**The Story of the Aged Mother**

Long, long ago there lived at the foot of the mountain a poor farmer and his aged, widowed mother. They owned a bit of land which supplied them with food, and their humble were peaceful andhappy.Shining was governed by a despotic leader who though a warrior, had a great and cowardlyshrinking from anything suggestive of failing health and strength. This caused him to send out acruel proclamation. The entire province was given strict orders to immediately put to death all agedpeople. Those were barbarous days, and the custom of abandoning old people to die was notcommon. The poor farmer loved his aged mother with tender reverence, and the order filled hisheart with sorrow. But no one ever thought a second time about obeying the mandate of thegovernor, so with many deep hopeless sighs, the youth prepared for what at that time wasconsidered the kindest mode of death. Just at sundown, when his day’s work was ended, he took a quantity of unwhitened rice which isprincipal food for poor, cooked and dried it, and tying it in a square cloth, swung and bundle aroundhis neck along with a gourd filled with cool, sweet water. Then he lifted his helpless old mother tohis back and stated on his painful journey up the mountain. The road was long and steep; thenarrowed road was crossed and recrossed by many paths made by the hunters and woodcutters. Insome place, they mingled in a confused puzzled, but he gave no heed. One path or another, itmattered not. On he went, climbing blindly upward Â– ever upward towards the high bare summitof what is known as Obatsuyama, the mountain of the “abandoning of aged”. The eyes of the old mother were not so dim but that they noted the reckless hastening from onepath to another, and her loving heart grew anxious. Her son did not know the mountain’s manypaths and his return might be one of danger, so she stretched forth her hand and snapping thetwigs from brushes as they passed, she quietly dropped a handful every few steps of the way sothat they climbed, the narrow path behind them was dotted at frequently intervals with tiny piles of twigs. At last the summit was reached. Weary and heart sick, the youth gently released his burdenand silently prepared a place of comfort as his last duty to the loved one. Gathering fallen pineneedle, he made a soft cushion and tenderly lifting his old mother therein, he wrapped her paddedcoat more closely about the stooping shoulders and with tearful eyes and an aching heart saidfarewell. The trembling mother’s voice was full of unselfish love as she gave her last injunction. “Let notthine eyes be blinded, my son. A” She said. “The mountain road is full of dangers. LOOK carefullyand follow the path which holds the piles of twigs. They will guide you to the familiar way fartherdown”. The son’s surprised eyes looked back over the path, then at the poor old, shriveled hands allscratched and soiled by their work of love. His heart smote him and bowing to the grounds, he criedaloud: “oh, Honorable mother, thy kindness thrusts my heart! I will not leave thee. Together we willfollow the path of twigs, and together we will die!”Once more he shouldered his burden (how light it seemed no) and hastened down the path,through the shadows and the moonlight, to the little hut in the valley. Beneath the kitchen floor wasa walled closet for food, which was covered and hidden from view. There the son his mother,supplying her with everything needful and continually watching and fearing. Time passed, and hewas beginning to feel safe when again the governor sent forth heralds bearing an unreasonableorder, seemingly as a boast of his power. His demand was that his subject should present him witha rope of ashes. The entire province trembled with dread. The order must be obeyed yet who in allShining could make a rope of ashes?One night, in great distress, the son whispered the news to his hidden mother. “Wait!” she said. “Iwill think. I will think” On the second day she told him what to do. “Make rope twisted straw,” shesaid. “Then stretch it upon a row of flat stones and burn it there on the windless night. ” He calledthe people together and did as she said and when the blaze and died, behold upon the stones with every twist and fiber showing perfectly. Lay a rope of whithead ashes.

The governor was pleased at the wit of the youth and praised greatly, but he demanded to knowwhere he had obtained his wisdom. “Alas! Alas!” cried the farmer, “the truth must be told!” andwith deep bows he related his story. The governor listened and then meditated in silence. Finally helifted his head. “Shining needs more than strength of youth, ” he said gravely. “Ah, that I shouldhave forgotten the well-know saying, “with the crown of snow, there cometh a wisdom!” That veryhour the cruel law was abolished, and custom drifted into as far a past that only legends remain.

