

42: Soi Fa and Simala undergo ordeal by fire

[III/372]

The king, turner of the great wheel, ruler over the wealth of heavenly Ayutthaya, resident of the crystal palace where consorts bowed and wai-ed,

gave thought to Jameun Wai's wives who, on the previous day, he had ordered to undergo ordeal by fire. 'I must make sure the result is certain.' He walked out to the window.

All the chaophraya and officials of various ranks, including Phra Kanburi, Chumphon, and Meun Wai, were gathered for audience, prostrate at the front of the palace courtyard.

Thong Prasi shook with anger over the case. 'Struth! This Lao has done evil and brought karma!' Fearfully she hurried down the stairs and rushed along

the road in a daze. Big crowds of people made a noisy hubbub of talking about it. 'Let's go and watch the ordeal by fire.'

Chinese, Khaek, and Farang all knew about it and went along. The inner courtyard overflowed with people. Thong Prasi went to make obeisance.

The king saw her and spoke in greeting.¹ [He thought] 'Now she has sunken cheeks, broken teeth, and graying hair.² When she was a young girl, she had square shoulders and a round bottom. The poor state she's now in is pitiful.

Still, Khun Krai was an old royal retainer. Thinking about him makes me distraught. I feel sad thinking he had to die by royal punishment back then.'

Then the king said suddenly, 'Phaen, Chumphon, and Meun Wai. Don't let people have doubts in their heart. Take an oath before my eyes that you'll not take sides.'

Khun Phaen, Phra Wai, and Phlai Chumphon all swore an oath for the king. 'If I take any side, may I fall and be burnt in the Lokanta hell.

I will set my mind to be straight and just to both Soi Fa and Simala, not leaning either way or having evil intent.' Then they

¹ In truth this seems to be his thoughts.

² Literally two(-color) hair.

made obeisance. [373]

A Brahmin examined both ladies' feet to make sure there was no wound or fault.³ Both were seated beside the fire pit. An old teacher chanted a mantra to thwart any magic.

Both ladies were given popped rice and flowers. Brahmins on each side made offerings to the deities.⁴

They chanted, 'Lord Buddha, Brahma the great protector, mighty Krishna, god of water, god of fire of noble power,

Lord Ganesh, Lord Kartikeya,⁵ Lord Indra, Lord of the Winds, Lords of the Earth who oversee the four directions, please come to serve as witness.

Also the guardian spirits of the royal umbrella who sustain the religion, the powerful guardian spirits of the city, the city pillar of mighty Ayutthaya,

come to receive the offerings of food. Do not side with either plaintiff or defendant. Let whoever has spoken untruthfully be burned by the fire and exposed by sacred power to the eyes of the people.'

The two then had to make a prayer. Simala raised a tray of flowers and prayed, 'If I was lovers with Chumphon, may the fire burn me until blistered to destruction.

If I was faithful to my husband, let the fire not touch me. May the gods protect me, as if I were walking on cooling water.

Let the gods protect my honesty. If I was evil, let me die by the fire.' She had no fear. Her face was as bright as a lotus in bloom.

Soi Fa's face was dark. She raised her tray and mumbled her prayer so quickly it made no sense. 'Oh, spirits and those possessed by spirits, come to sniff.'

The Brahmins laughed, 'Oh, that's droll! What a wish, my lady!' Thong Prasi shouted, 'You blackface! Such an offensive prayer shows you up.'

Soi Fa made a new prayer. 'If I concocted magic with the elder, by

³ 'Have the feet washed, and have the wardens and judges inspect the soles and toes of the plaintiff and defendant for any injuries, new or old... and draw a picture of the toes and soles.' The arrangements for detaining the parties and ensuring they were dressed and fed in the same way applied to both types of ordeal (*KTSD*, II, 109–10).

⁴ The law specified long formulas to be spoken before the ordeal. That for the water ordeal occupies almost four pages of the Three Seals Law, and that for the fire ordeal almost three. These name every possible Indic god, shrine spirit, spirit of the place, malevolent spirit, and natural spirit to ensure a fair result. The version given here gives only a flavor. (*KTSD*, II, 116–22).

