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Author: Pierre Loti

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MADAME CHRYSANTHEME

By PIERRE LOTI

BOOK 3.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE FEAST OF THE TEMPLE

Sunday, August 25th.

About six o'clock, while I was on duty, the 'Triomphante' abandoned her prison walls between the mountains and came out of dock. After much manoeuvring we took up our old moorings in the harbor, at the foot of the Diou-djen-dji hills. The weather was again calm and cloudless, the sky presenting a peculiar clarity, as if it had been swept by a cyclone, an exceeding transparency bringing out the minutest details in the distance till then unseen; as if the terrible blast had blown away every vestige of the floating mists and left behind it nothing but void and boundless space. The coloring of woods and mountains stood out again in the resplendent verdancy of spring after the torrents of rain, like the wet colors of some freshly washed painting. The sampans and junks, which for the last three days had been lying under shelter, had now put out to sea, and the bay was covered with their white sails, which looked like a flight of enormous seabirds.

At eight o'clock, at nightfall, our manoeuvres having ended, I embarked with Yves on board a sampan; this time it is he who is carrying me off and taking me back to my home.

On land, a delicious perfume of new-mown hay greets us, and the road across the mountains is bathed in glorious moonlight. We go straight up to Diou-djen-dji to join Chrysantheme; I feel almost remorseful, although I hardly show it, for my neglect of her.

Looking up, I recognize from afar my little house, perched on high. It is wide open and lighted; I even hear the sound of a guitar. Then I perceive the gilt head of my Buddha between the little bright flames of its two hanging night-lamps. Now Chrysantheme appears on the veranda, looking out as if she expected us; and with her wonderful bows of hair and long, falling sleeves, her silhouette is thoroughly Nipponese.

As I enter, she comes forward to kiss me, in a graceful, though rather hesitating manner, while Oyouki, more demonstrative, throws her arms around me.

Not without a certain pleasure do I see once more this Japanese home, which I wonder to find still mine when I had almost forgotten its existence. Chrysantheme has put fresh flowers in our vases, spread out her hair, donned her best clothes, and lighted our lamps to honor my return. From the balcony she had watched the 'Triomphante' leave the dock, and, in the expectation of our prompt return, she had made her preparations; then, to wile away the time, she was studying a duet on the guitar with Oyouki. Not a question did she ask, nor a reproach did she make. Quite the contrary.

"We understood," she said, "how impossible it was, in such dreadful weather, to undertake so lengthy a crossing in a sampan."

She smiled like a pleased child, and I should be fastidious indeed if I did not admit that to-night she is charming.

I announce my intention of taking a long stroll through Nagasaki; we will take Oyouki-San and two little cousins who happen to be here, as well as some other neighbors, if they wish it; we will buy the most amusing toys, eat all sorts of cakes, and entertain ourselves to our hearts' content.

"How lucky we are to be here, just at the right moment," they exclaim, jumping with joy. "How fortunate we are! This very evening there is to be a pilgrimage to the great temple of the jumping Tortoise! "The whole town will be there; all our married friends have already started, the whole set, X—, Y—, Z—, Touki-San, Campanule, and Jonquille, with "the friend of amazing height." And these two, poor Chrysantheme and poor Oyouki, would have been obliged to stay at home with heavy hearts, had we not arrived, because Madame Prune had been seized with faintness and hysterics after her dinner.

Quickly the mousmes must deck themselves out. Chrysantheme is ready; Oyouki hurries, changes her dress, and, putting on a mouse-colored gray robe, begs me to arrange the bows of her fine sash-black satin lined with yellow-sticking at the same time in her hair a silver topknot. We light our lanterns, swinging at the end of little sticks; M. Sucre, overwhelming us with thanks for his daughter, accompanies us on all fours to the door, and we go off gayly through the clear and balmy night.

Below, we find the town in all the animation of a great holiday. The streets are thronged; the crowd passes by—a laughing, capricious, slow, unequal tide, flowing onward, however, steadily in the same direction, toward the same goal. From it rises a penetrating but light murmur, in which dominate the sounds of laughter, and the low-toned interchange of polite speeches. Then follow lanterns upon lanterns. Never in my life have I seen so many, so variegated, so complicated, and so extraordinary.

We follow, drifting with the surging crowd, borne along by it. There are groups of women of every age, decked out in their smartest clothes, crowds of mousmes with aigrettes of flowers in their hair, or little silver topknots like Oyouki—pretty little physiognomies, little, narrow eyes peeping between their slits like those of new-born kittens, fat, pale, little cheeks, round, puffed-out, half-opened lips. They are pretty, nevertheless, these little Nipponese, in their smiles and childishness.

The men, on the other hand, wear many a pot-hat, pompously added to the long national robe, and giving thereby a finishing touch to their cheerful ugliness, resembling nothing so much as dancing monkeys. They carry boughs in their hands, whole shrubs even, amid the foliage of which dangle all sorts of curious lanterns in the shapes of imps and birds.

As we advance in the direction of the temple, the streets become more noisy and crowded. All along the houses are endless stalls raised on trestles, displaying sweetmeats of every color, toys, branches of flowers, nosegays and masks. There are masks everywhere, boxes full of them, carts full of them, the most popular being the one that represents the livid and cunning muzzle, contracted as by a deathlike

grimace, the long straight ears and sharp-pointed teeth of the white fox, sacred to the God of Rice. There are also others symbolic of gods or monsters, livid, grimacing, convulsed, with wigs and beards of natural hair. All manner of folk, even children, purchase these horrors, and fasten them over their faces. Every sort of instrument is for sale, among them many of those crystal trumpets which sound so strangely—this evening they are enormous, six feet long at least—and the noise they make is unlike anything ever heard before: one would say gigantic turkeys were gobbling amid the crowd, striving to inspire fear.

In the religious amusements of this people it is not possible for us to penetrate the mysteriously hidden meaning of things; we can not divine the boundary at which jesting stops and mystic fear steps in. These customs, these symbols, these masks, all that tradition and atavism have jumbled together in the Japanese brain, proceed from sources utterly dark and unknown to us; even the oldest records fail to explain them to us in anything but a superficial and cursory manner, simply because we have absolutely nothing in common with this people. We pass through the midst of their mirth and their laughter without understanding the wherefore, so totally do they differ from our own.

Chrysanthemum with Yves, Oyouki with me, Fraise and Zinnia, our cousins, walking before us under our watchful eyes, move slowly through the crowd, holding hands lest we should lose one another.

Along the streets leading to the temple, the wealthy inhabitants have decorated the fronts of their houses with vases and nosegays. The peculiar shed-like buildings common in this country, with their open platform frontage, are particularly well suited for the display of choice objects; all the houses have been thrown open, and the interiors are hung with draperies that hide the back of the apartments. In front of these hangings, and standing slightly back from the movement of the passing crowd, the various exhibited articles are placed methodically in a row, under the full glare of hanging lamps. Hardly any flowers compose the nosegays, nothing but foliage—some rare and priceless, others chosen, as if purposely, from the commonest plants, arranged, however, with such taste as to make them appear new and choice; ordinary lettuce-leaves, tall cabbage-stalks are placed with exquisite artificial taste in vessels of marvellous workmanship. All the vases are of bronze, but the designs are varied according to each changing fancy: some complicated and twisted, others, and by far the larger number, graceful and simple, but of a simplicity so studied and exquisite that to our eyes they seem the revelation of an unknown art, the subversion of all acquired notions of form.

On turning a corner of a street, by good luck we meet our married comrades of the Triomphante and Jonquille, Toukisan and Campanule! Bows and curtseys are exchanged by the mousmes, reciprocal manifestations of joy at meeting; then, forming a compact band, we are carried off by the ever-increasing crowd and continue our progress in the direction of the temple.

