

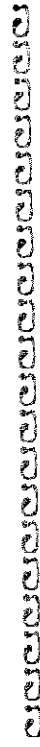
It was only a matter of time, of course, before a servant presented the king with a piece of the bright red fruit. It tasted so good that the king wondered about its origin. When he heard the story about the far-away island, he thought of Mai An Tiem and Co Ba right away. So many years had passed that his anger had diminished. Now the king recognized the severity of his punishment. He ordered his soldiers to go to the island and bring his son and daughter home. When the couple arrived with their little boy, the king almost didn't recognize them. Mai An Tiem had grown into a powerful man. The once-delicate Co Ba was now a strong and healthy woman. The king felt happiness and regret at the same time, happiness at seeing his family again, and regret at what he had done to them. Now he recognized the truth in what Mai An Tiem had long ago said. Wealth really didn't matter. All the wealth in the kingdom could not have bought such strong bodies or healthy minds. No riches could purchase the happiness that shone in these young people's faces. At that moment, the king knew that Mai An Tiem had the wisdom necessary to be a great leader and so he named him heir to the throne.

Under Mai An Tiem's reign, the kingdom was peaceful and prosperous. The shipping industry became busier than ever.

Man and Mo stayed on the island and turned melon farming into a hugely successful enterprise. Traders came from near and far to buy the fruit.

Today, watermelon remains one of the favorite fruits of Vietnam. In summer, people eat it to cool themselves down. In winter, during the days of Tet, they set it on their altars as an offering to the ancestors. Some people believe that the color of a Tet watermelon's juice tells the fortune of the coming year. If the liquid runs clear, it's a bad omen, but if it's a deep, dark red, they will count on good luck.

THE STORY OF THACH SANH



IN VIETNAM, even the smallest villages have rich people and poor people. A rich family might have two water buffalo, a vegetable garden behind the house, and even several pigs. In the city, such possessions wouldn't make you rich at all, but in the village, two water buffalo, a vegetable garden, and several pigs could mean you're the richest family around. Poor, on the other hand, is just poor. Wherever you live, poverty means a hard life.

Thach Sanh's family was the poorest family in the village. The boy lived with his mother and father in a tiny hut near the spot where the other villagers threw their trash. Every morning, they woke to the smell of vegetables rotting in the dump. Every night, they fell asleep to the sound of rats digging through the piles of trash, searching for something to eat. The family worked hard, but their situation never improved. They slept on the floor, and they never had enough money to buy even the cheapest pieces of meat. They only owned one valuable thing, an ax that Thach Sanh's father used to cut wood.

When Thach Sanh was fifteen, life got worse. His mother came back from the market one day with a cough. Soon, she grew so sick that she could do nothing but lie on the floor and moan. Neither Thach Sanh nor his father was willing to leave her alone, so they took turns taking care of her. While three members of the family had once been able to work, now they were down to only one.

