



JAPANESE GOTHIC TALES

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For the next nine years, until the incident at the hospital, Takamine never said a word about her, not even to me. Given his age and position in society, he could have married well. Yet he never did. If anything, he became even more strict in matters of personal conduct than he had been in his student days. But I have already said enough. Although their graves are in different places—one in the hills of Aoyama, one downtown in Yanaka—the countess and Doctor Takamine died together, one after the other, on the same day.

Religious thinkers of the world, I pose this question to you. Should these two lovers be found guilty and denied entrance into heaven?



The Holy Man of Mount Kōya

(*Kōya hijiri*, 1900)

1

"I knew it wouldn't do much good to take another look. But because the road had become unimaginably difficult, I lifted the sleeves of my kimono, made hot to the touch by the sun's rays, and reached in for the ordinance survey map that I had brought with me.

"There I was on an isolated byway, making my way through the deep mountains between Hida and Shinshū. Not a single tree offered the comfort of its shade; and on both sides were nothing but mountains, rising so close and so steeply that it seemed as though I could reach out and touch them with my hand. Despite the towering heights of these mountains there rode still others beyond them, each raising its crest above the next, blocking both bird and cloud from sight.

"Between earth and sky, I stood alone, the crystalline rays of the blistering midday sun falling white around me as I surveyed the map from beneath the brim of my sedge hat."

Saying this, the itinerant monk clenched both fists, placed them on his pillow, bent forward, then pressed his forehead against his hands.

We had become traveling companions in Nagoya. And now, as we were about to retire for the night in Tsuruga, it occurred to me that he had maintained this humility with perfect consistency, and that he had shown none of the airs of the self-righteous.

I remembered how we met on the train. I was traveling west on the main line that connects the cities of the Pacific Coast, when he got on at Kakegawa. He sat at the end of the car with his head bowed, and because he showed no more life than cold ashes, I paid him little attention. But then the train reached Nagoya, and everyone else got off at once, as if by previous arrangement, leaving only the monk and myself to share the coach.

The train had departed from Tokyo at nine-thirty the night before and was scheduled to arrive in Tsuruga that evening. As it was noon when we reached Nagoya, I purchased from the station vendor a small box lunch of sushi, which happened to be what the monk also bought. When I eagerly removed the lid, however, I was disappointed to find only bits of seaweed scattered on top of the vinegar-flavored rice and knew immediately that my lunch was sushi of the cheapest kind.

"Nothing but carrots and gourd shavings," I blurted out. The monk, seeing the look on my face, couldn't help but chuckle.

Since we were the only two passengers in the car, we naturally began a conversation. Although he belonged to a different sect, he told me that he was on his way to visit someone at Eihei-ji, the great Zen monastery in Echizen, and planned to spend the night in Tsuruga. I was returning home to Wakasa; and because I also had to stop over in the same town, we decided to become traveling partners.

He told me he was affiliated with Mount Kōya, headquarters of the Shingon sect. My guess was that he was about forty-five or -six. He seemed a gentle, ordinary, likeable sort. Modestly dressed, he wore a woollen traveling cloak with ample sleeves, a white flannel scarf, a pillbox hat, and knitted gloves. On his feet he had white socks and low, wooden clogs. Though a man of the cloth, he looked more like a poetry master or perhaps someone of even more worldly interests.

"So where will you spend the night?" His question prompted a deep sigh from my lips as I contemplated the drearier aspects of staying alone in a strange place: the maids who doze off with their serving trays still in hand; the hollow flattery of desk clerks; the way everyone stares at you whenever you leave your room and walk the halls; and,

worst of all, how they snuff out the candles as soon as dinner is over and order you to bed in the dim shadows of lantern light. I'm the sort who doesn't fall asleep easily, and I can't begin to describe the loneliness of being abandoned like that in my room. And now that the nights had gotten longer, ever since leaving Tokyo I had been preoccupied with how I was going to make it through that night in Tsuruga. I suggested to the monk that, if it was no bother, we might spend the night together.

He nodded cheerfully and added that whenever he traveled through the North Country he always rested his walking staff at a place called the Katoriya. Apparently the Katoriya had been a travelers' inn until the proprietor's only daughter, well liked by all who knew her, suddenly died. After that, the family took down their shingle and, though no longer in business, were always willing to accommodate old friends. For such people, the elderly couple still provided familylike hospitality. The monk suggested that if such a situation were agreeable to me, we would be welcome there. "But," he started to say, then paused for dramatic effect, "the only thing you might get for dinner is carrots and gourd shavings." With that, he burst into laughter. Despite his modest appearance, the monk had quite a sense of humor.

2

In Gifu, the sky was still clear and blue, but once we entered the North Country, famous for its inclement weather, things began changing. Maibara and Nagahama were slightly overcast—the sun's rays penetrated the clouds only weakly and a chill seeped into my bones. But by the time we reached Yanagase it started to rain. As my window grew steadily darker, the rain mixed with something white.

"It's snowing."

"So it is," the monk said, not even bothering to look up at the sky. If he found the snow uninteresting, neither was he concerned with the ancient battleground at Shizugatake or the scenery at Lake Biwa. As I pointed them out, he only nodded.

We neared Tsuruga, and I prepared myself for the annoying, or should I say frightening, tenacity of the solicitors who lie in wait at

the station for potential customers. As I expected, they were there in droves, waiting for us to step off the train. They lined the road that led away from the station, forming an impenetrable wall around the travelers. As they closed in on us with their lanterns and umbrellas, all emblazoned with the names of the inns they represented, they called out and demanded we stay the night with them. The more brazen ones even snatched up people's luggage and shouted out, "Thanks! This way, please!" No doubt, those suffering headaches would have found their heads pounding because of this intolerable behavior. But, as always, the monk kept his head bowed and calmly slipped unnoticed through the crowd. No one bothered to stop him, and, luckily, I followed right behind, emitting a sigh of relief once the station was behind us.

The snow showed no signs of letting up. No longer sleet, its dry, light flakes brushed my face as they fell. Though it was still early in the evening, the people of Tsuruga had already bolted their doors for the night, leaving the streets deserted and quiet. We cut across two or three wide intersections, then walked for another eight blocks through the accumulating snow until we stopped beneath the eaves of an inn. We had arrived at the Katoriya.

The alcove and sitting room had no decoration to speak of. But the pillars were impressive, the tatami new, and the hearth spacious. The pot hook dangling over the hearth was decorated with a wooden carp so lustrous I wondered if it were made of gold. Set into the earthen oven were two huge pots, each big enough to cook half a bushel of rice. It was a solid, old house.

The master of the inn was a short-cropped, hard-to-read sort of fellow, who had a habit of keeping his hands tucked inside his cotton jacket even when sitting in front of a brazier. His wife, in contrast, was charming, the kind of person who says all the right things. She laughed cheerfully when my companion told the story about carrots and gourd shavings and prepared a meal of two kinds of dried fish and miso soup with bits of seaweed. I could tell by the way she and her husband acted that they had known the monk for a long time. Because of their friendship, I felt very much at home.

Eventually we were taken to our beds on the second floor. The ceiling was low, but the beams were huge, unmilled logs, two arm-

spans in diameter. The roof slanted down at an angle so you had to be careful not to bump your head on the ceiling where the roof met the walls along the edges of the room. Still, it was comforting to know that even if an avalanche came tumbling down the mountain behind us, it would not disturb such a sturdily built structure.

I jumped right into bed, happy to see that our bed warmer had already been prepared for the night. In order to make the most of the heated coals, our bedding had been laid out at right angles so we could both take advantage of the warmer. The monk, however, pulled his futon around beside mine, intending to sleep without the comfort of the smoldering fire.

When he finally got into bed, he didn't even bother to remove his sash, much less his robe. Still wearing his clothes, he curled himself into a ball and quickly backed feetfirst into his quilts. As soon as his arms found the sleeves in his upper quilt, he pressed his hands to the mattress beneath him and lowered himself onto his pillow. Unlike you or me, the holy man slept facedown.

Before long he stopped stirring and seemed to be falling asleep. As I had told him many times in the train, I find it hard to get to sleep before the night grows late; and so I asked him, begging like a child, to take pity on me and tell me about some of the interesting things he had experienced on his many pilgrimages.

He nodded, and added that since middle age he had always slept facedown but that he was still wide-awake. Like me, he too had difficulty falling asleep. "So you want to hear a story? Then listen to what I'm about to tell you," he said. "And remember that what you hear from a monk isn't always a lecture or a sermon." It was only later that I learned he was none other than the renowned and revered Monk Shūchō of the Rikumin Temple.

3

"The owners of this inn mentioned that someone else might join us here tonight," the monk began. "A man from Wakasa, same as you. He travels around and sells lacquerware. He's young, but I know him to be a good, serious fellow, quite unlike a young man I once met

when making my way through the mountains of Hida. This other person was a Toyama medicine peddler whom I happened to run into at a teahouse in the foothills. What a disagreeable, difficult fellow!"

I intended to make it all the way to the pass that day, and I had set out from my inn at about three o'clock in the morning. I covered fifteen miles or more while it was still cool. But by the time I made it to the teahouse, the morning mist had burned off and it was starting to get hot.

I had pushed myself at a fast pace and my throat was as parched as the road beneath my feet. I wanted to get something to drink right away but was told the kettle wasn't boiling yet.

Of course, there was no reason to expect the teahouse to be ready for business as so few pass by on such mountain paths. In a place as isolated as that, smoke from the hearth rarely rises while the morning-glory blossoms are still blooming. As I waited, I noticed an inviting brook running in front of the stool on which I had taken a seat. I was about to scoop up a handful of water from a bucket nearby when something occurred to me.

Disease spreads quickly in the summer months, and I had just seen powdered lime sprinkled over the ground at the village called Tsuji.

"Excuse me," I called to the girl in the teahouse. I felt a bit awkward asking, but forced myself to inquire. "Is this water from your well?"

"It's from the river," she said.

Her answer alarmed me. "Down the mountain I saw signs of an epidemic," I said. "I was just wondering if this brook comes from over by Tsuji."

"No, it doesn't," she replied simply, as though I had nothing to worry about.

I should have been happy to hear her answer, but listen—someone else was already at the teahouse. The young medicine peddler I just mentioned had been resting there for quite some time. He was one of those vulgar pill salesmen. You've seen them dressed in an unlined, striped kimono, a cheap sash, and the obligatory gold watch dangling in front. Leggings and breeches, straw sandals, a square medicine chest tied to the back with a pale yellowish-green cotton cloth. Add an

umbrella or an oilskin slicker, folded up and tied to the pack with a flat Sanada string, and there you have it, the typical traveling salesman.

They all look the same—that serious, knowing look on their faces. But as soon as they get to their lodgings for the night, they change into loud, large-patterned robes. And with their sashes loosely tied, they sip cheap wine and try to get their feet onto the maids' soft laps.

"Hey, Baldy," he called, insulting me from the very start. "Forgive me for asking this, but I need to know something. Here you are. You know you're never going to make it with the ladies, so you shave your head and become a monk, right? So why worry about dying? That's a little odd, don't you think? The truth is, you're no better than the rest of us. Just like I thought. Take a look at him, miss. He's still attached to this floating world." The two looked at each other and burst into laughter.

