Japanese Ghost Stories

Lafcadio Hearn

British English
Classic

A blind musician plays to the spirits of the dead. A priest is attacked by heads that have left their bodies. An old man meets a woman who has no face. Read these and many more strange, ghostly stories from old Japan – and be afraid!

Number of words (excluding activities): 16,006
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1.1 What’s the book about?

1 Read about the stories on the back of the book. Then discuss the picture on the front cover.
   a Where are these stories from?
   b What do you think the cover story is about?

2 These words are all important in the stories. Check their meanings at the bottom of pages 1 and 2. Then put the right forms of the words in the story below.

| blind | ghost | haunt | pray | priest | spirit | temple |

A man was walking through a dark forest when, suddenly, he saw an old stone . There was a stone buddha in the wall.
A was on his knees, to the buddha. The man called the priest and the priest turned to him. The man saw that his eyes were closed. He was . The man was afraid. He felt that there were dancing in the air around him. Was the temple ?
He looked behind him. There were only dark trees. He turned back. The priest was gone. He wasn’t a priest – he was a ! The man screamed and ran back into the forest.

3 Discuss these questions.
   a You are in an old house with a friend. You go upstairs and see strange lights. Suddenly, there is a loud noise. What will you do?
   b Do you believe in ghosts? Have you ever seen one? Tell the story.

1.2 What happens first?

Read the words in *italics* on page 1, opposite, and look at the picture. What do you think? Tick (√) the best answers.

1 The listeners are listening to
   a  [ ] a ghost story.
   b  [ ] the story of a big fight.

2 They are crying wildly because
   a  [ ] the story is so sad.
   b  [ ] they are going to die.

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The Blind Musician

All the listeners cried out together – a long, long cry of pain. They cried loudly and wildly and the blind man was frightened.

More than 700 years ago there was a great fight at sea at a place called Dan-no-ura. It was the last great fight between two peoples – the Heiké and the Genji. All the Heiké fighters died there with their women and children, and their child emperor. His name was Antoku Tennō. And the Heiké ghosts have haunted that coast since that time.

The Heiké ghosts are quieter these days, but in earlier times they were a danger to ships. Ghostly lights circled around ships in the night as the spirits tried to pull them down under the water. They watched for swimmers and tried to pull them down too.

In a town on that coast – Akamagaséki – the people of the town built a Buddhist temple to try to please the Heiké spirits. The temple was called Amidaji. They built a garden for the dead too, near the beach. They put up

emperor /ˈemporə/ (n) the head of government of a country, or a number of countries; these lands are his empire
ghost /ɡaʊst/ (n) the part of a person that lives after death. Ghostly places are visited by ghosts.
haunt /hɔːnt/ (v) to visit a place often (used of ghosts and spirits)
spirit /ˈspɪrɪt/ (n) the part of a person that is believed to live after death
temple /ˈtempəl/ (n) a place where people practise their religion
stones with the names of the child emperor and his great followers. A Buddhist priest said prayers for the spirits of the dead. After that, the Heiké were less trouble. But they did strange things at times; something was still worrying them.

At that time there lived a young blind man named Hōichi. He was famous for performing poems and playing the biwa*. He learned both skills as a child, and he soon performed better than his teachers.

Hōichi grew up and became a professional biwa player, and his most famous performance was the history of the Heiké and the Genji. When he sang the song of Dan-no-ura, even the bad spirits cried.

At first Hōichi was very poor. Then he found a good friend at the Amidaji temple. The priest of the temple loved poems and music, and he often asked Hōichi to perform for him. He thought young Hōichi had wonderful skills. The priest invited Hōichi to live at the temple, and Hōichi accepted gratefully. In

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*biwa: you make music with this

priest /ˈprɪst/ (n) the officer of a temple
pray /preɪ/ (v) to ask the Buddha for help. A prayer is the words that you say.
blind /ˈblaɪnd/ (adj) unable to see
perform /pərˈfɔːm/ (v) to dance, sing or act in front of other people; to do
return for food and a bed, Hōichi only had to perform on two or three evenings each week.

One summer night, the priest was called away. His assistant went with him and Hōichi was left alone in the temple. It was a hot night and the blind man was too warm in his bedroom.

Behind his room was a small garden. Hōichi waited for the priest there and practised the biwa. Midnight passed and the priest did not return. But Hōichi stayed outside.

At last he heard some footsteps at the back gate. They came nearer. Somebody crossed the little garden and stopped in front of Hōichi … but it was not the priest.

‘Hōichi!’ A deep, angry voice called the blind man’s name. It was the voice of a samurai*.

