A CRISIS IN SEOUL

*Hatred of Yi Yong Ik - Conspiracy of the ministers - Little man, not little subject! - Petitions to the Emperor - Imperial embarrassment - The escape of Yi Yong Ik - Resignations, demotions and confiscations - The final pardon.*

I have talked about Lady Om and I have talked about Yi Yong Ik. I am now going to tell a little story of Court and government intrigues, which unfolded before my own eyes and which involved both of them. Poor Yi Yong Ik certainly never feared so much for his life as he did then.

He was detested by government officials of all parties, including his fellow Cabinet ministers, and their hatred reached a peak. The unbending approach he brought to his professional dealings with colleagues and subordinates, his harsh insistence that they pay the sums due to the treasury punctually and in full, and the truly exceptional honesty he displayed in the discharge of his many duties - an honesty clearly demonstrated by the fact that, although his multiple offices made him in practice the sole arbiter of all the empire’s financial resources, he had not the smallest property of his own and his private residence was more than modest, it was frankly humble - were reasons enough to attract so much hatred. His appointment as President of the High Court of Justice was to bring about his downfall. The severity of his judgments exceeded all limits: a very great number of officials guilty of embezzlement had been tried, flogged and sentenced to various punishments quite regardless of their rank. It was also said that even several women had been subjected to torture, something unprecedented in Korean criminal procedure.

His Cabinet colleagues, interpreting the general indignation, held an emergency meeting one fine day in November and resolved to ruin him.

To achieve this aim, they first had to accuse him publicly of some serious crime, and demand that the Emperor sacrifice him. In another country, they would have started by going through his accounts, scrutinizing the legality of subsidies granted and sundry expenses incurred, and they would perhaps have found that he was helping himself to state *gin-seng* to fortify his health, or using palace sedan chairs for private purposes and that his own visiting cards had come from the Imperial Printing House. But all such accusations are useless in Korea, they are blunt weapons. Something more serious, more sensational, was needed. So, what exactly? A failure to observe the formalities, a breach of Court etiquette, was what was needed. Could there ever be a more serious crime for Koreans than the non-observance of those formalities that have come down to them over many centuries and which fathers pass on to their children as a treasure greater than any other? And this disregard, this infringement of the age-old rules, in whose presence would it have to have been committed for the plot to succeed and the blow fall with maximum effect? The person who came naturally to mind was Lady Om.

And so there they were, those serious men, gathered in secret council, drawing up a Petition to the throne in which they accused Yi Yong Ik of having dared to refer to himself, in conversation with Lady Om, as *so-sin* ("little subject”), an expression that must only be used when speaking with the sovereign, whereas the appropriate expression to be used in this case would have been *so-in* ("little man”). Nor was this all, because Yi Yong Ik, perhaps thinking in his profound ignorance that he was paying a compliment to the august concubine, had dared to compare Oang Kui Pi to Yang Kui Pi, the favourite concubine of a Chinese emperor of the Tang dynasty, who lived about 1150 years ago, and who was the primary cause of her lord’s death.

It is best to reproduce, in its Italian translation, the exact text of that curious document, if only to give an example of the convoluted and grandiloquent style of official Korean correspondence:

We, unworthy subjects of Your Majesty, take the liberty of informing Your Majesty that we were told by Ciò Pyong Sik, Minister of Foreign Affairs, that Um Jun Ik, ex-Governor of Seoul, and Kim Yung Gin, Chief of the Executive Office of the Imperial Palace Police, went to see him and informed him that Yi Yong Ik, Head of the Imperial Administration, dared to express himself in words that should never even be murmured by a subject loyal to his Sovereign, words representing the greatest of insults to the most August of Persons. Furthermore, he is said to have risked making so imprudent a comparison that his secret thoughts are shown to be as hateful as they are dangerous.

Finally Ciò Pyong Sik explained to us that this careless talk and the resulting crime hide the blackest betrayal and therefore deserve the severe punishment proper to such cases.

We all, on hearing this news, felt our legs tremble, and our spirits sink in horror.

We then gathered together all the senior government officials in the Council of State, and having brought in Um Jun Ik and Kim Yung Gin and examined and compared their statements, we found, alas, that what we had been told was absolutely true. Not a word had to be changed!

Alas! The treacherous thoughts and insulting talk of Yi Yong Ik represent the greatest rebellion since the creation of the world! Such a traitor cannot be left unpunished even for a single moment.

We therefore have the high honour of begging your Majesty to deprive him immediately of all his ranks and offices and at the same time to order the Minister of Justice to seize him and punish him according to the laws regarding such a crime, so that the your sovereign authority is preserved intact, and the national grief is relieved.

