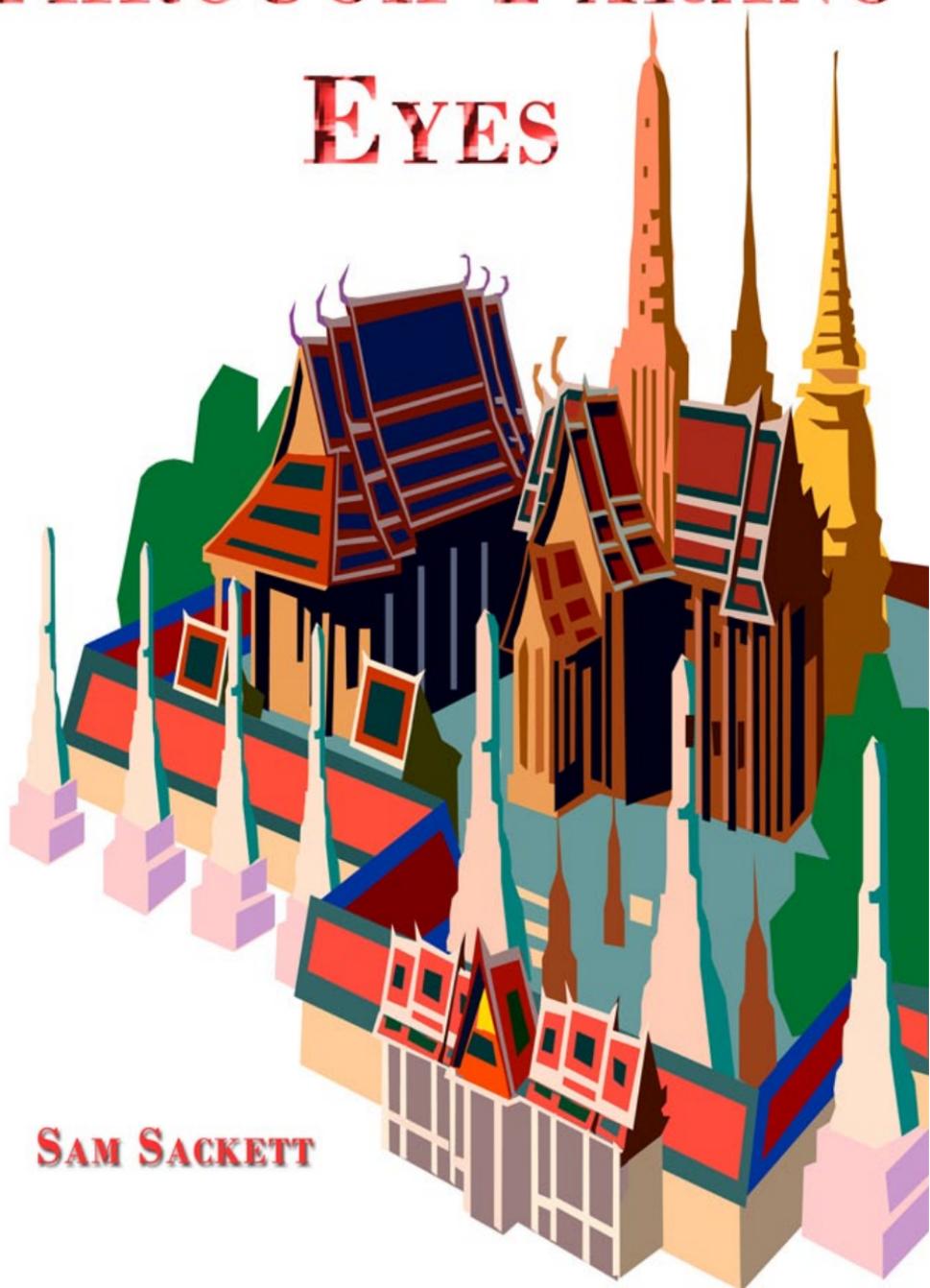


THROUGH FARANG EYES



SAM SACKETT

THROUGH FARANG EYES

1st edition 2011; ebook

Text by Sam Sackett

eISBN 978-616-245-025-9

E-book published by www.bangkokbooks.com

E-mail: info@bangkokbooks.com

Text & Cover Copyright© Sam Sackett

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, copied, stored or transmitted in any form without prior written permission from the publisher.

