

The Boy's Sacrifice

In the province of Kyungsang the small city of Yongyang lies at the foot of the mountain called Irwolsan. In an ancient time there lived in that place an honest and industrious family, consisting of three members, an old father, burdened with worries, a sick mother, and a tall and slender boy, nearly thirteen years old.

Every day the father would go out to cut wood. Whenever he reached the first height of Kogay, the level part of the pass, he would pause, as we do ourselves, to stand for a moment before the ghost tree. Then he would throw a stone or a small copper coin on the pile and sigh, "Lord Mountain Spirit, make my old woman healthy again." Then he climbed higher, deeper into the forest, and worked till evening when, loaded with wood, he would start for home.

But in the narrow hut his wife became sicker and sicker. Many doctors called, only to leave again, for none knew the way to help the woman. All the medicines used turned out to be worthless: Finally an old and experienced doctor and magician declared, "When the only son sacrifices himself, only then can the mother's sickness be healed."

Everyone in the house became frightened and gloomy, yet the boy, young as he was, remained calm and said that he would gladly offer a sacrifice of his life if his mother would then become healthy again, but he asked for a delay of three days in order to be of service to his father in the woodcutting.

On the third day the boy again accompanied his father into the woods. When they came to the high pass, he felt so tired that he asked his father to let him stay behind and rest a bit. The man gladly agreed to this, and the boy lay down in the shadow of the ghost tree and went to sleep.

Meanwhile something very strange happened at the father's house. The mother lay moaning in pain on her hard bed, when a boy came to the window, looked into the room, stepped inside and went up to the sick woman. "Mother," he said, "I am ready now. You can let me be put to death, and prepare the required medicine when I am dead, according to the doctor's words."

"By no means!" replied the mother. "I would rather die than sacrifice my only, beloved son. My sickness is beyond help!"

The woman found the boy's bright face very extraordinary, and the longer she watched it the brighter it shone, until her son stood before her, more beautiful and graceful than ever. Since his mother would no longer make the sacrifice, he tried to urge it upon her but couldn't persuade her again.

Into the middle of this affectionate argument stepped the doctor, who tore the clothes from the boy's body and threw him into a cauldron of boiling water. The boy became smaller and more wrinkled, a delicate smell of ginseng wafted from the

cauldron, and the viscous mixture became as red as blood. The doctor forced the woman to take the curing medicine. No sooner had she taken it, than her real son rushed in the door and cried out, "Mother, here I am, accept me as a sacrifice!"

Both the woman and the doctor were terribly frightened, for now for the first time they suspected that a ginseng boy had come in place of the real son and had given himself as a sacrifice. And from this hour the woman was entirely cured and thanked the Mountain Spirit on her knees for her deliverance.

On this day the father came home earlier than usual with his load of wood. The son was explaining how he had had a strange dream, and all those present urged him to tell more, so he began:

"Today I was a great deal more tired than usual. I could hardly keep up with Father's steps. When we finally came to the Kogay, even with the best intention I could go no farther, so I lay down in the shadow of the ghost tree and soon fell asleep. I dreamed that lovely birds were singing, and a very beautiful boy with a golden face, red shorts, and a purple jacket came up to me, remained standing before me, laughed and spoke. 'I love you very much; wish for anything and I will give it to you.' I never thought twice, but said, 'My mother is extremely ill. If I am allowed to ask you for one thing, it is this: make my mother well.' The boy nodded and answered, 'You are a brave child! Because you have asked for your mother's health, and not for money or positions of honor, I will not only grant your wish, but will also make you extremely prosperous. I will go myself and heal your mother of her sickness.' Then the little boy hurried away. I heard again the beautiful birdsong and then I woke up. I was completely light at heart. Now, Mother, when I see you well, I am truly happy for the first time, for now I know that it was not a mere dream, which never finds fulfillment, but the voice of the Mountain Spirit." And he kissed his mother.

Now everyone was happy, and the father hurried off to bring his thanks and worship to the Mountain Spirit. The mother also, when she became stronger, made a pilgrimage to the ghost tree. And the son became one of our most famous writers; his fame has lasted from the mid-fourteenth century to this day and his name is on all lips: this was Kim Sayong who called himself Kim Antong.