

11: Phim changes her name to Wanthong; Khun Chang claims Phlai Kaeo is dead

[I/188]

Phim slept alone and lonesome in the bridal house, straining for news of the army, but no news came.

Every night, she missed him so much she could never fall fast asleep. In the daytime, she lay engrossed in graphic dreams, sleeptaking as if possessed by spirits.

For no reason, she would rush out of her room, laughing, crying, and babbling deliriously. As happens, she contracted a fever which would not go away, just got progressively worse.

Saithong tried to soothe her, but she had no ears for listening. 'Oh, my brilliant Phlai Kaeo, don't you care for me at all?'

Her old mother, Siprajan, watched her daughter wasting away with grief. Many doctors came and went, but their medicine had no effect.

Whatever the doctors wanted was given to them. All the servants bustled around in confusion. The whole house prayed, at a loss to know what was the matter.

On consultation, some doctors said she was not dying. Others said they could find no problem. Others said tetanus¹ had entered her heart. Others said the fever was caused by menstruation.

Others said the spirit of the house was running in and out of her. Siprajan rolled her eyes and did not know what to do. She sounded off about the doctors, 'You're no good. You sit around eating and eating happily.

When the patient cries out like a cow mooing, you don't go to look, just laugh. Why should I let you look after her? Get out of my house!'

The doctors left with Siprajan's scolding echoing in their ears. 'Sending for doctors to see my daughter is just a waste of betel and pan. I'm fed up with it. [189]

She's so thin her eyes are bulging.' She cried and hugged her daughter. She tended to her for a long time without her attention wavering for a minute.

¹ *Bat thayak*, Mc gives as tetanus

'I don't know what you've got. I think you're just upset in a big way. The doctors have given you every medicine in the book. Cost a packet already.

Please try to eat something. You've set your mind on waiting for young Phlai Kaeo. But since the army went, we haven't had any news about what's happened.'

She stroked her daughter to console her. 'Would you like some rice porridge? I'll make it for you. Why don't you say anything? What's up? Has some spirit taken possession of you? Tell me.

Oh dear daughter, why has this happened? Is it Phan Son my husband? I didn't know his spirit had come. Don't be offended. I'll make an offering of liquor, rice, turtle, and fish,

and send the merit to him. It'll help you recover. Why are you sticking out your tongue and rolling your eyes? Young Phim has a fever. Please help.'

Phim was uptight and upset. 'What spirit has come and from where? My father gets blamed for so much. I'll die within days.

My heart is so very, very heavy. Don't bother tending to me, mother, it won't go away. What to do to see the face of Phlai!' She hugged Saithong close and whimpered.

Siprajan's body trembled and her tears flowed to see her daughter so out of sorts. Her thoughts turned to the abbot.

She got up, came out of the room, and called the servants. 'Where have you got to?' They put betel and pan on a tray and hurried off to Wat Palelai.

On arrival she went straight to offer betelnut to the abbot. 'Young Phim has some kind of fever. None of the doctors in Suphan can shift it.

She's babbling without making sense, as if possessed by a spirit. She's wasting away with grief so much I don't think she'll survive. Oh abbot, please look at her stars and explain things.' [190]

Abbot Ju promptly examined the timing. When the meaning was clear, he spoke. 'Young Phim's luck right now is bad.

She's in the same position as Sida when she was abducted by ten-faced Totsakan. Unless she stays away from her husband, she'll die. If we take action, there'll be no problem.

She must change her name to Wanthong. Then her sickness will go away, she won't die, and she'll come into wealth.'

Siprajan took leave, happy the abbot said she would recover. Arriving at the house, she cried out, 'She won't die. The abbot says

so, for sure.’

She prepared rice, fish, banana, sugarcane, little sweets, and everything to do a soul ceremony for Phim.

She called on her daughter’s soul. ‘Oh, soul! What’s right or wrong, don’t get lost. Don’t go off into the wild woods. It’s very lonesome on your own in the forest.

Don’t wander off to see the tiger, lion, bear, porcupine, treeshrew, mole, rabbit, rhino, elephant, sambar, gibbon and langur, all dashing about. The orchids² will seem to be speaking—spooky!’

She scooped up rice and fish and threw it. ‘Away with all diseases and perils, including thorns and splinters!’ She tied a black thread round Phim’s wrist, extinguished the candles, and changed her name to Wanthong.

