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Author: Pierre Loti

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MADAME CHRYSANTHEME

By PIERRE LOTI

With a Preface by ALBERT SOREL, of the French Academy

BOOK 1.

PIERRE LOTI

LOUIS-MARIE-JULIEN VIAUD, "Pierre Loti," was born in Rochefort, of an old French-Protestant family, January 14, 1850. He was connected with the French Navy from 1867 to 1900, and is now a retired officer with full captain's rank. Although of a most energetic character and a veteran of various campaigns—Japan, Tonkin, Senegal, China (1900)—M. Viaud was so timid as a young midshipman that his comrades named him "Loti," a small Indian flower which seems ever discreetly to hide itself. This is, perhaps, a pleasantry, as elsewhere there is a much more romantic explanation of the word. Suffice it to say that Pierre Loti has been always the nom de plume of M. Viaud.

Lod has no immediate literary ancestor and no pupil worthy of the name. He indulges in a dainty pessimism and is most of all an impressionist, not of the vogue of Zola—although he can be, on occasion, as brutally plain as he—but more in the manner of Victor Hugo, his predecessor, or Alphonse

Daudet, his lifelong friend. In Loti's works, however, pessimism is softened to a musical melancholy; the style is direct; the vocabulary exquisite; the moral situations familiar; the characters not complex. In short, his place is unique, apart from the normal lines of novelistic development.

The vein of Loti is not absolutely new, but is certainly novel. In him it first revealed itself in a receptive sympathy for the rare flood of experiences that his naval life brought on him, experiences which had not fallen to the lot of Bernardin de St. Pierre or Chateaubriand, both of whom he resembles. But neither of those writers possessed Loti's delicate sensitiveness to exotic nature as it is reflected in the foreign mind and heart. Strange but real worlds he has conjured up for us in most of his works and with means that are, as with all great artists, extremely simple. He may be compared to Kipling and to Stevenson: to Kipling, because he has done for the French seaman something that the Englishman has done for "Tommy Atkins," although their methods are often more opposed than similar; like Stevenson, he has gone searching for romance in the ends of the earth; like Stevenson, too, he has put into all of his works a style that is never less than dominant and often irresistible. Charm, indeed, is the one fine quality that all his critics, whether friendly or not, acknowledge, and it is one well able to cover, if need be, a multitude of literary sins.

Pierre Loti was elected a member of the French Academy in 1891, succeeding to the chair of Octave Feuillet. Some of his writings are: 'Aziyade,' written in 1879; the scene is laid in Constantinople. This was followed by 'Rarahu,' a Polynesian idyl (1880; again published under the title *Le Mariage de Loti*, 1882). 'Roman d'un Spahi (1881) deals with Algiers. Taton-gaye is a true 'bete-humaine', sunk in moral slumber or quivering with ferocious joys. It is in this book that Loti has eclipsed Zola. One of his masterpieces is 'Mon Freye Yves' (ocean and Brittany), together with 'Pecheur d'Islande' (1886); both translated into German by Elizabeth, Queen of Roumania (Carmen Sylva). In 1884 was published 'Les trois Dames de la Kasbah,' relating also to Algiers, and then came 'Madame Chrysantheme' (1887), crowned by the Academy. 'Japoneries d'automne' (1889), Japanese scenes; then 'Au Maroc' (Morocco; 1890). Partly autobiographical are 'Le Roman d'un Enfant' (1890) and 'Le Livre de la Pitie et de la Mort' (1891). Then followed 'Fantomes d'Orient' (1892), L'Exilee (1893), Le Desert (Syria; 1895), Jerusalem, La Galilee (Palestine; 1895), Pages choisies (1896), Ramuntcho (1897), Reflets sur la Sombre Route' (1898), and finally 'Derniers Jours de Pekin' (1903). Many exquisite pages are to be found in Loti's work. His composition is now and then somewhat disconnected; the impressions are vague, almost illusory, and the mirage is a little obscure, but the intense and abiding charm of Nature remains. Loti has not again reached the level of Madame Chrysantheme, and English critics at least will have to suspend their judgment for a while. In any event, he has given to the world many great books, and is shrined with the Forty "Immortals."

ALBERT
SOREL
de
l'Academie
Francaise.

DEDICATION

To Madame la Duchesse de Richelieu

MADAME LA DUCHESSE,

Permit me to beg your acceptance of this work, as a respectful tribute of my friendship.

I feel some hesitation in offering it, for its theme can not be deemed altogether correct; but I have endeavored to make its expression, at least, in harmony with good taste, and I trust that my endeavors have been successful.

This record is the journal of a summer of my life, in which I have changed nothing, not even the dates, thinking that in our efforts to arrange matters we succeed often only in disarranging them. Although the most important role may appear to devolve on Madame Chrysantheme, it is very certain that the three principal points of interest are myself, Japan, and the effect produced on me by that country.

Do you recollect a certain photograph—rather absurd, I must admit— representing that great fellow

Yves, a Japanese girl, and myself, grouped as we were posed by a Nagasaki artist? You smiled when I assured you that the carefully attired little damsel placed between us had been one of our neighbors. Kindly receive my book with the same indulgent smile, without seeking therein a meaning either good or bad, in the same spirit in which you would receive some quaint bit of pottery, some grotesquely carved ivory idol, or some fantastic trifle brought to you from this singular fatherland of all fantasy.

Believe me, with the deepest respect,
Madame la Duchesse,
Your affectionate
PIERRE LOTI.

INTRODUCTION

We were at sea, about two o'clock in the morning, on a fine night, under a starry sky.

Yves stood beside me on the bridge, and we talked of the country, unknown to both, to which destiny was now carrying us. As we were to cast anchor the next day, we enjoyed our anticipations, and made a thousand plans.

"For myself," I said, "I shall marry at once."

"Ah!" said Yves, with the indifferent air of one whom nothing can surprise.

"Yes—I shall choose a little, creamy-skinned woman with black hair and cat's eyes. She must be pretty and not much bigger than a doll. You shall have a room in our house. It will be a little paper house, in a green garden, deeply shaded. We shall live among flowers, everything around us shall blossom, and each morning our dwelling shall be filled with nosegays—nosegays such as you have never dreamed of."

Yves now began to take an interest in these plans for my future household; indeed, he would have listened with as much confidence if I had expressed the intention of taking temporary vows in some monastery of this new country, or of marrying some island queen and shutting myself up with her in a house built of jade, in the middle of an enchanted lake.

I had quite made up my mind to carry out the scheme I had unfolded to him. Yes, led on by ennui and solitude, I had gradually arrived at dreaming of and looking forward to such a marriage. And then, above all, to live for awhile on land, in some shady nook, amid trees and flowers! How tempting it sounded after the long months we had been wasting at the Pescadores (hot and arid islands, devoid of freshness, woods, or streamlets, full of faint odors of China and of death).

We had made great way in latitude since our vessel had quitted that Chinese furnace, and the constellations in the sky had undergone a series of rapid changes; the Southern Cross had disappeared at the same time as the other austral stars; and the Great Bear, rising on the horizon, was almost on as high a level as it is in the sky above France. The evening breeze soothed and revived us, bringing back to us the memory of our summer-night watches on the coast of Brittany.

What a distance we were, however, from those familiar coasts! What a tremendous distance!

MME. CHRYSANTHEME

CHAPTER I

THE MYSTERIOUS LAND

At dawn we beheld Japan.

Precisely at the foretold moment the mysterious land arose before us, afar off, like a black dot in the vast sea, which for so many days had been but a blank space.

At first we saw nothing by the rays of the rising sun but a series of tiny pink-tipped heights (the Fukai Islands). Soon, however, appeared all along the horizon, like a misty veil over the waters, Japan itself; and little by little, out of the dense shadow, arose the sharp, opaque outlines of the Nagasaki mountains.

The wind was dead against us, and the strong breeze, which steadily increased, seemed as if the country were blowing with all its might, in a vain effort to drive us away from its shores. The sea, the rigging, the vessel itself, all vibrated and quivered as if with emotion.

CHAPTER II

STRANGE SCENES

By three o'clock in the afternoon all these far-off objects were close to us, so close that they overshadowed us with their rocky masses and deep green thickets.

We entered a shady channel between two high ranges of mountains, oddly symmetrical—like stage scenery, very pretty, though unlike nature. It seemed as if Japan were opened to our view through an enchanted fissure, allowing us to penetrate into her very heart.