Interested in publishing your manuscript or selling your ebook on iTunes, iBooks, Amazon, Google, Barnes & Noble, Borders and bangkokbooks.com? Contact us at info@bangkokbooks.com or visit www.bangkokbooks.com

BOOKS BY SAM SACKETT

FICTION

The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short

(Translation of *De Man die Zijn Haar Kort Liet Knippen*, by
Johan Daisne)

Sweet Betsy from Pike

The Robin Hood Chronicles

NONFICTION

Kansas Folklore

(With William E. Koch)

Cowboys and the Songs They Sang

E.W. Howe

(Twayne United States Authors Series)

Learn Thai

(With Dr. Thanapol Chadchaidee)

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to two families who became my good friends in Thailand:

in Bangkok, Dr. Thanapol Chadchaidee, his wife Pradabporn, their daughter Apinya, and their son Kritthi; and

in Ayutthaya, Thanuwat Ratanapongsai, his wife Patcharin, and their daughter Shantika.

JUST WILD ABOUT HARRY

(Note: “Just Wild about Harry,” words by Noble Sissle, Music by Eubie Blake. Originally published 1921, now in public domain.)

Harry Armbruster stopped for a moment and blinked his eyes. He was about to step into the large hall where people awaited the arriving passengers at Don Muang International Airport. He had been here three years before with Estelle, and the guide from the tour they had signed on to was awaiting them with a big sign with his name on it. Now he was alone, and there was nobody here to greet him.

The other passengers were rushing past him to meet their friends and relatives and business colleagues and tour guides. One of them jostled Harry’s elbow as he rushed past. Harry took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, tightened his grip on his suitcases, and walked forward.

Harry had been a bookkeeper. Not an accountant, a bookkeeper. He had worked for twenty-four years in the finance department of a PVC pipe manufacturer, entering the credits and debits and making out the invoices. Then, three years ago, he had retired. To celebrate, he and Estelle went on a tour of Thailand that November. Harry had liked the place; it was warm compared to Topeka, the people were friendly and smiling, the Grand Palace in Bangkok was awesome, and the elephant ride in Ayutthaya was fun. Estelle did not share his enthusiasm; she didn’t like the food, there was something about Buddhism that her Methodist soul cringed at, and elephants frightened her.

Eighteen months after their return, Harry was hit with one of those double wallops that the psychologists tell us take years off our lives. Estelle died of a cancer that had not been discovered in time for the doctors to save her, and the PVC company found a way to stop paying Harry his pension.

At sixty-seven Harry was in some ways in very good physical shape. He had no major illnesses, his mind was still sharp, and he

retained his good looks, though his face was somewhat seamed and his hair was gray. But he was in no condition to start life all over again, and that was what it looked as though he would have to do.

A friend suggested that he sign up with H&R Block to do income taxes, and it sounded like a good idea to Harry. But when he got into the course, he discovered that it made him nervous. He had been a bookkeeper, not an accountant, and he was very good at doing what his supervisor told him to do. But he was not good at making decisions, at least those decisions which would affect clients' taxes, and deciding what was deductible gave him sleepless nights worrying whether he had made a mistake. And that was just in the preparatory course; doing it for real would terrify him.

The memory of Thailand kept coming back to him. He liked the country, and he remembered how cheap everything was. If he sold his house in Topeka and watched his expenditures, he could live on his Social Security income.

Harry and Estelle had never had children. Harry's older sister had died in a car wreck years before. The closest thing Harry had to a living relative was a brother-in-law whom he had never really liked anyway. Harry thought Estelle's brother was lazy and irresponsible, though he had never used those words to her. So in effect Harry was alone in the world. There were no ties to keep him from going to Thailand.

He dropped out of the H&R Block course and gave himself up to planning. As a bookkeeper, Harry was good on details. Knowing that air fares were less expensive if you made your reservation early, he held several conversations with a travel agent he knew – they were both in the Silver Circle of the Methodist Church – and came out with a pretty good rate to fly from Kansas City to Bangkok via Chicago and Tokyo. Without telling the agent, he went on the Internet to see if he could get a better deal; he found he could save only about fifteen dollars, so he decided to stick with his friend.

