

THE DEATH OF YUN SSI, MRS. SIN

by Bag Zong Hwa

After Mr. Sin Sug-Zu had gone off to the Palace, Yun Ssi, his wife, Mrs. Sin, was doing her needlework. While her hands were sewing, her brain was whirling with worry about several things. The suspicious way her husband had sighed in his drunkenness the previous night after coming home late, the way he had looked as he went off to the Palace that morning without speaking to her, as if he were going to his death disappointed—these, and many other things, all aroused her suspicions. It seemed to her that something horrible was about to happen soon. She thought that something must surely happen to her husband, as a result of the terrible affair which had just at this time taken place in the Government.

Death, as she had imagined the night before—It looked as if a sentence of death would be the lot of her husband. She thought too of her own death, and the death of her sons, royal retainers, and all that would ensue. As she was doing her needlework, going over in her mind what might occur, Yambun, her maid-servant, who had been out to the street rushed into the house, gasping, and called out to her mistress.

Yun Ssi was shaken by the sight of Yambun's rushing into the house, gasping. The thought of her husband's death came back to her like a flash of lightning. She stopped her needlework, quickly stood up and saying,

"What's the matter?", She rushed out of the room to meet Yambun who answered, still gasping,

"When I got into the street, it was quite crowded. I asked the people what had happened. They told me that Ministers Song and Bag had tried to kill the newly ascended usurper King but that their plots had been discovered; so the King will himself sentence them, and they will be carried to Sênamtô to-day to be executed."

Yambun could only finish her tale with difficulty. As Yun Ssi heard it, it was a great shock to her mind, which woke her up and set all her nerves on edge.

Yambun was at last able to regain her breath sufficiently to ask Yun Ssi, "By the way, madame, wasn't Minister Song the one who often visited this house and was a close associate of our Minister, Mr. Sin?"

Yun Ssi just nodded in agreement as if she did not care to answer.

Yambun asked her further, out of her anxiety, "But your husband won't be involved in this trouble, will he?"

Yun Ssi answered in her mind, "Why, Yes! He might have joined with them!"

But she could not say it out loud and sat there silent.

She thought to herself, "His behaviour was very suspicious yesterday, and this is what it meant!" She felt as if she had been struck by a thunderbolt from above. She could see no alternative but death for her husband, and nothing but her own death, following him, a royal retainer. Her heart burned. She thought it all over once again. Death and life, life and death—so she murmured, all alone by herself. She supposed that they would soon be arresting her young sons, and putting them to death, and taking her herself to be a court servant. She thought more about this—it would not be pleasant to live on as a court servant after the deaths of her husband

and her young sons. Her maid shouted,

“Nothing is better than death!” Death is to be preferred to a long life of insults!

Her heart was on fire, but she felt chill all over. The wind seemed to be blowing in her room.

She was able to calm herself only after some while. She thought, further, that loyalty and chastity should be the duty of the person with the most noble motives, and the most honest of men would carry it out. She wished to die. Her mind was firmly made up.

She wondered about how to kill herself when the time came, whether she should stick a dagger into her neck or throw herself down a well.

She saw a white towel hanging on the wall, and thought of killing herself by hanging. Yun Ssi sent all her household down to the street. She ordered them to watch who might be taken away under arrest, and, if her husband were among them, to come home at once to tell her.

Now that she had decided on death, Yun Ssi’s mind was at rest.

Her heart, now resigned to death, was quite calm. She was just like the blue, cold moon, which can continue to cast its pale beams quietly on the earth, coolly and immovably, though black clouds attack it in the wild wind and fearsome showers threaten it.

Yun Ssi took the cleanest cotton towel, which had been hanging on the wall, and climbed up to the highest floor of her house. She folded the long towel in two and hung it from the thick beam. So she made everything ready for her death. She stretched up on her toes to hold the cotton towel with her hands, and tried to see what was going on in the street. But she could see nothing but the roofs of the neighbouring houses. She listened to the noises of the street. But she could distinguish no sound clearly. She could only hear the general bustle through the wind.

The servants who had been sent outside came back and reported, “Now the carriages of the Ministers Song and Bag have just passed by.”

When she heard this, Yun Ssi expected her husband’s carriage to follow next. She nodded without a word and sent them down to the street again to continue their watch.

After a while, a servant came in again, and Yun Ssi asked, “Who has come now?”

“The carriages of the Minister Ha and the royal tutor Yi have passed”, was the answer. Yun Ssi sent him out again.

The servant came back and reported, “The carriage of Mr. Song Senior, Minister Song’s father, has just passed.”

Yun Ssi wondered in her mind what could be the matter with her husband. She sent the servant again into the street, expecting that his carriage would surely pass by.

Before long, the servant came in, and reported, “General Yun’s carriage has passed by.”

Yun Ssi felt uneasy, and thought that her husband must have died in the Palace. She ordered the servant to be alert for exact information.

Meanwhile the sun set, and the noisy street gradually fell quiet. In the evening, the servants came back, and reported that all the royal retainers had been carried away and that the crowd in the street had scattered homewards. They also said,

“We thought that we might have made a mistake, and so asked other people about the number of carriages that had passed. They gave us exactly the number which we had seen.”

Yun Ssi’s heart was beating. She thought that her husband must surely have been killed in the Palace. She could see him before her eyes, tortured and dying. Before her eyes was the scene of her husband, Sin Sug-zu, with his hair undone ruffled, and bloodstained, slowly moving his limbs until his heart was finally broken and he breathed no more.

She sent some servants round to the Palace to find out as many details as possible. As she sat thinking things over, she suddenly heard loud voices in the street, shouting for the way to be cleared for high officials.

“Hung ho! Hung ho!”

“You, fellow! Get back and clear off!”

“Stand up there!”

“Sit down there!”

“Silence “

“You, fellow! Stand up there! Sit down there!”

“Silence!”

“Hung ho! Hung ho!”

The servant who had been standing outside rushed into the house, crying, “Madame, the Master is coming now!”

Yun Ssi was astonished to hear her husband returning, obviously still in a position of authority, for she was sure that he must have been killed at the Palace. She realized, like a flash, that he must have given in. She had been ready to die and now felt indignation rise within her. Her husband’s weakness made her sad. It seemed to her great disgrace that her husband alone should be alive and returning home, while all his friends had been arrested and carried away to be executed, the fate of condemned Royal retainers. Her face went pale, and she was paralyzed, as she tried to stifle her indignation.

At that moment the inner door of the middle gate was opened noisily, and Sug-zu came in.

Yun Ssi was standing still, on the spot where she had been standing the whole day, with fixed gaze. When Sug-zu reached the door-step, his figure drooping, she said,

“Why have you come back? Why aren’t you dead?” His face flushed. He dropped his head and muttered,

“Because of our sons ... “

His face seemed infinitely hateful. She was angry at her husband’s lack of loyalty. His mouth, which had once said night and day that a royal retainer should not be a royal slave, seemed filthier to her eyes than a dung-heap. Her impatience with him made her spit unconsciously into his face.

Sug-zu, thus insulted, entered his study without a word .

The following morning as it was beginning to dawn, the servant who came into the garden to sweep found the stretched corpse of the lady of the house, Yun Ssi, who had committed suicide by hanging herself by the neck with the long white towel from the beam on the top floor of the house.