* samurai: a class of Japanese soldiers, seen as upper class from the late 1500s
Hōichi was very surprised and frightened, and at first he did not answer.
‘Hōichi!’
‘Yes?’ the blind man answered this time. ‘I cannot see. I do not know who is calling me.’
‘There is nothing to fear,’ said the stranger more quietly. ‘I have a message for you from my lord. My lord is a man of very high class, and he is now staying in Akamagaseki, with many followers. He came to see where the great sea fight of Dan-no-ura took place. And now he wants to hear the story of the fight. He has heard of your skill and he is waiting for you. Bring your biwa and come with me.’
Hōichi put on his shoes and picked up his biwa. He went away with the stranger. The stranger guided him carefully. Hōichi could hear that he wore metal.
‘He is probably a palace guard,’ thought Hōichi, and he began to feel happier. ‘I am in luck. His lord is an important man.’

They walked for some time. Hōichi had to walk very fast to stay with him. And then the samurai stopped outside a large gateway. Hōichi was surprised. He could not remember a large gateway in that part of the town; only the main gate of the Amidaji temple.
‘Kaimon!’ shouted the samurai.
Hōichi jumped. Then he heard the gates opening.
They crossed a garden and stopped in front of another entrance. Then the samurai cried in a loud voice, ‘I have brought Hōichi.’
Suddenly there were many sounds: feet hurrying, doors opening, women’s voices. Hōichi knew he was in the house of a lord, but which lord and where? He did not have much time to think. He climbed some stone steps. He was told to leave his shoes on the last step. Then a woman’s hand guided him across smooth wooden floors.
At last they came into the middle of a great room. Hōichi felt there were many people in the room. He could hear many quiet voices, all talking together. Their speech was the speech of a lord’s court.
‘Do not be afraid, Hōichi,’ said a woman’s voice. ‘Please make yourself comfortable here on the floor.’
Hōichi sat down and prepared his biwa.
‘My lord requests you to perform the history of the Heiké, in speech and music,’ said the woman.

The story was long. Many nights were needed for it. Hōichi bravely asked a question. ‘As the history of the Heiké is long, which part of it shall I now perform?’

*Kaimon! a samurai’s call to the guards when he wanted to pass through his lord’s gate

lord /lɔːd/ (n) a very important person with many soldiers and a lot of land
The woman answered, ‘Tell the story of the great fight of Dan-no-ura, because that is the saddest part.’

Then Hōichi lifted up his voice and began his story. He made his biwa sound like great fighting ships on the waves and the crashing of metal on wood. In his story, men fought and cried, and bodies were thrown into the sea. The water turned red with their blood.

Voices around Hōichi talked of his skill: ‘What a wonderful artist!’ ‘I have never heard playing like this!’ ‘No other singer in the empire is as good as Hōichi.’ These words made Hōichi feel braver. He played and sang better than before. But then he came to the deaths of the fair women and helpless children – and the death of the child emperor. All the listeners cried out together – a long, long cry of pain. They cried loudly and wildly and the blind man was frightened. Slowly the sounds died away until the great room was quiet again.

Then the woman spoke. ‘We heard that you played the biwa well,’ she said. ‘We heard that you performed poems beautifully. But we did not know that anyone could perform like this. You have taken us to the heart of the great fight of Dan-no-ura tonight. Our lord is very pleased. He wants you to perform again tomorrow night and for the next six nights. After that, he will probably make his return journey. Tomorrow night the palace guard will come for you again.

‘There is one more thing. No one knows that our lord has travelled here. His journey here is secret. Please do not tell anyone about your visits here. … You are now free to go back to your temple.’

Hōichi thanked the speaker, and a woman’s hand guided him back to the entrance. The same samurai waited there to take him home. He left Hōichi in the small garden behind his room.

It was almost daylight when Hōichi returned. Nobody saw him go and nobody saw him come back. The priest returned late. He imagined that Hōichi was asleep in his room. Hōichi slept a little during the day and said nothing about his strange adventure.

In the middle of the next night, the samurai again came for him and took him back to the great room. Hōichi performed another part of the history of the Heiké. His second performance was as successful as his first. But during this second visit, the priest at the Amidaji temple discovered that Hōichi was not there.

The next morning, the priest called Hōichi to see him.

‘We were very worried about you, friend Hōichi. You are blind! It is very dangerous for you to go out alone and so late. Why didn’t you tell us? I can always send someone with you. And where did you go?’

‘I am very sorry, kind friend!’ Hōichi answered carefully. ‘I had some private business.’ He said no more.
The priest was surprised, but not angry. Hōichi was acting strangely. Perhaps some bad spirits were at work here. He did not ask any more questions. But privately he asked his temple assistants to watch Hōichi. He asked them to follow Hōichi if he left the temple after dark again.

That night, the assistants saw Hōichi leave the temple. They immediately lit their lights and followed him. But it was a rainy night, and very dark. Before they reached the roadway, Hōichi disappeared.

‘How can he walk so fast?’ they asked. ‘He is blind and there are many holes in the road.’

The men hurried through the streets. They asked at every house, but nobody had any news of Hōichi. At last they turned to go home. They were returning to the temple along the beach when they suddenly heard a biwa. The sounds came from the garden of the dead next to the temple.
A few ghostly fires seemed to hang in the blackness above the stones. The men ran to the place with their lights; and there they found Hōichi. He was sitting alone in the rain in front of a large stone. The name of Antoku Tenno was on the stone. Hōichi was telling the story of the great fight of Dan-no-ura. And behind him, around him and above him, the Oni-bi* hung over the stones.