⁵ *Kantakuman*, Skanda, the six-headed son of Siva.

washing my hair with the elder and burying figures, to make Phra Wai infatuated with me, [374]

and also if Phlai Chumphon and Simala are not lovers as I claimed, let the fire burn and blister both my feet.’ She trembled white-eyed, and her heart felt icy.

Khun Phaen, Meun Wai, Thong Prasi, and Phlai Chumphon sat at the edge of the pit. The four pillars, city officials, inner and outer guards all crowded around.

People were jammed together, jostling one another, arguing irritably, getting into noisy fights, falling on top of one another, pushing and shoving with trembling bodies.

Those on the outside could not see, and tried to barge in. Dust billowed up, cloaking their heads. Children cried and hung onto their mothers. Some rode on shoulders, holding onto the hair and straining to see.

A Jek selling sweets stumbled and fell. A gang of riff-raff yanked his pigtail. ‘Aiyaa! Don’t tug that.’ He crouched down and huddled up to hide.

A Mon girl selling rice crackers trod on his leg. ‘Aiyaa!’, the Jek cried, and jumped up. The Mon girl scolded, ‘*Fuck your mother*,⁶ you villain! I want to see the fire ordeal but you’re jostling me.’

Inner guards were arrayed round the edge of the courtyard to put a stop to any quarrels. People sat crowded together. Suddenly, silence fell.

King Phanwasa sent down an order to summon Soi Fa and Simala to undergo the ordeal by fire to reveal the truth.

Consorts and inner ladies poked their faces out of the windows or peered through the slats of the muli to watch Soi Fa and Simala undergo the ordeal.

On the king’s order, Soi Fa and Simala approached either end of the pit, and made obeisance.

People fanned the charcoal bright red. Soi Fa was very frightened. Simala looked pretty and smiled brightly. After making obeisance, she walked into the fire pit,

pacing like a royal golden swan. Though she stepped on the fire, she felt no heat. Without fear, she walked back and forth three times. [375]

The gods protected her because of her honesty. A wind blew,

⁶ ตีอกย้าย, *tok yai*, translation from Mon by Pat McCormick.

touching her like celestial water. People cheered her loudly.

Soi Fa stood awkwardly at the head of the pit. The flames blazed up in front of her. She was frightened the fire would burn and blister her. She steeled herself and clumsily stepped forward.

After two or three steps on the fire, her body shook and her feet scorched. She jumped out of the pit. ‘Oh, I-Sang, the heat will kill me!’

I-Mai went and dragged her away. ‘Your feet are as red as little mice, I pray.’ The crowd was in uproar. Phra Wai came over, gnashing his teeth and trembling.

He kicked her in the side. Nobles shouted out to stop him, ‘Don’t! Don’t!’ Phra Wai said, ‘Why keep her? Take her and cut off her head at the execution ground.’

Khun Phaen felt very sorry for Simala. ‘Soi Fa shouldn’t have put you to this difficulty. She was intent on doing you harm. I knew already from some time ago,

but because nobody else knew I had my doubts. You’ve been hurt very much. Now everything is revealed before the king and everybody else, this will put an end to the gossip.’

Thong Prasi was furious at Soi Fa. She rolled her eyes, gnashed her gums, shook, and shouted. She grabbed a *samae* stick and rushed forward. ‘I’ll bash your head to my satisfaction!

Struth! You maker of love potions and elephant medicine. Why are you lying there legs akimbo and whimpering? Are you hot? Use some phimsen to treat the burn.⁷ You deserve this, you clever maker of love charms.

You contacted that evil elder and novice to fix your husband but that wasn’t enough. You also accused Chumphon of having Simala. Why are you pointing at your leg and whimpering?’

Chumphon ran up and grabbed the end of Thong Prasi’s cloth. ‘Don’t do this, grandmother, I beg you.’ Thong Prasi angrily pushed his hand away. ‘I’m going to bash her head.’ She hitched up her lower cloth, Khmer style.

‘What will be, will be. I’m not listening.’ Guards surrounded her back and front, like kids playing a noisy tug-of-war.⁸ She sank down, still ranting with oily eyes. [376]

⁷ See note in chapter 4. Phimsen is heaty and would make the burns worse.

