

had missed so much during those three years he had been away from the village was that sound of rice-pounding pestles worked by the diligent hands of the Stra* women — his mother, Mai, Zit — which was so familiar to him since his childhood. He tried to keep calm but his heart was beating wildly and his feet kept stumbling over tree roots. He overtook Heng, then outstripped him. The boy protested: "Hey, there are plenty of traps around. It's not like what it used to be. Wait for me. Go behind."

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

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

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

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

Heads were still sticking out of the openings of the houses—giggling young girls, who were too timid to go down and welcome Thu. He was soon surrounded by a thick crowd. He recognized them all: Old Tang, with his usual fringe of beard, sporting a long pipe made with metal retrieved from a downed helicopter;

* A national minority of Vietnam (*Publ.*).

Brother Pro, now looking quite a bit older; Sister Blom with white streaks in her hair; Old Mother Proi, who had lost all her teeth... A swarm of urchins, their faces smeared with soot from *xanu* fire. "Where's Old Met?" Thu asked.

A heavy hand tightly clasped his shoulder. He turned: Old Met was there, looking as sturdy as ever, his glossy black beard reaching down to his chest, his slant eyes shining, and with the old scar on his cheek. His bare chest looked as strong as the trunk of an old *xanu*. He gave Thu a gentle push, eyed him up and down, then burst into an uproarious laughter:

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

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

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

"How long is your leave?" Old Met asked. "Just one night? Right. If your commander gives you one night's leave, stay over one night. If he gives two, stay over two. Orders are orders. Tonight, stay at my place."

Nobody protested. Met added:

"Now, everybody go home. The day is over, it's about time to prepare the evening meal. You kids, go and wash your faces clean of soot: you all look like actors on the stage. Those who don't do so, let their

pals give them a good dressing down... You Thu, go and wash your feet. You remember where the fountain is, don't you? You do? Right. If you didn't, I'd chase you out into the jungle!"

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

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

From the house roofs rose dark violet threads of smoke.



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

"I still have half a tinful of salt Zit gave me when she came back from the district Congress of Emula-

tion Fighters. The salt she received as a reward at the Congress, she shared with us all. But this is reserved for the sick."

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

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

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

He angrily put his bowl down:

"But every one in the village know that, don't they? A finger can pull a trigger even if only two-thirds of it is left. Did you pass by the *xanu* forest near the big stream? The trees are thriving. Nothing is stronger than our *xanu*. One fallen, others grow up. I defy those bastards to destroy the whole forest. Eat, son. We Stra people grow good rice, the best rice in this part of the country."

Soon after the meal was over three sounds of tocsin came from the direction of the communal house. The village people began streaming to Old Met's. Girls stamped out their torches before going into the house, but some old women entered the room with burning

ones in their hands so that they could have a good look at Thu, and then threw them into the fire-place, making the flames leap fiercely. Old men asked in a resounding voice when they had only walked half way up the stairs. "Is Thu there? Have you given him a good meal. Old Met?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pushing some children gently aside, the old man sat down beside Thu, next to the fire. He knocked the bowl of his pipe on the "head of the household god" *, picked up a little bamboo stick and cleaned his pipe with it, then looked around at the people in the room. They seemed to be all waiting for him to begin speaking.

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

"All the old folk know this story. Some of the young people do, others don't. The children certainly

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

have heard nothing about it." The old man stopped and stared at the kids, who sat silently with their eyes wide open. He continued :

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

Everybody kept silent. One could hear only the far-off noise of the water from the bamboo pipe mingled with the muffled sound of raindrops on the tree leaves. Thu also kept silent. He looked at Old Met. The light from the flickering fire was playing on the old man's muscular body and Thu thought of the heroes of the old legends he used to listen to in long night sessions when still a child. He looked at Zit. She had grown as tall as Mai when he had met her at the foot of the tree standing at the entrance to the forest. The tree had now fallen across the path and the guerillas had dug a maze of trenches around it. Zit

was also listening with calm, wide open and thoughtful eyes.

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

Oh yes, the old folk had not forgotten, the young and Thu himself too. In his mind's eye he saw a child carrying a small basket left by his mother. In the basket were two canfuls of rice hidden under some vegetable. The child was weaving his way in the jungle, jumping nimbly from one rock to another, bringing food to a revolutionary cadre. A little girl, smaller even than himself, was running after him, her hand lifting a too long skirt that her mother had just made for her. Hopping from one rock to another like a bird, she shouted, “ Wait for me, Thu. Wait!” Her friend turned and glared at her. “ Can't you keep your mouth shut, Mai? It's a clandestine job we're doing and you are bellowing like a hart!” Mai wanted to laugh but fearing a rebuke, she kept silent...

