

INTRODUCTION

The story of Vietnamese independence begins, not with the victory over the French at Điện Biên Phủ, not with the rise of Hồ Chí Minh, nor even with the Fall of Saigon and the withdrawal of US troops from Việt Nam, but two thousand years earlier, with two sisters from a village overlooking the Red River.

In 40 CE, in what is known today as northern Việt Nam, a regional lord by the name of Trưng stood up to the oppressive laws of a brutal Hán governor, which included conscripting young Việt men to fight in distant wars, banning the worship of Việt gods, and forcing Việt aristocrats to marry and form traditional family units, the better to pay taxes to the Hán. Eventually, his daughters took up arms, raising an army of women and leading them to victory against the Hán Chinese. They briefly ruled a free and independent nation, creating the precedent for Việt Nam that would come into being a thousand years later.

The Trưng Sisters are a historical reality, but one veiled in myth. The traditional Vietnamese account canonizes the Trưng Sisters as saints and attributes their success to divine

favor. It is full of legends of daring, seemingly impossible feats, and a thirst for independence that pervades Vietnamese literature throughout the ages.

At the center of the story of the *Trung* Sisters is the symbol of the bronze drum. With carvings representing sea birds in flight, splayed frogs, and other figures, these drums are tools of narrative as much as instruments of rhythm. The story they tell is of the indomitable spirit of the *Việt* people.

After the fierce General Ma Yuan reconquered ancient *Việt* Nam for the *Hán*, he decreed that all the bronze drums across the land be seized, smelted into base metal, then reconstituted into two giant bronze columns as a symbol of *Hán* power. “As long as these columns stand,” he said, “the *Hán* will rule in this land.” But many *Việt* women did not willingly submit their bronze drums; they hid them, or buried them, and two thousand years later, archaeologists still find these artifacts in excavation sites scattered throughout the north, as a reminder of the enduring legacy of the *Trung* Sisters.

PROLOGUE

Gather around, children of Chu Diên, and be brave. For even to listen to the story of the *Trung* Sisters is, in these troubled times, a dangerous act. The Hán gods are jealous of *Việt* heroes, and while the Hán have ruled *Lạc Việt* for a hundred years, our legends threaten to reduce the empire to ashes.

Behold the lacquered puppets dancing on a clear pool of water under the moonlight, and think back farther than you ever have before, to your ancestor-memory, and witness:

Here are the *Trung* Sisters! *Trung Nhị* is wild and venturesome, while *Trung Trắc* is disciplined and proud. They ride into war on the backs of elephants, wearing golden armor, brandishing swords that flash in the sun, leading an army of women. And in the distance, the thrashing of the bronze drum, announcing the battle at hand.

Look! The wicked Hán governor enters the stage. He takes *Việt* honor and blood as if they were shimmering coins in his hands. He will settle for nothing but total subjugation.

Soon the armies will clash on the field. The *Việt* women love freedom and will not bow. The Hán men fight to conquer

what was never theirs to rule: the soul of this country, its unobtainable heart.

Now watch as I, Kha the guardsman, ride between the two, and carry the heroic secret of how to vanquish the Hán to the *Trung* Sisters, She-Kings of the *Việts*. I will not presume to claim responsibility for their victory—suffice it to say the outcome would have been uncertain without my help.

Let us clear the stage before we go too far. Let us focus instead on this sublime moment: the cusp of the *Trung* Sisters' triumph. There is nothing more beautiful than the intake and outflow of breath from the bodies of free men and women.

Today, on the sands of *Tượng Lâm*, there loom two vast bronze columns. General Ma Yuan, who erected them, said that the Hán will rule in this land as long as they stand. Yet the shift in the fortunes of women and men is as swift as the darting of the black-winged kite, soaring in one direction, then jinking suddenly in another. The work of nature upon us is more patient and, like the crawl of the snail, seems to leave only a faint trail behind it. Yet the shell endures, emptied of its life, to be worked on by the elements until it is indistinguishable from a rock, until it, too, joins with the grains on the beach.

Children, I say to you *this*: the bronze columns on the sands of *Tượng Lâm* one day will sink, to be swallowed by the tide and, over time, taken by the ocean as easily as a body.

