

# Madame Chrysanthème

PIERRE LOTI

青月夜の目と  
浅草乃大の目



哥  
麻呂  
筆

MADAME  
CHRYSANTHÈME

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Pierre Loti

Translated from the French by Clémence Aubert

*An excerpt from the forthcoming Espresso Publishing  
House edition*

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ESPRESSO PUBLISHING HOUSE

### A NOTE ON THIS EXCERPT

This excerpt comprises the Avant-Propos, the Dedicatory Letter, and the opening three chapters of *Madame Chrysanthème* by Pierre Loti (1887). The translation is by Clémence Aubert. The complete edition, with a full Introduction, Translator's Note, and editorial apparatus, will be published by Espresso Publishing House.

## A V A N T - P R O P O S

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At sea, around two in the morning. A calm night, a sky full of stars.

Yves stood on the bridge beside me, and we spoke of the country — utterly new to both of us — to which the accidents of our fate were this time taking us. It was the next day that we were to make landfall; the prospect amused us and we were making a thousand plans.

— As for me, I was saying, the moment I arrive, I shall get married...

— Ah! said Yves, in his detached way — the manner of a man nothing any longer surprises.

— Yes... with a small woman, yellow-skinned, black-haired, cat-eyed. — I shall choose her pretty. — She will be no taller than a doll. — You will have your room in our house. — It will all take place in a paper house, nicely shaded, in the middle of green gardens. — I want everything in flower all around; we will live among flowers, and every morning our home will be filled with bouquets, with bouquets such as you have never seen...

Yves seemed now to take some interest in these domestic plans. He would have listened with equal confidence if I had expressed an intention to take temporary vows with monks of that country, or to marry some island queen and shut myself away with her, in the middle of an enchanted lake, in a house of jade.

But the plan I was laying out for him was genuinely fixed in my mind. Out of boredom, my God, out of loneliness, I had come little by little to imagine and desire this marriage. — And then above all, to live for a

while on land, in some shaded corner, among trees and flowers — how tempting that was, after the months we had just lost in the Pescadores (those hot and sinister islands, without greenery, without trees, without streams, smelling of China and of death).

We had traveled far in latitude since our ship left that Chinese furnace, and the constellations of our sky had changed rapidly: the Southern Cross gone with the other austral stars, the Great Bear risen toward the zenith and standing almost as high now as in the sky of France. Already the cooler air we breathed that night rested us, revived us deliciously — brought back our watch nights of old, in summer, on the Breton coasts...

And yet, at what a distance we were from those familiar shores, at what a frightful distance!...

## DEDICATORY LETTER

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*to Madame*

*THE DUCHESSE DE RICHELIEU*

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Madame la Duchesse,

Please accept this book as a tribute of most respectful friendship.

I hesitated to offer it to you, because the subject matter is not altogether proper; but I have taken care that the expression never be of base currency, and I believe I have succeeded.

It is the journal of one summer of my life, unchanged — not even the dates, for I find that when one arranges things, one always puts them thoroughly in disorder. Although the longest part appears, on the surface, to belong to Madame Chrysanthème, it is quite certain that the three principal characters are Myself, Japan, and the Effect that country has produced upon me.

Do you remember a photograph — rather comic, I admit — showing tall Yves, a Japanese woman, and myself, arranged side by side on the same card at the direction of a Nagasaki artist? — You smiled when I assured you that this small person between the two of us, so carefully coiffed, had been one of my neighbors. Please receive this book with that same indulgent smile, seeking in it no moral weight, dangerous or wholesome — as you would receive a droll vase, an ivory figurine, some outlandish absurdity, brought back for you from that astonishing homeland of all outlandish absurdities.

With deep respect, Madame la Duchesse,

your devoted,  
pierre loti.

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## I

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At the first light of dawn, we catch sight of Japan.

Right on schedule, it appears — still distant — at a precise point in this sea which, for so many days, has been empty expanse.

At first it is only a series of small rose-pink summits (the outer Fukaiï archipelago in the rising sun). But behind, the full length of the horizon, one soon sees something like a heaviness in the air, a veil lying heavy on the waters: that is Japan proper, and little by little, out of that great confused mass, entirely opaque silhouettes take shape — the mountains of Nagasaki.

