

### 13: Phlai Kaeo becomes Khun Phaen, Khun Chang gets Wanthong

[I/220]

At dawn, Phlai Kaeo came out to sit in front of his quarters. Thai and Lao nobles prostrated to pay their respects.

They were discussing that the king's instructions for the war had been accomplished, when an officer of the guard rushed into the camp, sat down and greeted them with a smile. 'I carry the king's orders. Without delay,

close the campaign and return to Ayutthaya.' Phlai was very happy. He gave orders to the Lao chiefs and lords to keep the provinces secure.

He ordered conscripts to harness his lofty elephant with its elegant black howdah, and to load up food, silver, gold, and other goods. The captured Lao families were sent on ahead.

At an auspicious time for the troops to march, the columns set off to the sound of gongs and shouting. Elephants and horse swarmed across the fields in lines.

Phlai Kaeo rode in his elephant's howdah. The mahout drove the mount swiftly into the forest. The breeze fluttered the flags, and wafted the fragrance of flowers.

Laothong mounted a she-elephant, Yot, along with her maids. They sat clinging tightly together. She still wept despondently at the thought of her aged parents.

'I won't know whether they are sick or well, dead or alive. Who will look after them? Nobody is the same as one's own child.' Her loud weeping resounded along the way.

Phlai Kaeo overheard the sound and felt sorry for Laothong being still forlorn. He ordered his mahout to slow down so his elephant closed with hers, and then asked her to come over.

He lifted her into his howdah, and set up curtains to conceal them at front and rear. He put his arms round her lovingly, and urged her to enjoy the flowers in the forest.

Leaves and flowers sprouted from every branch. Buds and blooms were everywhere. The air was suffused with fragrance, and pollen sprinkled down from on high along the way. [221]

As they sat cheek-to-cheek, Laothong's sadness began to subside. Love drove away her tears and her longing.

He pointed out herds of wild animals, tigers running elegantly, gibbons, langurs and monkey on the branches of a banyan. The male grabbed his

mate,

and swung up to the treetops where they stood bent over, hugging. Big monkeys chased and fought one another, then swung away up high. Phlai said to Laothong, 'Look at that dirty monkey!' She shyly averted her eyes.

The governors of Kamphaeng, Rahaeng, and Thoen marched ahead through the guardposts of Nan and Phrae.<sup>1</sup> Chiang Thong, however, was kept under arrest. At the river landing, they made rafts and boarded the cooks.

Phlai Kaeo embarked on a boat with a large mattress. Laothong stuck close beside him. A full crew of oarsmen got in and took their places. Some made a racket playing heads-and-tails.<sup>2</sup>

With the oarsmen pulling hard, churning the water into eddies, they pounded along for seven days. Swept along by the current, they passed many places, large and small,

and reached the city as the dawn came up. Phlai bathed, changed his clothes, and escorted the four lords to sit in the inner court sala.

They met senior officials who greeted them and asked to be told tales of the victory. Then on the king's orders, they were taken into the audience hall.

When the sun had risen to the second hour,<sup>3</sup> the almighty king who resided in a spacious palace topped by a golden spire,<sup>4</sup> came out to the **Rojana** audience hall.<sup>5</sup>

Large numbers of ladies of the inner palace came with him in procession, carrying his regalia. He sat on a throne of stone.<sup>6</sup> Officials put their hands together to pay respects.

The orchestra of ranad, drums, gongs, conch, and horn played loud and joyful music. The righteous king spoke of the affairs of state.

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<sup>1</sup> This would be a strange route from Chomthong to Ayutthaya as it would start with a trek northeast (i.e., away from Ayutthaya) across three ranges of hills. Much more obvious would be to go straight down the Ping River which flows through Chomthong, or cross to the Thung Saliang route used in chapter 27 and 32. Probably this reflects the Bangkok authors' hazy grasp on northern geography.

<sup>2</sup> Speculative. Perhaps playing for positions in the boat?

<sup>3</sup> 8 am by modern reckoning

<sup>4</sup> The word for palace here is *prasat* meaning a building in which only a king can reside, and the 'spire' is a *prang*, a Khmer style of corncob-shaped tower.

<sup>5</sup> *Rojana* means the act of composition.

<sup>6</sup> In 1833, the future King Mongkut (Rama IV) discovered a stone slab in Sukhothai which was assumed to be the Manangkasila throne or stone platform mentioned in Sukhothai Inscription One, which claims to date from 1292. There is no reference to a stone throne in documents on the Ayutthaya era, so perhaps this reference to one was inspired by the discovery of the Manangkasila. The authenticity of Sukhothai Inscription One, the role of the Manangkasila in the inscription, and the likelihood that the discovered stone is the Manangkasila, have all since been thrown into doubt.

