

A MOTHER AND HER SONS

by Gim Dong-Ni

There was a mother who was very proud of her three sons. Whenever she met the neighbours, she used to say that the eldest was manly, the second sympathetic, and the third gentle.

None of the neighbours, however, would believe her. They rather suspected that the old woman did not really mean what she said.

"Why don't the manly and sympathetic sons arrange for the youngest to marry?" the villagers would sometimes ask her in a rather querulous tone, to which she would reply apologetically, "Please don't say things like that, my neighbours. It is said that the throat is the police station (i.e. that one cannot live without eating). Don't get the wrong idea about them because they do not arrange for him to marry when they are well off themselves."

Then another villager would say in a tone of deep suspicion, "So if one has money, I say, he can marry even without his brothers' help." To this the old woman would answer in a distressed voice, "I admit that Ddoczul's Daddy drinks too much wine, of course." By Ddoczul's Daddy she meant her second son, whose son was called Ddoczul. She never mentioned her eldest son, nor did anyone ask her about him. The whole village considered his conduct utterly scandalous. Drink, quarrels, gambling, and insulting behaviour—these were his whole life.

"My dear old wife, you will have to die in your eldest son's house," her husband often said before he died, and so the old woman would never speak ill of her eldest son in the presence of others, however bad his conduct might have been, for she did hope that it would be in his house that she would die, as her husband had said.

"Isn't the eldest your son? Why do you make fun of me, Mother?" her second son would growl at her when he came home drunk. She used to answer quietly, "I'll die there when I die."

The old woman lived with her second son as long as her husband was alive. The second son was not such an evil character as the eldest, though he too used to drink too much. Latterly he used to vent his spite to her towards his brother—his mother's youngest son. His wife used to say, and he believed her, that it was due to his mother that his youngest brother had been expressing his desire to marry more strongly. In the evenings when his youngest brother left the house after visiting him, choking with rage he would say angrily to his mother, "Mother! If you care so much for your youngest son, you should go and live with him. Why do you stay in my house and trouble me like this?"

He always used to protest to his mother in this way and complain that she was only a nuisance. She would never argue with him, nor would she even ask him how it was that she troubled him so much. She only reflected that 'the throat is the police station' and lamented that her husband should have died first and left her alone.

That year the youngest son, Dori, was twenty six years old. He had worked as a farm hand since the year following his father's death, thirteen years before. All that

time he had worked steadily, a hardworking and honest young man, who neither smoked, drank nor gambled. The villagers praised him as 'a bachelor fit for sowing', in other words, an ideal bridegroom, but, strangely, he was still unmarried. Every year he used to bring the grain that he received in wages as his share of the harvest, (usually unhulled rice and barley) to his brother's house where his mother lived. For the first few years his brother used to say, in the hearing of his mother and his wife, "I'll arrange for you to marry when you are nineteen," whenever he brought his annual wage of grain. But when the youngest brother was nineteen, his brother did not arrange for him to marry, nor did he ever mention the subject after that.

It was not that he had changed his mind because times were hard.

He had more children, and he drank more than ever. Once two bowls of cooked rice a day had sufficed for them, but now they needed ten. Whereas he had had two children, he now had four, but the whole family got thinner. So Dori did not want to have a serious quarrel with his brother at first. Until he was twenty one or twenty two, he did not much care if the grain that he earned with the sweat of his brow was eaten by his niece, his brother, or his old mother. But when he was twenty four, he used to get furiously angry, but it was not that his mother had incited him to it as his sister-in-law used to tell his brother.

His mother often said to her second son appealingly, "Please get your youngest brother married next autumn. He's twenty-four now. All his friends are married, and he alone is single. He must be very unhappy."

It was not her second son but her daughter-in-law who used to get angry and obstinate whenever she said this. "One son is the same as another," she would chide her mother-in-law without hesitation "Mother, you might have been happy to live only on your second son's earnings. Would the sky fall if you lived on what your youngest son got?"

"Why shouldn't I live on what Dori gets? But it wouldn't be sin to get him married, would it?"

The two women often argued in this way over the question of Dori's marriage.

This year several times Dori and his sister-in-law had exchanged hard words face to face. His sister-in-law ran out of the kitchen and shouted at Dori, "I won't eat what you've earned. Is Ddoezul's Daddy a cripple or deformed? Why do you glare at me so? Why do you glare at me?"

"Who said my brother was a cripple or deformed? He drinks what he pleases and sleeps as much as he likes, and he leads a life no better than a beggar's, I tell you."

