

that American society produces such publications and films abundantly; Saigon, since the Americans arrived, has been literally flooded with them. Even newspapers favourable to the regime have sounded the alarm very early. Let us quote the *Tanzan* of June 18, 1959:

“The novels, long or short, published by those sinister newspapers are all cheap love stories written with low and vulgar techniques, in which pornographic art reaches its highest degree. On the other hand the merchants of literature endeavour to create types of adventurers with cowboys’ and gangsters’ exploits which demoralize the youth. These poisons impregnate young minds every day and push our youth into the abyss.”

The *Cachmang quocgia* of March 10, 1960 quotes the opinion of a university professor:

“The cinema initiates the children to techniques of crime and misdemeanour. The films awaken the children’s bellicose and sexual instincts. For them, the cinema is the school of theft and crime.”

Let us pick up at random some titles of films in the newspapers: the Love-thirsty, the Secrets of Those Ladies, Love Among the Bandits, What You Should Know About Night-Clubs the World Over... and a few advertisements: “More seductive than Marilyn Monroe, more exciting than Brigitte Bardot, smarter than Anita Ekberg, more sexy than Diana Dors, the star of this film will play a young girl endowed by nature with a magnificent body, who as a result of a shipwreck lands on a desert island where live five males athirst for lust,” “the frantic appeal of the flesh inflamed by lust,” etc.

"Literary" works do not lag behind the films in any way. The review *Tin Van* (Literary News) published in Saigon (issue of August 6, 1966) complains:

"Never has literature become such a big brothel.

There are books in which from beginning to end there is but one thing: going to bed, the characters being indeed mere pigs in men's dresses."

Even the periodicals specially catering for schoolboys do not escape the rule. Let us read the diary of a schoolboy published in *Giaipham hocsinh* (Schoolboy's Works):

"I thank you, whore; at the cost of 130 piastres, I and three other boys slept with you the whole night. The school, the desks, the benches were witnesses to that night of love-making, when we sought each other like dogs running after bitches. Four o'clock in the morning, I saw you back in the cold night."

The journal *Chinhluan*, of May 10, 1965 specified that that issue of "Schoolboys' Works" had been widely distributed after approval by the "responsible authorities."

Besides pornographic literature, a whole series of books of adventure and detective novels incite people to violence. All through those stories one hears only the crash of pistols, the howls of people being murdered, the satanic laughter of ferocious supermen; blood and sex are intimately mixed.

A more subtle way to demoralize the youth consists in directing them toward cynicism or pessimism, thus removing from them all aspiration for a better, worthy

life. Chu Tu put these words in the mouths of his characters :

“ Fatherland, justice, fraternity, friendship, love, all that is but dupery. All I know is money ” (in his novel *Song* (Life) p. 45)

“ The greatest aim remains our personal interest.” (in *Loan* (Turmoil) p. 65).

“One must rid oneself thoroughly of the usual complexes inherent in the so-called honest citizens (in *Yeu* (Love), p. 28)

Deceit and crime in his view are part of “human nature” and, what is more, constitute the only charms of life. Says he pontifically :

“ I think that if man captivates us and seduces us, if life is full of joy, it is because man knows how to hate, to deceit, to cheat, to betray. How dull life would be if all men, obeying the moralists, became like millions of well-regulated clocks, all striking at the same hour, not a minute slow or fast. Society then would be made up only of men with sound reason, but that perfect society would be perfectly inhuman, for it would lack this “essence” of the criminal man, both lovable and hateful.”

(In *Loan*, p.287)

Thus it would be justifiable to reject all of one's duties, and in particular to betray one's country, to sell oneself to the highest bidder, the Americans.

In the midst of this general depravity, honest and courageous minds who seek to give a meaning to their writings or other artistic works are not lacking. But censorship is pitiless: any demand for some justice and honesty is soon condemned as "communist propaganda." It is sometimes necessary to "decode" their writings to know the authors' true intentions. Therefore it is not surprising that more and more writers and artists have joined the Resistance.

The great vacuum

What are the results of twelve years of American domination of cultural life in South Viet Nam? The Saigon review *Bachkhoa* of January 1961 observes:

"For many years now we haven't had a single work, even a collection of short stories, which gives us an image of reality ... While real life brings about dramatic confrontations, which carry man's heart and mind to higher planes, we find only shadows of the past in literary works... These works have no depth, they are like a thin film of oil on the surface of the water... the level of knowledge and sensibility is very poor...

"The main shortcoming remains that poetry, like the novel, has no readers. We cannot find a single flower, hear the song of a single bird... but only lassitude, debauchery, suffering, abjection, despair, a breath from the woman one loves, and many dreams in a life doomed to impotence."

Tin Sach, which contains a monthly review of books, writes (September 1962):

“Present-day novels are all alike, one finds in all of them the same superficial sentiments, the same despair. It is of no importance whether one reads them or not.”

On November 4, 1963, after the fall of Diem, three of the writers who had served the regime most faithfully, had a fit of sincerity. They wrote in the *Ngon Luan*:

“We pretended to be fighting, with our pens, for freedom, democracy and the emancipation of man, but in reality during all those years, to get something to eat and through cowardice, we closed our eyes and drank filthy water, we prostituted our souls, betrayed truth, betrayed our people, resigned ourselves to being lackeys to the Ngo family.”