Nagasaki, as yet unseen, must be at the extremity of this long and peculiar bay. All around us was exquisitely green. The strong sea-breeze had suddenly fallen, and was succeeded by a calm; the atmosphere, now very warm, was laden with the perfume of flowers. In the valley resounded the ceaseless whirr of the cicalas, answering one another from shore to shore; the mountains reechoed with innumerable sounds; the whole country seemed to vibrate like crystal. We passed among myriads of Japanese junks, gliding softly, wafted by imperceptible breezes on the smooth water; their motion could hardly be heard, and their white sails, stretched out on yards, fell languidly in a thousand horizontal folds like window-blinds, their strangely contorted poops, rising up castle-like in the air, reminding one of the towering ships of the Middle Ages. In the midst of the verdure of this wall of mountains, they stood out with a snowy whiteness.

What a country of verdure and shade is Japan; what an unlooked-for Eden!

Beyond us, at sea, it must have been full daylight; but here, in the depths of the valley, we already felt the impression of evening; beneath the summits in full sunlight, the base of the mountains and all the thickly wooded parts near the water's edge were steeped in twilight.

The passing junks, gleaming white against the background of dark foliage, were silently and dexterously manoeuvred by small, yellow, naked men, with long hair piled up on their heads in feminine fashion. Gradually, as we advanced farther up the green channel, the perfumes became more penetrating, and the monotonous chirp of the cicalas swelled out like an orchestral crescendo. Above us, against the luminous sky, sharply delineated between the mountains, a kind of hawk hovered, screaming out, with a deep, human voice, "Ha! Ha! Ha!" its melancholy call prolonged by the echoes.

All this fresh and luxuriant nature was of a peculiar Japanese type, which seemed to impress itself even on the mountain-tops, and produced the effect of a too artificial prettiness. The trees were grouped in clusters, with the pretentious grace shown on lacquered trays. Large rocks sprang up in exaggerated shapes, side by side with rounded, lawn-like hillocks; all the incongruous elements of landscape were grouped together as if artificially created.

When we looked intently, here and there we saw, often built in counterscarp on the very brink of an abyss, some old, tiny, mysterious pagoda, half hidden in the foliage of the overhanging trees, bringing to the minds of new arrivals, like ourselves, a sense of unfamiliarity and strangeness, and the feeling that in this country the spirits, the sylvan gods, the antique symbols, faithful guardians of the woods and forests, were unknown and incomprehensible.

When Nagasaki appeared, the view was rather disappointing. Situated at the foot of green overhanging mountains, it looked like any other ordinary town. In front of it lay a tangled mass of vessels, flying all the flags of the world; steamboats, just as in any other port, with dark funnels and black smoke, and behind them quays covered with warehouses and factories; nothing was wanting in the way of ordinary, trivial, every-day objects.

Some time, when man shall have made all things alike, the earth will be a dull, tedious dwelling-place, and we shall have even to give up travelling and seeking for a change which can no longer be found.

About six o'clock we dropped anchor noisily amid the mass of vessels already in the harbor, and were immediately invaded.

We were visited by a mercantile, bustling, comical Japan, which rushed upon us in full boat-loads, in waves, like a rising sea. Little men and little women came in a continuous, uninterrupted stream, but without cries, without squabbles, noiselessly, each one making so smiling a bow that it was impossible to be angry with them, so that by reflex action we smiled and bowed also. They carried on their backs little baskets, tiny boxes, receptacles of every shape, fitting into one another in the most ingenious manner, each containing several others, and multiplying till they filled up everything, in endless number. From these they drew forth all manner of curious and unexpected things: folding screens, slippers, soap, lanterns, sleeve-links, live cicadas chirping in little cages, jewelry, tame white mice turning little cardboard mills, quaint photographs, hot soups and stews in bowls, ready to be served out in rations to the crew;—china, a legion of vases, teapots, cups, little pots and plates. In one moment, all this was unpacked, spread out with astounding rapidity and a certain talent for arrangement; each seller squatting monkey-like, hands touching feet, behind his fancy ware—always smiling, bending low with the most engaging bows. Under the mass of these many-colored things, the deck presented the appearance of an immense bazaar; the sailors, very much amused and full of fun, walked among the heaped-up piles, taking the little women by the chin, buying anything and everything; throwing broadcast their white dollars. But how ugly, mean, and grotesque all those folk were! I began to feel singularly uneasy and disenchanted regarding my possible marriage.

Yves and I were on duty till the next morning, and after the first bustle, which always takes place on board when settling down in harbor—boats to lower, booms to swing out, running rigging to make taut—we had nothing more to do but look on. We said to each other: "Where are we in reality?—In the United States?—In some English colony in Australia, or in New Zealand?"

Consular residences, custom-house offices, manufactories; a dry dock in which a Russian frigate was lying; on the heights the large European concession, sprinkled with villas, and on the quays, American bars for the sailors. Farther off, it is true, far away behind these commonplace objects, in the very depths of the vast green valley, peered thousands upon thousands of tiny black houses, a tangled mass of curious appearance, from which here and there emerged some higher, dark red, painted roofs, probably the true old Japanese Nagasaki, which still exists. And in those quarters—who knows?—there may be, lurking behind a paper screen, some affected, cat's-eyed little woman, whom perhaps in two or three days (having no time to lose) I shall marry! But no, the picture painted by my fancy has faded. I can no longer see this little creature in my mind's eye; the sellers of the white mice have blurred her image; I fear now, lest she should be like them.

At nightfall the decks were suddenly cleared as by enchantment; in a second they had shut up their boxes, folded their sliding screens and their trick fans, and, humbly bowing to each of us, the little men and little women disappeared.

Slowly, as the shades of night closed around us, mingling all things in the bluish darkness, Japan became once more, little by little, a fairy-like and enchanted country. The great mountains, now black, were mirrored and doubled in the still water at their feet, reflecting therein their sharply reversed outlines, and presenting the mirage of fearful precipices, over which we seemed to hang. The stars also were reversed in their order, making, in the depths of the imaginary abyss, a sprinkling of tiny phosphorescent lights.

Then all Nagasaki became profusely illuminated, sparkling with multitudes of lanterns: the smallest suburb, the smallest village was lighted up; the tiniest but perched up among the trees, which in the daytime was invisible, threw out its little glowworm glimmer. Soon there were innumerable lights all over the country on all the shores of the bay, from top to bottom of the mountains; myriads of glowing fires shone out in the darkness, conveying the impression of a vast capital rising around us in one bewildering amphitheatre. Beneath, in the silent waters, another town, also illuminated, seemed to descend into the depths of the abyss. The night was balmy, pure, delicious; the atmosphere laden with the perfume of flowers came wafted to us from the mountains. From the tea-houses and other nocturnal resorts, the sound of guitars reached our ears, seeming in the distance the sweetest of music. And the whirr of the cicadas—which, in Japan, is one of the continuous noises of life, and which in a few days we shall no longer even be aware of, so completely is it the background and foundation of all other terrestrial sounds—was sonorous, incessant, softly monotonous, like the murmur of a waterfall.

CHAPTER III

THE GARDEN OF FLOWERS

The next day the rain fell in torrents, merciless and unceasing, blinding and drenching everything—a rain so dense that it was impossible to see through it from one end of the vessel to the other. It seemed as if the clouds of the whole world had amassed themselves in Nagasaki Bay, and chosen this great green funnel to stream down. And so thickly did the rain fall that it became almost as dark as night. Through a veil of restless water, we still perceived the base of the mountains, but the summits were lost to sight among the great dark masses overshadowing us. Above us shreds of clouds, seemingly torn from the dark vault, dragged across the trees, like gray rags—continually melting away in torrents of water. The wind howled through the ravines with a deep tone. The whole surface of the bay, bespattered by the rain, flogged by the gusts of wind that blew from all quarters, splashed, moaned, and seethed in violent agitation.

What depressing weather for a first landing, and how was I to find a wife through such a deluge, in an unknown country?

No matter! I dressed myself and said to Yves, who smiled at my obstinate determination in spite of unfavorable circumstances:

"Hail me a 'sampan,' brother, please."

Yves then, by a motion of his arm through the wind and rain, summoned a kind of little, white, wooden sarcophagus which was skipping near us on the waves, sculled by two yellow boys stark naked in the rain. The craft approached us, I jumped into it, then through a little trap-door shaped like a rat-trap that one of the scullers threw open for me, I slipped in and stretched myself at full length on a mat in what is called the "cabin" of a sampan.

There was just room enough for my body to lie in this floating coffin, which was scrupulously clean, white with the whiteness of new deal boards. I was well sheltered from the rain, that fell pattering on my lid, and thus I started for the town, lying in this box, flat on my stomach, rocked by one wave, roughly shaken by another, at moments almost overturned; and through the half-opened door of my rat-trap I saw, upside-down, the two little creatures to whom I had entrusted my fate, children of eight or ten years of age at the most, who, with little monkeyish faces, had, however, fully developed muscles, like miniature men, and were already as skilful as regular old salts.