‘Hōichi San’! Hōichi San!’ cried the temple assistants. ‘These are bad spirits! … Hōichi San!’

But the blind man did not seem to hear. He played his *biwa* more and more wildly. He was almost screaming the poem. They caught his clothes; they shouted in his ear, ‘Hōichi San! Hōichi San! Come home with us immediately!’ Hōichi spoke to them angrily. ‘Do not speak to me so rudely, in front of these important listeners.’

*Oni-bi*: the bad spirit fires of the dead

*San*: a word for Sir, placed after a person’s name
The assistants looked at Hōichi and at his ‘listeners’ and then started to laugh. They were sure that there were spirits all around him. They pulled him to his feet and hurried back to the temple with him. They gave him dry clothes and a hot drink, and then the priest asked for a full explanation.

Hōichi said nothing at first. But then he understood that the priest was angry with him. He decided to speak. He told the story from the first visit of the samurai.

The priest said, ‘Hōichi, my poor friend, you are now in great danger! I am sorry that you did not tell me all this before! Your wonderful skill in music has brought you into strange trouble. You must know now that you have not visited a house. You passed the night in the place of the dead. You were sitting in front of Antoku Tenno’s stone when we found you. Everything was in your imagination; nothing was real, except the calling of the dead. You did what they asked. Now you are in trouble. Next time, they will pull you to pieces.’

The priest had business away from the temple again that evening. He could not stay with Hōichi.

‘Before I go,’ he said to Hōichi, ‘we will protect your body. We will write Buddhist prayers on it.’

Japanese Ghost Stories
Before the sun went down, the priest and his assistant took off Hōichi’s clothes. They painted the prayers all over his body, his head, face and neck, his legs and arms, his hands and feet. After that, the priest told Hōichi what to do.

‘Tonight, as soon as I go away, you must wait in your small garden. When the samurai calls you, do not answer. Do not move. Say nothing. If you move, he will pull you to pieces. Do not be frightened. Do not call for help – because no help can save you. Do exactly as I tell you. Then the danger will pass. You will have nothing more to fear.’

After dark, the priest and his assistant went away. Hōichi sat in the small garden and put his biwa on the ground next to him. For hours he sat and did not move.

Then he heard footsteps coming from the roadway. The footsteps passed the gate and crossed the small garden. They stopped not far from Hōichi.

‘Hōichi!’ called the deep voice. But the blind man did not answer.

Hōichi!’ called the voice a second time, more angrily. Then it called a third time, now very angrily, ‘Hōichi!’

Hōichi did not move.

‘No answer? Where is he?’
The footsteps came right up to the blind *biwa* player. For a long minute, there was silence. Hōichi’s heart raced inside his body.

At last the deep voice spoke close to Hōichi. ‘Here is the *biwa*. But where is the *biwa* player? I see … only two ears! So that explains why he did not answer. He has no mouth to answer with. There is nothing left of him except his ears … I will take those ears to my lord. He will believe me then.’

Fingers closed on Hōichi’s ears and pulled hard. They pulled Hōichi’s ears off his head! The pain was sharp and terrible, but Hōichi did not make a sound. The heavy footsteps went back across the garden, out onto the roadway and disappeared. Hōichi felt thick, warm blood on both sides of his head, but he did not lift his hands …

Before the sun came up, the priest returned. He ran to the small garden behind Hōichi’s room, stepped on something wet and fell. It was blood! He gave a terrible cry but then saw Hōichi. Hōichi was still sitting in the same place. Blood ran slowly and thickly from the holes in the sides of his head.

‘My poor Hōichi!’ cried the priest. ‘What is this? You are hurt!’

When he heard his friend’s voice, the blind man felt safe at last. Tears poured down his face and he told the priest about his adventure of the night.
‘Poor, poor Hōichi!’ said the priest. ‘This is all because of me! We wrote Buddhist prayers all over your body, except on your ears! That was my assistant’s job and I did not check his work. It was very, very wrong of me! Well, it is too late now. We must try to stop the pain quickly. Smile, my friend! The danger is over. Your ghostly visitors will never trouble you again.’

Hōichi was soon better, with the help of a good doctor. The story of his strange adventure travelled all over the country, and made him famous. Many important people came to Akamagaséki to hear his performances. They gave him large presents of money and he became very rich. From the time of his adventure, he had a new name: Hōichi-No-Ears!

Today you can still see and hear many strange things along that coast. You can find strange fish – fish with Heiké faces on their backs. People say these are the spirits of Heiké samurai. And on dark nights, thousands of ghostly fires seem to hang over the waves – pale lights, called Oni-bi by the fishermen. When the winds are strong, you can hear terrible noises from the sea, like the sound of men killing men.