

Thu was about to leave the village to join the Liberation Army, the little girl had stayed awake all night sitting beside the fire, for she had little clothing and the night was too cold. At dawn, she had pounded rice for Thu to take along with him. She pounded thirty canfuls of rice, put it in a sausage-like bag and gave it to him. She did not weep or say a word over her sister's death, while everybody, even Old Mêt, cried his eyes out.

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

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

Little Heng did not know about that episode in Thu's life. He climbed on the tree and, turning,

beckoned: "Hurry up, brother," he shouted. "Can't you even climb a little slope, after being away from the village so long?"

The sloping path was full of spiked pits. Thu walked in silence and the features on his face had hardened. From afar, he now heard the muffled sound of rice pestles, and he realized that what he had missed so much during those three years he had been away from the village was that sound of rice-pounding pestles worked by the diligent hands of the Stra (1) women—his mother, Mai, Zit — that sound so familiar to him since his childhood. He tried to keep calm but his heart was beating wildly and his feet kept stumbling over tree roots. He overtook Heng, then outstripped him. The boy protested: "Hey, there are plenty of traps around. It's not like what it used to be. Wait for me. Go behind."

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

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

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

(1) A national minority of Vietnam.

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

Heads were still sticking out of the openings of the houses—giggling young girls, who were too timid to go down and welcome Thu. He was soon surrounded by a thick crowd. He recognised them all: Old Tang, with his usual fringe of beard, sporting a long pipe made with metal retrieved from a downed helicopter; brother Pre, now looking quite a bit older; Sister Blom—white streaks had appeared in her hair; old Mother Proi, who had lost all her teeth... A swarm of urchins, their face smeared with soot from *xanu* fire. But where's Old Mêt? Thu was about to ask when a heavy hand tightly clasped his shoulder. He turned: Old Mêt was there, looking as sturdy as ever, his glossy black beard reaching down to his chest, his slant eyes shining, and with the old scar on his cheek. His bare chest looked as strong as the trunk of an old *xanu*. He gave Thu a gentle push, eyed him up and down, then burst into uproarious laughter:

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

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

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

"How long is your leave?" Old Mêt asked. "Just one night? Right. If your commander gives you one

night's leave, stay over one night. If he gives two, stay over two. Orders are orders. Tonight, stay at my place."

Nobody protested. He added :

"Now, everybody go home. The day is over, it's about time to prepare the evening meal. You kids, go and wash your faces clean of soot : you all look like actors on the stage. Those who don't do so, let their pals give them a good dressing down... You Thu, go and wash your feet. You remember where the fountain is, don't you ? You do ? Right. If you didn't, I'd chase you out into the jungle !"

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

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

From the house roofs, dark violet threads of smoke rose.

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

"I still have half a tinfal of salt Zit gave me when she came back from the district Congress of Emulation Fighters. The salt she received as a reward at the Congress, she shared with us all. But this is reserved for the sick."

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

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

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

He angrily put his bowl down:

"But all in the village know that, don't they? A finger can pull a trigger even if only two-thirds of it is left. Did you pass by the *xanu* wood near the big

stream? The trees are thriving. Nothing is stronger than our *xanu*. One fallen, others grow up. I defy those bastards to destroy the whole forest. Eat, son. We Stra people grow good rice, the best rice in this part of the country."

Soon after the meal was over, three sounds of tocsin came from the direction of the communal house. The village people began streaming to Old Mêt's. Girls stamped out their torches before going into the house, but some old women entered the room with burning torches in their hands so that they could have a good look at Thu, and then threw them into the fire, making the flames leap fiercely. Old men asked in a resounding voice when they had only walked half way up the stairs, "Is Thu there? Have you given him a good meal, Old Mêt?"

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

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

Thu did not understand. "What paper?" he asked in reply.

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

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

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

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

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

Pushing some children gently aside, the old man sat down beside Thu, next to the fire. He knocked the bowl of his pipe on the "head of the household

god”(1), picked up a little bamboo stick and cleaned his pipe with it, then looked around at the people in the room. They seemed to be all waiting for him to begin speaking.

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

“All the old folk know this story. Some of the young people do, others don't. The children certainly know nothing about it.” The old man stopped and stared at the kids, who sat with their mouths shut and their eyes wide open. He continued :

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

Everybody kept silent. One could hear only the far-off noise of the water from the bamboo pipe

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

mingled with the muffled sound of raindrops on the tree leaves. Thu also kept silent. He looked at Old Mêt. The light from the flickering fire was playing on the old man's muscular body and Thu thought of the heroes of the old legends he used to listen to in long night sessions when still a child. He looked at Zit. She had grown as tall as Mai as he remembered her when he had met her at the foot of the tree standing at the entrance to the forest. The tree had now fallen across the path and the guerillas had dug a maze of trenches around it. Zit was also listening, with calm, wide open and thoughtful eyes.