Office-holders presented matters of current importance without giving offence to the soles of the royal feet. Pages read and submitted reports. The royal pleasure was absolute. [222]

A senior officials took the opportunity to address the king. 'My liege, your sovereign majesty! Pray allow me to report. In the beginning, a Chiang Mai army came

with the power to besiege Chiang Thong. The city's ruler could not put up a defense and agreed to cede the city. You graciously allowed Nai Phlai

to go up there in command of conscripts to attack on your behalf with the help of three cities. Through the power of your accumulated merit, the attack was comfortably successful. Families, cattle, and buffalo were captured

along with lances, swords, guns, other weapons, and materiel including clothing. All has been sent to the capital under a sealed inventory. May it please your grace.'

Hearing this, the almighty king clapped his hands loudly. 'You Chiang Thong are a rogue with thousands of ruses. Hey! What were you thinking?

You switched sides, back and forth! You did not honor the water oath of loyalty. Did you believe you have sufficient merit not to depend on anyone? What were you thinking? Tell me!'

The king's question made Chiang Thong hot and flustered. He stuttered, 'My lord, please have mercy! I face a charge whose penalty is death.

I'm not distorting events or covering matters up. I did not revolt against the soles of the royal feet. I acted in fear of danger. If I had not submitted, I would be dead.

The Chiang Mai army numbered in tens of thousands. The Lao soldiers were all over the place, and valiant. Their commanders, Falan and Sanbadan, had invulnerability and expertise as warriors.

But on the morning that the Thai army arrived, I immediately made a secret agreement with them. The enemy fell for our trick. We attacked them hard at the same time.

They did not realize in time, and so could not avoid being defeated, scattered, and pulverized. If you do not show me favor, my punishment is death. All I have said is true and sincere. Have mercy.'

The king responded, 'I still have doubts about what you say. Hey, Phlai, tell us what you know about it. [223]

He looks to me like an evil two-headed bird. Chiang Mai comes, so he sides with Chiang Mai. The Thai arrive, so he submits to the Thai. He sways this way and that like a stick planted in mud!'

Phlai Kaeo's response to the king was full of guile. 'Yes, Chiang Thong shifted this way and that. Probably he was maneuvering to save his own skin.

But if he truly went along with Chiang Mai, why then did they charge the

enemy camp, and not retreat one pace, neither officers nor men? Even a very bad action can be erased by a good one.’

The king listened and ordered Phramuean Si<sup>7</sup> to present an urn,<sup>8</sup> sword, and other royal gifts as reward for good deeds.

Phlai was given the title of Khun Phaen,<sup>9</sup> and assigned to guard a remote frontier region in command of 500 conscripts. He was also presented with a boat 18 meters in length.

For action beyond the call of duty, the rulers of Kamphaeng, Rahaeng, and Thoen were rewarded with betel boxes, golden flasks,<sup>10</sup> and other articles. They took leave of the king,

left the palace, and boarded a boat immediately, taking Chiang Thong with them. In fifteen days they reached home happily.

Phlai Kaeo, now raised to noble rank by royal appointment with the name Khun Phaen, took leave of the king and went to board his boat.

He took Laothong and her two maids, and they sat in a row in the sleeping boat. They left the landing with the oarsmen pulling long strokes and making a tumultuous racket.

A haloed moon shone serene in a cloudless sky strewn with shining stars, highlighting the fairness of Laothong’s face.

Late at night, a breeze came up. Phlai’s thoughts turned to little Phim. ‘Right now, is my precious waiting forlornly? Is she love-sick or ailing, I don’t know.

With me so far away, she must face many obstacles. There’s an old saying which runs: If you sleep on high, it’s smart to lie face down so you’ll see anything that happens, [224]

but if you sleep down low, lie face up. A man with a beautiful wife shouldn’t entrust her to a mother-in-law. Oh my dearest love, so far away,

are you sleeping alone and lonesome? Khun Chang has jealous intentions.’ With these thoughts, he urged the oarsmen to hurry. In the bright light of

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<sup>7</sup> This is Jaomuean Si Sorarak, who has an important role in the story. In the royal pages, there were four directors (*jangwang*) immediately under the department head who was invariably a royal relative. These four had the title of *jao muean*, sakdina of 1000, and were addressed colloquially as *phra nai*. The four were: Sanphetphakdi, Si Sorarak, Samoe Jairat, and Wai Woranat. In the poem, the title and name is often shortened to Jamuean Si, Phramuean Si, or Muean Si. (Prachak:215, using *Rueang mahatlek*, cremation volume of Jaomuean Sanphetphakdi, Akhom Bunnak; *KTSD*, I, 223)

<sup>8</sup> *Jiat*, part of the regalia of rank (Mat:241, pix). Needs better translation.

<sup>9</sup> The full title seems to be Khun Phaen Saensathan, though the text plays with the name, using Saensongkhram (great warrior), Saensanit (great friend), and other variants according to context. The nearest equivalent to this title in the list of titles in the Three Seals Law is Khun Phlaeng Sathan, palat of the left in the royal guard, sakdina 600 (*tamruat phuban*) (*KTSD*, I, 226).

