

# *the walls are down*



*by Dick Diamond*

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# THE WALLS ARE DOWN

by

**DICK DIAMOND**

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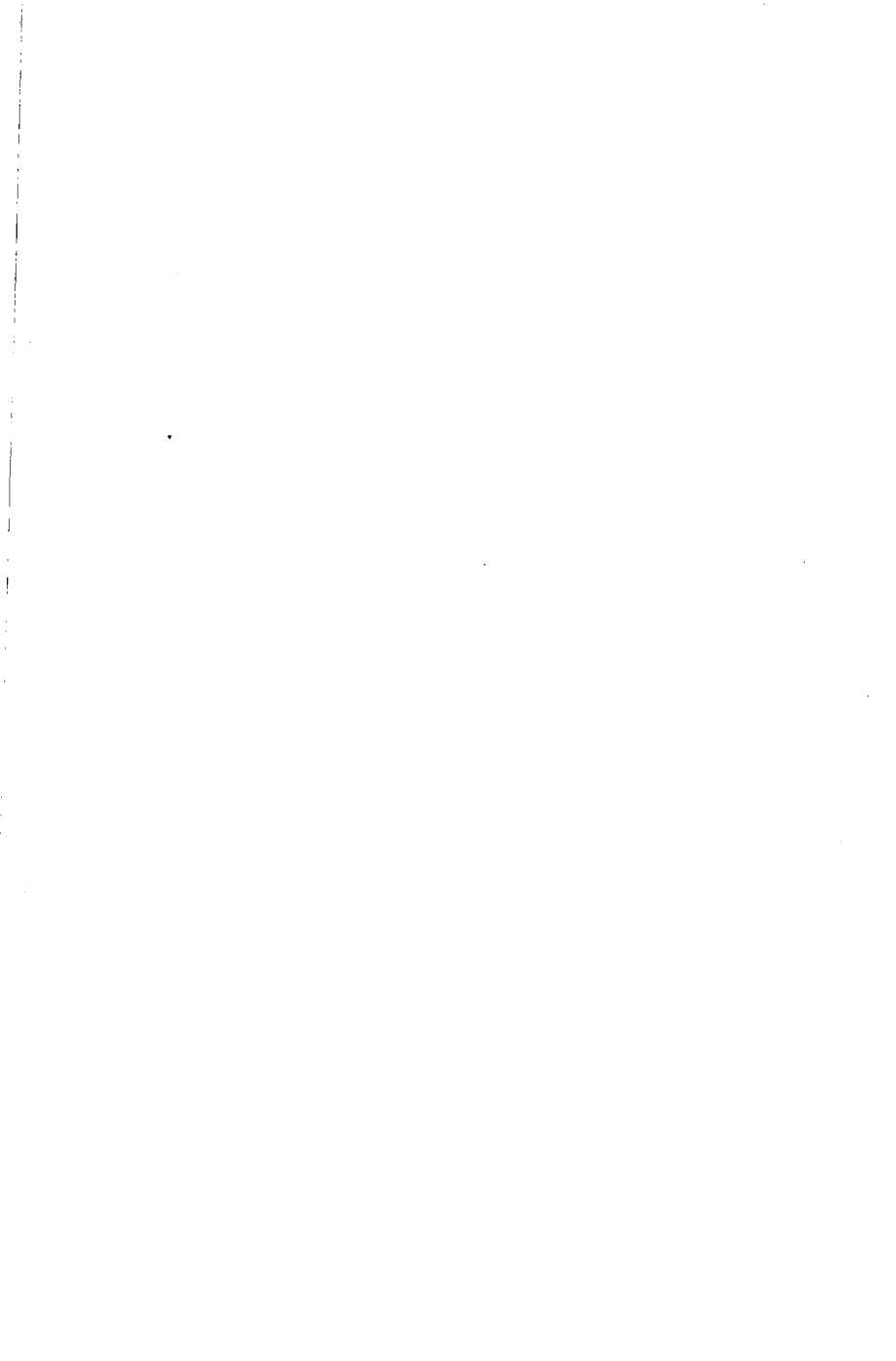
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*For Liliane  
and the People of Vietnam*



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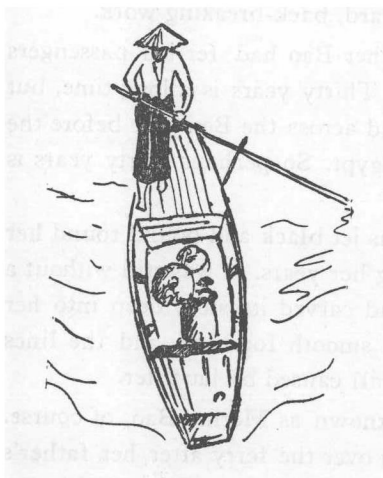
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## CHAPTER I

# MOTHER BAO



The August sun had risen red through the haze over the paddy fields, and by mid-morning blazed down from a sky of brass. The day had begun busily in the village, but now it was slowing perceptibly with the increasing heat and would

come to a halt when the sun reached its zenith.

