

The Sympathy of Benten¹

By Lafcadio Hearn

In Kyōto there is a famous temple called Amadera. Sadazumi Shinnō, the fifth son of the Emperor Seiwa, passed the greater part of his life there as a priest; and the graves of many celebrated persons are to be seen in the temple-grounds.

But the present edifice is not the ancient Amadera. The original temple, after the lapse of ten centuries, fell into such decay that it had to be entirely rebuilt in the fourteenth year of Genroku (1701 A. D.).

A great festival was held to celebrate the rebuilding of the Amadera; and among the thousands of persons who attended that festival there was a young scholar and poet named Hanagaki Baisnū. He wandered about the newly-laid-out grounds and gardens, delighted by all that he saw, until he reached the place of a spring at which he had often drunk in former times. He was then surprised to find that the soil about the spring had been dug away, so as to form a square pond, and that at one corner of this pond there had been set up a wooden tablet bearing the words *Tanjō-Sui* ("Birth-Water").² He also saw that a small, but very handsome temple of the Goddess Benten had been erected beside the pond. While he was looking at this new temple, a sudden gust of wind blew to his feet a *tanzaku*,³ on which the following poem had been written:—

Shirushi aréto
Iwai zo somuru
Tama hōki,
Toruté bakari no
Chigiri narétomo.

This poem—a poem on first love (*hatsu koi*), composed by the famous Shunrei Kyō—was not unfamiliar to him; but it had been written upon the *tanzaku* by a female hand, and so exquisitely that he could scarcely believe his eyes. Something in the form of the characters,—an indefinite grace,—suggested that period of youth between childhood and womanhood; and the pure rich color of the ink seemed to bespeak the purity and goodness of the writer's heart.⁴

Baishū carefully folded up the *tanzaku*, and took it home with him. When he looked at it again the writing appeared to him even more wonderful than at first. His knowledge in calligraphy

¹ The original story is in the *Otogi-Myaku-Monogatari*

² The word *tanjō* (birth) should here be understood in its mystical Buddhist meaning of new life or rebirth, rather than in the western signification of birth.

³ *Tanzaku* is the name given to the long strips or ribbons of paper, usually colored, upon which poems are written perpendicularly. Poems written upon *tanzaku* are suspended to trees in flower, to wind-bells, to any beautiful object in which the poet has found an inspiration.

⁴ It is difficult for the inexperienced European eye to distinguish in Chinese or Japanese writing those characteristics implied by our term "hand"—in the sense of individual style. But the Japanese scholar never forgets the peculiarities of a handwriting once seen; and he can even guess at the approximate age of the writer. Chinese and Japanese authors claim that the color (quality) of the ink used tells something of the character of the writer. As every person grinds or prepares his or her own ink, the deeper and clearer black would at least indicate something of personal carefulness and of the sense of beauty.

assured him only that the poem had been written by some girl who was very young, very intelligent, and probably very gentle-hearted.

But this assurance sufficed to shape within his mind the image of a very charming person; and he soon found himself in love with the unknown. Then his first resolve was to seek out the writer of the verses, and, if possible, make her his wife. . . . Yet how was he to find her? Who was she? Where did she live? Certainly he could hope to find her only through the favor of the Gods.

But presently it occurred to him that the Gods might be very willing to lend their aid. The *tanzaku* had come to him while he was standing in front of the temple of Benten-Sama; and it was to this divinity in particular that lovers were wont to pray for happy union. This reflection impelled him to beseech the Goddess for assistance. He went at once to the temple of Benten-of-the-Birth-Water (*Tanjō-sui-no-Benten*) in the grounds of the Amadera; and there, with all the fervor of his heart, he made his petition:—"O Goddess, pity me!—help me to find where the young person lives who wrote the *tanzaku*!—vouchsafe me but one chance to meet her,—even if only for a moment!" And after having made this prayer, he began to perform a seven days' religious service (*nanuka mairi*)⁵ in honor of the Goddess; vowing at the same time to pass the seventh night in ceaseless worship before her shrine.

