

*Brothers of the Revolutionary Liberation Front,*

*My wife and I have only one son. Now we are caught up in the strategic hamlet. In the old days, thanks to the Revolution which gave us land, we got along quite well. We owe a great debt to the Revolution and the Party. My son (the bearer of the present message) has grown up. I cannot let him be pressganged into the My-Diem army, to fight against the Revolution. So we send him to you as a present to the Revolution. He is still young and inexperienced. Make a man of him, we shall be most grateful to you.*

Nguyen Van Ba, poor peasant.

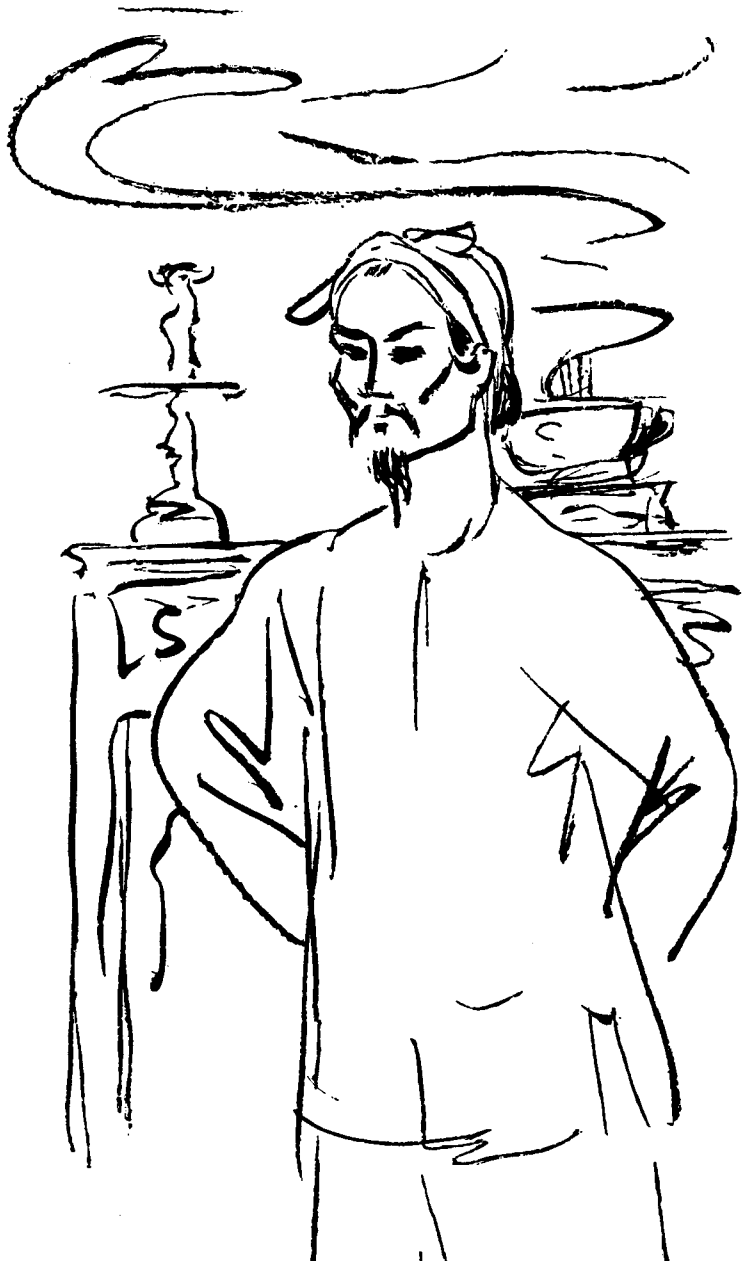
Under the signature, there were also prints of the thumb and the forefinger, made with a mixture of soot and coconut oil. The guerilla commander came up to Trung and clasped his shoulders.

"So it's you," he said, as though seeing the boy for the first time. "Your father sent you here, didn't he?"

Trung smiled and nodded. The commander added:

"Your uncle Chin Tam has talked to me about you. Good, you can stay here. Perhaps you'll go with us. Now, it's late. Go to sleep. We'll discuss everything in more detail to-morrow. I have a very big mosquito net. Come on inside!"

