

MANDARIN
A Novel of Viet Nam



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by

John Havan



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John Havan
Manila, 2007



PART 1
THE DIAMOND SON



1



The Escapade

That Sunday morning in 1894, I woke up very early, my mind on fire, ready for adventure. Nanny Thao was snoring softly in her bed next to mine but Xuan was already awake. He was my houseboy and slept on a reed mat at the foot of my bed. I quickly pulled on loose-fitting, shiny black cotton pantaloons and a white, collar-less silk tunic with long sleeves, slipped into rubber-soled brown cloth slippers, taking care not to make any noise. Signaling for Xuan to follow, I sneaked out of the bedroom and ran silently downstairs into the grand, ornate main hall and out into the inner gardens, the pride and joy of my mother. My parents were still asleep, and the many inner compound servants were nowhere to be seen. At the main door, I looked at Xuan, my mind racing. He looked back; our eyes locked. His normally broad, homely face was excited, with eyes wide open and the eyebrows almost at the hairline. We both knew that today was the day.



On the other side of my mother's carefully-tended gardens, with their hundreds of miniature trees and hanging orchids, were a number of smaller buildings used as dining halls for lesser guests or for card games. The pleasant smells of wet grass and morning dew hung in the air. We crossed through these into the spotless, empty inner courtyard. This was a large, flat surface, paved with bricks, crisscrossed diagonally with grass and bordered with colorful plants. A large, wide alabaster fountain stood in the middle, decorated with dragons and phoenixes, with lotus leaves floating

on the surface of the placid water. I crossed the yard and carefully pulled back the brass bolt on a small lacquered door in the wall that separated the inner compound from the outer one. Xuan was right behind me. We found ourselves in the outer compound, where workers and servants lived in row upon row of thatch-roofed huts. Beyond the outer compound, which was already like another world to me, ran the thick manor walls, on top of which armed guards could be seen.

In accordance with the plan I had made, we walked slowly so as not to draw the attention of the workers, who had been up since well before dawn. One worker might report it later to the inner compound servants, who would in turn report it to the main household staff, who would report it to Nanny, who would alert my mother, resulting in all sorts of complications. Xuan, barefooted, with loose-fitting brown pantaloons and a brown short-sleeved tunic made of coarse material, would not have attracted attention, but my white silk shirt and black pants stood out from a distance. I had thought of wearing something less conspicuous, but diamond sons don't have nondescript clothes.

The forbidding manor walls that ringed the outer compound had four massive gates, each facing one major point of the compass. On top of the gates, pacing back and forth along the battlements, were armed sentries. Near each gate was a small barrack, filled with guards who were in various stages of getting up. We carefully avoided these, and headed for the pigsties near the southern gate. Near these crude pens, a small tunnel was hidden in between a large straw stack and some broken-down carts.

It had been dug out by casual laborers employed on the estate, hired hands who had wanted to go in and out of the manor without being searched by the guards. When discovered, these bolt holes were promptly filled in but within the month new ones had appeared.

Xuan knew where these holes were because his parents were permanent laborers who lived in the outer compound. When I had first said I wanted to see what was outside the manor walls, he had shown me one such hole. That was two months ago. It was a different hole now, the other one having been spotted by the manor guards. As we burrowed under a large, shaggy bale of straw to avoid being seen, the pungent, sour smell of pig slop and wet straw assailed my nostrils. Being squeezed in with Xuan, I could also recognize the familiar smell of his sweat. Unlike me, he didn't have to be washed twice a

day, and he could smell like a normal person, like most of the workers on the estate, whereas my sisters and I always smelt faintly of some fragrance or other. We were scrubbed down by our respective nannies before lunch and after dinner every day, without fail, before being patted over with perfumed toilet water. To clean his teeth when he felt like it, Xuan would gargle with water, swish it around his mouth, and spit it out in a high arc, while my sisters and I watched with admiration. Sometimes he would add salt to the water. My sisters and I, on the other hand, had to undergo two cleaning operations each day, after meals. Cotton wool was dipped into alcohol and wrapped around a chopstick, and Nanny would then carefully rub it against each tooth, while our jaws were forced open to the point of dislocation.

