

The girl stops at once and wipes the drops of rain coursing down her face. "Do you know where he is?" she asks, pleased and excited.

"He went on a mission and it's not possible to reach him. Eat that rice yourself, you shouldn't carry it around uselessly..."

I am wrong. The gaiety does not leave the girl's face. The light of spring still shines in the pupils of her eyes. Afraid she will not heed him, the cadre growls, "I tell you that you won't be able to find Sac!"

"I thought so too. But my parents told me: take the rice with you anyway, if you meet him you will give it to him..."

She goes on. The soft guitar notes begin again, one after the other. Her fingers must be used to the strings. And I return to my first impression: the rain, the slopes, the loads, everything is unreal. The only thing that counts is the joy that flows out of this girl's heart, a joy which she can't keep for herself and which comes out transformed into harmonious chords.

They file before us. Old men naked except for loin cloths, young women with black or flowered skirts. They all joyfully salute the Liberation soldiers as old friends on a festival day.

Beside me my friend does not stay still, worried over the girl and her fifteen measures of rice. Suddenly we hear him cry, "Oh! Is that you, Kan Poo?"

It is a young woman in a black jacket with narrow sleeves and a string of pink beads around her neck. She turns and her smile lights up her dark skin.

"And your child?" adds my companion.

"He's with me."

In fact, half way up the slope, we see a little boy climbing towards us wrapped in a sheet of sky-blue plastic which leaves only his big black eyes and his tiny legs visible. He carries something on his back which looks like a basket.

"What...?" My companion is astonished. "... The little one carries a basket too? But I meant your baby."

"He's here too. His big brother is carrying him on his back."

We have not recovered from our surprise when she says: "Hah! The cadres refused to let me leave because the children were too little. But I couldn't take that. I take along the bigger brother to carry the baby. So... I do my duty for the revolution without leaving my children."

The color slowly drains from my companion's face. He throws his cigarette away and gets up. "Do the cadres know this?"

"They couldn't stop me even if they knew. I don't have anything else to give to the revolution except my own efforts... Oh, you have tobacco!"

The man almost empties his tobacco tin into her hand. He lifts the palm leaf from his basket and asks, "Do you have rice?"

"Don't need it."

"But what do you eat?"

"I have manioc."

"I have enough extra rations for several days. Take it for the kids."

"But no! The baby doesn't eat rice yet and the older one has his own ration of manioc."

The man hands his rice to the young woman, but she continues to refuse. Finally he proposes to swap his rice for her manioc. He raises the leaf protecting her basket, takes out a manioc tuber and throws in his own sack of rice.

The rain continues to fall in sheets, making the hills and mountains look white. During the six months' rainy season, it sometimes falls for a whole month without stopping on the Truong Son. The bands of monkeys which habitually set up a great noisy chatter when we approach have completely disappeared. They must be spending their time in the depths of humid caves picking lice off each other. The birds are certainly on the other side of the range where there is sun and its warmth. They say that when the rain falls long on one side of the mountains, the sun shines on the other. Only men continue their interminable march under the rain.

After days of rain, the atmosphere this morning becomes extremely fresh. The forest gives us a very agreeable feeling which succeeds in lifting every sense

of fatigue. Through the dark foliage, I look at pieces of blue sky above, sown with light clouds which come in from the sea. They look like puffs of kapok. Xuong constantly reminds me of the order: "Be careful of the spikes in the ditch alongside the trail!"

Today the deserted path runs between ditches, as though to announce that we will soon arrive at our destination.

We stop in front of a small, palm-thatched guard tower. It's the first in a long time. A young Liberation soldier, in his khaki uniform, glances quickly at our papers and lets us pass. The liaison agent with us is our best recommendation.

Near a well made of fitted rocks, a woman sits in a short jacket tight at her waist. Judging from the vegetables she is about to wash, she is the cook. She greets us with a broad smile and a nod of her head.

We go up a climbing path, holding on to a rattan handrail. Faint and diffused smoke comes out of the chimney of a Hoang Cam kitchen\*, and it seems to us that we smell the rice of the plain which we have appreciated during our stay in the military sector. From one of these houses, remarkable for their doors woven in arabesque designs, we hear the clear, calm and deliberate voice of a radio announcer giving the news.

The liaison agent leads us into a very neat, clean house. On a mat spread on the floor are stacks of mimeographed pages piled in precise order. Unopened

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(\*) Kitchen constructed especially to camouflage the smoke, named after their inventor.

wooden boxes, undoubtedly just arrived, are piled in one corner. Near a window a man is typing. The rapid sound of the keys makes us think of the heavy rain. The head of the office, a young, thin man with clear skin and dressed in black, replaces the telephone and smiles. "They are waiting for you a few steps from here, comrades," he says without waiting for introductions.

We get rid of our loads and follow him along another pathway, also with the same handrail, to the next house. The vice-political commissar of the armed forces of Tri-Thien lives here. The head of the political bureau is with him.

Once, while we were waiting at relay station X. for the water of a flooded stream to subside, a communications agent who had learned that we were going to the Sector command headquarters told us: "There you will have the impression of being in a town." Impossible! What would a town in the forest be like on this narrow strip of land? And here we are. The vice-political commissar's house is like the others. Beams and walls made of logs with the bark still on, tightly bound together with strong vines. Roof of plaited *duoc* leaves. One room used both for living and for working. Two tables and a small bed made of bamboo. The legs of the bed, of branches, are buried in the dirt floor. A shelf hangs close to the roof and contains only a haversack. At the head of the bed, a belt with a pistol near a transistor radio. Judging from its sooty blackness, a gas can hanging on a beam is used to boil the water. Just behind the door where there is

more space, big chunks of firewood are piled in a fireplace. But there is no fire, the ashes have been swept clean. Our host seats us on benches, actually simple blocks of wood, around a table on which is a telephone. A vague mildew smell comes from the mats, telling us in a discreet way that the master of the house is generally absent. The acrid odor of bombing in the neighborhood still hangs in the air.

Xuong, who has been looking right and left, meets my eye. We have the same thought. "The other day," he says, "someone told us that your service is located in a real town."

The commissar — large, worried forehead, hair sprinkled with gray in contrast with his youthful smile — pours us some tea and answers gaily: "Yes. These small houses might not be worth much, but when you leave them you feel a nostalgia for them."

His words fill his house with warmth and personality.

The chief of the political bureau — high forehead, pink skin, a red-brown sweater, who looks just like a civil cadre of the N.F.L. — closes his notebook, a colored school notebook with a picture of a girl on the cover, and tells us warmly, "When you learn the history of Tri-Thien, you'll know that the comrades told you the truth..."

He begins to tell us the difficult beginnings of the Sector when the first units were formed. The soldiers used to joke about the four "stockrooms" they carried bumping along on their backs. First, a mess stockroom —

45 measures of rice, a small amount of peanuts, salt, sweetened flour, etc. Second, a clothes stockroom — uniforms for the different seasons, sweaters, underwear, a blanket, mosquito net, hammock, tent cloth, etc. Third, a weapons stockroom — rifle, bullets, hand grenades, explosives, shovel-hoe, special equipment according to the mission. Fourth, a pharmaceutical stockroom — medicines for malaria, grip, cough, diarrhea, different antibiotics, antiseptics, disinfectants, creams against the cold, cotton, bandages, etc.

