

**MOMOTARO
OR
THE PEACH-BOY**

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It was the beginning of summer. The ground was covered with a sheet of soft green, and the willows on the banks of the river were shaking out their tassels. Every now and then a soft breeze ruffled the surface of the water. The green all round and the summer air gave a delicious feeling that cannot be put into words.



On the bank of the river an O baa San [1], sat washing clothes. She had chosen a good place for her basket, and taking the clothes one by one, was washing them in water so

clear that you could see the stones at the bottom and the crazy dartings of the little minnows as plainly as if they had been in your hands. Suddenly there came rolling down with the stream the most enormous, round, soft-looking peach.

'Well,' said the O baa San, 'I am sixty years, but never have I seen such a wonderful-looking peach. It must be delicious to eat.' She looked round for a stick to reach it with, but there was none. She was perplexed for a moment, then, clapping her hands and nodding her head, she sang the words

*'Far waters are bitter, near waters are sweet ---
Leave the bitter, come to the sweet.'*

These words she sang three times, when, strange to say, the peach rolled over till it was just in front of her.

'How delighted the old man will be!' she thought as she picked it up. She then packed up her clothes and hurried home. When she saw the O jii San returning from the mountains, where he had been cutting grass, she ran out to meet him, and showed him the peach.

'Dear me,' said the O jii San, 'it is wonderful. Where did you buy it?'

'Buy it? I did not buy it.' And then the O baa San told the story.

'I feel hungry,' said the O jii San; 'let us have a feast at once.'

So they got out a board to cut it on, and a knife; but just as the O jii San was going to cut it he heard a clear child's voice, which said, 'O jii San, wait!' and at that moment the peach fell in two, and out there danced a little boy. Was not this a strange thing? The O jii San and O baa San thought so, and they were nearly fainting with surprise when the boy said --



'Do not be afraid of me. You have often lamented that you have no child, and the gods, being touched with pity, have sent me down to be your child.'

Was this not delightful for the old couple? They did not know how to express their gratitude for this unexpected favour.

As he had come to them in a peach they called the child Momotaro, or Peach-boy. The years passed very quickly, and as Momotaro grew up he became remarkable for his beauty, his bravery, and, above all, his great strength.

One day he came to the O jii San and said ---

'Father, for many years your kindness has been higher than the mountains on which you cut the grass, and deeper than the river where the O baa San washes her clothes. How can I thank you?'

'Do not thank us,' said the O jii San; 'it will pain us if you do so; besides which, when we grow old we shall be dependent on you, so you will not be indebted to us.'

'While I am still so much indebted to you I do not like to leave you,' said Momotaro, 'but still I have a request to make: please give me leave to go away for a short time.'

'Go away! where to?'

'From the earliest ages,' said Momotaro, 'in the north of Japan, separated from the mainland by the sea, is an island which is inhabited by demons. These demons do not obey the gods of Japan, but follow their own wicked devices. They are rascals who steal both people and treasure, but I mean to crush them with one blow, and to bring back all their stolen riches. For this purpose I wish to leave you.'

The O jii San was at first speechless with astonishment, but as he considered the matter he remembered that Momotaro, having been sent down by the gods, was not likely to receive any injury, so he said

'As you wish to go I will not stop you. Indeed, as these demons are the enemies of Japan, the sooner you destroy them and restore peace to your country the better.'

Momotaro was very glad that the O jii San had so willingly given permission, and preparations for his journey were begun at once. The O baa San got out her stored-up millet and made him some dumplings, and then got his clothes ready.

When the time came for him to start the old couple saw him off with tears in their eyes.

'Take care of yourself. May you return victorious,' they said.

'And you, also, please to take care of yourselves,' said Momotaro.

He pressed on as quickly as he could on his journey, till when it was midday he sat down to eat his dinner. He Momotaro had just taken out one of the dumplings, when suddenly beside him there appeared a dog, who, showing his teeth, began to bark. 'Wan ! Wan!' barked the dog, 'you have come into my territory without leave, so if you do not at once give me your dinner I will devour you.'

Momotaro smiled scornfully. 'You desert dog,' he said, 'I am going forth to fight the enemies of Japan, and if you come in my way I will slay you.'

'I did not know it was Momotaro,' said the dog, cowering down and putting his tail between his legs. 'I humbly beg your honourable pardon for my rude conduct. Please allow me to accompany you to fight the enemies of our country.'

'I have no objection to your coming,' said Momotaro.

'Nothing would give me so much pleasure,' said the dog. 'But I am very hungry. Will you please give me something to eat ? '

'Here is a dumpling for you,' said Momotaro.

When the dog had eaten the dumpling they hurried on. They had crossed many mountains and valleys, when suddenly, as they were hurrying along, an animal sprang down from a tree, and bowing down in front of Momotaro, said--

'Is this not the great Momotaro going to make war against the enemies of Japan? Pray allow me to accompany you.'

The dog came angrily forward. 'You mountain monkey, of what use would you be in the war? I alone accompany the great Momotaro.'

Now, the dog and the monkey never can be friends, and, of course, this speech made the monkey very angry.

'You think a great deal of yourself,' said the monkey, preparing to fight. He could not draw his sword, for the monkey does not generally carry a sword; but, showing his teeth and sharpening his nails, he approached the dog. just then Momotaro stepped forward.

