Thu stood up. He stepped towards the fire. What should he say? Love for his people filled his heart.

"Old Met, all of you folk!" he said at last. "I... yes, I met that Zuc..."

"Where?"

"In his post."

"Did you kill him?"

"I did."

"Did you shoot him?"

"No."

"Why?"

Thu unslung his rifle from his shoulder and rested it on the floor.

"Well," he said, "it happened like this. We attacked their post and killed all the troops."

"All of them?"

"All of them. Their commander had taken refuge in an underground shelter. We called on him to surrender but he refused. We dropped grenades, but there were recesses sheltering him from the splinters. Our commander asked, 'Who'll go down after him?' I said, 'I'll go.' So, I went down. It was pitchdark. I got hold of him. He fired. I snatched away his gun. He tried to overpower me, but I was the stronger of the two. I put my knee on his chest, and switched on my flashlight. 'Zuc,' I asked, 'do you remember me?' He shook his head. 'All right,' I said, 'look at my hands. They can still hold a rifle.' He started rolling his eyes in terror. I said, 'Look,' I have a gun. I have a knife, too. But I won't shoot you and I won't

stab you. Listen, Zuc, I'm going to strangle you with my maimed fingers."

Zit asked in a calm voice :

"You killed him all right?"

"Of course."

"But he was not Zuc!"

"Of course... all of them are Zucs."

Old Met stood up. He laid his heavy hand on Thu's shoulder. "Right!" he said. "Right!" he laughed grimly. The sound echoed. Laughter filled the room.

Cannon shells started falling on the *xanu* hill near the big stream. But nobody paid any attention. The people's voices drowned the muffled explosions.

***

Thu left in the morning. Old Met and Zit walked part of the way with him. They came to the *xanu* forest near the big stream. Last night's shelling had cut down several big trees. The sap which had oozed from their wounds glittered under the summer sun. All around, countless saplings were springing into life. Shoots were bursting from the ground, pointed as bayonet tips.

They stood there for a long moment, looking into the distance. *Xanu* forests followed each other to the horizon, as far as the eye could reach.

1964

Nguyen Sang

THE IVORY COMB

IN the bath of dim moonlight, the hut lay hidden in the heart of the Plain of Reeds, among a thinly grown mangrove belt washed by the rising water. A liaison post on a communication artery, it was small but crowded with people. As we had to wait for our turn to leave, we now lay relaxing, now sat cross-legged on a plank bed with a sense of confinement. To while away our time we chose to tell stories. I shall never forget an aged comrade, a really talented story-teller. His smuts — Resistance smuts, too — made us die with laughing. To begin, he always summoned a smile and then looked rather funny. But that night there was something different with him. He insisted that he should talk, but when all agreed he remained silent for quite a moment. He bent his head a little, sat very still and looked out into the immensity of the water around. We stopped joking in anticipation of something serious. Outside, a gusty wind blew and the surfs broke on the mangroves. The hut jolted and rocked like a boat. Some storks stirred uneasily, others flapped their wings, fluttering in the air. The waves and the wind seemed to remind him of

remote events. He strained his ears as though he was listening to a distant voice. In undertones, he began his story. Turning away from us, he looked at the horizon and the twinkling stars...

***

The story went back more than a year ago, every time I remembered it, I still felt aghast as if I had just come out of a dream.

" That day I travelled from Post M.G. to Post D.A. As soon as the motor-boat left the shore, everyone of us was eager to know who was manning it. This was not merely out of curiosity. Before our departure we were told by the head of the liaison post that we had a long and dangerous journey ahead, and that we should have to go by boat and also on foot. By water, we should be easily spotted by choppers, and by land we should easily bump against commandos. Should choppers whirl overhead, we should have to remain calm and strictly abide by the steersman's orders. That meant we should place our fate in his hand. I naturally wanted to know who he was. Darkness, however, only allowed me to notice that it was a slender young girl with a U.S.-made carbine slung on her shoulder and a scarf round her neck. Her manner was rather tidy.

I knew by hearsay that this post had a very clever liaison girl. One day, she guided the way for a cadres' group. Before crossing a river, she asked them to stop in a paddy-field far from the bank. Together with her male colleague, she moved forward to probe the area.

On arriving at an orchard near the river bank, she realized that she had fallen into an enemy ambush. She showed no sign of embarrassment and told her friend:

'Everything is all right. Go back and take the travellers here. I'll get to the other side to take the boat.'