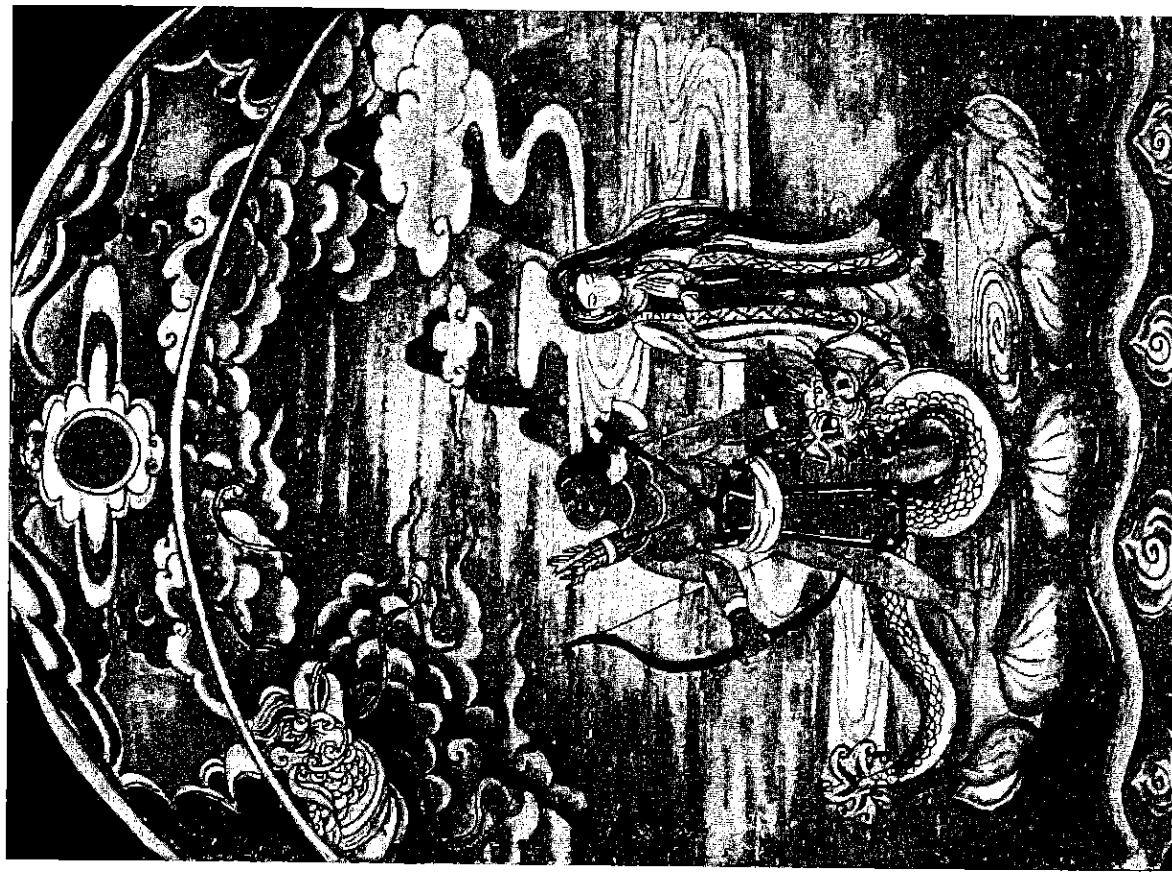
One evening, after they'd eaten only rice with warm water for dinner, Thach Sanh asked his father if they should sell the ax. His father shook his head. "Keep that ax with you, my son," he said. "No matter what happens, that ax will help you in your life."

That night, Thach Sanh's mother died. The father, overwhelmed with grief, passed away soon after. Now, Thach Sanh was an orphan.

The boy wanted to honor his parents in a way that they had never been honored in life, so he sold the hut and nearly everything in it in order to pay for a respectable funeral for his mother and father. After the funeral, he only had one possession left. Luckily, that ax was very sharp.

Thach Sanh went to live under a banyan tree at the edge of the village. The banyan was a thousand years old and so big that neither sunlight nor rain could penetrate its leaves. Thach Sanh liked living there. Even though he had to sleep outside, the air was fresh, and he didn't have to smell the stink from the dump. Every day, he took his ax into the forest to cut wood, which he traded with other villagers for rice and supplies.

Thach Sanh soon became the most sought-after woodcutter in the village. He had two things no other woodcutter had. One was the ax, which was so sharp it could cut through even huge logs very smoothly. Thach Sanh's other advantage



was unusual strength. He carried loads of wood four times heavier than an average person could carry, and he still walked so fast that it looked as though he had nothing weighing down his shoulders at all.

Thach Sanh didn't think his life was too bad. He had more food to eat than he'd ever had, but he also experienced loneliness worse than he'd thought possible. At night, he lay beside the huge roots of the banyan tree and tried to pretend that those hulking forms were his mother and father.

