



A Japanese Tale

Long ago there lived in a small fishing village by the southern sea a boy named Urashima Taro.

One bright day while he was walking along the seashore with his fishing pole, Taro saw a group of children jumping and running about. All of the children seemed very excited. They were shouting with glee and seemed to be standing over some object lying on the beach. When Taro came nearer to the children, he saw that they were tormenting a little turtle. They threw stones at it, and then each one took his turn kicking the poor turtle.

Taro felt great sympathy for the unfortunate turtle. He turned to the children and said, "Please don't be cruel to the little turtle. You should be kind to animals. If you will set the turtle free, I will give each of you some money."

So Taro bought the turtle's freedom from the thoughtless children. Then he took it to the water's edge and set it free. Soon the turtle disappeared into the blue waves and in a moment Taro could see it no more.

After a few days Taro again went fishing by the seashore. He cast his line into the water and, as he did so, he was surprised to see a big turtle appear from out of the waves.

The huge turtle approached Taro and said, "Hello, Taro-san! Don't you remember me?"

Taro stared at the turtle, and to his great surprise he saw that it was the same turtle whose life he had saved by rescuing it from the naughty children a few days before. But now the turtle was very large and looked very old.

Smiling at Taro, the turtle continued, "Thank you very much for your kindness to me the other day. You rescued me from those bad children. I wish to reward you for your kindness. If you wish to go, I will take you to the Coral Palace. It is a beautiful palace in the middle of a kingdom down under the sea. Please get on my back, Taro. Then we will begin our journey."

Taro was delighted with the invitation from the turtle. He jumped on the hard-shell back, and they started for the Coral Palace.

Into the depths of the blue sea they plunged. It was the first time Taro had been so far under the water, and it was probably the first time anyone had lived to see the bottom of the ocean.

The bottom of the ocean was a beautiful sight to Taro. For a minute he just blinked his eyes, for he could not believe what he saw. Strange and pretty grasses and trees grew on the bottom of the sea. They swirled and waved with the gentle current of the water. Glistening red, blue, and yellow fish of all sizes and shapes swam everywhere. Schools of tiny fish played among the pink and blue coral. Funny little sea horses fled from the larger fish. The shining coral reflected glittering shafts of light in

every direction. Everything was like a dream. It was most beautiful and quiet.

The turtle was a swift swimmer, and soon Taro saw the gates of the Coral Palace in the distance.

At the palace, the queen awaited Taro. The queen was named Otohime, and she was delicate and sweet-looking. Otohime wore a long, white robe, and on her head rested a golden crown sparkling with many diamonds and pearls. As she moved, her skirt, which was covered with hundreds of pink shells, swayed and gleamed in the water. Each shell was like a twinkling star:

Behind Otohime stood twenty maids in waiting. Each wore a different-colored dress, and in their hair they had interwoven green seaweed.

With a smile on her tender face, Otohime spoke in a soft voice to Taro. "Welcome, Taro-san! It was so kind of you to have rescued my loyal turtle. All the inhabitants of my kingdom wish to reward you by entertaining you in my Coral Palace. You will see many strange and wonderful things beneath the sea."

And then she beckoned and said, "Come with me, Taro. We will go into the palace."

Taro followed Otohime, and the charming queen led him through one splendid room after another. Finally they came to a huge room filled with beautiful furniture and treasures. In the center of the room was a great table and it was laden with golden plates, knives, forks, and spoons, crystal glasses, silver trays, and delicate china.

The food upon the table was the strangest and most inviting food Taro had ever seen. Taro had never tasted such delicious dishes, and he did not know any of the names of the strange delicacies.

Otohime was a generous and charming hostess, and she offered Taro one wonderful dish after another.

Then, when Taro could eat no more, he was delighted to see many beautiful fish dance into the banquet hall. They swam before the table where Taro sat with the queen, and after they bowed and shyly smiled at the guest, the fish began to dance to a lovely tune.

Tiny fish swayed, and sunfish tossed their tails. Thousands of gleaming bubbles rose above the dancers. Goldfish danced to a soft waltz, and shafts of light shone on their gleaming gilt scales. It almost looked as if many mirrors were dancing. Then gleaming codfish and trout moved in rhythm to the gay tunes of oysters who clacked their shells open and shut. Off to one side, five small fish danced over the keys of the golden piano. They made a delicate, tinkling tone bubble out. Beside them a sweet rainbow trout stroked the strings of a silver harp. And in the background a group of proud lobsters played their violins while a huge, fat lobster led the musicians. Taro laughed at the lobster leader, for he had thick glasses resting on the end of his nose, and he looked very funny as he conducted the orchestra.

Finally the feast and the entertainment were over. Otohime then showed Taro the treasures of the palace. She had so many treasures, too! She had more silver and gold and pearls than anyone on earth or under the sea.

Taro spent many days at the Coral Palace. Every day was a new experience which ended with a splendid feast and an evening of entertainment. For a while Taro even forgot his friends and parents at home above the sea.

But one day Taro felt a great longing for his own people. Taro did not wish the queen to think him ungrateful for her kindness, but he felt that he must tell her of his desire to return home. By then Taro was very homesick.

So the next time he saw the queen, Taro approached her and said, "Thank you very much for your kindness, little Queen Otohime. I have never spent such happy days before. I love your palace and all your little friends. But now I feel a longing to see my home again. I must say good-by."

Otohime was sorry to hear Taro speak these words. She cried bitterly to think of his leaving her kingdom, and all her little maidservants tried to persuade Taro to remain with them forever.

Taro did not wish to see the queen cry, but he would not change his mind.

The time came for Taro to leave. The big turtle prepared to carry Taro to the land above the sea, and he awaited him at the gates of the palace.

Otohime, brushing away tears like pearls from her eyes, said to Taro, "I am sorry you are leaving my palace, Taro. But I do not wish you to be unhappy. Do not forget me, even though you go back to your own country and people."

Then Otohime showed Taro a jewel-encrusted chest and said, "I wish to give you this as a token of farewell. It will bring great luck to you if you keep it. But one thing you must remember. You must never, never open it. Do not forget my words, Taro-san. It will only bring you luck if you keep it unopened."

Then the queen handed the chest to Taro.

Taro was delighted with his gift and he thanked the queen many times.

Then, holding the precious chest in his hand, Taro got on the turtle's back and amid a swirl of water and bubbles they sped to the surface of the sea.

They reached the beach, and Taro bid good-bye to the turtle. Then Taro set out for home.

When he arrived at the gates of his native village, he was surprised to see that everything was changed.

Nothing was the same as before he had gone to the Coral Palace. Not one familiar face remained, and Taro felt like a stranger. Taro asked many people about his old friends, but hardly anyone seemed even to have heard of them. Only one or two old men remembered Taro's friends. These old men had heard their grandfathers speak of them, but that was many, many years ago.

With disappointment and sorrow heavy in his heart, Taro looked for the home where he had once lived. But even that was no longer there, and strange people now lived on the site in a new house. Taro felt very lonely in this strange town where he was but a puzzling stranger to all the inhabitants.