

Tidu dropped her chopsticks. She grew pale and snapped back almost instantly :

“ No, you mustn't go.”

Ma Quang sadly replied :

“ I didn't want to go. But the district chief and the commander threatened me: ‘ If you refuse, we shall arrest you, take away your pigs and burn down your house’.”

“ As they please, we don't mind.”

As though regretting her too peremptory tone, she softly enquired :

“ Do you mean you are ordered to help them hound out our brothers?”

Ma Quang shook his head :

“ Our brothers have all regrouped to the North. As for Phuong, he has not come back for the last few years.”

Then he went on hesitatingly :

“ Besides, I won't take them into the forest. I'll just lead them along highways.”

Tidu frowned :

“ In case they have an encounter with our brothers, would the bullets spare you?”

As Ma Quang gave no reply, she pressed her point a little further. “ Won't it be better that you'll flee into the forest?”

Ma Quang sighed :

“ It'll be all right for me, but what will happen to mother, to you and Anu?”

At the same moment, Old Kha tossed in her bed.

Tidu and Ma Quang stopped talking. Both peered anxiously into the corner where she was lying, wondering whether she had overheard their conversation.

Ma Quang whispered to his wife:

“Give me a torch. I’ll leave right after dinner.”

“No, you mustn’t. At least, wait until morning.”

“That won’t do. The soldiers will have breakfast and get ready before dawn.”

Tidu desperately held on to her husband:

“No, no, you mustn’t go. You will die, for sure. Don’t you care for mother, for me and for our son?”

“I do care for you all. That’s why I must go. I don’t want to see mother and you and Anu being killed. There will be some more salt for our family.”

Tidu exploded:

“Go and take the district chief’s salt for your own use. We don’t want it. Shame! That evil salt has turned your head. You have forgotten Uncle Ho’s words.”

Tidu stood outside until the torch had vanished into the darkness. As for Old Kha, she had heard the conversation, but did not utter a single word though she did not like Ma Quang’s going, she was afraid of the My—Diem clique. She only prayed God so that the soldiers would not come across our brothers. Tidu came near her mother. Both gazed silently at the blazing fire, and sat motionless for a long time.

At length, Tidu spoke out:

“ Don't worry, Mummy dear, go to bed. Ma Quang will come back. ”

“ I don't feel like sleeping. You're so tired after a day's work at the *ray*, why don't you go to bed ? ”

Tidu remained silent. Then she suddenly gripped Old Kha by the wrist, her eyes blazing fiercely like those of a vulture. Mother took fear, expecting the worst to happen.

“ Mummy dear, stay home with Anu, I'm going out for a while. ”

Old Kha could hardly believe her own ears.

“ You just latch the door, Mummy. There's nothing to worry about. ”

“ But where are you going at this late hour? To the district chief's? No, you shouldn't. It is very dark, and there are a lot of leeches down there. ”

Tidu shook her head :

“ I'm not going to the district chief's. I'm going to Song Trang. ”

Her eyes dilated with bewilderment, Old Kha almost shouted :

“ To Song Trang? You have gone mad, haven't you ? ”

Tidu had made up her mind. She said softly :

“ That's true, Mummy dear. I must go to Song Trang now. Otherwise... ”

She was blinking, with tears glistening in her eyes. Old Kha couldn't make out why she was weeping.

“ Mummy, what a fool my husband’s. A shame for us all, I can’t put up with it.”

Her mother scolded her :

“ But why not wait until daybreak ? How dare you cross the Chu Lay jungle at this hour ? You’ve got the heart of a tiger, haven’t you ? Don’t you care for your son ? ”

Biting her lips very hard, Tidu replied :

“ With a knife and a torch, I’ve nothing to fear. Besides, I’d rather die than...”

Well aware of the stubbornness of her daughter, Old Kha, nevertheless, tried to probe a little further.

“ At least, tell me how things are like.”

Grasping her mother’s hands, Tidu pleaded :

“ Don’t ask me, Mummy dear. I can’t tell you anything now. Don’t you remember what our cadres and armymen told us about keeping secrecy ? Now, please get me three tinfuls of rice while I prepare the torch. Quick, Mummy.”

