

The whirring of the sewing machine.

Gabriel gets up and plays a record by the Rolling Stones.

Shit, I'm almost sorry that Curtius should have found this quotation from Stevenson before I did: "Every book is, in an intimate sense, a circular letter to the friends of him who writes it. They alone take his meaning; they find private messages, assurances of love and expressions of gratitude, dropped for them in every corner. The public is but a generous patron who defrays the postage. Yet though the letter is directed to all, we have an old and kindly custom of addressing it on the outside to one. Of what shall a man be proud, if he is not proud of his friends?"

Of what shall a man be proud, if he is not proud of his friends?

Translated by John C. Murchison

KIJIMA HAJIME / JAPAN

A Tale Told by the Scorched Tree

This is a tale which has survived out of the depths of time, of bygone ages when monkeys still were more powerful than dogs.

The queen of the monkeys had great wisdom. In all the forest none was wiser than she.

The queen would have liked to be the mother of simian princes and princesses. But she could not bear the thought that she might by some misfortune have a child less beautiful than herself, and so it was that she had none.

Thus, since nature had failed her, she had no other hope left to her save artifice. So she sent out a decree to all the painters in the monkey kingdom. She commanded them to paint a likeness of herself as one unsurpassed among her kind. To stir the painters to do their utmost, she had it made known that a prize would be given to the artist whose work pleased her best.

"I myself without a doubt am the most beautiful simian being in the world"—this, the artists understood well enough, was the queen's thought. Being able to guess correctly her desire, all of them set to work with a will and began to create upon their canvasses the likeness of a monkey of surpassing beauty.

Beauty in a monkey? Just what, you ask, may that be?

The question is easier to answer than you might think: sleek fur, russet or gold, which gleams lustrously in the sunlight, and long slender arms. Beautiful indeed is the sight of such a monkey, supple and without fear, at play in the topmost branches of a forest tree, swaying in the singing wind with no thought for the plodding earth below.

The painters all finished their work within the appointed time, and the exhibition was opened in a clearing in the forest. Accompanied by the lord chamberlain, the queen moved at leisure to and fro among the rows of paintings. She seemed to admire all the portraits, and she spoke ill of none, so that no one work stood out as an obvious choice for the prize. This went on for some time. At length the lord chamberlain began to be disturbed. In whispered asides, he tried to urge the queen toward a decision: "This is a fine picture, is it not? And such an exquisite likeness of Your Majesty, too. Surely I have never seen a painting to compare."

But the queen only frowned and shook her head. She was not content. For, if truth be told, nearly all the paintings were exactly alike.

Only one painting stood out as being at all different. Like the other paintings, it showed a noble female monkey with glossy fur and mild, intelligent eyes. There, however, the resemblance stopped. For, floating over her head like some figure in a nightmare, a grinning skeleton mimicked the monkey's graceful pose. From one gaping eye-socket there sprouted a single chrysanthemum flower.

The queen paused before this painting, and she showed no signs of proceeding onward again.

"That sort of thing's child's play," growled the lord chamberlain, making as if to brush past. The queen stopped him with a look. "Who painted this?" she asked.

A low murmur of amazement went up among the waiting crowd. Like a glancing moonbeam the rumor spread—surely the unhappy artist who had dared to paint a skeleton would be thrown into the dungeons.

The rumor, however, was mistaken, as rumors are wont to be. "Very interesting work," said the queen, and for the first time she spoke a word of praise for one of the paintings. The artist, a thoughtful and somewhat withdrawn monkey named Sukitori-me, was summoned, and the queen awarded him the prize.

The prize, of course, was fruit—three large, ripe persimmons. After this, Sukitori-me painted other portraits one after the other, and he became the most renowned artist in the kingdom. Hoping that they, too, might gain royal favor, all of the other painters did nothing but imitate his work.

Royal favor nonetheless had its drawbacks. Whenever Sukitori-me produced a painting which did not please the queen's fancy, the lord chamberlain reprimanded him harshly. When this had happened several times, Suki-

tori-me gradually grew weary of the life of a court painter. At length, he asked for leave and set off on a long journey, determined to seek for something which no one had ever heard of or seen, something called the Soul.