One day, while Thach Sanh was off in the forest, a rice wine dealer from a neighboring village stopped to rest under the banyan tree. The dealer, whose name was Ly Thong, sat drinking rice wine for much of the afternoon. At dusk, he watched a teenage boy approach, carrying two huge loads of firewood. A thought suddenly came to Ly Thong's mind. "This kid is very strong," he told himself. "He could be very useful for my business." When Thach Sanh reached the tree, Ly Thong introduced himself very politely. Thach Sanh sat down next to him and they began to talk.

After some minutes of friendly conversation, Ly Thong made a proposition. "My family has only my mother and me in it," he said. "You're all alone here. Why don't you come and live with us? You can be my blood brother. My mother can be your mother, too."

Thach Sanh was pleased. Ly Thong was six years older and could advise and teach the teenage boy. From that moment, Thach Sanh began to call Ly Thong "older brother," and he began to think of him that way. Letting the blue sky be their witness, they promised to be brothers until the end of their lives. Then Thach Sanh followed Ly Thong home.

The lives of Ly Thong and his mother became much easier after the new brother arrived. Thach Sanh did all the housework and cooking, so neither of them ever had to do a

thing. He also helped Ly Thong haul the rice wine and, because of Thach Sanh's unusual strength, Ly Thong could buy five times more wine than before. Money poured into his pocket as quickly as wine fills cups on a festival day.

A few years passed. One winter, a fire-breathing snake came to live near Ly Thong's village. No one knew where he came from. He destroyed rice fields and ate many people. The king offered a big reward to anyone able to kill the snake, but of the many young men who went off to try, none ever came home. Finally, people in the area held a meeting about the problem. They agreed that each month they would offer the snake one person to eat. The snake, who was lazy and tired of going out to find food by itself, accepted this deal. After that, the families took turns sacrificing their loved ones to the devil. A deathly atmosphere covered the whole area.

When Ly Thong's turn came around, he faced a real crisis. If he let Thach Sanh die at the hands of the snake, the rice wine business would begin to decline. But Ly Thong had no other choice. Who else but Thach Sanh was fit to die?

That evening, Ly Thong said to Thach Sanh, "My brother, tonight is my turn to guard the communal temple. I'm so tired. Could you please help me for one night?"

Without a moment of hesitation, Thach Sanh agreed. He picked up his ax and headed for the temple.

That night, while Thach Sanh was sleeping, the wind began to blow and a terrible smell woke him. He jumped up and, holding the ax firmly in his hand, rushed outside just as the snake, following its habit, rushed in. Thach Sanh raised his ax and whacked the snake in the middle of its head. Luckily, the forehead was the one vulnerable place on the snake's body, and the monster fell over and instantly died. Thach Sanh sat next to the body for the rest of the night. He had never killed anything before. He knew the snake was a

monster, but still he felt terrible. At dawn, he slowly walked home.

When Ly Thong and his mother heard Thach Sanh's knock on the door, they were terrified. Surely, Thach Sanh's ghost had come back to punish them.

Ly Thong stood by the closed door and said in a trembling voice, "Please forgive me, my brother. I will worship you on this anniversary of your death every year of my life."

Thach Sanh laughed, and called through the door, "It's just me, Thach Sanh. I killed the snake. The body is out in the temple."

"Please don't lie to me. How did you kill it?"

"I just did. If you don't believe me, go see for yourself."

Ly Thong, still suspicious, opened the door slightly. As soon as he saw Thach Sanh's healthy face, he knew that the young man was indeed still alive. Suddenly, Ly Thong had an idea. Letting a look of horror cross his face, he said, "This is terrible. Didn't you know that the snake belonged to the king? You've killed it. The king is going to punish you."

Thach Sanh was frightened. "What should I do, brother?" he asked.

