

REPENTANCE

by Bag Yông-Zun

I

She would not go back to his house under any circumstances, and he could make no further effort; but then the thought of the shame he would feel before the people of his church and his mother made him try once again to persuade her.

“The thought of me may be hard, but you can bear it, can’t you? I’m afraid that people will criticise me for trying to save the souls of others, though I can’t control my own home. If you really won’t come back home, I think that I may not be able to continue with my church work.”

But his wife persisted in her attitude, as firm as a rock.

“I do feel very sorry for you, and I am sure that I could make you as happy as one may be just by serving you, but, unfortunately, I have put you in a very unhappy situation. Please do not think that I have too little feeling for you. This is causing me suffering, too.”

“If you think of me so much, you must see that things are settled so that I am not shamed before God and the people. Won’t you do that?”

“I wish that I could, but it’s beyond my power. I prayed for that many times, but whenever my mother-in-law’s face appears before my eyes, all pious feeling vanishes without my noticing!”

“You can’t go back at all, do you mean that?”

“I am sorry! We had better stay apart for a while. We may find some solution.”

“Then I’ll go home alone. Please think it over some more, and I hope that you will return as soon as possible.”

Byông-Su felt that he could not leave it at that, and after preparing to depart, he asked her to drop her head, and he began to pray,

“Holy Father! It is not within the power of this sinner to cleanse his wife’s heart, and he is going back. Man is wandering eternally in the Hell of shame, hate, and jealousy because of Eve’s sin. May Thy Almighty hand lead us to destroy the puny minds which are against Thy Will! May Thou make my wife’s mind generous, and make this sinner a servant of Thine without shame! May Thou protect her in my absence! In Jesus’ name, Amen!”

His wife saw him off at the outskirts of the village and asked him to visit her often, weeping as she did so, but he could not understand her mind at all. If her affection for him had not changed, then she might not persist in this obstinate way, even though she could not get along with his mother. It was already four months since she had left his home for her parents’ house, and he had visited her twice during that time, trying every possible persuasion to make her understand. He thought that she should have gone back with him, though she might return to her parents’ house again. He explained to her that his mother had repented to some extent during those months, and he tried his best to make her understand that he too would be especially careful in the future to see that no more trouble should occur, although he was in a difficult situation between the two of them. But right up the end,

in spite of all his repeated efforts, she would not follow him and so he concluded that her affection for him must have changed in some way.

The twenty mile journey seemed very long to him. Besides his own gloomy feelings, he was afraid of having to answer the questions of the believers of his church, and so his homeward steps were very reluctant.

When Byông-Su came within sight of his village, after passing along the lane through the rice fields and crossing the slope, he sat down on the grass by the roadside and prayed in his mind,

“Lord! May Thou change my wife’s mind, and I pray that Thou keep this sinner’s heart, which is faltering at temptation! Lord! May ‘Thou not abandon this sinner!”

His heart was really faltering. His doubt about his wife, and his feeling of shame before the believers, really was contradicting God’s Will.

Suspicion is the greatest of all sins. His intention to keep away from his people because of his shame at not having been able to maintain peace in his family was an act of abandoning God’s work. To commit the sin of abandoning God is nothing but a way to sin. So he stood up from the grass, and, as he walked towards the zinc-roofed church, he prayed repeatedly that his mind might not falter, whatever might happen to him.

When he entered the small, straw-roofed house attached to the church, his mother asked him,

“Have you come back alone again?”

His mother seemed to have been waiting, expecting that he might be accompanied by his wife.

“She said that she would stay there a little while longer and then come back,” Byông-Su lied. He said this because he was worried about what his mother would think if he told her what his wife had said, though his wife was not actually coming back. His mother really seemed to have changed her mind.

“I guessed she wouldn’t come back. She has no idea of serving in her husband’s house, has she? Don’t bother about her, since she won’t come back!”

“I don’t think so, mother. She has been sick in bed and only got up a few days ago. So she said that she would come back after a little more rest.”

He was not at all happy about his mother’s attitude, the way she hated her daughter-in-law. His mother had never appreciated her daughter-in-law and had finally driven her away, but he hoped that she might feel differently this time. His mother had felt sorry for her son and had asked him to bring his wife back, but now, to his surprise, she seemed rather to be happy than to miss her. If she was the beloved wife of her dear son, then his mother ought to love her too. He could not understand why his mother would not realize that she was only making her son suffer by hating her daughter-in-law.

“Was she sick? She might have been sick because she had had too much rest!”, his mother said, displeased. She was not a wicked woman, but she was hard on her daughter-in-law, and so found fault with her, even when she was said to be sick.