Old Kha said nothing more. Sadly she stood up and went into the corner groping in the dark for the rice basket. She suddenly asked :

“ Will you take some salt also ? The salt Ma Quang has just brought home ? ”

Tidu frowned :

“ No, Mummy, just take some from the gourd.”

In no time, Tidu had fastened a close-woven basket to her shoulders. It was a small basket, wherein she put a few tinfuls of rice, half a cup of salt, a dozen maize cobs and a piece of touchwood.

By then Anu had waked up. Pressing his body against the back of Old Kha, the boy looked at Tidu with astonished eyes. Never had he seen his mother setting out for the *ray* in the thick of the night. He did not cry, however, nor dared he complain. As soon as Tidu had gone down the stairs, Old Kha passed the torch to her from the upper floor. Tidu tied the knife to her left side. Her skirt was closely knit against her body, while her black blouse, too short and already in rags, practically left her arms naked.

The dancing light of the torch caught a forced smile on her face, as she tried to console Anu :

“ Anu dear, sleep with Grandma. Mummy will bring you sugar-cane from the *ray*. ”

No sooner had Tidu walked a few steps than her mother called her back, and handed her a torn cloth to cover her head.

“ Be careful when you cross the river. ”

Then she added, almost whispering :

“ Remember me to Phuong and the other ‘ boys ’. ”  
Tidu was almost stunned by surprise. How the devil did mummy know about all this ! She nodded though.

Tidu half strode, half ran as the herbs and reeds kept lashing at her face, arms and legs. At some places, the trail was almost completely hidden by luxuriant vegetation. She shuddered a while then furiously forced her way through with her knife. Soon, her skirt, and then her blouse, were soaked through as though under a lasting rain. She wanted to take the cloth from the basket in order to cover her head with, but she feared to lose time. The leeches gave her even

greater trouble. Every now and then, she found them, not one but two, three, four of them clinging to her legs. She used the knife to get rid of them all at one stroke.

She couldn't remember the brooks she had crossed, so many there were of them. She no longer looked at the path, she was just walking from memory. And, great wonder, her feet could eschew the sharp stones and the tree-stumps as though they had their own eyes.

Song Trang was still a long way off. How could Tidu reach there before dawn? The question obsessed her: she should take no rest, must walk on and on, and even run.

The winding path had now left the brook and set about climbing. The Chu Lay mountain stood ahead, dark and towering. Beyond it, was a small hamlet, and then the Song Trang forest. There, things would be much easier and she would no longer need a torch for the remaining part of the journey.

Until then, she had to cross the Chu Lay mountain, well known for its elephants and tigers. Pedestrians treading through Chu Lay in daytime could often hear the noise made by elephants breaking trees and branches. If they happened to travel in groups they could beat the trunks of trees, whistle and shout in order to frighten away those beasts. Without male companions, womenfolk used to flee in panic.

Tidu vanished into the thick mass of trees and leaves. The stars could no longer be seen. With every new step, the trees seemed to grow thicker, stretching their huge

branches as though they wanted to bar her way. She walked on, her eyes looking straight ahead, not daring to steal even a side glance at the surroundings. Suddenly, a shadow dashed past just a dozen steps ahead of her. Tidu stopped short, raising her knife in self-defence. Her legs shook violently, no matter how hard she tried to press her big toes against the ground. "Bep... bep..." Thank God! it was a deer, not a tiger as she had feared. She lowered the knife and heaved a sigh of relief.

She admonished herself:

"What a coward you are! Even if your path is barred by a tiger or an elephant, you mustn't get panicky. Otherwise, you'd better stay home."

Tidu no longer felt cold. She wanted to take a short rest, but was afraid of being too late. Though utterly tired, she kept on climbing. She breathed hard, very hard, and it seemed as though her ears were also breathing.

Completely exhausted by the time she had reached the hill-top, Tidu sat down heavily, not even bothering to lift the basket from her shoulders. Then, with a few strokes on the ground, she reduced the flame of the torch, and closed her eyes, leaning her back against the basket. "Just a moment, not more; the day is coming," she reminded herself.

