



NGUYEN VAN TROI  
AS HE WAS



Phan Thi Quyen at a congress in the liberated zone (on her left, Lawyer Nguyen Huu Tho, President of the South Vietnam N.F.L.).

# NGUYEN VAN TROI AS HE WAS

*Told by Phan Thi Quyen  
Recorded by Tran Dinh Van*

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## FOREWORD

*On 15th October, 1964, on orders from the Americans the Saigon authorities sent before the firing squad a young electrical worker, Nguyen Van Troi on the charge of having attempted to blow up a bridge on which McNamara, the U.S. Defence Secretary, was to have passed. Everyone still remembers that at the beginning of that month, Venezuelan patriots had kidnapped the American colonel Smolen and threatened to execute him in case Nguyen Van Troi was killed. On instructions from Washington, the execution of the Vietnamese patriot was suspended, but as soon as Smolen was freed the Americans ordered Nguyen Van Troi to be immediately shot.*

*On the morning of 15th October the Vietnamese and foreign journalists who were present in large numbers at the execution were surprised to see a completely self-possessed young man who gave them a veritable press conference. He told them in particular :*

*"You are journalists, and so must be well informed about what has been happening. It is the Americans who have committed aggression on our country, it is they who have been killing our people with planes and bombs. It is McNamara who has worked out a whole plan for the conquest of our fatherland. I feel infinite love for my fatherland. I cannot let the Americans trample on our independence. I have never acted against the will of my people. It is against the Americans that I have taken action. I wanted to make away with McNamara, who is at the origin of the so many crimes committed in this country."*

*A journalist asked him :*

*"Do you feel any regret before dying?"*

*"I only regret not to have succeeded in killing McNamara."*

*When a priest wanted to give him absolution he refused, saying :*

*"I have committed no sin. It is the Americans who have sinned."*

*He tore off the bandage covering his eyes, saying :*

*"Let me look at our beloved land."*

*He died with the greatest calm. Hit by the first volley he kept crying : "Long live Vietnam ! Long live President Ho Chi Minh !"*

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*Where did he come from, this young hero whose name is now known all over the world ? How did he live ? How did he carry out his revolutionary activities ? What was he like in day-to-day life ?*

*His young wife Phan Thi Quyen, who succeeded in escaping to the liberated zone, has given a moving account of her last days with Nguyen Van Troi. Recorded by Tran Dinh Van, her story is hereafter published in full, in all its simplicity and, may we say, in all its candour.*

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That morning of Sunday 10th May 1964, I was on tenterhooks. Troi had been absent from home all night. I was longing for him, more so than on any previous holiday. Since our wedding, we had not so far been able to visit any of our relatives. My parents were natives of the North. Together with many co-villagers from Vangiap commune, Thuongtin district, Ha-dong province they had moved to the South several decades ago. Yet all of them had been careful to observe the customs and traditions of their native land. Of those traditions, one was that the bride and bridegroom should visit the former's relatives on the day following their wedding.

Weeks had elapsed since ours. But Troi had always found some pretext not to comply with this custom. Would he again find one this Sunday? I was truly worried: what important matter had so far prevented him from having even a single day off? We had been very much in love with each other, and before our marriage, whenever he mentioned our forthcoming wedding, he had always shown the greatest joy, calling it the happiest day in his life. "There is only one such day in a man's life," he would say, "so let's make

it a great day, with lots of people attending. Then, we will have a few days to ourselves, for trips and visits."

But when our wedding-day came, he didn't live up to his word: he didn't even have a sorely needed haircut. After we were married, he usually came back late from work. He sat up late at night, making all kinds of sketches. When he took me to a friend's, I would be left to sit by myself while the two of them had endless talks in the courtyard, sometimes moving little stones the way chessplayers would their pawns. Once I asked him: "You seem to have quite a lot of worries?". He answered: "The boss has given me a complicated electrical machine to repair. I haven't found a way to tackle it yet." The wedding-ring had disappeared from his finger, a ring with the letter "Q" I had given him on Lunar New Year's Day of 1964. He said it interfered with his work. How surprising! When I had given it him, he had looked truly moved, as if he had received something sacred. He caressed it, tried it on, assured himself that it would not slip off during work. Turning it on his finger, he said half in jest: "It will leave my hand only if this finger is cut off in a work accident."

Before we were married he seemed madly in love with me. He had been introduced to me by one of his girl cousins who worked in the same factory as I did. Every afternoon when leaving work I found him waiting for me, shine or rain. Once he went back to his native village in Quangnam for two weeks. During this time, he wrote two long letters to me, in which he made me feel as if we had been separated for years. I loved to read his letters. I knew every line



by heart. I was secretly proud of having such a sweetheart, so faithful, so deeply in love, and held in such high esteem by my family. Other young men had wooed me, but he was so completely different from them. He did not fawn upon me: his love was deep and sincere, but at the same time showed dignity and frankness. He had no indulgence even for little faults, or for mere words which he thought inconsiderate. Sometimes I bore him a grudge, and then he would say: "I only wanted to make a still finer girl of you: the more we love each other, the more we should try to make finer people of each other."

