



The Sea King and the Magic Jewels

Green Willow And Other Japanese Fairy Tales

Japanese

Intermediate

17 min read

This is a tale beloved by the children of Japan, and by the old folk—a tale of magical jewels and a visit to the Sea King’s palace.

Prince Rice-Ear-Ruddy-Plenty loved a beautiful and royal maiden, and made her his bride. And the lady was called Princess Blossoming-Brightly-as-the-Flowers-of-the-Trees, so sweetly fair was she. But her father was augustly wrath at her betrothal, for his Augustness, Prince Rice-Ear-Ruddy-Plenty, had put aside her elder sister, the Princess of the Rocks (and, indeed, this lady was not fair), for he loved only Princess Blossoming-Brightly. So the old King said, “Because of this, the offspring of these heavenly deities shall be frail, fading and falling like the flowers of the trees.” So it is. At this day, the lives of their Augustnesses, the Heavenly Sovereigns, are not long.

Howbeit, in the fullness of time, the lady, Blossoming-Brightly-as-the-Flowers-of-the-Trees, bore two lovely men children, and called the elder Fire Flash and the younger Fire Fade.

Prince Fire Flash was a fisherman, who got his luck upon the wide sea, and ran upon the shore with his august

garments girded. And again, he tarried all the night in his boat, upon the high wave-crests. And he caught things broad of fin and things narrow of fin, and he was a deity of the water weeds and of the waters and of the fishes of the sea.

But Prince Fire Fade was a hunter, who got his luck upon the mountains and in the forest, who bound sandals fast upon his feet, and bore a bow and heavenly-feathered arrows. And he caught things rough of hair and things soft of hair, and he knew the trail of the badger and the wild cherry's time of flowering. For he was a deity of the woods.

Now Prince Fire Fade spoke to his elder brother, Prince Fire Flash, and said, "Brother, I am aweary of the green hills. Therefore let us now exchange our luck. Give me thy rod and I will go to the cool waters. Thou mayest take my great bow and all my heavenly-feathered arrows and try the mountains, where, trust me, thou shalt see many strange and beautiful things, unknown to thee before."

But Prince Fire Flash answered, "Not so ... not so."

And again, after not many days were past, Prince Fire Fade came and sighed, "I am aweary of the green hills ... the fair waters call me. Woe to be a younger brother!" And when Prince Fire Flash took no heed of him, but angled with his rod, day and night, and caught things broad of fin and things narrow of fin, Prince Fire Fade drooped with desire, and let his long hair fall untended upon his shoulders. And he murmured, "Oh, to try my luck upon the sea!" till at last Prince Fire Flash, his elder brother, gave him the rod for very weariness, and betook himself to the mountains. And all day he hunted, and let fly the heavenly-feathered arrows; but rough of hair or soft of hair, never a thing did he catch. And he cried, "Fool, fool, to barter the heavenly luck of the gods!" So he returned.

And his Augustness, Prince Fire Fade, took the luck of the sea, and angled in sunshine and in gloom; but broad of fin or narrow of fin, never a fish did he catch. And, moreover, he lost his brother's fish-hook in the sea. So he hung his head, and returned.

And Prince Fire Flash said, "Each to his own, the hunter to the mountain, and the fisherman to the sea ... for thou and I have brought nothing home, and this night we sleep hungry. We may not barter the luck of the gods. And now, where is my fish-hook?"

So Prince Fire Fade replied, saying softly, "Sweet brother, be not angry ... but, toiling all day with thy fish-hook, broad of fin or narrow of fin, not a fish did I catch; and, at the last, I lost thy fish-hook in the sea."

At this his Highness, Prince Fire Flash, flew into a great rage, and stamping his feet, required the fish-hook of his brother.

And Prince Fire Fade made answer, "Sweet brother, I have not thy fish-hook, but the deep sea, whose bottom no man may search. Though I should die for thee, yet could I not give thee back thy fish-hook."

But his elder brother required it of him the more urgently.

Then Prince Fire Fade burst the wild wistaria tendrils which bound his august ten-grasp sword to his side. And he said, "Farewell, good sword." And he broke it into many fragments, and made five hundred fish-hooks to give to his brother, Prince Fire Flash. But Prince Fire Flash would have none of them.

And again Prince Fire Fade toiled at a great furnace, and made one thousand fish-hooks; and upon his knees he humbly offered them to his brother, Prince Fire Flash. For he loved his brother. Nevertheless Prince Fire Flash would not so much as look at them, but sat moody, his head on his hand, saying, "Mine own lost fish-hook will I have, that and no other."

So Prince Fire Fade went grieving from the palace gates, and wandered lamenting by the seashore; and his tears fell and mingled with the foam. And, when night came, he had no heart to return homewards, but sat down, weary, upon a rock amid the salt pools. And he cried, "Alas, my brother, I am all to blame, and through my foolishness has this come upon me. But oh, my brother, together were we nursed upon the sweet breast of our mother, Princess Blossoming-Brightly-as-the-Flowers-of-the-Trees, for almost hand in hand did we come into the world."

