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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Japanese Tales.

(Pantheon fairy tale and folklore library)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

I. Tales—Japan. I. Tyler, Royall.

II. Series: Pantheon fairy tale & folklore library

GR340.J33 1987 398.2'0952 86-17017

ISBN 0-375-71451-0

Book design by Susan Mitchell

Printed in the United States of America

[04] 9 8 7 6 5



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F O R L I Z



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## C O N T E N T S

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS xvi

A NOTE ON PRONUNCIATION xvii

INTRODUCTION xix

### OAK, MELON, GOURD, ANGEL, FLEA

1. The Giant Oak 3
2. Melon Magic 3
3. The Sparrows' Gifts 4
4. The Maiden from the Sky 7
5. The Flea 9

### SURPRISES

6. The Little Spider 9
7. A Flash in the Palace 10
8. Salt Fish and Doctored Wine 10
9. The Tapeworm's Sad End 14
10. A Toad to Reckon With 15

### HAUNTS

11. Better Late Than Early 16
12. The Ravenous Storehouse 17
13. The Grisly Box 18
14. The Bridge 19
15. The Rooted Corpse 22
16. An Old, Old Ghost 23

### MONK JOKES

17. Syrup 24
18. Not Quite the Right Robe 25



- 
19. The Nose 25
  20. Two Buckets of Marital Bliss 27
  21. Home in a Chest 29

## BUDDHIST BEGINNINGS

22. The Emperor's Finger 30
23. Japan's First Gold 31
24. Gyōgi and Baramon 33
25. The Old Mackerel Peddler 34
26. Kōbō Daishi 35
27. The Kannon in the Pine 37

## G O D S

28. Very Kind of Him, No Doubt 38
29. The Dog and His Wife 39
30. An Old God Renewed 40
31. Come to My Kasuga Mountain! 42
32. Princess Glory 46

## TENGU AND DRAGONS

33. The Murmuring of the Sea 47
34. Japan Means Trouble! 48
35. The Invincible Pair 52
36. Rain 53
37. No Dragon 55

## PURE HEARTS

38. Things As They Are 56
39. The Portrait 57
40. What the Beans Were Saying 57
41. Mercy 58
42. Among the Flowers 59

## MUSIC AND DANCE

43. For Love of Song 60
44. Three Angels 61

- 45. Give Me Music! 61
- 46. The Weight of Tradition 62
- 47. The God of Good Fortune 63
- 48. Divine Applause 67

T  
A  
L  
E  
S

M A G I C

- 49. Bring Back That Ferry! 67
- 50. The Man-Made Friend 68
- 51. The Laughing Fit 70
- 52. Small-Time Magic 72
- 53. The Little Oil Jar 75

T H E S E X E S

- 54. A Hard Moment 76
- 55. A Nice Mug of Molten Copper 77
- 56. The Little Bottle of Tears 78
- 57. Elimination 78
- 58. But She Couldn't Help It! 81

Y I N - Y A N G W I Z A R D R Y

- 59. The Genie 82
- 60. One Frog Less 83
- 61. The Spellbound Pirates 83
- 62. The Test 84
- 63. Man's Best Friend 85

R O B B E R S

- 64. Genjō 87
- 65. The Rashō Gate 88
- 66. The Selfless Thief 89
- 67. Authority 90
- 68. The Wrestler's Sister 92
- 69. To Sooth the Savage Breast 93

H E A L I N G

- 70. The Buddha with Lots of Hands 94
- 71. The Protector Spirit 94

- 
72. The Flying Storehouse 95  
73. No Respect 97  
74. The Invisible Man 99

## E S C A P E S

75. Dyeing Castle 102  
76. Taken In 104  
77. The Sacrifice 107  
78. The Lure 110  
79. Just Like a Bird 113

## F O X E S

80. Enough Is Enough! 114  
81. The Loving Fox 115  
82. Touched in the Head 116  
83. Yam Soup 118  
84. The Eviction 122

## A S C E T I C S

85. Incense Smoke 124  
86. The Blessing 125  
87. Another Flying Jar 126  
88. The Wizard of the Mountains 127  
89. An Awful Fall 130  
90. The Ricepoop Saint 131

## O D D I T I E S

91. What the Storm Washed In 132  
92. Sea Devils 133  
93. The Dancing Mushroom 134  
94. The Best-Laid Plans . . . 135  
95. Real Flames at Last! 136  
96. The Painted Horse 137

