

The Tongue-Cut Sparrow

by A. B. Mitford Tales of Old Japan

Once upon a time there lived a little old man and a little old woman. The little old man had a kind heart, and he kept a young sparrow, which he cared for tenderly. Every morning it used to sing at the door of his house.

Now, the little old woman was a cross old thing, and one day when she was going to starch her linen, the sparrow pecked at her paste. Then she flew into a great rage and cut the sparrow's tongue and let the bird fly away.

When the little old man came home from the hills, where he had been chopping wood, he found the sparrow gone.

"Where is my little sparrow?" asked he.

"It pecked at my starching-paste," answered the little old woman, "so I cut its evil tongue and let it fly away."

"Alas! Alas!" cried the little old man. "Poor thing! Poor thing! Poor little tongue-cut sparrow! Where is your home now?"

And then he wandered far and wide seeking his pet and crying,

"Mr. Sparrow, Mr. Sparrow, where are you living?"

And he wandered on and on, over mountain and valley, and dale and river, until one day at the foot of a certain mountain he met the lost bird. The little old man was filled with joy and the sparrow welcomed him with its sweetest song.

It led the little old man to its nest-house, introduced him to its wife and small sparrows, and set before him all sorts of

good things to eat and drink.

"Please partake of our humble fare," sang the sparrow, "poor as it is, you are welcome."

"What a polite sparrow," answered the little old man, and he stayed for a long time as the bird's guest. At last one day the little old man said that he must take his leave and return home.

"Wait a bit," said the sparrow.

And it went into the house and brought out two wicker baskets. One was very heavy and the other light.

"Take the one you wish," said the sparrow, "and good fortune go with you."

"I am very feeble," answered the little old man, "so I will take the light one."

He thanked the sparrow, and, shouldering the basket, said good-bye. Then he trudged off leaving the sparrow family sad and lonely.

When he reached home the little old woman was very angry, and began to scold him, saying,

"Well, and pray where have you been all these days? A pretty thing, indeed, for you to be gadding about like this!"

"Oh," he replied, "I have been on a visit to the tongue-cut sparrow, and when I came away it gave me this wicker basket as a parting gift."

Then they opened the basket to see what was inside, and lo

and behold! it was full of gold, silver, and other precious things!

The little old woman was as greedy as she was cross, and when she saw all the riches spread before her, she could not contain herself for joy.

"Ho! Ho!" cried she. "Now I'll go and call on the sparrow, and get a pretty present, too!"

She asked the old man the way to the sparrow's house and set forth on her journey. And she wandered on and on over mountain and valley, and dale and river, until at last she saw the tongue-cut sparrow.

"Well met, well met, Mr. Sparrow," cried she. "I have been looking forward with much pleasure to seeing you." And then she tried to flatter it with soft, sweet words.

So the bird had to invite her to its nest-house, but it did not feast her nor say anything about a parting gift. At last the little old woman had to go, and she asked for something to carry with her to remember the visit by. The sparrow, as before, brought out two wicker baskets. One was very heavy and the other light.

The greedy little old woman, choosing the heavy one, carried it off with her.

She hurried home as fast as she was able, and closing her doors and windows so that no one might see, opened the basket. And, lo and behold! out jumped all sorts of wicked hobgoblins and imps, and they scratched and pinched her to death.

As for the little old man he adopted a son, and his family

grew rich and prosperous.