

THE TONGUE-CUT SPARROW

A tale from Japan

A long time ago an old man and his wife lived in the Japanese countryside. He was a good, kind-hearted man. However his wife, a mean tempered woman, complained all her waking hours. The old man spent most of each day working hard in the fields. When he came home it was his only pleasure to talk to his pet sparrow and teach her tricks. At supper time, he always saved some of his meal which he fed to his little bird.

One day when the old man was working, the old woman got ready to wash clothes. She made starch from rice and set it aside for a time. When she came back to look for it she found the bowl empty.

Soon, her husband's pet sparrow flew down, bowed her little feathered head and chirped, "It is I who took the starch because I thought it was food that had been put out for me. If I have made a mistake please forgive me!"

Since the sparrow was truthful, the old woman ought to have forgiven her. But that did not happen.

The old woman had never liked the sparrow. This was her chance to complain about it. She scolded the bird for her bad behavior, and in a fit of rage cut off its tongue.

After this, the old woman drove the bird away, not caring at all what might happen to it. How unkind the old woman was!

When his work day was done, the old man came home. He looked forward to reaching his gate and seeing his pet bird come flying and chirping to meet him, ruffling out her feathers to show her joy, and at last coming to rest on his shoulder. But this did not happen, much to the man's disappointment.

He soon began to wonder if his wife, in one of her bad moods, had shut the sparrow up in its cage. So he called her and said anxiously, "Where is Miss Sparrow today?"

The old woman pretended not to know, and answered, "Your sparrow? I am sure I don't know."

Eventually, when the old man gave her no peace, his wife confessed all.

"Oh! How could you be so cruel?" the old man said. Although he was too kind to punish his shrew of a wife, he was terribly distressed about the fate of his friendly sparrow.

The old man shed many tears that night. As he tossed and turned in bed he decided to look for the sparrow the next day. He rose early, ate a hasty breakfast, and started on his journey. He traveled over hills and through the woods, stopping at every clump of bamboos to cry, "Where, oh where is my tongue-cut sparrow?"

In the late afternoon he found himself near a large bamboo grove. At the edge of the wood he saw his own dear sparrow waiting to welcome him. He was so happy that he ran forward quickly to greet her. She was very pleased to see her old friend again, and, surprisingly, she could talk again. A new tongue had grown in place of the old one. It was then that the old man knew his sparrow was a fairy, and no common bird.

The sparrow asked him to follow her. She led him to a beautiful house. Inside, the old man was seated in a place of honor. Lady Sparrow thanked him for all the kindness he had shown her over the years.

Then she introduced him to her family. This done, her daughters, brought out a feast of delicious foods, and they performed a wonderful dance to amuse their guest.

The old man thoroughly enjoyed himself. But day turned to night and the old man thought about taking his leave and returning home. Lady Sparrow begged him to stay, but the old man said he must return to his wife and to his work. But now that he knew where Lady Sparrow lived he would come to see her whenever he could.

Lady Sparrow had two boxes brought into the room, one large and the other small. She asked the old man to choose whichever one he wanted for a present. The old man chose the smaller box because it would be easier to carry the long way home.

When the old man got home he found his wife even crosser than usual, for it was late and she had been waiting up for him. The old man tried to pacify her by showing her the present he had brought back. Then he told her of all that had happened to him, and how wonderfully he had been treated at the sparrow's house.

The two sat down to open the box. To their utter astonishment they found it filled to the brim with gold and silver coins and many other precious things. The sparrow's gift would enable him to give up work and live in ease and comfort the rest of his days.

But the old woman, after the first moments of surprise and joy, could not suppress her greed. She reproached the old man for not having brought home the big box. Not contented with the good luck which had so unexpectedly befallen them and which she so little deserved, the old woman made up her mind, if possible, to get more. Early the next morning, she got up and made the old man describe the way to the sparrow's house.

Ever since Lady Sparrow had returned home weeping and bleeding from the mouth, her whole family had done little else but speak of the old woman's cruelty. They determined to punish her if they ever had the chance.

After walking several hours the old woman found the bamboo grove and the bird's house. She approached the door and knocked loudly.

When Lady Sparrow came to the door the old woman got right to the point and said, "You need not trouble to entertain me. I have come to get the box that my husband so stupidly left behind. I will take my leave as soon as you give me the big box!"

Lady Sparrow consented and had the box brought out. The old woman eagerly seized it and without even a word of thanks began her journey homeward.

Before she got home, the greedy old woman put down the box and opened it, expecting to set her eyes on a mine of wealth. What she saw instead so terrified her that she nearly lost her senses. As soon as she lifted the lid, a number of horrible and frightful looking creatures bounced out of the box and surrounded her. A demon with one huge eye right in the middle of its forehead glared at her. Monsters with gaping mouths looked as if they would devour her. A huge snake coiled and hissed about her, and a big frog hopped and croaked towards her.

The frightened old woman ran away as fast as her quaking legs would carry her. When she reached home she fell to the floor and told her husband all that had happened.

She began to blame the sparrow, but the old man stopped her at once, saying, and “Don't blame the bird. It is your wickedness which has at last met with its reward. I only hope this has taught you a lesson!”

The old woman said nothing more. Instead she repented her cross, unkind ways, and by degrees became a good old woman. She and her husband spent their last days together happily, free from want or care, spending carefully the treasure the old man had received from his pet, the tongue-cut sparrow.

*Adapted by Kathleen Simonetta. Inspired by the following tales:

“The Sparrow with the Split Tongue” found in Best Loved Folktales of the World: Selected and with an Introduction by Joanna Cole. NY: Anchor Books, c1982, pp. 509-512.

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