## G O L D E N P E A K A N D T H E O M I N E M O U N T A I N S

97. A Model Demon 137  
98. The River of Snakes 138

99. The Wine Spring 139  
 100. Very High in the Mountains 141  
 101. The God of Fire and Thunder 144  
 102. The Gold of Golden Peak 149

T  
A  
L  
E  
S

TURTLES AND A CRAB

103. The Thunder Turtle 150  
 104. The Catch 151  
 105. The Grateful Turtle 152  
 106. Urashima the Fisherman 154  
 107. The Grateful Crab 156

DESIRE

108. Young Lust 157  
 109. The Pretty Girl 158  
 110. Mesmerized 159  
 111. Red Heat 160  
 112. Lovesick 162

PARADISE

113. Gone, Body and Soul 163  
 114. Paradise in the Palm of the Hand 164  
 115. No Compromise 165  
 116. The Failure 168  
 117. Letters from Paradise 169  
 118. Not Exactly the Land of Bliss 171

TENGU, BOAR, AND BADGER

119. One Last Shower of Petals 172  
 120. Inspiring, Unfortunately 173  
 121. No Fool, the Hunter 174  
 122. The Hairy Arm 176  
 123. Expert Help 176

HEALING II

124. Rice Cakes 177  
 125. A Memorable Empress 178

- 
126. Quite a Stink 181  
127. The Master 182  
128. A Simple Cure 184

## L O V E A N D L O S S

129. A Beloved Wife, a Bow, a White Bird 185  
130. The Unknown Third 186  
131. An Image in a Flame 187  
132. The Forsaken Lady 188  
133. She Died Long Ago 190  
134. I Saw It in a Dream 191

## S N A K E S

135. The Snake Charmer 193  
136. The Tug-of-War 194  
137. As Deep As the Sea 195  
138. What the Snake Had in Mind 196  
139. Red Plum Blossoms 198

## R O B B E R S I I

140. The Enigma 199  
141. Wasps 200  
142. Without Even a Fight 202  
143. The Temple Bell 203  
144. The Dead Man Wakes 205  
145. Cowed 206

## L O T U S T A L E S

146. The Bloody Sword 207  
147. A Plea from Hell 208  
148. The Voice from the Cave 209  
149. Incurrible 211  
150. The Pirate's Story 215  
151. A Little Lesson 217

BOYS

152. Heroic Patience, Almost 218  
 153. The Pot-Headed Demon 219  
 154. Riotous Living 220  
 155. The Boy Who Laid the Golden Stone 221  
 156. Cherry Blossoms 224

T  
A  
L  
E  
S

PARADISE II

157. The Thirst for Paradise 224  
 158. The Chanting Skull 225  
 159. The Nice Little God Sails Away 226  
 160. The Unearthly Fragrance 228  
 161. A Twinge of Regret 229

YIN-YANG WIZARDRY II

162. Daddy, Who Were Those People? 230  
 163. The Curse 231  
 164. The Harmless Haunt 232  
 165. In the Nick of Time 233  
 166. Astride the Corpse 235

DEMONS

167. Twinleaf 236  
 168. No Night to Be Out Courting 237  
 169. Lump Off, Lump On 239  
 170. Take a Good Look! 241

PLENTY

171. Cherish-the-Aged Spring 242  
 172. The Bottomless Sack 242  
 173. The Solid Gold Corpse 244  
 174. A Fortune from a Wisp of Straw 246  
 175. "Dog's Head" Silk 250

## ODD PATHS TO SALVATION

176. A Very Surprised Bodhisattva 251  
 177. The Awakening 252  
 178. The Little God's Big Chance 258  
 179. Pious Antics 258  
 180. The Reprieve 262

## WATER

181. The Water Spirit 264  
 182. The Master of Streams and Falls 265  
 183. The Dragon Cave 266  
 184. Gold from the Dragon Palace 267  
 185. The Pond God Takes a Wife 269

## CLOSED WORLDS

186. The Isle of Man and Maid 270  
 187. The Snake and the Centipede 271  
 188. Through the Water Curtain 274  
 189. Cannibal Island 281

## HAUNTS II

190. No Nonsense! 282  
 191. Quite a Bit of Nonsense 283  
 192. One Mouthful 283  
 193. Suddenly, Horse Dung 284  
 194. The Monk in White Armor 285

