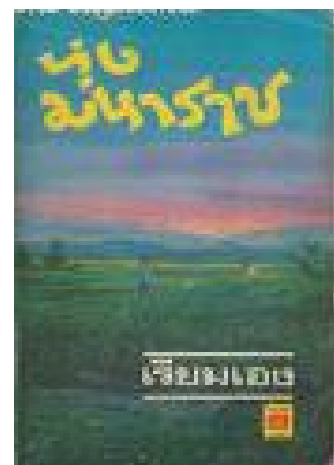


the field of the great

MALAI CHOOPHINIT

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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Viscount Nikhom Borribarn breathed his last on a Sunday, on the fourteenth day of the waning moon in the fifth month of the Year of the Tiger, 2493 of the Buddhist era [1950 AD] – ninety-two years after he had first opened his eyes to the world, such an extensive life as few men ever know or witness. He died peacefully in the embrace of his wife, a contented smile on his slightly parted lips, his eyelids about to close, his wide forehead and his cheeks deeply sunk in a sharp structure of bones.

Viscount Borribarn passed away on the first day of a new year of the Thai minor era*. He died like we all must, only so very untimely, when the spirit of the New Year celebrations was still floating in the air, and the scent of the lustral water mixed with aromatic powder that the young pour on their elders' hands still clung to clothes, the only day when one should not die, as flowers bloom all over the jungle, birds of all kinds sing beautifully all over the forest, and the giant reeds and

* Beginning 21 March 638 AD: the Thai major era began in 78 AD; classification used by Thai historians before the Bangkok era, which began in 1782.

clumps of tall grass on the island midstream put forth white flowers in a sea of snow.

After three full days of merit-making following the cremation gathering, the old woman felt as if she had entered a totally dark maze that offered no way out. She didn't know where to turn, what to think, what to do, except sit next to the betel tray on the veranda of the house, a wide platform which opened onto the path meandering along the northern bank of the Ping river, now almost dry and turned into an expanse of sand and pebbles stretching as far as the eye could see.

Viscount Nikhom Borribarn had passed away! His cremation was a clamorous and magnificent affair such as villagers seldom had the good fortune to witness during their lifetime. There were all kinds of entertainment, from mask and musical folk drama, to puppet and shadow plays. These may have lured people but their power of attraction was not as strong as the magnetic personality of the deceased. When rites and ceremonies were over, the entertainers packed up and left on trucks and boats, the spectators returned home, but no one would forget Viscount Nikhom Borribarn. For sixty full years, he had spent his life amongst these villagers. For sixty full years, he had gone through what the forefathers of the new generation in this very province had gone through. For sixty full years that were at times peaceful, at times adventurous, he had known the bitter taste of poverty and what sorrow, torment, danger,

endurance and sacrifice mean to the human race, while he fought his way to his present status.

Viscount Nikhom Borribarn had passed away, but still remained in the memory of those he had come to know, relatives, friends and foes. He still remained in the air that they breathed, in the daily life and customs of Nakhorn Chum, as part and parcel of the district, as a local symbol which no new custom, civilisation or even time would erase.

Sitting on the veranda that afternoon, the old life companion of Viscount Nikhom Borribarn was certain that no one would forget him. Many would praise his good-heartedness, and many would whisper that he had been a wicked man, but, good or bad, old Sutjai knew that no one in the whole province would have dared to confront him on the battleground, whether over work or over life itself. Viscount Nikhom was born a real man, who wanted to spend his life as a real man, and he had done so to the fullest.

‘Everything here is worth living and dying for,’ he had told her sixty years ago when they first met at the landing. ‘A beautiful girl like you, an upright fellow like me, plenty of food available – only one thing’s missing, and that’s a leader, and I’m the one the gods have sent to be that leader.’

Sixty years ago at the landing – such a long time, and yet it all seemed to have happened only the day before yesterday. The old woman felt her eyes mist with tears

brought forth by the memory of his words, which led her to recall days and events gone by.

Sixty years ago! Nakhorn Chum was still Khlong Suan Mark then, a few dozen houses with walls of bamboo splits and roofs of elephant grass, plus a few families of refugees from Vientiane who squatted the huts in the nearby fields; the coconut groves were still wild and sparse; the outer walls of the old city had not yet been pulled down to make way for the roads; and Dong Seithee was still a city of barren ruins left behind as a monument to earlier generations. The island in front of the house was still far from the bank, and the golden mango tree still spread its shady foliage over the front of the landing.

A servant with a grim face made weary by the workload of the past few days shuffled up to her. 'The boat you asked for is here, m'am,' she reported.

Old Sutjai turned to her with a distracted expression. 'What boat?'

'Why, the governor set up a meeting at his residence this evening about repairs to the temple. You were invited and you asked Kaeo to bring the boat around.'

The old woman sighed. This was one of the many obligations she had been unable to avoid all her life. Not a day had passed without Viscount Nikhom having to perform some charity work or attend some social function with his old wife involved in one way or another. But now that Viscount Nikhom was no longer... The

picture of the landing in the shade of the golden mango tree that afternoon long ago presented itself to her again, clearer and fresher than any memory, as if to usher her back once more to the years of her youth.

‘Tell Kaeo I’ve changed my mind. He can take the boat back. I’ll see the governor some other day.’

Other business could wait, whereas the business of life, which is the past, present and future of us all, could pass us by without giving us a second chance. The old woman wanted to remember the good old days now that her mind was clear and everyone had given her the opportunity to be by herself. Milin, her eldest living child, had gone with his wife and son on an errand at Park Narm Pho. Sa-ing and her lazybones of a husband had not yet returned from a party in town. Her children and grandchildren had once meant happiness, but who amongst them knew what suffering was? They had been born too late to get a taste of the kind of life Viscount Nikhom Borribarn and she had known. All of her children, both sons and daughters – even Darun and Sa-arng, who had died in the prime of life, even her first-born, who had been taken away as a boy when the smallpox epidemic had decimated the village – all had become other people’s property, body and soul, once they had left her bosom. Only Viscount Nikhom and she had always belonged to each other. Even though the vim and frenzy of youth had many times led him astray and he had had countless affairs, he still had belonged to her at all times.

From the wind-swept veranda which the spirit of the New Year celebrations had just left, the gaze of the old woman was fixed on the landing and on the large empty space where the golden mango tree once had stood. She paid no attention to the people who walked by and bowed to her with hands joined, or to the noise of the children playing boisterously at the back of the house.

‘I can remember everything well,’ the old woman thought. ‘It’s as clear as if it had happened only yesterday – the golden mango tree, the logs of the landing, and the vastness of the Ping, bearing down lots of water-lettuce and Java weed, lots of bamboo floats, pole rafts, and dugouts with coloured flags, Mis’ Louis’s paddle steamer*, now gone for ever, and then that punting boat, and – and him.’



Malai Choophinit (1906–1963), whose journalistic career spanned 37 years, was a top editor and master writer of his time, but by all accounts he cut the unassuming figure of a hack. A slim, slow-spoken and controlled man who dressed casually, loved jungle outings, big-game hunting and boxing, and played traditional string instruments, he read voraciously, both in Thai and in English, had a phenomenal capacity for work, slept few hours, drank coffee, chain-smoked – and died of lung cancer at age 57.

He wrote thousands of articles and editorials, thirty plays for the theatre, perhaps a dozen more radio and television plays, some five hundred short stories and nearly fifty novels.

* Actually Mis[ter] Louis, the founder in the 1890s of the Louis T. Leonowens trading company, still active today.