

14: Khun Phaen states his case

[I/239]

Khun Phaen, whose powers made enemies quail., had been living together with Laothong for two nights,

when he woke at midnight in their room. The earth was bathed in bright moonlight. It was dead quiet with nobody speaking, only the lonesome sound of birds in the forest,

and the relentless ring of crickets. A cool dew lay on the ground, and a refreshing breeze blew. His thoughts turned to Wanthong.

‘Oh dear! I was really careless. Should I have thrown away a loving wife? On the day I arrived back, the jealousy between her and Laothong made it a very depressing day.

Khun Chang had already built a bridal house ready and waiting. On top of that, she was so quick-tempered and changeable. But the longer I leave her there, the more chance he has to fulfill his desires. That’s worrying.

What a pity! I was so full of hopes, but now this demon has smashed them all. While I was away, he was just waiting to grab her. I rushed back, but too late.

We saw one another, but still messed things up. It’s like having a jewel in your grasp but then dropping it exactly where a thief can attack. Perhaps by now she’s already lost her honor.

When a tiger gets a juicy chunk of meat, does he wait before eating it? I’ve left her with him for two days already. How are you, my darling?

The more I think about this, the more I feel uptight, worried, boiling with anger, and frustrated. It won’t go away. Tomorrow I’ll go to Suphan.

By midnight on the day after tomorrow, I should know how things are. I’ll use a mantra to go in and check. If Wanthong is sleeping with him, I’ll slash both their necks.

Siprajan and Thepthong too. Even though we’re related, I won’t let them live. I’ll treat them like a dog with a crooked tail. Those old ladies who asked for her hand too.’ [240]

With this in mind, he pushed open the window and saw the golden light of early dawn at cock crow. He quickly got up and washed his face as the sun came up.

He summoned his servants and conscripts, both Thai and Lao, and made up a story. ‘Get things ready quickly. Put enough rice in

your waist-pouches¹ for about four days

Prepare the horses and everything else, including the weapons I usually carry.’ He chose by name twenty of those with skill.

‘I’m making a patrol to the frontier. Neglecting government service is not fruitful. You lot have already been to war and survived. Now I trust you to follow my arse.’

He went back into the room and talked to his beloved Laothong. ‘I’m going on patrol on the king’s orders. I’ll be back shortly.’

He got dressed, buckled on his kit, picked up his sword, and walked away from the house. The conscripts and horses were ready and waiting. They mounted,

carrying their weapons, along with food and torch sets in their waist-pouches. They cut across the fields and reached the Suphan area after two nights.

They stopped and dismounted at the edge of the forest where they ate steamed rice and grilled fish. At sundown, they made a spirit house,

and lit victory candles to initiate it. They pronounced special formulas to enchant their kit with power, and used mantra to enchant rice and limes.

When this was quickly done, they got dressed, harnessed the horses, grasped their weapons, and made a prayer at an auspicious time.

Khun Phaen brandished his sword this way and that, flashing like a jewel. He moved off quickly, and leapt on his horse. His men followed behind.

About midnight, under a glittering star-lit sky, they reached the house. Khun Phaen dismounted and scattered enchanted rice around [241]

to drive away all the spirits of the place, and to ensure nobody woke up. He hastened to Khun Chang’s house, lit a candle, and fixed it to the first post.²

With a spirit-doctor’s knife,³ he hacked at the post, splitting its end into four, then **magically** sprung the bolts on the window. He scattered rice mixed with the bones of the dead,

¹ *Tai*, a tubular pouch tied around the waist.

² This post would have been the subject of ritual during construction to enshrine powers to protect the house. By ritually damaging this post, Khun Phaen is removing this protection over the house’s inhabitants.

³³ *Mit mo*, a ‘doctor knife,’ a knife that has been instilled with power by an adept.

ensuring all in the house were overcome with drowsiness, and fell asleep, curled up and tumbled over one another. He climbed up to a big window,

and jumped down onto the floor inside. Faces were lit by a dim light. He cut down a curtain into a pile on the floor, and moved ahead to open the mosquito net. He saw the face of Wanthong,

asleep on the bed beside Khun Chang with their arms round one another. 'Hell! How dare you, my good woman! So confident in this husband you don't fear me at all!

All the promises we made still stand, but I was hardly out of the door when you took a lover in full public view.'

He strode up beside the bed, pushed them apart to see her face, and lifted the cloth covering her chest. 'Tst! It'll serve you right, my pretty thing.

I didn't realize such a figure would have no heart. You're so beautiful – your breasts and your alluring ways – I wanted to swallow you whole. But I shouldn't have put such store in looks.

