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# OOKA AND THE HONEST THIEF

*Japanese folktale*

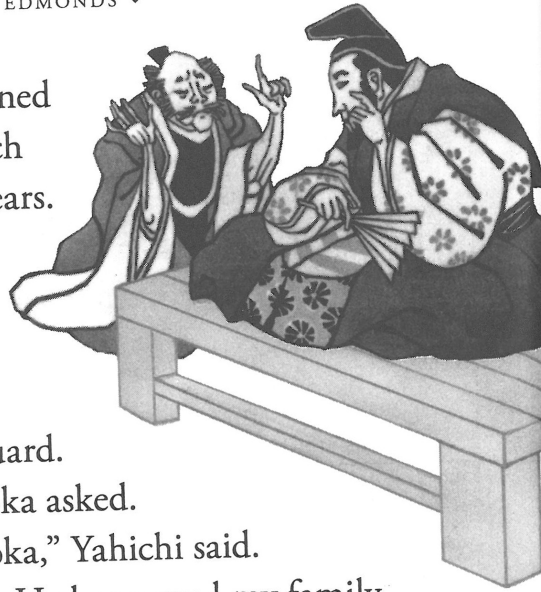
*as told by I. G. Edmonds*

One day, Yahichi, owner of a rice store, came to Ooka's court, complaining that each night some of his rice disappeared.

"It is such a small amount that I hesitate to trouble your Honorable Honor," Yahichi said, touching the ground with his head to show proper respect for the great magistrate. "But I am reminded of the story of the mountain that was reduced to a plain because a single grain was stolen from it each day for centuries."

Ooka nodded gravely. "It is just as dishonest to steal one grain of rice as it is to steal a large sack," he remarked. "Did you take proper steps to guard your property?"

“Yes, my lord. I stationed a guard with the rice each night, but still it disappears. I cannot understand it,” the rice merchant said, pulling his white beard nervously.



“What about your guard. Can he be trusted?” Ooka asked.

“Absolutely, Lord Ooka,” Yahichi said. “The guard is Chogoro. He has served my family for seventy-five years.”


“Yes, I know Chogoro,” Ooka said. “He is a most conscientious man. He could not be the thief. But it is possible that he falls asleep at his post. After all, he is eighty years old.”

“A man can be just as alert at eighty as at twenty,” Yahichi replied quickly. “I am eighty-one myself, and I have never been so alert. Besides, I stood guard myself with Chogoro these last two nights. The rice vanished just the same.”

“In that case I will watch with you tonight,” Ooka said. “I should like to see this for myself.”

As he had promised, Ooka made his way that evening to Yahichi’s rice store. He was sure that both Yahichi and Chogoro had fallen asleep and had allowed the thief to enter each time the rice had

been stolen, and it was not long before his suspicions were proved correct. Within an hour, both men were sleeping soundly. Ooka smiled. He was certain that when the men awoke neither would admit he had slept at all.



A little past midnight, Ooka heard a slight sound outside the building. He sprang to his feet and peered cautiously out the window. To his astonishment, Ooka found himself staring straight into the face of a man, standing in the shadows just outside the building. The judge recognized him as Gonta, a laborer who had been out of work for some time. The man was rooted to the spot by fear.

Ooka hesitated to arrest him. After all, he had not entered the rice store. Ooka would have no proof that he had come to steal. He could simply say that he had lost his way in the dark.

Though Ooka had recognized the thief, Gonta had not recognized the judge, for the darkness inside the building hid his face.

Ooka decided the best thing to do would be to pretend that he, too, was a thief. In this way he might trap Gonta into completing his crime. Speaking in a harsh tone to disguise his voice, he said, "You have obviously come here to steal rice just as I have."

Gonta was relieved to find himself face to face with another thief instead of a guard.



“As a favor from one thief to another,” Ooka continued, “I will pass the rice out to you, so that you will not need to risk coming in yourself.”

Gonta thanked him profusely for his courtesy, and Ooka picked up a large sack of rice and handed it out to him.

“This is too much,” Gonta protested. “I want only a few handfuls.”

Ooka was amazed. “But if you are going to steal, you may as well take a large amount. After all, if

Ooka catches you, you will be punished as much for stealing a single grain as you would for a whole sack.”

“That would be dishonest!” Gonta replied indignantly. “I take just enough to feed my family for a single day, for each day I hope I will find work and not have to steal anymore. If I do find work, I intend to return all I have taken.”

Then he took out the amount of rice he needed for his family’s daily meal and handed the sack back to the astonished judge. Thanking Ooka once more for his courtesy, Gonta turned and disappeared into the darkness. Ooka did not try to stop him.

When the shopkeeper and his guard awoke, Ooka told them what had happened.

“But why did you let the thief go?” Yahichi asked indignantly.

“Gonta is certainly a thief,” Ooka replied. “But I am convinced he is an honest one, for he refused to steal more than he needed.”

“But, Lord Ooka, how can a man be a thief and honest at the same time?”

“I would never have believed it possible, but it is so,” Ooka said. “It is the duty of a judge to punish wickedness and reward virtue. In this case, we find both qualities in the same man, so obviously it would be unfair to treat him as any ordinary thief.”

“But, Lord Ooka—”

“I have made my decision. Tomorrow I will see that work is found for Gonta which is sufficient to feed his family and still leave enough to allow him to pay back the rice he stole. We will see if he keeps his promise. If he returns here and replaces the extra amount each night, it will prove my belief that he is an honest thief.”

The plan was carried out according to Ooka's wishes. Gonta was given a job, without knowing that



Ooka was responsible. And, as the judge suspected, every night Gonta took the rice left over from his day's earnings and left it in the rice shop.

Ooka put all kinds of obstacles in his way to make it difficult for him to enter the shop, but this did not prevent Gonta from returning each night, although he became more and more afraid of being caught.

Yahichi admitted that the thief had been punished enough for his crime and told Ooka he did not wish to press charges. The great judge smiled and wrote out a small scroll which he ordered Yahichi to leave for Gonta to see when he came to pay for the last portion of rice.

When the honest thief slipped fearfully into the rice shop for the last time, he was shocked to find the scroll on which was written in Ooka's own handwriting, and bearing Ooka's signature, the following message:

*You owe an extra ten percent for interest.  
Honesty is the best policy.*

