The Old Man Who Made Withered Trees to Flower

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Long, long ago there lived an old man and his wife who supported themselves by cultivating a small plot of land. Their life had been a very happy and peaceful one save for one great sorrow, and this was they had no child. Their only pet was a dog named Shiro, and on him they lavished all the affection of their old age. Indeed, they loved him so much that whenever they had anything nice to eat they denied themselves to give it to Shiro. Now Shiro means “white,” and he was so called because of his color. He was a real Japanese dog, and very like a small wolf in appearance.

The happiest hour of the day both for the old man and his dog was when the man returned from his work in the field, and having finished his frugal supper of rice and vegetables, would take what he had saved from the meal out to the little veranda that ran round the cottage. Sure enough, Shiro was waiting for his master and the evening tit-bit. Then the old man said “Chin, chin!” and Shiro sat up and begged, and his master gave him the food. Next door to this good old couple there lived another old man and his wife who were both wicked and cruel, and who hated their good neighbors and the dog Shiro with all their might. Whenever Shiro happened to look into their kitchen they at once kicked him or threw something at him, sometimes even wounding him.

One day Shiro was heard barking for a long time in the field at the back of his master’s house. The old man, thinking that perhaps some birds were attacking the corn, hurried out to see what was the matter. As soon as Shiro saw his master he ran to meet him, wagging his tail, and, seizing the end of his kimono, dragged him under a large yenoki tree. Here he began to dig very industriously with his paws, yelping with joy all the time. The old man, unable to understand what it all meant, stood looking on in bewilderment. But Shiro went on barking and digging with all his might.

The thought that something might be hidden beneath the tree, and that the dog had scented it, at last struck the old man. He ran back to the house, fetched his spade and began to dig the ground at that spot. What was his astonishment when, after digging for some time, he came upon a heap of old and valuable coins, and the deeper he dug the more gold coins did he find. So intent was the old man on his work that he never saw the cross face of his neighbor peering at him through the bamboo hedge. At last all the gold coins lay shining on the ground. Shiro sat by

erect with pride and looking fondly at his master as if to say, “You see, though only a dog, I can make some return for all the kindness you show me.”

The old man ran in to call his wife, and together they carried home the treasure. Thus in one day the poor old man became rich. His gratitude to the faithful dog knew no bounds, and he loved and petted him more than ever, if that were possible.

The cross old neighbor, attracted by Shiro’s barking, had been an unseen and envious witness of the finding of the treasure. He began to think that he, too, would like to find a fortune. So a few days later he called at the old man’s house and very ceremoniously asked permission to borrow Shiro for a short time.

Shiro’s master thought this a strange request, because he knew quite well that not only did his neighbor not love his pet dog, but that he never lost an opportunity of striking and tormenting him whenever the dog crossed his path. But the good old man was too kind-hearted to refuse his neighbor, so he consented to lend the dog on condition that he should be taken great care of.

The wicked old man returned to his home with an evil smile on his face, and told his wife how he had succeeded in his crafty intentions. He then took his spade and hastened to his own field, forcing the unwilling Shiro to follow him. As soon as he reached a yenoki tree, he said to the dog, threateningly:

“If there were gold coins under your master’s tree, there must also be gold coins under my tree. You must find them for me! Where are they? Where? Where?”

And catching hold of Shiro’s neck he held the dog’s head to the ground, so that Shiro began to scratch and dig in order to free himself from the horrid old man’s grasp.

The old man was very pleased when he saw the dog begin to scratch and dig, for he at once supposed that some gold coins lay buried under his tree as well as under his neighbor’s, and that the dog had scented them as before; so pushing Shiro away he began to dig himself, but there was nothing to be found. As he went on digging a foul smell was noticeable, and he at last came upon a refuse heap.

