

*OLD WHITE WHISKERS
AND MR. BUNNY*

Korean Fairy Tales

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OLD WHITE WHISKERS AND MR. BUNNY

WHITE WHISKERS was the name of a huge, tawny tiger that lived in the mountains of Kang Wen. He was the proudest tiger in the whole peninsula of Korea. He had the most fiery eyes, the longest tail, the sharpest claws, and the widest stripes of any animal in the mountains. He could pull down a cow, fight all the dogs in any village, eat up a man, and was not afraid of a hunter, unless the man carried a gun. As for calves and pigs, he considered them mere tidbits. He could claw off the roof or break the bars of stables where cattle were kept, devour one pig on the spot, and then, slinging another on his back, could trot off to his lair miles away, to give his cubs their dinner of fresh pork.

White Whiskers was especially proud, because he was the retainer of the great genii of the mountains, that men feared and worshiped and in whose honor they built shrines. One of these Mountain Spirits, when he wanted to, could call together all the tigers in his domain, and then, sitting astride the back of the biggest, he would ride off on the clouds or to victory over Korea's enemies. Both tigers and leopards were his messengers to do his bidding. Only the big and swift and striped tigers were chosen to carry out the Mountain Spirit's orders.

One particular matter of business confided to White Whiskers, the great striped tiger, was to visit daily the shrines in the hill passes to see if offerings were continually made. The people who were in terror of both the Mountain Spirit and his servants the tigers, daily offered sacrifice out of fear. They piled up stone, rags, bits of metal, or laid food on dishes for the Mountain Spirit who was very exacting and tyrannical. The poor folks thought that if they did not thus heap up their offerings the spirit would be angry and send the tigers at night to prowl around the village, scratch at their doors, and eat up donkeys, cows, calves, pigs, and even men, women and children. Then the hunters would go out with matchlocks to slay the man eaters, but by this time, in daylight, the tigers were far up into their lairs in the mountain.

Indeed, it was so hard to get a shot at a tiger that the Chinese, who like to make fun of their neighbors in white coats, declared that during one half of the year the Koreans hunt the tigers, and during the other half the tigers hunt the Koreans. That is, the men go out with their guns in summer; but in winter, when men keep within doors, the hungry wild beasts descend from the mountains for their prey.

Now Old White Whiskers was both proud and crafty. For many years he had eaten up pigs, calves, dogs, donkeys and chickens and had twice feasted on men, besides avoiding all their traps and dodging every one of their bullets. So he began to think he could laugh at all his enemies. Yet, proud as he was, he was destined to be outwitted by a creature without strength or sting, claws or hoofs, as we shall see.

Mr. Rabbit, who burrowed in a hill near the village, had often heard the squealing of unfortunate pigs and the kicking of braying donkeys, as they made dinners for Old White Whiskers. Thus far, however, by being very cautious, he had kept out of the striped tyrant's way and maw. But one cold winter's day,

coming home, tired, weak and hungry, from having no food since yesterday, just as he was crossing a river on the ice, he met Old White Whiskers face to face. From behind a rock by the shore, near Mr. Bunny's burrow, the big tiger leaped out and tried to freeze the rabbit with terror, by staring at him with his great green eyes. Mr. Bunny knew only too well that tigers love to maul and play with their prey before eating it up, and he thought his last hour had come.

Nevertheless Mr. Bunny was perfectly cool. He did not shiver a bit. He had long expected such a meeting and was ready for Old White Whiskers, intending to throw him off his guard.

Fully expecting, in a minute or two, to tear off the little animal's fur and grind his bones for a dinner, the tiger said to the rabbit:

" I'm hungry. I shall eat you up at once."

" Oh, why should you bother with me?" said Mr. Bunny. "I'm so little and skinny as hardly to make a mouthful for Your Majesty. Just listen to me and I'll get you a royal dinner. I'll go up the mountain and drive the game to your very paws. Only you must do exactly what I tell you."

At this prospect of a full dinner, the tiger actually grinned with delight. The way he yawned, showing his red, cavernous mouth, huge white teeth, each as big as a spike, and the manner of his rolling out his long curved tongue, full of rough points like thorns, nearly scared Mr. Bunny out of his wits. The rabbit had never looked down a tiger's mouth before, but he did not let on that he was afraid. It was only the tiger's way of showing how happy he was, when his mouth watered, and he licked his chops in anticipation of a mighty feast.

" I'll do just as you say," said Old White Whiskers to Mr. Bunny, seeing how grateful the rabbit was to have his own life spared.

" It is my ambition to serve the lord of the mountains," said Mr. Bunny. "So, lie down on the ice here, shut your eyes and do not stir. Now mind you keep your peepers closed, or the charm will fail. I'll make a circle of dry grass and, then go round and round you, driving the game to you. If you hear a noise and even some crackling, don't open your eyes till I give you the word. 'Twill take some time."

Old White Whiskers, tired of tramping in the forest and prowling around pig-pens all day but getting nothing, was both hungry and tired. So he resolved, while waiting, to take a good nap. As quickly as one can blow out a candle, he was asleep.

Thereupon Mr. Bunny made himself busy in pulling up all the dry grass he could find and piling it around and close up to Old White Whiskers. Delighted to hear the big brute snoring, he kept on until he had a thick ring of combustibles. Then he set it on fire, waiting till it blazed up high. Then he scampered off to see the fun.

Old White Whiskers, awakened by the crackling, yawned and rubbed his eyes with his paws, wondering what the noise could be.

" Hold on!" screamed Mr. Bunny, "keep your promise," and farther he ran away up the hill.

" Rascal!" growled the tiger as the red tongues of flame leaped up all around him. He had to jump high to escape from the flames with his life.

Even as it was, one paw was scorched so that he limped, and his fur was singed so badly that all his long hair and fine looks were gone. When he got back home, the other tigers laughed at him.

Henceforth he had to take second place, for the great Mountain Spirit no longer trusted such a stupid servant.