



Flowers of Fire

T W E N T I E T H - C E N T U R Y
K O R E A N S T O R I E S

Revised Edition

Edited by
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Kapitan Lee

CHÖN KWANGYONG

Chön Kwangyong was born in Pukch'öng, South Hamgyöng, on March 1, 1919, earned a degree in Korean literature from Seoul National University (1951), and remained to obtain his M.A. in 1953. Since then he has taught at the same university, where he is professor of Korean literature.

His first story appeared in 1939, but his literary career began in 1955 with the publication of the story "Black Hill Island." In his earlier works such humble, isolated characters as a fisherwoman and a miner were allowed to express their isolation and poverty, as well as occasional zeal for life. The setting of the next group of stories is a decadent, corrupt society that sought only profit and power. The characters were made to compare such a world to a dumping ground or a dung hill. But again, Chön did not fail to register their attempts to leap from their miserable condition, testifying to their dream of attaining a sense of human dignity. In these and later stories, Chön skillfully arranged characters into symbolic relations with each other and presented a tension between their psychological states. A compressed style and concise yet sensitive sentences helped create a rapid flow and a sense of tension.

"Kapitan Lee," first published in the journal Sasanggye in July 1962, was nominated the same year for the Tongin Prize. The story traces a human type during Korea's tragic years of servitude under the Japanese. Some, like Ko Hyön and his father ("Flowers of Fire"), revolted in spirit and by action; others, like Yi Inguk, cultivated the secrets of a successful life only to protect themselves. From the moment Yi receives a watch as a prize,

he begins to venerate the oppressor as a chosen people and develops a slave consciousness. A slave unable to revolt against his master denies himself tomorrow and seeks a comfortable life day to day. Opportunism engenders an illusion that he, too, belongs to the world of the dominators. Like a chameleon, Yi changes his color and lives in a world of infamy and lies. An epitome of a sad human type, Yi is nevertheless not alone to be blamed for his hypocrisy and baseness. Yi's worldly wisdom deserves at once our scorn and our compassion.

Dr. Yi Inguk emerged from the operating room and flopped down on the sofa in the reception room. He removed his rimless glasses, with their platinum earpieces, to wipe his brow. As the perspiration running down his spine dried, fatigue gripped him. Two hours and twenty minutes. Surgery on a stomach growth with the patient still in a coma.

Today's operation left a bitter aftertaste; the usual good feeling was missing.

Yi remembered the record he had set: the shortest time for a laparotomy, in the days of the Japanese occupation, when miracle drugs were scarce. Such routine things as appendicitis or phimosis could be turned over to the younger physicians, but not the major cases. The patients insisted that Yi himself undertake those operations. This only served to flatter him, and it left the pleasant sensation of being an expert at wielding a scalpel.

Yi's hospital was located in a densely populated neighborhood. His patients were those referred to him by the crowded, first-class university hospitals. Just as a hotel clerk instinctively determines, after scrutinizing a guest's clothing, which room the guest should be assigned (or whether he should be refused outright), so did Yi's hospital have two long-established characteristics: the premises were spotlessly clean, and the fees were almost double those of other hospitals. The initial examination of a new patient consisted of an estimate of his financial status. If a patient appeared unable to meet the cost, Yi's nurse turned him down. For the most part, preliminary checkups of light cases were handled by the younger doctors. It was Yi's job to hand down the final decision, taking into account the patient's symptoms and his financial means. Credit was out of the question unless the patient was a friend of a bigwig. Even if credit was extended in some cases, Yi's concurrent examination of the patient's symptoms and finances was the secret watchword that underlay his career of half a lifetime, resulting in no outstanding expenses or losses. It was no accident, therefore, that during the Japanese days his patients were mainly Japanese, while currently they were of the privileged or moneyed classes.

The doctor's day began each morning in the consultation room, where he dusted the windowsills and the desk top with his fingertips, staring with unblinking deep eyes from behind his rimless glasses. The nurse would suffer the whole day through if Yi

found one speck of dust. His regular patients never failed to express admiration for his spotlessness.

At the time of the January 4 retreat, Yi had come across the Thirty-eighth Parallel carrying only a bag containing a stethoscope. No sooner had the capital been regained than he rented a room and set up his practice. Now he owned a two-story tiled structure in the heart of the city, where one *p'yōng*¹ of land was worth five hundred *hwan*. In addition to surgery, he had added such other departments as internal medicine, pediatrics, and obstetrics. The management of each was up to individual doctors, but Yi was the director.

Yi drew his eighteen-carat gold watch out of his vest pocket. It was 2:40 P.M., only twenty minutes to an appointment he had with a Mr. Brown of the U.S. Embassy. The watch had a history of its own. Every time he looked at it, Yi was reminded of an incident akin to a miracle. The watch was a relic of his evacuation, together with his housecall bag. The old bag had disappeared without a trace, replaced by a new one given him by a GI doctor, but the watch was a memento that had shared his fateful escape from the North—his life's companion, as it were. Even at night, he did not leave it beside his pillow or in its pocket. Only after he had secured it in the emergency cabinet containing his registration papers and savings book did he retire. He had good reason to do this. The watch, with his name inscribed on the back, was his proud graduation prize from an imperial university.

