

THE WEDDING THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

by Bang In-Gon

I.

“The falling leaves float down and blow about noisily. They show that Autumn is furious. It is a painful scene which can move us to tears as we see even the plants and the grass become thin and shivering in the cold, with their bodies naked. I do not understand why the bitter cold wind so heartlessly and harshly tosses the poor plants about. It is quite painful to see the plants trembling and weeping as the wind shows its authority.”

This was how Dong-Hun felt about autumn and human life and the wind and the plants, for at this time he was most prone to sentimentality. He had become so sentimental and melancholy because his dearest love Nan-Yông seemed lately to have changed her attitude a little. Their love had once been as beautiful as springtime and as warm as the summer, but its flowers feel and its passion too grew cold. If Nan-Yông's attitude had changed all at once, then he could have overcome his unhappiness more easily, but she had grown cold towards him little by little. If she meant their love to die, she should have killed it with one stroke of the sword, but it appeared that her idea was to let it die of starvation over months and years. Though outsiders could not notice any change in her attitude to him, Dong-Hun, who was most affected by it, could feel it distinctly, and it seemed to be eating his heart like a moth. Of course Nan-Yông did not deliberately plan it so but she found it hard to give him up all at once, and she was drawn back to him a little without realising it, though she wanted to forget. But she could not realise what terrible pain she was bringing upon the man she affected so deeply.

However hard he tried to understand it. Dong-Hun could not find out why Nan-Yông was changing. Sometimes he thought of asking her, but he always put it off, in case she got a better chance when he had thought a little more about it. He did not want to disturb her love unless he could find some clear proof, even if he understood it. These days he did find some clues. She had been in the habit of visiting the house where he lodged every other day, but lately she had been coming only once in four or six days, and often she did not come at the time she had promised. So now he made up his mind firmly that next time she came he would ask her.

After supper as he swept the room and waited for her to come he thought, “She will surely come today.” He had already waited three days in vain. He could not go to her house because her parents did not yet know of their love. Besides the family was numerous, and it was not easy for them to talk to one another there. So all he could do was wait for her to call on him. She used to come in the evenings. Sometimes she visited him in the early evening, and sometimes late at night, saying that she came to see him because she missed him suddenly before she went to bed. He would clasp her in his arms like a baby, and she would lie there with her eyes closed. On these occasions Dong-Hun felt a warm affection for her in his heart. When he thought that she missed him enough to come and see him, trudging the long road late at night when she might be in bed asleep, he loved her enough to

want to bite her and to embrace her so tightly that he would almost crush her. She was just like a child who is beaten to the accompaniment of hateful glares and so will cry at the slightest touch; but, if one has a kind expression while one beats it, it will never cry however hard it is beaten, but it bears the pain and smiles. So when Dong-Hun clasped her so tightly, she endured the pain and did not move at all, as if she wished that her body might be broken and united with Dong-Hun's.

Dong-Hun looked up at the green glass clock hundreds of times, expecting her to come at any moment. He listened eagerly to any sound outside, but at each disappointment he grew more impatient, and it seemed that he would prefer any sound if only it were continuous. The clock had been a gift from Nan-Yông, and when she brought it to him, she had said, "We shall keep our promise and our meetings shall be as punctual as this clock. And please think of me every time you look at this clock. You must think of the glass as my pure heart which I give to you, and of the ticking as the beating of my heart which will beat for you for ever." And this was the very clock. Yet for all she had said, and now he counted on his fingers and found that only seven months had passed, Nan-Yông had already been late many times. He stared at the clock as if to bore a hole in it with his eyes, and looked almost impatient. Though he realised that the clock was innocent, yet he came to hate it and even thought of throwing it away. The clear glass seemed dull, and the ticking got on his nerves badly.

It was long past nine. Dong-Hun's tensed mind was now quite relaxed, like the spring of the clock, and he gave up waiting and suddenly lay down on the floor where he had been sitting. He pillowed his head on his arms and looked up at the ceiling with a sigh. He reflected that the most painful and difficult thing in the world was to wait for the person one loved. He thought it was a difficult and heartbreaking job to wait for someone. Then suddenly as in a dream he heard a voice. "Are you at home?" it said. When he realised that it was the familiar voice of Nan-Yông that he could distinguish clearly amid the babble of the crowds that thronged the main street, Zongno, he shot up like a sprung, or like withered, thirsty flower, refreshed by rain, and sat like an acrobat; he felt the blood leaping all over his body.

"Do come in," he called, and opened the door. He spoke in a kind and pleasant voice, for he was rather ashamed of his suspicion of her.

He complained a little at her lateness, "I was afraid you might be out," said Nan-Yông, and came into the room. It was a cold day, but her face looked rosy and warm. Dong-Hun could not know why, for he was not a disembodied spirit. To tell the truth, just a little before, Nan-Yông had been dallying with a new man friend at a neighbouring Chinese restaurant. She had lately fallen in love with him and was flushed with her ardent affection for him. Nan-Yông was rather sorry for Dong-Hun and called in to see him on her way home. She was also moved by the idea of comparing her new lover, with whom she had been, and Dong-Hun, testing, appreciating and indulging in pleasure. To Dong-Hun, however, she seemed more charming and attractive than ever, and his heart was attracted to her still more strongly.

"You write to me so seldom these days, Nan-Yông, and you don't come to see me very often, and you often do not keep your promises. What has happened? Have you forgotten the pledges you made when you brought me that clock?"

