

188.

THROUGH THE WATER CURTAIN

A wandering monk came to the province of Hida where, deep in the mountains, he got lost. Following a faint track buried in dead leaves, he finally came to a wide, high waterfall that cascaded like a great curtain down a cliff. He could not go back since he had no idea where he was, and in front of him rose a two-hundred-foot wall of rock. While praying to the Buddha for guidance, he heard footsteps behind him. It was a man with a load of wood. Though the monk was relieved to see him, the man looked surprised and upset. "Who are you? Where does this path go?" asked the monk, but the man walked straight past him into the waterfall and vanished.

Apparently he had been a demon, not a man. The frightened monk decided that before the demon ate him he would plunge into the waterfall too, and die. "Then it won't bother me if he does eat me!" he said to himself.

Praying for a happy rebirth, he walked straight ahead till water pounded on his face. Then he was through. He supposed drowning came next, but in fact he still seemed to be conscious. The waterfall really *was* a thin curtain, and the narrow path on the other side led on under the mountain. He was glad at last to reach a large village.

The man who had passed him now came running toward him, ahead of a gentleman in light blue-green formal dress. The gentleman hastily invited the monk to follow him home. On the way people joined them from all directions and each one asked the monk home. What could they all want? The gentleman silenced them. "We'll go to the mayor and let him decide who gets this fellow!" he said.

The crowd swept the monk on to a large house, where an agitated old man came out and asked what was going on. The first man the monk had seen complained, "I'm the one who led him here from Japan and now this man has taken him over!" He pointed at the gentleman in blue-green.

Without discussion the old man awarded the monk to the gentleman, who began leading the monk away. The crowd dispersed.

The monk could only think they were all demons, and that this one was taking him away to eat him. He began to cry. "Japan!" he thought in despair. "Where is this place if Japan is so far away?"

The gentleman noticed his expression. "Please don't worry!" he said. "It's very peaceful here, you know. I promise you you'll be comfortable. You won't have a care in the world."

The gentleman's house turned out to be a little smaller than the one they had just left, but very nice and with a large staff of servants and retainers. The monk's arrival caused a great stir. When the gentleman invited him in, his pack, straw cloak, hat, and straw boots were politely taken from him and put away.

"Food, please!" the gentleman ordered, and a meal was served. But despite the wealth of beautifully prepared chicken and fish, the monk did not eat. Instead he only sat and stared.

His host asked him what was the matter.

"I've been a monk all my life, you see, and I've never eaten anything like this. Looking is all I can do."

"I understand. But you're with *us* now, you know. You'll have to eat up! And another thing. I have a daughter I love very much and she's ready to be married. So you should start letting your hair grow, because I want her to marry *you*. You can't leave, anyway. Just remember to do as I say!"

The monk thought he might be killed if he showed any sign of resistance, and there certainly was no escape. "I'm just not used to this sort of food," he answered, "but all right, I'll eat it." As the two ate, the monk wondered what the Buddha could be thinking of him now, since he had vowed never to eat the flesh of any living creature.

At nightfall a very pretty girl came in, beautifully dressed. Her father pushed her gently toward the monk. "She's yours," he said. "From now on you must love her as much as I do. She's my only daughter, you understand, so you can imagine how deeply I mean that." With this little speech he withdrew.

No argument was possible. The monk (from now on he will have to be "the young man") welcomed the girl, and after that they were man and wife. The young man was actually very happy. He was dressed in the best and served whatever food he wanted. This new life was so unlike his old one that he put on a good deal of weight. When his hair was long enough for a topknot he did it up properly,

and with a respectable hat on he cut a fine figure. His wife thought the world of him and he loved her in return.

After eight months like this, the young woman grew sad. Her father, on the other hand, only redoubled his attentions. "Good, good, we've gotten some flesh on you!" he would say. "Fatten up all you like!" He fed his son-in-law so often that the young man kept putting on weight. As he did so his wife began to have fits of weeping. When the young man asked her why, she would answer only that she felt sad, but wept more and more. The baffled young man put up with it as best he could.

One day his father-in-law entertained a visitor. Listening in discreetly, he heard the visitor say, "That's a nice young man you've got! You must be pleased to have your daughter so well provided for."

"I certainly am!" the gentleman answered. "If I didn't have him, I don't know how I could stand it by now."

"I just wish I could get one myself," said the visitor, rising to go. "I'm sure I'll be miserable by this time next year."

Having seen his guest off, the gentleman asked solicitously whether his son-in-law had eaten and made sure a meal was served. The young man's wife wept while he ate. The puzzled young man kept thinking about what the visitor had said, and although he did not quite understand it he was afraid. His wife resisted every effort of his to coax an explanation out of her, though she clearly wanted to speak.

The village was bustling with preparations for a festival. Depressed as she was, the young man's wife now did little more than cry, and she seemed so estranged from him that he finally reproached her. "I thought we'd always be together in joy and sorrow," he complained, "but you've gotten so far away! You're too cruel!" He burst into angry tears.

