

SINGING ON THE TALE OF VÂN TIÊN
(‘Câu Hò Vân Tiên’ by Nguyễn Văn Sâm)
Translated into English by Thiếu Khanh
Nguyễn Huỳnh Điệp

The huge merchant vessel was moving sluggishly on high water. For a month until now all hands on the boat had never found their work easier than it was today. In the wide river water was flowing slowly and there was little traffic; to keep the boat moving it needed only two men holding their poles walking along from the bow to the stern and back to keep the boat in stream. It had been much harder when passing the Nao estuary and the Đại Ngãi lagoon earlier where water was whirling violently and all hands onboard had to exhausted themselves against the waves while the boat didn't seem to like moving.

Having passed the Bến Lức Market for a short time the boat came to Đệm Market at Bình Điền when it turned dark. The sky was dotted with some flickering stars in the evening. The dark was like a black screen already hung somewhere in the sky waiting for its time to fall down covering the world. The waxing crescent had appeared already looking like a streak of flashing light in the sky. *The serene scenery in the cool breezes made me remember of my close relatives at home. I had to nerve myself to follow my mother's words to hitch a ride on this huge vessel.* The couple of the merchant vessel's owners usually didn't allow female passengers aboard. Earth was ruled by earth gods, rivers by river gods and on boats there might be many spirits of the deceased. Women with their periods were believed to cause bad luck to the boats they rode on and the boat owners would ruin their career for that. *But it was so lucky that due to my father's good reputation that the owners of the vessel and his wife were graceful to accept my request. Now I was expecting all that would happen in the civilized region I was bound to. Just me alone. The farther the boat traveled the more different the scenery became and the more I felt*

nostalgic. I remembered the patch of sugarcanes in the front yard stretching to the river bank where I used to do the washing everyday; I remembered the row of huge earthenware jugs containing long preserved rain-water standing quietly in the middle of the two compartments of the house; in a hot day just a nip of the water would cool down your throat. I remembered my mother who had usually busied herself all day in the kitchen. I remembered the evenings when my mother and I had been shooting the breezes under the dim light of a small calophyllum oiled lamp. All those familiar things were no longer available now and I didn't know when I would be able to see them again. And my eldest brother – he had gone performing statute-labor to dredge the Ông Đốc Canal in Tân Châu – Hồng Ngự without sending home a word. I was told that labors were paid daily with two small balls of rice to go with some pieces of coarse salt and two two-finger-sized pieces of dried cuttlefish plus one and a half cent which couldn't go as far as to pick up a pack of home-cut weed; yet labors had to submerged themselves in the water for hours scooping up mud. The place abounded with mosquitoes, aqua-leeches and terrestrial leeches. That I was on the journey meant that my brother and I were put apart from each other. Hadn't my dad been arrested it wouldn't have come to a pretty pass that I had to grudgingly leave the village.

Tears were welling in Lành's eyes as she felt she was going to cry, but she had to bottle up her feelings as she didn't want to be seen crying by people on board. But there was something in her heart that left her down in the mouth as though she was blamed unfairly in her childhood. She cast a glance at the cargo compartment where chinaware was kept. Layers of china bowls and disks were buried in a thick bed of husk. Some dozen of those Qianlong-timed items might help one make a small fortune. They were highly valued by urban citizens. The merchandise was authentically china-made. People could feel proud of having bought them to display them in their glass-cases. Much money would be spent for the purchase however the price could be. Lành

smacked her lips and turned back to the reality. The haves were wallowing in wealth, whereas the have-nots did not have a bean. *I was lucky enough to be allowed on board, otherwise I could be still staying somewhere under there. It was rather strenuous to hitch a lift for each distance at a time. The boat was likely to arrive at its destination tomorrow morning. And then I would land in a strange place where I wouldn't know if I would come across any relatives of mine. All that I knew was that they were living in Chợ Đũi Catholic community near the Chợ Đũi Girls' School, but I was not sure where the place actually was. When having arrived there I would try to look for it. Failing to hit on it would mean that I would find myself, a sole girl, left high and dry at such a strange place.* Lành smacked her lips thinking her mother was quite unreasonable to have put her daughter into such a journey. Who knew what would happen next. *We could be living hand to mouth at home but even so we, mother and daughter, would have each other. Our food would be nothing to worry about. Our frugal meals should suffice us. In any case, birds and fishes were abundant. Just setting up a fish trap once one would have enough fish for his daily meals. Vegetables were in plenty in the gardens that you could think of removing to reduce them. Famine would be far from the case. Perhaps mother was afraid that those hoodlums who were rising to power in the village could wreak havoc on everything.* Thinking of that Lành burst into tears and she was sobbing her heart out. Recalling her mother's words at the moment of parting she felt the reunion with her mother would be a faint hope. *"You must have known the story of a woman whose husband and son had been killed by tigers but she didn't want to move to another place?"* said her mother. *"It was because the place she was living at wasn't governed by a cruel ruler. Local powers that be are usually more bestial than wild beasts. That's why our forefathers have said, 'Vicious politics is more dangerous than tigers.'*" That was her mother's words. *"You should flee this place for your dear life,"* her mother concluded in her shaking voice with tears. *"It is dangerous for a girl to live far from home, but it'll be better to run away. Everyone wants to leave this*