Xuan was a little bigger than me, but already much stronger. His sole responsibility in life, at age twelve, was to service me in any way required. He was my personal servant, companion and friend, all rolled into one. Because he was a two years older than me, and from the lower social classes, he was expected to be more level-headed than I was. Nanny thought he would be a good counterweight to my personality, which veered from natural caution to wild abandon for no apparent reason. In fact, in spite of his solid, stoic appearance, Xuan could be depended on to agree with whatever crazy scheme I thought up. Of limited imagination, he trusted my judgement implicitly. He slept without a mosquito net at the foot of my king-sized bed, with thick pillars supporting a mosquito net of the finest muslin. He ate whatever was left over from my plate. He never seemed to catch cold, have a cough or a stomach ache, and he was on call day and night. He loved his job and his parents considered themselves lucky beyond words that their son had been chosen out of many candidates by my mother on the recommendation of my nanny.



After checking out the terrain, Xuan duck-walked the short distance to the tunnel in the manor wall, with me right behind. The ground was too dirty to crawl on, and we couldn't stand up, so we waddled along in a squatting position. It was hilarious, and I felt a thrill shoot through me. This would be the first time I ventured outside the manor, although it wouldn't be the first time I had discussed it with Xuan. In my mind, I had already sneaked

out of the manor a number of times. But today, things were different. It was for real. We crawled under the bushes as soon as we cleared the manor walls. Glancing up, we could see the guards walking their beat. Occasionally, we heard snatches of conversation from the top of the ramparts. Once in while, a guard would walk up to the edge of the wall and look around. Stray dogs from the surrounding villages below often came up to the manor walls, attracted by the smells of cooking inside the fortress-like compound. They would chase one another around, their playfulness sometimes erupting into serious fights. At other times, they would mate and become locked in coitus. The guards, bored by their endless sentry duty, would throw rocks and clods of earth at the dogs to disperse them. Once in a while, an archer would let loose an arrow or two and hit a dog, which would run off with the arrow sticking out of its rump, yelping its head off, followed by the rest of the pack.

As we squatted there, I whispered to Xuan that if a guard should see us and shout we should stand up at once otherwise he might think we were dogs and put an arrow in our arse. He laughed silently, and then wiggled his bushy eyebrows up and down, as if he were signaling. This was one of his mannerisms, and I often found myself copying him, only to be roundly told off by Nanny, who said that she would send him away if I caught 'that stupid habit'.

But today all was quiet. Avoiding the roads and paths that led into the valley, we sneaked from bush to bush, banana grove to banana grove, bamboo cluster to bamboo cluster, using the vegetation as our cover. The manor sat on top of a hill and as we slipped and slid our way down, the top of the ramparts soon disappeared from view.

It was not yet the planting season and empty brown mud fields filled the valley. Each plot of land was surrounded by low, reddish earthen dikes, with clumps of banana trees here and there. The unfamiliar smell of night soil, wet mud and coarse wild grass greeted my nostrils. Beyond the fields small villages nestled here and there in thick clumps of bamboo or banana trees. Far away in the distance, running from east to west, I could see a dark and forbidding range of mountains, with ridges and humps, in the shape of a woman lying down, with her head pointing East. This was the famous Woman of the Mountain. Everyone knew the story about this mountain, which had originally been a woman. Her husband and her son had one day left the province to go on a long fishing trip and never returned. She had lain

down to wait for them, and had been turned into a mountain. The outline of her face, with a nose and chin, could clearly be seen at one end, looking up at the sky. Further west were two humps that could be construed as her two breasts. A small waterfall even further west was said to be her private parts. People always snickered when they got to this part of the story. Far to the west lay her feet, and there ran a large river. There was also a story about this river, and my father had told it to me many times as part of his long repertoire of bedtime stories for his favorite son. The gods had placed the river there to soothe the poor woman's feet in the daytime, and at night carried her down to the beach so she could look for her family. Before dawn, however, the river always reversed its course and brought her back to her resting-place on the mountain. My father always pursed his lips and nodded solemnly at this part, and I felt a growing admiration for the way this river took such kind and good care of the poor Woman of the Mountain.