⁸ ชักสาว, *chak sao*, drag the girl, a gamre for two teams of around ten, boys against girls. The leaders of both teams grasp a piece of wood, and the others form a chain behind holding onto one another’s waists. Then the two teams pull like a tug-of-war. (Mat:266).

Chumphon prostrated at Simala's feet, with one hand angrily wiping away tears. He went over to Soi Fa and shouted, 'You sieve! Your tricks made others shamed.'

Simala loves me like her own child. You lie and have contempt for her so easily. You forest Lao, you have no shame, lying on your back whimpering for the crowds to see.'

He put an arm-lock on I-Mai's neck, and elbowed her. 'I know how you helped protect her.' He grabbed Soi Fa's hand and dragged her away. 'I'll slash you at the execution ground.'

Phramoen Si pulled Chumphon away by the hand. 'Listen to me. Don't be harsh.' The crowds stood around staring, and all badmouthing Soi Fa.

King Phanwasa was angry at Soi Fa like a raging fire. 'Now I see as if I can look into your heart, you evil trickster.'

You used the love magic on your husband to make him fall madly in love with you to the extent his powers and knowledge weakened. Although he was besotted, you still weren't satisfied.

You provoked a quarrel between father and son that blew up into a big enough affair for them to kill one another, and the father to come and challenge me.

Then you turned on Chumphon and Simala with false accusations which could get them both executed. You think of everyone as an enemy. Truly you seem to be in rebellion.

Ha, hey, Phraya Yommarat! Take her away and slash her dead. Open her chest with an axe for public shame. Make an example of her to caution others.'

Phraya Yommarat summoned the executioners immediately. He grabbed Soi Fa's wrist, gnashing his teeth. She implored, 'Please have mercy!'

If I'm to die, let me take leave of my husband and grandmother. I must ask forgiveness of Simala so I don't carry the karma to my death.'

The executioners gripped her arms on both sides, and took her along. She prostrated to her husband, to her grandmother, and to everybody there. Then weeping she went up to Simala, [377]

and raised Simala's foot onto her head. She flailed around without raising her face. 'My lady and mistress, I'm bad. Please accept my apology and don't hold things against me.'

Let the karma end here. Make merit so I may be born in a new life. Though I carry my sin and bad karma, your forgiveness will ease

the burden.

Karma gave me such a bad heart that I stupidly contacted the novice and elder, and let myself be ruled by jealousy and revenge. I couldn't see my own wrongdoing.

That wasn't enough. I accused you of being lovers with Chumphon in the past. I laid false accusations to make the king hate you. I told insolent lies because I got carried away.

Me, I'm of low birth and a danger to the city. Everybody knows that now. I'm dishonored and ashamed. I know that matters have come to this because I'm evil.

The protective deities saw that I cause trouble and so sent me to my death. The king should execute me. He may have mercy only because of the child in my womb.

Though just seven months and blameless, the child will die with me, without ever seeing either sun or moon, without us knowing whether it was boy or girl.

Oh mistress, please do not leave me with the karma. Keep me as your servant until death. Think that you are helping the little baby in my womb.'

Thong Prasi's tears fell. 'Who made you like this, you beggar? Only when heaven's anger hits you in the back,⁹ do you have remorse. I can't hold back my tears.

However much I taught you, it didn't get into your head. Instead you bullied me with your big mouth. I've never met anyone as arrogant. Now you hug my feet and ask for mercy.

Have a care for me, dear Simala. She was bad to you and your husband. But if you spurn her, the baby will die. For better or worse, have mercy on the little child in her womb.'

At this, Simala's heart softened and her tears fell. Now that Soi Fa admitted her guilt, Simala felt pity. 'I'll ask the king to reprieve her, according to her merit. [378]

If it's not yet her fate to die, sending merit should help her. I don't aim for anything in return. I'll use my merit to help save a life.

Don't imagine I'm vengeful. Don't fear, but concentrate on prayer.' Simala promptly made her prayer. 'Oh, powers!¹⁰ I have made some merit.

⁹ A saying meaning when something catches up with you (Red:693).

¹⁰ *kho decha*, the same phrase elsewhere translated as 'my liege' when used to address the king, but here an appeal to the gods.

