

Four Reigns

KUKRIT PRAMOJ

Translated from the Thai
by Marcel Barang

First Reign



Chapter 1

‘Phloi!’ Mother’s voice was calling as the boat, coming out of the Bang Luang canal into the Chao Phraya river, headed straight for Tha Phra*. ‘Phloi, remember this: when the time comes, find yourself a faithful husband. Don’t settle for a man collecting wives or you’ll be distressed like your mother!’ Mother was silent for a while, then added, ‘And never be anyone’s minor wife. Remember this.’

Phloi turned to look briefly at her mother then went back to gazing from under the awning at the boats paddling upstream and downstream, at the waterside houses and houseboats full of goods for sale on display, at the people on the banks and inside the boats going by, gazing in excitement and at a loss for words, because this was the first time she ventured so far from home and before they left Mother had told her they were leaving for good, for the rest of their lives they’d never set foot on the threshold of that house again.

Phloi’s home was by the Bang Luang canal. It could be said it was a big estate, with a brick wall topped with an iron fence running the length of the grounds on the waterside. The landing place had a big pavilion made of wood. From the landing stairs, you walked across a wide courtyard to reach the building which was the residence of Phloi’s Honoured Father. That mansion was considered modern in the 1880s, during the reign of His Majesty Phra Phuttha Chao Luang the Great** in Rattanakosin***, with white stuccoed brick walls and a roof of corrugated Chinese tiles. The front twin stairways merged

* Royal Pier

** Rama V, King Chulalongkorn

*** The old royal city of Bangkok

to form a modest open veranda and from there a straight flight of stairs led to the upper part of the building. A veranda with dark green ceramic balusters shaped like elongated grapes ran around that floor. The three large rooms at the front were where Honoured Father dwelled. There was another, smaller room for Buddha images and the ashes of Honoured Grandfather and numerous previous ancestors. When Phloi was still a child of six or seven, she had gone up one afternoon to see Honoured Father. She was especially afraid of this room because it was always closed and silent. It would be opened once a year when Honoured Father made merit, and on such an occasion, Phloi had seen the urns lined up on a set of votive tables. She had been called upon to light joss sticks and candles and prostrate herself in front of Honoured Grandfather, Honoured Grandmother and several other Honoured Ancestors. From that time on she had been in awe of that room in particular. The veranda at the back of the house was a place to relax for Honoured Father. When he was at home, he would usually be there, have his meals there and rest there, and there he would receive visiting acquaintances. The floor of the upper part of the house was made of large boards turned shiny by decades of diligent polishing. Honoured Father would sit on a small rug, with the customary betel tray, water pot, dipping bowl, spittoon, cigarette box and footed tray with implements for lighting up all laid out before him. On the day Phloi was to leave the house, she went there to take her leave of Honoured Father, Mother having told her to go there alone. By then she was ten years old, old enough to have a sharp sense of observation. In years to come, whenever she thought of him, she would still see Honoured Father as he sat cross-legged on the rug that day. He wore a casually draped length of nutmeg-dyed chintz round his loins. She would always remember how he scanned the face of his youngest daughter, scrutinising her features as if to learn them by heart. Yet he didn't open his mouth in greeting or dissuasion, merely stared at her until she crawled back and went down.

So, in 1892 Phloi was ten years old. Had someone asked her then who her father was, she would have answered that his name

was *Phraya** Phiphit and her mother's Chaem. Mother was Phraya Phiphit's Number One Wife but didn't have the status of Khunying (Dame), because his first wife and thus khunying was Ueam. A native of Amphawa, Khunying Ueam didn't live with Honoured Father but had returned to her hometown since before Phloi was born, leaving in the care of her husband their three children: Khun Un**, Phloi's eldest sister, aged nineteen; Khun Chit, Phloi's elder brother, aged sixteen; and Khun Cheui, her other sister, two years older than she was. Phloi had an elder brother from the same mother, Phor (Young) Pherm, older than her by a little over one year, and a younger sister from another mother – Honoured Father's Number Two Wife Waeo – named Wahn and two years younger than Phloi. Of all these siblings, besides her full brother Pherm, Phloi got along especially well with Khun Cheui, as they were almost the same age and Khun Cheui was a child who liked to romp about everywhere, which agreed with Phloi's disposition. Khun Un, the eldest sister, Phloi considered as an adult to be held in awe, because she lived upstairs with Honoured Father. Khun Un was the only one to have the key to another large room where the silver and gold were kept. All outgoings in the house were overseen by her. Honoured Father trusted her as his eldest daughter. As for Phloi's mother, whom everyone in the house called Mother Chaem, Honoured Father had had a wooden house of five rooms built as her residence next to the main house within the compound. The meals for the three of them, mother and children, were brought in from the kitchen. When the meal was over, Phit, a servant Mother had taken into her service at the cost of twelve *tamlueng****, would eat what was left and do the dishes. Sweeping the house, taking out and laying out mattresses and pillows and doing the house's laundry were Phit's other duties.

Phloi's two elder brothers were Khun Chit and Phor Pherm. The

* A high-level nobility title for men in royal service, addressed as 'Jaokhun'

** Pronounced, like Khun, with a short 'oo' sound; *Khun* is a term of address meaning Mr, Mrs, Miss (as in this case).

*** A unit of 60 grams of silver

first, she hardly knew at all. By then Khun Chit was a young man of sixteen. At times she saw him in the early evening, wearing a coloured sarong and a short tight-fitting shirt with straight long sleeves of glazed silk, his hair slicked back, a round patch to cure headaches on each temple as was the fashion amongst young men in those days, walking to and fro near the landing pavilion. As soon as it was dark, he would stealthily cross the canal to slip into town with some of Honoured Father's young menservants. Once, Phloi remembered, he disappeared for days, but on his return there was a big fuss, as Honoured Father gave him and the menservants a whipping in the courtyard there and then. Their shouts resounded throughout the compound. Phloi went to spy from behind one of the Chinese box-trees around the house with Khun Cheui, who was delighted that her brother got whipped and remarked to Phloi it served him right. Another time, Phloi saw Khun Chit lying, gaunt and in pain, in the house where he lived with menservants of the same age, and saw them boiling pots of potions for him to take. Khun Cheui came over and whispered to Phloi, 'Mae Phloi, I'll tell you something. Don't repeat it. Khun Chit has men's disease. If you tell anyone I'll be very angry.'

Pherm, Phloi's big brother, seemed to give his allegiance to Khun Chit more than to any other sibling, but he had to visit him without Mother knowing, because if she found out he was associating with Khun Chit, it was a thrashing every time. As for Wahn, her half-sister and Mother Waeo's daughter, she was too young for Phloi to pay attention to her.

One day, Phloi asked Mother about her siblings: how was it that people called Honoured Father's children Khun Un, Khun Chit and Khun Cheui but called the other children Phor Pherm, Mae Phloi and Mae Wahn. Mother glanced at Phloi and then laughed. She answered, 'Because you're children of minor wives. They are the children of a khunying, so they have to be "Khun". Just be thankful they're not calling you "Ee" Phloi as they would servants!'

From as far back as she could remember, Phloi felt that Mother and Khun Un, her eldest sister, were always uneasy with each other. True, they were never angry one with the other to the point of coming to words, and in front of Honoured Father talked with each other

as much as was necessary, but Phloi noticed with the sensitivity of a child that Mother took pains to be especially polite in her address to Khun Un, for example calling her 'Khun Yai' and herself 'Dichan' with a clear enunciation and punctuating her sentences with liberal doses of 'Jao Kha', thus emphasising her inferior status, while maintaining a deferential demeanour so cold and standoffish as to mask all feelings, but on occasion Mother would let her true feelings show privately, so that Phloi could see that Mother was always under pressure and feeling frustrated as Khun Un, whom Mother held to be only Jaokhun's daughter whereas she was his wife, enjoyed his total confidence and, what was worse, was left by him in absolute authority over the household. Mother would cry and confide in Phloi that Honoured Father was treating her like a servant or a dependent; she had no rights whatsoever in this house; she was left to vegetate from day to day. As for Mother Waeo, Honoured Father's third wife, she was very intimate with Khun Un, they were always together and almost never parted, because Mother Waeo was only four or five years older than Khun Un, she used to be her personal servant, and Mother told Phloi that Khun Un had arranged for her servant to become Honoured Father's wife in order to have Mother leave the house. Mother also told her that at the time she had been, as she put it, 'jealous of that Waeo woman' and had wanted to run away there and then but, Phloi being so very young, she had had to take a hold on herself and bear with staying put.

Phloi found herself in the middle of the tension between Mother and Khun Un, so that sometimes she felt afraid of both and didn't want to get close to either. The one who could relieve the tension that Phloi could not but sense was Honoured Father, because Honoured Father was someone who loved all children, his as well as anyone else's. Sometimes in late afternoon he would call on all the children in the house to go out and play in the courtyard while he watched. They could shout their lungs out if they felt like it, and the one who shouted the loudest and laughed the loudest was Honoured Father himself. But with the grown-up children he was seemingly passive, showing consideration for Khun Un's feelings and, in the

case of Khun Chit, with whom there were all too often grounds for vexation, they simply could not see eye to eye. Honoured Father had given all of his children their names, and simple, one-syllable names at that. Phloi had heard him laugh at some of his noble friends who thought up long-drawn-out monikers imitating royalty that would no doubt invite lice on their heads, like Phra Phiphat's nearby household whose children's highfalutin names had the same beat: Pheinphitsamai, Saisukhontharot, Sotsamrarnjit and Sanitsanei-ha*. Honoured Father had once chanted them out to Mother and then told her it sounded like the song of an Indian firewalker.

Before she left the house, Phloi noticed that the tension between Mother and Khun Un had increased. Amongst Khun Un's several maids there was a young woman named Yuean who was prettier than the others. Mother told Phloi 'Khun Yai is about to offer that Yuean hussy to Jaokhun,' and Phloi felt that something terrible was going to happen.

Finally, the terrible event which was to change Phloi's life so much did happen. One evening, Mother went to see Honoured Father in his quarters at eleven o'clock. Phloi stayed in the house and fell asleep while waiting for Mother, only to wake up with a start some time after three in the morning when Mother came in, lighted the lantern in the room and then went straight to wake her up, with Pherm, who slept outside, following her inside looking befuddled.

'You are coming with me, Phloi.' Mother's voice was edgy, her face bathed in tears. 'Given that he won't care for me any longer, I must leave and let things run their course. We too are well born. Who could accept to be trampled upon like a bonded slave? Pherm, as a son, you must stay here. Honoured Father won't let me take you with me. Stay here under his care and do your best. Don't think of yourself as his child, though, because his eldest daughter considers us as menials. As for you, Phloi, I won't leave you here or they'd soon all be bullying you. Though I can't take proper care of you singlehanded, we still have our patron. I'll have you go into Sadeit's service.' Hav-

* Lovely Moonlight, Clear Redolent Savour, Fresh Buoyant Mind and Bewitching Charm

ing said this, Mother lowered her head and cried, mopping up her tears with a corner of her breast cloth, as if her heart would break. Pherm, upon hearing Mother say she was leaving him behind, burst into racking sobs that shook the house in the dead of night.

Hearing Mother say she'd entrust her to Sadeit (Her Royal Highness), Phloi understood at once, because she had often heard Mother tell her about Sadeit. Sadeit lived in the royal palace. Mother had lived there since she was a child until she left to live with Honoured Father, because a relative on her mother's side had brought her into service there. Mother told Phloi that actually she too was a relative of Sadeit's. Mother's Father, that is Phloi's Grandfather, was a nephew of Sadeit's mother's, a royal concubine, but Mother only told her this much and then said, 'Don't talk about it. We are only her servants. It's not good to claim family connections with royalty; it will only bring lice on our heads.' About catching lice on your head or being cursed with bad omen when meddling with royalty, Phloi was familiar with that too. If it wasn't Honoured Father saying so, Mother had repeated the words so often that Phloi thought those royals must be crawling with lice, like Chup, the slave-child in the house: every time Phloi played with her, she came back with lice. She had asked Honoured Father about it. He had laughed uproariously but then hadn't said anything.

About Sadeit, Mother had told Phloi that when she was a little older she would offer Phloi into Sadeit's service. Mother had already asked Honoured Father and he had made no objection. He had said, 'Just as well. The child will get good training there,' but then had asked her to leave it until later, as otherwise he would be left with no little child to play with. Therefore, as soon as Mother said she would have her go into Sadeit's service, Phloi understood, but seeing Mother crying so much and with Pherm bawling, all she could do was sit and stare dumbly, unable to think of what to say.

Seeing Pherm's distress, Mother took him in her arms and undertook to soothe him in low whispers. She herself stopped crying, lest her son wail all the more. When she saw that he had somewhat calmed down, she asked him to fetch Phit to help with the packing.

For the rest of the night, Mother and Phit were busy packing up. At dawn Mother sent Phit with the luggage to the landing pavilion with orders to arrange for a boat. Then Mother took Phloi to wash her face, redid her topknot and dressed her up well before dawn, asking her to wait on the balcony outside.

‘Mae Phloi!’ Khun Cheui’s voice called her softly. ‘Don’t make any noise. Come down here right now.’

Phloi looked up, saw that Mother was still busy inside, so she slowly went down the stairs. As soon as she came within reach, Khun Cheui grabbed her wrist and pulled her under the house and then asked in a trembling voice, ‘You’re really leaving, aren’t you? Khun Un just told me a minute ago but I couldn’t believe it.’

Phloi saw the pallor of Khun Cheui’s face and, thinking how they had romped about together every day, her throat constricted and she merely nodded her head. Khun Cheui wouldn’t let go of Phloi’s arm and the hand holding her arm was icy-cold.

Big tears rolled out of Khun Cheui’s eyes when she saw her nod and several of them fell on Phloi’s arm.

‘Oh dear, Mae Phloi!’ she said in a shaky voice. ‘Who am I to play with when you’re gone? You won’t forget me, will you?’ She kept repeating those words.

After standing still looking at each other for another while, Khun Cheui held out the small package she had brought along, saying, ‘Here, Mae Phloi, this is for you. *Jan-ap**. I pinched them from Khun Un upstairs. Take them to eat along the way.’

Phloi took the *jan-ap* package from Khun Cheui’s hand as if it was the most valuable thing in the world. She could not say a word to Khun Cheui as her throat was constricted with emotion. Her vision of Khun Cheui’s face was blurred because her eyes were full of tears. Just then Mother called Phloi softly two or three times from the house. Phloi took the opportunity to free her arm from Khun Cheui’s grip and hurriedly turned round to flee upstairs to Mother.