During the thirty years that followed, everything had changed around Yi but the watch. Gone was the rosy-cheeked, proud youth of twenty. Not only was half of his hair grey, but the wrinkles on his forehead were etched more deeply. Days of Japanese control, imprisonment under the Soviet military occupation, the war, the Thirty-eighth Parallel, the U.S. Army—how many crises had he managed to escape?

It was a miracle that the seventeen-jewel Waltham watch kept time through such tribulations. After checking the time, Yi would listen to the ticking of the watch, his half-closed eyes gazing upon miniature views of his past. Yielding to an irresistible impulse, he recalled anew the day when he changed from the square cap and closed-buttoned jacket of a student into a business suit.

Yi Inguk remembered the letter he had placed in a drawer just before the operation. His daughter, Nami, was now in the United

States. Her Japanese name was Namiko; after the liberation he called her simply "Nami" for obvious reasons, and the "ko" was dropped from the residence registry. Nami-*chan*—her image floated up to his mind along with the memory of those happy days. Nami had been the joy of the family. Now that she, too, had left him, Yi could not suppress occasional empty feelings, even though he had remarried. His first wife had died at the Kōje prisoner-of-war camp, and he had no idea of the fate of his son. He often tried to brush aside the generation gap that separated him from his second wife, Hyesuk, who was twenty years his junior. In contrast to Hyesuk's elastic body, his wrinkled skin made his entire body shrivel. A one-year-old baby born to them was now his only flesh and blood, its future as hazy and uncertain as it was distant.

With great expectations and great curiosity, Yi opened the air letter. It was the reply to a previous letter of his in which he had neither approved nor opposed Nami's plan to marry an American. He pushed the letter to a corner of the desk top. He reflected that the affair might have begun even before Nami's departure from Korea. His daughter was studying English literature at a university, and her husband-to-be was giving her private lessons. He had obtained a scholarship for her, and had found her a sponsor. None of this was by chance. But was it not her father who had maintained—in accordance with the trend of the times—the importance of studying in the States? When a foreign professor specializing in oriental studies admitted that he wished to marry a Korean girl, who was it that had expressed his approval, without thinking, and said that he thought it was an excellent idea? Yi shut his eyes and clenched his ivory pipestem between his teeth. He was angry and disbelieving. A big-nosed son-in-law! The mere thought was enough to make his blood boil. The filthy wench finally . . . He gave a mighty cough of disgust. He remembered the days of the Japanese occupation, when marriage between Japanese and Koreans had been presented as unassailable proof of the oneness of the two peoples. He had not thought this idea slanderous or humiliating at the time. Hadn't he looked upon it as a matter of fact or, in some respects, as a matter of superiority? But this time . . .

He ruminated on his daughter's words: "Are there borders in love?"

How trite! He, too, had mastered such habits of thought during his own school days. Arrogantly, you intend to preach to

Yi Inguk
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daddy? Why can't you be a shade more frank? So you wish to offer yourself as a touchstone of international marriage?

"Anyway, you said you would come over soon, so I'll follow your wishes as to the final decision. But . . ."

So if daddy doesn't show up, you want to go ahead with your plan?

Calling to mind the theory of heredity he knew, Yi shook his head.

A white offspring!

The very thought was repulsive.

He picked up the picture he had flung aside. A great stone structure resembling a campus building, numerous couples strolling in the garden—with this as the backdrop, his daughter and the American professor posed smiling with their arms around each other.

Hum! They've had a good time, eh? With a groan, Yi stood up.

I'll meet Mr. Brown and ask him—I'm going anyway—to rush the papers through. He was anxious to confirm the State Department invitation, which was supposed to offer the best terms.

He crossed over to the living quarters, where Hyesuk waited.

"Nami says she'll marry for sure."

"Is that right?"

Yi detected a lack of feeling, or bewilderment, in his wife's voice. He had hitherto refrained from discussing his children by his first marriage in front of his second wife. On the other hand, the indirect stimulus for Nami's study abroad might have been the family atmosphere—Yi harbored a guilty conscience. Nami had never once called Hyesuk "Mother," and Hyesuk had never conducted herself as a mother to Nami. Delicate strains lay concealed in the relationship between the two women.

"I'll help you, if you wish," Hyesuk had said the first day she met Yi in Seoul. At first, Hyesuk had not known that Yi's wife was dead, and Yi had not concerned himself with Hyesuk's status. Then Hyesuk left the university hospital and moved to Yi's. But as his love for Hyesuk deepened, Yi had wished first of all to sound out his daughter's opinion. The daughter was sympathetic to his loneliness. Accepting the fact that the chores of tending to her father would be too much for her, and that Hyesuk was the only one to look after him, the daughter had expressed her approval on the spot. But as time passed, Hyesuk and Nami drifted farther apart

until Hyesuk, too, began to look upon Nami as an obstacle to a normal family life.