place. Everything now is in turmoil. Our homeland doesn't belong to us any more. It belongs to them. And they hang together and become allies in a complicated system. We common people can have nothing else for it but to lie down under their suppression. To bow to the inevitable. Trying to keep ourselves alive as long as we can. To wait. If those hay stacks in the front yard could move they would have already fled this place..."

Now I've already left my mother's arms to stand on my own feet and deal with the life on my own. From now on, everything will depend on the luck of the draw. I should make all my decisions without asking for help from my mother.

The voice of the two boatmen took Lành out of her interminable thoughts:

"Here we're at Ba Cùm now," one said. "You know the way those thieves at Ba Cùm act, don't you? If you fail to pay attention to them, all the merchandise might be knocked off before you could say Robinson. And don't forget our packs of clothing, or we would have to go to market with just a pair of underpants on."

"I already knew it. Don't bother," answered the other. "They often use big junks to make believe they are honest people. Then they'll leave their junks and use small sampans to travel to and fro craftily. It's difficult to know who's who."

"That's right," replied the first one. "Since it's difficult to know it so once a big junk happened to be on its way transporting paddy when those thieves managed to put all its members on board asleep using narcotic and stole the best part of the paddy and all the precious belongings of the female owner of the junk..."

"Psitt! Psitt!" the man signaled to his fellow. "That junk is chasing after us. It might be *them*. It keeps running doubtfully toward us."

Lành wiped her tears with her sleeves and looked backward. A junk was traveling in the wake behind the boat she was on. The craft was broad in its width, but short in its length. It looked awkwardly like those carrying firewood or cajeput trunks. In the dark, the small roof at

the stern of the junk gave a black shape against the star-spotted sky on which now appeared and then disappeared the shadows of two men. At times a live cigarette flashed on brightly rising up and down; a human head stood out on the dim background of the sky. A singing voice rose melodiously and spread in the quiet space, penetrating every follicle of the listeners. The voice sounded so noble like a gentleman in the old days taking a walk round the market place, and so gentle like that of young girls when they were pounding rice and singing under the moonlight.

Hoo-hoo... It's the strong winter wind that knows those hard pine-trees

It's the strong fire that knows how pure gold is

A young lady will get married to a gentleman

I'm not the one that may have any flirtation

Hoo-hoo... Bamboo goes with orchid flowers beautifully

Like Lục gentleman that has married Kiều lady

Oh darling keep your mind determined for a full due.

Hoo-hoo... Even if one day my boat drifted somewhere in the north I'd try my best to come back with you...

Lành was paralyzed as she used to be in her childhood when she was facing the long rod of the traditional teacher who taught Chinese characters to the kids. She wanted to raise her voice but her mouth was kept shut. It was a common way as the singer started his song describing his mind and giving his advice, but the way he kept the verses duly short except the last one which he lengthened deliberately suggested that he was a very experienced singer. *All I could do now was prick my ears listening to him and could not sing a word in reply.* The two boats continued to move. The ambience was heavily quiet. The last word “y..o..u...” of the song was still resounding in the chilly wind of the night and hanging on to everybody on the boat.

It seemed for ever and a day before a female voice rose. The voice was clear and seductive but her singing was rather short as though the singer didn't care whether someone would misjudge it:

Hoo-hoo... Whomever I should get married to I'd try

To find out whether he is a Bùi Kiệm or a Vân Tiên⁽¹⁾ before I could make my reply.

The singing had come to its end but Lành did not come to her senses yet. The voice of that singer was so clear as water that can be seen through to the bottom of the stream, and so high like a bird flying over the clouds. *My voice was much appreciated in the neighborhood but it can hardly be compared to this singer's. It is like a novice compared to an expert. The farther one goes the more knowledge he acquires. If one is good at something, there must be someone else much better at it than he is.*

Hoo-hoo... onboard a vehicle I'd give up my seat to thee,

To assure thy convenience and, hoo-hoo... let thou first address me.

