



# *Flower of the Peony*

Green Willow And Other Japanese Fairy Tales

Japanese

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*Intermediate*  
*10 min read*

Aya, sweet maid, was the only child of a daimyo of the Province of Omi. Mother had she none, and her father was a noble lord and a warrior. He was at the Court of the Shogun, or he had weighty affairs at the capital, or he went here and there with armies and overcame his enemies. Aya saw little of him.

Long years she dwelt with her nurse and her maidens within the walls of her father's castle. High walls were they and well-guarded, and at their foot was a deep moat which was rosy with lotus flowers all the seventh month.

When the Lady Aya was some sixteen years old her father the daimyo came home victorious from a foray, and she went with her maidens to meet him in the gate. She was dressed in her bravest, and as became her rank.

"My lord and father," she said, "sweet is your honourable return."

"Child, how you have grown!" her father said, astonished. "How old are you, Aya?"

"Sixteen years old, lord," she said.

"By all the gods, you are become a little great young lady, and I thought you were a baby and brought you home a doll for a home-coming gift."

He laughed, but presently afterwards grew grave, and in deep thought he went into the castle.

Soon after this he began to look about him, to find a fitting husband for his daughter.

“Best it should be done now,” he said, “for a wonder has come to pass, and I am at peace with every daimyo in the land—and it will not last.”

The Lord of Ako, in Harima, had three tall sons, fine young men and warriors all.

“The eldest is over old,” said the Lord of Omi. “The youngest is a boy—but what of the middle brother? It seems to me that the middle brother should do well. They say that second thoughts are best,” said the Lord of Omi.

So after messengers had come and gone, the Lady Aya was betrothed to the young Lord of Ako, and there was great rejoicing in all the country-side, for all the man and the maiden had never set eyes on one another.

The Lady Aya was very glad when she saw the presents that came from her bridegroom’s house. She sat with the seamstress of the castle and fingered the soft stuffs of her fine new robes. For the rest, she played with her maidens the live-long day, or took her broidery frame, plying the needle and long silken thread. It was the month of May, and very often they took the air in a garden gallery, where Aya and her maids laughed together, and sometimes they spoke of the young Lord of Ako and how brave and beautiful he was, how skilful in art and in war, and how rich. When evening came they slipped down the gallery steps and into the garden, where they went hither and thither, hand in hand, to enjoy the cool air and the sweet scent of the flowers.

One night the Lady Aya walked in the garden according to her wont. The moon rose, round and silver.

“Ah me,” sighed one of the maidens, “the moon is a love-lorn lady. Look how pale and wan she goes, and even now she will hide her eyes with her long sleeve of cloud.”

“You speak sooth,” returned Aya, “the moon is a love-lorn lady; but have you seen her faint sister who is sadder and fairer than she?”

“Who, then, is the moon’s sister?” asked all the maidens at once.

Aya said, “Come and see—come.”

With that she drew them along the paths of the garden to the still pond, where were the dancing fireflies and

the frogs that sang musically. Holding each other's hands, the maidens looked down into the water, and one and all they beheld the moon's sister, and they laughed softly together. While they played by the water's brim, the Lady Aya's foot slipped upon a smooth stone, and most assuredly she would have fallen into the pond. But all of a sudden a youth leapt forward out of the sweet secrecy of the night, and caught her in his arms. For a moment all the maidens beheld the glimmer of his garments. Then he was gone. Aya stood alone, trembling. Down gazed the moon, wide-eyed and sorrowful; and still more sorrowful and sweet, upwards gazed the moon's pale sister. They saw a band of silent maidens who stood in a wilderness of blossoming peony flowers, that grew to the water's edge. It was the Lady Aya who loved them and had them planted so.

Now the lady turned without a word and moved along the paths of the garden very slowly, hanging her head. When she came to the garden gallery she left all her maidens save one, and went silently to her bower.

There she was for a long space, saying nothing. She sat and traced the pattern on her robe with the point of her finger. And Sada, her maiden, was over against her.

At length, "He was a great lord," said Aya.

"Truth, lady."

"He was young."

"He was passing well-favoured."

"Alas! he saved my life, and I had not time to thank him."

"The moon shone upon the jewelled mounting of his sword."

