

birds and talking among themselves in a low voice. At last, when they prepared to leave in their launch after telling him severely that he would be sent to jail very soon the young man screwed up his courage and asked them again for the name of the rightful owner of the forest. One of them barked :

“ It's Sir Councillor of Phong Thanh ! ”

The young peasant had never seen Sir Councillor of Phong Thanh, who nonetheless became the owner of the “ bird preserve ”. He was not, however, sent to jail as the men in khaki had threatened. To “ redeem his fault ” he was to stay on as Sir Councillor's unpaid gamekeeper, in other words, from a master of this forest corner he had become the servant of its “ lawful owner ”. As he could not think of any other place to go, and his wife was with child and nearing her time, he was forced to accept the deal.

Some time later, Sir Councillor sold the “ bird preserve ” to a Frenchman named Laguy, and the young peasant became servant to Laguy, and remained so for a long, long time until the revolution broke out in August 1945.

The Revolution meant a new life to him. His wife had died and their son had grown up. He found a wife for him, and when the French later began attacking this region, he urged him to enlist in the *Ve Quoc Doan*. In the battle at Xeo Ro, his son was killed, leaving a wife and a baby son.

During the Resistance War, the forest was part of the liberated zone, and Mr. Fourth was gamekeeper for

the State. After the return of peace, the Diem administration set up a military post at Xeo Duoc, soon came to Bia Rung hamlet where they organized a "village council" and a "rural self-defence unit", the tools for their policy of repression against former Resistance members. But the mangrove forest and Mr. Fourth's "bird preserve" remained, even during the darkest years, a safe refuge for revolutionary cadres. It was during those years that he witnessed so many tragic happenings and lost his daughter-in-law. Pitying her young age, he had urged her to remarry, saying that he would look after her young son, but she had refused. She continued to live with him, helping him in his work. She often brought food to revolutionary cadres hiding in the mangrove forest. One day the *ac-on*\* caught her. They killed her on the spot by ripping up her belly.

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It was now completely dark, but the old man was still standing there, his hands on his chest. In a flash, memories of his life came back to him.

Recent bombings by the Americans had revived in him the souvenir of past miseries under the former oppressive regimes, and a silent anger and hatred in his heart. Napalm had been repeatedly dropped on the

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\* Term used to designate cruel agents of the Diem administration (*Publ.*).

forest, particularly along the jungle track leading to the river Tram. The reason for such raids was clear: the hard-hit enemy had realized that Liberation troops had been moving through the mangrove forest for their attacks on his positions on the other side of the river. And so he had decided to burn it up with napalm. From a gamekeeper, Mr Fourth had become a forest fire fighter. The day he was entrusted with this job, the head of the village military committee had told him :

“ Our duty here is to preserve the forest. It’s a matter of life and death for our people. The Liberation troops have confidence in us. As for me, I have full confidence in you.”

Standing there in the dark, listening to the cries of the birds overhead, the old man slowly clenched his fists. He felt that his arms were still firm and strong. “ I am not that old !”, he murmured to himself. “ I’ll teach those bastards a lesson. This forest, this river, these birds belong to my people. Let them beware !”

The kitchen fire was aglow. Mangrove wood was burning with a cracking noise. The young girl was broiling fish, stopping once in a while to tidy her long hair. The old man’s anger had subsided, giving way in his mind to something gentle and fresh. A familiar scene was before his eyes : it seemed as though he was seeing his daughter-in-law, sitting by the fire and cooking. But it was his grand daughter-in-law. A younger generation was growing up. He entered the hut. The girl turned and said in a merry voice :

“ The rice will be ready soon. Where have you been, grandpa? I am broiling some fish for you to sip your rice wine with. ”

The old man squatted on the floor and took off his headscarf.

“ Is there any wine left, child? ” he asked.

“ Oh yes. My father sent you a bottle this morning. He said it was excellent. ”

The girl turned the fish on the grill, then went and fetched a bottle of rice wine. The old man poured some in a little cup and took a sip. The good smell of broiled fish filled the room. Presently the girl brought some rice and a plateful of fish. The old man said ;

“ Eat, child. Are you going on your round tonight? ”

“ Yes. The lasses will come and call me, later. ”

The girl put some rice in her bowl and some fish in her grandfather's. Outside, the cries of the birds slowly abated. From time to time, one heard a shrill cry from a stray egret or crane looking for its flock, then it was silence again. The old man took small sips of his wine. When the girl had finished her meal, he hadn't touched his rice yet.

