



The Oni on His Travels

William Elliot Griffis

Dutch

Intermediate

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Across the ocean, in Japan, there once lived curious creatures called Onis. Every Japanese boy and girl has heard of them, though one has not often been caught. In one museum, visitors could see the hairy leg of a specimen. Falling out of the air in a storm, the imp had lost his limb. It had been torn off by being caught in the timber side of a well curb. The story-teller was earnestly assured by one Japanese lad that his grandfather had seen it tumble from the clouds.

Many people are sure that the Onis live in the clouds and occasionally fall off, during a peal of thunder. Then they escape and hide down in a well. Or, they get loose in the kitchen, rattle the dishes around, and make a great racket. They behave like cats, with a dog after them. They do a great deal of mischief, but not much harm. There are even some old folks who say that, after all, Onis are only unruly children, that behave like angels in the morning and act like imps in the afternoon. So we see that not much is known about the Onis.

Many things that go wrong are blamed on the Onis. Foolish folks, such as stupid maid-servants, and dull-witted fellows, that blunder a good deal, declare that the Onis made them do it. Drunken men, especially, that stumble into mud-holes at night, say the Onis pushed them in. Naughty boys that steal cake, and girls that take sugar, often tell fibs to their parents, charging it on the Onis.

The Onis love to play jokes on people, but they are not dangerous. There are plenty of pictures of them in Japan,

though they never sat for their portraits, but this is the way they looked.

Some Onis have only one eye in their forehead, others two, and, once in a while, a big fellow has three. There are little, short horns on their heads, but these are no bigger than those on a baby deer and never grow long. The hair on their heads gets all snarled up, just like a little girl's that cries when her tangled tresses are combed out; for the Onis make use of neither brushes nor looking glasses. As for their faces, they never wash them, so they look sooty. Their skin is rough, like an elephant's. On each of their feet are only three toes. Whether an Oni has a nose, or a snout, is not agreed upon by the learned men who have studied them.

No one ever heard of an Oni being higher than a yardstick, but they are so strong that one of them can easily lift two bushel bags of rice at once. In Japan, they steal the food offered to the idols. They can live without air. They like nothing better than to drink both the rice spirit called saké, and the black liquid called soy, of which only a few drops, as a sauce on fish, are enough for a man. Of this sauce, the Dutch, as well as the Japanese, are very fond.

Above all things else, the most fun for a young Oni is to get into a crockery shop. Once there, he jumps round among the cups and dishes, hides in the jars, straddles the shelves and turns somersaults over the counter. In fact, the Oni is only a jolly little imp. The Japanese girls, on New Year's eve, throw handfuls of dried beans in every room of the house and cry, "In, with good luck; and out with you, Onis!" Yet they laugh merrily all the time. The Onis cannot speak, but they can chatter like monkeys. They often seem to be talking to each other in gibberish.

Now it once happened in Japan that the great Tycoon of the country wanted to make a present to the Prince of the Dutch. So he sent all over the land, from the sweet potato fields in the south to the seal and salmon waters in the north, to get curiosities of all sorts. The products of Japan, from the warm parts, where grow the indigo and the sugar cane, to the cold regions, in which are the bear and walrus, were sent as gifts to go to the Land of Dykes and Windmills. The Japanese had heard that the Dutch people like cheese, walk in wooden shoes, eat with forks, instead of chopsticks, and the women wear twenty petticoats apiece, while the men sport jackets with two gold buttons, and folks generally do things the other way from that which was common in Japan.

Now it chanced that while they were packing the things that were piled up in the palace at Yedo, a young Oni, with his horns only half grown, crawled into the kitchen, at night, through the big bamboo water pipe near the

pump. Pretty soon he jumped into the storeroom. There, the precious cups, vases, lacquer boxes, pearl-inlaid pill-holders, writing desks, jars of tea, and bales of silk, were lying about, ready to be put into their cases. The yellow wrappings for covering the pretty things of gold and silver, bronze and wood, and the rice chaff, for the packing of the porcelain, were all at hand. What a jolly time the Oni did have, in tumbling them about and rolling over them! Then he leaped like a monkey from one vase to another. He put on a lady's gay silk kimono and wrapped himself around with golden embroidery. Then he danced and played the game of the Ka-gu'-ra, or Lion of Korea, pretending to make love to a girl-Oni. Such funny capers as he did cut! It would have made a cat laugh to see him. It was broad daylight, before his pranks were over, and the Dutch church chimes were playing the hour of seven.

Suddenly the sound of keys in the lock told him that, in less than a minute, the door would open.

Where should he hide? There was no time to be lost. So he seized some bottles of soy from the kitchen shelf and then jumped into the big bottom drawer of a ladies' cabinet, and pulled it shut.

"Namu Amida" (Holy Buddha!), cried the man that opened the door. "Who has been here? It looks like a rat's picnic."

However, the workmen soon came and set everything to rights. Then they packed up the pretty things. They hammered down the box lids and before night the Japanese curiosities were all stored in the hold of a swift, Dutch ship, from Nagasaki, bound for Rotterdam. After a long voyage, the vessel arrived safely in good season, and the boxes were sent on to The Hague, or capital city. As the presents were for the Prince, they were taken at once to the pretty palace, called the House in the Wood. There they were unpacked and set on exhibition for the Prince and Princess to see the next day.

