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the marrying monster

by CLAUStamm

GORO PUT down his tools and relaxed into a pile of wood shavings, his back against a half-finished bathtub. To enjoy the evening cool, he told himself, wiping his face with a blue and white rag. Actually, he wanted to postpone the evening meal. Either the rice would be overcooked to a sticky goo or he would be picking hard, underdone kernels out of his teeth all night. And bean soup, when he made it, always had things swimming in it that had no business there.

A night insect went *weep-weep-weep*. The sound, the night falling, and the thought of his own cooking made him think of his dead wife.

"She was a good cook, poor thing," he thought out loud. "My, my—how I miss her."

He gave a deep sigh. Oh, to have a wife again—a jolly, round wife and a good cook. Just like the old one with perhaps the small exception

that she would not eat a man out of house and home and herself into the grave in the bargain. Had he said that aloud? Bad sign, when a man talks to the night insects—better to go into the house, better to eat rice and bean soup. He shuddered.

He began to get up and paused halfway, one hand against the wood of the tub, the other shielding his eyes. He peered into the forest that came almost to the work yard. Someone was coming through there, he heard it. He sat down again. Fireflies flitted among the trees. What if it were his wife's spirit—would it be a chubby ghost? It should be.

A woman walked out of the forest.

She was tall, he noticed, watching her thread her way among finished and unfinished buckets and tubs, tall and slender—almost gaunt. She had her sleeves tied back out of the way with a white *tasuki* cord, as though ready for hard work, and her bare

arms were wiry and capable looking. She bowed.

Goro scrambled to his feet, catching a splinter or two in his shoulder on the way up. He bowed.

"Good evening," said the woman. "Is this the house of Goro, the cooper who wants a wife that does not eat too much and is a good cook?"

Goro's eyes crossed and his mouth fell open. His fingers scrambled.

"You *do* look unwell...like a starved goldfish," said the woman, "—I don't mean to seem rude."

"I haven't had dinner..." said Goro, for want of anything brilliant to say. He felt wondrously helpless; things like this did not usually come up in the tub-making business.

"Naturally, poor thing. I'm sure you can't cook well, either," said the woman and Goro marvelled how ever she had guessed it, "Well, I can cook. I can do the work of three women. Into the house with you now, before you catch cold. Shoo!"

She drove him ahead of her into the house.

"I would say I'm quite charming," she said, closing the door behind them, "when one gets used to me. As for my name, why, 'wife', I think, will do nicely."

And sometime in the next few days still with the feeling that he was being left out of things, Goro found himself married.

The new wife was an excellent cook and indeed did the work of three ordinary women. Dinner was never late, and the house was generally spotless. She spoke neither too much nor too little. On evenings when Goro came home discouraged, she always had some good remark ready about the tub-making business—how much artistry and labor went into a good bucket, how unreasonably little money went to the hard-working artist—cheering things, flattering things. Goro gained weight and was not unhappy. At mealtimes his

wife ate a little more than a bird but not quite so much as a large cat.

The food bills went up and up.

Goro gradually discovered that with the little eating going on, he was using up food at a rate to feed six or seven coopers together with a few aunts and uncles.

"Curious..." he muttered, "...very," and determined to investigate.

One morning he made a great fuss about getting measuring equipment together. He told his wife that he was going to a village half a day's walk away, to take measurements for the village head-man's new tub. Then he went a short distance into the forest and waited behind a tree.

When he saw his wife go to a nearby meadow to gather mushrooms, he flitted around to the back of the house. Hiding his tools behind the rear door, he crept inside. He shinned up the center pole and flattened out against one of the big ceiling beams. And waited.

His wife came back and put on the fire the largest pot in the house. From the storage bins she took about five pounds of rice and fell to washing it. She ladled out enough bean paste to nearly fill another big pot, and made bean soup.

"Who," wondered Goro on his beam, "is she expecting, and how many of them?" He blinked, blinked again—his eyes rather rolled up.

