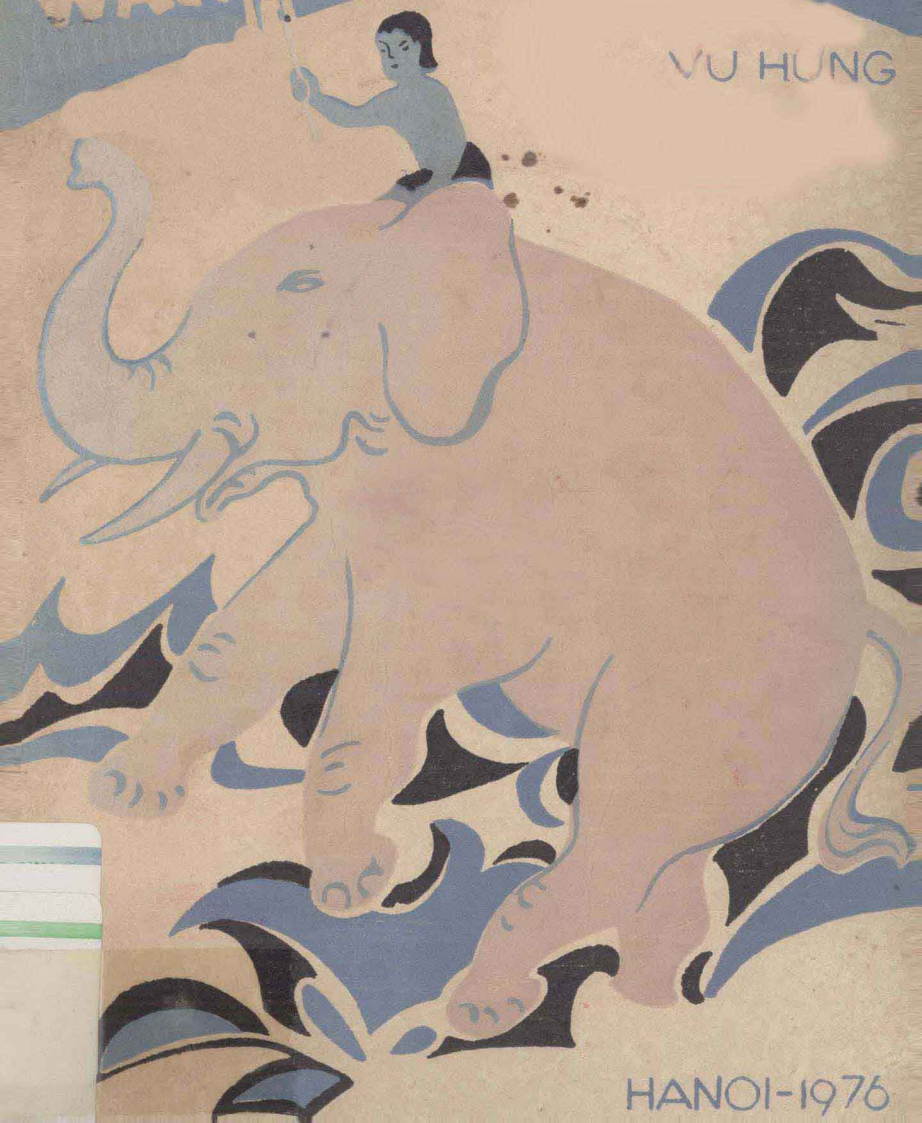


THE STORY OF A MAHOUT AND HIS WAR ELEPHANT

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*To Bun Xon and the
pack elephants on the
Truong Son range*

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

It was a chilly night on the Truong Son Range. The sky was clear and bright with so many blue stars, whose incandescent light revealed the existence of big stilted houses nestling here and there among the shadowy trees.

Our platoon had taken shelter in a house much longer than it was wide, and whose dim interior seemed fathomless. The host had already retired for the night, and we found only a man and a little boy by the fire.

