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CATTLE

by Zôn Yông-Teg

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!”

The round moon lingers quietly over the hill behind the village, and the sun has not yet risen, but a speckled cock crows shrilly with wide open beak, seemingly the first to wake of all the inhabitants.

“Cluck! Cluck!”

A hen which had just laid an egg got down from her nest and clucked loudly in answer.

“Cluck! Cluck!”

The hen clucked loudly once again as if to announce, “I have just laid an egg!”

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!”

The speckled cock came quickly to the hen and crowed once more as if he had laid the egg himself.

The fat mistress of the house had been hulling barley diligently in the dark kitchen, and had had no time to roll up her loose curly hair, but now she came rushing out with her hands covered in barley bran, and without brushing it off she rushed to the nest. She kicked aside the pup which had got tangled up with her feet. She looked in the nest and, open-mouthed with pride, said, “Oh, what a big egg! I am pleased with my daughter!” She murmured these words as if to console the hen and picked the egg up. Then she opened the creaking wooden door of the store house, and put the egg carefully into a jar in the furthest corner of the store-room. She took another look into the egg-jar and then seized a handful of barley from another jar which stood nearby. She came out of the storeroom and scattered the grains in front of it. The cock and the hen gobbled them up greedily.

The fat woman went back to hull the barley in the mortar in the kitchen, but found the puppy licking the bran on the mallet. “Oh, bother!” she cried, “Off with you, puppy!” She grabbed a worn-out broom and, holding it the wrong way up, chased the pup away with it. Then she set to work again.

“Czid-czôd-czô.”

While she hulled the barley in the mortar, her mind wandered to the eggs in the store-room. “If the hens lay a few more,” she thought, “there will be enough for three straw bundles, ten eggs to each bundle. Our hens each lay an egg a day without fail, while our neighbours’ hens only lay an egg every two or three days! Now there will be three bundles exactly, with four eggs left over. Next market day I shall sell them, and how much will I get? When, I sell them I shall buy one more hen. If the four hens, including the three I have already, lay an egg a day, there will soon be ten bundles. Then I will sell them and buy a pig. No, it would be better if I bought a heifer instead of a pig, though of course it will cost more. Then it will grow up into a cow and the cow will bear a calf. And then when there are ten cows—that will be wonderful! Then we can sell some of them and buy ricefields and a big house, and our eldest son will marry, too “

All this day-dreaming took her mind off her work, and she just put barley in and out of the mortar mechanically. Just then the master of the house came in. He had got up early to go shopping in the town and had gone into the stable to drive the

cow out. And finding his wife smiling happily, he asked, "What's made you smile so happily to yourself?"

"Isn't it wonderful? Our hens each lay an egg a day without fail. There will soon be three bundles. We'll sell them and buy some more hens, won't we?"

Her husband guessed at once what she was driving at. She was always looking for some way to make money and would never let their young son eat even one egg. He thought she was unreasonable in this, and sometimes he hated her for it. So he replied with a scornful laugh,

"Don't think so much about it. You will cook eggs for the young lad and yourself too, won't you?"

His wife was surprised at his words, and replied, "What do you mean? Since I do not serve even egg-soup with pickled shrimps on your table, how can I or the lad eat it? The next hen we get by selling the eggs will be my profit, won't it?"

"Oh, I nearly forgot. To-morrow is your birthday, isn't it? I think I'll go to the market and buy some meat."

She replied in a frightened manner, "Are you out of your mind? What's the good of a birthday, and talking of meat? We can have it some other time."

She meant that sometime in the distant future, when they had made great profits and were wealthy, they would buy meat. In the evening as she was weaving sheets, she saw her husband bring some meat home. She scolded him without getting up from the loom.

"Are you crazy?" she cried, "Who said to get meat? It's not three years since we vowed not to, so what do you mean by it? You have warned me day and night that I am careless. And now you are making a fool of yourself over this."

Her husband threw the meat on the pile of firewood in the kitchen.

He got some water from the jar and washed his face. As he swept the garden he thought over the happenings of the past three years.

Mr. Hong was a young man of a bit over thirty, who had come to the mountain village of Oyôul in the County of Czunczôn in Gangwôn province some three years previously and had since been engaged in farming. He was a man of few words and cautious by nature, so that he was reputed by the villagers to be a gentleman and was well received by them, though he did not associate with the young men. The villagers were not certain of where he came from or what he was doing before he came to the village. Some had heard that he had once studied in Japan and had taught in a school and had worked for a time in a government office in some county or other. He used to act as letter-writer for the villagers, so that he was nicknamed 'The Honourable Hong', but no one knew who first called him that.