Now on the seventh night,—the night of his vigil,—during the hour when the silence is most deep, he heard at the main gateway of the temple-grounds a voice calling for admittance. Another voice from within answered; the gate was opened; and Baishū saw an old man of majestic appearance approaching with slow steps. This venerable person was clad in robes of ceremony; and he wore upon his snow-white head a black cap (*eboshi*) of the form indicating high rank. Reaching the little temple of Benten, he knelt down in front of it, as if respectfully awaiting some order. Then the outer door of the temple was opened; the hanging curtain of bamboo behind it, concealing the inner sanctuary, was rolled half-way up; and a *chigo*⁶ came forward,—a beautiful boy, with long hair tied back in the ancient manner. He stood at the threshold, and said to the old man in a clear loud voice:—

"There is a person here who has been praying for a love-union not suitable to his present condition, and otherwise difficult to bring about. But as the young man is worthy of Our pity, you have been called to see whether something can be done for him. If there should prove to be any relation between the parties from the period of a former birth, you will introduce them to each other."

On receiving this command, the old man bowed respectfully to the *chigo*: then, rising, he drew from the pocket of his long left sleeve a crimson cord. One end of this cord he passed round Baishū's body, as if to bind him with it. The other end he put into the flame of one of the temple-lamps; and while the cord was there burning, he waved his hand three times, as if to summon somebody out of the dark.

Immediately, in the direction of the Amadera, a sound of coming steps was heard; and in another moment a girl appeared,—a charming girl, fifteen or sixteen years old. She approached gracefully, but very shyly,—hiding the lower part of her face with a fan; and she knelt down beside Baishū. The *chigo* then said to Baishū:—

"Recently you have been suffering much heart-pain; and this desperate love of yours has even impaired your health. We could not allow you to remain in so unhappy a condition; and We

⁵ There are many kinds of religious exercises called *mairi*. The performer of a *nanuka-mairi* pledges himself to pray at a certain temple every day for seven days in succession.

⁶ The term *chigo* usually means the page of a noble household, especially an Imperial page. The *chigo* who appears in this story is of course a supernatural being,—the court-messenger of the Goddess, and her mouthpiece.

therefore summoned the Old-Man-under-the-Moon⁷ to make you acquainted with the writer of that *tanzaku*. She is now beside you.”

With these words, the *chigo* retired behind the bamboo curtain. Then the old man went away as he had come; and the young girl followed him. Simultaneously Baishū heard the great bell of the Amadera sounding the hour of dawn. He prostrated himself in thanksgiving before the shrine of Benten-of-the-Birth-Water, and proceeded homeward,—feeling as if awakened from some delightful dream,—happy at having seen the charming person whom he had so fervently prayed to meet,—unhappy also because of the fear that he might never meet her again.

But scarcely had he passed from the gateway into the street, when he saw a young girl walking alone in the same direction that he was going; and, even in the dusk of the dawn, he recognized her at once as the person to whom he had been introduced before the temple of Benten. As he quickened his pace to overtake her, she turned and saluted him with a graceful bow. Then for the first time he ventured to speak to her; and she answered him in a voice of which the sweetness filled his heart with joy. Through the yet silent streets they walked on, chatting happily, till they found themselves before the house where Baishū lived. There he paused—spoke to the girl of his hopes and fears. Smiling, she asked:—“Do you not know that I was sent for to become your wife?” And she entered with him.

Becoming his wife, she delighted him beyond expectation by the charm of her mind and heart. Moreover, he found her to be much more accomplished than he had supposed. Besides being able to write so wonderfully, she could paint beautiful pictures; she knew the art of arranging flowers, the art of embroidery, the art of music; she could weave and sew; and she knew everything in regard to the management of a house.

It was in the early autumn that the young people had met; and they lived together in perfect accord until the winter season began. Nothing, during those months, occurred to disturb their peace. Baishū’s love for his gentle wife only strengthened with the passing of time. Yet, strangely enough, he remained ignorant of her history,—knew nothing about her family. Of such matters she had never spoken; and, as the Gods had given her to him, he imagined that it would not be proper to question her. But neither the Old-Man-under-the-Moon nor any one else came—as he had feared—to take her away. Nobody even made any inquiries about her. And the neighbors, for some undiscoverable reason, acted as if totally unaware of her presence.