Hoo-hoo... I'd like to be thy friend

Since I'm not a Bùi Kiệm, hoo-hoo... why off thou fend...

Lành understood. They were flirting with each other and expressing their mutual affection. They made believe they were not traveling on the same boat and as if they didn't know each other. It was interesting. They were singing referring to the characters in the Vân Tiên verse novel. *I'd see how far they would go with it.*

The female was giving a nice reference to the novel to make known of her mind:

Hoo-hoo... Thê Loan⁽²⁾ is a dishonest woman

That nobody would like her hoo-hoo... is very certain.

¹ Bùi Kiệm is one of Vân Tiên's friends in a verse novel titled *Lục Vân Tiên* by Nguyễn Đình Chiểu. But Bùi Kiệm has symbolized a shameful flirt who has courted Nguyệt Nga, the would-be-wife of his friend, Vân Tiên.

² Thê Loan is a character in the verse novel. She was engaged to Vân Tiên, but when knowing that Vân Tiên was blind for having cried so much for the death of his mother, she agreed with her father to sell him down the river.

It was so clear. Referring to this character Thê Loan, the singer also implied that she had been already involved with someone else, hence no changes were possible then. Usually, commencing like this the singer threw a curve at her male partner. The door was shut. There was no way arguing the toss. But the male voice was rising, passionately wheedling, and also haughtily challenging:

Darling, thou should marry to someone in the money

Then thou'll be living all thy life in luxury.

Don't get married to those oarsmen

Or thou waste thy dear life unprotected then.

The two boatmen were laughing together, "They were evidently alluding to us. But we didn't tease or pester them, did we? They may refer to anything else, why did they blame us boatmen? If only we could sing." They looked at Lành tacitly asking for her help. Lành was puzzled. "Should I sing in reply? Mother warned me that being a girl I should keep my mouth shut in most circumstances. It's not any good to be garrulous. Just ignore it and I'll arrive at my place tomorrow. The life ahead is much more important to worry about. What's the pleasure to sing about? And what's the ascendancy here to compete for?"

From afar in the quiet night, the voice of the girl was rising to accuse the male:

One's love was predestined in the heaven

You shouldn't behave profligately like Búi Kiêm which's so brazen

Then the singer changed the tune:

A big parasol, if remained a frame, still has a large canopy

An umbrella even golden coated is merely a tiny copy

As a man you have neither literary talent nor military ability

While a young girl I have acquired both skills and beauty

If you were the son of Lục Ông³), so talented and jocund

I would have waited for you and hadn't got married to my husband.

Lành burst out laughing. It was so interesting. That was an indirect answer. It served him right. Well deserved for the flirt. There were now many things that could make anyone confused. Quite a few women abandoned their husbands and followed those dull-witted village officials. Many women had to get married to the men they held in contempt just to help tide their families over. Such cases were thick on the ground. The phrase "rebelling against the Great France" was like a sword at one's throat that could make anyone's blood run cold; and those epithets such as "members of the rebellious party" or "henchmen of the old regime" were like an explosive that could destroy one's family. Those officials in the village administrative committee were ready to take and exploit any advantage, and their heart never went out to anyone. They had their stooges on the watch everywhere who now alleged that someone was illegally distilling spirits, and then would accuse someone else for having sold their paddy as an attempt at tax evasion. They tried to throw men in jail and took liberties with their victims' wives. They were like Búi Kiêm and were in spade in the village; they were dead to all sense of shame as to praise the heroic France. They cheered the great France without scruple. They felt happy to be owls but wanted to perch on the branches of an apricot; they were proud to be apes but wished to climb onto a cinnamon tree. They didn't remember "the frame of a big parasol and a gold coated umbrella". *It is partly because of those occurrences that I have to leave my native village. Now they are prowling about outside the gate but very soon they will break into my home. If I were living at a civilized place I wouldn't have to flee like this.* Lành smiled embarrassingly. *If anything, I will be like Nguyệt Nga holding the portrait of my man and stay faithful to him although I might have passed my prime and even got over the hill. Few girls have an opportunity to come across a Vân Tiên in their life, and it is not that every girl can be so faithful to her Vân Tiên as did Nguyệt Nga. It*

³ Lục Vân Tiên's father.

may not be easy for a girl to meet her luck in love for her life...

On the river, the singing went on, and was turning to a higher standard, similar to the tune of “Vọng cổ hoài lang”⁽⁴⁾ in Bạc Liêu tone.