We have headwind, a fresh breeze that keeps rising, as if this country were blowing with all its force against us to drive us back. — The sea, the rigging, the ship, are restless and loud.

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## II

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Around three in the afternoon, all these distant things have drawn close, drawn close until they tower over us with their rocky masses or their tangles of greenery.

And we are entering now a sort of shadowed corridor between two rows of very high mountains succeeding one another with a symmetrical strangeness — like the flats of a stage set built entirely in depth, extremely beautiful, but not quite natural. — One would say that this

Japan opens before us, in an enchanted rift, to let us penetrate into its very heart.

At the far end of this long and strange bay, Nagasaki must be — not yet visible. Everything is admirably green. The great open-sea wind, fallen abruptly, has given way to calm; the air, now very warm, fills with scents of flowers. And in this valley an astonishing music rises from the cicadas; they answer each other from shore to shore; all these mountains ring with their innumerable trembling; the whole country gives off a ceaseless crystal vibration. We brush past companies of great junks gliding gently along, pushed by imperceptible breezes; on the barely ruffled water one cannot hear them move; their white sails, spread on horizontal yards, hang down loosely, draped in a thousand folds like lowered blinds; their elaborate sterns rise into galleries, like the poops of medieval ships. Against the intense green of these mountain walls, they are snowwhite.

What a country of greenness and shade, this Japan — what an unexpected Eden!...

Outside, on the open sea, it must still be broad daylight; but here, in the depths of this valley, one already has the sense of evening; below the brightly lit summits, the bases, all the denser parts near the water, lie in a twilight dimness. Those junks passing — so white against the dark foliage — are handled in silence, wonderfully, by small yellow men, entirely naked, their long hair combed flat in a woman's bands. The further one goes into the green corridor, the more penetrating the scents become and the monotonous chime of the cicadas swells like an orchestral crescendo. Above, in the luminous cut of sky between the mountains, birds wheel — something like gyrfalcons — making their cry: *Han! Han! Han!* — with a deep resonance like a human voice; their calls fall into the stillness sadly, prolonged by the echo.

All this exuberant fresh nature carries in itself a Japanese strangeness; it resides in some indefinable quality of the mountain peaks and — if one can say such a thing — in the improbability of certain things that are too pretty. Trees arrange themselves in clusters with the precious grace of

figures on a lacquer tray. Great rocks surge up straight, in exaggerated poses, beside hillocks of gentle form covered with tender grass: disparate elements of landscape placed close together, as in artificial scenes.

...And looking carefully, one catches sight here and there — most often built cantilevered over some abyss — of some old mysterious little pagoda, half-hidden in the tangle of overhanging trees: this above all casts, from the first, upon newcomers like us, the distant note and gives the feeling that in this country the Spirits, the Gods of the woods, the ancient symbols charged with watching over the countryside, are unknown and incomprehensible...



When Nagasaki appears, it is a disappointment to the eye: at the foot of the overhanging green mountains, an altogether commonplace city. In front, a jumble of ships flying every flag in the world, ocean liners like anywhere else, black smoke, and on the quays, factories; in the way of the banal already seen everywhere, nothing is missing.

There will come a time when the earth will be a very tedious place to live, when it has been made the same from end to end, and when one can no longer even try to travel for a little distraction...



Around six o'clock, we anchor noisily amid a crowd of ships already there, and at once we are invaded.

