Chapter Eighty-Eight

THE SUNBEAM, just about to reach the end of the manu, stayed on the shoe stone lightening up a pair of white leather shoes. The sun was quite strong but the late autumn air was chily. Samwŏl, looking untidy, was pulling the cabbages. She plucked them recklessly and at random. Yi-ch’osi, looking out at her, frowned. Thanks to the fertilizer Kim-sŏbang-taek had applied so diligently they were well filled out and looked good to eat.

‘Phew!’

She flopped down on the furrow. She picked up the knife, cut off a thin root of a cabbage, scraped off the soil and crunched it as she looked up at the sky. Her face was bruised and a long scratch wound round her neck like a worm. There was not a day when her face was not bruised. No one made any comment on it, probably thinking she had been born that way. She herself made no show of crying or lamenting. Samsu had beaten her frequently in the past and recently he did it more frequently and more violently.

‘I’m the loser because of you, you bitch! Damn it all, “A widow offers her body and only gets slapped on the cheek,” as they say. I worked for him till my bones were weary and ended up by being handed down an old bitch? Look at that bastard Pogi, he’s done nothing and got Yŏni, a virgin. I must’ve been mad.’ Then he would say, ‘Hmn, “the frog doesn’t think of the days when he was tadpole.”’ For him to grab hold of a millionaire’s property – didn’t I make any contribution? It was all in vain, in vain. It’s worse. I landed up with a useless woman with a brat that no one knows who’s its father was. Damn it all! I’ve lost all my friends and been made to look disloyal… all for nothing. I want to burn it all up. He used to allure me gently with words sweet as honey, saying when the enlightenment came even servants would wear hats with golden trimming.’

He went on panting with anger but it was not only from anger that he beat Samwŏl. He obtained a perverse sexual pleasure out
of it. It had become worse since he had violated Turi in the millet field. Each time this happened Samwŏl gave out a faint squeak like that of a little chicken but when the day dawned she would go out and do all the rough household work. Her once slim waist was thick, her fingers thick with swollen joints, and she spoke very little. No one could guess what went on in her mind but they said she was half-deranged. Even though within the same house she rarely saw Cho Chun’gu or Madam Hong. Since falling to the level of a rough worker she had little occasion to enter the sarang or the inner quarters. Madam Hong had completely forgotten her existence and Cho would be the same. He not only did not call on her but also seemed to refrain from having any relationship with the other maids. He kept a concubine in Seoul and there was a kisaeng in Hadong, which he frequented but more than anything, he was a man who took great care of his body.

When she munched the cabbage root Samwŏl, sitting on the furrow, started to trim the cabbages.

It seemed unusually bright outside. It was not a time the sun would be shining on it but the sliding door was bright. A beautiful spring day; the earth cracked as plump buds poked through, and a mirage shimmered along the riverside – it was only his imagination. Restless, Pyŏngsu could not sit still inside. He closed his book and stood up. As he opened the door to step out he was met by a chilly wind. The scene outside was of early winter. He looked at Samwŏl squatting in the vegetable patch, with her face as bruised as usual. My mother’s doing – he recalled the frightening sight, some time ago, of his mother inflicting fierce beatings on her. As the bruises on her face were always new his fear of his mother was renewed each time he saw her. Sometimes he thought the bruises on her face were like the hump on his back. Though invisible, there were bruises and scratch marks in it, he thought. He did not know why he was thinking of such things. He stepped down on to the courtyard and called, ‘Samwŏl!’

‘Yes, master.’ She answered without stopping her work.

‘What are you going to do with all those cabbages?’

‘How do you mean what will I do with them? Make kimch’i, what else?’