



146.

THE BLOODY SWORD

A mountain temple in Tajima province was over a century old. No one went near it because it was haunted by demons, but one day a pair of monks, one old and one young, happened by just after sundown, and since they did not know the place they decided to stay there.

After dark they settled down on opposite sides of the altar. In the middle of the night something bashed its way through the wall. The creature stank horribly and wheezed and snorted like an ox, but in the darkness they could not see it. It attacked the younger monk, who, in his fright, recited the Lotus Sutra and fervently prayed to be spared. Suddenly it dropped him, fell on the older monk, and began devouring him. The victim screamed horribly, but no one saved him and the demon ate him up.

The younger monk was sure the demon would now be back for *him*. He clambered up on the altar (there being no other refuge), threw his arms round one of the divinities, and begged for help, then went on inwardly reciting the Lotus. When the demon did come after him, he nearly fainted with terror but his concentration never wavered. He heard the demon crash to the floor in front of the altar.

There was dead silence. The monk assumed the demon was waiting for him to betray himself by some slight noise, so he hardly dared even to breathe. With his arms around the statue, and still mentally reciting the Lotus, he waited for dawn. It seemed like years. When day came at last, he found he had been embracing the divine guardian Bishamon. Before the altar an ox-headed demon lay cut in three, and the blade of Bishamon's spear was red with blood.

147.

A PLEA FROM HELL

Tateyama, a mountain in Etchū province, has been known since antiquity for its hells. The rugged, sweeping landscape there is desolate, and countless boiling springs gush from deep fissures in the ravines. Even a huge boulder resting on one of these cracks may be set rocking by the water that surges up irresistibly around its base. The heat is terrible, and you come eventually to a column of endless fire. In one valley of this hellish waste there is a waterfall over a hundred feet high that looks like a vast expanse of white cloth.

One peak of the mountain is named Mount Taishaku because they say that is where Lord Taishaku and the officials of the underworld gather and judge the deeds of sentient beings. People have always believed that most of the sinners in Japan end up falling into the hells of Tateyama.

Once a monk of Miidera came to Tateyama in the course of a difficult pilgrimage to the holy places of the realm, and while he was walking among the hells he met a young woman. The sight of her frightened him because in a remote spot like that she could only be a demon, and he began to run away. But she called to him, assured him that she was not a demon, and told him that he need not be afraid. She had something to tell him.

"My home," she said, "was in Gamō county of Ōmi province, where my parents still live. My father makes his living carving buddha-images out of wood. When I was alive, my food and