

NAM CAO

# CHI PHEO

AND OTHER STORIES





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## INTRODUCTION

**N**am Cao succumbed in the first days of November 1951, on the edge of the Red River delta, while crossing the white zone to take part in the agricultural tax collection campaign in the rear of the enemy line. He was then thirty six.

Nam Cao was born into a middle peasant family in Ha Nam province in the centre of the Red River delta. The frequent leitmotiv of his short stories and novels was his poor village, those ramshackle huts built here and there along the river bank, amidst the gardens "as deserted as the grave-yards" where never a song was heard. When he reached the age of thoughtfulness, the young Nam Cao felt in his heart of hearts the injustices visited on the people by the notables of his village. He

heard "the honourable Kien giving orders to tie up eighteen persons and to beat one of them until the "apple ran out of his eye"; every year he witnessed the drama of tax levy which strangled the peasants and plunged them deeper and deeper into poverty.

Beriberi and a heart disease compelled him to give up study and to go to South Viet Nam. In Saigon, where he took part in the huge demonstrations of the Democratic Front, he led a life as depicted in his novel "Song Mon" (Aimless Life) — he earned a living by doing all kinds of jobs, including those which the intellectuals took pride in never having engaged in: he lived and worked among the toilers and workers. He dressed in black like the workers and devoted the short time left to him to study. Physically too weak to carry a gun or a sabre, he fought with his pen..."

A few years later, when he returned home, he found that his family was in poverty. In that village where "everything remained the same as in the old days; worse than in the old days, imported cloth was sold at dirt-cheap prices. The looms on which the villagers lived ground completely to a standstill". Nam Cao went to Hanoi and worked as a teacher in a private school, and there, day after day, he suffered the same privations and servitude which harassed him without leaving him a breathing-space.

He was known as a writer around 1940 when the Japanese fascists set foot on Indo-China and the Petain clique tightened their grip on Viet Nam. The French censorship and the kampetai subsidised blackmailers who, in their gutter-press, were always singing praises

of Petain, Decoux, the "National Revolution", the Mikado, the Japanese pilots, the saké and the geishas. The shelves of bookshops abounded in old-fashioned romantic books which restored to life aristocratic beauties and brazen-faced, debauched and blasé supermen, those who extolled the mandarins and men in office in the hope of restoring the "order, ethics and beauty" of bygone days.

Nam Cao did not want to bear such a suffocating regime. This frail young writer who spoke calmly if not shyly, and blushed for nothing, possessed an unsuspected force. He hated these lying books stuffed with fantastic adventures and idle fancies. He penetrated the hypocrisy of this regime which martyred and degraded man. He burnt with impatience to expose it and show to everyone the omnipresent misery which slips into the depth of the people's soul to check their most beautiful leaps forward. He cursed bourgeois literature which made a show of "brooding over the woes of the people" to poetise them.

His short story "Chi Pheo" marked a date in Viet Nam's young realist literature which was groping its way in the dark. He depicted the atrocious misery which prevailed in the countryside under the yoke of the dignitaries bolstered by the mandarins and colonialists. Chi Pheo, this dare-devil outcast, struggled amidst the peasants, bled white, oppressed until suffocation, and exploited because they were too submissive. Never in their lifetime could these creatures lead a human life,

nor shun the spectre of misery and ignorance which throttled them and drove them to the rubber plantations or to extremities.

At the end of 1944 Nam Cao completed "Aimless Life". Despite repeated attempts, this novel could not escape the grip of censorship and was banned until the outbreak of the Revolution, though after a word for word examination, not even a small passage could be taken exception to. This is the story of the pitiful, risky and sorry life of petty-bourgeois intellectuals without money. This picture of a gloomy and dull existence which "mildewed, rusted, declined and rotted" without being able to find a way out, has as leitmotiv the question of the fate of a bitter, tragic, painful and degrading society, in which life had no meaning and ran against the wall of a blind alley.

In these initial works, Nam Cao already distinguished himself by his sarcastic style, and his keen and rather ironical look at reality. Far from priding himself and his class (as did some petty-bourgeois authors in a philosophy of submission to the ruling regime) he created typical characters, vivid and stirring at the same time. Whilst bourgeois romantic authors abstained from speaking in common parlance and used a gibberish which was mixed up with French vocabulary and sounded more and more hollow, Nam Cao created a new language which was racy but devoid of triviality. How much love there was in his cries of anger? Nam Cao held his unfortunate village in affection; he loved those quiet landing-places, those mornings and middays in the

Vietnamese countryside. It was with grievous sympathy that he wrote about the stupidity and inconstancy of poor people ground by misfortune.

To these naive souls, torn by poverty, even to a blind fellow such as Chi Pheo, Nam Cao knew how to give a flash of light, which was love and thirst for life, so dear to man. This flash sparkled in a split second and died out in a pitiless life. Though Nam Cao had not yet been able to gauge the potential force lying under the yoke of poverty, it was just that discreet glimmer which prevented his stories from sinking into oblivion, and — more than the author expected — made them the harbingers of a change, a dawn, a still remote and uncertain dawn.

Nam Cao's respect for the toilers enabled him to observe tiny deeds in the forgotten life of those who lived around him and to denounce all the absurdity of a rotten world, when he depicted the most commonplace events.

How long would this oppressive society last? Who would abolish it and by what means would it be done? What would happen to it afterwards? These were questions which Nam Cao had not yet put to himself. He saw only needy, stupid peasants oppressed for ages, without realizing the force which was smouldering in them, and capable of shaking off the yoke under which they were living. He scrutinised the plain reality with the eyes of a man who was trampled underfoot and not a man who had mastered it and had the certitude of

changing it. How many cries for help, how many flimsy hopes did his stories contain? At last a tiny glimmer sparked at the end of the two-hundred pages of wrath and sufferings which made up "Aimless Life": Enemy planes bombed empty Hanoi. Thu, the hero of the novel, left his private school for the countryside. In the packed train, a peasant was reading his newspaper. It contained only war information.

"How many dead! How many cities destroyed! There was something terrifying in this tragedy which made the blood flow in rivers and the corpses pile up in mountains. Shaken by the maelstrom, men struggled, winced, groaned, repented, defamed one another to build a new life. What would come out of it?... A dim glimmer suddenly lit in Thu's heart. He visualized a faint hope coming from afar. After the war, life would perhaps become more easy, just and beautiful... But he reddened soon. One always gets what one deserves. What had he done?..."

It was the Revolution which paved the way for his future. The increased fierceness of the war shook Vietnamese society. Owing to the many requisitions and privations imposed upon it by the Japanese army and French administration, wretchedness became unbearable. The corpses of hunger-stricken people piled up on the pavements. "For the convenience of the burying work, the starvelings were thrown into the same ditch as the dead." Famine carried off Nam Cao's kith and kin and threatened him. His wife wrote, "For over one

month Huong and Thien have only rice gruel to eat. They have just enough rice for three days. I am heart-rent to see them die piecemeal."

But in these circumstances, on the verge of despair, Nam Cao got acquainted with the cultural manifesto of the Indo-Chinese Communist Party; he fought in the Cultural Association for National Salvation and studied the platform of the Viet Minh. In those darkest days, hitherto unknown, while Death struck without discrimination, he saw Life mounting as a tidal wave. And he was not the only one to witness it: the Vietnamese people had seen light. Everywhere red flags sprang up from the earth. The poor who had pondered over their affliction, "in so cowardly and stupid a manner as one could imagine" now did wonderful things before his eyes. Suddenly he discovered the force of the people and found therein his own salvation. The fierce revolutionary struggle waged throughout the country, took him forward and showed him a way out. For the first time, he realized that it was worth living and knew where his place lay. After the coup-de-force staged by the Japanese on March 9, 1945 he returned to his native village and, without having time to mourn over his child stricken by famine, buckled down to his task of organizing an underground Viet Minh front. He took part in the investment of the district town and became chairman of the administrative committee of his native village.

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Like a gigantic plough, the August Revolution tilled the war torn Viet Nam land to restore to life this soil

soaked in blood and tears. All kinds of problems cropped up at one time. Hardly had South Viet Nam been liberated when it had to wage the resistance war against the colonialists who had just landed their expeditionary corps there. But all the twenty million odd people who had come to life were filled with joy.

Like all men of letters, Nam Cao worked so eagerly for the Resistance that he frequently forgot his literary work.

He had no time to think of writing a long novel, for he had to devote himself heart and soul to the Resistance. He accompanied Commander-in-Chief Vo Nguyen Giap to the Southern front and on his return, wrote his impressions in the paper "Vanguard". His first word was a cry of enthusiasm, "The road to the South is a road of joy." After many years of sufferings and humiliation, he was drawn into the optimism of his people who were fighting for their liberation.

Nam Cao welcomed the political directives of the people's organizations and the government in the manner of a prisoner who on his release from jail, swelled his chest to breathe the air of freedom. After so many hesitations and gropings, he knew how to appreciate the political opinions which enlightened his everyday life and enabled him to take it in hand and improve it. He came back to the subject of his native village. His new stories were still dry, sometimes far-fetched. Friends of his blamed him for making his characters too loquacious. It didn't matter! He grasped his art and made it useful. He didn't mind if his heroes were too talkative provided they spoke correctly.

In the first days of the nation-wide resistance, he attended to propaganda work in Ha Nam province, published a local news bulletin and wrote verses to serve immediate tasks. He directly took part in organizing the resistance in his village, which was one of the first villages threatened, invaded and ransacked by the enemy. In autumn 1947, he again left his wife and four children for the mountain regions in the North where his service was required. During the great offensive launched by the French against the Viet Bac, he worked at the editorial board of the paper Cuu Quoc (National Salvation) set up in the heart of Bac Kan province, then controlled by the enemy. It was there, in the roar of the enemy's guns that he joined the Communist Party. His diary "In the Jungle" written at that time revealed him as a militant and writer as well. He shared the life of "these naive people who ate wild yams for months on end to save rice for the revolutionaries, the life of those Mans \* — in rags and tatters and without education — who understood and loved the Revolution and devoted all their hearts and souls to it". Notwithstanding the crackling of guns all around, he lived among them, confident in a security which even amazed him. Everyday he would write newspaper articles which he read to a young Tho \* messenger, and correct them word by word in order to make them understood by everyone and used them as weapons of struggle. He was entrusted with the direction of a political course opened for the cadres of the district and various villages. Sometimes, deep in the jungle, he called to mind

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\* Minority peoples.

the painful, shooting memories of the life of yore. But enthusiasm and confidence gained over him as swiftly as a gust of wind.

"The harder the loads we carry, the more delighted we are", he wrote, "The revolution has completely changed my ways of thinking. Not only has the Revolution rejuvenated my mind, it has even changed my body.", "Only now can I realise that I am second to none in strength and part of it is wasted so much so that we do not even notice that we possess it."

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During the first years of the Resistance Nam Cao contributed a great number of articles to newspapers, especially the *Cuu Quoc*. He even wrote elementary geography handbooks. Now and then, he sent to press a short story or travel-notes such as "The eyes", "Four kilometers from an enemy post",... In his writings he constantly tried to reflect burning political topics. His sense of responsibility became more and more obvious in his articles. He was keen to make his pen useful. Over those years he tirelessly worked on a new novel about his village, stopping only to gather further documentary evidence and facts and to study what he had learnt during his trips to enemy occupied zones or his visit to "a fellow countryman". His old characters now became activists fighting in his village.

When at the beginning of 1950 he rejoined the Artists' and Writers' Union, he devoted himself entirely to writing, firmly resolved to reflect the Party line in his works. He readily accepted all the tasks entrusted to

him, however important they might be. Did he write a news bulletin or teach the messengers of various administrative services, or write a story, he discharged his duty with all his might. When he called on the musicians, he made suggestions and gave them advice on the scores sent to the Union. To the students of the Fine-Arts School, he talked about the program of credit and the policy on agricultural tax as contributions to the subjects for their posters. And he always left them with a promise to come back. In the China-Viet Nam border military campaign, he took charge of handwritten papers of army units, and carried out political work among the soldiers, as far as the front line. Never a complaint, never a mission left unfinished !

At Cao Bang and Lang Son, he wrote his "Stories on the Borderland" which he never ceased to improve. He did not regret throwing away scores of pages to make his book thinner and easier to print and to popularize. He wrote a scenario when the theatre of the Resistance was about to be organized. During the agricultural tax campaign, he noticed the usefulness of folksongs and buckled down to the task. All literary forms which appealed to the masses were good, and he utilized them without discrimination. To him, the aim of artistic creation is first and foremost to mobilize and educate the people. In his "Stories on the Borderland" he voluntarily chose typical activists whose examples would be useful. The Propaganda and Educational Board of the Viet Bac High Command took from this book the story "Speak openly" and used it to teach all the units of the People's Army.

He was ready to serve when informed that he was wanted in the agricultural tax campaign in the Third zone. The enemy was then setting up a white zone in the hope of blockading the Red River delta. As usual, Nam Cao accepted the mission despite all the difficulties and dangers it entailed. He sent in reports regularly: he studied the programs of tax collection, explained the difficulties met by the artists and writers of the Third zone, proposed the method of frustrating the enemy's propaganda. On the eve of the days he penetrated the enemy occupied territory, he wrote his last letter which said: "I have just come to a region where formerly guerilla warfare was quite active. Now the enemy is carrying out fierce mopping-up operations and constantly lie in ambush along the tracks; we have, however, a chance of crossing them quite rapidly... With the cadres I accompany, I do not feel quite out of my element... Their work and mine are one; never do I play the role of looker-on, and that is perhaps why I feel quite at home... After some time, if God keeps me alive and I shall not be captured, I will attend the conference of recapitulation. I shall write on current events".

His sense of responsibility and his contempt for danger had inspired him to write these last words. With a passionate love for life, he went to a constantly mopped up region where life hung upon a thread.

The enemy killed him but could not kill his work, his patriotism and his love for his people. Nam Cao is dead, but his example has become one of our writers' most brilliant traditions.

**NGUYEN DINH THI**



**CHI PHEO**



He swore while walking. It was his habit to swear after drinking. He cursed Heaven. Never mind.

Heaven belongs to nobody. Then he cursed life. That is of no importance. Life means everybody but no one in particular. He raged against the whole population of Vu Dai village. But people said to themselves: "May be he spares me!" Nobody answered him. How vexing indeed! Vexing enough to make you fume! Sons of bitches, those who did not answer him! No reply. Gang of asses! Had he drunk for

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nothing? Isn't it a great pity for him? Who is that idiot who fathered him so that he was so unhappy? Ah! He had got it! Let him come, the rascal who begot him! He ground his teeth and insulted the scoundrel who sired Chi Pheo. God knows who he was! Chi Pheo himself did not know and in Vu Dai village nobody knew either...

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**E**ARLY one morning, a catcher of eels found him naked and purplish blue, wrapped in a patched up skirt near a deserted brick-kiln. He brought him to a blind widow, who afterwards sold him to a sterile mill maker. After the latter's death the boy was left to himself, and hired himself as servant here and there. At twenty he worked as ploughman at mayor Kien's, now Honourable Kien, the first notable of the village. It was rumoured that despite her youthfulness, the mayor's third wife was often "sick", and she would oblige Chi Pheo, more than once, to massage her legs, belly, or back that the mayor, the terror of the village, knuckled down to his still young

third wife. She was plump and rosy-cheeked, but her husband was a martyr to lumbago. Those who have lumbago always yield to their wives, and are ferociously jealous. Some said that the mayor was jealous of the robust labourer, but dared not say a word for fear of his wife. According to others, the young man, strong in the third wife's confidence, would lay hands on money and rice. Everyone had his own version and one did not know who was right. The fact remained that one day, Chi Pheo was taken to the district town. Rumour had it that he was jailed. How long was his imprisonment? No one knew it. Only after seven or eight years' absence he came back to the village. Nobody recognized him, so much he has changed. He looked very much like a hooligan with his clean-shaven skull, and the black lac of his teeth scraped off. His sunburnt face, impudent manners and snaky look made your flesh creep. He wore a pair of black trousers and a yellow coat. His half-opened coat showed the tattoos on his chest—dragons and phoenixes surrounding a warrior armed with a club. The same tattoos were on his arms. A regular bogle!

The day after his return he was already seen drinking alcohol and eating dog meat at a small stall in the market the whole afternoon. When dead-drunk, he took an empty bottle, went to Honourable Kien's house, and insulted him by his nickname. The latter was out. Seeing Chi Pheo's excited gestures, Mrs. First left it to Mrs. Second to intervene, Mrs. Second pressed on Mrs. Third who, in her turn, called upon Mrs. Fourth to do it, but all told, none of these ladies

dared go out. This drunkard was brandishing an empty bottle. There were only women in the house, so they contented themselves with locking the gate and... let this imbecile shout! If he cursed, it would be himself who would hear his own curses for his mouth was very near his ears! Finally only three dogs got out to answer him. Three bad dogs and a drunkard, what a din!... The neighbours were deafened but who knew if, in their heart of hearts, they were not satisfied? Up to now, they were wont to hear only the insults of Mrs. First, Mrs. Second, Mrs. Third and Mrs. Fourth; now they could hear somebody insulting the Kien family. And what insults! Exactly as acrimonious as they would like it! "This time," they told one another, "we shall see if Honourable Kien and his son dare carry their head high! There is something to turn upside down his ancestors' graves with." Others, more calm, were content with saying: "Chi Pheo is lucky because the mayor is not at home. "The mayor mentioned here was Mr. Cuong, Honourable Kien's son, famous for his arrogance, who considered the villagers as rotten thatch or sweepings. Ah! If he were at home! And they were right. A metallic voice was heard: "What do you want, you fool? Are you trying to quarrel with me?... You, fatherless and motherless! You wretch!" Right they were. It was Mr. Cuong's voice. It was himself... A sound slap was heard. Oh! What has happened? Cuffs and kicks were raining. One would have one's bones broken. A sudden crash was heard! Sure enough, Chi Pheo had thrown the bottle against the gatepost... Now he

yelled! He insulted and called for help as though his throat had been cut! What yells! "Oh, villagers! Help! Kien and his son are killing me! Cuong has stabbed me! O villagers!..."

And they saw Chi Pheo rolling over and over on the ground, yelling and lacerating his face with broken glass. It was horrible to see so much blood streaming down. The dogs were turning aggressively about him, and barking wildly. Mr. Cuong turned pale, and looked over with a ghastly and contemptuous smile. So, Chi Pheo had intentionally come here to raise a scandal.

People rushed out. From the dark paths swarmed out a huge crowd! It was as noisy as at the market. Assured with the presence of Mr. Cuong, Mrs. First, Mrs. Second... the whole household had come out and were all gesticulating and cursing to their hearts' content. In fact, they wanted to see how Chi Pheo would behave. He was quite capable of getting their respectable husband into trouble...

But Honourable Kien was back again. "Why this mob?" he said high-handedly. The crowd bowed to him and stood aside to let him pass. At once Chi Pheo lay motionless and wailed like a person at death's door.

At the first glance, Honourable Kien understood what happened. He had witnessed many scenes of this kind during his career and that of his son, the present mayor. This did not surprise him. He began to scold his wives who wanted to boast of their courageous intervention.

## CHI PHEO

"Get in! Women only complicate things," he said.

Then, turning to the villagers, he lowered his voice a little :

"Go home, please! There's nothing for such a gathering!"

"They went away in silence. Some did by respect, others for care's sake: peasants never want to be disturbed. Who would be stupid to stay there, and risk being summoned as witness later on? Only Honourable Kien, his son, and Chi Pheo remained on the spot. Then, the old man came near the latter, and shook him gently, saying,

"My brave Chi Pheo, why do you behave like that?"

Chi Pheo, with half-closed eyes, moaned :

"May you and your son kill me! But if I die, somebody will be ruined or even imprisoned."

Honourable Kien tittered; all his prestige in the village came from this laugh. "Why do you speak like that?" he said. "What have we done so that you want to die? A man cannot be killed like a frog. Are you drunk again?"

Then changing his voice he went on in a friendly manner :

"Why haven't you come to see me since your return? Come in and have a drink."

As Chi Pheo lay motionless, he continued :

"Stand up, please. Let's have a drink. A friendly accommodation is better than a quarrel. Why so much fuss to be the laughing stock of everyone?"

While helping Chi Pheo stand up, he said,

"What a pity! If I had been at home these things would not have happened. Look! Don't be so childish! A bit of a chat and that's alright. Oh, this hot-headed Cuong! There is a family relationship between you both, you know."

The family relationship of which he had never heard before, made Chi Pheo cool down. He took the most exhausted air in sitting up. Seeing that he was the winner, Honourable Kien winked at his son, shouting:

"Where is Cuong? You deserve punishment. Tell a servant to prepare tea, hurry up."

He helped Chi Pheo stand up, then the latter followed him trying to hobble as if he were lame. Being drunk no longer, he did not feel like shouting and cursing. Gentleness made him soft. Moreover, he felt lonely because there were no more onlookers. A great fear ran through him — the same as he had experienced in the past. He felt foolhardy because he dared pick a quarrel with Honourable Kien's family — the Kiens who numbered four generations of canton heads and mayors in their family. At this thought his vanity was flattered. Who was he in this village? He had neither supporters, nor relations and friends, he was fatherless and motherless, yet he dared alone face Honourable Kien, the canton head, the notable of Vu Dai village and of the region, and a people's representative of Tonking, well known in the whole district. Who then in this commune of more than two thousand inhabitants would dare behave like that? Had he to die he would not regret it. But it was just

the contrary; this Honourable Kien, who spat fire and flame, stooped to invite him to tea. Chi Pheo was satisfied. Because the other yielded, he accepted his invitation. But he hung back. This cunning old man could play him a nasty trick once in the house. He was up to that. It was easy for him to take out some plates and cauldrons or gold and silver jewels to hang them on Chi Pheo's neck, and ordered his wives to shout stop thief, then tie him up, gave him a deadly blow and accused him of being a thief. This pig of an Honourable Kien who passed his life in plundering the people, why did he grovel before him? Did he think that he was silly enough to enter the tiger's mouth? No, Chi Pheo would not move from here. He would roll on the ground and still cry for help. But after deep thought, he said to himself: what's the good of that? Scarcely had Honourable Kien opened his mouth than people went away. Who then would answer his call? As he was no longer tipsy, he had not the courage to lacerate his face with broken glass. He had to get in, come what may! As to knocking one's head against the wall, it's better to do it in "his" house than outside. At the worst, if thing went bad, he would go to prison purely and simply. The prison did not upset him. And he entered Honourable Kien's house.

He wasn't long in seeing that his apprehensions were groundless. The former mayor really wanted to settle the quarrel. This man was far from being an ass. Very foxy, he divided the people to be feared into two kinds: the chivalrous heroes and the pariahs

driven to extremities. Chi Pheo was not a hero but a reckless person. Needless to blame such an individual. Submissive fellows and stiff-necked ones are to be treated differently. In a mandarin's career, if one crushes down and strangles people without distinction, one soon ends by selling one's house. Honourable Kien repeated this axiom to his son more than once. If this brute of a Cuong was a village head, he owed his appointment to his father. Without him, "the others" would have already driven him in the mud.

It was not easy to be a notable. In this village of more than two thousand inhabitants far from the district and provincial towns, it was easy to extort money from the people. But don't think that the mayor only sat on his mat to do it! Long ago, an adventurous geomancer had told that the outline of Vu Dai evoked "a flock of fish contending for prey". And in fact, the "seniors" of the village were like those fishes. The prey was tempting and each one tried to seize it. Under the veil of apparently courteous relations, in truth each notable tried to trample the others underfoot. Did Chi Pheo come here at the instigation of one of them? That would cost Honourable Kien dear if he tried to complicate things. How to catch a bald man by his hair? It is easy to put Chi Pheo in prison, but he will get out of it one day and will he leave one in peace? The former mayor never forgot the affair of Tho the Fifth.

Tho the Fifth was a stiff-necked man who seemed openly to make a stand against him at the time when

he took up his duties. Mayor Kien only waited for an opportunity to deal him some punishment. It wasn't long in coming. The rascal was soon drawn into brigandage and arrested. The necessary steps were taken by Mayor Kien to have him condemned. One would have expected that after this failure which led him to prison, this abortion would reappear no more in the village. Honourable Kien was satisfied to have removed a nasty thorn from his flesh. But one evening, when he sat alone putting his papers in order, Tho the Fifth rushed in without warning, a knife in his hand, and told him: "A word and you die." He had just escaped from prison and came to ask for an identity card in the name of a honest man and a hundred piastres to flee. "If you agree to my request," he added, "I'll disappear from here for ever, otherwise I stab you on the spot, come what may! To live together with your wives and children, it is better that you listen to me."

Of course Mayor Kien listened to him. Tho the Fifth never came back again. But in life, when the bamboo-tree gets old, the young shoots sprout. The race of hooligans can never be suppressed: No sooner had Tho gone away than soldier Chuc came back to the village. Formerly, when he still lived in the village, he was meek as a lamb. He did what he was ordered to, a simple shout made him piss in his trousers; he was ready to pay two piastres instead of one for taxes. He had a charming wife, but dared not raise even his finger when she flirted in front of him. As mute as a fish, he waited till she was back home to

correct her. Thus life went on; by dint of being sweet, he became silly, and the silly men in this village were always trampled underfoot. Chuc worked hard but remained very poor all the year round. All the money he earned slipped from his hands. Everybody tried to dupe him, and, each time, he resigned himself to keeping quiet. At last, enraged, he enlisted. It turned out badly for him! If he did not get angry, he would have kept his wife. He would undoubtedly share her with others from time to time, but she would in the end remain to him. His indignation made him lose her. His wife was still young, just had two children. He left her alone, with her rosy cheeks and burning almond-shaped eyes. Who could withstand the temptation of this piece of beauty?

She lived close by the road. The deputy-mayor called at her house on the way home from the gambling den at night, the night watchman did the same, and her neighbour came slyly too. To such a point that even old Dien, the white-haired watcher who passed all his life to serve the mayors, came there too to woo her. The hazard made Chuc's wife a prostitute for nothing. Honourable Kien himself, in spite of his three wives at that time, could not turn his back on this good fortune fallen from the sky. Far from losing, he still won. Each time Mrs. Chuc went to receive the amount of her husband's money-order, she had to take the mayor with her to certify her identity. No mayor was seen spending his own money to certify the identity of one of his administered, and that is easy to be understood. But Honourable Kien, satis-

fied to squander her purse and have his palm oiled, obliged her to sit by him in the same rickshaw and spend the day together with him in the provincial town.

Thus, some piastres she got were spent lavishly, and the next day, her children received only some sweets, or — unprecedented luck — two or three cakes made of glutinous rice. All the sacrifices of soldier Chuc monthly procured his wife a festival party together with the mayor.

Did he realize it all and was sick of his family? After three years of enlistment he had not yet come back. Later on, a warrant of arrest against the named Tran Chuc was sent to the village mayor. No sooner had the latter answered that the man had emigrated and not come back to the village than he reappeared the next morning. Mayor Kien sent the warrant of arrest to summon him. He went immediately to the Mayor's house bringing with him his wife and children. Without letting the mayor speak, he brandished a knife saying: "To be quite frank with you, I am condemned for murder. If you have no pity on me and arrest me, my wife and children will die of hunger. Anyhow they will die, it's better for me to kill them in front of you and at the same time be arrested." Blood rushed into his face, and he brandished his knife; it made everyone's blood run cold. He could be capable of killing his wife and children and even somebody else. After deep thought, Mayor Kien told him to go home, and promised to look into the affair, that is to say he concealed his crime. Each time a warrant

against Tran Chuc came he would answer that the latter had not yet come back. And Chuc led a quiet life in his village while he was searched for elsewhere. One wondered that his wife became serious and faithful, and worked hard to feed her husband. Thereupon the notables even considered as a crime to pay attention to a married woman. Everybody became reasonable except Chuc whose impertinence was outrageous. He cultivated a garden without paying tax. To call him to order? He insulted you. To confiscate his land? He threatened to stab you. It is useless to lodge a complaint against him, because all faults would fall on the mayor for having wittingly protected a murderer. However, the latter was not satisfied. One day, without knowing why, he took his knife and called on the Mayor.

"Since my enlistment, I sent altogether hundreds of piastres to my wife," he said. "I don't know how she spent them, perhaps she gave them to her lover, but the fact is there is not a cent left. I ask her and she tells me that she dared not keep them and entrusted them to you. I don't believe her and have tied her up at home. Please, give the money back to me so that I can feed my children. If even one piastre is lacking, I will bother 'them'."

The mayor understood that the word "them" includes him too. He sneered, saying:

"She did not..."

Chuc opened wide his eyes and shouted

"Who has eaten this money then?"

The mayor answered hurriedly:

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"Do you need money ? It is not in killing your wife that you can recover this sum. What's the use of complicating things and bring yourself trouble ?"

At these words he opened his box and flung him five piastres. The former soldier took them, respectfully bowed to him, and went home. After that, he became respectful to the mayor and considered him as his master, but Honourable Kien must give him money from time to time. That ended last year, at Chuc's death...

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Now it was Chi Pheo who was a nuisance to him. He had been as meek as a lamb. Ah ! The poor man ! Honourable Kien remembered having seen him shiver while massaging his third wife's thighs. Suddenly his attitude became menacing. To pull hard at a cord, one breaks it. For long, the first notable of Vu Dai village had admitted that it's stupid to oppress the juniors, thus obliging them to leave the village. Of ten who went away, nine came back with the hooligan's manner — the recalcitrance they had learned from afar. An experienced wise man only half-oppresses. He should discreetly push people into the river, then save them, for their gratitude. He thumps on the table to squeeze five piastres from people, but once the money is in his pocket, he flings back fifty cents "with pity for your poverty !" He knows what kind of people he is dealing with. These are the rich, with their beautiful wives and numerous children, who are afraid of mandarins and easy to be extorted ; on the

contrary, it is easy to kill homeless people, but they bring you nothing, except their carcass. To pick a quarrel with them, it is to give your enemies a good opportunity to get you into trouble. Like all other villages, Vu Dai had its class: that of Honourable Kien, of Sergeant Tao, of Tu Dam, and of Bat Tung. These gangs connived with one another to exploit the "juniors" but they hated each other, found every occasion to strike deadly blows at one another... Experience also taught Honourable Kien that in the countryside, only the meek sweat blood to feed the notables, but many times the latter must keep quiet to supply the pariahs who are always reckless and are ready to stab at someone or at themselves.