I wish to free myself from this world¹¹ and be on the way to nirvana in the future. May I help a living creature to evade death.' With this prayer, she walked

over in front of the throne, prostrated, raised her hands in wai, and said, 'My life is under the royal foot. Whatever is the pleasure of the king.

At present Soi Fa is under penalty of execution by the king's order. She is around seven months pregnant and will take Phra Wai's child to death.

My heart feels pity for the child which must follow its mother to death. Please grant pardon to Soi Fa so that the child may survive.'

The king was shocked. He had not known a child would die. Righteousness made his anger abate.

'Soi Fa's fate is not to die. Simala's good deed helps boost her merit. And the merit of the child in her womb protects her and enables her to escape the threat.'

The king said, 'Thank you, Simala. You're not vengeful, but extremely honest and fair. Though this villainous woman has an evil heart,

you ask for her pardon, and so I'll grant her life. But to keep her here will be a public danger. Before long she'll create trouble. I don't want to see you undergo ordeal by fire again.'

He gave orders to Phraya Yommarat, 'Soi Fa is a danger. Simala pleaded for her life, but Soi Fa can't be kept. Expel her from the city.'

Phraya Yommarat made obeisance, backed out, and gave orders. 'The king has pardoned Soi Fa's life. Expel her from the city within three days.' [379]

King Phanwasa wanted to console Simala. He commanded the treasury to arrange gold, silver, various articles,

two chang of silver, two trays of cloth, a gemstone ring for the little finger, wash bowl, and an enamel betel box with a votive-deity pattern as royal gifts to Simala.

He also gave golden armlets and bracelets as gifts for the baby in the womb. 'Simala, you've been good on this occasion. I repay your good deeds.

Phaen and Chumphon came back because you went to talk with

¹¹ *Songsan*, samsara, the cycle of rebirth.

Phaen, otherwise the old man wouldn't have overcome his anger. If you'd made a mistake, he'd have stampeded away.'

Then he issued commands. 'Phaen and Chumphon, don't wander around. Drop the quarrel with Wai. Let bygones be bygones, I beg you.'

Phra Kanburi, Phra Wai, and Phlai Chumphon all took the king's order on their heads. The king left. Others trooped out of the inner palace.

I-Moei said to Soi Fa, 'Never forget the goodness of my mistress.' Simala angrily reprimanded her, 'Struth, you evil Mon! Keep quiet!'

The local people all showered Simala with praise. 'Mistress Simala is so good.' 'She wasn't vengeful but asked the king for Soi Fa's life.' 'The likes of her are hard to find.'

Some said, 'If it were me, I'd have had her head cut off and stuck up over there.' Soi Fa's feet hurt. With drawn face, she walked gingerly to the ruean.

Supported by I-Mai's back, she went into the room. The burns ached and swelled up messily. 'I'll leave this ruean. All the possessions must be left here.'

At dawn, Soi Fa went in to see her husband. In tears, she prostrated to ask forgiveness. 'I did evil to myself.

Please absolve me of blame. I'm leaving. I'm going far away to drift on the ocean. I felt warmth depending on your merit, but now I'll be lonesome. My lord protected me since I came down here. [380]

My parents also depended on you when in trouble. You helped matters a great deal by speaking to the king, otherwise the whole city of Chiang Mai would have been reduced to dust.

The king favored me to be your wife. Whether I did right or wrong, you kindly never complained. But karma from the past got in the way and made me happen to have bad thoughts.

Since leaving my city, I've been with you and depended on you. Now I return, you'll be far from my sight. Morning and night, I'll think of you in desolation. Going through the forest alone will be tough.

I came down with lots of people. I return alone. Along the way through the forest, there are elephants, terrible tigers, fierce rhinos, buffalo, and cattle.

I must pick my way around streams, gorges, and craters, with thorny undergrowth all around. When I came down, father gave me an elephant to ride. Now I must go by foot.

There's nobody to carry goods. I must drift along with my big

belly, troubled by the sun and the wind. I'm very worried that the child in my womb

must suffer this hardship. Rice and water will be rare. The father won't know whether the child lives or dies, whether it's a boy or a girl.