Oh darling, don't look at someone in decent attire of silk and brocade with a tortoise-shell comb in his hair and a pair of shoes on and deem that he was a gentleman; nor should you see a man in ragged clothing, with holed hat on and muddy bare feet and think that he is a petty man. Don't you remember that Thạch Sanh⁵ wore just a loin-cloth and played an instrument but he managed to catch the eagle and rescue the princess; afterward who is better than he was?

Oh darling, don't follow Thử Loan who was keen on someone of note and cast away the one she had been engaged to. Oh darling, nor should you follow Tiao Shun who embraced Lupa⁽⁶⁾ in the morning, and in the evening she fell into the arms of his adopted father. Try to behave like Kiều Nguyệt Nga who was so honest and faithful to Vân Tiên and eventually she was reunited with him...

Lành was dozing off amid falling stars all around, the singing voice was still resounding in her ears mixing with the verses from the tale in verses of Vân Tiên she used to hear from someone long time before. In her dream, she was happily smiling with the image of Vân Tiên who put on a golden war helmet, holding a silver head spear and sitting on a black horse with strange and shy feelings for the first time he met the young lady who would be his sweetheart... *Please sit tight and don't raise the veil; 'Cause I'm a male and you are female...*

⁴ “Listening to the drum sounds at night and missing one's husband”, a traditional genre of Vietnamese music.

⁵ Thạch Sanh is the hero of a folk tale in Vietnamese literature.

⁶ Tiao Shun and Lupa are the characters of a well-known Chinese romance, San-Kuo Chih Yenji.

Water kept moving slowly in the river. The other boat was parting for a long distance. In the quietness of the night there was probably the faint noise of someone lowering himself quietly into the water. Very quietly..

2.

The days near the Tết were like mourning days in Lành's heart. The gloomy faces of the boat owners made everybody feel uneasy. The singing had cost all people on the boat dearly. It had lulled them into the land of nod, clearing the way for the thieves to break in. Her bundle of clothing disappeared with the image of Vân Tiên; the safe where the boat owners' money and jewelries were kept went off with the melodious voice of singing. *Needless to say that I suffered it because of my ignorance and because I couldn't have expected what would happen.* Pushed into an abject poverty by heavy taxation, people had to rip off one another to sustain their lives. There couldn't be such a singing session without a purpose. People became cunning to exist, and crafty lest to be destroyed. Such cases hadn't been known of in previous years when people were very hospitable, they loved to invite and welcome visitors from places far away. *But the boat owners' loss was understood as due to the bad luck I'd brought to them. People didn't look at the reality to see why there were those thefts. They were fussing at the people around. I was looking forward to meeting my relatives so that I could leave this place. If it wasn't because of their great respect to my father I might have been left high and dry at some strange place. Who knew what could have happened! And the gold necklace. A hoodlum almost broke my neck when he snatched it from my neck at Ông Lảnh Market some days ago. But for Nam – was he Nam? I was so frightened at the time and couldn't make it clear whether his name was Nam – who forced the thief to give it back to me that afternoon, I wouldn't have a bean left now. What a man, he just cast his bread upon the waters and left. It was a week since then but I couldn't make out where he was to express my gratitude to him. I was going to leave here and I couldn't say where I would be*

to. All of a sudden Lành looked down at her dress which had been blueed the day before with «Dancing» labelled blueing paper. *I've fallen in love. Missing. Sprucing myself up. Nguyệt Nga has met Vân Tiên. But will the story have an upbeat ending?* She thought. On the riverside people seemed to have retreated to their houses preparing oblation to offer to their ancestors and waiting for the starting hour to make their first going out in the new spring for good luck. Hills of water melons, hundreds of baskets of oranges, rows of boats carrying bananas, and such number of flowers which some days earlier no one could think they would be sold out, now left only mounts of trash on streets, a plentiful party for swarms of annoying flies. The scene looked like a battlefield with its unlucky soldiers of the both sides after a fight. Lành got agitated with the pessimistic comparison in her mind. *Perhaps I've been affected by all that happened in the journey, she thought. There were wind and waves, thefts, and the image of Nguyệt Nga drowning herself in the river. Oh I shouldn't. There is nothing much to miss. I still possess my necklace. If you're still alive there's still hope. These clothes given by the woman owner of the boat suffices me for the Tết. When having found my relatives, all problems will be solved. Today is the first day of the new year, it won't be any good if I wear a gloomy face,* thought Lành.

Lành was ready for a very happy smile to greet the couple of boat owners who were about to step aboard from the ramp after having gone to somewhere ashore to cast the diviner's rod. The woman was smiling at Lành, pointing to the dragon dancing team gathering around at the stele which bore the image of a tiger on it at the Cầu Muối Temple:

-Lành, go ashore and see Saigon dragon dance over there. Very interesting. It's lucky to arrive here on a Tết occasion.