<sup>10</sup> *Khontho*, another item of regalia, probably of Persian origin (Mat:160, pix).

dawn, they arrived at Suphan

and moored in front of the landing just as Saithong was coming down there. She happily went straight back to tell Phim that Phlai Kaeo had returned.

Wanthong, who was still sad with longing from morning to night, was happy to hear Saithong's news.

She grabbed a cloth to put round her shoulders, opened the window, and saw the sleeping boat moored by the big bridge. 'Kaeo has come! Nobody else!' She came down the stairs and rushed

with long strides to the sleeping boat. She saw the piles of mattresses and pillows, and the curtained partitions. Khun Phaen saw her coming and stuck his head out of the curtain to greet her.

Seeing his face, she raised her hands to wai her husband and burst into tears. She could not open her mouth to speak because her heart was bursting. She embraced her husband's feet, sobbing.

Seeing her grief, Khun Phaen thought, 'Oh my beloved Phim, how are you? You look thin. Your figure has changed. Have you been sick with fever and grief because I took so long?

Your mood seems very changed, at a very low ebb. You can't speak for crying as if someone has made you upset.

Your husband's return should make you happy, but here you are crying your eyes out.' Khun Phaen was perplexed and began to have suspicions. He asked,

'What's the matter? Why are you so sad, Phim? Don't cry. Listen to me.' He lifted her chin and wiped her tears. 'What's upsetting you?'

Wanthong spoke through her tears: 'It's like a thorn is stuck in my chest, making it swell up and ache. It's hard to speak because my heart is falling apart. It's like birds. When the pair live together, [225]

they can look after the nest and the eggs without a problem. No crow or kite can swoop down to steal them. But when the male goes away, before even a month has passed,

the nest is left empty, the crow and kite swoop down, clean out the nest, and pull it apart. The house has been knocked down because a friend thought up a dirty trick.

Khun Chang came to tell my mother that you wouldn't return from Chiang Thong; the army was defeated and scattered; you'd been stabbed by the Lao and left in the uplands.

He brought some bones wrapped in a cloth to show me. When I heard this, I cried endlessly, lying on the bed with Saithong. My heart ached all the time.

I went to see the three bo trees. The leaves were yellow and fallen. I felt

dismal, depressed, devastated, beyond belief. I went to make merit and pour water.

I had flags made and sent the merit to you. But that didn't stop me grieving day in, day out. Because of this terrible heartache, I fell ill with fever almost to the point of death.

Mother nursed me for a long time but it wouldn't go away. So she went to ask the abbot of Wat Palelai and he said I'd hit a patch of bad fortune.

If I weren't apart from my husband, I'd die. Nothing could overcome this misery, except changing my name, then the sickness would subside,

and I'd come into some wealth, like before. So my name was immediately changed to Wanthong. After that I began to get better. Then that lackey Khun Chang turned up.

He brought some old people to the house to speak with mother. They said my husband was dead and I was a widow; the ministry has a law

that if a man goes to war and dies, his wife is kept as a royal widow. So they asked for my hand for Khun Chang. My mother didn't know this was a lousy trick.

She got greedy at the thought of wealth, and consented. The old house was taken down and sent to Wat Klang. He built a new bridal house and held a prayer chanting. [226]

It's seven days now and I haven't gone in there. Mother shouted at me and beat me to smithereens. She tied my hands and hung me up. I'm so ashamed, but I've borne it and borne it until today.'

She peeled off her upper cloth, 'Look at my back. Like chopped meat. I'm incredibly upset. If you don't believe me, I've had it.'

Khun Phaen felt angry enough for blood to flow from his eyes. 'Struth! Can a friend be so disloyal? What will happen, let's see within today.

The whole place knows you're my wife, but this baldie thinks he can wreck things. And that old mother thinks she can pull your hair and beat you to her heart's content.

They're in league to take my wife – saying I was stabbed to death and wouldn't come back, saying all kinds of bad things, cutting the roots of the bo tree to be a bad omen.

What a liberty to pull down the bridal house and build a new one over the remains, just like that! If I don't repay them, then I'm not a man. If the king doesn't keep me, well let it be.

And you, Wanthong, not going into his bridal house for seven nights like this – you're the best in Ayutthaya! Any other woman would have lost her honor.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Literally *sia prapheni*.

If he snatched any one of thousands of other women away from me, I wouldn't complain a bit. But snatching the lovely Phim is like cutting open my chest and pulling out my heart.

Why are my men sitting around doing nothing? Surround the house!' He drew his sword and brandished it angrily. 'I'll slash down the whole of Suphan!'

From behind the curtain, Laothong saw him shaking with rage. She was frightened he would kill someone. She opened the curtain, and came out to block his path.

