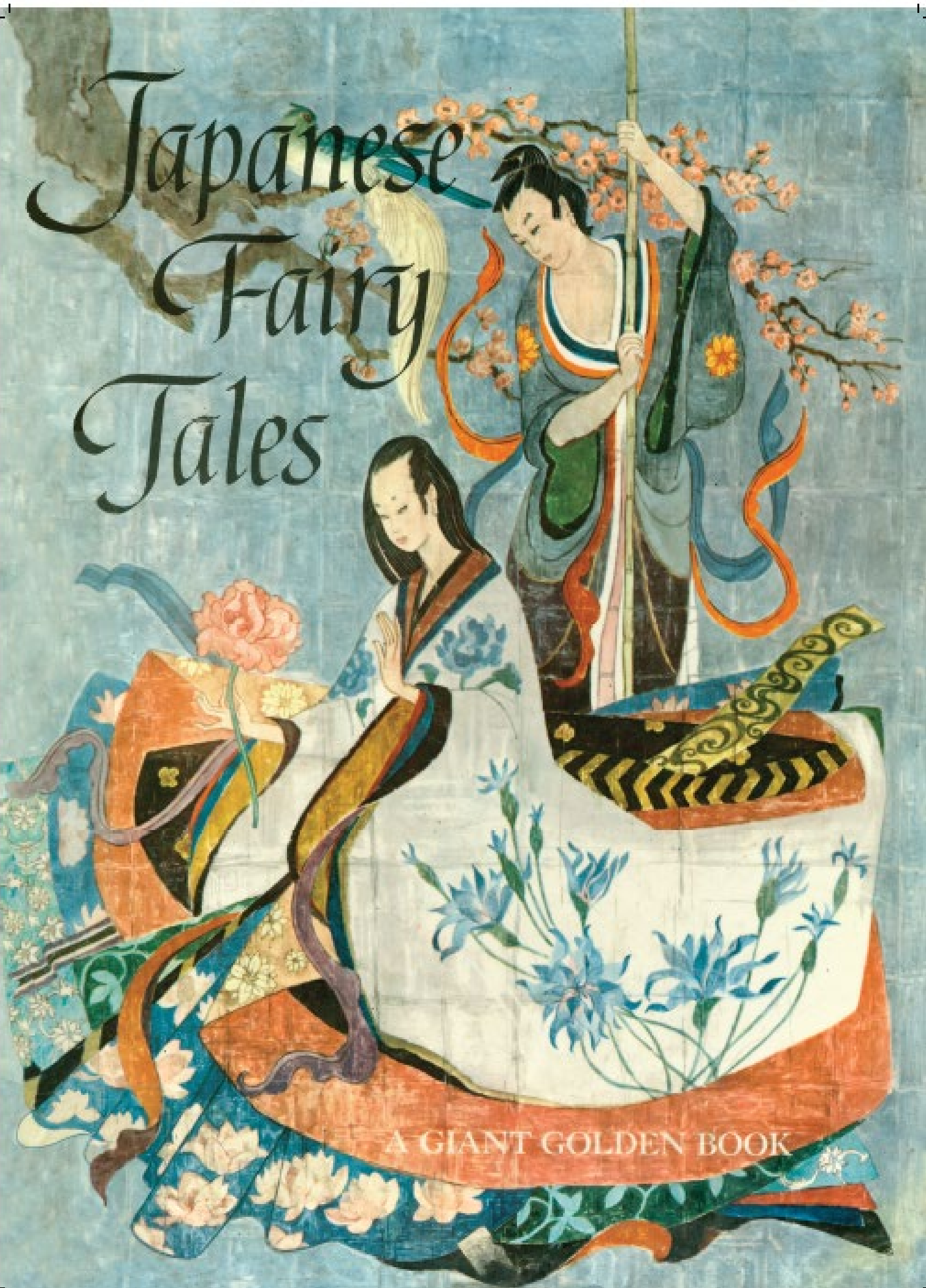


# Japanese Fairy Tales



A GIANT GOLDEN BOOK

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## The Story of Issoumbochi

**T**HIS IS the story of Tom Thumb. Not the Tom Thumb that you know, but a Tom Thumb with long black hair and sparkling, almond-shaped eyes. Because, you see, this Tom Thumb is Japanese and his name is Issoumbochi, which means, in Japanese, as small as a thumb!

Issoumbochi was born small, quite small. And small he remained. One day, his parents took him with them to the fields and sat him on a tree trunk. They gave him many instructions, and told him especially that he was not to move from that spot. He was so little that he could easily have gotten lost behind a clump of earth. Obediently, Issoumbochi sat still and looked about at the beautiful view, singing in a high little voice a song that he had made up.

Hearing him, his parents continued their work in the fields with renewed energy. "Our Issoumbochi is not big, but how smart he is! He is a real poet!" they said, with pride in their voices.

But Issoumbochi's joy suddenly disappeared and was replaced by sadness. He had noticed that the other children were helping their parents with the work in the fields. Poor little Issoumbochi! Would he ever be useful to anyone. When the work in the fields was done that day, Issoumbochi returned to his home sadly.

He went to see his grandfather, the head of the family, and said to him, "Good day, esteemed Grandfather. I would like to go to the city to study and become a great man. Please give me your consent."

