# The Strange Story of the Golden Comb

In ancient days two samurai dwelt in Sendai of the North. They were friends and brothers in arms.Hasunuma one was named, and the other Saito. Now it happened that a daughter was born to the house of Hasunuma, and upon the selfsame day, and in the selfsame hour, there was born to the house of Saito a son. The boy child they called Konojo, and the girl they called Aiko, which means the Child of Love.Or ever a year had passed over their innocent heads the children were betrothed to one another. And as a token the wife of Saito gave a golden comb to the wife of Hasunuma, saying: “For the child’s hair when she shall be old enough.” Aiko’s mother wrapped the comb in a handkerchief, and laid it away in her chest. It was of gold lacquer, very fine work, adorned with golden dragon-flies.This was very well; but before long misfortune came upon Saito and his house, for, by sad mischance, he aroused the ire of his feudal lord, and he was fain to fly from Sendai by night, and his wife was with him, and the child. No man knew where they went, or had any news of them, nor of how they fared, and for long, long years Hasunuma heard not one word of them.The child Aiko grew to be the loveliest lady in Sendai. She had longer hair than any maiden in the city, and she was the most graceful dancer ever seen. She moved as a wave of the sea, or a cloud of the sky, or the wild bamboo grass in the wind. She had a sister eleven moons younger than she, who was called Aiyamé, or the Water Iris; and she was the second loveliest lady in Sendai. Aiko was white, but Aiyamé was brown, quick, and light, and laughing. When they went abroad in the streets of Sendai, folk said, “There go the moon and the south wind.”Upon an idle summer day when all the air was languid, and the cicala sang ceaselessly as he swung on the pomegranate bough, the maidens rested on the cool white mats of their lady mother’s bower. Their dark locks were loose, and their slender feet were bare. They had between them an ancient chest of red lacquer, a Bride Box of their lady mother’s, and in the chest they searched and rummaged for treasure.“See, sister,” said Aiyamé, “here are scarlet thongs, the very thing for my sandals ... and what is this? A crystal rosary, I declare! How beautiful!”Aiko said, “My mother, I pray you give me this length of violet silk, it will make me very fine undersleeves to my new grey gown; and, mother, let me have the crimson for a petticoat; and surely, mother, you do not need this little bit of brocade?”“And what an obi,” cried Aiyamé, as she dragged it from the chest, “grass green and silver!” Springing lightly up, she wound the length about her slender body. “Now behold me for the finest lady in all Sendai. Very envious shall be the daughter of the rich Hachiman, when she sees this wonder obi; but I shall be calm and careless, and say, looking down thus humbly, ‘Your pardon, noble lady, that I wear this foolish trifling obi, unmeet for your great presence!’ Mother, mother, give me the obi.”“Arah! Arah! Little pirates!” said the mother, and smiled.Aiko thrust her hand to the bottom of the chest. “Here is something hard,” she murmured, “a little casket wrapped in a silken handkerchief. How it smells of orris and ancient spices!—now what may it be?” So saying, she unwound the kerchief and opened the casket. “A golden comb!” she said, and laid it on her knee.“Give it here, child,” cried the mother quickly; “it is not for your eyes.”But the maiden sat quite still, her eyes upon the golden comb. It was of gold lacquer, very fine work, adorned with golden dragon-flies.For a time the maiden said not a word, nor did her mother, though she was troubled; and even the light Lady of the South Wind seemed stricken into silence, and drew the scarlet sandal thongs through and through her fingers.“Mother, what of this golden comb?” said Aiko at last.“My sweet, it is the love-token between you and Konojo, the son of Saito, for you two were betrothed in your cradles. But now it is full fifteen years since Saito went from Sendai in the night, he and all his house, and left no trace behind.”“Is my love dead?” said Aiko.“Nay, that I know not—but he will never come; so, I beseech you, think no more of him, my pretty bird. There, get you your fan, and dance for me and for your sister.”Aiko first set the golden comb in her hair. Then she flung open her fan to dance. She moved like a wave of the sea, or a cloud of the sky, or the wild bamboo grass in the wind. She had not danced long before she dropped the fan, with a long cry, and she herself fell her length upon the ground. From that hour she was in a piteous way, and lay in her bed sighing, like a maid lovelorn and forsaken. She could not eat nor sleep; she had no pleasure in life. The sunrise and the sound of rain at night were nothing to her any more. Not her father, nor her mother, nor her sister, the Lady of the South Wind, were able to give her any ease.Presently she turned her face to the wall. “It is more than I can understand,” she said, and so died.When they had prepared the poor young maid for her grave, her mother came, crying, to look at her for the last time. And she set the golden comb in the maid’s hair, saying:“My own dear little child, I pray that in other lives you may know happiness. Therefore take your golden token with you; you will have need of it when you meet the wraith of your lover.” For she believed that Konojo was dead.But, alas, for Karma that is so pitiless, one short moon had the maid been in her grave when the brave young man, her betrothed, came to claim her at her father’s house.