

## "The Mirror" Japan

Long years ago in old Japan there lived in the Province of Echigo -- a very remote part of Japan -- a man and his wife. When this story begins they had been married for some years and were blessed with one little daughter. She was the joy and pride of both their lives, and in her they stored an endless source of happiness for their old age.

What golden days in their memories were those that had marked her growing up from babyhood: the visit to the temple when she was just thirty days old, her proud mother carrying her, robed in ceremonial kimono, to be put under the patronage of the family's household god; then her first dolls' festival, when her parents gave her a set of dolls and their miniature belongings, to be added to as year succeeded year; and perhaps the most important occasion of all, on her third birthday, when her first brocade sash of scarlet and gold was tied round her small waist, a sign that she had crossed the threshold of girlhood and left infancy behind. Now that she was seven years of age, and had learned to talk and to wait upon her parents in those several little ways so dear to the hearts of fond parents, their cup of happiness seemed full.

There could not be found in the whole of the Island Empire a happier little family. One day there was much excitement in the home, for the father had been suddenly summoned to the capital on business. In these days of railways and auto-rickshaws and other rapid modes of travelling, it is difficult to realise what a journey such as from Matsuyama to Kyoto meant. The roads were rough and bad, and ordinary people had to walk every step of the way.

So the wife was very anxious while she helped her husband get ready for the long journey. She knew how arduous a task lay before him. She wished that she could accompany him, but the distance was too great for the mother and child to go, and besides, it was the wife's duty to take care of the home.

All was ready at last. The husband stood in the porch with his little family round him.

"Do not be anxious, I will come back soon," said the man to his wife. "While I am away take care of everything, and especially of our little daughter."

"Yes, we shall be all right. But you must take care of yourself and delay not a day in coming back to us," said the wife, while the tears fell like rain from her eyes.

The little girl was the only one to smile, for she was ignorant of the sorrow of parting, and did not know that going to the capital was different from walking to the next village, which her father did very often.

She ran to his side, and caught hold of his long sleeve to keep him a moment. "Father", she said, "I will be very good while I am waiting for you to come back, so please bring me a present."

As the father turned to take a last look at his weeping wife and smiling child, he felt as if someone were pulling him back by the hair, so hard was it for him to leave them behind, for they had never been separated before. But he knew that he must go, for the call was imperative. With a great effort he ceased to think, and resolutely turning away he walked quickly through the little garden and out of the gate. His wife, holding the child in her arms, ran as far as the gate, and watched him as he went down the road between the pines till he was lost in the haze of the distance and all she could see was his quaint peaked hat, and at last that vanished too.

"Now father has gone, you and I must take care of everything till he comes back," said the mother, as she made her way back to the house.

"Yes, I will be very good," said the child, nodding her head, "and when father comes home please tell him how good I have been, and then perhaps he will give me a present."

"Father is sure to bring you something that you want very much. I know, for I asked him to bring you a doll. You must think of father every day, and pray for a safe journey till he comes back."

"O, yes, when he comes home again how happy I shall be," said the child, clapping her hands, and her face growing bright with joy at the glad thought. It seemed to the mother as she looked at the child's face that her love for the child grew deeper and deeper.

Then the mother set to work to make the winter clothes for the three of them. She set up her wooden spinning-wheel and spun the thread. Then she began to weave. In the intervals of her work she directed the little girl's games and taught her to read the old stories of her country. Thus did the wife find consolation in work during the lonely days of her husband's absence.

Time slipped by quickly in the quiet home. The husband finished his business and returned. It would have been difficult for anyone who did not know the man well to recognise him. He had travelled day after day, exposed to all weathers, for about a month altogether, and was sunburnt to bronze. However, his fond wife and child knew him at a glance, and flew to meet him from either side, each catching hold of one of his sleeves in their eager greeting. Both the man and his wife rejoiced to find each other well.

With the mother and child helping, his straw sandals were untied, his large umbrella hat taken off, and he was once again in their midst in the old familiar sitting-room that had been so empty while he had been away.

As soon as they sat down on the white mats, the father opened a bamboo basket that he had brought in with him, and took out a beautiful doll and a wooden box full of cakes.

