

GONGITSUNÉ, THE LONELY FOX

By Niimi Nankichi

(translated by Michael Pye)

Introductory note

This story was first written, in Japanese, when the author Niimi Nankichi was seventeen years old. Niimi was born in 1913 and died in war at the age of 32, leaving works which were later published in eight volumes. The original title, *Gongitsune*, is made up of two words. The first, *gon*, means “temporary” or “provisional” and alludes to the Buddhist tradition that people may be reborn in special form for particular reasons. The second part, *-gitsune*, comes from *kitsune* meaning fox. The final “e” is pronounced distinctly and is therefore shown here as *gongitsuné* to assist readers of English. The phrase “the lonely fox” is an explanatory addition suggestive of the main theme.

ONE

This is a story which I heard, when I was little, from an old man named Mohei who lived in our village.

Long ago, near our village, there was a place called Nakayama where there was a little castle in which there was said to be a baron whose name was also Nakayama. Just a little way off from Nakayama there was a mountain on which there lived a fox named Gongitsuné. In Japanese this means “Gon the fox” so he was just called Gon for short.

The little fox, Gon, was all alone in the world, and he lived in a hole which he had dug among the ferns which grew so well in the mountain woodlands. By night, or by day, he would come out to the nearby village and get up to a lot of tricks.

He would go into the fields, pull up some potatoes and scatter them about. He would set fire to the rape-seed pods laid out to dry. He would pull down the red peppers hung up behind the farmhouses and run off with them. He did all kinds of things.

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It happened one autumn.

As rain had been falling for two or three days, Gon could not go out and was crouching in his hole.

When the rain lifted, Gon breathed a sigh of relief and crept out of his hole. The sky had cleared up and the cries of the shrikes echoed around with a *kinn-kinn* sound.

Gon came out as far as the embankment of the little village stream. Drops of rain were still glistening in the ears of the pampas grass round about.

The stream does not usually have much water in, but after three days of rain it had suddenly swollen. Pampas and bush-clover stumps, not usually covered at all by the water, were now tossed about and toppled over sideways in the muddy yellow stream.

Gon walked on downstream along a muddy path, when suddenly he caught sight of a man standing in the middle of the stream doing something. Gon drew furtively closer, deep in the grass so that he would not be seen, and peered out intently.

“It’s Heijū” he thought.

Heijū had tucked up his tattered black kimono and was standing in the water up to his waist, wielding a special, tightly strung net. His face was surmounted by a head-band, and on his cheek there was clinging a single leaf of the bush-clover, looking like a large mole.

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After a while Heijū lifted the bag-shaped, end part of his net out of the water. The inside was full of tangled grass roots, leaves and rotten pieces of wood, but here and there something white was blinking and glistening. It was the belly of a fat eel or of a big silver carp. Heijū threw the eel and the carp straight into his fish basket along with all the rubbish. Then he tied up the mouth of the bag again and lowered it back into the water.

After that Heijū clambered out of the stream with his fish basket, put the fish basket down on the bank and ran off up-stream as if he were looking for something.

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When Heijū had disappeared, Gon rushed out of the grass with a swish and ran to the side of the fish basket. Suddenly he felt like playing a trick. He caught hold of the fish in the fish basket and, aiming at the middle of the stream just below where the net was fixed, he threw them back in with a good splash. Each and every fish smacked the surface and hid itself away in the muddy water.

Last of all he set about grabbing the fat eel, but it was so slippery that it always wriggled free and he could not get it into his paws at all. Gon got vexed, thrust his head right into the fish basket and took hold of the eel’s head in his mouth. The eel let out a faint cry and twisted itself round Gon’s neck. Just at that moment, Heijū turned round and roared: “Hey! What’s that thieving fox up to?”

Gon jumped up startled, but the eel stayed firmly wound around his neck. Gon dashed off headlong, just as he was, and ran away for all he was worth. When he got to an alder tree near his den he looked round again, but Heijū was no longer in pursuit. Gon pulled himself together, crunched the eel’s head with his teeth, finally got it off his neck, and laid it down on the leaves of grass outside his hole.