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

Oh yes, the old folk had not forgotten. Neither had the young people. Thu himself had not forgotten. In his mind's eye he saw a child carrying a small basket left by his mother. In the basket were two canfuls of rice hidden under some vegetable. The child was weaving his way in the jungle, jumping nimbly from one rock to another, bringing food to a revolutionary cadre. A little girl, smaller even than himself, was running after him, her hand lifting a too long skirt that her mother had just made for her. Hopping from one rock to another like a bird, she shouted, "Wait for me, Thu. Wait!" Her friend turned and glared at her.

"Can't you keep your mouth shut, Mai. It's a clandestine job we're doing and you are bellowing like a hart!" Mai wanted to laugh but fearing a rebuke, she kept silent...

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

As if it had all happened only yesterday.

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The revolutionary cadre's name was Quyet. Ever since My-Diem troops had come to this part of the country, they had been scouring the woods day and night. One heard echoes of the barking of their hounds and their guns. But there was one thing the people of Xoman village were proud of: for five years, not a single cadre had been either caught or killed by the enemy in that part of the jungle. At first, the young people brought food to the cadre and kept watch for him. Then My-Diem agents found out and struck at them. Young Xut was hanged on a fig-tree at the entrance to the village. "Such will be the fate of any who try to bring food to the communists!", warned the My-Diem men.

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

The children replaced the old folk. The most devoted among them were Thu and Mai. When Thu was busy

working in the *ray*, Mai went to the jungle. When Mai had to look after her little sister Zit, Thu went. Sometimes, they both went. They even stayed overnight in the jungle: you can't leave a cadre alone there, how would he know which way to flee if My-Diem agents tried to track him down? Once Quyet, the cadre, asked them:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mai turned away, trying hard to smother a laugh. She whispered, "You've a very good memory, Thu. The name of the pot-bellied letter is 'b'."—"Oh yes, 'b', that's right, what a blockhead I am!"

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

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

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

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

Thu's back was crisscrossed with cuts from knives. "Show us the communists," the soldiers bawled at him. "Untie my hands," he said, "how could I show you anything with my hands tied?"

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

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

Three years later, Thu came back to Xoman, having made a successful escape from Kontum jail. The wounds on his back had healed. He met Mai at the foot of the big tree at the edge of the forest, and as she took his

hands, her eyes filled with tears. As for him, he looked at Mai with surprise; she had grown so tall! She took him to the village where the people assembled at Old Mêt's just as they did tonight. Yes, just like tonight...

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yes, everybody had been there. Old Tang, Brother Pro, Sister Bloom, Old Mrs. Broi, Old Leng. One thing was different though: Mai had been there. After Thu had finished reading Quyét's message, the whole hamlet lit *xanu* torches and followed Old Mêt into the jungle to fetch carefully hidden weapons. Thu walked three days to Mount Ngoc Linh, but it was not to bring back chalk, as he had done three years before. He brought back a basketful of grinding stone. On top of Mount Ngoc Linh, there was enough grinding stone for the steel to be used in one hundred insurrections.

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

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

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

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

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

“Anyone caught trying to leave the village will be shot dead on the spot!”

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

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

Thu heard those words. He was hiding behind a tree at the entrance to the village near the fountain. From

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

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

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

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

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

"Where is Thu?"

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

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

Thu pushed the old man's hand away. Again Old Mêt said, "Thu!" Thu turned, and the old man no longer recognized his face: his eyes were two embers. Old Mêt let go of the young man's shoulder.

A terrible roar. Thu had rushed into the middle of the courtyard. The burly ruffian fell flat on his back and Zuc was flying into the communal house. The clicking of gunbolts was heard. Then Mai holding her baby crawled into Thu's arms, and he clasped them in his strong embrace.

"Here I am, cannibals! Here's Thu!" he shouted. But Thu could not save Mai and her child.

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

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

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

Darkness fell. Thu was surprised to find himself so calm. He thought: "The baby has died. So has Mai, probably. I too am going to die. Who is to become a cadre? Who is going to lead the Xoman people when the orders come from the Front for the insurrection? Old Mêt is already well on in years. Never mind, there are still the young people. Zit will grow up. She is even more resolute than her sister... The only thing I regret is that I won't live to see the day when the Xoman people will rise up in arms..."

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

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

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

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

One of Thu's fingers was set ablaze. Another soon followed, then another... *Xanu* resin is very inflammable. Thu's fingers were now but ten flaming little torches. Thu closed his eyes, then opened them again, staring before him. Heavens! The fire, it seemed, was not only devouring his fingers, but his lungs, his bowels as well. There was a bitter taste of blood in his mouth: he had bitten his lips so hard. But he did not utter a single cry. A communist never begs for mercy, Quyet had said. He would never beg for mercy, Thu said to himself. The flames were biting hard at his very bowels. O Quyet, brother! Was he, Thu, going to cry out? Oh no, never.

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

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

Then, Thu heard the calm voice of Brother Broi :

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

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

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

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

Gongs resounded...

