

12: Siprajan gives Wanthong to Khun Chang

[I/209]

Khun Chang's passion for Wanthong had not waned. He ordered his servants who were experienced craftsmen to fashion a bridal house rapidly in time for the event.¹

They sawed, chiseled, and hammered, making a racket all over the house. 'A big house with nine rooms and wooden floors, as big as a wihan is what I have in mind.'

Women soaked flour to make sweets. They bought bananas, sugarcane, oranges, roseapples, coconuts, palm sugar, betelnut, pan, chicken, pork, prawns, and fish in large quantities.

Near the time, Khun Chang was counting the days. He asked his elder brother, Son Phraya, to accompany him to Siprajan's house to report that everything had been arranged.

'I've come to consult you. I'd like to pull down Phlai Kaeo's old bridal house and take it as an offering to the wat so the ground can be cleared.

My bridal house will be as huge as Indra's golden pavilion. There'll be nothing comparable anywhere.' Siprajan doubled over with laughter.

'So! My daughter's bridal house will be huge. Thank you so much, sir. Whatever you want, just say. Don't hesitate. Build the bridal house well, my son.

We'll take the old one to the wat. Whatever you think fit, I won't complain. A huge new bridal house suits our standing. Bring it over here quickly, don't delay.'

Siprajan got up and went to talk to her daughter, consoling and placating her, so she wouldn't know her mother's wiles.

'Dear daughter, I've been thinking. I don't know. I'm very sorry about young Kaeo. Whether he's dead or still surviving, we don't know how it'll be.

I think his bridal house should be taken to make merit for sending to him. If by the power of this merit, he doesn't die and returns, then we can rebuild it again. [210]

If we offer it to the wat as a kuti, certainly it will gain some merit. If he returns, we'll rebuild it even bigger. My darling, what do you say?'

Wanthong did not understand her mother's subtlety and fell for the trick.

¹ The house is crafted elsewhere (probably at Khun Chang's residence) and then carried to Siprajan's compound for final assembly.

She turned and replied, 'Just what I've been thinking, mother.

Take it to make a kuti or sala. I agree without reservation. There's nothing better than making merit from good deeds. It'll help my lord and master survive.'

Siprajan was pleased by this response and hastened over to tell Khun Chang. 'I fooled little Wanthong.

She didn't know my tricks. You must go away from this house quickly now. Get only your people and your relatives to come and pull it down.'

Khun Chang was happy to hear this, and quickly crept away. He ordered his servants to pull down the bridal house without delay and offer it to the monks in Wat Klang.²

Siprajan took care of everything left in the bridal house, then Khun Chang's servants and relatives came to pull it down and carry it away

to offer to the monks in Wat Klang. They reassembled every plank, and then all returned home.

At Cockfight Hill in Kanburi, Thong Prasi had waited for her son for many days. 'It's a long time since I saw him.

I feel sorry for young Phim. She's very determined to wait for him. When they were first parted, before I left, she was missing him so badly.

I don't know how she is now. Is she well or wasting away with fever? Tomorrow I must go down there to visit her and see for myself.'

With this thought, she ordered her servants to get everything arranged. 'Go and round up buffalo with good hooves and hitch them to the cart at dawn tomorrow. [211]

I'm going to visit my daughter-in-law. Don't be late or you'll be flogged.' She ordered I-Thap and I-Thian, 'Look after the house and don't try to steal my arse.'

With that she went in to sleep. Very early as the dawn came up, she rose, washed her face, found betel and pan, and inspected the porters.

When everything was in order, she mounted the cart and set off. At midday they slept until the sun eased. After two nights they reached Suphan.

At the house, Thong Prasi was shocked not to see her son's bridal house. She quickly went up into Siprajan's house, and Siprajan came out to welcome her.

Servants came and placed the betelnut tray. Thong Prasi sat down with a thump. Siprajan said, 'Times are bad. Young Kaeo went to war and fell dead.'

She spoke with tears flowing. 'He left my daughter a widow. It's bad luck but it's all true. Young Phim almost died too.

² Now called Wat Suwannaphum; on the east bank of the Suphan River to the north of the market.

She had to change her name to Wanthong and got a bit better because of the abbot. Then she heard the news her husband had died and she became even sadder.