Suddenly they began to shout; no doubt we were approaching the landing-place. And indeed, through my trap-door, which I had now thrown wide open, I saw quite near to me the gray flagstones on the quays. I got out of my sarcophagus and prepared to set foot on Japanese soil for the first time in my life.

All was streaming around us, and the tiresome rain dashed into my eyes.

Hardly had I landed, when there bounded toward me a dozen strange beings, of what description it was almost impossible to distinguish through the blinding rain—a species of human hedgehog, each dragging some large black object; they came screaming around me and stopped my progress. One of them opened and held over my head an enormous, closely-ribbed umbrella, decorated on its transparent surface with paintings of storks; and they all smiled at me in an engaging manner, with an air of expectation.

I had been forewarned; these were only the djins who were touting for the honor of my preference; nevertheless I was startled at this sudden attack, this Japanese welcome on a first visit to land (the djins or djin-richisans, are the runners who drag little carts, and are paid for conveying people to and fro, being hired by the hour or the distance, as cabs are hired in Europe).

Their legs were naked; to-day they were very wet, and their heads were hidden under large, shady, conical hats. By way of waterproofs they wore nothing less than mats of straw, with all the ends of the straws turned outward, bristling like porcupines; they seemed clothed in a thatched roof. They continued to smile, awaiting my choice.

Not having the honor of being acquainted with any of them in particular, I chose at haphazard the djin with the umbrella and got into his little cart, of which he carefully lowered the hood. He drew an oilcloth apron over my knees, pulling it up to my face, and then advancing, asked me, in Japanese, something which must have meant: "Where to, sir?" To which I replied, in the same language, "To the Garden of Flowers, my friend."

I said this in the three words I had, parrot-like, learned by heart, astonished that such sounds could mean anything, astonished, too, at their being understood. We started, he running at full speed, I dragged along and jerked about in his light chariot, wrapped in oilcloth, shut up as if in a box—both of us unceasingly drenched all the while, and dashing all around us the water and mud of the sodden ground.

"To the Garden of Flowers," I had said, like a habitual frequenter of the place, and quite surprised at hearing myself speak. But I was less ignorant about Japan than might have been supposed. Many of my friends, on their return home from that country, had told me about it, and I knew a great deal; the Garden of Flowers is a tea-house, an elegant rendezvous. There I should inquire for a certain Kangourou-San, who is at the same time interpreter, laundryman, and confidential agent for the intercourse of races. Perhaps this very evening, if all went well, I should be introduced to the bride destined for me by mysterious fate. This thought kept my mind on the alert during the panting journey we made, the djin and I, one dragging the other, under the merciless downpour.

Oh, what a curious Japan I saw that day, through the gaping of my oilcloth coverings, from under the dripping hood of my little cart! A sullen, muddy, half-drowned Japan. All these houses, men, and beasts, hitherto known to me only in drawings; all these, that I had beheld painted on blue or pink backgrounds of fans or vases, now appeared to me in their hard reality, under a dark sky, with umbrellas and wooden shoes, with tucked-up skirts and pitiful aspect.

At times the rain fell so heavily that I closed up tightly every chink and crevice, and the noise and shaking benumbed me, so that I completely forgot in what country I was. In the hood of the cart were holes, through which little streams ran down my back. Then, remembering that I was going for the first time in my life through the very heart of Nagasaki, I cast an inquiring look outside, at the risk of receiving a drenching: we were trotting along through a mean, narrow, little back street (there are thousands like it, a labyrinth of them), the rain falling in cascades from the tops of the roofs on the gleaming flagstones below, rendering everything indistinct and vague through the misty atmosphere. At times we passed a woman struggling with her skirts, unsteadily tripping along in her high wooden shoes, looking exactly like the figures painted on screens, cowering under a gaudily daubed paper umbrella. Again, we passed a pagoda, where an old granite monster, squatting in the water, seemed to make a hideous, ferocious grimace at me.

How large this Nagasaki is! Here had we been running hard for the last hour, and still it seemed never-ending. It is a flat plain, and one never would suppose from the view in the offing that so vast a plain lies in the depth of this valley.

It would, however, have been impossible for me to say where I was, or in what direction we had run; I abandoned my fate to my djin and to my good luck.

What a steam-engine of a man my djin was! I had been accustomed to the Chinese runners, but they were nothing beside this fellow. When I part my oilcloth to peep at anything, he is naturally always the first object in my foreground; his two naked, brown, muscular legs, scampering along, splashing all around, and his bristling hedgehog back bending low in the rain. Do the passers-by, gazing at this little dripping cart, guess that it contains a suitor in quest of a bride?

At last my vehicle stops, and my djin, with many smiles and precautions lest any fresh rivers should stream down my back, lowers the hood of the cart; there is a break in the storm, and the rain has ceased. I had not yet seen his face; as an exception to the general rule, he is good-looking; a young man of about thirty years of age, of intelligent and strong appearance, and a frank countenance. Who could have foreseen that a few days later this very djin? But no, I will not anticipate, and run the risk of throwing beforehand any discredit on Chrysantheme.

We had therefore reached our destination, and found ourselves at the foot of a high, overhanging mountain; probably beyond the limits of the town, in some suburban district. It apparently became necessary to continue our journey on foot, and to climb up an almost perpendicular narrow path.

Around us, a number of small country-houses, garden-walls, and high bamboo palisades shut off the view. The green hill crushed us with its towering height; the heavy, dark clouds lowering over our heads seemed like a leaden canopy confining us in this unknown spot; it really seemed as if the complete absence of perspective inclined one all the better to notice the details of this tiny corner, muddy and wet, of homely Japan, now lying before our eyes. The earth was very red. The grasses and wild flowers bordering the pathway were strange to me; nevertheless, the palings were covered with convolvuli like our own, and I recognized china asters, zinnias, and other familiar flowers in the gardens. The atmosphere seemed laden with a curiously complicated odor, something besides the perfume of the plants and soil, arising no doubt from the human dwelling-places—a mingled odor, I fancied, of dried fish and incense. Not a creature was to be seen; of the inhabitants, of their homes and

life, there was not a vestige, and I might have imagined myself anywhere in the world.

My djin had fastened his little cart under a tree, and together we climbed the steep path on the slippery red soil.

"We are going to the Garden of Flowers, are we not?" I inquired, desirous to ascertain whether I had been understood.

"Yes, yes," replied the djin, "it is up there, and quite near."

The road turned, steep banks hemming it in and darkening it. On one side it skirted the mountain, all covered with a tangle of wet ferns; on the other appeared a large wooden house almost devoid of openings and of evil aspect; it was there that my djin halted.

What, was that sinister-looking house the Garden of Flowers? He assured me that it was, and seemed very sure of the fact. We knocked at a large door which opened immediately, slipping back in its groove. Then two funny little women appeared, oldish-looking, but with evident pretensions to youth: exact types of the figures painted on vases, with their tiny hands and feet.

On catching sight of me they threw themselves on all fours, their faces touching the floor. Good gracious! What can be the matter? I asked myself. Nothing at all, it was only the ceremonious salute, to which I am as yet unaccustomed. They arose, and proceeded to take off my boots (one never keeps on one's shoes in a Japanese house), wiping the bottoms of my trousers, and feeling my shoulders to see whether I am wet.

What always strikes one on first entering a Japanese dwelling is the extreme cleanliness, the white and chilling bareness of the rooms.

Over the most irreproachable mattings, without a crease, a line, or a stain, I was led upstairs to the first story and ushered into a large, empty room—absolutely empty! The paper walls were mounted on sliding panels, which, fitting into each other, can be made to disappear—and all one side of the apartment opened like a veranda, giving a view of the green country and the gray sky beyond. By way of a chair, they gave me a square cushion of black velvet; and behold me seated low, in the middle of this large, empty room, which by its very vastness is almost chilly. The two little women (who are the servants of the house and my very humble servants, too), awaited my orders, in attitudes expressive of the profoundest humility.

It seemed extraordinary that the quaint words, the curious phrases I had learned during our exile at the Pescadores Islands—by sheer dint of dictionary and grammar, without attaching the least sense to them—should mean anything. But so it seemed, however, for I was at once understood.

I wished in the first place to speak to one M. Kangourou, who is interpreter, laundryman, and matrimonial agent. Nothing could be easier: they knew him and were willing to go at once in search of him; and the elder of the waiting-maids made ready for the purpose her wooden clogs and her paper umbrella.