Before long, Wanthong began to eat, to sleep soundly without dreaming and sleep-talking, and to put on weight day by day. Siprajan gradually cheered up too.

Khun Chang heard Wanthong’s fever had gone. ‘Phlai Kaeo has disappeared off to war with no news, either good or bad,

about when he might return. The Lao have probably cut open his liver so he fell down in the shit. What magical powers does he have? If he’d taken Chiang Thong, he’d be back by now.

Well! I’ll take this opportunity to ask for Wanthong’s hand. It’d be better if she lives with me. I’ll talk to her mother Siprajan and tell her young Kaeo is dead.’ [191]

He summoned his servants and sent them to tell old Kloi and old Sai their master had invited them to the house. The servants ran off and gave the invitation to the two old ladies who promptly arrived at Khun Chang’s house and went in.

Khun Chang pleaded with them. ‘I need your help. I can give silver and gold without paying a thought. Kindly go with me to ask for Wanthong’s hand just this once.

Her husband, young Kaeo, went off to war. They were defeated by the Lao and he was stabbed to death. Nobody survived. Now, about Phim.

Her mother changed her name to Wanthong. The astrologer foretold she’ll come into wealth. Please help by going with me to ask for her hand.’

Old Kloi and Sai did not know Khun Chang was being tricky. They were taken in by the thought of getting cash. They agreed and

² The text has a specific orchid, *nang krai*, *habenaria susannae*, sometimes called the Susana orchid.

went off.

The two old ladies bathed, powdered themselves, combed their hair, and put on new clothes. Khun Chang selected a servant who he knew from experience could be trusted.

He whispered his orders, 'I have some important business. I've put my faith in you before. Hurry over to the wat.

Collect some bones from the bodies in the graveyard, and put them nicely in a new pot.' The servant hastened to the graveyard and arranged a pot of bones as ordered.

Khun Chang took the pot and put it in his room. He dressed in a golden yok and a woolen upper cloth. He lifted up a mirror to look at his head, and was upset when he saw his bald pate.

'I'm so angry I could bash it myself. It's foul, hopeless, no bloody good at all! Nothing at the front, nothing at the back. Awful!' He slapped on a couple of cupfuls of soot

and smudged it over his head like a kid playing. He combed the hairs one by one but they did not hide the smooth patch. He used a small stick to arrange the hair in rows, then daubed on tons of pomade.³ [192]

'This straggly little bit of hair is smaller than the vacant bit. It's the hair of a slave. So ugly! I can't be bothered to comb it. What a pity. I've enough gold and silver to redeem over a thousand slaves,

or buy over a hundred elephants or horses. Why can't I have enough hair to cover my head? If only I could buy some. What fun to have a hair cut and admire the styling!

If I'd known I'd be bald from birth, I wouldn't want to be born such an outcast.'⁴ Burnt up with frustration, he plunged into the inner room,

picked up the pot of bones, and tied it up in paper. He summoned the servants he could trust from all those gathered kneeling around. He gave them the pot of bones and set off.

They came down from the house around noon. The two old ladies walked in front. They arrived at Siprajan's house and asked for her.

The servants said she was inside and ran off to tell their mistress. 'Khun Chang has come with. He's waiting at the bottom of the stairway with oily eyes.'

Siprajan opened a window and called out a greeting to Khun Chang. 'Your face is bathed in sweat. What have you come for? Please come up.'

³ *Munai*, Tani oil mixed with soot and lime, used as a hair cosmetic (Mat:687).

⁴ *Samsam*, someone thrice wicked, low, degraded (Mc:??).

Khun Chang walked up the stairs with the two old ladies beside him. They sat down with their eyes rolled up, raised their hands and wai-ed one after the other, repeatedly.

Siprajan returned the wais but couldn't keep up. She turned and pushed the betel tray towards them. 'Why have so many of you come? What brings Auntie Kloï and Auntie Sai here?'

Khun Chang screwed up his face and pretended to whimper. He wiped away the tears dropping from his eyes. He brought out the pot of bones and set it down.

'These are the bones of young Phlai Kaeo. He was stabbed dead by a Lao. They were brought to me. The Phraya of Chiang Thong was in two minds. He sided with Chiang Mai but then switched

and pretended to side with young Phlai Kaeo. They marched the army through the forest, halting to sleep several times. At dusk, [193]

the Phraya of Chiang Thong crept up and stabbed him. Red blood dripped into his lungs. He cried out but the assailant fled, and young Kaeo died quickly.

