THE PILLOW BOOK OF SEI SHŌNAGON

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PENGUIN BOOKS

1. *In Spring It Is the Dawn*

In spring it is the dawn that is most beautiful.[1] As the light creeps over the hills, their outlines are dyed a faint red and wisps of purplish cloud trail over them.

In summer the nights. Not only when the moon shines, but on dark nights too, as the fireflies flit to and fro, and even when it rains, how beautiful it is!

In autumn the evenings, when the glittering sun sinks close to the edge of the hills and the crows fly back to their nests in threes and fours and twos; more charming still is a file of wild geese, like specks in the distant sky. When the sun has set, one's heart is moved by the sound of the wind and the hum of the insects.

In winter the early mornings. It is beautiful indeed when snow has fallen during the night, but splendid too when the ground is white with frost; or even when there is no snow or frost, but it is simply very cold and the attendants hurry from room to room stirring up the fires and bringing charcoal, how well this fits the season's mood! But as noon approaches and the cold wears off, no one bothers to keep the braziers alight, and soon nothing remains but piles of white ashes.

2. *Especially Delightful Is the First Day*

Especially delightful is the first day of the First Month, when the mists so often shroud the sky. Everyone pays great attention to his appearance and dresses with the utmost care. What a pleasure it is to see them all offer their congratulations to the Emperor and celebrate their own new year![2]

I also enjoy the seventh day, when people pluck the young herbs that have sprouted fresh and green beneath the snow.[3] It is amusing to see their excitement when they find such plants

growing near the Palace, by no means a spot where one might expect them.[4]

This is the day when members of the nobility who live outside the Palace arrive in their magnificently decorated carriages to admire the blue horses.[5] As the carriages are drawn over the ground-beam of the Central Gate,[6] there is always a tremendous bump, and the heads of the women passengers are knocked together; the combs fall out of their hair, and may be smashed to pieces if the owners are not careful. I enjoy the way everyone laughs when this happens.

I remember one occasion when I visited the Palace to see the procession of blue horses. Several senior courtiers[7] were standing outside the guard-house of the Left Division; they had borrowed bows from the escorts, and, with much laughter, were twanging them to make the blue horses prance. Looking through one of the gates of the Palace enclosure, I could dimly make out a garden fence, near which a number of ladies, several of them from the Office of Grounds, went to and fro. What lucky women, I thought, who could walk about the Nine-Fold Enclosure as though they had lived there all their lives! Just then the escorts passed close to my carriage – remarkably close, in fact, considering the vastness of the Palace grounds – and I could actually see the texture of their faces. Some of them were not properly powdered; here and there their skin showed through unpleasantly like the dark patches of earth in a garden where the snow has begun to melt. When the horses in the procession reared wildly, I shrank into the back of my carriage and could no longer see what was happening.

On the eighth day[8] there is great excitement in the Palace as people hurry to express their gratitude, and the clatter of carriages is louder than ever – all very fascinating.

The fifteenth day is the festival of the full-moon gruel,[9] when a bowl of gruel is presented to His Majesty. On this day all the women of the house carry gruel-sticks, which they hide carefully from each other. It is most amusing to see them walking about, as they await an opportunity to hit their companions. Each one

is careful not to be struck herself and is constantly looking over her shoulder to make sure that no one is stealing up on her. Yet the precautions are useless, for before long one of the women manages to score a hit. She is extremely pleased with herself and laughs merrily. Everyone finds this delightful – except, of course, the victim, who looks very put out.

In a certain household a young gentleman had been married during the previous year to one of the girls in the family.[10] Having spent the night with her, he was now, on the morning of the fifteenth, about to set off for the Palace. There was a woman[11] in the house who was in the habit of lording it over everyone. On this occasion she was standing in the back of the room, impatiently awaiting an opportunity to hit the man with her gruel-stick as he left. One of the other women realized what she had in mind and burst out laughing. The woman with the stick signalled excitedly that she should be quiet. Fortunately the young man did not notice what was afoot and he stood there unconcernedly.

'I have to pick up something over there,' said the woman with the stick, approaching the man. Suddenly she darted forward, gave him a great whack, and made her escape. Everyone in the room burst out laughing; even the young man smiled pleasantly, not in the least annoyed. He was not too startled; but he did blush a little, which was charming.

Sometimes when the women are hitting each other the men also join in the fun. The strange thing is that, when a woman is hit, she often gets angry and bursts into tears; then she will upbraid her assailant and say the most awful things about him – most amusing. Even in the Palace, where the atmosphere is usually so solemn, everything is in confusion on this day, and no one stands on ceremony.

It is fascinating to see what happens during the period of appointments. However snowy and icy it may be, candidates of the Fourth and Fifth Ranks come to the Palace with their official requests. Those who are still young and merry seem full of confidence. For the candidates who are old and white-haired things do not go so smoothly. Such men have to apply for help

from people with influence at Court; some of them even visit ladies-in-waiting in their quarters and go to great lengths in pointing out their own merits. If young women happen to be present, they are greatly amused. As soon as the candidates have left, they mimic and deride them – something that the old men cannot possibly suspect as they scurry from one part of the Palace to another, begging everyone, 'Please present my petition favourably to the Emperor' and 'Pray inform Her Majesty about me.' It is not so bad if they finally succeed, but it really is rather pathetic when all their efforts prove in vain.

3. *On the Third Day of the Third Month*

On the third day of the Third Month I like to see the sun shining bright and calm in the spring sky. Now is the time when the peach trees come into bloom, and what a sight it is! The willows too are most charming at this season, with the buds still enclosed like silkworms in their cocoons. After the leaves have spread out, I find them unattractive; in fact all trees lose their charm once the blossoms have begun to scatter.

It is a great pleasure to break off a long, beautifully flowering branch from a cherry tree and to arrange it in a large vase. What a delightful task to perform when a visitor is seated nearby conversing! It may be an ordinary guest, or possibly one of Their Highnesses, the Empress's[12] elder brothers; but in any case the visitor will wear a cherry-coloured[13] Court cloak, from the bottom of which his under-robe emerges. I am even happier if a butterfly or a small bird flutters prettily near the flowers and I can see its face.

4. *How Delightful Everything Is!*

How delightful everything is at the time of the Festival![14] The leaves, which still do not cover the trees too thickly, are green

and fresh. In the daytime there is no mist to hide the sky and, glancing up, one is overcome by its beauty. On a slightly cloudy evening, or again at night, it is moving to hear in the distance the song of a *hototogisu*[15] – so faint that one doubts one's own ears.

When the Festival approaches, I enjoy seeing the men go to and fro with rolls of yellowish green and deep violet material which they have loosely wrapped in paper and placed in the lids of long boxes. At this time of the year, border shading, uneven shading, and rolled dyeing all seem more attractive than usual.[16] The young girls who are to take part in the procession have had their hair washed and arranged; but they are still wearing their everyday clothes, which sometimes are in a great mess, wrinkled and coming apart at the seams. How excited they are as they run about the house, impatiently awaiting the great day, and rapping out orders to the maids: 'Fit the cords on my clogs' or 'See that the soles of my sandals are all right.' Once they have put on their Festival costumes, these same young girls, instead of prancing about the rooms, become extremely demure and walk along solemnly like priests at the head of a procession. I also enjoy seeing how their mothers, aunts, and elder sisters, dressed according to their ranks, accompany the girls and help keep their costumes in order.

5. *Different Ways of Speaking*

A priest's language.

The speech of men and of women.[17]

The common people always tend to add extra syllables to their words.

6. *That Parents Should Bring Up Some Beloved Son*

That parents should bring up some beloved son of theirs to be a priest is really distressing. No doubt it is an auspicious[18] thing

10. *I Enjoy Watching the Officials*

I enjoy watching the officials when they come to thank the Emperor for their new appointments. As they stand facing His Majesty with their batons[36] in their hands, the trains of their robes trail along the floor. Then they make obeisance and begin their ceremonial movements[37] with great animation.