Next I demanded a well-served repast, composed of the greatest delicacies of Japan. Better and better! they rushed to the kitchen to order it.

Finally, I beg they will give tea and rice to my djin, who is waiting for me below; I wish,—in short, I wish many things, my dear little dolls, which I will mention by degrees and with due deliberation, when I shall have had time to assemble the necessary words. But the more I look at you the more uneasy I feel as to what my fiancée of to-morrow may be like. Almost pretty, I grant you, you are—in virtue of quaintness, delicate hands, miniature feet, but ugly, after all, and absurdly small. You look like little monkeys, like little china ornaments, like I don't know what. I begin to understand that I have arrived at this house at an ill-chosen moment. Something is going on which does not concern me, and I feel that I am in the way.

From the beginning I might have guessed as much, notwithstanding the excessive politeness of my welcome; for I remember now, that while they were taking off my boots downstairs, I heard a murmuring chatter overhead, then a noise of panels moved quickly along their grooves, evidently to hide from me something not intended for me to see; they were improvising for me the apartment in which I now am just as in menageries they make a separate compartment for some beasts when the public is admitted.

Now I am left alone while my orders are being executed, and I listen attentively, squatted like a Buddha on my black velvet cushion, in the midst of the whiteness of the walls and mats.

Behind the paper partitions, feeble voices, seemingly numerous, are talking in low tones. Then rises the sound of a guitar, and the song of a woman, plaintive and gentle in the echoing sonority of the bare house, in the melancholy of the rainy weather.

What one can see through the wide-open veranda is very pretty; I will admit that it resembles the landscape of a fairytale. There are admirably wooded mountains, climbing high into the dark and gloomy sky, and hiding in it the peaks of their summits, and, perched up among the clouds, is a temple. The atmosphere has that absolute transparency, that distance and clearness which follows a great fall of rain; but a thick pall, still heavy with moisture, remains suspended over all, and on the foliage of the hanging woods still float great flakes of gray fluff, which remain there, motionless. In the foreground, in front of and below this almost fantastic landscape, is a miniature garden where two beautiful white cats are taking the air, amusing themselves by pursuing each other through the paths of a Lilliputian labyrinth, shaking the wet sand from their paws. The garden is as conventional as possible: not a flower, but little rocks, little lakes, dwarf trees cut in grotesque fashion; all this is not natural, but it is most ingeniously arranged, so green, so full of fresh mosses!

In the rain-soaked country below me, to the very farthest end of the vast scene, reigns a great silence, an absolute calm. But the woman's voice, behind the paper wall, continues to sing in a key of gentle sadness, and the accompanying guitar has sombre and even gloomy notes.

Stay, though! Now the music is somewhat quicker—one might even suppose they were dancing!

So much the worse! I shall try to look between the fragile divisions, through a crack which has revealed itself to my notice.

What a singular spectacle it is; evidently the gilded youth of Nagasaki holding a great clandestine orgy! In an apartment as bare as my own, there are a dozen of them, seated in a circle on the ground, attired in long blue cotton dresses with pagoda sleeves, long, sleek, and greasy hair surmounted by European pot-hats; and beneath these, yellow, worn-out, bloodless, foolish faces. On the floor are a number of little spirit-lamps, little pipes, little lacquer trays, little teapots, little cups—all the accessories and all the remains of a Japanese feast, resembling nothing so much as a doll's tea-party. In the midst of this circle of dandies are three overdressed women, one might say three weird visions, robed in garments of pale and indefinable colors, embroidered with golden monsters; their great coiffures are arranged with fantastic art, stuck full of pins and flowers. Two are seated with their backs turned to me: one is holding the guitar, the other singing with that soft, pretty voice; thus seen furtively, from behind, their pose, their hair, the nape of their necks, all is exquisite, and I tremble lest a movement should reveal to me faces which might destroy the enchantment. The third girl is on her feet, dancing before this areopagus of idiots, with their lanky locks and pot-hats. What a shock when she turns round! She wears over her face the horribly grinning, death-like mask of a spectre or a vampire. The mask unfastened, falls. And behold! a darling little fairy of about twelve or fifteen years of age, slim, and already a coquette, already a woman—dressed in a long robe of shaded dark-blue china crape, covered with embroidery representing bats—gray bats, black bats, golden bats.

Suddenly there are steps on the stairs, the light foot steps of barefooted women pattering over the white mats. No doubt the first course of my luncheon is just about to be served. I fall back quickly, fixed and motionless, upon my black velvet cushion. There are three of them now, three waiting-maids who arrive in single file, with smiles and curtsies. One offers me the spirit-lamp and the teapot; another, preserved fruits in delightful little plates; the third, absolutely indefinable objects upon gems of little trays. And they grovel before me on the floor, placing all this plaything of a meal at my feet.

At this moment, my impressions of Japan are charming enough; I feel myself fairly launched upon this tiny, artificial, fictitious world, which I felt I knew already from the paintings on lacquer and porcelains. It is so exact a representation! The three little squatting women, graceful and dainty, with their narrow slits of eyes, their magnificent coiffures in huge bows, smooth and shining as shoe-polish, and the little tea-service on the floor, the landscape seen through the veranda, the pagoda perched among the clouds; and over all the same affectation everywhere, in every detail. Even the woman's melancholy voice, still to be heard behind the paper partition, was evidently the proper way for them to sing—these musicians I had so often seen painted in amazing colors on rice-paper, half closing their dreamy eyes among impossibly large flowers. Long before I arrived there, I had perfectly pictured Japan to myself. Nevertheless, in the reality it almost seems to be smaller, more finicking than I had imagined it, and also much more mournful, no doubt by reason of that great pall of black clouds hanging over us, and this incessant rain.

While awaiting M. Kangourou (who is dressing himself, it appears, and will be here shortly), it may be as well to begin luncheon.

In the daintiest bowl imaginable, adorned with flights of storks, is the most wildly impossible soup

made of seaweed. After which there are little fish dried in sugar, crabs in sugar, beans in sugar, and fruits in vinegar and pepper. All this is atrocious, but above all unexpected and unimaginable. The little women make me eat, laughing much, with that perpetual, irritating laugh which is peculiar to Japan—they make me eat, according to their fashion, with dainty chop-sticks, fingered with affected grace. I am becoming accustomed to their faces. The whole effect is refined—a refinement so entirely different from our own that at first sight I understand nothing of it, although in the long run it may end by pleasing me.

Suddenly enters, like a night butterfly awakened in broad daylight, like a rare and surprising moth, the dancing-girl from the other compartment, the child who wore the horrible mask. No doubt she wishes to have a look at me. She rolls her eyes like a timid kitten, and then all at once tamed, nestles against me, with a coaxing air of childishness, which is a delightfully transparent assumption. She is slim, elegant, delicate, and smells sweet; she is drolly painted, white as plaster, with a little circle of rouge marked very precisely in the middle of each cheek, the mouth reddened, and a touch of gilding outlining the under lip. As they could not whiten the back of her neck on account of all the delicate little curls of hair growing there, they had, in their love of exactitude, stopped the white plaster in a straight line, which might have been cut with a knife, and in consequence at the nape appears a square of natural skin of a deep yellow.

An imperious note sounds on the guitar, evidently a summons! Crac! Away she goes, the little fairy, to entertain the drivelling fools on the other side of the screens.

Suppose I marry this one, without seeking any further. I should respect her as a child committed to my care; I should take her for what she is: a fantastic and charming plaything. What an amusing little household I should set up! Really, short of marrying a china ornament, I should find it difficult to choose better.

At this moment enters M. Kangourou, clad in a suit of gray tweed, which might have come from La Belle Jardiniere or the Pont Neuf, with a pot-hat and white thread gloves. His countenance is at once foolish and cunning; he has hardly any nose or eyes. He makes a real Japanese salutation: an abrupt dip, the hands placed flat on the knees, the body making a right angle to the legs, as if the fellow were breaking in two; a little snake-like hissing (produced by sucking the saliva between the teeth, which is the highest expression of obsequious politeness in this country).

"You speak French, Monsieur Kangourou?"

"Yes, Monsieur" (renewed bows).

He makes one for each word I utter, as if he were a mechanical toy pulled by a string; when he is seated before me on the ground, he limits himself to a duck of the head—always accompanied by the same hissing noise of the saliva.

"A cup of tea, Monsieur Kangourou?"

Fresh salute and an extra affected gesticulation with the hands, as if to say, "I should hardly dare. It is too great a condescension on your part. However, anything to oblige you."

