

THE STORY OF PRINCE YAMATO TAKE

FROM JAPANESE FAIRY TALES



The insignia of the great Japanese Empire is composed of three treasures which have been considered sacred, and guarded with jealous care from time immemorial. These are the Yatano-no-Kagami or the Mirror of Yata, the Yasakami-no-Magatama or the Jewel of Yasakami, and the Murakumo-no-Tsurugi or the Sword of Murakumo.

Of these three treasures of the Empire, the sword of Murakumo, afterwards known as Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi, or the grass-cutting sword, is considered the most precious and most highly to be honored, for it is the symbol of strength to this nation of warriors and the talisman of invincibility for the Emperor, while he holds it sacred in the shrine of his ancestors.

Nearly two thousand years ago this sword was kept at the shrines of Ite, the temples dedicated to the worship of Amaterasu, the great and beautiful Sun Goddess from whom the Japanese Emperors are said to be descended.

There is a story of knightly adventure and daring which explains why the name of the sword was changed from that of Murakumo to Kusanagi, which means grass clearing.

Once, many, many years ago, there was born a son to the Emperor Keiko, the twelfth in descent from the great Jimmu, the found-

er of the Japanese dynasty. This Prince was the second son of the Emperor Keiko, and he was named Yamato. From his childhood he proved himself to be of remarkable strength, wisdom and courage, and his father noticed with pride that he gave promise of great things, and he loved him even more than he did his elder son.

Now when Prince Yamato had grown to manhood (in the olden days of Japanese history, a boy was considered to have reached man's estate at the early age of sixteen) the realm was much troubled by a band of outlaws whose chiefs were two brothers, Kumaso and Takeru. These rebels seemed to delight in rebelling against the King, in breaking the laws and defying all authority.

At last King Keiko ordered his younger son Prince Yamato to subdue the brigands and, if possible, to rid the land of their evil lives. Prince Yamato was only sixteen years of age, he had but reached his manhood according to the law, yet though he was such a youth in years he possessed the dauntless spirit of a warrior of fuller age and knew not what fear was. Even then there was no man who could rival him for courage and bold deeds, and he received his father's command with great joy.





He at once made ready to start, and great was the stir in the precincts of the Palace as he and his trusty followers gathered together and prepared for the expedition, and polished up their armor and donned it. Before he left his father's Court he went to pray at the shrine of Ise and to take leave of his aunt the Princess Yamato, for his heart was somewhat heavy at the thought of the dangers he had to face, and he felt that he needed the protection of his ancestress, Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess. The Princess his aunt came out to give him glad welcome, and congratulated him on being trusted with so great a mission by his father the King. She then gave him one of her gorgeous robes as a keepsake to go with him and to bring him good luck, saying that it would surely be of service to him on this adventure. She then wished him all success in his undertaking and bade him good speed.

The young Prince bowed low before his aunt, and received her gracious gift with much pleasure and many respectful bows.

"I will now set out," said the Prince, and returning to the Palace he put himself at the head of his troops. Thus cheered by his aunt's blessing, he felt ready for all that might befall, and marching through the land he went down to the Southern Island of Kiushiu, the home of the brigands.

Before many days had passed he reached the Southern Island, and then slowly but surely made his way to the head-quarters of the chiefs Kumaso and Takeru. He now

met with great difficulties, for he found the country exceedingly wild and rough. The mountains were high and steep, the valleys dark and deep, and huge trees and boulders of rock blocked up the road and stopped the progress of his army. It was all but impossible to go on.

Though the Prince was but a youth he had the wisdom of years, and, seeing that it was vain to try and lead his men further, he said to himself:

"To attempt to fight a battle in this impassable country unknown to my men only makes my task harder. We cannot clear the roads and fight as well. It is wiser for me to resort to stratagem and come upon my enemies unawares. In that way I may be able to kill them without much exertion."

So he now bade his army halt by the way. His wife, the Princess Ototachibana, had accompanied him, and he bade her bring him the robe his aunt the priestess of Ise had given him, and to help him attire himself as a woman. With her help he put on the robe, and let his hair down till it flowed over his shoulders. Ototachibana then brought him her comb, which he put in his black tresses, and then adorned himself with strings of strange jewels just as you see in the picture. When he had finished his unusual toilet, Ototachibana brought him her mirror. He smiled as he gazed at himself—the disguise was so perfect.

He hardly knew himself, so changed was he. All traces of the warrior had disappeared,



and in the shining surface only a beautiful lady looked back at him.

Thus completely disguised, he set out for the enemy's camp alone. In the folds of his silk gown, next his strong heart, was hidden a sharp dagger.