"Yes, you are quite right. The sight of that clock makes me ashamed, but I have been very busy lately making pickle for the winter as we do every year."

"I don't think you make pickle for yourself. It's too late now isn't it?"

"I am making them. We didn't expect the weather to turn cold suddenly like this. We hadn't thought of making pickle yet."

"Then hasn't our love turned cold like the weather?" "Has love spring, summer, autumn or winter?"

"Of course it has. It seems to me to be more changeable than the weather."

"Woman is the moon, man the sun. So please warm the moon with your heat."

"Then you are cold, aren't you? Woman is like the moon, so you are very cold aren't you?"

For about half an hour they argued. But it is usual for a man to come off worse in an argument, and so Dong-Hun was rather overcome by her, though he feared that she might be deceiving him by her reasons and explanations. Nan-Yông found it interesting and was impressed with her own skill. She envisaged herself able to play with two or three men in her hand as she would with rubber-balls. As their dramatic scene was gradually drawing to a happy conclusion, a voice was heard outside.

"Is Dong-Hun at home?"

Nan-Yông was more startled by this than Dong-Hun was. She picked up her handbag and sat tensely waiting.

"Who is it?"

"It's me."

"Oh, it's Tê-Bong. Do come in. It's all right, Nan-Yông. It's only Tê-Bong."

Tê-Bong was rather drunk and staggered as he came into the room.

He opened his eyes wide in astonishment and said, "Why, it's Nan-Yông ..."

"How do you do, Tê-Bong," Nan-Yông replied, and bowed her head.

Tê-Bong sat down with a bump and said, "I've called to have a drink with you, Dong-Hun. With your permission, Nan-Yông."

"Then I'll be going home."

"No, you mustn't do that. We'll have a drink, and Nan-Yông can have something to eat. Now, Dong-Hun, please send a servant for some Chinese food. It's my order, I'll pay, of course."

"Never mind that. I've got some money too."

Chinese food and wine were brought in. When the Chinese waiter who brought the food greeted Tê-Bong and Nan-Yông, she turned her face away. Dong-Hun was rather suspicious at this.

The men drank wine, and Nan-Yông pretended to eat, as she was pressed to do. The two men talked for a while, and then Tê-Bong asked Dong-Hun abruptly, "Do you write articles nowadays?"

"I don't seem to be able to write very well these days, I don't know why."

"I've been waiting for your masterpiece to appear, but I haven't seen it yet. What's the matter?"

"Well"

"I've always said, the life of an author is not for you. First you must think of bread. Where there is no bread, there can be no art, can there? The pen holder is one, but the chopsticks are two. Obviously one thing cannot do better than two. How can one pen maintain a life which needs two chopsticks, or, if we include the spoon, three pieces? You had better give up your pigheaded idea and break your pen holder. If you do break it, it will be two pieces like chopsticks, and so you will be able to live. I'm not joking, it's true. If you break your pen-holder, I'll get you an introduction that will find you a job."

Tê-Bong's suggestion seemed quite reasonable to Dong-Hun, but his resolute

determination was never to abandon 'his art, even in the face of starvation. He used to seethe with Indignation when he saw anyone he knew give up writing to earn money, and he despised those of his friends who could wield both pen and chopsticks at the same time. So he would not follow Tê-Bong's suggestion, all the more because Nan-Yông was present, and while Tê-Bong was talking rather arrogantly in his drunkenness, 'he felt rather slighted and would not listen to his friend.

"I'll fight to the end. The result will be known only when I'm old or after I am dead."

"You talk big, but one day you will change your mind. How can anyone defy reality and the circumstances of the time? You can't do it. You can't."

Dong-Hun and Tê-Bong were childhood playmates who had grown up together. They were the only two boys in the village who studied at school. And Tê-Bong used to say jokingly, "Which of us will be successful in life? Let's have a bet on it." He was always jealous of Dong-Hun and tried to do better than him, and even feared him most of all the world. When he left school, Tê-Bong became a white collar worker and gradually won promotion. He was fairly well settled with his savings of some years. He made twenty thousand won or so in a few years by lending money and dealing in land and houses. On the other hand Dong-Hun could not get a job and wandered penniless from one lodging house to another, so that for the time being Tê-Bong might well be proud of his victory over Dong-Hun. But Dong-Hun was never jealous of him, but rather took pity on him instead. When he found that Tê-Bong was gradually becoming less honest and more cunning, he realised that the poisonous rust of money was already affecting him. While everyone else was sailing with favoring winds in proud ships on a sea of gold and singing merrily, Dong-Hun imagined himself al-one as he forged his way. upstream. And when he found that other people laughed at him, despised him, and treated him badly, he felt indignant, alone and weary. Though he was sometimes tempted to make money first and then devote himself to his art, he refused steadfastly to give in. He would not cut himself off from his own true nature, however foolish it might be.

It was after eleven when Tê-Bong and Nan-Yông went home. It often happened that Tê-Bong went off with Nan-Yông, and it hurt Dong-Hun's feelings very badly this time. When he saw the intimacy between the two flash out like lightning from time to time, though as they talked they pretended that there was nothing between them, he trembled but would not believe that anything unusual was going on. If he had once suspected, he would have noticed many suspicious signs constantly recurring. He got up suddenly, left the house, and went to the Chinese restaurant.

