

## **AI-Generated Graded Readers**

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### **About This Edition**

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice.

The text was translated from Japanese into English and simplified using ChatGPT for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

The adaptation aims to improve readability while preserving the narrative content and spirit of the original work.

### **Source Text**

Original work: Jigokuhen (地獄変)

Author: Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (芥川龍之介)

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<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/>

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<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000879/card60.html>

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Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Hell Screen [Jigokuhen]* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified from the Japanese by ChatGPT)

## Part 1

There has never been a man like our Great Lord, and I do not believe there will ever be another like him again. Even before he was born, people said that a holy figure appeared in his mother's dream. From the beginning, he was not like ordinary men. Everything he did surprised those around him. Nothing about him was small or common.

If you look at his residence in Horikawa, you will understand this at once. It was not only large. It was bold, almost wild in its design. It was far beyond what people like us could imagine. Some people compared him to cruel rulers of the past, saying that he loved power and glory too much. But those people did not understand him. They only saw one small part and judged the whole.

Our Lord did not live only for himself. He thought about all people, even those far below him. He wished to enjoy life together with the world. He had a wide and deep heart. Because of this, people respected him greatly. Men and women of all ages in the capital spoke his name with admiration, almost as if he were a holy being who had returned to the world.

There were many stories about his power. It was said that even when he met a strange parade of spirits in the night, nothing happened to him. Another time, a ghost that appeared often in a certain place vanished at once after being scolded by our Lord. People believed that even spirits feared him.

Once, after a feast, one of his oxen broke loose and ran into an old man on the road. The old man was hurt. But instead of complaining, he joined his hands together and gave thanks. He said he was honored to be struck by the Great Lord's ox. Such was the feeling people had toward him.

During his life, many events happened that people still talk about today. He gave thirty white horses as gifts at a great banquet. He once offered a beloved young boy as a human sacrifice for the building of a bridge. He even allowed a

foreign monk to cut open his own flesh to treat a sickness. There are too many stories to tell them all.

However, among all these stories, there is one that is more terrible than the others. It is the story of a folding screen known as “Hell.” Even our Lord, who was not easily shaken, seemed deeply moved when that event took place. As for those of us who served him, we felt as if our souls had left our bodies.

I myself had served the Great Lord for twenty years, but I had never seen anything so fearful in all that time.

To explain this story, I must first speak about the man who painted that screen. His name was Yoshihide.

## Part 2

If you lived in the capital at that time, you must have heard the name Yoshihide. There was no painter who could equal him. People said that when he held a brush, no one could stand beside him. By then he was already near fifty years old. Yet, when you looked at him, you did not feel respect. You felt something unpleasant instead.

He was a small man, thin as if he were made only of bone and skin. His face looked hard and unfriendly. His lips were strangely red, and this made his expression even more disturbing. Some people said that his lips were red because he often put his brush in his mouth. Whether that was true or not, I cannot say. But it is certain that he gave people a feeling like that of an animal.

Because of this, people called him by a cruel nickname. They said he looked like a monkey and called him “Monkey Yoshihide.” He did not seem to care. Or perhaps he did not notice at all.

At that time, Yoshihide had one daughter. She was about fifteen years old and served in the Great Lord’s residence. Unlike her father, she was gentle and kind. She was also very clever. Since her mother had died when she was young, she had grown up quickly and learned to understand others well. Because of this, the ladies of the house liked her very much.

Around that time, a tame monkey was brought from the province of Tanba as a gift. It was a playful animal, and the young lord of the house decided to give it a name. As a joke, he called the monkey “Yoshihide.”

The name was very fitting. The monkey’s movements were strange and amusing, and when people called out “Yoshihide,” it seemed as if they were speaking to both the animal and the painter. Everyone laughed at this. But soon, the laughter became something more cruel.

People began to tease the monkey. When it climbed a tree or made a mess, they shouted its name loudly. “Yoshihide! Yoshihide!” they called, as if they were scolding the painter himself. They did this again and again, enjoying the joke.

One day, something happened that I still remember clearly. Yoshihide’s daughter was walking down a long corridor. She held a branch of red plum blossoms in her hand, tied with a letter. As she walked, she heard noise coming from the far end.