CHAPTER 1

The Courtyard of Cung Điền Mê Linh

Lady Man Thiện stirred restlessly beneath the furs. Her neck twinged in the recess of the stone pillow. Soon, the lord lying beside her would begin to dream, and within these troubled dreams, another night of frantic fear would ensue. But rather than wander the grounds at night, as was her habit, Lady Man Thiện shook her husband awake and asked him to tell her a story.

“What kind of story?” the lord asked.

“Something other than a nightmare,” said Lady Man Thiện. “I’ve heard enough of your nightmares.”

“Right now? You know how much trouble the night brings.”

“I want to hear something pleasant for once. Tell me how our daughters come to prosper.”

“Okay,” said the lord, blinking the sleep out of his eyes. He leveled a placating stare at his wife and spoke in his most

assuaging tone. Hers was not an idle worry. Their daughters would one day rule in Mê Linh, though neither showed the right disposition for it. The lord shared his wife's fears for the future, that *Trung Trắc* might never possess the forcefulness of a leader and *Trung Nhị* may never yield to tradition. Yet Lady Man Thiện needed his assurances. "Years from now, *Trung Trắc* will be the most desired woman in Lạc Việt, and though she will receive the attention of the strongest and handsomest men in the region, she will choose to marry none of them. Instead, she will give birth and raise children here in Cung Điện Mê Linh."

"What about *Trung Nhị*?" Lady Man Thiện asked.

"Well, *Nhị* is skilled at horse riding, so she will join the army, and rather than starting out as an officer, she will train cavalymen until she learns enough discipline and responsibility to become a leader. Then she will marry a lord—"

"Why should she marry?" Lady Man Thiện asked.

"*Nhị* is too wild. She needs the taming influence of a husband," the lord said.

"Oh? And have you tamed me?"

"That would be impossible," said the lord, but his playful smile gave way to worry lines upon his brow. "Yet the Hán have tamed us all."

Silence prevailed in the complete darkness of the lord's chamber.

"I thought you were going to tell me a happy story?" Lady Man Thiện said.

"The only happy story you want to hear begins with a revolution."

1

Trung Trắc, the elder sister, was imperious, solemn, and filial; *Trung Nhi*, the younger, was ardent and restless to become a woman. *Trung Trắc* had recently reached her age of maturity, and *Trung Nhi* was not far behind. *Trung Trắc* could often be found indoors, studying the history of the *Việts* and the *Hán*, while *Trung Nhi* was usually out in the garden, idling among the marbled cats and painted turtles and peacocks, if she could be found at all. The one space they shared with comfort and equanimity was the courtyard of *Cung Điện Mê Linh*. Here the sisters recited poetry and sparred with lacquered wooden staffs on a dirt-floored, sun-speckled patch of earth, in the shadow of a great stone sculpture of an elephant. The ointment of music soothed the sisters' restless spirits and focused the mind so that even the most contentious wills could sync as one. Outside the courtyard, they never spoke about how each sister inspired the other, but in the songs they sung, one could imagine a unity that was impossible to break. When they sang together, their harmony reached the far corners of the palace and seemed, from a distance, like the keening of unhappy ghosts.

It was easy to glean each sister's temperament by watching her spar. *Trung Trắc*'s movements were patient and controlled, her every strike flawlessly executed but performed dispassionately, as she threaded the air with her staff like a needle in the hands of a seamstress. *Trung Nhi* struck wildly, guided by the same instinct by which an ox charges a rival. *Trung Trắc*'s formal style, honed through innumerable hours of practice,

bested *Trung Nhi*'s powerful but undisciplined stance. At the end of a spar, *Trung Trắc* would help the fallen *Trung Nhi* to her feet and apply a balm of camphor and paraffin to the bruises that covered her sister's arms, her torso, her back.

Mornings, the golden light upon the dun clay walls of *Cung Điện Mê Linh* ascended over the ceramic tiles and through the slats in the wooden windows, like a purifying fire. For the night was full of the sounds of their father's howling and crying.

Lord *Trung*'s visions were occasionally so powerful that he believed he could see the future. The voices threatened to strangle him in his sleep. Many nights he would stir his family awake and beg them to leave their home, clothed in rags, and become a family of peasants. Lady *Man Thiện* would soothe him by stroking his hair like a child's, though he was an old man whose gray beard had grown down to his navel.

