

Story of a Tengu

By Lafcadio Hearn

In the days of the Emperor Go-Reizei,¹ there was a holy priest living in the temple of Saito, on the mountain called Hiyei-Zan, near Kyôto. One summer day this good priest, after a visit to the city, was returning to his temple by way of Kita-no-Oji, when he saw some boys ill-treating a kite. They had caught the bird in a snare, and were beating it with sticks. "Oh, the poor creature!" compassionately exclaimed the priest;—why do you torment it so, children?" One of the boys made answer: "We want to kill it to get the feathers." Moved by pity, the priest persuaded the boys to let him have the kite in exchange for a fan that he was carrying; and he set the bird free. It had not been seriously hurt, and was able to fly away.

Happy at having performed this Buddhist act of merit, the priest then resumed his walk. He had not proceeded very far when he saw a strange monk come out of a bamboo-grove by the roadside, and hasten toward him. The monk respectfully saluted him, and said: "Sir, through your compassionate kindness my life has been saved; and I now desire to express my gratitude in a fitting manner." Astonished at hearing himself thus addressed, the priest replied: "Really, I cannot remember to have ever seen you before: please tell me who you are." "It is not wonderful that you cannot recognize me in this form," returned the monk: "I am the kite that those cruel boys were tormenting at Kita-no-Ôji. You saved my life; and there is nothing in this world more precious than life. So I now wish to return your kindness in some way or other. If there be anything that you would like to have, or to know, or to see—anything that I can do for you, in short—please to tell me; for as I happen to possess, in a small degree, the Six Supernatural Powers, I am able to gratify almost any wish that you can express." On hearing these words, the priest knew that he was speaking with a Tengu; and he frankly made answer: "My friend, I have long ceased to care for the things of this world: I am now seventy years of age;—neither fame nor pleasure has any attraction for me. I feel anxious only about my future birth; but as that is a matter in which no one can help me, it were useless to ask about it. Really, I can think of but one thing worth wishing for. It has been my lifelong regret that I was not in India in the time of the Lord Buddha, and could not attend the great assembly on the holy mountain Gridhrakûta. Never a day passes in which this regret does not come to me, in the hour of morning or of evening prayer. Ah, my friend! if it were possible to conquer Time and Space, like the Bodhissattvas, so that I could look upon that marvelous assembly, how happy I should be!" "Why," the Tengu exclaimed, "that pious wish of yours can easily be satisfied. I perfectly well remember the assembly on the Vulture Peak; and I can cause everything that happened there to reappear before you, exactly as it occurred. It is our greatest delight to represent such holy matters. . . . Come this way with me!"

And the priest suffered himself to be led to a place among pines, on the slope of a hill. "Now," said the Tengu, "you have only to wait here for awhile, with your eyes shut. Do not open them

¹ This story may be found in the curious old Japanese book called "Jikkun-Shô." The same legend has furnished the subject of an interesting No-play, called "Dai-E" (The Great Assembly).

In Japanese popular art, the Tengu are commonly represented either as winged men with beak-shaped noses, or as birds of prey. There are different kinds of Tengu; but all are supposed to be mountain-haunting spirits, capable of assuming many forms, and occasionally appearing as crows, vultures, or eagles. Buddhism appears to class the Tengu among the *Marakâyikas*.

until you hear the voice of the Buddha preaching the Law. Then you can look. But when you see the appearance of the Buddha, you must not allow your devout feelings to influence you in any way ;—you must not bow down, nor pray, nor utter any such exclamation as, ‘Even so, Lord!’ or, ‘O thou Blessed One!’ You must not speak at all. Should you make even the least sign of reverence, something very unfortunate might happen to me.” The priest gladly promised to follow these injunctions; and the Tengu hurried away as if to prepare the spectacle.

The day waned and passed, and the darkness came; but the old priest waited patiently beneath a tree, keeping his eyes closed. At last a voice suddenly resounded above him—a wonderful voice, deep and clear like the pealing of a mighty bell—the voice of the Buddha Sâkyamuni proclaiming the Perfect Way. Then the priest, opening his eyes in a great radiance, perceived that all things had been changed: the place was indeed the Vulture Peak—the holy Indian mountain Gridhrakûta; and the time was the time of the Sutra of the Lotus of the Good Law. Now there were no pines about him, but strange shining trees made of the Seven Precious Substances, with foliage and fruit of gems;—and the ground was covered with Mandârava and Manjûshaka flowers showered from heaven;—and the night was filled with fragrance and splendor and the sweetness of the great Voice. And in mid-air, shining as a moon above the world, the priest beheld the Blessed One seated upon the Lion-throne, with Samantabhadra at his right hand, and Mañjusrî at his left—and before them assembled—immeasurably spreading into Space, like a flood of stars—the hosts of the Mahâsattvas and the Bodhissattvas with their countless following: “gods, demons, Nâgas, goblins, men, and beings not human.” Sâriputra he saw, and Kâsyapa, and Ânanda, with all the disciples of the Tathâgata—and the Kings of the Devas—and the Kings of the Four Directions, like pillars of fire—and the great Dragon-Kings—and the Gandharvas and Garudas—and the Gods of the Sun and the Moon and the Wind—and the shining myriads of Brahma’s heaven. And incomparably further than even the measureless circling of the glory of these, he saw—made visible by a single ray of light that shot from the forehead of the Blessed One to pierce beyond uttermost Time—the eighteen hundred thousand Buddha-fields of the Eastern Quarter with all their habitants—and the beings in each of the Six States of Existence—and even the shapes of the Buddhas extinct, that had entered into Nirvâna. These, and all the gods, and all the demons, he saw bow down before the Lion-throne; and he heard that multitude incalculable of beings praising the Sutra of the Lotus of the Good Law—like the roar of a sea before the Lord. Then forgetting utterly his pledge—foolishly dreaming that he stood in the very presence of the very Buddha—he cast himself down in worship with tears of love and thanksgiving; crying out with a loud voice, “O thou Blessed One!” . . .

Instantly with a shock as of earthquake the stupendous spectacle disappeared; and the priest found himself alone in the dark, kneeling upon the grass of the mountain-side. Then a sadness unspeakable fell upon him, because of the loss of the vision, and because of the thoughtlessness that had caused him to break his word. As he sorrowfully turned his steps homeward, the goblin-monk once more appeared before him, and said to him in tones of reproach and pain: “Because you did not keep the promise which you made to me, and heedlessly allowed your feelings to overcome you, the Gohô-tendo, who is the Guardian of the Doctrine, swooped down suddenly from heaven upon us, and smote us in great anger, crying out, ‘How do ye dare thus to deceive a pious person?’ Then the other monks, whom I had assembled, all fled in fear. As for myself, one of my wings has been broken—so that now I cannot fly.” And with these words the Tengu vanished forever.