Short Pieces

by Patricia Walton Hill

Pat Hill in Dacca,
circa 1964

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A Fundamental Old-fashioned Christmas
Parlor Bazaar
Republic Week in New Delhi
Cyprus: Island of Immortality
Forsaking Saigon
Saigon Scene

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Materials collected by Mary Frances Dunham
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Short Pieces

by Pat Hill

A Fundamental Old-fashioned Christmas

A FUNDAMENTAL OLD-FASHIONED CHRISTMAS

by

Patricia Walton Hill

c/o Sheree Rusby
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Christmas in East Bengal arrived modestly, without street corner Santas or excited television bulletins or newspaper splashes. In a Muslim country where the largest minority group is Hindu, Christian holidays do not attract gross attention. A few shops in the bazaar displayed some Christmas cards and a handful of giddy baubles; that was the extent of public demonstration. Fortunately, all offices closed on December 25 to mark the birthday of the nation's founder.

During the years we lived in Dacca--the capital of what is now Bangladesh but was then East Pakistan--we, like the other Americans and Europeans, evolved our own customs to fit the circumstances.

The first December we were in residence, Kripa, our ayah, and Ganesh, the mali (gardener), built a tiny creche, a stable with a grass roof supported by bamboo sticks. Saileshwar, our Bengali cook, covered its floor with shredded red and green paper and populated it with such figures as he could find among our effects--a tarnished snowman, a clown, a small clay Hindu statue. Stephen, our pious Christian sweeper, hung paper stars and wooden angels everywhere, murmuring as he floated through the house "Khub sundar, memsahib," ("Very beautiful, madame"). One night the electric power failed, as it did from time to time, and while the cook and bearer were preparing the kerosene lanterns, I wandered toward the veranda with Anthony, our baby son, in my arms. I met Stephen coming down the hall with a lighted candle in his hand. His eyes were raised heavenward, and he was singing "Adeste Fideles" in Bengali. Who, I wondered helplessly, would trade this for a vacuum cleaner?

The season's approach was signalled, not by a street hung with colored lights in November as in our home towns, but by the poinsettias in our garden turning vividly red against the white walls which enclosed the compound. Lacking the familiar accessories with which to greet the season, we all improvised in our assorted fashions.

A week before that first Christmas, I asked my friends Pat Owens and Mary Frances Dunham to send their servants along to help ours deck the halls. Our household prepared tea and betel nut and cigarettes and cookies for their colleagues. Kripa had brought from her home hundreds of tissue paper squares, in purple, cerise, yellow and green, with a cut-out design proclaiming "Merry Christmas" in English and "Burra Deen" ("Big Day") in Bengali. These were pasted on all the window panes and strung along the walls. Regina, the Owens' ayah, was an organizer and she had a theatrical flair. Kripa had invited a few extra ayahs, and they all occupied the big veranda, where they played drums and tambourines, and danced with ankle bells. Kripa dressed up in a lunghi, the tube of cotton cloth worn skirt-like by Bengali men, and a false mustache, with a plastic laundry bag for a hat, and strolled among them with a tray calling "Cigarettes, flowers, betel nut..." Ganesh abandoned the garden to play the khol drum.

The Dunhams' cook and bearer arrived late and stared in disbelief at the revelry. Their master was an architect and an artist, and the handmade decorations at their house were brilliant with ingenuity. Little had been accomplished by our merry workers except miles of technicolor paper chains.

Regina had just fastened a number of these between walls and a ceiling fan when Akbar, their cook, switched on the fan. Half a morning's work went up in confetti and civil war threatened.

The Dunham staff later reported to Dan Dunham that they thought they could do something better than the Hill house production. And indeed they did.

They thought our crèche was a good idea, though poorly executed, and decided to make one secretly as a surprise for Mr. and Mrs. Dunham. When they presented it on Christmas Day, their superiority was manifest. Their little stable had walls, plastered with roses, and windows with Bengali-style bars made of matchsticks, and a front porch, and paper Pakistani flags, and miniature flower pots. They had painted a glittered sign over the doorway of this bungalow, in Bengali, which was meant to say "Our Big Day" but due to a happy spelling mistake translated as "Day of Wine". It was truly lovely.

The next year we struck back. The Sisters at the Catholic orphanage had made a life-size crèche and we resolved to have one too. Kripa and Saileshwar and I drove out to the brick fields and brought back a bucket of wet clay. Kripa and Ruplal, who was our mali at that

time, built bodies for the Holy Family with bamboo poles and straw, added mud faces, and dressed them in old lunghis and scarves and shawls. When the heavy work was finished, our shrewd Buddhist cook slipped out one crisp afternoon and touched up the Infant's face with yellow paint and almond eyes so that it looked like a popular version of a baby Buddha.

In the midst of the project, Ruplal threatened to quit. He said that he could not work there because nobody loved him. I assured him that Sahib and I loved him, but he told me tearfully that the cook and bearer did not. What provoked the crisis I never knew, but when I asked the cook why he didn't love the mali, he exploded. I was afraid that I might have to build the stable myself. But tempers cooled, and Ruplal set a split bamboo roof on four poles at the edge of our lake. We established our Holy Family there, with an oil lantern that shone on the water at night. We had the crèche every year after that.

While our style was Indigenous and the Dunhams' was Arty, our late great friend Cathryn Maillefert excelled in Posh. Her husband Bill was with USIS, and wherever they went, the Mailleferts carried own special aura with them. This

included an elegant collection of Christmas ornaments, gold and crystal, Portuguese and Bavarian, and the Mailleferts' tree trimming could not have been more sophisticated had they been in the heart of Manhattan. Cathryn was known as a warm and talented hostess from Connecticut to Bengal, and their house throbbed throughout the season with eager guests from every corner of the international community. The food was always memorable: thin slices of home-pickled beef or thyme-scented wild pig; smoked fish on dark bread with caraway butter; cubes of mango, pineapple or papaya marinated in lime juice and pepper; clove-dusted roast nuts.

In our part of town, we always had Stanley and his "carollers". Stanley was a Christian Bengali who worked at my husband's office, and on Christmas Eve he brought a troop of boys and girls from his village, painted and costumed. Some time after sunset we would hear the shouts and drums in the garden, and our household would stream out into the keen evening air to watch. They danced in a circle, singing and stomping and clapping while Stanley played his harmonium. One couple stood motionless in the center; the girl was small and her face was painted white. They were Mary and Joseph, and a tall angel with enormous wings stood

guard behind them. When it was over, we all applauded; my husband gave Stanley our donation, to be used for a village picnic, and the entertainers applauded.

Afterward we presented gifts to our servants, and they draped us with malas, the flower garlands which had been made in the afternoon, sweet-smelling bel flowers and rosebuds. Later we drove across the city through the dark still streets to midnight church services.

Our sons invaded their Christmas stockings on the next morning. Anthony, who was eighteen months old when we moved to Dacca, had not gotten a very clear concept of Santa Claus. Christopher was nine years old when we arrived, and his vision of the man in the red suit had been blurred during the course of an Italian Advent and a Christmas celebration aboard a Dutch liner with St. Nicholas the bishop and Black Peter. This did not dim at all their greedy enthusiasm, and their assault upon their presents was an inspiring exhibition of Yankee enterprise. Gifts were not as abundant as they had been for American Christmases. Postal problems and the customs office made it quite impractical for our families to send anything to us, or

for us to import foreign wares. There were few ordinary toys available, but mercifully the children were not stimulated by an avalanche of commercials or by neighborhood competition. Anthony found his stocking filled annually with tools made in Red China--hammers, saws, and chisels--and books, which satisfied him. Christopher got books and lunghis, having adopted the latter article for comfortable lounging and sleeping.

And some of the most treasured presents of my life came to me in Dacca. Among them: from my husband, polished Kashmiri stone necklaces, embroidered shawls, silver filigree, and sandalwood oil. From Pat Owens, a plastic fly-swatter shaped like a sunflower and a jar of gimlets. From Regina, a papaya wrapped in purple tissue and a four-color paper party hat. And once Christopher, who shopped at the bamboo stall on the corner, gave me a bottle of hair oil whose label promised me "lovely silky black hair" and declared that it "arrests boldness" (sic) and "cools brain." I tried it for a couple of days, and while my boldness was not visibly arrested, I did observe the appearance of suspicious soot-dark streaks in my brown hair.

In the foreign community we did not have time to wait four hundred years to accept a custom as the Bengalis did.

We learned to specialize in instant tradition. (Our consul general sensibly decided to have the Independence Day family picnic during the clear cool winter weather instead of the steamy monsoon, and the Americans scarcely stumbled in celebrating the Fourth of July in January.) One year Dee and Scott Rutherford revived the Twelfth Night tradition, which we all enjoyed so much that we stamped it our own and compelled them to repeat it every year. We were invited to bring our fading Christmas trees or similar greenery and cast them into a bonfire in the Rutherford garden. We stood in the dusk, embraced by the burning pine essence, cheered by good cocktails and company. When the needle-bright sparks had settled, we retired to the candlelit living room, where Biharilal Barua, their beaming cook, set forth a chafing dish of shrimp in shamelessly rich Newburg sauce, with a great bowl of savoury rice, tomatoes and cucumbers marinated in vinaigrette dressing, and fresh fruit compote with meringue cookies.

The Dunhams had open house every Christmas Day for all the Bengalis in Dan's department at the college. Their house was gloriously festooned, and a handsome buffet luncheon was offered in their sunny courtyard. I wondered

how they managed the sensitivities involved in mixing Bengali guests of different stations in life, as they can be rather alert about such distinctions. Dan said that the guests segregated themselves into homogeneous social groups--engineers, secretaries, drivers, etc.--each of which ignored the others, and nobody seemed to mind.

"But the sweepers! The sweepers always come at nine o'clock in the morning. At first I tried to explain to them that open house started at three o'clock in the afternoon. But they just looked at everything and took their presents, and the next year they came back at nine. Finally I discovered that they knew they mustn't be there when the other guests came on account of their hopelessly low caste. So now we just put some of the food out in the morning and expect them."

One of our own most gratifying experiments was on a Christmas Eve afternoon, an awkward time for parents with excited children and no relatives to visit. This seemed especially true of Europeans who had lived at home with a good deal of family environment to absorb the emotion. We invited our friends' children to bring their parents from four to seven o'clock. We set up an adult buffet and bar

in the dining room, and a long low table in Anthony's room laden with children's popular fare. I was bemused to see how the little ones--notoriously hostile toward liver in any form as well as unfamiliar food in general--forsook the peanut-butter-and-lemonade spread for stealthy swift forays upon the liver pate canapes and anchovied eggs in the grown-up territory.

Life in Bengal, for the foreigner who became caught up in it, was a highly distilled potion. Time was telescoped, awareness heightened, and experience compressed, so that one seemed, in retrospect, to have lived there for a decade when the calendar recorded a year. A servant who had been with you for three years might be regarded as an old family retainer. In five years you had seen so many people come and go, some of them close friends, and so many births, marriages, and deaths, among Bengalis and foreigners, that you felt as if you had lived there for generations.

And so for us Christmas in Bengal became infused with a special nostalgia as real and persistent as that associated, in an earlier life, with sleigh bells and the smell of fresh fir.

the end

Short Pieces

by Pat Hill

Parlor Bazaar

PARLOR BAZAAR

by

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P. W. Hill

PARLOR BAZAAR

Those peddlers who used to bring to rural America the joys of worldly goods--buttons, ribbons, laces, calico, patent medicines and sideshows--have sunk into nostalgic history. But in the Asian subcontinent, the bazaar still comes to our door. The vendor wallahs are usually the first to find that door, in fact, and they bring everything from bananas to rubies.

Wallah is a term used all over the subcontinent, in Hindi, Bengali or Urdu, and the word properly means "owner". Like many other convenient labels, however, it is used widely and loosely. A man from Kabul or Uttar Pradesh is a Kabuli wallah or a U.P. wallah; a visitor from the State Department is a Washington wallah. And all of our itinerant salesmen are referred to as wallahs.

A motor rickshaw trembles and clatters into our driveway and the rug wallah steps out, a tall Kashmiri in baggy pyjama with a curved nose and shiny black mustache.