We joined them after having spread our rolls. Suddenly noises began below the raised floor—deep—throated, reverberating noises, like those made by a big brass gong. Then a chain rattled loudly, accompanied by a confusion of other sounds.

"That's my elephant," the boy explained, laughing at my discomfiture.

"What makes it so restless?" I asked.

"Calling for its mates," the man hitherto silent broke in.

"It's going to rain for sure," he added.

Surprised, I looked at the man. He was of middle age, and had only one arm. His face was rather too square, and the stubble on his chin was sparse and rough. The man had a dark complexion, and the eyes he kept fixed on the fire had a somewhat vacant look.

"You the mahout, Comrade?" I queried.

"Yes."

"And this boy?"

"My aid and my son."

I looked away, through the window, into the night, at the immense sky.

"So many stars," I commented.

"Yes, but it'll rain for sure," the man insisted.

"Elephants can smell rain a long way off, you know," he made his point clear. "They always go hunting for new roots and new shoots after a rain. Instinct, you know."

The boy got up, dropped an armful of maize stalks through a hatch in the floor to the animal below.

"Eat your fill, baby," he crooned. "Eat and sleep well. We've a long way to go to-morrow."

Half an hour later, a wind started blowing. Dark clouds wheeled about, blotting out all the stars. Lightning made the frames of the door and window stand out in bright relief. The elephant trumpeted again. The rain began in earnest, beating heavily on the roof.

"Good elephant!" I exclaimed in wonder.

"He's good, all right," the mahout conceded, not without pride. "Very intelligent, too," he went on.

"You don't know him yet, but people around here know him very well. He served in the last war, and is serving in this war, too. Done a lot."

"Tell us something about him, will you?" I ventured timidly. The mahout nodded in agreement. He fed the fire with several big logs. The fire roared merrily while we made ourselves comfortable around the mahout and his son.

One summer day in 1942.

The sun shone with great intensity. Complete silence in the jungle. Not a breath of wind. The trees stood motionless. The air, heated to a white haze, was stifling.

Towards late afternoon, the heat was almost unbearable. People stayed at home instead of going out to work on the terraced fields. Chickens stood gaping by stone mortars or on thresholds. Dogs sprawled on the ground, heads between front paws, tongues lolling, eyes shut tight.

An old Kha¹, Rem, was squatting on the floor, squinting at the sky, or gazing at the dogs, his brows working incessantly.

"Heaven," he groaned. "Big storm coming."

In the park the elephants were getting restless. They swayed wearily, chained to deeply-sunk stakes. From time to time they jerked up their trunks as if to gulp down some air, and blared nervously.

"Just listen to the elephants," the old man mumbled to himself again. "Bet it'll rain heavily."

1. The Kha is a minority ethnic group living in mountains in the western part of Binh Tri Thien province. It includes many sub-groups, the Van Kieu, the Xo, Xek, etc.

He stood up, took a lance down from the wall, and went down the ladder.

"Dik," he called. "Hey Dik!"

A prolonged hoot answered him from the jungle.

"Dik," the old man shouted again, waving the lance towards the place from which the answer had come. "Come here."

A boy emerged from a bush, a crossbow in his hand, a quiver dangling from his waist, his bare brown chest glistening with sweat.



"I must go now," Dik said, casting a regretful look back at the place where he had spent half a day with Sprung, his friend, waiting by a squirrels' nest.

"Hush!" A brown face peered out from the bush. "No noise now, or the squirrels won't come in."

"Grand-father called for me. I'm going now."

"Yes. You can go. I'll send you one for your evening soup."

"No, I won't make soup," said Dik with a broad smile, displaying his even, white teeth. "I'll make some roast squirrel for grand-father to wash down with his rice wine."

Winking and nodding at his friend, Dik darted off. Beads of sweat stood out on his glowing face.

He rushed up the ironwood ladder, which was worn to a silky smoothness by time and use. Old Rem took the crossbow and quiver from him, and handed him the lance.

