

Chapter 24: The birth of Phlai Ngam<sup>1</sup>

[II/151]

The beautiful Wanthong was living miserably in the house with Khun Chang. Because her pregnancy had now definitely reached the tenth month, she was constantly in floods of tears.

The birth pangs were more frequent and more painful. Her pelvis was distended, and her thighs stiff. She felt so exhausted she saw fireflies flickering before her eyes, but she was reluctant to call out to Khun Chang.

Instead she massaged herself, until the pain became intolerable. Then she tossed and turned, cradling her belly, with tears streaming down her face. Finally, she called out to the servants, 'I'm dying! Please help me, all of you!'

Khun Chang woke up and raised his head. He saw his wife, and leapt up frantically. He cradled her while praying **for help**.<sup>2</sup> 'Don't lose heart. Please steel yourself.'

He looked at her belly and cried out, 'Eh! It's coming out! Stay calm. I'll press.' Wanthong cried out and tossed around. Khun Chang found a pillow to support her neck.

He called out to the servants frantically. Lots of women rushed around the terrace. They sent for the midwives, Granny Sai and Granny Yo, who arrived amid the uproar.

They felt her belly and said the child's head was pointing

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter was composed by Sunthon Phu (1786–1856), perhaps the single most famous poet in Thailand's past. Many commentators have pointed out that Sunthon Phu probably drew on his own life experience in the composition. There is almost no documentary record of Sunthon Phu's life so his biography has largely been reconstructed from allusions in his literary works, thus there is some circularity about suggesting his work drew on his life. He was born in Thonburi and his mother was a wet nurse (and possibly a relative) of the queen of the Rear Palace. His father split from the family and entered the monkhood in his family home of Klaeng (now in Rayong province). His mother remarried. Like Phlai Ngam, Sunthon Phu grew up with his mother and a foster-father. Like Phlai Ngam, he met his natural father much later – by traveling to Klaeng, an experience he described in *Nirat mueang klaeng*: 'My head bent low, I bowed at his feet; / Not without pangs of grief / that some past sin had separated us / and kept me from my father and relatives.' (Prem Chaya translation, p. 58, lines 775-8). The journey to Klaeng might also have supplied some of Phlai Ngam's trip to Kanburi. Pinyo (2003, 110-1) speculates that Sunthon Phu may have made a similar a trip earlier in his life, closer to the age of Phlai Ngam on that trip. Pinyo (108-16) also wonders whether Thong Prasi's role in Phlai Ngam's education might be modeled somewhat on Sunthon Phu's mother; whether Phlai Ngam's training by Phrameun Si and presentation at court might follow Sunthon Phu's experience of becoming an *alak* (secretary) around 1816 under the patronage of the Rear Palace; and whether Khun Phaen's anger at Khun Chang was inspired by an incident in which Sunthon Phu was jailed for drunkenness by the king because of the machinations of an elder relative.

<sup>2</sup> Guess: บนเอาต้นทุน, 'praying for capital'.

downwards and twisted to the right. They corrected that as her time approached. They pounded medicine, squeezed oranges,<sup>3</sup> and boiled water.

Wanthong cried, 'I'm dying!' The karma wind<sup>4</sup> came and went. Dawn broke and the sun rose. Her womb loosened and she gave birth without fatality.

The infant began whimpering as soon as it emerged from her belly. Wanthong shrieked in fright, her face pale and her breast trembling. Khun Chang took a look and called out, 'The kid's a boy!' The old ladies came to look at the infant and give medicine.

Wanthong went to lie by the fire,<sup>5</sup> with no fever or pain. To cut a long story short, the child was carefully raised until he had grown to the age of nine years.

He looked exactly like his father, Khun Phaen – plump and handsome, with fair blonde skin, a nicely rounded head, and a topknot. He was also talkative and spoke well. [152]

Wanthong's thoughts turned to Khun Phaen. Because the child had inherited his likeness, she told the servants to call her darling son by the name Phlai Ngam.

Khun Chang resented that. 'He's Khun Phaen's son for sure, not a shadow of doubt. Sometimes I thought he looked like me, but in the end he's turned out like his father, the ungrateful Thoraphi!<sup>6</sup>

Wanthong is in two minds. That good woman's so right to call him Phlai like her husband.' Every night he thought about chopping the child dead.

One day, Wanthong had the misfortune to fall especially badly sick. Khun Chang listened until she fell sound asleep in the middle of the day. Phlai Ngam was sitting with him in the central hall.

He saw the child had no companions, so invited him to go downstairs and have a ride on his shoulders. Then he said, 'Let's go

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<sup>3</sup> *Som*, which is used loosely for various sour things including tamarind. Wenk (83) suggests this might be *som kung*, *rubus moluccanus*, whose leaves are also used for medical preparations.

<sup>4</sup> *Kammachawat*. There is an old belief that there is a wind in a woman's body which blows at the time the child is ready for delivery, turning the child's head downwards. (Suphon: 270)

<sup>5</sup> According to traditional medical practice, a post-partum mother went to lie beside a stove or fire for a certain period as a preventive against infection or other complications. Medical manuals prescribed a complex formula of different woods to be used in the fire.

<sup>6</sup> Thoraphi is a buffalo in the Ramakian which has become proverbial for a child who is ungrateful or harmful to parents. His father, Thorapha, used to be a giant guarding Siva's palace but, after playing around with one of Siva's female servants, was cursed by Siva to be reborn as a fierce albino buffalo, who is lord over 500 female buffalos and who kills any male rivals. One of his consorts gives birth to a male calf, Thoraphi, who is hidden and protected by the forest deities. When Thoraphi grows up, he challenges his father and kills him in combat. Thoraphi then becomes arrogant and challenges everybody, including the deities who raised him. He is killed by Phali, one of the monkey soldiers created by Vishnu.

to look at the elephants, deer, and other animals.

There are flocks of peacocks and swans. We could catch some wild cock to raise so we hear them crowing.’ As they walked through the forest, he went on speaking to keep the child’s spirit up, and distracted him to look at flocks of crows,

barbets, oriental darters, and dancing cockatoos.<sup>7</sup> Tree shrews gamboled in the trees and leapt away in fright. Phlai Ngam asked his father a stream of questions. Khun Chang led him a winding route until they came upon some logs.

Seeing this was a remote, quiet spot, Khun Chang tucked up his lower cloth, swung Phlai Ngam down with a thump onto the ground, and laid into him with kicks to the stomach, punches, elbow jabs, and slaps, grunting loudly.

Phlai Ngam cried out, raised his hands to defend his face, and jiggled to and fro to avoid the blows. Slipping out of Khun Chang’s grasp, he shouted, ‘Wanthong, help! Father’s beating me to death.’

When she did not appear, he burst into tears. Khun Chang grabbed him and went on beating him silently until he was soaked in sweat. Then he sat on the child until he gasped for breath, and began to wring his neck.

Phlai Ngam wriggled until his cries died away and his breath slowed. He raised his two hands in a wai. Khun Chang said, ‘Stop crying. Be quiet.’ Phlai Ngam cried, ‘Don’t kill me, father.’

Spare a thought for Wanthong. Have some mercy, please! Look after me like you used to.’ Each time the child raised his head, he was slapped down stunned. [153]

Khun Chang pinched Phlai Ngam’s nose, covered his mouth, and dragged him bumping along the ground until he collapsed and passed out. Khun Phaen’s spirits came to surround their master’s son so nothing could touch him.

Khun Chang thought he had crushed the child until his liver ruptured. He made a pile of elephant grass, earth, and logs to hide the body, and then sauntered home blithely enjoying the forest.

