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The Saint of Mt. Koya

Izumi Kyoka

Translated by Stephen W. Kohl

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Izumi Kyoka

Izumi Kyoka lived and wrote in Tokyo during the Meiji, Taisho and Showa periods (the late 19th and early 20th centuries), when Japan was rapidly accommodating western influences. Highly respected by the big names in literary circles, he was a strong influence on Akutagawa, author of the well-known short story, "Rashomon", and friends with Soseki, perhaps Japan's most famous modern writer. Tanizaki later called his work "purely Japanese ... native-born, borrowed neither from the West nor from China." Mishima likened him to "a peony garden sending forth blossoms in the desert of modern literature."

Kyoka wrote in the old style, using Kanji characters that a generation later were outdated, if not unreadable, to many Japanese. And his stories were often a kind of Gothic fantasy, filled with superstition and spirits and traditional ways -- hardly fashionable when machinery, mass advertising, and the Jazz Age hit Japan. Still, his works endured and his name survived, and eventually a few books were translated into English.

The Saint of Mt. Koya was originally published as *Koya Hijiri*, in 1900, some fifty years after Kyoka had died. The English translation was printed in 1990, by a private group in Kyoka's hometown. "Any writer whose work continues to be read nearly a century after it was written and a full fifty years after the author's death occupies a significant place in any country's literary tradition," wrote translator Stephen W. Kohl. Here then, is a significant piece of Japan's literature, written by an author quintessentially Japanese.

The Saint of Mt. Koya

Izumi Kyoka / Translation by Stephen W. Kohl

1.

"I thought to myself, it will surely be of no use to get out my Army Corps map and check it again, but the road seemed endless and the day was stiflingly hot. Even the sleeve of my travelling cloak felt hot as I raised my arm and fumbled for the map case.

"There I was on an isolated track deep in the mountains between Hida and Shinshu. There was no tree in sight to give a weary pilgrim a shady place to rest; all around, nothing but mountains. Some of the peaks seemed so close, I felt I could almost reach out and touch them, and yet I could see the towering ranges rising one behind the other in endless succession into the distance. The sky above was equally empty, showing never a sign of bird or cloud.

"I stood alone between the earth and the sky. It was high noon, as I recall, and the sun scorched the earth with merciless intensity. The only protection I had from the sun's glare as I pored over the map was the shadow cast by my deep-brimmed pilgrim's hat."

With these words the itinerant priest clenched his fists together on the pillow and placed his forehead on them in the manner of religious ascetics.

This venerable holy man had been my travelling companion coming from Nagoya across the mountains to this wayside inn at Tsuruga on the rugged north coast of Japan. As we prepared for bed in our modest traveller's inn, it occurred to me that on the

whole of our long journey, I had never once seen the priest put on the smug airs one so often sees in pious men. Nor to my knowledge did he relax even in bed, but, rather, crouched at his pillow in an attitude of prayer, as I have described.

I had been on the train taking the main trunk line along the coast, and I remember he boarded my car when we stopped at Kakegawa. From the beginning I could detect in him all the signs of one who is aloof from the concerns of the world. He took a seat in the corner of the coach and kept his head bowed. He was in no way conspicuous. Indeed, his eyes, when I noticed them, showed no hint of human passion, but were like cold ashes. I paid no attention to him at the time.

Reaching Nagoya all the other passengers, like lemmings driven by some inexplicable and irresistible urge, got off the train, leaving only the venerable old priest and myself to share the coach.

My train had left Shimbashi Station in Tokyo at nine-thirty the previous evening and arrived in Tsuruga this evening. It had been just noon when we reached Nagoya, so I bought a small box lunch from a vendor at the station. By chance the priest ordered the same sort of lunch as I. When I opened the box, it turned out to be cheap fare consisting of rice with a little seaweed sprinkled over it, but no fish.

"Why there's nothing here but bits of carrots and gourd shavings. Where's the fish?" I blurted out indignantly. Seeing the look on my face, the priest chuckled softly to himself.

Since there were only two of us in the coach, we presently became acquainted. Inquiring about his destination I learned that he was bound for the great Zen monastery, the Eihei-ji. Though it belongs to a different sect from his own, he was on his way to visit a friend. He planned, he said, to spend the night at Tsuruga and continue on the next morning.

I myself was returning home to Wakasa, and since I too would be spending the night in Tsuruga, we decided to travel together.

The priest said he belonged to the monastery on Mt. Koya. He appeared to be in his mid-forties and seemed quite genial. He was attired in a woolen travelling cloak with ample sleeves, a

white flannel muffler, a pill box cap, and woolen gloves. He wore white socks and low, wooden clogs. Indeed, his dress, while old-fashioned, reminded me not so much of a priest, but rather suggested the apparel of a master of tea or of poetry; that is, of one who is devoted more to worldly pursuits than to religious practices.

"Where will you spend the night?" he asked. This question brought a deep sigh from my lips as I contemplated the monotony of spending the night alone in a strange city. I could just picture in my mind how it would be – the maid who served my dinner would doze off with the rice paddle in her hand. The desk clerk would surely be full of cynical and meaningless flattery, and yet, as soon as I left my room to go to the bath, the clerk and maids would watch my every move with suspicion, convinced, no doubt, that I was about to steal everything in sight. And worst of all would be that the instant I finished eating my dinner, the maid would take away the bright reading lamp and replace it with a dim night light, bid me good-night, and go off leaving me in semi-darkness. It is not my custom to sleep early, and it is quite impossible to describe the feeling of dismay I experienced at the thought of being abandoned like that in a dimly lit room. It is even worse at this time of year when the nights are so long. Ever since leaving Tokyo I had been preoccupied with the thought of how I would make it through the dreary night. The priest's question about where I would spend the night brought all this to mind once again, and I asked the priest if he would mind sharing a room with me.

He nodded his cheerful assent and said that whenever he made a pilgrimage to this part of the country he made a point of resting his pilgrim's staff for the night at a place called the Katoriya. 'Resting his pilgrim's staff for the night,' was the quaint way he phrased it. He explained that originally the Katoriya had been an ordinary inn until the proprietor's only daughter, who had been the most attractive feature about the place, died. After that, the family took down their sign, and although they no longer encouraged customers, they would still accommodate their old customers when the need arose. They were an old couple who provided simple hospitality for occasional travellers.

The priest said that I would be welcome, if I liked, to put up with him there. "But," he cautioned putting down his lunch box, "you may have to get by with nothing better to eat than carrots and gourd shavings." With that he burst out laughing.

Apparently the priest had a sense of humor beneath his modest looks and bearing.

2.

While our train rolled through Gifu Prefecture the sky remained blue and clear, but crossing the mountains we encountered the familiar gloomy overcast of the north coast; a change that occurred gradually but steadily. At Maibara and Nagahama there was only a thin layer of clouds making the weak winter sunlight even bleaker. Gradually the icy chill seeped into my very bones. By the time we reached Yanagase it was drizzling, and presently, as the world outside the train grew dark, the drizzle became mixed with sleet, and finally with white flakes of snow.

"Snow," I said.

"So it seems," was the only comment my laconic companion made. Apparently he was without interest in what was happening outside. He did not even bother to look up at the sky. And this was not the first time the itinerant priest had responded thus; earlier, when I had pointed out the site of the ancient battlefield at Shizugatake, and again when I had commented on the scenery around Lake Biwa, he had only nodded his head saying nothing.

The irritating, almost frightening thing about visiting Tsuruga is the clamorous insistence of the hotel solicitors. They hang around the station in swarms, each trying to lure customers to his own hotel. As I had feared, when we alighted from the train we were confronted by a solid wall of solicitors lining the road from the station all the way back to the streets of the town. Each one carried an umbrella and a lantern with the name of his hotel printed on it in large letters. This crowd of solicitors closed in around the disembarking passengers leaving them no avenue of escape. Each solicitor shouted loudly, demanding that travellers stay at his hotel or inn. Some of the more enthusiastic ones

would actually snatch a person's luggage out of his hands with a phrase such as, "Thanks for choosing our establishment." Regardless of how indignant the victim of this behavior became, he found it impossible to retrieve his luggage and could only follow along.

As usual my companion seemed utterly aloof from the uproar of the world around him. Head bowed, he cut through the noisy throng without trouble, and I followed close behind. Miraculously none of the solicitors tried to clutch at the priest's sleeve or snatch at his luggage. Still, when we reached the deserted streets of the town I heaved a great sigh of relief.

The snow continued without respite, only now there was no drizzle mixed with it, only dry, fluffy flakes brushed my face as we walked along. Though it was early in the evening, the streets of Tsuruga were deserted and the shops were closed and shuttered for the night. We crossed two or three broad intersections and continued for about eight blocks through streets that were rapidly piling deep with snow. When, at last, we came to a halt, we were standing in front of the inn called Katoriya.

Both the alcove and the sitting room of the old house were Spartan and devoid of decoration, but I could tell that the place was well built. The pillars and the beams were impressive, the mats were firm, and the hearth spacious. From the ceiling above the hearth hung a long, hooked rod of iron cast in the form of a carp. This was used to suspend pots over the fire, and the carp's scales glowed in the dim light making me wonder if they were perhaps made of gold. In the kitchen area were two enormous kettles, each capable of cooking a bushel of rice at a time.

The master of the inn had close-cropped hair in the manner of a priest and made a practice of keeping his hands withdrawn inside his hempen jacket. I noticed that he never brought his hands out even when sitting close to the fire. He was a phlegmatic and stubborn old man, but his wife was the cheerful sort who enjoyed doing things for people. When my companion the priest told the story about the carrots and dried gourd strips, she chuckled merrily and prepared a meal of dried fish and soup for us. Judging from the way they talked, I could see that the old couple had known the priest for a long time and I, as the priest's

companion, felt very much at home with them.

Presently we were shown to our sleeping quarters on the second floor. The ceiling was low, supported by huge, rounded beams that slanted down from the ridge pole. The ceiling was so low at the side of the room that we were in danger of bumping our heads there. The house was so stoutly built it would have withstood an avalanche sweeping down from the mountains that towered behind it.

Since our bedding had been specially fitted with a heater at the foot to keep us warm, I was happy to crawl under the covers. Our quilts were spread out at right angles to each other so that our feet would be warmed by the same heater, but the priest did not use his bed; instead, he lay down beside me, shunning the warmth and comfort of the heater.

I noticed that the priest did not even loosen his sash, much less remove his robe. Dressed as he was, he curled himself into a ball and, with the blankets around his waist he crouched down, sleeves covering his shoulders, with his head face down; just the opposite of the way ordinary people sleep.

Before long he stopped stirring and appeared to be falling asleep. As I had mentioned repeatedly on the train that I am one who is not able to sleep until late, I had hoped he would feel sorry for me and refrain from sleeping for a while in order to keep me company. So, like a child demanding a bedtime story, I asked him to tell me about some of the interesting experiences he had had in his wanderings throughout the land.

The priest nodded and observed that since middle age it had been his habit not to lie on his back in bed as ordinary people do, but to crouch face down in the manner I have just described. He went on to say that he, like me, was not sleepy, and agreed to tell me a story. "You must not always expect to hear religious stories from a priest," he cautioned, "Nor sermons and platitudes either. Listen carefully, young man, to what I am about to tell you."

Later I made inquiries and learned that this man was none other than the renowned and revered priest Shucho, of Rikuminji Temple, one of the great teachers and preachers of his sect.

3.

"They tell me there is another young man who will spend the night here with us. He is from Wakasa the same as you; he's a peddler of lacquerware. He is just a young fellow, but a good man and very serious.

"As I have already told you at the beginning of my story, I encountered a very different sort of young man once when I was crossing the Hida mountains. He was a medicine peddler from Toyama whom I met at a tea house at the foot of the mountains. He was rather offensive and an altogether unsavory young character.

"It had been my original intention to try to make it to the pass that day, and with that in mind I had set out from my lodgings at about three o'clock in the morning so that I might get a good start. I covered six miles or more while it was still in the cool of the morning, and made it all the way to the tea house without pausing to rest, but by then the day had dawned clear and sunny and it was rapidly becoming very hot.

"As I had been single-minded in my attempt to make good progress, it was inevitable that my throat was feeling parched and dry. I decided to stop at the tea house for a quick cup of tea before hurrying on my way, but it was too early and they told me they had not yet got the tea water boiling.

"That's the way it was done in those days. At the best of times there were few travellers on that road and it was unreasonable to suppose that rest stations along the way would be open so early. The saying was that the shops don't open while the morning glories are still in bloom.

"There was a cold mountain stream flowing just in front of the tea house and I was about to scoop up a ladle full of water to drink. Just then, however, I remembered that it was the height of the hot season and there was a widespread epidemic of some horrible disease going around. Some distance back I had passed through a village called Tsuji and had seen that the villagers had spread quicklime everywhere.

" 'Excuse me, miss,' I said self-consciously. 'Is this water from your well?'

" 'Why no. It comes from the stream.'

"Suddenly I was very cautious. 'I have heard there is a terrible epidemic sweeping this area. Doesn't this stream flow through Tsuji?'

" 'No, it doesn't,' said the girl indifferently. At first I was happy to hear this, but listen to what happened next.