The monkey was running toward her. It limped as if it had hurt its leg. Behind it came the young lord, holding a stick and shouting, “You thief! Stop!”

The monkey ran straight to the girl and clung to her clothes. It cried in fear. The girl stopped for a moment. Then, without thinking further, she gently opened her sleeve and picked up the small animal.

Holding the monkey close, she bowed to the young lord. “Please forgive it,” she said in a clear and calm voice. “It is only an animal.”

The young lord frowned. He was still full of anger. “Why do you protect it?” he asked. “It stole fruit.”

“It is only an animal,” she repeated softly. Then she smiled a little, though her eyes were sad. “And when people call its name, it is the same as my father’s. I cannot bear to see it punished.”

Hearing this, the young lord paused. At last, he lowered his stick. “Very well,” he said. “If you ask for your father, I will forgive it.”

He threw the stick aside and walked away.

From that day on, the girl and the monkey became close companions.

### Part 3

After that day, the bond between the girl and the monkey grew stronger and stronger. The girl hung a small golden bell, given to her by a young princess, from a bright red string and tied it gently around the monkey's neck. The sound of that bell followed her wherever she went. The monkey, in return, never left her side.

When the girl felt unwell and had to lie in bed, the monkey sat quietly near her pillow. It watched her with a worried face, as if it understood her pain. Sometimes it even seemed to bite its nails in anxiety. Seeing this, the people in the house could not help but feel affection for the small creature.

Before long, no one teased the monkey anymore. Instead, they began to care for it. Even the young lord, who had once chased it with a stick, would sometimes throw it fruit or nuts. On one occasion, when a servant kicked the monkey, the young lord became very angry and scolded the man severely.

Later, the Great Lord himself heard about this matter. He ordered that the girl bring the monkey before him. When she appeared, holding the animal in her arms, he listened to the story of her kindness.

“You are a good child,” he said. “Your heart is full of care.”

As a reward, he gave her a beautiful red robe. The girl bowed deeply and accepted it. The monkey, imitating her, also lowered its head in a strange but respectful way. Seeing this, the Great Lord laughed and seemed very pleased.

Because of this, the Great Lord began to favor the girl. Some people later spread rumors that his feelings toward her were not proper. But I can say with certainty that this was not true. He admired her kindness and wished to protect her. There was no hidden desire in his heart.

The girl herself remained modest and careful. She never acted in a way that would cause others to envy her. On the contrary, she became even more loved by the people around her. She was especially close to the young princess and rarely left her side. Whenever the princess went out, the girl followed, always with the monkey near her.

While the monkey gained love and attention, Yoshihide himself remained

disliked by almost everyone. People still called him “Monkey Yoshihide” behind his back. This was not only inside the Great Lord’s residence. Even outside, his reputation was poor.

It is said that a certain high priest, upon hearing Yoshihide’s name, would turn pale with anger. There were also stories that Yoshihide had drawn mocking pictures of important people, making fun of their behavior. Whether these stories were true or not, I cannot say for sure. But they show how little people trusted him.

If there were any who spoke well of him, they were either fellow painters or those who knew only his work and not the man himself.

In truth, Yoshihide had many faults. It was not only his appearance that made people dislike him. There were deeper reasons, which I must now explain.

#### Part 4

Yoshihide had many bad habits, and these made people dislike him even more. He was greedy, selfish, and without shame. He was also lazy in daily life, yet full of pride. Above all, he was arrogant. He always believed that he was the greatest painter in the land, and he spoke as if no one could compare with him.

If his pride had been limited to painting alone, people might have forgiven him. But Yoshihide did not respect anything. He laughed at customs, traditions, and even the beliefs of others. Nothing was sacred to him.

One of his former students told me a story. One day, a spirit was said to enter the body of a shrine maiden. The people around her were frightened and believed they were hearing a divine message. But Yoshihide did not care at all. While others listened with fear, he calmly sat nearby and painted the woman’s face. He only wished to capture the strange expression before him.

It seems that even a god’s anger meant nothing to him.

When he painted holy figures, he used the faces of common people. When he painted a fierce god, he chose the face of a criminal. These actions shocked many. But when people complained, he only laughed.

“If the gods I paint are real,” he once said, “then let them punish me themselves.”

