

*The Watchmaker  
of*

**Dien  
Bien  
Phu**

**HANOI-1974**





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FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE  
HANOI — 1974



## **Editor's note**

*Since 1945, fundamental changes have taken place in the history of the Vietnamese people. After reconquering their independence, they were forced into two wars against aggression. The first, against the French colonialists, ended with victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The second, against the American imperialists, produced the victory of a peace agreement in 1973, but the struggle cannot yet be considered finished.*

*In spite of this situation — more than twenty-five years of uninterrupted war — the Vietnamese people undertook a socialist revolution and the building of a new life in the completely liberated northern half of the country.*

*A young literature serving the people and the revolution has grown up, seeking to reflect these realities of Vietnamese society. Written in the flames of action, these works are essentially witnesses — living documents. This book is the first collection, grouping writings from 1945 to 1964. A second will appear, collecting writings after 1964 — the beginning of the U.S. war of destruction against North Viet Nam.*

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## ***Trang's Wife***

KIM LAN

Trang came back from work every evening as night fell and the darkness began to make faces vague. Tonight, with uneven steps, he followed the winding path which crossed the market and turned toward the boat landing.

He smiled to himself. His little eyes seemed to pierce the half-light, his large jowls quivered slightly, animating his unpleasant features and giving him both a droll and evil air. He had a habit of chewing over his thoughts in a low mumble.

Seeing his heavy silhouette coming around the corner of the market, the children of the quarter always run to him, calling to each other. "Hey, come on ! It's Trang !" "Pick me up in your arms, Trang !" "Trang, have you been drinking again ?"

And soon he is surrounded by all the kids of the quarter, one pulling him, another climbing his legs, while he laughs stupidly. Thanks to him, the miserable quarter in which the poor live becomes alive for a few moments every evening.

But for some time now, no child had come running toward him. They stayed next to the walls, silent and mournful. Trang dragged along with heavy steps, his

faded **cu nau** jacket on one arm, his bald head hanging forward. He seemed to carry all the worries of the world on his large shoulders.

Nobody really knew precisely when hunger erupted in this place. Families from Nam Dinh and Thai Binh had appeared with their mats, their children and their gaunt faces and simply taken over the huts of the market. And the dead ! They fell like straws. Every morning as they went to the market or the fields, the villagers found bodies curled up along the road. A foul smell mingled with the disgusting odour of decaying garbage not swept away.

One night, in the middle of this desolation, Trang was seen coming back, accompanied by a woman. His satisfaction was visible. He walked with shining eyes and a beatific smile. The woman came three or four steps behind him, a small basket on her arm, eyes on the ground, a tattered conical hat half hiding her face. She seemed ashamed or shy and walked with small hesitant steps. The children moved in on the unusual couple. But Trang, unwilling to stand their usual jokes this time, became serious and shook his head ferociously.

A voice called out from the group. "Trang, you got a wife, huh ?"

Trang smiled slightly. "Get out of here, you devil."

Very ill at ease, the woman frowned and straightened her jacket with a brusque movement.

The market crossroad became gloomy as the night deepened. A cold wind rose. No light shone in the slums on either side of the road. Silhouettes seemed to

wander aimlessly under the banyan trees like ghosts to the cawing of the crows on the branches of a kapok tree.

From their doorways, perplexed people watched Trang and the woman go on their way. Comment became lively. They seemed to guess the truth. Emaciated faces beamed. Something fresh and unusual was blowing on their black misery. Someone sighed. Another asked in a low voice. "Who can she be ? A relative of Mrs. Tu, perhaps ?"

"No, even when Mr. Tu was alive, nobody ever saw any relatives."

"Strange..."

Silence. Then a voice laughed. "Must be Trang's wife. Sure, look how confused he is !"

"What an idea to take a wife now ! How can Trang support her in times like these ?"

Knowing that she was the target of attention, the woman grew more and more nervous.

But her companion looked blissful, proud to have provoked all this curiosity. The woman mumbled something incomprehensible. Trang turned and said "What ?"

"Nothing"

"What's the matter with them looking at us like that ?" he said.

But suddenly someone called out in a loud voice "Trang ! Hey, Trang !" A bald head appeared in a doorway.

He had to retrace his steps.

"Come in a moment, Trang !"

"Some other time, sir."

The man winked, nodded his head in the woman's direction and asked mischievously, "Who is it?"

"Uh... she's an acquaintance... I'll see you some other time."

He turned to catch up with the woman who was now standing in front of a small temple. "Hey" he cried, "we turn here."

"This way?"

"Yes."

They took a small path under two high rows of high bamboos. Under the bamboos there was a feeling of calm and deep silence. Trang longed to say something tender to his companion. But he did not know how. Clumsily, he scratched his shoulder and walked at the woman's side. She said nothing either, only glancing anxiously in front of her. The wind played in the bamboos and dead leaves crackled under their feet.

Trang seemed to forget his daily miseries, the terrible hunger which threatened to overwhelm the whole world and his own future. He thought only of his love for this woman who walked at his side. Something new, unusual, something he had never known gripped him from his head to his feet, making him shiver as if a hand was passing over his back.