"It turned out that the medicine peddler I mentioned earlier had been resting here at this tea house for some time before I arrived. He was just one of those seedy travelling salesmen; you know how they dress. He wore a striped, unlined kimono tied with a Kyushu sash. He strutted around with a pocket watch; you see that a lot these days. His legs were wrapped in old-fashioned leggings and straw sandals. Strapped to his back was a square medicine chest wrapped in a yellowish linen cloth. He also had an oilskin rain cape wrapped in a tight bundle, and attached to his right wrist by a braided cord was an umbrella. In other words, he was dressed like a typical medicine peddler. They all look the same with that serious, sophisticated expression on their faces.

"You know the sort of person I am talking about. They affect a sophisticated world-weariness while on the road, but the moment they arrive at an inn for the night, they change into a gaudy kimono and then with the sash half undone, they loll around in the most slovenly way drinking cheap wine and trying to pinch the maids.

" 'Hey you, priest,' he called, making me feel like a fool from the very first. 'Do you realize what you said just now? Do you see the paradox of it? You are one who has taken a vow not to taste the pleasures of this world. You've shaved your head and become a priest, and yet you still seek to protect your life. It doesn't make any sense, but that's human nature. Come on, admit it. You claim to have renounced the world, but you really want to hold on to your life after all. You see, Miss, he has not yet freed himself from an attachment to the things of this world.' When the peddler had said this, he turned to the maid and they both burst into raucous laughter.

"I was young then, you know, and I burned red with shame, and yet I was still reluctant to drink the water I had already scooped up.

"The peddler knocked the dottle from his pipe and said, 'What's the matter, man? Don't hold back; go ahead, drink up. Drink your fill. What does it matter if you get sick, I have plenty of medicine here. Surely fate brought me here just for this purpose, don't you think so, Miss? Oh, but don't get me wrong, the medicine won't be free. I have some Mankitan pills here, but out of respect for the medicine I give you, you will have to pay three sen a pack for them. You'll have to pay for them alright. I have never yet committed such a sin that I had to atone for it by giving something free to a priest. And how about you, Miss? I wouldn't mind committing a few sins with you.' With these words he poked the tea house maid suggestively in the ribs.

"Shocked by the man's lewd behavior, I hurried away down the road.

"An elderly priest like myself has no business telling you indecent stories about poking tea house maids, or about pinching them either, but I guess it will be all right this time since that is the subject of my story."

4.

"I was incensed by the man's insolence. Furious, I hurried away along the path through the fields that cut across the mountain. I had only gone a short distance when the path began to rise steeply and I could see the road climbing above in a series of sharp switchbacks. So high and so steeply did the path rise, curving like a bow, that it seemed to arch out over me like some fabulous, heavenly bridge.

"I had just started to climb the slope with my eyes upturned, fixed on my goal, when the very medicine peddler I had encountered earlier came hurrying along, overtaking me. We did not exchange words, not even a greeting. In fact, I was determined not to reply even if he spoke to me. As before, the man was completely insolent and merely cast a defiant look in my direction as he hurried past and went on ahead. For a brief moment his umbrella seemed to blossom on the ridge line at the top of the hill, then disappeared down the far side.

"I followed the same trajectory, up the hill, over the hump,

and down the other side. The peddler had preceded me, but had come to a halt at the bottom of the slope and was looking about in all directions. I was on my guard thinking he might be planning some mischief, but when I came closer, I saw what he was up to.

"At that point there was a fork in the road. One path led straight up the steep slope and was quite overgrown with grass on both sides. There was an enormous cypress tree there, so large it would have required four or five men joining hands to encircle its girth. This narrow path disappeared behind the cypress, then reappeared winding among three or four enormous boulders that climbed the slope in a steady line. I considered all this and decided it was not the path for me. Up to this point in my journey I had always felt that the wider path was surely the proper way to go, and from the looks of things, in this case too, by following the wider path for another couple of miles I would be well up into the mountains and on my way to the pass.

"I paused for a time at the fork, looking over the situation wondering which path to follow. The huge cypress completely blocked the wider path, its branches arching out over the surrounding rice fields like a rainbow spanning the sky. And not only its branches, its roots too, were remarkable. They broke through the ground in many places, forming fantastic patterns like a mass of squirming eels. I also noticed that a spring of water was flowing from among the roots and spread out over the ground forming a large puddle. In fact, the water was flowing right down the wider of the two paths, the one I had intended to follow, transforming it into a stream.

"I thought it odd that the surrounding rice fields had not become a lake. With my eyes I followed the torrent of the stream and saw that some distance in front of me stood a grove of trees that seemed to form a barrier stopping the water. Nevertheless, the two hundred yards between where I stood and the grove of trees was a rushing current. Here and there in the stream bed were rocks that could have been used as stepping stones if one took large strides. Although they seemed most natural, I was sure these stepping stones had been placed there by human hands.

"The ford was not so difficult that the traveller would have to remove his travelling robes in order to cross, but on the other hand, it seemed an excessively difficult crossing if this was really the main road. It would be difficult for a horse to make his way along here, much less a foot traveller like myself.

"The medicine peddler, too, had stopped here for a moment in uncertainty, but then he resolutely turned away and set off at a brisk pace to the right following the narrower path that led up the hill. Even as I watched, he disappeared behind the huge cypress only to reappear a few moments later on the slope above looking down on me.

" 'Hey you, priest,' he called, 'This is the road to Matsumoto.' With that he set off again along the path he had chosen. A moment later he leaned over a large boulder and called again to me, 'Be careful or you might find yourself bewitched by a tree spirit. I know it's broad daylight now, but you can't be too careful.' With these sarcastic words he disappeared among the shadows of the boulders and was completely lost from sight in the tall grass beyond.

"A moment later when I glanced up at the slope above, I caught a glimpse of his umbrella, but it soon disappeared among the thick brush and trees of the mountainside.

" 'Ho there!' came a cheerful voice and I looked around to see a peasant approaching, hopping across the stones in the river. He wore a rush mat around his waist and in one hand carried a shoulder pole with nothing attached to it."

5.

"Needless to say, apart from the medicine peddler I had not met a soul from the time I had left the tea house until now. At that moment I was rather confused; having heard the peddler's parting comment, and thinking that since he was a travelling salesman he must know the way even in this remote area, I was about to consult my map once again even though, as I mentioned before, I had already studied it carefully that morning.

" 'Excuse me,' I said to the farmer, 'I must ask your help.'

" 'What can I do for you, sir?'

"These mountain people may be rustic, but when they see that I am a priest, they are invariably polite.

" 'I guess I really don't need help; I was just wondering if this is the main road that goes straight along here.'

" 'Are you heading for Matsumoto? Well sir, thanks to all the rain we had during the rainy season, the main road, as you can see, has become something of a river.'

" 'Is the road flooded like this all the way along?'

" 'Oh no. There is a lot of water right here, but it only goes as far as that grove of trees over yonder. After that the road is clear. All the way to the mountains it is wide enough for freight wagons to pass each other. That grove, by the way, is the site where a certain doctor had a mansion in the old days, and there was once a village right here where we are standing now. I believe it was thirteen years ago that we had the heavy flood and everything was washed away making this a wasteland. A lot of people died then. Since you are a priest, sir, would you be good enough to offer up a prayer for the poor departed souls as you walk along?'

"I enjoyed the old rustic's comments even though I had not asked him to tell me about the history of the area. At any rate, at least I knew I was on the right road, but at the same time I realized that the peddler had taken the wrong road.

" 'Where does the other road go?' I asked, looking off to the right along the narrow path taken by the peddler.

" 'Oh yes, well that's the old road that people used to take fifty years ago or more. It is only a foot path. Eventually, of course, it ends up in Shinshu the same as the main road. It saves about seven miles overall, but it is virtually impassable these days, no one can get through. Last year a family was on a pilgrimage and took that route by mistake. That was a terrible thing. They were a pretty poor lot, no-account people, but, as you know, sir, every soul is precious, so we felt we had to try to help them. Three of the local constables and twelve villagers formed a search party and went up into the mountains after them. Eventually we found them and brought them back, but I can tell you it was touch and go for a while. You seem vigorous enough, but I warn you, don't take that path just because it is a

bit shorter. You will do better to stick to the main road even if you become exhausted and end up having to sleep in the open. Well, God go with you sir. Farewell.'

"I parted with the peasant and was about to set out across the flooded path on the stepping stones when suddenly I paused, wondering what might become of the peddler who had chosen the wrong path.

"The peasant's story sounded a bit melodramatic, but if it were true, I would be leaving the peddler to die on the wrong road. It occurred to me that I am a priest who has renounced the comforts of the secular world and therefore it mattered little which route I followed. When evening falls I have no need to find the comforts of an inn as other travellers do. With this in mind, I decided to set out in pursuit of the peddler and, if I could overtake him, to bring him back to the correct path. If I did not overtake him, on the other hand, and ended up following the old road the whole way, there would be nothing wrong with that. After all, this was not the season when wolf packs are on the prowl, nor are the forest spirits active, and so I thought to myself, 'Why not go after him.' Having made up my mind, I paused for a moment before setting out and looked around, but the kind peasant had disappeared.

" 'Good,' I thought to myself and resolutely set off up the hill along the narrow path. My decision to pursue the peddler was not based on any desire to become a hero, nor was it the result of youthful exuberance or folly. From what I have said you may think that at that time I was already some sort of enlightened saint, but the fact is that I was really a rather cowardly person. After all, I valued my own life so highly I had been loathe even to drink the water from the river. Under those circumstances you may well wonder why I chose to follow the peddler in hope of bringing him back to the proper way.

"If he had simply been another traveller with whom I had exchanged a casual greeting, I would certainly have left him to his fate, but since he was a person toward whom I had held angry feelings, if I had simply abandoned him without resolving that anger, my heart would not have been at ease."

As he related all this Shucho remained crouching with his

face to the pillow and his hands folded as though in prayer.

"I felt that to do nothing would belie the prayers I was always so piously saying with my mouth."

6.

"So, listen to what happened. I followed the narrower path behind the huge cypress and climbed the slope beyond, making my way among the huge boulders until at last I came out on the mountainside above. From there the road passed through some woods and continued endlessly through fields of deep grass.

"Before I knew it I had crossed the first mountain and was approaching the second. All around me was a broad prairie. It turned out that this path was wider and more gently sloping than the main road I had been following before.

"For the most part the path I was following now ran parallel to the main road I had been on earlier. One road passed east of the mountain in front of me and the other road passed to the west. In any case, the road I was on was wide enough to have accommodated a daimyo's procession.

"Even in this wide open area I could see no sign of the medicine peddler, not the least trace. The only signs of movement were the occasional insects that flew up into the molten sky as I passed along. In this empty, barren prairie I felt alone and a bit anxious. There was nothing familiar in the landscape to console me. Of course I knew all the old sayings that on the Hida crossing inns and stopping places are few and far between, and I knew that even when one finds an inn, it is only rarely that the traveller will be served even such poor fare as rice mixed with millet. So I had expected this, and as my legs are strong, I continued on my way without resting. Gradually, however, the mountains began to close in on both sides. Soon the path seemed to be climbing straight up and the mountain walls were so close on both sides I could spread my arms and touch both sides of the canyon through which I was walking.

"I knew that from there on I would be ascending the notorious Amo Pass. Already I was panting heavily in the fierce heat, but I paused only to retie the laces of my straw sandals.

"Years later I heard that there is a natural flue in that vicinity which carries the cool mountain breeze all the way from this defile to an opening beneath the Rendaiji Temple in Mino, where it serves as a form of air conditioning. At that time, however, I was too preoccupied with climbing the pass to take time out for sightseeing or looking at natural phenomena. So intent was I that I paid no heed to natural surroundings; indeed, I hardly knew whether the day was clear or cloudy. All my attention was focused on climbing the pass.

"The real story I want to tell you is what happened after this. I was completely alone on the road, and the thing I hated most about travelling through here were the snakes. They lay across the path with their heads buried in the grass on one side of the path and their tails disappearing in the grass on the other side. The first time I encountered one of those snakes, my knees turned to jelly and gave way beneath me. I sat on the ground, my straw hat still on my head and my walking stick still clutched in my hand. I was paralyzed with fear. It was not just that I find snakes loathsome, I actually have a pathological fear of them. I always have had.

"As I sat transfixed with terror, the snake, fortunately for me, slithered across the path and, raising his head, disappeared into the grass. I felt as though I had been saved.

"At last I managed to get to my feet and resumed my journey along the path, but five or six hundred yards further on I saw the same thing again; the snake was warming its stomach in the sun while its head and tail were hidden in the grass on either side of the path. I leaped back with a shout of surprise, but this snake, too, slithered away into the grass with a sinister, susurrant whisper. Next I encountered the third snake, but it did not move away so quickly, and judging from the great size of its body and the sluggishness with which it was moving, I estimated it would take at least five minutes for the huge serpent to cross the path. I felt I had no choice but to jump over the snake. As I did so, however, I suddenly had a feeling that all my body hairs and pores were momentarily transformed into scales, and my eyes felt cold and glassy as though even my face had become the face of a snake.

