

The Mallet

Green Willow And Other Japanese Fairy Tales

Japanese

Easy
15 min read

There were once two farmer men who were brothers. Both of them worked hard in seed-time and in harvest-time. They stood knee-deep in water to plant out the young rice, bending their backs a thousand times an hour; they wielded the sickle when the hot sun shone; when the rain poured down in torrents, there they were still at their digging or such like, huddled up in their rice-straw rain coats, for in the sweat of their brows did they eat their bread.

The elder of the two brothers was called Cho. For all he laboured so hard he was passing rich. From a boy he had had a saving way with him, and had put by a mint of money. He had a big farm, too, and not a year but that he did well, what with his rice, and his silk-worms, and his granaries and storehouses. But there was nothing to show for all this, if it will be believed. He was a mean, sour man with not so much as a “good day” and a cup of tea for a wayfarer, or a cake of cold rice for a beggar man. His children whimpered when he came near them, and his wife was much to be pitied.

The younger of the two brothers was called Kanè. For all he laboured so hard he was as poor as a church mouse. Bad was his luck, his silk-worms died, and his rice would not flourish. In spite of this he was a merry fellow, a bachelor who loved a song and an honest cup of saké. His roof, his pipe, his meagre supper, all these he would share, very gladly, with the first-comer. He had the nimblest tongue for a comical joke, and the kindest heart in the world. But it is a true thing, though it is a pity all the same, that a man cannot live on love and laughter, and presently Kanè was in a bad way.

“There’s nothing for it,” he says, “but to pocket my pride” (for he had some) “and go and see what my brother Cho will do for me, and I’m greatly mistaken if it will be much.”

So he borrows some clothes from a friend for the visit, and sets off in very neat hakama, looking quite the gentleman, and singing a song to keep his heart up.

He sees his brother standing outside his house, and the first minute he thinks he is seeing a boggart, Cho is in such ragged gear. But presently he sings out, “You’re early, Cho.”

“You’re early, Kanè,” says Cho.

“May I come in and talk a bit?” asks Kanè.

“Yes,” says Cho, “you can; but you won’t find anything to eat at this time of day, nor yet to drink, so let disappointments be avoided.”

“Very well,” says Kanè; “as it happens, it’s not food I’ve come for.”

When they were inside the house and sitting on the mats, Cho says, “That’s a fine suit of clothes you’ve got on you, Kanè. You must be doing well. It’s not me that can afford to go about the muddy roads dressed up like a prince. Times are bad, very bad.”

In spite of this not being a good beginning, Kanè plucks up his courage and laughs. And presently he says:

“Look here, brother. These are borrowed clothes, my own will hardly hold together. My rice crop was ruined, and my silk-worms are dead. I have not a rin to buy rice seed or new worms. I am at my wits’ end, and I have come to you begging, so now you have it. For the sake of the mother that bore us both, give me a handful of seed and a few silk-worms’ eggs.”

At this Cho made as if he would faint with astonishment and dismay.

“Alack! Alack!” he says. “I am a poor man, a very poor man. Must I rob my wife and my miserable children?” And thus he bewailed himself and talked for half an hour.

But to make a long story short, Cho says that out of filial piety, and because of the blessed mother of them both, he must make shift to give Kanè the silk-worms’ eggs and the rice. So he gets a handful of dead eggs and a handful of musty and mouldy rice. “These are no good to man or beast,” says the old fox to himself, and he laughs. But to his own blood-brother he says, “Here, Kanè. It’s the best silk-worms’ eggs I am giving you, and the best rice of all my poor store, and I cannot afford it at all; and may the gods forgive me for robbing my poor wife and my children.”

Kanè thanks his brother with all his heart for his great generosity, and bows his head to the mats three times. Then off he goes, with the silk-worms’ eggs and the rice in his sleeve, skipping and jumping with joy, for he thought that his luck had turned at last. But in the muddy parts of the road he was careful to hold up his hakama, for they were borrowed.