As we walked away from the manor, we talked in whispers. I don't know why, because there was no one in sight. My mind was running along at great speed, with many thoughts all jumbled up. So much was happening. Being the eldest son of a prominent Court family, I had led a sheltered life. What little I knew of the world outside the family manor came from my tutors, tailors, barbers, and even from Xuan, who somehow knew much about the outside world although he was only two years older than me. I had become aware that outside the manor's huge outer compound there was a different and exciting world, where my barber said a million and one things existed. It was in this way that I had heard about a small pagoda near the south gate, where a mad monk practiced martial arts all by himself at sunrise, laughing like a crazy man. It was said that this same monk had killed a tiger with his bare hands, that he could pulverize a large rock into powder with one punch, and that he could drive his fingers through a banana tree trunk with one thrust of his open hand. It was also said that this monk, whom everyone called the Mad Monk, could change into a crow and fly over mountains, or turn into a fox and hunt chickens at night. Intrigued by these stories and curious by nature, I felt that I had to go and watch the Mad Monk at morning practice, and I talked Xuan into it. At first he didn't seem keen on the idea, perhaps because he instinctively knew that if our escapade were reported to my parents he would be severely beaten for not having discouraged me from undertaking such a dangerous adventure. He

knew that diamond sons were never blamed for anything they did, but that everyone else involved with them would be. But he was still young, we were good friends, and my enthusiasm carried him along, as usual.

I had decided not to tell my parents about my intentions, or even Nanny, who had been my wet nurse and who knew all my secrets but never talked about them in front of my mother. I had a feeling they would all be against the idea. Mother, while kind, was quite strict. Father was generally a no-nonsense, military kind of person who liked children to be on their best behaviour at all times. Unlike Xuan, I was not afraid of being beaten, because I knew that this would never happen, but I disliked the thought of being scolded by an adult. On the few occasions that this had happened I had felt belittled and confused, unable to think of what to say to defend myself, and my emotions had choked me, making me want to cry. So I decided to sneak out at sunrise and be back before breakfast. No one would know. Xuan would give me moral support as well as help me find my way there and back in case I got lost.

I walked in the direction of the mountain woman's feet for one thousand steps, following the directions given to me by my barber. He was a large old man who gently shaved my head every month, leaving only small tufts on the side and at the top, so that Buddha could catch me if I fell. I walked in the lead along a narrow beaten path, flattened over the years by generations of barefooted peasants who lived and worked on my father's land. I felt it was natural that I should lead the expedition, because it was my idea, although I was glad he was behind me. When I reached the large, placid river I admired so much, I turned left and walked along its wide banks, heading for a dense bamboo copse about two kilometers away. It was not the sort of walk I was used to, and I can't say that I enjoyed it, but at no time did I ever think about turning back. Generally cautious, I liked to plan things out, but, once committed, I would go on till the end. Nevertheless, every now and again, I looked back to make sure Xuan was still there. It was always reassuring to see him plodding along, his face expressionless until he saw me looking back at him. A conspiratorial smile would then appear on his broad face and we would grimace at each other. When we were in private, we talked to each other in the colloquial way children from lesser families did. We looked directly into each other's eyes, and he addressed me as 'young uncle', as befitted my social station, although I was two

years younger than him. I addressed him as ‘big brother’, to show our age difference. In public, things became more complicated. He had to call me ‘young master’ and couldn’t make eye contact during conversation, while I addressed him directly by name, as one does a young servant. I also rarely turned my face in his direction when I spoke to him. We had to do this because the adults insisted that proper social decorum be observed at all times in a master-servant relationship.