When he came to the village, the Honorable Hong had several basic principles determined in his mind. The first one was never to leave the farming country; the second was to keep cattle and to work on his land as hard as an ox; and the third to make everything for himself and to buy nothing in the market. His wife supported him in his determination. she bought no cloth from the shop but wove it all herself; and she promised to buy no meat from the butcher. They vowed that they would not relax their determination until their son Yông-Dôg, who was then just over two years old, should reach the age of ten.

They cooked a chicken for the first time when an intimate friend came to visit them from Czunczôn. They never even ate an egg or bought a pair of the rubber shoes which were so popular. Hong used to wear an old pair of European shoes when he went out visiting, but they usually made sandals for themselves from hemp.

The Honourable Hong's sole amusement was to feed the cattle, while his wife busied herself looking after the fowls. He held that the Korean people ought to love cattle and keep them in every house. He had several hives of bees and used to give the honey to his son, and he advised the villagers to keep bees too.

"Daddy! Please come out and look!"

Yong-Dôg opened the door of the inner room and shouted as if something important had happened. He gazed at his father, who had already been up and gone outside but had come back to bed and had dozed off again.

Yong-Dôg was now more than ten years old; and the Honourable Hong was by now quite well off. He had bought some rice land and had built a detached house. He kept two head of cattle and had more than ten pigs, including those being looked after for him by others. This morning he had got up very early and cleaned out the cowshed and had fed the cow solicitously with boiled fodder. The cow was with calf. She ate the food and the calf was born immediately. The Honourable Hong was so glad that he washed the calf himself with warm water and put an opened-out sack over the cow's back. He tended the cow as if she had been a human mother who had given birth to a child, for the early autumn morning was quite chilly. He had caught a slight chill, and so he had gone back to bed when he came inside.

"Daddy! Daddy! The cow has a calf. And the calf can walk already. Do come out and see it."

"I've seen it. I've seen it."

The Honourable Hong looked at Yong-dôg for a while and nodded.

Then he yielded to his son's pleading and came out. He gazed at the cow which lay on the ground licking her calf. His wife came out from the kitchen where she had been cooking breakfast. "How big the newborn calf is!" he said to her.

"I have never seen such a big calf before," she replied. "Is it a bull calf? It shall belong to Yong-Dôg. Next time when a heifer is born it will be mine. Yong-Dog, this is your calf. What do you think of that?"

"How do you know that the next one will be a heifer?" said Hong.

"If this one belongs to Yong-Dog, he must feed it. Do you think he is old enough to look after a calf?" He seemed to be delighted at the thought that his young son would soon be old enough to look after the calf and ride on it, and he smiled at his wife who chattered heedlessly like a child in her happiness. He unbarred the gate, which he had forgotten till then, and, looking back once more at Yong-Dôg, went into the room. As she gazed at the calf, his wife seemed to be turning something over in her mind.

"It would be better if we bought another calf to be mine," she said, "Then the two cows will each bear one calf, and the mew calves that will be born will each produce calves, and then, ... "

At that moment the creaking of the wooden gate startled her and put an end to her dreaming. Zang-Son's mother, who lived next door, entered the house slowly.

"Mrs. Hong! You've got a new calf. How big it is!"

"This calf belongs to Yong-Dôg," replied Mrs. Hong, who had been looking only at the calf. She was proud of it and stroked Yong-Dôg's hair as he stood beside her. Zang-Son's mother stood hesitantly, hiding a gourd-dish behind her back. At last she ventured to whisper in Mrs. Hong's ear, and begged her to lend her two dwoe of barley.

"Zang-Son's mother, we haven't got any to spare today. We have delivered ours to the government, and some of it we lent to other people. I'm afraid we may

run short of food ourselves before barley-sowing time comes.”

Mrs. Hong shook her head and refused at once. Zang-son’s mother was embarrassed and perplexed and almost ran from the house. The Honourable Hong came out of the inner room and watched the woman’s retreating back. He felt very sorry for her and was almost moved to tears. She was dressed in rags and her emaciated body showed through the rents in her torn jacket. Her legs and feet showed beneath her ragged skirt which was made from a hempen sack opened out. Much worse would be the hungry children, he could imagine, who must have cried themselves to sleep. He thought of the poor mother who could stand it no longer, and he felt very sorry indeed for her.