“At every step,” he laughs, “you could feel the full weight of this load on your shoulders. And now we have it all right here. Passing from that nomad life to a sedentary one is like moving from a chicken coop into a splendid house.”

Our hosts ask about our health and the difficulties of the trip. As we tell them about the mountain girls we met on the way, the head of the political bureau, who was rolling a cigarette, stops and frowns.

“We have thought a lot about all this,” he says in a measured voice. “They are as good as men at this hard work. But it is bad for their health. The heavy basket constantly pulls their shoulders from behind. It hurts and curves their backs, makes their shoulder muscles big, stunts their chests, to say nothing of the possible deformation of their legs. To be sure, the transport is necessary, but it is also necessary to think of the consequences. We proposed that they be sent to the villages for other work, but they wouldn’t listen. None of them accept the idea of quitting the

'liberation uniform'. Certainly they think about marriage and children, but they are haunted by the fear of being cut off from the revolution. We are still squeezing our brains to find a work which fits them better."

The political commissar interrupts: "That reminds me, what are you going to do about Kan Lich, send her on leave or bring her husband Ku Chien here?"

"I am more inclined towards the second solution. It would be more comfortable for them here. But it depends on Kan Lich. We have already decided to ask her opinion before we telephone her husband's unit."

They bring us something to drink — a beverage thick like milk in cups and glasses of every size.

"Try this, comrades, if you want to taste something! It's a new invention of the Quartermasters — powdered eggs."

I am still wondering who Kan Lich is — her name is not familiar at all to me — when the political commissar sets the biggest glasses before us and says, "You should get to know Kan Lich. She's staying only a few doors from here. Really, the Tri-Thien mountain people are extraordinary!"

So, she's a girl from the mountains of this province.

In addition to the telephone calls, our conversation is often interrupted by the roar of planes overhead, the whine of bullets and the explosion of bombs, shaking everything and bringing clouds of dust down on us. We know that Westmoreland has arrived in Quang Tri and that the enemy is shifting its troops. The area has become a hot spot. One night on our march, we had heard the N.F.L.'s call to smash the Yankee

aggressors' second dry season counter-offensive. Here in Viet Nam it has already started. There, caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, Johnson racks his brains and knocks his head against the wall over this dry season. And what's going on here in this narrow neck of land adds to his headaches.

Our host gives orders into the phone, tells us the latest news he has just heard, and then begins the conversation again where we left off. He approves the carefully worked out plan we have submitted to him: Quoc will stay at the command headquarters for a while, then visit different units to study how the political work is carried on. Xuong will go to the west. I will go back down to the plain. Then the three of us will meet again to finish our common mission.

But we don't only talk about mission. In an admirably concise style, the political commissar tells us how they harvested in the flooded paddy fields of his village before he left his family to work in the revolution. He makes Quoc promise to come to play chess with him before he leaves. The head of the political bureau talks about classical music, a Schubert sonata, works of Chopin and Tchaikovsky. He probably thinks that because Xuong and I are journalists and writers, we must be fond of music. Knowing that our transistor was broken during a bombing, he invites us—"if you're too tired to come," he says—to his place in the evening to listen to classical music generally broadcast very late by a foreign radio station.

A young man, back slightly bent and very alive, comes in and hands the political commissar the *Quan Giai*

*Phong* (Liberation Army). The ink is still wet. Our host gives the paper to the chief of the political bureau and says, "Not bad, eh?"

Then he turns to the young cadre: "It's excellent, this red paper is excellent for celebrating our victories at the beginning of the dry season... But later we'll have to think about white paper for easier reading."

"We've already thought about it, comrades. Several reporters are bringing us white paper on their way here."

Xuong and I shake hands warmly with this comrade-in-arms. Here, journalists must not only dig their own shelters, build a roof for the printing press, get supplies from behind enemy lines and go with the troops to the front to write their reports, but carry on their own backs, as anyone else, the paper on which to print their articles! We are moved by the newspaper. Four full pages, well laid out, perfectly printed. Articles which reflect the rage of battles.

We know that the Liberation troops have been preparing a series of big engagements in the Sector. Our positions are ready and troops deployed, as are the enemy's. Probably tomorrow or even in the next few minutes the enemy will give us some probing blow. Nevertheless, everyone in the command headquarters is calm and serene at the beginning of this second dry season. Every eventuality seems to have been taken care of. Nothing astonishing about this, we have been fighting for more than twenty years. In this familiar theater, we cannot retreat, and we do not have the right to lose this long protracted war.

Kan Lich is a girl of the Pa Koh national minority, more exactly, a girl from the village of Le Loc on the edge of the clear water of the P'lin River. She was born and grew up in this enchanting environment, made even more beautiful in the spring by the plum blossoms.

All the girls of Le Loc take part in the war. Kan Lich herself has been in twenty-six engagements and killed forty-one of the enemy. This includes three Americans, one a colonel, killed in a plane she shot down. Actually, she has killed far more than that, but the young woman is very strict in her count. The figures she gives in her reports never need to be discussed. She doesn't list soldiers killed by hand grenades or explosives or a machine gun during a fight alongside her comrades. "Common exploits," she calls them.

Once, she was chosen to go to the Congress of Emulation Fighters of the P.L.A.F. of central Trung Bo. After the Congress, she went here and there reporting on it. By the time she returned to the Sector, a year had gone by and she thought she could go straight back to her village. But no, the leaders wanted her to stay and take part in a festival of the P.L.A.F. of Tri-Thien.

She looked disappointed and people were sure that she was homesick. Her mother was still in the village. The comrades gave her a three-day leave. Later, she explained, "It wasn't homesickness, because the thought of my mother didn't make me sad. I was unhappy because I had learned that during the absence of

Uncle Vai \*, guerrilla warfare in our village hadn't gone so well and the furious mopping-up campaigns of the enemy had killed many of our comrades. When I joined the revolution, the only thing I wanted was to fight. I feel uneasy when a day goes by without fighting. And they made me travel constantly! Of course I learned a lot, but when I go on those trips the only thing I can do is repeat my exploits over and over again at every meeting. That made me sad."

So, Kan Lich headed for her village with her leave papers in her pocket. It took her twice the time to reach her village as it did to come back. Instead of going directly there, Kan Lich stopped at the house of the old head of the guerrillas of the village. He told her about the troubles of the detachment and both of them searched for a way to change the situation.

"And what if we went to harass the A Luoi post tonight?" the girl suddenly proposed.

"Good idea!..."

A neighborhood boy who had come to welcome Kan Lich wanted to go with them.

Kan Lich and her two companions started as night fell. Every path, crossroad, stream and tree provoked memories in the girl of those, young and old, boys and girls, who had fought at her side and who no longer existed. When the little group arrived near the post, Kan Lich looked around to work out her battle plan.

