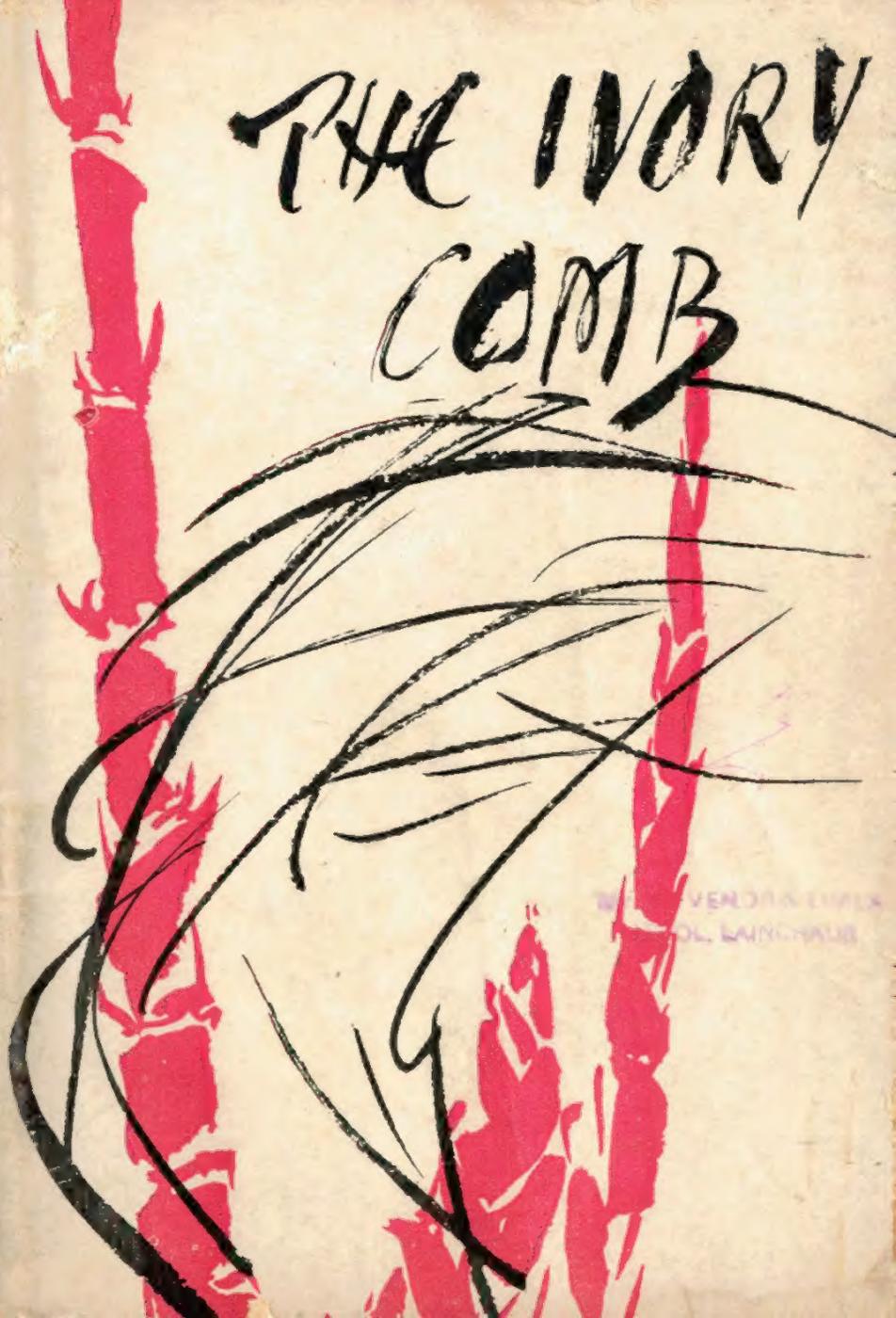


THE IVORY COMB

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(Second Edition)

GIAI PHONG
PUBLISHING HOUSE
SOUTH VIET NAM-1968

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(PART 1)

THE IVORY COMB

Second Edition

Cover and illustrations
by Diep Minh Chau

GIAI PHONG
PUBLISHING HOUSE
SOUTH VIET NAM - 1952

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

South Viet Nam! On this indomitable land, gunshots have never ceased resounding over the past twenty years and more. Her people have been resisting successively French colonialism and U. S. imperialism — the chieftain of world imperialism and the enemy of mankind today.

Thousands of miles away from Viet Nam who has never done any harm to the American people, the bosses of the White House and the Pentagon have sent here half a million G.I.'s to fight together with 700,000 satellite and puppet troops. Billions of dollars have been squandered. All that in execution of darkest schemes aimed at quelling the South Vietnamese's national-liberation struggle.

Every day American and mercenary forces undertake terrorist raids, burning down villages and massacring innocent people, not sparing old folk, women and children. American planes drop heavy bombs, C.B.U.'s and napalm, and

spray noxious chemicals to defoliate vegetation and destroy food-crops. Peasants are forced at gun-point to leave their homes and lands for disguised concentration camps dubbed "new-life hamlets".

Armed force, however, has proved unable to suppress the South Vietnamese people's aspirations for independence and freedom. In face of the brutal enemy they have no other alternative than to rise up in arms for the defence of their lives. They use all weapons — from rudimentary booby traps to modern guns seized from their adversary — and demonstrations and strikes, etc. People of all ages, nationalities, political tendencies and religious creeds take part as best they can in the national-salvation struggle. Combating under the leadership of the National Front for Liberation, they testify to a shining truth of our time: united in a monolithic bloc, determined to fight, placed under a clear-sighted leadership and benefitting by the wholehearted support of the world peoples, a nation, however small, can defeat any aggressor to liberate itself.

This finds a lively reflection in the present selection of short stories by South Vietnamese authors.

GIAI PHONG PUBLISHING HOUSE
SOUTH VIET NAM

Anh Duc

THE SON

BA and his wife sat up late into the night. He was about forty and she two or three years younger. He was sitting on a rush mat spread on the ground, his back leaning against a pillar, his legs stretched. They remained silent for a long while. All of a sudden, the man struck the ground with his clenched fist:

"I've so decided."

His wife said nothing, but tears started welling up in her eyes. Her face looked pitiful. At intervals, a rifleshot broke the stillness of the night, coming from a watch-tower, but this was such common happening in a "strategic hamlet"* that neither of them paid any attention. When the echo of the shot had died down, one again heard the snoring of a young boy of sixteen or so lying on a bamboo bed.

Ba drew back his legs, stood up and stretched himself, then walked towards a plank bed. His wife also stood up and came up to him.

"When will he go?" she whispered.

* Name given by the Saigon administration to disguised concentration camps (Pub.).

"Don't know yet, but pretty soon, I guess. I'll see soldier Tu first and discuss the matter with him. He'll go as soon as Tu is on guard."

"Heaven!" wailed his wife.

"What's the matter with you, wife? You women are easily moved to tears. Let me ask you: will you be happy if Trung gets pressed into their army?"

His wife stood still, wiping her tears. She knew her husband a man of character: once he has come to a decision, he'll never go back on it. For two weeks now he had been talking to her about Trung, their son. He'd never let their boy live in this "strategic hamlet", he had said. Let her get Trung's things ready; he would arrange for the boy to go. "Where?" she had asked. "With the Liberation army," he had whispered into her ears. Then he had added: "Don't talk to anyone, even to Trung. Get his things ready, mend his clothes. As for the two hundred piastres we've saved, don't touch them, they are for the boy when he leaves. He's our only child, I know, but I've thought the matter over and over. He's strong and approaching draft age. He's like a prey ready to fall into the claws of the pressgangs. We'd better come to a quick decision. Let him go with the Liberation people, they will make him a man. Sure, they will put a rifle in his hands and he'll use it to kill the traitors. Even if he should die fighting, I'd feel happy!"

The first time her husband talked to her about this, she was quite nervous. How could she help it while they were living in this "strategic hamlet", teeming with all kinds of thugs and ruffians. As a matter of fact, she had trembled with fear. But then she thought and

thought over the matter, and she had decided that Ba was right. Trung was their only son. Soon he would come to draft age; the puppets would surely take him away. Yes, Ba was right: they could not wait passively for that day. But knowing that her husband had arrived at a right decision hadn't alleviated her sufferings. She could hardly sleep these days and often thought of the circumstances in which she had given birth to her son, sixteen years ago. That night, a nurse of the *Ve Quoc Doan** helped her while in the distance gun reports were heard from a newly set up French military post. It was also the *Ve Quoc Doan* who had given them cloth for the baby's napkins. They were then poor farmhands and their own clothes were made of pieces taken from old gunny bags. The following year, the revolutionary regime gave them two hectares of land, which allowed them to make a decent living and bring up their child. But three months ago, soldiers of the Diem administration had come and driven them out of their house and land. Ba had tried to prevent one of them from climbing on the thatch roof and taking it down: he had pulled a soldier's leg and caused him to fall. They had beaten him into unconsciousness with rifle butts and dragged him away, together with his wife and child. Now, they were penned up in this "strategic hamlet", a real prison. Here they had been living a miserable life, constantly threatened and bullied. And now that terrible thing, the drafting of their boy, was going to happen. It was worse than anything they had known so far.

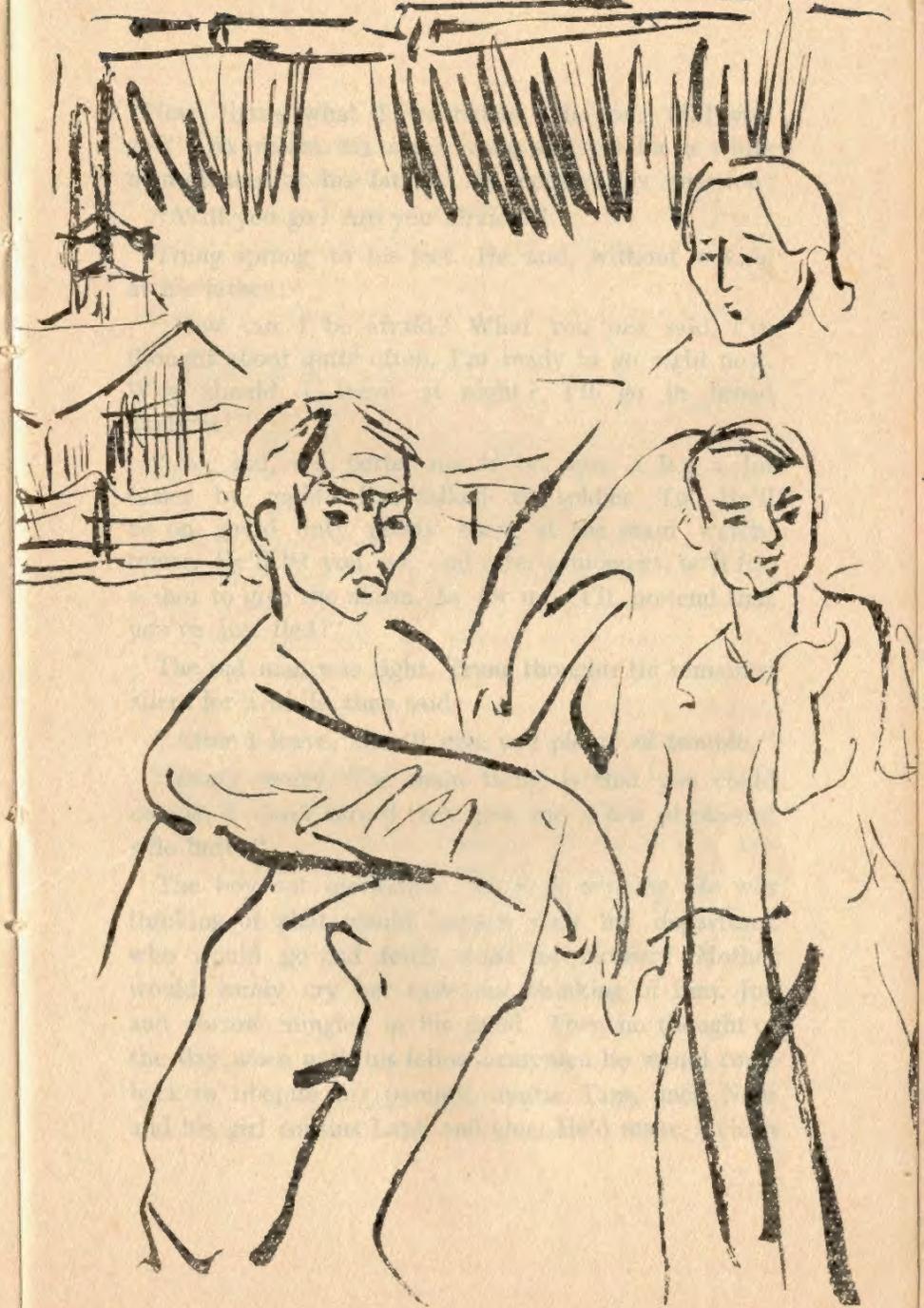
*Army for the Defence of the Fatherland, which was to become the Viet Nam People's Army (*Pub*).

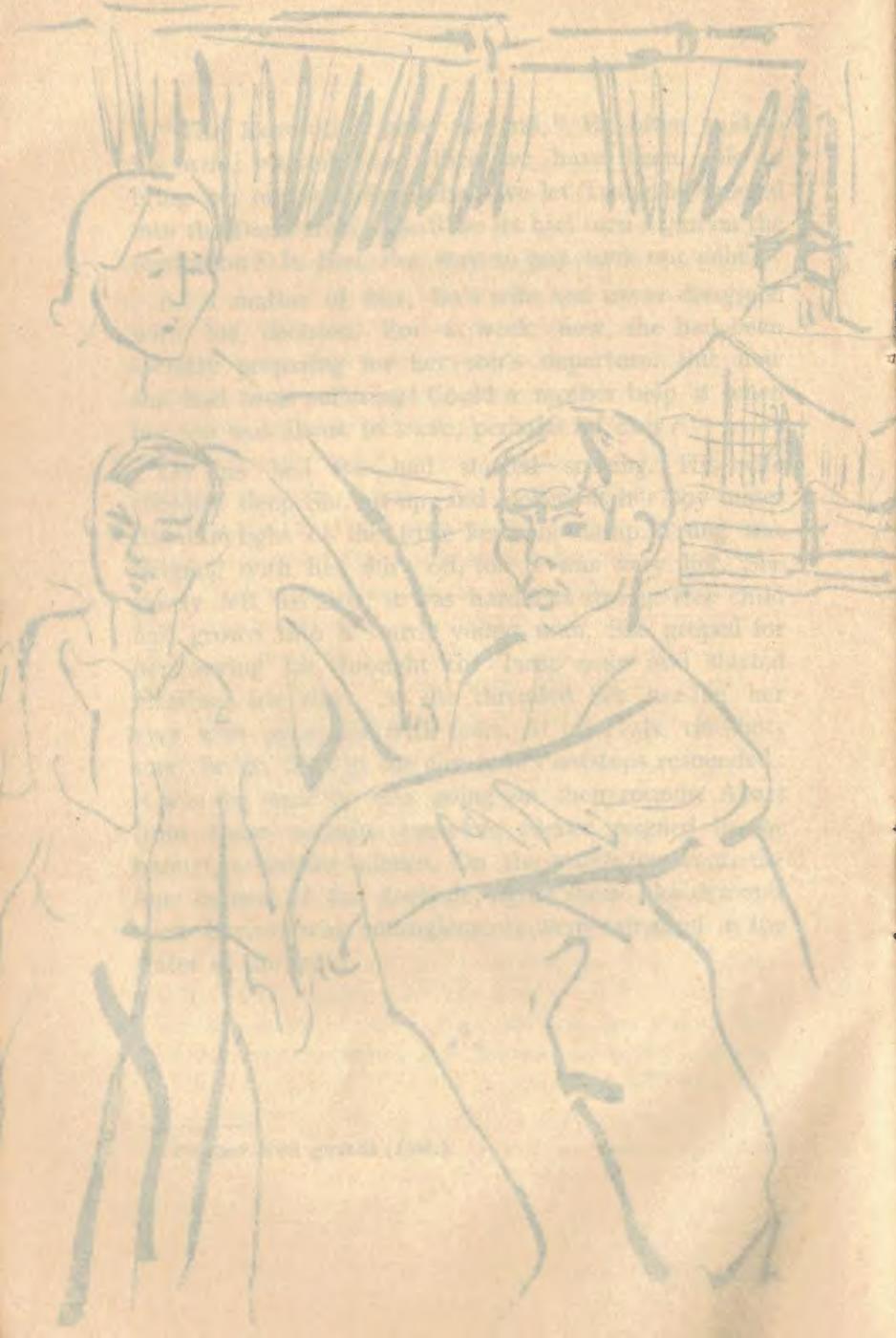
"The Revolution gave us land," Ba often said to his wife, "thanks to which we have been able to bring up our son. Now, shall we let Trung be pressed into the Diem army? Shall we let him turn a gun on the revolution? Is that the way to pay back our debt?"

As a matter of fact, Ba's wife had never disagreed with his decision. For a week now, she had been secretly preparing for her son's departure. But how she had been suffering! Could a mother help it when her son was about to leave, perhaps for ever?

On his bed Ba had started snoring. His wife couldn't sleep. She sat up, and looked at her boy under the dim light of the little kerosene lamp. Trung was sleeping with his shirt off, for it was very hot. She gently felt his arm: it was hard and strong. Her child had grown into a sturdy young man. She groped for her sewing kit, brought the lamp near and started mending his shirt. As she threaded her needle, her eyes were again dim with tears. At intervals, rifleshots tore the air, fired by the *dan ve* *. Footsteps resounded: it was the security men going on their rounds. Apart from these sounds, complete silence reigned in the hamlet, a sinister silence. On the watch-towers at the four corners of the stockade, lights shone like demon's eyes. Barbed wire entanglements were mirrored in the water of the moat.

* Puppet civil guards (*Pub.*).





"Now, that's what I wanted to tell you. Will you go?" Ba asked his son. Trung sat still for a while then glanced at his father. Ba repeated his question:

"Will you go? Are you afraid?"

Trung sprang to his feet. He said, without looking at his father:

"How can I be afraid? What you just said, I've thought about quite often. I'm ready to go right now. Why should I leave at night? I'll go in broad daylight!"

"No, kid, it's better not to be seen. ! It's a lot easier by night. I've talked to soldier Tu. He'll be on guard duty pretty soon, at the main watch-tower. He'll let you go, and after a moment, he'll fire a shot to give the alarm. As for me, I'll pretend that you've just fled!"

The old man was right, Trung thought. He remained silent for a while, then said:

"After I leave, they'll give you plenty of trouble."

"Don't worry. The main thing is that you could escape. I don't care if they give me a few strokes of rifle butts."

The boy sat motionless. He kept winking. He was thinking of what would happen after his departure: who would go and fetch wood for mother? Mother would surely cry her eyes out thinking of him. Joy and sorrow mingled in his mind. Then he thought of the day when with his fellow-armymen he would come back to liberate his parents, auntie Tam, uncle Nam and his girl cousins Lanh and Que. He'd make a clean

sweep of all the guards and militia here. He'd knock down all the stockades and fences. People on our side, like soldiers Tu and Chin Co, would be spared, but all the others, well, he'd throw them all into the river! Before his mind's eye, he saw seething scenes of battle!

"Once you've come to the liberated zone," his father said, "you must be an industrious and active boy, understand? Overcome all hardships. If they take you into the Liberation army, so much the better, but even if you're given a mere courier's job, don't refuse. Accept every assignment you are given, understand?"

His father laid particular emphasis on the last word. Trung seemed a bit annoyed by such repetition. If you join the revolution, hardships are inevitable. He was not afraid of them. He had swam across rivers, waded in the mud of ricefields and swamps, he had gone without food for two or three days at a stretch. Of course, hunger is something very unpleasant, but he promised to himself that he'd never get discouraged. Every hardship of the kind his comrades endured he could. Trung looked out: beyond the barbed wire fence, he saw half-built ramparts, a river, an expanse of fields, then green hedges; that's where My Hiep village was and next to it his own native village, Tan Hiep. He'd swim across the river—it's easy, he could do it four times over. He'd break into a run and rapidly cross the expanse of fields. No, there would be no difficulty.

"The main thing is..." his father's voice again rose.

"Again, that confounded main thing..." Trung thought, rather irreverently.

"The main thing is that you should have plenty of courage. We always get the better of the My-Diem* troops because our morale is a whole lot higher. They are ready at any time to take to their heels, whereas our men would launch an assault even before the order is given!"