‘Come here, Phloi,’ Mother’s voice called from the room once

* Chinese sweetmeat made from peanuts, sesame, puffed rice, etc

again. Phloi swiftly went in and sat down beside her. Mother had finished packing. Items such as cups, bowls and the like, Mother held that they belonged to the house so she had set them apart. She would keep only clothes and a few personal things placed into a wooden chest wrapped in black leather bearing a gold motif of swans and dragons. As for Phloi's clothes, Mother had put them in a smaller chest, a red one. Mattresses, pillows and mosquito nets she would leave in the house for Pherm to use; she'd find replacements later. The more Phloi saw the things they had all used every day thus sorted out the more her emotions grew, because everything she saw testified to a broken home. The tears welling in her eyes poured over and she could do nothing to stop them.

Mother took a cloth to wipe her tears and caught a glance of the package Phloi held in her hand, so she asked, 'Phloi, what's this package?'

'A pack—' A sob cut her short and then she stuttered, 'A package of jan-ap, Mother.'

'Who gave it you?' Mother asked, but then she guessed and added at once, 'Khun Cheui, isn't it?'

Phloi merely nodded. Mother was about to close a chest but stopped short, rested a hand on the lid for a while, her eyes gazing through the window as if she was mulling over some decision, but then she heaved a sigh, shook her head as she turned towards Phloi, gave her the piece of cloth to wipe away her tears again and then stroked her head, saying, 'Quiet, Phloi. Don't cry, my darling daughter. I am the one who loves you most. Nobody will ever love you more than I do. Do go with me. I love you so I want the best for you. At the palace, in Sadeit's quarters, before long you'll be in clover and won't miss this house again.' Mother was silent for another spell and then whispered in a tremulous voice, 'Phloi, go to the main house and take leave of your Honoured Father, and when you are done go to the landing. I'll be waiting for you there.' Having said this, she turned her face away, began to stuff a chest with things busily and slammed the lid shut as if to use the vigour and fracas of it to help strengthen the firmness of her resolution.

Phloi stealthily left the room, slowly walked across the porch and

down the stairs because it was the last time she would go out of the house she had lived in since she was born. She knew every defect, every crack in every single wall, each more noticeable than ever at this moment, every slit of the floorboards she had ever sat on or lain over or secretly dropped things through to the ground below. They seemed to be calling for her to stop leaving. Every step of the stairs she had slid along up and down on her bottom, and even the stairs railing she was always swinging from with Khun Cheui seemed bigger than before, more obvious than before, more important at the time they were about to part today.

Khun Cheui had already vanished from below the house, wherever it was she had gone to hide. Phloi slowly walked across the courtyard, looked all around her as if to take leave of the place and surroundings she had seen every day – the big Indian cork tree in whose shade she had played cooking with Khun Cheui and whose flowers they had plucked to offer Mother to mix with tobacco and roll into cigarettes for Honoured Father. Phloi wondered who would roll cigarettes for Honoured Father once Mother was gone as she had always been the one to do it and it was big work because you had to boil honey, pineapple juice and liquorice along with tobacco shreds from Phitsanulok and then roll the tobacco into individual units either with paper or with a banana leaf you had to flatten and cut just the right size. All of this, who would do it when Mother wasn't around any longer? Phloi walked past the East Indian coffee bush whose small, fragrant white flowers Mother picked to thread into garlands for Phloi's topknot; past the night jasmine bush, the fallen flowers of which Mother had ordered to collect every morning as she would sun-dry their red stems to dye breast cloth with; past the *chaloot* climber which had a powerful smell but whose white flowers were hard to pick out – all of this was calling for Phloi to stop, turn around and stare, but her reluctant steps finally took her to the bottom of the back stairs of the mansion. When she reached the veranda, Phloi knelt down and began to crawl, and when she was close enough to Honoured Father, she prostrated herself then sat with her head bent, one hand worrying a board to relieve her nervousness, waiting to see what Honoured

Father would say. After sitting for a while, there was not a sound from Honoured Father at all except for the occasional clearing of throat and spitting of betel juice. Phloi prostrated herself once again and then crawled out to go back down the stairs.

‘Mae Phloi!’ Khun Un’s voice was calling from inside her room. ‘Come here!’ Phloi was startled out of her wits. She hesitated. Should she or shouldn’t she? When she decided it would be wrong not to, she turned to watch Honoured Father’s face, saw him nod towards the room as if to tell her to enter just as Khun Un’s voice called her again, so Phloi crawled into the room.

That room was always dark, because Khun Un didn’t like sunshine, saying it ruined her skin. The room was suffused with scents. The walls on three sides had rows of sideboards crammed with silverware and nielloware. Besides these, there were several metallic strongboxes placed in dark corners containing jewellery and articles of gold for which only Khun Un had the keys. Khun Un sat in the middle of the room, with a silver betel set and a silver spittoon close at hand. That day was a Wednesday. She was wearing a green chintz wraparound skirt pumiced to a fierce shine and a dark orange-yellow breast cloth. She was a stickler for observing the dressing code for each day of the week and was always impeccably dressed. She combed her oiled hair impeccably so that not a strand could shake loose, her hairline kept impeccably neat at all times. As soon as she saw Phloi crawling in, she picked up an ivory compact, opened it, took out a blob of wax she smeared on her lips and then asked in a tone devoid of mercy, ‘So you are leaving with your mother, aren’t you, young pup?’

Phloi sat silent, her head hung, looking at the floor without fidgeting, feeling oddly frozen stiff.

‘Leave then, and don’t come back,’ Khun Un went on. ‘We can’t have you coming and going: your high and mighty mother would lose her dignity.’ Phloi kept still and silent, unable to think of an answer.

‘Go then! Go away!’ Khun Un dismissed her. ‘You’re your mother’s daughter. Tiger cubs and crocodile hatchlings can’t be nurtured.’

Those were the only words of farewell from Khun Un. Phloi bowed low and then hastened to crawl out of the room and sped

across the back veranda because her heart was now bent on going away for good. As soon as she reached the foot of the stairs, she ran straight to the landing where Mother was waiting with Phit. Pherm stood hugging a post of the pavilion and sobbing.

When Phloi reached the landing, Mother didn't ask or tell her anything but at once told Phit to take Phloi to the boat. She went over to Pherm, took him in her arms and whispered a few words to him. Pherm's sobbing grew deeper and louder, and then Mother hurried to get into the boat and ordered the oarsman to get going. The prow left the landing. It was morning and the tide was low. Phloi looked out of the boat in the direction of the house, and saw only the posts of the pavilion emerging from the water. When the boat was at some distance from the landing, she could see the roof of Honoured Father's mansion, the iron fence of the compound wall and the whole landing pavilion. Pherm still stood hugging the post crying and sobbing in the same posture as before. And then that picture grew smaller as the distance lengthened until it finally disappeared, replaced by pictures of other houses, gardens and orchards along the canal. The closer to the mouth of the canal, the denser the houses and rafts on both sides, the more bustling on water as well as on land. Phloi looked intently at the colourful scenes that kept running as if on a screen in a fascinating way. As the boat came out of the canal, Mother spoke. Phloi paid no attention, because the fear she had felt since Mother woke her up in the small hours, the sorrow of having to leave home and the bitterness at Khun Un's parting words had numbed her feelings, and the vision of so many exciting novel things made her hardly interested in what Mother was saying.

When the boat was in the middle of the river, Phloi looked at the opposite bank and her excitement grew so that she couldn't help it: she had to ask Mother.

'What's that over there, Mother?' Phloi pointed at a roof of coloured tiles with gold-stamped finials glinting by the bank.

'That's a floating palace, of course,' Mother's voice answered. Phloi didn't understand what a floating palace was, who owned it and what it was there for. Her interest and curiosity were changing fast and growing by the minute. She pointed to beyond the floating

palace and asked, 'And over there, Mother? Those tall spires, what stupa is this? What temple is it, so huge?'

Mother giggled, gave her a hug and then answered, 'It's no temple, child. That's the Royal Palace where you are going to stay. Those tall sharp spires, that's the Grand Palace. What you see like a temple roof is the Royal Household. In a moment we'll be landing at Tha Phra and then walk around a bit to enter the palace by the Srisudavongsa Gate.'

'Then where does Sadeit live? In those tall spires?'

Mother laughed again. 'No, child. She doesn't live there at all. When I repeat your question to Sadeit, she'll laugh no end. She lives in another palace altogether we cannot see from here ... Phloi! Don't lean too far out, or you might fall into the water!'

Phloi hastily drew back and sat properly in the boat, her heart throbbing with excitement. 'So that's where we are going to stay?' Phloi thought to herself. 'It is so very beautiful. They say Honoured Father's mansion is beautiful, but it's nothing compared to the Grand Palace.' To clear up her doubts, she asked Mother: 'This Grand Palace, does it belong to Sadeit?'

'Good gracious, no!' Mother exclaimed in mirth. 'It belongs to His Majesty the King. What you see here, all of it is the King's Halls. Sadeit and the other royals live in palaces in the Inner Court, where men are not allowed, only women like us. If men could get there, I wouldn't have had to leave Pherm behind. It's because I couldn't do anything about it that I didn't take him along.'

'Then are you going to stay with me in the palace, Mother?' Phloi asked worriedly.

Mother was silent for a moment and then, sighing, answered, 'I shall for a while, but I must find some way of earning a living ... Let's not talk about this now. We'll see how it goes, child.'

By then the boat had drawn alongside the pier. Mother took Phloi's hand and got out of the boat then had Phit oversee the unloading of their belongings, some of them to be left at the pier until someone was hired to take them to the palace in late morning. As for Phloi's small chest, Mother had Phit carry it along.

Mother and child skirted the palace wall for a while with Phit

in their wake and then turned into an outer gate. Phloi was all the more impressed because the palace grounds were full of buildings she found incredibly huge. The place teemed with people moving in and out, as well as countless peddlers with shoulder loads and squatters with trays of goods for sale. In front of her, looking further inside, Phloi could see another high wall without any opening except a wide-open gate. She noticed that the people who entered and went out of the gate were in a state of frenzy. Some shouted, greeting each other boisterously; others sped with their heads bowed and their eyes on the ground, as if on urgent errands. All of them were women, oddly dressed. The old or middle-aged wore inner breast cloths with pleated silken cloth on top. Younger women wore blouses pleated at the waist with bunched-up sleeves, from plain straight ones to frilly ones with bows all over. Phloi looked at Mother's clothes and the way she walked: she looked the same as the others and could have been taken for any of them coming and going. Seeing Mother, some people hailed her, saying 'Where have you been? We haven't seen you around in ages.' Mother bowed to some respectfully. Others shot long looks at her as she walked by. Mother pretended not to notice, but her mouth complained loudly to Phit, 'Some of us just won't have the grace to die, don't you think?' and there was Phit's voice answering readily, 'I should say so indeed!' and then there was the noise of Phit loudly spitting out betel juice.

'Oh! Phloi!' Mother exclaimed just as if she had just thought of something. 'When you go through the gate, you have to step over the threshold. Don't step on it or touch it with your foot or there will be trouble.'

Having said this, Mother hurried Phloi along towards the gate. Phloi was startled out of her wits. Her interest fled from other wonders to centre at once on the threshold she could see ahead. It was made of a rather high square beam but not so high as to be hard to step over. There were traces of gold leaves pressed on it in places, and packets of joss sticks stacked by the gate jambs. Beyond it, there were women old and young sitting on both sides. Phloi would learn later that those women had the duty to watch over the palace gate

and many other duties in the palace. They were officials of the palace guardian department. The palace people called them *khloan* or guards of the Inner Court.

If Mother hadn't warned her abruptly about the threshold of the palace gate, Phloi might not have known of its importance nor paid attention to it and thus might have gone over it blithely, but as soon as Mother spoke, her interest shifted entirely to that threshold with apprehension.

The closer she got to it the taller and thicker it looked, increasing her alarm accordingly. Everything else around her seemingly blurred. Even the people going in and out in confusion she saw as mere shadows. The one thing that stood out in her vision, growing increasingly clear as each step brought her closer, was that gate threshold dabbled with gold leaves, to the point that it seemed to have changed from a most ordinary block of wood into a ghastly growling monster barring her progress and that monster seemed to be shouting, 'Don't enter! Don't enter! Don't you dare step on me! Don't step on me! Come in if you dare but steer clear of me!'

She thought with dread, 'I can't get through! I can't get through! This is the Grand Palace, the King's abode. Whoever makes the least little mistake gets whipped, gets thrown into jail, gets beheaded. Whoever steps on the threshold must surely be beheaded! Look: no one dares do it. Everyone entering or leaving has to jump over it, but I surely won't be able to do it, tall and big like that!'

Phloi's heart beat wildly out of fright. Both her eyes stared fixedly at the gate threshold and both her hands were bunched into tight fists. She felt sweat drench her palms. Both her feet walking behind Mother slowed down. Phit, who carried the chest behind her, pressed her.

'Walk faster, Mae Phloi. Don't linger. Look, your mother has gone in already.' What Phit was saying was true. Mother had sprightly stepped over the threshold and turned to greet someone who sat inside the gate, calling her 'sergeant'.

Phloi had to make a do-or-die decision: no matter what, she had to catch up with Mother. She hastily lengthened her strides towards the gate. As she reached the gate, she suddenly felt herself grow cold,

closed her eyes and raised one foot as high as it would go and took a step, a step she felt was the widest step she had taken in her life. As soon as she put her foot down on the ground, she opened her eyes and saw that she was actually standing on the threshold of the gate.

‘Stop!’ someone thundered. ‘Stop right now! Come back here first!’ that voice barked again.

Phloi ran to Mother and in her panic would have run past her had not Mother caught her arm, asking in alarm, ‘Phloi! What’s the matter, child? Stop first. What have you done?’ but then she understood, squatted down hugging Phloi and then laughed herself to tears.

‘Phloi!’ she said as she laughed. ‘You’ve stepped on the palace threshold, haven’t you? It’s my fault. I wasn’t looking.’ And then she went on laughing, looking amused no end.

Seeing Mother laugh in mirth, Phloi’s felt considerably better. She slowly turned her face to look at the threshold where the incident had taken place, saw the guard who had shouted draw the others’ attention to Phloi and then signal with her hand for her to go back to the gate. Seeing this, Phloi looked Mother in the eye, but Mother nodded her head and told her, ‘Let’s go, child. I’ll go with you. Go and prostrate yourself to the threshold. That’s all there is to it. No-one will do anything to you.’ Then she whispered into Phloi’s ear, ‘Since you are going to live here, please remember: don’t ever get into a fight with the guards. They can give you a lashing just with their tongues. We can’t fight them at all.’

