

THE

IVORY

COMB

**GIAI PHONG
PUBLISHING HOUSE
SOUTH VIET NAM—1967**

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by Diep Minh Chau

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

South Viet Nam! On this (indomitable) land, gunshots have never ceased resounding over the past twenty years and more. Her people have been resisting successively French colonialism and now U.S. imperialism — the chieftain of world imperialism and the enemy of mankind today.

Thousands of miles away from Viet Nam who has never done harm to the American people, the bosses of the White House and the Pentagon have sent here half a million G.I.'s to fight together with 700,000 satellite and puppet troops. Billions of dollars have been squandered. All that in execution of darkest schemes aimed at quelling the South Vietnamese's national liberation struggle.

Every day American and mercenary forces undertake terrorist raids, burning down villages and massacring innocent people, not sparing old folk, women and children. American planes drop heavy bombs, C.B.U.'s and napalm, and

spray noxious chemicals to defoliate vegetation and destroy food-crops. Peasants are forced at gun-point to leave their homes and lands for disguised concentration camps dubbed "new life hamlets".

Armed force, however, has proved unable to suppress the South Vietnamese people's aspirations for independence and freedom. In face of the brutal enemy they have no other alternative than to rise up in arms for the defence of their lives. They use all weapons — from rudimentary booby traps to modern guns seized from their adversary — and demonstrations and strikes, etc. People of all ages, nationalities, political tendencies and religious creeds take part as best as they can in the national salvation struggle. Combating under the leadership of the National Front for Liberation, they testify to a shining truth of our time: united in a monolithic bloc, determined to fight, placed under a clear-sighted leadership and benefitting by the whole-hearted support of the world peoples, any people, however small, can defeat any aggressor to liberate themselves.

This finds a lively reflection in the present selection of short stories by South Vietnamese authors.

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SOUTH VIET NAM

THE SON

BA and his wife sat up late into the night. He was about forty and she two or three years younger. He was sitting on a rush mat spread on the ground, his back leaning against a pillar, his legs stretched. They remained silent for a long while. All of a sudden the man struck the ground with his clenched fist :

“I’ve so decided.”

His wife said nothing, but tears started welling up in her eyes. Her face looked pitiful. At intervals, a rifleshot broke the stillness of the night, coming from a watchtower, but this was such common happening in a “strategic hamlet”^{*} that neither of them paid any attention. When the echo of the shot had died down, one again heard the snoring of a young boy of sixteen or so lying on a bamboo bed.

Ba drew back his legs, stood up and stretched himself, then walked towards a plank bed. His wife also stood up and came up to him.

“When will he go?” she whispered.

^{*} Name given by the Saigon administration to disguised concentration camps (*Publ*).

“Don’ t know yet, but pretty soon, I guess. I’ll see soldier Tu first and discuss the matter with him. He’ll go as soon as Tu is on guard.”

“Heaven!” wailed his wife.

“What’s the matter with you, wife?” You, women, are easily moved to tears. Let me ask you: will you be happy if Trung gets pressed into their army?”

His wife stood still, wiping her tears. She knew her husband to be a man of character: once he has come to a decision, he’ll never go back on it. For two weeks now he had been talking to her about Trung, their son. Hed’ never let their boy live in this “strategic hamlet”, he had said. Let her get Trung’ s things ready; he would arrange for the boy to go. “Where?” she had asked. “With the Liberation army,” he had whispered into her ears. Then he had added: Don’ t talk to anyone, not even to Trung. Get his things ready, mend his clothes. The two hundred piastres we’ ve saved, don’ t touch them, they are for the boy when he leaves. He’ s our only child, I know, but I’ve thought the matter over and over. He’ s strong and approaching draft age. He’ s like a prey ready to fall into the claws of the pressgangs. We’d better come to a quick decision. Let him go with the Liberation people, they will make a man of him. Sure, they too will put a rifle in his hands, but he’ll use it to kill the traitors. Even if he should die fighting, I’d feel happy!”