She had slid the kitchen door out of its frame and was using it for a dumpling factory, lining the dumpings up—lines and lines of rice dumplings like fat well-paid soldiers.

Then she stretched and peered about as if to make sure she had not forgotten something. Satisfied that she had not, she parted her hair and exposed the mouth in the center of her head.

Goro made a circle of his thumbs and forefingers, trying to calculate the size of the thing and nearly fell

off his perch. It was fairly large.

Into this crater, his wife pushed dumplings by ones and twos and they disappeared. To make certain, she washed them down with all the bean soup, ladles of bean soup.

When she had disposed of everything she waited a moment, expectantly. A cheery, satisfied rumble came from the top of her head.

"Burps, too," thought Goro. "A regular volcano. Wonder if there'll be smoke." He was too interested to be frightened.

But nothing further happened. She bound her hair back neatly, smiled, and left the house on some errand like any good, wifely wife.

Goro slipped down and out of the house, picking up his tools on the way. He went back into the forest, found a comfortable tree and sat down against its trunk to smoke his tiny pipe and think.

"I must have married one of the monsters the priests and old men talk about, a yamamba. A 'mountain-mother'. Hmm," he nodded, bit his lip, and squinted his eyes.

"Now why do you suppose they call them that?" he asked a squirrel that sat upright near his left foot, like an attentive, furry little doctor, "They come from the mountains—fine. But what's motherly about them, I do not understand.

"Squeerp!" said the squirrel, and ran halfway up the tree. From there it peered down and examined Goro's head.

He tilted his head back so that the squirrel could get a better look and told it that, at any rate, this was no kind of wife for a good man.

Then he stood up and began to walk home, looking down at the ground, kicking thoughtfully at fallen leaves and occasionally scratching his head.

He came out from among the trees and across the yard of his home, dragging his feet like a man who has

walked a long way.

He started speaking as soon as he put down his tools.

"Wife, I have been thinking about our marriage and—it hurts me to say it, you understand—but it was too sudden. No—don't interrupt," he said, though his wife had shown no sign of breaking in. "I'm very sorry, but I feel that we're simply not suited to each other."

"All right, husband, I'll leave," she answered in quite an ordinary voice, "even if it makes me unhappy. Could you do only one thing for me before I go? Nothing much—I'd like you to make me a tub—as a kind of souvenir. A very large one. For bathing in."

"The simplest thing in the world," said Goro, glad to get off so easily. "I have one ready, it happens. The very one I was sitting against when you came out of the forest. A very sound tub, one of my best."

"It has a lid, I hope," she said.

"All of my tubs have lids," said Goro. "Well-fitting lids. Water stays warm in my tubs, even without a fire, once that lid is on. Come, I'll show it to you."

He led her out to the tub.

"See? There's the lid, right up against it," he said, thumping the tub with his fist. "Feel that wood! Isn't it a beauty?"

She looked into the tub and agreed that it was getting harder and harder to find real quality in tubs. "Too bad there's that large hole in it," she said.

"Hole?" said Goro. "Hole? A hole in one of my tubs? Impossible... where's that hole!"

He put his hands on the edge to raise himself and peered over.

"There. Bottom right," she said. "Can't you see it?"

"Oh, the bottom..." said Goro, leaning further over the edge. "It's too dark to—"

She seized Goro's trousers in a firm grip and heaved.

"—see," he finished, at the bottom of the tub. He was still wondering how he had gotten down there when the lid came down, bang, and it grew very dark. He felt the tub sail up, come to rest on something and begin to move forward with an up and down rocking movement.

It did not take Goro long, in his bucket-shaped night, to realize that the yamam'ba, having no further reason to pretend a feminine weakness she probably despised anyway, had placed the tub on her head and was on her way home. To the mountain.

"Excuse me," he called out. "Where are we going?"

"To dinner," came his former wife's voice through the wood. It grated unpleasantly. He decided to ask no more questions.