"Fiddlesticks! You may think you're clever, but we would be beggars even without the grain that you bring. Don't you worry!

"Why should I worry? Why should I concern myself about a family which has a roof over its head, farm lands, and four children?"

"Why shouldn't we have a house and children? You would be pleased if we were beggars and had to wander the streets! No, don't you worry. This autumn we may have to sell this cottage and all our children just to get you married. Then Mother too complains night and day that we have eaten up all the grain you earn. You glare fiercely whenever you see this dirty cottage and those kids hungry as devils This autumn I'll certainly get you married if I have to sell the girls to the brothel so that Mother can go and live with her youngest. She talks at us about her youngest day and night until our ears are quite hardened to it."

Whenever she argued with Dori his sister-in-law would always come round to

his mother in the end like this. She did this in the first place because she was convinced that Dori's attitude was the result of his mother's promptings, and in the second place because she hoped that, when Dori was married, she would be able to send her mother-in-law away to live with him.

That autumn Dori did in fact get married. He rented a room in the house of a man he knew at one end of the village. His mother went to live with him for a while to see how he got on in his new life and to get to know her new daughter-in-law. She was most unhappy because, though she was his mother she could not make for the newly wedded pair the present even of a spoon, and she found it very awkward to have to live in the same room with them for many days, however intimate her relationship with her son. At supper one night she said to her son and daughter-in-law, "Dori, tomorrow I am going back to Ddoczul's." Her son did not reply, but her new daughter-in-law said, at least as a courtesy, "Do stay, Mother, even if it is a bit inconvenient." The old woman felt grateful to her for her kindness. "I'll come and visit you often and stay here as well as there."

Next day she went back to her second son's house, feeling her way with a stick, for her eyes were dim. As soon as she stepped through the garden gate, the younger Czul, Ddoczul's young brother, who was sitting on the steps, shouted, "Grandmother, why are you coming back?"

"I've missed you much," so she replied. She drew a deep breath, 'huyuu', and climbed up onto the floor. Her daughter-in-law inside made no effort to open the door of the sitting room. Ddoczul, her eldest granddaughter, was in the room but to please her mother did not open the door.

The old woman breathed hard and said, "Ddoczul, please bring me a bowl of water."

Ddoczul morosely opened the door and came out with a bowl of water. She gave it to her grandmother and then went back inside without greeting her grandmother in any way. The old woman drank the water and asked, "Where has Sitgun gone?"

"He is playing in the backyard," little Czul answered.

The old woman really did miss her grandchildren. She missed them all, Ddoczul, little Czul, Silgûn and Zangsoe. She had come back here because it was hardly possible for her to stay with her youngest son, but at the same time it was also because she missed them so much. Even though she only had one bowl of porridge in the whole day, she would be very pleased to see her young grandchildren, and so she murmured to herself until she came in at the gate. But the children were so unkind to her that she felt very lonesome and wept.

She lay down in the room and said to herself, "Gumnyo's mother had only had four daughters while I had three sons. She used to envy me whenever she saw me and say how happy I would be." Before long she fell asleep.

The greatest change that she noticed when she came back to her second son's house was her treatment at table. However acrimonious their arguments might be before Dori married and went away, they observed strict etiquette at dinner. When her son went and bought fish on market day, it would be reasonable for her daughter-in-law to serve her husband first, but she never forgot a dish 'for grandmother'. Now, however, Silgûn was promoted above his grandmother, and she received the same treatment as the rest of the family-- if there was anything left, they would get it, but if there was not, they had to go without.

Her son rushed into the room with his sandals on, picked his mother as if she

had been any old woman of the neighbourhood. "Hey, old woman!" he would cry. "You used to talk so often of your youngest son, but even the youngest is just the same as the others, isn't he?" Then his mother would recall how Gûmnyô's mother used to envy her." She only had four daughters, and I had three sons ... "

"You constantly incited your youngest son to get married-of course you expected to live with him always then. But now it looks as if the youngest son is nothing very special!" So her daughter-in-law would say in support of her husband's complaints. The old woman tried to take no notice and reflected, " Gûmnyô's mother used to say that I would be so happy!"

Silgûn capped everything by saying, "Grandma, you'd better go back to uncle's." The old woman answered him alone, "It was to see your twinkling eyes that I came back here. I missed them so much."