"I felt ill and a cold sweat began to form on my skin; my legs turned to rubber. I tried to tell myself that it would never do to be so terrified each time I saw a snake because there are so many of them in this area, and frightened though I was, I tried to hurry along the path only to encounter yet another snake almost immediately. This one had been torn in two and all that remained was the midsection and tail of the serpent. The part of the snake's body that had been sundered was tinged with blue, and a yellowish fluid oozed from the gaping wound. The snake was still writhing and twitching.

"At that point I completely lost my head and tucked up my robes, preparing to run back the way I had come, but then I remembered the snakes I had encountered earlier on the trail and knew I could not go back to where they were waiting. I would rather have died than to have to jump over that huge snake again. I knew in my heart that if the old peasant had told me in advance that I would find all these snakes on this road, I would never have taken it even if it meant suffering in hell for eternity for abandoning the peddler."

Pressing his head with his hands the old priest concluded, "I was weeping tears of fright and reciting prayers to the Lord Buddha, and even now just the thought of that experience terrifies me."

7.

"There was no way to avoid the encounter if I continued on my way, and it was impossible to turn back, so I tried to get a grip on myself. When I looked again, the body of the snake was still in the road confronting me. I ran off the path into the grass making a wide detour around it. Even as I did so, however, I was in a panic, fearing that the front half of the snake might be pursuing me. Just the thought of this paralyzed my legs and caused me to stumble over a stone. Apparently that is when I twisted my knee.

"From then on I continued walking along the road, but it was difficult. I felt like just collapsing where I was and dying from heat exhaustion. Nevertheless, I made up my mind to get

hold of myself and to continue toward the pass no matter how difficult that proved to be.

"The grass was rank beside the road and gave off a terrible stench. Underfoot I was continually stepping on the remains of what appeared to be the eggs of some sort of large bird.

"For the next two miles the path wound up the slope in serpentine coils. As I made my way, sometimes I found myself pressed flat against the side of the mountain, while at other times I clambered over large boulders or clung to vines and roots, and at last paused to consult my map, as I said at the beginning.

"There was no doubt that the road I saw on my map was the same road the peasant had told me about earlier. I found precious little comfort in knowing for sure that this was the old road, and I knew my map was authoritative, but the road marked on it was only a fine red line drawn across a fuzz of altitude markers.

"I realized that I could not expect the hazards of the journey such as the snakes, the hairy caterpillars, the bird eggs, and the stench of the rotting grass to be marked on the map, so I folded it up and replaced it in its case. All I could do was to try to fortify myself by chanting prayers. Yet no sooner had I drawn a breath than another snake emerged from the grass and crossed the path. By now I felt I had already suffered too much and decided this must be a manifestation of the mountain spirit. Throwing aside my walking stick, I knelt and placed both hands on the baking ground in obeisance. 'I am truly sorry to bother you,' I said, 'But please allow me to pass. I will go discreetly so as not to bother you while you are napping. As you can see, I have thrown away my walking stick.' I remained for a time in my crouched attitude of prayer, but when I finally looked up, I heard the snake hissing at me.

"The snake departed and just as I had thought, he was an enormous one. His movement made the grass ripple some four or five yards in all directions. Indeed, the grass continued to ripple in a straight line all the way down into the valley below while the encircling peaks above trembled and shook. My body was rigid and cold with fear. Regaining my senses, I noticed that

a cool and refreshing wind was blowing down from the peaks above.

"I quickly realized that the wind was reverberating through the mountains and creating an echo. Certainly the wind currents in the mountains are always uncertain, but I had a feeling that this wind was blowing through some sort of natural wind chimney.

"I wondered if this was the reply of the mountain deity to my prayer. In any case, the snake was gone and the heat seemed to relent a little and I once again resumed my journey in better spirits. Soon I was able to see why the wind was suddenly cooler, for there spread out before me was a great forest.

"I had always heard that Amo Pass is a strange and disturbing place, where it rains even when there are no clouds in the sky, and according to people I had talked to, there had not been a woodcutter in these forests since the beginning of time, yet up to this point in my journey there had been very few trees.

"Entering the dark and shadowy forest, my feet grew cold with the fear that land crabs might creep onto the path instead of the snakes I had encountered earlier. As I penetrated deeper into the forest it began to grow dark. Down among the pines and cedars I could barely make out the distant shafts of sunlight filtering between the branches of the trees. The earth I walked upon was completely black, but where the rays of the sun were filtering through the trees, the color of the earth was changed to red.

"Water dripping from the leaves overhead splattered on my feet and formed a thin trickle along the ground. The evergreens were dropping their needles in a steady rustle, and trees unfamiliar to me creaked and groaned, dropping their leaves suddenly either onto my broad pilgrim's hat, or onto the path behind me. The forest was so dense the leaves fell from branch to branch and it took years before they finally reached the ground."

8.

"I cannot tell you how frightened I was. I am cowardly by nature, and I was not at all well-versed in the austere practices of religious training, so venturing into such a dark and dismal place as this, I was relieved to be able to rely on my simple prayers for support. Indeed, I even felt refreshed after the heat of the open road. The weariness went out of my legs and I proceeded briskly. Soon I had gone more than halfway through the forest, when suddenly I felt something heavy fall from a branch overhead and land with a plop on my hat. It was something heavy and sodden, so I supposed it was an overripe fruit of some sort, but when I shook my head to get rid of the thing, it continued to cling to my hat. Without thinking I reached up and plucked at it with my hand only to find that it was cold and slimy.

"Nevertheless, I picked the thing off and looked at it. It was a strange creature resembling a sea slug, having neither eyes nor ears, but it was definitely alive. I was repelled by the horrid creature, yet when I tried to throw it away, it clung to the tips of my fingers and just dangled there. When at last I cast it off, beautiful, bright, red blood dripped from the finger to which it had clung. Startled, I held the finger up before my eyes to examine it. As I did so, I noticed that a similar creature had attached itself to the inside of my elbow. It looked like an enormous slug about half an inch wide and three inches long.

"Even as I gazed at the thing in stupefied amazement, I could see it swelling ever larger as it sucked the living blood from my arm. It was a soft, black thing with brown stripes covered with spines like a cucumber. At last I recognized it to be a blood-sucking leech.

"There was no mistake, anyone would have recognized the creature, but the disgusting thing was so large it took a moment before I realized what it really was. I had never supposed a slug of this size existed either in the rice fields of today, or in the legendary swamps of old.

"I waved my arm frantically trying to shake the thing off, but quickly realized that it was stuck fast in its desire to consume my blood. I had to pluck it off with my fingers, and in

the process it broke in two. I could not stand to have the awful thing on me, so I flung it to the ground. I tried to squash it with my foot, but in this deep and sunless part of the forest, the ground was soft and it merely sank into the mud. I was unable to crush it.

"Suddenly the back of my neck began to itch and I realized there was another leech there. I tried to brush it off with my hand, but it was too slimy to get a grip on. Then I noticed that I was covered with the things. One was on my chest and another was working his way beneath the sash around my stomach. I blanched with horror only to find that there were more of them on my shoulders.

"Starting up with a frightened leap and shaking myself furiously, I moved out from under the branch from which the leeches had dropped. Crazed with terror I plucked frantically at the leeches wherever I could find them.

"Believing the leeches had come from the branch under which I had been standing, I now paused to look back at it and saw that the whole surface of the tree was a squirming mass of leeches. I shouted out in terror as I saw the ravenous, black, slimy things dropping down from the tree like rain.

"Looking down, I saw that they had completely covered the top of my foot. So thick were they I could not even see my toes. The whole living mass was throbbing and pulsing as they sucked blood from my foot. Just the sight of it made me feel faint and queasy. In that moment an extraordinary fantasy came to me.

"It occurred to me that these frightful leeches had been here since the beginning of time waiting for travellers to come along. How much blood, I wondered, had they sucked from travellers over the long years of time? It seemed to me that once they had reached their fill, the leeches would vomit up their store of human blood in such vast quantities that the whole earth would be turned to mud; whole mountains would sink beneath an enormous swamp of mud and blood. Here in this dark, dank, and dismal place where the sun never penetrated, even the trees would topple over and be transformed into leeches. Such was the terrible vision that came to me in my distraught condition."

9.

"Certainly the destruction of mankind will not begin with the earth bursting into eruption and fire raining down from the sky, nor yet will it come from the waves of the ocean washing over the earth. The very seeds of the destruction of mankind are to be found in those leeches of the forest of Hida. In the end all that will remain will be these black leeches swimming in an endless swamp of mud and blood. Gradually it came to me that this was indeed a vision of the world to come.

"Naturally I had entered this forest not supposing it was anything unusual, but as I went further and proceeded deeper into these dark woods, I could see that the very roots of the trees were turning into tangled masses of leeches and that there was no hope of salvation for me, that my death here in this place had been fated from the beginning. Thoughts such as these flitted through my mind and suddenly I knew I was on the brink of death.

"Resigned to my fate, I decided it made little difference when or how I met my end, and so, putting one foot in front of the other, I went forward, determined to see at least the edge of this vast swamp of mud and blood – a scene so terrible no ordinary person could imagine it. Having reached this resolve, I went forward oblivious to the disgust I had experienced earlier. I picked off and discarded the leeches that still clung to my body like fat rosary beads. Walking rapidly and flailing my arms, I proceeded on my way in a sort of mad St. Vitus' dance.

"At first my body felt puffy and swollen and the itching was unbearable, later I felt gaunt and wracked with pain. I was being assailed on all sides; there was no respite.

"Already my sight was growing dim and I felt on the verge of collapse; I had reached the limit of my suffering, and yet, paradoxically, it was just at that moment that I caught a faint glimpse of the distant moon, like the light at the end of a tunnel, and presently emerged from the forest of leeches.

"Coming out of the darkness and finding myself under a blue sky, I flung my body violently to the ground as though I wished to crush myself to dust. Not caring whether the ground was covered with stones or needles, I rolled in the dirt to rid my

body of the leeches that still clung to me. At length, trembling violently, I got to my feet and continued on my way.

"Looking now at my surroundings I felt I had been making a fool of myself with my earlier fears. In the mountains all around I could hear the song of the cicada, a song that was even coming from the dark woods behind where I had imagined such a swamp of mud and blood. The sun was setting and the bottom of the valley was already in darkness.

"I went down the gently sloping road thinking that even if I were to be eaten by wolves, it would at least be a conventional way to die, and so, light hearted as a young and carefree apprentice, I strode briskly along with my walking stick riding jauntily on my shoulder.

"Had I not been troubled by the pain, itching, and tickling of the leeches I would surely have broken into some mad, heathen dance with the sutras for my accompaniment, right there on the solitary path through the mountains of Hida.

"I chewed one of my Seishintan pills, mixed it with saliva, and plastered it on the wounds left by the leeches. Then, once again, I was able to enjoy the beauty of the world around me. Indeed, I felt as though I had been restored to life. At the same time I began to wonder anew about what had happened to the medicine peddler from Toyama. Surely he was in the swamp behind me, reduced by now to mere skin and blood. No doubt his wasted corpse was languishing in some dank part of the forest, covered with hundreds of those filthy creatures who would be devouring his very bones. Even if I were to go back and find him and pour vinegar on the leeches to remove them, I would be too late to save him. Reasoning thus, I did not look back, but continued down the slope at a rapid pace.

"I heard the sound of rushing water at the bottom of the hill, where I found a stream spanned by a short, earthen bridge. As soon as I heard the sound of the stream, I wanted to throw myself into the water to cleanse my body of the effects of the swarms of leeches. Thinking only of how nice it would be to immerse myself in the water, I did not even worry about the bridge collapsing under me. I went straight across without regard for the danger, and although it trembled a little, I passed on

without difficulty. On the other side, the slope started upwards again and I gathered my resolve to meet the challenge of the climb."

10.

"By this time I was thoroughly exhausted and not at all certain whether or not I would be able to make it to the top. Suddenly, in front of me, I heard the sound of a horse neighing. Thinking it might be a teamster on the road, it occurred to me that I had not seen another person since I had parted with that peasant early in the morning. It felt as though years had passed since I had enjoyed the company of others. I reasoned that if there was a horse in the area, there must be a village nearby. This thought revived my spirits, and once again I set out briskly.

"From there it was no great effort to make my way to a single, lone hut perched high in those lonely and desolate mountains. As it was summer none of the doors or windows were closed and there was no fence surrounding the house. I saw a man sitting on the sagging and dilapidated veranda, but could not make out what sort of person he was.

" 'Excuse me, I wonder if you can help me,' I asked in a tone of supplication knowing that there was no one else to ask. 'Excuse me, please,' I repeated, but still there was no reply. The man's head had lolled over so that one ear rested on his shoulder, and he had a blank, imbecile look on his face. He just sat there staring at me with his puffy eyes as I stood in the doorway. He seemed too lethargic even to move his eyes.

"His robes were short, the sleeves did not even reach to his elbows, and he wore a child's diapers. Yet all his clothing appeared to have been freshly washed and starched. His vest was knotted over his stomach with a cord, but his belly was grotesquely distended like a fat drum, and his belly button protruded grossly like the stem of a pumpkin. With one hand he fiddled mindlessly with his navel while the other hand lay limply at his side.

