chain⁴ across her chest glittering with gold inlay and gems; bracelets on both wrists;

a ring with diamonds, jet, and emerald; and a sabai of ripe yellow⁵ color, full of fragrance. Her mother and father escorted her. They went down from the house surrounded by their servants

carrying many gifts. All their relatives came to accompany Laothong without needing to be told,

bringing whatever they had as gifts for the army, carried along in a jumble of covered containers.⁶ They reached the camp and were received by people

³ This is the summary plot of the Ramakian, the Thai version of the Ramayana. The ten-faced giant is Totsakan, the Thai name for the character known as Ravana in the Indian version.

⁴ *Sangwan*.

⁵ *Sisuk*, bright yellow with a touch of orange, ripening rice/mango.

⁶ *Talum hap* (Red 667).

from the army

who turned out in droves to gaze at the Lao girl. ‘Wow!’ ‘Really cute.’ ‘Immaculate face.’ She walked through the middle of them with her curvy waist, full breasts,⁷ and complexion glowing like the moon.

‘This kid sashays along like a dancer.’ ‘Fair skin, curvy waist, she looks like a sculpture.’ Eyes glazed over at such truly good proportions. Ai-Mun said, ‘If I got her, I’d never release my grip.’

They came to Phlai Kaeo, and sat down quietly and politely with hands raised in a respectful wai to the army commander as the gifts were set down in piles. [175]

Phlai Kaeo returned the wai of the two parents and invited them to sit up on a carpet. Laothong also shifted, and sat demurely with her hands in a wai.

Phlai Kaeo glanced at her. ‘She’s lovely. Very like Phim.’ The parents met his eyes. He picked up the betel tray and talked about something else.

The two parents talked in the manner of people of substance. ‘We have come to see the Thai noble to thank you very much for your protection.

Hundreds of villages and thousands of cities met disaster and did not survive. They were cut to pieces like fish on a slab, until the water flowed so thick it was undrinkable.

But our little Chomthong village was not destroyed because the soldiers respected our property. They did not loot and create resentment.

We thank you sincerely. Even the merit of parents is incomparable. Now you’ll march the army back to the Thai city. As you don’t have anything to take back with you,

we’ve brought whatever gifts we can for provisions along the way. We don’t have much silver, gold, and other things to give to all the troops who came up here.

We have only our daughter, Laothong, and a few little things which we thought of bringing to you. We offer you Laothong, our dear and charming daughter, to be your servant until death.

She’ll leave her parents to go along with you, and will be without any kin, sir. We entrust her to you. Please don’t abandon her.

We’re afraid what will happen when she’s out of our sight. If you don’t take care of her, she’ll lose her head. But if you’re kind, it won’t be bad.

This old couple will be far away. When would we go down to see her? If in future you come up here again, kindly pay us a visit to give us peace of mind.’

Phlai Kaeo replied with a smile: ‘Sir, don’t be too sad. I understand what

⁷ *Nom pen kong*, breasts in piles

being far apart and out-of-sight means. [176]

If you're offering me the daughter who is like your own hearts, it must be because you love me. Perhaps it was some merit accumulated from the past which made me be kind to Chomthong village.

Every other village we trashed, but here we gave protection and did no harm. This wasn't because someone tipped me that you have a lovely daughter.

I honestly didn't know. I was sitting quietly and found out just now when you brought her here. I'm happy beyond comparison, even beyond getting heaps of silver and gold,

and thousands of men and women. This is something I didn't expect. No woman came to lie with me here. I resolved to sleep alone and didn't care.

As you've brought Laothong to me, I'll look after her in a manner which befits her dignity. You need have no doubt. I won't want to part from her in a hundred years.

I'll be beside her until death. I'll not tire of her and let my heart wander away. Whatever wealth I acquire, I'll not share with anyone else as much as with her.

From all the spoils of war and down to the level of little things, I'll give to Laothong. You do not need to worry about that.'