And the moon rose so that the sea and the Central Land of Reed Plains was light. But Prince Fire Fade ceased not to lament.

Then Shiko-Tsuchi-no-Kami, the Lord of Sea Salt, came with the rising tide, and spoke, “Wherefore weeps the Heaven’s Sky Height?”

And Prince Fire Fade made answer: “I have taken my brother’s fish-hook, and I have lost it in the sea. And though I have given him many other fish-hooks for compensation, he will have none of them, but desires only the original fish-hook. Truly, the gods know, I would give my life to find it; but how should that serve?”

And Shiko-Tsuchi-no-Kami took him by the sleeve to where a boat moved upon the water, and set him in the boat and pushed it from the shore, saying, “My son, pursue the pleasant path that Tsuki-Yomi-no-Kami, His Augustness, the Moon Night Possessor, has made for thee upon the waters. And, at the end, thou shalt come to a palace made of fishes’ scales, which is the palace of the great King of the Sea. Before the gate there is a clear well, and by the well-side there grows a cassia tree with many spreading branches. Therefore climb thou into the branches of the cassia tree, and there wait for the King’s daughter, who shall come to give thee counsel.”

And Prince Fire Fade, standing up in the boat, made obeisance, and thanked the Lord of Sea Salt. But this one girded his august garments and pushed the boat before him, till he was thigh-deep in the water. And he said, “Nay, nay, fair youth, no thanks, only do my bidding.”

So his Augustness, Prince Fire Fade, came to the Sea King’s palace. And he forthwith climbed the cassia tree and waited among its green branches.



“At the day’s dawning came the handmaidens of the Sea King’s daughter, with their jewelled vessels, to draw water from the well.” Illustration by Warwick Goble, published in *Green Willow and Other Japanese Fairy Tales* by Grace James (1910), MacMillan and Company.

At the day’s dawning came the handmaidens of the Sea King’s daughter, with their jewelled vessels, to draw water from the well. And as they stooped to dip their vessels, Prince Fire Fade leaned and watched them from the branches of the cassia tree. And the glory of his august countenance made a brightness upon the waters of the well. So all the maidens looked up and beheld his comeliness, and were amazed. But he spoke them fairly, and desired of them a little water from their vessels. So the maidens drew him water in a jewelled cup (howbeit the jewels were clouded, because of the coldness of the well water), and they presented it to him with all reverence. Then, not drinking the water, Prince Fire Fade took the royal jewel from his neck, and holding it between his two lips he dropped it into the cup, and the cup he gave again to the maidens.

Now they saw the great jewel shining in the cup, but they could not move it, for it clung fast to the gold. So the maidens departed, skimming the water like the white birds of the offing. And they came to the Sea King’s daughter, bearing the cup and the jewel in it.

And the Princess, looking at the jewel, asked them, “Is there, perchance, a stranger at the gate?”

And one of the maidens answered, “There is some one sitting in the branches of the cassia tree which is by our well.”

And another said, “It is a very beautiful young man.”

And another said, “He is even more glorious than our king. And he asked water of us, so we respectfully gave him water in this cup. And he drank none of it, but dropped a jewel into it from his lips. So we have brought them unto Thine Augustness, both the cup and the jewel.”

Then the Princess herself took a vessel and went to draw water at the well. And her long sleeves, and certain of the folds of her august garments, floated behind her, and her head was bound with a garland of sea flowers. And coming to the well she looked up through the branches of the cassia tree. And her eyes met the eyes of Prince Fire Fade.

And presently she fetched her father, the Sea King, saying, "Father, there is a beautiful person at our gate." So the Sea King came out and welcomed Prince Fire Fade, and said, "This is the August Child of the Heaven's Sun Height." And leading him into his palace he caused the floor to be spread with eight layers of rugs of asses' skins, and eight layers of rugs of silk, and set the Prince upon them.

And that night he made a great banquet, and celebrated the betrothal of Prince Fire Fade to his daughter, the fair Jewel Princess. And for very many days there was held high revel and rejoicing in the Sea King's palace.

But one night, as they took their ease upon the silken floor, and all the fishes of the sea brought rich dishes, and sweetmeats in vessels of gold and coral and jade to set before them, the fair Jewel Princess herself sat at Prince Fire Fade's right hand to pour the wine into his cup. And the silver scales upon the palace walls glittered in the moonlight. But Prince Fire Fade looked out across the Sea Path and thought of what had gone before, and so heaved a deep sigh.

Then the Sea King was troubled, and asked him, saying, "Wherefore dost thou sigh?" But Prince Fire Fade answered nothing.

And the fair Jewel Princess, his betrothed wife, came closer, and touched him on the breast, and said softly, "Oh, Thine Augustness, my sweet spouse, art thou not happy in our water palace, where the shadows fall green, that thou lookest so longingly across the Sea Path? Or do our maidens not please thee, who move silently, like the birds of the offing? Oh, my lord, despise me not, but tell me what is in thine heart."

Then Prince Fire Fade answered, "My lovely lady, Thine Augustness, let nothing be hidden from thee, because of our love." And he told them all the story of the fish-hook, and of his elder brother's wrath.

