

“water” then turned out to be a mass of huge snakes whose undulating backs from a distance resembled a stream. They seemed to have caught the intruder’s scent on the wind because they lifted their heads in the air as he approached.

Their backs were dark blue-green and their throats a lustrous crimson, while their eyes glittered like polished bronze bowls and their tongues flickered like flames. The ascetic thought he was lost and scrambled back up the steep slope, pulling himself along as best he could by the tough dwarf bamboo stems. He made such slow progress that hot, fetid serpent breath was soon gusting up at him from below. Any moment he would be devoured, if he did not black out first and die from the horrible smell.

Something was coming down the slope toward him, although he was too dazed by the stench to be able to tell what it was. The thing seized his arm and slung him roughly across its shoulders. Terrified, he felt over the creature with his free hand but found nothing reassuring. It was clearly a demon and would only be hauling him off to eat him. His last thought before he passed out was that today, one way or another, he would die.

The demon raced up hill and down dale till it put down its burden on a distant peak. The ascetic came to and expected the end, but since nothing happened he asked the demon timidly what it was. “I’m the demon Kuhanda,” it answered. At last the ascetic opened his eyes. Naked but for a loincloth, the creature was ten feet tall. Its black skin glistened like lacquer and its red hair bristled straight up. Suddenly it turned away and vanished.

The ascetic realized that his own devotion to Thousand-Armed Kannon must have saved him, because only Thousand-Armed Kannon could have come to his aid. The thought brought tears to his eyes and he prostrated himself in thanks.

He set off toward the northeast, all the while chanting the darani, till he came to a waterfall tumbling a good fifty feet from among the crags. It was so beautiful that he stopped awhile to admire it. The moss on the rocks beside it was especially lovely. All at once a boulder many yards across rose from the pool at the base of the fall, thrust twenty feet into the air, then sank again. Shortly it rose and subsided as before. The ascetic watched the cycle several times with mounting astonishment till he saw that the rock was actually a huge snake which filled the pool and which was lifting its head into the pounding waters of the fall. The snake must have been there so long! Despite his fear and loathing, he was touched by compassion for the snake’s suffering, and he recited many sutras for it and called often on Thousand-Armed Kannon before he went his way.

99.

THE WINE SPRING

Once a monk passing through the Ōmine Mountains lost his way and found himself heading down into a totally unknown valley. In the valley was a large village.

He was looking forward to asking where he was, but first he came to a roofed spring. The ground all around it was paved with stone. When he went for a welcome drink, he found that the water was all yellow. It turned out actually to be wine.

While he puzzled over this amazing discovery, a crowd of villagers gathered and wanted to know who he was. He explained how he happened to be there.

"Come with me," one said. The monk followed unwillingly, wondering where they were off to and whether he would be killed. They got to a large, prosperous house and a gentleman came out to meet them. He too asked the monk to explain himself and the monk told his story as before.

The gentleman invited him in, fed him, and turned him over to a young man who was to escort him to "the usual place." Apparently the gentleman was the mayor. The monk quaked to imagine what "the usual place" might be, but there was no escape.

The young man led him to a deserted spot in the mountains where he announced that he had brought him there to kill him. "People have wandered into the village as you did several times in the past," he explained. "We've always killed them because we're afraid they'll talk about us in the world outside. No one out there has any idea our village even exists, you see."

The monk's mind froze, but in tears he managed to remind the young man that being a monk he followed the path of the Buddha and was dedicated to the welfare of all. That was why he had been passing through these mountains in the first place. "You have no idea of the sacrifices I've made, of labors I've performed in pursuit of my goal!" he went on. "And now you're going to kill me just because I lost my way! Of course I'm going to die in the end, I know. Everyone is. That's not what I mind. It's just that it's such an awful sin for *you* to kill a blameless monk! Please, please, won't you let me live?"

"I see," the young man replied. "Yes, I'd like to let you go. But I'm so afraid of what would happen if you talked about us outside!"

"Oh, but I *won't* talk about you, of course I won't. A man values his life more than anything and he never forgets what he owes someone who's saved him!"

"Well, all right. You're a monk. I can see that. I'll let you go, as long as you'll keep this knowledge to yourself. I can just pretend I killed you."

The monk swore every way he knew how that he would keep his mouth shut, and the young man, with many repetitions of his caution, showed him the path back to the outside world. One last time the monk bowed to his benefactor, assuring him that he would never forget his kindness as long as he lived. Then with tears of emotion on both sides the two parted, and the monk followed the trail till it rejoined the normal path through the mountains.

In due course he got back to the village he had started from. Of course he had sworn himself to silence many times over, but he was a great talker and was soon spouting the whole story to everyone. The general reaction was "Tell me another!" but he described the village and the spring of wine in such eloquent detail that some high-spirited youths decided to check. It would be one thing if those villagers were gods or demons, but apparently they were just people. They could not be as scary as all that.

Half a dozen of the strongest young braves set out, each armed with a bow, arrows, and a club, and the monk went with them. Several older, more responsible people tried to stop them, warning them not to engage a completely unknown community on their own ground, but the hotheads paid no attention. The monk's eloquence had fired their imaginations. The parents and relatives who remained behind were very worried.

The party did not return that day or the next. In fact, they never came back at all. No one volunteered to go after them. Amid lamentations, the matter was dropped. No doubt the whole party had been massacred.

That monk had really distinguished himself with all his talk. He would have done better to leave well enough alone, and his audience would have done better still to ignore his prattle!

100.

VERY HIGH IN THE MOUNTAINS

The monk Giei spent his life roaming from province to province, visiting every holy site in the land. In his travels he made a pilgrimage to Kumano and from there passed northward into the Ōmine Mountains.

He was headed for Golden Peak, but got so lost on the way that he could no longer tell east from west. A good blast on the conch he had slung at his waist got no answer. Next he climbed a peak for a better view, but all he could see from the top was valley after dim valley.

After ten days Giei was so desperate that he begged the buddha of his portable altar to lead him back to civilization. As he prayed he came to a handsome wood with a pretty little house inside it, surrounded by a broad garden strewn with white sand. The shrubs were as green as green could be, and it was a marvel to see flowers blooming everywhere amid a profusion of ripe berries and fruit.

What a cheering sight! In the house a monk no older than twenty was chanting the Lotus Sutra in a sublime voice that touched the depths of Giei's being. Each chapter was a separate scroll. As soon as the monk had finished one and laid it on his desk, the scroll would rise into the air, roll itself back up cover and all, tie its own cords neatly, and settle back down. Scroll by scroll, the monk went through the whole Sutra. Giei was awed and frightened.

The holy man stood up. He did not hide his astonishment on seeing his visitor. "No human has ever been here before," he said. "I'm so high in the mountains that I seldom even hear the birds singing in the valleys. Who are you?"

Giei explained that he was a monk and lost. The holy man invited him in, and some beautiful acolytes served him a delicious meal that made him forget all about hunger and starvation. He asked the holy man how long he had lived here and why he lacked nothing.

"I've been here eighty years," the holy man answered. "Once I was a monk on Mount Hiei, but I'm sorry to say there was a little trouble between me and my master and he refused to keep me with him any longer. I couldn't think of anything else to do but go roaming. Of course I was young and strong then, and I worshipped at all the holy places. When I got old I took refuge in these mountains, and I've been here ever since, waiting for death."

Giei listened with growing amazement. "You say no one comes here," he insisted, "but you have three beautiful acolytes serving you. Surely you can't be serious!"

"The Sutra itself says, 'Celestial boys will come to serve the one who upholds this Sutra.' Is it really so strange?"

"You say you're old, but as far as I can see you're in the flower of youth. Are you