With these words, he ordered servants to prepare clothing, silver, gold, cattle, buffalo, elephants, horses, and people to be given to the parents.

The villagers responded by presenting their gifts in a joyful spirit. 'Sathu! You have been like a father to us.

You should be taking the silver and gold you got back home, but you're giving lots to us little people. The more you are a big brother, the more a little brother looks up to you. Definitely you should be our lord.'

The parents paid their respects to the army chief and were about to leave. 'Take care of our daughter,' they said. Laothong was distraught thinking of her mother.

She prostrated and wai-ed, racked with sobs. 'When will I come up to see you?' All of them were bathed in tears. The two parents tried to bottle their emotions. [177]

The silver, gold, clothing, and other things given by Nai Phlai Kaeo were carried away. Some people chatted happily, but the two parents were already missing Laothong,

and the servants grumbled about their mistress going away. When they reached the house in the afternoon, father and mother went into their room, distraught and tearful.

When the sun took its leave of the sky and dusk fell, Phlai Kaeo the army commander had candles lit to give light,

and assembled his valiant warriors along with the lords, chiefs, and

overseers from the provincial cities. All prostrated in dread of his power.

They discussed the conclusion of the war with Chiang Thong. Clerks drew up an inventory of the massive number of families that had been captured, and unit heads⁸ were assigned to check them.

The large volume of weapons and equipment abandoned by the Lao when they scattered was placed under seal as royal property. Fine silver,⁹ things of value,

good elephants and horses were entered on the inventory. Cattle and buffaloes were given to the troops. Trays, tables, and other receptacles were given to whoever won them in battle.

‘Don’t try to hide things and don’t get into fights over them. Everything is above board. In five days we march back to the city.

The Phraya of Chiang Thong is liable to a major royal punishment. He will be escorted to Ayutthaya to hear the king’s order on what is to be done.

If the king wants to punish him, we will plead his case. Kamphaeng Phet and Rahaeng will also go along to give evidence to the king in his favor.’

These orders were passed on by word of mouth, and promptly implemented. People made their farewells.

After the nobles left towards the end of the first watch, the conscripts in Phlai Kaeo’s camp folded up the carpets. [178]

Servants fell asleep. Candles went out and darkness fell. Phlai Kaeo glanced around and then made towards Laothong. He drew back the curtains,

but found she was not there. He asked a Lao in her service who said she had gone to stay with her maids in another room. She had been crying since her parents left and the maids were looking after her.

‘We went there for a chat, but she is still too upset.’ Phlai Kaeo ordered her, ‘Go back down there right now,

and tell the maids, Wiang and Wan, to bring her up here because I want to talk with her about her future.’

Sao Phromma received the order, got up and went straight into Laothong’s room and sat down close beside her.

She told the three of them who were sitting together that Mom Phlai Kaeo had asked her to go up for a talk. Then she took leave.

Knowing that Phlai Kaeo wanted her to go up to the bedroom, Laothong clung to the two maids sobbing,

⁸ (*nai muat*)

⁹ Literally ‘cartwheel silver,’ *ngoen kha kwian*, a name for finely grained white silver (Red:667).

and trembling with trepidation. ‘Wan and Wiang, go up first.’ She raised her hands in a wai and pleaded, ‘I’m no good at talking with nobles.

I was brought up to this age without even a servant setting eyes on me. My parents fed me morning and evening. Day and night I didn’t see anyone.

Now the army commander wants me to go and talk. What’ll I say? I don’t know anything at all. I’m not going to survive, Wan.’

Wan and Wiang tried to console her. ‘Why get into a negative frame of mind?

Your mother and father sent you here as his servant. Why be stubborn? You must learn how to please him and make him kind towards you. Then you’ll do well. [179]

If you annoy him and spoil his mood, he won’t be friendly and might be cruel. Our friends and neighbors will suffer the consequences, maybe your father too.

He gave us protection and that’s why you were given to be his servant. You’re meant to be the face [of the family] now. Your mother and father will depend on you until their dying day.