Your body is beautiful but your kiss is not sweet. You soot face! You swan's neck!' He kicked them off the bed, one after the other. 'Why should I let you live?'

He raised his sword to cut them in two, but a jingjok⁴ called out a warning close by. He stopped himself, held back his anger, and did not strike.⁵ 'You're lucky. You'll survive.

Otherwise you wouldn't live to see tomorrow morning. Your heads would be off, both of them. But within today I'll make you pay for daring to do this without any fear.'

He pulled a cord out from the curtains. 'Although I've decided not to put you to death, you'll still get what you deserve, you witch. I'll have fun with this rope.' [242]

With his foot, he pushed the two of them together, and wound the rope tight around their prone bodies. He trussed them with lengths of the rope, tightened the bonds with a splint, and tossed the end of the rope up onto the roof.

Then he wrapped them in cloth like a corpse. 'There, you vile lot, that's what you deserve.' With dawn almost brightening the sky, he hurried down from the house,

and pulled the charmed knife out of the post. He called his conscripts and had each of them bind a torch and light them all so it looked like a royal procession.

⁴ Common house lizard, gecko.

⁵ Old belief that when a jingjok calls out close at hand, one should stop whatever one is doing or saying [Red: 669-70]

Then he released the mantra and in an instant everyone in the house woke up at the same time. Khun Phaen remounted his horse and beat on the walls with his sword.

He had his men shout loudly, 'Is Wanthong there?' 'Where's she gone?' 'Is anyone awake in there?' 'Lower the stairway to receive Khun Phaen!'

Saithong heard the noise. 'Eh? Whose voices are those?' She rushed out and saw many people on horseback

and torches blazing brightly all around. She took fright, hid herself, peered around, and saw Phlai. 'Now we're in for it!

Darling Wanthong has lost her honor and now Kaeo has come back to find her. I must go down to talk with him and try to cool things down out the front.'

She got up to open the door but sensed his anger and again lost heart. 'If he lashes out, I'll die. But he's not bad at heart. It should be alright.'

She pushed the stairway down and steeled herself to go to face Khun Phaen. In floods of tears, she said, 'I'm in despair, Phlai.

How come you abandoned Wanthong so easily? On that day she hanged herself but you weren't upset and wouldn't even look.

Siprajan forced her to marry that baldie. They had a big fight and she beat Wanthong until the blood flowed. [243]

Because **Thungyang**⁶ is very far away, I couldn't go to tell you. She lost her honor by force just two days ago.'

Khun Phaen was even more incensed. 'Saithong, there's no need to say anything else. I understand the trickery.

I don't have wealth and good fortune so Siprajan wants to separate us because she sees no benefit. Khun Chang is richer and can support you through everything.

I came with the intention of fetching her, and would still love her if she hadn't lost her honor. But now she's tainted, why should I take her? **You can't wash this away.**⁷

But why talk about Wanthong? Even you won't escape his clutches in the end. When he's used her up, he'll take you instead because you're the same in flesh and spirit.

This one or that, that one or this, he'll make use of you. I fear you'll "lose your honor" often, don't deny it. It was a waste of effort

⁶ Thungyang has not been mentioned earlier, but this must refer to Kanburi.

⁷ Literally, even though put in a basket and wash, there's no salt.

to love and make promises. I want to see the faces of those who helped him.

I thought of suing but it's a waste of time. I'll just slash the whole house so nothing's left. The married couple will be hanged. And I'll have fun and games with those who came to ask for her hand.

Even you who are also my wife, how come you fell in with them? Now you're cornered and scared, you'll tell me only the things that put you in a good light.'

Saithong cried out, 'Oh dear! Don't talk like this, I don't like it. It's like looking in a basket of fish to find exactly which one is rotten.

It's almost light, Phlai. Please come up into the big house.' She went up the stairs and into Siprajan's room.

'Get up quickly, mother. Khun Phaen has come. He's downstairs in the middle of the compound with lots of people, horses, lances, swords, and everything.'

Siprajan's body trembled, her mouth shook, her neck palpitated, and she wanted to disappear into the earth. 'What shall we do, Saithong? [244]

People are making a racket all over the house. Has he come to arrest me? I'm cornered. My head's swelling. He'll beat me into the ground!

'Mother, this time he's good. He's in the king's favor. I heard him talking with the conscripts. He'll rip us to pieces.

They've got swords, lances, and rope. Someone's going to be hanged for sure. He named Thepthong and Siprajan. He said he'd slash and leave the results for people to see.'