Trung glanced at his father, thinking to himself:

"Heaven, a soldier going into action before the order is given!" The idea seemed ludicrous to him, but he did not dare to show his amusement, nor to contradict his father. The man was rather hot-tempered: if he got angry he'd go after him! But Trung knew how deeply his father loved him and his mother: only the man disliked making a display of his feelings. As for his mother, she was tender-hearted and doted upon her boy: after he left, she'd surely cry her eyes out. It's a pity that he should be her only child; if he had a younger sister, like his cousin Que for instance, that would be a solace to his mother. For the moment she was busying herself in the kitchen. A nice smell wafted in. What was it? Perhaps noodles and shrimps, his favourite. He hadn't had any for quite a long time. The reason was, here at the "strategic hamlet", it was not easy to get shrimps. Before they were penned up, he used to go catching them in the canal near Tan Hiep. A few minutes' wading in the shallow would be enough for him to get a nice catch. But here, you just had to

* U.S-Diem (Pub.).

go without shrimps. This morning, his mother had to ask for a special authorization from Hai, the security man, to go to market; she had brought back a few shrimps, which had cost her a lot of money, fifteen piastres for eight!

His mother was laying the bowls and chopsticks for the meal when footsteps were heard: it was Hai. He stopped before the door, his hands thrust into the pockets of his fashionable "dacron" pants, and shouted into the house:

"Hey, political studies this evening. Very important: the open-arm policy of the government."

Getting no answer, he bellowed:

"What, are you all dead? Nobody's at home?"

Without stepping out, Ba said from inside the house: "Here I am."

"Why should you keep your big mouth tightly shut like that?" said the security man. "Look here, go to the meeting-hall this evening for the study session on President Ngo Dinh Diem's open-arm policy. If you have any relatives who have followed the Viet Cong, try to persuade them to go back... Hmm... What a nice smell! What are you cooking?"

"It's some noodles... We've run out of rice..."

"Noodles in place of rice? What prosperous people you are! How hard, though, it was to bring you over here!"

"Well, perhaps we are prosperous, but..."

"Stop it... I know what you are going to complain about... Rising prices... everything hard to get... and so on and so forth."

After the security agent had left, Ba muttered to himself: "Open-arm policy? To-morrow, I am sending my son to the Viet Cong!"

After lunch, Ba ordered his son to bring him a pen and ink. Then he told him to stand guard at the door, just in case some militiaman should pop in. He would not let his son join the revolution without some recommendation of his own. As he was about to put pen to paper, something sacred seemed to well up inside him. He felt as though he were saluting the colours in some ceremony or bowing his head before war martyrs' graves. His eyes were moist and his hand trembling. It was a long time before he could write a word. In fact, writing a letter was something he had done not very often. He didn't know how to begin. At first he thought he should write: "My old woman and myself have only one kid." But after some pondering, he wrote: "My wife and I have only one son." It sounded much better.

Ba sat hunched on the bed, tracing each letter carefully. Whenever he heard Trung give a cough he would hastily hide the paper under the mat. When another signal came, he would take it out and resume his writing. The letter took him almost a whole morning, one of the kind that he had never written before.

* * *

They had their evening meal much earlier than usual. Ba's wife didn't feel like touching the food. She would raise her bowl to her lips just to

put it down again. Trung, too, had not much appetite. His father was the only one of the family to eat as calmly as ever. He said to his son, his voice filled with unusual affection:

"Eat, sonny, as much as you can. This is perhaps the last meal mother cooks for you."

On hearing these words, his wife stood up and walked to the bamboo bed where she sat sobbing. Trung quickly finished his meal and sprang up. He said in an apparently firm voice:

"Don't cry, mother, you should feel happy, instead. It'll be quite dark soon. Where is my pack?"

"Here it is."

She handed him a little parcel: some clothes wrapped in her own scarf. Trung took the parcel and squatted on the ground. From the scarf came the pungent smell of sweat. His eyes swelled with tears. He turned his head away, not wanting his mother to see. Wherever he went with the Liberation army, he thought to himself, he would keep this precious scarf with him. It would be as though she was by his side. It was then that his mother sat down beside him and thrust a little parcel into his hands:

"Here's some money for you," she said.

Trung unwrapped the parcel: he found four fifty-piastre bills. He took one and gave the rest back:

"A soldier doesn't need so much money," he said. But his mother kept insisting and so he finally had to accept another bill.

Meanwhile, Ba had left the house. Presently, he was back.

"I've seen Tu," he said. "Everything is all right."

"Shall I go now, father?" Trung asked.

"Not yet, wait until later in the night. Now, take this..."

He handed to his son the letter he had written:

"Take good care of this. You'll give it to uncle Chin Tam, the secretary of the My Hiep Party branch. If you don't meet him, you may give it to whatever Liberation armyman or guerilla you come across. Now look: in a moment you'll be leaving. You just go through the main gate, where Tu is on duty. He'll let you go. After you've crossed the river, you'll probably hear a shot. No fear: It'll be fired by Tu. When you reach the road, don't take it, it's full of traps. Wade in the canal."

Trung said, "Fine!", but his mother looked quite worried.

About an hour later, Trung left the house, after his father had made sure nobody was around. After walking some distance he turned and saw the silhouette of his mother standing in the doorway. He knew that she was sobbing.

Now, Trung had arrived at the main gate of the "strategic hamlet". The door was ajar. He gave it a push and slipped through. When he had passed the last barbed-wire fence and reached the fields, he started running with his pack on his shoulder. The wind was

blowing wildly. After a while, he stopped to recover his breath. He sensed that the air here was indeed completely different from that inside the hamlet. At the river-side, he took off his clothes and wrapped them up in the scarf. Then, with one hand holding the parcel above his head, he began swimming. As his father had predicted, a rifleshoot resounded when he was about to reach the other bank. He calmly stepped ashore, put on his clothes and looked back at the hamlet. He saw lights on the watch-tower, then streaks of flashlights. "They're making a search," he thought.

When he came to the edge of an orchard, it was quite late in the night. Following his father's instructions, again he took off his clothes and walked into the canal. The water was only breast-deep. When he had covered a short distance, he heard a shout coming from the bank:

"Who's there?"

"It's me," he answered.

"Me, who?"

"I...I came from the 'strategic hamlet'... Let me go ashore..."

A shadow appeared on the bank of the canal, then another. Rifles were pointed at him and he was blinded by a flashlight. He heard a voice say:

"There's only one... a young boy..."

Then the voice asked him:

"So you come from the 'strategic hamlet', don't you? Anyone else with you?"

"No, I'm alone."

Trung climbed on the bank. He put on his clothes and asked to see uncle Chin Tam. They told him that he was away. One of them stepped forward and told him:

"Is there anything you want to tell us?"

Trung thought for a while then said:

"Yes."

"All right. Come along."

Trung followed the man, who led him along a foot-path to a house. The man lighted a lamp, looked him over, then called another man. The latter sat up, rubbed his eyes and asked:

"What's the matter?"

"A young boy has just come from the 'strategic hamlet'. He wants to see you."

"Where's he?"

Trung screwed up his courage and said:

"Here I am."

Then he took his father's letter out of his pocket and handed it to the man.

"My father told me to give this to uncle Chin Tam," he said, "and that if I couldn't see him I might hand it to whatever Liberation armyman or guerilla I should come across."

The guerilla commander took the letter and came up to the lamp. His bushy eye-brows knitted as he began reading. The handwriting was big and coarse:

Brothers of the Revolutionary Liberation Front,

My wife and I have only one son. Now we are caught up in the strategic hamlet. In the old days, thanks to the Revolution which gave us land, we got along quite well. We owe a great debt to the Revolution and the Party. My son (the bearer of the present message) has grown up. I cannot let him be pressganged into the My-Diem army, to fight against the Revolution. So we send him to you as a present to the Revolution. He is still young and inexperienced. Make him a man, we shall be most grateful to you.

Nguyen Van Ba, poor peasant.

Under the signature, there were also prints of the thumb and the forefinger, made of a mixture of soot and coconut oil. The guerilla commander came up to Trung and clasped his shoulders.

"So it's you," he said, as though he saw the boy for the first time. "Your father sent you here, didn't he?"

Trung smiled and nodded. The commander added:

"Your uncle Chin Tam has talked to me about you. Good, you can stay here. Perhaps you'll go with us. Now, it's late. Go to sleep. We'll discuss everything in more detail to-morrow. I have a very big mosquito-net. Come on inside!"

1963

ANH DUC

THE NATIVE LAND

IT was the 23rd of the twelfth moon. The year of the Dragon was drawing near. Dinh, the editor-in-chief of the provincial paper, told me:

"What about your going to Xeo Duoc? The 'strategic hamlet' there has been destroyed. You may perhaps write a story about the first New Year's Day after the people have broken loose from the enemy's grip. By the way, you can settle everything about the boat..."

"All right, I'll go," I said.

The following day, I prepared for the trip, my heart full of expectations. So Xeo Duoc had been liberated. I would meet there old acquaintances, men and women I had known during many years of common, arduous struggle. Professional habits evoked in my mind things I thought I was going to see there: peasants returning to their homes, clasping stumps of trees felled by the enemy and crying; earth walls surrounding the "strategic hamlet" razed to the ground; heaps of barbed-wire coils; and the

splash of oars on the river... I had always felt that a reportage about freedom recovered could not do without these details.

As to the boat, well, that was an old story. Dinh and I had often thought of it, for years ago we had borrowed a boat from the Xeo Duoc people and had no opportunity to bring it back.

That year, the situation at Xeo Duoc was very tense. We had been living in the hamlet, but now this was no longer possible as a "rural self-defence corps" had been organized by the enemy and its members started looking for "Viet Cong" everywhere. So we left the place and went into the jungle with an old radio-set and a no less dilapidated mimeograph. We fed mainly on *vop*, a kind of molluscs we caught in the brooks, and were busy all day copying and printing news. Five or six months later, towards the end of the twelfth moon of the year 1959, we received an order to move to another region and set up a publishing organ there. The message said a boat would be waiting for us that night at a river-side. So we carried our all on our backs and slogged our way through muddy jungle paths to the bank of a river. Both of us were drenched to the skin. We slipped into a thicket and waited. One hour passed, then another, without any sign of a boat coming. We felt anxious. The only way to travel in this region was by river, and the assignment was urgent. It was then the 30th of the twelfth moon, the eve of the Lunar New Year. We crawled back and forth along the river bank. At last

Dinh said: "Something bad must have happened to the comrade who was to take us away. Maybe... But we should stay on and wait."

A cold mist was falling. The place was deserted and silent. It was so dark that we could not even see our hands. In spite of our strong desire to have a smoke, we did not dare to light a cigarette and whenever a mosquito bit either of us, he would try to kill it by as gentle a slap as possible. From the thicket we fixed our eyes on the river. After a moment, Dinh said:

"Perhaps we should try to borrow a boat from someone in the hamlet."

I agreed and volunteered to go. Dinh said:

"Be careful. It's not the time to get killed or caught."

Holding a grenade in my hand, I slipped out of the thicket. The first man I thought of going to was Uncle Tam whose family had remained faithful to the Revolution even in the darkest days. Uncle Tam was nearing seventy but still quite healthy and strong. He was the only man in Xeo Duoc to grow his hair long in the old style. He had settled at the place which was to become Xeo Duoc at a time when wild boars' droppings were found right inside the huts of the first settlers, when tigers lay in wait for men, and the birds that used to follow them uttered their strange cries in the dead of night: "Boong... Boong... Kroi... Kroi..." The old man was, without exaggeration, a living piece of annals of this Lower U Minh region.

He was a wonderful hunter, endowed with such a sharp sense of smelling that, it was said, he needed only to smell the water of the brook in the morning to know whether any boar or fox had come to drink during the night. A mere look at him called up in my mind images of jungle, mangrove, sea water and fertile soil.

When I reached the mooring place, there was indeed a boat there, complete with oars. I was about to go to his house when I heard dogs barking furiously, hurried footsteps, then old Tam's voice: "Who's there?" I answered softly: "It's me."

Uncle Tam hugged me in the dark. He said that a "rural self-defence" squad on patrol had just passed by. I told him the fix we were in and asked him to lend us his boat. He hit it off at once.

I returned to the boat. Unfortunately for me, it was attached not with a rope but with an iron chain, which clanked loudly when lifted. At that moment I heard several people's footsteps and Uncle Tam's cough. Trouble was ahead. I grasped the chain fast and held my breath, my heart beating wildly. When the "rural self-defence" squad had passed, I untied the chain, making as little noise as possible. Then I pulled the boat out and headed for the place where Dinh was waiting.

That night, just on the eve of the New Year, Dinh and I left Xeo Duoc in Uncle Tam's boat. On our way, as we were looking for some rope, we found big glutinous rice cakes and two packets of first-class tea hidden under a plank. The cakes were still warm,

a proof that they had been cooked not long ago. We were quite surprised when finding them, and surmised that Uncle Tam had intended to give them to some relative.

We could not return the boat to its owner. Preparations for local insurrections took up much of our time, and then the enemy's grip tightened on Xeo Duoc, around which several more posts had been set up. It was turned soon into a "strategic hamlet".

Now I was on my way back to Xeo Duoc which I reached on the 30th of the twelfth moon. There was an atmosphere of great animation. Along the bank of the river, women were washing bowls and cups, talking and laughing. Children were dancing and singing in little groups. In the twilight people were busy at work in a small vermicelli hand mill. Smoke rose from the roofs of the cottages. I saw barbed wire, not in coils and heaps, but in fences surrounding the whole village. Even the walls and ramparts were still there. A sign was planted on the bank, which read: "Determined to defend our village!" I said to myself: "The 'strategic hamlet' is now serving quite a different purpose!"

Night was falling. Reflections of kitchen fires were dancing on the roofs. "People must have finished cooking their glutinous rice cakes for the Tet festival!" I thought.

Although it was pitch dark, I had no difficulty finding Uncle Tam's mooring place. But now an earthen wall had been built on the bank, with four gunslits. Only a

small passage had been left through the barbed-wire entanglements. I steered my boat ashore and fastened it. The iron chain in my hands clanked loudly, but I didn't care. That would only inform Uncle Tam of a visit. Freedom was something quite concrete, something that could be grasped by the senses, like the clanking of our iron boat-chain. The same acute consciousness of freedom was felt as I walked along the footpath leading towards Uncle Tam's house, where the enemy used to go on their rounds.

The first man I saw was not Tam himself, but his son, Hai Can. Some guerillas were also there, sitting on a wooden plank bed in the middle of the house, eating and drinking, their guns stacked nearby.

I stepped in. People looked up, but they didn't recognize me. Then Hai Can cried out, jumped down and clasped my shoulders. He looked at me with bewildered eyes and said:

"Heaven! It's Bay..."

"Yes, it's me, Hai."

"It's several years since you left Xeo Duoc. Where have you been?"

"Almost everywhere. How's everybody? Where's Uncle Tam?"

"My father!" Hai Can stopped short. Then he added abruptly: "He's dead."

I stood dumbfounded. Without a word he took my hand and drew me to the plank bed. A guerilla said:

"We'll talk about the old days later. Now, let's enjoy a few more drinks."

I sat down. Now I recognized them all. The one who had just spoken was Tu Duong. In the old days, he had been a member of the enemy's "rural self-defence" squad. Once, in a raid on our base, he stepped right on the hole where I was hiding. He bent down, covered it with branches and leaves and whispered: "Keep still, man." I had also known all the others. Most of them had run after us with sticks in their hands, but in fact had been our most efficient bodyguards. At that time, the village had been plunged into the darkness of oppression. Now it was a fighting village and those men had become guerillas defending it. They handed me a glass of wine, and I could see that Xeo Duoc rice wine was as clear as ever. Looking at the little bubbles that rose from the bottom of my cup, I sadly thought of Uncle Tam. How he had died, nobody told me yet. Someone said:

"Empty your glass, Bay."

I drank my wine in small sips. When I finished, they wanted to pour me some more.

"It's enough, thank you. I have to go now..."

"Where? It's *Tet**."

Eagerly and persistently Hai Can added:

"Stay overnight. I'll tell you the story."

The drinking didn't last very long. Soon, the guerillas were gone with their guns. Hai Can's wife brought us some rice and told her husband:

* Lunar New Year's Day.

"I'm going to a women's meeting. We'll talk about what we'll do tomorrow: bring some delicacies to Liberation army men."

I asked Hai Can about his father's death. He didn't speak right away. After a moment of thoughtful silence, he began slowly:

"The night you came to borrow the boat my father had thought of bringing you some cakes and tea for the *Tet* festival. He took four of the cakes that my wife had just cooked and hid them in the boat, but he couldn't go, for the guards' rounds went on almost uninterruptedly."

"Indeed, the cakes were still warm when we found them. Brother Hai, we were really to blame. Today, I... I bring back the boat."

Hai Can said nothing. When he looked up, his eyes were red with tears. Paying no attention to the boat, he continued:

"My father died last year. At that time, they were herding the people into the 'strategic hamlet'. But nobody wanted to go. Our house being here, just at the entrance to the hamlet, the soldiers always came here first. But my father always found a pretext not to remove. He said: 'If we give way, other people will, too.' As we didn't budge, the whole village also refused to. The soldiers grew tired of this continuous struggle. When they first came, my father told them: 'Like you I don't want to move from my native place. So, don't insist, I won't

go'. The next time they came, they threatened to bring our house down. My father took a machete and planted it right in the middle of the house. 'Look', he said, 'I'm talking seriously. Any of you, young brothers, who dares to lay a finger on a straw of my roof, I'll cut him down!'

"He talked calmly, addressing the soldiers as his 'young brothers'. None of them dared to drag down our house. Finally, they went to that of our neighbour, Mrs Sau, a widow. She also refused. They menaced to set everything afire. She sat with her little children in the middle of the house, saying: 'Set us afire, too!'

"The soldier who had a firebrand in his hand threw it down, not knowing what to do. The district chief at Song Doc was furious. He dismissed the commander of the Xeo Duoc post and appointed another one, a ruffian called Dom. The day he arrived, Dom said: 'What would happen to me if I couldn't pen up those people?'

"The following day, he took his soldiers along and came to our village. My father sat waiting for them on this very plank bed. I knew Dom to be a very cruel man, so I hid an axe behind the door panel and stood by my father. Of course, they stopped at our house first. Hardly had he set foot on our yard when Dom fired a shot from his Colt. Then he shouted:

'Who's the owner of this house?'

'Me,' said my father.

"The post commander went in. He eyed my father and myself up and down, waved his pistol at us and asked:

'You are, aren't you? You know what I've come here for, don't you?'

'Fine, but wait a bit,' my father said.

"Dom thought he was cowed, so he looked at his men, winked and sat cross-legged on the bed. He lighted a cigarette:

'Good. Take your things with you. Got a boat?'

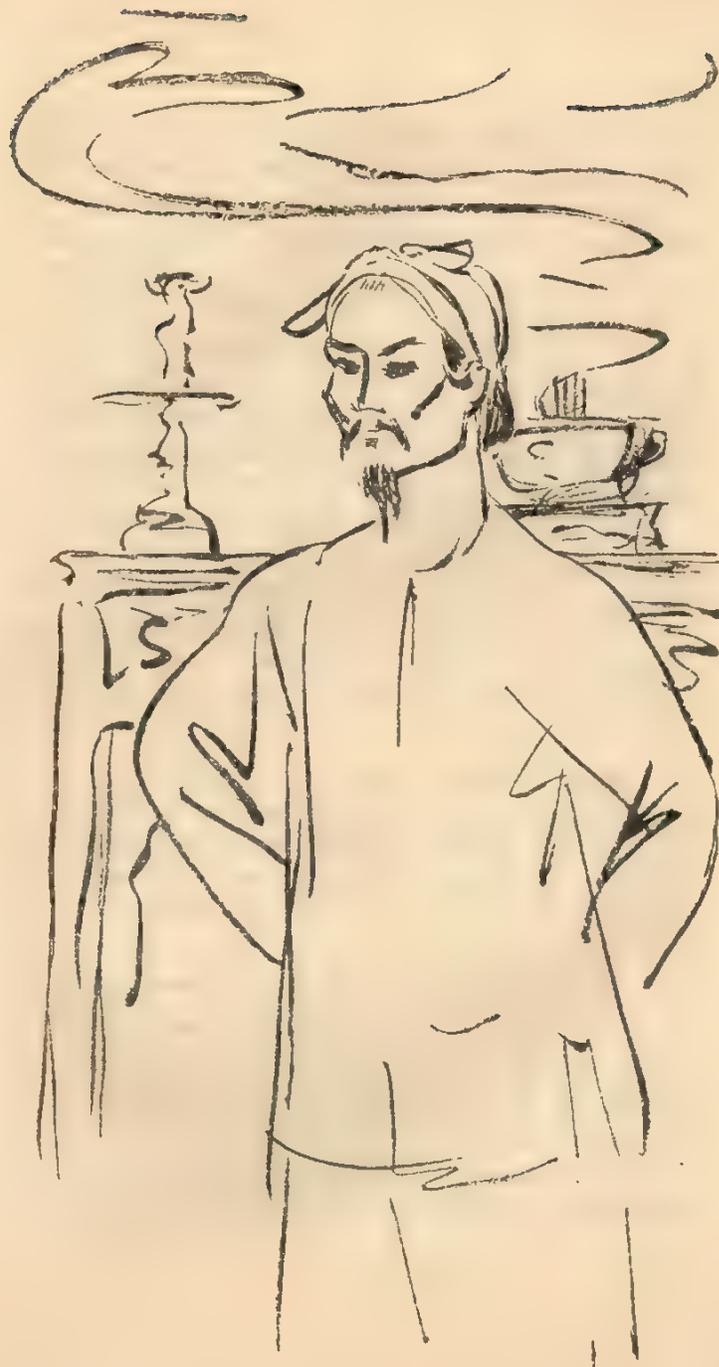
'Yes, I have.'