"Well, it was an accident," Ly Thong replied. "I'll do what I can to help you. Hide yourself somewhere, and I'll go beg the king's forgiveness. Don't show up here again. I'll come find you and let you know what happened."

Thach Sanh did not doubt a word that Ly Thong said. Saying goodbye to his blood brother and his mother, he put the ax over his shoulder and went back to the banyan tree where he used to live.

As soon as Thach Sanh disappeared down the road, Ly Thong hurried to the temple, cut off the snake's head, and took it to the king's palace to receive his reward. The king was so pleased that he gave Ly Thong a high position in the court,

as well as bags full of gold and jade. Ly Thong and his mother settled into a very comfortable life in the palace.

That year, the king's only daughter reached marriage age. Many high-ranking young men proposed to her, but the princess turned them all down. The king, who was anxious to find a groom for his daughter, came up with a plan. Finding a fortuitous day on the moon calendar, he invited every prince from the neighboring kingdoms, every young mandarin, and every old mandarin's son to a festival. At the festival, the princess would throw the royal sphere into the crowd. The man who caught it would become the prince consort.

Rumors about the princess's beauty and gentleness spread across the land. When the festival day arrived, thousands of young men crowded around the palace hoping that fate would smile on them. Ly Thong stood among those men.

That morning, the sky was blue and cloudless. Sunshine warmed the earth and a breeze blew gently through the trees. Birds were singing cheerfully and flowers that had only budded yesterday were now in full bloom. The young men, dressed in their best clothes, whispered to each other that spring had finally arrived. Standing below the princess's balcony, each one secretly hoped that this beautiful day would be a good omen for him.

At precisely nine o'clock, the princess, in a magnificent long white gown, stepped out onto the balcony. Her beauty far surpassed what the young men had imagined, and now their young hearts beat even faster. A sweet smile appeared on her pink lips, which were as fresh as rose petals in the morning dew. When she spoke, her voice reminded all the men of the sound of a nightingale singing.

"Today I follow my royal father's advice," she said, turning for a moment to smile at the king, who had walked onto the balcony behind her. "I will throw the royal sphere. I want

to thank you for coming to the festival, despite the time and distance. Later, after I have found my husband, my father will invite all of you to stay and join the wedding celebration."

When the princess finished speaking, two maidens stepped onto the balcony, carrying a golden tray. On it sat the five-colored sphere, which was covered in fine velvet and embroidered with the royal symbols of the kingdom. The princess gently rolled up her sleeves, displaying a small white hand and long, smooth fingers. She carefully picked up the sphere. Down below, thousands of men were absolutely silent.

Suddenly, a gust of cold wind swept across the palace courtyard and up to the balcony. Not a single cloud appeared, but the sky turned as dark as it would in a thunderstorm. At that moment, a giant eagle landed on the balcony, grabbed the princess, and flew away. By the time everyone realized what had happened, the eagle and the princess had disappeared. Up on the balcony, the king stood stunned. The two maidens were crying.

Finally, with his eyes full of tears, the king began to speak. "I thought today would be a happy day at the palace. Considering this change in circumstances, I hereby change the rules. Among all of you young men, whoever can rescue my daughter and bring her back to me can marry her. I don't care if you are rich or poor, from a noble family or not, just bring my daughter back alive."

Ly Thong, standing in the crowd in the courtyard, suddenly remembered his blood brother. He had not given a thought to Thach Sanh in months, but the young man was a great fighter. Who better to help Ly Thong find the eagle and win the princess?

Ly Thong rushed back to the old banyan tree. Thach Sanh was kneeling over a small pack, as if preparing to go somewhere. As soon as he saw his blood brother, he exclaimed

with joy, "My dear brother, you've come just in time. If you'd come a moment later, you would not have found me here. How's our mother?"

"Mother's fine. She misses you terribly," Ly Thong said. "Where are you going?"