## DREAMS

195. Little White Hairs 286  
 196. The Man Who Stole a Dream 286  
 197. The Buddha-Ox 287  
 198. The Falconer's Dream 290  
 199. Poverty 292

SCARES AND NIGHTMARES

- 200. The Nightmare 292
- 201. The Double 294
- 202. Bewitched 294
- 203. The Funeral 296
- 204. The Grinning Face of an Old Woman 297

T  
A  
L  
E  
S

FOXES II

- 205. Fox Arson 298
- 206. The Fox's Ball 299
- 207. Singed Fur 300
- 208. Not Really a Tree at All 303
- 209. The White Fox: Four Dreams 304

BEYOND THE RULES

- 210. The Telltale Fish 305
- 211. A Taste for Fish 305
- 212. The Promise 306
- 213. The Jellyfish's Bones 307
- 214. The Stinking Hut 310

PARENT AND CHILD

- 215. Be Good to Your Mother and Father! 312
- 216. Hell in Broad Day 313
- 217. The Old Woman on the Mountain 315
- 218. Mother 316
- 219. Perilous Gratitude 317
- 220. The Ugly Son 319

SOURCES AND NOTES 321

THE WORKS THESE TALES COME FROM 325

TALES CLASSIFIED BY SOURCES 327

BIBLIOGRAPHY 331

INDEX 333





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## A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

John Dower introduced me to Pantheon and so began the book. Susan Tyler, my wife, read and reread my drafts, continually making suggestions; discussed countless questions of form and content with me, always offering wise and well-informed advice; and kept me going with batches of cookies. Wendy Wolf, my editor, was always quick and helpful. How can I thank them enough?

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A N O T E  
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P R O N U N C I A T I O N

Japanese is easy to pronounce. The consonants work when spoken just as they are written in this book. The vowels sound roughly as in Italian. Each syllable in Japanese gets equal stress (quite unlike Italian) and in principle each vowel is a separate syllable. For example, the name Tadaie is pronounced tah-dah-ee-ay.

O's and U's with a macron or long mark over them ( $\bar{o}$  or  $\bar{u}$ ) are supposed to last twice as long as plain ones — the difference between sOft and sOfa. For example, the name S $\bar{o}$  is pronounced, not "Sue," but more like "SO, O magnificent one, I have a humble suggestion."

A few names, like Urin'in, have an internal apostrophe which the reader can ignore since it hardly affects pronunciation.

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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

These tales from medieval Japan are by turns curious, touching, disturbing, funny, gross, and sublime. No doubt they will give everyone who reads them a different impression, but I think first of how civilized they are. There have never been better losers than the Palace Guards in no. 8, who laugh wholeheartedly at their own awful discomfiture; and no warrior was ever wiser than the hero of no. 67. Most people in the stories are quick to laugh or cry but slow to kill or seek revenge, and their gods (with a few local exceptions) are kind.

Nearly all the stories come from tale collections put together between about A.D. 1100 and 1350, though the earliest (no. 106) was written down in the early 700s and the most recent (no. 209) in 1578. Most tell about things that happened in the two centuries between 850 and 1050, a classic period in Japanese civilization.

### T H E W O R L D O F T H E T A L E S

Nowadays we associate tales mainly with country people. No doubt villagers told tales in Japan a thousand years ago too, but if the aristocracy had not been equally fond of stories, the ones in this book would never have been written down. People's ideas about the world then were rather different from ours, and from those of the modern Japanese. It is true, for example, that fox lore still survives in Japan, and that possession by fox spirits is still a factor in a very few people's lives; but it has been a long time since someone like a regent could encourage such goings-on as those in no. 47. The rumor of a modern prime minister practicing fox magic would be too weird to make sense.

Even time was different then. Day and night were each divided into six "hours" which expanded and contracted as the seasons turned. Since the calendar was lunar, instead of solar like the modern world's, the "months" followed the moon's phases. That is why in this book I use the word "moon" instead of "month," for a "moon" and a solar month are not the same. The New Year came sometime in our February, as it still does in the Chinese calendar today.