Hearing such words, even his students felt uneasy. Some of them left him, fearing that they would suffer for following such a man. It was said that Yoshihide believed no one in the world was greater than himself.

Even among painters, there were those who spoke badly of him. They said his work was strange and unnatural. Old paintings were said to bring beauty and peace. Flowers seemed to smell sweet, and music seemed to be heard from them. But Yoshihide’s paintings were different.

They brought fear.

People said that when you passed a gate where he had painted scenes of suffering, you could hear sighs and cries in the night. Some even claimed that they smelled decay, as if something dead were near.

There were also stories about portraits he had painted of women in the Great Lord’s house. It was said that those women soon became ill and died within a few years. Whether this was true or not, I cannot say. But such rumors spread quickly, and they made people afraid of his work.

Yoshihide, however, seemed proud of this. When the Great Lord once joked, “You seem to like ugly things,” Yoshihide smiled in a strange way and answered, “Only those who understand beauty can see the beauty in what is ugly.”

To speak so boldly before the Great Lord was dangerous. Yet Yoshihide did not hesitate. Some even gave him another nickname, comparing him to a demon from foreign lands.

Still, even a man like Yoshihide had one human feeling left in his heart. There was one thing he truly loved.

That was his daughter.

## Part 5

Yoshihide loved his daughter with all his heart. In this one matter, he was not like the man people hated. His love was so strong that it seemed almost like madness.

As I have said before, the girl was gentle and thoughtful. She cared deeply for her father. But Yoshihide's feelings were no less strong. For her clothes, her hair, and her small needs, he spent money freely. This was surprising, because he never gave money to temples or charity. Yet for his daughter, he held nothing back.

However, his love had a strange side. He did not think about her future in a normal way. He never tried to find her a good husband. In fact, if any man showed interest in her, Yoshihide would become angry. It was even said that he might harm such a man in secret.

For this reason, when the girl was called to serve in the Great Lord's house, Yoshihide was not pleased. At first, he showed his anger openly. Even when he appeared before the Lord, he could not hide his unhappy face.

Because of this, some people began to whisper. They said that the Great Lord had taken the girl because of her beauty, without caring about her father's feelings. But this was only a rumor. In truth, the Lord wished to protect her and give her a better life.

Yoshihide, however, did not think this way. He wanted his daughter to return to him. Many times, he asked the Great Lord to let her leave.

One day, he painted a picture of a young holy figure. He used the face of a favorite child in the Lord's house, and the result was very fine. The Great Lord was pleased and said, "You may ask for any reward you wish."

Yoshihide bowed and answered at once, "Please return my daughter to me."

Such a request was very bold. No one would normally dare to ask such a thing. For a moment, the Great Lord said nothing. Then he replied shortly, "That cannot be done."

After that, he stood up and left.

Yoshihide made the same request again and again. Each time, he was refused. With each refusal, the Great Lord's feelings toward him grew colder.

Meanwhile, the girl worried about her father. When she returned to her room, she would sometimes hide her face in her sleeve and cry quietly. Seeing this, people spoke even more. Some said the Lord had feelings for her. Others said Yoshihide was too stubborn.

But from what I saw, the truth was simple. The Great Lord wished to keep the girl safe. He believed that life in the palace was better than life with such a harsh father.

Still, Yoshihide would not give up. His desire to have his daughter back only grew stronger.

It was at this time, when the tension between them had become clear, that the Great Lord suddenly gave a new order.

He called Yoshihide and commanded him to paint a folding screen of Hell.

## Part 6

When I think of that folding screen of Hell, even now the image rises clearly before my eyes. It was unlike any other painting. From the beginning, its design was different from the works of other artists.

In one corner of the screen, there were small figures of the judges of the dead and their servants. But the rest of the space was filled with fire. Great flames rose and twisted, as if they would burn even iron and stone. Red and black colors filled the whole scene. Smoke and sparks moved wildly, like a storm inside the world of the dead.

Within that fire, many people suffered. But they were not like the figures in ordinary paintings of Hell. Yoshihide had drawn all kinds of people. There were nobles in rich clothes, ladies of the court, monks with prayer beads, young students, servants, and even beggars. All were thrown together into the same flames.

