

THE BRIDLE

by Yöm Sang-Söb

I

The rain seemed to have stopped and the hour of curfew was at hand, yet her husband had not returned. Perhaps the rain had delayed him. But if that were the case, he could have taken a taxi and come back, though a little late because of the weather She thought it over again, but still she could not understand it. He did not dine out as a rule, nor had he any circle of acquaintances that he frequented nor many friends on whom he might call. He was in the habit of going out for a walk in the morning or the evening to the Bêuge market, where he would stroll around and look over the prices. Often he would buy some trifle of food or other and bring it home, or he might go round and make calls to pay his debts or to collect the overdue rents of the four or five houses that he owned. This was the total extent of

his daily routine. Today, however, he had changed into his best late summer clothes and gone out.

"Where are you going?" she had asked crossly, "It will soon be dark. You must have some place you want to visit secretly, pretending that you have business to attend to." Her first idea was to stop him going out, but with great reluctance she let him go, for he murmured hesitantly, "I think I'll go down to the market and buy a perch."

Now that it was so late and her husband had still not come back, she imagined that he must have gone and called on some girl he knew. He must have taken the perch he was going to buy and dined on perch and noodles or slices of raw perch. That was surely the reason for his lateness. She lay under a mosquito net, listening for the gate and watching the dock. Just then it struck ten.

"H'm. Something unusual must have happened, indeed!" she muttered to herself, and got up from under the mosquito net, half undressed as she was. She went to the door and called into the darkness.

"Has your husband come back yet?"

"Not yet, Mother," her daughter-in-law replied, and came to the front of the house.

"It's past ten o'clock. They're keeping us both up. The young one is taking after the old one " said the older woman, tut-tutting in her disapproval and fearing her son too was taking to dissolute ways. She lit her pipe. "It's rather hard on a man to keep him in in this hot weather. He's sure to come back," said her daughter-in-law crossly. She thought her mother-in-law was far too strict with her father-in-law. "What is Father up to anyway?" she continued, looked his darkened room.

The older woman glared at her husband's room as if she hated it.

"He's with his mistress somewhere, I'll be bound. He must have bought some perch and taken it along to her place. I hope it's given him indigestion, guzzling it raw. The old rascal is having his last fling. He'll have no energy left before long. You must have noticed something. It surely can't have escaped you entirely."

Her husband had gone to live with this girl the previous year, and in the end

she had found out about it. Then she had gone along and smashed up all the furniture in the girl's house and had made him stay away from her. The girl's name was Gêsông-zib. So what with one thing and another, the old couple were not on the best of

terms and since the spring they had been sleeping in separate rooms. From that time her husband had taken to going out more often in the daytime. He had always in the past been in the habit of taking tonics, but all through the summer he took them continuously. This, too, aroused her suspicions, and she complained to him unceasingly about it. Besides, she had asked her son and his wife if they knew anything: about the affair and urged them to tell her anything that they found out.

"How do you expect me to know anything about it?" her daughter-in-law always answered. "I'm confined to the house the whole time."

The old woman bit her lower lip. "All right, then. I'll go and find out for myself tomorrow. The old rascal has dug his own grave, and he's cheerfully lying in it. He doesn't realise that I'm trying to save his life, to let him live even one day longer " she muttered' furiously.

She was fifty three years old this year, and yet she had not a single white hair in her head. Under the electric light her face appeared to be powdered, clear and lively, and she looked no more than forty. She did in fact make up with great care every day, and since her husband had packed their son and his wife off to the detached house and had himself moved into the room opposite that they had vacated, she had begun to pay much more attention to her dress. She had not driven her husband from the inner room. It was ridiculous that an old man of sixty should go off and live in a room by himself and take tonics like a young man. Anyhow, he had made some excuse and quietly moved to the room opposite. His wife was not old enough to displease him, and he was in fact rather grateful to her for doing her best to look after him, but he was certainly tired of her authoritative face which he had seen every day for twenty years. To make matters worse, she had become harder to please than she had been when she was young and often complained unreasonably. She frequently got up out of bed in the middle of the night in her irritation, that she disturbed his sleep. He grew weary of her teasing and jealousy, and in the end he moved to the room opposite, separated from her by the passage. And now she became daily more domineering, and his white hair almost fell out with her scolding and rebukes.

