The Spider's Thread

1

In the Buddha-land of Purity, there was a pond with a lot of lotus flowers. They were all as white as snow. Their golden stamens were continuously giving off sweet fragrance. One day in the morning, the Buddha was alone strolling around the lotus pond.

When the Buddha was staying still by the pond, he happened to look down between the lotus leaves and flowers at the darken world of



Hell---it was far beneath the pond. He could clearly see the Styx, a bloody-pond and a pin-hill through the clear water of the lotus pond.

The Buddha noticed a man called Kandata squirming around with other sinners. This man used to be a thief who had committed one misdeed after another, such as killing people and setting fires to houses, such a bad man was he. But he had carried out a good deed: it was many years ago when he was walking along in the deep woods, he found a small spider crawling across the path. He tried to stamp it down to death, but he changed his thought, "It is merely a small insect, but it is sorrowful to take its life thoughtlessly." After all, he didn't kill the spider. Looking down at him, the Buddha thought of saving him out of Hell as he remembered Kandata's only good deed he had done in his life. Just the right time, the Buddha saw a spider spinning a beautiful silver thread between leaves of lotuses. He gently picked it up and hung it down into the water between the white lotuses, as if it was aiming at Hell. It became longer and longer and went down far, far from the lotus pond to Hell.

2

In the meantime, the sinners were floating up and down in the bloody-pond in Hell. It was completely dark out there. The only things that could be seen dimly were pins on the dreadful pin-hill. It was also dumb silent. The only sounds that could be heard were the sighs they sometimes gave off. Since they were down there, they were suffering the torments of Hell and had no more energy to speak with each other. Kandata was also choked with blood in the pond and did nothing but writhed in agony like a dying frog.

In the soundless darkness that day, Kandata happened to look up at the sky above him. He saw a silver thread hanging down toward him from far above the sky. Looking at it, he unconsciously clapped his hands with joy.

"If I hold that thread tightly and climb it up, I could escape from Hell." He

thought, "If luck could have it, I might climb up to Buddha land of Purity. In that

case, they'd never drive me away onto the pin-hill nor make me sink into the bloody pond."

Just then the thread reached him on his nose; he at once held the spider's thread with his both hands tightly and began to climb up hurriedly. He was good at doing so, as he used to be a thief. He kept climbing the thread up, up, up. But however hard he did, it was not easy to get to the goal which was far away from Hell. On the way he felt too tired to climb up any more and stopped climbing to take a rest. He looked down; the bloody pond and the pin-hill were far below him. He thought he'd reach the goal sooner or later. He chuckled to himself with a voice of "well, well" for the first time in many years. He, however, noticed a huge number of sinners climbing up his thread like ants. He was flabbergasted and said to himself,

"I don't think my spider's thread can bear such heavy weight. If it snapped off, all the people on the thread would fall down headfirst into Hell, including me, who have climbed up all the way." In fact, hundreds of thousands of sinners were crawling up the thread in a line.

"I have to do something to stop them, otherwise the thread must snap off halfway and I'll fall down back into the bloody-pond."

He yelled at them at the top of his lungs,

"Hey, you! This spider's thread belongs only to me. From whom the Hell did you get the permission to climb up the thread? Climb down quickly!"

All of the sudden the thread, which had kept bearing the weight, snapped just where Kandata was holding with both hands. He fell down headlong into the bloody pond spinning like a top in no time.

The shining but shortened thread was still hanging down from the sky. It was still dark--no moon or stars in the sky.

3

The Buddha was staying still by the lotus pond and watching what had happened from beginning to end. After seeing Kandata sinking in the bottom of the bloody-pond like a stone, the Buddha resumed strolling as if nothing had happened, but he looked so sad. It seemed like the man's merciless behavior made the Buddha sad: trying to escape from Hell only by himself turned out to get him the equivalent punishment.

The lotuses in the pond had nothing to do with this affair. The white flowers were quietly swaying and giving off sweet fragrance from their golden stamens. It had been nearly noon in Buddha land of Purity.

