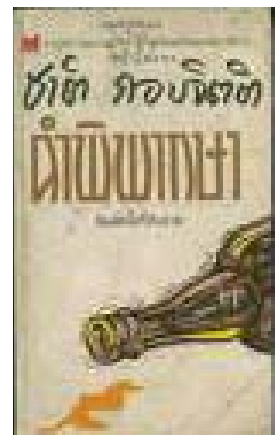


the judgment

CHART KORBJITTI

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG
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This is the story of a young man who took as his wife a widow who was slightly deranged. (The story would probably have ended there had the widow not been his father's wife.) And as the affair happened to take place in a small rural community, it grew into a major scandal which shook the morals of nearly everyone in the village and set one and all gossiping and passing judgment on the basis of whatever opinion each had formed about this abnormal relationship.

Rumour had it that, less than a month after his father died Fak had taken his stepmother as his wife. Some went so far as to claim that the two of them had cuckolded Old Foo even before his body had been laid to rest in his coffin. Just look at Somsong, so bucked up these days, and look at Fak, skinny as a bag of bones—

The rumour started with Young Lamai, the boiled-peanut seller at the twelfth-month temple fair, which, that year, also celebrated the sixtieth birthday of the temple's abbot. In the morning the villagers had made merit by offering food to the monks and in the evening dedicated temple-goers had organised all kinds of entertainment to keep the whole community in high spirits.

That evening, during the *likei** performance, the villagers crowded before the stage, some sitting, some standing, the latecomers watching from beyond the covered area. Behind the multicoloured lights that shone at the front of the stage, the leading actor was singing his lines and dancing his part. His costume glittered and shimmered and his every move sent flashes of silver and gold. The backdrop was a throne hall drawn in perspective which seemed to stretch as far as the eye could see, hypnotising the audience and transporting it right into the palace and its wonder.

Young Lamai sat beside the stage selling boiled peanuts from a basket placed on a table next to a kerosene lamp. Young men kept dropping by to treat themselves to some peanuts and to chat and flirt with the young vendor, who was filling them all with the hope that she might treat them to something else altogether some day.

As Fak was passing by with his stepmother, the widow Somsong, Young Lamai called to him with the familiarity of those who have known each other all their lives. At the time, two or three youngsters were munching their peanuts next to the table.

'Fak, aren't you going to buy some?' she asked, flashing him an enticing smile.

'I've already eaten.' Fak came to a stop and stood there, smiling back.

'Oh, come on, a handful or two won't hurt you. All right,

* Open-air folk opera

if you won't buy 'm, you can have 'm for free. Here!' Young Lamai wasn't letting up and she went on teasing Fak, but the widow Somsong didn't take this as a joke at all. She was clearly possessive over Fak as she glared at the young vendor.

'You leave my man alone, you hear!'

Young Lamai turned red in the face and shot back a volley of abuse. There and then, the area before the kerosene lamp would have turned into a battlefield had not Fak dragged his stepmother away, the young vendor screaming in their back: 'Sure, Fak don't like to eat peanuts, but his mouth isn't big enough to munch yours, you bitch!'

It was on this night, then, that the announcement was made that stepson and stepmother had become man and wife. The revelation was relayed by Young Lamai, who was seething with anger, and let no one ignore that as everybody knew, this happened to be the twelfth month, during which, as she didn't fail to point out, nobody got married because it was the month in which only dogs were in heat.

The temple fair had been over for many days and with it the visual entertainment, but the entertainment derived from gossip was only just beginning and it looked as though it would get juicier in coming days.

The temple was the centre of activity for the villagers. When a child was born, it was taken to the temple to be

given an auspicious name by the abbot according to the date of its birth. Those who had offspring of ordination age would have them ordained in the temple, where they remained for the duration of the Buddhist Lent. Of course, when someone died, the body would be brought to the temple to be cremated. Whenever people wanted to meet and talk, or whenever the community leader sought to convene a meeting of all the villagers, they did so at the temple. When district officials came to issue identity cards, it was there, too, that they interviewed the villagers. The doctors who gave immunisation shots had everyone line up at the temple. The elderly regularly went there to make merit and renew their vows. Officers from the police station investigating a crime or looking for a suspect would stop at the temple to ask questions. Individually and collectively, everybody relied on the temple.

Fak himself had his hut behind the temple, built on monastery grounds. So some people, when they came to the temple, kept their eyes and ears open in the hope of finding out a little more about the disgusting affair between Fak and his stepmother. Sometimes, they took back home a bit of gossip to feed the rumour.

Fak worked as school janitor, a job he had inherited from his father. It was rather like a legacy his father had bequeathed to him before he had drawn his last breath. But some people sneered at Fak behind his back, saying: 'He sure has made a clean sweep of his father's property, wife included.' 'A pity all the time he spent studying as a

novice is now wasted.’ He thus became in their eyes an ungrateful person who showed no respect for the memory of his father. His friends began to desert him one after the other and even the monks refused to sit and chat with him for hours on end as they had used to do. He had almost become an outcast in the village, but not quite, because there were still occasions when it was necessary to exchange a few words with him.

With every passing day, Fak’s world became more desolate as if he lived all alone in the village. To other people, he was a target of ridicule and contempt. Every word that reached his ears sounded harsh and coarse as if the speaker was unwilling to talk. Sarcasm lay behind every joke.

Work was like a friend to him, the only thing that soothed him and prevented his thoughts from running wild. He passed his days lost in work, but his nights were protracted battles to find sleep as they stretched out in a turmoil of thought.

As time went by, Fak became increasingly tormented by his suspicion and dread of the people around him. During the day he wore himself out, but at night he couldn’t sleep. As he became thinner and thinner, the villagers began to call him a bag of bones.

Chart Korbjitti, born 1954, is a highly successful, self-publishing Thai novelist and short story writer with a wide range of styles.