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TWO

About ten days later, Gon happened to be passing by behind the house of a farmer named Yasuké where, in the shade of a fig tree, Yasuké's wife was blackening her teeth. Going along behind the house of Shinbee the blacksmith he saw Shinbee's wife combing her hair.

"Hmm" he thought, "There's something going on in the village. I wonder what it is. It could be the autumn festival, and if it's the festival it means they'll be playing drums and flutes. But then, first of all there should be a banner going up at the shrine."

With such thoughts in his mind he went on, and soon he came out in front of Heijū's house with the red well in front of it. Inside that dilapidated little house a crowd of people had gathered. Wearing their best kimonos, protected at the front by towels tucked into their sashes, some women were kindling a fire at the fireplace outside. Something or other was cooking slowly in a big pot.

"Ah. It's a funeral," thought Gon. "Somebody in Heijū's house must have died."

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In the afternoon Gon went to the village cemetery and hid himself in the shade of six stone buddha figures (of the bodhisattva Jizō). As it was fine weather the tiles of the castle roof glistened brightly, far away in the distance. In the cemetery *manjusaka* flowers were still flowering like scraps of red cloth, and from the village could be heard the sound of the bell going dong, dong. It was the signal for the funeral procession to begin.

Soon the people in the procession came along into view, their white kimonos fluttering lightly. The sound of voices in conversation also came closer. The procession turned into the cemetery. Where the people had passed through, the *manjusaka* flowers lay trodden down.

Gon stretched up so he could see. Heijū was wearing ceremonial dress (*kamishimo*) and holding a memorial tablet. His face, normally healthy and red like a sweet potato, seemed today to be drooping.

"Ah, then it must be Heijū's mother who has died," thought Gon, pulling his head in again.

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That evening, Gon sat in his den thinking.

"Heijū's mother must have been ill in bed and saying she would like to eat some eel. That's why Heijū got out his eel-trap. But I was cheeky enough to run off with the eel he caught, and so Heijū couldn't give his mother any eel to eat. That must have been just before his mother died. So she must have died thinking 'I want to eat some eel. I want to eat some eel.' Oh dear, I wish I had never played that trick now."

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THREE

Heijū was washing barley beside his red well. Up till now Heijū and his mother, just the two of them, had eked out a poor existence together, but now that his mother had died Heijū was alone in the world.

“So Heijū is all alone in the world, just like me,” thought Gon, looking out from behind Heijū’s storeroom. He moved off from the storeroom and began to slip away when somewhere he heard the voice of a sprat-seller.

“Sprats, cheap and fresh, sprats, cheap and fresh.”

Gon ran off in the direction of that lively voice.

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Then he heard Yasuké’s wife calling out of her back door, “Sprats please!”

The sprat-seller parked his cart, which was loaded with a basket of sprats, by the side of the road. He seized some of the glittering sprats in both hands and took them in to Yasuké’s house. Gon took his chance, fished out five or six sprats from the basket and ran off the way he had come.

Then he threw the sprats through Heijū’s back door into the house and set off back to his den. When he got to the top of a hill on the way he looked back and saw Heijū still washing barley beside his well. He seemed a very small figure.

Gon thought to himself that anyway he had done one good thing to make up for the eel.

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The next day Gon gathered a big pile of chestnuts in the hills and carried them off to Heijū’s house.

Looking up inside through the back door, he saw that Heijū had started to eat his lunch. He was just holding up his rice-bowl, lost in single-minded thought. There was a nasty bruise on his cheek.

Gon was wondering what had happened to him, when Heijū started talking to himself.

“Who on earth threw those sprats into my house? Thanks to that, I get blamed as a thief and beaten up by that sprat-seller fellow,” he grumbled.

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Gon thought that was dreadful. How pitiful to see Heijū beaten up by the sprat-seller and getting such a wound.

