

KING RAMA VI'S LAST WORK

Prince Dhani Nivat Kromamun Bidyalabh

About June or July of the year 1923, when on account of a serious illness His Majesty was ordered a long rest by the doctor, the King began to convert a long-conceived fancy into a play in five acts in Thai verse entitled *Madanabādhā*, or *the Romance of a Rose*, which he finished on the 18th of October of the same year at Phya Thai Palace where he was then in residence. As pointed out in the preface to that edition, the plot was entirely original, based upon no myth nor tradition. In order to be the better able to consider the subject in some detail it will be necessary to give here a summary of the plot.

PLOT The curtain rises upon the first act revealing a scene up in the heavens. Sudeshna, a lord on the celestial plane, is pining away because of his unfulfilled love for a celestial maiden named Madanā who does not reciprocate his feelings. A sorcerer is brought in to use his magic-influence. The maiden is therefore brought to Sudeshna under a trance. Although magic is able to compel her to say or do anything it is unable to influence her spirit which remains dormant. She is therefore never in a position even in a trance to say that she loves him. She is then restored from such a condition, only to assert her own conviction that she never can reciprocate his love. In desperation the lord banishes her from the heavens to assume on earth a human form or any other that she may wish to choose. Madanā asks to be a fragrant flower, new to mundane existence, which desire is acceded to and she becomes a plant in the forest of the Himalayas known thenceforth as the *lub jaka*, a rose.

We are now switched, in act II, from on high to the Himalayas, where a hermit, Kaladarsin, living in retirement finds a new plant, which through supernatural intuition he recognises as

“ not ordinary,

But is a maid, the best of all women.”

He therefore has the plant removed to the neighbourhood of the hermitage in order that the precious plant may receive the greatest possible care. The seer further realises that the plant will be transformed periodically into human form for one day at each full-moon.

King Jayasena now arrives at the hermitage on a hunting trip and as it happens to be the night of the full-moon on which the rose is ordained by the curse to assume its human counterpart of the lovely Madana, the King falls in love at first sight with her. Act III is taken up with a love-scene in the grounds of the hermitage in the light of the full-moon followed by a ritual of marriage celebrated by the seer Kaladarsin on the next morning, thus terminating the curse under which the heroine was to assume human form forever after.

Act IV portrays the heroine installed in the royal pleasure in the King's capital, Hastinapura, where however the King has already a Queen, the bride of a political *mariage de convenance*. Palace intrigues, in the regular style of the classical Sanskrit Drama with an interfering handmaid and the rest, follow as a result of the Queen's jealousy. The Queen takes advantage of the King's absence at the front on a military expedition to hatch a plot to estrange her husband from Madana. The King returns to find a ritual being gone through in the grounds of

his Palace, supposedly instigated by Madanā to get rid of the King himself in favour of her amour, his favourite lieutenant and confidant, Subhānga. Blinded by jealousy the King does not see through the intrigue, the initiative of which is really the Queen's, and orders the execution by one of his officers of the beloved Madanā and the confidant Subhānga. The King leaves immediately for the front to continue his campaigns, at the conclusion of which he returns in act V to find out the whole truth of the matter; but unfortunately his return is neither soon enough to prevent Madanā invoking the help of her former imprecator Sudeshna to let her resume forever the form of a rose, nor to restore his confidant as the latter had gone to the front and, purposely placing himself in the thick of the fighting, got himself killed.

ORIGINAL SIAMESE VERSION. As stated above, the King finished his romance on the 18th October 1923. Before he finished a discussion took place within his intimate circle of friends as to what form of flower should be chosen for the heroine to assume in her mundane existence. The consensus of opinion was in favour of the rose as being a universal favourite among flowers on account of its lovely form and fragrance. As the scene of the play is laid in the "Middle Land", the rose must needs find a Sanskrit or Pali equivalent, not only to give it an atmosphere consonant with the obviously ancient Indian format of the play but also to provide greater variety of epithets for the Siamese *kuḷab*, which after all is not too convenient for poetical diction. It then became problematical whether

the rose ever existed in ancient India, and if not, the choice would be hardly fitting. Luang Dhurakic, afterwards promoted to the rank of Phra Saraprasroet, otherwise known in literary circles as Nagapradip after consulting Professor Arya of the National Library, submitted an opinion thus:

“When one speaks of the *kulāb*, i.e. the rose, his mind naturally turns to the usually accepted classical equivalent of *ja pa*. The *ja pa* in the Indian classics is however without thorns and cannot be a rose. A further search among dictionaries has revealed another word, the *kubjaka*, which Monier Williams defines in his *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (1899 edition) as the *rosa moschata* quoting from the Dhanvantari Nighantu, which has been translated:

“The *kubjaka*, lovely as a young maiden, large flowered, fully pollinated, hardy, plentifully studded with thorns, dark with swarms of bees:

The *kubjaka*, fragrant, digestible, sweet, tasty, a cure for the three bodily imperfections, aphrodisiacal, cool and an antidote for dysentery.”