蜘蛛の糸

1

極楽の池には、沢山の蓮の花が咲いていました。どれも 雪のように真っ白でした。蓮の花の金色の芯からは、何 とも言えないよい匂いが絶え間なく出ています。ある朝 の事です。お釈迦様は蓮池のあたりを一人でぶらぶら歩 いていらっしゃいました。

お釈迦様は蓮池のふちに、じっとたたずみ、ふと蓮の葉や花の間から、池のはるか下、池の底の暗い地獄界をご覧になりました。蓮池の澄み切った水を通して、三途の川、血の池、針の山がはっきり見えました。



お釈迦様は、カンダタという男が他の罪人と一緒にもがいているのに目を止められました。その 男はもとは泥棒でしたが、とんでもない悪人で、殺人や火付けなど悪事を重ねてきました。そん な男にも、一つだけ善い行いがありました。何年も昔のこと、深い森を歩いていた時、道を横切 る小さな蜘蛛を見つけました。踏み殺そうとしましたが、「こんな小さな虫けらでも、むやみに 命を奪うのはかわいそうだ。」と思い直し、結局逃がしてやったのです。

お釈迦様は、カンダタを見下ろし、生前この男がした唯一の善行を思いだし、地獄から救い出してやろうとお考えになりました。丁度その時、お釈迦様は、蓮の葉に一匹の蜘蛛がきれいな銀の糸をかけているのに目を留められました。そっと糸を手に取ると、白い蓮の間から、地獄に向かって、水の中に糸をお降ろしなさいました。糸は、どんどん下へ、蓮池から地獄の底へ降りて行きました。

2

一方、地獄の血の池では、罪人達が浮いたり沈んだりしていました。そこは真っ暗闇でした。かすかに見えるものは恐ろしい針の山の針だけでした。それに、しーんと静まりかえっていました。聞こえてくるのは罪人がつくため息だけでした。罪人達は、地獄に落ちてから、地獄の責め苦を受け、話す気力も残っていませんでした。カンダタも、血の池の血にむせび、死にかかった蛙のように苦しみもがくだけでした。

その日、ひっそりした暗闇の中、カンダタは何気なく頭上の空を見上げました。銀色の糸がはるか彼方(かなた)の空から、自分の方に垂れ下がって来るのが見えました。それを見て、カンダタは嬉しさのあまり思わず手を叩きました。

「あの糸にしっかりつかまってのぼっていけば、ここから抜け出せるかも。うまく行けば、極楽 まで行けるかもしれない。そうすれば、針の山に追いたてられることも、血の池に沈められるこ ともなくなる。」と思いました。

丁度その時、糸がつい鼻先まで降りてきました。早速、男は蜘蛛の糸を両手でしっかりとつかむと、すばやく上(のぼ)り始めました。元々泥棒であった男にとっては容易(たやす)いことでした。糸を上へ、上へよじのぼりました。しかし、上れど上れど、一向に遠く離れた極楽にはたどり着けません。途中、とうとうくたびれて、上るのをやめて一休みし、下を見ました。血の池、針の山ははるか眼下にありました。遅かれ早かれ極楽に行けるだろうと思いました。男は何年ぶりかで、「しめ、しめ」とほくそ笑んだのです。ところが、数え切れないほどの罪人が蟻のよう

に糸につかまり上って来るではありませんか。びっくり仰天し、

「俺様の蜘蛛の糸はあんな大勢の重みに耐えられない。途中で切れたら、はるばる上って来た俺様もろとも、みんな地獄へまっさかさまに落ちてしまう。」と思いました。実際、何百、何千という罪人が列をなしてよじのぼっていました。

「何とかして奴らを止(と)めなければ。さもないと糸が途中で切れて、俺様は血の池にまた落ちてしまう。」

男は、声を張り上げて下の連中に向かって叫びました。

「おい、お前ら!この蜘蛛の糸は俺のだぞ。一体誰に断って上がってきたんだ。早く降りろ!」 その途端、今まで重さに耐えていた糸が、ぷっつりと切れてしまいました。カンダタが両手で掴 んでいたまさにそこからです。男は、あっという間に、独楽のようにぐるぐる回りながらまっさ かさまに血の池に落ちてしましました。

短くなった糸が、それでもきらきらと輝いて空から垂れ下がっています。空は真っ暗で、月も星 もありません。

3

お釈迦様は、蓮池のふちに静かにたたずまれ、全てをご覧になっていらっしゃいました。カンダタが血の池の底に石のように沈むのを見とどけられると、何もなかったかのようにまたそぞろ歩きを続けられました。でもどこか悲しげなお顔です。自分だけが地獄から抜け出そうという冷酷な振る舞い、それに相当する罰を、男は受けることになった・・・お釈迦様はそれを悲しく思われたのでしょう。

蓮池の花々は、このようなことには全く無関係です。白い花は静かに揺れ、金色の芯からはよい 匂いが出ています。原作: 芥川龍之介