It was a wooden house painted green. As he entered he heard the sounds of frying and boiling food and lumps of dough thudding on the mixing board. He began to question the Chinese waiter who had taken the food to his house. He tried hard to suppress his excitement and not show it in his face, for he was afraid that the Chinese might be suspicious and not give him the correct answers. So he smiled and put his questions as if he was feeling quite as calm as usual. Furthermore he used polite words, though in a semi-honorific style.

"You saw two guests in my house didn't you? A lady and gentleman? Would you mind telling me if they were here earlier in the evening?"

Dong-Hun thought that a shot in the dark like this was the best way to ask his question.

“Yes, yes, they were here.”

“Both together?”

“Yes.”

“How long did they stay?”

“About three hours.”

Dong-Hun felt as if he had fallen over a precipice, and his hot blood boiled in his heart. He did not want to go home at once. He went up to a quiet room on the first floor and ordered strong Chinese gin. He drank it alone. He hated Tê-Bong and felt furious with Nan-Yông too. He hated them both almost equally. When he thought of them sitting calmly together in his room and deceiving him he grew more furious still. He hated Tê-Bong enough to kill him, a man who enticed away his friend's love, to say nothing of Nan-Yông who turned her back on him. The next moment he felt terribly lonely. He was lonely at the loss both of his dearest love and his closest friend. It was so sad that he should hate them whom he had loved and with whom he had been familiar until so recently.

He tried to think what course would be best against them and for himself too. He felt a lot better at the thought of meeting Nan-Yông or Tê-Bong and paralysing them and himself, with his wrath bursting forth like a volcano, but he decided that that was a defeatist attitude and would only make them despise him all the more. He decided that a more reasonable attitude would be to pretend that he had noticed nothing and to behave coolly towards them, so that, being ashamed of themselves, they might keep as far away from him as they could. He felt that this would bring him true revenge, and then he could concentrate on his art and strive towards a successful future rather than let such trifling emotions worry him. It was his sincere belief that the affairs of this world were in reality illusions of fantasy, to be laughed at. He felt that all the passions and conflicts, the hatreds and jealousy of mankind were utterly mean and ridiculous.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha!” He laughed outright. But then his eyes filled with tears and he felt the emptiness of solitude. He drank half a gûn of the Chinese gin and ate onions and Chinese pea-cheese with it. He felt that the gin was not strong enough for him and wished that he had something that would stab him more fiercely. With a pang he remembered that the Nan-Yông he had loved so much had suddenly left him, and he felt as if he had lost a precious jewel. An agonising pain took hold of his body, as if his very flesh had been torn away. Memories crowded upon him and sorely tried him. Two years had passed since he had first met Nan-Yông and become friendly with her while they were still at school, and they had promised that they would marry in the coming winter or the following spring. He had fallen in love with her because she was so pretty and had such a delightful character, and now he found it hard to forget the deep affection that he had nurtured for two whole years. They had gone together to see many famous places in Seoul or the surrounding countryside, and they had talked together of all sorts of intimate matters which concerned them both, so that he had come to think of them as being united in body and soul. But now Nan-Yông had transferred her affections to Tê-Bong, and he thought that she must have fallen for his sociable nature. Moreover he was more highly trained and had more money and better social standing. He had too a fair, clear complexion, such as to appeal to girlish heart, and with all these advantages might have blinded Nan-Yông to his real nature. He nodded, and clenched his jaw, and thought it possible and not at all surprising that, seeing that he was so inferior to Tê-Bong in all the attributes of a man that had popular appeal, even Nan-Yông,

apparently so superior to the average girl, should have fallen for such a popular sort of fellow.

“Let them go their way, and I will go mine,” he murmured. He stood up and left the room. He looked up at the stars twinkling in the sky, and felt that in the sky of his mind there twinkled some stars of hope.

II

Nan-Yông subsequently called on Dong-Hun once or twice, but he preserved his attitude of calmness toward her and asked her no questions at all. It appeared that she was trying to find out how he really felt and was anxious to know whether he was aware of the true state of affairs. It was a rather interesting and despicable scheme. Soon she gave up calling on him; and as he did not write to her, their association naturally came to an end. Though he had been jilted, he tried to make her believe that it was she who had been jilted because he did not like her. Tê-Bong never came to see him again.

It seemed that the affair had been settled, but Love is not to be forgotten or conquered by opium, and he always missed Nan-Yông and was most unhappy. He thought that Nan-Yông too might be sorry and miss him, though deeply in love with Tê-Bong. This illusion afforded him some relief, but he still suffered. He refused to let slip such proud memories and determined that he would keep them deep in the secret recesses of his heart and take them out from time to time to enjoy them. By chewing over Ibis melancholy, he got a taste of love. He also nurtured the hope that one day Nan-Yông would in some miraculous manner repent and come back to weep on his bosom.

One day he heard unexpectedly that Nan-Yông and Tê-Bong were to be married just before Christmas, on the 22nd of December. He thought that they must have hurried their wedding because of him. Though two months had passed since he had given up hope, he was unhappy at the news that they were to be married. He craved for something to fill his empty heart. He went for a walk in the main streets, Zong-no and Bon-zong, and went to a cinema. But the love scenes on the screen and records of the popular songs played in the intervals made his melancholy worse rather than better. Then he left the cinema and went alone to drink wine, but the alcohol only made him sadder and more unhappy. He hated to go back to the empty room at his lodgings as much as if it had been his grave.

