



Saigon sunset

A saga in several episodes by Graham Price

Chapter one

Phuong was born in old Saigon in 1938 during the French colonial period — her mother, Tran Thi Mai, was a Vietnamese mathematics school teacher at the elite Nguyen Académie for girls situated off Rue de la Grandiere. Her father — Pierre Duval a French government official, had been transferred down from Hué in 1936 to the lesser administration at Saigon in Cochin China. They had met at a diplomatic party arranged by the American Legation — Mai being from one of Saigon's wealthy families, with her father deeply involved in rubber and its exports.

Pierre and Mai were married in 1937 at the Roman Catholic cathedral in Saigon and efforts to produce a family resulted in one still birth—a boy, and eleven months later in 1938, Phuong was born. Her name in Vietnamese folklore means phoenix rising. Destiny had been fulfilled, thought Mia — the gods had looked kindly upon her after the first misfortune and had given her a child of the heavens in compensation. The child grew in strength and in time came to be accepted by both families Tran and Duval as a gift from the celestial realms. There were no further children from Mai's womb, no matter how hard she and Pierre tried. For some years it vexed Mai that she could not produce further children, but by 1945 at the end of the Japanese invasion of Vietnam, she finally acquiesced and accepted that her family's destiny rested in Phuong.

Both parents noted how the child learnt quickly, much faster than her cousins, when by the age of seven she had already mastered Vietnamese, French, and even English. Mai was amazed that on the child's eighth birthday she showed a knowledge of the French language and Vietnamese culture which far surpassed that of her mother and her numerous French speaking neighbours.

Phuong Duval, having been sent by her parents for her finishing education at Paris and London, had in 1958 at the age of twenty become the English teacher at the Nguyen Académie for girls shortly before her parents were deceased. Both had died early, leaving the daughter with a grand mansion home and a reasonable inheritance. But the académie was a position that she had poured herself into regardless of her sudden wealth. She had such a love for the mostly Vietnamese girls from wealthy families together with certain daughters of French officials, that it almost broke her heart if she found some who were failing in their education. The girls from ruling class families were not all entirely interested in education, and were being groomed by their parents for covert marriages with males of Saigon's upper class. Which is how in 1959, Phuong came to meet James McKinnon, widower, and father to three children.

James McKinnon was with the British company of Asia Barr, which owned rubber plantations and tin mines throughout the region of South-East Asia. He had recently been transferred from Malaya to Cochin China for the purpose of ascertaining further rubber plantation investment and mineral ore deposits that possibly could be developed for export. That the country and its northern provinces was under French colonial rule never phased Asia Barr. They were into South East Asia with a vengeance, though some of their employees secretly wished that the French and the Dutch would somehow be kicked out of Asia by local uprisings, so that Asia Barr would then have a foothold for the negotiation of further mineral treaties. Britannia still ruled the waves with her massive naval fleet and her supportive commonwealth countries, so it was said, but not all the lands East of Suez were under their thumb. The French and the Dutch were such an annoyance, as had been the previous Portuguese. As for the Spanish, except for the Philippines they seemed to be more interested in the South Americas and thus were no real commercial threat.

James had come across from residing many years at Kuala Lumpur with his two daughters and one son and they had settled in a an old French colonial mansion on the outskirts of Saigon city. He'd not wished to leave Malaya, as it was so welcoming and peaceful for British colonials. To be *tuan* in any of the Malayan princely states was to be regarded as one of superior ability and talents compared to any of the local officials. When anyone on board ship questioned him about British colonialism, he always smiled, nodded, and said: "We've improved the land beyond anyone's desire."

"Oh," said Michelle, his eldest daughter recently turned sixteen, "How beautiful Saigon is. It leaves KL in the dumps. Oh, papa, why could we not have come here years ago? It's so Parisian, so elegant. I am going to stay here forever. I shall marry a rich Vietnamese and produce twelve children who will go on to luxuriate in the life that we have here. It is so, so romantic."



Samantha, waving a Chinese fan in front of her and who was thirteen, simply smirked and said: “You will have to get daddy’s permission you silly mong. Anyway, not all Vietnamese are rich.”

