



The Black Bowl

Green Willow And Other Japanese Fairy Tales

Japanese

Intermediate

13 min read

Long ago, in a part of the country not very remote from Kioto, the great gay city, there dwelt an honest couple. In a lonely place was their cottage, upon the outskirts of a deep wood of pine trees. Folks had it that the wood was haunted. They said it was full of deceiving foxes; they said that beneath the mossy ground the elves built their kitchens; they said that long-nosed Tengu had tea-parties in the forest thrice a month, and that the fairies' children played at hide-and-seek there every morning before seven.

Over and above all this they didn't mind saying that the honest couple were queer in their ways, that the woman was a wise woman, and that the man was a warlock—which was as may be. But sure it was that they did no harm to living soul, that they lived as poor as poor, and that they had one fair daughter. She was as neat and pretty as a princess, and her manners were very fine; but for all that she worked as hard as a boy in the rice-fields, and within doors she was the housewife indeed, for she washed and cooked and drew water. She went barefoot in a grey homespun gown, and tied her back hair with a tough wistaria tendril. Brown she was and thin, but the sweetest beggar-maid that ever made shift with a bed of dry moss and no supper.

By-and-by the good man her father dies, and the wise woman her mother sickens within the year, and soon she lies in a corner of the cottage waiting for her end, with the maid near her crying bitter tears.

“Child,” says the mother, “do you know you are as pretty as a princess?”

“Am I that?” says the maid, and goes on with her crying.

“Do you know that your manners are fine?” says the mother.

“Are they, then?” says the maid, and goes on with her crying.

“My own baby,” says the mother, “could you stop your crying a minute and listen to me?”

So the maid stopped crying and put her head close by her mother’s on the poor pillow.

“Now listen,” says the mother, “and afterwards remember. It is a bad thing for a poor girl to be pretty. If she is pretty and lonely and innocent, none but the gods will help her. They will help you, my poor child, and I have thought of a way besides. Fetch me the great black rice-bowl from the shelf.”

The girl fetched it.

“See, now, I put it on your head and all your beauty is hidden away.”

“Alack, mother,” said the poor child, “it is heavy.”

“It will save you from what is heavier to bear,” said the mother. “If you love me, promise me that you will not move it till the time comes.”

“I promise! I promise! But how shall I know when the time comes?”

“That you shall know.... And now help me outside, for the sweet morning dawns and I’ve a fancy to see the fairies’ children once again, as they run in the forest.”

So the child, having the black bowl upon her head, held her mother in her arms in a grassy place near the great trees, and presently they saw the fairies’ children threading their way between the dark trunks as they played at hide-and-seek. Their bright garments fluttered, and they laughed lightly as they went. The mother smiled to see them; before seven she died very sweetly as she smiled.

When her little store of rice was done, the maid with the wooden bowl knew well enough that she must starve

or go and find more. So first she tended her father's and mother's graves and poured water for the dead, as is meet, and recited many a holy text. Then she bound on her sandals, kilted her grey skirts to show her scarlet petticoat, tied her household gods in a blue printed handkerchief, and set out all alone to seek her fortunes, the brave girl!

For all her slenderness and pretty feet she was a rarely odd sight, and soon she was to know it. The great black bowl covered her head and shadowed her face. As she went through a village two women looked up from washing in the stream, stared and laughed.

"It's a boggart come alive," says one.

"Out upon her," cries the other, "for a shameless wench! Out upon her false modesty to roam the country thus with her head in a black bowl, as who should cry aloud to every passing man, 'Come and see what is hidden!' It is enough to make a wholesome body sick."

On went the poor maid, and sometimes the children pelted her with mud and pebbles for sport. Sometimes she was handled roughly by village louts, who scoffed and caught at her dress as she went; they even laid hands upon the bowl itself and sought to drag it from her head by force. But they only played at that game once, for the bowl stung them as fiercely as if it had been a nettle, and the bullies ran away howling.

The beggar-maiden might seek her fortune, but it was very hard to find. She might ask for work; but see, would she get it? None were wishful to employ a girl with a black bowl on her head.

At last, on a fine day when she was tired out, she sat her upon a stone and began to cry as if her heart would break. Down rolled her tears from under the black bowl. They rolled down her cheeks and reached her white chin.

A wandering ballad-singer passed that way, with his biwa slung across his back. He had a sharp eye and marked the tears upon the maid's white chin. It was all he could see of her face, and, "Oh, girl with the black bowl on your head," quoth he, "why do you sit weeping by the roadside?"

“I weep,” she answered, “because the world is hard. I am hungry and tired.... No one will give me work or pay me money.”

“Now that’s unfortunate,” said the ballad-singer, for he had a kind heart; “but I haven’t a rin of my own, or it would be yours. Indeed I am sorry for you. In the circumstances the best I can do for you is to make you a little song.” With that he whips his biwa round, thrums on it with his fingers and starts as easy as you please. “To the tears on your white chin,” he says, and sings:

“The white cherry blooms by the roadside, How black is the canopy of cloud! The wild cherry droops by the roadside, Beware of the black canopy of cloud. Hark, hear the rain, hear the rainfall From the black canopy of cloud. Alas, the wild cherry, its sweet flowers are marred, Marred are the sweet flowers, forlorn on the spray!”

