

# Overweening Pride

by Vu Trong Phung (1912-1939)

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**About the author:** *Vu Trong Phung (1912-1939) is a major voice in modern Vietnamese literature of the early twentieth century. His writings often expose and criticize the ludicrous, corrupt, and decadent lifestyles and behavior of the Vietnamese people who attempted to adopt and practice Europeanization in their own lives. Recurring issues addressed in his fiction are concepts of progress, civilization, social reform, and modernity, which were introduced into colonized Vietnam by the French colonists. Vu Trong Phung is considered the Balzac of early twentieth-century Vietnam under the French colonial occupation, and his works are best categorized under satire or parody. His most famous novel, Dumb Luck (1936), has been translated into English by Peter Zinoman and Nguyen Nguyet Cam (U of Michigan P, 2002).*

As her husband got home, she hurriedly inquired, "So, has she got any better? Is she going to make it?"

Pham Quang stood there, breathing heavily as if he had walked ten kilometers, although he had walked only from the end of the street back to his home. He gently hung his hat on a deer-horn coat rack, took off his coat, and lay down on the floor. It took him a while to reply, "The situation is grave. Not sure if she's going to make it this time."

His wife stopped her sewing, frowned, and asked, "So. How is she doing?"

Quang wearily said, as if he were half awake or half sleeping, "Last night, she was delirious in her sleep, but once awake, she sobbed continuously. Mr. Dan told me that, in her delirium, she kept calling my name. We've got to be really careful, or we'll destroy everything. It turns out that I have committed a crime: Killing a woman!"

Unable to understand the couple's conversation, I asked Mrs. Quang, "Who's this person you are talking about?"

She responded, "Ah, she is a cousin of mine."

Her very brief clarification caused me even more surprise and confusion. How could that be? I thought, how could her husband have the guts to talk about something that sounded like a tragic love triangle, and mention his wife's cousin right in front of his wife?

“I am sorry, but I still don’t get it,” I said.

Mrs. Quang started to look at me mischievously and at her husband slyly. She then cleared her throat and smiled, “The patient is actually my cousin, Mrs. Oanh. Before we got married, my husband had been infatuated with Mrs. Oanh, but sadly, when he proposed to her, she declined. Then, my husband proposed to me, and Mrs. Oanh got married thereafter. Very unfortunately for her, however, she married a bad man, a good-for-nothing—he lives a decadent life and he is an abusive wife beater. He has abandoned his wife and son, and we don’t know which whore he is living with right now. This depressed Mrs. Oanh greatly, and she became ill probably because she still thinks about and loves the man who truly had loved her but whose marriage proposal she refused—my husband, I mean—as I have told you.”

Pham Quang, probably embarrassed because his wife talked about the past at an inappropriate time, covered his forehead with his hands discreetly to indicate dismay, because it seemed abnormal to act so indifferent in this situation. However, Mrs. Quang was smart and understood her husband’s thoughts immediately. She said seriously, “So when you just visited her, did you observe anything that you should be concerned about?”

Mr. Quang quickly sat up and looked at me attentively to avoid embarrassment in his response to his wife’s inquiry. He said, “As I pulled up a chair and sat at the head of her bed, she pulled down her blanket and looked at me. Her eyes contained the countless unspoken things endured by her suffering soul. But in the eyes of this very ill woman sparkled an unusual beam of light. I felt a mixture of regret, hope, and worry in those eyes. Then she stammered, ‘You, do you still love me as you used to? Don’t you hate me?’—and I didn’t know whether I should nod or shake my head, nor how to answer those questions. Later outside, while Mr. Dan was holding her son, Chat, in the hospital’s playground, I took her son’s hands and placed them on my chest affectionately. He stared at me skeptically, withdrew his hands and turned his face to a wall. Then he kept sobbing and crying unceasingly. I lost patience, stood up unsteadily, and left. Oh, God, what should I do now?”

Mrs. Quang showed no facial expression for a while. She then looked genuinely sad, sighed, and slowly said, “I feel sorry for her. Mrs. Oanh is to be pitied.”

Her attitude toward Oanh astonished me. If others were in her shoes, no one could imagine how much jealousy, anger, and resentment

would ensue. If they had a wife who suffered due to a previous love affair, how miserable their faces would look. But Mrs. Quang not only showed no jealousy but rather expressed sympathy for her cousin.

I felt it necessary to offer her a compliment: “Mrs. Quang, you’re such a model wife.”

My friend is a fortunate man to have married a woman like her. Although he was a destitute author, he still could claim to be the happiest man in the world. It seemed that Mr. Quang had obtained all the happiness one could obtain in life, as he had found a trustworthy soul mate in Mrs. Quang and married her—a faithful spouse.