**14. The Gold Harvest**
 Long ago in Old Ayudhya, there lived a man named Nai Hah Tong who dreamed of turning copper into gold. His wife, Nang Song Sai, had little faith in magic. She believed in the wealth of nature and richness of the earth. When her husband boasted, “Someday, we will be the richest people in Ayudhya”, she listened patiently; however, when all their tical had been used for experiments, she decided something would have to be done about her husband’s great expectation.

She said to her husband, “Nai Hah Tong, you have experimented with copper and a monkey spaw, copper and lizard’s tail. You have polished copper with the gold stripe of fur cut from the tigers skin, but the copper did not turn into gold. Why don’t you give up this dream and go to work like other men?”
Her husband said, “Mai chai”, that is not right. With each experiment my magic has grown stronger.”

“Mai pen rai , never mind, my husband, you must do what you must do,” she answered.
The next day, however, she went home to see her father and asked him what to do about NaiHah Tong”s unreasonable search for gold.
Her wise old father did not seem disturbed. He said, “Pai, go now, and say nothing of this meeting. I have a plan to help your husband.”
The next day Nai Hah Tong received an invitation to dine with his father-in-law. At ginukow, or meal time, Nai Hah Tong was there on the mat-covered floor beside the elderly gentleman.
The old man said, “My son, since you desired power and a long life, you sit facing east. I see honor and dignity, so I shall sit facing west.”
“Chai , yes, my father, I always follow the old relief. I never sit facing north when I eat, for I fear the bad luck such an action would cause, but sometimes, I eat facing south because I would like to have esteem and respect.”
The old man smiled and nodded in agreement.
A servant interrupted and conversation by placing a large tray bearing bowls of white rice, hot chicken curry, roasted turtle eggs, vegetables and namprick , a spicy sauce made from beetles and fish paste. Another tray held bowls of fresh water for washing, cloths for drying, and lime scent for perfuming the hands. The men ate from the same bowls, using only the fingers of their right hand. They did not speak very much while eating because the delicious food demanded their complete attention. The curry was spicy, yet sweet with the added milk of the coconut. The rice was fluffy and fresh from the top of the pot. The namprick  bit the tongue, but it was good and made the mild milk drink more tasty by contrast.
When the meal was over, Nai Hah Tong felt as content as a baby gibbon sitting upon his mother’s lap.
“Ah, we are lucky for fish in the water and rice on the land,” he said.
“Chai , my son, but there is more to life than good food. I have asked you to come to see me thisevening because I need your help. Like you, my son, I have been looking for a way of turning copper intogold. Now, I know how to do it.”
Nai Hah Tong drew in his breath and made a long, long whistling sound. “Oh, it’s too good to be true! I can’t believe it!” he said.
“Listen carefully, Nai Hah Tong. I have all things I need for the miracle except one additional ingredient. Because I am an old man, I don’t think I can work hard enough and long enough to get it.”
“Mai pen rai , never mind, father, I will get whatever you nee,” Nai Hah Tong replied.
“That is not an easy as you might think, my son. I must have two kilos of soft fuzz gathered from t he underside of the banana leaf, and the fuzz must be plucked carefully from our very own banana trees. Furthermore, I know the fuzz will not perform the miracle, unless it comes from a tree planted when the magical words were spoken.”