Invaded by a mercantile Japan — eager, comic — arriving in full boatloads, in full jonkloads, like a rising tide: men and women entering in an unbroken file, without cries, without arguments, without noise, each with a bow so smiling that one dares not be annoyed, and at last, by reflex, one smiles oneself, one bows in return. On their backs they carry small baskets, small cases, receptacles of every shape, invented with the most

ingenious skill to fit inside one another, to contain one another, and then to multiply until they fill all available space, until there is no end of them; from them emerge unexpected, unimaginable things: screens, shoes, soap, lanterns; cuff links, live cicadas singing in little cages; jewellery and trained white mice able to turn tiny cardboard mills; obscene photographs; soups and stews in bowls, piping hot, ready to be served in portions to the crew; — and porcelain, legions of vases, teapots, cups, small pots and plates... In an instant all of it unwrapped, spread on the deck with prodigious speed and a certain art of arrangement; each seller crouching like a monkey, hands touching feet, behind his wares — and always smiling, always bent double in the most gracious bows. And the ship's deck, under these heaps of multicolored things, suddenly resembles a vast bazaar. And the sailors, greatly amused, in high spirits, trampling through the piles, chucking the chins of the women vendors, buying everything, scattering their silver piastres at will...

But, my God, how ugly they all are, how petty, how grotesque! Given my plans for marriage, I grow very pensive, very disenchanted...



We are on duty, Yves and I, until the following morning, and, after the first commotions that always follow anchorage aboard ship — (boats to be lowered; ladders, booms to be swung out) — we have nothing more to do than watch. And we wonder: where have we really arrived? — The United States? — An English colony in Australia — or New Zealand??...

Consulates, customs-houses, factories; a dock where a Russian frigate sits enthroned; a whole European concession with villas on the heights, and on the quays, American bars for the sailors. Over there, it is true, further back and beyond all these common things, at the very end of the immense green valley, thousands upon thousands of blackish little houses, a tangle with a slightly strange look from which rise here and there higher rooflines painted dark red: probably the real, the old Japanese Nagasaki, still surviving... And in those quarters, who knows — mincing behind

some paper screen — the small woman with cat's eyes... who perhaps... within two or three days (I have no time to lose) I will have married!!... All the same, I can no longer quite picture her, this little person; the vendors of white mice have spoiled her image for me; I am afraid now that she might resemble them...



At nightfall, the deck of our ship empties as if by enchantment; having in an instant closed their boxes, folded their sliding screens and spring-loaded fans; having given each of us their most humble bow, the little men and little women go away.

And as night descends, blurring things in a bluish darkness, this Japan we are in becomes again, little by little, little by little, a land of enchantment and fairy tale. The great mountains, all black now, double themselves at the base in the still water that bears us, reflected with their inverted outlines, giving the illusion of frightful precipices above which we are suspended; — and the stars, also inverted, make in the depths of the imaginary gulf a scattering of little phosphorescent patches.

Then all this Nagasaki lights up in abundance, covers itself with lanterns without end; the least suburb shines, the least village; the most insignificant cabin, perched up there in the trees and not even visible during the day, casts its little glowworm light. Soon there are lights, there are lights everywhere; on all sides of the bay, from top to bottom of the mountains, myriads of fires glow in the black, giving the impression of an immense capital arranged around us in a vertiginous amphitheatre. And below — so still is the water — another city, equally illuminated, descends into the abyss. The night is mild, pure, delicious; the air full of a flower scent sent to us by the mountains. Sounds of guitars, coming from the teahouses or the nocturnal establishments of ill repute, seem in the distance to be sweet music. And that singing of the cicadas — which in Japan is one of the eternal sounds of life, to which we will cease to pay attention a few days from now, it is here so completely the very ground

beneath all earthly sounds — one hears it, resonant, incessant, gently monotonous like the fall of a cascade of crystal...

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### III

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It rains in torrents the next day; one of those driving rains, unceasing, unsparring, blinding, flooding everything; a rain so dense one cannot see from one end of the ship to the other. One would say that the clouds of the whole world have assembled in Nagasaki Bay, made their rendezvous in this great green funnel to pour themselves out at their ease. And it rains, rains; it is almost dark, so thick it falls. Through a veil of shattered water the base of the mountains is still visible; but as for the peaks, they are lost in the heavy dark masses pressing down on us. Ragged clouds are visible, which seem to detach themselves from the dark vault, trailing high up among the trees like great grey rags — and endlessly dissolving into water, into torrential water. There is wind too; one hears it howl in the ravines with a deep voice. — And the whole surface of the bay, pocked with rain, harried by squalls arriving from every quarter, laps and groans and writhes in extreme agitation.