In the evenings, I must hide in the bushes, with nobody to help fetch firewood. I must lie on the earth with a log as a pillow, praying out of fear for the forest animals.

I'll hear only the cries of deer and birds, and the whooping of gibbons echoing around the great forest. Not only will I think of the dangers around me, but I'll be sad from missing my lord.'

She lifted her husband's foot onto her head. The pain of parting overwhelmed her. She cried as if her heart would shatter to dust, until her eyes were clouded and blood-shot.

'What a pity! Karma caused such trouble that I must depart from you. If I could stay, I would not part from my lord, even though I would face hardship and penury.

Look at me while I'm still here, my lord and master. From now on, you'll not see me again. I'll disappear from your sight until death.' [381]

Phra Wai (Phlai Ngam) sighed heavily out of pity and sadness for his wife. His tears flowed, and he hastily wiped them away from shame.

He steeled himself and consoled Soi Fa. 'Please get rid of this sadness. Every man and woman faces both happiness and hardship. A bad fortune must result in troubles.

Look after the baby in your womb. If in future you're still alive, you should meet me again. Don't flay yourself before the fever comes.¹² If you look after yourself, we should meet again.'

Hearing Phra Wai, Soi Fa's grief subsided. 'I'll remember all your words of instruction steadfastly until death.

But my heart will miss you because of love. The further apart, the more I'll fear, the more I'll be desolate.' With tears flowing, she fanned out her hair and went down to wipe his feet.

'Oh lord and master! After today's parting, I'll not see your face. Stay well. Be in good health. May you live a thousand years.'

She took her leave and went weeping to prostrate and wai Thong Prasi. 'Mistress grandmother has been kind to me. For better or worse, you didn't abandon me to die.

¹² A proverb meaning don't look on the bad side, don't be pessimistic ahead of time.

You made Simala plead for me so that I was not destroyed. I want to stay here to repay your kindness until death, but that's against the king's order to expel me.

Stay well, mistress of meritorious heart. I'll not come back to the southern city. Leaving you now is like dying. The way is long. Dead or alive, we won't see one another again.'

Thong Prasi listened to Soi Fa, trembling and weeping. 'I pity you. You acted rashly without thinking.

The more I reprimanded you, the more you played with love charms. Your mouth was not connected to your mind.¹³ Only when you faced death did you think. It was beyond my powers to help you.

I stayed with my husband into old age. I never gave a thought to love charms. If he didn't love me, I didn't care. We got on with no bother.' [382]

Soi Fa wai-ed, bowed, and prostrated. 'Grandmother hoped I'd be something of substance, but I was so bad I almost died. I can't blame my karma on others.'

She raised Thong Prasi's foot onto her head, and shook with weeping. 'Please forgive me.' She prostrated to take leave,

and went to prostrate to Khun Phaen. 'Please absolve me from blame. I did such wrong I almost died. I angered you. Don't burden me with the karma.

I'm a stupid fool. In anger, I listened to the elder. I let myself be ruled by jealousy and revenge. I created karma which smothered me.

Phlai Chumphon too, stay well. Today I take leave. Be happy. Achieve your wishes. I'm bad. I must take my leave according to my karma.'

Khun Phaen and Phlai Chumphon listened. Khun Phaen said, 'I helped you but you wouldn't listen. You created karma for yourself by keeping bad company.

The whole city got to know about it, and everybody gossiped. It wasn't right to create a scandal for the whole realm. You weren't careful about doing vile things.

But why should we bear a grudge? Go. Don't worry about past matters like a living being who has erred and fallen into hell. We forgive you. Don't worry.'

¹³ Literally: 'One hundred and eight, mouth neck not connected.' The number is perhaps a reference to a well-known collection of 108 mantra.

Soi Fa listened to both of them. 'That is my due, my lords.' She prostrated trembling before Khun Phaen then took leave of Chumphon.

She went into Simala's room and embraced her feet in tears. 'Karma makes me go far away. I wai you. Stay well.

You had the goodness to beg the king on my behalf, otherwise I would've died. I'll keep your goodness on this occasion in my mind until death.