"Are we going to get there soon?" the woman asked suddenly,

"Yes, soon"

"Does someone live with you?"

"I'm all alone with mother."

The woman smiled. "But that's not alone ! You think you are still a child !"

"But it's true."

The conversation became more intimate. He moved closer to her, reflected a moment, then showed her a little bottle in his hand. "It's some oil for the lamp."

"What luxury !"

"I had to pay 20 **xu**, but it doesn't matter."

"It's a waste !"

He clicked his tongue. "What the devil, it doesn't happen every day ! When one gets married... You don't want me to climb in bed at once, as soon as night comes, do you ?"

"Don't be indecent." She assumed a serious air and gave him a light blow on the shoulder.

Highly amused, he burst into laughter. Nearby dogs fled behind the bushes and began to bark furiously. He took a stone and threw it at them. "Why do you have to bark like that, damn dogs !"

"Is it still far ?"

"Oh, very far."

The woman looked displeased. "All right," she said.

But he smiled, bent down and opened a gate and said, "Here we are !"

The woman entered behind him in silence. The deserted house seemed to crouch in the corner of a garden invaded by weeds. Glancing around her, she let out a long sigh which expanded her flat chest. Trang pushed aside the mat hanging in the doorway, went in and quickly swept up the dishes and laundry from the floor and the bed. Then he turned toward her and said,

"Without the presence of a woman, everything is upside down."

The woman smiled without grace. Trang patted the bed quickly and said, "Sit here. It's not necessary to be formal." She sat down on the edge of the bed.

Suddenly they both felt confused. Trang stood a moment in the middle of the room, then went out quickly into the courtyard, mumbling in an exasperated voice, "The old woman had to pick today to stay out late !"

He walked to the lane to wait for her, then returned to look inside the house. The woman was still sitting on the edge of the bed, her two hands on her basket, pensive and sad and annoyed. Perplexed, he asked himself, "Why is she so sad ? Yes, why ?" He spat carelessly and smiled to himself. Looking at this woman sitting in his house, he began to doubt her presence. A wife of his own ? Eh, that was hard to imagine ! Who would have thought that his joking would produce such rapid results ?

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\*   \*

Trang carried rice to the provincial capital for the company. Every time he passed the store, he saw some women sitting idly in front of the door. He supposed they were waiting to pick up grain which fell or to try to get work from people coming to the store. Once, bending forward against the weight of the cart he was pulling, he started singing to forget his fatigue, Who wants to eat white rice and sausages ? Come and push the cart with me.

He was not speaking to anyone in particular, but the group laughed and pushed a young woman toward him. "Hey, he's calling you !" They said. "Run and help him and eat as much as you want."

The young woman joined in impudently, "Hey, mister, are you serious ? It's not a joke, is it ?"

Trang turned toward her and guffawed. "Quick," he told her, "give me a hand."

Instantly, she ran up and began pushing the cart. "Here I am, here I am !" She laughed and winked at him.

Trang was overjoyed. Never had a woman seemed so warm with him.

The second time he met her, he had just finished delivering some goods and was drinking tea in the market. Suddenly the woman ran up to him. She was furious. "Liar !" she said. "Liar !"

He widened his eyes in astonishment. He hardly recognized her. Clothed in rags, thin, a long and grey face, she did not look good. Only her eyes were bright.

"The other day you said you were going to come again soon," she snapped. "You're a liar !"

It was true. Now he remembered. He smiled. "Then it is for today. All right, sit down, my dear, and have a piece of betel."

"I don't want betel. I want something else".

She remained standing in front of him. He was forced to say, "Well, eat what you want. *Beaucoup riche !*" he added in broken French, touching his pocket.

Her eyes above dark circles lighted up. "Is it true ?" she said quickly, "Well, all right then." She sat down



at once and gulped four bowls of **banh duc**<sup>1</sup> one after the other, without stopping to breathe. Then she wiped her mouth with her chopsticks and sighed, "Ah, that's good. But what will your wife say when you get back and she sees your money gone?"

"But I'm a bachelor." Again the joking came to his lips: "So, if you want to come with me, fill the cart and let's go."

Trang had thought he was making a joke. But the woman had followed him. At first he told himself. "It's impossible to feed another mouth." But in the end he acquiesced. "Oh well, what happens, happens!"

He had taken her to the provincial market, bought her a small basket for her few belongings, eaten a full meal with her and then, pushing the cart, turned toward home with her.

\*

\*   \*

Trang stopped his pacing and pricked up his ears. An old woman shuffled toward him with hesitant steps, coughing and muttering unintelligible words. Trang jumped like a child and turning toward the house cried, "Hey in there, Mother's back!" He added at once, "How late you are, mother, I waited for you, you know."

The blinking eyes of the old woman stared at Trang. "What's all the hurry?" she demanded in a tired voice. "Go inside and you will see!"

Entering behind Trang, her heart beating, she suddenly stopped in the middle of the yard. Good

1. Rice porridge.