Foul weather for setting foot on shore for the first time... How to go find a wife, under this deluge, in an unknown country!...



No matter! I dress and say to Yves — who smiles at my notion of going out all the same:

— Get me a sampan alongside, would you, brother.

Yves then, with a sweep of the arm into the wind and rain, calls up a kind of small white wooden sarcophagus that was bobbing near us on the sea,

managed with a scull by two naked yellow children in the downpour. — The thing approaches; I leap onto it; then, through a small trapdoor shaped like a rat-hole that one of the scullers opens for me, I slide in and stretch out flat on a mat — inside what is called the "cabin" of a sampan.

I have exactly the space of my prone body, in this floating coffin — which is, moreover, of meticulous cleanliness, white as new pine. I am well sheltered from the rain, which drums on my lid, and here I am on my way to the city, sailing flat on my face in this box; rocked by one wave, shaken roughly by another, half-overturned sometimes — and, through the gap of my rat-hole, seeing from below two small figures to whom I have entrusted my fate: children of eight or ten years at most, with marmoset faces, but already muscled like real miniature men, already as deft as seasoned hands of the sea.



...They raise a great cry: no doubt we are coming in! — Through my trapdoor, which I have thrown wide open, I see the grey flagstones of the quay, there very close. I emerge then from my sarcophagus, preparing to set foot, for the first time in my life, on Japanese soil.

Everything drips more than ever and the rain lashes at the eyes, irritating, unbearable.

Barely have I set foot on shore than a dozen strange beings, difficult to define at first through the blinding downpour — human-shaped hedgehogs, each trailing something large and black — bound toward me, cry out, surround me, bar my way. One of them has opened over my head an enormous umbrella, with closely spaced ribs, on which storks are painted transparent — and here they all are smiling at me, their faces engaging, with an air of waiting.

I had been warned: they are simply *djins* competing for the honour of my preference; though I am taken aback by this sudden assault, by this Japanese welcome on a first visit. (*Djins*, or *djin-richisans*, means

running-men who pull small carts and carry passengers for money; hiring themselves by the hour or by the ride, like our cabs at home.)

Their legs are bare to the top — today very wet — and their heads hide beneath a large shade-lamp-shaped hat. They wear a waterproof coat of rush matting, all the straw ends sticking out, bristling like a porcupine; one would say they were dressed in the thatch of a cottage. — They continue to smile, awaiting my choice.

Having the honour of knowing none of them, I opt at random for the *djin* with the umbrella and climb into his little carriage, which he pulls the hood down low over me, very low, very low. Over my legs he spreads an oilskin cover, pulls it up to my eyes, then steps forward and says to me in Japanese something that must mean: "Where shall I take you, sir?" To which I reply in the same language: "To the Garden of Flowers, my friend!"

I have answered that in three words learned by heart, somewhat parrot-fashion, astonished that it could mean anything, astonished to be understood — and off we go, him running at full tilt; me being pulled by him, jolting along the road in his light cart, wrapped in oilskins, shut in as in a box; — both of us still drenched, sending up sprays of water and mud from the soaking ground.

"To the Garden of Flowers," I have said, like a regular, surprised to hear myself. The truth is I am less ignorant of things Japanese than one might suppose. Friends returning from that empire have coached me, and I know a great many things: this Garden of Flowers is a teahouse, an elegant meeting place. Once there, I will ask for a certain Kangourou-San, who is at once interpreter, laundryman, and discreet agent for the crossing of races. And this evening perhaps, if my affairs go as desired, I will be introduced to the young woman that mysterious fate has destined for me... This thought keeps my mind alert during the breathless race we are making, my *djin* and I, one rolling the other, under the inexorable downpour...

Oh! the singular Japan glimpsed that day, through the gap of those oilskins, from under the dripping hood of my little carriage! A sullen Japan, muddy, half-drowned. All that — houses, animals or people — I had known only in pictures; all that I had seen painted against the fine blues or pinks of screens and vases, appearing now in reality under a black sky, with umbrella, with wooden sandals, pitiful and tucked up.