Down by the river, Mother Bao sat in the shade of a banyan tree and sang a song. Her voice was full and strong, as befitted one whose life had been spent plying the ferry across the Ben Hai.

A voice upstream sang a verse in reply. It was high pitched and seemed to float down on the slow-moving stream and remain suspended for a moment in the heat of the morning.

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Across the river she watched Old Truong, knee deep in water, weeding between the rows of paddy, his cone-shaped straw hat bobbing up and down as he moved along. In the neighbouring plots, other peasants were working at the same task, for the fields gave back only what was put into them in the way of hard, back-breaking work.

For thirty years Mother Bao had ferried passengers across the Ben Hai River. Thirty years is a long time, but peasants were being ferried across the Ben Hai before the pyramids were built in Egypt. So perhaps thirty years is not so long.

Mother Bao's hair was jet black and bound round her head in a manner befitting her years. It was still without a trace of grey ; but life had carved its story deep into her once rounded cheeks and smooth forehead, and the lines around her eyes were not all caused by laughter.

She was not always known as Mother Bao, of course. When she had first taken over the ferry after her father's death, she was called \* Chi Bao. Then, as she stood in the stern of her boat, leaning on the big oar, with the sun shining on her brown face and glistening teeth, her cotton trousers rolled to the knees, she was good to look upon.

Her husband, Cuong, had been well liked in the village, but what had happened to him few remembered and no one asked. When wars and famine sweep a country everyone loses someone, and one does not talk about losses. But none had forgotten the death of Hai, her second son,

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\* Sister

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and even now the villagers talked of it as they sat outside their huts of an evening and watched the shadows moving over the hillside.

Mother Bao lived with her son Dien and his Tay wife, Anh, in a bamboo hut facing the river. Twice a year she would bundle up her possessions and visit her married daughters, Oanh and Thoa, at nearby hamlets. But always she returned to the hut by the river's edge where her boat lay idle along with all the other craft which once ferried the peasants across the Ben Hai.

The halting of the traffic did not happen immediately after the country was divided at the Ben Hai River. At first, trade was as brisk as ever. The markets on the north bank and on the south were traditional meeting places where fruit and vegetables, cloth and handicraft work were exchanged with all the gossip of life on both sides of the river.

Market days had been busy ones for Mother Bao, ferrying the peasants and their goods and animals from one side of the river to the other from early morning to midday when the market closed.

But gradually free movement between the two zones became more and more difficult, and more and more soldiers could be seen on the south bank, enforcing the restrictions that made it so. Then one day all traffic across the river was stopped by the Southern administration. At first, the people did not understand this — in all of two thousand years no one had ever been prevented from

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crossing the river. There was no cause for alarm — it would be all right tomorrow, some thought. But tomorrow came and again the peasants were stopped. Then the people cried out in anger and there were arrests and the soldiers burned down the market place on the south bank. And so the people who were really one and whose families lived on both sides of the river were divided and forced to live as two.

But ties of blood are stronger than the laws of man. And so the peasants on either bank would sing their songs and speak to each other in a way they alone understood. And when Grandfather Duc wanted to see his innumerable grand-children on the south side, or when Fifth Daughter felt the need to talk things over with mother on the north, it was Mother Bao who ferried them across the river when the moon was down.

Now, as she sat on the bank singing her song, a voice replied from accross the river. At times the voice was harsh, as though protesting bitterly against fate ; and then suddenly it would change to a soft, mournful note of suffering. Mother Bao knew that the singer was Truong, his head bent low so that one might think it was the peasant in the next plot who was singing.

Suddenly the song was cut short and Mother Bao smiled. She knew that somewhere nearby on the opposite bank, one of the landlord's bullies would be listening.

Dien came through the bamboo grove behind her his body showing thin and brown above the cotton

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knickers. He stood beside her waiting for the singer to go on, his face with its dark eyes and well-moulded lips intent and serious.