"Memsahib, you look at rugs today?" He cocks his head and adds persuasively, "I have very nice rugs today, you want to see."

If for some reason we cannot view his wares at the moment--perhaps we have guests, or amoebic dysentery--he asks, "When shall I come back?"

Sooner or later he is in our living room with his oriental rugs and his partner. All have incredibly emerged from the tiny interior of the rickshaw. These wallahs frequently work in pairs. Each has his own role in the scene, but its exact nature is known only to the team. It is likely to be a family affair, and one purpose of the togetherness is doubtless to see that neither cheats the others. Dust flies like dry fog as they unroll the rugs, one after another, shaking each to produce seductive waves of sheen on the surface, glancing at us sharply to see the effect.

"You look from this side, sahib, you see, you like too much color." The tone of the rug lightens and darkens as we change our angle of vision. Each rug is tossed carelessly aside as another is spread for examination, until

the floor is covered with them. They lie in banks, stacks, overlapping at all angles. The names ring: Kashan, Kirman, Shiras; Isphahan, Turkoman, Afghan. Patterns are profuse. A garnet-bright medallion on cream; intricate tendrils and arabesques on pale blue; stylized mosques on a brick-colored prayer rug; geometric flowers; wine reds and delicate pinks; sapphire blue and bronze greens.

Surrounded, we breathe deeply and try to keep calm. Oriental rugs may be an acquired taste. I seem to remember a time when I, like many occidentals, preferred the more subdued colors, but it must have been a long way back. These rugs easily become an addiction.

We pace around, peering and scowling thoughtfully. If we gaze too long at one of them, one wallah begins to lift and shake it again, emphasizing its glories.

"Well--what do you think?" we ask each other. "I rather like <u>that</u>--" "But it's awfully busy, isn't it?" "Let's look at this one again..." Sahib drops to his hands and knees and studies the knots on the back. The wallahs smoke and wait, occasionally interrupting to encourage us, often talking to each other in their own dialect, Kashmiri or Punjabi. We mutter about warps and wefts and guls,

sounding more knowledgeable than we are, which deceives no one. Our bearer brings tea. Time is no object, only money.

This session concludes when we decide to keep two or three of the rugs for a few days and see how it feels to live with them. This is a very important feature of the purchase. I am bewildered by the presence of quantities of anything, and suffer agonies of indecision at a super-market or smorgasbord. We must have a rug or a copper lamp resting quietly in the house for a while by itself to know how warmly we feel about it.

The wallahs roll up all the other rugs and the whole party is tucked into the rickshaw again. The price haggling will come a few days later when they return for our decision. This can be good theater if you have the right cast.

Wallahs come in seasonal spasms, unpredictably. One summer in Dacca, in what is now Bangladesh, we had a heavy rug season. The city seemed to be flooded with merchants from Sind, Azad Kashmir, and Punjab, who had come from West Pakistan to sell in the eastern province. Every Sunday we gathered in our living room with our close friends and neighbors, Paul and Sheroo Busby, and a wallah. Sheroo, a Parsi from Bombay, an art collector and a first-rate

business woman, conducted the bargaining. It was wonderful to watch her read a newspaper, grandly ignoring the wallah who knelt among his carpets and brass, rolling his eyes and pleading with her to be reasonable.

"Memsahib! I make no profit at that price! Only leave me a little profit--my wife, my children--please!" He looked desperately at the rest of us who, taking our cue, went on eating or drinking or reading or gossiping. Soothing music poured from the stereo speakers.

"Tch! baba," our negotiator said briskly, turning a page, "you mustn't try to cheat people like this--at such prices, who will buy?"

"Memsahib! You say I am not honest man?"

"Tch! Honest has nothing to do with it. Business is business, baba."

Eventually she glanced over the carpets, suddenly swooped upon several, made a package offer, and the drama swept to its climax.

The brass and copper wallah, who sometimes travels with the rug wallah, brings his wares tied in a large grimy cloth. He sits cross-legged before us, unfastens the knots, and sets out brass vases, copper bowls, samovars, hookah pipes, wine cups, wedding plates, trays, spoons, lamps, bells, candlesticks, old coins. Many of these will be

newly made, but there are usually a few antiques. If he is also a god wallah, he might have some figures of Krishna or Shiva or Ganesh. These always seemed poignant in Muslim Pakistan, where their source was often a Hindu family fleeing from danger, or a looted temple.

A shawl wallah approaches on his cycle, wearing a Muslim prayer cap and a long white beard, carrying stacks of woolen stoles or scarves. Sometimes he brings dress lengths, too, and then we send emissaries to find the dirzi, the tailor, and bring him to the house. The dirzi sets up shop in a corner someplace, seated on the floor with a legless sewing machine in front of him.

Our carpenter mistris came upon request, too, to make furniture. I watched one of them build a very respectable cabinet of teak, working on our veranda with hammer, saw, chisel, a bow-string auger, and his fingers and toes.

Our gem wallahs come as a pair, a huge stout Pathan with round black eyes and a tall turban, and his sharp-nosed little partner in a karakul cap. From knotted handkerchiefs, they spread on the table moonstones, sapphires, topaz, quartz, turquoise, and old coins--whatever they have at the moment. Buying must be prudent here, for the wallahs themselves often have no idea of the value of the stones.

In New Delhi, wallahs come down from Kashmir to spend the winter. They bring exquisitely carved wood--tables, screens, boxes, trays, figures, chests--and cream-soft suede to be custom-made into coats and shoes and bags. And furs, Persian lamb and gray lynx. I have spent happy opulent days in the flat of our Indian friend there as her wallahs came in successive waves. The living room was heaped with leather goods, deer-brown, butter-yellow, and moss-green, and piles of the distinctively soft Indian Kashmiri wool embroidered with microscopic stitches. Among the latter we found a rare "ring shawl", of a texture so fine that the whole piece can be drawn through a wedding ring. All these were strewn lavishly over tables and floor to be touched and examined.

With the arrival of other wallahs, the room was filled with handsome oil-rubbed walnut, antique Hindu and Moghul paintings, oriental rugs. The Rusbys' wallahs in New Delhi were considerably more sophisticated than ours in Lahore, and their gem wallah came from Lucknow when he had an especially fine specimen to show them, and set them according to Sheroo's design.

And weekly, the masseur arrived to knead aching muscles. The luxurious atmosphere was intoxicating.

Entertainment can appear in the same manner. In Lahore, our favorite was the bird wallah, who came by foot, carrying his cages. We sat on the veranda railing to watch; the children and servants gathered closer around him in the sunny garden. He squatted, salaamed, smiled, and opened a cage, clucking softly. The birds came out to perform, and we all laughed with delight when a bright green parrot ran around the drive pulling a tiny chariot, in which another parrot rode pompously. They climbed through rings; they picked the right card from a scattered deck; one small bird caught a coin in his beak as it was tossed in the air. He handled them gently, rewarded them with a bit of seed and "Shabash," "Well done."

But the most exciting part was the wallah's own sleight-of-hand. When the birds were snugly back in their cages, he began, quietly, without fanfare, to be the magic wallah. While we all watched intently, the "right card" flew into the air from a deck our son was holding; a coin disappeared from the baffled child's closed fist and was found under his arm. Our bearer's gold ring vanished from a tied cloth in my hand; the wallah picked an orange from our tree and before our bulging eyes, cut it open and dug out the imbedded ring.

Those with dancing bears or goats who balanced on poles are not so appealing, though the children enjoy them. They like the pony wallah, too, who takes them out riding on the patient beasts. We have all heard of marvelous snake-charmers in India, but the only ones I have seen in the subcontinent, in East Bengal, were a depressing lot, usually women, whose major exhibition was to let the snakes crawl over them and their children.

Once in the Punjab we saw a highly skilled troop of acrobats perform at a party, and were astounded to learn that they were a family of farmers who, for generations, had learned this exacting accomplishment--presumably in their spare time--solely to entertain at village celebrations. Now several appreciative Pakistani gentlemen are trying to find paying engagements for them, to encourage them to keep this art alive.

Das was a flute-playing Hindu rogue from a village near Dacca, who managed to turn up, with a few companions and tablas (drums), wherever there were signs of a party going on--lamps burning in the garden, or an extraordinary number of cars parked in front of a house. They gave us music and Das accepted a gift of money, and always whispered confidentially that he would not resent the offer of a strong drink.

In Lahore, on important holidays, a casual band of bagpipers and drummers wandered through the neighborhood, playing for baksheesh. On Christmas Eve in Dacca, we came to expect Stanley, a Christian who worked in my husband's office, with his troop of fellow villagers. They were billed as carollers; it was a peculiarly Bengali version of the tradition. Some time after dark, the sound of tablas and Stanley's aged harmonium swelled in our garden, and we all--children, servants, guests--went outside to greet them. Dressed in an indescribable assortment of costume, they danced, stomped, laughed and sang in a circle with abandoned delight. A trio with white-painted faces stood in the center; a very grave young girl as St. Mary, a self-conscious St. Joseph, and an Angel in great paper wings. When it was finished, we all applauded and a gift of money was presented to Stanley. He counted it and announced the amount, and the troop raised a robust cheer. The money collected this way was to finance an annual village picnic, and well they deserved it.

If you stay in one place long enough, or have good connections, you can collect your own favorite wallahs, and so get first choice of the rugs or moonstones or deities. The relationship is gracious and personal.

"If you find any topaz, this size, you bring to me, eh?"

"Sahib, you like old tray? I bring one copper tray, very old."

If you are a visitor, you may have to exercise some cunning to bring the wallahs to you. Luxury hotels do not encourage too-picturesque vendors to invade the rooms with their freight, especially when the hotel maintains expensive boutique and handicraft shops in its very own lobby. But the room bearers may very well arrange it quietly.

This system of shopping at home for goods, services or theater, is a comfortable and civilized one. No traffic, no parking problems, no crowds. Low overhead for the wallahs. No fixed hours. No fixed prices either, of course, but the prices in the bazaar usually are not fixed either--except in hotel lobbies where they are fixed high. Besides, this is a sociable occasion, not to be handled by a computer. Men who would become pale or sullen at the prospect of tramping from shop to shop, sometimes in bleaching heat, find a mellow pleasure in fingering semi-precious stones and walnut buffalo and brass lamps in their own parlors, over tea or cocktails. The wallahs are part of our lives, to the benefit of all parties.

Short Pieces

by Pat Hill

Republic Week in New Delhi

REPUBLIC WEEK

IN NEW DELHI

by

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"We must get there very early," our Indian hostess told us, "or we won't get good seats and there will be absolutely no point in going at all."

Mr. R., her husband, agreed. He is from Pennsylvania, and besides me was the only foreigner in the house party. "People come from all over India and a lot farther to see Republic Day in New Delhi," he said. "This is no high school Hallowe'en parade."

Even I knew that. The New Delhi hotels were swamped, all of them. I had flown from Lahore to spend Republic Day week with my friends, and some of Mrs. R.'s family had come up from Bombay and Poona.

"We leave the house at 6:15 in the morning, and the procession will start promptly at 9:20," and before anyone could scream loudly, Mrs. R. rushed on to sprinkle balm over us. "We'll take lots of hot coffee and lots of sandwiches. Lots of ham and cheese," she added soothingly. "Three hours will pass so quickly, you'll see."

January 26 was first celebrated as Independence Day in 1930, during the struggle against British rule; and since the Constitution of independent India took effect on January 26, 1950, it has been celebrated as Republic Day. For a full week, the capital is animated by festivity, tradition, and nostalgia, as participants are drawn there from the far-more-than-four corners of the country and into a grand design of the unity-in-diversity that India represents.

At night the great government buildings are outlined by electric lights, so that the domes and towers seem to be trimmed in diamonds against the dark sky. Old Delhi broods in its ancient skein of streets. New Delhi was planned and constructed in modern times, with broad tree-lined avenues, parks, and shopping arcades. In its maidans, massive new fountains spray fragile light-tinted clouds of water.

Early in the week, ceremonies began at the Red Fort, the great Moghul structure in the Old City, beyond Delhi Gate.