"Here," he said to the little girl, "is a present for you. It is a prize for taking care of mother and the house so well while I was away."

"Thank you," said the child, as she bowed her head to the ground, and then put out her hand just like a little maple leaf with its eager widespread fingers to take the doll and the box, both of which, coming from the capital, were prettier than anything she had ever seen. No words can express how delighted the little girl was. Her face was filled with joy.

Again the husband dived into the basket. This time he brought out a square wooden box, carefully tied up with red and white string. Handing it to his wife, he said, "And this is for you."

The wife took the box, and opening it carefully, she took out a metal disc with a handle attached. One side of the disk was bright, shining, and smooth, and the other was covered with raised figures of pine-trees and storks. Never had she seen such a thing in her life, for she had been born and raised in the countryside.

She gazed into the shining disc, and looking up with an expression of surprise and wonder on her face, she said, "I see somebody looking at me in this round thing! What is it that you have given me?"

The husband laughed and said, "Dear, it is your own face that you see. What I have brought you is called a mirror. Whoever looks into its clear surface can see their own form reflected there. Although there are none to be found in this out-of-the-way place, yet they have been in use in the capital from the most ancient times. There the mirror is considered very necessary for a woman to possess. An old proverb says, 'As the sword is the soul of a samurai, so is the mirror the soul of a woman'. According to popular tradition, a woman's mirror is an index to her own heart: if she keeps her mirror bright and clear, so her heart is pure and good. A mirror is also one of the symbolic treasures that form the insignia of the Emperor. So you must take good care of your mirror, and use it wisely."

The wife listened to all her husband told her, and was pleased at learning so much that was new to her. She was still more pleased at the precious gift -- his token of remembrance while he had been away.

"If the mirror represents my soul, I shall certainly treasure it as a valuable possession, and never will I use it carelessly." Saying so, she lifted it as high as her forehead, in grateful acknowledgment of the gift, and then shut it up in its box and put it away.

The wife saw that her husband was very tired, and set about serving the evening meal and making everything as comfortable as she could for him. It seemed to the little family as if they had not known what true happiness was before, so glad were they to be together again, and this evening the father had much to tell of his journey and of all he had seen at the great capital.

Time passed in the peaceful home, and the parents saw their fondest hopes realised as their daughter grew from childhood into a beautiful girl of sixteen. As a gem of priceless value is held in its proud owner's hand, so had they reared her with unceasing love and care, and now their pains were more than doubly rewarded. What a comfort she was to her mother as she went about the house taking her part in the housekeeping, and how proud her father was of her, for she daily reminded him of her mother when he had first married her.

But, alas, in this world nothing lasts for ever. Even the moon is not always perfect in shape, but loses its roundness with time, and flowers bloom and then fade. So at last the happiness of this family was broken up by a great sorrow. The good and gentle wife and mother was one day taken ill.

In the first days of her illness, the father and daughter thought that it was only a cold, and were not particularly anxious. But the days went by and still the mother did not get better. She only grew worse. The doctor was puzzled, for in spite of all he did the poor woman grew weaker day by day. The father and daughter were stricken with fear. Day and night, the girl never left her mother's side. But in spite of all their efforts, the woman's life was not to be saved.

One day as the girl sat near her mother's bed, trying to hide with a cheery smile the gnawing trouble in her heart, the mother roused herself and taking her daughter's hand, gazed earnestly and lovingly into her eyes. Her breath was laboured and she said with difficulty, "My daughter, I am sure that nothing can save me now. When I am dead, promise me to take care of your dear father, and to try to be a good and dutiful woman."

"Oh, mother," said the girl as the tears rushed to her eyes, "you must not say such things. All you have to do is to make haste and get well. That will bring the greatest happiness to father and myself."

"Yes, I know, and it is a comfort to me in my last days to know how greatly you long for me to get better, but it is not to be. Do not look so sorrowful, for it was so ordained in my previous state of existence that I should die in this life just at this time. Knowing this, I am resigned to my fate. And now I am going to give something to you which will help you to remember me when I am gone."

Putting her hand out, the mother took from the side of the pillow a square wooden box tied up with a silken cord and tassels. Undoing this very carefully, she took out of the box the mirror that her husband had given her years ago.