Today I'll leave, and not come back again easily. I won't miss my possessions. Please offer them to the monks and send the merit to me. [383]

If I survive and reach Chiang Mai, my family will support me. I'll think only of your goodness. I've depended on your merit and haven't been able to repay it.

If in future I'm still alive, I should come back down here for sure. Let me bow my face as repayment. Don't harbor revenge. I take my leave.'

Simala replied, 'If I were pent-up harboring thoughts of revenge, why would I have pleaded with the king? There's no need to repay me. I don't wish it. I feel sorry for the baby in your womb. I've no anger and want only the merit.

I'll offer the possessions for you. I'll die the white cloth yellow, and present the cups, bowls, and other things for the monks' use.'

Soi Fa raised her hands in blessing, and prostrated. 'Your goodness is overflowing. You don't burden my karma with what I've done.

If I could share my merit, I'd give half to you. Forgive me. I take my leave. Don't let my bad deeds from the past become my karma.

All the trouble and anger I created, right down to the business with the elder, let it be dismissed from my karma from today.' She offered a tray of popped rice and flowers.

Simala accepted it, then asked for pardon by passing it immediately back to Soi Fa who accepted the apology and said, 'I've made up my mind. Don't have any doubts.'

Soi Fa walked grieving back to her ruan, and lay down on the bed.

'I've been in this ruan of mine for several years, furnished it with many good things, including powder sets, and beautiful screens for the bed.

I think of my husband, and think of myself facing hardship. Having to leave here, I'll be frightened and lonely. I'll think of being

together with Phra Wai.’ The more she thought, the more she writhed as if to die. [384]

She steeled herself and swallowed her sorrow. ‘I can’t stay here longer or I’ll be in the wrong. Because I was condemned to death, I must make up my mind to leave.

She packed silver, gold, and valuables in a big basket. She chose the lower cloth and sabai which she liked the most.

When packed, she went out and ordered the servants, ‘Bring the boat down to wait at the landing.’ Khanan Ai took the order, and brought a boat 3 wa¹⁴ long with an awning down to the mooring.

I-Mai carried things to load in the boat – chili, salt, rice, stove, kitchen utensils, and things in reserve. Soi Fa boarded the boat.

Phra Wai opened his window on the side of the landing. He saw Soi Fa looking sad. Khanan Ai and I-Mai were going with her. The head of the boat swung out, and they paddled away.

He still thought of the past with love. ‘I feel sorry for you with your belly. You’ll face a lot of hardship. You’ll have to walk a long way through the forest.’

The sound of her pitiful weeping echoed clearly along the river. ‘Oh, our karma made before this life has forced us to this separation.

Were it not for fear of the king’s authority, you wouldn’t leave here easily, my darling. Even though you did wrong, I’ll still miss you. Oh, the ending of this love should not be!’

He craned to let his eyes follow his love until the boat was hidden by a promontory. His tears splashed down. ‘From now on, there won’t be a day I won’t miss you.’

He closed the window and walked into the room. He lay down, still thinking of her with a broken heart. He felt pent-up as if someone had trussed him up. She stayed in his mind until he dozed off.

Soi Fa, Khanan Ai, and I-Mai paddled quickly along the river past Ban Bom¹⁵ to Hua Saphan.¹⁶

They stayed two days and two nights at Ang Thong, then paddled

¹⁴ Six meters.

¹⁵ The fort village, on the northwest corner of Ayutthaya at the river junction (Red:623)

¹⁶ A canal used to branch left from the Chaophraya River at Khanon Pak Khu customs house and run westwards to meet the Bang Ban Canal at Kopjao. Hua Thaphan/Saphan is a little north of Kopjao on the Bang Ban Canal going towards Pa Mok (Red:623).

along past many villages to reach Bang Kaeo.¹⁷ In the evening they stopped at Bang Maeo.¹⁸ [385]

At nightfall, boatmen coming from north and south moored alongside one another in rows. They steamed rice and boiled curry by the flicker of lights. After cooking and eating, they chatted together

about a crocodile around one sen¹⁹ long which liked to show off its might by floating in the middle of the river. When boats wanted to go up, the wind and waves would get stirred up. There was another crocodile about 9 wa²⁰ long.

