

Momotarō  
Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1924)

I

Once upon a time, long ago, there was a big peach tree hidden away, deep in the mountains. It might not be enough to just call it “big.” The branches of this peach tree spread above the clouds, and the roots of this peach tree reached down to the bowels of the earth, even as far as Hell. Perhaps when the heavens and earth were being created and Izanagi-no-mikoto flung peaches into the pebbles in order to drive back the eight thunder deities to Yomitsuhirasaka [Hell]—those peaches from the Age of the Gods were from the branches of this tree.

Starting from the dawn of the world, this tree bloomed once in 10,000 years and bore fruit once in 10,000 years. The flowers looked like crimson silk canopies dripping golden fringe. Actually—that the peaches, too, were big goes without saying. But, what was stranger than that was that in the place of a pit, those peaches each bore a beautiful child inside—immaculate conception, as it were.

Once upon a time, long ago, this tree, its branches that covered mountains and valleys and with numerous peaches attached, was quietly bathed in sunshine. In 1,000 years, none of the fruit that ripened once in 10,000 years had fallen to the ground. However, one lonely morning, fate took the form of a [magical] three-legged crow that swooped down onto the branch. Immediately, it pecked at a small peach, just kissed with red, and knocked it off. Truly, it fell from among the rising clouds and mist down to a river in a valley far below. Of course, the river—like a stream of smoke—coursed between the peaks and flowed on into the realm of men.

After this childbearing fruit left the recesses deep within the mountains, what sort of people got ahold of it? That is still more unnecessary to say. At the base of the river, an old woman—as Japanese children know—was washing the clothes or something of an old man who had gone to gather kindling...

II

Peach-born Momotarō resolved to go on a punitive expedition to Demon Island. The reason why he had made up his mind to do this was because he didn’t like going to work in the mountains or rivers or paddy fields like the old man and the old woman did. Upon hearing this talk, the elderly couple, who had reached the point where they inwardly were out of patience with this brat, decided to bring him whatever he said was necessary for his preparations to take to the field in the hopes of getting him out of the door as quickly as possible. Not only that—just as the Momotarō explanations also say, they even made *kibidango* [steamed millet buns] for his provisions on the road.

Momotarō’s spirits soared along the way to the punitive expedition to Demon Island. Suddenly, a big stray dog appeared. Famished eyes flashing, he addressed Momotarō as follows:

“Momotarō-san. Momotarō-san. What is it that you have there at your waist?”

“These are the number one *kibidango* in Japan,” Momotarō replied with a self-satisfied air. Of course, actually, it was unclear even to him whether these were the number one *kibidango* in all Japan. However, upon hearing “*kibidango*,” the dog immediately drew close to his side.

“Please give me one. I’ll join you.”

In a flash, Momotarō drew out his abacus. “One is impossible. I’ll give you ½.”

For a while, the dog obstinately repeated, “One, please.” But Momotarō never wavered in his response of “I’ll give you ½.” Thus, as with all business, he who has nothing must submit to the will of him who has something. Finally, with a sigh, the dog became Momotarō’s companion in exchange for half of a *kibidango*.

Later, as expected, in addition to the dog, Momotarō took a monkey and a pheasant into his service in exchange for ½ of a *kibidango* each. Unfortunately, however, they did not get along well. The dog, with its large fangs, made fun of the wimpy monkey. The monkey, swift at *kibidango* calculations, made fun of the proper-looking pheasant. The pheasant, well versed in seismology, made fun of the thick-headed dog. Since they continued this infighting, they didn’t give Momotarō any trouble even after he had taken them into his service.

All the same, the monkey grew hungry and suddenly proclaimed his dissatisfaction. He suggested that somehow, the idea of going along on a punitive expedition to Demon Island in exchange for about ½ a *kibidango* was a matter that required some thought. At that, the dog barked wildly and suddenly made to sink its fangs into the monkey. Had the pheasant not stopped him, the monkey—without waiting for the ‘Crabs’ Vengeance’ [to finish him off]—might have been already dead. However, while pacifying the dog, the pheasant instructed the monkey about the rules for proper conduct for lord and vassal, telling him to follow Momotarō’s orders. Nonetheless, since this was after the monkey had fled to the tops of the trees along the side of the road in order to avoid the dog’s attack, he wasn’t able to hear what the pheasant was saying very easily. It was Momotarō’s finesse that was able to satisfy the monkey. Looking up at the monkey, Momotarō gestured with his Rising Sun fan for the monkey to be off and coldly and deliberately told him, “Fine, fine. Don’t come along with us. For that, we won’t share a single bit of the treasure that we get from our punitive expedition to Demon Island.”

The monkey’s eyes grew round with desire. “Treasure? Whaaaat? There’s treasure on Demon Island?”

“There’s not a place *with* treasure. There’s a ‘Wishing Gavel’ that produces whatever you want when you strike it.”

“Well, if you used the Wishing Gavel to make umpteen more Wishing Gavels, you could get your hands on whatever you wanted all at once, couldn’t you? That’s good news. Pleeeeease take me with you.”

Momotarō once again, together with his companions, hastened along the way on his punitive expedition to Demon Island.