“ You'd better get some sleep, child, ” he said in a voice filled with affection. “ There'll be more raids tomorrow. When the time comes for the round, your friends will drop in and call you. ”

The girl said, “ Yes, grandpa, ” but after washing her feet, she didn't go to bed. She took out some clothes of the old man and sat mending them. The room took on a cosy air. The day's bombing raids

seemed completely forgotten in this hut where a young girl busied herself with thread and needle, and an old man sat calmly sipping a cup of crystal-clear rice wine. The birds were now at roost, and the evening breeze had driven away the heat of napalm.

From the direction of the sea came the distant rumbling of the waves. Suddenly, the old man asked :

“ Have you got Thang’s letters with you, child ? ”  
Thang was the name of his grandson, the girl’s fiancé.

“ Yes, grandpa. What’s the matter ? ”

“ Leave your work, child, and read those letters for me. ”

He poured some more wine into his cup. The girl took out a small wallet, from which she drew a photograph of a young soldier and a few letters. The soldier was carrying a rifle and looked gentle and proud.

“ Shall I read, grandpa ? ” she asked.

“ Yes. Read them in order. ”

The girl cleared her throat and started reading in a low voice. She read fluently, without a hitch. In each of his letters, the young soldier always inquired after his grandpa’s and fiancée’s health, the birds and the people in Bia Rung. He asked about a lot of other things too : had more birds come ? had the old eel-traps been changed ? He and his friends would like so much to eat some eel, he wrote. Then he recounted stories about the fighting. In a recent ambush, his unit lay in wait for three days on end for heliborne G.I’s. When the latter finally came, they were picked

like ripe fruit. Not a single one escaped. Those bastards are incredible cowards, he wrote; our soldiers rushed at them with fixed bayonets, they covered their faces with their hands and showed a clean pair of heels!

The old man nodded his head and stroked his beard with ostensible satisfaction. When the girl had finished reading the passage about the heliborne G.I.'s. he slapped his thigh and cried out:

"I know those ruffians. They are only brave when riding in their choppers!"

Then he started eating his rice with evident pleasure.

"I know Thang is longing after a good home-cooked meal with eel and tortoise. Sure he is..." he said, munching his rice.

"He keeps saying in each of his letters that he'll drop in to see us some time, but he never shows up," the girl said in a slightly reproachful voice. "He's gone almost a year now."

The old man stopped eating.

"It's not easy for a soldier to go home for a visit. They're having their hands full, with one battle following another. The Yanks are coming in large numbers these days. Our soldiers must wipe them out as they come."

The girl put the letters back in her wallet. The old man finished his meal and added:

"Write him a letter. Tell him about the recent American raids on our hamlet and forest: tell him how many of our people have lost their lives, tell him

that the birds and tortoises are greatly frightened and are fleeing away..."

Then he went to a corner of the hut and spread a mat on the floor. The girl hung a mosquito-net over, and soon he started snoring. She sat beside the lamp and went on with the mending. A moment later, girls' voices called to her from the direction of the canal. She stood up, slung her rifle across her back, blew out the lamp, and left.

The old man lay sleeping in a corner of the hut. His was a loud, healthy snore. It was interrupted towards midnight by sounds of gunfire coming from the river. The old man opened his eyes, but didn't get up yet. He listened carefully: the sounds increased in intensity. Recoilless rifles and machineguns kicked up a terrible shindy. The old man sat up: "Heaven!" he muttered to himself, "our men are attacking." Like a child, he was all in a fidget. Finally, he got out of the hut. Standing in the yard, he looked towards the place where the gunfire seemed to come from. But he couldn't see a thing because of the thick forest. So he ran towards the bank of the canal. Standing there he saw flashes of lightning in the distance, as if a storm was brewing. A few seconds after each flash, he heard the report of the gun. "It's our D.K.Z. \* Our boys are attacking the Bien Rach post!" he exulted.

The splash of oars was heard. To the query shouted by the old man, girls' voices answered: "It's the

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\* Recoilless gun (*Publ.*).

guerillas back from their round." Then he heard the voice of his grandson's fiancée:

"Is it you, grandpa?"

"Yes, it's me."

"Our men are attacking Bien Rach!"

"Good! that's what I thought of."

The boat came ashore. The girl leapt on to the bank, rifle in hand.

"We've received a message from the village committee."

"What kind of message?"