11. *The Sliding Screen in the Back of the Hall*

The sliding screen in the back of the hall in the north-east corner of Seiryō Palace is decorated with paintings of the stormy sea and of the terrifying creatures with long arms and long legs that live there.[38] When the doors of the Empress's room were open, we could always see this screen. One day we were sitting in the room, laughing at the paintings and remarking how unpleasant they were. By the balustrade of the veranda stood a large celadon vase, full of magnificent cherry branches; some of them were as much as five foot long, and their blossoms overflowed to the very foot of the railing. Towards noon the Major Counsellor,[39] Fujiwara no Korechika, arrived. He was dressed in a cherry-coloured Court cloak, sufficiently worn to have lost its stiffness, a white under-robe, and loose trousers of dark purple; from beneath the cloak shone the pattern of another robe of dark red damask. Since His Majesty was present, Korechika knelt on the narrow wooden platform before the door and reported to him on official matters.

A group of ladies-in-waiting was seated behind the bamboo blinds. Their cherry-coloured Chinese jackets hung loosely over their shoulders with the collars pulled back; they wore robes of wistaria, golden yellow, and other colours, many of which showed beneath the blind covering the half-shutter. Presently the noise of the attendants' feet told us that dinner was about to be served in the Daytime Chamber,[40] and we heard cries of 'Make way. Make way.'

The bright, serene day delighted me. When the Chamberlains had brought all the dishes into the Chamber, they came to announce that dinner was ready, and His Majesty left by the middle door. After accompanying the Emperor, Korechika returned to his previous place on the veranda beside the cherry blossoms. The Empress pushed aside her curtain of state and came forward as far as the threshold.[41] We were overwhelmed by the whole delightful scene. It was then that Korechika slowly intoned the words of the old poem,

> The days and the months flow by,
> But Mount Mimoro lasts forever.[42]

Deeply impressed, I wished that all this might indeed continue for a thousand years.

As soon as the ladies serving in the Daytime Chamber had called for the gentlemen-in-waiting to remove the trays, His Majesty returned to the Empress's room. Then he told me to rub some ink on the inkstone. Dazzled, I felt that I should never be able to take my eyes off his radiant countenance. Next he folded a piece of white paper. 'I should like each of you,' he said, 'to copy down on this paper the first ancient poem that comes into your head.'

'How am I going to manage this?' I asked Korechika, who was still out on the veranda.

'Write your poem quickly,' he said, 'and show it to His Majesty. We men must not interfere in this.' Ordering an attendant to take the Emperor's inkstone to each of the women in the room, he told us to make haste. 'Write down any poem you happen to remember,' he said. 'The Naniwazu[43] or whatever else you can think of.'

For some reason I was overcome with timidity; I flushed and had no idea what to do. Some of the other women managed to put down poems about the spring, the blossoms, and such suitable subjects; then they handed me the paper and said, 'Now it's your turn.' Picking up the brush, I wrote the poem that goes,

The years have passed
And age has come my way.
Yet I need only look at this fair flower
For all my cares to melt away.

I altered the third line, however, to read, 'Yet I need only look upon my lord.'[44]

When he had finished reading, the Emperor said, 'I asked you to write these poems because I wanted to find out how quick you really were.

'A few years ago,' he continued, 'Emperor Enyū ordered all his courtiers to write poems in a notebook. Some excused themselves on the grounds that their handwriting was poor; but the Emperor insisted, saying that he did not care in the slightest about their handwriting or even whether their poems were suitable for the season. So they all had to swallow their embarrassment and produce something for the occasion. Among them was His Excellency, our present Chancellor, who was then Middle Captain of the Third Rank.[45] He wrote down the old poem,

Like the sea that beats
Upon the shores of Izumo
As the tide sweeps in,
Deeper it grows and deeper –
The love I bear for you.

But he changed the last line to read, "The love I bear my lord!", and the Emperor was full of praise.'

When I heard His Majesty tell this story, I was so overcome that I felt myself perspiring. It occurred to me that no younger woman[46] would have been able to use my poem and I felt very lucky. This sort of test can be a terrible ordeal: it often happens that people who usually write fluently are so overawed that they actually make mistakes in their characters.

Next the Empress placed a notebook of *Kokin Shū* poems before her and started reading out the first three lines of each one, asking us to supply the remainder. Among them were several famous poems that we had in our minds day and night; yet for

some strange reason we were often unable to fill in the missing lines. Lady Saishō, for example, could manage only ten, which hardly qualified her as knowing her *Kokin Shū*. Some of the other women, even less successful, could remember only about half a dozen poems. They would have done better to tell the Empress quite simply that they had forgotten the lines; instead they came out with great lamentations like 'Oh dear, how could we have done so badly in answering the questions that Your Majesty was pleased to put to us?' – all of which I found rather absurd.

When no one could complete a particular poem, the Empress continued reading to the end. This produced further wails from the women: 'Oh, we all knew that one! How could we be so stupid?'

'Those of you,' said the Empress, 'who had taken the trouble to copy out the *Kokin Shū* several times would have been able to complete every single poem I have read. In the reign of Emperor Murakami there was a woman at Court known as the Imperial Lady[47] of Senyō Palace. She was the daughter of the Minister of the Left who lived in the Smaller Palace of the First Ward, and of course you have all heard of her. When she was still a young girl, her father gave her this advice: "First you must study penmanship. Next you must learn to play the seven-string zither better than anyone else. And also you must memorize all the poems in the twenty volumes of the *Kokin Shū*."

'Emperor Murakami,' continued Her Majesty, 'had heard this story and remembered it years later when the girl had grown up and become an Imperial Concubine. Once, on a day of abstinence,[48] he came into her room, hiding a notebook of *Kokin Shū* poems in the folds of his robe. He surprised her by seating himself behind a curtain of state; then, opening the book, he asked, "Tell me the verse written by such-and-such a poet, in such-and-such a year and on such-and-such an occasion." The lady understood what was afoot and that it was all in fun, yet the possibility of making a mistake or forgetting one of the poems must have worried her greatly. Before beginning the test, the

Emperor had summoned a couple of ladies-in-waiting who were particularly adept in poetry and told them to mark each incorrect reply by a *go* stone.[49] What a splendid scene it must have been! You know, I really envy anyone who attended that Emperor even as a lady-in-waiting.

'Well,' Her Majesty went on, 'he then began questioning her. She answered without any hesitation, just giving a few words or phrases to show that she knew each poem. And never once did she make a mistake. After a time the Emperor began to resent the lady's flawless memory and decided to stop as soon as he detected any error or vagueness in her replies. Yet, after he had gone through ten books of the *Kokin Shū*, he had still not caught her out. At this stage he declared that it would be useless to continue. Marking where he had left off, he went to bed. What a triumph for the lady!

'He slept for some time. On waking, he decided that he must have a final verdict and that if he waited until the following day to examine her on the other ten volumes, she might use the time to refresh her memory. So he would have to settle the matter that very night. Ordering his attendants to bring up the bedroom lamp, he resumed his questions. By the time he had finished all twenty volumes, the night was well advanced; and still the lady had not made a mistake.

'During all this time His Excellency, the lady's father, was in a state of great agitation. As soon as he was informed that the Emperor was testing his daughter, he sent his attendants to various temples to arrange for special recitations of the Scriptures. Then he turned in the direction of the Imperial Palace and spent a long time in prayer. Such enthusiasm for poetry is really rather moving.'

The Emperor, who had been listening to the whole story, was much impressed. 'How can he possibly have read so many poems?' he remarked when Her Majesty had finished. 'I doubt whether I could get through three or four volumes. But of course things have changed. In the old days even people of humble station had a taste for the arts and were interested in elegant

pastimes. Such a story would hardly be possible nowadays, would it?'

The ladies in attendance on Her Majesty and the Emperor's own ladies-in-waiting who had been admitted into Her Majesty's presence began chatting eagerly, and as I listened I felt that my cares had really 'melted away'.

12. *When I Make Myself Imagine*

When I make myself imagine what it is like to be one of those women who live at home, faithfully serving their husbands – women who have not a single exciting prospect in life yet who believe that they are perfectly happy – I am filled with scorn. Often they are of quite good birth, yet have had no opportunity to find out what the world is like. I wish they could live for a while in our society, even if it should mean taking service as Attendants,[50] so that they might come to know the delights it has to offer.

