



urashima and the turtle

THERE was once a young fisherman, the son of sons of fishermen. He loved the sea, the crash of the waves and the shifting tides. He lived at the shore. He loved to watch the sea by night and by day, winter and summer, stormy and fair.

His name was Urashima. At dawn he went out in his boat. He came home again at dusk. Sometimes the fishing was good, sometimes it was poor. If he had had his way he would never have kept the fish he caught. He'd have thrown them back in the water to live, for he thought the fish were beautiful. Their skins flashed silver. They were delicately made, and strong.

Late one afternoon Urashima felt a tug at his

line. He reeled in. He expected to see the shimmer of a sea bass. Instead he saw a turtle.

Urashima smiled, and threw the turtle back in the water. "I'd sooner go hungry tonight than kill a young turtle," he said. Turtles live long, long lives, and this one was young.

The turtle hit the water in a wide splash of foam. From the spray sprung a girl more beautiful than the day and the night together. She came to sit at Urashima's side.

She said, "I am the Sea King's daughter. We live at the bottom of the sea. Father let me change into a turtle, to test your good heart. Indeed you are good, and kind. Will you come and share my dragon palace in the kingdom of green waves?"



Urashima saw only her great beauty. He wanted to be with her always.

"Yes," he said. They each of them took an oar. They rowed the boat beneath the waves, to the bottom of the sea. Crystalline fish with golden crests swam to escort them.

Before the sun had set, they reached the palace. It was made of coral and pearl. It glimmered as if all the world's jewels were shining underwater in a soft wash of moonlight.

Velvet-finned little dragons obeyed their every wish in that palace. They fed on the delicacies that the sea gives only to those who love her.

In the perfect quiet of that place Urashima lived four years with his princess. Day and night, the sea anemones danced, light, soundless, and slow, in the luminous water.

They were very happy until one day, Urashima saw a young turtle. It reminded him of the day when he'd come under the sea. He thought of his village and of his family.

The princess knew at once that he was thinking of home.

"You miss the earth and your people," she said. "If you stay here, you'll hate me for keeping you. If you go now, you may come back. Take this pearl box, tied with green ribbon. Keep it safe. It will bring you here when you're ready. But keep the ribbon tied. If the bow comes undone, and the box is opened, you'll never return."

Urashima got into his boat and the princess thrust it up through the waves. Soon he was on top of the water, sailing for home. There stood his hill and his cherry trees. There lay the sand where he'd built castles as a boy.

Memory made his heart pound. He hurried up a path he knew well.

At first he thought nothing had changed. The sky shone blue, crickets chirped, rocks

stood out of the sand, as they always had.

But when he came to where his house had been, he felt lost. The house was gone. Even the tree that had shadowed it was gone.

He went on. All the houses were different. Children stared at him. What had happened in the four years he was under the sea?

He saw an old man sitting in the sun, and he went to talk to him.

"Beg pardon, sir, can you tell me how to find Urashima's house?" he asked.

"Urashima?" said the old man, puzzled. "It's an odd name. I never heard it but once before. That was in my great-grandfather's story of a boy who was drowned. His brothers, their sons, and their sons' sons lived hereabouts. But the family died out, long before my time. It's a sad little tale, isn't it, stranger? A young man went fishing, four hundred years ago, and disappeared. They never found even a stick from his boat. The sea simply swallowed him up," said the old man.

Fatherless, motherless, brotherless, homeless, Urashima was a stranger in his own village.

The old man pointed with his cane. "You might find his tombstone in the old cemetery," he said, "down that way."

Slowly, Urashima went to the cemetery. There, beside his parents' tombstones, and his brothers', was his own name, cut in a worn old stone.

Now Urashima understood. There was nothing for him in this village. Here on earth, he had been dead and gone for four hundred years. He must return at once to his beloved princess.

He still had the pearl box, tied with green ribbon. He knew he mustn't lose it. He knew he should hurry, but he felt tired and discouraged.

He went back to the beach, slowly. He sat



to rest on the sand, with the box on his knees. He wondered how he could return to the palace. Brooding, without thinking, he untied the ribbon around the box.

Absent-mindedly, slowly, he opened the box. A white mist drifted up and hung an instant on the air. It had the shape, cloud-soft, of his dear princess.

Urashima held out his arms but the mist disappeared on a sea breeze. He ran after it, but it had gone.



At the water's edge he stopped. He felt so old. His back bent. His hands shook. His hair whitened and fell. His muscles failed and vanished. He withered away, from top to toe.

Soon on the white beach lay a skeleton fit for a grave dug four hundred years before.

When the moon stood above the pine trees, it shone on the waves that gather and break, gather and break, over and over, forever. It shone on a little empty pearl box, and a green ribbon fluttering in the wind.