"It says our troops are attacking Bien Rach tonight. The village people are to protect the forest if planes come tomorrow to set it afire."

"Good, good. Hey girls, you'd better get ready!"

"We're all ready, grandpa! Everybody in our brigade has been informed. We'll come to fetch you."

One after another, the girls leapt on to the bank.

"Grandpa," one whispered into his ears, "tomorrow the Liberation troops will withdraw this way."

"How can you know that?" the old man said in an angry voice. "They won't withdraw this way. They have a hundred ways to withdraw. How can you girls know?"

But as he walked back towards his hut, Mr. Fourth thought to himself: "The girls are probably right. Otherwise, why are the people so urgently mobilized to protect the forest?"

At dawn, enemy planes swarmed in. Jets roared over the mangrove forest still wet with dew. Napalm

bombs started exploding along the canal, on a distance of about ten kilometres. One fell not far from the old man's fire-fighting brigade. He immediately rushed forward, after ordering all to follow him. Wielding their picks and shovels, they dug a canal down the wind, which would prevent the fire from spreading. Rushing from one place to another, the old man was like a commanding general. He had taken off his shirt. Hot air from the napalm fire was blowing back the scarf on his head. The people worked diligently, cutting trees and digging a deep channel. The smell of gasoline stank, and the fire was getting nearer and nearer, carried by the wind. Jets kept roaring overhead. The guerillas' rifles crackled. The guerillas were all girls. They hid behind mangrove trees, resting the barrels of their guns on branches and shot at the low-flying planes.

The channel was taking shape. Sap oozed from the felled trees and cut lianas. The earth dug up was thrown on the progressing fire. The soil in U Minh is mostly rotten mangrove leaves and stumps, and so it was not difficult to dig it up. Under the old man's pick, the earth collapsed in big chunks. He was an experienced man, indeed. He gave quick, short efficient blows of his pick, working in an apparently effortless way.

On the edge of the burning patch of forest, the ten-odd people of the old man's brigade seemed to resist the fire with their bare chests: a truly demoniac fire that would burn up everything on its path, and that water is powerless to quench. In fact, should inexperienced men seek to pour water from the canal on it,

it would burn even more fiercely. The only way to fight it is to stop it by digging a channel.

The arc-shaped channel got deeper with every passing minute. Now the fire was almost on the men. Mr. Fourth shouted to them to get away, which they did after pulling to safety the less nimble women and children.

The fire rushed in with a roar. It was stopped by the channel. The old man looked at the flames licking the other edge of the channel as if saying to them, "I'll allow you to burn up only that patch, not an inch more."

He looked around with an air of satisfaction: the damage had not been very great. The major part of the forest was still lush and green. The foliage was thick overhead. The girl guerillas kept shooting at the planes. The latter did no longer dare to fly very low, but they kept dropping napalm containers. Some fell into the reddish water of the canal, which seethed like a caldron.

Soon, three more bombs fell into the part of the forest under the old man's responsibility. "Follow me," he shouted.

Wielding his pick, he began tracing a meandering path encircling the burning patch of the forest. The others followed him, felling trees, cutting roots, hoeing and shovelling. This time, they had to dig a longer channel and the fight was tougher. At times it seemed as though the fire was about to overwhelm them. Amidst the fire and smoke, their silhouettes were dim and uncertain. The stink and the heat of the gasoline

flames stifled them. But the channel ended by hemming in the fire. With every passing minute it got deeper and wider. The fire was definitely checked. A woman and a child were carried away, with serious burns.

From then until late afternoon, the old man's fire-fighting brigade had to cope with nearly ten more napalm bombs dropped in two more raids. Nobody had been wounded, but several had fainted. At sunset, the last fire had been tamed. It was then that the old man suddenly collapsed, overwhelmed by fatigue and the pain from several burns.

His grandson's fiancée and another girl guerilla carried him on a stretcher through the unburnt part of the forest towards the hut. At one point, he came to and asked them where they were taking him. When they said they were heading for home, he jumped from the stretcher and ran a few steps towards where his brigade was working, then collapsed. They put him back on the stretcher.

When they arrived at the hut, the girl went to the canal bank to pick a few broad leaves of an aquatic plant, which she put under his back to soothe the pain. From time to time, the old man would come to and ask, "Are they still dropping napalm?" and each time the girl, with tears running down her cheeks, would shake her head.

