

The Burning of the Rice Fields

Once there was an old man who lived high up on a mountain far away in Japan. All around his little house the ground was flat and the soil was good. Here were the rice fields belonging to all the people who lived in the village at the foot of the mountain. Beyond the village was the blue sea, so close that there was no room for anything but houses.

The old man lived with his grandson, Yone. The child loved the rice fields and he often helped his grandfather to watch over them because he knew that all the good food for the villagers came from there.

One day, the grandfather was standing on his own looking down at the village and the people going about their business. He was thinking how beautiful the scene was when something caught his eye far out to sea. It was as though a huge cloud was rising and as if the sea itself was lifting into the sky. The old man put his hands to his eyes and looked again as hard as he could. Then he turned and ran to the house shouting, "Grandson, grandson! Come quickly! Bring a burning stick from the fireplace!"

Yone could not imagine why his Grandfather wanted the fire, but he always did as he was told without question, so he quickly and carefully got the burning wood.

The old man grabbed the fiery wand and ran to the rice fields. Yone ran after him and was horrified to see his grandfather setting light to the dry rice in the fields. He thrust the torch in again and again as the stalks turned red, orange and yellow.

"Grandfather! What are you doing?" screamed Yone, thinking his grandfather must have lost his mind.

Very soon, the field was completely ablaze; the fire spread quickly and black smoke began to creep up the mountain side. It rose thick and dark and in no time the people in the village below saw it and knew that their precious rice fields were on fire. As quickly as their legs could carry them, they ran. Not one person stayed behind.

When they came closer, and could see that they were too late to save any of it, they cried and wailed, "Who could have done this? How could it happen?"

"I did it," said the old man.

"It's true," sobbed his grandson, "My grandfather started the fire."

The villagers gathered angrily around the old man, "Why?" they screamed, "Why?"

He turned and pointed to the sea. "Look."

They all turned to look. There, where the sea had been so beautiful, still and calm, a gigantic wall of water as tall as the sky was rolling in. The people were so aghast at the terrifying sight they could not even scream.

The wall of water fell on the village and destroyed every house and building. The sound was awful. Wave after wave battered and covered the place where the village had been until it was all under the sea.

Disastrous as this was, every last person was safe.

When they realised what the old man had done, they thanked him and honoured him for his quick thinking which had saved them all from the tidal wave.

Answer the following questions:

1. Where is this story set?
2. Why did Yone not ask his Grandfather why he wanted a burning stick?
3. What was the danger coming from the sea?
4. Does the story have a message? What do you think it is?
5. The Burning of the Rice Fields is a re-telling of a traditional tale. Name 3 other traditional tales.

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