

15: Khun Phaen is parted from Laothong

[I/259]

The king, ruler of the world, to whom every country to north and south submitted, resided in his palace of victory under a golden spire. Inner ladies prostrated and bowed with clasped hands.

The royal pleasure was complete. As the sun descended and its light weakened, he walked out to the Jewel Audience Hall, handsomely arrayed with regalia and things of excellence,

to deal with affairs of state. He was in a good mood. He turned his face to look for the good Phrameuan Si, and spoke.

‘That Phlai Kaeo who took the Lao territory, returned safely, and was made Khun Phaen, he’s still young, bold, and valiant. If he’s put to work, it’ll pay off in time.

But right now he’s sent to patrol the forests. We’ve never had him come to serve in the court. If we leave him there for too long, he’ll not get to know the work of the capital.

He doesn’t have any senior relatives. You’re good at training people, Phramuean Si. Bring Phaen to serve as a page, and I’ll place him under your care as his teacher.

Also that Khun Chang from Suphan, the one with a bald skull like a Chinaman. His father came to present him when he was still only a child.¹

Let me place him with you too. Train them up and see how they turn out. Go to Kanburi and Suphan and bring both of them here immediately.’

Chamuen² Si took the order, crawled back out, and told officials to arrange a group of inner guards forthwith.

They arrived at Cockfight Hill, entered the house, and informed Khun Phaen of everything. ‘His Majesty the King has ordered you to report for duty

to be trained on government service in the palace.’ Khun Phaen was pleased to hear this, and went to tell his mother. ‘I’m taking leave to go the city tomorrow morning [260]

on the orders of King Phanwasa to attend at court to be trained on government work of various kinds. Let me leave Laothong in your care,

¹ In chapter 1.

² The text wanders between Chameun and Phramuean for his title but this has been standardized to Phrameuan.

mother.

When I'm settled in a house, I'll come to fetch you so we can be together. Meanwhile the city is not far away, so I won't abandon you but shuttle back and forth.'

Thong Prasi was so happy at her son's news that she wept freely, and patted him lovingly on back and front.

'Go, and don't worry about your wife. Leave her here and I'll look after her and make sure she doesn't get upset.

Put your heart into training for government work. Make an effort to put up with sourness now to eat sweetness later. If you do well, you'll get rank to show for it, and will repay the goodness of Khun Krai, your father.

But it's very hard to be accomplished at government work. In the olden days, they laid down four qualities for a government servant.

First, he must be gentlefolk with lineage, have proper manners, and know the right form. Second, he must study and gain knowledge as the basis for supporting himself.³

Third, he must be of mature age, able to discriminate perfectly between right and wrong. Fourth, he must have the well-rounded wisdom to know good from bad in the course of work.

They say servants of the dust below the royal feet must have all four qualities. You seem to have them and are suitable to come under the royal protection.

But don't be too sure of yourself and carelessly do something rash which cannot escape the royal wrath. Remember your mother's words, Kaeo.

There's an old saying that servants of the king have to study diligently the principles laid down in a manual of royal service which has long existed from the past.

One, whatever knowledge and capability you have, don't hide it from the king but make sure he knows everything. Two, be courageous in any duty and determined to bring it to its proper conclusion. [261]

Three, don't neglect any government duty, right or wrong; think deeply and constantly study to learn more. Four, be honest, reliable, and ethical, as if following the precepts faithfully.

Five, adopt a modest attitude and don't stray into boastful arrogance and over-confidence. Six, be close to the king, but don't be so confident of his grace that you imitate him.

Seven, don't sit on the throne which is wicked and villainous in a big

³ There is a similar scene in which Saming Pho Phet instructs Saming Nakhon In in *Ratchathirat*, 'King of Kings,' a version of a Mon royal chronicle written by Chaophraya Phrakhleng (Hon) in 1805. Suphon (75) wonders whether the same author could have written this passage, but equally it could have been copied.

way. Eight, when at court, pay attention to the business at hand, and don't be more close or distant than is appropriate to the matter.