"The man sat with his legs thrust straight out in front of him as though he was not aware that they existed, and I had the

impression that if his buttocks had not been firmly placed, he would have toppled over. He appeared to be in his early twenties. His mouth hung slackly open, his upper lip pulled back; his nose was broad and thick. He had a low, sloping forehead, and his hair, once closely cropped, now grew in wild, spiky tufts and hung long over his collar and ears. The man made no response to my inquiries, only stared at me blankly like a toad, causing me to suspect that he was retarded or mute or something. I was surprised, even startled, to encounter such a person, and although I did not feel in any personal danger, the man did present a bizarre and disturbing spectacle.

" 'Excuse me, I'd like to ask you something.' I had no choice but to attempt once more to communicate with this creature, but he made no reply. His only response was to flop his head over so that it rested on the other shoulder. His mouth remained slack and open as before.

"I felt rather uneasy, not knowing what such a person might do. I was afraid that by way of response he might suddenly snatch at me and try to lick my navel. Cautiously I stepped back a little. And yet, when I thought about it a bit, it seemed that deep in the mountains like this it was unlikely that such a person would be left all alone, unattended, so I stood on tiptoe and called louder, 'Excuse me, is there anyone at home here?'

"Once again I heard the horse neighing. This time it sounded as though the sound came from the rear of the shack.

" 'Who is it?' came a woman's voice from one of the inner rooms of the house. I retreated another step at the sound of this disembodied voice. What sort of woman would be living in a place like this, I wondered. For all I knew she might be some great, scaly serpent lurking in the depths of the house; a horrid creature speaking in a woman's voice. I had heard tales of such things.

" 'Oh, you're a priest,' said the woman emerging from the house. She was very beautiful, slightly built, and her voice was pure and limpid as the mountain air.

"She seemed very gentle, and, heaving a sigh of relief, I kept my eyes on the ground and merely nodded my head without saying a word.

"The woman was kneeling on the floor in an attitude of formality, but she leaned forward peering through the twilight gloom to get a better look at the forlorn figure I cut standing there travel-weary and all alone. 'What do you want?' she asked.

"Since she did not invite me to come in and rest, I assumed that her husband was away and that she was reluctant to invite a stranger to spend the night. I quickly stepped forward, determined to ask for lodging for the night before I lost the opportunity. Bowing politely, I said, 'I am a traveller who is crossing the mountains to Shinshu. Can you tell me how far it is to the next inn?'"

11.

" 'I am afraid you still have more than eight miles to go,' said the woman.

" 'Is there any sort of private home or other sort of accommodation nearer?'"

" 'I'm afraid there isn't.' She held my gaze with her limpid eyes.

" 'I'm sorry to hear that. The fact is that I couldn't go a step further even if you told me there is a wonderful place just a few yards ahead where I could find a place to sleep and where they would do me the favor of fanning me the whole night through. Actually, I don't mind where I spend the night. Could you just let me use a shed or a corner of the barn. Please.' I said this because it had occurred to me that the horse I had heard earlier surely belonged to this house.

"The woman considered my request for a while, then turning sideways, she took up a cloth bag and poured rice into a wooden bucket beside her knee. Ladling up the rice in her hands, she kept her eyes riveted on the floor as she said, 'Well, I suppose you could stay here for the night. We have enough rice to go around. We do not have bedding for you, though, and it gets quite chilly here in the mountains at night, but since it is summer, perhaps it will be all right. Please come in and make yourself at home.'

"Even before the woman had finished speaking I stepped

forward and seated myself on the veranda. The woman suddenly came close to me and said urgently, 'Even though you are a priest, there is one thing I must warn you about if you plan to spend the night.'

"She spoke very clearly and I was afraid she was about to impose some impossible condition on my spending the night there, but I said, 'Certainly, just tell me what it is.'

" 'Well,' she said, 'It's really not all that important, but you see, the fact is that I am always hungry to hear news of what is happening in the capital, and no matter how I try to restrain myself, I will go to any lengths to find out. You must remember not to give in to my pleading on this subject. I am giving you fair warning, no matter how I plead, you must remember not to reply.'

"Her strange request seemed laden with uncertain nuances and implications. Here was a woman living in a house surrounded by majestically high mountains and incredibly deep valleys, and I felt her words had some significance unknown to me, but since it was no difficult condition to agree to, I merely nodded my assent and murmured, 'Very well, then, as you wish, I will not say a word about the news of the capital.'

"No sooner had I finished saying this than the woman remarked, 'Well now, the house is filthy, but come inside and make yourself at home. Shall I bring water to wash your feet?'"

" 'Oh no,' I said. 'You needn't go to all that trouble, but I would like to borrow a wash cloth. It would be nice if you have a damp cloth. I had a terrible time of it on the road today and feel dirty and sticky all over. I would like to wipe my back if it is not too much trouble.'

" 'Yes, I can see that you are soaked with sweat. You must be very hot. Please wait a moment. The best part about stopping at an inn is that the first thing they do is invite you to have a bath. I am afraid I cannot serve you so much as a cup of tea, much less a bath, but there is a lovely stream at the foot of the hill behind the house, and if you don't mind bathing there, I am sure you will find it very refreshing.'

"Hearing these words I was ready to fly to the stream and bathe. 'Wonderful,' I said. 'That will be splendid.'

" 'Shall I show you the way, then? It's no trouble, I am going there in any case to wash the rice.' Clutching the bucket to her hip and leaving the veranda, she slipped on her sandals. Drawing an old pair of wooden clogs out from under the veranda, she clapped them together to knock the dirt off. Placing them before me, she said, 'Here. Why don't you wear these and leave your travelling sandals here.'

"I gave a deep bow of gratitude saying, 'Thank you, I am sorry to trouble you.'

" 'They say that when two people spend the night in the same lodging it is the result of the kama of a previous life, so please don't be so formal with me. Just make yourself at home here.'

"And so although I had at first been dubious about staying here, things seemed to have turned out very well indeed."

12.

" 'Follow me, please. We'll go this way,' she said. As she stood up to go, she held the rice bucket under her arm and tucked a towel into her narrow sash. Her rich, beautiful hair was tied up in a bun and held in place by a comb and pins. All I can say is that she had a beautiful figure.

"Since I had already taken off my travelling sandals, I now slipped on the old clogs. Getting up from the veranda, I glanced over at the idiot boy only to discover that he was still staring at me. Apparently he had some sort of speech impediment, but he seemed to be trying to say something. At last the words came, but all he could get out was 'Sister, ah... ah...' He seemed quite intrigued by my shaven head and in his own bewildered way he raised his hand to his head and asked, 'Priest? Priest?'

"At this the woman's full face was wreathed in smiles and she nodded her approval several times. The man merely murmured something incomprehensible and returned once again to playing with his protruding navel.

"I felt so sorry for the woman that I averted my eyes and pretended not to notice the intimacy and affection that passed between them, but the woman seemed quite unconcerned by the

whole thing. Then as I followed her away from the house, an old man suddenly appeared from behind a clump of hydrangeas. Apparently he had come from the back of the house. He wore travelling sandals and a small, leather medicine bag dangled from his sash. A pipe jutted rakishly from his mouth.

"He stopped in front of us and greeted me saying, 'You are welcome here, sir.'

"Before I could make a reply the woman turned to the old man asking, 'How do you think it will turn out?'

" 'Well you know how it is, for a mule he is too smart, but I can do some pretty hard bargaining and use a good go between. Anyway, I will get enough for him that you will be able to get by for two or three months. I will bring the money by for you tomorrow.'

" 'I appreciate what you have done for me.'

" 'Sure, sure. I understand. Where are you going anyway?'

" 'We're just on our way down to the river,'

" 'So, you're on your way down to the river with the young priest here, are you? Be careful you don't get into something over your head. I'll just wait here until you come back.' With these words the old man seated himself on the veranda.

" 'Did you understand what he meant?' asked the woman looking at me with a knowing smile.

" 'Perhaps it would be better if I went down to the river by myself,' I said stepping back a little, but the old man just snickered lewdly and said, 'Well hurry up then, you two. Don't take too long.'

" 'Please wait here until we get back,' said the woman. 'We have already had two guests visit us today and who knows but what we might see another. If someone were to show up and only Jiro was here to greet him, the guest would not know what to do, so please wait here until we get back.'

" 'All right. All right.' The old man sat down beside the idiot boy and gave him a terrific whack on the back with his fist. The idiot's stomach rippled with the force of the blow, but the boy only grinned and drooled.

"I shuddered and turned away embarrassed, but the woman paid no attention to how the boy was being treated.

"The old man jokingly said, 'You be careful or I'll kidnap this husband of yours while you are gone.'

" 'You go right ahead and do that. Come, sir, let us go down to the river.'

"As we walked away I had a feeling that the old man was watching us closely, but I had no choice but to follow as the woman led me around the house. Our path led away from the hydrangeas from which the old man had emerged and presently we came to the back of the house. Off to the left I could see a horse stable. I heard the horse stamping and kicking the sides of the stall, but the deepening dusk made it hard to see.

" 'We will take the path down to the river from here,' said the woman. 'It is not slippery, but the path is rough, so watch your step.' "

13.

"At the point where the path appeared to lead down the slope there stood a slim pine tree of extraordinary height. The trunk was slender and it had no branches up to some fifteen or twenty feet above the ground. I paused to look up as I passed under this tree, and there, through the uppermost branches of the tree, I could see the silver moon. It was the thirteenth night of the new moon, and although it appeared to be the same moon I had always seen, tonight it made me realize how far away I was from the world of ordinary human habitation. The woman, having led me down the slope, suddenly disappeared from sight. Presently, by clinging to the trunk of the tree and searching the slope below, I caught sight of her.

"She looked up at me saying, 'Be careful, the slope is very steep right here. It may be difficult for you to manage in those old clogs. Shall I give you my sandals to use?' She thought I had fallen behind because of the rough path, but the fact was that I was anxious to get down the slope as quickly as possible in order to wash off the effects of the leeches. I was in such a hurry I even considered just letting go and rolling down the hill.

" 'Never mind,' I said. 'It's all right, I can go down barefoot if necessary. Sorry to have troubled you, Miss.'

" 'Oh. So you call me Miss, do you?' she exclaimed with a lovely, high-pitched laugh.

" 'Why yes,' I stammered. 'That's what the old man called you earlier. Why? Are you married or something?'

" 'I guess it doesn't matter, but the point is that I am old enough to be your aunt. Anyway, hurry up. It would not do to give you my sandals since your feet are bigger than mine and the rocks on the path might hurt your feet if you tried to wear them. Besides, my sandals are wet and you would not feel comfortable in them.' She turned away as she spoke and tucked up the hem of her skirts into her sash. Her white thighs, luminous in the gathering dusk, were swallowed up in darkness as she walked ahead of me.

"We went quickly down the slope until we noticed a toad that emerged from a clump of grass beside the path. 'Oh, what a disgusting thing,' said the woman, and in a trice she had leaped completely over the creature. 'What's the matter,' she asked speaking to the toad, 'Can't you see that I have a guest? It is really going too far for you to come out like this and cling to my feet. You should be satisfied eating flies. You deserve nothing more. Please sir,' she said to me, 'Come right along. Pay no attention to the likes of this creature. In a remote place like this these creatures seek one's affection. It's really disgusting, don't you agree?' Turning to the toad she concluded, 'I would be ashamed if anyone thought we were friends. Please leave me alone.'

"With that the toad crept back into the grass and hid itself while the woman turned and walked away. Soon we came to a log bridge composed of a tree trunk that was all but hidden by the tall grass. The woman said, 'Here, we will have to cross this bridge, but be sure not to step on the earth that has been packed in around the log, for it is soft and will not hold your weight.'

"When I mounted the log, I found that the clogs I was wearing presented no difficulty, for the log was surprisingly large and I was able to walk right across. Reaching the other side, I could hear the sound of rushing water quite clearly.

"It seemed we had come quite a long way from the woman's house. When I turned and looked back up the slope down which

we had come, I could see no sign of the pine tree and the moon was by now low on the horizon, almost at the top of the slope, and it was so clear I felt I could almost reach out and touch it although in reality I had no idea how high the moon was.

"Come this way, please," said the woman stopping some distance below me. There stood a large boulder and the water of the stream cascaded over it forming a backwash. The river was only about three feet wide, and I found that when I was near it, the sound of the running water was not really all that loud. Near at hand the flowing water resembled liquid crystals, but in the distance it thundered against jagged rocks.

"The far side of the river was formed by the lower slope of the adjacent mountain whose peak was obscured in the darkness. The flanks of the mountain, however, were illuminated by the moon. I could see in the spectral moonlight that the slopes were strewn with stones, large and small, in a weird and fantastic variety of shapes and sizes. Some were shaped like sea shells, some like crystals, others perfectly round. Wherever I looked there were stones and more stones. One of them, larger than a house, thrust out into the water of the stream."

14.

"We are fortunate today that the river is high. We won't have to go all the way out into it, we can wash right here." Saying this, the woman stood on the large boulder and dabbled her snow white feet in the water in a most seductive way. On the other side of the river, the slope of the mountain came right to the water's edge and the boulder reaching out into the stream provided a good place to stand.

