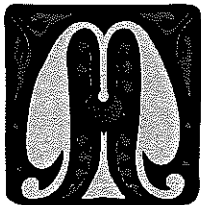


JAPAN



Ignoring the instructions or well-meaning advice of others is a popular theme in many tales around the world. Often a story's hero is able to overcome any resulting problems and everything turns out all right. Not so in this Japanese tale, which ends on a more somber note.

Urashima the Fisherman



any years ago in a small village in the Tango province, there lived an old man and his wife and their grown son Urashima (oo-RAH-she-mah).

Each day Urashima would row out to sea in a small boat. There he would drop his nets in the water and pull up the fish that got trapped in them. When luck was with him, Urashima might pull up several huge baskets of fish, which his mother and father would then sell at the village market. This was how they lived.

One day, Urashima rowed out to sea as usual. When he pulled up his nets, he hadn't caught a single fish. He tried again, and again his nets were completely empty.

Urashima had no luck the next day, nor the next. He was ready to go home empty-handed once again when he dropped the nets into the water one last time. When he pulled them up, he found he had snared a sea turtle.

Urashima carefully untangled the netting from around the turtle's

flippers. He turned around to free a bit of the rope that was caught on the prow of his boat. When Urashima turned back, he saw that the turtle had changed into a beautiful young woman, dressed in a shimmering kimono patterned with a design of clouds.

“I’ve been watching you for a long time,” the young woman said to Urashima. “I so wanted to meet you.”

“Who are you?” asked Urashima. He stared uncertainly at the mysterious woman.


“I am not from your world,” the woman replied. “I am an immortal, and I live in the sky. Yes, it’s true,” she added, seeing the disbelief in Urashima’s eyes. “I am a goddess.”

Urashima nodded his understanding and somehow accepted that a mere mortal such as himself could see and talk to a god. Then he asked, “But why did you wish to talk with me?”

“I have loved you from the first moment I set eyes on you,” the woman said. “I want to bring you to my home. Will you come with me?”

Urashima suddenly lost all his fear, and replied, “Yes, I will come with you. But how shall we get to your home?”

“Take the oars in your hands and shut your eyes,” the woman said. Only a few seconds passed before the sky goddess told Urashima to open his eyes. He saw they were nearing a large island with earth the color of jade. He could see a magnificent palace with watchtowers



that rose even higher than the clouds. It was unlike anything Urashima had ever seen, or even imagined.

The two landed on a pebbly beach and strolled hand in hand up to the gates of the palace. "My parents are most anxious to meet you," the goddess said. Urashima was introduced to her mother and father, and they greeted him warmly, telling him how gladdened they were by this rare meeting of gods and mortals.

That evening, Urashima was invited to join the family at a special banquet held in his honor. The food was delicious and beautifully prepared. After the meal, Urashima and the Immortals talked of the future.

"When the sun goes down," the goddess's father said, "you shall be man and wife." And so they were wed, and Urashima lived happily with his new wife and her family in their home in the sky.

All was fine for three years—three years that went by so quickly it seemed like only three days. Then one day Urashima felt a pang of longing for his own mother and father and for his life as a fisherman in their village. Each day he felt the tug of his past more strongly, until he finally spoke to his wife about it.

"My parents must be very worried about me," Urashima told his wife. "I never told them where I was going. Besides, I miss them greatly, and I wish I could see them and make sure they are all right."

"I understand," Urashima's wife said kindly. "But when we wed, we promised we would be as true to one another as the rocks are to the mountains. Your parents are fine; I know they are. Your homesickness will go away, too, I am sure."

But Urashima missed his own family more and more, and finally

he persuaded his wife and her parents that he must be allowed to return to his village. They were saddened to see him go, but they told Urashima he could return to the kingdom of the clouds any time he chose.

"Take this box," said Urashima's wife, handing him a tiny box that fit in the palm of his hand. "Just grip it tightly in your hand when you wish to come back to us. But you must *never* open the box . . . ever," she warned, kissing her husband good-bye.

Urashima got into his boat, and his father-in-law told him to close his eyes. A few seconds later the boat ground to a gentle halt. Urashima opened his eyes and saw he was back in his village. But it looked so different he could hardly recognize it.

Urashima walked toward where his house should have been, but he could find it nowhere. He stopped a woman on the street. "Excuse me," he said, "but could you tell me where I might find the family of Urashima the fisherman?"

"Who?" replied the old woman. "Urashima? Never heard of him."

"But he lived with his mother and father in a house right on this spot," insisted Urashima.

"Oh, yes," the old woman recalled. "I know who you are talking about now. I remember my great-grandfather telling a story about a fellow named Urashima. They say he went out fishing in his boat one day and never returned. But that was over three hundred years ago!"

Urashima was speechless for a moment. "I don't understand," he stammered.

"Well, I don't understand why you're looking for someone who has been missing for three hundred years," replied the old woman. She walked away, shaking her head.

Urashima strode from one end of the village to the other, search-



ing for at least something that he might recognize. Had all traces of his mother and father disappeared? Could it be that three years in the kingdom in the clouds were really three hundred years on earth? He looked down at the box he held in his hand. "Perhaps this box holds the answers," he thought to himself.

Ignoring his wife's stern warning, Urashima lifted its lid. A white cloud rose from the box and Urashima could just make out the shape of the goddess as it floated up into the sky and vanished from view.

"What have I done!" Urashima wailed, realizing that he would never see his wife again. He sat on the ground and held his head in his hands and wept.

When Urashima had dried his tears, he sang of his love for his wife. "My love," he sang, "each morning when I wake, I will listen for the sound of the waves breaking against the shore of your island home."

If only Urashima hadn't opened the box, the villagers said from that day on, he could have returned to his beloved wife.

"If only," Urashima sang, "if only."



