

### **31: Khun Phaen and Phlai Ngam take the army home**

[III/126]

Khun Phaen, Phra Thainam, and Phlai Ngam sat discussing that now they had victory and had taken the city, they must inform the capital.

‘Let the king know the news that we took Chiang Mai, including King Chiang In, peak king, so the king may let us know his wishes.’

Together they wrote a missive with a seal of Hanuman, the expert warrior. They attached a copy recording the affair, wrapped it three times, placed it in a bamboo cylinder,

closed the mouth with wax, and stamped it with a seal. Nai Ban Khwan Fa and Nai Khong Mun were ordered to select specially good horses, and leave on the following day

to cut straight down to Rahaeng, pass Kamphaeng, and make for Ayutthaya. ‘When you’re done, return without delay. Be back here by the end of the month, with no postponement.’

The two officers saluted and took the cylinder. They came out and promptly packed clothes, put dried rice in waist-sacks, and went to choose fleet, well-paced horses to harness up.

They mounted Phan Phen Phajon and Dan Thorani, and gave the horses their heads. They cut straight through the forest and reached Ayutthaya in ten-and-a-half days.

They went straight to the inner court sala, and informed all the nobles there, ‘Khun Phaen ordered us to bring this sealed missive to you,

to report on the course of the war. Please convey the news to the king that we were victorious and took the Lao country. What are the king’s wishes?’

Happy in the knowledge that the capital of Chiang Mai had been taken, the minister<sup>1</sup> ordered a duty officer, ‘Copy the report and bring it to us.’ [127]

He put on a sombak of red silk with entwined nagas, and wrapped his prostration cloth round his waist. Shortly before the king was due to appear out front, he hurried to wait on the king in audience.

The almighty king, who lived in the Mahaisawan,<sup>2</sup> came to the

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<sup>1</sup> *Jao khun athipathi*, not specific which minister, but later he seems to become Chaophraya Jakri.

<sup>2</sup> Great power, supremacy, great wealth.

resplendent audience hall late in the morning.

He sat on the jeweled throne under a brilliant white umbrella. All the senior officials bowed and prostrated together.

The minister addressed the king, 'My liege, righteous king. My life is under the royal foot.

Khun Phaen Saensongkhram and Phlai Ngam, who volunteered, have sent a report to the royal grace.' The clerk of the seal unfurled the report to read.

'In the report, it says that the diligent Khun Phaen and Phlai Ngam volunteered to the foot of the righteous king to lead troops to war.

They marched an army with four divisions up to the outskirts of Chiang Mai city, where they halted and made camp. They disguised themselves and entered the city.

At nightfall they infiltrated the main jail and rescued every one of the Thai. Together they killed people, stole horses and elephants, and returned to their military camp.

Next morning the Lao came with five armies, flooding the whole forest with men. I led the troops to attack, fight, and grapple hand-to-hand.

Their commanders fell dead on the battlefield, and their troops scattered away in flight. All five armies retreated to the city, where they closed and bolted all the gates.

They guarded the boundaries, kept a strict watch, lit bonfires so it was like daytime, and waited to defend against the Thai army.

That night, Phlai Ngam and I infiltrated the palace of the Chiang Mai king, and captured him while asleep. He awoke in shock and turmoil. [128]

Fearing death, he pleaded to offer Soi Thong, his consorts, and the royal family including his daughter and chief wife, to be placed under the royal foot of the almighty king.

As for himself, he consents to submit as your servant and present royal tribute until death. He pleads only for his life. He gave his word on everything.

I judged that his word is acceptable and credible, so withheld from killing him. I pondered and consulted with others, then sent Nai Ban and Nai Mun to carry this report

to inform the royal foot of the almighty king. If I have made errors, please have mercy on my head. I wait to hear the royal command on how to proceed, by your grace.'

Knowing they had taken Chiang Mai, the king felt as if hundred-

eyed Indra<sup>3</sup> had come to invite him to his palace.

His face was radiant and his mood joyful now that his desire was fulfilled. ‘Hey! As soon as I hear this news, all my angry and vengeful feelings have vanished.

I have been heartsick for over a year, and today this sickness is lifted because of Khun Phaen. For acting to my liking, both father and son will be rewarded equally.

Chaophraya Jakri, send a sealed order to recall the army. As for the old King of Chiang Mai, he will be punished most seriously for his evil thoughts.

The provisions of the legal code must be followed. He should be executed. All his officials and servants who colluded with their master should be punished by death without exception.

As for his daughter, wife, servants, and slaves, they must become **destitutes**<sup>4</sup> because of the king’s evil. Seize all the elephants, horses, buffalo, cattle, families, silver, gold, and goods that they have.

Also, the men and women of the city must be swept down as war prisoners, according to normal practice. Because he submits and pledges loyalty, I will graciously grant the king his life.

But sweep all his family down here for everyone in the country to see as an example so nobody will act in such a dishonest way in the future. [129]

As for the beautiful Princess Soi Thong, who he dared abduct to Chiang Mai, and his own daughter, Soi Fa, have them sent here to be inner ladies.

Since the royal princess of Si Sattana was the original cause of this war with Chiang Mai, so it will be our honor to show that we were victorious and recovered the princess.

Organize *prathiap*<sup>5</sup> boats to go and collect the princesses in the proper way. Also send two *kanya* boats to fetch Khun Phaen.

