

# The Story of Tam and Cam Vietnam

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Long, long ago there was a man who lost his wife and lived with his little girl named Tam. Then he married again a wicked woman. The little girl found this out on the first day after the wedding. There was a big banquet in the house, but Tam was shut up in a room all by herself instead of being allowed to welcome the guests and attend the feast.

Moreover, she had to go to bed without any supper.

Things grew worse when a new baby girl was born in the house. The step-mother adored Cam--for Cam was the name of the baby girl--and she told her husband so many lies about poor Tam that he would not have anything more to do with the latter.

"Go and stay away in the kitchen and take care of yourself, you naughty child," said the wicked woman to Tam.

And she gave the little girl a dirty wretched place in the kitchen, and it was there that Tam was to live and work. At night, she was given a torn mat and a ragged sheet as bed and coverlet. She had to rub the floors, cut the wood, feed the animals, do all the cooking, the washing up and many other things. Her poor little soft hands had large blisters, but she bore the pain without complaint. Her step-mother also sent her to deep forests to gather wood with the secret hope that the wild beasts might carry her off. She asked Tam to draw water from dangerously deep wells so that she might get drowned one day. The poor little Tam worked and worked all day till her skin became swarthy and her hair entangled. But Sometimes she went to the well to draw water, looked at herself in it, and was frightened to realize how dark and ugly she was. She then got some water in the hollow of her hand, washed her face and combed her long smooth hair with her fingers, and the soft white skin appeared again, and she looked very pretty indeed.

When the step-mother realized how pretty Tam could look, she hated her more than ever, and wished to do her more harm. One day, she asked Tam and her own daughter Cam to go fishing in the village pond.

"Try to get as many as you can," she said. "If you come back with only a few of them, you will get flogged and will be sent to bed without supper." Tam knew that these words were meant for her because the step-mother would never beat Cam, who was the apple of her eyes, while she always flogged Tam as hard as she could.

Tam tried to fish hard and by the end of the day, got a basket full of fish. In the meantime, Cam spent her time rolling herself in the tender grass, basking in the warm sunshine, picking up wild flowers, dancing and singing.

The sun set before Cam had even started her fishing. She looked at her empty basket and had a bright idea. "Sister, sister," she said to Tam, "your hair is full of mud. Why don't you step into the fresh water and get a good wash to get rid of it? Otherwise mother is going to scold you."

Tam listened to the advice, and had a good wash. But, in the meantime, Cam poured her sister's fish into her own basket and went home as quickly as she could. When Tam realized that her fish were stolen away, her heart sank and she began to cry bitterly. Certainly, her step-mother would punish her severely tonight!

Suddenly, a fresh and balmy wind blew, the sky looked purer and the clouds whiter and in front of her stood the smiling blue-robed Goddess of Mercy, carrying a lovely green willow branch with her. "What is the matter, dear child?" asked the Goddess in a sweet voice.

Tam gave her an account of her misfortune and added: "Most Noble Lady, what am I to do tonight when I go home? I am frightened to death, for my step-mother will not believe me, and will flog me very, very hard."

The Goddess of Mercy consoled her. "Your misfortune will be over soon. Have confidence in me and cheer up. Now, look at your basket to see whether there is anything left there."

Tam looked and saw a lovely small fish with red fins and golden eyes, and uttered a little cry of surprise. The Goddess told her to take the fish home, put it in the well at the back of the house, and feed it three times a day with what she could save from her own food.

Tam thanked the Goddess most gratefully and did exactly as she was told. Whenever she went to the well, the fish would appear on the surface to greet her. But should anyone else come, the fish would never show itself. Tam's strange behavior was noticed by her step-mother who spied on her, and went to the well to look for the fish which hid itself in the deep water. She decided to ask Tam to go to a far away spring to fetch some water, and taking advantage of the absence, she put on the latter's ragged clothes, went to call the fish, killed it and cooked it.

When Tam came back, she went to the well, called and called, but there was no fish to be seen except the surface of the water stained with blood. She leaned her head against the well and wept in the most miserable way. The Goddess of Mercy appeared again, with a face as sweet as a loving mother, and comforted her: "Do not cry, my child.

Your step-mother has killed the fish, but you must try to find its bones and bury them in the ground under your mat. Whatever you may wish to possess, pray to them, and your wish will be granted."

Tam followed the advice and looked for the fish bones everywhere but could find none. "Cluck! cluck!" said a hen, "Give me some paddy and I will show you the bones.

Tam gave her a handful of paddy and the hen said, "Cluck! cluck! Follow me and I will take you to the place." When they came to the poultry yard, the hen scratched a heap of young leaves, uncovered the fish bones which Tam gladly gathered and buried accordingly. It was not long before she got gold and jewelry and dresses of such wonderful materials that they would have rejoiced the heart of any young girl.

When the Autumn Festival came, Tam was told to stay home and sort out the two big baskets of black and green beans that her wicked step-mother had mixed up.

"Try to get the work done," she was told, "before you can go to attend the Festival." Then the step-mother and Cam put on their most beautiful dresses and went out by themselves.

After they had gone a long way Tam lifted her tearful face and prayed: "O, benevolent Goddess of Mercy, please help me." At once, the soft-eyed Goddess appeared and with her magic green willow branch, turned little flies into sparrows which sorted the beans out for the young girl. In a short time, the work was done. Tam dried up her tears, arrayed herself in a glittering blue and silver dress. She now looked as beautiful as a princess, and went to the Festival.