You’ve forgotten **I-Sang**. You’re not listening to us. You’ll bring disaster on your mother and father. Please have a care for your old relatives. They sent you to be his wife so they can depend on you.

Don’t make a fuss. We’ll go as your companions and wipe your cheeks when they’re smudged with tears. It’s a pity you’re so gloomy and listless. Let us powder you to freshen you up.’

She was in a confused daze. With the two maids on either side, she walked up to the curtain and knelt down to crawl in. The maids accompanied her,

but Laothong hung back and sank down on the floor. The two tugged at her hands. The curtains parted and a blinding light illuminated the sheen of her skin.

Laothong bent over, buried her face, and crouched hiding behind the curtain in a funk. The maids pushed her towards the front, but she cowered down behind them.

Phlai Kaeo saw her hiding at the back and understood she was still nervous. Even behind the maids, she looked lovely.

He gazed at her radiant skin and beautiful face and could not help falling in love. He felt exuberant and eager. He addressed her with a broad smile.

‘Precious, sit up. What’s the matter? Don’t hide in the shadows. Please sit in the light. Let’s talk together calmly. May I ask what problems you’ve had in the past?

The day the army came to Chomthong village, were you frightened? Other villages fled in fear, so how come your village took the risk of staying put?

Or did someone tell you I’d be kind and not round everyone up? Or is

there a good person of some sort,¹⁰ and that's why you didn't run off and abandon the village?' [180]

Wan and Wiang, crouching and looking up with their hands raised in wai, nudged Laothong to respond. She didn't say a word.

So the two of them smiled at Phlai and burred answers to his questions. 'The day the Thai army attacked? We didn't run away in time because we didn't know what was going on.

Besides, we're under Lamphun. There's no cause for war. Everywhere's peaceful. So everyone protected their property and families. They feared they'd die if they ran away.

We thought it would stay quiet and peaceful. Only people in that house hid away. The headman told us not to go into hiding but stay put in our houses and not get concerned.

Even if the army captured the whole village, we wouldn't be separated from our families. Thanks to your merit, you gave us protection and so Chomthong still exists.

Even then, we're still anxious. So giving Laothong to be your servant, she's meant to be our face. May we rely on your protection until death.'

Phlai Kaeo replied with a smile, 'Perhaps I'd made a lot of merit, and so I persuaded the officers and men not to do harm to Chomthong village.

But really, I didn't expect to get a beautiful wife to share my room. This evening I saw a lot of faces coming, and the two parents brought Laothong.

She's exactly what I like. Even if I got Chiang Thong it would be less pleasing. Why isn't she talking? Is she unwilling?

You two maids close beside her, please ask her to dispel my doubts. If she's not willing to love, it doesn't matter. But she shouldn't cry, it dulls her cheeks.'

Wan and Wiang thought up a ploy, with good intentions. They nudged Laothong. 'Mistress, why are you silent and not talking?

If you do well, we two can depend on you. But if you resist and don't listen to us, you'll have to go to Ayutthaya but you won't see our two faces because we'll run away back here. [181]

We brought you up, and expect to rely on your merit. If we can't, we'll go elsewhere. It's a waste of effort to instruct you day and night when you just whimper and don't listen to us.'

Laothong heard what her maids were saying, but found it difficult because

¹⁰ In many places, 'good' means versed in the supernatural arts. Perhaps this means someone with the ability to predict the future.

she had never spoken in Thai.

Talking to a man also made her shy, and she was trembling all over. But she was afraid the two would abandon her, and there really would be nobody else.

She had to force herself to speak, but still turned her face away in shyness and embarrassment. The maids pinched and prompted her. In a tremulous, scared voice, she said,

‘I agree to be your servant. I’ll go to the southern city. But I’m worried to breaking point about what I’m leaving behind. I’m lost and I don’t know what to say.’

Phlai Kaeo watched her speaking without raising her face and knew she was still nervous. Further conversation would take a long time.