“I can say the magic words, and I can raise the banana trees. I will collect the two kilos of banana fuzz for you,” said Nai Hah Tong.
The old man smiled and said, “I know you can do this, my son, because I have faith in you. I will loan you the money to buy the land you will need to raise banana trees.”
The young man bowed low to the older. In the hearts of each of them, there was a feeling of faith and trust.
Nai Hah Tong was determined to prepare his fields in a way which would be most pleasing to all the gods who might influence his crops. For this reason he went to his village wat and asked guidance from the priest who knew how to look at the gleaming stars and interpret the wisdom of the night sky. The priest’s saffron robe glowed in the moonlight. His bare feet made no sound as he walked from the wat to the open court. The glittering stars seemed to light the sky as the fireflies lit the darkness. The priest gazed at the stars as if they were the eyes of heaven.
Nai Hah Tong waited patiently for the priest. The only sound he heard was the lonely call of the gecko lizard hiding in a crack of the stucco wall of the wat. He counted the lizard’s croaks — nung, song,sam, see, ha, hok, jet.
“Ah, it is a rare sign of good fortune. The gecko calls seven times, bringing me good luck.”
The priest returned to his small, bare cell and opened a worn folding book. He said, “Since you were born in the year of the Ox, you must begin your plowing on Wednesday, the tenth day of the fourth lunar month. Now, do not forget to begin when the sun is midway between the horizon and the highpoint of noon.”
“Chai, chai , yes, yes. I shall do as you say.”
The priest continued. “Before this auspicious hour, you must build a shrine to the guardian spirit of the field, Phra Phum. Give him an offering of the best rice. Lay it flat on a shining green banana leaf and serve him graciously. At the north corner of your field, you must place three triangular white flags. As you mount them on bamboo poles, ask the blessing of the goddess who makes the banana tree fertile with the yellow fruit. Do not forget to praise the earth goddess and do remember to ask Phra Phum’s blessing. Ask these gods to keep hungry locusts and nibbling worms far away from fields.”
”Is there anything else that I must do?”asked Nai Hah Tong.
“Chai, you will ask your village chieftain to guide your plow three times around the field. When this is done, again honor Phra Phum with the scent of incense and the beauty of flowers plucked by your own hands.”
“All shall be done exactly as you desire,” said Nai Hah Tong.
He followed the priest’s suggestions and added one more touch of magic. With the planting of each banana tree, he uttered the special secret words given to him by his father-in-law.
The gecko had predicted good luck, so Nai Hah Tong was not surprised when his banana trees grew tall, sturdy, and heavy with blossoms. Not very long after he had thousands of firm yellow bananas and myriads of shiny leaves with a soft layer of fluffy fuzz on the underside.
Each morning Nai Hah Tong gave Phra Phum an offering of rice from the top of the pot. Then he carefully collected the soft fuzz from the underside of the banana leaves and stored it in a pottery jar. Each morning his wife, Nang song Sai, gave Phra Phum flowers and incense. Then she collected the beautiful yellow bananas, took them to market, sold them and place her tical  in a pottery jar.
After three lunar years had passed, Nai Hah tong had a half kilo of banana fuzz. His wife had three pottery jars full of  tical. Strangely, Nai Hah Tong was so intent upon collecting and storing the fuzz that he paid no attention to his wife’s profitable labor.

