

## The Impatient Doctor

by Shinjo Takame

There was once a doctor, well known in the small village he lived in and beyond for his knowledge, talent and the success he had treating his patients. People would come a long distance to consult him, go to his modest house and leave with the hope they would get well.

But the doctor was also a bad tempered man, rude and abrupt with people. Patients were made to wait outside until the doctor curtly called them in. They were then made to kneel before the doctor and recite their symptoms. The doctor would then tell them what ailed them and then write them a note which he stamped with his seal for them to take to the village apothecary. The doctor lived alone and had no friends, for he could not tolerate the simple people of the village. When he was not seeing his patients he would read, late into the evening. He often looked thin as his reading would have him neglect his meals.

One windy autumn afternoon, his house was rather quiet and when his current patient was about to leave, the doctor asked him if there was anyone else waiting.

"There is only a young lady there," replied the patient.

When the patient left the doctor called for the next one to come in, not looking up from his notes. He didn't hear anything so he curtly repeated the summons. Then he looked up, and was startled to see that the young lady had already entered. Usually this was when the patient knew to recite their symptoms, and if they did not the doctor was sure to remind them. But there was something about her that the doctor felt that would be inappropriate.

She wore clothing of a richness in colour and fabric that was not usually seen in village, on her head a wide conical hat that was draped with a gauzy veil that partially hid her down-turned face.

"I am sorry, I didn't hear you come in," said the doctor softly. "How can I help you?"

The woman looked up at him, her face was pale, very-different to the sun-browned faces of the villagers who usually came to him. She opened her mouth but no sound came out, she raised her hand to her throat.

"I am sorry," he said again, he passed his own brush and a blank piece of paper.

*I am mute*, the young lady wrote on the piece of paper, *please cure me*.

The doctor looked at her with pity. He wasn't sure if he could, and he so wanted to help her.

"I, I need to look into your mouth," he said, feeling clumsy and coarse around her.

She removed her hat and opened her mouth, the doctor knelt closer to her and looked inside her mouth. At first he couldn't see anything but then he saw a small red thread at the back of her throat.

"Hold still," he said, getting his tweezers. He reached inside her mouth to grab the thread, pulling it out. But it still continued, he pulled it gently, winding it around his hand until it reached the end.

"Can you speak now?" the doctor asked.

"Yes," said the lady, her voice was soft but sounded a bit scratchy. "Thank you," she made a bow.

He poured her a cup of cold water. "There is some medicine that can help you," he said, writing it down on a piece of paper and marking it with his seal. "You need to take this to the apothecary."

He held the paper out to her, but she didn't take it. She glanced at it blankly as if she did not know what to do with it.

"Or, I could bring it to you, if you like," added the doctor.

"That would be very kind, thank you," she said, replacing her hat on her head. "I live just over the bridge, you will see the gate just as before enter the forest, then follow the path."

The doctor thought she must live considerable distance from the village. "You live there, by yourself?" he asked.

She got to her feet and started to head for the door. "No, my father rules there," she said, "he will be most pleased to meet you."

She pulled the veil back over her face. A servant who had been waiting outside the doctor's house brought forward a horse. The servant helped her mount the horse sidesaddle and led her off. The doctor stood there outside his house for sometime after he had left. He had never seen the like of her before, never imagined that he would. She was like a rare and beautiful flower that had been sheltered from the perils and troubles of the world. But why had he not heard of her before? As far as he heard there were no nobility that lived near here, and she was clearly noble.

But he would get to see her again when he brought her the medicine.

He went to the apothecary that very day, but it was late when the medicine was ready so he took it over the next morning. He crossed the bridge, and just as she said there was a gate just on the edge of the forest. It hung with a straw rope and fluttered with prayer streamers. He opened the gate and walked along the path.

The forest was thick with pine trees that blocked out much of the light, but as they parted he came in sight of a castle, tall, white and wooden against the morning sky. At the castle gate there were armoured guards carrying spears. Was he mistaken? Could this be where she lived?

He approached the guards. They lowered their spears and bowed and the doctor approach, letting him pass. When he went inside he was met by a servant.

"You are the doctor who cured the Princess?" the servant asked.

The doctor was confused for a moment. "Ah, yes, yes I did," he said.

"You are expected," said the servant, leading the way, "you will be received in the man hall."

The "main hall" that the doctor was led to was a finely decorated reception chamber. The walls were gilded and painted with mountain scenes. The floor was a wide stretch of fresh tatami and at the far end of the room upon a small dais was the lord of the castle and on his left was clearly his daughter, the young lady whom he had cured.

"You are the doctor?" asked the lord. "Come forward young man and tell me of yourself."

The doctor came forward and knelt before him, bowing low. He had worn his best clothes but he felt awkward and shabby in this place.

"I have brought the medicine for the princess, my lord," said the doctor.

The lord smiled kindly, his face was lined with age and wisdom. "You have done us a great service," he said.