His men came to the city and were clapped in prison. Many people suffered a lot. Ai-Mak sent the pot of bones.' After these words, Khun Chang put on a sorrowful face.

'He died so young! Just thinking of young Kaeo, I'm downhearted. He shouldn't have boldly volunteered so he died and made Phim a lonely widow.'

Siprajan listened to Khun Chang spinning his tale. 'Young Kaeo is dead! Oh no! I've been waiting and counting every day.

Wanthong was overwhelmed by bad luck, grief, and illness. She had a fever but didn't die. Now young Phlai has died before her. They were in the bridal house such a short time.

Wanthong cried endlessly, beyond consolation.' She shouted out to Wanthong, 'Oh my darling, your heart is broken.'

In her room, Wanthong had heard what Khun Chang said. At the sound of her mother wailing, she came out, saw Khun Chang's face, and said angrily,

'Who says my husband is dead? Who's making up this bad news? You cobra, you big trickster, you just bought this pot for ten cowries, didn't you?'

She stamped her foot down bang in the doorway. 'A curse on your mother's ancestors! I can't be bothered to shout at you.' She went back into her room with tears welling, and collapsed crying on the

bed.

‘Oh my darling Phlai Kaeo. I don’t believe this baldie. He’s making it up to stir things up. It was his deviousness that got you sent off to war.

Now the toady turns up with a story and a pot of bones to fool us. How can this **bastard [ai mae yap]** say these things! He’s back-and-forth and inside-out all the time.

Thinking about it makes me lose heart. When a husband goes off **like this people say, well, if he hadn’t gone, nobody would come around to see you.** I’m at my wit’s end, dear Kaeo.’ [194]

Siprajan was very angry at her daughter for sounding off. ‘Oh good people, please pay no attention to her. Previously she wasn’t like this.

Since she had the fever, she’s a bit crazy. Whatever I say, she takes no notice but complains and makes a big row. I can’t be bothered to beat her. You haven’t seen young Kaeo’s ghost, have you?’

Old Kloï and old Sai saw an opportunity to butt in. They fluttered their eyes and whispered, ‘Well, my dear Siprajan,

for ages the law has been that anyone who dares volunteer for war and comes back defeated gets the chop. That’s the law laid down by the ministry.

And if someone dies in war, his wife is seized to be a royal widow, and the kids too. And the conscripts who come back defeated are rounded up and sent to the inner jail.

Wanthong will have to be a royal widow. That’s something to worry about. It’s tough. Got to do something about that. Let Khun Chang take her as wife.

He’ll think of a way to fix things in the capital. He’s got bags of silver and gold he’s ready to use. Don’t let this blow up like a big fire. Find a compromise before it goes too far.’

Siprajan was racked by floods of tears. ‘Wanthong’s a widow. Her husband’s dead. We won’t see his face. Who’ll protect us?’

Khun Chang’s a big millionaire. He can shell out silver and gold without a thought. We can depend on him in the future.’ With this in mind, she said,

‘Wanthong’s husband has just died. We can’t sit still and let her become a widow. If there’s a law case, it’ll be a bed of thorns. What you ask for depends on how smart you are.

But the field is wide and the road is long. I don’t know where to

begin. If young Phlai isn't dead and comes back, there'll be an issue between them in the future.'

Old Kloï and old Sai said, 'Kaeo died for sure. The conscripts are in jail. And even if Phlai Kaeo did survive and came back, [195]

you can say you didn't know and it won't matter. They may impose a fine on us. If you consent, make an agreement now. You can't delay. It'll be dangerous.

If they seize her and take her off, it'll be a big noise in the city. Fix things up right now. At the end of this waning month, make it official.'

Siprajan agreed and said, 'On the third of the waning moon, come to the house. Hurry and don't delay. I agree for sure and won't change my mind.'

In her room, Wanthong heard her mother giving her away. She leapt up, shaking her head in anger, and shouted at the servants.

'Where's my Saithong? Go and call Ai-Phrom to me. He doesn't do his duties, morning or night. A curse on his mother's clan!⁵ What's he thinking of?'

Saithong heard Wanthong calling herself and Ta-Phrom, and rushed to her.