The Honourable Hong called out to his wife and the woman, but his wife disappeared without replying, and the woman left the house in silence. He started to sweep the garden. After a little while he went round to the back garden and chided his wife for being so hard hearted toward her neighbours. He asked her to take some rice to the woman at once.

“If you are so sorry for her you had better take her some yourself. Why should I go to the trouble of carrying a gourd-dish of rice about the village. That woman doesn’t know her manners. She should have returned what she borrowed before, and then she could have come to ask for more. She shouldn’t expect us to supply her with everything. If I had anything to spare for her, I would give it to my sister ... Even the Government cannot overcome poverty, they say, don’t they? I can’t do it myself, I can’t do it.”

His wife, whose lips were somewhat protruding by nature, pouted more than ever, and she went out of the house to go to the well. The Honourable Hong pulled a wry face and finished sweeping the garden. He once more brushed the cow that had given birth to the calf, and he muttered as he cleaned out the stable, “Poverty, poverty.”

He thought of the sorrows of poverty, the conditions under which the villagers lived, and he often deliberated on ways of eliminating poverty. He did not think that his wife had been so heartless in the early days, but now that they were well off, she had become so.

That same evening, in the twilight that followed the setting of the hot August sun, he went out to watch the cow as it grazed by the brook near the village. There he met Zang-Son, who had been cutting grass on the bank. At the memory of what had happened in the morning he felt very sorry for him. Zang-Son turned away in shame, but Hong went up to him and started to talk to him.

“Come to me later,” he said. “I will give you some secretly. Bring a bag.”

“It’s not harvest time yet. We have been starving for days now, with grandmother, who is eighty, and the young children. Mother must have gone to your house because she couldn’t stand it any longer, though I did tell her not to. We could manage breakfast by cutting grain in the field.

Then Honourable Hong could do no more than nod his head in silence.

“By the way, Honourable Hong. I would like to ask you just one favour. Could you get me a calf, to keep my family alive? If you would be so kind as to get one for me, I will work hard farming with it, and we will not come to your house to borrow rice any more.”

Zang-Son gazed at the Honourable Hong’s cow with its calf. He put down the sickle he had been using to cut grass and clasped his hands as if to bow in the most respectful way. Zang-Son had lost his father long before, and now had to support his

grandmother, mother, and younger brothers. He was the tenant of a farm, and also rented one of the Honourable Hong's fields, and from these managed to eke out a bare living. He had been a bachelor until he reached the age of twenty-five, but he had been able to marry in the autumn of the previous year through the favour of a man who had offered him his daughter because he was so hard working.

The Honourable Hong merely nodded, without any word of agreement or refusal. He was favorably impressed with Zang-Son, because he was sincere by nature, did not smoke or drink, and was very hardworking too. He had made him a present of rice when he married, and he felt very sympathetic towards him. He felt that it was not right that such an honest man should suffer as much as he did. And he was very favourably disposed to the young man's idea that he should keep a cow.

He recalled those days when he too had suffered much. Before he came to Gangwôn Province, he had been to Inczôn and then to Seoul. He had known very hard times when he was farming in the Ambyôn district. He thought that, if a man were helped when he was in difficulties, he would be able to turn back the tide. The people of Korea had been oppressed, cheated and robbed, and had never received help. It was right that men should work together and help one another. The Honourable Hong, who held such opinions, felt Zang-Son's predicament as if it had been his own. To tell the truth he had been very deeply in debt to a friend of his in Czunczôn who had helped him and backed him so that he could settle in this province of Gangwôn and become self-supporting. He had elder brothers and a wealthy uncle, but he preferred to support himself and not be dependent on others. He had made up his mind that, if he always worked for wages, he would end up as a beggar, so in the end he turned back to living in the country. He took up farming as soon as he arrived, and he kept hens and bees as a sideline. Of course he had a more important reason for taking up farming and passing for a man of no education, for he thought that when times became harder he would not otherwise be able to be his own master.

"Now we must work hard and save every penny, so that we may bring up our children to a better life. And then they will not be forced by poverty to beg from others."

This was the agreement he made with his wife. Since they owned some land and his wife was fortunately vigorous and hardworking, he could support himself without leaning too much on others.

"Let me see now. If you can support your family in that way, how glad I would be to have you as my neighbour and cousin, as the proverb says."

