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THE WOMAN WHO THOUGHT THE DOCTOR WAS GOD

By Florence J. Murray

I first met Kang Doka, a tiny bright-eyed Korean woman in her fifties, when I went to Hamheung, Korea, to open the mission hospital there. It had been closed since the death of the founder Dr. Kate MacMillan the previous year. Doka, Dorcas in English, the doctor's long time helper and companion, now transferred her love and loyalty to me. Everyone called her Grandmother and she was like a grandmother to them all.

One evening feeling ill I went early to bed in my room in the hospital. A gentle knock sounded on the door. Doka entered.

"Do you feel very bad?" she asked. "I'll massage you and then you'll feel better."

"Thank you," I said. "I'd like that."

Turning down the covers she began to massage my arms and shoulders, (and while doing so she told me her story.)

The Woman Who Thought The Doctor Was God

"We used to live in Wonsan," she said. "We had four children, and my husband was kind to me, so we were happy till three of the little ones died in two days with some throat disease that was going around among the village children. There were no doctors nor hospitals and many children died. I was frantic with grief and couldn't eat nor sleep for days, till a friend who lost two little ones herself came to console me.'

"'Come with me to the house of God,' she said, 'and learn how you can see your children again.'"

"'Don't mock me,' I said. "They're dead and gone and I'll never see them again.'

"'Yes, you can,' she told me. 'Come to the house of God with me.'

"Where's the house of God?' I asked.

"'I'll come and take you on Sunday,' she said.'

"When'll that be? I wanted to know. That's how ignorant I was," And she smiled ruefully.

"Three days later my friend came. The house of God was an ordinary house with mud walls, straw thatched roof, paper windows and doors, and a hot floor, like we all lived in. But there was a strange person there dressed in odd uncomfortable looking clothes of some coarse dark material, with a big nose and feet, green eyes, and yellow hair, like no one I ever saw or heard tell of. This must be God I thought.'

The Woman Who Thought The Doctor Was God

"How could I ever have been so stupid?"

"God said good words and read something out of a book in our language, but I didn't hear anything about my children. However, when God invited sick people to come next day for free treatment, I decided to go and see what God would do."

"Several people told me they were much better since taking medicine from the house of God, but if all the sick folk in Wonsan were to be healed God would need some help. I brought sick people to be healed, carried water, kept the rooms clean, and tried to learn all I could. Turn over now and let me massage your back." I turned gratefully.

"When I was a child," she went on, resuming her gentle but firm rubbing, "there wasn't a school for girls in all Korea. People thought girls couldn't learn. Women were very ignorant. Can you believe it was almost a year before I realized Dr. MacMillan wasn't God but a woman like myself?"

"What a remarkable woman she must have been!" I exclaimed, thinking no one would make a mistake like that about me. "You're tired now and I feel better. Please don't do any more. Rest and go on with your story."

"I always did this for Dr. MacMillan when she was tired or sick and I'll do the same for you," she insisted.

"I learned many things from the doctor; how important it is to be clean, how diseases may be spread through ignorance, how babies should be fed after weaning, and how some diseases may be prevented. I learned a better way to care for wounds than by

covering them with manure and cabbage leaves. I found that bathing did no harm even when a person is sick. After a while she let me boil the instruments she used in operating, and then I began to help her with surgery. There were no trained nurses and I was her chief helper.'

"She taught me that Jesus loved the people of this world, even the bad ones, so much he came to earth to live with them, cured their diseases, and showed them a better way to live. When I heard what they did to him I could hardly believe it. I made up my mind that whatever others might do, I would believe in him and follow his teachings the rest of my life."

"What did your husband think of that?"

"Though we lived in Wonsan, our families lived in a village a long piece away and they didn't know I wanted to be a Christian. My husband said if it comforted me for the loss of our children, he didn't mind. So I began to attend worship with the little group of Christians.'

"They told me I should learn to read so I could read God's word for myself. I laughed at that. How could a grown up woman learn to read? But they said they would teach me, and they did. When I read about the woman who believed in Jesus and sewed for and helped the poor I wanted to be like her. Do you know how I got my name Doka?"

"Tell me. It doesn't sound like a Korean name."

"As a child I wasn't given a name," said she. "Lots of girls weren't in those days. At home they called me Tuipangie, (born in the back room) and the neighbors knew me as Kang Too Sik's second girl child.'