Nine, don't meddle, flirt, or become attached to any palace woman. Ten, show love and loyalty to your royal master, and even if he is angry, bear it and never answer back.

These are the ten principles of royal service which you must commit to memory. Keeping your word is the most important of all. You must be committed, Phaen,

to overcome all obstacles, do well, win success, and gain such appreciation from the king that you will be raised to the rank of phraya.'

She left the room and called to the servants, Ai-Tao and Ai-Ma, to accompany Phaen on his journey.

Khun Phaen took his mother's blessing then went to find Laothong. She was forlorn. He stroked her back and chided her consolingly. 'Why do you keep on crying?

My leaving doesn't mean I'm abandoning you. If I'm free, I'll come to be with you in the room.' He comforted her by asking her to prepare things for going away.

At dawn Khun Phaen and the guard left the house together and went straight to Khun Chang's house in Suphan.

When Khun Chang saw Khun Phaen coming, he jumped up and slammed the door shut. He went inside, lay down hugging a pillow, and said tremulously to Wanthong,

'Khun Phaen in coming up to the house, bringing guards with him. Why? This will make matters get out of hand. Has he come on the king's orders?' [262]

Wanthong was very scared. 'What can I do? Oh dear! Where can I hide my face?

If matters get worse, it'll be like a firestorm. Spending silver and gold won't overcome the problem. I'm worried I'll be arrested and taken to court which would be awful. What do you think, my lord and master.'

'Truly, this is out karma, Wanthong. If he sues, then it'll be a mess. I don't care how much silver and gold it takes. I beg only that I can have you.

If it were only me, I'd face up to the royal court. But I'm concerned and depressed because of you.' In tears, he embraced Wanthong and fell into deep thought, moaning and groaning.

The guard called, 'Hey, you rogue elephant! Have you gone to sleep inside there? We're calling and calling but there's no reply. How can you stay so stubbornly quiet?

We have the king's orders to fetch you. You can say whatever you like,

but let's go today in time. If you delay, we'll drag you off.'

Khun Chang was flustered, trembling, and dripping with sweat. In reply, he called out, 'I can't even sit up, my dear sir.'

The doctor says it's ague⁴ and I'll die this afternoon. Just now, I couldn't move. Don't make trouble, I beg you.'

The guard said, 'Just now I saw you sitting there! Then you closed the door and ran off. You're lying. If you don't come out, we're coming in to get you.'

In fright, Khun Chang nudged Wanthong, 'Bolt the door, my dear wife!' She walked across on shaking legs, and pulled the bolt in time.

Khun Phaen and the guard rushed up to shove the door but found it would not open. Realizing it was bolted, Khun Phaen

blew the great unlocking formula, and the bolt sprung as if someone had pulled it. They crowded into the bedroom. Khun Chang picked up a pillow, and adopted the pose of a monster.⁵ [263]

He swayed his body, rolled his head, and said, 'A spirit has possessed me. I'm the Lord of Phrapadaeng with a broken wall.' He rolled his eyes, stuck out his neck, and guffawed with laughter. 'Do you know me or don't you, Ai Khun Rong?'

The guard shouted, 'Khun Chang, you arse around too much, you creep.' Khun Chang jumped up and down. 'If you insult and threaten me, I'll break your neck!

Where do you lot come from? Do you have the temerity not to fear me?' He raised an eyebrow, blinked his eyes, and scowled. 'If you make fun of me, you'll get what you deserve!'

Khun Phaen was scorched with anger and wanted truly to turn him into a ghost. He was also infuriated by Wanthong's vile behavior. If he had a sword, he would have cut them to pieces.

He pretended to take fright that Khun Chang would attack him. He danced up and down, deliberately trod on the curtain, ripped it in two when it fell, and kicked Wanthong,

who fell face-down doubled over and winded, her hands clutching her stomach, unable to get up. Khun Chang shook with shock. He hugged his wife saying, 'Karma, karma.'

