

THIRTY YEARS

by Zang Dôg-Zo

The gale which had sprung up in the morning gradually died away soon after midday, and when Mr. Gim Zong-Hun stepped outside his door to take a walk after supper, the wind was quiet as if it had been washed away.

The beautiful plants that grew in his garden of more than 300 pyong in area were surrounded with fallen leaves, and in the evening glow of the setting sun all was as bright as a landscape painting.

With his big Western-style house and the big copper coloured gate towering over the granite paving of the back garden, the view reminded him of his house in a New York suburb where he had lived until five months before.

"It looks just like" murmured Zong-Hun, opening his narrow eyes and lighting a cigarette with a lighter.

For him America was his second homeland. He had lived there for thirty-two years. In that country where the fruits of culture shone bright and clear-in that land of luxury where business has the greatest influence-there he had lived for most of his youth and middle age, and he always displayed a certain childish innocence, for it was there that his character had been trained. He was a cheerful man.

During his stay abroad he had been respected as one of the leaders of Korean nationalism, but when after the Liberation he was invited back to his homeland people found him different and were surprised at his attitude which was not at all what they had expected.

He wore a red tie and a blue suit of the latest fashion that was more suitable for a young man of twenty or so. The people of Korea felt that a national leader should behave like a Korean gentleman and live a simple life, and they were very disappointed in him.

"He's no Korean, that fellow," they would say. "He looks just like a foreigner." There were some who bestowed an uncomplimentary nickname on him and spread ridiculous stories about him.

Zong-Hun did not mind in the slightest. With the money he had earned in America, he built himself a great house on the high ground outside the Sode-mun, or West Gate, and went on living the life of a bachelor.

He was kind to everyone and was ready to welcome anyone as his guest. Though he- was given a high post in the government, his private life was just the same. He had no bodyguard and showed no appreciation of the formality that went with his post. He liked to walk to and from his office. When he had to go by car, he would drive himself. If anyone criticised him for behaving in a childish manner, he would claim that he was observing the manners and customs of his Motherland. He was really ecstatically happy to be back in this country where people had hair and skin of the same colour as his own.

Zong-Hun did indeed feel rather differently about things from other people and lived in rather different conditions from them, but he was fortunate in his position, and money, and he enjoyed a certain popularity.

That autumn evening as he gazed at the lonesome fallen leaves in his garden

he perceived a certain resemblance to his house in America. He had no complaint against his motherland.

"I must make a success of life here in Korea as I did in America, where I started with nothing," he mused, and threw away his cigarette. He tugged at the brim of his hat with his hands. "Yes, I must win!"

His Buick car was driven on to the marble paving and stopped before him, gleaming in the dim twilight. The chauffeur got out and handed over the wheel to his master and raised one hand in salute.

With Gim Zong-Hun at the wheel, the car passed out through the copper coloured gate and glided along the street.

The car drove up the wide road towards a hill, running as slowly as possible, just like a duck.

It was not quite dark yet, and so the faces of the white-clad passers-by would suddenly show up in the dim glow of the headlamps and stagger past and vanish. Some of them deliberately stood in front of the car and glared fiercely at it. It was neither from sheer selfishness nor unthinking resentment against the car.

There was indeed a certain element of suspicion in those glaring eyes, the sort of thing that one sees in the eyes of children who have not been able to develop their personalities under the harsh rule of a stepmother, but Zong-Hun ignored it. As he drove along sitting at the wheel, he pondered how by the power of pure and noble love alone he might best uplift the souls and living conditions of his beloved nation to his own higher level.

The unfortunate Korean people!

The unfortunate people of this country!

The car had almost reached the end of the road. Through the windscreen he could see big buildings in front of him, that gradually grew dark.

"This is the city," he said and turned the steering wheel to change direction. Just at that moment the shadow of a man carrying a wicker suitcase appeared in front of him. The man looked startled and tried to get out of the way. But the street was too narrow and his burden too heavy. He waved his outstretched hand wildly, something like a swimmer. He was kicked out and fell down in a daze.

"Oh!" Zong-Hun cried, and abruptly applied the brakes. He felt as if strong vinegar had been poured over him, and a heavy lump was rolling down from his neck to his stomach.

The accident had happened in a flash. Skilled driver as he was, Zong-Hun stopped his car almost at the very moment that the man and his suitcase fell to the ground. At once a crowd gathered.

