



Saigon Sunset

A saga in several episodes by Graham Price

Chapter four

The story so far: It is 1959 and widower, James KcKinnon, with his three children Michelle sixteen, Samantha thirteen, and Jules eleven, have recently settled in Saigon having arrived from Kuala Lumpur in Malaya. James is with Asia Barr, a company that excels in buying up rubber plantations and other likely mining investments throughout South-East Asia. James has employed a French governess, Charmaine Curtaine, to attend to his children, but is encouraged to send Michelle to a prestige school in Saigon named the Nguyen Académie. Michelle is excited by the prospect and not quite by accident the family is introduced to the English teacher — the elegant Vietnamese-French Phuong Duval at the market place in Cholon. Also entering the scene at Cholon and being introduced to the family is an inspector of the secret French Sûreté, Claude Bastein. James is at first suspicious of the inspector's intentions, but then comes to accept the big man as a friend. Arrangements are made for a dinner at James' French colonial home in Saigon, with invitations to both the inspector and Phuong Duval. The inspector is attacked by a Viet Cong sympathiser, Phan Van Kim, with intentions of kidnapping him in return for Kim's imprisoned cousin Phan Van Dong, but the inspector turns the tables and Kim is incarcerated, awaiting possible torture. Meanwhile, other members of the Cong are close by, with intentions of attacking American aid transports.

Bishop Jean-Baptiste Lacroix looked down upon his Sunday morning congregation at the Saigon Cathedral, which was so recently blessed from the Vatican with the exclusive name of Notre Dame. The coolness of the Cathedral was a welcome relief to the heat outside and the building was packed with hardly an empty space to be seen. Jean-Baptiste was a popular priest within his community. His sermons were often written down and sometimes appeared in the local newspapers. Politicians knew him as a man not to be messed with. The Bishop oversaw an immensely large population of Saigon and he was well aware of his own influence in the city, in particular with the ruling President Nho Dinh Diem and his relatives.

From the lectern where he stood, he noted General Dao Hu Loc and his beautiful wife Trinh, sitting not far from Phuong Duval, the English teacher at the *Nguyen Académie*, who was sitting in the front pews beside. . . oh, what was her name? Charmaine something. . . the French governess to the newly arrived British people from Malaya. The Bishop was a wiry man, almost six feet in height, an angular face with heavy eyebrows and intense blue eyes. He had developed a manner of appearing to stare directly into the very heart and soul of anyone who took his gaze. In his ecclesiastical gowns he seemed much larger, indeed a formidable figure was this vicar of Christ who became the absolute centre-point within the sacred building during a Sunday service. All eyes were focused upon this splendid vision in green and gold before them. It was not difficult for some in the congregation to believe that here was Christ in person. His eyelids flickered suddenly as he noticed further back in the pews, the Inspector of the Sûreté, Claude Bastein, whom he knew wasn't Catholic. What was he doing here? A convert, perhaps? That was laughable. That would never happen.

He waited while the choir boys sang through the last verse of *Panis Angelicus*, sweeping his strong blue eyes back and forth over the congregation as the exotic sounds of the boy sopranos reached his ears. So devotional, so mystical, so heavenly! It was as if the angels had descended upon the Cathedral that very morning with their love and caresses. He was immensely relaxed and ready, as always, to give out his sermon direct from his God. I am the instrument, he mused, I am the instrument of The Most High.

“As Jesus sacrificed himself on the Cross, so must we, my beloved friends in these troubled times, look forward to making sacrifices. Sacrifices not only of economics, finance, but sacrifices of the mind and body. For some within our midst would lead us in directions of corruption and malice.” He stared down at the General. “There are moves afoot, in this beloved country of ours, to attempt to preserve old ways that are no longer generous to our land and its future. We have reached a milestone, a crossroads, if you will, where only the strong and the faithful will survive. And only our faith will carry us through. Many demons are among us; many will seek to overthrow our consciences, but my beloved brothers and sisters, we must stand firm in the faith of our Lord. These are times that will test our faith, test our reliance.”

It was then that something very strange occurred. A flash of light, perhaps sunlight directed off a building or the windscreen of a car hit a slightly cracked stained glass window beside him. He was covered in multi-coloured beams of light. The congregation gasped and then murmured among themselves as the spectacle of light reached his mitre, turning it from



white to gold. The congregation turned to silence and awe. It was a sign—a miracle. Jean-Baptiste was aware that something had occurred within the Cathedral, but was puzzled. He stopped speaking for a moment, then realised that he was bathed in this rainbow of light. So, that was it? Well, he thought, might as well make use of it. He smiled at the congregation and crossed his hands in front of his heart.