1963



## THE NATIVE LAND

IT was then about the 23rd of the twelfth moon. The year of the Dragon was drawing near. Dinh, the editor-in-chief of the provincial paper, told me :

“What about your going to Xeo Duoc? The ‘strategic hamlet’ there has been destroyed. You may perhaps write a story about the first New Year’s Day spent by the people after breaking loose from the enemy’s grip. By the way, you can settle everything about the boat...”

“All right, I’ll go,” I said.

The following day, I prepared for the trip, my heart full of expectations. So Xeo Duoc had been liberated. I would meet there old acquaintances, men and women I had known during many years of common, arduous struggle. Professional habits evoked in my mind things I thought I was going to see there : peasants returning to their homes, clasping the stumps of trees felled by the enemy and crying ; earth walls surrounding the “strategic hamlet” being razed to the ground ; heaps of barbed wire coils ; and the

splash of oars on the river... Somehow I had always felt that a reportage about freedom recovered could not do without those details.

As to the boat, well, that was an old story. We had often thought of it, Dinh and I, for years ago we had borrowed a boat from the Xeo Duoc people and had no opportunity to bring it back.

That year, the situation at Xeo Duoc was very tense. We had been living in the hamlet, but now this was no longer possible as a "rural self-defence corps" had been organized by the enemy and its members started looking for "Vietcong" everywhere. So we left the place and went into the jungle with an old radio-set and a no less dilapidated mimeograph. We fed mainly on *rop*, a kind of molluscs we caught in the brooks, and were busy all day copying and printing news. Five or six months later, towards the end of the twelfth moon of the year 1959, we received an order to move to another region so as to set up a publishing organ. The message said a boat would be waiting for us that night at a river-side. So we carried our all on our backs and slogged our way through muddy jungle paths to the bank of the river. Both of us were drenched to the skin. We slipped into a thicket and waited. One hour passed, then another without any sign of a boat coming. We felt anxious. The only way to travel in this region was by river, and the assignment was urgent. It was then the 30th of the twelfth moon, the eve of the Lunar New Year. We crawled back and forth along the river bank. At last,

Dinh said : " Something bad must have happened to the comrade who was to take us away." " Maybe... But we should stay on and wait."

A cold mist was falling. The place was deserted and silent. It was so dark that we could not even see our hands. In spite of our strong desire to have a smoke, we did not dare to light a cigarette; and whenever a mosquito bit either of us, he would try to kill it by as gentle a slap as possible. From the thicket we fixed our eyes on the river. After a moment, Dinh said :

" Perhaps we should try to borrow a boat from someone in the hamlet."

I agreed and volunteered to go. Dinh said :

" Be careful. It's not the moment to get killed or caught."

Holding a grenade in my hand, I slipped out of the thicket. The first man I thought of going to was Uncle Tam whose family had remained faithful to the Revolution even in the darkest days. Uncle Tam was nearing seventy but still quite healthy and strong. He was the only man in Xeo Duoc to grow his hair long in the old style. He had settled at the place which was to become Xeo Duoc at a time when wild boars' droppings were found right inside the huts of the first settlers, when tigers lay in wait for men, and the birds that used to follow them uttered their strange cries in the dead of night : " Boong... Boong... Kroi... Kroi..." The old man was, without any exaggeration, a living annal of this Lower U Minh region.

He was a wonderful hunter, endowed with such a sharp sense of smelling that, it was said, he needed only to smell the water of the brook in the morning to know whether any boar or fox had come to drink during the night. Just looking at him called up in my mind images of jungle, mangrove, sea water and fertile soil.

When I reached old Tam's mooring place, there was indeed a boat there, complete with oars. I was about to go to his house when I heard dogs barking furiously, hurried footsteps, then Uncle Tam's voice: "Who's there?" I answered softly: "It's me."

Uncle Tam hugged me in the dark. He said that a "rural self-defence" squad on patrol duty had just passed by. I told him the fix we were in and asked him to lend us his boat. He agreed right away.