But the old man was not a man to bewail his lot. That doesn't pay. Those pariahs are oppressed because they know nothing but moaning. Honourable Kien needs not lament: he utilized those he could not oppress. After all, it is good to have headstrong men. Without them, who would tame other headstrong men? If he was not accommodating, how would he be able to repress the other clans? Now hard, now conciliatory, he knew how to utilize these reckless fellows who despise death and prison. They are the men who render him the best services. When the moment comes, one needs only give them some cents to drink alcohol, and send them against one's opponents. If they fall on a stubborn man who does not want to yield, they manage to stab him or discreetly burn his house. Have they dealings with a timorous man? They slip into his garden a bottle of smuggled

alcohol and go to inform the Customs, unless they pick a quarrel, then roll over and over on the ground and call for help. They are useful to create troubles which allow one to peculate. Without them one can only plunder these meek villagers who are satisfied with their lot, at the levy of taxes. This only happens once a year. Even in selling the graves of one's ancestors, one can never recover three or four thousand piastres spent to get the copper seal. \*

Therefore, on that night, Chi Pheo left Honourable Kien's house completely satisfied! Instead of accusing him of some crime, the old man served him with chicken and alcohol, and even gave him one piastre to take care of his wound. One piastre, it's too much. He staggered laughingly. Three cents would be more than enough! In prison he has learnt some good recipes for healing wounds: some medicinal leaves suffice to heal the wound on his face. As for the piastre, he would keep it to drink...

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He drank for three days, on the fourth day, he stared at the innkeeper:

"Today I have no money left," he said. "Sell me on credit a bottle of alcohol. I will pay you this evening."

The innkeeper hesitated, that was enough for him to draw out a box of matches and set fire to her hut.

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\* Seal symbolizing the mayor's power.

Terrified, she cried noisily and hastened to quench the fire. Then, weeping, she gave him a bottle of alcohol. Furious, he pointed at her, saying :

"You do not want to be treated gently ! I buy your alcohol, and do not ask you to give me alms ! Do you think I do not want to pay you ? That can never be my case. I have plenty of money in the Honourable's. You will be paid right this afternoon."

She wiped her nose with the flap of her gown, saying,

"I do believe you, but I lack money."

He shouted :

"I will pay you this afternoon. Are you dying of hunger right now ?"

He went out with the bottle of alcohol and walked towards a small temple close by the river because he had no house. On the way, from an orchard he thieved some green bananas and pilfered a pinch of salt from the stand of a little merchant. Now he drank alcohol while eating with gusto green bananas together with salt. All that he ate while drinking seemed good to him.

When he had finished his alcohol, he wiped his lips and staggered to the mayor's house. "I am going to Honourable Kien to claim a debt " he said to everybody he met. On seeing Chi Pheo enter his house, the old man understood that he came to pick a quarrel. The drunkard's eyes were red with anger, his legs staggered and his purplish blue lips trembled. It's lucky that he came without the empty bottle !



"Where are you going?" asked Honourable Kien with a firm voice.

Chi Pheo bowed to him, saying loudly

"My respects, Mr. the Honourable! I, your humble son, come to hand you a request."

His thick voice spoiled half of what he said. But nothing in his attitude showed his bad intentions. Scratching his head and ears, he muttered

"Respectfully, Sir, I admit that since you sent me to prison, I have a taste for it. Yes, Sir, it's right. God punish me if I lie! Your honour, you cannot know how one is happy in the prison. There, one has rice to eat, while here, in my village I have not even a patch of ground to stick a bradawl in. I cannot earn my living. Your honour, I come once more to ask you for a service, that of sending me to prison again."

Honourable Kien shouted. He always began shouting to test his interlocutor's nerves.

"You are drunk again!"

Chi Pheo made a dash toward him, his eyes bulging, and his arms half raised.

"No, I am not. I come to ask you to send me to prison. If you refuse... then... Mr. the Honourable..."

He searched all his pockets and draw out something that he brandished in front of him: a little but very sharp knife. He ground his teeth

"Yes, Mr. the Honourable," he went on, "if you refuse, your humble son will stab some one, so that you send him to the district town."

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Then bending his head, he slashed the edge of the table. Honourable Kien guffawed, — he was proud of this laugh — stood up, and tapped on Chi Pheo's shoulder, saying :

"You are really reckless ! By the way, dear Chi Pheo, if you want to stab some one, that is not difficult. Sergeant Tao still owes me 50 piastres. Try to get them ; if you are successful you will have a garden."

Sergeant Tao, a man of authority in the village, had strong allies who always opposed the clan of Honourable Kien, and the latter had to yield to them, because this retired military man had a big life annuity, strong acquaintances, and fluent speech. He had borrowed 50 piastres from Honourable Kien, but in a sudden change of attitude, refused to pay this loan, on the pretext that the new mayor, Mr. Cuong, has not made him a present at the time of his accession to office. The old man swallowed his rage but did not know what to do, because soldier Chuc, his appointed fighter, the only one capable of standing up to the sergeant, died last year. Chi Pheo could replace him, and the old man sounded his man out. If this drunkard got the better of Sergeant Tao, fine ! If he got himself killed, nothing to lose. Both ways were advantageous to him.

Chi Pheo waited for nothing else. He went straight to the sergeant's house, and began cursing at the end of the lane. Another day, the affair would have ended in blood : Sergeant Tao was not a man to yield, nor to avoid a murder. But luckily for him, or for Chi Pheo, on that day, an indisposition nailed him to his

bed. Perhaps he did not know that he was being insulted. The smell of alcohol exhaled by this noisy visitor, refreshed the memory of the sergeant's wife. She hastened to secretly take 50 piastres and give them to her servant who followed Chi Pheo at once. Women always like peace, and try to settle things by mutual agreement. What's the use of bristling up to bring you a lot of trouble? Furthermore, the sergeant's wife had her reasons : her husband was sick... One could not deny that he had borrowed this sum... After all, it was not a big sum for them. A lawsuit could cost three times as much!

That is why Chi Pheo could come back triumphantly. He said proudly to himself : "Among the heroes of this village, no one can match me." Honourable Kien who recovered his money without having to speak to the council of notables, seemed very satisfied. He immediately gave five piastres to his new lackey, saying :

"Chi Pheo, these 50 piastres belong to you. But if you take the whole sum, you will spend it in three days. Take five piastres to drink alcohol, and I shall sell you a patch of ground for forty five piastres. How can you live without land?"

After a very respectful "yes" Chi Pheo went home. Some days later, Honourable Kien told his son, mayor Cuong, to give him the portion of land that he had just seized from an insolvent taxpayer, 1,800 square metres of land on the river bank. Thereupon, Chi Pheo became owner of a house. He was only 27 or 28 years old...

Now, clever is he who could give him an age. 38 or 39 ? 40 or more. Outwardly he is neither young nor old. His face looks like that of an animal. To look at a beast, who could guess its age ? The wrinkles and scars left by the broken pieces of glass after so many scandals, have ploughed this yellow mask now turning grey. How many scenes has he made, how much violence, sabotage ; how many murders and cruel plots committed on the others' orders ? He could not say. That was his life, a life of which he is unable to count the years. He has not even the tax-card in which his age was written. In the register of births of the village, he is always declared as having emigrated. He vaguely remembers that he was twenty years old, that he went then to prison, then he was twenty-five years old, but he is not sure of it. Thence, for him time has neither days nor months. He got always drunk. His drinking-bouts have uninterruptedly followed one another, on the point of melting into an endless and immense drunkenness. Drunk, he eats, drunk, he sleeps, drunk still, he awakes, knocks at his head, lacerates his face, insults and threatens. Drunk, he drinks to get drunk again to remain in this endless inebriety. He has never recovered consciousness, perhaps he has never been lucid enough to realise his very existence. He may not know that he is a cruel devil sowing terror in Vu Dai village. How would he realise that he has ruined so many families, broken so many lives, destroyed so much happiness, and made so many honest people weep and bleed ? How could he be aware of that because

all that has been made in his drunkenness. When he gets drunk he is able to do everything he is asked to. The whole village is afraid of him and tries to keep clear of him when he passes by.

And that is why he insults people. He insults for nothing. When he is drunk, he curses like others... sing. Perhaps he would not do it if he knew how to sing. Unluckily for him and for others, he doesn't. Therefore he curses as he still does this afternoon...

He curses Heaven and life. He curses the whole village of Vu Dai. He drags all those who do not answer his cursings through the mud. But what does it matter? Who wants to waste his breath? In hot anger, he curses those who have given birth to him. But one doesn't care a rap. This silence increases his anger: the reason is that one cannot insult oneself. It is not interesting to curse oneself! Then he has a reason to get angry — a well-founded reason that allows him to run wild for revenge. Yes, let he revenge himself on any one! He must enter a house at all hazards. He will take the first lane to plunder and burn a dwelling or roll over and over on the ground to create a scandal. That's right, he will take the first lane. Ah! Here it is, hurry up!

But the moon is rising, a perfectly round full moon. Its brightness shines on the white road. What is this black and deformed mass which moves about on the roadway bathed in moonlight? It zigzags, and suddenly now shrinks and now extends, sometimes tears itself and gets deformed, without leaving Chi Pheo's feet. He stops, looks at it, and suddenly holds his

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sides with laughter. That is more unpleasant to the ear than his cursings! This thing that wriggles on the road is his shadow. In laughing, he forgets his revenge. He has passed the first lane. He is now in that leading to Tu Lang's house, the old scanty-bearded soothsayer. An idea suddenly strikes him he will swing to there and break into pieces this shabby sorcerer's two-string guitar. The old soothsayer shares his time between two occupations: to make offerings to genii and devils or to castrate pigs. His guitar harms your ears more than pigs' squeals. On Chi Pheo's arrival, Tu Lang is drinking. Sitting

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in the middle of his yard, he sips alcohol, caressing his scanty beard and wagging his head. Chi Pheo stops looking at him and finds him interesting. For him, whoever drinks alcohol has something interesting. And suddenly he feels thirsty! Oh! Good gracious! What a thirst! A thirst to burn your throat! Without hesitation, he comes near old Tu, takes the bottle of alcohol and drinks straight out of the bottle. The old man cranes his neck like a plucked cock, stares and stands gaping. His tongue fails him. He has drunk two thirds of the bottle. Chi Pheo empties the rest at a draught, utters a grunt of satisfaction and smacks his lips as if unsatisfied. Then he seizes the soothsayer by his goatee, raises and looks at it by the moonlight, laughing. His laughter infects the old man, and both fall on each other's neck, laughing like two mad friends. Then Tu Lang enters his house to take two last bottles out, and invites Chi Pheo to drink to satiety. Drink, then, don't worry! His wife died seven years ago; his daughter, an unmarried mother, left him. He can then drink all day long. Drink, drink, lost friend coming from the moon palace. Drink to your heart's content, drink to pass alcohol with the urine, that's happiness. Why stint oneself of alcohol. One will be rich, distinguished, covered with honours at one's death, nobody will call one "Your Excellency The Grave!" More than fifty years he is in the world, has never seen an excellency of that kind. All the graves are alike, one ends one's life in a hole, the drunkards like the others. Never mind, let us be drunk!

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It is the first time that Chi Pheo has satisfactorily quenched his thirst. He wonders not to have thought of picking acquaintance with this man sooner. Both drink like sponges. It seems that the whole Vu Dai village will have to abstain from alcohol so that they have enough to drink.

When the two bottles are emptied Tu Lang crawls on the yard like a crab, and asks Chi Pheo : "On what can men stand up ?" The latter tumbles him, strokes his scanty beard several times, then leaves the old man stretched out there, and staggers away. While walking he scratches his chest, neck, ears and head. Sometimes he has to stop to do it freely, raising a leg to scratch it. His body is itching, and he suddenly thinks of the river near his hut. His garden is, in fact, on the bank of a smooth and clear river. On both sides, as far as the eyes can see, mulberry-trees wave in the wind. However, in his garden there are only banana-trees and a little hut in a corner. By moonlight like this evening, the moonbeams cast on it dark shadows which look like newly dyed clothes dried on the beach. The crumpled banana-leaves that seem to be wetted by the silver beams, toss now and then in the breeze, as thirsty for love.

While curiously looking at the banana-leaves, Chi Pheo makes for his garden. He does not enter his dirty hut, but goes straight to the river bank, intending to take a bath to calm his itchings, and sleep on the grass : why enter this hut where one suffocates in the sweltering heat. A man who would not die

even if beaten on the head is inured to wind and dew... At the river bank he stops: it seems there is somebody. He is not mistaken, and looks stupefied.

A woman sits between two jugs, her back against a banana-tree, and her legs spread out. No doubt, it is a woman because her long hair falls over her bare shoulders and chest... her bare arms swinging, her mouth wide open facing the moon, her legs stretched before her, her skirt creased. She is sleeping, unless she is dead. She may have tossed in her sleep, for her camisole slips and lays bare a fleshy side. All that is displayed to the moonlight which embellishes all and whitens things which are perhaps not white in daylight. Thi Pheo feels a dry throat, and, yet saliva comes to his mouth. He tingles from head to foot, and suddenly he shivers. Why is it so? It should be this poor woman who has to shiver, this imprudent woman who indecently lies sleeping near his hut.

Thi No is her name, one of these idiots in the village of whom the legends relate, an ugly woman to frighten the devils. Her face, true irony of the Creator, is so short that it seems to be broader than long and, as a crowning misfortune, two hollow cheeks that emphasise it. Had they been full, her face would resemble that of a sow, a rather common occurrence on the neck of human beings. Her nose, flat and fat, red and rough like an orange-peel, encroaches upon her lips that swell to vie with it, and so, their skin cracks. The betel that she chews thickens them with a coat of red slaver whose vividness happily hides



this greyish flesh of buffalo. Moreover, her teeth protrude as if to diminish her ugliness a bit. Besides, Thi No is crazy, and that was a special favour from the Creator towards her: if she was clever she would be unhappy as soon as she bought her first mirror. And, she is poor, otherwise she would cause the misfortune of a man. Worse still, she comes from a leper-family: this brought no worry to any young man. People shun her like the plague; over thirty years old she is still unmarried. In this Vu Dai village the girls get married at the age of eight, and are confined at fifteen, nobody waits the age of twenty to give birth to a first child. That is to say Thi No will never find a husband. Moreover she has no relatives except an old unmarried aunt. It is Heaven's will that nobody stays alone in the World. The aunt hires herself to a dealer in bananas and betel who goes to and fro between Hanoi and Haiphong, even Hongay and Campha. As for Thi No, she earns her living in the village. Both women live in a thatch-roofed house close to Chi Pheo's garden, on the other side of the dyke. He is their neighbour although he lives on the river bank and they in the hamlet. For one reason or another, Thi No is not afraid of this man who frightens everybody else. By familiarity one becomes acquainted, and acquaintance often drives away fear. The keepers of zoological gardens say that tigers and panthers are as sweet as cats. Why should she be afraid of this man? Everybody fears plainness, poverty and stupidity which are her only fortune. Moreover Chi Pheo is rarely at home and when he is, he is

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meek as a lamb. No man is wretched when he sleeps. He only comes home to sleep.

Thi No crosses his garden once or twice a day to take a short cut to the river. Formerly, the villagers went through it to get a bath, wash linen or draw water, but since the arrival of Chi Pheo, little by little, people have preferred going a long way round. As Thi No is crack-brained, she does not follow them. Excess of confidence in others or in herself, temerity, stubbornness, or simply old routine? The fact remains that she has continued to take this short cut without being troubled, and that has become a habit. One day, while Chi Pheo slept, she entered his house to seek fire. Another time, she asked him for alcohol to massage her legs. Half-awakened, he told her to take what she wanted in a corner of the house, and let him sleep in peace. And more than once, Thi No asked herself why people were so afraid of him.

Last evening, she went as usual to draw water from the river. The moon, more shining than ever, cast silver gleams on the river, the golden waves of which amazed her but wearied her eyes at long last. The breeze was cool as a caress. She felt sleepy, her eyelids grew heavy and were closing. It was her irremediable bad habit to drop to sleep where she was and whatever she did. Her aunt said that she was a simple-minded woman, incapable of the least attention. Thi No yawned, then thought: there is no hurry, I can lay down my pails and take a rest here. Since noon she had broken clods of earth without respite. And it was unusual to find a spot where one

could find fresh air to tickle your skin. What happiness! She pulled off her coat and leant her back against a banana trunk in a careless attitude, not knowing that it could be a lustful attitude. She was only simple-minded, one could not ask that she sees farther than the end of her nose. Moreover, she was alone. And Chi Pheo had not come back yet. If he came back he would be tipsy, sleeping while walking, and once at home he would throw himself on the bed. What would he come here for? After all, Thi No did not care much for his presence... She did not fear any disrespect towards her, for the very simple reason that she had not so far been outraged by anybody. In fact, she did not think so much. She already had a shade at the bottom of her brain. She had to sit down, and could not do otherwise. Hardly had she sat down when the thought of falling asleep flashed on her. In fact she already half-slumbered. "Never mind," she said to herself. "If I go home, I will sleep too. It is better to lie down here. My aunt will be back today. It's better to stay here for a breath of fresh air." And she slept a delightful and sound sleep.

Chi Pheo gazed intently on her, shivering. Then he drew near her stealthily. It was the first time he had acted so since his return to the village. He set aside the two pails, and sat calmly by her.

Thi No started. But the man had already grasped her... She tried to get loose, opened her eyes, woke from her sleep and recognized Chi Pheo. She fought with him "Oh!... Let me go! I will cry for help... Let

me go!" The man burst out laughing. Why did she want to cry for help? He thought this was his privilege. How dared she vie with him? Then he cried for help. He shouted like a man who was being murdered, forced the woman to lie down. Thi No held her breath and glared at him, astonished: why does he cry for help? And he continued crying! Luckily, his voice was not strange to the villagers. People grumbled and went to sleep again. Chi Pheo cried for help like others sang to drown their sorrow. Only the dogs barked to answer him.

Thi No suddenly burst out laughing. While letting out some oaths she tapped him on the back. It was a friendly tap for her hand drew him towards her. And both of them laughed...

Now they slept side by side... The child sleeps after the suck, and the man, after sexual love. They slept as they had never slept... Above them, the moon was still clear, and cast a silver powder on the river which glittered like a mirror... Early in the morning, Chi Pheo half-rose leaning on his arm. He felt sick, fagged out, as if he had taken nothing for three days. But strange to say, his belly swelled, it seemed he had a stomach-ache. No doubt, he had an attack of colic. The pain wrung his bowels. Sudden cold bit him, he shivered. He wanted to get up, but his head ached, and he was quaking at the knees. He felt dizzy. His belly cramped, and the pain hurt his back. Three or four times, he felt nauseated, but could not vomit. Then he put a finger in his mouth and tickled the uvula. His bowels seemed to be tossed. But he only

vomited saliva. He stopped a while and did it again. At last he succeeded in vomiting. There was no end of his nauseating. The noise he made awoke the woman. She got up and looked at him, stupefied. Time is necessary to this heavy-brained woman to remember and understand.

Now Chi Pheo ceased vomiting. Exhausted, he fell on the ground, dazed, and groaned feebly. That was all he could do. A faint smell of alcohol came from what he had vomited. Suddenly he shivered.

Thi No came near him and put her hand on his chest. She understood at last!

"You have vomited?" She asked him.

He rolled his eyes which lighted up a little while to immediately fall again in their haziness.

"Let's go in"

He tried to shake his head, but only his eyelids blinked.

"Stand up then."

How could he stand up? She hooked her arm under his armpit and helped him sit up, then stand up. He leant on her and both of them crawled to the hut, staggering.

She laid him on his bamboo bed and covered him with all the pieces of mat she could lay hands on. He stopped groaning and seemed to sleep. She was dying with sleep too. But the mosquitoes which infested the hut reminded her the coat forgotten in the garden. She went out. The pails made her remember that she had to bring water home. She quickly put on her coat and carried her load home.

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It was still moonlight. Thi No went to bed but her recent adventure came to her mind. She smiled, incapable of sleeping again, and ceaselessly turned over on her bed.

Chi Pheo woke late in the morning. The sun was already high and dazzling, judging by the chirpings of birds outside. But it was dim light in the low and humid hut. Here evening came in the afternoon and night in the evening. As Chi Pheo was never sober he had never realised that.

But this time he was recovering consciousness. He felt a little bewildered after an endless drunkenness, having a bitter taste in his mouth, and a vague sadness. He was done up, and tired out. Was he wanting in alcohol? This very thought made him shiver and feel sick. Now he got a distaste for alcohol like sick people for rice. Outside, the song of birds was so gay! The laughter of those who went to market were heard. A fisherman struck an oar on his sampan to drive fish towards his net. These were the familiar noises, but it was the first time he heard them. What a nuisance!

"How much have you sold your cloth for today?"

"Less than three cents yesterday per metre"

"There is profit then!"

"Five cents per piece if you stretch out the cloth  
at the utmost."

"Is it possible? But that is better than nothing..."

Chi Pheo guessed it was a woman who spoke to a cloth seller from the Nam Dinh market, and he was sad, for this talk recalled to him a far off past when

he had dreamed of a little family. The husband would be hired as labourer, the wife would have woven, and both would have bred a pig to have a small saving. When they were well-off, they would have bought some sao\* of ricefield.

Recovering consciousness he realised that he was old but still lonely. How sad is life! How can it be so? Would he be already old? More than forty years old... In any case, it is not at this age that one thinks to found a home. He was facing the decline of life. With people like him, who were never ill in spite of poison and hardships, an indisposition is the alarm-signal that your body is already worn out. It is a shower at the end of autumn announcing the coming of cold and the beginning of winter. Chi Pheo seemed to foresee his old days with hunger, cold, illness and — worse than all — loneliness.

He nearly wept but for the coming of Thi No. She brought a pot of hot onion rice soup in a basket. Last night, in turning over on her bed, she suddenly felt pity for this lonely reckless man fighting against sickness. Without her, he would die on the river bank. She felt flattered for having saved a man. She was under the impression that she loved him as a benefactress loved her protégé, and also, as if she owed him something. How could a woman like her forget? It would be ungrateful of her to desert him. After all, they already behaved like husband and wife. The

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\* 360 square metres.

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words "husband and wife" made her redden, but pleased her. Was it her long cherished desire? Or were they feelings roused by sensual pleasure?

She only knew one thing: she was burning to see Chi Pheo again. It would be amusing to recall together with him the adventure of the last night! How could there be such unconventional people? "One" sat down there and he dared come to stick himself close to her! And this ill-bred person shouted more loudly than you! Really she was an idiot. What's the good of shouting to this thick-headed man who did not fear even a thunderbolt? So much the worse! He vomited much. Such a night had entirely tired him out. He must have something to eat. An onion rice soup for his good. When he perspires, he will be better... And so, early in the morning she ran to borrow rice. Luckily, she had some onions at home. And now she was bringing this soup to Chi Pheo.

The man was so surprised that tears came to his eyes. It was the first time that a woman offered him something. He had been given nothing so far. All that he got, he had to snatch it by threat, violence or any awe-inspiring means. Now he felt abashed before this bowl of smoking soup. Thi No glanced at him and laughed heartily. He looked at her and found her charming. Truth to say, love beautifies. He felt a joy mingled with sadness and something like repentance. It could be so. One often repents of having committed crimes when one is no longer able to do so. Thi No

urged him to eat the soup before it got cool. He took the bowl and brought it to his mouth. Ah ! this soup smelled good ! A mere sniff at it made he feel better. He sipped it and concluded that those who, in their life, have never tasted onion soup cannot realise how good soup is. But why only now does he taste it ?

He had the answer : there was nobody to prepare the soup for him. And for a very good reason ! Since his birth, there has been no woman to look after him. His thoughts went to Mrs. The Third, a she-devil who obliged him to massage her legs, higher, always higher, merely for her own pleasure, without the least love of him ! He was then twenty, the age where man is not a stone, but not merely a mass of flesh. One does not like what one despises. To be called by a woman to massage her legs ! He felt more ashamed than delighted. Worse still, he was frightened. And truly, from the day when he realised that the patroness called him for a shameful work, he had done it in trembling. It was impossible for him to refuse in that house, all depended on that woman. As for him he did not set to work heartily, which made her angry. "How stupid you are ! At twenty, you are already like an old man !" Then, as he feigned not to understand : "Do you think that I send for you to massage my legs ?..." On seeing him hesitate, she insulted him. What a shame ? How could he love her ? No, truly, no woman had loved him. This onion soup offered by Thi No made him think much. Why create enemies when he can get friends ?

## CHI PHEO

The bowl emptied, Thi No filled it again. Chi Pheo perspired profusely, beads of perspiration stood on his forehead and face. He wiped them, blew his nose on his coat-sleeve, smiled and retook the bowl. The more he ate, the more he perspired. Moved, Thi No looked at him, nodding. He felt young again, and wanted her to cajole him like a mother with her son. How sweet he was, this Chi Pheo! Who could believe that he was the man who knocked his head against the walls, lacerated his face and stabbed people? Is it his true nature so far paralysed by life? Has sickness changed him not only physically but also psychologically? Weak people are generally sweet. Cruelty requires strength. What has become of his strength? Now and then, he looked at himself anxiously. For long he had lived on robberies and threats. If he was unable to do so, what would become of him? To tell the truth, it is his effrontery which gives him strength. He vaguely understood that a day would come when it would be impossible for him to seek adventure. There's the rub! Good gracious! How badly does he want to be honest, and on friendly terms with everybody! Thi No would show him the way. If she could live in harmony with him, why not others? They would see that he would do no harm, and admit him to this peaceful and cordial society of honest people... He looked anxiously at Thi No as if to sound her on the matter. As she still kept quiet, smiling confidently, he left suddenly relieved.

"How interesting it would be, if life were always like this!" he told her. She did not answer. But it

seemed that her red nose swelled a little more. And the wry face was not without charm under Chi Pheo's eyes.

"Darling, come and live with me," he said with an amorous look.

She cast a sidelong glance at him. Lovers, even the most plain-faced, use a side-glance. Satisfied, he burst out laughing. At lucid moments Chi Pheo's laughter was lovely. Thi No was very pleased. The onion soup began to take effect. Overjoyed, he pinched her so suddenly that she gave a start.

"Do you remember what happened last night?" he asked her laughing.

She gave him a tap as if she did not like joking. Why so much decency? But whatever ugly Thi No may be, decency gave her much charm. He bubbled over with laughter and to make her shyer he strongly pinched her thigh. This time, she was not content with jumping, she howled, and catching him by the neck she obliged him to bend. Thus they manifested their love, needless of kisses. How would they feel in kissing each other, when her lips crackled like a dyke in the days of long drought, and his face was more furrowed than the top of a chopping-block. Moreover they had more simple ways to manifest their love, by pinching, tapping each other... how practical it was!

## CHI PHEO

They would become a very well-matched couple. They came to this conclusion and decided to marry. Thus she stayed five days and five nights with Chi Pheo, going out only to earn some money. As for him, he was no longer disgusted with alcohol, but tried to drink the least possible. For economy's sake, but chiefly to be clear-headed to love each other. Women have no ferments of alcohol but enrapture men all the same. He was madly in love with her. But on the sixth day this crazy woman suddenly remembered that she had an aunt who would come back that very day, and she thought it better to ask her advice before continuing to love.

When Thi No put the question to her, the old woman burst out laughing, and thought it was a joke. But as soon as she remembered that her niece was badly witted, she was dismayed. She was ashamed for her ancestors. Maybe she thought bitterly of herself. Recalling her long single life, she felt irritated, without knowing against whom, and then she poured her rage on Thi No. This virtuous woman found her niece indecent. What a scandal! Over thirty years, and so loose! Who would get married over thirty? Who? Who would have a husband at this age? And what a husband!... Had all men died so that she chose this bastard? A scoundrel ready to raise a scandal! Good gracious! What a shame! Oh, my ancestors! The old woman howled like a fool, shaking her finger at her niece who behaved like a street-girl:

"As you can abstain from men up till now, go on till the end of your life then. What an idea to take Chi Pheo as husband."

These words revolted Thi No. But how could she oppose her? This old woman could speak, she was over fifty. One does not think to marry at this age. But Thi No did not know how to oppose the question. That made her fly into a rage. And what a passion! She had to pour out that anger on someone... She ran at her lover, and found him drinking and grumbling at her for her long absence. Chi Pheo was not used to waiting. To kill time, he retook to his bottle of alcohol, and drowned his sorrow in drink. And the curse came after the beverage as a matter of course. But what had she done to be insulted? Had he the right to do so? Madly excited she pranced with rage as a sorceress who evoked a spirit. And he found the spectacle so amusing that he nodded laughing. This passed all bounds! He had the face to laugh at her!

She could master her temper no more. With arms akimbo, holding up her head, curling up her big lips, she threw on him all that her aunt had said. He thought a while and seemed to understand. Now, he was amazed. He was thinking about the good smell of the onion soup, and gaped at her while she ran wild. Her passion gone, she contracted her big red nose, then, satisfied, she turned her back and went away rolling her buttocks. Stupefied, Chi Pheo called her. To no avail! She was too proud to come back!

What did he want her to do? He ran after her and took her arm. But she spurned him so roughly that he rolled on the ground, and shouted. He gathered a brick to strike his head, but as he was not entirely drunk, he thought better of it; it would be no good of him to raise a scandal at home. He had to make all speed to Thi No's house to kill that old hag and all her family. Otherwise, he would strike his head with a brick and stir up the villagers. But one cannot hit one's head without being completely drunk. How would blood flow without alcohol? He had to drink one more bottle. And he drank it. But the more he drank, the more lucid he became. And the more lucid, alas, the more sad he felt. For him, alcohol had lost its stuff. Now and then he smelt the far-off odour of the onion soup. He took his head in his hands and wept. Then he drank again and again till complete inebriety. He went away, a knife at his belt. He walked, grumbling: "I will kill her! I will kill her!" However he walked straight forward. Why did he forget to enter Thi No's house? Mad men and drunkards never do what they intend to.

The sun was very hot, the road deserted. Chi Pheo went straight forward, swearing, threatening to kill "them". He arrived at the gate of Honourable Kien's house. He entered without hesitation. Everybody was in the fields, except the old man, who was taking a siesta. Chi Pheo's roars made him angry. He was

already nervous, because of a light illness, and was waiting for a fresh hand to massage his temples. Perhaps he only wanted his fourth wife to be back sooner. She was out for a long time, one did not know where. Why did she look so young? Nearly forty years old and still so appetizing! Too much indeed! He, this year, was over sixty, so weak and old, it cut him to the heart. It would be better if she were old too. But she was still as fresh, seductive, and lovely as just over twenty, and moreover, very alluring. To look at her was very agreeable, but how irritating; a sort of beefsteak for a toothless old man. She had a lovely mouth and fascinating eyes, but alas, too sensual. A trifle made her laugh uproariously, her cheeks reddened and her eyes half-closed. Ah! How he hated those young men who kept turning round her when they had not even



## CHI PHEO

the age of her child. They only babbled nonsense and coarseness, but she laughed at what they said. A careless woman so easy to get on with! Ah! If he could put all these youngsters in prison!... Even a wise man could not be calm with such thoughts? All the more when he saw a man who only came to squeeze money for alcohol like Chi Pheo. Honourable Kien however took fifty cents from his pocket and began to shout to be relieved

"Is it you, Chi Pheo? Don't chatter too much, I am not a storehouse."