Harry selected a Bangkok hotel from the Internet, one which looked as though it was neat and clean, and was delighted to learn

that the price in baht for a single-occupancy room worked out to forty-three dollars a night. He e-mailed the hotel, explained that he was moving to Thailand, and asked whether he could mail some boxes of personal belongings to the hotel to be held until he arrived. He could. So he made a reservation for the day of his arrival, explaining that his plane got in at 11:45 p.m., and he would go directly from the terminal to the hotel.

Those details taken care of, Harry had nearly two months before flight time. He spent part of the time boxing up the personal belongings he wanted to take with him, part of the time watching some television shows, including some that Estelle had not wanted him to watch, and part of the time talking with R.G. Benson, a realtor who was also in the Silver Circle, about selling his house. He also arranged with the branch manager of his Topeka bank to maintain his account there and use his ATM card to withdraw money when he needed it; the ATM system the bank subscribed to had thousands of machines all over the world, and surely there would be some in Thailand.

As time drew near, Harry mailed his boxes to the hotel and arranged to have his Social Security checks direct deposited to his Topeka bank, since the Social Security Administration did not mail checks to Thailand. Then he put one ad in the *Auto Bargain Post* offering his Plymouth for sale and another in the *Topeka Capital* announcing a Mammoth Garage Sale. The Plymouth brought him about nine thousand dollars, which he thought would make a good stake to begin his new life with. He sold nearly everything in the house, furniture and appliances and all, and cleared almost seven hundred dollars. What he didn't sell, he called the Salvation Army to pick up. Then he spent a few days enjoying the hospitality of his realtor, who had a spare room and who agreed to drive him to Kansas City to catch his plane.

And now here he was, standing on the sidewalk outside Don Muang International Airport, his wallet stuffed with baht that he

had exchanged his dollars for, waving to attract the attention of a taxi driver.

Driving through the streets of Bangkok can be a harrowing experience, even at midnight, but Harry was so tired from his journey and the various hassles at the airport that he dozed most of the way. The taxi lurched to a halt, awakening him, and he saw the name of his hotel spelled out on the marquee above the door. He paid the cabby in the unfamiliar money and went to the desk.

Yes, he was told, his reservation was in order, and his packages had arrived and were being held in storage. His room was on the eleventh floor, and a young man carried his bags for him; the young man wore no uniform, but Harry assumed he was a hotel employee. When they reached the room, the young man held out his hand in a gesture that needed no Thai-English translation. Harry searched his wallet, found the smallest bill was for 20 baht, and gave it to him. The young man made a gesture as though he were praying to Harry, bowed, and left.

Harry awoke late the next morning, at nearly ten-thirty. Looking out the window, he saw that the streets of Bangkok were crowded with people walking faster than they did in Topeka; he shook his head, remembering what the travel brochure had said about the leisurely pace of life in Thailand.

He needed to open a bank account, so that he could have money transferred into it from his Topeka bank. After what the menu called an American Breakfast, which was pretty good for Asia, Harry sauntered to the desk to ask the clerk to direct him to a bank.

The clerk, it happened, was an attractive woman of an age which Harry guessed was late teens or early twenties. Like most Thais, she had tan skin, brown eyes, and black hair. She smiled at him dazzlingly and asked, "May I hep you?"

"Yes, I need to find a bank where I can open an account."

The young woman looked over her shoulder at the clock on the wall behind her. "I get off fifteen minutes," she told him, "You wait, I hep you find it."

“Thank you very much,” Harry said. There were comfortable chairs in the lobby, and Harry found one by a table on which a previous occupant had left a copy of the Bangkok *Post*. Happy to find a publication in his native language, Harry leafed through it, looking for the sports section, and was pleasantly surprised to find a short story about the latest misadventure of the Kansas City Chiefs.

He looked up from the paper to find the young woman standing silently before him. “You ready?” she asked.

“Certainly.” He rose and accompanied her through the door to the street. “What’s your name?” he asked, to make conversation.

“Loot,” she answered. He thought maybe she was trying to say Ruth, and later events proved him correct. “You Mr. Hally Ambuster?” She had evidently figured that out from the hotel register.