I cannot bear men who believe that women serving in the Palace are bound to be frivolous and wicked. Yet I suppose their prejudice is understandable. After all, women at Court do not spend their time hiding modestly behind fans and screens, but walk about, looking openly at people they chance to meet. Yes, they see everyone face to face, not only ladies-in-waiting like themselves, but even Their Imperial Majesties (whose august names I hardly dare mention), High Court Nobles,[51] senior courtiers, and other gentlemen of high rank. In the presence of such exalted personages the women in the Palace are all equally brazen, whether they be the maids of ladies-in-waiting, or the relations of Court ladies who have come to visit them, or housekeepers, or latrine-cleaners, or women who are of no more value than a roof-tile or a pebble. Small wonder that the young men regard them as immodest! Yet are the gentlemen themselves any less so? They are not exactly bashful when it comes to looking at the great people in the Palace. No, everyone at Court is much the same in this respect.

Women who have served in the Palace, but who later get married and live at home, are called Madam and receive the most respectful treatment. To be sure, people often consider that these women, who have displayed their faces to all and sundry during their years at Court, are lacking in feminine grace. How proud they must be, nevertheless, when they are styled Assistant Attendants, or summoned to the Palace for occasional duty, or ordered to serve as Imperial envoys during the Kamo Festival! Even those who stay at home lose nothing by having served at Court. In fact they make very good wives. For example, if they are married to a provincial governor and their daughter is chosen to take part in the Gosechi dances,[52] they do not have to disgrace themselves by acting like provincials and asking other people about procedure. They themselves are well versed in the formalities, which is just as it should be.

13. *Depressing Things*

A dog howling in the daytime. A wickerwork fish-net in spring.[53] A red plum-blossom dress[54] in the Third or Fourth Months. A lying-in room when the baby has died. A cold, empty brazier. An ox-driver who hates his oxen. A scholar whose wife has one girl child after another.[55]

One has gone to a friend's house to avoid an unlucky direction,[56] but nothing is done to entertain one; if this should happen at the time of a Seasonal Change, it is still more depressing.

A letter arrives from the provinces, but no gift accompanies it. It would be bad enough if such a letter reached one in the provinces from someone in the capital; but then at least it would have interesting news about goings-on in society, and that would be a consolation.

One has written a letter, taking pains to make it as attractive as possible, and now one impatiently awaits the reply. 'Surely the messenger should be back by now,' one thinks. Just then he returns; but in his hand he carries, not a reply, but one's own

letter, still twisted or knotted[57] as it was sent, but now so dirty and crumpled that even the ink-mark on the outside has disappeared. 'Not at home,' announces the messenger, or else, 'They said they were observing a day of abstinence and would not accept it.' Oh, how depressing!

Again, one has sent one's carriage to fetch someone who had said he would definitely pay one a visit on that day. Finally it returns with a great clatter, and the servants hurry out with cries of 'Here they come!' But next one hears the carriage being pulled into the coach-house, and the unfastened shafts clatter to the ground. 'What does this mean?' one asks. 'The person was not at home,' replies the driver, 'and will not be coming.' So saying, he leads the ox back to its stall, leaving the carriage in the coach-house.

With much bustle and excitement a young man has moved into the house of a certain family as the daughter's husband. One day he fails to come home, and it turns out that some high-ranking Court lady has taken him as her lover. How depressing! 'Will he eventually tire of the woman and come back to us?' his wife's family wonder ruefully.

The nurse who is looking after a baby leaves the house, saying that she will be back presently. Soon the child starts crying for her. One tries to comfort it by games and other diversions, and even sends a message to the nurse telling her to return immediately. Then comes her reply: 'I am afraid that I cannot be back this evening.' This is not only depressing; it is no less than hateful. Yet how much more distressed must be the young man who has sent a messenger to fetch a lady friend and who awaits her arrival in vain!

It is quite late at night and a woman has been expecting a visitor. Hearing finally a stealthy tapping, she sends her maid to open the gate and lies waiting excitedly. But the name announced by the maid is that of someone with whom she has absolutely no connexion. Of all the depressing things this is by far the worst.

With a look of complete self-confidence on his face an exorcist

splendid to me. Quite the contrary – I am sure the occupant is an odious creature.' I was amused by his comment.

After the twentieth of the month the Middle Counsellor became a priest, which caused me much regret. That the cherry blossoms should scatter in the wind is the way of this world; but the Counsellor had certainly not reached the age of 'waiting for the dew to fall'.

24. *It Is So Stiflingly Hot*

It is so stiflingly hot in the Seventh Month that even at night one keeps all the doors and lattices open. At such times it is delightful to wake up when the moon is shining and to look outside. I enjoy it even when there is no moon. But to wake up at dawn and see a pale sliver of a moon in the sky – well, I need hardly say how perfect that is.

I like to see a bright new straw mat that has just been spread out on a well-polished floor.[99] The best place for one's three-foot curtain of state is in the front of the room near the veranda. It is pointless to put it in the rear of the room, as it is most unlikely that anyone will peer in from that direction.[100]

It is dawn and a woman is lying in bed after her lover has taken his leave. She is covered up to her head with a light mauve robe that has a lining of dark violet; the colour of both the outside and the lining is fresh and glossy.[101] The woman, who appears to be asleep, wears an unlined orange robe and a dark crimson skirt of stiff silk whose cords hang loosely by her side, as if they have been left untied. Her thick tresses tumble over each other in cascades, and one can imagine how long her hair must be when it falls freely down her back.[102]

Near by another woman's lover is making his way home in the misty dawn. He is wearing loose violet trousers, an orange hunting costume, so lightly coloured that one can hardly tell whether it has been dyed or not, a white robe of stiff silk, and a scarlet robe of glossy, beaten silk. His clothes, which are damp

from the mist, hang loosely about him. From the dishevelment of his side locks one can tell how negligently he must have tucked his hair into his black lacquered head-dress when he got up. He wants to return and write his next-morning letter[103] before the dew on the morning glories has had time to vanish; but the path seems endless, and to divert himself he hums 'The sprouts in the flax fields'.[104]

As he walks along, he passes a house with an open lattice. He is on his way to report for official duty, but cannot help stopping to lift up the blind and peep into the room.[105] It amuses him to think that a man has probably been spending the night here and has only recently got up to leave, just as happened to himself. Perhaps that man too had felt the charm of the dew.[106]

Looking round the room, he notices near the woman's pillow an open fan with a magnolia frame and purple paper; and at the foot of her curtain of state he sees some narrow strips of Michinoku paper and also some other paper of a faded colour, either orange-red or maple.

The woman senses that someone is watching her and, looking up from under her bedclothes, sees a gentleman leaning against the wall by the threshold, a smile on his face. She can tell at once that he is the sort of man with whom she need feel no reserve. All the same, she does not want to enter into any familiar relations with him, and she is annoyed that he should have seen her asleep.[107]

'Well, well, Madam,' says the man, leaning forward so that the upper part of his body comes behind her curtains, 'what a long nap you're having after your morning adieu! You really are a lie-abed!'

'You call me that, Sir,' she replied, 'only because you're annoyed at having had to get up before the dew had time to settle.'

Their conversation may be commonplace, yet I find there is something delightful about the scene.

Now the gentleman leans further forward and, using his own fan, tries to get hold of the fan by the woman's pillow. Fearing

his closeness, she moves further back into her curtain enclosure, her heart pounding. The gentleman picks up the magnolia fan and, while examining it, says in a slightly bitter tone, 'How standoffish you are!'

But now it is growing light; there is a sound of people's voices, and it looks as if the sun will soon be up. Only a short while ago this same man was hurrying home to write his next-morning letter before the mists had time to clear. Alas, how easily his intentions have been forgotten!

While all this is afoot, the woman's original lover has been busy with his own next-morning letter, and now, quite unexpectedly, the messenger arrives at her house. The letter is attached to a spray of bush-clover, still damp with dew, and the paper gives off a delicious aroma of incense. Because of the new visitor, however, the woman's servants cannot deliver it to her.

