



The Goblin Tree

Japan

A Samurai dwelt in the Oni province and his name was Satsuma Shichizaemon. He had a garden, the most beautiful of any in the village. It was filled with flowering plants, and the shrubs had a delicious fragrance which filled the air. Golden-hearted lilies floated upon the tiny lake, dwarf pines waved their branches over the water's edge, and above all, dark and silent, towered a huge *enoki*, or goblin tree.

This tree had stood there for centuries, and no one had dared to cut a branch or even to pull one of its leaves.

Shichizaemon, however, was of a bad heart, and had no reverence for the things of his fathers. He wished the view from his window not to be hidden, and the *enoki* stood between him and the valley. So he gave orders to have the tree cut down.

That night his mother dreamed a dream. She saw before her a terrible dragon-like monster whose forked tongue spit fire, and who said to her:

'Mother of Satsuma Shichizaemon, beware! Your son shall die and all his house if he harm the *enoki*, for the spirits of the trees will not suffer insult to the goblin tree.'

Next day she told her son of her dream, but he only laughed at her, and said:

'If all the spirits of the earth and air and water were to come to you in dreams, still I should make way with this tree.'

Then he sent a woodman to cut down the tree. As the tall tree fell with a crash so loud as to frighten all the household, Satsuma also fell to the ground.

‘I am ill!’ he cried. ‘The tree! The tree!’

And he knew no more; for he was dead.

Soon too his wife fell ill, and then his mother. Within a month there remained not one of all his people. Even the servants disappeared from earth, all crying as their spirits departed, ‘A-a-e-e-e-i! The tree! The tree!’

Long the dwelling was left deserted. Stagnant waterweeds fouled the lake, and even the songs of the birds seemed mournful and sad.

At last it was remembered that there remained of the family of Satsuma but one person, a nun named Tikem, who dwelt in the temple at Yamashira. They sent to her saying:

‘O Tikem San, will you not come to the garden of your kinsman, and remove the terrible curse which rests upon it?’


‘I will come,’ she answered.

She came to the dwelling of Satsuma Shichizaemon, her kinsman, and all the people in the village watched in fear, lest the sickness of the goblin tree should come upon her. But O Tikem San feared not.

She abode in the house calmly attending to her duties, and she was well. Every day she went to the place where had stood the goblin tree, and there she offered up prayers for the kinsman who had perished. And there was no more curse, for the holiness of O Tikem San rested upon the place like a gentle breath from heaven.

And all the children of the village played happily in the sunlit garden where once had been the goblin tree. □

Adapted by Mary F. Nixon-Roulet (1908).

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Comments

Enoki is the name given in Japan to the Chinese hackberry (*Celtis sinensis*), an ornamental tree that can reach 20 metres in height and which in ancient Japan was considered sacred to the god Kojin. This gave it a magical character, being inhabited by *onis*, creatures from Japanese folklore that would have similarities to goblins and ogres in Western culture, and who would punish and torment evil humans. However, the existence of good *onis*, who would have a protective role, was also accepted.

Joly (1908) mentions the existence of an *enoki* near Tokyo, the *Yenkiri Enoki* – ‘the tree that breaks the union’ – to which jealous people would turn for help.

Interestingly, Henri L. Joly, speaking of the *enokis*, also relates the legend we have shared above, albeit with some significant changes, including the name of the samurai. Joly says:

According to legend, there was in Omi, an Enoki tree over one thousand years old, which grew amongst a forest of pines near the estate of a Daimio called SATSUMA BISHIZAEMON. The latter decided to have the tree felled, as it interfered with the landscape, seen from the castle, obstructing the view of a beautiful lake. The Daimio was beseeched not to carry out his idea, but without avail. During the night preceding the day fixed for the work, a dragon appeared to Satsuma’s mother, predicting the end of her son’s race if he did not desist; Satsuma was deaf to all prayers, and the work was proceeded with. As the tree fell to the ground, a terrible noise like a loud moan was heard, and Satsuma’s mother, his wife, his children, his retainers, and finally himself started to howl and run like mad animals. The Daimio hanged himself, and his mansion was deserted, until a princess of the Satsuma family, who had become a nun under the name of Jikin in the neighbouring Yamashiro temple of Kwannon, was prevailed upon to exorcise it. (Joly, 1908, p. 63)

In Japan, respect for trees, especially centuries-old and thousand-year-old trees, is a deeply rooted cultural element in the population, both among those who believe in *onis* and among people who do not share these beliefs.

Sources

Joly, H. L. (1908). *Legend in Japanese Art*. Londres: John Lane The Bodley Head.

Nixon-Roulet, M. F. (1908). The Goblin Tree. In *Japanese Folk Stories and Fairy Tales* (pp. 154-157). New York: American Book Co.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 6b: Place the burden of proof on those who argue that a proposed activity will not cause significant harm, and make the responsible parties liable for environmental harm.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 1a: Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

Principle 2a: Accept that with the right to own, manage, and use natural resources comes the duty to prevent environmental harm and to protect the rights of people.

Principle 6: Prevent harm as the best method of environmental protection and, when knowledge is limited, apply a precautionary approach.

Principle 6a: Take action to avoid the possibility of serious or irreversible environmental harm even when scientific knowledge is incomplete or inconclusive.

The Way Forward: This requires a change of mind and heart.