Already you can hear alert steps running in the streets. Calm returns as soon as people realize that it is not the B 52s. Bullets hit the sandbags with a dull sound. An unhurried voice rises above the chaos: "We're the Liberation troops. We ask our compatriots to light lamps and open your doors to us."

Young voices call to each other. Then come knocks on the doors.

Here they come, entering with their cotton hats, shorts over white legs. Young, with radiant faces. They tie up the police bastards. Who knows how they can tell them from the honest people in a house? They do nothing else. The arrests finished, they say goodby and leave.

Everyone rushes to the door. The entire post of An Lo is in flames. From time to time an explosion flashes. The rattle of machine guns, punctured by the crash of hand grenades, moves towards Ba Phuong. The sharp bark of mortars from the direction of Tu Ha, Pho Trach. These two support points are probably also under attack. Not one single shell has wandered here. People wait for the counter action of the Third Battalion and the Yankee advisors in the An Lo base. People who know about military things predict an imminent P.L.A.F. assault following their softening up with artillery. Meanwhile, the post grows more and more silent.

The arrest of the police agents is finished. There they are, leading them out in a long file in the street. A Liberation fighter, with a pistol and steel helmet, tells the inhabitants, "Go back to your shelters in case of

an enemy shelling. We have just knocked out the An Lo post."

How is it possible? They have only sprayed it with their artillery. But it is true. Aren't those the voices of the P.L.A.F. calling to each other inside the silent post, lighted by a single fire near the water tower? And here is the file of prisoners, those "republican" soldiers, many of whom wear only pants and undershirt. One of them carries a bunch of ultra-rapid automatics on his shoulder. Others, individual mortars. Another, two radios. Extraordinary! — a good number of them carry this booty with radiant faces, as if *they* had just won victory.

"Go back to your shelters! The post is destroyed and the enemy will certainly retaliate!"

An old woman leans on her granddaughter in front of her. "I can die happy," she says. "For twenty years they were gone and finally I have seen them again!"

A girl runs towards a Liberation fighter and tries to slip a small package into his hands. "My mother told me to give you this. When you come back, don't forget to visit us..."

The man, who is rolling up telephone wire, backs away and stutters, "Thank you... thank you, you and your relatives... But we can't take gifts from the people. When An Lo is liberated, we will surely come to your house..."

The girl stops abruptly and looks down at the package of candy in her hand. Her eyes raise to the fighter, who hurries to finish his task.

The talk goes on for days. Some say that the P.L.A.F entered the post even while their own artillery was pounding it. Some puppet soldiers who got out of it tell them this was true.

People praise the accuracy of the artillery men, the "humanity" of their shelling. Those shells which fell by the hundreds — maybe even thousands — like the raids of the B-52s, found no civilian victim and did not demolish any house around the post. The banana trees which grow so close to the barbed wire, not even they received a fragment. Inside this vast ring, yesterday crawling with soldiers, officers and U.S. advisors, today it is silent as a desert. And nevertheless, from this land of death a crowd of dishevelled people come out in the morning. Wives of officers and soldiers. Their faces white and fear-stricken. Some of them carry babies. They tell that their husbands have been killed. But their children and they themselves don't have even a scratch. The bullets and shells of the P.L.A.F. spared even these women and their children.

The owner of a jewelry store and his wife do not get tired of telling what happened at their place. Scared to death by the explosions, they reached their shelter, solid, underground and well hidden, which reassured them. When they heard a knock on the door above, they did not answer. The husband murmured: "It's the end of us, it's the Viet Cong!" Someone smashed the lock. Both of them thought: "Even if they spare us, they will take everything and we will be thrown penniless out in the street!"

The door opened. A voice demanded, "Anyone here?"

The couple held their breath.

"Anyone in there?"

The husband squeezed his wife's hand for silence. Footsteps came and went. Many, and not one by one. This time for sure, it was the end. Then, they heard the door being shut. The steps went away. They had gone! The wife cried out in pain and her husband hastily dropped her hand. What a narrow escape. But they were dead just the same — how could they make a living with all their goods taken away? They could no longer stay in An Lo. As soon as the sun came up, they would have to go to Hue. And how could they live there when they no longer possessed anything?

When everything became calm again, they heard their neighbors calling them and climbed back out of their shelter. Seeing the light of their lamps, they felt as though they were coming back from far away. The door was closed. Nothing seemed to have been touched. The husband went at once to his glass cases: the jewels were there! They examined the door. Yes, it had been forced. The couple had the impression of coming out of a dream. But they had to believe their eyes: the Viet Cong had really entered their place, but they had only broken a latch.

Some days after, some postal employees who had been able to get out came back to An Lo. They asked the people what had happened. They consoled the jeweler: "You're alive, that's the main thing, because man produces what he has and not the contrary. But what did they take from you? Your losses are heavy?"

The husband answered calmly, "All that we have lost are our customers. Nothing else. When gold and jade no longer attract them, what else do you expect them to find in my place?"

Then, the An Lo market becomes alive in an extraordinary way. From Hue and other places come a crowd of people who pretend to be searching for children, husbands and relatives. In reality, they have come to see with their own eyes if everything happened as they were told. Anything can be sold or bought in the market. The puppet authorities tell themselves that any restrictions now would become ridiculous, since the Viet Cong have not taken rice, tobacco, sugar, milk or medicines.

The destruction of the An Lo post is considered as a good curtain- opener for the dry season.

The fighters joke with a slight edge of pride: "To make a good job of our mission, we have to have three graduation diplomas: one for our military skill, one for our cooking talents and one for our medical ability."

In effect, each Liberation soldier must know how to do anything, for he operates in a cramped theater. On one side, the forests and mountains, and on the other, sand dunes, the sea and the Tam Giang lagunes skirting the two provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien for a hundred kilometers. There is the peak of Hai Van so high, numerous rivers, the arms of the sea, villages, towns and cities. And in all this the Liberation soldier must contend with swarming, machiavelian enemies, to say nothing of their agents. He must be at ease on the most diverse territory, acquire the speed

and ingenuity of guerillas to hit the enemy suddenly without leaving him time to recover his balance. But he must also have the implacable courage of soldiers who fight the enemy face to face and clobber him with staggering blows. Today you are in the ranks of a Liberation unit, acting under the strictest discipline. But tomorrow you may be a N.F.L. cadre who has to know how to mobilize and organize the people, fight in the most different ways, flexibly as well as strongly, with spikes, crossbows or bare hands.

It rains six months a year in Tri-Thien. The volume of precipitation is the highest of the entire Indochina peninsula. Each fighter must know how to cook rice in the shortest possible time when the smallest piece of firewood oozes water. Cooking rice is not a relaxing occupation. One flame or wisp of smoke in the forest is enough to bring on a swarm of B-57s or even the B-52s. Nevertheless, the Liberation soldiers manage to get two hot meals a day, with a good vegetable soup and sometimes a dish of meat or fish to make it really good.