Khun Phaen’s spirits were furious about Khun Chang. They dragged away the logs and blew on Phlai Ngam’s wounds which were cured and faded away. He stirred and revived like waking from sleep.

A female spirit said, ‘We’re servants of Khun Phaen. We came to act in his stead when that guy dragged the logs over you. You’re not done for, my darling, don’t worry. Wait here and don’t be upset.’

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<sup>7</sup>This unlikely list appears because the Thai names rhyme: *phoradok nok ngua kradua*. Cockatoos are not found in Southeast Asia.

'We'll tell your mother to come and fetch you.' They disappeared in a flash, as was their nature. Until evening, Phlai Ngam saw nobody. He wandered around crying and craning his neck to see his mother.

He could not remember the way home through the forest, and that thought brought on more tears. As he watched the sun slanting downwards, he felt bad about the way his father had tricked him.

'Loving him and relying on him was just a waste of time. What big thing made him so angry? None of my friends have a father who'd trick their child so he could wring their neck.

After this I don't want to call him father. I'll tell mother Wanthong to sue him.' Looking around and seeing nobody, his tears flowed. He felt chilly and abandoned.

Around him the forest was thick and silent. No branch swayed or twig moved. Only the crickets and cicadas chattered and flickered.

When a coel called, he thought it was his mother. He stood up, craning his neck and straining his ears. 'I'm here, mother. Please come and get me.' Fretfully he ran round in circles.

The spirits with their protective powers could travel anywhere like a puff of wind. When Wanthong was in the inner room, they entered her dreams so that she would seem to see the child and think lovingly of him.

When her darling child was about to die, her eyebrow twitched as an omen and she yawned sleepily and anxiously even though it was only midday. [154]

As soon as she dozed off, she seemed to see little Phlai being covered with logs by the vile Khun Chang. She started awake in shock with her breast trembling.

At that moment, a pregnant spider beat its chest, and she looked up at the sound. Disturbed by the omen, she thought immediately of Phlai Ngam.

She went out and looked around but could not find him anywhere. She went to inquire where he usually played. I-Duk, the son of a slave, told her he had seen Phlai Ngam following his father into the forest.

She suspected Khun Chang wanted to kill her son and broke into floods of tears. She went out of the fence and walked along on her own, peering around and calling out.

The dim shapes of the bushes in the evening light made her heart lurch. 'Where have you got to, Phlai Ngam, you poor thing? Why won't you come to me.' At the mound where he used to play, there was no sign.

‘Has he been gored by a buffalo or bitten by a poisonous snake? Why has his corpse disappeared.’ As the evening grew murkier, her anxiety deepened.

Crows flew around, cawing loudly. Wolves howled as they sought a place to sleep. The droning of crickets rang through the branches.

Locusts and *kaeo* snakes<sup>8</sup> screeched faintly in the distance. Cicadas shrilled like a conch. Wanthong was becoming desperate. ‘Have the spirits hidden him away out of sight?’

‘I’ll offer a pig, liquor, and anything if only they let me find my beloved child.’ She poked around everywhere. ‘Oh my darling, this is very strange.’

She shouted out to Phlai Ngam. Searching on her own at dusk was heart-rending. She sobbed as birds went to sleep in nests all through the forest.

Seeing a flock of birds shepherding their young deepened her misery. ‘Oh son, I don’t know where you are.’ The plaintive whooping of gibbons made her miss him even more, bringing on floods of tears.

Then she heard a faint sound like someone calling. Thinking it was him, she listened with her hair standing on end. Looking around a dense thicket, she saw him standing, peering around, and shaking with tears. [155]

In joy she went and put her arms round him. ‘My darling child, your mother’s here now. Don’t be afraid, my love. What happened? Why did you wander away from the house? I’ve been looking since the afternoon when I found you’d disappeared.’

Little Phlai spoke through his tears. ‘Father got me lost. Then he hit me, kicked me, pinched my nose, and piled logs on me. I almost died.’

The people of some Khun Phaen came to help me. I didn’t die because you have great merit. But I’m bruised and hurt all over.’ He spoke dripping with tears of bitterness.

Wanthong cried heart-rendingly. ‘Oh, what can be done about our karma in this life? I’ll tell you the whole truth. You’re not his child. That’s why he hates you.’

Your father’s name is Khun Phaen. He’s Khun Chang’s enemy from the past.’ She told him about the old problems. ‘Now he’s still suffering in jail.’

We’re in a mess because we have nobody to depend on. Khun

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<sup>8</sup> Again the association of these two beasts owes everything to alliteration (*petphi pikaeo*) and nothing to nature. *Petphi* is a large grasshopper, *holochlora siamensis* or *eleandrus titan*, which calls at night (RI:706). *Pikaeo* is name for a family of small snakes including *oligodon joysoni* and *oligodon taeniatus*.

Chang can be so violent because we're poor. We can't sue him for the same reason. If you don't escape, it'll be dangerous.

But I know granny Thong Prasi has a home in Kanburi at Wat Soeng Wai. If you go to be looked after by her, you'll be safe and comfortable from now on.

But it takes a day-and-a-half to get there. You might get lost walking through the forest. Oh, who could take you?' She sobbed and swallowed her tears.

Now Phlai Ngam understood the situation, he said, 'Mother I'm so angry. If this guy isn't my father, then let me go away to find granny's house in Kanburi.

But I'm worried about you. If I go away, you could die without me knowing, because this stepfather is crafty and unkind. But if I stay here, I'll die.

I'm ready to face death or whatever the future holds. Because we're born with karma, what else can we do? Let me go away for a year.' Then he cried, thinking of his real father.

'Oh father Khun Phaen, when will I see your face? Having to suffer in jail is pitiful.' He grieved sorely. [156]

Wanthong cried heart-rendingly, hugging little Phlai and already missing him. 'Oh my darling, you'll have to go. But you've never been on the road through the forest.

Will you find the way or will you get lost? Oh what a mess we're in! In the past maybe we made some karma by forcing some animals to part,

and now you have to be parted from me. I won't see anybody. It'll be awful.' She hugged him close, unable to stop the tears streaming down.

As evening approached and the dew glistened on the ground, she soothed her beloved son, Phlai. 'If our enemy finds out, he'll come after you. I'll take you to Master Nak.'

They cut through to Wat Khao,<sup>9</sup> saw the abbot, and went in on all fours to pay respects. They told him the whole story. 'Please help, sir.

Take the young lad and hide him in your room. If that gang comes looking, don't let them find him.' The abbot said, 'Fine. Leave the matter to me. Don't be afraid of your husband.

If he comes up to my room and I don't give him the elbow, you

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<sup>9</sup> Presumably the same as Wat Khao Yai where Phim played as a child (ch. 1), and where the fathers of Khun Chang and Phim were cremated (ch. 2).

can come and complain. I've never heard of anyone trying to kill the poor little stepchild<sup>10</sup> they're raising. Don't worry. I'll help the young fellow.'

Wanthong gloomily coiled her son's topknot with tears flowing. Knowing it was nearly dark, she had to leave despite her concern. She went down the stairway and walked off quickly.

As she entered the fence, she bluntly hurled abuse at her husband. 'You creep! Wringing his neck! I don't want to see you. In this life why do I suffer the karma of having a man like this as a husband?'

She went up to the house feeling her heart had deserted her body. The sight of Khun Chang was so hateful, she turned her back and ran into her room in a foul mood. Seeing the empty bed made her even sadder.