She cried her heart out all the time, and almost went mad. The bridal house has been pulled down and sent to the wat. All the clothing has been cut up for flags.'

As Thong Prasi listened, her eyebrows furrowed and her face puckered in anger. 'Here, who came to tell these tales? It's untrue, all of it.

If my son had died in the Lao country, some news would've come for sure. What about all those soldiers who went with him? Not a single one has come back.'

Siprajan said, 'The soldiers that escaped death were all clapped in jail. Khun Chang went to the city and brought back the news.

Even then, Wanthong did not believe it. She was so hopeful she got in the boat and rushed off to see the bo tree where they made a prayer. For some reason, the leaves had fallen.' [212]

Wanthong, who was still grieving day and night, was glad to hear her mother-in-law had come.

She came out of her room and sat with tears streaming. 'Thanks to your merit, you came quickly or else you might not have seen me alive.

Khun Chang has been sowing confusion. I almost hanged myself. He wheedled my mother to give me to him as wife, and she consented.

The abbot of Wat Palelai divined that Phlai defeated the enemy for certain. He didn't die and is still alive, but my mother doesn't believe it.

Khun Chang fixed the date for the third night of the waning moon. I'm desperate because there's nowhere to give me hope. I'd run away but I haven't the faintest idea where to go.

Thanks to your merit, you've come to shelter me from danger. It's like raising me from the dead. I'll go to live in the house in Kanburi.'

Siprajan was livid. 'Look at her, she talks without shame. She's arrogant enough to accuse her mother to excuse herself. Let's see if I don't beat you to death!

Do you think it's nothing to accuse me like this. You don't know anything, do you? Ai-Mak brought the bones for us, and Khun Chang just helped to deliver them.

He said Phlai Kaeo went to war and met disaster. He's dead and gone. So I'm concerned about you. They'll haul you away and you'll suffer.

As a widow in the palace, you'll be locked up morning and evening. No fun. Khun Chang got you out of this hole. Spreading his silver and gold around helped

to make the royal punishment disappear. So I agreed to give you to him. If

you want to go to Kanburi, fine, off you go. But if I don't beat you with a stick, I'm not Siprajan.'

Thong Prasi was angry too. 'I'm not listening to what you say. You believe this dirty old man so easily. You don't check for certain. [213]

Someone just comes to fool you, and you give away your daughter just like that. If Kaeo isn't dead and comes back, how are you going to deal with it?'

Siprajan cried out, 'My dear, don't believe in ghosts. He won't come back. Besides, even if he defeated the army and returns victorious, what can we depend on *him* for?'

These words made Thong Prasi shake with rage. 'What is this? You've seen how good he is. I'll pursue this until I hit my head on a brick wall.'

She went down from the house and asked around to see the village headmen. She found Phan Chot and Kamnan³ Taeng and told them the story.

'My son Phlai Kaeo volunteered for the army. It's not yet time for him to return. That mischievous old woman is out of control. She believes people who claim he's dead.

She hasn't checked the news, but has given her daughter to be married so easily. It'll create a big thing between them. Please come to be witnesses.'

Phan Chot and Kamnan Taeng responded, 'He volunteered to go to war on royal service. It's our duty

to see what's said is right, or else the fault will lie with us. When things are not out in the open, it's all imagination.' Saying that and no more, they hurried over

to Siprajan's house and were invited up. They sat on the bench placed for chatting. Phan Chot said, 'For sure, auntie,

Phlai Kaeo volunteered for the army and received many orders from the king. It's not known yet whether he died. You shouldn't rush into things and create confusion.

Think carefully before giving your daughter in marriage. It could blow up in your face and we'd have to sort it out.'

Siprajan said, 'Enough! Don't go on. My daughter has to be married off. Whatever will happen, I'm not afraid. Silver and gold will take care of things. [214]

Nowadays do you find any "good" person who isn't a bit fake? Even if he returns from war victorious, what can we depend on *him* for?'

³ A kamnan is a word originally meaning a manager or protector, which has acquired the more specific meaning of a village head.

Thong Prasi was so hurt her body shook. ‘What will be will be, let’s see. I’ve told both you officers.

You’re sure, huh, Siprajan? If I’m lying, let me die by sunset. I love my son and I warned him, but he wouldn’t listen.