"I could not see very far either upstream or down, but the river varied in width from place to place and seemed to writhe and twist about the great stone mountain on the opposite shore. Finally the flow was lost from sight, threading its way among the rocks and boulders. The silver moonlight on the broken flow of the river made the surface of the water look like overlapping plates of armor mail. Near at hand the flow was smoother, resembling loose white strands that were being combed.

"What a beautiful view of the river," I cried out in delight.

"Yes. This river has its source in the waterfall upstream. Travellers in these mountains always report hearing a roar which they suppose is the sound of the wind. Didn't you hear something like that when you were on the road through here earlier today?"

"Now that she mentioned it, I recalled that I had heard something like that just before I encountered the leeches in the forest. 'Isn't that just the sound of the wind blowing through the forest?' I asked.

"No. That's what everyone says, but there is a waterfall about three miles up a side road from that forest. They say it is the largest waterfall in all Japan, but the road is so terrible not even one in ten travellers makes it through there. That waterfall is known to be a very violent one and just thirteen years ago there was a terrible flood along here. The water was higher than where we are standing now, and the village at the foot of the mountains and the mountains themselves and the houses were all swept away. Before that there were almost twenty houses located around here. It was the flood that brought the river into its present course as you see it now. All the stones and boulders you see jumbled up over there were all washed down by the river."

"By this time the woman had finished washing the rice, but in the process her kimono had become a bit disheveled and one of her breasts was visible. In the moonlight I could see her well-formed nose and mouth as she gazed up at the mountain peaks with a glint of ecstasy in her eyes. The light of the moon gave a dream-like illumination to the side of the mountain.

"Even now, seeing the marks on my arms where the leeches sucked, I am filled with horror and revulsion," I said as I began to wash my arms.

"There now, sir," said the woman, "If you are as modest as all that you will end up getting your kimono wet and it will make you uncomfortable. You should just take off your clothes and bathe properly. Here, I will wash your back for you."

"No!" I cried out in alarm. "For heaven's sake don't do that."

"Oh don't be so modest. Look. You've already gotten your

sleeve soaking wet.' With these words she snatched at my sash from behind and in a moment, despite my struggles, she had stripped off my kimono. You should know that I had done my religious training in a very strict sect, and as a form of austerity, I had never taken my clothes off from the time I had become a priest. Now here I was stripped naked as a snail without its shell, and in front of a woman no less. I was mortified with shame. All I could do was crouch over and keep my legs together as best I could. Meanwhile the woman nonchalantly hung my kimono on the branch of a nearby tree.

" 'I'll leave your kimono here,' she said. 'Now let me attend to your back. You gave me a very nice compliment a little while ago when you called me Miss, so I will repay the favor now. Hold still.'

"Holding back one of her long sleeves with her teeth, she placed both her beautiful hands on my back, but seeing the condition it was in, she hesitated, saying, 'My goodness, what's this?'

" 'What's the matter?' I asked.

" 'It looks like bruises all over your back.'

" 'Oh yes, those. I had a very difficult trip.' As I spoke I relived the horror of the leeches."

15.

"The woman was shocked when she saw the condition of my back. 'Apparently you had a very hard time of it in the forest. Travellers say that when they cross the Hida mountains, that is the place they encounter the leeches. You evidently missed the bypass and walked right into the thick of them. You must be favored with divine protection to have survived. Those leeches even kill cows and horses that pass that way. These wounds must feel very painful and itchy.'

" 'It is not so bad now. Just painful, that's all.'

" 'Even so, I am afraid that if I scrub you with this rough towel, it will do further damage to your skin.' With these words she began scrubbing my back with her hands. Her soft hands caressed my shoulders, then moved down over my back, my flanks, and buttocks. All the while she was sluicing me down

with clean water.

"I had thought the water would be numbingly cold, but it was not. Of course it was just the hottest part of the summer, but that was not why the water was warm. The truth is that my blood was boiling, and the woman's own warm passion as she scrubbed my body with her bare hands made the water feel warm and soothing. The sensation I experienced was so pleasant that although I did not exactly fall asleep, I did forget all about my earlier embarrassment and seemed to fall into a sort of reverie in which I forgot all my aches and pains. The warm, pliant body of this woman pressed to my back made me feel as though I was in the embrace of some lovely and exotic flower.

"The woman hardly seemed the sort you would expect to find in these remote mountains. Indeed, a woman of her beauty and refinement would be rare even in the capital city. She was like a gentle and delicate flower. Although she made every effort not to breathe on me while washing my back, and even though I was trying my best to ignore her presence, I must confess I felt carried away by a transport of ecstasy as she bathed me.

"There was also the exquisite fragrance; I was uncertain whether it was the mountain air or the woman's own fragrance, but I felt it like a zephyr of her breath on my back."

Here the old priest interrupted his narrative and said to me, "Here, you are closer to the lamp than I am. Trim it and make it burn a little better. I am afraid you might be overly stimulated hearing a story like this in the dark. Nevertheless, I will try to brazen my way through the rest of the story."

The light had indeed grown so feeble that even though the priest was lying just beside me, I could hardly make him out in the darkness. I quickly adjusted the lamp, and in the new brightness the priest smiled at me and continued his story.

"At any rate, that is how it was; the whole experience seemed like a dream. As I say, I had the unreal feeling that I was being enfolded by a gentle, fragrant flower. It seemed to twine around my legs, then my waist, my hands, shoulders, neck, and finally even my head. Suddenly I fell flat on my buttocks on the boulders and my legs thrust out into the flowing stream. For a moment I thought I would surely slide off the rock into the river,

but the woman flung her arms around me from behind, hugging me to her breast and thus saving me from the swift current.

"Aren't you offended by the smell of perspiration when I am close to you like this? I have always been a hot-blooded person.' Hearing these words, I quickly recovered myself, and breaking free from her embrace, I stood stiffly upright and very embarrassed.

"Please forgive me,' I said.

"Don't worry. There is no one around to see us,' she said cheerfully. At some point she had taken off her own clothes and stood before me perfectly naked, her skin smooth as silk. You can imagine how surprised and flustered I was.

"I am so fat I have trouble enduring the heat. During this season of the year I come here two or three times a day to wash away the sweat and to refresh myself. I wouldn't know what to do if there was no water. Here's the towel for you,' she said wringing out the towel and bringing it to me. 'You can use it to wipe your feet.'

"Before I quite knew what was happening, she had wiped my body dry. I am afraid this is a rather disturbing story I am telling you," said the priest with a laugh.

16.

"Now that I could see the woman, I realized that she was quite different than she had appeared when wearing clothes. She was voluptuous and her skin was silken.

"A little bit ago I was in the stable taking care of the horse,' she explained, 'I have that horsey smell all over me and feel quite uncomfortable. This will be a good chance for me to bathe as well.' The woman spoke quite casually as though I were a member of the family rather than a stranger.

"Holding back her hair with one hand, she raised her arm and scrubbed the side of her body with the wash cloth. Then she stood bathed in the moonlight, the figure of some pale goddess, wringing out the wash cloth. It seemed to me, perhaps I only imagined it, that the woman's sweat as she washed it away was a pale pink, almost red in color. Afterwards she combed out her

long, wet locks of hair.

"What would happen if I fell in the river and drowned?' she asked. 'It embarrasses me to think what the villagers downstream would say when they fished my nude body from the river.'

"Lovely as a peach blossom is what I should think they would say.' I blurted this out without thinking, and before I knew it, our gaze met and locked. Her smile was so radiant, she looked younger by seven or eight years, but she quickly dropped her gaze to the ground in maidenly modesty. I also looked away, but in my mind I could still see the woman's beautiful figure under the transforming moonlight, wreathed from behind by the swirling mist and outlined by the black jumble of stones on the far shore. Just then from out of a cave somewhere there came large, dim, flitting shadows of several enormous, bird-like bats. They darted and dived about us.

"The woman swiftly turned and cried out to them, 'Here, you! Go away. Can't you see that I have a guest with me now?'

"Is something wrong?' I asked, regaining my composure after I had gotten my clothing back on.

"No,' said the woman curtly, turning her back on me.

"Just then a small rodent-like creature appeared and leaped from the riverbank straight onto the woman's back. It clung to her hips and twined itself around the lower part of her body. 'Get away from me, you beast,' she cried angrily, 'Can't you see I have a guest with me? Your behavior is outrageous.' She hit the creature roughly on the head as it peeked under her arm. The rodent bounded away squeaking shrilly and landed on the nearby tree branch where my kimono had been hung. The thing only paused there for a moment, then scurried quickly up the tree. I realized it must be some sort of monkey. Even as I watched, it climbed steadily from branch to branch until it reached the very top of the tree. Through the thin leaves and branches I could see that the moon had risen from the top of the cliff and was now as high as the top of the tree.

"The woman appeared to be quite put out with the mischief that was being done; first by the toad, then by the bat, and now the monkey. Her irritation at these repeated pranks by the ani-

mals suggested the mood of a young mother when her children are too rowdy.

"The woman continued to be angry as she put on her kimono, and I stood aside without saying a word."

17.

"I stood anxiously by, watching the woman's mood. She seemed gentle, yet strong-willed; light hearted yet calm, comfortable, yet fearsome at the same time. I felt she was the sort of woman who would remain calm in any sort of emergency, so I told myself I should be careful and by no means take liberties with her. I could not bear the thought that she might turn her scorn on me just as she had on the monkey. I was filled with anxiety.

"'You must have found that quite a spectacle indeed,' she said, once again favoring me with a smile. 'I'm afraid it was just one of those things that can't be helped.' She was light hearted as ever as she quickly retied her sash. 'Why don't we go back up to the house,' she said, taking the bucket of washed rice under her arm and slipping on her sandals as she started up the slope. 'Be careful,' she cautioned, 'It's tricky along here.'

"'That's all right. I can manage, I'm sure.' I had been quite confident of myself from the beginning, but the further we climbed, it turned out that the steep hill was quite a bit higher than I had remembered. Eventually, however, we came again to the great tree lying almost buried under the tall grass. It seemed to me that its rough bark resembled the scales of some terrible serpent lurking there. Indeed, the trunk itself, in its length and girth, reminded me of the large snake with its head and its tail hidden in the grass I had encountered earlier. The uncertain light of the moon made it appear very much like a snake. My knees grew weak with dread as I recalled the snakes I had encountered earlier on the mountain path.

"From time to time the woman looked back over her shoulder to make sure I was coming along all right. 'As you cross the log,' she said, 'Be sure not to look down. It is a long way down to the floor of the valley, and it would not be wise to make yourself dizzy by looking down.'

"'Thank you.' Since it would not do to hold back, I tried to laugh at my fears and bravely mounted the log. It had notches cut into it, so as long as I was careful about what I was doing, I could walk across it even wearing clogs. Nevertheless, once I got up on the log it seemed to writhe and squirm like a living serpent. I cried out in alarm and fell down astride it.

"'What a coward you are,' cried the woman. 'It is the clogs that are causing you all that trouble. Here, trade with me, wear my sandals. Come on, do as I say.'

"Somehow I had all along been aware of the tone of authority in this woman's bearing, and for better or for worse I felt compelled to do just as she said. Thus, I obediently changed sandals with her. But listen to what happened next. Wearing the clogs, she took me by the hand and led me up the path. Suddenly my body seemed weightless as I floated along behind her and before I knew it, there we were at the back door of the woman's shack. There we met the old man we had seen earlier.

"'Well, I guess you sure took your time about going down to the river. I trust the young priest was able to maintain his vows of chastity.'

"'What are you talking about, Uncle? Was everything all right here while you were looking after the house?'

"'Everything was fine, but it is getting late, so I had better be going or I will have trouble finding my way. I am going to take Old Blue out of the barn and get him ready for the trip.'

"'Sorry we kept you waiting.'

"'You had better go look after your husband. Don't worry, though, he's all right. I didn't kidnap him or anything.'

"The old man set off toward the barn, laughing like an idiot. The retarded boy was still in the same place, in the same position. Since the sun never shone on the veranda, it seemed he was unconscious of the passage of time and thus never changed in any way."

18.

"From where we were on the veranda we could hear the neighing of the horse and the sound of its hoofs as the old man

brought him from the back of the house around to the front gate. There he paused for a moment holding the horse by the bridle and said, 'Well then, Miss, I'll be going along. You be sure to give the young priest plenty of what he wants.'

"Meanwhile the woman was crouching before the hearth with the lamp close to her as she worked busily to get a fire started beneath the kettle that hung there. She looked up when the old man spoke, and still clutching a pair of metal chopsticks she used in the fireplace, said, 'Thanks for all your help. Please come again soon.'

" 'You're welcome,' he called. Turning his attention to the horse, he led it away. Old Blue was a spotted horse without a saddle, and its mane was thin. I am not particularly interested in horses, but as I was just sitting there behind the idiot boy with nothing to do, when the old man led the horse out, I moved to the edge of the veranda to watch.

" 'Where are you taking the horse?' I asked.

" 'To the horse market at Lake Suwa. It is a little bit further along the path you will be taking tomorrow morning.'

"Suddenly the woman interposed, 'Hey, you're not planning to go along with him now while he takes the horse to market are you?'

" 'No, no. Of course not. There would be no point in it. It would violate my religious vows to perform my pilgrimage at a horse's expense. No, I'll do all the walking myself.'