"I only acted as a doctor should," the doctor replied.

The princess smiled at him, she wore a many robes of many colours, her dark hair hung long framing her white painted face and red lips. "Will you join us for some tea?"

"Yes, thank you," said the doctor.

A servant provided small tables and tea was served. The lord asked the doctor polite questions about himself, his work and interests. The doctor found the lord was a pleasure to talk to, and before he knew it much time had passed.

"My apologies," said the lord. "I know you have patients that are depending upon you."

"But would you visit again?" asked the Princess.

"Of course, and thank you for your hospitality," said the doctor.

This became the first of many visits that the doctor made to the castle. He and the lord would talk, sometimes over tea, sometimes on opposite sides of a go board. The princess was always there and she often would join in their conversation, revealing her learning and her intelligence. Autumn passed into winter, the doctor continued his even when the snow began to fall. He enjoyed the visits not just for the conversations he had with the lord, but for the company of the Princess. And as the winter went on, his affection for the Princess grew.

Winter passed into spring, the flowers began to bloom. One afternoon when he visited the castle, the Princess took him into the garden where the flowers were blooming. The doctor saw her, among the blossoms with flower petals flying around her, and his heart ached with love of her. But he knew he was not worthy, so he had to remain silent.

The Princess stepped close to him. "If there there is something in your heart, speak."

The doctor turned away, but he knew he could refuse her nothing. "I must confess that I love you, I have loved ever since the first day you came into my house. I wish to marry you for I cannot be without you. But I am not worthy of you, I cannot provide for you in the way you are accustomed to."

"But you are wrong," said the Princess. "You won the right to marry me when you cured me. Speak to my father, he will surely consent."

Her father did, but he did so with some reluctance. "I do not approve of these sorts of marriages, but I will not stop it," he said. "But remember, you speak even one word to her in anger and she will leave you."

And so the two were married. The Princess came to live with the doctor, putting aside her long, flowing court garments for a simple kosode robe and wrap skirt.

And she had hardly lived a week at the doctor's house before he wondered how he had lived without her before. She brought joy and life to his house, singing as she conducted her domestic duties. The doctor was always sure of a hot meal and a smile at the end of his day. She also changed how he saw his patients, telling him that him shouting for them was "not kind" and instead she would come to the door and tell the patient "The doctor will see you now", asking about their ailments and hoping they were feeling better.

The people in the village also noticed a change in the doctor himself. He looked not as thin and tired, as he only rarely stayed up reading in the evenings instead seeking his wife's company. His tone was gentler and less impatient with his patients.

His wife's kind nature and cheery disposition won her several friends around the village. The doctor seldom accompanied her when she visited them, so she would tell him when she returned. Chatting brightly to him about what had happened. As time passed, this started to irritate him. One autumn evening, several years after they had been married, his wife was visiting a friend and the doctor took the opportunity of the quiet to do some reading. He heard her return, beginning to talk to as soon as she entered the house.

The doctor frowned, he had been hoping for more quiet reading but he was not to have it. His wife continued to chatter as she prepared the evening meal, making a clatter in the kitchen. This was intolerable, the doctor looked up from his reading and addressed her sharply.

"Would you be quiet!"

His wife stopped talking, stopped moving completely, she stared at him. She then started to walk out of the house.

"No, no!" the doctor cried, following her.

She walked back towards her father's castle, the doctor following, calling her frantically, the pale moon casting shadows on the two of them. As she walked, her simple clothes disappeared to be placed with her flowing colourful robes. The doctor begged her to stop, but she did not stop, did not even turn around.

They crossed the bridge, coming towards the bamboo gate on the path to the castle. But as she approached the gate, the moonlight seemed to shine through her. She then walked right through the bamboo gate and disappeared.

The doctor cried out in shock, opening the gate and running up the path to where the castle should be. But it was not there, all he saw was a mound where it once stood, a mess of weeds where once was the garden.

The doctor sank to his knees and wept.

Eventually, the doctor returned to seeing his patients. Where before he had been impatient with them, now he was a recluse. He would see his patients behind a screen, the doctor only outlined in silhouette. They would recite their symptoms as before, but instead of giving them the note for the apothecary, they would have to go to a small window at the side of the house where the doctor

would put it so he did not have to see anyone.

The people of the village wondered where his wife had gone, but the doctor gave no answers.

The years passed, the doctor lived alone, seeing no one and rarely leaving his house.

Then one day, when the doctor had become an old man, he found he did not have the strength to rise from his bed. He lay there not moving, sleeping lightly, until he heard the sound of someone's step in his house.

"Who is there?" he asked weakly.

The Princess appeared, dressed in the colourful robes and with her hair flowing free as he had seen her in her father's castle. She knelt beside his bed.

"My wife," he croaked. "I am so sorry..."

She gently put her finger on his lips, silencing him. "I have come to take you back to the castle," she said softly. "It is now time for you to live there always."

She gently took his hand.