And so the sermon continued, with all eyes fastened upon this charismatic figure before them — this vicar of Christ who filled them with hope at the same time as he filled them with fear. But all they were aware of that day was his magnificence, his superlative phrases that could have only come direct from God himself. And the congregation filed out into the bright sunlight knowing that the Angels of Heaven had been among them that Sunday morning. Some gathered around the new statue of the Blessed Virgin, marvelling at the immense size and delicate contours of the statue, blessed by the Vatican in honour of the sister Cathedral in France, the most sacred Notre Dame. The day was featherweight, such a lightness of being, as the people streamed out of the Cathedral. And, as Jean-Baptiste Lacroix, the priest of eternal visions, shook the hand of the last person to leave, Inspector Claude Bastein looked back and wondered. A politician in the making! Or if not, then a prince among men. Or even, a presidential candidate! He waited until Charmaine and Phuong came out, catching their attention.

“My goodness, Inspector, it’s rather a surprise to see you here,” said Charmaine, shielding her eyes from the mid-day sun.

“Good morning Charmaine, and Miss Duval. I make it a practice to move about the city. I’d heard that your Bishop was an excellent speaker, not only on faith but often on politics. And yes, he certainly gave me a lot to think about. Now, would you ladies like to come over to the Café Papillon for some tea and pastries?”

Charmaine unzipped her handbag and took out a pair of sunglasses. “Well, I do have to get back and organise lunch for Mr. McKinnon and the children. Perhaps Miss Duval might oblige you?”

Phuong shook her head. “It’s very kind of you, Inspector. Perhaps some other time, but the sermon went longer than expected and my chauffeur is waiting for me.”

Charmaine turned away, then looked back at the Inspector. “Miss Duval was taking me home in her car, but perhaps. . . . perhaps you would like to come for lunch. That is, if you have your car here. I’m sure Mr. McKinnon wouldn’t mind, in fact he would be rather pleased to see you. There is something he wishes to discuss. Phuong, do you mind?”

“Of course not.” Phuong offered her gloved hand to the Inspector and moved away. “I’ll be in touch, Charmaine.”

“This way,” said Claude, taking Charmaine by the elbow. “Just over here.”

The Peugeot arrived at the McKinnon home within fifteen minutes, snaking its way through the torrent of bicycles, pedicabs and the little Renault taxis. Hearing the wheels crunching on the pebbled driveway, James poked his head out. He was surprised to see Claude Bastein holding open the passenger door for Charmaine and then escorting her to the front door.

Over lunch the men discussed the recent hold up of the McKinnons by the small team of Viet Cong.

“Are you sure they weren’t the Cao Dai?” said Claude, tasting the light white

James gave a small sigh. “No, they were interested in American supply trucks; besides, I have a leave of pass given to me by their leader, a woman. Definitely Cong.”

The inspector raised his eyebrows. “Really! I’d be interested to know what she looks like. Could you describe her for me after lunch, and perhaps draw a picture?”

“Yes, she was very striking. Beautiful, in fact. I don’t understand why women get involved in all this fighting.”

“Family connections, perhaps . . . and the trucks . . . you saw none?”

“No. Perhaps they were diverted . . . some intelligence received maybe concerning the ambush? I didn’t know the Americans had supply trucks here.”

“They would have come from Bien Hoa, the airfield. Medical supplies, crates of canned food, tons of it.”

James put down his fork. “And weapons, ammunition?”

“What gives you that idea, my friend?”

“I don’t see why the Cong would be interested in those trucks unless there were munitions in them.”

Claude adjusted his napkin. “There is no evidence of that. The Cong and the Minh have need of medical supplies and food. So easy to arrange an ambush simply for that purpose.”

Then why,” said James, pointing his finger, “as it seems to be, were the trucks diverted?”

The inspector shrugged. “Like I said, the insurgents have need of other things than arms. Much they obtain from the villagers, but any extra via ambush would be welcomed with joy, no doubt. I think, James, that your imagination is running away with you. The American aid program is vast, and we are very thankful for it.”

There was a lull in the conversation and James was considering thoughtfully, when Charmaine spoke above the tick-ticking of the ceiling fan.



“James, tell Claude about the plantation.”

James leant back in his chair. “Oh yes, something not quite right up there. The books square up and the plantation is in good condition, but to my mind the workers seem to be nothing but slaves. One of your compatriots, a Pierre Marchand, is the owner. I didn’t like him much, but that’s an aside. Some of his workers had cuts and bruises on them, so I’m certain they had been beaten. Marchand’s 2IC, a Chinese name of Chun Li, was walking about with this heavy stick, as also was his Vietnamese assistant. You should have your people investigate that place, Claude.”

“Marchand, you say? I wonder if it is the same Captain Marchand interned by the Japanese during the last war, who became a collaborator and betrayed many of our countrymen? If it is, I’d like to bring him to justice, but sad to say French law no longer applies here and I doubt if my Vietnamese friends would be interested in him. All the same, thanks for that James. I shall make some enquiries.”

James had a half smile on his face. “Ah, but if he sells up and returns to France . . . and if it is the same man, then you have got him under French law. Would you like me to take another visit, to see what else I may find out about this strange person? After all, Asia Barr is still considering whether to buy or not. Personally, I don’t think we should be involved in what appears to be a callous operation with local people being exploited, but I could string it out for a while so as to obtain more information.”