Father and son have done very well. It will be fitting for them to travel by *kanya* boat so word spreads to every bend in the river that we defeated Chiang Mai and took their country.

As for the king of Chiang Mai and his family, put them in the boats behind. Because he wanted to cause trouble and irritation, let the city people enjoy the sight, as an example.’

The accomplished minister of Mahatthai, took the royal order and placed it on his head. He left the audience hall of victory, went to

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<sup>3</sup> *Jom suthat*, the lord of Suthat, a name for the city of Indra.

<sup>4</sup> *คนระบาท*, *khon rabat*, which pallegoix defines as money lost by loan or various accidents (Pal:795).

<sup>5</sup> A boat for royal consorts.

the sala, and had a sealed missive drafted immediately.

Once it was set down on paper and the seal affixed, it was placed in a cylinder and closed securely. The two officers took the missive, prostrated to take leave, and left the capital immediately.

They galloped through the forest to Chiang Mai in ten days. They dismounted, crawled in, and delivered the sealed cylinder to Khun Phaen.

Khun Phaen saluted, took the missive, and cracked the cylinder open. He drew out the missive, read the contents, and reported everything to the Thai.

Then he told his son Phlai Ngam to go and inform the king of Chiang Mai that the king of Ayutthaya had ordered the families swept down to Ayutthaya.

‘The king has granted him his life. But he must collect all his property, and inform all his people. We will wait fifteen days.’

Phlai Ngam took leave and went off, trailed by a crowd of volunteers. Entering the audience hall, he saluted and addressed King Chiang In. [130]

‘A sealed message has come from the king. Because of your evil and misguided actions in the realm, all the families are to be swept down, including you, your wife, and consorts.

Chiang Mai will be left in the care of officials. You will go down to the capital under guard. Ancient traditions must be upheld. The king grants you only your life.’

The King Chiang In, peak of the city, knowing he would be swept to the southern city, felt as hot as if he was lying in fire. His face burned with dismay.

He spoke sweetly and pleadingly with Phlai Ngam. ‘I knew already my punishment would be major. The fact that I survive this alive is due to you two army commanders.’

Phlai responded, ‘Don’t be upset. Your punishment is very severe. You will have to face hardship and discomfort. We will help plead with the king to restore the city to you.’

‘Be praised! My hopes are with you two commanders. I have survived death because of your help. If the city can be restored, I will offer myself and present articles of tribute.’

Phlai Ngam took leave, and returned to where the army stayed. The King of Chiang Mai ordered the officials to summon the whole city population,

then walked back into his palace, feeling extremely miserable. He

came to the golden bedroom,

sat on the jewel throne, and said to his beloved Queen Apson, ‘A sealed missive has come from the king of Ayutthaya to the army commander.

We and the families are to be swept down. We’ll probably end up in the Thai city. The people will be crushed. There’ll be heaps of dead along the way.

Oh, a pile of karma made me take the wrong course and act dishonestly! Until now, we’ve lived here, but now we must leave the palace.’ The king wept and wailed.

Queen Apson lamented too. ‘All the consorts and palace ladies are so distressed and dismayed. [131]

Oh, just how terrible will it be in the southern city? We’ll have to suffer as servants of the Thai. We’ll end up dead and buried deep under ground.

Children will be parted from parents, grandparents from grandchildren, king from consorts, and consorts from the palace.

The inner royalty will wail out loud like the sound of horns and conches, writhe and shake to the end of their strength, and fall on top of one another like *nang rung*.<sup>6</sup>

The King of Chiang Mai spoke very mournfully to all the consorts. ‘Please swallow your grief and cheer up. If we don’t die, you’ll probably come to the city with us.

If I die in the southern city, you’ll have to be their servants. If by the power of merit my punishment is reduced, you probably won’t stay in the Thai city.

This is the pile of karma we’ve made between us. It’s caught up with us all. Don’t cry. Don’t get het up, but face up to the karma first. Crying won’t help you escape. Try to bear it.’

The mass of the people all struck their chests in anger and distress as if to beat themselves to a tearful death. They packed food and belongings to take with them.

They sawed bamboo cylinders, and stuffed them with fermented fish, fish sauce, chili, salt, and grilled deer meat. They sewed waist sacks and filled them with dried rice. They packed betel, pan,

mortar and pestle, fermented fish, dried fish, rice pots, curry pots, and skillets. They rushed around collecting things with tears brimming. They looked sadly at their wives’ faces.

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<sup>6</sup> นางรัง, *nang rung*, ladies of the nest, perhaps birds.

They beat their chests, sobbed, and thought of lovers. They packed betel boxes and smeared pan with fresh lime paste. Newly weds, still madly sweet on one another, went into their rooms and wept.

Some had just asked for their partner's hand, built the bridal house, and were staying together with the adults' permission. Widows left alone when their husband died lay down in a stupor, curled up with weeping.

Playboy musicians got ready for a tough life by packing *khaen*, flute, drum, castanet, flute, and fiddle so they would be able to beg alms for food. [132]

Some hid gold, dried food, and ornaments including little gold rings with jet gemstones in their lower cloths. Some removed their hairpins and wrapped them away.

Crude objects too difficult to carry were hidden away in the hollows of big trees. People secreted things away in fake corpses in the wat, or in ponds and water pipes.

Some parents were too old to survive the trek. Those who were blind or had lost a leg were full of trepidation. Those stricken with illness truly could not manage to struggle along.

