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

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A N O T E
O N
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 (ō or ū) are supposed to last twice as long as plain ones — the difference between sOft and sOfa. For example, the name Sōō 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.

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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