“But,” said Michelle. “Don’t you not think that a Vietnamese noble or prince would fancy me?”

The much younger red-haired Jules, at eleven years, laughed. “This place is going Marxist you silly girl. Where on earth are you going to find anyone of your dreams? You’ll probably be married to a peasant commissar of the communist party.”

James had heard the last of the conversation and interrupted his children. “There will be no talk of Marxism in this house. If you wish to learn about that, then I will be pleased to ship you off to China where the Marxist revolution is taking place at this very moment. There are Marxist ideas spread everywhere these days, which lead to unholy revolution with hundreds of thousands — if not millions — being slaughtered, and the sooner you learn that, the better.”

“Such a bore,” said Michelle, softly enough so that her father would not hear.

The thirty-year-old sleep-in French and English speaking governess, Charmaine Curtaine, shook her head slightly, indicating to Michelle that it was not ladylike to carry on like that. She pulled Michelle to one side. “I have taken you as far as I can. It is now up to your father to seek further schooling, perhaps in Paris, perhaps here in Saigon. I know of an académie to be recommended here in Saigon and not that far from our house. It would mean that your wish to stay in Saigon would be granted, though I know your father wishes you to be sent to France or England for your finishing. I also know that you are not happy with that and I may be of help in persuading him to let you stay here in Saigon. What do you think?”

“You’re such a gem, dear Charmaine. Oh, goody goody, please squeeze papa as much as you can. I want to stay here in Saigon for the rest of my life. It is so exhilarating, so atmospheric, sooooo French.”

And Jules, sitting at a small table in the drawing room, couldn’t help but overhear. “Piffle! If I had my way I’d ship you off to the Caribbean where you would become a slave in the sugar plantations.”

“I heard that, you slug!” It was Samantha, sliding in on the polished floorboards like a ballet dancer from Paris. “Anyway, the way things are going in this country, we might as well be in the Caribbean. At least the English have things in their colonies under some sort of control. This Saigon administration is going to be kicked out of here sooner or later. It’s just a lackey of the French.”

“You know too much for your own good,” said Jules. “Been reading propaganda again, have we?”

“Which one? They’re all deadbeats, losers, couldn’t hold onto an empire of their own making without messing it up. Their insincerity really poo’s me off.”

“What would you know, weasel!”

“Ha, you’re the weasel. I have friends who know about things here, stupid. They get information from their parents’ Viet maids and gardeners. That president Ngo Dinh Diem won’t last much longer. He’s being paid by the Americans who have their spies all over the place. Don’t you know that the revolutionist Ho Chi Minh up in Hanoi has his spies here too? So, there is a neutral pact at the moment, but I know that the communists from the north will win out and we’ll all be thrown out of here.”

Charmaine was out of earshot, having wandered down to the kitchen to see what the cook was preparing for lunch. She had recently turned 35, caught a glimpse of herself in a hall mirror as she passed by — shook her dark curly hair and smiled at her reflected dark brown eyes. Still quite good looking, she considered. Having come down from Hué after her father died, and securing through the agency this position as governess with the McKinnon family, she was aware that she held some feelings for James and perhaps it was mutual, but she was not willing to be landed with an instant family as a step-mother. As governess, the situation was a happy one so why change anything? Besides, she was considering returning to France in a few years, being somewhat unsure about the political situation here in Cochin China.

James had been out for a walk, but now had come in and heard the voices of his children. He stopped at the entrance to the drawing room and listened. What he heard made him wonder about the astuteness of his children, particularly Samantha, who appeared to have a grasp of politics even for her youthful age. Well, he thought, perhaps a trip to Cholon over the week-end — the Chinese quarter just out of Saigon — might give his children some insight into a different culture not exclusively dominated by the French or the Vietnamese. In his civilian role, James considered himself to be a certain historian. He had followed the French colonial ‘invasion’ of Viet Nam closely. He had also delved into the ancient history of these Annamese people from earlier centuries — particularly concentrating on the colonisation and then the repelling of emperors and warlords from China. He was aware that the country was split into three divisions under French colonial rule: the lower or southern area being known as Cochin China, the middle known as Annam with Hué as the capital, and the northern



protectorate was Tongking. It was a fascinating history, with much of the land under Confucian ideology with worship of ancestors a prime reason for being. The ceremonies of worship, especially at the Tet lunar new year, were so colourful and magnificent. But Cholon would be different, as it was predominantly Chinese and, no doubt, somewhat noisier.