I was a young man at that time, and my face burned red with shame. I froze there with the scoop of water still in my hands.

"What are you waiting for? Go ahead, drink till you drown. If you come down with something, I'll give you some of my medicine. That's why I'm here. Right, miss? It's going to cost you, though. My Mankintan's three *sen* a packet. It may be 'the gift of the gods.' But if you want it, you buy it. I haven't done anything bad enough to make me want to give it away. But maybe we can fix that. How about it, girl? Maybe I should have my way with you." He patted the young woman on the back.

I was shocked by the man's lewd behavior and quickly got away from there. Of course, someone of my age and profession has no business going on about the seduction of teahouse maids, but since it's an important part of the story. . . .

4

I was so furious I rushed down the road that led through some rice paddies in the foothills. I had gone only a short distance when the path rose steeply. Looking to the side, I could see it going up the side of the mountain like a rounded, earthen bridge. I had just started the climb, my eyes fixed upward upon my goal, when the medicine peddler I had encountered earlier came hurrying along to overtake me.

He didn't have anything to say this time. Even if he had, I doubt I would have responded. Thoroughly accustomed to looking down on other people, the peddler made a point of giving me a contemptuous glance as he passed by. He pressed forward to the top of a small hill, where he stopped, holding his opened umbrella in one hand. Then he disappeared down the other side.

I followed him, climbing the steep slope until I made it to the top. Then I proceeded ahead.

The peddler had already made it down the other side and was standing on the road, looking this way and that. I suspected he might be planning some mischief and was on guard as I continued in his footsteps. When I reached the spot, I could see why he had stopped.

The road forked at that point. One of the two paths was extremely steep and headed directly up the mountain. It was overgrown with grass on both sides and wound around a huge cypress tree four, maybe even five, spans around, then disappeared behind a number of jutting boulders that were piled one on top of the other. My guess was that this wasn't the road to take. The wide, gently sloping one that had brought me this far was, no doubt, the main road, and if I just stayed on it for another five miles or so, it would surely take me into the mountains and eventually to the pass.

But what was this? The cypress I mentioned arched like a rainbow over the deserted road, extending into the endless sky above the rice paddies. The earth had crumbled away from its base, exposing an impressive tangle of countless eel-like roots; and from there a stream of water gushed out and flowed over the ground, right down the middle of the road I had decided to take, flooding the entire area before me.

It was a wonder the water hadn't made a lake of the rice paddies. Thundering like rapids, the torrent formed a river that stretched for more than two hundred yards, bordered on the far side by a grove. I was glad to see a line of rocks that crossed the water like a row of stepping-stones. Apparently, someone had gone to a lot of trouble to put them there.

The water wasn't so deep that I would have to strip down and wade. Still, it seemed a bit too difficult to be the main road, as even a horse would have had a hard time of it.

The medicine peddler, too, had hesitated because of the situation.

But then he made his decision and started climbing the hill to the right, where he disappeared behind the cypress tree. When he reappeared he was five feet or so above me. "Hey, this is the road to Matsumoto," he called down, then sauntered another five or six steps. Half-hidden behind one of the huge boulders, he called out in a jeering tone. "Watch out or the tree spirits'll get you! They don't give a damn if it's still daylight!" Then he entered the shade of the boulders and eventually disappeared into the grass growing farther up the slope. After a while, the tip of his umbrella reappeared higher up the mountain, but then, just as it reached the same level as the treetops, it disappeared again into the undergrowth.

That was when I heard someone behind me. I turned to see a farmer hopping across the stones laid out across the flowing water, encouraging himself with a relaxed-sounding *Dokkoisho*. He had a short reed skirt tied around his waist and carried a shoulder pole in one hand.

5

Needless to say, from the time I left the teahouse until that moment, I hadn't met anyone but the medicine peddler. As the peddler went his way, I paused to consult my map—the one I was telling you about earlier. It occurred to me that even though the grass-grown path seemed like the wrong road, the peddler, who was a professional traveler after all, ought to know his way around these mountains.

"Excuse me," I said to the farmer.

"Yes," he replied. "How may I help you?" Mountain people are especially polite when talking with monks, as you know.

"Sorry to bother you about such an obvious matter," I said. "But this is the main road, isn't it?"

"You're going to Matsumoto?" he asked. "Then yes, this is the right road. We've had a lot of rain this year, and the whole place has turned into a river. But this is it."

"Is it like this all the way?"

"Oh, no. Just what you see here. It's easy enough to cross. The water goes over to that grove there. On the other side, it's a regular road. Up to the mountains, it's wide enough for two carts to pass each

other with no problem. A doctor once had his mansion in that grove there, and this place, believe it or not, used to be a village. A flood came through thirteen years ago and washed everything away. Many people died. Since you're a monk, sir, maybe you could pray for the dead as you walk through."

The good man gave me more information than I had asked for. Now that I had the details, I was comforted to know which was the right road. Yet at the same time, his instructions meant that someone else had gone the wrong way.

"Then may I ask where this other road goes?" I inquired about the left fork that the medicine peddler had taken.

"That's the old road people used to take fifty years ago. It'll get you to Shinshū all right, and it cuts off a good seventeen miles overall. But you can't get through anymore. Just last year, a family on pilgrimage went that way by mistake. It was terrible. They were poor as beggars. But since every soul is precious, we felt we should try to find them. We got a search party together—three local constables and twelve people from the village—and went into the mountains to bring them back out. Sir, I wouldn't get too ambitious and decide to take that shortcut. Even if the longer road is more tiring and makes you spend a night under the stars, I wouldn't take the chance. Well, take care now and have a good trip."

I said goodbye to the farmer and started across the line of stepping-stones that had been set in the river. But then I stopped. What would become of the medicine peddler?

I doubted the old road was nearly as bad as the farmer had described. But if it were true, it would be like letting the man die before my very eyes. Anyway, as one who had renounced the world, I had no business worrying about whether I could find an inn before nightfall or not. And so I decided to go and bring the medicine peddler back. Even if I didn't find him and ended up taking the old road all the way, it wouldn't be as bad as all that. This wasn't the season for wild dogs prowling or for forest spirits lurking about. "So why not?" I thought. When I turned around, I saw that the kind farmer had already disappeared from sight.

"I'll do it," I said to myself and started up the steep path. It wasn't that I wanted to be a hero or that I was getting ahead of myself. Judg-

ing from what I've just told you, you might think I'm some sort of enlightened saint. But the truth is that I'm really a coward. I didn't even dare drink the river water. So you're probably wondering why I decided to take the dangerous path.

To tell the truth, I wouldn't have cared that much about someone with whom I'd exchanged only a few words of greeting. But because the peddler had been such a disagreeable person, I felt I would be purposely letting him take the wrong road. In short, my conscience made me do it.

The Monk Shūchō, still lying facedown, brought his hands together in prayer. "I just didn't think letting him die would be worthy of the *nenbutsu* I chant," he added.

6

"So, listen to this."

I walked past the cypress tree, then made my way through the boulders and ended up on the trail above them. Passing through a stand of trees, I entered a path in the thick grass that seemed to go on forever.

Before I knew it, I had climbed the mountain and was approaching another. For a while a meadow opened up, and the path sloped gently and became even wider than the main road I had just left—easily wide enough to accommodate a daimyo's procession. The two roads were running parallel to each other. One was slightly to the east and the other situated a bit to the west, with the mountain in the middle.

Even in this broad plain, though, I could see no sign of the medicine peddler, not even a speck the size of a poppy seed. Every once in a while, a small insect would fly across the baking sky. I felt even more insecure, walking in the open where everything was empty and unfamiliar! Of course, I had heard about travel in the Hida Mountains before—how few inns there were along the way, and how if you got millet-rice for dinner you were doing well. I was prepared for the

worst, and because my legs were strong, I kept up the pace without flagging. As I made my way, the mountains began closing in until I was walled in on both sides and the trail before me rose steeply.

From here I knew I'd be crossing the notorious Amō Pass, and so I did what I could to prepare myself for the climb. Readjusting my straw sandals, I gasped for breath in the blistering heat.

Years later I heard about a wind cave in the pass that sends air all the way to the Rendai Temple in Mino; but at that time, of course, I had no desire to go see it. I was so intent on climbing that I was oblivious to the scenery and to whatever natural wonders might lie along the way. I didn't even know if it was cloudy or sunny. Concentrating only on getting to the top, I crawled up the incline.

Now this is the part I really want to tell you. You see, the trail got much worse. Not only did it seem impossible for a human being to climb, but there was something even more horrible: snakes. They were buried in the grass, their heads on one side of the trail and their tails on the other, writhing like bridges across my path. The first time I encountered one, my breath rushed from my lungs and my knees gave way beneath me. I crumpled to the ground, my sedge hat still on my head and my walking staff still in my hand.

I've always been afraid, or maybe I should say terrified, of snakes.

That first time, the creature did me the favor of slowly slithering away. It raised its head, then disappeared into the grass.

I got to my feet and continued ahead another five or six hundred yards, only to find another snake sunning its belly, its tail and head also hidden in the grass on either side of the path.

I shouted and jumped back, and this one, too, slithered away. But the third snake I encountered was in no hurry to move. You should have seen how big around it was! I guessed that if the thing started crawling, it would take a full five minutes before its tail finally appeared. Having no other recourse, I forced myself to step over its thick body. My stomach turned and I felt as though my hair and all my pores had turned into scales. I closed my eyes and imagined my face turning as pale as the creature's belly.

I could feel myself breaking out in a cold sweat. My legs lost their strength. Barely able to keep my feet under me, I stumbled down the trail, my heart pounding with fear. And again, another snake appeared.

This one had been cut in half. All that remained was the length from belly to tail. The wound was tinged with blue, and, as the snake twitched on the path, a yellow fluid ran from where it had been severed.

That was when I finally panicked and started running back the other way. But then I came to my senses and remembered the other snakes I had just passed. No doubt they were lying in wait for me. And yet I would rather be killed than jump over another one. I knew in my heart that if the farmer had said, even in passing, that there were snakes like this on the old road, I wouldn't have taken this way though it might have meant suffering in hell for abandoning the medicine peddler. Baked by the sun, I felt tears come to my eyes. "Save me, Merciful Buddha!" Even now the thought of that experience makes me shudder.

The monk pressed his hand to his forehead.

7

But losing control wasn't going to help, so I did my best to regain my composure. It was not the time to be turning back. I would only run into the severed body of the dead snake, about three feet long. This time I left the path, deep into the grass, in order to get around it. And as I did, I panicked again, fearing that the other half would appear and coil itself around me. My legs grew stiff and I stumbled over a stone. Apparently, that's when I twisted my knee.

From there I had to limp along the trail as best I could. I knew that if I collapsed on the road, I would be killed by the steamy heat. So I made up my mind that I was going to make it and pressed on.

The hot stench of the grass was menacing. And underfoot I was constantly stepping on what felt like large birds' eggs strewn about.

For the next five miles, the road twisted and turned up the mountain in a series of switchbacks. Reaching the heart of the mountain, I turned the corner around a huge boulder and worked my way through a tangle of tree roots. This was when I stopped to look at the map, for the trail had become impossibly difficult.