Indeed, no more planes were coming. Outside, the last patch of sunshine had gone. It was dusk. There was less agitation in the air compared with the previous evening: perhaps egrets and cranes had found

other refuges. The hut was soon engulfed in the shadows of evening as the soft rustling of the wind blowing in the foliage of the trees mingled with the distant rumbling of the sea. The old man lay still on the floor of the hut, in a kind of coma. The burns on his back were not very serious, but he was dead with fatigue, having spent the last bits of his strength in three days' running battle with the fire.

It was a still night, a real summer night in the U Minh forest. The old man had a dream, a strange dream he had never had before. The mangrove forest was seething with a weird surge of life: the leaves were never so green, the flowers so fragrant. The water of the canal was literally covered with their white petals. As to his "preserve", well, it was teeming with not only egrets and cranes, but throngs of strange birds with multi-coloured plumage. The old man felt as though he was no longer living in this world, but in some paradise. Now, he was attending the wedding of his grandson. It was held at a place which recalled the abode of gods and genies. Liberation armymen, in brand new uniforms, were dancing, singing and drinking wine drawn from the canal, for its water had turned into pure rice wine. All the girl guerillas were there, in splendid clothing. Amidst this well-dressed crowd, the old man found out that he had no shirt on, only a scarf on his head, and his hand was clasping a pick. Then he heard a screaming sound, like a bomb falling. With a flourish of his pick, he shouted to all people present to follow him. Then he rushed forward, and... awoke.

But it seemed as though another dream had come to him. Sitting beside him was Thang, his grandson. He was gently pulling at his arm and calling softly:

“Grandpa, I’ve come back... Grandpa...”

The old man opened his eyes wide: it was Thang all right! His uniform was not a brand new one, as in his dream, but made of coarse cloth and dripping with sweat. He was carrying a gun, of a type he had never seen before. Thang had grown into such a strapping fellow that the old man thought he was still dreaming. But no, it was his hut all right, with its walls of leaves and its paraffin lamp. Beside Thang was his fiancée. The old man looked at her with uncertain eyes. She clasped his hands and said in a voice quivering with emotion:

“Wake up, Grandpa, it’s Thang coming home for a visit.”

A sharp pain in the back convinced the old man that he was no longer dreaming. The girl explained to him that the Liberation troops had withdrawn through the mangrove forest after wiping out the Bien Rach post. After a moment of hesitation the old man clasped his grandson’s hand:

“But I thought... I thought... Now I am fully awake... Thang, is it true that the Bien Rach post has been wiped out?”

“Yes, we did away with them, to the last man. We also sank a few supply ships. We began withdrawing at sunset through the forest.”

The old man sat up.

“What, through the forest? Did you get safely through? It wasn't completely burnt up, was it?”

“The planes tried hard to spot us, but we got safely through. The forest was green and lush, big parts of it, and gave us good cover. The people had done a wonderful job fighting the fire. Now, I must go, grandpa. All the boys have left.”

Tears welled up in the girl's eyes. The old man looked at his grandson in silence. Finally he said:

“Yes, you go and try to catch up with your mates.”

Thang stood up, steadied his gun on his shoulder, looked at his fiancée, then turned and told the old man:

“Good bye, grandpa.”

Suddenly he stretched his hand towards the girl and smiled. She eagerly seized it and was about to burst into sobs. “What, a guerilla sobbing? That'll be a pretty sight!” he said teasingly. This turned her sob into a laugh. Thang looked around at the hut for the last time, then stepped out. The girl sprang to her feet and ran after him.

The old man lay still on the floor of the hut. His eyes were wide open and everything was now clear in his mind. He listened to the footsteps of Liberation soldiers passing by, and to the sounds of oars striking against the sides of the boats, down in the canal. The sounds gradually subsided and grew distant. The night was again still and silent, with

only the rumbling of the waves, like distant drumbeats, and the wind blowing softly in the foliage of the mangroves.

The old man again fell into sleep. Was he again dreaming? His face was serene and happy and a smile flitted on his lips.

The girl came back. Kneeling beside her grandpa, with a towel, she gently dabbed the yellowish fluid oozing from the burns on his shoulders and back.

1966



## CROSSING THE CHU LAY MOUNTAIN

TIDU mounted the stairs, gently lifting her skirt which somewhat hindered her ascent. The stair rods creaked under her feet as she bent downward under the weight of the bamboo water pails full to the brim. She lowered her head to dodge the thatch roof and entered the hut.