He was walking by the river near the bridge of Gwang-gyo when he happened to recall the house of a ‘giseng’ or dancing girl which he had visited once or twice with a friend of his. He remembered that the girl and her mother had been very kind. He imagined that he heard them now asking him to call on them if he was passing. He thought that if he went there for a while it might make him feel better, so he went straight in, though he felt rather diffident about it.

The girl’s mother welcomed him much more warmly than he had expected, “I am very glad to see you,” she said. She was quite alone in the sitting room. She told him that her adopted daughter, whom he had met the previous time, had found a lover and was living with him. So here too he was doomed to disappointment. Her mother was doubt-less, very lonely, and now that she had a man to talk to, she became very garrulous. He had gone there to solace his own loneliness, but instead he found himself providing another’s entertainment. The woman was now more than fifty, and her face was drawn and brazen of expression, and gave the impression that

she was two-faced. Her booming voice and her smile made her at once portentous and malicious.

She prattled unasked of Do-Hong, the dancing girl who had found a lover. She explained in detail how she had slaved to bring her up, and now she had become the concubine of a rich man. She herself as the mother had got some thousands of won out of the transaction. When he asked why the furniture in the room that belonged to the girl had not been taken away, the old woman answered that the rich man had set her up in luxury. Her belongings in the house were being left as they were in case some day she should break off her present relationship and return. Then she said that she had another adopted daughter and that she would be very relieved to see her married.

"There's another?" said Dong-Hun. "I didn't see her last time."

"She was probably out at a singing lesson. Shall I call her in?" said the woman, and without more ado turned toward the room opposite and called her name. "So-Hong, come here."

So-Hong slid the door open gently and came in. Dong-Hun looked her up and down with great curiosity. He saw to his surprise that she was a young virgin with her long braided hair hanging down her back. He was rather disappointed, but when he looked closer and saw her modest demeanour as she sat and greeted him, he saw a promise in her face that she would develop into a fine woman. There was something noble about her, quite different from the coarseness of the average dancing girl.

"This girl is sixteen now, in a few days time she will be seventeen. I haven't been able to have her hair braided up yet. I'll get a licence for her, send her to the dancing girls' club, and let her attend the big restaurants. She's really rather a long time about it, isn't she?"

"She looks more than sixteen."

"She's just very hesitant. Her friends are already dancing girls. Her sister Do-Hong braided her hair up when she was fourteen and received guests. But this girl doesn't want to be braided up yet. She won't have anything to do with them. I'm afraid she will soon be too late."

This was rather hard on a dancing girl's mother, and meant financial loss too, for she would not bring in any money. The mother gets the girl engagements and then sells her to someone else, and so makes her profit.

"What do you mean by having her hair braided up?"

"You surprise me! Do you mean to say you don't know?" "I really don't. It's the first I've heard of it."

So-Hong bowed her head and blushed. Dong-Hun thought her very attractive. She seemed more beautiful and chaste than Nan-Yông.

"It's like this. When a girl wishes to become a dancing girl, she can't leave her long braided hair hanging down her back. But the family cannot braid it up for her at home, some guest must do it for her. In fact it means that she is married temporarily, and she cannot be married in public in the ordinary way. It's a matter of form, really."

"What is the procedure for doing it?"

"There's no special form laid down as there is for a wedding. It depends on the guest, of course. Some men hold lavish banquets, but there's not much of that these days. The guest buys a set of chests, hair pins, rings, and some dresses."

"Then what does braiding the hair up signify?"

"I'm afraid you don't understand. The man takes the girl as his bride, and lives with her for a few days. That's all he has to do. To tell the truth, it's much better for a

man to have a girl's hair braided up like this than to take one at second hand. The girl can never forget him, because he is her first husband."

Then the woman went into all sorts of details, with exaggerated mimicry. Dong-Hun looked at her face to see how thick her skin was, that she should talk of such things in her daughter's presence, but it was extremely thin. So-Hong blushed in embarrassment, and Dong-Hun felt his own face getting hot. He was rather ashamed of listening, but the woman talked without the slightest hesitation of matters usually left unsaid. So-Hong wore an air of sadness and melancholy. Dong-Hun was sorry to see her thus. He felt great sympathy for her when he reflected that, deprived of her real parents, she could yet be married in the usual way, but now would be forced to undergo such treatment. So-Hong turned her long braided hair to one side and touched the red ribbon with her fingers. It seemed that the pink passion of a virgin was aflame, and in her mouth closed like a flower-bud was hidden the mystery of virginhood.

Dong-Hun went back to his room, and when he thought of So-Hong, he no longer felt lonely. He was as delighted as if he had found a jewel. He went to see her several times afterwards, and sometimes they talked alone together. So-Hong talked of her sorrow in a tone of sincerity, and it was evident that she was very fond of him. She asked him to take her to the theatre or to see the temples, but he felt that he could not do so, for he would have been embarrassed to be seen walking in the streets with a girl with long braided hair.

One evening he asked her smilingly, "Shall I braid your hair up?" So-Hong bowed her head.

"I'm serious. What about it? Do give me an answer."

"I don't know," she said and turned aside to hide her blushes.

But Dong-Hun could see in her face that she was pleased.

"So-Hong! Answer me please. Would you like it or not?" She made no reply.

"Why won't you answer? Do you mean that you don't like the idea?"

"I don't mean I don't like it."

"Then?"

