THE WOOD-CARVER'S LAST PANEL: BY CHARLES H. SHINN

In the days of old Japan, when strange things now and then came to pass because men had believing hearts, there was a wood-carver who lived alone, in a very small hut on the edge of a forest, and very often sat beside the gate of an ancient temple of the gods. Every year since his boyhood he had carved a votive panel, and had given it to the priest of the temple, and as his mastery increased the fame of these panels went abroad. Nothing did he ever carve which he had not first seen with the inner eye, and meditated upon, long and truly, and never would he put a price upon his work, but gave it where he thought it should be, or kept it in silence.

Once to his nearest friend, the old priest, he said: "I have entered a garden, a labyrinth, full of wonders and of the sound of new languages, the visions of untold forms of life; sometimes I seem to be near its heart, and its secrets, and again I wander far away, in glooms and desolations."

The everyday senses of the old wood-carver were failing him, but ever the sweetness and strength of his face grew more visible, and all who went up to the temple took joy in watching him carve, and in sitting near and sharing with him their homely meals, for it was a land of peasants, and he was the son of a long-departed pruner of trees, and had grown up amongst them.

Ever, as the years passed, the wood-carver chose bits of wood here and there—things which had been cast aside and forgotten, and each result he related in some wise and serene manner to the medium through which it was wrought. When the kindly old wood-chopper on the mountainside above the temple passed from mortal sight, the carver asked for a broken handle of his axe. Presently on that worn piece of gray kaki-wood he so marvelously shaped a honey bee on a golden-blossoming spray of mountain pine that those who saw it declared that the wings of the toiling bee moved and murmured as if it were alive, and that it somehow reminded them of the busy little old wood-chopper himself.

Another time, after the carver had brooded long upon the mystery of lands beyond the gate of dreams, it chanced that he saw in the dust a child's broken toy of the silky brown, fragrant cinnamon wood, and presently he shaped it into a pale and secret-holding akebia bud, in the axil of a mothering leaf, and touched with all the marvel of dews and skies. Then, one night, not long after, when the tale of this was being told, a peasant woman, tall and silent, a mother in the robe of mourning, crept to his feet, in the dusk... Gently
and slowly he drew forth the little carven panel made from the broken toy of her child, and put it into her hands with a smile which seemed to her more than mortal. Nor could she be restrained from kissing his sandaled foot, and then she went away weeping new and blessed tears such as she had not shed since the child was taken from her sight.

But the ancient wood-carver sat thinking of the wise masters of death and of life, and of his sorrowful neighbor, the peasant woman, until the star of the morning shone. And he longed with utter longing that even more of himself, clear to the last drop of his life and strength might dwell in his carvings, and that they might at last somehow learn to walk forth alone wherever they were needed most. Then he went into the temple at daybreak to pray as was his wont, for mightier and more world-helping craftsmanship, for the mother’s passion had stirred his soul with sorrow and longing, and the sight of his votive tablets gave him only pain, so mean and so dead they seemed, so little beside the midnight visions in his labyrinthian gardens whose clue he had now sought for more than seventy years.

His friend the priest spoke to him, saying: “Brother, a man came but last night from far off, from the side of Fujiyama, the Sacred Mountain, and brought what he had found there—a piece of ancient, long-seasoned, very fragrant, wax-pale cedar, sealed up in a cave and marked with the old-time ideograph of that one among the fathers of Japan who once carved out of a gingko tree of the temple a human figure which later, in time of need, walked out of its place and rang the bell which called a province to arms.

“Unsealing the cave, he had taken the long-hidden panel of cedar, because it was made plain to him that this wood had been put away, in the days of the beginnings, for an old carver by the gate of this temple in order that he might spend and be spent upon it. Then,” said the priest, “he laid this slab of cedar in my hands, and went out through the gate, past where you sat, with a woman in mourning at your feet, and one of his hands was stretched out over both of you.”