He’s just a youth and he fell in love – so infatuated he couldn’t see in front or behind himself. He pleaded with me sincerely so I was forced to follow his wishes.

Now you’re going to snatch her away from young Phlai. Well, I’m not a tad disappointed. With her lineage, there’s nothing worth missing. That’s all I have to say.’

She hurried down from the house. Wanthong rushed after her. Siprajan grabbed a stick and gave chase. She beat Wanthong and dragged her back towards the house.

Thong Prasi grabbed Wanthong and tried to pull her away. Siprajan called the servants who came in mass and hauled Wanthong up into the house. Thong Prasi lost face and went off home in a rage.

On the appointed day, Khun Chang bustled around organizing things. He ordered his servants to carry the materials for the bridal house

to Siprajan’s compound. People went in large numbers including Son Phraya, Phan Son, Ratthaya,⁴ and Khun Chang himself.

At the spot, they assembled the house rapidly. They dug holes to place the main pillars,⁵ laid the floors, fitted the ceilings, and thatched the roofs.

Siprajan laid on food including rice and sweets, all of good quality. The whole crew feasted noisily.

Wanthong looked at Khun Chang’s edifice in sadness and distraction, murmuring to herself as if losing her mind, and cursing him openly. [215]

The building was quickly complete. Khun Chang took leave of Siprajan and returned home to prepare the dowry.

Siprajan and her servants walked the short distance over to Wat Palelai and went up the stairs to find the abbot.

She handed over an offering of betel and pan and asked him to come on that same day to chant prayers at the house. ‘Since young Kaeo has died, I’m arranging the ceremony to marry Wanthong to Khun Chang.’

Abbot Ju was worried this was a mistake. ‘But Kaeo isn’t dead. Hold off and listen to me before something happens.

Do you know for certain he died? Later this could create big trouble.

⁴ Khun Chang’s elder cousin and two elder brother’s respectively. See the start of chapter 20.

⁵ *Sao mo*, the two pillars flanking the main pillar (Red:669).

Listen to my words, and don't be easily led. I think this will turn out badly.'

Siprajan lost her temper. 'Your honor, you're out of your mind. What you're saying isn't true. You're talking nonsense and not believable.'

Abbot Ju said, 'Look here Siprajan. You came in here shaking to talk about this. This shouldn't be any business of mine, but it is. I helped to bring young Kaeo up.

If you don't listen to my advice, that's up to you. It'd be better for you to ask another monk. I fear young Kaeo will come back, and he'll say: if you knew, why did you let this happen.'

Siprajan took leave and lurched off. She went straight to Wat Klang and then Wat Phlap⁶ and asked them to chant prayers that evening.

Thepthong was busily arranging the dowry, shouting at the servants until the tendons on her neck bulged. 'Would you run around and help a bit?

Hey, tell old Kloi and old Sai that it's almost afternoon and the sun's high in the sky. How come they're so slow and not dressed up yet?'

Kloi and Sai frantically changed their clothes and combed their hair. Others dressed up the children. When everyone was ready, they set off. [216]

Those chosen to carry the four trays with the dowry were all attractive teenage girls from respectable families of good status, and dressed to the nines.

The very best mahori ensemble had been found to accompany them. At the auspicious time, the dowry was hoisted aloft, and the ranat and gong started playing.

At Siprajan's house, they made a racket shouting and beating gongs. Bald-headed Ta-Phon leapt out to close the door and prevent anyone entering.

Elders dug out money to offer him, then he opened the door to let them up into the house. The elders led the way up into the house and sat on a carpet. The dowry trays were set down in a row.

The elders inside the house welcomed them and counted the gifts. There were sweets, pork, chicken, strong liquor in round bottles, bananas, oranges, and hundreds of things as promised.

The elders from both sides chatted together. The cash and cloth was counted and placed on three-legged tables, then everything was carried into the house.

Presents were given according to tradition. Then food and sweets were brought out and everybody merrily ate their fill before the elders returned home.

⁶ Wat Phlap is on the west bank of the river 4 kms north of Suphan town.

In the evening when the heat of the sun had faded, Khun Chang bathed, changed his clothes, and patted sandal powder on his unruly chest hair.