Claude nodded. “In the meantime, I’ll see what I can find out about him through our records. I’ll contact Paris to see what they have on him. Yes, from what you have told me, I feel very strongly in my bones that it is the same man. Some of my friends were handed over to the Japanese for execution because of him. And now, I am wondering how he managed to get his hands on a rubber plantation. With the help of the occupation Japanese, perhaps? Rewards for collaborators were given in many strange ways. But, if that is so, why didn’t the pre war owners claim it back in 1945?”

“Seems I have opened a fat can of worms, eh?” said James.

“Indeed you have, my friend . . . indeed you have. By the way, where are your children?”

Charmaine spoke up. “Oh, they’ve gone to a birthday party for one of Jules’s school friends. I don’t expect we’ll see them back until about 4.00.”

“Well,” said Claude, “It’s been a delightful lunch, James and Charmaine, but I must travel on. Thank you so much, and don’t worry; if Marchand is the person I think he is, I will bring him to justice. Oh, and yes, I may take you up on your offer to return and spy out the land for me. *Au revoir, mon amie.*”

Charmaine rose from her chair. “I’ll see you out, Inspector.”

At the door as he was taking his leave, Claude turned to Charmaine. “If you feel so inclined, would you do me the honour of having dinner and dance at The Continental one evening?”

Somehow, in her mind, she had been waiting for this, so it was not unexpected. But at the same time she did something also unexpected of herself. She touched him on the shoulder and kissed him lightly on his cheek. Not only did her action surprise him, but it also left her with a strange feeling.

“My pleasure. That would be so delightful.”

He almost staggered down the steps. “Thank you. I’ll be in touch. *Vous êtes belle* Charmaine.”

She closed the door against the heat, watching the green Peugeot turn out of the drive. Her heart was thumping. So, it was out there at last, a committal, a trust, which would lead—where? She was of two minds between two men, but where really did her heart lie? She had recently come to a resolution that she might take on James and his children for a lifetime, up one rung of the ladder from governess to wife and mother — which is probably what he needed her to be — but now this startling change of events clung to her like a bee clings to the nectar of a new born rose. And that nectar was indeed so sweet.

Phan Van Kim rested in the low canvas bed in the home of a distant relative within the village 20 kilometres from Saigon . . . having been rescued from the hospital due to the secret intervention of a middle ranking Vietnamese police officer from the Sûreté prison in Saigon. He was free! He was out of that rat trap of a prison where he knew no day from night, or week from week. What he had endured whilst in chains, was not speakable and apart from casual references to the torture he had endured, he was not willing to elaborate. But as he rested, his mind went over and over how Chu Lam Long and his men had successfully rescued him from that hospital, all of it being the plan to get him out of the Sûreté prison headquarters.

She had come to him, Cuc his eternal love, on the night of his freedom, but he was weak and had suffered much. He barely recognised her, but was grateful for her presence as he slipped in and out of consciousness. That cell in Saigon came back at him . . . flooded his mind . . . when that large Chinese with the electric prongs attached onto Kim’s flesh, and who kept asking questions, the answers if he did not like, then . . . zap. . . zap! On and on again until Kim blacked out.

But now, with the smoothness of her hand upon his brow, it all faded away.



“You are safe, my love,” he heard her gentle voice whispering to him. “There is no harm. There is only peace and love. It will be some time for you to retain your strength, but that will come . . . that will come. Oh, my sweet, what have they done to you!”

He lifted his head, somewhat confused as to where he was, not aware of his surroundings, but feeling the touch of her upon his forehead. Was he really free from torture?

“Where . . . where am I?”

Cuc, who had been nestling close to his bedside, now leant over and kissed him on his cheek.

“You are safe, my darling. You are rescued. But you must sleep to regain your strength.”

He coughed, so heavily that she thought it would be necessary to call for a Viet Cong medic, but then it subsided and she held his head and gently lowered it to the straw pillow.

“Oh, my love, my love . . . I’m here. I’m here. Sleep now, for in sleep you will heal. It is best. Sleep now.”

And he drifted away, with the soft, gentle touch of her hand upon his brow . . . and then, there he was running through the rice paddies naked as a child, jumping onto the water buffalo and riding along under the blue Vietnam skies . . . swimming in the cool canals . . . laughing with the other children as they chased the chickens and pigs, and then admonished by parents, but ending up giggling much of the night, all the same. “Oh mother!” he cried out suddenly, and his head suddenly fell into the arms of Cuc, who somewhat startled, could only look at the stillness and peace upon his face as she slowly closed his eyelids. It was an automatic reaction and she was really not aware of it. She stared at the calm face before her and then, lowering her head deeply onto his chest, felt herself breaking into pieces: “Oh no . . . no . . . **no!**”

The children returned to the house around 4.30. “How was the party?” said James, as he sat in his lounge room smoking a pipe.

“Fabulous,” said Jules, “and guess what, papa, Miss Duval was there. I think I’m in love with her, she’s such a beautiful person.”

“Hmm, to be in love is a very serious thing, Jules. First of all, you need to know a tremendous lot about the person you say you are in love with. And secondly, you have to ascertain whether that person feels the same as you do. So, really, it’s a life and death question. Well then, are you committed to marrying Miss Duval and paying for her upkeep? With what I give you for your weekly allowance, I really can’t see that happening. Besides, where would you live with your bride, my dear son? You cannot bring her here.”