"Seems she's getting friendly with that American professor," Yi observed, as if to himself, without meeting Hyesuk's eyes.

"What can we do? We have to follow her wishes," said Hyesuk unconcernedly.

"Well, I suppose so, but . . ." Unable to finish, he just made a clucking sound with his tongue and could not go on.

The doctor could not suppress a compulsive concern for Nami, as if all of this were his fault, even as he was stimulated by the young body of his wife as she offered her breast to the crying baby.

It would take another twenty years for that little thing to grow to be a companion like his son Wönsik or his daughter, Nami. By then he would be a grandfather of seventy.

Today, medicine has increased the average life span, excluding the possibility of sudden death by diseases like cancer. But here I am, a physician, unable to guarantee my own life. Didn't I let my own wife die before my very eyes, as easily as letting a bird get away?

Come what may, I'll have to see that brat through college. Time is time, so I should see him through his studies in America. And come to think of it, it's not so terrible to have an American as an in-law. At least they live better. It's only because of face, he grumbled, not knowing whether his thoughts expressed self-pity or resignation.

"Will you wrap that thing up?" His voice was even now.

"What thing?" The wife only turned her head to reply, since she was still suckling the baby.

"I mean that vase." He indicated an antique on the dressing table.

"Where are you going to take it?"

"To Mr. Brown, at the U.S. Embassy. I owe him a lot."

Yi emerged from his entrance hall walking slowly and carrying the parcel neatly wrapped by his wife.

However you looked at it, it was a miracle. Complex recollections arose intermittently, swirling and lashing, bringing fear and other emotions. It always seemed like yesterday—so fresh, so vivid.

The end of August 1945.

The whole world was still in the vortex of a whirlpool as a result of the sudden liberation. The dog days had ended, but it was still unbearably hot. Sleep did not come to the anxious, fretful Yi during those few days. Not a sign of a patient where so many had thronged before; not a sound from a telephone that had rung without end. The wards had been bare since the last peritonitis patient, a Japanese bureau chief of a provincial government, had left. The worried assistants and pharmacists had all departed, saying they were going to visit their home towns. Only Hyesuk, the Seoul-born nurse, remained to keep what to all intents was an empty house.

In his ten-mat room upstairs, the fretful kimono-clad doctor threw down his fan and rose. He went to the bathroom and doused himself with cold water. A tingling chill ran down his spine, and he felt lightheaded. Even as he dried himself with a towel, he could not wipe away the tedium that weighed on him.

He went to the window and looked out at the street. The milling crowds still surged to and fro amidst pandemonium. Across the street he could make out the words inscribed in white on the iron shutters of a tightly barred and bolted bank.

"Down with pro-Japanese traitors and reactionaries!" The double circle daubed in red remained distinct in the doctor's vision. The shudder he had felt for the first time around dusk of the previous day assaulted him again. At that moment, Yi quickly turned his head away. "Surely that doesn't apply to me," he said to himself, picking up the fan again.

While he was gazing at the slogan, the image came to him of young Ch'unsök, whose flushed face, wearing a wry smile, seemed to express either contempt or excitement; that face kept on assaulting him. Yi felt uneasy, as if he had caught sight of a spider's web on a dark night. However much he tried to wipe the image away from his mind, it clung to him like a leech.

The event had taken place six months before. A seriously ill patient, out on bail from a police cell, had been carried in on his back. The patient was a young man, just skin and bones, with vacant eyes, and hardly able to move. He was supported by a nurse throughout the examination. Even as he made out the faint breathing through the tubes of his ivory-tipped stethoscope, Yi's mind paused at the crossroad of final diagnosis. "Should I admit him? Or

should I refuse?" The patient's offensive face and his companion's sloppy dress revealed the level on which they existed. There was a more disturbing point: it was unthinkable to admit anyone guilty of an offense involving dangerous thoughts to an official city hospital where Japanese officials came and went at will. An edifice built with effort to be a model citizen of the empire—and commonly acknowledged as such by himself and others—could not be allowed to crumble in one day. Yi reached an instant decision. He gave the patient first aid and sent him and his companion away on the justifiable grounds that there was no room. Later he learned from the nurse that the patient's house was in an alleyway across from the hospital. But that was nothing unusual, and he gave the matter no further thought.

But some days before, when he and Hyesuk, caught in the excitement, had come out to watch the liberation parade at the end of the citizens' rally, his eyes had met those of the same young man, now wearing the armband of the Self-Defense Corps, among those who marched by. The young man glared in Yi's direction, his eyes glittering with bloodthirsty rage. The dumbfounded Yi could not understand why until Hyesuk reminded him of the earlier incident. Yi gave a furtive look around and slunk back into the hospital. Thereafter he stayed off the streets as much as possible, only to run into the young man one night in front of the slogan painted on the bank.