The two chiefs Kumaso and Takeru were sitting in their tent, resting in the cool of the evening, when the Prince approached. They were talking of the news which had recently been carried to them, that the King's son had entered their country with a large army determined to exterminate their band. They had both heard of the young warrior's renown, and for the first time in their wicked lives they felt afraid. In a pause in their talk they happened to look up, and saw through the door of the tent a beautiful woman robed in sumptuous garments coming towards them. Like an apparition of loveliness she appeared in the soft twilight. Little did they dream that it was their enemy whose coming they so dreaded who now stood before them in this disguise.

"What a beautiful woman! Where has she come from?" said the astonished Kumaso, forgetting war and council and everything as he looked at the gentle intruder.

He beckoned to the disguised Prince and bade him sit down and serve them with wine. Yamato Take felt his heart swell with a fierce glee for he now knew that his plan would succeed. However, he dissembled cleverly, and putting on a sweet air of shyness he approached the rebel chief with slow steps and

eyes glancing like a frightened deer. Charmed to distraction by the girl's loveliness Kumaso drank cup after cup of wine for the pleasure of seeing her pour it out for him, till at last he was quite overcome with the quantity he had drunk.

This was the moment for which the brave Prince had been waiting. Flinging down the wine jar, he seized the tipsy and astonished Kumaso and quickly stabbed him to death with the dagger which he had secretly carried hidden in his breast.

Takeru, the brigand's brother, was terror-struck as soon as he saw what was happening and tried to escape, but Prince Yamato was too quick for him. Ere he could reach the tent door the Prince was at his heel, his garments were clutched by a hand of iron, and a dagger flashed before his eyes and he lay stabbed to the earth, dying but not yet dead.

"Wait one moment!" gasped the brigand painfully, and he seized the Prince's hand.

Yamato relaxed his hold somewhat and said.

"Why should I pause, thou villain?"

The brigand raised himself fearfully and said:

"Tell me from whence you come, and whom I have the honor of addressing? Hitherto I believed that my dead brother and I were the strongest men in the land, and that there was no one who could overcome us. Alone you have ventured into our stronghold, alone you have attacked and killed us! Surely you are more than mortal?"



Then the young Prince answered with a proud smile:—"I am the son of the King and my name is Yamato, and I have been sent by my father as the avenger of evil to bring death to all rebels! No longer shall robbery and murder hold my people in terror!" and he held the dagger dripping red above the rebel's head.

"Ah," gasped the dying man with a great effort, "I have often heard of you. You are indeed a strong man to have so easily overcome us. Allow me to give you a new name. From henceforth you shall be known as Yamato Take. Our title I bequeath to you as the bravest man in Yamato."

And with these noble words, Takeru fell back and died.

The Prince having thus successfully put an end to his father's enemies in the world, was prepared to return to the capital. On the way back he passed through the province of Idum. Here he met with another outlaw named Idzumo Takeru who he knew had done much harm in the land. He again resorted to stratagem, and feigned friendship with the rebel under an assumed name. Having done this he made a sword of wood and jammed it tightly in the shaft of his own strong sword. This he purposely buckled to his side and wore on every occasion when he expected to meet the third robber Takeru,

He now invited Takeru to the bank of the River Hinokawa, and persuaded him to try a swim with him in the cool refreshing waters of the river.

As it was a hot summer's day, the rebel was nothing loath to take a plunge in the river, while his enemy was still swimming down the stream the Prince turned back and landed with all possible haste. Unperceived, he managed to change swords, putting his wooden one in place of the keen steel sword of Takeru.

Knowing nothing of this, the brigand came up to the bank shortly. As soon as he had landed and donned his clothes, the Prince came forward and asked him to cross swords with him to prove his skill, saying:

"Let us two prove which is the better swordsman of the two!"

The robber agreed with delight, feeling certain of victory, for he was famous as a fencer in his province and he did not know who his adversary was. He seized quickly what he thought was his sword and stood on guard to defend himself. Alas! for the rebel the sword was the wooden one of the young Prince and in vain Takeru tried to unsheathe it—it was jammed fast, not all his exerted strength could move it. Even if his efforts had been successful the sword would have been of no use to him for it was of wood. Yamato Take saw that his enemy was in his power, and swinging high the sword he had taken from Takeru he brought it down with great might and dexterity and cut off the robber's head.

In this way, sometimes by using his wisdom and sometimes by using his bodily strength, and at other times by resorting to craftiness, which was as much esteemed in



those days as it is despised in these, he prevailed against all the King's foes one by one, and brought peace and rest to the land and the people.