Jules looked somewhat crestfallen. “It’s just that, oh, I don’t know . . . she’s so much like . . . well, like mother was before . . . before . . .” And he broke into tears, ran to his father and clung to him. Samantha was standing in the doorway watching this scenario. She bit her lower lip and turned away. Yes, she missed her mother, but Jules had no right to carry on like that, a sooky baby. When I am older, she thought, I will show them all that you don’t need to be sooky. No way. You have to stand up just like Charmaine does and be yourself. She ran up the stairs to her room, slammed the door and threw herself on the bed. Someone had turned the ceiling fan on and it was tick ticking slowly under the ceiling. The little lizards — she’d called them geckos in Malaya — were chasing each other along the white ceiling. Upside down, she thought. You’re crazy running upside down. Did they have sex, she wondered. That’s what daddy and Miss Duval want, isn’t it, she thought. And Charmaine and that policeman. I don’t like him much, she thought, and then recanted. Shouldn’t think like that. But what if he takes Charmaine away from us? They might go back to France and leave us here . . . where will that leave us? Oh glory be, things are so complicated. She got up and looked out of the window. The businesses were beginning to close and streams of white clothed officials popped into the streets, some hailing pedicabs, some with their own Vietnamese chauffeurs. Oh, it was so hot. The books on her dressing table beckoned. *Charlotte’s Web* stared up at her. All about the pig which became friendly with a spider. Ahhh, a bit creepy, she thought, with visions of the pig being readied for the chopping block. Was it saved? She couldn’t remember. She needed something more uplifting; perhaps she could re-read *Alice in Wonderland*. Yes, that might take her mind off things — dear Alice, who stood up to the Red Queen. No sooky babies there.

Commissar Chu Lam long stared at Cuc with his steely brown eyes. “Are you sure that this is what you wish to do, because once in there is no turning back . . . no comfort of your soft bed . . . no special food, and . . . there will be a separation from your parents. You will not be able to contact any of your relatives in Saigon, but you will be one for the freedom of our beloved country. You give up your life for Ho Chi Minh! You must be dedicated to the cause of our freedom”.

Cuc’s eyes were moist. She had not long come from the burial of her beloved Kim. There was a fierce hate in her heart for the police and other authorities who had caused his death. That he had been tortured beyond belief, was so evident. She placed her hand upon Long’s arm. “I swear that I will uphold the principles of the National Liberation Front that is to be. My uncle trained me in the use of weapons before he, too, was taken in a confrontation with Diem’s police. He also fought



against the Japanese and survived. He was a hero. I am ready, just as Kim was ready. I will do anything it takes to avenge his death and destroy the capitalist warmongers.”

Du Trong Linh sauntered over. She leaned her AK47 against the hut. The day was already hot, with the fierce sun bearing down upon them. She seemed a little short of patience. She curled her lower lip, focused her dark eyes upon the newcomer and said: “Not as simple as that. You’ve lived a soft city life full of shit . . . what makes you think you can handle being out in the jungle all day and all night, with little food, little comfort for sleep?”

Cuc felt the strong inquisition that was coming from this Viet Cong person. She was not going to be intimidated by another woman. If it was fine by Commissar Chu for her to join the Cong, then it should be fine by any of the others. Who was this woman, anyway, and why should she interfere? Stuff you, she thought.

Linh stepped forward and pushed Cuc hard, almost knocking her to the ground. “Let’s see if you are strong enough, then! Show me your strength!”

Long moved back. He was not going to interfere between these two young tigers.

Cuc’s response was unexpected. She swung her left leg around, colliding with Linh’s left knee joint and setting her off balance. As Linh was attempting to regain her balance, Cuc closed up on her and slammed her right fist into Linh’s throat. Linh gasped and coughed, attempting to regain her breath. The cadre began to gather around, some whooping, some cheering Linh on. Cuc flipped Linh’s right foot away from her and the second in charge of the cadre fell heavily to the dusty ground. Cuc then slammed her right foot deeply into Linh’s belly, then fell upon her pummeling her with her fists.

“That’s enough!” shouted Long. “Break it!”

Several cadre members grabbed Cuc and pulled her off, but they couldn’t help but laugh. Two others helped Linh up, but she was winded and bleeding slightly. There was a strange smile on her face, and she stood back, panting, trying to regain her breath in the arms of her fellow cadre members. She laughed and shook her head. “Welcome Comrade. Welcome! How . . . how did you . . .?”

Cuc stood back and eyed the victory over her opponent. She grinned. “My uncle!”

Long spat on the ground and laughed. “Never underestimate uncles.”