He reached out and took a betelnut from the tray. Holding his breath, he recited a sacred formula. Knowing she had trusted the maids for a long time, he passed it to them.

‘Please offer this betelnut to Laothong. You two both take from the tray. We’ve talked until late. Please go now and come again another day.’

The maids took the betelnut and offered it to Laothong who took it without raising her face. She feared he would not let her go unless she ate it, and so put it into her mouth. The mantra thrilled her.

Since arriving that evening, she had not once looked at Phlai’s face. Now under the influence of the mantra from chewing the betelnut a little, she stole a glance at him.

The sight of the army commander made her break into a smile. She wanted desperately to crawl over to him. Phlai Kaeo saw her manner and knew she was excited by the Love-Spirit mantra.¹¹

He turned to talk to the two maids. ‘Please go now and come again another day. Laothong is already yawning. Time to extinguish the lights and go to sleep.’ [182]

The two maids exited, closed the door, and hurried away. Laothong could not tear her eyes away from him. She did not leave and wanted to be his wife.

Phlai Kaeo got up from the bed and walked over to close the door of the room. His hands groped around and found Laothong. She sat still and did not cry out.

He sat down close to her. ‘Who is this? Nothing comes out of her mouth at all.’ She pushed his hand away from her breast in surprise. ‘I know who this is now – Laothong.’

¹¹ *Thepranjuan*, name of a mantra.

Precious, why are you sitting here. It's not suitable.' The time was getting close to dawn. He stroked, kissed, and fondled her, then lifted her onto the bed in his arms,

and lowered her gently onto the mattress. 'Don't worry, I'll rap-khwan.' He smiled as he caressed her feverishly, and breathed in the fragrance of her krajae sandal.

Her skin felt velvety soft. Her breasts were pointed like a lotus when the petals are about to burst open. She was fragrant, sweet, and very loveable.

The storm rumbled, and fierce clouds gathered. The ground shook and dust scattered in the monsoon wind. The crash of thunder rampaged across the universe. Nothing could withstand. Water flooded the whole three worlds.

The storm subsided, darkness dispelled, and the moon again shone brilliantly. Both were in ecstasy. He struck a flint and lit the lamps.

Laothong lay face down on the bed feeling drained. Phlai kept close beside her body, and went on gently kissing her, keeping her heart spinning.

He lifted her chin and got her to sit up and take some betelnut. 'Isn't your mouth sour? How can you stand it?' He lifted her in his arms onto his lap. Though she was listless, her young breasts were soft and beautiful.

He kissed her hair and pressed his face against hers. 'Sit up and open your eyes. I want to ask you a question. This is the truth, I tell you. I love you enormously and I'll follow whatever you desire.

If I didn't have my official army duty, I wouldn't go back down there. I feel sorry for you. Leaving your parents will be a constant source of sadness. [183]

Even though I'll be there to caress you, thinking of your parents will make you cry. I feel sorry for them too because they'll be miserable. With them staying and you going, it'll be heartbreaking.

But if I were to abandon you in Chomthong, I wouldn't stop thinking of you and I'd be frustrated. To get a wife and then leave her would be heartbreaking too.

Either way, a love has to be broken. We'll go down together. Don't cry. Or, if you want to stay, it's up to you. I won't complain and make you feel bad.'

Laothong shyly averted her face. Her passion had not yet subsided. She clung close to Phlai's chest and did not want anything to change.

'My old parents are lovely. They took care of me until I'd grown up, and I haven't repaid them very much yet. I'll miss them more than I can describe.

Leaving the parental bosom to come to a husband, I don't know how things will be. While it's brand new, we say we love one another. But when we get to the southern city, I'm afraid.

If you're nifty enough to have two loves, I'll be in difficulty because she's

your boss. If you love me and look after me, I'll just about survive. But I'm worried it won't work out with your wife.

Don't worry that I'll stay home here. Out of love I agree to follow wherever you go. Love brings humiliation, but I'll face it until I die before your eyes.'