Taking Phloi by the hand she led her back to the gate. The voice of the middle-aged woman Mother called sergeant asked, ‘So this is your daughter, Chaem? She must be new to the palace.’

‘My daughter, yes,’ Mother answered. ‘I’m placing her under Sadeit’s protection – and yours too, Sergeant.’ While Mother spoke, Phloi sneaked glances at the sergeant, who sitting on a rug was taking a pinch of tobacco to rub on her gums before stuffing her mouth with betel. She was a woman dressed in the most outlandish way Phloi had ever seen. She wore a plain sarong, a blouse pleated at the waist and with straight long sleeves, and an outer garment. What was most strange to Phloi was that the sleeves had four chevrons.

The prospect of imminent chaos over her stepping on the threshold had her interested in the sergeant only in that she was a woman wearing chevrons, because up until then she had only seen men wear those. By then the people around the palace gate had turned to look at Phloi. Those entering and leaving had stopped to see her being punished by prostrating herself to beg forgiveness from the threshold. As for the guard who had shouted at Phloi to stop, she was glaring at her to prevent her from leaving. Phloi was alternately hot and cold, cold and hot. Sweat from nowhere came out of her body through every pore. Mother released her arm and told her to get on with it. Phloi slowly inched forward, her head hung, so ashamed she almost wished to be swallowed up by the earth, not daring to meet the hundreds and thousands of eyes staring at her with amusement. For all that, she couldn't help noticing that the people were calling at one another to stop and watch, some making amused comments, others laughing gaily. When she reached the threshold, she knelt down, joined her palms, placed the side of her hands on the wood, then closed her eyes tight and lowered her head amidst guffaws answering one another. Even the guards who sat by the gate seemed to be laughing, but she didn't have the energy to turn round and find out, because by then if she had been able to vanish she would have done so out of shame. When she was through with the prostration she promptly stood up, turned around and for dear life ran to Mother.

Taking Phloi by the arm, Mother walked on, past a theatre in a palace which was an open hall. Seen in the daytime it looked like a large temple pavilion and was quite meaningless. A few people sat there idly. Further on, Mother pointed out a pool, saying it was Princess Orrathai's pool. They walked past a row of rooms for khloan, which had Phloi scared witless all over again because at her first step inside the Inner Court she had become aware of the power of the guards. In those rooms, Phloi noticed, there were many of them, some fully dressed, that is wearing the regulation pleated clothes, others dressed informally, wearing only a breast cloth as they went about domestic chores. Several of the guards sitting there knew Mother, especially the older ones, and greeted her boisterously, some claiming

they hadn't met in years but she hadn't aged a bit, others asking her loudly if she was still as naughty as she used to be, some others asking aloud who Phloi was. 'Where did you get that child, Mother Chaem?' someone shouted. Mother shouted back, 'My own daughter, she'll be staying in the palace.' The shouted answer was, 'That's good. I'll help look after her.' But then another voice objected, 'If she's as naughty as her mother at her age, you don't know what you are in for.' And then Mother and her loud interlocutors broke into merry laughter. Mother asked the guards further, 'How is Luang Mae Jao?' and someone answered, 'So-so, you know. Sickly. She's getting on in age.'

This renewed Phloi's interest because she had never heard before of a Head Mother. She couldn't restrain her curiosity, and had to touch her mother's arm and ask in a whisper, 'Mother, who is Luang Mae Jao?'

Mother turned to tell her, 'The head of the guards, Phloi. Don't ever forget it.' Then she took her by the arm and walked on. The road by now had many embranchments, each side street paved with flagstones, and wherever you looked it was only a maze of princely residences and mansions of various sizes. Mother took Phloi into one of the side streets and past a very long two-storey building with many rooms. Phloi noticed that there were many people in that building. When she asked what this long building was called, Mother answered, 'Teng Row'.

'And who stays in this Teng Row?' Phloi asked further. 'Oyo! Such a crowd in there!' Mother answered, 'Attendants, supervisors, officers of the King's Kitchen, Upper Residence maids...'

Phloi was at once drawn to such weird names. Mother mentioned many others, but Phloi couldn't remember them all, only up to 'Upper Residence maids', so she asked Mother only about what she could register, such as who those residence maids were. Mother answered, 'The maids of the Upper Residence princess of course,' then turned to greet people she knew in Teng Row as if the answer she had given Phloi was clear enough.

Phloi found that Teng Row was crammed and had not an inch of space to spare from what she could see of the people who sat or stood

there busy with private tasks, some putting washing out to dry, others placing opened boxes of folded and perfumed linen in front of their rooms to catch the sun. Some places had small articles laid out for sale – utensils, cakes and snacks, sausages, fish, side dishes and others. There was an unending stream of people buying and selling or stopping by for a greeting or a chat. Phloi came to understand that the palace was no ordinary village but a whole town with its urban grid and its own existence, uninvolved with and uninterested in the outside world, and in that town which she had just entered all dwellers were women, with not a single man mingling with them.

Finally, Mother grabbed Phloi's wrist as they came to a large square building. The yellow paint over the stuccoed walls had darkened with age. Windows and doors, most of them closed, were louvered, and had garland mouldings around their frames. Seen from the front gate, the facade looked dark. The low flight of stairs leading in was of only a few stone steps. Mother told Phit to wait there first and then took Phloi along to walk quietly inside.

The front part of the residence had closed rooms, and rooms whose insides could be glimpsed at. Phloi could see finely carved tables and chairs, and glass-fronted cabinets of the same style with things on display she didn't have time to identify. In a whisper, Mother ordered her to walk softly because Sadeit had still not woken up, but actually this was unnecessary because the cool dimness of the place, the strangeness and newness of the residence and the respectful awe she felt, this being Sadeit's residence, already had Phloi walking on eggs. Mother took her into a room to the back of the residence, past a large staircase leading upstairs. Before reaching it, Mother turned to whisper to Phloi that she was taking her to see Khun Sai, Sadeit's housekeeper. Actually Mother had already told Phloi about Khun Sai many times, telling her that she had been in Sadeit's service since Sadeit was still a child and so was she, had stayed with her all along and become most trusted, and was in charge of the princess's personal affairs of all kinds besides supervising all attendants in the residence. Mother had told her that Khun Sai was very kind, didn't consider herself the favourite, and was always ready to look after her subordinates. Khun

Sai was already an adult when Mother was a child and had taken good care of her to the point of imparting many sorts of knowledge to her. Mother had told her that, besides Sadeit, she was also in debt to Khun Sai, and her own children should never forget it. Having heard her mother repeat so often that Khun Sai was very kind, Phloi followed her without feeling frightened. When they reached Khun Sai's room, she sat down and prostrated herself as Mother instructed, and when she raised her head to look at Khun Sai who sat in the centre of the room, she knew at once that everything Mother had told her about Khun Sai's kindness and benevolence was true.

Khun Sai had a plump figure, the face of someone good tempered, and a healthy complexion. Although she was getting on in years and her closely cropped hair, as was the fashion in those days, was getting grey and sparse, her face still didn't show the lines betraying past anger or sorrow. She wore a shiny iron-grey wraparound and an orange-yellow plaited breast cloth, and lay face down comfortably on the cool shiny perfectly spotless floorboards, with in front of her a bamboo threshing-basket filled with betel leaves, some of them already folded. Beside her was a large container full of lime made redolent by aromatic leaves. She was folding a long betel leaf of the kind with an exceptionally long stem that even the ones Khun Un was always folding couldn't match. Next to her she had the betel tray that was inseparable from ladies in those days and there were also two covered dishes close at hand.

As soon as she saw Mother, Khun Sai sat up to welcome her in delight, pushed the threshing-basket aside, told Mother to come close and then patted her head and back, firing questions as people who haven't met in years are wont to do. Mother started to tell her softly what had happened at home and was soon in tears yet went on with her tale. Khun Sai nodded in sympathy, and now and then entreated her to stop crying as a grownup would a child. Meanwhile Phloi was merely busy surveying the items in the room. On a wall without opening Khun Sai had disposed a few cabinets holding sundries. On the opposite wall, which had a window, she had lined up a number of chests and large, antique, wide-mouthed covered earthen pots with

motifs of flowers and butterflies, to keep folded blankets in. Looking towards the wall by the door, Phloi's heart beat faster because she had just realised that she hadn't eaten anything that morning. Her stomach was beginning to protest now that she had reached her destination. What made her aware that she had not eaten yet was the low shelf on the wall next to the door. On it was a row of glass jars containing coconut-flavoured crispy rice, roasted chilli paste, dried shredded pork, glazed tamarind, fried dry fish, salt and chilli, crispy golden threads, alua macaroons and other tantalising treats for a child of ten like her.

Khun Sai sat chatting eagerly with Mother but would occasionally cast a glance at Phloi. When she saw that the girl sat gazing at the shelf with foodstuff as if mesmerised, Khun Sai thoughtfully asked aloud, 'I say, have you eaten yet?'

Mother hearing this raised her hand to her breast and exclaimed, 'Good grief, Phloi, my child, you haven't had anything to eat all morning!'

'For goodness' sake, dear Chaem!' Khun Sai said. 'Fighting with your husband so much you forget to feed your child! Aren't you starving as well?' She gestured to Phloi to get close. When Phloi had crawled almost up to where she sat, Khun Sai moved the two bowls next to her and offered them to Phloi, saying, 'Here, Phloi, have some of this while I go and tell them to bring you some proper food.' And then, adjusting her breast cloth, she walked quietly out. Mother told Phloi, 'Eat something first, Phloi. I'm hungry too. Here we don't have to be afraid someone will look down on us. Just think that this is home, and a better one than the one over there.' Then Mother opened the two bowls to have a look. 'Golly! I haven't had those in years.'

Phloi looked at the foodstuffs in the bowls and was stumped, as she had never seen anything like these before and couldn't believe there could be such things: one bowl contained horseshoe crab roe, which she had only seen served in pineapple sautéed curry, and the other small flat shrimps which she had only seen used to make shrimp paste or as an ingredient in fried food and curries, but the crab roe and shrimp she saw in the palace today were new to her because both

were sugared to the point of being hard. Phloi cast a sidelong glance at Mother for a clue and saw her pick up a sugared shrimp or, to give it its proper name, a preserved shrimp, bring it to her mouth and munch on it with relish.

‘Mother,’ Phloi whispered as she moved near, ‘I can’t eat that. It’s so I don’t know what.’

Mother laughed and then took some crab roe and put it in Phloi’s mouth, her own mouth saying, ‘Do try it, Phloi, it’s delicious, really.’

Phloi tried to chew but had to swallow it all in a hurry because it was so sweet it was revolting, but then she had to remain silent, asking nothing from Mother any longer for fear she would plop more unknown stuff into her mouth.

After a while, Khun Sai returned into the room with two servants in her wake, one carrying in a food tray and two plates of rice she set down in front of Mother and Phloi, the other holding a spittoon, a pitcher of water and hand towels she set about similarly. Khun Sai’s voice ordered the girl holding the food tray, whom she simply called Phart, to add a portion of dried fish from the jar to the meal. As for Phloi, who was rather apprehensive that the food tray would hold bizarre palace fare, as soon as Phart removed the lids from the bowls, she felt relieved to see it was all dishes she already knew, such as *kaeng born**, fried string beans and spicy catfish roe salad. Meanwhile Khun Sai was complaining to Mother that ‘I had no idea you were coming. Had I known I would have ordered your favourite dishes.’

Mother laughed and answered, ‘Ah, you’ve always spoiled me – that’s why I couldn’t stay with anyone for long but must come back here every time.’

While Phloi ate with Mother, Khun Sai walked over to unlock a cabinet by the wall, took a golden footed tray then went to another cabinet, opened it and took out a set of four pairs of joss sticks and candles and as she walked back to where she sat she told Phart to go and get her another banana leaf to make a flower *krathong*** with.

* Snakehead-fish and elephant-ear curry

** Small banana leaf receptacle

Mother stared at Khun Sai dubiously and then asked, 'What's that for?'

'What do you think?' Khun Sai answered. 'I'm preparing the set for Phloi's presentation to Sadeit, what else?'

'Does it have to be that much?' Mother protested. 'Phloi is my daughter. I'm already Sadeit's attendant. Why present her as well?'

'Really, dear Chaem! When will you ever grow up?' Khun Sai grumbled. 'Since when is Phloi your daughter only? Her father is a phraya and of the clan across the river too. If she is not properly presented, her relatives will blame me as well. Since we are introducing Phloi, we might as well do it properly, and there's nothing much to it. We've got everything we need here.'

Mother laughed and then told Phloi, 'Listen to your aunt: she is rich. Everything here is hers.'

Khun Sai giggled then protested. 'Now, don't exaggerate. This footed tray here is mine; it's not Sadeit's at all...'

'And those sets of joss sticks and candles are yours too, are they?' Mother interrupted.

'Oh, I won't argue with you,' Khun Sai exclaimed good-humouredly. 'Who would present someone like me with joss sticks and candles? Of course they are hers. She keeps receiving lots of them from people everywhere. If I present them again to her once in a blue moon, how is she to remember?'

Having said this, both Khun Sai and Mother burst out laughing gaily. As for Phloi, who wasn't interested enough to listen, she went on wolfing the food like one truly hungry.

Meanwhile, the news of Mother being back to the palace slowly spread. Several of Sadeit's attendants came in turn into Khun Sai's room. Some came from other residences to greet Mother and inquire about her until the room was full of women old and young, all friends and acquaintances of Mother's from way back. All of them addressed Phloi nicely. Some hugged her, kissed her, patted her on the back. Phloi felt both embarrassed and excited, because since she was born she had never been so much fussed about by so many people. But her unease didn't prevent her from noticing that all the

ladies coming into the room were impeccably dressed and all in the same way. They all wore chintz wraparounds and breast cloths of the colours of the day and of the same cut. The only difference was in the rings and necklaces they displayed. They all wore powerful perfumes of the kind that stuck to the floorboards where they sat, and smoothly combed oiled hair, each having given herself before coming a beauty treatment of the first order.

Upon seeing her friends and acquaintances of old, Mother seemed to have forgotten all the sorrow she had been through that made her flee from home with her child that very morning. She chatted with them in high spirits. Their laughter and banter never ceased. Phloi noticed that Mother was an altogether different person from the one she had been at home. There she had often behaved like a grumpy old woman. Sometimes she sat looking dejected, staring into space, indifferent to everything around her. It was very seldom that Phloi had seen her in animated conversation with anyone, but now after only a few hours in the palace, amongst a circle of old acquaintances and friends, back into a cool atmosphere devoid of petty annoyances, she seemed altogether rejuvenated and spry, she had begun to chatter and jest with the people around her and everyone who had come to see her seemed to be hanging onto her every word with devotion, finding everything she said funny. Laughs greeted Mother's every remark without a break.