But the fall of Diem has changed nothing, for the U.S. occupant is still there, more omnipresent than ever. The psy-war services continue to impose themes on writers and artists: pornographic works and films are thriving, and the vacuum prevails more than ever. On Nov.8, 1966, at a ceremony for awarding literary prizes, one of the laureates, speaking on behalf of all, exclaimed:

“If one casts a glance over the cultural and ideological evolution of the country during the last decade, one cannot help being pessimistic: all vitality seems exhausted, all convictions worn thin, all humanist values trampled underfoot. The young generations do not enjoy any protection against the pernicious influences which undermine their possibilities; the right of

self-expression as well as the very lives of writers and artists are not safeguarded. We continue to witness drastic limitations, gross violations of the writer's mind, body and profession."

In Vietnam more than anywhere else, anti-communism and national treason cannot serve as a basis for a good literary production. In Saigon, for the last twelve years under the reign of the U.S. dollar, in spite of abundant material means at the disposal of men of letters, there has been a great vacuum. It is in the other camp, on the side of the National Front for Liberation, that one must look for genuine national literature.

Poems

Giang Nam

My Native Land

When I was a boy, and to school went twice
a day.
I loved my native land through what books had
to say.
"Who says buffalo-boys lead a hard life?"
Dreaming, I listened to the birds that sang on
high.
Often played truant,
Catching, near the pond, the butterfly,
And was caught by Mamma...

Hardly had the whip licked at me
Than already I wept: Hee, hee, hee!...
The little girl next door
Looked at me, and chuckled. Oh, what a bore!
Then the Revolution broke out,
And the Long War (1) was brought about.

*My native land was plagued by the enemy.
Leaving Mother, I went away.
The little girl next door — who would believe it? —
Also joined a guerilla unit.
The day we met, she chuckled too.
Her eyes were round and black — lovely and true!
But we were to fight, and no word was said.
As my unit passed, I turned my head...
Though rain filled the sky,
Warm was my heart, I knew not why...*

*When peace was restored, I returned again
To the old school, to the furrows, the sugar cane.
Again we met;
Confused, you hid behind the door...
And you laughed, when I whispered:
“Are you married?” — “It’s so hard to say,
brother.”
Trembling, I took your hand so fine,
And you left it, left it burning there in mine...*

*Today I heard of you.
How hard to think! Yet, it’s true...
They shot you, and threw you away.
Why? “You’re a partisan,” they say.
Pain tears my heart, half-dead am I!*

*I once loved my native land for its birds and
butterflies,
For the days when I played truant and was whip-
ped by Mother.
I love it now, for on each clod of earth there lies
Part of the flesh and blood of the girl I'll love for
ever.*

1960

Translated from the Vietnamese

*Crossing a Village
at Night*

*The boat was coming in the dead of night :
Clusters of bamboos, rising tide,
The oars shook the starry sky,
A stray bird circled on high.
Noiselessly the boat came in the dark,
As searchlights swept the tops of the palms.
Guns loaded, eyes wide open,
We waited.*

*

*The sampan girl had rolled up the legs of her
trousers,
A cold wind blew in from the dunes,
She helped load our packs on board,*

*Wild flowers and dry grass: the smell of forest and
mountain.*

*As our hands touched, her cheeks blushed red, it seemed,
I felt her warm breath and her quick gestures.*

The water splashed,

Heavily laden, the boat pulled out with difficulty.

"May we help you, Comrade?" I asked,

She shook her head and made the sampan turn fast.

Living in the midst of enemy posts and blockhouses,

She was used to containing joy and sorrow.

*

The boat went out into the darkness,

As the tide kept rising.

The oars again shook heaven and stars,

On the other bank, the palms seemed to beckon to us.

The sampan girl kept her eyes fixed

On the distant watchtower at the village entrance.

Her nimble hands worked the oars,

*Her thin figure stood in the midst of the vast expanse of
water.*

A few more strokes! The bank was now quite close,

Joy and emotion welled up in our hearts.

A burst of gunfire tore the night,

Sparks flew in the darkness.

"Sit still," she said, "don't move!"

*The boat kept advancing towards the enemy.
It gave a lurch, bullets whizzed overhead,
Her silhouette towered over the waves.
"Sit down, sister, we'll do the rowing," we pleaded.
"No, brothers, don't worry." Again the boat moved
forward.
The whole dark sky was in turmoil,
Our hearts ached, our eyes shone with anger,
Enemy slugs swept the river,
In our clenched fists, our guns burned with the fire of
hatred.*

*

*The boat was now safely moored to a tree,
Holding the girl's hands, we hesitated to leave.
"Thank you," we whispered. A smile
lighted her face as she shook her head.
"I'm a member of the Revolutionary Youth," she said,
"I've only done my duty."
Her figure faded in the night.
As we marched across the village,
It seemed we still heard her muffled steps.*

*

*Valiant girl, your memory
Is alive in our hearts, as we storm the post.*

September 1962

Translated from the Vietnamese

Vien Phuong

We Shall Be Wedded in the Spring

*Songs resound in the whole village,
It's festival night, and I think of you.
Everything is bathed in moonlight, yet I think
of our small lamp.
I've travelled the length and breadth of the
country,
Yet memories of our little village haunt my
mind:
There lies half of my heart, my beloved.*

*

*I think of you, my love, of those dark days
When I lived in a hole underground,
Ate from a ball of rice and drank from a
flask, (1)*

(1) Revolutionaries working underground hide in tunnels, and the people bring food to them.