Then, as though having read Lành's mind, she added:

-Oh, don't be sad any more. It was the bad luck of the old year. You've lost something but you stay alive. They stole your bundle of clothes

only to carry the burden of all the bad luck on your behalf. You'll get better in the new year. Go watch dragon dance, and I'll be on the watch for the boat. It's the Tết. If you have time, come and cast a diviner's rod at the Lady's pagoda. The Lady is very miraculous. Go along the riverbank to the Borese street and you'll see the pagoda there.

To please the woman, Lành said « yes, yes » and she stepped onto the ramp to get ashore and joined the crowds swarming away. From afar, the rhymic sounds of dragon dancing drums were repeating attractively. Before she knew it, Lành had been admitted in to the crowds. Amid the spectators, the dragon dancers dressed neatly like boxers in the termite-perforated picture which was rolled up and slipped behind the altar and Lành used to see the thing on important death anniversaries in her family. Lành was excited and she felt herself a little queer. They were performing dragon dance and martial art with spears and knives; nothing was unfamiliar to her. Every year, she had delighted her eyes with the dragon dance performed by the Phụng Hiệp team which started from the new lunar year's eve to the end of the fifth day of the first month. But dragon dance in Lục Tỉnh⁽⁷⁾ which was rather rustic and not sophisticated as that performed by those genuine teams in urban areas like Saigon. In her village, the dragon dancing performers were simply dressed in plain black « bà ba » clothes; their bare feet were muddy and chapped. They might have performed well, but still it looked rather oddly. The attire of this dragon dancing team in Saigon stirred Lành's soul. The performers' trousers were bound with rubber strings up to their shanks. Their short and skimpy tunics, fastened at the belly, bore the red image of a dragon head on the back. On their heads were small palm-leaf conical hats which were painted red, and on top of each was a pointed tassel. They looked like frontier guards in Cambodia and Cần Giỏi in days of yore, only that they

⁷ The southern part of South Vietnam, under early Nguyễn Dynasty in 19th century, comprised six provinces.

didn't wear their long hair. Nor did they have beard. All these things sufficed to recall her memories from her childhood. She remembered her father's reverent eyes and his shaking fingers before the sparkling light of a candle when he caressed the portrait:

"That's your grandfather. He was a military officer in the militia of His Excellency Trương. Your grandfather took responsibility to defend from this side of the Cần Giuộc River to Gò Công estuary and as far as to those islets of Hòn Đất, Hòn Cu... in the sea. Then His Excellency Trương was killed by a traitor, the militia was disintegrated, your grandfather took me to move over here. Now everything has changed, opportunities have altered, people heart is no more united. I just try to maintain my moral integrity, and practice my medical career to help people until I follow our ancestors. Great tasks to turn the table in the country is left to those of great talents...."

The father's eyes were sparkling dreamily. Vaguely visible in his hazy eyes was the family proud which was occasionally mentioned of mixing with the attitude of being content with his lot after a long time on the lam. The father and the daughter were sitting looking out of the door for a long time, each followed one's thoughts.

As the sun was edging slightly to the west, there were more people, pressed by the drum sounds, coming from their houses far in the hamlet. A dragon head with a white long beard was turning to this side then to the opposite, playing with the ball or moving its horn to struggle for the pearl in front of the house which was offering a prize. The dragon's protruding eyes were swaying from side to side. Its large mouth opened and shut repeatedly as if it was going to swallow up someone among the people swarming around. Its single horn was black and bent; every time the dragon advanced forward it seemed that the horn could slash the belly of some spectator. Terrible. The performance was not for a novice. The performer not only waved the dragon head with both of his hands but also danced on his legs with the kicks, the retreat of his kicking feet and the quickness in his defensive positions. With just a look you could know that was a very

experienced performer. More than ten rolls of fire-crackers hung from the roof of the house almost touching the ground were set off. The explosion was dinning everybody's ears. The dragon dancer prostrated himself and moved back at the doorway. Then the dragon turned up to look at the red pennon, which bore yellow words "Ông Lãnh Market Chino-Vietnamese Youths' Dragon Dance Association", hung dangling from the top of the roof. Accompanied the pennon were pieces of lettuce and a line of new decorating paper. The dragon danced and jumped violently as though it was angry. Many chucking sounds of appreciation were heard among spectators. It was great. The dragon head was rather heavy, but the performer danced with it lightly. It looked like Xiang Yu lifting the cauldron. It took an hour already but he didn't seem to be any tired.