Sukitori-me departed, but he left behind him many remarkable paintings. Some showed winged monkeys soaring into the heavens or diving into the depths of the sea. Others depicted stars in simian hands, flashing forth signals into unknown realms of the universe.

"Ah, superb!" the queen would exclaim whenever she noticed one of these paintings, and yet again all the remaining artists would busy themselves turning out imitations in the style of Sukitori-me. They, too, painted monkeys with wings and monkeys with webbed feet, hoping in vain for a word of praise from the queen.

"No good, any of them. All they can do is copy Sukitori-me, and badly at that!"

All their efforts were wasted, for the queen was not pleased. The lord chamberlain, in a rage, stormed at the waiting assembly of artists: "All you ever do is paint the same thing over and over, all of you. The mere sight of such stuff is revolting!"

When the audience was at an end, one of the painters approached the lord chamberlain obsequiously and whispered softly in his ear, "Allow me another chance to offer the *fruits* of my skill. . . ."

"What kind of fruit does the wretch mean?" thought the lord chamberlain. "It may be that I can make use of him."

So the lord chamberlain took care to praise this painter to the queen: "This artist has offered to use the fruit of his skill in painting an especially lovely portrait of Your Majesty. I have looked over all the other prospects and found them wanting. To me he seems the best."

The artist who had spoken to the lord chamberlain was a monkey called Sonotori-me. His paintings were so realistic that everyone who looked at them exclaimed, "A living likeness!" Soon his name became famous.

The lord chamberlain and everyone else at court had nothing but admiration for Sonotori-me.

Only the queen was not satisfied.

She grew angry whenever a painting might be less beautiful than herself. She was so clever that none could argue against her, and she always had the last word.

"This may be a good picture, but it is not a picture of me. I will have none of it!"

"Ah, yes, Your Majesty, of course it is as Your Majesty is pleased to say." Sonotori-me could do nothing but add two small lines to the face he had just painted.

But his work was in vain, for the queen only grew angrier than before. No doubt it was because the portrait was now uglier than herself.

Sonotori-me was in tight straits. He appealed to the lord chamberlain. "I beseech your pardon. I did not mean to offend Her Majesty."

The chamberlain was unperturbed. "Nothing to worry about, I'm sure. Her Majesty will come around in time. You said something, I believe, about offering the fruit of your skill. Fruit, mind you. FRUIT," he said softly to the abject Sonotori-me.

"Ye—yes. Yes. Fruit. I understand. I shall obey," the painter stammered.

Sukitori-me traveled to the land of the baboons and to the land of the orangutans and to many other monkey kingdoms. He heard tales of that creature which is simian and not simian, the strange creature called Man. He learned many strange tongues, from the language of the fishes to that of the pheasants who alone of all creatures can understand the slow silent speech of the earth itself. The first of all simian beings to be a friend of cassowaries, chimpanzees, and rattlesnakes alike was the painter Sukitori-me.

The queen had longed for Sukitori-me to return, and when at last the day came, she dressed and made up her face with exquisite care, using the glassy waters of a forest pond for a mirror.

"Now, paint my picture, please. As the most beautiful in the world."

Sukitori-me sat in silence and gazed at his easel. Days passed. Still the portrait was not finished. Nor begun. The paper remained as white as at first. Stifling her impatience, the queen continued each day to dress herself with care and went on posing for Sukitori-me.

"Well, and have you not finished yet?"

"Yes, Madam, at last I have finished."

"Will you show it to me, then?"

"Be so gracious as to look and see for yourself."

The paper was, as ever, pure white. Nowhere upon it could she see her own graceful likeness. The queen stiffened with anger.

"Where is there a trace of me anywhere on this paper?"

The lord chamberlain tried to soothe her. "Surely the painter has tried to depict the exquisite heart of Your Majesty as true and unchanging pure white."

But the queen was not entirely mollified by this attempt at explanation.

"I shall still grant you your prize. But this time you must not paint my heart. Paint me. *Me!* As you see me here living and breathing before you."

Sukitori-me munched away on his prize persimmons, and as he ate he mused half to himself, "Her heart is not pure white after all. In the very center of it there exists a little spot which is black. It is not so much that she is perfection—rather, that all those around her amount to naught. To say that she is the only simian being with wisdom is to go too far, or else to distort the meaning of the word."

