

The Fire Quest

Green Willow And Other Japanese Fairy Tales

Japanese

Intermediate
4 min read

The Wise Poet sat reading by the light of his taper. It was a night of the seventh month. The cicada sang in the flower of the pomegranate, the frog sang by the pond. The moon was out and all the stars, the air was heavy and sweet-scented. But the Poet was not happy, for moths came by the score to the light of his taper; not moths only, but cockchafers and dragon-flies with their wings rainbow-tinted. One and all they came upon the Fire Quest; one and all they burned their bright wings in the flame and so died. And the Poet was grieved.

“Little harmless children of the night,” he said, “why will you still fly upon the Fire Quest? Never, never can you attain, yet you strive and die. Foolish ones, have you never heard the story of the Firefly Queen?”

The moths and the cockchafers and the dragon-flies fluttered about the taper and paid him no heed.

“They have never heard it,” said the Poet; “yet it is old enough. Listen:

“The Firefly Queen was the brightest and most beautiful of small things that fly. She dwelt in the heart of a rosy lotus. The lotus grew on a still lake, and it swayed to and fro upon the lake’s bosom while the Firefly Queen slept within. It was like the reflection of a star in the water.

“You must know, oh, little children of the night, that the Firefly Queen had many suitors. Moths and cockchafers and dragon-flies innumerable flew to the lotus on the lake. And their hearts were filled with passionate love. ‘Have pity, have pity,’ they cried, ‘Queen of the Fireflies, Bright Light of the Lake.’ But the

Firefly Queen sat and smiled and shone. It seemed that she was not sensible of the incense of love that arose about her.

“At last she said, ‘Oh, you lovers, one and all, what make you here idly, cumbering my lotus house? Prove your love, if you love me indeed. Go, you lovers, and bring me fire, and then I will answer.’

“Then, oh, little children of the night, there was a swift whirr of wings, for the moths and the cockchafers and the dragon-flies innumerable swiftly departed upon the Fire Quest. But the Firefly Queen laughed. Afterwards I will tell you the reason of her laughter.

“So the lovers flew here and there in the still night, taking with them their desire. They found lighted lattices ajar and entered forthwith. In one chamber there was a girl who took a love-letter from her pillow and read it in tears, by the light of a taper. In another a woman sat holding the light close to a mirror, where she looked and painted her face. A great white moth put out the trembling candle-flame with his wings.

“‘Alack! I am afraid,’ shrieked the woman; ‘the horrible dark!’

“In another place there lay a man dying. He said, ‘For pity’s sake light me the lamp, for the black night falls.’

“‘We have lighted it,’ they said, ‘long since. It is close beside you, and a legion of moths and dragon-flies flutter about it.’

“‘I cannot see anything at all,’ murmured the man.

“But those that flew on the Fire Quest burnt their frail wings in the fire. In the morning they lay dead by the hundred and were swept away and forgotten.

“The Firefly Queen was safe in her lotus bower with her beloved, who was as bright as she, for he was a great lord of the Fireflies. No need had he to go upon the Fire Quest. He carried the living flame beneath his wings.

“Thus the Firefly Queen deceived her lovers, and therefore she laughed when she sent them from her on a vain adventure.”

“Be not deceived,” cried the Wise Poet, “oh, little children of the night. The Firefly Queen is always the same. Give over the Fire Quest.”

But the moths and the cockchafers and the dragon-flies paid no heed to the words of the Wise Poet. Still they

fluttered about his taper, and they burnt their bright wings in the flame and so died.

Presently the Poet blew out the light. "I must needs sit in the dark," he said; "it is the only way."

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