Finally it becomes unseemly for the gentleman to stay any longer. As he goes, he is amused to think that a similar scene may be taking place in the house he left earlier that morning.

25. *Flowering Trees*

Plum blossoms, whether light or dark, and in particular red plum blossoms, fill me with happiness. I also like a slender branch of cherry blossoms, with large petals and dark red leaves. How graceful is the wistaria as its branches bend down covered with whorls of delicately coloured petals!

The *u no hana*[108] is a more modest plant and deserves no special praise; yet it flowers at a pleasant time of the year, and I enjoy thinking that a *hototogisu* may be hiding in its shade. When passing through the plain of Murasaki[109] on one's way back from the Festival, it is lovely to see the white of the *u no hana* blossoms in the shaggy hedges near the cottages. They look like thin, white robes worn over a costume of yellowish green.

At the end of the Fourth Month and the beginning of the Fifth the orange trees have dark green leaves and are covered

with brilliant white flowers. In the early morning, when they have been sprinkled with rain, one feels that nothing in the world can match their charm; and, if one is fortunate enough to see the fruit itself, standing out like golden spheres among the flowers, it looks as beautiful as that most magnificent of sights, the cherry blossoms damp with morning dew. But I need say no more; so much has been written about the beauty of the orange trees in the many poems that link them with the *hototogisu*.[110]

The blossom of the pear tree is the most prosaic, vulgar thing in the world. The less one sees this particular blossom the better, and it should not be attached to even the most trivial message.[111] The pear blossom can be compared to the face of a plain woman; for its colouring lacks all charm. Or so, at least, I used to think. Knowing that the Chinese admire the pear blossom greatly and praise it in their poems, I wondered what they could see in it and made a point of examining the flower. Then I was surprised to find that its petals were prettily edged with a pink tinge, so faint that I could not be sure whether it was there or not. It was to the pear blossoms, I recalled, that the poet likened the face of Yang Kuei-fei when she came forth in tears to meet the Emperor's messenger – 'a spray of pear blossom in spring, covered with drops of rain'[112] – and I realized that this was no idle figure of speech and that it really is a magnificent flower.

The purple blossoms of the paulownia are also delightful. I confess that I do not like the appearance of its wide leaves when they open up. . . . But I cannot speak of the paulownia as I do of the other trees; for this is where that grandiose and famous bird of China makes its nest, and the idea fills me with awe.[113] Besides, it is this tree that provides the wood for the zithers from which come so many beautiful sounds. How can I have used such a commonplace word as 'delightful'? The paulownia is not delightful; it is magnificent.

The melia tree is ugly, but I find its flowers very pretty indeed. One always sees them on the fifth day of the Fifth Month, and there is something charming about these dried-up, oddly shaped little flowers.[114]

such a man should slink along the narrow corridors of some Palace building in order to steal into a woman's room.[146]

A man's trouser-skirt hanging over a curtain of state that has been discreetly perfumed with incense.[147] The material of the trouser-skirt is disagreeably heavy; and, even though it may be shining whitely in the lamp-light, there is something unsuitable about it.

An officer who thinks he is very fashionable in his open over-robe and who folds it thinly as a rat's tail before hanging it over the curtain of state – well, such a man is simply unfit for night patrol. Officers on duty should abstain from visiting the women's quarters; the same applies to Chamberlains of the Fifth Rank.

33. *I Was Standing in a Corridor*

I was standing in a corridor of the Palace with several other women when we noticed some servants passing. We summoned them to us (in what I admit was a rather unladylike fashion) and they turned out to be a group of handsome male attendants and pages carrying attractively wrapped bundles and bags. Trouser-cords protruded from some, and I noticed that others contained bows, arrows, shields, halberds, and swords.[148] 'Whom do these things belong to?' we asked each of the servants in turn. Some of them knelt down respectfully and replied, 'They belong to Lord So-and-so.' Then they stood up and continued on their way, which was all very nice. But others gave themselves airs, or else were embarrassed and said, 'I don't know', or even went off without replying at all, which I found hateful indeed.

34. *Gentlemen Should Always Have Escorts*

Gentlemen should always have escorts. Even young noblemen, however handsome and charming, strike me as dull creatures if they are unescorted.

I have always regarded the position of Controller[149] as a fine and honourable one; but it is a shame that the train of his under-robe should be so short and that he is not provided with an escort.

35. *Once I Saw Yukinari*

Once I saw Yukinari, the Controller First Secretary, engaged in a long conversation with a lady near the garden fence by the western side of the Empress's Office.[150] When at last they had finished, I came out and asked, 'Who was she?' 'Ben no Naishi,'[151] he replied. 'And what on earth did you find to discuss with her for such a long time? If the Major Controller had seen you, she would have left you quickly enough.' 'And who can have told you about that business?' asked Yukinari, laughing.[152] 'As a matter of fact, that is precisely what I was discussing with her. I was trying to persuade her not to leave me even if the Major Controller did see us.'

Yukinari is a most delightful man. To be sure, he does not make any particular effort to display his good points and simply lets people take him as he appears, so that in general he is less appreciated than he might be. But I, who have seen the deeper side of his nature, know what an unusual person he really is. I said this one day to the Empress, who was well aware of it herself. In the course of our conversations he often says, 'A woman yields to one who has taken pleasure in her; a knight dies for one who has shown him friendship.'[153] We used to say that our feelings for each other were like the willows on Tōtōmi Beach.[154]

Yet the young women at Court heartily detest Yukinari and openly repeat the most disagreeable things about him. 'What an ugly man he is!' they say. 'Why can't he recite sutras and poems like other people? He really is most unpleasant.' Yukinari, for his part, never speaks to any of them.

'I could love a woman,' he said one day, 'even if her eyes were

turned up,[155] her eyebrows spread all over her forehead, and her nose crooked. But she must have a prettily shaped mouth and a good chin and neck, and I couldn't stand an unattractive voice. Of course I would prefer her not to have any bad feature. There's really something sad about a woman with an ugly face.' As a result, all the Court ladies with pointed chins or other unattractive features have become Yukinari's bitter enemies, and some of them have even spoken badly of him to the Empress.

I was the first person he employed to take messages to the Empress, and he always called on me when he wanted to communicate with her. If I was in my room, he would send for me to the main part of the Palace, or else he would come directly into the women's quarters to give me his message. Even if I was at home, he would write to me or come himself, saying, 'In case you are not returning to Court at once, would you please send someone to Her Majesty informing her that I have such-and-such a message.' 'Surely you could tell a messenger yourself directly,' I said; but he would have none of it.

On one such occasion I suggested to Yukinari that one should 'take things as they are'[156] and not always stick to the same habits. 'But such is my nature,' he replied, 'and that is something one cannot change.'

'Well then,' I said in a surprised tone, 'what is the meaning of "Do not be afraid"?'[157]

Yukinari laughed and said, 'There has no doubt been a lot of talk lately about our being so friendly. But what of it? Even if we were as intimate as people think, that would be nothing to be ashamed of. Really you could let me see your face.'[158]

'Oh no,' I replied, 'I cannot possibly do that. I am extremely ugly, and you said you could never love an ugly woman.'

'Are you really?' he said. 'In that case you had better not let me see you.'

Often thereafter, when it would have been easy for Yukinari to look at me in the normal course of things, he covered his face with a fan or turned aside. In fact he never once saw me. To think that he took what I said about my ugliness quite seriously!

Towards the end of the Third Month it becomes too warm for winter cloaks, and often Chamberlains who are on night watch in the Senior Courtiers' Chamber wear only the over-robes of their Court costumes, leaving off their trouser-skirts and trains. Early one morning in that month, when Lady Shikibu and I had been sleeping in the outer part of a room in the Empress's Office, the sliding-door was pushed open and the Emperor and Empress entered. We were thrown into utter confusion and did not know what to do with ourselves, which greatly amused Their Majesties. Hastily we threw on our Chinese jackets, tucking our hair inside, and then we heaped the bed-clothes and everything else in a great pile. Their Majesties walked across the room and, standing behind this pile, watched the men going between the Palace and the guard-house. Several courtiers approached our room and spoke to us, without suspecting who was inside the room. 'Do not let them see we are here,' His Majesty said with a chuckle.