It was the same road, all right—whether you hear about it or see

it on a map. There was no mistaking it was the old road, though knowing this was no consolation. The map was reliable, but all it showed was a sign for "wilderness area" with a red line drawn over it.

Maybe it was too much to ask for notations that would indicate the true difficulties of the trail—the snakes, the insects, the birds' eggs, and the suffocating odors of the grass. I folded the map, stuffed it into my kimono, took a deep breath, and, with the *nenbutsu* on my lips, started off again. I had the best of intentions, but before I had taken another step, another snake crossed my path.

"No use," I thought, wondering for the first time if this might not be the doing of the mountain spirits. I threw down my staff, got on my knees, and placed both hands on the baking earth. "I'm truly sorry to bother you," I fervently implored the gods. "But please let me pass. I'll go quietly, I promise. I won't disturb your afternoon nap. Look, I've already thrown away my walking stick." I was truly at wit's end.

When I raised my head, I heard a terrifying, rushing sound. This time, I thought, it must be a gigantic snake—three, four, five feet long, maybe more. Before my eyes, the grass moved in a straight line that gradually approached the ravine to my left. Then the peak towering above me, indeed the entire mountain, began swaying back and forth. With my hair standing on end, I froze in my tracks as a coolness pierced my bones. It was then that I realized it was not a giant snake at all but a mountain gale, and the sound I was hearing was the wind's echo. It was as if a whirlwind had originated deep in the mountains and had suddenly rushed out an opening it had created for itself. Had the mountain gods answered my prayer? The snakes were nowhere to be seen and the heat dissipated. Courage returned to my heart, and strength to my legs. Before long I learned why the wind had suddenly grown so chilly: just ahead was a deep forest.

There is a saying about the Amō Pass—that it rains there even on a cloudless day. People also talk about the remote forests that haven't been touched by an ax since the age of the gods. Up to this point there hadn't been many trees, but now—

Stepping into the cold, damp woods, I thought about how there would be crabs rather than snakes crawling around now. As I walked ahead, it became dark. Cryptomeria, pine, Chinese nettle—there was just enough light to allow me to tell the trees apart. Where the shafts

of weak sunlight touched the earth, the mountain soil was pitch black. Depending on how the sun pierced the canopy of treetops, though, the light was also mottled blue and red. Some of the places were textured and very beautiful.

Occasionally my toes would get caught in the threadlike rivulets that had formed from the water dripping from the leaves. These drops had traveled from branch to branch, originating high up in the forest canopy. They were joined by the steadily falling evergreen leaves and the rustling of some other trees that I couldn't identify. Some leaves fell on my hat, and some landed behind me where I had just walked. They, too, had collected on the branches, and it was my guess that some had taken decades to reach the forest floor.

8

I don't have to tell you how despondent I was. But I suppose a dark place like that is better than daylight for strengthening one's faith and pondering the eternal truths, even for a coward such as myself. At least it wasn't as hot as before. My legs were beginning to feel much stronger, and so I walked much more quickly, thinking I was already three-quarters of the way through the woods. But just then something fell, apparently from the branches five or six feet above my head, and landed on my hat.

It felt like a lead sinker. Perhaps it was the fruit of a tree. I shook my head once, twice. But it stuck to my hat. I reached up and grabbed it. Whatever it was, it was cold and slimy.

In my hand it looked like a sliced-open sea slug with no eyes or mouth. It was alive, no question about that. And how repulsive! I tried to fling it away, but it only slid down and dangled from my fingers. When it finally fell off, I noticed bright red drops of blood dripping. Surprised, I brought my hand up to take a closer look and discovered another creature, similar to the first, dangling from my elbow. It was about half-an-inch wide and three inches long. It looked like an enormous mountain slug.

As I examined the creature in stupefied amazement, it sucked blood from my arm, swelling larger and larger from the tail up. It had

brown stripes on its dull black skin, like a cucumber with warts. Now I could see it for what it was—a blood-sucking leech!

There was no mistaking it for anything else, though it was so huge that I hadn't recognized it at first. No rice paddy, no swamp, however famous for its grotesqueries, had leeches like this.

I gave my elbow a vigorous shake, but the animal was firmly attached and wouldn't let go. Even though it was the last thing I felt like doing, I grabbed the leech with my other hand and pulled until it finally came off with a sucking sound.

I couldn't bear the thought of the leech touching me a moment longer and immediately flung it to the ground. These dumb creatures had taken over the woods by the thousands, and the dank, sunless forest had been prepared especially for that purpose. When I tried to squash the thing under my foot, the ground was soft and the leech merely sank into the muck. It was impossible to crush.

Already my neck had started to itch. There was another one! I tried to brush it off, but my hand only slipped over its body. Meanwhile, another had worked its way into my kimono and was hiding on my chest. I examined it with horror and discovered still another on my shoulder.

I jumped up and down. I shook my entire body. I ran out from under the large branch in order to get away. As I ran, I frantically grabbed at the ones that were sucking away at my blood. I was under the impression that the leeches had fallen from one particular branch, but when I looked back at the tree, I saw that the whole thing was swarming with them. On the right, on the left, on the branch in front—they were everywhere!

I lost control and shouted out in terror. And then what do you think happened? Even as I stood there watching, a shower of thin, black leeches began raining down on me.

They covered the tops of my sandaled feet and piled themselves one on top of the other. They stuck to the sides of my feet and made my toes disappear beneath their disgusting mass. As I watched those blood-sucking creatures squirming and pulsing and heaving, I started to feel faint. It was then that the strangest thought occurred to me.

These terrifying mountain leeches had been gathered there since the age of the gods, lying in wait for passersby. After decades and cen-

turies of drinking untold quantities of human blood, they would have their fill and disgorge every ounce! Then the earth will melt. One by one, the mountains will turn into vast, muddy swamps of blood. And at the same time, all these enormous trees, large enough to block out even the midday sun, will break into small pieces that will then turn into even more leeches. Yes. That's exactly what will happen!

9

The destruction of mankind will not come with the rupture of the earth's fragile crust and with fire pouring down from the heavens. Nor will it come when the waves of the ocean wash over the land. Rather, it will begin with the forests of Hida turning into leeches and end with the black creatures swimming in blood and muck. Only then will a new generation of life begin.

It was true that nothing had seemed so unusual about the forest when I first entered it. But once I had, conditions were as I've just described. If I continued on, I would discover that the trees were rotting from the roots up and had turned into leeches, every one. There was no hope for me! It was my fate to be killed in the woods!

Suddenly it occurred to me that such are the thoughts of those who sense the approach of death. If I was going to perish anyway, I thought, I might at least try to reach the shore of this vast swamp of blood and muck, to see with my own eyes a place that ordinary people couldn't imagine in their wildest dreams. The decision made, I became oblivious to the ghastliness of my situation. The leeches stuck to my body like beads to a rosary; but my hands found them and plucked them off one after another. With arms flailing and legs marching, I made my way like a madman dancing through the forest.

At first my body swelled and the itching was unbearable. But then I felt as though I'd been reduced to pain-racked skin and bone. As I pressed on, the attack of the blood-sucking leeches continued.

My sight grew dim and I felt as though I was about to collapse. But just as I reached the height of my tribulations, I caught a faint glimpse of the distant moon, as if I had reached the end of a tunnel. At last, I emerged from the leech-infested forest.

When I saw the blue sky above me, I threw myself down on the road and began smashing the creatures to pieces. I wanted nothing more than to reduce them to the dust of the earth. I rolled on the ground, not caring if it were covered with gravel or needles; and after scraping off more than ten, I tumbled ahead another thirty feet before I stood up with a shudder. My friend, those creatures had had their way with me. Here and there in the surrounding mountains, the evening cicadas were chirping against the backdrop of this forest that was so intent on turning itself into a great swamp of blood and muck. The sun was low in the sky. The bottom of the ravine was already dark with shadows.

There was a chance I might become food for wild dogs, but even that would be an improvement over being sucked to death by leeches. The road sloped gently downhill. Carrying my bamboo walking stick on my shoulder, I made a hasty escape.

If only I hadn't been suffering such indescribable torment—at once so painful, itchy, and ticklish—I would have danced down the road through the Hida Mountains, chanting a sutra as my accompaniment. But I had recovered enough to be able to think about chewing one of my Seishintan pills and applying the paste to my wounds. I pinched myself. Yes, I really had returned from the dead. Even so, I wondered what had become of the medicine peddler from Toyama. My guess was that he was in the swamp behind me, long since reduced to blood, his corpse nothing but skin and a skeleton, lying in some dark spot in the woods with hundreds of the filthy, disgusting creatures still sucking on his bones. It would be useless to try to dissolve them with vinegar. With my mind filled with such thoughts, I continued down the slope, which went on for some distance.

When I finally reached the bottom, I heard the sound of running water. There, in the middle of nowhere, I came upon a small earthen bridge.

With the music of the water in my ears, I immediately thought of how wonderful it would feel to throw my sucked-over body headfirst into the river below and to soak it there. If the bridge collapsed as I tried to cross over, so be it.

Giving no thought to the danger, I started across. The bridge was a bit unsteady, but I made it. On the other side, the trail rose steeply again. Yet another climb. Is there no end to human suffering?

Tired as I was, I didn't think I could make it over one more hill. But then, coming from up ahead, I heard the echoing sound of a neighing horse.

Was it a packhorse driver on his way home? Or a horse passing by? Not much time had passed since my chance meeting with the farmer that morning, yet I felt as though I had been denied the company of my fellowmen for at least several years. If that was a horse I heard, there should be a village nearby. Given new courage by the thought, I pushed ahead.

Before I knew it, I was standing in front of a secluded mountain cottage. As it was summer, all the sliding doors had been left open. I couldn't locate a front gate, but directly before me was a dilapidated veranda. On it sat a man. What kind of man, I couldn't really tell.

"Excuse me. Excuse me." I called out in a pleading voice, as if imploring him to help me.

"Excuse me," I said again, but received no reply. He looked like a child. His head was cocked to one side so that one ear almost touched his shoulder. He stared at me with small, expressionless eyes. He was so listless it seemed he couldn't even be bothered to move his pupils. His kimono was short, the sleeves only coming to his elbows. His vest was properly starched and tied in front, but his stomach protruded from the kimono like a huge, smooth drum, and his belly button stuck out like the stem of a pumpkin. He fingered it with one hand, while waving the other in the air as if he were a ghost.

His legs were sprawled out as if he had forgotten he had them. Had he not been seated squarely on the veranda, I'm sure he would have toppled over. He appeared to be about twenty-two or -three years old. His mouth hung open, his upper lip curled back. His nose was flat and his forehead bulged. His hair had grown out and was long like a cockscomb in front, flipped all the way back to his collar and covering his ears. Was he a mute? An idiot? A young man about to turn into a frog? I was surprised by what I saw. He presented no real danger to me, but what a bizarre sight!

"Excuse me," I said again.

Despite his appearance, I had no choice but to try to communicate with him. My words of greeting, though, made little difference. He

only stirred slightly and flopped his head over so it now rested on his left shoulder, mouth still agape.

I couldn't anticipate what he might do. But I did feel that if I weren't careful he might suddenly grab me, and then, while fiddling with his navel, lick my face instead of answering my inquiries.