"Now that I could read, and worked with the doctor, I wanted a name of my own. I chose Doka, the name of the woman who worked to help the poor."

"It's a lovely and appropriate name," I said. "Tell me more."

"Three years after I began working with the doctor my husband died suddenly, leaving me with one son. When the doctor moved to Hamheung shortly after, she asked me to go with her. Since I'd had so much sorrow in Wonsan, and had no relatives there, I was glad to begin a new life in another place."

"I was with her when she began work here in a tiny mud house. She lived in one room and the other two she used for her clinic, till she built the brick hospital where we are now. There were no training schools for nurses in Korea and I taught the young nursing attendants what I had learned. I helped in the church too. We worked together for twenty years, until--" her voice shook and she paused, "until last year when she took care of the girls sick with typhus in the school dormitory. They all got well but the doctor herself got the disease. She was so tired and worn she hadn't the strength to recover. I was with her all the time. She wanted no one but me. If I went out of her sight even to bring her food, she'd call out feebly, 'Where's Doka? I want Doka.'"

Tears filled her eyes and her chin trembled as she remembered her old friend.

"She's gone, and you've come in her place. I'll serve you like I served her as long as I'm able."

"That's a wonderful story," I said as she tucked me in. "Thank you for telling me and for being my friend and helper. I've much to learn about this country, its people and customs, and I'll often need your help. Now you must be tired and I feel better for the massage and I'll go to sleep now. Thank you very much. Sleep in peace."

Prostrating herself on the floor, she asked God to bless and guide the young doctor so far from her own country and people, and with a quiet, 'Sleep in peace' she slipped away.

When the hospital closed after the death of Dr. MacMillan the staff scattered. I had to recruit and train a new one. It wasn't easy finding suitable people. The few girl graduates from high school wanted to be teachers, that being an honorable profession. Middle school graduates who couldn't aspire to teaching and were willing to become nursing attendants were generally refused permission by their parents. Hospital work was considered too menial an occupation for anyone with that amount of education. Most of the early nursing attendants were unlearned widows or deserted wives (who were) obliged to take any job available.

Doka was matron of the hospital dormitory for women employees, advisor to the cook, instructor and supervisor of the nursing attendants, and comforter to the anxious and bereaved. She told of God's love to those in fear of evil spirits, and did what others feared to do, laid out the dead.

She rose at daybreak to see that all was well in the hospital, and ^{she} walked through the wards any time she happened to wake at night.

She guided patients to the proper clinic and when they failed to understand the doctor's instructions, she explained again. To those near death, afraid to go out into the unknown spirit world, she told of a heavenly Father's love that had prepared a place of peace and joy for his children.

When I was in doubt of what to do in some case of discipline, she was a good advisor. Her age giving her authority, she (usually) dealt with minor cases herself and reported ^{me} to me afterward. At other times she tipped me off to some misconduct that unaided I should never have suspected.

One problem was the careless irresponsible pharmacist. When admonition proved unsuccessful, I reprimanded her, but she continued to make mistakes. When health and even life were endangered by a mix up in medicines, I could no longer tolerate her on the staff. The hospital committee decided to dismiss her, but as it was the Christmas season, they agreed not to give her notice till Christmas day was over.

Late on Christmas eve Doka wakened me to tell me that the pharmacist, who lived in the dormitory with the nursing attendants, missed some money. She made them cast lots to determine who had stolen it. When the lot fell on the cook, the young pharmacist accused her of the theft. In spite of the protests of Doka and the others, the sturdy pharmacist set upon the older woman, beat her and tore her clothes.

"And now," continued Doka urgently, "the pharmacist's dragged the cook out into the snowy street and is taking her to the police station."

Flinging on my dressing gown over my nightdress, I thrust my feet into bedroom slippers and rushed off in pursuit. This would never do, an old woman dragged to the police station by a young one, on the night before Christmas too.

It was past midnight and very cold. The streets were deserted. I couldn't see the couple anywhere and feared they had got to the police station where in my night attire I could hardly follow. I turned back breathless and unhappy.

Sometime later they returned. I told the pharmacist such conduct couldn't be tolerated any time, least of all at Christmas, a time of peace and good will. There must be no accusations nor quarrelling now and as soon as Christmas was over I would have a proper investigation.

