

Kumasaka

Arthur Waley

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A Priest from the Capital
Kumasaka No Chonan
Chorus

Priest:

These weary feet that found the World

Too sad to walk in, whither

Oh whither shall wandering lead them?

I am a priest from the Capital. I have never seen the East country, and now I am minded to go there on pilgrimage.

He describes the journey, walking slowly round the stage.

Over the mountains, down the mi road by a foam-flecked stream;

And through the woods of Awazu.

Over the long bridge of Seta

Heavily my footfall clangs.

In the bamboo-woods of Noji I await the dawn.

There where the morning dew lies thick, over the Greenfield Plain,

Green in name only for the leaves are red with autumn

In evening sunshine to the village of Akasaka I am come!

Kumasaka: It is convenient to call him this, but he is the ghost of Kumasaka, appearing in the guise of a priest.

Hey, you priest, I have something to say to you!

Priest:

What is it you would say to me?

Kumasaka

Kumasaka:

To-day is some one's birthday. I beg of you to pray for the salvation of his soul.

Priest:

I have left the World, and it is my business now to say such prayers; but of whom am I to think when I pray?

Kumasaka:

There is no need to know his name. He is buried in that tomb over there, among the rushes to this side of the pine tree. It is because he cannot get free that he needs your prayers.

Priest:

No, no; it will not do. I cannot pray for him unless I know his name.

Kumasaka:

Pray, none the less. For it is written, "All the creatures of the world shall be profited.

There shall be no distinction."

Priest:

From dying and being born.

Kumasaka:

Deliver him, oh deliver him!

Chorus:

For he that taketh a prayer unto himself

Even though his name be not named, if he receive it gladly,

Is the owner of the prayer.

Was not the promise made to the trees of the field,

To the soil of the land? Though the heart that prays marks no name upon the prayer,

Yet shall it be heard.

Kumasaka:

Then come back to my cottage with me and pass the night there.

Priest:

Kumasaka

Kumasaka

I will come.

They go into the cottage, which is represented by a wicker framework at the front.

Listen! I thought you were taking me to where there would be a chapel, so that I could begin my prayers. But here I can see no painted picture nor carven image that I could put up. There is nothing on the wall but a great pike, no handstaff, but only an iron crowbar; and other weapons of war are nailed up. What is the reason of this?

Kumasaka:

You must know that when I first took the vows of priesthood I went round from village to village here, to Tarui, Auhaka and Akasaka there is no end to them, but I know all the roads, through the tall grass at Aono and the thick woods of Koyasu, night or day, rain or fine. For I was a hill-bandit in those days, a thief of the night, tilting baggage from mules' backs; even stripping servant-girls of their clothes, as they went from farm to farm, and leaving them sobbing.

Then it was that I used to take with me that pike there and waving it in their faces, "Stand and deliver!" I would cry.

But at last a time came when it was not so. And after that time I was glad enough to find shelter even in such a place as this. I yielded my will and was content. For at last I had indeed resolved to leave the hateful World.

Oh petty prowess of those days!

Chorus:

For hand of priest unfit indeed

Such deeds and weapons had I thought;

Yet among gods

Hath not the Lord Amida his sharp sword?

Doth not the King of Love

Shoot arrows of salvation from his bow?

Tamon with tilted lance

Outbattled demons and hath swept away

All perils from the world.

Kumasaka:

Thoughts of love and pity

May be sins fouler

Kumasaka

Kumasaka

Chorus:

Than the Five Faults of Datta;

And the taking of life for faith

Be holiness greater

Than the six virtues of Bosatsu.

These things have I seen and heard.

But for the rest, is it not Thought alone

That either wanders in the trackless night

Of Error or awakes to the wide day?

"Master thy thoughts, or they will master thee,"

An ancient proverb says.

Speaking for Kumasaka.

"But I must have done, or dawn will find me talking still. Go to your rest, Sir; and I too will doze awhile." So he spoke, and seemed to go into the bedroom. But suddenly the cottage vanished: nothing was left but the tall grass. It was under the shadow of a pine-tree that he had rested!

There is usually an interlude to occupy the time while Kumasaka is changing his costume. An inhabitant of Akasaka tells stories of Kumasaka's exploits.

Priest:

I have seen strange things. I cannot sleep, no, not even for a while as little as the space between the antlers of a young stag. Under this autumn-winded pine-tree lying, all night long I will perform a service of chanted prayer.

Kumasaka: Reappearing with a scarf tied round his head and a long pike over his shoulder.

The wind is rising in the south-east. The clouds of the north-west are shifting; it is a dark night. A wild wind is sweeping the woods under the hill.

Chorus:

See how the branches are heaving.

Kumasaka:

The moon does not rise till dawn to-night; and even when she rises she will be covered.

Send along the order for an assault!

Kumasaka

Recollecting himself.

The whole heart divided between bow–hand and rein–hand, oh the sin of it! For ever seizing another's treasure!
Look, look on my misery, how my heart clings to the World!