I stepped back. But then I thought that no matter how out-of-the-way this place might be, no one would leave such a person alone. I stood on tiptoe and spoke a little louder.

"Is anyone home?"

I heard the horse whinny again. The sound came from behind the cottage.

"Who is it?" It was a woman's voice, coming from the storage room. My goodness! Would she come slithering out, scales on her white neck, trailing a tail behind her? I fell back another step.

And then she appeared—a petite, attractive woman with a clear voice and a gentle manner. "Honorable Monk," she greeted me.

I let out a huge sigh and stood still. "Yes," I finally said, and bowed.

She sat down on the veranda and leaned forward, looking at me as I stood in the evening shadows. "Is there something I can do for you?"

She didn't invite me to stay the night, so I assumed her husband was out. It seems they had decided not to take in any travelers.

I quickly stepped forward. If I didn't ask now, I might lose my chance.

I bowed politely. "I'm on my way to Shinshū. Can you tell me how far it is to the next inn?"

11

"I'm afraid you still have nineteen miles or more to go."

"Then perhaps you might know of a place nearby where I could stay the night?"

"I'm afraid I don't." She stared into my eyes without blinking.

"I see. Well, actually, even if you were to tell me that I could find lodging nearby, and that they'd put me up in their best room and fan me all night as an act of piety, I really don't think I could take another step. Please, I beg you. Even a shed or the corner of a horse stall would

be fine." I said this because I knew that the horse I had heard couldn't possibly belong to anyone else.

The woman considered my request for a moment. Suddenly she turned, picked up a cloth bag, and started pouring rice from it into a pot at her side. She emptied the bag as if it were filled with water. With one hand steadying the pot, she looked down and scooped up the rice with the other.

"You can stay here tonight," she said at last. "We have just enough rice. Mountain cottages like this get cold at night, but it's summer and you should be fine. So, please. Won't you come in?"

As soon as she said this, I plunked myself down on the veranda. The woman got to her feet. "But, Sir. There is one thing I have to ask of you."

She was so forthright that I expected her to set down some impossible condition. "Yes," I said nervously. "What is it?"

"Nothing that important. It's just that I have a bad habit of wanting to know what's going on in the city. Even if you're not in the mood to talk, I'll keep asking you question after question. So you mustn't tell me anything, not even by a slip of the tongue. Do you understand what I'm saying? I'll keep pestering you if you do. So you mustn't say anything. Even if I beg you, you have to refuse. I just wanted you to know that."

There seemed to be some hidden reason behind her request. It was the sort of thing you might expect to hear from a woman living in an isolated cottage where the mountains are tall and the valleys immeasurably deep. As it seemed an easy enough request to fulfill, I nodded.

"That's fine. Whatever you say."

With this, the woman immediately became friendlier. "The house is a mess but please come in. Make yourself at home. Should I get you some water so you can wash up?"

"No, that won't be necessary. But I could use a washcloth. And would you mind getting it wet and wringing it out for me? I ran into a little trouble along the way. I feel so sticky I'd like to wash up, if I could trouble you for that."

"You do look hot. It must have been hard traveling on a day like this. If this were an inn, you could take a bath. They say that's what travelers really appreciate most. I'm afraid, though, you won't get even a cup of tea, let alone a tub of hot water. If you don't mind going

down the cliff behind the house, though, there's a beautiful stream. You could go there and wash."

Hearing those words, I was ready to fly to the river. "That sounds perfect."

"Then let me show you where it is. I have to wash the rice anyway." The woman picked up the pot, placed it under her arm, then put on her straw sandals. Stooping over, she looked under the veranda and pulled out a pair of old wooden clogs, which she clapped together to shake off the dust. She set them down on the ground for me. "Please, wear these. Leave your straw sandals here."

I pressed my hands together and thanked her. "That's very kind of you."

"Your staying here," she said, "must have been determined by a former life. Don't hesitate to ask for what you need."

My friend, she was a most hospitable woman.

12

"Please follow me." With the rice pot in her hand, the woman tucked a small towel into her narrow sash. Her rich, lovely hair was tied up in a bun and held in place with a comb and an ornamental hairpin. I noticed she had a beautiful figure.

I quickly removed my sandals and put on the old clogs. When I stood up from the veranda and looked around, there was Mr. Idiot still staring in my direction and babbling some sort of nonsense. "Sister, dis, dis." He slowly lifted his hand and touched his tousled hair. "Monk. Monk?"

A smile formed on the woman's face. She gave him quick nods.

The young man said "Mmm," then grew limp and started playing with his navel again.

Out of sympathy for the two, I didn't raise my head but merely stole a glance at the woman. She didn't seem to be bothered at all. Just as I was about to follow her, an old man appeared from behind a hydrangea bush.

He had come around from the back. A carved ivory netsuke dangled from a long pouch string tied around his waist. Holding a pipe

in his teeth, he came up to the woman and stopped. "Well, if it isn't a monk."

The woman looked over her shoulder at the man. "May I ask how it went?"

"Oh, you know. He's one stupid jackass, all right. Nobody but a fox could ever ride that horse. But that's where I come in. I'll do my best to get a fair price. A good deal should fix you up for two or three months."

"That would be nice."

"So where you headed?"

"Down to the water."

"Don't go falling in with the young monk now. I'll be on the lookout here." He leaned over and sat down on the veranda.

"Listen to him talk." She looked at me and smiled.

"Maybe I should go by myself." I stepped to the side and the old man laughed.

"Hurry up and get going, you two."

"We've already had two visitors today," she said to the old man. "Who knows? Maybe we'll have another. If somebody should come while Jirō's here alone, they won't know what to do. Maybe you could stay and make yourself comfortable until we get back."

"Sure." The man moved over to the idiot and whacked him on the back with his enormous fist. The idiot looked as if he might cry, but then grinned.

Horried, I turned away. The woman didn't seem to be bothered by it at all.

The man laughed. "While you're away, I'm going to steal this husband of yours."

"Good for you," she said and turned to me. "Well then. Shall we go?"

I had the feeling that the old man was watching us from behind as I followed the woman along a wall leading away from the hydrangeas. We reached what seemed to be the back gate. To the left was a horse stable. I could hear the sound of a horse kicking at the walls. It was already starting to get dark.

"We'll take this path down. It's not slippery, but it is steep. Please be careful."

A grove of extremely tall, slender pine trees, their trunks clear of branches for about fifteen or twenty feet from the ground, marked the path that we were apparently going to take down to the river. As we passed through the trees, I spotted something white in the treetops far above. It was the thirteenth night of the new month, and though it was the same moon I had always seen, tonight it made me realize how far from the world of human habitation I had come.

The woman, who had been walking ahead of me, disappeared. When I looked down the hill, holding onto one of the trees, I spotted her below.

She looked up at me. "It gets a lot steeper here so please be careful. Maybe I shouldn't have given you those clogs. Would you like my sandals?"

She obviously thought I was lagging behind because of the steepness of the path, but really, I was more than willing to tumble down the slope to get that leech filth off my body.

"I'll come down barefoot if I have to," I said. "I'm fine. Sorry to make you worry, Miss."

"Miss?" She raised her voice slightly and laughed. It was a charming sound.

"That's what I heard the man call you. But maybe you're married?"

"Either way, I'm old enough to be your aunt. Now, come. Quickly. I'd give you my sandals but you might step on a thorn. They're soaking wet, anyway. You wouldn't like the way they felt on your feet." She turned away and quickly lifted the hem of her kimono. I could see her white ankles in the darkness. As she walked ahead they disappeared like the frost at dawn.

We were making good progress down the hill when a toad sluggishly emerged from a clump of grass on the wayside.

"Disgusting!" She lifted her heels and jumped to the side. "Can't you see I have a guest? Let go of my feet. Back to your bugs!" She turned to me. "Come right along. Don't pay attention to him. In a place like this, even the animals want attention." She turned back to the toad. "To think I'd be flattered to know you. Go away!"

The toad slowly moved back into the grass, and the woman started ahead.

"You'll have to climb up here. The ground's too soft." In the grass appeared the trunk of a tree, round and huge. I got up on it and had no trouble walking, even in my clogs. As soon as I had reached the end, the sound of rushing water was in my ears, although the river was still a distance away.

When I looked up I could no longer see the pine trees. The moon of the thirteenth night was low on the horizon, nearly half-covered by the mountain. Yet it was so brilliant I thought I could reach out and touch it, even though I knew its height in the heavens was immeasurable.

"It's this way." She was waiting for me, just a bit farther down the slope. There were boulders all around and pools created by the water flowing over them. The stream was about six feet across. As I approached it, the flowing water was surprisingly quiet, and its beauty was that of jewels broken from their string and being washed away. From farther downstream came the terrifying echo of the water crashing against other boulders.

On the opposite bank rose another mountain. Its peak was hidden in the darkness, but its lower reaches were illumined by the moonlight spilling over the crest of the mountain across the way. I could see boulders of various sizes and shapes—some like spiral seashells, others angular and truncated, and still others resembling spears or balls. They continued as far as the eye could see, forming a small hill at the water's edge.

"We're lucky the water's high today. We can bathe up here without going down to the main stream." She dipped her snow-white feet into the water that covered the top of a boulder.

The bank on our side was much steeper than the other, and tight against the river. We were apparently standing in a small, boulder-filled cove. It was impossible to see either directly upstream or downstream, but I could make out some water winding tortuously up the

rock-strewn slope across from us. The stream gradually grew narrower, each bend bathed in moonlight so its water gleamed like plates of silver armor. Closer to where we stood, its waves fluttered white like a shuttle being taken up at the loom.

"What a beautiful stream."

"It is. This river begins at a waterfall. People who travel through these mountains say they can hear a sound like the wind blowing. I don't suppose you heard something along the way?"

I had indeed, just before I entered the leech-filled forest. "You mean that wasn't the wind in the trees?"

"That's what everyone thinks. But if you take a side road from where you were and go about seven miles, you come to a large waterfall. People say it's the largest in Japan. Not even one in ten has ever made it that far, though. The road is steep. So, as I was saying, this river flows down from there."

"There was a horrible flood about thirteen years ago," she continued. "Even these high places were covered with water, and the village in the foothills was swept away—mountains, houses, everything was leveled. There used to be twenty homes here at Kaminohora. But now they're gone. This stream was created then. See those boulders up there? The flood deposited them."

Before I realized it, the woman had finished washing the rice. As she stood and arched her back, I caught a glimpse of the outlines of her breasts, showing at the loosened collar of her kimono. She gazed dreamily at the mountain, her lips pressed together. I could see a mass of moonlit rocks that the flood had deposited halfway up the mountainside.

"Even now just thinking about it frightens me," I said as I stooped over and began washing my arms.

It was then that she said, "If you insist on such good manners, your robes will get wet. That's not going to feel very good. Why not take them off? I'll scrub your back for you."

"I wouldn't—"

"Why not? Look how your sleeve is getting in the water." She suddenly reached from behind and put her hand on my sash. I squirmed, but she kept going until I was completely naked.