They ran, fell, and cried out as they were chased by demons. Some were struck with iron rods. Others were crushed under heavy stones. Some were torn by strange birds or bitten by terrible creatures. There were too many kinds of suffering to count.

Yet among all these scenes, one image stood above the rest.

In the middle of the sky, a single carriage was falling. It was caught in the flames, its curtains burning, its wheels breaking apart. Inside the carriage was a

woman. She was dressed in fine clothes, like a lady of high rank. Her long black hair flowed in the fire. Her white neck was bent back as she cried in pain.

This one figure seemed to gather all the horror of the painting into itself. When people looked at it, they felt as if they could hear her voice, crying out in fear and suffering. It was a terrible and powerful image.

To create such a painting, something dreadful had to happen. No one could imagine such suffering without seeing it. Yoshihide himself paid a great price to complete it. It was as if he had entered Hell and returned only to show us what he had seen.

But I have spoken too quickly. I have described the finished work before telling how it came to be. Let me return to the beginning.

After receiving the order, Yoshihide began his work at once. For five or six months, he did not come to the Great Lord's residence. He shut himself inside his house and painted day and night.

Even his love for his daughter seemed to disappear when he worked. This was strange, but those who knew him were not surprised. When Yoshihide painted, he became like a man possessed. Nothing else mattered to him.

People said many things about him. Some believed that he had gained his skill through prayers to a powerful spirit. Others said that foxes gathered around him while he painted. Whether these stories were true or not, his behavior was certainly not normal.

He stayed in a dark room, rarely seeing the light of day. He mixed strange colors and made his students wear different clothes so that he could study their forms.

But these things were not the most frightening part. Yoshihide went much further than that.

What he did next was beyond anything we had ever seen.

## Part 7

It was said that when Yoshihide began to paint, he forgot everything else in the world. Even his beloved daughter no longer came to his mind. Day and night, he

remained in his dark room, working without rest. Those who saw him at that time said that he looked as if something had taken hold of him.

One of his students told me what happened one day. The student was preparing colors when Yoshihide entered the room. His face looked tired, and his eyes were strange.

“I wish to sleep for a while,” Yoshihide said. “But recently, my dreams have been bad.”

This was unusual. Yoshihide was not a man who feared dreams. The student felt surprised, but he answered politely, “Yes, master.”

Yoshihide hesitated, then spoke again. “While I sleep, stay beside me. Sit near my pillow.”

The student agreed. It was a simple request. Yoshihide then added, “Do not let anyone else enter.”

They went into the inner room where Yoshihide painted. It was dark, even during the day. A small lamp burned quietly. Around the room stood the folding screen, still unfinished.

Yoshihide lay down and soon fell into a deep sleep. At first, everything was silent. But after a short time, the student heard a strange sound.

It was a voice.

At first, the words were unclear. Then they became more distinct, like someone speaking while drowning.

“Come... come... You call me... Where must I go? To Hell... to the burning Hell...”

The student stopped his work and looked at his master. Yoshihide’s face had turned pale. Sweat covered his skin. His mouth was open wide, and his tongue moved quickly, as if pulled by an unseen force.

“Who are you?” Yoshihide murmured. “Ah... it is you... I knew it was you... You have come to take me... to Hell... My daughter is waiting there...”

Hearing these words, the student felt a deep fear. For a moment, he thought he saw a shadow move across the surface of the unfinished screen. It was as if something from another world was coming closer.

He could not bear it any longer. He shook Yoshihide with all his strength. But his master did not wake. The strange voice continued, rising and falling like a cry in the dark.

At last, the student took water and threw it over Yoshihide's face.

“Come... ride the carriage... come to Hell...”

The words ended in a choking sound. Yoshihide suddenly opened his eyes and jumped up. For a moment, he looked around wildly, as if he still saw something terrible. Then, slowly, he returned to himself.

“You may go now,” he said coldly.

The student left the room at once. When he stepped outside into the daylight, he felt as if he had escaped from a nightmare.

But this was only the beginning.

Soon, even stranger things began to happen.

## Part 8

Not long after that, another student was called into Yoshihide's room. The young man was strong and brave by nature, not easily frightened. Yet even he later said that he had felt a terrible fear that day.

