

## Chapter One

*omen n. The comet visiting earth was viewed as an evil omen.*

In January 1910, a comet streaked like a nimble white rabbit across the starry meadow for all on earth to see, reaching its brightest visibility around the middle of the month when it could be spotted with the naked eye even in the daytime. It was brighter than Venus and more brilliant than Halley's comet which would follow three months later. The long tail of this January comet spanned the sky like a rainbow bereft of its seven colours. Many astrologers pronounced it to be a bad omen, and true enough, by October of that year Siam was saddened by the death of King Rama V.

Another comet appeared at the beginning of 1932, and another one in June of the same year. It was during that June that the governing system in Siam underwent a change. A new era had dawned as democracy was ushered in by the hands of the people.

I was seven when the 1910 comet came to visit. My mother told me later that she had pointed out for me the bright star with a tail, but I could not recall the incident at all. However, I had reached 29 in 1932, and had definitely seen that comet when it came around. Normally I didn't hold with superstition, nor did I believe in supernatural powers, but the things that had been happening throughout that year made me wonder if the comet was indeed a bad omen. I could attribute to the power of the comet the inspiration for an article I was endeavouring to write. It was entitled *Whose Power Is It Anyway*, and it was to have been for an English language newspaper.

Roars of thunder occasionally broke into the rhythmic clickety-clack of my typewriter. The wind was high. Rain was coming. I typed on.

I paused to disentangle some snarled-up type bars and decided to extend the pause into a short break. I lit a cigarette, inhaled a lungful and released the smoke to be dispersed by the breeze.

Looking out beyond the open window, I saw some local people who made their living by growing ebony trees in a nearby plantation that covered quite a big area. The breeze gathered its strength into a strong wind that dislodged a piece of paper anchored with a pin onto the wall board and sent it flying. I got up to retrieve it. It was a leaflet with a printed message

urging that Thai people should wake up and come together in search of democracy.

The sight of it reminded me of how it had come to be here. It had been handed directly to me on the day the system of government changed, i.e. June 24 of the year before. I remembered all the images of that day clearly, not because it had happened only a year ago, but because the incident had made such a significant impact on my life.

Ever since April 6, 1932, during the celebrations of Bangkok's 150th birthday, there had been signs that could subsequently have been interpreted as harbingers of the events that would change the destiny of the Thai people forever. That had been the day King Rama VII had inaugurated the newly constructed Memorial Bridge. At the time, rumour was rife that General Prince Boworadej would be staging a coup d'état to force a change in the system of government after his falling out with Marshal-Admiral Paribatra Sukhumbhand, Prince of Nakhon Sawan, over the restructuring of the Army and after he had been defeated in his motion for pay increase for the soldiers. By the middle of 1931, Prince Boworadej had resigned from his position as Minister of Defence. The change people widely predicted would be instigated by Prince Boworadej had indeed taken place, but the Prince had nothing to do with it.

The appearance of the comet in the night sky in 1932 had brought about all manners of ominous forecasts. The royal astrologer prophesied plague and famine. Then tales were told by people who lived near the Memorial Bridge of the apparition of a white-bearded old man who walked with a cane up the bridge from the Bangkok side, heading towards the Thonburi side, then disappeared into thin air. People were saying that it was the ghost of King Rama I, and that it was a warning that the Chakri Dynasty would come to an end now that it had reached its hundred and fiftieth year.

Rain had pelted down over the whole of Bangkok as the night of June 23 gave way to the morning of June 24. By dawn the downpour had eased off to just a few droplets, leaving the sky bright and clear. That morning I saw a vehicle driving by my house, sporting a cloth banner with 'People's Party' and 'Democracy' hand-written on it. A young man on the vehicle was using a megaphone to issue his stream of announcement. He was saying, "Wake up, all you Siamese people. It's time to reach out for democracy. Support the People's Party; join us now as we strive to change our country, making it a land of hope, peace, liberty and equality,

made possible by democracy...”

The vehicle was moving forward at a slow pace. A number of soldiers riding on it were handing out leaflets to the people who were lining the roadsides. The amplified announcement continued, “Fellow citizens, this is one of the most important days in the history of Siam. Today we are stepping towards a new system of government, a system that is used in every civilised nation. With democracy, Siam will be the equal of all nations in the world...”

His voice had resonance and credibility, also there was something familiar about it. I knew that voice. I knew that man. It was my old friend Prajak Deprajak. He was wearing military uniform with a second lieutenant insignia. Suddenly the vehicle stopped, and Prajak greeted me with a wave. I asked him, “What is it you’re doing?”

His eyes shone with a smile.

“You know damn well what it is I’m doing, Saeng. This is reality. Now. Today. A new chapter in Siam history is opening up at this very moment. Would you like to join us?”