Her chest trembled and her tears plopped down. 'Oh my child, here's where you slept until ten years old.

Now we're being parted and I'll see only your bedding. Oh Phlai Ngam you poor thing, I won't hear the clear sound of your voice.' Wanthong was flooded with tears. [157]

Khun Chang, the bearded trickster, stood by the wall, beaming drunkenly. Hearing Wanthong crying, he lit a lamp and went in to find her sitting on the edge of her bed.

He enquired jokily, 'Is there a thorn hurting you? I'll pull it out.' Then he soothed her by singing a line from a drama. 'What hardship is making you so troubled and aggrieved?'

Wanthong tossed her head angrily. Khun Chang struck a dance pose and approached to grab her. She pushed him away, scratching and pinching. 'You're annoying me. Dammit! Why do you keep bothering me?'

My son's disappeared. Dead or alive, I can't find a corpse. Don't cover up the tiger's tracks.<sup>11</sup> I'm fed up with this shameful stuff. You took him into the forest and didn't bring him back. Tell me why.'

Khun Chang made excuses. 'I got drunk on liquor and passed out asleep. Who told you I took him? Strike a light! You didn't follow me.

At midday I saw him playing humming sticks<sup>12</sup> with Ai-Eung and

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<sup>10</sup> Sunthon Phu slips in the word for a myna (*iyang*) rhyming the word for raise (*liang*), giving the son the defencelessness of a bird.

<sup>11</sup> A saying meaning to cover up an evil deed (Red:677)

<sup>12</sup> See note in ch. 15.

I-Duk, son of I-Bi. Then, as I said, I got good and drunk. I've told you already not to let him go down on the ground.

He's loaded with bracelets and bangles. Probably he ran into one of those opium heads<sup>13</sup> who beat him to pulp like a midge, and stole the bangles. It's karma.'

Then to cover his shame, he stumbled out of the room, and shouted for the servants to accompany him down to the landing to make enquiries. Finding nothing, he pretended to sigh, and came back home.

He poured liquor and lapsed into a drunken stupor, putting on an act of crying like nobody else had ever cried. He went up to the central hall in the moonlight. 'Oh, my friend-for-life!'

He pretended to weep and wail, chanted 'oh-oei,' then a bass part, got lost and skipped to the last section, then switched into a walk in the forest: 'Your soft wing fluttered down into the pandan bush.'<sup>14</sup>

Then he came to his senses and felt afraid of his wife so broke into song again. 'You must be parted from your father, my dear child.' He lay spread-eagled on his back mumbling thickly until he stopped singing from drowsy drunkenness.

The fair Wanthong crept out to find Khun Chang asleep as she wished. She sobbed thinking she had to be parted from her son because of this devil of a husband. [158]

She sewed a waist-sack, and put in sweets, dried mango paste,<sup>15</sup> candy,<sup>16</sup> chow chow,<sup>17</sup> sweet persimmons, and a ring of Bang Taphan gold worth five chang.

'Going to live in grandmother's house will have its difficulties. Whenever he goes hungry, he'll have some spending money.' She sat lost in tearful thought, waiting for the sun to come up.

Under the abbot's care, poor little Phlai Ngam was sitting crying inside the room. Disciples, novices, and elder monks helped to grind casumunar ginger and apply to the wounds where he had been

<sup>13</sup> The vocabulary is an 'opium throat.'

<sup>14</sup> As earlier, Khun Chang is displaying his lack of skill at recitation. The 'oh-oei' is probably the yodelling start of a sakkawa, and the 'walk in the forest' means a *nirat*. The Thai original is written to allow the reciter to mimic Khun Chang's fumbling for hilarious effect.

<sup>15</sup> ส้มลิ้ม, *som lim*. There are various interpretations of what this could be, including *mamuang kuan*, dried mango paste (Suphon:281), a small candied orange (Red:667), or a *yam* made with raw mango or mayom and dried prawns (RI:1125).

<sup>16</sup> แช่อิ่ม, *chae-im*, a fruit or fruit peel candied with sugar.

<sup>17</sup> จันอับ, *jan-ap*, a Chinese dried sweet in many varieties made from rice, bean, sesame, etc.

beaten.

After the abbot went fast asleep, quiet fell. A cock crow chilled his heart. Because mother and son had been so close, he kept dreaming that he saw her coming to him.

When a coel cried loud and clear, he thought Wanthong was calling him. His heart leapt even though his eyes stayed closed, and he called back ‘yes’ at the top of his voice even though it was midnight.

Then he came to his senses and felt miserable. He lay quietly sighing and sobbing until the temple bell was hit a merry clang. The abbot woke up and reminded the elders to chant prayers.

Near dawn when the dew fell and the sky was streaked with red, Wanthong was still crying. She knew Wat Khao well as she used to go there often. She tucked up her lower cloth securely in *jongkraben* style, and put on a sensible seamed black upper cloth.<sup>18</sup>

Carrying the waist-sack with the sweets, clothing, and a blanket, she came down from the house, made for the landing at a fast pace, and walked straight into the sugar-palm grove.

Arriving at Wat Khao in the early morning, she saw her little child sitting looking pitiful. Not wanting to waste time talking, she took leave of the abbot and took her son off to the *sakae*<sup>19</sup> woods.

She gave him the sweets and fruits. ‘I feel so sorry for you having to be parted from your mother. The way to Kanburi is right here. Remember it well. Don’t get lost and go round in circles.

Your grandmother will teach you how to read and write. Try to remember the route I tell you. Follow the cart track to the open plain. Then at the flat clearing, cut into the forest.’

She tied his topknot, fastened the waist-sack she had packed, gave him the gold ring and other things, and wished him luck. She hugged the child who would now be far away, and sobbingly entrusted him to the gods. [159]

‘Oh lord spirits of the forest, I pay my respects. Please subdue the tigers, buffalo, and other wild animals. And you, spirits of the hills, please guide him to his grandmother without getting lost.

And you, lord Khun Phaen, master of special powers, immortal father of our beloved, help your son Phlai Ngam in this time of need so he may come through danger and evil to reach Kanburi.’

She sobbed and cried as if her breast was an aching open wound. ‘I carried you in my womb and brought you up to ten years old. Now

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<sup>18</sup> หมี่เปลาะ, *hom phlo*, an upper cloth made by sewing two pieces of cloth together.

<sup>19</sup> Combretum quadrangulare

we're parted.

You're used to eating and sleeping with me, and asking me for anything. You'll be lonesome in the forest. Who'll coil your topknot and shave your hairline? I'll count the days and months you're away.

It may be years before you see my face again. You'll seem as far away as a moon that's set. Oh, I have a bad fate in this life and it's crushing me with so much hardship and bad feeling.

I had a husband and he was forced apart, resulting in all these problems. On top, I have a child and he's parted from me. I have a troubled karma.' She sobbed and grieved.

Phlai Ngam felt very sorry for her. He looked at her face streaming with tears. He prostrated to his mother with feeling. 'When I'm grown, I'll come to find you.

But right now our karma is to part. I have to leave you because of that man. I'll go to look for father, and may I have the power of merit to find him. I won't forget your goodness and I'll come to see you.

You love your child and your child knows that. Among thousands and millions of people, there's nobody the same. You guided me in everything with such loving kindness. I leave home and I leave you but only in body.

Mother Wanthong, please go home. That evil fellow will make trouble for you. I must go and submit to my fate without fear. Don't be miserable, mother. Please be strong.'

She hugged and kissed him, stroked his back, and gave advice. 'Blessings on you, little Phlai. I weep for you. May you travel safely, live happily, and avoid danger. When you grow bigger, ordain and study.

