

The women watched eagerly as Shumpei's brother moved up to the lamp, untied the bag that held his *san*, and emptied the sticks on the floor.

"What's funny about those things?" the women complained. "Why, nothing at all! Come, come, we want to laugh!"

Shumpei's brother ignored them. Instead, he began making passes with the sticks and arranging them in patterns.

When he was finished, he had one left over, and he held it up before them. "Now, ladies," he said, "you're going to laugh, and let's hope it doesn't hurt too badly. Yes indeed, you're going to laugh!"

"How stupid can you be?" the women muttered. "How could laughing hurt?"

Shumpei's brother added the last stick to the pattern. A spasm of mirth abruptly seized all the women. They laughed and laughed and simply could not stop. Tears poured from their eyes, their sides felt as though they were literally splitting, and they thought they were going to die. Unable even to speak, they wrung their hands before the tormentor who just now had been their victim, begging him to desist.

"I told you!" he said. "Have you had enough?"

They nodded frantically, rolling around the floor and laughing hilariously even as they pleaded. When he thought they had suffered enough, he broke up the pattern. There was a sudden, dazed silence. "I'd have been dead if that had gone on much longer," one woman finally gasped. "I've never had such an awful experience in my life!" They were all lying in a heap, practically ill with exhaustion.

People said it was a good thing that Shumpei's brother had never been taught how to kill people with the *san*. If he had, something *really* awful might have happened.

52.

SMALL-TIME MAGIC

Long ago Emperor Yōzei sent Michinori, an imperial guard, down

to the east to collect tax revenues. On the way Michinori stopped off in Shinano province at the house of a county magistrate, who entertained him very civilly before retiring with his retainers for the night.

Unable to sleep, Michinori quietly got up again and began poking about the house. He soon found a beautiful room with fine new matting on the floor and a screened-off space inside. A lamp was burning within the screens, and a delicious fragrance floated on the air. Peeking curiously between two screens, he saw a woman in her late twenties, exquisitely lovely in face and figure, lying there all alone.

The more he looked the less he felt like leaving. No one was around. He thought it over. The magistrate had been very kind, and if this was his wife, he ought not to take advantage of her. On the other hand, he could not resist trying his luck. He slid into bed beside her.

The woman just smiled. Michinori was as pleased as punch. Her scent was delicious. Since it was early fall and the weather still warm, neither of them had much on. He undressed. When he slid his hands under her shift, she put up only token resistance and let him fondle her as he pleased.

Feeling a sudden tickle between his legs, Michinori reached for his member. It was not there. He groped around feverishly like a man trying to catch a bug in his beard, but it was gone as though it had never been. All thought of the woman, who lay there smiling enigmatically, vanished from his mind. Finally he got up, went back to his own bed completely confused, and made another minute inspection. It was hopeless.

Michinori was not too panicked to use his head. He called one of his men, told him about the stunning woman he had found, and mentioned that she was available. The man who went off with high hopes soon came back looking deeply disturbed. "He got it too!" thought Michinori, and passed the tip on to the next victim, who came back in his turn with anguish written all over his face. Michinori sent all eight of his men to the woman, and they all looked the same way when they came out.

The sky paled with the coming of dawn. Considering the night's disaster, Michinori preferred to leave as quickly as possible, despite his host's kind welcome, and he and his men hurried off before it

was fully light. They had not gone more than a quarter of a mile when a man galloped up behind them, hailing them urgently and holding aloft a package wrapped in white paper. The rider was one of their host's retainers.

"The magistrate told me to deliver these to you," he said. "How *could* you have left them behind? We had your breakfast all ready, but you were in such a rush that you must have just forgotten them. Anyway, we picked them up for you and here they are." Michinori and his party wondered what he was talking about.

The packet contained a heap of male organs; they looked rather like mushrooms. Dumbfounded, the men inspected them one after another, each counting nine. Suddenly the organs vanished, and the messenger wheeled his horse around and galloped away. Michinori and his men shouted for joy, "It's back! It's back!"

On his return journey Michinori stopped again at the magistrate's house and made him a generous gift of gold, horses, eagle feathers, and the like. He explained to the puzzled magistrate that he hoped to learn just what had been done to him during his last visit. The magistrate felt he could hardly refuse. He told Michinori how in his youth he had had an affair with the young wife of the magistrate of another county, himself an old man, and how suddenly his member too had disappeared. He had done his best to be very, very nice to the old magistrate until he had succeeded in getting himself taught the same magic. But he reminded Michinori that Michinori was presently traveling on imperial business. If he wanted to learn the magic too, he should go straight back to the Capital, conclude his mission, and then come back privately. Michinori readily agreed, and set off.

When he came again he brought this magistrate another suitable present, and the magistrate cheerfully undertook to teach him all he knew. "However," he cautioned, "you don't learn this sort of thing casually. First you'll have to spend seven days fasting and purifying yourself with cold water."

Michinori did as he was told, and on the appointed day the magistrate took him far up into the mountains. They came to a stream beside which the magistrate went through various ritual procedures and made Michinori swear a terribly sinful oath. Then the magistrate set off upstream. "No matter what comes down the stream," he warned, "grab it in your arms. Devil or demon, I don't

care, just throw your arms round it!"

Soon a heavy rainstorm blew in from upstream. The sky blackened and the water rose. Down the stream came a colossal snake. Its head alone was big enough to fill a man's arms and its eyes were like great bronze bowls. The snake's back was a deep blue and its belly was red. Michinori knew well enough that he was supposed to throw his arms around it but instead was so terrified that he collapsed on the spot.

The magistrate quickly returned. "How did it go?" he asked. "Did you hold on to it?" Michinori reported what had happened. "Too bad!" said the magistrate. "You won't be able to learn. Well, anyway, let's try again." And off he went.

In no time an enormous boar came hurtling down, bristling with fury, crushing great boulders, and belching fire. Once again Michinori was terrified, but he desperately screwed up his courage and dashed forward to clasp it in his arms. It turned out to be a bit of old log. He was terribly let down, especially when he realized that the snake too must have been a log. He was kicking himself for not having gone after the snake when the magistrate reappeared.

Michinori told him how it had gone this time. "Well," replied the magistrate, "you lost your first chance and that means you can't learn what you wanted. But I think you could manage some other little amusement. I'll teach you one." Michinori learned what he could and returned disappointed to the Capital.

Back at the palace he bet his fellow guards that he could turn all their shoes into puppies, then did it, and the puppies scrambled around all over the place, yapping madly; and he turned an old straw sandal into a great big carp flopping around on a dinner tray. When the emperor heard about these goings-on, he summoned Michinori and got himself taught magic too. His Majesty used it to make the grand procession of the Kamo festival go by over the screen he always sat behind.

People deeply disapproved of the emperor himself learning an art which offended the Buddha's way, and one has to agree that not only was Michinori (who after all was a nobody) very wrong to teach him, but that however rare these sort of tengu tricks may be, His Majesty was a bit crazy to want to learn.