Suddenly the old woman started at the creaking of the gate. For at moment she thought that it must be her husband, but it was her son who came in and noisily locked the gate behind him.

"Hasn't Father come back?" his wife asked.

He did not take much notice of her as she spoke to him in the garden and went to his room. His mother, who had been sitting by the door, suspected that her son's attitude was one of studied carelessness.

"Did your father take you to that creature's house with him? And have you too been entertained with perch soup?" she said to him in a tone of irony. She suspected that her husband might have paid her son to keep his secret from her.

"I don't know what you mean," he answered. Though he truly did not know what she meant, he guessed that his father had been calling on Gêsông-zib in secret, but now perhaps he was spending the night with her quite openly. His elder sister had told him that his father had gone back to the girl and had opened a wine-shop for her as long ago as the spring. He had promised his sister that he would not

divulge the secret, for their mother had a terrible temper.

"Never mind, then. What is money? A father may bribe his son with money, but I have money too. Don't come to me with your hand out begging for money," said his mother wryly.

His mother did indeed own her own house and some land too, but she had lent considerable sums from the private savings of twenty years of married life.

Her son laughed loudly and said, "By the way, I need ten thousand won tomorrow. Give me ten thousand won for my expenses, and I'll get an agent to find out the truth for you."

"Your father sold a house last spring, didn't he? And do you know where the new one he bought is?"

"No, I don't."

The old woman had heard her husband say that he would not buy a new house until the prices came down, but she could never get out of her head the suspicion that he might have bought a new house for Gêsông-zib or some other girl or have offered her one of the houses he used to let. She thought of checking over all the houses herself, but she thought that, since her husband and the girl were living together in secret, it might perhaps be in some house he had lately bought.

When her son and his wife had gone back to their room, the old woman took her bunch of keys and went into her husband's room. She kept the title-deeds herself for the house where the family were living now, but those for the other houses were in her husband's strong-box. So she decided to try her keys in the lock in the hope of being able to examine the documents in the safe. She managed to open the lower drawer of the wardrobe with one of her keys, and she took his small strong-box from it. None of her own keys would open it. She knew that her husband kept his keys in a drawer in the desk in the corner of the room, but he had fixed the two drawers together firmly with a metal bar and locked them with a nickel padlock. Opening it presented quite a problem. She did not think that her husband could complain even if she cut the desk open with an axe to get the keys from it, for he had put himself in the wrong by staying away. But she valued the desk highly, and so she tried to loosen the screws with the screwdriver from the sewing machine. In this way she managed to open the right-hand drawer, and in it she found the bunch of keys, lying in front of the bundles of notes each of ten thousand won. She ignored the money completely, but took the bunch of keys, listening unconsciously for the gate. It would not have worried her if her husband had come back and caught her, but she felt like a thief, alone in an empty room, late at night, so that for a moment she instinctively felt sly and apprehensive.

She opened the strong-box and examined the envelopes in it. At last she found the title-deeds and took them out. Though she could not read, she had often seen them in the past. She was very surprised to find five sets of documents, and she thought it most remarkable and highly suspicious. If, as her husband had said, he had sold one house, there should be only four sets, but there were five, which could only mean that he had bought a new house and had concealed the fact from her.

She went and shouted in the direction of her daughter's house, "Dear daughter, please come here!" She could read the date and had picked out the latest document, but she could not read the address.

So she wished to ask her daughter-in-law to read it for her. The young woman had already gone to bed and did not come at once. Her mother-in-law waited

impatiently.

“Where are you? Please come and read this for me.”

The young woman came in and said, “I read it Nêng-dong.”

“He bought it in March, didn’t he?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“You see! He sold the other house to buy this one in March. But, only the other day he still said that he hadn’t bought a new house yet, didn’t he? First of all, I must tear out his tongue!”