"The old man joined in saying, 'You couldn't ride this horse anyway, he's in no condition for it. Besides, you have had a hard and dangerous journey today. You had best let the young lady here minister to your needs tonight. Good-bye, then, I'll be going.'

" 'Okay,' I said.

" 'Giddyup!' the old man cried, but the horse did not move. Instead, it turned to look back at us, waving his head and champing at the bit as though trying to say something. 'Whoa, boy. Steady now.' The old man jerked the reins both left and right, but the horse did not budge, it was as though he was rooted to the spot. The old man grew angry, shouted at the horse, and beat him, but the horse only moved around in a small

circle while the old man followed growing angrier by the moment. At last the old man bumped the horse's flank with his shoulder to force it onto the path, and the horse lifted its foreleg as though about to start, but then planted it again and stood firm. At last the old man called to the woman and asked her to step out of sight so the horse could not see her.

"She hurried behind the soot-blackened pillar and concealed herself. From where I sat, all I could see was a glimpse of her snow white foot, which seemed disturbingly erotic against the blackened pillar, but apparently she was hidden from the horse's view.

"The old man paused for a moment to pull a dirty, sweat-stained rag from his sash and mopped his creased forehead. Once again he stepped to the horse's head. This time he took the reins in both hands, planted his feet firmly, and pulled on the reins with all his strength. What do you suppose happened?

"With a loud whinny the horse reared back on its hind legs and the old man was thrown flat on his back, raising a cloud of dust in the moonlight. The idiot boy seemed to find this hilarious. Throwing back his head, he opened his thick lips revealing an uneven row of thick, stubby teeth. He waved his arms and laughed loudly.

" 'What a nuisance,' said the woman slipping on her sandals and hurrying out of the house to help.

" 'It's not you, Miss. I've noticed from the beginning that the horse has been looking at the priest. Maybe there was some connection between them in a former life and now the horse wants the priest to pray for him.'

"I was shocked to hear the old man suggest that I might have had some connection with the horse in a former life, but the woman turned to me and asked, 'Excuse me, sir, did you meet anyone on your way up here today?'

19.

" 'Why yes,' I said, 'At the fork in the road at the foot of the mountains I met a medicine peddler from Toyama. He came up this road ahead of me.'

" 'Ah, so that's it,' said the woman with a smile as though I had just explained something to her. Her smile deepened and became almost a smirk of satisfaction as she looked again at the horse.

"The woman seemed quite open to conversation, so I ventured to ask, 'Didn't you see the peddler? He must have come right by here since this is the only road.'

" 'Why no,' she said. 'I saw no sign of him.' Once again she assumed an air of formality, so I did not pursue the subject. The woman was now looking at the old man who was standing in front of the horse patiently dusting himself off. 'Sorry the horse acted up,' she said. 'I guess there is no other way. She began to roughly undo her sash and when it dangled and began dragging in the dirt, she paused to tuck it up.

" 'Ah, ah,' cried the idiot boy in a husky voice. He reached out his arms as though clutching for her loosened sash. She gave it to him and he spread it in his lap and folded it and devoted all his attention to it as though protecting a thing of great value. Meanwhile, the woman, clutching the front of her kimono closed beneath her breasts, quietly left the house and approached the horse.

"I was astounded to see what she did next. Standing on tiptoe, she gently stroked the horse's mane several times with her open palm. She was standing directly in front of the horse's large muzzle and suddenly she seemed taller, much taller than I had remembered her. As I watched, her eyes went blank, her lips closed, and her brow relaxed, she appeared to have lapsed into a state of unseeing ecstasy. She had lost all of her self-conscious playfulness and informality. It seemed to me that she had been transformed into something superhuman, either a goddess or a seductress.

"The darkness of the deep mountains seemed to intensify. The peaks all around seemed to tilt their heads to catch a glimpse of this pale goddess under the specter moon, with the old man kneeling at her feet and the horse before her awaiting her pleasure.

"A warm, caressing breeze enveloped us as the woman slid the kimono from her left shoulder, baring her breast covered

only by a thin undergarment which she clutched to her body with her right hand. The next moment she was completely nude.

"The horse twitched its back and flanks, and soon was dripping with sweat. Its stiffened legs began to tremble. Slowly the horse's muzzle lowered to the ground and it began to froth at the mouth. Its forelegs seemed about to crumple at any moment.

"The woman ran one hand caressingly along the underside of the horse's jaw, and with her other hand, she threw her kimono over the animal's eyes. Like a playful kitten she moved to the horse's side, clothed only in the ghostly light of the moon. She slid her nude body between the horse's forelegs, then, snatching her kimono from the horse's eyes, she ducked away along his flank.

"Seeing his chance, the old man now pulled the reins and the horse began to walk quickly up the road. Soon they were out of sight.

"The woman quickly put on her kimono and returned to the veranda where she tried to snatch her sash away from the idiot boy. He treasured the thing, however, and would not let go of it. He raised his hands and tried to push her away. The woman brusquely shoved him aside with a scornful look and the idiot boy gave in and merely sat with his head drooping. I watched all this happen in the phantastic and uncertain light of the dim and flickering lamp.

"Just then the brush in the hearth burst into flames and the woman quickly went to tend the fire.

"Faintly, in the distance, I thought I heard the song of the horseman, but the eerie sound seemed to be coming from somewhere beyond the moonlit sky."

20.

"After the old man and horse had gone, we enjoyed a supper of succulent mountain food. It was nothing so ordinary as carrots and gourd shavings; there were pickled peppers and ginger, boiled greens, and miso soup with some sort of mountain mushrooms.

"The food itself was ordinary, but the woman had prepared

it all herself, and of course, it was made tastier by the fact that this lovely woman served it with her own hands. She sat with the wooden tray propped on her knees, her elbows resting on it, her chin in her hands. A smile played across her face as I ate. Meanwhile, the idiot boy had been left to himself on the veranda. Apparently he did not like being alone, for like a cripple he dragged himself into the room where we were seated and plopped himself down beside the woman where he sat cross-legged. The whole time he stared at the tray from which I was eating and pointed at it with his fingers, making whimpering sounds.

"What are you doing?" scolded the woman. "You can eat later. Can't you see that we have a guest?"

"The idiot made a mournful face, turned down the corners of his mouth, and shook his head.

"What? You don't want to wait? Well then, I guess you will have to eat with the gentleman here. Please excuse him," she said to me.

"Without thinking, I put my chopsticks down. 'Oh please go ahead. Don't mind about me. I don't want to cause you any trouble.'

"Oh no, it's no trouble.' Turning to the idiot, she said, 'It will be better if you wait and eat later with me. Otherwise you will just be making a nuisance of yourself.' She seemed quite pleasant about the whole thing, but a short time later she had prepared for him a tray of food that was the same as mine. She was very wife-like in the way she served his food, but at the same time, there was something elegant, refined, and aristocratic about her.

"The idiot raised his dull gaze to the level of the plate and looking about mumbled, 'That one. Give me that one.'

"The woman gave him a firm look and said, 'That's all right now. You get to eat those things all the time. Tonight, though, we have a guest.'

"No, no, please, please," he said quivering and whimpering. The woman was evidently distressed by this and I felt sorry for her that she was in such an awkward and embarrassing situation.

"I don't know what he wants, Miss, but please do as he asks. It will make me feel uneasy if you do too much for me," I said politely.

"The woman tried once more, saying, 'Don't you like this food? Is it no good?'

"The idiot boy still seemed on the verge of tears, so the woman with a reproachful look at him went to the broken cupboard and got something from a bowl for him and placed it on his tray. 'All right, then, have this.' She spoke peevishly, but had a smile on her face.

"I watched with fascination and disgust to see what sort of thing the idiot would be eating. Would it be tasty broiled snake, or perhaps steamed, pregnant monkey, or, perhaps, less spectacular, would he be cramming his mouth full of dried frog meat? Even as I watched, he took up the bowl in one hand, and with the other he took from it only an old, dried up pickle. It was an enormous pickled radish that had been sliced lengthwise and the idiot boy seemed to gnaw on it as though it was an ear of corn.

"The woman seemed completely at her wit's end about how to deal with the boy. She stole a glance at me and her face quickly reddened. She bowed her head and chewed the edge of the towel she held in her lap. All these actions revealed the extent of her embarrassment.

"It occurred to me that this pickle was the most appropriate food for the idiot boy since he was plump and his skin had the same yellowish tinge as the pickled radish. In a moment he had greedily eaten the whole thing, but though it must have been very salty, he did not even ask for a cup of water. He merely turned away and began to breathe heavily.

"Somehow I feel congested and do not feel like eating. I guess I will eat later.' With these words the woman cleared away our two trays without ever taking up chopsticks herself."

21.

"The woman looked dejected for a time, then said, 'I expect you must be quite tired, wouldn't you like to go straight to bed?'

" 'I appreciate all the trouble you have gone to, but I don't feel the least bit sleepy. After bathing I seem to have revived from my earlier exhaustion.'

" 'That river is known for its healing waters; it can remedy any ailment. When I am overworked and have become worn away to nothing but skin and bone, I find that if I soak in the river for half a day, I come back feeling completely restored. Even in winter when the whole mountain is covered with ice and snow, that place where you bathed is the only spot that is not frozen over. The steam rises from there all year around. Monkeys that have been wounded or injured by hunters, and herons who have broken a leg, and all sorts of other animals come here to take the water. By following their tracks you can always find your way down the cliff. In any case, the bath seems to have done you a world of good. If you really aren't too tired, please stay here and chat with me so I won't be lonely. I am really quite embarrassed; being shut away deep in the mountains like this I am afraid I have almost forgotten how to carry on a conversation.

" 'But if you feel sleepy, please say so. I am afraid we do not have a special guest room for you in so poor a place as this, but on the other hand, we don't have any mosquitoes either. They say that once when one of the people from up here in the mountains went down to the village to spend the night, they put up a mosquito net for him to sleep under, but he did not know how to get into it and ended up asking for a ladder so he could climb up and sleep on top of it. No matter how late you sleep in the morning, there is no temple bell to awaken you, and no roosters to crow at dawn, and no dogs either, so you can be sure you will be able to sleep as late as you like without being disturbed.'

"Turning to the idiot boy, she continued, 'This fellow was born and raised in these mountains, so he knows nothing about the world outside. Still, he is very good-natured, so you can put your mind to ease on that score. Besides, he knows how to recognize a guest when we have one, and he has all the necessary manners for entertaining a guest – oh my, he hasn't yet greeted you formally and welcomed you to our home. Here, you,' she said to the idiot, 'You have grown lazy recently,' Then she ex-

plained to me, 'No, sir, he isn't completely stupid, he is aware of everything that goes on.

" 'Here now, please say hello to the priest who has come to visit us. What's the matter, have you forgotten your manners?' She approached the idiot and putting her face quite close to his in an intimate manner, looked at him closely and tried to encourage him. The idiot placed his palms on the mat, but instead of a bow, he merely flopped forward on the floor like a rag doll.

" 'Thank you,' I said, feeling a surge of pity as I nodded my head in acknowledgment.

"The idiot remained face down on the floor, but he seemed to lose his balance and was about to fall over sideways when the woman gently helped him back into sitting position. 'There, you did that very well,' she said sounding pleased with what he had done. To me she said, 'I believe he is able to understand anything you tell him to do, but you see, he has suffered an illness and neither the doctors nor the healing waters of the river were able to restore him. He has lost the use of both his legs and has no feeling in them. As you have seen, I have taught him how to bow, but that is the limit.'

" 'Even when I teach him things, he has a very hard time remembering them, and since he finds it painful to move his body, I have made a point of not asking him to do things. Gradually he has also lost the use of his hands and has forgotten how to talk. But he knows how to sing. Even now he still remembers two or three songs. Here, won't you sing a song for our visitor?'

"The idiot boy looked at the woman, then turned his gaze again to me before finally shaking his head as a way of saying no."

22.

"At first the woman had to coax and encourage the idiot boy in every possible way, but at last he tilted his head to one side, and with his hands still playing with his navel, began to sing:

Even the summers are cold
On Mt. Ontake in Kiso.

Let me give you
A double lined kimono
And tabi socks as well.

" 'I told you he could sing well,' said the woman with a bright smile.

"It was weird. You cannot imagine what the idiot boy's song was like just from hearing me tell about it. It was as different as day from night from what I had expected. The dynamics, the contrast, the purity of tone were so wonderful it seemed impossible that they had come from the mouth of one such as this. His song had a remarkable, unworldly quality about it. I had to think it came from a former life and that this was his former self transmitting the music from the depths of Hell to this present self through an invisible tube to his stomach.

"I sat formally at attention while he sang, and when he had finished, I continued to sit with my hands on my knees, somehow unable to look up at the man and the woman before me. I felt a lump rising in my throat and tears sprang to my eyes.

"Apparently the woman noticed my tears, for she said, 'Here now, what's the matter?'

"I was unable to reply for a time, but at last managed to mumble, 'No, nothing is wrong with me. I won't pry into your personal affairs, and please don't ask me to comment on his singing.' I could say no more than this, but it was clear to me from her behavior that she was a woman better suited for the rich and lavish life of some great emperor's court with all the riches and finery that go with it. Even though I am a priest who has renounced such worldly things, I felt deeply moved by the woman's simple display of tenderness and affection for this idiot boy; so moved, in fact, I wept.