One day Nang song Sai’s father came to ask if he would have to wait much longer for the two kilos of banana fuzz. When he saw the pottery jar partially full, he appeared worried. “I am an old man. If you don’t get more land, more banana trees, and more banana fuzz, I shall not live to see copper turned into gold.”
“Mai pen rai, never mind, father. I will borrow more money to buy more land. Then there shall be more banana trees and I can collect even more banana fuzz,” said Nai Hah Tong.
Now Nai Hah Tong and his faithful wife worked for many years. The moons rose, waxed, and waned, days ran after days until finally the time arrived when each had accomplished a goal. Nang Song Sai had collected many jars full of tical. Nai Hah Tong had two jars full of banana fuzz. As you can imagine, it was an especially happy day. Nai Hah Tong shouted to his wife, “Run and bring your father here. Today he can test his magic. If all goes well, we shall see red copper grow until it is as gold as the sun of Siam.”
When the old man arrived, Nai Hah Tong bowed very low before him and presented him with the treasured banana fuzz. The old man said: “Arise, my son; today you will be a rich man.”
Nai Hah Tong trembled nervously. Litter rivers of perspiration ran down his face. His fingers shook like banana leaves in the wind. The old man, on the other hand, was not in a hurry. He turned to his daughter and calmly asked, “Have you made any money from the sale of the bananas?”
“Oh, yes, chai, chai, my father,” she said.
Nai Hah Tong thought his father-in-law must be out of his mind. When the copper was waiting to be turned into gold, why worry about the sale of a few bananas?
Nang Song Sai brought a tray piled high with golden tical and placed it before her husband.
“Aha!”said her father. “Now, Nai Hah Tong, just look at all this money that has been made by following my directions. My son, I cannot turn copper into gold, but you and my daughter have harvested gold from the sale of your bananas. You cared for the young plants until they became trees producing delicious fruit. Is not that just as great a miracle as turning copper into gold?”
Nai Ha Tong did not answer because he felt like a fool, but he was a very rich fool.
His clever wife knelt before him to show her love and respect. When she arouse she said, “My husband, you are a master magician. With the help of the gods you cleared land. You cared for the banana trees with the same loving care we give our son. You made the gods happy, and they rewarded you with the golden fruit of the banana trees.”
“Mai chai, that is not right, my clever wife. Do not put a story under your arm and walk away with it. It is your father who is the master magician. he has made his honorable daughter and worth lesson-in-law the richest people in Ayudhya.”
Nai Hah Tong looked at the meaningless pile of banana fuzz mounted high on the table under the smiling face of his father-in-law. Right there and then it is said, Nai Hah Tong mixed the banana fuzz with a little water and carefully molded a statue of the old man.
“What are you doing?” asked his wife.
“I am making a statue of your father. I hope our sons and our son’s sons will treasure it as an heirloom. Each time they look upon it, they will be reminded of my foolishness and your father’s wisdom.”

**15. THE SPIDER’S THREAD**

     The Buddha Shakyamuni is meandering around Paradise one morning, when he stops at a lotus-filled pond. Between the lilies, he can see, through the crystal-clear waters, the depths of Hell. His eyes come to rest on one sinner in particular, by the name of Kandata. Kandata was a cold-hearted criminal, but had one good deed to his name: while walking through the forest one day, he decided not to kill a spider he was about to crush with his foot. Moved by this single act of compassion, the Buddha takes the silvery thread of a spider in Paradise and lowers it down into Hell.

Down in Hell, the myriad sinners are struggling in the Pool of Blood, in total darkness save for the light glinting off the Mountain of Spikes, and in total silence save for the sighs of the damned. Kandata, looking up by chance at the sky above the pool, sees the spider’s thread descending towards him and grabs hold with all the might of a seasoned criminal. The climb from Hell to Paradise is not a short one, however, and Kandata quickly tires. Dangling from the middle of the rope, he glances downward, and sees how far he has come. Realizing that he may actually escape from Hell, he is overcome by joy and laughs giddily. His elation is short-lived, however, as he realizes that others have started climbing the thread behind him, stretching down into the murky depths below. Fearing that the thread will break from the weight of the others, he shouts that the spider’s thread is his and his alone. It is at this moment that the thread breaks, and he and all the other sinners are cast back down into the Pool of Blood.

Shakyamuni witnesses this, knowing all but still with a slightly sad air. In the end, Kandata condemned himself by being concerned only with his own salvation and not that of others. But Paradise continues on as it has, and it is nearly noontime there. Thus the Buddha continues his meanderings.

**16. The Cricket Boy**

A long time ago, cricket fighting caught on in the imperial court, with the emperor leading the fad. A local magistrate in Huayin, who wanted to win the favor of the monarch, tried in every way to get him the best fighting crickets. He had a strategy for doing so: He managed to get a cricket that was very good at fighting. He then made his subordinates go to the heads of each village and force them to send in a constant supply of fighting crickets. He would send to the imperial court the crickets that could beat the one he was keeping. Theoretically, everything should have worked smoothly. However, as the magistrate was extremely zealous to please the emperor, he meted out harsh punishment on any village heads who failed to accomplish their tasks. The village heads in turn shifted the burden to the poor villagers, who had to search for the crickets. If they failed to catch them, they had to purchase them from someone else, or they had to pay a levy in cash. The small insects suddenly became a rare commodity. Speculatorshoarded good crickets, buying them at a bargain and selling them for anexorbitant price. Many village heads worked hand in hand with thespeculators to make profits. In so doing, they bankrupted many a family. Cheng Ming was one such villager. The head of his village delegated part of his duties to him because he found Cheng Ming easy to push around. Cheng Ming did not want to bully his fellow villagers as the village head