At moments the downpour falls so hard that I close everything tight; I grow numb in the noise and jolting, forgetting entirely what country I am in. — This carriage hood has holes that run little streams down my back. — Then, recalling that I am travelling through Nagasaki itself for the first time in my life, I throw a curious glance outside, at the risk of receiving a soaking: we are trotting through some small sad blackish street (there is a labyrinth of them, thousands); cascades tumble from the rooftops onto the gleaming pavements; the rain draws grey hatching in the air that blurs everything. — Sometimes we pass a lady, tangled in her robe, unsteady on her high wooden shoes, a screen-figure fumbling with a painted paper umbrella. Or we pass the entrance to a pagoda, and then some old granite monster, seated backside in the water, pulls a face at me, ferocious.

But how vast it is, this Nagasaki! For nearly an hour we have been running at full speed and it shows no sign of ending. And it is flat; one had no idea, from the anchorage, that there could be such an expanse of plain in this valley bottom.

I would be entirely unable to say where I am, in what direction we have run; I put myself in the hands of my *djin* and chance.

And what a steam-engine, my *djin*! I was accustomed to Chinese runners, but there was nothing like this. When I pull my oilskins aside to look at something, it is always him I see, naturally, in the foreground: his two bare legs, tawny, muscled, one after the other, splashing everything, and his hedgehog back, bent under the rain. — Do the people who see this little carriage go by, so thoroughly drenched, suspect that it contains a

suitor in search of a wife?...



At last my vehicle stops, and my *djin*, smiling, with precautions so as not to send new rivers down my neck, lowers the hood; there is a lull in the deluge, it has stopped raining. — I had not yet seen his face; it is rather pleasant, exceptionally; a young man of around thirty, lively and vigorous in his look, with an open expression... And who would have told me that, a few days later, this same *djin*... But no, I do not wish to let that out yet; it would risk casting a premature and unjust shadow of discredit over Chrysanthème...

So, we have just stopped. It is at the very foot of a great overhanging mountain; we must have passed beyond the city, probably, and we are in the suburbs, in the country. One must get out, it seems, and climb now by a narrow, near-vertical path. Around us, suburban cottages, garden enclosures, very high bamboo fences masking the view. The green mountain crushes us with its full height, and low, heavy, dark clouds hang above our heads like an oppressive lid that would finish shutting us into this unknown corner where we are; truly it seems that this absence of distance, of perspective, better inclines one to notice all the details of this very small patch of intimate Japan, muddy and wet, that we have before our eyes. — The earth of this country is very red. — The grasses, the small flowers bordering the path are foreign to me; — and yet, in the fence, there are bindweeds like ours, and in the gardens I recognize dahlias and zinnias and other flowers of France. The air has a complicated smell; to the scents of plants and earth something else is added, coming no doubt from the dwellings: one would say a mixture of dried fish and incense. No one passes; of inhabitants, of interiors, of life, nothing shows itself, and I might just as well imagine myself anywhere at all.

My *djin* has stowed his little carriage under a tree, and we climb together up this steep path, on this red soil where our feet slip.

— We are going to the Garden of Flowers? I ask, anxious to know whether I have been understood.

— Yes, yes, says the *djin*, it is up there and quite close.

The path turns, grows narrow and dark. On one side, the mountain wall all covered in wet ferns; on the other, a large wooden house, almost without openings and of forbidding aspect: it is there that my *djin* stops.

What? This sinister house — the Garden of Flowers? — He insists, with every air of certainty. We knock on a heavy door which at once slides in its grooves and opens. — Then two small women appear, funny, almost old; but having retained pretensions, that is immediately plain; perfectly correct vase-figure dress, hands and feet like a child's.

Barely have they seen me than they drop to all fours, noses to the floor. Good heavens, what has happened to them? — Nothing at all; it is simply the ceremonial greeting performed thus; I was not yet accustomed to it. And now they are up, busying themselves to take off my shoes (one never enters a Japanese house with one's shoes on), to dry the bottom of my trousers, to feel whether my shoulders are soaked.



What strikes one first, in these Japanese interiors, is the meticulous cleanliness, and the white, glacial nakedness.