"Apparently the woman understood how I felt, for she immediately said, 'You are a very kind and sensitive person.' As she spoke she held my gaze and there was an indescribable look in her eyes which reflected some deep emotion which I could only interpret as sexual desire. I quickly averted my gaze, and she, too, looked away."

The priest said, "Once the lamp began to gutter and burn

low. I wondered if this was somehow caused by the idiot boy of whom I have been telling because just then the great singer gave an enormous yawn that practically sucked the flame from the lamp that was sitting before him.

"He began to squirm and fidget, and at last said, 'Bed. Sleep.'

" 'Are you sleepy? Do you want to go to bed now?' asked the woman, straightening up and looking about as though her mind was on something else. Outside it was as bright as day in the light of the moon, and since the house was all open, the moonlight penetrated the inner rooms as well. Even the hydrangeas in the garden were a vivid blue in this light.

" 'Are you ready for bed too?' asked the woman turning to me.

" 'Yes, but I am afraid it is quite a bother for you.'

" 'Well, I am going to put my husband to bed now, but please take your time and stay up as long as you like. This room is near the front of the house, but it is large and cool in summer, so I think you will be comfortable here. My husband and I will sleep in the inner room, so you can have this room all to yourself. You can stretch out and make yourself at home.' With these words she quickly got to her feet and went to the entry hall. Her movements were so brisk that her black hair that had been neatly coiled into a bun fell loose about her shoulders. Holding the coil of loose hair in her hand, she opened the door and looked out, murmuring, 'I seem to have lost my comb earlier in all the excitement.'

"I knew she was referring to her earlier encounter when she had slid her body beneath that of the horse."

23.

Lying in the darkness of the inn in Tsuruga listening to the priest's story, we heard footsteps in the corridor downstairs. Someone was taking long but stealthy steps, yet in the stillness of the lonely night, they sounded all the louder. Apparently someone had gotten up to go to the toilet, and a moment later I heard one of the heavy rain shutters rattle open and the sound of

someone washing his hands. I recognized the voice of the landlord as he murmured, "Oh, the snow is really piling up tonight."

"Well," said the priest, "Apparently the Wakasa merchant we were expecting is spending the night elsewhere. I hope he has sweet dreams."

"Go on," I said, "Tell me what happened after that." By this time I was interested in his story and did not want to be distracted by other things. I urged him to continue on with his tale.

"So there I was in that lonely house in the mountains and the night was growing late," said the priest resuming his story. "You can imagine the situation. I was quite tired of course, yet found it difficult to sleep in such an isolated and lonely house deep in the mountains. In the first place, so many things had already happened to get me excited and keep me awake, but when I went to bed and closed my eyes, I began to feel a bit drowsy. I lay there half asleep waiting for the dawn to come.

"At first, quite unconsciously, I found I was lingering expectantly for the temple bell to toll, but after waiting from moment to moment, there was no sound to be heard, and I began to feel uneasy. At last I remembered there was no temple nearby and I felt the loneliness and isolation still more intensely.

"The night was already at its deepest ebb, so to speak, and even the idiot boy's heavy snoring could no longer be heard from the other room; suddenly I realized something was moving around outside the house.

"It sounded like animal footsteps and they seemed to be quite near the house. At first I tried to calm my anxiety by reminding myself that there were many monkeys and frogs in this area, and yet somehow that did not seem to explain the noise I was hearing. Presently, I realized that whatever it was had come right up to the front door of the house and was bleating like a sheep.

"As I was lying with my head toward the door, it sounded as though the creature was right beside my pillow. Soon I heard another sound; the beating of a bird's wings which came from beneath the hydrangea that were growing off to the right of the front door.

"Next I heard something on the roof that sounded like it

might be a flying squirrel, and then something huge approached the house making my blood run cold; it moed like a cow. Next, some creature came running up from a distance with quick, short steps; it sounded as though the thing was wearing straw sandals on its feet. And so on it went as groups of animals continued to surround and assault the house. All told, I could hear perhaps twenty or thirty of them with their ragged, rasping breath and frantically beating wings. It was like a scene from one of those painted screens that depicts the sufferings of animals in Hell. In the light of the moon I could see the silhouettes of ghastly figures cavorting and dancing across the front door of the house. I wondered what sort of evil spirits they were, for in their frenzy they sounded like fallen leaves restlessly fluttering in the wind.

"This was not the worst of it, though. I stopped breathing entirely when I heard a long, low, sobbing moan from the inner room. At first I thought it was the woman in the other room having a nightmare. But then she cried out, 'How many times must I keep telling you, we have a guest tonight?' After a short pause, I heard her cry out again clearly, 'We have a guest with us tonight.' And then, again, a third time, in a very low, husky voice, almost a moan, 'Not tonight. Please not tonight. We have a guest.' Along with these sobs and moans I could hear her tossing and turning in her bed in the next room. I could hear the animals outside also stirring restlessly and with such force the whole house trembled. Not knowing what else to do, I took up my rosary and began to chant the sutra.

"Over and over I recited the sutra with all my heart and soul. Then, suddenly the wind seemed to drop and everything was quiet outside. Inside the couple's bedroom as well everything was still."

24.

"Around noon the following day I found myself beside a waterfall near the village. There I met again the old man who had gone off yesterday to sell the horse. At the time I was planning to give up my pilgrimage in the performance of religious austerities

and return to that lonely house deep in the mountains where I would spend the rest of my life living with the woman there.

"To tell the truth, this single idea had dominated my thoughts ever since I had departed from that house. Fortunately I had encountered no snakes across my path that morning nor any forests of blood-sucking leeches, but the road had been hard going and I was sweating heavily and did not feel comfortable. This led me to question whether my pilgrimage was really worth the effort. What would it avail me to live the life of a holy man, even to someday wear the purple robe of the highest clergy and to live in an abbot's fine quarters? Even if I were to become a living Buddha and people thronged around to worship me, I knew in my heart I was a sinner and that I had experienced the same lusts as ordinary men.

"I suppose I had better explain what I mean and tell you the part of the story I have left out. You see, that night, after the woman put the idiot boy to bed, she returned to where I was sitting by the hearth. She suggested that instead of being an eternal pilgrim travelling through this world of anguish and travail, wouldn't I be better off to stay there with her in that place where the river was cool in summer and warm in winter. Well, if I had simply accepted that, I am sure you would say I had sold my soul to the devil, but in my own defense let me say that I truly felt sorry for the woman. There she was, all alone in that desolate house in the mountains with no one to share her bed but that idiot boy with whom she could not even have a conversation. She was afraid that under these circumstances she herself would eventually forget how to talk; that seemed terribly sad to me!

"I had been particularly moved by our parting at dawn that morning. She had said how sad she felt, with no hope for anything but to grow old in that remote place with no chance of ever seeing me again. She said that whenever in my travels I chanced upon a small stream and saw the white peach blossoms floating in it, I was to remember her, for the blossoms would be emblematic of her own tragic condition. Despite her obvious despondence over our separation, she was ever the thoughtful hostess and told me that if I followed the course of the river, I would eventually

come to a village. She said I would know I was approaching the village when I saw the water beginning to run swifter and finally form a waterfall. She said the waterfall would be a sign that would put my mind at ease. With those words she accompanied me along the path till we were out of sight of the house.

"Even though we could never marry, I fantasized what our life together would be like: morning and night we would be as one and talk about things as we sat at the table and drank our mushroom soup, or I would light the fire and she would set the kettle over it; I would gather fruits and nuts in the forest and she would shell and peel them; or we would be one of us inside the house and the other outside, chatting and laughing through the paper screens, then the two of us would go down to the river together. She would be naked and I would feel the fragrance of her breath on my back and be enfolded in the strange, alluring warmth of her flower-like embrace. Yes, these were the dreams I had, and for them I would gladly have forfeited my life!

"Preoccupied by these fantasies, I stood watching the roiling, boiling water of the waterfall, and when I think of it, even now, I break into a cold sweat.

"By that time I was at my lowest ebb both physically and spiritually, and as I had been walking at a rapid pace all morning, I was very tired. Even though I found that by good fortune I was, at last, approaching human habitation, I was not happy about the prospect of returning to civilization. All I could expect to find at the traveller's rest stop would be a cup of poor quality tea served by an old woman with bad breath. So I sat on a stone for a time gazing at the waterfall and mulling over my thoughts and feelings. Later I learned that this was the 'Husband and Wife Falls.'

"Thrusting out into the middle of the falls was a large, black rock shaped like the head of an enormous shark. The water of the river fell and broke upon the point of this rock, dividing into two streams. The waterfall itself was no more than fifteen or twenty feet high, but the water was like a blue brocade on a white cloth, and the river itself surged on below the falls, penetrating the village like an arrow. Where the two streams were sundered by the rock, one stream fell straight and smooth

as glass, while the other, narrower stream, fell tumbling and splashing among the many rocks of the riverbed, creating a jeweled curtain of froth down the face of the cliff where it broke against the sharp rocks."

25.

"The smaller of the two streams, called the Wife Falls, seemed to twist and writhe in agony, and although it was delicate and thin, it produced an uncanny sound like a woman crying or wailing in jealous rage; it seemed to reach out, even by a single thread of water, across the shark stone, to clutch at the Husband Falls. But the two streams were sundered inevitably by that unmoving rock, and even the spray that rose from the two streams did not mingle until they merged together again far below.

"The Husband Falls was quite the opposite; it was an imposing stream of water, powerful enough to pulverize rocks and pound its way into the earth. As I watched the river fall and divide into the two streams, I was overcome by a deep and pervasive sense of melancholy. It seemed as though the Wife Falls was breaking her heart as she flowed trembling and distraught, like a beautiful woman sobbing in a man's lap. Though standing safely on the bank of the river, I too trembled at this sight and was even more moved by the thought that just upstream on this same river I had bathed last night with the woman of my dreams. Perhaps it was my febrile imagination, but for a moment the Wife Falls itself was transformed into the image of the woman who haunted my memory. This image floated up in my mind only to be swallowed by the rising mist. Again it took shape in my mind only to be dashed to pieces against the rocks below and scattered like the petals of a beautiful flower. In the next moment, her image floated up again, her face, her neck, her breasts, her arms and legs floated up, then disappeared, dashed to pieces once again. Time after time, no sooner had the image shattered than she reappeared. Unable to endure the sight of this seductive vision, I was about to leap into the stream, to clasp this Wife Falls in my arms and hold her in my embrace. Just in time, however, I regained my senses and became aware of the

Husband Falls flowing down with such massive dignity that the mountains shook and reverberated with the sound of its pounding. But, I thought, if the Husband Falls is so powerful and strong, why, why indeed can he not save his poor wife from her misery?

"Rather than fling myself into the waterfall, I made up my mind to return to that lonely house in the mountains. I had hesitated to take this step because I knew in my heart that my motives were impure. Still, I made up my mind to go back, thinking that if I could only see her face and hear her voice, if I could just lay out my bedding beside the bed she shared with her husband, that would be far better than to spend the rest of my life sweating over the religious austerities of being a priest. Rising from the boulder on which I had been sitting, I turned back and was about to retrace my steps when someone thumped me on the back and said, 'Well, if it isn't the priest.'

"I was startled from my reverie, as much because of my guilty conscience as anything else, but as it turned out, it was not the devil's messenger who had found me, but the old man I had met the night before.

"Evidently he had sold the horse, for he seemed in good spirits and was carrying a small bundle on his back. From one hand dangled a large carp with golden scales. The fish seemed quite fresh and was still moving its tail as it hung with a straw rope though its gills. It was about three feet long.

"I was so surprised at his appearance that I could think of nothing to say and just stood dumbly while the old man gave me a good looking over. At last he broke into a grin, but it was not a friendly one, rather I had the impression that he could read my thoughts and was smirking.

" 'What are you doing here? I thought you were supposed to be practicing religious austerities, not resting by the river and taking it easy. It's not that hot and you have only come five miles from where you spent the night. If you had really made an effort, you'd be in the next village by now, praying to the statue of Jizo.

" 'I can see you have been thinking about my girl back there in the mountains. Oh, don't try to fool me. I may be old and

bleary-eyed, but I can still tell white from black when I see it.

"But let me tell you, if you were an ordinary man, you would no longer be human after being caressed by her hands and bathed in that river. Oh no, you would have been transformed into a cow or a horse or a toad or a bat or some other such creature, and would have spent the rest of your life hopping and dancing about. When you came up from the river last night you still had your human form; I was astounded. You obviously have a strong will and firm determination. It was that virtue which saved you.

"I guess you saw the horse I took away from there yesterday. Well, I expect that on the road before you reached the house you must have met a medicine peddler from Toyama. He was a lecherous fellow and right away he turned into a horse, and then I took him to the market and changed him from a horse into money, and then the money was changed into this carp. After all, this is my girl's favorite food. You look surprised, but what did you think she was anyway?"

Without thinking I blurted out, "What was she?" rudely interrupting the priest's story.

26.

