

An Epitaph for Phnom Penh: A Gallant Prince
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An Epitaph for Phnom Penh

By Dorothy Fall

Mrs. Fall is the widow of Bernard B. Fall, the writer, historian and professor of international relations at Howard University, who was killed by a Vietcong mine while on patrol with U.S. Marines near Hue in February, 1967.

WITH CAMBODIA at war, my heart is heavy. I feel the terrible loss of a fascinating era that can never return, not to mention the tragic involvement of a people uninterested in this war. I am lucky to have seen this country in its tranquil beauty and to have partaken of its fairy tale existence at a time when one could still feel light-hearted.

In late 1961, my husband was awarded a Rockefeller Foundation grant for research in Southeast Asia and we decided on Phnom Penh as a base from which we could travel and where I could paint with no other obligations except the care of my two little girls, 4-year-old Nicole and year-old Elisabeth.

I arrived in the Cambodian capital before the last dirt roads were paved and the paillotes (thatch huts on stilts) torn down to make way for modern buildings. There were wide boulevards—some tree-lined, others with flowers and grass islands down the center—and the largest playgrounds I have ever seen. There were even marvelous Parisian-type restaurants along the boulevards.

The city, by contrast with the country, was densely populated with 500,000 inhabitants of many nationalities and religions. There were as many Vietnamese and Chinese as Cambodians, complemented by Indians, Europeans, Americans, Burmese, Chams.

The streets were bustling with people in all kinds of dress. Women in sarongs, full trousers, long, transparent Vietnamese tunics or saris rubbed elbows with monks in saffron robes. The traffic was a hodgepodge of automobiles, bicycles, scooters, cyclos and even an occasional regal elephant accompanied by his caretaker. The cen-

tral streets converged on the main market, an enormous building full of foodstuffs and other items.

The focal points of the city were the palace grounds, with its complex of elegant triangular roofs facing the Tonle Sap River, and the Wat Phnom. The wat or temple is built on a hill (phnom) with a flower clock on one side. A Mme. Penh was responsible for its being built, hence the name of the city.

Also on the phnom are stupas, conical structures that guard the ashes of the departed, and temple lions. Like the other 25 temples of the city, its Buddhist air of tranquility was balm for the soul. One would hardly believe that there was a war anywhere in the world, much less in a neighboring country.

Drab Costumes

THE CAMBODIAN people were not as delicate or as colorful as I had expected. The women are bigger and heavier than the Vietnamese, often with kinky black hair. They wear faded sarongs of dark colors or black trousers and jackets, often with a similar faded cloth around their heads.

Near Phnom Penh is one of several Cham-Malay villages. These people came from the ancient country of Champa, were joined by the invading Malays and now are Moslems. The men who have made the trip to Mecca often wear a fez. As in other parts of Southeast Asia, there are a number of mountain tribes, generally nomadic. The men wear loin clothes or tunics and turbans and the women generally wear a brief skirt and sometimes a sleeveless bodice.

Because Bernard was to teach a course at the Royal School of Administration, we were entitled to an apartment in the Batiment des Experts, which mainly housed U.N. advisers and some journalists. The living room, which ran the width of the building and had huge balcony-type openings at both ends, formed a sort of wind tunnel. In monsoon season, the soup would literally fly off the spoon.

The kitchen and bathroom had lowered openings so that while taking a shower, one was exposed to the street below. There was no hot water, and the Vietnamese cook, Ti Hai (the name for the first servant; Ti Ba was her subordinate), did her cooking on charcoal.

We rented a refrigerator and an air conditioner for the bedroom, both of which went dead during one of the city's periodic power failures. This usually happened before a dinner party so that there was no ice and the ice cream melted. It was two months before we bought a car—a second-hand Citroen often referred to as a mobile garbage can with a sewing machine motor, but it could take the roughest terrain.

Until then, travel was by cyclo-pousse, a bicycle arrangement in which the passenger sits in front of the driver facing oncoming traffic. The driver is usually erratic, enjoying the sport of dodging other vehicles and passing trucks as closely as possible. The price was never the same; it cost the cook two riels to go to market while I paid six. Americans paid top fare.

There was always a cyclo driver waiting outside the apartment building and rumor had it that many belonged to the police.

A Gallant Prince

MY HUSBAND had met Prince Norodom Sihanouk years before and we were accepted as friends. He is a charming man with the Old World gallantry that has almost disappeared. Often when dignitaries were visiting Cambodia, we were invited to the palace for dinner.