"I just saw the strangest sight," Thach Sanh said. "A giant eagle flew by, carrying a girl. I grabbed my slingshot, aimed at its neck, and shot. Unfortunately, I didn't have time to get a better shot. The stone only hit the bird's wing. It began to bleed, though, and I believe that if I follow the trail of blood, I can find the eagle's nest and rescue the girl."

This was good news for Ly Thong. "Why don't I go with you and give you a hand?" he asked.

Thach Sanh smiled and said, "I'd be so happy to spend some time with you."

The two men followed the trail of blood drops into a very deep forest. The canopy of trees became so dense that down on the ground it seemed almost as dark as night. Thach Sanh led the way, keeping his eyes on the drops of blood. Ly Thong, unwilling to be alone in this forest, hurried to keep up. After a long time, Thach Sanh came to a halt at the edge of an empty well. The drops of blood had disappeared.

Thach Sanh said, "Maybe the eagle's nest is at the bottom of this well. We'll have to go down there to get him."

Ly Thong leaned over and looked into the well. It seemed bottomless. He was not going to go down that well.

"Here's an idea," he said. "Let's make a long, strong rope, tie it to the edge of the well, and you can climb down there on it. I'll stay here and make sure no animal drags the rope away. If you see the girl, tie the rope around her waist and jerk it twice. I'll pull her up first, and then drop the rope down again to pull you up. What do you think?"

Thach Sanh agreed. Then the two blood brothers went to

look for rattan vine to weave into a long and sturdy rope for Thach Sanh to climb down.

After reaching the bottom, Thach Sanh hesitated for a few minutes, surveying his surroundings with the small candle he carried with him. This place wasn't just an old well, but a huge cave with many dark passages. From somewhere off to the right came the sound of someone weeping. "Who is that?" Thach Sanh asked. "Please let me know where you are so I can help you."

"Look down the narrow passage behind the large rock. I'm here," said the voice.

Following the instructions, Thach Sanh came to a small room with iron bars in front of it. Sitting inside was the young woman whom the eagle had been carrying that morning. Now, even in the dim candlelight, he saw how beautiful she was.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Why are you here?"

"I'm the princess," she said, explaining how the giant bird had kidnapped her. "The eagle wants me for his wife, and he would have married me immediately. Luckily, on the way back to this cave, someone shot him. Now he's gone to look for medicine. Who are you? How did you get here?"

"My name is Thach Sanh. I'm the one who shot the eagle. I followed the trail of his blood to rescue you."

The princess looked up at Thach Sanh with her lovely eyes. "You are very kind, but I don't think that's possible," she said sadly. "The eagle is strong, and you're all alone. We won't be able to escape."

Thach Sanh smiled and said, "Please don't worry. With my ax, I can easily kill him. If you step out of the way, I'll get you out of this room."

Thach Sanh chopped through the iron bars between him and the princess. Just as she stepped out of the room, the eagle

returned. The sight of a stranger in his territory infuriated the bird. He charged straight for his young enemy. Thach Sanh raised his ax, ready for the attack. The princess, hiding in a corner of the cave, prayed for him.

Thach Sanh and the eagle fought for so long that the air grew heavy with feathers and dust. The eagle tried to pierce Thach Sanh's eyes with its beak, and its knife-like claws ripped at the young man's skin. Gradually, however, the giant bird grew weaker. Blood poured from ax wounds all over its body. Thach Sanh felt himself becoming stronger as he fought. Finally, the eagle collapsed from exhaustion. Within seconds, it was dead.

The princess ran over to Thach Sanh, then gasped when she saw a deep gash in the young man's shoulder. She made Thach Sanh sit down. Then, she tore off a sleeve from her gown and gently wiped and dressed the wound. Thach Sanh had not been treated so kindly since his parents' deaths and the gesture left him speechless. He became dreamy, breathing in the sweet fragrance of the princess's clothes. He forgot where he was. The world seemed very small just then, as if only the two of them lived in it.