"And now," he said, "will the Jewel Princess give me counsel?"

Then the Jewel Princess smiled, and rose up lightly, and her hair was so long that it hung to the edge and hem

of her silken red robe. And she passed to where the palace steps led down into the water. And standing upon the last step she called to the fishes of the sea, and summoned them, great and small, from far and near. So the fishes of the sea, both great and small, swam about her feet, and the water was silver with their scales. And the King's daughter cried, "O fishes of the sea, find and bring me the august fish-hook of Prince Fire Flash."

And the fishes answered, "Lady, the Tai is in misery, for something sticks in his throat so that he cannot eat. Perchance this may be the august fish-hook of his Augustness, Prince Fire Flash."

Then the Princess stooped down and lifted the Tai from the water, and with her white hand she took the lost fish-hook from his throat. And after she had washed and dabbled it for a little, she took it in to Prince Fire Fade. And he rejoiced and said, "This is indeed my brother's fish-hook. I go to restore it instantly, and we shall be reconciled." For he loved his brother.

But the fair Jewel Princess stood silent and sorrowing, for she thought, "Now will he depart and leave me lonely."

And Prince Fire Fade hastened to the water's edge, and there bestrode a valiant crocodile, who should bring him to his journey's end. And ere he went, the Sea King spoke: "Fair youth, now listen to my counsel. If thy brother sow rice upon the uplands, do thou sow thy rice low, in the water meads. But if thy brother sow his rice in the water meads, then do thou, Thine Augustness, sow thy rice upon the uplands. And I who rule the rains and the floods will continually prosper the labours of Thine Augustness. Moreover, here are two magic jewels. If thy brother should be moved by envy to attack thee, then put forth the Tide Flowing Jewel and the waters shall arise to drown him. But if thou shouldst have compassion upon him, then put forth the Tide Ebbing Jewel, and all the waters shall subside, and his life be spared."

And his Augustness Prince Fire Fade gave thanks with obeisance. And he hid the fish-hook in his long sleeve, and hung the two great jewels about his neck. Then the fair Jewel Princess came near and bade him farewell, with many tears. And the Sea King charged the crocodile, saying, "While crossing the middle of the sea, do not alarm him."

So Prince Fire Fade sat upon the crocodile's head; and in one day he came to his own place and sprang lightly to shore. And unsheathing his dagger, he hung it upon the crocodile's neck for a token.

Hereupon, Prince Fire Fade found his brother, and gave him back his own fish-hook that had been lost. Nevertheless, because of the two great jewels, which he wore in the folds of his raiment, he had everlasting dominion over his brother, and flourished in all his doings.

And, after some time, there came to Prince Fire Fade the daughter of the Sea King, the fair Jewel Princess. And she came across the Sea Path bearing in her arms a young child. And she, weeping, laid down the child at the feet of His Augustness and said, "My lord, I have brought thy son."

But Prince Fire Fade raised her up and made her welcome, and built for her a palace on the seashore, at the limit of the waves. And the palace was thatched with cormorant's feathers. So they dwelt there with the August Child.

And the fair Jewel Princess besought her lord, saying, "Sweet husband, look not on me in the dark night, for then I must take my native shape; with those of my land it is ever so. Howbeit, look not on me, lest I should be ashamed and misfortune should follow." So Prince Fire Fade promised her, and spoke many fair words of assurance.

Nevertheless, there came a night when Prince Fire Fade lay awake, and could get no rest. And, at length, when it was very dark, before the dawn, he arose and struck a light to look upon his bride as she slept. And he beheld a great scaled dragon, with translucent eyes, which was coiled up at the couch's foot. And Prince Fire Fade cried out aloud for terror, and dropped the light. Then morning broke very grey upon the sea. And at the same instant the great dragon stirred, and from its coils the Jewel Princess lifted up her lovely head. And the green scales fell away from her like a garment. So she stood, in a white robe, with her child upon her breast. And she hung her head and wept, saying, "O Thine Augustness, my sweet spouse, I had thought to have made the Sea Path a highway between thy land and mine, that we might go and come at pleasure. But now, though I warned thee, thou hast looked upon me in the night. Therefore, my lord, between me and thee it is farewell. I go across the Sea Path, and of this going there is no return. Take thou the August Child."

She spoke, and departed immediately upon the Sea Path, weeping and covering her face with her hair and

looking back to the shore. And she was never more seen upon the Central Land of Reed Plains. Moreover, she shut the gates of the sea and closed the way to her father's palace. But the young maid, her sister, she sent to be a nurse to her babe, and because, for all that had been, she could not restrain her loving heart, she made a little song, and sent it to her lord by the maid, her sister. And the song said:

“Oh, fair are the red jewels, And fair is the string on which they are strung ... Even so, fair is my babe. But brighter far, and more renowned are the white jewels, The jewels that are like my lord.”

Then the husband answered, in a song which said:

“As for thee, my lady, whom I took to be my bride, To the island where lights the wild duck—the bird of the offing, I shall not forget thee till the end of my life.”

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