I shook my head. He looked intently into my eyes, and with a smile, said to me, “Saeng, this is your last chance to come in with us.”

I shook my head once again, and the vehicle moved on.

More people poured out to throng the roadsides. I listened to their comments. One of them said, “The Royal Plaza is packed full of soldiers...”

I decided to get on my bike and follow that vehicle. My friend had kept up his sonorous urging drawing more and more people out into the streets. Soon it had reached the Royal Plaza and came to a halt. I saw a great many soldiers congregating there. Many military transport trucks were parked in the vicinity, and more were arriving. Even though I had some inkling that there might be a movement to change the system of government, I had just not thought that it would happen on that very day.

Many more military trucks had driven in to park, and soldiers were jumping down from them. They were mostly cadets who had come there prepared to form lines in the plaza, but their commanders told them, “Do not form lines. Spread out and mingle with other soldiers and the people.”

They did what they were told. The gathering had drawn more people eager to find out what it was all about. Leaflets were handed to all of them. My friend continued his broadcast. “Let those who do not wish to take direct part in the power take-over refrain from obstructing the People’s Party. Any assistance given to the People’s Party will mean giving assistance to your nation, to yourself and to your descendants for generations to come. Everyone will have a job, no one will starve. Everyone

will have equal rights. You will be freeing yourself from bondage and enslavement...”

His voice was drowned by the lusty and thunderous cheering of the soldiers and the people.

Siam had given birth to its democracy on the 24th of June, 1932. The delivery was done in three phases, taking only three hours and with no loss of lives. In the first phase, a number of high ranking royals and bureaucrats were taken as hostages, followed by the capture of strategic locations, and completed with the assembly of as many soldiers and citizens as could be rounded up at the Royal Plaza in order to demonstrate that it had been by the people's will that the change in the system of government had come about. All of this then led to the claim that Siam now stood shoulder to shoulder with all other civilised nations because now we too had Democracy.

The majority of the 12 million Thai people, among them thirty thousand government employees, had never, before that day, heard the word *Prachattipattai*\*. A great number of people had been under the impression that it was the name of a person, that the stork had suddenly dropped this baby named 'Pracha', last name 'Tippattai', among us. We were made to welcome him with open arms even before we had time to prepare the feeding bottles, formula and cradle. Had he been born prematurely? No one knew for certain whether this baby boy would be able to survive childhood illnesses and grow up to be a responsible adult. Nevertheless, he was born in our midst and we had to nurture him as best we could.

I remembered a conversation I had had with Prajak in Paris several years before. The state of unpreparedness that had existed then, both for the nation as a whole, and for the people in particular, had led me to believe that they would never succeed should they attempt a revolution. I had learned afterwards that it had first been planned for June 19 but had been postponed because it was discovered that Paribatra Sukhumbhand, Prince of Nakhon Sawan was not going to be in the city. Thursday June 23 was the next designated date, with all the important civil service officers expected to be in place, but again it had been put off because the Navy was still away on their manoeuvres. Finally, by consensus, June 24 was settled on for fear that the secrecy could not be contained if there were any further delay.

I pinned the leaflet back on the board which was crowded with

\* Thai word for 'democracy'

newspaper cuttings, all of them about the revolution of 1932 and other political events of note in its aftermath throughout the following year. Photographic reproduction on newsprint was hazy at best, but every image had retained absolute clarity in my mind's eye – the people milling about, troops acting for the People's Party, taking over strategic places such as the Bang Kunprom Palace, and King Rama VII bestowing the contemporary constitution.

The way I saw it, however sincere the promise to the people had been, of hope, peace, liberty and equality, the real issue was still the seizing of power from the monarch and the transferring of it into the hands of a certain group of people. The people, perforce, had to accept the change. They had been given no choice, no voice. But as a free spirit, however, I myself knew that I had two choices: to leave well alone and go with the flow, or to oppose the changes.

I chose the latter.

Subsequent events proved that I was not alone in my dissension. Siam was caught in the whirlwind of political in-fighting which had started less than a year after the event of June 24, 1932. The first coup d'état occurred on June 20, 1933 when Phraya Paholpolpayuhasena toppled the government of Phraya Manopagornnitada to become Siam's second Prime Minister. Ever since then, the political situation in the country had become as murky as a sky pregnant with an impending storm.

The repeated banging of an unsecured window pane buffeted by strong wind woke me up from a nap I didn't know I had fallen into, still sitting at my desk. I had worked myself into a stupor. I got up to latch the window pane. The sky was thunderous. The heat oppressive. But still no rain.

I finished the article I had been writing and typed in the byline, "By Nai Saen Saeb", before pulling the last page out of the roller. This was to be the very last article by a journalist who had been using 'Nai Saen Saeb', among many others, as his pen name. I let out a long, deep sigh. It was my intention to end my career as a political commentator right here and now.