“Why do you speak in that way, mother? You should rather say “ Byông-Su started to answer. He used to get annoyed whenever he heard his mother blaming his wife. He wished to cure this habit of his mother’s of finding fault with whatever her daughter-in-law did, though she was kind towards others.

“How could she be taken ill, since she hasn’t any hard work to do?”, his

mother asked in reply, still displeased.

“Hard work is not the only cause of sickness, is it? You seem to hate her too much! I did not expect that you would find fault even with her sickness.”

“Stop, please! I know that you don’t like me, so I won’t say anything in the future, even if she is sick in bed or falls dead.”

His mother turned her back on him and sat down, pouting like a child. He could say no more because his mother used to take this attitude whenever he tried to change her mind.

“Mother, Jet’s pray! That’s the best thing to do, isn’t it?”, he said, as he always used to say on such occasions.

“Oh Lord! Forgive this sinner! This is an unfilial son, to make his mother suffer in her mind. May thy warm hand soothe her mind, and make her happy! May our poor house be filled with peace and smiles!”

There were tears in Byông-Su’s eyes.

II

A few days later, when he returned home after finishing the Wednesday evening service, his mother and a woman guest were sitting facing each other.

Presuming that the woman was a Christian who attended his services, he was slipping off his robe as usual, when the woman stood up and bowed to him in greeting. When he saw, even in the dim light of the oil lamp, that the woman was not a Christian as he had expected, he went up to her and looked into her face.

“How did you come to be here?”, he asked and drew back a step, leaving his robe half off.

“I have moved to this district.” The woman blushed as she spoke, but it might have passed notice in the dim light.

“Is that so? Where to?” Byông-Su had been able to calm himself, and he sat down on the carpet as he asked this.

“I have moved to the coal mine over there. I haven’t been there a month yet.” The woman guest sat down as well.

Byông-Su did not know how to begin. He must take control of his mind before he spoke. He tried to appear calm, so that his mother should not think that anything was strange, but it seemed most unnatural. He thought that he should begin some conversation, but he could not get any words out. Suddenly he introduced the woman to his mother.

“This lady was the daughter of my landlady when I was at high school.”

“Yes, I heard about that before you came in.” His mother did not guess at anything wrong.

Byông-Su did not wish that his mother should notice that anything was unusual, so he prayed silently with his eyes closed, or rather tried to calm his mind as he pretended to pray.

“Blessed be the Lord! Here we’ are in the same district!”, he said, just as he usually spoke to people attending his church.

“Does your husband work at mine?” He found the strength to ask.

“Yes.”

“What section is he in?”

The coal mine was about half a mile away, but as his church was subsidised by the mine, he knew most of the staff by sight.

“He is just working there.”

“But he must have a job, mustn’t he?”

To this question Yông-Nan, the woman guest, did not reply. She did not want to answer, so he could not ask about the husband again, and he changed the subject.

“Do you attend the church?”

“No!”, was her simple answer.

“Believe in Jesus, and let us live together in God!”

“Certainly.” Again the simple answer.

Her answer was brief, and she seemed not to have anything to say.

She did not speak, except to answer, and soon stood up and returned the usual parting compliments.

After she had gone, Byông-Su thought of her husband first of all he could not say why. He could find whether it was the way she was dressed or the way she looked that made him wonder what her husband was like, or whether it was something quite different which made him so curious. Anyway, he could be fairly sure that the married life of Yông-Nan, who had not been able to attend high school because her parents were so poor, would not be a luxurious one. It was safe to assume that she might be suffering from poverty, but he wished to know whether her husband was making her happy or not.

Byông-Su dropped his head and closed his eyes. He tried to banish earthly thoughts by praying to God. He always thought, whenever his will was weak, that firm belief in God would lead him nearer to God.

It was the same when he suspected that his wife’s love for him might have changed; and now, as he began to have worldly thoughts of reviving his former affection, at the thought that his old love, Yông-Nan, might be unhappy, he could not but turn to God.

“My Lord! May she be blessed! May worldly thoughts not spoil her!”

He tried to forget his fond recollections of her by praying for

III

However he tried to pray, he, could not stop his only love of bygone days reviving in his heart again and again. That Yông-Nan, who had often appeared in his dreams and wept since he had married his present wife, should now be living so near to him so moved his heart that he felt as if in a dream. If he had wooed her and she had rejected him, he would. not have suffered so much. But even her parents had wished her to be married to him, and he had refused because of his plans for his further education, so this is what he must suffer because of his obligation to her.

Though he wished to forget her, he was tempted to call on her whenever he visited the mine, but he could not do this because he did not know her house or her husband’s name either. Even if he had known these things, it seemed out of the question for him to visit her, and he hoped to see her some time unexpectedly. But such a chance did not easily come his way.