Before long Their Majesties left. 'Come along, both of you,' said the Empress. I replied that we would come as soon as we had made up our faces, and we stayed where we were.

Lady Shikibu and I were still discussing how splendid Their Majesties had looked when, through a small opening in the blinds (where the frame of our curtain of state was pressed against the sliding-door in the back of the room), we noticed the dark silhouette[159] of a man. At first we thought that it must be Noritaka[160] and continued to talk without paying any particular attention. Presently a beaming face appeared through the opening in the blinds. We still took it to be Noritaka, but after a quick look we were amused to find that we were mistaken. Laughing heartily, we rearranged our curtain of state so that we were properly hidden. Too late, though. The man turned out to be none other than Yukinari; and he had seen me full-face. After all my past efforts this was extremely vexing. Lady Shikibu, on the other hand, had been looking safely in the other direction.

'Well,' said Yukinari, stepping forward, 'now I have really managed to see you completely.'

'We thought it was Noritaka,' I explained, 'and so we didn't

bother to hide properly. But why, may I ask, did you examine me so carefully when in the past you said that you would never look at me?'

'I have been told,' said he, 'that a woman's face is particularly attractive when she rises in the morning. So I came here hoping for a chance to peep into one of the ladies' rooms and see something interesting. I was already watching you when Their Majesties were here, but you suspected nothing.'

Then, as I recall, he walked straight into the room.

36. *The Roll-Call of the Senior Courtiers*

The roll-call[161] of the senior courtiers is a delightful event, and I also enjoy it when the gentlemen in attendance on the Emperor have their names called. They tumble out of the buildings with a noisy clatter of footsteps. From the eastern part of Her Majesty's wing of Seiryō Palace I and the Empress's other ladies-in-waiting can follow everything if we listen carefully. How exciting when one hears some close friend answering with his name! It is exciting, too, to hear the voice of a man who is unfamiliar even though one knows he is on duty in the Palace. The women freely discuss the different styles in which the men have responded, and this is very amusing.

As soon as the roll-call is finished, one hears the loud footsteps of the Imperial Guards of the Emperor's Private Office, who come out while twanging their bow-strings. Then the Chamberlain on duty proceeds to the balustrade at the north-east corner of the building, his shoes reverberating noisily on the wooden boards, and adopts the posture that I believe is called 'high kneeling'. Facing the Emperor's Palace, he asks the officer who stands behind him, 'Is so-and-so present? And so-and-so?' – all most impressive. Sometimes the answers are given in a soft voice, sometimes loudly; and sometimes the muster is cancelled, if there are insufficient men present. The Officer of the Guards announces this to the Chamberlain, who asks why the men are

absent; when the necessary information has been given, he returns to the Palace to make his report to the Emperor.

Things do not go so smoothly when the Chamberlain on duty is Masahiro.[162] Ever since some young noblemen advised him that he was being too lax about the report of the Officer of the Guards, he gets quite incensed on hearing of any absences among the men; he rebukes them severely, telling them that they must improve their behaviour. As a result Masahiro has become the laughing-stock, not only of the gentlemen at Court, but even of the common guardsmen.

On one occasion Masahiro actually left his shoes on the serving-board in the Emperor's Dining Room. This caused great indignation, and it was said that whoever was responsible should be forced to do purgation. Some women in the Office of Grounds and a few others knew the name of the culprit and could not help feeling sorry for him. 'Whose shoes can these be?' they said. 'There's really no telling.' In the midst of all this excitement Masahiro himself came to fetch the shoes. 'Oh dear,' he said, 'those dirty things[163] belong to me.'

37. *It Is Hateful When a Well-Bred Young Man*

It is hateful when a well-bred young man who is visiting a woman of lower rank calls out her name in such a way as to make everyone realize that he is on familiar terms with her. However well he may know her name, he should slur it slightly as though he had forgotten it. On the other hand, this would be wrong when a gentleman comes at night to visit a lady-in-waiting. In such a situation he should bring along a man who can call out the lady's name for him – a servant from the Office of Grounds if she is in the Imperial Palace, or else someone from the Attendants' Hall; for his voice will be recognized if he calls her name himself. But, when he is visiting a mere under-servant or girl attendant, such a precaution is unnecessary.

played the thirteen-string zither, Yukinari the ordinary flute, and Captain Tsunefusa the thirteen-pipe flute.[181] They gave a delightful performance of one piece; then, after the sound of the flute had stopped, His Excellency the Major Counsellor, Korechika, chanted the line,

The music stops, but the player will not speak her name.[182]

While all this was going on, I lay out of sight in my room; but now I got up and went into the Empress's apartments. 'Whatever guilt this may bring upon me,'[183] I said as I entered, 'I cannot resist such a charming recitation.' Hearing this, the gentlemen all burst out laughing.

I recall that there was nothing very remarkable about the Major Counsellor's voice; yet it seemed to have been made especially for the occasion.

51. *The Captain First Secretary, Tadanobu*

The Captain First Secretary, Tadanobu,[184] having heard certain false rumours, began to speak about me in the most unpleasant terms. 'How could I have thought of her as a human being?' was the sort of thing he used to say.

One day I learnt that he had gone so far as to speak badly about me in the Senior Courtiers' Chamber. I felt terribly ashamed, but I laughed and said, 'How distressing if what he said were correct! As it is, he's sure to find out the truth soon enough, and then he'll change his mind about me.' Shortly afterwards Tadanobu heard my voice when passing near the Black Door,[185] and, without even glancing at me, he covered his face with his sleeve. Despite his dislike of me, I never tried to explain matters, and let time pass without so much as looking at him.

Towards the end of the Second Month it rained a great deal and time hung on my hands. One day someone told me that Tadanobu was secluded in Seiryō Palace on the occasion of an Imperial Abstinence[186] and that he had been overheard to remark, 'After all, things do seem a bit dreary since I stopped seeing

Shōnagon. I wonder if I shan't send her a message.' 'I don't believe a word of it,' I replied. Yet I spent the entire day in my room, thinking that a messenger might arrive, and by the time I went to the Empress's apartments I found that she had already retired for the night. The ladies-in-waiting on duty were seated in a group near the veranda; they had drawn up a lamp and were playing a game of parts.[187]

'Oh, good!' they cried when they saw me. 'Come and join us!' Yet I felt depressed and wondered why I had come. Instead of joining the women, I sat down by a brazier; but presently they had all gathered round me and we started chatting to each other. Just then there was a loud cry outside the room: 'A messenger is here!'[188]

'That's strange,' I said. 'I've only just arrived. What can have happened since I left my room?' I sent a maid to find out; when she returned, she told me that the man was from the Office of Grounds and that he had a message which he must at all costs deliver to me personally. I went out and asked the man what had happened. 'Here is a letter for you from the Captain First Secretary,' he said. 'Please answer it without delay.'

In view of Tadanobu's attitude, I wondered what sort of a letter he could have written; but, since I did not want to hurry through it then and there, I told the messenger that he could leave and that I would send my reply presently. Tucking the letter in the breast of my robe, I returned to my companions.

We were once more chatting away when the messenger returned and said, 'His Excellency, the Captain, ordered me to bring his letter back to him if there was no immediate reply. Please be quick.' It was all as strange as a tale from Ise.[189] I examined the letter. It was elegantly written on heavy blue paper, and there was nothing about it to worry me. I opened it and read:

With you it is flower time
As you sit in the Council Hall
'Neath a curtain of brocade.[190]

And below this he had added, 'How does the stanza end?'

I was at a complete loss. If Her Majesty had been there, I should have asked her to look at the letter and give her opinion; but unfortunately she was asleep. I had to prove that I knew the next line of the poem, but were I to write it in my somewhat faltering Chinese characters it would make a bad impression. I had no time to ponder since the messenger was pressing for a reply. Taking a piece of burnt-out charcoal from the brazier, I simply added the following words at the end of Tadanobu's letter:

> Who would come to visit
> This grass-thatched hut of mine?