James had traded his Citroen light 15 for the entirely new manufactured model — the Citroen Goddess. He was intrigued with its hydraulic transmission and the suspension that hissed softly as the car came to rest, lowering itself gently toward the pavement. It had wide wings and wrap around good looks with large glass areas. Too late he realised that it was an attention seeker, with people crowding around, wanting to touch it. Several weeks went by with local Vietnamese children surrounding the car whenever he parked and James, somewhat fearful of the sudden popularity, managed a deal with the garage owner to trade back to a Light 15, but this time with the more powerful six-cylinder engine. Michelle was heartbroken. “Oh, how could you do that, papa? It was such a beautiful thing, and now we’re stuck with another ugly duckling.” Jules had piped up: “Well, you don’t know what you’re talking about. The fifteen has a more powerful engine, so we’ll be able to race away from any Viet Minh attacks.”

“Dreaming again are you? It’s almost as if you want to be involved with the Minh. You read too many of those jungle and pirate books. The country’s at peace since they kicked the French army out, so don’t try and scare us, Julie-Jules. It’s not on.”

Jules looked up from his drawing of a British battleship, “One day, Michelle, you will have to eat those words.”

The road to Cholon was crowded with pedicabs, trishaws, bicycles, bullock carts and humans on foot, with cars attempting to squeeze through. The noise of car horns sometimes obliterated conversation. The wide expanses of rice fields on each side of the road caused Samantha to comment: “Look at all those poor people in the water and mud. What are they planting?”

“Rice seedlings,” said Charmaine. “The villagers have their own plots of land.”

“And those tall towers. What are they for?”

Charmaine looked at James, waiting for him to reply, because she really did not wish to talk about those high timber-structured towers, placed every now and then along the road to Cholon. James was silent for a moment, then spoke.

“They are for soldiers to keep a watch on things — to keep us safe.”

Michelle piped up: “Safe from whom, papa?”

“Safe from the Commies, silly chook,” said Jules, looking up from a British picture story book for boys.

James was still silent. Better let this one go, he thought. There are enough problems on this day without adding to them. He blew the Citroen’s horn hard, as a bullock cart laden with Vietnamese swayed too close to the car. Jules waved to several children on the back of the cart and they waved back. He laughed and bobbed his head up and down making the children smile and chatter to each other in their own language.

Finally the fields gave way to town buildings and James eased the car through the streets of Cholon, the smell of dried fish and spices giving instant knowledge that they were now in Chinatown. It could have been anywhere in Asia where the Chinese had settled, bringing their unique style to buildings — especially to ancestral temples with their dragon motifs and curved roofs. But the entrance to Cholon market — the *Binh Tay*. — was distinctly colonial French with a Vietnamese or Chinese touch. James parked the car, giving a small Chinese boy some *piastres* to guard it while the family moved off into the bazaars located under massive roofs surrounding a square. They wandered through numerous stalls, with Charmaine informing the children not to touch, but simply look. It was a wonderland of silks and other materials, clothes and shoes of all description, exotic foods sizzling on hotplates. Jules went to run his hand along a line of roasted and glazed ducks hanging in front of a small eatery when his father saw him. “Don’t do that, Jules, or you’ll be spending a week inside locked up.”

Michelle laughed: “Bad Jules, don’t do that. . . don’t be a silly goose.”

With Samantha pouting: “Silly goose, goosey goosey, silly old goose.”

“Hush Children,” said Charmaine, giving Samantha a playful box on her left ear. “Have some manners for goodness sakes. . . Oh look, there’s Miss Duval, the English teacher at the *Nguyen Académie*, with her chauffeur!”

