

THE GRATEFUL CRANE

JAPANESE FAIRY TALE

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“Fighting sparrows fear not man,” as the old proverb says. Yet it was not a sparrow but a crane that fell down out of the air. Near the feet of Musai, the farmer’s boy, it lay, as he waded in the ooze of his rice-field, working from daybreak to sundown.

The farmer’s boy was used to cranes, for in the plough’s furrow on the dry land these long-legged birds walked close behind, not the least afraid in the Mikado’s dominions. For who would hurt the white breasted creature, that every one called the Honourable Lord Crane? The graceful birds seemed to love to be near man, when he worked in the wet or paddy fields, where under four inches of water the seeds were planted and the rice plants grew. So graceful in all its movements is the crane, that many a dainty little maid, who acts politely, hears herself spoken of as the “bird that rises from the water without muddying the stream.”

Musai hurried to the grassy bank at the edge of the paddy field as fast as he could wade through the liquid mud, to see what was the matter with the crane. Throwing down his hoe, and looking in the grass, he saw that an arrow was sticking in the crane’s back, and that red drops of blood dappled its white plumage. Instead of seeming frightened when the man came near, the bird bent down its neck, as if to submit to whatever the farmer’s boy should do.

Gently Musai plucked out the arrow and helped the bird to rise, pushing back the undergrowth so that its broad white pinions could have free play. After a few feeble attempts to fly, it spread its wings, rose up from the earth, and after circling several times round its benefactor as though to thank him, it flew off to the mountain.

Musai went back to his work, hoping that in season his labour would yield a good crop. He had his widowed mother to support and must needs toil every day. His one delight was to come home, weary after the long hours of labour in the muddy rice-field, and have a hot bath. This his mother always had ready for him. Then, clean and with a fresh kimono, and a little rest before suppertime, he was ready for a quiet evening with the neighbours.

So in routine the days passed by until autumn was near at hand. One day, returning before the sun was fully set, he found seated beside his mother a lovely girl. In spite of his contemptible appearance after a day’s toil, working barelegged in the mire, she welcomed him with the grace of a princess.

Not thinking of returning the salute, in his unwashed condition, he took off his head kerchief, drew in his breath, and bowing to his mother asked,

“Who is the honourable That Side, and how comes she into this miserable hut?”

“My son,” replied his mother, “though you are a man, you have as yet no wife. Your virtues of obedience, filial reverence, fidelity, and politeness have made you well known. Hence this fair damsel is not unwilling to become your wife. But, without your consent, I could not answer her proposal. What do you think about it?”

The young farmer, though highly complimented, at first said little, but he thought hard.

“Daintily reared, and perhaps of noble birth is she, but should I gratify her desire, how can she bear the poverty to which we are accustomed? Will she be patient, when she has to suffer hunger? Or, shall we be separated, and that which promises love and happiness last only a little while, to pass away, leaving gloom and sorrow behind?”

But as the days slipped along, and when he saw how kind she was to her new mother, ever patient and self-denying in loving reverence, all his fears were driven away like clouds before the wind. So the young man and woman were married.

But when the full autumn time came for the rice ears to fill and round out, nothing was found but husk and shell. The crop was a total failure. With heavy taxes unpaid and no food in the house, starvation loomed before them. By winter, all were in dire distress.

Then the patient wife revealed new powers and cheered her husband, saying,

“I can spin such cloth as was never made in this province, if you will build me a separate room. I cannot weave here, or make the fine pattern of red and white except when alone and in perfect silence. Build me a room, and the money you need will flow in.”

The old mother was doubtful as to her daughter-in-law’s project and even Musai was but half-hearted. Yet he went to work diligently. With beam, and wattle, and thatch, floor of mats and window of latticed paper, with walls made tight because well daubed with clay, he built the room apart. There alone, day by day, secluded from all, the sweet wife toiled unseen. The mother and husband patiently waited, until after a week, the

little woman rejoined the little family circle. In her hands she bore a roll of woven stuff, white and sheeny, as lustrous and pure as fresh fallen snow. Yet here and there, a crimson thread in the stuff did but intensify the purity of the otherwise unflecked whiteness. Pure red and pure white were the only colours of this wonderful fabric.

“What shall we call it?” enquired the amazed husband.

“It has no name, for there is none other in the world like it,” said the fair weaver.

“But I must have a name. I shall take it to the Daimio. He will not buy, if he does not know how it is called.”

“Then,” said the wife, “tell him its name is ‘White Crane’s down cloth.’”

Quickly passed the snowy fabric into the hands of the lord of the castle, who sent it as a present to the Empress in Kioto. All were amazed by it, and the Empress commanded the donor to be richly rewarded. The farmer husband, bearing a thousand pieces of coin in his bag, hastened home to spread the shining silver at his mother’s feet and to thank the wife who had brought him fortune. A feast followed, and for many weeks the family lived easily on the money thus gained. Then, when again on the edge of need, Musai asked his wife if she were willing to weave another web of the wonderful Crane’s down cloth.

Cheerfully she agreed, cautioning him to leave her in privacy, and not to look upon her until she came forth with the cloth.

But alas, people have too much wicked curiosity and pry into everything! Not satisfied with having been delivered from starvation by a wife that served him like a slave, Musai stealthily crept up to the paper partition, touched his tongue to the latticed pane, and poked his finger noiselessly through, thus making a round hole to which he glued his eye and looked in.

What a sight! There was no woman at work, but a noble white crane—the same that he had seen in the field, and from whose back he had extracted the hunter’s arrow. Bending over the spinning wheel, the bird pulled from her own breast the silky down, and by twining and twisting made it into the finest thread which mortals ever beheld. From time to time, she pressed from her heart’s blood red drops with which to dye some strands, and thus the weaving went on. The web of the cloth was nearly finished.

Musai astounded looked on without moving, until suddenly called by his mother, he cried out in response, “Yes, I’m coming.”

The startled crane turned and saw the eye in the wall. Throwing down thread and web she moved angrily to the door, gave a shrill scream and flew out under the sky. Like a white speck against the blue hills, she appeared for a little while and then was lost to sight.

Son and mother once more faced poverty and loneliness, and Musai again splashed barelegged in the rice-field.

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