"And his robe that was broidered with peony flowers—my peony flowers."

"Lady, the hour grows very late."

"Well, then, untie my girdle."

"You look pale, lady."

"Small marvel, I am weary."

“Lady, what of the young Lord of Ako?”

“What of him? Why, I have not seen him. Enough, let be—no more of him. Alas! I am drowsy, I know not what I say.”

After this night the Lady Aya, that had been so fresh and fair and dancing gay as a wave of the sea, fell into a pale melancholy. By day she sighed, and by night she wept. She smiled no more as she beheld her rich wedding-garments, and she would not play any more with her maidens upon the garden gallery. She wandered like a shadow, or lay speechless in her bower. And all the wise men and all the wise women of that country-side were not able to heal her of her sickness.

Then the maid Sada, weeping and hiding her face with her sleeve, went to the Lord of the House and told him of the moonlight adventure and the fair youth of the peony bed.

“Ah me,” she said, “my sweet mistress pines and dies for the love of this beautiful young man.”

“Child,” said the daimyo, “how you talk! My daughter’s garden is well guarded by walls and by men-at-arms. It is not possible that any stranger should enter it. What, then, is this tale of the moon and a samurai in peony garments and all manner of other foolishness, and how will such a tale sound in the ears of the Lord of Ako?”

But Sada wept and said, “My mistress will die.”

“To fight in the field, to flatter at Court and to speak in Council, all these are easy,” said the daimyo, “but preserve me from the affairs of my women, for they are too hard for me.”

With that he made a search of all the castle and the castle grounds, but not a trace did he find of any stranger in hiding.

That night the Lady Aya called piteously for the cooler air, so they bore her out on to her garden gallery, where she lay in O Sada’s arms. A minstrel of the household took his biwa, and to soothe her he made this song:

“Music of my lute— Is it born, does it die, Is it truth or a lie? Whence, whence and where, Enchanted air? Music of my lute Is mute.

“Sweet scents in the night— Do they float, do they seem, Are they essence of dream, Or thus are they said The thoughts of the Dead? Sweet scents in the night Delight.”

Now, while the minstrel sang and touched his instrument, a fair youth stood up from the rosy sea of peonies by the pond. All there saw him clearly, his bright eyes, his sword, and his dress broidered with flowers. The Lady Aya gave a wild cry and ran to the edge of the garden gallery, holding out her white arms. And immediately the vision passed away. But the minstrel took up his biwa once more and sang:

“Love more strange than death— Is it longer than life, Is it hotter than strife? Strong, strong and blind, Transcending kind— Love more strange than death Or breath.”

At this the mysterious knight of the flowers stood once again straight and tall, and his shining eyes were fixed upon the Lady Aya.

Then a gentleman of the company of the daimyo, who was a mighty man of war, drew his sword forthwith and leapt down amongst the peonies to do battle with the bold stranger that so gazed upon his master's daughter. And at that a cloud drew across the moon's face as if by faery, and of a sudden a great hot wind blew from the south. The lights died upon the garden gallery, the maidens held their garments together while their long gossamer sleeves floated out. All the peony bed was tossed about like a troubled sea, and the pink and white petals flew like foam. A mist, damp and over-sweet, hung upon the wind, so that all who were there grew faint and clung to one another, trembling.

When they were recovered, they found the night still and the moon undimmed. The soldier of the daimyo's company stood panting and white as death at the steps of the garden gallery. In his right hand he held his unstained sword, in his left a perfect peony flower.

“I have him,” he shouted; “he could not escape me. I have him fast.”

Aya said, “Give me the flower”; and he gave it her without a word, as one in a dream.

Then Aya went to her bower and slept with the peony upon her breast and was satisfied.

For nine days she kept the flower. The sweet colour came to her face, and the light to her eyes. She was perfectly healed of her sickness.

She set the peony in a bronze vase and it did not droop or fade, but grew larger and more lovely all the nine days.

At the end of this time the young Lord of Ako came riding in great pomp and state to claim his long-promised lady. So he and the Lady Aya were wed in the midst of much feasting and rejoicing. Howbeit, they say she made but a pale bride. And the same day the peony withered and was thrown away.

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