**The Crystal Heart
A Vietnamese Legend**

**Told by Aaron Shepard**

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PREVIEW: The mandarin’s daughter did not really see the boatman who sang from the river, but she’s sure he’s her destined love.

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| GENRE: Folktales CULTURE: Vietnamese THEME: Kindness, false imagining |   | AGES: 7 and up LENGTH: 1500 words |

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Long ago, in a palace by the Red River, there lived a great mandarin and his daughter, Mi Nuong.

Like other young ladies of her position, Mi Nuong was kept indoors, away from the eyes of admiring men. She spent most of her time in her room at the top of a tower. There she would sit on a bench by a moon-shaped window, reading or embroidering, chatting with her maid, and gazing out often at the garden and the river.

One day as she sat there, a song floated to her from the distance, in a voice deep and sweet. She looked out and saw a fishing boat coming up the river.

“Do you hear it?” she asked her maid. “How beautifully he sings!” She listened again as the voice drew nearer.

*My love is like a blossom in the breeze.
My love is like a moonbeam on the waves.*

“He must be young and very handsome,” said Mi Nuong. She felt a sudden thrill. “Perhaps he knows I am here and sings it just for me!”

The maid’s eyes lit up. “My lady, perhaps he’s a mandarin’s son in disguise—the man you are destined to marry!”

Mi Nuong felt a flush on her face and a stirring in her heart. She tried to make out the man’s features, but he was too far off to see clearly. The boat and the song glided slowly up the river and away.

“Yes,” she said softly. “Perhaps he is.”

All day long, Mi Nuong waited by the window, hoping to hear the singer again. The next day she waited too, and the next. But the voice did not return.

“Why doesn’t he come?” she asked her maid sadly.

As the days passed, Mi Nuong grew pale and weak. At last she went to her bed and stayed there.

The mandarin came to her. “Daughter, what’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing, Father,” she said faintly.

The mandarin sent for the doctor. But after seeing Mi Nuong, the doctor told him, “I can find no illness. And without an illness, I can offer no cure.”

The weeks passed, and Mi Nuong grew no better. Then one day her maid came before the mandarin.

“My lord, I know what ails your daughter. Mi Nuong is sick for love. To cure her, you must find the handsome young man who sings this song.” And she sang it for him.

“It will be done,” said the mandarin, and he sent out a messenger at once.

Days later, the messenger returned.

“Lord, in no great house of this province does any young man know the song. But in a nearby village I found a man who sings it, a fisherman named Truong Chi. I have brought him to the palace.”

“A fisherman?” said the mandarin in disbelief. “Let me see him.”

The messenger brought him in. The fisherman stood uneasily, his eyes wide as they cast about the richly furnished room.

For a moment, the mandarin was too astounded to speak. The man was neither young nor handsome. His clothes were ragged and he stank of fish. *Certainly no match for my daughter!* thought the mandarin. *Somehow, she must not realize . . . .*

He gave his order to the messenger. “Bring the fisherman to my daughter’s door and have him sing his song.”

Soon Truong Chi stood anxiously outside the young lady’s room. He could not understand why they’d brought him here. What could they want? He was just a fisherman, wishing only to make an honest living. He had hurt no one, done nothing wrong!

At the messenger’s signal, he nervously started to sing.

*My love is like a blossom in the breeze.
My love is like a moonbeam on the waves.*

In the room beyond the door, Mi Nuong’s eyes flew open. “He’s here!” she cried to her maid. “How can that be? Oh, quickly, help me dress!”

Mi Nuong jumped from her bed. Never had she so swiftly clothed herself, put up her hair, made herself up. By the time the song drew to a close, she looked like a heavenly vision in flowing robes.

“Now, open the door!” she said, trying to calm her wildly beating heart. She forced herself to stand shyly, casting her eyes down in the manner proper to a modest young lady.

As the door pulled open, Truong Chi shrank back, not knowing what to expect. Then all at once he found himself gazing on the greatest beauty he had ever known. He felt his heart leap, and in that moment, he fell deeply, hopelessly, desperately in love.

Mi Nuong could not wait a moment longer. She lifted her eyes to look upon her beloved. And in that moment, her eyes grew wide and she burst out laughing.