The guard said, 'So the spirit possessing you has gone already? Why didn't it stay all day? Is it a forest fever that's making you mad and sunken-eyed, or is some internal disorder giving you the shakes?'

We came today on the king's orders to fetch you forthwith because your father presented you at court but you haven't yet been taken into

⁴ *Sannibat* fever.

⁵ *Yaksa*.

government service.

You'll be taken for training. Now, why are you so worked up, and putting on this chaotic act of being possessed, and acting like a monster or demon to deceive us?'

Realizing he was not being taken to the law court, Khun Chang breathed easily and cooled down. 'If I'd known from the start there's no trouble, why would the spirit-lord have possessed me?

I'm not one little bit lazy at the prospect of government service.' He promptly ordered his wife to call the servants and phrai down from the house.

Khun Phaen, Khun Chang, and the guard took a short cut through the forest to Ayutthaya and went straight to find Phramuean Si. [264]

Phramuean Si said, 'His Majesty the King has ordered me to train you both.

Anyone who does government service for a long time and with commitment is rewarded.' Khun Chang quickly said, 'I'm hopeless. I don't know anything about government service.

I'm only used to shouting at buffaloes out in the fields. I'm not acquainted with any royalty. I know only how to play humming sticks.⁶ How does one go on all fours in court, sir?'

Phramuean Si cackled. 'If all you're good at is raising buffalo, you're going to be a problem, you abomination. Just don't make trouble and it'll be alright.

You won't be put to work immediately. You'll have time to learn.' They began training together every day.

Khun Phaen was committed and easy to teach. Khun Chang was quite hopeless. He crawled into the audience like a field turtle. It was many days before he could go on duty.

The other pages laughed and gave him a nickname, the wat beggar.⁷ But after long practice he became accomplished, and both went on duty together.

One day, Khun Phet and Khun Raminthra⁸ called at Phramuean Si's

⁶ *Mai heung*, a children's game played between two teams of 3–4 persons. A short stick is placed over a hole in the ground, and hit with a longer stick so it flies up in the air. If the other team catches the short stick, the roles are reversed, otherwise they pay a forfeit of humming by the hole.

⁷ *Khun then*, an old person who lives in a wat in order to eat from the remains of the alms collections.

⁸ Officials of the guard (*tamruat*) under Mahatthai (Prachak: 200), but not found in the listing in the Three Seals Law. The titles were later used by the police department. Ramindra Road in Bangkok is named after a director-general of

house to dine and drink liquor.

The three of them invited Khun Phaen and Khun Chang to join them drinking until they were all drunk with glazed eyes. Then they poured liquor and salt to take an oath

to be loyal to one another in all things. They sat around, drunkenly shooting their mouths off, until the liquor was finished, and then each went merrily home.

While the beautiful Laothong was living with her beloved husband's mother, she collapsed with fever and was at death's door for several days. Doctors were summoned to give her medicines,

but without effect. Thong Prasi tended her to the full, and also anxiously prayed and made many propitiatory offerings, but these did no more than keep death at bay. [265]

So Thong Prasi sent off a servant. 'Make sure you find Khun Phaen and tell him quickly.' The servant raised his hands in wai, and left by boat.

Arriving at Phramuean Si's house where his master was staying, Ai-U promptly sought him out and told him everything.

The servant's news made Khun Phaen very concerned about Laothong's fever, but he kept himself calm and looked at the horoscope.

Saturday morning was a time of the moon and the fever would be almost fatal. But the time of the moon foretold that the fever would then abate. The character who came into play⁹ was not a bad force.

The evil influence of both the iron spear and wandering Rahu were above the arrow, indicating a quick recovery. The astrology manual indicated she would not die, but he knew his darling would be frantic.