Bald old Ta-Phrom came and sat down humbly, looked up and asked, 'What did you call me for?'

Wanthong wagged a finger in his face and shouted, 'A curse on your mother, you useless bald git. Don't you have any sense? You're a servant but you don't look after the house.

The only thing you're good at is lying. You deserve to be slapped into a pile of dogshit. You were supposed to be watching the gate but you closed your eyes and let a pack of dogs stray in.

Piss and shit all over the place. That mangy dog is making a row barking, and the bitches are howling. Why do you let your mother's ancestors make such a racket?'

Hearing Wanthong's mouth, old Kloï and Sai sat with grim faces. Khun Chang pretended he was deaf and didn't know what was going on, until it became too much to bear.

He said to the two old ladies, 'Time's getting on. Let's go.' He wai-ed Siprajan who repeated, 'Don't forget. What we've agreed

⁵ *Kotra mae meung.*

must happen quickly.’ [196]

Wanthong shouted out again. ‘Hey! Where have you got to, Grandma Mi? You don’t do your duty morning or evening. Wherever there’s a chitchat you’ll be sitting there.

You have a wagging tongue, you shitty slave. Your head looks like a scraped coconut. As weird as cabbage boiled in coconut milk. You’re descended from a bunch of lying owls.’⁶

Kloi, Sai, and Khun Chang hurried out of the central hall, down the stairs, and away from Siprajan’s house.

Old Kloi and old Sai said, ‘We’ve lost face. I don’t wish to come here ever again to have my ancestors dug up and reviled. I wouldn’t come back for a pile of gold.’

Khun Chang said, ‘It’s not like that. Wanthong was speaking in riddles. She told me it’s a woman’s ploy. She wants my mother Thepthong to pay a call,

so she talked about mother’s ancestors, meaning: please ask your parent to come. I should get her as wife. Don’t be disheartened. Nobody is like my darling.’

In her room, Wanthong yearned. ‘Oh my brilliant Phlai Kaeo, how could you really be dead?

On the day your life ended, I should dream a little something, but there’s been nothing, and no bad omen giving the news. The men who went with you haven’t come back.

They’re saying that when the boss dies, the men are jailed. But it’s beyond poor me to find out. There are so many obstacles everywhere.’⁷ I don’t know how things are in Ayutthaya.

Ever since I was born I’ve never once been to Ayutthaya. The day I went to see my husband off, I saw only Banglang Canal.

The bo tree! We planted them together so if anything happened there would be a sign. If Kaeo is dead and gone, the middle bo tree will be dead too.

The more I think about it, it’s awful of mother not to find out for certain. She’s fallen for that villain’s story and consented to give me to him. [197]

Oh what a pity, poor me! Why is everything so difficult? Am I suffering without relief because of some karma created in the past?

I got married and my husband disappeared off after two or three days. The day he left the bridal house, he said with tears in his eyes

⁶ *Thingthut*, an unidentified species of owl.

⁷ A chess metaphor, every square is blocked

that he was hugely worried about me.

In his heart, he thought he'd return. He said it over and over again, despite the sorrow. He entrusted Saithong to look after me, then left because he had to.'

At that moment, Saithong crept in to find Wanthong with her face bathed in tears. She flung her arms round Saithong's neck and cried and cried. 'Oh Saithong, I don't want to live.'

Saithong soothed her, 'Don't cry. I'm fed up with seeing you getting ever sadder.' The two clung together, crying and sobbing in floods of tears.

'Oh my dear Wanthong, how come you can't find a little happiness, just because this villainous Khun Chang has been smitten with you ever since you came of age.

He was out to catch you at the house and at the wat. This lowlife is really something. Even when you married Phlai Kaeo, he kept poking his nose into everything.

He got the king's ear and had Phlai sent off to war, leaving you crying as if you'd die. Now he's going on all the time that Phlai Kaeo is dead.

This toady is full of tricks. He brings along a pot of bones to claim that Phlai is dead, so he can ask for your hand.

He goes on that he's a rich man and ready to spend money like water. Our old mother has given her consent, and now we two are at our wits' end.

Oh karma, what shall we do? Where can we run away and hide? Your mother-in-law is living far away in some unknown place in Kanburi.