The first time her husband talked to her about it, she was quite nervous. How could she help it while they were living in this “strategic hamlet,” teeming with all kinds of thugs and ruffians. As a matter of fact, she had trembled with fear. But then she thought and thought over the matter, and she had decided that Ba was right. Trung was their only son. Soon

he would come to draft age; they would surely take him away. Yes, Ba was right: they couldn't wait passively for that day. But knowing that her husband had arrived at a right decision hadn't alleviated her sufferings. She could hardly sleep these days and often thought of the circumstances in which she had given birth to her son, sixteen years ago. That night, a nurse of the *Ve Quoc Doan* * had delivered her of a son, while in the distance gun reports were heard from a newly set up French military post. It was also the *Ve Quoc Doan* who had given them cloth for the baby's napkins. They were then poor farmhands and their own clothes were made of pieces taken from old gunny bags. The following year, the revolutionary regime gave them two hectares of land, which allowed them to make a decent living and to bring up their child. But three months ago, soldiers of the Diem administration had come and driven them out of their house and land. Ba had tried to prevent one of them from climbing on the thatch roof and taking it down: he had pulled a soldier's leg and caused him to fall. They had beaten him into unconsciousness with rifle butts and dragged him away, together with his wife and child. Now, they were penned up in this "strategic hamlet", a real prison. Here they had been living a miserable life, constantly threatened and bullied. And now that terrible thing, the drafting of their boy, was going to happen. It was worse than anything they had known so far.

* Army for the Defence of the Fatherland, which was to become the Viet Nam People's Army (*Publ.*).

"The Revolution gave us land," Ba often said to his wife, "thanks to which we have been able to bring up our son. Now, shall we let Trung be pressed into the Diem army? Shall we let him turn a gun on the revolution? Is that the way to pay back our debt?"

As a matter of fact, Ba's wife had never disagreed with his decision. For a week now, she had been secretly preparing for her son's departure. But oh! how she had been suffering! Could a mother help it when her son was about to leave, perhaps for ever?

On his bed, Ba had started snoring. His wife lay down by Trung's side. She couldn't sleep. She sat up, and looked at her boy under the dim light of the little kerosene lamp. Trung was sleeping with his shirt off, for it was very hot. She gently felt his arm: it was hard and strong. Her child had grown into a sturdy young man. She groped for her sewing kit, brought the lamp near and started mending his shirt. As she threaded her needle, her eyes were again dim with tears. At intervals, rifleshots tore the air, fired by the *dan ve* *. Footsteps resounded: it was the security men going on their rounds. Apart from these sounds, complete silence reigned in the hamlet, a sinister silence. On the watch-towers at the four corners of the stockade, lights shone like demons' eyes. Barbed wire entanglements were mirrored in the water of the moat.

* * *

* Civil guards (*Publ.*).

"Now, that's what I wanted to tell you. Will you go?" Ba asked his son. Trung sat still for a while then glanced at his father. Ba repeated his question:

"Will you go?" Are you afraid?"

Trung sprang to his feet. He said, without looking at his father:

"How can I be afraid? What you just said, I've thought about quite often. I'm ready to go right now. Why should I leave at night? I'll go in broad daylight."

"No, kid, it's better not to be seen. You ass! It's a lot easier by night. I've talked to soldier Tu. He'll be on guard duty pretty soon, at the main watch-tower. He'll let you go, and after a moment, he'll fire a shot to give the alarm. As for me, I'll pretend that you've just fled!"

The old man was right, Trung thought. He remained silent for a while, then said:

"After I leave, they'll give you plenty of trouble."

"Don't worry. The main thing is that you could escape. I don't care if they give me a few strokes of rifle butts."

