

Urashima

Green Willow And Other Japanese Fairy Tales

Japanese

Easy
7 min read

Urashima was a fisherman of the Inland Sea.

Every night he plied his trade. He caught fishes both great and small, being upon the sea through the long hours of darkness. Thus he made his living.

Upon a certain night the moon shone brightly, making plain the paths of the sea. And Urashima kneeled in his boat and dabbled his right hand in the green water. Low he leaned, till his hair lay spread upon the waves, and he paid no heed to his boat that listed or to his trailing fishing-net. He drifted in his boat till he came to a haunted place. And he was neither waking nor sleeping, for the moon made him mad.

Then the Daughter of the Deep Sea arose, and she took the fisherman in her arms, and sank with him, down, down, to her cold sea cave. She laid him upon a sandy bed, and long did she look upon him. She cast her sea spell upon him, and sang her sea songs to him and held his eyes with hers.

He said, "Who are you, lady?"

She told him, "The Daughter of the Deep Sea."

"Let me go home," he said; "my little children wait and are tired."

“Nay, rather stay with me,” she said:

“Urashima, Thou Fisherman of the Inland Sea, Thou art beautiful; Thy long hair is twisted round my heart; Go not from me, Only forget thy home.”

“Ah, now,” said the fisherman, “let be, for the dear gods’ sake.... I would go to mine own.”

But she said again:

“Urashima, Thou Fisherman of the Inland Sea, I’ll set thy couch with pearl; I’ll spread thy couch with seaweed and sea flowers; Thou shalt be King of the Deep Sea, And we will reign together.”

“Let me go home,” said Urashima; “my little children wait and are tired.”

But she said:

“Urashima: Thou Fisherman of the Inland Sea, Never be afraid of the Deep Sea tempest; We will roll rocks about our cavern doors; Neither be afraid of the drowned dead; Thou shalt not die.”

“Ah, now,” said the fisherman, “let be, for the dear gods’ sake.... I would go to mine own.”

“Stay with me this one night.”

“Nay, not one.”

Then the Daughter of the Deep Sea wept, and Urashima saw her tears.

“I will stay with you this one night,” he said.

So after the night was passed, she brought him up to the sand and the seashore.

“Are we near your home?” she said.

He told her, “Within a stone’s throw.”

“Take this,” she said, “in memory of me.” She gave him a casket of mother-of-pearl; it was rainbow-tinted and its clasps were of coral and of jade.

“Do not open it,” she said; “O fisherman, do not open it.” And with that she sank and was no more seen, the

Daughter of the Deep Sea.

As for Urashima, he ran beneath the pine trees to come to his dear home. And as he went he laughed for joy. And he tossed up the casket to catch the sun.

“Ah, me,” he said, “the sweet scent of the pines!” So he went calling to his children with a call that he had taught them, like a sea-bird’s note. Soon he said, “Are they yet asleep? It is strange they do not answer me.”

Now when he came to his house he found four lonely walls, moss-grown. Nightshade flourished on the threshold, death lilies by the hearth, dianthus and lady fern. No living soul was there.

“Now what is this?” cried Urashima. “Have I lost my wits? Have I left my eyes in the deep sea?”

He sat down upon the grassy floor and thought long. “The dear gods help me!” he said. “Where is my wife, and where are my little children?”

He went to the village, where he knew the stones in the way, and every tiled and tilted eave was to him most familiar; and here he found folk walking to and fro, going upon their business. But they were all strange to him.

“Good morrow,” they said, “good morrow, wayfarer. Do you tarry in our town?”

He saw children at their play, and often he put his hand beneath their chins to turn their faces up. Alas! he did it all in vain.

“Where are my little children,” he said, “O Lady Kwannon the Merciful? Peradventure the gods know the meaning of all this; it is too much for me.”

When sunset came, his heart was heavy as stone, and he went and stood at the parting of the ways outside the town. As men passed by he pulled them by the sleeve:

“Friend,” he said, “I ask your pardon, did you know a fisherman of this place called Urashima?”

And the men that passed by answered him, “We never heard of such an one.”

There passed by the peasant people from the mountains. Some went a-foot, some rode on patient pack-horses. They went singing their country songs, and they carried baskets of wild strawberries or sheaves of lilies bound upon their backs. And the lilies nodded as they went. Pilgrims passed by, all clad in white, with staves and rice-

straw hats, sandals fast bound and gourds of water. Swiftly they went, softly they went, thinking of holy things. And lords and ladies passed by, in brave attire and great array, borne in their gilded kago. The night fell.

“I lose sweet hope,” said Urashima.

But there passed by an old, old man.

“Oh, old, old man,” cried the fisherman, “you have seen many days; know you ought of Urashima? In this place was he born and bred.”

Then the old man said, “There was one of that name, but, sir, that one was drowned long years ago. My grandfather could scarce remember him in the time that I was a little boy. Good stranger, it was many, many years ago.”

Urashima said, “He is dead?”

“No man more dead than he. His sons are dead and their sons are dead. Good even to you, stranger.”

Then Urashima was afraid. But he said, “I must go to the green valley where the dead sleep.” And to the valley he took his way.

He said, “How chill the night wind blows through the grass! The trees shiver and the leaves turn their pale backs to me.”

He said, “Hail, sad moon, that showest me all the quiet graves. Thou art nothing different from the moon of old.”

He said, “Here are my sons’ graves and their sons’ graves. Poor Urashima, there is no man more dead than he. Yet am I lonely among the ghosts....”

“Who will comfort me?” said Urashima.

The night wind sighed and nothing more.

Then he went back to the seashore. “Who will comfort me?” cried Urashima. But the sky was unmoved, and the mountain waves of the sea rolled on.

Urashima said, “There is the casket.” And he took it from his sleeve and opened it. There rose from it a faint

white smoke that floated away and out to the far horizon.

“I grow very weary,” said Urashima. In a moment his hair turned as white as snow. He trembled, his body shrank, his eyes grew dim. He that had been so young and lusty swayed and tottered where he stood.

“I am old,” said Urashima.

He made to shut the casket lid, but dropped it, saying, “Nay, the vapour of smoke is gone for ever. What matters it?”

He laid down his length upon the sand and died.

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