"But my father wasn't going to collect his things, nor did he go and get his boat ready. He opened the wardrobe and took out his black silk gown, which he wore only on our ancestors' anniversaries. He slowly put it on. He went about it very carefully, straightening every fold. Then he loosened his long hair, which had been done in a knot. The soldiers watched in surprise, but my father didn't pay attention to them. His whole mind was on what he was doing. When he had finished, he took a few joss-sticks and told me:

'Light the lamps on the altar.'

"I shivered and did what I was told. My hands were trembling. My father lighted the joss-sticks, and clasping them in his hands, knelt down before the altar:

'O souls of my ancestors,' he murmured, 'and of revolutionary martyrs, this land and house have been given me by you, my forefathers, and also by the Revolution. Now they want to force me out, but I won't let them do. I would rather die. I bow my head to you and ask you to be my witness...'



'Shut up!' the post commander shouted. The scene had become too eerie for his nerves. But my father had finished. He stepped towards the corner of the room, seized his machete, turned round and walked towards Dom.

'Now, I've finished. What do you want of me?'

"The post commander grew pale. Without a word, he pointed his gun at my father, who at once pointed his machete at him. I grasped the axe hidden behind the door panel; the soldiers cocked their rifles. Slowly my father walked on, the post commander retreating before him. Dom's hands were trembling violently. Suddenly, his gun crashed, and blood started trickling down my father's face. Covering his face with one hand, he stumbled forward. At a point, Dom turned and broke into a run. But I wouldn't let him: I let fly my axe which hit him behind the neck. He fell flat on his belly with a shriek."

Hai Can stopped and poured himself a drink, the wine spilling over the brim of his glass. Then he rested his empty glass on the bed with a sharp gesture, and looked out into the night. His shadow on the wall remained motionless for a long while. I asked in a low voice:

"What about the soldiers? Did they shoot?"

Hai Can shook his head.

"No, they didn't. Nor did I attack them. I threw away my axe and walked towards my father. He no longer breathed. A soldier took my father's machete and handed it to me, saying: 'Go away. We'll fix things up'. I looked at him in surprise, but two other

soldiers also urged me: 'Flee away'. Then they carried my father to the wall and leaned him against it. One took the axe and laid it beside him. I understood in a flash, seized the machete and dashed out. When I had got some distance away, I heard the soldiers shout: 'The old bastard has cut the lieutenant down!'

"I was arrested a month later. But nobody, except the soldiers, knew it was I who had killed the post commander. When I was released, the whole village had been penned up behind barbed wire. After my father's death, nobody had agreed to move away, so they had come with barbed wire and turned the village into a 'strategic hamlet' on the same site. For nearly a year, it was a continuous struggle. At times, they had to send in a whole company. Finally..."

Here Hai Can paused and asked me:

"Do you know how we destroyed the 'strategic hamlet'?"

"Not in detail."

Hai Can laughed:

"We went about it in a rather unusual way. We did it in broad daylight."

"In broad daylight?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes," Hai Can nodded. "That increased the pleasure! Besides, we couldn't otherwise have the 'forces' take part."

"The forces? Which ones?"

"The Liberation forces, of course. Here, you know, if we want to destroy a 'strategic hamlet' we must at the same time knock down the military post. So, we asked the regional Liberation troops to give us a

hand. The most difficult thing was to hide them in the hamlet."

"Hide them in the hamlet?"

"Why not? That was not difficult, after all. Every family we contacted readily agreed. They said: 'All right, but you must knock them down for good'. I replied: 'Of course. We'll do'. Then they said: 'If this is so, we'll hide the Liberation troops inside our mosquito-nets. After they have done away with the soldiers, we'll destroy the hamlet'. That night, we introduced Liberation troops into the hamlet. The following morning, as soon as the puppet soldiers got out of their blockhouse and wandered about, our troops dashed out of the mosquito-nets and mowed them down. They died like flies in the village lanes: none could take refuge in the post. Those few who had remained there surrendered. The post was razed to the ground, but the 'strategic hamlet' was left as it was. Now, it serves our purposes, not theirs."

Hai Can had ceased talking, but for a long while it seemed as though I continued to hear guns crashing, puppet soldiers screaming, and Uncle Tam's eerie voice:

"O souls of my ancestors, and of Revolutionary martyrs!..."

I left as though the soil under my feet was warm and quaking, and in my mind's eye, I saw puddles of blood. When I turned to Hai Can, he was no longer sitting by my side. He was kneeling before the altar, where his father had knelt. The smell of joss-sticks floated in the air.

The New Year was coming.

MR FOURTH'S DREAM

THE fire had been put down on the last patch of forest set afire by American napalm. The sun was fading from the tops of the mangroves. The heat of day and of the fire had subsided. Evening was descending on the U Minh forest and on the sea. It seemed as though a loving hand was seeking to soothe the wounds inflicted on the forest — burnt patches of ground from which smoke was still rising.

An old man leaning on a hoe was watching the half-burnt mangroves. The upper half of his body was naked. He wore a scarf on his head and a pair of odd breeches that went down to his knees. His sunburnt, dark and wrinkled back was moist with sweat. He remained motionless for a long while, his eyes staring at the trees. Around him stood a dozen people: peasants, young girl guerillas with rifles, and a few children. All seemed to be under the command of the old man, for, after watching the dying fire for a moment, he suddenly said with a flourish of the hoe:

"Now let's go."

They followed him along the bank of a canal. From time to time, he stopped, bent, and caught a tortoise

that the fire had driven out of its refuge. He gave it to the children, who followed closely on his heels, awaiting signs from him to search the water for more tortoises. Once the old man turned and said:

"If any of you wants a tortoise for your meal, just go over there, near the burnt patches, down the wind. Damn the Yanks! If they keep bombing like that, all the tortoises will leave the place!"

When the group arrived at a part of the forest over which swarms of egrets and cranes were hovering, the old man stopped. Before leaving the group to go into that area, he said to them:

"At dawn let all of you come to my hut. Bring scythes along."

All said yes. His was a peremptory tone, and everybody showed him confidence and respect. One of the young girl guerillas followed the old man, while the rest continued their way to a hamlet called Bia Rung.

When the old man arrived at his hut, it was dark. The young girl preceded him into the house and soon a lamp was lighted. Its flickering light showed a cosy room, small in size, but clean and orderly. The floor was made of mangrove trunks stripped of their barks and well polished by time. There was a kitchen with table ware, and a kind of guitar was hung from a pillar.

The old man leant his hoe against the wall and lingered for a moment in the yard while the girl kindled the fire in the kitchen and caught some fish from a pottery vessel for the evening meal. It was getting

darker and darker, yet egrets and cranes kept hovering overhead. They cried and flapped their wings noisily, as though they couldn't quite make up their minds whether they should alight for the night or fly away. The old man put his callous and dusty hands to his breast and wailed: "Heaven!"

It was obvious that he was suffering from what he saw and heard. He knew that *his* birds were in a quandary; they wanted to regain their familiar perches for the night but fear kept them away. The old man murmured to himself: "Indeed, this was the fiercest raid ever!"

Night fell on the forest, the birds and the old man. It had been a tragic day, the most tragic indeed since he came here forty years ago. Here, in this corner of the U Minh forest close to the sea, he had spent nearly all his life. For forty years, every one of his nights had been filled with the noises of egrets and cranes coming and going, flapping their wings and crying. His life had always been closely associated with the birds. Every evening, he enjoyed the simple pleasure of seeing *his* birds come back to this corner of the forest, animating earth and sky. His life had been filled with hardships and miseries, and he drew his simple joy from two sources: the birds and the Liberation armymen. Said he on one occasion: "I can part with anything but with the birds and those lads of the Liberation army!"

"Those lads of the Liberation army" included his own grandson, whose fiancée was now living with him.

* * *

Few men in the region knew his real name. The people of Bia Rung hamlet called him Mr Fourth * of the Forest With the Birds. He was now over sixty, but the Forest With the Birds was much older than he. The birds, he said, had come here long before he did with his wife, as young landless peasants looking for a living. One day, as they were wandering in this region, he climbed on a tree to take his bearings. He saw in the distance a patch of forest with swarms of white dots hovering above the tops of the trees: egrets and cranes. He shouted to his wife at the foot of a tree:

"Cheer up, wife, now we've got something to live on!"

True, they had found something to make a living with: the young birds which they caught and sold. Nature seemed to compensate them for all the miseries they had endured, but alas, this didn't last long. A few months later, men clad in khaki jackets came from the sea in a motor launch, and told him that the "bird preserve" had been conceded long ago to someone who had become its rightful owner, and that he had been acting contrary to the law by catching the birds and selling them. The young peasant was so frightened he broke into a cold sweat. When he timidly asked the men in khaki for the name of the rightful owner of the preserve, they did not deign to answer him. Instead, they kept walking around with their hands behind their backs, watching the

* He was probably the fourth son of his parents (*Pub.*).

birds and talking among themselves in a low voice. At last, when they prepared to leave in their launch after telling him severely that he would be sent to jail very soon the young man screwed up his courage and asked them again for the name of the rightful owner of the forest. One of them barked:

"It's Sir Councillor of Phong Thanh!"

The young peasant had never seen Sir Councillor of Phong Thanh, who nonetheless became the owner of the "bird preserve". He was not, however, sent to jail as the men in khaki had threatened. To "redeem his fault" he was to stay on as Sir Councillor's unpaid gamekeeper; in other words, from a master of this forest corner he had become the servant of its "lawful owner". As he could not think of any other place to go, and his wife was with child and nearing her time, he was forced to accept the deal.

Some time later, Sir Councillor sold the "bird preserve" to a Frenchman named Laguy, and the young peasant became servant to Laguy, and remained so for a long, long time until the revolution broke out in August 1945.

The Revolution meant a new life to him. His wife had died and their son had grown up. He found a wife for him, and when the French later began attacking this region, he urged him to enlist in the *Ve Quoc Doan*. In the battle at Xeo Ro, his son was killed, leaving a wife and a baby son.

During the Resistance War, the forest was part of the liberated zone, and Mr Fourth was gamekeeper for

the State. After the return of peace, the Diem administration set up a military post at Xeo Duoc, soon came to Bia Rung hamlet where they organized a "village council" and a "rural self-defence unit", the tools for their policy of repression against former Resistance members. But the mangrove forest and Mr Fourth's "bird preserve" remained, even during the darkest years, a safe refuge for revolutionary cadres. It was during those years that he witnessed so many tragic happenings and lost his daughter-in-law. Pitying her young age, he had urged her to remarry, saying that he would look after her young son, but she had refused. She continued to live with him, helping him in his work. She often brought food to revolutionary cadres hiding in the mangrove forest. One day the *ac-on** caught her. They killed her on the spot by ripping up her belly.

* * *

It was now completely dark, but the old man was still standing there, his hands on his chest. In a flash, memories of his life came back to him.

Recent bombings by the Americans had revived in him the souvenir of past miseries under the former oppressive regimes, and a silent anger and hatred in his heart. Napalm had been repeatedly dropped on the

* Term used to designate cruel agents of the Diem administration (*Pub.*).



forest, particularly along the jungle track leading to the river Tram. The reason for such raids was clear: the hard-hit enemy had realized that Liberation troops had been moving through the mangrove forest for their attacks on his positions on the other side of the river. And so he had decided to burn it up with napalm. From a gamekeeper, Mr Fourth had become a forest fire-fighter. The day he was entrusted with this job, the head of the village military committee had told him:

"Our duty here is to preserve the forest. It's a matter of life and death for our people. The Liberation army has confidence in us. As for me, I have full confidence in you."

Standing there in the dark, listening to the cries of the birds overhead, the old man slowly clenched his fists. He felt that his arms were still firm and strong. "I am not that old!", he murmured to himself. "I'll teach those bastards a lesson. This forest, this river, these birds belong to my people. Let them beware!"

The kitchen fire was aglow. Mangrove wood was burning with a cracking noise. The young girl was broiling fish, stopping once in a while to tidy her long hair. The old man's anger had subsided, giving way in his mind to something gentle and fresh. A familiar scene was before his eyes: it seemed as though he was seeing his daughter-in-law, sitting by the fire and cooking. But it was his grand daughter-in-law. A younger generation was growing up. He entered the hut. The girl turned and said in a merry voice:

"The rice will be ready soon. Where have you been, grandpa? I am broiling some fish for you to sip your rice wine with."

The old man squatted on the floor and took off his headscarf.

"Is there any wine left, child?" he asked.

"Oh yes. My father sent you a bottle this morning. He said it was excellent."

The girl turned the fish on the grill, then went and fetched a bottle of rice wine. The old man poured some in a little cup and took a sip. The good smell of broiled fish filled the room. Presently the girl brought some rice and a plateful of fish. The old man said:

"Eat, child. Are you going on your round tonight?"

"Yes. The lasses will come and call me, later."

The girl put some rice in her bowl and some fish in her grandfather's. Outside, the cries of the birds slowly abated. From time to time, one heard a shrill cry from a stray egret or crane looking for its flock, then it was silence again. The old man took small sips of his wine. When the girl had finished her meal, he hadn't touched his rice yet.

"You'd better take a nap, child," he said in a voice filled with affection. "There'll be more raids tomorrow. When your friends come I'll call you."

The girl said, "Yes, grandpa," but after washing her feet, she didn't go to bed. She took out some clothes of the old man and sat mending them. The room took on a cosy air. The day's bombing raids

seemed completely forgotten in this hut where a young girl busied herself with needle-work, and an old man sat calmly sipping a cup of crystal-clear rice wine. The birds were now at roost, and the evening breeze had driven away the heat of napalm.

From the direction of the sea came the distant rumbling of the waves. Suddenly, the old man asked:

"Have you got Thang's letters with you, child?" Thang was the name of his grandson, the girl's fiancé.

"Yes, grandpa. What's the matter?"

"Leave your work, child, and read those letters for me."

He poured some more wine into his cup. The girl took out a small wallet, from which she drew a photograph of a young soldier and a few letters. The soldier was carrying a rifle and looked gentle and proud.

"Shall I read, grandpa?" she asked.

"Yes. Read them in order."

The girl cleared her throat and started reading in a low voice. She read fluently, without a hitch. In each of his letters, the young soldier always inquired after his grandpa's and fiancée's health, the birds and the people in Bia Rung. He asked about a lot of other things too: had more birds come? had the old eel-traps been changed? He and his friends would like so much to eat some eel, he wrote. Then he recounted stories about the fighting. In a recent ambush, his unit lay in wait for three days on end for heliborne G.I.'s. When the latter finally came, they were picked

like ripe fruit. Not a single one escaped. Those bastards are incredible cowards, he wrote; when our soldiers rushed at them with fixed bayonets, they covered their faces with their hands and showed a clean pair of heels!

The old man nodded his head and stroked his beard with ostensible satisfaction. When the girl had finished reading the passage about the heliborne G.I.'s he slapped his thigh and cried out:

"I know those ruffians. They are only brave when riding in their choppers!"

Then he started eating his rice with evident pleasure.

"I know Thang is longing after a good home-cooked meal with eel and tortoise. Sure he is..." he said, munching his rice.

"He keeps saying in each of his letters that he'll drop in to see us some time, but he never shows up," the girl said in a slightly reproachful voice. "He's gone almost a year now."

The old man stopped eating.

"It's not easy for a soldier to go home for a visit. They're having their hands full, with one battle following another. The Yanks are coming in large numbers these days. Our soldiers must wipe them out as they come."

The girl put the letters back in her wallet. The old man finished his meal and added:

"Write him a letter. Tell him about the recent American raids on our hamlet and forest; tell him how many of our people have lost their lives; tell him

that the birds and tortoises are greatly frightened and are fleeing away..."

Then he went to a corner of the hut and spread a mat on the floor. The girl hung a mosquito-net over, and soon he started snoring. She sat beside the lamp and went on with the mending. A moment later, girls' voices called to her from the direction of the canal. She stood up, slung her rifle across her back, blew out the lamp, and left.

The old man lay sleeping in a corner of the hut. His was a loud, healthy snore. It was interrupted towards midnight by sounds of gunfire coming from the river. The old man opened his eyes, but didn't get up yet. He listened carefully: the sounds increased in intensity. Recoilless rifles and machineguns kicked up a terrible shindy. The old man sat up: "Heaven!" he muttered to himself, "Our men are attacking." Like a child, he was all in a fidget. Finally, he got out of the hut. Standing in the yard, he looked towards the place where the gunfire seemed to come from. But he couldn't see anything because of the thick forest. So he ran towards the bank of the canal. Standing there he saw flashes of lightning in the distance, as if a storm was brewing. A few seconds after each flash, he heard the report of the gun. "It's our D.K.Z. * Our boys are attacking the Bien Rach post!" he exulted.

The splash of oars was heard. To the query shouted by the old man, girls' voices answered: "It's the

* Recoilless gun (*Pub.*).

guerillas back from their round." Then he heard the voice of his grandson's fiancée :

"Is it you, grandpa?"

"Yes, it's me."

"Our men are attacking Bien Rach!"

"Good! that's what I thought of."

The boat came ashore. The girl leapt on to the bank, rifle in hand.

"We've received a message from the village committee."

"What kind of message?"

"It says our troops are attacking Bien Rach tonight. The village people are to protect the forest if planes come tomorrow to set it afire."

"Good, good. Hey, girls, you'd better get ready!"

"We're all ready, grandpa! Everybody in our brigade has been informed. We'll come to fetch you."

One after another, the girls leapt on to the bank.

"Grandpa," one whispered into his ears, "tomorrow the Liberation troops will withdraw this way."

"How can you know that?" the old man said in an angry voice. "They won't withdraw this way. They have a hundred ways to withdraw. How can you girls know?"

But as he walked back towards his hut, Mr Fourth thought to himself: "The girls are probably right. Otherwise, why are the people so urgently mobilized to protect the forest?"

At dawn, enemy planes swarmed in. Jets roared over the mangrove forest still wet with dew. Napalm

bombs started exploding along the canal, on a distance of about ten kilometres. One fell not far from the old man's fire-fighting brigade. He immediately rushed forward, after ordering all to follow him. Wielding their picks and shovels, they dug a canal down the wind, which would prevent the fire from spreading. Rushing from one place to another, the old man was like a commanding general. He had taken off his shirt. Hot air from the napalm fire was blowing back the scarf on his head. The people worked diligently, cutting trees and digging a deep channel. The smell of gasoline stank, and the fire was getting nearer and nearer, carried by the wind. Jets kept roaring overhead. The guerillas' rifles crackled. The guerillas were all girls. They hid behind mangrove trees, resting the barrels of their guns on branches and shot at the low-flying planes.

The channel was taking shape. Sap oozed from the felled trees and cut lianas. The earth dug up was thrown on the progressing fire. The soil in U Minh is mostly rotten mangrove leaves and stumps, and so it was not difficult to dig it up. Under the old man's pick, the earth collapsed in big chunks. He was an experienced man, indeed. He gave quick, short efficient blows of his pick, working in an apparently effortless way.

On the edge of the burning patch of forest, the ten-odd people of the old man's brigade seemed to resist the fire with their bare chests: a truly demoniac fire that would burn up everything on its path, and that water is powerless to quench. In fact, should inexperienced men seek to pour water from the canal on it,

it would burn even more fiercely. The only way to fight it is to stop it by digging a channel.

The arc-shaped channel got deeper with every passing minute. Now the fire was almost on the men. Mr Fourth shouted to them to get away, which they did after pulling to safety the less nimble women and children.