By now the encounter had flared up into a tourney of wit between the queen and the artist.

Since, however, it had been the queen herself who had singled out Sukitori-me as a favorite, it was hardly possible for her to grow too angry with him.

The queen had Sonotori-me summoned in place of Sukitori-me. This time she did not take such pains with her appearance.

Sonotori-me turned out painting after painting—"The Dignity of Our Queen," "Our Queen in a Quiet Mood," "Our Queen's Wisdom."

With a will, the lord chamberlain set to flattering his work. "No matter what kingdom you may search in, you surely will not find portraits to equal these. Now the beauty of Her Majesty will never fade, to the end of eternity."

However, the queen offered no reward save one sour green persimmon. She did not so much as mention anything smacking of a first prize. She still could not accept any likeness, no matter how realistic, which was either more or less beautiful than she was in reality herself.

Time passed, and the queen grew older. She was the last of her line, and she had no heirs. In her heart of hearts, she was determined that she herself would become something which is simian and not simian so that her people might revere her forever.

From Sukitori-me she had for the first time heard of those creatures called Men which are simian and not simian. She had also learned that over and above the creatures called Men there were deathless beings called gods.

"Then paint me, please, as the god of the monkey race."

"Whether gods are beautiful or not, I cannot say."

"That is of no import."

"Gods are august and terrible beings."

"Very good. I shall be pleased."

"All of those who meet gods face to face are bewitched or transformed."

"Better and better. Still better."

"If I paint Your Majesty in the guise of a goddess, forever afterwards people will identify Your Majesty's image with the portrait, and . . ."

"Better yet, better and better. That is just what I desire."

"Then, by your leave, I shall undertake to paint such a portrait."

Sukitori-me, veiled in thought, sat staring at his easel. The queen waited quietly. When she was bored with waiting, she summoned the lord chamberlain and had him bring her fruit—persimmons and pomegranates and pears. When she was bored with eating, she would lie down and daydream. When she was bored with rest, she called for hairdressers to clean and comb her glossy fur.

Then, once again, she would wait quietly by Sukitori-me's easel.

"Have you done with my portrait yet?"

"No, not yet."

"Well then, have you begun yet? Have you painted even a little?"

"No, Your Majesty, not even a little."

"I still do not look like the goddess of the monkeys?"

"No, Madam, indeed Your Majesty looks like a goddess, but . . ."

"But? But what?"

"You see, it is a matter of determining what aspect, what form . . ."

"How can you imply that I have no form, I who am actually here before your very eyes? And do not try to tell me that you are painting my pure white heart!"

"Speaking of aspects, Your Majesty's aspect seems to have changed remarkably all of a sudden. A while ago, Your Majesty's nostrils were not flaring and contracting so rapidly and grandly as they are now."

"That is because I am angry!"

"True, true, Your Majesty indeed has reason to be angry. But that is a part of the essence of my problem. Should I paint a furious queen? Or a weeping queen? Or a laughing queen?"

"None of them. Paint me as a goddess. A GODDESS!"

"I have heard, and I shall endeavor to obey."

Sukitori-me asked for leave overnight. Gorging himself upon chestnuts and persimmons, he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. During the night he had one strange dream after another. One vision especially he could not forget. He had climbed up into the very tip of the highest tree in all the forest. Gazing downward, he suddenly perceived that all the branches of all the forest trees were filled with emaciated monkeys looking up at him and stretching out their long, bony arms. But on further inspection—were the trees, then, really monkeys? Were the monkeys, with their long arms, only the branches of trees? There were so many that he could not say for certain which they were.

Morning came, and at a stroke Sukitori-me completed the promised portrait of the simian goddess.

When the queen saw the finished painting, she screamed for the lord chamberlain, had Sukitori-me put in chains, and ordered him thrown into the deepest dungeon.

The lord chamberlain whispered commiseratingly into the queen's ear, "That villain is too different. He cannot see things as they are, but only as he wishes them to be. He only painted distorted things or things which do not exist. He is probably a traitor, a spy who would betray us to the armies of the dogs. He knows too much about outlandish tongues, and he has no reverence for propriety."