When he entered the room, Yoshihide was sitting in the dim light, holding a brush in his mouth. Without any greeting, he turned suddenly and said, “Take off your clothes.”

The student had done such things before, so he obeyed. He removed his clothes and stood naked before his master. Yoshihide watched him closely, his eyes sharp and cold.

“I want to see a man bound in chains,” Yoshihide said. “It may be painful, but do as I say.”

His voice showed no kindness.

The student hesitated for a moment. Later, he said that he feared Yoshihide might kill him. But before he could speak, Yoshihide had already taken a thin iron chain in his hands.

With sudden force, he leaped forward. He twisted the student's arms behind his back and wrapped the chain tightly around them. The student cried out, but Yoshihide did not stop. He pulled the chain hard, and the young man fell to the floor with a loud sound.

The student's body was bent in an unnatural way. His arms and legs could not move freely. Blood gathered under his skin, turning it red. He could move only his head.

Yoshihide, however, seemed not to notice the suffering. He walked around the helpless body, watching from every side. Then he began to draw. Again and again, he made sketches, carefully recording the shape of the twisted body.

The student's pain grew worse with each moment. It seemed that Yoshihide would continue without end.

Then something unexpected happened.

From the shadow of a jar in the corner, a dark line began to move. At first, it looked like oil flowing slowly across the floor. But soon it became clear.

It was a snake.

The creature moved closer, its body shining faintly. It came straight toward the student's face. Seeing it, the student cried out, "A snake! A snake!"

His body could not move. He could only watch as the snake approached his neck. Its cold tongue seemed ready to touch his skin.

At that moment, even Yoshihide reacted. He threw aside his brush and rushed forward. With quick movement, he seized the snake by its tail and lifted it into the air.

The snake twisted and tried to strike, but it could not reach him. Yoshihide looked at it with anger.

"Because of you, I have ruined a perfect line," he said.

Then he threw the snake back into the jar. After that, he untied the student's chains. But he spoke no words of concern. It seemed that the lost drawing troubled him more than the student's suffering.

Later, it was learned that Yoshihide had kept the snake for this very purpose—to study its form.

Stories like this were not rare. They showed how far Yoshihide would go for his art.

Yet even these events were not the most terrible.

There was still something worse to come.

## Part 9

Among the many strange things Yoshihide did, there was one event that people spoke of with the greatest fear. It involved a young student, no more than thirteen or fourteen years old. He was gentle in appearance, almost like a girl, with pale skin and soft features.

One night, this boy was called into Yoshihide's room. The hour was late, and the house was quiet. When he entered, he saw something he had never seen before.

Yoshihide sat under the dim light of a lamp. In his hand, he held a piece of raw meat. Before him stood a strange bird. It was large, almost the size of a cat. Its feathers stood out like ears on both sides of its head, and its round eyes shone like amber. Its shape was unnatural, and its presence filled the room with unease.

The boy bowed and said, "You called me, master?"

But Yoshihide did not answer at once. He only looked at the bird with great interest. Then he spoke slowly. "See how well it has become tame."

The boy looked at the creature with fear. "What is it?" he asked. "I have never seen such a bird."

Yoshihide gave a small, cold smile. "You have not seen one? That is because you are a city boy. This is a mountain bird. A hunter brought it to me a few days ago. It is called an owl. But one like this, so calm and used to people, is rare."

As he spoke, Yoshihide gently stroked the bird's back.

In the next moment, everything changed.

The bird let out a sharp cry. It spread its wings and flew suddenly into the air. Before the boy could react, it rushed toward his face.

The boy raised his sleeve just in time to protect himself. The bird struck at him again and again, its claws reaching, its beak snapping.

The boy cried out in fear. He tried to push the creature away, but it attacked without stopping. He moved across the small room, stumbling as he tried to escape. The bird followed him, flying low and then rising, always aiming for his eyes.

The sound of its wings filled the room. The air itself seemed heavy and strange, as if the place had become something far from the human world. The boy later said that the room no longer felt like a house. It felt like a dark valley deep in the mountains, full of unseen dangers.

But what frightened him most was not the bird.

It was Yoshihide.

While the boy struggled and cried out, Yoshihide sat calmly. He spread out paper, took up his brush, and began to draw. He watched every movement of the terrified child and the attacking bird, capturing the scene with great care.