This was always a lavish affair, although sometimes the invitation was issued as late as 3:30 of the same afternoon. After the usual exchange of gifts between the prince and the visitor, we went in to dinner. This was a sumptuous feast usually of French cuisine and ended in a delicacy that one could not find in the stores of Phnom Penh.

The dinner was almost always followed by a performance of the Royal Ballet. The Cambodian dance is similar to that of the Thais but much slower. It looks simple and languid, but having taken lessons, double jointed that I am, I found it terribly difficult and painful to do.

The dancers are sewn into their costumes even for rehearsal; there are no buttons or zippers. The costumes are of silk with intricate gold and silver designs interwoven. The heavy gold headdresses and jewelry—ankle and wrist bracelets, rings, necklaces—are old palace treasures. Often masks are worn to represent the villain or a god or even animals.

Diplomatic life in Phnom Penh was fascinating at that time. All countries were represented—the East, the West, North Vietnam and South, Red China and Taiwan—and one had a sense of perpetual intrigue.

Everything revolved around Sihanouk. His doctors had told him to reduce, so he decided to play volleyball. Everyone played volleyball. There was the team of diplomats, the American military advisers and the Cambodian team, on which Sihanouk played and which usually won.

Cambodia had had many of the same men in ministerial posts for years, except that they rotated. The Minister of Information became Minister of Agriculture. The Finance Minister became Prime Minister. A Prime Minister became commander in chief of the royal armed forces. Gen. Lon Nol was always one of the prince's closest advisers.

Prince Sihanouk was also president of the political structure, the Sangkum Reastr Niyum or Popular Socialist Community. An interesting aspect of the Sangkum was the National Congress, an open-air session in the Congress Square near the palace where Sihanouk presided over debates, some by government officials, about the country's problems. He also listened to complaints and personal problems of these involved families. Some times a woman's problems with her husband or an appeal to reopen the "tea houses." Sihanouk acted as mediator.

A Food Cornucopia

IN GOING to Phnom Penh, I had envisioned problems in obtaining proper nourishment for my children. To my delight, I discovered that Cambodia has an abundance of fresh food. The market was filled with vegetables, some familiar, some exotic; the freshest fish, the most succulent langoustine; carcasses of beef—a form of buffalo—tough but tasty; pork; meager chickens and ducks; mounds of grain and rice, and native cooked food.

Of course, one has to bargain. As an American, and a timid one, I was at first ashamed to dicker. So often when I would settle on what must have been too high a price, the vendor would throw in extra lemons or flowers. It was all in the game.

One could also find the best imported French cheeses and butter and canned goods from other countries, including Communist China. All this was topped by the best French bread I have tasted anywhere in the world, sold at any street corner. The little rice bugs baked into it could easily be removed.

Local currency was no problem. I would go to a Chinese grocer, give him a personal check for \$200 drawn on our Washington bank and he would give me Cambodian riels at the rate of 65 to \$1. The official rate was 35 to \$1, but I knew of no one who got that little.

From our apartment, I could watch the women of the army dependents' village across the road bathing in the open. They would douse themselves with dipperfuls of water from a huge vat and emerge in a clean sarong, the other having been somehow secretly discarded before my eyes.

Cambodian Girl

The palace elephants grazed in the field next to our building. There was a street near the palace where monkeys played in the trees; one could coax them down with a banana, but they could be vicious.

The daily routine was often broken by some festival or ceremony. My favorite was the "Ploughing of the Sacred Furrow," marking the beginning of the agricultural year. It began with a member of the royal family walking with a plough behind a beautifully decorated ox and followed by a princess sowing grain. Then two oxen were led to a row of silver platters each containing a different item: rice, beans, water (meaning drought), sugar cane. Whatever they nibbled indicated what crops would grow well that season. They appeared to have a bit of help in making their choices.

FOR AN ARTIST, Cambodia provided a wealth of inspiration. Often I would go to the edge of the river to draw the ferry or the melon boats or the village on the other side. As I alighted from the cyclo with a