On casual inspection, the portrait which was Sukitori-me's downfall seem-

ed to be a charming likeness of the queen. Extending her supple arms to full length and with her sleek fur shining, she swung freely and elegantly in the air in the midst of a cluster of five branches.

However, if one looked more closely, one could perceive that the five branches were not part of a tree at all, but five simian fingers. No mistake about it—the triumphant figure of the queen appeared, in fact, to be dancing in the palm of some gigantic monkey's hand.

After the queen had had Sukitori-me immured in the dungeons, she called for Sonotori-me and asked him to say just whose hand it might be.

"No, no, Your Majesty, those cannot be fingers. Surely they are the branches of a persimmon tree."

"But are they not worlds different from the persimmon trees which I have seen in your paintings?"

"Not persimmon branches? Well, then, perhaps they are part of a chestnut tree."

"Are chestnut branches so crooked, do you think?"

"No, not necessarily. But of course I paint differently from that madman Sukitori-me."

"You do insist that they are the branches of a tree?"

"Perhaps after all they may be fingers."

"If so, whose fingers?"

"Your Majesty, I have no idea. None whatsoever."

"He painted an odd enough portrait. It could hardly be called a goddess, could it? I wish to become a goddess, not something strange like this."

A little while afterwards, as the queen was wandering at leisure among the high-crowned tree tops, disturbing murmurs came floating upwards to echo jarringly in her ears.

"Whose hands? The lord chamberlain's hands!"

"Whose hands? Sukitori-me's hands!"

"Whose hands? Sonotori-me's hands!"

The echoes did not cease.

Hitherto the forest had been still and peaceful. But now it was alive with rumor. The very leaves of the trees rustled with speculation. Wherever the queen might go, she could not find a tranquil branch upon which to seek repose.

Sensitive as the queen was, she grew troubled and restless. Thinking more and more about Sukitori-me's tale of the beings called gods, at last she hit upon a plan. Somehow, she would devise a way to use this tale to her own advantage so that the lord chamberlain and all her other subjects would go on revering her forever.

She had one of Sonotori-me's portraits brought before her. "This," she informed her attendants, "shall be the god for all those of simian race. Henceforth, all my subjects must do obeisance before their god."

Everyone who heard this latest royal decree was astonished. Such beings were unheard-of and unknown. None had ever seen one. But it came as a shock to the monkeys that their god, if god there were to be, should be anything other than their own revered queen herself.

"God of the monkeys? What is this god? Is it, as they say, something which does not die?"

"Well, yes to that, and no. That is, it is of course our queen who shall be immortal. If only we take such a likeness of her and cling to it, putting all our trust in it, it will protect us, and we need have no fear."

"Then, even if those black villains of dogs come to harry us, we shall always be safe."

That, indeed, is just how matters seemed to turn out at first. Whenever the monkeys, in possession of this divine portrait, did battle with the armies of the dogs, their icon protected them, and they were not defeated. Even if the tides of war seemed to turn against them, they were always able to escape, leaping nimbly up into safety in the trees. In either case, they were unharmed, and they would adore the portrait offering thanks for their deliverance.

Sonotori-me's portrait of the queen—it was now transfigured into a sacred talisman—was copied over and over many times and distributed far and wide among all the monkeys. If one of the copies was seen to differ in the least from the original, the lord chamberlain's men-at-arms confiscated and destroyed it.

For Sukitori-me, immured in the queen's dungeons, to be denied a chance to paint was to be denied life itself. But if his jailers did not bring him canvas or paper, at least they did not deny him access to the walls. Using only the twenty nails upon his hands and feet, he worked on and on scratching out endless pictures upon the living rock of the dungeon walls. Narrowly and yet more narrowly, the confines of his prison pressed in upon him. The boundaries of his existence were reduced to a matter of seeing the unseen and hearing the unheard, the life of a blind seer who is, by a quirk of fate, denied the sight of aught save truth itself.

Among the drawings on the dungeon walls, one loomed especially large and foreboding. It was, in fact, a depiction of the plight of those monkeys who had played their own fortunes into the hands of the queen and the lord chamberlain—a pathetic dance of death paced by ragged grey ghosts, their eyes seared with horror and a sense of betrayal.

It will be a while before we fully understand this picture.