When the palace maid came in next morning to clean up the floor and dust the various articles, her curiosity led her to pull open the drawer of the ladies' cabinet; when out jumped something hairy. It nearly frightened the girl out of her wits. It was the Oni, which rushed off and down stairs, tumbling over a half dozen servants, who were sitting at their breakfast. All started to run except the brave butler, who caught up a carving knife and showed fight. Seeing this, the Oni ran down into the cellar, hoping to find some hole or crevice for escape. All around, were shelves filled with cheeses, jars of sour-kroust, pickled herring, and stacks of fresh rye bread standing in the corners. But oh! how they did smell in his Japanese nostrils! Oni, as he was, he nearly fainted,

for no such odors had ever beaten upon his nose, when in Japan. Even at the risk of being carved into bits, he must go back. So up into the kitchen again he ran. Happily, the door into the garden stood wide open.

Grabbing a fresh bottle of soy from the kitchen shelf, the Oni, with a hop, skip and jump, reached outdoors. Seeing a pair of klomps, or wooden shoes, near the steps, the Oni put his pair of three toes into them, to keep the dogs from scenting its tracks. Then he ran into the fields, hiding among the cows, until he heard men with pitchforks coming. At once the Oni leaped upon a cow's back and held on to its horns, while the poor animal ran for its life into its stall, in the cow stable, hoping to brush the monster off.

The dairy farmer's wife was at that moment pulling open her bureau drawer, to put on a new clean lace cap. Hearing her favorite cow moo and bellow, she left the drawer open and ran to look through the pane of glass in the kitchen. Through this, she could peep, at any minute, to see whether this or that cow, or its calf, was sick or well.

Meanwhile, at the House in the Wood, the Princess, hearing the maid scream and the servants in an uproar, rushed out in her embroidered white nightie, to ask who, and what, and why, and wherefore. All different and very funny were the answers of maid, butler, cook, valet and boots.

The first maid, who had pulled open the drawer and let the Oni get out, held up broom and duster, as if to take oath. She declared:

"It was a monkey, or baboon; but he seemed to talk—Russian, I think."

"No," said the butler. "I heard the creature—a black ram, running on its hind legs; but its language was German, I'm sure."

The cook, a fat Dutch woman, told a long story. She declared, on honor, that it was a black dog like a Chinese pug, that has no hair. However, she had only seen its back, but she was positive the creature talked English, for she heard it say "soy."

The valet honestly avowed that he was too scared to be certain of anything, but was ready to swear that to his ears the words uttered seemed to be Swedish. He had once heard sailors from Sweden talking, and the chatter sounded like their lingo.

Then there was Boots, the errand boy, who believed that it was the Devil; but, whatever or whoever it was, he was ready to bet a week's wages that its lingo was all in French.

Now when the Princess found that not one of her servants could speak or understand any language but their own, she scolded them roundly in Dutch, and wound up by saying, "You're a lot of cheese-heads, all of you."

Then she arranged the wonderful things from the Far East, with her own dainty hands, until the House in the Wood was fragrant with Oriental odors, and soon it became famous throughout all Europe. Even when her grandchildren played with the pretty toys from the land of Fuji and flowers, of silk and tea, cherry blossoms and camphor trees, it was not only the first but the finest Japanese collection in all Europe.

Meanwhile, the Oni, in a strange land, got into one trouble after another. In rushed men with clubs, but as an Oni was well used to seeing these at home, he was not afraid. He could outrun, outjump, or outclimb any man, easily. The farmer's vrouw (wife) nearly fainted when the Oni leaped first into her room and then into her bureau drawer. As he did so, the bottle of soy, held in his three-fingered paw, hit the wood and the dark liquid, as black as tar, ran all over the nicely starched laces, collars and nightcaps. Every bit of her quilled and crimped hair-gear and neckwear, once as white as snow, was ruined.

"Donder en Bliksem" (thunder and lightning), cried the vrouw. "There's my best cap, that cost twenty guilders, utterly ruined." Then she bravely ran for the broomstick.

The Oni caught sight of what he thought was a big hole in the wall and ran into it. Seeing the blue sky above, he began to climb up. Now there were no chimneys in Japan and he did not know what this was. The soot nearly blinded and choked him. So he slid down and rushed out, only to have his head nearly cracked by the farmer's wife, who gave him a whack of her broomstick. She thought it was a crazy goat that she was fighting. She first drove the Oni into the cellar and then bolted the door.

An hour later, the farmer got a gun and loaded it. Then, with his hired man he came near, one to pull open the

door, and the other to shoot. What they expected to find was a monster.

But no! So much experience, even within an hour, of things unknown in Japan, including chimneys, had been too severe for the poor, lonely, homesick Oni. There it lay dead on the floor, with its three fingers held tightly to its snout and closing it. So much cheese, zuur kool (sour kroust), gin (schnapps), advocaat (brandy and eggs), cows' milk, both sour and fresh, wooden shoes, lace collars and crimped neckwear, with the various smells, had turned both the Oni's head and his stomach. The very sight of these strange things being so unusual, gave the Oni first fright, and then a nervous attack, while the odors, such as had never tortured his nose before, had finished him.

The wise men of the village were called together to hold an inquest. After summoning witnesses, and cross-examining them and studying the strange creature, their verdict was that it could be nothing less than a Hersen Schim, that is, a spectre of the brain. They meant by this that there was no such animal.

However, a man from Delft, who followed the business of a knickerbocker, or baker of knickers, or clay marles, begged the body of the Oni. He wanted it to serve as a model for a new gargoyle, or rain spout, for the roof of churches. Carved in stone, or baked in clay, which turns red and is called terra cotta, the new style of monster became very popular. The knickerbocker named it after a new devil, that had been expelled by the prayers of the saints, and speedily made a fortune, by selling it to stone cutters and architects. So for one real Oni, that died and was buried in Dutch soil, there are thousands of imaginary ones, made of baked clay, or stone, in the Dutch land, where things, more funny than in fairy-land, constantly take place.

The dead Japanese Oni serving as a model, which was made into a water gutter, served more useful purposes, for a thousand years, than ever he had done, in the land where his relations still live and play their pranks.

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