

Thai Fiction

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SANEH SANGSUK

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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The afternoon was coming to an end. The light was softening, and the dark-red sheen of the sun was fading. The sky was a deep dome of crystal, clear and vast. Thin shreds of clouds on the horizon to the west took on wondrous hues under the last sunrays. Their ever-changing shapes enticed the imagination. He sat still, looking at those clouds as if in a trance. He saw them as tangled mountains, as thick jungle, as a solitary tree whose branches had been shorn bare by storms, as hillocks in the shape of a woman lying on her side. He had never told the secrets in his imagination to anyone, not even to the gang of close friends who were out grazing their cows and busy playing with pinwheels made out of rushes. He looked at his own cows grazing along with the cows of his friends. As his gaze swept over them, he was counting. The eight of them were still there.

He it was who had given each cow its name. His father and mother had left him at liberty to do so, and he had chosen each name after much careful thought. The first four had names that had to do

with nature: Field and River and Forest and Mountain. It sounded like a nursery rhyme, too. The next two had names of gems: Diamond and Pearl. And when his father had bought another two calves last year, he hadn't been long in coming up with Silver and Gold. Diamond and Pearl and Silver and Gold: it sounded like a nursery rhyme, too. Every time his father and mother were told of the name of a cow, they smiled and approved without reservation, then set about using the name. One evening his father said, *Well now, Field and River, it's time for you two to stay in the cowshed, so you know where you belong.* One evening his mother said, *Silver and Gold, it's time you behaved like mature cows; I'll have you plough the rice field.* His father and mother were pleased that their cows had nice-sounding, well-matched names, and he was happy to please his father and mother. He was very close to his eight cows. If he hadn't been the one to give them their names, then for sure he wouldn't feel as attached to them as he did. He was their friend and he was their Lord of Life as well, and they acknowledged that much to him. He loved all of his cows. He was extremely careful not to show prejudice or bias. Come bedding season, his father used Field and River to harrow the rice field. His mother used Forest and Mountain to harrow the rice field. He used Diamond and Pearl to harrow the rice field, with Silver and Gold in reserve in case one pair of cows got too tired, or was badly hurt by the yoke. But he tried his utmost to love his cows equally; he

didn't pay attention to Silver and Gold only. After the day's harrowing was done, he bathed them all carefully and gave each of them a sheaf of green grass. He'd like his father and mother to buy one more cow or, even better, another two. He spent much of his spare time thinking up suitable names for them.

He was ten years old last February, just after he finished with primary school. His friends in the village, boys and girls alike, called him the Cripple. When he was still going to school, his classmates called him the Cripple. Some grownups in the village also called him the Cripple. That was because his right arm, from the shoulder down, was stiff and atrophied. He couldn't fold his crooked elbow. All of his fingers were rigid and useless; they stuck out like rods, couldn't be splayed out or bunched into a fist. His right shoulder looked caved in, shapeless and thin. But his left arm rippled with muscles. His left fingers were long, thick, tapered and deft. His left shoulder was strong and powerfully built. He was always ready to fight with boys his own size or even slightly bigger than him. And he always fought to the finish, even though he had the use of one arm only.

*Song Wat* took great pleasure in calling him the Cripple, that damn Cripple, or that fucking Cripple, with utmost hate and contempt. He was happy constantly reminding himself and others in the village of the child's impairment. *Song Wat* was a medium. He was a man of about fifty, short, brawny and very