His wife sobbed aloud. "What ever made me think I could keep silent till the very end?" she cried. "There's so little time left! Oh, if only I didn't love you!"

"Am I going to die? Well, so are we all, some time or other. There must be something else! Tell me!"

"You see, we have a sacred obligation here to give our gods living human sacrifices. That's why everyone was so anxious to have you when you came. They all wanted you for the sacrifice.

Each year it's another household's turn to provide the victim, and if no one from outside can be found the household head has to provide his own son or daughter. I'd have been the victim if you hadn't come. Oh, I wish I could take your place after all!"

"Don't cry!" said her husband. "Perhaps it could be worse. Tell me, is the victim carved up *before* being offered to the gods?"

"No, I don't think so. The victim is laid out naked on a cutting board and carried inside the inner sanctuary fence. Then everyone leaves. I hear the gods carve up their victim themselves. If the victim is thin or displeasing in any way, they're very angry. Then the crops fail, people get sick, and we villagers do nothing but quarrel. That's why my father has been feeding you so often and making you gain weight."

At last the young man understood all the care that had been lavished on him. "But these gods," he said, "what shape do they have?"

"They're supposed to be monkeys."

"All right, I have an idea. Can you get me a good dagger?"

"Of course I can," his wife answered, and quickly did so.

The young man sharpened it carefully and hid it on his body. He got much livelier now, ate with unfailing appetite, and went on fattening nicely. His father-in-law was pleased, and everyone in the village looked forward to a good year.

Seven days before the festival, ceremonial ropes were stretched around all the houses to mark the sacred occasion, and the young man was made to fast and undergo purification. Though his wife counted the days with tears and groans, he himself seemed untroubled. In fact, he comforted his wife so well that even she took heart a little.

On the festival day he was made to wash and put on a beautiful robe. His hair was combed and tied up, and his sidelocks carefully dressed. A messenger came from the shrine again and again, more impatient each time. Finally the young man and the gentleman rode out on horses together while the young wife stayed behind, hiding under her robe and weeping in silence.

The shrine was a row of sanctuaries composing a single large structure inside an impressively fenced sacred enclosure. The crowd before the fence was eating a festive meal. The young man was led to a high seat among them and served food too. After the

company had eaten and drunk freely, there was dancing and music.

At last the young man was called on to rise. He was undressed, his hair was unbound, and he was laid on the cutting board with a final, strict order neither to move nor to speak. Green sprigs of the sacred *sakaki* tree were planted at the board's four corners, and a sacred cord with white streamers fluttering from it was strung from sprig to sprig. Having carried the board ceremoniously through the fence and laid it before the sanctuaries, the bearers withdrew and closed the gate behind them. The young man was all alone. He stealthily reached for the dagger hidden all this time between his thighs.

When the door of the chief sanctuary creaked open, the young man's hair stood on end. One by one the other doors opened too. Next a monkey as big as a man came round from behind the shrine and chattered at the chief sanctuary. The sanctuary curtain was swept aside and out came another monkey with gleaming white teeth, larger and fiercer than the first. "They're just monkeys after all!" thought the young man with relief. More monkeys came from the other sanctuaries, and when all were present the messenger monkey received chattered orders from the monkey of the chief sanctuary. These instructions obviously concerned the victim because the messenger monkey now came to the cutting board, picked up the large cooking chopsticks and knife that were laid out for him, and prepared to carve.

The young man leapt up and attacked the chief monkey who, taken completely by surprise, toppled over backwards. A dagger pinned him to the ground. "Are you a god?" the young man roared. The monkey wrung his hands beseechingly while all the others fled and sat chattering furiously in the treetops.

The young man tied up the monkey with some vines that came to hand and bound him to a post. Then with his dagger to the pit of the monkey's stomach he cried, "Why, you *are* just a plain monkey! And all these years you've been calling yourself a god and eating people! Now what have you got to say for yourself? All right, call out your sons! Call them out! You're dead if you don't. Of course if you're a god my knife won't hurt you. Perhaps I'll just stick it in your belly and see what happens!" A little pressure on the blade made the monkey scream and wring his hands again. "All right," said the young man, "call out your sons!"

The monkey chattered and the messenger monkey came back. Sending him for more vines, the young man first tied up the chief monkey's three sons, then the messenger monkey too. "You were going to carve me up," he said, "but I'll let you live if you stay quiet. I will kill you, though, if you ever curse those poor, ignorant people again or eat them!"

He led the monkeys out the gate through the shrine fence and tied them to trees. Next, he set fire to the shrine with embers from the recent cooking fires. The village was so far off that no one knew, though when flames leaped from the spot the villagers saw them and worried. No one went to see what was happening because people were supposed to stay at home for three days after the festival.