'Hold off and think first. Please listen to this wife. Why all this noise? There are laws in the land, and **wherever you go you won't escape them.**<sup>12</sup>

Right or wrong, think it through. Why not report the matter to the king? If you rush off and slash people, later you'll be in danger. [227]

You've heard only one side and lost your temper. You don't yet know the wrongs and rights of the matter. How come this fellow had the nerve, even though she was already married?

Was there some kind of consent that made him dare to seize her, and even build a bridal house? How deep does this thing go? You have to think carefully. Listen to me and don't get carried away like a drunk.

**She hasn't got a neck like a steel anvil,** but she's not a little toddler, is she? And her mother gave her consent. That's why he had the nerve to do everything.'

Wanthong felt that a thunderbolt had broken her head into seven pieces. 'How come this face floats into the middle of this like a flying swan, making so much noise!

Cutting me off. Telling my husband what to do. Knowing the rights and wrongs of the matter so perfectly. Suspecting some trickery at the bottom of it. Flirting and flaunting to get him to fall for her.

Is this your wife, Phlai? Is that why she blundered into this and broke her neck? Where's her ladyship from? Perhaps she's just a relative of yours? Or a Lao kid you abducted along the way?'

'This wife of mine is from Chomthong. I'm not hiding anything. Her parents gave her for me to marry and bring down here. She's the child of a big house, and her name is Laothong.

I had meant her to wai you,<sup>13</sup> but then things blew up, she intervened, and I failed to introduce you. Please show me some consideration, the two of

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<sup>12</sup> Speculative. needs to be checked

<sup>13</sup> The minor wife wais the major wife to indicate subservience, and if the major wife returns the gesture it signifies acceptance of the minor wife into the household.

you.

Laothong, wai Phim first. Phim, don't be angry and make accusations. Please show forbearance to one another, don't be biased. If there's any problem, we can talk it over.'

'Enough, Phlai! I don't desire a wai from anyone. Only when she comes and shows her face here do I know that you have a lover.

Did she speak up because some matter arose, or was she trying to insult and offend me? Is she spitting all this out to create confusion, or perhaps you like what you hear and find it amusing.

When she stopped you, her words were laced with poison.<sup>14</sup> It was disgraceful. Everything she said sowed suspicions about me. Crafty, subtle, and sharp as nails. [228]

The right or wrong of it, you're the judge. Does she always jump up and stop people? She's so good at fawning and flaunting her beauty, but she's not after being your wife, Kaeo?'

Laothong burned with anger at the heavy sarcasm, and totally lost her composure.

'I didn't know in time that you're his major wife. I didn't intend to give offence. I saw Phlai mad enough to kill someone, so stopped him to let him cool off.

I just said slow down or you'll get yourself into big trouble.<sup>15</sup> Should I have left the matter dangling? I don't sway around like a stick stuck in mud. If I see my husband explode, I shout and complain.

If I didn't stop him, who would? I could see he was getting very aggressive, so I couldn't hang back. If a fire's burning and you carelessly toss on more firewood, you'll make it flame up even hotter.

You don't wish to receive my wai, but I'm not a bad person, not a little tough nut. I'm resolved to follow my husband's orders, but I don't want to wai and get no response.

Because of this confusion between us, I didn't wai you in time. I'm just a simple-mannered Lao from the forest. I don't know what's going on here in any depth, not even your name.

If I'd known beforehand that he had a wife, I'd have brought presents of good things like eaglewood and ivory. That's the custom among forest people.

Now I'm upset that I came empty-handed and it's too late to bring anything to give you. We've just met, so let me wai you. There, don't be

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<sup>14</sup> Guess, literally, daubed with indigo

<sup>15</sup> Guess, and needs better proverb/metaphor. Original is you'll receive two beautiful big knives.

angry.’

‘Struth! This little upland Lao can weave her words full of wiles! If you’d brought wood and ivory, I’d have brought a tusker out to receive you,

so that you wouldn’t have to walk on the ground. I’d have sent up a litter so soldiers could take turns carrying you along the way, and people could admire you in the middle of the army.

That would be fitting for the Chomthong family with its rank and its big house. I’d have arranged food in advance and rushed up as soon as your litter was set down. [229]

I thank you for being careful about creating trouble. When Phlai was getting aggressive, you thought quickly and jumped up like a windmill to stop him, or else things today would be even more confused.

Because of your ladyship’s action, we now have absolute peace and quiet. You grasped the firebrand and dunked it in water. But your face looks as sour as if you just ate a pickle fruit.<sup>16</sup>

You said you don’t sway around like a stick stuck in mid. No, you’re a boundary post buried six feet deep in firm clay. You could make Phlai fall over and stand up at the same time.

If that weren’t so, how would you have the nerve to come? Here at Ayutthaya you’ll be a sensation, talked about day in day out, unlike any other lady in the whole land.