*Swallowing my anger in the bosom of the cold earth.
You brought me rice each night, your eyes shining,
Only the stars bore witness to our love.*

I dreamt of Chuc Anh Dai

While you saw in me a Luong Son Ba (1)

Their grave had opened one night

And two white butterflies darted out into the sky,

Freed from injustice, now they could be happy at last.

*

But we both chose to fight,

*We didn't seek to escape from injustice, but to restore
justice.*

One day, rifle in hand, I carried their post by assault,

But when I came back to you, you too had gone.

*

Four years have passed, how fast time flies,

Our forces have grown, like trees in the forest,

Our steps shake the Pentagon,

In our hands, three-fourths of the land.

Immense are the freed areas,

Under this vast sky I haven't met my sweetheart.

It's festival night. How I think of you :

Four years! And we haven't met.

Only a few words once reached me on a tiny sheet,

Stained with the blood of a young courier :

(1) Two unhappy lovers in an old story.

*On her way she had been killed by the enemy,
She died but your letter reached me none the less,
And her own last words were relayed to me:
"She loves you and thinks of you,
In the city she is in the van of the struggle."
And so Saigon has become even dearer to my heart,
For in its streets I imagine your shadow passing
And your voice in the clamour of its multitude
Engaged in earth-shaking struggle!
Festival night! But blood hasn't dried on the streets of
Saigon,
The tyrants want no spring for the people!
Yet joy is in every heart:
Victory is near, put on your new clothes to give battle,
Magnificent is your fight! Rifle in hand,
I shall walk into the heart of Saigon singing the Song
of Liberation,
And plant our flag on this town of glory,
So the Gold Star shall shine over Ho Chi Minh City!
I shall look for you. Put on your new clothes,
When the guns fall silent, wedded we shall be.
Over our free land, in the Spring of Victory,
Two white doves shall take wing in the azure sky.*

Translated from the Vietnamese

The Shadow of the K'nia Tree

A folk poem of the Hre national minority
(Southern High Plateaux)

*In the morning I went to the field,
I saw there the shadow of the great k'nia tree,
Which stretched bending towards me
and covered my bosom.
I came home thinking of you
and I couldn't sleep.
At midday my mother came in from the field;
She saw the shadow of the k'nia tree,
And the round shadow at the foot of the tree
covered my mother's back.
Mother came home thinking of you,
Mother wept.*

I asked the k'nia tree,

"Tree, tell me where does the wind go?"

"It goes there where the sun rises."

Mother asked the k'nia tree:

"Where do your roots draw water?"

"They go to drink at the springs in the North."

The earthworm lives on the earth which feeds it,

The phi bird, on the forest which shelters it.

Mother and I think of you,

You who refresh yourself at the springs in the North,

Like the shadow of the k'nia tree,

Like the wind in the k'nia tree.

Thanh Hai

I Crossed the Demarcation Line

*Last night I crossed the demarcation line
On my way North to meet you.
For so long I had been thinking of you,
Oh, with what eager haste I walked.*

*I hurried along the ricefields
So beautifully green.
I went through the streets of the city,
Was it you, darling, I saw over there?*

*Oh yes, it was you — you — you
Yes it was you, darling. I broke into a run.
“Darling,” I cried, “wait!
It’s me, darling, wait for me.”*

*You stopped. You had recognised
My figure from afar.*

*Even lost amidst a hundred thousand girls,
I would have caught your eyes right away.*

*And in your arms nestled,
I cried: "Five years have gone!"
You clasped me tight;
There were so many things to say!*

*You asked me about the fields,
The hamlet and the village.
Bitter, oh bitter were those years,
How could I tell you all our sufferings.*

*You touched my round arm,
Where you used to rest your head.
With sudden anguish you asked,
"What's this scar in your flesh?"*

Who made that deep gash in your arm?"
— *"All these years I've waited for you,
I've not gone over to the enemy,
I've refused to take another husband.*

*Because I refused to forsake you,
The enemy hunted and arrested me.
It was they who made that deep cut
Where your head used to rest."*

*My throat choked,
Only tears could relieve my pain.
In your chest where I buried my head
Anger boiled.*

.

*A cock crowed somewhere,
I started from my sleep,
The memory of my dream
Rent my heart with grief.*

*From the martyred South,
Oh, do you know it, dear?
Each night, to meet you, my heart
Crosses the demarcation line.*

Translated from the
Vietnamese

Thank Hai

The Song of the Fighters

*They rob us of our land and put it under their
ploughs,
They raze our homes and build military posts,
Crying will not dissipate our anger,
Imploring pity will not open the way to salva-
tion.*

*

*Guns and bombs are not our way of life,
We have never been friends of war,
But here they come, armed to the teeth,
Shall we resign ourselves to slavery? Never.*

*

*Let's rise up, rifles and knives in hands,
Let's defend our lands, our rivers, our marketplaces!
Cruel and truculent they are,
But for blood they will pay with blood.*

*

*Those who come to commit aggression,
Those who bring in elephants to trample their ancestors'
tombs, (1)
We shall hold our rifles firm and crush them,
As we did their like years ago.*

*

*Night after night, under the palm trees,
Our land stirs, our people prepare for attack.
The fighters' eyes shine in the darkness,
They look at the stars, embrace the immense vault of
heaven.
Forward they march, singing passionately,
Of their beloved land, their blood and bones shall be the
rumparts.*

Translated from the Vietnamese

(1) An old saying used to designate traitors to the country.