Siprajan trembled like a bird chick. Sweat flowed down her face and dripped from her ears. Tears gushed down in floods. 'This time I'm fated to die!'

She went back into the mosquito net, covered herself with a mattress, and wound cloth round herself in despair. 'Saithong, please shout out to Phlai that I fainted down dead several days ago.'

'Come on! Where will you hide from him? You think he won't come in and search?' Saithong went out and pushed on Wanthong's door.

She found the bolt closed tight and did not know how to enter the room. She returned to look out of the doorway, and called Khun

Phaen to come up.

Khun Phaen went up with his servants and conscripts in a big crowd. He asked Saithong, 'How come I don't see my mother-in-law?

Is Wanthong here or not? Where's she gone? Why is she still sleeping so late?' He created uproar by calling out and pounding on the walls with a stick.

Khun Chang and Wanthong were scared by all the noise of people outside the room. But they could not get up because they were trussed up tight with rope

and wrapped in a curtain. They rolled their heads around, trying to breathe. They trembled with fear but could only look at one another.

Khun Phaen called out, 'Wanthong! Aren't you coming out of your room? Don't you get up until midday? Come out and talk. What's up?' [245]

Wanthong recognized her husband's voice and quaked in greater panic. Tied together, the two of them were helpless, and she was too ashamed to call out.

Khun Phaen shouted, 'Hey, Khun Chang! Its late now, why don't you put my wife down? Today you meet your death. Don't give a thought that you'll survive.

I don't know where you are in there, or else I'd come in and cut your head off.' Quivering with reckless rage, he grabbed his sword and kicked the wall to make them panic.

Hearing him, Khun Chang's mind was full of anger and despair at being trussed up like a corpse. Wanthong felt more ashamed and would not open her eyes.

Saithong called out, 'Mother Siprajan, he's going to slash Wanthong for sure. Why are you skulking in there? How do you think you can escape?'

Siprajan was too scared to come out but afraid he would slash her daughter to death. She steeled herself to go out and face her fate.

She lifted the big mattress off her body, but was again overcome with panic. She tied the mattress round herself with string like a puppet. 'Even if he slashes me, it'll only get the kapok. No matter.'

Then she folded a cloth into five and wrapped it round her head, covering her ears and eyes completely. She thrust her hands inside the mattress.

With the cloth covering her face and eyes, she walked blindly off in the wrong direction and tumbled over, snorting from her nose.

‘Saithong, come and help me.’

Saithong ran in, found a bulky roll of bedding stuck in the doorway, and burst out laughing.

She wrestled with the cloth and mattress, but Siprajan blundered this way and that, and was too big to get through the door. She pushed and pushed, then slipped and fell down with a thump.

Khun Phaen’s men craned to look and guffawed with laughter. ‘See the masked raider!’ ‘Lo, the prancing donkey!’ ‘It thinks it’ll be eaten by a forest spirit!’⁸ [246]

Saithong guided her out onto the terrace. Trying to keep a straight face, Khun Phaen called out, ‘What’s this wrapped in a mattress? Is Saithong making fun of us?’

‘Where’s Siprajan? I don’t see her yet. I’ll kill her alive. She won’t escape.’ Siprajan thought he did not understand, so she leant against the wall and said nothing.

Khun Phaen thought things over very carefully, and sent for Phan Chot because he was a big man in the district.

‘You’re kamnan of the village.⁹ I went to Chiang Thong on royal service. You were aware Wanthong and I were married and for how long.

When I came back from the war, I couldn’t find my bridal house. Do you know who this new house with nine rooms belongs to? If so, tell me.’

Phan Chot said what he knew with no falsehood. ‘When you were away up there and had not yet returned, I was a witness

that Khun Chang brought old Kloi and old Sai¹⁰ to say that you’d died, and to arrange a date for the marriage ceremony.

Before the day when the dowry was brought to the house, Siprajan and Thong Prasi had a big long argument over whether you’d died.

Thong Prasi told them not to hold the ceremony, but this side was high-handed and didn’t listen. Before she went home, Thong Prasi told me so I know the truth.’

After listening to everything the headman had to say, Khun Phaen sat quietly and pondered the truth of the matter. ‘My beloved wife

⁸ *Phi bong[khang]*, a type of forest spirit (Mat:573).

⁹ In the previous chapter, Phan Chot and Kamnan Taeng were two different people, but here Phan Chot has become the kamnan.

¹⁰ In the original of this chapter, she is spelt as Sa, but this has been changed to Sai, the spelling used when she first appeared in the previous chapter.