Hundreds of villages and thousands of cities will celebrate this one lady. Nay! Not only the humans who walk on this earth, even Indra will probably come down to look!’

‘In truth, good people are not celebrated and evil people become popular. It’s shameful. I’m like a pillar planted in stone. But I didn’t see that it was muddy in front of the landing.

When the boat moored, I put out my feet and got filthy dirty because there wasn’t a hair’s breadth to stand on. Rice husks, shit, and duckweed<sup>17</sup> all mixed up

in a gooey, muddy mess like sap. I’ll have to wash it all off and dry in the sun. I thank you for wanting to bring an elephant to receive us because Phlai and I don’t have one.

But it’d be an elephant in must with splayed tusks! Now you have both a real elephant and a man elephant,<sup>18</sup> everything! Wanthong now has such so much saved up—to pull down a house and build such an big new one.

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<sup>16</sup> *Talingpling*, fruit of the cucumber tree, *averrhoa bilimbi* (geraniaceae).

<sup>17</sup> *Jok*, *pistia stratiotes*, water lettuce.

<sup>18</sup> A pun on *chang*=elephant.

I heard you were sick and wasting with fever because Phlai left and went away. You don't have any servants so you have to ride on an elephant.

The beast broke the house pillars, so you barged in and built a new one over the top. The astrologer said you had bad fortune from the past. **Venus entering, Saturn stuck, Mars intervening.**

If the monk didn't avert the bad fortune in time, you'd fall to pieces. So you changed your name and shaved your head so your husband wouldn't know you. But something broken can be put back together again without a trace.' [230]

'Even so, whose affair is this? Did an elephant stab you in the throat? Tst! You little forest Lao who floated your face up her, I'll thump you so the blood runs down and washes your feet.

I'm hugely hurt, like someone cut my body open with a sword. Saithong, I-Pli, and I-Jin! Come down to the boat and help me!

Whatever happens, I'm not letting you get away with it.' Khun Phaen blocked Wanthong. Laothong hid behind him peeping out. Saithong rushed up ready to deliver a slap.

'Don't! Don't make more trouble, Saithong. Whatever happens, she's come here like this. I'd like you to calm Wanthong down. Don't, Wanthong, please restrain yourself.'

'No, I won't listen to you at all. Even if Indra comes down to stop me, I won't listen. If you don't want to keep me, let it be. Just slash me down in this boat.

Shout at me as much as you like, I won't argue. Bash me into ten pieces, I won't complain. This little upland Lao, this clever talker, this eater of lizards and frogs, is getting a slap from me!'

She grabbed for Laothong's arm. Khun Phaen cried 'Don't! Don't!' and blocked her with his hands. Laothong dodged away. The slap came too late and caught Khun Phaen on the full.

'Eh! Look here! What's this? Don't you fear me one little bit? I say don't but it just fans the flames. Why are you so stubborn?'

'If you want to beat me then beat me, Phlai Kaeo. Strange, you weren't like this before, so aggressive and heavy-handed. Can you fly in the dark?'

Why is the sight of me as hateful as the sight of a tiger? Have you been poisoned, my dear husband? Did she cut open your body and eat everything so that it's completely absorbed in her black bones?'

Your face is covered with freckles, all over the nose and the lips.<sup>19</sup> Before long, you'll be crawling on the ground, and she'll ride on your neck like an ox.'

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<sup>19</sup> A sign that someone has been subject to a love charm.

‘Eh! Enough! Too much, Wanthong. Over the top. You show no respect for your husband. You’re stubborn, wrong-headed, thoughtless. Even if you don’t fear me, at least show me a little respect. [231]

For better or worse, I’m your husband, but you don’t seem to want me to be. Don’t overdo it or I’ll get angry. You’re beating the water in front of the trap to scare away the fish.

If you love yourself and fear shame then simmer down. Don’t make a racket because you’ll lose face. If you don’t listen to me and keep on, you’ll be shamed in front of the townsfolk. Let’s see.’

‘I knew already you don’t love me. Go on, kill me dead if you want to. You brought her home to insult me. Now we all know Miss Golden Tongue.’<sup>20</sup>

You’ve brought only this evil woman, this curse of the town, and you’re already making up stories to batter me. If you get someone better than this, don’t expect me to give her a public welcome by the water tank.

If you leave me now, before long you’ll be like a chopping board for chopping fish, morning and night. This little Lao will chop you to shreds. Our merit and karma is finished from today.’<sup>21</sup>

Wanthong leapt up onto the jetty. ‘So nothing leaves a stain, I’ll scoop up river water to wash the house, scrub it with my feet,

even put on krajok oil and krajae powder, and leave it to dry as a crust. To get this liar out of my life,<sup>22</sup> I’ll dig over the surface of the earth so there’s not a trace behind.

I cut myself off from you completely from today. I won’t miss you in even one joint of my little finger. Even if Indra comes down to scold me, don’t hang around for me to go back on my word!’