Fiction

extracts



Liberated Goluy

Sketch by Huynh Phuong Dong.

Hon Dat

The following is an extract from the novel Hon Dat, which was awarded the Nguyen Dinh Chieu literary prize in 1965. Hon Dat is the name of a heroic South Vietnamese village, whose people put up a magnificent resistance to attacks by Ngo Dinh Diem's troops.

Editor

That afternoon, the small town of Tri-tôn suddenly came to life. Lorry after lorry loaded with soldiers drove in from Rach-gia. They kicked up clouds of dust, which fell on the pubs, bazaars, tenement houses and new buildings along the main street. The lorries came to a stop and the soldiers jumped onto the ground. Regulars in khaki uniforms and leather boots, and rangers in camouflage battle-dresses and canvas jungle boots marched off in small groups, amidst whirling eddies of dust, their feet beating heavily on the roadway.

Standing on the side-paths, the townspeople whispering under their breath, watched them pass. There were familiar faces among the rangers, but nobody dared recognize them. While the regulars, who came from Saigon, looked curiously at the shops and houses, the rangers kept their faces hard and their eyes cold, and their tommy guns and carbines at the ready.

Their commander, Lieutenant Xam, brought up the rear, walking with heavy steps. His camouflage battle-dress tightly fitted his muscular body and he rolled his eyes furiously till only the whites were visible. On his head was a cap with three flaps to protect him from the sun, popularly called a "three-curtained" cap. On his hip, an enormous Colt 12 in a leather holster about the same colour as the skin of his face. He was also carrying a carbine and a bushknife. His rangers were clad in the same kind of uniform, each armed with a carbine or a tommy-gun, and an American dagger. All looked vicious and cruel.

Xam suddenly left the road and stalked into a pub. Without saying a word, he grabbed a bottle of beer, winked at the Chinese owner and stalked out. Drawing his bushknife, he knocked off the neck of the bottle and poured the foamy liquid into his mouth. After finishing about two-thirds of the beer, he handed the truncated bottle to the soldier walking ahead of him, who happily gulped down the rest. He seemed quite used to receiving similar favours from his superior.

It was then that an order to halt came from the battalion commander.

The local military post could house only two more battalions, and so the two battalions of regulars were to be quartered there. As for the remaining battalion, composed of militia and rangers, it received the order to camp on the dry ricefields cracked by drought.

The burly militia commander ordered his companies to march to the appointed camp site, but Xam grumbled:

"Hell, am I going to sleep in the open in my own native place!"

None the less, with a sweep of his hand, he drove his motley crowd into an empty lot, close to the town boundary.

The last beams of the setting sun shed a yellow light on the fields around the post. The soldiers set about unfolding canvas tents or marking places for the kitchens. Some noisily gulped draughts of water or liquor from American-made flasks, others lay on their backs, puffing at their cigarettes. They exuded a pungent smell of sweat, strong tobacco, alcohol and cheap hair oil, a rather nauseous odour that had become closely associated with the mercenaries.

Xam unbuttoned his shirt. Half Vietnamese and half Khmer, he wore numerous amulets, yellow and red *ca-tha* threads on his wrists and a gold chain hanging from his neck with a horrible-looking demon's face carved in ivory and adorned with gold fangs. Lying on his back on a grey piece of canvas, he did not seem to notice that his cigarette was burning out. Suddenly, he threw it away and sat up. He was watching with

his bulbous eyes some soldiers unpacking large chunks of bread, when a small orderly wove his way up to him:

"Dinner is ready, Elder Brother," he said.

Xam slowly stood up and followed the soldier to a piece of canvas spread out on the ground and covered with an old newspaper. On it was a roast chicken, two big chunks of bread and an opened tin of sardines. Xam's face showed displeasure as he asked in a sullen voice:

"What about the drinks?"

"Here they are, Elder Brother," and the orderly produced a pot-bellied flask, the immediate effect of which was to brighten up his commander's face. Xam grabbed the flask, shook it to make sure it was full, uncorked it and put it to his lips. After a few swigs, he handed the flask to the soldier, took hold of the chicken and tore off a leg greedily. His gold teeth shone as he chewed mouthful after mouthful and wiped the fat dripping from the corners of his mouth with the back of his hand. The orderly was allowed to share his meal, which he did with obsequious pleasure. Xam drank and ate heavily, gave a grunt of pleasure after each gulp of rice wine, and tore off large pieces of chicken with his fingers.

By the time the two of them had finished the chicken and the flask of rice wine, it was dusk, but the dark-red disc of the sun was still lying on the horizon.

Xam stood up with a tipsy lurch and scratched his ribs. Looking at the dying sun, he belched out an oath that he was the only one to understand and showed his teeth in a silent laugh. Many of the soldiers

were also half-seas over. There was no more liquor left and they were sharing among themselves the big loaves of bread. Some had taken off their shirts, showing shiny dark breasts tattooed with dragons and snakes. Others were fetching firewood, big logs which they had got heaven knows where.

