



The Espousal of the Rat's Daughter

Green Willow And Other Japanese Fairy Tales

Japanese

*Advanced
5 min read*

Mr. Nedzumi, the Rat, was an important personage in the hamlet where he lived—at least he was so in his own and his wife's estimation. This was in part, of course, due to the long line of ancestors from whom he was descended, and to their intimate association with the gods of Good Fortune. For, be it remembered, his ancestry went back into a remote past, in fact as far as time itself; for had not one of his race been selected as the first animal in the cycle of the hours, precedence being even given him over the dragon, the tiger, and the horse? As to his intimacy with the gods, had not one of his forebears been the chosen companion of the great Daikoku, the most revered and the most beneficent of the gods of Good Fortune?

Mr. Rat was well-to-do in life. His home had for generations been established in a snug, warm and cosy bank, hard by one of the most fertile rice-fields on the country-side, where crops never failed, and where in spring he could nibble his fill of the young green shoots, and in autumn gather into his storerooms supplies of the ripened grain sufficient for all his wants during the coming winter.

For his needs were not great. Entertainment cost him but little, and, unlike his fellows, he had the smallest of families, in fact a family of one only.

But, as regards that one, quality more than compensated for quantity, for it consisted of a daughter, of a

beauty unsurpassed in the whole province. He himself had been the object of envy in his married life, for he had had the good fortune to marry into a family of a very select piebald breed, which seldom condescended to mix its blood with the ordinary self-coloured tribe, and now his daughter had been born a peerless white, and had received the name of Yuki, owing to her resemblance to pure snow.

It is little wonder, then, that as she grew up beautiful in form and feature, her father's ambitions were fired, and that he aspired to marry her to the highest in the land.

As it happened, the hamlet where he lived was not very far removed from a celebrated temple, and Mr. Rat, having been brought up in the odour of sanctity, had all his life long been accustomed to make pilgrimages to the great shrine. There he had formed the acquaintance of an old priest, who was good enough to provide for him out of the temple offerings in return for gossip as to the doings of his village, which happened to be that in which the priest had been born and bred. To him the rat had often unburdened his mind, and the old priest had come to see his friend's self-importance and his little weaknesses, and had in vain impressed upon him the virtues of humility.

Now Mr. Rat could find no one amongst his village companions to inform him where to attain what had now become an insatiable desire, namely, a fine marriage for his daughter. So he turned to the temple custodian for advice, and one summer morn found him hammering on the gong which summoned his friend the priest.

"Welcome, Mr. Rat; to what am I indebted for your visit?" said the old priest, for experience had shown him that his friend seldom came so far afield unless he had some request to make.

Thereupon Mr. Rat unburdened himself of all that was in his mind, of his aspiration, and of the difficulty he had in ascertaining in what manner he could obtain it.

Nor did the priest immediately satisfy him, for he said the matter was a difficult one, and would require much consideration. However, on the third day the oracle gave answer as follows: "There is no doubt that apart from the gods there is no one so powerful, or who exercises so beneficent a rule over us, as His Majesty the Sun. Had I a daughter, and did I aspire to such heights for her as you do, I should make my suit to him, and I should take the opportunity of so doing when he comes down to our earth at sundown, for then it is that he decks himself in his most gorgeous apparel; moreover, he is more readily approached when his day's work is done, and he is about to take his well-earned rest. Were I you I would lose no time, but present myself in company with your honourable wife and daughter to him this very evening at the end of the great Cryptomeria Avenue at the hour

when he especially honours it by flooding it with his beams.”

“A thousand thanks,” said Mr. Rat. “No time is to be lost if I am to get my folk together at the time and place you mention.”

“Good fortune to you,” said the priest; “may I hail you the next time I see you as father-in-law to His Majesty the Sun.”

At the appointed hour parents and daughter were to be seen in the avenue, robed in their finest clothes; and as the sun came earthwards and his rays illumined the gloom under the great pines, Mr. Rat, noway abashed, addressed His Majesty and at once informed him of his desire.

His Majesty, evidently considering that one business personage addressing another should not waste time in beating about the bush, replied as follows: “I am extremely beholden to you for your kind intention of allowing me to wed your honourable and beautiful daughter, O Yuki San, but may I ask your reason for selecting me to be your honourable son-in-law?”

To this Mr. Rat replied, “We have determined to marry our daughter to whoever is the most powerful personage in the world, and that is why we desire to offer her to you in marriage.”

“Yes,” said His Majesty, “you are certainly not without reason in imagining me to be the most august and powerful person in the world; but, unfortunately, it has been my misfortune to discover that there is one other even more powerful than myself, against whose plottings I have no power. It is to him that you should very certainly marry your daughter.”

“And may we honourably ask you who that potentate may be?” said Mr. Rat.

“Certainly,” rejoined the Sun. “It is the Cloud. Oftentimes when I have set myself to illumine the world he comes across my path and covers my face so that my subjects may not see me, and so long as he does this I am altogether in his power. If, therefore, it is the most powerful personage in the world whom you seek for your daughter, the honourable O Yuki San, you must bestow her on no one else than the Cloud.”