She spoke in a loud voice so that the enemy could hear her. By these words, she gave a secret signal. The liaison man paced back and quietly took the travellers across the river at another point a few kilometres away. As for her, she planted two grenades then crossed the river safely. Meanwhile, the enemy lay still in wait, hoping to make a good catch. Time wore on and nothing happened. Knowing that they had been deceived, the commandos cursed one another and returned to their base. On their way, they stumbled against the grenade trap which took several lives. Later, pepping the story, people said that the girl had a keen sense of smell, and that she could thereby locate the enemy and differentiate between the Yanks and the puppets.

If it happened that the girl who was to man this boat was the liaison woman in question, I thought, there would be no cause for much anxiety.

'How many women are working at this post?' I asked inquisitively.

'Only two, a cook and I.'

It was she, without doubt, and I was greatly relieved. Hearing her voice, I guessed her to be eighteen

or twenty at most. I came to like her and wanted to ask her a few more questions. Seeing that she was busy with the starting gear, I gave up the idea. After putting the cord around the starting disk, she stood erect and turned towards a boat nearby, saying:

'I start first. All right now?'

'Hear, hear, good journey!' said the liaison men on the next boat. She was called by them now as Sister Hai (eldest) now as Sister Ut (youngest). She gave some witty answers, addressing the liaison men as her little brothers. Then in a polite manner, she told us to put all important things in our pockets or in separate parcels to avoid losses in case we should be strafed by helicopters or ambushed by commandos.

Unlike the station master she warned us against these possible mishaps in a rather mild and lovely tone. Then she bent forward and started the motor. The boat slowly left the thick mangrove belt and dashed forward. There was a pleasant chill in the air. At her instructions, the passengers busied themselves with their luggage. As for me, nothing else was more precious than my papers and travelling expenses which I always kept in my pocket. Suddenly I thought of the tiny ivory comb. So I unpacked my bag, searched it out, put it together with my papers in a pouch that I slid into my breast-pocket and carefully fastened this with a safety pin.

The little comb was the last vestige from an intimate friend of mine. Whenever I looked at it, I would feel some solicitude and a pang of regret.

It was the first days following the restoration of peace. A friend of mine and I revisited our native village. We had lived next door to each other, near an estuary of the Mekong River. We both had joined the Resistance War at the beginning of 1946 after the invasion of our home province by the French. He stood sixth in his family and was accordingly called Sau. His only daughter was then barely twelve months old. Every time his wife came to see him in the liberated areas he would urge her to take their daughter along the next time she came— something she dared not do as she had to go through the jungle. For herself such a journey was no easy job. Sau, therefore, could not find fault with her. For eight long years he saw his daughter only in a small-size photograph. Now on the way home, he was stirred by indescribable fatherly feelings. The boat approached a landing place. He saw a little girl of about eight, with bobbed hair, black trousers and a red-flowered vest, play in the shade of a mango-tree in the front yard of the house. He was sure she was his daughter. Not waiting for the boat to reach the bank, he jumped to it : the boat was driven back and I was almost dangling. He walked forward, then stopped and shouted, 'Thu, my daughter!'

Just at that moment I was close behind him. He expected her daughter would bound towards him and fling her arms around his neck. He made a few more steps, bending forward and opening his arms, ready to hold her in a warm embrace. Startled by his call, the little girl stared at him with round eyes, and looked lost and puzzled. As for him, he failed to control his

emotion. Each time he was seized with a sudden emotion, the scar on his right cheek turned red and grew dreadful to look at. With such a face and his hands stretching out, he slowly moved forward, and in a trembling voice, he mumbled, 'Come on, daughter! Come on!'

The little girl could not understand and blinked at me as if to ask who he was. Her face suddenly grew pale. She broke away in a run and cried, 'Mother, Mother!' Her father did not move. His eyes did not leave his daughter. His face was distorted with pain and his arms dropped listlessly.

As the trip had been rather long, we had only three days left to stay at home, not enough for the girl to recognize her father. That night, she did not allow him to sleep with her mother. Showing sharp protest, she got out of bed, and standing on the ground, she pulled him out. Throughout most of the day, he did not stay away, trying to comfort her. His effort proved futile. He expected so much from her to utter the word 'Daddy', but it did not come. When her mother told her to call him in for dinner, she retorted, "You'd better call him yourself!"

The mother exploded in fury, snatched a big chopstick and threatened to beat her, insisting that she should obey. 'Come in for dinner!' Thu simply said.