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

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

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

"I've told you the whole story. The people of Xoman took up arms that night. Thu left soon after, when his fingers had healed. Each of his fingers had but two joints left, but he could still hold a spear and fire a rifle. We had heard that on the other side of

Mount Ngoc Linh there was another Zuc, and that the people there had also risen up. So we sent Thu to look for the revolution and he has been away ever since... Why have you been so long, you young devil? The girls have all been longing for you. Now, then, I've said all I have to say. Now is your turn. What have you done all these three years? Have you done anything we should be ashamed of? What have you done? How many of My-Diem's men have you killed?"

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

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

"Where?"

"In his post."

"Did you kill him?"

"I did."

"Did you shoot him?"

"No."

"Why?"

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

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

"All of them?"

"All of them. Their commander had taken refuge in an underground shelter. We called on him to

surrender, but he refused. We dropped grenades, but there were recesses sheltering him from the splinters. Our commander asked, 'Who'll go down after him?' I said, 'I'll go'. So, I went down. It was pitchdark. I got hold of him. He fired. I snatched away his gun. He tried to overpower me, but I was the stronger of the two. I put my knee on his chest, and switched on my flashlight. 'Zuc,' I asked, 'do you remember me?' He shook his head. 'All right,' I said, 'look at my hands. They can still hold a gun.' He started rolling his eyes in terror. I said, 'Look, I have a gun. I have a knife, too. But I won't shoot you and I won't stab you. Listen, Zuc, I'm going to strangle you with my maimed fingers.'"

Zit asked in a calm voice :

"You killed him all right?"

"Of course."

"But was he Zuc?"

"Of course... all of them are Zucs!"

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

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

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

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

1964

Translated from the Vietnamese

The Departure

Nga was milling flour when Chinh came to say good-bye. Giving her shoulder a jerk to shake away a lock of hair which touched her neck, she looked at her friend in surprise.

"Are you leaving really?" she exclaimed.

"Yes," Chinh answered. "I'll go on the second day of Tet (1)."

"Good Heavens!"

The two friends embraced. As the moment of separation was drawing near, the old memories came back. Looking at Chinh, Nga felt greatly moved. They had lived unforgettable moments together. The day they both went to destroy a "strategic hamlet", on the way back at night, for fear of enemy ambush, they

(1) Lunar New Year Festival.

had had to sleep in a duck-breeder's hut amid flooded fields. On getting up the next morning they had found the place filled with water. There were nights when they had confided their secrets to each other, laughing and crying, before falling into sleep. And that day when they passed by the enemy post at Nga Ba on the way to market, with leaflets hidden under their elastic waist-bands, an awkward gesture had made the leaflets fall and the wind had spread them all over the road. And lots of other memories emerged from the past, vanished, reappeared and mingled with one another. Suddenly Nga patted her friend on the knee.

"How happy you must feel, dear!" she said.

They looked at each other and burst into laughter.

Chinh ran to the place where their friend Ha was standing on a branch of a *tram bau* tree, looking out for enemy planes. Ha climbed down.

"Have you been called up?" she asked. "What about me?"

"I don't know, dear!"

"All the three of us have registered. Why should you be the only one chosen?"

If she had not been on guard duty she would have gone and asked Comrade Viet, the head of the guerilla unit. Ha was the youngest of the women guerillas. She didn't care about American bombing but was only anxious lest enemy airplanes should crash on her head.

"Will you ask them to let me go with you?" she said to Chinh.

"Certainly."

"Shall I go and order a hammock right now?"

"No need to do that yet, dear."

Sadness clouded Ha's face. Silence drew the two friends back to reality.

"If you attack the post," Chinh said, "don't forget to fire my share of shots for me."

"The post's gone, you know that, darling!"

"Just cross the Ngang canal for a combined attack on the one there with our comrades."

Ha thought for a while, rubbing against her cheek the stick used to sound the alarm tocsin, then suddenly said:

"So we girls shall be all alone?"

"Why don't you go and fight together with our men, dear?"

"How about your staying home till after Tet?"

At this moment, old memories came back to them. Once, Ha had taken Chinh to the district market so that they could get an idea what those American aggressors looked like.

Chinh went home. Her mother was preparing cakes, with little Binh sleeping nearby. Standing in the veranda she observed them—something she had never done before. Mother's hair was still black but her eyes were so weak that she had to bend her head close to the kerosene lamp, and screw up her eyes to see if the flour was correctly mixed. Chinh said to herself: "So, I shall leave mother and little Binh very soon!"

Her mother handed her the pestle as she came in.

"You're going far away. How can you come home when you get a leave?" she asked her daughter.

“Our liberated zones have been greatly extended... Don't worry, mother!”