They must also know how to help their comrades if they are wounded or sick. The enemy doesn't shrink from any ferocious or savage thing. Humanity has never known more odious and hateful criminals. The Yankees use pellet bombs, napalm, phosphorus, and poison chemicals. Liberation fighters must be good at knowing how to use the dozens of medicines which hang at his belt, and their correct doses. Yellow pills, gray pills, pills with the good smell of the herbs from which they are made in our laboratories deep in the forest. Red capsules, or yellow, tablets which resemble each other so much in form and color but are completely

different in effect — many of them coming from the aid of foreign friends.

An Lo is considered a battle typical of our style of fighting.

Our fighting style is one of a people not numerous, on a territory not very large, against an enormous imperialist power. We are obliged to hit this aggressor who tramples the soil bequeathed to us by our ancestors. Even if they are an armed force of more than a million men. Even if they possess an incredible amount of iron and steel and horrible means of killing. Our forefathers did the same. With their legacy, they bequeathed us this injunction down across the ages: "Love your soil and you can defend it." In this one sentence there is not only an expression of their love for the mountains and rivers of our country, but also practical experience built on absolute truth. It is from these treasured experiences that our style of fighting today has come.

Our enemies, who were protected at An Lo by high barriers of barbed wire, ingenious curtains of fire, ferocious dogs, suddenly received a stab straight in the heart. Some fell immediately. Others not before they had had just enough time to see death coming.

In reality, not all the puppet battalions were wiped out by our first salvos. Those who survived had time to grab their automatic rifles and run out. They thought to reach their fighting posts and fight the P.L.A.F. attacks sure to follow the shelling. One of them carried two weapons. Somebody blocked his way with the clear intention of lightening his burden by taking one of his guns. He gave one to the man. But

it was a Liberation soldier who had run out of ammunition and was looking for another weapon. The puppet could not believe that the enemy was already inside the post.

Others only thought of getting out of this hell as quickly as possible. But the terrifying explosions everywhere they turned, and those silhouettes running like lightning, discouraged them. Without a word among them, they fled head over heels towards the river. But there, grenades were waiting for them. Dozens of puppet soldiers, nevertheless, succeeded in throwing themselves into the water. Some days later, their bodies floated up to the surface. What killed them? Asphyxiated by the fumes of the explosion which dropped the bridge into the river? Didn't know how to swim? Or were they too scared to be able to stay above water? Nobody knows exactly.

Those killed inside houses and barracks by falling roofs and collapsing walls, or destroyed in underground tunnels and blockhouses, still wore a terrified expression on their faces. Beside each of them was a sack with five days ration for the operation which had been planned for the next day. This was to be the mopping up of Phong Nguyen, stopped before it could start.

A young communications soldier is taking us to the detachment which played the spearhead role in the An Lo battle. Our guide has adopted a strange way of walking. Both on flat ground and on slopes, he raises himself on his feet at regular intervals as if he wanted to seem taller than he is. We secretly laugh at his "affected manners". But we swallow our laughter at once when we learn that he was wounded in the left foot. His difficult steps now hurt our hearts.

A desolated scene appears in front of us. A recent bombing ? Denuded trees, big splinters of split rock, everything bathed in a gray luminous pall, as if sprayed with molten lead. Our guide stops and turns towards us. "Wait for me a minute, all right ? I have to go and ask. If you are tired, rest "

The gentle voice which he hopes will placate us makes us burst out laughing.

He disappears behind uprooted trees which lie all over. With all of the guides gone, they had chosen this young man who had just come to the region. He accepted the mission without hesitation, sure that he could always ask as he went along. But the service station here where his acquaintances are supposed to be seems to have evaporated. Without doubt they have moved after a recent air raid. Our guide is completely lost.

But here he comes back with his curious walk There is some affectation in the walk after all, simply because he doesn't want people to know that he has become a cripple. He tells us to take our packs and follow him.

We take the same path as before. Probably he met no one in the cave where he just went. The path divides continuously and becomes less and less perceptible. Each time our guide is in difficulty, he stops, observes, bats his eyes to indicate the direction. What dictates his choice ? None of us know. We tell ourselves : another mistake. But finally we come to a house snuggled in a grove. Our guide enters, then comes out at once to signal us. We are there. On my word, he must possess a sixth sense from having lived so long in the forest.

As we enter, the fighters who are sitting around a bamboo table turn to look at us, impressed by the corpulence and beard of Xuong. One of them, wearing in a knit cap, asks us to follow him.

The path is flanked on both sides by trenches which must date from quite a while ago. Water from the rains has eaten away the edge of the path, leaving only gravel. Bomb fragments have left recent traces. The man asks us in a familiar way, "Have you just arrived from the Center, comrades?"

"We are returning from a holiday excursion to An Lo," laughs Xuong. "We are cadres from a sub-sector who don't, of course, know much."

"You don't fool me. One glimpse of you and I know who I'm dealing with... You will fill us in on the news?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Anything and everything."

An Lo, like any other explosive action, was not accomplished as easily as a boy lights firecrackers. The authors of this most remarkable exploit did not descend from the sky with miraculous weapons. The spearhead detachment on whom the principal responsibility fell included fighters who had not even been under fire before.

Van The Hung was charged with taking the underground sector. The small group he commanded contained a few new recruits. Before the operation, he told them, " You will die only if I die. Stick as close to me as my shadow." And they told him, " We'll do exactly what you tell us."

Then the company commander fell ill in the middle of the preparations. Some of the scouts coming back from the enemy post hesitated. The command was divided on the chances of success. Political officer Luc was on the side of those who thought victory was certain. Impossible to retreat before difficulties in the middle of this action. It was necessary to arm oneself with resolution and translate this into concrete acts. Luc picked up his pistol and went with the scouts to coordinate the preparations himself. The dry season had started everywhere except in Tri-Thien where it still rained hard and the mission was not one which you could finish in one night. Luc is not very old, but he carries some forty tiny fragments of bullets in his body and he is as sensitive to the weather as a barometer. Any time the weather is about to turn cold, the pieces of metal make him suffer atrociously with every small movement.

They finally established a plan of operation. But its execution would be far less easy than it looked on paper. Once, they had to call it off and go back because of bad weather. In such circumstances, the task of a political officer is not an easy one. Others can swear or even complain. But he must keep his head above present contingencies, he must see beyond the present problems to the long-range ones. In front of

the men's uneasiness, he is the one who galvanizes them. To their overeagerness, he reminds them to be vigilant. Nothing is so fluid and changeable as human thinking. Like different breaths of wind. Well, the political officer's duty is to make all these winds blow in the same direction so as to create a cyclone which carries out the decision.