On the third day, Mr. R. called us suddenly to the roof terrace to see a rehearsal of the Fly Past, an Air Force performance which customarily follows the parade. From beyond the city roofs, formations of planes streaked across the sky, one after another, shining black and silver arrowheads trailing streamers of tri-colored smoke--green, saffron and white, the Indian national colors.

On the eve of Republic Day, the rain fell, rain for which the Punjab plain had waited in vain for many weeks. Our spirits fluctuated doubtfully, but by morning the weather had subsided to a fine cold drizzle, and at 7:00 we were in our places, bundled in sweaters and scarves and surrounded by thermos jars and hampers of food. We had brought newspapers and cushions and plastic sheets, plus two shower caps, to cover the wooden chairs and ourselves, and established a cozy colony. Altogether, including the children, the maid, and the driver, we were a party of eleven.

Republic Day is organized by the Indian Army with dazzling efficiency. New Delhi's wide streets were dense with automobiles from an early hour that morning, but each

car destined for the parade displayed a colored sticker according to which its route was dictated. Traffic moved smoothly and steadily under police direction. Thousands of chairs had been set up along the parade route in orderly lines. Blankets were spread (wisely at the last moment, so the rain would not soak them) at the roadside for extra seating space.

Gradually the multitude arrived to fill the chairs and stand packed in the aisles. Two Sikh gentlemen in European suits and dark red turbans sat in front of us. I think no turban can look more elegant than that of a well-groomed Sikh. Since he is forbidden by religious law ever to cut his hair, the turban must be wound high to accomodate a wealth of growth, and it is always balanced by a beard. Even in the Armed Forces, the Sikhs wear, with their meticulous regulation uniform, this turban, in an appropriate color. With our Sikh neighbors was a small boy whose uncut hair, not yet abundant, was worn in a tiny white cotton bun on top of his head. He smiled for a woman behind us who aimed a camera at him; then he collapsed with delight and embarrassment.

A few rows ahead, one family group stood up and gazed all around them, distinctive with their bright embroidered coats, thick black braids, and pink-cheeked Mongolian faces.

"Those Tibetans will have to sit down," Mrs. R. said severely.

Saris swept by, somehow never seeming to trail in the mud; women in Punjabi trouser suits; fur hats; Kashmiri shawls; acchkan tunics; smart checked British caps. There were Bengalis and Goanese and Uttar Pradeshis, Gujrathis and Madrasis and Rajasthanis; young foreigners in formless clothes and tangled hair; nylon parkas and long hair; goat skin vests from Kabul; Europeans, Americans, Chinese, Africans. The three hours did pass quickly, to my surprise.

"It's beginning now -- tell those people to sit down. The procession starts out from the President's Palace," Mrs. R. explained, and grinned. "You see when we were the colony of an Empire, we had Viceregal Lodge and Governor's House. But now we are Socialist, so we have the Presidential Palace.

"Then they will pass along this road in front of us-- this is Raj Path. We got rid of the Raj, but we're very proud of the King's Road."

We had a glimpse of an open carriage, and a very long black car as the President and the Prime Minister went by, followed by jeeps full of V.C.s. The Armed Forces were introduced by the Horse Cavalry, historically the most glamorous of militia, with fine horses and red-coated, gold-braided riders; and the camels, looking enormous and eternal in the mist. Then, after a drab length of Mechanized Column, the marching columns appeared in living color.

I had not seen a parade at all for years, and never one like the tapestry which India unrolls for her national pageant, woven of ancient and current history, of pre-history, of beauty and--rather unexpectedly--of discipline. Corps after corps marched, perfectly rhythmic and coordinated, fantastically vivid against the gray day.

Pipers and drummers with red punkah hats and plaid capes; High Altitude Warfare troops in white fur caps and suits, carrying skis; Navy blue and white--the Sikhs among them in white turbans like meringue; territorial army in green with white pom-poms on their caps; assorted veterans; olive-green with mango-orange pom-poms; olive green with a bright red stripe; a Police Band in red and gold with turbans and epaulets; khaki uniforms with cherry red turbans.

"How absurd," I said, "to use anything so beautiful for fighting. They should be kept just for parades." From time to time cheese and biscuits, and paper cups of coffee, passed down the row of our party, and sometimes on to the nearest neighbors if Mr. or Mrs. R. thought they looked cold or hungry.

White coats and burgundy caps with orange fringes; berets with conical ice-cream puffs; a woman's ambulance unit in white saris; sky-blue turbans; Montgomery caps; a division of green turbans followed by garnet berets; pipers in navy blue and white; Air Force in light blue with steel gray caps; girls in khaki with red; bottle green with burgundy; pipers in red coats and gold epaulets; plaid skirts; cadets, blue and white, in short pants; Girl Guides in blue and white with orange kerchiefs; Boy Scouts in blue kerchiefs, with berets or turbans.

After the dark-shirted Defense Employees had passed, the procession burst into grandeur with the Cultural Pageant. Caparisoned elephants bearing houdahs came first--elephants in purple, under pink parasols; elephants draped, head and back, with cloth of gold; elephants bejeweled and embroidered, with mahouts in turbans and gold sashes.

"Now that we are a Socialist state," Mrs. R. observed solemnly, "we live in humble style, scorning ostentation. Do you see the modest homespun on those elephants?"

"Oh come on," I said, "man does not live by rice alone and a little splendor is good for the soul."

"I enjoy it tremendously!" she agreed. "Pageantry is our middle name in the subcontinent. But we could do without all the humbug about the spiritual East and Socialist plain living."

Along Raj Path rolled the floats, wonderfully adorned. Fiery temple dancers with huge papier-mâché idols from Andhra Pradesh; a tableau of buffalo fighting from the hills of Assam; craftsmen fashioning pottery and date-leaf baskets against a mural of Haryana; climbers in orange suits clinging to a white mountain slope from Himachal Pradesh; a scene from Shalimar, the fabulous Moghul garden of Kashmir; a long boat from Minicoy Island with thirty-two oarsmen in white shirts and pink head scarves; a rather involved scene of tribal worship from Madhya Pradesh, with song, drum, and cymbal; a scene of pilgrimage from Maharashtra; booths and tea stalls and plumed heads of a Meghalaya village bazaar; Manipur festival dancers in orange skirts, gold aprons, and

great intricate crowns; a mud hut with white designs painted on its brown walls so that it looked exactly like a gingerbread house; girls in bright saris and clinking bangles, churning curd and spinning cotton; Rajasthani villagers crouched beside the village well, printing textiles with carved wooden blocks; a stilted bamboo hut with thatched roof from the tribal hills of Tripura; paddy harvesting in West Bengal. And after the cottage industry and village life came a pavilion completely covered--canopy, pillars and all--with flowers; Akbar the Great and his Court, in velvet and silk and jewels, lounged within, watching dancing girls.

"We've ousted the maharajahs too," my friend murmured. "We just keep them for parades."

Behind the floats marched the Delhi school children, in tidy ranks, neatly uniformed and carrying banners which ripped in silky fields over their heads; a field of gold succeeded by one of carnation pink; lime-colored shirts and red hair ribbons under maroon flags; a wave of burnt orange; green-and-white uniforms and rose-pink banners; blue-and-white with purple banners; turquoise banners; lemon-yellow; burgundy-and-white with pine-green banners.

The folk dancers were last of all, group after group in a generous variety of costume, reminding one of the range and assortment of people and tradition in India. Women in narrow striped lunghi, tube skirts, from Manipur and Nagaland on the eastern side of India; men in white gowns and turbans; men in tight jodhpur trousers with very full tunics; jewelled caps and ankle bells; long skirts with short blouses; turbans with walking shorts; drums, horns, and sticks. A treasury of legend and lore danced along Raj Path before us.

Some of the spectators began to stand up to get a better view, and those behind them, unable to see anything, followed suit. Some lifted children onto their shoulders, or stood on chairs to take photographs.

"Law and Order are breaking down," Mr. R. sighed.

"It's practically over anyway," Mrs. R. said. "Now we'll have our picnic while we wait for the crowd to leave." The sandwiches were brought out, with fruit and chocolate bars, and we ate while the audience around us moved toward the exit. Another family on the slope behind us pulled their chairs into a circle and opened covered, steaming dishes.

"What have they got?" I demanded.

"Something delicious--rice, curry, dal," replied Mrs. R., who really prefers a solid Indian hot meal at lunch time.

The children bought paper Indian flags; one flag quickly got broken, and amid the tears, howls, accusation and denial, someone cried "Look! Look!"

From somewhere, clusters of balloons had begun to rise, green and saffron and white, like the flags. Bouquets of colored bubbles floated toward the gruel-gray sky. We watched until they disappeared.

"It's too bad about the rain," Mrs. R. said. "They couldn't do the Fly Past, or the helicopters before the parade--they always fly over dressed as elephants or peacocks, and scatter flowers over everybody."

I hesitated to suggest the Folk Dances at the stadium next day, as everybody else in the house had seen them. But Mrs. R.'s brother said he wanted to go, and the children and I set out for the stadium with him while the others settled down to take naps. We ran into another and better-known traditional aspect, however, which the parade had not presented. In front of the huge stadium, tickets were dispensed from a single tin hut with one window. The children played in the flower bed and I watched the crowd while our escort suffered through a mob of people clustered at the booth, to find that all of the tickets had already been sold.

The week's celebration concludes with Beating Retreat, a military custom from an age when troops disengaged from battle at sundown and withdrew at the bugle's call into the fortress. In New Delhi, the scene is Vijoy Chawk, a great open square below the Presidential Palace. Spectators' chairs are banked on three sides of the square. We were on the front row--two hours early this time--facing directly up the Raj Path between the Secretariat buildings, toward the Palace. Banners flew in rows at the edge of the square, and near us, two soldiers raised the Indian flag on its pole. The children sat on blankets in front of us. Behind us a party of Russians chattered and rustled, busily photographing any important personage who came into view.

Atop the flat roofs of the Secretariats, a single sentinel stood at each corner. Camels, still as carved wood, formed a line along a wall on either side. At five o'clock, the fanfare rolled, and military bands appeared at the crest of the hill and moved toward us into the square. Framed by a symmetry of domes and columns, they seemed to be marching through fortress gates.

Pipes, horns, drums--the music swelled and sank and whirled in the square, while the players marched, flowed, and revolved in live patterns as graceful and disciplined

as classical ballet. They played tribal folk tunes, Indian martial music, ballads, naval marches, Scottish reels. Navy blue and white, Air Force gray, red coats with black hats, tartans; dark skins against clarion color.

It was an awesome demonstration of the depth of the union between the British Empire and the Indian nation. The product of that dramatic and troubled marriage is an organic kinship. One cannot stay long in the U. K. without being aware of India, from the curries in the cuisine to the Indian words imported and absorbed into the language. No spoken English is more beautiful than that of a cultured Indian. No Scot or Briton could seem more natural than the Indian martial bands executing the stirring cultural fusion of Beating Retreat.

They reached the Finale with a Lushai folk song, followed by drum beats, and then "Abide With Me". Silence, and from one tower and then another, an unseen bugle sounded, sweetly and sadly, on the cold air.

Drums rolled, the flag was lowered, and the quick march of retreat was struck up.

It was one of those moments when the spirit of a nation seems a personal, palpable entity. I have felt a similiar elation during an American presidential inauguration;

and a British friend once wrote to me that she and her husband, who considered themselves very republican and scornful of regal pretensions, were astonished to find themselves in tears at the historic ceremony of a real coronation.

Shadows filled Vijoy Chawk, and jewelled illumination lit the imposing buildings overlooking it. We gathered up our wraps and bags and shuffled toward the parking lot. Tomorrow the Army would fold the chairs and clear away the debris. Our house party would disperse. India, as any other nation, would turn to its chronic affairs--rebellious tribesmen, communal feuds, political trouble in Bengal, gross national product, conflict with Pakistan, and so on. But in that hour in New Delhi, the air held a vigorous taste of glory.

Short Pieces

by Pat Hill

Cyprus: Island of Immortality

patricia walton hill

p. o. box 32, Freetown,
Sierra Leone, W. Africa

CYPRUS: Island of Immortality

by Patricia Walton Hill

CYPRUS: Island of Immortalitty

The man at the Customs desk in Nicosia looked at us from under his thick black eyebrows, and at our luggage, and at us again. Having spent trying hours at similar counters throughout Asia, we resigned ourselves to the ordeal ahead. I sat down on a suitcase.