A mandarin’s son? Her destined love? Why, he was nothing but a common fisherman! How terribly, terribly silly she’d been!

Shaking with mirth at her folly, she turned her head away and whispered, “Close the door.”

The door shut in Truong Chi’s face. He stood there frozen, the young lady’s laughter ringing in his ears. He felt his heart grow cold and hard.

Truong Chi was sent home. But he could not go on as before. Hardly eating or sleeping, he grew pale and ill. He no longer cared if he lived or died.

And so he died.

The villagers found him on the sleeping mat in his hut. On his chest sat a large crystal.

“What is it?” a man asked.

“It is his heart,” said a wise old woman. “The laugh of the mandarin’s daughter wounded it so deeply, it turned hard to stop the pain.”

“What do we do with it?” asked a young woman. “It is very lovely. Like one of his songs!”

“We should put it in his boat,” said another young man, “and let it float down to the sea.”

At sundown, they set the crystal in the fisherman’s boat. Then they pushed the boat from its mooring and watched in sorrow as it drifted down the river and out of sight.

But the boat did not drift to the sea. It came to shore by the mandarin’s palace. And so it was that the mandarin found it at sunrise as he strolled along the bank.

“What have we here?” he said, reaching in to pick up the crystal. He turned it over in his hand, examining and admiring it. “What a splendid gift the river has brought!”

A few days later, when no one had claimed it, the mandarin sent it to a turner to be made into a teacup. He brought the cup one evening to Mi Nuong’s room.

“A gift for my lovely daughter,” he said.

“Oh, Father, it’s beautiful! I can hardly wait to drink from it!”

When the mandarin left, she told her maid, “It’s late, so you can go to bed. But first make me some tea, so I can drink from my cup.”

The maid finished her task and went off. Mi Nuong poured the tea, blew out the candles on the table, and carried the cup to her window seat. A full moon shone into the room, and looking out, she watched the moonlight play upon the river. The scent of blossoms drifted from the garden.

Mi Nuong lifted the cup to her lips. But just as she was about to drink, she cried out in surprise and fear. She quickly set the cup down on the bench.

On the surface of the tea was the face of Truong Chi, gazing at her with eyes filled with love. And now his sweet song filled the room, familiar but a little changed.

*Mi Nuong is like a blossom in the breeze.
Mi Nuong is like a moonbeam on the waves.*

And Mi Nuong remembered those eyes she had seen so briefly through the open door, and she remembered her laugh. “What have I done? I was so cruel! I didn’t mean to hurt you. I didn’t know. . . . I’m sorry. So very, very sorry!”

Her eyes filled with tears. A single tear dropped into the cup.

It was enough. The crystal melted away, releasing the spirit of Truong Chi. Then Mi Nuong heard the song one last time, floating off over the river.

*Mi Nuong is like a blossom in the breeze.
Mi Nuong is like a moonbeam on the waves.*

“Good-bye,” said Mi Nuong softly. “Good-bye.”

\* \* \*

It was not many months more when Mi Nuong was given in marriage to the son of a great mandarin. He was young and handsome, and she felt that her dreams had come true.

Yet now, as she gazed on a different garden and a different view of the river, she often still heard the song of the fisherman echo softly in her heart.

**About the Story**

For the retelling of this popular Vietnamese legend, numerous versions were consulted, the most important being “Le Cristal D’Amour,” in *Légendes des Terres Sereines,* by Pham Duy Khiêm, Mercure de France, Paris, 1951; and “Truong-Chi and Mi-Nuong,” in *Vietnamese Legends,* by L. T. Bach-Lan, Saigon, 1957 (private printing).

**How to Say the Names**

Mi Nuong ~ MEEN WONG
Truong Chi ~ troo-ONG CHEE

**How to Sing the Song**

The Song of the Fisherman
Words and music by Aaron Shepard

My love is like a blossom in the breeze.
My love is like a moonbeam on the waves.

The melody and words of this song are my own, composed for this retelling. The distinctive flavor comes from the pentatonic (five-note) scale common to most East Asian traditional music.

[More About the Story](http://www.aaronshep.com/extras/CrystalHeart_note2.html) | [Hear the Names](http://www.aaronshep.com/names/CrystalHeart.mp4) | [Hear the Music](http://www.aaronshep.com/music/CrystalHeart.mp4)
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