‘Hmm! You’re too full of yourself, Wanthong. You’re blaming me unreasonably. When I arrived, I thought things were good. I didn’t know your tricks before.

You pretended to cry and wail, but you were concealing lots, you little fibber. I caught you out, you tricky tongue. You were scared I was about to go up

and slash Khun Chang in the middle of the house. You love your bald-headed husband so you couldn’t stay still. You lit into Laothong to cover things up, then quarreled and severed the relationship with me.

You don’t wish to be friendly, you sneaky, thick-faced, shameless piece.

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<sup>20</sup> *Lin thong*, a pun on Laothong

<sup>21</sup> Meaning that she breaks with him.

<sup>22</sup> The Thai is the other way round, to get rid of the life of this liar, but this way works better in English

Your husband was hardly out the door and you were canoodling with the lover you had tucked away. [232]

The tanyae vine is horribly itchy, but not as bad as this. With ringworm, mange, or scabies<sup>23</sup> you can at least reduce the itch with medicine.

This bad lot is like a worm that bores it's way in and gives you the shakes. Even if you look for a cure all over Suphan, you'll exhaust the medical manuals in one day.

You'd be better off dead right now, Wanthong.' He drew his sword, raised it to strike, and stamped his feet on the boat. 'I'll grasp you by the hair and chop you dead!'

In shock, Wanthong ran up into the big house, threw herself down on the bed, and writhed around in utter despair. 'Oh my Phlai!

It was a waste of effort to preserve myself without taint like a gold ring that lights up the sky, like an egg buried in stone, trying to hide even from bugs and mites.

Even the breeze had no chance to touch me. My body was untainted. I saved myself for my husband, but as soon as we met, there was a problem.

I can't blame him at all. I deserve it for being so insulting. **The mud is all on my face.** He tried to stop me but I went on being aggressive and didn't see the danger.

Now because of my carelessness, everything is severed and smashed into dust. In a gale, it's the tallest tree with no neighbors to lean on that gets blown down.

Oh, poor Wanthong! I shouldn't be smashed into smithereens. How can I put things back together? I'm like a swan with a broken wing that falls into the mud,

loses its glittering gold color,<sup>24</sup> and becomes a crow. Because of bitterness, of clever words that provoke anger, the swan is drowned.

Oh my lord and master, my partner at the table, partner in bed, my friend in sickness, friend in health, you've gone and I won't see you again.

We were just at the beginning of love and we've quarreled. You came just in time and I ran down to meet you. You still loved me and meant to live together as before. Then the demon of jealousy took over. [233]

Feeling unappreciated made me so mean-minded. I got stubborn and impatient. I should've borne it for half a year and let him thump me to his heart's content.

But I messed it up and Phlai has thrown me away. How can I escape Khun Chang now? I'm worried mother will give me to him, even though I have no

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<sup>23</sup> *Phan nai*, a disease with worms under the skin (Mat:607).

<sup>24</sup> This is a *hongsa*, a mythical swan, hence the golden color.

feeling of love.

Only this old and two husbands! So much trouble, so much sadness, in every strand of hair! Only shame and endless grief. Dead and buried, with only my name left.

The pain won't lessen, and the shame will never disappear, like a tattoo on the back of a hand. Why should I love this body?

Death is finer.' She dragged over a rope, raised her hands, and prostrated three times. 'In this life, I've lost Phlai.

In fear of shame, I'll die and wait to meet him in the next life. Don't let Khun Chang have a clue.' She ducked behind the curtain,

grasped a pillar, and climbed up onto the roofbeam. With two hands, she tied the rope tightly round her neck, and let her body swing from the roof. At that moment, Saithong came in and was shocked.

She supported Wanthong's body, grabbed a knife to cut the rope, and screamed out loud, 'Mother! Come quick! Wanthong did it! She hanged herself!'

Siprajan cried out, 'I'm dead too!' She jumped up to run, fell flat on her face and rolled over. Khun Chang leapt up too with bleary eyes, tripped over his mother-in-law, and crashed down with a thump.

Siprajan complained, 'You old elephant! You bashed into me and almost broke my arse.'<sup>25</sup> Khun Chang wailed, 'My eyes were so bleary. I fell on my shoulder blade and nearly died.'

The servants in the house raised a racket. They massaged Wanthong but failed to bring her round. Saithong cried, 'Wanthong really hanged herself, Phlai. Come and look.'

Khun Phaen was livid as if seared by fire. 'I won't miss Wanthong at all.' He ordered his servants to harness the elephant to go to his mother's house at Cockfight Hill village. [234]

When this was done, they quickly loaded up all the goods. Khun Phaen mounted the elephant with Laothong,

and her maids Wan and Wiang got on a big she-elephant. With the servants following behind, they reached Kanburi in two days.

Seeing many people, elephants, and horses coming, Thong Prasi recognized him and cried out happily, 'My son has come! Over there!'