did him, so he often had to pay cash out of his own pocket when he failed to collect any competent crickets. Soon the little proper ties he had were draining away, and he went into a severe depression. One day, he said to his wife that he wanted to die.“Death is easy, but what will our son do without you?” asked his wife, glancing at their only son, sleeping on the kang. “Why can’t we look for the crickets ourselves instead of buying them? Perhaps we’ll strike some good luck.”Cheng Ming gave up the idea of suicide and went to search for crickets. Armed with a tiny basket of copper wires for catching crickets and a number of small bamboo tubes for holding them, he went about the tedious task. Each day he got up at dawn and did not return until late in the evening. He searched beneath brick debris, dike crevices, and in the weeds and bushes. Days went by, and he caught only a few mediocre crickets that did not measure up to the magistrate’s standards. His worries increased as the dead line drew closer and closer. The day for cricket delivery finally came, but Cheng Ming could not produce any good ones. He was clubbed a hundred times on the buttocks, a form of corporal punishment in the ancient Chinese judicial system. When he was released the next day, he could barely walk. The wound on his buttocks confined him to bed for days and further delayed his search for crickets. He thought of committing suicide again. His wife did not know what to do.

Then they heard about a hunchbacked fortune teller who was visiting the village. Cheng Ming’s wife went to see him. The fortune teller gave her apiece of paper with a picture on it. It was a pavilion with a jiashan (rock garden) behind it. On the bushes by the jiashan sat a fat male cricket. Beside it, however, lurked a large toad, ready to catch the insect with its long, elastic tongue. When the wife got home, she showed the paper to her husband. Cheng Ming sprang up and jumped to the floor, forgetting the pain in his buttocks.“This is the fortune teller’s hint at the location where I can find a perfect cricket to accomplish my task!” he exclaimed.“But we don’t have a pavilion in our village,” his wife re minded him.“Well, take a closer look and think. Doesn’t the temple on the east side of our village have a rock garden? That must be it.” So saying, Cheng Ming limped to the temple with the support of a make shift crutch. Sure enough, he saw the cricket, and the toad squatting nearby in the rock garden at the back of the temple. He caught the big, black male cricket just before the toad got hold of it. Back home, he carefully placed the cricket in a jar he had prepared for it and stowed the jar away in a safe place. “Everything will be over tomorrow,” he gave a sigh of relief and went to tell his best friends in the village the good news. Cheng Ming’s nine-year-old son was very curious. Seeing his father was gone, he took the jar and wanted to have a peek at the cricket. He was removing the lid carefully, when the big cricket jumped out and hopped away. Panicked, the boy tried to catch the fleeing cricket with his hands, but in a flurry, he accidentally squashed the insect when he finally got hold of it.“Good heavens! What’re you going to say to your father when he comes back?” the mother said in distress and dread. Without a word, the boy went out of the room, tears in his eyes. Cheng Ming became distraught when he saw the dead cricket. He couldn’t believe that all his hopes had been dashed in a second. He looked around for his son, vowing to teach the little scoundrel a good lesson. He searched inside and outside the house, only to locate him in a well at the corner of the court yard. When he fished him out, the boy was already dead. The father’s fury instantly gave way to sorrow. The grieved parents laid their son on the kang and lamented over his body the entire night. As Cheng Ming was dressing his son for burial the next morning, he felt the body still warm. Immediately he put the boy back on the kang, hoping that he would revive. Gradually the boy came back to life, but to his parents’ dismay, he was unconscious, as if he were in

a trance. The parents grieved again for the loss of their son. Suddenly they heard a cricket chirping. The couple traced the sound to a small cricket on the door step. The appearance of the cricket, however, dashed their hopes, for it was very small. “Well, it’s better than nothing,” Cheng Ming thought. He was about to catch it, when it jumped nimbly on to a wall, cheeping at him. He tip toed to ward it, but it showed no sign of fleeing. Instead, when Cheng Ming came a few steps closer, the little cricket jumped onto his chest.

