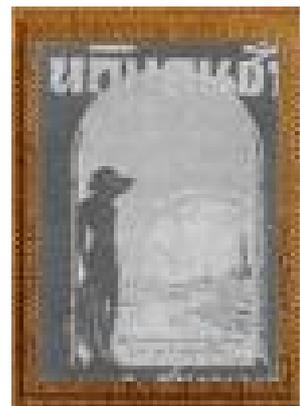


the fallen woman

KOR SURANGKHANANG

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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The beam of light of a huge lamp came dazzling forth from a distance. Behind it, at first, one could only see a dark shadow with sparks shooting up into the darkness like tiny fireworks, until it became apparent to the eye that it was a locomotive pulling a long row of carriages. The clatter of iron wheels against the rails and of pistons at work reverberated from afar. The stoker blew the whistle as a signal and gradually reduced the power of the engine. Soft light briefly swept over a sign that read 'Hua Hin' and soon the train came to a stop along the platform. There was a buzz of conversation in all the carriages that were lit. Some passengers poked their drowsy heads out of the windows. Travellers embarking at the station were preparing to board; those about to get off, laden with cumbersome parcels, watched their front and rear. Twenty-one hundred hours was the arrival time of the Bangkok–Padang Besar express and it triggered quite a commotion.

A young man of medium height and slender build, clad in a noticeably rather out-of-date travel suit,

attracted the attention of several of the passengers leaning out of the windows, because when he mounted the steps of a second-class carriage, he turned and reached out to a uniformed employee of the Hua Hin Hotel who promptly passed him a smallish travel bag. Some even smiled to themselves when they saw the bellboy bow his head and grin as he held out his hand to receive the valuable piece of paper the man tipped him with.

As the train moved out of the station, the young man carrying his travel bag opened the glass door and went inside. By the light of the ceiling lamp the two or three passengers still awake who sat facing the carriage door could see his swarthy face clearly. From his looks and bearing, plus the fact that he had a hotel employee accompany him and had given him a tip, they jumped to the conclusion that he was rather well off. His broad face showed that he was good-humoured, but his rather nervous manner, ah, that told that he had been away from city life for a couple of years or longer.

The shaking of the train as it gathered speed along the straight track made him hold his bag awkwardly and he muttered excuses as he jostled his way along to an empty seat almost at the far end of the carriage. He dropped his bag, thrust it under the seat and heaved a sigh of relief. He pulled a handkerchief out of his shirt pocket and wiped the sweat on his brow and cheeks, beneath his nose and round his neck, and then stuffed it into his trouser pocket and looked

around at his fellow travellers, starting with the man in front of him, a fat Chinese with the looks of a trader. Even though he was sitting up, his eyes were tightly shut and he even seemed to be snoring softly. The young man screwed up his face and turned to his right. Two Indians with unkempt moustaches were jabbering away in a language he didn't understand. Fancying that he could smell butter, he raised his hand and rubbed his nose as he turned round to take a look at his last hope for company. Catching sight of green cloth, he knew at once that it was a soldier. He saw three shiny stars on the man's shoulder and neatly combed hair on his head bent over in a reading posture. Turning back again, he felt rather pleased that the fellow traveller behind him was an army captain. But then a thought struck him: he had seen this officer before. He sat holding his head in his hands, frowning as if deep in thought, and then impulsively turned round once again, leaning so much that his sudden shadow startled the captain. The officer looked up from the newspaper and as their eyes chanced to meet, they both cried out simultaneously.

'Charn!'

'Damrong!'

'Hey! Is that you?'

'So it's you, you rascal!'

On a long overnight journey, a familiar face is always welcome, especially if it turns out to be that of someone one knows well enough to greet with this

sort of words. So pleased was the young civilian that he almost jumped over the seat. The captain threw his newspaper aside and stood up hurriedly, shouting something incomprehensible. It was only after the two of them had clasped hands heartily that they regained their composure. As they did so, they became aware of the two Indians eyeing them with annoyance and bafflement and of the Chinese fellow's equally thoroughly disconcerted face. Captain Charn puckered his lips in warning and whispered, 'Hey, Damrong, I'm so glad to see you I'm forgetting myself. I thought this was a beer hall, not a train.'

Damrong looked over his shoulder and smiled as he let himself drop back onto his seat. 'The beer hall where we met four or five years ago,' he said, then looked up thoughtfully. 'How many years was it actually? Four years? Four, that's right. I say, where are you off to?' Imposing chest, strong shoulders, full face: his friend had hardly changed.

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Kor Surangkhanang was the best-known pen name of Kan-ha Khiangsiri (1911-1998) née Wanthanaphat. Proclaimed a Thai National Artist in 1986, she was the archetypal author of what later generations have come to call 'stagnant-water literature'. She wrote one hundred short stories and nearly fifty novels – mostly escapist romances – over a forty-year period starting in 1936.