Suddenly there came the sound of an uproar outside. Lying on the bed with his hands clasped behind his head, Yi was lost in a thought whose beginning or conclusion he could not make out. He sat up and cocked his ear in the direction of the street. The clamor grew louder. Unable to allay his anxiety, he leaned over, crouching low on the bed, to look out the window. People were milling about on the pavement and cheering, holding red flags and Korean flags.

"What can it be?"

He settled back on the bed, cocking his head to one side.

Sounds of hurried footsteps came up the stairs and Hyesuk ran in.

"It seems the Soviet army has entered the city." She was breathless. "Everybody's in a stir."

He lay flat on the bed without a word, only blinking his eyes. The radio had foretold in the past few days that the Soviets would

arrive today. So they had indeed, he thought. He remained motionless, staring out the window after Hyesuk went downstairs. Then a thought suddenly struck him, and he rose with a jerk. He opened the closet door and produced a picture frame.

He had stowed it away on liberation day and forgotten all about it. Opening up the back of the frame, he took out a thick sheet of paper that looked like a restaurant permit, and tore it to shreds so that not a word might remain intact. Back in the old days, this sheet of paper had proved adequate to guarantee smooth business dealings with the Japanese. Yi felt a twinge of regret—a patient unable to speak Japanese seldom showed up in the hospital, and Yi spoke only Japanese at home and abroad. After the liberation, of necessity he had to employ his native tongue, which, he found, was inadequate in making himself understood. His wife had proved of immeasurable help by taking the initiative and setting an example; his children, too, had kept up the practice. How elated the family had been when it was awarded this sheet of paper, as if it were a happy event!

“I believe you speak Japanese even in your dreams. Nothing less could have earned you such an honor,” the branch officer of the National League of Total Efforts had said with a smile. At the moment, Yi had reflected how fortunate he had been to send his children to Japanese schools, starting from the primary grades.

The doctor heaved a deep sigh. He felt a renewed gratitude for the goodwill of the manager of a branch bank who allowed him to withdraw all the savings from his account. If I hadn't had that cash . . . The mere thought chilled his spine. With this sum, his household would not be affected whatever form of government was in power, not before half the city had been affected. He mumbled to himself, thinking of the safe in the chest in the inner room. He had a vague presentiment that no matter what transpired, he would emerge unscathed.

The agitation and clamor at dusk seemed enough to shake the earth on its axis. The mob exploded into loud shouts of “*Manse!*” The shouting went on endlessly. Yi's wife, who had gone out to see what was happening, returned.

“The tank brigade is in, and the streets are overflowing with people. What're you doing inside?”

“Doing what?”

“Go out and see. The big-noses are in.”

Her voice was impassioned in the dark, but was this strong emotion or confusion?

“Women are foolish and yet audacious.” Casting a steady glance in her direction in the dim light, Yi clucked with his tongue.

“You haven't turned on the light.” She switched it on. The hundred-watt bulb proved too bright for the doctor.

“Why on earth did you turn the light on?”

“Why not? It's dark; let's go out and see!”

Yi followed his wife out with a blank face. A dazzling glare of headlights—the tank brigade filed past endlessly. Avoiding the glare, the doctor leaned against a tree. Amid unending cheers and applause, the tanks slowly rolled past along both banks of the river. Occasionally a close-cropped soldier would lift a hatch cover and wave his hands, shouting “Hurrah!”

Yi continued to stare vacantly, neither applauding nor cheering, holding onto the illusion that he had nothing to do with these foreign troops. He only looked about himself, in case his behavior was being observed. But all attention was on the tanks, which were greeted with full-throated shouts of *Manse!*

“Things will work themselves out somehow or other,” he said calmly and returned home.

Over the radio, a folk song, and then a march, was followed by a proclamation from the commander of the occupation forces. The doctor drew nearer the radio and listened raptly.

“We positively guarantee to secure the lives and properties of the citizens. Be at ease and stick to your posts. Arms are prohibited. Turn over shotguns, Japanese swords, and all manner of weapons at once!”

Suddenly Yi was struck with the thought of his hunting gun in its chest. Was he to surrender that, too? The latest model English double-barreled gun, his well-cared-for prized possession that he had never once lent to anyone?

He turned the dial. What were they doing in Seoul? It was the same. A folk song or a march, a speech by someone from the National Construction Preparatory Committee.

What was going to happen, anyway? He had no way of allaying his anxiety.

In the first days after the liberation, he was calm and com-

posed, but his friends seldom showed up after the arrival of the Soviet troops. Of course, he ruled out any possibility of going out himself and inquiring after them.

