

## THE SOIL

by Yi Gwang-Su

I. 1.

II.

Ho Sung had come home after teaching at the night school. He lay back against his wicker suitcase, crossing his arms behind his neck and pillowing his head on them. As he lay there quietly, he listened to the hum of the mosquitoes as they flew hither and thither in their efforts to escape from the smoke of the fumigator. It was already past the fifteenth in the seventh month of the lunar calendar, and the wind at night was rather cool.

Ho Sung had not heard the hum of the mosquitoes for two years, for he had not left Seoul in all that time. Now he was back in his native village, and he found the sound delightful.

"How ever did Yu Sun grow so big and pretty?" Hô Sung murmured to himself. He recalled to his mind the countenance of Yu Sun. She was a strong girl and rather fat. Her complexion was rather dark as a result of exposure to the sunlight, rich in ultra-violet rays in that district, but her eyes, nose and mouth were all sharply defined, and the general impression was one of softness. Seen in the moonlight, her face was as beautiful in colour as the very moon itself. If she had a defect it was that her hands were rough. She spent her time weeding in the fields or working in the kitchen, and so her hands did not have the delicacy of city womens' that look as if they have been painted with powder.

She wore a rough cotton skirt and jacket and a pair of black rubber sandals without stockings. The tops of her feet were burnt black by the sun. Her hands, her wrists, her neck and as much of her legs as appeared beneath her skirt were all sunburnt. It seemed that the summer sun had been covetous of her beautiful and healthy flesh and had tried to kiss it wherever it was accessible.

Hô Sung compared Yu Sun in his mind to Zông-Sôn. Zông-Sôn was the daughter of an ex-Minister, Yun, in whose house Hô Sung was employed as tutor. Zông-Sôn was a thin and delicate girl. Her skin was white and her tiny soft hands looked as if they would be crushed if they were grasped. She was one of the most beautiful girls at the Sugmyong Girls' High School.

Of course Zông-Sôn seemed to Hô Sung to be a beauty living in the moon. Never in his wildest dreams did he imagine that he could dare to look upon one so beautiful as Zông-Sôn, the only daughter of a wealthy leading family, for he was a poor young countryman without parents or property, who taught one of the children and lodged in a room in the gatehouse.

He could marry a girl like Yu Sun if he so desired. In his present condition, her parents might hesitate to let their daughter marry him, but when he had finished there, they might accept him as her bride-groom.

With these thoughts in his mind Sung sighed, feeling sorry for himself.

In the past his family had been well off and of high standing in the village. Gyôm, his father, had long ago graduated from the Dêsông School in Pyông-Yang and had taken part in nearly all the political incidents, such as the North Gando affair,

the New Nation Association affair, and the Manse, or Shout of Independence, incident. So after the Japanese Military Police came and established their Administrative Headquarters there, he was repeatedly arrested and spent in all some eight years in gaol. In fact he led the life of a prisoner for ten years if one includes the time he spent detained at the police station awaiting trial.

So his family had to manage without him when he was in prison, and their wealth was almost entirely used up. They became very hard up, quite apart from the expense of maintaining Hô Sung at school. So Gyôm mortgaged the fields that remained to him to the Money Corporation and turned to business, in which he was totally inexperienced. But he lost all the fields he had mortgaged, and in his despair he took to drink. Then he caught typhoid fever somewhere, and died, and with him died his wife and Sung's younger sister. Of all the family Sung alone was unaffected.

Now Sung had no home in the village and was staying for the present at his uncle's house.

Yu Sun's house was on the other side of a low hill. Her parents were real farmers. Her father Zin-Hûi was still young, but her old the title of Czo-Si. For hundreds of years the Ho family had lived in one village and the Yu family in the other village across the hill. From time to time a Ho or a Yu would bring honour to his family by passing in the Civil Examinations, and these men lived in the neighbourhood in houses with tiled roofs. But Yu Czo-Si gave it to be understood that to his mind the study of the Classics and the possession of noble rank had ceased to count at all since the Reformation.