"You are coming to visit Cyprus?"

"Yes."

A grand sweep of his hand. "Go ahead."

Too stunned by this unquestioning reception to stammer our thanks, we moved on, and stepped out into the bright day. A young man from the King George Hotel in Famagusta was waiting with a car.

"It's hot here," he said, almost apologetically.

"It's perfect," we assured him.

As we drove away from the airport, it was very warm, as one would expect on the Meseoria plain in late June. It was summer, 1971.

But the air was soft, and our driver sang to himself. I remembered hearing that the climate of Cyprus is so superb that people never die there.

"Is it true that people in Cyprus live forever?"

"Oh yes, " the driver replied. "The undertakers here live on alms. Forever, of course."

It wasn't hard to believe.

Cyprus, like the Greek islands farther west, presents a dreamy peaceful aspect from the air, floating in the rich color of the Mediterranean. Homer records that Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty, was born here. This picture belies its distinctive character and long turbulent history. The earliest settlements found in Cyprus date back to the Neolithic period, and the island rose to importance with the discovery of copper about 2500 B.C. Eventually, as commerce developed, foreign trade and colonization arrived. Lying in the path of empire between East and West, the island was subjected to waves of conquest. Egyptian, Greek, Assyrian, Persian, Roman, Byzantine, Frankish, Venetian, Turkish, and British influence left their print upon Cyprus. It became an independent republic in 1960, amid fiery conflict between its Greek majority and Turkish minority.

From Nicosia, the capital, we headed toward Famagusta, the large eastern district, almost surrounded on three sides by the sea. For an hour we rode past golden-brown fields and little stone farmhouses. As we drew closer to Famagusta, orange groves and windmills sprang into view on all sides. The formidable walls and towers of the Old City loomed suddenly. Properly speaking, the name "Famagusta" refers either to the district or to the walled medieval city, and the modern city beside it is Varosha. In popular practice, though, the old and new towns were called Famagusta, and the former was labelled "The Old City". Red and white star-and-crescent flags fluttered above the turrets.

"That belongs to the Turks," our driver told us. "We Greek Cypriots aren't allowed to go in there."

We drove through the wide handsome streets of Varosha and came to our hotel on the bay. The King George Hotal looked fairer in life than on the glossy postcards, with its colors mellowed by Mediterranean sunshine and its shape irregular against the translucent blue sky. From the courtyard we climbed a short flight of steps to our room, cheerful with peasant color and soft-brown wood, and vines clinging to the shuttered windows.

"Famagusta" is derived from a Greek word meaning "hidden in the sand", and few beaches in the Mediterranean could rival the sands of Famagusta. The terrace of the King George looked directly down on a long golden beach, and water so clear that one might count the grains of sand if so inclined. By day the sun threw a glittering crystal net over the sea, and the beach was alive with sun-burned British tourists and richly tanned Scandanavians and striped beach umbrellas--and some brightly printed with "Cinzano" and "Campari". Glossy heads and flowered bathing caps dotted the water. By night, the lights from the hotels and cafes that lined the bay spangled the black water with gold. We liked to walk along the water's edge in the morning or late afternoon, picking our way among prostrate sun-worshippers, and watch the fishermen unload their slippery catches and spread their nets to dry. Anthony, who was nine years old, carefully gathered seashells and snails to decorate our room.

In the evenings after dinner, he and I wandered up and down the beach, the sand cool and silky under our bare feet, gazing out across the shimmering dark bay, or up at the lighted terraces and verandas where the holiday people relaxed and sipped wine or coffee.

We ate breakfast each morning on the King George terrace, when the breeze was fresh from the sea. We also ate either lunch or dinner there, and early each day I harassed the good-natured waiters for the prospective menus so that we could choose which meal to eat In and which Out. The food at the King George was excellent, but tended to be European rather than Cypriot. For our third meal of the day, we prowled the nearby streets for more indigenous dishes.

In Cyprus, in the summer, eating and drinking were outdoor sports. We ate wonderful garlic-grilled shrimp at a tiny sidewalk across the street, with a bottle of cold White Lady, a dry Cypriot wine. But most of the cafes in the hotel area seemed to specialize in fish and chips or pizza. One afternoon, when the hotel dinner looked especially promising, we asked a friendly taxi driver for a luncheon suggestion.

"You like seafood?"

"Yes."

"I know one place."

He drove us a few blocks to a square building whose sign read "The Silver Fish". He looked at it thoughtfully and said, "I better go in with you."

The room inside was plain, with a glass case at one end displaying fish and seafood. We had arrived at a time outside the usual lunch hour; there were no other customers. A very broad Greek mama came out of the kitchen, smiling nervously, followed by a young girl. Neither spoke any English; the taxi driver explained our presence and departed. Since there was no menu in English or Greek at that moment, I went with Mama to the fish display and we browsed, examining the shrimp and octopus and finally selecting one whole fresh fish. We groped through the wine cupboard in the same manner, coming up with a bottle of Keo Hock, an admirable dry white local product. She disappeared into the kitchen with the fish, and we sipped and waited, while Anthony played with family kitten.

I was very sorry that a language barrier prevented me from asking what she had done with that fish. ("Cooked it over coals," Anthony, having peeked into the kitchen, said succinctly.) Crisp and artfully seasoned, it was a rare treat. And while we fell upon the delectable flesh, Mama, beaming, fetched to our table a number of good, homely accessories: tomato and onion chipped in olive oil and lemon juice, wrinkled black olives, white Halveda cheese with chopped cucumber.

We ate there again, one evening, on the terrace, when there were other customers, and a menu, and an English-speaking son to relay our order. But it is the first luncheon, of course, that we remember so hungrily, for fun as well as food.

Because the local Greek taxi drivers could not enter the Old City--"though the Turks can come out whenever they like," one explained wryly--we rented a car one afternoon and set out to invade the fortress. The Turkish guards at the gate checked merely to see that we were foreigners and not Greek Cypriots. We passed through the fifty-foot walls into the antiquity of old Famagusta.

Here, in the narrow twisted streets, Turkish shopkeepers dozed among their wares--tobacco, neon-bright plastic bags, oranges. Dark-eyed children looked up incuriously at the strangers, and venerable monuments stood by impassively. Famagusta had been an insignificant seaport until the end of the Crusades, when merchants from Acre fled there to escape the Saracens. They were clever merchants, and the sleepy port quickly became one of the wealthiest cities in the Mediterranean. They were prodigious church-builders--tradition says that the city once had 365 churches in addition to the Cathedral, and almost one hundred of them are still there. The Church of Sts. Peter and Paul, with its Byzantine apse and windows and Gothic flying buttresses, was erected by the fabulously rich Lakhos family with the proceeds from a single shipment of grain to Syria. An historic grain deal scandal, perhaps?

This prosperity faded during the reign of the Venetians, who came to Cyprus in 1489 and devoted their heartiest efforts to building up a defense against the expected Turkish invasion. They built the massive Famagusta wall, which at some points is 27 feet thick. From the top of the wall, one could look over the harbor and see the ships anchored in the harbor below; Famagusta had become the island's busiest port.

The Turks came, of course, and after a fierce siege conquered, in 1571. The honorable terms of the surrender were broken promptly by Lala Mustapha Pasha, the Turkish leader, who had the Venetian officers hacked to pieces in his presence. The courageous Bragadino, who had led the defense forces, was flayed alive in the broad sunny square in front of the Gothic cathedral. The cathedral became the Lal Mustapha Pasha Mosque, the stained glass was taken out of the windows, and the pillars and walls were painted white, covering the murals.

From the Land Gate, where one crossed the bridge over the moat, to grim Othello's Tower in the Citadel overlooking the harbor, where Desdemona is said to have been murdered, Famagusta was an architectural and historical treasury. British rule eventually replaced Turkish rule, and when we saw the Old City, it seemed to have become again a fortress. The aura of immortality was almost tangible.

Presently we roused ourselves from our contentment in Varosha to drive to Kyrenia, the small northern coastal district whose chief town and harbor had attracted foreign settlers for many years. We crossed the plain to Nicosia, then turned north into the hills. Our road wound among olive and carob trees, and as the air cooled, through pine groves. We met little traffic, and much of the time seemed to be alone in the tranquillity. As we descended the coastal side of the road, villages began to appear, tucked among the hills and lemon groves. At last Kyrenia town spread before us, sprawled around the

gem of its harbor. The water shone in bands of sapphire, jade, and burgundy. The great square bulk of Kyrenia Castle squatted imposingly over the harbor to the east, and southwest of the town, St. Hilarion Castle rose on a pinnacle. The town was an old one, with skinny steep streets and gently weathered houses. It used to be popular among the British as an idyll for retirement and, as everywhere throughout the Empire, they brought their gardens with them. Thus you find tidy English flower and vegetable plots blooming in random corners of the blurred Mediterranean beauty of Kyrenia.

While we waited for the restaurants to prepare themselves for luncheon, we went down to the shore and waded among the rocks in the shallow water, peering with delight at the tiny marine life which abounded there. When the sun was very warm upon us, we wandered up to the hotel area that lined the harbor. At the Marabou, we chose a sidewalk table with a view of the dark wood-panelled dining room on one side and the sun-dazzled water, with its idly dancing boats, on the other. It was here that we first ate a grand mezze. Like a smorgasbord, the mezze can be modest, a few bites with drinks at the village tavern or a bountiful spread. This one covered our table with platters and bowls of assorted delicacies: piquantly marinated fish, tiny marrows stuffed with spiced meat, pastry filled with creamy cheese, thin slices of tender Cyprus ham and turkey, salty white feta cheese, sesame-scented tahini sauce, and my first taste of taramasalata, a blend of red carp roe with whipped potatoes, fresh cream,

lemon juice, olive oil, and spices. With this came good bread and a leather-bound jug of red table wine.

Wine-making has an ancient and noble history in Cyprus, as in Greece. Its virtues were sung by Greek poets, and its specialty, the sweet red dessert wine Commanderia, was later sent forth to Europe and the Near East. The original vines which produced Madiera, among other wines, are believed to have come from Cyprus, carried westward by Crusaders on their way home. The quality of Cypriot wines had deteriorated during the Turkish occupation; but in 1956 the British Government set a Commission to see what could be done to bring the industry up to modern standards. Organized cooperatives and companies were formed to improve the vineyards' product, and legislation was introduced to control the quality.

We enjoyed the light table wines, and ouzo, (the arak of Arab countries), the anise-flavored aperitif which turns cloud-white when water is added. (The retsina wine popular among Greeks, however, is usually an acquired taste for foreigners--if they persist.)

Some respectable brandies were produced locally, too. George, in the Terrace Bar at the King George, was especially proud of his brandy sours. Somehow we never got around to the Filfar, though we had been assured that no visitor should fail to taste the orange liqueur of Cyprus.

A great bonus for the gourmet, or anybody else, was Cypriot fruit. Fat sweet grapes from the Troodas hills, tart crisp apples,

great golden lemons, luscious pink melon, crimson cherries, glowing apricots, tender pears, all heavy with juice and flavor--we kept the fruit bowl in our room lavishly stocked from the market.

The shops of Varosha offered the predictable dreary souvenirs, and a great quantity of imported Indian brass, Persian rugs, African carvings, and Egyptian camel skin lamps. Some of the imports were quite nice, but one had to search to find distinctively Cypriot articles of good quality. Traditional Cypriot handicrafts have included some superb work, but their quantity had shrunk grievously. Wood-carving was almost extinct, and a visit to the Cyprus Museum in Nicosia would illustrate the sadness of its loss. Authentic hand-looming, pottery, and embroidery, once proud features of Cypriot life, were declining. Still, one could find delicate Lefkara white needle embroideries and laces, coarse red clay pottery, some attractive silks and cottons, and occasionally an interesting painting. You could also find elegant ready-made clothes and skilled tailorsl the urbane Cypriot was very chic.