A group of five men were putting up a tall and mature bamboo pole which was as large as a man's upper arm. The men were at their proper positions to keep the pole stand upright firmly. The dragon dancer was somersaulting around, then he looked up and down the pole as to estimate its height before climbing. Lãnh had seen such performance once at Cần Thơ Market when she was a child. The performer wore the dragon head on one of his arms and started to climb up the pole which was so smooth and tall. The other end of the pole was joined across by a piece of bamboo on which the dancer would perform his somersault in the drum sounds. The dragon's white beard was floating in the freezes; the performer looked like a fighting general. In a sudden the drum sounds slowed down and was low in volume. The dancer jumped onto a stool dancing for a while and then he put out one of his legs straight forward. Now from the group of boxers standing behind, appeared another dragon smaller than the first one, with parti-colored face and grey beard. This dragon was rather humble. The way it danced was also gentler, and slower. It bowed down to the white bearded dragon three times and then it slowly and timidly crawled under the leg of the other performer in fear. Lãnh was so surprised. Usually, only a strange dragon dancer was to prostrate to the local one

to accept its status of inferiority. But these two dragons were of the same team. Why did they behave in such a queer way?

“Cầu Muối Dragon prostrates itself to recognize Cầu Ông Lãnh Dragon as its big brother,” someone was speaking in a loud voice as though he wanted to be noticed as one in the know. “It has to eat crow to lick someone’s boot at the market like Han Xin in his ill-timed situation. It has to do so for eight years so far. There have been times it was sneezed at its horn, or its beard was plucked...”

Another man, a native perhaps, told the story in full details:

“Since the fight at Chợ Đũi catholic hamlet, near the tomb of religious martyr Gã, as the result of a dispute over the right to perform a dance at the marriage-connected family of Bá hộ⁽⁸⁾ Xường, in which Sáu Tiết, the leader of the Cầu Muối Dragon Dance Team was killed, soon his team disintegrated. But Út Hồng the big hoodlum leader of Cầu Ông Lãnh Team keeps having this scene repeated every year. Every time seeing this I’m very angry, especially since my family is at Cầu Muối. It doesn’t concern me, but I feel very embarrassed about it.”

“You know why?” the man asked, and he made the answer himself. “Út Hồng thought in this small area there shouldn’t be two big-brothers, which was like two bears in the same forest. He couldn’t stand it. He was in cahoots with a band of thugs in Chợ Lớn, and they conspired with a group of Frenchmen’s servants around the Bồn Kèn area⁽⁹⁾ to murder Sáu Tiết although the both bands had agreed they wouldn’t trespass on each other’s area...”

⁸ An honorary title conferred by the king on greatly rich men in the country. Xường was the third of the four richest families in Saigon in early 20th century – they were, “first: Sĩ, second: Phương, third: Xường, and forth: Định.”

⁹ Bồn Kèn was the roundabout at the junction of the Catinat Street and Bonard Avenue (Đồng Khởi Street and Lê Lợi Street nowadays) in Saigon in the time of French domination, where every late afternoon a French military band gathered to play music for public entertainment.

The man paused for some moments to take his breaths, then he continued in details:

“It’s a pity that Sáu Tiết’s underlings were either recruited into other bands or broke rank and retired. Even so, Út Hồng still doesn’t feel satisfied and he has this scene performed again and again to bring dishonor upon some remaining members of the Cầu Muối dragon dance group. In addition, this is also to forewarn those who may want to restore the old group. Now as the only team in this area, they can do whatever they want to; who can get a hold over them? But... everything should be kept reasonable. Any extreme would be intolerable...”

Lành learned the whole story. She shook her head. *This really was the limit. The dead couldn’t rest in his grave. Their rival’s team had disintegrated yet they kept abusing them. Still, they’d acquired the reputation of the cock of the walk in a section of a river, or at a market. Their underlings might amount to almost a hundred and nobody bothered to make an issue out of it. Why should they cause resentment? Not only it wasn’t one’s self-respecting action but it also hurt others’ feelings.*

The drum sounds continued loosely. The smaller dragon kept crawling patiently to and back under the leg of the white bearded arrogant dragon dancer. Someone among the boxers were laughing pleasantly while others frowned at it. Some quietly vowed to express their discontent and cast their angry glances at the sight. The atmosphere was as highly tense as it was on the day of the fight at Lăng Tô⁽¹⁰⁾ between the band of Khánh Hội’s ruffians and that of Cầu Muối last year that the French policemen had to try their best to break them up.