For a man, his handwriting is his rank. You must make the effort to practice regularly.' She led him down beside the cart landing. Parting was tearing at their hearts. [160]

He looked at her, and she looked back, both feeling so close they could weep blood. They sobbed their farewells. Then he steeled himself, walked away from her, and followed the path.

He turned back and saw she was still gazing after him. She looked after her little child with such yearning. The path twisted and turned. Suddenly he disappeared and her heart lurched. 'Oh, he's gone!' Both stood stunned and sobbing.

Wanthong was miserable and afraid of Khun Chang. 'He's terribly jealous like nobody else in the world.' She walked quickly around the edge of the fields and arrived back at the house feeling anxious.

She missed Phlai Ngam so much she cried sadly every day and

night. She had no taste for food, and her flesh steadily wasted away.

Phlai Ngam made his way across the plain towards the hills, sobbing as he walked. Behind Ban Tan,<sup>20</sup> the woods loomed around him in the dim light – shady *rang* and ironwood<sup>21</sup> in rows,

lush stands of *khae*, *khang*,<sup>22</sup> *krang*,<sup>23</sup> and *krathum* with sprays of flowers as lovely as a painting. Phlai walked along the cart track lost in thought, cooled by a gentle breeze.

He passed Gong mound,<sup>24</sup> Saphan pond,<sup>25</sup> and a Karen village. To left and right, he saw shelters beside the cotton fields, bright flashes of chili and yellow eggplant, and mynahs which ate them and flew off cawing.

Spotting bantams scratching for bamboo seeds, he sprinted zig-zag after them. Coming across a big flock of peacocks, he chased them to whoosh up into the sky, calling noisily.

Then he felt tired and his spirits dropped. He thought of Wanthong and began to cry. The sun slowly dropped down the sky, and his heart sank with it.

Close to dusk, he came upon a pack of little jackals<sup>26</sup> and ran after them. Their howls made his hair stand on end. He reached the upland forests of Kanburi,

and saw an old ruined wat beside a hill.<sup>27</sup> All that was left was one Phra Chinnasi<sup>28</sup> image but the ancient doors of the ubosot were still in good condition. When night came, he prostrated and wai-ed the image, and went to sleep there.

Early next morning, he ate his fill of the sweets and dried mango paste, then walked through the hills to Ban Krang.<sup>29</sup> On the way he met hill people carrying goods on poles, and kids herding buffalo noisily along. [161]

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<sup>20</sup> There is a Ban Tan 5 kms east of U Thong, close to the Song Phinong Canal.

<sup>21</sup> *Thakhian*, malabar ironwood, *hopea odorata*, Tree:102.

<sup>22</sup> *Khang*, *albizzia lebbekoides*.

<sup>23</sup> A banyan, *ficus bengalensis*, but the point here is the alliteration.

<sup>24</sup> *Namanukrom* suggests Sra Kong (Gong pond) in Yung Thalai. Not on maps.

<sup>25</sup> Probably Huai Taphan, near Phanom Tuan, which is marked on the early nineteenth-century maps (RSM: 102).

<sup>26</sup> *ma jingkok*, *canis aureus*, Golden Jackal, Mammal:83.

<sup>27</sup> Perhaps Khao Noi, 3 kms northwest of modern Kanchanaburi, which has a wat at the foot.

<sup>28</sup> Here, as elsewhere, this seems to be a poetic term for a Buddha image.

<sup>29</sup> Ban Krang is 5 kms northeast of Kanchanaburi on the road to Cockfight Hill.

Not knowing where Thong Prasi's house was, he asked the locals. A village kid explained, 'She's in the fields over there, out of sight.

There's a big mayom<sup>30</sup> at the house that's very sweet to eat. I often go to steal them, but she lies in wait and if she catches you she grabs your prick and squeezes it. She's awful, like an ogress.<sup>31</sup>

If any kid goes there and she sees him, she catches him and slaps him round the head with her droopy breasts. Why are you asking after her so fearlessly? Old granny droopy tits will catch you and beat you to death.'

Knowing this, Phlai Ngam asked, 'Please take me to see this sweet mayom. I'll climb up and steal enough for all of us to eat together.'

The kids said happily, 'Let's go!' They packed some rice and fish, released the buffalo, and set off. Some tucked up the front of their lower cloth or tied it round their belly. They laughed among themselves, 'I'll collect as much as I can carry!'

When they reached Thong Prasi's village, the kids pointed out the house and went to hide. Phlai Ngam began to feel apprehensive. He crept up and looked around from a distance.

It seemed quiet with no sign of his grandmother keeping watch. He slipped round the end of the fence and came to a closed door. He stopped and listened. From inside came a squeaking sound.

He knew that people upstairs were sitting spinning cotton. He thought up a plan for telling Thong Prasi what was going on. He'd climb the mayom to steal, let her come to catch him,

then tell her the whole secret story. After that he'd live with his grandmother, his father's mother. He peeped around, pushed through the fence, and climbed up the mayom where he could not be seen.

He beckoned the kids over, but they were wary of the garrulous old granny, and kept themselves out of sight with their heads down. He picked the mayom while whispering and flicking his eyes to call them.

Thong Prasi was in the house with Granny Pli and Granny Ple. The servants had been sent to the fields following the practice of Kanburi.

Since Khun Phaen had been jailed, Thong Prasi had been miserable all the time. Often she cried alone in her room. Over the

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<sup>30</sup> *Phyllanthus acidus*, a tree originating from Brazil with a fleshy fruit ripening from green to pale orange.

<sup>31</sup> ฝืนเนื้อ, *phi seuu*. The idea of an ugly giantess with oversize droopy breasts is found in Phi Seu Samut in the Ramakian. Sunthon Phu expanded this into one of the most memorable characters in his picaresque fantasy, *Phra Aphaimani*.

years, she had become wasted and gloomy. [162]

Her ears pricked up at the sound of mayom falling. She looked through a chink in the wall and saw the kids slipping in. She picked up a stick and peeped out.

As she descended the stairs, the kids ran away. She chased after them scolding, but they answered back. ‘Up your clan, we’ve had enough of you!’ She heard a sound up in the mayom,

and looked up to see a kid with a little topknot. ‘Mmm! You little forest thief!’ she shouted at him. ‘Stop hiding up there like a squatting god. Come down and let your back have a taste of my stick!’

Phlai Ngam was frozen with fear, feeling like a little mouse. He replied, ‘I’m your grandson. Let me tell you all about it. I’m the one who lives at Wanthong’s house in Suphan.’

Thong Prasi waggled her finger and said, ‘Really! This fraud of a grandson deserves my elbow. Come down here and “grandmother” will give you the stick.’ She waited to give him what for.

Phlai Ngam was trembling and rooted to the spot. He did not dare go down. But then he thought, ‘She’s my grandmother, why should I be afraid?’ He jumped down and prostrated at her feet.

Thong Prasi thwacked his back. ‘I’ll tie you up, but I won’t fine you. Where do you come from? Are you a Thai kid or Chinese? You thieves keep breaking the branches on the mayom.’

Little Phlai tried to avoid the blows, then paid his respects. ‘I’m hurt bad already. Have mercy on your grandson. I’m the child of Khun Phaen. On my mother’s side, her name is Wanthong.

I came to find my grandmother called Thong Prasi. Don’t keep beating me. I’ll tell you the whole sad story.’ Thong Prasi saw it was true and threw away the stick. She hugged and consoled him while swallowing her own tears.

