

Mr. Straw

Japanese Tale



Once upon a time, long ago of course, for that's when most stories take place, there lived a man named Mr. Straw. Mr. had no home, he had no wife, he had no children, he had nothing but the shirt on his back, in fact. For Mr. Straw had no luck. He was always poor and had little to eat, so he was as thin as a piece of straw. That, you see, is why people called him Mr. Straw.

Every morning, Mr. Straw went to the temple to ask the Goddess of Fortune for better luck. One day he heard a voice.

"The first thing your hand touches when you leave the temple will bring you great fortune," it whispered.

Mr. Straw rubbed his eyes, pinched himself, and looked all around him. The temple was empty.

"Was I dreaming, or was that the Goddess of Fortune?" he wondered. He rushed out of the temple to find his new luck.

But poor Mr. Straw tripped on the temple steps and tumbled all the way down to the bottom, where he lay in the dirt. When he picked himself up, he found his hand was clutching a piece of straw.

"Well," he thought, "a piece of straw is a pretty worthless thing. But since the Goddess of Fortune meant me to pick it up, I'd better not throw it away."

So he walked along, holding the piece of straw.

Before long a dragonfly came and began to buzz around his head. Mr. Straw waved and shoed, but it wouldn't go away. It buzzed and whirred and flew circles around him.



“Very well,” said Mr. Straw. “Since you won't go away, you must stay with me.”

He caught the dragonfly and tied his straw to its tail, so it looked like a little kite on a tiny string. And he kept walking down the road.

Pretty soon he met the flower lady and her little boy coming the other way. They were going to the market to sell their flowers. They had been walking a long time, and the boy was hot and tired, and the dust brought tears to his eyes. But when he saw Mr. Straw's dragonfly buzzing on the end of the straw, his face lit up.

“Mother,” he said, “can I have a dragonfly? Please?”

“Well,” thought Mr. Straw, “the Goddess of Fortune told me this piece of straw would bring me luck. But this little boy is hot and tired, and it will make him happy.”

So he gave the boy the dragonfly on the straw.

“You are very kind,” the flower lady said. “I have nothing to give you in return except this rose. Will you take it?”

Mr. Straw thanked her and went on his way, holding his rose.

After a while he saw a young man sitting on a tree stump, holding his head in his hands. He looked so forlorn, Mr. Straw asked him what was the matter.

“This evening I'll ask my belle to marry me,” the youth cried. “But I'm a poor man and have no gift to bring her.”

“Well, I'm a poor man too,” Mr. Straw said. “I have nothing valuable, but if you want to give her this rose, you are welcome to it.”

The youth perked up when he saw the splendid rose.

“Please take these three oranges in return,” he said. “It's all I have to offer.”

So Mr. Straw set off again, carrying three plump, juicy oranges.

Soon he met a peddler pulling a little cart. "

“Can you help me?” the peddler panted. “I’ve been pulling this cart all day, and I’m so thirsty I’m going to faint! I need a drink of water.”

“I’m afraid there are no wells nearby,” Mr. Straw said, “but you can have these oranges and drink the juice.”

The peddler was so grateful he reached into his cart and pulled out his finest roll of silk.

“You’re very, very kind,” he said. “Please take this cloth in return.”

So Mr. Straw set off once again, this time with his silk under his arm.

Before long, he met a princess in a golden carriage. She wore a worried look, but her face lit when she saw Mr. Straw.

“Where did you get that silk?” she cried. “It’s just what I’ve been looking for. Today is my father’s birthday, and I want to make him a new royal robe.”

“Well, since it’s his birthday, you’re welcome to have this silk,” Mr. Straw said.

The princess couldn’t believe her luck.

“You’re very thoughtful and kind,” she said with a smile. “Please take this jewel in return.”

She rode away, leaving Mr. Straw holding a jewel that gleamed like the fire of the sun.

“Well, well,” he told himself. “I started with a worthless piece of straw, and suddenly I find I have a jewel. Something tells me this has gone far enough.”

He took the jewel straight to a merchant and sold it. Then he took the money and bought a great rice field. He worked hard in his field, and every year it grew more and more rice, and before too long he was a rich man.

But his wealth did not change him one bit. He always shared his rice with the hungry, and built a school for the village children, and helped anyone who needed a hand. And everyone said it all came from one little piece of straw, but Mr. Straw knew his luck really came from his kindness.