



The Maiden of Unai

Green Willow And Other Japanese Fairy Tales

Japanese

Intermediate
11 min read

The Maiden of Unai was fair as an earthly deity, but the eyes of man might not behold her. She dwelt in a hidden place in her father's house, and of what cheer she made the live-long day not a soul could tell, but her father who kept watch, and her mother who kept ward, and her ancient nurse who tended her. The cause was this.

When the maid was about seven years old, with her black hair loose and hanging to her shoulder, an ancient man, a traveller, came, footsore and weary, to her father's house. He was made welcome, served with rice and with tea, whilst the master of the house sat by, and the mistress, to do him honour. Meanwhile the little maid was here and there, catching at her mother's sleeve, pattering with bare feet over the mats, or bouncing a great green and scarlet ball in a corner. And the stranger lifted his eyes and marked the child.

After he had eaten, he called for a bowl of clear water, and taking from his wallet a handful of fine silver sand he let it slip through his fingers and it sank to the bottom of the bowl. In a little he spoke.

"My lord," he said to the master of the house, "I was hungry and weary, and you have fed me and refreshed me. I am a poor man and it is hard for me to show my gratitude. Now I am a soothsayer by profession, very far-famed for the skill of my divination. Therefore, in return for your kindness I have looked into the future of your child. Will you hear her destiny?"

The child knelt in a corner of the room bouncing her green and scarlet ball.

The master of the house bade the soothsayer speak on.

This one looked down into the bowl of water where the sand was, and said: "The Maiden of Unai shall grow up fairer than the children of men. Her beauty shall shine as the beauty of an earthly deity. Every man who looks upon her shall pine with love and longing, and when she is fifteen years old there shall die for her sake a mighty hero from near, and a valiant hero from afar. And there shall be sorrow and mourning because of her, loud and grievous, so that the sound of it shall reach High Heaven and offend the peace of the gods."

The master of the house said, "Is this a true divination?"

"Indeed, my lord," said the soothsayer, "it is too true." And with that he bound on his sandals, and taking his staff and his great hat of rice-straw, he spoke no other word, but went his ways; neither was he any more seen nor heard tell of upon that country-side.

And the child knelt in a corner of the room, bouncing her green and scarlet ball.

The father and mother took counsel.

The mother wept, but she said, "Let be, for who can alter the pattern set up upon the looms of the weaving women of Heaven?" But the father cried, "I will fight. I will avert the portent; the thing shall not come to pass. Who am I that I should give credence to a dog of a soothsayer who lies in his teeth?" And though his wife shook her head and moaned, he gave her counsel no heed, for he was a man.

So they hid the child in a secret chamber, where an old wise woman tended her, fed her, bathed her, combed her hair, taught her to make songs and to sing, to dance so that her feet moved like rosy butterflies over the white mats, or to sit at a frame with a wonder of needlework stretched upon it, drawing the needle and the silken thread hour after hour.

For eight years the maid set eyes upon no human being save her father, her mother, and her nurse, these three only. All the day she spent in her distant chamber, far removed from the sights and the sounds of the world. Only in the night she came forth into her father's garden, when the moon shone and the birds slept and the flowers had no colour. And with every season that passed the maid grew more beautiful. Her hair hung down to her knees and was black as a thundercloud. Her forehead was the plum blossom, her cheek the wild cherry,

and her mouth the flower of the pomegranate. At fifteen years old she was the loveliest thing that ever saw the light, and the sun was sick with jealousy because only the moon might shine upon her.

In spite of all, the fame of her beauty became known, and because she was kept so guarded men thought of her the more, and because she might not be seen men longed to behold her. And because of the mystery and the maiden, gallants and warriors and men of note came from far and near and flocked to the house of Unai; and they made a hedge about it with themselves and their bright swords; and they swore that they would not leave the place till they had sight of the maid, and this they would have either by favour or by force.

Then the master of the house did even as he must, and he sent her mother to bring the maid down. So the mother went, taking with her a robe of grey silk and a great girdle of brocade, green and gold; and she found the maid, her daughter, sitting in her secret chamber singing.

The maid sang thus:

“Nothing has changed since the time of the gods, Neither the running of water nor the way of love.”

And the mother was astonished and said, “What manner of song is this, and where heard you of such a thing as love?”

And she answered, “I have read of it in a book.”