Trung Nhi often listened to her mother's calm entreaties from the hall, as she lay down on the cold stone at the threshold of her father's chamber like a guard dog. The sound of her father's whimper excited the deepest protective instinct of her nature. Her memories of childhood were still sharp, and she recalled the times when, after being lulled to sleep by his sweet singing, she refused for days afterward to leave his lap. Back then, *Trung Nhi* wished never to leave his embrace.

Every night, she swore to protect him; and every morning, after another night of listening to his howling in the dark, she swore that she would become nothing like him—that she would never be controlled by her fears.

The foundation for the lord's latest dream was the

introduction of a new governor, Tô Đĩnh, who was rumored to be ruthless, and who forbade the men and women of Lạc Việt from honoring the Guardian Spirit, forcing them to worship Hán gods. The governor, the lord dreamed in one of his nightmares, had learned of a plot among the Việt people to rise up.

For three generations, the Hán had occupied Lạc Việt and imposed their laws and customs on the Việt people. The Việts—tribal, communal, and matriarchal—were now separated into familial units governed by men, according to the Confucian tradition. Yet the legacy of their ancestors was preserved in stories passed from mother to daughter and sung in the corridors of every home, and the next generation of Việt aristocrats were emboldened to challenge the Confucian order.

But a new Hán governor in Lạc Việt asserted his will among the populous. He demanded the conscription of young Việt men to fight in distant wars, strict adherence to Hán law and religious practice among the peasantry, and marriages for Việt aristocrats so that the Hán could keep track of households and therefore debts.

The Trưng Sisters watched their father maintain an uneasy peace with the Hán, their historical enemy and their current regents—a powder keg that threatened to explode with the slightest spark.

In his dreams, the Hán swarmed the palace, the mud of their boots scuffing the stone floor, overwhelming the meager guard of Cung Điện Mê Linh, and leaving headless bodies everywhere they went. “If they mutilate our men, what will

the Hán barbarians do to our daughters?” Lord *Trung* begged his wife to understand.

“Our daughters are safe from the Hán,” said Lady Man *Thiện*. “If the time comes, they will know to take their lives rather than to have it taken from them by an enemy. If you are born to die by your own hand, then you have nothing to fear from war.”

From her perch outside the lord and lady’s chambers, these words rang and echoed in *Trung Nhi*’s ears. She felt detached from this vision of her nobly taking her own life, landing with all the force of prophecy as though it were the fate of a stranger. Why did Man *Thiện* insist that war would shape their lives’ contours? *Trung Nhi* did not believe she was born to die by her own hand, and imagined the day that she could run her own palace and entertain visitors freely—the kind of guests who would laugh at the solemnity of duty and the sacredness of war. She defied her mother’s notion of what it means to be a leader; but she was utterly alone in this defiance. She longed for friendships twined in pleasure, not forged in battle.

Framed by the window, the turtle named Kim Quy canted its leg and crooked its neck, as though to bring itself into perfect synchrony with the bending branch of willow buds behind it. A cicada from the field chirped its shrill ascending clicks, and the stalks of wheat waved slightly as though in response.

Seated ceremonially on the floor beside *Trung Trác*, *Trung Nhi* was brought back from her reverie of this never-

to-be-repeated moment in nature by a swift strike on the neck from their mother. *Trung Nhi*'s attention immediately fixed itself on the assortment of stones, shells, and coins in front of her, representing the three constituencies of war: enemies, allies, and innocents. If she could trace a path to the stones through the sand without touching any of the coins, she would win. These war games were *Trung Trác*'s favorite challenge of her martial education, but the lure of battle—simplified and abstracted into shapes representing the field of combat—was lost on *Trung Nhi*.

“What is your move?” Lady Man *Thiện* repeated now that *Trung Nhi* was finally focused.

Trung Nhi pinched her brows together in concentration. Her eyes always seemed to glint with mischief, and her high forehead formed an arch, unlike the widow's peak upon her mother's and sister's browlines. Taking her stick in hand, she traced a line in the white sand between a shell and a stone that passed through a coin in the middle.

Lady Man *Thiện* let out a restrained laugh. “You cannot just trample over the innocents,” she said. “You must find another way to reach your enemy.”

Trung Nhi resented being corrected in front of her older sister, who always seemed to find favor with their mother. She retraced the line, making a harder mark in the sand than the first time. “There are no innocents in war,” she said. “I must make them my ally, or they will *become* my enemy.”