When he returned to the capital the King praised him for his brave deeds, and held a feast in the Palace in honor of his safe coming home and presented him with many rare gifts. From this time forth the King loved him more than ever and would not let Yamato Take go from his side, for he said that his son was now as precious to him as one of his arms.

But the Prince was not allowed to live an idle life long. When he was about thirty years old, news was brought that the Ainu race, the aborigines of the islands of Japan, who had been conquered and pushed northwards by the Japanese, had rebelled in the Eastern provinces, and leaving the vicinity which had been allotted to them were causing great trouble in the land. The King decided that it was necessary to send an army to do battle with them and bring them to reason. But who was to lead the men?

Prince Yamato Take at once offered to go and bring the newly arisen rebels into subjection. Now as the King loved the Prince dearly, and could not bear to have him go out of his sight even for the length of one day, he was of course very loath to send him on his dangerous expedition. But in the whole army there was no warrior so strong or so brave as the Prince his son, so that His Majesty, unable to do otherwise, reluctantly complied with Yamato's wish.

When the time came for the Prince to start, the King gave him a spear called the Eight-Arms-Length-Spear of the Holly Tree (the handle was probably made from the wood of the holly tree), and ordered him to set out to subjugate the Eastern Barbarians as the Ainu were then called.

The Eight-Arms-Length-Spear of the Holly Tree of those old days, was prized by warriors just as much as the Standard or Banner is valued by a regiment in these modern days, when given by the King to his soldiers on the occasion of setting out for war.

The Prince respectfully and with great reverence received the King's spear, and leaving the capital, marched with his army to the East. On his way he visited first of all the temples of Ise for worship, and his aunt the Princess of Yamato and High Priestess came out to greet him. She it was who had given him her robe which had proved such a boon to him before in helping him to overcome and slay the brigands of the West.

He told her all that had happened to him, and of the great part her keepsake had played in the success of his previous undertaking, and thanked her very heartily. When she heard that he was starting out once again to do battle with his father's enemies, she went into the temple, and reappeared bearing a sword and a beautiful bag which she had made herself, and which was full of flints, which in those times people used instead of matches for making fire. These she presented to him as a parting gift.



The sword was the sword of Murakumo, one of the three sacred treasures which comprise the insignia of the Imperial House of Japan. No more auspicious talisman of luck and success could she have given her nephew, and she bade him use it in the hour of his greatest need.

Yamato Take now bade farewell to his aunt, and once more placing himself at the head of his men he marched to the farthest East through the province of Owari, and then he reached the province of Suruga. Here the governor welcomed the Prince right heartily and entertained him royally with many feasts. When these were over, the governor told his guest that his country was famous for its fine deer, and proposed a deer hunt for the Prince's amusement. The Prince was utterly deceived by the cordiality of his host, which was all feigned, and gladly consented to join in the hunt.

The governor then led the Prince to a wild and extensive plain where the grass grew high and in great abundance. Quite ignorant that the governor had laid a trap for him with the desire to compass his death, the Prince began to ride hard and hunt down the deer, when all of a sudden to his amazement he saw flames and smoke bursting out from the bush in front of him. Realizing his danger he tried to retreat, but no sooner did he turn his horse in the opposite direction than he saw that even there the prairie was on fire. At the same time the grass on his left and right burst into flames, and these began to spread swiftly

towards him on all sides. He looked round for a chance of escape. There was none. He was surrounded by fire.

"This deer hunt was then only a cunning trick of the enemy!" said the Prince, looking round on the flames and the smoke that crackled and rolled in towards him on every side. "What a fool I was to be lured into this trap like a wild beast!" and he ground his teeth with rage as he thought of the governor's smiling treachery.

Dangerous as was his situation now, the Prince was not in the least confounded. In his dire extremity he remembered the gifts his aunt had given him when they parted, and it seemed to him as if she must, with prophetic foresight, have divined this hour of need. He coolly opened the flint-bag that his aunt had given him and set fire to the grass near him. Then drawing the sword of Murakumo from its sheath he set to work to cut down the grass on either side of him with all speed. He determined to die, if that were necessary, fighting for his life and not standing still waiting for death to come to him.

Strange to say the wind began to change and to blow from the opposite direction, and the fiercest portion of the burning bush which had hitherto threatened to come upon him was now blown right away from him, and the Prince, without even a scratch on his body or a single hair burned, lived to tell the tale of his wonderful escape, while the wind rising to a gale overtook the governor, and he



was burned to death in the flames he had set alight to kill Yamato Take.

