

THE QUARREL OF THE MONKEY AND THE CRAB

FROM JAPANESE FAIRY TALES



Long, long ago, one bright autumn day in Japan, it happened, that a pink-faced monkey and a yellow crab were playing together along the

bank of a river. As they were running about, the crab found a rice-dumpling and the monkey a persimmon-seed.

The crab picked up the rice-dumpling and showed it to the monkey, saying:

“Look what a nice thing I have found!”

Then the monkey held up his persimmon-seed and said:

“I also have found something good! Look!”

Now though the monkey is always very fond of persimmon fruit, he had no use for the seed he had just found. The persimmon-seed is as hard and uneatable as a stone. He, therefore, in his greedy nature, felt very envious of the crab’s nicer dumpling, and he proposed an exchange. The crab naturally did not see why he should give up his prize for a hard stone-like seed, and would not consent to the monkey’s proposition.

Then the cunning monkey began to persuade the crab, saying:

“How unwise you are not to think of the future! Your rice-dumpling can be eaten now, and is certainly much bigger than my

seed; but if you sow this seed in the ground it will soon grow and become a great tree in a few years, and bear an abundance of fine ripe persimmons year after year. If only I could show it to you then with the yellow fruit hanging on its branches! Of course, if you don’t believe me I shall sow it myself; though I am sure, later on, you will be very sorry that you did not take my advice.”

The simple-minded crab could not resist the monkey’s clever persuasion. He at last gave in and consented to the monkey’s proposal, and the exchange was made. The greedy monkey soon gobbled up the dumpling, and with great reluctance gave up the persimmon-seed to the crab. He would have liked to keep that too, but he was afraid of making the crab angry and of being pinched by his sharp scissor-like claws. They then separated, the monkey going home to his forest trees and the crab to his stones along the river-side. As soon as the crab reached home he put the persimmon-seed in the ground as the monkey had told him.

In the following spring the crab was delighted to see the shoot of a young tree push its way up through the ground. Each year it grew bigger, till at last it blossomed one spring, and in the following autumn bore some fine large persimmons. Among the broad smooth green leaves the fruit hung like golden balls, and as they ripened they mellowed to a deep



orange. It was the little crab's pleasure to go out day by day and sit in the sun and put out his long eyes in the same way as a snail puts out its horn, and watch the persimmons ripening to perfection.

"How delicious they will be to eat!" he said to himself.

At last, one day, he knew the persimmons must be quite ripe and he wanted very much to taste one. He made several attempts to climb the tree, in the vain hope of reaching one of the beautiful persimmons hanging above him; but he failed each time, for a crab's legs are not made for climbing trees but only for running along the ground and over stones, both of which he can do most cleverly. In his dilemma he thought of his old playmate the monkey, who, he knew, could climb trees better than any one else in the world. He determined to ask the monkey to help him, and set out to find him.

Running crab-fashion up the stony river bank, over the pathways into the shadowy forest, the crab at last found the monkey taking an afternoon nap in his favorite pine-tree, with his tail curled tight around a branch to prevent him from falling off in his dreams. He was soon wide awake, however, when he heard himself called, and eagerly listening to what the crab told him. When he heard that the seed which he had long ago exchanged for a rice-dumpling had grown into a tree and was now bearing good fruit, he was delighted, for he at once devised a cunning plan

which would give him all the persimmons for himself.

He consented to go with the crab to pick the fruit for him. When they both reached the spot, the monkey was astonished to see what a fine tree had sprung from the seed, and with what a number of ripe persimmons the branches were loaded.

He quickly climbed the tree and began to pluck and eat, as fast as he could, one persimmon after another. Each time he chose the best and ripest he could find, and went on eating till he could eat no more. Not one would he give to the poor hungry crab waiting below, and when he had finished there was little but the hard, unripe fruit left.

You can imagine the feelings of the poor crab after waiting patiently, for so long as he had done, for the tree to grow and the fruit to ripen, when he saw the monkey devouring all the good persimmons. He was so disappointed that he ran round and round the tree calling to the monkey to remember his promise. The monkey at first took no notice of the crab's complaints, but at last he picked out the hardest, greenest persimmon he could find and aimed it at the crab's head. The persimmon is as hard as stone when it is unripe. The monkey's missile struck home and the crab was sorely hurt by the blow. Again and again, as fast as he could pick them, the monkey pulled off the hard persimmons and threw them at the defenseless crab till he dropped dead, covered with wounds all over



his body. There he lay a pitiful sight at the foot of the tree he had himself planted.

When the wicked monkey saw that he had killed the crab he ran away from the spot as fast as he could, in fear and trembling, like a coward as he was.

Now the crab had a son who had been playing with a friend not far from the spot where this sad work had taken place. On the way home he came across his father dead, in a most dreadful condition—his head was smashed and his shell broken in several places, and around his body lay the unripe persimmons which had done their deadly work. At this dreadful sight the poor young crab sat down and wept.

But when he had wept for some time he told himself that this crying would do no good; it was his duty to avenge his father's murder, and this he determined to do. He looked about for some clue which would lead him to discover the murderer. Looking up at the tree he noticed that the best fruit had gone, and that all around lay bits of peel and numerous seeds strewn on the ground as well as the unripe persimmons which had evidently been thrown at his father. Then he understood that the monkey was the murderer, for he now remembered that his father had once told him the story of the rice-dumpling and the persimmon-seed. The young crab knew that monkeys liked persimmons above all other fruit, and he felt sure that his greed for the coveted fruit had been the cause of the old crab's death. Alas!

He at first thought of going to attack the monkey at once, for he burned with rage. Second thoughts, however, told him that this was useless, for the monkey was an old and cunning animal and would be hard to overcome. He must meet cunning with cunning and ask some of his friends to help him, for he knew it would be quite out of his power to kill him alone.

