

# *Anna and the King of Siam*

By Margaret Landon

## **Chapter One**

*Bangkok, 1862*

The Siamese steamer Chow Phya, most modern of the ships plying between Singapore and Bangkok, came to anchor outside the bar at the mouth of the River Chow Phya. A troupe of circus performers were hanging over the rails trying to catch the first glimpse of the country whose king had invited them to entertain his extensive family. Their trained dogs were barking and snarling at the two dogs belonging to the captain of the ship, George Orton, but Jip and Trumpet were disdainful and superior.

Somewhat apart from the rough and laughing group an Englishwoman was leaning against the rail. Her dress of lavender mull had a neat high collar and modest wrist-length sleeves. She was slender and graceful as she stood there with a light breeze ruffling her full skirts. Chestnut curls framed a face that was pretty except for the rather prominent nose. Her dark eyes were turned toward the line on the horizon that was land. She stood almost motionless, fingering a curious brooch on her breast, a gold brooch into which were set two tiger claws. Beside her a Newfoundland dog stood as quiet as she.

The circus dogs came close, sniffed and barked, but the Newfoundland did not return their greeting. She was aloof, reposeful, dignified, not to be cajoled into confidences with strange dogs. She kept her eyes fixed on her mistress' face as it looked across the water to the distant shore.

The sun rose higher. Golden rays danced and sparkled on the slow blue swells of the gulf. The laughter and shouting on deck continued. The dogs raced about. But the woman was as remote from the confusion as if she were separated from it by an invisible wall.

A carefully dressed boy of about six came up from below deck, followed by a Hindustani nurse in a richly patterned sari. He had the same look of good bones, the same delicate air of breeding that distinguished the woman at the rail. His brown hair was curly and his brown eyes danced.

"Mama, Mama," he cried, dashing up to the still figure. "Are we there? Are we there?"

She turned to him with a smile. "Yes, Louis. We are there. In a little while we'll be in Bangkok. Shall we not, Captain Orton?" she inquired of the bronzed young man in an immaculate uniform who had stepped up behind her son.

"We'll go over the bar with the tide," the officer answered, "and you'll sleep on shore tonight."

Louis ran shouting with the news to the circus performers, and the Newfoundland gravely padded after him. "Stay with him, Beebe," the woman directed in Malay.

"Beebe and Bessy take good care of you and Louis, don't they?" asked the captain.

"Yes, they're very faithful." She smiled faintly, her eyes on the hurrying back of the ayah. "Beebe and Moonshee have been with me since before I was married, you know. And good old Bessy is a member of the family, too. She'd guard us with her life."

Captain Orton stood silent a moment. A puff of fresh wind blew the woman's curls back. "Mrs. Leonowens, that ought to be a man's job," he said in a low voice to the pink ear that hardly reached his shoulder. "A maid, a dog, and an old Persian professor aren't enough. I don't like your going in there. For some women, yes. For you, no. People go in there and never come out again." Dark color moved under the clear tan. "Forgive me for saying so much, but you can't even imagine what it will be like."

"You forget that I've lived in the Orient ever since I was fifteen."

"Yes, in British colonies with British soldiers to protect you. This is Siam!"

The woman bit her lip, but did not turn her eyes toward him. "I can't go back now. I've given my word."

"You will not go back now?"

"I cannot!"

He paused, hesitating, then forged ahead. "There's always Mr. Cobb. He's a gentleman and rich!"

She flushed deeply. When she did not speak, he went on in a savage voice, but low. "There is also myself, as you know. Perhaps not a gentleman, and certainly not rich!"

She turned to him then, the deep brown eyes full of tears. "Dear Captain Orton, don't belabor yourself so! To me you are a gentleman, a kind gentleman who has made this difficult trip endurable. But--please try to understand, that for me there has only ever been one man--Leon--and now that he's--gone--there will never be anyone else." She looked out across the water, but her eyes were unseeing. A tear ran down her cheek and she dried it hurriedly with a handkerchief. The man leaned on the rail beside her.

"Mrs. Leonowens, you're too young to bury your heart in a grave." There was a note of pleading in his voice. "Believe me, I would not ask much. Just to take care of you, and Avis, and Louis."

She answered slowly, "But I can't give even that little. I don't know why, but I haven't it left to give." She lifted her face toward his and for a long moment he looked deeply into her eyes, then turned away scowling. Halfway down the deck he wheeled and came back. "I'll be in port every month. If ever you need me, the Chow Phya and I are at your service." And he was gone without waiting for a reply.

The sun was hot now. Sighing, but a little reassured, the slight, graceful woman went below.