James swung his attention away from Jules and took in the slim woman in the lemon coloured national dress, the *ao dai*, which clung to her figure in the light breeze that wafted through the market stalls. The wide silk pantaloons were wrapped by the breeze around her shapely legs and she turned as if she had heard her name. Charmaine waved to her and moved forward. James was struck by the golden beauty of this English teacher, who certainly wasn’t French, but might have been a person of mixed heritage. He felt his heart beat faster as he watched a smile of recognition appear on her face when



Charmaine greeted her. The two women talked for a moment while James and the children looked on, then taking the teacher by the arm, Charmaine introduced her to the others.

The children were somewhat speechless as they gazed at the vision before them, and James, completely embarrassed by the silence, managed to doff his hat, bow slightly, and utter some words in his rusty French.

“Enchanté Mademoiselle.”

“Merci, C’est un plaisir, Monsieur.”

Her soft voice had a determined sound about it, and he realised immediately that this was a strong woman, regardless of her delicate beauty. She was slightly taller than the average Vietnamese female and he quickly glanced at her feet, but saw only flat sandals there. She was almost shoulder to shoulder with him. Her Vietnamese chauffeur was staring at him with a quizzical look. No doubt sizing me up, thought James, to see if I am a threat to this beautiful woman. The chauffeur was short but wiry and looked strong, and James didn’t care to get on the wrong side of him. He nodded to him and gave a small smile, to which the chauffeur returned rather slowly.

The children were ecstatic, especially Michelle. Charmaine had introduced them one by one, then half turning to James, said to Phuong Duval “It might be possible for Michelle to attend your académie this year, that is, if my employer Mr. McKinnon, would grant his permission.”

James knew this was a setup. “Well, I . . . I had hoped to send Michelle to London, or Paris. . . .”

“I’m sure your Michelle would be very welcome at our académie, Monsieur McKinnon. We have extremely good reviews from parents in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States. Our syllabus is one of the most appreciated in the world.”

Michelle gave a little jump and clapped her hands. “Oh goody. . . please papa. . . please. . . I would love it instead of going somewhere overseas, which would be such a bore. After all, our life is here now. . . please papa.”

James laughed. “Let me think about it. . . and perhaps Miss Duval would come to dinner one evening with us and Charmaine. . . er. . . to tell us more about her académie?” The words were out of his mouth before he knew it and he was surprised at his own forwardness. “Would next Friday evening be suitable?”

Phuong didn’t betray any shock or apprehension from this sudden invitation. She simply nodded toward her chauffeur: “I shall need to check my diary. If you give me your address, Kam will contact you later this evening or tomorrow. It has been so pleasurable meeting with you Monsieur McKinnon. I do hope you will consider allowing your daughter, Michelle, to attend our Nguyen Académie. We do have an extremely good reputation.”

When they had practically tired themselves out checking all the stalls at Binh Tay market, James, Charmaine and the children retired to a small bar-restaurant opposite where another surprise awaited them. Charmaine recognised a man sitting at the bar, who was seated so that he could watch everyone who entered. He saw her looking at him and he nodded.

“That man over there,” she said to James, “is police. . . an inspector of the Sûreté. He is from Hué. . . I wonder what he is doing here?”

James looked up from the menu and glanced across at the large man in an immaculate white suit. “How do you know him?”

“My brother was in trouble with gambling and owed a lot of money to some Viet Nam gangsters. It was before my father died when we were living in Hué. Father knew this man and asked him to act as an intermediary if father could provide the money. Inspector Bastein somehow managed to smooth things over without anyone being hurt or arrested, and father then packed off my brother to France to live with his uncle.”

James stared at the man, noting his deeply tanned face, somewhat pock-marked with the hint of a moustache, but with clean shaven cheeks and neck. His head was large and somewhat square, but then, thought James, he is a big man — probably at least six feet tall when he stands. It was then that the inspector slapped something on the counter of the bar and rose steadily.