The fire rushed in with a roar. It was stopped by the channel. The old man looked at the flames licking the other edge of the channel as if saying to them, "I'll allow you to burn up only that patch, not an inch more."

He looked around with an air of satisfaction: the damage had not been very great. The major part of the forest was still lush and green. The foliage was thick overhead. The girl guerillas kept shooting at the planes. The latter did no longer dare to fly very low, but they kept dropping napalm containers. Some fell into the reddish water of the canal, which seethed like a caldron.

Soon, three more bombs fell into the part of the forest under the old man's responsibility. "Follow me," he shouted.

Wielding his pick, he began tracing a meandering path encircling the burning patch of the forest. The others followed him, felling trees, cutting roots, hoeing and shovelling. This time, they had to dig a longer channel and the fight was tougher. At times it seemed as though the fire was about to overwhelm them. Amidst the fire and smoke, their silhouettes were dim and uncertain. The stink and the heat of the gasoline

flames stifled them. But the channel ended by hemming in the fire. With every passing minute it got deeper and wider. The fire was definitely checked. A woman and a child were carried away, with serious burns.

From then until late afternoon, the old man's fire-fighting brigade had to cope with nearly ten more napalm bombs dropped in two more raids. Nobody had been wounded, but several had fainted. At sunset, the last fire had been tamed. It was then that the old man suddenly collapsed, overwhelmed by fatigue and the pain from several burns.

His grandson's fiancée and another girl guerilla carried him on a stretcher through the unburnt part of the forest towards the hut. At one point, he came and asked them where they were taking him. When they said they were heading for home, he jumped from the stretcher and ran a few steps towards where his brigade was working, then collapsed. They put him back on the stretcher.

When they arrived at the hut, the girl went to the canal bank to pick a few broad leaves of an aquatic plant, which she put under his back to soothe the pain. From time to time, the old man would come and ask, "Are they still dropping napalm?" and each time the girl, with tears running down her cheeks, would shake her head.

Indeed, no more planes were coming. Outside, the last patch of sunshine had gone. It was dusk. There was less agitation in the air compared with the previous evening: perhaps egrets and cranes had found

other refugees. The hut was soon engulfed in the shadow of evening as the soft rustling of the wind blowing in the foliage of the trees mingled with the distant rumbling of the sea. The old man lay still on the floor of the hut, in a kind of coma. The burns on his back were not very serious, but he was dead with fatigue, having spent the last bits of his strength in three days' battle with the fire.

It was a still night, a real summer night in the U Minh forest. The old man had a dream, a strange dream he had never had before. The mangrove forest was seething with a weird surge of life: the leaves were never so green, the flowers so fragrant. The water of the canal was literally covered with their white petals. As to his "preserve", well, it was teeming with not only egrets and cranes, but throngs of strange birds with multi-coloured plumage. The old man felt as though he was no longer living in this world, but in some paradise. Now, he was attending the wedding of his grandson. It was held at a place which recalled the abode of gods and genies. Liberation armymen, in brand-new uniforms, were dancing, singing and drinking wine drawn from the canal, for its water had turned into pure rice wine. All the girl guerrillas were there, in splendid clothing. Amidst this well-dressed crowd, the old man found out that he had no shirt on, only a scarf on his head, and his hand was clasping a pick. Then he heard a screaming sound, like a bomb falling. With a flourish of his pick, he shouted to all people present to follow him. Then he rushed forward, and... awoke.

But it seemed as though another dream had come to him. Sitting beside him was Thang, his grandson. He was gently pulling at his arm and calling softly:

"Grandpa, I've come back... Grandpa..."

The old man opened his eyes wide: it was Thang all right! His uniform was not a brand-new one, as in his dream, but made of coarse cloth and dripping with sweat. He was carrying a gun, of a type he had never seen before. Thang had grown into such a strapping fellow that the old man thought he was still dreaming. But no, it was his hut, with its walls of leaves and its paraffin lamp. Beside Thang was his fiancée. The old man looked at her with uncertain eyes. She clasped his hands and said in a voice quivering with emotion:

"Wake up. Grandpa, it's Thang coming home."

A sharp pain in the back convinced the old man that he was no longer dreaming. The girl explained to him that the Liberation troops had withdrawn through the mangrove forest after wiping out the Bien Rach post. After a moment of hesitation the old man clasped his grandson's hand:

"But I thought... I thought... Now I am fully awake... Thang, is it true that the Bien Rach post has been wiped out?"

"Yes, we did away with them, to the last man. We also sank a few supply ships. We began withdrawing at sunset through the forest."

The old man sat up.

"What, through the forest? Did you get safely through? It wasn't completely burnt up, was it?"

"The planes tried hard to spot us, but we got safely through. The forest was green and lush, big parts of it, and gave us good cover. The people had done a wonderful job fighting the fire. Now, I must go, grandpa. All the boys have left."

Tears welled up in the girl's eyes. The old man looked at his grandson in silence. Finally he said:

"Yes, you go and try to catch up with your mates."

Thang stood up, steadied his gun on his shoulder, looked at his fiancée, then turned and told the old man:

"Good bye, grandpa."

Suddenly he stretched his hand towards the girl and smiled. She eagerly seized it and was about to burst into sobs. "What, a guerilla sobbing? That'll be a pretty sight!" he said teasingly. This turned her sob into a laugh. Thang looked around at the hut for the last time, then stepped out. The girl sprang to her feet and ran after him.

The old man lay still on the floor of the hut. His eyes were wide open and everything was now clear in his mind. He listened to the footsteps of Liberation soldiers passing by, and to the sounds of oars striking against the sides of the boats, down in the canal. The sounds gradually subsided and grew distant. The night was again still and silent, with

only the rumbling of the waves, like distant drumbeats, and the wind blowing softly in the foliage of the mangroves.

The old man again fell into sleep. Was he again dreaming? His face was serene and happy and a smile flitted on his lips.

The girl came back. Kneeling beside her grandpa, with a towel, she gently dabbed the yellowish fluid oozing from the burns on his shoulders and back.

1966

CROSSING THE CHU LAY MOUNTAIN

TIDU mounted the stairs, gently lifting her skirt which somewhat hindered her ascent. The stair rods creaked under her feet as she bent downward under the weight of the bamboo water pails full to the brim. She lowered her head to dodge the thatch roof and entered the hut.

Old Kha stopped pouring soup into large bowls, and walked forward to take the pails off her daughter's shoulders. Anu, Tidu's little son, who had been impatiently waiting for the dinner, stealthily pinched some boiled pumpkin leaves that he hurriedly cooled down by blowing on them. Grandmother caught him in the act: "Take care, you'll burn your mouth."

The boy pulled a wry face, saying: "Mummy, salt."

Tidu neatly arranged the buckets on the floor, her eyes staring intently at her son who had grown thinner and thinner in the last few months, his ribs showing out piteously. The drought had badly affected the maize harvest and, worse still, salt was wanted in this remote mountain region. As a result, a big pot

of soup could barely get a few crystals. Every household was allowed to buy no more than two tinfuls each month. Overbuying would be liable to arrest and hunger detention by the police in Suoi Dau district.

One was not free to buy even with one's hard-earned money. Whatever sum one got from the selling of rattan, banana and honey should be brought home or spent on food on the spot. Alcohol alone could be purchased and taken away in illimited quantity. Wary of further screw-tightening tricks of the "nationalist" authorities, the inhabitants hid whatever amount of salt they could lay hands on, and held it in store in view of cases of dire need. Chilly was often used as a substitute. The salt-needy villagers could hardly handle their tools and had to sit down panting and exhausted after a short spell of labour. At every meal, Anu kept wailing for salt.

"Eat, grandson."

As always, Tidu was deeply moved by her mother's soft voice. There was no end to Old Kha's misery, even at this advanced age.

"Mummy, you eat with Anu, I'm waiting for my husband."

Then, more tenderly, she added, "Take some more salt for yourself and give Anu a little bit."

"Well, the food's salted enough."

The grandmother gave a sigh and looked at Anu:

"We shouldn't get him accustomed to salt, he will wail all the time for it."

Yet, Tidu took out the dry gourd hanging above the hearth, and poured on the palm of her hand a few shining crystals of salt. The boy made a few steps, took them and, smiling with satisfaction, thrust them into his mouth.

She put some more wood into the fire and set about pounding maize. Worn down by the day's toil and hunger, she did not feel like eating.

The sun was slowly setting. Tidu and her husband, Ma Quang, were still working on the *ray** when two armed civil guards of district chief Ali came up and asked Ma Quang to follow them. To Tidu's insistent queries, the guards reluctantly replied:

"We saw a lot of soldiers in the house of the district chief. A lot, can't say how many for sure."

Filled with fright, Tidu wanted to follow Ma Quang who tried to dissuade her:

"Don't worry, I'll be back soon. Go on clearing the other side of the *ray*. Look, it may rain this evening."

After making a few steps, Ma Quang turned to her:

"Perhaps, the district chief only wants me to get some pigs and chickens for the troops."

She was far from convinced by this far-fetched explanation. If it were only about buying pigs and chickens, other people in the lower hamlet would do.

Indeed, a strong suspicion was already lurking in the depth of her mind that Ma Quang might be drafted into the Saigon army.

* A forest clearing (*Pub.*).

Tidu was lost in thought and hardly noticed that the night had settled upon the village. Anu was snoring in the arms of his grandmother who was slightly coughing now and then. The jungle wind wailed amidst the rustle of leaves. The time had come for wild beasts to go out hunting. Tidu went on pounding the maize, her impatient eyes strained into the darkness.

At long last, Ma Quang came back. He put out the torch and went up the stairs, while Tidu threw more wood into the fire. As the flame blazed up impetuously, the pigs downstairs also set about rummaging noisily in their manger. Ma Quang cleaned his feet at the entrance of the hut and put into Tidu's hand a small packet. She hurriedly opened it. "Oh, salt for us, Mummy," she exclaimed.

Old Kha also sat up and poked her fingers into the packet which Tidu handed to her.

"Where did you get it, son?"

Ma Quang gave no reply. Instead, he busied himself rolling a cigarette and puffing away at it. His face looked grave with downcast eyes. This was not lost upon Tidu who quietly brought out the dinner. It was not until they sat face to face before the basket of boiled maize that Ma Quang spoke out:

"I didn't buy it. The salt is from the district chief."

"Why did he give you?"

"I was ordered to guide troops to Song Trang. That will take two nights*. They will give me food for the journey and another bowlful of salt upon return."

* Minority people usually measure time in terms of nights instead of days.

Tidu dropped her chopsticks. She grew pale and snapped back almost instantly:

"No, you mustn't go."

Ma Quang sadly replied:

"I didn't want to go. But the district chief and the commander threatened me: 'If you refuse, we'll arrest you, take away your pigs and burn down your house'."

"As they please, we don't mind."

Apparently regretting her too peremptory tone, she softly enquired:

"Do you mean you are ordered to help them hunt down our brothers?"

Ma Quang shook his head:

"Our brothers have all regrouped to the North. As for Phuong, he hasn't come back for the last few years."

Then he went on hesitatingly:

"Besides, I won't take them into the forest. I'll just lead them along highways."

Tidu frowned:

"In case they'd an encounter with our brothers would the bullets spare you?"

As Ma Quang kept silent, she pressed her point a little further. "Won't it be better that you'll flee into the forest?"

Ma Quang sighed:

"It'll be all right for me, but what will happen to mother, to you and Anu?"

Old Kha tossed in her bed.

Tidu and Ma Quang stopped talking. Both peered anxiously into the corner where she was lying, wondering whether she had overheard their conversation.

Ma Quang whispered to his wife:

"Give me a torch. I'll leave right after dinner."

"No, you mustn't. At least, wait until morning."

"That won't do. The soldiers will have breakfast and get ready before dawn."

Tidu desperately held on to her husband:

"No, no, you mustn't go. You will die, for sure. Don't you care for mother, for me and for our son?"

"I do care for you all. That's why I must go. I don't want to see mother and you and Anu being killed. There will be some more salt for our family."

Tidu exploded:

"Go and take the district chief's salt for your own use. We don't want it. Shame! That evil salt has turned your head. You've forgotten Uncle Ho's words."

Tidu stood outside until the torch had vanished into the darkness. As for Old Kha, she had heard the conversation, but did not utter a single word. Though she did not like Ma Quang's going afar, she was afraid of the My-Diem clique. She only prayed God so that the soldiers would not come across our brothers. Tidu came near her mother. Both gazed silently at the blazing fire, and sat motionless for a long time.

At length, Tidu spoke out:

"Don't worry, Mummy, go to bed. Ma Quang will come back."

"I don't feel like sleeping. You're tired after a day's work at the *ray*, why don't you go to bed?"

Tidu remained silent. Then she suddenly gripped Old Kha by the wrist, her eyes blazing fiercely like those of a vulture. Her mother took fear, expecting the worst to happen.

"Mummy, stay home with Anu, I'm going out for a while."

Old Kha could hardly believe her own ears.

"You just latch the door, Mummy. There's nothing to worry about."

"But where are you going at this late hour? To the district chief's? No, you must not. It's very dark, and there is a lot of leeches down there."

Tidu shook her head:

"I'm not going to the district chief's. I'm going to Song Trang."

Her eyes dilated with bewilderment, Old Kha almost shouted:

"To Song Trang? You've gone mad, haven't you?"

Tidu had made up her mind. She said softly:

"That's true, Mummy. I must go to Song Trang now. Otherwise..."

She was blinking, with tears glistening in her eyes.

Old Kha couldn't make out why she was weeping.

"Mummy, what a fool my husband's. A shame for us all, I can't put up with it."

Her mother scolded her:

"But why not wait until daybreak? How dare you cross the Chu Lay jungle at this hour? You've got the heart of a tiger, haven't you? Don't you care for your son?"

Biting hard her lips, Tidu replied:

"With a knife and a torch, I've nothing to fear. Besides, I'd rather die than..."

Well aware of the stubbornness of her daughter, Old Kha, nevertheless, tried to probe a little further.

"At least, tell me how things are like."

Grasping her mother's hands, Tidu pleaded:

"Don't ask me, Mummy. I can't tell you anything now. Don't you remember what our cadres and army-men told us about keeping secrecy? Now, please get me three tinfuls of rice while I prepare the torch. Quick, Mummy."

Old Kha said nothing more. Sadly, she stood up and went into the corner, groping in the dark for the rice basket. She suddenly asked:

"Will you take some salt also? The salt Ma Quang has just brought home?"

Tidu frowned:

"No, Mummy, just take some from the gourd."

In no time, Tidu had fastened a close-woven basket to her shoulders. It was a small basket, into which she put a few tinfuls of rice, half a cup of salt, a dozen maize cobs and a piece of touchwood.

By then Anu had waked up. Pressing his body against the back of Old Kha, the boy looked at Tidu with astonished eyes. Never had he seen his mother setting out for the *ray* in the thick of the night. He did not cry, however, nor dared he complain. As soon as Tidu had gone down the stairs, Old Kha passed the torch to her from the upper floor. Tidu tied the knife to her left side. Her skirt was closely knit against her body, while her black blouse, too short and already in rags, practically left her arms naked.

The dancing light of the torch caught a forced smile on her face, as she tried to console Anu:

"Anu dear, sleep with Grandma. Mummy will bring you sugar-cane from the *ray*."

No sooner had Tidu walked a few steps than her mother called her back, and handed her a torn cloth with which to cover her head.

"Be careful when you cross the river."

Then she added, almost whispering:

"Remember me to Phuong and the other 'boys'." Tidu was almost stunned by surprise. How the devil did mummy know about all this? She nodded though.

Tidu half strode, half ran as the grass and reeds kept lashing at her face, arms and legs. At some places, the trail was almost completely hidden by luxuriant vegetation. She shuddered a while then furiously forced her way through with her knife. Soon, her skirt, and then her blouse, were soaked through as though under a lasting rain. She wanted to take the cloth from the basket in order to cover her head with, but she feared to lose time. The leeches gave

her even greater trouble. Every now and then, she found them, not one but two, three, four clinging to her legs. She used the knife to get rid of them all at one stroke.

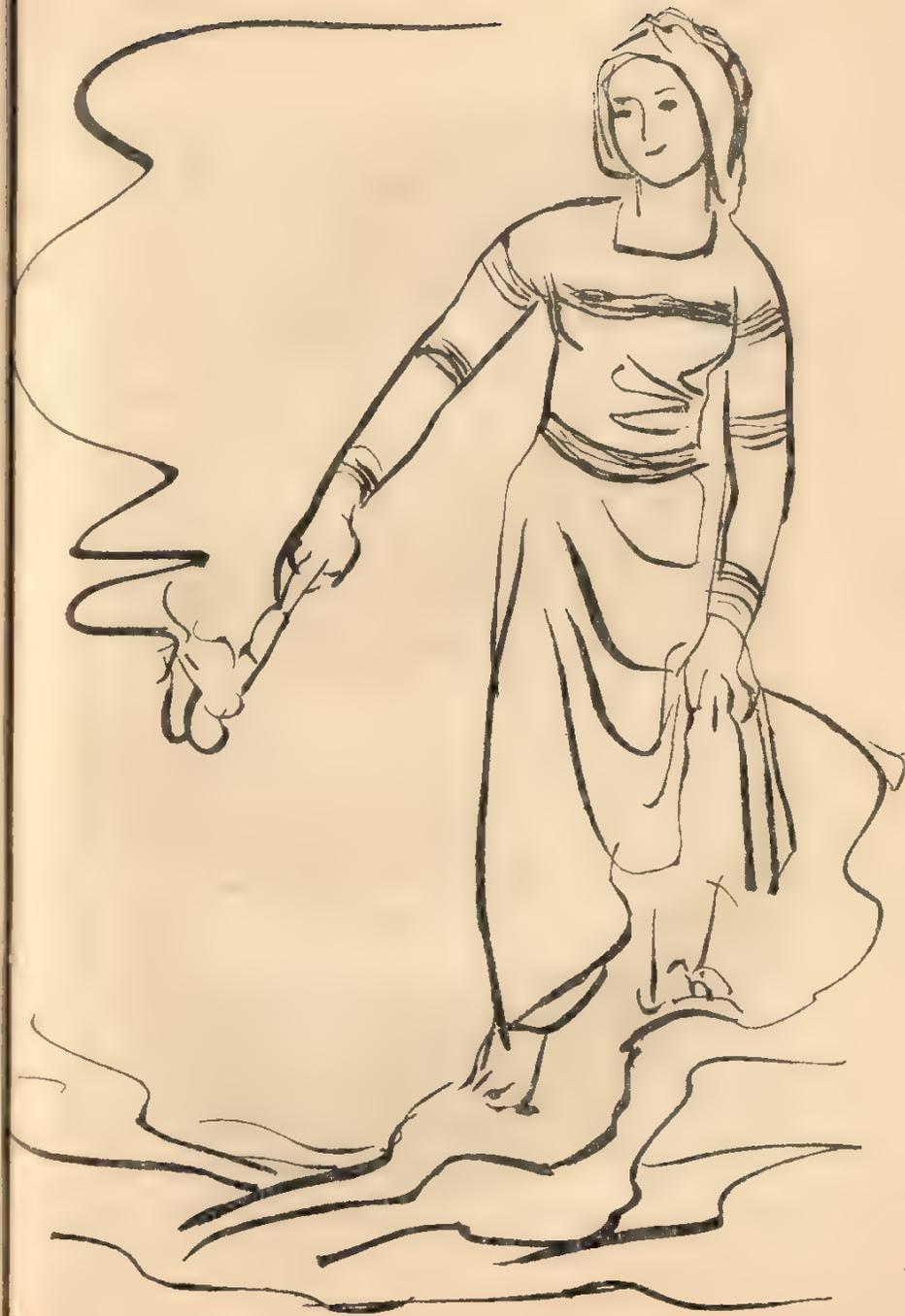
She couldn't remember the brooks she had crossed, so many there were of them. She no longer looked at the path, she was just walking from memory. And, great wonder, her feet could eschew the sharp stones and the tree-stumps as though they had their own eyes.

Song Trang was still a long way off. How could Tidu reach there before dawn? The question obsessed her: she should take no rest, must walk on and on, and even run.

The winding path had now left the brook and set about climbing. The Chu Lay mountain stood ahead, dark and towering. Beyond it, was a small hamlet, and then the Song Trang forest. There, things would be much easier and she would no longer need a torch for the remaining part of the journey.

Until then, she had to cross the Chu Lay mountain, well known for its elephants and tigers. Pedestrians treading through Chu Lay in daytime could often hear the noise made by elephants breaking trees and branches. If they happened to travel in groups they could beat tree trunks, whistle and shout in order to frighten away those beasts. Without male companions, women used to flee in panic.