Flinging him fifty cents, he said:

"Take them and go away. Find a job. You cannot always sponge on me!..."

Chi Pheo rolled his eyes and pointed at him shouting:

"I don't come here for fifty cents."

On seeing him trying to raise a scandal, Honourable Kien resigned himself to lowering his voice

"Take them, I have no more left."

But Chi Pheo raised his head proudly:

"I have said: I don't need money!"

"Good! It is the first time that you don't ask me for money. What do you want then?"

"I want to be an honest man!" Chi Pheo replied in a steady voice.

"Well done!" Honourable Kien guffawed derisively. "I only wish you to become honest for everybody's welfare."

"Too late," said Chi Pheo, wagging his head. "Who will give me the means? Who will wipe out the scars

which disfigure me? I can never be an honest man. Do you know it? Then there is only one means... do you know it?... There is only one means... that thing! Do you know it?..."

He whipped out a knife and rushed forward. Scarcely had Honourable Kien time to cry than Chi Pheo was already upon him and stabbed him, howling to muster the village. When Chi Pheo cried, nobody came immediately to his help. At last when people came, he was also dying in a pool of blood, his eyes rolling upwards. He opened and shut his mouth as if he wanted to speak, but no word came. From the wound at his neck, blood still oozed.

The inhabitants of Vu Dai village were in a flutter. They warmly discussed this unexpected murder. More than one was delighted at it. Many people openly expressed satisfaction at it. Some spoke with due caution "There is justice on earth, my friends!" Others did not refrain from saying: Neither of them is to be regretted. They kill each other, it's needless to dirty one's hands to do it." Most happy were the notables of the village. They poured into the mayor's house, under the pretext of presenting their condolences but in fact, to cast a satisfied and provoking glance at Mayor Cuong. At the market, Sergeant Tao cried out for everyone to hear, "Now the father is dead, one will make his son swallow mud." And it is understandable that this "one" means the Sergeant himself. The juniors of the village whispered to one another: "We must feast the death of this old

## CHI PHEO

sponger." But the wisest people contented themselves with a smack of the lips: "When the bamboo-tree gets old, shoots sprout. A dirty fellow dies, another will come. That matters little to us..."

Thi No's aunt pointed at her niece:

"Lucky you are," she said, sarcastic. "Do you still want to marry Mr. Chi Pheo?"

Thi No smiled and feigned not to hear her

"It seemed that mayor Cuong spent nearly 100 piastres to have the report written," she said. "He lost his father, and also his money."

But at the bottom of her heart, she thought

"And to tell the truth, he was sometimes meek as a lamb!"

Then remembering the nights she had spent together with him, she furtively glanced at her aunt before looking at her belly:

"If I am pregnant, now he is dead, what is to be done?"

And in her mind's eye appeared suddenly a deserted brickyard, far from the houses and the road...

February 1941





## OLD HAC



LD Hac was blowing at the wisp of straw and kindling a fire. I cleared the water-pipe, filled it with tobacco, and invited him to smoke first, but he refused...

"Smoke first, please, Mr. Teacher!"

He gave me the torch.

"Thank you," I said.

Slowly he opened his packet of tobacco and rolled a pellet. I took a puff, cleared the water-pipe and put it on his knees. He filled it with tobacco. As he took the torch, and shook off its ashes, he said,

"Perhaps I will sell my dog, Mr. Teacher !"

And he smoked. As I blew out the smoke I looked at him with dim eyes, the eyes of an intoxicated man, pretending to pay attention to his words. In fact I was indifferent to what he said because I had heard it so many times. I knew that he was talking for the mere sake of talking and he would never sell his dog. Besides what would happen if he did sell it ? Why so much fuss over a dog ?...

After smoking, he put down the pipe, turned and blew out the smoke. After taking a puff from a water-pipe, one is plunged into a light-headed stupor. Old Hac sat silently enjoying this small pleasure. I sat silently too and was thinking of my few books. I loved them more than my own fingers. I had sold nearly all my clothes, but not a single book when I had been seriously ill in Saigon. After my illness I had come back to my native village, with a suitcase full of books as luggage. Oh ! Those beloved books ! I had made a vow to keep them all my life as a souvenir of a diligent, active and confident period full of passionate hopes : each time I opened a book and even before I began reading it, I felt reviving in me the dawn of my life. My mind went back to the days when I was twenty years old, a time when one knows how to love and how to hate... But we are unhappy not only once in our life. Each time I was deprived of means of living, having sold everything else, I was compelled to sell some of my books. At last only five remained and I was determined not to sell them, even if I should die of hunger. However I had to sell them in

## OLD HAC

the end ! A month ago, my little child had had dysentery and was almost dying. Oh, no, Old Hac, we are not allowed to keep anything for ourselves ! Your love for your dog Sandy could not stand comparison with the love I had for my five books...

So ran my thoughts. As for old Hac, what was he thinking ? Suddenly he said,

"I have not heard from my son for a year !"

Ah ! Old Hac was thinking of his son. For five or six years the young man had worked on a rubber plantation. His contract had ended. Old Hac brought me his letter and asked me to read it. The son let his father know he had asked to sign a new contract... Old Hac hastened to explain why he had shifted from the story of the dog to the story of his son.

"It was my son who bought the dog !... He bought it for the purpose of killing it for food later, on the occasion of his wedding \*..."

Alas ! Such is life. One cannot always do what one wants. Hac's son and his sweetheart loved each other tenderly. The girl's parents had consented to their marriage. But they asked too much as a wedding gift : one hundred piastres in cash with areca nuts and spirits... that made two hundred piastres in all. Old Hac could not provide this sum. His son wanted to sell the garden in order to get the money at any cost, but his father would not agree. Why sell the garden for the wedding ? And where to live after the marriage if the garden was sold ? In any case, if the girl's

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\* Dog meat was much appreciated by some Vietnamese.

parents were firm in their intention, the sum derived from the sale of the garden could not cover the marriage. Old Hac knew all this but dared not say so to his son. He tried to get him to understand this difficulty; he advised him to give up the match and wait and make a better and cheaper marriage. There were still a lot of girls in the village; luckily...

Old Hac's son was a good boy. He obeyed his father, dropped the idea of marriage and did not speak of it again. But he was sad and old Hac knew he was still in love with the girl. The old man loved his son very much. But what was to be done?... That year in October the girl got married; her husband was the son of a rich deputy village chief. When Hac's son heard the news he was dejected. Some days later he went to town, made his way to the labourers' recruiting office, handed in his identity card and signed a contract to work at rubber plantations...

Old Hac told me, tearfully,

"Before his departure he gave me three piastres! I don't know how much he borrowed but he brought me the money, saying, "I give you three piastres for your extra expenses, because at home I could not provide for your subsistence. Now I can go without anxiety. Sell the products of the garden and hire yourself out from time to time, and you will have enough to live on. This time I am determined to go away and work, and I will come home when I have hundreds of piastres. It is a shame to live penniless and miserable in this village..."

## OLD HAC

"I have nothing ~~else to say~~, but to weep. The authorities have kept his identity card and taken his photograph. As he has borrowed money from others he belongs to them and is not my son any more..."

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Now I understand why old Hac did not want to sell his dog Sandy. It was his only companion and comfort. His wife was dead. He had no news from his son. One could not help feeling sad when one was old and alone. During moments of melancholy his dog amused him for a little. He tenderly called him "Little Sandy" as a barren woman calls an unhopedor child bestowed by a deity. When he had nothing to do he looked for fleas or bathed him in the pond. He fed him in a bowl like a rich family's dog. Sandy sat at his feet when he drank spirits in the evening. Whatever Hac ate he gave some to Sandy like people feed their children. And he gently chided him, spoke to him as he would to a little child about his father. One day he said to the dog,

"Do you miss your father? There has been no news from him for a long time. Perhaps three years have passed since he left... More than three years... Already four years... Oh, exactly four years this October... Will he come home at the end of this year? If so, he will get married and he will kill you. Mind yourself!"

The dog lifted his muzzle and looked at old Hac with indifference; the old man frowned, stared at the dog and threatened,



"My son will kill you! Do you know it? Mind your life!"

Thinking that his protector was reprimanding him, the dog wagged his tail to please his master. Old Hac roared,

"Ah, you're happy, You wag your tail! But you'll be killed all the same! You'll die!"

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Seeing him so menacing, the dog made as if to leave, but Hac seized the dog, clasped its head in his arms, patted its back and whispered,

"Ah, no! Ah, no! You will not be killed, little Sandy!... My Sandy is good! I will not allow any one to kill you... I want to keep my little Sandy with me..."

He let go the dog to sip alcohol. He became contemplative and sighed. In a low voice he began counting. He was counting the income from the sale of crops from his garden.

After his son's departure he had said to himself. "This garden belongs to my son. When his mother was still alive she managed to buy it with her savings. In those days everything was cheap... Now he inherits what she bought. Once I didn't agree to his intention to sell it because I wanted to keep it for him and not for myself. He had no money for the wedding ceremony, and, dejected, left home to find a job. When he gets enough money to marry he will be back. Now the profit from the sale of the crops from his garden must be saved; on his return, either I'll give it to him for his marriage or to him and his wife so that they will have some capital..." So he carried out his plan. He earned his living by hiring himself out as a labourer. He put aside the proceeds derived from the garden and believed that on his son's return he would have at least one hundred piastres...

Discouraged he shook his head saying,

"Now I have nothing left, Mr. Teacher! After two months and eighteen days of illness!"

After his illness the old man became very weak. He was no longer able to do hard work. In the village weaving had been abandoned because there was no cotton thread and the women had taken all the light jobs. A violent storm had destroyed all his crops. He had nothing left to sell. The price of rice jumped. He had to spend thirty cents for his food and that of the dog, but they were still hungry...

He continued, "My dog Sandy eats more than I, Mr. Teacher. I have to spend at least fifteen or twenty cents a day on him. Where can I find money to keep him? And if he has not enough to eat he will grow thin and I shan't be able to sell him at a good price. Now he is fat and people will be willing to pay a high price."

He stopped talking for a while, then, clicking his tongue, went on.

"I think I shall really have to sell the dog! A cent spent is taken from the savings for my son. It is detrimental to him. And above all, I cannot work now!"

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The next day, old Hac came to see me and said,

"My dog is gone, Mr. Teacher!"

"Sold already?"

"Already, they have taken him away."

He was pretending to be gay. But he was half crying, half laughing and tears welled into his eyes, and I wanted to put my arms round him and cry. Now I did not regret my five books as much as before. I pitied old Hac. I wanted him to talk, and asked,

"And the dog let himself be caught?"

His face began to shrink. He screwed up his eyes and the tears fell. He bent his head, his toothless mouth twitched like a child's. He sobbed noisily...

"But... Mr. Teacher!... The dog did not know what was happening to him. At my call he ran to me immediately and wagged his tail cheerfully. I give him some food. While he was eating, Muc, hidden just behind him, grabbed his hind legs and turned him upside down. In a few seconds Muc and Xien tied his legs. Only at that moment did he understand he was doomed to die!... Oh! Mr. Teacher! he was an intelligent animal he kept silent as if accusing me; he uttered some faint cries and stared at me seeming to say, 'Ah! miserable old man! I was good to you and now you treat me like this?' I am old, and yet still cheated a dog who trusted me!"

I comforted the old man.

"You think this, but the dog could not really understand! Who does not sell a dog or eat its meat after having fed it? To kill it is to give it another life, to give it another existence."

Old Hac said acrimoniously,

"You are right. A dog leads an unhappy life, so when we kill it to transform it into man, perhaps it would be happier than me for instance!..."

I looked at him sadly and said,

"We have all the same fate, my old man! Do you think that I am happier than you?"

"If men are unhappy, then what kind of fate is a really happy one?"

With these words he laughed and coughed noisily. I shook his thin shoulders and said gently,

"No, fate is happy, but we can be happy with this take a seat and I will go and cook some sweet potatoes and prepare green tea; and we will eat sweet potatoes, drink tea and smoke the water-pipe. We'll be happy."

"Yes! You are right! For us, we are only happy with such things as these."

With these words he laughed to set the conversation going. A forced laughter but more gentle. I said to him gaily,

"You agree? Then sit down, please, I will go and boil sweet potatoes and water."

"No, It's only a joke, let's eat and drink another time, please..."

"Why another time? You must never delay your happiness. Sit down, please! I can get everything ready quickly."

"I see, but will you do me a favour..."

He became serious...

"What kind of favour, old man?" I asked.

"Let me speak... the story is rather long."

"Yes, speak, please!..."

Then, in low tones, he spun out his story. But it could be summed up in two things. First: he was old. His son was away and still inexperienced. If there was no one to take care of his garden, it was quite impossible for him to keep it and live on it. I was a literate man, knew law and was in everyone's good graces. So old Hac wanted me to keep his son's

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garden, which was about 1,100 square metres; he drafted a contract-selling me the garden so that other people would not try to get hold of it. His son would take possession of the garden again on his return. In the meantime I held the contract and was responsible for keeping a close watch on the garden... Second: he was very old already and didn't know when he would die; and as his son was not at home, there was nobody to take care of his funeral if he should die suddenly. Tormented by these thoughts, he felt he could not close his eyes in peace when he died. He had twenty five piastres left plus five piastres from the sale of his dog. He handed them over to me, so that if he were to die I would hand this money to his neighbours and ask them to attend to his funeral. This was a sign that he had something left and he would ask for the goodwill and indulgence of the villagers to cover the rest of the expenses incurred by his funeral.

I burst out laughing and said,

"Why do you worry about such nonsense? You are still very healthy, you won't die as easily as all that! Keep this money for your daily use. We'll see when you die! Why go hungry when you have money?!"

"No, Mr .Teacher! If I spend it now, I'll have nothing left for my funeral. You are right, but I have spent all that I could get from selling different things in my son's garden. He has no wife yet. Suppose he will have nothing to get married and will be obliged to sell his garden, what shall we do? I im-

plore you, Mr. teacher! Do allow me to hand over this sum to you if you take pity on the old man that I am."

At his repeated insistences, I was forced to accept. When he was about to go home I asked him again, "If you hand over to me all that, what will you buy food with?"

He said, grinning,

"Don't mind... I have taken all necessary steps and everything will be all right."

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From that day on old Hac ate sweet potatoes. Then he ate whatever he could find banana roots, boiled sycamore figs, edible leaves and sometimes wild grapes or snails. When I told my wife about the poor old man she cut me short, saying,

"Let him die! Why does he want to endure this miserable life when he has money! It is he who makes himself unhappy! We are no better off than he to help him. Our own children are hungry..."

Alas! If we do not try to understand those who live around us we always think they are stupid, miserly, bad, vulgar... all motives for us to treat them without pity; we never take compassion on them; we never love them... My wife was not bad but she was very unhappy. A person whose foot aches never forgets it to think of other things. When one is very unhappy one never thinks of other people's misery. People's kindness is completely masked by anxiety, sadness and selfishness. I understood this,

## OLD HAC

and was only sad but not angry with my wife. I did not let her know that I had helped old Hac. But perhaps he knew that my wife was not willing to help him. Proudly refused all that I gave him; and his friendliness faded.

I felt he misunderstood me and I was very sad. Poor people who respect themselves too much are usually like that. They were always thinking of their sad fate and that is why they were thin-skinned and easily hurt. I was very hard to please them... One day, I complained to Binh Tu, another neighbour of mine, of this state of affairs. He was a thief and did not like old Hac because of his honesty. He curled his lips saying,

"Old Hac is pretending to be honest! In fact he is a hypocrite; he is very cunning. He recently asked me for a small quantity of dog bane."

I opened my eyes wide in surprise. He whispered, "Old Hac says that there is a dog that often comes into his garden... And he is determined to poison it. If he is successful, he and I will have a drinking bout with dog meat..."

Alas for old Hac! Driven to despair, he would be bold enough to do a dishonest thing!... He had been a good man!... A man who had wept because he had cheated a dog!... A man who would starve to save money for his funeral, because he did not want to disturb his neighbours... Did this venerable old man follow Binh Tu's path, to have something to eat? Such is life! Life becomes more and more gloomy.

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## OLD HAC

No! Life is not really sad, or it is sad, in another way. On my return from Binh Tu's I heard a confused noise in old Hac's house. I ran to it and saw some neighbours already there. I hurried inside. Old Hac was twisting on his bed, his hair dishevelled, his clothes in disorder, his eyes rolling. He howled, foamed at the mouth, and from time to time a convulsion shook his thin frame. Two strong men had to hold him... After two hours of contortion he died a violent death. No one knew what illness made him die so painfully and suddenly. Only Binh Tu and I knew. But what was the use of speaking of it?

Oh! old Hac! Shut your eyes for ever in rest! Don't worry about your garden. I shall do my best to keep it for you. On your son's return I shall hand it over to him and tell him, "It is the garden your father has done his utmost to keep for you; he preferred to die rather than sell an inch of it..."





## AN UNWORTHY LIFE



U looked at Ho thrice and each time she wanted to speak to him but dared not interrupt as he was deep in a book.

His bushy eyebrows met in the middle and curved up slightly at the temples. His bright eyes were somewhat protruding. His broad forehead wrinkled a bit. His shiny cheek-bones stood high on the brink of his sunken cheeks. His long, straight nose was shiny too. His severe fleshless face, bending over the book, looked grim, almost cruel. He frightened his wife...

Tu loved her husband with a love rather like that of a dog for its master. She was very gentle and unselfish. Moreover, Ho was her benefactor. He had sympathized with her misfortune and had come to her rescue when she had been in great despair. Tu's lover had deserted her, abandoning her with a newborn baby. She had loved her ignoble lover with the first flame of love and had believed in him as in a deity. She had unstintingly given her body and soul to him. And when she knew she was to have a child, she had no regret she felt very happy. But for all that, her lover had left her in a cowardly and despicable manner, at the very moment when Tu had had most need of him to keep her, and safeguard her honour when the child was born. Tu was shocked at the news and could not believe it. But after the shock was gone she wept bitterly as if she could never stop. She wept and with the baby in her arms had resigned herself to hunger because there was no one to help her, and there was her blind and weak old mother whose living depended on her. What could her old mother do? Only shed tears with her daughter. They were in great despair when Ho opened his arms to Tu. He took her, her mother and her baby under his protection. He agreed to be the baby's father. To comfort her and to save her honour he accepted her as his legal wife. When her mother died he paid for her funeral. Tu felt this was too much kindness and affection! Even though she loved her husband very much, endured all difficulties, and worked like a slave for him, she felt she could never repay his kindness.

## AN UNWORTHY LIFE

Because of her devotion, for many years Ho found his wife very good, very obedient and very faithful. And he should have been very happy.

But he was only happy for a certain time. After his act of generosity, seeing that it was repaid by an agreeable love, he thought only of his family, of how to feed it. He was a poor man, a poor writer.

Previously, with his careful writing he could earn just enough for his own miserable living. But at the time he was alone. Hunger and cold had held no fears for a young man devoted to an ideal. His heart danced with optimism. His mind was full of lofty ideals, despising petty material cares. He thought only of cultivating his talent to make it shine brighter. He read, pondered, carried out research diligently, studied and followed a line of thought untiringly. In those days art was everything to him, for he took no interest in anything else. He mused on his work that would throw into the shade all other works published at the same period...

But after his marriage, he had a family to take care of. He now understood the value of money, and knew a husband's sorrow at seeing his wife and child in rags. He could not help thinking of these small cares, and they absorbed the greater part of his time. He had to have novels published which he had dashed off in a hurry, write articles which, once read, were soon forgotten. Each time he re-read one of his books or articles, he blushed with shame, frowned and ground his teeth in disgust. He would crush the pages in anger, rebuke himself for turning out such rubbish,

and call himself a rascal. Because that is what he was — a rascally and dishonest man! Carelessness in any craft was dishonesty. But carelessness in literature was really vile. Alas! What had he written? His works were shallow, expressing light and superficial emotions, and setting forth ordinary and weak ideas in a monotonous and loose style. He contributed nothing new to literature. All this meant that he was useless and in the way. Literature did not need writers who were merely slick and who imitated other people's styles. Literature admitted only those who examined questions thoroughly, carried out diligent research, went deeply into new matters and created new ideas... So ran his thoughts, and they made him very sad and despondent. How sad when one is tired of oneself! How tragic when one is thirsting to do something to raise higher the moral standard of one's life and yet cannot do so because one can think of nothing but food and clothes! Could he let his wife and child live in poverty? Could he abandon them, neglect them, or sacrifice them as was often spoken of? Sometimes these ideas flashed upon him and he thought of the eloquent words of a certain philosopher: "One must be cruel and pitiless in order to live mightily." But he also thought: Tu deserves to be loved, to be pitied. He could sacrifice his love, this kind of self-love, but he could not give up his pity. Perhaps he was spineless, cowardly, vulgar, but he was still a man. He was a man and not a monster commanded by self-esteem. A strong man is not one who satisfied his egoism by making others suffer but

## AN UNWORTHY LIFE

one who knows how to help others. And if a man could not feed his wife and child, was he worth his salt ?...

He said to himself, "I will spend some years earning money. If only Tu had a little capital to start a small business..."

But she had never had even tiny capital! Now, living from day to day was not so easy! Tu gave birth to another baby. The two children often cried during the day and at night. As they were delicate and ailing, they were constantly in need of medicine. She was worn out with looking after them, and she had no time to do anything else. Ho was tired of the never-ending chase after money. He was also tired of hearing his children's cries; because there was never a moment's quietness in the house to enable him to write or read. He felt unhappy and irritable, then became surly and lost his temper with his wife and children, with anyone and even with himself. And several times, when he could no longer endure the tense atmosphere in the house, he would suddenly get up, almost in tears, and angrily go to town, utterly discontented, nearly choking with rage. He would wander about until a fresh breeze cooled his forehead and his anger subsided, then he would go into a tea-room to drink beer or lemonade, hoping to find a friend with whom to talk literature, to exchange ideas about new books and new names in the newspapers, to outline a programme which he knew beforehand he could not carry out. He would sit silently, hopelessly thinking about the work he had for so long intended

to write. He would grow pensive, like a man in exile, sitting sadly on a gloomy evening looking at a heavy cloud of smoke and thinking of his native country. He would also remember the past... the beautiful dreams in times gone by... the kind man who was no longer kind... He would shake his head saying to himself, "Alas, it's all over! I'm stagnating... getting dull..." And he would think of his renown that was vanishing while new and brighter men of letters were coming to the fore... Then he would go home, his thoughts scattered. His anger would disappear. He was no longer seething with inward rage, but was exhausted... f

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Of late, when he came home, he was not only sad but drunk, too drunk. On his way back he often slept in some inn before reaching his dwelling; when he got home, unable to struggle out of his clothes, he would fall down on the bed like a dead man. On those occasions, Tu had to wait until her children were asleep, then get up noiselessly to take off her husband's shoes and trousers, slip a pillow under his head and do all she could to move his heavy, sprawling form into a more comfortable position... But sometimes he did not fall asleep straight away. He would stagger into the house, his eyes threatening, his lips tight. He would walk straight up to Tu, bend down, stare at her, thrust his finger in her face and threaten her as he would a naughty child:

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"Tomorrow... do you hear?... Not a day later!... I will throw you and your children out... Even little Thao, who is a good child... and the other one deserves to be killed! They only know how to eat and cry! And you also, you deserve to be killed! You only know how to eat and sit with your baby in your arms like spider brooding over its eggs; you don't like working to earn money. You make me utterly miserable!"

Then his lips would tighten again and he would stare dully into her face. She would not dare answer, but silently look down like a guilty child being reprimanded. He would remain in this exasperated state for a while, then take off his clothes, throw them in disorder over the bed, take off his shoes and throw them in a corner of the room. Sometimes, in a fury, he would scatter the things on the table and scold Tu for not having tidied them. After having had his say, he slept. Only then did Tu dare get up, hang up his clothes and pick up and straighten the things he had thrown about.

The first time this happened, Tu was stupefied. She could not understand what had happened. She guessed that her husband was jealous after hearing rumours or gossip. She wept all night long and thought up answers for the next morning. But she dared not speak to him when he awoke. Ashamed, he told her that he had drunk too much, asked her what wrong he had done the previous evening as he could not remember anything and begged her pardon, and kissed his children like a good father. He promised

to give up drinking from that day on but he drank again all the same and made fearful rows as before.

And so it went on. Tu got used to it and was not angry any more. But she dimly understood that she was perhaps causing her husband unhappiness. When she realised this, she was very sad. How sad to know that one is the cause of the unhappiness of one's beloved? But what could she do? Several times she wanted to go away with her children. Several times she wanted to stop looking after them so as to be able to work. She wanted to kill herself, but was too weak! She was a wife. She was a mother. She had a woman's ordinary emotion: she loved her husband very much and knew that he loved her too and wanted her to stay with him. When she was ill, Ho would be very anxious and would stay awake whole nights to attend to her. He would do the same for his children. When he was away from them for a few days he would think of them and on his return, when he saw them jump with joy and clutch at his coat, he would be moved to tears. He would kiss them warmly... He might not be happy without his wife and children.

When Tu thought of him, at times it came to her mind to try and find means to live apart from him; but at the thought she would weep... She did her best to be more submissive and lovable. She spent little on food and clothes, she tried to cut down expenses, and keep the house in good order. She tried to quieten her children's cries and laughter. She was even afraid of speaking to her husband. That was why three times she wanted to say something to him but

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dared not because he was too immersed in his reading. Then she would just look at the baby in her arms and say nothing.



Suddenly Ho looked up. After a very good passage he was wont to stop reading to think it over and to let his mind dwell on it in satisfaction. But on this particular day, scarcely had his eyes left the page than he looked at her, searching her gentle eyes. He smiled, and she smiled back. He said,

"Dear... After thinking things over a great deal, I know I should not be unhappy and yet I am; it is I who makes my life unhappy; I am unhappy because I am too fond of literature. I am really unhappy, yet if a very rich man asked me to exchange my life for his, I am not sure that I would agree. I think when one reads a passage such as this and understands the full beauty of its meaning, one feels happier than when eating good food; yes, very happy! How is it possible that such a man of letters exists? He uses only three sentences to describe a homesick man..., just three sentences! Do you understand?... Only three simple sentences — and they are very beautiful..."

He re-read the passage and translated it for Tu. He explained it to her, and although she could not understand it all she believed everything she was told. She went on smiling while he spoke. When he stopped speaking, she pretended to remember something and said,

"Today is the 2nd or 3rd day of the month, isn't it, dear?"

"Ah yes! Today is the 3rd day... If you had not asked me I would have forgotten... I must go to town."

She reminded him gently,

"The rent collector came this morning..."

Ho said gloomily,

"The rent... The laundry-bill... The expenses for medicines, for pickling-brine... Ask for more time! We spent too much last month, and were broke by the tenth day. Fortunately we can still buy on credit."

He was thinking of the useless expenses during the first days of the months. Each time he got annoyed he was in despair, and spent all his money on alcohol. Tu did not complain of her husband's behaviour, but she and the children had little to eat for the whole month, and they often went hungry. They had to go without breakfast. Sometimes for dinner they ate soup instead of rice. Ho noticed it, and as he loved them very much, he was full of remorse at having spent his money so carelessly. Because of that, from the tenth until the last day of the month, he did not go out, so as to avoid incurring expenses...

As he was getting dressed ready to go out, he said to himself,

"Today I am determined not to idle about... After having got the money due to me from the publishers I'll come back at once..."

But Tu urged him,

"Dine out today, please. There is just enough rice for the children. I am not buying any more today ;

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tomorrow I'll pay our debts and buy some more rice... But today there will be nothing to eat on your return..."

Ho frowned because he was afraid of going into a restaurant. He might meet some friends there... and then... alas! He would not give a thought to his family!... He would drink a lot, talk about all sorts of things, run round all night and go home at day-break. After thinking a little, he said,

"I'll buy something for us to eat."

"No, don't trouble! The children will have eaten and be asleep before you get back."

"Wait for me and we'll eat together. I'll come back early. The children have had hardly anything to eat for days. Today I shall have some money and want to give them a square meal."

Tu smiled,

"What an idea!"

Ho smiled to and came up to her, and as he bent down to fondle the child in her arms, their faces were close together. His lips lightly touched Tu's cheek and she pretended to dust his sleeves. Husband and wife looked at each other tenderly. He stroked her cheek and went out...

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From the publishers', Ho headed for a butcher's. He was determined to buy some meat and bread for his wife and children. It gave him pleasure to think of his children, who would eat the meat and bread

greedily, stuffing it into their mouths, their lips shiny with grease. What a vulgar but moving picture! He would laugh with satisfaction. And Tu would sit beside him looking at the children, moved to tears but full of happiness... Arrived at the butcher's, he stopped and carefully looked round before stepping inside. A friend of his might pass by and see him slipping the packet of meat into his pocket!... No! Nothing happened... But in the shop a beautiful girl was bargaining... He had to wait. He put his hands behind his back and pretended to be waiting for a friend who had just gone into a house nearby. Suddenly he started and looked round as someone tapped him on the shoulder. It was his friends Trung and Mao. The former only smiled, but the latter laughed noisily. They shook hands with Ho,

"By dint of admiring Muse, you have become dumb."

Ho uttered,

"Ah! You!..."

"Are you following any one?" asked Trung.

"That's nothing!" added Mao. "A poet is one who remains young for ever and always keeps a pure heart."

"Happily I'm not a poet," replied Ho.

"That means you are not following any one?"

"Of course not."

"Then follow us!"

Ho looked at Trung and Mao for a while and asked,

"What for?"

"Nothing in particular."

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"I am afraid I cannot come. I must go home, otherwise I shall miss the tram."

Trung stared at Ho, stupefied and scornful.

"Why so foolish? How can you go home on such a lovely afternoon and when the town is so lively!"

Ho became serious,

"Don't joke... I must go home because I have no more business in town."

"It's easy to understand if you speak like that... Then goodbye!... But have you heard the news?"

Ho was about to go, but turned and looked at Trung...

