

Charan

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Korean

Intermediate

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In the days of King Sung-jong (A.D. 1488–1495) one of Korea's noted men became governor of Pyong-an Province. Now Pyong-an stands first of all the eight provinces in the attainments of erudition and polite society. Many of her literati are good musicians, and show ability in the affairs of State.

At the time of this story there was a famous dancing girl in Pyong-an whose name was Charan. She was very beautiful, and sang and danced to the delight of all beholders. Her ability, too, was specially marked, for she understood the classics and was acquainted with history. The brightest of all the geisha was she, famous and far-renowned.

The Governor's family consisted of a son, whose age was sixteen, and whose face was comely as a picture. Though so young, he was thoroughly grounded in Chinese, and was a gifted scholar. His judgment was excellent, and he had a fine appreciation of literary form, so that the moment he lifted his pen the written line took on admirable expression. His name became known as Keydong (The Gifted Lad). The Governor had no other children, neither son nor daughter, so his heart was wrapped up in this boy. On his birthday he had all the officials invited and other special guests, who came to drink his health. There were present also a company of dancing-girls and a large band of musicians. The Governor, during a lull in the banquet, called his son to him, and ordered the chief of the dancing-girls to choose one of the prettiest of their number, that he and she might dance together and delight the assembled guests. On hearing this, the company, with one accord, called for Charan, as the one suited by her talents, attainments and age to be a fitting partner for his son. They came

out and danced like fairies, graceful as the wavings of the willow, light and airy as the swallow. All who saw them were charmed. The Governor, too, greatly pleased, called Charan to him, had her sit on the dais, treated her to a share in the banquet, gave her a present of silk, and commanded that from that day forth she be the special dancing maiden to attend upon his son.

From this birthday forth they became fast friends together. They thought the world of each other. More than all the delightful stories of history was their love—such as had never been seen.

The Governor's term of office was extended for six years more, and so they remained in the north country. Finally, at the time of return, he and his wife were in great anxiety over their son being separated from Charan. If they were to force them to separate, they feared he would die of a broken heart. If they took her with them, she not being his wife, they feared for his reputation. They could not possibly decide, so they concluded to refer the matter to the son himself. They called him and said, "Even parents cannot decide as to the love of their son for a maiden. What ought we to do? You love Charan so that it will be very hard for you to part, and yet to have a dancing-girl before you are married is not good form, and will interfere with your marriage prospects and promotion. However, the having of a second wife is a common custom in Korea, and one that the world recognizes. Do as you think best in the matter." The son replied, "There is no difficulty; when she is before my eyes, of course she is everything, but when the time comes for me to start for home she will be like a pair of worn shoes, set aside; so please do not be anxious."

The Governor and his wife were greatly delighted, and said he was a "superior man" indeed.

When the time came to part Charan cried bitterly, so that those standing by could not bear to look at her; but the son showed not the slightest sign of emotion. Those looking on were filled with wonder at his fortitude. Although he had already loved Charan for six years, he had never been separated from her for a single day, so he knew not what it meant to say Good-bye, nor did he know how it felt to be parted.

The Governor returned to Seoul to fill the office of Chief Justice, and the son came also. After this return thoughts of love for Charan possessed Keydong, though he never expressed them in word or manner. It was almost the time of the Kam-see Examination. The father, therefore, ordered his son to go with some of his friends to a neighbouring monastery to study and prepare. They went, and one night, after the day's work was over and all were asleep, the young man stole out into the courtyard. It was winter, with frost and snow and a cold, clear moon. The mountains were deep and the world was quiet, so that the slightest sound could be

heard. The young man looked up at the moon and his thoughts were full of sorrow. He so wished to see Charan that he could no longer control himself, and fearing that he would lose his reason, he decided that very night to set out for far-distant Pyong-an. He had on a fur head-dress, a thick coat, a leather belt and a heavy pair of shoes. When he had gone less than ten lee, however, his feet were blistered, and he had to go into a neighbouring village and change his leather shoes for straw sandals, and his expensive head-cover for an ordinary servant's hat. He went thus on his way, begging as he went. He was often very hungry, and when night came, was very, very cold. He was a rich man's son and had always dressed in silk and eaten dainty fare, and had never in his life walked more than a few feet from his father's door. Now there lay before him a journey of hundreds of miles. He went stumbling along through the snow, making but poor progress. Hungry, and frozen nearly to death, he had never known such suffering before. His clothes were torn and his face became worn down and blackened till he looked like a goblin. Still on he went, little by little, day after day, till at last, when a whole month had gone by, he reached Pyong-an.

