



THE ASHES THAT MADE TREES BLOOM

by William Elliot Griffis

SUMMARY

The lesson "The Ashes that Made the Trees Bloom" by William Elliot Griffis narrates the story of an old, hardworking and childless couple and their beloved dog. Through the story, the author wants to show that good deeds are always blessed.

Part - I

The Old Couple's Child: Muko

In the good old days of 19th century Japan, there lived an old childless couple who had a pet dog named Muko. They loved Muko very much and treated it like their own child. The old woman made a blue crape cushion for Muko and it would sit there comfortably during mealtime. The couple would even feed it boiled rice and pieces of fish from their own chopsticks. Being treated with such affection, Muko also loved them like its own parents.

The Old Man's Character

The old man was a rice farmer. He would go to the field every day in the early morning with his spade and would work till sunset. The dog faithfully followed him every single day to the farms. He never harmed the white heron that followed the old man to pick up worms. Muko had learned it from the old man who was also kind, patient and valued all forms of life.

The Pile of Gold

One day, the dog came running to his master and pointed to a spot behind. Initially, the old man thought that Muko was only playing but he soon realized that Muko wanted to show something to him. Muko, then, took his master to a place a few yards away and began digging the ground there. The old man thought that it might be a buried bone or bit of fish. However, it turned out to be a pile of gold. Thus, the old couple became rich in an hour. They bought a piece of land, arranged a feast for their friends, and distributed some of their wealth to the poor neighbours.

The Wicked Couple

In the same village, there lived an evil couple who were insensitive and unkind. They treated the dogs badly whenever dogs passed by their house. After hearing about the gold incident, they attracted Muko into their garden by offering him food. However, it refused to eat or move. They dragged Muko out of the house and took his spade and hoe with them. The dog began scratching near a pine tree in their garden. The evil old couple began to dig the ground with excitement. To their disappointment, they found a dead kitten that had a foul smell. They killed the dog out of anger and buried its dead body.

Muko Visits its Master's Dream

Upon hearing about the death of Muko, the old master mourned for it. At night, he went under the pine tree and set up bamboo tubes in which he put fresh flowers. Then, he put a cup of water and a tray of food on the grave and burned several expensive incense sticks. He mourned for Muko and called it many dear names as if it were still alive. The same night, the dog's spirit appeared in his master's dream and told him to make a mortar and a mill and the mill had to be used for making the bean sauce.

Making of the Mortar and the Mill

The old man started the process by cutting down the tree. He then cut out a section about two feet long from the middle of the trunk. By using fire and chisel, he made a hollow space as big as a small bowl. The mill was made in the form of a long-handled hammer wood. Around New Year's time, the old couple was all set to make some rice pastry. The old woman put the fully boiled rice into the mortar while the old man pounded the rice into dough by lifting the hammer. When the pastry was all done for baking, it suddenly turned into a heap of gold coins. They repeated the process and gold began dropping like rain.

Wicked Couple Destroys the Mill

The evil couple saw how the old couple got those heaps of gold when they were peeping at the window. They were filled with jealousy. The next day, the wicked couple came to borrow the mortar and the mill. After putting in boiled rice and pounding them, they began to pound and grind. However, the pastry and sauce turned into a foul mass of worms. They, then, chopped the mill down and used it as firewood.

Part - II

Muko's Spirit Visits the Old Man Again

Not long after, Muko's spirit visited the old man again and narrated how the evil couple had burned down the mill. He asked the old man to collect the ashes of the mill and sprinkle it on the withered trees. These would help the trees bloom again.

The old man then went to the evil neighbour's house. He found them sitting and smoking near their square-shaped fireplace in the middle of the floor. They would from time to time warm their hands and feet with the fire made from the broken mill. The good old man requested to give him the ashes. They scolded him harshly as if he were a thief but let him take the ashes in his basket.

How the Cherry Tree Blooms Fully

Upon reaching home, the old couple went to their garden and sprinkled a pinch of ashes on their favourite cherry tree. Since it was winter, the cherry tree was bare. Surprisingly, it blossomed into a pink cloud and the air was filled with its smell. Everyone in the village ran out to see the wonder. When the evil couple heard the news, they collected the remaining ashes and kept it aside to use for the same purpose.

Lord Daimio Visits the Village

The good old man heard that his lord daimio was passing along the high road near the village on a train (procession). After taking the ashes in his basket, he went out and climbed into an old withered cherry tree. It was a custom in those days that when the daimios passed by a village, their loyal people must shut their high windows. They even had to paste a slip of paper and close the windows. It was done so that they didn't commit the mistake of looking down on their lords. All the people were required to fall upon their hands and knees, and remain looking down on the ground until the procession passed by.

The Daimio Witnessed the Wonder

On the day, when the procession drew near, one of the tall daimios men marched forward to announce the people to pay respect to their lordship by kneeling down. When the leader of the van saw the old man up in the tree, he was initially very angry. However, he ignored him thinking of his old age. When the daimio's palanquin came nearby, the old man sprinkled the ashes and the cherry tree bloomed. The daimio was very happy to witness such a miracle. He thanked the old man and rewarded him with silk robes, sponge-cake, and as other things. On top of it, he was invited to the daimio's castle. The happy old man went home to share the joy with his dear wife.

The Wicked Man was Punished

When the evil man heard about it, he also climbed up a cherry tree and waited for the daimio to pass. As the daimio's procession reached below his tree, he threw a handful of ashes. Instead of making the tree bloom, the ashes were blown by the wind and went into the eyes and noses of the daimio and his wife. It made the couple sneeze and choke, which ruined the pride and dignity of the procession. The man, who had the duty of ordering people to get down on their knees, caught the evil old man by the collar. He dragged him from the tree, and threw him and his basket full of ash into the

ditch by the road. He, then, beat the old man and left him to die there as punishment. The story ended with the wicked old man dying in the mud and the kind couple living a healthy, prosperous and peaceful life.

WORD – MEANING

Word	Meaning
Choking	Act of suffocating
Tumbled	Fall suddenly
Seized	Caught
Pomp	Ceremony and splendid display
Gleefully	In a joyous manner
Palanquin	Royal van/cart
Competent	Having the necessary ability
Procession	Function
Prostrate	Lying stretched out on the ground with one's face downward
Impertinence	Insult
Fast	Tightly
Sprouted	Developed
Bare	Not covered
Turned up their noses	To treat with disrespect
Humbly	Kindly
Blaze	A very large or fiercely burning fire
Spinning	The process of converting fibers into thread or yarn
Withered	To become dry
Pound	Crush
Peeped	To look from a narrow opening
Grind	Crush
Hollow	Empty
Chisel	A long-bladed hand tool

Mortar	Bowl
Petted	Cuddled
Carcass	Dead body
Heaped	To put objects in a pile
Hag	Ugly old woman
Crone	An old woman who is thin and ugly
Covetous	Having or showing great desire to possess something
Dainties	Something good to eat, a delicacy
Coaxed	To persuade someone gently to do something or go somewhere
Wicked	Evil or morally wrong
Smothered	Kill someone by covering their nose and mouth so that they suffocate
Gleamed	Shone/glittered
Scratching	Grating
Whining	Give or make a long, high-pitched complaining cry sound
Sod	The surface of the ground covered with the grass
Turned up	Dug up
Heron	A kind of bird
Hoe	A long-handled gardening tool
A being with a soul	A human child that has emotions
Tidbits	A small piece of tasty food
Snug	Comfortable, warm, and cozy
Crape	A kind of fabric
Dame	A woman
Daimios	Wealthy landowners in Japan during the 19th century