The princess, too, felt moved. For the first time in her life, she stood so close to a young man that she could feel his breath send a soft breeze through her hair. As she touched his shoulder, her heart beat fiercely against her chest. Neither of them said a word. When she finished wrapping the bandage, he stood up. For a long time, the two of them stood looking at each other in silence.

The candle flickered. Thach Sanh suddenly remembered Ly Thong, waiting for them up above.

"We should go up," he told the princess. "My blood brother is waiting for us."

They walked to the rattan rope and Thach Sanh wrapped

it several times around the princess's waist. "Can't we go up together?" she asked.

Thach Sanh shook his head. "The weight would be too heavy. The rope could break."

As if she believed something bad would happen, the princess pulled a ring off one of her fingers. "My mother gave me this ring when I was a child," she said, handing it to Thach Sanh. "I've never taken it off before. Keep it with you. If anything ever separates us, take it to the palace and look for me."

Thach Sanh carefully placed the ring in the pocket of his shirt. "Don't worry," he said. "In a few minutes, we'll see each other again."

Thach Sanh gave two jerks to the rope. Ly Thong pulled the princess up. Then, as Thach Sanh waited for the rope to fall back down, Ly Thong hurled huge rocks down into the hole, blocking the exit.

The princess, screaming, watched in horror. All the emotion of the day swept over her and she fell unconscious to the ground.

As soon as the rocks started dropping, Thach Sanh rushed into a small passage to get out of the way. Watching the rain of rocks, he saw for the first time the treachery of his blood brother. A wave of sadness swept over him.

For a long time, Thach Sanh stood desolate, thinking about Ly Thong. He felt drained of energy and began to question his desire to live. When his thoughts returned to the events of the day, however, the memory of the princess reignited the warm flame in his heart.

"At least she's safe," he told himself. The thought of her gave him the urge to escape.

Thach Sanh searched up and down the cave. When the candle went out, he closed his eyes and, using his hands as a guide, moved along the passages, never knowing if he was

nearing an exit or leading himself deeper and deeper into the pit. Room after room sat behind iron bars. Room after room contained human bones. Thach Sanh shivered at the thought of how many of the eagle's victims had died here.

After many hours, Thach Sanh heard a weak moaning coming from a back corner of one of the rooms. He cut through the iron bars and found a young man lying on the floor. Thach Sanh helped him sit up, then fed him some of the water and food he had in his pack. The young man slowly regained enough energy to explain that he was the son of the Emperor of the Ocean. "A week ago, I traveled onto dry land to explore," he whispered. "The eagle grabbed me and carried me back to this cave. I've had neither food nor water. I've grown so weak that I prayed I'd die. You have no idea how grateful I am for your rescue."

"I haven't rescued you," Thach Sanh said. "The way back out is blocked. We could both very easily die here."

The Prince of the Ocean squeezed Thach Sanh's hand. "We won't die. I know how to get out. I couldn't do it because the iron bars trapped me. Down this passage is a door to the sea. Every time the eagle used it, I could smell the ocean air."

Thach Sanh helped his new friend stand up and together they made their way to the end of the long, narrow passage, where a huge boulder blocked their way. Here, they felt cool air and saw a dazzling light seeping through cracks at the edge of the rock. When Thach Sanh pressed his face against the cracks, he saw blue sky and fluttering leaves. He took a deep breath, spread his arms around the boulder, and with all his strength he tried to push it out of the way.

At first, the enormous rock didn't budge. Slowly, however, it slid one inch, then another, then another, little by little easing open. Thach Sanh kept pushing and pulling until, finally, he created a gap big enough for himself and the prince to slide

through. When they emerged from the cave, they fell to the ground exhausted, then slept through the rest of that day and night.

The sound of birds woke Thach Sanh. For a long time, he continued to lie on the ground, admiring the beautiful forest morning. Then, remembering what had happened, he woke the prince, who was still sleeping beside him.