Some grandparents had to stay home while their children and grandchildren went. The air was filled with the noise of lovelorn weeping, including little kids whimpering and whining. Some were too heavily pregnant to make it.

Some had just given birth and were staying by the fire. Their husbands had gone with the army, died, and left them as widows. They could not stay but were frightened about going. People beat their chests and boxed their heads all over the city.

Close to the time the army would leave, everyone was herded up. The road was full of people carrying goods on poles. Inner ladies were all packing their silver, gold, food, and belongings in great distress.

King Chiang In, supreme king, commanded all the elephants to be harnessed, and had one consort mount each elephant. The howdahs were piled overflowing with goods.

The senior palace officials ordered palace guards to mount and give protection. Hordes of consorts of the department of the palace were lined up in rank order all around.

The elephants of Soi Thong and Soi Fa both had a glittering golden canopy, a red backcloth with offertory-rice pattern, and gold curtains to screen the princesses from view.

The elephant of the king and queen of Chiang Mai had an elegant golden howdah. The diligent and careful mahouts brought the

elephants alongside the mounting platform.

Khun Phaen, expert, powerful and brave, and his powerful and beloved son Phlai Ngam each mounted impressively fine tuskers.

Phra Thainam, Kamkong, and the **volunteers' standard-bearer**<sup>7</sup> also rode tuskers. Behind them, the road overflowed with soldiers riding elephants and horses. [133]

Khun Phaen ordered the Thai to divide into two brigades to march on each side of the road, with the families in the middle. The elephant brigade was to march in line at the front.

The Lao of Vientiane were to march on the left and right sides to guard the Lao soldiers and city people. The volunteers were placed at the rear to watch on the families.

'There are more wild elephants than tame ones. Don't be careless. Keep a close watch on everything. If anyone puts up a fight or sneaks off, catch them and chop off their heads without fail.'

At an auspicious time, the army set off in a raucous multitude. The soldiers cheered in unison. The air crackled with gunfire.

The King of Chiang Mai with his queen, consorts, and palace ladies mounted their elephants. The king gave orders to Thao Nu to guard the palace.

As they left through the east gate, King Chiang In turned to look back at the golden spire of the royal palace. His eyes flooded with tears of parting.

'Oh, I feel sorry for the palace. We have lived here for ages, since the ancestors. Now it will disintegrate day by day until it's collapsed, abandoned, and overgrown like a graveyard.

The side-pavilion<sup>8</sup> is like a holy place. The golden spire is like a palace in a heavenly city. From now on, they'll disappear from our sight. Everything will deteriorate and collapse like a vulture's nest.

I feel sorry for our the favorite trees in the garden of the right. The crystal lotus pond will dry up. The audience hall will be abandoned and become like the middle of a field. The seats in the audience hall will deteriorate.

Such a pity. We used to sit out there in the evening. Now it will be overgrown by elephant grass, brambles, and forest weeds.<sup>9</sup> The rucan of the consorts will crack and collapse. Their four lamp posts

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<sup>7</sup> *Thong asa*, perhaps a name, but it does not appear elsewhere.

<sup>8</sup> พระปรัศว์, *phraprat*, an ancillary building beside a palace (Mat:535, pix).

<sup>9</sup> ผักโหม, *phak hom*, 'a class of forest vegetables which grow in waste places' (Mc:949), now more usually *phak khom*, a general term for plants of the Amaranthus family (RI:163).

will become dangerous.

Oh, I feel sorry for the stables of the chariots, elephants, and horses. They'll be ruined too. The walls and fortifications will fall down and be scattered all over the city.

I feel sorry about the moon garden where we used to play. Before long it will become a canal. The palace landing will become a desert.<sup>10</sup> The world and sky will turn yellow throughout the Lao country.' [134]

Queen Apson's chest burnt with distress, as if it had been slashed open by a kris dipped in acid. She felt as if she were being destroyed.

'Oh, when I lived in Chiang Mai, I enjoyed only happiness and good company. Wherever I went around the city, I was carried so pleasantly in an elegant litter,

trailed by swarms of palace ladies, and surrounded by lovely consorts from the Department of the Palace. Oh now I'll end up in the Thai city, and will have to walk among the ordinary commoners.

Royal retainers will order me around. This hardship makes my breast ache as if I'd fallen into an abyss. I won't even have good cloth to wrap around my waist. My breast will shatter every day from now on.

While living in our city, the royal victuals were so refined, following the traditions of the queens of Chiang Mai. Now I have the bother of leaving the city, and probably starvation and deprivation will follow.'

She lamented, beat her body, pulled her hair, and shed floods of sad tears. All the consorts and palace ladies grieved along the way.

They marched out of Chiang Mai city, driven along by the Thai soldiers. The Lao families were fearful and subdued. Some had carrying poles. Others hoisted young kids, or dragged older children by the hand.

The old, lame, weak, and crippled had to be carried clumsily in litters. Gentlefolk who had no elephants mounted themselves on cattle and buffalo.

Ta-Rak, Ta-Ma, and Ta-Sai herded everyone along with canes. They were merciless. If anyone tried to hide or slip away, they chased after them with their canes, making people run, slip and stumble in turmoil.

Ta-Rak shouted, 'Hey, old Thi, this is one of the market people

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<sup>10</sup> Literally, a dry beach.

who was always very fierce.<sup>11</sup> When Ai-Lo and I went to beg alms, she flogged me with a stick and almost broke my back.