Over irreproachable mats, without a crease, without a motif, without a stain, I am led up to the first floor, into a large room in which there is nothing, absolutely nothing. The paper walls are composed of sliding panels, able to slide into one another, to disappear entirely if needed — and one whole side of the apartment opens onto a veranda looking out onto the green countryside, the grey sky. As a seat, a black velvet cushion is brought, and here I am seated very low in the middle of this bare room where it is almost cold — the two small women (who are the servants of the house and very humbly mine) waiting for my orders in attitudes of

deep submission.



It is remarkable that these outlandish words, these phrases I learned over there, during our exile in the Pescadores, laboriously from dictionary and grammar, with no conviction whatsoever — it seems they do mean something; one understands me at once.



I want first to speak to this Monsieur Kangourou, who is interpreter, laundryman and discreet agent for great marriages. — Perfectly; he is known, they will go fetch him this very moment, and the elder of the servants prepares for this purpose her wooden sandals, her paper umbrella.

Next, I want them to bring me a properly served light meal, composed of refined Japanese things. — Better and better; one rushes to the kitchens to order it.

Finally I want tea and rice served to my *djin* who waits below; — I want, I want many things, ladies my dolls, I will tell you them one by one, calmly, when I have had time to gather my words... But the more I look at you, the more I worry about what my fiancée of tomorrow will be. — Almost charming, I grant you — by force of drollery, of delicate hands, of miniature feet; but ugly, all in all, and then ridiculously small, the air of a mantelpiece ornament, the air of a marmoset, the air of I know not what...

...I am beginning to understand that I have arrived in this house at an ill-chosen moment. Something is going on here that is none of my concern, and I am in the way.

I could have guessed this from the first, despite the excessive politeness of the welcome — for I recall now, while they were removing my shoes downstairs, I heard whispering above my head, then a sound of panels

being slid very quickly in their grooves; it was evidently to conceal from me what I should not see; they were improvising for me the room where I am — as in menageries one makes a separate compartment for certain animals during the performance.

•••

Now I have been left alone, while my orders are being carried out, and I sit listening, crouched like a Buddha on my black velvet cushion, in the midst of the whiteness of these mats and walls.

Behind the paper partitions, tired voices — many of them, it seems — speak very low. Then a sound of guitar and a woman's voice rise, plaintive, rather sweet, in the resonance of this bare house, in the melancholy of this rainy day.

Through the veranda, thrown wide open, what one sees is quite lovely, I admit; it resembles an enchanted landscape. Mountains admirably wooded, mounting high into the still-dark sky, hiding the tips of their peaks, and, perched in the clouds, a temple. The air has that absolute transparency, the distances that sharpness, which follow great downpours; but a thick vault, still laden with water, remains stretched above everything, and on the foliage of the hanging woods there is something like large tufts of grey cotton hanging motionless. In the foreground, below and in front of all these near-fantastic things, is a miniature garden — where two beautiful white cats stroll, amusing themselves chasing each other through the alleys of a Lilliputian labyrinth, shaking their paws because the sand is full of water. The garden is as mannered as possible: no flowers, but little rocks, little lakes, dwarf trees trimmed with a bizarre taste; all of it unnatural, but so ingeniously composed, so green, with such fresh mosses!...

A great silence outside, in those wet countryside over which I look down; an absolute calm, all the way back into the depths of the immense backdrop. But the woman's voice behind the paper wall sings on with an

extreme sad sweetness; the guitar accompanying it has grave notes, slightly lugubrious...

Well!... it is quickening now — and one would even say they are dancing!

Never mind! I will try to look through the light panels — through a gap I can see over there.