Phloi and Mother had long finished eating and Phart had long removed the food trays as well. While Mother spoke with her friends, Khun Sai sat making a flower krathong, listening genially, occasionally joining in the laughter. Phloi, to whom by now no-one paid attention, because everyone sat around talking with Mother about things Phloi didn't understand and wasn't much interested in, merely sat observing Khun Sai sewing the krathong, but the krathong, or what Khun Sai called a krathong, was stranger than any she had ever seen. First, Khun Sai took a fine banana leaf and cut it into strips of equal size, which had Phloi mystified, wondering what she was up to, but then Khun Sai undertook to plait each cut piece into shapes and then pinned them together with wooden pins until finally they formed a

small krathong which was the most exquisite Phloi had ever seen. Khun Sai unfolded another banana leaf packet, took out the few champak flowers it contained and put them in the krathong and then reshaped the banana leaf into a cone as a lid for the krathong. Then she took a set of four pairs of joss sticks and candles, laid them on a footed tray and put the flower krathong on top. This done, she caught sight of Phloi who sat watching eagerly and smiled at her then asked, 'Is it pretty, Phloi?'

Phloi didn't know how to answer, so she just smiled back then lowered her head and looked at the floor.

'Since you'll be staying with me, I'll teach you how to make them,' Khun Sai's voice said further. 'I'm only afraid that once we've got used to each other, you'll be mischievous like your mother and turn out as useless as she has.'

'Sure!' came Mother's voice from amongst her group of friends. 'Blame everything on me, and don't be surprised that my child no longer has any respect for me.' Then everyone around burst out laughing.

Right then, a young woman walked past Khun Sai's room on her way to the back of the residence. Khun Sai saw her and called her over. The young woman came over and kneeled down by the door of the room.

'Samai, has Her Royal Highness woken up yet?' Khun Sai asked.

'Quite a while ago,' Samai answered. 'I was going to have her breakfast served.'

Hearing this, Khun Sai went into action, took the footed tray with the offerings and then said, 'Dear Chaem, let us go up now. It's good to have an audience while she eats. Talking will help give her an appetite.'

Upon which Mother exclaimed, 'I say, as soon as her eyes fall on me she'll have a seizure for sure! For all those years with a husband I've never visited her once and it takes leaving my child here to be raised by her for me to come visiting.'

But then she stood up, adjusted her clothes and told Phloi to follow her outside.

FOUR REIGNS/KUKRIT PRAMOJ

Once out of the room, Khun Sai led the way holding the footed tray with flowers, joss sticks and candles, with Mother and Phloi right behind her, through dim corridors past several closed rooms and then up the large staircase Phloi had seen earlier. As she started to go up the stairs, Phloi's heart began to pound out of nervousness, because Mother had told her about Sadeit from as far back as she could remember and she knew that Sadeit was the person Mother held in the highest esteem. Today Phloi would be introduced to Sadeit. She would see her in a moment, because Sadeit lived upstairs, only a few short steps away.

When they reached the middle of the stairs, Khun Sai gave the footed tray to Phloi to hold and then walked up ahead. At this point, Phloi was struck by how different the atmosphere between upstairs and downstairs was. Downstairs anyone walked and talked at ease and didn't have to be particularly on the alert, but only halfway up the stairs, Khun Sai and Mother's attitude changed. Even going up the stairs or handling the footed tray was done with composure, no longer with the easy-going informality of the ground floor of the residence. A breath of air from upstairs brought a mix of scents and perfumes to Phloi's nose and to her ears the hum of soft conversation followed by soft laughter.

As soon as Khun Sai reached the last step, she crouched down and crawled on the landing. Mother and Phloi followed suit right behind. Phloi was scared she wouldn't be able to raise her head to look around, especially with one hand busy holding the tray, which seemed to be growing heavier by the minute. To grab it with both hands as she crawled she wouldn't dare try, because she would have to raise her head, so she was left with only one hand and both knees to crawl in an ungainly way. What she could see most clearly as she did so was Khun Sai's feet lurching ahead. How long it was Khun Sai led the way thus, who knows, but eventually she stopped, shifted to the side a little and then crouched down. Phloi shot a glance at Mother and saw her stop crawling to prostrate herself. Phloi put the footed tray in front of her and did the same, but then stayed crouched, her nose to the floorboards, not daring to look up to see who was where.

‘Who is this you’re bringing me, Sai?’ a lady’s voice asked and that voice resounded from straight ahead. As Phloi understood it was Sadeit asking, she lowered her head even more, but before Khun Sai could answer, Sadeit answered herself, saying, ‘Isn’t that Chaem?’ Phloi stole a sidelong glance at Mother and saw her prostrate herself once again, so she did too.

‘Hey, what’s this?’ Sadeit went on saying. ‘Am I going to get one prostration for every question? How are you, Chaem? You’ve disappeared for I don’t know how many years and here you show up again. I thought you must have died.’

‘Today I brought my daughter to enter your service, *mangkha* (Your Highness).’

Phloi had heard people addressing royalty in royal language for the first time today. Mother had taught her royal language at home but in no great detail, so she knew that, as a female, she should end her answers with ‘*pheikha*’, but now that it came to the crunch, Mother didn’t say ‘*pheikha*’ at all, but something that sounded like ‘*mangkha*’, with ‘*mang*’ hardly stressed either.

‘So this child is your daughter?’ Sadeit went on saying. ‘It was only yesterday I saw you prancing about as a child yourself and then you were gone and now you are back with a child for me to raise all over again. You people don’t seem to know how to grow. You make yourselves scarce and send your daughters instead.’

Discreet laughter came rippling from a number of women crouched here and there on the veranda.

‘You never knew how good you had it here,’ Sadeit said. ‘You wanted to go and have a husband and then you did, as a minor wife to boot. Did he throw you out or did you walk out, Chaem?’

‘I walked out, Your Highness,’ Mother answered, ‘but he didn’t stop me.’

‘Same old Chaem, never at a loss for an answer!’ Sadeit laughed. ‘What’s your child’s name? How old is she?’

‘Her name is Phloi, Your Highness.’ Mother prostrated herself again. ‘She is ten years old.’

‘Do raise your head, Phloi,’ Sadeit said. ‘Don’t hide your face like a shy loris.’

Hearing such words from Sadeit, Phloi felt like sinking into the ground out of nervousness and shyness, but Mother promptly gave her a little push and she forced herself to raise her head as ordered.

This allowed her to see the various things around her. Where she was crouching was a long veranda with a shiny scrubbed floor, windows on one side letting in daylight, and on the other doors opening onto the various rooms of the residence. In front of her at a short distance a green carpet was spread close to the wall. Sadeit sat in its middle on a small square mattress stitched to a triangular cushion; both mattress and cushion were sheathed in dark floral-patterned silk. All around her were a variety of implements such as spittoon, water pitcher, betel tray, hot-water bottle and small footed trays bearing lots of useful odds and ends.

Sadeit was the same age as Khun Sai or only a few years older. Phloi noticed that she was paler than Khun Sai and she felt that, either because she sat in a well-lighted place or for some other reason, Sadeit was more radiant than anyone else crouching there, even though she dressed no different, that is with the same kind of chintz wraparound and top cloth as the other palace people Phloi had seen wore. What drew her attention most in Sadeit's appearance was her eyes, glossy black and sparkling. Those eyes seemed to look at her and see through her entirely. She felt at once that those eyes had the power to order people about, but at the same time she also felt that they were full of loving kindness which could be just as fully relied upon for protection.

Of the several young female attendants present on the veranda Phloi couldn't help thinking that they were all most beautiful. As soon as she raised her head, all eyes turned to fasten on her and everybody including Sadeit smiled at her with kindness. As she turned her face down again out of bashfulness, Mother gave her another nudge and whispered, 'Phloi, present your incense and candles,' and then aloud to Sadeit, 'She's very shy, Your Highness. She has never been out anywhere until today.'

'That's good,' Sadeit answered. 'If she were as daring as her mother was as a child, I'm afraid I'd give up, I couldn't handle her.'

Phloi rose and stirred forward. One hand grabbed the tray. Crawl she hardly could because she was still so very nervous but Mother reached out to push her leg and have her move forward. Phloi slowly slithered forward until she reached the green carpet and then froze, not knowing whether to go on crawling or what. That's when Sadeit said, 'Come closer, Phloi.'

Phloi forced herself to go on and when she came as close as she dared closed her eyes, thrust the footed tray forward and then crouched down and prostrated herself, her heart racing, not knowing what to do next.

'Oh, look, you haven't opened the flower krathong,' Sadeit's voice said. 'Lift the lid first, Phloi.'

Phloi raised her hand and took off the conic lid but she still didn't know what to do next until Sadeit said, 'Now hand me the tray.' Phloi did so. Sadeit took the flowers, joss sticks and candles and put them down by her side then stretched her royal hand and stroked Phloi's hair gently while she said, 'So innocent and helpless. I wonder how easily it will be for you to get on with people, being terrified of me as if I were a demon or a devil. There is nothing to fear from me, Phloi.'

Sadeit's hand raised Phloi's chin up to look at her face and then she laughed and said, 'Such a lovely face, prettier than her mother even. A fair complexion too, worthy of a phraya's daughter.' Hearing this, Phloi felt as if she were on cloud nine because at home no-one had ever said she was pretty – sweet at best, but never pretty. Sadeit's praise delighted her beyond words.

'If you give her to me it's for good, you know,' Sadeit said to Mother. 'Don't come next to take her away to some husband when she's grown-up.'

'My goodness, I would never do that, Your Highness,' Mother's voice answered. 'I leave her in your care for good if you are kind enough to have her. If I come and interfere, have me punished at once.'

'That's what you say,' Sadeit answered. 'How can mother and daughter be parted? I can only take care of her until she is grown-up. What do you say, Phloi?'

All Phloi did was lower her head, not knowing how to answer.

‘And what about you, Chaem? What are you going to do?’ Sadeit asked Mother.

‘I’ll look around first, Your Highness,’ Mother said. ‘In the meantime I would rely on your benevolence, if you please.’

‘Wait here till he sends for you, knowing you?’ Sadeit chafed and then laughed.

‘Not in this lifetime. I’ll never go back,’ Mother answered. ‘When I was here, I knew only happiness; I didn’t know what sorrow was. Only when I left did I know, and knowing sorrow now, I will never go for it again.’

‘You are all the same,’ Sadeit said. ‘Living in comfort you don’t like, claiming you feel confined and constrained. You want to leave to have husband and children, to be dames, to be ladies, to live to the full. In the end you all complain. I really don’t know how I can help you, Chaem. I don’t want to interfere in family matters. When you are angry, you come and complain, but when you patch it up with your husband you might just start blaming me.’

‘As the old saying goes,’ Khun Sai pointed out, ‘never interfere in man and wife affairs.’

‘Oh?’ Sadeit laughed. ‘So you too have a husband, have you?’ Everyone there burst out laughing.

‘Eek!’ Khun Sai shrieked. ‘What are you saying? I was merely repeating the old saying, Your Highness.’

‘Then how do you know the old saying is right, with you being single?’ Everyone there laughed out again. Right then, two new attendants brought in the meal. Phloi cast a glance at Mother, saw her wink and nod for her to pull back. She took the footed tray and crawled back to go and crouch down by Mother.

The two attendants placed the food tray in front of Sadeit. The various dishes were on silver saucers disposed on small silver footed trays. Phloi felt that the portions were tiny. She had once seen at home food offerings to the Buddha placed in small dishes and had thought there was no way that would be enough to fill anyone. Seeing Sadeit’s food this time, there was no way she would have enough to eat either.

Sadeit rinsed her mouth and then began to eat. While she did so she conversed with Mother and Khun Sai about Mother's affairs at home or old events that came to mind, but it was mostly Mother who spoke. Phloi saw Sadeit laugh often. Sadeit picked at her food as if she wasn't interested in what she ate. There seemed to be about two spoonfuls of rice on her plate, but no matter how much she ate that amount never seemed to diminish. Before the main course was put aside and replaced with sweets, much time had elapsed.

'Sai,' Sadeit called out, 'this afternoon there is prayer chanting at the Throne Hall. I think I shall attend for a while. I don't know if Sadeit of the Upper Residence will attend. If she does, we should go together.'

'I'll go and enquire, Your Highness,' Khun Sai answered, but she had hardly finished speaking when someone was heard coming up the stairs and the voice of one of the attendants crouched by the entrance said, 'Ma-lai from the Upper Residence is here, Your Highness.' Whereupon a middle-aged lady showed her face and prostrated herself at the entrance and then said at full speed, 'There is prayer chanting at the Throne Hall this afternoon, Your Highness. Sadeit told me to ask Sadeit if Sadeit will *sadeit* as Sadeit would like to *sadeit* with Sadeit.'

Phloi knew that 'sadeit' in the royal language was both noun or pronoun for royals and their verb for 'to come' and 'to go', but she had never heard anyone utter the word seven times in succession and at such speed and she was so astonished that she dared to look up.

Sadeit burst out laughing and said, 'Phloi, you don't seem to be used to royal language yet. Well now, tell Ma-lai here that Sadeit wishes to tell Sadeit that Sadeit will *sadeit* and will be very happy for Sadeit to *sadeit* with her.'

Everyone, including Ma-lai, laughed uproariously, forcing Phloi to lower her head even more.

Second Reign

Chapter 1

One afternoon, a heavily pregnant Phloi sat watching her children as they played in front of the mansion. Own by now was a little over seven years old; An about five; and Ort, Phloi's second son, who had been conceived and had been born in the Sixth Reign during the construction of the pyre for the cremation of King Chulalongkorn the Great, was about three years old. All the time that she was pregnant with Ort, she was convinced that her child would be a girl, but then it was a boy she gave birth to. The child didn't look much different from An. As he came after An, within the family he was nicknamed Ort, and for his real name his father decided on Praphot, an obvious choice given that he followed on Praphon and Praphan. Shortly after Ort was two, Phloi became pregnant again. This time, she prayed and pledged offerings at sundry shrines for the child to be a girl, and during the same period sat musing about what her yet-to-be-born daughter would look like. Even her name she had chosen in advance as Praphai. When she told this to Khun Preim, he laughed and then teased, 'Be careful, dear Phloi: if it turns out to be a boy like last time, there'll be another flurry, so you'd better have another name ready.'