It required little consideration for both father and mother to see the wisdom of the Sun’s advice, and upon his suggestion they determined to wait on the Cloud at the very earliest opportunity, and at an hour before he rose from his bed, which he usually made on the slopes of a mountain some leagues removed from their village. So

they set out, and a long journey they had, so long that Mr. Rat decided that if he was to present his daughter when she was looking her best, the journey must not be hurried. Consequently, instead of arriving at early dawn, it was full afternoon when they neared the summit where the Cloud was apparently wrapped in slumber. But he roused himself as he saw the family approaching, and bade them welcome in so urbane a manner that the Rat at once proceeded to lay his request before him.

To this the Cloud answered, "I am indeed honoured by your condescension in proposing that I should marry your beautiful daughter, O Yuki San. It is quite true, as His August Majesty the Sun says, that when I so desire I have the strength to stay him from exercising his power upon his subjects, and I should much esteem the privilege of wedding your daughter. But as you would single out for that honour the most powerful person in the world, you must seek out His Majesty the Wind, against whom I have no strength, for as soon as he competes with me for supremacy I must fain fly away to the ends of the earth."

"You surprise me," said the Rat, "but I take your word for it. I would, therefore, ask you whether His Majesty the Wind will be this way shortly, and where I may best meet him."

"I am afraid I cannot tell you at the moment when he is likely to be this way. He usually announces his coming by harrying some of my subjects who act as my outposts, but, as you see, they are now all resting quietly. His Majesty is at this moment, I believe, holding a court far out in the Eastern Seas. Were I you I would go down to the seashore and await his coming. He is often somewhat inclined to be short-tempered by the time he gets up into these mountainous parts, owing to the obstructions he has met with on his journey, and he will have had few of these vexatious annoyances during his ride over the sea."

Now, although from the slopes of the mountain the sea looked not very far distant, it was in reality a long way for a delicately-nurtured young lady such as Yuki, and every mile of the journey that she had to traverse increased her querulousness. Her father had often boasted of the journeys that he had taken down to the coast, free of cost, concealed in a truck-load of rice, and she would take no excuses that there was no railway to the point at which they were to await His Highness the Wind, although had there been it would never have done for a party engaged on such an embassy to ride in a railway truck. Nor was her humour improved by the time they had to wait in the very second-rate accommodation afforded by a fishing hamlet, as none of them were accustomed to a fish fare. But after many days there were signs that the great personage was arriving, and they watched with some trepidation his passage over the sea, although when, in due time, he neared the shore they could hardly credit the Cloud's assurance as to his strength, for he seemed the personification of all that was

gentle; and Madame Rat at once interposed the remark that you should never judge a person's character by what you hear, and that the Cloud evidently owed the Wind a grudge.

So the Rat at once unburdened himself to the Wind as it came over the water towards him, making its face ripple with smiles. And the Wind itself was in the fairest good humour and addressed the Rat as follows: "Mr. Cloud is a flatterer, and knows full well that I have no power against him when he really comes up against me in one of his thunderous moods. To call me the most powerful person in the world is nonsense. Where do you come from? Why, in that very village there is one stronger than me, namely, the high wall that fences in the house of your good neighbour. If your daughter must fain marry the strongest thing in the world, wed her to the wall. You will find him a very stalwart spouse. I wish you good day. I am sorry I cannot offer you a seat in my chariot, but I am not going in the direction of that wall to-day, else I should have had much pleasure in introducing your honourable self to my powerful antagonist."

By this time the party was getting much disheartened, and the stress of the journey and the chagrin of so many disappointments were beginning to tell on O Yuki San's beauty. But Mr. Rat said there was nothing for it but to return home; he knew the wall in question very well, but had no idea it stood so high in the world's estimation—he had always thought of it as somewhat of a dullard.

So they trudged homewards, and it was weary work, for the Cloud had hidden the Sun, and the Wind had fretted the Cloud, who showed his ill-humour by discharging a surplusage of moisture he had in his pocket, and they approached their home wet through, bedraggled and worn out. As luck would have it, just as they gained the wall which the wind had singled out for its power, a heavier downpour than ever came on and they were glad to take shelter under the lee of the wall. Now Mr. Wall had always been known for his inquisitive nature, which, it is said, arose from one side of his face never being able to see what was going on on the other; and so hearing his leeward side addressing Mr. Rat, and ascertaining that he had come from the sea, the windward side at once asked whether he had any tidings of that scoundrel the Wind, who was always coming and chafing his complexion.

"Why," said Mr. Rat, "we met him but recently, and he desired to be remembered to you, who, he said, was the strongest person in the world."

"I the strongest! It shows his ignorance. Why, only yesterday your nephew, the big brown rat, because he would not be at the trouble of going round, must needs gnaw a hole through me. The strongest thing in the

world! Why, next time the wind comes this way he'll rush through the hole and be telling your nephew that he's the strongest person in the world."

At this moment the rain stopped, the clouds rolled by, and the sun shone out, and Mr. and Mrs. Rat went home congratulating themselves that they had not had to demean themselves by proposing their daughter in marriage to a neighbour with such a false character.

And a month afterwards O Yuki San expressed her determination to marry her cousin, and her parents were fain to give their consent, for had he not proved himself to be the most powerful person in the world?

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