

Tam and Cam

A LONG TIME AGO, a father lived with his daughter, Tam. He loved his daughter, but soon fell in love with a woman who became Tam's stepmother. Tam's stepmother was wicked, always ordering Tam around and making her do work she was too small to do on her own. She constantly made up stories about Tam's bad behavior, when in truth Tam had done nothing wrong.

When the father and stepmother were wed, they had a child of their own, whom they named Cam. Things got even worse for Tam when Cam was brought home. Her stepmother could see no wrong in Cam, and in contrast to her own perfect child, saw Tam as terrible and naughty.

Cam was going to need a bedroom, so she let Cam move into Tam's bedroom. She made Tam sleep in a dirty corner of the kitchen, with nothing but a pile of grass and a torn sheet for comfort. During the day, the evil stepmother made Tam sweep the floors, feed the animals, cook every meal, and clean up after completing each task. Her hands were sore and blistered from her endless work, but never once did she complain. Sometimes, when she went to the well to fetch water, she saw in the reflection her dirty face and tangled hair. But when she splashed some of the water on herself, she thought she was the prettiest girl in the village.

One day, Tam's stepmother asked Tam to take Cam fishing in the local pond. "Catch as many fish as you can," she ordered. "If you come back with less than ten, you'll be sent to bed without supper." It sounded like she meant the both of them,

but Tam knew she only meant her.

Tam spent all day fishing at the pond, while Cam played and basked in the sun. But when the time came to head home, Cam looked in her basket and saw that it was empty. "Sister," she said. "You're so dirty from days of work. Take a few minutes to bathe in the pond before you go home. You know mother will be angry if you come home looking the way you do now."

She was insulted, but she knew Cam was right. She stepped into the pond to wash the dirt out of her hair and scrub her face. As she was bathing, Cam took Tam's fish and ran home as quickly as she could. When Tam came out and saw what had happened, she began to cry. Surely, this would be the worst punishment she had ever endured!

As she sobbed, a soft wind blew, and the clouds broke. She looked up, and a beautiful woman, sparkling in the late afternoon sun, appeared in front of her. "What is wrong, child?" she asked.

Tam told her the story of her cruel stepmother, and what her sister had done with her fish. "There, there," said the woman. "I can help you. Go, take a look in your basket." She did as she was told. In the basket she found a small red fish with golden eyes. "What's this for?"

"Put it in the well and feed it three times a day, and this fish will grant you whatever wish you have."

Tam did as she was told. Her family wondered why she was going to the well so often, but if anyone else approached the well, the fish would hide.

Days passed, and the fish grew fatter and fatter. When it reached full size, Tam wished for gold, jewelry, and finery she had never had before, but was careful not to let her family see it.

Spring turned to fall, and soon the Autumn Festival came. Of course, the night of the festival, Tam's stepmother ordered Tam to stay home and sort beans for the night. "Once you're done with that, then you may join us." Tam watched as her stepmother and stepsister put on their finest gowns and left.

When they were out of earshot, Tam ran outside and asked her fish for help. "Little fish, please send me help! If I do not finish this chore, I'll never be able to go to the festival, and stepmother will be terribly angry."

Just then, two birds swooped down and hovered over her. "We are here to help you," they said. They followed her inside and helped her sort all the beans, every last one! She had plenty of time left to get to the festival. She washed her face, combed her hair, and dressed herself in a beautiful gown and glittering jewelry. As she passed the well on her way into town, she saw that she looked as lovely as a princess.

When she arrived, the villagers could not stop staring. She was the most elegant woman they had ever seen! Even her stepmother and Cam took notice. "My, doesn't that woman look like Tam? How strange. Look at her gown; her jewels! She must be a queen."

Tam heard them whispering as she walked by, and was suddenly afraid that they would recognize her. In her panic, she

ran away. She ran so fast that, on the way back home, one of her slippers fell off and landed in a stream. It floated down the stream to the grounds of the royal palace, where a guard picked it up and brought it inside. "Your Majesty, I have found this in the garden," he said. "Look at that stitching, that silk! This must belong to someone royal."

The king lived alone, and had wanted to find a queen for quite some time. "See if you can find its owner," he ordered his guard. "I would certainly like to meet her."

The guard started with the ladies at the palace, but it did not fit any of them. He then went all around the kingdom, visiting women of noble birth. They all tried it, but it was too small for them all, too.

Having exhausted all his other options, the guard began knocking on doors of the villagers. In his search, he came to the house of Tam and Cam. The stepmother tried it on first, but it was too small. Then, Cam tried it on, but it was too big. He was just about to leave, when Tam spoke up for herself. "Excuse me, may I try?"

He was confused—this perfect slipper couldn't possibly belong to this ragged girl—but he wasn't going to turn her away. He slipped the shoe on her foot, and to his surprise, it fit just right. He rushed her to the palace where she met with the king. The two got on well, and were married the next year.