My master was a strict man, and, as one whose calling it is to

recite the holy sutras, I had never taken off my clothes, not even the sleeves of my robes. But now I was standing naked in front of this woman, feeling like a snail without a shell. I was too embarrassed even to talk, let alone run away. While she tossed my clothes onto a nearby branch, I hunched my back and stood with my knees together.

"I'll put your clothes right here. Now. Your back. Hold still. I'm going to be nice to you because you called me 'Miss.' Now don't be naughty." She pulled up one of her sleeves and held it between her teeth to keep it out of the way.

Without further ado, she placed her arm on my back. It was as smooth and lustrous as a jewel. For a moment, she only looked. "Oh, my."

"Is something wrong?"

"These bruises all over your back."

"That's what I was saying. I had a terrible time in the woods." Just remembering the leeches made me shudder.

15

She looked surprised. "So you were in the forest. How awful! I've heard travelers talk about leeches falling from the trees. You must have missed the detour and gone right through their nesting grounds. You're lucky to still be alive. Not even horses and cows make it. It must really itch."

"Now it only hurts."

"Then I shouldn't be using this cloth. It'll make your skin peel." She touched me gently with her hands.

She poured water over my body and stroked my shoulders, back, sides, and buttocks. You would think the cold river water would have chilled me to the bone, but it didn't. True, it was a hot time of the year, but even so. Perhaps it was because my blood was aroused. Or maybe it was the warmth of her hand. Anyway, the water felt perfect on my skin! Of course, they say that water of good quality is always soothing.

But what an indescribable feeling! I wasn't sleepy, but I began to feel drowsy. And as the pain from my wounds ebbed away, I gradually

lost my senses, as if the woman's body, so close to mine, had enveloped me in the petals of its blossom.

She seemed too delicate for someone living in the mountains. Even in the capital you don't see many women as beautiful. As she rubbed my back, I could hear her trying to stifle the sounds of her breathing. I knew I should ask her to stop, but I became lost in the bliss of the moment. Was it the spirit of the deep mountains that made me allow her to continue? Or was it her fragrance? I smelled something wonderful. Perhaps it was the woman's breath coming from behind me.

Here Monk Shūchō paused. "Young man, since the lamp's over there by you, I wonder if you could turn up the wick a bit. This isn't the kind of story to be telling in the dark. I'm warning you, now. I'm going to tell it just as it happened."

The monk's outline showed darkly beside me. As soon as I fixed the lantern, he smiled and continued his story.

Yes, it was like a dream. I felt as if I were being softly enveloped in that warm flower with its strange, wonderful fragrance—my feet, legs, hands, shoulders, neck, all the way up to my head. When the blossom finally swallowed me completely I startled and collapsed on the boulder with my legs out in front of me. Immediately, the woman's arms reached around me from behind.

"Can you tell how hot I am? It's this unbearable heat. Just doing this has made me sweat."

When she said that, I took her hand off my chest. I broke away from her embrace and stood up straight as a stick. "Excuse me."

"Not at all. No one's looking," she said coolly. That was when I noticed she had taken off her clothes. When, I don't know. But there she was, her body softly shining like glossy silk.

Imagine my surprise.

"I suffer from the heat because I'm a little overweight. It's embarrassing," she said. "When it gets hot like this, I come to the river two or three times a day. If I didn't have this water, I don't know what I would do. Here. Take this washcloth." She handed me a wrung-out towel. "Dry your legs."

Before I knew what was happening, she had wiped my body dry.

"Ha, ha." The monk laughed, seeming a bit embarrassed. "I'm afraid this is quite a story I'm telling you."

16

With her clothes off, she looked very different. Her figure was voluptuous and full.

"I had some business to take care of in the shed back there," she said, "and now I've got horse's breath all over me. This is a good chance to wash up a bit." She spoke as if confiding in a brother or sister.

She raised one hand to hold back her hair, and wiped under her arm with the other. As she stood and wrung out the towel with both hands, her snowy skin looked as if it had been purified by this miracle-working water. The flowing perspiration of such a woman could only be light crimson in color, the shade of mountain flowers.

She began combing her hair. "I'm really being a tomboy. What if I fell into the river? What would the people downstream think?"

"That you were a white peach blossom." I said what came to my mind. Our eyes met.

She smiled, as if pleased by my words. At that moment, she seemed seven or eight years younger, looking down at the water with an innocent shyness. Her figure, bathed in the moonlight and enveloped in the evening mist, shimmered translucent blue before a huge, smooth rock that was being moistened black by the spray from the opposite bank.

It had grown dark, and I had trouble seeing clearly. But there must have been a cave somewhere nearby, for just then a number of bats, creatures as large as birds, began darting over our heads.

"Stop that. Can't you see I have a guest?" the woman suddenly cried out, and shuddered.

"Is something wrong?" I asked calmly. I had put my clothes back on.

"No," she said as if embarrassed, and quickly turned away.

Just then a small, gray animal the size of a puppy came running toward us. Before I could shout out, it jumped from the cliff, sailed through the air, and landed on her back. With the animal hugging her like that, she seemed to vanish from the waist up.

"Beast! Can't you see my guest?" Now there was anger in her voice. "What insolence!" When the animal peered up at her, she struck it squarely on the head. It let out a shriek, jumped backward into the air, and dangled by its long arm from the branch where she had hung my clothes. Then it did a somersault, flipped itself on top of the branch, and scampered up the tree. A monkey! The animal jumped from branch to branch, then climbed to the very top of the tall tree, sharing the treetops with the moon that had risen high in the sky and was showing through the leaves.

The woman seemed to be in a pout because of the monkey's misbehavior, or rather because of the pranks of the toad, the bats, and the monkey. The way her mood soured reminded me of young mothers who get upset when their children misbehave.

As she put her clothes back on, she looked angry. I asked no questions. I hid in the background and tried to stay out of the way.

17

She was gentle yet strong, lighthearted yet not without a degree of firmness. She had a friendly disposition but her dignity was unshakable, and her confident manner gave me the impression that she was a woman who could handle any situation. Nothing good could come of getting in her way if she were angry. I knew that if I were unfortunate enough to get on her wrong side, I would be as helpless as a monkey fallen from its tree. With fear and trembling, I timidly kept my distance. But, as it turned out, things weren't as bad as all that.

"You must have found it odd," she said, smiling good-naturedly, as if recalling the scene. "There's not much I can do about it."

Suddenly she seemed as cheerful as before. She quickly tied her sash. "Well, shall we go back?" She tucked the rice pot under her arm, put on her sandals, and quickly started up the cliff. "Give me your hand."

"No. I think I know the way now." I thought I was prepared for the ascent; but once we started the climb, it was a lot farther to the top than I had expected.

Eventually we crossed over the same log. Lying in the grass, logs have an amazing resemblance to serpents, especially pine trees with their scalelike bark. With the cliff towering above us, it seemed as

though the fallen tree was indeed a slithering snake. Judging from its girth, the serpent's head would be somewhere in the grass on one side of the path and its tail on the other. There it was, its contours brightly lit by the moonlight. Remembering the road that had brought me here, I felt my knees begin to quiver.

The woman was good enough to keep looking back to check on me. "Don't look down when you cross over. Right there in the middle, it's a long way to the bottom. You wouldn't want to get dizzy."

"No, of course not."

I couldn't stand there forever, so I laughed at my timidity and jumped up on the log. Someone had cut notches into it for traction, and as long as I was careful I should have been able to walk on it even wearing clogs. Nevertheless, because it was so like the back of a boa—unsteady, soft, and slithery beneath my clogs—I shouted out in fear and fell, straddling the log.

"Where's your courage?" she asked. "It's those clogs, isn't it? Here, put these on. Do as I say."

By that time I had already developed a sound respect for her. For better or worse, I decided to obey, no matter what she wanted. I put on the sandals, just as she asked.

And then, listen to this, as she was putting on my clogs, she took my hand.

Suddenly I felt lighter. I had no trouble following her, and before I knew it we were back at the cottage.

As soon as we arrived the old man greeted us with a shout. "I thought it'd take a little time. But I see the Good Brother's come back in his original form."

"What are you talking about?" she said. "Anything happen while we were gone?"

"Guess I've done my time here. If it gets too dark, I'll have trouble on the road. Better get the horse and be on my way."

"Sorry to make you wait."

"Not at all. Go take a look. Your husband's fine. It's going to take more than I've got to steal him away from you." Pleased by his own nonsense, the old man burst into laughter and plodded off toward the horse stall.

The idiot was sitting in the same place, just as before. It seems that even a jellyfish will keep its shape if kept out of the sun.

I could hear neighing, shouts, and the sound of the horse's hooves stomping the ground as the man brought the animal around front. He stood with his legs apart, holding the animal by its halter. "Well, Miss, I'll be off. Take good care of the monk."

The woman had set up a lantern near the hearth and was on her knees, trying to get a fire started. She glanced up and placed her hand on her leg while holding a pair of metal chopsticks. "Thank you for taking care of everything."

"It's the least I could do. Hey!" The man jerked back on the animal's rope.

It was a dappled horse, gray with black spots. The muscular stallion with a straggly mane stood there with nothing on but a halter.

I found nothing particularly interesting about the animal. Yet when the man tugged on the rope I quickly moved over to the veranda from where I was sitting behind the idiot and called out, "Where are you taking that horse?"

"To an auction over by Suwa Lake. Tomorrow you'll be taking the same road."

"Why do you ask?" the woman suddenly interrupted. "Are you planning to jump on and ride away?"

"Not at all," I said. "That would be a violation of my vows—to rest my legs and ride while on pilgrimage."

"I doubt you or anybody else could stay on *this* animal," the old man said. "Besides, you've had your share of close calls already today. Why don't you just rest easy and let the young lady take care of you tonight? Well, I'd better get going."

"All right, then."

"Giddap."

The horse refused to move. It seemed to be nervously twitching its lips, pointing its muzzle in my direction, and looking at me.

"Damned animal. Hey now!"

The old man pulled the halter rope to the left and right, but the horse stood as firm as if its feet were rooted in the ground.

Exasperated by the creature, the old man began to beat it. He closely circled around the horse two or three times, but the animal still refused to move forward. When the man put his shoulder against

its belly and threw his weight against the horse, it finally lifted one of its front feet, but then planted all four again.

"Miss! Miss!" The man wailed for help.

The woman stood up and tiptoed over to a soot-blackened pillar, where she hid herself from the horse's eyes.

The man pulled out a dirty, crumpled towel from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his deeply wrinkled brow. With new determination on his face, he placed himself in front of the horse and, maintaining his calm, grabbed the rope with both hands. He planted his feet, leaned back, and threw his whole weight into it. And guess what happened next?

The horse let out a tremendous whinny and raised both its front hooves into the air. The old man stumbled and fell to the ground on his back; and the horse came down, sending a cloud of dust into the moonlit sky.

Even the idiot saw the humor of this scene. For once and only once, he held his head straight, opened his fat lips, bared his big teeth, and fluttered his hand as if fanning the air.

"What now?" the woman said, giving up. She slipped on her sandals and stepped into the dirt-floored area of the cottage.

"Don't get it wrong," the old man said to her. "It's not you. It's the monk. This horse has had its eye on him from the start. They probably knew each other in a former life, and now the beast wants the Holy Man to pray for its soul."