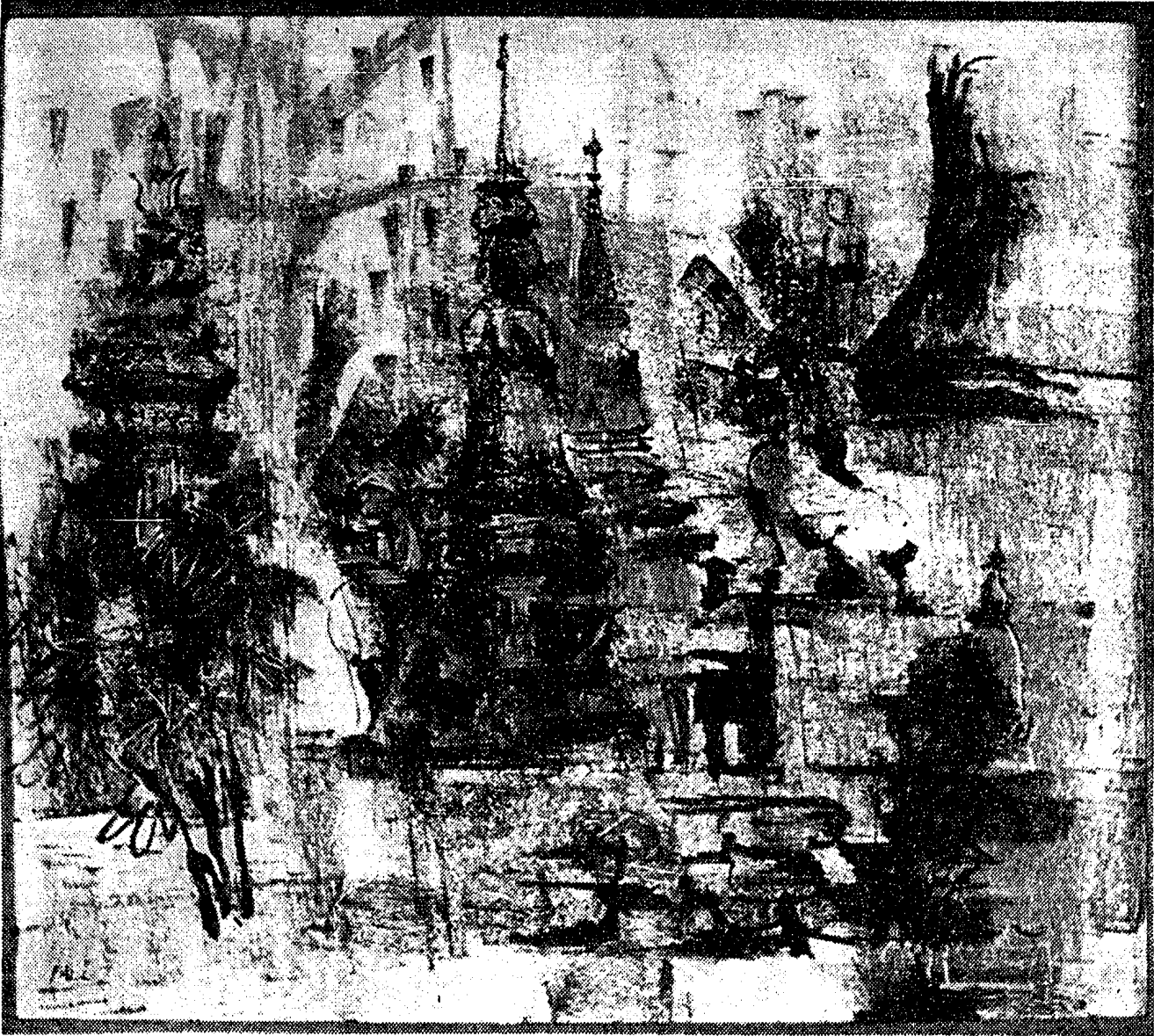
large drawing pad under my arm, people would suddenly start running over until there were 50 or 100 of them peering over my shoulder or even standing in front of me, making comments in Khmer or Vietnamese. Once, near a village, some little girls were fascinated by the fact that I perspired and that I had hair on my face and arms, which they would never have.

The climax of our stay for me was an exhibit of my paintings and drawings which the prince visited and purchased six of the works. I wonder where they are now . . .

In our last day in Phnom Penh, I tried to make some quick sketches from which I could later paint. A drawing of water buffalo swimming in a pond which I had done three weeks earlier had been sold; I wanted to do another. But when I arrived at the spot, the pond no longer existed. It had been filled in and the road was paved.

The village opposite my apartment was being torn down, no doubt to make room for modern buildings. The following year, a stadium was built, and then a university and more apartment buildings. All this, I suppose, was for the good of the country. But I prefer to remember this as a never-never land with all of its idiosyncrasies and charms rather than a country marching on the road to progress, and now perhaps to destruction.

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Stupas (burial structures) on the Wat Phnom (hill).