Oh! the singular spectacle: evidently some young Nagasaki elegants in the middle of a grand clandestine feast! In an apartment as bare as mine, a dozen of them sit in a circle on the floor; long cotton robes in blue with pagoda sleeves, long greased flat hair topped by a European bowler hat; idiotic faces, yellow, exhausted, bloodless. On the floor, quantities of little braziers, little pipes, little lacquer trays, little teapots, little cups; — all the accessories and all the remains of a Japanese orgy resembling a children's tea-party. And in the middle of the circle of these dandies, three women in fine dress — three strange visions, one might say: pale-coloured robes of no nameable shade, embroidered with golden chimeras; great chignons arranged with an unknown art, pinned with needles and flowers. Two have their backs to me: one holding the guitar; the other, the one who sings with that sweet voice; — they are exquisite in pose, in costume, in hair, in nape, in everything, seen thus furtively from behind, and I tremble lest a movement should show me their faces, which will doubtless disenchant me. The third stands and dances before this Areopagus of imbeciles, before these bowler hats and flat hair... Oh! what a fright when she turns! She wears on her face the horrible, contracted, pallid mask of a spectre or a vampire... The mask detaches and falls... She is a vision of a small fairy, twelve or fifteen years old perhaps, slender, already coquettish, already a woman — dressed in a long robe of dark midnight-blue crêpe, shadowed, with a broderie of grey bats, black bats, gold bats...

Footsteps on the stairs, a woman's feet, light, unshod, rustling on the white mats... No doubt the first course of my lunch being brought. — I fall back, immediately still, fixed, on my black velvet cushion.

There are three of them now, three servants arriving in file, with smiles and bows. One presents me with the brazier and the teapot; another, preserved fruits on delicious small plates; another still, indefinable things on jewel-like small trays. And they crouch before me on the ground, placing all this little feast at my feet.

At this moment I have a rather charming impression of Japan; I feel myself entered fully into that small imagined, artificial world that I already knew from paintings on lacquer and porcelain. It is so exactly this! These three small seated women, graceful, delicate, with their slanted eyes, their beautiful wide, smooth, almost varnished chignons; — and this little service on the floor; — and this landscape glimpsed through the veranda, that pagoda perched in the clouds; — and this preciousness that is everywhere, even in things. It is so exactly this too, that melancholy woman's voice still audible behind the paper partition; it is thus, evidently, that they must have sung, those musicians whom I had once seen painted in strange colours on rice paper, half-closing their small vague eyes amid oversized flowers. I had divined this Japan long before coming here. Perhaps, in reality, it seems to me diminished, more insipid still, and more sad too — no doubt because of that shroud of black clouds, because of this rain...



While waiting for M. Kangourou (who is coming, apparently, who is dressing), let us have the little feast.

In a very charming bowl ornamented with soaring storks, there is an improbable soup of seaweed. Elsewhere, small dried fish in sugar, crabs in sugar, beans in sugar, fruits in vinegar and pepper. All of it atrocious, but above all unexpected, unimaginable. They make me eat, the little women, laughing a great deal, with that perpetual, irritating laugh that is the Japanese laugh — eat in their fashion, with nice chopsticks and a touch full of grace. I am growing accustomed to their faces. The whole of it is refined — refined in a way very unlike our own, which I can barely

begin to understand at first sight, but which in time may perhaps come to please me.

...There enters all at once, like a night moth awakened by full daylight, like a rare and surprising *phalène*, the dancer from next door, the child who wore the sinister mask. She has come no doubt to see me. She rolls the eyes of a frightened kitten; then, tamed at once, comes to lean against me with a baby-cat caressingness that rings adorably false. She is charming, fine, elegant; she smells good. Oddly painted, white as plaster, with a small perfectly regular pink circle in the middle of each cheek; the mouth carmined and a little gilding underlining the lower lip. Since it was impossible to whiten the nape, because of the down hairs that are numerous there, one has, for love of correctness, stopped the white plastering there in a straight line that looks cut with a knife; the result, behind her neck, is a square of natural skin, which is very yellow...

An imperious guitar note from behind the partition, an obvious summons! Bang, she runs away, the little fairy, goes back to rejoin the imbeciles next door.

What if I married this one, without looking further? I would respect her as a child entrusted to me; I would take her for what she is, for a bizarre and charming toy. What an amusing little household that would make me! Truly, since I am marrying a trinket, I would have difficulty finding better...