Since the change of reign, Khun Preim had done well in his career. After the Coronation ceremony, he had been raised to silk-clad royal page rank and bestowed the title of Nai Sanong Ratchakit* and everybody called him Khun Sanong. The name 'Khun Preim' Phloi

had called him from the beginning seemed to have gone into disuse. One year later there was another celebration of the Coronation in Bangkok which was attended by more royals from foreign lands than had ever gathered in the East. Khun Preim or Khun Sanong's performance of his duties then met with much praise and he was awarded a medal and royal decorations, and not long after the celebration was transferred from the Royal Page Department to the Palace Department with the rank of Khun Phra and the companion title of Phra Borribarn Phoominart*. The day he received his certificate of rank, Khun Preim went back home and told Phloi, 'Dear Phloi, I am a Khun Phra now. When I hear people calling me Khun Phra, I feel terribly old. Being called Khun Sanong didn't bother me as it had a youthful ring to it, but being called Khun Phra, I feel positively ancient.' He walked over to the mirror to look at himself, raised his hand and stroked his hair, which had a sprinkling of grey above his temples, and then he went on saying, 'Whoever sees me as old, I don't care. It's good actually. But there's one person I want to see me as always young, and that one is you, dear Phloi. Therefore, don't ever call me "Khun Phra" as the others do. Call me the way you've always called me. If you won't listen, I'll get rid of you and find myself a new wife.'

Phloi laughed, delighted. 'Listen to you!' she exclaimed. 'Calling yourself old and in the same breath threatening to get yourself a new wife ... as if I would ever forbid you. Get yourself as many as you want.' She stopped laughing and went on: 'Actually, there's nothing for you to worry about. You're not the only one growing old, you know. These days I feel much older than you. If anything, you look a lot younger than you used to.'

Her words were uttered in jest and yet had more substance than even she was aware, because by now she was feeling completely adult. Several of her senior relatives were no longer. Not long after the previous sovereign had passed away, her Sadeit had been taken ill and three months later had breathed her last. This loss had meant deep sorrow once again for Phloi, who had taken her newborn son with her to the palace to help Khun Sai in the funeral rites held at the Dharma Sangweit Pavilion. After the cremation the residence was

left only with Khun Sai and Khun Choi and a few elderly servants, all of them now deprived of the patron who had ruled and resided there. After Sadeit's death, Phloi felt completely an adult, no longer a child or adolescent girl under adult supervision, but someone who had to be responsible for herself and a pillar of strength for her children.

If someone had asked her how the previous and current reigns differed, Phloi would still have had to think of Khun Preim first, because the difference was most clear in Khun Preim himself. The previous reign had been a reign of elderly seniors. Khun Preim and everyone else Phloi knew thus behaved fully as adults. The way they spoke, the way they dressed, the way they conducted their daily lives, down to the way they worked, they seemed to do as had their seniors. But as soon as a new reign began, changes and differences began to appear progressively. The new reign was a reign of young men. The atmosphere in the palace was one of youthfulness. Khun Preim had changed accordingly without being aware of it. He dressed more fastidiously than before, with a greater attention to elegance. His deportment seemed to have taken up the jauntiness of the farang. He had given up betel nuts and Thai cheroots and taken to smoking cigarettes imported in boxes and, what Phloi felt disturbing but didn't dare deter him from doing, had begun to drink a variety of imported spirits which were quite pricey and which, for all his arguing about the need to socialise and about the superior quality of those drinks making them harmless, she still frowned upon.

The care he had begun to take of his attire was something she couldn't help but notice, as it directly affected her. He bought silk and cotton fabrics of various colours and in great numbers and had shirts made out of expensive material in great numbers as well. Wherever he went he dressed meticulously as if out to compete in a fashion show. Phloi remembered that during the previous reign he had paid little attention to what he wore because royal pages going 'inside' – that is amongst the ladies of the Inner Court – were only allowed to wear cotton sarongs and had to ruffle their hair not to look too neat. But now times had changed. The new sovereign was still unattached and there was still no Inner Court. Everything

of importance, including displays of luxury, came out to parade and compete at the Front Court. Everyone endeavoured to hold everyone else's attention. Khun Preim's personal status was higher than that of commoners and thus allowed him to dress up magnificently. Phloi watched this change in him with equanimity. Sometimes she was amused, sometimes annoyed, and sometimes alarmed for him when he began to amass hip wrappers and shirts, hats and shoes, stockings even. She let him, feeling amused and moved at the same time. But when he began to mention that the ironing of jackets was no good in this land as it lacked finesse, he wanted to send his by steamer to Singapore, she thought with irritation that he was going too far and pretended not to hear instead of going along with him. He bought a motorcar with a brass engine and a gas lantern lighted at the front, and hired an Indian driver. Phloi readily agreed because a motorcar was something new, cleaner and faster than a horse-drawn cab, and it gave her not a little prestige as well. But for all that Khun Preim didn't give up raising horses and instead bought a few more and hired more hands to take care of them especially, because he had joined the Wild Tiger Cavalry Corps, newly set up by His Majesty. He thus spent his spare time riding and training horses with gay abandon and a daring that left Phloi perennially uneasy.

Another change that Phloi could see clearly concerned life in the palace, because this reign, as already mentioned, had no Inner Court yet. Wilting had begun to take place in the palace little by little. Customs and traditions remained, royal residences and throne halls appeared as before and didn't go to ruins, but every time Phloi entered the palace to visit former acquaintances, she had the feeling that she was entering a house without owners. Blue-blooded royal wives had moved to live in their private palaces and mansions all over the city. Some of the royal consorts whose children were posted elsewhere had taken their leave to go and stay with them. In the palace few royals remained as permanent residents, besides a number of servants of deceased princesses and those watching over the various residences whose owners had gone out to build palaces outside.

As to her old home at Bang Luang Canal, Phloi had not gone there

or kept in touch. At first, while Pherm still lived there, he kept her informed of goings-on she wasn't much interested in anyway, but it wasn't long before he took a wife, by the name of Yuean, the daughter of a small trader in the Ban Kaek area, and crossed the river to go and live in his wife's house. He still worked in the same department and had been conferred the rank and title of Luang Phanthawijarn. Everybody including Phloi now called him Khun Luang Phan.

As Phloi sat watching her children romping about, her mind on various events of the past, a rickshaw came to a halt outside the gate. A middle-aged woman dressed in subdued colours befitting her years stepped out, a paper parcel in her hand. She paid the fare and then walked in. Phloi looked at her idly because at first glance she didn't know who she was and thought she must be visiting someone else in the compound. The woman, having stepped through the gate, stopped to look left and then right for a moment. When she saw Phloi she smiled and walked straight to her. The afternoon sun flared on her face, making it hard to be seen clearly. Phloi raised her hand to shade her eyes and the next instant sprang erect and almost jumped in delight as when she was a child as she shouted, 'Khun Cheui!'

Khun Cheui, laughing, rushed to her, delighted beyond words to see her little sister.

'Khun Cheui!' Phloi shouted again, flinging out her hand to grab Khun Cheui's arm and make sure she wasn't dreaming or her eyes weren't failing her.

'Oh, Khun Cheui! You've disappeared for so many years! I missed you so. I didn't know where to find you.'

Khun Cheui let herself down and pulled Phloi by the arm to make her sit beside her and then started to laugh and cry for joy at the same time. A while later she finally managed to speak and said, 'Phloi, I too missed you so much my heart almost burst. How are you, Phloi? Please let me have some water. There's so much to tell. In a moment, when I've rested a bit, I'll tell you.'

Phloi called a maid to get some water for her and then sat with a smile on her face staring at her elder sister. Khun Cheui's first question was to ask about the children playing around. When Phloi told

her they were her nephews, she called them up to hold them in her arms one after the other. She hugged Ort for a long time, observing and comparing him with her other nephews. Then she said, 'I love this one very much, Phloi,' and then laughed, remarking, 'Look at me! As soon as I arrive I start being partial. I must be getting old. You mustn't mind me, Phloi.'

Phloi noticed that her sister had grown thinner and darker than before. It was particularly evident in her hands, which were no longer small and tapering as when she was at home, but had become the hands of someone working hard: they had grown thicker and their knuckles were broad. Even though she was thinner and darker, her manners were still spry, showing that she wasn't troubled by any illness, and the glint in her eyes suggested that she knew happiness in life. When she had drunk and rested, Phloi prompted her, 'You haven't told me yet where it was you disappeared for so many years.'

'When I left home I first went to stay in the Tanao Road area with Khun Luang,' Khun Cheui answered. 'At first I thought I'd come and see you, but there was much work, too many things to be done all the time. I put it off day after day and then one month had gone by and then months turned into years. During that time I sometimes went upcountry with Khun Luang and yes, years went by. But now I have time to breathe. In the future I'll come and see you often, if you don't mind.'

'How can you speak like this?' Phloi protested. 'Why should I mind? I've missed you all the time. But tell me more about what you've been doing. I really want to know.'

'So many things,' Khun Cheui answered. 'I don't know if I can remember it all. The day I left home, Khun Luang took me to his house at once. When I saw the house, I was shocked. It was in a blind alley, an old hip-roofed house with other houses stuck to it, the kind where a falling chicken can't reach the ground, as they say. To reach it you had to walk along an endless succession of old planks over the mud. Once inside, whatever you said or did the neighbours heard and saw, and whatever they said we heard too, and they'd hurl curses at one another all day long. The space under the house was filthy, with stink-

ing stagnant water everywhere. When I first got there I pictured myself there and almost dissolved into tears at the bottom of the front steps. I'd never lived like that, but out of love and compassion for Khun Luang I had to put up with it. Inside, the house was a complete mess, like a rat's nest, because with his former wife long dead, he lived alone, he had no-one to look after him, so it had to be like that. I had to sort out the mess and fight with dirt for almost three months before the place was presentable. Khun Luang was kind actually, he did everything he could to be nice to me, he wouldn't hear of using my money, he said he'd be accused of having taken me to fleece me. But that was it, his salary wasn't enough. I had to use my money to pay for expenses without him knowing, enough to get by, and I had to do almost everything myself, with no servant or slave like everyone else. So I had no time to go anywhere, except to the market to buy rice. At first I was ashamed because I had never done it, me, the daughter of a phraya. Carrying a basket at the waist to go to market felt so weird, but then I got used to it. Now I go anywhere by myself, with no need of a servant in my wake as before.'

Khun Cheui stopped to laugh at her fate and then resumed speaking. 'So that's how it went with us, Phloi. Some days I was so unhappy I could have washed my knees with my tears; at times I felt so tired I thought I'd die, but we've never hurt each other's feelings. Are we happy? I guess you could say so. We live like poor people. We can't afford luxuries. Soon after His Majesty passed away, the Medicine Department was dissolved, so Khun Luang was out on a limb and stayed at home doing nothing. That's when we were really hard up. When it became too much, I pressed him to make medicines for sale, because he had the texts for that, but he said he had no capital, and he wouldn't hear of using my money. It took a long time arguing and pleading before we could agree. Now it's not too bad, because we make enough to live on one day at a time.'

She stopped chewing betel and then went on. 'But it's quite tiring, you know, Phloi. I have to help him grind the ingredients and hand-roll the pills day and night. The two helpers we hired can't quite be trusted. The more medicines we sell, the more it wears us out. Once

in a while I have to take a trip upcountry with Khun Luang to sell drugs and buy plant ingredients, because they are cheaper there than here, but that's good, there's extra profit. I save what I can. Now Khun Luang has rented a shop house right by the road, with a room to sell drugs at the back, so I've moved to stay there, because it's easier to supervise.'

Hearing this, Phloi was shocked, as she had never even thought Khun Cheui would have to live in a shop house, selling drugs by the roadside. If it was she having to live like that, it might not sound too far-fetched, but Khun Cheui! It was unimaginable.

Phloi wanted Khun Cheui to tell of her life in much more detail than she had thus far. To ask bluntly she didn't dare, so she asked in a roundabout way, 'Is the shop doing well?'

'So-so,' her sister answered. 'Enough to live on from day to day, but we'll never be tremendously rich, that's for sure.' She took the paper parcel she had come with and unfolded it in front of Phloi. 'Here you are. I brought them for you, knowing you have many children. This is aromatic powder for wind.' She pointed at a small packet. 'And this is good for when you feel faint or dizzy, especially in early pregnancy. These are laxatives, and this is to fight fever. When my nephews have a fever, you can give it to them at once.' She laughed and then added, 'I talk as if I were a doctor myself. Actually I'm only the doctor's wife, and these days it's hard to find patients. Well-to-do patients increasingly turn to farang-style doctors, leaving only the poor for Khun Luang to treat or give them pills. They seldom have two pennies to rub together and sometimes he treats them for nothing, but never mind, we're all human beings, and if we can help one another, let's do it.'

'Do you have any children yet?' Phloi asked.

'I'd have brought them along if I had,' Khun Cheui answered. 'No I don't, Phloi. I take it Khun Luang is sterile, because with his former wife he didn't have any. I'd really love to have children myself, but what can I do? Thinking a little further, it's just as well: we are still poor. If we had children we'd have to raise them well and since we couldn't, better not to have any.'

Third Reign

Chapter 1

Be it because of a law of nature whereby time passes faster as we grow old or because events in the following period did actually happen faster, or for some other reason, Phloi had the feeling that each day of her life went by faster than before and, if she wasn't careful all the time, days and nights would turn into months and years without her noticing it, and the various events that happened to her as of the start of the new reign – the third in her life and the seventh of the Rattanakosin era – would follow one another in confusion verging on chaos, so that at times she was unable to grasp them in their proper order.

After he fainted on the day His Most Gracious Majesty Rama VI passed away, Khun Preim was in poor health for several days. It wasn't clear what exactly ailed him, besides being exceedingly exhausted for a while. His exhaustion coupled with deep sorrow had undermined his health, and it was Phloi's duty to look after him for days on end, and even when he was healthy again, she still worried about him, keeping on the alert, observing him with eyes full of concern.