Then I told the messenger to take it back to Tadanobu. I waited for a reply, but none came.

I spent the night in the Empress's apartments with the other ladies-in-waiting. Very early on the following morning, when I had returned to my own room, I heard Captain Tsunefusa call in a booming voice, 'Is Grass Hut here? Is Grass Hut here?'

'How could anyone with such a vulgar name be staying here?' I asked. 'Now, if you were to ask for Jade Tower, you might get a reply.'[191]

'Ah, good!' said Tsunefusa. 'So you are in your room. I was prepared to go all the way to the Palace to find you.' He then told me what had happened on the previous evening. He and several officials of the Sixth Rank and above (all of them gentlemen of some talent) had been with Tadanobu in the Captain's night-duty room. In the course of their conversation, while they were discussing various people and events, Tadanobu said, 'I have completely broken with Shōnagon. But even now that it is all over between us I find it hard to leave things as they are. I have been waiting for her to make some move to bring us together again, but she does not seem to give it the slightest thought. Really, I find this indifference of hers most galling. . . . Well, tonight I am going to make up my mind about her once and for all and settle things properly.'

'We all discussed the matter,' continued Tsunefusa, 'and it

was decided that he should put you to the test by means of a letter. But, when the messenger returned, he told us that you had gone back to your room and could not read the letter at once. Hearing this, Tadanobu sent the man back again with the instructions, "This time seize her by the sleeve and get a reply from her willy-nilly! But in any case bring back my letter!"

'Despite the heavy rain the messenger was soon back in the night-duty room. "Here it is," he said, producing a letter from the folds of his robe. It was the same blue piece of paper that Tadanobu had sent. We wondered whether you had returned it without perusal. But, when Tadanobu unfolded it, he gave an exclamation of surprise, and we all gathered round him curiously. "What a rogue she is!" he said. "How can one break with a woman like that?" We examined the letter excitedly. "We'll have to send it back to her with the first three lines added,"[192] said someone. "Come, Captain Tsunefusa, you provide the missing lines!" We stayed up until late at night cudgelling our brains for the right words, but in the end we had to give up. We then decided that this was an incident that people must hear about.'

I was quite embarrassed by Tsunefusa's praise. 'So now,' he added, as he hurriedly took his leave, 'you have acquired the name of Grass Hut.' 'That's all very well,' thought I, 'but it's hardly a name I should like to keep indefinitely.'

Just then Norimitsu, the Assistant Master of the Office of Palace Repairs,[193] arrived in my room, 'I thought you would be in the Palace,' he said, 'and I have just been there to tell you how delighted I was by the news.' 'Why so delighted?' I said. 'I haven't heard about any official appointments. What post did you get?' 'No, no,' replied Norimitsu. 'It's about your answer to Tadanobu yesterday evening. I've been waiting all night to tell you how pleased I was. There's never been anything like it.'

He then related the whole story that I had heard from Captain Tsunefusa. 'Tadanobu told us that he would finally make up his mind about you depending on your reply to his letter. If it turned out to be unsatisfactory, he was going to break with you once

and for all. When the messenger came back the first time empty-handed, I decided that this was in fact a good sign. The next time, when he returned with your answer, I was so curious to know what you had said that my heart was pounding. To tell the truth, it occurred to me that, if your answer was inadequate, this would reflect on me too as your elder brother. As it turned out, it was not merely adequate; it was outstanding. Everyone in the room praised it warmly, and one of the old men told me, "This is something for you to hear since you're her elder brother."

'Of course I was delighted, but I kept it to myself and simply said, "I am totally incompetent in matters of this kind." "We aren't asking for your criticism," was the reply, "and we don't even expect you to understand what she wrote. But we do want you to tell people about it." This was rather mortifying for your elder brother, but I found some satisfaction in the difficulties they themselves had in framing a reply. "We simply can't find the right opening lines," they said. "But, after all, is there any special reason that we have to send a return poem?"[194] Still they did not give up. Since they realized that to produce a feeble reply would be worse than nothing at all, they stayed there till the middle of the night racking their brains for the proper words.

'Well now, surely we both have good cause to rejoice. Even if I had been given a promotion during the period of official appointments, it would have been as nothing compared to this.' Listening to Norimitsu, I was most vexed at the idea that all these men had been sitting in judgement on me without my knowledge.

(As for the matter of 'younger sister' and 'elder brother', everyone from the Emperor and Empress down knew about it, and even in the Palace people called Norimitsu 'elder brother' instead of designating him by his office.)

Norimitsu and I were still talking when a servant came to my room and told me to report at once to Her Majesty. As soon as I was in her presence I realized that she had called me to discuss what I had written to Tadanobu. 'The Emperor has been here,' she said, 'and he told me that all his gentlemen have your reply

written on their fans.' I was amazed and wondered who could have spread the news.

Thereafter Tadanobu no longer hid his face behind his sleeve when we met and he seemed to have altered his opinion of me.

52. *On the Twenty-Fifth of the Second Month*

On the twenty-fifth of the Second Month in the following year Her Majesty moved to the Empress's Office. I did not accompany her but stayed behind in Umetsubo Palace.[195] On the next day a message came from Tadanobu: 'Last night I visited the temple at Kurama. Since the direction to the capital is closed this evening, I am taking a detour and expect to be back before dawn.[196] There is something I must tell you. Please wait for me and be ready to open the door as soon as I knock.'

It happened, however, that Her Highness, the Mistress of the Robes,[197] sent me a message. 'Why stay alone in your room?' she wrote. 'Come and spend the night here.' Accordingly I went to her.

It was late on the following morning when I got up and returned to my room. My maid was waiting for me. 'Last night,' she said, 'someone was knocking very loudly at the door. In the end I had to get up. The visitor ordered me to announce to my mistress that the man who had promised to come had now arrived. I replied that you would pay no attention to such a message and went back to bed.'

I was feeling very annoyed about all this when a messenger came from the Office of Grounds and said, 'His Excellency, the First Secretary, wishes to inform you that he has to leave at once but that first he has something he must tell you.'

If Tadanobu were to visit me in my own room, he would probably open the blinds and do other such bothersome things. The idea made me nervous, so I told the messenger that I was going to the Palace on business; if His Excellency wanted to see me, he should come there. I then went to Umetsubo Palace and had

be put to the question like that. Besides, you never told me what I should answer, but simply sent that silly bit of seaweed wrapped in paper. I suppose you did it by mistake.'

'What a strange mistake that would be!' I thought. 'Who would ever wrap up such an object and send it to someone?' I was really disgusted with Norimitsu for having so completely missed the point, and without a word I took a piece of paper that was lying under the inkstone and wrote the following poem:

> Tell no man where she lives –
> The diver in the water's depths –
> Such must have been the meaning of her glance.[208]

I gave it to Norimitsu, but he pushed it back with his fan, saying, 'Ah, you have been good enough to write one of your poems for me. But I have no intention of reading it.' And he hurried out of the room.

Norimitsu and I had always been on close terms and tried to help each other, but now, without anything particular having happened, a coolness came between us. Shortly afterwards I received this note from him: 'I know that I may have put you out in some way, but please do not forget our pact. Even though we are apart, remember that I have been your elder brother.'

I have heard Norimitsu say, 'People who are fond of me should spare me their poems or I shall have to regard them as enemies. When you feel that the time has come to break with me, just send one of those things.' So it is possible that Norimitsu never actually read the following poem that I sent in reply to his note:

> Smoothly runs the river of Yoshino
> Between Mount Imo and Mount Se.*
> Yet, should those mountains crumble,
> The river too would vanish from our sight.[209]

In any case he never answered it. At about the same time he was awarded the head-dress of nobility and appointed Assistant Governor of Tōtōmi; and so we parted while still on bad terms.

* 'Younger Sister' and 'Older Brother'.