Then the old woman took the paper from her daughter-in-law and read the number of the house in Nêng-dong. She peered intently at the number and then put the paper back in the envelope, and told her daughter-in-law to screw up the drawer again.

“What does that document mean, Mother?” asked the younger woman, with an air of knowing nothing about the matter. “It’s utterly intolerable,” the old woman replied, her voice trembling, “This time I will bring that creature here and make her work like a slave and die thin.”

II

It was past midnight when she went to bed, and she lay sleepless until four o’clock when it began to get light. Those four hours seemed so unbearable that her soft face grew hard in the space of just one night, and her eyes grew wild and bloodshot from lack of sleep. Quickly she washed her face and changed her clothes and waited for five o’clock to strike. Then she woke her sleeping daughter-in-law and left the house in haste, like a spinning top.

She took the tram from Yônzi-dong where she lived to Nêng-dong, and it took her two hours to find the street, for she had never been there before. It was still very early, and very few of the houses had their gates open, and the only people in the street were workers going to factories or people going early to the wine-shops. She went into a shop in the main street to make inquiries and finally found the house by following the directions she got there, but it had no door-plate giving the number or the occupier’s name. Judging by the numbers of the houses on each side it was indeed the house she was looking for, and she imagined that she heard her husband’s voice within. Yet she dared not knock at the gate. If it were Gêsông-zib’s house all would be well; but if it were not, then some woman she did not know would answer, and she might well pretend that she did not know an old man like her husband. In that case she would not be able to go in and look in the inner room. She would have liked to rush quickly into the house and seize her husband by the neck as he lay in bed, and enjoy the spectacle of him apologizing humbly to her. But she was afraid that if she let her quick temper run away with her in this golden opportunity, she might lose the fish that she had hooked, and with it the fishing rod as well. So she went and hid in the gateway of the house next door to wait for her husband to appear. If her husband did not show up, she would ask anyone who chanced to come out of the house where she was waiting to tell her about the house where her husband was. Before long she heard the gate behind her creaking and a young woman came out of the house with a straw broom.

“May I ask who is the owner of that house?” the old woman asked with a smile.

“There are two families living there. One of them is called Gim, I hear,” the

woman answered, bending forward from the waist began to sweep.

“Mr. Gim is an old man, isn’t he?”

“That’s right,” the woman replied and stopped her sweeping for a moment. She looked inquiringly at the old woman’s face, for she saw that she was angry and perplexed by something.

“The lady is fairly young, isn’t she?”

“Yes, the mother is very young, and it was their child’s first birthday just the other day.”

The old woman gaped in astonishment at the mention of a child, and the thought of the baby’s birthday celebration oppressed her. She stared at the closed gate of the ‘house, then left the woman to her sweeping and walked swiftly to the gate. She pushed it and it creaked slightly as it swung open easily.

“My old husband might have gone home!” she thought to herself, for the gate was already unbarred. The only reason why she had come here so early in the morning was to catch her husband there and settle the matter on the spot. But most regrettably it had taken her a long time to find the house. She pushed the gate open and went into the inner garden.

“Where have you been and where are you going now?” her husband asked. He was sitting at the door wearing a pair of yellow shoes, as if he had been waiting for a welcome guest. He was over sixty, but he wore a white suit and a panama hat. He was still healthy and vigorous, with a ruddy youthful face, and gave the impression that he had led a riotous life in his youth. He had never got into difficulties, he dressed quite smartly, and he was proud and stubborn by nature. Yet he could be careless and easy-going enough.

“You devil!” cried his wife, standing in the middle of the garden, utterly perplexed. The mounting indignation in her heart stifled her and she could say no more.

“Er, mm, I met Mr. Czoë from Czôrôn yesterday and he asked me to come out and see the new house he’s just moved to, and I stayed a while. I did try to come home sooner, but he plied me with wine, and it was raining so hard, and I got rather drunk ...” he stammered apologetically. He would not let his wife get up on the step, but he stepped down himself and told her to go back home with him.

“Oh I understand perfectly. You mean you went visiting to call on Mr. Czoë in the inner room.”

