

## Momotaro

LONG AGO, there was an old couple who didn't have any children. Their days passed quietly: The old man cut grass for a living, and his wife kept the house clean and the garden neat. They were happy to have a roof over their heads and enough food on the table, but they were always a little sad because they never had a child.

One day while the old woman was washing clothes in the river, a big peach came floating towards her. "What luck!" she cried. "I'm so tired of eating plain rice for dinner. With this peach I can make the most delicious dessert!" Looking around to make sure no one saw her, she buried the peach in her apron and took it home to surprise her husband for dinner.

"Say, what you got there in that apron?" said the husband when she walked in the door. The peach was huge, and hard to hide. "You'll find out once dinner is done," she said slyly.

She went into the kitchen and closed the door. She got out a big knife, the biggest she could find, to cut the large peach. Slowly, she sawed at the skin. When she broke the surface, she heard a strange crying from inside!

She put down the knife and stepped back. With her hands, she tore at the flesh of the peach until she saw what was inside—a baby boy!

"Husband, quick! Come here!"

"But you told me not to peek until dinner—"

"Forget what I said and come in here!"

The husband rushed into the kitchen to find his wife of fifty years, stunned and silent, cradling a squirming pink newborn in her frail arms. The husband stopped in his tracks.

"I...I..." started the wife. The husband reached out for the child and began to cry. "I don't know how you got here, little one, but I'm glad you did," he said. "Little Momotaro...Peach Boy..."

Years passed, and Momotaro grew up strong; stronger than all the other boys his age. Still, like any teenager, he was curious. He spent his afternoons exploring the mountains and caves around his home. Each time he went farther away from his parents' house than the last, but always returned in time for dinner.

One day, he happened upon a shore he had never seen before. Off in the distance, he could see a little island. He swam out to it, and found it to be full of monsters! He crept along the shore, and overheard a group of them talking about launching an attack on his village. Shocked, he hurried back home.

"Father," he said as he entered his home. "You must know by now how thankful I am for you and mother."

"Of course," replied his father. "It has been no trouble at all to raise you, even at our age. You have been a joy to our lives, and for that we are thankful for you."

"That is why, I'm afraid, I must leave for a while," he said with a heavy sigh.

His father gasped. "Whatever for?"

Momotaro then told him what he had seen that afternoon. "I must go and

defeat them," he said. "I can't bear the thought of what could happen to you and Mother if they carry out their plans."

His father was shocked, but he could hear the conviction in his son's voice. He thought it was best to let him go, for he knew stopping him would only make him more determined.

The next morning, Momotaro set out for the island, carrying a sack of food and supplies. His parents stood in the doorway and sent him off. "Be well, my son," said his father, fighting back tears.

He bravely kissed them goodbye, but he couldn't get rid of the dread in his stomach. It hurt to leave his parents undefended—what if he didn't make it to the island in time? Or worse, what if the monsters won? He was full of worry, but instead he smiled and reassured his parents. "I'll be back before you know it. And when I return, we will feast in victory!"

Momotaro set off down the road, retracing his path from the day before. As midday approached, he began to get hungry. He sat down in the shade of a tree and pulled a rice cake his mother had made out of his sack. As he was eating, a large dog came wandering up to him.

"Gee, those cakes look good. Might I have one?" the dog pleaded.

"Sure. Here, have a bite," he said, breaking off a piece to give to the dog, who lapped it up with great joy. "I'm Momotaro, by the way."

The dog stopped and looked up. "Momotaro? *The* Momotaro? Why, everyone around here has heard of you! What are you doing out here today?"

"I'm on my way to fight the island

monsters. I was out there yesterday, and heard of their evil plan."

"It's true, those monsters are no good," agreed the dog. "Take me with you. With your smarts and my size, we'll be unstoppable."

The two continued on to the shore. Many more miles down the road, a monkey crossed their path. "Why, you're the famous Momotaro!" he said. "Where are you off to?"

"I'm going to the island of monsters to stop them from invading my village."

"Oh, please let me come with you. I'm small and wily. I can be of great use!"

"Another helping hand couldn't hurt. Come along with us."

More hours passed, and they came to a field where they met a bird.

"Why, if it isn't Momotaro," he exclaimed. "You're off to fight those monsters on the island, aren't you? I flew over it yesterday and heard their plan. I thought of you and your family."

"Yes, that's exactly where we are headed."

"Take me with you, please. I'm a great scout—I can see things from up here that you three cannot."

"Sure, come on."

They walked and walked, and at last they came to the sea. Momotaro and the bird were ready, but the dog and monkey hesitated. They had never seen the ocean before, and were afraid to cross it.

"Come on, you two. If you can't handle a little water, how do you expect to take on monsters?"

"But it's so unpredictable. We could get hurt," cried the dog.

"That's true," said Momotaro calmly. "But you know what? Sometimes you just have to be brave and face the things you're scared of."

The dog knew he was right, and the monkey did too. The two closed their eyes and stepped into the water.

They arrived at the island in a short time. When they climbed ashore, a large castle loomed in front of them. "Bird, fly overhead and see what's going on there," Momotaro said. The bird did as he was told. He perched on the edge of a parapet and shouted, "Listen up, you vile things! The great fighter Momotaro has come. I strongly advise you surrender, or face his wrath."

The monsters, scared at first, began to laugh when they saw it was just a tiny bird. "Please! You wouldn't stand a chance against us." They charged at the little bird, but he was too fast for them. He evaded them all, and pecked them in the eyes when he could.

Meanwhile, Momotaro, the dog, and the monkey looked for a way to enter the castle. It was surrounded on all sides by high walls and twisting iron gates, and it was beginning to look like there was no safe entrance. But as they snuck along the perimeter of the castle, they ran into two young women washing clothes in a stream, weeping as they worked.

"Excuse me," inquired Momotaro. "What's wrong? Can I help?"

"We are captives here," one of them said through sobs. "We were stolen away from our homes and made slaves to these terrible ogres. It seems unlikely we will ever leave!"

"Fear not. I'll do what I can to rescue you both," he said reassuringly. "Just tell me how to get into the castle."

The two women led him to an opening in the castle wall. Momotaro wiggled inside and attacked. Caught off guard, the monsters were easily defeated. By the time they had finished, the only one left to take down was the king, who had been hiding in his chambers. He was prepared to surrender.

"Please don't hurt me," he said, kneeling at Momotaro's feet. "You can have all the treasure in the castle if you leave me be!"

"Oh, what's this? Big, scary monster isn't so scary after all!" mocked Momotaro. "You're all bark and no bite. Still, you don't deserve my mercy." He tied up the king, took the treasure, and went back to the two women to send them home. Then, he proudly marched back home with his new friends. "Nice work back there," he said as they made their way back to the village. "Thanks for all your help. I couldn't have done it without you."

Momotaro, the monkey, the dog, and the bird received a hero's welcome upon their return. There was much rejoicing and feasting for days. Best of all, though, his parents rushed to embrace him when they saw him coming down the road. "We're so proud of you," his mother whispered. "Baking a dessert that night was the best decision of my life." The treasure he brought home kept his family comfortable for the rest of their days.

**THINK ABOUT IT**

Momotaro is clearly the hero of this story. How does Momotaro act like a hero?

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How is he different from other heroes you have read about or seen?

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What does this story say about bravery?

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Find a quote from the story that supports your answer and rewrite it below.

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