The streets gradually ascend (the temples are always built on a height); and by degrees, as we mount, there is added to the brilliant fairyland of lanterns and costumes yet another, ethereally blue in the haze of distance; all Nagasaki, its pagodas, its mountains, its still waters full of the rays of moonlight, seem to rise with us into the air. Slowly, step by step, one may say it springs up around, enveloping in one great shimmering veil all the foreground, with its dazzling red lights and many-colored streamers.

No doubt we are drawing near, for here are steps, porticoes and monsters hewn out of enormous blocks of granite. We now have to climb a series of steps, almost carried by the surging crowd ascending with us.

We have arrived at the temple courtyard.

This is the last and most astonishing scene in the evening's fairy-tale—a luminous and weird scene, with fantastic distances lighted up by the moon, with the gigantic trees, the sacred cryptomerias, elevating their sombre boughs into a vast dome.

Here we are all seated with our mousmes, beneath the light awning, wreathed in flowers, of one of the many little teahouses improvised in this courtyard. We are on a terrace at the top of the great steps, up which the crowd continues to flock, and at the foot of a portico which stands erect with the rigid massiveness of a colossus against the dark night sky; at the foot also of a monster, who stares down upon us, with his big stony eyes, his cruel grimace and smile.

This portico and the monster are the two great overwhelming masses in the foreground of the incredible scene before us; they stand out with dazzling boldness against the vague and ashy blue of the distant sphere beyond; behind them, Nagasaki is spread out in a bird's-eye view, faintly outlined in the transparent darkness with myriads of little colored lights, and the extravagantly dented profile of the mountains is delineated on the starlit sky, blue upon blue, transparency upon transparency. A corner of the harbor also is visible, far up, undefined, like a lake lost in clouds the water, faintly illumined by a ray of moonlight, making it shine like a sheet of silver.

Around us the long crystal trumpets keep up their gobble. Groups of polite and frivolous persons pass and repass like fantastic shadows: childish bands of small-eyed mousmes with smile so candidly meaningless and coiffures shining through their bright silver flowers; ugly men waving at the end of long branches their eternal lanterns shaped like birds, gods, or insects.

Behind us, in the illuminated and wide-open temple, the bonzes sit, immovable embodiments of doctrine, in the glittering sanctuary inhabited by divinities, chimeras, and symbols. The crowd, monotonously droning its mingled prayers and laughter, presses around them, sowing its alms broadcast; with a continuous jingle, the money rolls on the ground into the precincts reserved to the priests, where the white mats entirely disappear under the mass of many-sized coins accumulated there as if after a deluge of silver and bronze.

We, however, feel thoroughly at sea in the midst of this festivity; we look on, we laugh like the rest, we make foolish and senseless remarks in a language insufficiently learned, which this evening, I know not why, we can hardly understand. Notwithstanding the night breeze, we find it very hot under our awning, and we absorb quantities of odd-looking water-ices, served in cups, which taste like scented frost, or rather like flowers steeped in snow. Our mousmes order for themselves great bowls of candied beans mixed with hail—real hailstones, such as we might pick up after a hailstorm in March.

Glou! glou! glou! the crystal trumpets slowly repeat their notes, the powerful sonority of which has a labored and smothered sound, as if they came from under water; they mingle with the jingling of rattles and the noise of castanets. We have also the impression of being carried away in the irresistible swing of this incomprehensible gayety, composed, in proportions we can hardly measure, of elements mystic, puerile, and even ghastly. A sort of religious terror is diffused by the hidden idols divined in the temple behind us; by the mumbled prayers, confusedly heard; above all, by the horrible heads in lacquered wood, representing foxes, which, as they pass, hide human faces—hideous livid masks.

In the gardens and outbuildings of the temple the most inconceivable mountebanks have taken up their quarters, their black streamers, painted with white letters, looking like funeral trappings as they float in the wind from the tops of their tall flagstaves. Thither we turn our steps, as soon as our mousmes have ended their orisons and bestowed their alms.

In one of the booths a man, stretched on a table, flat on his back, is alone on the stage; puppets of almost human size, with horribly grinning masks, spring out of his body; they speak, gesticulate, then fall back like empty rags; with a sudden spring they start up again, change their costumes, change their faces, tearing about in one continual frenzy. Suddenly three, even four, appear at the same time; they are nothing more than the four limbs of the outstretched man, whose legs and arms, raised on high, are each dressed up and capped with a wig under which peers a mask; between these phantoms tremendous fighting and battling take place, and many a sword-thrust is exchanged. The most fearful of all is a certain puppet representing an old hag; every time she appears, with her weird head and ghastly grin, the lights burn low, the music of the accompanying orchestra moans forth a sinister strain given by the flutes, mingled with a rattling tremolo which sounds like the clatter of bones. This creature evidently plays an ugly part in the piece—that of a horrible old ghoul, spiteful and famished. Still more appalling than her person is her shadow, which, projected upon a white screen, is abnormally and vividly distinct; by means of some unknown process this shadow, which nevertheless follows all her movements, assumes the aspect of a wolf. At a given moment the hag turns round and presents the profile of her distorted snub nose as she accepts the bowl of rice which is offered to her; on the screen at the very same instant appears the elongated outline of the wolf, with its pointed ears, its muzzle and chops, its great teeth and hanging tongue. The orchestra grinds, wails, quivers; then suddenly bursts out into funereal shrieks, like a concert of owls; the hag is now eating, and her wolfish shadow is eating also, greedily moving its jaws and nibbling at another shadow easy to recognize—the arm of a little child.

We now go on to see the great salamander of Japan, an animal rare in this country, and quite unknown elsewhere, a great, cold mass, sluggish and benumbed, looking like some antediluvian experiment, forgotten in the inner seas of this archipelago.

Next comes the trained elephant, the terror of our mousmes, the equilibrists, the menagerie.

It is one o'clock in the morning before we are back at Diou-djen-dji.

We first get Yves to bed in the little paper room he has already once occupied. Then we go to bed ourselves, after the inevitable preparations, the smoking of the little pipe, and the tap! tap! tap! tap! on the edge of the box.

Suddenly Yves begins to move restlessly in his sleep, to toss about, giving great kicks on the wall, and making a frightful noise.

What can be the matter? I imagine at once that he must be dreaming of the old hag and her wolfish shadow. Chrysantheme raises herself on her elbow and listens, with astonishment depicted on her face.

Ah, happy thought! she has guessed what is tormenting him:

"Ka!" ("mosquitoes") she says.

And, to impress the more forcibly her meaning on my mind, she pinches my arm so hard with her little pointed nails, at the same time imitating, with such an amusing play of her features, the grimace of a person who is stung, that I exclaim:

"Oh! stop, Chrysantheme, this pantomime is too expressive, and indeed useless! I know the word 'Ka', and had quite understood, I assure you."

It is done so drolly and so quickly, with such a pretty pout, that in truth I can not think of being angry, although I shall certainly have tomorrow a blue mark on my arm; about that there is no doubt.

"Come, we must get up and go to Yves's rescue; he must not be allowed to go on thumping in that manner. Let us take a lantern, and see what has happened."

It was indeed the mosquitoes. They are hovering in a thick cloud about him; those of the house and those of the garden all seem collected together, swarming and buzzing. Chrysantheme indignantly burns several at the flame of her lantern, and shows me others (Hou!) covering the white paper walls.

He, tired out with his day's amusement, sleeps on; but his slumbers are restless, as may be easily imagined. Chrysantheme gives him a shake, wishing him to get up and share our blue mosquito-net.

After a little pressing he does as he is bid and follows us, looking like an overgrown boy only half awake. I make no objection to this singular hospitality; after all, it looks so little like a bed, the matting we are to share, and we sleep in our clothes, as we always do, according to the Nipponese fashion. After all, on a journey in a railway, do not the most estimable ladies stretch themselves without demur by the side of gentlemen unknown to them?

I have, however, placed Chrysantheme's little wooden block in the centre of the gauze tent, between our two pillows.