"Quyen's novel 'On The Way Back' will be translated into English! He is selling his copyright for three thousand piastres."

Ho opened his eyes wide in surprise. Only after a short time could he ask,

"Is that true?"

"Yes. It was Quyen himself who let us read the negotiating letter."

Ho was in doubt,

"It's impossible!... I know... But come here, I won't go home straight away, after all. Let's have some beer..."

Ho forgot his wife and children. He was enthusiastic to know more about Quyen's translated book. The three men went into a refreshment-room opposite the Lake of the Restored Sword. After only half an hour Ho's face and ears were red, and he banged the table with an empty beer bottle, saying,

"'On the Way Back' has only a local value, don't you know? It is being translated because people want to know foreign customs. It only describes the outside of the society. It's too simple! A work of real value must transcend all frontiers and limits, must be a work for mankind in general. It must contain something great and mighty, speaking out against misfortune yet containing enthusiasm. It must sing of love, brotherhood, justice... It must bring people closer to one another. Only such a work can be regarded as good, do you understand? I have not despaired yet! And you'll see... I'll write only one book, but it will win the Nobel prize and be translated into all languages of the world!"

Trung shook his head, always with his silent smile. Mao laughed noisily. Ho did not laugh, his face was alight with enthusiasm. He spoke passionately. And when the street lamps were switched on, Trung and Mao wanted to go home, but Ho said to them,

"Slowly, please! Don't hurry! Let's have a drink... I have money..."

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The next morning, Ho awoke in his own bed. He felt sick all over, his head was heavy, he had a bitter taste in his mouth. He was thirsty. He stretched out his arm and felt for the tea-pot which Tu had thoughtfully placed beside the bed; another of her kindnesses. Ho understood, and was very sad because he began to remember... he had been drunk last night, had gone home after wandering about the

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streets, and had quarrelled with Tu ; it seemed that he had beaten her, put her out, shut the door and gone to bed... Suddenly afraid, he got up, his eyes staring as he searched for Tu. But no ! She was still there... Being drunk he had probably not been able to lock the door properly, and after he had fallen into a drunken sleep, she had slipped into the house again with the baby. Now she was asleep in the hammock with the child beside her. She made a practice of getting up early. This morning, however, she was very tired, and slept late. Her head turned to one side, an arm hanging loosely out of the hammock, her whole posture revealed her weariness and mental pain. Ho was sad. Alas ! It wrung his heart to see her lying there so dejected. Because she had been unhappy throughout her whole life, sorrow was transparent even in her sleep. He remembered he had sometimes looked at her carefully and found her lacking charm. Suddenly he wanted to see how she looked. With bare feet he went to her noiselessly, squatted on his haunches beside the hammock and breathed very quietly. He looked at her face for a while. She was pale, her lips colourless ; her eyelids purplish blue and she had livid rings round her eyes ; her hollow cheeks made her face more angular. He sighed shaking his head anxiously. He took her hand gently. A bony hand ! The blue veins showed through the pale skin. Her wrist was frail. All these showed a weak and thin body which needed his protection..., an unhappy fate, a creature in pain and distress who needed his comfort... But what had he done to make

her life less unhappy? What had he done so that she would not be unhappy? Tears streamed down his eyes. Alas! He wept. He sobbed. He clutched her frail hand as he wept. She woke up and understood at once, without asking him anything. She was moved and tears came to her eyes. She gently drew away her hand, put her arms round his neck, sweetly drew him to her and let his head rest on her bosom. He sobbed noisily and tried to speak through his tears,

"I... I... am only... a... scoundrel!"

"No!... You're only an unhappy man!... It's because of me that you're unhappy."

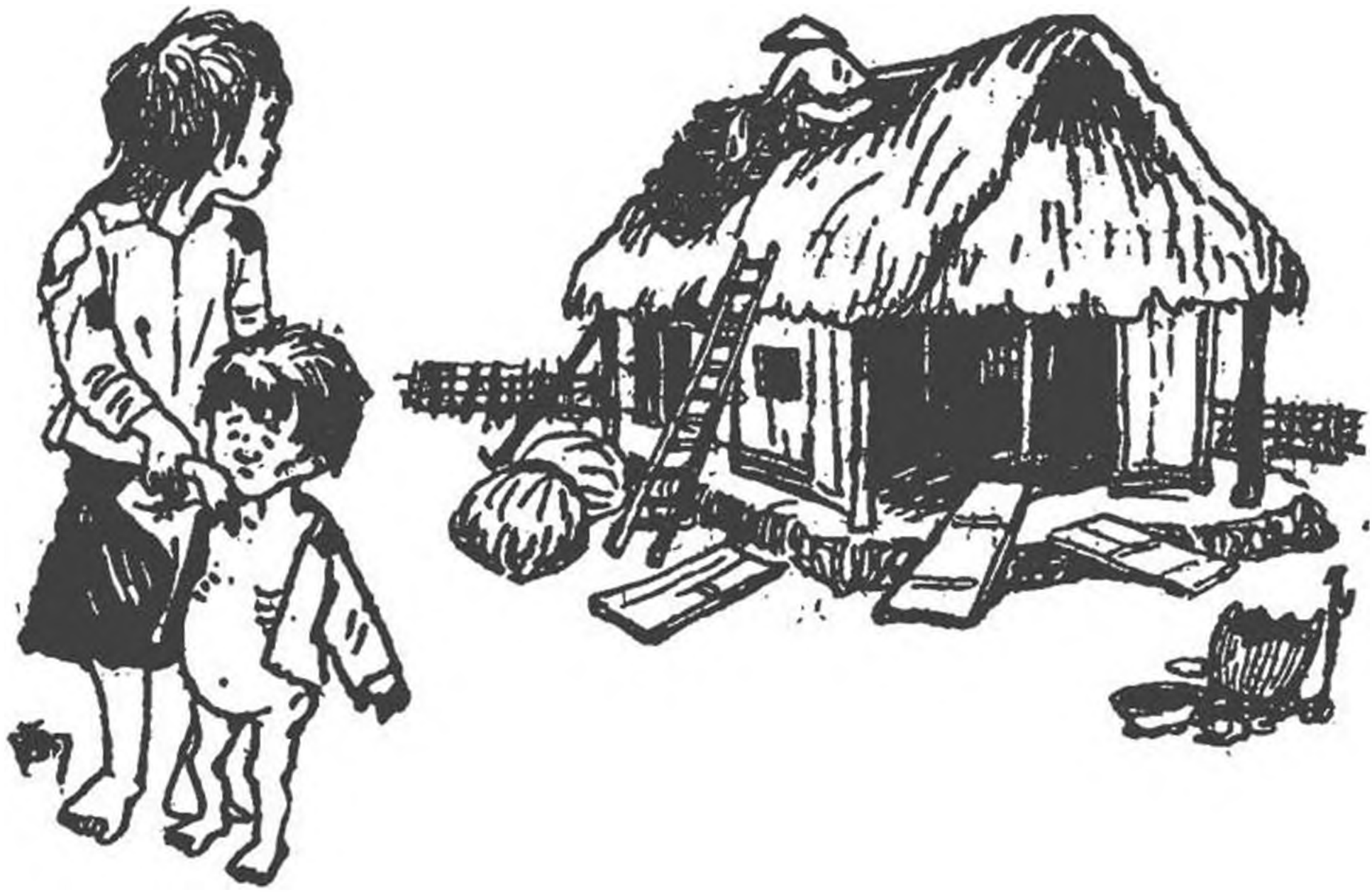
Her arms tightened about him. Her face was careworn. She was about to put her head on his shoulder, but just then the baby began to cry. She relaxed her hold to comfort it. With a trembling voice she fondled it,

"Mum's here, little one! It's your mum! My child has started up from his sleep... I love..."

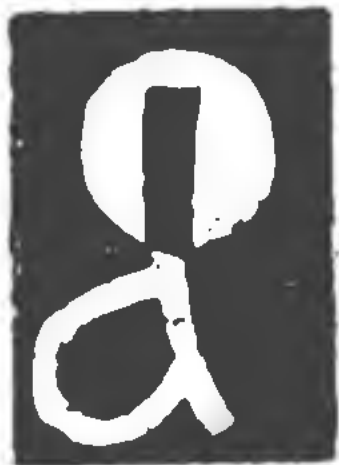
Ho moved away a little as she began to swing the hammock... As the hammock swayed, she sang,

"Who makes smoke go up to the sky,  
Rain to the earth, and men divided.  
Who makes North separate from South,  
And tears wet the whole body..."





## BUYING A HOUSE



EAR Kim,

That evening, after seeing you off on the junk for Nam Dinh, I went home very angry. I was angry with myself. I blamed myself for having asked you home in a minute of groundless enthusiasm.

Don't get angry, dear Kim. I understand clearly. We know each other not simply because of a well-cut suit, a pair of shoes of the latest fashion, a good motor-car — we know each other because of other things. We love each other for other reasons. We also esteem each other for reasons other than the possession of a big or a little house. The ancients belittle

men of letters who are ashamed of eating a poor meal or wearing torn clothes. A wise man must be content with drinking water and resting his head on his arms instead of on a pillow, without grumbling. I understand all that. But I always blame myself for letting my friends see my poverty. Is this petty-minded of me? Yes, it is! But you must understand me. At your house, I sit comfortably on up-to-date, well-sprung, high-backed chairs. At De's we sit on Chinese chairs made of valuable wood engraved with mother-of-pearl. At Phung's, there are tables and chairs made of ebony inlaid with mother-of-pearl. At Minh's, we sleep on European beds. At the worst, at the village mayor's we can still sit on a flowery mat laid on the paved veranda and contemplate the moon. But you had to bend down to get into my dark hut. Its floor of beaten earth is often damp. A nasty musty smell made you turn up your nose. My eldest child was ill with stomach-ache, and had to lie in a hammock slung across the room, blocking the way. He was wearing a jacket and trousers made of a stuff that even your maid would not want. There was a damp patch on the floor where the child had been sick. I blushed for shame. And when you went up to him and bent down to ask him how he felt, I was about to cry. No, dear Kim... You were very good. Without hesitating, you took my child's hand and said kindly: "You are a good boy." You spoke to him gently. Your fellow-feelings for a poor friend helped you behave with ease. But our profession has trained us to have keen eyes. Our sharp eyes do not miss the flicker of

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an eyelid, a slightest hesitation of a finger or an imperceptible change of expression on an impassive face. Don't deny it, dear Kim. We must speak frankly. I know that after holding my child's hand you wished a basin of clean water and soap to wash your hands. It was as if you had spoken your thoughts aloud. It was only natural. But you refrained from telling what you thought. You looked round the room saying:

"This house is still in good repair... It's more than enough for four or five people to live in!"

How could I answer you? I only smiled. I was busy trying to arrange for more space. In the meantime, my wife and baby had to sleep at the neighbour's. I lifted the mosquito-net hung over my bed. Four of us sat down but two others had to stand because there was no room.

Fortunately it did not rain. We could lay the mat in the courtyard to take our meal. You had to take off your shoes and European trousers in order to sit on the ground. "Never mind! With a good appetite, that's all right!..." you said. Each of you tried to act naturally and look at ease. This effort was due to your kindness towards a friend. You didn't want me to feel awkward about my house. I also wanted to think the same. But impossible. I couldn't sleep at all that night, and felt very unhappy...

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I would have been unhappy for a long time because I did not know when I could build a larger and

cleaner house! I worked very hard. I was killing myself slowly trying to earn some money. But man's strength has its limits. And the prices of bamboo and wood kept on soaring. They got dearer every month. All my efforts towards building a house were far from being realised. I estimated the cost as two hundred piastres. By the time I had managed to get one hundred piastres, two hundred piastres were no longer enough; at least three hundred would have been needed. I dared not borrow money with high interest. I had done so several times already... Now, every month the interest I have to pay back takes more than half the money I earn. Debts increase very quickly when the interest is added. It is fatal to borrow money.

But an unforeseen calamity happened. It was a tempest, as late as the ninth month. It happened suddenly. My wife and I had to go away with our children through rain and wind. We went to look for shelter. I carried my eldest child, who was convalescing, on my back. I held a knife in my hand. My wife followed holding the baby in her arms. Everyone staggered under the storm. The rain was whipping our faces. I had to clear a passage by cutting down bamboo branches straggling across the roadway. We were scratched by thorns on all sides and had to shut our eyes while advancing. We were shivering and numb with cold. The thorns pricked our feet, scratched our faces and shoulders, and we didn't even feel it. We went on facing the danger bravely. My wife

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stumbled several times. When at last we got to my father-in-law's house, we were exhausted. My daughter was as pale as a ghost. My wife could not speak, nor could I. Happily there was a fire and we were able to warm ourselves while my parents-in-law wrapped the children up warmly. We recovered after having warmed ourselves for a long while. We had to stay at my father-in-law's for a day and a night.

The next morning, the wind stopped blowing. Leaving my children in the care of my parents-in-law, my wife and I went home. My house had collapsed like an old man bent down on his knees ; it was impossible to erect it again. How weak is a house made of bamboo ! This one was already old and had had three owners. It had the right to fall down under a strong wind. How could it stand up to a storm ? Well, it had been my faithful friend for a long time. I could not ask for more. I know that. But what could I do ? There are very old parents who do not want to die because they love their children too much and want to spare them the expense of a funeral. Why did my house not think like this ? It made me unhappy because it fell down at that particular moment. My wife wept and so did I. I loved my house as one loves a wife absent for a long time, as the writers say. In truth, I felt utterly sorry for myself. Suddenly I had no house. That was not all. My garden was completely destroyed. All the money and sweat gone into tending betel-plants and sugar-cane was now over and done with !

But it's an ill-wind that blows no one any good. After some days of disappointment, I consoled myself with the fact that I had to live and find a house. Consequently I could not be angry with heaven. Heaven is not afraid of those who get angry. With a forced smile, I said to my wife: "Well! It is right that our house should fall down. If not, when would we build another? We have hesitated for a long time. Now it's time to stop weighing the pros and cons..."

Of course it had to be so. I had to build a house and not think otherwise. We thought of buying bamboo and hiring workers. We had no money, so had to raise a loan. We could not do otherwise and did not regret it. I strove to work harder than before. I would probably kill myself quicker, but one has to die sooner or later. Man is mortal. And one dies only once. Why live miserly?

I came to a hasty decision. After a storm there must surely be many people thinking like I. Thanks to that, I was able to buy a house cheap, dear Kim. A wooden house, for only three hundred piastres. The real price was five hundred. I was in luck, because a bamboo house costs two hundred piastres at least.

The seller of the house was a man who had many debts. He was a widower and had two little children to look after. He had just lost two hundred piastres at the four coins game. His creditors were pressing him ceaselessly. He had set his hopes on some hundred square metres of sugar-cane to pay his debts, but they were destroyed by the storm. He came to find me and said,

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"You intend to build a house. Now a bamboo house costs two hundred piastres at least. Pay me better and I'll sell you my house."

"How much?"

"Three hundred."

It was a very good price. He seemed sincere but I felt pity for him and asked,

"Why do you want to sell it?"

"Because I have gambled away my fortune. Now I want to recoup myself, at any cost, and I need a big sum! So I want to sell my house for a few hundred piastres."

Ah! I am not a man who acts hastily. To raise a loan by selling a house is sometimes necessary, but to sell a house to recoup oneself at gambling is to imperil one's life. To risk all is to die. Then the gambler's life is either in my hands or in others. In spite of that, I have not the courage to take a knife and kill him. Is that sincerity or falsehood? I tried to dissuade him from doing so.

"I think you are selling your house because you don't want it any more, or you need money to do business, but are not selling it to gamble. At gambling, one cannot foretell the future. I'm afraid you'll lose all your money."

"I don't think so. Lately I have lost because I had not enough money to gamble longer. I never lose if I have plenty of money. It would be a good thing if

you could buy my house : I know that you have money to pay me cash. If you don't want it I'll sell it to someone else."

I thought : Let him die if he wants to. Have I the right to hinder him ? If he doesn't sell his house to me he will sell it to someone else. I would be stupid if I let a good opportunity slip by. And so I decided to buy it.

I went all over the place to raise a loan. I accepted loans at five per cent interest, even at six or eight per cent. By next morning I had managed to collect three hundred piastres. Once the papers of both sides were in order, I remitted the money to the seller. My wife tried to hire workers to dismantle the house the next morning..., but there were none available.

House builders are always busy after a storm. After three or four days the house I had bought was not yet dismantled. One evening a relative of mine came to my father-in-law's and said to me,

"Do your best to dismantle the house. He has gambled away your three hundred piastres. Scarcely was he out of your house, than the gamblers got to know that he had a big sum. They followed him closely. On that very night he lost one hundred piastres. He still has many debts. He has sold his garden. If you don't dismantle the house at once, you will have trouble because he will go away after having lost all his money."

If I did not dismantle the house quickly, another person would do it in spite of the contract of sale.

## BUYING A HOUSE

But my purse was already very light. And then could I bring an action against the seller? No. So I must do my utmost to hire workers to dismantle the house next morning.

The next morning we went to the seller's and saw him lying on a torn and dirty mat on a bamboo bed. His son was sitting on the ground grasping the foot of the bed and groaning. Since early morning he had had a belly-ache. His elder daughter was massaging her brother's back and grumbling. I bowed to him. He just muttered a few words in answer. We were embarrassed and looked at one another like enemies. Why was that? I dared not look at his two children for long. I felt ashamed...

I looked down saying,

"Allow me to remove your furniture so that the workers can begin dismantling the house..."

He smiled bitterly,

"I have no furniture to remove except this bed. Throw it out and dismantle the house."

He stood up and said to his children,

"Get up. Go to your uncle Vi's and ask him for shelter."

The sister shouted, lost her temper with her young brother, picked him up, and carried him on her back to go to their uncle's. She was still muttering and he was still groaning. The workers climbed on the roof, removed the thatch and throw it on the ground. I sat in the yard watching them...

After a moment, having left her brother in someone's care, the girl came near to me and watched the house. I looked at her closely. She was very thin. Her wrists and ankles were very small. Her cheeks were hollow. Her clothes were in rags. She stuck her teeth out pitifully. Suddenly I became sorrowful and sighed. I asked her,

"Have you eaten today yet?"

Instead of answering she shook her head in a tired way. It seemed that she was thinking of something. She blinked and frowned. Perhaps it was because of the sun. But it seemed to me that she hated me very much. I repeated to myself: if I hadn't bought the house, another person would have done...

Poles and beams were taken down. The joiner dismantled the wooden sections. The hammering made a deafening noise. I saw the little girl's face redden. She did not stick her teeth out any more. She pursed her lips and puffed out her cheeks. She did not speak but ran noisily to the neighbours. What did she want to do? I was tormented by a vague anxiety. Suddenly I heard a child's voice screaming,

"Oh, mother!...

My heart was shaken and beat madly. I stumbled and tottered. Now I could not conceal my thoughts any more. How cruel I am! I am very cruel! I have to own myself guilty...

I am very cruel, dear Kim. Remorse will shed a dark shadow in my new house which is bigger and

## BUYING A HOUSE

cleaner than the old one. On cold evenings, the lizard hidden on a beam will make its funny clicking noise and remind me : I am very cruel ! I am very cruel ! But enough of that, dear Kim ! What is the use of thinking of that ? For us now, happiness is only a very narrow blanket. When one person turns over and pulls the blanket, the other has not enough to cover himself with. I do not want to be bad. But what can I do ? Why is life so hard ? If one may think of oneself without injuring anyone...

9.





## IN THE MOONLIGHT



**D**IEN had four rattan chairs, the only pieces of furniture of any value in his house. If they were there, it was not that he had bought them — he hated buying. The only purchase he had made since his marriage was a bed made of shaddock wood bought from one of his aunts who needed money to take care of her sick husband. For Dien had need of a bed. His wife had just given birth to a boy. The couple now had two children, making a family of four. Four persons huddling together in one bed! In winter, it is all the warmer. But in summer, it is a defiance to hygiene.

## IN THE MOONLIGHT

she went to bed early. The daughter, tired from weeping, lay down on the bed and slept. Dien was alone in the yard. He tried to be calm. No doubt his wife loved him very much, but she only knew that a man was in need of rice and clothes, and medicines when he was ill. She stinted herself for him to eat his fill. She wore torn clothes so that he could dress properly. She even sold her camisoles and gowns to buy medicines for him. And she thought he was happy. Though he was not used to warm feeling and soft words, this frowning face, vulgar language, and chiefly this vulgar manner of loving — a rude one, so to speak — made him suffer. He found that he was lacking in sentimental life. Living in this house, among these shabby cares, his heart would dry up. And with it the priceless source of the poem which he hoped to create one day...

High above, the moon frolicked in the sky, like a girl in her first love. The soft wind made the leaves dance. The banana-leaves with silver gleams were swinging... Dien was thinking of those idle women, who take perfumed baths, wear bodices of blue silk and lie down on rocking chairs swinging their legs indolently...

Why did he suddenly think of such images? He could not explain himself. Did he perhaps wish to have near him perfumed hair, a smooth skin, a caressing hand? There were beautiful women who knew all the secrets of love for they took refined meals, dressed with care, preserved their beauty, and sat idle.

That's right, his wife was very vulgar. She was not worthy of either his love or his pity. He would best go away to keep his heart young as long as possible. He

If Dien happened to care for hygiene it is because he is a learned man. For three years he was a teacher at a private school. Last year, the school which paid him twenty piastres per month to teach the 4th form, had to shut down, leaving its rooms for another use, more urgent at that time. The headmaster still owed Dien half a month's wages; he could not collect the school fees of the last month. How best to settle this affair as between friends? If he succeeded in finding money, the headmaster would pay him immediately, and things would turn out all right. But where to find it? It would be unfair to let Dien's wages slide. Then... then... — how to say? — The headmaster forced a laugh:

"Well! Mr. Dien! If it is of no trouble to you, take these rattan chairs home. The soup dealer has offered only seventy cents for each. The other day, just changing the cane-bottom of two chairs cost me one piastre. It would be a pity to sell them at this price. Besides you have no chair yet at home..."

Dien refrained from pulling a long face. Actually, he was deeply worried and did not feel like bothering his head about this furniture. Call them rattan chairs! Dislocated backs, bandy legs... The painting scaled like a leprous skin. A pitiful sight! Dien thought ruefully of the seventy cents' railway fare back to his village and now he would have to pay the transport of these four old things. But it would not be decent to refuse. He would appear sulky and risk hurting the headmaster. This was impossible. They were friends in need and together had endured so many misfortunes

## IN THE MOONLIGHT

caused by others. Dien was seeking a pretext to refuse when the headmaster suggested :

"It would be better for you to travel by boat. It will cost you fifty cents only. Fifty cents and five cents for the porter, that will make fifty five cents. Suppose you have to pay for the transport of the chairs, it will cost in all no more than a train ticket. And you will be at ease, — sit on one chair and stretch your legs on another. You will be as comfortable as at home. Why be boxed up in a train ?"

This was a good idea after all. Neither have to elbow one's way to buy a ticket, nor to sit down on one another's thighs. Not to smell the sweat of the crowded passengers or the mustiness of the pigs tied in the fourth class carriages. But... but...

The headmaster, guessing what embarrassed Dien, put in :

"Don't worry about the transport of the chairs, I'll tell the boy to fasten them in pairs, hang them from both ends of a shoulder pole and carry them to the wharf. On your arrival, you will pay a child five or ten cents to carry them home."

Dien did a mental calculation. One piastre at the most for boat fare, including this unexpected luggage, that is to say twenty cents more than by train. Twenty cents for four chairs ! It was alright even for dilapidated chairs... He accepted the proposition... And that is why the headmaster's chairs, for which the soup dealer had offered only seventy cents each, left for Dien's native village.

\* \* \*

## NAM CAO

Thus he became owner of this furniture of which he ignored the true price. However he guessed that new chairs would be dearer. Perhaps three or four piastres each! Nearly twenty piastres for the whole lot! Nobody in this hamlet had such high-priced things. His wife was exceedingly fond of them. It broke her heart to see unmannerly visitors, after praising their beauty and smartness, plop down, straining the cane bottoms with their heavy weight, then curl up their legs to put their dirty feet on the bottoms, and lean heavily against the backs which bent under their weight. Poor chairs! Even made of iron they would not have stood such treatment!... Mrs. Dien finally told her husband:

"Listen to me, dear. The peasants are too careless. We must take care of our belongings. We should remove these rattan chairs so as not to allow people to squat on them, otherwise they will be useless in no time!"

He burst out laughing, thinking of women's stinginess. They make gowns to put them aside, and when they buy chairs, they do not allow people to sit on them. He wanted to protest, but after giving it some thoughts he agreed with his wife who was anyhow better than he in settling household problem. Besides he sponged on her. She paid for everything, even his hair cuts. As she shouldered all the family burden, she was entitled to some rights, or else she would say: it is all the same to you to see our belongings break,

## IN THE MOONLIGHT

it is not you who pay... From that day, the four rattan chairs were hung on the roof-tree, and were only brought down for distinguished guests.

But during the evenings in the moonlight, even without visitors, Dien brought the four chairs out into the yard and called his wife and children. His wife sat on one chair, the baby in her arms. He gave another to their daughter, sat on the third and used the fourth to rest his legs. They stayed there waiting for the moonrise. If the baby did not weep and her sister did not ask him to scratch her prickly heat, it was unalloyed happiness. Wind drove away anxieties and bitterness of life. Like a bath of freshness, the moonlight caressed the faces and wiped out the wrinkles. Smiling and cheerful, Dien's wife seemed ten years younger. How sweet and lovely she was in these leisure hours! She was no longer the sullen housewife who scolded her children and the servant, stormed at the cat and dog and kicked up a rumpus in the house all day long. She bent over the baby, then fondly looked at the elder. The babe smiled at its mother. She smiled at her daughter and husband. Looking at them, Dien felt overcome with joy and smiled at the moon.

He was fond of the moonlight, as anyone fed with the belles-lettres. Only by reading poetry can one realize the charm and value of the moon. The moon is a golden sickle among a heap of stars and a silver disc in the blue velvet sky. It spreads dreams over the earth and pours freshness for the thirsty souls to take refreshment. O! the moon! Ideal breast caressed by

the poets from time immemorial! Dien indeed regretted nothing. His parents had sold their ricefields and garden to pay for his studies. They had not wasted their money. Indeed, their only ambition had been to procure him an honourable employment as secretary or clerk and they had been disappointed to see him climb up the tree without being able to eat the fruit. Dien was not admitted to a government office on account of ill health, and people hastened to say that money was thrown out of the window on his studies. But Dien was firmly convinced that though his knowledge did not help him to earn his living, it was very useful to him. In initiating him in literature, it had revealed to him the beauty of wind and of the queen of night. He was sorry for those like his wife who saw in the moonlight only an occasion to economise two cents of lamp oil. Now ground-nut oil cost two piastres a litre. Truly, this world war damaged the poor! Every evening, the lamp was lit for only an instant and this short moment of light cost two cents. Thus each moonlight night allowed them to economise. Two cents were not much, but ten times two cents are twenty cents, ten times twenty cents are two piastres, and ten times two piastres... How could such calculation be ended? Why was his wife always counting up her money? Those who spend their life worrying about figures only give themselves pain during their whole existence... Dien never ceased repeating it, without even realising that he did so. Even at this moment, while gazing at the moon to temporarily forget the petty cares of human life, he still laid his plans

chimerically. The immense sky and the numberless stars reminded him of the verse of a European poet comparing the starred vault to a field. If the sky were a field, this field was immense indeed. How, Dien would like to have a parcel of land as big as the piece over there behind the roof of his house. That was enough to end all worries about earning their living! He would place it in his wife's charge. As for him, he would be free and could devote himself to his dream..

A literary dream. There was a period when Dien passed all his time reading and writing, burning to become a writer. He challenged all the privations and hardships undergone by the scholars of his country. He often said to a friend who shared his aspirations that he was ready to refuse a job bringing in one hundred piastres per month if he only succeeded in earning five with his pen... But for several years he was unable to earn a single cent. And during this time, he had to live. His family suffered utter poverty. His brothers had to give up their study and did not eat their fill. Misery was not long in bringing countless disagreements. One day, his father left home. His mother had to hire herself out to feed her two babies. In order not to starve the big boys had gone into service, one kept watch over the offspring of a landowner, the other the buffaloes, the third went from house to house collecting banana flowers and sweet potato leaves to sell them at a distant market for a few cents. Dien understood that he had acted selfishly. What was the good of continuing this vocation instead of thinking of his family? He must rebuilt his family. Giving

up his literary ambitions temporarily, he became school-master earning only twenty piastres per month. His mother arranged for him to marry the daughter of a rich family. The latter had married him for his education. Afterwards Dien had children. Though incapable of helping his mother and brothers, he was in charge of a new family of his own. He was always tormented by money worries. Petty cares consumed him. At time, his former dream got the better of him again. He sighed and comforted himself: "When I have money, I shall write." However he knew that he would never write, for he would never have enough to live on...

\*  
\* \*

Though it was moonlight that evening, Dien only brought two chairs into the yard. The maid-servant was absent, and his wife had not had a minute's grace the whole day. She had to weave some metres of stuff to sell them the next day to pay the interests on their debt. Then, she hastened out to plead for a small sum of money that someone owed her. On her return home, the baby was tired out from crying, the elder had a dirty face, the house was in great disorder. And the servant was not due back yet! Not knowing which way to turn, she stamped with rage calling Heaven to witness, slapped her daughter's face, stormed at her baby, threw the broom in a corner, kicked against the basket and continued gesticulating and grumbling against one and all. Then taking the baby in her arms,



## IN THE MOONLIGHT

would do anything to live, and write in peace. Only thus could he succeed in writing. Style should be elegant, and ideas fine and lofty. His pen would stir up the source of poetry and dreams. Art was precisely the mysterious moonlight which beautifies all, even the most vulgar and ugly reality...

Once more, he recalled the gracious images of these fragile women swinging in the rocking chairs... They would read his work and be of the purest heart. They would love him and send him short perfumed letters. He thought of romantic love with beautiful ladies who only knew how to make up and love.

A choleric voice arose in the house. Suddenly the moon was deprived of her charm. Dien bent his head, ashamed as if he were a culprit caught in the very act, and listened attentively.

"What is the matter?" asked his wife roughly.

"I have a belly-ache," answered her daughter, weeping.

"Oh dear me!" grumbled the mother "That will teach you to eat anything! Woe betide you if I hear you cry!"

The child daring not weep loudly, moaned and whimpered.

At times, incapable of suppressing it, she gave a sob. Dien thought he heard her vomiting but did not move. He felt sick. His eyes blurred with tears...