I remember her face perfectly. Now it's my turn for revenge! I'll flog her so the forest echoes with her cries. There'll be only horns and skins left to give her master.'

At sunset, the army halted. They dismounted from horses, elephants, cattle, and buffalo and left them in rows jamming the forest. The place looked crammed with people. [135]

A pavilion was constructed for Soi Thong and Soi Fa, with walls all around, a ceiling, and gold curtains to screen them from view. Men sat outside to keep guard.

The families looked weak and pinched with hunger. Some just dropped their burden and sprawled on the ground. The brigade head, Thammathian, called out orders to erect a circle of stakes, and set bonfires.

The Thai had suffered deprivation for a long time. As soon as night fell, they went searching around everywhere. Where they saw young girls lying, they squeezed in beside them, or crawled off with them among the howdahs and harness.

When they felt a sagging breast, they immediately took their hand away. But if they touched a firm one, they grabbed and held on tight. Lao girls woke and saw they were Thai. Some pretended to sleep and ignore them.

Some refused to play and cried out loud when they were grabbed. Those sleeping close by were frightened and woozily thought a tiger or bear had come to bite them.

The brigade head, Thammathian, called out, 'What's all that racket? Don't be alarmed. It's not a long-tailed tiger. It's just a two-legged tiger with a teeny tail.'

The tiger was abashed, and got out of there. But as soon as one unit was quiet, before there was time to go to sleep, the unit in front made a row. Others were wandering about to court girls and make trouble.

When the streaks of dawn lit up the sky, they steamed rice, roasted fish, and ate busily. When full, they hoisted their carrying poles onto their shoulders and set off.

Buffalo, elephants, and horses walked out in file. The army commanders drove them along. The forest was full of the sound of the Lao crying.

Aew!

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<sup>11</sup> จาค, *jat*, can't find in dix. Gussed.

Oh such trouble  
roaming from home  
the carrying poles bouncing  
walking through the undergrowth

parting the elephant grass and lalang  
the clumps of grass and papyrus  
grimy sweat flows down  
toiling along

eating rice and salt  
drinking sweat instead of water  
morning meal comes late  
evening meal at nightfall

can't stop at all  
the Thai beat and beat us  
can't even finish peeing  
they grab us and fondle

goods fall to the ground  
dragged into the thicket  
hit us if they can  
box us if we run

beside the path  
jigging, jogging  
up and down  
heart will break and die, oei!  
[136]

Aew!  
Oh my heart  
in our city  
eat morn and eve  
no shortage of food

young and old girls call us  
arrange to go to the field  
go to pick water spinach  
catch fish and prawn

apple snails and river snails  
all put in a basket  
go along the bund  
seek out crab holes

dig out moles and mice

dig holes to trap lizards  
pick beetles and cocoons  
bother wasp nests

catch long-legged frogs  
little frogs and big frogs  
when one torch burns out  
already got half a basket

make *jaew*<sup>12</sup> make *phla*<sup>13</sup>  
*jaew* five and *jaew* mince<sup>14</sup>  
going to the southern city  
belly won't be used to the food

eat hot, eat mild  
belly ache, belly swollen  
belly airy, belly bloated  
belly will be the death! Oei!

Khun Phaen, powerful as the king of the lions, rode his elephant at the front, impatient to avoid delay.

They slept at nightfall and set off again at dawn. The forest overflowed with the people trailing behind. In fourteen-and-a-half days of quick march, they reached the city of Phichit.

They halted to let the troops and people rest. Everyone dismounted from elephants and horses. The area behind Wat Jan was packed with hundreds and thousands of families.

Orders were given to make pavilions for Soi Thong, Soi Fa, and the king of the Lao capital. Father and son stayed in the sala.

Phra Phichit and Busaba had learnt from a missive with a royal lion seal that Khun Phaen had taken the city. They were happy, and waited to receive him on the way back.

The *prathiap* boats had come up several days earlier and were moored along the landing. The oarsmen were being fed and lodged at the sala in front of the wat.

At Wat Jan, a large area was cleared and leveled. Elephant grass, wood, and food of all kinds was prepared.

On the day the army reached Phichit, *thanai* went to investigate,

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<sup>12</sup> A sauce or dip made with chilli and fermented fish, of many varieties.

<sup>13</sup> พล่า, *phla*, a sour salad, usually made with meat.

<sup>14</sup> แจ่วหั่นแจ่วบอง, *bong* can mean mince.

and rushed back to give the news. The couple were pleased and decided to go to Wat Jan. [137]

They hurriedly changed clothes, and commanded servants to inform the minor officials that they would go to welcome the army.

Phra Phichit and Busaba descended from the house, and went along together with the palat, yokkrabat, mahatthai, local officials, and nobles.

Khun Phaen and Phlai Ngam were in front of the big sala when they saw Phra Phichit and Busaba coming in the distance. They happily rushed to receive them,

and took them up to sit in the sala. Father and son saluted them, and said, 'We've just arrived and things are still chaotic. We meant to come and prostrate at your feet,

but the place is overflowing with families and people, men and women, children and adults, commoner and royalty. If we're a bit slack, they get out of hand. If the Lao get spread out, we have to round them up.

We have to take care of the two princesses, Soi Fa and Soi Thong. There's no other eye or ear we can trust. We thought we'd come to see you tomorrow,

but you've been kind enough to make the effort to come out here. Have you been well? And how is Simala?'