He guesses at the first words what I require from him.

"Of course," he replies, "we shall see about it at once. In a week's time, as it happens, a family from Simonoseki, in which there are two charming daughters, will be here!"

"What! in a week! You don't know me, Monsieur Kangourou! No, no, either now, to-morrow, or not at all."

Again a hissing bow, and Kangourou-San, understanding my agitation, begins to pass in feverish review all the young persons at his disposal in Nagasaki.

"Let us see—there was Mademoiselle Oeillet. What a pity that you did not speak a few days sooner! So pretty! So clever at playing the guitar! It is an irreparable misfortune; she was engaged only yesterday by a Russian officer.

"Ah! Mademoiselle Abricot!—Would she suit you, Mademoiselle Abricot? She is the daughter of a wealthy China merchant in the Decima Bazaar, a person of the highest merit; but she would be very dear: her parents, who think a great deal of her, will not let her go under a hundred yen— [A yen is equal to four shillings.]—a month. She is very accomplished, thoroughly understands commercial writing, and has at her fingers'-ends more than two thousand characters of learned writing. In a poetical competition she gained the first prize with a sonnet composed in praise of 'the blossoms of the

blackthorn hedges seen in the dew of early morning.' Only, she is not very pretty: one of her eyes is smaller than the other, and she has a hole in her cheek, resulting from an illness of her childhood."

"Oh, no! on no account that one! Let us seek among a less distinguished class of young persons, but without scars. And how about those on the other side of the screen, in those fine gold-embroidered dresses? For instance, the dancer with the spectre mask, Monsieur Kangourou? or again she who sings in so dulcet a strain and has such a charming nape to her neck?"

He does not, at first, understand my drift; then when he gathers my meaning, he shakes his head almost in a joking way, and says:

"No, Monsieur, no! Those are only geishas,—[Geishas are professional dancers and singers trained at the Yeddo Conservatory.]—Monsieur— geishas!"

"Well, but why not a geisha? What difference can it make to me whether they are geishas or not?" Later, no doubt, when I understand Japanese affairs better, I shall appreciate myself the enormity of my proposal: one would really suppose I had talked of marrying the devil.

At this point M. Kangourou suddenly calls to mind one Mademoiselle Jasmin. Heavens! how was it he had not thought of her at once? She is absolutely and exactly what I want; he will go to-morrow, or this very evening, to make the necessary overtures to the parents of this young person, who live a long way off, on the opposite hill, in the suburb of Diou-djen-dji. She is a very pretty girl of about fifteen. She can probably be engaged for about eighteen or twenty dollars a month, on condition of presenting her with a few costumes of the best fashion, and of lodging her in a pleasant and well-situated house—all of which a man of gallantry like myself could not fail to do.

Well, let us fix upon Mademoiselle Jasmin, then—and now we must part; time presses. M. Kangourou will come on board to-morrow to communicate to me the result of his first proceedings and to arrange with me for the interview. For the present he refuses to accept any remuneration; but I am to give him my washing, and to procure him the custom of my brother officers of the 'Triomphante.' It is all settled. Profound bows—they put on my boots again at the door. My djin, profiting by the interpreter kind fortune has placed in his way, begs to be recommended to me for future custom; his stand is on the quay; his number is 415, inscribed in French characters on the lantern of his vehicle (we have a number 415 on board, one Le Goelec, gunner, who serves the left of one of my guns; happy thought! I shall remember this); his price is sixpence the journey, or five-pence an hour, for his customers. Capital! he shall have my custom, that is promised. And now, let us be off. The waiting- maids, who have escorted me to the door, fall on all fours as a final salute, and remain prostrate on the threshold as long as I am still in sight down the dark pathway, where the rain trickles off the great overarching bracken upon my head.

CHAPTER IV

CHOOSING A BRIDE

Three days have passed. Night is closing, in an apartment which has been mine since yesterday. Yves and I, on the first floor, move restlessly over the white mats, striding to and fro in the great bare room, of which the thin, dry flooring cracks beneath our footsteps; we are both rather irritated by prolonged expectation. Yves, whose impatience shows itself more freely, from time to time looks out of the window. As for myself, a chill suddenly seizes me, at the idea that I have chosen to inhabit this lonely house, lost in the midst of the suburb of a totally strange town, perched high on the mountain and almost opening upon the woods.

What wild notion could have taken possession of me, to settle myself in surroundings so foreign and unknown, breathing of isolation and sadness? The waiting unnerves me, and I beguile the time by examining all the little details of the building. The woodwork of the ceiling is complicated and ingenious. On the partitions of white paper which form the walls, are scattered tiny, microscopic, blue-feathered tortoises.

"They are late," said Yves, who is still looking out into the street.

As to being late, that they certainly are, by a good hour already, and night is falling, and the boat which should take us back to dine on board will be gone. Probably we shall have to sup Japanese

fashion tonight, heaven only knows where. The people of this country have no sense of punctuality, or of the value of time.

Therefore I continue to inspect the minute and comical details of my dwelling. Here, instead of handles such as we should have made to pull these movable partitions, they have made little oval-holes, just the shape of a finger-end, into which one is evidently to put one's thumb. These little holes have a bronze ornamentation, and, on looking closely, one sees that the bronze is curiously chased: here is a lady fanning herself; there, in the next hole, is represented a branch of cherry in full blossom. What eccentricity there is in the taste of this people! To bestow assiduous labor on such miniature work, and then to hide it at the bottom of a hole to put one's finger in, looking like a mere spot in the middle of a great white panel; to accumulate so much patient and delicate workmanship on almost imperceptible accessories, and all to produce an effect which is absolutely nil, an effect of the most complete bareness and nudity.

Yves still continues to gaze forth, like Sister Anne. From the side on which he leans, my veranda overlooks a street, or rather a road bordered with houses, which climbs higher and higher, and loses itself almost immediately in the verdure of the mountain, in the fields of tea, the underwood and the cemeteries. As for myself, this delay finally irritates me thoroughly, and I turn my glances to the opposite side. The other end of my house, also a veranda, opens first of all upon a garden; then upon a marvellous panorama of woods and mountains, with all the venerable Japanese quarters of Nagasaki lying confusedly like a black ant-heap, six hundred feet below us. This evening, in a dull twilight, notwithstanding that it is a twilight of July, these things are melancholy. Great clouds heavy with rain and showers, ready to fall, are travelling across the sky. No, I can not feel at home in this strange dwelling I have chosen; I feel sensations of extreme solitude and strangeness; the mere prospect of passing the night in it gives me a shudder of horror.

"Ah! at last, brother," said Yves, "I believe—yes, I really believe she is coming at last."

I look over his shoulder, and I see a back view of a little doll, the finishing touches to whose toilette are being put in the solitary street; a last maternal glance is given the enormous bows of the sash, the folds at the waist. Her dress is of pearl-gray silk, her obi (sash) of mauve satin; a sprig of silver flowers trembles in her black hair; a parting ray of sunlight touches the little figure; five or six persons accompany her. Yes! it is undoubtedly Mademoiselle Jasmin; they are bringing me my fiancée!

I rush to the ground floor, inhabited by old Madame Prune, my landlady, and her aged husband; they are absorbed in prayer before the altar of their ancestors.

"Here they are, Madame Prune," I cry in Japanese; "here they are! Bring at once the tea, the lamp, the embers, the little pipes for the ladies, the little bamboo pots! Bring up, as quickly as possible, all the accessories for my reception!"

I hear the front door open, and hasten upstairs again. Wooden clogs are deposited on the floor, the staircase creaks gently under little bare feet. Yves and I look at each other, with a longing to laugh.

An old lady enters—two old ladies—three old ladies, emerging from the doorway one after another with jerking and mechanical salutations, which we return as best we can, fully conscious of our inferiority in this particular style. Then come persons of intermediate age—then quite young ones, a dozen at least, friends, neighbors, the whole quarter, in fact. And the entire company, on arriving, becomes confusedly engaged in reciprocal salutations: I salute you—you salute me—I salute you again, and you return it—and I re-salute you again, and I express that I shall never, never be able to return it according to your high merit—and I bang my forehead against the ground, and you stick your nose between the planks of the flooring, and there they are, on all fours one before another; it is a polite dispute, all eager to yield precedence as to sitting down, or passing first, and compliments without end are murmured in low tones, with faces against the floor.

They seat themselves at last, smiling, in a ceremonious circle; we two remaining standing, our eyes fixed on the staircase. And at length emerges the little aigrette of silver flowers, the ebony coiffure, the gray silk robe and mauve sash of Mademoiselle Jasmin, my fiancée!