She shaded her eyes and peered out from the stairway. 'Kids, come quickly to receive Phlai Kaeo. There are two of them. Must be Wanthong.' She hawked and said, 'Why did young Kaeo bring Wanthong?'

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<sup>25</sup> Actually coccyx.

Khun Phaen dismounted from the elephant, and brought her along to prostrate at the feet of his mother who said, 'It's not her.' He told his mother the story from the beginning up to the quarrel with Wanthong.

Thong Prasi said, 'Oh my son, no need to tell me. Siprajan is full of herself. When she gave Wanthong away to Khun Chang in marriage, I went and shouted at her, made a lot of noise.

I severed relations completely from that day on. We can't keep Wanthong.' Then she turned to speak to Laothong. 'I trust you to nurse me and take care of my dead body.

Whatever we have, I give to you. Come to live together into the future. Love yourself, protect yourself, and fear gossip.' She ordered the servants to carry their things up into the house.

The servants tethered the elephants and horses, and put things away neatly. The many Lao who had arrived with them went off to build new houses scattered around the village.

In the bridal house, Khun Chang spent fifteen days curled up unable to sleep. Every day without fail he tossed and turned, mumbled to himself, and hugged his pillow.

Up to the second or third watch, he could not sleep. When he dropped off he dreamt, and sat up in his sleep with eyes wide open and his hands pressed on the mattress hard enough to break it apart.

At a creaking sound, he got up to look around. 'Have you come? Don't go away!' The only reply was a dukkae's call. He lay down again, got up, sat down, and went back to lying again. [235]

First face up, then face down, then turning his body on its side. His legs felt as stiff as lumps of wood. He got up to read a *phlengyao* and recite a poem.

My love, this bed is cold as ice  
 Oh what to do and where to meet  
 To eat the sugar and young rice  
 I miss you darling club of wood  
 Yet could not come this holy day  
 From dearth may riches come to rule  
 That whirlpool down at Bang Sarai  
 I'll drool and suck it all away  
 Oh say we'll meet before I die<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> This rendering mimics the 8-syllable lines, the rhyming scheme, and Khun Chang's clumsy search for rhymes found in the original, but deviates a bit in detail, especially changing the place name. More literally it translates as follows: Oh lady, my bed is cold as if soaked in water / what should I do and where / to eat young rice and fresh palm sugar / I miss you darling club of jan wood / but I restrain myself as it's a holy day / may I overcome poverty and become rich / may I find a whirlpool at Bang Kaja / stick my face in and suck the whole bowl / may I meet you for a while before I die.

Then he burped and laughed. ‘Oh! It’s you. Today warmth will dispel the chill. Look after your darling son and he’ll relax. Spirits of my grandmothers, come and help.

Grandfathers too, everyone. I’ll give you strong liquor and roast pork. Please urge her to come here quick. I’ll receive her generously, the dozy little thing.

Spirits with fearless tongues, including the spirit of lovers, come and help me. In reward, I’ll offer you a stick for combing hair befitting my wealth, tani oil,<sup>27</sup> and a comb.’

Seeing her son-in-law upset and frustrated, Siprajan tried to bring Wanthong round. ‘Don’t sit around doing nothing. Flesh of my flesh,<sup>28</sup> don’t be hesitant.

Today fifteen days are up. Dear child, go up into the bridal house. Khun Chang has been moping around with his head hanging down. Don’t be reluctant, my dear.’

‘Oh mother and mistress of mine, do you want to kill me? My husband went to war and just came back. You saw him with your own eyes too.

If he hadn’t survived, had met his death, I’d go to live with Khun Chang without hatred. But we’ve been parted for only two days. Will you force me and make me die?

It was a waste of effort to carry me in your womb if you’re going to kill me off so easily. If I go on living, I can’t escape shame because that baldie is hateful.’

‘Whether what you say is right or wrong, you’re an arrogant child. Don’t you want a husband with silver and gold? Sitting and eating in comfort until your dying day! Why make so much out of his bald head? [236]

You’re moaning on about Phlai Kaeo, but he’s got a new wife, hasn’t he? He badmouthed you loud enough for all Suphan to hear. He’s broken it off with you and doesn’t care.

If you won’t listen to me, you can get out of this house. Tough or easy, alive or dead, don’t look to *me*.’ She grabbed Wanthong to drag her out.

Wanthong dodged away from her. They pushed one another and fell against the wall. Khun Chang blundered up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, opened the door ajar and waited.

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<sup>27</sup> Hair oil made from coconut oil (Mat: 471).

<sup>28</sup> Literally, ‘Warm flesh of mother.’

Siprajan kept on dragging her. ‘You difficult little abomination, you’ll make your mother lose face. All tears and snot like a toddler.’ She grappled, pushed, and pulled.

