Chapter Thirty-Seven

It was much more than a case of 'Same bed, different dreams'. Sometimes in the water mill, or on the grass or behind a rock, and more frequently in the Fertility Shrine, Kwinyŏ and Ch’ilso’ng, burning with different expectations and ambitions, continued a physical relationship that was as infertile as barren land. These respective ambitions and expectations not only denied all human love but would not allow even the lust which might naturally accompany such an affair. They acted only for a purpose – it was mortification for the attainment of an end that transcended all instinct. It was an ugly and inhuman affair – in this respect, the woman was even stronger and more thorough than the man. These heartless assignations which took place deep in the night were kept entirely secret, thanks to watertight plans and instructions from P’yŏngsan. Whether or not a child was conceived seemed like some great gamble with the gods. If a son were born, the three of them would raise a toast to victory. If it were a girl, Ch’ilso’ng would be dropped out of a new plot by P’yŏngsan and Kwinyŏ. The shrine of the Fertility Spirits buried deep in the woods of Tangsan solemnly kept watch over the night and, inside, the child Buddha, with smiling face, looked down on these ardent deeds of supplication. The bleak autumn wind whispered past the eaves of the shrine, the leaves rustled as they rubbed together, a nightingale cried like an elderly spinster and an owl like the ghost of an old bachelor, while the figure of the Buddha – was it no more than a lump of metal melted by a craftsman and mindlessly poured into a mould? – never spoke but only smiled.

‘I say – Kwinyŏ.’

Squashed beneath his chest she did not reply.

‘I mean “Ondal” . . .’.

‘. . .’.

‘What about if he doesn’t come back after a month and then two months – there’ll be trouble, won’t there? If you become pregnant
during this time, they’ll be suspicious, because they will count up the months, won’t they?

‘Ondal’ was P’yŏngsan’s code-name for Ch’isu. She burst out shrilly, ‘You don’t have to worry about that. Do you think he won’t be back in time for the harvest festival?’ and added, in a voice that was lower but full of contempt. ‘It’s none of your business.’

‘What? Oh, really? If I don’t worry about it, who will?’

‘It’s hardly anything to do with you.’

‘Hardly anything to do with me? A child’s born – and the father has hardly anything to do with it?’

He pressed on her hard, and she responded with laughter that was like a groan.

‘Don’t count your chickens before they are hatched. Even if there was baby . . . and, as there isn’t, what do you mean, “father”?’

‘That may be so, but, I reckon it will come – so I might as well think about what needs to be thought about.’

‘You’re filled with greed right up to your neck . . .’

Having released each other, they parted like enemies. Kwinyŏ went down the mountain first. As if following her receding figure, as she descended with her outer skirt over her head, came the successive hoots of an owl. When he reached the spring Ch’ilsong fell on his knees to drink and, as he rose, he saw P’yŏngsan, who had been on guard, strolling down towards the village, his hands thrust into his waist-band.

‘Bloody hell! That cat! It’s the seed that counts – what does the soil matter?’

After Ch’ilsong, wiping the drops from his lips with his fist, had also gone down, the moon, a piece missing, hung faintly above the roof of the shrine.

‘Do they think it will all happen just as they wish?’ – Was the little Buddha saying something like this to himself?

In Pongsun-ne’s room at the Ch’oe house, Haman-taek and Imi-ne were helping her with her sewing. Another fortnight and it would be Ch’usŏk, the Harvest Moon. She could not manage all the servants’ clothes by herself so she had called in Haman-taek and Imi-ne, known in the village for their agile fingers. In the previous year, also, they had come in to help. With her painstaking nature, Haman-taek