I was shocked to hear the fellow suggest I had any connections with the animal. It was then that the woman asked me, "Sir, did you happen to meet anyone on your way here?"

"Yes. Just before I reached Tsuji, I did meet a medicine peddler from Toyama. He started out on the same trail, a little ahead of me."

"I see." She smiled as if she had guessed something right, then glanced over at the horse. She looked as if she couldn't help but smirk.

She seemed to be in a better mood, so I spoke up. "Perhaps he came by this way."

"No. I wouldn't know anything about that." She suddenly seemed to distance herself again, and so I held my tongue. She turned to the man, who was standing meekly before the horse, dusting himself off. "Then I guess I don't have much of a choice," she said in a resigned tone and hurriedly untied her sash. One end of it dangled in the dirt. She pulled it up and hesitated for a moment.

"Ah, ah." The idiot husband let out a vague cry. As he reached out with the long, skinny arm that was constantly fanning the air, the woman handed him her sash. Like a child, he placed it on his lap, then rolled it up and guarded it as if it were a precious treasure.

She pulled the lapels of her kimono together and held them with one hand just below her breasts. Leaving the house, she quietly walked over to the horse.

I was struck with astonishment as she stood on tiptoe. She gracefully raised her hand in the air, then stroked the horse's mane two or three times.

She moved around and stood directly in front of the horse's huge muzzle, seeming to grow taller as I watched. She fixed her eyes on the animal, puckered her lips, and raised her eyebrows as if falling into a trance. Suddenly her familiar charm and coquettish air disappeared, and I found myself wondering if she were a god, or maybe a demon.

At that moment, it was as if the mountain behind the cottage and the peak directly across the valley—in fact, all the mountains that surrounded us and formed this world that was set apart from all others—suddenly looked our way and bent over to stare at this woman who stood facing the horse in the moonlight. Turning ever darker, the deep mountains grew more lonely and intense.

I felt myself being engulfed in a warm, moist wind as the woman slipped her kimono off her left shoulder. Then she took her right hand out of its sleeve, brought it around to the fullness of her bosom, and lifted her thin undergarment. Suddenly she was naked, without even so much as the mountain mist to clothe her.

The skin on the horse's back and belly seemed to melt with ecstasy and drip with sweat. Even its strong legs became feeble and began to tremble. The animal lowered its head to the ground and, blowing froth from its mouth, bent its front legs as if paying obeisance to her beauty.

At that moment, the woman reached under the horse's jaw and

nimbly tossed her undergarment over the animal's eyes. She leaped like a doe rabbit and arched her back so she was looking up at the ghastly, hazy moon. Threading the undergarment between the horse's front legs, she pulled it from its eyes as she passed beneath the belly of the horse and stepped off to the side.

The old man, taking his cue from her, pulled on the halter. And the two started walking briskly down the mountain trail and soon disappeared into the darkness.

The woman put on her kimono and came over to the veranda. She tried to take her sash from the idiot, who refused to give it back. He raised his hand and tried reaching for her breasts. When she finally brushed off his hand and gave him a scornful look, he shrank back and hung his head.

All this I witnessed in the phantasmal flickering of the dimming lantern. In the hearth, the faggots were now aflame, and the woman, in order to tend to the fire, rushed back into the cottage. Coming to us from the far side of the moon, the faint echoes of the horseman's song reverberated in the night.

20

It was time for dinner. Far from mere carrots and gourd shavings, the woman served pickled vegetables, marinated ginger, seaweed, and miso soup with dried wild mushrooms.

The ingredients were simple but well prepared, and I was practically starving. As for the service, it couldn't have been better. With her elbows resting on the tray in her lap, and her chin cupped in her hands, she watched me eat, apparently gaining great satisfaction from it.

The idiot, tired of being left alone, started crawling limply toward us. He dragged his potbelly over to where the woman was seated and collapsed into a cross-legged position. He mumbled as he kept pointing and staring at my dinner.

"What is it?" she asked him. "No. You can eat later. Don't you see we have a guest tonight?"

A melancholy look came over the idiot's face. He twisted his mouth and tossed his head from side to side.

"No? You're hopeless. Go ahead, then. Eat with our guest." She turned to me. "I beg your pardon."

I quickly set my chopsticks down. "Not at all. Please. I've put you through too much trouble already."

"Hardly. You've been no trouble at all." She turned to the idiot. "You, my dear, are supposed to eat with me, after our guest finishes. What am I going to do with you?" Saying this to put me at ease, she quickly set up a tray identical to mine.

Good wife that she was, she served the food quickly, without wasting a single movement. Yet there was also something refined and genteel about her.

The idiot looked up with dull eyes at the tray set before him. "I want that. That," he said while glancing goggle-eyed around the room.

She looked at him gently, in the way a mother might look at her child. "You can have that any time you want," she said. "But tonight we have a guest."

"No. I want it now." The idiot shook his entire body. He sniveled and looked as if he was about to burst into tears.

The woman didn't know what to do, and I felt sorry for her. "Miss, I know next to nothing about your situation here," I said. "But wouldn't it be better just to give him what he wants? Personally, I'd feel better if you didn't treat me like a guest."

"So you don't want to eat what I've fixed?" she asked the idiot. "You don't want this?"

She finally gave in to him, as he looked as if he was about to cry. She went over to her broken-down cupboard, took something from a crock, and put it on his tray, though not without giving him a reproachful look.

"Here you go." She pretended to be peeved and forced a smile.

I watched from the corner of my eye, wondering what kind of food the idiot would be chewing in his huge mouth. A blue-green snake stewed with vegetables in thick soy and sugar? A monkey fetus steam-baked in a casserole? Or something less grotesque, like pieces of dried frog meat? With one hand the idiot held his bowl. With the other he picked up a piece of overpickled radish. It wasn't sliced into pieces either, just chopped into a big chunk so the idiot could munch on it as if eating a cob of corn.

The woman must have been embarrassed. I caught her glancing over at me. She was blushing. Though she hardly seemed like an innocent-minded person, she nervously touched a corner of her towel to her mouth.

I took a closer look at this young man. His body was yellow and plump, just like the pickled radish he had just devoured. By and by, satisfied with having vanquished his prey, he looked the other way, without even asking for a cup of tea, and panted heavily with boredom.

"I guess I've lost my appetite," the woman said. "Maybe I'll have something later."

She cleared the dishes without eating dinner.

21

The mood was subdued for a while after that. "You must be tired," she finally said. "Shall I make up your bed right away?"

"Thank you," I replied. "But I'm not the least bit sleepy. Washing in the river seems to have revived me completely."

"That stream is good for any illness you might have. Whenever I'm worn out and feel withered and dry, all I have to do is spend half a day in the water and I become refreshed again. Even in the winter, when the mountains turn to ice and all the rivers and cliffs are covered with snow, the water never freezes in that spot where you were bathing. Monkeys with gunshot wounds, night herons with broken legs, so many animals come to bathe in the water that they've made that path down the cliff. It's the water that has healed your wounds.

"If you aren't tired, maybe we could talk for a while. I get so lonely here. It's strange, but being all alone in the mountains like this, I even forget how to talk. Sometimes I get so discouraged.

"If you get sleepy, don't stay up on my account. We don't have anything like a real guest room, but, on the other hand, you won't find a single mosquito here. Down in the valley they tell a story about a man from Kaminohora who stayed the night there. They put up a mosquito net for him, but since he had never seen one before he asked them for a ladder so he could get into bed.

"Even if you sleep late you won't hear any bells ringing, nor any

roosters crowing at dawn. We don't even have dogs here, so you can sleep in peace."

She looked over at the idiot. "That fellow was born and raised here in the mountains. He doesn't know much about anything. Still, he's a good person, so there's no need to worry on his account. He actually knows how to bow politely when a stranger visits, though he hasn't paid his respects to you yet, has he? These days he doesn't have much strength. He's gotten lazy. But he's not stupid. He can understand everything you say."

She moved closer to the idiot, looked into his face, and said cheerfully, "Why don't you bow to the monk? You haven't forgotten how, have you?"

The idiot managed to put his two hands together on the floor and bowed with a jerk, as if a wound-up spring had been released in his back. Struck by the woman's love for the fellow, I bowed my head. "The pleasure's mine."

Still facing down, he seemed to lose his equilibrium. He fell over on his side, and the woman helped him back up. "There. Good for you."

Looking as if she wanted to praise him for what he had done, she turned to me and said, "Sir, I'm pretty sure he could do anything you asked of him. But he has a disease that neither the doctors nor the river can heal. Both of his legs are crippled, so it doesn't do much good to teach him new things. As you can see, just one bow is about as much as he can tolerate."

"Learning something is hard work. It hurts him, I know, so I don't ask him to do much. And because of that he's gradually forgotten how to use his hands or even how to talk. The one thing he still can do is sing. Even now he still knows two or three songs. Why don't you sing one for our guest?"

The idiot opened his eyes wide and looked at the woman, then at me. He seemed shy as he shook his head.

22

After she encouraged and cajoled him in various ways, he cocked his head to one side and, playing with his navel, began to sing.

*Even the summers are cold
On Mount Ontake in Kiso.
Let me give you
A double-lined kimono
And tabi socks as well.*

The woman listened intently and smiled. "Doesn't he know it well, though?"

How strange it was! The idiot's voice was nothing like you might expect, having heard his story. Even I couldn't believe it. It was the difference between the moon and a turtle, clouds and mud, heaven and earth! The phrasing, the dynamics, the breathing—everything was perfect. You wouldn't think that such a pure, clear voice could emerge from the throat of that young man. It sounded as though his former incarnation was piping a voice from the other world into the idiot's bloated stomach.

I had been listening with my head bowed. I sat with my hands folded in my lap, unable to look up at the couple. I was so moved that tears came to my eyes.

The woman noticed I was crying and asked me if something was wrong. I couldn't answer her right away, but finally I said, "I'm fine, thanks. I won't ask any questions about you, so you mustn't ask about me either." I mentioned no details, but I spoke from my heart. I had come to see her as a veritable Yang Gui-fei, a voluptuous and alluring beauty who deserved to be adorned with silver and jade pins for her hair, gossamer gowns as sheer as butterfly wings, and pearl-sewn shoes. And yet she was so open and kind to her idiot husband. That was the reason I was moved to tears.

She was the sort of person who could guess the unspoken feelings of another. She spoke up as if she immediately understood exactly what I was feeling. "You're very kind." She gazed at me with a look in her eyes that I cannot begin to describe. I bowed my head and looked away.

The lantern dimmed again, and I wondered if this perhaps was the idiot's doing; for just then, the conversation lagged and a tired silence overcame us. The master of song, apparently bored, yawned hugely, as if he were about to swallow the lantern before him.

He started to fidget. "Want sleep. Sleep." He moved his body clumsily.

"Are you tired? Shall we go to bed?" The woman sat up and, as if she had suddenly come to her senses, looked around. The world outside the house was as bright as noon. The moonlight poured into the cottage through the open windows and doors. The hydrangeas were a vivid blue.

"Are you ready to retire?"

"Yes," I said. "Sorry to inconvenience you."