I returned to the boat. Unfortunately for me, it was attached not with a rope but an iron chain, which clanked loudly when lifted. Just at that moment I heard several people's footsteps, then Uncle Tam's cough. Trouble was ahead. I grasped the chain fast and held my breath, my heart beating wildly. When the "rural self-defence" squad had passed, I untied the chain, making as little noise as possible. Then I pulled the boat out and headed for the place where Dinh was waiting.

That night, just on the eve of the New Year, Dinh and I left Xeo Duoc in Uncle Tam's boat. On our way, as we were looking for some rope, we found big glutinous rice cakes and two packets of first-class tea, well hidden under a plank. The cakes were still warm,

a proof that they had been cooked not long ago. We were quite surprised when finding them, and surmised that Uncle Tam had intended to give them to some relative.

We could not bring the boat back to its owner. Preparations for local insurrections took up much of our time, and then the enemy's grip tightened on Xeo Duoc, around which several more posts were set up. Soon, it was turned into a "strategic hamlet".

Now I was on my way back to Xeo Duoc which I reached on the 30th of the twelfth moon. There was an atmosphere of great animation. Along the bank of the river, women were washing bowls and cups, talking and laughing. Children were dancing and singing in little groups. In the twilight people were busy at work in a small vermicelli hand mill. Smoke rose from the roofs of the cottages. I saw barbed wire, not in coils and heaps, but in fences surrounding the whole village. Even the walls and ramparts were still there. But a sign was planted on the bank, which read: "Determined to defend our village!" I said to myself: "The 'strategic hamlet' is now serving quite a different purpose!"

Night was falling. Reflections of kitchen fires were dancing on the roofs. "People must have finished cooking their glutinous rice cakes for the Tet festival!" I thought.

Although it was quite dark, I had no difficulty finding Uncle Tam's mooring place. But now an earth wall had been built on the bank, with four gunslits. Only a small passage had been left through the barbed wire

entanglements. I steered my boat ashore and bound it. The iron chain in my hands clanked loudly, but I didn't care. The only result of the noise would be to inform Uncle Tam of a visit. Freedom had become something quite concrete, something that could be grasped by the senses, like the clanking of an iron boat-chain. The same acute consciousness of freedom was felt as I walked along the footpath leading towards Uncle Tam's house, where the enemy used to go on their rounds.

The first man I met was not the old man himself, but his son, Hai Can, and some guerillas. They were sitting on the wooden plank bed in the middle of the house, eating and drinking. Their guns were stacked nearby.

I stepped in. People looked up, but they didn't recognize me. Then Hai Can cried out, jumped down and clasped my shoulders. He looked at me with bewildered eyes and said :

“ Heaven! It's Bay...”

“ Yes, it's me, Brother Hai.”

“ It's several years since you left Xeo Duoc! Where did you go then?”

“ To work, of course. How's everybody? Where's Uncle Tam?”

“ My father!” Hai Can stopped. Then he added abruptly: “ He's dead.”

I stood dumbfounded. Without a word he took my hand and drew me to the plank bed, as if to invite me to take a seat. A guerilla said :

“We’ ll talk about the old days later. Now, let’ s enjoy a few more drinks.”

I sat down. Now I recognized them. The one who had just spoken was Tu Duong. In the old days, he had been a member of the enemy’s “rural self-defence” squad. Once, in a raid on our base, he stepped right on the hole where I was hiding. He bent down, covered it with branches and leaves and whispered: “Keep still, man.” I had also known all the others who were there. Most of them had run after us with sticks in their hands, but in fact had been our most efficient bodyguards. At that time, the village had been plunged into the darkness of oppression. Now it was a fighting village and those men were guerillas defending it. They handed me a glass of wine, and I could see that Xeo Duoc rice wine was as crystal clear as ever. Looking at the little bubbles that rose from the bottom of my cup, I sadly thought of Uncle Tam. How he had died, nobody told me yet. Someone said:

“Empty your glass, Bay.”

I drank my wine in small sips. When I finished, they wanted to pour me some more.

“It’s enough, thank you. I have to go now...”

“Where? It’s Tet\*.”

Eagerly and persistently Hai Can said:

“Stay overnight. I’ll tell you the story.”