I thought I might be able to alleviate Quang’s nervousness a little bit, so I tapped him on his shoulder and said, “You probably don’t know how lucky you are.”

Mrs. Quang asked me excitedly, “Nothing unusual here, so why are you being so generous with compliments?”

“I think it’s unusual. Jealousy is in a women’s nature. It is proverbial that in order to be happy, one must love madly, and to love madly, one must show jealousy. You’re not jealous at all, but you’re still happy.”

Mrs. Quang smiled calmly and explained: “I really am generous and kind; that’s all. So I can’t forbid my husband to be forgiving. Also, Mrs. Oanh should be pitied because she made a bad decision. She declined his proposal, then he proposed to me . . . You should be aware of this: I come from a wealthy family, but Oanh comes from a poor family. Although I am not obliged to act kindly, I do believe that Mrs. Oanh has contributed to our current nuptial bliss. Isn’t that so? If Oanh had accepted the proposal, we would not be married today. That’s why I hold sympathetic feelings for her. Other women surely would act through jealousy and then suffer through suspicion. They would hate her and want to see her suffer so that they could gain satisfaction. But I am not one of those women. Right now, Oanh has regrets, which is understandable. It is humbling when one has lost one’s pride and self-esteem. When one suffers due to one’s resentment and hatred of someone else, it leads to loathing of oneself. In this situation with Oanh, how could I be jealous and vent my anger upon my husband? What’s there for me to hate in Oanh? Those are the deeper reasons for my sympathy, and not because we are cousins.”

“You’re definitely right. Even siblings could stab one another due to jealousy, and in this case you two are just cousins.”

Mr. Quang interrupted our conversation and said angrily, “I don’t know her actual physical condition yet. The charlatans at the hospital have

been discussing her illness boisterously and nonsensically, but no one knows what really is going on with her health. One said she has lung problems, another said she has brain damage, another said she has heart problems. Even God doesn't seem to know!"

Mrs. Quang looked at her husband and forced a smile: "You're being irrational. She definitely has mental problems, which injure her entire body, and her heart too, of course. I think she is suffering from two kinds of pain: physical pain and mental pain. If you want to cure her, first, you must attend to her emotional distress. Those quacks at the hospital don't know anything!"

"You're so right. Why don't you suggest a method of treatment? It's easy to talk about it, but *not* so easy to do something," Mr. Quang said.

"Now, listen to you. That's your business, not mine."

I was on my friend's side, defending him: "Please be kind and think of a way to help your husband."

She then continued with her sewing, but looking pensive. I didn't know for sure whether she was considering a cure for this miserable woman's anguish—a woman whom she should consider a rival—or whether she was regretting of her previous extraordinary declaration of kindness and forgivingness, which had been elicited by my earlier compliments. There are duplicitous people who talk the talk of generosity but who not walk the walk. To find these people out, one must give them rope to see if they hang themselves.

That night, my friend rushed me to a bedroom to recount in specific detail the story about Mrs. Oanh, while his wife continued to sew until very late.

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The following morning, when my friend called me out for breakfast, his wife asked him cheerfully, "So, have you thought of a solution?"

Quang grimaced and replied jokingly, "I can think of nothing."

Mrs. Quang looked at me, smiled, and then said to her husband sardonically: "Poor thing! Your hair has turned gray because you've been seeking a solution all night, like Wu Zisu\*."

My friend pressed his forehead with his hands, and I felt significance in his gestures. I felt that his wife had just ridiculed him and found

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\* A famous Chinese scholar and military general who fought for the state of Wu during the Spring and Autumn Period (771-1 476 BC) in China.

satisfaction in doing so. She no longer seemed so extraordinary a woman, because she was expressing deep levels of irony. But Mrs. Quang continued, "It's such a simple matter. Can't you think of anything at all?"

Suddenly, I was embarrassed. Her comment targeted not just my friend, but also me. Honestly, I had spent the entire night thinking of a way to help my friend but I had failed. Men, through vanity, often underestimated women, but now a woman's sarcastic mockery of another man for his naiveté humiliated me, and it occasioned a sense of extreme uneasiness within me.

But Mrs. Quang was a clever woman, and noticing how I blushed with embarrassment more than her husband did, she continued, "Well, in your situation, how can you think of anything while you are deeply saddened and distracted by your emotions? Although I am not very smart, as an outsider, my mind at least is clearer than yours."

Quang looked up and gently asked his wife, "Then, what do you think I should do?"

Before speaking, his wife lowered her head; it seemed as though she were attempting to articulate her thoughts tactfully.