'I'll dress to the hilt.' He placed a mirror and looked at himself from different angles. 'Why is this beeswax sticky like something overboiled?

I'm fed up with this beard. Why doesn't it run up and sprout on my head? It teases me by growing on my chin. The more I shave it, the heavier it returns.

But on top of my head, not a trace! It's all run away to shame me.' He put on a good, pricey yok, recently purchased inside the palace,

an upper cloth of good wool in a bright color, and a belt worth over ten chang. He descended from the house and waddled along with his servants following en masse. [217]

Villagers came to have a look at this finery, but when they saw his face they laughed, winked, and whispered among themselves. 'Hey, look at this fellow with faces back and front and blazing eyes!'

When he reached Siprajan's house, Ta-Phon slammed the door shut. Khun Chang lost his temper. 'Who are you making fun of, you awful old bald fraud?'

Ta-Phon said, 'My lord Khun Chang, I was bald since I was a baby, and I'm not making fun of anyone. You're such a rich man. Give me some money and I'll open up.'

He handed money to Ta-Phon and they went up into the house and sat in lines on the verandah. When the time came, all the monks arrived from Wat Klang and Wat Phlap as arranged.

They entered the room and sat, holding the sacred thread and gazing around. Meanwhile, Siprajan told her daughter to put on a white lower cloth and white upper cloth.

Phim angrily refused. Siprajan smacked her back loudly. 'You difficult, foul-mouthed child.' She wound the cloth round her. They wrestled together. Siprajan dragged her by the hand.

Phim clung tight onto the door bolt. Siprajan put her foot against the wall and tugged with her body trembling.

Her hand slipped and she fell down a couple of meters away. Boiling with anger, she got up bellowing.

She stood and called out to senior monk Ton, 'Chant the prayers now, it's going to be evening. The bride is sick and in pain. She can't come for the water sprinkling, your honor.'

When the chanting is over, please let me have some lustral water for pouring inside here. That'll be okay.' Khun Chang looked on awkwardly. The monks were invited to start the prayer chant.

They ended by sprinkling water. Everyone offered food to the monks who then returned to the wat. The groom's party changed their clothes and sat in

rows on the verandah to feast.

Everyone ate their fill and returned home happily, except Khun Chang who was overjoyed that he did not have to go anywhere. He had a sepha recited with the mahori ensemble.

After sunrise, the abbot and monks got dressed and left the kuti carrying their bowls and trays.⁷ [218]

At the new bridal house, the cooks had prepared food ready. The monks filed up in order, the novices set down their bowls, and they chanted prayers.

Khun Chang picked up a scoop to ladle out rice. He called out to Siprajan, 'Please get Phim to come out here

so we can give alms together. She's my wife now.' Siprajan was wondering why she had not come out

when Phim wailed angrily, 'I don't want to give alms. I don't want to be shamed in front of pigs, dogs, and servants.' She doubled over in tears.

Siprajan groaned. 'Khun Chang, please don't take offence. Since she was badly ill in the year of the dog, she's been a bit off her head.'

Khun Chang said, 'I can see that. Phim had the ague. She can dig up my ancestors as far back as she likes, I won't take offence. Don't worry.'

After the chanting was over, everyone fed the monks from five big earthen pots of *khanom jin namya*. 'Senior monk Ton knows how to eat. Give him a lot!'

Servants carried in the excellent sweets, *thong yip* and *foi thong*.⁸ They were put on plates and proffered to each of the monks in turn

until everyone was full. The trays were then cleared away so the monks could chant the offertory blessing before returning to the wat with the novices carrying baskets overflowing.

At dusk as the sun faded, Khun Chang went to sleep in the bridal house. Over-excited with longing for Phim, he paced up and down distractedly for three days.

He tried hugging a long pillow and imagining it was her. At the dead of night, he sat almost driven mad by fantasies. His mattress was bathed in sweat from his fevered body. Even when he fell asleep, he babbled about Phim.

He got up and recited a sepha, beating cymbals to keep time.