Zong-Hun got out his car. The man lay unconscious and the blood that flowed from his head and shoulders stained the miserable rags he wore. It was essential that he should receive medical attention before the bleeding became serious. With the help of some of the bystanders, Zong-Hun carried the injured man to his car. Though his clothes and the high quality cushions were stained with blood, his democratic spirit did not care. At last the car reached the entrance of a leading hospital.

Zong-Hun's confusion communicated itself to the doctors and nurses, and they became confused too, disorganising the normal routine of the hospital. When the victim regained consciousness and his bruises had been washed, it was seen that he had not been seriously injured. Thereupon a certain amount of sympathy for Zong-Hun was expressed, and he felt relieved and refreshed.

When he began to look more cheerful, the nurse who was changing the injured man's clothes said to him in a tone of flattery, "He was rather lucky to be knocked down by your car, sir. If it had been one of those dirty trucks now. . . . There's an element of luck about the accident, too!"

Zorig-Hun smiled at her words, as if he rather agreed with what she had said. But the very next moment he stared dumbfounded at the man, and the smile froze on his face, for the other had abruptly turned away from him. Zong-Hun felt that they must have met before. As the stranger's face and head were completely swathed in white bandages, he was almost unrecognisable, but he was clearly a man whom Zong-Hun must know, perhaps even an intimate friend. So he bowed his head.

The patient in the bed was now glaring fiercely at him again. The nurse perceived the tense atmosphere between the two men and felt out of place. So she picked up the injured man's blood-stained clothes and left the room. Zong-Hun was still searching in his memory for some clue to the man's identity when the nurse came in again with a pencil and paper. He still could not think who it was, and he sat on a chair with his eyes closed. He heard the nurse asking, "Have you any relations in the city?" and the reply "Yes, my wife and children."

At the sound of his voice Zong-Hun roused himself.

"Please call my wife here. She is in the refugee camp at Gongdôg-dong."

"I take it you are from the North. Your age, please." "Fifty-three."

He was the same age as Zong-Hun, "Your name, please."

"Bag Gi-Czan."

When he heard this name Zong-Hun was astounded and he hardly believed his ears. Memories revived of thirty years before and passed through his mind like lantern slides. Bag Gi-Czan was his friend, his rival in love, and the man who had supported him.

Over thirty years before Gim Zong-Hun and Bag Gi-Czan had been intimate friends. They had been born in the same village and were the only two from there who had studied in Seoul.

Gi-Czan had loved Pil-Lye. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they had become engaged by an arrangement between their parents. Zong-Hun used to visit Gi-Czan at home and knew the relationship between Pil-Lye and Gi-Czan. He was also dependent on Gi-Czan for financial support to enable him to continue his studies. And he too was in love with Pil-Lye. The outcome was a foregone conclusion from the start. Zong-Hun was unfortunate in love, but he could not give up without a struggle.

When they were both twenty-two years old, Zorig-Hun went to spend the summer vacation at the home of Gi-Czan, who was considered the richest man in the village. It was a small village, and Pil-Lye lived nearby, and so she often came to call on her fiance, Gi-Czan. She would put fruit or rice-cakes in the room where the two young men spent most of their time, and go home again without saying anything. Zong-Hun saw the luxuriant yet slender eyebrows of the girl who appeared so often and vanished after a few moments. Those eyebrows attracted Zong-Hun and made deeper feelings stir within him. Sometimes he was overcome with jealousy and would say pettishly, "You are a genius, and Pil-Lye is exquisitely beautiful. Yours will be called the marriage of genius and beauty."

"You mean one of these ideal modern families, don't you?" responded Gi-Czan.

"A modern family?" asked Zong-Hun,

Gi-Czan knew of Zong-Hun's feelings and replied coldly, which roused him still more to jealousy.

"As you know, I was brought up in a traditional feudal family. And the tradition of our family was to train a woman by beating her when she was disobedient."

So spoke the man who was assuredly going to win the lady.

"I've no particular method. A new modern home certainly sounds very nice and all that, but women have to be whipped to keep them in order," continued Gi-Czan.

Without thinking Zong-Hun sprang up and slapped his friend hard.

When he had slapped him, he stood there undecided as his impulsiveness ebbed away.

For a moment Gi-Czan did not know what to do, seeing the mood his friend was in. "Gi-Czan, please do not whip Miss Pil-Lye! You mustn't use force to a lady!"