With such thoughts, Gon went quietly round to the store-room, put the chestnuts down at the entrance and went off home.

The next day, and the day after, Gon gathered chestnuts and took them to Heijū's house.

On the day after that he took not just chestnuts but two or three mushrooms¹ as well.

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FOUR

It was a fine moonlit night. Gon went out for a casual stroll. Passing by the foot of Nakayama Castle it looked as if somebody was coming towards him along the rather narrow path. He heard voices in conversation. Chirp, chirp, chirp, went a cricket.

Gon hid himself at the side of the path and held quite still. The voices gradually came nearer. It was Heijū and another farmer called Kasuké.

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"You know, Kasuké," Heijū was saying.

"Eh?"

"There's something very peculiar going on."

"What is it?"

"Since my mother died, somebody, and I don't know who, has been bringing me chestnuts and mushrooms day after day."

"Hmm. Who could it be?"

"That's just what I don't know. Whoever it is comes and leaves them before I can find out."

Gon followed along behind the two men.

"Really?"

"Yes, really. If you don't believe me, come tomorrow and see for yourself. I'll show you the chestnuts."

"It sounds very strange."

And the two men walked on without talking any further.

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¹ Matsutake, *armillaria edodes*.

Kasuké happened to look back. Gon was startled, made himself small and stood rock-still. Kasuké did not notice him and walked briskly on as before.

When they got to the house of a farmer named Kichibee the two men went inside. The sound of a wooden fish-gong² was heard: pon, pon, pon. A light shone on the paper screens in the windows and the shaven head of a Buddhist priest could be seen in outline, moving slightly.

“They are going to pray to Amida Buddha,” thought Gon. And he squatted down beside the well. After a while three more people came along together and went into Kichibee’s house.

Gon could hear a Buddhist sūtra being recited.

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FIVE

Gon stayed squatting by the wall until the service was finished. Heijū and Kasuké set off home together. Gon thought he would try and listen to what they were saying, and followed on behind. He went along stepping in Heijū’s shadow.

When they got as far as the castle, Kasuké said,

“You know what you were telling me about before. Well, it must be a *kami*³ helping you.”

“What?”

Heijū looked at Kasuké’s face in surprise.

“I’ve been thinking about it all the time. It can’t be a human being. It must be a *kami*. Some *kami* is sorry for you because you have been left all alone, and is giving you various things as a divine favour.”

“Do you think so?”

“I do. You really ought to be saying thank-you to the *kami* every day.”

“Right.”

Gon thought, “What a useless fellow. He has silly ideas. I go and give the man chestnuts and mushrooms, and instead of saying thank-you to me he is supposed to say thank-you to the *kami*. It’s not fair.

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² *Mokugyo*.

³ *Kami*: a general term for various spirits or divinities in Japan.

SIX

The next day Gon set off again for Heijū's house, carrying his chestnuts. Heijū was in his store-room twining a rope. So Gon crept stealthily into the house through the back door.

Just then Heijū happened to raise his head. Wasn't that a fox which had just gone inside his house? It must be that Gongitsuné who made off with my eel the other day. He's come to play more tricks.

"Right then!"

Heijū stood up, took down his matchlock which was hanging in the shed, and charged it with gunpowder. Treading very quietly, he waited for Gon to appear again. Then, just as Gon was coming out of the door, there was a bang, and Heijū had shot him.

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Gon fell straight to the ground. Heijū came running up. Looking inside the house, he caught sight of some chestnuts placed in a pile on the floor.

"Oh my...!" said Heijū in surprise, and looked down at Gon.

"Gon, was it you who brought me all those chestnuts?"

Gon's eyes were closed with exhaustion as he nodded in reply. Heijū dropped his gun with a thud. Coming out of the barrel there could still be seen a thin wisp of blue smoke.

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The present document file is entitled *Gongitsuné A* (translation). An explanatory postscript to this story is in preparation and will be published in the same place in due course under the document title *Gongitsuné B* (postscript).