When I saw the roof of the pagoda in the distance, I knew I had found the right place although I was surprised to see that the pagoda walls were orange in colour. Most of the pagodas I had seen when visiting nearby manors with my father had yellow walls. I advanced carefully, keeping low, staying in the shadows where possible, hiding behind bushes and bamboo clumps. As I maneuvered to get nearer, I suddenly remembered the old countryside saying, ‘Where there are bamboos there are tigers’. A shiver of fear ran through me as I squatted in the bamboo grove, peering through the smooth green trunks at the pagoda. I then remembered the Mad Monk’s tiger-killing prowess, and here I was hiding, stalking, watching, just like a tiger. What if he thought I was a tiger and rushed over and killed me? Would I have time to run away? What if he could really fly and swooped down on me as I ran through the rice fields?

I decided that if the Mad Monk sensed that I was there, spying on him, I would stand up and announce I was the son of Lord Giap. Surely the monk, however mad, would not kill a small boy, especially one from a Court family. I knew that people around the manor feared my father. Reassured, I crept forward until I could see the small courtyard in front of the pagoda. Behind me, Xuan moved like a shadow.

A thick-bodied man with a bald crown ringed by shoulder-length black hair and a face marked by a curving moustache and a short beard was exercising. He moved slowly, executing a series of dance-like movements, holding each pose for a few seconds before moving on to the next. He was big, like a bear, and he had the same extraordinary sense of balance. For all his bulk, he was remarkably supple. After a while, he stopped exercising and

inhaled deeply, sending the air all the way down to the pit of his stomach. He held it there for an eternity, then breathed out slowly, until no air was left in the lungs, after which his stomach became a concave arch, flattened against the inside of his spine. He then paused, for what seemed an eternity, and slowly began sucking air into his lungs and stomach again.

Time went by, the sun rose, while we both watched, entranced. In my mind, I knew that I should be returning to the manor by then, but a stubborn trait rooted me to the ground. I half expected Xuan to tug at my sleeve and whisper that we should be going, but he said nothing. I think that was one of the reasons I liked him so much. He always agreed with whatever I did.

The Mad Monk was now doing a sort of shadow boxing, dodging and evading imaginary blows and retaliating by kicking and punching in the four directions in rapid succession, many times. He then sank to the ground on one leg, swept the other in a complete circle, sprang up, turning around while still in the air, then fell softly onto his feet, letting out a roar like a tiger. The sound startled us out of our wits, and I almost bolted for home, but didn't. I saw him relax, and start all over again. The sun rose higher; rivulets of sweat covered my face, running onto my chest.



After a long time, perhaps thirty minutes or more, the monk wiped himself down with a small cloth. He reached for a coconut shell that had been cut in half and scooped up a draught of water from an open jar and drank copiously. He wiped himself down, had another drink of water, jumped up and down to loosen up, then started laughing loudly. He laughed and laughed until the sweat ran down in streams all over his face onto his body. Each laugh started in the pit of his stomach, rumbled up to his lungs and exploded through his large open mouth, carrying for miles, reaching the chain of mountains. My ears went deaf with this torrent of sound. Suddenly the Mad Monk stopped laughing and sat down on a nearby rock, with his back to us. In a loud but friendly voice he said, 'Come here, both of you. Don't be afraid. Come here, boys.' I stood up, covered with sweat, weak at the knees, with butterflies in my stomach. My lips were trembling. Behind me, Xuan also stood up, his jaws clenched tight. He looked like a servant who

was about to receive a beating. After a while, I moved tentatively forward, and he followed. When we were standing in front of the monk, we saw what a large man he was. The smell of his sweat was sour and earthy, but I didn't dare wrinkle my nose.

'I heard you two long before you arrived at the bamboo clumps there,' he said in a matter-of-fact voice. 'I am teaching a class to young boys like yourselves in about one hour. You are welcome to stay and watch. You can sit here and wait, or come back another day.'