Lady Man *Thiện* walked over to the table, took up a brush, and returned to the floor near the window where her daughters sat. She carefully erased the line *Trung Nhi* had

drawn with her stick. “That’s what the Hán say,” said Lady Man Thiện. “But if there are no innocents, then the Hán have already won. It is their purpose to divide Việt from Việt.”

Trung Nhị felt the thumb of her mother’s disapproval pressing down upon her, but she refused to be cowed. “The Hán *have* won,” she said. “Otherwise we wouldn’t live by their laws.”

Lady Man Thiện turned to look at Trung Trắc hopefully. “What would *you* do, elder daughter?”

Trung Trắc lifted the sleeve of her robe with one hand; then, with contained eagerness, deftly flanked the rear position with two shells. Her movements appeared to flow in and out like a breath, and matched her pacific expression. The arcs in the white sand, one short and one long, looked like the trajectories of two arrows.

“Why?” Lady Man Thiện said. “You have trapped yourself in the snake’s nest.”

“To cut off the snake’s head,” said Trung Trắc.

Trung Nhị scoffed. Her sister’s move was bold, but it angered her to think of a cadre of generals sitting atop a hill and plotting while the war raged in the valley. “The generals are cowards, and always place themselves at the rear, where they are spectators to war.”

“A leader should never be a coward,” said Lady Man Thiện. “Especially not a Việt.”

Trung Nhị said nothing, though she knew she would never be a leader and suspected herself to be, deep down, a coward.

1

Cung Điện Mê Linh was more than a palace. Overlooking the Red River, where the city of Mê Linh resided, Cung Điện Mê Linh was like a town unto itself, populated by workers and surrounded by a low stone wall. The servants and their families lived in separate longhouses on the grounds, and the *Trưng* family, the guardsmen, and their guests lived in the main palace, which, though its corrugated roofs were no higher than the back of an elephant, boasted a terrace overlooking the gardens.

Trưng Nhị strolled in the flower garden with the gardener's son, Phan Minh, who was one year younger than *Trưng Nhị*. His father was responsible for keeping the animals. *Trưng Nhị* called Phan Minh "Keeper of the Names," and presently she tested his knowledge of them. "One day it will be your duty to care for our animals, and you must treat them like your equals," she said.

"My equals?" Phan Minh said. "They are my superiors. A gardener's son has no status and no name but that which you bestow upon him."

The fountain bubbled as the water spilled from the mouth of a stone fish into a pool of real ones, multicolored and moving in every direction, popping their mouths above the surface of the water as if waiting for flakes of feed to fall from the heavens. The palace stood squat and wide and gray in the background, a horizon over which the late morning sun shone. *Trưng Nhị* thought that, with a little bit of luck, every day could be like this.

“All right,” replied *Trung Nhi* with a wicked smile. “I now bestow upon you the name of Animal Acquirer. Furthermore, it shall be your job to bring more animals into our parks and gardens.”

“I am already struggling to remember the names of the fifty-five animals,” said Phan Minh.

“You aren’t counting the fish! The fish have names, too,” *Trung Nhi* said, gesturing at the fountain. The idleness of a sun-warmed day and Phan Minh’s banter, alternately earnest and playful, blended into an ointment that spread along the surface of her skin. His friendship demanded nothing but her presence and her attentiveness, which he returned with equal fervor. She basked in it. She did not have to strive to earn his respect, as she would with her sister and mother, because it was easily given. “So, Animal Acquirer, when will we get a dog in *Cung Điện Mê Linh*?” Her voice was sincere but her eyes betrayed her mischief.

“A dog,” said Phan Minh, “would harass the marbled cats, scare away the painted turtles, and snap its jaws at the peacocks.” He made a snapping motion with his hands to show her how the peacocks would feel about such an arrangement.

“If we cannot get a dog,” said *Trung Nhi*, “then I declare *you* to be the dog of *Cung Điện Mê Linh*. I hereby bestow upon you a new name: Minh the Dog.”

Playfully, Phan Minh immediately dropped to his hands and knees, barking and bounding around the garden like a new puppy. His boisterous play was infectious. *Trung Nhi* laughed, taking a stick and hurling it over Phan Minh’s head, which he chased and brought back in his teeth, dropping it at

her feet. He panted like a dog, and *Trung Nhi* patted his head fondly. But when Phan Minh licked her hand, *Trung Nhi* slapped him for his impertinence. It was an innocent reflex, though she was immediately flooded with both a yearning and pride, at once embarrassed by his audacity yet desperate for the kind of familiarity that it implied. He looked at her with wavering, watering eyes.