After dark, his son and daughter returned, one from middle school and the other from primary school. They chattered about the Russians and the tanks. There was more talk as Yi's mother and Hyesuk joined them. The children were heedless of their father's anxiety. Yi quietly rose and went upstairs. What would future developments be like, he wondered—boulders blocking his path? Amidst a tangle of thoughts that refused to unravel themselves, Yi stared vacantly at the ceiling, clinging to a faint hope. Pangs of regret or pricks of conscience were out of the question.

"North Korean Students in Russia Escape to West Germany."

Such were the headlines in bold type, like reports of moves in a chess game. A foreign dispatch occupied the left side of the page, with a picture as large as the palm of the hand. Yi glared and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. His eyes were trying to focus on the type, and the image of his son floated up in his mind. Had he coerced his son to go abroad to study in Moscow? The son had little in his favor in terms of class or profession, except for the fact that he had graduated from high school and entered a university. Then, as now, Yi was confident of his secret for a successful life.

"Look, son, study Russian diligently!"

"What for?" the son retorted suspiciously.

"It can't be helped, Wönsik. Japanese was the tongue to master under the Japanese occupation, but now it's Russian. A fish can't live out of water, so it must learn to live in it. Take up Russian!"

The son did not seem particularly impressed.

"Don't tell me you can't, at your age. Why, even I can manage a few sentences."

"Don't worry." The son's reply inspired confidence in Yi. "Can there be any difference just because they have big noses?"

"Just learn to communicate, and it's all the same, I'm sure," the doctor replied with a profound expression.

In the end, the doctor had managed to secure a Soviet scholarship for his son on the basis of a recommendation from an important party member he had met through Major Stenkov.

2 End

"Let's live like ordinary people," his wife had said. "The safest way is to be inconspicuous. Consider—we've barely escaped one crisis. Now you want to push him into the heart of 'Raise the red flag' and all the rest of it. What will come of it?"

"How little you know. There's no catching the tiger unless you enter his lair. Whatever the world may be, let's do all we can to get the best of it."

"But to send a child like that as far away as Russia?"

"Why, even middle-school kids are desperately struggling to go. Why not a college boy?"

"But who knows what's going to happen?"

"Don't worry! Those rascals who are out to pick on me will be silenced when my son returns with a Soviet education. Let's live proudly once again."

So he had high-handedly consoled his worried wife and carried through his intention. "Hmmm, even the families of revolutionaries find it hard to crack this nut, and that's just what I've done. I, the pro-Japanese Dr. Yi Inguk. What do you say to that?"

The son had sent letters in a continuous stream, saying that he was getting along well. Between the outbreak of war and the retreat, though, no news had come. One could attribute his wife's death to her anxiety for her only son, exiled in a no-man's land, the doctor thought.

Yi scrutinized every word in the paper, hoping to find some tidings of his son, but to no avail. "What in the world is he doing?" Yi muttered. "Can't he take his place in the ranks? Man must know how to take the initiative and adapt himself to circumstances."

He folded the paper and rolled it up carelessly. "The swift steed is born of a creek, but my son is not up even to his daddy." He clucked with his tongue.

In the next instant, there came another thread of thought: "Can it be that he's wavering because he doesn't know his family has come south? But some word of us must have reached him by now, and he must feel tacit pressure. The lad's naive. He's below average."

As soon as he alighted from the car, he spat on the pavement. He remembered what Stenkov had said: "Dr. Yi, I guarantee

it. Send your son to our fatherland, the Soviet Union." The major's voice seemed to buffet his eardrums even now.

Yi was summoned the day after the Self-Defense Corps became the Security Corps. He found himself kneeling on a cement floor, his lips blue, the lower part of his body paralyzed, his sides aching. This was the greatest pain he had ever suffered in his life. But more than this, he was caught in the grip of an impending, unknowable fate. Hearing the thud of footfalls back and forth and curses pouring down on him, he was unable to raise his drooping head, which seemed about to burst. Only time moved. And many thoughts he had hitherto suppressed began to nod their heads at him one by one.

"If I knew this was to happen, I could have hidden beforehand, or even fled south . . . But now, in these circumstances, who is to help me? Those who are in a position to do something are all in the same boat, or will be sooner or later. The Japanese! To whom can I turn now that the walls against which I've been leaning have all crumbled?"

"But surely, somehow . . ." Some slight hope remained even in this moment of impending danger. "Lucky I wasn't included in the first round of people's trials. There's no way to learn about the fate of those who were dragged away. And what of those rumors about summary convictions? Only three more days, and I might well have left. It's all fate. And yet, there must be a way . . ."

"You miserable agent of the Japs!"

Startled, Yi lifted his head with a jerk. It was Ch'unsök, wearing an armband over a clean Japanese military uniform, who was glaring at him.

The doctor did not even have the strength to return the other's gaze. It's death, he thought.

"You stepping-stone for the Japs!"

A kick from a Japanese army boot landed on his side."

