

6

Saigon Hostess

Saigon's night-life was hectic, but severely shortened by the midnight curfew. A string of invitations for official receptions, parties, cocktails and dinners kept coming to me as a result of my weekend pool-side entertainment. The town's most envied invitations, however, came from Mme Do Kim Chi, President of the Vietnamese War Widows' Association, she whose charms had smitten both the American Ambassador and the CIA station chief at that first dinner hosted by Mike Corrie. Saigonese of all walks of life would pick up the lively boulevard press for her latest reported remarks, or for pictures of her recent appearances.

Vietnamese women are endlessly interested in physical detail, and always try to conform to some or other beauty 'norm'. In the past, ladies of the Song Dynasty bound their daughters' feet at the age of five, to create the deformed stumps on which they could not walk. This was their 'norm'. Even in today's world, young sophisticated Vietnamese women gladly suffer similar indignities to conform to the modern norm. They will hide their legs in silk trousers forever if they find them a fraction too muscular. They will use plastic surgery on their beautiful slanting eyelids to turn them into crudely rounded ones. And not only society women believe in the norm. Even the poorest, lowliest female work-gang members wear broad-brimmed hats and full-length gloves in the midday sun to protect skin whiteness, in emulation of the pale admired Hong Kong movie stars. Kim Chi was good looking but in addition just seemed to have the self-confidence to make others believe that her individual features and hair styles were the current norm.

Before going to my first dinner at her house, I decided to spend some moments on the roof terrace of the Caravelle Hotel, which served as a meeting point and information exchange for foreigners and journalists reporting the war in comfort. We males also paid obeisance to the fashionable norm, but less physically, mainly in our dress code. I wore a dark blue rough-silk suit of exaggerated cut by the famous French tailor of Tu Do Street with a loud tie and, I shudder to remember, crocodile leather shoes with large metal buckles. On that terrace, however, such attire was unremarkable. The roly-poly French businessmen and Corsican Mafiosi, escorting scantily-dad ladies, all went to the same tailor. They comfortably hung their bellies over the modishly tight flared trousers. The Caravelle roof garden was our very own grandstand view of the war. In total safety, we marvelled there whenever the horizon lit up with tracer ammunition fired from 'Puff the Magic Dragon' planes, or when a rocket cut a trail across the night sky. To us, those deadly shows on the edge of our city were visual displays of history in the making, like watching the making of a war film on set. We even criticised the scenario and suggested alterations to the script.

From the Caravelle, my driver Tao took me, through the garden gate, past two alsations on chains and a sandbagged bunker, to the entrance of Kim Chi's

house, where I joined the others in a long reception hall. Of the hostess there was no sign yet, but her imprint was everywhere in the interior decoration. I was intrigued by the uninhibited passion for artful effects, and by the free spirit of extravagance. Standing aside in a corner, I watched a fresh water stream gliding over mossy rocks, then gurgling into a marble pond. Cushions had been laid on the side for those wishing to study the goldfish at ease. There was a grand piano nearby. Black lacquered sofas inlaid with mother of pearl and white raw silk upholstery lined the wall. Antique rosewood chairs polished by age, around low tables on curved legs, displayed images of birds and flowers between thick layers of lacquer. One length of wall was taken up by a mural painting of a rice harvest, in cinema poster style, somewhat marred by a vertical stain caused by a leaking roof. And looking up to the blue-domed ceiling, I saw a stuffed eagle with outspread wings slowly turning in the slipstream of the ceiling fans.

The far end was dominated by a life-sized, rough-grained, press photograph of battle tanks moving through jungle grass, the guns hung with baskets and bananas, and, in the centre foreground, Mme Do's late lamented husband. Ah, the brief joys of military life and the long-lasting sorrows of the widow! The General, with the shaven bullet-head of a Buddhist monk and the happy sunlit eyes of a child on vacation was exchanging jokes with his officers. Everyone knew that his only education had been at Saint Cyr's Military Academy, and that his only true family were the paratroopers. With them, as a colonel, he had legitimised the rule, and one saved the life, of former President Ngo Dinh Diem, by beating the Binh Xuyen gangsters, back in 1955, for the control of Saigon, and with them he had later forced the same President, by surrounding the palace, to release an imprisoned brother paratrooper.

Because he was one of the real generals with real troops near the capital, no coup d'etat could succeed without his previous telephoned approval. But politics never held his interest, because at heart he was just a professional soldier. For this reason, the Americans had chosen him to command the last offensive of the South Vietnamese Army, the Cambodia incursion of January 1971, but they were astonished when nothing moved on the appointed day. The President of the United States phoned for explanations, Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams were livid, but no one dared to tell these important figures the publicly-known reason: that his wife's astrologer's insistence on a 24-hour delay. He always respected her wishes, and when he did attack, he overran the Communist headquarters and their supply caches the same day, critically weakening the preparations for the communist offensive of the next year.

Lights came on in the upper gallery. Kim Chi descended the stairs in an aluminium sheath which offset her brown skin, her confident face framed in curls. We almost applauded, as for an actress's entrance, although she was quick to laugh away the impression she made on her guests. Amongst them were serious Vietnamese officers, whose troops at this moment patrolled the fields. The commander of the Navy, Tran Van Chon, was using the occasion to apologise to me for the inadequate protection of our tankers on the Saigon River. What did such men seek in her company, I wondered? Confirmation that

they still counted in the real world? I saw old lions of the past exchanging harmless gossip, but also General Quang, very much in charge of current psychological warfare, retailing his misinformation to some female guests as if his belief in himself depended on his social achievements in these circles. Had they gathered around one woman, on the flimsy excuse of exchanging serious information, or just in need of entertainment? After all, the management of a 20-year war finally became a boring nine-to-five job like mine. We all needed entertainment.

