



Broken Images

Green Willow And Other Japanese Fairy Tales

Japanese

Easy
5 min read

Once there lived two brothers who were princes in the land.

The elder brother was a hunter. He loved the deep woods and the chase. He went from dawn to dark with his bow and his arrows. Swiftly he could run; he was strong and bright-eyed. The younger brother was a dreamer; his eyes were gentle. From dawn to dark he would sit with his book or with his thoughts. Sweetly could he sing of love, or of war, or of the green fields, and tell stories of the fairies and of the time of the gods.

Upon a fair day of summer the hunter betook himself very early to the woods, as was his wont. But the dreamer took his book in his hand, and, musing, he wandered by the stream's side, where grew the yellow mimulus.

"It is the fairies' money," he said; "it will buy all the joys of fairyland!" So he went on his way, smiling.

And when he had continued for some time, he came to a holy shrine. And there led to the shrine a hundred steps, moss-grown and grey. Beside the steps were guardian lions, carved in stone. Behind the shrine was Fugi, the Mystic Mountain, white and beautiful, and all the lesser hills rose softly up like prayers.

"O peerless Fugi," said the dreamer, "O passionless wonder mountain! To see thee is to hear sweet music without sound, the blessed harmony of silence."

Then he climbed the steps, moss-grown and grey. And the lions that were carved in stone rose up and followed him, and they came with him to the inner gates of the shrine and stayed there.

In the shrine there was a hush of noonday. The smoke of incense curled and hung upon the air. Dimly shone the gold and the bronze, the lights and the mystic mirrors.

There was a sound of singing in the shrine, and turning, the dreamer saw a man who stood at his right hand. The man was taller than any child of earth. Moreover, his face shone with the glory of a youth that cannot pass away. He held a year-old child upon his arm and hushed it to sleep, singing a strange melody. When the babe fell asleep he was well pleased, and smiled.

“What babe is that?” said the dreamer.

“O dreamer, it is no babe, but a spirit.”

“Then, my lord, what are you?” said the dreamer.

“I am Jizo, who guards the souls of little children. It is most pitiful to hear their crying when they come to the sandy river-bed, the Sai-no-kawara. O dreamer, they come alone, as needs they must, wailing and wandering, stretching out their pretty hands. They have a task, which is to pile stones for a tower of prayer. But in the night come the Oni to throw down the towers and to scatter all the stones. So the children are made afraid, and their labour is lost.”

“What then, my lord Jizo?” said the dreamer.

“Why, then I come, for the Great One gives me leave. And I call ‘Come hither, wandering souls.’ And they fly to me that I may hide them in my long sleeves. I carry them in my arms and on my breast, where they lie light and cold,—as light and cold as the morning mist upon the mountains.”

When he had spoken, the year-old child stirred and murmured: so he rocked it, and wandered to and fro in the quiet temple court and hushed it as he went.

So the swift moments flew and the noontide passed away.

Presently there came to the shrine a lady most gentle and beautiful. Grey was her robe, and she had silver sandals on her feet. She said, “I am called The Merciful. For mankind’s dear sake, I have refused eternal peace.

The Great One has given to me a thousand loving arms, arms of mercy. And my hands are full of gifts. O dreamer, when you dream your dreams you shall see me in my lotus boat when I sail upon the mystic mere.”

“Lady, Lady Kwannon ...” said the dreamer.

Then came one clothed in blue, speaking with a sweet, deep, well-known voice.

“I am Benten, the Goddess of the Sea and the Goddess of Song. My dragons are about me and beneath my feet. See their green scales and their opal eyes. Greeting, O dreamer!”

After her there came a band of blooming boys, laughing and holding out their rosy arms. “We are the Sons of the Sea Goddess,” they said. “Come, dreamer, come to our cool caves.”

The God of Roads came, and his three messengers with him. Three apes were the three messengers. The first ape covered his eyes with his hands, for he could see no evil thing. The second ape covered his ears with his hands, for he could hear no evil thing. The third ape covered his mouth with his hands, for he could speak no evil thing. Then came She, the fearful woman who takes the clothes of the dead who are not able to pay their toll, so that they must stand shivering at the entrance of the mysterious Three Ways. They are unfortunate indeed.

And many and many a vision the dreamer saw in that enchanted shrine.

And dark night fell, with storm and tempest and the sound of rain upon the roof. Yet the dreamer never stirred. Suddenly there was a sound of hurrying feet without. A voice called loud, “My brother, my brother, my brother!...” In sprang the hunter through the golden temple doors.

“Where are you?” he cried, “my brother, my brother!” He had his swinging lantern in his hand and held it high, as he flung his long blown hair back over his shoulder. His face was bright with the rain upon it, his eyes were as keen as an eagle’s.

“O brother ...” said the dreamer, and ran to meet him.

“Now the dear gods be thanked that I have you safe and sound,” said the hunter. “Half the night I have sought you, wandering in the forest and by the stream’s side. I was all to blame for leaving you ... my little brother.”

With that, he took his brother’s face between his two warm hands.

But the dreamer sighed, "I have been with the gods all night," he said, "and I think I see them still. The place is holy."

Then the hunter flashed his light upon the temple walls, upon the gilding and the bronze.

"I see no gods," he said.

"What see you, brother?"

"I see a row of stones, broken images, grey, with moss-grown feet."

"They are grey because they are sad, they are sad because they are forgotten," said the dreamer.

But the hunter took him by the hand and led him into the night.

The dreamer said, "O brother, how sweet is the scent of the bean fields after the rain."

"Now bind your sandals on," said the hunter, "and I'll run you a race to our home."

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