Then she scolded herself for not believing him and insisting on thrashing her beloved grandson so much. **Hanging her head, she said, ‘This is his precious offspring.’**<sup>32</sup> She took him into the house and shouted to Granny Pli.

‘Help grind some casumunar ginger paste quickly. I-Ple, bring a bowl out here to wash his face.’ She bathed him until the dirt was gone, applied a whole bowlful of turmeric,

then put the casumunar ginger on his wounds, feeling very concerned. They sat on a rattan mat to talk and she asked, ‘What’s your name? Tell me why you came to your grandmother.’ [163]

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<sup>32</sup> *Phloi no*, rather speculative.

Phlai Ngam sadly told the story from the time they were in Suphan. ‘Wanthong brought me up with lots of care. She gave me the name Phlai Ngam, her little darling.

She made me pay respects to Khun Chang just like a father. Then he played a trick without me suspecting it. He took me into the forest so I got lost. Then he piled logs on top of me so I nearly died.

Mother then told me that my father was called Khun Phaen, and that Khun Chang was jealous of him. I couldn’t stay in Suphan so I came here. Let me depend on your merit like a poor person.’

Thong Prasi beat her breast. ‘That leper Chang of a slave race and hairy face, son of old Thepthong from Khlong Namchon!’<sup>33</sup> To kill someone without any mercy!

He’s acting like the Lord of Life. I’d like to sue him and have him punished until he couldn’t stand it.’<sup>34</sup> She reeled off a flood of curses. ‘You’ve come to your grandmother’s house now, so don’t be afraid.

Even if that troublemaker comes to claim you’re his child, he’ll get swiped around the skull by my droopy tits.’ She called I-Mai in the kitchen, ‘Bring some *kua* curry, rice, and fish to eat.’

In the late afternoon, the Lawa, Mon, and Lao servants came back from the fields. Some lit fires so the smoke would ward off the mosquitoes and midges, as was the custom in upcountry places among the ricefields.

At dusk, a gong was struck and Thong Prasi called Granny Pli and Granny Ple into the house to make a *baisi* with cat’s nipple flowers, duckweed, and orange jasmine. They placed rice, fish, sweets, and savories on trays,

along with candles, flowers, boiled eggs, and coconut. Fragrant oil and powder suffused the whole room. Thong Prasi brought out a pile of bracelets and bangles, saying, ‘These belonged to his father from childhood,

and now we’ll put them on our poor grandson because he’s flesh of our flesh, and I love him dearly. He’s exactly like Khun Phaen, handsome and brilliant.’

She called the servants up to the house and had them sit next to one another in order. When the *baisi* was set up, they all bowed to pay their respects, and chanted for the benefit of Phlai Ngam’s soul.

‘Soul of Phlai Ngam, poor thing, come and admire this brilliant golden home. All belongs to you including the sandalwood perfume

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<sup>33</sup> In chapter 1, Thepthong’s home village is not mentioned. Unidentified.

<sup>34</sup> Literally, until his ears went soft.

and flower garlands. Oh soul, don't go off into the forests and hills.  
[164]

You'll see only deer, lions, tigers, troops of monkeys and langurs.  
You'll be lonely drifting around aimlessly. Oh soul, come to see  
grandmother. Don't get carried away. May you prosper for a  
hundred years with no difficulty.'

Candles were lit and passed around the servants who shouted so  
loudly the place shook. Each took a candle and passed the others  
around the circle. Then they extinguished them and wafted the  
smoke towards Phlai Ngam.

'Oh soul, there's young coconut and rice for you to eat, and krajae  
sandal to make your face radiant.' Lao Wiang<sup>35</sup> girls with good  
voices came to play the fiddle and flute and sing for the soul of their  
master.

While you were in the forest<sup>36</sup>  
with a thicket as your home  
eating neither rice nor fish  
your soul went astray

your soul is weak and wandering  
leaving your body lonesome  
it lives on the top of yang trees  
in the grasslands and paddyfields

your soul is remote and distant  
we invite you, soul, oh soul  
to listen to the fiddle and the chanting  
oh soul, dear soul

here's a full basket of sticky rice  
and a whole forest of rice and berries<sup>37</sup>  
soul, please come along  
to the body of Phlai, oei!

Then the Mon played the fiddle and sang a *thayae*.<sup>38</sup> 'Look here, all  
you mothers. Great master Phlai Ngam, the handsome. Oh soul, we  
call you to turn back to **him**.

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<sup>35</sup> Lao from Vientiane.

<sup>36</sup> In the Thai, each line of this chant is four syllables, and four lines make a stanza. The fourth syllable of each line rhymes with the second in the following line, except for the last syllable of the last line of each stanza which is not rhymed.

<sup>37</sup> ປື້ອມ, meaning *makham bom*, *phyllanthus emblica*, emblic myrobalan, a tree with sour, juicy fruits eaten to moisten a dry throat (Tree:737).

<sup>38</sup> An old song form from the Ayutthaya era with alternating bars of 4 and 6 beats (RI:515).

May you live well, be well, and have a young wife. *Bring six people to have a drink. One, two, come to make him happy. Three, four, please eat fish.*<sup>39</sup>

Thong Prasi happily gives them money. All around, she saw only crowds of slaves. The time came for him to go to bed, and enjoy having a mattress, pillow, mosquito-net, and curtain.

Phlai Ngam asked her, 'Why does my father Phaen have to suffer such hardship? I don't know him at all. Please take me so I can see his face.'

At her grandson's words, she dissolved in tears. 'My darling, whatever I said to your father, he had no fear. He got carried away over a Lao wife who's a palace lady.

He petitioned the king who lost his temper and had him locked up as punishment, though not in irons. It's ten years now and he's still not released.

I'll take you tomorrow morning. We'll go to find him at the shelter beside the inner gate. Your father will be delighted to see you.' They talked until they dropped off to sleep. [165]

At sun up, she was thinking gloomily about her son. She ordered the servants to harness an elephant with a big howdah, and pack food, clothing, torches, gourds, melons, sugar,

sago, betel, pan, and lime paste to give to poor Khun Phaen. A Kula<sup>40</sup> with a hollow eye acted as mahout. She took her grandson to mount the elephant and they set off along the way.

They went down to Bang Kham and crossed over to Ban Saphan Khlong.<sup>41</sup> Going out to the open plain, they turned onto the road going to the right, and in two-and-a-half days reached Ayutthaya. They dismounted and she walked with Phlai Ngam along the road.

Khun Phaen, weighed down with troubles, had been depressed since his imprisonment. Although he used to keep himself well, in the shelter at the inner gate he had let himself go. He had wasted away, and looked a mess.

His hair was long and coiled up on his head. It could not be cut because of his invulnerability and magic powers.<sup>42</sup> He had got fed up

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<sup>39</sup> This seems to be a mix between Thai and a few rather disconnected phrases of Mon (indicated by italics). Thanks to Pat McCormick.

<sup>40</sup> A people known for being hunters and itinerant traders rather than settled farmers.

<sup>41</sup> Can't work out where this is. The main river they would have to cross would be the Thachin/Suphan.

<sup>42</sup> Before cutting his hair, Khun Phaen would always have done a rite, enchanting water and immersing the scissors, and presumably this was inconvenient in jail (Sup: 286).

with doing nothing, so made the effort to weave small baskets.

Khun Phaen plaited the edges tightly with rattan, and Kao Kiriya painted them with lacquer. They could easily expect one baht each, and many were hung for sale around their dwelling.