The drinking didn’t last very long. Soon, the guerillas were gone with their guns. Hai Can’s wife brought us some rice and told her husband:

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\* Lunar New Year’s Day.

“ I’m going to a women’s meeting. We’ll talk about what we’ll do tomorrow: bring some delicacies to Liberation army men.”

I asked Hai Can about his father’s death. He didn’t speak right away. After a moment of thoughtful silence, he began slowly:

“ The night you came to borrow the boat, Father had thought of bringing you some cakes and tea, for the Tet festival. When evening came, he took four of the cakes that my wife had just cooked and hid them in the boat, but he couldn’t go, for the guards’ rounds succeeded each other almost continuously...”

“ Oh yes, the cakes were still warm when we found them. Brother Hai, we were really to blame. Today, I... I bring back the boat.”

Hai Can said nothing. When he looked up, his eyes were red with tears. Then he said, paying no attention to the question of the boat:

“ My father died last year. At that time, they were herding the people into the ‘strategic hamlet’. But nobody wanted to go. Our house being here, right at the entrance to the hamlet, the soldiers always came here first. But my father always found a pretext to refuse. He said: ‘ If we give way, the other villagers will, too.’ As we didn’t budge, the whole village also refused to budge. The soldiers grew tired of that continuous wrangle. When they first came, my father told them: ‘ We are just like you. We don’t want to move from our place. So don’t insist ; I won’t

go.' The next time they came, they threatened to bring the house down. My father took a machete and planted it right in the middle of the house. 'Look,' he said, 'I am talking seriously. Any of you, young brothers, who dares to lay a finger on a straw of my roof, I' ll cut him down!'

He talked in a calm voice, addressing the soldiers as his 'young brothers'. None of them dared to lay a finger on the house. Finally, they went to that of our neighbour, Mrs Sau, a widow. But she too refused. They threatened to set her house afire. She sat with her little children in the middle of the house, saying: 'Set us afire, too!'

The soldier who had a firebrand in his hand threw it down, not knowing what to do. The district chief at Song Doc was furious. He dismissed the commander of the Xeo Duoc post and appointed another one, a ruffian called Dom. The day he arrived, Dom said; 'What would happen to me if I couldn't pen up those people?'

The following day, he took his soldiers along and came to our village. My father sat waiting for them on this very plank bed. I knew Dom to be a very cruel man, so I hid an axe behind the door panel and stood by my father. Of course, they stopped at our house first. Hardly had he set foot on our yard when Dom fired a shot from his Colt. Then he shouted;

'Who's the owner of this house?'

'Me,' said my father.

The post commander went right in. He eyed my father and myself up and down, waved his pistol at us and asked:

‘ You are, aren’t you? You know what I’ve come here for, don’t you?’

‘ Fine, but wait a bit. ’

Dom thought my father was cowed, so he looked at his men, winked and sat cross-legged on the bed. He lighted a cigarette and said :

‘ Good. Take your things with you. Have you got a boat?’

‘ Yes, I have. ’

But my father wasn’t going to collect his things, nor did he go and get his boat ready. He opened the wardrobe and took out his black silk gown, which he wore only on our ancestors’ anniversary days. He slowly put it on. He went about it very carefully, straightening every wrinkle on the silk. Then he loosened his long hair, which had been done in a knot. The soldiers watched in surprise, but my father didn’t pay any attention to them. His whole mind was on what he was doing. When he had finished, he took a few joss-sticks and told me :

‘ Light the lamps on the altar. ’

I shivered and did what I was told. My hands were trembling. My father lighted the joss-sticks, and clasping them in his hands, knelt down before the altar :

‘ O souls of my ancestors, ’ he murmured, ‘ and of revolutionary martyrs, this land and house have been given me by you, my forefathers, and also by the Revolution. Now they want to force me out, but I won’t let them. I would rather die. I bow my head to you and ask you to be my witness... ’

'Shut up!' the post commander shouted. The scene had become too eerie for his nerves. But my father had finished. He stepped towards the corner of the room, seized his machete, turned round and walked towards Dom.