Now the Prince ascribed his escape entirely to the virtue of the sword of Murakumo, and to the protection of Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess of Ise, who controls the wind and all the elements and insures the safety of all who pray to her in the hour of danger. Lifting the precious sword he raised it above his head many times in token of his great respect, and as he did this he re-named it Kusanagino-Tsurugi or the Grass-Cleaving Sword, and the place where he set fire to the grass round him and escaped from death in the burning prairie, he called Yaidzu. To this day there is a spot along the great Tokaido railway named Yaidzu, which is said to be the very place where this thrilling event took place.

Thus did the brave Prince Yamato Take escape out of the snare laid for him by his enemy. He was full of resource and courage, and finally outwitted and subdued all his foes. Leaving Yaidzu he marched eastward, and came to the shore at Idzu from whence he wished to cross to Kadzusa.

In these dangers and adventures he had been followed by his faithful loving wife the Princess Ototachibana. For his sake she counted the weariness of the long journeys and the dangers of war as nothing, and her love for her warrior husband was so great that she felt well repaid for all her wanderings if she could but hand him his sword when he sallied forth to battle, or minister to his wants when he returned weary to the camp.

But the heart of the Prince was full of war and conquest and he cared little for the faithful Ototachibana. From long exposure in traveling, and from care and grief at her lord's coldness to her, her beauty had faded, and her ivory skin was burnt brown by the sun, and the Prince told her one day that her place was in the Palace behind the screens at home and not with him upon the warpath. But in spite of rebuffs and indifference on her husband's part, Ototachibana could not find it in her heart to leave him. But perhaps it would have been better for her if she had done so, for on the way to Idzu, when they came to Owari, her heart was well-nigh broken.

Here dwelt in a Palace shaded by pine-trees and approached by imposing gates, the Princess Miyadzu, beautiful as the cherry blossom in the blushing dawn of a spring morning. Her garments were dainty and bright, and her skin was white as snow, for she had never known what it was to be weary along the path of duty or to walk in the heat of a summer's sun. And the Prince was ashamed of his sunburnt wife in her travel-stained garments, and bade her remain behind while he went to visit the Princess Miyadzu. Day after day he spent hours in the gardens and the Palace of his new friend, thinking only of his pleasure, and caring little for his poor wife who remained behind to weep in the tent at the misery which had come into her life. Yet she was so faithful a wife, and her character so patient, that she never allowed a reproach to escape her lips, or a frown to mar the sweet



sadness of her face, and she was ever ready with a smile to welcome her husband back or usher him forth wherever he went.

At last the day came when the Prince Yamato Take must depart for Idzu and cross over the sea to Kadzusa, and he bade his wife follow in his retinue as an attendant while he went to take a ceremonious farewell of the Princess Miyadzu. She came out to greet him dressed in gorgeous robes, and she seemed more beautiful than ever, and when Yamato Take saw her he forgot his wife, his duty, and everything except the joy of the idle present, and swore that he would return to Owari and marry her when the war was over. And as he looked up when he had said these words he met the large almond eyes of Ototachibana fixed full upon him in unspeakable sadness and wonder, and he knew that he had done wrong, but he hardened his heart and rode on, caring little for the pain he had caused her.

When they reached the seashore at Idzu his men sought for boats in which to cross the straits to Kadzusa, but it was difficult to find boats enough to allow all the soldiers to embark. Then the Prince stood on the beach, and in the pride of his strength he scoffed and said:

“This is not the sea! This is only a brook! Why do you men want so many boats? I could jump this if I would.”

When at last they had all embarked and were fairly on their way across the straits, the sky suddenly clouded and a great storm arose. The waves rose mountains high, the

wind howled, the lightning flashed and the thunder rolled, and the boat which held Ototachibana and the Prince and his men was tossed from crest to crest of the rolling waves, till it seemed that every moment must be their last and that they must all be swallowed up in the angry sea. For Kin Jin the Dragon King of the Sea, had heard Yamato Take jeer, and had raised this terrible storm in anger, to show the scoffing Prince how awful the sea could be though it did but look like a brook.

The terrified crew lowered the sails and looked after the rudder, and worked for their dear lives' sake, but all in vain—the storm only seemed to increase in violence, and all gave themselves up for lost. Then the faithful Ototachibana rose, and forgetting all the grief that her husband had caused her, forgetting even that he had wearied of her, in the one great desire of her love to save him, she determined to sacrifice her life to rescue him from death if it were possible.

While the waves dashed over the ship and the wind whirled round them in fury she stood up and said:

“Surely all this has come because the Prince has angered Rin Jin, the God of the Sea, by his jesting. If so, I, Ototachibana, will appease the wrath of the Sea God who desires nothing less than my husband's life!”

Then addressing the sea she said:

“I will take the place of His Augustness, Yamato Take. I will now cast myself into your outraged depths, giving my life for his.