Her hand slipped, and she fell against the wall, ripping her cloth, and bashing her head. Wanthong also fell face down with a bang. Siprajan pushed her to roll head-over-heels,

and beat her remorselessly. ‘You won’t go, really? Well I’m not listening to that.’ Wanthong shouted out, ‘You’re forcing me. Hold off! The villagers will come and look.’

Bald-headed Ta-Phon, who lived in a house close by, took fright that robbers had come to kill his pigs. He grabbed a lance, came out to his doorway, and cried out, ‘To battle! No retreat!’

Siprajan shouted angrily at old Phon, ‘What are you up to, you hairy-chested old baldie, jumping up and down shouting?’ He cried out, ‘Who’s spearing my pigs?’

Khun Chang thought his mother-in-law was shouting at him. ‘Heavens above! I haven’t speared anything yet. Why are you slow at sending Wanthong to me?’ Siprajan cried angrily, ‘You sex maniac!’

She turned away and dragged Wanthong further. Her cloth slipped off and she staggered about in a rage. Coming to the fig tree,<sup>29</sup> she stepped on a bowl which broke and cut her foot.

She screamed, ‘I’m dying!’, picked up her foot and waved it around, red with blood. ‘**That’s awful. Too much. You pest!**’ Wanthong got a grip on a bamboo bench and hung on tight.

Siprajan pulled shards of the bowl out of her foot, climbed onto the bench, and grabbed Wanthong again. Wanthong lost her grip on the bench and was dragged by her mother up into the new bridal house in tumult. [237]

They went through the door in a tussle. Dragged along the floor, Wanthong lost her upper cloth. Bleary-eyed Khun Chang leapt over, missed Wanthong, and kissed his mother-in-law twice.

Siprajan reeled away, pushing his chest back. ‘You dirty baldie, you ghost’s skull!’ Khun Chang cried, ‘Ay! Damn! Riding your wife’s mother is a big mistake!’

He released her and turned to Wanthong. He dragged her into the room in high excitement, clumping along on his knees like a crawling turtle. ‘I’m going to heaven today!’

Inside the room, Wanthong shouted, ‘Khun Chang is forcing himself on me, Phlai Kaeo! This pestilential bastard is going to kill me. His eyes are bulging like an old cat.

Get away from me, you mean shit! Your head’s like a dried old coconut!’

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<sup>29</sup> *Mai liap*, ficus accor, a kind of fig with edible fruit and young leaves (Tree:780).

Panting, Khun Chang reached out his hands to grab her shoulders and push her into the mosquito net.

Wanthong kicked him in the middle of his chest, and he fell off the bed with a thump. He scrambled up and lay across her stomach. The string of the mosquito net broke, and as she squirmed desperately,

it wrapped round her like a coating of egg-white. ‘I can’t breathe, you abomination!’ With his bleary eyes, Khun Chang groped around and got the net totally tangled.

‘I’m really furious with this mosquito net. First thing tomorrow, I’ll throw it in the shithouse.’ He ripped the net and screwed it up in his hands, but Wanthong was still tangled up.

Khun Chang lifted the net wound round her body, leaving only her head in the tangle, giving himself the opportunity to satisfy his passion. Stuck in the folds, Wanthong was at her wit’s end.

She struggled to get up, crying her eyes out. ‘You winded me, you creep.’ She kicked Khun Chang who fell down doubled over. He danced up and down, back and forth,

kicking over a water bowl which drenched his legs and made him shiver. Wanthong freed herself enough to sit up, still wound up in the net. Khun Chang stumbled over and grabbed her by the throat.

He wrestled her down onto the bed with a thump. Wanthong struggled and pounded on the wall with her eyes staring wide. Wondrously, the sky burst and the rain drizzled down in a continuous stream, bathing the earth. [238]

Fish and shrimps jumped happily up from the water. Huge ones slid over the rocks. Catfish,<sup>30</sup> looking for food, swam down and wriggled into the ground.

Wanthong was lackluster, feeling only sorrow. Khun Chang was ecstatic. ‘I love you enough to swallow you up. Thousands of other women mean nothing to me.

I’ll give you silver and gold, at least a hundred baskets, you of great merit. Wherever you go, I won’t let you be tired. You can ride resting on the neck of your loving husband instead of a male elephant.’<sup>31</sup>

Wanthong humphed and tossed her head. She could not stop hating herself for doing wrong. She thought of her husband, and she felt dead. She was too ashamed to let anyone see her,

and stayed in the room for two days, grieving enough to lose her mind. She was now forced to live with Khun Chang, but behind his back she sorrowed for Phlai.

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<sup>30</sup> *Thepho thepha*, pangasius larnaudii and pangasius sanitwongsei, the black ear catfish and Chaophraya giant catfish.

<sup>31</sup> Another pun on his name and *phlai*.

She ate nothing. She woke in the morning but lay in bed until late, heart-broken enough to pass away, her hands wiping away floods of tears.