Having learned the story, although being a female I felt very frustrated and lost my temper. It sounded as though the wharf my boat came to anchor didn’t have a hero; or as though I’d mistakenly got married to a chinless wonder...

¹⁰ The name was Lăng Thọ. “Lăng Tô” is a French pronunciation of the word.

But Lành didn't have to be frustrated for long. The last straw would have broken the camel's back. Corralled into a corner even a dog would turn to bite you, much less a human. A very loud and sonorous cry suddenly rose from the group of boxers which was followed by a man with his hands holding up two scimitars. The man was speaking in tears:

"Dear late big brother! I die today... I can't stand this anymore.... They're abusing us too much... I'll die beautifully and boldly to have our revenge, big brother..."

The man brandished two shining scimitars to chop at the Cầu Ông Lãnh dragon. Frightened out of his wits, the dragon dancer raised his dragon head to ward off the man's weapons. The two sharp knives fell down through the dragon head as though they were cutting a banana trunk. The dragon head was cut into three pieces showing its dangling bamboo laths.

"Chop him!," from the Chinese dressed group gathering around the Earth God, a man shouted out his order with his Chinese accented Vietnamese which sounded as sharp as a razor. "Chop him! And kill him! That's trouble maker, a spoilsport. He's a traitor!"

Spectators were running away in horror like swarm of bees when their beehive was being destroyed. The sounds of crying, shouting, and that of knives slashing at flesh, and of someone falling, all combined into a kind of horrifying sound of death like that in a rebellion. Lành cupped her face in her hands and run like hell to shy away from seeing knives chopping at a human body. In her state of panic, Lành vaguely saw that the face of the heroic man looked faintly like that of Nam...

3.

The Tết was passing away as slowly as the time of a dozen years. The tale of Nam, a young man of Cầu Ông Lãnh, slashing the Cầu Muối dragon to be chopped to death, was carried by words of mouth from this one to the other. Many people admired him but not a few took a dim view of his action. They all were

reasonable: he was bold and he was stupid. But everybody was onlooker. *Outsiders are always loud in their judgment*, thought Lành, who felt deeply heartbroken about it. The man had appeared in her life just once but it seemed to her they both had ever known each other since time immemorial. That she was grateful to him now became insignificant compared to his heroic action. His saying that he would die to have his comrades' revenge was stirring in her mind all the time, in her wakefulness as well as in her sleep, when she was shopping as well as when she was cooking. It pulled her soul out of her body to come somewhere high in the firmament. It lifted her from the surface of the earth, kept her hanging away from the dirty earthly world. She wore a distant look when present at a place and was asleep when moving normally.

Many a time the lady owner of the boat glanced at Lành and talked to her husband:

"It's a pity. She seems to have gone out of her mind and she looks bewildered all the day. In such state how can she find her relative's home? I wonder how we shall settle the case. We're in a dilemma whether to abandon her or to take her along."

Lành caught the sigh which the female boat owner had heaved at the end of her lament. It was a sigh of compassion especially from a woman. She quickly thought of Nam. Of Vân Tiên. Of Nguyệt Nga. And of her situation. *Why should I link my life with someone who might not know even my name, who had not intimated his heart to me, and especially he was dead. I might be teased by the soul of the dead. The soul of someone who was killed under knives or swords wouldn't be able to leave for ever the mundane existence and was said to find somewhere to lodge at. To be a forsaken spirit. To be fiends or demons to lead someone else astray. I should come to Một Hình⁽¹¹⁾ to pray for*

¹¹ Một Hình was the way native people referred to the statue of French Admiral Rigault de Genouilly which had been placed by the French government at a Square on a Saigon riverside street. The statue was toppled and destroyed by people in 1945.

safety. I vowed to love him all my life and wished him enter the Pure Land. I'd vow and pray. Just one action for several purposes.

Lành put on the “bà ba” dress offered by the woman owner of the boat some days before. The upper piece of the dress was rather large but quite good; the pair of trousers fitted her well. Lành draped a stripped scarf round her neck, letting down the two ends of the scarf on her chest. She looked at her image in the mirror and smiled to herself, then she hurriedly left for the shore. It was early in the evening. Street lights were on. On the Lò Heo Street, she felt a faint headache with the dolefully cries of those pigs carried on the carriages to the abattoirs. Near the Middle Railway, at the alley connecting to Borese Street, the colored lanterns of the area of streetwalkers had started to be lit. Lành was walking at a quick pace. She blushed at the indecent look of some brothel frequenters. Some glass-windowed carriages⁽¹²⁾ were running; their horse hooves were striking the road click clack and the screeching sounds of the wheels grinding on the macadam could make one's flesh crawl. From afar, the Saigon – Chợ Lớn streetcar with electric sparks on its top like firecrackers in the night was coming; then it passed her and came to stop at Cuniac Station. Lành felt that the civilized city at night was quite joyful. Lights were shining brightly; everywhere was thronged with people. *It's unlike at my remote village in the back country, where everybody keeps hanging about at home after sunset.*

From the statue of *Một Hình* Lành was walking along the river bank to come back to the boat. The bell from the State Cathedral was chiming eight o'clock. Male and female handsome and pretty young people were crowding at the Admiral Park.