His wife cautiously put the sleeping baby in the hammock, took a knife, and went to the garden to dig up some ginger-races. She washed, ground and watered them with lime-juice — the panacea of the

poor. She allowed the liquid to decant and took it to her daughter. The girl shuddered at the smell of the medicine and pursed her lips. She stubbornly refused to drink it. Her mother had to take her in her arms, make her sit on her lap. With one hand she lifted her head and with the other brought the bowl near to her. The child persisted in pursing her lips.

"Open your mouth!" the mother shouted angrily.

The girl began to cry. And her mother promptly poured the ginger concoction in her mouth. The child splashed like a leech in lime and spat it all out. Then she bawled. The mother's coat was soaked with the spilt medicine. Startled, the baby cried noisily. Irritated, the mother spanked her daughter and threw her on the bed as one gets rid of a cat.

"So much the worse! The devil take you!" the mother grumbled.

"Sorry, mummy!" implored the child while crying "It burnt me! Sorry, mummy! It burns my mouth..."

"Shut up, or I'll fetch you a blow..."

The child continued weeping. Her mother suddenly took her arm, saying

"Will you be quiet?"

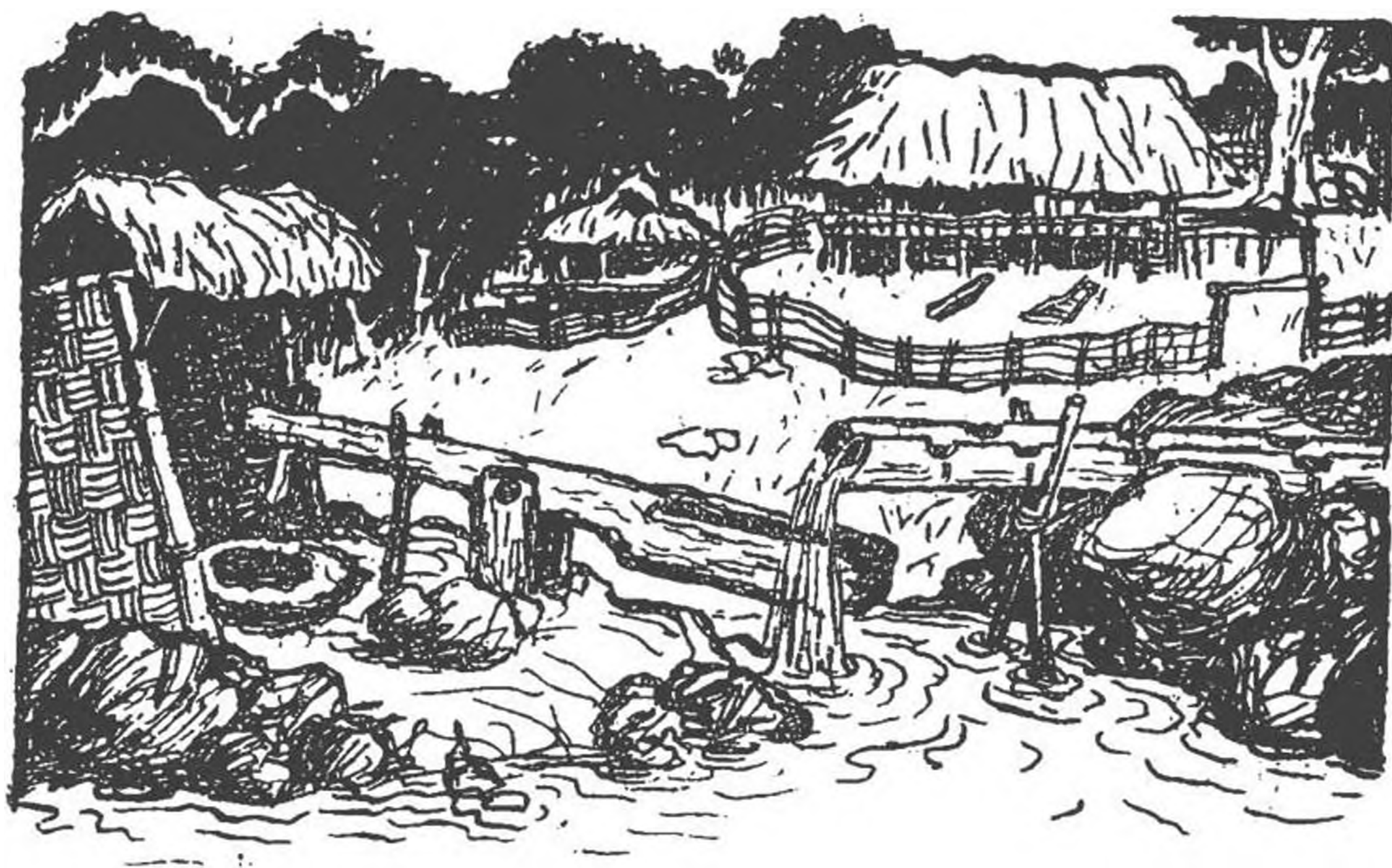
Frightened, the child obeyed. But she groaned from time to time. Dien took pity on his daughter. No! He could not go away. How could he be happy while his children suffered? O! What charm it has! The moon was so sweet, so limpid and so calm! But in these tumbledown hovels transfigured by her, how many people endured, in sobbing, all sufferings of their fate! What a lot of teeth grinding and oaths! What a lot of

## IN THE MOONLIGHT

hardships and miseries!... No! No! Dien was not allowed to dream. This cruel reality surrounded him. It took away his romantic dreams which sowed in his mind a style of idlers' literature. To avoid reality? Labour lost! His wife, children, and parents suffered. He too. What a lot of people were like him! Misery had scarred a great number of human hearts. There was a strong echo of suffering cry. Art could not be and must not have been this cheating moonlight. It must only be that cry of suffering which, coming from all these pariahs' lives was strongly echoing in his mind. Needless to go elsewhere, needless to flee away, it sufficed to stay amid this misery, to open to these echoes of life...

...The next morning, Dien took to writing. Around him, his children wept, his wife got into a rage; at the entrance of the hamlet, someone shouted to demand the payment of a debt; a neighbour who had lost a hen let fly a volley of oaths. Never mind! He started writing.





## IN THE JUNGLE

*(Diary)*

October 19, 1947. — Time and again the enemy motor vehicles run noisily on the highway three kilometres from our place. The villagers have destroyed everything and gone to secret huts in the jungle. No more cockcrow, not a living soul. The usual creaking of a water-driven mortar has vanished. The familiar sound of wooden bells on the necks of wandering buffaloes has disappeared. Only the rumbling of a brook prevails over the silent expanse.

We have practically finished our job of concealing things. Three days of hard carrying work have made us very tired. We spent last night in the jungle and

this morning, on getting up, we find that our faces, necks, arms and legs are all blood-stained by jungle leeches. Having no time to wash, we held a short meeting near a secret barn just erected. The meeting did not last more than fifteen minutes because there was nothing worth discussing at length. Everything was thrashed out quickly. The most important section of our organisation will immediately move to a far away place chosen a long time ago. A smaller group composed of Tu, Khang and myself will remain here to carry on our activities according to a new programme.

Immediately after the meeting, we prepared our knapsacks to go to the Man region. This country is completely mysterious to us. Even the Thos who live right at the foot of the mountain have rarely gone there. There are old Thos of sixty odd who have never set foot in this region. When we inquire about the Mans, apart from the head of the Viet Minh village committee who has warded off all prejudices which have so far divided the two peoples living next to each other and who has many a time gone to attend meetings with his Man comrades, most of the Thos we have known cannot conceal their fear and contempt for the Mans. "No, we don't know them" they would say. "We never dare go there. They live in houses built right on the ground not on poles like ours. Snakes can creep in. The Man people cannot speak Vietnamese; they have a lot of lice. They are very mysterious and do not want to have any company. If you go there, they will kill you!"

## IN THE JUNGLE

But Tu who was entrusted with the task of finding a site for our service, has come to the Man region. He has shown us a sheer mountain slope. No road and even no track leading to it. Very few people venture to go there. We will have to work our way through dead leaves and thick grass. No platform as large as a knife blade will be found to sit on. During six kilometres of climbing the track is so stiff that our noses seem to touch the ground. All fear lies there. The Man people are not to be feared. What sets them apart from the Thos and the Kinhs\* is that they are very good mountaineers and good at finding jungle tracks, to the point that they are said to be able to discover the footprints of a mouse running on the meadow. Their clothes are more tattered and their living conditions harder than those of the Thos and the Kinhs. They like to live at high altitudes, far from other people. That's all. They kill nobody and are not monsters.

In this first trip we had to trudge along, because our legs — the legs of Hanoi city folk — were soon tired. October is rather cold in the mountain. We set off with winter clothes, but shivered with cold when crossing a streamlet. However, after a short climb, we had to lay down our knapsacks and take off our winter clothes one after the other. Our faces were red and wet with perspiration. We were hot and thirsty. As we climbed the man behind only saw the heels of

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\* The majority people in Viet Nam.

the man in front but distinctly heard his panting breath. One of us had to clench his teeth to climb. Every step was an exhausting physical effort. We halted at every few hundred metres. We looked at one another, panting. I massaged my thighs while walking, and had the sensation that they had become swollen and hardened.

The deeper we penetrated the jungle, the more mazy and winding was the track. There were only trees. The track had disappeared. However with more perspicacity one could see three or four tracks. And that was our trouble! We turned round and round until we lost our bearings. Over our heads, there were only branches and leaves so thickly interwoven, that the sky was hidden. The light was so dim that one did not know whether it was noon or afternoon. We only knew that it was getting darker and darker. Was the jungle more dense or was the sun setting? There were no huts, and no people. Tu had been there four times, yet he had now lost his way. We came back twice or three times. Our legs were bruised and our lips parched with thirst when fortunately we met a woman. Tu called aloud "Nhin Pin!" and explained that "nhinh" means sister. Thanks to his frequent contacts with the local population, he has come to know a few words of the Tho dialect. But this is not enough to keep up a conversation with the Tho people. With them he prefers to use the Kinh, the standard language, to avoid their

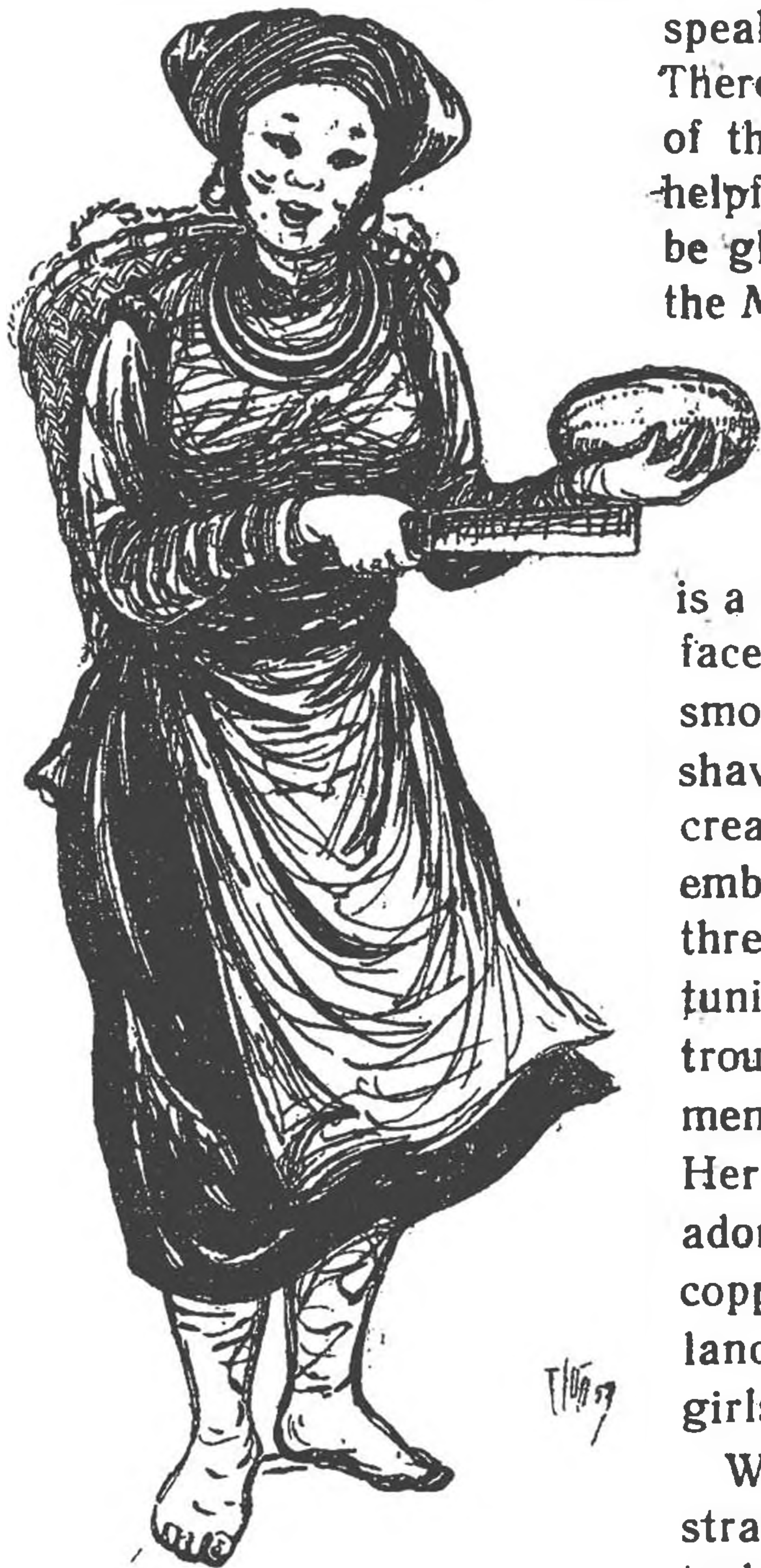
## IN THE JUNGLE

laughter. Except old women, nearly all the Tho's speak the Kinh fluently. But the Mans do not know it, and

speaking some Tho words. Therefore Tu's knowledge of the Tho dialect is very helpful. Besides he would be glad to speak Tho with the Man people.

Sister Pin is a young girl whose legs are as "round as columns". She is a strongly built lass; her face is round, her forehead smooth and her close shaven head covered with a creased turban in red linen embroidered with white thread. She wears a long tunic and a pair of indigo trousers like the Tho women, but is more shabby. Her neck and wrists are adorned with silver and copper rings of which highland women and young girls are very fond.

What is particularly strange to us is the big red turban on her head. Seeing



it I have the sensation of meeting something barbarian and mysterious, something much like the motley dress of mediums I saw in my childhood.

But in sister Pin, there is nothing savage or mysterious. She reddens at seeing Tu. Her lips and eyes are all smiles. Like all shy girls in the delta, she hides her mouth with her hand when smiling. Once, Tu asked her jokingly, "How old are you?"; she replied timidly, "I don't know".

Sister Pin came from the "ray"\*. She carried on her back a basket full of paddy ears and held a big water melon in her hand.

Tu asked her, "What kind of fruit is that?"

"Water melon," she replied.

"Is it eatable?"

"Yes, it is"

She took out her jungle knife, sliced the fruit and gave it to Tu.

"How much do you charge?" Tu asked.

"Free of charge," she said.

Tu took half the water melon only, but she told him to give us the other half. As we were thirsty the sight of the water melon delighted us. But we were still afraid that the fruit was dirty. Why? The water melon had just been brought in from the field. Were we afraid that the girl's big hands were dirty? In this country inhabited by the Mans we still see things through a Hanoian's eyes. But Tu had bitten at one slice of the water melon. We followed suit. The fruit

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\* Field obtained by clearing the jungle.

## IN THE JUNGLE

is as big as a sweet melon, but its pulp is as sickly as that of a big cucumber. After having quenched our thirst, we even found it a bit sour.

At nightfall, we come to an old man's hut. Made of unbarked trunks and bamboo, it stands alone but is a whole hamlet and has a name of its own. Pigsty and hen-roost are in the house near the men's quarters; there were no pigs and poultry; only animal dung and cockchaffers. The master of the house told Tu, "The pigs and poultry have 'pay co'". This means that they have gone to the jungle huts. Tu gave us an additional explanation, "Co" means "co quan", administrative organ. This word was perhaps formerly used in the period of underground activities, when the Mans were obliged to destroy everything and take refuge elsewhere. They all built secret huts to conceal paddy and domestic animals and also called these private hiding places "co quan", or "co" "

Duc told Tu to inquire whether the old man's "co" was far away. "Very far," said the old man. What's a misfortune! We have believed that upon our arrival we could buy a chicken for our meal. Now that all the poultry has gone to the "co", we are reduced to eating only rice and salt.

After the meal, we lay on the floor around the fire. The old man put at our disposal the only bed of the house, but we turned down his offer. Silently, he went and fetched wood to feed the fire and kindled another fire near the entrance door. Now it was very warm; the smoke drove the nauseous smell away. Even lying on a mackintosh and covered only with a lounge-jacket,

my head near the hen-roost, I could sleep soundly. Yes, after several cold nights of uncertain sleep and half a day climbing and carrying a heavy load, I slept instantly. At midnight, on awakening, I found that the fire was still burning and a woman was sitting by it. She is still young and we presume that she is perhaps the old man's second wife. How can it be otherwise as there are only the two of them in the house, a man and a woman. However, I am puzzled, for the difference in ages is rather great. Last evening we bandied jokes on this subject. At bed time I saw that only the old man went to his room, while the woman lay alone on a bed outside, far from the fire and without any cover or mat on her. Now she was sitting up. In the red flames, we could see her oval-shaped face, her charming little mouth and her slanting eyes. One could not help thinking of the beautiful mysterious oriental princesses depicted in moving pictures. In the solitary night spent amidst tired out people who were snoring, she was the only one awake to feed the fire. Did the cold prevent her from sleeping, or was it a token of solicitude towards the guests? The flames vacillated and played with her shadow. I was vaguely sad without my knowing exactly why.

October, 20, 1947.— We got up early in the morning. The old man had taken water from a bamboo pipe and boiled it for us to wash. He is a tall man, always bending his back as if he were afraid of bumping his head against the roof of the hut, his gesture is slow, his face naive. He is kindhearted, always smiling, and stammers something that I do not understand because

## IN THE JUNGLE

he knows a few Tho words only. He is so handsome that Khang, the painter, longs to draw his portrait. But our artist wonders whether there is a custom forbidding this and dares not ask the old man to act as model. Besides, he is unable to make himself understood and is obliged to wait until more friendly relations can be established.

I have gone out to have a look around the house. Tiger grass hides our heads. The jungle is three paces from us. A few days ago I was in a locality constantly disturbed by gun report and where people lived in a turmoil. Now in this place, I feel quite safe though gun shots are still heard in the vicinity. Only when the enemy are able to re-establish their power and hold all the population under their sway, can they venture to wander in this locality. It is why the setting up of our organ here gives us confidence that we can work for a long time.

I suddenly started on seeing a man. I did not expect to meet a living soul in this lonely place. His head moved among the tall grass. He has a plump face, a sallow complexion and slanting eyes. An indigo turban is rolled around his head which looks like that of a Chinese general made of mealy substance sold as children's toy when I was young, a head which is funny and awful at the same time; his face is neither young nor old, I cannot determine his age. However, the small chignon on his head gives me the impression that the man has just grown up.

He looked intently at me. "Good morning, comrade, he greeted me in a loud and cordial voice.

"Good morning, comrade!" I replied.

The man drew near me. He was fat but not tall; his back bent under the weight of a heavy basket. His short indigo jacket laid bare a protruding belly and his trousers fell almost to his hips. With the few Tho words I had learnt last night, I inquired, pointing at the basket, "What is in there, comrade?"

"Water melon," he replied.

Water melon. That's good! Minced and taken with salt, it can be eaten with rice, and it is always better than to eat rice with salt alone. I told him to bring the basket in for us to buy the fruit. He laid the heavy basket on the ground, withdrew his hands from behind the basket straps and heaved a long sigh. He went to the water pipe to wash his feet and came to the fire-side to warm. Suddenly, he exclaimed "Oh!" and smacked his tongue. "What's up!" we asked.

"A jungle leech bites me!" he said, took off the leech and threw it into the fire. Duc shouted, "You speak Vietnamese! do you?"

"Yes! A little only," he said.

We surrounded his basket and saw a dozen water melons and water melon leaves as vegetables.

"How much do you charge?" we asked him.

"Nothing. I give you free of charge," he replied.

Duc thrust two spick and span five-dong paper notes into his hand. After some hesitation, he consented to take one.

Slowly the old man hung his jungle knife on his belt and slung a flint-lock on his shoulder. He smiled, stammered something which might be parting words,





and went to the jungle. With his knife and gun, he looks all the more handsome. However, his head bends slightly forward when he walks. This is not because he is old, but because he must be wary in the dense jungle. He walks slowly like a wild beast. I suddenly realized that the woman had also vanished. Only the water melon seller and we remained in the house. He fetched a flat basket to put the fruit and vegetables in. He entered the room, arranged and swept the house. His protracted sigh became a wail. He was in his habit of heaving sigh every fifteen minutes.

"The house is dirty and there is no bed. In the delta you live comfortably; here you have to rough it," he said.

He spoke as if he is a member of the family. After some minutes talking to him, we realized that in fact he is. He is the old man's son-in-law and the young woman's husband. The old man is called old Nhan. He has long been a widower. As to the young man's name, Trieu Van Huong, it sounds as if it is the name of a hero in some Chinese novel. And what surprised me is that he is forty-two years old.

That night and the following night all the members of old Nhan's family slept in the jungle. By day, if some one returns to the house, it is only for a short time to take something away or to bring us firewood. We were the real masters of the house. We were afraid that we might cause some trouble to the family, but Tu said, "They like that. The question of living does not matter much to them. They can sleep everywhere."

## IN THE JUNGLE

October 21, 1947. — Tu does not consider that old Nhan's house is secret enough. He uses it as temporary refuge. Today he will take Khang and me to another place to discuss with us about finding a new site. As soon as our meal is over, a Man has come to fetch us, a gun on his back. He is thirty odd. He has a chignon and wears a turban. His face is bright, he looks like a young teacher of the Nguyen Trai period \*. But his jacket is rather short and the flaps of his trousers worn out, laying bare strongly-built legs, dirty and covered with big running sores. Tu calls him Comrade Quan. Representing Chan, the hamlet chief, Quan will go with us in search of the new site.

We worked our way through stream, open forest, reed jungle, banana tree jungle and again open forest, with jungle leeches clinging to our bodies. We had no time to get rid of them. After an hour of hard walking we came to Vang Kheo, another village made up of three huts looking like three pigeon houses perched on a mountain top. But they are roomy and open on a bright and splendid scenery. Mountains succeed mountains in a gentle billowy range, as high as the sky. There are so many mountains that I have the impression that apart from them there is nothing else on earth. Khang who is fond of colours and light enjoys this landscape to his heart's content. The hills close to us are proud of the beautiful colours of their ricefields — light yellow, golden yellow and green of different shades.

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\* At the beginning of the 14th century.

## NAM CAO

In the morning a red light glows from behind the mountains and snow white clouds cover the valleys. One would say a sea with islands.

In the evening the sun darts its rays just like a spot light beaming on the stage. The scenery changes constantly. Khang jotted down the phenomenon in details, saying this will be useful for his stage decor work when he returns to Hanoi later on.

Moonlight. A leafless tree stands out against a background of light blue sky. A delicate picture with mountains and the moon sailing amidst the clouds, as soft and spongy as a pillow.

However, the house is dirty beyond description. The pigsty is on the verandah. Pigs and poultry are free to go about and defecate. The kitchen is in the middle of a room, in straight line with a dirty larder at one end and a hearth for the preparation of pig slush at the other. The rice grinding mortar is also in the sooty house. There are three tiny rooms, each large enough to lay one bed in; they have never been swept. Cobwebs are on the roof and plaited bamboo partitions. The ground is dusty. The beds and their lower parts are full of rubbish.

All the villagers are out for the harvest. There remain only an old man, a woman nursing a baby and a lad of eleven whose face is besmeared by the running of his nose. They all disappeared in the jungle upon our arrival. However, a few minutes later, hearing comrade Quan's voice, the woman came back with her baby, followed by the little boy. The lad looked intently and curiously at our faces, tried to



touch the sleeve of my vest and withdrew his hand quickly as if he wanted to feel the reaction of a strange animal; then he put out his tongue and laughed without uttering a sound. I understood later that this habit of sticking out his tongue, touching with his fingers and laughing silently is as frequent in him as comrade Van Huong's sighs. Until we leave the house later, we never hear him speak and do not know whether he is dumb.

The woman cannot speak Tho. Comrade Quan took us to the uppermost hut. There we saw an old man coming out of a bush. Quan calls him old Xenh. To Quan's questions he only replied with a smile. Quan told us he is deaf. After Quan had taken us freely to the three houses, he told us to choose one to our liking. We take the first hut which has a large T shaped room and three smaller rooms, because it is the roomiest and cleanest of all.

Immediately the next morning we begin to move there rice, salt and other things from old Nhan's hut. Once again we do not meet the owner of the house. But it is cleaner than on the previous day; we need to sweep it once more to be able to live in it.

Kim, the owner of the house is in the jungle or in the field all day long. His wife spends the nights in the 'co'. From the day we live in his house, Kim also sleeps in the 'co'. He comes home from time to time. Once he brought in a big banana trunk. Smoking a copper pipe, he lay down the banana trunk, sat on it and, with a long sharp knife, chopped it very quickly and skilfully. Then he put all the banana pieces into

## IN THE JUNGLE

a big cauldron, poured water in and cooked the banana the whole day till it became slush. This quantity is sufficient to feed the pigs for five days.

Salt is an invaluable commodity here. People are very joyful when we give each family one bowlful of it. But they never touch it though we store basketfuls in their houses. Once returning home after several days' absence, we were told by Ly Ky Huong, old Xenh's son, that Kim's wife, the woman who has round eyes and thick lips like those of European women, intended to take our salt. This does not matter, because we have told Kim to take some if he wants ; but he warns his wife, "Don't steal salt from others as Viet Nam is now independent." And the couple eat rice without salt.

The man who lives next door to us is also called Kim. He was a guide and messenger during the underground period. Usually in the afternoon, we heard him singing the "March to the Front" Not so much out of tune, but the words are frequently clipped. He is the father of the lad who is in the habit of shooting out his tongue and the brother of Nhin Pin, the girl who has given us water melon. Nhin Pin is a shy girl. She liked to chat with Tu. Once she gave him some maize cobs ; Tu refused because she did not take the money. So she asked Tu, "Do you refuse because the maize is old ?"

Tu did not pay much attention to these words. But in the same afternoon when we sat around the fire with old Xenh and the two Kims, grilling maize cobs

and heard Tu complaining that the maize was old, Xenh said, smiling, "The maize is not old but the woman is."

The two Kims, also laughed. Tu became suspicious. Was it a love hint?

If Tu is absent, Khang and I get into trouble, because at Vang Kheo, people do not know Vietnamese, and speak Tho very little. Nor do we know much of the Tho language. This dialect is spoken in a drawling voice. Apart from some usual words, we understand nothing. When we speak Tho, the inhabitants shake their heads, saying "We don't understand" But when we inquired about President Ho Chi Minh, everyone knows. They know also Comrade Van (General Vo Nguyen Giap's nickname) and Comrade Thach.

Not knowing how to make ourselves understood, Khang and I are compelled to eat rice and salt many days on end. When we want to buy something, they reply "We have not got it" Afterwards Tu teaches us a trick: whenever we want something, we have only to tell them, "Go to the jungle" or "Give me this one or that one", and we had vegetables to eat. They sell at very cheap prices and do not charge for small quantities. In the long run, we are fed up with vegetables cooked with salt. I devise another dish which consists in making a broth with vegetables, water and salt to which is added a little ginger. Not so bad. Even old cocks whose flesh is as tough as buffalo meat are not available. In this region, people are not

## IN THE JUNGLE

willing to sell their poultry, even if they are old, to rear chicks for more profit, and very old cocks are free to live for ornament.

Luckily honey is easily found. Once we bought from a messenger an entire beehive which he had brought from the jungle. It is a delight to suck honey directly from a hive. Sometimes we eat rice mixed with honey. Tobacco grown by the Mans blended with honey is delicious to smoke. Soon we are known throughout the village as inveterate smokers.

Another delight at Vang Kheo is to swim in a rapid stream. Its bed is covered with white and yellow pebbles and there are round and smooth reefs to sit on. We saw a hollow formed by some rocks, large enough for a man to sit in; snow white and clear water is falling. Though it is cold, I like to go there everyday to practise physical exercises and to lie down for the falling water to bathe me from head to toe. What a delight!

However to get from our house to the stream, we have to climb up a hill some hundred metres long. To do this several times a day is rather tiring, but we enjoy this exercise very much because it is a means of developing our thighs. The harder the loads we carry, the more delighted we are. The revolution has completely changed my ways of thinking. Not only has the Resistance rejuvenated my mind, it has even changed my body. How different I shall be when returning home!

November 1, 1947.— While waiting for the workers to put the printing house in working order, Khang

and I lithograph. We have been doing this job for about one week when Tu came to tell us to move our office to comrade Chan's house in order to establish relations with the organ down hill.

Once again we had to move rice, salt, clothes and lithographic stones. This took us two days. We are quite accustomed to doing this work and to climbing mountain roads. The track to Comrade Chan's is no more a problem to me, but that leading to the 'co' is intolerable. No visible track. The slope is steep. Sometimes I have to snatch at a tree to ascend. Yet with half a basket of rice on my shoulder I have done my best to climb. I manage to make three or four trips, one hour each. Only now can I realize that I am second to none in strength. Usually we do not make full use of our strength and part of it is wasted so much so that we do not even notice that we possess it. I realize that when the Resistance is over, should I like to till my land instead of using my pen, then I should be able to do so. I don't fear hard work.

I think of Lien, my wife. She has never left her native land. My village is occupied by the enemy. Now she is obliged to abandon her house and garden to go away with her children and a bundle of clothes. I have left her alone in a place completely unknown to her. Does she reproach me for that? For me, I miss her badly, but I am sure she will not die of starvation. Lien will change her character just as I have changed mine. One must try to do something to realise that things are not so difficult to do. Everyone is able to fulfil his task.



**November 2, 1947.**— Last night I was stiff all over. The moon rose at midnight. I woke up to drink water and was awake for a long time. Early in the morning it has become cold.