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\* Hero of the P.L.A.F., Kan Lich's uncle, who had gone on a visit to North Viet Nam.

Taking advantage of the darkness, she and her companions crawled up next to the airfield. The enemy always sent out a morning patrol around the field. Kan Lich's plan was to attack the patrol in this unexpected place.

"Wait until we see the enemy's faces clearly before we fire," she recommended. "Or better, wait until I give the order. In any case, we'll shoot only when they're at very close range."

She urged her companions to sleep so they would be in good shape in the morning and she stood watch. Unfortunately, the enemy had just changed its defences. Neither Kan Lich, the old guerrilla or the boy knew that a new guard tower had been built close to their position.

The man lay awake all the night, but the boy slept like a baby. His loud snoring alerted the enemy to the presence of guerrillas and allowed them to inform the post. The commanding officer of the garrison made his plan and decided to sweep with a good net at dawn. When the heath grouse cackled, Kan Lich woke the boy. She checked the rifles and repeated, "Don't fire before I tell you and not before you can see their faces clearly."

The horizon grew lighter. But a thick mist covered the peaks and the P'lin River. The guerrillas crawled towards the path normally taken by the airfield patrol. Unknown to them, an enemy detachment was following them, waiting for them to fall into their ambush.

The mist suddenly lifted — and Kan Lich found herself confronted by the enemy in front and behind!



Two companies, more or less. She fired into the middle of them. Two soldiers fell, but the men did not fire back. Instead, the commander of the post, livid but smiling, said with a sweet voice: "Don't fire. We've come to discuss among brothers."

He was afraid his men would be caught in their own fire because they were bunched opposite each other on two sides of Kan Lich. Nor did he want to order everybody to throw themselves on the ground and fire because that would give the guerrillas time to disappear into the forest. Besides, a girl, an old man and a boy were easy prey.

Kan Lich turned and saw the boy caught by a big soldier. Time lost meant surrender.

"Fire!" the girl cried sharply and pulled the trigger.

The big soldier received the bullet straight in the heart. Another bullet hit a soldier wearing a black felt hat. He dropped his automatic rifle and fell beside his weapon.

The officer had to order his men to throw themselves on the ground. At once, Kan Lich yelled, "Attack!"

The three guerrillas vanished into the undergrowth. It took quite a while for the enemy to recover from the shock, pull themselves together and fire. A bullet struck the stock of the old man's rifle and ricocheted against his cartridge belt. The flames ate the edge of his jacket, but he wasn't hurt and escaped with Kan Lich and the boy.

When Kan Lich returned to the Sector command headquarters, the first thing she did was to criticize herself for taking two more days than her leave allowed. Then she added, "I offer in compensation a small thing, I have killed four enemies to avenge our village comrades."

Kan Lich is now at the Sector command headquarters, waiting to leave for the Congress of Heroes and Elite Fighters of South Viet Nam. We remember that she is the niece of Vai and that he spoke about her many times in his report at the Congress of Heroes and Emulation Fighters of the P.L.A.F. last year. A few days later we learn why the leaders of the Sector were worried about her.

Two years ago Kan Lich was married to Ku Chien, a young man in the Y. detachment of transport.

In the beginning of that winter, Ku Chien, pack on his back, had come down towards the P'lin River area. His leave papers in his pocket, he had decided this time to marry the girl he had been in love with for several years. Strong, robust and bronze-skinned, the young man armed himself with his sweetest smile to cross the door-sill of the house of his fiancée. Kan Lich was not there, her mother told him, which was very often the case in those days. She commanded a detachment of guerrillas and four platoons of regional troops which

had the A Luoi post encircled. Ku Chien got rid of his pack and went to find his fiancée at her command post near the enemy garrison. There, the regional P.L.A.F. and the mountain guerrillas were living on fruit and enduring countless privations in order to keep a puppet battalion immobilized behind its own walls. The besiegers did not dare to show a light at night and during the day they crawled from one of their temporary huts to another to avoid sniper fire from the post. For Ku Chien, his leave was providential, he needed rest from the pressure his missions generally put on him. But Kan Lich could not leave her command because the enemy showed clear signs of being about to abandon the garrison. At last, she said to her fiancé:

"I agree to get married now, but you go back to the village and take care of the preparations. I'll stay here to finish this action; smashing this enemy post will be a good way to celebrate our marriage! When you've finished, let me know."

Returning to Le Loc, the poor Ku Chien went to see the local Party secretary for help. But he pulled the rug out from under his own feet for the secretary did not agree with an immediate marriage. He was afraid that Kan Lich would follow her husband to another village and he would lose a valuable fighter and cadre. A long discussion began between the secretaries of Hong Van and Hong Bac. The district levels had to intervene and the secretary of Kan Lich's village had no other choice but to approve the marriage. Ku Chien was up in the clouds. But he still had a lot to

do. If nowadays marriage no longer means a series of banquets one after the other, nevertheless it was necessary to organize a good dinner and drinks. When everything was ready, only two days were left of his ten-day leave. Ku Chien went to tell his fiancée.

Towards the end of afternoon, Kan Lich came back in a great hurry. Her comrades, parents, friends, neighbors were already gathered. Only the bride was missing. As soon as she hung up her rifle in the corner, she ran outside to wash her hands and face, and the ceremony began.

Ku Chien was very shy. When it came his time to speak before the assembled people according to the custom, he only smiled and got red in the face. Not a word came out of his mouth. Kan Lich had to speak for her husband:

"Chien and I..." she said, "...if one works in transport and the other in the P.L.A.F., it is for the revolution. And it is also for the revolution that we get married today. Also, I want to tell you that to honor this beautiful day I have killed seven enemies..."

Applause, shouts of approval and a wave of murmured admiration cut off her words for several minutes. This was all it took to touch them off—the spoken vows they already knew. But Kan Lich quickly added: "When the ceremony is over I am going back to the fighting at once and my husband to his revolutionary work. As long as the enemy is here we will stay at our posts. If we have worked well before our marriage, we shall work better..."

When the ceremony was over, she turned to her new husband and said, "Drink with our comrades and friends, Ku Chien, I am going back. When the enemy post falls, we'll see each other again."

She strapped on her rifle and left. Ku Chien drank with the people of the village until very late in the night. In the early hours of the morning, he took to trail, hurrying to rejoin the transport service.

It was not until a year later that he was able to stop in the village again. No enemies anymore on the banks of the P'lin River. They had been forced to flee in great haste in their planes towards the low regions because the guerrillas had infiltrated the last defences of the post. Constant sniper fire had robbed them of sleep and appetite. Kan Lich was the first to enter the airfield of the A Luoi post when it fell.

This time, Ku Chien was certain that he would meet his wife. Alas! He was told that she was at a district training course, a very serious matter for Party members. A bad moment to take her away from her study. Another time then... there was no hurry! The young man, strong and robust, smiled gently and put his pack back on his shoulders.