The old man’s disgust can be imagined. This soon gave way to anger. He had seen his neighbor’s good fortune, and hoping for the same luck himself, he had borrowed the dog Shiro; and now, just as he seemed on the point of finding what he sought, only a horrid smelling refuse heap had rewarded him for a morning’s digging. Instead of blaming his own greed for his disappointment, he blamed the poor dog. He seized his spade, and with all his strength struck Shiro and killed him on the spot. He then threw the dog’s body into the hole which he had dug in the hope of

finding a treasure of gold coins, and covered it over with the earth. Then he returned to the house, telling no one, not even his wife, what he had done.

After waiting several days, as the dog Shiro did not return, his master began to grow anxious. Day after day went by and the good old man waited in vain. Then he went to his neighbor and asked him to give him back his dog. Without any shame or hesitation, the wicked neighbor answered that he had killed Shiro because of his bad behavior. At this dreadful news Shiro's master wept many sad and bitter tears. Great indeed, was his woful surprise, but he was too good and gentle to reproach his bad neighbor. Learning that Shiro was buried under the yenoki tree in the field, he asked the old man to give him the tree, in remembrance of his poor dog Shiro.

Even the cross old neighbor could not refuse such a simple request, so he consented to give the old man the tree under which Shiro lay buried. Shiro's master then cut the tree down and carried it home. Out of the trunk he made a mortar. In this his wife put some rice, and he began to pound it with the intention of making a festival to the memory of his dog Shiro.

A strange thing happened! His wife put the rice into the mortar, and no sooner had he begun to pound it to make the cakes, than it began to increase in quantity gradually till it was about five times the original amount, and the cakes were turned out of the mortar as if an invisible hand were at work.

When the old man and his wife saw this, they understood that it was a reward to them from Shiro for their faithful love to him. They tasted the cakes and found them nicer than any other food. So from this time they never troubled about food, for they lived upon the cakes with which the mortar never ceased to supply them.

The greedy neighbor, hearing of this new piece of good luck, was filled with envy as before, and called on the old man and asked leave to borrow the wonderful mortar for a short time, pretending that he, too, sorrowed for the death of Shiro, and wished to make cakes for a festival to the dog's memory.

The old man did not in the least wish to lend it to his cruel neighbor, but he was too kind to refuse. So the envious man carried home the mortar, but he never brought it back.

Several days passed, and Shiro's master waited in vain for the mortar, so he went to call on the borrower, and asked him to be good enough to return the mortar if he had finished with it. He found him sitting by a big fire made of pieces of wood. On the ground lay what looked very much like pieces of a broken mortar. In answer to the old man's inquiry, the wicked neighbor answered haughtily:

“Have you come to ask me for your mortar? I broke it to pieces, and now I am making a fire of the wood, for when I tried to pound cakes in it only some horrid smelling stuff came out.”

The good old man said:

“I am very sorry for that. It is a great pity you did not ask me for the cakes if you wanted them. I would have given you as many as ever you wanted. Now please give me the ashes of the mortar, as I wish to keep them in remembrance of my dog.”

The neighbor consented at once, and the old man carried home a basket full of ashes.

Not long after this the old man accidentally scattered some of the ashes made by the burning of the mortar on the trees of his garden. A wonderful thing happened!

It was late in autumn and all the trees had shed their leaves, but no sooner did the ashes touch their branches than the cherry trees, the plum trees, and all other blossoming shrubs burst into bloom, so that the old man’s garden was suddenly transformed into a beautiful picture of spring. The old man’s delight knew no bounds, and he carefully preserved the remaining ashes.

The story of the old man’s garden spread far and wide, and people from far and near came to see the wonderful sight.

One day, soon after this, the old man heard some one knocking at his door, and going to the porch to see who it was he was surprised to see a Knight standing there. This Knight told him that he was a retainer of a great Daimio (Earl); that one of the favorite cherry trees in this nobleman’s garden had withered, and that though every one in his service had tried all manner of means to revive it, none took effect. The Knight was sore perplexed when he saw what great displeasure the loss of his favorite cherry tree caused the Daimio. At this point, fortunately, they had heard that there was a wonderful old man who could make withered trees to blossom, and that his Lord had sent him to ask the old man to come to him.