This morning after breakfast, we went to fetch bamboos and trees to adorn our house. It is Comrade Chan's secret hut standing in the middle of other huts; it is as large as a bookstall in Saigon. Its piles are made of branches, loosely fastened. Its roof is covered with big green bamboos, looking quite beautiful. The floor, of the size of a large bed, is supported by low poles. Near it is a patch of land joining the two houses and serving as a kitchen. The hut suits two persons nicely.

In the next hut are three children and a man looking like a Chinese. Tu dubs him "Mr. Five Ball" Poor man! He is in a high fever. His abdomen is swollen. His face and limbs are swollen too. His skin is sallow and covered with mildewed spots. A few days later, knowing his name, we call him Comrade Minh. He is seriously ill, and cannot go to work. He comes and lives with his children in his secret hut. Coming to our house, he but looks silently at our work. Slowly he draws at his pipe — a pipe similar to Kim's — and slowly he releases smoke. He speaks very little. His voice is hoarse.

It is just noon when we finish making a shelf on which to put paper, books, knapsacks and another to place plates, bowls and food, and repairing the surroundings of the kitchen to keep our feet clean. The afternoon is reserved for a rest. I have made up my

## IN THE JUNGLE

mind to do some reading. But when I have finished writing my diary, the afternoon is almost over. I feel that the days are too short, because I want to do a lot of things.

Comrade Chan brought us a scroll of paper and a cauldron and let us know that Tu has fever. Perhaps it is because yesterday Tu worked too much !

November 3, 1947.— Tu is only slightly ill, he has no fever. He goes on with his job of finding a secret track to communicate with the organ down hill. After dinner I went to cleanse dishes and bowls. On my return, I saw that Khang was reading a slip of paper Tu had sent him through Chan's mother. Every night she would carry Chan's orphan son to the jungle hut to sleep. Together with the letter, she gave us firewood — what a useless job ! — a bundle of water melon leaves, two green pumpkins, four cassava roots and Tu's bag, in which there was a pig's leg among miscellaneous things for lithographic printing.

What a pity ! Just half way through our meal there was no more sesame left. I had to grill a bowlful for the next day's meal. Khang minces meat and boils it with some water and salt to serve as spare food. As to the bones, we cook them with some rice to make a soup for the next morning's meal.

The neighbour with a swollen abdomen is afraid that his dog would eat the meat at night ; he comes to our house to warn us to be very careful. But Khang is very cautious. He has hung the pot of meat very high, placed the pot of soup near a heap of burning coal, covered it with leaves, tied it fast with string and

laid very heavy pieces of firewood on its lid. The dog must be very disappointed ! Khang promises to give him a big share of the bones, but the following morning he had gone to the village with his old mistress. How unlucky he is !

Today at nightfall, it becomes cold. We kindle a big fire but it dies away at midnight. Our blanket is too narrow and both of us sleep curled up because of the cold. Our bodies are aching.

When we awake, we hear the wind whizzing. Through a slit on the roof and at a plaited bamboo partition, the moon shines slantingly into the house. I get up and try to rekindle the fire ; my nose touches the ash. The kitchen is cold. I am obliged to go back to my bed, wrapped in my blanket, but cannot sleep, I think at random of my wife and children, of Chan's old mother, of his family, of the Man people...

I feel very anxious for Comrade Chan's son. He is as thin as a lath and his body drooped like a faded leaf : he constantly slung on his grandmother's back while she is working in the kitchen, carrying water, fetching firewood or threshing paddy.

His mother died as soon as he was born. Perhaps his grandmother has reared him from that time. Whenever she feeds him with masticated rice, he cries and coughs violently. Without milk and having a lot of malaria germs in his blood, the child is ailing and looks pitiful. Strange that he is alive !

His father is now twenty-eight, but looks older than his age. Since war broke out in the region, every day people have come to his house to take refuge and ask

## IN THE JUNGLE

him to be their guide. He is a very kind man. Once, he led Tu to a locality. Suspecting that the French might be there, he told Tu to wait for him and went alone to make inquiries, saying "I'm too anxious for you to go there."

Once Tu asked him "Are you afraid of the French?"

"No", he said.

"Can flint-locks kill the French?"

"Of course, they can."

"Why didn't you go and fight the French?"

"The Thos didn't tell us to go."

He has waited for the Thos to come and take him to fight the French as if to take him to hunt a bear.

He has a young brother named Bao, aged twenty-two. Bao knows Kinh better than anybody else in the region. He can read and is teaching Chan. He was clawed by a bear on the day we arrived and the **wounds are not yet healed**. Later, when we saw him the second time he was nearly healed, but was still on diet. He ate rice with chilli and salt and dared not even think of eating scrambled eggs and soya beans which comrade Chan had given us. Even when there is no diet, the food consists of salt and chilli only. When it is cooked, rice planted in dry fields is soft and sticky, but one is soon sick of it. Here people are in the habit of cooking rice once a day, half to be taken straight away and half rolled in loaves for the next meal. They eat very little and slowly. Is it because they dare not eat too much or because they cannot eat much? Then how can they fight against malaria? If our country is not independent and their livelihood

not improved, they will die piecemeal. With its bareness, thinness and gloominess, the Man villages look like something which is going to die out.

However, the Mans are good people. Recollecting the stories of our revolutionaries who worked here during the underground period, Trieu Van Huong's wife always told Tu, "The revolutionaries were very miserable!"

She movingly repeats the words which a comrade told her formerly:

"The Mans should not kill the revolutionaries, should not arrest them and hand them over to the French!"

The Mans had not arrested the revolutionaries but helped them. They had often gone without food, hidden rice and brought it to the revolutionaries. Had the French discovered that rice the Mans would have had their heads cut off. Indeed some Mans had had their heads cut off for that. Still they had continued to support the Revolution. I remember that General Vo Nguyen Giap once told me:

"Had the launching of the General Insurrection been delayed for one month, a whole Man village would have died of starvation for going without food in order to feed a National Liberation unit"

We can see how great is their sympathy for the Revolution, from the care they are giving us... As Khang stirred I knew that he had awakened. I imparted to him what was in my mind. He also lavished praise on the Mans. He praised the fervent revolutionaries who had shed light on depth of the forest

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and succeeded in kindling the fighting fire in these plain people who were almost lacking of social consciousness. These people, who formerly shunned other people, now also speak of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam, independence, freedom and happiness, are able to distinguish French democrats from French colonialists, hang President Ho's portrait in their houses, write slogans on their lattice-walls, also attend meetings and hold conferences.

One night, sitting around the fire, the Chan brothers and we taught each other our respective languages. I pointed at the brass pot asking.

"What is it in Tho?"

"Mo tong. What is it in Kinh?" one of them asked.

"Noi dong"

He stared at me, his eyes wide-opened in astonishment "Noi dong?" and what about you? You are called Hoi dong nhan dan?" \*

Indeed it's naivety! but these amusingly simple people had eaten wild tubers for months to spare rice for the revolutionaries.

As for us, we are cherished, tended and protected by everybody in this village only because we are revolutionaries.

In this train of thought, I complained of the behaviour of a group of people coming from the plains who had spent a night in this village. They quarrelled

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\* Member of the People's Council.

## NAM CAO

with one another, pestered the villagers with their demands to buy this and that and insisted even when meeting with a refusal. They under paid for what they bought. At dinner those who had something ate and those who had nothing just sat there looking. They soiled the huts with bits of food, and dirtied their proximity with foul matters. When they left they took with them bowls belonging to the masters.

After their departure, Bao told us :

"They're not united. They're a herd of cattle". Then he went on with his comments.

"You and we are good. You eat and we eat. The others are not good. Those who have something eat. Those who have nothing don't eat. No solidarity",

I blushed with shame at their misconduct. But on second thought I found that they had only misbehaved. They did not bear in mind that the highlanders were judging lowland people through them. They were not careful with their conduct. They are not cadres. We explained to Bao that they are only a minority. Bao nodded

"The same everywhere. Good and bad people. There're also bad ones among the Mans. Formerly some Mans arrested the revolutionaries and handed them over to the French. The enlightened Mans are good."

By living with these half-starved and illiterate Mans we have extreme confidence in them as we witness their deep love and great devotedness to the Revolution. Comparing them with the few good-for-nothings whom he called "half intellectuals", Khang

## IN THE JUNGLE

was all indignant at the way they were living. They loved nothing and did nothing. They were good only at sneering.

Nov. 4, 1947.— I opened my eyes, the moon was peering through rifts in the roof.

Cold, strong wind. Hearing noise of blowing fire in the next hut, we got up to make a fire.

"It's very cold!" Khang exclaimed. The women in the next hut giggled, repeating him:

"It's very cold!"

A few cassava roots were baked. It was broad daylight when we had eaten them. After his toilet, Khang polished a stone, prepared ink and wrote. I wrote my diary. Hens and cocks scattered squawking noisily. Hum of motor: motor-cars or airplanes?

May be Tu has gone to Pic Cay or to a provincial meeting at Lung Trang. If he were at home, he would have undoubtedly come. Mean to spend today reading but I don't know whether I have time to do it or not. In a few minutes I'll have to go out cutting firewood, then to cook a meal. What next? Perhaps I'd better go down the mountain to fetch some more rice or something to keep my feet fit.

Nov. 6, 1947.— Last night, the little boy in the next hut cried, it sounded so much like my own boy, Thanh. Sadness. I missed my boy so much.

This morning, dark sky. After our physical exercise and bathing, it drizzled. I finished reading a book on the Soviet Union. How fine is the building of the first Soviet country!

## NAM CAO

We two went down to Comrade Chau's hut for rice. His old mother looked round for something to give us but found nothing. In the end she gave us a tinful of mountain rice and a piece of ginger. It rained heavily after we had returned to our hut. There were so many leaves in the forest! They moaned and wailed under the pelting raindrops. Thick and dull sound.

**Nov. 12, 1947.**— Tu sent us a duck, then came up intending to stay a few days with us. I was glad to find that unexpectedly I had become a good cook. The duck was well dressed and roasted. Rice mixed with green beans were well cooked. The dessert made up of pumpkin cooked with green bean and glutinous rice was found wonderfully delicious by my comrades. And cooking becomes a pleasure for me. I'm now the number one cook at this office.

Enemy cars roared past on the highway below. Heavy gunfire. Sometimes it sounded as if it were right at the base of the mountain. But Tu assured us that it was five mountains away from us so we could still smoke cigarettes and chat at leisure.

Of a sudden, Lien, the sister of Chau and Bao, ran up to fetch Tu. Someone wanted to see him. Had a misfortune befallen our office down there? We were restless. Nothing was done yet. The planned newspaper could not be issued yet. The "receiving station" was still unable to work. For a whole month we've heard only news of the surroundings brought back by Tu from various local organs with which he is in contact. One of our battalions is in activity in this area.

## IN THE JUNGLE

The offices, including ours, are defended by one company. A great number of enemy troops were killed in scattered groups. It seems that the enemy have failed in their attempt. They encountered violent resistance everywhere and could not advance. At Cao Bang front as enemy troops were allowed to pass through Chinese territory they were in more favourable conditions to attack us. But even there they were dealt heavy blows. Although Bac Can is occupied by the enemy, there is little activity there. At Cho Moi, Cho Don they suffered big losses. Indeed their offensive on Viet Bac\* is no easy task for them. Some of our organs a bit off their guard suffered some losses. That's all!

The man who wanted to see Tu, turned out to be a messenger. He turned pale and was frightened out of his wits at hearing gun-fire and dashed straight to Tu's office. Tu was very angry. There can be no such cowardliness and fear. His office is close to the enemy and needs courageous and level headed people. Tu believed that the enemy dared not yet push to as far as his office at the mountain foot.

He again came up to us. After dinner a fire was kindled. To lie down looking at the fire was our new entertainment. When the weather was warm and no fire could be made, we felt a bit sad. We three lay on the floor, singing at random all kinds of songs new and old. Of many songs we remembered only a few lines. The children around us also joined in the

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\* Northernmost part of Viet Nam.

chorus. They knew a tune that is unknown to us, and a "Scout farewell" which we could sing with our own words, a few lines of "Long live Ho Chi Minh!" and the whole "Tien Quan Ca" \*. So we could meet each other mostly in the National anthem only.

I forget to say that tonight there were more people in the other huts. Maybe it was due to the heavy gunfire in the afternoon. Three more children and comrade Quan's old mother.

His son looks very intelligent but was very dirty and so were the other children. Little Pu who often lives with us, has got into the habit of washing her face and also her brother's. They are cleaner. The children are bare-bottomed, even the girls, although they wear head-dress, necklaces and rings. In spite of the cold weather, some sat naked by the fire. Clothes are scarce.

The villagers gave us glutinous rice, rice-cakes, lemons, cassava roots, pumpkins and vegetables. They gave what they had and very often. In return we also gave them part of what we received from the base of the mountain. We are intimate with each other like members of a family. Whenever little Pu cooked bean for her family she gave us a bowl of it. She smiled, and handed the bowl to us without a word because she could not speak Tho. At first we accepted it to please her. The following times we refused not willing to impose on her family.

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\* The March to the Front, national anthem of the D.R.V.N.

## IN THE JUNGLE

After a while singing and playing with the children we felt tired and sad. Tu thought longingly of his village, of places where he had met his lover. Khang recalled Hanoi, the illuminated Great Theatre, its stage and the audiences. My mind went back to my wife and children, to the old days we had lived together in poverty. On my return home, we'd... I yearned to hug thin little Thien in my arms, to bite little Thanh's plump leg who would be burying his face in his mother's breast and to stroke little Hong's silky hair. I felt a great pity for Hong as I thought of the time I had been at home and scolded her. A thousand memories came back to me, sometimes my mind went back to Sam.\* Oh man!...

Nov. 13, 1947.— Tu changed his mind. He grew impatient. He could not rest for a few days as he had intended. He left after breakfast.

We began to print leaflets for Miss Vau. We jokingly call her Miss Vau because her teeth are really protruding but she is sweet and quick. She comes of a good family. She is frail, of a pale complexion, and seriously stricken by malaria but she is devoted to her work, dignified and very enthusiastic. She is one of the first cadres who volunteered to go to the remote Viet Bac. Local people are very fond of her.

Removing a paper from the stone Khang's face beamed with pleasure.

"Very clear and fine. Miss Vau will certainly like it!".

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\* His lover

His voice was soft, the first time I had noticed it so. I've known him for a long time but I've never heard him speak of women. This over thirty-years-old man seemed to have never cared about love. He hates painting women. He had always been cold with them. In Tu's words, the few rat's whiskers on his face never stirred in the presence of a woman. Had our solitude or something else made him blurt out these fond words ? I chuckled.

While printing we ate pumpkin seeds given by comrade Quan's old mother. She came to see us work. She has a kind heart and a sweet face. She's fond of talking and loves her grand-children.

In the evening, she saw that we had no vegetables, only a thin watery broth of cassava root. She hurried to the forest and brought back a wild banana-flower and some eatable leaves. She told us to wait, cooked them and gave us a bowlful. It was a bit bitter still I praised her for her cooking. Once Chau gave us some roast rat meat cooked with salt and water. Tu ate it without wincing, even praising the host's cooking.

Tonight, I feel sick and worn out. Is it from too much work ? or heavy tobacco-smoking ? or eating pumpkin seeds ? We went to bed early and chatted disconnectedly. The fire died out yet I had no strength to get up to feed it. But a while later, I felt so depressed that I again sat up, made a big fire, rolled a cigarette and smoked dreamingly. It was better with a fire.

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The deer again belled. It had been troated for many nights. The cry sounded barbaric, pitiful and quite near. Why did nobody go out to shoot at it?

**Nov. 14, 1947.**— Old and young villagers went down the mountain, except little Pu, little Ly and their little brother which Pu carried on her back. Emptiness. No more meat left, only rice mixed with green beans sprinkled with sesame. Tu and Khang used to call me Doctor because at mealtime I usually worry about calories and vitamins. Short of meat, I tried to replace it by beans. Sesame has oil. That is quite sufficient.

No printing today. I read. I want to avail myself of the opportunity to read as much as I can. The Party needs more journalists. I wish that after the Resistance war I shall have a good stock of knowledge to help me, if necessary, to manage for example, a weekly.

Tonight I again feel sick and tired. Too much writing? Tobacco smoking? administration of quinine? Hunger? or too much sport?

**Nov. 15, 1947.**— Last night, comrade Chau's old mother coughed herself into fits, moaned and did not cease to speak in her sleep. Comrade Chau's little boy also coughed. He coughed himself into convulsion, so much that he could not cry.

This morning bursts of machine-guns followed by thunder of artillery were heard. They sounded quite near. Gun-fire died out. Hum of motors could be heard.

Rain began to fall. Little Pu hurried out to cut banana leaves to cover the hut. She was still carrying her little brother on her back. She is only eight or nine years old but does all the household work: collecting firewood, cooking and minding her two brothers. She is the housewife. Her parents are out in the field all day long. She has to look after everything at home. Her youngest brother never leaves her back for a minute, his head dangling from right to left in his sleep while his sister busies herself with her work, even when chopping fire-wood. The older brother can cry to his heart's content unheeded, then stops of his own accord. He is three or four years old and already has to help himself at meal. I saw him take a few pieces of pumpkin with his chopsticks, dip them in salt and chilli then mix the whole thing with rice. Here chilli is like salt. Even children eat chilli without sucking in their breath. Roast chilli has a queer taste and we like it very much.

Rain. Rain brought sadness. The roof might leak. The forest was full of tiny leeches. In the last rain a leech had forced its way into my hips, blood wet the bottom of my trousers and could not be stopped until evening.

Nov. 19, 1947.— Many times we had surprised the children correctly reading lessons in the primer published by the Mass Education Department. This time I thought that they were studying and ran to their hut but there was no book. They had learnt by heart.

## IN THE JUNGLE

Maybe they had heard the grown-ups read. Who? Only Bao who had studied for twenty days at the underground organ in Vang Kheo forest.

Last night Bao came to visit us. He brought us our suit-case containing books which we had not yet time to go to fetch. Bao whispered to us that the whole family of comrade Quan is haunted by "hen-ghost" \*. It's dreadful to be haunted by hen-ghost. Haunted people often harm either children or animals in the houses they call at.

On the highlands is there any person who is not affected with malaria? The evil disease may break out at any hour. All of a sudden people collapse with it. And when this happens it is said that the patients are hurt by a ghost.

Woe betide you if for many times after your visit someone in the house of your host falls ill, a pig or a hen dies. People will say that you are haunted by hen-ghost. The bad reputation spreads. You are feared and despised like a leper. To be haunted by hen-ghost is a misfortune, a shame transmitted from generation to generation. Nobody wants to marry a hen-ghost haunted person. Like lepers, a haunted boy can but take a haunted wife. It is believed that the haunted person has to make offerings to the ghost and in leap year he has to allow the ghost to kill at least one human being or an animal, if not the ghost will swoop down on the haunted person's own house.

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\* So named because the affected person coughs like a gurgling hen.

"Can comrade Quan make his hen-ghost hurt me?" I asked.

"He can if he likes," was the reply.

"Can hen-ghost bring death to a man?"

"Children die, grown-ups get over it after making offerings to the ghost."

That is easy to understand. The children whose resistance to disease is weak, often die from malaria. Grown-up people who are stronger and inured to the disease, fell ill then recover. According to Bao there are among the Mans we know, six, seven who are haunted by hen-ghost. They are all very nice. Neither hen-ghost, nor forest ghost has ever hurt us. I said to my Man friend laughing:

"We get into our mosquito-nets as soon as night falls and take three quinine tablets every week. The ghost can do no harm to us."

As a matter of course Bao does not believe me. He is not to blame. Great is the number of people in the plains who have studied science and are still afraid of hen-ghost!

Nov. 20, 1947 — Vegetables are very scarce now. Whenever she came the old woman smiled awkwardly:

"No vegetables," she said in greeting.

She looked worried, unhappy to have nothing to give us.

"Rice with salt is quite good, mother," we said laughing.

"No. Rice with salt no good. Comrades endure many hardships here," she smiled.

## IN THE JUNGLE

To-day she brought us a handful of black beans. They are not like those grown in the plains. The grains are smaller. I asked her how to cook them but she could not speak enough Kinh to make herself understood.

"Like soya bean. I think," said Khang, "roast them then add some fat, pour in water and salt."

No more fat. I cooked beans with water and salt. Yet we wolfed down five, six bowls of rice. Since living in the jungle we have invented many uncommon dishes.

And we have also discovered many queer things and the queerest is that there is nothing queer. When I was in the plains my hair stood on end with terror whenever I heard raftsmen tell stories of jungle, tiger, panther, bear and boa. I believed that houses in the jungle had to be built on very high piles and strongly fenced, that people had to be in a great number when going out and they had to take with them gongs to frighten the tigers and at night time people dared not open the door and had to urinate right in their houses. Now we are living in the depth of the jungle and on top of very high mountains. The door is never closed because there is no door. Many nights there were only two of us. We go everywhere by ourselves and sometimes I am all alone. I had but a small stick, not to defend myself, but to climb the mountain. Yet I went out leisurely as if I were walking in my room or in my garden. Thanks to Heaven none of us has found his grave in the tiger's mouth!

Defying the Lords of the jungle, Khang often asked me :

"Damn them ! Where have they all gone ? We've been here for half a year, yet we've not seen a tiger or a panther !"

One night little Pu, little Ly and even their dog went down to their house at the base of the mountain to make offerings to the ghosts. We two remained behind. "It's queer that no Fox-fairy comes to pester us !" Khang said laughing.

"Are there tigers in this forest ?" I once asked Bao.

"We've not seen any for a long time. Last year we shot down one."

"Why are there none this year ?"

"Don't know. The other day one was shot at Pic Cay. It killed an ox."

"Are there bears ?"

"Plenty."

"Why have I not seen any ?"

"They do not go out in winter."

"Don't go out ? How do they feed ?"

"They don't eat."

"How can they keep themselves alive without eating ?"

"They can live but have no fat. When they can eat they're very fat."

A few days later people called one another to go hunting bears.

"Where ?" I asked.

"At comrade Quan's field. They came to eat maize, they might be caught in a trap," Chan replied. Then he asked:

"Have you seen them?"

"No."

"They have passed by your hut."

"How do you know?"

"I've seen their foot-prints. They came from the mountain and passed by here to go to comrade Quan's field. They ate maize. Oh! They ate plenty of maize. They ate for many nights."

"It's strange that our friends have gone stealthily by themselves. They've passed by our hut without asking us to go with them so that we can take some cobs for roasting," Khang said laughing.

We cautioned each other not to go out of our hut at night or else we would get our faces smashed. But we were heedful for only a few days, then we again went out at night as usual, clicking our tongues

"There were so many Liberation troops living here and none of them have been killed by tiger or bear."

Nov. 23, 1947.— We grew restless because our newspaper had not yet been issued when Tu and Tam came up. They brought a duck, some dry bamboo-shoots, a handful of letters, new books, newspapers and news bulletins.

Most valuable was the news. Our troops had scored a big victory on the Lo River and shot down airplanes at Cao Bang. On all other fronts we had won many successes. All our comrades had safely arrived at the new organ and had set to work at once.

## NAM CAO

In our area, the enemy had withdrawn from many posts and were on the defensive in the remaining ones, not daring to make incursions as before. Their unique supply is by air.

In such situation there is no need for us to remain too scattered. This only means loss of time. Tu informed us that all preparations at the new organ would be over in a week's time, that we would go down for greater expediency and that this organ would be used only in case of emergency.

As we are going to leave our secluded spot, every day Khang took out his easel and busily set about painting.

Nov. 30, 1947.— Work has started at the printing house. The receiving station is almost ready. We have been down at comrade Chau's house for two days awaiting our return to the village. We shall be very busy soon when our newspaper is issued. We will not be able to come here before long. We want to stay a few days with our friends to have time to chat with them.

Tonight, nearly the whole village was sitting around the fire. We asked them about the comrades who had been in underground activity here in imperialist times. They spoke of Comrades Van and Tong\*. They related the storming of various posts. They sang old revolutionary songs.

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\* Van, pseudonym of General Vo Nguyen Giap, Commander-in-Chief of the V.P.A., and Tong, of Prime Minister Pham Van Dong.

## IN THE JUNGLE

We told them about the plains, Hanoi, the Insurrection days, Central Viet Nam and South Viet Nam meaning to help them understand how large is our country, how populous and rich it is and that they belong to a bloc of people who are carrying out a great movement. We also told them about the world, the revolutionary movement that is seething from Asia to Europe. We used simple words and concrete examples. We mostly spoke of President Ho and they were also very fond of stories about President Ho. With great pride they told us that in the old days the President had often gone through their area. He usually travelled at night, along these steep bumpy and winding paths overgrown with vegetation. Well! compared with him we are but white hair boys who are learning to lead the hard life of the fighters. Our present hardships are but grains of dust beside those the revolutionaries endured in the underground. The Resistance War may lead us to circumstances thousand times more difficult than at present. But we do not feel in the least disheartened. We have faith in our endurance and in our compatriots' assistance and protection. And we have the right to be confident and hopeful when in remote places there are still Man people who live scattered in poverty but are so devoted to the Revolution, to independence and freedom.

Our conversation became livelier with passing minute. The eyes of the Mans sitting by us brightened and came to life. It seemed that something had just woke up in these gloomy, wild heads. Chau and Bao

sang aloud. They told each other: when the Resistance War is successful they would strive to get some money to buy good clothes and go down to the plains for a visit. Trieu Van Huong also warmed up and spoke loudly. He promised that he would shoot down a deer, would take its skin to make a coat when going to Hanoi.

Lieu also brightened up. This girl, as slim as a willow, often cast sidelong glances at Tu. When laughter and voices ebbed down she told Tu in a whisper:

"When the Resistance War is successful, comrade Tu will stay here, take a Man wife and do field-work"

Since then to avoid all misadventures that can alienate the local people's sympathy for us, wherever we go and stay for a long time we always hint cleverly that we are married and have many children. And this is hard upon us. We are young and always yearn for love, yet we have to bridle our hearts. The rosy white-skinned Tho girls with very beautiful eyes, who are very natural and always joking used to tell us

"That's not true! You're not yet married. The Viet Minhs \* do not take wives."

Sometimes the old beast — the dissipated and selfish beast — in us came to life again. In these moments we say to each other half in jest half in bitterness:

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\* Resistance members.

## IN THE JUNGLE

"If only we were not Viet Minhs !"

However the people are very impressed by our correct and polite behaviour. They used to compare our exemplary conduct with that of French officers in the old days. The villagers had to send each day a beautiful girl to the garrison to attend to the French Commander and sleep with him. So we find that it is all the more necessary to preserve our dignity. And whenever we meet a beautiful woman we can but sigh in secret.

**Dec. 2, 1947.**— Yesterday we went down the mountain, the whole Man village gave us a good send-off. Comrade Chau's family gave us lemons, soya beans and eggs. Comrade Quan's mother ran after us giving a big bundle of mustard. We were some way off when comrade Minh's boy ran after us calling. We thought that we had forgotten something. No. Panting he handed us a string of ginger. Although we were already overloaded, to please the villagers we had to accept all their gifts. They time and again told us to come back to see them when we have time.

By evening we arrived at the foot of the mountain. The comrades who had not seen us for a long time exclaimed in astonishment. They said that we were about to become Buddhas meaning that we were about to change into bears. Indeed we were hirsute. Our ears were almost buried by long hair which covered completely our napes. Our complexion and clothes were yellowed from smoke. We felt as if we had broken into a very crowded, illuminated, civilized

place. Everybody looked handsome and their clothes new. The paths and terraces of ricefields seemed quite flat to us.

Today we got clippers and cut each other's hair. It was as if a load had been removed from our heads. We went to a big brook and had a good bath, going under water to wash our heads. I felt very happy although I was blue with cold. Putting on new clothes I was like a man who has shed his skin. On our return we met a file of Tho girls marching behind an old man on their way to their secret shelters.

"Good morning old venerable! Good morning comrades!" I greeted them. The old man nodded his head. The girls answered in a myriad of voices:

"Good morning, comrades!"

"You're very handsome", one of the girls added aloud and they burst out laughing. I blushed with pleasure. I was sorry that I could not find a mirror to have a look at my face to see whether I was really handsome. But in the evening I was brought back to reality. Tu told me that more than a half of our comrades had been praised for their good looks by the local girls. The other half was not lucky enough to have met a girl. I'm no better off than before.

**March 2, 1948.**— Since our newspaper was issued, I have been up to my ears in work and forgot to write my diary. Besides there was nothing worth writing down.

Everyday I busied myself writing articles. I strove to write my leading articles — the editorial as well

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as miscellaneous news — as short and easy to understand as possible. I gave what I had written to the young Tho messenger asking him whether he understood and re-wrote the parts he did not understand and removed the words unknown to him.

For a long time I have always been wishing to have a small paper fit for those who have just learned to read that is, fit for the masses. Prior to the outbreak of the Resistance war I had left Hanoi to go and live in a small town to make an experiment. But I had been unable to find sufficient means to do it. Now I have a good opportunity to put my idea into practice. I have been working very hard and like the work which would have driven me mad four years ago. At that time I only wrote for fame. My ambition was to create something to leave behind to the posterity. I longed for praise from other writers, from the learned and from well-known critics. They were everything to me. I never heeded the ordinary readers. What did they read for? How could they enjoy literature? And literature was of no use to them, to those people who were poor in sentiment and low in education. If they wanted to amuse themselves, there were gambling, drinking and eating. They had no need for books and sometimes if they happened to read a book or two they never took care of remembering the author's name.

I had thought too much of myself. After the August Revolution I had come to understand more clearly that self is insignificant. It is of value only when identified with the people around it. Sometimes one must

be able to forget one's self and one's name if one wants to be of service. It is not necessary to go to a lot of trouble trying to enter one's name in History. To create History is a bigger cause. But the creation of History is the work of the masses. We must think more of the masses than of ourselves. I have made and am still making great efforts to be able to like ordinary, obscure but useful work.

I know that I still have to make greater efforts. There were still moments when the old artist in me woke up. I would then be in low spirits at the thought that for these past ten years I had not written a work to make my friends remember me by. After working as chairman of a village committee, I joined a propaganda team then wrote for a popular paper. When can I devote myself to the great novel that has been haunting my mind every night these last few years?

Is it only now that I have to put aside this long yearned for work? I had to put it aside from the very day it germinated in my mind. In the old days I spent most of my time writing short and long stories, children's tales with which I was not in the least satisfied but they helped me wring money from the literature mongers to keep alive myself, my wife and my children. My country was enslaved, so my language was held in contempt and the writers were looked down on, ill-treated and whose disappearance from the earth would not be a loss to anyone. I had to go counter to my wishes only because I had to keep myself alive. Why should I not control my passions to contribute my forces to the present 'non artistic'

## IN THE JUNGLE

work in preparation for a higher artistic level for myself. Should I have enough talent to write the great work of my life it would be read not by a few thousand people as before but by millions and millions of people.

