

Karma

Green Willow And Other Japanese Fairy Tales

Japanese

Easy
7 min read

The young man, Ito Tatewaki, was returning homeward after a journey which he had taken to the city of Kioto. He made his way alone and on foot, and he went with his eyes bent upon the ground, for cares weighed him down and his mind was full of the business which had taken him to Kioto. Night found him upon a lonely road leading across a wild moor. Upon the moor were rocks and stones, with an abundance of flowers, for it was summer time, and here and there grew a dark pine tree, with gnarled trunk and crooked boughs.

Tatewaki looked up and beheld the figure of a woman before him in the way. It was a slender girl dressed in a simple gown of blue cotton. Lightly she went along the lonely road in the deepening twilight.

“I should say she was the serving-maid of some gentle lady,” Tatewaki said to himself. “The way is solitary and the time is dreary for such a child as she.”

So the young man quickened his pace and came up with the maiden. “Child,” he said very gently, “since we tread the same lonely road let us be fellow-travellers, for now the twilight passes and it will soon be dark.”

The pretty maiden turned to him with bright eyes and smiling lips.

“Sir,” she said, “my mistress will be glad indeed.”

“Your mistress?” said Tatewaki.

“Why, sir, of a surety she will be glad because you are come.”

“Because I am come?”

“Indeed, and indeed the time has been long,” said the serving-maid; “but now she will think no more of that.”

“Will she not?” said Tatewaki. And on he went by the maiden’s side, walking as one in a dream.

Presently the two of them came to a little house, not far from the roadside. Before the house was a small fair garden, with a stream running through it and a stone bridge. About the house and the garden there was a bamboo fence, and in the fence a wicket-gate.

“Here dwells my mistress,” said the serving-maid. And they went into the garden through the wicket-gate.

Now Tatewaki came to the threshold of the house. He saw a lady standing upon the threshold waiting.

She said, “You have come at last, my lord, to give me comfort.”

And he answered, “I have come.”

When he had said this he knew that he loved the lady, and had loved her since love was.

“O love, love,” he murmured, “time is not for such as we.”

Then she took him by the hand, and they went into the house together and into a room with white mats and a round latticed window.

Before the window there stood a lily in a vessel of water.

Here the two held converse together.

And after some time there was an old ancient woman that came with saké in a silver flagon; and she brought silver drinking-cups and all things needful. And Tatewaki and the lady drank the “Three Times Three” together. When they had done this the lady said, “Love, let us go out into the shine of the moon. See, the night is as green

as an emerald....”

So they went and left the house and the small fair garden behind them. Or ever they had closed the wicket-gate the house and the garden and the wicket-gate itself all faded away, dissolving in a faint mist, and not a sign of them was left.

“Alas! what is this?” cried Tatewaki.

“Let be, dear love,” said the lady, and smiled; “they pass, for we have no more need of them.”

Then Tatewaki saw that he was alone with the lady upon the wild moor. And the tall lilies grew about them in a ring. So they stood the live-long night, not touching one another but looking into each other’s eyes most steadfastly. When dawn came, the lady stirred and gave one deep sigh.

Tatewaki said, “Lady, why do you sigh?”

And when he asked her this, she unclasped her girdle, which was fashioned after the form of a golden scaled dragon with translucent eyes. And she took the girdle and wound it nine times about her love’s arm, and she said, “O love, we part: these are the years until we meet again.” So she touched the golden circles on his arm.

Then Tatewaki cried aloud, “O love, who are you? Tell me your name....”

She said, “O love, what have we to do with names, you and I?... I go to my people upon the plains. Do not seek for me there.... Wait for me.”

And when the lady had spoken she faded slowly and grew ethereal, like a mist. And Tatewaki cast himself upon the ground and put out his hand to hold her sleeve. But he could not stay her. And his hand grew cold and he lay still as one dead, all in the grey dawn.

When the sun was up he arose.

“The plains,” he said, “the low plains ... there will I find her.” So, with the golden token wound about his arm, fleetly he sped down, down to the plains. He came to the broad river, where he saw folk standing on the green banks. And on the river there floated boats of fresh flowers, the red dianthus and the campanula, golden rod and meadow-sweet. And the people upon the river banks called to Tatewaki:

“Stay with us. Last night was the Night of Souls. They came to earth and wandered where they would, the kind wind carried them. To-day they return to Yomi. They go in their boats of flowers, the river bears them. Stay with us and bid the departing Souls good speed.”

And Tatewaki cried, “May the Souls have sweet passage.... I cannot stay.”

So he came to the plains at last, but did not find his lady. Nothing at all did he find, but a wilderness of ancient graves, with nettles overgrown and the waving green grass.

So Tatewaki went to his own place, and for nine long years he lived a lonely man. The happiness of home and little children he never knew.

“Ah, love,” he said, “not patiently, not patiently, I wait for you.... Love, delay not your coming.”

And when the nine years were past he was in his garden upon the Night of Souls. And looking up he saw a woman that came towards him, threading her way through the paths of the garden. Lightly she came; she was a slender girl, dressed in a simple gown of blue cotton. Tatewaki stood up and spoke:

“Child,” he said very gently, “since we tread the same lonely road let us be fellow-travellers, for now the twilight passes and it will soon be dark.”

The maid turned to him with bright eyes and smiling lips:

“Sir,” she said, “my mistress will be glad indeed.”

“Will she be glad?” said Tatewaki.

“The time has been long.”

“Long and very weary,” said Tatewaki.

“But now you will think no more of that....”

“Take me to your mistress,” said Tatewaki. “Guide me, for I cannot see any more. Hold me, for my limbs fail.

Do not leave go my hand, for I am afraid. Take me to your mistress,” said Tatewaki.

In the morning his servants found him cold and dead, quietly lying in the shade of the garden trees.

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