In this way, for two years after they were married, Kan Lich and Ku Chien could not be together. This year, Kan Lich had to attend the Congress of Elite Fighters of Tri-Thien sector. There she was chosen with others to represent the sector at the next Congress of Elite Fighters of South Viet Nam. A lot of water will flow under the bridge before she comes back. So now she is waiting for the order to leave and the

leaders have decided to give Ku Chien the opportunity to see her—Kan Lich is a heroine at the head of her troops and now the deputy-commander of the district, but she is also a wife.

It is only necessary to meet Kan Lich a few times for her to become friendly. She confides in us without restraint. She is the same towards the other cadres: heart on her sleeve, frank, with no reservations. To her, everything is clear, even her private affairs, because she has nothing to hide. What can I say?—it doesn't even occur to her to hide anything.

She is not at all astonished that we ask her questions, even though she might not know their purpose. We have grilled her about her family, her battles, her feelings, her impressions, but also on what she thinks of the *dan gon* (a folklore music instrument), buffalo fights, *alopa* bark burned for light, the many-colored plumage of the bird called the *abiet*, the words they teach the *giong* bird to say... She has two ways of answering. Either she doesn't know, or she launches into very detailed explanations. Her heart and her spirit are tied to revolutionary action in the most natural, unaffected way.

One day, as Xuong and I are going to see Kan Lich, we meet the comrade in charge of the emulation movement of the sector coming out of her house. The

political director has sent him to the young woman to ask what she thinks about the meeting with her husband.

"What did she say?" Xuong asks. "Does she want Ku Chien to come here or will she go to him?"

The cadre shrugs his shoulders.

Kan Lich is weighing it pro and con... She hasn't yet decided.

I wonder why she hesitates so much over such a simple question. We know that a passionate correspondence has gone on between her and her husband. She is not ashamed at all to admit that, like any other wife, it hurts her to be far from him.

Kan Lich is lying in a hammock between two trees behind the room where the radio crackles. To announce our presence, Xuong raises his voice: "What are you doing Kan Lich?"

The young woman jumps up at once, smoothing her rebellious hair which is always falling over her face in spite of its clips. "You see," she says, smiling. "I am learning the newspaper."

It is not a slip of the tongue. Kan Lich speaks Kinh\* perfectly, and often gently mocks those who pronounce it badly. She really is studying everything printed in the newspaper. Xuong and I look at each other as if to say: "Aha! See the importance of your articles, sirs."

Kan Lich folds the newspaper and picks up her rifle. The weapon leans against a tree, shiny with oil, undoubtedly just cleaned. She slings it over her shoulder.

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\* Language of the majority people.

It's her third. The first was smashed by an enemy bullet. The second was broken during a hand-to-hand fight. This one will go with her to the Congress in South Viet Nam. And perhaps she will have to use it on the way. Bad luck for any enemy who finds himself in front of this gun!

Kan Lich asks us to follow her to the river. We have gotten into the habit of meeting there on a smooth flat rock where we can talk undisturbed. Today the young heroine wears a black tunic with red transverse stripes without sleeves, which reveal round tanned arms. Rifle on her shoulder, she looks more agile, more supple, sweeter than usual. She has told us that her friend Kan Trao is the prettiest girl of her village. She is only the strongest, the more robust. Nevertheless, before her marriage, she made many boys in the region dream of her. This morning I realize how really beautiful she is as she follows the path with bare feet, the rifle hanging negligently from her shoulder. Two bright eyes, a pure look uncomplicated with mental reservations, a slightly sloping chin which has its own charm, thin lips always ready to smile. She laughs easily, over nothing. Many times we have seen her lying in a corner, roaring with laughter all by herself, thinking of some funny thing, so that everybody ends by laughing with her. "I like to laugh," she tells us. As simple as that.

The beauty and attraction of Kan Lich lies in her great sense of mission and the bubbling joy which she gives to the revolution.

I ask her a frank question which has puzzled us: "Where are you going to meet Ku Chien, where he works or here? From our point of view, we would prefer that he be here so that we can meet him."

She smiles and answers slowly, "Neither here nor there."

"What?..."

Seeing me jump, Kan Lich reflects a moment and then continues in her sweetest voice, "We love each other very much and I think of him in every moment as he does of me. To meet here or there is the same. But the revolution has sent me to attend the Congress and I have to go there first..."

She hesitates a moment, then: "Many of my friends already have children. I would like to have one, but if I were pregnant I wouldn't be able to go to the Congress. I must wait until I get back."

Stunned, I ask, "Have you written Ku Chien to ask his opinion?"

She raises her narrow eyebrows in surprise and answers, "Ask Ku Chien? What for?... He thinks exactly as I do, it's sure."

Like an astronomer who expects to see a nebula in his telescope, but finds instead many suns, I have no words. It is the same with my comrades—because of all we are learning about our compatriots in the mountains.

They came to the revolution not only with their heads but especially with their burning hearts. Their ardent love for the revolution gives them strength and endurance. It helps them avoid errors when they must go through hard tests. It rules their thought and action in a particularly remarkable way.

In one village, it happened that a cadre had acquired bad habits. Instead of listening to the opinions of the population, he decided things all by himself. He violated many local customs honored by the mountain people. People whispered, "He is not a real revolutionary." Extremely frank, the mountain people do not know how to hide their dissatisfaction. They always react violently not only towards the enemy, but also towards those whom they consider unworthy. In spite of this, however, our cadre lived without troubles in the village. They ate with him, cured him when he was sick. He had no idea that they couldn't stand him. At times he even thought that they respected and loved him. One day a high cadre came and the people poured out their hearts to him about the man. He was astonished because he knew they were treating him well. They told him, "We have wanted to send him away for a long time, but if we did that we would lose contact with the revolution. He is bad, but he represents it. We don't love him, it's true, but we respect the cause he supports."

Where does such love for the revolution come from? This morning, I said goodbye to Kan Lich and Xuong to come down to the plain with Quang, a young reporter of the local edition of *Quan Giai Phong*. On the way I keep thinking: What made Kan Lich become a

revolutionary cadre? Her village had not yet been smashed, her family was not in want, they owned a big wooden house, two elephants, a herd of horses and buffalos, big reserves of rice.

Was it because her mother, in the dark years, hid food under all kinds of rubbish in a corner of her shed to avoid searches and then day after day carried it to cadres living in the forest?

Was it because a man named A Meo, with his beard and long hair, lacquered teeth, ear rings and a loin cloth came to confer with her father every evening in 1957? Three years later, seeing him shaved, his hair cut, without the ear rings and dressed as they do on the plains, Kan Lich knew that he was a Kinh cadre who had disguised himself in order to establish contacts in her village.

Was it because the members of the Dai Viet Party and the Ngo Dinh Diem clique proved to be so cruel? Nobody in Kan Lich's family filed their teeth as was the ancient custom, including her Uncle Vai. The little girl had kept her splendid teeth intact until she was thirteen. When the Dai Viet came to Le Loc, they thought she was a Kinh. "If she is from this village," they reasoned, "why haven't they filed her teeth?" In the end, all the family were forced to hold the little girl down and break off her upper incisors with blows of a hammer.

Was it because the militant Minh had saved her from an unhappy fate and helped her to return through a thousand dangers to her village when she had been

taken off to become the second wife of her brother-in-law, in spite of her tears?