Every evening the Tho villagers from the other huts came to ours to have a chat or to read newspapers. I have more opportunity to understand better their knowledge, their way of speaking and way of living, and their worries and wishes. Thanks to that, I correct my style and find subject matters for writing. And I am as happy as if I have written a good short story to my liking when I succeed in telling the villagers something practical, giving out news that can be imparted at large, or writing a few lines of ca dao\*, very simple ones but not so simple as to become ve\*\*, or writing an article, that is few of words but rich in content and can be understood even by women and children. Sometimes my friends and even I worry that such a way of writing will damage my novel-writing style, that had won the favour of a number of readers. But the number of readers of my little newspaper is increasing with every passing day. The propagandists and cadres have informed me that my paper fits the local people to a nicety. And these four to five thousand readers re-read or relate what they have read to at least four or five thousand others. Is it sensible for me to pay less attention to

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\* Ca dao : folksongs.

\*\* Ve : rhymed prose.

these scores of thousand of direct and indirect readers than to four or five thousand readers of my novels of old. I was always worried about the effect of my old works. Now, I am easier in mind about my short articles. They do not contain anything profound but they help the readers to have a better knowledge of and a firm confidence in our Resistance war. They stir up their enthusiasm to do something useful to the Resistance war that is being waged by the whole nation and suggest to them what they can do to be of use to the Resistance. That is my dearest wish.

Besides writing for the newspaper, I read books. We organized "self-taught" groups among those of the some cultural level and educational classes for those working at the printing-house. In the evening, sitting by the fire, I explained, in the form of questions, rudiments of geography, history, politics... to the Tho messenger who is living with me. And by midnight, when he was deep in sleep, I quietly slipped out of my blanket, took some bamboo tubs and bare-footed groped down a very slippery path to fetch water at a small pond which dried up in the day-time because too many people came to draw water there. From the manager and editor down to the messengers and supply-men, we live in great friendship and equality like brothers of the same family. So everyone is devoted to the work and has made great efforts. In spite of the unhealthy climate, shortage of foods, very small pay and the long distance separating us from our family and villages we are all very cheerful and very attached to our organ. The villagers living

## IN THE JUNGLE

near our office are very impressed by our way of life. Many have brought their children or brothers to our organ asking us to teach them how to read and write or to take them on for good so that they can learn a trade and at the same time learn to read and write. They have promised that wherever our organ moves to, their sons and brothers will go with us.

Meanwhile, Tu is in close contact with the local administration, mass-organizations and people. He lectures at the political training courses and leads the work of mass-mobilization in our area. Khang has opened a course of lithography and layout of newspaper for propaganda cadres from the neighbouring provinces. Our life is quite pleasant and there are not many changes. From time to time some Man comrades come down to visit us and give us mustard, mushrooms, pumpkin-seed, cassava root, ginger or bear meat.

We jokingly call the Man village our native village. On the Tet\* Tu and I spared a day off to return to our "native village" and visited every family. We were very happy to find in a suit-case a few gilt bracelets and necklaces so we took them as gifts for the girls. Their mothers exclaimed with delight. One of them took out a piece of many days old pork from a basket to make a dish for us. We were overcome with nausea yet we had to eat it. Tu ate "too honestly" and by midnight he brought up

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\* Lunar New Year Day.

all that he had eaten and had diarrhoea. I cleverly dodged this pork, eating nothing but beans and was safe and sound.

During the New Year's holiday, I wrote a short story to dismiss home-sickness from my mind. It was entitled "The bloody Tsao Tsaó!" Later I give it a simpler and more serious title "The eyes".

**March 6, 1948.**— Loi received a letter from his family. Puppet administration was set up in his home area. For half a year the French succeeded in inching forward just one village! If they moved forward on both banks of the river as before my village would have been in the occupied zone. My thoughts went to my parents, my brothers and sisters, my house, my rice-fields and garden. I thought of my young comrades. Are they still able to maintain their organization? Comrades, defend our beloved village!

In French time, I despised my village. Since our country has won independence I love my village with all my heart. Khang and Tu have often to put up with my endless talk of it and its young people.

**March 7, 1948.**— Rain. Too much rain. Jungle leeches made their way into the huts. My trousers rolled up, I put on a raincoat and leaning on a stick, I went to a village in the neighbourhood to speak of the international and home situation at a training class, "instead of Tu who has gone to the plains.

The class is attended by more than twenty Thos and Mans, old and young. There is one over fifty who

## IN THE JUNGLE

has a stately bearing like a Canton Chief. Most of them know the Kinh language just enough for everyday use. How should I lecture to them?

I was quite happy when the old comrade's eyes suddenly sparkled with understanding. At break-time he told me cheerfully:

"Only now can I understand something. Before I knew nothing. No newspaper. And even when I read one, I did not understand all that was written in it."

**March 9, 1948.**— Still at the training class. Sitting in the kitchen and smoking water-pipe tobacco I chatted with the students. They all complained that they had not been able to go to school when they were young.

Nobody believes me when I say that I could not go to school. If I had not gone to school how can I read and write and how can I work now as a cadre? In my childhood I had to mind buffaloes. When grown up I had go on corvee and toil hard to earn something to pay taxes. Only children of mandarins and of rich families could go to school, one cadre told me angrily. Most of them are self-taught. Many scratched letters on the ground while minding buffaloes and in the end could write and read.

"Many children of rich families who could go to school but preferred to play only, remained illiterate after three or four years of schooling", another said. As I showed doubt, he stared me in the face:

"True, they were very silly. They were unable to make love to a woman. They could take a wife only by money."

## NAM CAO

Those who left homes for underground activity suffered a great deal, but those who remained behind suffered tenfold greater. When the enemy concentrated the cadres' families in one place to keep watch on them, the cadres no longer worried about them. They could devote themselves to their work. The traitors were very anxious.

**March 16, 1948.**— Sunshine for three days then rain again. Too much rain. Spring time in mountainous areas is the season of rain and leeches. I would be bored to death without books!

**March 18, 1948.**— This morning the drawling voice of an opium addict of the puppet broadcasting station in Hanoi announced that yesterday they signed the Five-nation Pact. It was mentioned in its prologue of human dignity, freedom of each individual in the society...

My nerves' grated as if scraped by a bamboo blade as when in the old day I heard the warder who was versed in torturing the prisoners for bribes speak of his family's traditional kindness. I felt like cursing aloud.

Yesterday's news: the Chinese Liberation Army is advancing. When the peoples' tide had risen, it spread out powerfully, carrying away and sweeping clean all the garbage of a rotten society. The financiers' gold would be powerless. Comrade fighters, you who are advancing rapidly! We are looking forward to the day we can shake hands with you...

**March 19, 1948.**— Still raining. Last night's rain fell more heavily. Rain dropped through the mosquito

## IN THE JUNGLE

net on my face waking me up. I turned right round in my bed. I tried to make myself as small as possible to avoid rain water from the leaked roof. For a long time I could not resume my sleep. It rained cats and dogs. Torrents of rain poured down then stopped, poured down again then stopped in turn. The rain no longer pattered on the leaves. It poured down in torrents on the thick foliage. I heard the muffled noise of the brook under the floor of our hut high on pile spread out in the dark night like an opened boil.

Dear me! the invisible mites that crawled out of my cotton padded ragged blanket made me itch on the face and neck. I was unable to sleep. And as a matter of course my thoughts jerked back to my wife and children, to so many rains in my life. My life was but an endless rain. It rained at the critical moments. It rained when I left my home. Rain! rain! It rained the night I was drifted in a boat carrying sugar-cane. The rainy nights in old Mrs. Xoan's hut...

At intervals when the rain subsided I again caught gun report. Guns were firing all day yesterday in spite of the rain. In that endless rainy night guns continued to fire heedless of the rain. Gun-barrels never soften. Oh guns! oh steel guns! oh comrades of the Ve Quoc Quan\* I know that many a time you had to eat nothing but rice-gruel and to fight the enemy day and night in the rain. Your hearts are like gun-barrels. Never can rain soften a well-tempered heart. I am ashamed of my weak heart. It is

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\* National Defence Army.

## NAM CAO

not strong yet. Comrades! comrades! unknown fighters! Do teach me to take sacrifice, to fight, to fight in silence, to fight without worrying about fame and even about my life. Do throw the bright light from your hearts and eyes on my heart. My heart is still too dark.

The old dark clouds are still lingering there. Sweep them away for me, please — all of them — so that my heart and soul be shining and like new!...

Guns are still crackling. I strain my ears listening to the gun-fire. Machine-guns are guffawing. Yesterday, two French soldiers in Phu Thong post surrendered to us. How could they put up with their sad plight and rainy days in mountainous areas? How could they endure the hardship of eating nothing but rice-gruel while fighting? Rain! rain! Do go on raining for my sake! Many more enemies will surrender.

1948

## THE EYES



HE young peasant pointed to a small brick gate and turned to me :

"Here you are. This is Mr. Hoang's."

"Thank you, I shall call on you soon," I said

patting him on the shoulder.

I was about to enter the gate when he stopped me short: "Wait, let me ask someone in the house to chain up the dog. It's a big, mean one."

I made a soft exclamation of astonishment as I found it somewhat pleasing to learn that Hoang had another big dog. I remembered visiting Hoang when he was in Hanoi. Every time after ringing the bell, I had had to wait for Hoang to hold fast by the collar his calf-size German dog, and thrust its head into the corner below the staircase before I had the courage to hurry past and enter the sitting-room.

I was very afraid of this fierce animal. Once, arriving at Hoang's house, I felt as if a burden had been lifted from my mind when my friend, instead of standing firmly holding his pet, sorrowfully told me of its death.

The dog died at a time when a horrible famine was raging, one which our future generations would refer to with horror. It died, not because his master was unable to give him some two hundred grammes of beef a day. Hoang was a writer and at the same time a cunning blackmarketeer. When we were starving and did not know where to sell our manuscripts, Hoang was well-off and his dog never went without a meal. But dead bodies abounded in streets and the dog probably died from eating decaying human flesh or breathing in so much stench. It was greatly to be pitied.

And now, calling on Hoang at the place hundreds of kilometres from Hanoi, to which he and his family had evacuated I was told he had another mean dog! What a jest!

I chuckled. My guide did not know what amused me, and laughed also.

At his call, a brisk clack of wooden shoes was heard crossing the tiled yard. A young boy dressed in a black cap and a grey woollen pull-over rushed out. He stared at me with his two jet-black eyes.

"Uncle Do, father! Uncle Do!" he shouted.

It was Ngu, Hoang's son. Not waiting to greet me, he ran inside laughing noisily.



"What is the matter ? What is the matter ? H'm !"  
This was Hoang's voice, grave and threatening. Every time he spoke to his son, he used the same ridiculous voice. The boy mumbled something I could not hear. And then Mrs. Hoang's clear voice rose urging her son :

"Ngu, chain up the dog ! Chain it to the pillar over there !"

Hoang came out. As always, he strutted forward slowly : he was corpulent. As he walked, he swung his arms, the flesh under his arm-pits bulging and making him look too short. When he was in Hanoi, well clad in his European clothes, his heavy gait seemed to be correct and a bit haughty. Now the bulk of his body appeared rather awkward in his light blue pyjamas and white woollen pull-over which I thought too tight for him to breathe easily.

He stopped inside the gate, slightly raised his plump hand toward me, threw back his head and smiled. He gave the appearance of an amazed or overjoyed man. I had enough time to notice a change on his full face : on his upper lip grew a row of moustache shaped like a small horse-shoe.

He stood still for a while, feigning to be overwhelmed with astonishment, and afterwards spoke emotionally from the depths of his throat :

"My goodness ! Brother ! How wonderful !"

He turned to his wife :

"Darling ! It is brother Do himself. He didn't mind walking a long way to come and see us."

## THE EYES

At that moment Mrs. Hoang came running out, still busy doing up the last button of her brick red gown that she had hurriedly put on to welcome me. She greeted me warmly :

"We have been so longing to see you. When our boy ran in to tell us, my husband thought he was mistaken. We couldn't imagine that living some fifteen or twenty kilometres from here, you...."

Not waiting for his wife to finish her words, Hoang tenderly pushed me forward. She ran briskly into the house before us to put the table and chairs in order. "Why this moving welcome?" I thought to myself. I began to doubt the bad opinion I had had of him since the general uprising.

After the August Revolution, Hoang's attitude towards me cooled down suddenly and completely. I called upon him several times to see how much he had changed since our people's great change, but I didn't meet him. His house was always shut up. His servant peeped through a small hole to see who it was and never forget to make sure of my name before running in only to return to tell me that his master was not in. Several times the boy told me the same thing. I began to doubt what he said. On my last call, before I rang the bell, I still heard Hoang's and his wife's voice. But the servant assured me that they had gone to their cottage in the suburbs the night before. It was clear to me that Hoang did not want to receive me. I did not know the reason why. From then on, I went there no more. When we happened to come across each other in the street, we just shook hands in a cool

manner and exchanged some formal greetings and then each went his way. I knew that Hoang had the habit of suddenly turning against his friends for reasons known to him alone. Sometimes it was because a work of his friend won the sympathy of a critic who had criticized some of Hoang's writings. Sometimes he did not need such a big motive. You might be Hoang's closest friend when you were a writer living in a distant province and Hanoi knew you only through the articles you contributed to the press, but if you came to live in the capital and had relations with some other writers, you would no longer be Hoang's friend. Perhaps this was so because Hoang knew how badly he was considered in Hanoi literary circles.

For me in particular, I did not understand why he was hated by so many people until he turned his back on me. I should have understood him better than anyone else. At the time when the allied forces came to our country to disarm the Japanese fascists, a number of taxi-girls flung away their European garments to put on Chinese attire. As for Hoang, with the support of a certain Chinese compradore, he issued a daily paper in which he bellowed out slanders. After abusing everybody, he began to slander his old friends who were all very kind, and who had never had harmed a hair of his head. He hated them because they contributed their articles to the much read papers serving the cause of the national liberation movement. He angrily flouted the proletarian writers and treated them as poor and tattered people

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whose golden time had come to them and who wanted to keep all for themselves. I only giggled. It was not because his slanders offended me, but I could not bear the fact that at that time, there were still a number of Vietnamese writers who used their pens for ignominious deeds.

Hoang was a conservative. He would not transform himself. I thought that he and I would never become close friends again. Why then was he now receiving me so warmly? Had he had enough time to get rid of his previous attitude? Or had the fierce struggle waged by our people swept away from him what remained of his old life? Frankly, I was very moved when he said, "There has not been a day when we did not mention your name in our conversation. Once, when reading an article written by you in a paper I borrowed from a neighbour of mine, I guessed that you must be in the propaganda service of this province. I sent you a letter by the care of a provincial cadre who happened to come here. I just took a chance. I didn't dare to think that it might reach you. And suppose it should reach you, I was afraid that you were too busy to come and see us. But now here you are! What a luck? You do not look strong, how could you hoof it such a long way? And how could you find my house? When we first came here, I used to get lost every time I went about 10 metres away. There are so many gates and they are all alike. Sometimes I got lost after taking a walk in the fields!"

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Hoang's house was quite large. It consisted of three neat rooms bordered with a wide verandah. It looked all the more comfortable with its tiled yard, its walls decorated with flowers and its green kitchen garden.

Hoang was proud that his family could occupy the whole house. The landlord was a merchant in Hanoi. He usually borrowed money from Hoang or the latter served him as a middleman for the purchase of goods. There was no better opportunity for him to show his gratitude to Hoang. He had moved to his father's nearby and let his own house to Hoang.

"If we had not got this house," Hoang added, "we don't know what would have become of us. Other refugees are living in very bad conditions. Can you imagine that a man and his family taking shelter in his young brother's had to move his wife to a hut built in a corner of the garden when she was confined".

I told him that it was the custom in the countryside not to let women...

"Yes, quite true," he interrupted me with anger and indignation, "Yes, it is the custom, but I cannot imagine why they still believe in such odd things in these circumstances. Seeing that his elder is now in poverty, the young brother did not pity him, but on the contrary abused him, recalling the time when his brother spent extravagantly. He scolded him saying, "Why didn't you save your money when you had it? You only spent it on rich food and beautiful clothes." Or he said, "When you had a lot of money I asked

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you to send me some to buy gardens and rice-fields, and you said you only wanted houses in the city. Why don't you remain there now with your houses?"

"You see," Hoang concluded, "it is terrible. Don't they know that in such difficulties caused by the war that they must show kindness to each other? Every man spends his money on pleasure, when he has it, does he not? How many people are there who work like buffaloes, not daring either to eat enough or dress themselves neatly, contenting themselves with whatever dwelling they can get in order to put aside money for the purchase of gardens and rice-fields?"

Mrs. Hoang added:

"Moreover, their ways of looking at things worry us greatly. It can be said that of one hundred persons, ninety nine thought that the French would never dare fight us. Even when the evacuation order was issued, I thought that it was only to intimidate them. And all of a sudden war broke out. Only we and the children could go, we had no time to move all our belongings. Fortunately, we were able to take with us some money and goods we had left at our cottage in the suburbs. If we are thrifty enough, this will last us one year at the best. Of course the end of it will mean poverty. The thing I am afraid of is that when we are poor, people will jeer at us. That is why we dare not eat even a chicken now. It is not because we have no more money left, but we are afraid that they would know and what a shame if they reproach us with it when we are in need. They are people of no mercy, aren't they?"

Hoang burst out laughing :

"And I cannot imagine how they still have time to poke their noses into others' business when they have so many things to do. Suppose today you eat a chicken, tomorrow the news will spread over the whole village. You see, you have just come and some people are already peeping into my house to know who you are. I am sure that to-morrow the news of your coming will be known to every villager. They will gossip in detail about your name and age, how fat or thin you are, how many moles you have on your face, how many holes you have on the left leg of your trousers."

I smiled, explaining, "In war-time strangers who come to the village must be paid close attention to. I think that those who peeped at me are responsible people of the village committee or of the village self-defence group."

"And again their committee and self-defence group," Hoang put in, "they are stupid and pretentious as well. They take pregnant women for traitors having grenades hidden in their skirts! They spend at least a quarter of an hour to spell out a scrap of paper, yet hardly have they seen someone passing by before they ask him to produce his pass. You are asked when you go out. You are asked again when you come back. Suppose you have just gone out of the village and immediately come back to fetch the hat you had forgotten, they also ask you to let them see your paper before you are allowed to go. And you

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are asked again even if you go out right after that. It seems that reading passes gives them much pleasure."

He grinned, running his eyes over me and asked

"Do you understand their psychology? You have been living a long time in the countryside. Try to explain to me why they give themselves so much trouble. Before I came here I was always in Hanoi and only knew about peasants through your short stories. Now living amidst them, I find them really unbearable! Unbearable, I say!"

His contempt was expressed in the curl of his lips. His nose wrinkled as if some decaying corpse was near him. Both he and his wife vied with each other to tell me the many clumsy things of the peasants. "All of them," they said, "are idiots, boistrous, selfish, covetous and miserable. They are not good to each other even between fathers and sons, and between brothers. Boys and lasses are more fussy than anyone else. They don't yet know how to spell correctly, yet they are fond of talking about politics. Hardly have they opened their mouths than they pour out the words "propose, request, criticize, warning, colonialist, fascist, reactionary, socialism, democracy and even, what the hell, 'new democracy'!"

"If they happen to hook someone, the poor creature is helpless and cannot get rid of them. He must endure their propaganda for hours. Perhaps in their opinion those who come from Hanoi such as my wife and I

are outmoded people knowing nothing of the new trend, therefore they never let go the least opportunity to make propaganda. And what propaganda !”

Hoang opened wide his eyes and continued :

“Let me tell this true story which you will probably think I have invented. But I will be hanged if I have added a word to it. One day I strolled to the district market. Before setting off I got detailed information about the way there. Unfortunately, arriving at a crossing I got lost, not knowing which way to take. After waiting for a long while I saw a young man approaching with a bundle of bamboo on his shoulder. I greeted him and asked, ‘Please show me the way to the district market, sir.’ He stood staring at me without saying a word as if I were a creature from Mars. I understood what he wanted. I took out my pass and gave it to him and repeated my question. Only then did he say to me, ‘Just follow this way. When you come to a large banyan tree, turn to the right. After a short distance turn to the left, go past a field, enter a tiled lane of Ngo village, go behind the communal house, turn to the right, go on a while and there you will be at the market.’ It is not exactly what he said but something like it. The only thing I knew was that his information was so complicated — there were so many rights and lefts — that I could not remember. He showed me another means. It was to wait there and follow someone who carried goods to market. I agreed. He laughed and said, ‘Good bye sir, I am in a hurry. I have to take this load of bamboo to Thuong for sabotage works. We have to build up

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barricades to stop the modern motorized forces of the enemy. Our long resistance is divided into three stages : stage of contention, stage of equilibrium and stage of general counter-offensive. The stage of contention means...' He went on like this, saying by heart a lesson of five pages long at least."

Mrs. Hoang burst out laughing. I laughed also but probably in not a very natural way. Hoang deemed it necessary to swear once more :

"I would be hanged if I had invented the story. And, I tell you, I was so astonished I could not laugh. Moreover, I didn't dare to. Suppose I laughed and he beat me, it would be a catastrophe. But since that day on, I have asked my wife always to shut up the gate and we don't dare go out a step."

I feigned laughing. What I wanted to tell him, I kept secret in my heart. I knew he would never agree to being a simple propagandist like me. Moreover, I could not convince him to do what I was doing, to carry a sack on his shoulder and go from one village to another to gain an insight into the countryside and understand it better. It would be of no interest to him. He had a one-sided outlook on the people's life. He saw the young peasant saying by heart his lesson of 'three stages' but he could not see the bundle of bamboo he carried on his shoulder to stop the enemy. And even in the fact that the young peasant said by heart like a parrot the article which he had read in a newspaper, he only saw the apparent stupidity of the thing and did not see the very lofty motive inside. If he still went on looking at things the same way as he

was doing, the more he saw and the more he looked into things, the more he would become bitter and discouraged.

I was well aware of my position. Before this elder in literary circles, I was only a novice, just beginning my career. That is why I did not dare to tell him all I thought. I spoke with care and mentioned only some observations :

“There are so many strange things. Peasants are a mystery to us. I have been living among them for a long time. I was almost discouraged because I saw that the great majority of them are ignorant, miserable, timorous and submissive in a pitiful way. On hearing people speak of ‘the forces of the masses’ I was very sceptical. I always held that the great majority of our people were peasants and peasants of our country would never be able to make the revolution. The days of Le Loi and Quang Trung \* are gone for ever. But when the general uprising broke out I was set aback. Only then did I realize that the peasants of our country could still make the revolution and they made it with great eagerness. I followed them when they attacked the administrative centre of my district. I met them at the front. Many of them had lacquered teeth, gummy eyes, and called grenades ‘lenades’. They sang the national anthem like sleepy people saying their prayers, but at the front they launched assaults upon the enemy with courage. And

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\* Le Loi and Quang Trung were two Vietnamese heroes who fought back the Chinese feudalists who attempted to invade Viet Nam. They were made kings after their victories.

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they worried not a bit about their wives and children and houses and land as they usually did. When meeting them, you could not imagine that they were the same people you had met before. Some five months ago, if a puppet soldier flirted with their wives under their very noses, all that they could do was to keep silent and go away with reluctance and when being far away, to mumble some insults. They kept all their anger and jealousy in the depth of their hearts to pour on the heads of their poor wives on returning back home."

Hoang curled one corner of his mouth to show his contempt and put in with sarcasm :

"But you cannot deny the fact that their stupidities are unbearable. I have seen many self-defence militiamen and even men of the People's Army fingering rifles and grenades like young boys. They did not know that their trifling might cause death easily. Many people did not know how to handle a gun of a special type. Under these conditions heroism results in nothing. But that is a matter of course. How can people know how to handle a gun when they had never had the chance to touch it. And they will know at the end by fighting much. But why not let them stick to fighting with the French. The trouble is that they are wanted to be in this committee and in that. To take a living example, the chairman of my quarter committee in Hanoi before war broke out, was a pork soup dealer. As such he might know how to prepare

a black pudding but how can he assume the task of a committee chairman? The chairman of this village committee when reading my wife's pass, took it for a man's that she had borrowed for the mere reason that her name was Nguyen Thuc Hien instead of Nguyen Thi Thuc Hien, and according to him, women's names must necessarily bear the word Thi as is the custom."

Mrs. Hoang laughed until she coughed and tears streamed down. She took her handkerchief to dry them, smacked her lips, shook her head and said:

"If you can stay here for long, many instances will make you laugh to death. And you know that chairman of the village committee came two or three times and insisted that my husband to be a teacher of mass education or a propagandist."

Her husband added:

"I have nothing to do for the time being. Sometimes I feel lonesome. But, you know, how can I work with such people? I prefer them to treat me as a reactionary."

To turn the conversation upon another subject, I asked him:

"Now you have plenty of time, I suppose you have written a great deal. What interesting work have you created?"

"I haven't written anything. I have not even a comfortable table to write on. Anyhow, we must write something on this period. If we can do the job well, our work will be many times more interesting than

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'So Do' (The lucky man) by Vu Trong Phung. If Phung was still alive, one could imagine what he could have written."

We finished our dinner at 4 p.m. Hoang invited me to go with him and his wife to see some evacuees who had lived with them in the same street in Hanoi. There were a retired chief of province, a school director who was sacked for having violated a school-girl, an old secretary who lived as a middleman in law suits or in helping people to get a mandarin honour. Hoang did not like them because they knew nothing about literature and art. They were only good at "to tom" \*. Their conversation was fastidious. But if he did not call on them occasionally, he did not know where to go. As we walked slowly so that Mrs. Hoang could catch up with us, he told me in a low voice of the rottenness, stupidities, whims and absurdities of each of them.

Mrs. Hoang quickened her steps to rejoin us. Her cheeks were red as she had just come out of the kitchen. She explained her slowness by saying:

"I had to have a last look at the pot of sweet potatoes that I am cooking so that they may be ready when we come back. In this village good food is difficult to procure but we have plenty of cheap things to eat the whole day. Stay here and tomorrow I will buy some sugar cane and perfume it with the flowers of grape-fruit trees and we shall eat it."

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\* A card game which resembles Chinese Mah-jong.

Arriving at a big brick gate covered with creepers, Hoang pulled the bell string. A boy ran out and politely greeted :

"Good afternoon, sir."

"Good afternoon, is Mr. Pham in ?"

"No, Sir. He is at the director's."

"But I was told that the director has been here since this morning."

"No, Sir. I didn't see him come here this morning."

We went back our way. After passing through some crooked lanes, we arrived at another brick gate also covered with creepers. A maid-servant holding a child in her arms greeted us :

"Good afternoon, Sirs. Good afternoon, Madam."

"Good afternoon. Is the director in ?"

"No, Sir. My master went to the chief of province."

"But there they said that he is here."

"No, Sir. My master is out."

Hoang turned back. After taking some steps, he whispered to his wife :

"They are all playing 'to tom', aren't they ? Mrs. Yen Ky is also out, isn't she ? That woman is also a 'to tom' fan. Probably they are gathering here or at Mr. Pham's. Their servants have orders not to let anyone get in."

Mrs. Hoang did not give her opinion. Hoang patted me on the shoulder and said :

"Is it not sad ? Intellectuals are like that. As for the masses, you probably know something about them."

I secretly cursed the accident which brought him to this place together with all the remnants of this

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'intellectual elite'. Why did he not follow the Army or the artists in their propaganda tour, live with the cultural group for the resistance, see students and Government workers enrol in the People's Army, doctors work earnestly in laboratories or in military hospitals, his colleagues go into the midst of the masses to learn from them and teach them, at the same time to get new subjects for their literary creation? I grinned:

"On hearing you, I feel discouraged. Is it not that our resistance is doomed to failure?"

He seized my words as quickly as a cat jumping at a mouse:

"Indeed, I am so pessimistic. To look close at things would discourage me to the utmost. But if I am not as discouraged as that it is probably because I have confidence in the President. I think that if our August Revolution like our Resistance is successful it is thanks to the wise guidance of our leader. Ho Chi Minh should have saved a bigger country to make it worth his while. It must be rather wearisome for him to save a country like ours.

"Our President has done such marvellous things that I always hold that however idiotic our people are, he can lead them to victory in their struggle for independence. The conclusion of the March 6 Modus Vivendi drove the Americans to despair. They saw that they could never deceive him. What are the French worth? They are already too weak. Had not the Americans been behind the screen to pull the wires, the French would never have dared to put their

signatures to the March 6 preliminary agreement. What we had given them then was already something for them. They would have clung to it, would they not?"

In the evening, when we had taken boiled potatoes and tea, we went to bed early. Hoang was afraid that I was tired because that day I had walked some fifteen kilometres and talked with him since my arrival. Moreover though I did not want to sleep yet, I thought it better to be in a mosquito net and covered with warm blanket. The two beds were side by side and separated by a narrow passage. The tulle mosquito nets were as white as snow. Just to see them gave pleasure and comfort.

Mrs. Hoang put things in order, closed the doors, brought a big lamp to our foot and took a bottle. On seeing this, Hoang asked her:

"Are you lighting the big lamp?"

"Yes, but I will put in some more kerosene first."

He then asked me:

"Do you like the novel 'The Three Kingdoms'?"

I told him frankly that I had never read it thoroughly.

"I am sorry indeed," he said. "Among all the novels of the East as well as of the West, I am only fond of 'The Three Kingdoms' and the 'Dong Chu Liet Quoc' (The Novel of the Eastern Great Kingdom of the Chu dynasty). Speaking of novels we must say that Chinese ones are the best. But in my opinion, the two I just mentioned are the most outstanding. 'Thuy Hu' is also interesting but not so interesting as 'The Three

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Kingdoms' and 'Dong Chu Liet Quoc'. For other novels, however interesting they are, I only read them once. To read them the second time does not have the same interest. As for 'The Three Kingdoms' and the 'Dong Chu Liet Quoc' I can read them again and again and always find them as interesting as the first time."

"Do you have these two novels with you now?" I asked him.

"The Dong Chu Liet Quoc was lost in Hanoi. I could not take it with me. What a pity! Fortunately the 'Three Kingdoms' was left at my cottage in the suburbs and I saved it. Otherwise I would be heart broken."

