

**1** ● A storm was gathering to the south. Grey clouds began to cover the sky, cloaking the mountains of Dăng Mản and Thiên Nhãn under a dark veil. As the sunlight faded, the fields on both sides of Lam river darkened. Shades from the dark clouds mixed with the dying sunlight to turn the ripening rice fields into leopard skin, now dark green, now yellow. Flashes of lighting were followed by roars of thunder rumbling out of the depths of the foreboding clouds...

By the banyan tree at the entrance to Chùa village, some half-sleeping oxen were ruminating lazily, drooling from the corners of their mouths. Gadflies darted up from the oxen's backs, avoiding their whipping tails. A group of peasants, back from work, gathered around a blind singer. They asked him to play a certain new song on his monochord. Facing the direction of the thunder and inhaling the sweet fragrance of the nearby lotus pond, he knitted his brows together and asked the people to sit beside him:

“Is the sky rumbling... or are those shots from General Phan Đình Phùng's gun ones ringing out in the forest?”

“That is the thunder, old man. It rumbles so much now, but so far not a drop of rain. As for our patriots’ fights against the Westerners, our country is doomed by destiny. King Hàm Nghi was defeated. The French have already deported him. What else is there for us to hope for now?”

An old man quietly listened to the conversation as he wove a bamboo eel-catching basket. Suddenly, he dug his lance into the soil, put both hands on its handle, and interjected.

“Why do you say there is nothing to hope for? The country has had its troubles now and then but talented men have always risen to the occasion. If an old tree falls down, another shoots up. There are always trees in the forest and there are always great men among our people!”

Everybody looked at him with approval. The blind singer wiped his closed eyes with his sleeve. He mumbled, sniffed the air:

“Lotuses are blossoming. Their fragrance drifts up even here.”

“Old man,” said a young girl, “I have some boiled lotus pods for you. Please eat them, they will make you feel cool.”

The blind singer held the smooth boiled lotus pods in his hand, quite moved:

“Whose daughter are you that you are so kind, little girl?”



The girl smiled, said nothing. A peasant replied for her:

“She is candidate SẮc’s daughter, old man.”

The blind man smiled, his wrinkled face was beaming:

“So, I know her well. She is Thanh, candidate SẮc’s eldest daughter and baccalaureate Hoàng Xuân Đường’s granddaughter. All right then, I am going to sing a song for all of you and this little Thanh to enjoy.”

The girl handed him a calabash of water:

“Please have a drink to cool your throat before singing, old man.”

“Thanks for your kindness. I am not thirsty. By the way, for whom did you bring water to the rice field?”

“It’s for my mother.”

“Well then, your mother has not given birth yet, right? Which do you want, a brother or a sister, for me to sing the congratulations song now?”

“I would like another brother, old man.”

Nodding, he smiled and tuned his instrument. Everybody gathered around the blind old singer. The oxen were still half-sleeping. A fascinating sound accompanied the song:

*“Oh Heaven, do you know  
Why the country of Vietnam has been suffering  
From generation to generation  
In the hand of ones coming from the West  
Who invaded Gia Định, then Đồng Nai  
Occupying the South, and now the North?”*

*Mandarins wanted to fight against them.*

*But they were forbidden by King Tự Đức*

*Without any explanation*

*So, now our capital and our cities are lost...”*

Little Thanh listened, though she hardly understood the full meaning of the song sung by the blind old man. But others followed each line:

*“Oh Heaven, do you know*

*Everywhere, people are beaten down and suffering*

*Working for other countries who plunder our land*

*We are coolies yet we pay heavy taxes*

*Patriots are standing up in anger*

*Gathering an army to smash the French*

*And reclaim Vietnam...”*

People were attentively listening to the sorrowful melody and the heartrending song when a woman stood by a cow, and pointed her hand at the lotus pond:

“Oh Thanh! What is the matter with your mother? Look over there!”

The slim seven-year-old girl rushed toward her mother with the calabash of water in her hand, the song still followed her: *“Gathering an army to smash the French... And reclaim Vietnam... Saving the people’s lives... Rescuing them from the difficulties and hardship...”*

Mrs. Hoàng Xuân Đường, little Thanh’s maternal grandmother, was rushing toward the pregnant woman, together with some other women, their silk shashes floating backward...

When Thanh's mother reached the edge of the yard, another painful contraction made her sit down at the foot of a persimmon tree. Over her head, a flock of birds were flying back to their nest, singing merrily. Mrs. Hoàng Xuân Đường criticized her gently but reproachfully:

"Didn't I tell you not to be so hardworking... And didn't I tell you to stay at home instead of going to work so far away? Don't you know that it is time for delivery?"