“And,” added the Knight, “I shall be very much obliged if you will come at once.”

The good old man was greatly surprised at what he heard, but respectfully followed the Knight to the nobleman’s Palace.

The Daimio, who had been impatiently awaiting the old man’s coming, as soon as he saw him asked him at once:

“Are you the old man who can make withered trees flower even out of season?”

The old man made an obeisance, and replied:

“I am that old man!”

Then the Daimio said:

“You must make that dead cherry tree in my garden blossom again by means of your famous ashes. I shall look on.”

Then they all went into the garden—the Daimio and his retainers and the ladies-in waiting, who carried the Daimio’s sword.

The old man now tucked up his kimono and made ready to climb the tree. Saying “Excuse me,” he took the pot of ashes which he had brought with him, and began to climb the tree, every one watching his movements with great interest.

At last he climbed to the spot where the tree divided into two great branches, and taking up his position here, the old man sat down and scattered the ashes right and left all over the branches and twigs.

Wonderful, indeed, was the result! The withered tree at once burst into full bloom! The Daimio was so transported with joy that he looked as if he would go mad. He rose to his feet and spread out his fan, calling the old man down from the tree. He himself gave the old man a wine cup filled with the best SAKE, and rewarded him with much silver and gold and many other precious things. The Daimio ordered that henceforth the old man should call himself by the name of Hana-Saka-Jijii, or “The Old Man who makes the Trees to Blossom,” and that henceforth all were to recognize him by this name, and he sent him home with great honor.

The wicked neighbor, as before, heard of the good old man’s fortune, and of all that had so auspiciously befallen him, and he could not suppress all the envy and jealousy that filled his heart. He called to mind how he had failed in his attempt to find the gold coins, and then in making the magic cakes; this time surely he must succeed if he imitated the old man, who made withered trees to flower simply by sprinkling ashes on them. This would be the simplest task of all.

So he set to work and gathered together all the ashes which remained in the fire-place from the burning of the wonderful mortar. Then he set out in the hope of finding some great man to employ him, calling out loudly as he went along:

“Here comes the wonderful man who can make withered trees blossom! Here comes the old man who can make dead trees blossom!”

The Daimio in his Palace heard this cry, and said:

“That must be the Hana-Saka-Jijii passing. I have nothing to do to-day. Let him try his art again; it will amuse me to look on.”

So the retainers went out and brought in the impostor before their Lord. The satisfaction of false old man can now be imagined.

But the Daimio looking at him, thought it strange that he was not at all like the old man he had seen before, so he asked him:

“Are you the man whom I named Hana-Saka-Jijii?”

And the envious neighbor answered with a lie:

“Yes, my Lord!”

“That is strange!” said the Daimio. “I thought there was only one Hana-Saka-Jijii in the world! Has he now some disciples?”

“I am the true Hana-Saka-Jijii. The one who came to you before was only my disciple!” replied the old man again.

“Then you must be more skillful than the other. Try what you can do and let me see!”

The envious neighbor, with the Daimio and his Court following, then went into the garden, and approaching a dead tree, took out a handful of the ashes which he carried with him, and scattered them over the tree.

But not only did the tree not burst into flower, but not even a bud came forth. Thinking that he had not used enough ashes, the old man took handfuls and again sprinkled them over the withered tree. But all to no effect. After trying several times, the ashes were blown into the Daimio’s eyes. This made him very angry, and he ordered his retainers to arrest the false Hana-Saka-Jijii at once and put him in prison for an impostor. From this imprisonment the wicked old man was never freed. Thus did he meet with punishment at last for all his evil doings.

The good old man, however, with the treasure of gold coins which Shiro had found for him, and with all the gold and the silver which the Daimio had showered on him, became a rich and prosperous man in his old age, and lived a long and happy life, beloved and respected by all.

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