Chapter Thirty-Five

CH’ISU had been expected to leave the next day, but he stayed on at the monastery for three more nights. During these three days, Ugwan in the isolated hermitage and Ch’isu in his room near the Seven Star Chapel hardly came out or met again. Sitting alone, Ugwan sipped the tea brought in by the novice, Myōngsim, briefly listened for steps outside and closed his eyes. Even though he shut them, from all directions Ch’isu’s face flickered before him. This face, smiling with smiling eyes, hundreds and thousands of such faces filled the room and moved like monsters before him. It was like looking into purgatory. He opened his eyes. The brightness of the latticed paper door dazzled him – it was a sign of autumn. It came to the mountain monastery one step ahead of the village, beginning with the petals of the bell flowers. Through the thin-paper door he was aware of the world outside – the sky, the woods, the monastery buildings, the rocks and the paths among the woods all at once holding their breath, each standing in its place, transfixed, without a quiver, all things rigidly keeping their distance, as if held by a lever – a solemn space which would not allow the two of them to come nearer, not one inch – that was how he thought of the distance between himself and Ch’isu. The sound of the wind that shook the wood as it passed, of the mountain stream trickling between the stones, the chanting of scriptures that seemed to carry and spread the calm, and the sound of the monks’ steps and movements, even these seemed to Ugwan to be a part of the fog-like curtain that shut him off from Ch’isu. It was a fierce confrontation between the measureless power of inner, centripetal forces and outer, centrifugal ones.

He sighed and closed his eyes again. He felt an endless temptation to open his heart to Ch’isu and tell him the truth: ‘I know it is natural for retribution to follow according to the law of cause and effect. However, as retribution for one evil act leads to another, it becomes
an endless cycle. Didn’t the disciple Mongnyŏn beg Buddha to tell him what to do to save his mother from being punished in Hell? In your case, it is a good woman, who came to the temple to pray for the repose of her dead husband and for blessing on her son and through an unforeseen disaster was made pregnant with the seed of sin. Can it be said that she is sinful? Who has the right to punish her? When you think about all the pain she has suffered by labelling herself a sinner, how can you subject her to the tragedy of bloodshed between her children?’

It was hard for him to suppress his impulse to talk in this way to Ch’isu, sitting close to him, knees touching. He was well aware that he felt like this because of love for his nephew, Hwani, which he could not sever however hard he might try, and also aware that there was no chance of changing Ch’isu’s mind. Besides, it was risky and dangerous, for though Ch’isu had said something about betraying blood ties with those who had defiled them, one could not conclude from this that he knew all about it. It was a secret which even if everyone else knew, he must not, a secret that had to be kept. The witnesses, Pau and Kannan–halmŏn, and Wŏlsŏn’s mother, were all under the ground and the sower of the seed, Kim Kaeju, was also no longer of this world. This man, on the one hand like storm and fire and on the other cold and merciless like an incarnation of ambition, who had led the Tonghak mob against the aristocrats without the slightest mercy, like a pack of blood-thirsty wolves – he was dead and rotting beneath the earth. His brother’s son, Hwani, Mun, and himself – only the three of them held the secret – along with Lady Yun herself. He was inclined to believe that it could not have been revealed.

(Stupid idiot!)

Before his eyes, the images of his younger brother, Kaeju, and his nephew Hwani, intermingling, rose and disappeared – Hwani, who was now a fine young man, and those eyes of Kaeju, full of distinction and wisdom. Kaeju, after the affair, had said to his furious brother, ’Why is it a sin to love a woman whose husband is dead? Heaven gave us the body and who are we to defy it?’ He had smiled weakly but as he left the monastery he had shed a few tears of grief.