Then Mrs. Hoàng Xuân Đường urged her younger daughter An to burn some charcoal, and told little Thanh:

"Go to grandfather's for dinner. Tonight you and your brother Khiêm will sleep there as well."

Stepping through the row of tea plants separating her house from that of her maternal grandparents, little Thanh heard her mother's groaning, her maternal grandfather's coughing, and her father, who was substituting for her ill grandfather in the classroom, admonishing his pupils.

"Listen to my explanation before taking notes... As Confucius said: whether a king or an ordinary man, everybody has to strive for self-improvement."

From Thanh's house, her aunt An called out joyfully:

"Oh... my sister has delivered a boy, another boy! How cute he is!"

"Shut up!" Her grandmother yelled. "How dare you let the devils hear you!" Then she ordered: "Give

me a sliced bamboo piece... Be quick... I'm going to cut the placenta for the baby. That is done... Give me your father's old trousers, the ones that I have washed and dried. Wrapped in his grandfather's warmth, the boy will be even smarter and learned than his grandfather and his father..."

Then she turned to candidate SẮc's wife: "Remember that you have to clean the lamp saucer before filling the lamp with oil. Our forefathers used to say: *'You are smart, thanks to your mother who cleaned the lamp saucer regularly.'*"

Mrs. SẮc had stopped groaning. The baby's first cries blended with the sound of the hens calling their chicks back to their cages and the cows leading their calves back to their stables. The doves were cooing on the roof of the house and the leaves were rustling.

The lotus fragrance from the pond mingled with the smell of burnt soapberry which came from the pot of charcoal in Mrs. SẮc's room.

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Chùa village was now covered with dreamy mist. The pupils from the private classes run by Mrs. Hoàng Xuân Đường and candidate SẮc left for home by the main gate instead of their usual route cutting through their teacher's yard. A dangling cactus branch hung in candidate SẮc's woven bamboo gate, warning strangers

not to enter casually, according to the tradition of a family with a newborn child. In Chùa village, whenever the gate to a house was closed, everybody respected this family's privacy.

Outside, the frogs were crying nonstop for the rain to come. Numerous fireflies sparkled on and off in the immense darkness. The old teacher, Mr. Hoàng Xuân Đường, sat cross-legged on a plank bed, an elbow resting on a pile of three pillows. Sắc was facing his father-in-law, quite at ease. Little Khiêm lay close to his maternal grandfather's thigh, sleeping soundly, his feet stretched toward his father. The room was lit by a saucer-shaped peanut-oil lamp, around which the mayflies were flapping their fragile wings. A nearby incense burner lets sandalwood smoke in tenuous threads. Lotus fragrance slightly entered from outside.

Sắc poured alcohol into his father-in-law's cup. The old teacher took a draft:

"For our family, and for the Nguyễn's family of Sen village..." said Mr. Hoàng Xuân Đường.

Then he stood up, reverently lit five incense sticks, and made five bows in front of his ancestors' altar. Solemnly, he stood with clasped hand. Sắc, standing behind him, also had his hands clasped. From the lotus pond came the cry of the waterhens: "Quốc... Quốc!<sup>(1)</sup>"

Both men returned to their seats. The old teacher slowly recited a line from a poem: "The cry of the waterhen at night gives you a shooting pain."

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(1) Quốc also means Country.

Candidate Sắc realized that since the day his father-in-law's health had begun to decline, the old man had had many moving reminiscences. To cheer Mr. Hoàng Xuân Đường up, Sắc asked him to give a name to his newly second-born son.

"Father, would you please give a name to your grandson tonight?"

"I have been thinking about that as well."

Tapping his fingers pensively on the surface of the pillows, the old teacher went on:

*"A precious son is hard to rear, delicious fruit is coveted by many people."* A man can surmise the effect of his deeds. For instance, when we have a good seed we believe that it will give us a good tree. Therefore, I want to call my new grandson Côn, to be known as Tất Thành which means 'sure to succeed'."

Sắc blinked his eyes and smiled:

"Côn... This name comes from the legend about a kind of fish that turned into a gryphon, right, father?"

"Right. My wish is that this child would have the will to travel all over the world. Though he will face trouble, he will surely be successful. That is why I want him to be known as Tất Thành."

Sắc wet his brush on the ink stone. The smell of sandalwood blended with the fragrance of lotus at the end of his brush made the beautiful words on a piece of silk: NGUYỄN SINH CÔN, to be known as TẤT THÀNH.