daughters of VIETNAM

by Mona Brand

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For my husband.
For the women of Vietnam and
for people of peace everywhere.

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FOREWORD

This small collection of stories and poems is dedicated to all the courageous women of Vietnam who played such a magnificent and often astonishing role in their country's recent war of resistance.

Although most of the stories deal with the Vietnamese struggle against French colonialism, the Vietnamese people have always felt the deepest sympathy for the French people, many of whom fiercely opposed their government's prosecution of the war in Indo-China. In the past there have been many firm friendships formed between Vietnamese and French people, and today friendly ties between Vietnam and France are steadily developing.

In the collecting of the material for these stories, I am indebted to the Vietnam Women's Union as well as the interpreters who gave their selfless assistance when my husband and I talked with women in various parts of North Vietnam — peasants in small cottages on the delta and at the seashore, miners at Hongay-Campha and people belonging to the various national minorities in the new Thai-Meo autonomous region of the North West.

Three of the stories, Return to Life, The Little Messenger *and* Voice in the Jungle *can more correctly be described as biographies because they describe*

events almost exactly as they took place, with the exception of the creation of a few minor characters. Down Dragon *and* Once More Flowers Blossom, *while always describing actual incidents, are somewhat fictional, in that the chronological order of events has been altered, love interests added, and (in the case of the last-mentioned story) several characters welded together into one. For this reason, names have often been changed. In this connection, however, I would like to express my thanks to three women miners I met at Campha — Nguyen Thi Ca, Cao Thi Bao and Nguyen Thi Tram — because it was they who told me of experiences they had personally had, and around which the story is built.*

I should also like to thank Dang Thuc Hang for his English translation of the first three songs used in «Voice in the Jungle.»

The Material for Once More Flowers Blossom *was gathered from a number of women living around Quang Huy and Thuan Chau in the North West. In this story the character of Xuong is largely authentic in so far as it describes the work done by a Muong girl, Mui Thi Xuong, in mobilising the women of two villages. The character of Yen, however, is a composite one of several women belonging to the Black Thai* minority.*

The three girls, Nguyen Thi Chanh, Nguyen Thi Liên and Thuong Huyen in the biographical stories, are at present living in or near Hanoi. Nguyen Thi Thanh, who devoted most of her time during the Resistance War to mass education work, came to North Vietnam after the 1954 Armistice Agreement, and continues her

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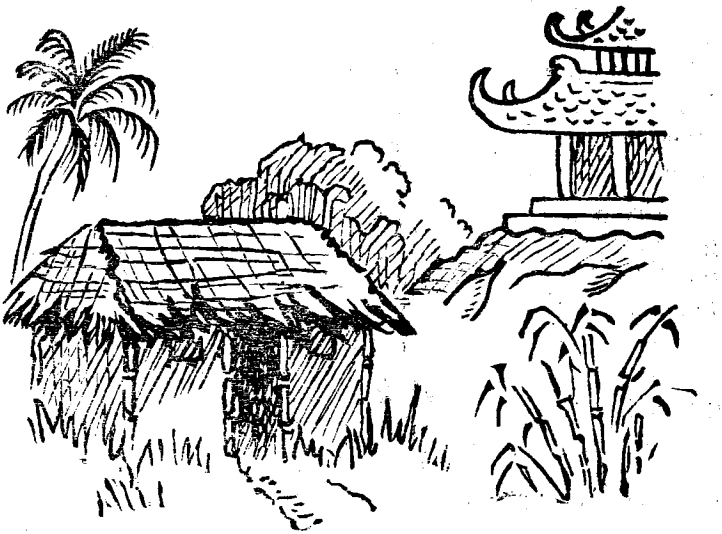
* *As distinct from the White Thai, so called because of the jackets worn by the women.*

work today in a small village near Hanoi. Nguyen Thi Lien had many further adventures as an underground liaison worker, during which she met and married a man engaged on the same task. In 1954 they both came to the North, where Lien is now working in a big Soviet-equipped hospital in Hanoi. Thuong Huyen is still one of the Voice of Vietnam's leading singers, and is at the same time a member of a theatrical ensemble which often visits country areas. In 1957 she won a silver medal at the Moscow Festival of Youth and Students.

Like many thousands of the Vietnamese people who made sacrifices during the war, all the women we met and talked with are playing a decisive part now in repairing the terrible damage wrought by the war, and in rebuilding their country in the North along socialist lines. At the same time they, like many of their courageous brothers and sisters in the South, are constantly working for the peaceful reunification of Vietnam. The material in this book cannot hope to give more than a small glimpse of the heroic past and present life of the Vietnamese women — those women whom two years ago I began by liking and admiring, and whom, because of their modesty, simplicity and kindness, I have grown to love deeply.