Phra Phichit and Busaba smiled brightly and replied, 'Both of us and our beloved daughter have been happy and well throughout.

But we've been very concerned about you every day. Since we knew you took the city, we've been waiting anxiously for you every day and night.

You have masses of families. How can two of you possibly look after them? We have local city officials who'll come to help, no problem.'

He summoned the palat, yokkrabat, and all the local officials. When they arrived together, he explained matters.

'Good sirs, there's a lot of official work to be done here. Khun Phaen has brought many Lao. If any incident happens in our city, we'll all be held responsible. Bear that in mind. [138]

Palat, assign our people to the various duties required. As government officials of this city, make sure there is no bad incident.'

Khun Phaen, Phra Phichit, and the local officials discussed the division of work. The garrison commander took care of the Thai army and Lanchang Lao.

Mahathai looked after the feeding of elephants, horses, cattle,

buffalo, and various animals. The city department guarded the families, watched the roads, barricaded the entrances, and set bonfires.

The palace department built pavilions for royalty to stay, including the king of Chiang Mai and his wife and daughter. The warehouse department kept guard on all goods, including gold and silver.

The land department served as the central unit manning the granaries to distribute food. Other people were kept in reserve for various duties. All the assignments were made.

The palat and yokkrabat were to supervise. They requisitioned boats and selected some to transport the army and families all together. In three days, they would start out for the capital.

Once everything was arranged properly, Phra Phichit and Busaba returned home in the late afternoon.

Simala had been miserable since Phlai left. She thought of him constantly, morning and night. She stayed in her room in floods of tears.

While eating, she sighed with longing. While sleeping, she had fearful dreams. She did not smile or chat, but hid away lying on her bed for almost a month.

Her parents suspected something was wrong, but when they asked their daughter she was evasive. I-Moei was concerned. She went into her ruan and whispered warnings to her mistress. 'Don't be too sad.

Your father and mother will have an inkling. You're not badly sick. You must dress up, put on a happy face, and be sociable.

Try to appear like you used to be. Hide you sadness, and don't let it show on your face. Though you have to suffer, it won't be long. He'll come as hoped, and put you out of your misery.' [139]

Simala agreed and tried to be as cheerful as before. Only when going back to her inner room to sleep would she sigh and sob every night and morning.

Her breast trembled when she thought of him. 'How will the war turn out?' She prayed and made offerings to the gods for his protection. She counted the days waiting for Phlai till they became many months.

When she heard the news the army had returned, it was like receiving an incomparable jewel. She summoned I-Moei into her ruan. 'Don't hang around. Find an opportunity to slip away.

If Phlai is asking around, tell him that I've got a fever. Then listen to what he says. Don't make anyone suspicious.'

I-Moei smiled. 'Mistress, don't worry. If I don't get Phlai, you can bawl me out. But leave this until tomorrow. I won't take long.' They talked together until evening.

When the dawn sun brightened the heavens, Khun Phaen and his son consulted together, and made the necessary arrangements

to take gifts to Phra Phichit, Busaba, and the fair Simala, the focus of concern. They summoned servants and attendants to carry the gifts to the governor's house.

On arrival, they went up and saw Phra Phichit and Busaba in the sitting hall. Phlai had only Simala on his mind, and looked all round for her.

The servants unloaded the gifts in rows, filling the verandah of the lateral hall at the front. Father and son sat down to pay their respects. 'We've brought a few little things –

some soft Lao mats, triangular cushions, food tables, and trays – things used everyday in Chiang Mai.

Betel baskets, water bowls with drinking cups, miang leaves,<sup>15</sup> and sugar juice.' They prostrated at the feet of Phra Phichit and Busaba. 'Just some presents from the forest. This valuable ruby ring is for dear Simala.'

Phra Phichit and Busaba said, 'How kind of you to take the trouble. It's worthwhile to love you. Thank you.' [140]

Then he called, 'Hey I-Moei. Tell Simala to come out here. Khun Phaen has come back to the city with Phlai Ngam.

He's been kind and thoughtful enough to bring some gifts. Don't be shy. Come to say hello to them.' I-Moei smiled sweetly and went off to tell Simala in the inner room.

Fair Simala had already recognized the voices. 'It's him and nobody else!' Love almost made her dash out. But she thought twice because of women's feelings, and because the truth was that the adults did not know.

She had to stifle her feelings and put off the meeting. At night he would probably come. She said to I-Moei quickly, 'Tell them I'm sick. Help me.'

She got up and spied through a gap in the wall. She saw Phlai. He was looking plump and healthy, but very sun-burnt.

He sat hidden behind his father, with his eyes staring at the wall of her ruan, as if questioning. She felt elated to see him, and could not tear her eyes away.

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<sup>15</sup> Miang is the northern Thai word for the tea plant. The leaves were mainly used for chewing. Subsequently miang has come to describe a way of eating various kinds of chopped food wrapped in leaf.

I-Moei, the tricky girl, put on a straight face and walked out of the ruean. She said to Phra Phichit, 'Today, mistress Simala's body is hot.'

She's had a throbbing headache since midnight, and woke feeling weak and exhausted. She's still groggy and aching. She sent me to prostrate at their feet for her.'

Phra Phichit thought he understood – his daughter must be shy about coming out because of her betrothal to be married to Phlai Ngam.

He turned to smile at Khun Phaen. 'She's got a high fever. We shouldn't force her. I'd like to talk about your success in the war.'