Unknown to the children and also unknown to Charmaine, James McKinnon had been visiting Phuong Duval at her home after work. There was time, he thought, between leaving the office and attending the evening meal at home, for love. The house was large, too large for her, he thought. The old colonial French villa stood back from a tree lined boulevard, somewhat gracefully aligned with others also of pre 20th century construction. We could be on the outskirts of Paris, he thought, when he first set his eyes on the building . . . except that is, for the climate. He’d parked his Citroen in the semi-circular driveway and entered under the courtesy of the housemaid, Lien, a reasonably tall, sharp faced Vietnamese woman — a widow it seemed with no children. Then there was a gardener, a cook, and a young girl of fifteen or sixteen who helped out with Lien. An orphan, James found out, who had been adopted by Phuong.

“It does her good,” said Phuong, “to do some small domestic chores. Teaches her resilience.”

“And what will you do,” said James, sipping on his whisky, “when some young man comes along and takes her from you?”

Phuong laughed. “Putting the horse before the cart, I think. She’s still very young.”

“Not too young for Vietnam to marry her off. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen! You know how it is.”

She was silent. She looked at him with her head slightly angled. After a moment she nodded, and sipped her cocktail. “When and if that occurs, I should be somewhat lonely.”

The remark startled him. He was lost for words and looked around the room, at the *avante garde* art, the Parisian motifs, the comfortable and sensual feeling that her well designed living room gave. He stared through the open doors into the garden beyond. It was a haven . . . indeed, a haven that she had been living in for a very long time since the death of her parents, and her company was now a very fine looking teenager . . . an orphan, adopted as one of her own some years back, eleven, twelve was it? Mia, a lovely name indeed. James sighed. If only time could stand still. I could remain like this forever, simply breathing in the atmosphere of Phuong’s presence and her wisdom. This is surely something that has to be. We are of different religions, but surely that can be overcome. Catholic, Protestant, but surely that cannot stand in the way of true love, of definite commitment body and soul?

She was watching him, those deep brown eyes — pools of infinity, he thought. She has such lovely eyes. The whole universe might be there, within. What stars could possibly compete with the sheen of her eyes? A flicker of a smile appeared upon his lips and he nodded ever so slightly at her. She knew his meaning, stood up and came toward him. Nestled beside him on the couch, her hand on his, and their faces touching, Mia came to the door and stopped in her tracks. Yes, she thought. It’s what I want. At long last, a mother and a father to be. At last.



The McKinnon household bustled with activity that night. Sun settling down for the evening and cars parked in the driveway. Stars bright. A moon almost full and beginning to show as the sun set. No wind. It was as if heaven had settled upon that old French mansion that night as the guests settled for dinner. The house was alive. Laughter was bold and at times hilarious. Once again Charmaine had settled her guests in perfect order on the round dining table with James next to Phuong, herself next to the Inspector, Claude Bastein; the South Vietnam General Dao Loc and his wife Trinh next, then Howson Pendlebury and his wife Hilda from the British Embassy, next Vernon Clement Harris and his wife Melody from the American Embassy. Again, a surprise to all was James's boss, Justin Trevallyn with his Vietnamese wife Nguyet down from Hue for a few days. Last of all was a late invite — Bishop Jean-Baptiste Lacroix, as a precursor to the planned forthcoming wedding of James and Phuong. The children, as usual, were upstairs amusing themselves with games, having had an earlier dinner.

Claude Bastein interrupted the dining by dinging on his wine glass. Ding ding ding! "Well, my dear friends, ladies and gentlemen. It behooves me to announce . . . probably as you all know anyway . . . the engagement of James McKinnon to Phuong Duval, so I propose a toast. A toast to James and Phuong, may their lives together be ever blessed and with numerous bountiful children. Ha ha. To James and Phuong!"

"To James and Phuong!"

Charmaine touched Phuong's hand. "What a lovely ring. You must be so happy, my dear."

Phuong brandished her left hand and the expensive diamond engagement ring sparkled in the light. "And you?"

Charmaine grinned. "Oh, don't worry about that, all in order."

They both laughed, clinked their glasses together and laughed some more.

General Dao was speaking in reply to the British attache. "No, there aren't any American military arms being sent to us. And quite sincerely, I say, we don't need them."

Howson Pendlebury from the British Embassy raised his eyebrows. "Well, General, what was that great load of trucks from the airport going up north the other week, eh? Filled with Coke-a-Cola, no doubt?"

"Oh shush," said Melody, "Why do you British have to spoil things with talk about military, if that's what you were getting at?"

"I was simply asking . . . you Yanks seem to be pouring in here like so much heck and no one seems to know why. Last time I looked around there were CIA people everywhere. They're rather easy to pick out, though they pretend to be tourists. That's a real joke. Down in the Givral, the Continental, you name it, darling."

"Oh, do be quiet, Howson." The words came from General Dao's wife, Trinh. "You don't know what you're talking about and you're spoiling this special evening for James and Phuong. Just slow it down, for goodness sakes."

The voice that then spoke was cultured, deep and firm. It was Bishop Jean-Baptiste Lacroix. "My children, this is a time of confusion, let there be no doubt about that. But, we are here not here tonight for confusion, we are here for a celebration. We are invited for the forthcoming celebration of a marriage. It is that which overcomes mere politics or military talk. Indeed, it is an opportunity for each one of us to look inside our hearts and discover who we truly are."