Without saying a word, in a dignified manner, as if she were rectifying an error of etiquette that I had inadvertently committed, Chrysantheme takes up her piece of wood, putting in its place my snake-skin drum; I shall therefore be in the middle between the two. It is really more correct, decidedly more proper; Chrysantheme is evidently a very decorous young person.

Returning on board next morning, in the clear morning sun, we walk through pathways full of dew, accompanied by a band of funny little mousmes of six or eight years of age, who are going to school.

Needless to say, the cicadas around us keep up their perpetual sonorous chirping. The mountain smells delicious. The atmosphere, the dawning day, the infantine grace of these little girls in their long frocks and shiny coiffures—all is redundant with freshness and youth. The flowers and grasses on which we tread sparkle with dewdrops, exhaling a perfume of freshness. What undying beauty there is, even in Japan, in the fresh morning hours in the country, and the dawning hours of life!

Besides, I am quite ready to admit the attractiveness of the little Japanese children; some of them are most fascinating. But how is it that their charm vanishes so rapidly and is so quickly replaced by the elderly grimace, the smiling ugliness, the monkeyish face?

CHAPTER XXXV

THROUGH A MICROSCOPE

The small garden of my mother-in-law, Madame Renoncule, is, without exception, one of the most melancholy spots I have seen in all my travels through the world.

Oh, the slow, enervating, dull hours spent in idle and diffuse conversation on the dimly lighted veranda! Oh, the detestable peppered jam in the tiny pots! In the middle of the town, enclosed by four walls, is this park of five yards square, with little lakes, little mountains, and little rocks, where all

wears an antiquated appearance, and everything is covered with a greenish mold from want of sunlight.

Nevertheless, a true feeling for nature has inspired this tiny representation of a wild spot. The rocks are well placed, the dwarf cedars, no taller than cabbages, stretch their gnarled boughs over the valleys in the attitude of giants wearied by the weight of centuries; and their look of full-grown trees perplexes one and falsifies the perspective. When from the dark recesses of the apartment one perceives at a certain distance this diminutive landscape dimly lighted, the wonder is whether it is all artificial, or whether one is not one's self the victim of some morbid illusion; and whether it is not indeed a real country view seen through a distorted vision out of focus, or through the wrong end of a telescope.

To any one familiar with Japanese life, my mother-in-law's house in itself reveals a refined nature—complete bareness, two or three screens placed here and there, a teapot, a vase full of lotus-flowers, and nothing more. Woodwork devoid of paint or varnish, but carved in most elaborate and capricious openwork, the whiteness of the pinewood being preserved by constant scrubbing with soap and water. The posts and beams of the framework are varied by the most fanciful taste: some are cut in precise geometrical forms; others are artificially twisted, imitating trunks of old trees covered with tropical creepers. Everywhere are little hiding-places, little nooks, little closets concealed in the most ingenious and unexpected manner under the immaculate uniformity of the white paper panels.

I can not help smiling when I think of some of the so-called "Japanese" drawing-rooms of our Parisian fine ladies, overcrowded with knickknacks and curios and hung with coarse gold embroideries on exported satins. I would advise those persons to come and look at the houses of people of taste out here; to visit the white solitudes of the palaces at Yeddo. In France we have works of art in order to enjoy them; here they possess them merely to ticket them and lock them up carefully in a kind of mysterious underground room called a 'godoun', shut in by iron gratings. On rare occasions, only to honor some visitor of distinction, do they open this impenetrable depositary. The true Japanese manner of understanding luxury consists in a scrupulous and indeed almost excessive cleanliness, white mats and white woodwork; an appearance of extreme simplicity, and an incredible nicety in the most infinitesimal details.

My mother-in-law seems to be really a very good woman, and were it not for the insurmountable feeling of spleen the sight of her garden produces on me, I should often go to see her. She has nothing in common with the mammas of Jonquille, Campanule, or Touki she is vastly their superior; and then I can see that she has been very good-looking and fashionable. Her past life puzzles me; but, in my position as a son-in-law, good manners prevent my making further inquiries.

Some assert that she was formerly a celebrated geisha in Yeddo, who lost public favor by her folly in becoming a mother. This would account for her daughter's talent on the guitar; she had probably herself taught her the touch and style of the Conservatory.

Since the birth of Chrysantheme (her eldest child and first cause of this loss of favor), my mother-in-law, an expansive although distinguished nature, has fallen seven times into the same fatal error, and I have two little sisters-in-law: Mademoiselle La Neige,—[Oyouki-San]—and Mademoiselle La Lune,—[Tsouki-San.]—as well as five little brothers-in-law: Cerisier, Pigeon, Liseron, Or, and Bambou.

Little Bambou is four years old—a yellow baby, fat and round all over, with fine bright eyes; coaxing and jolly, sleeping whenever he is not laughing. Of all my Nipponese family, Bambou is the one I love the most.

CHAPTER XXXVI

MY NAUGHTY DOLL

Tuesday, August 27th.

During this whole day we—Yves, Chrysantheme, Oyouki and myself—have spent the time wandering through dark and dusty nooks, dragged hither and thither by four quick-footed djins, in search of antiquities in the bric- a-brac shops.

Toward sunset, Chrysantheme, who has wearied me more than ever since morning, and who

doubtless has perceived it, pulls a very long face, declares herself ill, and begs leave to spend the night with her mother, Madame Renoncule.

I agree to this with the best grace in the world; let her go, tiresome little mousme! Oyouki will carry a message to her parents, who will shut up our rooms; we shall spend the evening, Yves and I, in roaming about as fancy takes us, without any mousme dragging at our heels, and shall afterward regain our own quarters on board the 'Triomphante', without having the trouble of climbing up that hill.

First of all, we make an attempt to dine together in some fashionable tea-house. Impossible! not a place is to be had; all the absurd paper rooms, all the compartments contrived by so many ingenious tricks of slipping and sliding panels, all the nooks and corners in the little gardens are filled with Japanese men and women eating impossible and incredible little dishes. Numberless young dandies are dining tete-a-tete with the ladies of their choice, and sounds of dancing-girls and music issue from the private rooms.

The fact is, to-day is the third and last day of the great pilgrimage to the temple of the jumping Tortoise, of which we saw the beginning yesterday; and all Nagasaki is at this time given over to amusement.

At the tea-house of the Indescribable Butterflies, which is also full to overflowing, but where we are well known, they have had the bright idea of throwing a temporary flooring over the little lake—the pond where the goldfish live—and our meal is served here, in the pleasant freshness of the fountain which continues its murmur under our feet.

After dinner, we follow the faithful and ascend again to the temple.

Up there we find the same elfin revelry, the same masks, the same music. We seat ourselves, as before, under a gauze tent and sip odd little drinks tasting of flowers. But this evening we are alone, and the absence of the band of mousmes, whose familiar little faces formed a bond of union between this holiday-making people and ourselves, separates and isolates us more than usual from the profusion of oddities in the midst of which we seem to be lost. Beneath us lies always the immense blue background: Nagasaki illumined by moonlight, and the expanse of silvered, glittering water, which seems like a vaporous vision suspended in mid-air. Behind us is the great open temple, where the bonzes officiate, to the accompaniment of sacred bells and wooden clappers-looking, from where we sit, more like puppets than anything else, some squatting in rows like peaceful mummies, others executing rhythmical marches before the golden background where stand the gods. We do not laugh to-night, and speak but little, more forcibly struck by the scene than we were on the first night; we only look on, trying to understand. Suddenly, Yves, turning round, says:

"Hullo! brother, there is your mousme!"

Actually, there she is, behind him; Chrysantheme, almost on all fours, hidden between the paws of a great granite beast, half tiger, half dog, against which our fragile tent is leaning.

"She pulled my trousers with her nails, for all the world like a little cat," said Yves, still full of surprise, "positively like a cat!"