"Let's see you die, dog!"

Kicks rained all over his body, front and back.

The doctor screamed as a shock ran through his spine, and he collapsed in a stupor.

Pulling at his shoulder, they tried to make him sit up, but his body would not respond, and he fell over to one side.

"So you would sell your people and your fatherland! You dog! It's the firing squad for you. The firing squad!"

The words came to him as in a dream. Yi did not know how much time had passed when he became aware of the rustling sound of someone touching him, and of a metallic clink. A pair of hands covered with a mass of yellow hair tugged at Yi's watch chain. Yi instantly took tight hold of his watch pocket and stared at the owner of the hands. A blue-eyed, close-cropped Soviet soldier grinned, showing all his teeth, and grabbed at the end of the chain. With all his might Yi shielded the pocket with his hands.

"Huh, Yaponski!" Yi's reaction had angered the blue-eyed soldier.

"Spare me just this."

Unable to communicate by words, the two confronted each other with their hands and eyes. At length, the soldier flung the doctor's hand aside and grabbed the watch. The chain was broken, leaving the ring dangling at the tips of the doctor's fingers. The soldier disappeared.

"Death and a watch . . ." the doctor grumbled to himself.

The image of the soldier, who had two wrist watches on each wrist and yet needed to take Yi's precious pocket watch, was etched vividly in his memory.

The cell was full. But distinctions between the oldtimers and newcomers were made clear by the positions they occupied, and within a month Yi was two-thirds of the way up in the ranks of the former, moving slowly away from the stool bucket. All day long he was silent. Great uneasiness prevailed, for as surely as the informers planted in their midst left, the complainers would be called out, only to return half-dead. Yet within a day or two the prisoners were able to adapt, whiling away their time by airing yet more grievances and talking about food.

Yi remained silent, not because he did not wish to expose his crimes, but because he knew that silence was the best policy.

The doctor picked up the Russian conversation book a student prisoner had left behind upon his release during the night, and pored over it. His spine ached, and his ribs were sore; he feared they might be past healing. The weather grew perceptibly colder in the morning and evening, and he could not allay his anxiety despite his

efforts at resignation. He kept up with his Russian primer even as his ears took in all the exchanges of his cellmates. They were making estimates of the sentence each was likely to draw, and the doctor was startled at the enormity of his crime. Seven years for one who had sold Grains Association rice stocks; ten years for one who had rounded people up for forced labor. Ostensibly, judgments were based on the law, not on emotions, but what laws were there in such confused times? Against their taste, and it was the firing squad for sure.

“Pro-Japanese, traitor to the people, refusing to treat an anti-Japanese fighter, a spy for the Japanese imperialists . . .”

His crimes were uncountable. If he were to be sentenced according to this list the investigators had toted up, the least he could expect was life imprisonment. More probably, death.

The doctor looked around the cell and heaved a deep sigh.

A patch of sunlight the size of a handkerchief came through the ventilator hole at the eave, lengthened into a shape resembling a bamboo stick, shimmered like a thin thread, and then disappeared. Through the lattice, Yi saw a far-distant autumn sky that summoned a mass of forgotten memories; his heart ached. How eternal was his separation from the outside world!

“What could we do? What did you expect of a colonized people? Of what use was the best talent—the swiftest feet and the strongest wings? Were there any who had not flattered the Japs? A fool is he who does not eat the proffered cake. We’re all cut from the same cloth, right?”

The doctor was able to relieve his anxiety by fabricating excuses.

Then, too, there was the thin ray of hope in the expression of the consultant during the final interrogation session yesterday. A somewhat forced consolation, and yet . . . ! What was his name? Major Stenkov? An officer with a wart on his cheek. The major had taken particular note of his occupation. “Doctor . . . doctor,” he had repeated, cocking his head. The sudden expression that had come over his face—was it an auspice of a miracle?

Startled by a groan, Yi opened his eyes. Dim light from the corridor filtered through the iron bars, weaving a pattern across the cell. He glanced upward at the ventilation hole. The sun had not yet risen, and it was dark.

The smell of fresh excrement assailed Yi’s nostrils. On one of his trouser legs—he touched the trouser leg and brought his hand to his nose. He retched—it was excrement, all right.

The lad beside him continued to groan. The doctor peered closely at him. The lad’s buttocks were wet. Diarrhea, Yi thought.

The doctor shook the bars and called out for a member of the Rehabilitation Corps.

“What?” came an indistinct, sleepy voice.

“Look! Look, at this!”

Only the round outline of a man’s face beneath a cap emerged in the light that shone behind him. The doctor pointed at the young man’s buttocks. “There’s blood! . . . Blood!” he exclaimed, suddenly aware of a red glow there. “Dysentery,” he went on in a louder voice, prompted by his professional knowledge.

“Dysentery?” repeated the voice from outside in an unconvinced tone.

“There’s blood in his stool. See for yourself,” the doctor insisted, raising his voice.