Priest:

If you are Kumasaka himself, tell me the story of those days.

Kumasaka:

There was a merchant, a trafficker in gold, called Kichiji of the Third Ward. Each year he brought together a great store, and loading it in bales carried it up–country. And thinking to waylay him I summoned divers trusty men. . .

Priest:

Tell me the names of those that were chosen by you and the countries they came from.

Kumasaka:

There was Kakuj of Kawachi, and the brothers Surihari that had no rivals in fencing.

Priest:

Well, and from within the City itself among many there were

Kumasaka:

There was Emon of the Third Ward and Kozaru of Mibu.

Priest:

Skilful torch–throwers, in broken–attack

Kumasaka:

Their like will never be seen.

Priest:

And from the North country, from Echizen

Kumasaka:

There was Matsuwaka of Asau and Kur of Mikuni.

Priest:

And from the country of Kaga, from Kumasaka

Kumasaka

Kumasaka:

There was this Ch han, the first of them, a great hand at deeds of villainy; and with him seventy men of the band.

Priest:

On all the roads where Kichiji might be passing, up hill and down dale on every halting-place they spied, till at last

Kumasaka:

Here at the Inn of Akasaka we found him, a fine place, with many roads leading from it. We set watch upon the place. The merchants had sent for women. From nightfall they feasted. They roystered the hours away

Priest:

And at last, very late at night,

Kichiji and his brother, with no thought for safety,

Fell into a sodden sleep.

Kumasaka:

But there was with them a boy of sixteen.

He put his bright eye to a hole in the wall.

He did not make the least noise.

Priest:

He did not sleep a wink.

Kumasaka:

Ushiwaka! We did not know he was there.

Priest:

Then the robbers, whose luck was run out,

Kumasaka:

Thinking that the hour of fortune was come,

Priest:

Waited impatiently.

Chorus:

Kumasaka

Kumasaka

Oh how long it seemed till at last the order came.

Kumasaka:

Dash in!

Chorus:

And, hurling their firebrands,

In they rushed, each jostling to be first,

More of them and more, in a wild onslaught.

Not even the God of Peril had dared to face them.

But little Ushiwaka showed no fear.

He drew his belt-sword and met them.

The Lion Pounce, The Tiger Leap, The Bird Pounce . . .

He parried them all. They thrust at him but could not prevail.

Thirteen there were who attacked him;

And now, done to death, on the same pillow head to head they lie.

And others, wounded, have flung down their swords and slunk back weaponless,

Stripped of all else but life.

Then Kumasaka cried: "What demon or god can he be

Under whose hand all these have fallen? For a man he cannot be!

But even robbers need their lives! This is no work for me; I will withdraw."

And slinging his pike, slowly he turned to go.

Kumasaka:

I was thinking.

Chorus:

He was thinking as he went,

"Though this stripling slash so bravely,

Yet should Kumasaka employ his secret art,

Kumasaka

Kumasaka

Then though the boy be ogre or hobgoblin,
Waist-strangled he would be pressed to dust."
"I will avenge the fallen," he cried, and, turning back,
He levelled his pike and sheltered behind the wattled door,
Waiting for the urchin to come.
Ushiwaka saw him, and drawing his sword held it close to his side,
Stood apart and watched. But Kumasaka too stood with his pike ready.
Each was waiting for the other to spring.
Then Kumasaka lost patience. He lunged with his left foot and with his pike
Struck a blow that would have pierced an iron wall.
But Ushiwaka parried it lightly and sprang to the left.
Kumasaka was after him in a moment, and as he sprang nimbly over the pike
Turned the point towards him.
But as he drew back the pike, Ushiwaka crossed to the right.
Then levelling the pike, Kumasaka struck a great blow.
This time the boy parried it with a blow that disengaged them,
And springing into the air leapt hither and thither with invisible speed.
And while the robber sought him,
The wonderful boy pranced behind and stuck his sword through a chink in his coat of mail.
"Hey, what is that?" cried Kumasaka. "Has this urchin touched me?"
And he was very angry.
But soon Heaven's fatal ordinance was sealed by despair:
"This sword-play brings me no advantage," he cried; "I will wrestle with him."
Then he threw away his pike, and spreading out his great hands,
Down this corridor and into this corner he chased him, but when he would have grasped him,
Like lightning, mist, moonlight on the water,

Kumasaka

Kumasaka

The eye could see, but the hand could not touch.

Kumasaka:

I was wounded again and again.

Chorus:

He was wounded many times, till the fierce strength of his spirit weakened and weakened. Like dew upon the moss that grows.

Kumasaka:

Round the foot of this pine-tree

Chorus:

Are vanished the men of this old tale.

"Oh, help me to be born to happiness."

Kumasaka entreats the Priest with folded hands.

The cocks are crowing. A whiteness glimmers over the night.

He has hidden under the shadow of the pine-trees of Akasaka;

Kumasaka hides his face with his left sleeve.

Under the shadow of the pine-trees he has hidden himself away.