

The Beautiful Dancer of Yedo

Green Willow And Other Japanese Fairy Tales

Japanese

Easy

10 min read

This is the tale of Sakura-ko, Flower of the Cherry, who was the beautiful dancer of Yedo. She was a geisha, born a samurai's daughter, that sold herself into bondage after her father died, so that her mother might have food to eat. Ah, the pity of it! The money that bought her was called Namida no Kané, that is "the money of tears."

She dwelt in the narrow street of the geisha, where the red and white lanterns swing and the plum trees flourish by the low eaves. The street of the geisha is full of music, for they play the samisen there all day long.

Sakura-ko played it too; indeed she was skilful in every lovely art. She played the samisen, the kotto, the biwa, and the small hand-drum. She could make songs and sing them. Her eyes were long, her hair was black, her hands were white. Her beauty was wonderful, and wonderful her power to please. From dawn to dusk, and from dusk to dawn she could go smiling and hide her heart. In the cool of the day she would stand upon the gallery of her mistress's house, and muse as she stood and looked down into the street of the geisha. And the folk that passed that way said to one another, "See, yonder stands Sakura-ko, Flower of the Cherry, the beautiful dancer of Yedo, the geisha without peer."

But Sakura-ko looked down and mused and said, "Little narrow street of the geisha, paved with bitterness and broken hearts, your houses are full of vain hopes and vain regrets; youth and love and grief dwell here. The flowers in your gardens are watered with tears."

The gentlemen of Yedo must needs have their pleasure, so Sakura-ko served at feasts every night. They whitened her cheeks and her forehead, and gilded her lips with beni. She wore silk attires, gold and purple and grey and green and black, obi of brocade magnificently tied. Her hair was pinned with coral and jade, fastened with combs of gold lacquer and tortoise-shell. She poured saké, she made merry with the good company. More than this, she danced.

Three poets sang of her dancing. One said, "She is lighter than the rainbow-tinted dragonfly."

And another said, "She moves like the mist of the morning when the bright sun shines."

And the third said, "She is like the shadow in the river of the waving willow-branch."

But it is time to tell of her three lovers.

The first lover was neither old nor young. He was passing rich, and a great man in Yedo. He sent his servant to the street of the geisha with money in his girdle. Sakura-ko shut the door in his face.

"You are wrong, fellow," she said, "you have lost your way. You should have gone to the street of the toy-shops and bought your master a doll; let him know there are no dolls here."

After this the master came himself. "Come to me, O Flower of the Cherry," he said, "for I must have you."

"Must?" she said, and looked down with her long eyes.

"Aye," he said, "must is the word, O Flower of the Cherry."

"What will you give me?" she said.

"Fine attires, silk and brocade, a house, white mats and cool galleries; servants to wait on you, gold hairpins—what you will."

"What do I give you?" she said.

“Yourself, just that, O Flower of the Cherry.”

“Body and soul?” she said.

And he answered her, “Body and soul.”

“Now, fare you well,” she said, “I have a fancy to remain a geisha. It is a merry life,” she said, and she laughed.

So that was the end of the first lover.

The second lover was old. To be old and wise is very well, but he was old and foolish. “Sakura-ko,” he cried, “ah, cruel one, I am mad for love of you!”

“My lord,” she said, “I can easily believe it.”

He said, “I am not so very old.”

“By the divine compassion of the gods,” she told him, “you may yet have time to prepare for your end. Go home and read the good law.” But the old lover would hear nothing of her counsel. Instead, he bade her to his house by night to a great feast which he had prepared for her. And when they had made an end of the feast she danced before him wearing scarlet hakama and a robe of gold brocade. After the dancing he made her sit beside him and he called for wine, that they might drink together. And the geisha who poured the saké was called Silver Wave.

When they had drunk together, Sakura-ko and her old lover, he drew her to him and cried:

“Come, my love, my bride, you are mine for the time of many existences; there was poison in the cup. Be not afraid, for we shall die together. Come with me to the Meido.”

But Sakura-ko said, “My sister, the Silver Wave, and I are not children, neither are we old and foolish to be deceived. I drank no saké and no poison. My sister, the Silver Wave, poured fresh tea in my cup. Howbeit I am sorry for you, and so I will stay with you till you die.”