I picked up a photo album from a low table. The first glossy picture showed an immense funeral cortege in white, with barely-controlled crowds trying to touch the General's coffin, followed by picture upon picture of famous men, some of whom were now in the room, laying wreaths for the fallen warrior. And there was a last riveting frame, of the guard of honour at the grave-side being jostled aside by grieving women in formless white robes of mourning. My eyes fell on one prominent face, partially covered by a triangular white cape, hiding hair and eyes but leaving a strong chin exposed, flowing with tears. With a physical shock of recognition I looked into that wide open thick-lipped mouth, with even rows of strong teeth, in total surrender to grief. A far cry from the controlled expression she wore tonight.

A servant held a board with the seating arrangements in Gothic letters. The highest in rank took their places in the middle around Kim Chi, the others, in order of diminishing importance, towards the ends. As a businessman, I sat at the bottom, next to other minor personalities like the wretched Admiral of the Navy, whose obsolete ships inspired fear only in his own fishermen. A few ex-ministers and a buxom lady politician joined us, and on the whole they formed a lively and enjoyable company. As the mood mellowed, the older diplomats at the centre began making toasts to themselves, commemorating various events. Touching their long-stemmed glasses with a silver spoon for silence, they would launch into faltering speech. Bunker loved presiding over such Vietnamese diplomatic occasions. Finally, he touched his glass to command silence for a few words from our hostess, and I was surprised at the sudden change that came over her as she rose. Face-to-face, she made good common sense, but with all eyes on her, only a cascade of frivolities poured out, delivered in a childish voice, sustained by peals of laughter, in which people joined without knowing why. The double meanings of her jokes went heavily underscored by winks and flashes of the eyes. Ripples of applause carried forward her solo performance, and she could easily have ended in mid-sentence, by just raising her glass. Instead she wandered on, drawn by adoration, stringing together happy phrases like pearls. When she finally stopped, there was an ovation. Almost immediately, however, the officials had to leave because of the curfew, and they filed out in a hurry to where the drivers waited in the official black limousines, with the curtained windows and the loaded guns clipped to the backs of the front seats.

The reality behind Kim Chi's performance of celebrated hostess, as very few of her admirers knew, was totally different. Her society position rested entirely on make-believe, which made the government 'forget' the rent on her house as long as she served to let its ministers meet the heads of the

American establishment privately, and it made the CIA pay an exaggerated rent on her own villa in Dalat for the same privilege in reverse. Tonight's performance had cost more than a widow's monthly pension, and she had an extended family and retinue to take care of. It required whole blocks of freshly-printed bank notes just to maintain her status. And those banknotes had to be largely generated by Kim Chi's farm.

Normally she rose at dawn, ready for work, without make-up, her hair held back with a traditional clasp, a linen shirt tucked into black peasant pants and her feet in clogs. In that attire, none of her nightly dinner guests would have given her a second glance. In her Volkswagen bus, her driver would place a wicker chair, next to sacks of cement, so that the servant girl could sit on the metal floor at her feet, and via the back streets they would head towards the farm, while the city was still asleep.

Well before Bien Hoa, the VW bus would jump off the asphalt onto the low wasteland, which was stone-hard and dusty in the dry season and muddy in the wet, the tracks changing all the time. It was anonymous terrain, neither field nor village, pasture nor workshop. Poor people scraped a living there in shacks between roadside eating-places and junk-yards. But these haphazard communities, with their ducks and dogs, were her shield and network of protection. So the bus would stop often for a chat with an owner, or to distribute sweets to the children. Her earthy remarks split dark peasant faces into wide grins. These were no diplomatic pleasantries. Beyond those shacks, the terrain sloped down to a stream and rose up on the other side towards no-mans-land, at the jungle's edge. There stood the farm, with its long modern pig-sheds built in the shadow of eucalyptus trees, its manioc fields planted in straight lines. A bridge gave access to a house with an aluminium roof, tall radio antennae and helicopter pad, the latter in disuse since the General's death. Boys in army greens, deserters working in exchange for a safe refuge, would unload the bus.

Hers was the largest pig farm in Vietnam, yet it existed largely outside the law. It supported not only her family, but also surrounding villages and sub-contractors, supplying Saigon with low-priced meat. It was protected from government harassment only by her name. She had bought the land cheaply, when no-one else dared invest, because it lay in a contested zone. The corrugated iron roofs, scrounged from US surplus stock, rested on pillars made of spent artillery cartridges, filled with concrete filched from the Public Works Department. But the layout of the farm, its feeding systems and its administration came from the latest Danish agricultural pamphlets, which she was the first to apply in Vietnam. Neighbouring market farmers sold her the green offal they had previously thrown away. The labour-force grew its own food, and only the foreman received a salary. She and her neighbours obtained relative security through mutual support and accommodation. When the foreman made a disastrous mistake, such as when newly-bought pigs were mixed with the existing herd, she would have to pitch in like an ordinary labourer. On one occasion, a disease from a new animal had spread to a few hundred other pigs and a score had already died. An epidemic of this order could wipe her out within days. She could not afford to wait for a vet from

Saigon, and after the segregation of the sick animals, she had to do the injections of antibiotics herself, in rubber boots, jumping astride each animal while it was held by two men, inserting the needle between the shoulder blades while another man dabbed it with purple and chased it into a different shed. Thus she would stagger on until late afternoon, and only if the animals lived would she too survive. But she was not one to dwell on the negative side. As she returned from the farm in the evening, with the bus, loaded with eggs for the Saigon market, she would lift her eyes to the high ground near the stream and dream of the two-storey colonial house which she planned to build there.