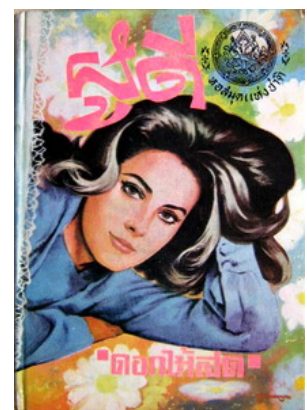


noblesse oblige

DORKMAI SOT

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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The big, brand-new automobile, the classiest model of the day, moved away from the front of the house as smoothly as a boat going with the flow. A young lady whose every feature well matched the elegance of the car turned to smile and wave at the young man who was her brother and then the vehicle turned past the gate of the family compound and was gone.

It motored along a gravel road whose pitted surface far from matched the slickness of the vehicle but increased its worth as the driver thought of the old car whose steering wheel he had held for years plying the Phya Thai district and whose bumpy rides were not easy to forget.

The young woman who sat behind him seemed to have thoughts akin to his. She asked him, 'Well, Jui, do you miss our old Morris?'

Pleasure appeared on the driver's face, but he did not answer. His young employer went on: 'Don't forget to stop by Miss Sutjai's house.'

The car motored on for quite some time before it stopped in front of the main gate of a house.

'Hoot the horn, will you, Jui,' the young woman ordered.

The hoot resounded at once and then Jui left his seat with the guarded manners of a trusted house servant and went to stand composed beside the car, ready to listen to further instructions.

The young woman looked at the house in front of her. It was a two-storey wooden house, so old that you could hardly guess at the colour of its original paint. All windows within sight were open. To one side flapped some white cloth. From the front of the house you couldn't see clearly what it was, but an observer could tell that it must be pillowcases or bed sheets. By now it was about four twenty in the afternoon; the sunlight was still strong enough to cleanse the washing or else the house-keeper was still busy with other tasks and hadn't had time to tell the maid to bring it in.

'Jui, hoot the horn again.'

The driver did as he was asked. Just as the hooting stopped, a young woman's head appeared at a window, peered out at the car, and then pulled back. When the woman below saw her, she uttered a faint cry of surprise.

Then she stretched out her hand to grab the handle to open the car door but couldn't do it. Jui was the one to open it, after which he went to open the gate. This set off loud chimes. The woman in the house peered out of the window for the second time and saw the person entering the gate.

'Oh, it's you, Wimon. Whose car did you come in?'

'Well, mine actually,' was the answer. 'How come you aren't dressed yet?'

A middle-aged lady walked out of a first-floor room and said in greeting, 'Oh, Young Wimon. Such boisterous shouting. I was wondering who it was.'

The young woman laughed lightly. 'I've come to pick up Sutjai, Auntie,' she answered.

The older woman nodded. 'She's getting dressed. I don't know how come she isn't ready: she's been at it since morning.'

Wimon looked up through the window again. She didn't see Sutjai, so she walked on and went up the flight of steps, telling the older woman, 'I'll go and help her,' then climbed the stairs leading to the second floor.

At the top of the stairs, she walked the length of a rather dark veranda past the doors of two rooms. She didn't try to peer inside as she was used to the general untidiness of the house. It was only when she reached the third room that she turned and went through its door.

The first thing that she saw was Miss Sutjai's face in the mirror and then that picture moved as Sutjai turned round to face Wimon, her hand holding a red lipstick close to her mouth. She said, 'Just a second. I shan't be a minute. I'm almost done,' then turned back to the mirror.

Wimon went to stand beside the dressing table, looked

at Sutjai closely and saw beads of sweat seeping through the cream and powder on her forehead. So she said charitably, 'No need to hurry so much, you know.' Then she asked further, 'How come you've only started to get dressed after I've arrived so you have to hurry like this? Look at you: the weather is rather cool, yet your face is all sweaty.'

'As well it should,' Sutjai answered, sounding annoyed, 'what with having to do so much. I've got to do everything myself. Look at this.' She turned her back towards Wimon. 'Do you see my blouse? Right here, at the waist. Can you see?'

Wimon looked at the blouse critically. She saw nothing wrong that should upset its owner, so she said, 'I can't see anything wrong with it. There are only these two pleats, which look fine.'

'I had to pleat the blouse because it's rented, that's why,' Sutjai answered. She dropped the red stick on the table, picked up a black stick and high-lined her almost inexistent eyebrows. 'I meant to take a bath by three thirty to be ready by the time you came, but as soon as I took this blouse to iron it, Mother wanted me to iron hers as well. So I had to iron her two blouses before I could iron my own. That devil of a blouse tore, so I had to stitch it. How could I not be late?'

Wimon listened resignedly, her eyes on her relative's eyebrows that had been drawn into a half-moon-like curve. Sutjai dropped the black stick, picked up a comb

and combed her hair, then put some oil on, then combed some more, then arranged her hair with her hands to perfect its permanent wave. At the same time, she turned round to look at Wimon briefly. As soon as their eyes met, she turned back to the mirror and, with a hard-to-decipher smile, said, 'I have this picture of you when you get dressed. You almost don't have to lift a finger to do anything. You think of a blouse and the blouse comes out of the wardrobe; you think of shoes and the shoes come out... It isn't the same with me.'

'The main point is,' Wimon answered with a laugh, 'I don't have to lift a finger to put lipstick on, draw eyebrows or draw anything like you do.'

'Don't tell me. You are pretty enough as it is,' Sutjai answered petulantly, dropping the comb and springing up from her seat.

Wimon laughed again and then asked, 'Ready now? Shall we go?'

'Hey, wait a minute, Miss. I haven't put my shoes on yet.'

'Oh? I thought you already did.' Then Wimon looked around. 'Where? Where are they?'

Sutjai looked for them too. When she couldn't find them, she said, 'I haven't taken them out yet. They are in the wardrobe.'

She walked to the wardrobe, opened its lower door, opened one of the cardboard boxes stacked in there, then opened another three and still couldn't find what she

wanted. It was only from the fifth box that she picked up a pair of shoes, which crackled as the bits of gravel stuck to them fell onto the cardboard. Sutjai tapped the shoes against the floor, then raised them up and blew on them, then with the tip of her fingers wiped dust off their exposed parts. She put the shoes down on the floor, slipped her feet into them and threw the box into the wardrobe and banged the wardrobe door shut.

‘Ready now, right?’ Wimon asked. She walked up to the mirror. ‘Just have a look at my face. Isn’t it a bit dark?’

‘Oh, come off it. As pretty as you are and you still have to worry about being a bit dark?’ Sutjai said as she bent over to fasten the buckles of her shoes. With a laughing voice, Wimon answered from the front of the mirror, ‘Pretty enough, you are right. No need to powder again. It’s a waste of time.’

Dorkmai Sot is the pen name of ML Buppha Kunjara [pronounced kun.chorn] Nimmanhemin (1905-1963), a moralising romantic novelist who penned a dozen groundbreaking novels before and after the Second World War as well as a couple of plays. Her best work, *Noblesse oblige (Phoo Dee)*, has been part of the curriculum in Thai schools since its publication in 1937. *Dorkmai Sot* means ‘fresh flower’, as does *Buppha*.