

Teak Lord

Chapter 47 – Spanning the Ping

Things were changing fast in Chiang Mai. New inventions such as bicycles and the telegraph were beginning to reshape the lives of the people of Lanna. The telegraph in particular transformed communications, so that questions sent to Bangkok received answers within a day rather than waiting three months or more for boats to go down and back up the river. However, none of these novel developments caused as much of a stir as the opening of Cheek's Bridge.

In the past, most of the city's population lived to the west of the Ping River, either in or around the Old City, so there was no need for a bridge over the river. However, as the population grew, more and more buildings sprang up on the east side of the river, including the warehouses of Chinese merchants, the homes of Western missionaries and now the mansions of teak traders like Leonowens. So crossing the river became a problem. Many years before, a bamboo bridge had been built to accommodate this increasing traffic, but what with teak logs from the northern hills constantly smashing into the support poles and overladen oxcarts plummeting through the flimsy walkway, the bridge was frequently unusable. At such times most locals paid a small fee to be ferried across the river, while the poorer folks simply waded across, as for much of the year it was not more than a few feet deep.

For years Cheek had been planning to build a new bridge over the river as part of his idea to improve life for everyone who lived here. The Chao had agreed to finance the project, Cheek had employed the services of an American engineer and finally it was finished. Piles had been driven deep into the riverbed and V-shaped deflectors had been placed upstream of the supporting pillars to prevent damage from the constant stream of teak logs floating down from the north. Large crossbeams under the walkway promised to cope with the heaviest loads that might be hauled by oxen.

Cheek had persuaded the Chao that some kind of opening ceremony would be in order so that his people could appreciate their ruler's beneficence, while as the instigator of the project, he hoped that he would also receive some

praise. Taking a leaf out of Leonowens' book, he arranged for musicians and dancers to perform at the ceremony, and he had his mahouts embellish his three biggest elephants with glittering caparisons.

He had recently heard about a new railway line in America being opened with a ribbon-cutting ceremony, and he thought this would add a colourful touch to the occasion. To ensure an auspicious outcome, a Brahman priest had been consulted to determine the best time for the ceremony to begin, and the priest had declared that nine minutes past nine on the ninth day following the consultation would be appropriate. At the appointed time, the Chao in his formal robes and Cheek in his best suit stood at the western entrance to the bridge as the musicians sounded a fanfare. All activity in the market had stopped and a throng that included Leonowens and several other resident Westerners pressed around to witness the memorable event. A sky-blue ribbon with an elaborate bow blocked passage to the bridge, and the Chao brandished a pair of new scissors in the air before cutting the ribbon. A huge cheer went up from the crowd as the ribbon split in two. "After you, sir!" Cheek exclaimed, with a flourish of his left arm, indicating that the Chao should be the first to walk on the bridge. Suddenly the Chao's big grin disappeared, and he adopted a panicked expression.

"Oh no, I no go. Maybe fall down." The Chao peered at the river as if gazing down from a vertiginous cliff, and Cheek's heart sank. As far as he was concerned, the climax of the ceremony would occur when the Chao walked over the bridge, not with the simple cutting of the ribbon. He protested, "It's perfectly safe – look!" He stamped on the boards at the beginning of the bridge as hard as he could. "You see, this bridge is as strong as your palace, made of mighty teak wood."

"Oh no, no, no." The Chao backed away. It was clear that he would not change his mind, and a murmur of surprise spread through the onlookers. Was this new bridge destined to become an unused structure, the same as the old one? Cheek needed to rescue the situation, and fast.

He pointed at the three elephants standing behind them. "Look sir, you know these elephants are very heavy. Do you think they can walk on the bridge?"

"Oh no, no, fall down." The Chao shook his head vigorously.

"Well, watch me." He had the leading elephant bend its leg so that he could clamber up onto its back. Since it was carrying no howdah, he sat on its neck as a mahout would, which brought a cheer from the audience; they had never seen a foreigner riding an elephant bareback before.

"Now, let's go. Pai! Pai!" He shouted the order to go in the local language and dug his heels into the elephant's neck. He waved his arm for the other elephants to follow, and with their mahouts walking beside them and clinging on to their ears, all three elephants stepped on to the bridge. The Chao looked incredulous.

As the elephants sauntered across the bridge, it creaked and rumbled a bit, but no planks broke and there was no sign of unsteadiness in the supporting pillars. The onlookers went silent, perhaps expecting a tragic end to this showmanship. When the elephants reached the east bank, Cheek turned round and waved his hat in triumph. Once again, the onlookers broke into a loud cheer.

Seemingly reassured by Cheek's actions, the Chao stepped tentatively on to the first plank of the walkway, lifting his robes as if walking through water, and then took another step. Suddenly, either through fear or excitement, he lifted his robes higher and began running. A gasp went up from the onlookers, who pressed closer to the bridge, as if eager to follow. When the Chao got to the far side, he turned round with a beatific grin on his face and waved at the spectators to follow him. A surge of people crowded on to the bridge and raced after the Chao, with no detrimental effect to the new structure spanning the Ping. The sturdiness of Cheek's bridge had been well and truly tested.