M. A. B.
Hanoi 1958



RETURN TO LIFE

When the first cock crowed in the little hamlet of Tay Ban, many people stirred. It was not yet light, and the air was still and warm, promising a hot day to come. In the woven bamboo cottages with their thatched roofs, some rose immediately, from habit; others stretched their limbs and allowed themselves another minute or two of the only rest they would know until after nightfall.

In the big house set back from the road, closed in behind a bamboo hedge and sheltered by banyan trees and longan trees, old Nam and his family still slept. The only member of that silent household to open her eyes was Chanh.

Chanh moved on her bundle of straw in the stable where she lay close to the grey buffalo. The animal lifted his head, and she could just distinguish his sorrowful eyes and the look of long-suffering he turned upon her, with his big horns laid back and his nose in the air. Chanh patted him and stood up, shaking the straw from her clothes. She was small for her nine years, and her eyes, though soft, were sorrowful in her smooth, round face.

From a corner of the barn she fetched a bundle of grass and put it down before the buffalo. Then she went out into the yard where the dog crouched at the end of his chain. Light was now beginning to come into the sky, and sounds of life could be heard in the hamlet. Somewhere a baby cried, and in the pigsty close at hand a pig grunted. There was a distant sound of water splashing into a bucket. A man coughed loudly and cleared his throat. Chanh took a sort of witches broom made from a bundle of twigs tied to a long bamboo handle, and began sweeping the first of old Nam's four yards.

While she was sweeping the fourth and biggest, which formed the main courtyard, she heard the first sounds of life inside the house, and began to move faster. The courtyard was hard to sweep because it was strewn with stubbs of sugar cane and smeared with patches of sticky sugar cane juice, and in one corner there stood a huge wood and iron cane-crushing machine mounted on wooden blocks.

Chanh moved all the faster when she heard a shrill female voice rise inside the house, screaming and scolding. That would be Phi, old Nam's wife. There was a loud slap, and a child began to cry. Despite the sticky ground under her bare feet, Chanh's little black clad figure darted backwards and forwards, her every movement expressive of the fear that gripped her — a fear that some of the

wrath indoors would find its way out and begin to descend on her own head. That was the way trouble usually began for her : something happened inside the house — old Nam roared or his wife scolded as she was doing now — and before long a rain of blows fell upon Chanh, sometimes from the landlord or his wife, sometimes from one of the children. There was no way of knowing when it would begin, or why.

But strangely enough, today the sun was well up before any notice was taken of Chanh, and then one of the other servants shouted to her that the first meal was ready.

Old Nam and his family — that is to say, his wife, his concubine, his two sons, his daughters-in-law and three of his five grand-children—sat or squatted on the smooth-topped plank beds in the central compartment of the house, just beyond the verandah, digging their chopsticks in and out of the steaming hot rice and vegetables the servants had set before them in bowls.

Behind them, at the back of the room, stood the ancestors' altar : three lacquered tables of varying heights, carved with dragons and clouds. On the highest table there stood a red and gold lacquered box containing a list of the names of old Nam's ancestors, and beside this stood a china pipe, a tea service, a betel plate and two wooden receptacles for incense sticks. Before the altar was a red and gold lacquered panel, carved with a moon and lions.

When Chanh came in from the yard, old Nam's youngest grand-child, a baby of a few months, lay sleeping in a rattan hammock that was being rocked by one of the servants, and a child of two years stood clinging to his mother's knee, screaming lustily.

"Where have you been, you lazy maggot? the child's mother shouted as Chanh ran to him and gathered him

up into her arms. Muttering some words to quieten him, she sat on the floor and held him close, tempting him with the rice bowl that one of the servant girls had handed to her.

As usual, Chanh kept her eyes turned away from the members of the family, for fear of having an angry sneer directed towards her, or something thrown at her head by one of the older children. The only person in the household who ever looked at her kindly was Nam's concubine, Hoa, whose sweet eyes sometimes gazed at her sadly, but who, in her role of semi-servant, was afraid to talk to the other menials.

Today the family ate as noisily as ever, but nobody spoke, and Chanh sensed that old Nam must be in one of his most sullen moods. Every line of his corpulent body expressed displeasure, and his cold eyes rested on one after the other of his children as the chopsticks went back and forth from the bowl to his mouth.

Nam was by no means one of the biggest landlords in the district, but he rented twenty or forty acres — according to the season — and hired twelve peasants to do the work for him. His was chiefly a sugar growing farm, but he had several acres planted with rice, and he grew some vegetables and kept a few pigs and chickens. He was notoriously bad tempered all the year, but in the cane-cutting season he was more ferocious than ever, and watched the labouring peasants with the eye of a hawk, ready to beat them if they rested even for a few moments in the broiling heat of the sun.

When she had finished feeding the child, Chanh filled a small bowl with some of the food left over by the family, and went and sat with it on the edge of the verandah. As she began to eat, the children dashed into the yard, brushing past her and bumping her as they went. The