A cold dew drop fell on her forehead, she waked up with a start to find the torch practically extinct with only a few parcels of ash still smouldering feebly. Tidu hurriedly took out the piece of touchwood and attempted to revive the flame, but despite all her efforts, the ash continued to shrink, and finally went out.

All hopes died down with the torch. A deep sense of fear and anger alternatively took hold of her. How the devil did she sleep? How could she proceed farther in this jungle as dark as hell? If she had to wait until daybreak, she would surely be outstripped by the enemy troops who, equipped with flash lights, would, of course, take the highway instead of the difficult jungle paths.

No, she couldn't sit here any more. If her eyes could not find the trail, then her feet should feel it out. At least she should try to reach the foot of the hill. Tidu had made up her mind. She no longer feared the tigers or the elephants. She was only concerned about not to go astray. Groping in the dark she cut for herself a stick. Then, hanging the knife at her side, she felt her way ahead, her strained eyes trying desperately to pierce the pitch darkness all around.

She went on for a long time. Yet, the slope was still stiff, and the ground wet and boggy. She had not yet reached the big stone which, as she knew pretty well, was further than half-way of the slope.

Suddenly, her head hit violently against something. She staggered, lost her balance and fell down. A violent pain shot through her body, as her left back-side landed heavily on a lump of stone. The stick was tossed away. Tidu sat up, and rubbed her forehead with dirt-soiled hands. Tears ran down her cheeks as she tried to refrain from wailing. However, she too was to blame for the accident. The last time she went through this part of the forest there was no fallen tree

across the path. But she should have prepared herself for such a mishap. She groped in the dark, searching for the lost stick.

The recovered stick gave her another unpleasant surprise, it helped her find out that her maize cobs had been scattered all over. She had so tightly packed them though. By all means, she had to recover them all, lest they might arouse the suspicion of enemy troops, should they go back this way. And so, she went on groping in the dark, her weary hands coming across stones, rotten wood, dry leaves and even rattan thorns.

After crawling under the fallen tree, Tidu slowed down her pace. The bruise on her forehead was as big as a chicken egg. Her legs were faltering almost beyond control. By now Anu and her grandmother should have been deep in sleep. She wondered whether Old Kha had properly locked the door and kept the fire alive so that Anu might not catch a cold. As for Ma Quang... No, she would rather not think of him any more.

The Chu Lay mountain was now far behind as she finished the last leg of her descent. The cocks began to crow in the nearby hamlet. She took to running through a thin patch of thatch-grass and went past the first houses in the hamlet. Happily, the dogs didn't bark, but only grumbled lazily. Suddenly, Tidu stopped. Yes, that was the house of Lien, her guerilla companion-in-arms during the anti-French Resistance War, a bosom friend of hers, and still a spinster. Could she still be trusted with such

a secret? Perplexed, Tidu made a few steps, then turned back. She was sure Lien, who had been taught the same things as she, was always herself. Over the past years, only a few men had turned traitors, getting enrolled in the US-Diem army and working as village or district chiefs. But no woman had so far strayed from the right path.

As the dogs in Lien's house started barking furiously, Tidu gave a few warning coughs, lest any one might shoot at her from inside with his cross-bow.

Presuming that Lien might have been awake by then, Tidu set about climbing the stairs when someone shouted :

“ Who's there ? ”

Tidu recognised the voice of Old Tanh, Lien's father. She replied :

“ Father, it's me Tidu. Is sister Lien home or at the *ray* ? ”

“ Tidu dear... ”

Lien tossed aside her ragged blanket and opened the door, Tidu told her to come down. The latter kept staring at her. In the dark Tidu could feel the deep fear of her friend who stood numb, unable to utter a single word. She whispered something into Lien's ears, while the latter passed her hands now on her hair, now on her dress and on the bruise on her forehead.

In the end, Lien nodded :

“ All right, but I'm afraid of tigers. Better leave it until morning, will you ? ”

"A guerilla should not be afraid of anything. I've covered a much longer distance. I've even passed through the Chu Lay mountain, and didn't fear anything."

Lien pondered a while and said hesitatingly:

"I'm willing to go. But father and mother might not allow me..."