'Stop,' said he; ' do not be so hasty, dog. This monkey is not a bad fellow, and I intend to enrol him as one of my vassals.' So saying, he gave the monkey half a dumpling, which the monkey ate, and so became one of Momotaro's retainers. But it was no easy matter to make these two go peacefully along together. So at last Momotaro hit upon the plan of giving his standard to the monkey, and making him walk in front, while he gave his sword to the dog, who walked behind, while Momotaro himself walked in the middle, carrying only his fan.[2]

And so they hurried on their way, when suddenly, as they were entering a wilderness, a wonderful bird sprang from the ground. His body was clothed with a feather robe of the five colours, and his head plumage was of the deepest crimson.



The dog, seeing the bird, thought he would devour him at one mouthful; but Momotaro sprang forward and prevented this.

' He is a curious bird, and may be of use to us,' he said. ' Bird, do you wish to interrupt my journey ? If so, the dog shall bite off your head. But if you submit to me, you may become

my vassal.'

The bird, instantly kneeling down in front of Momotaro, said --

'Is this the great Momotaro of whose expedition I have heard a rumour? I am called the pheasant, and am a humble bird that lives in the wilderness. Pray allow me to accompany you to fight the enemies of Japan.'



The dog stepped forward. 'Does this low fellow go with us?' he said.

'It is no business of yours, dog,' said Momotaro. 'But I will give you three animals warning that, if there is the slightest quarrelling between you, I will send you back that very moment. . In war a good position is better than good luck, but union is better than either good luck or good position. However weak the enemy, we cannot be victorious if we do not fight together.'

The three animals listened with the greatest reverence, and promised implicit obedience,

and after the pheasant had been enrolled in their ranks by receiving the customary half dumpling, they again hurried on their way.

At last they came to the sea. Not even the smallest island was in sight, nothing to be seen but waves. It looked as if some monster lay at the bottom of the sea, stirring it up.

Now the dog, the monkey, and the pheasant are all creatures that live on dry land, and though the steepest cliff and deepest valley could not frighten them, yet when they saw the rolling up and down of the waves they stood quite speechless.

Momotaro, seeing this, said in a loud voice, 'Now, my vassals, why do you hesitate? Do you fear the ocean? You cowards! It would have been better to have come alone than to have had such companions; but I will now dismiss you. Return!'

The three animals were much pained at hearing these reproaches, and clinging to Momotaro, besought him not to send them away. As they really seemed to be plucking up courage, he at last consented, and they began to prepare a boat.

There was a favourable wind, and after they set out the receding shore was soon lost to sight in the morning haze. At first the animals were very unhappy, but they gradually became accustomed to the motion, and then they used to stand on deck looking eagerly for the appearance of the island. At last, for want of occupation, each animal began to show off his own particular accomplishment; the dog sat up and begged, the monkey played tricks, and the pheasant, not to be outdone, began to sing a mournful kind of song.

All this was a great amusement to Momotaro, and before he knew it the island was close at hand. They saw a rock carved out as with a chisel, on the top of which was a gate and barrier of iron. The houses were closely crowded together, and their roofs were also of iron. Many flags were flying; indeed, it seemed an impregnable fortress. Momotaro, seeing this, turned to the pheasant, 'Lucky you have wings,' he said. 'Now fly to the island and find out what they are doing---- those island demons.'

The pheasant, bowing low, instantly obeyed his orders and flew to the island, where he

found the demons all assembled on the roofs of their houses.

'Listen, you island demons,' sang the pheasant. 'The messenger of the great Sun Goddess is coming with an army to destroy you. If you wish to save your lives, yield at once.'

'You vain pheasant!' laughed the demons. 'We will soon let you feel our weapons.' And so saying, they, girded up their garments of tiger-skin and seized their weapons. But the pheasant, who is naturally a very strong bird, swept down, and with one peck took off the head of a red demon.^[3] Then began a fierce battle, but very soon the gate burst open, and the dog and the monkey rushed in, raging like lions. The demons, who thought that they had only to do with one bird, were much alarmed, and began to fight furiously. Even the children of the red, black, and blue demons all joined, and the sound of their yells as it mingled with the sound of the waves beating on the shore was truly terrible. But they soon got the worst of it, some falling from the rocks and some being killed by the fierce onslaughts of the dog, the monkey, and the pheasant.



Till at last only the head demon was left; and finally he, throwing away his weapons, broke off his horns, as a sign of submission.

With his hands full of treasures he knelt down before Momotaro in a spider-like fashion, and with tears streaming down his cheeks. 'Great Momotaro,' he said, 'spare my life! From today I shall reform; only spare me!'

Momotaro laughed scornfully. ' You coward, only thinking of your life! For many years you have persecuted and killed innocent people, so now you shall receive no pity. We will take you a prisoner to Japan, and there your head will be cut off and stuck on a gate as a warning to all who see it.'

So the monkey, tying a rope round the demon, led him prisoner. They also carried away with them the hoarded treasures of the demons. There was coral, and tortoise, and pearls, not to speak of magic coats and umbrellas, which made the person who used them quite invisible. All these things were put in the boat, and great was the joy of the O jii San and O baa San when they saw Momotaro return victorious.

And they lived happily ever after.

NOTES

- 1** The terms 'O jji San' and 'O baa San' mean 'honourable old man' and 'honourable old woman,' and are always used when speaking of old people. The word 'jji' is pronounced as in 'Gee up, horse!' and 'baa,' the same as in 'Baa, baa, black sheep.'
- 2** This would be his *gunsen*, or war-fan. Before the Japanese army was modelled on the European system, an officer's equipment included a fan, partly made of iron, with which he pointed when giving his orders.
- 3** In Japan there are red, black, and blue demons, according to tradition.