On the previous attack, Luc had his automatic and his grenades like all his comrades. If needed, he would have behaved as any valiant soldier under fire. But now in this operation his task would be tougher. It was enough for an awakened dog's bark, the noise of a motor on the highway, an exclamation or an unaccustomed sigh from one of the men, to plunge him into thought. He did not think of himself but of the well-being of others, of the common fight. All this worried him to the point that he forgot the personal dangers which were waiting for him once the battle began. Even in that moment, unforeseen things could happen without warning.

Under the starry sky, the puppet base seemed asleep. The night dew wet the shoulders of the men. Luc clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering. Everything had gone well so far. Suddenly he heard the voice of a puppet sentry say, "Who goes there?" Le Hong Thoa was in command on the side where the sentry was. Had we been discovered? A blast of automatic fire answered the sentry. Had Thoa begun the battle, Luc wondered, when the other sections were not completely ready?

"What shall we do?" asked Binh, the second in command of the company.

He asked the political officer for advice before giving the order for the attack because the result of the battle depended on this order. The issue of an engagement is sometimes decided in a flash.

"We go!" Luc said.

Binh raised his flare pistol. A red signal rose in the night: attack! Luc took his grenades and ran towards the post with the second in command. Flames erupted everywhere, roof tiles flew and walls crumbled. He knew instinctively that his order had been correct.

Our modest needs reassure the political officer. We realize that just before our arrival his unit has been terribly busy. Three other cadres of the province and the Sector arrive in the afternoon. The command post fills with people, each one going about his own affairs in a great commotion. Luc turns himself into four persons in order to do all he can to facilitate our work. We know that he weighs every decision. Everyone we meet gives us the impression of being interrupted in their work. As for Luc, he takes advantage of every quiet moment to come to talk with us, for he is one of the men we would like to know well.

The rain has begun to fall again. At the end of the morning, the mist instead of dissipating, covers the countryside like a heavy cloak. After their meal, the

two comrades who came from the Sector command post take a' nap under their blankets. After having given some orders to the cook's helper, Luc comes out of the kitchen and sits with us around the fire. He blows on the embers, warms his hands and asks us, " Don't you have the habit of taking a nap ? " Then he changes the subject : " With this continuous rain, we have difficulties at the unit."

His detachment is considered as a technical unit. It is always involved with adversaries more numerous, of ten to one. Under fire, it has to manage for itself without calling in the artillery, and fight the enemy face to face. To come out untouched and win each time, it has to charge into the enemy's lair, jump on his back and strike. Each of its operations so far has been victorious. Its men fight with a typically Vietnamese style, never described in any military manual. A style which allows them to win over a much stronger adversary, to win resounding victories with minimum losses of men and almost no cost in matériel. This is the style of a poor and not very fortunate people.

In the An Lo battle, we had no deaths. To obtain such a result, this method of fighting needs, among other things, an enormous attention to details in the preparation.

Xuong and I understand that Luc wants to give us some minutes of interview.

" What province do you come from, comrade ? " I ask him.

" Here, from Thua Thien. "

"Then you must often have the chance to pass your home and stop in."

"Not one single time since I left it."

"How many children do you have?"

"I don't have anybody at all."

We understand that he means that he is not married. He looks at the beds of his comrades of the command and adds, "The three of us have no families."

His face a bit pale, with a strong chin, lights up in a nice smile: "You see, at my age I have not yet figured out how to behave with a wife. Many of the comrades know more about this than we three do. Many already have a wife and children."

"But you're not old at all."

I realize that this sentence — so habitually said — doesn't mean a thing to him.

Luc's eyes are following a yellow squirrel on a branch broken by a bomb fragment. When it reaches the end, it comes back with tiny gracious steps, its bushy tail like the fluffy head of the cattail reed. Luc's voice becomes confidential. "Many of my comrades have happened to stop in to visit my mother. She asks them all to tell me: 'You're getting old, my son. Do what you want, come back when you please, but find a wife.'"

He becomes silent. His eyes stare at the burning embers of the fire, now covered with a thin layer of ashes. When he speaks again, his voice is gay. "We don't worry about getting old. You see, the other day

when we were passing a place in the plain, the girls told us, 'Since the enemy is still here, go and fight him. But on the day the revolution triumphs, if you are interested in getting married, we will take a good third of your age away from you!'"

On his camp bed, one of the sleepers stretches his legs and says, "Comrade Luc, to get married with a woman far younger than you are—is that not following feudal customs?"

But his neighbor on the bed retorts, "Of course not. Early marriage, forced marriage, polygamy, these are feudal customs. But when there is mutual agreement, in spite of the difference in age, there is nothing feudal in this, isn't that true, Comrade Luc?"

So the two comrades, far from sleeping, have been listening.

Taking advantage of the remaining light of the afternoon, we have moved next to the window to bring our notes up to date. A tall man, in undershirt and black pants, comes into the room, glances quickly at us, says hello with a slight nod of his head and goes to the empty bed. He unfastens the nylon cloth around his neck, throws it over a vine hanging in the room and hooks his wet hat on a beam near the door. His skin is blue from the cold and rain. The comrade sitting

next to us informs us in a low voice: "Comrade Hong, head of the detachment."

Hong takes some dry clothes out of his kit bag and disappears into the shelter. He returns a minute later dressed in a khaki uniform and a coffee-colored turtleneck sweater. He lies down without a word, head on his bag, pulls a blue parachute cloth over him and falls asleep.

When mealtime comes, he is still in bed. The medic brings him some rice and a canteen of soup, but the commander only half opens his eyes and then promptly closes them again.

After dinner, we are worried to see him still in bed.

"Does he have a temperature?"

"Some," the medic answers.

It is only long after nightfall when we are listening to the news over the radio that Hong awakes. He gets up, eyes red. From where he sits, Luc asks, "Are you sick, Hong?"

"Only a slight fever."

Hong washes and takes his ration to the table.

"It's better to warm your meal," says Luc. "Let me do it."

"Not necessary, old man."

And he starts eating his cold food. He swallows with difficulty. The rice and soup must be ice cold. Without finishing it, he goes to bed again and falls asleep immediately.

The next morning, Hong joins us at breakfast. After his long sleep, he seems refreshed and in good spirits. His complexion over prominent cheekbones is clear and a gold tooth shows when he smiles. He asks about us: "When did you arrive ?"

"Three days ago."

"But we must celebrate, Luc!" he goes on, turning towards his political officer. "Try to find something for tonight. I have brought back some tea with me."

Breakfast ended, we gather at the bed to divide one tobacco leaf which the Sector comrade has taken out. Hong joins us enthusiastically and Xuong makes a place for him with a smile. But Hong doesn't smoke. We have not seen him smoke since he came yesterday evening. He takes a thin sheet of paper from his pocket, unfolds it and spreads it out on the canvas bed cover. Cigarettes half-rolled in their fingers, everyone stares at the map. Even though Hong keeps silent, we know that he has drawn it from an enemy position where he had gone on an observation mission.