Knowing her husband was far away would make her depressed and allow the fever to overwhelm her. All the treatment of ten doctors would not be not the same as just seeing his face.

'As I'm on duty today, I must first find someone to take my place.' He anxiously got up and went to sit down beside Khun Chang, emitting a big sigh.

'My good friend, a servant has come to tell me that my wife is suffering from a high fever. Can I ask you to take care of all my government duties?

We have promised, as gentlemen together, to do anything for each other, wherever we friends are, for ever into the future until our dying day.'

Khun Chang replied, 'No problem. I can take your place. That's simple. Go off as you please and don't be worried.' Khun Phaen left with

the police department who owned the land on which the road was built (KP: 132).

⁹ literally come-speak-sit. This whole passage needs to be checked with someone who understands the astrology.

his servants,

wrapped a *thompak*¹⁰ haphazardly round his belly, and rushed through the forest to Cockfight Hill. Going up into the house,

he prostrated at his mother's feet. 'Your wife's back there with fever. I've tended her, called the doctors, and offered prayers, but it won't go away and I'm losing heart.' [266]

Khun Phaen went in to find her. 'Don't be sad. I've come. Your fragrant flesh is wasting away. Can't you eat something?

One of the kids came to tell me and I rushed here. I wasn't delaying and neglecting you. With my attention, you'll soon get better.' She lifted her face and fair cheek. 'I've had only medicine.

I've been on the point of death countless times, but hung on patiently waiting for you. If you'd delayed your return a few more days, I'd have stopped taking those bitter medicines.

Seeing your face is like the fever has gone, even more than if Indra had come to be my doctor.' Khun Phaen laughed, hugged her, and begged her to take her medicine.

He tended her for many days. The fever quickly disappeared, and her health gradually improved. Khun Phaen pondered that he should return to Ayutthaya on the following day.

That night he slept with the lovely Laothong, and both enjoyed ecstasy with no thought what the future held in store.

The King went out to preside serenely over the audience of his senior officials.

On seeing Khun Chang, he asked, 'Where's Khun Phaen? Isn't he on duty? This fellow usually does his work properly.'

The past entered Khun Chang's thoughts like a raging fire. 'Khun Phaen harbors resentment against me and in the long term he'll probably bring a case against me if he can.

He has intentions to destroy me and take Wanthong from my side. That'd be like being poisoned with snake venom or chopped up like a fish.'

He craned his neck and said, 'My liege, I can tell no lie. We had been on duty together for many days, and I heard him moaning about his wife every day.

Yesterday, he said he would go home. Your humble servant advised him against such a rash move, but he just cursed and complained. Then late around the end of the third watch, [267]

¹⁰ Red: 671 says this is a cloth with a two-sided border which was an outfit of officials. Matichon: 395 says it's a bronze container with a laquered pattern.

Khun Phaen climbed over the palace wall. I berated him, but he loaded me with vulgar insults and threatened to kill me. I think he went to his wife's house.'

After hearing him out, the king was enraged. He stamped his foot and bellowed, 'This fellow turns out to show no deference.

Khun Chang has reported courageously. It seems Khun Phaen has climbed out over the walls. He is condemned to execution. Skewer his head on a pole as an example to others!

But let me ponder a bit. He has gained royal favor, otherwise he would be put to death. How come he can't be apart from his wife? Does she float down from heaven and make him forget he should be fearful?

Hey, officers! Go right now and bring this Laothong away from her husband. I don't want to see Khun Phaen. He did wrong, and must stay in Kanburi.

Let him take conscripts to patrol the frontier. If Ayutthaya should be embroiled in a war, he can be called back to government service to fight. Go quickly within tonight!

The officers took the royal order and left the palace. They took a group of the inner guard, mounted horses, and left the palace in darkness.

Laothong had gradually recovered from the fever which laid her low. At night she lay close beside her husband, bathed in joy until falling asleep on the bed.

She dreamed a big monster entered the room, tied her up, dragged her from the pillow, put her in an iron cage, and made her suffer greatly all year round.