Heavens! why, I know her already! Long before setting foot in Japan, I had met her, on every fan, on every teacup with her silly air, her puffy little face, her tiny eyes, mere gimlet-holes above those expanses of impossible pink and white cheeks.

She is young, that is all I can say in her favor; she is even so young that I should almost scruple to accept her. The wish to laugh leaves me suddenly, and instead, a profound chill seizes my heart. What! share even an hour of my life with that little doll? Never!

The next question is, how to get rid of her.

She advances smiling, with an air of repressed triumph, and behind her looms M. Kangourou, in his suit of gray tweed. Fresh salutes, and behold her on all fours, she too, before my landlady and before my neighbors. Yves, the big Yves, who is not about to be married, stands behind me, with a comical grimace, hardly repressing his laughter—while to give myself time to collect my ideas, I offer tea in little cups, little spittoons, and embers to the company.

Nevertheless, my discomfited air does not escape my visitors.

M. Kangourou anxiously inquires:

"How do you like her?" And I reply in a low voice, but with great resolution:

"Not at all! I won't have that one. Never!"

I believe that this remark was almost understood in the circle around me. Consternation was depicted on every face, jaws dropped, and pipes went out. And now I address my reproaches to Kangourou: "Why have you brought her to me in such pomp, before friends and neighbors of both sexes, instead of showing her to me discreetly, as if by chance, as I had wished? What an affront you will compel me now to put upon all these polite persons!"

The old ladies (the mamma, no doubt, and aunts), prick up their ears, and M. Kangourou translates to them, softening as much as possible, my heartrending decision. I feel really almost sorry for them; the fact is, that for women who, not to put too fine a point upon it, have come to sell a child, they have an air I was not prepared for: I can hardly say an air of respectability (a word in use with us which is absolutely without meaning in Japan), but an air of unconscious and good-natured simplicity. They are only doing a thing that is perfectly admissible in their world, and really it all resembles, more than I could have thought possible, a bona fide marriage.

"But what fault do you find with the little girl?" asks M. Kangourou, in consternation.

I endeavor to present the matter in the most flattering light:

"She is very young," I say; "and then she is too white, too much like our own women. I wished for one with an ivory skin, just as a change."

"But that is only the paint they have put on her, Monsieur! Beneath it, I assure you, she is of an ivory hue."

Yves leans toward me and whispers:

"Look over there, brother, in that corner by the last panel; have you noticed the one who is sitting down?"

Not I. In my annoyance I had not observed her; she had her back to the light, was dressed in dark colors, and sat in the careless attitude of one who keeps in the background. The fact is, this one pleased me much better. Eyes with long lashes, rather narrow, but which would have been called good in any country in the world; with almost an expression, almost a thought. A coppery tint on her rounded cheeks; a straight nose; slightly thick lips, but well modelled and with pretty corners. A little older than Mademoiselle Jasmin, about eighteen years of age perhaps, already more of a woman. She wore an expression of ennui, also of a little contempt, as if she regretted her attendance at a spectacle which dragged so much, and was so little amusing.

"Monsieur Kangourou, who is that young lady over there, in dark blue?"

"Over there, Monsieur? She is called Mademoiselle Chrysantheme. She came with the others you see here; she is only here as a spectator. She pleases you?" said he, with eager suddenness, espying a way out of his difficulty. Then, forgetting all his politeness, all his ceremoniousness, all his Japanesery, he takes her by the hand, forces her to rise, to stand in the dying daylight, to let herself be seen. And she, who has followed our eyes and begins to guess what is on foot, lowers her head in confusion, with a more decided but more charming pout, and tries to step back, half-sulky, half-smiling.

"It makes no difference," continues M. Kangourou, "it can be arranged just as well with this one; she is not married either, Monsieur!"

She is not married! Then why didn't the idiot propose her to me at once instead of the other, for whom I have a feeling of the greatest pity, poor little soul, with her pearl-gray dress, her sprig of flowers, her now sad and mortified expression, and her eyes which twinkle like those of a child about to cry.

"It can be arranged, Monsieur!" repeats Kangourou again, who at this moment appears to me a go-between of the lowest type, a rascal of the meanest kind.

Only, he adds, we, Yves and I, are in the way during the negotiations. And, while Mademoiselle Chrysantheme remains with her eyelids lowered, as befits the occasion, while the various families, on whose countenances may be read every degree of astonishment, every phase of expectation, remain seated in a circle on my white mats, he sends us two into the veranda, and we gaze down into the depths below us, upon a misty and vague Nagasaki, a Nagasaki melting into a blue haze of darkness.

Then ensue long discourses in Japanese, arguments without end. M. Kangourou, who is laundryman and low scamp in French only, has returned for these discussions to the long formulas of his country. From time to time I express impatience, I ask this worthy creature, whom I am less and less able to consider in a serious light:

"Come now, tell us frankly, Kangourou, are we any nearer coming to some arrangement? Is all this ever going to end?"

"In a moment, Monsieur, in a moment;" and he resumes his air of political economist seriously debating social problems.

Well, one must submit to the slowness of this people. And, while the darkness falls like a veil over the Japanese town, I have leisure to reflect, with as much melancholy as I please, upon the bargain that is being concluded behind me.

Night has closed in; it has been necessary to light the lamps.

It is ten o'clock when all is finally settled, and M. Kangourou comes to tell me:

"All is arranged, Monsieur: her parents will give her up for twenty dollars a month—the same price as Mademoiselle Jasmin."

On hearing this, I am possessed suddenly with extreme vexation that I should have made up my mind so quickly to link myself in ever so fleeting and transient a manner with this little creature, and dwell with her in this isolated house.

We return to the room; she is the centre of the circle and seated; and they have placed the aigrette of flowers in her hair. There is actually some expression in her glance, and I am almost persuaded that she—this one—thinks.

Yves is astonished at her modest attitude, at her little timid airs of a young girl on the verge of matrimony; he had imagined nothing like it in such a connection as this, nor I either, I must confess.

"She is really very pretty, brother," said he; "very pretty, take my word for it!"

These good folks, their customs, this scene, strike him dumb with astonishment; he can not get over it, and remains in a maze. "Oh! this is too much," he says, and the idea of writing a long letter to his wife at Toulven, describing it all, diverts him greatly.

Chrysantheme and I join hands. Yves, too, advances and touches the dainty little paw. After all, if I wed her, it is chiefly his fault; I never should have remarked her without his observation that she was pretty. Who can tell how this strange arrangement will turn out? Is it a woman or a doll? Well, time will show.

The families, having lighted their many-colored lanterns swinging at the ends of slight sticks, prepare to retire with many compliments, bows, and curtsies. When it is a question of descending the stairs, no one is willing to go first, and at a given moment, the whole party are again on all fours, motionless and murmuring polite phrases in undertones.

"Haul back there!" said Yves, laughing, and employing a nautical term used when there is a stoppage of any kind.

At length they all melt away, descending the stairs with a last buzzing accompaniment of civilities and polite phrases finished from one step to another in voices which gradually die away. He and I remain alone in the unfriendly, empty apartment, where the mats are still littered with the little cups of tea, the absurd little pipes, and the miniature trays.

"Let us watch them go away!" said Yves, leaning out. At the door of the garden is a renewal of the same salutations and curtsies, and then the two groups of women separate, their bedaubed paper lanterns fade away trembling in the distance, balanced at the extremity of flexible canes which they

hold in their fingertips as one would hold a fishing-rod in the dark to catch night-birds. The procession of the unfortunate Mademoiselle Jasmin mounts upward toward the mountain, while that of Mademoiselle Chrysantheme winds downward by a narrow old street, half- stairway, half-goat-path, which leads to the town.

Then we also depart. The night is fresh, silent, exquisite, the eternal song of the cicadas fills the air. We can still see the red lanterns of my new family, dwindling away in the distance, as they descend and gradually become lost in that yawning abyss, at the bottom of which lies Nagasaki.

Our way, too, lies downward, but on an opposite slope by steep paths leading to the sea.

And when I find myself once more on board, when the scene enacted on the hill above recurs to my mind, it seems to me that my betrothal is a joke, and my new family a set of puppets.

CHAPTER V

A FANTASTIC MARRIAGE

July 10, 1885.

Three days have passed since my marriage was an accomplished fact.

In the lower part of the town, in one of the new cosmopolitan districts, in an ugly, pretentious building, which is a sort of registry office, the deed was signed and countersigned, with marvellous hieroglyphics, in a large book, in the presence of those absurd little creatures, formerly silken-robed Samurai, but now called policemen, dressed up in tight jackets and Russian caps.