Giving us time to look, he points with his bony finger to the plan projected for the different spearheads of attack. One of the men sent by the Sector examines the map carefully, turning it around at different angles to look at it, and nods in approval. Not a word is exchanged. They seem to understand each other without words.

"It's all ready," murmurs Hong, who adds for our benefit, "Our next operation plan."

A few days ago, I had come back to the command post of the area to rejoin Xuong before going on with him to the different units. That night we were the guests of the Propaganda-Education Service. We spent the evening in an underground shelter provided with a stove which had the double advantage of warming and keeping the mosquitos away. Backs against the walls covered with fresh palm leaves, we drank tea and ate nougats. Here, each return, even after a short absence, pleases everyone. The conversation was on the private life of the comrade chief of service. He contented himself with his habitual gentle smile, which had the effect of stretching his very attractive side whiskers. He did not give in to our curiosity or answer our purposely indiscreet questions. When we talked about marriage, he remained with his lips closed as usual. To elude questions, he turned on his transistor for the news.

In that moment we heard of the first plane raid on Hanoi!

Our laughter ceased abruptly. Anxiously, we kept our ears glued to the radio for the entire evening. Each of us tried to figure out from the news and battle reports how many hombs had fallen on Hanoi and which streets had been destroyed. The Dong Da quarter was hit. It was there that Quang Trung had defeated the Ching armies. The embassy quarter—isn't that near Ba Dinh square, close to the President's huilding? The quarter along the Red River hit. Was the Long Bien bridge damaged? We were anxious and upset, on hot coals.

Here, we have become almost indifferent to the bombing all around us like sailors get used to squalls. During these raids, we only think of their end, saving our anger for other circumstances, as one stores up his strength to climb a hill. But these bombs are falling on Hanoi and affect our deepest feelings. Many of us have never seen a roof or tree of our capital, but Hanoi has been linked with our lives and our hopes for a long time. It is from there every day that the voice of the motherland comes, the voice of President Ho Chi Minh, this sacred voice which guides us on the road of battle, which gives us at every moment new strength and brings us nearer to victory. Bombed Hanoi, the heart of our motherland! It is our own heart which is outraged.

In that moment, the same resolve came to each of us: strike back! Avenge Hanoi! It came to those responsible for conducting operations. It came to each of the cadres and fighters of this little detachment. And today it has materialized in this map opened on the bed before our eyes. Will it be La Vang, Tu Ha, Quang Tri or Phu Bai?

When not out on operations or transporting supplies, the men devote their nights to rest or personal affairs. The scattered lodgings and the necessity of being cautious with lights make getting together a bit difficult.

But in each house, it is in the night hours that the most people are there. In winter, at any cost, one must find wood for the fire.

At the end of the afternoon, the medic and the liaison agent brought two big logs. They are water soaked, but in spite of that they will become red coals in the fire. Meanwhile, they fill the room with smoke. The smoke doesn't annoy us because it is far preferable to the cold darkness.

We gather around the fireplace, putting our faces or our feet near the crackling fire. Xuong puts one of his sandals on a log, sits on it and tries to dry his jacket which has been damp for many days.

Commander Hong, standing on the edge of a bed, is tying a cord to one of the rafters in order to hang a mess tin of water over the fire to boil. As the medic pushes aside the heavy curtain covering the door, Hong asks him point blank : " So ? Did you succeed ? "

The medic enters with an aluminum can in his hand. " I had to fight hard. I had to tell them ten times that we had guests from the Center. "

" How many pieces of sugar ? "

" Four. "

" The peanuts ? "

" Eight measures "

" It's a stingy amount of sugar. "

A man sent by the General Staff interrupts : " Who cares ? Let's start ! "

Hong smiles. His gold tooth gleams. His voice sounds like a field order: "Pot on the fire! I'm in command of this operation!"

Meanwhile, they fire all kinds of questions at us on the national and international situation. We have to admit that our knowledge is limited and we can't satisfy the curiosity of our questioners. We search our memories to find some fact which will interest these men whose personalities are now familiar to us.

The small man with a bandaged forehead whose smile totally involves his slanted eyes, is Van The Hung, head of the spearhead group which demolished the undergound fortifications at An Lo. He was only a small buffalo boy before he came into the army. The bandage on his head resembles a halo and emphasizes his fine oval, open face.

His neighbor with the deep and pensive eyes hidden under thick brows is called Le Hong Thoa. He was the first to enter the post and attack the command headquarters. The ray of his flashlight had fallen on a big bearded Yankee crouched down behind a blue curtain. Steel helmet, armed. Thoa did not know whether he was going to flee or flatten himself in the room. Thoa presented him with three bullets. His companions killed three other Yankees.

The short, heavy one with the fine face, warming himself near the fire, is Nguyen Kim Dung. He has just come back from a mission tonight. After he reported, he ran into the kitchen to eat a ball of rice and then returned by the fire to hear the news instead of going to his quarters. Now he warms himself and

dries his clothes. Some time ago, he had the chance to stop at his house in Trieu Phong in Quang Tri province. His mother examined him for a long time in the light of the lamp before concluding : " They lied. Nothing has happened to my son. "

Seeing a girl sitting behind his mother, he stared at her, " Who are you ? " he asked.

His mother, who was crying from joy, couldn't help laughing.

" What," said the girl. " You used to tease me all the time and now you've forgotten me ? "

His little sister ! Really, apart from her high forehead, no one would have recognized her. One hour later, as they were saying goodby, his mother took his hand and said, " It is natural for you to go to war because the enemy is in our country. But I would like so much to have a grandchild. Can't you think about getting married ? "

At An Lo, Dung had commanded the attack on a large number of blockhouses. Just as he had silenced a pocket of resistance and was about to clean out a barracks with grenades, he heard the cries and pleading of women and children.

" Come out of there, quickly ! " he cried.

The women came out, accompanied by their children in tears.

" Anybody else in there ? "

None of them said a word. He tossed a grenade in the place to get any hidden enemies and then ordered

the women and children inside again to get them out of the way of stray bullets. He didn't hesitate to take some minutes for all this, even though he knew it might give the enemy an advantage.

The big and solid one with the chestnut eyes, who wears a kepi with a visor, is Ku Bay, a man of the Pakoh national minority. When the Yankees arrived in the Thua Thien, his comrades wondered what the new enemies were like. Bay used to tell them, " They have two arms like us. Even if they are big as elephants, it doesn't take more than one bullet to stop their heart ! " In the first engagement of the detachment at Dong Lam, Bay hurled eight grenades and killed all the Yankees sleeping in three tents. He fought with such fury that he did not hear the order to withdraw. The head of his group had to come and pull him off by the arm.

" What ? We're leaving ? " he cried, wide-eyed.

After the battle, he said that the Yankees are blind as bats and clumsier than the puppet soldiers.

Here before me are the men whose exploits are told throughout the plain like legends.