Was it because her Uncle Vai who loved her so much chose the revolutionary road and persuaded her to follow him?

All these reasons — and others that Kan Lich cannot recall completely. In this lost corner called Le Loc, as everywhere else in South Viet Nam where Americans and their lackeys have installed themselves, revolutionaries rose up and made themselves known. It was Day and Night, Good and Evil. It is natural that everything that happened on this soil contributed to pushing Kan Lich and those like her onto the revolutionary road.

As with many others, everything in her behavior, thoughts and feelings towards the revolution keeps its original candor. At certain moments in the whirlpool of a complex fight it is possible to forget the elementary truths. But in Kan Lich we have caught something which resembles the angelic look of children, a look which has the power to purify the soul and clarify the truth.

Lost in my reflections, I do not realize that we have come a long way. Comrade Quang turns to me: "A few more minutes," he says. "We'll rest in Ba Choi (three cabins)."

We start around the side of a mountain. B-52s have passed here. Great uprooted trees lie everywhere, their tops in the ravines. A rock blown in two. Piles of sharp fragments of stone all around. Another proof of the murderous rage of the blind giant.

What does it want, beating on the rocks and trees this way? But a little farther on I see some small fields of manioc and understand the reason for this fury.

On a hill, in a green grove which has miraculously escaped bombing, are three fairly large cabins. This must be Ba Choi. Some hens, followed by their yellow downy chicks, scratch for bugs and worms in the muddy manure. Somewhere pigs root noisily for their food. Children repeat their lessons. This peaceful haven, in the middle of a carpet of bomb craters, in an atmosphere still heavy with the smell of gun powder, sets me to musing.

We stop before the tiny Information hut. A paper is pasted on the door with blue letters which read:

*“With rice paddies as battlefields,  
Two-wheeled carts and hoes for arms,  
The peasants are fighters.” \**  
*Even if the bombs kill us,  
The people will have food to eat!  
We must answer the call of Uncle Ho!*

The paper is a clear white, the ink still fresh. In spite of a few spelling errors, the words come out with such force that I am struck silent for a long moment. Is this the proud Manifesto which the inhabitants of this tiny hill hurl into the face of the Americans' deliberate and systematic murder of a people?

Quang urges us towards one of the cabins to rest. Putting our rain cloths on the low roof we bend slightly

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\* From a poem by Ho Chi Minh.

to go through the doorway. Two old people, a young man and some children surround us in welcome.

The furniture is arranged as in an office. Two long bamboo benches separated by a wide table also of bamboo. Under the benches, air raid shelters reinforced with beams of wood and covered with a heavy layer of tamped earth. What makes this house different from an office is that the stove occupies the center of the room. Pieces of dried boar meat hang from the edge of a smoke-blackened shelf on which are arranged ears of seed corn. Some old women, shoulders bare, skirt waist high on their chests, pound rice with long wooden poles. Hosts and visitors gather around the table. Quang takes an issue of *Quan Giai Phong* from his kit bag and gives it to the pleased family. He tells them the latest news of the fighting on the plain. As he comes to each victory, the two old people cry out "Bravo! Bravo!"

All the males, including children, wear long trousers. The children are sitting among the grownups. From time to time they speak to the old ones in the local dialect, as if translating what Quang says. Sometimes they laugh and speak rapidly, no doubt commenting on the events in their own fashion.

Hanging next to me on a beam is a shiny new automatic rifle with a curved stock. As Quang asks a young man about the security of the place, I understand that he is a guerrilla.

The room is fairly large, but low and dark. The roofs had to be lowered to camouflage the light better. In the shadow, a square of light strikes my eyes. It is

a sort of window cut in the bamboo wall through which I can see a clearing in the grove and above it the sky which the rain has made milky. Near the window I see a table piled with books and notebooks and a bottle of ink. This must be the place where these clear-eyed children study their lessons.

Yes, it happened like that. In the past, the mountain people lived in pile houses flooded with sunlight. The Yankees came and confiscated their light and threatened their lives with bombs. But the mountain people of the Truong Son stood up to fight until victory under the banner of the N.F.L. These calm and serene men, women and children, confident in the future in spite of endless bombs, this light from the window falling on the children's table, the "Information" sign in front, this new automatic rifle, even these ears of seed corn—all this is the people's declaration of war. In this mortal struggle for the right to life and light, those around me in this room know that they will win.



### III

The forest opens up. Our eyes are less bothered by that green screen which has always blocked off the horizon. As we continue to descend, our ears hear the precipitous noise of waterfalls. The trail we follow, a small brook during the rains, has been transformed by perpetual flowing waters into a pebble-strewn ditch. Looking at the nearby forest, now hidden, now revealed behind a torn curtain of fog, I have the impression that the scene is a great curve like the circular panoramic screen in a motion picture theater. It is only the effect of a heavy white mist which floats midway around the mountain, the deafening noise of the cataracts and the unreal lightness of walking on the descent. In front of us the vault of the sky appears, immense, curving into the sea in the east. We will soon be on the plain. I open my jacket to get the salt breeze from the sea. I do not want to ask my guide anything for fear he will spoil the pleasure the waiting gives me.

We stop in the middle of a grove dotted with white flowers and here and there pleasant bushes we know. It looks like a public garden. Under our feet appear the paths which go on down to cross the plain below, looking like ant trails seen from the top of a house.

I recognize some clumps of *sim* and *mua*, familiar plants which grow along newly planted paddy fields. Finally the villages of the plain, recognizable by their low roofs, straight rows of areca palms, irrigated green orchards, everything circled by a band of bamboo. The sole difference from villages of other regions is that here they are smaller and press into the tiny spaces among the paddy fields, hills and sand dunes. Innumerable paths cross each other, checkerboarding the plain. Farther off, there is a metallic reflection which clashes with the gentle whiteness of the sand. The Tam Giang lagoons. Beyond these is the eastern sea with its strange blue water which grows darker at the horizon where it is marked off by countless white clouds. These images blind us as light does a man who has just come out of the dark.

But soon my eyes are drawn to some precise points on this picture. Little houses scattered among the bomb craters. The golden thatched roofs seem to give off the good smell of ripe heads of grain and the familiar warmth of loved ones. For a quarter of a century, bombs and bullets have not stopped raining on this narrow strip of land. But never have our brothers and sisters abandoned it. Other houses have been built on this scorched earth. But not close together as before. Impossible to live roof to roof, garden to garden. The

houses are dispersed over the plain to foil the deluge of bombs. After having weathered so many storms, there they are, standing imperturbable and unpretentious, like the girls of this place who last night were firing rifles and today comb their long ebony hair before their mirrors. Those mud and straw houses, so tiny, breathe an indomitable courage like those fighters who keep themselves going on wild plants, go barefoot, who get up again after each fall, ten times, a hundred times, to throw themselves again at the enemy. They seem to say, "Don't worry, no matter how fierce they are, they can't make us afraid! We have held firm before foreign invasion for more than twenty years, if necessary we can hold firm another twenty years..."