A few days before we left, we drove again through the Kyrenia mountain range to the north coast, this time with Gerry Constantinou of the Esperia real estate agency. On the way back to Famagusta, in the late afternoon, we stopped at a village in the hills, and Gerry took us to the local coffee house. We sat at a wooden table that wobbled on the hard dirt floor of the veranda, drank beer, and watched the honey-colored light spill over the mountain peaks and the Orthodox

Church tower beyond the thatched roofs. From shops and street, a few men gathered, reserved but interested, to study us and to gossip in Greek with our host. The village tailor emerged from his door across the street, took the chair next to me, and began to speak in hesitant English. He assumed that we came from England, and told us of the man who had come to his village from there and married his daughter and taken her away to his own country. Gerry discussed the purchase of a cow, whose owner ambled off to fetch the beast for inspection.

"And everybody lives forever in Cyprus?" we aked again idly.

The answer seemed simple. "Why not?"

Why not indeed? And if one is going to live forever, we thought, where else?

Since then, history has repeated its violence on Cyprus. The country's face has been altered by forcibly displaced features. What has become of its character we don't know. We have not gone back as we planned, to drive around the island, to visit its south and west, to see again the terrace of the King George and the "Silver Fish" lady and the Constantinous and the harbor of Kyrenia.

We saw it during the period after British rule and the Cyprus of Lawrence Durrell's Bitter Lemons, and before it was struck and torn once more by the conflict of national powers from across the jewel-colored Mediterranean waters. We think of it often, and are grateful to have seen it as it was then; and we hope for its immortality, one way or another.

Short Pieces

by Pat Hill

Forsaking Saigon

FORSAKING SAIGON

by

Patricia Walton Hill

c/o R. Jorgensen Assoc. Inc. (UNDP)

P. O. 32

Freetown, Sierra Leone, W. Africa

More than a year has passed since we left Saigon in April, 1975, my husband and our 13-year-old son and I, all American civilians.

To most of the world, "Viet Nam" means only a bitter battleground, physical, ideological and emotional. So much has been said and written--often too much by too many who knew too little--about the political passions and military visions of the war era. When mass humanity makes the headlines, individual humanity is likely to be forgotten. Now it seems time to probe past the septic scars and recall, for the record, the life and the people with whom we shared those final months before the Communist gate shut on Viet Nam.

When we were there, the American troops had gone, but the hostilities sputtered on like an angry fuse. War still permeated the fabric of the society with its persistent stain and stench. Everyone was accustomed to such minor routines as carrying identification cards and emergency telephone numbers; twelve o'clock curfew; keeping car windows rolled up as a precaution against random bombs. Anthony, our son, had to notify us when he moved from one compound to another in case we should have to contact him in a hurry. Wartime measures were a well-conditioned reflex.

Inside the high walls of our private compound, the air was tropically soft and tranquil; the barbed wire that topped the great metal gate in front remarked that it was, for all of us within, more or less a refuge.

Anh, our maid, was a sturdy young woman of Cambodian decent. She had been living with her brother, a policeman, and his wife Lam (our cook) and their seven children. She moved into our servants' quarters, where she turned her little whitewashed room into a cheery spot of home with a bright bedcover and picture calendar, and the radio which was a souvenir from a former American-family employer. We all loved Anh. Anthony, with precocious gallantry, helped her occasionally with her work. For a while he let her take him to school on her Honda, heedless of his schoolmates' teasing. Even the tabby kitten followed her, up and down, in and out, of the high old colonial villa.

Huong was a matronly widow in full pajamas and jade earrings, who had been living with a brother and his family before she came to tend our garden and keep a watchful eye out for intruders. She moved into her own room on our compound energetically, with pots, pans, bed, and a wire brush that meant business. When her room and kitchen were purified by scrubbing and disinfectant, she converted her armoire into a small Buddhist altar. Huong was a religious woman, and cleanliness was not so much next to godliness as identical with it. She cooked her own native dishes and sometimes invited me to lunch with her, sitting on her spotless floor to eat spicy fish heads and boiled rice and incendiary pickles. She frowned darkly at every speck of dirt as she worked, and when Anthony sneaked up behind and shouted to frighten her, she dropped the brush, threw up both hands, then laughed breathlessly. Between her cleaning weaponry and her cleaver, we felt our fortress well defended.

Lam, Anh's sister-in-law, was shy. She moved like a modest shadow, shuttling barefoot between the charcoal burners in the kitchen and the refrigerator in the dining room. After our dinner each night, she went home to her flourishing family, where she also spent her Sundays.

Huong's day of rest was Sunday, too, when she went to her pagoda and socialized among her friends.

When I spoke to Anh about her day off, she said, "I don't want a day off, Mrs. Hill. I have no place to go; I like to stay here. Then when I need some time to go see friends or to shop or something, I can just ask you." So that was how we did it.

In the narrow alley outside our compound, children played and squealed, sometimes ringing our bell at the massive gate to tease Huong, who pattered out to scold them through the security peephole. At the tables and stalls strung along the rough pavement, steady commerce went on in tea, noodles, soft drinks, cigarettes, soups, and the long crisp loaves of les baguettes, an enduring French contribution to Saigon's fare. Halfway up the alley, behind a red-and-yellow pagoda gate, an American girl taught in a kindergarten; we could hear the Vietnamese children sing-songing their lessons as we passed.

The city was punctuated matter-of-factly with sand-bags, barbed wire, soldiers in jungle camouflage suits, and refugee camps. On the street outside my husband's office, black market liquor, toasters, irons and watches were displayed for sale so candidly that "murky market" might have described it better. The elegant little shops downtown sold silk kimonas, screens and boxes inlaid with mother-of-pearl, delicate carvings and silver jewelry. The rumble of artillery on the city outskirts was a familiar background noise.

A less ordinary night sound was that of male voices in our courtyard at two a.m. Robbers? Viet Cong? I ran downstairs to see. One man in uniform was talking to Anh and Huong, who stood calm and grave in their robes. Another man was flinging open the doors of kitchens and servants' rooms to peer inside.

"Vietnamese police," Anh told me softly.

Uneasiness fermented quickly into indignation. I asked for their ID cards, and warned the women for opening the gate to strangers without first calling me or my husband. Rather to my surprise and relief, the second man stopped banging doors and they both politely showed me their identification. My speech sank to a murmur, with a little admonition about summoning householders before alarming staff--though how they could have started their search by rousing us on the second floor I don't know, except by entering via rooftops and balconies, and <u>that</u> would have been alarming indeed. Anyway, we thanked each other and they went away nicely.

"What were they looking for here at this hour?" By this time I was almost wide awake.

"Viet Cong," said Anh, and went back to bed.

Later I asked myself what valiant and decisive action I might have taken had the midnight visitors turned out to be bandits of some sort. No answer.

Where did the end actually begin? When did the conflict change from chronic to acute?

At Christmas time, 1974, life was rippling along as usual. We tied some bright baubles on the potted palms, tied tinsel around the kitten's neck, and played carols on the cassette. Our amiable landlord brought a Lucky Plant from his compound to plant in our front garden, where it auspiciously burst into red and yellow blossom. Our big glazed pots held plants with huge yellow-freckled green leaves. "We call that one the Long Life Plant," Anh said.

Bright, good-natured, and tri-lingual (after three generations in Viet Nam, her family still spoke Cambodian at home), Anh tutored us patiently in local folkways. Once I asked her why she didn't take a secretarial course and get an office job, with a higher salary and regular hours.

"I like working in homes better," she said thoughtfully, fastening her long hair back with a silver clip. Certainly in our house she demonstrated a warm feeling for intelligent domesticity and family life. "I will never marry, Mrs. Hill," she went on. "You know, I am twenty-five years old, and since I was born we have always had war. Always. My older sister got married, her husband went into the army and was killed and left her with five children to take care of. My girl friends, all the same. I'm not going to do that."

We celebrated our New Year's Eve with a cozy Chinese fire pot at home: homemade chicken broth fragrant with fresh ginger and coriander, shrimp and sliced chicken, black mushrooms and cabbage. Afterwards we met some friends for a drink, before we all hurried home in time for our curfew. 1975 was with us, and still no discernible sign of its portent.

It was time to prepare for Tet, the local New Year. Memories of the Tet Offensive of 1968 prickled more sharply in Saigon's collective mind. There were rumors of fresh military activity in the north, and lips were pursed and brows wrinkled over them. Yet the flower stalls on Nguyen We were filled with glorious bloom, and customers ate lustily at the French and Chinese restaurants, the corner soup stands, the milk bars and pizza parlors. In our rear garden, laced with sun and shadow, Huong scrubbed the tiny fish pond under the great tree until Ralph feared the fish would die of sanitation. She picked all the leaves from the Lucky Plant so they would burst out afresh in time for Tet. (They didn't, and perhaps that should have been a clue for us.) If we could get through Tet without hordes swooping down from the north, the reasoning ran, the Year of the Cat augured well. (It did occur to me that it must be the same feline year for the folks up north too.)

The first week in January, Mr. Nguyen, my husband's official interpreter and guide, moved with his family from their suburban home into his brother's vacant villa in the city. The Viet Cong had become more threatening in their neighborhood lately, and their household was a high-ranking target. Nguyen was a spirited and devoutly Catholic native of Hanoi, who had led a large group of refugees south when Dien Bien Phu fell. He had lived in Saigon since then, and much of his career had been spent in active opposition to the Viet Cong. Twice a week he accompanied Ralph when they drove through a "semi-combat area" to My Tho to conduct training programs. ("Where," Ralph said drily, "we are probably teaching the V. C. how to maintain these roads.")

His plump, doe-eyed wife was as quiet as he was voluble. Their grown sons were in the army, but two lively teen-age daughters lived with them. The elder daughter, Mai Chinh, told me one day that they would like to make a Vietnamese dinner for us. "We will have to use your kitchen as we have nothing to work with where we are staying." So on Sunday afternoon, Mme. and Mlle. purred into our compound with a bulging market bag on their Honda, took off their conical hats, and set to work. A chicken simmered for the soup; snail shells were cleaned carefully, and the heavy cleaver chopped in quick staccato rhythm.

At seven, Mr. N. and Mai Anh, the younger daughter, arrived, and we gathered at the table. Mrs. N., who spoke no English, gazed on with mild pleasure while everybody else chattered. There were bowls of rich broth with white meat and beanstarch noodles; escargots stuffed with pork, garlic and lemon; fish steamed with nuoc mam, the ubiquitous fermented fish sauce. Nothing about the feast was more memorable, though, than the élan of a family abruptly whisked from their home to camp in an empty house, with sons in the army and danger at the door. Here, I reflected, maybe dislocation had been a way of life for so long that it lacked the element of surprise.

A few days later, another provincial capital fell to Communist assault. The President declared three days' mourning, and angry demonstrators churned in the street to protest the loss.

In mid-January, the Nguyen sisters came to me with a small tape recorder. I was to read aloud their English lesson so they could practice with the tape. Mai Anh listened in attentive silence while Mai Chinh capably pushed buttons and directed the performance. Promptly at the end of the allotted time, they mounted the Honda and zoomed off to their English classes at the Vietnamese American Association. I felt that in their place I would have been less diligent in view of the uncertain future of the English language in Saigon. Later events proved their approach cannier and more far-sighted than mine.

And the Nguyens came to bring us a box of fragile and delectable pastry, and to pray for good luck and peace in the coming year. Spirits were high.

The happy seasoned was shortened, and the army kept on alert. "It used to be a long holiday," Anh said, "but since 1968, there isn't enough time...."

In February I fell into the clutches of flu. At least, the doctor at the American mission hospital said it was a virus and recommended rest. But our friend the doctor of Chinese medicine came and took my pulse at two separate points on my forearm--"one for the heart and one for the liver"--and told Anh, our translator, that I read and think too much. After that, he prepared and sent over twice a day a glass of thick black brew, and Anh watched with a wicked grin while I drank it. He also phoned daily to ask her if I was talking my medicine, and whether the patient was improving. But later he looked at my palm and laughed, his eyes crinkling pleasantly. Not to worry, he said, I have a long life line.

During my convalescence, Anh told me that she had taken her savings of about eight years and bought a small house for her mother, near her brother's home in Saigon.