She remains bent double in the most humble form of salutation; she smiles timidly, afraid of being ill received, and the head of my little brother-in-law, Bambou, appears smiling too, just above her own. She has brought this little mousko—[Mousko is the masculine of mousme, and signifies little boy. Excessive politeness makes it mousko-san (Mr. little boy).]—with her, perched astride her back; he looks as absurd as ever, with his shaven head, his long frock and the great bows of his silken sash. There they stand gazing at us, anxious to know how their joke will be taken.

For my part, I have not the least idea of giving them a cold reception; on the contrary, the meeting amuses me. It even strikes me that it is rather pretty of Chrysantheme to come around in this way, and to bring Bambou-San to the festival; though it savors somewhat of her low breeding, to tell the truth, to carry him on her back, as the poorer Japanese women carry their little ones.

However, let her sit down between Yves and myself and let them bring her those iced beans she loves so much; and we will take the jolly little mousko on our knees and cram him with sugar and sweetmeats to his heart's content.

When the evening is over, and we begin to think of leaving, and of going down again, Chrysantheme replaces her little Bambou astride upon her back, and sets forth, bending forward under his weight and painfully dragging her Cinderella slippers over the granite steps and flagstones. Yes, decidedly low, this conduct! but low in the best sense of the word: nothing in it displeases me; I even consider Chrysantheme's affection for Bambou-San engaging and attractive in its simplicity.

One can not deny this merit to the Japanese—a great love for little children, and a talent for amusing them, for making them laugh, inventing comical toys for them, making the morning of their life happy; for a specialty in dressing them, arranging their heads, and giving to the whole personage the most fascinating appearance possible. It is the only thing I really like about this country: the babies and the manner in which they are understood.

On our way we meet our married friends of the Triomphante, who, much surprised at seeing me with this mousko, jokingly exclaim:

"What! a son already?"

Down in the town, we make a point of bidding goodby to Chrysantheme at the turning of the street where her mother lives. She smiles, undecided, declares herself well again, and begs to return to our house on the heights. This did not precisely enter into my plans, I confess. However, it would look very ungracious to refuse.

So be it! But we must carry the mousko home to his mamma, and then begin, by the flickering light of a new lantern bought from Madame Tres- Propre, our weary homeward ascent.

Here, however, we find ourselves in another predicament: this ridiculous little Bambou insists upon coming with us! No, he will take no denial, we must take him with us. This is out of all reason, quite impossible!

However, it will not do to make him cry, on the night of a great festival too, poor little mousko! So we must send a message to Madame Renoncule, that she may not be uneasy about him, and as there will soon not be a living creature on the footpaths of Diou-djen-dji to laugh at us, we will take it in turn, Yves and I, to carry him on our backs, all the way up that climb in the darkness.

And here am I, who did not wish to return this way tonight, dragging a mousme by the hand, and actually carrying an extra burden in the shape of a mousko on my back. What an irony of fate!

As I had expected, all our shutters and doors are closed, bolted, and barred; no one expects us, and we have to make a prodigious noise at the door. Chrysantheme sets to work and calls with all her might

"Hou Oume-San-an-an-an!" (In English: "Hi! Madame Pru-u-uu-une!")

These intonations in her little voice are unknown to me; her long-drawn call in the echoing darkness of midnight has so strange an accent, something so unexpected and wild, that it impresses me with a dismal feeling of far-off exile.

At last Madame Prune appears to open the door to us, only half awake and much astonished; by way of a nightcap she wears a monstrous cotton turban, on the blue ground of which a few white storks are playfully disporting themselves. Holding in the tips of her fingers, with an affectation of graceful fright, the long stalk of her beflowered lantern, she gazes intently into our faces, one after another, to reassure herself of our identity; but the poor old lady can not get over her surprise at the sight of the mousko I am carrying.

CHAPTER XXXVII

COMPLICATIONS

At first it was only to Chrysantheme's guitar that I listened with pleasure now I am beginning to like her singing also.

She has nothing of the theatrical, or the deep, assumed voice of the virtuoso; on the contrary, her notes, always very high, are soft, thin, and plaintive.

She often teaches Oyouki some romance, slow and dreamy, which she has composed, or which comes back to her mind. Then they both astonish me, for on their well-tuned guitars they will pick out accompaniments in parts, and try again each time that the chords are not perfectly true to their ear, without ever losing themselves in the confusion of these dissonant harmonies, always weird and always melancholy.

Usually, while their music is going on, I am writing on the veranda, with the superb panorama before me. I write, seated on a mat on the floor and leaning upon a little Japanese desk, ornamented with swallows in relief; my ink is Chinese, my inkstand, just like that of my landlord, is in jade, with dear little frogs and toads carved on the rim. In short, I am writing my memoirs,—exactly as M. Sucre does downstairs! Occasionally I fancy I resemble him—a very disagreeable fancy.

My memoirs are composed of incongruous details, minute observations of colors, shapes, scents, and sounds.

It is true that a complete imbroglio, worthy of a romance, seems ever threatening to appear upon my monotonous horizon; a regular intrigue seems ever ready to explode in the midst of this little world of mousmes and grasshoppers: Chrysantheme in love with Yves; Yves with Chrysantheme; Oyouki with me; I with no one. We might even find here, ready to hand, the elements of a fratricidal drama, were we in any other country than Japan; but we are in Japan, and under the narrowing and dwarfing influence of the surroundings, which turn everything into ridicule, nothing will come of it all.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE HEIGHT OF SOCIABILITY!

In this fine town of Nagasaki, about five or six o'clock in the evening, one hour of the day is more comical than any other. At that moment every human being is naked: children, young people, old people, old men, old women—every one is seated in a tub of some sort, taking a bath. This ceremony takes place no matter where, without the slightest screen, in the gardens, the courtyards, in the shops, even upon the thresholds, in order to give greater facility for conversation among the neighbors from one side of the street to the other. In this situation visitors are received; and the bather, without any hesitation, leaves his tub, holding in his hand his little towel (invariably blue), to offer the caller a seat, and to exchange with him some polite remarks. Nevertheless, neither the mousmes nor the old ladies gain anything by appearing in this primeval costume. A Japanese woman, deprived of her long robe and her huge sash with its pretentious bows, is nothing but a diminutive yellow being, with crooked legs and flat, unshapely bust; she has no longer a remnant of her little artificial charms, which have completely disappeared in company with her costume.

There is yet another hour, at once joyous and melancholy, a little later, when twilight falls, when the sky seems one vast veil of yellow, against which stand the clear-cut outlines of jagged mountains and lofty, fantastic pagodas. It is the hour at which, in the labyrinth of little gray streets below, the sacred lamps begin to twinkle in the ever-open houses, in front of the ancestor's altars and the familiar Buddhas; while, outside, darkness creeps over all, and the thousand and one indentations and peaks of the old roofs are depicted, as if in black festoons, on the clear golden sky. At this moment, over merry, laughing Japan, suddenly passes a sombre shadow, strange, weird, a breath of antiquity, of savagery, of something indefinable, which casts a gloom of sadness. And then the only gayety that remains is the gayety of the young children, of little mouskos and little mousmes, who spread themselves like a wave through the streets filled with shadow, as they swarm from schools and workshops. On the dark background of all these wooden buildings, the little blue and scarlet dresses stand out in startling contrast,—drolly bedizened, drolly draped; and the fine loops of the sashes, the flowers, the silver or gold topknots stuck in these baby chignons, add to the vivid effect.

They amuse themselves, they chase one another, their great pagoda sleeves fly wide open, and these tiny little mousmes of ten, of five years old, or even younger still, have lofty head-dresses and imposing bows of hair arranged on their little heads, like grown-up women. Oh! what loves of supremely absurd dolls at this hour of twilight gambol through the streets, in their long frocks, blowing their crystal trumpets, or running with all their might to start their fanciful kites. This juvenile world of Japan—ludicrous by birth, and fated to become more so as the years roll on—starts in life with singular amusements, with strange cries and shouts; its playthings are somewhat ghastly, and would frighten the children of other countries; even the kites have great squinting eyes and vampire shapes.