On my left lie the ruins of an enemy post destroyed by the P.L.A.F., only a few ghostly sections of the walls left standing. On my right, a long trail of denuded nothing running up into the mountains, indicating the run of B-52s.

Quang tells me that this was where the B-52s made their first raid on the Tri-Thien area. Before the bombing, the enemy dropped millions of leaflets over the area, carrying a photograph of these planes and information about their formidable cargoes of death. When they thought they had terrified the population, the superfortresses took off from Guam. It was the people's first experience with constant and continuous strings of bombs which came down in such numbers that their noise in the air was like heavy rain. Even the fishermen at sea saw the brilliant uninterrupted chains of flashes climbing up the Truong Son range.

The next day, when the morning mist had lifted, even from far away one could see the long bleeding wound cut into the green of the mountain. In bombing these anonymous and deserted heights, the Yankees had their own idea. Millions of new leaflets soon fell on the forests and paddy fields in an attempt to persuade the P.L.A.F. to "rally" to the "nationalist" ranks now that they had seen with their own eyes how impossible it was to withstand such heavy blows. The reverse side of the leaflet was a pass with which they would be received with open arms. The Yankees are proud of their power and the machiavelian way they use it. Each bomb dropped and each dollar spent are investments which must bring a maximum profit. The first raid on the empty forest was designed to demonstrate their brutal strength. The mighty swath of the bombing aimed to intimidate. With this parade of their flying fortresses, they were confident that all those who had left their villages would come back and that no one would any longer dare to join the guerrillas in the mountains. Once again they were wrong. These small houses which pushed up silently and proudly at the foot of the mountains were evidence enough — if no other was needed — to smash their pretensions.

Quang points his finger towards the horizon where there is still the fog of bad weather. It is in this direction that it is possible to see the town of Hue when the weather is good. He wraps a piece of parachute cloth around his waist and urges me on towards the plain. The Yankees might spot us if we take too long.

In the evening we stop at the house of Tu.

His small house is in the middle of the plain. Perhaps we have seen it from above in the mountains, even though I have come a long distance since then following on the heels of my guide.

At first Quang had not intended to stop there. He counted on taking me to the tiny hamlet of Mit, near National Highway No. I, the home of his adoptive mother. He knows every path, trail and road crossing the plain, even the depth of the smallest streams. The guerrillas on guard at the crossroads let me pass behind him with a smile. As we went along the bamboo fences of a tiny hamlet perched on a rise, a Liberation soldier appeared out of a grove to tell Quang that after we turned and came out on the paddy fields, we might be seen by the U.S. sentries who held the hills above the National Highway.

"It doesn't matter. We're only two," answered my guide in an even tone.

He broke a branch with green leaves, handed it to me and suggested that I camouflage myself a little better. We continued to walk until we came to the paddy fields. Quang looked at the hills and smiled at me. "Everywhere here I am at home," he said. "But where I am taking you now, the old woman considers me as her own son."

As we followed a path, many Liberation soldiers were coming out of a tiny hamlet. Their cautious air and light equipment told me that they were a reconnaissance patrol. A man of short height, wrapped in a piece

of camouflage cloth, an automatic rifle at ready under his arm, asked us, "Where are you going, comrades?"

"To the hamlet of Mit."

"The hamlet doesn't exist anymore. The Yankees razed it a little while ago. The people have gone on the other side of the Highway."

Joy instantly drained from Quang's face, that joy which I had seen in his eyes from the moment we reached the plain. He stood absolutely still for a minute. Then he hurried with me towards the house of Tu.

At the door we hear Mrs. Tu cry out from inside, "But it's Quang! And we thought you were dead all this time!"

Quang smiles again. His face becomes red with relief and emotion.

Tu is over forty. Hair cut short, a heavy beard, a warm and good face. Sitting on his bamboo bed with a baby, he responds pleasantly to our greetings. His wife, a few years younger, has a round face and tanned skin. She is cutting manioc near the stove and never stops telling one story after another. The oldest child, almost twelve and with his mother's great round eyes, comes to sit near Quang. Every time Mrs. Tu stops to catch her breath, he takes her place.

Thus he tells us many details, far more clearly than his mother, of how yesterday morning three Yankees who probably came from Bong Bong set up an ambush at the edge of the village. As a guerrilla passed near them, they called out, "Hey!" The guerrilla was not armed and ran away. But the Yankees, instead of

pursuing him, ran away as fast as they could. Then, artillery raked the area. According to the boy, the Yankees had come as scouts and did not dare to fire on the guerrilla because they were too few.

If Mrs. Tu had not told him for the second time to take the buffalo back to the shed, he would have gone on telling us many other stories.

Mrs. Tu complains that the puppet authorities have declared her "illegal" and not being able to go to the market, because of this, she has no cigarettes to offer us. The police have controlled the market for some days and do not allow anyone to buy more than twenty piastres worth of rice for fear that the people will give it to the P.L.A.F. Tu contents himself with following attentively what his wife and boy say with a smile on his lips, as if to verify their words. Seeing that I have been staring at the courtyard for several minutes, Mrs. Tu turns to me and says, "Now, you tell us something."

Quang excuses me. "He comes from the South and doesn't catch the Thua Thien accent very well."

"That doesn't matter. We can understand the accent of the South as well as the North. That's what I told some comrades from Nam Bo who imitate our accent badly. 'Talk the way you're used to, we understand perfectly.'"

Quang touches a beam which is actually made from the trunk of an areca palm tree. The house is brand new, the mud and straw walls are still damp. All the beams are old wood except this one. "How long ago did you build this house?" he asks.

"A little more than a month ago," answers Mrs. Tu. "We didn't make it all at once, but day by day. We finished the walls only a few days ago. One of the old beams was cut in two by a bomb fragment, so my husband had to replace it with the new areca trunk. The bomb threw dirt as high as the roof. This is our fifth house. They smashed the others one after the other, but we always kept one house ahead of them. So long as the earth is here, there is no danger of not having a roof over our heads. They'll have to make the land itself disappear if they want to take our houses away and make us helpless!"

The rice is cooked. Mrs. Tu urges us to eat with her husband and two children, then stirs up the fire and puts a second pot on to boil.

The evening mist descends on the plain. Today there was no shelling. The motorized troops which roar every day on the road were equally mute. The light of the kerosene lamp makes the room cozy. It's the first meal I've had in a long time in a family atmosphere. The rice is mixed with manioc, but it is steaming hot and we eat it with a good appetite. With the fish soup the meal is excellent. The fish was caught by the son when he went to bring in the buffalo. But each one politely wants to leave the fish for the others and no one touches it.

Tu feeds the baby. While we have finished our bowls, his remains almost untouched. His wife stays near the stove. Her hands have not stopped once from the moment we arrived. The second pot of rice cooked, she begins to toss the hulled rice to winnow it.

The hot breath of the war seems not to have crossed the threshold of this house. The destruction we saw on the road and all around is now plunged in grayish mist and no longer visible. Nothing is real except the little room, illuminated by reflections from the fire and the light of the lamp, where the baby amuses himself with a tray. The Tu couple calmly go about their different domestic tasks.

