



205. FOX ARSON

A retainer who served the governor of Kai was heading home one sundown from the governor's mansion when he saw a fox, gave chase, and shot at it with the kind of noisemaker arrow used for scaring off dogs. He hit it in a back leg.

The fox yelped in pain, rolled over, and dove limping into the brush. As the retainer went to retrieve his arrow the fox reappeared in front of him, and he was about to shoot at it again when it vanished.

A quarter of a mile from home he saw the fox running ahead of him carrying a flaming brand in its mouth. What could it be up to? He spurred his horse on. On reaching the house, the fox changed into a human being and set the house on fire. The retainer was ready to shoot as soon as he got within range, but the human changed right back into a fox and got away. The house burned down.

Beings like that exact swift vengeance. It's better to leave them alone.

206. THE FOX'S BALL

A healer and his woman medium were once called to get rid of the spirit that was making someone ill. The spirit declared through the medium that it was a fox. "I didn't mean to put a curse on anyone," it said. "I only came because I thought you might have something good to eat. You didn't have to shut me up like this!"

The medium drew from the fold at the breast of her robe a little white ball (foxes often have one), and began tossing it in the air and catching it. The people present thought the ball pretty enough, but they were sure the medium had hidden it in her robe beforehand to trick them. One among them, a brave young man, waited for the medium to toss the ball into the air again, then quickly stuck out his hand, caught the ball, and popped it into the front of his own robe.

"Confound you!" snapped the fox. "Give me back my ball!" The man ignored its pleas till finally it said tearfully, "All right, you've got the ball, but you don't know how to keep it. It won't be any good to you. For me, it's a terrible loss. I tell you, if you don't give it back I'll be your enemy forever. If you *do* give it back, though, I'll stick to you like a protector god."

The young man decided the whole thing was a waste of time. "So you'll protect me?" he asked.

"Of course I will. Creatures like me never tell lies, and we always repay a debt of gratitude."

"Will the guardian spirit who caught you vouch for you now?"

"Listen, guardian spirit!" cried the fox. "I swear I'll protect him if he gives me back my ball!"

The man took the ball out and returned it to the woman, which made the fox very happy. Next, the healer dismissed the spirit and the fox left. The people seized the medium immediately, before she could get up, and searched her. The ball was not on her. She really had been possessed.

Sometime later the man was on his way home after dark from a visit to the great temple at Uzumasa. When he reached the Ōten Gate he became afraid, for the neighborhood was well known to be dangerous at night. Visions of all the awful things that could happen to him ran through his head. Then he remembered that the fox had sworn to protect him. All alone in the darkness he called, "Fox! Fox!" A series of sharp barks rang out in answer, and in a moment the fox was before him.

“You *did* keep your word, fox!” he said. “I’m touched. You see, I’m afraid to go through this area and I want you to stay with me.”

The fox seemed to understand. It went ahead, looking carefully all around and avoiding the usual path, while the man followed. Eventually it stopped, arched its back, and moved forward again only with the lightest steps, glancing about even more cautiously than before. The man tiptoed. He soon caught the sound of human voices and a glimpse of human shapes moving just beyond a fence. Through the gloom he spied a large group of armed men. They seemed to be talking something over, and shortly he gathered what it was: they were discussing where to commit their next robbery. The fox had led him this way — a way no ordinary person would know — just because the bandits would not be looking for a traveler to pass so close. The fox disappeared once he was safely by, and he reached home without further difficulty.

The fox stayed faithfully with him and often rescued him again. More and more touched by its fidelity, he was very glad indeed that he had had the good sense to return that ball.

207.

SINGED FUR

Kōya Brook runs east of Ninnaji, just northwest of the Capital. One evening at dusk a pretty young woman stood on the bank. When a man rode by toward the city, she asked him to let her up behind and take her with him. With a brief word of assent he had her get on. After a quarter of a mile she jumped down and ran. She turned into a fox as he chased her and got clean away, barking.

This happened more than once and the word spread. One day the warriors of the Palace Guard were passing the time among themselves when the story came up in the conversation. A brave and clever young warrior swore he would catch the girl and mocked all those who had let her get away. The rest of the guards were sure he would fail, but he ignored them and promised he would do it that very evening.

He rode to Kōya Brook alone on a good horse. When he first

crossed the stream there was no sign of the girl, but once he turned back toward Kyoto she was there on the bank. "Please take me up behind you, sir!" she called, smiling sweetly at him.

"All right!" he answered. "Where are you going?"

"To the city, sir. It's already sundown, you see, and I wonder if I mightn't ride with you."

She got on. Quick as a flash he tied her to the saddle with a rope he had ready. "Oh sir, what are you doing?" she cried.

"You're coming to bed with me, so I just want to make sure you don't get away."

Darkness fell. He rode east along First Avenue and had just passed West Omiya when he saw torches coming his way, accompanying a procession of carriages. Servants were going before the procession with loud and imperious shouts to clear the road. Obviously a person of quality was on his way somewhere. He cautiously turned south down Omiya, continuing east when he reached Second Avenue. Finally, after a long detour south around the palace compound, he reached the gate where he had told his fellow guards to meet him. They were all there.

Untying the girl, he roughly pulled her to the ground, seized her arms, and forced her in through the gate. Guards with torches lit his way to their headquarters where the rest of the men were waiting. "Here she is!" he announced. The girl, terrified by so many men, was crying and begging him in vain to let her go. The guards surrounded him and his captive.