"I could stay there with her--unless I go to America with you." (We had begun to talk about that, for she wanted very

And the Nguyens came to bring us a box of fragile, delectable pastry, and to pray for good luck and peace in the new year. The season had passed happily. We all enjoyed our last hour of euphoria in Saigon.

In February I was felled by what we thought was flu. Our friend the Chinese-medicine doctor, though, took my pulse at wrist and elbow, and pronounced that I read and think too much. Twice a day he sent a freshly-made black brew, and Anh watched with her wicked full-lipped grin while I drank it. He also phoned daily to ask her if I was taking my medicine, and whether the patient was improving. Later he looked at my palm, and his eyes crinkled merrily. Not to worry, he said, I have a long life line.

During my convalescence, Anh told me that she had taken her savings of about eight years and bought a small house for her mother, near her brother's home in Saigon.

"I could stay there with her--unless I go to America with you." We had already begun to talk about that, for she wanted very much to come with us, to leave Viet Nam and the war and find another kind of life. "Too many Viet Cong in her village," she went on. "They move into the houses and the people have to live out in the field. They cook and sleep there. It's very hard for old people and little kids."

"Would your mother stay in the city then?"

"I don't know. We have to talk to her." She shrugged and spread her hands with a slight sigh. I was of tangled emotions, rather comforted at her expression of faith in the security of Saigon, but rather fearful that she might have wasted her money.

By the time I was up and aware again, the atmosphere had darkened with mind-spinning speed. The provinces were falling like autumn leaves. Hue, Da Nang, Da Lat, the Highlands....Refugees arriving by boatloads at Cam Ranh Bay were pouring into Saigon's already swollen camps.

Forced to realize that this was no border skirmish, we kept saying, "If the rains come in time, they might stop till next year, slow down and consolidate their gains. Another year could give the South time...." In offices and homes and clubs, there were tentative questions about the evacuation of foreign women and children. The American Embassy kept a firm official silence on the subject.

The U.S. Congress had refused further aid to South Viet Nam. Washington probably rang with phrases like "cutting losses" and "no use throwing good money after bad" and "public opinion." From where we sat, comments like "pulling the rug from under" and "eviction without notice" were more audible. Anyway, Congress had clearly washed its hands of the whole affair, and the sands of time were running away.

Our landlord had been trying for weeks to get passports and visas for his wife and daughter to visit another daughter in the States. At last they came to say goodbye to us, smiling dutifully, but not with their eyes; and they left the next day.

From all over the Far East, foreign correspondents were collecting in Saigon. We sat with a group of them early one evening on the terrace of the Continental Palace Hotel, another relic of French colonial days. Listening to them exchanged bulletins from their various sources and forays, I blinked at the unreality of it all. The immediate scene was unchanged. The terrace ambience still suggested parasols and aperitifs as the soft-footed waiters passed the drinks. As always, shrill urchins hawked newspapers and used paperbacks and plastic gadgets on the sidewalk beside the railing, and ladies of the evening, with slit skirts and painted eyes, strolled past. City traffic smoked and choked through its usual delirious patterns and paces.

In spite of my unwillingness to suspend disbelief, the melancholy pervaded our compound. Huong, passing the grilled window above my desk, peeped in one morning and said, "Madame not happy." I had to admit it.

"Et vous, Madame?" I asked, and she scowled and shook her head sadly.

We were trying feverishly to find some way to get the necessary permits and papers to take Anh with us if we had to go. This was before the force of volcanic exodus in the final few days swept so many formalities out of the way. I brought myself grudgingly to ask her, "What will you do, Anh-san, if the Communists take Saigon?"

Her answer was ready. "I will put on peasant clothes like my mother and go to her farm and work there." We didn't talk about her brother, Lam's husband. Tales had reached us all of the mass executions of South Vietnamese policemen and government in the fallen northern provinces. The phrase "blood bath" kept surfacing like an ugly bubble. I thought of an anguished letter from a local employee in my husband's office, begging that his job be looked after while he went to a northern town to try to find his children, even if only to bury them decently.

"Don't worry about me, Mrs. Hill," Anh said kindly. "You won't be able to get me out. Forget it and don't worry. I'll take the kitten with me too."

This must have been when the numbness began to take hold, that emotional insulation which lets us plod through crises without quite dissolving. Memories of the days that followed are like patches of colored lights against a fog.

With the surge of refugees came countless homeless children. An American agency kept an orphanage a few streets away, and in the last week of March, guided through the back streets by Huong, I found my way there. In its walled courtyard, young children and infants swarmed everywhere, playing or crying or staring blankly, under the supervision of several Vietnamese women. We were shown to the little office where a young man labored over stacks of paper forms.

Still squinting from the strong sunlight and awed by the wilderness of waifs through which we had picked our way, I asked if there was anything we could do to help. Food, time, clothing...? Mr. Victor tried to focus on us through his preoccupation. He would tell Mrs. Theissen when she came in, he said. Carol Theissen, we had heard, was an American woman who had come to Saigon months before to work among Vietnamese children, and this orphanage was her station. She would get in touch with us, he promised, and we went home, heavy with futility.

Then there were three Catholic sisters who had left their orphanage in the north, shepherding all their charges with them, to trek south ahead of Communist troops. They had been overtaken by Viet Cong, and the sisters separated from the children and held captive for a week or so. They were released, apparently because they proved to be not Yankees but Canadians. We never heard what became of the children.

Business was brisk now among the vendors and objets d'arts shops, and packers and shippers. "Evacuation" was still an underground word; the American Embassy did not want to alarm the local population. But foreign wives and children were being sent on holiday at an interesting rate to Bangkok, Ankara, Honolulu, Hong Kong, etc. Reports had it that quite a number of Chinese residents of Cholon were quietly going abroad. The Vietnamese held no fondness at best for the Chinese, who had once conquered and ruled them. The many successful capitalists among Cholon's entrepreneurs could hardly hope for agreeable accomodation with a V.N. Communist regime. Our local curfew fell earlier and earlier.

Anh's mother came to visit the first of April. Though she certainly didn't look ancient, her dark hair was crisply cropped in the traditional fashion of Cambodian old women. She was small and wiry in her black trousers and collarless jacket, and she gave us, with Anh's translation, the news from the village. She lived in "disputed territory", which meant that the RNVP troops and the Viet Cong took turns trying to plunder her farm. Ms. Lam, however, the durable mother of ten children, was stubborn. When a V.C. lad grabbed her chicken, she grabbed it back, and he offered to kill her if she didn't give it up. She told him to kill then, it didn't matter, she was old; but she damn well wasn't going to let him stroll off lightly with her chicken. After he went away

chickenless, an RNVP soldier arrived, covetous of the fowl. He wore a strip of concealing tape over the identification tag on his jacket, as was the custom when bent on burglary. She ripped off the tape and promised to report him to his commanding officer if he didn't unhand her feathered friend. He unhanded. The poultry, we surmised, must be pretty tough too in that corner of the paddy field.

Ralph asked Anh to bring a flower bouquet from the market for us to give to her mother. But no; flowers had always come from up country, and now there were none in the market. Her family tried to coax the mother to stay on in the house Anh had bought for her, but she would not hear of it, and went back to mount her home guard over field and flocks.

Next Ralph announced that he had tickets for Anthony and me the following week to Salt Lake City. I protested. It was an echo of the family debate before Anthony and I were evacuated from Dacca during the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war, and the decision that in case of a hasty last-minute withdrawal, men could move faster without dependents.

So Anh and I began to pack for Anthony and me. There wasn't much we could talk about, with our dry throats and flickering thoughts.

"If I can come back, I will," I said, and she nodded. But I knew that if Ralph had glimpsed any silver lining in the cloudy prospect, we might have gone to Bangkok to wait out the storm.

Two days before we left, Carol Thiessen came to see me. She looked younger than I had somehow expected, but the strain of the last weeks was impressed on her face. Resolution shone through exhaustion in her eyes.

"Victor told me you came," she said. "And if you can--spare a little time--just to help watch the children--there are so many, and they keep coming, and some of them are sick--"

Her voice crackled with fatigue and desperation. And I had to tell her that I was quitting the scene. I persuaded her to pause for a cup of tea.

She talked about the children. Some were orphans in the strict literal sense--both parents dead. Others had one or two parents who were homeless, landless, jobless, and hopeless, with no means to take care of their children. A few were "prospective orphans", brought to her by parents who, because of politics or personal prosperity, had reason to believe themselves likely to be eliminated when the Communists began to purge Saigon, and wanted the foreigners to save their children. All of them were helplessly dependent, all had suffered the shock of displacement; and the burden of their physical care, let alone providing comfort and reassurance, was staggering. I mentioned Anh and Huong, both unattached and highly recommended, in the hope that they might all help each other as needs arose.

She talked little about herself. Her volunteer work was, for her, the fulfillment of a long dream, and she was totally immersed. "I'll stay anyway, no matter what happens," she said, tightening her lips. "I can't leave these kids."

She was to join us for dinner the next evening--and I intended to remind her of Anh and Huong--but she didn't appear. Later, when I was in the States, a note came from her, explaining the emergency that had kept her away. Ralph, she added gratefully, had come to visit her the following week with a box of provisions--excitingly including a bottle of ketchup. The only return address she gave was in Saigon, and by that time I couldn't answer.

The morning before we left Saigon, Anh woke me urgently. "Mrs. Hill, somebody just bombed the President's palace!"

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. "Who did that?"

"I don't know. It didn't hit the palace, just the gardens. Some people killed, I think." Even Anh, the determinedly unflappably calm, looked concerned.

Oh God, I thought, what now? Well, blanket curfew, for one thing. Workers scurrying frantically home from their shops and offices lest they be stranded there indefinitely. No chance for farewell visits, but I was relieved about that. There was enough pain of parting within my own compound.

Wednesday morning we were packed and waiting. My face felt as if stricken by novocaine. Anh's brother (Lam's husband) came to say goodbye. He spoke no English; we had to resort to my limited French. A good-looking, gentle young man. I remembered his delightful smile, but it had already been erased. I regretted our departure: he regretted too. My husband would be here for some days anyway, I said. We agreed that Anh should go to her mother after that. "Et vous?" I asked reluctantly. "If les Communistes come?"

He quietly drew a finger across his throat. He sat soldier-straight, and his face, except for the grave dark eyes, was expressionless.

"Non." I tried to sound assured. "If they have Saigon, they will not be so hard. Si le guerre finis...."

He shrugged. "In every town, they kill those who worked for this government. Especially police and soldiers."

"They can't kill everybody," I argued. "You can wear farmer's clothes and go with Anh and how will they know?"

A corner of his mouth quirked grimly. "They have lists. They know." Of course; the Viet Cong had always been everywhere throughout the South. It was a common understanding that Saigon was their holiday resort.

When he had gone, I sat beside the luggage until the car came for us. Our three good souls came to the gate to see us off. None of us could summon a smile, only look at each other in dumb misery.

In the airport lounge, a friend pointed out to me a tall well-groomed woman who was murmuring farewells here and there. "That's Dorothy Stark," my friend said. "She and her husband are leaving today. Their daughter was killed in the Babylift crash. Dr. Stark was on the flight too--they both volunteered to accompany the kids--but he lived through it."

The well-publicized Air Babylift disaster, a few days before; that first major effort to fly the Vietnamese infants and children to a haven. And Miss Stark, the girl in her twenties who had taught the kindergarten near our villa on Ky Dong, had died when the plane crashed on takeoff.

We didn't see the Starks again until we flew out of Hong Kong after a few hours' unrestful sleep. The night across the Pacific from the Orient to America's West Coast is very long. Anthony slept. I sat beside Dorothy and we sipped Scotch and soda and talked. Her husband had left a private medical practice a dozen years ago for volunteer work among the Vietnamese. People do not easily break away from the emotional attachments of long service, and they had intended to stay on as long as possible; but after their daughter's death, the sponsoring agency insisted that they leave. Shock and grief do impose their limits on minds and bodies.

"She was such a lovely girl, such a fine person," the husky, deliberately controlled voice told me. "My husband kept looking for her in the wreckage...." We discussed other things too, but I don't remember them. She broke off occasionally to check on the young Vietnamese boy they were bringing to America with them. "His parents are good friends of ours, and they are afraid of what will happen to them. He'll stay with us until we can find out."