"Please come with me to my kingdom," said the Prince of the Ocean. "My father will want to thank you."

Thach Sanh shook his head. "I don't need thanks, because you would have done the same for me. Anyway, how could I survive underwater?"

"Please," said the Ocean Prince. "I can help you. You saved my life, and I will consider you a friend forever." Although Thach Sanh had become suspicious of such vows, something told him that the prince was an honest man. After a few more minutes, he agreed to go.

The prince clapped his hand three times. The waves split into two parts, revealing a path just like a path on land. The prince led Thach Sanh by the hand and, as they walked, the waves closed up again behind them.

The Emperor of the Ocean was elated to see his beloved son. For a whole week, everyone in the ocean kingdom had frantically searched for him, but he had disappeared without a trace. Now, the king ordered his subjects to prepare a great celebration in honor of Thach Sanh. The prince took his friend to many regions of the ocean. They visited gardens with all kinds of rare plants and water flowers. Beautiful mermaids wearing vibrant-colored algae clothes thanked Thach Sanh for saving their brother, the prince. The whole kingdom, so happy with the return of the prince, begged Thach Sanh to stay with them forever.

After three days, however, Thach Sanh was ready to leave.

As spectacular as the ocean was, he missed the land, and he couldn't forget the lovely image of the princess.

The Ocean Prince wanted to have one last party for Thach Sanh. "At the party," he told his new friend, "my father will offer you many precious things. Don't take any of them. Instead, ask him for the old rice pot and the lute that he keeps in his storage room. Those two things will help you more than any gold or jewels."

Thach Sanh followed the prince's advice. When the Emperor of the Ocean insisted that he take some gift from the sea, Thach Sanh asked for the lute and the rice pot. Without a moment's hesitation, the emperor ordered his servants to go and get them. "You've made a wise choice," the king said. "Those two things are among my most precious possessions, but my son's life is the most precious of all. We would have liked you to stay with us forever, eventually sharing the water kingdom with my son."

Thach Sanh lowered his head. He was beginning to understand what true generosity and love could be, and the knowledge filled him with emotion. When he could finally speak, he thanked the king and the prince for all that they had given him and for all that they had taught him.

The prince led Thach Sanh back to the land. Just before saying goodbye, he told Thach Sanh, "You're very kind. Heaven will bless you for that. If you ever want to return here, just clap your hand three times, and I will send someone to welcome you."

Thach Sanh agreed. Then, carrying the lute, the rice pot, and the ax on his shoulders, he started off on the road to the palace.

Much had happened in the time since Ly Thong dropped the rocks down the mouth of the well. As soon as he was sure that Thach Sanh was dead, he carried the unconscious princess

back to the palace. The king, so relieved to have his daughter home safely, was ready to let Ly Thong marry her immediately. Only one impediment remained. When she finally regained consciousness, the princess couldn't speak at all. Not only had her beautiful voice left her, but she didn't seem to remember anything, including her fiancé, Ly Thong. The king postponed the wedding and put Ly Thong in charge of finding a doctor to cure her. All the famous doctors in the land came to the palace to try to help the princess, but none of them could do a thing. All day long, she sat in the palace gardens, weeping.

When Thach Sanh arrived, he learned that the princess was sick. Taking the ring from his pocket, he gave it to the mandarin in charge of visitors and said, "Please give this ring to the princess and tell her Thach Sanh would like to try to help her."

The mandarin could see by its crest that the ring came from royalty. He told Thach Sanh to wait and hurriedly carried the ring toward the princess. Before the mandarin reached the garden, however, Ly Thong stopped him and asked him when the next doctor was due to arrive. When the mandarin told the story, Ly Thong broke into a sweat.

"That man stole the ring," he said, and ordered Thach Sanh imprisoned immediately without any food.

Ly Thong knew nothing about the magic rice pot. Although the palace prison was dark and desolate, Thach Sanh hardly suffered. Whenever he felt hungry, he only had to tap on the iron lid of the pot and mounds of fragrant rice would appear in front of him.