54. *Things That Give a Pathetic Impression*

The voice of someone who blows his nose while he is speaking.
The expression of a woman plucking her eyebrows.[210]

55. *Then a Few Months after Our Visit*

Then a few months after our visit to the guard-house of the Left Guards I was staying at home when I received this message from the Empress: 'Come back quickly. I keep remembering that early morning when you went to the guard-house. How can you be so indifferent to it all? Surely such an experience must have made a deep impression on you.'

In my reply I assured Her Majesty of my profound respect; then, as a personal touch, I added the following: 'How could it fail to make an impression on me when even Your Majesty was so moved by the scene that she referred to us, her mere attendants, as "heavenly maidens hovering in the air"?'[211] The messenger returned presently with these words from the Empress: 'I wonder why you should have said something to bring discredit on Nakatada, who was such a favourite of yours. In any case, leave everything and come back here this very evening. I shall resent it greatly if you don't.'

I sent the messenger back with this reply: 'If Your Majesty had simply said "slightly annoyed", I should consider it a terrible thing. Since you used the word "greatly", I shall return even at the risk of my life.' So saying, I went back to the Palace.

56. *Once When Her Majesty Was Residing*

Once when Her Majesty was residing in the Empress's Office, Perpetual Readings[212] were held in the western part of the main hall. The usual paintings of the Buddha had been hung for the

occasion, and several priests were in attendance. On the second day of the readings the voice of a common-sounding woman reached us from the veranda. 'I expect there'll be some scraps from the altar offerings,' she said. 'How could there be any left-overs this early in the service?' replied one of the priests. I wondered who the woman might be and went on to the veranda to have a look. It turned out to be an old nun dressed in a filthy cotton trouser-skirt which was so short and narrow that it seemed more like a sort of tube than an article of clothing. Over this she wore something equally dirty which was presumably meant to be a robe but which came only about five inches below her sash. She really looked like a monkey.

'What do you want, woman?' I asked.

'Madam,' she replied in an affected tone, 'I am a disciple of the Buddha and I was hoping to receive the left-overs from his altar. But these priests are so stingy that they grudge the smallest gift.' She now spoke in a bright, elegant fashion and I was rather touched to see her so crushed by misfortune. Yet there was a gaudiness about her manner that annoyed me and I said, 'So you eat nothing but the Buddha's holy left-overs! How worthy of you!' Seeing my expression she said, 'Why do you suppose that's all I eat? It's only when I can't get anything else that I take left-overs.'

I put some fruit, flat rice cakes, and other things in a basket and gave it to her. She then became extremely familiar and began chatting away. Some of the younger ladies-in-waiting joined us on the veranda and plied her with all sorts of questions, such as 'Do you have a lover?' and 'Where do you live?', to which she replied with jokes and suggestive quips. When one of them asked her whether she could sing and dance, she burst out with

> Who shall share my bed tonight?
> Hitachi no Suke[213] – he's my man!
> His skin is soft to touch.

This was followed by several other songs in a similar vein. Then she started rolling her head round and round, and sang,

> The maple leaves of scarlet
> That tint Otoko's manly peak
> Proclaim that mountain far and wide.[214]

Her behaviour was most unbecoming. The ladies-in-waiting laughed with disgust and said, 'Be off with you!', which I found very amusing. 'Let's give the woman something before we send her packing,' said one of them.

The Empress had heard all this and reprimanded us. 'Why have you made her behave in such an embarrassing way?' she asked. 'I couldn't bear to hear it and I had to stop up my ears. Here, give her this robe and send her away at once!'

The ladies took the robe and threw it at the woman, saying, 'Her Majesty has generously given you this present. Take off your filthy robe and put on this nice clean one.' The nun received it with a deep bow; then, draping it over her shoulders, she began to perform a dance of thanks.[215] She was really too repulsive, and we all went indoors.

Evidently this gift made her feel that she was now fully accepted in Her Majesty's household; thereafter she was always coming and going, and soon she had acquired the nickname of Hitachi no Suke. She still wore her same dirty robe. We wondered what she had done with the one the Empress gave her and we felt quite disgusted with the creature.

One day when Lady Ukon paid a call, Her Majesty told her about the nun. 'My ladies have taken it into their heads to befriend her,' she said. 'She's always coming to see us these days.' Then she asked Lady Kohyōe to give an imitation of the nun. Lady Ukon burst out laughing. 'How can I arrange to see her for myself?' she asked. 'You really must show her to me. Don't think I'll try to take her away. I realize she is Your Majesty's favourite.'

Later there came another nun – a cripple this time, but with a naturally elegant manner. She called to us from the veranda; when we went out, she begged for alms, in such an embarrassed way that we were truly sorry for her. Her Majesty ordered that she be given a robe and the nun prostrated herself on the ground.

Her movements were much the same as the other nun's, but there was nothing unpleasant about her. Just as she was leaving the veranda, weeping for joy, Hitachi no Suke happened to arrive and caught a glimpse of her. Thereafter Hitachi did not visit us again for a long time, and we soon forgot about her.

From the tenth day of the Twelfth Month it snowed very heavily. I and the other ladies-in-waiting gathered large quantities of snow and heaped it in lids; then we decided to build a real snow mountain[216] in the garden. Having summoned the servants, we told them it was on Her Majesty's orders, and so they all got to work. Men from the Office of Grounds, who had come to do some sweeping, also joined in, and soon the mountain was rising high above the ground. Next came some officials from the Office of the Empress's Household, who made suggestions and helped build an especially beautiful mountain. There were also a few Assistant Officials from the Emperor's Private Office and some more men from the Office of Grounds, so that soon we had about twenty people working away. In addition messages were sent to the servants off duty, saying that a special stipend would be given to anyone who helped on that day, but that those who did not appear for work could expect nothing. This brought the men rushing out, except for those who lived far away and could not be informed.

When the mountain was finished, officials from the Office of the Empress's Household were summoned and given rolls of silk tied up in sets of two. They threw the rolls on to the veranda, and each of the workmen came and took a set. Having bowed low, they thrust the silk into their robes before withdrawing. Some of the Court gentlemen changed from their formal over-robes into hunting costume and remained in attendance at the Empress's Office.

'Well,' said Her Majesty, 'how long is that mountain likely to last?'

Everyone guessed that it would be ten days or a little more.

'And what do you think?' the Empress asked me.

'It will last till the fifteenth of the First Month,' I declared.

Even Her Majesty found this hard to believe, and the other women insisted that it would melt before the end of the year. I realized I had chosen too distant a date; the mountain would last until the first of the year at the outside, which was the latest day I should have given. Yet there was no taking back what I had said: though I knew the mountain was unlikely to survive till the fifteenth, I stuck to my original prediction.

Towards the twentieth it began raining. There was no sign that the snow was about to melt, but the mountain did shrink a little. 'Oh, Goddess of Mercy of Shirayama,'[217] I prayed frenziedly, 'do not let our mountain melt away!'

On the day we built the mountain Tadataka, the Secretary in the Ministry of Ceremonial, arrived with a message from the Emperor. We gave him a cushion and joined him for a talk. 'Today they're making snow mountains everywhere,' he told us. 'The Emperor has ordered his men to build one in the garden in front of his Palace, and they're also building them in the Eastern Palace and in the Koki and Kyōgoku Palaces.'[218] Hearing this, I wrote a poem and asked the woman standing beside me to recite it:

> That mountain in our garden,
> Which we had thought so rare!
> Everywhere its snowy likeness . . .
> And we can boast of nothing new.

Tadataka was impressed. 'I would not want to spoil the brilliant effect of your poem by making a poor reply,' he said, bowing repeatedly. 'The next time I find myself outside the blinds of some fashionable Court lady I shall repeat your lines.' And with that he took his leave.

I had heard that Tadataka was very fond of poetry, and his behaviour surprised me. When I told the Empress about it, she said, 'He obviously preferred not to reply at all unless he could produce something really good.'

Towards the end of the year the snow mountain seemed to have

Her movements were much the same as the other nun's, but there was nothing unpleasant about her. Just as she was leaving the veranda, weeping for joy, Hitachi no Suke happened to arrive and caught a glimpse of her. Thereafter Hitachi did not visit us again for a long time, and we soon forgot about her.