The hospital committee looked into the matter and failed to trace the lost money, but they reprimanded the pharmacist for her conduct and gave her notice of dismissal.

She was furious and claimed that I had ruined her reputation and now she could never get another job or even get married. Her brother wrote me threatening letters, and one night after I'd gone to bed, Doka came to my door to tell me he had arrived on the night train and was downstairs demanding to see me at once.

"Don't see him," she advised. "He's in an ugly mood and with nobody around he might hurt you."

I locked my door. A moment later he was pounding on it.

"I don't see people in my bedroom in the middle of the night," I told him through the door. "If you have anything to say to me, come to my office in the morning and I'll see you then."

After pounding and shouting for about five minutes he left.

When he returned in the morning, the staff were there and gave their account of what had happened. Doka pointed out in her quiet way that all this publicity on their part was doing them no good in the public eye, and the more noise they made, the more people heard about it. They left somewhat subdued and I heard no more from them.

One day while Doka and I were walking (down the hill) past the church she began to laugh. "This ~~hill~~ ^{place} ~~used to be the haunt of evil spirits,~~" she said. "~~This~~ was the worst place for evil spirits in the city. Nobody dared cross this hill after dark and even in ~~the~~ daytime people didn't like to come here alone. Since the church was built the spirits have all left. They won't stay near a church. Now nobody's afraid ~~to come here alone~~ even after dark."

Doka's salary went to support her good-for-nothing son's family. He seldom worked but always came on pay day to get his mother's money before she could spend any of it herself. She was pleased to pay ~~the~~ tuition for her grandchildren to attend school, but ~~she~~ had to do much more, (than that)

Once when ~~her~~ ^{she} son had got deeply into ~~debt~~ ^{who} he tried to sell the house they lived in though it belonged to his mother.

"Can he sell what doesn't belong to him?" I asked.

"Yes, he can," I was assured. "Isn't he a man? What can a woman do about a thing like that?"

I bought the house to make sure Doka would have a place to live when she retired.

On Sundays she walked three miles to the village to conduct Sunday School for the children. Her daughter-in-law attended but her son made it a point to be absent when she came. This was a great grief to her.

On retiring she went to live with her son's family and he ^{then} collected her pension, ~~as formerly her salary~~. She carried on the Sunday School, nursed the sick, ^{in the village} and taught children who couldn't ^{afford} ~~to~~ school ^{for} ~~or want of tuition.~~

~~Once when I visited her~~ ^{she} showed me a complete outfit of white silk garments such as she hadn't worn since her husband's death.

"These are ~~the~~ burial clothes I've made for myself," she told me. "I've bought a burial site on the top of the mountain behind the house. I often go there to watch the sunset and ~~to~~ pray. I want to be buried respectably in a quiet lovely spot and I've told my son so there'll be no slip up."

~~When I heard~~ ^{hearing} she was sick I went ~~at once~~ to see her. Very thin and feeble she was, but she grasped my hand and thanked me for coming.

"You needn't come again," she said, "for I won't be here. This is the last time for us to meet in this world, for I'm going to Jesus and will soon see my lost children again."

She paused for breath. "If only my son were a Christian I'd die happy."

Three days later when I attended the ^{customary} ceremony of placing the body in the coffin I was distressed to see my dear friend's body dressed in the cheapest coarse unbleached cotton..

"Where are the lovely white silk things she made for herself?" I asked the daughter-in-law. She hung her head.

"Dear Grandmother made those over for the children a long time ago," replied one of the neighbors. How like her.

At the funeral next day the villagers, people from the hospital staff, and former patients came to pay their respects and tell of the many kindnesses she had done. There was quiet weeping but none of the hopeless wailing for the dead heard at non-Christian funerals, and there were also words of comfort and hope, and prayers of gratitude for the life of loving service that had helped so many.

Not seeing any pall bearers ~~to carry the coffin to the site she had provided for herself~~, I asked the son how he was going to get ^{the coffin} it up to the mountain top.

"Too much trouble altogether," he replied carelessly. "The grave's dug out behind the house."

Buried in the back yard by an unfilial son, her memory is revered by hundreds, her spirit is with the Lord she loved and served, and who can say she has not seen her children?

The end.