Therefore hear me and bring him safely to the shore of Kadzusa.”

With these words she leaped quickly into the boisterous sea, and the waves soon whirled her away and she was lost to sight. Strange to say, the storm ceased at once, and the sea became as calm and smooth as the matting on which the astonished onlookers were sitting. The gods of the sea were now appeased, and the weather cleared and the sun shone as on a summer’s day.

Yamato Take soon reached the opposite shore and landed safely, even as his wife Ototachibana had prayed. His prowess in war was marvelous, and he succeeded after some time in conquering the Eastern Barbarians, the Ainu.

He ascribed his safe landing wholly to the faithfulness of his wife, who had so willingly and lovingly sacrificed herself in the hour of his utmost peril. His heart was softened at the remembrance of her, and he never allowed her to pass from his thoughts even for a moment. Too late had he learned to esteem the goodness of her heart and the greatness of her love for him.

As he was returning on his homeward way he came to the high pass of the Usui Toge, and here he stood and gazed at the wonderful prospect beneath him. The country, from this great elevation, all lay open to his sight, a vast panorama of mountain and plain and forest, with rivers winding like silver ribbons through the land; then far off he saw the distant sea, which shimmered like a

luminous mist in the great distance, where Ototachibana had given her life for him, and as he turned towards it he stretched out his arms, and thinking of her love which he had scorned and his faithlessness to her, his heart burst out into a sorrowful and bitter cry:

“Azuma, Azuma, Ya!” (Oh! my wife, my wife!) And to this day there is a district in Tokio called Azuma, which commemorates the words of Prince Yamato Take, and the place where his faithful wife leapt into the sea to save him is still pointed out. So, though in life the Princess Ototachibana was unhappy, history keeps her memory green, and the story of her unselfishness and heroic death will never pass away.

Yamato Take had now fulfilled all his father’s orders, he had subdued all rebels, and rid the land of all robbers and enemies to the peace, and his renown was great, for in the whole land there was no one who could stand up against him, he was so strong in battle and wise in council.

He was about to return straight for home by the way he had come, when the thought struck him that he would find it more interesting to take another route, so he passed through the province of Owari and came to the province of Omi.

When the Prince reached Omi he found the people in a state of great excitement and fear. In many houses as he passed along he saw the signs of mourning and heard loud lamentations. On inquiring the cause of this he was told that a terrible monster had ap-



peared in the mountains, who daily came down from thence and made raids on the villages, devouring whoever he could seize. Many homes had been made desolate and the men were afraid to go out to their daily work in the fields, or the women to go to the rivers to wash their rice.

When Yamato Take heard this his wrath was kindled, and he said fiercely:

“From the western end of Kiushiu to the eastern corner of Yezo I have subdued all the King’s enemies—there is no one who dares to break the laws or to rebel against the King. It is indeed a matter for wonder that here in this place, so near the capital, a wicked monster has dared to take up his abode and be the terror of the King’s subjects. Not long shall it find pleasure in devouring innocent folk. I will start out and kill it at once.”

With these words he set out for the Ibu-ki Mountain, where the monster was said to live. He climbed up a good distance, when all of a sudden, at a winding in the path, a monster serpent appeared before him and stopped the way.

“This must be the monster,” said the Prince; “I do not need my sword for a serpent. I can kill him with my hands.”

He thereupon sprang upon the serpent and tried to strangle it to death with his bare arms. It was not long before his prodigious strength gained the mastery and the serpent lay dead at his feet. Now a sudden darkness came over the mountain and rain began to fall, so that for the gloom and the rain the

Prince could hardly see which way to take. In a short time, however, while he was groping his way down the pass, the weather cleared, and our brave hero was able to make his way quickly down the mountain.

When he got back he began to feel ill and to have burning pains in his feet, so he knew that the serpent had poisoned him. So great was his suffering that he could hardly move, much less walk, so he had himself carried to a place in the mountains famous for its hot mineral springs, which rose bubbling out of the earth, and almost boiling from the volcanic fires beneath.

Yamato Take bathed daily in these waters, and gradually he felt his strength come again, and the pains left him, till at last one day he found with great joy that he was quite recovered. He now hastened to the temples of Ise, where you will remember that he prayed before undertaking this long expedition. His aunt, priestess of the shrine, who had blessed him on his setting out, now came to welcome him back. He told her of the many dangers he had encountered and of how marvelously his life had been preserved through all—and she praised his courage and his warrior’s prowess, and then putting on her most magnificent robes she returned thanks to their ancestress the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, to whose protection they both ascribed the Prince’s wonderful preservation.

Here ends the story of Prince Yamato Take of Japan.