“Listen to me, please. I went down there, and then I went back home. Why have you come to look for me here. They told me at home that you had come out here, and so I came after you. And I got here first. Let’s go home at once. I’ve rented this house to a friend of mine.” He took her arm and tried to get her out of the house in a friendly manner, but she refused to go.

“I know all about that. I came here to see that friend of yours ...” she replied and sprang up into the house like a tiger. Without taking off her shoes she ran to the door of the inner room and burst it open. Under the mosquito net that still hung in the room two pillows lay on a wide mattress, and there were a baby’s blankets and others lying scattered beside them, but there was no one in the room.

“You can’t hide where you won’t be seen, and you can’t run away without being chased,” the old woman cried. The sight of the bed and the pillows irritated her still more, and she rushed into the Doom still wearing her shoes. She tore the mosquito net down and she opened the door of a wall closet. There was no one in there either, but her husband’s old suitcase was. She became very excited as if she

had found the proof she was seeking, She picked up the heavy suitcase, and stepping on the mosquito net, one corner of which was broken, opened the west window and looked out for some sign of the girl, but in vain.

"You are quite happy here, and you have spent a lot of money on her," she said. She did not think that her husband could possibly argue about the suitcase, and threw it on the floor. She crossed to the room opposite, but when she turned and looked in the garden, her husband had disappeared. An oldish woman had come out of the detached house and was lighting a fire in a brazier.

"H'm. Now the old rascal has run away too. Did you see him go?" the old woman asked, and jumped down into the garden.

"I just saw them going out," the other woman answered.

The old woman hardly listened to her answer and rushed out of the house. She thought that they could not have got far yet, and ran out panting to the main street, but there was nothing to show whether they had turned to the right or to the left ... The sun had risen now, and the street was very crowded. So she hurried toward the tram stop at the West Gate, and there she saw her husband appear at a corner on the left, wearing a white suit and a panama hat. He held up his hand to hail a taxi. He glanced up and thirty feet away he saw his wife coming toward him panting. His eyes met hers. He had to drop his hand sheepishly and he laughed awkwardly. She had never been so glad to find her husband, and yet so full of hate too as she was at that moment.

The young woman, Gêsông-zib, was carrying a baby on her back.

She had not changed into her street clothes, and' looked rather shabby. When she came face to face with the old woman she looked like a rat cowering before a cat. The old woman had once before scolded her severely the previous winter, and now again her face grew pale, and her lips seemed to be burnt black.

"You slut! You haven't given up yet, I see! You couldn't get yourself a husband, young as you are, and so you had to go and catch an old one like that!" the old woman shouted in a threatening tone, and looked as if she would have seized her by the hair if they had not been in the street. Her old husband gave up his idea of going off in the taxi and sent it away. Then he calmed his wife down and took her back to the house.

"You must be very happy with a young husband at night and an old one in the daytime. The neighbours told me all about you," the old woman said as soon as they came into the house. She seized the young woman by the hair and spun her around. Then she went on, "You want to wear my old husband out so that he will die before long, and then you hope to get a house for yourself. That's your idea, isn't it? Whose child is this? A nice one indeed. It looks just like my husband."

The woman from the detached house found this scene quite unbearable and took the baby from Gêsông-zib's back. She began to carry it to her room, but the old woman was furious and made as if to snatch it from her and dash it on the ground.

"Please calm yourself, madam," said the woman from the detached house, "Don't you feel sorry for this young mother? I'm sure her intentions are not in the least selfish. She stays with the old gentleman only because of the baby I'm sure she's really a very nice person." She spoke with real sympathy for Gêsông-zib, who stood weeping by the kitchen door, pale and motionless as a bee after eating honey. But the old woman challenged the woman from the detached house, for she suspected that she might be on Gêsông-zib's side, and might have hidden her in her own room and helped 'her to escape a little while before, and now was backing her

up. She thought too that this woman might be one of Gêsông-zib's relations, and might be helping her in her scheme to get rid of the old man. So she was very angry with this woman.