The word *kubjaka* however savoured too much of a humped-back, and for that reason the royal author chose in its stead the word *madanā*, meaning “love”. Hence the title *Madanabādhā* or the pain of love, to which was added *being the Romance of a Rose*.

It goes without saying that the King's romance had nothing to do with a thirteenth century namesake in French literature, *le roman de le rose*, commenced in 1230 by Guillaume de Lorris. Curiously enough, the author of that old romance

left it also unfinished though it was later continued and concluded forty years later by Jean Clepinel, surnamed Jean de Menn. To the best of my knowledge the King never thought of this namesake at all while engaged in this work.

It should be further mentioned that half a year later the Royal Institute of Siam, then still called the Society of Literature, issued a certificate of commendation of the work as being "a pioneer work of modern drama, which has been well composed and is only possible of achievement by one with a high degree of ability and wide learning".

It might be also added that some time after the author's death a second edition was issued.

TRANSLATION. In 1925 the King translated his play into English finishing it in May. The translation had taken him several months. It was supplemented by a learned glossary of terms and names.

This English version was, however, done in prose; and, being aware of His Majesty's ardent admiration for Shakespeare and the Shakespearean blank-verse, I suggested that the value of his translation would be much enhanced if he could find time to put it into such a form. The suggestion was at first only partially adopted for the King merely chose the original lyrical portions for versification. Nevertheless a few months later, in August in fact, a metrical translation of the first act of some 600 lines took shape. His Majesty's autograph letter giving details of the metres employed is here reproduced as being of interest on that account:



๑๕/๐๕๕

Phya Thai
2nd August, 2468

Dear Dhani,

At last, after about a month's work, I have made a metrical translation of "Madamabādha" as far as the end of Act I, which I send for your perusal at the same time as this letter. Apart from the lyrical pieces, I have adopted the usual decasyllabic blank verse, as it is best adapted for dialogues. There are occasionally decasyllabic rhymed couplets, and you will discover, in three places, somelets sandwiched ⁱⁿ between (following the practice adopted by Shakespeare as in "Romeo and Juliet"). There are other metres here and there to provide a little variety. I tried to put the lines originally written in 16s into lines of sixteen syllables, but they read so like lines from Christmas pantomimes that I had to write alternative lines in decasyllabic blank, which necessitated splitting the original lines into two in most places, as you will see when you read them. Please tell me what you think of my effort.

Ramak

The second act, of about the same length, followed 16 days later. The covering letter being, of no less literary interest, is also reproduced.

१०/०६०८



Anya Thai

18th August, 1968.

My dear Anani,

Many thanks for your helpful criticism of the first act of "Madanabādha". The "worthy of praise" was certainly boastful and unjustified by the Siamese text. I have altered it to "loyal always". I am glad you like the 16 syllable couplets, for they are as a matter of fact harder to write than blank verses. The line "To save her sire, herself false she must prove" was not a happy one, and I felt its awkwardness myself, but could not at the moment think of anything better. The "she" was really only a make weight to complete the number of syllables. I have now altered it to:— "To serve her sire, herself forsworn must prove", which is much better. The boat's head and other things you pointed out are certainly more Chinese than Indian in character. I have therefore substituted parched grains. The adjective "chief" in connection with "flour" was also not very happy, and "fine" is certainly better. —

I am sending you with this letter the second act which was finished some days ago. Having got into



๑๑/๖๕๖๕

(10)

my stride, I found that I could work much quicker. You will find in Act II some variety in metres, though not so many as one could wish. In the way of metres the English are not so prolific as the French and, being more conservative, rather look askance at new metres in dramatic works, for which they usually employ only decasyllabic blank verses, decasyllabic rhymed couplets, and, occasionally, sonnets, while fancy metres they only use for lyrics. However, an author should be allowed some latitude, so I shall break out into fancy metres where I want to. At the end of Act II, p. 55, you will find a quatrain à la Fitzgerald (of the "Rubaiyat" fame.) Please find some spare time to read and send me suggestions again. By the time you have finished with Act II I shall probably have Act III ready for you, as I have been at work on it for several days already.

Yours etc

Ramak

The third act of some 800 lines followed in less than a week—the longest act taking the least space of time, thus testifying how thoroughly the King had got into his stride in spite of its being "somewhat more difficult" as stated in the third letter herewith reproduced.

Phya Thai
24 August, 2468

Dear Wham,

Here is the Third Act of "Madana-
badhā", which has been somewhat
more difficult to write than the Second;
but luckily I had already made trans-
lations of the hymns and chant in
my spare time, which therefore saved
a lot of trouble.

As I have only finished the Third
Act today, it may be some time before
I can send you the Fourth which I
shall begin tomorrow.

Yours to
RamaR

The King's hope, as expressed in the last sentence above, was alas! never fulfilled, for the pressure of state-business prevented further work on the translation of his dramatic phantasy; and towards the end of October the King contracted an illness which proved fatal, death taking place in the early hours of the 26th of November. Upon further search among papers left on the writing-table of His Majesty, a few pages of act IV of the metrical translation were found. This then was where the "Unfinished Symphony," if one might be allowed to adopt a musical simile, ended, a touching memorial to its versatile author.