From the day of His Majesty's demise, he seemed to have turned into an old man. He stopped being concerned with himself, with what he ate, with how he dressed, and was even somewhat negligent in keeping himself neat. All of this Phloi put down to a mental breakdown, as he was in despair and no longer paid attention to his

environment. He had always been very interested in his own life and in those of the people he knew. His former behaviour, she felt, had been motivated by his will to prosper and distinguish himself. At the same time he was interested in what the others were doing, who was good or evil and to what extent, and then he compared their behaviour, their qualifications and the results of such behaviour with his own behaviour and qualifications, which made him interested in life, and that eagerness was the power that propelled his life forward. But now little remained of that eagerness. He was not interested in what was to happen to him and neither was he interested in what was to happen to others. Before that, he had been the one inviting Phloi to look at the world and the one telling her what was happening around them; she was in the position of a listener. But all of a sudden, to her befuddlement, it was the other way around: she was the one prodding him to look at other people and at the various events, and he was now the listener, but one who didn't listen very carefully. During the reign of Rama VI, he had always told her of his love and veneration for His Majesty and how totally dedicated he was to him in heart and mind. Whenever she had heard him speak like this, she had felt she believed him only for one part; for another, which she kept to herself, she had the feeling that it was his eloquence and the mood of the moment that made him speak as he did, and it was only when His Majesty passed away that she realised he had spoken entirely sincerely. But what she didn't know – and neither did he – was a truth of a different kind: that when Rama VI had succeeded Rama V, Khun Preim was still a man full of vigour and enthusiasm, eager to start life and ready to learn the lessons of life and put them to good use, but given the way he had been trained, he had tied up his life to this particular Lord of the Land, had oriented it to follow the royal lead in all things disregarding any personal views or wishes. For this reason, when the first change of reign took place, he held that his life had changed direction henceforth and he must adapt to the times. When Rama V passed away and Rama VI took over, he was still young and strong enough to change his ways and start on a new life. For the fifteen years of the Sixth Reign, he felt that his life was com-

plete, he was happy with it and didn't want it to change, but he knew perfectly well that, if he was to dedicate his life in the Seventh Reign correctly, he had to adapt his way of life to a different level, he had to get acquainted with new people, he had to study life anew. To put it briefly, he had to start from scratch, but he was too old and no longer strong enough to do so. Regarding the new sovereign, he knew that his loyalty wasn't diminished, but his enthusiasm to respond to royal commands had been eroded by the ageing of his body.

By now, Phloi was the one who had to make him interest himself in this and that all the time, but her attempts took her nowhere, because he merely sat listening without saying anything, and if what she said happened to refer to some event of the previous reign, he would turn his face away and then heave a sigh, as if he didn't want to recall the past. There was only one thing in which he was interested as before, or it seemed even more than before, and that was breeding and riding horses. Every day now, he would just go through the motions of going to the palace, as the royal mortal remains were still lying in state, but then hurry back home to busy himself in the stables morning and evening. He would ride his favourite horse towards Khlong Toey or towards the Lumpini garden, where a big fair celebrating the fifteen years of the Sixth Reign had been planned and some structures had even been set up, but the unexpected royal demise had aborted the event. Khun Preim liked to ride away from home alone, without any escort. He came back drenched in sweat and his horse covered in white foam. Phloi wasn't happy about this continued interest of his in horses, because he was growing old and she was afraid some accident would befall him, but she had to keep quiet, not daring to warn him out because she could see that horse riding was the only thing he liked and it brought him a measure of pleasure.

Because of the sudden shock of His Majesty's death and because of her worry over her husband's health, Phloi didn't have time to think about how much time went by, and before she knew it Ort sent news that he would be travelling back by steamer to Singapore and there take a train to reach the Bangkok Noi railway station in Thonburi. When the time for his return came, Phloi went to the railway station

along with Khun Preim and all the children as if in a dream from which she woke up when the train stopped alongside the platform and Ort rushed out of a carriage and took her in his arms, squeezing her tight, and he was laughing and the others were laughing and greeting him in a rumpus.

Phloi raised her face to look at her son through her tears. He had grown so tall that Phloi, who stood right against him, had to bend over backward to be able to see his face. His face looked paler, more adult and bore traces of a nascent beard and moustache, but his way of talking, his way of laughing and the way he looked at her and the others showed that he was still the same Ort, her son. The ten years that had gone by hadn't changed him in substance. He enfolded her in his arms again and whispered, 'Stop it, Mother. Aren't you ashamed to be such a cry-baby?'

His words made her laugh and she promptly wiped away her tears. Ort talked with everyone intimately, prostrated himself at Khun Preim's feet deferentially, joked with Pherm, Khun Cheui and Luang O-sot, turned round and grinned at An and Own and Praphai who had come to welcome him and then walked over and bent over to kiss Lucille on the cheek as farang relatives properly do. Today Phloi saw Khun Preim truly beaming for the first time. He was saying louder than usual out of gladness, 'You are so much taller than I, Ort. Come and stand by me so we can see how tall you are.'

Ort did as he was ordered and Phloi saw with delight that he was taller than his father by about a hand-width. While the servants took the luggage out of the carriage, Phloi couldn't help glancing at the carriage door to see if someone else hadn't come along with Ort as well. At first glance she saw nothing, so she glanced again, and again, so that Ort noticed how she was behaving and smiled to himself.

When all the luggage was taken out of the carriage, they all went to the motorboat Khun Preim had arranged for to take them across the river and return home. Ort sat next to Phloi and asked her in a low voice, 'Are you satisfied now, seeing I came back alone, without anyone trailing me?'

Phloi laughed in relief, stretched out her hand to squeeze his arm

with satisfaction. Ort's low voice said further, 'Tut-tut! Don't do this. An's looking this way. You'll make him angry.'

But Phloi knew that what he was saying no-one else could hear, because the noise of the boat engine covered every word.

None of the relatives who had gone to welcome Ort that day went their separate ways. Pherm, Khun Cheui and Luang O-sot readily accepted Phloi's invitation to have lunch together. As soon as they were home, Phloi took Ort to shower and change and the happiness that day seemed to be complete, because she was taking care of her child who had just come back unattached, with the feeling that it was totally her right to do so, no-one was there to prevent her or compete with her. Ort took a shower and then dressed in a fine lawn-top and Chinese silk trousers Phloi had ready for him. Those trousers were black, as mourning for his late Majesty was still on. Then Ort came and sat down to lunch, which Phloi had arranged, with such hunger and relish after having been deprived of Thai food for so long that Phloi forgot to eat, as she merely sat smiling, feasting her eyes on him. When she finally resurfaced, she glanced at the others around the table and saw Khun Cheui, Luang O-sot and Pherm equally hiding smiles of contentment as they watched Ort regaling himself.

Once he was full, Ort said, 'From now on, I'll never leave Siam again. I'll remain here until I die because there is no other country as comfortable as this one.'

'How is it then they say it's fine and dandy abroad, young Ort?' Pherm asked.

'Maybe it is for those who go there for a short stay only, Uncle,' Ort answered. 'When you live there, nothing can beat our way of life. When you are abroad, even though there are good sides, you must always be conscious that they are not yours, they belong to others. Once you reach your own country, you can see that everything is yours. No matter how hot the weather is, it's yours. Even if there are bad smells in the air or what not, they are signs that make you feel this is home. Our cities, our roads, our fields, even our plants and trees, no matter how messy they are, we made them so. If we messed them up we can tidy them up in turn. The train I took entered Thai territory at dusk. I couldn't sleep and

kept looking at our countryside, on and on, without ever getting bored, so much so that when the train reached Bangkok Noi I wasn't even aware of it. No matter where I looked it was a treat to the eye.'

'You seem to feel it quite deeply,' Pherm said in a low voice as if talking to himself.

'Feel deeply about what, Uncle?' Ort asked.

'Nothing ... You're my nephew, that's all,' Pherm answered. 'I've long thought exactly as you do. I've always lived here since I was born and even at my age I've never been tired of it. I sit looking at it every day and I still enjoy it every day. Whoever comes and tells me the way it is here is good, the way over there is good too, I don't trust their eloquence. I couldn't argue because I've never gone there, so I just listen to them quietly. Well now, young Ort, tell us how our country and theirs differ.'

'If I were to tell you everything, one year wouldn't be enough,' Ort said. 'But I'll give you just the main points of difference. Thinking about it right now, foreign countries and ours have rich and poor people, but in foreign countries the rich are really rich and the poor are truly poor, which isn't quite the case here. If the rich foreigners saw our rich people, they'd look down on us and say we are poor because we can't compare with them in any way. The houses we live in, the food we eat: we can't beat them. And even more so in terms of property, because here we consider someone with a hundred thousand baht as rich, but their rich people own tens or hundreds of millions of baht. Our wealth has been transmitted over a few generations; theirs, for thousands of years, so it's very much. But their poor can't compare with ours, because our climate allows our poor to live like the rich, food is easy to find and, what's of paramount importance, the weather is hot. The truly poor can dress with just a hip cloth, sleep at a monastery and still be doing fine, but their poor can't do that. If they did they might die, so they have to find warm clothes and a fire to stay by. Sometimes very small rooms are half underground, the poor have to rent them and pile into them by the dozen, cooking, washing, sleeping and doing everything in there. Doors and windows can't be opened because of the cold, so they have to keep warm like

that, without taking baths because that's expensive. When you open a door, the stink of people and other things in there clobbers you.'

'How do you know about this?' Khun Preim, who had sat listening silently for a long time, asked.

'I had a look around, Father,' Ort answered. 'You sent me abroad, so I wanted to find out as much as I could.'

'Did you see how the well-bred live as well or not?' Khun Preim wondered.

'Quite a lot, yes,' Ort answered with a smile. 'My friends at the university who were children of the gentry invited me to their homes on holiday. They live amazingly well. Whatever they want, they only have to ask. The English gentry have large houses out of town; their properties stretch as far as the eye can see; their houses are like our palaces. When it's time for them to return home, they invite whomever they like to stay as their guests and treat them. In the evening you have to dress up in white starchy shirts to sit down to dinner. In the daytime they play games, sports, shoot birds or rabbits or go fishing or even hunt foxes on horses depending on the season.'

'Why do they have to ride horses to hunt foxes?' Khun Preim asked, at a loss.

'They have packs of hounds to hunt them and they follow on horses. When the hounds find the foxes they bite them to death.'

'But why do they hunt them?' Khun Preim asked again, wanting to get to the bottom of it.

'They claim they go after ducks and chickens,' Ort answered with hesitation.

'Can't they shoot them or trap them?' Khun Preim persisted.

'How could they, Father?' Ort protested. 'If they did that, it would go against the English nobility's sense of fair play. Whoever does that is ostracised right away.'

'Zounds!' Khun Preim exclaimed. 'Ostracising someone for shooting a fox?'

'They are damn serious about it, yes,' Ort explained. 'Hunting and fishing are highly regulated. Birds like pheasants and partridges are only hunted in season; for the rest of the year, they don't shoot

them, and they only shoot birds in flight, never when they are on the ground or on branches. Sometimes the birds are tame, because people buy the eggs to hatch them and keep the birds from very young, so they must be chased away to take flight.'

'I hear they have many more mountain forests than us, young Ort, so there are lots of animals to hunt,' Pherm said with interest.

'Not at all, Uncle,' Ort answered. 'Forests in foreign countries, when I first saw them I had to be told those were forests: I thought they were orchards.'

'Then when you say they hunt animals, where do they do it?' Pherm asked.

'On their own lands. All animals there have owners and only they or their guests can shoot. Hunting or fishing rights are bought and sold at high prices. Only the well-off can hunt.'

'Really!' Pherm said. 'Then what about the poor? What do they do?'

'The poor who want to eat wild animals must poach, shooting animals or trapping fish on the sly, but if they are caught they are fined or sent to jail, because it's illegal. In the old days, only a few decades ago, mind you, they were liable to the death penalty.'

Pherm raised his joined hands over his head and bowed and then said, 'Amen! Let me never stay in England but be reborn here every time! Being rich over there would be too good, but being poor would be such a burden!'

'How about the high-born over there?' Khun Cheui asked in turn. 'Are their manners the same as ours or very different?'

'They differ from ours only in matters of detail,' Ort answered. 'For instance, we bow and prostrate ourselves; they shake hands or salute each other. We sit on the floor; they sit on chairs – that sort of thing. But generally their manners are the same, except that the English are much more reserved than we are. When I first went there, the manners Mother had taught us served me very well indeed.'

Phloi almost sprung up to hug and kiss him out of pleasure and pride. It had been no waste of time making Ort his mother's child, training him and teaching him in everything. However far he had

gone he never forgot his mother or the training she had provided him with. The others went on talking with Ort for quite a while, but she just sat hugging and kissing him with her eyes and with her heart.

Once home, Ort himself may not have been aware of how much happiness he had brought back to his mother, but Phloi at the bottom of her heart knew that she was receiving happiness and satisfaction to the full, in a way she couldn't estimate every time he ran to her to ask for a jongkrabein, to have her sew a button on his shirt or to ask for some dish he would like to eat. After he had been back for a while, Khun Preim took him to pay his respects to those elders Khun Preim honoured, but then that was all he did. Ort stayed at home, didn't go and work anywhere. With Khun Preim languid and indifferent, Ort showed no enthusiasm and was happy enough to sit or lie down in the house and stay close to his mother, chatting with her, without giving a thought to making his way forward as young men of his age usually did. Phloi gave him money to spend, one or two hundred baht at a time, which he never asked for. Whatever she gave him he slipped into his shirt pocket. To find out whether he had gone through the money she had given him she had to go and check herself. He didn't seem to know the importance of money. Whatever he had he spent. Actually he had few personal expenses, but if someone in need came to ask, whether someone from the house or someone from elsewhere, he would give that person whatever was left in his shirt pocket every time. In her heart of hearts, Phloi wanted him to stay at home indefinitely because having her child at home all the time without him having to go and work somewhere left her with a warm feeling, but she was the one who had to begin thinking about what he should do in the future, because he himself wasn't interested and Khun Preim didn't seem to have thought about this yet. One day, seeing that he was in a good mood, she said to her husband, 'Have you thought yet about what Ort should do, where he should work? Didn't you say you'd find him work at the ministry?'

Khun Preim heaved a sigh and then said, 'Let him stay like this for a while, dear Phloi. Don't think about work yet. I myself don't know what's what or what the future holds either.'

Fourth Reign

Chapter 16

Phloi was ill for several months and grew increasingly weak. Even though her children and other relatives tried to take the best care of her, the patient's feelings were an important obstacle, to wit, even though she hadn't given up on her will to live, she didn't have any enthusiasm to go on living. She wasn't in any way worried about her own condition but behaved as if she left herself drift along the tide of fate, didn't try to get better and had no will to fight. An even more important obstacle to treatment was the penury of drugs at the time, especially for her ailment, a rare disease affecting the heart which required several kinds of special drugs that were hard to find, because the volume of those drugs before the war was small compared to those needed for more usual diseases. When war started, those drugs were used up. The few that were left were hoarded to be sold at astoundingly high prices. The doctor who treated Phloi himself didn't know where to find the drugs he needed to treat her and merely jotted down their names and said that they would be very useful if they could be found.

The penury of drugs thus was a big problem over which they had to consult one another constantly. One day, Khun Seiwee came to the Bang Luang Canal house to see both Phloi, who was ailing, and Praphai, who had come to take care of her mother. As they sat talking for a while An took out the paper where the drugs were listed, had a look at it and then said, 'Seiwee, you know many people. Try to see if you can find those drugs for Mother. I've been looking for them just about everywhere but can't find any.'