Night fell. Camp fires were lit, shedding light on the patches of ricefields. The men crowded around them and started boiling water in their mess-tins. In spite of orders forbidding them to leave the camp, many went to town to buy liquor, beer, and delicacies to swallow them with. The orders had come from Operation Command but the commanders of the various units cared very little about them. Xam cared so little that he often joined his men in drinking bouts. They in turn never failed to invite him whenever there was something to drink, and fawned upon him. They all called him Elder Brother, and his deputy, a thin-faced, hollow-eyed second lieutenant, Second Brother. Xam in fact much preferred being called "Elder Brother" to "Sir Lieutenant". "Elder Brother, please come and have a drink!" one of them would say; "Elder Brother, you never seem to get drunk!" another would add.

Xam was very pleased to be so invited. He never refused an invitation. Indeed he could drink like a fish without ever getting really drunk.

Now, the whites of his eyes had grown bloodshot: they seemed to reflect fire and be bathed in blood. His men crowded around him. They were full of

admiration for his extraordinary ability to kill people and swig liquor. One of them suddenly asked:

"Are you paying your family a call to-morrow, Elder Brother, when we go to Hon Dat?"

Xam laid down the flask he was about to put to his lips. His hands trembled a little. The man's question seemed to touch something in his heart and he remained silent for a long while.

"I am," he said at last. "I'll drop in to see my mother and my younger sister."

"Ca My?" said the other. "She's a big girl now, isn't she?"

"About nineteen, I think..." said Xam. Then he added with something like real feeling in his voice, "Ca My is so much like me. And I love my mother."

"I heard you had invited them to leave the village and go to town. Why didn't they go?"

"We're going to occupy Hon Dat for good this time, and I will ask them to come and live in the post."

Xam heaved a long sigh and took a draught from his flask. Then he shook his head and said:

"I heard my mother had joined the Vietcong. She bears my father a deep grudge." Then, lowering his voice:

"Hon Dat is wonderful. When I was the post commander there, I used to be a lot happier than now. All kinds of delicious fruit, and dried buffalo meat galore! And the girls are just beautiful! Wonderful breasts! Big as coconuts! Those of you with small hands won't be able to handle them!"

The soldiers guffawed with anticipatory pleasure. They knew that they would be in Hon Dat to-morrow, and although death would be lurking there, few gave it any thought: their minds were full of the prospects of plunder and rape. Some had been in Hon Dat on previous occasions, and were bragging about their exploits: they told their comrades that any time they wanted to taste buffalo meat, the only thing to do was aim their rifle at one of the buffs grazing on the hill-slope and press the trigger. One gave a detailed account of each of the numerous rapes he had committed and boasted that he had "torn off no less than thirteen women's pants." Another told how he had broken the skulls of Vietcong with stakes, so violently that his uniform was "splashed with bits of their brains". Above all, Elder Brother's marvellous skill in disembowelling people and plucking out their livers was unanimously praised: just one stroke of the dagger above the navel, enough to thrust four fingers in and pinch out the liver!

Xam had indeed ripped up the bellies of many of his victims. But his skill did not stop there: he knew a hundred ways of making people die. He was a worthy scion of a local tyrant, a Vietnamese landlord who had reigned over Hon Dat as an absolute despot. But none of the blood of his mother, whose life had been a long calvary, seemed to flow in his veins.

His mother, Mrs. Ca Xoi, had been a pretty girl when she was young. She had the brownish, sun-tanned skin of local Khmer girls, and the harmonious, balanced gait so peculiar to them. Most of them made a living

from making earthen pots and selling them. Their trade made them walk long distances every day, thirty kilometres on an average, the distance from Hon Dat to the town of Rach-gia, the provincial capital. This gave them a supple and lively gait, further enhanced by their habit of *ca-om* carrying. When one of them walked home along sandy paths from the brook with her *ca-om* full of water on her head, she hardly ever touched it with her hands, but kept swaying to balance it with peculiar grace.

Muu, Xam's father, had forced Ca Xoi to become his concubine. Her sweetheart Thach Kha was driven into such desperation that he left the village and went to Kompongcham in Cambodia to work as a raftsmen. When Xam was still quite small, Muu began neglecting Ca Xoi for younger girls. She was then with child, but this did not prevent him from driving her out of the house, keeping Xam for himself. Ca Xoi left Muu's big house and came back to Hon Dat where she built herself a tiny straw hut and hired herself out as a farmhand. When her time came, the pain was such that she crawled out into the fields and chewed dry stems of harvested rice plants in her effort to stifle her screams. Fortunately for her, a villager, Mrs. Sau, and her daughter Su passed by that night on their way back from Van Rang, and so little Ca My was born in Mrs. Sau's home. A week later, Thanh Kha came back from Kompongcham. He went to Mrs. Sau's, kowtowed to her to thank her, and brought Ca Xoi and her baby daughter to live with him. But only a few months had passed when killers hired by Muu attacked him in the forest. He knocked one down with his

woodcutter's axe, but they wounded him seriously. Gathering the last bit of his strength, he ran home and collapsed in his yard where he breathed his last. His widow made a living by making earthen pots and little Ca My grew up into a sweet and gentle girl, the very image of her mother.

As for Xam, he continued to live with his father, of whom he was the very spit, and by whom he was greatly pampered. He grew up in the big stone house and reigned together with his father over the vast expanses of land in Hon Dat: besides their orchards and fields, they made a lot of money selling clay of which they had the monopoly by the cubic metre to the local potters. During the anti-French resistance war the revolutionary authorities confiscated the lands and distributed them to the people. Muu took refuge in French-occupied Rach-gia city and the big stone house fell in ruin.

