



136.

THE TUG-OF-WAR

The wrestler Ama no Tsuneyo lived in Tango province. In the summer he liked to stroll by the river that ran near his house, and was doing so one day, with a small boy beside him, when he paused under a tree by a deep pool.

The pool was blue-green and frightening because you could not see the bottom. Tsuneyo was gazing at the rushes around it when he noticed a large ripple dart from the opposite bank straight toward him. What could it possibly be? When the ripple reached his side, a snake lifted its head from the water. It was a very big one indeed, judging from the size of the head, and it stared at Tsuneyo so hard that he nervously stepped back a little. Then it vanished again into the pool.

The ripple darted off to the far side and a swell of water came rolling back. The snake's tail rose from the pool and thrashed its way toward Tsuneyo, who waited, calmly now, to see what it would do. When the tail had wrapped itself twice around his legs, the snake began to pull. It wanted to drag him into the pool! Tsuneyo planted his feet more firmly, but the snake was so strong that the teeth of his high clogs broke and he felt sure he would be dragged down. Once more he dug in his feet, but the snake tugged so hard that they simply plowed through the earth, leaving a furrow several inches deep. Tsuneyo was just putting up a last, desperate effort, when the snake snapped in two and blood stained the surface of the pool. He pulled up the tail half, unwound it, and washed his legs in the pool. The attack had left indelible marks.

By this time Tsuneyo's servants had rushed up, and he had them wash the wounds with wine. Then they inspected the snake's tail half. Huge was the only word for the creature. The body was a good foot thick where it had broken. It turned out that the snake

had wrapped its head end, on the opposite bank, around a thick tree-root to give itself a better hold. Even so Tsuneyo had proved the stronger, and the snake had snapped instead. The head end, still clinging as tightly as ever to the root, seemed not to have realized what had happened. Imagine how it must have been feeling!

But how strong had the snake really been? Tsuneyo's men tied a rope round their master's legs and ten of them pulled on it. Tsuneyo said the snake had tugged harder than that. Three men were added, then five, but they still were not enough. Finally sixty men took the rope, and Tsuneyo decided that yes, that was how the snake had pulled. In other words (considering that Tsuneyo had *not* been dragged down by the snake) Tsuneyo had the strength of about a hundred men.

That was the kind of wrestler we used to have in the old days.

137.

AS DEEP AS THE SEA

A professional keeper of hawks once followed an escaped bird deep into the mountains till he spied a hawk's nest in a tall tree. This was a welcome find. He marked the place, went home again, and returned at the right time to get the young hawks.

It was a wild and desolate spot, and the tree leaned over a bottomless ravine. The nest of young hawks was high in its branches, and the parents were circling round it. What specimens the parents were! No doubt the young would be just as impressive. Bent on catching them, the man hardly even knew he was climbing the tree.

Just short of the nest, a branch broke under him and he plummeted into another tree growing straight out of the cliff below. He hung on there, more dead than alive, between a yawning chasm and a sheer wall of rock.

Though his servants assumed he had fallen into the ravine and been killed, they thought they had better make sure. Clinging precariously to the edge of the cliff, they peered over into the

depths. All the leaves in the way hid their master from them, and they got nothing for their trouble but a spell of dizziness. They could only go home and inform their master's wife and children, who wept at the news. The family wanted at least to see for themselves where the body lay, but the servants cried, "No, no, we can't even remember the way, and besides, it's no use your going! Goodness knows how deep that ravine is! We did our best to find him down there, but we couldn't see anything at all!" So no one even went back to look.

The man sat on a tiny ledge about the size of a dinner tray, clinging to the tree and keeping very still. The slightest movement, and he would be dashed to pieces on the rocks below. There was nothing he could do. But although his business was raising hawks, he had chanted the Kannon Sutra ever since his childhood and he trusted in Kannon's mercy. Now he called on Kannon to save him and began to chant.

When he got to the passage, "His vow to save suffering beings is as deep as the sea," he thought he heard something rustling up from the bottom of the ravine. What could it be? With infinite caution he peered down and saw an enormous snake at least twenty feet long slithering straight up toward him. It was going to eat him, or at least that was the only explanation that made sense. Now he was *really* frightened, and begged Kannon from the bottom of his heart to save him from this awful danger.

The snake made no attempt to swallow him when it reached his seat. On the contrary, it just kept going. Its only thought seemed to be to climb up and out of the ravine. Perhaps he could hang on to it somehow and go up with it! He drew the dagger from his belt, plunged it into the snake to make a handhold, and let himself be drawn up and over the edge of the cliff. As he slid off he tried to take out the dagger, but it was too firmly planted. The snake pulled away from him and slithered off toward the next ravine with the dagger still stuck in its back.

Delirious with relief, the man tried to run home, but sitting motionless for several days, without food or water, had made him so weak that in fact he could only barely drag himself back to his house. The household was in the middle of a memorial rite for him when he staggered in, causing momentary pandemonium. He wept as he told them his extraordinary experience. Then he ate and slept

soundly.

The next morning he got up early, washed his hands, and opened the text of the Kannon Sutra he always read. His dagger, the one he had plunged into the back of the snake, was planted in the text at the words “His vow to save suffering beings is as deep as the sea.”

138.

WHAT THE SNAKE HAD IN MIND

A woman on her way up to hear the monthly preaching at Urin'in, a temple in northern Kyoto, had come to a stone bridge — just a small slab over a tiny brook — when another, younger woman walking along the brook stepped on the slab as she crossed and overturned it. Where it had been the first woman was surprised to see, all coiled up, a little spotted snake.