Wanthong still loves me

as much as her own life, but she's been forced to split from me. Khun Chang is deliberately hostile. He made up a story in order to ask for the marriage.

Wanthong tried to preserve our relationship. But when the war ended and I came home, we got into a quarrel and stupidly wrecked the relationship. [247]

I was too hot-headed – just blundered in and put the blame in the wrong place. Regrettably, that allowed Khun Chang to close in. Should I think about taking her back?

But I've doubts about her feelings. Now Khun Chang has enjoyed her, it's like drinking water and seeing the leeches and everything. Reviving our love won't feel right.

To report matters to the king would affect Wanthong and make her lose face in front of the lawcourt. She was forced into giving up her honor. If I'm generous, there should be some benefit in the future.

Or should I think about the loss of face? Khun Chang dared do this with no respect for me because his silver and gold make him arrogant. If I let things go, he'll be even more overbearing.

Up to now, I haven't done anything. If I let things ride, he'll just play more tricks. I have to teach him a lesson.' With these thoughts, he said,

'Phan Chot, you're a big person around here. Please summon all those involved, including Thepthong, Kloi, and Sai.'

Phan Chot ordered Nai Son to go off immediately. He rushed over and went up into the house.

Thepthong called out, 'Who's come with a face covered in sweat and eyes screwed up? What business brings you to the house?' She pushed the betel tray and invited him to take some.

Nai Son said, 'For sure, auntie, a big mess has arisen. Our village has a problem, something big like the earth on fire.'

In fright, Thepthong asked, 'Where? Kids, fetch the machetes and protect the house!' She got up and bustled about frantically. Son said, 'It's not a fire.'

Thepthong cried, 'Then it's robbers come to steal! That's worse, you lose ten times more than in a fire.' She sat back down and asked with her mouth trembling in apprehension, 'What's this about?'

Nai Son said, 'It's about Wanthong. Her husband has come to that house. He's now in royal favor. He's got a title and thousands of men. [248]

He's called Khun Phaen. He's shouting threats at the headman.

He wants to arrest people, take them to the city, and ask the king to execute them.

Phan Chot sent me to get you, along with Kloi and Sai as well. As for Khun Chang, Wanthong, and Siprajan, they're tied up already.'

In the middle of pounding betelnut, Thepthong dropped the pestle with a thump. 'Oh hell! Oh my father! Karma, oh karma, karma! What to do? How to talk our way out of this?

From birth to old age and broken teeth, I've known only how to do paddyfields and gardens – planting taro and cassava, tilling the earth. Now almost at death's door, I'm being taken to court

because that lackey Khun Chang with the beard on his chin didn't listen to his mother. Sai and Kloi spun a tale and now he'll have them tied up like wat cattle.'

She cried out to Kloi and Sai, 'That bastard Khun Chang has fixed you good. Khun Phaen came back to arrest him but he's shifted the blame onto you. He'll tie you up like sea crabs.'

Kloi fell down the stairs in fright, and limped across with her sagging breasts slapping on her unruly belly. They tottered up into Thepthong's house.

Sai said, 'Oh let me go, sir,' but did not see a gap in the stairway and fell in doubled over. She eased herself up, eyes bulging, and staggered on up, dragging her leg and feeling very stiff.

Thepthong said, 'What's up, Sai? Does your leg hurt? Are you making out your pelvis is broken?' She jerked her head. 'It's late. Let's go. Let's find out how bad things are.

Please cover those droopy breast with a cloth. Hurry up now. Face the music!' The servants came along behind en masse, eyeing one another's faces with apprehension.

The closer they got, the more Thepthong got scared. She turned and said, 'Dear Nai Son, help me. I'm not going, sir.

Please mollify him, I beg of you. Don't let his anger get out of hand. I'll give you silver and gold for merit. Tell him Khun Chang's mother has gone far away. [249]

She took the family and moved elsewhere. There's nobody left at the house. Kloi and Sai, please go along and sort this out. Help to get me off, my dears.'

Nai Son said, 'Why are you asking me this? Am I to tell them lies? For better or worse, let's go together. A court case is a serious matter. Don't beg me.'

That said, they all walked along and soon reached the house. Seeing people swarming all over the place, the three accused became

even more frightened.

Nai Son went up to the terrace first. Thepthong would not follow but skulked at the foot of the stairs, peering around. Phan Chot said, 'Why aren't you coming up?'

The three then rushed headlong up the stairs. Khun Phaen was sitting holding his sword and looking down. He stood up and called out, 'Who's come?' Thepthong shrieked and fell down with a bang.

