

again a little later there was nothing in the fold of her robe.

It was very strange how those rice cakes had disappeared.

125.

A MEMORABLE EMPRESS

The exquisitely beautiful Somedono Empress was the regent's daughter and the mother of Emperor Montoku. At one time she was persecuted and made ill by an evil spirit, and although the holiest monks and most powerful healers were called in to intervene, nothing they did brought her any relief.

Now a certain hermit lived high in the Katsuragi Mountains of Yamato province, on a peak named Kongōsen. When he was hungry, he had his begging bowl fly down to the foot of the mountain to get him food, and he sent his water jar to the stream to fill itself when he was thirsty. The wonders he worked spread his fame far and wide till it reached the ears of the emperor and his father-in-law, the regent. They decided that the hermit should pray for the empress and issued an order that he be brought to court.

The hermit did his best to refuse, but it was hard to turn down a direct summons from the emperor and he finally went. His prayers certainly worked, because he had no sooner begun than one of the empress's ladies-in-waiting went quite mad and began uttering strange cries. Next, a spirit possessed her and she ran about screaming. The hermit redoubled his efforts, bound the woman with his spells, and threatened the possessing power till an old fox staggered out from the breast of her robe, in no condition to run away. The hermit had the fox tied up and informed the regent, who was enormously relieved. In a day or two the empress was perfectly well.

The regent was so pleased that he insisted on having the hermit stay awhile longer at court. It was summer. One day when the empress was wearing no more than a nearly transparent gown, a gust of wind lifted her curtains and the hermit caught a brief glimpse of her. This was not the sort of sight he was used to, and the vision of so lovely a woman made his heart pound and his

innards crumble to dust. In a word, he fell hopelessly in love with the empress.

Passion burned in him like fire and caused him terrible agony. Unable to think of anything else, he at last lost his reason, seized an unguarded moment, darted to the empress through her curtains, and held her tight. The horrified empress broke into a sweat of terror but was not strong enough to resist.

While the hermit strove with might and main to consummate his offense, the ladies-in-waiting saw him and raised the alarm. The physician assigned by the emperor to care for his wife happened to be in attendance nearby and the clamor brought him running. He arrived just as the hermit came out again, and caught him. Next he informed His Majesty, who of course was furious and threw the hermit into prison.

The prisoner would speak with no one. He only lifted his eyes to heaven, sobbing, and prayed to die and become a demon. "In that form," he continued, "may I achieve with this empress, while she still lives, the intimacy I crave!" His jailers heard him and warned the regent, who, in a fright, reported the matter to the emperor. His Majesty thought it safest to pardon the hermit and simply return him to his mountain.

Far from forgetting his lust, the hermit back on Kongōsen pleaded with the buddhas to bring him and the empress together. When he realized that such a thing was impossible in this life, he resolved to become a demon after all. After fasting for over ten days, he died at last of starvation. Instantly he changed into a demon: naked, bald, eight feet tall, and with black, glistening skin. His eyes were like brass bowls and his gaping mouth bristled with knifelike teeth, while short tusks crossed each other from the corners of his upper and lower jaws. Stuck in the red loincloth that was his only garment, he carried a demon's mallet.

In this guise he suddenly stood by the empress's curtains, in broad daylight and plainly visible to anyone. People cowered in terror or fled, while the ladies-in-waiting fainted or simply groveled on the floor and hid under their robes.

Meanwhile he addled the empress's brains so thoroughly that she welcomed him with smiles and led him to lie down with her behind her curtains. All the ladies-in-waiting could hear was the demon telling their mistress how fiercely he had wanted her, and

their mistress giggling in reply. Then they all ran away.

When the demon left, around sundown, the ladies-in-waiting rushed back to their mistress wondering what had become of her. She looked the same as ever. In fact, despite the odd gleam in her eye she seemed not to know that anything special had happened.

On hearing of this fresh incident, His Majesty was less frightened by the demon than worried about what might have happened to his wife. The demon now came daily in just the same way. The empress never showed any fear, although she certainly was in no ordinary state of mind, and she treated him each time simply as a lover. The palace ladies and gentlemen who saw what was going on were very sorry.

