

The Spider's Thread

AKUTAGAWA KYUNOSUKE

translated from the Japanese by Edwin McClellan

ONE DAY THE LORD BUDDHA was taking a walk by the edge of the lotus pond in Paradise. The lotus flowers blossoming in the pond were white as pearls, and an indescribably delicate fragrance, rising from their golden stamens, filled the air, never ending. The hour in Paradise was perhaps early morn.

Then the lord Buddha paused, and through a clear patch of water between those lotus flowers that covered the surface of the pond, he looked at the scene below. At the bottom of the lotus pond in Paradise was Hell, and through the crystal-clear water could be seen, as though in a peep-show, such sights as the River of Death and the Mountain of Needles.

And almost immediately the lord Buddha noticed a man named Kandata, writhing in the midst of other sinners. This man Kandata had been a great thief, and had done many wicked deeds on earth, killing men and burning houses. Yet even he had once acted with kindness. One day, when walking through a thick forest, he saw a little spider crawling across his path. He lifted his foot, and was about to crush it to death, when he suddenly changed his mind. "No," he said to himself, "I must not. Even a little creature such as this has life, and to kill it without cause would be a great pity." And so he spared the life of the spider.

The lord Buddha, as he looked at the scene in Hell, remembered Kandata's kind-

ness to the spider; and he thought that he should save Kandata if he could, in return for his one good deed. Fortunately, beside him, on a lotus leaf the color of dark jade, a spider of Paradise was weaving a silvery web. The lord Buddha picked up the spider gently, and then began to let it down between the pearl-white flowers, straight towards Hell far beneath.

Meanwhile, Kandata, with other sinners, was struggling to keep afloat in the Lake of Blood, which was in the lowest depths of Hell. All was darkness, except for an occasional, ghostly glimmer of half-light coming from the fearful Mountain of Needles. The quiet was like that of a graveyard, and the only sound that could be heard was the faint sighing of the sinners. Perhaps those that had come so far down in Hell had gone through too many torments to have any strength left for loud cries of self-pity. And in the Lake of Blood, even the great thief Kandata could only writhe and choke like a dying frog.

But it so happened that Kandata, in the midst of his suffering, raised his head and looked towards the sky above the lake. And he saw, descending gradually towards him in a straight, shimmering line, as though fearful of being seen by man's eyes, the silvery thread of the spider. It seemed to come from far, far above, through the silent darkness. Kandata clapped his hands for joy. Surely, he thought, if he could once get hold of the thread, and climb far

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