dark-skinned. Formerly, he was plain Wat by name, but one day five years ago he had told everyone in the village that the spirit of the Sacred Mother who protected the village intended to use him as her medium and that he was the only person able to invite the spirit of the Sacred Mother to enter his body at any time. Many people in the village and the neighbouring villages believed him. And so it was that Master Wat became *Song* Wat, Wat the Anointed, just like that, and he grew steadily more prosperous without having to break his back in the rice field or raise cows or pigs any longer. When he was inhabited by the spirit, he wore a white, old-fashioned loincloth tied round his legs, a white long-sleeved shirt, a white shawl round his shoulder and a red flower over his ear. He spoke with the smooth, mellifluous voice of a woman, using quaint, ancient turns of phrase that were hard to figure out. His whole attitude too changed into that of a woman, and he could even dance with a peculiar, dainty grace. It was an impressive and credible act. *Song* Wat thus was someone who had power and influence in the village, and power and influence he was always ready to use. Around the village were strips of fallow land which were open to all, but *Song* Wat had taken them over on his own authority, fenced them off and planted them with trees, in the hope of becoming their owner eventually. The child's father said this was selfish and objected publicly but *Song* Wat stubbornly stayed on the land so that if the

land officials ever issued title deeds, he could claim the plots by right of use.

Being the medium of the spirit protecting the village made the people respect and fear him, but the crippled child's father did not believe that Wat was the medium of the Sacred Mother. His father always said, *That fellow Wat is only good to deceive fools*. That was the reason why *Song Wat* didn't like his father and mother and by the same token didn't like him either. Furthermore, *Song Wat* had taken to hating him the day he had given his son a black eye (he had thrown a mighty punch heedless of the fact that the fellow was much bigger than him – Heck, shouldn't have come 'n' bullied him in the first place). *Song Wat* always said that disparaging the medium of the Sacred Mother was like disparaging the Sacred Mother herself, and them that did would be brought to reckoning sooner or later. *Song Wat* said that if the boy had fallen from that palm tree and broken his right arm and lost the use of it year before last, it was because the invisible hand of the Sacred Mother had pushed him.

Two years earlier, when he was eight and still in the third form, he had gone with his cows in the fields and found a sugar palm tree whose berries were just right for his mother to preserve. It was a young tree about six metres high, without any bamboo steps up its trunk. He decided to climb it. He took his knife out of his waist and put it between his teeth, wiped the caked mud of the rainy season

off his feet on a clump of wet grass on the ground and shinnied up until he almost reached the crown. He knew no fear, the notion of danger didn't even enter his mind: higher palm trees than this he had climbed. The top of the tree was a cluster of dry palm midribs that still clung, blocking his ascent. He couldn't climb any higher to pick the berries unless he got those midribs out of the way. So, he used his left hand to clasp the trunk, with both his feet taking the weight of his body on either side of the trunk, and he used his right hand to pull at the dry midrib right above his head. The whole trunk was covered with slippery green mould. The midrib he pulled with all his strength came loose easier and faster than he thought, and this made him lose his balance. He was telling himself, Heck, this messy stuff's coming off real easy. Even before he had thought this through, he had slipped and was falling along with the midrib. Fright made him yell. His knife fell out of his mouth. The right side of his body slammed into the ground. There was the unmistakable sound of a bone in his arm breaking, along with a searing pain and a gut-wrenching spasm. He lay prone on the ground, jaws clenched, and remained lying thus until the sun had left the land. His cows (he had only six then) wouldn't go back to the cowshed even though it was getting dark. They came and gathered round him and stood looking at him, lowing, nudging him gently with their muzzles, licking his body and his face with their raspy slobbering

tongues, snorting in distress, until the evening star shone and his father came and found him breathing feebly on the ground, his body covered in mud, his right arm stiff and disjointed, but even so his jaws still clenched tight and his eyes dry. The hospital was too far, as was the monastery of Father Ring, the famed bonesetter. He had to drink a decoction of *buabok* leaves for a whole month to nurse his contusions, and from that day, his right arm was a dud. That was what made everyone call him the Cripple. That was what made *Song Wat* always say that that accident had happened because his father did not show respect to the medium of the Sacred Mother, and not a few folk thought *Song Wat's* opinion was correct, and he was respected and feared all the more.

But his father and mother never called him the Cripple, neither did Granny Phlapphlueng, the midwife, nor Reverend Father Thian, the abbot of the village monastery, and he always thought of all four of them with gratitude.