And every evening, in the little dark streets, bursts forth the overflow of joyousness, fresh, childish, but withal grotesque to excess. It would be difficult to form any idea of the incredible things which, carried by the wind, float in the evening air.

CHAPTER XXXIX

A LADY OF JAPAN

My little Chrysantheme is always attired in dark colors, a sign here of aristocratic distinction. While her friends Oyouki-San, Madame Touki, and others, delight in gay-striped stuffs, and thrust gorgeous ornaments in their chignons, she always wears navy-blue or neutral gray, fastened round her waist with great black sashes brocaded in tender shades, and she puts nothing in her hair but amber-colored tortoiseshell pins. If she were of noble descent she would wear embroidered on her dress in the middle of the back a little white circle looking like a postmark with some design in the centre of it—usually the leaf of a tree; and this would be her coat-of-arms. There is really nothing wanting but this little heraldic blazon on the back to give her the appearance of a lady of the highest rank.

In Japan the smart dresses of bright colors shaded in clouds, embroidered with monsters of gold or silver, are reserved by the great ladies for home use on state occasions; or else they are used on the stage for dancers and courtesans.

Like all Japanese women, Chrysantheme carries a quantity of things in her long sleeves, in which pockets are cunningly hidden. There she keeps letters, various notes written on delicate sheets of rice-paper, prayer amulets drawn up by the bonzes; and above all a number of squares of a silky paper which she puts to the most unexpected uses—to dry a teacup, to hold the damp stalk of a flower, or to blow her quaint little nose, when the necessity presents itself. After the operation she at once crumples up the piece of paper, rolls it into a ball, and throws it out of the window with disgust.

The very smartest people in Japan blow their noses in this manner.

CHAPTER XL

OUR FRIENDS THE BONZES

September 2d.

Fate has favored us with a friendship as strange as it is rare: that of the head bonzes of the temple of the jumping Tortoise, where we witnessed last month such a surprising pilgrimage.

The approach to this place is as solitary now as it was thronged and bustling on the evenings of the festival; and in broad daylight one is surprised at the deathlike decay of the sacred surroundings which at night had seemed so full of life. Not a creature to be seen on the time-worn granite steps; not a creature beneath the vast, sumptuous porticoes; the colors, the gold-work are dim with dust. To reach the temple one must cross several deserted courtyards terraced on the mountain-side, pass through several solemn gateways, and up and up endless stairs rising far above the town and the noises of humanity into a sacred region filled with innumerable tombs. On all the pavements, in all the walls, are lichen and stoncrop; and over all the, gray tint of extreme age spreads like a fall of ashes.

In a side temple near the entrance is enthroned a colossal Buddha seated in his lotus—a gilded idol from forty-five to sixty feet high, mounted on an enormous bronze pedestal.

At length appears the last doorway with the two traditional giants, guardians of the sacred court, which stand the one on the right hand, the other on the left, shut up like wild beasts, each in an iron cage. They are in attitudes of fury, with fists upraised as if to strike, and features atrociously fierce and distorted. Their bodies are covered with bullets of crumbled paper, which have been aimed at them through the bars, and which have stuck to their monstrous limbs, producing an appearance of white leprosy: this is the manner in which the faithful strive to appease them, by conveying to them their prayers written upon delicate leaflets by the pious bonzes.

Passing between these alarming scarecrows, one reaches the innermost court. The residence of our friends is on the right, the great hall of the pagoda is before us.

In this paved court are bronze torch-holders as high as turrets. Here, too, stand, and have stood for centuries, cyca palms with fresh, green plumes, their numerous stalks curving with a heavy symmetry, like the branches of massive candelabra. The temple, which is open along its entire length, is dark and

mysterious, with touches of gilding in distant corners melting away into the gloom. In the very remotest part are seated idols, and from outside one can vaguely see their clasped hands and air of rapt mysticism; in front are the altars, loaded with marvellous vases in metalwork, whence spring graceful clusters of gold and silver lotus. From the very entrance one is greeted by the sweet odor of the incense-sticks unceasingly burned by the priests before the gods.

To penetrate into the dwelling of our friends the bonzes, which is situated on the right side as you enter, is by no means an easy matter.

A monster of the fish tribe, but having claws and horns, is hung over their door by iron chains; at the least breath of wind he swings creakingly. We pass beneath him and enter the first vast and lofty hall, dimly lighted, in the corners of which gleam gilded idols, bells, and incomprehensible objects of religious use.

Quaint little creatures, choir-boys or pupils, come forward with a doubtful welcome to ask what is wanted.

"Matsou-San!! Dondta-San!!" they repeat, much astonished, when they understand to whom we wish to be conducted. Oh! no, impossible, they can not be seen; they are resting or are in contemplation. "Orimas! Orimas!" say they, clasping their hands and sketching a genuflection or two to make us understand better. ("They are at prayer! the most profound prayer!")

We insist, speak more imperatively; even slip off our shoes like people determined to take no refusal.

At last Matsou-San and Donata-San make their appearance from the tranquil depths of their bonze-house. They are dressed in black crape and their heads are shaved. Smiling, amiable, full of excuses, they offer us their hands, and we follow, with our feet bare like theirs, to the interior of their mysterious dwelling, through a series of empty rooms spread with mats of the most unimpeachable whiteness. The successive halls are separated one from the other only by bamboo curtains of exquisite delicacy, caught back by tassels and cords of red silk.

The whole wainscoting of the interior is of the same wood, of a pale yellow shade made with extreme nicety, without the least ornament, the least carving; everything seems new and unused, as if it had never been touched by human hand. At distant intervals in this studied bareness, costly little stools, marvellously inlaid, uphold some antique bronze monster or a vase of flowers; on the walls hang a few masterly sketches, vaguely tinted in Indian ink, drawn upon strips of gray paper most accurately cut but without the slightest attempt at a frame. This is all: not a seat, not a cushion, not a scrap of furniture. It is the very acme of studied simplicity, of elegance made out of nothing, of the most immaculate and incredible cleanliness. And while following the bonzes through this long suite of empty halls, we are struck by their contrast with the overflow of knickknacks scattered about our rooms in France, and we take a sudden dislike to the profusion and crowding delighted in at home.

The spot where this silent march of barefooted folk comes to an end, the spot where we are to seat ourselves in the delightful coolness of a semi-darkness, is an interior veranda opening upon an artificial site. We might suppose it the bottom of a well; it is a miniature garden no bigger than the opening of an oubliette, overhung on all sides by the crushing height of the mountain and receiving from on high but the dim light of dreamland. Nevertheless, here is simulated a great natural ravine in all its wild grandeur: here are caverns, abrupt rocks, a torrent, a cascade, islands. The trees, dwarfed by a Japanese process of which we have not the secret, have tiny little leaves on their decrepit and knotty branches. A pervading hue of the mossy green of antiquity harmonizes all this medley, which is undoubtedly centuries old.

Families of goldfish swim round and round in the clear water, and tiny tortoises (jumpers probably) sleep upon the granite islands, which are of the same color as their own gray shells.

There are even blue dragon-flies which have ventured to descend, heaven knows whence, and alight with quivering wings upon the miniature water-lilies.

Our friends the bonzes, notwithstanding an unctuousness of manner thoroughly ecclesiastical, are very ready to laugh—a simple, pleased, childish laughter; plump, chubby, shaven and shorn, they dearly love our French liqueurs and know how to take a joke.

We talk first of one thing and then another. To the tranquil music of their little cascade, I launch out before them with phrases of the most erudite Japanese, I try the effect of a few tenses of verbs: 'desideratives, concessives, hypothetics in ba'. While they chant they despatch the affairs of the church: the order of services sealed with complicated seals for inferior pagodas situated in the neighborhood; or trace little prayers with a cunning paint-brush, as medical remedies to be swallowed like pills by invalids at a distance. With their white and dimpled hands they play with a fan as cleverly as any

woman, and when we have tasted different native drinks, flavored with essences of flowers, they bring up as a finish a bottle of Benedictine or Chartreuse, for they appreciate the liqueurs composed by their Western colleagues.