Now that he was so close to the princess, Thach Sanh's longing to see her grew even worse. That night, while the whole country slept, he sat in his prison cell overcome with

sadness. Finally, in hopes of consoling himself for a few minutes, he took out the lute and began to play a melancholy tune.

Thach Sanh remained a prisoner, but the notes of his lute escaped. They floated through the prison's gates, over the walls of the palace, and into the princess's room. Her eyes opened as soon as she heard the sound of the lute, that sorrowful song of a person mourning his fate.

The princess got out of bed, walked to her father's room, and said to him in a clear voice. "Father, please bring that musician here to me."

So glad to hear his daughter speak again, the king immediately ordered his servants to do as she asked. The palace guards led Thach Sanh up to the princess's room and as soon as she saw him she burst into tears and told her father the whole story. Thach Sanh then showed the king the bandage made from the princess's gown, which he had kept like a treasure in his pocket. The soft piece of fabric perfectly matched the missing sleeve on the dress the princess had worn on that unlucky day.

Now that he knew the true story, the king immediately ordered Ly Thong's head to be cut off.

"No," said Thach Sanh. "I cannot live with the knowledge that a man has died because of me. Please spare him."

The king accepted Thach Sanh's request. Instead of chopping off Ly Thong's head, he withdrew his royal ranking, stripped him of his groom's clothes, and ordered the soldiers to kick him out of the palace. Ly Thong crept back to his village. News travels faster than a ruined man, and by the time he reached home, a mob of people were gathered there to scorn him.

Thach Sanh married the princess that afternoon, and the

country celebrated for three days. Everybody in the kingdom approved of Thach Sanh, because he was such a kind, honest, and brave young man.

Princes from neighboring countries, however, did not approve at all. Taking the princess's marriage to a woodcutter as a terrible insult to their honor, they gathered together and invaded the Viet kingdom.

The king summoned all his mandarins to discuss a plan. At the meeting, Thach Sanh volunteered to go to the battlefield. The king offered to give Thach Sanh his royal sword and 20,000 soldiers to accompany him. Thach Sanh refused.

"I'll only need twenty men," he said.

The sight of Thach Sanh and his army of twenty made the neighboring princes roll on the ground with laughter. Thach Sanh ignored them. Without saying a word, he sat down, took out his lute, and played.

The music sounded like wives calling for their husbands, mothers crying for their sons. It reminded the enemy soldiers of their families back in the countryside. It made them unwilling to fight. The music urged them to drop their weapons, to think of peace. A soldier took his armor off and walked away. Two, three, four, then dozens, then hundreds, then thousands of others soldiers joined him. Within minutes, the enemy had lost its desire to fight.

The music made the princes realize how unreasonable they had been. They knelt down and asked Thach Sanh for forgiveness. He insisted that they stand up and be his friends. The princes agreed willingly.

Thach Sanh said, "You've traveled here from very far away. Perhaps you're hungry. We would like to feed you."

The neighboring princes did not believe that Thach Sanh and his twenty men could possibly feed such a huge army of

soldiers. When Thach Sanh took out his magic rice pot, one prince said, "Thank you, brother, for thinking of our men. But such a small pot would not provide enough rice for even one of my bodyguards. How could you feed the whole army?"

Thach Sanh smiled. "Let me feed your body-guard first," he said. "If I do not have enough rice, I will apologize for breaking my promise."

One of the guards, obeying his master, stepped forward. He used his fingers, thinking he would finish the rice in one second. But, strangely enough, the more he ate, the fuller the pot became. Finally, when he could eat no more, the pot remained as full as if no one had touched it. Now, the neighboring princes believed that Thach Sanh had magic powers. The former enemies feasted and celebrated together long into the night.

After that, Thach Sanh and the princess lived happily, and the country enjoyed many years of peace.