

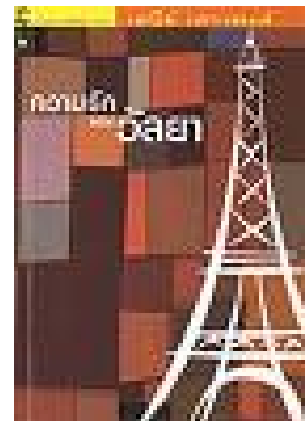
wanlaya's love

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SEINEE SAOWAPHONG

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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I love Paris!

Not because Paris has excellent wine and champagne. Not because Paris has dancing cabarets such as Casino de Paris, Tabarin, Folies-Bergère, Lido and Naturiste. Not because Paris has the charm of the women of the Champs Élysées, Pigalle, Madeleine and Clichy.

Of course I will not deny that such attractions are part of what makes Paris the Paris everyone talks about, but they are only a small, nonessential part of it. Whoever knows only this much of Paris does not know Paris.

I love Paris because Paris is a city of life, a very old city which has seen many events of great import for the history of mankind, a city which has seen blood, tears, cruelty, struggle, sacrifice, betrayal and revolution. Paris may not have the latest buildings or be as spick-and-span as the capitals of some other countries, but its antique splendour and the events of the past which have etched invisible marks in the stone of its walls, on the cobbles that cover Place de la Concorde and on the stone slabs of the Bastille jail, which was so thoroughly taken apart that nothing of the main structure remains to be seen, the blood and tears

that still flow and mix in the Seine over lichen-covered human bones and the rusty remains of old weapons – all this is the pride of Paris which no other city has and which makes it unlike any other. I love the Paris of Balzac, Voltaire, Hugo and Rolland, the Paris of Pasteur and Joliot-Curie, of Bizet and Gounod, of Delacroix, Rodin and Picasso, the Paris that artists and writers such as Heine, Goya, Chopin, Repin, Belinsky, Hemingway and Ehrenburg came to know at various periods in their lifetimes.

I like the ancient feel of Paris, the small old houses along the steep streets of Montmartre, the narrow, dark alleyways of Saint-Germain-des-Prés and Montparnasse, the movable flower and book stands along the quays of the Seine, the shade of the chestnut trees on a summer afternoon...

Some thirty years ago, after the First World War, young Thai students congregated at La Source and Dupont coffee shops in the Latin Quarter to discuss everything from affairs of the heart to political developments at home. At that time, the world was going through momentous changes: the Hohenzollern and Habsburg dynasties had fallen, the Austro-Hungarian empire had been dismantled and replaced by socialist republics in a new trend toward democracy – Poland, Czechoslovakia, Finland and Yugoslavia and, most outstanding of all, the socialist revolution in the former Russian empire.

Amid the disorders of post-war daily life, the economic depression prompted new thoughts and new struggles.

The disintegration of the old institutions foreboded the end of any lingering faith in the sacredness of the old order. No one was invulnerable, nothing was everlasting. The old had to give way to the new.

After the Second World War, the coffee shops are still here but many things have changed. At the very least, the customers are no longer of the same ilk. Maurice Chevalier's song 'Paris will always be Paris' had been on the lips of all Parisians before the war and even when the town was crawling with soldiers wearing the Swastika, but no one thinks of singing it now. Is Paris still Paris, I wonder. The time has come for a new generation. Even Delacroix's painting '*La liberté guidant le peuple*' (Liberty Guiding the People) still gives heart to those who witness quarrels and arguments, as now Paris is the Paris of the Fourth Republic.

Life is something that does not hold still. The good old days are gone forever, but better days must surely lay ahead, as life definitely tends to evolve toward perfection and excellence.

At first glance, it looks like nothing has changed. The coffee shops are still crowded in the summer. The people of Paris still like to relax and discuss their thousand-and-one problems over a glass of Martini with small ice cubes and the zest of a lime in it. The women with slender bodies and fashionable, much copied hairdos and clothes are still around. In the little streets of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, which look so much alike that at night you hardly know

which is which, under old-fashioned lampposts that throw a dim light in the evening, couples and groups of all sizes walk by, often singing songs of love or songs of strife, as some think of love and romance while others think of struggle. *'C'est la lutte finale...'*

I love Paris and this is the reason why I am writing about life in Paris. It may be a task beyond the capacities of someone of my calibre but I am not worried because I write out of love. I have met many people in Paris; their life stories are interesting and, taken altogether, form a picture which highlights the progression of life in both wisdom and feeling during the era in which you and I live. Of all the natural phenomena, life is the most beautiful, and the most lovable lives are those of the young, because the door of their future is wide open to all kinds of wonderful possibilities. Besides, as you know, writers usually crave beauty, and this being so, how could they possibly neglect life?

Talking of Paris makes me think of Wanlaya, a Thai woman I met there. She was twenty-four years old, beautiful and a bright student. Would you like to know her?

Her name is Wanlaya, her surname – her surname is of no importance whatsoever, because one day she will probably use someone else's; maybe yours, if you are a really good person. But beware, I am warning you, a woman like Wanlaya doesn't love easily.

No, I am not trying to interpose myself, and I will tell you her story presently.

You may want to know how rich or poor she is. If she is rich, many of you may try your luck, because to marry a woman both rich and beautiful is the ultimate dream of many a man. And if she is poor, several among you may rub your hands in satisfaction at the prospect of buying her body and soul as easily as if she were a socialite or an actress.

Wanlaya came from a family of ordinary people, who were rather poor, but she was a clever child who learned well and had a talent for music, and she was given a scholarship to pursue her musical studies in Paris, which she hoped to complete in the next two years.

Wanlaya was a young woman and as such had the awareness that a woman with ordinary feelings and emotions ought to have. And everybody knew that she had a male friend who was closer to her than anyone else. His name was Reiwat. He studied economics in England. Reiwat paid his way through university, as he was the heir of a noble family whose history could be traced back to the early Bangkok period, and he had both money and lineage. He came to Paris almost every year during the summer vacation, and all those who knew them both always saw the two of them out and about together. It was thought theirs would be one of the many love stories that end in ordinary bliss, but this was not to be.

It happened on a day in spring.

When Wanlaya stepped off the bus at Place des Pyra-

mides at the corner of Rue de Rivoli and walked toward the Jardin des Tuileries, she found him already standing there waiting.

‘Have you been waiting long, Reiwat?’

‘Not long. Fifteen minutes only,’ Reiwat answered, took his Dunhill pipe out of his mouth and emptied the bowl by tapping it against the sole of his shoe.

‘Sorry to have kept you waiting,’ Wanlaya explained further. ‘Today, the last class was singing. No matter how hard we tried, the teacher wasn’t satisfied. By the time she let us go, it was several minutes past the hour. That’s why I’m late to meet you.’

The two of them went into the park and strolled along gravel paths in the shade of trees through which sunrays seeped. ...



In the early 1950s, novelist-diplomat Sakchai Bamrungphong, now better known under his pen name Seinee Saowaphong, wrote two socially committed novels that flopped – *Wanlaya’s love* and *Ghosts* – and as the diplomat prospered the novelist fell into oblivion. Two decades later, however, the ‘student revolution’ of 1973 resurrected these generous, prophetic works and their author was given a second literary life and pride of place as Thailand’s foremost progressive writer. Proclaimed a National Artist in 1990, Seinee Saowaphong is ninety-one years old this year.