The old wood-carver thought of the stories told among the elders of his craft, that the very first among men to shape in wood such dreams as his own had lived in a hollow tree in a great forest on the side of Fujiyama, and had so wrought in toil and suffering that the gods gave to him the inmost desire of his soul. Thus it came to pass as the elders told, that smiles and speech were possible when they chose to the immortal creatures he carved, in earth’s fresh youth, for the children of men.
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The old wood-carver took the gift humbly and gladly; he went into a glade of the forest and there began to shape the panel of which he had long dreamed. The people who loved him brought food, and little children played in the grass, and peace and hope dwelt in his soul as he carved a thing of wonder from the pale and fragrant cedar.

“Thou first of all the wood-carvers of Nippon,” he thought, “how easy it was to find that which thou hadst sealed up! Now lead me, day by day, into the far, high places of art, clear as mountain tops. Brother of my heart, help me to make visible that which is in this living and immortal piece of cedar. Let it be for the service of all my fellow toilers, and let my life pass into it for good, not for evil.”

AT LAST the old wood-carver came back to the temple bringing his panel, hidden under flowers and fern leaves, and surrounded as he walked by groups of happy children, and followed by mothers carrying babes. Then he prayed in the temple, and he drew aside the coverings, and there was the revealing vision of his heart. There stood two divine and immortal children in a forest, by a river. One, an eager boy, was like the earliest moment of a spring morning in a new land, when all things welcome the day-break. The other, a girl with quiet, serene poise, was like the veiled tenderness of dusk and twilight when one faint star begins to appear in the deepening skies.

Then the priest said to the wood-carver: “One is like Life and the other is like Death, and both are equally beautiful to me.” And the peasant women said: “They seem to us dear as our own children, and we wish they were alive and toiling in our fields with us.” And the children who were gathered about the old wood-carver said: “They are really just as alive as we are, and we think that sometime they will come and play with us.”

Just then the priest placed the votive tablet in the place prepared for it, and laid below it the wood-carver’s simple knives, whetstones, polishes and other tools of his craft, for his last panel was now completed.

One night, very soon after this, the woman who had once sat weeping by the temple gate came bearing a babe, and spoke in wonder to the wood-carver as he sat in quiet meditation by the temple gate.

“When this babe came to take the earth place of the boy I lost, whose broken toy thou didst carve, I sat alone, holding him, and I heard a light foot swiftly coming across the gardens and then a marvelous youth entered, and the fragrance of cedar wood filled the hut, and he laid your worn knife in my hand, as a sign that the babe was
to be a wood-carver, and see, he added another bud with a touch of his finger to the akebia bud you cut for me. And then sunlight grew about him as he smiled on us. Then he went back to the temple across the rice field, and he is but just returned.”

Together they went in, and one of the wood-carver’s knives was gone from the temple wall, and the eyes of the beautiful child still shone, and the mud of the rice field was faintly spattered on his garment’s hem, and they were conscious that the child of the cedar panel laughed sweetly and lightly and smiled upon them, and went to sleep again, before their eyes.

Then it chanced that the old priest grew ill, and one night as he lay in silence, thinking of the journey he was soon to take, he saw in the moonlight through his open door, the divine girl of the shadows step from the panel on the wall, and come to him, nurse, helper and physician, giving him to drink from the cup she carried. When morning came, and he had gone on that journey, there was in his hand a wild rose from the far-off grave of the one he had loved most in all his life, and the look on his face was one of infinite happiness and of unspoken surprise.

So passed the years, and in all that province nightly walked to and fro, on errands wise, far, serene, the two children of the cedar tablet, until the tale of them reached certain high and lordly rulers, who set a trap to surprise and tether those who thus went forth, a trap that failed miserably. But after this happened, to the sorrow of many, only once more, when the old wood-carver passed away, did the children of the cedar tablet go out among men. That once they stood together before him, in the darkness of his hut, as the tale runs, kneeling, as if he were their father. Then the bright one embraced him, and the serene one of silence and awe put her arms about him, and took him to the wood-carver’s ancient cave on the side of Fujiyama.

Almost they breathe still, so instinct with life and beauty they are. Almost their eyes shine, their limbs move. But the old faith perishes, and no more till time ends will the children step down from their cedar panel.

**SEEDS**

The seeds I cuddle in my hands are dreams—
The waiting earth and dew
The wind and rain, the sun with magic beams
Will make them all come true.

*Aileen Cleveland Higgins.*