Then they took her, her mother and the wise woman, and they tied her hair and pinned it high upon her head with gold and coral pins, and held it with a great lacquer comb. She said, “How heavy it is!”

While they dressed her in the robe of grey silk, and tied the girdle of brocade, first she shuddered and said, “I am cold.” Then they would have thrown over her a mantle broided with plum blossom and pine, but she would have none of it, saying, “No, no, I burn.”

They painted her lips with beni, and when she saw it she murmured, “Alack, there is blood upon my lips!” But they led her down and out on to a balcony, where the men who were assembled might see her. She was fairer than the children of men, and her beauty shone like the beauty of an earthly deity. And all the warriors who were there looked upon her and were silent, for already they were faint with love and longing. And the maid stood with eyes cast down, and slowly the hot blush rose to her cheek and she was lovelier than before.

Three or four score men of name sought her hand, being distraught for love of her, and amongst them were

two braver and nobler than the rest. The one came from afar and was the champion of Chinu, and the other came from near, the champion of Unai. They were young, strong, and black-haired. They were equal in years, in strength, and in valour. Both were girded with great swords, and full-charged quivers were upon their backs, and six-foot bows of white wood were in their hands. Together they stood beneath the balcony of the maiden of Unai, like twin brothers in beauty and attainments. Together they cried aloud with passionate voices, telling of their eternal love, and bidding the maiden choose between them.

She lifted up her eyes and looked fixedly upon them, but spoke no word.

Then they drew their swords and made as if to fight the matter out there and then; but the maid's father spoke: "Put up your swords, fair sirs; I have devised a better way for the decision of this thing. If it please you, enter my house."

Now part of the house of Unai was built out upon a platform over the river that flowed past. It was the fifth month and the wistaria was in blossom upon the trellis, and hung downwards nearly into the water. The river was swift and deep. Here the master of the house brought the champions, and the maiden was there also. But the mother and the wise woman stood a little way apart, and hid their faces in their long sleeves. Presently a white water-bird dropped from the blue sky, and rocked to and fro upon the water of the river.

"Now, champions," cried the father of the maiden, "draw me your bows and let fly each of you an arrow at yonder white bird that floats upon the river. He that shall strike the bird and prove himself to be the better marksman, he shall wed my daughter, the peerless Maiden of Unai."

Then immediately the two champions drew their bows of white wood and let fly each of them an arrow. Each arrow sped swift; each arrow struck true. The champion of Chinu struck the water-bird in the head, but the champion of Unai struck her in the tail so that the white feathers were scattered. Then the champions cried, "Enough of this trifling. There is but one way." And again their bright swords leapt from their scabbards.

But the maid stood trembling, holding the gnarled stem of the wistaria in her hands. She trembled and shook the branches so that the frail flowers fell about her. "My lords, my lords," she cried, "oh, brave and beautiful heroes of fame, it is not meet that one of you should die for such as I am. I honour you; I love you both—therefore farewell." With that, still holding to the wistaria, she swung herself clear of the balcony and dropped into the deep and swift-flowing river. "Weep not," she cried, "for no woman dies to-day. It is but a child that is lost." And so she sank.

Down sprang the champion of Chinu into the flood, and in the same instant down sprang the champion of Unai. Alack, they were heavy with the arms that they bore, and they sank and were entangled in the long water weeds. And so the three of them were drowned.

But at night when the moon shone, the pale dead rose, floating to the surface of the water. The champion of Unai held the maiden's right hand in his own, but the champion of Chinu lay with his head against the maiden's heart, bound close to her by a tress of her long hair; and as he lay he smiled.

The three corpses they lifted from the water, and laid them together upon a bier of fair white wood, and over them they strewed herbs and sweet flowers, and laid a veil over their faces of fine white silk. And they lighted fires and burned incense. Gallants and warriors and men of note who loved the maiden, alive or dead, stood about her bier and made a hedge with themselves and their bright swords. And there was sorrow and mourning, loud and grievous, so that the sound of it reached High Heaven and offended the peace of the gods.

A grave was dug wide and deep, and the three were buried therein. The maid they laid in the middle, and the two champions upon either side. Idzumo was the native place of the champion of Chinu, so they brought earth from thence in a junk, and with this earth they covered him.

So the maid slept there in the grave, the champions faithfully guarding her, for they had buried with them their bows of white wood and their good armour and their spears and their bright swords. Nothing was forgotten that is needful for adventure in the Land of Yomi.

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