When he reached home he gathered great store of green mulberry leaves. This was for the silk-worms that were going to be hatched out of the dead eggs. And he sat down and waited for the silk-worms to come. And come they did, too, and that was very strange, because the eggs were dead eggs for sure. The silk-worms were a lively lot; they ate the mulberry leaves in a twinkling, and lost no time at all, but began to wind themselves into cocoons that minute. Then Kanè was the happy man. He went out and told his good fortune to all the neighbours. This was where he made his mistake. And he found a peddler man who did his rounds in those parts, and gave him a message to take to his brother Cho, with his compliments and respectful thanks, that the silk-worms were doing uncommonly well. This was where he made a bigger mistake. It was a pity he could not let well alone.

When Cho heard of his brother’s luck he was not pleased. Pretty soon he tied on his straw sandals and was off

to Kanè's farm. Kanè was out when he got there, but Cho did not care for that. He went to have a look at the silk-worms. And when he saw how they were beginning to spin themselves into cocoons, as neat as you please, he took a sharp knife and cut every one of them in two. Then he went away home, the bad man! When Kanè came to look after his silk-worms he could not help thinking they looked a bit queer. He scratches his head and he says, "It almost appears as though each of them has been cut in half. They seem dead," he says. Then out he goes and gathers a great lot of mulberry leaves. And all those half silk-worms set to and ate up the mulberry leaves, and after that there were just twice as many silk-worms spinning away as there were before. And that was very strange, because the silk-worms were dead for sure.

When Cho heard of this he goes and chops his own silk-worms in two with a sharp knife; but he gained nothing by that, for the silk-worms never moved again, but stayed as dead as dead, and his wife had to throw them away next morning.

After this Kanè sowed the rice seed that he had from his brother, and when the young rice came up as green as you please he planted it out with care, and it flourished wonderfully, and soon the rice was formed in the ear.

One day an immense flight of swallows came and settled on Kanè's rice-field.

"Arah! Arah!" Kanè shouted. He clapped his hands and beat about with a bamboo stick. So the swallows flew away. In two minutes back they came.

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When he had scared them away for the ninth time, Kanè takes his tenegui and wipes his face. "This grows into a habit," he says. But in two minutes back came the swallows for the tenth time. "Arah! Arah!" Kanè shouted, and he chased them over hill and dale, hedge and ditch, rice-field and mulberry-field, till at last they flew away from his sight, and he found himself in a mossy dell shaded by spreading pine trees. Being very tired with running he lies down his full length upon the moss, and presently falls fast asleep and snoring.

The next thing was that he dreamed. He thought he saw a troop of children come to the mossy glade, for in his dream he remembered very well where he was. The children fluttered here and there among the pine-trees'

trunks. They were as pretty as flowers or butterflies. One and all of them had dancing bare feet; their hair hung down, long, loose and black; their skins were white like the plum blossom.

“For good or for evil,” says Kanè to himself, “I have seen the fairies’ children.”

The children made an end of their dancing, and sat them upon the ground in a ring. “Leader! Leader!” they cried. “Fetch us the mallet.” Then there rose up a beautiful boy, about fourteen or fifteen years old, the eldest and the tallest there. He lifted a mossy stone quite close to Kanè’s head. Underneath was a plain little mallet of white wood. The boy took it up and went and stood within the circle of children. He laughed and cried, “Now what will you have?”

“A kite, a kite,” calls out one of the children.

The boy shakes the mallet, and lo and behold he shakes a kite out of it!—a great kite with a tail to it, and a good ball of twine as well.

“Now what else?” asks the boy.

“Battledore and shuttlecock for me,” says a little girl.

And sure enough there they are, a battledore of the best, and twenty shuttlecocks, meetly feathered and gilded.

“Now what else?” says the boy.

“A lot of sweets.”

“Greedy!” says the boy, but he shakes the mallet, and there are the sweets.

“A red crêpe frock and a brocade obi.”

“Miss Vanity!” says the boy, but he shakes all this gravely out of the mallet.

“Books, story books.”