The boy sat motionless. He kept winking. He was thinking of what would happen after his departure: who would go and fetch wood for mother? Mother would surely cry her eyes out thinking of him. Joy and sorrow mingled in his mind. Then he thought of the day when with his fellow-armymen he would come back to liberate his parents, auntie Tam, uncle Nam and his girl cousins Lanh and Que. He'd make a clean

sweep of all the guards and militia here. He'd knock down all the stockades and fences. People on our side, like soldiers Tu and Chin Co, would be spared, but all the others, well, he'd throw them all in the river! Before his mind's eye, he saw seething scenes of battle!

"Once you've come to the liberated zones," his father said, "you must be an industrious and active boy, understand? Overcome all hardships. If they take you into the Liberation army, so much the better, but even if you're given a mere courier's job, don't refuse. Accept every assignment you are given, understand?"

His father laid particular emphasis on the last word. Trung seemed a bit annoyed by such repetition. If you join the revolution, hardships are a matter of course. He was not afraid of them. He had swam across rivers, waded in the mud of fields and swamps, he had gone without food for two or three days at a stretch. Of course, hunger is something very unpleasant, but he promised to himself that he'd never get discouraged. Every hardship his comrades could endure, he could. Trung looked out: beyond the barbed wire fence, he saw half-built ramparts, a river, an expanse of fields, then green hedges; that's where My Hiep village was and next to it his own native village, Tan Hiep. He'd swim across the river— that's easy, he could do it four times over. He'd break into a run and rapidly cross the expanse of fields. No, there would be no difficulty...

"The main thing is..." his father's voice again rose.

"Again, that confounded main thing..." Trung thought, rather irreverently.

“ The main thing is that you should have plenty of courage. The reason why we always get the better of the My—Diem * troops is because our morale is a whole lot higher. They are always ready to take to their heels, whereas our own troops would launch an assault even before the order is given! ”

Trung glanced at his father, thinking to himself: “ Heaven, a soldier going into action before the order is given! ” The idea seemed ludicrous to him, but he did not dare to show his amusement, nor to contradict his father. The man was rather hot-tempered: if he got angry he'd go right after him! But Trung knew how deeply his father loved him and his mother; only the man disliked making a display of his feelings. As for his mother, she was tender-hearted and doted upon her boy: after he left, she'd surely cry her eyes out. It's a pity that he should be her only child; if he had a little sister, like his cousin Que for instance, that would be a solace to his mother. For the moment she was busying herself in the kitchen. A nice smell wafted in. What was it? Perhaps noodles and shrimps, his favourite. He hadn't had any noodles and shrimp for quite a long time. The reason was, here at the “ strategic hamlet ” it was not easy to get shrimps. Before they were penned up, he used to go catching them in the canal near Tan Hiep. A few minutes' wading in the shallow would be enough to get him a nice catch. But here, you just had to go without shrimps. This morning, his mother had needed a special authorization from Hai, the security man, to

* US-Diem (*Publ.*).

go to market ; she had brought back a few shrimps, which had cost her a lot of money, fifteen piastres for eight !

His mother was laying the bowls and chopsticks for the meal when footsteps were heard : it was Hai, the security agent. He stopped before the door, his hands thrust into the pockets of his fashionable “ dacron ” pants, and shouted into the house :

“ Hey, political studies this evening. Very important: the open-arm policy of the government.”

Getting no answer, he bellowed :

“ What, are you all dead? Nobody’s at home?”

Without stepping out, Ba said from inside the house: “ Here I am.”

“ Why should you keep your big mouth tightly shut like that?” said the security man. “ Look here, go to the meeting-hall this evening for the study session on President Ngo Dinh Diem’s open-arm policy. If you have any relatives who have followed the Vietcong, try to persuade them to go back... Hmm... What a nice smell ! What are you cooking?”

“ It’s some noodles... We’ ve run out of rice...”

“ Noodles in place of rice ? My, what prosperous people you are ! Yet, how hard it was to bring you over here ! ”

“ Well, perhaps we are prosperous, but...”

“ Stop it... I know what you are going to complain about... Rising prices... everything hard to get... and so on and so forth.”