The old man did his best to calm them down and got very hot and sweaty in the process. He was afraid that his wife might smash up all the furniture as she had once before, and so he went with her as she wished. So the two of them left the house and called carriers to load the furniture onto a cart and take it to their own house. If her husband could not live apart from Gêsông-zib, the old woman wanted her to live in the same house as herself.

"You'll never do it," thought the old man scornfully. He well knew his wife's temper and did not believe that the two woman could live in the same house for even one day. He could not refuse her request, however, for if he had, she would surely have beaten and abused the young woman, and he would only have made things worse for her. So he sat still and pretended to smile.

"You chase after women all the time until you are sixty, and then you collect the rents from your houses only to pour them into her mouth, and kill yourself in the process. You old fool! Why do you squander your energy like this? You will die before long if you are not more careful," the old woman advised her husband, who was smoking on the veranda. She seemed to have cooled off a little, now that all the furniture had been loaded on the cart.

"You have been spying on me jealously all the time. You are nothing but a toothless and hollow-cheeked old hag, aren't you? I wonder how long it will be before you lose your temper again," sighed the old man.

"What are my teeth to you? Have you ever lived for my teeth?" the old woman snapped back. She had lost many teeth this year and had had them replaced with artificial ones. She was really rather proud of them, for they made her look young again.

"We are both getting old, so please don't speak so roughly to me. Won't you let us be more friendly?"

"That's just what I would wish."

She spoke these words more gently and sounded rather sad. When the old couple heard the words 'sixty' or 'old enough' they felt rather forlorn. They looked at Gêsông-zib standing by the kitchen door. Now they both felt pity for the young woman who stood there sad and distraught, and they also envied her the chubby cheeks of youth.

They moved the furniture to their house in Yônzi-dong, and then the old woman made her husband move back to the inner room and give up his room to Gêsông-zib. Now he would have to live in the same room as his wife and face to face with her, false teeth and impudent face and all, under a strict unceasing watch. "It's worse than being in prison!" he thought, but he had to endure his inner melancholy as patiently as he could, and he tried to do his best to please his wife. Gêsông-zib worked well in the house and said not a word, and the old woman came to complain less and less. Moreover her son and his wife sympathised with her. Then she suggested to her husband that they should offer the house in Nêng-dong to their daughter.

"Do what you like," said the old man. He had bought the house where their daughter was then living, and he felt rather reluctant to give up the better house, larger, and well furnished for his dear concubine, but he did not want to oppose his wife's wishes.

Ten days after they had brought Gêsông-zib to this house; his daughter moved from her house by the race-course outside the East Gate into the house in Nêng-dong outside the West Gate. After lunch the old man went out to take a walk in the market. While he was out his wife paid a quick visit to the house in Nêng-dong to see their daughter move in, and told her daughter-in-law to watch Gêsông-zib.

The old man walked round the market and bought food as he had done in the past—dried stonefish, or dried perch, or meat. When he got home his wife was not there. The house suddenly seemed bigger, and a load was lifted from his mind. He plucked up courage to look in the room opposite his. Gêsông-zib was sitting beside her sleeping baby. "What shall I do? I want to go back to Gêsông," she said with an appealing smile. This was the first time that they had spoken to each other since they had come to this house, and the old man was quite overcome by the beauty of her smile, as if this were the first time he had seen her for many years.

"Just wait a minute. You will have somewhere to go. Change your clothes and wait," the old man said and he hurried out of the house. Before long he came back, and at once said to his daughter-in-law in the detached house, "Daughter! I'm sending the young mother in the room opposite mine to Gêsông by the three o'clock train. Your old mother might make trouble when she comes back, so I'm sending her away while she's out."

The old woman had asked her daughter-in-law to keep an eye on Gêsông-zib, and so she was very afraid that her mother-in-law would be very angry when she came back, but she could not interfere with her father-in-law's action in sending his concubine away. She tied up bundles of blankets and clothes and put them in the taxi waiting outside, and sent the three of them off. The old man had been very worked up and trembling in fear that his wife might come back while they were getting ready to leave; and when the taxi started, he was so relieved that he burst out laughing quite spontaneously. He had been planning it for ten days, and happily it went off without the slightest hitch.