'Now I have finished. What do you want of me?'

The post commander grew pale. Without a word, he pointed his gun at my father, who at once pointed his machete at him. I grasped the axe hidden behind the door panel; the soldiers cocked their rifles. My father slowly walked on, the post commander retreating before him. Dom's hands were trembling violently. Suddenly his gun crashed, and blood started trickling down my father's face. Covering his face with one hand he kept stumbling forward. At a point, Dom turned and broke into a run. But I wouldn't let him: I let fly my axe which hit him behind the neck. He fell flat on his belly with a shriek."

Hai Can stopped and poured himself a drink, the wine spilling over the brim of his glass. Then he rested his empty glass on the bed with a sharp gesture, and looked out into the night. His shadow on the wall remained motionless for a long while. I asked in a low voice:

"And the soldiers. Did they shoot?"

Hai Can shook his head.

"No, they didn't. Nor did I attack them. I threw away my axe and walked towards my father. But he had collapsed and died. A soldier took my father's machete and handed it to me, saying: 'Go away. We'll fix things up.' I looked at him in surprise, but two other soldiers also urged me: 'Flee away'. Then they

carried my father to the wall and leaned him against it. One took the axe and laid it beside him. I understood in a flash, seized the machete and dashed out. When I had got some distance away, I heard the soldiers shout: 'The old bastard has cut the lieutenant down!'

I was arrested only a month later. But nobody, except the soldiers, knew it was I who had killed the post commander. When I was released, the whole village had been penned up behind barbed wire. After my father's death, nobody had agreed to move away, so they had come with barbed wire and turned the village into a strategic hamlet on the same site. For nearly a year, it was a continuous struggle. At times, they had to send in a whole company. Finally..."

Here Hai Can paused and asked me:

"Do you know how we destroyed the 'strategic hamlet'?"

"Not in detail."

Hai Can laughed:

"We went about it in a rather unusual way. We did it in broad daylight."

"In broad daylight?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes," Hai Can nodded. "That increased the pleasure! Besides, we couldn't otherwise have the 'forces' participate."

"The forces? Which ones?"

"The Liberation forces, of course. Here, you know, if one wants to destroy a strategic hamlet, one must at the same time knock down the military post. So we asked the regional Liberation troops to give us a hand. The most difficult thing was to hide them in the hamlet."

“ Hide them in the hamlet ? ”

“ Why, of course. That was not difficult, after all. Every family we contacted readily agreed. They said: ‘ All right, but you must knock them down for good. ’ I said: ‘ Of course. We ’ ll knock them down for good. ’ Then they said: ‘ If this is so, we ’ ll hide the Liberation troops inside our very mosquito-nets. After they have done away with the soldiers, we ’ ll destroy the hamlet. ’ That night, we introduced Liberation troops into the hamlet. The following morning, as soon as the puppet soldiers got out of their blockhouse and wandered about in the hamlet, our troops dashed out of the nets and shot them down. They died like flies in the village lanes: none could take refuge in the post. The few that had remained there surrendered. The post was razed to the ground, but the ‘ strategic hamlet ’ was left as it was. Now it serves our purposes, not theirs. ”

Hai Can had ceased talking, but for a long while it seemed as though I continued to hear guns crashing, the puppet soldiers screaming, and Uncle Tam ’ s eerie voice:

“ O souls of my ancestors, and of Revolutionary martyrs! The land and soil has been given me by you, my forefathers, and also by the Revolution... ”

I felt as though the soil under my feet was warm and quaking, and in my mind ’ s eye, I saw puddles of blood. When I turned, Hai Can was no longer sitting by my side. He was kneeling before the altar, where his father had knelt. The smell of joss-sticks floated in the air.

The New Year was coming.



## MR. FOURTH'S DREAM

THE fire had been put down on the last patch of forest set afire by American napalm. The sun was fading from the tops of the mangrove trees. The heat of day and of the fire had subsided. Evening was descending on the U Minh forest and on the sea. It seemed as though a loving hand was seeking to soothe the wounds inflicted on the forest — burnt patches of ground from which smoke was still rising.