When his mother arrived at the shelter, he welcomed her inside along with all the things brought for him. Spotting Phlai Ngam, he asked, 'Whose child is this? He looks cute.'

Thong Prasi explained, 'This is your son. Come on, wai your father.' Then she told the story about their enemy. Khun Phaen stroked and consoled Phlai Ngam, swallowing his own tears.

He hugged and kissed him, and stroked his back. His tears came in floods. 'I hate Khun Chang enough to die from frustration.'<sup>43</sup> He gets his way so much it's become a habit.

He abducted Wanthong to possess her. He thinks because I've given my word I won't escape, I can't chop his head off. Now he's tried to kill the child like an ox or a horse. Does he think I'm scared of him, the villain?

This evening I must go to his house and chop his head so the blood flows. A man dies where he dies.' He gnashed his teeth and worked himself up into an aggressive rage.

Thong Prasi said, 'My son, you're a father now. I beg to oppose you. It would be better to kill a ghost rather than Khun Chang. Why go on creating sin and karma? [166]

Your child has come to see you. What other descendants do you have? Please listen to me alone from now on. You must pray to stay alive.

I'll bring your child up, educate him, and present him at court, so the king may calm down and relax your punishment. In a time of bad fortune, you must act humbly.

There's an ancient saying that mortal humans can rebound from hardship seven times. All these difficulties will pass. You should survive your punishment without death.'

Khun Phaen politely prostrated to his mother in tears. 'I know you are so good and supportive. Please teach Phlai Ngam to study knowledge.

All the books, both mine and my teacher's, are kept arranged in sequence in the cupboard. If you forget anything, unlock it and bring them out to consult.'

The he stroked little Phlai Ngam's back and instructed him. 'Please study how to write formulas. Knowing anything else cannot

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<sup>43</sup> Literally, writhe until die.

match knowing the disciplines.<sup>44</sup> In the future when you grow up, you will reap the benefit.

We are in difficulties, my darling. Don't be careless. We've no kinsfolk to give support, only the kindness of your grandmother. I rely on her merit to raise you.

Please think of her as your mother and father. However much she scolds you, don't answer back. I can't be close beside to help bring you up, my jewel.'

He hugged Phlai Ngam tearfully to his chest. 'Oh what karma did we create in the past? I've just seen my child's face, and now we'll be parted.

You came to visit but I've got nothing to give you except these rosary beads. Take them as a present. They'll make you invulnerable from spears and guns, and protect you from now on.'

Phlai Ngam felt so sorry for his father that he could not stop crying. He accepted the rosary beads and spoke his feelings, 'I want to live with you and help

draw water, pound rice, make the fire, and find vegetables every morning and night. When you've got over this difficulty, then I'll set myself to studying hard.' [167]

Khun Phaen was overwhelmed. 'Where would you find another tiny fellow who knows how to speak like this?' Thong Prasi also gave vent to her feelings of pity, and her tears flowed.

Khun Phaen said, 'I don't think you can stay here. In this jail, there are so many difficulties. It's like falling into hell while still alive. I haven't been released from my punishment for a single day.

But minister Yommarat allows me to stay in this shelter by the inner gate, and I'm on good terms with all the overseers so they leave me alone and don't put me in irons.

Phrameun Si provides my food every day, and that lightens the burden. I don't have to fetch water and pound rice. His goodness overflows the sky.

If you can study knowledge, I'll put you under the patronage of Phrameun Si, and he'll present you to the king so you'll be a man of evident status in the future.'

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<sup>44</sup> A very famous line which Sunthon Phu repeated in slightly modified form in *Phra Aphaimani* when the rishi is instructing Sudsakhon: 'Knowing anything cannot match knowing the disciplines / knowing how to survive is the ultimate' (Sunthon: 287). Translating *wicha* here is very difficult. It conveyed the sense of the specialist knowledge gained by study, including the martial and magical arts in which Khun Phaen specialized, but also others such as mathematics and law.

Little Phlai Ngam sorrowfully acquiesced. ‘Sir, I’ll study hard.’ They grew happier, chatting together until almost dusk.

Thong Prasi said, ‘It’s evening. We have to leave you.’ Khun Phaen wai-ed his mother. Phlai Ngam took leave of his father emotionally,

and followed his grandmother away from the shelter at the inner gate. He turned to cast a tearful look back at Khun Phaen who was almost heartbroken. They looked at one another yearningly until he passed from sight and his heart lurched.

They mounted the elephant beside Wat Tha Ka Rong.<sup>45</sup> With the moon shining brightly in the sky, they set out across the plain of Ayutthaya and hastened back to Kanburi.

Little Phlai Ngam studied assiduously with Thong Prasi as his teacher. He happily got down both old Khmer<sup>46</sup> and Thai. He studied Buddhist texts on magic,

and all the formulas beginning with ‘na,’<sup>47</sup> and practiced them correctly to become invisible. He studied the abbreviated ‘heart’<sup>48</sup> formulas, powerful *itthije*<sup>49</sup> formulas for writing on cloth, and other charms and devices. Then he chanted mantras, enchanted turmeric, and drank oil.

As children do, he tried out his knowledge in his room, stabbing himself diligently until a sharp blade was blunted because of the Great Awesome<sup>50</sup> formula for invulnerability. He was able to draw yantra number patterns without error. [168]

Then he did the abbreviated *itipiso*<sup>51</sup> to unlock chains, and spells to stun people or conceal his own body. Day or night, rain or shine, he applied himself diligently.

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<sup>45</sup> The monastery of the cawing crow, to the northwest of Ayutthaya, around 500 meters up the Chaophraya on its southern bank. On the Phraya Boran map, this is shown as two wat, Wat Tha and Wat Ka Rong. Wat Tha Ka Rong is now a very popular temple, because the abbot has made a name as a lover of plants, and because he advertises a lot. At the riverbank, there is a lovely wooden sala, claimed to be Ayutthaya era. It seems to be all wood, including the two rows of inward-leaning pillars.

<sup>46</sup> Magic texts were usually written in old Khmer (*khom*) script (Red:307).

<sup>47</sup> Means a category of formulas beginning with the Khmer character “na” (visualised in Red), to make the practitioner loved by others. Includes the *mahalaluai* which Khun Phaen used extensively in his courting. (Red:307, 677)

<sup>48</sup> *Hua jai* here means an abbreviated form of a formula used to write for purposes of memorisation, and for quick application. These formulas were often two or three syllables taken from a longer prayer and formed into a mnemonic, e.g. i-sawa-su. A collection of 109 ‘heart’ formulas was well-known. (Red:308.)

<sup>49</sup> Formula, similar to the ‘na,’ written on the palm when chanting a formula, for inducing love and also for successful trading. (Red:308, with pix)

<sup>50</sup> *Mahathameun*.

<sup>51</sup> An example of a heart (*hua jai*) abbreviated formula.

In addition, he studied the thamma, meditation, nibbana, sutra, how to summon up spirits and suppress them, and how to animate grass dummies as warriors. Thong Prasi taught her grandson to be expert.

When Phlai Ngam was aged thirteen, he looked robust with a fair complexion. Reaching adolescence, he was an attractive lad with a smiling disposition, reticent manner, and good looks.

His eyes were round, black, keen, and handsomely bright. Everyone he met liked him and enjoyed talking with him. Thong Prasi was happy. She looked for an auspicious time. 'You're thirteen now, my dear grandson.

On Friday the tenth of the waxing month, we'll shave your topknot.<sup>52</sup> She made *namya jin*<sup>53</sup> and boiled pigs legs. Neighbors brought betel and pan, and helped to sweep the floor and lay mats, carpets, and rugs.