The dogs were less clever than the monkeys but more cunning. They were the first of all creatures to do homage to the creature which is simian, and not simian, the creature called Man. Before long, the silence of the forests was shattered by a sound yet more terrifying than the baying of dogs—the whine and roar of weapons.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The dogs were marching upon the forests, and they brought their new masters with them.

The monkeys, however, had placed all their faith in the images of their god, and they had no fear no matter who their attackers might be.

Still more time passed. The queen grew old. And older. She had played for high stakes during her long lifetime, but, in the end, even she could not win against time. She allowed none to see her save her faithful lord chamberlain. When she felt the approach of death, she gave him one final command:

"I abjure you to see that my subjects go on worshipping the god of the monkeys forever. Even if I must die, I do not wish to die. If only they will do this, I shall surely be immortal. Let them continue to honor me as they always have, and all in this kingdom—you, too, my friend—will be preserved in safety unto the sunset of time."

The lord chamberlain was careful to let no one know of the queen's death. All the monkeys went on just as ever venerating and worshipping the portraits of their queen, exquisitely beautiful and eternally young.

In the course of the endless and unending struggle between dogs and monkeys, the dogs contrived to have the forest, the stronghold of their enemies the monkeys, burned to ashes by their new ally, Man. But even the dogs did not yet dream just how heavy the hand of Man could be.

When vast numbers of the monkeys were trapped by the flames, and had no other place to flee, they took their icons and sought refuge in the dungeons where Sukitori-me had lived out the years of his captivity so long before.

From somewhere in the midst of the now smoldering forest, a hideous reek of burning still arose. The dogs pricked up their noses and set off to find out what it was. When they reached the place where the dungeon gates had been, they stopped. With one voice they bayed together, "Wan! Wan! Wa-wa-wa-wa-waaan! WAN!" But it was not to celebrate their conquest. "Horrible! Nothing so horrible!" they were trying to say.

If Sukitori-me had heard them, he could have interpreted their howls readily enough.

Of all the vast numbers of monkeys who had sought safety within the dungeons not one remained alive. They had adored and trusted the image of their goddess, but it led them only into destruction.

When they realized how many had died in the flames, both dogs, whose intent had simply been victory, not destruction, and Men, by whose wickedness the destruction had been done, were so amazed that words failed them.

Corpses and still more corpses of monkeys were hauled up out of the wreck of the dungeons and buried in pits dug deep in the scorched earth. But even after the dead were in their graves, their likenesses were still to be

seen upon the walls of the depths where they had died. No one could know that these were the pictures drawn so many years before by Sukitori-me who saw the unseen and could foresee the future. Using only the twenty nails on his hands and feet on the dungeon walls, Sukitori-me had etched a dreadful scene—wave upon wave of dying monkeys, writhing in fear, with despair and disillusionment flaming in their eyes.

When at last the seared forest trees began once more to put forth buds, and those monkeys who had been able to escape slowly started coming back, they found the drawings on the walls. Dogs and men alike had puzzled over the figures of monkeys scratched into solid stone. The monkeys, however, understood Sukitori-me's drawings only too well, and it struck their hearts and minds with all the force of an earthquake.

In these sketches outlined with such difficulty on the dungeon walls, Sukitori-me had succeeded perfectly in expressing thoughts and feelings which cannot be described by the gibberish chatter of simian speech.

Let us word it more precisely. In attempting to describe the unseen and relate the unknown, the artist Sukitori-me was the first to make use of signs and symbols mutually intelligible to all simian beings.

With this, the story comes to an end.

If you who read this tale should ever chance to find strange signs and scratchings upon the walls of caverns or upon the stumps of long-dead trees, look at them well and think of the monkey painter Sukitori-me. Of course it will not matter if you do not remember his name. If, when you see such signs and endlessly repeating patterns, you can imagine feelings unnamable in words and think somehow of the eternal struggle between that which lives and that which belongs to death, that thought alone will be enough.

Translated by Ann Herring

NIEH HUALING / CHINA

The Several Blessings of Wang Ta-nien

Having served three "emperors"—his own name for his principals—the teacher Ta-nien became privileged to occupy, with his wife and children, one of the three small rows of houses behind the school. They had lived in a