An old man leaning on a hoe was watching the half-burnt mangroves. The upper half of his body was naked. He wore a scarf on his head and a pair of odd breeches that went down to his knees. His sunburnt, dark and wrinkled back was moist with sweat. He remained motionless for a long while, his eyes staring at the trees. Around him stood a dozen people: peasants, young girl guerillas with rifles, and a few children. All seemed to be under the command of the old man, for, after watching the dying fire for a while, he suddenly said with a flourish of the hoe:

“ Now let's go. ”

They followed him along the bank of a canal. From time to time, he stopped, bent, and caught a tortoise

that the fire had driven out of its refuge. He gave it to the children, who followed closely on his heels, awaiting signs from him to search the water for more tortoises. Once the old man turned and said :

“ If any of you wants a tortoise for his meal, just go over there, near the burnt patches, down the wind. Damn the Yanks ! If they keep bombing like that, all the tortoises will leave the place ! ”

When the group arrived at a part of the forest over which swarms of egrets and cranes were hovering, the old man stopped. Before leaving the group and going into that area, he said to them :

“ At dawn let all of you come to my hut. Bring scythes along. ”

All said yes. His was a peremptory tone, and everybody showed him confidence and respect. One of the young girl guerillas followed the old man, while the rest continued their way to a hamlet called Bia Rung.

When the old man arrived at his hut, it was dark. The young girl preceded him into the house and soon a lamp was lighted. Its flickering light showed a cosy room, small in size, but clean and orderly. The floor was made of mangrove trunks stripped of their barks and well polished by time. There was a kitchen with table ware, and a kind of guitar was hung from a pillar.

The old man leant his hoe against the wall and lingered for a while in the yard while the girl kindled the fire in the kitchen and caught some fish from a pottery vessel for the evening meal. It was getting

darker and darker, yet egrets and cranes kept hovering overhead. They cried and flapped their wings noisily, as though they couldn't quite make up their minds whether they should alight for the night or fly away. The old man put his callous and dusty hands to his breast and wailed, "Heaven!"

It was obvious that he was suffering from what he saw and heard. He knew that "his" birds were in a quandary: they wanted to regain their familiar perches for the night but fear kept them away. The old man murmured to himself, "Indeed, this was the fiercest raid ever!"

Night fell on the forest, the birds and the old man. It had been a tragic day, the most tragic indeed since he came here forty years ago. Here, in this corner of the U Minh forest close to the sea, he had spent nearly all his life. For forty years, every one of his nights had been filled with the noises of egrets and cranes coming and going, flapping their wings and crying. His life had always been closely associated with the birds. Every evening, he enjoyed the simple pleasure of seeing "his" birds come back to this corner of the forest, animating earth and sky. His life had been filled with hardships and miseries, and he drew his simple joy from two sources: the birds and the Liberation army men. Said he on one occasion: "I can part from anything but from the birds and those lads in the Liberation army!"

"Those lads in the Liberation army" included his own grandson, whose fiancée was now living with him.



Few men in the region knew his real name. The people of Bia Rung hamlet called him Mr. Fourth of the Forest With the Birds\*. He was now over sixty years old, but the Forest With the Birds was much older than he. The birds, he said, had come here long before he did with his wife, as young landless peasants looking for a living. One day, as they were wandering in this region, he climbed on a tree to take his bearings. He saw in the distance a patch of forest with swarms of white dots hovering above the tops of the trees : egrets and cranes. He shouted to his wife at the foot of the tree :

“ Cheer up, wife, now we’ve got something to live on !”

True, they had found something to make a living with : the young birds which they caught and sold. Nature seemed to compensate them for all the miseries that they had endured, but alas, this didn’t last long. A few months later, men clad in khaki jackets came from the sea in a motor launch, and told him that the “bird preserve ” had been conceded long ago to someone who had become its rightful owner, and that he had been acting contrary to the law by catching the birds and selling them. The young peasant was so frightened he broke into a cold sweat. When he timidly asked the men in khaki for the name of the rightful owner of the preserve, they did not deign to answer him. Instead, they kept walking around with their hands behind their backs, watching the

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\* He was probably the fourth son of his parents (*Publ.*).