Old Kha stopped pouring soup into large bowls, and walked forward to take the pails off her daughter's shoulders. Anu, Tidu's little son, who had been impatiently waiting for the dinner, stealthily pinched some boiled pumpkin leaves that he hurriedly cooled down by blowing on them. Grandmother caught him in the act: "Take care, you'll burn your mouth."

The boy pulled a wry face, saying: "Mummy, salt."

Tidu neatly arranged the buckets on the floor, her eyes staring intently at her son who had grown thinner and thinner in the last few months, his ribs showing out piteously. The drought had badly affected the maize harvest and, worse still, salt was wanting in this remote mountain region. As a result, a big pot

of soup could barely get a few crystals of salt. Every household was allowed to buy no more than two tinfuls of salt a month. Overbuying would be liable to arrest and hunger detention by the police in Suoi Dau district.

One was not free to buy even with one's hard-earned money. Whatever sum one got from the selling of rattan, banana and honey should either be carried home or spent on food on the spot. Alcohol alone could be purchased and taken home in illimited quantity. Wary of further screw-tightening tricks of the "nationalist" authorities, the inhabitants hid whatever amount of salt they could lay hands on, and held it in store in view of cases of extreme necessity. Chilly was often used as a substitute. The salt-needy villagers could hardly hold their tools and had to sit down panting and exhausted after a short spell of labour. At every meal, Anu kept wailing for salt.

"Eat, grandson."

As always, Tidu was deeply moved by her mother's soft voice. There was no end to Old Kha's misery, even at this advanced age.

"Mummy, you eat with Anu, I'm waiting for my husband."

Then more tenderly she added, "Take some more salt for yourself and give Anu a little bit."

"Well, it's salty enough."

The grandmother gave a sigh and looked at Anu :

"We shouldn't get him accustomed to salt, he will wail all the time for it."

Yet, Tidu took out the dry gourd hanging above the hearth, and poured on the palm of her hand a few shining crystals of salt. The boy made a few steps, took them and smiling with satisfaction, thrust them into his mouth.

She put some more wood into the fire and set about pounding maize. Worn down by the day's toil and hunger, she did not feel like eating.

The sun was slowly setting. Tidu and her husband, Ma Quang, were still working on the *ray*\* when two armed civil guards of district chief Ali came up and asked Ma Quang to follow them. To Tidu's insistent queries, the guards reluctantly replied :

“ We saw a lot of soldiers in the house of the district chief. A lot, can't say how many for sure.”

Filled with fright, Tidu wanted to follow Ma Quang who tried to dissuade her :

“ Don't worry, I'll be back soon. Go on clearing the other side of the *ray*. Look, it may rain this evening.”

After a few steps, Ma Quang again turned to her :

“ Perhaps, the district chief only wants me to get some pigs and chickens for the troops.”

She was far from convinced by this far-fetched explanation. If it were only about buying pigs and chickens, other people in the lower hamlet would do.

Indeed, a strong suspicion was already lurking in the depth of her mind that Ma Quang might be drafted into the Saigon army.

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\* A forest clearing (*Publ.*).

Tidu was lost in thought and hardly noticed that the night had settled upon the village. Anu was snoring in the arms of his grandmother who was slightly coughing now and then. The jungle wind wailed amidst the rustle of leaves. The time had come for wild beasts to go out hunting. Tidu went on pounding the maize, her impatient eyes strained into the darkness.

At long last, Ma Quang came back. He put out the torch and went up the stairs, while Tidu threw more wood into the fire. As the flame blazed up impetuously, the pigs downstairs also set about rummaging noisily in their manger. Ma Quang cleaned his feet at the entrance of the hut and put into Tidu's hand a small packet. She hurriedly opened it. "Oh, salt for us, Mummy," she exclaimed.

Old Kha also sat up and poked her fingers into the packet which Tidu handed to her.

"Where did you get it, son?"

Ma Quang gave no reply. Instead, he busied himself rolling a cigarette and puffing away at it. His face looked grave with downcast eyes. This was not lost upon Tidu who quietly brought out the dinner. It was not until they sat face-to-face before the basket of boiled maize that Ma Quang spoke out:

"I didn't buy it. The salt is from the district chief."

"Why did he give you?"

"I was ordered to guide troops to Song Trang. That will take two nights. \* They will give me food for the journey and another bowlful of salt upon return."

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\* Tribal people usually measure time in terms of nights, instead of days.