Poof! Poof! The sound of the pestle falling on the flour resembled that of earthen grenades made by little Binh to play with. All the enemy posts around the village had been wiped out. The same thing had happened in many other villages! Now the white egrets could freely fly from one end of the district to the other, without being afraid of anything. It was said that great-scale operations were being prepared by the N.F.L. As the head of the village women guerillas' unit, she had volunteered to fight. Nga, Ha and the new recruits would certainly be able to cope with the few puppet troops in the district even if they were helped by their American masters. They would, together with the men, cross the river by night and join forces with comrades at the district centre.

“Mother, I think you should grow sugar cane on the plot of land allotted to us by the Front.”

“Don't worry about that. Just go and fight well.”

The mother glanced at her daughter. She suddenly realized that the girl had not talked the way she usually did. In this house of hers, it was she who had been telling her daughter how to work. But now it was her daughter who was giving her advice. Recently the Front had allotted her family two *congs* (1) of land. About twenty *congs* of land had been recovered from the defence perimeter of the destroyed enemy posts. Now the children could freely play there and pasture buffaloes

(1) One *cong* = one - tenth of a hectare.

when there were no enemy airplanes. Meanwhile those to whom the land had been distributed were getting it ready for cultivation.

"Where will you go? To the provincial capital or to the liberated zone?" the mother asked.

"I'll go wherever I am told to. You'll grow sugar cane, won't you mother?"

"Yes."

"If you plant tobacco, I'm afraid you are not strong enough for the watering."

The mother remembered that every day her daughter had watered the plot of tobacco without ever complaining.

"I can manage it, child!" the mother answered. "Just think of making preparations for your departure."

*

Chinh was joining the army at a time when the hamlet was preparing for the Lunar New Year Festival. Two or three times a day, enemy helicopters would come on a "retaliatory" mission, to attack the guerillas. Yet, the first batch of *banh tet* (1) was coming out.

Members of the women guerillas' unit had asked to join the army long ago, when the enemy had just set up an enclosure round the hamlet. Every afternoon, *dan ve* guards with pomaded hair, wearing sun-glasses and smoking American cigarettes, would go on patrol,

(1) A sort of rice cakes made especially on the occasion of *Tet*.

riding in pedicabs. Chinh, Nga and Ha had known one another when they were but little girls with bobbed hair. The enclosure of the "strategic hamlet" had shut them in but failed to paralyze their life. Their friendship had become even closer. Pretending to graze oxen they brought supplies to the cadres hiding in the fields. At night, they lighted small signal lamps which twinkled in the darkness like stars. Those beacons led revolutionary cadres on their way to the village, and in the heart of the "strategic hamlet" hundreds of other stars would appear. As a rule, in the afternoon, Chinh with some betel leaves in her hand would meet Nga who would then climb up the *khê* tree and shake its branches to signal a message to Ha. Dressed in coloured shirts, the three lasses would then go to meet somewhere. The people of this hamlet had long been used to such a routine. They would wait for good news next morning: the policeman who used to dress in a tiger skin jacket was found dead in his bed last night, or the secretary of the puppet administration, who used to have his eyebrows crayoned, was found tied to stakes outside the hamlet; or all the stakes and barbed wire fences around the hamlet had been cleared away during the night. In winter nights, with a kerchief on, Chinh used to mount guard in the fields, braving the bitter wind and swarms of mosquitoes. She took up her post when the evening star began twinkling like a lamp in the dark sky and only left after the blue morning star had vanished from the horizon reddened by the rising sun. On those same nights, together with other guerillas, Nga and Ha would carry barbed wire to the resistance bases. Coming back at dawn, they would look mischievously

at each other, break into laughter, and — one, two — plunge into a canal. All wet, they passed by the enemy post, pretending to be back from fishing. Once Chinh went out for three days and came back with three grenades. Good Heavens! Nga thought they would explode at any moment. Ha stopped her ears. Jerking back her hair, Chinh took a grenade as if it were a mere potato, and showed her friends how to lay booby traps.

And so the Party cell had not yet accepted the three girls' request to enlist, on the ground that they were badly needed in the village to light the small lamps which twinkled at night like stars...

Then came the day when all the stockade around the "strategic hamlet" was swept away, and individual hamlets recovered their identity. The three young girls repeated their requests. Ha's reason was that she was nearing seventeen and that she would soon be "too old" for the army. Nga said that if she remained in the village, she couldn't postpone for ever her marriage with her boy friend Ba Nghe. As for Chinh, her only aspiration was to go to every corner of the country, rifle in hand, as a fighter of the Liberation Army.

*

The Liberation Army was coming to annihilate the Tong Phong post. That evening, Chinh came across old Hai Ngang with a guitar in one hand and a bundle of pointed spikes in the other. He cried to her:

"Where're you going? Don't you know that our village is building a bridge for our troops?"

"Are they really coming, uncle?"

Chinh rushed back to the village. The Liberation Army! Emotion caused her to stumble every few steps. The road leading to the common house was now crowded with soldiers, weapons and gun emplacements. So much so that she could hardly edge her way through. In the hubbub she heard Uncle Hai Ngang's husky voice inviting the soldiers to dinner, her mother urging some young girls to make tea, her grandfather talking with a squatting soldier she couldn't see, and children laughing merrily. Voices as dear and familiar to her as the village lanes were resounding, turning night into day.