One drizzling day, when the season had come for wearing a single cotton jacket and the autumn rain was falling that comes at the end of the later wet season, the old woman went and visited the house by the race-course where her daughter had once lived. She pushed the gate gently. It creaked slightly, and she peeped through the crack of the gate into the garden. She saw some wet firewood lying in the open on the desolate ground. The melancholy raindrops were falling steadily on them, and there was no sound of any human voice. It 'seemed to her to be very dreary, and she went round the house to the back to see whether the wooden gate near the kitchen was locked or not. She found the same lock on it as when her daughter had moved out of the house. Her daughter had four or five children, noisy as tinkling bells, and when she had lived there they had run boisterously in and out of the house the whole day long. The old woman felt more melancholy at the sight of her daughter's former house standing deserted, and the raindrops falling on her umbrella sounded very sad in the quiet valley. She thought that she had gone to the trouble of investigating all in vain.

After he left the house when he sent Gêsông-zib away, her old husband did not reappear for three or four days. However much she might scold her innocent daughter-in-law at home, it would be much ado to little avail, and her runaway husband would be no more likely to come back. So the previous day and the day before that she had gone round all the five houses to look for him. It was a palpable lie that he had sent Gêsông-zib away, but she had not expected that he would run

away with the girl. She did not think it likely that he would go with her to Gêsông, to the mean home where her parents lived; and even if they stayed in a hotel in the city, her husband was not the man to pay expensive hotel charges. She thought it likely, therefore, that they might have gone to one of the houses he used to let, and so she came to this house. She found the other four houses occupied as she expected.

In the end she came to this house with rather high hopes, though she realised that she might not find them immediately in the empty house. So she went there despite the drizzling rain.

“Has she gone? Has she gone?” asked Gêsông-zib through the slightly opened door of the loft, where she was hiding in fear and trembling, suckling her baby. When the gate creaked she had climbed up into the loft, and the old man had thought of following her, but he had changed his mind and instead had to see what was happening outside, climbing up silently to look out of the high window of the inner room near the back gate. He had seen his wife’s disappointed face through the glass. Her muddy heels disappeared beneath her waist and her waist in turn was hidden by her black umbrella as she went further away, and finally the umbrella too became invisible, and there was only the patter of the drizzling rain falling gently in the valley. The old man was rather anxious at first when he saw his wife disappear, but now he felt easier in his mind though his heart was filled with loneliness and he stood looking vacantly at the wet roof and did not turn round for a long time.

His own idea was that his wife might come after him if she had no food to eat, or if she had been younger, but he had settled more than enough property on her to last her the rest of her life, and they were both getting quite old, and yet she followed him up so seriously. He found her somewhat contemptible, but he knew that she did not do it from mere selfishness. It might be his wife rather than Gêsông-zip who would really take care of him and be sympathetic to him, and he felt pity for his wife who went out on a rainy day to find him.

“. . . but if I had been lying helpless in bed what would she have done? if she had been young enough to look at other men, would she still have chased me so persistently?”

He recalled that he was her third husband. So even though he had the lovely young Gêsông-zib, who was still under thirty, beside him, when he thought over his frequent feeling of loneliness and melancholy, he was not without sympathy for his wife.

“Ah, let’s go out for a meal in spite of the rain. It’s all right now. She may not come again, perhaps.”

The old man got down from the high window and took the baby from his young mistress while she came down from the loft. He held the baby as if it were his grandchild, clicking his tongue clumsily. The three of them went out to have a late breakfast that was really lunch too. They opened the barred front gate and locked it again from outside when they left the house.

They could not afford to go and live in a hotel, so they had got the key of the house from the agent. The old man got his daughter to arrange with the agent to sell the house. They had moved in for the time being with their things to hide, and he had locked the back gate from inside. They had already been there for two days and three nights like beggars living in an empty house, the pitiful ‘love nest’ of an old man. The old man took off his rain-coat and covered the baby on the mother’s back with it, letting himself get wet from the rain. Then he felt in his pocket. He examined the documents relating to the five houses in his pocket where he had put them. He

was worried that the papers might have got wet in the rain.

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