From that time people began steadily to leave these villages, and men no longer wore their traditional hats, the gwan, and in their place they wore towels; they threw away their writing brushes and went off to the fields with weeding hoes. Some still yearned for the glory that was gone and sat at home wearing gwan. Some, like Sung's father, "accepted the Reformation". They cut their hair and wore European style suits, but later they found themselves in gaol. So one might say that Yu Sun's family represented those who were clever and cautious, while Sung's family was representative of the radical outlook, men who seemed wise in the ways of the world and willing to attend the new schools.

- I. 2.
- II.

The week at night school drew to a close with no unforeseen happenings, and on the last night Hô Sung, who was a more conscientious teacher than most, remained behind to give advice to the students. He even went so far as to make a speech, for it was expected that he would leave for Seoul next morning.

The night school was divided into two sections, one for men, and the other for women. In the women's section were Sung's aunt, grandmother, and sisters. They listened with interest when he advised them on problems of health, explained that the earth is round and that it is the earth that goes round the sun and not the sun round the earth. He explained aeroplanes, and the electric light, and the causes of rain and snow, and many other such things.

"What, can all this be true?" the sceptics among them asked, but none raised any open objection.

But the men's section, unlike the women, queried his assertions, or frankly disbelieved them.

"Well, why does life on the earth steadily get more difficult? Answer me that."  
They say that there are university graduates out of work, don't they?"

There were those who were well aware of what was going on in the world.

"Now that you have completed your education, you should marry and set up your home. What use is study alone?"

Some of the older members of the Hô family boldly gave advice to Sung, their teacher, after they had heard what he had to say.

The majority of the students were from the Hô family, but there were a few others. So it happened that Yu Sun was one of the students in the women's section.

Yu Sun had completed her primary schooling, but she went to the night school none the less. She was one of the most attentive students.

Now that Hô Sung had made up his mind to leave on the following morning, he naturally felt rather lonesome. As he talked he let his eyes rest on Sun as much as he could. Many times their eyes met. Sung was unwilling to end his lecture.

When the men's and women's classes were over, scores of men and women gathered under a zelkova tree for Sung's farewell party. They brought melons and wine, and they brought boiled corn. There was a lively buzz of conversation.

"Now that you are going, when do you expect to come back?"

"Next year, perhaps."

"When do you graduate?"

"Next year."

"You're studying law, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Do you think you might be appointed head of the police station?" He made no reply.

"Perhaps you will be a clerk in the county government office. You don't get promoted to county magistrate as quickly as all that, you know."

"You can get very well paid in the lower grades, it seems, but even for that you must pass your examination, mustn't you?"

"Yes."

"He has a good brain. He'll be a lawyer."

"The best way to make money is to be a doctor."

"A gold mine is the only way to get rich."

"There's not that much money in Korea. It's all dried up!"

"We who plough the land never see a ten-won note these days, do we?"

"Have another sweet melon, won't you?"

"Oh it's getting very late."

So the talk went on. When he heard this sort of thing Sung blushed red or sighed deeply. But he was very fond of these men who seemed so ignorant. They were very dear to him. Their talk seemed endlessly full of goodwill towards him. He was very pleased to find true humanity among them, much more than among the people in the cities, cultured, clever and smart though they were.

That night Sung had spoken of the Co-operation movement, and his opinion had met with great appreciation. Unfortunately he had no time to organise one and was obliged to leave the village.

Next morning he set out for the station to get the early train, carrying his bag and his blanket from his uncle's, with the song of the insects in the grass by the roadside filling his ears. When he came to the junction of the road from the village

across the hill, a surprise awaited him.

Yu Sun was standing there. "It's me," she said, and his astonishment increased. When he had recovered from the shock of seeing her there so unexpectedly he took her by the hand.

"When are you coming back?"

"I'll come next summer."

Sung stroked her hair as she stood with her head resting on his breast.