"And *what* we are," said General Dao, raising his glass.

There was an uneasy silence in the room. The guests looked at each other for a sign of sympathy from anyone willing to give it, but there were blank faces. Suddenly, Claude Bastein lifted his glass and began to sing. "*My love loves me, oh the wonders I see. A rainbow shines in my window, my love loves me . . .*" His rich tenor voice rang out above the silence and soon the voices of all joined in, and so it went on with sopranos, bass and tenors lifting upward and onwards and filling the home with stentorian syllables the house had not heard of in a hundred years. There was laughter, there was joy, there was comradeship among the various political ideologies around the table. The Vietnamese waiter poured more wine and rolled his eyes.

Vernon Clement Harris, the American Legation's first secretary, was transfixed by Justin Trevallyn's wife, Nguyet. She was slightly smaller of stature than Phuong and Trinh, but he thought oh how beautiful and how every every movement of hers was so graceful. She knows her attraction, she knows she is someone. He felt drawn to the young Vietnamese woman. Really something, he thought. He fiddled with his glass of red wine, drew in a deep breath and said in his southern drawl: "Mrs. Trevallyn, I understand you are a cousin of the recent Emperor, Bao Dai?"

She looked at him with those deep brown eyes penetrating his. Who is this stupid man? Oh yes, the American Embassy person with his clever blonde wife. She is soooooo stunning though. I wonder what she is doing with such a dimwit man? These Americans are here in their increasing numbers Will there be any room left for us?. I wonder if that man from the British Embassy is correct? Well, either way I guess we should be thankful for the Yanks being here, providing us with so much support and goodies.

She gave a tepid smile. "A distant cousin, fourth I think. I have not seen him for many years, but yes I have had a letter now and then. My father was a great friend of his, they played together as children."

Vernon Harris leant forward. "How did your family take it when the current President, Ngo Dinh Diem, forced him from the throne?"



Nguyet looked startled. “He abdicated.”

“Yes, but it was a staged *coué*, was it not?”

Justin broke in. “It’s all past history now, Vernon, and we are not interested in raking up old ghosts if you don’t mind. Bao Dai lives a separate life from Vietnam these days, though I suppose he may one day live in the United States with the blessing of your president. Who knows? Everything in this world is in a state of flux and many of us around this table might be shocked if we could see into the future.”

The morning came with a kind of dullness that infiltrated his head. Bloop Bloop! Bloop! Claude Bastein awoke slowly, unsure of where he was or what day it was. Oooh, too much of that delicious French wine last night, he thought, sweet though it was, James McKinnon did seem to have a cellar of great taste. And, he thought, impeccable taste in women as well. He lurched from the bed, attempting to steady himself against the warmness of the wall, but slid off. Some night it had been, and that Bishop, my, my . . . how he had held forth! What a wonder. He should have been on stage, a great actor perhaps! And then it came to him how he himself had taken charge at one moment and sung his heart out. *P’laisir de amour*. Oh lord, he thought, was I drunk? Surely not. McKinnon’s wines were potent. Ah, Charmaine, he thought. It was all because of you . . . you my beloved darling sweet French maid. He fell back onto the bed and began to dream. Charmaine . . . Charmaine, so sweet, so tender, so lovely. And what an organiser! Yes, she would make a good wife and mother, yes indeed. It was time. Vietnam was in crisis and perhaps it was time to leave? He had enjoyed his years with the *Sûreté* in both Hanoi and Saigon but he was not getting any younger, neither was Charmaine. It was time to do something about it before everything exploded in one’s face. He could see a time coming when the North would exert itself again, regardless of the Geneva decision. The peace talks didn’t appear to be working and Ho Chi Minh was never going to be satisfied with half a country. Time to take Charmaine and go. Woohoo! His head was still throbbing as he reached for his singlet and underpants. Even so, still some unfinished business to attend to. That rubber plantation owner, for one . . . what was his name? Marchand, yes, the name was familiar to him from the past.

But, there was much more on his mind. Charmaine was to be with him that evening at the Continental — that magnificent hotel on the Rue Catinat. It would cost him a few week’s pay, but it was worth it. He saw through the day with routine activities, even sending off to Paris via telegraph an enquiry about Captain Marchand. All in all it had been a dull kind of a day. He’d sat in on a group instruction with the Vietnamese police and the Ministry of Interior concerning information that the guerrillas were forming a group called The National Liberation Front. Otherwise the day had passed by with nothing much but with a heap of paperwork. Incredibly boring.

At seven he picked her up from the McKinnon household in the green Peugeot. “You look so fresh,” he said as she slipped into the car. He was wearing his white sharkskin suit, with a pale blue tie to match and white leather shoes. Charmaine was wearing an off the shoulder evening gown of green satin with matching high heeled shoes.

“Well, it’s slightly cooler now, so there. My, you do look handsome.”