“That’s right.”

The racket of the city made further conversation impossible.

The nearest branch of the Bangkok Bank, as it happened, was a block and a half away. There were no traffic lights at the intersection, the traffic was heavy, and Ruth held Harry’s hand as they crossed the street. It gave him a strange feeling, but he did not pull his hand away.

The New Accounts Officer, a young lady in a purple suit, was busy, and Ruth and Harry sat on benches to await their turn. Harry said, to make conversation, “I’d like to buy a house as soon as possible.”

He was surprised at Ruth’s answer: “*Mei dai*,” she said.

He blinked and paused, trying to formulate what he wanted to say, then: “Of course I may die, but I’ll need a place to live in the meantime.”

She laughed and shook her head. “No,” she said, “I mean no can do. *Farang* no can buy house in Thailand.” Harry figured that *farang* was what he was. “Can buy condo. No can buy house.”

Well, Harry figured, if all he could do was buy a condominium, then that’s what he would do.

“I know good condo for sale,” Ruth continued. “I off Saturday.

I come show you.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Harry said.

The chairs across the desk from the New Accounts Officer were now vacant, and Ruth and Harry occupied them.

Harry said, “I want to open a checking account.”

The young lady looked at him vacantly. Evidently she did not understand English.

Ruth said something in Thai; Harry presumed she was interpreting for him.

“*Mei dai*,” the New Accounts Officer responded. She continued in Thai.

“She say no checking account. Checking account only if you have work permit. Without work permit you get savings account and ATM card, no need for checks.”

“Then that’s what I’ll do,” Harry said.

He was relieved to find that instructions on the form he had to fill out were in both Thai and English. The form finished, he gave the New Accounts Officer the money he wanted to open the account with; she went to one of the tellers and returned with a receipt. She said something in Thai which Ruth translated as “She say will take two week to get ATM card. Will mail to hotel.”

The delay didn’t bother Harry; he could use the ATM card from his bank in Topeka to access funds until the Bangkok Bank card came through. “Tell her thank you,” Harry said, and Ruth said, “*Kap khun mak kah*.”

Harry repeated, “*Kap khun mak kah*,” and both Ruth and the New Accounts Officer laughed. “No,” Ruth explained. “Only woman say *kah*. You man, you say *kap*.” It was Harry’s first lesson in Thai.

Harry corrected himself, and he and Ruth left the bank. It was now nearly one o’clock, and Harry was getting hungry, even after his American Breakfast. He thought that he should treat Ruth to a meal to repay her for her help. “Have you had lunch?” he asked her.

“No,” she said.

“Then let’s have lunch together.”

“Okay,” she said. “Hotel cost too much. I show you good place cheaper.”

She held his hand again as they crossed the street. They entered a large, dark area filled with shops of all kinds and busy with people jostling each other in the aisles. Harry followed Ruth, who looked back from time to time to see that he was still with her, and she led him to a little area with a dozen tables, at one of which they sat. The menu card was on the wall, in Thai, and Ruth translated it for him. Harry had no idea what most of the dishes were, so he told Ruth to order for him.

“You like hot?” she asked him.

Well, Harry thought, he liked Mexican food, and that was pretty hot. “Yes,” he said.

Ruth gave the order to the middle-aged waitress, who in turn relayed it to a man standing at the back of the restaurant. Harry was amazed to see that the stove was a canister of natural gas with a ring around the top, and the man cooked every order separately in a wok which rested in the ring.

Harry’s order came first, and he discovered that it consisted of a mound of steamed rice, covered with vegetables, a few of which he recognized, and chunks of what looked like chicken. For utensils there were a fork and a large spoon.

“Go on,” Ruth encouraged him. “My food coming.”

Harry took his first bite of the concoction. His reaction caused all the heads in the restaurant, and some in the aisle outside, to turn in his direction.

Ruth laughed, and then said, “I sorry. Maybe too hot.”

Harry tried to say, “Maybe,” but his vocal chords were still paralyzed from the assault.

Ruth took his plate and picked out some shiny, dark red vegetables. “Peppers,” she explained. “Now you try.”

Harry cautiously tried another bite. This was much more manageable.