Yi Yong Ik’s lucky star did not desert him, for when the Petition reached the Emperor he was in the Palace with him, and it did not take him long to convince the sovereign that this was neither more nor less than a plot to harm him, and that if he were abandoned and handed over to his enemies, great damage would be done not only to the State, but to the Emperor himself, whose purse strings he held. It was even whispered that over six million yen belonging to the Emperor were deposited in a Shang-hai bank in Yi Yong lk’s name. This last argument undoubtedly convinced the Emperor more than any other, and he replied verbally to the ministers that the matter did not seem so serious to him, and that in any case he would think about it and decide later.

But the conspirators were not satisfied with this evasive answer, and they hastened to send this second Petition to the throne:

We, unworthy subjects of Your Majesty, have the high honour of recalling that we have already submitted a collective petition concerning the wickedness and betrayal of Yi Yong Ik.

We now dare to say that there is no greater crime than that committed by an official who nurtures disrespectful feelings for his sovereign. Now, can there be more disrespectful feelings than those that dwell in Yi Yong Ik's heart?

Since Sun Pi (Lady Om) has been raised to the position of *Oang Kui Pi*, he has dared to compare Your Majesty and *Oang Kui Pi* to *Tang Myeng Oang* and *Yang Kui Pi*, without the slightest scruple or fear. In addition, he has dared to call himself *so-sin* when speaking with *Oang Kui Pi*; on several occasions she herself had to point out to him the mistake he was making, as the Illustrious Lady well understands that her current position does not entitle her to such a sign of respect, but he paid no attention.

So how can it be denied that his thoughts are dangerous and conceal betrayal? Alas! It is true that the rogue is nothing but a fool, but with the office he holds he has now reached the rank of Minister, and he must know what the rules of official etiquette are. He is well aware with whom officials must use the expression *so-sin* [little subject], but he dared to call himself *so-sin* when speaking to a person who is not entitled to such an honour. But is it ignorance that led him to do this? No, we well know that by acting in this way he aimed to lead her [Lady Om] into a trap.

Now, can a person who has any consideration for his sovereign do such a thing?

We all know that *Tang Myeng Oang* was a corrupt monarch and *Yang Kui Pi* a bad woman. And he dared to compare the present kingdom with theirs? What, then, does he think the present kingdom is? Oh, this is indeed the greatest rebellion that has ever taken place since the creation of the world and he himself is the greatest rebel ever born on earth.

But his rebellion is now clear for all to see and it is useless for us to insist further. We have vowed not to live under the same sky as him [ Yi Yong Ik]. And moved by righteous anger we again submit a collective petition requesting Your Majesty to have the firmness and energy to issue an order to the Minister of Justice so that the provisions of the Criminal Code can be applied to him, for the greater dignity of the Court, and the relief of the Nation’s sorrow.

The affair was becoming more and more serious. Yi Yang Ik was still in the Palace and energetically refused to leave it. All the ministers were waiting outside with their acolytes and if he had fallen into their hands he would certainly have been killed. Around the palace there was a continuous coming and going of soldiers who watched all the exits by specific order of the Minister of War. The Emperor did not know which way to turn, but he understood that it was absolutely not in his interest to sacrifice Yi Yong Ik, and he sent the following reply to the ministers:

If what is written in the Petition is true, how could he be forgiven? But how can you be sure that the words he is accused of uttering only became offensive after passing from mouth to mouth?

So you must not believe it, but generously admit the other side of the question.

This response did not satisfy the ministers. And there they all were, gathered in front of the main door of the Palace, remaining there day and night in protest. A third petition was sent to the sovereign, which for the sake of brevity I will not reproduce, complaining that while they, ministers of state, were waiting outside, Yi Yong Ik, the rebel, was free to move undisturbed inside the Palace. They had to be given some satisfaction, and so an imperial decree was published in the Official Gazette dismissing Yi Yong Ik from all his posts, while at the same time His Majesty addressed this new response to the ministers:

Although it became clear after the confrontation held before the State Council [that Y1 Yong Ik is guilty], are there not perhaps other reasons for these accusations?

He is still in the palace because he has to settle his official accounts. So do not raise this business with me any more.

But the ministers were determined to have the matter settled once and for all and they were not satisfied with these half measures. The crowd in front of the palace was increasing every day; the ministers stayed outside the entrance, each surrounded by his own clients, and there was fear of disorder in the city. Various notable personalities, such as Sim Sun Tak, former prime minister, and Ciò Pyung Se, chairman of the privy council, sent their own petitions to the throne, all begging the Emperor to hand Yi Yong Ik over to justice, but the Emperor thought of the millions in Shanghai and held firm. Several of these petitions were rejected and subsequently sent back several times, until the ministers, tired of waiting any longer, sent a fourth collective petition:

We, Your Majesty’s subjects, have the honour to recall that, after having met, and having sent Your Majesty the information regarding the traitor Yi Yong Ik, we withdrew to our private residences and waited at home for seven days and seven nights for the imperial order to be issued [for his arrest].