Probably to cover his embarrassment while waiting for her answer, Quang sighed and said, "This is a sad situation. I have predicted that this would happen sooner or later . . . . Currently, Oanh's husband has left her to pursue a whore, and she is considering submitting to the court her suit for divorce. Even now, I don't know why she declined my marriage proposal. She declined it when the entire village thought she should have felt fortunate to marry me. Very strange—because even my wife is surprised at Oanh's decision. Could it be that she was in love with another man back then? Did she and her present husband marry each other out of true love? Was she acting through arrogance toward me or loyalty to another? It doesn't matter anymore; I used to love her sincerely, and now she must accept her decision with regret."

Mrs. Quang responded delicately to her husband's original question: "You should find a way to make Oanh stop regretting the past. I'm sure she then will recover."

My friend said, "Ah, I've got it."

"So, what are you waiting for?" she asked.

"But . . . if . . . will she resent me?"

"Of course, it's inevitable."

Quang thought for a long while and shook his head: “No. No, I can’t. Right now, Oanh is suffering from regret, which means she still loves me. . . . Oanh loves me! She is madly and genuinely in love with me! Would it be wise to ruin the beautiful romantic love that she holds for me—a person who once loved her, too? She must have loved me greatly . . . to have such strong feelings for me now. I can’t deceive her. In the past, she didn’t return my love, but I enjoyed being in love. If I now must make her hate me, I inadvertently would compromise my true feelings and love and justify her hatred all the more.”

His wife raised her hand and advised, “You must make the sacrifice. You must be brave. ‘Loving a person to have her love you is narcissistic!’ I know, of course, that if you lie to her, she’ll hate you. But I beg you, at least give it a try—then you will learn how it feels to love someone who hates you.”

Buried deeply in his thought, Quang frowned and shook his head: “No. I cannot make Oanh hate me. I apologize. You are a forgiving and understanding woman; you should know . . . I still love Oanh very much.”

Mrs. Quang, showing signs of anger, rebutted: “But if you refuse to lie to her, you are torturing an already-injured heart. You simply don’t want to be abhorred! You’re so selfish! Just wait until she dies and then grieve.”

Pham Quang dropped into his chair like a falling tree. He nearly wept: “I’d rather see her die now. If that happens, I can tend her grave and grieve properly. If she dies now, her soul can rest in peace. But if she lives, as you suggested, not only will her body become decrepit, but her soul will never rest, because of the resentment and hatred that would occupy her heart.”

Mrs. Quang forced a smile and said, “You’re so wrong. Resentment is nourishing, not detrimental. Resentment gives birth to ego inflation and overweening pride, and it is overweening pride that becomes one’s defensive force. It is one’s regret and self-hatred that kill.”

Quang still was unsatisfied. “But I do not want to kill Oanh’s love for me. Hatred is an ugly shortcoming that should not exist in a woman who simply has made a bad decision. Rather she should be pitied. Isn’t it better for Oanh to keep her regret, to remain desperate, and to die of love, so that her love can follow her into eternity, and her love can become immortal?”

Mrs. Quang said tremblingly, “Okay, let Oanh die, then. But how about her son, Chat? He is only six years old. He’s my nephew—our nephew. Killing his mother means killing him, too. You cannot kill that innocent child.”

Mr. Quang looked at his wife for a while, and then departed. He went to Oanh's home. He returned half an hour later with a grimace and said, "It's over now. I have acted, cruelly."

"What happened?"

"I told Oanh this: 'I have only pity for you. You asked me if I hate you. I did not love you, so how I could I hate you? Why did you reject me? You've ended up in a miserable situation and you want to love me now ... This kind of love has no value. A bowl thrown out with its water cannot be refilled.'" Oanh was so overwhelmed that she couldn't speak a word. She choked, and I left immediately.

Mrs. Quang shrugged her shoulder satisfactorily: "Only by doing that can you prolong her life."

Then she said to me, "You should be patient and stay with us longer, to see the end of all of this."

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A week later ...

On a day, the Quangs called out to me from their window. Oanh was holding her son, leisurely enjoying the outdoor atmosphere in the street. Only then did I see her face, for the first time, which looked so unusually calm, indicating that her regret over her past love had dissipated. Although she still looked pale, her gait was firm. I had the feeling that this woman would not die. Oanh held her son affectionately, as if she had laid everything down to rest in order to focus on raising him well.

Mr. Quang held his wife's hands and said, "I am very grateful to you. You have taught me a lesson about sacrifice, which has saved two lives."

I lit a cigarette to reward myself, because I knew so well how overweening pride and vanity both wounded and heightened a woman's dignity.

I wanted to take a look at Oanh again, but she had disappeared behind a fence.

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