After the restoration of peace in 1954 and the regrouping of the revolutionary forces in the North, Muu came back to Hon Dat with his son, who had become a second lieutenant in Ngo Dinh Diem's army. He wrested back his land, rebuilt his house, and together with his son, took dreadful revenge on the revolutionaries. Xam was even more wicked than his father. Armed with American guns and surrounded by blood-thirsty ruffians picked among the garrisons of local militia posts, he went out man-hunting. His rangers could run as fast as horses. They chased revolutionary cadres over the fields and right into the jungle, day and night. One could hear their guns firing at any

time: in the dead of night, when a storm was raging, or at cockcrow. Whenever their guns crashed, the local people wondered in anguish whether their sons, their relatives, their friends, who were engaged in revolutionary activities, had perhaps just been killed at that moment.

But the one who suffered most was Mrs. Ca Xoi.

When finally an insurrection broke out, Muu was executed by the people but Xam escaped. He became even more cruel than before.

In Hon Dat, as everywhere else in the world, each mother has her own pain and worries. But few suffered as much as Mrs. Ca Xoi.

When Diem's troops came back to the region and set up military posts there, Xam was made the commander of the one at Hon Dat. He often tried to give his mother and sister some of the silk and gold he had plundered in his raids, but they never accepted his presents. Once, his mother threw them out into the yard, and burst into sobs.

And that is why Xam was now saying to his men:

"I heard my mother had joined the Vietcong!"

He was right.

Hadn't she once stood right in front of the muzzle of his gun?

*

At about the same time, Mrs. Ca Xoi was heading for Mrs. Ba U's store, at the crossroads near Hon Dat. She walked in silence in the darkness, an empty bottle in her hand. Whenever they saw someone

wandering about in the night without a light, the villagers were sure it was Mrs. Ca Xoi: no one else had this strange way of walking in the darkness like a shadow. Something had gone wrong with her mind, people said. But strangely enough, in spite of her supposed derangement, she could move about quite safely at night, without ever stumbling on a stone or falling into a hole. She seemed to have second sight.

When she arrived at the store, she found it apparently empty. On getting in however, she saw the owner, Mrs Ba U, doing her accounts at the counter. Mrs Ba U looked up when she heard the footsteps and asked in a gentle voice:

"Is that you, Mrs. Ca Xoi? What brings you here so late?"

Without a word, Mrs. Ca Xoi raised her empty bottle. The owner understood. She quickly finished counting her money and took the bottle. Mrs. Ba U really deserved her name (U means "fat" in Vietnamese — *Tr.*) She was just enormous! A roll of flesh could be seen round her wrist when she stretched out her hand for the bottle. She waddled up to an earthen jar, dipped a little bamboo scoop into it and with astounding skill, poured the wine into Mrs. Ca Xoi's bottle without needing a funnel and without a drop falling out.

Handing back the bottle to Mrs Ca Xoi, she asked in the Khmer language:

"You've heard the news, haven't you?"

"What?" Mrs Ca Xoi asked in reply, shaking her tousled head.

Mrs. Ba U whispered in her ear :

“ Xam is coming back. I saw him this afternoon in Tri-ton, the district centre, as he was jumping down from a military lorry...”

“ Is he ? ” Mrs. Ca Xoi blinked and looked at the ground, as if she were searching for something. Then she hurriedly walked to the door, but this time she stumbled on the threshold and almost fell. The bottle crashed on the floor and the rice wine spread out in a pool, but she didn't seem to notice it and kept on walking. Mrs. Ba U ran clumsily after her and caught her hand, saying :

“ Come back, dear, I'll give you another bottle. Do come, please ! ”

She took her back to the store, looked around for an empty bottle, found one which had contained soft drinks, filled it with rice wine, stoppered it and handed it to her.

“ Take care, don't let this one fall ! ” she said.

Poor Mrs. Ca Xoi was now acting like a little child. She did as she was told, grabbed the bottle firmly by the neck and walked out without saying a word. She stumbled now repeatedly in the darkness and fell many times before reaching her home, which was a small isolated one-room hut a fair distance from the crossroads.

She found her daughter Ca My sitting on a mat spread on the earth floor, weaving rush bags by the yellowish light of a kerosene lamp. The young girl looked up briefly at her mother and down again at her work.

Ca My had Mrs. Ca Xoi's features. She was a sturdy lass of nineteen, with a fairer complexion than her mother, big dark eyes and long silky eyelashes. Even in the feeble light her lips looked fresh and rosy. She was like Mrs Ca Xoi in her youth, even prettier.

"Ca My," said her mother, "Xam is back. He is now in Tri-ton."

"Is he?" said the girl with something like panic in her voice. "Who told you so, Mama?"

"Mrs. Ba U."

Mrs. Ca Xoi went to sit on the edge of the plank bed, drawing one leg up on it. She remained silent for a long while, then poured some rice wine into a small cup which she emptied at one draught, as if it were pure water. She did not refill her cup but sat looking at her shadow on the wall. It was her habit each night to drink a cup of rice wine after finishing two or three rush bags. Unlike many people, who get drunk and forget about everything, rice wine only made her mind more lucid and her memories more acute. She looked at her daughter and remembered the time when she was her age. She thought of the pots she made, which looked bright red in the oven, of those nights of *zu-ké* (popular operas of the Khmer people - *Tr.*) when Thach Kha acted the part of the prince and she that of the poor girl who went snail catching. Then in her mind's eye appeared the face of Muu, the landlord, and scenes of her life in the big stone house; the few happy months lived with Thach Kha after his return from Kompong-cham; and the horrible tragedy: Thach Kha collapsing in the yard, his hands beating the ground convulsively.