Khun Seiwee took the list, looked at it, then took out a note-

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book from his shirt pocket and then turned to smile at Phloi and said slowly, mouthing every word as always upset her, 'It is no problem, Mother. I am glad to repay my debt of gratitude to you to the full. Those drugs, other people may not find them, but I think I can. Don't worry, Mother.'

The next day, he came to the house in the afternoon. An, who worried about the drugs, asked about them as soon as he saw him. Khun Seiwee was silent for a moment and then said, 'Everything in this country of ours can be found if we know where to look for it. The important thing is whether we can pay the required price or not.'

'Come on, Seiwee,' An said heatedly. 'Whatever the price, Mother must be cured, that's all that matters.'

'The drugs you asked for are injections,' Khun Seiwee explained. 'They are hard to find because there are very few of them. A friend of mine has some. When he knew it was for Mother, he was glad to sell them for less than the market price.'

'How much will he sell them for?'

'Four thousand two hundred per shot,' Khun Seiwee said with a straight face.

Phloi was so shocked when she heard the price of just one vial that her heart almost stopped beating for good.

An was clearly taken aback. He answered dilatorily, 'That's good, Seiwee, but let me try another source and see what they say first. Anyway, we'll let you know.'

'As you wish,' Khun Seiwee said. 'But don't delay for too long because in another few days the price might go up again. These days, prices increase every day.'

An clenched his teeth and didn't answer and sat smouldering until Khun Seiwee took his leave. As soon as he was gone, Phloi, who had lain on her bed listening quietly, called An in a low voice for him to come and sit close to her. When he had sat down on the edge of the bed, she said, 'An, don't buy that drug. It's far too expensive.'

'Good grief, Mother!' An exclaimed in a near whisper. 'Why scrounge at this point?'

'I don't want to scrounge,' Phloi answered in a low voice. 'But I've always used money in useful ways. That drug, it isn't that one injection will be enough to cure me, there must be several. At four thousand two per shot, that's forty two thousand for ten shots, and the price might go up in time. Before long that one drug might cost us a hundred thousand baht.' She stopped speaking, resting for a while and then heaved a sigh. Then she resumed speaking in a low voice. 'With this kind of outlay, think carefully, An. My life isn't worth that much.'

'Mother!' An uttered this one word and then hung his head and cried next to his mother, unable to control himself.

Phloi stroked his head softly and then answered, 'Don't worry too much about me, An. I'm not hurting much. And that drug, even if we get it, won't cure me right away. Illness depends very much on fate whatever one does. Some people have lots of drugs and won't get well, and often die.'

'It isn't that, Mother,' An said in a voice full of resentment. 'I'm very sorry because I can see through him clearly this time.'

'Whom do you mean? I don't understand,' Phloi said.

'Seiwee,' An told her. 'I know very well that he has invested in the drug business and that he has that drug, but even though he knows you are seriously ill and you must have that drug, he has the cheek to come and tell us he's selling it for four thousand a shot.'

'Well, he's trading with his partners. Maybe it's a joint investment. Perhaps he's afraid of their reaction if he gave it away,' Phloi said, groping for excuses.

'Even then, filthy rich as he is he could sell at cost, but here he comes and adds a huge mark-up ... Never mind, Mother, I'll go and find the drug somewhere else. Maybe I'll get it cheaper. I asked him only to find out how he would react.'

When she heard An's answer, Phloi merely heaved a sigh. She didn't resent her son-in-law's lack of generosity but was taken aback by the deterioration of goodwill in general. Generosity and loving kindness seemed to have disappeared from this world. Even Phloi herself, who was better off than most, still had to feel hard-pressed when she was ill. What was it like for those who had less?

An must have been very angry and resentful with Khun Seiwee over this. The next day he managed to buy the same drug from somewhere else, though he didn't get as many vials as the doctor had ordered. When Pherm came to the house that day, An told him the story.

Pherm shook his head in discouragement and said, 'Never mind, An. No matter how rich people of that ilk will be, I believe that in this world there is merit and karma. Those with an evil heart, even if we don't see them, heavenly powers do. You just wait. Before long they'll wash their knees with their tears.'

'I'm afraid it won't be like that, Uncle,' An said.

'Oh? Why not?'

'I look at the world every day and I can't get myself to believe in anything at all. Those who are honest, sincere, helpful to others as well, turn out to be losers, they'll never prosper, but those who are flatterers, who are fickle, who cheat others, they prosper at all times because they always sell out in time.'

'But that's very bad, young man,' Pherm exclaimed.

'Very bad, yes, but for people like us. For them, it isn't bad. It's good and getting better every day,' An answered grimly.

'You mean that there's no fairness in the world, is that it? That doing evil doesn't bring you evil?' Pherm asked dubiously.

'I wouldn't put it quite like that,' An answered. 'Evil must result in evil. But what results there are don't necessarily befall those who do evil, but also others who know nothing about it. As when you cheat someone and get arrested, you pay the price, but in most cases if people cheat one another, they don't let themselves be caught. The negative result of being cheated happens all the same, but it affects others who don't cheat or aren't aware of it.'

'Uh, hard to say, hard to say,' Pherm fenced. 'I can't quite bring myself to believe this.'

Phloi, who lay listening to the two of them, said, 'I think as you do, An ... I've long thought like that, and that's why I don't want to do evil, I don't want to commit sins.'

Pherm turned to look at Phloi and then muttered, 'Well now, mother and son echo each other. I don't understand what you're talking about.'

‘It’s true, you know, Khun Luang,’ Phloi maintained. ‘If I did something evil knowing that I would be paid back with evil, that it wouldn’t affect others, I wouldn’t fear evil all that much, and I might commit sins like everyone else because good or bad concerns only me. If I go to hell, it’s I who go there, so what? If we want to commit evil, we must be ready to face the consequences. It’s like when you want something: you have to spend money to buy it. But from what I’ve seen, it’s always the others who have nothing to do with it who suffer the consequences, so I can’t bring myself to commit sins because I’m afraid others might suffer.’

‘Let’s talk about something else, Phloi. Take pity on me,’ Pherm said wearily.

Phloi’s condition kept going from bad to worse in the months before the war ended. The penury of drugs made her treatment partly inefficient and she made up her mind to pay no attention to the state of her body. She felt as if she was disabled, found it difficult to do anything, and the more time passed the more she felt that she had to rely on others entirely. This sort of feeling left her all the more dispirited.

One day, Pherm came to see her and after talking about other matters as usual, he said, ‘I think the war won’t last much longer. I think it’ll soon be over. Now Germany has been thoroughly defeated, only Japan remains. A few days ago, America dropped a new kind of bomb on Japan. The people died in the hundreds of thousands.’

‘Like the world-consuming blaze at the end of time,’ Phloi thought at once. ‘When will men stop killing men?’ But what her mouth said was, ‘What kind of bomb is it that is so disastrous? How dreadful!’

‘They call it an atomic bomb,’ Pherm answered. ‘It’s much, much more destructive than those that rained down on us. A single bomb can erase a whole town, killing everybody. So I think Japan can’t go on fighting for long. They must lose for good. Think about it: if they keep fighting, another dozen bombs or so and the entire Japanese archipelago will be destroyed.’

‘Good grief!’ Phloi exclaimed in a feeble voice. ‘And those people who die all over town must be people like us, old people, children, all innocents.’

‘Alas, Phloi,’ Pherm said. ‘The longer they fight the worse it is. If they stop, it’ll be good. The survivors will be fine. But that bomb I can’t help thinking about it. A friend of mine told me they just invented it in America. It’s frightening.’

‘It must be huge, don’t you think, to be able to bring such destruction,’ Phloi said out of simple curiosity.

‘That’s the thing, you see,’ Pherm said with obvious pride as if he had invented the atomic bomb himself. ‘He said the bomb was the size of an ordinary bomb or a little smaller actually, but tens of thousands of times more destructive.’

‘I can’t believe it, but then you must know this better than I.’

‘It’s true, you know.’ Pherm laughed. ‘This is no silly joke. It’s a most important matter actually. We can say that humankind has entered a new era. Think about it. We were born in an era when people still fought with knives and sticks of wood, or shot themselves with flintlocks and pistols. Being airborne was only to be found in epic tales. And we’ve lived until people can fly and drop bombs of a new type, one explosion and a whole town is gone, like with the Pharamart arrows in the *Ramakhian*. It’s been a life worth living, I say.’

‘And has anything improved?’ Phloi couldn’t help asking, even though in her heart she didn’t want to speak. ‘I’ve only seen people killing one another and those who don’t die are left in dire trouble, starving, with no clothes to put on.’

‘You must be patient. It won’t be long. In a little while the war will be over, we’ll all be fine. Just wait.’

‘Another of your premonitions, is it?’ Phloi asked with a smile, thinking of the various erroneous predictions her brother always liked to make.

‘Nothing of the sort.’ Pherm laughed. ‘I’m being rational. Everybody says the same thing.’

But finally it was as Pherm had predicted, because after Bangkok had been heavily bombed and the two electric power stations were destroyed, which led to power outage and water shortage, shortly thereafter and totally unexpectedly, the war ended quietly and suddenly, just as it had started one morning. The news was all over town

that the war was over, with Japan admitting defeat by the Allies. Pherm hurried over to see Phloi as soon as he learned the news in the morning. He went up the steps with a grin on his face and when he saw Phloi said, 'This time it's great fun, Phloi. Germany surrendered first, and then Japan this morning. There only remains superpower Thailand left to fight alone against England and America!'

'You must be very happy this time,' Phloi said.

'Who wouldn't? This time it's the end of our troubles at last. Prices will go down now.'

'I'm not so sure about this. We've been held at the throat for years, there has been much fighting and killing and then with no fighting any longer suddenly everything will be fine and dandy as before? I can't believe that, Khun Luang.'

Phloi's views on this matter proved to be correct. Even Pherm and many others who used to think that everything would be fine and return to normal when the war was over had to acknowledge that her opinion was better than theirs eventually because, even though the war was over and the participation of Thailand in that war, such as her alliance with Japan or her declaration of war on England and America, had been annulled, the overall situation didn't seem to indicate a return to normal as before the war but on the contrary seemed to be getting worse than during the war itself. Goods and foodstuffs of all kinds were still hard to find, with prices soaring to frightening and worrying levels. Foreign soldiers who had been coming into the country throughout the war had all disappeared in little to no time, but foreign soldiers of another persuasion had come in instead, that is, the soldiers of the winning side, and not long after those soldiers had arrived, rumours went around about the coarseness and daredevilries of all kinds on the part of this new batch of foreign soldiers, leading to much fear. The little children that ran along the streets being friendly with all passersby gave up greeting people with Japanese words, stopped shouting '*Arigato!*' or '*Banzai!*' and began to shout '*Okay!*' instead, which, when Phloi heard it, she understood must be farang language. At first there were people who hated Japan as an invader and saw the foreign soldiers as friends who had come to kick

all Japanese troops out of Thailand, but as time passed that feeling changed to wondering how long those soldiers would stay.

Pherm, who came to find out how Phloi fared almost every day, remarked one day, 'I think something is wrong with me. When the Japanese were here I hated them to the marrow, but now that the war is over I feel pity for them because I see they are shamefully meek. Even more so now that they are gone, that they are no longer all over our streets, I've come to miss them. I'm totally fed up with those farang soldiers.'

An, who sat there too, laughed and then said, 'You are not the only one to feel like that. I think almost all of us Thai people are like that. When the farang soldiers were captured by the Japanese around Bang-pong, we all felt pity for them, we wanted to help them. When the train passed by, I used to see passengers throwing cigarettes, fruits and other things to the farang detainees, the whole train. But now that the Japanese have lost and are detained by the farang, it's the Japanese soldiers we pity. Whenever we see them, we give them cakes and cigarettes on the sly again. I think it's because we are charitable and have sympathy for losers.'

'I think so too,' Phloi said. 'I too am like that. All things considered, it has nothing to do with us; it's other people fighting. Whoever makes a wrong move and is in trouble I pity.'

Pherm laughed. 'My sister is really living on another planet,' he said. 'We almost died in the fighting and now she says it has nothing to do with us.'

On the Thai side, Phloi knew that the people who had been on top during the war had lost all power as Pherm had predicted and a new group of influential people had come up instead, but she was too old to pay attention to this and besides around that time came an announcement which monopolised her attention: His Majesty Rama VIII was to return to the capital.

This news could be compared to an important drug for her, because of one of the symptoms of her illness which no drug could treat or cure, and that symptom was her lack of interest in what was happening around her. The news that His Majesty would be back re-

kindled that interest, and she recalled the time when she had gone to admire him upon his first return. That was several years ago and he was very young. By now he must have grown into a young man. What he would look like was something Phloi reflected upon and pondered with much pleasure. The delight she felt was no different from what she had felt when her children were to return from abroad, because the feeling she had for His Majesty was like what Choi had told her once: a deeply absorbing love, not just loyalty as the populace had for their sovereign, but a sense of close kinship as if His Majesty really was hers, a member of the family, a blood relation, a beloved child or grandchild whose growth she had watched with love and benevolence, along with hopes of a prosperous future. Thus it was that she felt much better at the news that His Majesty would be coming back. Her heart, which had lain fallow because it was devoid of hope and interest after enduring much sorrow and disappointment, began to blossom again, which led to some improvement in her physical condition, so that her children and siblings wondered, because she now seemed to be on her way to recovery as she could sit up and walk sprightly like someone in good health. Food and sleep were satisfactory, so that those who worried over her health believed that she had seen the worst of it and would recover before long.

When only a few days remained before His Majesty returned, Phloi told An, with words which had him stare at her dubiously, 'When His Majesty returns, I want to go and attend. Go and fetch Auntie Choi as well, because the last time we went together.'

'But Mother...' An said, in a turmoil. 'You've only just recovered and it's still touch and go. Are you really up to it?'

'I've never asked for more than I can handle, An,' Phloi answered with certainty. 'Usually I don't like to go anywhere, but this time I do. Don't disappoint me. I feel that if I don't go this time I'll never be at peace. I'm old, An. Please arrange for me to go and see His Majesty this once, while he drives by, that'll be enough. I'm not asking for much.'

An thought for a moment and then said, 'I don't think there will be any problem. A friend of mine rents a place on Ratchadamnern,

just on the route. If you sit and wait there, taking along your medicine and water, you'll be able to see him. I'll arrange it for you.'

'Thanks, An,' Phloi answered happily. 'Think of it as making merit for your mother, and don't forget to get Choi.'