Torches blazing, the guards urged him to let her go in the circle. He said no, she would get away if he did, but they insisted and a dozen drew their bows, shouting what fun it would be. "We'll shoot her miserable butt!" they cried. When he gave in and let her go, she instantly turned into a fox and darted off, barking.

The fire and the circle of men vanished. He was alone in the dark.

Completely confused, he called to his companions over and over but got no response. A glance at the surroundings told him that he was somewhere (he had no idea where) out in the wilds. Though his heart pounded and he was overcome with dread, he managed not to lose control of himself. From the look of the hills and the lie of the land he judged that he must be in the great burning ground at Toribeno. Naturally his horse was nowhere to be seen.

The trouble must have started when he turned down Omiya Avenue to avoid the procession of carriages. After that he had only believed he was heading for the Tsuchimikado Gate, but had actually been coming here. All those torches on First Avenue had been fox-fires. He started walking and reached home late in the night.

The next day he was almost dying. The guards who had missed him the night before were meanwhile having a good laugh at his expense and pressing him to join them. Late on the third day he finally went, still looking far from well, to face their questions and taunts. They demanded to know what he had done with the fox. He answered that he had suddenly become ill and had not been able to go after the fox after all. "But tonight," he promised, "I'll try again."

"Well then, bring us *two* foxes!" his companions cried. Taciturn as ever, he left without another word.

He did not really suppose that the fox would be foolish enough to appear again, but if it did he was prepared to hold on to it all night if necessary. If it did not, he would hide himself from the world forever.

This time he took the strongest of his own men with him. He thought as they rode how mad he was to risk his whole career on such nonsense, though of course his promise left him no other choice.

There was no sign of the girl when they crossed Kōya Brook. Then they turned back and there she was. At least, there *a* girl was, because the face was different from last time. As before she asked to ride behind him and he let her get up; and as before he tied her securely to the saddle and continued on toward town along First Avenue.

By now it was dark. He had some of his men ride ahead of him with torches and kept others right beside him. The band reached their gate without meeting a soul and dismounted. He seized the girl by the hair and forced her, despite her tears and cries, to the same spot as before.

His fellow guards were all there, clamoring for news. "Here she is!" he replied again. This time he had tied her up so tightly that she kept her human form for some time, but the men tormented her till she turned into a fox in the end, despite being a prisoner.

They singed the fox's fur off with their torches and shot it over and over with stinging arrows, shouting at it all the while never to try its tricks again. In the end they let it go without killing it, and it managed somehow to run off, although it could hardly walk. Only then did the warrior confess how the fox had fooled him the first time and led him off all the way to Toribeno.

Ten days later he decided to visit Kōya Brook again. A very sick-looking girl, loitering on the bank, declined his invitation to get up behind him. "I'd like to," she said, "but you burned me so badly last time!" Then she disappeared.

208.

NOT REALLY A TREE AT ALL

Chūdaifu lived in Nara since his uncle was the high priest of the Kasuga Shrine. Late one afternoon Chūdaifu's horse disappeared while out grazing. Chūdaifu and a servant set out eastward toward the mountains to look for it, armed with bows.

They had not gotten far when the sun set and night fell. There was only the dimmest light from a veiled moon. As they walked on, still hoping to find the stray animal, Chūdaifu glimpsed through the gathering shadows a colossal cryptomeria tree, twelve feet thick and a good two hundred feet tall. He stopped dead in his tracks. "Am I seeing things?" he exclaimed. "Has some spirit addled our brains? Do *you* see that cryptomeria too?" The servant answered that he did. "Then it's not my imagination," said Chūdaifu. "We must have met one of those gods who get you lost, and he's led us off goodness knows where. Where in the whole province of Yamato are you going to find a cryptomeria like that?"

"I've no idea, sir," the servant replied. "I've seen a few cryptomerias here and there, of course, but they've all been quite small."

"That's it, then. We've been bewitched and now we're lost. What are we going to do? I'm frightened, you know. I think we'd better get on back. I wonder how far we've come. This is terrible!"

"It's a strange business we've run into, sir, but it would be too

bad just to go home again without trying anything ourselves. I suggest, sir, that you shoot an arrow into that tree, then come back tomorrow morning and check it.”

Chūdaifu heartily approved and said they should both shoot the tree. When their arrows hit the tree it suddenly vanished. “Sure enough,” said Chūdaifu, “we’ve met a spirit! Let’s get away from here!” They practically ran home.

Early the next morning Chūdaifu and his servant returned to the scene. They found a bald old fox lying dead with a cryptomeria branch in his jaws and pierced through the belly by two arrows. “Aha!” they exclaimed. “*Here’s* the fellow who had us so confused!”

Before leaving, they retrieved their arrows from the corpse.

209.

THE WHITE FOX: FOUR DREAMS

*Shaped like a fat, falling drop, the Wishing Jewel
is an emblem of good fortune. The tails of magic foxes
sometimes end in a Wishing Jewel shape.*

Four nights ago someone brought me what he said was a picture of the Kasuga God, though I couldn’t see what the god looked like.

The night before last I watched the evening star and a bright moon rise over Flower Mountain. Star and moon were the same size.

Last night in the fields I came to a big stone that looked like a Wishing Jewel, and I touched it. It was warm. North of the stone lay three foxes. I picked the white tuft off one’s tail and saw it was a big white fox. “Wear red,” the fox said, “when you bring me offerings.”

At dawn I got twenty golden relics of the Buddha.

As I write down this marvelous sequence of dreams, I shiver again with joy and awe.