Sai and Kloi tumbled after her. The stair rail crashed down on top of them pinning their necks. They could not get up. People roared with laughter.

Thepthong called out, 'Why put us in the stocks, sir? I'm ready to give evidence though I've never done it before.' Then she raised her head and realized she was pinned down by the stair rail.

They all got up feeling battered as if chopped with knives. They helped one another put the stair rail on the terrace, and stood craning their necks for a place to hide.

Thepthong steeled herself to go up front. Kloi and Sa followed her in a funk. When a dukkae called, they all dropped to their knees, and Thepthong called in reply, 'It's only me!'

She stumbled into the door, and the bolt thumped down on her head. Saithong cried, 'What a shambles!' ¹¹ People laughed uproariously.

Thepthong tottered up to the main room with Kloi and Sai following. She caught sight of Khun Phaen and crawled away to the wall to avoid him.

She saw the mattress wrapped around Siprajan. 'Heavens, I've met a ghost!' She scrambled to her feet and bumped into the mattress, knocking Siprajan down flat. [250]

Siprajan cried out, 'Spare me. I'm terrified, sir.' She stuck out her face with eyes bulging, then extricated herself from the mattress, trembling. 'Sir, please spare me.'

Khun Phaen was in a big rage and demanded answers immediately. 'Now, you, Wanthong's mother.

I came to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage and you consented. When I went off to distant Chiang Thong, the bridal house was still there as evidence.

I entrusted my Wanthong to you. When were we divorced? But you went off and gave her to Khun Chang. What have you got against me?

Perhaps you thought I had only low rank and little wealth or

¹¹ Total guess, *mai pen phleng*

property, so you could act high-handedly and I wouldn't have the standing to resist you.

Your new son-in-law is such a big fellow with lots of property, elephants, horses, and everything else, so you conspired together to trample all over me with no respect.

You knocked down the house to rebuild in the wat, and brought a new bridal house in its place. You think I deserve to be cut to pieces like this just because I'm poor.'

Siprajan's mouth went dry with fear. In utter panic, she lifted her arse but then dropped it crashing down on the bamboo floor. Her body shook and her mouth quivered.

She heaved a big sigh and her body was racked with sobs. She buried her tearful face in both hands. She sat up, wiping away the snot like a bird chick. She boxed her own head, saying, 'Yes, yes, sir!

Kloi and Sai came to sow confusion that you were dead. They brought bones that had just been cremated, and asked for Khun Chang to be married.

I was scared that I couldn't protect her from being taken as a royal widow, so I consented. Wanthong complained every day and cried her eyes out – tears as big as cowries.

For fifteen days she refused to go into the bridal house. She only gave up and went in two days ago. She hasn't been tainted *that* much. Don't hold it against her. Take her back.' [251]

Hearing Siprajan's words, Kloi and Sai could not sit still. 'No! No! I'll tell you. Thepthong asked us to come

and say that Phlai Kaeo had gone to war with Chiang Thong and been stabbed by the Lao in the forest. Whether that's true or false, have mercy on us. They coached us to say it, so we did.'

Thepthong reeled and beat her breast. 'It was Khun Chang who told you to say it! I beg you. I was completely in the dark. I'm at my wit's end. Please spare me.'

Hearing these conflicting versions, Khun Phaen burst out, 'It was wrong from the start. You had no fear. The whole of Suphan knew.

My mother Thong Prasi came to the house and objected to the house, the marriage, everything. But Thepthong and Siprajan stubbornly went right ahead.

You effectively challenged me to take you to court, but with all your gold and silver that was no worry. Why are you afraid now? Today it'll all come out.

Where's Khun Chang, where is he? Why is he hiding his head? Come out here! If what you have to say puts me in a bad temper, I'll kill you. But if you're good, I'll think of you as a friend.'

Siprajan and Thepthong called out, 'Why don't you come out to meet him? Are you having fun sleeping over half the day, you girdle-headed bastard.'

However much they called, there was no answer. Khun Phaen said, 'My anger's rising...' Khun Chang called out blearily, 'They tied me up.'

Siprajan pushed on the door of the room. 'Why are you lying in there, you bastard? Just because you're inside there means you have no fear? Thepthong, haul him out by his hair.'

Thepthong and Siprajan shoved on the door but it was locked tight and would not open. Khun Phaen held his breath and then blew a formula

which opened the door with a click. Siprajan and Thepthong went into the room, shrieked, and fainted. 'Who brought the Chinaman Khong's corpse in here?' [252]

Khun Chang cried, 'Mother, don't be scared. It's not a corpse. Help untie me.' Thepthong screamed in greater panic, 'Oh! This corpse can speak like a live person!'