In the dream, her husband came after her, but fell into a mountainous ravine and also faced enormous hardship. Then a man of great power

came and carried both Laothong and Khun Phaen in his arms out of the land of the monsters. At the end of the dream, she woke in fright and aroused her husband to interpret the dream.

Khun Phaen sat pondering over Laothong's dream. 'Eh, we're both entering a bad time. Tomorrow, there'll be danger. [268]

Laothong and I must be parted, and some huge problem will arise. In the long term, we'll meet someone to solve this problem and things will turn out happily.

I should warn her, but I fear it'll make her sorrowful.' So he spoke reassuringly, 'This dream is neither good nor bad.

Because of your fever, elements in your body have changed, so the dream is confused and meaningless.' He distracted his beloved wife by talking about something more cheerful.

The sun's chariot rose in the sky, brightening the earth with golden light. The calls of coels resounded through the forest, and crickets trilled constantly in their nests.

The breeze blew, wafting fragrance. Bees swarmed and buzzed. He nudged Laothong to listen, but the sounds were eerily lonesome.

Mice scurried. Jingjok chattered. Spiders beat their chests incessantly. He knew these strange sounds foretold something.

At dawn, the inner guards arrived, dismounted, and came towards the house with sullen faces. Seeing them, Khun Phaen felt as if someone had plucked the life from his body.

There were crowds of them. He steeled himself to go out and meet them. 'What business brings you here, sir? Is there some crisis or war?'

In reply, an officer told Khun Phaen in full detail. 'At the audience, Khun Chang told the king that you climbed out over the palace wall.

He said he tried to stop you, but you threatened to chop him dead. This is a capital offence, but the king has been merciful because you took Chiang Thong.

You're banned from the palace, and ordered to be parted from your wife. This has arisen because of you alone. We will take your wife away with us.'

Khun Phaen's heart shuddered and he felt feverishly cold. He went inside and stretched out on the bed with a sigh. [269]

He covered his face with his left hand, and embraced Laothong with the right. 'What a pity! We are going to be parted just like someone cut us in two with a sword. Khun Chang has killed me this time.

When I left, I asked him to take care of my duty, but he spoke to the king very cleverly. Now I can't escape the fault. It's like I'm being trapped in the forest.

I'm like a bird flying in the sky which carelessly gets blown off course and seeks shelter, but is forced by the gale to fly down straight into a menacing snare.

I thought it was a branch not a snare, got my feet caught, and I'm now wriggling helplessly until death. The king angrily condemned me to death but I escaped because I had something in my favor from the past.

So he reprieved me and will only take you away. Oh, where will I see your face again, dead or alive? I'm in despair and desolation to be far from you, my darling Laothong!'

Laothong felt she had been slit open by a sharp kris. Sobs escaped from her mouth and tears flooded down. 'We've been married less than a year.

To leave you is like falling from the golden Meru and rolling along dead, bones cold as dust, not seeing the light of the sun. Sorrow is now

inescapable.

During the waning moon, I'll wane too, and when it waxes, my confusion and sadness will increase. Until the end of the Kaliyuga,¹¹ I'll be struggling against a sadness that never lessens.

Oh, what karma made you do this? Both of us are going to suffer without a break. If war arose and brought about your death, I wouldn't feel so disheartened.

I'm saddened that some karma made you forget your anger. That man had done you wrong before, but you were too restrained and didn't see the crooked kris in his heart.

He'd already grabbed Wanthong, smashed the bridal house, and stolen everything. He's like a scorpion with a curved tail that shows he's wild and never straight

Yet you still trusted him and put yourself in his hands, giving him the opportunity to fulfill his desires. Did you see a smooth path and set off into the forest, only realizing it was the wrong way after you were lost? [270]

Cornered because too trustful. Now I have to be parted from you.' She wept from a broken heart, writhing about until she swooned away in the middle of the room.