“Fine,” *Trung Nhi* said, offering her hand condescendingly. “You may lick.”

Trung Trác sat on a stone recess in the wall, while *Trung Nhi* leaned against a pillar. The great hall was the innermost room of the palace, allowing the sisters to look out upon the courtyard, the great elephant statue, and the moss-covered stone. This vision of the elephant was so familiar that it was like a silent, watchful parent. “Do you want to wander in the garden?” asked *Trung Nhi*. She could still feel her muscles aching from their morning bout and she wanted her sister’s tenderness now that she had been beaten and mended. *Trung Trác*’s quiet studiousness simultaneously frustrated and impressed her. She could not help but seek her sister’s approval.

“I’m too old to wander in the garden,” said *Trung Trác*, her face impassive. Her expressions were slighter than *Trung Nhi*’s, yet to those who knew her, the slightest curl of the lip or bend of the eyebrow could communicate more than any sutra.

“What do you do all day indoors?” asked *Trung Nhi*. She felt sorry that her sister was content to be confined to pacing

within the clay walls of the palace, while her own domain was all the world outside it.

“I write.” *Trung Trắc* gestured with her arms to indicate the scroll upon her lap, feeling vulnerable at the prospect of sharing her private musings with her callous sister.

“Military strategy,” *Trung Nhi* said dismissively. *Trung Trắc*’s filiality almost sickened her in such moments. She might as well have been talking to Lady Man Thiện. How could she have a real relationship with her sister when *Trung Trắc* spent her whole life emulating her parents, living accordingly to their will and whim?

“No,” said *Trung Trắc* defensively. “I write letters, notes, lists . . . jokes and riddles.”

Trung Nhi laughed almost witchily, but with an undertone of warmth. *Trung Nhi*’s crooked, comely smile always risked a look of impishness.

Trung Trắc looked at *Trung Nhi*. “You’re laughing,” she said. “But I haven’t even told you a joke yet.”

“It’s just that you never mentioned this before,” she said. *Trung Nhi* pictured her sister diligently and dutifully and humorlessly crafting a joke. “I never imagined you trying to be funny. Please tell me one?”

“Okay. Let me think of one you’d like.” Suddenly *Trung Trắc* sprang to her feet and performed the joke like a puppet, shaking her head from side to side and saying in a shrill voice, “Our Hán cat never sleeps. He keeps us up at night, making bad smells. Why does he never sleep?”

“Why?” asked *Trung Nhi*.

“Because he’s dead!”

Trung Nhi's expectant face turned indignant. "Dead cats are not funny. You are not funny. Go back to studying."

"Maybe you didn't get it," said *Trung Trác*. "He never sleeps, but smells bad because he's dead, right?"

Feeling cheated by the promise of a moment to smile and laugh together, *Trung Nhi*'s eyes lingered for a moment on her sister's face. She wished to find her own wildness, the inner animal that stirred and roared, reflected back at her in *Trung Trác*'s expression, but saw only the tight line of her mouth with the slightest bend to suggest that she had been amused by her own joke. *Trung Nhi* stood up and walked away, her egg blue silk robe gently undulating in the wind from the courtyard.

"Wait, I have others," *Trung Trác* said.

"I don't want to hear them," said *Trung Nhi* to the air. She had tried to connect with *Trung Trác* and felt pitiable now for abasing herself in the name of familial harmony—a virtue she detested.

Trung Trác stared at the space vacated by her sister, before turning her attention to her pages of military strategy. "Each opponent is different, but their universal quality is fallibility," it read. "Every enemy is vulnerable in its own way, whether an excess of pride, or a habit of indulgence, or a surfeit of will. To discover where the ship is weakest, you must use an awl to prod the wood, cubit by cubit."

1

A month later and the monsoon season was almost upon them. For the feast of the Golden Turtle, Lord *Trung* and

Lady Man Thiện hosted the Lords and Ladies of Chu Diên, Cửu Chân, Nhật Nam, and Hợp Phố at the palace. The dining hall was lit by beeswax candles, and all the lords and ladies sat on the floor, holding their bowls to their lips to taste of the ox broth. Only when the last bowl was emptied, and the wine poured, did the talk begin.

“Your daughters are grown now and beautiful beyond any parent’s fondest hope,” the Lady of Nhật Nam said.