Baishū wondered at all this. But stranger experiences were awaiting him.

One winter morning he happened to be passing through a somewhat remote quarter of the city, when he heard himself loudly called by name, and saw a man-servant making signs to him from the gateway of a private residence. As Baishū did not know the man’s face, and did not have a single acquaintance in that part of Kyōto, he was more than startled by so abrupt a summons. But the servant, coming forward, saluted him with the utmost respect, and said, “My master greatly desires the honor of speaking with you: deign to enter for a moment.” After an instant of hesitation, Baishū allowed himself to be conducted to the house. A dignified and richly dressed person, who seemed to be the master, welcomed him at the entrance, and led him to the guest-room. When the courtesies due upon a first meeting had been fully exchanged, the host apologized for the informal manner of his invitation, and said:—

“It must have seemed to you very rude of us to call you in such a way. But perhaps you will pardon our impoliteness when I tell you that we acted thus upon what I firmly believe to have been an inspiration from the Goddess Benten. Now permit me to explain.

⁷ *Gekkawō*. This is a poetical appellation for the God of Marriage, more usually known as *Musuhi-no-kami*. Throughout this story there is an interesting mingling of Shintō and Buddhist ideas.

“I have a daughter, about sixteen years old, who can write rather well,⁸ and do other things in the common way: she has the ordinary nature of woman. As we were anxious to make her happy by finding a good husband for her, we prayed the Goddess Benten to help us; and we sent to every temple of Benten in the city a *tanzaku* written by the girl. Some nights later, the Goddess appeared to me in a dream, and said: ‘We have heard your prayer, and have already introduced your daughter to the person who is to become her husband. During the coming winter he will visit you.’ As I did not understand this assurance that a presentation had been made, I felt some doubt; I thought that the dream might have been only a common dream, signifying nothing. But last night again I saw Benten-Sama in a dream; and she said to me: ‘To-morrow the young man, of whom I once spoke to you, will come to this street: then you can call him into your house, and ask him to become the husband of your daughter. He is a good young man; and later in life he will obtain a much higher rank than he now holds.’ Then Benten-Sama told me your name, your age, your birthplace, and described your features and dress so exactly that my servant found no difficulty in recognizing you by the indications which I was able to give him.”

This explanation bewildered Baishū instead of reassuring him; and his only reply was a formal return of thanks for the honor which the master of the house had spoken of doing him. But when the host invited him to another room, for the purpose of presenting him to the young lady, his embarrassment became extreme. Yet he could not reasonably decline the introduction. He could not bring himself, under such extraordinary circumstances, to announce that he already had a wife,—a wife given to him by the Goddess Benten herself; a wife from whom he could not even think of separating. So, in silence and trepidation, he followed his host to the apartment indicated.

Then what was his amazement to discover, when presented to the daughter of the house, that she was the very same person whom he had already taken to wife!

The same,—yet not the same.

She to whom he had been introduced by the Old-Man-under-the-Moon, was only the soul of the beloved.

She to whom he was now to be wedded, in her father’s house, was the body.

Benten had wrought this miracle for the sake of her worshippers.

* * *

The original story breaks off suddenly at this point, leaving several matters unexplained. The ending is rather unsatisfactory. One would like to know something about the mental experiences of the real maiden during the married life of her phantom. One would also like to know what became of the phantom,—whether it continued to lead an independent existence whether it waited patiently for the return of its husband; whether it paid a visit to the real bride. And the book says nothing about these things. But a Japanese friend explains the miracle thus:—

“The spirit-bride was really formed out of the *tanzaku*. So it is possible that the real girl did not know anything about the meeting at the temple of Benten. When she wrote those beautiful characters upon the *tanzaku*, something of her spirit passed into them. Therefore it was possible to evoke from the writing the double of the writer.”

⁸ As it is the old Japanese rule that parents should speak depreciatingly of their children’s accomplishments the phrase “rather well” in this connection would mean, for the visitor, “wonderfully well.” For the same reason the expressions “common way” and “ordinary nature,” as subsequently used, would imply almost the reverse of the literal meaning.