After a few months, he heard that his wife had gone to Seoul, and he was informed that she had entered a woman’s college. He was annoyed at this report,

and he ought to have dismissed it as a rumour, but he was gloomy because his wife, by carrying out this plan without any word of consultation with him, had placed herself in a very distant place where he could not reach her.

It was quite impossible for a Christian priest to divorce his wife.

It was not only the divorce, which was a personal matter, but he would have to stop preaching the love of God before the believers. He felt some shame as it was, living apart from his wife. He was only able to preach in the church because the people kept silent about it, out of sympathy with him in his awkward position. But what should he do if his wife should finally leave him? So he kept praying all the time and read his Bible. On every occasion God said to, him, "She is still your wife. She will return to you." Then he had to pray, "Oh Lord! May man not betray man, and desert God!"

It was a painful thing that his wife should betray him, but it would be dreadful for him to lead a hopeless, cursed life through abandoning God because of his wife. But he felt that God would not give him up. God parted the waters of the Red Sea to make a way for the Jewish people when they were seeking the happy land of Canaan, and God fed them with flour when they were starving. He thought that God would not forget Byông-Su, His servant.

So he came to forget Yông-Nan. In this he was fortunate. He felt that it was the will of God, to prevent him from committing sins of the mind, and he thanked Him. If it had not been so, his affection for Yông-Nan might have revived. Just to think of her would be to commit adultery, and how could he love Yông-Nan, deceiving God.

But God's trial did not stop there.

One day, in the early autumn, he received a letter from his wife in Seoul. She wrote that she had not expected that such unhappiness would fall upon them within a few years of their marriage, and so she had become a student in a college in order to forget about it. She also said that the two of them were not responsible for their misfortune and ended ironically,

"I hope that you will marry someone whom mother-in-law will like and finally I pray that you will be confirmed in your belief that God will settle everything!"

She was blaming God and abandoning her husband. This could bring nothing but curses and destruction upon her. But Byông-Su did not wish to curse his wife with his own mouth.

"Holy God! May Thou guide into the right way as soon as possible the poor woman who has betrayed Thee!"

As he was trying to compose himself with this prayer, news came that many mine workers had been killed by an accident.

He rushed to the coal mine without even stopping to fasten the cord of his robe. There had been a fall of the roof in the second pit, and three corpses had already been carried out by a truck. The tearful cries of their families sounded round about, and the cries of the others who had not yet been able to find the bodies of their men filled the evening air and seemed to pierce the sky.

Byông-Su could not help weeping at the sight of the mangled corpses. This was not the first accident he had seen, but he used to feel this uncontrollable emotion rising in his breast whenever he saw the horrible sight of the victims. As he thought of the weakness of human life, he thanked God, who had opened the way to eternal life, and tried to believe even more strongly.

Byông-Su wiped away his tears and asked the crowd to bow their heads for

prayer, so that he might do his duty as a priest.

“Three of Thy beloved sons have died by an unexpected accident. Human life is nothing but a cloud floating in the world, and soon it may cease to exist, but we, human that we are, feel sad at this. We believe that Thy three beloved sons, now returned to Thee, will be protected in Thy bosom. We pray Thee that Thy Goodness save the families which they have left behind them and lead them to Thee until the end of their days!”

After the prayer, he went to the families one by one and tried to console them. When he found that the woman weeping in the front of all was none other than Yông-Nan herself, he felt as if his body had turned to stone. If she had been any other woman, he could have consoled her with the usual words, but he could not use them to her. He thought that the customary words of consolation would sound like an artificial lie to Yông-Nan, so he stood there, not knowing what to do, with tears in his eyes. After a little while he could only say that he was very sorry for her, and, going over to a middle-aged woman and an old woman who were standing beside her, he advised them not to be so sad, and returned home.

The following day, when the joint funeral was held for the five victims—two more bodies had been found later—he had to go to the coal mine. When he saw Yông-Nan so sad, he felt himself, too, that his heart would break. His especial sympathy for Yông-Nan, though he acted much as usual towards the others, might not spring from pity for the dead.

However, the reasons which prompted him did not matter. He could not help weeping for Yông-Nan. After the funeral service, he followed to the cemetery and then went to Yông-Nan’s house with her.

“Yông-Nan, please do not grieve so! What could you do for him if it was his fate?”

But Yông-Nan seemed not to have heard him and was weeping tears.

“If you weep too much, I shall feel very sorry, as if I had caused your tears myself.”

Byông-Su really felt that he might be the cause of her unhappiness, since, he thought ruefully, if he had married her, she would not have met with this misery.