“Yes, grown,” said the Lord of Nhật Nam. “So when will they marry?”

“My daughters are not made to marry,” said Lady Man Thiện. “Marriage is an economic arrangement for the benefit of the Hán.”

“What will they do?”

“They will do as our mothers did and take whatever lover will bring them joy, and make them the best children, to raise in their own homes.”

“To raise children alone?” asked the Lord of Nhật Nam.

“Maybe,” said Lady Man Thiện. “What does a husband do but let himself be taken care of?”

The Lord of Nhật Nam scoffed. “But who will protect them?”

Lady Man Thiện raised an eyebrow. “You speak like a Confucian.”

The Lord of Nhật Nam, his legs crossed and his hands planted on his thighs, raised his chin as though he had just awoken. “Maybe I am a Confucian, then. I am just thinking about what is best for your daughters. It is my intuition that, even though our society has allowed women to choose mates

at their own will, what women secretly want is a husband and head of household.”

“Maybe so, maybe not,” said Lady Man Thiện. “There’s only one way to know. Let’s ask.”

The Lord of Nhật Nam looked amused by the challenge. “If we are going to ask your daughters such a question, it is not enough that they give an answer. They must be persuasive.”

“You and I have already shown our bias,” said Lady Man Thiện, then gestured across the table to a thin, elderly woman, whose bowl of wine shook in her arthritic hands. “Why don’t we enlist the Lady of Cửu Chân as an impartial judge?”

The Lord of Nhật Nam’s lips pinched into a straight line, failing to conceal his amusement. “If we have a lady judge, we must also enlist a lord. The Lord of Hợp Phố will serve as a judge.”

So Trung Nhị and Trung Trắc were called in. Trung Trắc stood with her arms rigid at her sides, like a soldier, as Trung Nhị crossed her arms and scanned the room with a sour expression. Both women wore *áo dài*, the flowing silk gowns embroidered with floral patterns, Trung Nhị draped in the orange of sunrise, and Trung Trắc in the dark blue of twilight. When the sisters learned of the terms of the contest, they looked at each other for some invisible cue as to who should make the first attempt, and it was Trung Trắc who finally spoke.

“A woman wants the same things a man wants,” she said, as though repeating instructions from a manual. “Glory in battle, comfort in bed, and the freedom to choose one’s own fate.”

“What of marriage?” asked the Lord of Nhật Nam.

“Marriage is an institution forced upon us by the Hán. It is the legacy of Confucianism, and should be abolished,” she said. But she felt the cold draft of disapproval wafting from the judges, and added, “Though marriage is fine for your generation, which has had to accept the yoke of Confucianism, and your own marriages are, I’m sure, sacred things.” As she spoke, everyone in the room could see her confidence waver.

Trung Nhi, seeing her sister beginning to flail, interceded. Despite her feelings of rivalry with Trung Trác—despite her hope to surpass her in their morning sparring sessions and her dream to one day reign in her own palace far from Mê Linh and the Hán occupation—she hated to see her elder sister wriggle like a carp in a net. She stepped forward and gestured wide with her arms, a posture that suggested a story was forthcoming.

“Here in Mê Linh there was once a beautiful and proud girl named Hoàng Tâm, whose silken hair grew so long that it brushed the floor. She wanted nothing more than to mate with Trần Thuận, a handsome boy who lived in the same quarter. Trần Thuận was simple and happy, always quick to smile. His mother had never known marriage, and she was happy to see her son grow into a lover of women. But Hoàng Tâm’s parents were united in the system of marriage, and they would not agree to a coupling without the promise of eternal loyalty. Hoàng Tâm loved Trần Thuận but could not say whether she would love him forever.

“So Hoàng Tâm secretly visited Trần Thuận at night and enjoyed his favors, her hair becoming a dark blanket around

their bodies, and she soon became pregnant with his child. In most houses, this would be a blessing, but in Hoàng Tâm's home, this was cause for shame. Her parents chased their daughter out of their home, and Hoàng Tâm had to live among the peasants, where she gave birth in a stable, and had to beg in order to eat. The baby contracted a disease and died shortly after its birth. One day an unscrupulous trader saw the beautiful girl with long hair begging in the street, and lured her into his carriage with the promise of riches.