He laughed loudly as he spun the car out of the driveway. The Peugeot purred its way along the boulevard, cocooning the two of them into its French leather interior. When they arrived at the Continental they were ushered into a very special dining area attached to the ballroom. They could hear the music from the band, though somewhat diminished. Light filtered upon them in a delicate shade of ochre, which slightly shadowed their faces, and with the orchestral melodies in the background combined to make this an atmosphere with one purpose — seduction. Around them were couples intensely enjoying the luxury of an environment so designed for love. The stage was set. All they had to do was to relax, let themselves go, and the night was theirs. Claude had booked a bedroom. A bedroom of first class. In his left pocket was a small satin covered box, and he fingered it now and then. Claude raised his glass of Champagne and clinked it with hers. *‘Enchanté! To our future!’*

The black Packard swung into the circular drive of the Presidential Palace. Bishop Jean-Baptiste Lacroix yawned slightly within the rear compartment. The sun was setting. The night previously at James McKinnon’s had tired him somewhat. Perhaps it was all the red wine? And indeed, what wine it was! The French cuisine had been delicious, so it couldn’t have been that. Now, another dinner with the President and his in-laws. Would he survive the night? He chuckled to himself as the car came to a halt and his Vietnamese driver swung the rear door open for him. “Thank you Duy, no need to wait around, you may take the time for yourself, but be back here by 9.30, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

A military aide was waiting for him at the steps. He looked up at the grand building, originally built for a French governor sometime in the 1890s. It stood as time stood, haughty, so provincial, so aware of itself, standing out upon its surroundings as if it was some living creature. It’s grandeur so prominent. Magnificent structure, he thought, but surely too large even for a President. Heading toward Ngo Dinh Diem’s study for a pre-dinner conversation, Jean-Baptiste Lacroix passed by a full length mirror. He glanced at himself, so tall and intensely groomed in his amaranth red piped short cassock,



with the amaranth red sash around his tightly controlled midriff, and the red Zucchetto upon his head, holding down his perfectly groomed black hair with an odd grey sneaking in there. Not that one would notice. No one ever did. *Superior* was the thought that came to his mind, and he gave himself a silent grin before the slick military aide opened the door.

The South Vietnamese President, Ngo Dinh Diem, was seated behind an enormous desk. There seemed to be gold embellishings everywhere. Diem rose, bowed slightly and indicated a seat. The Bishop settled himself into a comfortable chair side-on to the desk.

“Cognac?”

Bishop Jean Baptiste Lacroix nodded and Diem pressed a on button his desk. An aide entered and Diem nodded to the liquor cabinet and gave a sign that the aide seemed to understand. The Bishop received the small glass with thanks and the aide disappeared.

Diem resumed his conversation. “You’ve been dining with the British and Americans?”

“You are very well informed, my dear friend. Are you watching the inspector of the Sûreté as well?”

Diem laughed. He shuffled some papers on his desk. “No no no, he is part of my dedicated police, why would I want to shadow him, a superb investigator?”

Jean Baptiste took a sip of his cognac. “Just wondering. He won’t be here forever, you know, and when he is gone, who and what will you rely upon? There are many within the police who would betray you. That is a fact.”

Diem winced. “And you? It is my understanding that the Vatican is to install a Vietnamese born Bishop very shortly and that I shall be losing a very dear friend. Yes, I am losing many old friends. We are not insignificant folk, you know *Jean Baptiste*. We were both given that Saint’s name at our birth, so we are eternally tied to each other’s destiny. We are spiritual brothers, never to be released from each others lives.”

Jean Baptiste set his teeth upon his lower lip. “That is true my President. We are undoubtedly linked in God’s grace within time as we are able to understand it. We are truly blessed by that providential occurrence. However, I am being called back to Rome next month, and I shall very much miss our special meetings and conversations. I have given a recommendation that the Very Reverend Monsignor Cam Phuc be installed as the new Bishop of our Notre Dame Cathedral here in Saigon. He is a graduate of my old alma mater, *Institute Catholique le Paris*. Very dedicated, very dedicated indeed, and the word is that soon there will be Archbishoprics created throughout our . . . your wonderful country. So, he will be in, ah . . . in a very short time, it would appear . . . the first Archbishop of Saigon.”

“Which distinction, if you had stayed longer, would have fallen directly upon you, would it not! But, if I know the way things work in our faith, your calling back to Rome may well be greatly in your favour?”

Jean Baptiste smiled. He took another sip from his cognac. “I believe our beloved God has something arranged for me.”

“Yes, well, I need Him to do a little more for us here, my dear *Jean Baptiste*, Archbishop, and possibly Cardinal to be in the future, God willing. Now, about the British — we need to put some pressure upon the Vatican, for them in turn to pressure the British. The Brits have done so well in Malaya, virtually wiped out that communist insurgency. Their techniques could be used here. I need them, and I need you to put it to the Vatican for them to become involved. You know, my father was very fond of Malaya where he studied and brought back to Vietnam many principles of the British.”

Jean Baptiste frowned. “I do acknowledge our spiritual bond and the dual blessing upon our birth, but my understanding is that the British do not wish to become involved in our business, and indeed it is not the same kind of situation to what we have here.”

“Well, I need them. The Americans are all very well, but they do not have that finesse and understanding the British have in counter-insurgency measures. Nor, if I may say so, do your French compatriots. I am willing to accept the Americans for what they are, but there are reservations.”