Silver and gold pots were brought out of store. Conches were filled to the brim with sacred water. A half-moon dais was prepared for the monks. Following custom, gongs and drums were readied to celebrate alms giving.

On the auspicious day, Master Koet came from nearby Wat Khao Chon Kai<sup>54</sup> with ten monks. An ensemble played a salutation.

They sat chanting prayers until dusk, then scattered sacred water around. Men and young Lawa girls crowded together to receive this blessing.

The women pinched the bodies of the men next to them, and there was a lot of noisy jostling and grappling. I-Hang aimed a crazy kick at Ai-Dam, and the two leapt up and began wrestling uproariously.

Thong Prasi gaily said, 'Ai-Dam wrestling I-Hang will be fun for sure? Who's going to lose?' Then she sent her grandson to change his clothes. He came shyly to prostrate before the abbot.

Master Koet looked at Thong Prasi and asked, 'Whose kid is this little one?' She opened her mouth and, dribbling betel juice, told the story from beginning to end.

'Currently Khun Phaen is still in jail. When we've shaved this lad's topknot, I'll take him to present at court. Master, please look at the horoscope of Young Phlai's father. Will his bad fortune disappear somehow?' [169]

Having heard the story, the abbot was angry. 'Struth! Phaen is

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<sup>52</sup> A coming of age ceremony.

<sup>53</sup> A fish curry usually eaten with noodles.

<sup>54</sup> The monastery of cockfight hill.

hopeless. After all the knowledge I taught him, he can't manage things and runs off to jail. What a joke!

That loverboy! I told him before, his weakness for women would get him into trouble.' He laughed, reclined comfortably, and quietly examined Phlai Ngam.

'I can see he's a cute and clever type. He'll have good fortune to ride on palanquins. If he strikes it really lucky, he has the attributes to be rich.

As for women, a big mess. His problem will be a beautiful young girl with fair skin. This fellow will easily fall head-over-heels and be influenced by greed, lust, and sensuality.'

Then the abbot laughed, 'This young kid, this grandson of yours, is going to be a loverboy beyond belief. But at eighteen years old, he'll become an official with a title as Meun or Khun,

and a young wife from a long northern lineage. This lass will bring disaster. Young Phlai's father Khun Phaen will be released at the end of the second month in the year of the pig.

From then on, all will be happiness not hardship. He'll have a bed to sleep on and a chair to sit in.' Thong Prasi happily wai-ed the abbot. 'Please share your merit<sup>55</sup> so Khun Phaen gets back on his feet.'

The abbot acknowledged and went back to the wat. To accompany the music ensemble, Thong Prasi's people sought out the very best masters of sepha. Old Mi, a firecracker maker, was good at fight scenes.<sup>56</sup>

He recited with his neck swelling, making the sound 'oh-eh.' Old people liked to hear him to the end. Old Rongsi was good but funny, knowing everything. He clicked the castanets<sup>57</sup> while rolling his eyes.

Nai Tung had a loud voice, sounding 'wo-wok.' His recitation was rousing and very funny. Nai Phet had lots of tricks, and dragged things out slowly to three wa and two sok, like a long gun.

As for Nai Ma, Phraya Non, a comedian, he was crude and bawdy, and made people laugh heartily. Old Thongyu knew how to recite in Lao, and sing background music<sup>58</sup> in a drone.

At dawn, Phlai's topknot was shaved. He felt free of hardship and

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<sup>55</sup> If a highly merit-laden figure such as the abbot shares his merit with someone, then the receiver benefits greatly (Suphon:290.).

<sup>56</sup> The figures who appear here were the great sepha players of the Second Reign. See Damrong's preface.

<sup>57</sup> *Krap*, two wooden cylinders, around six inches long, tapped together to provide rhythm and stress during the recitation of sepha (Mat:\$6, pix).

<sup>58</sup> *Krao choet*, rousing background music played on various occasions such as fights, marches, travel.

slept peacefully. His long hair was cut in Mahatthai style.<sup>59</sup> He thought about entering royal service, [170]

and relying on the power of his merit to petition the king for his father's release. It would be a beautiful way to do his father a favor. He sat quietly pondering until nightfall, then went to his grandmother's bedside, tears flowing.

He stroked her and pleaded in a soft, sweet voice, 'Tomorrow, I'll take leave to go to father. I'll enter the service of the Lord of Life and get on good terms to ask pardon for father's punishment.'

Thong Prasi was happy to give her consent. 'You come from the Phlai lineage. Please go. You'll help your parents get over this. That will be a fine display of filial duty.

I'll send you off to your father, and to Phrameun Si, then it's up to your merit and fortune. As for me, I'll die some day.

Having a child is an added burden. I've always known tears rather than happiness, always getting sick, injured, coughing and wheezing. Who'll cremate my corpse, I don't know.

Remember everything I taught you, and you'll rise steadily in rank and reputation. I'll send Ai-Phat, Ai-Bat, and Ai-Bu, all three, to attend on you,

carry your *sombak*<sup>60</sup> umbrella, draw water, steam rice, and prepare all kinds of food.' They talked things over until late at night and then slept until sun up.

When she came to, Thong Prasi packed silver and clothing in a chest, along with various sweet and savory foods, and loaded everything in the elephant's howdah.

Phlai Ngam took leave of his grandmother and received her blessing. At an auspicious time with no obstacles, he mounted the female elephant and jogged off along the road, crossing the plain to the capital without an overnight stay.

He went to find his father and paid his respects. Khun Phaen anxiously asked many questions, and little Phlai explained to him, 'I'll ask Phrameun Si to present me at court.'

Khun Phaen gave his consent. 'You come from the Phlai lineage,

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<sup>59</sup> A style initially fashionable among officials of the Mahatthai ministry, and later more widely among officialdom. A horizontal parting circulated the head at the level of the hairline on the forehead, and was emphasised by shaving and applying powder. Below this parting, the hair was cut short. Above it, the hair was parted in the middle and combed into two sideways wings. See Kukrit: 173 for a sketch.

<sup>60</sup> *Sombak* is the patterned lower cloth worn by nobles at royal audience. Perhaps the word is being used here to denote a ceremonial umbrella which is similarly a mark of office.

so please make the effort to keep up the family name. You're destined to be a warrior and need have no fear. I'll take you to Phrameun Si.'

He grilled Phlai Ngam on what he had learned, and made him recite passages. His expectations were fulfilled. He went on teaching his son other tricks and stratagems until dusk. [171]

When the gong and drum sounded at nightfall, Khun Phaen told his son to follow behind. Even though they met people on the way, nobody saw Khun Phaen's face. They arrived at Phrameun Si's house beside the canal,

and went up the brightly lit stairway. They enquired from the servants and were relieved to hear that all was well. As they waited at the hall, Phrameun Si called out, 'Come on in, my friend.'

Because he honestly loved Khun Phaen and considered him as a friend, he always treated him well and never turned his face away. Khun Phaen took his son to wai him. Phrameun Si asked, 'Who's this young fellow?'

Khun Phaen said, 'He's the child of Wanthong who was heavily pregnant when we came from the forest.' He related matters from the past. 'I wish to place him under your care, sir.'

Ever since my conviction, I've nowhere else to turn. You have kindly given me such help and support. You are my patron so I come to ask a favor, though your gain will be only merit because I'm in poverty.

His grandmother has taught him the disciplines, and he seems well-versed. I drilled him. If there's an opportunity which you deem propitious, please kindly present Phlai Ngam at court.'

