

THE MYSTERIOUS BOOK FILIPINO TALE

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THE MYSTERIOUS BOOK^[0]

Once upon a time there lived a poor father and a poor son. The father was very old, and was named Pedro. The son's name was Juan. Although they were very poor, Juan was afraid of work.

One day the two did not have a single grain of rice in the house to eat. Juan now realized that he would have to find some work, or he and his father would starve. So he went to a neighboring town to seek a master. He at last found one in the person of Don Luzano, a fine gentleman of fortune.

Don Luzano treated Juan like a son. As time went on, Don Luzano became so confident in Juan's honesty, that he began to intrust him with the most precious valuables in the house. One morning Don Luzano went out hunting. He left Juan alone in the house, as usual. While Juan was sweeping and cleaning his master's room, he caught sight of a highly polished box lying behind the post in the corner. Curious to find out what was inside, he opened the box. There appeared another box. He opened this box, and another box still was disclosed. One box appeared after another until Juan came to the seventh. This last one contained a small triangular-shaped book bound in gold and decorated with diamonds and other precious gems. Disregarding the consequences that might follow, Juan picked up the book and opened it. Lo! at once Juan was carried by the book up into the air. And when he looked back, whom did he see? No other than Don Luzano pursuing him, with eyes full of rage. He had an enormous deadly-looking bolo in his hand.

As Don Luzano was a big man, he could fly faster than little Juan. Soon the boy was but a few yards in front of his antagonist. It should also be known that the book had the wonderful power of changing anybody who had laid his hands on it, or who had learned by heart one of its chapters, into whatever form that person wished to assume. Juan soon found this fact out. In an instant Juan had disappeared, and in his place was a little steed

galloping as fast as he could down the street. Again, there was Don Luzano after him in the form of a big fast mule, with bubbling and foaming mouth, and eyes flashing with hate. The mule ran so fast, that every minute seemed to be bringing Juan nearer his grave.

Seeing his danger, Juan changed himself into a bird,—a pretty little bird. No sooner had he done so than he saw Don Luzano in the form of a big hawk about to swoop down on him. Then Juan suddenly leaped into a well he was flying over, and there became a little fish. Don Luzano assumed the form of a big fish, and kept up the chase; but the little fish entered a small crack in the wall of the well, where the big fish could not pursue him farther. So Don Luzano had to give up and go home in great disappointment.

The well in which Juan found himself belonged to three beautiful princesses. One morning, while they were looking into the water, they saw the little fish with its seven-colored scales, moving gracefully through the water. The eldest of the maidens lowered her bait, but the fish would not see it. The second sister tried her skill. The fish bit the bait; but, just as it was being drawn out of the water, it suddenly released its hold. Now the youngest sister's turn came. The fish allowed itself to be caught and held in the tender hands of this beautiful girl. She placed the little fish in a golden basin of water and took it to her room, where she cared for it very tenderly.

Several months later the king issued a proclamation throughout his realm and other neighboring kingdoms, saying that the youngest princess was sick. "To any one who can cure her," he said, "I promise to give one-half of my kingdom." The most skilful doctors had already done the best they could, but all their efforts were in vain. The princess seemed to grow worse and worse every day. "Ay, what foolishness!" exclaimed Don Luzano when he heard the news of the sick princess. "The sickness! Pshaw! That's no sickness, never in the wide world!"

The following morning there was Don Luzano speaking with the king. "I promise to cure her," said Don Luzano. "I have already cured many similar cases."

"And your remedy will do her no harm?" asked the king after some hesitation.

"No harm, sir, no harm. Rely on my honor."

"Very well. And you shall have half of my kingdom if you are successful."

“No, I thank you, your Majesty. I, being a faithful subject, need no payment whatever for any of my poor services. As a token from you, however, I should like to have the fish that the princess keeps in her room.”

“O my faithful subject!” exclaimed the king in joy. “How good you are! Will you have nothing except a poor worthless fish?”

“No more, that’s enough.”

“Well, then,” returned the king, “prepare your remedy, and on the third day we shall apply it to the princess. You can go home now, and you may be sure that you shall have the fish.”

Don Luzano took his leave of the king, and then went home. On the third day this daring magician came back to the palace to apply his remedy to the princess. Before he began any part of the treatment, however, he requested that the fish be given to him. The king consented to his request: but as he was about to dip his hand into the basin, the princess boldly stopped him. She pretended to be angry on the ground that Don Luzano would soil with his hands the golden basin of the monarch. She told him to hold out his hands, and she would pour the fish into them. Don Luzano did as he was told: but, before the fish could reach his hands, the pretty creature jumped out. No fish now could be seen, but in its stead was a beautiful gold ring adorning the finger of the princess. Don Luzano tried to snatch the ring, but, as the princess jerked her hand back, the ring fell to the floor, and in its place were countless little *mungo*^[1] seeds scattered about the room. Don Luzano instantly took the form of a greedy crow, devouring the seeds with extraordinary speed. Juan, who was contained in one of the seeds that had rolled beneath the feet of the princess, suddenly became a cat, and, rushing out, attacked the bird. As soon as you could wink your eyes or snap your fingers, the crow was dead, miserably torn to pieces. In place of the cat stood Juan in an embroidered suit, looking like a gay young prince.

“This is my beloved,” confessed the princess to her father as she pointed to Juan. The king forgave his daughter for concealing from him the real condition of her life, and he gladly welcomed his new son-in-law. Prince Juan, as we shall now call our friend, was destined to a life of peace and joy. He was rid of his formidable antagonist; he had a beautiful princess (who was no longer sick) for a wife; and he had an excellent chance of inheriting the throne. There is no more.

[0] Narrated by Leopoldo Uichanco, a Tagalog from Calamba, La Laguna. ↑

[1] Mungo — a small legume about the size and shape of a lentil. Same as mongo. ↑

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