Seeing this, the boy felt a deeper terror than before. He believed that Yoshihide might let him die, just to complete his painting.

At last, unable to endure the fear, he ran to the corner of the room and covered his head with his arms. He let out a cry that he himself did not understand.

At that moment, something unexpected happened again.

There was a loud noise. The lamp fell, and the room was suddenly filled with darkness.

The sound of wings grew wild. Something struck the floor. Yoshihide shouted for the other students.

When light returned, they saw a strange sight. The owl lay on the floor, struggling. Around its body, a black snake had wrapped itself tightly. The two creatures fought, twisting together in the dim light.

For a moment, everyone stood still, unable to speak.

No one knew what would happen next.

## Part 10

For a few moments, the two students could only stand and stare at the scene before them. The owl struggled wildly on the floor, beating its wings in pain.

Around its neck and one wing, the black snake had wrapped itself tightly. The two creatures twisted and fought, their bodies moving in a dark and terrible knot.

Yoshihide stood nearby, half-risen from his seat. His face showed a strange expression, as if he were both surprised and interested at the same time. He muttered something under his breath, words that no one could clearly understand.

At last, the other students who had been called came running with a lamp. When the light returned, the room looked even more frightening. Oil from the fallen lamp had spread across the floor, making everything shine in a dark, wet way.

The owl was still struggling, but its movements were weaker now. The snake tightened its hold again and again. No one moved to stop them. It was as if they had forgotten that these were living creatures.

After a time, the two students bowed silently and left the room. They did not wish to remain any longer. As for what became of the owl and the snake, no one knows.

Such events continued again and again. From the beginning of autumn to the end of winter, Yoshihide worked without rest on the screen of Hell. During that time, his students lived in constant fear. It was like being trapped in a cage with a wild animal.

As the months passed, Yoshihide changed even more. His face grew darker, his words sharper. He spoke to others with anger and impatience. At the same time, his work seemed to slow.

The painting was almost complete. The main design had been finished. Yet something was missing. Yoshihide himself seemed to feel this. Sometimes, he even destroyed parts he had already painted, as if they were not good enough.

No one knew what troubled him. His students did not dare to ask. They had already seen too much. They kept their distance, avoiding him whenever possible.

But there was one strange change in Yoshihide that people could not ignore.

He began to cry.

This proud and cruel man, who had once shown no fear, was now seen weeping when he was alone.

One day, a student happened to see him standing in a corridor, looking out at

the sky. It was near the end of winter. The air was still cold, but the light of spring had begun to appear.

Yoshihide stood there quietly, his eyes filled with tears.

The student felt embarrassed and turned away at once. It was difficult to believe that this was the same man who had calmly drawn suffering and death.

At the same time, another change was taking place.

Yoshihide's daughter, who had once been cheerful and calm, began to grow quiet and sad. She tried to hide it, but those around her could see the change. Her eyes often filled with tears, and her face lost its color.

At first, people thought she was worried about her father. Others believed she was in love. But soon, a darker rumor spread.

They said that the Great Lord was trying to make her obey his wishes.

After that, no one spoke openly about her anymore.

It was around this time that something else happened—something that would lead to the final tragedy.

## Part 11

One night, when the air had begun to grow soft with the coming of spring, I was walking alone along a corridor in the Great Lord's residence. The moon was faint, and a quiet light lay over the garden. It was a peaceful night, or so it seemed.

As I walked, something suddenly leaped toward me from the shadows. It caught hold of my robe and pulled at it again and again. Startled, I looked down.

It was the monkey.

The small creature showed its teeth and cried out loudly. Its voice was sharp and wild, unlike anything I had heard before. It did not behave like a tame animal. It seemed almost mad.

At first, I felt both fear and anger. I thought of kicking it away and continuing on my path. But then I remembered how the young lord had once become angry when someone had treated the monkey badly.

More than that, the monkey's behavior was too strange to ignore. It was clearly

trying to tell me something.

So I followed it.

The monkey ran ahead, looking back again and again to make sure I followed. It led me along the corridor, then turned toward a darker part of the residence.