Why don't you and I go to Wat Palelai to see Abbot Ju? He sees the future well. Mother Siprajan will go to sleep soon. [198]

Stay in the room and don't cry, while I go to find some betel and pan.' She found them and put them in a bowl. Around dusk, whispering and signaling with their eyes,

the two left the room and quietly stole down from the house. At the wat, they went up to the abbot's kuti,

and handed the betel and pan to a novice who in turn offered it to the abbot. He peered out, shading his eyes, and asked who it was. Then he recognized her and laughed. 'Oh, Wanthong!

I changed you name to make the fever go away. What's the matter? Are you still not well? You look down. But you've put on some weight, that's good. What have the two of you come for?'

Wanthong and Saithong prostrated and raised their hands in wai.

'I've been very unsettled since my husband went to war and has not returned.

They're telling stories with bad news that he's died. Is it true? Please check by the manual. Is what they say true?'

Abbot Ju examined the time and the position of the sun and moon. He was confident there was nothing bad, and so he said,

'**Divining by the three-eyed time,**⁸ whoever told you this is lying. Don't believe them. Your husband was victorious. He took the city and pulverized the enemy.

He got gold, silver, goods, and people in large numbers. In a little while, he'll return. Don't worry. Don't believe anyone sowing confusion.'

Listening to these words, Wanthong and Saithong felt their sorrow disappear. They wiped away their tears in relief, prostrated to take leave, and hurried home.

They went up into the house and joyfully told Siprajan everything the abbot had foretold.

'I went to see the old abbot. He looked things up and said nothing's the matter. Kaeo attacked and won a victory. He's captured families and will soon return.' [199]

Siprajan shook her head. 'I don't believe in these predictions based on some tricks about timing. How can that be compared to seeing with your own eyes?

He boasts he knows for sure. Oh, child! Sometimes it's not even a little bit right. Don't be naive and believe it. Every one of the soldiers has been jailed.

They'll seize you as a royal widow. You'll sit there hugging your legs, moaning and groaning, all alone. Nobody will be on your case because of poverty. Accept things. Don't be troublesome.

It's not that I don't love young Kaeo. But he's dead and won't return. The only thing wrong with Khun Chang is his skull. And even though that's bald and shiny, what's inside is good.'

Her mother's words made Wanthong want to kill herself. She collapsed, crying distractedly. 'If mother talks like this, I've had it.

All you can see is his silver and gold. If he were a pig or a dog, you'd give me to him. The abbot divines things but you ignore it.

⁸ *Trinetra*, three-eyed, which usually means Siva, but sometimes is used to mean Indra.

You're not kind to me any more.

Even if you're not ashamed before people, you should be ashamed before the spirits. Sixteen years old and two husbands! Even if you give me to him, I won't consent. Nothing has happened to my husband.

If the astrologer's advice is wrong, then the bo tree is an important sign. Let's go to see and make sure. If Phlai Kaeo is dead, then so is the bo tree.'

Siprajan was frustrated at not getting her way. 'Don't prolong matters, you little abomination. You'll create confusion for me too. Will you love being a widow?

It's no small distance to check the bo tree. I won't go. If you keep crossing me, I'll give you to Khun Chang today.'

At this, Wanthong collapsed in grief on the spot and screamed out loud, 'This is not right! Beat me to death, I don't care.

When I'm born again in my next life, I've no desire to enter your womb. Not ever! Not for hundreds and thousands of eras. What kind of mother is like this? [200]

All you can see is money. It's obscene. You'd give a person to a ghost. Please kill me and let me have done with life. Just thump my chest and bash me over the head.

If that shiny-head comes near me, I'll thwack him with a stick so he bellows out loud. I don't want to live any more.'

Siprajan jumped up and grabbed a stick. 'A curse on your ancestors! I'll beat you into dust.' Hurling curses and reprimands, she lurched up the stairs to the bridal house.

She hit Wanthong on the side with a big thwack. Wanthong shrieked and turned sideways. Siprajan pinched her repeatedly to her heart's content, then thrashed her with the stick until the welts showed.

Wanthong asked for no forgiveness. 'My husband's dead so I'll follow him. That Khun Chang has hair as bushy as a pygmy owl. This race of shiny heads should be allowed to die out.'

Siprajan pinched her lips. 'You difficult child! I'll flay your back into stripes. He's a rich man, a millionaire. He'll slap you till all your teeth fall out.