Phlai Kaeo smiled, *rap-khwan*, and replied: 'I love the beautiful Laothong more than a hundred of other people's loves combined.

Even though I have a wife, don't worry. It won't be as you think. I look after all my lovely ladies, big or small, on equal level.

Darling, though you're now an orphan with no kin, don't be afraid and miserable.' He soothed her with insistent caresses which stirred her full of passion.

They fondled and whispered sweet nothings. He nuzzled her cheeks, caressed her breasts, and gently lay his cheeks between them, lighting flames of lust which burnt her heart. [184]

They went on fondling without a nap or feeling sleepy until almost dawn. When the sun rose brightly, sprays of fragrant flowers burst into bloom.

Bees caressed their petals, and the coel uttered its sweetly melodious call. They clung close in ecstasy for a long time. Then Phlai Kaeo drew the curtain and went outside.

The war prisoners prostrated. A tray was brought with water and a towel. A betel tray was placed inside the room. Phlai Kaeo went out to sit with his nobles.

In the room, Laothong thought up a plan. 'As I'm going to be away from here for ever, I'll leave a record so my skill is well-known.'

With this idea, she called the two maids. 'Wan and Wiang, come here. I've had this idea.

I'm going down to the southern city and who knows when I'll return home. I'm good at embroidery so I'll embroider a tapestry

and offer it to the wat in Lamphun to serve as a record in the future. The two of you go off and find some good cloth.' They made all the arrangements

for grinding, mixing and boiling to dye the silk a glossy bright purple. It was put in a frame and stretched evenly. She sat, intent and joyful,

with the two maids on either side to thread the silk. She embroidered the lord of the demons leading his army

to do battle under the bo tree.¹² He was angrily kicking his elephant to

¹² Doing battle with the Buddha. While the Buddha is meditating under the bo tree at Bodhgaya, he is attacked by demons (*mara*), but remains supremely composed and thus renders their assault harmless. Finally he touches his fingers on the earth, which summons Mae Thorani, the earth goddess, who rings from her hair a torrent of water which washes

charge. His soldiers transformed their bodies into various shapes. Some wore glinting armor.

Some carried clubs across their chest. He rode an elephant as high as Mount Meru, and carried poison arrows, a glittering short sword, a shining crystal discus, a mace,

a trident, throwing knife, bow, twin-edged dagger, and shields for his arms and body. His valiant elephants had upcurving tusks. A tall and powerful great lion followed behind. [185]

A magnificent horse like the Palahok horse,¹³ equipped with beautifully ornate saddlery, high-stepped elegantly across a field. People riding great oxen overflowed from a troop column.

She embroidered the army's standard waving against a pall of clouds which darkened the sun. The gods of every direction¹⁴ fled away. The scene shimmered with gold everywhere,

lustrous bright purple, and red like the red in vermilion. She embroidered luxuriantly pretty trees with leaf and branch, and birds swooping after one another.

Different species stood out as if alive – pecking, looking around, and flying away. She embroidered Suthat, one of the seven ranges encircling Mount Meru, and also Winantok, Karawik, and Yukhanthon.¹⁵

Next she added five bands for the ocean,¹⁶ and the river Ganga, crystal clear and full of rippling, splashing water, with kinnorn¹⁷ coming to bathe and drink.

She embroidered attractive lotuses in bloom; bees gliding and hovering; many four-legged beasts on the ground; and a mass of creatures feeding and flying around.

Little Laothong sat from morning through until sunset. Phlai Kaeo came to take a look. Entering the room, he was dazzled by the tapestry.

He stood watching her embroider, 'So loveable and so skilful too.' Sitting humbly with her face down, her whole body looked beautiful. 'Her face is just like Phim.'

away the demons. This scene is a favorite subject for mural painting in Thai wat, generally on the end wall opposite the Buddha image.

¹³ See note in chapter 2.