I remain silent to enjoy the tranquility which reigns in this house. I think. All is calm. Life unfolds normally here.

Sleep doesn't come during this first night on the plain. The Tu couple insist that we sleep near the shelter, but we refuse. Everyone, except the boy, sleeps in the same room. Tu and his wife on the bed with their baby between them. Quang and I in our hammocks.

A little while ago, seeing Mrs. Tu preparing a big ball of cooked rice, I asked her, "Everyone has eaten, why are you making a rice ball?"

"It is for you two. So you will have something to eat if the enemy arrives early tomorrow morning or you have to leave us before you eat..."

Two young men stop in to ask for tea. Tu gives it to them. I think they must be ordinary passers-by, for

they carry small and impeccable haversacks on their backs. They wait here until a girl in a black short-sleeved jacket with a transistor hung by a strap on her shoulder, comes to get them, laughing. "I guessed that you would stop here to get tea and tobacco from Uncle Tu. Let's go, the others are already there waiting for you."

She laughs again. A crystal, contagious laugh. One of the young men gets up, says goodbye to us and goes out. The other picks up the water pipe, takes a last quick puff. Turning to catch up with his comrade, he throws at the girl: "Look at this empty-head who only knows how to laugh!"

At once she becomes silent. She looks at the young man, drops her white arms in mock dismay and retorts, "Do you want me to cry then?"

Bursts of hearty laughter. When she leaves, I notice a pack on her back too. Her transistor is turned on and the voice of the woman announcer of Radio Hanoi grows fainter as the girl goes down the path between the remains of the old strategic hamlet's barbed wire defences.

"Where are they going?" I ask Quang, thinking it is to some kind of ceremony to honor the new recruits.

"Daily meeting of the hamlet's young people."

"But why do they carry haversacks?"

"Local habit. The young people always take them along even when they go to visit each other. The enemy might come and they are always ready."

According to my guide, we will do without the mosquito net tonight because it might hamper us in case of an alert. In fact, we have taken out our pistols and put them within reach.

The courtyard of tamped earth is washed with the soft light of a moon in first quarter. We can see roofs here and there. Everywhere there is calm, a calm which nothing has disturbed since the sun went down. We hear some artillery fire, but very far away, and submerged by the strident and intermittent chirping of a cricket on the beam of the areca palm above us.

The door is left open. Since the area was liberated, people do not close them. Not so much because stealing has disappeared, but because the hamlet is on a P.L.A.F. route and the soldiers have the habit of resting here before continuing towards the sea or the mountains. These guests, always in a hurry, seem to come out of nowhere at any hour of the day or night. Sometimes they appear at noon, ask for a little water and straw to cook their rice, eat in a hurry, put what is left of their meal back in their packs and leave in a hurry. Other times, they arrive in the middle of the night. They come into your house with their pack baskets full of rice, hang their hammocks lengthwise and crosswise of the room, or spread their rainproof cloths on the floor, and fall asleep at once. Before dawn they all disappear.

There are others who, like us, spend an entire night and eat with the people of the house before starting another stage the next day. The Tu couple do not even know what most of their guests are like. Tacit convention governs their relations. Before going to

bed, Tu and his wife straighten up their house. Pots, dishes, knives, firewood... everything is put near the stove. The guests can sleep anywhere. Everything they need is at their disposal if they want to fix a meal.

In the night, if the family is sleeping, the guests are careful not to awaken them. With the light of a flashlight or a cigarette lighter, they do what they have to do noiselessly, coming and going on tiptoe, for they know that the slightest bit of rest is priceless in this area. In the morning when the family gets up and sees a new layer of ashes in the stove, some half-burned pieces of wood, a few cigarette ashes, a few grains of rice on the floor, they know that soldiers have passed a few hours in their house. The tiptoed steps, utensils put back in their places, traces of sweeping the floor... are tributes to the family.

The Tu couple have been sound asleep for some time. The woman has taken the baby under her blanket, her arm around it. A while ago she rocked him, and sleep has caught her in this position. Her husband is lying with his back towards her. His regular snoring becomes louder from time to time. They must not have known many moments of intimacy in all these years. Mrs. Tu no longer observes the custom that husband and wife sleep separately when there are guests, for the Liberation cadres and soldiers are considered as members of the family. This attachment has broken the taboos of other times.

When it was time to go to bed, Quang had tried to give Mrs. Tu the amount of money which is due for each meal. But the good woman would have nothing to

do with this, only saying that a few bowls of rice mixed with manioc are nothing. She and her husband have welcomed us in their home as they have done to hundreds and hundreds of Liberation soldiers. A pile of straw, some firewood, a few bowls of rice for each one. A simple way of calculating it, but my heart is both moved and pained.

The sky suddenly darkens. A cloud passing over the moon? But I soon understand that the moon has only gone down behind the mass of the Truong Son. I still cannot close my eyes in spite of the fact that I tell myself to sleep, at least a bit, because I have to be on the road early in the morning. But reasoning only chases the sleep away. At times, sleep brushes its wing across me, but then disappears immediately like a cloud over the moon, leaving me more awake than ever.

A slight snap in the courtyard makes me open my eyes. I see sparks near the door. Someone is trying to light his cigarette lighter and I have only time to glimpse cotton hats like the Liberation soldiers wear. When the flame finally comes, a girl's face appears, marked with fatigue, a face vaguely familiar to me. The heavy basket she carries on her back has pulled the bottom edges of her jacket high.

"No room here," she whispers. "It's occupied."

"Let's go farther," another feminine voice answers.

The lighter goes out. The two figures go away. I suddenly remember that this is the girl who once sold Quang and me cigarettes in a market in Thua Thien province. On that day she had worn a jacket with violet

flowers on it. Her companion certainly sells in the market like her. The girls here are crazy about the famous hats of the P.L.A.F. and the black clothes of the women cadres. Certainly the two have come down to the plain to get supplies for their small store. And here they are disappearing into the black night full of pitfalls for them. The route passing Tu's house is all quiet again. Realizing that they are only two, I reproach myself bitterly for letting them go. A verse of Nguyen Du\* comes to my head: "*All alone, in the black night on a road without end...*"

The young Kieu who fled trembling in the night two centuries ago has been replaced by fearless women cadres who laugh at the darkness to complete their missions.

The sound of artillery comes from the direction of Highway No. 1. The image of the two girls looking for a place to stay in this blazing area drives away all sleep.

Perhaps I had dozed off a minute or so when Quang shakes me lightly. It is three o'clock in the morning. We fold our hammocks, take our packs and quietly leave the house of Tu.

Our feet trample down the dew-wet grass. I fix my eyes on the slightly bent back of my comrade whose trall silhouette stands out clearly in front of me. From time to time my guide stops to warn me of a ditch with spikes or a puddle. He has cat's eyes, really. As

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\* Nguyen Du (1765-1820): Vietnamese poet, author of the well-known *Kieu*.

soon as the sky clears, we hear the panting whir of helicopters coming nearer and nearer. We hide in a small grove, waiting for these steel dragon flies to pass. Shortly, we hear rifle shots.