Thus he gave Zang-Son no definite answer, but went home and considered the matter very carefully that evening.

"There are others in the village besides Zang-Son who are in the same position. Surely they could support themselves, if only they had some cattle ... " He thought it over carefully, and made up his mind to start with Zang-Son.

"Now I may be obliged to leave this village," Hong murmured to himself, as he looked at the mountain Namsan and the road that crossed the pass beside it. He gazed vacantly at the road where his wife had gone a few days before in the early morning, despite all his entreaties that she should stay.

In accordance with his promise to Zang-Son, indefinite though it was, he took him a calf. He was merely fulfilling his offer, but it caused a quarrel with his wife. He gave Zang-Son the calf with no strings attached, but Zang-Son asked him what his conditions were. He was annoyed by the question and replied, "Don't worry about

things like that. I tell you I've just brought it for you. So now you may farm diligently with it, and I hope you may live in comfort. If you do not understand what I mean, then you had better think of me as your elder brother or father."

These were his words when he gave the calf to Zang-Son. But Zang-Son's mother was deeply grateful and came to his wife to thank her for her kindness and told her everything. His wife, who had been hoping to buy a calf for herself, was very angry that her husband should have given Zang-Son a calf without consulting her. She passed a sleepless night in her vexation, and her husband was impatient with her and most offended. Seething with indignation, he threw out the brazier which happened to be near him. Unfortunately it hurt his wife's forehead and burnt her face. She could not eat for some days and to calm her down and explain his real intention, but she stubbornly was confined to her bed. He apologised afterwards and humbly tried to calm her down and explain his real intention, but she stubbornly refused to listen to him.

His wife, burst into tears. "Do you think that I saved up all our money just for you?" she stormed. "I could not eat what I wanted, could not wear what I wanted, and even went without sleep to save it up, didn't I?"

This was the first time that they had quarrelled, and they quarrelled again when Yong-dôg got bad indigestion and was in great pain. He accused her of careless ignorance in letting their son eat too much, and she wept and moaned. This time he took no notice of her complaints and left her alone; then she left the house as if she were running home to her parents, without even waiting to spend the Autumn Festival at home.

The Honourable Hong was very lonely, as he spent the Festival with his sick young son. Some time afterwards his wife came home, but thereafter she spent more time away than she spent at home. While she was away, Zang-Son's mother, who lived next door, came in and cooked for them as if for her own family.

Five years passed by. The Honourable Hong suffered greatly during these years, as all our nation did. Yong-Dôg fell sick with pleurisy and, after a long illness, finally died. Then his wife too fell ill and was often confined to her bed, and she became very irritable. He was often called up for forced labour, and he did not have enough to eat, so that he became very weak too. Nevertheless he carried on farming as usual, and expended much effort in keeping cattle and bees. Meanwhile he bought cattle one by one for those villagers who had none. And now at last there was no one in the village who did not own any cattle. Thus at the end of ten years, the villagers of Oyôul were much more prosperous than they had ever been before. So they were all deeply grateful to the Honourable Hong and sympathised with him in his trouble. "Now we are much better off than we have ever been before," they said, "and all of it we owe to him. But we must admit that his family is most unfortunate,"

The detested war under the oppressive rule of the Japanese came to an end, and the whole peninsula of Korea was filled with joy at the liberation. A few days after August 15th the Honorable Hong heard the news and instructed the villagers to take over the administration and maintain order and to follow the policies of the government which would be set up. He advised them to do nothing hasty or thoughtless. Only once did he go up to the town of Czunczôn, and he worked busily as usual preparing for autumn, caring for his cattle and looking after the bees.

Now winter passed, and the new year came with the spring. The Honourable Hong was again preparing to work in the fields. His wife was dissatisfied. "All your friends have gone to Czunczôn or Seoul," she said. They have got good jobs for

themselves and are making a success of things. Do you mean us to work ourselves to death buried here in the country in these prosperous times?"

It happened that Hong's village was located a little to the south of the 38th Parallel, but he had no intention of flinging himself upon the world as yet and he made up his mind to stay in the farming country as his determination had always been.

"There must always be someone working in the country too," he replied, to calm his wife. "If there are no farmers there will be no food, and how can the people live then? Let us continue to live in this village as we have always done.

