



**e-book edition**

# **A MOORHEN**

By

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(A SHORT STORY),

Translated by

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# A Moorhen

**It was an extremely** peaceful afternoon, with a feeling of autumn in the keen air. Arranging his folding-chair on the outer edge of the verandah, Ryudo, the painter, gazed at the swampy ground in front of his house. Along a small track which edged a paddy-field he noticed a sportsman walking, headed by a pointer. In the far distance sounded two gun-shots. The dog slopped suddenly and perked up his ears.

" I would like to keep a moorhen," remarked Ryudo, looking back at his younger sister Otane, who was busy sewing behind him on the verandah. "And, I would lead fresh water on to my land, and would plant green reeds there. I wouldn't mind having one or two of the moorhens, but I would let them roam about quite freely."

"When you've realized your great ambition?" said Otane rather cynically, without lifting her eyes.

"O no. I could do such a thing anytime!"

"But could you afford to build a house with this land of yours?"

Ryudo burst into laughter at his sister's dry remark.

"It is useless for you to have so many luxurious ideas, for you could never earn so much money! "



That night, after they had taken their bath, and when they were sipping their tea in their sitting-room, Ryudo repeated his wish again to Imanishi, his pupil.

"But, don't you think it would be far more picturesque to plant Korean variegated bamboo-grass there

than reeds?"

" No, it wouldn't!"

" Why?"

"Because . . . . "

" But I like Korean bamboo much better."

"Anyway, its stems are far too thick for a moorhen to live among."

This longing to keep a moorhen was typical of Ryudo's nature. When he caught sight of one, with the bright ribbon of scarlet crest on its forehead, running here and there among the reeds, with slender legs like new-born stems, its shy and almost bashful nature reminded him of a maiden in her teens. But he would never tell such thoughts to Otane.

About 15 years before, he had lived in Kyoto, and at that time he had a disappointing affair with a girl of about the same age, of the merchant class. No one knew of it but his sister. At first he had regretted his conduct toward the girl, and for a long time his heart was troubled, and he suffered terribly, but with the passing of the years, time had softened his sorrow, and he could now think of her with a very good grace. Lately he had seen her in his dreams, and these sweet visions gave him extreme pleasure, and somehow the sight of a moorhen brought back memories of her.

At such times he did not care to think that by now she had. already reached the age of 30.



A week passed by. One morning Ryudo, standing in one of his rooms, was designing a rather big picture, referring every now and then to his sketch-book in which he had lately been taking down some rough drawings. From the wicket-gate which led into the garden, came Otane, clothed in a morning dress, and holding in her hands a small parcel wrapped round with a 'furoshiki.'

"My dear brother, I have something nice for you here . . . . but you must thank me first!" She smilingly approached the verandah and sat down.

" What have you got ? " He said from his room.

"A real live moorhen ! The old woman a few doors away gave it to me."

Ryudo was silent, but after a moment he carefully put down his brushes, and came to where she was seated.

"What do you think about it ? Aren't you glad?"

"But why on earth did she give you such a thing?"

" The other day I was chatting to her about moorhens, and she told me that, if we set some floating hooks for eels about the garden, it would be very easy to catch one. She did so, and caught this one for us!"

Ryudo stretched out his hands, and gently attempted to undo the *furoshiki*. The bird, which had remained quiet until this moment, now began to flutter beneath its covering.

"Please do not touch it, for it might get away."

Soon Mr. Imanishi will come along with a chicken-pen which our neighbour has kindly offered to lend us."

"The bird continued to flutter, but uttered no cry. After a while it settled quietly down again.

The moorhen would never become tamed. It not only refused to be tame, but it would eat nothing; and, when Ryudo was absent from home, it beat its wings against the wire of its cage and tried its hardest to get free. No sooner did he make his appearance than it would run into a corner of its cage, and would stand with its tail toward him, remaining absolutely motionless.

Ryudo became very anxious about the bird. He gave it goby and small silver carp, and he made Imanishi catch young dragon-flies for it to eat. Sometimes he would attach some food to a bamboo-stick and would push it through the wire-netting close to the bird, but this only made it flutter its wings, or move to the other corner of the cage, where it would immediately become immovable as before.

As he watched its antics, he could not help thinking that its fear and its motionless attitude as if of anger were something like the nature of the girl he had once loved. But every time he thought of this it made him sad.

"No bird will become tame, even though such a man as you gives it persistent attention. Let it be free and it will become tame naturally. If it felt hungry then it would surely look for food!"

"Yes, I believe you are right," he answered gently and rather unusually for him.

The next morning, soon after getting up, he went to look at his moorhen. He found the bird lying on its side on the floor of the cage, with its long legs stretched out straight in front of it, quite dead. Over its cold body insects and dragon-flies crawled about.

As Ryudo gazed, he was filled with horror.

That evening, when they were sitting together, the student remarked: "Moorhens are very delicious to eat. When I told our neighbour that we had buried our dead moorhen, they were very regretful!"

"In spite of their regret I would never eat a bird I had tried to tame! Even if the day comes when I shall realise my great aspiration, I will never again try to keep a rnoorhen !" he added with a bitter smile.

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