"Go fetch Lekdam, sonny."

"Why don't you let him enjoy a shower?"

"No shower tonight. Storm's coming."

Dik went down, two rungs at a time. Then, flourishing the lance like a professional mahout, he raced off to the elephant park.

He unchained Lekdam. The old elephant showed its appreciation by caressing the boy's face with the tip of its trunk and rubbing the boy's flanks with its curved tusks. Then, with infinite care, it lapped its trunk around the boy's waist, lifted him up, and gently placed him on its broad back.

Dik straddled the huge animal and prodded its neck with the lance.

"Pei ! Pei"¹ he ordered, assuming the tone of a grown-up.

At a stately pace Lekdam started off, dragging along a length of chain.

Other people were coming to take their elephants home. The village became unusually animated. Elephants were trumpeting. Children were running madly about, throwing up their arms as if they were trying to embrace the rising wind.

The wind was gathering strength, becoming stronger and stronger at each gust. At the now deserted elephant park, dry grass was blown about. Blown about were also the birds in their desperate flight for home. The sky darkened. Suddenly clouds were ripped up by lightning. Then, hardly had the children reached shelter when the rain broke loose, spilling great torrents on the bamboo roofs. Trees swayed drunkenly. They began to look ragged with their leaves falling in great quantities.

The floor-boards of Old Rem's house, secured though they were to sturdy ironwood pillars, were

1. "Go ! Go !" in the Lao language. Lao is spoken by mahouts on the Truong Son Range. The reason is that the first elephants were bought from Lao people. Today even newly domesticated elephants are given Lao names and spoken to in the Lao language, as a reminder of the old practice.

heaving and shaking as though they would jerk loose any moment.

Old Rem raked the fire, sending up leaping flames. On the wall his shadow and his grand-son's quivered for a long moment.

A thunderbolt crashed somewhere high up on the mountain. So loud was the noise that it seemed to come from just above the roof. Then, there were more noises, a prolonged rumbling.

"Landslide," the old man whispered.

Straining their ears they could hear rocks falling and rolling, trees crashing, animals howling in fear.

"Landslide," Old Rem repeated, awed by the ruthless strength of nature.

He and the boy picked their way to the window and looked out. There was a blinding flash of lightning followed immediately by another deafening roar. In that brief instant they saw something like a wide road running down the slope, and they could discern very large rocks charging down that path.

Amidst this orgy of unearthly sounds they could make out the braying of frightened elephants.

"Wild elephants," remarked Dik in a whisper.

"Yes, wild elephants," agreed the old man, always attentive.

This was not unusual in Takhan. At the beginning of the rainy season, when young plants were sprouting everywhere on mountain slopes and in the fields, wild elephants would leave their mountain dens for food. They moved around all the time, going wherever it was raining. This had been their way from time immemorial.

From below, Lekdam was beating its trunk against the floor. The other elephants in the neighbourhood were also stamping impatiently. Then they started trumpeting and pulling at their fetters.

From somewhere at the farthest end of the village, a gong resounded, and soon gongs were heard everywhere, their metallic reverberations drowning the wail of the wind. People were signaling the presence of wild beasts. The village woke up, on the alert.

The pack of wild elephants was approaching. Their high-pitched cries had an undeniably ferocious quality. They could be heard stamping heavily. Soon they came into sight, big black shapes lumbering in the night. Wherever they went trees shook. But they disappeared quite soon. Their stampings were lost in the howling wind.

Long afterwards, the old man and Dik heard one lone elephant heading for the village. Its heavy feet made loud splashes where water had gathered. The animal paused every now and then as if it were feeling its way.

Old Rem and Dik saw it now.

"A stray elephant," the old man exclaimed with great excitement. Then, as agile as a squirrel, he made a leap to the place in the wall where a gong was hanging. He waited until the stray elephant had reached the village clearing, then gave a quick succession of blows on the gong.