Chapter Thirty-Nine

WITH the Harvest Festival over, the fields from which the grain had been gathered looked forlorn. Only in the hillside paddies dependent directly on rain did patches of uncut rice remain. Like insects swarming on a withered leaf, flocks of sparrows gathered over these paddies, where the scanty crop did not promise much to thresh and garner, and feasted at ease. Here and there the yellowing leaves of mooli or cabbage caught the eye like stains on the grey expanse of fields. Before the ground froze they also would have to be gathered, either for the market, or to make kimch’i for the winter, but the cold was not yet imminent. The stooks of rice still basked in warm sunshine.

‘What boundless greed – to shake off the last grain of millet as well!’

‘It’s shocking. It’s like sucking the blood of a flea. How long has he been a landlord? As they say “Seeing the big fish leap, the little fish leap too.” It’s so childish.’

Kim-hunjang and Sŏ-sŏbang were indignant over the story of a new landowner in the next village who rented out some acres of rice land nearby and, saying the rice payment was short, had taken away from Ttajul even the grains from his millet stalks.

‘Well, they say “A man with ninety-nine sacks will rob a man with one to make it a hundred,” but even so . . .’

‘ “Evil times, evil customs.” People have become so mean, the country is bound to go down.’

‘That shows you don’t understand, sir,’ said Sŏ-sŏbang.

Remembering Kim-hunjang’s contemptuous attitude towards his close relationship with his wife, saying ‘Evil times, evil customs’ and ‘low-class things’ and so on, he went on sulkily, ‘It’s not that the world has changed; it has been like this from the beginning. Even the noble house of Ch’oe – everyone knows how they accumulated their wealth – taking someone’s land for a handful of barley after a bad

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harvest, and so multiplying it again and again. If you see it like that, how can you think that it's all suddenly gone wrong?

‘Huh, really! So the world’s going well – is that it?’

‘It’s not that it’s going specially well – it’s always been the same.’

‘It’s shameful, just shameful! The country is perishing but the leaders can think of nothing but their own interests and the people can barely survive. Who will stand up to stop the enemy?’

‘When even the king himself can’t do anything, do you think you can put it right by worrying about it? That must be why your hair keeps getting whiter.’

‘You are wicked! That’s what I mean when I say, “Evil times, evil customs” – when the lower orders don’t even respect a gentleman . . .’

He stopped to knock out his pipe on the stake to which the ox was tethered. Talking with people like Chun’gu or Dr Mun he stuck strictly to the manners of a gentleman and, even when roused to a heated argument, never lost his composure, and could rise to greatness, but in his dealings with ordinary people he became a little ridiculous. His feelings of joy, anger, sorrow or pleasure showed so instantly on his face that he seemed whimsical. Perhaps this unrestrained frankness was because he felt closer to the common people than to the gentry. With Yunbo or Sŏ-sŏbang he would volunteer opinions on this and that and end up by raising his voice in anger, but when he met them next time he would start chatting with them just as before. On their side, neither Yunbo nor Sŏ-sŏbang were the least afraid of his temper and never took to heart the gross insults that he sometimes poured out upon them.

‘In the old days people at least knew how to behave according to their rank but now, gentlemen or commoners, they are all in a mess. “The road is there but you can’t walk it; the sun’s up but it’s dark as a cave.” “No one knows where to stand.” – it’s deplorable.’

‘What can you do about it? We have to just live out our days. “Even if the sky falls in, there’ll still be a crack to crawl through”, as they say.’

‘Huh, that’s just what I mean . . . “pearls before swine” . . .’

While this was being said Sŏ-sŏbang had one eye on something else.

‘Where’s he off to?’

Ttajul was coming along with a bundle under his arm.