"But I can't stand it here at all," replied his wife. "I am no longer strong enough to work hard, and I haven't even got the inclination these days. Men toil hard that they may some time live at ease. Who would live under such conditions of suffering all his life? Now let us go to a big city so that we may eat as we wish and see the sights. Then we will be as happy as the others there, won't we?" So she went on complaining as much as ever and seemed very anxious to go to the city. Her idea was that they had always worked hard as farmers in the village so that they could one day live in relative luxury on the money they had saved.

"What you say sounds reasonable enough, but even if we do suddenly move to a city, what can we expect there? Do you think that there will be any place as suitable for us to live in as this?" replied Hong, and he insisted that they should not leave the village.

"Then you can live here alone. I'm not staying", said his wife.

"I shall sell my cow and go to Czunczôn or Seoul."

"Sell the cow? And what will you do then?"

"I'll set up in business. The wife of the headman from the next village did very well trading with the North, I have heard ... "

"Do you think you will be any good at business? And isn't the cow one of the family? What do you mean by selling one of our family? Do you think you will make much profit out of it? You mean to give up all our fortune, indeed!"

"Never mind all that. I shall sell my cow as I wish. Do you mean that I am not to do as I please with my own? If I don't sell it, we might well lose it, mightn't we? Zang-Son lost his cow, so why shouldn't ours be the next?"

Zang-Son's cow had disappeared a few days previously, and she was still complaining about her husband having bought the cow for him in the past.

"It may be yours, but how can you bear to sell the cow which has served us so obediently until now? Perhaps no one in the village will buy it, and then if you sell it in the market it will surely be killed for meat, won't it?"

"Hum! Why such sympathy for a mere cow? It's only an animal."

"A mere animal, indeed! Isn't it one of our most precious possessions? A man often complains and does not do all he should, but a cow works silently and obediently, don't you see that? Why are you complaining so much these days?"

"I don't know. It's just that I don't like living here."

His wife began to cry. Hong considered quietly, and it seemed to him that he was forcing his own opinion on her too much. He suddenly felt very sorry for her. He was shocked and on the verge of tears, but he gave up and lay down with his back to her and ended the discussion.

Hong slept badly and got up early next morning and went out of the house. Zang-Son came running towards him, panting.

"Mr. Hong! Mr. Hong! Oh, Mr. Hong! How can I face you?" Zang-Son's eyes

were full of tears and he could hardly go on. "They tell me that the villagers in the North killed our cow for meat," he gasped. "They say that a cow wandered to the North and was killed. It must indeed be our cow. What can we do about such scum?"

Hong flushed to the eyes, and he stood looking up at the sky without a word.

"A blind man kills his own hen, they say. They killed a cow that belonged to their own fellow countryman. How can they do that with a clear conscience?" Hong muttered, and he was much distressed all the ensuing day. He climbed up the hill behind the village and looked down on Oyôul, his village. And then he gazed at the "North Land" beyond. All day long he wept and ate no food at all. He came down from the hill at nightfall when countless stars shone in the sky. He found his house in disorder and all his possessions lying scattered. It was like an empty house, and his wife sat silently mending a skirt. He sat a while at the gate of his detached house and then once more climbed the hill. As he sat on a secluded rock, he recalled to his mind his wife and the happenings of the last ten years, the village and the Fatherland, and he looked up at the stars in the sky. He gazed at the surrounding villages, dimly shrouded in the mist, and he could not distinguish South from North. He tried to decide what his future course should be, but, with tears in his eyes, he could not form any coherent idea. Just then he heard noisy voices, and found some of the young men of the village coming up. They were driving towards him through the pine trees a bull which he did not recognise. He saw Zang-Son among them. They had caught a bull which had strayed over from the North and were driving it here to kill it for meat.

"The other side killed our cow!" panted Zang-son.

All the young men clamored excitedly for it to be killed.

"You can't do that! You can't do that!" shouted Hong. "People who live in the same country mustn't do that sort of thing to one another. You must send it back. If you want meat so badly come and kill my cow." With these words he ran down to the village.

He meant to drive his own cow out to them, but when he opened the door of the cowshed he found it empty. He could not find his cow anywhere near the house when he went into the house he saw a scrap of paper on the floor. On it was written in an uneducated hand. "I am going away with my cow. Do not expect me back."

Hong stood in the middle of the room utterly dejected. He took his money from the box and gave some of it to Zang-son, so that he could buy another cow. He took the rest with him. He talked with Zang-Son's mother for a few moments and then left the house.

That was the last time anyone saw Hong in the village of Oyôul.