And while we, state officials, complain of his betrayal, he [Yi Yong Ik] can move freely around the Palace instead. This situation has arisen precisely because he does not care about his sovereign. After this, who will still believe that there are laws in this country that have to be observed? Oh, this is truly the greatest rebellion that has ever occurred since the creation of the world!

Of course, Yi Yong Ik is nothing but a trivial being. But what a great responsibility he bears for bringing the nation’s laws into such a ruinous state, those laws which were broken in defiance of all the generations that have ever existed! Such a rebellion is unprecedented.

All this appals us, pains us, and almost causes our death. This may have made us forget the established customs for a moment, as we hurried to submit our complaints.

We sat in front of the Palace and demanded that an appropriate imperial order be issued. Was this perhaps due to our ignorance of customs? We ourselves know very well that it was an exceptional move, but we found ourselves obliged to do so because it was urgent. We are taking the liberty of saying that Your Majesty has not yet clearly understood what it is about ..... We are still eagerly awaiting this order [to arrest him]. We are still very anxious and very tired, but so far the order has not appeared.

Of course, it is very important that he settle the official accounts. But can we forget the things that have brought about this disorder in the nation's laws?

These things are of the greatest urgency, and so we again dare to risk incurring Your Majesty’s wrath and submit this collective petition with which we have the high honour of asking for an order to be issued immediately to calm the righteous indignation of the nation.

It is not my intention to reproduce the other petitions sent to the throne on that occasion – eleven in all - to which the Emperor no longer knew what to answer.

He had never been so embarrassed. If it had not been for the millions in Shang-hai, he would willingly have abandoned Yi Yong Ik to his fate, ridding himself of the whole troublesome business in the process. It was clear that as long as Yi Yong Ik remained in the Palace, the ministers would be outside waiting for him, and this state of siege could not continue. So it was decided that Yi Yong Ik would flee and the Emperor agreed to facilitate his escape.

The Russian chargé d'affaires agreed to offer him asylum in his Legation, and so it was that while the ministers were in uproar outside, the Emperor left the Palace by a secondary door to perform a sacrifice in the Temple of the Ancestors, not far from the Palace itself. In the closed road leading to the Temple, a side door - a wise precaution – gives access to the Russian Legation. When Yi Yong Ik, who was in the Emperor’s retinue, reached it, the door was ajar and behind it a certain number of Cossacks were ready for any eventuality. He stepped resolutely inside, closed the door behind him, and was finally able to say that he was safe. I will never forget the expression on that man's face at the moment when, after so many days of anxiety, in constant fear of literally losing his head from one moment to the next, he knew that he was safe at last.

His escape remained a secret for a couple of days, during which the ministers continued to submit their protests. When the rumour finally spread in the city that Yi Yong Ik had found shelter in the protective shadow of the Russian gryphon-eagle, five of the ministers most fiercely committed to the struggle sent their resignations to the throne. That was the false move which brought down the whole carefully constructed conspiracy.

The Emperor hastened to take note of the resignations which they and other great dignitaries had submitted, and not only accepted them, but decided that all those who resigned would have their entire assets confiscated and would be degraded and sent into exile.

Now, trying to ruin Yi Yong Ik was one thing, but ruining oneself was quite another, and none of the conspirators was prepared to make so very great a sacrifice and resign himself to such a fate.

Meanwhile, Yi Yong Ik, with a good escort of Cossacks, was sent to Cemulpo under cover of night; when he arrived there, he boarded the *Karietz*, the Russian gunboat stationed in that port, which took him to Port Arthur, a much safer place for him.

The disgraced ministers immediately enlisted the support of all their partisans to obtain an imperial pardon. They did not have to wait long, but when it came the pardon was total, with no exceptions - the same decree reinstated both the ministers who accused Yi Yong Ik and the accused himself in all their former grades, offices and duties with their associated privileges; and with that the Yi Yong Ik affair was closed once and for all.

The ministries reopened, normal business resumed and Seoul recovered its usual tranquility. After a couple of months, Yi Yong Ik made his bold return to Seoul, calm and serene, as if nothing had happened, as influential as ever and, perhaps, more feared than before. I invited him to dinner around the same time; he sat next to his most ardent accuser, and the two of them smiled and chatted cheerfully, almost amicably, together, for all the world like close friends!