There was no fixed reference point in Japanese history comparable to

the birth of Christ or the Hegira. Instead, the flow of the years was divided into "year periods," which might range in length from a year or two to about twenty. Year periods did not correspond to the reign of an emperor or to anything else easy to describe, and they could start or stop at any time. Each had its own name: for example, Shōtai (898–901) and Engi (901–923). No. 171 tells how Yōrō (717–724) got its name. The people in charge of deciding year periods, and of all matters relating to the calendar, were top yin-yang diviners (see below) like the Kamo no Tadayuki of nos. 162 and 165. Of course, all dates in this book have been converted to the modern Western calendar.

People's names, then as now in Japan, were written with the surname first, but they were a little different in other ways from their modern counterparts. For example, the full name of the regent in no. 47 is Fujiwara no Tadazane. "Fujiwara" is his family or clan name; "no" is a particle like the French *de* or the German *von*; and "Tadazane" is his personal name. In other words, Fujiwara no Tadazane means "Tadazane of the Fujiwara [clan]." Similar names are Minamoto no Yorinobu (no. 67) and Tsunetsumi no Yasunaga (no. 130). Names like these have about as much meaning as ours do — usually rather little.

The names of Buddhist monks and nuns are distinctive. In these stories a monk has only one name, usually the one he acquired on entering religion. Buddhist names often have some sort of fortunate meaning. In no. 101, for instance, Dōken ("Wise about the Way") receives in a vision the new name Nichizō ("Sun-store"). Monks' names sound quite different from laymen's names, although both are written with Chinese characters, because they are pronounced according to entirely different principles.

#### THE CAPITAL AND THE PROVINCES

The center of Japan, about the year 1000, was "the Capital": the city now known as Kyoto. It sprang up in 794 when the emperor moved to the site from Nara (see below), and for centuries was practically the only city in the land. Among its roughly 100,000 inhabitants, those who "really mattered," both men and women, probably numbered no more than a few thousand, but they gave a sort of glow to all the rest. Thanks to them the Capital, seen from the provinces, was a sort of Parnassus: the home of elegance, wit, romance, learning, the arts — in short, of all civilization. The rest of the population consisted of the lower aristocracy and officialdom, servants of many degrees, craftsmen, petty merchants, guards, priests, Buddhist monks of various kinds, etc. There seems also

to have been a twilight zone, not outstandingly large, of assorted ne'er-do-wells and thieves. Government income came from dwindling crown lands; the aristocracy lived off the income from their growing private estates; and religious institutions prospered from pious donations and from their own landholdings. Nothing like a middle class developed until centuries later.

The streets of the Capital were laid out in the same regular grid pattern as the Chinese capital of the time. (Modern Kyoto is still patterned this way, although none of the buildings mentioned in these stories survive.) The major east-west avenues were numbered (First Avenue, Second Ave., etc.), while the north-south ones were named (East Omiya Avenue). Smaller, intermediate streets were also named (Horikawa Street).

The central north-south thoroughfare was Suzaku Avenue. It began at the Suzaku Gate, the central gate in the south wall of the palace compound, and ran down to the Rashō Gate, the central, southern gate into the city itself. The flute-playing demon of no. 167 lived high in the structure of the Suzaku Gate, and the Rashō Gate sheltered the equally musical demon-thief of no. 64.

Naturally the Imperial Palace occupied a commanding position in the city. Located at the north end of Suzaku Avenue, it was actually a complex of buildings inside a large, rectangular walled compound that occupied about three hundred acres. Within the compound were several hundred buildings including the emperor's personal residence (in a sub-compound of its own), the various halls of government, and many other structures either functional or ceremonial. No. 59, for example, starts with a scene of gentlemen arriving at the palace, apparently for a council to be held near the Great Hall of State. In no. 207, a warrior of the Palace Guard arranges to meet his colleagues by a gate at the northeast corner of the palace compound, while at the next gate south lurks the dastardly toad of no. 10.

Rivers flow on either side of Kyoto, east and west. To the east is the Kamo, which every visitor has seen. Riverside Palace (Kawara-no-in), where Retired Emperor Uda met the ghost (nos. 190, 191), was on the west bank of the Kamo. To the west flows the deeper Katsura River, where two holy men (nos. 116, 161) came to grief.

The city lies in a basin surrounded on three sides by mountains. This makes it miserably hot in summer, which is why the empress was wearing "a nearly transparent gown" when the hermit first glimpsed her in no. 125. Ladies often dressed that lightly in summer, at least in private. To the northwest rises Mount Atago, where another hermit had his false vision (no. 121); to the north stretches a range where a man met a

mountain god in the form of a white dog (no. 129); and to the northeast towers Mount Hiei, where all sorts of curious things went on (nos. 33, 34, and others).