"Do as you like," cried So-Hong and buried her face in her hands. On the morning of Nan-Yông and Tê-Bong's wedding it snowed heavily. Dong-Hun woke up very early and lay on his bed for a long time in a vacant mood. It pained him to think of Tê-Bong and Nan-Yông so happy on this bright snowy morning and himself lying there so lonely.

"Shall I go to the wedding?" he thought to himself, but he stifled this rash impulse at once. He felt that this was going to be the most painful day of his whole life and that he would find it very difficult to endure. They will be married and go on their honeymoon, they will welcome the first night thoughts like these passed through his mind, and he thought that he could not endure the day without great suffering, though the days following might not be so bad. If things had gone smoothly, he and Nan-Yông might have been married by now, and his gall rose when he thought of the way things had turned out. This was indeed an accursed day, never to be forgotten, when his dearly beloved Nan-Yông would finally break with him forever. He thought that he must go out of his mind. She had caused him greater pain than he could ever endure.

Dong-Hun got up and washed his face. Then he took his savings bank pass book and left the house the very moment he finished his breakfast. It was the money he had skimmed and scraped to save for his marriage to Nan-Yông. He reached the

bank too early and found the iron doors closed and the steps thick with snow. The black-clad passers-by in the streets, moving to and fro over the white snow like the shuttles of a loom, had a certain dreamlike quality. At last the door clattered open, and he was first inside.

He drew his money and then went along the river to the bridge Gwang-gyo. He went into So-Hong's house and called her name. She opened the door of her room and looked out. She had taken her jacket off to wash her face and was so startled to see him that she slammed the door shut. Then she called out to him, "Please, go into the sitting room."

"Is your mother at home?" asked Dong-Hun.

"She's gone out to buy something for breakfast, but she'll be back soon. Do go in and sit down. I'll be with you when I've finished washing."

Dong-Hun went into the sitting room and before long the old woman came back. Dong-Hun handed her his money and announced that he meant to braid up So-Hong's hair at once. He added that he intended to do it that very day, for he was going away in a few days time, and he could not promise anything after that. He told the old woman that he had already talked it over with, So-Hong. The old woman was pleasantly surprised at the news, but asked him to put it off for a few days, insisting that she could not make ready for it at such short notice. In the end, however, she agreed to do as Dong-Hun wished and to do everything that same day.

The house was turned quite upside down, just as if there was to be a wedding feast. The old woman's friends, the experienced old men, and Do-Hong came to the house. Then utter bedlam reigned as they dressed So-Hong and made her up. Food was brought from a restaurant, and there was more that was cooked in the house. Dong-Hun was afraid that he might have made them make preparations too fast, but everything was done as quick as lightning. He did not know whether to laugh or cry when he thought of the remarkable contrast between his marriage with So-Hong and that of Nan-Yông and Tê-Bong.

That evening he got on a train with So-Hong in her bridal regalia and went to the Hot Spring at Bêczôn. They stayed at the Czônil-gag Hotel. Of course So-Hong's mother went with them. So-Hong was rather shy, but she was very happy and behaved just like a real bride. They took a bath and went into their room, So-Hong's hair was neatly braided up and she wore a beautiful dress. She was a beautiful lady who need not have been ashamed to be looked at in any company. They were lonesome and sad at the thought that their marriage was not to be an enduring one, but only for a few days, though for the moment they were ecstatically happy together. The snow piled up thickly like bundles of cotton-wool outside the window, and made them feel very sentimental. Their first night was very quiet and warm.

So the three days passed, and now their pleasures were to end on the following morning. The time had flashed by like lightning, but they would never forget these days as long as they lived. The first three days after the wedding are very dear in the memory of any married couple, but for these two they constituted the whole of their married life, and they loved each other dearly. So-Hong fell on her knees before Dong-Hun and, sobbing bitterly with great heaves of her beautiful soft shoulders appealed to him never to forget her. He swallowed down the welling tears and felt great agony in his heart.

"I am an orphan, and I have lost my parents, my brothers and my sisters. I wish to live beside you and love you alone of all the men in the world. The life of a dancing girl I hate more than death."

“I am a lonely man who has lost parents, brothers and sisters. I love So-Hong, but-”

“So you musn’t leave me. Don’t go away from me. I’ll follow you wherever you go.”

“No, you can’t do that. You realise that, don’t you?”

“You had better speak to mother. If I can’t go with you, I would rather die.”

Dong-Hun found it difficult to make her leave him, and he found it impossible to leave her now. He found her much purer and more passionate, more obedient to love than Nan-Yông. So they discussed how they might make their marriage legal and set up house like any married couple.

But as they had expected there was one serious obstacle. So-Hong’s mother would never agree. It might have been possible if Dong-Hun could have offered her a large sum of money, say a few thousand won, but she would not release her for nothing. After all So-Hong was her livelihood, and there was a certain capital sum tied up in her, and she hoped that in the future she might bring in many thousand won of profit. So-Hong wept and begged her mother to release her and promised that she would pay whatever she asked later on, but the old hag got very excited and stubbornly refused. In fact she had come with them to the hot spring to keep a strict watch on them, for she had feared that they might run away together. If she had not been there, they would have stayed a few days longer, as indeed they had planned to do so, but she forced them to return home the next day. The only alternatives left to the two young people were to run away together or to commit suicide, but this was not the way Dong-Hun would choose. It would also have been possible for him to live in So-Hong’s house or to visit her frequently, but he had no desire to be the keeper of a dancing girl. He wanted to go away and start life anew somewhere else, but the thought of casting aside the poor girl who clung to him was so painful that his heart was almost rent apart.

