



A Legend of Kwannon

Green Willow And Other Japanese Fairy Tales

Japanese

Intermediate
8 min read

In the days of the gods, Ama-no-Hashidate was the Floating Bridge of Heaven. By way of this bridge came the deities from heaven to earth, bearing their jewelled spears, their great bows and heavenly-feathered arrows, their wonder robes and their magic mirrors. Afterwards, when the direct way was closed that had been between earth and heaven, and the deities walked no more upon the Land of Fresh Rice Ears, the people still called a place Ama-no-Hashidate, for the sake of happy memory. This place is one of the Three Fair Views of Yamato. It is where a strip of land runs out into the blue sea, like a floating bridge covered with dark pine trees.

There was a holy man of Kioto called Saion Zenji. He had followed the Way of the Gods from his youth up. He was also a disciple of the great Buddha; well versed was he in doctrines and philosophies; he knew the perils of illusion and the ineffable joys of Nirvana. Long hours would he pass in mystic meditation, and many of the Scriptures he had by heart. When he was on a pilgrimage he came to Ama-no-Hashidate, and he offered up thanks because the place was so lovely in his eyes.

He said, "The blind and ignorant have it that trees and rocks and the green sea-water are not sentient things, but the wise know that they also sing aloud and praise the Tathagata. Here will I take up my rest, and join my voice with theirs, and will not see my home again."

So Saion Zenji, the holy man, climbed Nariai-San, the mountain over against Ama-no-Hashidate. And when

he had come to the place of the Lone Pine, he built him a shrine to Kwannon the Merciful, and a hut to cover his own head.

All day he chanted the Holy Sutras. From dawn to eventide he sang, till his very being was exalted and seemed to float in an ecstasy of praise. Then his voice grew so loud and clear that it was a marvel. The blue campanula of the mountain in reverence bowed its head; the great white lily distilled incense from its deep heart; the cicada shrilled aloud; the Forsaken Bird gave a long note from the thicket. About the hermit's hut there fluttered dragon-flies and butterflies innumerable, which are the souls of the happy dead. In the far valleys the peasant people were comforted in their toil, whether they planted out the green young rice, or gathered in the ears. The sun and the wind were tempered, and the rain fell softly upon their faces. Ever and again they climbed the steep hillside to kneel at the shrine of Kwannon the Merciful, and to speak with the holy man, whose wooden bowl they would fill with rice or millet, or barley-meal or beans. Sometimes he came down and went through the villages, where he soothed the sick and touched the little children. Folks said that his very garments shone.

Now in that country there came a winter season the like of which there had not been within the memory of man. First came the wind blowing wildly from the north, and then came the snow in great flakes which never ceased to fall for the period of nine days. All the folk of the valleys kept within doors as warm as might be, and those that had their winter stores fared none so ill. But, ah me, for the bitter cold upon the heights of Nariai-San! At the Lone Pine, and about the hermit's hut, the snow was piled and drifted. The shrine of Kwannon the Merciful could no more be seen. Saion Zenji, the holy man, lived for some time upon the food that was in his wooden bowl. Then he drew about him the warm garment of thought, and passed many days in meditation, which was meat and drink and sleep to him. Howbeit, even his clear spirit could not utterly dispel the clouds of illusion. At length it came to earth and all the man trembled with bodily weakness.

"Forgive me, O Kwannon the Merciful," said Saion Zenji; "but verily it seems to me that if I have no food I die."

Slowly he rose, and painfully he pushed open the door of his hut. The snow had ceased; it was clear and cold. White were the branches of the Lone Pine, and all white the Floating Bridge.

"Forgive me, O Kwannon the Merciful," said Saion Zenji; "I know not the reason, but I am loath to depart and be with the Shades of Yomi. Save me this life, O Kwannon the Merciful."

Turning, he beheld a dappled hind lying on the snow, newly dead of the cold. He bowed his head. "Poor gentle creature," he said, "never more shalt thou run in the hills, and nibble the grass and the sweet flowers." And he stroked the hind's soft flank, sorrowing.

"Poor deer, I would not eat thy flesh. Is it not forbidden by the Law of the Blessed One? Is it not forbidden by the word of Kwannon the Merciful?" Thus he mused. But even as he mused he seemed to hear a voice that spoke to him, and the voice said:

"Alas, Saion Zenji, if thou die of hunger and cold, what shall become of my people, the poor folk of the valleys? Shall they not be comforted any more by the Sutras of the Tathagata? Break the law to keep the law, beloved, thou that countest the world well lost for a divine song."

Then presently Saion Zenji took a knife, and cut him a piece of flesh from the side of the dappled hind. And he gathered fir cones and made a little fire and cooked the deer's flesh in an iron pot. When it was ready he ate half of it. And his strength came to him again, and he opened his lips and sang praises to the Tathagata, and the very embers of the dying fire leapt up in flame to hear him.

"Howbeit I must bury the poor deer," said Saion Zenji. So he went to the door of his hut. But look where he might no deer nor dappled hind did he see, nor yet the mark of one in the deep snow.

"It is passing strange," he said, and wondered.

As soon as might be, up came the poor folk from the valley to see how their hermit had fared through the snow and the stormy weather. "The gods send he be not dead of cold or hunger," they said one to another. But they found him chanting in his hut, and he told them how he had eaten of the flesh of a dappled hind and was satisfied.

"I cut but a hand's breadth of the meat," he said, "and half of it is yet in the iron pot."

But when they came to look in the pot, they found there no flesh of deer, but a piece of cedar wood gilded upon the one side. Marvelling greatly, they carried it to the shrine of Kwannon the Merciful, and when they had cleared away the deep snow, all of them went in to worship. There smiled the image of the sweet heavenly lady, golden among her golden flowers. In her right side there was a gash where the gilded wood was cut away. Then

the poor folk from the valley reverently brought that which they had found in the hermit's pot, and set it in the gash. And immediately the wound was healed and the smooth gold shone over the place. All the people fell on their faces, but the hermit stood singing the high praise of Kwannon the Merciful.

The sun set in glory. The valley folk crept softly from the shrine and went down to their own homes. The cold moon and the stars shone upon the Lone Pine and the Floating Bridge and the sea. Through a rent in the shrine's roof they illumined the face of Kwannon the Merciful, and made visible her manifold arms of love. Yet Saion Zenji, her servant, stood before her singing in an ecstasy, with tears upon his face:

“O wonder-woman, strong and beautiful, Tender-hearted, pitiful, and thousand-armed! Thou hast fed me with thine own flesh— Mystery of mysteries! Poor dead dappled hind thou cam'st to me; In the deep of mine own heart thou spoke to me To keep, yet break, and breaking, keep thy law— Mystery of mysteries! Kwannon, the Merciful Lady, stay with me, Save me from the perils of illusion; Let me not be afraid of the snow or the Lone Pine. Mystery of mysteries— Thou hast refused Nirvana, Help me that I may lose the world, content, And sing the Divine Song.”

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