“Sir, I do not understand your song,” said the girl with the bowl on her head.

“Yet it is plain enough,” said the ballad-singer, and went his way. He came to the house of a passing rich farmer. In he went, and they asked him to sing before the master of the house.

“With all the will in the world,” says the ballad-singer. “I will sing him a new song that I have just made.” So he sang of the wild cherry and the great black cloud.

When he had made an end, “Tell us the interpretation of your song,” says the master of the house.

“With all the will in the world,” quoth the ballad-singer. “The wild cherry is the face of a maiden whom I saw sitting by the wayside. She wore a great black wooden bowl upon her head, which is the great black cloud in my song, and from under it her tears flowed like rain, for I saw the drops upon her white chin. And she said that she wept for hunger, and because no one would give her work nor pay her money.”

“Now I would I might help the poor girl with the bowl on her head,” said the master of the house.

“That you may if you wish,” quoth the ballad-singer. “She sits but a stone’s throw from your gate.”

The long and short of it was that the maid was put to labour in the rich farmer’s harvest-fields. All the day long she worked in the waving rice, with her grey skirts kilted and her sleeves bound back with cords. All day long she plied the sickle, and the sun shone down upon the black bowl; but she had food to eat and good rest at

night, and was well content.

She found favour in her master's eyes, and he kept her in the fields till all the harvest was gathered in. Then he took her into his house, where there was plenty for her to do, for his wife was but sickly. Now the maiden lived well and happily as a bird, and went singing about her labours. And every night she thanked the august gods for her good fortune. Still she wore the black bowl upon her head.

At the New Year time, "Bustle, bustle," says the farmer's wife; "scrub and cook and sew; put your best foot foremost, my dear, for we must have the house look at its very neatest."

"To be sure, and with all my heart," says the girl, and she put her back into the work; "but, mistress," she says, "if I may be so bold as to ask, are we having a party, or what?"

"Indeed we are, and many of them," says the farmer's wife. "My son that is in Kioto, the great and gay, is coming home for a visit."

Presently home he comes, the handsome young man. Then the neighbours were called in, and great was the merry-making. They feasted and they danced, they jested and they sang, many a bowl of good red rice they ate, and many a cup of good saké they drank. All this time the girl, with bowl on her head, plied her work modestly in the kitchen, and well out of the way she was—the farmer's wife saw to that, good soul! All the same, one fine day the company called for more wine, and the wine was done, so the son of the house takes up the saké bottle and goes with it himself to the kitchen. What should he see there but the maiden sitting upon a pile of faggots, and fanning the kitchen fire with a split bamboo fan!

"My life, but I must see what is under that black bowl," says the handsome young man to himself. And sure enough he made it his daily care, and peeped as much as he could, which was not very much; but seemingly it was enough for him, for he thought no more of Kioto, the great and gay, but stayed at home to do his courting.

His father laughed and his mother fretted, the neighbours held up their hands, all to no purpose.

"Oh, dear, dear maiden with the wooden bowl, she shall be my bride and no other. I must and will have her," cried the impetuous young man, and very soon he fixed the wedding-day himself.

When the time came, the young maidens of the village went to array the bride. They dressed her in a fair and

costly robe of white brocade, and in trailing hakama of scarlet silk, and on her shoulders they hung a cloak of blue and purple and gold. They chattered, but as for the bride she said never a word. She was sad because she brought her bridegroom nothing, and because his parents were sore at his choice of a beggar-maid. She said nothing, but the tears glistened on her white chin.

“Now off with the ugly old bowl,” cried the maidens; “it is time to dress the bride’s hair and to do it with golden combs.” So they laid hands to the bowl and would have lifted it away, but they could not move it.

“Try again,” they said, and tugged at it with all their might. But it would not stir.

“There’s witchcraft in it,” they said; “try a third time.” They tried a third time, and still the bowl stuck fast, but it gave out fearsome moans and cries.

“Ah! Let be, let be for pity’s sake,” said the poor bride, “for you make my head ache.”

They were forced to lead her as she was to the bridegroom’s presence.

“My dear, I am not afraid of the wooden bowl,” said the young man.

So they poured the saké from the silver flagon, and from the silver cup the two of them drank the mystic “Three Times Three” that made them man and wife.

Then the black bowl burst asunder with a loud noise, and fell to the ground in a thousand pieces. With it fell a shower of silver and gold, and pearls and rubies and emeralds, and every jewel of price. Great was the astonishment of the company as they gazed upon a dowry that for a princess would have been rich and rare.

But the bridegroom looked into the bride’s face. “My dear,” he said, “there are no jewels that shine like your eyes.”

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