

THE GOOD THUNDER

from Japanese Fairy Tales by Grace James

Rai-den Sama lived in a Castle of Cloud set high in the blue heaven. He was a great and mighty god, a Lord of the Elements. Rai-Taro was his one and only son, a brave boy, and his father loved him.

In the cool of the evening Rai-den and Rai-Taro walked upon the ramparts of the Castle of Cloud, and from the ramparts they viewed the doings of men upon the Land of Reed Plains. North and South and East and West they looked. Often they laughed--oh, very often; sometimes they sighed. Sometimes Rai-Taro leaned far over the castle walls to see the children that went to and fro upon earth.

One night Rai-den Sama said to Rai-Taro, "Child, look well this night upon the doings of men!"

Rai-Taro answered, "Father, I will look well."

From the northern rampart they looked, and saw great lords and men-at-arms going forth to battle. From the southern rampart they looked, and saw priests and acolytes serving in a holy temple where the air was dim with incense, and images of gold and bronze gleamed in the twilight. From the eastern rampart they looked, and saw a lady's bower, where was a fair princess, and a troop of maidens, clad in rose colour, that made music for her. There were children there, too, playing with a little cart of flowers.

"Ah, the pretty children!" said Rai-Taro.

From the western rampart they looked, and saw a peasant toiling in a rice-field. He was weary enough and his back ached. His wife toiled with him by his side. If he was weary, it is easy to believe that she was more weary still. They were very poor and their garments were ragged.

"Have they no children?" said Rai-Taro. Rai-den shook his head.

Presently, "Have you looked well, Rai-Taro?" he said. "Have you looked well this night upon the doings of men?"

"Father," said Rai-Taro, "indeed, I have looked well."

“Then choose, my son, choose, for I send you to take up your habitation upon the earth.”

“Must I go among men?” said Rai-Taro.

“My child, you must.”

“I will not go with the men-at-arms,” said Rai-Taro; “fighting likes me very ill.”

“Oho, say you so, my son? Will you go, then, to the fair lady’s bower?”

“No,” said Rai-Taro, “I am a man. Neither will I have my head shaved to go and live with priests.”

“What, then, do you choose the poor peasant? You will have a hard life and scanty fare, Rai-Taro.”

Rai-Taro said, “They have no children. Perhaps they will love me.”

“Go, go in peace,” said Rai-den Sama; “for you have chosen wisely.”

“How shall I go, my father?” said Rai-Taro.

“Honourably,” said his father, “as it befits a Prince of High Heaven.”

Now the poor peasant man toiled in his rice-field, which was at the foot of the mountain Hakusan, in the province of Ichizen. Day after day and week after week the bright sun shone. The rice-field was dry, and young rice was burnt up.

“Alack and alas!” cried the poor peasant man, “and what shall I do if my rice-crop fails? May the dear gods have mercy on all poor people!”

With that he sat himself down on a stone at the rice-field’s edge and fell asleep for very weariness and sorrow.

When he woke the sky was black with clouds. It was but noonday, but it grew as dark as night. The leaves of the trees shuddered together and the birds ceased their singing.

“A storm, a storm!” cried the peasant. “Rai-den Sama goes abroad upon his black horse, beating the great drum of the Thunder. We shall have rain in plenty, thanks be.”

Rain in plenty he had, sure enough, for it fell in torrents, with blinding lightning and roaring thunder.

“Oh, Rai-den Sama,” said the peasant, “saving your greatness, this is even more than sufficient.”

At this the bright lightning flashed anew and fell to the earth in a ball of living fire, and the heavens cracked with a mighty peal of thunder.

“Ai! Ai!” cried the poor peasant man. “Kwannon have mercy on a sinful soul, for now the Thunder Dragon has me indeed.” And he lay on the ground and hid his face.

Howbeit the Thunder Dragon spared him. And soon he sat up and rubbed his eyes. The ball of fire was gone, but a babe lay upon the wet earth; a fine fresh boy with the rain upon his cheeks and his hair.

“Oh, Lady, Lady Kwannon,” said the poor peasant man, “this is thy sweet mercy.” And he took the boy in his arms and carried him to his own home.

As he went the rain still fell, but the sun came out in the blue sky, and every flower in the cooler air shone and lifted up its grateful head.

The peasant came to his cottage door.

“Wife, wife,” he called, “I have brought you something home.”

“What may it be?” said his wife.

The man answered, “Rai-Taro, the little eldest son of the Thunder.”

Rai-Taro grew up straight and strong, the tallest, gayest boy of all that countryside. He was the delight of his foster-parents, and all the neighbours loved him. When he was ten years old he worked in the rice-fields like a man. He was the wonderful weather prophet.

“My father,” he said, “let us do this and that, for we shall have fair weather”; or he said, “My father, let us rather do this or that, for to-night there will be a storm,” and whatever he had said, so, sure enough, it came to pass. And he brought great good fortune to the poor peasant man, and all his works prospered.