### III

Demon Island was a solitary island far off in the ocean. It was not just rugged mountains as is commonly believed. Actually, it was a beautiful natural paradise, one with towering palm trees and chirping Birds of Paradise. The demons born in this paradise loved peace, of course. Why, it is said that those beings called “demons” were originally a breed more hedonistic than we humans. The demons in the story of the man who had his wen taken danced the entire night long. The demons in the story of Inchling did not worry about any danger to themselves—they were smitten at the sight of the young lady who had come to call. The demons Shutendōji of Mt. Ōeyama or Ibaragidōji of Rashōmon Gate are doubtless thought of as quintessential demons. However, weren’t Ibaragidōji and his ilk just like those of us who are fond of the Ginza district? Wasn’t he just overly fond of Suzaku Avenue, stealthily showing himself at Rashōmon Gate from time to time? It’s true that Shutendōji, too, just

drunk sake in his cave at Mt. Ōeyama. The matter of the kidnapping of girls—if we don't, for the moment, inquire into the truth of it, it's nothing more than what the girls themselves said. If we accept everything that girls say as the truth—well, I've had my doubts about that for these last twenty years. Weren't Raikō and Shitenō both just slightly gallantry-mad devotees of women?

The demons lived quite carefree in the midst of this tropical landscape, strumming zithers, dancing dances, and chanting the poems of classical poets. The demon wives and daughters, too, wove cloth with looms, brewed sake, made bouquets of orchids—they lived no differently from our human wives and daughters. Moreover, demon [grand-]mothers, their hair already white and their fangs already fallen out, always took care of their grandchildren, regaling them with stories of we humans' frightfulness.

“If you all misbehave, you'll be sent to Human Island. Because demons who are sent to Human Island are most certainly killed, just like Shutendōji long ago, right? What? What are humans? Humans are indescribably dreadful things that have no horns and whose faces, hands, and legs are white. Moreover, the day that human girl came, she had smeared her naturally white face, hands, and feet with a layer of lead powder [to make them whiter]! If that were all, it would be fine, but... the men and women alike tell lies, have deep-seated desire, burn with jealousy, are filled with conceit, kill one another, set fires, steal, and are shiftless beasts...”

#### IV

Momotarō presented these blameless demons with the horribleness that follows a nation's founding. The demons forgot their metal staves and dashed pell-mell into the loftily towering palms, crying, “The humans are coming!”

“Onward! Onward! Kill the demons as you find them! None gets out alive!”

With his peach banner in one hand and firmly waving his Rising Sun fan, Momotarō gave the orders to the dog, monkey, and pheasant. The dog, monkey, and pheasant may not have been the most collegial of followers. However, such that they were starving animals, it is unlikely that they were well qualified to be troops of unparalleled loyalty and courage. They all stormed in pursuit of the fleeing demons. With a single bite, the dog killed demon youths. The pheasant, too, pecked demon children to death with its sharp beak. The monkey, too—since monkeys are closely related to us humans in character, before strangling the demon daughters, he certainly violated them as he pleased...

After all these atrocities had been committed, finally, the leader of the demons and those demons who had escaped with their lives surrendered to Momotarō. You can imagine Momotarō's satisfaction. Demon Island was no longer the heaven of warbling Birds of Paradise that it had been the day before. Demon corpses lay scattered everywhere amongst the palm trees. Momotarō, his banner in one hand and his three retainers in tow, forbiddingly approached the demon leader, who was prostrate like a great spider.

“Well, out of [my] extraordinary compassion, I am sparing your life. In exchange for that, you are to present every single one of the treasures of Demon Island.”

“Understood. I proffer them to you.”

“Also, in addition to that, you are to hand over your demon children as hostages.”

“This, too, we understand.”

The demon leader once more touched his forehead to the ground, after which he fearfully asked Momotarō, “I understand that we have done grievous insult to you for which reason we met with your punitive expedition. However, in truth, neither any of the other

demons of Demon Island nor I myself understand what the insult was. Thus, might we trouble you to enlighten us as to the circumstances of our insult?”

Momotarō calmly nodded. “Since I, Momotarō, best in all Japan, engaged the dog, monkey, and pheasant as my loyal [retainers], we came on a punitive expedition to Demon Island.”

“And what, please, was the reason that you engaged these three?”

“That was because I had the intent to go on a punitive expedition to Demon Island, so I made *kibidango* and hired them. Well? If you still don’t get it, I’m going to kill all of you.”

Shocked, the demon leader sprang three feet back and made a still more polite bow.

## V

With the demon children he’d taken hostage drawing along the cart of loot, Momotarō, best in all Japan, and the dog, monkey, and pheasant, returned to their hometown in triumph. That much is the story that Japanese children have long known. However, it is not necessarily the case that Momotarō led a happy life. When the demon children came of age, they bit and killed the pheasant warden and fled to Demon Island to hide. Not only that, the surviving demons on Demon Island came from time to time to try to set fire to Momotarō’s residence or kill him in his sleep. There is a rumor that the murder of the monkey was a case of mistaken identity. Momotarō did not keep his grief at these mounting sorrows to himself.

“Somehow, the tenacity of these demons is really causing problems.”

“It’s not strange that even the kindness of the master who saved their lives has been forgotten after all of this time.” The dog always regretfully moaned this [in response] when he saw Momotarō’s bitter expression.

At that time, too, five or six demon youths were on the lonely rocky shores of Demon Island, where, bathed in tropical moonlight, they fashioned bombs from coconuts in a plan for the independence of the island. Perhaps they had even forgotten how to love gentle demon girls? Silently, but seemingly happily, their eyes, round as teacups, glittered...

## VI

That peach tree that pierces the clouds and mist deep within the mountains unknown to man bears numerous fruits beyond counting today, just as of old. Of course, only the fruit that bore Momotarō has been borne away by the flow of the river in the valley. However, unknown numbers of future geniuses are still slumbering inside those fruits. When is the next time the great three-legged crow will show itself above the treetops? Ah, unknown numbers of future geniuses are still slumbering inside those fruits...