The ceremony took place in the full heat of midday; Chrysantheme and her mother arrived together, and I alone. We seemed to have met for the purpose of ratifying some discreditable contract, and the two women trembled in the presence of these ugly little men, who, in their eyes, were the personification of the law.

In the middle of their official scrawl, they made me write in French my name, Christian name, and profession. Then they gave me an extraordinary document on a sheet of rice-paper, which set forth the permission granted me by the civilian authorities of the island of Kiu-Siu, to inhabit a house situated in the suburb of Diou-djen-dji, with a person called Chrysantheme, the said permission being under the protection of the police during the whole of my stay in Japan.

In the evening, however, in our own quarter, our little marriage became a very pretty affair—a procession carrying lanterns, a festive tea and some music. All this seemed quite necessary.

Now we are almost an old married couple, and we are gently settling down into everyday habits.

Chrysantheme tends the flowers in our bronze vases, dresses herself with studied care, proud of her socks with the divided big toe, and strums all day on a kind of long-necked guitar, producing sweet and plaintive sounds.

CHAPTER VI

MY NEW MENAGE

In our home, everything looks like a Japanese picture: we have folding- screens, little odd-shaped stools bearing vases full of flowers, and at the farther end of the apartment, in a nook forming a kind of altar, a large gilded Buddha sits enthroned in a lotus.

The house is just as I had fancied it should be in the many dreams of Japan I had had before my arrival, during the long night watches: perched on high, in a peaceful suburb, in the midst of green gardens; made up of paper panels, and taken to pieces according to one's fancy, like a child's toy.

Whole families of cicadas chirp day and night under our old resounding roof. From our veranda we have a bewildering bird's-eye view of Nagasaki, of its streets, its junks, and its great pagodas, which, at certain hours, is illuminated at our feet like some scene in fairyland.

CHAPTER VII

THE LADIES OF THE FANS

Regarded as a mere outline, little Chrysantheme has been seen everywhere and by everybody. Whoever has looked at one of those paintings on china or silk that are sold in our bazaars, knows perfectly the pretty, stiff head-dress, the leaning figure, ever ready to try some new gracious salutation, the sash fastened behind in an enormous bow, the large, flowing sleeves, the drapery slightly clinging about the ankles with a little crooked train like a lizard's tail.

But her face—no, not every one has seen that; there is something special about it.

Moreover, the type of women the Japanese paint mostly on their vases is an exceptional one in their country. It is almost exclusively among the nobility that these personages are found, with their long, pale faces, painted in tender rose-tints, and silly, long necks which give them the appearance of storks. This distinguished type (which I am obliged to admit was also Mademoiselle Jasmin's) is rare, particularly at Nagasaki.

Among the middle classes and the common people, the ugliness is more pleasant and sometimes becomes a kind of prettiness. The eyes are still too small and hardly able to open, but the faces are rounder, browner, more vivacious; and in the women remains a certain vagueness of feature, something childlike which prevails to the very end of their lives.

They are so laughing, and so merry, all these little Nipponese dolls! Rather a forced mirth, it is true, studied, and at times with a false ring; nevertheless one is attracted by it.

Chrysantheme is an exception, for she is melancholy. What thoughts are running through that little brain? My knowledge of her language is still too limited to enable me to find out. Moreover, it is a hundred to one that she has no thoughts whatever. And even if she had, what do I care?

I have chosen her to amuse me, and I should really prefer that she should have one of those insignificant little thoughtless faces like all the others.

CHAPTER VIII

THE NECESSARY VEIL

When night comes on, we light two hanging lamps of religious symbolism, which burn till daylight, before our gilded idol.

We sleep on the floor, on a thin cotton mattress, which is unfolded and laid out over our white matting. Chrysantheme's pillow is a little wooden block, cut so as to fit exactly the nape of her neck, without disturbing the elaborate head-dress, which must never be taken down; the pretty black hair I shall probably never see undone. My pillow, a Chinese model, is a kind of little square drum covered over with serpent-skin.

We sleep under a gauze mosquito-net of sombre greenish-blue, dark as the shades of night, stretched out on an orange-colored ribbon. (These are the traditional colors, and all respectable families of Nagasaki possess a similar net.) It envelops us like a tent; the mosquitoes and the night-moths whirl around it.

This sounds very pretty, and written down looks very well. In reality, however, it is not so; something, I know not what, is lacking, and everything is very paltry. In other lands, in the delightful isles of

Oceania, in the old, lifeless quarters of Stamboul, it seemed as if mere words could never express all I felt, and I struggled vainly against my own inability to render, in human language, the penetrating charm surrounding me.

Here, on the contrary, words exact and truthful in themselves seem always too thrilling, too great for the subject; seem to embellish it unduly. I feel as if I were acting, for my own benefit, some wretchedly trivial and third-rate comedy; and whenever I try to consider my home in a serious spirit, the scoffing figure of M. Kangourou rises before me— the matrimonial agent, to whom I am indebted for my happiness.

CHAPTER IX

MY PLAYTHING

July 12th

Yves visits us whenever he is free, in the evening at five o'clock, after his duties on board are fulfilled.

He is our only European visitor, and, with the exception of a few civilities and cups of tea, exchanged with our neighbors, we lead a very retired life. Only in the evenings, winding our way through the steep, narrow streets and carrying our lanterns at the end of short sticks, we go down to Nagasaki in search of amusement at the theatres, at the tea-houses, or in the bazaars.

Yves treats my wife as if she were a plaything, and continually assures me that she is charming.

I find her as exasperating as the cicadas on my roof; and when I am alone at home, side by side with this little creature twanging the strings of her long-necked guitar, facing this marvellous panorama of pagodas and mountains, I am overcome by sadness almost to tears.

CHAPTER X

NOCTURNAL TERRORS

July 13th.

Last night, as we reposed under the Japanese roof of Diou-djen-dji—the thin old wooden roof scorched by a hundred years of sunshine, vibrating at the least sound, like the stretched-out parchment of a tomtom—in the silence which prevails at two o'clock in the morning, we heard overhead a sound like a regular wild huntsman's chase passing at full gallop.

"Nidzoumi!" ("The mice!") said Chrysantheme.

Suddenly the word brings back to my mind yet another phrase, spoken in a very different language, in a country far away from here: "Setchan!" a word heard elsewhere, a word that has likewise been whispered in my ear by a woman's voice, under similar circumstances, in a moment of nocturnal terror—"Setchan!" It was during one of our first nights at Stamboul spent under the mysterious roof of Eyoub, when danger surrounded us on all sides; a noise on the steps of the black staircase had made us tremble, and she also, my dear little Turkish companion, had said to me in her beloved language, "Setchan!" ("the mice!").

At that fond recollection, a thrill of sweet memories coursed through my veins; it was as if I had been startled out of a long ten years' sleep; I looked down upon the doll beside me with a sort of hatred, wondering why I was there, and I arose, with almost a feeling of remorse, to escape from that blue gauze net.

I stepped out upon the veranda, and there I paused, gazing into the depths of the starlit night. Beneath me Nagasaki lay asleep, wrapped in a soft, light slumber, hushed by the murmuring sound of a thousand insects in the moonlight, and fairy-like with its roseate hues. Then, turning my head, I saw

behind me the gilded idol with our lamps burning in front of it; the idol smiling the impassive smile of Buddha; and its presence seemed to cast around it something, I know not what, strange and incomprehensible. Never until now had I slept under the eye of such a god.

In the midst of the calm and silence of the night, I strove to recall my poignant impressions of Stamboul; but, alas, I strove in vain, they would not return to me in this strange, far-off world. Through the transparent blue gauze appeared my little Japanese, as she lay in her sombre night-robe with all the fantastic grace of her country, the nape of her neck resting on its wooden block, and her hair arranged in large, shiny bows. Her amber-tinted arms, pretty and delicate, emerged, bare up to the shoulders, from her wide sleeves.

"What can those mice on the roof have done to him?" thought Chrysantheme. Of course she could not understand. In a coaxing manner, like a playful kitten, she glanced at me with her half-closed eyes, inquiring why I did not come back to sleep—and I returned to my place by her side.

CHAPTER XI

A GAME OF ARCHERY

July 14th.

This is the National Fete day of France. In Nagasaki Harbor, all the ships are adorned with flags, and salutes are fired in our honor.

