

KOREAN POETRY

THERE is nothing more interesting than a good dialect story, but literature contains nothing more really deceptive. The reason is that the raciness of it, due to oddities of idiom and pronunciation, is utterly unfelt by the people of whom it is the ordinary mode of speech. The negro dialect is often irresistibly funny or irresistibly pathetic, not to the negro himself but to those who are impressed with his peculiarities of accent, idiom or use of illustration.

When a foreigner sees a Korean for the first time he feels like laughing because of the apparent absurdity of certain parts of his costume. Pidgin English affects new-comers in the same way, but neither the Korean with his funny hat, nor the Chinaman with his outlandish talk can see anything amusing in it nor anything to laugh about. Rudyard Kipling's Terence Mulvaney is quite irresistible, but you laugh when he would be sad and you feel for your handkerchief when he, perhaps, is miles from tears.

Now it is in some such way as this that we are juggled when it comes to the poetry of other peoples, especially of people so radically different from the Anglo Saxon race as are these eastern Asiatics. If we are after a real knowledge of these people rather than an hour's amusement it will be better worth our while to inquire how this or that odd turn of expression affects the native who uses it than how it affects the foreigner. When a Korean says to you "Is not the great man's stomach empty?" you understand him to say, "Are you not hungry, sir?" It means nothing more than that to him and if it means more to you it is simply because you are not accustomed to the peculiarities of his speech.

This is my reason for rejecting all literal translations of Korean songs or poetry. It would mean something different to most readers of *The Repository* than it does to the Korean. The thing wanted is to convey the same idea or to awaken the same sensation in the reader as is conveyed to or is awakened in the native by their poetry.

The first difficulty lies in the fact that much of Korean poetry is so condensed. Diction seems to have little or nothing to do with their poetry. A half dozen Chinese Characters, if properly collocated, may convey to him more thought than an eight line stanza does to us. As you pass through a picture gallery, each picture is a completed unit in itself conveying a whole congeries of ideas and sending the mind, it may be, through a whole range of memories. Supposing that instead of the picture which is intended to portray the idea of devotion there should simply be the word devotion written on a placard and hung against the wall or perhaps a few words illustrative of devotion. That would illustrate in a certain way the difference between Korean and English poetry. In the one case the ear is the medium, in the other case the eye. It is for this reason that there is no such thing in the whole East as

oratory. There is no *art* of speech; it is entirely utilitarian. Allow me to illustrate this pregnancy of meaning in single characters as used by Koreans. Take the two characters 落花. The first of these is called *nak* meaning to fall, and the second is *wha* meaning a flower. In other words *fallen flower*. The allusion is historical and when these characters meet the eye of an educated Korean they convey to his mind something of the meaning of the following lines.

In Pak Jé's * halls is heard a sound of woe.
The craven King, with prescience of his fate,
Has fled, by all his warrior knights encinct.
Nor wizard's art, nor reeking sacrifice,
Nor martial host can stem the tidal wave
Of Silla's vengeance. Flight, the coward's boon,
Is his; but by his flight his queen is worse
Than widowed; left a prey to war's caprice,
The invader's insult and the conqueror's jest.
Silent she sits among her trembling maids
Whose loud lament and cham'rous grief bespeak
Their anguish less than hers. But lo, she smiles,
And, beckoning with her hand, she leads them forth
Beyond the city's walls, as when, in days of peace,
She held high holiday in nature's haunts.
But now behind them sounds the horrid din
Of ruthless war, and on they speed to where
A beetling precipice frowns ever at
Itself within the mirror of a pool
By spirits haunted. Now the steep is scaled.
With flashing eye and heaving breast she turns
And kindles thus heroic flame where erst
Were ashes of despair. "The insulting foe
Has boasted loud that he will cull the flowers
Of Pak Jé. Let him learn his boast is vain,
For never shall they say that Pak Jé's queen
Was less than queenly. Lo! The spirits wait
In yon dark pool. Though deep the abyss and harsh
Death's summons, we shall fall into their arms
As on a bed of down and pillow there
Our heads in conscious innocence." This said,

*One of the ancient kingdom of southern Korea.

She calls them to the brink. Hand clasped in hand,
In sisterhood of grief an instant thus they stand,
Then forth into the void they leap, brave hearts!
Dike drifting petals of the plum soft blown
By April's perfumed breath, so fell the flowers

Of Pak Jé, but, in falling, rose aloft
To honor's pinnacle * * *

The Korean delights in introducing political allusions into his folk-tales. It is only a line here and a line there, for his poetry is nothing if not spontaneous. He does not sit down and work out long cantos, but he sings like a bird when he cannot help singing.