“Alas and alack, Konojo, the son of Saito, alas, my brave young man, too late you have come! Your joy is turned to mourning, for your bride lies under the green grass, and her sister goes weeping in the moonlight to pour the water of the dead.” Thus spoke Hasunuma the samurai.“Lord,” said the brave young man, “there are three ways left, the sword, the strong girdle, and the river. These are the short roads to Yomi. Farewell.”But Hasunuma held the young man by the arm. “Nay, then, thou son of Saito,” he said, “but hear the fourth way, which is far better. The road to Yomi is short, but it is very dark; moreover, from the confines of that country few return. Therefore stay with me, Konojo, and comfort me in my old age, for I have no sons.”So Konojo entered the household of Hasunuma the samurai, and dwelt in the garden house by the gate.Now in the third month Hasunuma and his wife and the daughter that was left them arose early and dressed them in garments of ceremony, and presently were borne away in kago, for to the temple they were bound, and to their ancestral tombs, where they offered prayers and incense the live-long day.It was bright starlight when they returned, and cold the night was, still and frosty. Konojo stood and waited at the garden gate. He waited for their home-coming, as was meet. He drew his cloak about him and gave ear to the noises of the evening. He heard the sound of the blind man’s whistle, and the blind man’s staff upon the stones. Far off he heard a child laugh twice; then he heard men singing in chorus, as men who sing to cheer themselves in their labour, and in the pauses of song he heard the creak, creak of swinging kago that the men bore upon their shoulders, and he said, “They come.”“I go to the house of the Beloved, Her plum tree stands by the eaves; It is full of blossom. The dew lies in the heart of the flowers, So they are the drinking-cups of the sparrows. How do you go to your love’s house? Even upon the wings of the night wind. Which road leads to your love’s house? All the roads in the world.”This was the song of the kago men. First the kago of Hasunuma the samurai turned in at the garden gate, then followed his lady; last came Aiyamé of the South Wind. Upon the roof of her kago there lay a blossoming bough.“Rest well, lady,” said Konojo, as she passed, and had no answer back. Howbeit it seemed that some light thing dropped from the kago, and fell with a little noise to the ground. He stooped and picked up a woman’s comb. It was of gold lacquer, very fine work, adorned with golden dragon-flies. Smooth and warm it lay in the hand of Konojo. And he went his way to the garden house. At the hour of the rat the young samurai threw down his book of verse, laid himself upon his bed, and blew out his light. And the selfsame moment he heard a wandering step without.“And who may it be that visits the garden house by night?” said Konojo, and he wondered. About and about went the wandering feet till at length they stayed, and the door was touched with an uncertain hand.“Konojo! Konojo!”“What is it?” said the samurai.“Open, open; I am afraid.”“Who are you, and why are you afraid?”“I am afraid of the night. I am the daughter of Hasunuma the samurai.... Open to me for the love of the gods.”Konojo undid the latch and slid back the door of the garden house to find a slender and drooping lady upon the threshold. He could not see her face, for she held her long sleeve so as to hide it from him; but she swayed and trembled, and her frail shoulders shook with sobbing.“Let me in,” she moaned, and forthwith entered the garden house.Half smiling and much perplexed, Konojo asked her:“Are you Aiyamé, whom they call the Lady of the South Wind?”“I am she.”“Lady, you do me much honour.”“The comb!” she said, “the golden comb!”As she said this, she threw the veil from her face, and taking the robe of Konojo in both her little hands, she looked into his eyes as though she would draw forth his very soul. The lady was brown and quick and light. Her eyes and her lips were made for laughing, and passing strange she looked in the guise that she wore then.“The comb!” she said, “the golden comb!”“I have it here,” said Konojo; “only let go my robe, and I will fetch it you.”At this the lady cast herself down upon the white mats in a passion of bitter tears, and Konojo, poor unfortunate, pressed his hands together, quite beside himself.“What to do?” he said; “what to do?”At last he raised the lady in his arms, and stroked her little hand to comfort her.“Lord,” she said, as simply as a child, “lord, do you love me?”And he answered her in a moment, “I love you more than many lives, O Lady of the South Wind.”