Nga had just put a pot of medicine on the fire when Chinh and Ha came.

"It isn't ready yet. How can I drink it?" she wailed.

"Just gulp it down. We'll help you."

Nga drank the medicine at one gulp, and felt her bellyache leaving her in no time. The three girls went out in haste. On reaching the gate, they heard a great explosion from the Tong Phong post followed by the crackling of rifles. Hardly had they got into shelter when great shouts were heard from the market. The Tong Phong post had been overrun. Could it be true? Chinh's ears still rang with deafening sounds. The soldiers she had met were still in the village. So it was others who had attacked the post. Things were happening at such a fast tempo that Chinh, elated, didn't know where to go and what to do.

The next day, the soldiers stayed on for an attack on enemy reinforcements. Women guerillas served as liaison agents. Flying splinters of enemy shells stripped

the trees of their leaves, which fell on their heads. Spent cartridges from an enemy plane dropped on Ha's knees. Formerly in Chinh's mind, to wage the revolution had meant to go, rifle in hand, to kill reactionaries, to hold demonstrations with other villagers sailing in motor-boats hung with posters to the provincial market, to guide Liberation soldiers to the Rach Dau post for night attacks. But this time, the revolution came to her as an immense sky filled with the roar of guns. She quickly familiarized herself with these new aspects of the struggle. An American plane blew up in the sky and fell on the bank of the river. Her surprise lasted but a few minutes. Then she thought that it was only right that it should fall at the very place it had so often attacked. Besides, it seemed to her as though she had already seen once before an airplane blowing up and falling to the ground.

All that was left of the enemy battalion was a district chief with only his pants on and two soldiers clad in nearly the same way, who fled in haste to the district centre. Toward midnight, on her way back from ferrying soldiers across the river, Chinh trampled on something wet and soft. It was the corpse of an American pilot. When he was alive and armed with bombs and rockets, he had failed to intimidate her. Now that he was but a heap of rotten flesh, she was rather impressed. Along the road the villagers, with lamps, went to pick up shell cases and parachutes. The pungent and sweet odour of burnt sugar cane was smelt everywhere. People drank tea, discussed how to fill up bomb craters, and rebuild houses, schools and markets.

Nga asked :

“ Shall the children go to school at the market place ? ”

Chinh looked at her friend's tall body in the light of enemy parachute flares :

“ The market was liberated yesterday by our soldiers. ” She said. “ Don't you know that ? ”

The victorious battle had given the three girls different feelings. Nga thought : “ It must be fun but rather awkward to go to the market place to teach children to dance and sing. ” Ha was no longer afraid of enemy bombing but was only anxious lest planes should crash on her head. As for Chinh she unreasonably got angry about having been born into the world as a girl.

*

The stony road bordering the hamlet, along which *dân vệ* guards wearing sunglasses and riding in pedicabs used to patrol, now was reduced to a small path winding among holes and trenches dug by the people, along which walked women going to and from market. Every morning, riding back from the district market, old Hai Ngang would lean his bicycle against the barbed wire fence of the fighting village, spit out on his hand the betel quid he was chewing, wave a newspaper and call out :

“ Where're you, Chinh ? Come and look at this picture of amphibious carriers ! ”

As a rule, when hearing this familiar voice, the villagers would know that a new victory had been won

by our army. They would come out and form a circle around him. "Great victories!" he would say. "We have annihilated a battalion of enemy troops in Long An. How many troops a battalion? About five hundred!" Then he would talk about Taylor's wife who, like Lodge's, had stuck an amulet on her door to ward off bad luck! Or about the fifty U.S. Phantom's blasted by our guns in Bien Hoa. Hundreds of U.S. troops had been killed in Saigon, he went on, thousands of others in Binh Gia. On the land of our ancestors, storms were now raging and guns crashing.

In those days, when mornings resounded with news of victories and Hai Ngang's two-stringed violin sang in moonlit nights, Chinh and other guerillas were seldom seen home. Tens of villages had been liberated. Now children could in broad daylight sing "You stinking Yankee pests!" while sharpening pointed bamboo spikes. Chinh and the guerilla unit were going after the enemy in far-off places.

From time to time, the small hamlet would be stirred by news of victories, by the passage of Liberation soldiers, or by a helicopter raid. Then its people would resume their routine work, listening, dreaming, waiting for something to come, ready to stock a pond with fry, as well as, like Hai Ngang, to spend their last bit of money buying rifles for the guerillas. What remained of life now was extremely precious, and everyone should strive to preserve it. Even that chirping chicken scratched by an enemy bullet called for care and protection.

One morning, Hai Ngang was having his meal when Chinh came.

"I've come to say good-bye to you, uncle! I'm joining the army."

"You leaving now?" Hai Ngang took off his glasses.

"Anyone going with you?" he again asked.