Straight to Charan's home he went, but Charan was not there, only her mother. She looked at him, but did not recognize him. He said he was the former Governor's son and that out of love for Charan he had walked five hundred lee. "Where is she?" he asked. The mother heard, but instead of being pleased was very angry. She said, "My daughter is now with the son of the new Governor, and I never see her at all; she never comes home, and she has been away for two or three months. Even though you have made this long journey there is no possible way to meet her."

She did not invite him in, so cold was her welcome. He thought to himself, "I came to see Charan, but she is not here. Her mother refuses me; I cannot go back, and I cannot stay. What shall I do?" While thus in this dilemma a plan occurred to him. There was a scribe in Pyong-an, who, during his father's term of office, had offended, and was sentenced to death. There were extenuating circumstances, however, and he, when he went to pay his morning salutations, had besought and secured his pardon. His father, out of regard for his son's petition, had forgiven the scribe. He thought, "I was the means of saving the man's life, he will take me in," so he went straight from Charan's to the house of the scribe. But at first this writer did not recognize him. When he gave his name and told who he was, the scribe gave a great start, and fell at his feet making obeisance. He cleared out an inner room and made him comfortable, prepared dainty fare and treated him with all respect.

A little later he talked over with his host the possibility of his meeting Charan. The scribe said, "I am afraid that there is no way for you to meet her alone, but if you would like to see even her face, I think I can manage it. Will

you consent?”

He asked as to the plan. It was this: It being now a time of snow, daily coolies were called to sweep it away from the inner court of the Governor's yamen, and just now the scribe was in charge of this particular work. Said he, “If you will join the sweepers, take a broom and go in; you will no doubt catch a glimpse of Charan as she is said to be in the Hill Kiosk. I know of no other plan.”

Keydong consented. In the early morning he mixed with the company of sweepers and went with his broom into the inner enclosure, where the Hill Kiosk was, and so they worked at sweeping. Just then the Governor's son was sitting by the open window and Charan was by him, but not visible from the outside. The other workers, being all practised hands, swept well; Keydong alone handled his broom to no advantage, knowing not how to sweep. The Governor's son, watching the process, looked out and laughed, called Charan and invited her to see this sweeper. Charan stepped out into the open hall and the sweeper raised his eyes to see. She glanced at him but once, and but for a moment, then turned quickly, went into the room, and shut the door, not appearing again, to the disappointment of the sweeper, who came back in despair to the scribe's house.

Charan was first of all a wise and highly gifted woman. One look had told her who the sweeper was. She came back into the room and began to cry. The Governor's son looked in surprise and displeasure, and asked, “Why do you cry?” She did not reply at once, but after two or three insistent demands told the reason thus: “I am a low class woman; you are mistaken in thinking highly of me, or counting me of worth. Already I have not been home for two whole months and more. This is a special compliment and a high honour, and so there is not the slightest reason for any complaint on my part. But still, I think of my home, which is poor, and my mother. It is customary on the anniversary of my father's death to prepare food from the official quarters, and offer a sacrifice to his spirit, but here I am imprisoned and to-morrow is the sacrificial day. I fear that not a single act of devotion will be paid, I am disturbed over it, and that's why I cry.”