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

As if all that had happened only yesterday.

The revolutionary cadre's name was Quyet. Ever since adverse troops had come to this part of the country, they had been scouring the woods day and night. One heard echoes of the barking of their hounds

and their guns. There was one thing the people of Xoman village were proud of : for five years, not a single cadre had been either caught or killed by the enemy in that part of the jungle. At first, the young people brought food to the cadre and kept watch for him. Then U.S.-Diem agents found out and struck at them. Young Xut was hanged on a fig-tree at the entrance to the village. "Such will be the fate of any who tries to bring food to the Communists !", warned the men.

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

The children replaced the old folk. The most devoted among them were Thu and Mai. When Thu was busy working in the *ray*, Mai went to the jungle. When Mai had to look after her little sister Zit, Thu went. Sometimes, they both went. They even stayed overnight in the jungle : you can't leave a cadre alone there, how would he know which way to flee if U.S.-Diem agents tried to track him down ? Once Quyet, the cadre, asked them :

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Three years later, Thu came back to Xoman, having made a successful escape from Kontum jail. The wounds on his back had healed. He met Mai at the foot of the big tree at the edge of the forest, and as she took his hands, her eyes filled with tears. As for him, he looked at Mai with surprise: she had grown so tall! She took him to the village where the people assembled at Old Met's just as they did tonight. Yes, just like tonight...

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yes, everybody had been there. Old Tang, Brother Pro, Sister Blom, Old Mrs. Broi, Old Leng. One thing was different though: Mai had been there. After Thu had finished reading Quyet's message, the whole hamlet

lit *xanu* torches and followed Old Met into the jungle to fetch carefully hidden weapons. Thu walked three days to Mount Ngoc Linh, but it was not to bring back chalk, as he had done three years before. He brought back a basketful of grinding stone. On top of Mount Ngoc Linh, there was enough grinding stone for the steel to be used in one hundred insurrections.

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

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

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

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

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

"Anyone caught trying to leave the village will be shot dead on the spot."

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

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

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

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

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

“Have you lost the use of your tongue, bitch!” Zuc bellowed. Then turning to the soldiers, he roared,

“What are you waiting for?”

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

“Where is Thu?”

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

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

Thu pushed Old Met's hand away. Again the old man no longer recognized his face: his eyes were two embers. Old Met let go the young man's shoulder.

A terrible roar. Thu had rushed into the middle of the courtyard. The burly ruffian fell flat on his back and Zuc was flying into the communal house. The

clicking of gun-bolts was heard. Then Mai holding her baby in her arms crawled into Thu's arms, and he clasped them in his strong embrace.

"Here I am, cannibals! Here's Thu!" he shouted.

But Thu could not save Mai and her child.

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

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

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

Darkness fell. Thu was surprised to find himself so calm. He thought: "The baby has died. So has Mai probably. I too am going to die. Who is to become a cadre? Who is going to lead the Xoman people when the orders come from the Party for the insurrection? Old Met is already well on in years. Never mind,

there are still the young people. Zit will grow up. She is even more resolute than her sister... The only thing I regret is that I won't live to see the day when the Xoman people will rise up in arms..."

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

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

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

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

One of Thu's fingers set ablaze. Another soon followed; then another... *Xanu* resin is very inflammable. Thu's fingers were now but ten flaming little torches. Thu closed his eyes, then opened them again, staring before him. Heavens! The fire, it seemed, was not only devouring his fingers, but his lungs, his bowels as

well. There was a bitter taste of blood in his mouth: he had bitten his lips hard. But he did not utter a single cry. A communist never begs for mercy, Quyet had said. He would never beg for mercy, Thu said to himself. The flames were biting hard at his very bowels. O Quyet, brother! Was he, Thu, going to cry out? Oh no, never.

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

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

Then, Thu heard the calm voice of Brother Broi:

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

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

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

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

Gongs resounded...

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

* * *

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

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

“ I've told you the whole story. The people of Xoman took up arms that night. Thu left soon after, when his fingers had healed. Each of his fingers had but two joints left, but he could still hold a spear and fire a rifle. We had heard that on the other side of Mount Ngoc Linh there was another Zuc, and that the people there had also risen up. So we sent Thu to look for the revolution and he has been away ever since... Why have you been so long, you young devil ? The girls have all been longing for you. Now, then, I've said all I have to say. Now is your turn. What have you done all these three years ? Have you done anything we should be ashamed of ? What have you done ? How many of U.S.-Diem men have you killed ? ”