One of the best of this style is found in the story of Cho Ung who, after nailing to the palace gate his defiance of the usurper of his master's throne, fled to a monastery in the south and after studying the science of war for several years came forth to destroy that usurper. The first day he became possessed in a marvellous manner of a sword and steed and at night, still wearing the priest's garments, enjoyed the hospitality of a country gentleman.

As he stood at the window of his chamber looking out upon the moonlit scene he heard the sound of a zither which must have been touched by fairy fingers for though no words were sung the music interpreted itself.

Sad heart, sad heart, thou waitest long,
For love's deep fountain thirsting.
Must winter linger in my soul
Tho' April's buds are bursting?

The forest deep, at love's behest,
Its heart of oak hath riven,
This lodge to rear, where i might greet
My hero, fortune-driven

But heartless fortune, mocking me,
My knight far hence hath banished,
And in his place this cowl-drawn monk
From whom love's hope hath vanished.

This throbbing zither I have ta'en
To speed my heart's fond message
And call from heaven the *won-ang** bird,
Love's sign and joy's sure presage.

But fate, mid-heaven, hath caged the bird
That, only, love's note utters;

And it its stead a *ga-chi*† foul
Into my bosom flutters.

*A bird which chooses its mate for life and is thus a type of marital love and fidelity.

† The common magpie.

Piqued at this equivocal praise, Cho Ung draws out his flute, his constant companion, and answers his unseen critic in notes that mean.

Ten years among the halls of learning I have shunned
The shrine of love, life's synonym; and dreamt, vain youth,
That having conquered nature's secrets I could not wrest
From life its crowning jewel, love. 'Twas not to be.
To-night I hear a voice from some far sphere that bids
The lamp of love to burn, forsooth, but pours no oil
Into its chalice. Woe is me; full well I know
There is no bridge that spans the gulf from earth to heaven.
E'en though I deem her queen, in yon fair moon enthroned,
The nearest of her kin, can I breath soft enough
Into this lute to make earth silence hold that she
May hear, or shrill so loud to pierce the firmament
And force the ear of the night?

However that way be, he soon solved the difficulty by jumping over the mud wall which separated them, and obtaining her promise to become his wife, which promise she fulfilled after he had led an army against the usurper and had driven him from the throne.

Korean poetry is all of a lyric nature. There is nothing that can be compared with the epic. We do not ask the lark to sing a whole symphony, nor do we ask the Asiatic to give us long historical or narrative accounts in verse. Their language does not lend itself to that form of expression. It is all nature music pure and simple. It is all passion, sensibility, emotion. It deals with personal, domestic, even trivial matters often-times, and in this respect it may be called narrow, but we must not forget that the lives of these people are narrow, their horizon circumscribed. This explains in

part why they lavish such a world of passion on such trivial matters. It is because in their small world these things are relatively great. The swaying of a willow bough, the erratic flight of a butterfly, the falling of a petal, the drone of a passing bee means more to him than to one whose life is broader.

Here we have the fisherman's evening song as he returns from work.

As darts the sun his setting rays
Athwart the shimmering mere,
My fishing-line reluctantly
I furl and shoreward steer.

Far out along the foam-tipped waves
The shower-fairies trip,
Where sea-gulls, folding weary wing,
Alternate rise and dip.

A willow withe through silver gills,
My tophies I display.
To yonder wine-shop first I'll hie,
Then homeward wend my way.

In the following we again find a similar strain. A Korean setting of our "Oh, for a lodge in some vast wilderness."

Weary of the ceaseless clamor,
Of the false smile and the glamor
Of the place they call the world;
Like the sailor home returning,
For the wave no longer yearning,
I my sail of life have furled.

Deep within this mountain fastness,
Minified by nature's vastness,
Hermit-wise, a lodge I'll build.
Clouds shall form the frescoed cieling,
Heaven's blue depths but half revealing,
Sun-beam rafted, star-light filled.

In a lakelet deep I'll fetter
Yon fair moon- Oh who ould better
Nature's self incarcerate?
Though, for ransom, worlds be offered,

I would scorn the riches proffered;
Keep her still, and laugh at fate.

And when Autumn's hand shall scatter
Leaves upon my floor, what matter,
Since I have the wind for broom?
Cleaning house I will not reckon
Only to the storm-spirits beckon;
With their floods they'll cleanse each room.

We can not charge the Korean with lack of imagination but rather, at times, with the exuberance of it.

H. B. HULBERT.

Type errors have been reproduced for historical accuracy.