I had gone back down the aisle to look in on Anthony when Dr. Stark joined me. "She's asleep now," he said, with the taut white-lipped grin that strives to hold suffering within bearable bounds. "She hasn't slept since it happened." He brought drinks for us, and we sat sharing the cheerless night. He said, "I assigned my daughter to ride in the compartment with the babies, and I stayed with the older ones because they were more disturbed. She was in the section that broke off and burned. She loved all those kids, you see. She was a wonderful girl." Presently his wife woke up and he went to her. Each of them was sustained by holding up for the other's sake.

It was Dorothy who told me about the elderly little Canadian nun on our flight. She was of the same Order as those sisters who had tried to bring their flock of children to Saigon from a captured province. The other sisters had stayed on in Viet Nam, but had decided that she, being frail,

should return to Canada. I don't think she had been out of Asia for some time, and somehow in the confusion she had departed with no money except Vietnamese piastres. She seemed dazed about the odd inability to proceed on her journey with these funds. We tucked into her treasury enough U.S. dollars to see her to the nearest convent.

After we had passed through the Customs rites in Seattle, the passengers from our flight went their separate ways. Anthony and I flew south to Salt Lake City. We had been there for several days before my stunned sensibilities began to recover; one of the first sharp reactions was disgust.

Our return from Saigon had been reported in the Salt Lake Tribune. The next day I had a phone call from a woman who, without introducing herself, demanded to know what I thought about all those Vietnamese children being brought here. Very good, I said.

"Well I think it's just terrible! Why don't we take care of our own poor and needy first? We've got plenty of 'em in this country!" (I wondered for an instant how she would vote on issues like social welfare and free clinics.) "Why don't they adopt American babies instead?"

I explained that that wasn't always easy, politely restraining myself from asking what business it was of hers anyway. Besides, it was unlikely that the number of children being imported would have much effect on our social problems. After a second's hesitation, she asked, "Well--aren't some of them half-black?"

I gaped blankly at the telephone before I said "Babies are babies." "I can see we don't agree," she snapped, and hung up. Not a moment too soon, either. Next she'd have been asking me if the babies were Communists or Republicans.

The horrid realization grew that this was not just an isolated crank. Thrilled new mothers proudly leading their oriental children through streets and shops were accosted and insulted by replicas of my anonymous caller. Newspapers published disturbing distortions. Some of the children, they wrote, were not orphans at all, but had living parents. Some, it was noted censoriously, were actually well-dressed. One madly irresponsible item quoted a young refugee as claiming that a nun had snatched her off the street and forced her to be evacuated.

I thought of those people, the few I had met and the countless I hadn't, taxing their energies and resources unsparingly on rescue missions; and of the terrified parents who gave up custody of their children because they themselves expected to be dead soon; and of the scared bewildered children; and of the American families who waited to welcome them; and I felt sick.

There were, too, the laments over the cruelty of depriving the little ones of their hereditary culture and the advantages of growing up in a glorious liberated Viet Nam. John Birchers and the radical left sang in different keys, but the same hostile chorus.

The splashes of venom, though, seemed to be washed out in the general tide of kindliness with which so many American communities received the refugees. When whole families began to arrive, there was understandable alarm in areas where a high unemployment rate roused resentment against possible new competition in the labor market. But even this dissipated as the refugees found sponsors and jobs at scattered points around the country.

I had another, tragic call from a young man who had just been notified by the State Department that both his parents had died as escorts on the Babylift plane crash. "We didn't know they were planning to take the flight," he said, as if he could not quite believe it. He wondered if I might know any details. I didn't, and could only give him the name and phone number of somebody who probably did.

This reminded me of the thousands of American families who had lost sons or husbands in Viet Nam, and veterans whose lives had been disrupted or crippled by that war. Now they had to hear the chant, daily and insistently, "It was all in vain", with more than a hint of "We told you so." As events vindicated the popular anti-war sentiment, these victims were left coldly comfortless. And the fringe group, more vocal than cerebral, who were not really anti-war but merely pro-Ho, gloated gleefully.

More waiting, watching newscasts, reading every related news item. My husband came on April twenty-eighth. His first words on arrival: "I never want to go through that again. Saying goodbye to the servants, and our office staff. Never." He had tried to get documents that would let him bring Anh, but there were complications, and not enough time.

Shortly before Ralph was sent to Bangkok, the last week in April, he was summoned to a meeting in which the Americans were told it was time for them to leave. But, they were warned, they mustn't let the Vietnamese employees know.

"And all the time, of course," he told me miserably, "they were huddled outside the door trying to see and hear what was going on. And after the meeting one of our girls came to me and asked, 'Are you leaving, Mr. Hill?'"

He was quiet for a few minutes before he described his farewell at our villa. "I called Anh aside and told her I had to leave. She just asked 'When?' And I said, 'Two hours.'" He looked away, and finally added, "That's when she started to cry."

In those last days there was never enough time.

Like interested spectators everywhere, we saw and read of the last panic, the frenzy to escape, before the triumphant troups moved in. From halfway around the world, we watched the gulp that swallowed South Viet Nam.

I have sometimes pondered during the last year why so many of us--foreign and Vietnamese--were so tardy in foreseeing the quick final conquest. The Thieu government's decision to pull out of the Highlands was readily recognized in Saigon circles as an appalling mistake. Certainly we were aware that the U.S. Congressional denial of further support for the South could only, inevitably, enervate their morale and embolden the North. We heard even then that the North Vietnamese were as astonished as we were by the swift disintegration of the southern forces.

In spite of all this, hope persisted. Maybe we were misled by the unruffled surface of Saigon which had become habitual over the traumatic years. Possibly we all gave each other a false sense of security by keeping up a cool front. Anyway, the delayed reactions undoubtedly contributed to the disarray of the terminal evacuation process. For the Vietnamese who had worked for and with Americans during the past decade, it must have been incredible that their allies would abandon them. Some effort was made to help those who were most seriously in peril to seek asylum, but it was not notably adroit. Some were assisted by individual Americans. Too much of the refugee roll was based indiscriminately on luck and pluck.

Mr. Nguyen and his wife and two daughters could not reach the appointed evacuation site through the chaotic crowds. The city was shuddering with bomb blasts on April

twenty-ninth when his son firmly put the four of them on a boat headed down the Saigon River. Nineteen days later they reached Guam, from where Mr. N. wrote: "I learn more people feeling in human kind--I like people--I learn from them very much." We had left for Africa before they reached the mainland, but his letters have made a fascinating chronicle. Now they are in Pennsylvania, where Mr. N. is pouring his irrepressible enthusiasm into the orientation and education of a multitude of other refugees, sponsored by a local church. The girls are working and studying, and "Mme. Do is housewife and going to class to learn English and meet people."

It was April twenty-ninth too, while shells exploded around the airfield, that our Chinese-medicine doctor was helped hastily aboard a plane to take him to join his wife and daughters in Michigan. His letters indicate that he is resuming his practice in Chinese medicine, horoscopy and palmistry, and earnestly studying English.

Like their innumerable counterparts all over the globe, most of the Vietnamese refugees had to leave not only their property but fragments of their families as well. They must depend upon their skills, their fortitude, and the good will of their neighbors in the New World.

We do not have high hopes of hearing again from those who stayed behind. We look at our photo of Anh in her silk ao-dai, fresh and radiant on the festival of Tet; it summons

up a mental picture of her in a dark cotton jacket laboring in the rice fields of a ten-family solidarity cell. (I read that the new rulers had forbidden any woman to work as a maid because it was "degrading". Even for Communists, that seems dreadfully snobbish. Are women degraded, then, when they clean and cook for their families? Does General Dung wash his own underwear to spare his subordinates the degradation?)

We wonder if Anh will marry now that the war is over, and have a home of her own. Possibly in the city house she bought for her mother, if she is allowed to leave the farm. And Huong--will she live out her days as a dependent in her brother's crowded quarters? Not likely. Will she be assigned to head clean-up squads (in which case woe betide the untidy, regardless of rank); or harvest paddy; or work in the fisheries? Can she still worship at her beloved pagoda? We also read that all policemen had been dismissed, to be replaced by army personnel. Dismissed? Or dispatched? Well, one doesn't believe everything one reads, least of all the news scraps tossed forth from a closed society. We can only pray that Lam's husband merely lost his job, and ask ourselves what has become of Lam and the children in any case.

Those delightful, clever ones we remember--will they laugh or weep (privately, of course, for they are not foolish) over the content of their "re-education courses"? Or both?

The questions simmer on in the cauldron of the mind. Obviously the post-war reports from Viet Nam have thus far been more soothing than those from Cambodia. The reports from Cambodia, though, owe much to the avalanche of refugees who crossed the border after the Khmer Rouge victory, and described the conditions they had left, however accurately. A glance at today's world map raises serious doubt about the possibility of similar news sources from Viet Nam. At what border there could a refugee find a refuge?

The closed gate of Viet Nam is set in a formidable wall. And will we ever see beside it a doorbell marked "Inquire Within"?

the end

Short Pieces

by Pat Hill

Saigon Scene

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SAIGON SCENE

We moved into our Saigon villa 2 days before Christmas. It wasn't quite ready for us, but instinct prompted us to quit the hotel, where we had lived for three weeks, before the Yule bells rang.

When I first heard of Saigon years ago, before the fall of Dien Bien Phu, it was called "the Paris of the Far East." Our villa has indeed an air of French empire about it. Countless doors, louvres, windows laced with iron grillwork, and verandas punctuate its three stories, and fans stud the high ceilings. The bathtub boasts pink and blue tile, but the water trickles reluctantly from the taps. In the rear garden, leafy trees shade a quaint conceit, a fish pond designed in the shape of Vietnam, with a fountain in the vicinity of Hanoi. Big glazed pots hold

what our maid calls the Long Life Plant, large green leaves freckled with pale yellow. Mr. Ngu, our landlord, brought from his house a Lucky Plant for our front garden, where it promptly broke out in a rash of red buds and yellow blossoms (which, he said, it never did at his house.) This is the plant the Vietnamese buy at Tet, the Lunar New Year, to bring luck to their houses, and we were soothed to see that it seemed to react favorably to our villa. A few weeks before Tet, all of the plant's leaves are carefully stripped to assume a maximum burst of bloom by the New Year.

Our compound is enclosed by very high walls, which keep the interior dim. When we first looked at the villa, the effect was cheerless, for the previous tenants had dwelt among gray walls, fluorescent lighting, and brown plastic cushion covers. But by Christmas Eve, quantities of whitewash and bright orange cotton and a pair of carved wood Kashmiri lamps had transformed it. Presently large potted palms were fetched from Cholon, Saigon's Chinatown, to bracket our wide French doors, and a cinnamon-eared tabby kitten from the animal market played among the fronds.

From the living room we can see, across a strip of sunny courtyard and through the kitchen window bars, our gentle Cambodian cook at work. In neat pajamas and bare feet, she patters between the charcoal pits set in the tile counter, and

what our maid calls the Long Life Plant, large green leaves freckled with pale yellow. Mr. Ngu, our landlord, brought from his house a Lucky Plant for our front garden, where it promptly broke out in a rash of red buds and yellow blossoms (which, he said, it never did at his house.) This is the plant the Vietnamese buy at Tet, the Lunar New Year, to bring luck to their houses, and we were soothed to see that it seemed to react favorably to our villa. A few weeks before Tet, all of the plant's leaves are carefully stripped to assume a maximum burst of bloom by the New Year.

Our compound is enclosed by very high walls, which keep the interior dim. When we first looked at the villa, the effect was cheerless, for the previous tenants had dwelt among gray walls, fluorescent lighting, and brown plastic cushion covers. But by Christmas Eve, quantities of whitewash and bright orange cotton and a pair of carved wood Kashmiri lamps had transformed it. Presently large potted palms were fetched from Cholon, Saigon's Chinatown, to bracket our wide French doors, and a cinnamon-eared tabby kitten from the animal market played among the fronds.

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the little gas range, and the refrigerator in the living room (there is no space for it in the kitchen.) Her name is Suoong, but she is called Lam, her family name. Our maid is Lam's bright, pleasant young sister-in-law, whose name is Ut and who is called Ann. All of this name-juggling had been established long before we arrived on the scene.