When they come on board to return our visits, they by no means disdain to fasten their great round spectacles on their flat noses in order to inspect the profane drawings in our illustrated papers, the 'Vie Parisienne' for instance. And it is even with a certain complacency that they let their fingers linger upon the pictures representing women.

The religious ceremonies in their great temple are magnificent, and to one of these we are now invited. At the sound of the gong they make their entrance before the idols with a stately ritual; twenty or thirty priests officiate in gala costumes, with genuflections, clapping of hands and movements to and fro, which look like the figures of some mystic quadrille.

But for all that, let the sanctuary be ever so immense and imposing in its sombre gloom, the idols ever so superb, all seems in Japan but a mere semblance of grandeur. A hopeless pettiness, an irresistible effect the ludicrous, lies at the bottom of all things.

And then the congregation is not conducive to thoughtful contemplation, for among it we usually discover some acquaintance: my mother-in-law, or a cousin, or the woman from the china-shop who sold us a vase only yesterday. Charming little mousmes, monkeyish-looking old ladies enter with their smoking-boxes, their gayly daubed parasols, their curtseys, their little cries and exclamations; prattling, complimenting one another, full of restless movement, and having the greatest difficulty in maintaining a serious demeanor.

CHAPTER XLI

AN UNEXPECTED CALL

September 3d.

My little Chrysantheme for the first time visited me on board-ship to day, chaperoned by Madame Prune, and followed by my youngest sister in-law, Mademoiselle La Neige. These ladies had the tranquil manners of the highest gentility. In my cabin is a great Buddha on his throne, and before him is a lacquer tray, on which my faithful sailor servant places any small change he may find in the pockets of my clothes. Madame Prune, whose mind is much swayed by mysticism, at once supposed herself before a regular altar; in the gravest manner possible she addressed a brief prayer to the god; then drawing out her purse (which, according to custom, was attached to her sash behind her back, along with her little pipe and tobacco-pouch), placed a pious offering in the tray, while executing a low curtsey.

They were on their best behavior throughout the visit. But when the moment of departure came, Chrysantheme, who would not go away without seeing Yves, asked for him with a thinly veiled persistency which was remarkable. Yves, for whom I then sent, made himself particularly charming to her, so much so that this time I felt a shade of more serious annoyance; I even asked myself whether the laughably pitiable ending, which I had hitherto vaguely foreseen, might not, after all, soon break upon us.

CHAPTER XLII

AN ORIENTAL VISION

September 4th.

Yesterday I encountered, in an ancient and ruined quarter of the town, a perfectly exquisite mousme, charmingly dressed; a fresh touch of color against the sombre background of decayed buildings.

I met her at the farthest end of Nagasaki, in the most ancient part of the town. In this region are trees centuries old, antique temples of Buddha, of Amiddah, of Benten, or Kwanon, with steep and pompous roofs; monsters carved in granite sit there in courtyards silent as the grave, where the grass grows between the stones. This deserted quarter is traversed by a narrow torrent running in a deep channel, across which are thrown little curved bridges with granite balustrades eaten away by lichen. All the objects there wear the strange grimace, the quaint arrangement familiar to us in the most antique Japanese drawings.

I walked through it all at the burning hour of midday, and saw not a soul, unless, indeed, through the open windows of the bonze-houses, I caught sight of some few priests, guardians of tombs or sanctuaries, taking their siesta under dark-blue gauze nets.

Suddenly this little mousme appeared, a little above me, just at the point of the arch of one of these bridges carpeted with gray moss; she was in full sunshine, and stood out in brilliant clearness, like a fairy vision, against the background of old black temples and deep shadows. She was holding her robe together with one hand, gathering it close round her ankles to give herself an air of greater slimness. Over her quaint little head, her round umbrella with its thousand ribs threw a great halo of blue and red, edged with black, and an oleander-tree full of flowers, growing among the stones of the bridge, spread its glory beside her, bathed, like herself, in the sunshine. Behind this youthful figure and this flowering shrub all was blackness. Upon the pretty red and blue parasol great white letters formed this inscription, much used among the mousmes, and which I have learned to recognize: 'Stop! clouds, to see her pass!' And it was really worth the trouble to stop and look at this exquisite little person, of a type so ideally Japanese.

However, it will not do to stop too long and be ensnared—it would only be another delusion. A doll like the rest, evidently, an ornament for a china shelf, and nothing more. While I gaze at her, I say to myself that Chrysantheme, appearing in this same place, with this dress, this play of light, and this aureole of sunshine, would produce just as delightful an effect.

For Chrysantheme is pretty, there can be no doubt about it. Yesterday evening, in fact, I positively admired her. It was quite night; we were returning with the usual escort of little married couples like ourselves, from the inevitable tour of the tea-houses and bazaars. While the other mousmes walked along hand in hand, adorned with new silver topknots which they had succeeded in having presented to them, and amusing themselves with playthings, she, pleading fatigue, followed, half reclining, in a djin carriage. We had placed beside her great bunches of flowers destined to fill our vases, late iris and long-stemmed lotus, the last of the season, already smelling of autumn. And it was really very pretty to see this Japanese girl in her little car, lying carelessly among all these water-flowers, lighted by gleams of ever-changing colors, as they chanced from the lanterns we met or passed. If, on the evening of my arrival in Japan, any one had pointed her out to me, and said: "That shall be your mousme," there can not be a doubt I should have been charmed. In reality, however, I am not charmed; it is only Chrysantheme, always Chrysantheme, nothing but Chrysantheme: a mere plaything to laugh at, a little creature of finical forms and thoughts, with whom the agency of M. Kangourou has supplied me.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE CATS AND THE DOLLS

The water used for drinking in our house, for making tea, and for lesser washing purposes, is kept in large white china tubs, decorated with paintings representing blue fish borne along by a swift current through distorted rushes. In order to keep them cool, the tubs are kept out of doors on Madame Prune's roof, at a place where we can, from the top of our projecting balcony, easily reach them by stretching out an arm. A real godsend for all the thirsty cats in the neighborhood, on warm summer nights, is this corner of the roof with our gayly painted tubs, and it proves a delightful trysting-place for them, after all their caterwauling and long solitary rambles on the tops of the walls.

I had thought it my duty to warn Yves the first time he wished to drink this water.

"Oh!" he replied, rather surprised, "cats, do you say? But they are not dirty!"

On this point Chrysantheme and I agree with him: we do not consider cats unclean animals, and we do not object to drink after them.

Yves considers Chrysantheme much in the same light. "She is not dirty, either," he says; and he willingly drinks after her, out of the same cup, putting her in the same category with the cats.

These china tubs are one of the daily preoccupations of our household: in the evening, when we return from our walk, after the clamber up, which makes us thirsty, and Madame L'Heure's waffles, which we have been eating to beguile the way, we always find them empty. It seems impossible for Madame Prune, or Mademoiselle Oyouki, or their young servant, Mademoiselle Dede,—[Dede-San means "Miss Young Girl," a very common name.]—to have forethought enough to fill them while it is still daylight. And when we are late in returning home, these three ladies are asleep, so we are obliged to attend to the business ourselves.

We must therefore open all the closed doors, put on our boots, and go down into the garden to draw water.

As Chrysantheme would die of fright all alone in the dark, in the midst of the trees and buzzing of insects, I am obliged to accompany her to the well. For this expedition we require a light, and must seek among the quantity of lanterns purchased at Madame Tres-Propre's booth, which have been thrown night after night into the bottom of one of our little paper closets; but alas, all the candles are burned down! I thought as much! Well, we must resolutely take the first lantern to hand, and stick a fresh candle on the iron point at the bottom; Chrysantheme puts forth all her strength, the candle splits, breaks; the mousme pricks her fingers, pouts and whimpers. Such is the inevitable scene that takes place every evening, and delays our retiring to rest under the dark-blue gauze net for a good quarter of an hour; while the cicadas on the roof seem to mock us with their ceaseless song.