"I'll put him to bed first. Make yourself comfortable. You're right out in the open here, but in the summer this bigger room will be better for you. We'll sleep in the inner room, so you can get a good rest. Wait just a moment," she started to say and stood up. She hurriedly stepped down onto the earthen floor. Because her movements were so vigorous, her black hair, which had been twisted into a bun, fell down over the nape of her neck.

With one hand touching her hair and the other on the door, she looked outside and said to herself, "I must have dropped my comb in all the excitement."

She was obviously talking about when she had passed beneath the horse's belly.

23

The monk paused as he told his story. The night was still, and we could clearly distinguish slow, quiet steps in the hallway downstairs. It sounded like someone going to the bathroom. One of the rain shutters opened with a rattle; then came the sound of hands being washed. "The snow's piling up," came a voice. Most surely, it was the owner of the inn.

"I guess the merchant from Wakasa found some other place to spend the night," the monk said. "I hope he's having sweet dreams."

"Please, finish your story. What happened next?" I urged Monk Shūchō to continue.

Well, the night grew late, he resumed. As you can understand, no matter how tired a person gets, when you're in an isolated cottage in the middle of mountains like that, it's hard to fall asleep. Besides, I was bothered by something that kept me from dozing off. In fact, I was wide awake. I kept blinking my eyes, but, as you might expect, by that time I was so exhausted that my mind had become clouded. All I could do was wait for dawn to brighten the night sky.

At first I listened, out of habit, for the morning temple bells. Will they ring now? Are they about to ring? Surely enough time had passed since I had retired for the night. But then I realized there wouldn't be any temples in a place as isolated as this, and suddenly I became uneasy.

Then it happened. As they say, the night is as deep as a valley. As soon as I could no longer hear the sound of the idiot's slovenly breathing, I sensed the presence of something outside.

It sounded like the footsteps of an animal, one that hadn't come from very far away. At first I tried to comfort myself, thinking that this was a place where there was no scarcity of monkeys and toads. But the thought did little to reassure me.

A bit later, when it seemed the animal had stepped up to the front of the house, I heard the bleating of a sheep.

My head was pointed in its direction, which meant that the beast must have been standing right beside my pillow! A bit later I heard the sound of beating bird's wings just to my right, under the spot where the hydrangea was blooming.

Then came the sound of another animal crying *Kii, kii* on the rooftop. I guessed it was a flying squirrel or some such thing. Next a huge beast, as big as a hill, came so close I felt as though I were being crushed by it. It bellowed like a cow. Then came another two-legged creature that sounded as if it must have come running from far away with straw sandals on its feet. Now all kinds of creatures were circling and milling around the house. Altogether, there must have been twenty or thirty of them, snorting, beating their wings, some of them hissing. It was like a hellish scene from the Realm of Suffering Beasts. In the light of the moon, I could see the silhouettes of their ghastly figures cavorting and dancing in front of the house. Were these the evil spirits of the mountains and rivers?

The leaves on the trees shuddered. I held my breath. From the room where the woman and the idiot were sleeping came a moan and then the sound of someone drawing a long breath. It was the woman, overcome by a nightmare.

"We have a guest tonight," she cried out.

A few seconds passed before she spoke again, this time in a clear, sharp voice. "I said we have a guest."

I could hear the woman tossing in bed, and a very quiet voice that said, "We have a guest." Then followed more tossing.

The beasts outside stirred and the entire cottage began to shake back and forth. Frightened out of my senses, I began reciting a *dharani*.

*He who dares resist the heavens
And vainly tries to block truth's route,
May his head be split in seven
Like the young arjaka sprout!
His sin is worse than parricide,
His crushing doom without relief,
His scales and measures telling lies
Like Devadatta, we despise
Offenders of belief!*

I chanted the sacred words with heart and soul. And suddenly the whirlwind twisting in the trees blew away to the south and everything became still. From the couple's bed came not a sound.

24

The next day at noon, I ran into the old man who had gone off to sell the horse. I was standing by a waterfall not far from a village, and he was on his way back to the cottage. We came upon each other just at that moment when I had decided to give up my life as a monk, to go back to the mountain cottage and spend the rest of my days with the woman.

To tell the truth, ever since I had left her earlier that morning this single idea dominated my thoughts. No snakes spanned my path, and

I encountered no leech-filled forests. Still, though the way might continue to be hard, bringing tribulation to my body and soul, I realized that my pilgrimage was senseless. My dreams of someday donning a purple surplice and living in a fine monastery meant nothing to me. And to be called a living Buddha by others and to be thronged with crowds of worshippers could only turn my stomach with the stench of humanity.

You can understand why I haven't given you all the details of my story, but after the woman put the idiot to sleep, she came back out to my room. She told me that rather than going back to a life of self-denial, I ought to stay by her side in the cottage by the river, there where the summer is cool and the winter mild. Had I given in to her for that reason alone, you'd probably say that I had been bewitched by her beauty. But in my own defense let me say that I truly felt sorry for her. How would it be to live in that isolated mountain cottage as the idiot's bed partner, not able to communicate, feeling you were slowly forgetting how to talk?

That morning when we said goodbye in the dawning light, I was reluctant to leave her. She regretted never being able to see me again, spending the rest of her life in such a place. She also said that should I ever see white peach petals flowing upon a stream, however small, I would know that she had thrown herself into a river and was being torn apart bit by bit. She was dejected, but her kindness never failed. She told me to follow the river, that it would lead me to the next village. The water dancing and tumbling over a waterfall would be my sign that houses were nearby. Pointing out the road, she saw me off, walking along with me until her cottage had disappeared behind us.

Though we would never walk hand in hand as man and wife, I kept thinking I could still be her companion, there to comfort her morning and night. I would prepare the firewood and she would do the cooking. I would gather nuts and she would shell them. We would work together, I on the veranda and she inside, talking to each other, laughing together. The two of us would go to the river. She would take off her clothes and stand beside me. Her breath upon my back, she would envelop me in the warm, delicate fragrance of her petals. For that I would gladly lose my life!

Staring at the waterfall, I tortured myself with these thoughts. Even now when I think back on it, I break out in a cold sweat. I was

totally exhausted, both physically and spiritually. I had set off at a fast pace and my legs had grown weary. Even if I was returning to the civilized world, I knew that the best I could expect was some old crone with bad breath offering me a cup of tea. I could care less about making it to the village, and so I sat down on a rock and looked over the edge at the waterfall. Afterward, I learned it was called the Husband and Wife Falls.

A large jagged rock, like the gaping mouth of a black killer shark, stuck out from the cliff, dividing in two the quickly flowing stream that rushed down upon it. The water thundered and fell about fifteen yards, where it reformed, white against dark green, then flowed straight as an arrow toward the village downstream. The branch of the waterfall on the far side of the rock was about six feet wide and fell in an undisturbed ribbon. The one closest to me was narrower, about three feet across, caressing and entangling the huge shark rock in the middle. As it tumbled, the water shattered into a thousand jewels, breaking over a number of hidden rocks.

25

The smaller stream was trying to leap over the rock and cling to the larger flow, but the jutting stone separated them cleanly, preventing even a single drop from making it to the other side. The waterfall, thrown about and tormented, was weary and gaunt, its sound like sobbing or someone's anguished cries. This was the sad yet gentle wife.

The husband, by contrast, fell powerfully, pulverizing the rocks below and penetrating the earth. It pained me to see the two fall separately, divided by that rock. The brokenhearted wife was like a beautiful woman clinging to someone, sobbing and trembling. As I watched from the safety of the bank, I started to shake and my flesh began to dance. When I remembered how I had bathed with the woman in the headwaters of this stream, my imagination pictured her inside the falling water, now being swept under, now rising again, her skin disintegrating and scattering like flower petals amid a thousand unruly streams of water. I gasped at the sight, and immediately she was whole again—the same face, body, breasts, arms, and legs, rising

and sinking, suddenly dismembered, then appearing again. Unable to bear the sight, I felt myself plunging headlong into the fall and taking the water into my embrace. Returning to my senses, I heard the earthshaking roar of the husband, calling to the mountain spirits and roaring on its way. With such strength, why wasn't he trying to rescue her? I would save her! No matter what the cost.

But then I thought that it would be better to go back to the cottage than to kill myself in the waterfall. My base desires had brought me to this, to this point of indecision. As long as I could see her face and hear her voice, what did it matter if she and her idiot husband shared a bed? At least it would be better than enduring endless austerities and living out my days as a monk.

I made up my mind to go back to her, but just as I stepped back from the rock, someone tapped me on the shoulder. "Hey, Monk."

I had been caught at my weakest moment. Feeling small and ashamed, I looked up, expecting to see a messenger from Hell. What I saw instead was the old man I had met at the woman's cottage.

He must have sold the horse because he was alone. He had a small string of coins hanging from his shoulder and was carrying a carp. The fish had scales of brilliant gold and looked so fresh that it seemed alive. It was about three feet long and dangled from a small straw cord threaded through its gills. Unable to think of a word to say, I could only look at the man while he stared into my eyes. Finally, he chuckled to himself. It wasn't a normal laugh but a gruesome sort of snicker.

"What are you doing here?" he asked me. "You should be used to this kind of heat, or did you stop for something else? You're only twelve miles from where you were last night. If you'd been walking hard, you'd be in the village giving thanks to Jizō by now.

"Or maybe you've been thinking about that woman. Your earthly passions are stirred, aren't they? Don't try to hide it. I may be a bleary-eyed old man, but I can still tell black from white. Anyone normal wouldn't still be human after a bath with her. Take your pick. Cow? Horse? Monkey? Toad? Bat? You're lucky you're not going to be flying or hopping around for the rest of your life. When you came up from the river and hadn't been turned into some other animal, I couldn't believe my eyes. Lucky you! I guess your faith saved you.

"Remember the horse I led off last night? You said you met a

medicine peddler from Toyama on your way to the cottage, right? Well, he's what I'm talking about. The woman had that lecher turned into a horse long before you showed up. I took him to the auction and cashed him in. With the money I bought this carp. Oh, she loves fish! She'll eat this one tonight! Tell me. Who do you think she is anyway?"

"Yes. Who *was* she?" I interrupted the monk.

26

Monk Shūchō nodded. "Listen to this," he murmured. "It must have been my fate. Remember the farmer I met at the crossroads, where I took that trail into the haunted forest? Remember how he told me that a doctor once had his house there where the water was flowing over the road? Well, it turns out that the woman was his daughter."

In the high mountains of Hida, where life is always the same and nothing strange ever happens, something extraordinary occurred. To this country doctor was born a daughter who, from the moment of her birth, was as beautiful as a jewel.

Her mother had fat cheeks, eyes that slanted down, a flat nose, and breasts of the most disgusting sort. How could she raise a daughter who was so beautiful?

People used to gossip, comparing their situation to ancient tales where a god desires someone's daughter and shoots a white-feathered arrow into the roof of a house, or a nobleman who is hunting in the countryside, sees a country maiden and demands her for his mistress.

Her father, the doctor, was a vain, arrogant man with jutting cheekbones and a beard. During threshing season, farmers often get chaff in their eyes; and because infections and other diseases are common, he had gained some proficiency as an eye doctor. As an internist, though, he was an utter failure. And when it came to surgery, the best he could do was mix a little hair oil with water and apply it to the wound.