Zong-Hun still stood looking down at the floor, with tears welling from his eyes.

"Stupid man," murmured Gi-Czan, though he did not really mean it.

Afterwards Zong-Hun could not get this scene out of his mind. The conceited Zong-Hun felt nothing but scorn for this despicable Gi-Czan, whose nature was so cruel; and when he reflected that Pil-Lye was doomed to be this violent man's wife, his jealousy grew stronger. In the sultry summer night he could not sleep but tossed ceaselessly on his bed.

"It is traditional in our family to train a woman by beating her when she is disobedient."

When Zong-Hun remembered what Gi-Czan had said, he sprang from his bed and clenched his fist. He was in agonies from his intrusive and improper love and did his best to forget it. He would recall various displeasing aspects of Pil-Lye's character and tried to hate her for them or tried to laugh at her for country ways unworthy of a girl from the city. But in vain; love was blind.

Pil-Lye The sweetly perfumed Pil-Lye, whom he could never touch! The clever and patient Pil-Lye, who scattered sad and soft emotions about her. When he saw her in the distance, he felt as happy as if he were enfolded in silken garments.

Zong-Hun had been born into a family of no breeding and had been brought up by his grandmother, who had allowed him to do as he pleased, so that he was lacking in self-control. In the end he decided that he must leave his friend's house, his friend who had supported him, because he could no longer endure the fragrance of Pil-Lye that came to him through Gi-Czan. He felt himself slighted, and shameful too. But before he left the house, he wanted to meet the real Pil-Lye, without the intermediary of the seigne that was Gi-Czan; Pil-Lye as she really was, the pure girl, not the girl engaged to his friend.

It had been a sultry day until the evening when the sun broke through. For some days now Zong-Hun had been watching for an opportunity, and now he saw Pil-Lye climbing the hill behind the house alone, and he went and followed her.

She sat down under a maiden-hair tree on the hill. She looked up at the sky for a while, and then began to work on her weaving that she had brought in her apron. Zong-Hun pretended that he just happened to be passing and coughed gently to attract her attention. He turned towards her, as he approached, and greeted her.

He wanted to say something to her, but he could not get the words out of his mouth. After hesitating for a few moments, he at last managed to speak. "I'm going away," he said.

"Why?" she asked him. She stood up, and tried to keep him at a distance. Then she stood still, and asked him, "Is anything wrong?"

Zong-Hun had never been so close to her as he was now. He could never for one moment forget her slender eyebrows, and now he saw her white teeth behind her half-opened red lips, and her high and pretty nose. She wore a surprised expression, and he was utterly captivated.

"Are you going far away?" she asked.

"I'm going far, far away," he answered, and his whole body trembled.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she replied. "I understood that you were to remain here the whole summer."

"And so I wanted to see you alone," he went on.

"To see me?" She seemed surprised, but she was not really uneasy. "I'm a wretched lonely man. I'm staying at Gi-Czan's now, not for my friend, but for Pil-Lye."

"You surprise me," she muttered softly.

"Please don't misunderstand me. I have been stricken with an unconquerable passion that is driving me mad."

"Has it anything to do with me?" she asked him in a steady voice. Zong-Hun could say no more. Ever since he had reproofed Gi-Czan for his violence of character, he had felt that he was fighting singlehanded for his beloved. But now he found her trying to ignore his noble emotions, so rare in this confused world. He felt tears welling up within him.

"I'm out of my mind with love," he cried. "When I am gone, will you ever understand how much I have loved you?"

"What do you mean?" she asked coldly, and turned away from him.

"You must leave today," she went on. "You must not even wait till tomorrow. You must leave this place at once. Gi-Czan's house is my house too. You must not come between us." With these words, she went calmly home again.

Zong-Hun had never felt so insulted in his life. He tried to fight down the impulse to throw himself down and bewail his misfortunes. He sat down.

Thus the respect and longings which he had so long felt for her were destroyed in a moment when confronted by reality. Young Zong-Hun had fallen in love, had been crossed in love, and in the end had fallen in the darkness of disappointment. After his failure in love, he could not easily raise his head again, for he was a very vain character and very narrow in his outlook. So in the end he went abroad, profiting from the political and social confusion prevalent at the time.