Tidu vanished into the thick mass of trees and leaves. The stars could no longer be seen. With every new step, the trees seemed to grow thicker, stretching their huge



branches as though they wanted to bar her way. She walked on, her eyes looking straight ahead, not daring to steal even a side glance at the surroundings. Suddenly, a shadow dashed past just a dozen steps ahead of her. Tidu stopped short, raising her knife in self-defence. Her legs shook violently, no matter how hard she tried to press her big toes against the ground. "Bep... bep..." Thank God! it was a deer, not a tiger as she had feared. She lowered the knife and heaved a sigh of relief.

She admonished herself :

"What a coward you are! Even if your path is barred by a tiger or an elephant, you mustn't get panicky. Otherwise, you'd better stay home."

Tidu no longer felt cold. She wanted to take a short rest, but was afraid of being too late. Though utterly tired, she kept on climbing. She breathed hard, very hard, and it seemed as though her ears were also breathing.

Completely exhausted by the time she had reached the hill-top, Tidu sat down heavily, not bothering to lift the basket from her shoulders. Then, with a few strokes on the ground, she reduced the flame of the torch, and closed her eyes, leaning her back against the basket. "Just a moment, not more ; the day is coming," she reminded herself.

As a cold dew drop fell on her forehead, she waked up with a start to find the torch practically extinct with only a few parcels of ash still smouldering feebly. Tidu hurriedly took out the piece of touchwood and attempted to revive the flame, but despite all her efforts, the ash continued to shrink, and finally went out.

All hopes died down with the torch. A deep sense of fear and anger alternatively took hold of her. How the devil did she sleep? How could she proceed farther in this jungle as dark as hell? If she had to wait until daybreak, she would surely be outstripped by the enemy troops who, equipped with flash lights, would, of course, take the highway instead of the difficult jungle paths.

No, she couldn't sit here any more. If her eyes could not find the trail, then her feet should feel it out. At least she should try to reach the foot of the hill. Tidu had made up her mind. She no longer feared tigers or elephants. She was only concerned about not to go astray. Groping in the dark she cut a stick for herself. Then, hanging the knife at her side, she felt her way ahead, her strained eyes trying desperately to pierce the pitch darkness all around.

She went on for a long time. Yet, the slope was still stiff, and the ground wet and boggy. She had not yet reached the big stone which, as she knew pretty well, was farther than half-way of the slope.

Suddenly, her head hit violently against something. She staggered, lost her balance and fell down. A violent pain shot through her body, as her left back-side landed heavily on a lump of stone. The stick was tossed away. Tidu sat up, and rubbed her forehead with dirt-soiled hands. Tears ran down her cheeks as she tried to refrain from wailing. However, she too was to blame for the accident. The last time she went through this part of the forest there was no

fallen tree across the path. But she should have prepared herself for such a mishap. She groped in the dark, searching for the lost stick.

The recovered stick gave her another unpleasant surprise: it helped her find out that her maize cobs had been scattered all over. She had so tightly packed them though. By all means, she had to recover them all, lest they might arouse suspicion, should enemy troops go back this way. And so, she went on groping in the dark, her weary hands coming across stones, rotten wood, dry leaves and even rattan thorns.

After crawling under the fallen tree, Tidu slowed down her pace. The bruise on her forehead was as big as a chicken egg. Her legs were faltering almost beyond control. By now Anu and her grandmother should have been deep in sleep. She wondered whether Old Kha had properly locked the door and kept the fire alive so that Anu might not catch a cold. As for Ma Quang... No, she would rather not think of him any more.

The Chu Lay mountain was now far behind as she finished the last leg of her descent. Cocks began to crow in the nearby hamlet. She took to running through a thin patch of thatch-grass and went past the first houses in the hamlet. Happily, the dogs didn't bark, but only grumbled lazily. Suddenly, Tidu stopped. Yes, that was the house of Lien, her guerilla companion-in-arms during the anti-French Resistance War, a bosom friend of hers, and still a spinster. Could she still be trusted with such a secret? Perplexed, Tidu

made a few steps, then turned back. She was sure Lien, who had been taught the same things as she, was always herself. Over the past years, only a few men had turned traitors, getting enrolled in the MY-Diem army and working as village or district chiefs. But no woman had so far strayed from the right path.

As the dogs in Lien's house started barking furiously, Tidu gave a few warning coughs, lest any one might shoot at her from inside with his cross-bow.

Presuming that Lien might have been awake by then, Tidu set about climbing the stairs when someone shouted :

"Who's there?"

Tidu recognized the voice of Old Tanh, Lien's father. She replied :

"Father, it's me, Tidu. Is sister Lien home or at the *ray*?"

"Tidu dear..."

Lien tossed aside her ragged blanket and opened the door. Tidu told her to come down. The latter kept staring at her. In the dark Tidu could feel the deep fear of her friend who stood numb, unable to utter a single word. She whispered something into Lien's ears, while the latter passed her hands now on her hair, now on her dress and her bruised forehead.

In the end, Lien nodded :

"All right, but I'm afraid of tigers. Better leave it until morning, will you?"

"A guerilla should not be afraid of anything. I've covered a much longer distance. I've even passed through the Chu Lay mountain and didn't fear anything."

Lien pondered a while and said hesitatingly :

"I'm willing to go. But father and mother might not allow me..."

"All right, I shall talk them over."

Then Tidu went up the stairs and said :

"Father and mother, the My-Diem clique want to pressgang our young men into their army. Please allow Lien to go with me to Song Trang to inform our brothers. As for you, father, please let our fellow-villagers know about this. It's a sin to serve the My-Diem gang in shooting at our fellow-countrymen. If anyone asks you, just tell him that information came to you from Suoi Gia villagers. Don't say that it came from me."

Old Tanh shook his grey head :

"I'm afraid of My-Diem. They might arrest me. You know, there are a few scoundrels in this hamlet."

"Father, you just tell this to kind and stout-hearted people, and don't say a word to bad ones. Will that do?"

"All right."

With the help of a torch Tidu and Lien proceeded at a quick pace.

On reaching the approaches to Song Trang, they parted company. Lien went straight to the village, while Tidu turned left. As the path became easier, she put out the torch and threw it into the bush.

The dark shape of the Chu Tong mountain loomed ahead.

Leaning against the Chu Tong mountain was Old Lia's *ray*. It was there that five nights ago, while going to procure maize seeds, Tidu came across brother Phuong by pure chance.

Phuong tossed restlessly throughout the night. For, a year ago, the mass movement had to withstand most severe tests arising from massive attacks. The enemy set up a military outpost at C.R. and a concentration zone at Suoi Ca. Then, they launched mopping-up operations, burnt down houses, herded the population into specific areas, and established puppet administrative bodies at Lo May, Hon Da, Ca Thia and Suoi Gia... The local tyrants, who had fled away during the anti-French Resistance War, were now brought back to power with a view to taming down the population and holding them under tight control. Boasting that they had completed the "pacification" of the lowlands, the enemy now began prying into the highlands. A number of minority militants were arrested or killed, and the movement suffered notable losses. Yet, Phuong was not downhearted. He found with comfort that, in spite of those losses and the temporary severance of the leadership from the masses, the people continued to struggle on their own. While the enemy went on mopping up certain areas, we had succeeded in strengthening the hilly regions. And now, the time had come to make a thrust into the enemy-controlled regions and revive the movement. Song Trang was the springboard for this move.

Phuong's first objective was Suoi Gia, one of our fairly strong bases. Many highland people told him that "all the inhabitants at Suoi Gia had gone over to the enemy" and that armed civil guards would immediately arrest any revolutionary cadre that dared to show up there. Phuong was also told that the enemy had set a price—one *gia** of salt—on his head.

But this was not the only thing that disturbed him. He had fixed a rendez-vous for the next day with a former militant at Suoi Gia, a woman guerilla fighter. A few days earlier, he had an encounter with her when he passed through Old Lia's *ray*. He had no time to evade her when she rushed forward and gripped his hand, flushing with joy and emotion. After a long talk, he was told that she had married and had a child, and that she remained, as always, with the Revolution and the cadres. She also informed him of the local situation. Phuong was elated. Indeed, this was the first spark he had been looking for. They agreed to meet again after five nights. Yet, Phuong was torn by anxiety. Was she sincere? She might still cherish the revolution and the cadres, but would she have the courage to renew contact and engage underground activities? What if she had turned traitor? Such a possibility should not be lightly omitted.

And so, although the rendez-vous had been scheduled for noon, Phuong set out quite early. Better to take the initiative in any circumstance, he told himself.

* About zokg (*Pub.*).

Phuong walked lightly, taking care not to tread dry branches. On reaching the edge of the forest, he peered into the darkness, looking for any suspect signs. Then he moved into the heart of the *ray*, approached the watch-tower, trying to detect footprints.

Suddenly Phuong sat down. Through the tree leaves, he saw a human silhouette in the watch-tower. He held back his breath, listening intently to the noise around. If the enemy were lying in ambush, there were certainly suspect indications. Silence still prevailed. Phuong slowly crawled towards the tower. In the glimmering dawn light, he saw a human being—yes, a woman—sleeping in a standing position beside a basket, her back leaning against a pillar of the tower.

Phuong exclaimed loudly:

“Sister Tidu!”

The woman waked up with a start:

“Oh, God, brother Phuong.”

With her hair dishevelled, her dress and skirt soaked through, the woman gripped his arms with her icy hands. The bruise on her head told much to Phuong. He knew quite well the path leading from Suoi Gia to Song Trang. He knew only too well how scared of the night are women of the national minorities.

“Brother Phuong, I was so afraid that you might not come. I arrived here when it was still quite dark. Just imagine how glad I was when I could find new ashes in the hearth.”

She informed Phuong that the enemy were about to make an incursion into Song Trang.

“You must go away for a while,” she said. “Give me your towel, I shall pack some rice and salt for you.”

A crystal of salt dropped on the ground. Tidu hurriedly picked it up and threw it into her mouth. Phuong looked away, his heart filled with compassion.

At sunrise, Tidu lifted her basket and set out on her return trip. Though hungry and sleepy she did not feel tired in the least. Yes, brother Phuong was right. If we all stood up as one man, the My-Diem gang would certainly be defeated. With brother Phuong and other cadres, Tidu would not fear the Americans and Diemist agents, nor the tigers and elephants that roam about in the Chu Lay mountain. But what gladdened her most was that brother Phuong did not resent her husband's behaviour. He had told her, “Ma Quang is afraid and ignorant. That's the real cause of it all. Let's take pain to talk him to reason once, twice, many times if necessary.”

The sun rose over the horizon, and to Tidu it seemed to smile sweetly.

1963

THE XANU FOREST

THE village is within range of enemy artillery from the neighbouring post. They have acquired the habit of firing on it twice a day: either at dawn and dusk, or at noon and nightfall, or at midnight and cock-crow. Most of the shells usually fall on the *xanu*-covered hill beside the stream. Almost all the *xanu*, tens of thousands of them, bear their traces. Some have been cut in the middle, and have fallen as in a storm. From the cuts, sap has oozed in abundance, fragrant and sparkling at first under the summer sun, darkening and curdling later into blood-like clots.

Few species grow as vigorously as the *xanu*. For every tree that falls, four or five young ones spring up, their green, arrow-like tops shooting skyward. Few thirst so much for sunshine; the young plants grow very rapidly towards the sunshine, which pours down into the forest in big shafts glittering with myriads of yellow fragrant specks from the sap. When young, breast-high trees are cut down by the shells, the gashes cannot heal and the sap that exudes from them is thin and clear, they die within five or ten days. But full-grown ones, with thick foliage, cannot be

killed by the shells, their wounds heal quickly as young bodies do. And so, through all these last two or three years, the *xanu* forest has provided a shield for the village.

Standing on that *xanu*-clad hill and looking towards the horizon, one could see, as far as the eye can reach, nothing but an endless succession of other *xanu*-covered hills.

* * *

After three years in the Liberation armed forces, this was the first chance Thu had to return to his native village. He met little Heng at the stream and the boy offered to show him the way. The day Thu joined up, Heng was a mere tot not even reaching his waist, who used to follow grown-ups to the *ray*, carrying a tiny basket on his back. Now, it was an infantry rifle he was carrying. They followed the old path which wound through manioc and *pomchu* * fields, climbed up two steep slopes where steps had been carved, and crossed a forest teeming with jungle leeches on rainy days before arriving at his small village. Thu would not have dared to venture alone, without a guide, over this once so familiar track. It was now full of traps and pits: bent bamboos which, when released, would sweep the path and break your legs, spike traps, spears hurled in pairs by powerful cross-bows, etc. Little Heng was rather taciturn like all the inhabitants of Xoman. He was wearing a cap

* A kind of tubers (*Pub.*).

which some Liberation armyman had given him, a too long jacket and a G-string, and with his rifle slung across his back, he looked a real fighter. At times when they passed by some particularly well defended spot, he would wink at Thu and smile as if he wanted to ask him, "What do you think of that, brother?" His eyes would shine with pride, and Thu would smile back at him and nod sympathetically.

They stopped before a bamboo pipe emerging from a crevice from which water was gushing. Heng said:

"Wash your feet, but don't drink this water or you'll be criticized by Sister Zit."

Thu laughed and asked, "Is Sister Zit the village health official?"

"No, she is secretary of the Party Committee, and political commissar of the village militia, too."

Ah, so that was it. Thu took off his cap, unfastened a few buttons of his jacket and, bending over the brook, splashed water on his face and head. The water was quite cold. His blood circulated more quickly and he felt pulsations in his cheeks.

"So, Zit has become secretary of the village Party Committee," Thu thought to himself. He could not imagine what she looked like now. Zit was Mai's younger sister. Soon after Mai's death when Thu was about to leave the village to join the Liberation army, the little girl had stayed awake all night, sitting beside the fire as she had no shirt to put on. At dawn, she had pounded rice for Thu to take along with him. She pounded thirty canfuls of rice, put it

in a sausage-like bag and gave it to him. She did not weep nor say a word over her sister's death, while everybody, even Old Met, cried his eyes out.

Heng said: "You'd better hurry. Cold water will give you fever. Let's go. It will be dark soon."

Thu did not dry his hair. He took his cap and followed the young boy. At the edge of the forest, a big tree had fallen across the path and they had to climb over. A long trench had been dug by the guerillas nearby. The day Thu left the village, the tree was still standing. He stopped: it was here that he had met Mai for the first time. Well, it was not exactly the first time: they were from the same village and had known each other since they were small infants carried about by their mothers on their backs. But it was here that he had met Mai for the first time after he had escaped from prison. She had grown up so much, and when she took his hands—they were then still intact—and wept, her tears were no longer those of a child friend, but of a blushing loving girl. The memory of this meeting gave Thu a sharp pain. He opened his eyes wide, the way he had done years ago, when undergoing ferocious torture by the enemy.

Little Heng did not know about that episode in Thu's life. He got on the tree and, turning, beckoned: "Hurry up, brother. Can't you even climb a little slope, after being away from the village so long?"

The sloping path was full of spiked pits. Thu walked in silence and the features on his face had hardened. From afar, he now heard the muffled sound of rice pestles, and he realized that what he

had missed so much during those three years he had been away from the village was that sound of rice-pounding pestles worked by the diligent hands of the Stra* women—his mother, Mai, Zit—which was so familiar to him since his childhood. He tried to keep calm but his heart was beating wildly and his feet kept stumbling over tree roots. He overtook Heng, then outstripped him. The boy protested: "Hey, there are plenty of traps around. It's not like what it used to be. Wait for me. Go behind."

They reached the village before sunset. Heng rested the butt of his rifle on the ground and shouted, "Hey, we've got a guest!"

From each door emerged four or five heads, looking perplexed. Eyes opened wide, then joyful shouts were heard: "Heaven! Thu... Thu has come back... Are you really back, Thu?"

Some, not caring to use the stairs, jumped down from the bamboo terrace of their houses on stilts. Old women—God! Old mother Leng was still alive!—slowly groped their way down, gently cursing the young man:

"Did the Evil One get you, young devil? You wouldn't return before my death, would you?"

Heads were still sticking out of the openings of the houses — giggling young girls, who were too timid to go down and welcome Thu. He was soon surrounded by a thick crowd. He recognized them all: Old Tang, with his usual fringe of beard, sporting a long pipe made with metal retrieved from a downed helicopter:

* A national minority of Viet Nam (*Pub.*).

Brother Pro, now looking quite a bit older; Sister Blom with white streaks in her hair; Old Mother Proi, who had lost all her teeth... A swarm of urchins, their faces smeared with soot from *xanu* fire. "Where's Old Met?" Thu asked.

A heavy hand tightly clasped his shoulder. He turned: Old Met was there, looking as sturdy as ever, his glossy black beard reaching down to his chest, his slant eyes shining, and with the old scar on his cheek. His bare chest looked as strong as the trunk of an old *xanu*. He gave Thu a gentle push, eyed him up and down, then burst into an uproarious laughter:

"Ha-ha!... A Tommy gun... Liberation armyman... Right!"

Thu understood what the old man meant. He never said, "Good!" or "Wonderful!" When he was most pleased, he would say, "Right!"

As soon as Old Met spoke, everybody fell silent. It was as if he was giving orders. A powerful, resounding voice. And yet, he was sixty.

"How long is your leave?" Old Met asked. "Just one night? Right. If your commander gives you one night's leave, stay over one night. If he gives two, stay over two. Orders are orders. Tonight, stay at my place."

Nobody protested. Met added:

"Now, everybody go home. The day is over, it's about time to prepare the evening meal. You kids, go and wash your faces clean of soot: you all look like actors on the stage. Those who don't do so, let their

pals give them a good dressing down... You Thu, go and wash your feet. You remember where the fountain is, don't you? You do? Right. If you didn't, I'd chase you out into the jungle!"

However, after asking Thu to hand him his pack and gun, Old Met led him to the fountain near the entrance to the village. The children followed them in swarms. A few girls, whose faces Thu remembered quite well but whose names he couldn't yet call to mind, were filling long bamboo stems with water falling from a bamboo pipe. They stood aside making room for him. The young man had washed his face before reaching the village, but he washed it again. Then he took off his shirt and let the cold water fall on his head, back and chest, as he had done in the old days, at this same place, standing on a flat stone with a worn-off corner, where Old Met used to sharpen his knife.

Met stood in silence, watching Thu's big back. It was covered with purple scars. Tears trickled down his cheeks, which he hastened to wipe. Thu didn't see them, but they bewildered the children...

From the house roofs rose dark violet threads of smoke.

* * *

The meal comprised a vegetable soup without salt, and some fish; the fish was a special course in honour of the guest. Thu opened his food-box and gave Old Met a spoonful of salt. The old man said:

"I still have half a tinful of salt Zit gave me when she came back from the district Congress of Emulation

Fighters. The salt she received as a reward at the Congress, she shared with us all. But this is reserved for the sick."

Old Met didn't put the salt Thu gave him into the soup. He shared it among all present, each receiving a few grains. They put the salt in their mouths grain after grain and let it melt, slowly enjoying its taste. The rice was mixed with *pomchu* tubers. Raising his bowl, Old Met explained:

"It's not that we are short of food. We have enough rice till the next harvest. But each household must build up a three-year reserve. You're with the revolution, your commander must have told you that we shall have a long fight against the Yanks."

Then he asked, off-handedly, "Your ten fingers, they still remain as they were, without tips? Can't those tips grow again, huh?"

He angrily put his bowl down:

"But everyone in the village knows that, don't they? A finger can pull a trigger even if only two-thirds of it is left. Did you pass by the *xanu* forest near the big stream? The trees are thriving. Nothing is stronger than our *xanu*. One fallen, others grow up. I defy those bastards to destroy the whole forest. Eat, son. We Stra people grow good rice, the best rice in this part of the country."

Soon after the meal was over three sounds of tocsin came from the direction of the communal house. The village people began streaming to Old Met's. Girls stamped out their torches before going into the house, but some old women entered the room with burning

ones in their hands so that they could have a good look at Thu, and then threw them into the fire-place, making the flames leap fiercely. Old men asked in a resounding voice when they had only walked half way up the stairs. "Is Thu there? Have you given him a good meal, Old Met?"

An old woman said, "You men, make room for Zit. Sit here, daughter."

Thu looked up. Zit sat in front of him, her legs bent to one side, her skirt covering even her ankles. The young man shivered: it was Mai sitting before him. He couldn't believe his eyes, Zit was so much like her sister! Her nose, which used to have a round tip when she was a child, was now straight and thin, her eyes under dark eyebrows were wide open, clear and calm. She looked at Thu for a long time, while four or five kiddies scrambled for a place beside her. Then she asked, her voice somewhat cold, "Have you got a paper?" Thu did not understand. "What paper?" he asked in reply.