While Xuong and I tell them what we know of the news, a big pan is put in the middle of the fireplace on the half-consumed logs. Dung breaks the golden lumps of Quang Nam sugar and tosses the pieces into the pan. One of the General staff men sitting on the bed reaches over Dung's shoulder and tosses in a packet of white powdered sugar.

The mixture starts to bubble. Hong jumps down, takes the chopsticks from Dung. Dong protests: "But chief. Rest. You must have confidence in the masses."

"I have confidence in you for other things, but not for making nougat."

Hong pours the peanuts into the pan. They are shiny and plump like birds' eggs and fall into the hot sugar with the noise of hail. Then he stirs it all with the chopsticks. The syrup turns brown and slowly hardens around the peanuts.

"Enough," someone cries. "Don't stir any more, otherwise you'll spoil it!"

All conversation is suspended. All eyes are on the pan. The moment is solemn. If they don't take the pan off the fire at the right second, the sugar will not harden enough and all their work will have been wasted.

"Take it off!" someone says loudly. "You can already smell it burning, I tell you!"

"Calm down, calm down," Hong answers with assurance.

Then, suddenly remembering something, he asks with alarm, "Did anyone spread a piece of paper?"

"Everything's ready," answers a Sector man.

Hong stirs harder with the chopsticks. The pan no longer boils. We see the shiny peanuts stuck together in one mass. The smell is wonderful.

"Out of my way!" Hong shouts.

Those on the bed move aside. Hong takes the pan off the fire, moves quickly to the bed and pours the

contents out on the newspaper. The others join the process. Some scrape the pan, others carefully level the stuff on the paper.

"I think it's been on the fire too long," someone says. "The sugar will crystallize."

"You and your ideas," retorts Hong, turning towards Dung. "Take this pan, Dung, and boil some water. You who just came back have priority on the coffee."

"It's incredible, but he's right," says the General Staff man, touching the nougat with his fingers. "It looks good."

Sitting at the table, Luc who until this moment has not opened his mouth, comes out with: "Everybody sit down." He wants us to continue talking about the general situation.

The mixture has to cool before one can know whether it was successful or not. Hong returns to his place on the front bed, takes a package of tea from his sack and gives it to Hung. Then he rolls his sleeves down, sits down cross-legged and rubs his hands with satisfaction.

Xuong finishes a story heard god knows where. It concerns a Scandinavian woman writer on her first visit to Viet Nam. It seems that when she arrived in Hanoi, even the smallest details of our life in the capital astonished her. One day she was walking in the Thanh Nien (Youth) Street between Ho Tay Lake and Truc Bach Lake, a street which Uncle Ho had named. Seeing that the war had not stopped the people of Hanoi

from raising flowers, she asked the interpreter to translate what was written on a sign.

"It's a verse," the interpreter answered. "You know, in our country everyone likes poetry and knows part of the *Kieu* by heart. Many people can write poetry."

"What does this verse mean?"

"It means, 'If you like flowers, don't pick them.'"

The lady was very moved. In her country the climate is harsh. Before she had come here, she had been astonished to learn that many Vietnamese go barefoot. She simply could not understand that it is possible to live without shoes. She was convinced that our people were half savage or sunk in poverty. In Hanoi, she met many people with bare feet in the streets. Her ideas about man and life changed in Viet Nam.

Everybody likes Xuong's story.

Suddenly the General Staff comrade announces in a loud voice, "It's ready. And excellent!"

Everyone is pleased, as if his particular comments had helped to make it good. At the last moment, Hong, like a grand lord, tosses an unopened pack of "Rubis" cigarettes among us.

The tea keeps me from sleeping this night. Hong didn't drink any, nor did he smoke any of the cigarettes

he had gone to the trouble to bring back. He was satisfied with only a small piece of the peanut nougat, as if to congratulate himself on his good cooking. He shook his head whenever anyone offered him another piece. Sitting a little way from us, he watched us drinking tea, eating the nougat and smoking, with half-closed eyes and visible satisfaction. This small detachment seemed like a family where everyone got along fine together. And we, its guests, profit from this mutual good feeling towards each other. Luc told me during one of his conversations:

"Practically speaking, we don't have any personal things here. We divide any gifts: tobacco, good things to eat. Brotherhood reigns in our ranks. But sometimes it has a disadvantage: everyone who comes back from a mission wants to prolong his stay in 'the family'."

Everybody has been asleep for a long time. At nightfall, the enemy planes went wild, but after midnight, everything becomes extremely calm again. From time to time you can hear the cry of some bird of prey. These night hunters who hide permanently in the dark launch a cry dismal with solitude. I hear the cry of a bird coming nearer. It passes and fades in the silence of the night. Cries of despair which cast a note of sadness over the surroundings. Then I hear an unreal sound, strong at times, imperceptible at others, like the sound of the wind. Tornado arriving unexpectedly from far away, beginning to hit the forest? Can't be. Just a little while ago, the meteorological stations announced good weather. I try to recall the noise of

waves in a bad storm. And suddenly the truth hits me — it's them! But before I can wake up my companions, shells and bombs begin to explode together.

Instantly the sleepers are on their feet and dropping rapidly into the shelter. Hong, who has the habit of staying in bed even during heavy raids, resigns himself this time and follows us. B-52s. Hot blasts of air whip our faces in successive waves. Then there is absolute silence. We smell the charred odor. This time the bombs stopped at the edge of our station.

We are secure in a triangular shelter reinforced with huge logs. Silence. We hear drops of water falling somewhere. The B-52s never content themselves with one bombing, maybe the next wave will be for us. We wait gravely for that threatening roar which will surely come over the horizon.

Here they come! Immediately there is the characteristic whistle of the bombs.

The explosions march towards us rapidly like the pounding feet of thousands of stampeding elephants. Through the opening of the shelter we can see the flashes coming one after another, and after each one the earth shakes. If our shelter had only one entrance we would not be able to breathe easily for the violent changes in air pressure. The explosions suddenly become more ear-splitting, sharper and more lashing. Our shelter is rocked in every direction. We feel as though a giant weight were pressing us down, our ears roar.

Then the explosions retreat in the distance. The earth no longer shakes, but the air continues to throb.

We can still hear the growl of the planes. But it's finished. They go away. End of the second wave. Out in the forest a branch finally decides to fall, cracks and drops heavily to the ground with a crash. We have to remain in the shelter for the next hard blow. In the darkness, someone murmurs close to my ear, "Exactly like the peanuts in our nougat."

I can't see his face clearly, but I am sure from his tone that he is smiling. I like his comparison. Yes, there is something in the raid which reminds me of the noise of the peanuts falling into the big pan. The explosions continue, but far away. We discern in the uproar the noise of falling trees.

Calm returns around us. We hear the drops of water again.

"We can leave, men." Hong says.

He seems impatient. Outside, our house is intact. Nothing has happened except that the fire has been scattered everywhere, burning Xuong's blanket and my sandals. In spite of the fact that the bombs were close together, there was enough space between them to spare the houses and shelters.