The young crab set out at once to call on the mortar, his father's old friend, and told him of all that had happened. He besought the mortar with tears to help him avenge his father's death. The mortar was very sorry when he heard the woeful tale and promised at once to help the young crab punish the monkey to death. He warned him that he must be very careful in what he did, for the monkey was a strong and cunning enemy. The mortar now sent to fetch the bee and the chestnut (also the crab's old friends) to consult them about the matter. In a short time the bee and the chestnut arrived. When they were told all the details of the old crab's death and of the monkey's wickedness and greed, they both gladly consented to help the young crab in his revenge.

After talking for a long time as to the ways and means of carrying out their plans they separated, and Mr. Mortar went home with the young crab to help him bury his poor father.

While all this was taking place the monkey was congratulating himself (as the wicked often do before their punishment



comes upon them) on all he had done so neatly. He thought it quite a fine thing that he had robbed his friend of all his ripe persimmons and then that he had killed him. Still, smile as hard as he might, he could not banish altogether the fear of the consequences should his evil deeds be discovered. IF he were found out (and he told himself that this could not be for he had escaped unseen) the crab's family would be sure to bear him hatred and seek to take revenge on him. So he would not go out, and kept himself at home for several days. He found this kind of life, however, extremely dull, accustomed as he was to the free life of the woods, and at last he said:

"No one knows that it was I who killed the crab! I am sure that the old thing breathed his last before I left him. Dead crabs have no mouths! Who is there to tell that I am the murderer? Since no one knows, what is the use of shutting myself up and brooding over the matter? What is done cannot be undone!"

With this he wandered out into the crab settlement and crept about as slyly as possible near the crab's house and tried to hear the neighbors' gossip round about. He wanted to find out what the crabs were saying about their chief's death, for the old crab had been the chief of the tribe. But he heard nothing and said to himself:

"They are all such fools that they don't know and don't care who murdered their chief!"

Little did he know in his so-called "monkey's wisdom" that this seeming unconcern was part of the young crab's plan. He purposely pretended not to know who killed his father, and also to believe that he had met his death through his own fault. By this means he could the better keep secret the revenge on the monkey, which he was meditating.

So the monkey returned home from his walk quite content. He told himself he had nothing now to fear.

One fine day, when the monkey was sitting at home, he was surprised by the appearance of a messenger from the young crab. While he was wondering what this might mean, the messenger bowed before him and said:

"I have been sent by my master to inform you that his father died the other day in falling from a persimmon tree while trying to climb the tree after fruit. This, being the seventh day, is the first anniversary after his death, and my master has prepared a little festival in his father's honor, and bids you come to participate in it as you were one of his best friends. My master hopes you will honor his house with your kind visit."

When the monkey heard these words he rejoiced in his inmost heart, for all his fears of being suspected were now at rest. He could not guess that a plot had just been set in motion against him. He pretended to be very surprised at the news of the crab's death, and said:



“I am, indeed, very sorry to hear of your chief’s death. We were great friends as you know. I remember that we once exchanged a rice-dumpling for a persimmon-seed. It grieves me much to think that that seed was in the end the cause of his death. I accept your kind invitation with many thanks. I shall be delighted to do honor to my poor old friend!” And he screwed some false tears from his eyes.

The messenger laughed inwardly and thought, “The wicked monkey is now dropping false tears, but within a short time he shall shed real ones.” But aloud he thanked the monkey politely and went home.

When he had gone, the wicked monkey laughed aloud at what he thought was the young crab’s innocence, and without the least feeling began to look forward to the feast to be held that day in honor of the dead crab, to which he had been invited. He changed his dress and set out solemnly to visit the young crab.

He found all the members of the crab’s family and his relatives waiting to receive and welcome him. As soon as the bows of meeting were over they led him to a hall. Here the young chief mourner came to receive him. Expressions of condolence and thanks were exchanged between them, and then they all sat down to a luxurious feast and entertained the monkey as the guest of honor.

The feast over, he was next invited to the tea-ceremony room to drink a cup of tea. When the young crab had conducted

the monkey to the tearoom he left him and retired. Time passed and still he did not return. At last the monkey became impatient. He said to himself:

“This tea ceremony is always a very slow affair. I am tired of waiting so long. I am very thirsty after drinking so much sake at the dinner!”

He then approached the charcoal fireplace and began to pour out some hot water from the kettle boiling there, when something burst out from the ashes with a great pop and hit the monkey right in the neck. It was the chestnut, one of the crab’s friends, who had hidden himself in the fireplace. The monkey, taken by surprise, jumped backward, and then started to run out of the room.

The bee, who was hiding outside the screens, now flew out and stung him on the cheek. The monkey was in great pain, his neck was burned by the chestnut and his face badly stung by the bee, but he ran on screaming and chattering with rage.

Now the stone mortar had hidden himself with several other stones on the top of the crab’s gate, and as the monkey ran underneath, the mortar and all fell down on the top of the monkey’s head. Was it possible for the monkey to bear the weight of the mortar falling on him from the top of the gate? He lay crushed and in great pain, quite unable to get up. As he lay there helpless the young crab came up, and, holding his great claw scissors over the monkey, he said:



“Do you now remember that you murdered my father?”

“Then you—are—my—enemy?” gasped the monkey brokenly.

“Of course,” said the young crab.

“It—was—your—father’s—fault—not—mine!” gasped the unrepentant monkey.

“Can you still lie? I will soon put an end to your breath!” and with that he cut off the monkey’s head with his pitcher claws. Thus the wicked monkey met his well-merited punishment, and the young crab avenged his father’s death.

This is the end of the story of the monkey, the crab, and the persimmon-seed.