"When you were still a little child your father went up to the capital and brought me back as a present this treasure. It is called a mirror. This I give you before I die. If, after I have ceased to be in this life, you are lonely and long to see me sometimes, then take out this mirror and in the clear and shining surface you will always see me. So you will be able to meet with me often and tell me all your heart. And though I shall not be able to speak, I shall understand and sympathise with you, whatever may happen to you in the future."

With these words the dying woman handed the mirror to her daughter.

The mind of the good mother seemed to be now at rest, and sinking back without another word her spirit passed quietly away that day.

The bereaved father and daughter were wild with grief, and they abandoned themselves to their bitter sorrow. They felt it to be impossible to take leave of the loved woman who till now had filled their whole lives, and to commit her body to the earth.

But this frantic burst of grief passed, and then they took possession of their own hearts again, crushed though they were in resignation. In spite of this, the daughter's life seemed to her desolate. Her love for her dead mother did not grow less with time, and so keen was her remembrance, that everything in daily life, even the falling of the rain and the blowing of the wind reminded her of her mother's death and of all that they had loved and shared together.

One day when her father was out, and she had completed her household duties, her loneliness and sorrow seemed more than she could bear. She threw herself down in her mother's room and wept as if her heart would break. She longed just for one glimpse of the loved face, one sound of the voice calling her pet name, or for one moment's forgetfulness of the aching void in her heart.

Suddenly she sat up. Her mother's last words had rung through her memory hitherto dulled by grief.

"Oh! My mother told me when she gave me the mirror as a parting gift, that whenever I looked into it I should be able to meet her -- to see her. I had nearly forgotten her last words. How stupid I am. I will get the mirror now, and see if it can possibly be true!"

She dried her eyes, and going to the cupboard took out the box that contained the mirror. Her heart was beating with expectation as she lifted the mirror out and gazed into its smooth face.

Behold, her mother's words were true! In the round mirror before her, she saw her mother's face. But, oh, the joyful surprise! It was not her mother thin and wasted by illness, but the young and beautiful woman as she remembered her mother far back in the days of her own earliest childhood. It seemed to the girl that the face in the mirror must soon speak, almost that she heard the voice of her mother telling her again to grow up to be a good woman and a dutiful daughter -- so earnestly did the eyes in the mirror look back into her own.

"It is certainly my mother's soul that I see. She knows how miserable I am without her and she has come to comfort me. Whenever I long to see her she will meet me here. How grateful I am!"

From this time on, the weight of sorrow was greatly lightened for her young heart. Every morning, to gather strength for the day's duties before her, and every evening, for consolation before she lay down to rest, did the young girl take out the mirror and gaze at the reflection which in the simplicity of her innocent heart she believed to be her mother's soul. Daily she grew in the likeness of her dead mother's character, and was gentle and kind to all, and a dutiful daughter to her father.

A year spent in mourning had thus passed away in the little household, when, by the advice of his relations, the man married again, and the daughter now found herself under the authority of a step-mother. It was a trying position, but her days were spent in the recollection of her own beloved mother, and of trying to be what that mother would wish her to be. This made the young girl docile and patient, and she now determined to be filial and dutiful to her father's new wife in all respects.

Everything went on apparently smoothly in the family for some time under the new regime. There were no winds or waves of discord to ruffle the surface of every day life, and the father was content.

But the stepmother's heart was not as her first smiles were. As the days and weeks grew into months, the stepmother began to treat her stepdaughter unkindly, and tried to come between the father and his child.

Sometimes the new wife went to her husband and complained of her stepdaughter's behaviour, but the father knowing that this was to be expected, took no notice of her ill-natured complaints. Instead of lessening his affection for his daughter, as the woman desired, her grumblings only made him think of his daughter the more. The woman soon saw that he began to show more concern for his lonely child than before. This did not please her at all, and she began to turn over in her mind how she could, by some means or other, drive her stepchild out of the house. So crooked did the woman's heart become.

She watched the girl carefully, and one day peeping into her room in the early morning, she thought she discovered a very grave sin that she could accuse the child of to her father. The woman was actually a little frightened by what she had seen. She had seen the daughter looking closely at an object she was holding in her hands, and murmuring words to it. She thought the daughter might be doing some black magic against her.