The gentleman was particularly upset and feared something had gone very wrong. His daughter too was afraid because she knew better than her father what might have caused the flames. Then the victim himself appeared in the village, carrying a staff and driving the tied-up monkeys ahead of him. He was naked but for a belt of vines with a dagger stuck in it, and his loose hair flowed over his shoulders. People peeped at him through every gate along the way. "He's got the gods bound and he's driving them along!" they cried to each other. "Why, our sacrificial victim was more powerful than the gods! And if he can do this to the gods, just think what he can do to *us*! Maybe he'll eat us!" The villagers were terrified.

At his father-in-law's house the young man shouted for the gate to be opened. Silence met his demand. "Open up!" he shouted again. "I won't hurt you! But if you don't open up there *will* be trouble." He kicked at the gate.

The gentleman had his daughter go out to meet her husband. "He's stronger than the gods," he said, "and I'm afraid he may mean you harm. But open the gate and talk to him."

Fearful but happy too, the girl cracked the gate open and the young man pushed it wide. "Let me have my clothes," he said. She fetched him his trousers, his cloak, and his hat, and after tying the monkeys fast to the house he dressed. He also had her bring him a quiver and bow. Then he called out his father-in-law.

"It's horrible!" he said. "These are *monkeys* you've been calling gods and feeding people to all these years. Look! This is Mr. Monkey. You can keep him tied to your house, and if anyone does

any tormenting it's *you*, not Mr. Monkey. But you've had it all backwards! Well, you can be sure these monkeys won't trouble you any more as long as I'm here!"

He pinched one of the monkeys' ears. It did not react. The whole thing was rather funny. The monkeys seemed quite tame! Slightly reassured, the gentleman agreed that they had had everything wrong. "From now on *you'll* be our god," he said, "and we'll do whatever you say!" He rubbed his hands together ingratiatingly.

The young man led him off to see the mayor, herding the monkeys along. His knock on the gate again got no answer.

"Open up!" the gentleman shouted. "I've got to speak to you! There'll be trouble otherwise!" This threat brought out the mayor, trembling with fear, to open up. At the sight of the sacrificial victim he threw himself prostrate on the ground. The young man led his monkeys into the house and spoke to them with fury in his eyes. "You've falsely called yourselves gods, and each year you've killed and eaten a human being. Now you're going to mend your ways!" He fitted an arrow to his bowstring and took aim. The monkeys screamed in abject fear, and the mayor was so alarmed that he asked the gentleman, "Is he going to kill us, too? Save us!"

"Keep calm," the gentleman answered. "Nothing will happen as long as I'm here."

"All right," the young man went on, "I won't have your lives. But if you ever show yourselves here again, and try any mischief against the people, I promise I'll shoot you."

He gave each monkey twenty blows of his staff, then sent the villagers to smash and burn what was left of the shrine. Next, he drove the monkeys out of the village. They ran off, limping, deep into the mountains and were never seen again.

Now the greatest man in the village, the young man stayed on with his wife. The villagers were at his beck and call. Perhaps he told this story when he came back to our land for a secret visit. Since the people beyond the waterfall had no cattle, horses, or dogs he brought them puppies (dogs are great enemies of monkeys) and foals for them to put to work, and these all multiplied. But although he sometimes visited our land, no one from here ever visited his.

189.

CANNIBAL ISLAND

A man from Kyushu once set off by boat, with a good crew of men, to trade in parts unknown. On the return voyage the ship's first landfall was a large island far off the southwestern coast of Kyushu. It seemed inhabited, and the crew were all for putting in and taking on some provisions. When they landed, some wandered off to look over the island while others scattered to replenish their supply of chopsticks.

The soon heard a large group of people coming down from the heights of the island. For all they knew, the islanders could be demons. Rushing back to the ship, they quickly put some sea between themselves and the shore.

More than a hundred natives hove into view, dressed in white with tall, nodding caps on their heads. It was a familiar costume. Thank goodness they were humans after all! Apparently there was nothing to fear. Still, in so remote a spot these fellows could easily be murderous enough, and there certainly were a lot of them. The men kept rowing.

The islanders reached the edge of the water, saw that the boat was retreating, and came straight on into the sea. Being fighters, the crew were well armed. Every man had an arrow fitted to the string as they warned their pursuers off. The completely unarmed islanders glared at the ship a moment in silence, then turned round and disappeared again up onto the island.

What had the islanders had in mind? The crew did not really want to find out, and since the islanders could perfectly well try coming after them again, they followed the prompting of their fear and rowed away for good.

Back in Kyushu they told everyone they met about the incident. An old man who heard the story said they had been on Tora Island. As far as he knew, the islanders did indeed have human form, but were actually cannibals who would overpower any unwary visitor and kill and eat him. "You boys did well to get away from there," he declared. "If they'd gotten at you, you'd have all been dead, armed or not!" The men quaked afresh at this news and wondered at their narrow escape.