III

So-Hong stared vacantly at the furniture in her room. It had all been given her by Dong-Hun. It was ten days since they had parted and he had not visited her once. In vain she waited for him every day. She did not know where he lived, and so she could not go and visit him, and she feared from what he had said at the hot spring that he might have gone far away into the mountains or even abroad. She sighed deeply and wept bitterly when she thought of her hard lot which did not allow her to think of him as her official husband nor allow her to fulfill the duties of a wife, though she wished to do so. However poor or humble a woman may be, she may marry and make a home with her husband and bear sons and daughters, but she herself must perforce suffer miserably. She cried aloud when she reflected that if she had had only a father or a mother, brother or a sister, she need not have suffered so much. So badly did she miss Dong-Hun, though he was but the husband of a few days only, that she complained bitterly of his long absence and thought him heartless, however unavoidable his absence might have been. It drove her almost out of her mind to live alone in this room, prepared to receive a bride.

So-Hong summoned up vague memories of the days when she had lived in the country with her father and mother. Their’s was a small thatched cottage with a big garden in front and a vegetable patch outside the gate, where red peppers, cabbages, radishes, pumpkins, and corn grew profusely every year. There was a

small hill behind the house where chestnut trees grew thickly, with some oaks and persimmon trees. She would follow her father or her mother as they picked peppers or pumpkins, and in the autumn she used to gather chestnuts, acorns, and persimmons in her skirt. One unforgettable autumn festival she ate so many green dates that she had a terrible pain in her stomach that lasted for several days. The house commanded an extensive view over the farmlands to the high mountain beyond. When mists covered the mountain, it used to rain; when it was red, it meant that spring had come with all its flowers; when it was green, it was summer; and white, it proclaimed the snows of winter.

Long ago she could not remember clearly when her mother fell ill and died. In the following year, they had told her, her father too had died. An old man in the village had adopted her and brought her up. At first she did not know the meaning of sadness, but when she suffered in the house of another, she missed her parents very much.

She used to go up the hill at the back every day and cry loudly, looking toward the distant mountain and calling for her father and mother. At this time she was seven years old.

The next year, however, she was taken to a house by the river that flowed on the other side of the high mountain. There lived a young couple whom she was asked to call mother and father. The husband owned a boat and earned his living by carrying firewood or perhaps salted shrimps, and he would be away from home for a month or two at a time. While he was away, So-Hong lived with his young wife and used to attend the night school in the village. By day she used to fetch water, wash the clothes, or cook the rice. While the husband was away, his wife used to drink wine and sing songs with other men. Sometimes when So-Hong woke she saw the men sleeping in the room. When she saw them, she thought her mother was doing wrong and was sorry for her father. On one occasion, when he returned home he asked her who had been to the house during his absence and what they had done. Then she told him everything she had seen. Her father struck his wife with a mallet and, seizing her by the hair, quarrelled violently with her. It was a terrible scene, but somehow it afforded her relief to see her mother beaten, as if she had scratched an itchy spot, and she felt no pity for her.

After this, whenever her father was away with his boat her mother used to beat her and scold her. Sometimes she used to pinch her so hard that she bruised her, and she gave her less rice to eat and hard work to do. Then she missed her real mother terribly, who used to love and pet her. She would go and sit by the river and gaze in tears at the water. She would sit there dispirited and toss pebbles into the stream one by one, and she felt she would like to cast herself into the water too and float far, far away with the current.

When the cold winds blew and the river froze, she had to go there and break the ice to wash floor cloths. Then too she would weep. When the ice melted and the willows on the banks were green once more, she used to miss her father and mother more than ever. When she saw the boatmen going up and down, singing as they bent to their oars, she used to wish she could go with them.

Though the children of the village wore beautiful clothes and played together, she was dressed in rags, with her hair like a dust heap because her mother never combed it. She looked so much like a beggar that no one would have anything to do with her and everyone avoided her.

One summer, when she was eleven years old, it rained every day, and the

brown waters of the river shook the willows on the bank terribly. When the rain stopped and the weather cleared and the floods dropped, her father came to her and told her to come to Seoul with him in his boat. For the first time in years she put on new clothes. She went down to the river with her father and got on to the boat. The boat was heavily laden, and her father had another man to help him row. As she rode along on the flowing blue waves of the river watching the beautiful scenery of the banks shining in the sun, she thought that her dreams had at last come true. In two days they went ashore on the Han River and went into Seoul by tram. She gazed in wonder at the beautiful streets of the city. Her father took her to a house and talked for a while with a lady there. Then he said to her, "You will live here now and call this lady mother. Do you understand?" Then he left her. She wept and called for him, but he never came back. After a few days she was given silk dresses to wear and was sent to the dancing-girls' club to learn to sing and dance, which she hated more than death itself.

All these painful memories passed through her mind, and all those who had served as parents for her had been cold hearted. She had felt that there was no one in the world who cared for her in the slightest, but now for the first time in her life a young man had shown her warm affection. For the first time she had associated with a man, and he had loved her as his wife; yet even he, her husband, had left her. She was utterly miserable, and she missed him so much that she was almost out of her mind.

