

hand, were very unhappy to have had their legs broken and to have been shut up for months.

In ten days the three sparrows came back, and the woman peered eagerly at their beaks. Each dropped a gourd seed and flew off.

“There!” she chortled, and planted the seeds. The vines grew faster than normal and became very large, but they did not bear many gourds — seven or eight per vine, no more. The woman looked on with a big grin. “You told me I was useless,” she said to her children, “but I’m doing better than that woman next door!” How the children hoped she was right!

Since there were so few gourds they gave none away and did not even eat any themselves. They remembered, though, that the neighbor woman had shared her gourds with the whole village, and given them some as well. Perhaps they should offer some to other people, since they had three vines. The old woman agreed to give their nearest neighbors some gourds, and even sat down to a meal of gourd with her family. Everyone took a liberal portion, but the gourds turned out to be horribly bitter, and whoever ate any threw up.

The neighbors they had been so generous to besieged the house, shouting, “What kind of stuff was *that* you gave us? Everyone who’s even touched it is nearly dead from nausea and vomiting!” But the old woman and her children, writhing on the floor and retching helplessly, were in no condition to answer. Fortunately, the victims recovered in a few days.

What a disaster! The old woman decided she had been overeager and ought to have waited longer for the gourds to turn into rice, so she hung up the rest to dry. Months later, when she judged they were done, she got together enough containers to hold her harvest. Her toothless old mouth gaped wide in a shameless grin as she took down the gourds. Then she poured. Out came horseflies, wasps, centipedes, lizards, and snakes which battened onto her eyes, her ears, and every part of her body and stung her without pity. But she was so sure she was pouring out rice that she never felt a thing. She just kept muttering, “Just you wait, you little sparrows, I’ll get some from each of you!”

Swarms of venomous snakes from the gourds bit the children and stung the old woman herself to death. Those three sparrows had enlisted the help of every nasty creepy-crawly in the world and put them in the gourds.

Envy is something to avoid.

4 .

THE MAIDEN FROM THE SKY

One day long ago an old man who made bamboo baskets went to the bamboo grove to cut some more bamboo and saw that one of the bamboo stems was shining. Inside the stem he found a baby girl only three inches long.

Never having come across anything like *that* before, he hurried home to his wife with the little girl in one hand and his bundle of bamboo in the other. He and his wife were very happy. They put the tiny baby in a basket and cared for her tenderly. In three months she was a normal size for a child, and the bigger she grew, the lovelier she became. Meanwhile the old man kept going for more bamboo, and

each time he found gold in the stems he cut.

Soon he was rich. He built a palatial home peopled by flocks of servants and retainers, and his storehouse overflowed with treasures of all kinds. He and his wife, who now had their heart's desire in everything, continued to lavish love on their daughter.

She was so dazzling that it was hard to believe she belonged to this world. Rumors about her beauty began to get around and soon many lords were courting her, but she would have nothing to do with them. When they showered her with love letters anyway, she tried to put them off by setting them hopeless tasks. "I'm yours," she wrote to one, "if you'll bring me the thunder from the sky." She told others she wanted the flower that grows in paradise, or the drum that sounds without being beaten. But her beauty had so intoxicated the suitors that they did their best to obey. Off they went to ask people wise in old lore where they should look for such things. Some ended up roaming the beaches like vagabonds, while others wandered homeless through the mountains. Some died, others never returned.

Finally even the emperor heard she was the most beautiful woman in the world, and he decided to go and see her for himself. "If it's true," he thought, "I'll make her my empress." He set out with all his ministers and officials and was surprised to find, when he reached the house, that it was fit for a king. The girl came to him when he called her. No, there was no one like her in all the world. Why, she must have refused everyone just so as to keep herself for him!

"Fine!" he said happily. "We'll go back to my palace and you'll be my empress."

"That would please me very much, Your Majesty," she replied, "but you see, I'm not actually human."

"Well, what are you then? A demon or a god?"

"Neither, Your Majesty. But they'll soon be coming from the sky to take me away. You should go home now."

The emperor hardly knew how to take this. "What's she talking about?" he wondered. "Nobody's coming down from the sky to get her! She's just saying that to get rid of me!"

But a throng soon did descend from the heavens, and they carried the maiden away. They looked quite unlike the people of our world.

Well, it had been true. She had not been of this earth. The heartbroken emperor never forgot her, but not even he could follow her to her home.

What kind of being *had* she been, though? And why had she become the old couple's daughter? It's all a mystery.

5 .

THE FLEA

A wife and her lover were once in bed when the husband came home. Since the lover had no time to run or hide, the woman rolled him up in a straw mat, marched out with the mat under her arm, and announced that she was going to knock the fleas out of it. As she jumped over the hearth, the naked lover slid out and fell thump into the ashes. The husband's eyes widened. "Biggest flea I ever saw!" he