"Very well, my son, I give it to you. But take with you this goblet, these sticks, and this awl. The goblet will be your boat, the sticks your oars. Poke your awl through this piece of straw. The awl will be your sword and the straw your scabbard. Go, and may the gods protect you!"

"A thousand thanks, Grandfather!" said Issoumbochi. "I will study, and I will become big and strong and clever. Goodby, Grandfather, Goodby, Papa, goodby, Mama!"

Issoumbochi set off, and when he reached the edge of the river he placed the goblet in the water and jumped into it.

"Hey there, frog, let me pass!"

"Coa! Coa! Coa!" replied the frog.



"Move aside! Don't you see that you're in my way?" But the frog seized the rim of the goblet and began to shake it. "Wicked frog! I'll show you! I'm little but I'm very strong, you know!" Issoumbochi began to hit the frog with his tiny oars until the amazed creature let go.

After countless adventures, Issoumbochi finally reached the city. There he stopped, astonished at what he saw. "So many people! Such a large city! How beautiful it is!" he exclaimed.

He could not take his eyes away from a large temple which, with its strange roofs placed one on top of the other, seemed to rise like a huge flower from a grove of cherry trees. Then he walked along the streets of the city, careful not to be stepped on by the passers-by. There were large carts pulled by gentle oxen, and hundreds of people dressed in handsome silk kimonos. Most of all, Issoumbochi liked the beautiful houses, which were not at all like his own mud house. There were so many things to see that Issoumbochi did not notice that night was falling. Soon he found himself alone in the street. All the people had returned to their homes, because each evening a ferocious ogre appeared in the city. All the houses were bolted and no one would let Issoumbochi in.

"I must be patient," said Issoumbochi to himself. He sat down in the corner of a doorway and began to sing.





After a while, the door opened a little way. "Whose voice is that? Who is singing?" asked a young girl standing at the doorway.

"It is I. My name is Issoumbochi. I came to the city to study and to become big and strong. But I don't know anyone and don't know where to go. Can you show me where I can go to study?"

"How nice you are!" said the girl. "Come into my house. We will study together."

Issoumbochi thanked her and walked in. He was given an excellent meal and then went to bed. The next morning, set out on a low table, he found all the things he would need for writing. Everything was the right size for him. He sat down on a pillow and, following the little girl's directions, he began to form with a pen those very complicated symbols which make up Japanese writing.

"That's very good!" said the little girl, amazed at the speed with which Issoumbochi learned to draw the characters. "But that's enough for today. You must be tired."

"Not at all. Now I want to learn some more difficult signs . . . and then even more difficult ones."

"Then you want to become the most learned man in Japan?" said the girl. Issoumbochi agreed that indeed he did.

And so, for days and days, they studied without rest. One fine morning, they decided to take a walk up to the temple.

They set off happily. When they reached the big stone staircase leading to the temple, Issoumbochi began taking large leaps in order to climb the steps.

"Be careful! This staircase is dangerous!" the girl warned him.

"No it isn't. I'm strong. Come, let's go fast," answered Issoumbochi, who was fearless. "Why are you stopping all the time?"

"I want to see the cherry trees in bloom. Look how lovely they are!"

"But you keep stopping," he protested.

"I'm looking at that little bird. See how pretty it is."

Of course, she was really trying to find excuses to prevent her small companion from climbing the stairs too fast.

At the top of the staircase the little girl heaved a sigh of relief, a sigh which stopped short. She had just seen the wicked ogre!

The ogre was enormous and red all over. His fingernails were yellow claws, and two huge horns sprouted from his head. The little girl stood there horror-stricken for a moment, and then she fell into a swoon.



And Issoumbochi? Well, Issoumbochi had planted himself, hands on hips, in front of the ogre. And he was roaring with laughter!

"You are the ogre? Oh, how ugly you are! And what a silly face! You have horns like an ox. Hah, hah, hah!" Issoumbochi couldn't stop laughing.

Imagine the rage of the ogre, who had never been treated in this way before!

"You pipsqueak!" he roared. "I will destroy you just by breathing on you!"

"I dare you!" answered Issoumbochi.

The ogre breathed. But Issoumbochi had already jumped onto the tip of his nose. With his little sword he poked the ogre's eyes and nose. The ogre tried to catch him, but Issoumbochi slid between his fingers.

He jumped all over him. And the ogre only succeeded in hitting himself hard enough to fell an ox.

"Ouch, ouch! Wait till I catch you . . ." howled the ogre, his mouth wide open. Issoumbochi quickly leaped into the gaping mouth and slid down to the monster's stomach. There, using his sword as a lance, he lunged as hard as he could and pierced a hole right through the ogre's stomach. The ogre immediately collapsed and died. And Issoumbochi jumped out of the opening he had made and tumbled to the ground.

The little girl, who had recovered from her swoon, caught the ogre's last sigh and threw it at Issoumbochi, saying,

"Issoumbochi, become big!"

She had barely pronounced these words when Issoumbochi became transformed into a handsome young man.

"I am big, I am big!" he shouted. "I'm not Issoumbochi any more."

"That's right, you aren't Issoumbochi any more," said the girl joyfully. "Now you are big and strong and clever."

All the people of the city carried Issoumbochi off triumphantly and named him hero of the city. But although he became rich and famous, he remained simple and continued to study like other serious young people. When the little girl was old enough, he married her and they lived happily for many years, respected by all.