Soon, we came near a room where a faint light could be seen. The monkey stopped there and cried even louder, pulling at my clothes once more.

I approached the room quietly and looked inside.

What I saw there froze me in place.

The girl—Yoshihide's daughter—was sitting alone. Her head was lowered, and her shoulders shook. She was crying silently.

Before her stood the Great Lord.

His face was calm, but his eyes were fixed on her in a way that made me uneasy. He spoke to her in a low voice. I could not hear all his words, but I understood enough.

He was asking her to do something.

And she was refusing.

Again and again, she shook her head. Her voice trembled as she answered. Even from where I stood, I could feel her fear.

The Great Lord's voice grew colder. He stepped closer.

At that moment, the monkey let out a loud cry. It jumped into the room and ran to the girl, clinging to her as it had done before.

The Great Lord turned his eyes toward the animal. For a moment, his face showed a shadow of anger.

I could not remain there any longer. I stepped back silently and left the place, my heart beating fast.

From that night on, I could not forget what I had seen.

Soon after, events began to move toward their end.

The Great Lord called Yoshihide once again.

And this time, the command he gave would lead to a terrible fate.

Not long after that night, the Great Lord summoned Yoshihide. By then, the painter had grown even thinner than before. His eyes burned with a strange light, and his face looked almost like that of a man who had already left this world in spirit.

When he entered the presence of the Great Lord, he bowed as usual. But there was no humility in his heart. He stood there, waiting.

The Great Lord looked at him for a while without speaking. Then he said slowly, "Your screen is not yet complete."

Yoshihide lowered his head. "It is true," he answered. "There is one thing I still cannot paint."

"What is it?" the Great Lord asked.

Yoshihide hesitated for the first time. Then he spoke. "I must see it with my own eyes. Without that, I cannot complete the work."

The Great Lord's lips moved slightly, as if he were smiling. "And what is it that you must see?"

Yoshihide raised his head. His voice was calm, but his eyes were filled with something dark.

"A carriage burning in flames," he said. "A noble lady inside, suffering in the fire."

For a moment, there was silence.

The Great Lord looked at him without changing his expression. Then he said, "Very well. If that is what you need, I will show it to you."

Hearing this, Yoshihide bowed deeply. But those who stood nearby felt a chill in their hearts.

After that, preparations began. A fine carriage was brought, decorated like those used by high-ranking ladies. It was placed in an open space within the grounds. Many people gathered at a distance, though they did not know exactly what would happen.

Yoshihide stood with his tools, ready to observe. His face showed no emotion.

Then, at the Great Lord's signal, a lady was brought forward. She was dressed

in beautiful clothes, her long hair arranged carefully. Her face was pale, but she did not cry out.

She was placed inside the carriage.

At that moment, Yoshihide's eyes widened. He took a step forward. For the first time, his calm broke.

"That is—"

He could not finish his words.

It was his daughter.

Before he could move, the doors of the carriage were closed. Servants stepped forward with torches.

The flames were set.

Fire rose quickly, climbing over the wood and cloth. Smoke filled the air. The carriage shook as the fire grew stronger.

From within, a cry could be heard.

Yoshihide stood still. His body trembled, but he did not move to stop it.

Instead, he raised his brush.

And began to paint.

### Part 13

The flames rose higher and higher, wrapping the carriage in red and black fire. Smoke poured into the air, and sparks flew like a storm of light. The heat was so strong that even those watching from a distance stepped back in fear.

Inside the burning carriage, the girl cried out once more. Her voice, full of pain, cut through the night. It was a sound that no one who heard it would ever forget.

The monkey screamed as well. It ran forward, trying to reach the flames, but was held back by those nearby. Its small body shook as it struggled, its cries growing louder and more desperate.

Yoshihide stood before the fire, his brush moving quickly across the surface before him. His face was pale, and his eyes were wide, fixed on the burning carriage. Tears streamed down his cheeks, but his hand did not stop.

Every movement of the flames, every turn of the girl's body, every cry—he captured them all. It was as if he saw nothing else in the world.

Some of those who watched turned away, unable to bear the sight. Others covered their ears. But Yoshihide did not look away even once.

The fire grew stronger. The shape of the carriage began to break apart. The curtains burned away, and for a moment, the figure inside could be seen clearly.