I moved over to gaze at myself in a wall mirror. A slim young man looked back at me. Thirty was a relatively young age, but I had had more of life's experiences than most men my age. I had come a long way from childhood penury when a stroke of luck paved my way to a working sojourn in England.

But I still had a long way to go along the road that stretched out

ahead.

I changed my shirt, tied a bow tie, clipped a pen to my shirt pocket, and took a jacket out of the wardrobe. On my desk were a few framed photographs. There was me in England. Me with my mother. Me with Prajak Dejprajak, both in our Suankularb school uniforms. The last one, and dearest to me, was the picture of me and a girl. It had been taken on September 13, 1922 at the Phraya Grai temple dock on the day I left for England. Turning away from this last picture, my eyes alighted on a particular volume on the bookshelf, a palm-sized English dictionary in its brown cover.

I was in my senior year when after school one day, I stopped by a bookstore to browse, and had found an Oxford English dictionary there. I had been using my palm-sized one extensively, although I was beginning to find that the word entries were limited. For a while now, I had been wanting a bigger dictionary. I told myself that day that I must have this volume, however long I had to save up for it.

And it did take me a long time to save up. I put every spare coin into a jar, a *satang*\* here, a satang there. I worked at all kinds of jobs and put all my earnings into the jar. Many a time I had gone without lunch to add a few more coins to the savings. Finally, one day I had enough, and I went with my savings straight to the bookstore. As I reached for the longed-for dictionary, my hand collided with another also aiming for the same volume. It was the hand of a young girl who also intended to buy that very dictionary. That was the first time I met Sunant Sawitranont.

I didn't buy the dictionary that day, but I made a new friend.

Sunant Sawitranont was new in the neighbourhood. Her family had recently moved to the area. She attended the Rashinee girls' school. I would meet Sunant routinely in the morning. She'd go one way, and I another, to our different schools. We'd come together again in the evening. We had become friends, and the friendship blossomed into love.

I took a small black box out of a drawer and looked for a while at the gold ring inside. I couldn't help smiling. I was about to put into action a custom I had observed with admiration in England, that of a man proposing marriage to a woman.

I pushed the ring box into my trouser pocket and walked out of the room. My mother had been standing out there waiting. I showed her the manuscript. Mother asked, "Are you ready to go, Tonesang?"

"Yes, ma."

\* one hundred satang makes one baht

“What about Sunant?”

“I’ll pick her up on the way.”

I walked towards the door.

Our eyes met, she said, “Take care.”

“You know I always drive carefully.”

“You also know what I meant.”

She looked at the manuscript I held in my hand. I told her, “Don’t worry, Ma. This is my last piece.”

There was a rumble of thunder, but still no rain. Maybe it wouldn’t rain at all. I had been wishing for the rain to hold off until tomorrow because a big and important party was to take place that night.

I parked in front of Sunant’s house. It was a wooden house painted white with a hip roof. About a dozen well grown trees stood around the house making it more shady and cool than the surrounding dwellings. There was also a riot of blossoms from all kinds of flowers. The plaque fixed to the fence was inscribed, Luang Pinityuttitham (Soon Sawitranont), Public Prosecutor.

Sunant was waiting for me. She was dressed in a long skirt and blouse ensemble of soft yellow. Khun Uey, her mother, was standing beside her. I *wai*<sup>\*</sup>ed the middle-aged woman before greeting Sunant who smiled gently in response.

“You look so formal this evening.”

“And you personify the spirit of the party, wearing the colour of beer. Isn’t your father home?”

“He’s taking a nap, but he asked me to tell you to bring me home by nine.”

I nodded. Sunant’s father was very protective of his daughter.

I said goodbye to her mother and we both got into the car. I pressed the clutch pedal and engaged the gear shift, but Sunant said, “Just a moment, please.”

She straightened my bow tie and brushed away specks of dust from my shoulders.

“You’re all set.”

“Thank you, Sunant.”

I gazed into her face, which was as beautiful as a flower in bloom.

“What are you looking at?”

“At you.”

<sup>\*</sup> a wai is a gesture of respect, executed with clasped palms raised chest high

She smiled, "Why are you looking at me?"

"I'm just wondering how you got even more beautiful."

"So the sharp-tongued journalist also has a honey coated side?", she chided with a smile

"It's because I'm not a journalist anymore. From now on I'm a farmer."

"You're serious?"

"I am."

My journalistic career took a stumble after the events that had changed the system of government. I needed to reroute my life. Therefore, when Prince Sithiporn Kridakorn, who was a specialist in modern agriculture, offered me a job farming with him in Prachuab Kirikan province, I leapt at the new opportunity.

I turned the car into Siphraya road and parked in front of the Bangkok Daily Mail newspaper office, telling Sunant, "I'll only be a moment."

I waved the manuscript in my hand.

