Chapter Sixty-Two

AFTER BENDING over the malt that she was spreading to dry, on a straw mat, Kim-sŏbang’s wife stretched her back. ‘Oh, my back. It’s going to rain.’

She drew the pipe and tobacco bowl that rolled about on the maru as she thumped her back. The sun was about halfway on its course. Above the vegetable plot a couple of white butterflies circled while in the bamboo grove a flock of sparrows fluttered. As she lit her pipe, sucked, and blew out the smoke she was not a pretty sight. Dark flesh showed through the tears in her under-blouse.

‘Damn chick.’ She brandished her pipe. A hen picking at the malt clucked and sidled away.

‘As they say “There’s no knife in the smith’s own house”.’

Because of the drought the sesame crop had not been good. She had enough to last till the end of the season. But being imprudent she had given freely to various people and when her daughter last came home she had scooped out a big measure for her which had not even been particularly needed. She now came to realize that there was not a grain left for her own use.

(Whatever they may say the secret of good cooking is in the condiments. What’s the use of meat or whatever if you don’t have the right seasoning? – quite useless. On the other hand, even wild vegetables make good side-dishes when they are well dressed. They say your clothes are your wings but I would say, good food is your face powder. A woman must be a good cook to talk a bit. If you can’t spin you can buy the stuff from the market or if you can’t sew, pay someone to do it for you, but as for cooking, it is a different kettle of fish. Your daily meals – can you buy them all or pay someone else to do it? As they say ‘don’t boast of your cooking skill but have your seasonings well stocked.’) She had poured out this useless chatter to her daughter who had come home to ask for help with grains, adding that they could hardly manage even broth because of the bad harvest,
while she scooped out the sesame seeds. It never occurred to her how reckless she was in running her own household but she placidly repeated the saying about how a smith himself hasn’t a kitchen knife.

After tapping out her pipe on the shoe-stone she threw it on the *manu*, picked up a bowl and set out.

‘What else can I do but ask for some? Oh, ouch! My back! What’s wrong with it? It must be going to rain.’

A quick worker, she had much done in one morning. She had hoed the millet and spread out the malt. With nothing to do she felt a bit lonely. It seemed a good idea to go down to the House to ask for some sesame and get hold of someone, whoever it might be, to have a good chat. She went across the vegetable plot, turned round the walls of the backyard and was just passing the *pyŏldang* when she saw the back of Pongsun-*ne*, squatting in the courtyard.

‘Pongsun-*ne*, what are you up to?’

Pongsun-*ne* turned with a look that said ‘O, dear, here comes trouble!’

‘I’ve run out of sesame, so I’m going to ask for some.’

‘Run out of sesame?’

‘Don’t look so fierce. Why are you so stingy. It’s not your own anyway.’

‘Who was it that bragged about a big crop of it last autumn?’

‘I didn’t eat it all by myself, did I?’

‘You gave it all away.’ Pongsun-*ne* clicked her tongue.

‘I didn’t mean to…’ The steward’s wife stopped short and changed the subject.

‘Listen to me. The bitches, after taking this and that from me…’ She could not finish as Pongsun-*ne* snapped at her, ‘Stop it! I don’t want to hear. You don’t need to give things and then blame them afterwards.’ She turned back.

‘I shall never understand why everybody hates what I say as if it was a nasty-smelling soup or something. Anyway, why are you picking up those pomegranate flowers?’

‘They are lovely.’

‘Lovely? What’s the use of them?’

‘They’re not even bruised or wilted, so fresh.’

‘You’re mad. You should have better things to do.’