So she went at once to her husband, and said, "Please give me permission to leave you today."

The man was completely taken by surprise at the suddenness of her request, and wondered whatever was the matter. "Why do you find it so disagreeable in my house that you can stay no longer?", he asked.

She replied, "It has nothing to do with you. Even in my dreams I have never considered leaving your side. But if I continue to live here, I feel am in danger of losing my life. So I think it might be best for all concerned for you to allow me to go home".

The woman began to weep. Her husband was distressed to see her so unhappy. He said to her, "Please tell me what you mean! How is your life in danger here?"

The stepmother replied, "Your daughter dislikes me. Recently she has been shutting herself up in her room, morning and evening. Looking in, as I pass by, I am convinced that she has made an image of me and is trying to kill me by magic art, cursing me daily. This is why I feel it is not safe for me to stay here. Such being the case, indeed I must go away. We cannot live under the same roof anymore."

The husband listened to the dreadful tale, but he could not believe his gentle daughter could be guilty of such an evil act. He knew that by popular superstition people believed that a person could cause the gradual death of another by making an image of the hated one and cursing it daily. But where could his young daughter have learned such knowledge. It was impossible. And yet, he had noticed that his daughter had been staying in her room more often of late, and she had been keeping herself away from everyone, even when visitors came to the house. Putting this fact together with his wife's alarm, he thought that there might be something to his wife's concerns.

His heart was torn between doubting his wife and trusting his child. He did not know what to do. He decided to go to his daughter and try to find out the truth. Comforting his wife and assuring her that her fears were groundless, he glided quietly to his daughter's room.

The girl had indeed for a long time been very unhappy. She had tried to amiably and obediently show her goodwill, and to try in this way mollify her father's new wife, and to break down that wall of prejudice and misunderstanding that she knew often stood between stepparents and their stepchildren.

But she soon found that her efforts were in vain. The stepmother never trusted her, and seemed to misinterpret all of her actions. The poor child knew very well that her stepmother often carried unkind and untrue tales to her father. She could not help comparing her present unhappy condition with the time when her own mother was alive only a little more than a year ago: so great a change had occurred in this short time! Morning and evening she wept over the remembrance. Whenever she could, she went to her room, took out the mirror, and gazed into it -- seeing, she thought, her mother's face. It was the only comfort that she had in these wretched days.

When he arrived outside her door, her father found her occupied in this way. Pushing aside the sliding door, he saw his daughter bending over something very intently.

Looking over her shoulder, to see who was entering her room, the girl was surprised to see her father, for he generally sent for her when he wished to speak to her. She was confused at being found looking at the mirror, for she had never told anyone of her mother's last promise, but had kept it as a sacred secret of her heart.

So before turning to her father she slipped the mirror into her long sleeve.

Her father noting her confusion, and her act of hiding something, said in a severe manner, "Daughter, what are you doing? What have you hidden in your sleeve?"

The girl was frightened by her father's severity. Never had he spoken to her in such a tone. Her confusion changed to fear, her colour from scarlet to white. She sat dumb and shamefaced, unable to reply.

Appearances were certainly against her. The young girl looked guilty. The father, thinking that perhaps after all what his wife had told him was true, ask his daughter angrily, "Is it true that you are daily cursing your stepmother and praying for her death? Have you forgotten what I told you, that although she is your stepmother you must be obedient and loyal to her? What evil spirit has taken possession of your heart that you should be so wicked? You have certainly changed, my daughter! What has made you so disobedient and unfaithful?"

The fathers eyes suddenly filled with tears, that he had upbraided his daughter in this way.

She on her part did not know what he meant, for she had never heard of the superstition that by praying over an image it is possible to cause the death of a hated person. But she saw that she must speak and clear herself somehow. She loved her father dearly, and could not bear the idea of his anger.

She said, "Father, please do not say such dreadful things to me. I am still your obedient child. I would never curse anyone you love, much less pray for the person's death. Perhaps someone has been telling you untruths, and you are dazed, or some evil spirit has taken possession of your heart. As for me, I know absolutely nothing about the evil thing of which you have accused me."