But now, how difficult it was to understand his behaviour! He had grown so sparing of his words. I had been patiently trying to make out the reasons for such an abrupt change in his character. I must say however that in our daily life he kept lavishing care on me, even more so than previously. Once I was ill and had to stay from work for half a day. He was beside himself with anxiety, rushing around for medicines as if I had caught a serious disease. He played the mandolin for me, fed me rice soup and fruit and gave me motherly care. He sat up late at night fanning me to sleep. Only the day before, he took care before going out to prepare for my bath. He filled a can of water and carried it to the house next door, for we had no bathroom of our own and had to use our neighbour's. But seeing him getting prepared to go out on a Saturday evening, I grew somewhat angry and told him in a gruff voice:

"Go out if you have to. I'll carry water myself."

"No, there are a few steep steps. You may fall."  
When he had reached the door, and had hold of his moped, he turned and said :

"I'll soon be through with the repair of the electrical machine. To-morrow I may be able to take you out for a walk. Just say where you want to go. If you like, we'll go away for one or two days."

So I was confident that today Sunday he would come back and that I would be able to go out with him. I got a gown ready, the one I had worn on our wedding-day, and figured to myself whom we should visit first among our relatives. I would also take Troi to a few of my friends ; they had been teasing me, saying, "Your husband is as timid as a rabbit. Doesn't dare to show up anywhere !"

At about nine o'clock in the morning, suddenly I saw seven or eight policemen walking in, surrounding a man with his arms pinioned behind his back and his hands manacled. I didn't recognize Troi at first. But as soon as he saw me, he cried out, "Quyen, I've been arrested !" He came up to me as I stood there, dumb-founded. Only one night, and now he looked completely changed. His clothes were soiled with mud and blood, so much so that from their original blue they now looked a different colour. His face was haggard and bruised, his hair tousled. The policemen brutally pushed him in and made him sit on the bed. One of them, probably the commander, looked around at our little room and said with a Northern accent :

"Cosy and snug. Good for newly-weds. And yet he had to go and stir up trouble !"

He pointed his finger at a few things, adding :

"A mandolin, new clothes..."

He kept casting a glance here and there. When he saw me, he asked Troi :

"A young wife too, lots of happiness, what more do you want?"

Jerking his head back to remove a lock of hair from his eyes, Troi answered :

"I told you several times last night. What more do I want? I want to destroy all the Yanks. I want the South to be freed."

The police commander stood leaning against a small table, facing Troi. He glared at him threateningly :

"We'll see if you can go on braving it out."

He shouted at other policemen in the courtyard, who were looking for explosives, telling them to make a thorough search. Then he stepped towards the bed, saying :

"Brand-new bedding, blankets and pillows ! Soft and snug. But you didnt' want to stay home and enjoy these comforts. Instead you let yourself be induced by the Viet Cong to committing misdeeds. Of course, the Viet Cong have disappeared God knows where ; but, you, you've got manacles on your hands, and soon you'll get more blows."

Troi answered right back, looking him in the face :

"I'm different from you. I can't bow my head and try to live securely while the Yanks are bringing in bombs and bullets to massacre my people."

He sat with his back against the head of the bed, perfectly calm, completely ignoring the policemen standing around him. He looked around at the little room he had built two years ago with the help of his nephew, collecting board after board, palm-leaf after palm-leaf. He looked at me for a long, very long moment. His eyes were filled with love and affection, and looked as though he wanted to say something to me and to console me. The more I grew conscious of his deep love, the more I was filled with remorse. I blamed myself for not having been able to understand him on account of my youth and lack of experience and for having at times nurtured doubts about his faithfulness. Everything now was crystal clear : it was for the sake of the revolution that he had given up his personal happiness, that he had even been ready to give up his marriage. I now understood why he had wanted to postpone our wedding. Then I had suspected him of scheming to desert me. I had sent out invitation cards : what would people think if the wedding was to be postponed ? Unable to win me over to his arguments, Troi had sat still for a long moment, then said :

“How can I make you understand now ? All right, let's go ahead with the wedding as planned. But please, don't think badly of me. It has never been in my thought to desert you. I love you so much. Now you are angry with me, but some day you will understand.”

Now that I had come to understand him, he had been arrested. Sitting in a corner of the room, I cried bitterly.

Policemen equipped with mine-detectors, after a prolonged search in the house and the courtyard, failed to find any explosive. They then crowded into the room and stood around Troi. Their commander asked me :

“Do you know whether your husband has hidden any explosive anywhere? Have you ever seen him trying to hide something in this house?”

I answered, weeping :

“I don’t know anything about my husband’s activities. I have never seen him trying to hide anything.”

“If you don’t own up, I’ll beat your husband to death in this very room.”

“I can’t, because I don’t know.”