We should discuss the marriage too. I want to see a roof over our beloved daughter's head. While I'm still alive, I've got the means to make sure she's happy so I won't have to worry. [141]

We parents are getting older, and who knows whether we'll fall dead tomorrow. Please look for an auspicious date, then we can find the wood to build a ruean.'

Khun Phaen paid his respects and replied, 'I came here meaning to talk to you about the same thing. After we've taken the army home, we'll come back here before long to plan the wedding.'

I calculated the stars yesterday. On Tuesday waning in the fourth month, their fates coincide perfectly. It's up to your honor whether you agree.'

Phra Phichit consulted with Busaba and replied, 'The fourth month is good to fix the ceremony. The ruean should be finished in time.'

Then he said to Khun Phaen. 'Why stay at the wat? There are several days before you leave. Come and stay here with us. Why not?'

Khun Phaen thought quietly with concern. Young Phlai had been apart from her. Now that he was back, he would not dawdle.

At night he would fumble around to find her. If the matter did not stay secret like the last time, it would create a hullabaloo, and bring shame and ruin to both sides.

He replied with the flow of conversation. 'I'm up to my eyes. The army we brought back is much bigger than on the outward journey.'

Then there are Soi Thong, Soi Fa, the king of Chiang Mai, and his wives and children. On top, we have to guard the Lao families, forest people. If we stay away from there, it'll cause trouble.

Phra Thainam and people over there will report that we two neglected royal service and went to stay in comfort in your house.

I've had enough problems already. I don't want the slightest hint of any more risk. I'll have to drag my body along until we've finished what we undertook to do.'

He took leave of the governor and his wife, and walked down from the house. Phlai trailed behind not speaking, furious at his father. [142]

'What a pity. Father knows in his heart that I love her and have already had her as man and wife. I could put him to sleep with **magic** again with no fear. But he still wants to obstruct me. What a joke!

Fine! Never mind. Let's see. Don't imagine I'm going to sit here quietly like a monkey in a cage. After nightfall I'll go to find her.'

He walked along, acting unconcerned. Some distance from the residence, he saw I-Moei sitting smiling at the side of the road. He signaled secretly to her to follow.

They reached Wat Jan in the evening. Many local officials were waiting to see them. Khun Phaen talked to them earnestly. Phlai sneaked away to the side of the wat.

He looked for a hidden place with nobody around, and found a big phikun tree with smooth sand underneath. He slipped in and sat hidden by the tree.

I-Moei walked up behind, sat down, and raised her hands in wai. Phlai smiled and said, 'I hoped to run into you.

We have an urgent matter, as you know. Though my body left here, my heart has remained. Every day and night I've been thinking of her. Is she happy?

This morning when we sat in there, I was hoping to see her face a little, but no sign. Is she angry for some reason? Is that why she pretended to be sick and wouldn't appear?

Before I left, I entrusted you to please her and comfort her while waiting for me. You didn't keep your promise. What do you have to say for yourself?'

I-Moei tossed her head and said, 'My god! Why are you angry and blaming me? Don't you see my mistress' position? She doesn't want to meet you in front of people,

so she said she had a fever and wouldn't appear. She's not fibbing or pretending or going back on her word. After the day you led the army off, she wasn't well for several months.

She wasn't sleeping or eating. She became weak. The streams of tears never dried. I'm not making it up. I had to look after her all the time – keep talking to jolly her along. [143]

I'm glad you came back. Maybe you brought some medicine with

you. I hurried over to hear what orders you'd give for nursing her.

I fear you don't remember the words you promised. You've brought piles of gifts for the nobles, but nothing for a commoner girl. You pretend to ignore her.'

'Tst! Your mouth is as big as your body. Don't annoy me.' He took out some money and offered it to her. 'Here. For Moei as reward.

I have some very good herbal medicine for your mistress' fever. But it's medicine enchanted with yantra. It can't be taken in daytime. The patient dies.

A little after dark, I'll come to the house. You work out how to let me in. I'll give your mistress the medicine, and it should get rid of her fever by tomorrow.'

They agreed a signal. I-Moei took leave. Phlai hurried back to the sala. Nobody had any suspicion.

In the evening at sunset, the brigade and unit heads inspected the mass of troops, and kept watch around Wat Jan.

Phlai Ngam, adept at devices and mantra, went around giving orders, inspecting this brigade and that brigade at all levels, as he did every day.

At the end of the watch, he wended his way to the kuti of Chiton Thai. He saw the light of torches where people were playing chess.

The volunteers had come to play, while monks and novices had come to look for fun. They were squeezed together watching, making a racket that poured out of the kuti.

Phlai pondered quietly. 'I must fool father into thinking I'm here. I'll pretend to join in the chess game until he's gone to sleep, then I'll go off to find her.'

He went up to the kuti. 'Hey! Let me checkmate someone.' The soldiers let their commander sit in the middle. The noise on both sides was deafening. [144]

Khun Phaen was waiting for Phlai. He was worried that his son had disappeared. He went down from the sala and walked around. Seeing the light in the kuti, he hurried over.

When he got close, he could here the hullabaloo, and knew his son was in there enjoying a game of chess. He went back to the sala.

Around the second watch, Phlai Ngam thought his father would be asleep. He left the circle, descended the stairway, and sneaked away to get dressed up.

