

Of a Promise Kept

By Lafcadio Hearn

“I shall return in the early autumn,” said Akana Soyëmon several hundred years ago—when bidding good-bye to his brother by adoption, young Hasëbé Samon. The time was spring; and the place was the village of Kato in the province of Harima. Akana was an Izumo samurai; and he wanted to visit his birthplace.

Hasëbé said:

“Your Izumo—the Country of the Eight-Cloud Rising¹—is very distant. Perhaps it will therefore be difficult for you to promise to return here upon any particular day. But, if we were to know the exact day, we should feel happier. We could then prepare a feast of welcome and we could watch at the gateway for your coming.”

“Why, as for that,” responded Akana, “I have been so much accustomed to travel that I can usually tell beforehand how long it will take me to reach a place; and I can safely promise you to be here upon a particular day. Suppose we say the day of the festival Chôyô?”

“That is the ninth day of the ninth month,” said Hasëbé;—“then the chrysanthemums will be in bloom, and we can go together to look at them. How pleasant! . . . So you promise to come back on the ninth day of the ninth month?”

“On the ninth day of the ninth month,” repeated Akana, smiling farewell. Then he strode away from the village of Kato in the province of Harima;—and Hasëbé Samon and the mother of Hasëbé looked after him with tears in their eyes.

“Neither the Sun nor the Moon,” says an old Japanese proverb, “ever halt upon their journey.” Swiftly the months went by; and the autumn came—the season of chrysanthemums. And early upon the morning of the ninth day of the ninth month Hasëbé prepared to welcome his adopted brother. He made ready a feast of good things, bought wine, decorated the guest-room, and filled the vases of the alcove with chrysanthemums of two colors. Then his mother, watching him, said: “The province of Izumo, my son, is more than one hundred *ri*² from this place; and the journey thence over the mountains is difficult and weary; and you cannot be sure that Akana will be able to come to-day. Would it not be better, before you take all this trouble, to wait for his coming?” “Nay, mother!” Hasëbé made answer—“Akana promised to be here to-day: he could not break a promise! And if he were to see us beginning to make preparation after his arrival, he would know that we had doubted his word; and we should be put to shame.”

The day was beautiful, the sky without a cloud, and the air so pure that the world seemed to be a thousand miles wider than usual. In the morning many travelers passed through the village—some of them samurai; and Hasëbé, watching each as he came, more than once imagined that he saw Akana approaching. But the temple-bells sounded the hour of midday; and Akana did not appear. Through the afternoon also Hasëbé watched and waited in vain. The sun set; and still there was no sign of Akana. Nevertheless Hasëbé remained at the gate, gazing down the road. Later his mother went to him, and said: “The mind of a man, my son—as our proverb declares—may change as quickly as the sky of autumn. But your chrysanthemum-flowers will still be fresh to-morrow. Better now to sleep; and in the morning you can watch again for Akana, if you

¹ One of the old poetical names for the province of Izumo, or Unshu.

² A *ri* is about equal to two and a half English miles.

wish.” “Rest well, mother,” returned Hasébé;—“but I still believe that he will come. Then the mother went to her own room; and Hasébé lingered at the gate.

The night was pure as the day had been: all the sky throbbed with stars; and the white River of Heaven shimmered with unusual splendor. The village slept;—the silence was broken only by the noise of a little brook, and by the far-away barking of peasants’ dogs. Hasébé still waited—waited until he saw the thin moon sink behind the neighboring hills. Then at last he began to doubt and to fear. Just as he was about to reenter the house, he perceived in the distance a tall man approaching—very lightly and quickly; and in the next moment he recognized Akana.

“Oh!” cried Hasébé, springing to meet him—“I have been waiting for you from the morning until now! . . . So you really did keep your promise after all. . . . But you must be tired, poor brother!—come in;— everything is ready for you.” He guided Akana to the place of honor in the guest-room, and hastened to trim the lights, which were burning low. “Mother,” continued Hasébé, “felt a little tired this evening, and she has already gone to bed; but I shall awaken her presently.” Akana shook his head, and made a little gesture of disapproval. “As you will, brother,” said Hasébé; and he set warm food and wine before the traveler. Akana did not touch the food or the wine, but remained motionless and silent for a short time. Then, speaking in a whisper—as if fearful of awakening the mother, he said:

“Now I must tell you how it happened that I came thus late. When I returned to Izumo I found that the people had almost forgotten the kindness of our former ruler, the good Lord Enya, and were seeking the favor of the usurper Tsunéhisa, who had possessed himself of the Tonda Castle. But I had to visit my cousin, Akana Tanji, though he had accepted service under Tsunéhisa, and was living, as a retainer, within the castle grounds. He persuaded me to present myself before Tsunéhisa: I yielded chiefly in order to observe the character of the new ruler, whose face I had never seen. He is a skilled soldier, and of great courage; but he is cunning and cruel. I found it necessary to let him know that I could never enter into his service. After I left his presence he ordered my cousin to detain me—to keep me confined within the house. I protested that I had promised to return to Harima upon the ninth day of the ninth month; but I was refused permission to go. I then hoped to escape from the castle at night; but I was constantly watched; and until to-day I could find no way to fulfill my promise. . . .”

“Until to-day!” exclaimed Hasébé in bewilderment;—“the castle is more than a hundred ri from here!”

“Yes,” returned Akana; “and no living man can travel on foot a hundred ri in one day. But I felt that, if I did not keep my promise, you could not think well of me; and I remembered the ancient proverb, *‘Tama yoku ichi nichi ni sen ri wo yuku’* (The soul of a man can journey a thousand ri in a day). Fortunately I had been allowed to keep my sword;—thus only was I able to come to you. . . . Be good to our mother.”

With these words he stood up, and in the same instant disappeared. Then Hasébé knew that Akana had killed himself in order to fulfill the promise.

At earliest dawn Hasébé Samon set out for the Castle Tonda, in the province of Izumo. Reaching Matsué, he there learned that, on the night of the ninth day of the ninth month, Akana Soyëmon had performed harakiri in the house of Akana Tanji, in the grounds of the castle. Then Hasébé went to the house of Akana Tanji, and reproached Akana Tanji for the treachery done, and slew him in the midst of his family, and escaped without hurt. And when the Lord Tsunéhisa had heard the story, he gave commands that Hasébé should not be pursued. For, although an unscrupulous and cruel man himself, the Lord Tsunéhisa could respect the love of truth in others, and could admire the friendship and the courage of Hasébé Samon.