You've got a coarse tongue and a hard chin. Your words are crude, vulgar, and arrogant. Khun Chang is like a goldmine.' She beat her back mercilessly while delivering her tirade.

Wanthong cried but did not stop arguing. Under the blows, she shouted wildly, 'Even if you beat me until you're worn out, I won't listen, I won't listen.

You won't even go to see the bo tree we planted. Why do I want to live like this? Tomorrow when the sun comes up, I'll say goodbye to you and die.'

These words made Siprajan afraid that Wanthong really would hang herself and create a commotion. She suddenly felt pity and could not beat her any more. 'Don't cry, daughter.

If you want to see the bo tree, it's up to you. Go tomorrow. Listen to me. I carried you in my womb and I don't want to stand in your way.'

Wanthong replied, 'Bringing me up was a waste of your efforts. Even if Kaeo's dead and breathes no more, I won't consent to be given to that baldie. [201]

How could I sleep with someone with a mouth full of such shitty teeth? It's like throwing me away in the forest. Don't you love your daughter any more?'

Siprajan tried to console and appease her. 'I don't really want to give you to him. Don't say that. I love you like my own eyes. Why should I force you?

It's late now, precious. Listen to your mother, and don't cry.' She slept with Wanthong in the inner room for fear Wanthong would hang herself if left alone.

Khun Chang's passion for Wanthong had not waned. Feeling upset at home, he stole over to the house of Siprajan.

He heard the commotion inside – Siprajan hitting Wanthong, her crying, then the reconciliation, and the plan to make sure by going to see the bo tree.

Khun Chang took note of the place and rushed back home. He summoned the servants and ordered them to harness an elephant.

He prepared several hoes and spades, then mounted the elephant and set off across the ricefields. By dawn he had reached Banglang landing.

He dismounted from the elephant and worked out the site. He hurried across the river and found the bo trees planted in a line with their foliage green and bushy.

He grasped the central tree and wrenched hard. Phlai Kaeo had made a prayer for the local spirits to protect the trees and deflect any hoe, spade, or knife.

But the tree was still very young and could not withstand such a wrenching. The leaves shriveled and fell, as if touched by fire. Khun Chang and his servants returned home.

When dawn came up and the sun lit up the sky, the fair and beautiful Wanthong promptly went to remind her mother.

Siprajan summoned the servants. 'Quickly now, don't delay. I'm going off. Find some fish, rice, betelnut and pan. Where's the boat? Bring it here. [202]

Hey, you men, you'll do the rowing. Get dressed quick, you slaves.' She hitched up her lower cloth, stood with legs akimbo, and cursed their mother's clan loudly.

Wanthong and Siprajan boarded the boat together, 'Cast off! What are you hanging about for?' The servants cast off and paddled the boat away,

dipping their oars in time with their singing. 'The boat's rocking. Are you having an argument?' When they didn't paddle together, she shouted, 'Strike a light! You lot are used to riding on buffalos.

You just waggle your leg, and the buffalo knows to go this way or that. Easy! Paddling a boat bores you to death. You're no good at it and keep missing the stroke.'

Siprajan raised her eyes to the heavens and shouted at them. 'You're not in time, you slaves. You're good only at making a merry racket. I'll break your necks with this punt pole.

Over here you're light, over there heavy, all uneven. With this rocking we can't sleep. And you're making a racket arguing, you shower.' She picked up a piece of wood to hit them, creating more argument.

After one night and one day, they arrived at Banglang and moored the boat. The servants dived in the water and splashed around noisily.

Wanthong did not bathe, but landed and walked straight to the bo tree. Seeing the fallen leaves, she beat her chest, screamed out loud, and sprinted ahead.

She fell prostrate at the tree, 'Oh, Phlai is dead and won't return! Now I'm certain. The bo leaves are all shriveled.

Under the tree, they're newly fallen. Seeing this sign, I'm very sure that Kaeo is dead. His fate has caught up with him.

They told me the news but I didn't believe it. Now I have to learn to live with it. You won't come back to see one another again. Day by day, the hurt will get worse.

I've enemies all around. Khun Chang is the biggest. If you were

still alive and well, you could shelter me completely, [203]

like having seven layers of diamond walls to ward off any enemies' bad intentions. Now who'll protect me? Mother Siprajan is like a stick planted in buffalo shit.⁹

Even though she doesn't know a thing, she'll give me to that Khun Chang so easily. I'm not going to survive. If you alone die, then I'm left lonesome.