He shook the ashes from his cigarette and continued:

"I have just asked you whether you like to read 'The Three Kingdoms' because every night, we have the pleasure to read it before going to sleep. But today as you have come, we don't know if it is good to keep our habit. If you like to talk, we can spend an evening without reading."

Of course I asked them to read the novel as usual. Hoang asked me:

"Do you mind the light and our reading aloud?"

I told him I can even sleep in the printing-house under the light of the lamps and beside the noisy machine. Here, with these warm blankets, even if some one shoots near my ear, I could sleep soundly

all the same. Hoang laughed from the depth of his throat like a cock, and said to his wife :

"Then let us read. Take out the book, darling."

Mrs. Hoang went to the bookcase and took a thick book with a leathered back and asked her husband :

"Will you read or will I?"

"You read."

She put the lamp on the low stool at the head of her bed, took off her gown and lay at the side of her boy.

"Where were we last night? It seems to me that..."

"Never mind, you just read again the Chapter in which Tsao Tsao flattered Kuan Yu."

"Well," he asked me, "was Tsao Tsao a talented man in your opinion?"

I replied off handedly :

"I am told that he was very talented."

"Very talented, indeed! He was the most talented man in 'The Three Kingdoms'. I can't imagine how he could be so talented?"

Mrs. Hoang had found the chapter. She began to read with her clear voice. Hoang smoked and listened. At interesting paragraphs, he slapped his thigh and said loudly :

"Very talented! Very talented! One cannot be more talented than that! Damned Tsao Tsao!"

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IEU tenderly took her daughter Huyen to the bed in the inner room, laid her beside her little sister and put a fan in her hand. Then she went back to the bed in the outer room. Little Quan, her five-year-old son, was sound asleep, his arms and legs spreadeagled, his head slightly to the side, facing the front-door. His brow and hair were wet with perspiration. She fondled the child, mopped his brow and fanned him. She stayed there a long time, fanning her son, her mind full of vague thoughts. She never found the minutes spent beside one or the other of her children long enough, she always wanted to prolong them indefinitely.

She yawned. The light breeze crept through the slits of the window-blind, spreading its soft freshness over her body. She had dug but a few rows in her garden the whole day, but three hurry-scurry departures

resulting from three false alarms about the arrival of the French had completely exhausted her. She wished she could lie down for a little but she made an effort to resist the temptation knowing that as soon as she lay down she would fall fast asleep. She must not sleep, but instead must avail herself of the moonlight and get through with the patch of garden outside the front door; only a small part of it could be dug in the day-time, because one had to be constantly on the alert, lest the French should come. She had to force herself to do the work, for how could she afford to hire a hand? What could her children live on?

Lieu thoughtfully stroked her child's hair a little while; then she stood up resolutely, stretched herself and stepped out into the yard. The moon was dazzlingly bright, shedding its light over the patches of earth which seemed to merge one with the other.

The ground was covered with the shadows of banana-trees, the broad leaves of which, bathed in the fresh moonlight, were stirring languidly. The light and the outside air enlivened her. Briskly she went to the foot of the custard-apple-tree where she had put her hoe, picked it up, and with her back to the half-broken patch began to dig with stubborn energy. The sharp hoe falling at regular intervals on the soil made brisk and energetic sounds. They seemed to echo around with other sounds of hoes digging in neighbouring patches. Lieu strained her ears; more sounds were coming from farther away. So other people were also working their patches around her, by night. Nobody was willing to lag behind the others. All were keen to

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avail themselves of the moonlight to work and make up for the time lost in repeated evacuations ; they also wanted to fill the gap left by the absent ones who had gone away to serve the Fatherland. She smiled, thinking of the words which were on everybody's lips : "To increase production"... production ! production ! The sounds of hoes continued, as if echoing within her. They resounded more and more distinctly. The moon was slowly rising.

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The moon was very high now. Silence gradually came as the night wore on. Even the rustling of bamboo-leaves could be distinctly heard. The sounds of hoes thinned out, stopping in one garden, then in another. Sleep stole over the silent village, weighing heavily on it. A few isolated sounds of hoes continued. Lieu yawned many times. The hoe did not fall as regularly as before. But sounds of other hoes could still be heard from the neighbouring gardens. Lieu would not rest. People who had no small children could work in the daytime until the last few minutes before it was known for certain that the French were coming ; only then had they to evacuate. But Lieu had three children, all very young. She had to get away before the others. Only very little work could be done in the daytime, therefore she had to catch up by toiling harder and later in the night. "I'll sleep in the daytime" she said to herself.

The nearby sound of a hoe finally vanished. Lieu's arms were worn with fatigue. Every lift of the hoe

moved her whole body, which had become so heavy that she had to make considerable efforts to stir it. Her eyelids were heavy with sleep. The shadow of the night had crept into her head. Her hoe was falling with irregular sounds, now so painful and lonely. There was nothing around her to keep her up and encourage her. How weak and dispirited one feels when left alone !

The moon had reached its zenith. The clumps of banana and bamboo-trees seemed to doze off over their shrunken shadows. Gasping for breath, Lieu went back home, her hoe in her hand. She sat on the threshold for a short rest then went to the pond to wash herself. The water revived her.

Back in the courtyard, she heard a low voice singing from the gate :

"Dusk falls over the green fields  
My beloved one carries the harvested paddy  
In baskets hung from her shoulder-pole,  
So that I might go to the front and kill the enemy  
Last Autumn when war broke out..."

She recognized Nhan immediately. This song was Nhan's favourite one and by dint of hearing it, Lieu knew it by heart. The sweet voice rang through the deep night and in Lieu's heart. Surprised to see Lieu stripped to the waist, standing in the yard, Nhan exclaimed :

"What ! Haven't you gone to bed yet ?"

"I have just finished digging the garden."

"Bravo for the women who increase production !"

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She was talking at the top of her voice with all the youthful mischievousness of her age. Lieu beckoned to her :

"Not so loud, dear ! Let the kiddies sleep."

Nhan caught herself :

"My goodness ! I'd forgotten. So the little one is willing to sleep with his sister, is he ?"

"He has to. If I have to sleep with him, we'd starve in these resistance days... But why is the class over so late ?"

"It's been finished quite a long time. But I had to hold a meeting until just now."

"What did you discuss to keep you so long ?"

"The programme for patriotic emulation".

Nhan looked attentively at Lieu and seized her wrist :

"My dear sister, you are becoming very tanned and thin these days. You are looking quite old and worn out. Take care of yourself. What a pity if my 'dear brother' did not recognize you on his return !"

"No fear, we are an old couple and have three children already," said Lieu with a laugh. "Leave those worries to unmarried girls"...

Nhan blushed and said, swinging Lieu's hand : "I don't care either !"

Lieu looked affectionately at Nhan ; the young girl was her younger brother's fiancée. She herself had introduced them. They were going to marry just when the war broke out. But Duong had joined the guerillas, then the regular army, and had been away at the front ever since...

"Have you had any letters?" Nhan asked.

"My husband never writes home when he is away."

Nhan gave Lieu a compassionate look, then blurted out involuntarily :

"What a hard man !"

Lieu smiled. She knew that Nhan misunderstood her husband. Kien was respected by everyone, but he was somewhat upbraided by all for neglecting his wife and children. People said that he had lived in town a long time and had taken a liking to the "up-to-date" girls, and was spurning his too-rustic wife. Yet nobody loved his family better than Kien.

Lieu had known a very hard life since her marriage, yet she felt that she was the luckiest woman in the world. Kien loved her and never said an unkind word to her.

As for her, though she didn't know much about her husband's work, she loved his character and admired his manners ; and trusting him, she believed that he was always right. She loved what he loved, and hated what he hated. Never did she make demands on him, neither did she keep him from doing what he had to.

About a week after the beginning of the war, Kien returned from town. Contrary to his usual custom, he avoided all his friends and comrades in the village, lest, knowing of his return, they should come and see him. He told his wife : "I want to keep the whole day for us". Kien was about to leave for a very far place. He knew that the Resistance would be very hard ; the enemy might come to the village and devastate it. Lieu would have to evacuate with her children. Far

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from her garden and her field, without a cent to start a little business with and quite inexperienced in such matters, what would become of her, a woman alone with three young children? He felt foreboding at the thought of all the sufferings and hardships lying ahead of his wife and children. But the organization was calling him and this organization was a sacred thing to him. He was devoted to it till death. Never had he refused it anything. The country was in need of arms, of sacrifices.

There is no sacrifice without pain. That night, after the three children had gone to sleep, Kien and Lieu lay awake nearly the whole night through, without speaking much to each other, their heads lying close on the same pillow. In this farewell night, Lieu realised all her husband's ardent love towards her; she was both happy and bitterly sad. From afar echoed the crack of guns, now in bursts, now in isolated shots. Lying by her husband's side, she heard the detonations but with the closeness of her husband's body felt a sensation of serene sweetness and poignant sadness stealing over her. Alas! It would have been so easy for them to know happiness! But the greedy pirates' cruel hands extinguished lives, causing sufferings and humiliations, separation and death! Never had Lieu understood better than then the resentful words her husband used to speak: "No need to speak of happiness as long as we have not kicked the French out of our land. Our people would only live a dog's life!"

Kien said sadly to Lieu: "Since our marriage, you have known many hardships. In the worst difficulties

and greatest dangers, when you were badly in need of my help, I left you alone with the children. Do you bear a grudge against me?" Lieu did not answer, contenting herself with stroking her husband's hair tenderly. With a wan smile, Kien went on "After the victory of the Resistance war, if we are still alive, we'll come back to this village and be together again, shan't we?" Lieu had a glimpse of the heart rending separation. A sudden chill crept over her. She was on the verge of bursting into sobs, but clenched her teeth to refrain from doing so. Kien gently took her hand in his, as in the first days of their married life. They fell asleep with their heads touching.

Kien left the following day. He avoided looking at his children. Lieu was well aware that he was afraid of bursting into tears. She did not weep either. Cheerfully, she said to him for a joke: "How worn out your winter jacket is! You look quite old in it, my dear!" But a few moments after his departure she sent her children out to play in the garden and gave way to her tears.

Lieu now felt a lump in her throat at the recollection of these moments of separation.

Mistaking Lieu's sadness for repressed indignation at her husband's indifferent behaviour, Nhan consoled her:

"Never mind, dear, we are living through hard days now; but when Independence Day comes, we'll be happy to our heart's content, Kien will be such an important person!"

## LONGING

Lieu shook her head

"Not at all. After the victory, we shall meet again, life will be easier, the kiddies will go to school. That is all I wish for ; my husband does not like honours, he prefers to lead a simple life. I am at one with him."

"When Independence Day comes, he will come back and work in our village. With his leadership, we shall build it up in no time."

Lieu and Nhan recalled the old evenings, when they used to gather in this yard, under the moonlight, and have talks. Kien would give a sketch of the jobs which would have to be done: "We'll build a dam where our village and Son village border on each other. It will save nearly one hundred 'mows' of paddy-fields and bring in some hundreds of thousands of dong's profit to the village each year. Without gambling, expensive and wasteful feasts on social occasion, with industrious and rational labour, making use of every pond, big and small, breeding fish in one, growing lotus in another, growing longan-trees on every roadside, extending cotton-growing and cotton-spinning, how long will it take for our village to thrive? Only three years. Every road in this village should be paved. Two more schools should be built beside the one already existing. We must have a decent club and library. The information hall will have a radio-set.

...Then, our co-operative will be a very big one".

Nhan's mouth tightened :

"Those damned French only wish to strangle us so that we cannot raise our heads. But is there anyone who will let them have it their own way?"

A sudden crack of guns and a burst of grenades resounded, as if in reply to Nhan's question.

She exulted :

"I'm right, amn't I ? It's our guerillas for sure. They are quite good fighters now."

"If only they could attack and completely wipe out the enemy position ; we should not have to evacuate any more, and more time would be spared for production."

"They'll have to go away anyhow. I am told that we are now concentrating our forces to annihilate the isolated posts of the French. We are now in the second stage".\*

Though she did not quite know what this 'second stage' meant, Lieu felt cheered up. So we have covered one stage, and our struggle has drawn a step nearer to victory.

"It's hard indeed, but you get used to it, Nhan dear. To-morrow, we'll have to evacuate again. If some dozens of their soldiers are killed tonight, they're sure to come and raid us to-morrow morning. They'll burn some more houses. That's all they can do ! But what does it matter... Shall we go to sleep now ?"

"Yes, so that we can get up early to-morrow. Remember to wake me up, dear sister. I'm getting lazy these days, and often oversleep."

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\* The Resistance was divided into three stages  
 first, the stage of contention  
 second, the stage of equilibrium  
 third, the stage of general counter-offensive.

## LONGING

Nhan had only her grandmother on her mother's side left; the old woman was on the verge of eighty and had evacuated a long way away. She would not come back and Nhan was left by herself to look after the fields and the garden. She would spend the night with Lieu for company, and to give Lieu a hand as well, whenever they had to evacuate. They went into the house. The moonlight falling aslant lit up the near side of the beds. Lieu caught sight of her eldest daughter, Huyen, who was sleeping with her face buried in her younger brother's curled up body. She uttered in a low voice:

"Naughty girl! Why do you snuggle so close up to your brother? It's so hot!"

Nhan went to the bed and giggled at the sight

"Let me carry her to this bed"

She slipped her hands under the little girl and carried her to the middle bed

"Dear me! How heavy my niece is! When will you give me some of your wedding betel to chew?"

Lieu burst out laughing, and took her up affectionately

"Rubbish! Rather ask yourself!"

As she stooped to kiss her daughter, her cheek brushed against her husband's old torn silk shirt. She felt the freshness of the soft, velvety material. Since her husband's departure, she had never parted with this old shirt of his.

She shut her eyes, fondling her child:

"Poor, darling! You have had to sleep with your sister for so long! Mummy left you! Naughty mummy! Those wicked French make you suffer!"

She clasped the child to her breast. Kien's cheerful image appeared before her eyes. The Day of victory! The day of Independence! She had visions of a toddler running out to welcome his daddy! She heard Kien exclaiming:

"Ah! Ah! My son is quite grown up, isn't he?"

Those beautiful images glimmered in her mind, accompanying her into the land of dreams.

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## **FOUR KILOMETRES FROM AN ENEMY POST**



was told by the people living in the region surrounding the post that usually at about four o'clock in the afternoon, the French troops

stationed at that post came back to their base from their plundering raids. In spite of the hint, I was cautious and waited till it was quite dark before taking the ferry boat at a place two villages away from mine.

I had the feeling that it was very late in the night. A dead silence prevailed over the country. Not a dog's bark was heard. Not a flickering flame. Not a cough. Even the sentinels were not seen. Had they all evacuated? I could not help being a little anxious and, almost without my noticing it, I instinctively slowed down my steps and tried to walk noiselessly. My eyes

tried to pierce the darkness before me. Doubting each bush which stood out along the roadside, I pricked up my ears. Nothing was heard except my heart's throbs. The road was deserted. I suddenly felt a bit hesitant, wondering: "Has the enemy moved his post nearer? Is he stationed right in my village?" I stopped a moment, then proceeded.

All of a sudden, a call was heard: "Halt!" I had the feeling that it was not I but the silence itself which started. I stopped and looked around, unable to realize from which corner the call came. The roadsides were lined with thick bamboo hedges. About half a minute later two figures came up to me

"Where are you going?", they asked.

"I am going to Dai," I replied.

"Where do you come from?" they continued.

I produced my passport. A guard took it away and came back a moment later to hand it to me, saying: "Go, please."

"Please let me know," I asked, "whether there are French posts along the way from here to Dai?"

"No," they replied, "the enemy is stationed a village off from Dai, at Bai Thuong."

I felt a bit more reassured. "You are really a timorous man having just come from a security zone" I laughed at myself. It was rather cold. Only at that moment did I realize this.

I stopped dead. There were people coming in my direction. I hastened to the side of the road and hid in



a bamboo bush. A group of men and women, carrying loads on their heads or at both ends of their shoulder poles, walked silently and hurriedly.

"Where are you going, fellow-countrymen?"

"We are going to take refuge in another place."

"Where do you come from?"

"From Bai."

"But they say that French troops are stationed there!"

"Yes, they are, but we often go home secretly to get food and goods."

I realized all the more my cowardness. My fear vanished. I was then within the limit of my village, not far from my house. It was deserted all around me. A dead silence prevailed. Pitch darkness. Houses stood out gloomily with no fire, no living soul. Alas! where is the busy atmosphere of the bygone evenings when the youth, learning how to handle sticks for guns, along the road, clanked them with each other sharply; the children sang; the old folk talked and smoked water-pipe tobacco in the inns; the evening literate classes began with the teachers' resounding explanation and the pupils' monotonous collective reading. Where have my family gone? Is there anyone still remaining in my hamlet? Can it be that after half a year's absence, now coming back to my native village, I cannot enjoy a happy night at the side of my wife and children in the nice wooden house which I had built at the cost of untold hardships? No doubt my house now has the stuffy smell and dreariness of

## FOUR KILOMETERS FROM AN ENEMY POST

an uninhabited dwelling. Is there still a mat in it? I imagined that I would curl up, unable to sleep through the night, benumbed and faint in the dreariness and emptiness of the house which seemed too large. No cosy lamp-light dancing on the walls. No prattling and laughing of my son Thien and daughter Huong playing with my fifteen month old son pressing his cheek against my wife's breast and laughing merrily with them. No tender smile of my wife as she bends to kiss her children. Without these things, my house would be a mausoleum. I knew beforehand that my tears would run silently through the night in this house. I felt indignation rising and a lump in my throat. My angry eyes looked into darkness, towards Bai Thuong village where the enemy had caused this scene of ruin and devastation. My village... Alas! How could it come about that my beloved native village be reduced to such a tragic situation?

I hesitated on the dike at a place from which a steep lane ran down to my hamlet. I looked at the lane which appeared and disappeared between large ponds glimmering in darkness and then looked back in the opposite direction. Shall I go home? Or to some other place?... I wanted to look for someone to talk with in order to hear a human voice. But whom am I to look for? Who still remains in the village? I drew near a house at the side of the road: the gate was shut, the door barred by a screen of plaited bamboo. Silence. I went to another house about ten metres further: the gate was shut, the door barred by a screen of plaited bamboo. Silence. I cleared my throat to give sign of

my presence. No one came out. Perhaps I would experience the same thing at ten other houses. I hesitated a moment and decided to retrace my steps.

All of a sudden some people laughed uproariously. The laughs, merry, resounding, strong and bold, vibrated in the midst of this deathlike silence. How lost and strange they sounded. I became joyful: That clear resounding voice is that of Hien, a youth in the village, for sure. The rather rough one added to it is that of Khoi. The lads, their arms around each other's neck walked together, telling the story of Binh, the head of the village, who courted girls. Mimicking Binh, Khoi cleared his throat in a dignified way and imitated his drawling affected voice:

"Who goes there?"

"Me."

"A man or a woman?... Woman? Old or young?" Hien again laughed uproariously. Khoi joined in with his hoarse laugh. As they walked, they swayed boisterously from one side of the road to the other laughing playfully.

I suddenly felt my heart brighten. No! My village was not dead; it was still alive. It was still full of youthful sap. How encouraging this juvenile laugh was at that moment! I felt imbued with a new strength, all sadness about the absence of my family and the wretched state of my garden vanished. There was no cause for discouragement. The inhabitants have gone for the time being but the soil remains fertile, the vegetation luxuriant. People were still laughing merrily in the midst of this dreariness. There

## FOUR KILOMETERS FROM AN ENEMY POST

were only two boys but they dared to laugh loudly and proudly. There were still some people left behind. Vigorous shoots were still growing inside this apparent ruin, shoots bursting with sap and developing vigorously like a teenager in his rapid growth. These shoots are swelling, opposing death, gaining upon death, and trying to break it open to spring into light, air and the large space in order to develop one hundred, even one thousand times more quickly. Nothing could strangle that growing juvenile strength.

I asked them aloud, my voice betraying my joy :

“Are you Khoi and Hiên ?”

“Who is there ?”

I approached them and rested my hands on their shoulders. It was dark and my clothes were different from those I used to wear before I left my village, therefore they had to scrutinize me for some time before recognizing me.

“Ah, Vinh ! Where did you come from ?” Khoi held fast my hand. Hien cried in ecstasy

“Good Heaven ! It's Vinh ! Vinh ! Here you are after so long a time ! We thought that you had gone away for good.”

I was deeply moved. I loved them and they loved me very much. We were comrades, working together since the time of underground activities. After the general insurrection, I had to quit my village and leave them behind to carry on work which better befitted my abilities, but though being far from them, I did not forget my loyal comrades-in-arms back in my native village. My name still figured in the roll of

the members of the Youth Union for National Salvation of my village. I continued to entrust Hien with a sum of money with which he paid the monthly fee for me. Every time I came back home, I usually attended meetings of the Youth Union. When at home I set up a common fund which, when big enough, was used to establish a co-operative, and a cattle-breeding farm, hire ponds to raise fish or grow nenuphar plants, and buy land for production purposes. Later on, the Youth Union became the main organization whose membership was the largest, firmest, the most united and the most active in the village. Now realizing that they still remained behind and were in high spirits, I was very happy.

I asked them :

“You all remain in the village, do you ?”

“If the youth run away also, it means ruin,” they replied. “We passed a resolution that all the youth should remain in the village.”

“What about their families ?”

“They must evacuate, otherwise nothing can be done if the enemy comes.”

“Are there many deaths among us ?”

“Only six”.

Hien gave their names. He also told of the military feats and heroic death of each of them. I could not help being much grieved on hearing the news but at the same time felt proud. Hien let me know that the whole of my family had evacuated, and now there was neither a cover nor a mat in my house.

## FOUR KILOMETERS FROM AN ENEMY POST

I asked :

“Is there a place for me to sleep ?”

“There are many. Let us go to Ngu’s. He is living around here.”

“Why around here ?”

“Well ! we change our place all the time. No one sleeps in his own house. Damn them all ! They are searching for us intently !”

I had to grasp Hien’s shoulder so that he could guide me. It had rained during the previous days. The narrow lane became slippery. It meandered past rice-fields and ponds, through thick bamboo hedges. After crossing a bamboo bridge, we entered a large bushy garden, passed it, threaded our way through a bamboo hedge, proceeded to another lane also, bordered on both sides by ponds ; again we threaded our way through a hedge then passed a garden, and, after walking along a winding lane for some time, I saw a flickering flame. On approaching it we discovered a small thatched house. Ngu was sitting by the fireplace, searching his shirt for lice and throwing them into the fire. His wife, putting bananas into a large basket, laughed on hearing her husband say : “These blood sucking colonialists must be annihilated ! I have killed about a company, but this does not mean that all of them are destroyed.” I held my nose and imitating the French accent, asked in French :

“Eh ! tu ve \*, what are you doing there ?”

He turned, joined his hands to kowtow, saying,

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\* Self-defence guards.

"Mandarins ! I invite you to enter and receive some blows !"

He thought that it was only Khoi and Hien. When he saw that there was a third man, he looked with wide-opened eyes and recognized me immediately :

"It's quite right. Vinh has come back !"

He immediately threw his shirt onto the ground and ran to us :

"Dear me ! May God damn you ! Where have you been for so long ? Half a year away from us ! Suppose the French had killed us all, whom would you live with ? This time I'll be damned if you can run away. Our guerrilla unit still lacks a qualified political commissar, we always regretted that you were not at home to fill the post."

I could only embrace him and laugh. Khoi said

"This time, we'll just tie him up here. Now it's fighting ranks first, no more a question of literature but of dealing death blows to the French."

Hien put in :

"We are talking seriously. This time please stay in the village with us. We are quite at our ease here."

On entering the house, I said :

"Yes, quite at your ease. But the question is how to get a living. My family has gone away, whom will I rely on to live ?"

Ngu pursed his lips, and took a sight at me, saying :

"You are not so smart ! Why should we worry about help from our family ? We can live as well without it. Our organization is quite an ingenious one."

## FOUR KILOMETERS FROM AN ENEMY POST

In fact their organization was ingenious. The youth raised a sum of money. The villagers added their fund. With the capital thus provided, they bought cotton, took it to the locality where women and children were evacuated for spinning and weaving. Men and healthy women with no babies at breast who could come back home, were allowed to come at night and take away what they could collect from their garden to sell and make a living out of it. Those who were swift-footed enough to be able to shirk the enemy in time might remain at home and continued their productive work, but they must have secret ready-made shelters to hide against the enemy's raids; moreover they were allowed to keep in their houses only a quantity of food sufficient for five days, at the end of which they would go and fetch a new supply. A large quantity of foodstuffs stored at home risked being plundered by the French. This rule applied to the whole village. As for the Youth Union members, they lived as a collective, established co-operative and work-exchange teams to help each other. In spare time, they would hire themselves out to the other villagers. They also bought a boat to facilitate the transport of foodstuffs and goods. Money was entrusted to skilful people to do business transactions and got profits for the upkeep of those who were busy doing resistance work. The village was divided into sectors. Each sector was under the guard of a youth group which had the responsibility of protecting gardens and houses. When the enemy came they warned each other. If they were able to fight, they

would fight ; if not they would hide in secret shelters, holding their breath. From time to time they followed the regular army to launch a surprise attack against the enemy, or by themselves went to disturb the enemy to get used to military operations and gain more experiences.

Due to this good organization, the villagers who had evacuated could get a living, their gardens and rice-fields were not laid fallow, their crops could be harvested almost in full as in former times. The French came almost every day. However, the administration was maintained as usual, no plundering or theft occurred, and the people's property was intact ; there were less persons violated or arrested than in other localities.

Ngu said to me :

"The situation is thus quite all right for the time being. It is not as in the beginning when the inhabitants were in confusion. Now they are used to the new life. Particularly among the Youth Union the spirit has been raised unexpectedly. Its members have increased five-fold, not taking into account more than a hundred members already enrolled in the Army or serving in other organs. The discipline is as strict as before, even stricter. There are many new talents, therefore, the death of a few does not influence the general situation. Let us take Com as an example. Had you ever before thought that one day he would all alone attack the French with hand grenades ? And he did this many times. Once he killed two of them. The French got angry and burnt down Ngan's house.

## FOUR KILOMETERS FROM AN ENEMY POST

Another time he and Khoi waited in ambush, one hiding on one side of the road and the other climbing to the top of the village gate. A group of eight French soldiers passed through the gate; Com, from the top of the gate, threw a grenade at them. But it was dud. From the side of the road Khoi threw another grenade which exploded. How fortunate it was! The boys were able to escape. Probably there were some French soldiers killed, but none of our lads knew how many. How could they know when they were busy running away as fast as their feet could carry them! But traces of blood could be seen afterwards along the road. The funniest thing was once when he was lying in his house three French soldiers and a traitor passed along the street. Tickled by this sight, he thrust his two remaining hand grenades into his pockets and followed them. When near Bien's house, he hurled one grenade which dropped to the ground with a dumb sound like a green custard-apple and rolled over and over on the road. The traitor rushed forward, seized him by his chest and called the French: "Eh Sirs! Here is a Viet Minh! Sirs! Being at the end of his tether, our lad took the other grenade and without unpinning it struck hard with it at the bridge of the traitor's nose. Hurt by the blow, the traitor had to let go of him. Com had a narrow escape but still boasted: "Damn it! I had only dud grenades but the French couldn't do anything against me. If my grenades did not explode, I used them as knuckle-dusters. I could smash the traitor's face, couldn't I?"

I laughed fit to split my side. How could there be such smart fellows! I felt a great affection for them. To tell the truth, at that moment I was quite willing to remain definitely at the village and do the job of a political commissar and live with them. Suddenly Khoi said:

"Look! Mayor Ton has now become a good man! He's getting along quite well with us!"

I was bewildered, not because Mayor Ton could become good towards the youth but because the youth dared to believe that this could happen. I had had much trouble about this question but had been unable to convince them. My opinion had been that such people as Mayor Ton must be drawn to our side whereas the youth had been obstinate in their conviction that he and the like accustomed to bribing, were unable to serve the revolution. What miracle could have brought about this sincere co-operation for which I had so hoped?

Ngu laughed, saying:

"Nothing miraculous! The old fellow had some hundred baskets of paddy which he did not have time to evacuate. No hand could be hired for the transport. We volunteered to help him, whether he'd pay us or not. To tell the truth, we only wanted to carry the paddy away, lest it should be plundered by the enemy. It was an eye-opener to him. He was very moved, thanked us and admitted that we were people devoted to the common cause. In consequence, he gave us full support and drew the former notables to our side. Our villagers have never been so united as now."

## FOUR KILOMETERS FROM AN ENEMY POST

I slapped my thighs, laughing :

"Don't you see? I always said that we must believe in Uncle Ho's teaching that anyone can become good! You were too sceptical and narrow-minded. You did not want to win them over."

Ngu pursed his lips.

"Impossible if there is not a good opportunity. Occasions like this are necessary so that they may understand us before we can win them over."

Anyhow this was a very happy thing. I was even happier than when learning that my friends could kill the French. I told them :

"This time, after complete independence, we'll build up the village to our heart's content. We are united into one single bloc with nobody to stand in our way or sabotage our work. There's nothing that we can't do."

Hien nodded

"Of course. But do you intend to talk the night through? Will you keep silent so that Sister Ngu can sleep? Tomorrow she will have to carry bananas away early in the morning, lest she should run into the French patrols, then it'd be all up with the bananas!"

Ngu said :

"Never mind; my wife has prepared the sampan; she is going right now and won't sleep at home."

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At daybreak next morning, I hurried to leave. But it was too late. Hardly had I walked a short distance before a burst of gunfire cracked fiercely in the upper region. The self-defence guards warned me:

"Go back. The French are coming to Vu market. They will go by Nam Truc way."

Being afraid that they might also take the opposite direction; I did not go back, but went down to the river. Hearing the alarm, the boatmen had sunk all their sampans. I took off my clothes, put them into my bag which I carried on my head, and swam across the river. The water was icecold. When reaching the other bank, I was blue with cold and shaking from head to foot. But what did it matter to me at that time? A night spent with Hien, Ngu and Khoi inspired in me the cheerfulness, enthusiasm and boldness of those youths who had to struggle daily in the enemy rear. I grinned while putting on my clothes, defying the volleys of machine guns which were rattling two kilometres only from me and were coming nearer and nearer. On this side of the river, the alarm-tom-toms were resounding from one village to the other. The self-defence guards' whistles rent the air with their shrill short sounds calling one another. The lads ran hurriedly and noisily about the village to lay ambushes in the fields, and on the bank of the river. Their eyes flashed fire.

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