

## ARRESTING THE STONE BUDDHA

A Japanese Tale retold

by Kate Walker

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IT WAS GRANDPA'S job to take the family's cotton goods to market, and he always came home with the most amazing tales. So amazing, sometimes, they were very hard to believe.

Then one day grandpa said to Kenji, his grandson, "I'm getting tired. It's your job to take the goods to market now."

Kenji couldn't wait. He set out early next morning with his fifty bundles of cotton goods. It was a heavy load but he marched along, proud to be such a young wayfarer on so important a journey.

About ten o'clock he stopped to rest at a wayside shrine. It was just a bamboo shelter over a small stone statue of Buddha. Kenji placed his bundles of goods on the ground beside him, stretched out at the feet of the smiling statue and fell asleep. When he woke up a little while later, his bundles were gone.

Kenji panicked, but only for a moment. He knew what to do. Quickly he hurried back to the village through which he'd just passed and told the local policeman, "Someone has stolen the goods I was taking to market."

The policeman's name was Yamaguchi. Straight away he said, "Don't worry! I'll run for Mr O-oka. He's our district judge. He's a very clever man. He'll catch your thief for you." Yamaguchi hurried off and soon returned with a strange little man.

The little judge also acted very fast. "We'll hold court, at once," he said, "in the Inn yard!"

Wasn't that acting a little too fast? Kenji thought. How could they hold a trial until the thief was caught? But Mr O-oka was not to be argued with. He demanded a table and chair be brought into the yard and he said aloud, "Let the court begin!"

Mr O-oka ordered Kenji to tell his story, and as Kenji did, more and more people wandered into the inn yard to see what this was about. When Kenji finished, Yamaguchi, told how he'd seen the boy pass through the village earlier carrying his load.

“Just as he said,” the policeman cried, “fifty rolls of cotton goods at least!”

“So,” Mr O-oka said to Kenji, “when you went to sleep at the foot of the Buddha, your goods were beside you. When you woke up, they were gone.”

“Exactly,” said Kenji.

“Case solved!” said the judge.

The people in the inn yard began to glance at each other with puzzled smiles. “This is nonsense,” some whispered. Others called to passers-by, “Come and hear this!”

Despite the whispering and the steadily growing crowd, the little judge carried on.

“Buddha,” he said, “was the only one there when the goods were stolen. He must be the thief. Yamaguchi, get to the shelter and arrest the Buddha and bring him here. For his crime he must be charged and sentenced.”

“At once, sir!” Yamaguchi snapped to attention, then hurried away.

The little judge rose and walked into the Inn where he ordered tea.

The people began to chatter nosily. By the time Yamaguchi came struggling back with the stone Buddha, every person from the district was there. They all wanted to hear for themselves this crazy little judge pass sentence on a statue.

As Yamaguchi stood the stone Buddha before the judge's table, the crowd jeered and made donkey noises. Then when the judge himself returned, the crowd laughed and call out now much they thought the statue should be fined, and what prison it should be sent to.

Mr O-oka stood like a statue himself until every person there was laughing and calling out. Then he snapped: “You forget, this is a court of law!” His commanding voice stunned them to silence. “By laughing and joking you are in contempt of court. That is a serious crime and you are all subject to imprisonment or a fine!”

Kenji couldn't believe his ears. What about his stolen goods! The little judge seemed to have forgotten all about those. Several people came forward and apologised to the judge.

"I cannot alter the law," the judge said. "Each of you must pay a fine or go to prison." And the fine he imposed was one roll of cotton goods per person, to be paid immediately.

The villagers hurried away and came back with their cotton goods. They paid them to Mr O-oka, who kept a strict list of all items and names.

The rolls of cotton were taken to Yamaguchi's house, where Kenji sat holding his head. He would never get his family's goods back now. Whoever had stolen them would be long gone. Maybe the judge thought to give him the cotton goods collected as fines, to take to market. But they were mostly used and tatty, except for...!

Kenji leapt up. Among the fines paid to the little judge was one roll that was brand new. Kenji recognised it at once. It was one of his bundles!

Thus the thief was caught and all fifty rolls recovered. All the other goods, paid as fines, were returned to their owners and Kenji continued on his way.

He couldn't get home quick enough to tell his family the story. They all laughed, but none of them believed him and he couldn't understand why.

But his grandpa took him aside and told him, "They've never been to market like you and I, Kenji." The old man winked, "They've no idea what amazing people you can meet along the way."