Everything came back to her mind as she looked at her shadow on the wall and her daughter weaving rush bags. She thought of the Revolution, which had given her land, and of her son, Xam, who ripped up people's bellies and smashed their skulls.

"Xam is coming back!" Mrs Ba U's voice still rang in her ears. "How many more people was he going to murder? Why should he come back?" the poor woman thought to herself, "I wish he were dead!"

What mother would wish her son dead? Yet again and again Mrs. Ca Xoi had prayed for Xam's death. She would suffer less if he was no longer there; if he kept massacring like this, she would surely die of sorrow. Either he or she would have to die!

Ca My had once asked her :

"How could you have given birth to him? He can't be my brother!"

That was what her daughter had said. And that was what she herself had told her fellow-villagers :

"Xam is not my son," then she would lower her voice and add pleadingly, "Please don't look on him as my son."

But having said these words, she suffered even more. It would be terrible enough for any mother to have to disown her child. In the case of Mrs Ca Xoi, she was born with such a pure heart that the pain was unbearable and drove her out of her mind. It gave her a haggard look and dark rings around the eyes, and she hardly went out in the day. Perhaps she thought darkness would hide her from her fellow-villagers.



Digging trenches in Nhat Minh.

Sketch by Huynh Phuong Dong.

How many times she had tried to bring her son to reason! But Xam never argued with her. Sometimes he would shake his head as a sign of displeasure or ask her in feigned anger: "Mama, are you trying to win me over to the Vietcong?" But then he would smile, and his smile looked almost gentle. It seemed as though in his mother's presence, Xam could forget for a while that he was a ruffian and behave like her real son. And so for some time Mrs Ca Xoi could hardly believe her son to be the cruel killer who had ripped up his victims' bellies and plucked out their livers, as the rumours went. But the truth came to her in tragic circumstances.

One day, Xam dropped in to see her. Seeing blood at the corners of his mouth, she exclaimed, "Xam, your mouth is bleeding." Without saying a word, Xam wiped his lips, and left. Just then Ca My came rushing home, horror on her face. Sobbing hysterically she told her mother that Xam had just disembowelled a man on the beach and drawn out his liver. Then he had walked into a house, asked for a pan, fried the thing, and eaten it. Mrs Ca Xoi fainted. When she came to, she remembered the red blotch at the juncture on Xam's lips, and fainted again.

On another occasion, Xam came back from a raid on Vam-rang, bringing a few prisoners. It was not known whether they were revolutionary cadres or just ordinary people. Learning that Xam was going to open their bellies up at the crossroads, Mrs Ca Xoi hurriedly made her way there in the hope of making him change his mind. But by the time she arrived,

Xam had already made deep cuts with his knife around the anuses of his victims. He then untied them and ordered them to stand up, whereupon their bowels jutted out. With a scream, the poor woman collapsed on the road. Xam ordered his soldiers to carry her home. When she came to in late afternoon, she pointed her finger at Ca My who was standing by her bedside and shrieked, "Xam, go away, go away!" It was from that day, so the village people said, that Mrs Ca Xoi had become insane.

Insane? Well, I don't know if that is the right word, for she never did anything that mad people are supposed to do: for instance, she never smashed anything, never showed fury or committed violence. On the contrary, she fought shy of her fellow-villagers and wore a frightened, pitiful look. In many respects, her mind remained as clear as ever. Never did she forget a single item bought on credit at Mrs Ba U's and always gave Ca My the right amount of money to pay the store-keeper. She was as good as ever at weaving rush bags and never put a strip awry. What was peculiar about her was her habit of rushing out to meet passers-by, squatting down to clasp their legs and bursting into tears, as though to implore their forgiveness. Hai Thep, Nam Tan, Ba Ren, Mrs Sau and the Su sisters were those who had had most often to help her to her feet. For they were the ones who had come most often to her house to give her advice on how to bring Xam to reason, and later, when the situation had become hopeless, to comfort her and give her encouragement and solace.

Once Hai Thep told her:

"Aunt Ca Xoi, don't feel so desperate! The people here love you and Ca My. They will never abandon you."

And Mrs Ca Xoi had burst into tears.

When the first protest demonstrations took place against the puppet administration, she had not dared to join, thinking herself unworthy of such honour. But one day Mrs Sau and other women told her :

"Do come with us, Mrs Ca Xoi."

Poor Mrs Ca Xoi! She was so happy that her legs would hardly obey her. And since that day, she never missed a single protest march. One day she found herself facing the muzzle of Xam's gun, and in that decisive minute, the moral strength of a mother enabled her to turn away that gun from the column of demonstrators so that they could march on...

So that was the origin of Mrs Ca Xoi's supposed insanity. Something that was quite clear was that nobody at Hon Dat bore her any ill will. They thought of Mrs Ca Xoi as a poor, miserable Khmer woman, one of the exploited people, and of Xam and his father as exploiters. Yet Mrs Ca Xoi could never get rid of her obsession: nothing in the world could erase the fact that Xam was her son, that her blood flowed in his veins. From that torment, she could never free herself.

With Ca My, things were better. Not only did she never tire of repeating, "He is not my brother," but in her heart of heart she had always thought of him as a complete stranger. And not only that, she hated him, thoroughly. Never did she say a word to him

when he dropped in at the house. And she was genuinely shocked and vigorously protested whenever someone mentioned the kinship between them.