He doused his body with fragrant water, powdered his face and forehead, and rubbed on enchanted beeswax. He put on a flared<sup>16</sup> silk yok,

a three-color upper cloth given by the king, and a new ruby ring on his finger. In his right hand he carried an open fan. He picked up a striped handkerchief and set off.

The middle of the wat was deserted. Phlai chanted the Great Way mantra.<sup>17</sup> Surrounded by his spirits, he went into Phichit city.

Before long, he reached the front of the governor's residence. There were spirits all round the front and back. The surrounding wall was closed tight, and the gate bolted on the inside.

Phlai chanted the Great Unlocking mantra. All the bolts sprung with a fearful clack. The gates of the house opened, and Phlai went in.

The Mon slave girl, I-Moei, was up in the ruan. She had drawn the bolt, and was lying waiting. Hearing the locks on the house gates clack open, she got up to look and saw Phlai.

She opened the door, went down, and led him up to the ruan, threading their way through the people scattered asleep. She led him up to her mistress' ruan, and then made herself scarce.

When Phlai Ngam reached the room, he was happy beyond compare. He walked softly. By the lights of the ruan,

he saw his sweetheart Simala. 'Lying so quiet and still, you look perfect. Are you fast asleep or just pretending, my precious?' He tentatively sat beside her on the golden bed. [145]

He gently kissed, stroked, and embraced her. 'I'm here. Don't be miserable any more. I've been thinking of you constantly. My mind hasn't changed for a day.

When it's time to eat, I've had no appetite. When it's time to sleep, I've dreamt of you. If I wasn't afraid of the king, I'd have turned up here long ago.

By the power of our merit, my darling, we were victorious and came back. I heard you hadn't been well. I've been depressed since this morning.

Sitting in front of your ruan, I was almost out of my mind. I looked everywhere but couldn't see you. I made up my mind, life or death, to come and find you tonight.

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<sup>16</sup> ปลายปลิว, *plai pliu*, blown wide. The phrase suggests a crisp silk cloth which flares outwards at the bottom.

<sup>17</sup> *Muk yai*, see note in chapter 28.

I had to wait until my father was fast asleep, so I only just came at this late hour. Life's blossom, please turn your face this way for me to see.'

Simala pretended to lie still with her eyes closed under a cloth. His sweet-talk appealed to her. As hoped, she felt aroused with love.

She raised herself, sat beside him, then turned to prostrate on his lap. 'I thought you'd still be very tired and would want to rest first.

You went to war, won a victory, and took the Lao city. There must be lots of girls among the war prisoners. I've heard the rumor that Soi Fa is fabulous. Didn't you grab yourself something?

Why bother with the daughter of the Phichit lord? She's not worth making love to. Like a weed,<sup>18</sup> she looks fine when you don't have anything else, but once you have a flower you don't need her.

Maybe you're feeling some pity, so you made the effort to break into the house. But now you've seen my face, you'll be bored. You won't stay long. You'll get worried about the army and go back there.'

'Look here! What a pity you're so critical. You can accuse me for nothing if you like. But I give you my word, I haven't hit on any other woman, Lao or Thai, in the whole three worlds.

Since I left here, my heart has been with you. I've been miserable. Though I've been looking at the Lao, I've been seeing only the image of Simala, the ruler of my heart. [146]

As for Soi Fa, she's the daughter of the king of Chiang Mai and has been offered to the king of Ayutthaya. So has Princess Soi Thong, both of them.

I've made the effort to control myself, as if I'd shaved my head, put on the triple robe, become a monk, and been religiously chanting prayers every morning and evening to share the merit with Simala.

But instead of the merit, I've brought a ring, and now it's the end of lent. I'll disrobe tonight. You must make up your mind to be merciful.'

Simala could not stop herself laughing. Phlai grabbed hold of her immediately. They made love ecstatically, lying together on the golden bed.

Simala had prepared some food and left it beside the wall. She took him over, and they ate merrily,

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<sup>18</sup> ดอกหญ้า, *dokya*, literally grass-flower, often used as a metaphor for a girl of humble background.

chatting away. Simala was wreathed in smiles. Phlai teased her and would not leave her alone. They fondled away without sleeping

until the moon slipped from the sky and the coel called. 'It's almost morning. I have to go, my love. I'll come back to you every night.

After we've taken the army back to Ayutthaya, I'll hurry back to you here. When we've had the marriage ceremony as planned, we won't be apart a single night.'

He kissed and caressed her, then left the room. With I-Moei leading the way, he walked out of the walls,

and cut quickly through to Wat Jan. It was still pitch dark when he arrived. He avoided his father, pulled the clothes over his head, and slept.

Khun Phaen woke in the morning and saw Phlai Ngam still fast asleep. He thought he had enjoyed himself playing chess, and was not concerned over him.

That evening, Phlai again skipped off to show his face at the chess game, then late at night went to Simala. He was with his love every night. [147]

On the last night, the lovers got carried away talking, fell asleep, and did not wake in time. Only when dawn streaked the sky, did Phlai wake up, wash his face, and leave.

That night, Busaba woke up before the cock. Because Khun Phaen would leave at dawn, she was anxious about the food.

She got up, opened the window to wash her face, and saw Phlai Ngam walking away. 'Eh! This isn't right. He'll make trouble for our daughter.'

Trembling, she woke her husband. 'Sir! Phlai Ngam came into the house. He went down from the ruan just now. What's going on in here?