He turned to Troi :

“If you tell us where you’ve hidden the explosives, this room will continue to be a love nest for you two. If you persist in refusing, it will be turned into a torture chamber, and you’ll die in it.”

“I don’t know where the explosives are.”

They rushed at him and beat him up, then gave him electrical shocks. The shocks were so violent that he was flung brutally on the bed, writhing. I no longer could sit still; all fear had left my heart; I rushed at the thugs, trying to stop them. One of them caught hold of me, pulled me back to the chair, pressed my shoulders to force me to sit on it and stood in front of me. I started screaming. They whipped out their gun and pointed them at me.

Then they stopped and asked Troi :

“Where are the explosives?”

Breathing heavily, he said, louder than the previous time : "I told you I don't know. If you still want to know, just go wherever the Yanks are, the explosives are there."

This time, the police commander himself started the beating. Snatching a stick from one of the thugs, he lashed out at Troi, raining blows all over his body. After each beating, they interrogated him. An hour passed without their obtaining any result. The commander ordered his men to take Troi away. Standing up with effort, Troi told me in a loud voice : "Don't worry, Quyen. Just try to eke out a living with our nephew."

His clothes had been torn up, not a single button was left, his chest and his face were bleeding all over. He slowly made for the door, still looking at me and forcing himself to smile. I struggled with the policeman guarding me, trying to get nearer to my husband. In spite of the thug's hold on my neck, I managed to cry out : "Troi, I love you so much ! I love you so much !"

The commander turned and said :

"Forget about love and pity. Try instead to get another husband. The man deserves death for his crime."

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That night, at about eleven, the policemen came back. They told me :

"Your husband wants to see you. Right now."

Hearing that I might see him, I hastily followed them to their car. Knowing where they were keeping him, I would be able to look after him and bring food to him. After a while, they drove into a lane, arrested a school-girl, then brought both of us to the City Police Headquarters. In the interrogation room, I learned that the girl was also suspected of being connected with Troi's activities. That very night, I was interrogated. A police superintendent asked me :

"Do you know anything about your husband's activities ?"

"Nothing."

"How long have you been married ?"

"Nineteen days, exactly."

"Do you realize that for newly-weds like you and Troi, these are the finest, happiest days of your lives ?"

"Yes, I do."

"Good. If you own up to everything, and hide nothing, these finest, happiest days of your lives will not have ended."

He paused, yawned and reclined in his armchair. He was a rat-faced man, with the complexion of an opium-addict. He continued :

"Whom did Troi call on most often ?"

"He worked all day, sometimes even in the evening. He very rarely went out. Only once in a while did he take a stroll in the streets. I don't know whom he visited most often."

"Was there anyone who frequently visited him ?"

"Only once in a while did someone call on him. On these occasions, they played music together or sang, or did repair work entrusted to them on a piece-work basis. I've been married to him only for a few weeks, I can't know much about his friends."

"Try to remember. Tell me everything you know. Think the matter over. If you hide nothing, he'll be released. I've met Troi, and now I've met you : to tell the truth, you're a nice couple. I really feel sorry for you."

He flung on to the desk a photograph of Troi and myself, the one that had been taken on our wedding day. In the photo, I was wearing a gown with blue flowers, holding a bouquet of gladioli, and standing beside Troi. The police superintendent tried hard to put a note of pity in his words :

"Really, it would wring anyone's heart thinking that such a young couple may soon be separated for ever. I've been on this job for a long time and I've retrieved happiness for many a family. You can trust me. You and Troi will certainly be reunited if you help us find out Troi's leaders and associates, and where the explosives are hidden..."

I said :

"I don't know anything about his private affairs. I have my hands full what with my job at the factory and the household chores. Just visit the Bach Tuyet cotton wool factory where I am working and you'll understand what I mean. I have to work even on Sundays, and on weekdays I am on the job twelve hours at a stretch."



The police superintendent kept interrogating me and the school-girl, seeking to discover Troi's connexions. Towards midnight, he took us on a visit to the torture chamber, where he made us look closely at the various instruments of torture : ropes hanging from the ceiling, to which prisoners would be attached, canvas sacks in which their corpses would be thrown, powdered soap to be mixed with water and forced down their throats, pins of various kinds that would be driven into the tips of their fingers, a tank for the water torture, etc.

He said menacingly :

"These are for you if you should try to fool us."

At about 2 in the morning, we were taken back to the interrogation room. I was on tenterhooks : when passing before each room, I tried to look in, but nowhere did I see any trace of Troi. I asked the police superintendent :

"You said that my husband wanted to see me. Where is he ?"

He answered :

"He was here at noon yesterday for interrogation. We had meant to explain to him the government's 'rallying' policy, and make him repent his misdeeds, desert the Viet Cong, and cross over to the side of the administration. Had he consented, you two would have been reunited at once. But hardly had we said a word when he threw himself out of the window and broke his leg. He's now in Choray hospital."