Siprajan cried, 'Oh heavens! I've never seen twin corpses before.' Thepthong shouted, 'He died just this afternoon, and his dreadful little wife made such a performance she fell down dead too.'

Khun Chang hissed, 'It's me!' The two ladies leapt about frantically and fell down on their backs. Siprajan's cloth slipped off completely except for the end. The two grappled with one another noisily.

With a thought, Siprajan took a closer look. 'What's this? He doesn't have a pigtail.' Thepthong shouted, 'Really? No pigtail?'

Siprajan said, 'That's Wanthong!' Thepthong said, 'No, it's Ai-Bia. Why did they kill both husband and wife?¹² How come they haven't been cremated? Who brought them here?'

Khun Chang shouted, 'It's me!' The two ladies jumped wildly in fright, bashing their heads on the wall. They covered their eyes with both hands and started praying loudly. 'Saithong, please help.'

Saithong called, 'What's up?' and rushed in, colliding with Siprajan and knocking her over. Siprajan said, 'What are you shoving me for?'

Thepthong cried, 'Help me too! Is this that Chinaman's corpse or not? The rope tying looks too untidy to be a corpse. It can't be

¹² Chinaman Khong and Ai-Bia were probably real-life cases imported into the story. [Red 123]

Wanthong and Khun Chang.’

Saithong looked in and took fright. ‘Eh! What’s all this beating your chests, lying around without any clothes on, and mumbling?’ Then she turned and said, ‘What’s this?’

Who told you it was Chinaman Khong? You’re talking nonsense with your eyes closed. You see a person and bawl out it’s a corpse. I’m ashamed of you.’ She walked out.

Siprajan got down to look and wanted to die of shame. ‘Why are you sleeping in here with your eyes shut? Why did you let a robber strip off your clothes and wind you up in rope.’

The mothers of the husband and wife fetched a betelnut knife. ‘It may nick your flesh a bit.’ Feeling flustered, she cut the ropes and pulled them away. [253]

Siprajan picked up clothing to give to her daughter. ‘How shameful! He made me lose face.’ She said to Khun Chang, ‘Khun Phaen has come to make trouble.

He’ll go and ask the king to have us executed. You and I face disaster. The property will be scattered. Just now Phlai said,

if you’re good, he’ll look on you as a friend; but if you’re obstinate, he’ll kill. You must go out there to wai him and pay respects. Ask for his pardon and make him cool down.

Just don’t be stubborn. Go along with what he wants so the case disappears. He’s got a new wife close by his side. I don’t think he’ll be so disappointed about Wanthong.

He’s come here to say that we acted high-handedly. Ask his forgiveness and I think it’ll come to nothing. Just don’t answer back. Go out there now.’

When nobody came out, Khun Phaen shouted a warning, ‘What’s up? Why don’t you come out to talk?’

If you’re good, nothing will happen. If you’re too stubborn, I’ll slice you up.’ Thepthong’s eyes rolled up in their sockets. Siprajan said, ‘Khun Chang,

you’re still blinking, you abomination.’ She shoved him in the side with her foot. Thepthong cried, ‘Get out there, you thinhead.’ Khun Chang stiffened his body and shook his head.

Thepthong thumped him. ‘It’s worse than trying to drag Jao Ngo,¹³ you creep. Your cloth’s all loose and your belly’s hanging out.

¹³ Jao Ngo is a character in the outer drama *Sangthong* (The Golden Conch, see note in chapter 12). When the hero takes the form of the Ngo forest dweller, he acts as a buffoon, and has to be dragged to meet his bride who is a princess.

You'll turn the house into a coffin, you villain.'

Khun Chang peeped over the wall. 'Wanthong, please come out with me. Even if he's angry enough to kill someone, he'll soften up if you come.'

Wanthong said, 'Forget it! Even if Indra comes down, I'm not going. If he slashes me dead right here, I'd be happy. Don't even dream that I'll go out there.'

Khun Chang said, 'If you won't come, why should I go out to get killed? I don't want to die apart from you. Right or wrong, we should die looking at one another. [254]

If we die beside one another, we'll be born again beside one another in heaven.' He jumped up with his eyes rolled up and hugged tight onto Wanthong. 'I'm not going out there.'

Thepthong and Siprajan were shaking with fear. 'Tst! You did this, you beggar! You've got nothing on, you villain.' She seized a plank and bashed him in his middle.