Khun Phaen turned to console her. 'We'll be far apart, my darling. Leave me nicely, even though my coming is the reason we're being parted.

Because I love you, I dragged our love to disaster, like throwing you away in a big ocean. Oh, this is the result of some karma we've made. I'll cry until blood spurts from my eyes.

Your breast, my breast will swell and collapse. But who can tell how we feel inside. Look after yourself all the time. Let's not do any more bad.

Through the merit we've made in the past, we should overcome this misfortune some day. Remembering the good things will help you put up with this karma until things ease.

Any big fellow will want you to serve him. You must consent, ingratiate yourself, and be deferential. Be careful what you say. Always be true to your word.

Don't be too sad. The inner guard is impatient to leave. Get your things ready and don't take long.' Both of them went to see his mother,

and prostrated at her feet with tears flowing. 'The king has ordered me to be parted from Laothong. This has blown up like a fire. Khun Chang is behind it.

Laothong has to go and stay in the palace.' He told his mother all the details. Laothong wept and wept. 'Since I had to leave Chiang Thong

¹¹ In Hindu cosmology, the dark age, the era of calamity.

and be far away from my parents, I've depended on you. Your generosity has made me happy since the first day I came. I hope I can repay your kindness.

When I was sick with fever, you nursed me morning and night, took the trouble to give me medicine, fed me morsels of food and water, and soothed me to recover.

How can I repay you? We'll be far apart, not knowing whether one another is dead or alive, each with their own life and problems. Will I see you one more time?' [271]

Thong Prasi felt so upset and sorry for her that her tears poured down in an endless torrent. 'Oh dear! Karma is truly dragging you off. Where will I find someone like Laothong.

You never grumble. I can teach you like my own heart. But now you'll disappear from every room of this house.' She hugged Laothong sadly in floods of tears. 'I'd hoped you would do my cremation,

but now you're leaving and that won't be. You'll be far away and out of sight. After several months have passed, please come to see me sometimes to cheer me up.'

She counted out three chang for her to take. 'When it's finished, come for more.

I-Si and I-Sa, also Nang Wiang and Nang Wan, go along the five of you and make sure you get on well together.' She went out to speak with the guard. 'Sir, please be kind.

She's only a forest Lao and doesn't know things. If she makes a mistake, just tell her how it should be.' The officer replied, 'No problem. Khun Phaen and I are friends.

You stay here, but they cannot delay.' He went off. Laothong prostrated to take leave of her mother-in-law, then turned sobbing to take leave of her husband.

The more she put on a brave face, the more her heart was in turmoil, as if the ground she was standing on was collapsing under her. Khun Phaen was devastated. Laothong sobbed sadly.

'I feel sorry for myself, sorry for you, sorry for the house, sorry for mother who's crying too, sorry for this garden and its fragrant flowers, sorry for the servants, sorry for us all.'

Khun Phaen said sadly, 'I feel sorry for you, sorry for our room and the mattress and pillows where we sleep.' He watched her until she disappeared into the forest, then went into the room and lay weeping on the bed.

Along the way, Laothong sobbed softly on the elephant back. They reached Ayutthaya in two days and one night. The elephant handlers promptly returned home.

The officials entered the palace with Laothong following behind. She was presented to the king who turned to observe her. [272]

‘Is this her, Khun Phaen’s wife? Trim, rounded waist, attractive face, good complexion, nice eyebrows. You wanted to stick beside one of my lads.

For this, was it, Khun Phaen neglected his work and couldn’t be stopped from climbing over the wall? Officers, guard the gates. Make sure she doesn’t leave the palace.

Put her to work embroidering silk.’ A senior official took the order. Laothong was billeted in a guardhouse beside the treasury. She sat embroidering every day.

She grieved for her husband morning and night. She concentrated on her government work, ingratiated herself with several palace governesses,¹² and tried to act modestly and avoid punishment.

¹² *Jao khrua nai.*