On the day of the king's return, Phloi took along Somjai and her grandchildren, the several housemaids who wanted to see His Majesty, as well as Phuang, Khun Chit's wife, who carried food for lunch, water to drink as well as some medicine in a big basket, and they all left the house by boat, together with An, who, when he saw the basket, laughed and then said, 'You look ready to go on a Kathin, Mother!'

Phloi looked at the various implements and then laughed joyfully and answered, 'That's what it looks like. But this isn't all for me. There are many young ones going along too. So we have all of this just in case.'

When they had crossed the river to the Bangkok side, An took the whole party to go and wait in a building on Ratchadamnern as had been agreed and then took a cab to go and fetch Choi, who would come out of the palace. It was still very early in the morning, but Phloi noticed that the populace who had come to catch sight of their sovereign that day were unusually numerous, more so than what she had seen on the day His Majesty returned for the first time. They seemed to have gathered there for the same purpose of welcoming back the Lord Above Their Heads, who was the true leader of the nation and whom everyone had missed during the whole length of the war. His return today seemed to mark an important date in people's feelings, as the end of the barbarity of war they had gone through and the beginning of a new era in which everyone would reform themselves and build a bright new life after so many missed opportunities during the war.

All things considered, this belief and hope might be mistaken and unfounded in the eyes of many people who considered that the king was just an ordinary human being who had no more charisma than any other citizen, but in the eyes of Phloi and the great many people who had come to welcome him with delight and with loyalty that

day, his charisma was already effective in their hearts, through cheerfulness, a feeling of stability, an absence of loneliness, goodwill and good intentions towards all those who had loyalty in common. Each looked at the others as members of the same vast family without bias and with a common love and common goodwill towards one individual who was the focus of their veneration, one individual who united them as Thais and in their good feelings towards one another. True, His Majesty was still a young man, a teenager still, but he was a teenager who belonged to the whole nation, he was the grandson of the aged, the little brother of the middle-aged and the big brother and friend of the younger generation. This feeling of closeness had come about miraculously. To explain it according to Phloi's thinking, the thinking of a woman of the past, one had to say that it was due to the royal charisma. That day, hundreds of thousands of people lined the way from Donmuang to the Royal Palace to welcome back home the one they loved. Everyone was full of love, confidence and contentment. Among those hundreds of thousands, you wouldn't have found a single face that was sorrowful, sad, angry or resentful. Phloi looked around and her hair stood on end and the lump in her throat was from rapture which seemed to be just as painful as sorrow.

Choi, gasping for breath, pushed her way through the crowd and came to sit beside her. She raised her handkerchief to mop her face and then waved it vigorously at herself to fight the heat while saying in a raucous voice, 'Could I have some cold water, Phloi? I'm terribly thirsty.'

Phloi hurriedly opened the icebox, poured some water in a cup and passed it to Choi, who took it, drank some and poured the rest over her hands and then stroked her face and arms, after which she said, 'Since I was born up until now ... in more than sixty years, I never saw as many people as today. When I came out of the palace, I saw a human tide all over the roads, all over the Royal Esplanade. My legs wobbled and I almost fainted. An couldn't drive me there because cars weren't allowed through, so I had to walk through the throng all the way to here. Good heavens! I don't know where they all come from, so many of them.'

‘Indeed, Choi. I’ve been marvelling too, I’ve never seen the likes of it,’ Phloi said.

‘But look at you here. You are still not well: aren’t you afraid of passing out in the middle of it all?’ Choi asked with wonder and concern.

‘Never mind. I’ve been here since early morning, there weren’t so many people,’ Phloi answered. ‘But no matter what, I had to come today, I had to attend, I couldn’t miss it.’

‘I understand you exactly,’ Choi said. ‘If it was me, I’d come even if I were to die, because I love him, this king. Since I was born, this is the first king I have loved. The previous ones, I didn’t dare to love, I was afraid of them rather, but this one is not like the others. I love him truly, I don’t know why, maybe because he’s still so young, or maybe because I love democracy like the rest of them, who knows.’

The sound of An’s chuckle behind her made Choi turn and frown at him in jest, and then she said, ‘Look at young An here. When I say that I’m democratic, here he goes laughing at me. An old hag like me can’t love democracy, is that what you are thinking?’

After they had been chatting for a while, there was unusual excitement in the crowd, which meant that the royal apparition was imminent. People walked or ran in confusion, each looking for a place where they thought they would have the best view of His Majesty. The building where Phloi sat waiting bordered the road the motorcade would take. As the front of the building was thick with people, Phloi stood up and craned her neck to check if she could see over their heads and was relieved to find out that she could; she would catch a glimpse of His Majesty without having to go out amongst the crowd. Hoorays came from far away and then drew closer and closer. The confusion amongst people increased. Phloi stood erect, thinking that when the royal car would drive past she would have to tiptoe to have a good view. Her eyes stared straight ahead getting ready to see only one spot without looking sideways, unwilling to let anything divert her attention. The hoorays grew louder still. Finally, they were all around bursting her eardrums as if the land was collapsing. The ivory-coloured limousine drove by slowly, the royal standard fluttering up front. Right then Phloi had to raise both

hands to her chest as if to prevent her heart from thumping so hard as to slip out of it, because she saw His Majesty clearly sitting in the royal car with his younger brother by his side, waving his hand to the populace, a gentle smile on his face and his eyes full of royal kindness as Thai people of the era had never encountered before. Phloi stood still, tears flowing down, so enraptured that it was as if something hard was pressing against her heart. His Majesty had grown into a young man seemingly quite rapidly since she had seen him that last time. Nothing could compare with his royal appearance, so handsome, so full of majesty. He was everything and had all the traits she had always thought the Lord of the Land should have.

When the royal car went out of sight, Phloi turned to look at Choi, whom she thought stood beside her, to talk to her and express what she felt, but Choi wasn't there and the others who had come together had disappeared, leaving only An, who had remained out of concern for his mother.

'Where has everybody gone?' she asked.

'They raced outside when His Majesty came by. They are all outside.'

'What about Auntie Choi? Where is she?'

An laughed, pointed upfront and then said, 'She was the first to run outside, so they all followed her. She's over there. Can you see her? She went prancing over there, waving and shouting hooray like everyone else.'

Phloi looked in the direction An's finger pointed and couldn't help laughing, admiring her friend's stamina, as she said, 'Auntie Choi is really something, isn't she? Look at her. Doesn't she look like a young woman?'

The royal carriage now far away, Choi made her way back through the throng and she shouted, 'Oh my! I'm so exhausted. My darling Phloi, I beg of you, let me have another drop of cold water, for the love of me.'

Phloi poured her another cup and gave it to her while teasing her with 'Serves you well, old as you are you don't know how to spare yourself. You are lucky they didn't stomp you to death. What was the idea of going out dancing in the heat? From here you could see clearly.'

'Oh, don't play the old woman with me, will you. I don't even know how I made it out there,' Choi said while raising her handker-

chief to dab at her face, and then she exclaimed, 'How handsome! Good Lord, so handsome! If I was still young, I'd have run after him all the way to the palace gate!'

'Oh, you, Choi!' Phloi said and burst out laughing again. 'If the young ones hear you, they'll laugh their heads off.'

'Who cares?' Choi answered good-humouredly. 'Today, no matter what, I won't get angry, but he's so handsome, you know, Phloi! I've read so many reports of how handsome he is, but only today did I see with my own eyes how true it is. The young women who ran out to stand with me just now were jumping with joy you should have seen how.'

'And you too,' Phloi interrupted. 'I saw you jumping about with the lot of them, and shouting hooray like a young girl.'

'Oh? Did I, really?' Choi exclaimed as if she didn't believe it, and then went on saying, 'Well, isn't it as they used to say in the past: "*Young lasses and old crones, he leaves them all agog*"?'

'But he's really handsome, you know, Choi,' Phloi couldn't help saying in turn. 'Such bearing I'd never seen. Our old Lords, handsome they were indeed, but did I ever think they could be as handsome as this?'

'Exactly,' Choi said as she nodded. 'Really handsome, too handsome actually ... It goes beyond words. I'm lucky for once. This time he'll stay in the palace, at Borom Pimarn Hall. You know how forlorn it has been in the palace. Maybe his staying there this time will liven up things.'

'I think it won't be in the palace only,' Phloi said. 'Now that he's back, it'll be lively everywhere, all over town, but I heard he'll be here only for a while and then go abroad again. This is what I don't like. I'd like him to stay for good.'

'Don't I too,' Choi said. 'But then, what can we do? Let's not think about his leaving just now: he'll still be here for a long while. Even if he goes abroad again, I don't see anything wrong. Next time he comes back we'll come out again to greet him. It's such fun.'

Shortly after the whole royal procession had gone past, An went out to get a car to take them back. Phloi sat waiting for him and chatted with Choi until, after quite a long time had gone by, An drove up

to the front of the building. Phloi had everyone get in the car, including Choi who was to be dropped at the palace gate before they went to take the boat to return home. While they sat in the car, Choi said in a low voice, 'Phloi, how many times have the two of us gone out to welcome the king back home?'

Phloi thought for a moment and then answered, 'Three times. The first time was when the previous king returned from Europe, and twice for this king.'

'It was fun every time, wasn't it?'

'Very much so, Choi, every time,' Phloi answered.

Choi was silent for a while and then said, 'We've had lots of fun together, haven't we?'

'Very much so. Thinking back, it feels like yesterday for some.'

'Exactly,' Choi said with satisfaction. 'All things considered, the two of us have had a full life.'

When they reached the palace gate, Choi got out of the car, took her leave and then went back into the palace sprightly. Phloi was left with taking her party across the river back home with a full heart.

From that day, His Majesty became the main topic of most people's conversations. All other topics paled in comparison, because whatever their importance, they were likely to induce discord and cause tension and worry, whereas talking about His Majesty made everyone feel at ease, and for those who were interested in the latest news, he was very hot news as he had not lived in the capital for many years. Phloi never tired of listening to conversations about him and she also kept up with the royal news in the newspapers. During all the months that he stayed in the capital, Phloi heard and read of many instances that told of his sublime glory, of his kindness to his subjects and of the loyalty of those, Thai and foreigners alike, who sought his protection. Comparing what she was witnessing with what she had known of the three previous reigns, Phloi felt that the loyalty to the throne that had always been present in the hearts and minds of the people had never been so openly and widely demonstrated as in the current reign, and that this loyalty was felt by most people in a more personal, more intimate way.

She could feel that the general situation was more stable than before. As for herself, the pains and strains due to her heart condition had eased off enough for her to cease being bedridden and move about and do small chores. She knew very well that she was not cured and would never be, but this did not in any way alarm her. Her children were leading normal lives – Own was endowed with the peace of monkhood; An was a responsible family man; and Praphai, even though she was not getting along too well with her husband, seemed more mature these days and could be trusted not to do anything rash. If only Ort was still alive... Whenever she thought of him, Phloi felt a cold, wet shroud wrap itself around her heart, and she knew her sorrow would stay with her until the end of her days.

She led a simple life and the days went by, bringing closer the time when His Majesty would leave again for a last, short stay abroad. Whenever she left the palace to visit her, Choi was full of stories about the king, and whenever Pherm came visiting, he too was full of stories about the king. Pherm, who was particularly interested in political affairs – too much, to her taste – tried his best to hold back while His Majesty was here and concentrated instead, like everybody else, on any titbit that had to do with the Royal Person.

That day – it was a Sunday, because An was at home and had not gone to work – that Sunday morning in the month of June, Phloi woke up at dawn as usual. It was a day of bright sunshine like any other day, and everything looked fine and ordinary. Life was going on, and the boats and rafts floated up and down the Bang Luang canal as they had for many decades.

Towards eleven that morning, an ashen-faced Pherm came up the stairs and walked to the corner of the veranda where Phloi sat and An was playing with his son.

‘Phloi! An!’ Pherm said with a voice Phloi had never heard before. ‘Terrible news – the King is dead.’

Deeply shocked, she shrieked: ‘What are you saying? That’s not true! It can’t be. He is too young, he can’t possibly...’

An looked at her with concern and alarm.

‘I stopped for a cup of coffee at the shop in front of the Grand

Palace,' Pherm went on. 'Everybody was talking about it.'

Phloi felt greatly relieved. Brother Pherm's coffee-shop rumours! No truth in them. People these days would stop at nothing, even the most ill-omened lies, just for the sake of gossip.

'It's true, you know, Phloi! It's true, An!' Pherm said in a tearful voice. But Phloi did not pay him any attention, thinking only that he must be wrong this time. How could he be right when he maintained that such an unbelievable rumour was true?

Choi came from the palace about one o'clock and as soon as she saw her all dressed in black, Phloi stayed transfixed where she was sitting. Choi walked up the stairs in tears, but Phloi's heart could only cry: 'It's not true! Not true! I won't believe it!' Yet she did not dare to ask any questions because her heart also knew that it was indeed true.

Choi gave her certain details about the King's death which made the event even more unbelievable. It was growing dark outside and the wind and the birds and the water sounded like someone crying...

Choi left, saying there was much to do in the palace and she had better hurry back – Choi, who had spent her whole life in the palace and who would keep doing her duty there till the end of her days. Phloi rose to her feet and slowly walked to the bed to rest her aching back. She had never felt so tired and feeble in her life. She lay down and closed her eyes and tried to stop thinking altogether.

But rambling thoughts kept surfacing. 'He shouldn't have died. So young and strong and handsome – all destroyed like that. It shouldn't be, but he has departed, though he was our Lord, beloved by all ... Departed like Ort, who was just my son, how could he avoid death? Our Lord who had everything, and who still could not avoid ... Sleeping in the Bedchamber, watched over by all his entourage ... And yet death did find a way to him ... Just as it reached my son and soon will reach that body of mine ... The same for everyone ... Just a matter of time.'

Phloi felt as though she were floating on a higher plane. All the sorrows that had accumulated throughout her life seemed to have begun to ease out. She thought of Khun Preim, who seemed to always be near her in her moments of need.

FOUR REIGNS/KUKRIT PRAMOJ

“Khun Preim, there are so many things I don’t understand that I could ask you to explain. But it’s all right. Never mind ... Actually, I am beginning to understand some things, but I’ve lived so long, Khun Preim ... Seen things I never thought I would come to see ... I’ve lived through four reigns, Khun Preim ... Four reigns ... Such a long time ... I am so tired, so tired my heart will burst ... To outlive four reigns, isn’t that too much? Or am I tired for some other reason? I don’t know ... Four reigns...”

That Sunday evening, on the 9th of June 1946, when the water in the Bang Luang canal was leaving its banks exposed, Phloi’s heart, weakened by illness and repeated sorrows, went drifting away with the tide.

End of Four Reigns