'Don't hit me! I'm going out. Why do you hurt me like this, mother dear?' He grabbed a cloth and wound it round his trembling body, afraid enough to faint.

He hid behind the door and peered at the wall for a way to escape. Eyes screwed up with effort, he started to climb up the wall. Siprajan grabbed a foot, 'Come down from there!'

Thepthong tongue-lashed him, 'You mask face!', grabbed the other foot and pulled him back down. His cloth slipped off and he hung onto the end. He picked up a lantern¹⁴ and put it on his head.

He raised his two hands to his forehead. 'Please have some betel, dear Phlai.' He prostrated on Phlai's lap and raised Phlai's foot onto his head. 'I'm so happy,

your fragrant excellency, Mom Kaeo. They said you were dead but you've come back! Your stock of merit must be enormous and your innards as beautiful as lotus flowers.'

He lifted Khun Phaen's sarong, made a grab, and begged to kiss. He stroked his hands on Phlai, and then brought them to rub on his own head. 'As fragrant as if rubbed with tons of krajae!' People around shook with laughter.

Khun Phaen said, 'Don't! Don't, Khun Chang!' He pushed him away and quickly drew his cloth closed. Khun Chang went on busily kissing and stroking. Thepthong and Siprajan looked away

¹⁴ Khun Wichitmatra thinks this "lantern" must be the betel tray (Red: 123).

Khun Phaen ground his teeth in anger. 'Hey, Khun Chang! What were you thinking, my friend? Phim here is my wife.

I was still away at the war. Did I abandon her or sell her to you? Yet you knocked down my house to build a replacement. You said I was dead,

and turned up at the house with some bones wrapped in cloth. You dug up the bo tree so it withered. You set out to be her lover and husband. What were you thinking? Tell me.' [255]

The question made Khun Chang's hair stand on end. He embraced Khun Phaen with eyes closed, and said nothing.

Khun Phaen asked three times. Khun Chang did not answer. Khun Phaen became more angry and aggressive. 'I'll ask Wanthong first.

What's up, my dear? I'm coming to find you. Why are you lying in the room hiding your face? When a guest comes, you should welcome him properly.

That's good manners among both rich and poor. Offer the betel and pan tray, and give whatever you have for him to eat, not discriminating between rich and poor.

Here there's no sight of any betelnut from dawn to dusk. My mouth's sour. All I can see is a lantern. Are you ashamed to talk about something in front of the villagers? Is that why you won't come out?'

In the room, Wanthong heard this furious summons. She was so depressed, angry, and resentful that she truly found it difficult to open her mouth and talk.

But she was also afraid he would storm into the room. In terrified confusion, she darted to close the door tight shut,

and shoot the bolt on the inside. Even if he pushed it, the door would not give way even a little. She sat down, lost in terrible thoughts and heartsick almost to death.

'Aren't you coming out, Wanthong? Do you think I can't get in there? Have you bolted the door tight? Are you playing with me, Wanthong?

Or are you tricking me into entering a secret place where you'll catch me and eat my liver? Life or death, I'm going in there, even if I end up crying for help.'

He drew his sword. Khun Chang embraced his feet, whimpering. Khun Phaen kicked him away. Khun Chang sat down, grabbing at Khun Phaen's cloth which slipped off.

Khun Phaen clutched the end of his cloth, and raised his sword to strike. Thepthong cried out plaintively. Siprajan stumbled on top of Granny Khong.¹⁵ Khun Phaen bellowed, [256]

‘I’ll kill you both, man and wife! Look out for yourselves, all four or five of you! Wanthong loves her room and won’t move. She’s afraid her fair face will lose its luster in the wind.

The name Wanthong really suits you now. You’re grade eight on the royal scale.¹⁶ You’re afraid if you speak, jampa flowers will pour out of your mouth.¹⁷ You severed things completely on that day.

It was you who was careless. You went back on your word and deliberately cut me off. I was still thinking how we were before. I was naïve when I came to your house.

My heart felt you still had some thoughts for me. I didn’t know you had ditched everything. When you cut a banana flower, it hangs on by a strand. But for you, everything was already faded and forgotten.

At the start, I believed you were a genuine ruby, but that’s turned out to be a paste gem. A crow disguised itself as a swan, and I fell for it because I didn’t look at the crest beforehand.

You faked it so completely and cleverly. I was fooled by the dye and thought you were a swan, as if you really loved the Mujalin land.¹⁸ But out of sight of the flock of swans, you played in the mud and got covered in stinking filth. You swap heads like an actor in a mask-play. If the people like dancing, you arrange for drums. If they like bawdiness, you give them bawdiness.

