Chapter Thirty-Three

HELLO, where have you been?’ Kim-hunjang who had been squatting by the side of the road gazing at the ripening grain, took his long pipe from his mouth as he stood up to speak.

‘Yes, well . . .’

Dr Mun rather awkwardly left his sentence unfinished as he looked back in the direction of Hwagae whence he had come and ordered his mule to stop. He dismounted and told the servant to go on and wait at the Ch’oe house. As he turned to survey the fields, his eyes were half closed, perhaps because of the sun. Between his white beard and the dark rim of his hat passed blue sky and clouds.

‘It looks like a fair harvest.’

‘Yes, one way or another, up to average.’

As he replied, Kim-hunjang looked happy, as when rain comes in the midst of drought.

‘I hear you are farming Kim-chinsa’s land as well – you must be busy.’

‘Not really. The young people lend a hand. You couldn’t say I am doing it all on my own.’

‘Even so, it’s very good of you.’

‘For me, it’s just family business. It’s the young people who deserve the praise.’

Dr Mun gave a quick glance at his somewhat irritated face, but it softened at once, and he said, ‘Would you like to have a short rest before you go on?’

‘Yes, that’s a good idea.’

They walked side by side, gazing at the fields.

There was a difference of twenty years or more between them but they looked about the same age. Kim-hunjang wore a short jacket so that only the inner-cap on his half-white hair and the long pipe in his hand indicated his rank – otherwise his appearance was no different from that of the peasants, worn down by work and dried up
with age, that one can meet in any village. Dr Mun, on the other hand, had grown old neatly, looking as graceful as a heron and still energetic. He carried himself far better, looking every inch the gentleman-scholar, straight as bamboo. Kim-hunjang, though he took breeding more seriously than life itself and was like steel in making no concessions on social status, had always regarded the doctor with great respect, so he was not at all put out that the middle-class doctor looked like a high-ranking scholar while he himself, a genuine gentleman, looked like an old peasant. Sitting in the teacher's study, facing each other across the table brought in by his daughter, they passed the wine to one another.

Not a drinker by nature, the doctor seemed to have blurred vision after the first cup. He chewed a piece of bitter black mustard leaf pickled only with salt and smacked his lips.

‘What’s going on in the world?’

The teacher, starved of comments on current affairs since Chun’gu’s departure, quickly opened the discussion. The doctor, who moved in wider circles, often told him of events in the capital.

‘Very much as usual, I think,’ he said absently. His face was more sombre than usual and one could sense that his nerves were on edge, as they might be after attending a patient near to death.

‘Huh – um.’

The visitor was still silent.

‘It’s like leprosy setting in . . . leprosy,’ sighed Kim-hunjang, and he went on, ‘After the plot of Kim Hûngyuk, Russian influence seemed to recede a little, but I hear the Japs are now raising their heads again. They say that in Pusan you hear nothing but the clatter of their clogs, and didn’t that chap who’s supposed to be their prime minister even have the cheek to make an appearance in Seoul?’

‘. . .’

‘They ought to have their heads cut off!’

‘That absurd affair surrounding Kim Hungyuk who is only an interpreter . . .’

‘. . .’

With a quick glance at the teacher’s face, twisted with confusion, the doctor went on, ‘With the present government, things like that