Enter M. Kangourou. Grey worsted suit, from the Bon Marché or the Pont-Neuf, bowler hat, white filoselle gloves. A face at once cunning and idiotic; almost no nose, almost no eyes. Bow, Japanese style: abrupt plunge, hands flat on knees, torso at right angles to legs as if the fellow were snapping in half; small reptilian hiss (produced by drawing saliva between the teeth, and which is the last word in obsequious politeness in this empire).

— You speak French, Monsieur Kangourou?

— Yess! Missieu!

Another bow.

He makes one for every word I say, as if he were a clockwork puppet; when he is sitting before me on the floor, it amounts to a plunge of the head — always accompanied by the same hissing of saliva.

— A cup of tea, Monsieur Kangourou?

Another salutation and a very precious gesture of the hands, as if to say: "I would scarcely dare; it is too condescending of you... Well then, to obey you..."

He has guessed, from the first words, what I expect of him:

— Certainly, he answers, we will attend to that; in a week's time precisely a family from Simonosaki, with two charming daughters, is to arrive...

— What, in a week's time! You do not know me, Monsieur Kangourou! No, no, it will be right away — tomorrow, or not at all.

Another hissing bow, and Kangourou-San, caught up in my urgency, begins feverishly running through all the young ladies available in Nagasaki:

— Let us see — there was Mademoiselle Carnation... Oh! what a shame I did not speak two days earlier! So pretty, so skilled at playing the guitar... It is an irreparable misfortune: she was taken the day before yesterday by a Russian officer...

» Ah! Mademoiselle Apricot! — Would Mademoiselle Apricot answer my needs? She is the daughter of a rich porcelain dealer in the Décima bazaar; a person of great merit, but she would cost very much: her parents, who think highly of her, would not let her go for less than a hundred yen a month. She is very educated, can write commercial script fluently and commands, at her fingertips, over two thousand characters of scholarly writing. In a poetry competition she came first with a piece composed in praise of the little white hedge-flowers seen in the morning dew. But she

is not very pretty of face; one of her eyes is smaller than the other — and she has a pockmark on one cheek, left from a childhood illness...

— Oh! no, then, please, not her. Let us search among the less distinguished young ladies — those without scars. And those next door, in their beautiful gold-embroidered robes? The dancer with the spectre's mask, for instance, Monsieur Kangourou? or even the one who sings with so sweet a voice and whose nape is so lovely???

He does not quite understand at first whom I mean; then, when he has understood, shaking his head, almost mocking, he says:

— No, Missieu, no! Those are *Guéchas*, Missieu — *Guéchas*!

— Well, but, why ever not *Guéchas*? What concern is it of mine if they are *Guéchas*? — Later, when I am better acquainted with Japanese things, I may appreciate the enormity of my request myself: one would truly think I had spoken of marrying the devil...

But here is M. Kangourou suddenly recalling a certain Mademoiselle Jasmine. — My God, how had he not thought of her immediately; but this is exactly what I need; he will make approaches this very day, this very evening, to the parents of this young lady, who live quite far from here on the hill opposite in the Diou-djen-dji suburb. She is a very pretty young lady, around fifteen years old. One would probably have her for eighteen or twenty piastres a month, on condition of offering her a few robes of good taste and lodging her in a pleasant, well-situated house — which a gallant man such as myself can hardly fail to do.

So be it, Mademoiselle Jasmine — and let us part, time is pressing. M. Kangourou will come tomorrow to my ship to communicate the results of his first approaches and consult with me about the meeting. For remuneration, he will accept none for the moment, but I will give him my linen to launder and will bring him the custom of my comrades from the *Triomphante*.

Agreed.

Deep bows — I am reshod at the door.

My *djin*, taking advantage of this interpreter that chance has placed in his path, recommends himself to me for the future: his station is precisely on the quay; his number is 415, written in French figures on the lantern of his carriage (aboard ship, we have 415 Le Goëlec, fusilier, serving on the left of one of my guns; good, I will remember that); his rate is twelve sous per ride and ten sous per hour for regulars. — Excellent, he will have my custom, it is promised. — Let us go. The servants, who have accompanied me out, drop to all fours for the final salutation and remain prostrated on the threshold — for as long as I am visible in the dark path where the ferns are still dripping on my head...

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