¹⁴ *Rasi*, the divisions of the zodiac

¹⁵ *Sattapan*, the seven hills or ranges surrounding Mount Meru are Yugandhara/Yukhanthon, Isandhara/Isinthon, Karavika/Karawik, Sudassana/Suthat, Nemindhara/Neminthon, Vinataka/Winantok, Assakanna/Hatsakan (Reynolds and Reynolds: 275-8).

¹⁶ Sidantara, in pictorial representations often depicted as five bands, see the sixth colour plate in R&R.

¹⁷ *Kinnornwithaya*, where the *withaya* means a class of celestial beings below the level of deva but with the capacity for flight [Childers Pali dix, 606]. Kinnorn are the male half-human, half-bird creatures which were born from the toe of Brahma and dwell in Kuvera on Kalaish. See the fifth colour plate in R&R for kinnorn bathing in Ganga.

The longer he looked, the more he was carried away by memories of his beloved Phim. Her skill in this embroidery captivated him because Phim had the same skill. Watching brought a smile to his face.

He sat close to her but got excited and had to leave. He stood up, went into the room, and lay down on Laothong's bed, lost in thought until he fell asleep.

Laothong and her two maids lit lamps and went on embroidering without sleep. When the sun came up, it was complete as she intended.

They cut the tapestry from the frame. The two maids bathed her, powdered her face, and perfumed her with krajae and sandal. Then they went to see Phlai Kaeo. [186]

The three prostrated beside one another. Phlai Kaeo came and sat close to Laothong. He was still thinking about Phim. He said, 'Your embroidery is very skilful.

You're more knowledgeable about the story of the demons fighting Buddha than any woman in the capital. Even in Ayutthaya, nobody can match the skill of Phim – ow! – Laothong.'

Laothong heard him slip up over the name. She stretched out her hands and nudged both the maids. She thought and answered very deliberately: 'This tapestry of mine,

I intend to offer to Wat Chedi Luang.¹⁸ Please go with me. Because I'm going to the southern city, I'll also have a statue made of me.

It will lessen my old parents' suffering from missing me. Our home and the wat are close enough to pass by. I'll have the statue inscribed with the name *Phim*.'

'Oh! Look here. What's making you apprehensive? Your mouth is as thin as if it were painted with vermilion. So you think my wife is called Phim.' He smiled and stood up.

They went to the wat in Lamphun. Laothong and the two maids went behind him, followed by the servants all dolled up, and lots of men in the rear.

They prostrated and paid respects, and then went over to arrange for Nai Sa to mould the statue. The servants pounded the mortar, and added water steeped in cinnamom tree bark¹⁹ and cattle hide.

When it was mixed to the right consistency, the couple sat together watching him mould the statue. It was exactly like her and totally beautiful.

The figure was inscribed with the name Laothong. She called the two maids who happily prostrated before the tapestry, and threaded the cord to hang it up.

¹⁸ The name of a wat in Chiang Mai not Lamphun. Another mistake in northern geography.

¹⁹ *Mong*, cinnamomum iners. Steeping the bark gives stickiness. (Red:667)

Then she sat and offered a prayer: ‘Oh lord, may this tapestry I have embroidered completely in one night and one day, and hung as an offering to the holy image,

help me towards nirvana and wealth without decrease. Should I die, may I go to heaven. [187]

May this statue and tapestry remain for a hundred years. If and when Lamphun disappears, let them disappear together.’

After this prayer, she prostrated to take leave and called Phlai Kaeo to return to the army camp. They arrived in a good mood.

That evening, Phlai Kaeo and Laothong lay together in the room in blissful happiness. After Laothong went to sleep,

late at night when the moon shone brightly, Phlai Kaeo’s thoughts turned to home. ‘My gentle Phim must be missing me every night and day.

The war was over quickly. As soon as I get the military order, I’ll go back to bliss. How many more days!’

He was too pent up to sleep soundly. The more he thought the more he felt bad, but had to bottle it up in his heart.