He’s coming over here, thought James, already taking a dislike to the man. He watched as the inspector walked with large confident strides across the lacquered hardwood floor and James wondered if the slight bulge to the right side of the man’s jacket was a pistol. Charmaine had a tentative smile on her face, and James considered that although the policeman presented a formidable presence, she was pleased to see him.

“Ah, Mademoiselle Curtaine, what a coincidence!” “I was only thinking of your father the other day. . . very sad that he passed on so early in life. . . and here you are looking so young and pretty. Saigon must be good for you? Would you introduce me to your companions?”



Charmaine made the formal introductions and the inspector shook James firmly by the hand, winked at Samantha and tousled Jules' hair. "May I join you, Mr. McKinnon? If you are ordering, then please be my guest."

James stared at the man. "We have already ordered Monsieur Bastein, but *merci bein*."

"Then allow me to foot the bill. You have not been long in Saigon, nor here in Cholon, so I welcome you to my old city."

"But I thought you were from Hué?"

"Of course, but before that twelve years here in Saigon. I requested this new transfer, because there are certain influences down here that require watching."

Jules was fascinated by the inspector, who sat beside him. "You mean the Commies, don't you, sir?"

"Well, yes and no, not exactly *petit garçon*. There are other people who would cause our country trouble, criminals, so-called nationalists, and sometimes interfering foreigners."

"At my school, some of the boys say the president is a wicked man. They hear that from their gardeners and maids. And my sister hears the same."

James started. "Jules, that's enough!"

Inspector Bastein laughed. "Oh, that's quite alright, Mr. KcKinnon. It is a complicated situation. . . even the Buddhists and the Catholics are at each others throats and the president is a firm Catholic. Then there are the Cao Dai's, a very large religious group with their own army. They are a mixture of Catholicism, Buddhism and Confucianism. They even have their own pope. For the moment they are with us, but who knows what the future may bring. Then again, there is the Hoa Hao, a religious sect which I consider are nothing but gangsters. They have people in high places and are very influential."

James gave a sigh. "Inspector, your French army left some years back, didn't they, not long after they lost that battle of Dien Bien Phu? Why are people such as yourself still here now that Geneva has divided the country into North and South? We have found Saigon, and here in Cholon, to be very peaceful and welcoming."

Inspector Bastein smiled. "Please, call me Claude. There is an agreement with your son's so-called wicked president Diem for many of us to stay for a time to train the local Annamese people. We have much experience in rooting out traitors, and the president appreciates that. Even he does not trust some of his generals, who may be plotting against him. Ah, James, it may well be peaceful here in the city, but in the countryside it is another story. I trust you will be traveling back to Saigon before dark?"

"Why, of course. These Cao Dai people, are they dangerous?"

"Probably not. There was a defection some years ago by one of their officers, a Colonel Thé-he, who took with him into the jungle a few thousand troops and made himself up to General, but mainly as a force against the north. We don't see them as a threat, but. . ." He paused, glancing away to where a Vietnamese policeman was standing near the doorway. "You seem very interested in all of this, James, are you Catholic?"

"No, I'm Protestant."

"Ah, yes. The English are mainly that."

"We Scots," corrected James.

"Of course, said Inspector Bastein. . . forgive me. Yes, the people who with the Irish and the Welsh run England's empires for them, and very well at that, though they didn't do so well in India. I expect it was the English who made those debilitating errors, much the same — dare I say, as we French did in earlier days here in Viet Nam?"

James chuckled. "The British Isles certainly are a mixture, many good some bad. Of course we got rid of some of the more adventurous devils, shipping them in chains to America and Australia, where culture is not what it should be."

Bastein raised an eyebrow. "You are not in favour of those countries?"

"Oh no, no. I was simply comparing the culture of those countries with France and Britain, where we both have long centuries of developed arts."

"Hmm. . . give them time and they will find their own unique culture. I am sure of that."

In spite of his first appraisal of Claude Bastein, James found himself warming toward the man. There was something behind that large exterior and initially threatening posture, that James considered was, after all, a person with the human touch. And there and then he made up his mind to be more sociable to the inspector of Sûreté — the secret French police of Viet Nam. •

To be continued.