During the dark years of repression, it was with extraordinary fervour that she had come to the Revolution. It was as though she was running away from a forest fire!

Now she was a candidate member of the Youth organisation. She had been invited to a few meetings of the cell, and these had made her all the more enthusiastic and zealous. She was always among the first to go when spike traps had to be laid or trench shelters dug. She had a beautiful voice and liked to sing old Khmer songs, which brought back to the older people memories of nights in the distant past when they had waded across flooded fields on the way to Soc-tung where *zu-keé* operas were being played, with Thach Kha and Ca Xoi in leading parts. Mrs Ca Xoi listened absorbedly, tears trickling down her face.

It was a great pity that a woman like her should have taken to drinking. The day her son became a blood-thirsty ruffian she began seeking in alcohol a relief to the pain in her heart, for she had carried Xam in her bosom even before he received his name.

And tonight, as usual, she was drinking...

But contrary to her habit, tonight, she refilled her cup after a moment. Her hands trembled as she uncorked the bottle and poured the wine. She drank her second cup in small sips.

"Another cup, Mama?" grumbled Ca My, as she bent over her work. "Stop, one is enough!"

Dogs started barking outside and soon a voice called in Khmer:

"Ca My, are you home?"

The girl recognized her friend Quyen's voice. She put down her work, stood up and answered, "Yes, here I am."

Half-opening the door, she slipped out into the yard. Quyen took her hand and made her sit beside her. Then she whispered in her ear:

"Have you heard the news?"

"What?"

"A raid is brewing. We'll broadcast the fact with the megaphone pretty soon. Lots of soldiers have arrived in Tri-ton. The guerillas are ready. I've just been with them laying spiked traps."

"Why didn't you ask me?" Ca My asked in a somewhat displeased voice.

"Don't worry, you'll be pretty busy. It has been decided that you should be part of the groups of legal struggle. Xam commands part of the raiding troops. He is now in Tri-ton..."

"I know that," said Ca My.

"Well, listen. When they come, we'll not only fight them with spikes and grenades, but also politically. We should help the guerillas. As you have not yet been spotted as a resister and the soldiers owe you some regard as Xam's sister, you'll be entrusted with supply and liaison work."

"I'd rather go and lay grenade booby traps," said Ca My pleadingly.

"Others can do that."

Ca My remained silent for a few seconds, then said:

"All right, I'll do as you said. But... really, I hate having to meet them face to face. They are disgusting."

Quyên put an arm around her friend's neck:

"Nobody likes meeting them, but we must do that, for the sake of the Revolution. Oh, now there's one thing to remember: don't get angry, be patient with the soldiers, talk to them gently even if you are boiling inside... Sing Khmer love songs to them if need be... You understand, don't you? We count upon you to do a good job."

Ca My bit her lips and nodded in the darkness. Before Quyên left, she hugged her and gave her several hearty kisses.

During the fierce struggle, both armed and political, waged by the people of Hon Dat against the raiding troops, Xam committed more crimes. Mrs Ca Xoi laid a trap for him in her own house and arranged for him to be killed by the guerillas.

(Extract from the novel Hon Dat by Anh D. c.)
Translated from the Vietnamese.

Nguyen Trung Thanh

The Xanu Wood

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

Few species of pine grow as vigorously as the *xanu*. For every tree that falls, four or five young ones spring up, their green, arrow-like tops shooting skyward. Few thirst so much for sunshine: the young plants grow very rapidly

towards the sunshine, which pours down into the wood in big shafts glittering with myriads of yellow fragrant specks from the sap. When young, breast-high trees are cut down by the shells, the gashes cannot heal and the sap that exudes from them is thin and clear: they die within five or ten days. But full-grown ones, with thick foliage, cannot be killed by the shells; their wounds heal quickly as young bodies do. And so, through all these last two or three years, the *xanu* forest has provided a shield for the village.

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

*

After three years in the Liberation Armed Forces, this was the first chance Thu had to return to his native village. He met little Heng at the stream and the boy offered to show him the way. The day Thu joined up, Heng was a mere tot not even reaching his waist, who used to follow grown-ups to the *ray* (1), carrying a tiny basket on his back. Now, it was an infantry rifle he was carrying. They followed the old path which wound through manioc and *pomchu* (2) fields, up two steep slopes where steps had been carved, and crossed a forest teeming with jungle leeches on rainy days before reaching a tiny village, his village. Thu would not have dared to venture alone, without a guide, over this once

(1) A forest clearing.

(2) A kind of tubers (*Ed.*)

so familiar track. It was now full of traps and pits: bent bamboos which when released, would sweep the path and break your legs; spike traps; spears hurled in pairs by powerful crossbows, etc. Little Heng was rather sparing of his words like all his fellow-villagers of Xoman. He was wearing a cap which some Liberation armyman had given him, a too long jacket and a G-string, and with his rifle slung across his back, he looked a real fighter. At times, when they passed by some particularly well defended spot, he would wink at Thu and smile as if he wanted to ask him, "What do you think of that, brother?" His eyes would shine with pride, and Thu would smile back at him and nod sympathetically.

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

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

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

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

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

"So, Zit has become secretary of the village Party committee," Thu thought to himself. He could not imagine what she looked like now. Zit was Mai's younger sister. The day soon after Mai's death, when