Sau sat still, playing deaf, in wait for the word 'Daddy'. She remained in the kitchen and raised her voice:

'Dinner is ready.' Sau did not move. The girl turned towards her mother, angrily.

'I've done as I was told, but he pays no heed to my call.'

Sau eyed his daughter, slightly shaking his head, and smiled. May be he was too sorrowful to burst into tears. To prepare for the next meal, after putting the pot of rice on the fire his wife set out to buy some foodstuffs and told Thu to ask for Father's help if need be. The pot was boiling. The girl opened the lid and stirred the rice with a big chop-stick. The pot was a bit too heavy to be lifted off the tripod to pour out the excess water in it. She then looked up at Sau. I thought that she was now at the end of her tether and that all she could do now was to call her father for help. She looked round for a moment.

'The pot is boiling. Reduce the water for me, please,' she said aloud.

I intervened, trying to show her how to behave.

'You ought to say 'Father, please, help reduce the water.''

She seemed to ignore my words and went her way in a loud voice:

'The pot is boiling, the rice would be overcooked.'

Sau stayed motionless.

'If you spoil the rice,' I threatened her, 'you'll surely be beaten by mother. Why don't you call your father for help. Just say Daddy. Try it.'

As the water in the pot was now boiling to over-measure, she felt some fear, looked down and pondered. But she still held her ground. With a rag, she tried to lift the pot but without success. She

looked up again. The pot boiled faster. Hard pressed, she was near to crying. She turned her eyes at the pot, then at us. Her fumbling manner looked both pitiful and funny. We thought she would throw of the sponge. At last, she stretched out for a large spoon and used it to bail out the water, while muttering something we could not hear. She was terrible indeed!

During the meal, Sau served her with a lump of yellow fish egg. She set it aside in her bowl with her chop-sticks, then all of a sudden, she tossed it away, scattering rice all over. Angered by her behaviour, he beat her at the buttock. 'Why are you so mule-headed like that?' he shouted.

I expected that the little girl would cry or run away. But she sat still and looked down. After a moment, she picked up the egg and put it into her bowl again. Then she stood up and quietly moved towards the riverside. She jumped into the boat, unfastened the chain, purposely jingled it noisily, took an oar and rowed across the river. She called on her grandmother, told her of what had happened and cried. That evening, her mother tried hard to induce her to come back bome. But it was in vain. Sau was to depart the next day. His wife would like to spend the last night with him, and so she did not insist on her daughter's coming back.

The next morning, relatives came in large numbers to see Sau off. The little girl was also present with grandmother. He was busy receiving everybody and seemed not to pay attention to his daughter. His wife packed his belongings. Thu now stood alone in a

corner, now leaned against the doorpan gazing at everybody around her father. She looked rather different now, showing no more obstinacy, no frown on her brow. Her long and upturned eyelashes which seemed to have never flickered, made her eyes look wider. She was no longer obviously thoughtful.

At the moment of departure, only after he had said good-bye to everybody did Sau run his eyes to seek his daughter, who was standing in a corner. Ostensibly he would like to embrace her. But he simply gazed at her, lest she might flee again. His look was affectionate but there was a tone of sadness in it. I noticed a flicker in the girl's eyes.

'Bye-bye,' Sau uttered in a soft voice.

I thought that she would stand there motionless. Unexpectedly she shouted, 'Dad... dy, dad...dy.'

The scream tore up the silence and rented everybody's heart. This 'Daddy' broke out after being held back for many years past. Stretching out her arms, Thu sprang up and rushed towards her father with the agility of a squirrel. She clung to his neck. Her hair seemed to stand on end on her head. Pressing herseff tightly against his chest, she said with a sob:

'Daddy, I don't let you go. Stay with me.' The father hugged his daughter who kissed him in the cheek, in the hair, in the neck and even in the long scar on his face.

The grandmother then told the family about what had happened the night before. Trying to find out the reason why Thu refused to recognize her father she asked her why she didn't say 'daddy' to him.

'No, he is not daddy,' she said, tossing over the bed.

'Why do you know? Daddy has been away from home for a long time. That is why you can't recognize him?'

'The man does not look like daddy as I see him in the photograph.'

'Still, he is your father. Perhaps he looks older now after such a long time?'

'Not because he is older. Daddy has no scar on his cheek.'

So, grandmother understood everything. She explained that papa had been away fighting against the French and had got wounded. She related how the French perpetrated crimes in a post at the other end of the canal. The girl listened to her in silence, tossing herself every now and then and heaved a sigh like a grown-up. The next morning, she told grandmother to bring her home.