About thirty miles south of Kyoto is Nara, which became Japan's first "permanent" capital in 710. (Before then the imperial residence had moved every time an emperor died.) Nara appears often in these tales because the eighth century was such a crucial period in the development of Japanese civilization, and because the religious institutions founded there remained important later on. Tōdaiji, no doubt the single most famous Buddhist temple in Japan and a must for every tourist, appears in nos. 23, 24, and 25; while the great Shinto shrine of Kasuga (nos. 31, 45) still preserves the music and dance tradition honored by hell itself in no. 46.

The rest of Japan consisted of sixty-six provinces, whose names and boundaries were different from those of the modern Japanese prefectures. Those mentioned most often are the ones closest to the Capital, like Ōmi around the southern end of Lake Biwa; Yamato, where Nara is located; and Harima, which included the site of modern Kobe. For a courtier, the ends of the earth were represented by the nine provinces of Kyushu, such as Hizen, where Nagasaki eventually grew up; and Mutsu and Dewa in the far north of Honshu. Of the stories that take place in these more remote regions, many involve visitors from the Capital or persons bound for the Capital.

#### EMPERORS, MINISTERS, OFFICIALS, SERVANTS

The great nobles of this court-centered world, men whose birth destined them for the top ranks and posts in the government, figure prominently in the tales. Naturally the emperor had a special aura, even for the members of the nobility; but it is touching to glimpse (nos. 32, 67) how impressive even a provincial governor could look in his own province.

Provincial governors were appointed and sent out from the Capital, although sometimes (no. 8) they stayed in the Capital and had their provinces run by subordinates on location. Dazzling in the hinterland, at court they impressed no one because they came too low in the official hierarchy. A special provincial post, however, was that of viceroy of Kyushu. The viceroy was normally of considerable rank, but no one coveted his office since Kyushu was so far away. In fact, appointment as viceroy of Kyushu could amount to exile. Fujiwara no Yamakage (no. 105) seems not to have minded too much, but Sugawara no Michizane's

appointment as viceroy of Kyushu meant his downfall and led to his becoming a vengeful god (nos. 101, 103).

The emperor was of course supposed to rule Japan, and these stories assume that he really did. But it is remarkable how often, in Japanese history, real power has been held not by the figure with the great title, but by someone who is officially his subordinate. The great shogun who unified Japan in 1600 after a century of war legitimized his power with the fiction that he was ruling for the emperor at the emperor's request. History provides many other such examples. No doubt it is natural that effective power should have passed from office to office, from clan to clan, and even from class to class over time. What is more surprising is that the emperor should never have been deposed, and should always have remained the ultimate source of legitimate political authority.

In the time of these stories, real power had been captured by the Fujiwara clan, headed by a regent whose position was hereditary in one Fujiwara line. The Fujiwara were wealthier than the imperial family, and their "private" house administration rivaled the "public" (imperial) government nominally headed by the emperor, especially since so many of the top posts in the "public" government were inevitably held by the top Fujiwaras. Since most of the great lords belonged to the Fujiwara clan, this book is full of Fujiwaras great and small. Tadazane has already been mentioned, but the ultimate Fujiwara potentate was the Regent Michinaga (966–1027), whose little dog saves him from hostile magic in no. 63. Of the rest, most bore the surname Minamoto. Tōru (nos. 190, 191) was an illustrious Minamoto.

The regent's standing illustrates this state of affairs perfectly, for although there was no slot at all for a regent in the government's official table of organization, he outranked every other official at court even if he held no other office. Normally his daughter was the emperor's wife (no. 125), and therefore the mother of the next emperor. (No woman was allowed to succeed to the throne between 770 and 1630.) Michinaga had three emperors as his sons-in-law and four as his grandsons.

Under these circumstances emperors were often children, or at least very young, and usually abdicated early. A retired emperor enjoyed a good deal more freedom than a reigning one. Retired Emperor Kazan (no. 39), forced to abdicate by the Fujiwara, ended up leading a life of Buddhist practice. As a reigning emperor he could never have left Kyoto on pilgrimage to see a holy man, as he does in the story. Retired emperors could even wield real influence. In the twelfth century they came to compete with the regents for power at court, leaving the reigning emperor, as usual, to play a largely ceremonial role.



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