The telephone rings continuously. Everyone inquiring about us. Comrades are sent from the command post to the different sections to assess the damage. As soon as they leave, Hung arrives in a hurry.

"What is it, Hung?" asks Hong, extremely worried.

Hung throws a glance around the room with his slant eyes and says, "Nothing happened at our place. I've just come to find out about you."

Hong's face muscles relax.

The men sent to other sections return, their clothes spattered with mud but with happy faces. Group Four's house was demolished. Earth blocked the entrance of their shelter, but the men dug themselves out without a scratch. They are staying now in the barracks of other units. Except for one man who is temporarily deaf from the explosions, everyone is safe and sound.

He has ordered all of us to sleep in the shelter and, after answering the last telephone call, he goes to bed—outside, under the pretext that too many people are coming and anyway there isn't enough space in the shelter.

The liaison agent stirs up the fire near where I sleep. Everything becomes calm again as before the bombing. Luc who was next to me has disappeared. Undoubtedly he went to see Group Four. Xuong replaces his burned blanket with a parachute cloth and goes to bed. His breathing becomes regular. He has found again his interrupted sleep. I suddenly remember his trouble when we crossed the river and I smile.

I feel astonishingly close to all of those who sleep this night around me.

VI

We have started out again on the route to the north. Spring has returned. The rays of the sun filtering down through the foliage seem like multicolored and irridescent threads of silk. Nature warms itself. Through breaks in the sky we see an intense blue which seems to stretch to infinity. The clouds, empty of their rain and washed clean of the dirt of winter, wander nonchalantly as if to make people admire their cleanness. The streams do not roar with anger anymore. They have become smaller in their beds, giving the banks back to the reeds and other water plants still spotted with mud. The water has found its clearness again and, becoming sweeter, murmurs its secrets. The mud dries on the paths and we walk on firm soil sprinkled with tiny yellow daisies. Here and there, shoots push up out of the ground, pretty as flowers. In spite of the toxic chemicals, spring draws the sap up into the dry trees, where it opens buds along the stunted

branches. The weather in its unvarying cycle has started patiently to bind up the wounds which the enemies of mankind have inflicted on nature.

P.L.A.F. units brimming with life have already opened fire in Tri-Thien. But it is from today that the dry season really starts in this area. The fighting neither stops nor weakens, not even a second for people to catch their breath, but on the contrary becomes more intense. The defenders of the motherland, after more than twenty years of fighting, have as sharp a bite as in the beginning. They care only that, rainy or dry, the seasons of their country kill the aggressors.

They come down towards the plain. Towards National Highway No. 1 where the enemy has strung out hoping to hold it, without suspecting that it is suicide. Towards Highway 9 where the Americans have massed themselves since the preceding summer. Units of Marines, those shock detachments, the pirates of the twentieth century, are spread out along a long line of fortified places facing north. The Ben Hai River is not enough of a barrier for them, they need also to cut our motherland in two with a wall of men and mines. Day after day, the B-52s plow up both sides of the road, helicopters land prefabricated blockhouses on the hills. On the map along the unfortunate river appear the points occupied by the hated Americans: Dong Ha, Con Tien, Doc Mieu, Khe Sanh...

The equipment of our men gets better each year. It is all new, the gray-green uniform, pack with three pockets, rifle with red stock and shining barrel, rubber sandals, leather belt, sacks of rice. It is heavy, for they

are not bringing the enemy flowers, but lead. These precious objects which cost so much in the blood and sweat of our brothers and sisters in the rear—they are determined to deliver them to the addressees. The concern and care of the rear also shows in cheeks pink with health and eyes bright with confidence.

This big fellow with short side-whiskers who walks rapidly at the head of the detachment, a stick in his hand, pants rolled up—surely he's the one from Phong Dien who fled to the forest when the first "denounce communists" meetings began? Man does not live by bread alone—or rice. On the other hand, the enemy did not leave us a single grain. This man will never forget that dark night when he came back down out of the forest, crawling painfully towards the hamlets on legs trembling with fatigue. His sister had given him some money and a handful of cooked rice which he devoured hungrily. If the enemy discovered a grain of rice fallen in the garden or a trace of a footprint, his sister, father-in-law, nephews and nieces would be killed, that he knew. When it is necessary, even without rice, one must hold out. That is why those from whom the enemy confiscated the right to live more than ten years ago, succeeded in staying alive. They refused a bleak and flat existence. They adopted a life like the eagle's, at times soaring to the heights, at times plunging with spread wings towards the sea, sowing terror in the ranks of the enemy.

And that other one with the bronze complexion of a coastal man, who smiles and wipes his forehead. Isn't he a former fisherman from Cua Viet? How nostalgic he must be for those clear mornings when he pulled

out to sea, sails bellied with the wind, prow cutting the gleaming waves below the low-flying gulls. Or for those nights when the saddened sea called the stars to come closer to lessen its loneliness... For those schools of fish which leaped everywhere around his boat, splashing sparkling drops of water... For those days long ago when, as a small child, he had wandered on the beach searching for turtle eggs, strange shells and other curious things... For those days after he had become an adult when he fished with a hook and line or tended the nets. Who knows how many times he has looked far beyond the filao trees towards Cua Tung where his mother was born and the brown sails leave for the sea? The waters of the Ben Hai River mix with the sea, but the enemy stubbornly insists on dividing its waves.

And that other man who walks without a rifle, helping himself with a stick, carrying a big pack with a Red Cross on it, eyes deep and pensive, doesn't he come from Hue? He must have left his fiancée there, where the hem of her long white tunic billows in the wind every evening on the bank of the Perfume River. Americans in swim trunks, skin and hair burned by the sun, water ski. Does he remember the deafening noise of the heavily-loaded military trucks crossing the Bach Ho bridge and the thick voice of some G.I. sprawled dead drunk on the seat of a motorcycle passing in front of the Dong Ba market? The summer days when the dazzling red of the flamboyant trees enflame the streets and the crowds demonstrate. The evening in the half darkness of the curfew, as the

Trang Tien bridge silently contemplates its image in the river, just like the disconsolate trees along the quay. He still remembers that shy girl who, leading a little child, walked towards a residence of Americans with a hand grenade wrapped in a handkerchief. An explosion. Four Yankees died. The girl left calmly, holding her little brother's hand, walking quietly through the Yankees and puppets who ran there without knowing what had happened—the handkerchief still in one hand, but empty. Ah!—what is this little sister, so brave and sweet, doing at this moment?

Where do you all come from, comrades? The "agricultural colony" of Ba Long, whose sinister barracks encircled with barbed wire stand in the middle of a desert which no tree makes cheerful? Those liberated villages where the people rebuild their houses on the very edge of the bomb craters? Or do you come from farther still?