Her long hair spread out in the flames. Her body bent as she struggled. Her face, though filled with pain, seemed strangely calm for an instant.

At that moment, Yoshihide's hand moved even faster. His brush flew across the surface, as if guided by something beyond his will.

Then, slowly, the cries grew weaker.

The fire consumed everything.

At last, the carriage collapsed, and the flames began to die down. Only smoke and the smell of burning remained.

Silence fell over the place.

Yoshihide lowered his brush. For a moment, he stood without moving. Then he stepped back, as if waking from a dream.

He looked at what he had painted.

A strange light appeared in his eyes. It was not grief. It was not anger. It was something else—something like joy.

Those who saw his face felt a deep fear.

For they understood that, in that moment, Yoshihide had gained what he desired most.

And had lost everything else.

From that night on, he did not speak of his daughter again.

Instead, he worked without rest to complete the screen of Hell.

## Part 14

After that terrible night, Yoshihide changed once more. The strange anger that had filled him before seemed to disappear. He no longer shouted at his students.

He no longer showed impatience. Instead, he became quiet—almost calm.

Day after day, he worked on the folding screen. His brush moved with steady strength, as if he now knew exactly what he must do. Those who saw him said that his face had become peaceful, but in a way that was not natural. It was the calm of a man who had already given up everything.

No one dared to speak to him about what had happened. Even his students avoided looking into his eyes. The monkey, which had once never left the girl's side, was no longer seen. It had disappeared from the house, and no one knew where it had gone.

At last, the screen was completed.

When it was brought before the Great Lord, all who saw it were struck with fear. The flames seemed to move. The cries of the suffering seemed to echo in the air. It was not a painting. It was as if a piece of Hell itself had been placed before us.

And in the center, there was the image of the burning carriage.

The woman inside was drawn with such truth that no one could doubt what had been seen. Her pain, her struggle, the movement of her hair in the fire—all were captured perfectly.

The Great Lord looked at the screen in silence. For a long time, he said nothing. Then, slowly, he nodded.

“It is complete,” he said.

Those words ended everything.

Yoshihide bowed deeply. But there was no pride in his action. It was simply the movement of a man who had finished his work.

That night, he returned to his house.

The next morning, he was found dead.

He had taken his own life.

Some said that he could not bear the loss of his daughter. Others said that he had reached the end of his art and no longer had reason to live.

But no one truly knew what was in his heart.

Only one thing was certain.

He had completed the screen of Hell.  
And in doing so, he had destroyed himself.  
Even now, when I think of that painting, I feel a chill.  
For it was not only a picture of Hell.  
It was the record of a man who had lived it.

## Part 15

After Yoshihide's death, the folding screen of Hell remained in the Great Lord's residence. It was placed in a special room, and only a few people were allowed to see it. Even so, its fame spread far and wide. Many spoke of it as the greatest painting ever made, while others feared it and refused even to look at it.

Those who saw it often said the same thing. The flames seemed alive. The suffering of the people seemed real. And the woman in the burning carriage—her image stayed in the mind long after one had turned away.

Some claimed that if you stood before the screen at night, you could hear faint cries. Others said that the air grew heavy, as if filled with smoke. Whether these stories were true or not, I cannot say. But I know that no one who saw the painting could easily forget it.

As for the Great Lord, he kept the screen close and spoke little about it. His thoughts were unknown to us. He did not praise Yoshihide, nor did he condemn him. It was as if the matter had already passed beyond words.

Time went on, and people spoke less and less about the events of that year. New matters came, and old ones were forgotten. Yet some memories did not fade.

From time to time, someone would speak of Yoshihide and shake their head. "He was a man like a demon," they would say. "But no one could match his skill."

Others would speak of his daughter and grow quiet. Her name was rarely mentioned, but her story remained in people's hearts.

As for me, I have told this story as I remember it. There may be things I have not understood, and there may be truths hidden from my eyes.

But I believe this much is clear.

Yoshihide sought to paint Hell, and in the end, he found it.  
Whether it was in the world beyond, or in his own heart, I do not know.  
But the screen he left behind still shows us what he saw.  
And perhaps that is why it frightens us so deeply.  
Because it reminds us that such a Hell may not be far from us at all.