If I stay alive, Khun Chang will persist in asking. I'd rather die and follow you.' She wept until she collapsed, with just her heart still throbbing.

She fell down motionless under the central bo tree, as if dead, sighing once in a while. Though her sweat flowed, she remained still without turning over.

Siprajan waited a long time and then felt it was strange her daughter had not come back. She did not know what had happened,

and began to imagine she had tied a rope round her neck and hanged herself. In a tizzy, she rushed in pursuit and found her lying in a faint. In shock, she embraced Wanthong,

but her body was motionless. In panic she cried out loud and burst into floods of tears. She hugged her daughter to her own heaving chest.

'Oh, Wanthong, Wanthong!' No sound came in return. With body trembling, she shouted, 'Kids, come to help, quick!' The servants all came up in a rush.

They propped her up. They cried. They massaged both her legs. They pressed between her eyebrows to open her eyes. Siprajan cried out, 'Softly now!

Why don't you massage her jaw.' She sat with a kaffir lime in her hand, staring vacantly. 'Do everything you can, everything.' Someone bit Wanthong's big toe, and she murmured 'Ow!'

Siprajan carried her back to the boat. Ai-Deua poled and paddled away from the landing. Wanthong came round with her eyes still glazed over. She grieved along the waterway.

'Oh, my beloved partner! You shouldn't have been taken away from me to lose your life in Chiang Thong. I should die too. [204]

I was unlucky to be born with a bad fate. I was married only an instant and now I'm a widow. I'll cut my throat and follow you so we can meet again in the next life.

Oh, my dear lord and master! You abandoned our home to go to

⁹ Meaning the stick will easily lean or fall down.

heaven. You abandoned your wife and love, everything. I didn't even get to see your funeral pyre.

If only I could've put on one stick of firewood to repay your merit, I wouldn't complain. I just saw the bones in a new pot and it was pitiful.

To deny it, I'm uncertain. To believe it, I can't – because Khun Chang is evil. If anyone else brought the bones, I'd believe it.

Oh what a pity! Why does everything have to be so difficult. I was born with so much bad luck. When I was little, my father died.

I lived with my mother until I had my own house. Not enough days passed to make a month, and I was a widow. If I go on living, I can't escape the shame. That abomination has meddled and messed everything up.

My husband died far away, out of reach. Now I've nobody to rely on. I'm at my wit's end what to do. Oh my precious, I'll miss you terribly.'

Siprajan was overcome with pity. In the boat, she hugged Wanthong with tears streaming down her face. 'Oh dear, Phlai is dead!'

In her grief, she slid into pining over her own husband's death. 'I used to take care of him and humor him. He wanted to eat chicken boiled with fermented fish every day.

I wanted to die and follow him, but I was afraid of ghosts. I was worried I couldn't breathe when dead. I was going to jump into the water and drown, but I was scared the crocodiles would grab me.

I wanted to slash my throat several times, but I was afraid it would hurt. I prepared a rope to tie my neck but it was so big I feared I'd throttle myself.

Oh young Phim, wife of Kaeo. I worried that if I died, I might not meet him again. I thought and thought again, and didn't do it but lived into old age.' [205]

Then she recovered herself and could think straight again. 'The brilliant young Phlai is dead, huh? Now what will we do? Oh dear! What a pity Phlai is dead.'

Hearing her mother babbling made Wanthong sob even more. Siprajan beat her chest shakily and mumbled on in distraction.

'The more I think, the more awful this is. Other people don't suffer like this. They live together in the same house into old age, friends in hardship, friends in difficulty, never apart.

This is real case of karma causing hardship. Fortune is so unkind. He lived with Wanthong only two days, not long enough to know how things are.

Because of the dispute with Chiang Thong, he had to go to war. I can still remember his own words, "Look after Phim because I will return."

Phim cried her heart out. Siprajan moaned and mumbled on. Both mother and daughter were awash with tears. When the boat moored at the landing, they were still missing him.

In her room, Saithong heard the sound of weeping. She opened her window, saw the boat moored at the stairway, and rushed down to meet them.

Wanthong called out to her, 'My head's been lopped off, really. The central bo tree has almost no leaves. The other two still look fine.'

Saithong's heart sank. Her face fell and she flailed around. The two of them stayed in the boat weeping until sunset.