⁷ *Talum*, a footed tray

⁸ *Thong yip*, golden pinch, a mixture of beaten egg yolk, sugar, and flour, dropped into boiling syrup in disc shapes, then creased by the fingers into a mould. *Foi thong*, golden spray, beaten egg yolk squeezed from a banana-leaf cone into boiling syrup as a mat of yellow strands. Both sweets probably originated from early Portuguese visitors to Siam in the sixteenth century. *Foi thong* is served at weddings in the belief it aids a long married life, probably because of the length of the strands, and the auspicious association of gold.

Oh little Chim, my own true bride
 say when will I lie by your side
 be satisfied, dessert of mine [219]
 when we meet I'll slurp the pot!
 I pine, my tuna boiled in brine
 Oh turtle, come to drink moonshine
 Dear mother fine, please send her quick!⁹

Siprajan listened and praised him to the skies. 'It's like Jao Ngo¹⁰ reciting a sepha, sir!'

She tried to pacify her daughter: 'Don't delay. You've already been in a bridal house, so don't be hesitant.'

Wanthong was so pent up she shouted out loud and made a racket bashing the walls of the room. 'I don't want to see that hateful baldie's face. If you want someone to go in there, go yourself.'

Siprajan could not tolerate her daughter's sarcasm. She hitched up her lower cloth Khmer-style and danced up and down. 'Look here, Phim, you have a bad mouth and no respect.' She grabbed a stick and beat her many times.

Wanthong cried out, 'Oh father and mother, I've never experienced anything like this here. I don't love this baldie, so you hit me. Even if you're not ashamed to be seen by people, you should be ashamed to be seen by the spirits.'

'You won't stop arguing, will you.' Siprajan grabbed a rope from the wall, tied Phim's hands up to the ceiling, and thrashed her with the stick.

'Are you going into the bridal house or not? Answer quick. I won't untie you until you reply.' Wanthong shouted as if she was dying, 'Where's Saithong gone? Why don't you come?'

Help me please or I'm dead this time. Forgive me.' Saithong heard and burst into tears. She ran up and snatched the stick to stop the beating.

⁹ This rendering mimics the 8-syllable lines, rhyming scheme, and Khun Chang's clumsy rhymes of the original. A more literal translation would be: Oh my true bride, I-Chim / when will you let me enjoy you / dear phla-krim dessert of mine / when we meet I'll slurp the whole pot / my dear anabas fish boiled in salt I long for you / I want to drink liquor with a field turtle / mother please send her to me.

¹⁰ Jao Ngo is a character in *Sangthong* (The Golden Conch), a story from the Panyasa Jataka adapted into an outer drama by King Rama II. The hero is a divine being who is born as the son of Queen Janthewi in the form of a conch. When Janthewi discovers the child can come out of the shell, she breaks the conch. Because of conflict between Janthewi and other queen, he is abandoned in the forest. While in the care of a giantess, he discovers a golden pond and dips himself in it to become golden. To escape the man-eating giantess, he disguises himself as a Ngo or Sagai, a backward tribe of forest dwellers from the interior of the Malay peninsula, known for their dark skins and thick curly hair (*ngo* also mean rambuttan, a fruit with a spiny covering). When he is in the guise of Jao Ngo, he becomes a fool. However, he eventually marries a princess, proves to have knowledge which is valuable to the kingdom, and is restored to his princely status and his golden form. The joke here is that, if Jao Ngo were to recite sepha, it would be awful, and Siprajan may be assuming that Khun Chang does not know this.

‘Mother! ‘Don’t try to break a big knife handle over your knee.’¹¹ Hold off, just leave it to me. I’ll help to bring her round. Why not go into the bridal house? Don’t be hesitant.’

Saithong untied Phim’s hands and led her into the room, still crying. Saithong quickly ground some cassumunar ginger and rubbed it on the welts on her back and shoulders.’

Wanthong moaned about Phlai Kaeo. ‘Is he dead or alive? We don’t know what’s happened. If he’s dead, there should’ve been an omen. Now I’m at the end of my tether.

I’d go to check out the truth, but I don’t know my way around Ayutthaya. As a woman, how can I run off into the forest where there’s lots of wild animals?

But if I do nothing, I have this threat close at hand. Looks like I’ll die. Truly, karma is catching up with me.’ She poured out her troubles until she collapsed into sleep.

¹¹ A proverb somewhat like, Don’t beat your head against a brick wall, with the meaning, don’t hurt yourself trying to do something impossible.