Each one has left a little of himself in his village, as well as brought some of the village with him. Which one does not possess a mother, a Vietnamese mother who loves her children more than her life? Who has not heard her say, "The revolution needs your hands. Go then, my son." And those who have left a wife, a Vietnamese woman all sweetness and courage, who agreed that her husband should fight for a quarter of a century if necessary. And the children! Only the fathers know what children mean to a man. This corner of the earth, the object of so many anxieties and hopes, the endless source of joy, this native soil whose memory drives you on during days

of rain and forced rests, haunting your dreams, this corner of the land which burns in you, which awakens in you the purest and most exalted feelings, while you are climbing some mountain in a long line.

The green leaves of our camouflage rustle with every step, the water in your canteen, already half empty, sloshes at your side. The long cloth sacks of rice carried around the shoulder keep bumping your pack. The rapid breathing of all these strong and vigorous men warms the forest. Their column stretches along the mountain and only its movement distinguishes it from the surrounding foliage. The Truong Son range suddenly becomes animated under their light steps. Spring has returned. The thorn bushes cover themselves with flowers as if assaulted by thousands of butterflies.

We have found Dr. Hoang Huu Hai again at the edge of one of the Quang Tri brooks.

Our first meeting with him was also near a brook. That day, we were going along beside a mountain stream, following a gravel-strewn path under trees knocked down by bombs. The guide had urged us to hurry because the place was very exposed. We were pushing along among the stones and rust-colored puddles when suddenly we saw two men sitting on a

rock in the middle of the stream as if nothing was happening in the world. One of them, tall, thickset eyebrows, sparkling eyes, well fitted in his uniform, was obviously a Liberation soldier. The other held our attention because of his dress and manner. He wore a hat of plastic material with a broad brim, a sky blue undershirt and white pants which we rarely see here. A towel around his neck, like all of his clothes, was meticulously clean. He had the air of an intelligent civil servant who has nothing to do. Our guide knew him. The man only smiled in greeting to avoid the inevitable question as to why he was there. Without the wrinkles which opened as a fan at the corner of his eyes, I would have bet that he was very young. His smile had something unusual about it. The open lips above a rather pointed chin made us think of a courteous man, ready to please everyone. His smile and dress seemed to belong to a summer visitor idly lying on a beach. I told myself that he might be a man from Hue, freshly arrived, or at least a clandestine cadre from the city. A cadre in charge of economic affairs, I finally concluded.

After we had gone some distance beyond the stream, we asked our guide.

"It is the doctor," he said enigmatically.

We had expected something like that. And none of us asked anything more about this doctor too neatly dressed for the trail who rested in a dangerous place.

At the command post of the Zone, we found Doctor Hai again. His companion was Pham Thanh Chung, who was being named to the next Congress of Heroes

of the P.L.A.F. Once more, astonishment hit us about our doctor, because he had also been chosen to go to the Congress. In fact, he left a few days later.

No one knows why he is here at this brook today.

He is thin and his black costume seems to make his complexion pale. He is sitting on the edge of the brook, his hat on his back, revealing a big forehead ornamented with soft hair. Having recognized us, he gets up with a very pleased face. He smiles at our astonishment. "Didn't go to the Congress," he says. "Sick."

"What's wrong with you?"

"Rheumatism. Had it for years. Fortunately, it didn't catch me very far from here."

I remember that the other day when we had left him, he promised Nguyen Viet Phong, Hero of the P.L.A.F., to help him cross the mountain because he was not accustomed to it, having always lived in the plain. Who would have thought that the first one to fall out of the trip would be the doctor, to whom disease had done a bad turn?

We sit near Hai among the reeds. One of our group who had fallen behind on the trail, joins us. He is Nguyen, a middle-aged painter. The guide had been right about him when we had left. Showing his enormous leg muscles, he had told the painter, "Uncle, you'll never be an ace on the march." This judgement was exact. Only a moment was enough for Nguyen to fall behind. He walks slowly and with difficulty on his bowed legs. But at each pause, when the rest of us

want only to massage our legs, he starts at once to make sketches until we depart again. Then he falls behind soon after we start, only to sketch at the next pause. Everything he sees on the trail worth his charcoal he wants to put down on his sketch pad. He has the ambition to exhibit his sketches later in the Museum of South Viet Nam.

Seeing Hai, Nguyen cries, "God! You, doctor? 'And your trip?"

As the doctor smiles and is late in answering, our painter rattles on like a chatterbox, "I've found a name for my painting! To paint you while you are operating is too ordinary. I want to paint you coming out of the operating room and answering the anxious questions several Liberation soldiers ask you. Title: 'He's Recovered Consciousness.' Do you like that? 'He's Recovered Consciousness.' Very original, eh?"

Hai has many exploits in his record. He has saved desperate cases under unbelievable conditions. Apart from his work as a doctor, he knows how to do many things: carry the wounded, build huts, pick edible plants in the forest, transport rice in baskets for the hospitalized, evacuate the sick into shelters during bombing raids, help them break through enemy encirclements... In short, he is a person who inspires our painter.

Under Nguyen's flood of words, Hai only reddens and murmurs a deprecating "Oh..." which dies under an embarrassed smile. He is never at ease when people talk about such things in front of him.

"Look," pursues Nguyen, "what's wrong with you? A little under the weather?... Go on with your

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conversation, don't pay any attention to me, I just need a little time to make some corrections. The sketch of the other day doesn't fit at all with my new title..."

Hai keeps his constrained air while he turns his wedding ring a little too large for his finger. He puts it on his middle finger, then takes it off again and juggles it up and down in his hand. His fingers are long and tapered, exactly the kind which are dexterous with the scalpel.

His voice grows strong suddenly : " This ring," he says, "doesn't belong to me, comrades. I was married without thinking of having one made. It belongs to a comrade who works in the same hospital as I. His wedding ring. Before I left, he worried about the risk I was going to run. A sudden sickness, a sudden mopping up, losing contact with liaison, who knows what ? 'In case of need,' he told me, 'don't hesitate to sell it.' That made me think a lot, for we were not very close, the two of us."

He takes out his plastic wallet, wraps the ring in a piece of paper and puts it into a pocket of the wallet.

" Nothing can make me forget that it is a priceless treasure to my comrade. I took the ring only to please him, even if it only meant giving it back to him when I return."

He adds, with a pensive look, toying with the wallet, " One can judge the feelings of someone only when you are far away from him... "

He remains for a moment lost in his reflections, then deciding something, he takes out of the wallet a

tiny notebook in which he has the habit of writing his thoughts and which we had seen in his hands a number of times. His face brightens.

"I have had good news," he says. "I received a letter from my wife when I was at the sub-sector hospital."

"Is it true?" I exclaim to share his joy.

"Yes. I wanted to show it to you... only, maybe it is better to read you the poem I wrote after the letter."

Hai opens his notebook until he comes to a page where he has written verses without having crossed out one word. He hands it to me and says, "You know that I am not a poet."

"But you have the soul of one."