If any boat went along at dusk and ran into them, they would attack before their eyes, biting and breaking rudders and paddles. But they had not been seen to eat people.

Soi Fa had moored the boat at the edge of the bank. The story made her hair stand on end. She cried out loud, 'Oh, poor me! How to escape being bitten to death by a crocodile?

Our boat is very small. A big wave would sink it. Oh, this time I'm going to die.' She flailed around, out of her senses.

The novice and Elder Khwat had fled by boldly making themselves invisible and then going through the water as crocodiles. They stayed at the entrance to Ban Nang Maeo.

At nightfall, they made roaring sounds, came to the surface, and played around in agile fashion. Their eyes flared like fire flashing. Boats could not go out,

but huddled together at the mooring around a bend. Seeing a cluster of boats, the crocodiles approached to look, wanting to hear news of Soi Fa. Hearing some weeping, they went up close,

and recognized the voice of Soi Fa. They dived down, came up on the bank, and transformed themselves back from crocodiles. Elder Khwat walked along with Novice Jiw following behind.

They called out, 'Hey, Mai! Bring the boat to fetch us. I'm the elder with the novice. We're both here. We escaped and survived.'

Mai looked up to the bank and could recognize them in the

¹⁷ Ang Thong provincial capital is now at the site of Bang Kaeo. There may have been another Ang Thong village south of this site in the past (Red:624).

¹⁸ Just 2-3 kms north of Ang Thong.

¹⁹ Forty meters.

²⁰ Eighteen meters.

moonlight. She got up, pulled up the stake, paddled over, and steered the stern in to receive them.

The elder and novice stepped down under the awning, and saw Soi Fa sitting crying. The elder told the story from start to end. 'I could survive because of my knowledge. [386]

We became invisible to escape from prison, then went into the water as crocodiles to wait for you. We heard the news all along about whether Soi Fa would live or die.

We recognized the sound of you crying, and came up to find you. Why did you come up here? What punishment did the king give you? Where are the three of you going?'

Soi Fa related the story truthfully. 'At first, the king, pinnacle of the populace, had me questioned to get at the truth

whether I along with the novice and elder had made my husband besotted. I gave a statement which denied the matter evasively. I said the truth was that Chumphon and Simala

were lovers for sure, and that's why they provoked the parents to make accusations. There were no witnesses on either side, so King Phanwasa ordered an ordeal by fire.

Because I'd done wrong, I lost. The king ordered my execution. But because there's a child in my womb, I didn't die. The king had me expelled from the city.

I decided to go up to Chiang Mai. I'm pleased to have met the lord of great merit. You can be my companions which will be like saving my life. In sickness, we can see one another's faces.'

She ordered Khanan Ai to steer the boat away from there. The novice and elder went along in the boat, helping to paddle and punt upstream.

Elder Khwat took fright when he saw guard boats making inspections up and down the river, and people at the customs posts lit by fire-rafts²¹ along the way. 'If I get caught again, it won't be good.'

He snapped off a *hinghai phi*²² branch, and chanted the mantra of the Rishi Transforming Matter²³ to make the men at the guardpost see different people. They headed the boat along,

past the rivermouth at Bang Phutsa,²⁴ and further on past many

²¹ Rafts with torches were anchored in mid-stream to allow guards to inspect the night traffic (Sup:628-9).

²² *Crotalaria floribundia/bractiata*, a flowering shrub (Mat:929, pix)

²³ *Ruesi plom plang san*, a mantra to fool people's perception (Red:693).

²⁴ Now Singburi. The rivermouth is the entrance to the Lopburi river

villages. They were pleased that nobody accosted them. They stopped at nightfall and set off again immediately at dawn.

In one month they reached Rahaeng, and beached the boat in front of the landing. They continued by land through the forest. Soi Fa was in a pitiable state. [387]

She had never traveled through the deep forest. She had to walk carefully because of her belly. She was greatly troubled by the sun and wind. She felt afraid and lonely.

Sounds of wild animals and deer echoed around. Herds of elephants crashed through bushes. Gibbons, moneys, and langurs bounded around, leaping down onto the ground and gesticulating.