"All right, I shall talk them over."

Then Tidu went up the stairs and said:

"Father and mother, the My-Diem clique want to pressgang our young men into their army. Please allow Lien to go with me to Song Trang to inform our brothers. As for you, father, please let our fellow-villagers know about this. It's a sin to serve the My-Diem gang in shooting at our fellow countrymen. If anyone asks you, just tell him that information came to you from Suoi Gia villagers. Don't say that it came from me."

Old Tanh shook his grey head:

"I'm afraid of My-Diem. They might arrest me. You know, there are a few scoundrels in this hamlet."

"Father, you just tell this to kind and stout-hearted people, and don't say a word to bad ones. Will that do?"

"All right."

With the help of a torch Tidu and Lien proceeded at a quick pace.

On reaching the approaches to Song Trang, they parted company. Lien went straight to the village, while Tidu turned left. As the path became easier, she put out the torch and threw it into the bush.

Ahead of her lies the dark shape of the Chu Tong mountain.

Leaning against the Chu Tong mountain was the *ray* of Old Lia. It was there that five nights ago, while going to procure maize seeds, Tidu came across brother Phuong by pure chance.

Phuong tossed restlessly throughout the night. For a year ago, the mass movement had to withstand most severe tests arising from massive attacks. The enemy set up a military outpost at C.R. and a concentration zone at Suoi Ca. Then, they launched mopping-up operations, burnt down houses, herded the population into specific areas, and established puppet administrative bodies at Lo May, Hon Da, Ca Thia and Suoi Gia... The local tyrants, who had fled away during the anti-French Resistance War, were now brought back to power with a view to taming down the population and holding them under tight control. Boasting that they had completed the "pacification" of low-land areas, the enemy now began prying into the highlands. A number of tribal militants were arrested or killed, and the movement suffered notable losses. Yet, Phuong was not downhearted. He found with comfort that, in spite of those losses and the temporary severance of the leadership from the masses, the people continued to struggle on their own. While the enemy went on mopping up certain areas, we had succeeded in strengthening the hilly regions. And now, the time had come to make a thrust into the enemy-controlled regions and revive the movement. Song Trang was the springboard for this move.

Phuong's first objective was Suoi Gia, one of our fairly strong bases. Many highland people told him that "all the inhabitants at Suoi Gia had gone over to the enemy" and that armed civil guards would immediately arrest any revolutionary cadre that dared to show up there. Phuong was also told that the enemy had set a price—one *gia* \* of salt—on his head.

But this was not the only thing that disturbed him. He had fixed a rendez-vous for the next day with a former militant at Suoi Gia, a woman guerilla fighter. A few days earlier, he had an encounter with her when he passed through Old Lia's *ray*. He had no time to evade her when she rushed forward and gripped his hand, flushing with joy and emotion. After a long talk, he was told that she had married and had a child, and that she remained, as always, with the Revolution and the cadres. She also informed him of the local situation. Phuong was elated. Indeed, this was the first spark he had been looking for. They agreed to meet again after five nights. Yet, Phuong was torn by anxiety. Was she sincere? She might still cherish the revolution and the cadres, but would she have the courage to renew contact and engage underground activities? What if she had turned traitor? Such a possibility should not be lightly omitted.

And so, although the rendez-vous had been scheduled for noon time, Phuong set out quite early. Better

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\* About 20 kg (*Publ.*).

to take the initiative in any circumstance, he told himself.

Phuong walked lightly, taking care not to tread dry branches. On reaching the edge of the forest, he peered into the darkness, looking for any suspect signs. Then he moved into the heart of the *ray*, approached the watch-tower, trying to detect footprints.

Suddenly Phuong sat down. Through the tree leaves, he saw a human silhouette in the watch-tower. He held back his breath, listening intently to the noise around. If the enemy were lying in ambush, there were certainly suspect indications. Silence still prevailed. Phuong slowly crawled towards the tower. In the glimmering dawn light, he saw a human being—yes, a woman—sleeping in a standing position beside a basket, her back leaning against a pillar of the tower.

Phuong exclaimed loudly:

“Sister Tidu!”

The woman waked up with a start:

“Oh, God, brother Phuong.”