Just out ide our great metal gate lies Saigon in all its daily realities. In our narrow street, children play and cry, dogs bark and fight, and at the little stands, tables and stalls that dot the sidewalk, a leisurely trade goes on in tea, soft drinks, cigarettes and noodles. At the end of our block, the neighborhood pagoda presents a red and yellow facade, and children can be heard chanting within. At the corner a sleepy-eyed woman tends a counter stacked with shiny picture postcards and newspapers, while a baby plays solemnly around her feet.

Beyond the corner, the traffic swarms and shrills in a broad thoroughfare. Hondas, Lambrettas, Vespas, Yamahas, pedicabs, trishaws, circa 1940 Renaultstaxis, bicycles, all flow persistently through their paces and pphaos. Perhaps the most striking figure in the picture is the Vietnamese girl or woman. Her national dress is one of the most graceful and feminine in the world: the <u>ao dai</u>, a long tunic with a mandarin collar, split down each side and worn over trousers. The sight of a dainty figure in a broad-brimmed straw hat and immaculate

gloves coolly steering a motorcycle through the exciting traffic patterns of Saigon makes one ponder the awesome facets of the Vietnamese woman. Incredibly, the ao dai, despite smoke and heat and cycle grease, is always spotless.

And everywhere in Saigon are signs of the times we live in--barbed wire, sandbags, soldiers in jungle camouflage, refugee camps, and the occasional rumble of artillery fire.

The Vietnamese, believed to have their origins in a fusion between Central Asian and South Pacific immigrants, have had their own ancestral culture exposed intermittently to foreign influences, of which the Chinese is the oldest and most recurrent, and the French and American are the recent and western. The Chinese, no matter how many generations they have been in this country, tend to preserve their own identity and society. Cholon, founded long ago by Chinese merchants, is still their city, though its borders have merged with Saigon. The French have left an evocative breath of their presence. It is not hard to imagine the tables on the terrace of the Continental Palace Hotal occupied by colonial officers and their ladies; the atmosphere suggests parasols and aperitifs.

More significantly, European Catholic missionaries developed the romanized phonetic alphabet, which makes literacy in Vietnamese more accessible than in most Far Eastern languages--and they have, in fact, one of the highest literacy rates in Asia. The spoken language, though, being tonal, is still discouraging to western foreigners. The older local citizens often know some French; the younger are more likely to be acquainted with American English. The American servicemen are gone, but the accent lingers on--aye, even unto the pizza parlor and milk bar.

The multiple foreign influences can be detected in the restaurants around town: Chinese, of course, and French, American, and Japanese. Saigon, though, is unmistakably Far Eastern and tropical. The cheeses, wines, and milkshakes of Europe and America are no natural part of the native scene, and good apples and grapes are elusive and expensive. We can feast upon the juicy pomelo (a grapefruit relative), luscious papaya, tiny sweet bananas, fresh pineapple, sweet mango, waxy pink star apples, custard apples, and watermelon. The local strawberry is small, pastel pink-and-green, and rather unexpectedly very good.

But anyone who loves oriental food can be blissfully happy with provisions from a local market. Picking your way through the crowded humming bazaar, you find a bountiful assortment of raw materials. Live eels wriggle in a bucket of

water. A woman in black pajamas squats among heaps of big snails. Another looks up, chopsticks poised over her mid-morning snack of fish and rice, to call attention to her Chinese cabbage and endive and curly green lettuce. An Indian face beams behind bowls and jars aromatically filled with myriad spices; Saigon has its own Indian and Pakistani communities. One counter is covered with noodles--rice noodles, wheat noodles, thin transparent bean-starch noodles, flat white cooked noodles. And rice: red rice, brown rice, white, or glutinous. There are raw shrimp, ranging from miniature to huge, and dried shrimp and scallops; dried black and white fresh mushrooms; pale bamboo shoots and gingerroot; green coriander leaf, cress, dill, and scallions; and bottles filled with dark soya sauce and the odorous nuoc mam, a fermented fish sauce like the Thai nam pla. A basin of brine holds bricks of white soybean curd. A vendor passes with baskets of live chickens, carried over her shoulder by a bamboo pole. Another basket is filled with tiny birds.

Eating seems to be a more or less perpetual process. The cafe is always busy, whether it is a small single cart on a street corner or an assembly of long tables at the

edge of a market. I can never pass one without pausing to gaze at the bowls of noodles and bean sprouts, the bunches of coriander and mint leaves, the bright red chillies, the charcoal-grilled pork strips, the bubbling broth--whatever is on the day's menu.

Having been a devotee of Far Eastern food since my first visit to San Francisco long ago, I was prepared to indulge recklessly in Vietnamese cuisine, which now happily includes France's great contribution, les baguettes. Saigon French bread is excellent, and the golden brown loaves are ubiquitous. Some bakeries produce light flaky croissants and petits fours.

It isn't always easy to estimate the relationship of Vietnamese cuisine to that of the Chinese. At a glance, the Saigon menu has a Cantonese flavor. But the first recipe I gave to Ann, whose American English is fluent, to translate for Lam, whose isn't, was a Chinese shrimp-noodle affair, which she prepared beautifully. Ann reported that they found it interesting, now, and--well--foreign. This puzzled me, so I suggested that they give me an example of a Vietnamese soup. They responded with a crab-asparagus soup which was quite good but struck me as--well--occidental. Sometimes it's hard to get the facts. Both soups, whatever their origin, are part of Vietnamese cuisine.

Eventually, with anxious hovering, pleading, and a great deal of translation, I began to coax forth such local specialties as fritters filled with tiny river shrimp, bean sprouts, and herbs;

rice or noodles cooked in chicken stock and garnished with strips of chicken, Chinese nabilgs and bamboo shoot; and rice paper rolls stuffed with crab, pork, vegetables and noodles and deep-fried. Stuffed crab was another souvenir of the French century. What can compete with a cuisine spawned at the crossroads of Chinese and French tradition?

We developed some nouvelles of our own, too. We Vietnamized our Chicken Kiev by wrapping the butter-filled breasts in rice paper before frying it. Our native American oyster loaf was internationalized by various experiments. For one very palatable edition, the French bread was split in half and the inside removed, and the bread shells lined with maitre d'hotel butter and chopped Chinese mushrooms. Each was filled with cooked oysters and their liquor, seasoned with lemon juice and tabasco and mixed with bread crumbs, then topped with slices of mozzarella cheese and baked until the cheese melted.

In time we added to our compound cast a guard-cum-gardener, a matronly Chinese woman named Huong, which is much easier to write than to pronounce. There is something reassuring about her friendly bright eyes and jade-green earrings. After soundly scrubbing her room, she moved in, bringing a crisply made bed, her pots and pans, curtain, water carafe and glasses, and incense. When she isn't scrubbing the tiles in the courtyard or picking

dead leaves off trees and plants, or sweeping spiders from under the eaves, she is busy with cleaver and charcoal, concocting her own haute cuisine, in the well-disinfected kitchen which adjoins her room. Occasionally she sends over to our dining table a sample, a bit of fish potent with nuoc nam, a soup laced with tamarind, or a stuffed rice paper roll. (The "rice paper" is not the paper used for temple rubbings in Bangkok, but a thin sheet of edible rice cake.) And one evening she prepared for us from her grandmother's recipe "fried noodles", a term which hardly does justice to the platter of flavorful crab, shrimp, chicken, pork, bamboo shoot and snow peas--yes, and rice noodles--which came to our board.

One Sunday the wife and daughter of the office interpreter came to our house to prepare a Vietnamese meal for us. Mme. and Mlle. Chinh arrived, beaming under their straw hats, on a Honda at three o'clock to have dinner ready by seven o'clock. The preparation time included a trip to the market for chicken to be simmered for the broth, as well as the boiling and scrubbing of the snail shells, and a great deal of chopping. Fresh coriander and gingerroot perfumed the kitchen. When M. Chinh and the younger daughter arrived, the banquet was ready. The soup was elegantly filled with strips of chicken breast, bean starch noodles, and the dried black mushrooms called "cat's ear", and

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and garnished liberally with coriander. The escargots had been minced with pork, ginger, lemon juice and pepper, stuffed into their shells and steamed. Mudfish--much nicer than its name--was sliced and stewed with nuoc Lam. And of course there was a great bowl of steamed rice passed frequently.

We reached a kind of zenith, I think, when Lam loaned us her Mongolian fire pot one auspicious evening. Charcoal burned hotly in its chimney and homemade chicken stock simmered in the basin around it. Lam had prepared the plates of ingredients: shrimp, thinly sliced chicken breast and pork, bamboo shoots, Chinese cabbage, black mushrooms, snow peas and spinach. Rice noodles were already in the broth; our staff seemed only mildly surprised that we wanted to cook at the table. Armed with fondue forks or chopsticks according to preference, we each cooked our chosen morsels in the broth, dipped them into a soya-lemon-chilli sauce, and ate them. We finished off by drinking the delectable broth. Accompanied by a loaf of French bread, of course.

Patricia Walton Hill

(Cá Lóc Dồng Thit) STUFFED FISH (6 servings)

Remove bones from a 2-pound whole white fish and sprinkle cavity with lemon juice. In a bowl, mix together ¼-pound cooked ground pork, ½ cup cooked chopped rice noodles, 1 teaspoon chopped fresh dill, and ¼ pound chopped mushrooms. Wrap fish in thin strips of pork fat or bacon. Bake in a preheated moderate oven (350) for 25 to thirty minutes, or until fish flakes easily.

(Măng Tây Vói Cua) CRAB ASPARAGUS SOUP (6 servings)

Marinate ½ pound cooked crab meat in ¼ cup lemon juice mixed with 2 tablespoons sesame oil for 30 minutes. In a kettle, bring to a boil 6 cups chicken stock. Add 3 chopped scallions including green tops, 1 pound cooked asparagus, ¼ cup thinly sliced bamboo shoot, and the crab meat. Simmer for 5 minutes and correct seasoning. Remove from heat. Whisk together 2 egg yolks, 2 tablespoons stock, and 1 tablespoon heavy cream. Divide among 6 heated bowls and garnish with fresh coriander.

Patricia Walton Hill

(Chao Tôm) SKEWERED SHRIMP PASTE (6 servings)

Peel 12 8-inch thin strips of sugar cane. If these are not available, substitute bamboo skewers or chopsticks which have been soaked in water.

Peel, devein, and mince finely 2 pounds shrimp and marinate for 30 minutes in the liquid from 1 coconut and the juice of 1 lemon. Press out excess liquid and let stand for 15 minutes. Blend shrimp with 4 ounces finely minced pork fat, 2 minced garlic cloves, and a pinch of sugar. Mold mixture into long oval shapes around skewers and broil over moderate heat for 10 minutes, or until lightly browned, turning frequently. Serve immediately with lime wedges.

(Goi Coun) Stuffed Lettuce Rolls (6 servings)

In a bowl combine 3/4 pound ground cooked pork, 3/4 pound cooked deveined tiny shrimp, and 1/2 cup cooked chopped bean-starch noodles. Season to taste with lemon juice and freshly ground black pepper. Put 2 tablespoons of the mixture on each of 12 bib lettuce leaves. Roll lettuce leaves and place each on half a sheet of rice paper which has been moistened with water to soften. Wrap rice paper around lettuce roll and chill

Patricia Walton Hill

(Chả Giò) FRIED RICE PAPER ROLLS (6 servings)

In a bowl combine 3/4 pound cooked coarsely chopped chicken, 1/2 pound cooked flaked crab meat, 1/2 teaspoon freshly grated gingerroot, 3/4 cup bean sprouts, 1/4 cup chopped scallion tops, and 4 dried black mushrooms which have been soaked in water for 30 minutes. Cut in half 12 8-inch sheets of rice paper and moisten them in water to soften. Pat dry and put 2 tablespoons of chicken-crab mixture on each. Fold in ends and roll. Deep fry in 375 oil for 5 to 8 minutes, or until golden brown. Drain on paper towels and serve with a separate dish of nuoc mam or imported soya sauce seasoned to taste with lemon juice and chili pepper.