Serow²⁵ leapt along the hills, fell, and licked their wounds to disappear. Wild dogs²⁶ trailed tigers intent on eating their leftover prey.

When the sun cooled, they arrived at a narrow pass.²⁷ Sunset lit the sky red like cinnabar. They piled up leaves for her to lie on. The elder made a prayer before they slept.

The moon shone brightly in the centre of the sky, surrounded by masses of stars. Dew fell in a soft spray,

touching all the flowers in the forest. Petals bloomed in dazzling bunches. The breeze wafted fragrances to ease their fatigue. But her heart still dwelt gloomily on what she had left behind.

She missed Phra Wai greatly. 'What a pity! We were intimate together. He took care of me and made me happy. It's not right we have to be parted.

Feeling unappreciated made me very bad. I got obsessed with revenge and caused them trouble. Because of my wrongdoing, I almost lost my life.' In her melancholy, tears welled up and flooded her eyes.

She cried without sleeping through to dawn. The elder got up to wash his face. He took the almsbowl and went off to beg with Novice Jiw. They got some *sticky rice and fried tong*²⁸ from the forest villages.

After traveling a long time, their supplies of rice were finished.

²⁵ *Liang pha*. A goat antelope whose skin, bones, and oil were believed to have medical properties, and whose saliva was thought to have curing power effective only on the animal itself, hence its carelessness about leaping around limestone crags because it could always repair itself after a fall. (Sup:631-2)

²⁶ *Ma nai*, cuon alpinus/rutilans, dhole, Malay wild dog, a fox-like animal that hunts in packs.

²⁷ This could be a toponym, Chong Khaep, which appears several places in Thailand but not obviously on their route. The most likely is in Amphoe Phop Phra, Tak, which would mean they went west from Tak and up through the mountains, which is unlikely.

²⁸ *jieo thong*, ?? fried gold??

They had to look for food from the villages. They walked ahead intently, and reached the city after two-and-a-half months.

Simala was heavily pregnant and about to deliver. All the relatives gathered around. Thong Prasi prayed to the spirits. Hearing Simala moan, she trembled and called out loudly for this servant and that to come. [388]

‘She’s about to deliver. Quick, quick! Where have you put the firewood and the banana leaves we bought? Kids, light the fire and put on the pot to boil the water.

Fetch the turmeric, tamarind, and raw oil, and get pounding. Where has young Wai got to? He mustn’t be late enchanting water to dispel evil.’

Phra Wai enchanted water for his wife to drink, and poured the rest on her head. By the power of these special formulas, the child in the womb was delivered.

It was a delightful son with pleasing features – plump and very cute. Great-grandmother Thong Prasi quickly took him to bathe and anoint with turmeric.

She called the servants to bring good cloth to make a canopy. She put him in a basket with a little mattress under him, and lullabied him to sleep.

She arranged for Simala to lie by the fire. She had turmeric ground to make hot medicine, gave milk to the infant, and admired him.

Three months later, the son’s head was shaved. All the relatives came to perform the ceremony for his soul. Khun Phaen brought sema bangles and armlets to give his grandchild.

Phra Wai said to Phra Kanburi, ‘What’s a good name to give him, father, in line with family practice?’ Thong Prasi said, ‘The name of a jewel is smart.’

Khun Phaen gave him the name Phlai Phet, using a trace of his grandfather’s name. All the relatives agreed. They lived in happiness and comfort.

When Soi Fa was heavily pregnant, she felt hurt and desolate. The relatives all gathered around, and a lovely son was delivered easily.

He looked just like Phra Wai. His grandfather, the king, loved him greatly. He supplied a wet nurse and nursemaid to look after him every night.

He arranged to do the soul ceremony with all kinds of food offerings, a baisi, musicians playing, and Brahmins, monks, and ascetics to give blessings. [389]

The king commanded an old teacher of astrology to calculate his horoscope and find an auspicious time. 'I will give him a name according to his Thai lineage. Tell me which day is auspicious.'

On that good and auspicious day, the royal clan gathered together. The King of Chiang Mai named his grandson Phlai Yong Phong Nopharat.

He furnished him with servants, diamonds, gems, and the ornaments of a king including silver, gold, and several toys. They lived in happiness and well-being every day.