“Lord,” she said, “will you come with me then?”He answered her, “Even to the land of Yomi,” and took her hand.Forth they went into the night, and they took the road together. By river-side they went, and over plains of flowers; they went by rocky ways, or through the whispering pines, and when they had wandered far enough, of the green bamboos they built them a little house to dwell in. And they were there for a year of happy days and nights.Now upon a morning of the third month Konojo beheld men with kago come swinging through the bamboo grove. And he said:“What have they to do with us, these men and their kago?”“Lord,” said Aiyamé, “they come to bear us to my father’s house.”He cried, “What is this foolishness? We will not go.”“Indeed, and we must go,” said the lady.“Go you, then,” said Konojo; “as for me, I stay here where I am happy.”“Ah, lord,” she said, “ah, my dear, do you then love me less, who vowed to go with me, even to the Land of Yomi?”Then he did all that she would. And he broke a blossoming bough from a tree that grew near by and laid it upon the roof of her kago.Swiftly, swiftly they were borne, and the kago men sang as they went, a song to make labour light. “I go to the house of the Beloved, Her plum tree stands by the eaves; It is full of blossom. The dew lies in the heart of the flowers, So they are the drinking-cups of the sparrows. How do you go to your love’s house? Even upon the wings of the night wind. Which road leads to your love’s house? All the roads in the world.”This was the song of the kago men.About nightfall they came to the house of Hasunuma the samurai.“Go you in, my dear lord,” said the Lady of the South Wind. “I will wait without; if my father is very wroth with you, only show him the golden comb.” And with that she took it from her hair and gave it him. Smooth and warm it lay in his hand. Then Konojo went into the house.“Welcome, welcome home, Konojo, son of Saito!” cried Hasunuma. “How has it fared with your knightly adventure?”“Knightly adventure!” said Konojo, and blushed.“It is a year since your sudden departure, and we supposed that you had gone upon a quest, or in the expiation of some vow laid upon your soul.”“Alas, my good lord,” said Konojo, “I have sinned against you and against your house.” And he told Hasunuma what he had done.When he had made an end of his tale:“Boy,” said the samurai, “you jest, but your merry jest is ill-timed. Know that my child lies even as one dead. For a year she has neither risen nor spoken nor smiled. She is visited by a heavy sickness and none can heal her.”“Sir,” said Konojo, “your child, the Lady of the South Wind, waits in a kago without your garden wall. I will fetch her in presently.”Forth they went together, the young man and the samurai, but they found no kago without the garden wall, no kago-bearers and no lady. Only a broken bough of withered blossom lay upon the ground.“Indeed, indeed, she was here but now!” cried Konojo. “She gave me her comb—her golden comb. See, my lord, here it is.”“What comb is this, Konojo? Where got you this comb that was set in a dead maid’s hair, and buried with her beneath the green grass? Where got you the comb of Aiko, the Lady of the Moon, that died for love? Speak, Konojo, son of Saito. This is a strange thing.”Now whilst Konojo stood amazed, and leaned silent and bewildered against the garden wall, a lady came lightly through the trees. She moved as a wave of the sea, or a cloud of the sky, or the wild bamboo grass in the wind.“Aiyamé,” cried the samurai, “how are you able to leave your bed?”The young man said nothing, but fell on his knees beside the garden wall. There the lady came to him and bent so that her hair and her garments overshadowed him, and her eyes held his.“Lord,” she said, “I am the spirit of Aiko your love. I went with a broken heart to dwell with the shades of Yomi. The very dead took pity on my tears. I was permitted to return, and for one short year to inhabit the sweet body of my sister. And now my time is come. I go my ways to the grey country. I shall be the happiest soul in Yomi—I have known you, beloved. Now take me in your arms, for I grow very faint.”With that she sank to the ground, and Konojo put his arms about her and laid her head against his heart. His tears fell upon her forehead.“Promise me,” she said, “that you will take to wife Aiyamé, my sister, the Lady of the South Wind.”“Ah,” he cried, “my lady and my love!”“Promise, promise,” she said.Then he promised.After a little she stirred in his arms.“What is it?” he said.So soft her voice that it did not break the silence but floated upon it.“The comb,” she murmured, “the golden comb.”And Konojo set it in her hair.A burden, pale but breathing, Konojo carried into the house of Hasunuma and laid upon the white mats and silken cushions. And after three hours a young maid sat up and rubbed her sleepy eyes. She was brown and quick and light and laughing. Her hair was tumbled about her rosy cheeks, unconfined by any braid or comb. She stared first at her father, and then at the young man that was in her bower. She smiled, then flushed, and put her little hands before her face.“Greeting, O Lady of the South Wind,” said Konojo.

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