"But you just said..."

"This is my very last article."

She met my eyes, but before she could say anything, I assured her, "I promise, scout's honour."

I closed the car door and ran inside the building.

I walked up the old wooden staircase on my way to the office just as someone was coming down. It was a tall, thin young man called Chuang Chotejinda. Chuang was no more than twenty. He was employed as the office boy.

"Still here, Chuang?"

"Yes. I'll be going home as soon as I have closed the office for the day."

Chuang reminded me of myself at his age. He worked hard, doing everything he was told to do. He once said to me that one day he would like to be a journalist.

I walked up to the second floor. The office door had been left wide open, so I stepped inside. A somewhat thin western man in his fifties was sitting at his desk. On it were two typewriters with stacks of paper scattered all over. An old fan was feebly stirring the air.

Louis Kiriwat, whose former name was Louis Beaumont, was the editor of Bangkok Daily Mail newspaper. He looked up at me, a smile in his eyes.



"Hey, Mister Tonesang. How are things with you? Don't you look handsome tonight, in all your finery. Going somewhere?"

"The opening of SO Sethaputra's new company, of course."

I handed him the manuscript. He cast his eyes over it.

"Hmm, Whose Power Is It Anyway? A very appropriate question for the current mood in the country."

"As I've told you before. This is my last contribution."

"I thought you were jesting."

"You knew I was in earnest. I'm ending my career as a journalist. I'm going to Prachuab to work on a farm."

"And Sunant?"

"As I've also told you, Sunant agrees with me completely."

"Pity. But can you really stop writing?"

"I don't know for certain, but I'm sure I shall miss newspaper work."

"The readers will miss Nai Saen Saeb too. Phra Sotornsongkram will rejoice though. You've lambasted him often enough in both Thai and English newspapers."

I laughed softly.

"I don't bad-mouth people for the fun of it. I simply critiqued the political situation."

"Well, we call that bad-mouthing alright. Phra Sotornsongkram's lawyer called me this morning, saying Phra Sotorn was unhappy with what you wrote about him. He said you've stabbed him with your pen."

"Is Phra Sotorn going to sue then?"

Louis Kiriwat shrugged. "No. He just thought his lawyer could intimidate us. In any case, they have no grounds for legal action. Your articles are political analysis, supported by facts. He is a soldier with political ambitions, as such he must learn to accept the rules of the political arena. A person of his stature should be more adept than others at maintaining his cool."

"If now that I'm going to stop writing, he will probably think that it is because he has succeeded in intimidating me..."

Louis Kiriwat took off his glasses and put them on his desk. "Saeng, if you want to leave the newspaper business and start a new life as a farmer, just do it. Don't have second thoughts..."

A new voice broke suddenly into the conversation from the back of the room. "...and don't fear retaliation from anybody."

I exclaimed, "*Chao Khun*\*..."

\* Persons with the rank of 'Phraya' were addressed as *Chao Khun*

A man in his forties sitting in the big armchair swivelled around to face Louis and I. He chided me with a smile and said, “I told you to call me Luen.”

I waived him.

Captain RN Phraya Sarapaipipat was rather a large plumpish man who wore metal-framed glasses. His square face was solemn, but there was a playful twinkle in his eyes. People who knew him well appreciated that he was a man who always spoke his mind.

Phraya Sarapaipipat had had an illustrious career in the civil service. He had been a royal page, and personal secretary to Paribatra Sukhumbhand, Prince of Nakhon Sawan when the Prince was the Minister of the Royal Navy. His last post had been as the Director-General of the Secretarial Department and Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defence. I’d known him for years both as a bureaucrat and a fellow newspaperman. He also contributed to the Bangkok Daily Mail, so our paths had often crossed. His writings were regularly published in many newspapers.

After the change in the system of government the year before, he was unceremoniously dismissed from his civil service post. Those higher-up were not pleased with his double life as a journalist. In fact, after the 1932 revolution, the Bangkok Daily Mail had come under particularly close scrutiny by the government, who suspected it of being sympathetic to the old regime. The newspaper had been regularly publishing articles which heavily criticised the government, thereby drawing unwelcome attention to itself.

“Are you here to talk politics with Khun Louis, sir?”

“No, I’m actually waiting to see you, Saeng. But having overheard you saying you’re quitting newspaper work, I guess my business is no longer of interest.”

“What business would that be, sir?”

“The Deer Encirclement Plan.”

I was taken aback, and could only murmur in puzzlement, “But I thought that plan had been abandoned.”

Phraya Sarapaipipat walked over to the window. He stood looking at the quiet street outside. The strong wind tore leaves off the trees whipping them aloft. Still no rain.

“The Deer Encirclement Plan has been steadily moving forward. In fact, it is now at its strongest, with Chao Khun Sri joining us.”

“Chao Khun Sri?”