All this, which I should find amusing in any one else,—any one I loved —irritates me in her.

CHAPTER XLIV

TENDER MINISTRATIONS

September 11th.

A week has passed very quietly, during which I have written nothing.

By degrees I am becoming accustomed to my Japanese household, to the strangeness of the language, costumes, and faces. For the last three weeks no letters have arrived from Europe; they have no doubt miscarried, and their absence contributes, as is usually the case, to throw a veil of oblivion over the past.

Every day, therefore, I climb up to my villa, sometimes by beautiful starlit nights, sometimes through downpours of rain. Every morning as the sound of Madame Prune's chanted prayer rises through the reverberating air, I awake and go down toward the sea, by grassy pathways full of dew.

The chief occupation in Japan seems to be a perpetual hunt after curios. We sit down on the mattings, in the antique-sellers' little booths, taking a cup of tea with the salesmen, and rummage with our own hands in the cupboards and chests, where many a fantastic piece of old rubbish is huddled away. The bargaining, much discussed, is laughingly carried on for several days, as if we were trying to play off some excellent little practical joke upon each other.

I really make a sad abuse of the adjective little; I am quite aware of it, but how can I do otherwise? In describing this country, the temptation is great to use it ten times in every written line. Little, finical; affected,—all Japan is contained, both physically and morally, in these three words.

My purchases are accumulating in my little wood and paper house; but how much more Japanese it really was, in its bare emptiness, such as M. Sucre and Madame Prune had conceived it. There are now many lamps of sacred symbolism hanging from the ceiling; many stools and many vases, as many gods and goddesses as in a pagoda.

There is even a little Shintoist altar, before which Madame Prune has not been able to restrain her feelings, and before which she has fallen down and chanted her prayers in her bleating, goat-like voice:

"Wash me clean from all my impurity, O Ama-Terace-Omi-Kami! as one washes away uncleanness in the river of Kamo."

Alas for poor Ama-Terace-Omi-Kami to have to wash away the impurities of Madame Prune! What a tedious and ungrateful task!!

Chrysantheme, who is a Buddhist, prays sometimes in the evening before lying down; although overcome with sleep, she prays clapping her hands before the largest of our gilded idols. But she smiles with a childish disrespect for her Buddha, as soon as her prayer is ended. I know that she has also a certain veneration for her Ottokes (the spirits of her ancestors), whose rather sumptuous altar is set up at the house of her mother, Madame Renoncule. She asks for their blessings, for fortune and wisdom.

Who can fathom her ideas about the gods, or about death? Does she possess a soul? Does she think she has one? Her religion is an obscure chaos of theogonies as old as the world, treasured up out of respect for ancient customs; and of more recent ideas about the blessed final annihilation, imported from India by saintly Chinese missionaries at the epoch of our Middle Ages. The bonzes themselves are puzzled; what a muddle, therefore, must not all this become, when jumbled together in the childish brain of a sleepy mousme!

Two very insignificant episodes have somewhat attached me to her—(bonds of this kind seldom fail to draw closer in the end). The first occasion was as follows:

Madame Prune one day brought forth a relic of her gay youth, a tortoise-shell comb of rare transparency, one of those combs that it is good style to place on the summit of the head, lightly poised, hardly stuck at all in the hair, with all the teeth showing. Taking it out of a pretty little lacquered box, she held it up in the air and blinked her eyes, looking through it at the sky—a bright summer sky—as one does to examine the quality of a precious stone.

"Here is," she said, "an object of great value that you should offer to your little wife."

My mousme, very much taken by it, admired the clearness of the comb and its graceful shape.

The lacquered box, however, pleased me more. On the cover was a wonderful painting in gold on gold, representing a field of rice, seen very close, on a windy day; a tangle of ears and grass beaten down and twisted by a terrible squall; here and there, between the distorted stalks, the muddy earth of the rice-swamp was visible; there were even little pools of water, produced by bits of the transparent lacquer on which tiny particles of gold seemed to float about like chaff in a thick liquid; two or three insects, which required a microscope to be well seen, were clinging in a terrified manner to the rushes, and the whole picture was no larger than a woman's hand.

As for Madame Prune's comb, I confess it left me indifferent, and I turned a deaf ear, thinking it very insignificant and expensive. Then Chrysantheme answered, mournfully:

"No, thank you, I don't want it; take it away, dear Madame Prune."

And at the same time she heaved a deep sigh, full of meaning, which plainly said:

"He is not so fond of me as all that.—Useless to bother him."

I immediately made the wished-for purchase.

Later when Chrysantheme will have become an old monkey like Madame Prune, with her black teeth and long orisons, she, in her turn, will retail that comb to some fine lady of a fresh generation.

On another occasion the sun had given me a headache; I lay on the floor resting my head on my snake-skin pillow. My eyes were dim; and everything appeared to turn around: the open veranda, the big expanse of luminous evening sky, and a variety of kites hovering against its background. I felt myself vibrating painfully to the rhythmical sound of the cicalas which filled the atmosphere.

She, crouching by my side, strove to relieve me by a Japanese process, pressing with all her might on my temples with her little thumbs and turning them rapidly around, as if she were boring a hole with a gimlet. She had become quite hot and red over this hard work, which procured me real comfort, something similar to the dreamy intoxication of opium.

Then, anxious and fearful lest I should have an attack of fever, she rolled into a pellet and thrust into my mouth a very efficacious prayer written on rice-paper, which she had kept carefully in the lining of one of her sleeves.

Well, I swallowed that prayer without a smile, not wishing to hurt her feelings or shake her funny little faith.

CHAPTER XLV

TWO FAIR ARISTOCRATS

Today, Yves, my mousme and I went to the best photographer in Nagasaki, to be taken in a group. We shall send the picture to France. Yves laughs as he thinks of his wife's astonishment when she sees Chrysantheme's little face between us, and he wonders how he shall explain it to her.

"I shall just say it is one of your friends, that's all!" he says to me.

In Japan there are many photographers like our own, with this difference, that they are Japanese, and inhabit Japanese houses. The one we intend to honor to-day carries on his business in the suburbs, in that ancient quarter of big trees and gloomy pagodas where, the other day, I met the pretty little mousme. His signboard, written in several languages, is posted against a wall on the edge of the little torrent which, rushing down from the green mountain above, is crossed by many a curved bridge of old granite and lined on either side with light bamboos or oleanders in full bloom.

It is astonishing and puzzling to find a photographer perched there, in the very heart of old Japan.

We have come at the wrong moment; there is a file of people at the door. Long rows of djins' cars are stationed there, awaiting the customers they have brought, who will all have their turn before us. The runners, naked and tattooed, their hair carefully combed in sleek bands and shiny chignons, are chatting, smoking little pipes, or bathing their muscular legs in the fresh water of the torrent.

The courtyard is irreproachably Japanese, with its lanterns and dwarf trees. But the studio where one poses might be in Paris or Pontoise; the self-same chair in "old oak," the same faded "poufs," plaster columns, and pasteboard rocks.

The people who are being photographed at this moment are two ladies of quality, evidently mother and daughter, who are sitting together for a cabinet-size portrait, with accessories of the time of Louis XV. A strange group this, the first great ladies of this country I have seen so near, with their long, aristocratic faces, dull, lifeless, almost gray by dint of rice-powder, and their mouths painted heart-shape in vivid carmine. Withal they have an undeniable look of good breeding that strongly impresses us, notwithstanding the intrinsic differences of race and acquired notions.