The snake slowly unwound itself and set off after the young woman who had overturned its stone. This was intriguing. Perhaps the snake was angry at having been disturbed and wanted to get even. The older woman was curious enough to set out after it.

The young woman the snake was following did look round sometimes, but seemed to suspect nothing. No one passing by did either. Apparently only the older woman could see the snake.

In time they reached Urin'in. The young woman climbed the steps and sat down on the wooden floor while the snake too got up the steps and wriggled to her side. Still no one saw it or raised the alarm.

When the preaching was over the young woman left, and the snake with her. The older woman stayed behind them on the way back. In the southern district of the city the woman entered a house that seemed to be hers, and the snake followed.

The snake was unlikely to do anything during the day, but the older woman was determined to be on hand for whatever might happen that night. She went up to the house, explained that she had just arrived from the country and had nowhere to stay, and begged for a night's lodging. She had assumed all along that the young woman was the owner, but in fact it was an old lady who

invited her in. She found the young woman sitting on the raised floor with the snake coiled at the foot of a pillar, gazing at her. The young woman was talking about “the mansion,” and it seemed clear that she was in service somewhere.

When the sun set and darkness fell, the visitor could no longer see the snake, so she proposed spinning hemp in exchange for the old lady’s hospitality. For this she would need light. The old lady gladly accepted her offer and lit a lamp. As the visitor spun, she looked around her. The young woman seemed to have lain down to sleep. No doubt the snake would go to her now — but it did not. The visitor felt she ought to mention the snake, but decided she would only make trouble for herself if she did and so kept silent. The evening wore on till at last the lamp went out. There was nothing to do but go to bed.

Next morning the visitor woke up with a start, anxious to know what might have happened during the night. After getting up quite normally, the young woman told the old lady she had had an odd dream, and the old lady insisted on hearing it.

“Last night,” said the young woman, “I dreamed somebody stood by my pillow. She was human from the waist up, but from the waist down she was a snake. She was beautiful, though, and this is what she said to me. ‘Once I hated someone so much that I turned into a snake and spent many long and lonely years under the stone slab of a bridge. Yesterday you overturned the stone and saved me. I felt so gloriously free that I wanted to thank you properly. That’s why I followed you to the temple and heard the Buddha’s most rare and wonderful Teaching. That in turn canceled my sins, and now I’ll soon be reborn in human form. You’ve made me so happy! In return I’ll make sure that your life goes well and you find a good husband.’ And that was the end of my dream.”

Both listeners were astonished, and the visitor confessed who she really was and why she was there. She and the young woman became fast friends and saw each other often.

The young woman did do well, too, because she married a very wealthy man, a junior steward in a great household. Everything went for her exactly as she wished.

139.

RED PLUM BLOSSOMS

In the west of the Capital lived a man of some rank in the world. His only daughter, a sweet and lovely girl, wrote a beautiful hand by the time she reached her teens, and her skill at poetry was peerless. Not only that, she was also an expert musician and played the *koto* particularly well.

The family's large mansion included several bark-thatched pavilions, curiously and handsomely made. Pretty streams ran through a garden which was always beautiful, if not with spring flowers then with the leaves of fall. And while the girl's parents thought only of her, the girl herself was lost in delight over the flowers and leaves.

The garden had places where cherry blossoms opened in the mists of spring, and where the weeping willow fronds' new green swayed deliciously in the breeze; while elsewhere the colored autumn leaves hovered in layers of brocade, and chrysanthemums of many hues leaned under their burden of dew beneath the tall *hagi* plants' feathery curves. Yet the girl loved above all the red-flowering plum.

She planted a red plum tree near her room, and when it bloomed she opened her shutters to gaze on it rapturously, all alone. The fragrance intoxicated her so much that she stayed there all day. She let nothing else grow near her plum and would not have birds nesting in its branches. When the flowers fell, she gathered the fallen petals in a lacquered bowl to enjoy their scent awhile longer; and on windy days she even spread mats to collect them as they fluttered down, so as to make sure they were not blown away and lost. When the petals were withered at last, she mixed them into her incense to save the very last of their sweet smell.

In time she fell ill and grew rapidly worse, despite her parents' lamentations. Before long she was gone. Her mother and father had to bid her farewell forever, and could never look at the plum tree after that without a pang of sorrow.

One day a little snake appeared under the tree. Though it seemed ordinary enough, it came again the next spring and stayed wrapped around the tree. When the petals began to fall, it picked them up

one by one in its mouth and heaped them together. Realizing that it could only be their daughter herself, the parents grieved afresh. All they could do was to call in two holy monks and have them expound the Lotus Sutra under the tree, one chapter a day in the time-honored fashion, for the good of their daughter's soul.

The snake, which never left the spot, heard all the preaching. On the fifth day the monks spoke on the chapter in which the Serpent Princess offers the Buddha a priceless pearl and passes straight into Nirvana. Under the plum tree, the little snake died. Those who saw its passing wept.

Later the father dreamed about his daughter. At first she was dressed in torn and filthy clothes and looked very downcast. But a holy man came to her and had her take off her rags. Her skin underneath was golden and glowing, like the skin of a buddha, and the holy man dressed her in rich robes and a priestly stole. Finally he raised her up and they floated away together on a purple cloud.

That was the end of the dream. The girl's salvation was the Sutra's gift.