But you know what they say about how some can believe in anything or anybody. Those of his patients whose days were not already

numbered eventually recovered; and as there were no other quacks around, her father's practice flourished.

When his daughter came to be sixteen or seventeen, in the bloom of her youth, the people in the area came to believe that she was Yakushi, Healer of Souls, and that she had been born into the doctor's family in order to provide help to the needy. And provide she did. Both men and women came pleading for her healing touch.

It all began when she started showing interest in her father's patients. "So your hands hurt? Let me see." She pressed the soft palm of her hand to the fingers of a young man named Jisaku—he was the first one—and his rheumatism was cured completely. She stroked the belly of another patient who had drunk tainted water, and his stomachache went away. At first it was the young men who benefited from her healing powers, but then the older men started going to her, too, and later women. Even if they weren't cured completely, the pain was always less than before. When someone had a boil to be lanced, they screamed and kicked as the doctor cut with his rusty knife. But if his daughter pressed her chest up against their backs and held their shoulders, they could bear the pain.

Now, near the grove where the doctor had his house there was an old loquat tree; and in the tree, a swarm of bees had built a frighteningly huge hive. One day, a young man named Kumazō, the doctor's apprentice, found it. His duties were mixing medicine, cleaning the house, taking care of the garden, and transporting the doctor by rickshaw to the homes of patients living nearby. He was twenty-four or -five at the time, and had stolen some syrup from the doctor's medical supplies. Knowing the doctor was tightfisted and would scold him if he ever found out, Kumazō hid his own jar of the syrup on a shelf with his clothes and, whenever he had a few minutes of spare time, would satisfy his sweet tooth by secretly sipping from it.

Kumazō found the bees' hive as he was working in the yard and came over to the veranda to ask the doctor's daughter if she wanted to see something interesting. "Pardon me for asking, but if you could hold my hand, I'll reach into a bees' hive and grab some. Wherever you touch me won't get hurt even if the bees sting. I could try driving 'em away with a broom, but they'd scatter and get all over me. It'd be sudden death." She hesitated, but smiled and let him take her hand. He led her to the hive, where the bees were making a horrifying

drone. In went his left hand. And out it came unharmed, even with seven or eight bees on it, some fanning their wings, some moving their legs, others crawling between his fingers.

Well, after that incident, her fame spread like a spider's web. People began saying that if she touched you, even a bullet would cause no pain. And it was from about that time that she herself became aware of her power. When she went off to live in the mountains with the idiot, her powers grew even more wondrous. As she grew older, she became able to summon the most astounding magical powers at will. In the beginning, she needed to press her body against you. Then it was a touch of her foot or a caress of the fingertips. Finally, she didn't need to make physical contact at all. With a puff of her breath, she could turn a lost traveler into the animal of her choice.

The old man drew my attention to the creatures I had seen around the cottage—the monkey, the toad, the bats, rabbits, and snakes. All of them were men who had bathed in the river with her! When I heard that, I was overwhelmed with memories of the woman and the toad, of her being embraced by the monkey and attacked by the bat, and of the evil spirits of the forest and mountains that circled the cottage that night.

And the idiot? The old man told me about him, too. At a time when the daughter's fame had spread throughout the region, he had come to her father as a patient. He was still a child, accompanied by his father—a brusque, taciturn man—and by his long-haired older brother, who carried him down the mountain on his back. The boy had a bad abscess on his leg, and they had brought him to the doctor's house for treatment.

At first they stayed in a room in the doctor's house, but the boy's leg turned out to be more serious than originally thought. They would have to let his blood, and, particularly because the boy was so young, they would need to build up his strength before anything could be done. For the time being, the doctor prescribed that he eat three eggs a day. And to put his father's mind at ease, a plaster was put over the infection.

Whenever the plaster had to be removed, whether by his father or brother or by someone else, the scab would get pulled off, and the boy

would cry out in pain. When the doctor's daughter did it, though, he endured silently.

As a matter of practice, the doctor used the poor physical condition of his patients as an excuse to put things off whenever he knew he couldn't do anything to help. After three days passed, the boy's hardworking father left his older son to look after the younger one and returned to the mountains. Bowing and scraping, he excused himself and backed out to the entrance of the doctor's house. He slipped on his straw sandals, got down on the ground and bowed again, imploring the doctor to do what he could to save his son's life.

The boy didn't get any better, though. On the seventh day, the older brother also returned to the mountains, saying that this was harvesttime and by far the busiest season of the year. Bad weather was moving in, and if the storms continued for very long, the rice crop, their very source of life, would rot in the fields and their family would starve. Because he was the oldest son and the strongest worker in his family, he couldn't afford to stay away any longer. "Don't cry now," he said softly to his brother, and left him behind.

After that, the boy was alone. According to official records he was six years old, but actually he was eleven. The army wouldn't draft a son whose parents were already sixty. And so the boy's parents had waited five years before they registered his birth. Having been born and raised in the mountains, he had difficulty understanding people in the valley, but he was a bright and reasonable child, who understood that his diet of three eggs a day was producing the extra blood that was to be drained. He would whimper from time to time. But because his brother had told him not to cry, he bore his burden well.

The doctor's daughter felt sorry for the boy and invited him to eat with them, though he preferred going over to a corner of the room to chew on a pitiful chunk of pickled radish. On the night before the operation, after everyone had gone to sleep, the doctor's daughter got up to use the bathroom and heard him weeping quietly. Out of pity, she took him to her bed.

When it came time for the bloodletting, she held him from behind as she usually did for her father's patients. The boy perspired profusely and bore the pain of the scalpel without moving, but—was it because the doctor had cut the wrong place?—they couldn't staunch

the flow of blood. As they watched, the boy lost his color and his condition became critical.

The doctor himself grew pale and agitated. By the grace of the gods, the hemorrhaging stopped after three days; and the boy's life was saved. Still, he lost the use of his legs and from that point on was a cripple.

All the boy could do was drag himself around and look pathetically at his lifeless limbs. It was an unbearable sight, like seeing a grasshopper carrying its torn-off legs in its mouth. When he cried, the doctor, irritated by the thought that his reputation might suffer, glared angrily at him, making the boy seek refuge in his daughter's arms. The doctor had wronged his patients many times before. But this time he admitted his mistake and, though feeling it was inappropriate for a woman his daughter's age to be letting the boy bury his face in her bosom, he just folded his arms and sighed deeply.

Before long, the boy's father came to get him. He didn't complain to the doctor but accepted what had happened to his son as fate. Because the boy refused to leave the young woman's side, the doctor, finding an opportunity to make amends, sent his daughter to accompany them home.

As it turns out, the boy's home is the very mountain cottage that I've been telling you about. At the time, it was one of about twenty houses that formed a small village. The doctor's daughter intended to stay only one or two days, but lingered because of her affection for the child. On the fifth day of her stay, the rain came pouring down in an unrelenting torrent, as if waterfalls had been unleashed on the mountains. Everyone wore straw raincoats even inside their homes. They couldn't open their front doors, let alone patch the holes in their thatched roofs. Only by calling out to each other from inside were they able to know that the last traces of humanity had not been wiped off the face of the earth. Eight days passed as if they were eight hundred. On the ninth, in the middle of the night, a great wind began to blow; and when the storm reached its peak, the mountains and village turned into a sea of mud.

Strangely enough, the only ones who survived the flood were the doctor's daughter, the young boy, and the old man who had been sent from the village to accompany them.

The doctor's household was also annihilated by the same deluge.

People say that the birth of a beautiful woman in such an out-of-the-way place is a harbinger of a new era. Yet the young woman had no home to which to return. Alone in the world, she has been living in the mountains with the boy ever since. You saw for yourself, he said, how nothing has changed. From the time of the flood thirteen years ago, she's cared for him with utter devotion.

Once the tale had been told, the old man sneered again. "So now that you know her story, you probably feel sorry for her. You want to gather firewood and haul water for the woman, don't you? I'm afraid your lustful nature's been awakened, Brother. Of course, you don't like to call it lust. You'd rather call it mercy or sympathy. I know you're thinking of hurrying back to the mountains. But you'd better think twice. Since becoming that idiot's wife, she's forgotten about how the world behaves and does only as she pleases. She takes any man she wants. And when she tires of him, she turns him into an animal, just like that. No one escapes.

"And the river that carved out these mountains? Since the flood, it's become a strange and mysterious stream that both seduces men and restores her beauty. Even a witch pays a price for casting spells. Her hair gets tangled. Her skin becomes pale. She turns haggard and thin. But then she bathes in the river and is restored to the way she was. That's how her youthful beauty gets replenished. She says 'Come,' and the fish swim to her. She looks at a tree, and its fruit falls into her palm. If she holds her sleeves up, it starts to rain. If she raises her eyebrows, the wind blows.

"She was born with a lustful nature, and she likes young men best of all. I wouldn't be surprised if she said something sweet to you. But even if her words were sincere, as soon as she gets tired of you, a tail will sprout, your ears will wiggle, your legs will grow longer, and suddenly you'll be changed into something else.

"I wish you could see what the witch is going to look like after she's had her fill of this fish—sitting there with her legs crossed, drinking wine.

"So curb your wayward thoughts, Good Monk, and get away as quickly as you can. You've been lucky enough as it is. She must have felt something special for you, otherwise you wouldn't be here. You've been through a miracle and you're still young, so get on with your duties like you really mean it." The old man slapped me on the back

again. Dangling the carp from his hand, he started up the mountain road.

I watched him grow smaller in the distance until he disappeared behind the mass of a large mountain. From the top of that mountain, a cloud rapidly blossomed into the drought-cleared sky. Over the quiet rush of the waterfall, I could hear the rolling echoes of clapping thunder.

Standing there like a cast-off shell, I returned to my senses. Filled with gratitude for the old man, I took up my walking staff, adjusted my sedge hat, and ran down the trail. By the time I reached the village, it was already raining on the mountain. It was an impressive storm. Thanks to the rain, the carp the old man was carrying probably reached the woman's cottage alive.

This, then, was the monk's story. He didn't bother to add a moral to the tale. We went our separate ways the next morning, and I was filled with sadness as I watched him begin his ascent into the snow-covered mountains. The snow was falling lightly. As he gradually made his way up the mountain road, the holy man of Mount Kōya seemed to be riding on the clouds.



One Day in Spring

(*Shunchū* and *Shunchū gokoku*, 1906)

Part 1

"Who, me?"

The still of the spring day, no doubt, had made it possible for the reply to come so quickly, like an echo to the wanderer's "Excuse me, sir." How else could it be? The old man, wearing a loosely fitting headband on his wrinkled forehead, had a sleepy, almost drunken expression as he calmly worked the soft ground warmed by the sun. The damp and sweaty plum blossoms nearby, a flame ready to flutter away into the crimson sunset, swayed brilliantly with the chatter of small birds. Their voices sounded like conversation, but the old man, even in his rapturous trance, must have known that the sound of a human voice could only be calling for him.

Had he known the farmer would answer so promptly, the passerby might have thought twice about saying anything. After all, he was just out for a walk and could have decided the matter by dropping his stick on the road: if it fell north, toward Kamakura, he would tell the old man; and if it toppled south he would continue his walk without saying a word. Chances are the old man wouldn't hear him anyway,