"Your leave paper. You can't come home for a visit without a regular paper. The village Committee would put you under arrest if you did."

Thu burst out laughing. He had half a mind to say in jest that he hadn't got any paper, that he had been too homesick, and that he had simply left his unit to pay a short visit to his native village. But Zit's stern look and the waiting silence around him made him change his mind. He took a paper from his pocket and handed it to Zit. "All right," he said, "here's my paper, comrade political commissar."

The girl took Thu's paper and held it to the light from the fire. A dozen heads bent over. Children began spelling out the letters in it. Zit took a long time to read, starting all over again two or three times. Old Met asked, "Right? Has he got regular leave?"

Zit gave the paper back to Thu. Only then did she smile: "All right! Your commander's signature is there. You'll stay here only one night?" she asked. Then she added, "It's quite all right. It's enough for the village people to see how you look now. We have been talking so much about you."

The room was now resounding with talk and laughter. People voiced their remarks: "The commander's signature is on the paper."—"It's quite all right!"—"Only one night? Oh, such a short stay!"... Above the hubbub rose Old Met's rumbling voice, "Ha-ha... Right!"

Pushing some children gently aside, the old man sat down beside Thu, next to the fire. He knocked the bowl of his pipe on the "head of the household god"*, picked up a little bamboo stick and cleaned his pipe with it, then looked around at the people in the room. They seemed to be all waiting for him to begin speaking.

Outside, a night drizzle was falling and the wind blew softly. The old man's voice was very low-pitched.

"All the old folk know this story. Some of the young people do, others don't. The children certainly

* Any of the three lumps of clay on which rests a cooking pot (*Pub.*).

have heard nothing about it." The old man stopped and stared at the kids, who sat silently with their eyes wide open. He continued:

"Thu, your brother Thu, has just been back." He laid his muscular hand on the young man's shoulder. "I've talked to you quite often about him. He has joined the Liberation army, now he pops in to see us. He's got leave for one night. His leave paper bears the commander's signature; the Party secretary has checked it. Here he is! He is one of our Stra people. His parents died when he was a child. He was brought up by our village people. His life was hard, but his heart was clean like the water of the stream. Tonight, I am going to tell you all his story, in honour of his visit to the village. Let everyone of you Stra people who love your mountains and your streams and who have ears to hear, listen to my story and try to remember it. When I die, let him tell it to our children and grandchildren..."

Everybody kept silent. One could hear only the far-off noise of the water from the bamboo pipe, mingled with the muffled sound of raindrops on the tree leaves. Thu also kept silent. He looked at Old Met. The light from the flickering fire was playing on the old man's muscular body and Thu thought of the heroes of the old legends he used to listen to in long night sessions when still a child. He looked at Zit. She had grown as tall as Mai when he had met her at the foot of the tree standing at the entrance to the forest. The tree had now fallen across the path and the guerrillas had dug a maze of trenches around

it. Zit was also listening with calm, wide open and thoughtful eyes.

"The old folk have not forgotten. The dead have forgotten, let the living remember. At that time, My-Diem soldiers were roaming about the jungle like wild boars. Their bayonets were stained with blood, and their caps blood-red. Thu was then only a little child barely reaching my navel. He was quick as a squirrel..."

Oh yes, the old folk had not forgotten, the young and Thu himself too. In his mind's eye he saw a child carrying a small basket left by his mother. In the basket were two canfuls of rice hidden under some vegetable. The child was weaving his way in the jungle, jumping nimbly from one rock to another, bringing food to a revolutionary cadre. A little girl, smaller even than himself, was running after him, her hand lifting a too long skirt that her mother had just made for her. Hopping from one rock to another like a bird, she shouted, "Wait for me, Thu. Wait!" Her friend turned and glared at her. "Can't you keep your mouth shut, Mai? It's a clandestine job we're doing and you are bellowing like a hart!" Mai wanted to laugh but fearing a rebuke, she kept silent...

Yes, things were still alive in his memory. Everything. Everyone. Thu, Mai, Old Met, the cadre...

As if all that had happened only yesterday.

The revolutionary cadre's name was Quyét. Ever since adverse troops had come to this part of the country, they had been scouring the woods day and night. One heard echoes of the barking of their hounds and their guns. There was one thing the people of

Xoman village were proud of: for five years, not a single cadre had been either caught or killed by the enemy in that part of the jungle. At first, the young people brought food to the cadre and kept watch for him. Then U.S.-Diem agents found out and struck at them. Young Xut was hanged on a fig-tree at the entrance to the village. "Such will be the fate of any who tries to bring food to the communists!", warned the men.

Then they forbade the young people to go into the jungle. Food was brought to the cadre by the old folk. Again the agents got to know. They caught Old Mrs Nhan and chopped off her head and tied it by her hair to a gun barrel.

The children replaced the old folk. The most devoted among them were Thu and Mai. When Thu was busy working in the *ray*, Mai went to the jungle. When Mai had to look after her little sister Zit, Thu went. Sometimes, they both went. They even stayed overnight in the jungle: you can't leave a cadre alone there, how would he know which way to flee if U.S.-Diem agents tried to track him down? Once Quyét, the cadre, asked them:

"Aren't you afraid of My-Diem men? They will kill you like Xut and Old Mrs Nhan."

Thu, who had snuggled close up to Quyét, sprang to his feet and said in a firm voice: "Old Met says: The cadres are the Front. So long as the Front is there, the mountains and the streams will be ours."

In the jungle, Quyét taught Thu and Mai the alphabet. He cut a few bamboo stems, crushed them flat,

put them together into a few boards the width of three hands lying side by side. The boards were blackened with *xanu* soot and coated with resin. Then Thu walked three days to Mount Ngoc Linh from which he brought back a basketful of white stones, which they used as chalk. Mai was a much better student than Thu; after three months she had learned to read and write, and after six months she could do two-figure sums. Thu was slower-witted and, what was worse, flew easily into fits of rage. Once, Mai having got the better of him in a test, he broke his bamboo board and left for the bank of the stream where he sat all day long in the sulks. He refused to say a word to Quyet and threatened to beat Mai. Then Mai went and sat beside him.

"So long as you stay here," she said gently, "I'll be with you. Let's go back, Thu. I've made a new board for you." Then Thu seized a stone and struck at his own forehead, which started bleeding. Quyet had to bandage his wound.

That night, lying beside Thu, Quyet whispered into his ear: "Should I ever be killed by My-Diem men you would have to replace me. But you can't do a cadre's work unless you know how to read and write."

Thu feigned to be fast asleep, but his eyes filled with tears. When morning came, he called Mai to a corner behind the grotto where they were hiding. "Tell me, Mai," he said, "what's that letter which looks like an 'o' with a hook, and that one next to it with a big belly..."

Mai turned away, trying hard to smother a laugh. She whispered, "You've a very good memory, Thu."

The name of the letter is 'b'." "Oh yes, 'b', 'b', that's right, what a blockhead I am!"

Thu wasn't a bright fellow as far as remembering letters was concerned. But his knowledge of jungle paths had no equal. He was Quyet's liaison agent with the district. Never did he travel over the usual tracks. And whenever the enemy tried to block all pathways, he would climb on top of a tree, ascertain his bearings and then work his way through the jungle without ever getting lost. Whenever he had to cross a stream, he would choose a place where the waters were wild and turbulent and then he would swim across, like a fish. "The My-Diem agents will lay ambushes where the waters are quiet," he said. "They won't where the waters are wild."

But once, as he was about to cross the Dac Nang river after wrapping Quyet's letter in a leaf and putting it in his mouth, guns were pointed at him. He had barely time to swallow the letter.

Three days later, the Xoman saw Thu come back with his hands tied, escorted by enemy soldiers.

"Tell us who among the villagers are communists, otherwise you'll die," threatened the soldiers. People were standing around. Old Met stood beside Thu. The old man told him in the Stra dialect, his voice rumbling: "Don't make the Xoman people ashamed of you!" Thu merely glanced back at him, and the old man said, "Right!"

Thu's back was crisscrossed with cuts from knives. "Show us the communists," the soldiers bawled at

him. "Untie my hands," he said, "how could I show you anything with my hands tied?"

They loosened one of his hands. Thu put it on his belly. "Here's one," he said. Another gash cut his back, which was hardly the width of the basket left by his mother. Blood oozed from the gash, which by the afternoon had turned to a dark purple, the colour of *xanu* sap.

Before the soldiers took him away, Mai clasped him in her arms and burst into tears. Thu said, as if in anger: "Don't cry! Don't! Study hard. When I die, you'll be a cadre in my place..."

Three years later, Thu came back to Xoman, having made a successful escape from Kontum jail. The wounds on his back had healed. He met Mai at the foot of the big tree at the edge of the forest, and as she took his hands, her eyes filled with tears. As for him, he looked at Mai with surprise: she had grown so tall! She took him to the village where the people assembled at Old Met's just as they did tonight. Yes, just like tonight...

Old Met's voice rumbled on, like an echo from that night in the distant past:

"Just like this night. In the same house, around the same hearth. A drizzle was also falling. I was sitting here. Thu there, and Mai there, where Zit is now... Am I right, Thu?"

Yes, he was right. It was just like tonight: The drizzle tapping on the leaves of the fig-tree, the *xanu* sticks burning fiercely in the hearth, the distant noise of the water falling from the bamboo nozzle. The people had assembled at Old Met's then to congratulate Thu on his successful escape from jail. Mai was sitting just in front of him, like Zit tonight, and like her she had dark eyebrows, so dark they overshadowed somewhat her shining eyes. Perhaps her eyes were less serious and more affectionate than Zit's, but just as calm and determined. And of course, Old Met hadn't been speaking the way he did tonight. He had simply said:

"Mai, give me that paper Quyet left. Thu, you read it out."

Shortly after Thu's arrest, Quyet had gone to work in Bay district. He had soon been seriously wounded in an enemy ambush and had died in the jungle. Before breathing his last, he had written a message to the Xoman people. Thu held the paper to the light from the *xanu* fire and read aloud:

"Dear Thu, Mai, and Xoman people, I am going to die. You who are living must get your spears, arrows and cross-bows ready. Hide them in the jungle so that the enemy can't discover them. The day will come when you'll have to use them. As for Thu, you must study hard, and replace me as a cadre..."

Yes, everybody had been there. Old Tang, Brother Pro, Sister Blom, Old Mrs Broi, Old Leng. One thing was different though: Mai had been there. After Thu had finished reading Quyet's message, the whole hamlet

lit *xanu* torches and followed Old Met into the jungle to fetch carefully hidden weapons. Thu walked three days to Mount Ngoc Linh, but it was not to bring back chalk, as he had done three years before. He brought back a basketful of grinding stone. On top of Mount Ngoc Linh, there was enough grinding stone for the steel to be used in one hundred insurrections.

Night after night, the people of Xoman sharpened their weapons. In the daytime, following Old Met's directions, they cleared patches of forest and grew cassava and *pomchu*, so much so that part of the jungle was turned into green fields.

Then the news came to the soldiers at Dac Ha post that the Xoman people had been sharpening spears and knives. In full harvest-season, a whole squad of them came, soon after the birth of Mai's and Thu's first son. Zuc, their commander, wearing a blood-red cap, bellowed:

"It's Thu again, and nobody else. If we don't kill that tiger, he will kick up heaps of trouble."

Old Met and Thu had taken all the youth of the village into the jungle, not far from the village though. They had hidden themselves among the rocks and trees from where they were able to follow closely the comings and goings of the U.S.-Diem troops.

The enemy stayed in the village for four days and four nights. Their whips spared nobody. Cries and moans filled the village. Zuc, brandishing his rifle, shouted:

"Anyone caught trying to leave the village will be shot dead on the spot."





Nobody was able to leave. Nimble little Zit alone succeeded in carrying some rice every day at dusk to Old Met, by creeping out into the jungle along the bamboo water pipes. At dawn of the fourth day she was caught on her return from the forest. The ruffians ordered the child to stand in the middle of the courtyard then fired their Tommy guns at her, bullet after bullet, purposely avoiding to hit her. The bullets whizzed past her ears, singed her hair, ripped up the earth beside her tiny feet. Zit burst out crying when the firing began, but after the tenth bullet or so, she wiped her tears and tightened her lips. She stood surrounded by the soldiers, her slender body twitching each time a gun crashed, but her eyes staring at her persecutors were as calm as those of the Party secretary now sitting in front of Thu.

Unable to draw the least information from the child, Zuc had Mai arrested. "If we lay our hands on the tigress and her cub, we'll soon get the tiger himself," he bellowed.

Thu heard those words. He was hiding behind a tree at the entrance to the village near the fountain. From there he could see quite clearly the courtyard before the communal house. His hands clutched tightly at the tree trunk as he saw the soldiers, ten of them, drag Mai onto the courtyard. She was carrying her baby on her back, her one-month-old child, who everybody said was the very image of its father. As he could not go to Kontum to buy some fabric, Thu had had to tear his sash into halves and give one to Mai to wrap their child in. Now the baby was fast asleep on its mother's back.

"Where is your husband, you dirty communist?" asked Zuc.

Mai gently moved her baby, who had lolled to one side, into an upright position, then raised her head and stared at Zuc with her eyes wide open.

"Have you lost the use of your tongue, bitch!" Zuc bellowed. Then turning to the soldiers, he roared,

"What are you waiting for?"

A burly ruffian, holding an iron rod in his hands, stepped towards Mai. Sticking out his tongue, he ran it over his lips, then slowly raised his stick. Mai gave a sharp cry and hastily moved her child from her back to her breast, just before the iron rod lashed her back.

"Where is Thu?"

The second blow fell on her chest, but she had had time to move the baby away from it, onto her back. Again the soldier swung his stick and Mai again moved her child away from the blow. But the soldier quickened his tempo. No more cries came from Mai. Then the child gave out a shriek and silence fell: nothing was heard but the thudding sound of the blows.

Thu's hands fell away from the tree trunk. He sprang up but a hand caught his shoulder and he heard Old Met's voice, "No, not you, Thu! Let me..."

Thu pushed Old Met's hand away. Again the old man no longer recognized his face: his eyes were two embers. Old Met let go the young man's shoulder.

A terrible roar. Thu had rushed into the middle of the courtyard. The burly ruffian fell flat on his back and Zuc was flying into the communal house. The

clicking of gun-bolts was heard. Then Mai holding her baby in her arms crawled into Thu's arms, and he clasped them in his strong embrace.

"Here I am, cannibals! Here's Thu!" he shouted.

But Thu could not save Mai and her child.

"No, Thu could not save Mai and their child," Old Met was saying in his rumbling voice. He awkwardly wiped a tear. Then he continued in a louder tone:

"Thu could save neither his wife nor his child. Mai died that very night. As for the child, it was already dead. The iron rod had struck its belly as its mother fell, unable to protect it. As for you, Thu, they caught you, you had but your bare hands, and tied you up. I was standing behind a tree. I saw them tie you up with liana. I did not rush to your rescue. I too had but my bare hands. I went into the jungle, in search of the other young men. They had gone to fetch their spears and knives. Listen carefully, my children. Listen carefully and remember. When I die, you who are living must repeat it to your children: if the enemy come with guns, we must fetch our spears!"

The soldiers tied Thu up with liana, threw him into a corner of the communal house, then left to gorge themselves on the meat from the pig they had seized from Brother Broi.

Darkness fell. Thu was surprised to find himself so calm. He thought: "The baby has died. So has Mai probably. I too am going to die. Who is to become a cadre? Who is going to lead the Xoman people when the orders come from the Party for the insurrection? Old Met is already well on in years. Never mind, there

are still the young people. Zit will grow up. She is even more resolute than her sister... The only thing I regret is that I won't live to see the day when the Xoman people will rise up in arms..."

Zuc did not kill Thu right away. He had a big fire lighted in the middle of the communal house, and had all the people assembled there. Then he untied Thu and addressed the villagers:

"I heard that you bastards had started sharpening your knives and spears. All right! Those who want to hold knives and spears, let them look at Thu's hands." He signalled to the strongest-looking of his soldiers. They had got everything ready. The soldier took some rags out of his cartridge bag. The rags had been soaked with *xanu* resin. He wrapped Thu's fingers in them and took a firebrand. But Zuc said, "I'll do it!" and seized the piece of burning wood.

Not a cry came from Thu's lips. He glared at Zuc, who gave out a devilish laugh and held the flaming stick nearer to his face:

"Let's have a close look at this communist who wants to take up arms!" he said. "Listen, you rascals, you are not destined to take up arms! Give up that wild dream of yours!"

One of Thu's fingers set ablaze. Another soon followed, then another... *Xanu* resin is very inflammable. Thu's fingers were now but ten flaming little torches. Thu closed his eyes, then opened them again, staring before him. Heavens! The fire, it seemed, was not only devouring his fingers, but his lungs, his bowels as

well. There was a bitter taste of blood in his mouth: he had bitten his lips hard. But he did not utter a single cry. A communist never begs for mercy, Quyet had said. He would never beg for mercy, Thu said to himself. The flames were biting hard at his very bowels. O Quyet, brother! Was he Thu, going to cry out? Oh no, never.

Zuc's devilish laugh was ringing. The old folk had sprung up to their feet, but the soldiers kept them at a distance. Then all of a sudden there were shouts and heavy foot-steps. What was happening?

Thu uttered a shrill cry, only one, but his cry was immediately re-echoed many times. "Kill them!" Voices started shouting and foot-steps shook the floor of the communal house. The soldiers shrieked. Then Old Met's booming voice rose: "Kill them all!" Here he was, Old Met, a long knife in his hands, and Zuc was lying at his feet. Around him stood the youth of the village, each with a knife in his hands, a knife whose glittering blade had been sharpened on the grinding stone Thu had brought back from Mount Ngoc Linh.

Then Thu heard the calm voice of Brother Broi:

"Thu, Thu, have you recovered your senses? Look, we've killed them all, all the ten of them, with our spears, with our knives! Look!"

The fire on Thu's fingers had been put out. But the big fire of *xanu* in the middle of the room was still burning. The bodies of the soldiers were lying all around.

Old Met was standing in the middle of the room, resting the tips of his spear on the floor, and his voice again boomed:

"Now is the beginning. Let's light big fires. Let everyone, young, old, men, women, get a spear or a knife. Those who can't, let them sharpen bamboo spikes, five hundred spikes apiece! Light the fires!..."

Gongs resounded...

Standing on the *xanu* hill near the big stream, one could feel a great stirring in the Xoman part of the jungle. And everywhere, big fires had been lighted...

* * *

It was already quite late in the night. But nobody seemed to be aware of it. The rain had grown heavier.

Old Met raised his head and looked around. His goatee quivered as he added:

"I've told you the whole story. The people of Xoman took up arms that night. Thu left soon after, when his fingers had healed. Each of his fingers had but two joints left, but he could still hold a spear and fire a rifle. We had heard that on the other side of Mount Ngoc Linh there was another Zuc, and that the people there had also risen up. So we sent Thu to look for the revolution and he has been away ever since... Why have you been so long, you young devil? The girls have all been longing for you. Now, then, I've said all I have to say. Now is your turn. What have you done all these three years? Have you done anything we should be ashamed of? What have you done? How many of My-Diem men have you killed?"

Thu stood up. He stepped towards the fire. What should he say? Love for his people filled his heart.

"Old Met, all of you folk!" he said at last. "I... yes, I met that Zuc..."

"Where?"

"In his post."

"Did you kill him?"

"I did."

"Did you shoot him?"

"No."

"Why?"

Thu unslung his rifle from his shoulder and rested it on the floor.

"Well," he said, "it happened like this. We attacked their post and killed all the troops."

"All of them?"

"All of them. Their commander had taken refuge in an underground shelter. We called on him to surrender but he refused. We dropped grenades, but there were recesses sheltering him from the splinters. Our commander asked, 'Who'll go down after him?' I said, 'I'll go.' So, I went down. It was pitchdark. I got hold of him. He fired. I snatched away his gun. He tried to overpower me, but I was the stronger of the two. I put my knee on his chest, and switched on my flashlight. 'Zuc,' I asked, 'do you remember me?' He shook his head. 'All right,' I said, 'look at my hands. They can still hold a rifle.' He started rolling his eyes in terror. I said, 'Look, I have a gun. I have a knife, too. But I

won't shoot you and I won't stab you. Listen, Zuc, I'm going to strangle you with my maimed fingers."

Zit asked in a calm voice:

"You killed him all right?"

"Of course."

"But he was not Zuc!"

"Well... all of them are Zucs."

Old Met stood up. He laid his heavy hand on Thu's shoulder. "Right!" he said. "Right!" he laughed grimly. The sound echoed. Laughter filled the room.

