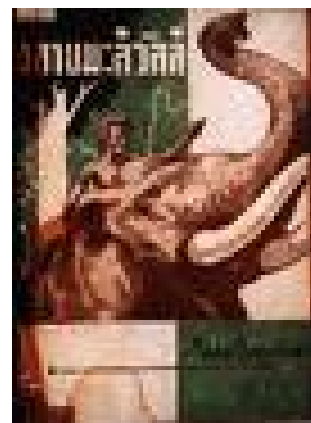


an elephant named maliwan

THANORM MAHA-PAORAYA

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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Above and to the left, a whip of buffalo hide was raised as high as it would go, and at the count of five, came down lashing the back of the culprit. Thirty seconds later, a similar whip was raised on the right side and came whooshing down in the same way, and this went on at a steady rhythm, from left to right, under the command of one man, who stood arms akimbo, shouting unremittingly: 'Left ... Right ... Right hardah ... Left's goood!'

The punishment proceeded without mercy or the slightest attention to the groans and moans of distress that betrayed the culprit's excruciating pain. A group of men and women stood by, exchanging comments in low voices. Some gritted their teeth, and tears welled up in their eyes; others whispered to one another that had the haulage equipment manager not stood there issuing instructions, the officials would probably have lowered the punishment to fifty or sixty lashes out of compassion.

The slim, tall man who stood leaning against a tree behind a group of workers at some distance from the

crowd of local people clearly heard their compassionate whispers and the scene he saw made him wince inside at every crack of the whips, until he felt he could not stand watching that heartbreaking sight any longer – but then, he was not quite sure whether what was happening wasn't a dream.

He did remember that early the night before, the captain had invited him over to his cabin for a nightcap, and he had stayed there until – until when? He had no idea. On the way back, it seemed that he had stopped and stood clutching the railing of the deck, looking at the water the ship parted into waves big and small. He had seen the crests of white foam crash into each other and disappear into the dense darkness ahead. He vaguely recalled that the ship had veered to anchor at a port he did not know, nor did he know whether it had been right or wrong for him to leave the railing, take a few staggering steps and stumble clumsily down some stairs to find himself sitting among a few passengers in a row boat which had come alongside the ship. A little after that, he had hauled himself up onto a kind of bridge the row boat had come to, and then walked aimlessly until a roomy container of sorts had stood in his way. He remembered clearly that he had eased himself onto it to take some rest because the thought had crossed his mind that he shouldn't wander too far away from the ship, though he understood the row boat would return soon and stop by to take him back to her, as he was certain she would never leave any

passenger behind on the long and cluttered bridge.

So how was it then that at dawn the water had turned into land and the white-crested waves into a thick forest of trees? The men and women standing around seemed ready to go about their daily work, and the most amazing thing was that he could see in front of him a white elephant, whose legs were tied to big poles, and who was being lashed left and right. Had he become raving mad because the alcohol had gone to his head, as several doctors and many friends and relatives had warned him about time after time? Had his destiny finally caught up with him now that his latest attempt at giving up alcohol had once again failed, and he had been far from any bottle this morning? He knew himself and was aware that shunning alcohol by going on a cruise aboard the *Phanurangsee* had been a grave mistake and, even worse, that his own obduracy would never again allow him to try and accommodate the pleas of Orraphin and other members of the family, because he hated to be such a dismal failure in circumstances that would make him an object of pity, even if it was failure in trying to turn his useless self into a worthy person.

His rambling thoughts were brought back to the scene at hand by trumpeting that resounded all over the forest, as the elephant who was being punished called to other animals at liberty somewhere in the deep jungle. He wondered again about his sanity. He definitely wasn't mad. All of his organs were perform-

ing normally. Each shriek made him feel as if the threaded dry-leather laces with which the officials lashed the raw hide of the elephant were inflicting sharp pains to his own chest. Therefore, instead of forcing himself to witness the torture of the animal and share the excitement of a few of the men there, he made up his mind that he had better find a way out of the area and return to the ship, so that he wouldn't show his compassion for the pitiful creature. This would be tantamount to meddling in other people's affairs, the sort of behaviour which had taught him a painful lesson in the not-so-distant past.

Thanorm Maha-paoraya (1908-1961), a scion of the Thai aristocracy, was an office worker who wrote eight novellas and dozens of short stories, mostly between 1942 and 1955 – after her better-known journalist and short story writer husband died, leaving her with three young children to raise. The elder, Thammanoon, would become a founding member of *The Nation* newspaper in the 1970s.

Phlai Maliwan, her 1946 masterwork every young Thai child is made to plough through at school, comes from her early married life in the 1930s when husband Theip worked in a lumber company east of Bangkok.