Next, the demon possessed someone to declare that he was "going to get that physician for what he did to me." The terrified physician soon dropped dead, and all four of his sons also went mad and died.

By this time the emperor and the regent were beside themselves and called in the holiest men they could find to subdue the demon. Perhaps this worked, because for some time the demon stopped coming and the empress recovered a little of her former self.

The emperor was of course kept informed, and he was so pleased that he decided to go and see her. Since it was an unusually touching visit, the whole court attended him as he went. He sat with her and told her, in tears, how sorry he was about the whole affair. She herself was moved and in fact seemed quite her old self.

Just then the demon burst in and made straight for the empress's private, curtained enclosure. The empress hurried to join him as usual, as though it was the most natural thing in the world. In a moment the demon rushed out again, striking terror into every minister, noble, and official present. The empress followed. And there, in the sight of them all, the pair brazenly performed an unspeakable act. When it was over the demon left, and the empress stood up and withdrew. At a loss for what to think, say, or do, the emperor returned to his palace.

Let noble ladies then take heed and allow no such hermit to approach them! This sad story should serve as a dire warning to all.



126. QUITE A STINK

Emperor En'yū had been ill for a long time, and since a spirit was causing the trouble, all the greatest healers of the time had been called in to do their best. Nothing had worked, though, and the emperor was beginning to be afraid.

Finally someone told him about an ascetic who had been practicing for years on Kōzen, the mountain near Nara. "He's built up such power that he can stop wild animals in mid-run with his spells, and bring down birds from the sky," the informant went on. "Summon him, Your Majesty! *He'll* help you!"

The ascetic came as fast as he could. All the way to Uji, about half the journey, flowers floated down on him from the sky — a sight that boggled the mind of everyone who saw it. (After Uji there were no more flowers.) The emperor called him in as soon as he got to the palace and had him begin his incantations. In almost no time His Majesty felt perfectly well.

Some of the great monks and healers whose intervention had failed found this instant success a bit odd. Among the doubters were five men who had just worked together in a particularly powerful Fudō rite.

"For years we've trusted in the Buddha and practiced his Teaching," one of the five complained. "Day after day we've prayed with heart and soul for His Majesty, and still we've failed. Who is this ascetic? What's *he* done to get such quick success? Perhaps he really is more powerful than any one of us, but he can't be more powerful than all five of us put together! It doesn't make sense!"

Having some more rites to perform, the five took the occasion to get near the ascetic from Kōzen and to direct some special incantations right at him.

The ascetic was seated by himself, entirely surrounded by curtains. In a moment they heard a vigorous scrabbling and scratching noise from inside the curtains, and a disgusting stink of dogshit filled the room. The nobles present were horrified, and so was His Majesty, but the five monks could tell that the truth about that ascetic was now beginning to come out. They redoubled their efforts.

Suddenly the ascetic hurtled out through his curtains and crashed to the floor, where he lay sprawled on his back. "Help!" he shrieked. "Good sirs, save me, please! All these years on Kōzen I've worshipped the tengu and prayed to them to make me famous. And it worked, you know, because I was called here to the palace! But what an awful mistake it was! I've learned my lesson now, yes I have! Please save me, oh please!"

The five monks were quite satisfied. As for the emperor, his first thought was to arrest the man and throw him in jail, but he changed his mind and only ordered him banished from the Capital. The ascetic was glad enough to make himself scarce. Some laughed to watch him go, while some just wished they could get their hands on him. He had been treated like a Buddha in person when he cured the emperor, but he made a very sorry sight as he fled.

127.

THE MASTER

Though expert in scholarship and in the mysteries of the faith, the monk Yōshin from Mount Hiei found himself passed over for promotion year after year in favor of younger and less experienced monks, and became so disappointed that he eventually left the mountain and wandered off toward Iyo province. On the way he stopped at Akashi, a harbor in Harima.

An epidemic had affected every household around Akashi. Yōshin found the villagers scurrying about. They told him about the sickness, and explained that a monk and strolling diviner had come by and promised them he could stop it. They were now hurrying around, on his instructions, to distribute the things