One day her second son came back drunk from the market. He must have quarrelled with Dori there, for he ground his teeth and shouted, "The devil," and "you devil," the very minute he stepped through the gate. "The conceited devil!" he raved. "The hateful and shameless devil! He threw mother out after only three days, and yet he has the nerve to say that I treated her badly and things like that. The Devil take you!" And he ground his teeth again. Her daughter-in-law shouted loudly for the neighbours to hear, "Perhaps he despises you. He wouldn't have listened if it were himself. If he is so dutiful, let him take his mother back and look after her. No one's going to stop him. He doesn't do any better than anyone else, and yet he causes trouble for others. It's very odd indeed! I've never known anyone play such a dirty trick as this!"

Then her son rushed to the door of his mother's room and flung it open. He shouted threateningly at her, "Come on, let's go, Mother! Come out here! I'll carry you back at once. Come out at once!"

"I'm not going," she answered. "I like to see the youngsters' twinkling eyes so much that I don't care at all what you give me to eat here even if it's only a mouthful of porridge or water. Whatever you give me, I won't complain. I just want to stay here."

"I won't let you, I won't let you, I say! Come out here, come out! You despise me, and you try me so!"

Her son rushed into the room with his sandals on, picked his protesting mother up bodily, and carried her out of the room. "I don't want to go!" she cried appealingly. But he took no notice and carried her straight off to Dori's house. He put her down at the door of Dori's room, and she could breathe freely again. Then he stamped his feet hard and shouted, "If you turn mother out again, I'll cut you into a thousand pieces!" Then he went home.

The old woman was confined to her bed for three days. Then she managed to stagger up and to eat spoonfuls of thin porridge. She clearly looked as if she was dying. Her hollow eyes were like pools, and her lips trembled nervously without stopping. With great difficulty she conveyed a few spoonfuls of porridge to her mouth. "My dear son," she said. "I must now go to Yong's house."

"Mother," her son replied. "You can't go anywhere in the state you are in."

"I will go."

After two days she went to visit her eldest son, tapping the ground with her stick as she had done some time previously. Her son was not at home when she arrived. His wife, Yong's mother, said to her, "What's the matter with you, mother?"

“Yes,” was all she could say, and she went inside and lay down in the innermost corner of the room where the urns of the memorial to the ancestors was placed. Yong’s mother asked her if she was hungry. Her nickname was ‘Oryun-zeng-i’ because she was rather a fool. The old woman merely shook her head weakly.

When her eldest son came home in the evening his wife pointed to the corner of the room and said, “Mother lay down there.” Without answering his wife, the eldest son slapped the sleeping Yong and said, “That’s all you do, eat and sleep.”

Next day the eldest son came home drunk. “Get up, Mother!” he cried. “Let’s go to that devil yonder!” By that he meant the second son. His mother lay where she was and struggled to answer in a low voice, “Long ago your father said to me that when I died I must die at your house.”

Her son smiled and said, “You’re not going to die yet.”

Then her daughter-in-law said, “Mother seems to be very ill indeed.”

“You thief of a she-devil!” her husband shouted and suddenly seizing her by the hair dragged her out into the backyard. “Ouch! That hurts!” she cried in pain. He held her by the hair and kicked her, and threw her to the ground. Then he came into the sitting room with bloodshot eyes. “Come here, Mother!” he cried. “I’ll make those devils mend their ways! There shall never be such villains as they are.”

“Your father said long ago ... When I die ... “ But before she could finish, her son picked her up and put her on his back and rushed out of the house. “You villains!” he shouted. “You have treated Mother as badly as you knew how. Perdition take these rascals!” He ran through the streets shouting with his mother on his back. He came to the second son’s house and put his mother, who was already drawing her last breaths, down on the floor by the door. “You villain!” He cried. “The worst kind of devil, fit to be hanged!” He picked up a mattock that happened to be nearby and began to smash his brother’s jar of sauce and bean mash.

Ddoczul’s mother shouted, “Let’s die—let’s die.” She rushed towards Yong’s father, and grabbed the handle of the mattock. The second son hung a rope round his neck, stooped over his brother, and shouted, “Let’s die, let’s die!” And he hung the other end of the rope around the eldest son’s neck.

As she lay on the floor, the old woman murmured in her throat as her breath was slowly chilled, “The eldest son is manly, the second son is sympathetic. . . the youngest is gen. . . gentle ... “

The youngest son and his wife ran to the spot to stop their brothers quarrelling. They found their mother just breathing her last. Dori seized her by the wrists and cried, “Mother! Mother! Mother!” She was already ice cold and murmured, “Gûmnyô’s mother only had four dau ... daughters, but I had thr ... three sons, ... three ... “

Her voice gradually sank deeper into her throat.