Cannon shells started falling on the *xanu* hill near the big stream. But nobody paid any attention. The people's voices drowned the muffled explosions.

* * *

Thu left in the morning. Old Met and Zit walked part of the way with him. They came to the *xanu* forest near the big stream. Last night's shelling had cut down several big trees. The sap which had oozed from their wounds glittered under the summer sun. All around, countless saplings were springing into life. Shoots were bursting from the ground, pointed as bayonet tips.

They stood there for a long moment, looking into the distance. *Xanu* forests followed each other to the horizon, as far as the eye could reach.

1964

Nguyen Sang

THE IVORY COMB

BATHED in moonlight, the hut lay hidden in the heart of the Plain of Reeds, amidst a thinly grown mangrove belt washed by the rising water. A liaison post on a communication artery, it was small but crowded with people. As we had to wait for our turn to leave, we now lay relaxing, now sat cross-legged on a plank bed with a sense of confinement. To while away our time we chose to tell stories. I shall never forget an elderly comrade, a really talented story-teller. His smuts—Resistance smuts, too—made us die with laughing. To begin, he always summoned a smile and looked rather funny. But that night there was something different with him. He insisted that he should talk, but when all agreed he remained silent for quite a moment. He bent his head a little, sat very still and looked out into the immensity of the water around. We stopped joking in anticipation of something serious. Outside, a gusty wind blew and the surfs broke on the mangroves. The hut jolted and rocked like a boat. Some storks stirred uneasily, others flapped their wings, fluttering in the air. The waves and the wind seemed to remind him of remote events. He strained his ears as though he was

listening to a distant voice. In undertones, he began his story. Turning away from us, he stared at the horizon and the twinkling stars...

* * *

The story went back more than a year ago, but every time I remember it, I feel aghast as if I have just come out of a dream.

“That day I travelled from Post M.G. to Post D.A. As soon as the motor-boat left the shore, everyone of us was eager to know who was manning it. This was not merely out of curiosity. Before our departure we were told by the head of the liaison post that we had a long and dangerous journey ahead, and that we should have to go by boat and also on foot. By water, we would be easily spotted by choppers, and by land we would easily bump against commandos. Should choppers whirl overhead, we would have to remain calm and strictly abide by the steerman’s orders. That meant we would place our fate in his hand. I naturally wanted to know who he was. Darkness, however, only allowed me to notice that it was a slender young girl with a U.S.-made carbine slung on her shoulder and a scarf round her neck. Her manner was rather tidy.

“I knew by hearsay that this post had a very clever liaison girl. One day, she guided a group of cadres. Before crossing a river, she asked them to stop in a paddy-field far from the bank. Together with her male colleague, she moved forward to probe the area. On arriving at an orchard near the river, she realized that



she had fallen into an ambush. She showed no sign of embarrassment and told her friend :

‘Everything is all right. Go back and take the travellers here. I’ll get to the other side to bring the boat.’

“She spoke in a loud voice so that the enemy could hear her. By doing so, she gave a secret signal. The liaison man paced back and quietly took the travellers across the river from another point, a few kilometres away. As for her, she planted two grenades then crossed the river safely. Meanwhile, the enemy lay in wait, hoping to make a good catch. Time wore on and nothing happened. Knowing that they had been deceived, the commandos cursed one another and returned to their base. On their way, they stumbled against the grenade trap which took several lives. Later, pepping the story, people said that the girl had a keen sense of smell, and that she could thereby locate the enemy and differentiate between the Yanks and the puppets.

“If it happened that the girl who was to man the boat was the liaison woman in question, I thought, there would be no cause for much anxiety.

‘How many women are working at this post?’ I asked inquisitively.

‘Only two, a cook and I.’

“It was she, no doubt, and I was greatly relieved. Hearing her voice, I guessed her to be eighteen or twenty at most. I came to like her and wanted to ask her a few more questions. Seeing that she was busy

with the starting gear, I gave up the idea. After putting the cord around the disk, she stood erect and turned towards a boat nearby, saying :

'I start first, all right?'

'Hear, hear, good journey!' said the liaison men on the next boat. Some called her Sister Hai (eldest), others Sister Ut (youngest). She gave some witty answers, addressing them as "little brothers". Then, in a polite manner, she told us to put all important things in our pockets or in separate parcels to avoid losses in case we should be strafed by helicopters or ambushed by commandos.

"Unlike the station master, she warned us against these possible mishaps in a rather mild and lovely tone. Then she bent forward and started the motor. The boat left slowly the thick mangrove belt and dashed ahead. There was a pleasant chill in the air. On her instructions, the passengers busied themselves with their luggage. As for me, nothing else was more precious than my papers and travelling expenses which I always kept in my pocket. Suddenly, I thought of the tiny ivory comb. I unpacked my bag, searched it out, put it together with my papers in a pouch that I slid into my breast-pocket and carefully fastened this with a safety pin.

"The little comb was the only relic left by an intimate friend of mine. Whenever I looked at it, I would feel some solicitude and a pang of regret.

"It was the first days following the restoration of peace in 1954. My friend and I revisited our native village. We had lived next door to each other, near an estuary of the Mekong River. We both had joined the Resistance War at the beginning of 1946 after the invasion of our home province by the French. He stood sixth in his family and was accordingly called Sau. His only daughter was barely twelve months old. Every time his wife came to see him in the liberated zone he would urge her to take their daughter along the next time she came—something she dared not do as she had to go through the jungle. For herself such a journey was no easy job. Sau, therefore, could not find fault with her. For eight long years he saw his daughter only in a small-size photograph. Now on the way home, he was stirred by indescribable paternal feelings. The boat approached a landing place. He saw a little girl of about eight, with bobbed hair, black trousers and a red-flowered vest, play in the shade of a mango-tree in the front yard of a house. Not waiting for the boat to reach the bank, he jumped on to it: the boat was shoved back and I was almost dangling. He walked forward, then stopped and shouted, 'Thu, my daughter!'

"Just at that moment I was close behind him. He expected she would bound towards him and fling her arms around his neck. He made a few more steps, bending forward and opening his arms, ready to hold her in a warm embrace. Startled by his call, the little girl stared at him with round eyes, and looked lost and puzzled. As for him, he failed to control his emotion. When he was seized with a sudden emotion, the scar

on his right cheek would turn red and become dreadful to look at. With such a face and his hands stretching out, he slowly advanced and, in a trembling voice, he mumbled, 'Come on, daughter! Come on!'

"The girl could not understand and blinked at me as though to ask who he was. Her face suddenly grew pale. She broke away in a run and cried, 'Mother, Mother!' Sau stood motionless. His eyes did not leave her. His face was distorted with pain and his arms dropped listlessly.

"As the trip had been rather long, we had only three days left to stay at home, not enough for Thu to recognize her father. She did not allow him to spend that night with her mother. Showing sharp protest, she got out of bed, and standing on the ground, she pulled him out. Throughout most of the day, he tried to comfort her. His effort proved futile. She didn't say 'daddy' to him. When her mother told her to call him in for dinner, she retorted, 'You'd better call him yourself!'

"The mother exploded in fury, snatched a big chopstick and threatened to beat her, insisting that she should obey. 'Come in for dinner!' Thu simply said.

"Sau sat still, playing deaf, in wait for the word 'daddy'. She remained in the kitchen and raised her voice:

'Dinner is ready.' Sau did not move. The girl turned towards her mother, angrily.

'I've done as I was told, but he pays no heed to my call.'

"Sau eyed his daughter, shaking his head slightly, and smiled. Maybe he was too sorrowful to burst into tears. To prepare for the next meal, after putting the pot of rice on the fire his wife set out to buy some foodstuffs and told Thu to ask for Father's help if need be. The pot was boiling. The girl opened the lid and stirred the rice with a big chopstick. The pot was a bit too heavy to be lifted off the tripod to pour out the excess water in it. She looked up at Sau. I thought that she was now at the end of her tether and that all she could do was to call her father for help. She looked round for a moment.

'The pot is boiling. Reduce the water for me, please,' she said aloud.

"I intervened, trying to show her how to behave.

'You ought to say, 'Father, help reduce the water.'

"She seemed to ignore my words and went her way in a loud voice:

'The pot is boiling, the rice would be overcooked.'

"Sau stayed motionless.

'If you spoil the rice,' I threatened her, 'you'll surely be beaten by mother. Just say, 'Daddy, help me.'

"As the water in the pot was now boiling to over-measure, she apparently felt afraid, looked down and pondered. Still, she held her ground. With a rag, she tried to lift the pot but in vain. She looked up again. The pot boiled faster. Hard pressed,

she was near to crying. She turned her eyes on the pot, then on us. She looked both pitiful and funny. At last, she stretched out to take a large spoon and used it to bail out the water, muttering something we could not hear. She was terrible, indeed!

"During the meal, Sau served her with a lump of yellow fish egg. She set it aside in her bowl with her chop-sticks, then all of a sudden, she tossed it away, scattering rice all over. Angered by her behaviour, he beat her at the buttock. 'Why are you so mule-headed like that?' he shouted.

"I expected that the little girl would cry or run away. But she sat still and looked down. After a moment, she picked up the egg and put it into the bowl again. Then she stood up and quietly walked towards the riverside. She jumped into the boat, unfastened the chain, purposely jingled it noisily, and rowed across the river. She called on her grandmother, told her of what had happened and cried. That evening, her mother went to fetch her and tried hard to induce her to come back home. But it was in vain. Sau was to depart the next day. His wife would like to spend the last night with him, and so she did not insist on her daughter's coming back.

The next morning, relatives came in large numbers to see Sau off: Thu was also present with grandmother. He was busy receiving everybody and seemed not to pay attention to his daughter. His wife packed his belongings. The girl now stood alone in a corner, now leaned against the doorpan gazing at everybody around her father. She looked rather different, showing

no more obstinacy, no frown on her brow. Her long and upturned eyelashes which seemed to have never flickered, made her eyes look wider. Obviously she was thoughtful.

"At the moment of departure, only after he had said good-bye to everybody did Sau run his eyes to seek his daughter. Ostensibly he would like to embrace her. But he simply gazed at her, lest she might flee again. His look was affectionate and there was a tone of sadness in it. I noticed a flicker in the girl's eyes.

'Bye-bye,' Sau uttered in a soft voice.

"I thought that she would keep standing there in the corner. Unexpectedly she shouted, 'Dad... dy, dad...dy.'

The scream tore up the silence and rented everybody's heart. This 'daddy' broke out after being held back for many years past. Stretching out her arms, Thu rushed towards her father with the agility of a squirrel. She clung to his neck. Her hair seemed to stand on end on her head. Pressing herself tightly against his chest, she said with a sob:

'Daddy, I don't let you go. Stay with me.' The father hugged his daughter who kissed him in the cheek, in the hair, in the neck and in the long scar on his face.

"The grandmother then told me what had happened the night before. Trying to find out the reason why Thu refused to recognize her father, she asked her why she didn't say 'daddy' to him.

'No, he is not daddy,' she said, tossing over the bed.

' Why do you know? Daddy has been away from home for a long time. That's why you can't recognize him?'

' The man does not look like daddy as I see him in the photograph.'

' Still, he is your father. Perhaps he looks older after such a long time?'

' Not because he is older. Daddy has no scar on his cheek.'

" So, the grandmother understood everything. She explained that papa had been away fighting against the French and had got wounded. She related how the French perpetrated crimes in a post at the other end of the canal. The girl listened to her in silence, tossing herself every now and then and heaved a sigh like a grown-up. The next morning, she told grandmother to bring her home.

" The daughter kept pressing herself tightly against her father's chest. Sau could not contain his emotion, but he didn't want her to see him cry. He carried her with one arm and wiped his tears with the other. He kissed her hair and murmured:

' Let daddy go. I'll be back again soon.'

' No,' the girl screamed. She tightened her grasp around his shoulders, clinging to him both with her arms and her legs. Many among those present could not hold back his or her tears. I myself did not breathe at ease, and should like very much to tell Sau to stay on for some days more. But there were some

difficulties to this. We did not know whether we should remain in the south or be regrouped to the north. We had to be back at the appointed time and make the necessary preparations in case we should go north. It was time to leave. People tried to comfort the girl.

" Sau's wife told her: ' Thu, my love, let father go. He'll return and live with us here when our country is reunified.'

" The grandmother touched the girl's hair with her hand and said: ' My good girl, let daddy go. Tell him to buy a comb for you.'

' Buy a comb for me and take it home, daddy,' said Thu with a sob. Then she released her grasp and dropped to her feet.

" Some time later, Sau and I went to East Nam Bo and worked in a mass organization. The period between 1954 and 1959 was a dark one. The U.S.-Diem regime hunted down former Resistance members. We had to live in the jungle. Our life there was eventful and it would take me the whole night to relate them. It occurred that in a single night we were surrounded three times by commandos treading on our heels, and days when we had to feed ourselves on leaves. But that is another story.

" We would spend the night in our hammocks with a plastic sheet as a roof. Sau often told me he felt a strong remorse for having beaten his daughter. Once, he suddenly sat up and said: ' People here often go

hunting elephants. I must see whether I can lay hands on a piece of ivory to make a comb with for my daughter.'

"Since then he slept upon this hope. Not long afterwards, running short of food, we thought of hunting with bows and arrows, not with a rifle as the silence of the jungle had to be kept in view of our security. We had no idea of hunting elephants, but by chance one came across our place. None of us showed interest in the game, but Sau decided to chase it. With a friend he hid himself in a bush, waiting for the animal to come within reach. They hit him right in the eyes.

"I still remember that afternoon. The downpour over the jungle had come to an end. Drops of water shone on tree-leaves. I was working under my plastic roof when I heard someone shouting. I looked up and saw Sau rushing through the jungle on the trail leading to our place. He raised a piece of ivory and showed it to me. His face brightened like a child's.

"Afterwards he hammered a 20-millimetre cartridge into a small saw. He was often seen laboriously working on the piece of ivory to make a comb, with the attention, skill and industriousness of a jeweller. I was much interested in watching him at his work. He normally completed a couple of teeth a day, and the whole comb not long after, which was ten by one and a half centimetres. On the hold of the comb, Sau painstakingly engraved these words: 'With my love and best thoughts for my daughter Thu.'

The comb brought relief to Sau's troubled mind though his daughter had not the opportunity to use it. On certain nights he was seen gazing at it, polishing it on his hair. Sau longed to see her again. But an unfortunate event occurred. It was by the end of 1958, at a time when we had no weapons yet. In a raid by American and puppet troops, Sau was killed by a bullet fired from an American plane which hit him at the chest. Before he died, he had not enough energy to confide his last will. He could only plunge his hand into his pocket and take out the comb. Handing it, he intently gazed at me. I lack words to describe his look at that moment. I can only tell you that from that day on, I have often seen him in imagination, riveting his eyes on me.

'I won't fail to bring the comb to your daughter,' I said in a low voice, bending my head closer to him. Upon hearing this, Sau shut his eyes for ever.

"I must tell you that on those dark days, clandestinity was observed not only by the living — this was conceivable — but also by the dead. Sau's tomb could not be built higher than the ground as usual, for the enemy would desecrate it, should he trace it. I carved out a sign into the bark of a nearby tree as a reminder.

"That was the way our comrades lived and died at that time. It was unbearable and we had to rise up in arms.

"Some time later I was in a comparatively safe Resistance base. One relative called on me. I wanted to send the ivory comb to Thu but I was told that she and her mother had left for Saigon or the Plain of Reeds.

In the village where they lived the Americans and the puppets had organized 'To cong' * courses, conducted terrorist raids and burned down the people's houses to herd them into concentration camps. After some years the place became completely desolate.

"I held the comb in my hand. The sight of it gave me much pain.

"The motor of the boat went on humming. I felt an eager desire to have a close look at the face of the liaison girl on whom my safety depended. The night was not dark and the starry sky was covered here and there with some hazy clouds. In the faint light I could only distinguish the girl's profile, her rather round face and a pair of eyes with an indescribable look. These struck me and I thought I had met her somewhere before.

"Suddenly, someone shouted, 'A plane! A plane!'

"The boat rocked because of the agitation of the passengers. Many people screamed: 'Make to the bank!'

'Where is the plane?'

'I see its light behind us.'

'Turn to the bank! turn to the bank! It's a jet coming.'

"The liaison girl lowered the speed of the motor-boat and looked at the sky for a while.

'No, it isn't a plane. It's the light of a star.'

* Indictment of communists. (Pub.).

"Her calm voice brought order back in the boat. It was so gentle and sweet. Then she speeded up the engine.

"Our travel on motor-boat after several days' walking gave me a real pleasure. However, I still felt uneasy about enemy aircraft.

"The boat now engaged in a canal running through an open field. There were no houses at all, only some bamboo-clusters in the distance. As though aware of my feelings, the liaison girl accelerated the speed. Water swelled at the prow and waves reaching to the banks caused the weeds and roots of wild ferns to quiver.

The passengers were quietly enjoying the trip while the liaison agent stopped the motor and shouted: 'Aeroplanes.'

"She steered the boat towards a bamboo-bush. Another boat behind us also took shelter here. Now we heard the droning of American helicopters. I could not know how acute her sense of smell was as the story had, it but it was really wonderful that she had distinguished the droning of aircraft amidst the roaring of our motor.

"The boat rocked and some passengers lost their balance. She tried to soothe them, saying: 'Keep quiet, uncles; the choppers are still far away. Jump onto the bank, disperse and hide yourselves. If they send flashes upon you, stay where you are without moving.'

"As she spoke, all but I were already on the bank. I was about to jump out when the girl told me: 'Stay

here, uncle. We're only a few in the boat, don't worry.'

"I should not have obeyed if the advice was given by anyone else. But her behaviour had so impressed me that I remained onboard.

"The choppers came up and from the other end of the canal, their flares advanced towards us. They roared like a ship convoy and drew nearer and nearer. For such a job, the Americans usually used three helicopters, one lighting the way and the two others doing the strafing.

"The girl repeated her advice to me: 'Camouflage yourself carefully with tree leaves and sit motionless,'

"This was the first time I was caught by choppers' flares. When they were directed upon me, I felt their intense light and the beating of their blades over my head. I was afraid that the boat was too visible. The camouflage was blown up as in a whirlwind, laying bare the knapsacks underneath. I thought I was finished and tucked my head between my shoulders to make me smaller. The girl tried to quieten me again as though she had guessed my anxiety.

'They cannot see us as we do ourselves,' she said.

"Her words had not the same effect upon me as they had had before. An idea came to me: jump into the water. But I could refrain myself in time.

"The dreadful flare became less dazzling and the roaring of the engines died down gradually as the aeroplanes went away. All became dark again. Yet I dared not move, fearing that the enemy might come back.

'They stage a show of strength, but they can't see anything at all. We have only to keep calm and not to move,' the liaison agent said. Then she looked up at the field and called the passengers back to the boat. Some were wet through. They grumbled as they changed their soiled linen. The motor roared again.

"After midnight our group landed on the bank and continued our trip on foot. We walked in a single line along the muddy, uneven and slippery ditches across a rice-field. We carried our sandals in our hands and groped for our way step by step. Even so, every now and then we fell one after another. At a point near the river-bank, the liaison girl ordered the group to stop and sent two scouts to reconnoitre the area.

"Within half an hour, they met with enemy commandos. The latter did not hide themselves in the gardens along the riverside as they usually did, but laid ambush in the open field. Shots were fired from all directions and cartridges flew close overhead.

'Brother Tu, guide the group away, I stay here,' was the liaison girl's order. From the way she spoke, I guessed that she was the team-leader. I felt a strange urge to tell her to go with us. But she had already faded away. Shells continued to fly whistling, then dropped in the distance. We lay as close to the ditch as we could, taking care not to raise our heads.

I heard a carbine shot on our left. It instantly drew all the firing towards this direction. I then understood that the liaison girl had purposely drawn the enemy's attention on her.

'Run away, Tu,' came the order. Our group rushed forward. I was not accustomed to the firing, but did not feel afraid, all my thought being given to the fate of the liaison girl. We ran helter-skelter across the field to the bush ahead, and from there to the river, which we crossed safely.

"The firing became fiercer and fiercer. I tried to make out the girl's carbine shot, but in vain, and grew all the more anxious.

"Fleeing the commandos as swiftly as possible, we arrived at the appointed place earlier than had been arranged. It was a bough in a village. But we had not to wait a long time for our new guide from D.A. post. We gathered in a pine-apple field damaged by toxic chemicals sprayed by the enemy, so much so that the plants did not bear fruit. None of us was missing. Some lost their rubber sandals, others their knapsacks when crossing the river. Though the oldest, I did not lose anything.