The time you spent in learning and rehearsal was not wasted. You’re really proficient, stylish, unmatched – a tribute to your clever teachers. When I was here, nobody came to give you a job.

But now you have a new teacher who puts you to good use. In competition, the whole village loses to you. Your name is on everybody’s lips. Before long they must come to ask you to dance,

and will likely insist you dance all through, not taking off your headdress until evening. Today I came to find you and make a down payment. But I’ve changed my mind and I’ll find a replacement.

Stay well, lady hibiscus-behind-ear.¹⁹ He got up angrily, mounted

¹⁵ The name of the midwife from chapter 1.

¹⁶ In the system for grading gold, grade eight meant one unit of gold was worth eight units of silver (Red: 670).

¹⁷ In an old folktale, whenever Nang Jampathong and Nang Pikunthong spoke, golden jampa and phikun flowers fell from their mouths respectively. This gave rise to a saying that someone who refuses to speak is afraid such flowers will appear. (Red: 670)

¹⁸ Mujalin is a lake or river in the Himaphan forest where the *hongsā* swans live.

¹⁹ Those sentenced to death wore a hibiscus behind their ear while in procession to the execution ground.

his horse, and led his men through the forest back to Cockfight Hill in Kanburi.

Khun Chang did not run away but stayed with his mother-in-law, on the lookout for danger. After things had gone well for about a month, [257]

he respectfully took leave of his mother-in-law to go home. 'If I stay too long, the elephants and horses will go astray, and the gold and silver will get lost. I'm taking leave to go my house.'

Khun Chang and Wanthong went to live happily as husband and wife in the house in the middle of the compound, looking after the land and house.

This chapter will stop here and, before resuming, tell about the governor of Sukhothai. He had to remit revenue from fines to the treasury.²⁰

He had sent some but still owed a balance of fifteen tamleung,²¹ and was suffering as a prisoner in the guardhouse. He talked with his favorite²² little daughter. 'Please help your father, Kaeo Kiriya.'

She willingly consented. 'Who will you sell me to, dear father?'²³ He replied, 'The son of my friend in Suphan.'

He bailed himself out and took his daughter to see Khun Chang. Seeing their gloom, Khun Chang asked, 'What's up? Why have you come, both father and daughter?'

The lord said, 'I must deliver the fines revenue and I don't have enough. This is a big matter which has made me suffer. I've brought my daughter to mortgage to you.'

You are son of my friend and like a son to me. Please help. I need fifteen baht immediately. I'll write a deed for you to keep.'

Khun Chang called to Wanthong, 'Bring money, count it, and hand it over. There's no need for a deed. I'll look after her like my

(Anuman, *Essays*, 333-4)

²⁰ Many officials, especially in the provinces, were expected to support themselves by taking a share of money which they collected on behalf of government, including taxes and fines imposed by the courts.

²¹ The original has no unit of currency, but tamleung becomes explicit later in the story.

²² *Jao roi chang*, lady of a hundred chang.

²³ Selling oneself or a dependent into slavery was a common form of raising money. A high proportion of the legislation which has survived from the Ayutthaya era is concerned with this process. A household head had the legal right to sell himself, his wives, or his children. The law required that the sale contract should be recorded in writing. The slave could redeem himself (or be redeemed) by payment of the original sale amount. The contract usually identified a guarantor who would be liable for the same amount if the slave fled. See the law on slavery in KTSD, II, 285-343, several subsidiary laws in KTSD, V, and R. Lingat, *L'Esclavage privé dans le vieux lois Siamois*, Paris: Les Editions Domat-Montchrestien, 1931.

own sister.’

The lord took leave of both of them. ‘I leave this “little sister” in the care of you two. If she does anything wrong, please be kind. Stay well, Kaeo Kiriya.

Be their humble servant. Pay careful attention to your duties. Help them to protect their property. Avoid trouble and don’t get yourself tainted.

As a servant, don’t let your clothes smell of sweat. Be gentle, humble, and good. Don’t sleep late. Fear your master. Prepare his rice, water, vegetables, and fish. [258]

It’s better to lose money than lose dignity. Don’t hang around with those lower than you. Maintain your status, love your rank, avoid shame. In three months, I’ll return.’

Kaeo listened to her father’s advice. She prostrated to wai him and said sadly, ‘Don’t let me stay here too long after you’ve gone. Come in three months, father.’

The lord of Sukhothai left his daughter but was very attached to her and could not avoid thinking of her. He quickly went to Ayutthaya and paid the balance due.