Though small, the cricket looked smart and energetic. Cheng Ming planned to take it to the village head. Uncertain of its capabilities, Cheng Ming could not go to sleep. He wanted to put the little cricket to the test before sending it to the village head. The next morning, Cheng Ming went to a young man from a rich family in his neighborhood, having heard him boasting about an “invincible” cricket that he wanted to sell for a high price. When the young man showed his cricket, Cheng Ming hesitated, because his little cricket seemed no match for this gigantic insect. To fight this monster would be to condemn his dwarf to death.“There’s no way my little cricket could survive a confrontation with your big guy,” Cheng Ming said to the young man, holding his jar tight. The young man goaded and taunted him. At last, Cheng Ming decided to take a risk. “Well, it won’t hurt to give a try. If the little cricket is a good-for-nothing, what’s the use of keeping it anyway?” he thought. When they put the two crickets together in a jar, Cheng Ming’s small insect seemed transfixed. No matter how the young man prodded it to fight, it simply would not budge. The young man burst into a guffaw, to the great embarrassment of Cheng Ming. As the young man spurred the little cricket on, it suddenly seemed to have run out of patience. With great wrath, it charged the giant opponent head on. The sudden burst of action stunned both the young man and Cheng Ming. Before the little creature planted its small but sharp teeth into the neck of the big cricket, the terrified young man fished the big insect out of the jar just in time and called off the contest. The little cricket chirped victoriously, and Cheng Ming felt exceedingly happy and proud. Cheng Ming and the young man were commenting on the littlecricket’s extraordinary prowess, when a big rooster rushed over to peck at the little cricket in the jar. The little cricket hopped out of the jar in time to dodge the attack. The rooster then went for it a second time, but suddenly began to shake its head violently, screaming in agony. This sudden turn of events baffled Cheng Ming and the onlookers. When they took a closer look, they could not believe their eyes: The little cricket was gnawing on the rooster’s bloody comb. The story of a cricket fighting a rooster soon spread throughout the village and beyond. The next day, Cheng Ming, along with the village head, sent the cricket to the magistrate and asked for a test fight with his master cricket, but the magistrate re fused on the ground that Cheng Ming’s cricket was too small.“I don’t think you have heard its rooster-fighting story,” Cheng Ming proclaimed with great pride. “You can’t judge it only by its appearance.”“Nonsense, how can a cricket fight a rooster?” asked the magistrate. He ordered a big rooster brought to his office, thinking that Cheng Ming would quit telling his tall tales when his cricket became the bird’s snack. The battle between the little cricket and the rooster ended with the same result: The rooster sped away in great pain, the little cricket chirping triumphantly on its heels.

The magistrate was first astonished and then pleased, thinking that he finally had the very insect that could win him the emperor’s favor. He had a golden cage manufactured for the little cricket. Placing it cautiously in the cage, he took it to the emperor. The emperor pitted the little cricket

against all his veteran combat ant crickets, and it defeated them one by one. What amused the emperor most was that the little creature could even dance to the tune of his court music! Extremely pleased with the magic little creature, the emperor rewarded the magistrate liberally and promoted him to a higher position. The magistrate, now a governor, in turn exempted Cheng Ming from his levies in cash as well as crickets. A year later, Cheng Ming’s son came out of his stupor. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, to the great surprise and joy of his parents. The first word she uttered to his jubilant parents were, “I’m so tired and hungry.” After a hot meal, he told them, “I dreamed that I had become a cricket, and I fought a lot of other crickets. It was such fun! You know what? The greatest fun I had was my fight with a couple of roosters!