"Ba Nghe, Tam To... all members of the Revolutionary Youth. The new recruits will replace us. There's no lack of them."

Suddenly, it seemed to the old fighter as though a gun had crashed in the distance. There Chinh sat, with her chubby cheeks, her pointed chin, and her smiling eyes looking at the flock of chickens.

Hai Ngang reached for his violin.

"On the chess-board, the Americans are in an impasse. This time you'll checkmate them."

On the third day of Tet, the road was teeming with bikes of all colours. Posters with inscriptions of victories were hung at every crossroads. The wind blew on the sandy road which bordered the hamlet, carrying wafts of delicious smell from the kitchens, where girls in white shirts were busy. Trenches were consolidated, underground galleries resounded with children's singing. Nga and Ha accompanied Chinh to the school-yard where the guerillas were performing a lion dance to wish their comrades farewell.

Ba Nghe was wearing his usual guerilla uniform — black pants with tight legs, a shirt to which two more pockets had been added, and a "main-force unit" bamboo hat covered with parachute cloth someone had given him. Everybody looked at him, then at Nga, and burst into laughter.

Nga patted Chinh on the shoulder and said :

“ Write us as soon as you can, will you ? ”

A joyful atmosphere prevailed. The drums resounded. Old Hai Ngang looked at the group of young army recruits and solemnly declared :

“ In the army, you won't fight the way you used to here. When the order is given for an assault, it should be executed immediately. You understand what I mean? This time, on the chessboard, our pieces are about to checkmate their king. It's no trifling matter... Oh! look at these young people : they're all fit as fiddles! ”

Chinh smiled shyly, her rucksack slung on her shoulders, the chin-strap of her new palm-leaf hat embracing her face. Everything was in her mind. The plot of land her family had just received would be planted with beans and tobacco ; her mother was still strong enough to give it good care. Little Binh now was old enough to wash himself. Nga would become the new head of the women guerillas' group. Though Ha couldn't yet join the army now as she wished, she still had plenty of time, for the resistance was to last a long time. She remembered everyone and everything : Old Hai Ngang, Ha's grandfather, Comrade Viet, the head of the village guerilla unit — and the old MAS rifle, the road where the guerillas used to lay ambushes, the canal subjected to repeated air-raids, and the rows of sugar-cane grown on the ground of the former enclosure of the “ strategic hamlet ”... How she was going to miss them! But having decided to go with the Liberation fighters to every corner of the country, she could not possibly bring along with her the whole hamlet !

Her mother put some *banh tet* into her rucksack and said to Hai Ngang:

"She never stopped blaming me for having brought her into the world as a girl! Now look at her eyes! She always said that she wanted to join the army to liberate the hamlet. We have now been liberated. Why is she leaving us?"

Waving her hat, Chinh bade good-bye to everybody. The drums rolled. The new recruits marched off. It seemed to old Hai Ngang that guns were roaring in the distance.

Translated from the Vietnamese



A guerrilla

Nguyen Chi Trung

A Letter from Muc Village

In the mountains, daylight is slow in coming. Singing birds gather in pairs long before the sun rises over the peaks and pierces through the thick foliage. The fog drifts along lazily, reluctant to leave. The cocks, too, find it too early to get down from their roosts, and when they crow, it's not to wake up people, but to announce their own awakening. For in this place people get up at midnight.

They sleep only a few hours as if they had to catch a night train. Hastily, they prepare the meals for the men and food for the pigs, boil the tea... so that no fire will be left burning after dawn. Then everybody leaves the village, the women with their youngest children on their backs, the men carrying the provisions.

There is no better protection against U.S. planes than the thick forest. The lethal loads dropped profusely but blindly from the air seldom hit a man. One only has to avoid coming into open spaces, or assembling around well-known water spots. But the frustrated Yankee pirates make it up by trying their utmost to destroy the crops.

*

Nhat was alone in the village. Lying curled up by the fireside, an arm under his head, and a hand on his belly, he was suffering atrociously. He had been urged to leave the place, but the pain was too great. The whole night, he had not been able to close his eyes. Only at dawn had he been able to doze off a little. For some time, his colic had become chronic. He no longer groaned when the pain came, but remained still, biting his lips, and refraining even from breathing too loudly. After everybody was gone, he crawled into his room, took his rifle and returned to his place by the fireside. Holding the weapon against his body, he lay on the floor.

When the sun had risen over the ridges and the fog had dissipated, the roar of jet planes was heard.

“Here they come again!” growled Nhat.

He listened intently, hoping that the pirates would go away. But the noise was getting louder and louder! Nhat knew that the enemy planes were heading straight for his village.

No, he could not remain lying there. Nhat stood up, took his rifle and went out at the very moment a fighter plane came circling over the village.

“That pirate! He’s getting at our crops!”