“No, sir!” Yông-Nan answered at last, as if she wished to protest against Byông-Su’s sympathy for her, to avoid placing the responsibility for her fate upon another.

“Then please wipe away your tears and calm yourself. That is more sensible for the dead.”

“I soon may not be able to weep, though I wish to. The living may not die. Please do not worry about me!”

Byông-Su was forced to be silent, realizing that his words had no effect at all on her, since she could see her future clearly, even through her tears.

However, some time later, when he found that Yông-Nan was digging coal, a huge pile, as high as a mountain, and loading it onto a freight train in order to keep herself alive, he could not bear it.

“I would rather keep you, however poorly,” he proposes, but she refused.

“I cannot bear to idle away the time.”

The more his kind offer was refused, the more his thoughts turned to her. He wished to arrange something for her, so that he should not see her in such a miserable condition, but, at the same time, he realized that his goodwill towards her was not pure sympathy. If it had been just sympathy, he would have felt more pity for

the mother of one of the other dead men, who was left alone. His greater sympathy for Yông-Nan than for the other unhappy person, that his love for her had taken root again and was reviving.

But he could not forget the words of the Bible, "To think only is adultery". In other words, God would not forgive him if he should think of it, for he would be going against His will. So he prayed again. He prayed for God's sound guidance. God reminded him of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt commit no adultery", was His answer. If to think only was adultery, then he had already broken the Commandment. Byông-Su was afraid. The sinner who did not obey the Ten Commandments, would be driven to Hell and punished in the flames.

So he determined not to think of Yông-Nan. Whenever the image of her face came before his eyes, he closed them and prayed. When she appeared in his dreams at night, he would get up and sing a verse of a hymn and pray. But her image never left his heart. It filled up the corners of his heart, like a stream following into a gap.

One day, he called at Yông-Nan's house on the way home from his customary visit to the believers. He had determined not to visit the place, but he could not pass it by, and he stepped into the house, though he knew that she would not be at home. But Yông-Nan had unexpectedly stayed at home.

"I thought you would have gone to work. Are you staying at home to-day?", he greeted her pleasantly.

When he entered the house, Yông-Nan's eyes were filled with tears, and she moved away the sack with which she had been busy.

"Were you going to leave?", he asked, since the sack seemed rather unusual, and he presumed that she might be going to her parents' house.

"I have made up my mind to leave here. My staying here would only make trouble for you", she answered; she wiped away her tears, and then dropped her head, and seemed to start crying again,

Byông-Su suddenly felt his face go hot; he gasped for breath and seemed to be suffocating. He wanted to call "Dear Yông-Nan!", but instead of her name he suddenly called out, "Oh God!" He tried to think calmly of the Ten Commandments, but, when he saw Yông-Nan trying to stop her tears, bravely closing her mouth with her hand, he could not help calling out, "Dear Yông-Nan!", instead of, "Oh God!" He did not mean to break the Ten Commandments, but he could not forget the human being, Yông-Nan, whom he could see there in front of him.

"Forgive me! I shall be responsible for all my sins." He took Yông-Nan by her wrist with his trembling hand.

"But you are a priest,", Yông-Nan could not finish. The word 'priest' must have stopped her from going on.

Byông-Su could find no satisfactory answer to what she had said. It was really true that he was a priest. But he still held her arm, and, after bowing his head for a few minutes, he was able to answer firmly, "Please do not leave!"

It seemed easier to turn his back on God than to betray a human being, and he thought that God Himself, though he might frown, would be glad to see a human being do a noble deed for another human being. It seemed a beautiful thing that a human being, after betraying Him, should ask for His Mercy, to calm his distracted mind, but not at all a beautiful thing that a human being should betray another human being because of His majesty.

"I am going to leave. I understand your heart, so I can leave gladly."

Yông-Nan looked up at Byông-Su's face. Her face was faded, wearied with poverty! But he could see her innocent and noble face, without any artificial intention, and he wished to look upon it as much as he could wish.

"You need not leave!", he said, putting his hand to her cheek.

"Do not do that, please! You must not forget the duties of a priest!"

"I have been betrayed by my wife. God has asked me long ago which I would choose, Himself or dear Yông-Nan, and He is waiting for my answer. I could not answer until now. I cannot forget you. If, with His help, I could forget the suffering which would be mine if I lost Yông-Nan, He is deceiving me. I do not wish either to be deceived by God or to give up Yông-Nan. I shall not be a priest from now on and shall no longer be His child. I am not ashamed of this."

So he prayed his last prayer,

"My Lord! I am going to leave Thee. But I shall not deny thy name for honesty!"