

# **The Spider's Web**

Ryunosuke Akutagawa



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# **The Spider's Web**

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Once upon a time Shakya Buddha was walking alone by the Lotus Pond in Paradise.

The lotus flowers were all of a pearly whiteness and in full bloom, and there floated from their golden pistils an indescribably delicious fragrance. It was morning in Paradise.

Suddenly Buddha paused, and walking to the edge of the pond, he happened to peep into the water which sparkled between the green leaves which covered the surface.

Beneath the Lotus Pond of Paradise lay the depths of Hell, and through the crystal water he could plainly see the River Styx and the Hill of Needles.

At the bottom of Hell he saw a man writhing and struggling amidst numberless other sinners. His name was Kandatta.

Kandatta had been a notorious robber during his life, and had committed murder, incendiarism, and many other shameful crimes, but once during his life on earth he had performed one good act. Once, when he had been passing through a dense forest, he noticed a small spider crawling along the ground. Immediately a feeling of cruelty awoke in him, and he wanted to crush it to death with his foot. But something held him back, and after a moment's hesitation he decided to spare its small life. He murmured to himself:

"O, no. It is a living creature, even though it is so tiny. To deprive it suddenly of its life is a very heartless act indeed." He passed on, and the little creature's life was spared.

Buddha, looking down into the arms of Hell, recollect ed that once this Kandatta had spared a small spider's life, and he determined that if it were possible he would now rescue him from his terrible sufferings. He wanted to do this as a reward for his one good deed during life.

As Buddha looked about him, he saw a spider of Paradise resting on an emerald-green leaf of the Lotus Pond. The small creature was just in the act of spinning its silken, silver web. Buddha stretched out his hands, and gently took the web from the leaf, and carefully lowered it between the pearly lotus-flowers so that it sank deeper and deeper into the depths of Hell below.

Deep in the dreadful Pond of Blood of Hell, Kandatta was struggling in agony, and crowded about him were innumerable other sinners. Around him utter darkness prevailed, and if ever by chance he happened to spy some pale object floating in that utter darkness it always proved to be nothing but the ghostly reflection of light from the bristling spikes which grew on the Hill of Needles, and in indescribable loneliness he would again abandon himself to even more hopeless despair than before.

On every side there was profound silence of Death, and the only sounds which at rare intervals reached his ears were the faint sighs of the other tortured sinners. Those who had been condemned to Hell were all so completely exhausted with its nameless sufferings and tortures that they had long since lost all power of crying. So even this great robber, Kandatta, choked and struggled in this awful Pond of Blood, and all his struggles were quite hopeless.

But one morning he feebly raised his poor head, and looking upward towards the darkened sky which spread itself like a pall over the Bloody Pond, his eyes discerned the silvery line of a fine cobweb shining in the silent darkness. As he watched, it gradually got lower and lower, as if it were ashamed of being noticed by anyone, for it came from the far, far Paradise in the skies. He noticed that it ceased moving, and suspended itself just above his head.

Kandatta clapped his hands for joy. If he clung to it, and if he could climb to the top of it, he might perhaps be able to free himself from the agonies of Hell, he thought. If luck favoured him he might even be able to reach Paradise. Then he would never have to be driven again over the Hill of Needles, nor have to struggle in the depths of the Pond of Blood.

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With these thoughts surging in his agonised brain, he quickly seized the web firmly with both his hands, and carefully began to climb upwards. This was not such a difficult feat for him because he had once been a great robber.

But the distance between Hell and Paradise was hundreds of thousands of miles, and however hard he struggled on, it would not be so easy for him to reach the upper world. At last he became exhausted with climbing, and found no more strength to ascend any higher, so he decided to rest for a little while. Hanging firmly to where he had climbed, which was about half way up the web, he looked back far down into Hell. And lo! thanks to the headway he had made, he was aware that the Bloody Pond, in which he had been struggling only a few minutes before, was already hidden far below in deepest darkness. He noticed also that the terrible Hill of Needles, which had before shone palely, was now far beneath him. If he continued climbing in this way, it might not be so very difficult for him to escape from Hell altogether.

Kandatta found himself laughing, and after all the fearful years he had passed in Hell he found a new voice born in his throat, and he cried, "I have succeeded!"

At that moment, however, he became aware that numberless sinners had started climbing up the lower part of the web, and they appeared to him like a procession of ants following his way of escape. With surprise and terror he knew not what to do, and for a while he hung there, gazing below him, with his mouth wide open and blinking his stupefied eyes. Was it possible that such a fine cobweb, which had threatened to break even with his own weight, would bear the stupendous weight of such a great number of people? If it should snap in the middle, his poor body would again be hurled headlong into the abyss of Hell. The thought of such a thing happening was terrible to him after the awful anxiety of his laborious arid painstaking climb. While he was thus meditating, he looked below him again, and he beheld thousands of other sinners climbing up behind him in a long line. They were crawling up the fine, silken thread, gradually getting nearer and nearer. He realised that unless he did something at once to get rid of them, the web would certainly snap, and he would fall.

So he cried out as loudly as he could:

"Listen, all of you! This cobweb is mine! Who gave you permission to climb it? Go down again, you scoundrels! Go down!"

Till then the cobweb had seemed quite strong, but suddenly, with a sharp sound, it snapped just at the place where he was desperately clutching to it, and lo! poor Kandatta was hurled head foremost into the abyss below, tumbling and tumbling with the lightning pace of a spinning top.

Behind him hung the remainder of the web leading to Paradise, delicately glittering midway in the dark starless sky.

Buddha stood on the Lotus Pond, and gazed at the scene below. He had seen all that had happened. He saw Kandatta falling, and when at last he saw the poor man sink like a stone in the Bloody Pond, he raised his sorrowful face, and moved slowly away from the Lotus Pond and resumed his walk. What sorrow it must have brought to his kindly heart to have beheld the egotistical cruelty of Kandatta in his attempts to save only himself, and to realise that his shameful malice had been rewarded only by his falling headlong back again into Hell!

But the beautiful lotuses in the Pond of Paradise did not seem to heed these things at all. The pearly-white flowers waved their calyces gracefully at Buddha's feet, and as they quivered, an indescribably exquisite fragrance rose perpetually from their golden pistils.

It was already noon in Paradise. **THE END**