The daughter kept pressing herself tightly against her father's chest. Sau could not contain his emotion, but he didn't want his daughter to see him cry. He carried her with one arm and wiped his tears with the other. He kissed her hair and murmured:

'Let daddy go. I'll be back home again soon.'

'No,' the girl screamed. She tightened her grasp around his shoulders, clinging to him both with her arms and her legs. Everybody present could not hold his or her tears. I could not breathe at ease, and should like very much to tell Sau to stay on for some

days more. But there were some difficulties to this. We did not know whether we should remain in the South or be regrouped to the North. We had to report to our unit, to get the order and to make the necessary preparations in case we had to go North. It was time to leave. People tried to convince the girl to let her father leave.

Sau's wife told her: 'Thu, my love, let father go. He'll return here when our country is reunified.'

The grandmother touched the girl's hair with her hand and said: 'My good girl, let daddy go. Tell him to buy a comb for you.'

'Buy a comb for me and take it home, daddy,' said Thu with a sob. Then she released her grasp and dropped to her feet.

Some time later, Sau and I went to East Nam Bo and worked as cadres in a mass organization. The period between 1954 and 1959 was a dark one. The U.S.-Diem regime hunted down former Resistance members. We had to live in the jungle. Our life and activities there were eventful and it would take me the whole night to relate them. There were nights we were surrounded three times by commandos sent on our heels, and days without meals, and we had then to eat wild leaves. But that is another story.

In the jungle at night, as we would lie on our hammocks with a piece of plastic as a roof, Sau often felt a strong remorse for having beaten his daughter. Once, during our conversation, he suddenly sat up in his

hammock and said: 'People here often go hunting elephants. I must see whether I can lay hands on a piece of ivory to make a comb with for my daughter.'

Since then he slept upon this hope. Not long afterwards, as our group ran short of food, we thought of hunting wild beasts with bows and arrows — not with a rifle — as the silence of the jungle had to be kept in view of our security. We had not any idea of hunting elephants, but by chance one came across our place. None of us showed interest in the game, but Sau decided to chase it. With a friend he hid himself in a bush, waiting for the elephant to come within reach, and they hit him right in his eyes.

I still remember that afternoon. The downpour over the jungle was just over. Drops of water shone on tree-leaves. I was working under my plastic roof when suddenly I heard someone shouting. I looked up and saw Sau rushing through the jungle on the trail leading to our place. He raised a piece of ivory and showed it to me. His face brightened like a child's.

Afterwards he hammered a 20-millimetre cartridge into a small saw. He was often seen labouriously working on the piece of ivory to make a comb, devoting his attention, his skill and industriousness as a jeweller does to his job. I was much interested in watching him at his work. He normally completed a couple of teeth a day, and the whole comb not long after, which was ten by one and a half centimetres. On the hold of the comb, Sau painstakingly engraved these words: "With my love and best thoughts for my daughter Thu".

The comb brought relief to Sau's troubled mind though his daughter had not the opportunity to use it. On certain nights, he was seen gazing at it, polishing it on his hair. Sau longed to see his daughter again. But an unfortunate event occurred. It was by the end of 1958, at a time when we did not yet have arms. During a raid by U.S.-puppet troops, Sau was killed by a bullet fired from an American plane which hit him at the chest. Before he died, he had not enough energy to confide his last will. He could only plunge his hand into his pocket and take out the comb. Handing it, he intently gazed at me. I lack words to describe his last look. I can only tell you that from that day on, I have often seen him in imagination riveting his eyes on me.

'I won't fail to bring the comb to your daughter,' I said in a low voice bending my head closer to him. Upon hearing this, Sau shut his eyes for ever.

I must tell you that on those dark days, clandestinity was observed not only by those living — this was conceivable—but also by the dead. Sau's tomb could not be built higher than the ground as usual, for the enemy would desecrate it, should he trace it. I carved out a sign into the bark of a nearby tree as a reminder.

That was the way we lived and died at that time. It was unbearable and we had to rise up in arms.

Some time later I was in a comparatively safe Resistance base. One relative called on me. I wanted to send the ivory comb to Thu but I was told that she and her mother had left for somewhere in Saigon

or the Plain of Reeds. The Americans and the puppets had organized 'To cong' * courses, conducted terrorist raids and burned down the people's houses to herd them into concentration camps, and after some years the village became completely desolate.