The young man, crouching behind a tree, followed the enemy’s movement. A bomb fell into the midst of the forest, but failed to explode. The plane soared up then dived again. The pirate surely felt himself the master of the sky. Apparently, nothing threatened him; he freely went up and down, spun round, roaring fiercely, and combed the forest in search of a prey. A third bomb fell. Its explosion shook the earth.

Lying flat on the ground, Nhat was violently shaken, but he sprang up at the sight of his fields burning. He uttered a shrill cry of pain and anger. Why that searing heat? He opened his eyes wide. The crops were burning — cassava, maize, rooted up and crushed, were burning fiercely. Nhat looked around, distraught, then fixed his eyes on the muzzle of his rifle. Many recollections surged up in his mind... That young mother named Gieng who during the first bombing raid ran up a mountain slope, terrified, with her baby in her arms, and was found the next day at the bottom of a precipice, her limbs broken... The cadre who told him once: “Against ground troops, we have traps; against the planes, we must use rifles....”

Nhat stood up, and loaded his rifle. It seemed that an inner voice was urging him:

“Go ahead! Bring it down!”

The plane roared past, its wings widespread, like a preying hawk. Nhat saw openings on the monster’s body, probably his eyes. The young man took aim. Through his gun-sight he saw the roaring jet grow

larger and larger. It pounced on Nhat. An irresistible force pushed him back against a tree. His rifle was still pointed skywards, but his finger on the trigger was numb.

He fell on the ground as if knocked down. The monster again soared up. Only after he had scrambled to his feet did Nhat realize that he had not fired a shot.

His mind was blank and he dropped his rifle. But again he heard the voice. It was that of Gieng, the dead woman.

“Shoot, Nhat! Are you chicken-hearted?”

Nhat again grasped his rifle. He must shoot. But not from this place, because he had certainly been spotted by the plane. He dashed towards another tree. The forest now seemed to be holding its breath in expectation of what was going to happen. Nbat heard neither the roar of the jet nor the bomb explosions in the distance.

Only the inner shout :

“Shoot! Bring it down!”

Sweat was dripping from his forehead, his chest and his back. He felt tired in a strange way. He wiped his brows and rested his rifle on a branch. In this manner, he could take aim more accurately. The plane came back and pounced on him. The weapon remained still, but Nhat's eyes sparkled. He no longer heard a shout but only a whisper. No longer a peremptory order but affectionate words of advice:

“Go ahead, Nhat!”

Slowly, his finger moved. A crack was heard, nothing in comparison with the thunder of the jet engine. Nhat's eyes shone:

"He's groggy, I dare say!"

Indeed, the plane was veering sharply. Then it burst into flames, dived and crashed with a terrific noise which resounded throughout the forest. His heart beating wildly, Nhat dashed toward the fallen aircraft.

There on the ground it was lying. It looked like a cut-up monster. Its wings broken, its nose buried deep in the ground, its body blackened by the flames, its eyes blinded, it made a sorry sight indeed. Nhat thumped with his fists on the body of the plane and laughed heartily. That evening, on returning home, the villagers heard Nhat playing the guitar to himself. They passed by his house, looking even more worried than in the morning.

*

Muc village had just shot down an enemy plane! The news spread faster than a bird's flight. It stirred the entire district of Nam Giang, spread through Dong Giang and reached Tay Giang.

People of all nationalities living in the region, — Kahangs, Katus, Ves — heard it. They whispered to one another:

"They are wonderfully courageous!"

"No! They are scared stiff now."

"Why?"

"They fear reprisals by the Americans!"

“How strange!”

“Well, not all of them are scared. The young went to have a look at the wreckage. But the old say: ‘The planes have more guns and more munitions than we. They fly high above. They can hit us very easily whereas it’s very difficult for us to get them.’”

These comments finally reached the guerillas of Muc, who in turn informed the other villagers.

“People in other villages are saying that we are far from being happy about our exploit.”

“And that our hearts are filled with fear!”

These words had the effect of a wind blowing on a fire. Night after night, the fire-places remained aglow, people stayed awake and discussed. Nhat visited the villagers’ homes and talked to them.

“I’ve brought down one of them, I know what I’m saying,” he repeated to everyone. “They seem terrible when one is afraid of them. Fear is like malaria: it makes you shiver even in the hot summer sun. But they are in reality not so formidable.”

Discussions and comments went on and on. Then, in larger meetings the matter was thoroughly examined. It is strange how meetings strengthen solidarity! Finally neighbouring villages received one day the following letter from the people of Muc:

“Dear countrymen in the district,

“On May 25, 1962, we brought down an enemy plane. It was Nhat, one of our partisans, who got it with a single shot of his rifle.

“ People in the neighbourhood have been saying that this exploit did not make us happy. It’s true. We were afraid. But we have held a congress. And now we have the honour to inform you that we are no longer scared.

“ That we should be afraid of our enemy does not stop them from attacking us. On the contrary, this will only encourage them to continue their criminal acts. It is true that they have plenty of arms and munitions and are much better equipped than we. But we have a strong determination. And with a strong determination we can defeat them.