Jean Baptiste’s face went a slight shade of red. “If I may say so, my President, you haven’t been all that clever in controlling your Generals. Some of them have been carrying on with outrageous activities. Your prisons are full of people who should not be there. There seems to have been no distinction between innocence and guilt. There is torture. Families have been broken up . . . torn apart! If you wish to learn something from the British, then you first need to bring the poor village families to some understanding of why you are doing what you are. You can’t simply crush people.”

Ngo slapped his hand down on his desk. “Isn’t that what the North are doing! How can I separate the innocent from the guilty in these villages if I can’t rely upon my Generals? And . . . and . . . don’t you go relying upon what you read in the American press. Most journalists are liars, filthy liars, only out to get a good scoop for their gullible readers.”

Jean Baptiste felt that he might have overstepped himself. He fingered his Episcopal ring. Then he finished off the cognac and lowered his voice. “I’ve told you this before, brother Diem, you need more civilian officers to go into these villages. You need people with humanitarian skills. You need to scour the institutions for those who are educated in



agriculture and sociology — those who have an understanding of the country, so that they may physically go into the villages to teach the people. Your Generals don't have that understanding. They've never had that understanding.”

Ngo Dinh Diem glared at the Bishop. ”The Generals are difficult to . . . to handle. There are factions among them jostling for superiority. All they are after is superiority! What am I ruling, eh? What in the name of the Blessed Virgin Mary am I ruling? We have this division of North and the South set in cement by Geneva for a time, but how long before the cement crumble's eh? And even here, within our South Vietnam borders I am having to guide the ropes of so many different junkets. So much shit. Not only do I have my Generals to worry about, but there are the Cao Dai separate military, who are kind of under our control at present, but who knows, and that gangster army of Hoa Hoa's, some who admittedly did have positions in my previous cabinet. It's not all that long ago that I crushed the Binh Xuyen who were causing massive trouble here in Saigon. Many are plotting against me, while I am trying to keep them aligned with us but having very limited success. Do you realise the stress they all put me through . . . so many divisions . . . so many groups with different ideas. They don't have that problem in the North where they clamp down on everything. You can't have private armies under Ho Chi Minh's General Giap. Never happen . . . never happen. But here, they're all over the place like demented mobs. And now, even yesterday, I had a visit from that Buddhist monk . . . you know him . . . what his name? Ah, yes, Thich . . . Thich Tri Quang. He said I needed to do something drastic to bring the Buddhist community into harmony with us Catholics. He said we were smothering them, we were beating them to death. The nerve of him! He told me my presidency was not supported by his people and that if there wasn't change, there would be much trouble. As if I have not enough problems without the Buddhists turning against me! I have organised land reforms, what else do they want me to do?”

Jean Baptiste sat the empty cognac glass on the desk. It rested there like a lone sentinel, empty, as vacant as the French army that had left several years previous; the overhead light reflecting through the glass and beaming back at him in various colours of the rainbow. He looked at it for a second or two and some past memory came to his mind. Something trying to tell him . . . what? What was he hearing both from his President and also within himself? The feeling wasn't great . . . something was rumbling down upon him and he didn't like it one bit .

But Diem had somehow strangely relaxed, leant back in his chair and stretched his legs out underneath his desk. He stared at the ceiling and then tapped a pencil on the surface of the desk while throwing his head back and faking a yawn. “We have known each other a very long time, my friend. I haven't always agreed with you, but you must understand that I have a country which is almost in despair to run . . . I have an enemies to defeat . . . enemies who will stop at nothing to destroy our way of life here in Saigon. There has to be rule . . . there has to be order . . . and sometimes innocent people may get hurt. I can't help that. It is the way of things. But get me the British! Use your influence with Pope John to get me the British!”

The Bishop expelled a good deal of his breath. “Awwwhhh . . . I shall do what I can, my brother, but I don't give it all that much chance of success.”

A side door opened. And an immediate dislike overwhelmed him. I'm a man of God, he thought, but I cannot help it. I cannot help it. She is so dangerous.

The President's aristocratic sister-in-law, Madame Nhu, stood in the doorway, waiting. Waiting for the President to acknowledge her presence. It didn't take long. He immediately switched from looking at Jean Baptiste and smiled at the vision of beauty before him. The vision spoke. “Diem darling, dinner will be served in ten minutes.” That was all she said as she disappeared the way she had come.

And the Roman Catholic Bishop of the sacred Notre Dame Cathedral in Saigon, Jean Baptiste Lacroix, knew in the depths of his being that he was walking into the Lion's den, into the real power behind his friend, President Ngo Dinh Diem — Madame Nhu and her husband Ngo Dinh Nhu, the President's very astute and controlling brother. The power behind the throne, so to speak. He steeled himself for the occasion. •

To be continued

The Council to Homeless Persons

Established in 1972, the Council to Homeless Persons is the peak Victorian body representing individuals and organisations with a stake or interest in homelessness. Our mission is to work towards ending homelessness through leadership in policy, advocacy and sector development.

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