Saithong consoled her. 'Don't cry. Let's go up to the house first, my dear.' Saithong helped her into the bedroom and they talked and pined together.

Saithong said, 'I was sure Kaeo wasn't really dead. Abbot Ju saw everything with no doubts and he's never wrong.

When you had the fever, if it hadn't been for Abbot Ju, you'd have died. You changed your name and you were fine. The day before yesterday he said nothing was the matter with Phlai. [206]

I think someone is fooling you about the middle bo losing its leaves. I don't believe it. I fear that oily head who brought the pot of bones is up to something evil.

The toady asked your mother and she gave her consent. That day when you really shouted at him, we were arguing with mother loudly in the house and begging her to go to see the bo tree.

The next morning that villain disappeared. The bastard must have done something to the bo tree for sure. This evening I saw him skulking around with his servants.

Please keep quiet about this for the time being. But I think I'm right. If Kaeo had fallen dead, surely there would have been some bad omen.'

Wanthong said, 'I think you're right but I'm uncertain. In my heart I'm still afraid. The more I think, the more my heart feels choked.' She sobbed on the bed until she fell asleep.

Dawn whitened the rim of the sky, and birds broke into song. Wanthong opened her eyes feeling forlorn. She went to talk over her sorrow and anger with Saithong.

'Whether Kaeo is really dead or not, we shouldn't be attached to

possessions. I loved my husband but I didn't get to possess him. I think I'll make merit for him.

I'll take his possessions to make merit and send all of it to him. If he survives and comes back, we can acquire things again.

Today I'll go to Wat Palelai – also to question the abbot. We still have some betelnut and pan in the store. My dear, please bring them along.'

She went to find Siprajan and mumbled to her between her sobs. 'Now my husband is dead, I'm taking leave to go to the wat.

I'll take his clothing and anything else remaining – silver, gold, cloth, everything – to make merit and send it to him.' Siprajan said 'Go. Please go.

I've no complaint about you making merit. I mean to pour water and send the merit to him. Why should we keep the belongings of someone who's dead? Khun Chang has heaps of silver and gold.' [207]

This made Wanthong angry. She tossed her head, got up, and left the main room. In her own room, she arranged things in piles and summoned the servants to carry them.

Wanthong and Saithong walked to Wat Palelai in a short time and went up the stairway to see the abbot.

Seeing Wanthong, Abbot Ju said, 'Eh? What are all these things you're carrying here? What are you crying for? At home has someone said something's up?'

Wanthong and Saithong knelt and raised their hands to wai him. 'I saw the bo trees where we made prayers. Oddly, the leaves have dropped.

So I can't be sure that Kaeo isn't dead. I think something's very wrong. I've brought all these things to make merit.

If my husband still survives, we can acquire things again. They all belong to Kaeo. All the merit is to be sent to him.'

The abbot listened and laughed. 'Whether it's true or not, your thinking isn't bad. Make the merit, send it to him, and don't be afraid. It'll help him to return quickly.'

He picked up some cloth of good quality. 'This can wrap texts and cover Buddha images. The *attalat*¹⁰ cloth can be cut into flags. The gold and silver we'll keep for making Buddha images.'

Then he said to Wanthong, 'Make a prayer with these gifts. Pray for your husband to come quickly. Ask to meet him tomorrow.'

¹⁰ A silk fabric from Persia with gold brocade motifs placed in the weave at intervals. (*Threads of a cultural heritage*). Cloth woven with silk, and some gold thread and maybe silver thread (Mat:964).

Wanthong both laughed and cried. 'Your honor, what did you say just now? If my husband hasn't lost his life, I promise I'll build a kuti as an offering to the wat.'

'Is that right? You'll give it for sure? I'll fix things up. I don't object. If he doesn't come as I've said within this month, please come and burn the wat down. Really!'

Wanthong and Saithong listened to the abbot challenging her to be sincere in her promise. Their sorrow lifted and uncertainty disappeared. [208]

The servants who had accompanied them also heard what the abbot said and felt happier. With their troubles lightened, the two took their leave.

Back home, they went to see their mother and related what the abbot said. The servants crowded in too. Siprajan cried out, 'Don't believe just anybody.'

The abbot has his eye on the reward, on everything you carried over there. He's just saying things to please you. I don't believe a word of it.'