Cam was very surprised to see her, and whispered to her mother: "Is that rich lady not strangely like my sister Tam?" When Tam realized that her step-mother and Cam were staring curiously at her, she ran away, but in such a hurry that she dropped one of her fine slippers which the soldiers picked up and took to the King.

The King examined it carefully and declared he had never seen such a work of art before. He made the ladies of the palace try it on, but the slipper was too small even for those who had the smallest feet. Then he ordered all the noblewomen of the kingdom to try it, but the slipper would fit none of them. In the end, word was sent that the woman who could wear the slipper would become Queen, that is, the King's First Wife.

Finally, Tam had a try and the slipper fitted her perfectly. She then wore both slippers, and appeared in her glittering blue and silver dress, looking extremely beautiful. She was then taken to Court with a big escort, became Queen and had an unbelievably brilliant and happy life. The step-mother and Cam could not bear to see her happy and would have killed her most willingly, but they were too afraid of the King to do so.

One day, at her father's anniversary, Tam went home to celebrate it with her family. At the time, it was the custom that, however great and important one might be, one was always expected by one's parents to behave exactly like a young and obedient child. The cunning step-mother had this in her mind and asked Tam to climb an areca tree to get some nuts for the guests. As Tam was now Queen, she could of course refuse, but she was a very pious and dutiful daughter, and was only glad to help. But while she was up on the tree, she felt that it was swaying to and fro in the strangest and most alarming manner.

"What are you doing?" She asked her step-mother.

"I am only trying to scare away the ants which might bite you, my dear child," was the reply. But in fact, the wicked step-mother was holding a sickle and cutting the tree which fell down in a crash, killing the poor Queen at once.

"Now we are rid of her," said the woman with a hateful and ugly laugh, "and she will never come back again. We shall report to the King that she has died in an accident and my beloved daughter Cam will become Queen in her stead!"

Things happened exactly the way she had planned, and Cam became now the King's first wife. But Tam's pure and innocent soul could not find any rest. It was turned into the shape of a nightingale which dwelt in the King's garden and sang sweet and melodious songs.

One day, one of the maids-of-honor in the Palace exposed the dragon-embroidered gown of the King to the sun, and the nightingale sang in her own gentle way: "O, sweet maid-of-honor, be careful with my Imperial Husband's gown and do not tear it by putting it on a thorny hedge." She then sang on so sadly that tears came into the King's eyes. The nightingale sang more sweetly still and moved the hearts of all who heard her.

At last, the King said: "Most delightful nightingale, if you were the soul of my beloved Queen, be pleased to settle in my wide sleeves."

Then the gentle bird went straight into the King's sleeves and rubbed her smooth head against the King's hand. The bird was now put in a golden cage near the King's bedroom. The King was so fond of her that he would stay all day long near the cage, listening to her melancholy and beautiful songs. As she sang her melodies to him, his eyes became wet with tears, and she sang more charmingly than ever.

Cam became jealous of the bird, and sought her mother's advice about it. One day, while the King was holding a council with his ministers, Cam killed the nightingale, cooked it and threw the feathers in the Imperial Garden.

"What is the meaning of this?" said the King when he came back to the Palace and saw the empty cage. There was great confusion and everybody looked for the nightingale but could not find it.

"Perhaps she was bored and has flown away to the woods," said Cam.

The King was very sad but there was nothing he could do about it, and resigned himself to his fate. But once more, Tam's restless soul was transformed into big, magnificent tree, which only bore a single fruit, but what a fruit! It was round, big and golden and had a very sweet smell.

An old woman passing by the tree and seeing the beautiful fruit, said: "Golden fruit, golden fruit, drop into the bag of this old woman. This one will keep you and enjoy your smell, but will never eat you." The fruit at once dropped into the old woman's bag. She brought it home, put it on the table to enjoy its sweet-scented smell. But the next day, to her great surprise, she found her house clean and tidy, and a delicious hot meal waiting for her when she came back from her errands as though some magic hand had done all this during her absence.

She then pretended to go out the following morning, but stealthily came back, hid herself behind the door and observed the house. She beheld a fair and slender lady coming out of the golden fruit and starting to tidy the house. She rushed in, tore the fruit peel up so that the fair lady could no longer hide herself in it. The young lady could not help but stay there and consider the old woman her own mother.

One day the King went on a hunting party and lost his way. The evening drew on, the clouds gathered and it was pitch dark when he saw the old woman's house and went in it for shelter. According to custom, the latter offered him some tea and betel. The King examined the delicate way the betel was prepared and asked: "Who is the person who made this betel, which looks exactly like the one prepared by my late beloved Queen?"

The old woman said in a trembling voice: "Son of Heaven, it is only my unworthy daughter."

The King then ordered the daughter to be brought to him and when she came and bowed to him, he realized, like in a dream, that it was Tam, his deeply regretted Queen. Both of them wept after such a separation and so much unhappiness. The Queen was then taken back to the Imperial City, where she took her former rank, while Cam was completely neglected by the King.

Cam then thought: "If I were as beautiful as my sister, I would win the King's heart."

She asked the Queen: "Dearest Sister, how could I become as white as you?"

"It is very easy," answered the Queen. "You have only to jump into a big basin of boiling water to get beautifully white." Cam believed her and did as suggested. Naturally she died without being able to utter a word! When the step-mother heard about this she wept until she became blind. Soon, she died of a broken heart. The Queen survived both of them, and lived happily ever after, for she certainly deserved it.