“That’s better,” says the boy, and out come the books by the dozen and score, all open to show the lovely pictures.

Now, when the children had their hearts’ desires, the leader put away the mallet beneath its mossy stone, and

after they had played for some time they became tired; their bright attires melted away into the gloom of the wood, and their pretty voices grew distant and then were heard no more. It was very still.

Kanè awoke, good man, and found the sun set and darkness beginning to fall. There was the mossy stone right under his hand. He lifted it, and there was the mallet.

“Now,” said Kanè, taking it up, “begging the pardon of the fairies’ children, I’ll make bold to borrow that mallet.” So he took it home in his sleeve and spent a pleasant evening shaking gold pieces out of it, and saké, and new clothes, and farmers’ tools, and musical instruments, and who knows what all!

It is not hard to believe that pretty soon he became the richest and jolliest farmer in all that country-side. Sleek and fat he grew, and his heart was bigger and kinder than ever.

But what like was Cho’s heart when he got wind of all this? Ay, there’s the question. Cho turned green with envy, as green as grass. “I’ll have a fairy mallet, too,” he says, “and be rich for nothing. Why should that idiot spendthrift Kanè have all the good fortune?” So he goes and begs rice from his brother, which his brother gives him very willingly, a good sackful. And he waits for it to ripen, quite wild with impatience. It ripens sure enough, and sure enough a flight of swallows comes and settles upon the good grain in the ear.

“Arah! Arah!” shouted Cho, clapping his hands and laughing aloud for joy. The swallows flew away, and Cho was after them. He chased them over hill and dale, hedge and ditch, rice-field and mulberry-field, till at last they flew away from his sight, and he found himself in a mossy dell shaded by spreading pine-trees. Cho looks about him.

“This should be the place,” says he. So he lies down and waits with one wily eye shut and one wily eye open.

Presently who should trip into the dell but the fairies’ children! Very fresh they were as they moved among the pine-tree trunks.

“Leader! Leader! Fetch us the mallet,” they cried. Up stepped the leader and lifted away the mossy stone. And behold there was no mallet there!

Now the fairies’ children became very angry. They stamped their little feet, and cried and rushed wildly to and fro, and were beside themselves altogether because the mallet was gone.

“See,” cried the leader at last, “see this ugly old farmer man; he must have taken our mallet. Let us pull his nose

for him.”

With a shrill scream the fairies’ children set upon Cho. They pinched him, and pulled him, and buffeted him, and set their sharp teeth in his flesh till he yelled in agony. Worst of all, they laid hold of his nose and pulled it. Long it grew, and longer. It reached his waist. It reached his feet.

Lord, how they laughed, the fairies’ children! Then they scampered away like fallen leaves before the wind.

Cho sighed, and he groaned, and he cursed, and he swore, but for all that his nose was not an inch shorter. So, sad and sorry, he gathered it up in his two hands and went to Kanè’s house.

“Kanè, I am very sick,” says he.

“Indeed, so I see,” says Kanè, “a terrible sickness; and how did you catch it?” he says. And so kind he was that he never laughed at Cho’s nose, nor yet he never smiled, but there were tears in his eyes at his brother’s misfortunes. Then Cho’s heart melted and he told his brother all the tale, and he never kept back how mean he had been about the dead silk-worms’ eggs, and about the other things that have been told of. And he asked Kanè to forgive him and to help him.

“Wait you still a minute,” says Kanè.

He goes to his chest, and he brings out the mallet. And he rubs it very gently up and down Cho’s long nose, and sure enough it shortened up very quickly. In two minutes it was a natural size. Cho danced for joy.

Kanè looks at him and says, “If I were you, I’d just go home and try to be different.”

When Cho had gone, Kanè sat still and thought for a long time. When the moon rose that night he went out and took the mallet with him. He came to the mossy dell that was shaded with spreading pine trees, and he laid the mallet in its old place under the stone.

“I’m the last man in the world,” he said, “to be unfriendly to the fairies’ children.”

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