With her hair dishevelled, her dress and skirt soaked through, the woman gripped his arms with her icy hands. The bruise on her head told much to Phuong. He knew quite well the path leading from Suoi Gia to Song Trang. He knew only too well how scared of the night are women of the national minorities.

“Brother Phuong, I was so afraid that you might not come. I arrived here when it was still quite dark.

Just imagine how glad I was when I could find new ash in the hearth."

She informed Phuong that the enemy were about to make an incursion into Song Trang.

"You must go away for a while," she said. "Give me your towel, I shall pack some rice and salt for you."

A crystal of salt dropped on the ground. Tidu hurriedly picked it up and threw it into her mouth. Phuong looked away, his heart filled with compassion.

At sunrise, Tidu lifted her basket and set out on her return trip. Though hungry and sleepy she did not feel tired in the least. Yes, brother Phuong was right. If we all stood up as one man, the My-Diem gang would certainly be defeated. With brother Phuong and other cadres, Tidu would not fear the Americans and Diemist agents, nor the tigers and elephants that roam about in the Chu Lay mountain. But what gladdened her most was that brother Phuong did not resent her husband's behaviour. He had told her, "Ma Quang is afraid and ignorant. That's the real cause of it all. Let's take pain to talk him to reason once, twice, many times if necessary."

The sun rose over the horizon, and to Tidu it seemed to smile sweetly.



## THE XANU FOREST

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

Few species grow as vigorously as the *xanu*. For every tree that falls, four or five young ones spring up, their green, arrow-like tops shooting skyward. Few thirst so much for sunshine; the young plants grow very rapidly towards the sunshine, which pours down into the forest in big shafts glittering with myriads of yellow fragrant specks from the sap. When young, breast-high trees are cut down by the shells, the gashes cannot heal and the sap that exudes from them is thin and clear, they die within five or ten days. But full-grown ones, with thick foliage, cannot be

killed by the shells, their wounds heal quickly as young bodies do. And so, through all these last two or three years, the *xanu* forest has provided a shield for the village.

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

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After three years in the Liberation armed forces, this was the first chance Thu had to return to his native village. He met little Heng at the stream and the boy offered to show him the way. The day Thu joined up, Heng was a mere tot not even reaching his waist, who used to follow grown-ups to the *ray*, carrying a tiny basket on his back. Now, it was an infantry rifle he was carrying. They followed the old path which wound through manioc and *pomchu* \* fields, climbed up two steep slopes where steps had been carved, and crossed a forest teeming with jungle leeches on rainy days before arriving at his small village. Thu would not have dared to venture alone, without a guide, over this once so familiar track. It was now full of traps and pits: bent bamboos which when released, would sweep the path and break your legs, spike traps, spears hurled in pairs by powerful cross-bows, etc. Little Heng was rather taciturn like all the inhabitants of Xoman. He was wearing a cap

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\* A kind of tubers (*Publ.*).

which some Liberation armyman had given him, a too long jacket and a G-string, and with his rifle slung across his back, he looked a real fighter. At times when they passed by some particularly well defended spot, he would wink at Thu and smile as if he wanted to ask him, "What do you think of that, brother?". His eyes would shine with pride, and Thu would smile back at him and nod sympathetically.

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

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

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

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

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

"So, Zit has become secretary of the village Party Committee," Thu thought to himself. He could not imagine what she looked like now. Zit was Mai's younger sister. Soon after Mai's death when Thu was about to leave the village to join the Liberation army, the little girl had stayed awake all night, sitting beside the fire as she had no shirt to put on. At dawn, she had pounded rice for Thu to take along with him. She pounded thirty canfuls of rice, put it

in a sausage-like bag and gave it to him. She did not weep nor say a word over her sister's death, while everybody even Old Met, cried his eyes out.

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

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

Little Heng did not know about that episode in Thu's life. He got on the tree and, turning, beckoned: "Hurry up, brother. Can't you even climb a little slope, after being away from the village so long?"

The sloping path was full of spiked pits. Thu walked in silence and the features on his face had hardened. From afar, he now heard the muffled sound of rice pestles, and he realised that what he