Quang halts in the middle of a step and turns towards the direction of the firing. He slept badly too, judging from his pale face. "Exactly where we spent the night," he says.

I have the impression that his eyes, brilliant and a little moist, suddenly become red.

My Thuy, a few kilometers from the airfield at Phu Bai, was one of the first villages liberated in July 1964.

In April 1965, G.I.s coming from Da Nang struck Thua Thien like a cyclone.

Convoys of trucks, jeeps and armored cars roared along Highway No. 1. The noise of tank tracks was deafening, clouds of dust covered the filao trees with a blanket of white. Between each convoy marched the infantry. Faded battle fatigues, ultra-rapid automatic rifles, individual FMs, belts of shiny cartridges around the waist, they marched in ranks as if on parade.

The big devils hammered the ground with their boots, looking at the strangely low, green villages with a lustful eye, even waving to the poor people who plodded in the mud behind their buffalos in the flooded paddy

fields. They smiled at the jet-eyed, black-haired children who watched them with a strange expression. But even in that instant, the Yankees were capable of firing a gunburst into their midst without caring what happened — after all, these were only “inferior” beings. Just as in their country the black people are regarded as slaves, so these yellow people are scarcely more to the G.I.s.

Most of them didn't know what the war was all about. They had a blind faith in the power of the weapons they carried on every part of their bodies, in the persuasive force of all this equipment which thundered on our narrow strip of land which seemed to present nothing for them to be afraid of.

A violent whirlwind arose in the sky over Phu Bai. An airfield appeared. The roaring never stopped, night or day, reaching such a point that the people feared for the health of their pregnant women. A whole section of the sky at Phu Bai was illuminated by night. From far away one could see the blinking red lights of the radio towers. It was from there that shells screamed out in all directions, falling on villages, crossroads and forests — their barrier of fire. The U.S. officers and artillery men took pleasure in seeing their shells fall exactly on their pre-fixed coordinates.

But they also knew that this pounding could not, by itself, hold back guerrilla action and guarantee the protection of the expensive equipment they had brought there. This explained their many sweeping operations to clear the perimeter around the base.

The single village of My Thuy alone bore the brunt of 2 000 G.I.s. Blithely they entered the hamlet which their men had just shelled and in which the acrid smell of powder still hung strong. They erected tents almost everywhere, piled up sand bag bunkers around them and then encircled it all with barbed wire. It wasn't possible to move anywhere without coming face to face with bayonets and rifle muzzles. They made the children come to play with them. A few who spoke Vietnamese fluently spread out in the hamlet, greeting each peasant they met. Sometimes they would give the peasant a little flour or a can of food or condensed milk. Of doubtful quality, it's true.

They stuck their noses into everything, even coming into the bedrooms — "to visit sick people" they said. It was their eyes which struck the inhabitants most. Not frank, but always furtive and inquisitive, glancing into places and things which did not concern them: a corner of the kitchen, a stable, the drawer of a sewing machine, the bottom of an incense burner on the altar to the ancestors... Their eyes belied their words. Then the people discovered that they disguised themselves, changing their clothes in an abnormal way. It even happened that their skin, white in the morning, became black in the afternoon.

A cargo of prostitutes had arrived with the G.I.s. But the Yankees were not satisfied. Entering the house of an old peasant, two wandering G.I.s discovered an adolescent girl. Knowing looks between these two brave men. Then one of them threw four hundred piastres on the table and seized the girl. She struggled

violently. The father sprang on her attackers and the girl got away. The Yankee whirled on the old man and grabbed him by the throat. But fortunately some neighbors had heard the uproar and came to the rescue. Another young girl, who was washing clothes at a well, found herself suddenly lifted off the ground. Seeing that she was in the arms of a G.I., she screamed for help. Other Yankees helped the rapist carry his prey away. But when the people poured out in a mass into the street, the Yankee threw his victim on the ground and fled. The poor girl lost her mind from the experience.

The local killers who had escaped the people's punishment in the previous resistance and who had since taken refuge in the enemy-occupied zones had now come back in the van of the enemy. They denounced cadres and went around probing and trying to discover underground hiding places.

At the slightest explosion or shot, the troops rushed out to chase guerrillas, like hunting dogs after wild game.

It was spring, the spring in which the Pentagon had thrown nearly 200,000 G.I.s into Viet Nam, not counting naval men. Its total forces, counting puppet and satellite troops, reached almost a million men. Few peoples have had to face such a huge invading army. The army of Napoleon which penetrated Russia a century and a half ago numbered only half a million men.

Then, almost overnight, South Viet Nam, this small theater of operations, received an additional force of

250,000 aggressor troops — all Yankees. This time, these arms merchants who have always intervened at the last moment to profit from other peoples' wars were forced to pay for it directly under strongly disadvantageous circumstances.

This massive invasion we had foreseen. Even in the last round against the French colonialists, we had already seen the tips of our new enemy's ears. In that epoch, we pitted ourselves against the Americans—with all their strategies, tactics, planes, tanks, heavy artillery, bombs and ammunition. But the real grapple with them has only begun today.

Their scheme was clear and visible, their appetite endless. When the balance of forces became tipped against them, they threw their weight into the scales thinking that with one crushing blow they could reverse the situation and seize a "decisive" victory.

But the struggle of our people had already taken a new turn. The American forces invading our country were going to swell considerably in the future. History had charged our people with an immense responsibility.

The leading comrades of the N.F.L. of South Viet Nam stood plunged in thought before the map. A tiny territory bordered on the west by an impassable chain of mountains, on the east by the sea. Every day the blue points on the map indicating enemy occupation grew more numerous. Impossible to retreat. No other solution but to stand and fight back with all their strength. The guerrillas of Tri-Thien, squeezed in between the mountain gorges and the strategic roads of

the plain, felt the soil tremble under the Yankee avalanche.

Nguyen Viet Phong\* is the leader of the people's militia of My Thuy. He was 20 years old in 1965 and was studying in a course for military scouts. When he was told of the tragedy which had hit his family, his comrades and his village, his heart broke. There was no sign of his father, taken by the enemy police. His mother had just been arrested. And not for the first time. His older brother who was also his comrade had been killed. His two younger sisters, left to themselves, had gone to live with his sister-in-law, herself the widow of a martyr. The apricot tree with the beautiful blossoms which grew in front of his house had been cut in two by a shell. At night, the searchlights of the airfield at Phu Bai swept over his house. Thousands of shells fell on the village. Hamlet 5 was razed. The police multiplied like maggots. Many militants fell under the blows of the repression, others were tossed into prison. But all that did not throw young Phong off the path. He was not born wrapped in cotton wool. He had seen too much tragedy, been through too many storms since the first "denounce communist" campaigns began!

What puzzled him was the Yankee himself. What was he like? That he possessed a profusion of weapons... light and ultra-rapid fire automatics... did not astonish him. What did astonish him was that according to the villagers, every time the Yankees heard a gun shot, they swarmed on us like a cloud of flies. How could

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\* A hero of the Liberation Army of South Viet Nam.