From that day, whenever she went to the big restaurants by rickshaw to wait on the customers, she felt no interest in her work. Not one day passed without her missing Dong-Hun, without her longing for his return. As the months and years passed, her longing grew stronger than ever. She would have been satisfied if only she could have news of him or meet him just once. But she heard nothing for a year, two years, for four years, in fact. No one she asked could tell her anything about him. Was he alive or dead, was he living in Seoul, in Korea, or abroad? What was he doing, when would he return? As she wondered what the answers might be, she sometimes felt more unhappy than ever, but often she built up illusions of hope.

At last she reached that age of twenty one, and was in full bloom as a dancing girl, and regarded as first class. When she came back at night from the restaurants where she waited on the customers and lay down in her lonely room, she missed Dong-Hun terribly. During these years she acquired a lot of beautiful furniture, but she still kept the things Dong-Hun had given her in her room so that she might see them often. A hundred times she took out the photograph they had taken together at the hot spring at Bêczôn, She preserved it as carefully as if it had been a precious jewel, for she would have been terribly unhappy to lose it. By now she had come to think that he might have married someone else and was living happily with sons and daughters. If this were so, it would be very foolish for her to long for him wholeheartedly as she did. Whenever this idea came into her mind, she felt depressed, and her very bones seemed to melt away.

When she saw her friends flitting from this man to that, she often thought that it might ease her suffering if she could do the same, but she could not bring herself to do it. Her mother used to complain angrily of her inability to catch a millionaire and urged her to hurry. On such occasions she used to wish that she could die at once and escape from this unclean world. But before she died, she wanted to see her first lover. Dong-Hun, once more. Her mother could not understand how she felt and was worried to see the years slip by and got pains in her stomach from her chagrin at not

being able to make a great profit from So-Hong, though she had already got back all she had paid for her in the first place. "Once you have passed the climacteric that will be the end of you as a dancing-girl. You had better catch yourself a male phoenix as soon as you can." She repeated this sentence time and time again with monotonous regularity. She was really a witch who loved good living, and had fenced herself off securely from all human thoughts. Already she had bought a dong-gi, or child dancing-girl, and was carefully grooming her as So-Hong's successor.

Despite the hard life she had led from her earliest childhood and the ill treatment she had received, and the evil ways of her various 'mothers' she had seen, So-Hong had never let her own outlook be coloured by such wickedness. Her true nature revolted against such a hell of depravity. She hated evil more strongly than anyone else, and her chastity was such that, having once given her body to a man, she wanted to be his wife and could never give herself to anyone else.

After four years Dong-Hun came back to Seoul. He had wandered through Manchuria, and Peking, Tientsin, Shanghai and Nanking in China. He had suffered hardships of every kind, but he had never forgotten about Nan-Yông and So-Hong, and he longed for his native country. He read and studied, and wrote articles, but he could not feel that his art was worthwhile in a foreign land. He thought that it was a pity to sow the seeds of his art on alien soil, but that he should rather sow them in his native soil so that his descendants might see the fruit and flowers with their own eyes. He returned passionately determined to sow the seeds of his art on his native soil, though it was a stony field filled with thornbushes and not fertile like foreign lands, and where he had sown, birds would pick out the seed and wild boar trample on them. He wished that all the blood of his brain and body might flow along the arm which held his pen and into the books he wrote.

One afternoon a few days after his return, he went for a walk on Mt. Inwang, and was coming back along the sloping path to his lodgings. He was staying in the same lodging house where he had lived long ago. A host of cicadas were majestically singing their last chorus of the day. The evening glow shone brightly over the capital. Then he suddenly came face to face with a woman who was coming up the path toward him. He was surprised to see that it was Nan-Yông. She was surprised to see him too. Both felt charged with electricity, their bodies stiffened, and their feet were rooted to the ground. Their lips were sealed together and they could not speak. They instinctively bowed in greeting, but they could not open their mouths. They both blushed, and their hearts beat fast.

Nan-Yông was not the delightful person she had been in the past, all this time?" she asked.

"No," he replied. "I have been travelling abroad, and I only came back a few days ago."

Nan-Yông was not the delightful person she had been in the past, and gloomy shadows of loneliness lingered in her face. They left the road and went among the pine trees by the roadside and sat down on the grass. They had loved each other once, and so their hearts were filled with gladness at meeting like this, and yet they were rather sad. They had feared that they would never meet again, and now they had met unexpectedly. They were happy and felt that their wishes had come true.

"Is Tê-Bong well," asked Dong-Hun. He could forgive him now, though he had hated him so much. In fact he had come to miss him. And now that he had met Nan-Yông, whom he had also hated, he felt that he could forgive her too, as if all the past

were forgotten. But in his heart he was sad.

"Yes," replied Nan-Yông, with tears in her eyes. As she spoke she turned her head away, and after a pause she continued in a low voice, "You must have railed bitterly against me and you must have hated me."

"At the time I did, but it's all forgotten now."

Nan-Yông was relieved to hear him say this, and yet she was not entirely pleased. It struck her that she would have preferred him to abuse her, and then she would have been able to throw herself on her knees before 'him and weep, as she would have liked to do. The realisation that she was now another man's wife and the mother of two children held her back, however, and shattered her dreamy fantasy. Yet she longed to pour out her sorrows, present as well as past to Dong-Hun, her former lover.

