

The Beast's Cave

Korean Mountains

When I look around us and see so many mountains, valleys, and fertile plains, I always think of one story, which has been repeated since the time of the Three Kingdoms on the Mount of the Waxing Moon. There lived in the village of Andong a married couple, who possessed only a cow, an ass, and a nanny goat.

One day the man said, "Whether we keep the goat or not is of no importance. I want to slaughter it and eat it up."

The woman loved her husband exceedingly and was blind to all his habits and sudden whims. She fed the cow and ass their little bit, but not the goat, and so went about her business.

One day the man said again to his wife, "Whether we keep the ass or not, what does it matter? I want to slaughter it and eat it up." And he invited his friends to come, and they ate the ass.

Again the woman spoke no word of rebuke, for she loved her husband and remained quiet before his wishes. As was her custom, she fed the cow and went about her work.

A few weeks might have gone by, when the man said, "It is of no consequence whether we keep the cow or not. I want to slaughter it and eat it up."

Now the woman was angry and said, "What do you mean, 'Whether we keep the cow or not?' Then what shall we plow our field with?"

The foolish husband did not listen to her, however, but slaughtered this animal as well.

When the woman saw that all her work had been done to no purpose, and that her husband had also squandered their tiny hard-earned savings, she wept bitterly and said, "Two of us cannot live without sustenance; I shall go out and work." And she went to the house of her rich uncle, winnowed grain, washed laundry, and looked after children. The uncle, a prudent man, commended her and presented her with a sack of rice. No sooner did night fall and work end, than the woman lifted the sack onto her head, hurried to her husband's house, laid the sack on the veranda and returned.

When the man saw the sack of rice the next morning, he rejoiced at the gift from Heaven. "What good spirit has made me this gift?" He thought of Mirok-posal the Savior, of the Mountain Spirit and the Spirit of the Seven Stars, but said to himself, "I have never made a sacrifice to any of these; why should they have helped me?" Finally his wife came to his mind, and indeed when he looked outside into the yard

he saw a woman's footprints in the snow. He followed the tracks, came to the uncle's house, and saw how hard his wife was working. Then, without letting himself be seen, he returned to his own house and ate up the rice.

Again the weeks passed, and again the woman received a sack of rice as recompense. This time too she hurried to her husband's house and put the sack on the veranda. In a short time he had eaten up all that rice, without further concerning himself about his wife.

When she had taken a third sack of rice to her husband's house and observed how he, thinking neither about her nor of their future, greedily ate up that rice as well, she returned no more to her uncle, but hurried into the forest to take her life. "For what purpose should I work and take such great trouble? All my toil and struggle fly away like dust in the wind. A man like my husband is not dear to me." Thus she spoke to herself, wandering lost in thought up the forest path, finally arriving at the ghost pine.

There a branch towered far up into the air; she immediately thought of using this to further her plan, pulled a shoot from a climbing plant and fashioned a noose. Then she heard a delicate voice, as if from a bird, "Come with me, come with me!"

Astonished and frightened at the same time, she dropped the noose and looked at the bough from where the voice came. Now she saw a magnificent bird, whose plumage was iridescent with every color. The bird flew up, around, from tree to tree. "Where can he be leading me?" thought the woman, and followed timidly, but inspired with new energy. The bird flew always on and on, and stopped eventually in the darkest depths of the forest to alight on an ancient tree. At its foot the woman saw a wild ginseng plant and was filled with joy, for its root guaranteed the fulfillment of all her wishes.

Again she heard the sweet voice, "Dig it up, dig it up!"

The woman knelt down and soon held in her hands a beautiful, old, and fragrant ginseng root. Carefully she laid the root aside, when it took on life, arms and legs, torso and head, became bigger and bigger, and finally a little boy stood before her in many-colored clothes, with a beaming face.

The woman didn't know if she was awake or dreaming. She had never seen such a beautiful little boy. "You always had the wish to be the mother of a boy. Take me with you. I will always be obedient to you, and whenever you have any wish, just tell it to me without hesitation."

The woman agreed to this and took the little boy as her own, though he immediately became the leader, saying, "This forest shelters many wild animals, bears, and tigers. I will lead you to a cave, but I will stay by you."

And just so, they soon came to a dark cave. In the back of the cave were piles of hay. There the woman made a bed, but the boy all at once turned into a fox, and said to her, "Keep yourself still and don't be afraid. The wild beasts will soon come together here. I'll stay by your side!"

The woman hid herself deeper in the hay and right away heard the rumbling of the tiger and the growling of the bear. Immediately the tiger became rigid, looked at the hay, and said, "Someone must be here. I have heard a rustling in the hay." He went over and pushed aside the hay with his paw and found the woman, who implored him tremblingly for her life. "Unggh," snarled the tiger, "I am very partial to human meat. You are welcome here."

Then the fox came out, laid his paw appeasingly on the tiger's foot, and spoke. "Don't! Certainly not! This woman can perform good and useful services for us. She can watch over our cave."

The bear was agreeable, so the tiger let the woman free, and she was allowed to live undisturbed in the cave.

They had meat and grain in great abundance, and one day, when the animals were sitting at a meal in the cave and eating heartily, the woman stealthily left the cave and went to her husband's house, to take him some of their plenty. Then she saw him amusing himself with a strange woman. Angrily she laid the sack she brought with her on the veranda and hurried back to the cave.

The next morning the man found the delicious meat and grain and immediately surmised that his wife must have set down this valuable present. Again he found the tracks in the snow, followed them and in that way arrived at the cave. No sooner had he stepped inside than the tiger caught sight of him, rushed upon the newcomer, and tore him to pieces.

To be sure, the woman bemoaned her husband's fate, but the fox comforted her and advised her that whenever she returned to her old house after that, he would be there to attend her.

The woman accepted this advice as well, and she was under the protection of the ginseng-boy--for the fox had again taken the form of a tiny boy--happy and contented to the end of her life.