Alas! All day long, I can not help thinking of that last fourteenth of July, spent in the deep calm and quiet of my old home, the door shut against all intruders, while the gay crowd roared outside; there I had remained till evening, seated on a bench, shaded by an arbor covered with honeysuckle, where, in the bygone days of my childhood's summers, I used to settle myself with my copybooks and pretend to learn my lessons. Oh, those days when I was supposed to learn my lessons! How my thoughts used to rove—what voyages, what distant lands, what tropical forests did I not behold in my dreams! At that time, near the garden-bench, in some of the crevices in the stone wall, dwelt many a big, ugly, black spider always on the alert, peeping out of his nook ready to pounce upon any giddy fly or wandering centipede. One of my amusements consisted in tickling the spiders gently, very gently, with a blade of grass or a cherry-stalk in their webs. Mystified, they would rush out, fancying they had to deal with some sort of prey, while I would rapidly draw back my hand in disgust. Well, last year, on that fourteenth of July, as I recalled my days of Latin themes and translations, now forever flown, and this game of boyish days, I actually recognized the very same spiders (or at least their daughters), lying in wait in the very same places. Gazing at them, and at the tufts of grass and moss around me, a thousand memories of those summers of my early life welled up within me, memories which for years past had lain slumbering under this old wall, sheltered by the ivy boughs. While all that is ourselves perpetually changes and passes away, the constancy with which Nature repeats, always in the same manner, her most infinitesimal details, seems a wonderful mystery; the same peculiar species of moss grows afresh for centuries on precisely the same spot, and the same little insects each summer do the same thing in the same place.

I must admit that this episode of my childhood, and the spiders, have little to do with the story of Chrysantheme. But an incongruous interruption is quite in keeping with the taste of this country; everywhere it is practised, in conversation, in music, even in painting; a landscape painter, for instance, when he has finished a picture of mountains and crags, will not hesitate to draw, in the very middle of the sky, a circle, or a lozenge, or some kind of framework, within which he will represent anything incoherent and inappropriate: a bonze fanning himself, or a lady taking a cup of tea. Nothing is more thoroughly Japanese than such digressions, made without the slightest apology.

Moreover, if I roused my past memories, it was the better to force myself to notice the difference between that day of July last year, so peacefully spent amid surroundings familiar to me from my earliest infancy, and my present animated life passed in the midst of such a novel world.

To-day, therefore, under the scorching midday sun, at two o'clock, three swift-footed djins dragged us at full speed—Yves, Chrysantheme, and myself—in Indian file, each in a little jolting cart, to the farther end of Nagasaki, and there deposited us at the foot of some gigantic steps that run straight up the mountain.

These are the granite steps leading to the great temple of Osueva, wide enough to give access to a whole regiment; they are as grand and imposing as any work of Babylon or Nineveh, and in complete contrast with all the finical surroundings.

We climb up and up—Chrysantheme listlessly, affecting fatigue, under her paper parasol painted with pink butterflies on a black ground. As we ascended, we passed under enormous monastic porticoes, also in granite of rude and primitive style. In truth, these steps and these temple porticoes are the only imposing works that this people has created, and they astonish, for they do not seem Japanese.

We climb still higher. At this sultry hour of the day, from top to bottom of the enormous gray steps, only we three are to be seen; on all that granite there are but the pink butterflies on Chrysantheme's parasol to give a cheerful and brilliant touch.

We passed through the first temple yard, in which are two white china turrets, bronze lanterns, and the statue of a large horse in jade. Then, without pausing at the sanctuary, we turned to the left, and entered a shady garden, which formed a terrace halfway up the hill, at the extremity of which was situated the Donko-Tchaya—in English, the Teahouse of the Toads.

This was the place where Chrysantheme had wished to take us. We sat down at a table, under a black linen tent decorated with large white letters (of funereal aspect), and two laughing 'mousmes' hastened to wait upon us.

The word 'mousme' means a young girl, or very young woman. It is one of the prettiest words in the Nipponese language; it seems almost as if there were a little pout in the very sound—a pretty, taking little pout, such as they put on, and also as if a little pert physiognomy were described by it. I shall often make use of it, knowing none other in our own language that conveys the same meaning.

Some Japanese Watteau must have mapped out this Donko-Tchaya, for it has rather an affected air of rurality, though very pretty. It is well shaded, under a shelter of large trees with dense foliage, and a miniature lake close by, the chosen residence of a few toads, has given it its attractive denomination. Lucky toads, who crawl and croak on the finest of moss, in the midst of tiny artificial islets decked with gardenias in full bloom. From time to time, one of them informs us of his thoughts by a 'Couac', uttered in a deep bass croak, infinitely more hollow than that of our own toads.

Under the tent of this tea-house, we sit on a sort of balcony jutting out from the mountain-side, overhanging from on high the grayish town and its suburbs buried in greenery. Around, above, and beneath us cling and hang, on every possible point, clumps of trees and fresh green woods, with the delicate and varying foliage of the temperate zone. We can see, at our feet, the deep roadstead, foreshortened and slanting, diminished in appearance till it looks like a sombre rent in the mass of large green mountains; and farther still, quite low on the black and stagnant waters, are the men-of-war, the steamboats and the junks, with flags flying from every mast. Against the dark green, which is the dominant shade everywhere, stand out these thousand scraps of bunting, emblems of the different nationalities, all displayed, all flying in honor of far-distant France. The colors most prevailing in this motley assemblage are the white flag with a red ball, emblem of the Empire of the Rising Sun, where we now are.

With the exception of three or four 'mousmes' at the farther end, who are practising with bows and arrows, we are today the only people in the garden, and the mountain round about is silent.

Having finished her cigarette and her cup of tea, Chrysantheme also wishes to exert her skill; for archery is still held in honor among the young women.

The old man who keeps the range picks out for her his best arrows tipped with white and red feathers—and she takes aim with a serious air. The mark is a circle, traced in the middle of a picture on which is painted, in flat, gray tones, terrifying chimera flying through the clouds.

Chrysantheme is certainly an adroit markswoman, and we admire her as much as she expected.

Then Yves, who is usually clever at all games of skill, wishes to try his luck, and fails. It is amusing to see her, with her mincing ways and smiles, arrange with the tips of her little fingers the sailor's broad hands, placing them on the bow and the string in order to teach him the proper manner. Never have they seemed to get on so well together, Yves and my doll, and I might even feel anxious, were I less sure of my good brother, and if, moreover, it was not a matter of perfect indifference to me.

In the stillness of the garden, amid the balmy peacefulness of these mountains, a loud noise suddenly startles us; a unique, powerful, terrible sound, which is prolonged in infinite metallic vibrations. It begins again, sounding more appalling: 'Boum!' borne to us by the rising wind.

"Nippon Kane!" exclaims Chrysantheme—and she again takes up her brightly feathered arrows. "Nippon Kane ("the Japanese brass"); it is the Japanese brass that is sounding!" It is the monstrous gong of a monastery, situated in a suburb beneath us. It is powerful indeed, "the Japanese brass"! When the strokes are ended, when it is no longer heard, a vibration seems to linger among the suspended foliage, and a prolonged quiver runs through the air.

I am obliged to admit that Chrysantheme looks very charming shooting her arrows, her figure well bent back the better to bend her bow; her loose- hanging sleeves caught up to her shoulders, showing the graceful bare arms polished like amber and very much the same color. Each arrow whistles by with the rustle of a bird's wing—then a short, sharp little blow is heard, the target is hit, always.

At nightfall, when Chrysantheme has gone up to Diou-djen-dji, we cross, Yves and I, the European concession, on our way to the ship, to take up our watch till the following day. The cosmopolitan quarter, exhaling an odor of absinthe, is dressed up with flags, and squibs are being fired off in honor of France. Long lines of djins pass by, dragging, as fast as their naked legs can carry them, the crew of the 'Triomphante,' who are shouting and fanning themselves. The Marseillaise is heard everywhere; English sailors are singing it, gutturally, with a dull and slow cadence like their own "God Save." In all the American bars, grinding organs are hammering it with many an odious variation and flourish, in order to attract our men.

One amusing recollection comes back to me of that evening. On our return, we had by mistake turned into a street inhabited by a multitude of ladies of doubtful reputation. I can still see that big fellow Yves, struggling with a whole band of tiny little 'mousmes' of twelve or fifteen years of age, who barely reached up to his waist, and were pulling him by the sleeves, eager to lead him astray. Astonished and indignant, he repeated, as he extricated himself from their clutches, "Oh, this is too much!" so shocked was he at seeing such mere babies, so young, so tiny, already so brazen and shameless.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Efforts to arrange matters we succeed often only in disarranging
Irritating laugh which is peculiar to Japan
Ordinary, trivial, every-day objects
Seeking for a change which can no longer be found

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MADAME CHRYSANTHEME — VOLUME 1 ***

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