Chapter Forty-Five

AFTER returning to Chiri Mountain, Ch’isu wandered for a month or more, leaving no corner untrodden, but he could not find Kuch’ôn. Hwani (Kuch’ôn) who had once gritted his teeth and sworn never to turn to the Master, Ugwan, had finally gone to Yôn’goks to seek the old monk who, in secular terms, was his uncle.

A lonely pine sprung from a seed dropped by the wind on a mountain wall to sprout and perilously to grow, seeing only sun and moon rise, in turn, and set again behind the screen of the peaks that enfold it, can have no idea of the wide world beyond the ridge line, upon which sun and moon also rise and set. As a boy, Hwani had been like that lonely seed fallen on the rock, that single pine tree perilously growing on the face of the mountain. From birth he had grown up to echoes of the forest changing with the seasons: the distant movements of animals, the wing-beat of birds, the scents of plants and wild flowers, the beckoning rainbow in the sky – he had sweated, slept and dreamed in the following of these pure essences. His awareness of a world beyond the mountains, on which sun and moon also rose and set, began one summer day when, following through forest paths a man who had come to find him at the monastery, he came out of the hills and reached an inn. He learned that this man who scrutinized him with such sharp and sparkling eyes was his father. He commanded great hosts of Tonghak rebels and the boy, following him like his shadow, took part in the uprising, witnessed the bitter end of the fighting and lost his father in the execution yard.

The several hundred miles of the escape route had been a long and thorny path across close-packed mountain ranges. He realized now not only that the sun and moon were different when they shone in the forest surrounded by a screen of mountains from what they were outside, but also that the mountains were the country of the moon, cool and calm, while outside was that of the burning sun – the one
a desolate peace like an illusion and the other a reality in which the body writhed in agony.

‘Don’t resent it. It is the same for all living creatures. Accept it and the pain will turn to pleasure’ thus had Ugwan once advised him.

He could run in the hills faster than others on a flat road. He knew the skills of concealment and could catch the scent of the chase as well as any mountain animal, but to be endlessly pursued made one short of breath. He had to run faster than the hunter and with no respite. Even so, he did not have the courage to leave the mountains and go amongst ordinary people. It may be that his birth and upbringing and the disasters that followed had already formed in him the habit of sad wandering, and it may be also that there was a lonesome restlessness already in his blood that made it impossible for him to settle in one place. That seemingly orderly and peaceful village had never been the right place for him to set foot in. On flat land, like a fish out of water, his mountain feet lost their strength and the wisdom of concealment was wasted. Even though he had to go round like a squirrel on a wheel, he could not bring himself to leave the mountains.

Alone, he would rather have fallen and died by some brook or in a gap between rocks than seek the Master, Ugwan, but his companion, filled with fear, was in a state that bordered on hysteria. Even when not asleep, she was delirious, saw phantoms or would run to the edge of a cliff. Hwani, seeing before him the respite offered by death, and an almost ecstatic vision of the end, also found himself screaming in delirium. Treading ground hardened by the bitter wind, followed by the cries of an owl, holding the sick woman’s burning hand, he came to stand before Ugwan.

‘Save us!’

In the patch of light from the stone lantern, Ugwan looked like a tower. He stood with his back to the dark wood. Penetrating rays of light came from his eyes as he remained motionless. To Hwani, his body seemed to grow bigger and bigger until the whole of it could not be seen, while that of the woman seemed to become smaller and smaller, until the burning hand held in his was all of her, and perhaps in the end even that might turn into froth and disappear – such was his illusion. He bent his knees and knelt on the ground.