I held the comb in my hand. The sight of it gave me much pain.

The motor of the boat went on humming. I felt an eager desire to have a close look at the face of the liaison-girl who held the string of my life. The night was not dark and the starry sky was covered here and there by some hazy clouds. In the faint light I could only distinguish the girl's profile, her rather round face and a pair of eyes with an indescribable look. These struck me and I thought I had met her somewhere before.

Suddenly, someone shouted, 'A plane! a plane!'

The boat rocked because of the agitation of the passengers. Many people screamed: 'Make to the bank.'

'Where is the plane?'

'I see its light behind us.'

'Turn to the bank! turn to the bank! It's a jet coming.'

The liaison-girl lowered the speed of the motor-boat and looked at the sky for a while.

'No, it isn't a plane. It's the light of a star.'

* Indictment of communists. (*Publ.*).

Her calm voice brought order back in the boat. It was so gentle and sweet. Then she speeded up the engine.

Our travel on motor-boat after several days' walking gave me a real pleasure. However, I still felt uneasy about enemy aircraft.

The boat now engaged in a canal running through an open field. There were no houses at all, only some bamboo-clusters in the distance. As though aware of my secret feelings, the liaison-girl accelerated the speed. Water swelled at the prow and two long trails behind the boat sent waves to the banks which caused the weeds and the roots of wild ferns to quiver.

The passengers were quietly enjoying the quick trip while the liaison agent stopped the motor and shouted: 'Planes.'

She steered the boat towards a bamboo-bush. Another boat behind us also took shelter here. Now we heard the droning of American helicopters. I could not know how acute her sense of smelling was as the story had it—but it was wonderful that she had distinguished the droning of aircraft amidst the roaring of our motor.

The boat rocked and some passengers lost their balance. She tried to soothe them, saying: 'Keep quiet, uncles; the choppers are still far away. Jump onto the bank for dispersion and hide yourselves. If they send flashes upon us, stay where you are without moving.'

As she spoke, all but I were already on the bank. I was about to jump out when the girl told me: 'Stay

here, uncle. We're only a few in the boat, don't worry.'

I should not have obeyed if the advice was given by anyone else. But her behaviour had so impressed me that I remained onboard.

The choppers came up and from the other end of the canal, their flares advanced towards us. They roared like a ship convoy and drew nearer and nearer. For such a job, the Americans usually used three helicopters, one lighting the way and the two others doing the strafing.

The girl repeated her advice to me: 'Camouflage yourself carefully with tree leaves and sit motionless.'

This was the first time I was caught by choppers' flares. When they were directed upon me, I felt their intense light and the beating of their blades over my head. I was afraid that the boat was too visible. The camouflage was blown up as in a whirlwind, laying bare the knapsacks underneath. I thought I was finished and tucked my head between my shoulders to make me smaller. The girl tried to quieten me again as though she guessed my anxiety.

'They cannot see us as we do ourselves,' she said.

Her words had not the same effect upon me as they had had before. An idea came to me : jump into the water. But I could refrain myself in time.

The dreadful flare became less dazzling and the roaring of the engines died down gradually as the aeroplanes went away. All became dark again. Yet I dared not move, fearing that the enemy might come back.

'They stage a show of strength, but they can't see anything at all. We have only to keep calm and not to move,' the liaison-agent said. Then she looked up at the field and called the passengers back to the boat. Some were wet through. They grumbled as they changed their soiled linen. The motor roared again.

After midnight our group landed on the bank and went by foot. We walked in a single line along the muddy, uneven and slippery ditches across a rice-field. We carried our sandals in our hands and groped for our way step by step. Even so, every now and then we fell one after another. At a point near a river-bank, the liaison-girl ordered the group to stop and sent two scouts to reconnoitre the area.

After some twenty minutes, they met with enemy commandos. The latter did not hide themselves in the gardens along the riverside as they usually did, but laid ambush in the open field. Shots were fired from all directions and cartridges flew close overhead.

'Brother Tu, guide the group away, I stay here,' was the order of the liaison-girl. From the way she spoke, I guessed that she was team-leader. I felt a strange urge to tell her to go with us. But she had already faded away. Shells continued to fly whistling, then dropped in the distance. We lay as close to the ditch as we could, avoiding to raise our heads.

I heard a carbine shot on our left. It instantly drew all the firing towards this direction. I then understood that the liaison-girl had purposely drawn the enemy's attention to her direction.