"Afterwards I repented bitterly," she went on. And I resented your attitude too. You pretended that you did not know of my association with that wicked man, and you did not attempt to do your best to lead me to better ways. Of course it's my fault. I fell for his winning ways. Afterwards I found out what sort of man he was and tried to get out of marrying him. But—but then I—oh, shame on me! I had already lost my virginity. I wanted to run to you and weep and appeal to you, but I had left it too long, and I hadn't the courage to do it. I only married him to preserve my chastity. I have sinned, but I have always been thinking of you till this very day " As she spoke her voice was racked with sobs.

"It was our fate, yours and mine," sighed Dong-Hun. "Yes, indeed, it was fated to happen."

"It was the dream of our youth!"

"It is too cruel that it should only be a dream."

"But what can we do about it, things being as they are?"

"He doesn't love me. Our home is indeed a hell! We are like devils raging at one another."

"Why?"

"He neglects his family to run after women and wine."

"What! Does the steady Tê-Bong do that?"

"Yes, he is utterly depraved. He is steadily frittering our money away."

"Have you any children?"

"Yes, a son and a daughter. I wouldn't worry so much if it wasn't for the children. Many times I tried to end my life, but each time I went home again for the children's sake. How strong is mother-love! It's harder than diamonds."

"That's instinct, isn't it?"

"When he doesn't come home at night, I sit up weeping all night long with the children in my arms. For the children's sake I couldn't ..."

"You are quite right. It's your first duty as a mother to save TeBong from the brothels and get the children a real father."

"Yes, I quite agree with you. I've always done my best. but whatever I did it was no use."

"You must persevere to the end. I will help you. I'll come and meet him and give what advice I can. I only hope you can be happy."

In the past Dong-Hun had wanted Nan-Yông to be unhappy, to repent and weep, and now he was surprised to find himself feeling such deep and generous sympathy. Nan-Yông was very moved by his words and continued with tears in her eyes.

"Thank you," she said. "I'll pray for your happiness t-Oo. It will be the final manifestation of our great love. I was so terribly unhappy today that I came up the mountain so that I could weep to my heart's content. I couldn't at home because of the children. Destiny must have meant me to meet you here."

"It was just. by chance that I came up here today. It's a miracle that we should meet. Why are you so very unhappy?"

"He's been much worse lately. He's infatuated with a dancing girl and stays with her day and night. That girl doesn't like him, but he still presses his love upon her, and even sleeps in the corner of her room. It's rumoured that he will soon be setting her up in a house and going to live with her. If he takes a dancing-girl for a wife, then my course is clear."

"A dancing girl? Do you know her name?" Dong-Hun interrupted. "Yes, her name is So-Hong."

"What! So Hong?" cried Dong-Hun in amazement.

"Why, do you know her?"

Dong-Hun stared at the sky with burning eyes. He felt that his blood was seething. He had intended to go and call on So-Hong, but first he wished to find out her present circumstances, where she was living, and any other news about her.

When he heard Nan-Yông speak of her, he suddenly became serious. It occurred to him, however, that several girls might have the same name, and so it might not be his So-Hong. But it seemed rather suspicious, and so he asked more about her.

"Do you know where this So-Hong lives?"

"I don't know the exact address, but I know it's somewhere near the river bank near the Gwang-gyo bridge."

"The river bank near the Gwang-gyo Bridge? Then it's the very house of my So-Hong, I'm sure."

"Do you know her?"

"Yes, I do."

Dong-Hun felt that he could remain silent no longer, both for the sake of So-Hong and himself, and of Nan-Yông and Tê-Bong. He could not wait a minute longer. He sprang to his feet and cried, "Let's go together!"

"Where?"

"To So-Hong's."

"Why?"

To send Tê-Bong back to you and his children."

They had not noticed that the sun had set and it was now dark.

They walked in silence through the night. The myriad lights of the city beneath their eyes twinkled like a sea of stars. To them the twinkling lights seemed like the rolling eyes of devils. With deep sighs they walked down gazing the city crowded with sins, sorrows, and suffering. It made them sad to think that here they were treading such a painful path of fate. Dong-Hun breathed noisily but said not a word, and Nan-Yông walked after him in silence. With every step they took they felt nearer to tears, and they walked along absent-mindedly.

At last they came to So-Hong's house. Dong-Hun tore the bamboo curtain aside and rushed straight to her room without taking off his shoes. So-Hong and Tê-Bong were sitting down, but sprang up in amazement when they saw him.

"Dong-Hun!" cried So-Hong.

Tê-Bong was speechless with astonishment to see Dong-Hun and Nan-Yông.

Dong-Hun marched up to him with an expression of furious anger on his face. He suddenly raised his hand and slapped Tê-Bong's face three times with all the force he could muster. And then he said, "Tê-Bong, you should have been slapped like this three years ago. You know very well why. Now go home with your wife to the children who are waiting for you. This very minute, now! If you don't I shall kill you!" He spoke in a tone that cut like a knife.

"What!" said Tê-Bong, in a trembling voice. "What has this to do with you?"

"I don't want to hear anything out of you! There'll be plenty of time to talk some other time. Go home at once," Dong-Hun urged him.

Tê-Bong bowed his head and went without another word. Then Dong-Hun said to Nan-Yông, "Please go with Tê-Bong. I'll come along later."

Nan-Yông wiped away her tears. She thanked Dong-Hun and followed her husband. Then Dong-Hun turned and looked at So-Hong. She came over to him and, throwing her arms around his neck, sobbed with her head on his chest. Dong-Hun too felt like crying. He embraced his dear wife more tightly.