Native clerical workers with French-styled glossily polished leather shoes, which might be used as pieces of mirror for one to shave his beard, and four-pocketed khaki overcoats on, wearing their side-parting hair, were hand-in-

hand with modern-styled girls whose plaited hair was flowing over their shoulders; they seemed to look down on people around. It was so offending: *people may express their affectionate behavior toward their sweethearts at their intimate and private places and at specific time, why are they showing such manners in public like this?* She thought.

Those who still followed old lifestyle were wearing traditional knee-long gown in marguerite-styled woven crape which was going with large gauze pants; they put on Canavaggio-branded shoes and white tropical helmet; wearing pointed waxed moustache they were going for a walk with their wife and children, and speaking gently. Some young men were looking at Lành desirously as thought they could swallow her. *Why was there a girl wandering here alone? Lăng Tô was a place for married couples and lovers.* Lành went all shy. She looked down and hastily walked away. *What's a place! Male and female people are walking close at each other's side!* The Thủ Ngũ flag tower was very tall. It was terrible that there were Frenchmen drinking and enjoying themselves noisily. In the river, the turning bridge was in a proper position along the stream to allow the passage of boats and ferries. Strollers standing at both sides of the gap were talking and laughing joyfully. *It's so strange. When coming home I'll certainly tell my mother about this: The turning bridge was a bridge that yielded to the river.* From Khánh Hội, some port gangsters were riding their white Alcyon bicycles over the very long slope of Móng Bridge which looked quite exciting.

When Lành was passing the high stone-built bank, someone was talking to her:

“Excuse me, miss... Could you stop so I would ask you a question?”

Lành blushed and shyly kept going straight. Nothing involved though but Lành felt she was in mourning for *him*. *Having prayed to the Một Hình made me feel relieved. Spiritually, now I belong to his spirit. I should deserve to be with the one that has died courageously. He died to get his revenge. He died so that he wouldn't have to look down and eat humble pie when*

¹² Many Frenchmen at the time preferred referring them as “voitures malabres”

being ridiculed. As I'm a girl it wouldn't matter much if I should get some disadvantage. Is there anyone in the world that deserves it than him? Life is so strange. The singing on the river from the thieves of Ba Cùm was like words of a good fortune teller. My life may be sad but beautiful, and as sweet-smelling as flowers of night blooming jasmine; I'll be like lady Kiều – no one shall criticize me as an ungrateful girl:

*Even though someone is extremely benign
Even though how someone would wheedle me
A lotus in full bloom will decline
I'll keep my chastity like Nguyệt Nga the great lady.*

...

*I'd rather be starved and in rags
Than be immoral to leave bad reputation
I'd rather live in poverty like washrags
Than be like greedy Võ and his daughter so brazen.*

Nam had put on the light so that his fellows would see what the insult was. There would be other lights. The light would help someone open his own eyes. And those young men who were practicing martial art in Lò Heo Street would learn how to live. "My heartbreak is of little account as compared to the death of a courageous man." Lành told herself firmly:

"I shall keep my chastity. I must do so. *It's the strong winter wind that knows those hard pine-trees / It's the strong fire that knows how pure gold is.* I'll stay single for ever, or until I could meet another Nam." A happy smile came on her lips. In a sudden, the dim lights in front of the Dragon House¹³ across the river were blazing like those of the Chợ Quán Electrical Plant when its engines were fed with fresh coal. Lành quickened her pace toward Cầu Chong. It was close to the anchored boat. *I should light some incense sticks for him.* The breezes from Quai de Belgique were so fresh and cool. At the Cuniac Station the brass band kept performing. The music was resounding as far as the river causing those merchant vessels there bobbing in their sleep. Lành smiled and hurried herself up. A couple of lines from the Vân Tiên verse novel came into her mind:

*Men should be honest and faithful to the country
Loyalty and chastity are of women's morality.*

¹³ The office of the old French maritime company 'Messageries Maritimes'. On top of the house there are two concrete dragons hence the name.