"Instead of caring for her, he traded her to a Hán, who used Hoàng Tâm as his concubine. Having vowed never to marry, she was now the property of a Hán devil. Rather than submit to a man, she shaved her head, wove her beautiful long hair into a rope, and used it to hang herself."

Trung Nhị drew her arms into her chest and stepped backward, to indicate the story's end. This game of unsettling the thoughts of so many distinguished lords and ladies thrilled her. The room hummed with murmurs from the emissaries gathered there.

"What should we take from this, Trung Nhị?" asked the Lady of Nhật Nam.

"What *do* you take from it?" asked Trung Nhị.

"Her stubbornness is to blame," said the Lord of Hợp Phố. "If she had just married the boy she loved, then this terrible fate would not have befallen her."

"But," said the Lady of Cửu Chân, "if Hoàng Tâm's mother had simply accepted the Việt way, and allowed her daughter to mate with Trần Thuận without making vows and promises for the future, then all would be happy."

“We should have anticipated this situation,” said Lady Man Thiện. “We have a tie.”

“Unless you can find an impartial judge who is neither male nor female,” said the Lord of Nhật Nam, “then the matter can never be resolved, and will remain a mystery.”

“I have an idea,” said Trung Nhị impishly. Lady Man Thiện caught her daughter’s eye and issued a silent rebuke, which she ignored. “Ngốc, the snail, is both male and female. It can impregnate other snails, and can be impregnated itself. Therefore, it is the most impartial creature on this question. I will bring Ngốc to the table, and if it slithers towards the Lady of Cửu Chân, then I am telling the truth when I say I do not wish to marry. If it crawls towards the Lord of Hợp Phố, then I secretly wish to be married like a Hán.”

All of the men and women arrayed there agreed this was a fair plan—an entertaining resolution to the game being played out that evening. And when Trung Nhị returned with Ngốc the snail, she placed him on the long table, where the Lady of Cửu Chân and the Lord of Hợp Phố sat on opposite sides, then said, “Listen to me, Ngốc. If you go east, to the Lady of Cửu Chân, then you accept that the tragedy of Hoàng Tâm and Trần Thuận is the fault of the institution of marriage; if you go west, to the Lord of Hợp Phố, then you agree that the tragedy of Hoàng Tâm and Trần Thuận is the fault of the girl Hoàng Tâm for refusing to marry.” Then she let go of his shell.

Everyone was silent while Ngốc crawled the table lengthwise, neither east nor west but north, toward the end of the table. When it did not stray in either direction, but continued

its journey away from both the Lady of *Cửu Chân* and the Lord of *Hợp Phố*, the silence gave way to howls and gasps of surprise. Seated at the end of the table was the Lord of *Chu Diên*, named *Đặng Vũ*, who had maintained his silence throughout the game. When *Ngốc* reached the Lord of *Chu Diên*, it affixed itself to the end of the table as though making a home there.

“The final verdict is yours, *Đặng Vũ*,” said Lady *Man Thiện*. “Who is to blame for the misfortune of *Hoàng Tâm*? Is it *Hoàng Tâm*, who wished to live independently in spite of her parents’ commands, or is it *Hoàng Tâm*’s mother, who wished to impose marriage on her daughter?”

Đặng Vũ reached over and clapped his hand on the shoulder of Lord *Trung*, and smiled. “I am not a scholar, and am innocent of higher forms of interpretation practiced by the monks, but my ear must be tuned to a different pitch than that of my friends from *Hợp Phố* and *Cửu Chân*. I cannot lay the blame upon either *Hoàng Tâm* or her parents.” *Đặng Vũ*’s smile folded down like a wilting rose. With his free hand, he slammed a fist down on the table, shaking the bowls of wine and causing *Ngốc* to crawl to the underside of the table, where it affixed itself. “I blame the *Hán*!” he said. “The men and women of our generation married, yes, but we never accepted the Confucian ways. *Hoàng Tâm*’s story only proves their folly, for it is a *Hán* scoundrel who forces a girl into concubinage. Our people are not property, and the story should provoke only one response: outrage at the injustice of living under such a people.”

The Lord of *Nhật Nam* was stern. Lord *Trung* stood and

said, “Surely we can agree that the Hán are to blame, and that my daughters are in earnest when they declare they will not be married.”

The prevailing silence meant many things: that no answer was possible; that the Hán were surely to blame; that Mê Linh, Cửu Chân, and all the lands of Lạc Việt were beyond saving by men.

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