He died in her arms and was fain to take his way alone to the Meido.

“Alas! alas!” cried the Flower of the Cherry. But her sister, Silver Wave, gave her counsel thus: “Keep your tears, you will yet have cause for weeping. Waste not grief for such as he.”

And that was the end of the second lover.

The third lover was young and brave and gay. Impetuous he was, and beautiful. He first set eyes on the Flower of the Cherry at a festival in his father’s house. Afterwards he went to seek her out in the street of the geisha. He found her as she leaned against the gallery railing of her mistress’s house.

She looked down into the street of the geisha and sang this song:

“My mother bade me spin fine thread
Out of the yellow sea sand— A hard task, a hard task. May the dear gods
speed me! My father gave me a basket of reeds;
He said, ‘Draw water from the spring
And carry it a mile’— A hard task, a hard task. May the dear gods speed me!
My heart would remember, My heart must forget;
Forget, my heart, forget— A hard task, a hard task. May the dear gods speed me!”

When she had made an end of singing, the lover saw that her eyes were full of tears.

“Do you remember me,” he said, “O Flower of the Cherry? I saw you last night at my father’s house.”

“Aye, my young lord,” she answered him, “I remember you very well.”

He said, “I am not so very young. And I love you, O Flower of the Cherry. Be gentle, hear me, be free, be my dear wife.”

At this she flushed neck and chin, cheeks and forehead.

“My dear,” said the young man, “now you are Flower of the Cherry indeed.”

“Child,” she said, “go home and think of me no more. I am too old for such as you.”

“Old!” he said; “why, there lies not a year between us!”

“No, not a year—no year, but an eternity,” said Flower of the Cherry. “Think no more of me,” she said; but the lover thought of nothing else. His young blood was on fire. He could not eat, nor drink, nor sleep. He pined and grew pale, he wandered day and night, his heart heavy with longing. He lived in torment; weak he grew, and weaker. One night he fell fainting at the entrance of the street of the geisha. Sakura-ko came home at

dawn from a festival in a great house. There she found him. She said no word, but she bore him to his house outside Yedo, and stayed with him there full three moons. And after that time he was nursed back to ruddy health. Swiftly, swiftly, the glad days sped by for both of them.

“This is the happy time of all my life. I thank the dear gods,” said Flower of the Cherry one evening.

“My dear,” the young man bade her, “fetch hither your samisen and let me hear you sing.”

So she did. She said, “I shall sing you a song you have heard already.”

“My mother bade me spin fine thread
Out of the yellow sea sand— A hard task, a hard task. May the dear gods
speed me! My father gave me a basket of reeds; He said, ‘Draw water from the spring
And carry it a mile’— A hard task, a hard task. May the dear gods speed me!
My heart would remember, My heart must forget; Forget,
my heart, forget— A hard task, a hard task. May the dear gods speed me!”

“Sweet,” he said, “what does this song mean, and why do you sing it?”

She answered, “My lord, it means that I must leave you, and therefore do I sing it. I must forget you; you must forget me. That is my desire.”

He said, “I will never forget you, not in a thousand existences.”

She smiled, “Pray the gods you may wed a sweet wife and have children.”

He cried, “No wife but you, and no children but yours, O Flower of the Cherry.”

“The gods forbid, my dear, my dear. All the world lies between us.”

The next day she was gone. High and low the lover wandered, weeping and lamenting and seeking her both near and far. It was all in vain, for he found her not. The city of Yedo knew her no more—Sakura-ko, the beautiful dancer.

And her lover mourned many many days. Howbeit at last he was comforted, and they found for him a very sweet fair lady whom he took to wife willingly enough, and soon she bore him a son. And he was glad, for time dries all tears.

Now when the boy was five years old he sat in the gate of his father’s house. And it chanced that a wandering

nun came that way begging for alms. The servants of the house brought rice and would have put it into her begging bowl, but the child said, "Let me give."

So he did as he would.

As he filled the begging bowl and patted down the rice with a wooden spoon and laughed, the nun caught him by the sleeve and held him and looked into his eyes.

"Holy nun, why do you look at me so?" cried the child.

She said, "Because I once had a little boy like you, and I went away and left him."

"Poor little boy!" said the child.

"It was better for him, my dear, my dear—far, far better."

And when she had said this, she went her way.

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