Deep into the woods went the yamam'ba, cutting through thicket and underbrush, the tub jouncing easily on her head, up and up into the mountains. Tireless on her long, rangy legs, she travelled along dead, forgotten roads lined with gnarled ugly trees. Goro heard their branches, bump-crack-bump, against his self-made prison. A thin edge of lesser darkness began to show at the top. He hoped it was the first time the lid had slipped on a tub made by Goro; this sort of thing could ruin years of reputation. But it might mean a way out of the tub.

The opening grew wider. Looking up, he was able to see a few stars. Did he imagine it, or was the tub slowing down? He hoped he was not going to be eaten immediately.

The tub stopped and settled. Something rough, twisted, and snakelike appeared in the opening. It did not move. Nothing moved. He put out his hand—it was a branch.

He gave the branch a delicate jiggle; it felt solid. The yamam'ba, he guessed, must have tired and sat down to rest against a tree. Very cautiously he lifted himself by the

branch, trying to move neither the lid nor the tub which must still be resting on the monster's head.

He heard a faint snore. Top or forward mouth, he wondered. He pulled himself to his feet, trying not to breathe and at last stood with his head out of the tub. The branch was thick, and the next branch, right above, looked dependable. Healthy wood; he appreciated that. Then came a few feet of bark—that would be hard climbing—but above that, four or five branches, almost a ladder. Further, it was too dark to see.

He tensed, took a deep breath, then gave a push and sent the heavy lid crashing down on the sleeping yamam'ba. Up she leaped, and the tub went flying, but Goro was already climbing from branch to branch. In a nearby tree some monkeys woke up and watched Goro's footwork with shame and envy.

From the ground the yamam'ba stared up at him. It was a rare chance to see just what a yamam'ba really wore for a face, and decided it was not very attractive.

Down below, the monster was letting down her horrible hair in a businesslike manner.

"Dinner will be early," she said with a ghastly, girlish laugh, "I was getting quite hungry."

She started up the tree, the top mouth opening and closing. There were teeth in it.

"We yamam'ba are very good with trees," she said, climbing steadily. "Don't climb any higher. It will only make you tired and sweaty and bitter to the taste. Say prayers instead and become calm and delicious."

"I hope I burn your tongue if you have one in there," said Goro, a little beside himself. "And try not to be such a chatterbox. You're making my head buzz."

He *did* hear a distinct buzzing, a small roaring right by his head where he was holding on to a thin branch.

He tried to move his hand away from the sound. Something small sat down on his thumb and set it on fire.

"Ya-yowch!" he said, loudly.

"Tee-hee-hee!" went the yamam'ba, coming up with an intimate rustling of leaves.

Goro sucked his thumb which had swollen surprisingly and stared at the ball-like thing hanging only an arm's length away. The buzzing came from it. Very carefully he reached out to see if he would be able to grab it instantly. He thought the size would be about right.

A hard, scaly hand with claws came groping through the branches. He moved his foot out of the way and waited for the head. It appeared, the top mouth gaping.

"Tee-hee-hee," said the yamam'ba, using both mouths.

"Tee-hee-hee yourself," said Goro. "Have a goody." And into the top of her head he dropped the buzzing ball.

"Whatever it was, it had a bad taste and your blood will wash it away," said the yamam'ba but just then the hornets woke up, highly irritated from lack of sleep.

They flew 'round and 'round inside the yamam'ba. A few of them tickled. Most of them stung. And all of them together worked a havoc in the delicate equipment that makes up the yamam'ba interior.

The yamam'ba made a noise like a frying and a noise like a boiling, and a noise like nameless things running through the night with their cars on fire. She tumbled from the tree, into the tub waiting below and bounced about inside it making unpleasant sounds too numerous to mention.

Goro followed, but more slowly. He arrived in time to see the tub skipping and hopping at the edge of the road which at that point was quite narrow. It teetered for a moment and then sailed out in a gracious curve, trailing its uproar behind it. Goro kneeled and peered down. It was very dark. From far below came a soft boompety-boomp. Then a mere whisper of a crash.

Goro got up, shaking his head. He dusted his knees and went away down the road, growing smaller in the cold, lonely night.