"We were all very tired. The guides allowed us one night's rest. Some did not mind to hang their hammocks and lay on the ground, using their bags as pillows, and soon began to snore. As for me, I just drowsed with a disturbed mind. I dreamt that I was on the way to my native province: many villages looked strangely different, the people had been forced to dismantle their houses and to come and live in concentration camps, which they later destroyed; gardens, too, had completely changed. I saw again all the scenes when, together with Sau, I returned to my village, and when we parted with each other for

ever, he handing me the comb which I still kept about me. From time to time, I woke up and thought of those who were behind to check the pursuit, especially of the liaison girl. 'What might have happened to her and the other liaison agents?' I asked myself. Then I fell asleep from exhaustion.

"I heard the faint noise of footsteps, voices, and laughters. At length I woke up and found it was dawn. Clouds hang like a stripe in the sky. People were talking lively. The liaison girl was there wet through, her clothes caked with mud. Thus, she had joined us in time.

"As I approached the group, they said good-bye to one another. I saw the liaison girl, more clearly this time. She had fought against the commandos and had just come out of a dangerous place, but looked as though nothing serious had happened to her. Sunburnt, she had shining eyes and must not be more than twenty of age. She was so childish in appearance with her pendent earrings. She stepped towards me. I wanted to express my admiration and gratitude. With a smile I greeted her and said, 'My niece, I was very anxious about you. What is your rank by birth in your family?'

'I'm the first, uncle.'

'Why do they call you Sister Ut? Is it because you are mar...?'

'No,' she replied without leaving me the time to finish my question. 'I'm the first and the last born: I'm the single child of the family.'

'What's the name of your village? I think I've met you somewhere before.'

'I've come from Culao Gieng'.

I shuddered on hearing the name of my native village. Looking at her in the eyes, I pressed on, 'Culao Gieng of Cho Moi district, Long Chau Sa province, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'What's your name?'

'Thu.'

'Thu, really?' I asked in surprise. 'Your father's name is Sau and your mother's Binh, isn't it?'

She was so astonished that she failed to utter a single word and stood looking at me from top to bottom. Thereupon the guides of D. A. post urged us to be ready for the departure. But I didn't mind what they said, nor feel like hearing anything else.

Neither of us had not come back from surprise. She continued fixing her round eyes on me. 'The eyes of my niece, for sure,' I said to myself and asked again:

'Your father's name is Sau, isn't it, my niece?'

'Yes... but how do you know?'

I tried to overcome my emotion and went on with a trembling voice:

'I'm uncle Ba. Do you remember the day when your father left home and promised to buy a comb for you?'

"She nodded lightly: 'Yes, I do.'

"Unexpected meetings like this, you all know, often occurred during the Resistance War. Glancing at the girl, I took the ivory comb out of my pocket.

'Your father sent you this. He made it himself.'

"Her eyes looked bigger in her bewildered face. She took the comb which, it appeared, reminded her of the day when her father parted with her. The sight of this all pained me to the utmost. I knew she was extremely happy and avoided to trouble her happiness. I felt I might lie: 'Father is well, he couldn't return home and asked me to bring it to you.'

"She murmured, her eyelids quivering:

'You're mistaken, this comb is not from my father.'

"I was disappointed and even anxious. I asked her: 'Your father is Sau and your mother is Binh, is it right?'

'Yes, it is.'

"She was about to cry as tears shone in her eyes. But she contained her emotion:

'If you aren't not mistaken, then you tell a lie,' she said, 'because you don't want to pain me. I know my father is dead.'

"Her eyes twinkled again and tears rolled down her cheeks. 'I can overcome my suffering. Don't be afraid to tell me the truth. I learnt two years ago that my father had died, then I asked my mother to let me work as a liaison agent.'

"She wanted to say more, but she couldn't as words died down in her throat. She bowed her head and looked to the ground: her hair trembled. I kept silent. My comrades in the group shouted to urge me to leave. I knew that I could not stay any longer. I asked for

Thu's address and briefly inquired after her mother's and relatives' health.

"The joy of meeting Thu lasted but a few moments. It was high time to leave. I glanced at her and instinctively said: 'Good-bye, my daughter.' She murmured something I could not hear. From a distance I turned round and saw her following us. She stopped by a ditch. Small rice-plants stirred by the wind resembled waves dashing towards her. Behind her, coconut-trees defoliated by toxic chemicals looked like gigantic fish skeletons hanging in the air. Young leaves sprang up, which, seen from afar, offered the spectacle of a forest of swords raised skyward."

1966

THE SOIL

THUS the underground shelter was completed, the most difficult I had ever known since I began digging trenches and taking a rifle to fight. I squatted down on the damp soil, leaning against a tree with folded arms on my knees, and choking with fatigue.

Gun reports from the HQ of the sub-sector rattled for a while then subsided and everything became silent again. I waited for the shelling to resume, but nothing happened.

"Well, they are done for," so I thought and looked up to the sky.

Above was a canopy of sparse foliage. The faint light of the last flares dropped by enemy planes almost blended with the feeble glimmer of a dawning day. Suddenly, there came the weary, somewhat boresome, whizz of a type of transport aircraft with a bulky and slightly curved belly, which we used to call "shrimp-sauce cargo plane."

Day gradually set in. The jungle exhaled smoke-like vapours that hung about on the trees and became increasingly thicker. "With such a weather, the planes

must wait at least one hour more to come into action," I said to myself.

I yawned while taking the wood-cutter knife and ran into the forest for some twigs to make a cover for my shelter.

In a horseshoe-shaped line, my comrades of the company were busy with the same job. The soil here was hard indeed, but the shelter I had dug was not a bad one after all. I lay the cover at the entrance, put some earth on it and camouflaged the whole thing with green leaves. All that was completed in a little less than half an hour. After washing my hands with my trouser pockets — no water was available — I took a petrol-soaked rag out of the cartridge pouch to clean my rifle. I loaded more bullets into the clip and carefully cleansed the bayonet, thinking that like this "it would go deeper into the Yanks' bodies if I ever had to use it."

Applying the rifle butt to my cheek I felt refreshed by the evening dew on it. The sensation delighted me a great deal.

As gently as possible I leant the rifle against a tree, opened my rucksack, took out some more cartridges and put them into the pouch. I also picked up some more tobacco, tore off a strip of paper from my notebook and slipped it into my sleeve. I fastened the rucksack, placed it on the cover of the trench, and the rifle on top.

Now with half a rice ball, a gulp of water to wash it down and a few puffs of tobacco, I could fight until nightfall.

It was broad daylight. From the forest smoke-like vapours rose higher and higher into the sky. The first sun-rays sliced down to form glimmering strips on the ground. A magpie pecked at morning dew drops and while singing, leapt from one branch to another, its beautiful tail curving up and down as though to beat time. In the ominous morning hush on the battlefield, its song filled me with delight as though I had just come back from a bath in the limpid water of a brook. Huynh, who was digging a trench next to me, screwed up his eyes at the bird and smiled like a child. Squad leader Quang also looked up, and soon the whole squad No 7 turned towards the magpie. But we could not enjoy this pleasure for a long time. Quang summoned us to a big well-hidden tree and said:

"Everything is all right but the camouflage. Do you know that other units annihilated the enemy in the sub-sector? A squad have even captured an armoured car and used the guns on it to fire back at attacking planes. Today it's our turn. We must emulate them and knock out adverse reinforcements."

He made a pause, apparently to think out what concrete orders he should give. The magpie went on singing on the tree. Quang cast a hasty glance at it and continued:

"Now you've to camouflage the fortifications then take your meals. Afterwards, let everyone get down into his shelter, except the look-out who must also camouflage himself carefully."

Huynh and I were assigned to mount guard. We returned to our trenches, put more twigs on them and began taking our frugal lunch.

The roar of jets rent the still air. Huynh wiped off his hands on his trousers, mumbling:

"They're coming."

Turning to me, he said:

"Which of us will stand guard first? Well, let me do it first. Go down to your shelter and when I throw a lump of earth on it, come up to relieve me."

I nodded and took a gulp of water. Bombers had circled twice over us. Above a grove some distance away, a helicopter was buzzing noisily in search of a landing place. Jets swooped down and frantically roared over our heads.

"The same old trick!" I said to myself, and did not look at them any longer.

The chopper changed its direction and flew straight towards our positions. I hastily pulled down a twig to hide my trench cover and sat down. I tried to secure a most comfortable posture while keeping my rifle from dirt, unpinned two grenades, put them before me, and pricked my ears. The aircraft flew so low that I feared it might send away the cover. It provoked a strong current into my trench and violently shook the branch I had planted at the entrance as a camouflage device. Bombs were exploding nearby in quick succession, which hurled me up and down. Their blasts seemed to squeeze the shelter. I had the impression of sitting in a small boat in a storm. The





earth shook under me and the cover was on the point of flying off at any moment. Bomb splinters hissed all around. I heard the dry sound made by the fall of the tree behind me, on which the magpie had perched a few minutes before.

After explosive bombs, the enemy rained napalm, making dull sounds here and there all over the place where the squad was positioned. The smell of burnt jelly came into my trench. Fire was raging outside. I took out my towel, soaked it with some water from the canteen and applied it on my face to guard against possible gas.

Now the planes began to let lose their zomm guns, riddling the air with deafening bursts. I felt reassured however and, leaning against the strong wall of my shelter, I rolled a cigarette. The shells could at most pierce through the layer of soil on the cover. I took long puffs at my cigarette and swallowed down the smoke with a great pleasure indeed. The smoke seemed to dissipate my tiredness and stir me to action. I felt like removing the cover to spring out. But there must be more waiting. The adversary was preparing for a landing ground. From experience I know that this was only the beginning which would be followed by one or two still fiercer bombings before they dared land troops. I was impatient and instinctively recalled the night before when, availing myself of the flares dropped by enemy planes, I dug and dug until I was almost out of breath. That was an unforgettable night in my soldier's life. I frowned at every stroke of my spade against the stone-like earth. All

that, however, would certainly make me remember for ever this particular stretch of land.

I lost in contemplation before my "great work". True, I had dug for twelve hours on end. During that sleepless night, I must confess, I once felt somewhat dismayed and angry at this rock-hard soil. But the burst of gunfire at the sub-sector headquarters had urged me not to relax. At long last, I completed my work and now the shelter was protecting me from tons of bombs. I ran my hands on the wall and had a pleasant sensation of coolness. I knocked at it with my fingers and felt very happily secure. The light that filtered through the cover showed the surface of the wall, so smooth as though it had been polished. That might be the result of the friction of my clothes or of the touch of my sweated palms or of both. I made a mental calculation and an idea came to me. I carved the number 200 on the wall of the shelter with the point of my knife.

Really, this was exactly the 200th trench I had dug, and it flattered me to realize in retrospect that this had been achieved in a far-off land which, probably, was made of the hardest soil on earth. An indescribable feeling took hold of me. I vaguely remembered that scores of trenches had been dug at encampments or bivouacs, as many for the people, and at least one hundred on battlefields. Yet, only now did I remember all these things although I had sat, stood, even slept, in over a hundred different shelters at a hundred different places.

A string of bomb explosions nearby cut off my line of thought. A lump of earth, the size of a fist, fell

into my trench. Huynh presumably wanted me to relieve him. I put the two grenades into my trouser pockets, seized my rifle and crawled to the entrance. Here I paused for a while to judge the range of bomb splinters, then got up. I felt dazzled by the sudden contact with sunlight. Seeing me Huynh asked:

"What are you out for?"

"To relieve you!"

"No, I haven't called you yet. May be it's the earth sent by an explosion," Huynh replied while taking a bandage from his belt. I stared at him: "Got hit?" Huynh nodded and held out his left hand: "They robbed me of a bit of flesh." He unrolled the bandage and began to dress the wound.

"An antiseptic application will do."

"Certainly," Huynh said, smiling. I told him:

"Now come down into the shelter and let me do the job. The second bombing, isn't it? There will be at least one or two more before they land."

Huynh disappeared in the underground. I looked round; bomb craters filled the place where our platoon was positioned, several near our shelters, others some distance away. One bomb had narrowly missed a trench and uprooted many trees of a grove in the vicinity. But all the fortifications remained intact. I felt a great relief and riveted my eyes on the jets circling in the sky. They flew higher and higher. Suddenly from the direction of the rising sun a group of fighter planes came out of the clouds. All of them were as black as soot.

"The third bombing," I said aloud and concentrated on my duty as a look-out. The aircraft made only one circle, then swooped down and unleashed their loads on our positions. The explosions shook the earth and gave me the impression that they might fling us out of our trenches. I parted my legs and tried to stick to the wall not to fall down. The explosions ceased now. I wiped the dirt off my face and neck, and ran my hands on the walls of the shelter. A large fissure was there and the cover had slid aside. Hardly had I turned round when something black streaked down before me. I had only time to duck low: an ear-splitting explosion was heard. I was nearly thrown out onto the ground. Had it not been for a shelter of this type, I would have been "finished".

I had dug 200 trenches in 200 different places, now in coastal areas made of sand, now in the plains of Central Viet Nam or in the muddy West, now in the rubber and coffee plantations of the East with reddish soil. In some of those places my job was rendered much easier by their clayed soil. In others, I bumped against the rock-like laterite of barren hills. Each battlefield I had come to, and each shelter I had dug, left me with unforgettable memories. In Gia Dinh province for instance, I had enjoyed the Lunar New Year Festival with the local population, took part in a counter-raid action and fought side by side with a woman guerilla who, some time later, became my fiancée. Now I found myself on this land, very far from my native one, to which I had never dreamt of coming. But the liberation struggle had led me here, and overnight it had become so dear to me, almost as

part of my own self. It had protected me from enemy bombs and bullets, as a mother does her child. I felt as though the soil was my second mother, indeed, and I was a fighter of it. In a few moments, when the adversary landed their troops, I should spring out of its bosom to wipe them out. I should defend every inch of it, for it was ours and not theirs.

The fighter planes had scurried away leaving behind some helicopters circling over the open ground in front of us. They would surely drop their troops there. Thereupon, a lump of earth was thrown at me. I turned round and saw squad leader Quang standing behind a tree. He said: "Word has come that they will be here presently. Observe absolute secrecy to welcome them properly. When the sappers' mine went off, hurl your grenades according to plan, and charge them when the bugle sounds. If any of them jumps into the shelters, just..." Quang swung his bayonet, smiled broadly and added:

"Anything particular since this morning, Son? Your trenches are still intact, aren't they? We must be grateful to this soil. Quite a lot of bombs, eh? Now tell Huynh our plan."

I threw a lump of earth into Huynh's trench; he popped out. I told him of the squad leader's order. No sooner had I finished than a flight of fighter planes moved in and swooped down to bomb immediately. I ducked in, but before I could withdraw my hands, a bomb exploded at the other end of the shelter. I felt some dampness on my left hand. I bent and looked at it. The little finger had been nearly

severed by a splinter. It was attached to the hand only by a bit of skin. I angrily gazed at the planes and tried to lift the finger back to its normal position, but in vain. So I decided to get rid of it to be freer in my movement. After all, it could not heal, I argued to myself. I bandaged the stump which ached a bit.

The aircraft bombed and strafed indiscriminately for quite a while then pulled up. Immediately, from the direction of the rising sun, some groups of three choppers each, rumbled in like a swarm of flies. There was a thunderous noise in the air. As I was standing in the shelter, reporting to the squad leader and Huynh, one helicopter skimmed over the open ground and dropped a red-smoke grenade to mark the landing spot for the others.

"We'll have a good haul, sure!" I nearly screamed with joy and excitement. The enemy were not aware that hundreds of men underground had spread a close-knit net around them. I bent down to put on my rucksack, placed two hand-grenades on the shelter edge, carefully loaded my rifle, fixed the bayonet to prepare for an eventual hand-to-hand engagement. After pulling some twigs over my head, I calmly lay in wait.

The first group of choppers was in front of me. I could see distinctly the soldiers on board. Clad in green uniforms and each with a grenade in hand, they fixed their eyes on the ground. Now the aircraft slowed down and were only five metres above the ground. Three of them slid past me, just a few metres

away. The soldiers began throwing grenades and jumped down. Most of them tumbled upon touching the ground, some flat on the face, others on the back, others again hopping on one foot. One got as close as fifteen metres from me. They formed three rows of about a company in all. The American commanders stood up as best they could, swaying back and forth like drunkards. They looked aggressive and moved as in a deserted place. They probably thought that had the "Viet Cong" dug in here, all would have been killed by American bombs and bullets. Their demeanour set my nerves on edge.

"You'll be finished in a moment," I mumbled.

Boiling with impatience, I clenched my teeth and grasped a grenade firmly in my hand. It was then that our sappers' mines made three deafening explosions. I tossed one grenade at the nearest group and, before it went off, I threw another. Many soldiers were sent to the ground. Not losing a second, our squad, then our entire company, popped out of the shelters. "We begin to pull our drag-net," I thought. Grenades showered on the adverse formation which was in utter confusion. The machinegun manned by Chi swept the ground. Many scrambled for life, screaming with horror. I raised my rifle and aimed at a Yank crawling on the grass. I pressed the trigger: he writhed a while, then lay motionless. The familiar bugle charge from behind the lines resounded. In the twinkle of an eye I sprang out of my shelter. I saw squad leader Quang, Huynh and Hien let loose sustained firings with their sub-machineguns. Many

enemies were hit, stood like pokers then tumbled down. Only a few could fire back some shots. Others took to flight or raised their hands. They could not understand where we had come from, even what had happened. The whole of our company rushed forward like a tidal wave of the Mekong river in the flood season. I jumped over many bodies straight to the Yank. He was still alive: my bullet had gone through his thigh. When a few paces from him I screamed out some unintelligible words, he turned his head and his pistol in my direction. I quickly skipped aside and the bullet snapped past my ear. I clenched my teeth and thrust the bayonet with all my strength into his huge side. The bandit made a curve of his body and dropped the pistol from his hand.

The engagement was like a violent but very brisk storm that swept the area in no more than ten minutes. The battleground relapsed into silence. One only heard the moaning of the wounded enemies and the whizz of jet planes high overhead.

Squad leader Quang ran to me. I handed him the pistol of the American officer and pointed to the bodies of the other enemies I had knocked down. Seeing the white bandage on my left hand, he asked: "Got wounded?"

"Yes, my little finger was cut by a bomb splinter, but I can still handle a rifle."

He stepped towards the dead Yank, took out all the papers from his pockets and slipped them into his own.

Quang looked at me and said after some reflexion: "Run to the company C.P. right away to escort the captives."

"What about my duty in our unit?"

"The squad stays here for the coming fight, don't worry about that."

"Shall I escort them up to the camp?" I asked with obvious disappointment.

"No," the squad leader shook his head. "Only to the rear where you'll hand them to the escort team and come back here."

I smiled broadly, so did Quang who was surely aware of my state of mind. He then urged my other comrades to collect the trophies. I walked towards the captured soldiers standing disorderly in the forest.

The sun beat down on the enemy corpses. The earth seemed to be burning under my feet.

Some of my fellow-fighters and myself had to keep watch on the prisoners from noon till late in the afternoon. From the fire-line came the intermittent rattling of machineguns that put me out of patience. Having gone astray, the escort team arrived only by 4 p.m. Once the prisoners had been handed over, I dashed towards the front-line. Because of several bombings while I was on the way, I came back only some time before nightfall. After reporting on my mission I rejoined my position. Huynh was taking his meal.

"Any more encounter since this morning?" I asked.

Huynh shook his head.

"Why so much firing?"

"It was from our other units."

"What's the news?"

"They wiped out two companies, and we one." And raising his finger, Huynh added: "With one enemy battalion knocked out, I'm afraid there'll be no more Yanks to fight."

"Did they bomb here since I left?"

"They did," Huynh pointed to the new bomb craters. "They retaliated."

I looked round and could hardly recognize the place. Bombs and rockets had knocked down all the trees around. The soil was ploughed up and looked like a hoed field.

"Anyone wounded?"

Huynh shook his head.

It took me a long while to find my shelter. There were three more bomb craters apart from the three I had noticed before I left. The layer of earth on the cover of the shelter had been blown off. I bent low over it and realized with surprise that the entrance had been seriously warped. I jumped in and found that its bottom was cluttered up with lumps of earth. I touched the walls with both hands: they remained intact.

I heard the squad leader calling me. I got out and was told to prepare to move elsewhere. Before I could ask any question, he said:

"We expect them to come in larger numbers tomorrow, at another place."

Our unit moved on. Again we set out for an unknown land. There I shall dig my 201st shelter, deep into the soil which will overnight become dear to me, and will protect me as a mother does her child. There, too, I shall spring out of the ground to kill any enemy who will venture to come. And the same process will go on and on until the whole of South Viet Nam gets rid of the last Yankee aggressor.