The Governor's son was so taken in by this fair statement that he trusted her fully and without a question. Sympathetically he asked, "Why didn't you tell me before?" He prepared the food and told her to hurry home and carry out the ceremony. So Charan came like flaming fire back to her house, and said to her mother, "Keydong has come and I have seen him. Is he not here? Tell me where he is if you know." The mother said, "He came here, it is true, all the way on foot to see you, but I told him that you were in the yamen and that there was no possible way for you to meet, so he went away and where he is I know not."

Then Charan broke down and began to cry. "Oh, my mother, why had you the heart to do so cruelly?" she sobbed. "As far as I am concerned I can never break with him nor give him up. We were each sixteen when chosen to dance together, and while it may be said that men chose us, it is truer still to say that God hath chosen. We grew into each other's lives, and there was never such love as ours. Though he forgot and left me, I can never forget and can never give him up. The Governor, too, called me the beloved wife of his son, and did not once refer to my low station. He cherished me and gave me many gifts. 'Twas all like heaven and not like earth. To the city of Pyong-an gentry and officials gather as men crowd into a boat; I have seen so many, but for grace and ability no one was ever like Keydong. I must find him, and even though he casts me aside I never shall forget him. I have not kept myself even unto death as I should have, because I have been under the power and influence of the Governor. How could he ever have come so far for one so low and vile? He, a gentleman of the highest birth, for the sake of a wretched dancing-girl has endured all this hardship and come so far. Could you not have thought, mother, of these things and given him at least some kindly welcome? Could my heart be other than broken?" And a great flow of tears came from Charan's eyes. She thought and thought as to where he could possibly be. "I know of no place," said she, "unless it be at such and such a scribe's home." Quick as thought she flew thence, and there they met. They clasped each other and cried, not a word was spoken. Thus came they back to Charan's home side by side. When it was night Charan said, "When to-morrow comes we shall have to part. What shall we do?" They talked it over, and agreed to make their escape that night. So Charan [23] got together her clothing, and her treasures and jewels, and made two bundles, and thus, he carrying his on his back and she hers on her head, away they went while the city slept. They followed the road that leads toward the mountains that lie between Yang-tok and Maing-san counties. There they found a country house, where they put up, and where the Governor's son became a sort of better-class servant. He did not know how to do anything well, but Charan understood weaving and sewing, and so they lived. After some time they got a little thatched hut by themselves in the village and lived there. Charan was a beautiful sewing-woman, and ceased not day and night to ply her needle, and sold her treasures and her jewels to make ends

meet. Charan, too, knew how to make friends, and was praised and loved by all the village. Everybody felt sorry for the hard times that had befallen this mysterious young couple, and helped them so that the days passed peacefully and happily together.

To return in the story: On awaking in the morning in the temple where he and his friends had gone to study, they found Keydong missing. All was in a state of confusion as to what had become of the son of the Chief Justice. They hunted for him far and wide, but he was nowhere to be found, so word was sent to the parents accordingly. There was untold consternation in the home of the former governor. So great a loss, what could equal it? They searched the country about the temple, but no trace or shadow of him was to be found. Some said they thought he had been inveigled away and metamorphosed by the fox; others that he had been eaten by the tiger. The parents decided that he was dead and went into mourning for him, burning his clothing in a sacrificial fire.

In Pyong-an the Governor's son, when he found that he had lost Charan, had Charan's mother imprisoned and all the relatives, but after a month or so, when the search proved futile, he gave up the matter and let them go.

Charan, at last happy with her chosen one, said one day to him, "You, a son of the gentry, for the sake of a dancing-girl have given up parents and home to live in this hidden corner of the hills. It is a matter, too, that touches your filial piety, this leaving your father and mother in doubt as to whether you are alive or not. They ought to know. We cannot live here all our lives, neither can we return home; what do you think we ought to do?" Keydong made a hopeless reply. "I am in distress," said he, "and know not."

Charan said brightly, "I have a plan by which we can cover over the faults of the past, and win a new start for the future. By means of it, you can [25]serve your parents and look the world in the face. Will you consent?"

"What do you propose?" asked he. Her reply was, "There is only one way, and that is by means of the Official Examination. I know of no other. You will understand what I mean, even though I do not tell you more."