They scanned Chrysantheme with a look of obvious scorn, although her costume was as ladylike as their own. For my part, I could not take my eyes off these two creatures; they captivated me like incomprehensible things that one never had seen before. Their fragile bodies, outlandishly graceful in posture, are lost in stiff materials and redundant sashes, of which the ends droop like tired wings. They make me think, I know not why, of great rare insects; the extraordinary patterns on their garments have something of the dark motley of night-moths. Above all, I ponder over the mystery of their tiny slits of eyes, drawn back and up so far that the tight-drawn lids can hardly open; the mystery of their expression, which seems to denote inner thoughts of a silly, vague, complacent absurdity, a world of ideas absolutely closed to ourselves. And I think as I gaze at them: "How far we are from this Japanese people! how totally dissimilar are our races!"

We are compelled to let several English sailors pass before us, decked out in their white drill clothes, fresh, fat, and pink, like little sugar figures, who attitudinize in a sheepish manner around the shafts of the columns.

At last it is our turn; Chrysantheme settles herself slowly in a very affected style, turning in the points of her toes as much as possible, according to the fashion.

And on the negative shown to us we look like a supremely ridiculous little family drawn up in a line by a common photographer at a fair.

CHAPTER XLVI

GRAVE SUSPICIONS

September 13th.

Tonight Yves is off duty three hours earlier than I; occasionally this happens, according to the arrangement of the watches. At those times he lands first, and goes up to wait for me at Diou-djen-dji.

From the deck I can see him through my glass, climbing up the green mountain-path; he walks with a brisk, rapid step, almost running; what a hurry he seems in to rejoin little Chrysantheme!

When I arrive, about nine o'clock, I find him seated on the floor, in the middle of my rooms, with naked torso (this is a sufficiently proper costume for private life here, I admit). Around him are grouped Chrysantheme, Oyouki, and Mademoiselle Dede the maid, all eagerly rubbing his back with little blue towels decorated with storks and humorous subjects.

Good heavens! what can he have been doing to be so hot, and to have put himself in such a state?

He tells me that near our house, a little farther up the mountain, he has discovered a fencing-gallery: that till nightfall he had been engaged in a fencing-bout against Japanese, who fought with two-handed swords, springing like cats, as is the custom of their country. With his French method of fencing, he had given them a good drubbing. Upon which, with many a low bow, they had shown him their admiration by bringing him a quantity of nice little iced things to drink. All this combined had thrown him into a fearful perspiration.

Ah, very well! Nevertheless, this did not quite explain to me!

He is delighted with his evening; intends to go and amuse himself every day by beating them; he even thinks of taking pupils.

Once his back is dried, all together, the three mousmes and himself, play at Japanese pigeon-vole. Really I could not wish for anything more innocent, or more correct in every respect.

Charles N—— and Madame Jonquille, his wife, arrived unexpectedly about ten o'clock. (They were wandering about in the dark shrubberies in our neighborhood, and, seeing our lights, came up to us.)

They intend to finish the evening at the tea-house of the toads, and they try to induce us to go and drink some iced sherbets with them. It is at least an hour's walk from here, on the other side of the town, halfway up the hill, in the gardens of the large pagoda dedicated to Osueva; but they stick to their idea, pretending that in this clear night and bright moonlight we shall have a lovely view from the terrace of the temple.

Lovely, I have no doubt, but we had intended going to bed. However, be it so, let us go with them.

We hire five djins and five cars down below, in the principal street, in front of Madame Tres-Propre's shop, who, for this late expedition, chooses for us her largest round lanterns-big, red balloons, decorated with starfish, seaweed, and green sharks.

It is nearly eleven o'clock when we make our start. In the central quarters the virtuous Nipponese are already closing their little booths, putting out their lamps, shutting the wooden framework, drawing their paper panels.

Farther on, in the old-fashioned suburban streets, all is shut up long ago, and our carts roll on through the black night. We cry out to our djins: "Ayakou! ayakou!" ("Quick! quick!") and they run as hard as they can, uttering little shrieks, like merry animals full of wild gayety. We rush like a whirlwind through the darkness, all five in Indian file, dashing and jolting over the old, uneven flagstones, dimly lighted up by our red balloons fluttering at the end of their bamboo stems. From time to time some Japanese, night-capped in his blue kerchief, opens a window to see who these noisy madcaps can be, dashing by so rapidly and so late. Or else some faint glimmer, thrown by us on our passage, discovers the hideous smile of a large stone animal seated at the gate of a pagoda.

At last we arrive at the foot of Osueva's temple, and, leaving our djins with our little gigs, we clamber up the gigantic steps, completely deserted at this hour of the night.

Chrysantheme, who always likes to play the part of a tired little girl, of a spoiled and pouting child, ascends slowly between Yves and myself, clinging to our arms.

Jonquille, on the contrary, skips up like a bird, amusing herself by counting the endless steps.

She lays a great stress on the accentuations, as if to make the numbers sound even more droll.

A little silver aigrette glitters in her beautiful black coiffure; her delicate and graceful figure seems strangely fantastic, and the darkness that envelops us conceals the fact that her face is quite ugly, and almost without eyes.

This evening Chrysantheme and Jonquille really look like little fairies; at certain moments the most insignificant Japanese have this appearance, by dint of whimsical elegance and ingenious arrangement.

The granite stairs, imposing, deserted, uniformly gray under the nocturnal sky, appear to vanish into the empty space above us, and, when we turn round, to disappear in the depths beneath, to fall into the abyss with the dizzy rapidity of a dream. On the sloping steps the black shadows of the gateways through which we must pass stretch out indefinitely; and the shadows, which seem to be broken at each projecting step, look like the regular creases of a fan. The porticoes stand up separately, rising one above another; their wonderful shapes are at once remarkably simple and studiously affected; their outlines stand out sharp and distinct, having nevertheless the vague appearance of all very large objects in the pale moonlight. The curved architraves rise at each extremity like two menacing horns, pointing upward toward the far-off blue canopy of the star-spangled sky, as if they would communicate to the gods the knowledge they have acquired in the depths of their foundations from the earth, full of sepulchres and death, which surrounds them.

We are, indeed, a very small group, lost now in the immensity of the colossal acclivity as we move onward, lighted partly by the wan moon, partly by the red lanterns we hold in our hands, floating at the ends of their long sticks.

A deep silence reigns in the precincts of the temple, even the sound of insects is hushed as we ascend. A sort of reverence, a kind of religious fear steals over us, and, at the same moment, a delicious coolness suddenly pervades the air, and passes over us.

On entering the courtyard above, we feel a little daunted. Here we find the horse in jade, and the china turrets. The enclosing walls make it the more gloomy, and our arrival seems to disturb I know not what mysterious council held between the spirits of the air and the visible symbols that are there, chimeras and monsters illuminated by the blue rays of the moon.

We turn to the left, and go through the terraced gardens, to reach the tea-house of the toads, which this evening is our goal; we find it shut up—I expected as much—closed and dark, at this hour! We drum all together on the door; in the most coaxing tones we call by name the waiting-maids we know so well: Mademoiselle Transparente, Mademoiselle Etoile, Mademoiselle Rosee-matinala, and Mademoiselle Margueritereine. Not an answer. Good-by, perfumed sherbets and frosted beans!

In front of the little archery-house our mousmes suddenly jump aside, terrified, declaring that there is a dead body on the ground. Yes, indeed, some one is lying there. We cautiously examine the place by the light of our red balloons, carefully held out at arm's length for fear of this dead man. It is only the marksman, he who on the 4th of July chose such magnificent arrows for Chrysantheme; and he sleeps, good man! with his chignon somewhat dishevelled, a sound sleep, which it would be cruel to disturb.

Let us go to the end of the terrace, contemplate the harbor at our feet, and then return home. Tonight the harbor looks like only a dark and sinister rent, which the moonbeams can not fathom—a yawning crevasse opening into the very bowels of the earth, at the bottom of which lie faint, small glimmers, an assembly of glowworms in a ditch—the lights of the different vessels lying at anchor.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Dull hours spent in idle and diffuse conversation
Prayers swallowed like pills by invalids at a distance
Trees, dwarfed by a Japanese process
Which I should find amusing in any one else,—any one I loved

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