Her father remembered that she had hidden something away when he first entered the room. He wished to clear up his doubts once for all. He asked her, "Then why are you always alone in your room these days? And tell me what is that that you have hidden in your sleeve? Please show it to me at once."

The daughter was shy to confess how she had been cherishing her mother's memory, but she saw that she must tell her father all in order to clear herself. So she slipped the mirror out from her long sleeve and laid it before him.

"This is what you saw me looking at just now", she said.

"Why," he said in great surprise, "this is the mirror I brought as a gift for your mother when I went to the capital many years ago! And so you have kept it all this time? Now, why do you spend so much of your time before this mirror?"

Then she told him of her mother's last words, and of how her mother had promised to meet her whenever she looked into the glass.

The father did not understand the simplicity of his daughter's character. He wondered to himself, "Is it really possible that my daughter does not know that what she sees reflected in the mirror is her own face, and not the face of her mother?"

He asked his daughter, "What do you mean? I do not understand how you can meet the soul of your lost mother by looking in this mirror?"

"It is true," said the girl. "If you don't believe what I say, please look for yourself."

With that, she placed the mirror before her. There, looking back from the smooth metal disc, was her own sweet face. She pointed to the reflection and asked her father earnestly, "Do you doubt me still?"

She turned and looked up into his face.

With an exclamation of sudden understanding the father clapped his two hands together and said, "How stupid I have been! At last I understand. Your face is as like your mother's as the two sides of a melon. Thus you have looked at the reflection of your face all this time, thinking that you were brought face to face with your lost mother! You are truly a faithful child. It seems at first a foolish thing to have done, but it is not really so. It shows how deep has been your filial piety, and how innocent your heart. Living in constant remembrance of your lost mother has helped you to grow like her in character. How clever it was of her to tell you to do this. I admire and respect you, my daughter, and I am ashamed to think that for one instant I suspected you of evil, and came with the intention of scolding you severely, while all this time you have been so true and good. I beg you to forgive me."

And here the father wept. He thought of how lonely the poor girl must have been, and of all that she must have suffered under her stepmother's treatment. His daughter steadfastly keeping her faith and simplicity in the midst of such adverse circumstances -- bearing her troubles with so much patience and amiability -- made him compare her to the lotus which rears its blossom of dazzling beauty out of the slime and mud of the moats and ponds, a fitting emblem of a heart which keeps itself unsullied while passing through the world.

Meanwhile, the stepmother, anxious to know what would happen, had all this while been standing outside the room. She had grown interested, and had gradually pushed the sliding screen back till she could see and hear all that was going on.

At this moment, she suddenly entered the room, and dropping to the mats, she bowed her head over her outspread hands before her stepdaughter, saying,

"I am ashamed! I am ashamed! I did not know what a filial child you were. Through no fault of yours, but with a stepmother's jealous heart, I have mistreated you all this time. Hating you so much myself, it was but natural that I should think you reciprocated the feeling. Thus when I saw you retire so often to your room I followed you, and when I saw you gaze daily into the mirror for long intervals, I concluded that you were out of revenge trying to take my life by magic art.

As long as I live I shall never forget the wrong I have done you in so misjudging you, and in causing your father to suspect you. From this day I throw away my old and wicked heart, and in its place I put a new one, clean and full of repentance. I shall think of you as a child that I have borne myself. I shall love and cherish you with all my heart, and thus try to make up for all the unhappiness I have caused you. Therefore, please throw into the water all that has gone before, and give me, I beg of you, some of the filial love that you have hitherto given your own lost mother."

Thus did the unkind stepmother humble herself and ask forgiveness of the girl she had so wronged.

Such was the sweetness of the girl's disposition that she immediately forgave her stepmother, and never bore a moment's resentment or malice towards her afterwards. The father saw by his new wife's face that she was truly sorry for the past. He was greatly relieved to see the terrible misunderstanding wiped out of remembrance by both the wrongdoer and the wronged.

From this time on, the three lived together as happily as fish in water. No such trouble ever darkened the home again, and the young girl gradually forgot that year of unhappiness in the tender love and care that her stepmother now bestowed on her. Her patience and goodness were rewarded at last.