Phrameun Si was pleased. 'He looks sharp, the true son of a seasoned soldier. Don't worry about him becoming a servant of the Lord of Life. Whenever there's a war, he should do well.'

Leave the matter with me. I'll present him and do the talking so your beloved son is raised to a position of status. As for lodging, he can stay in this house. We have the people. Don't worry.

Khun Phaen, you know I love you. Even though you almost speared me to death many times, we're not at odds. I like to think of us as friends, even though you're hard-up.

You're beyond help because your punishment is by royal command. There has to be an opening before we can expect relief. In truth, I think every night and day that I should help you while I'm still alive.'

Khun Phaen felt exhilarated, and joyfully raised his hands in a wai. He tried to swallow his tears, and said, 'You're helping us overcome hardship just like a parent.'

Even though I'm in great difficulty and facing severe punishment, you still send me food. Though I'm in jail, I intend to show my gratitude. It makes me happy just to prostrate to you each night. [172]

As for my son, Phlai Ngam, he'll now follow you alone. Let me pay my respects and take leave. I can't stay longer.' He stroked his son's back, and advised him, 'I'm leaving, my darling.

You will stay here and depend on his merit and goodness from now on. You will do well, get established, and fulfill my hopes.' Then he went down from the house in the moonlight, and returned to his usual sleeping place at the inner gate.

Phrameun Si Saowarak-rat called Phlai Ngam in for instruction. 'To be the king's servant, you can't lie around doing nothing. It won't do.

The big cupboard is full of royal laws and decrees in many volumes. Bring them out and read them. Then there are the departmental regulations, the penal code, the royal household law, and legislation **in the abbreviated version.**<sup>61</sup>

Then you should know the sayings of King Ruang,<sup>62</sup> and study the responsibilities of the ministries, the royal language,<sup>63</sup> and royal orders. Once you know all of this, you'll be ready.

Those who don't pursue knowledge as adult or child remain royal pages<sup>64</sup> through three generations – father, son, and grandson – the family ruined, eclipsed, or disregarded for being as lazy and blunt as a Mon cleaver.<sup>65</sup>

You have good family on both your mother and father's side. Don't go astray. Try to remember what you're taught.'

He arranged a room for Phlai Ngam to sleep. Phlai Ngam was free from worry, knowing Phrameun Si would bring him up in a fair way.

Phlai Ngam was sharp, good at figures, wise, and diligent. He was happy living in Phrameun Si's house. Every morning and night, he followed Phrameun Si into the inner palace.

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<sup>61</sup> Guess: *tat samnuan*.

<sup>62</sup> A literary work of the early Bangkok era which purports to be a collection of aphorisms attributed to a legendary king of the Sukhothai era.

<sup>63</sup> *Ratchasap*, a dialect derived from Khmer used when addressing the king or when describing royal matters.

<sup>64</sup> Meaning that they do not rise from the status of page to a high office.

<sup>65</sup> Possibly Mon here just means blunt because Thai metalworkers at that time had better command of the techniques of forging and annealing metal to be harder and sharper, and hence others' workmanship was inferior (Sup: 296).

Prameun Si went into audience, and Phlai Ngam sat behind the topiary,<sup>66</sup> listening to the king's words, and studying his disposition. He gradually got an all-round knowledge of court affairs and responsibilities. He did not make friends and go gadding about,

but stayed home reading legal treatises and texts on royal warfare, as should be. He matured into a smart looking youth, and many girls were interested in meeting him.

They came looking for him, but he knew nothing about courtship. If he turned round and saw a girl, he would run away and hide. He set himself to studying hard so that he would know everything, understand the customs, and carry himself modestly.

On an auspicious day, Phrameun Si was cheerful because he saw an opportunity. He thus arranged incense, candles and flowers to take Phlai Ngam for presentation at court. [173]

He put on a *sombak*<sup>67</sup> with a pleated front, and when everything was ready got in his palanquin. The servants crowded along behind carrying trays. Phlai Ngam brought up the rear. They entered the inner palace.

In the courtyard they enquired from the palace attendants who responded courteously. The gold tray with incense, candles, and flowers was carried inside and placed as required.

Phlai Ngam followed and sat by the tray, following exactly the procedure that Prameun Si had ordered. Close to the time, the chaophraya and others attending the audience ushered one another to the front of the audience hall.

They wore *sombak* with patterned end-panels, tucked their prostration-cloths<sup>68</sup> grandly in the front, and carried themselves elegantly. At four o'clock to the minute, the officials entered the audience hall.

The almighty king, crown of Ayutthaya, was staying in his crystal residence<sup>69</sup> as majestic as the palace of a heavenly city.

He was surrounded by masses of court ladies, of beauty and

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<sup>66</sup> This description is probably based on the Amarin Winitchai audience hall in the Second Reign, which Sunthon Phu would have known well. The hall was a wooden building with no walls, open to the breeze. Ranking nobles assembled inside, while their retinue stayed outside behind a screen of pruned plants placed between the hall's pillars. Such topiary was especially popular in the Second Reign. The hall was replaced with a walled, brick structure in the Third Reign. (Suphon:297; Kukrit:240)

<sup>67</sup> A form of lower cloth especially for nobles attending audience, sometimes called ผ้าเคี้ยว, *pha khiao*, with pattern on both ends. (Suphon:300. Mat:837 has picture.)

<sup>68</sup> *Pha krap*, a cloth for placing on the ground when prostrating.

<sup>69</sup> *Phra thaen waenfa*, term for a royal residence with glass (Mat)

graceful manners, who attended to him gracefully, always singing in the style of the inner court. The royal pleasure was complete.

At midday he came to the Jewel Audience Hall. He spoke and laughed merrily, in a very good mood. The people were happy. No enemies were approaching.

As a result of his merit and power, there was only good fortune and growing tax revenues. Those who came to audience and had done good deeds were presented with golden trays.

Phrameun Si Saowarak-rat did obeisance to the royal foot, and made a ceremonial address to the king. 'My liege, pray favor from the dust beneath the royal foot. These flowers, incense, and golden candles belong to Phlai Ngam,

the son of Khun Phaen, and grandson of Thong Prasi. He has knowledge, is well-behaved and refined. May I request that he endeavor to be a servant of the dust beneath the royal foot.<sup>70</sup> He prostrated three times and waited attentively for the king's words.

King Phanwasa looked at Phlai Ngam's face. He felt pity, and was about to pronounce a pardon for Khun Phaen. But karma was destined to influence the king's disposition.

His mind slipped to a verse from the outer drama which he could not recall. His head spun and his thoughts drifted away. He forgot to make the announcement as intended, and instead returned inside to the royal bedchamber.<sup>71</sup> [174]

Phlai Ngam was now a royal page. He lived with the astute Phrameun Si, attended audience every morning and evening without missing a day, and gradually grew in confidence.

The nobles came to know him and everybody liked him, even both the *jangwang*.<sup>72</sup> He put himself at everyone's service and acted respectfully towards all.

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<sup>70</sup> *Kho rong mulika phayayam*. This is presumably a set formula for asking for admission as a page.

<sup>71</sup> Most likely, this scene is modelled on King Rama II, who, as the chronicle of his reign reports, was much more interested in literary pursuits than government administration. Sunthon Phu was very devoted to Rama II under whose patronage he flourished as a court poet. But Sunthon Phu also showed in many instances of his work that he disliked the arbitrary use of power under the monarchy and *sakdina*. He also had a talent for the gentle lampoon, which blossomed in *Phra Aphaimani*.

<sup>72</sup> The deputy heads of the royal pages.