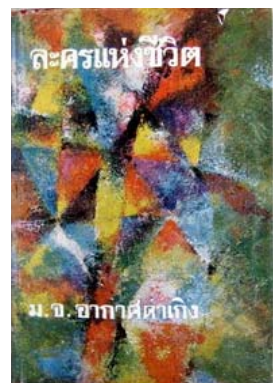


the circus of life

ARKARTDAMKEUNG RAPHEEPHAT

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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Childhood

Omar Khayyaám once said:

*'Watch the play, the circus and then yourself
You will jeer, laugh and dance as in a dream.'*

The truth of these lines has always impressed me very much. Furthermore, I feel that when he wrote them, the poet was in a state of carefree serenity, and his superior intellect made him able to perceive the very truth, dreams, joys and pains of mankind. Ah, the circus! The circus of life! The circus of the world!

Although I am only 28 years old, the curtain has already fallen on one performance in the circus of my life. I daresay without the slightest hesitation that you will be spellbound and thoroughly entertained while you watch this play, and that you will lose yourself in its bliss and sorrow. By this, I do not in any way mean to claim that I am an exceptional human being: in truth, I am just an ordinary young man, but what makes me different is the sudden and sweeping changes of fortune I have known throughout my life. Luck – that tiny light shining from some unknown direction – has guided me and turned me into an adventurer, a rogue, an inveterate gambler

addicted to almost all games, and I have wandered in all sorts of places to find them, unmindful of their trifling results and lowly returns. And it was luck, too, that had me born into one of the most illustrious families in Siam. But it would not be wrong to say that I was the ugly duckling in a flock of graceful swans, because I had a rather slack and rebellious nature, unlike everyone else in the family. Luck also gave me the opportunity to study, work and travel in almost every country in the world, and to know people of all nations and of all stations in life. I was in France at a time when a severe financial crisis brought deprivation and hardship to the people, and governments kept falling. I was in England during times of labour unrest, and in the United States of America when Lindbergh was the first man to fly across the Atlantic Ocean. I had the good luck to witness the warm welcome given to this magnificent aviator, as well as the achievements of male and female pilots who followed in his wake. Among them was Ruth Elder, a flying ace endowed with charm and beauty who has since become a star in Hollywood; I not only met her but also had a chance to converse with her in Washington. Isn't it true, dear readers? I was once a lucky man, as very few Thai young men can ever claim to be.

There is nothing worse than inequity and injustice. When they grow up, wayward children usually brood resentfully about the inequities that have been perpetually inflicted upon them since early childhood. These

painful feelings condition their behaviour. They become narrow-minded and eye everything in this world with bitterness and without confidence in themselves or in others. Whose fault is it, then? Inequity and injustice have been with us since the beginning of time and are an important part of the laws of life that no one can escape.

There are other people who have also had an unfortunate childhood but who, once they have been able to see the world, prefer to laugh at inequity, injustice and the distress they and others feel. They frequently sport smirks on their faces. To them, life is worthless, cruel and laughable. These people are like that because they have grown accustomed to their own lamentations. Everything they see and experience in the world is like a medicine that dispels their nasty thoughts and opens up their tormented hearts. Though they can be heartless, they are occasionally conscious of other people's woes and try to help as much as they can.

I used to be both of these. I was a child unfortunate to the point of weeping bitter tears, as well as one who could jeer at the world at the drop of a hat. I wonder how much you will hate the author of these lines once you have finished reading the story of his life.

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I intend to keep you thoroughly entertained as you read this story: I will guide you to the various cities in the

world that I visited, and introduce you to all the people whom I came to know, love and respect. But before getting on with the tale, I feel I must write about my childhood, which pains me very much. I have asked myself countless times why I must do so, but then I have come to realise that if Charles Dickens was able to write the story of David Copperfield's bitter childhood for people to read the world over, it should not be impossible for me to write about my own early life.

When I recall the events of my childhood, I cannot help but laugh. I have already stated that I like to laugh at the world. You may feel that mine is a sad and pitiful tale, but to me it is only part of a big circus – the circus of life.

Grandma Phorm, who was my nanny fifteen or sixteen years ago, was the only person in the world who knew or was in a position to know what kind of child I was. She knew me as a child whom she had raised and loved, and she shared the sorrow and joy of my young existence. She also tried to foretell my future. She always cried when she told others of her worries regarding what would await me as I grew into manhood. She wept because she loved me. But, alas, although she was good at making predictions, she turned out to be wrong about my future. She could never have imagined that I would have the opportunity to study in Europe and the United States, visit China and Japan, and bring back that wonderful medicine for the heart that roaming the world offers. Oh, if there were any way to let her know about

this, I can only wonder at how happy she would be.

Grandma Phorm was old-fashioned as were all the nannies in aristocratic families in those days. She was ugly, but her eyes – and it was only her eyes which made me realise this – expressed her readiness to give her life for me at any time. Whatever the season, she liked to wear an old loincloth and a tight, long-sleeved blouse. Constant betel chewing had turned her lips from red to charry black as if her mouth had been exposed to fire. Occasionally she rolled herself a coarse cigarette and enjoyed it to the last puff. She had one of the heartiest appetites I have ever seen.

When I was eleven years old and a naughty, brooding, vindictive little rascal, Grandma Phorm took me to the raft of her grandson-in-law, Jek Tee, which was moored at the mouth of the Phadung Krungkasem Canal. We would sit there at our leisure, and I remember that there was a young girl named Bun Hiang who would always come to chatter with me. She was Jek Tee's daughter, a talkative, lovable girl of about eleven or twelve. One day, as we all sat on the raft watching the rice barges and the rowing and paddling boats passing by, Bun Hiang said to me: ...