"Not even that."

And I read aloud those lines written in the nervous handwriting of doctors. Not so much a poem as a page of a diary put into verse. Hai put down his impressions when he received the letter. His wife lives in the North and he does not know which road her letter took to reach him.

...Your letter, my love,
Has reached me on a morning
At the hour when the mist lifts.
Heart beating, I hold it in my hand,
Fearing it will fly away as a bird.
I stare in silence at the envelope,
Which carries your trembling handwriting

And your loving soul.
In my name, I see your heart...
Your letter
I dared not read, for fear
Of bad news, afraid
Of your tenderness...
...I finish reading,
I remained dreaming all the day.
...Am I happy because I have a pretty wife,
Happy because I brave the flames—
Or am I happy because our children
Can do their subtraction?
It must be for all these—
Of you, of the children, also of me,
Of the fact that we march forward together
Having understood perfectly well
That happiness for us is the child of victory.
Dear one! The sun shines above me.
Receiving your letter,
I also received confidence.

Hai came originally from Trieu Phong in Quang Tri province. When he left his family to join the revolution, the enemy hounded his wife in such a way that she and the two little girls had to flee to the North, on the other side of the Ben Hai River. Today she studies medicine so that she can, says her letter, work in the same hospital as he when she rejoins him in the South.

When I finish reading his poem, he hands me a photograph. His hand trembles a little. A woman with two little girls, one on either side of her, near a young coconut palm on a beach. Sails on a background of reefs. The woman is still young and seems trim and gracious in her black costume. Her eyes look off in the distance, face tensed against the sunlight. The wind is blowing strongly, judging by the folds of her jacket pressed tight against her, the skirts of the little girls and the filled sails. The two children astonishingly resemble their mother. No one smiles in the photo. She must have been photographed during a two-day leave at the sea several years ago, before the American planes attacked Ha Long Bay.

Hai throws a quick glance at the photo and turns away. His face becomes paler and a slight shiver passes over him. I understand his feelings better from watching him than from reading his poem. I start to hand the photo to Xuong without knowing what to say. But Hai speaks before me.

"You know," he says, "it is only since we have become separated that we realize how much we love each other. My wife says that in each one of her letters. On the other hand, it cannot be expressed by words. I have also tried to say it in a poem. But I realized that that is even more difficult.

At the next halt on the trail, Nguyen asks everyone to help him finish his painting. He has just found another name for it: "The Arrival of Letters in the Spring". We must all serve as models.

So here we are, obliged to pose again according to the orders of the painter. A strange way to rest. But still, it is a chance to sit down again. I have seen him in other circumstances begging heavily-loaded soldiers to pose standing with all their load. Comrade Quoc jokes : " But Uncle, there is no brook here."

"Not important," answers Nguyen. " To read one's correspondence on top of a hill is even more beautiful. Look at those colors! I will put in the colors at the next stop on the trail. "

Two fighters who have climbed with us stand behind Nguyen, looking over his shoulder. They look from his sketch to our group to judge the resemblance.

Clouds on this hill begin to float down among us. We are growing colder.

"Can we smoke, genial painter?" Xuong demands.

"A cigarette? Why not? It will look more natural."

Then, his stroke of the pencil finished, he adds as a joke, " That way, people will know that we have tobacco in profusion on the Tri-Thien front... Hey, Hai! Don't move! "

Everyone bursts out laughing at the worried tone in his voice. Quoc takes his ration of tobacco out and gives each a pinch. We have to smoke sparingly in order to make it last until we reach the command post of Quang Tri where we have hopes of being reprovisioned.

The sight of a detachment coming to meet us stops Hai's retort. These men carry no pack, only weapons and a light blanket. They must be officers sent in advance to prepare some battle. One of them, thin and bearded, carries a briefcase and field glasses. He smiles with a candid air and addresses Nguyen : " Comrade painter ! Make my portrait for my fiancée ! "

"But before you do," one of his men interrupts, "lend him a carpenter's plane for his beard ! "

Nguyen considers the officer's beard and says, " If you have the time, Apollo, I will boldly paint you a sensational beard, like you never saw before ! "

The men double up with laughter, but do not halt. Their job cannot wait. Suddenly, from the detachment, someone leaps on Hai and almost smothers him in his arms. Hai recognizes him and hugs him to his heart.

" I have rejoined my unit, doctor ! "

" But your hand ? It is completely healed ? "

" It couldn't be better, " he answers, proudly showing his hand. " Didn't you receive my letter ? "

Instead of replying, Hai carefully examines the hand of the fighter, who quickly withdraws it.

" Well, " the soldier says, " I have to join the others. "

Once more he embraces Hai tightly and runs to catch up, as though he wants to avoid our stares.

...Not long ago, a young fighter arrived at the hospital with a smashed hand, bones exposed and emitting

an impossible odor. He complained of atrocious pain and begged them to amputate his hand. The majority of the hospital personnel agreed. A minor operation. A dozen days and the man would leave the hospital. Hai and his personnel could devote themselves to more difficult cases. But Hai could not take on himself such a comfortable solution. It was not so much concern for giving the fighter back to his unit with his two hands because, in reality, the young soldier was in a dangerous condition. Hai had another worry. He thought that these fingers, an integral part of the body, had grown up with their owner and shared joy and pain with him. These fingers which had so many common memories with the man! No, the fingers will not be amputated before we use all the resources of the medical art. Hai decided to heal the crushed hand. As he did not have Aquinas solution, he simply used saline. He irrigated the wounded hand with permanganate for several days before putting it in a cast. The hospital personnel struggled for two months. Result: the young man left with his two hands. There were tears in his eyes when he thanked the doctor.

This unexpected encounter plunges Hai into a long silence. It is only when we start to march again that he tells us all the story.

A helicopter appears through the rays of the sun on the top of a mountain before us, like a termite shaking its wings in rainy weather. Under its belly swings a reinforced cement blockhouse. The blades of its rotor turn with a sound of giant panting. It heads straight for Highway 9.

While we keep walking, we shade our eyes from the sun with our hands to watch it sneak its way heavily in and out between the trees. Simple incident of our route.

Suddenly, voices come out of a clump of palms whose large leaves violently reflect the strong rays of the sun. Girls' voices, clear and harmonious. Like birds. We make out these words : "My beloved! Do you think of me ?"

Then bubbling laughter which runs together like the waters of a clear spring. Where are these *dan cong* coming from ?

Why this contagious gayety? It is because the endless rains have finished, or because a spring full of promises has come ?

A young fighter, obviously a new recruit in a uniform too big for him—his trousers flap around his ankles, even though they are folded up—glances furtively towards the grove as if he fears the jokes of those who know the trail better than he. Heavy equipment miraculously becomes lighter. Steps become firmer and prouder. One straightens up, fixes his eyes on the man in front of him and makes his heels sound as though on parade. A small and stocky fighter, his hat worn like