“ Dear compatriots, thanks to the Revolution, we mountain people have put an end to the practice of vendettas. But now, we of Muc village, after discussing the matter, would like to make the following proposition to you. We mountain people have never harmed the Yankees’ fields or homes, never taken any food from them. Why then should they come to burn our houses and destroy our fields? We must take revenge on the Yankees for their crimes.

“ Do you agree with us on this point ? For our part we pledge to come to the next congress in large numbers, each with at least one exploit to his credit.”

*

For two months, the guerillas of Muc village waited in vain for an answer. But in a neighbouring village, Bin, a revolutionary cadre, was getting impatient. One day, he took his tommy-gun, said good-bye to his mother and went away together with Du, a guerilla.

Five days later, as his anxious mother went to Du's house to inquire about her son, she saw people flocking there.

"A meeting?" she asked.

"No, just the announcement of some news."

The woman quickened her pace. The house was crowded, and she couldn't get further than the entrance.

"What are they saying?" she asked another woman.

"They're talking about Bin."

Standing on tiptoe, she looked into the house. Bin was not there—only Du. The young man, squatting in the middle of the room, was gesticulating as he spoke. Sweat was dripping from his forehead but he did not seem to care. He was holding a pipe but forgot about smoking, absorbed as he was in what he was saying. The bowl of tea before him also remained half-full. His legs, which bore numerous cuts, were still bleeding. At a glance, Bin's mother could guess where her son's companion had been.

The audience was listening with breathless attention. Every time he made a pause to take breath, a question urged him on.

"And then?"

"When I arrived at Ba Vu, the sun was right above my head. It was terribly hot. Bin was crawling before me. Not toward the military post, but toward the nearby hill. From there, one could clearly see even the cigarettes on the lips of the Yankees, and the heads of the airmen in the cockpits of the planes.

"It's teeming with planes," I told Bin. "Do you know why?"

"Maybe they're bringing in fresh troops."

"Can they see us?"

"Probably not. We are covered by the grass."

Bin kept his eyes fixed on the planes, and he was muttering something. Then he turned toward me:

"Say, are you afraid?"

"Of course not!"

"Then get ready to shoot. Give me the rifle and keep the tommy-gun for yourself."

"We are quite near the post," I replied, "it's easier to hit with your tommy gun, Bin!"

"You're right. But I will not use it."

"I don't understand."

"You know, the partisans have only rifles. What I want now is not so much to shoot down an enemy plane as to know how to do it with a rifle."

"All right, if you are ready, my rifle is at your service!"

And I handed him my rifle. A long wait began. The barrel of his gun kept following the movements of planes, up and down, right and left. Then he put down the rifle.

"What's wrong?" I asked him. "Is your hand shaking? It's getting dark!"

I was crawling toward him when a shot rang out. I stopped dead.

"You got it?"

"I don't know."

There was no time to make out what happened. All the guns of the military post opened up. We ran away as fast as we could. My coat was torn up, my legs lacerated by the thorns... But scouts of the regional troops soon reported that the plane had been shot down. Ten bodies at least had been pulled out of the wreckage."

A long whisper of admiration swelled from the audience. Bin's mother finally edged her way in.

"And my son, where is he now?" she asked.

"Ah, here's Mother Bin!" exclaimed Du.

"Tell me, where is my son?" she repeated.

"You see... we ran away in different directions. I don't know where he is now."

The old woman's eyes opened wide, but her sight dimmed. She looked at Du without saying anything, thinking to herself:

"It's bad, it's very bad... he did not go to Nhat to ask for his advice as I had told him... He went to the Ba La post..."

Only nine days later did she get a note from her son. She took it to Du, who read it to her:

"Dear mother,

"Now I know how to shoot down a plane in flight. I can answer the questions of the guerillas on this subject. Today, I have to go to Toi village for some urgent matter."

She heaved a sigh of relief.

“What is he doing there, Du?”

“I don’t know, Ma!”

*

At Toi, the population was holding a congress. They had not hit any enemy plane whereas neighbouring villages—Bava, Dado, Choung—had shot down one each. The guerillas had a feeling of guilt, but Don, their cadre, who had been briefed by Bin, was waiting for a favourable occasion.

The laughter suddenly stopped. The girls cried out:

“Don, the planes!”

This was not a mere warning, but a call to action.

Don quickly put on his camouflage and darted toward the fields, enjoining his men to follow him. But nobody moved. He stopped running and shouted back:

“You, Buoc, at least you will come with me!”

Buoc was well-known for his marksmanship. He was capable of hitting a bird on the wing. Last year, he killed a deer with a single bullet in the head. In July, he got a roe the same way. He was no longer young but had extremely good sight. He could find his way in darkness better than a tiger even.

Don had hardly jumped into a trench when Buoc also took up position at the other end. The sky was cloudless. No wonder the Yanks were coming! As usual, the plane pounced on the village and skimmed over the tree-tops, cocksure of impunity. It tipped its wings as it