“Ah, yes indeed . . .”

In the clamor, the other prisoners opened their eyes one by one and began to shout.

“Dysentery is contagious! . . . Contagious!”

“Contagious, you say?”

Only then did the guard open the cell door.

Some time later, the youth was isolated, and the prisoners took their time cleaning up every trace of the excrement. By the time it was all over, they could not go back to sleep.

Two days later, two or three other similar cases were reported in another cell. As the days passed, the number of patients grew. The doctor pondered: nine out of every ten would surely die. He was seized with concern.

One evening he was summoned to the consultant’s office.

“Comrade, go work in the first-aid treatment room for the time being!”

A miracle—a bolt from the blue! The doctor could not believe the interpreter. A ray of hope leaped to his eyes as he stared alternately at the Soviet officer and the interpreter.

“Do you understand?”

"Yes," the doctor replied composedly, so as to conceal his elation. He clenched his teeth so as not to betray his feelings.

Every time he saw a corpse dragged off, Yi felt that it might very well have been himself. "Doctoring is my mission," he told himself over and over again.

He did his utmost for all the patients under his care. Thus, with this as a turning point, his skills were brought to the special attention of the consultant. For all that, he had no way of knowing what punishment awaited him. He learned belatedly that to let a "thought prisoner" die in a cell would result in an interrogation of the person responsible. He wanted to make the most of his excellent opportunities. "Even if I die, I won't regret anything," he thought.

How might he extricate himself, once and for all, from an invisible confinement? Even as he treated the patients, Yi thought constantly about the wart the size of the duck's egg on the major's left cheek. It was a natural deformity, but the fact that the major had advanced to a high rank must mean either that his party spirit was strong or that his war record was exceptional.

Hold on to that wart, and surely he would find an opening through which to emerge alive! Yi applied what crude knowledge of Russian he had to exchange greetings with Stenkov whenever the latter appeared on an inspection tour. To be sure, all books were banned, except for party literature and Russian-language texts. The doctor therefore memorized the Russian primer as if it were the key to his salvation.

His opportunity came with the Christmas drinking parties. Stenkov appeared on his usual inspection tour, his face aflame.

"I must not let this chance pass," Yi decided.

As Stenkov approached the room of a Soviet officer whose appendicitis had developed into peritonitis and whose sutures Yi was removing, Yi made it clear with Russian phrases and hand gestures that he was willing to operate on the wart.

"*Khorosho!*" [Good!] Stenkov said several times in rapid succession.

Several times thereafter, with an interpreter between them, the doctor had opportunities to express his views on how he would go about the operation. He spoke convincingly, remembering the wart

of the Japanese major he had successfully removed. "I neatly performed a medical miracle, besting the entire hospital staff of Keiō University." He spoke thus to himself, gambling his life on this undertaking.

A series of preliminary diagnoses was undertaken with a Soviet military doctor as a witness. Then the big day came.

Yi arranged to have all his familiar tools brought over from his own hospital. Three Soviet assistants were at hand, but it was Yi who wielded the knife. To him, these doctors from a field hospital were mere novices. He treated them as if they were assistants in his own hospital. When he held the scalpel in hand, the operating table was his kingdom to rule as he wished. But the written pledge he had signed just before the operation momentarily caused his concentration to waver: "The firing squad in case of failure."

Even though the patient appeared self-possessed his face was tense. That lasted only three minutes after anesthesia, though. The nurse kept wiping the endless beads of perspiration off the doctor's forehead with a cotton pad. The clink of metal instruments and the rhythm of human breathing under a bright reflector broke the suffocating silence in the room.

The operation was over more quickly than Yi had anticipated. When he removed his gown, he was wet with perspiration.

On the day of his discharge, Stenkov grasped both of Yi's hands and shouted "*Kapitan Lee, spasibo!*" [Thank you!]

The doctor flashed his widest grin. He felt liberated from the mind's prison.

"*Odin, odin, ochen' khorosho!*" [Number one, number one, very good!] Stenkov declared holding one thumb aloft to indicate that he thought the best of the doctor and patted him on the shoulder.

The following day, Stenkov called Yi into his office. He offered his hand in a most polite handshake, the first time he had done so.

"Can enemy confront enemy and make a one-hundred-eighty-degree turn like this? Even the yellow-haired ones are human in their hearts!"

"Beginning tomorrow, you may attend to your regular duties from your home."

The doctor heaved a great sigh, as if a dike were bursting open.

This time the doctor took hold of Stenkov's hands: "*Spasibo, spasibo!*"

"Have you no favors to ask of me?"

The thought of the watch came at once to Yi's mind. Was it wise to bring the subject up at this time and place? Wasn't it too trifling? He still had a lingering affection for the watch and was resolved to lay bare all that he felt about it, though the chances of recovering it might be nil. With the help of the interpreter, he set forth in minute detail every particular of the incident, including the time and place.