The holy man nodded his head as though he knew what I was thinking and murmured, "What was she? you ask. Listen and I will explain. As it turned out, I had learned something about the woman of that isolated house even before I actually met her. You remember that on the flooded road before I took that terrible bypass I met a peasant who told me about a doctor's house that had once stood there in a grove of trees; well, this woman was the daughter of that doctor.

"In the early days there was nothing strange or unusual in all the region of Hida, the only remarkable occurrence was the birth of this beautiful, gem-like daughter to the doctor. Her mother had fat cheeks, squinty, slanted eyes, and a flat nose. Her breasts had drooping nipples of the most disgusting sort, and everyone wondered how a child who had nursed at those breasts could have grown up to be so radiantly beautiful.

"The child was so lovely indeed that it was often rumored that she was just the sort you read about in the old fairy tales where a god will shoot a white feathered arrow into the roof of a house as a sign that he wishes the daughter to be offered up to him, or the stories about a nobleman hunting in the country who discovers a charming girl and takes her into his palace as a princess.

"This girl's father, the doctor, had sunken cheeks and a mustache; he was a proud and posturing sort of person. Nevertheless, he knew something about ophthalmology since he often was called on to treat cases of eye disease caused by the chaff and dust of the rice harvest. But what he knew about internal medicine was less than nothing, and when he performed surgery he did nothing more than mix a bit of his hair oil with water and apply it to the afflicted place. Since there are always some people who will believe anything, and since those of his patients who did not die eventually recovered, and since there were no other physicians in the area, he inevitably became respected as a doctor.

"Especially when the girl was sixteen or seventeen and in the full bloom of her young womanhood, true believers and unbelievers alike thronged to the doctor, saying that she was surely a manifestation of the healing Buddha, born to the doctor for the purpose of helping people.

"So that was how it all began and soon she was being seen daily by the most regular patients, and they developed a fondness for her. If someone had a pain in his hand, she would inquire about it and rub it gently with her fingers. First there was a young man named Jisaku who had a severe case of rheumatism which was entirely cured by a touch from her hand, and next a man suffering from water poisoning found himself to be completely cured when she stroked his stomach with the palm of her hand. At first her cures were only effective on young men, but gradually she began to cure old people as well, and finally she was even able to work her cures on female patients. Even when she was not successful in alleviating the pain, she was able to reduce it. The foolish old doctor would lance a patient's boil with a rusty scalpel, causing the patient to writhe and cry out in

pain, but they said that if the daughter would press her breasts against the patient's back and hold his shoulders, he would be able to endure the pain more easily.

"On one occasion a swarm of hornets built a nest in an ancient loquat tree that stood in front of the grove surrounding the doctor's house. At that time there was a young man named Kumazo who was an apprentice to the doctor and who also worked as a servant cleaning house, preparing medicine, digging potatoes in the garden, and pulling the doctor's riksha. The young man was in his mid twenties and had stolen from the doctor's pharmacy a bottle containing a mixture of hydrochloric acid and sugar water. He hid this in the closet under his formal clothing knowing that the doctor was a stingy man and that he would be scolded if the theft was discovered, but the boy liked to drink the concoction, so he kept pilfering it. One day while cleaning the garden Kumazo discovered the hornets' nest.

"He came to the veranda and called into the house telling the girl she should come and see what he had found, that it was something very interesting. He told her that if she would hold his hand for a while, he would then thrust that hand into the wasps' nest and let them cluster on it. He insisted that even if he was stung on a part of the hand which she had touched, he would feel no pain. Otherwise, if he were to swat the nest with his bamboo broom, the wasps would scatter in all directions and cluster around his body killing him with their stings.

"The girl merely smiled at his bravado, but he implored her and finally made her grasp his hand. Then he approached the wasps' nest where there was the sound of angry buzzing. Moments later the young man returned to the veranda with seven or eight wasps on his left hand beating their wings and twitching their legs, and crawling around between his clenched fingers.

"The upshot of this episode was that the girl's reputation grew like a spider's web, spreading rapidly in all directions. It was said that anything she touched with her divine hands would be protected even from the bullets of a gun.

"From that time forward she was recognized as having special powers, and over the years and months since she came to live with that idiot boy and moved away with him deep into the

mountains, she has worked to perfect her supernatural powers. In the beginning she would cast her spells by pressing her entire body against that of her victim; later, as her powers increased, she would use only her legs and then her hands, and now she can use merely her breath to bewitch a traveller who is lost on the road, and transform him into anything she pleases.

"This, then, was the story the old man related to me beside the waterfall. 'You,' he continued, 'probably saw the monkeys around the house, as well as the toads and bats. There are also rabbits and snakes. All of them are travellers the girl has bewitched and taken down to the river to bathe, and there she transformed them into animals of one sort or another.'

"When the old man told me this, I recalled the odd way the toad had followed the woman, and the way the monkey and the bat had clung to her. I remembered those monstrous demons that had attacked the house during the dead of night. Now at last all these peculiar happenings made sense to me.

"The old man went on, however, saying that the idiot boy to whom she was married had come to the doctor's house for treatment when the girl was at the very height of her reputation. He was just a young boy then, accompanied by his rustic father and a long-haired brother who carried him down from the mountains. They had brought him for treatment of a tumor on his leg that made it difficult for him to walk.

"They were given a room at the house where they could stay while the boy was being treated, but it turned out that the tumor was a serious one and the doctor had to drain off a large quantity of blood. Since the patient was just a child and needed to be in good health in order to undergo the operation, he was given three raw eggs a day to eat, and a poultice was placed over the tumor to relieve the pain. When the poultice was peeled off, it had dried on the tumor so it pulled the flesh off, causing the boy to cry out in great pain. Neither the father nor the brother was able to quiet the boy, but when the girl removed the poultice, he did not cry out at all.

"The truth is that the doctor did not know how to treat the boy, and saying that the child was too weak to undergo an operation, put off the treatment from one day to the next. After three

days the father had to return to the mountains, leaving the other son behind to look after the boy. As he took his leave, the father bowed to the floor with great humility and backed out of the house. After putting on his straw sandals, he even bowed to the ground in the earthen-floored entry hall asking the doctor to do everything possible to save the life of his second son.

"Soon a week had passed and still no progress had been made. At that time the brother who had been left behind said that since it was harvest time, his family was extremely busy and since the weather looked like rain, and since the rice would rot in the fields if they did not get it harvested before the rain, and since he was the best harvester in the family, with a great many tears he explained all this to the child and returned to the mountains as well.

"From that time on the child was all alone. According to his official record he was six years old, but in fact he was eleven. His parents, thinking that if he reached the age of twenty after his parents had turned sixty, the child would not be conscripted into the army, waited five years before registering the child's birth. Also, since he was raised deep in the mountains, he could not understand the people of the village when they spoke to one another, though in reality he was quite clever and bright. At the doctor's house, he continued as before eating three raw eggs a day, convinced that this was helping him produce excess blood which would make up for that which would be lost during his forthcoming operation. He did sob from time to time, but since his brother had admonished him not to cry, he managed to keep from breaking down completely.

"At the daughter's request the boy was invited to eat his meals with the rest of the family, but he would crouch in a corner of the room and gnaw on a bit of pickled radish.

"At last it was the night before the operation was to be performed. The whole house was silent and when the daughter got up to go to the bathroom she heard a faint sound of the boy weeping. Feeling sorry for the child, she took him in her arms and slept with him. The following day as the operation began, the girl as usual stood behind the patient and clutched him to her breast. The child, although he sweated heavily, bore the pain

of the operation with admirable fortitude, but apparently the doctor made an error, for the flow of blood could not be stanchd. The boy's color began to fade, and it was clear that his life was in danger. The doctor, too, grew pale and became very agitated. By the grace of heaven the hemorrhaging stopped after three days and the boy's life was saved, but he had lost the use of his legs and was completely disabled.

"The boy could only drag himself about and look forlornly at his useless legs. When he wept he looked like a grasshopper who carries its torn-off legs in its mouth, and the expression on his face was of such utter misery it could scarcely be endured.

"The doctor merely looked on with an angry expression, fearing that if the boy continued to cry, his reputation as a doctor would be harmed, but the girl felt pity for the child and held him in her arms while he buried his face in her bosom. The doctor who had treated many patients in his career could do nothing in this case but fold his arms across his chest and snort his disapproval.

"Eventually the boy's father came for him and, accepting the boy's condition as an invalid as an act of fate, did not appear dissatisfied with the way things turned out. But when it was time to return home, the boy would not leave the girl's side, so the doctor, taking advantage of this fortunate turn of events, arranged that the girl should accompany the boy home as a way of apologizing to the boy's family for the botched operation.

"The house to which she accompanied the boy was that same lonely shack where you stayed last night. In those days there was a whole village there composed of perhaps twenty small houses.

"The girl had planned to stay there only a day or two, but at the imploring request of the boy's family, ended up staying longer. On the fifth day a heavy rain began to fall; so heavy was the rain it seemed as though waterfalls had been turned loose all over the land. There was no slackening of the rain and the people had to wear raincoats even inside their houses since repairing the thatched roofs was out of the question. People could not leave their houses, and it was only by calling aloud to their neighbors that they were able to know that there was anyone

else alive in the world. It seemed as though eight centuries of rain had fallen in the space of eight days, and in the middle of the night of the ninth day a great wind arose turning the whole world into a vast sea of mud which swept everything away.

"By chance, the only ones to survive this terrible flood were the girl, the boy, and the old man who happened to be with them at the time. This same flood also killed everyone in the doctor's household at the foot of the mountain. It was rumored among the people of the area that it was a sign that there would be a change in the land that such a beautiful woman had been born in so remote a place.

"At any rate, the girl no longer had a home to return to, and the boy was an orphan alone in the world, and so they ended up living together alone in the mountains just as I found them. She had been caring for the idiot boy in this way for the thirteen years since the time of the flood.

"Here the old man's story came to an end and he favored me with one of his ominous and disturbing smiles. 'Now that you have heard my story,' he said, 'perhaps you feel sorry for the girl and think you would like to help her chop wood and haul water. Oh, you may say you feel sorry for her and have compassion, but call it what you will, the fact is your attraction to her is motivated by lust and nothing more. I know that you are determined to go back to the mountain, but I warn you not to do that. She may be the wife of an idiot and she may not covet worldly things, but she makes up for this by taking whatever man catches her fancy, and when she has used him and tires of him, she casts her spell and transforms him into a beast. That very mountain stream, formed as a result of the flood, was heaven's gift to her, and the magical power of its water enables her to seduce men. Indeed, before you came, there have been none who escaped with their lives. You are the first.

" 'As you know, it is terribly difficult and physically demanding to practice sorcery, and there are times when her hair becomes disheveled, her face grows pale, her features are sunken and gaunt, but she has only to bathe in that stream to regain her former beauty, and then even the fish will come when she beckons and the fruit from the trees will fall into her lap if she only

winks at it. When she flutters her sleeve, the rain begins to fall, and when the frown leaves her face, the wind begins to rise.

" 'The fact is that she was born with an unquenchable lust, and she is especially fond of young men. Perhaps she said something of a suggestive or amorous nature to you, but the truth is that when she gets tired of you, you will begin to sprout a tail, your ears will twitch, and your legs will grow long; before you know it you will be transformed into some sort of creature.

" 'Imagine if you will what she will look like shortly when she dines on this carp, spreading her legs apart in crude fashion as she drinks its blood. Seen in her true form she is a demon of the worst sort.

" 'Don't occupy your mind with lewd and empty thoughts. Do yourself a favor and get away from here. It is already a miracle that you have been saved. You see, she felt sorry for you and gave you special treatment after all. You are young and have been blessed, go now and devote yourself tirelessly to your religious austerities.' With these words the old man once again gave me a stunning thump on the back and set off up the mountain road, the carp still dangling from his hand. He never once looked back.

"I watched as he grew smaller in the distance, and just as he was completely hidden by the towering mountains into which he walked, the sky suddenly erupted with great roiling storm clouds which seemed to belch from the very peak toward which the old man was heading. Great peals of thunder rolled across the earth, drowning out even the sound of the waterfall beside which I was standing.

"Suddenly I seemed to come to my senses, and bowing in the direction the old man had taken as a sign of my gratitude for his advice, I tucked my staff under my arm, and tilting my hat against the force of the oncoming tempest, I set off down the road as fast as I could go. By the time I reached the village, the mountain ranges were lost behind a curtain of rain. It occurred to me that with so heavy a rain, the carp the old man was taking back for the woman would still be alive and twitching when he reached that isolated house deep in the mountains."

The holy man from Koya ended his story here and did not

try to draw a moral from it, but as we went our separate ways the following morning and he set out over the snowy mountains, I stood and watched his holy figure disappear through the falling snow as he wended his way up the mountain road. I had the impression that he had simply dissolved among the clouds.

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Stephen W. Kohl is an associate professor of Japanese literature at the University of Oregon, where he has taught since 1972. He has published numerous translations of modern Japanese literature, including works by Nagai Kafu, Shiga Naoya, Inoue Yasushi, and others. Kohl has written a study of the haiku poet Matsuo Basho and his travel diary *Narrow Road to the Deep North*. He is currently working on a study of early contacts between Japan and the Pacific Northwest in the years before Commodore Perry's arrival in Japan.