When they parted she gave him four sticks of boiled corn wrapped in cloth.

As the train that was carrying Sun away panted its way round the corner of the hill through the bluish haze of dawn, Sun waved her hand, and her eyes filled with tears.

I. 3.

Sung stood on the steps of the train and looked back, trying to see Sun as the train rounded the hill. But she was standing in the shadow of the hill half a mile away, and the colours of the dawn concealed her from his eyes. He waved in the general direction of the place where he imagined that she must be standing, and murmured to himself, "Sun, I'll come next summer."

The train crossed the Sanyôul bridge. Sanyôul—how dear that name was to him! He repeated it to himself, and looked down at the stream flowing under the bridge. The black water still enfolded the darkness of the summer night. He followed it upstream with his eyes to where the whitish mist of autumn still lingered in the valley. The white mist of autumn that lay like a dream over the moist earth and the stream that sounded faintly here and there! Of all the beauties of nature, it was one of those that affected him most deeply.

To the left and right of the Sanyôul were the ricefields, irrigated by its waters. They were so fertile that one mazi of land produced as much as four som of unhulled rice. They might have been a side grassy field, or a forest where the sky could not be seen. The clear water of the Sanyôul must have flowed through virgin forests where deer and foxes abounded. Here was the 'Hill Path of the White Sky.' Sung had heard his father explaining that the phrase meant that they would only see the white sky when they had climbed up the hill path.

Sung's ancestors and Sun's must have cultivated this land together.

They had cut down all the trees and dug out their roots, built dams to lead the water of the Sanyôul there, and ploughed and cultivated with their blood and sweat. The ancestors of Sung and Sun had lived there for generations and eaten rice won from the soil. All the flesh and blood and bones of Sung and Sun were nothing but flowers which were sown, grew up, and bloomed in this soil where their ancestors had mingled their blood and sweat.

But now the families of Sung and Sun no longer owned the rice fields. They had all been turned over to companies, banks or syndicates, or farms. So the people who lived in the village of Sanyôul where Sung was born had become like grass that has been cut off from its roots. The clucking of hens, the barking of dogs, the lowing of cattle, and the neighing of horses, these peaceful sounds had in the past filled the misty air of the valley, but this year one heard them far less than formerly. Not only was the livestock much reduced in number, but the noises they made no longer added to the charm of the peaceful countryside; they seemed to reproach the hearer, weary and harsh in tone.

As Sung rode along in the train and gazed at the mountains, fields, and villages gliding by, he saw the ripe rice and the millet and the deccan bowing their yellow heads, and the broom corn that stood like valiant warriors, their shaggy locks flying in the breeze as they joined battle. He saw women fetching water for the morning, carrying it in jars on their heads. The wet jars gleamed like gold in the morning sunlight. There was one woman with a jar on her head who wiped away the droops of water from the jar with one hand while she held the other hand over her breasts which showed through the short jacket she was wearing. Naked children ran out when they heard the sound of the train and shouted 'Hurrah'. After the long months of rain, the thatched houses looked weary, rather as if they were farmers who had finished their long months of summer toil. The blackened straw of the thatch seemed to suggest that those who lived in them were rotten at heart. Inside the houses they sat, staring vacantly, ground down by poverty, infested with fleas and bugs, oppressed by debts, and worn out by sickness.

The train stopped at a station. The station master, the guard, the porters, the red band round a policeman's cap, a man in a panama hat, who looked like a myônzang, the head of a local administrative district, a girl student with a basket apparently going to Seoul, a wrinkled old couple, no doubt her parents.

A whistle blew, and the engine whistled.

As he rode along past a large town and the small stations Sung began to feel hungry. He took out the corn that Sun had given him. He ate two sticks, but feeling rather diffident, he wrapped the rest up again.

When he got out at Seoul station, he felt as if he had awakened from a dream. The swarms of fussy taxis, buses like frenzied women, toylike rickshaws, the crowds of cold people who seemed to spread an iciness around them!