Stenkov listened with a strained expression on his face, all the while stroking the cheek where the wart had once been.

"No need to worry, *Doktor Lee*. The great Red Army is incapable of any such deed. It must be a mistake. I will bear the responsibility."

Doubt assailed the doctor once again as he stared at the profound expression on the major's resolute face. "Have I bungled up everything, needlessly?" he suppressed uneasiness and regret.

"Rest easy, *Doktor Lee*," Stenkov guffawed and allusively closed the issue.

The doctor returned home, released from the threshold of death.

He remembered what the interpreter had told him: Major Stenkov had marveled at his ability to express himself in Russian in so short a time.

The car came to a halt before the Brown residence. The sight of the Stars and Stripes reminded Yi of the red flag and the return of his watch. He was led into the drawing room, and while awaiting his host he examined the place. He had been indebted to the embassy official since his daughter went to the States three years before, but this was the first time he had visited the man at home.

One wall was stacked with such Korean classics as the *Véritable Record of the Yi Dynasty, Unofficial Histories and Notes of the Eastern Country*; and along another, old books were arranged neatly in cases. On the desk in front were a golden statue of the Buddha and several antique pieces. The ashtray atop the table in front of the twelve-panel screen, inscribed with Chinese seal characters, was an old white celadon one.

The doctor's face grew hot at the thought that each article must have been brought by someone. He turned an eye toward the inlaid Koryö celadon he had brought with him. He would certainly

miss this article, but he had never once reproached himself for contributing to the dissipation of national treasures. Rather, he vacillated: "Brown has so many precious things—one more wouldn't make him cherish it!"

As soon as Brown entered, the doctor offered him the gift with a smile. The host in turn smiled expansively as he unwrapped the package. "Thank you," he said as if unable to conceal his delight. "It's a very valuable gift, indeed."

"Not at all. It's merely an expression of my good will."

With a satisfaction following upon a relieved feeling, Yi agreed. Listening to Brown speaking half in Korean and half in English, he gave himself up to a sense of contentment.

"Where did you learn your English, Dr. Lee?"

"During the Japanese days, in the Japanese way. For instance, '*Zatto iz ah katto*.'"

"But your pronunciation is excellent now. You speak grammatically correct standard English."

Yi instantly recalled what Stenkov had said about his Russian. He noted that Brown, who was English-born, did not roll his *r*'s.

"I've been receiving private lessons for some time."

"Is that so?"

The doctor felt proud of his linguistic skills.

Brown returned from the kitchen with a tray of foreign liquors. "Please help yourself!"

As he watched Brown's face, the doctor recalled Stenkov, who felt good only when he had had a long draught of vodka, even if he had to take it straight.

Sipping his glass of Scotch—his high blood pressure compelled him to be moderate—Yi waited to hear what Brown would have to say.

"I've heard from the State Department."

The doctor was overwhelmed with joy, but he restrained himself. Instead, he shook hands with Brown slowly and gravely. "Thank you, thank you," he said again, recalling Stenkov after the successful operation.

"Sincerity moves heaven," thought the doctor in high spirits, reflecting on the fact that his practical wisdom had worked even with the Americans. Brown seemed happy as he went on caressing the celadon vase and emptying his glass.

"I'll entrust everything to you during my stay in the States."

“Please do. I’ll write you a letter of introduction when you leave.”

“Thank you.”

“The United States may have a short history, but it’s a paradise on earth. I hope you’ll help bring about friendly relations between our two countries.”

“Thank you.”

The doctor took his leave with a promise to join his host in a hunting excursion to the demilitarized zone. Reminded of his double-barreled English hunting gun, he drew a picture of the dark blue barrels in his mind, and his body felt as light as a feather.

He had been worried a short while ago about the results of the operation he had conducted on the patient with the stomach growth, but the gloom left him. He was full of hope and aspiration. He had completed his physical checkup and had arranged with the Foreign Ministry to process the papers the very day word came from the State Department. Within a week he would leave; he remembered Brown’s assurance.

He thought with disdain of those young fellows who, with just a university degree and no clinical experience, were prone to boast a mere trip to the States as if they had caught a falling star! Well, I shall return, and we shall see!

Again, the images of his daughter Nami and his son Wönsik leaped into his mind. His hands formed themselves into tight fists, and his face shivered. Then a wry smile spread over his face.

“Ha! I who have lived through those molelike Japs and prickly Russkis—what are the Yankees to me? Let revolution come, let the state change hands. None shall block the way of Dr. Yi Inguk. Considering how many have flown higher, what can possibly happen to me?” He wanted to shout at the void.

“Well, then, shall I go to the airlines office and check the flight schedule?”

Clamping a Florida cigar slantwise in his mouth, he hailed a passing taxi. “Bando Hotel,” he told the driver, plopping down into the bouncy cushion.

Through the windows, the clear autumn sky seemed bluer and higher than ever before.