He said, "Enough, your plan is just the thing to help us out. But how can I get hold of the books I need?"

Charan replied, "Don't be anxious about that, I'll get the books." From that day forth she sent through all the neighbourhood for books, to be secured at all costs; but there were few or none, it being a mountain village. One day there came by, all unexpectedly, a pack-peddler, who had in his bundle a book that he wished to sell. Some of the village people wanted to buy it for wall-paper. Charan, however, secured it first and showed it to

Keydong. It was none other than a special work for Examinations, with all the exercises written out. It was written in small characters, and was a huge book containing several thousand exercises. Keydong was delighted, and said, "This is enough for all needed preparation." She bought it and gave it to him, and there he pegged away day after day. In the night he studied by candle-light, while she sat by his side and did silk-spinning. Thus they shared the light together. If he showed any remissness, Charan urged him on, and thus they worked for two years. To begin with, he, being a highly talented scholar, made steady advancement day by day. He was a beautiful writer and a master of the pen. His compositions, too, were without a peer, and every indication pointed to his winning the highest place in the Kwago (Examination).

At this time a proclamation was issued that there would be a special examination held before His Majesty the King, so Charan made ready the food required and all necessaries for him to go afoot to Seoul to try his hand.

At last here he was, within the Palace enclosure. His Majesty came out into the examination arena and posted up the subject. Keydong took his pen and wrote his finished composition. Under the inspiration of the moment his lines came forth like bubbling water. It was finished.

When the announcement was made as to the winner, the King ordered the sealed name of the writer to be opened. It was, and they found that Keydong was first. At that time his father was Prime Minister and waiting in attendance upon the King. The King called the Prime Minister, and said, "It looks to me as though the winner was your son, but he writes that his father is Chief Justice and not Prime Minister; what can that mean?" He handed the composition paper to the father, and asked him to look and see. The Minister gazed at it in wonder, burst into tears, and said, "It is your servant's son. Three years ago he went with some friends to a monastery to study, but one night he disappeared, and though I searched far and wide I have had no word of him since. I concluded that he had been destroyed by some wild animal, so I had a funeral service held and the house went into mourning. I had no other children but this son only. He was greatly gifted and I lost him in this strange way. The memory has never left me, for it seems as though I had lost him but yesterday. Now that I look at this paper I see indeed that it is the writing of my son. When I lost him I was Chief Justice, and thus he records the office; but where he has been for these three years, and how he comes now to take part in the examination, I know not."

The King, hearing this, was greatly astonished, and at once before all the assembled ministers had him called. Thus he came in his scholar's dress into the presence of the King. All the officials wondered at this summoning of a candidate before the announcement of the result. The King asked him why he had left the monastery and

where he had been for these three years. He bowed low, and said, "I have been a very wicked man, have left my parents, have broken all the laws of filial devotion, and deserve condign punishment." The King replied, saying, "There is no law of concealment before the King. I shall not condemn you even though you are guilty; tell me all." Then he told his story to the King. All the officials on each side bent their ears to hear. The King sighed, and said to the father, "Your son has repented and made amends for his fault. He has won first place and now stands as a member of the Court. We cannot condemn him for his love for this woman. Forgive him for all the past and give him a start for the future." His Majesty said further, "The woman Charan, who has shared your life in the lonely mountains, is no common woman. Her plans, too, for your restoration were the plans of a master hand. She is no dancing-girl, this Charan. Let no other be your lawful wife but she only; let her be raised to equal rank with her husband, and let her children and her children's children hold highest office in the realm." So was Keydong honoured with the winner's crown, and so the Prime Minister received his son back to life at the hands of the King. The winner's cap was placed upon his head, and the whole house was whirled into raptures of joy.

So the Minister sent forth a palanquin and servants to bring up Charan. In a great festival of joy she was proclaimed the wife of the Minister's son. Later he became one of Korea's first men of State, and they lived their happy life to a good old age. They had two sons, both graduates and men who held high office.

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