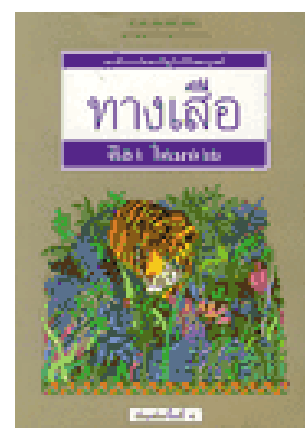


the path of the tiger

SILA KOMCHAI

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG
AND PHONGDEIT JIANGPHATTANA-KIT

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The torrential rain which had been pouring before daybreak as if the heavens were leaking had abated and then stopped, but the dawn sky was still overcast. Raindrops clung to the branches of the Siamese sindora tree and tapped on the leaves of the papaya trees by the brook. Branches and twigs stirred in the universal silence as if the tension from above wasn't over yet.

The young man sitting with his legs stretched across the threshold of the bamboo hut leaned out to look beyond the eaves at the sky above the brook. He carefully wiped the butt of his muzzle-loading rifle with a loincloth. A touch of unease briefly blurred the hope in his eyes. All the things he needed were laid out around him. The rifle was already loaded with saltpetre and pellets, so he prepared himself to go out. He took the horn of saltpetre, the tin box containing pellets and buckshot, and the dry bamboo-fibre tow, and put them one at a time in his haversack as if he were inspecting and counting them.

'It's going to rain again... Hurry back home before you catch cold,' the young woman who was cooking on

the veranda shouted out at him. She got up and came to him, put some rice tightly wrapped in banana leaf in his haversack and craned her neck to look through the doorframe at the little boy and girl who slept huddled under a tired blanket spread out sideways in a corner of the room.

‘It’s so cold with all this rain! You sure the caps didn’t get wet?’ the young woman asked, stroking her arms and looking at the gun. This made him hesitate. He lifted the zinc breech to examine the trigger, and after a while flipped it shut and placed the gun down flat on the floor. He took the tin box out of the haversack and inspected the caps. The flakes of red paper were streaked with rows of black blobs the size of match heads. He put them out to dry by the fire, just to make sure.

‘Take good care of the kids, with all this rain...’ His voice was deep and soft. He adjusted his haversack and grabbed his rifle, ready to start on his journey.

‘If I’m late tonight, wait for...’ He checked himself in time. Hunters have long held that they must always be ready and on the alert but should never anticipate – it brings bad luck.

The sky strained to bear its burden of pregnant clouds, which drifted along and clung to the mountain peaks. It was odd. When you were in the middle of a cloud, you couldn’t see its shape; it was like moving through fog without seeing it. He was now climbing but was only conscious of the immediate

slope, which was densely covered with a variety of bamboo groves. A little later, he came to a wide plain carpeted with all sorts of tall tropical trees tied up in a tangle of vines and creepers.

Although he was not a professional hunter – he had fled from the village in order to avoid confrontation with certain people over certain events – his life deep in the mountains for the better part of a year spent foraging for food had forced him to quickly learn how to make the best of the jungle. At the beginning of the rainy season, wild olives turned a ripe yellow and, on nights of heavy rain, they fell and scattered about on the ground, releasing a sweet, heady fragrance which enticed the barking deer and made their mouths water. They took great pains parting the thin pulp from the acid, astringent peel. Once they had swallowed, the saliva in their bulging jowls was exquisitely sweet. On those mornings, the ravenous deer would come out and lurk around the olives, and you had to find a tree to stalk them from for a fair shot.

He was now making his way through spongy, slimy soil. The cracking leaves of the dry season had gathered on the ground and were rotting, releasing musty scents on their way back to compost and plain earth. Hunters preferred the rainy season. When they crept closer to their prey, they did not have to be as cautious as during the dry months. Then, they had to hold their breath and try to avoid the merest crack of dry leaf or snap of twig underfoot that would alert

the animal. The air was torrid and the constant breeze carried the faintest smell, even the whiff of a wild rose. During the monsoon season, ripe fruit, bamboo shoots and young grass lured the animals to venture out of their prowling grounds. Ferment smells, light scents and the sustained babble of a brook covered up the approach of the hunter until he saw his target clearly and could pull the trigger certain that he would not miss.

On the flat ridge, he slowed down, cautious of where he put his feet, his eyes constantly on the lookout, sweeping left and then right to widen his field of vision. He was wary of the slightest shudder of leaves. If a hunter's weapon is essential, so are a sharp sight and an ear sensitive to the merest noise.

As he trod past a bush full of wet leaves, he pushed aside a tangle of creepers and triggered a downpour of droplets from on high. His clothes were drenched. He was taking care that his weapon wouldn't get wet and jam. With his left hand, he kept the muzzle pointed to the ground, and his right hand was wrapped around the breech, which protected the trigger and the caps.

A barking deer has the colour of a russet cow in the middle of a field, the size of an average Thai dog, the legs and snout of a deer, but horns only two to three inches long. Its meat is as good as that of a fully grown calf – better even, come to think of it, given the difficulty in coming by it. And it fills your

stomach meal after meal, he thought with longing.

‘Oh, no! What a fool!’ he groaned, confused and incensed at himself. Some hunter! He had come out meaning to shoot a deer, but had mindlessly loaded his rifle with pellets instead of buckshot.

It looked as though the jungle had begun to change again and was breathing. In the dry season, the leaves turned every nuance of vivid yellow and red, and the ground was strewn with ochre-coloured ones. Some trees lost all their foliage and bared all their branches and twigs, only to sprout pale-green buds, as if they had discarded old clothes to put on a new garb. From the outside and at a distance, the nature of the change was difficult to assess; trekking through the jungle brought only perplexity. The flat expanse of the ridge, once bare, was now covered with ferns and wild grass which had crept down in a wide crescent. It had been raining on the track, and the leaves and plant growth had almost completely erased it. The ferns, which disappeared during the dry season, proliferated as their newly sprouted fronds drank the dew above the ground. The familiar jungle had changed more than he could recall.

From the walking time and thanks to some tall trees he remembered, he reckoned he would soon reach the mountain pass. The wide flat stretch of the ridge gradually narrowed into a clearly defined crest. Right there stood a huge Indian rubber tree, whose trunk would have taken three or four men to girdle, next to a dead Siamese sindora tree, which

leaned to the left and projected into the sky its black and rotten branches. On both sides of the crest, tiny rivulets burrowed down the slopes and turned into deep ravines further down. When he reached the spot where he had figured he would find his bearings, he saw that some branches of the sindora tree had fallen and lay over a tangle of crushed undergrowth.

He chose a stub of rubber-tree roots to sit on and rest awhile. He leaned his gun against the trunk, pulled out his cloth belt and wiped the sweat off his face and arms. He got out his tobacco pouch, an old bag of saline solution, and took a pinch of tobacco and a piece of dry banana leaf from it to roll himself a cigarette.

‘Luck, that’s what I need,’ he mumbled to himself. He slowly exhaled the smoke through his nostrils and gazed at the blanket of mist that smothered the trees in the distance. He had shot only one barking deer in his life. Highland cultivation of rice, corn, eggplant, gourds, cucumbers and chillies left him little leisure, except to hunt for birds, rats and squirrels and to fish in the brook by the hut.

‘The poor creature must have been blind,’ his wife had said in jest as they helped each other cut up the barking deer.