In his new country, America, there was plenty of scope for an unusual man like Zong-Hun to spread his wings freely. He married an American girl. But after a few years they were divorced, for they were childless. Thereafter he lived alone and seemed to avoid the opposite sex. And his love for Pil-Lye faded in a dream, seeming to be hidden in a thick tent of long ago. And now after more than thirty years he was to hear the name of Bag Gi-Czan from the mouth of this man who had been knocked over by his car.

Zong-Hun suddenly stood up and took his friend by the wrist. He wanted to call his name, but he could not get the words out. They stuck in his throat and he could only grip the other's wrist more tightly.

Perhaps Gi-Czan had read of Zong-Hun in the papers a little while before. When he did not find any impure element in the expressions of his friend but joy at their reunion, his staring eyes gradually softened.

"Zong-Hun!" he exclaimed. "Don't you remember me?" His voice was as

friendly as in the old days.

"You seem to have fallen on hard times," said Zong-Hun. "When did you come south?"

"It was last January."

"That must have been before I came home."

"Probably"

"You should have come to see me."

"Should I have come to you?"

"Lots of people come to me these days."

"When you get used to it poverty isn't as bad as people think."

This was of course a brave show of mock courage.

"I understand that you have children. Is that so?"

"Yes. The eldest is dead, but the three younger ones are still alive."

Her interrogation interrupted by Zeng-Hun, the nurse stood by and watched in bewilderment, but Zong-Hun still seemed to have more that he wanted to ask.

Was Pil-Lye still living with Gi-Czan? Or was she dead? She must have suffered greatly, to judge from Gi-Czan's appearance. Though long ago she had so disappointed him and made the whole world seem dark, yet the focus of his concern now was this very woman. But he could not bring himself to mention Pil-Lye to Gi-Czan while the nurse still stood beside them, and so after a pause he went on, "You said you were living in the refugee camp at Gongdôg-dong, didn't you? I should like to go there to tell your family of your accident and apologise to them."

This was an excuse to meet Pil-Lye, but Gi-Czan shook his head.

"Today is Friday, isn't it? My wife isn't there on Fridays. She's working in a textile factory. and she has to stay late on Fridays."

"Even at night?"

"I'll ring the factory and ask her to come here."

Gi-Czan seemed to have made up his mind that he did not want Zong-Hun to meet his wife. Zong-Hun did not press the point. He did not want to go to an unfamiliar village with his car and his clothes stained with blood.

Zeng-Hun asked the doctor and the nurse to move Gi-Czan to a better room and left the hospital.

It was a starry night. Once more he felt the chill autumn night on his face, and the windows of his car gleamed like the surface of a lake. Pil-Lye, of whom he had vainly tried to get news, filled his memory and loomed far larger than his close friend Gi-Czan, whom he had seen for the first time in thirty years.

He imagined how she must look in profile. He visualised a woman grown old and almost dead from the poverty and unhappiness she had endured. Her hair must have turned white. She must have had a dirtstained wrinkled face, and her sunken eyes filled with tears. A woman whose lips must constantly curse the pain and sorrow that had come upon her, embittered and complaining-this exaggerated impression of Pil-Lye was perhaps due to a feeling of revenge against the beautiful girl who had once so coldly ignored him. At the same time he enjoyed a certain feeling of self-satisfaction at the thought she had fallen on such hard times simply because she had scorned him and gone with Gi-Czan.

He came to the approaches to the West Gate. It was there that Gi-Czan had been hurt. If it had been brightly lit, he could have seen bloodstains on the ground, but in the darkness of the night there was nothing to show that an accident had happened a few short hours before. But as he turned the corner, he seemed to see

before him the shadowy figure of Gi-Czan staggering in front of him, carrying a wicker suitcase on his shoulders. At the same time he could see Pil-Lye's face as she toiled through the night at the factory to earn money for her family, under the whips of strange men, without the protection and support that her husband could not now give her.

Zong-Hun thought over the circumstances of the accident. It seemed to him that his car had struck Gi-Czan not by mere chance but by the will of God. God must have willed that he should be the salvation of this poor couple, that he should give them material support. It was a pleasing idea that he should spend some of the wealth that he had earned by incessant toil in a foreign land for the purpose of restoring the fortunes of his old friend and his one-time love.