‘ Old Truong sings a sad song ’, Mother Bao said.

‘ His daughter is dead ’, Dien said.

‘ Landlord Luu has now squeezed the last drop of blood from him. ’

‘ What did Luu want with a girl of sixteen ? He had four wives. ’

‘ It was the fifth he wanted, Dien. Not the other four. ’

‘ They say she took her own life. ’

‘ It is true ’, Mother Bao said. ‘ Sad is the fate of woman. ’

‘ We fought the long war against this’, Dien said, softly.

He chewed on a straw ; across the river the hot sun beat down on the paddy fields and hung a haze over the rows of green shoots. On a hillside in the distance, Nguyen Van Luu’s house could be seen partly obscured by a belt of pine trees, the red roof shimmering in the heat. It had neither the character nor magnificence of the landlord’s former residence on the north bank, but it was fitting enough for a mandarin of wealth and position.

Mother Bao turned to him. ‘ Old Truong asks for help. ’

‘ It will not be wanting ’, Dien said. ‘ But a lot depends on him. ’

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'Truong is old and cunning. He will know what to do.'

Dien brushed an ant off his toes into the river. Old Truong would get the help he asked for, but if anything went amiss it might cost them their heads. Luu had the backing of the authorities in the South. His power could not be taken lightly.

'Tonight I will take the boat', he said.

'I go with my boat', Mother Bao said.

'There will be a moon. I must go alone.'

'I know best how this thing must be done', she said.

He knew better than to argue with his mother. High above the paddy fields a hawk hovered, then plunged earthward. Their eyes followed it until it was lost to sight behind a grove of bamboo.

Mother Bao began another song. It told of a landlord who lusted for the daughter of a peasant and how he claimed her in settlement of a debt. A voice from across the river took up the song where Mother Bao left it. Then from somewhere downstream another verse was added by a voice that came only faintly to the two who listened on the north bank.

\* \* \*

The Ben Hai is not a wide river ; to cross it takes no longer than for a cloud to cross the moon. They hid the boat in the shadow, and then climbed up the bank. Then Dien turned and spoke to his mother.

'Wait here for me.'

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Mother Bao pointed to the vast expanse of moon-washed paddy fields. There are a thousand ways through the fields, and who knows them better than I?' she said, and led the way into the paddy.

Beneath the green shoots water stretched on either side of the tiny dykes separating the narrow plots. Frogs croaked shrilly in the night, beating out their song on a monotonous note.

They shivered as the keen wind from the hills swept across the fields, rustling the paddy in swells of silver light and shadow. Away on the hillside the flickering lanterns at Landlord Luu's house served as a guide. The mournful hoot of an owl on a night's hunting came from ahead of them as they approached the belt of pines standing like dark sentinels around three sides of the large house. Wood-smoke pouring from a big chimney at the rear was caught by the breeze, and trailed across the night sky like a tattered grey ribbon.

Squatting silently in the shadow of the pines was a large group of peasants. Mother Bao spoke to them in a low voice for a few moments. Then with Dien she went through the open door of the house.

The room they entered was hung with white curtains and was devoid of furniture except for the bed in the centre. The small body of a girl lay on the bed, dressed in white with a square of paper covering the face. A bonze in his saffron robe stood at the head of the bed, muttering a prayer. On the mourning mat at the side knelt Luu's



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wives, wailing and chanting in turn. Old Truong stood silently behind them, head bowed, while Landlord Luu, dressed in white, was standing near the rear wall with his back to the window. The light caught his bald head and accentuated the wrinkles on his face, giving it the appearance of creased parchment.

He did not appear to notice Mother Bao until Truong bowed to her.

‘What does this woman want here?’ he asked.

‘She is my friend’, Truong said.

‘She has no place in my house’, Luu said.

Truong hung his head for a moment and then raised his eyes to look squarely at the landlord.

‘Neither has the body of my daughter.’

The Buddhist priest stopped his prayers and watched in silence. The women stood up, nervous and tense. Luu reached behind him and pulled a rope hanging down the wall and a bell sounded faintly in the rear of the house. Feet pounded along the passage outside, and two men entered the room carrying clubs. Luu spoke quietly as one who was in control of the position.

‘What do you want, Old Truong?’

Truong stood for a moment looking in silence at the guards. Then he spoke in a voice that barely reached the others, but left no doubt as to the determination behind it.

‘I want my daughter’, he said.

Landlord Luu smiled. ‘When a peasant forgets his place, Old Truong, he must be taught a lesson’.