There's an ancient saying, dogs shit on rubbish. His tracks will lead straight to our dear daughter. We parents are dishonored. We didn't have a clue, no suspicion. What are we going to do?'

Phra Phichit understood immediately. 'I thought something was wrong. It must be Simala.

After the army left, she was sick and very upset. When I asked what the matter was, she didn't reply. I didn't know they'd sneaked off to make love.

On the day the army came back, she was quiet and hid away as if she was afraid. Now they've probably made love and she's lost her virginity. If that's not so, why did he come here?

But it's not right to get angry and punish our daughter. This is a very important fellow. He knows how to make himself invisible and all kinds of love tricks.

Even if there were diamond walls seven layers thick, he'd blow a spell and blast them open. If he loves someone, he just blows a mantra and they all fall for him without exception.

But he's asked for her hand. Whatever happens, he must become her husband. He just got impatient, and showed no respect. Why get angry?

If we get into a shouting match, it'll hurt Khun Phaen, and that's not fitting. He's still faithful and loyal. We are big people, and shouldn't be fickle. [148]

If word gets around that Simala has had a lover, it'll shame her. When her breasts sag, it'll weigh on us.<sup>19</sup> Let it pass! Don't bring matters into the open.'

The couple finished talking and got dressed to leave before it was too late. They came out, summoned their servants and *thanai*, and walked to the front of Wat Jan.

The boats which had come up were milling around the mooring. The place was teeming with local officials. Crowds were boarding the boats and rafts. The courtyard of the wat was in uproar.

Phra Thainam and Kamkong went down to organize the two golden *prathiap* boats. They called out urgently that they were short of this and that. The princesses' flotilla needed a lot of arrangements.

Phra Thainam's boat was to lead the way, with the volunteers' boats on the flanks, and the *prathiap* boats between them in the middle, and the boats with the lady servants behind.

Next was the flotilla of the army commanders. The *kanya* boats which had come to collect them were resplendent. Father and son each boarded one of them. The oarsmen were all skilful soldiers.

Then came taxable<sup>20</sup> cargo boats, and the boats for the Lao at the rear. Units of the volunteers served as guards. They busily herded people along without let-up.

The boat of the king of Chiang Mai led the next group, followed by those of his daughter and wife, then those of their officials and servants. The boats of the volunteers came at the tail.

There were not enough boats remaining for the families, elephants, horses, cattle, weapons, and large quantity of military

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<sup>19</sup> Literally, her sagging breasts will roll over our breast: she'll become an old maid and we'll be landed with her.

<sup>20</sup> ต้องพัทธยา, *tong phatthaya*, liable to pay tax to the king.

equipment. All this had to be left in the keeping of the city.

When everything was loaded to take the army back to the southern city, Khun Phaen and his son went to prostrate to Phra Phichit and Busaba.

‘I beg to take leave of your feet to go and attend on King Phanwasa. After the audience we’ll come back for certain, as promised.’

Phra Phichit and Busaba gladly gave their blessings and good wishes. ‘Go down to attend the king who will favor you with rank and rewards. [149]

May you flourish and enjoy utter prosperity. May both father and son live happily for ever. May danger and trouble not intrude upon you.

When you’ve completed your royal service for the realm, come back here to finalize the plans for the wedding.’

Khun Phaen and Phlai Ngam prostrated to their elders, and took their leave. They boarded the *kanya* boats in front of the wat.

Boats and rafts were crammed with officers and men. On the signal of three gunshots, the boats set off.

The crowded flotilla floated down with the current in order from front to rear, passing villages and cities one after another until it entered the boundary of the capital near the city.

Men and women ran up in crowds to see the army. Both banks were jammed. Hands were raised to salute and celebrate the meritorious power of the victorious king,

saying ‘The might of the king could defeat the Lao city and the king of Chiang Mai!’ ‘They’re trailing masses of war prisoners!’ ‘What city will oppose his power!’

‘Look, there’s the boats of the army commanders.’ ‘This father and son are super-powerful.’ ‘Khun Phaen was good in the past. He’s thoughtful. The lord of life granted him pardon.’

Some uninformed people asked, ‘Which is the boat of Phlai Ngam?’ Those in the know said, ‘That one, the big *kanya* with the golden canopy.’

The boat in front is old Khun Phaen, the father. Phlai’s boat is behind. Look, he’s slender, lightly built, and fair.’ The watchers all stared.

The boats floated to the front of the royal landing pavilion.<sup>21</sup> Seeing Phlai Ngam’s good looks, the women were in turmoil. Some

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<sup>21</sup> *Chanuan*, a covered corridor or walkway, especially for royal use.

praised him, 'Just this, but so much power!'

Some stared, captivated. If they could get him, they would hug him tight. Some who used to be intimate with other girls changed their mind and thought they had made a mistake. [150]

One lady made things up, 'See! Phlai is making eyes at me. Is he just trying to get me excited, or is he serious? He's just got back and he wants a wife!'

Others said, 'He wouldn't ask for the hand of people like us. He'd just flirt around, have a free one, and leave us ruined. Don't get over-excited and get mixed up with him. You'll weep and wail and he'll take no notice.'

When Khun Phaen looked up from his *kanya* boat, he saw only widows and shy old maids who would be happy with either Phlai or his father.

The watchers swamped the river banks – men and women, Thai and Jek, kids and adults. Those who went with the army and returned to the capital celebrated that their troubles were over and they were now in clover.