He even pictured to himself how happy these two people who had fallen on evil days would be and how they would pour out their thanks when they heard of his intention. They would repent of all the errors of their past and kneel before him to ask his pardon. Perhaps, like the Woman of Samaria who had long ago washed the feet of Jesus Christ, Pil-Lye might dip her hair in perfumed oil and wash her benefactor's feet with it.

"At all events I must meet her and repay evil with goodness," he mused.

Indulging in these reveries, Zong-Hun reached his door without realising it.

Next morning he went early to the hospital. As he went in he asked the nurse how the patient had been during the night.

"Very satisfactory, I think," she replied. "And his wife is with him now." With a nod she indicated that he might go up.

Zong-Hun's heart beat fast as he went up the stairs. He came to a room where there was a label reading "Room 105, Bag Gi-Czan."

Perhaps there was a scene of tragedy in the room. But he had convinced himself that the miraculous power of money would at once transform tragedy into the bliss of Paradise. He stood rooted to the spot, with his hand on the handle of the door, and seemed to be savouring the idea.

Suddenly he heard a voice behind him. He turned round trembling as if his secret had been guessed by someone else. A woman with a pan in her hand was, standing there looking straight at him. Her sallow face was pretty, framed against the background of blue sky beyond the wide open window.

It was Pil-Lye.

Zong-Hun stared at her face almost ecstatically. Her noble serenity, which he had last seen under the maiden-hair tree on the hill more than thirty years before, was quite unchanged. How could a middle-aged woman be so beautiful! Her untidy dry hair and the few wrinkles under her eyes only enhanced the brightness of her face. She seemed more serene because of the worn and patched dress she was wearing. The battered pan she was holding created an atmosphere of sweet domesticity.

At last Zong-Hun managed to force out an inarticulate exclamation.

The woman came nearer and greeted him with bowed head.

"How do you do?" she said. "It's years since I saw you last." "Yes, indeed. How do you do? I'm very sorry that last night I ... "

Zong-Hun had no chance to ask how Gi-Czan was. He went on hurriedly: "I'm very sorry. I will take the responsibility for everything I've done."

"Please don't apologise. It was all due to our carelessness, I'm sure."

"I should say it was all my fault for not realising that you had come down to

the South. But now I mean to do all I can to help you.”

“That is very kind of you.”

Zong-Hun expected her to atone for her coldness in the past. Her head swayed and her eyes moved in a way that suggested to him that she was on the verge of tears—they did not seem to be normal movements. Or perhaps she was feeling faint from emotion and a deep sense of gratitude.

“I don’t quite know what I should do,” he went on. “How much would you need to live on?” He looked her straight in the eyes, and continued, “I’m making this offer more from goodwill towards you than towards Gi-Czan. Will you think it over and don’t hesitate to tell me what you need.”

At his words she opened her eyes wide in astonishment. “Thank you so much for your kind thought,” she said. “I must, however, refuse your offer at once.”

Zong-Hun could not understand why she said this.

“Others may find poverty hard,” she went on, “but we can manage all right in our own way. Even if we did accept your money, we wouldn’t know how to use it to the best advantage. Don’t trouble yourself about us.”

Zong-Hun saw that her outlook on life and material welfare was quite different from his. When he had first arrived in America, he had asked anybody who would to help him. When he had accumulated some capital, he laid the foundation of his later success and built it with his own wit and ability.

“At all events we will support ourselves. We can most certainly not accept your help.”

Zong-Hun felt rather overawed and small. What determination the woman showed! Perhaps it was not a spontaneous growth. She might well have suffered all kinds of bitter hardships that could only have been overcome by such firm determination. And now she was keeping the secret to herself.

“Won’t you go into the room?” she said. “Our children have come. Their father and I think that they are our only treasures.”

The love of a mother shone in her face.

Zong-Hun thought that he saw in her smile the secret of the patience and training that enabled a frail woman to stand up against the hard facts of life. There was not the slightest trace of meanness or cynicism in her refusal of his help, for she had implicit faith in her children’s future.

Jim Zong-Hun’s head reeled. There was no horde of hungry devils around Bag Gi-Czan, there was a garden full of beautiful flowers in full bloom. But he himself was nothing but a whirlwind that had attempted to disturb the peace of the garden.

Pil-Lye opened the door for him and said, “Do go in.” But he did not hear her. He stood there feeling utterly lonely. A vast inexplicable void filled his mind. He seemed to be floating high in the sky in the middle of a sphere of emptiness surrounded by all the pleasures and happiness of this world.