From the tenth day of the Twelfth Month it snowed very heavily. I and the other ladies-in-waiting gathered large quantities of snow and heaped it in lids; then we decided to build a real snow mountain[216] in the garden. Having summoned the servants, we told them it was on Her Majesty's orders, and so they all got to work. Men from the Office of Grounds, who had come to do some sweeping, also joined in, and soon the mountain was rising high above the ground. Next came some officials from the Office of the Empress's Household, who made suggestions and helped build an especially beautiful mountain. There were also a few Assistant Officials from the Emperor's Private Office and some more men from the Office of Grounds, so that soon we had about twenty people working away. In addition messages were sent to the servants off duty, saying that a special stipend would be given to anyone who helped on that day, but that those who did not appear for work could expect nothing. This brought the men rushing out, except for those who lived far away and could not be informed.

When the mountain was finished, officials from the Office of the Empress's Household were summoned and given rolls of silk tied up in sets of two. They threw the rolls on to the veranda, and each of the workmen came and took a set. Having bowed low, they thrust the silk into their robes before withdrawing. Some of the Court gentlemen changed from their formal over-robes into hunting costume and remained in attendance at the Empress's Office.

'Well,' said Her Majesty, 'how long is that mountain likely to last?'

Everyone guessed that it would be ten days or a little more.

'And what do you think?' the Empress asked me.

'It will last till the fifteenth of the First Month,' I declared.

Even Her Majesty found this hard to believe, and the other women insisted that it would melt before the end of the year. I realized I had chosen too distant a date; the mountain would last until the first of the year at the outside, which was the latest day I should have given. Yet there was no taking back what I had said: though I knew the mountain was unlikely to survive till the fifteenth, I stuck to my original prediction.

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Towards the end of the year the snow mountain seemed to have

become smaller, yet it was still very high. About noon one day, when I and some of the other women were sitting out on the veranda, Hitachi no Suke arrived. 'Why haven't we seen you for such a long time?' we asked her. 'Oh, nothing special,' she said. 'It's just that something rather sad happened to me.' 'And what may that be?' we asked. 'Well,' she replied, 'I couldn't help feeling that

> Lucky indeed is she,
> That nunnish diver of the briny depths,
> Who is so laden down with gifts
> That she can scarcely drag herself ashore.'[219]

She drawled out her poem, and we all laughed contemptuously. Since no one was paying much attention, she made her way up to the snow mountain and walked round it before leaving. Later we sent Lady Ukon a message about the visit, and she replied, 'Why didn't you bring her here? It was really too bad to abandon her like that and make her go all the way to that great mountain of yours by herself.' This caused us to burst into laughter again.

New Year came without affecting the snow mountain in any way.

On the first day of the year it again started snowing heavily. I was happily thinking how the snow would gather on the mountain when Her Majesty said, 'This has come at the wrong time. Leave what was there before and brush away all the new snow.'

Very early on the following morning, as I was going from the Palace to my room, I saw a man who looked like a head retainer. He was on his way to the Empress's Office and was shivering with cold. On the sleeve of his night-watch costume, which was as green as a citron leaf, I noticed a piece of paper, also green, attached to a pine twig.[220]

'Who sent this?' I asked him.

'The High Priestess of Kamo,'[221] he replied.

Realizing at once that this must be something pleasant, I carried the letter to the Empress's room. Her Majesty was still

in bed, and I did my best to open her lattice-door myself,[222] using for this purpose a *go* board on which I stood as I tried to push up the heavy grating. The lattice was very heavy, but finally one side opened with a creaking sound that wakened the Empress. 'Why are you doing that?' she asked. 'I have a letter from the High Priestess,' I replied, 'which I had to deliver to Your Majesty as quickly as possible.' 'Well,' she said, getting up, 'it certainly is early for a letter.'

Looking inside, she discovered a pair of hare-sticks, each about five inches long. They had been placed end to end so that they looked like a single hare-wand; some paper had been wrapped round the head of the sticks, which were prettily decorated with sprigs of wild orange, club moss, and mountain sedge. But there seemed to be no written message. 'Can this really be all?' said the Empress. Searching more carefully, however, we found the following verse written on a bit of paper wrapped round the end of the stick:

> I thought I heard the woodman's axe
> Echoing through the hills.
> But, oh, it was a gladder sound –
> The cutting of the festive wands.[223]

As I watched the Empress writing her reply to this letter (which turned out to be the beginning of a regular correspondence between her and the High Priestess), I was full of admiration. Determined to make her letter as elegant as the one she had received, Her Majesty took the utmost pains to correct the wording until she considered it just right. The messenger was rewarded with an unlined costume of white material and another of dark red that looked like plum blossom.[224] I enjoyed watching the man set off in the falling snow with the clothes over his shoulder. Unfortunately I never found out what Her Majesty had replied.

Meanwhile our snow mountain, dirty and unattractive though it had become, showed no sign of melting; and one would really have thought that it belonged to the northern land of Koshi.

I prayed that somehow it would survive until the fifteenth. I was convinced that I would win, but some people insisted that it would not outlast the seventh. We had all decided to wait and see what happened when suddenly on the third of the month the Empress was obliged to return to the Imperial Palace. This was a great disappointment, and at first I seriously thought that we would never know the outcome. 'Well,' said everyone (including Her Majesty), 'it was all very delightful. What a shame we couldn't see it to the end!'

I determined then that, if my original guess turned out to be correct, I would show Her Majesty the remaining snow whatever happened. I realized that this would require special steps, so I took advantage of the confusion of packing and moving to summon a gardener who lived in a hut near the wall of the Empress's Office. When he came to the veranda where I was sitting, I told him to take extremely good care of the mountain. 'Make sure it lasts until the fifteenth,' I said, 'and don't let any children climb up and scatter the snow. If you look after it really well and it lasts until the middle of the month, Her Majesty will give you a generous reward, and I too shall show you my gratitude.' So saying, I gave him some cakes and other food that I had got from the reserve that was always kept in the kitchen for poor people.

The gardener beamed. 'That will be quite simple, Madam,' he said, 'I shall certainly guard your mountain for you, though it may be difficult to stop the children from climbing. . .' 'If they refuse to obey,' I said, 'tell them whom they are dealing with!'

I then accompanied Her Majesty back to the Palace and stayed there until the seventh. During this time I was so worried about the mountain that I was forever dispatching under-servants, bathroom servants, and housekeepers with instructions for the gardener. On the seventh I sent him some of the left-overs from the Festival of Young Herbs; when the servants returned, I heard them laughing at the reverent way in which the gardener had received the gifts.

After I had gone home on the seventh, I was still greatly concerned with the mountain and early each morning I sent someone to look at it. On the tenth my messenger delighted me by saying that it would last for another five days or so. On the night of the thirteenth, however, it rained very hard, and I thought with distress that now my mountain must surely have melted. I stayed awake all night, lamenting that it could not possibly survive another day, let alone the necessary two. The people who heard me laughed and said I was mad. As soon as there was a sound of stirring in the house, I got up and tried to arouse one of the maids. The lazy wench would not budge. Thoroughly annoyed, I sent another servant, who was already awake, to inspect the mountain. 'Well, Madam,' she told me on her return, 'it is now about the size of a round straw cushion. The gardener has been looking after it very efficiently and has not let any children come near. It should last like this until tomorrow or even the next day. The gardener says that he is now confident of receiving his reward.'

I was overjoyed and decided that, with the arrival of the fifteenth, I should dash off a poem and send it to the Empress together with some of the snow in a basket.

Anxiously I awaited the following day, and before dawn I gave my maid a large chip-basket,[225] telling her to fill the cover with snow from those parts of the mountain where it was still white. 'Use a rake,' I said, 'and throw away all the dirty snow.'

She was back almost at once with the cover of the chip-basket dangling, still empty, from her hand. 'It's gone,' she announced. I was dumbfounded. The splendid poem that I had composed with such effort, thinking that soon it would be on everyone's lips, now seemed foolish and useless. 'But how,' I asked dejectedly, 'can such a large heap of snow have melted overnight?'

'The gardener was wringing his hands,' the maid said excitedly. 'He told me that the snow was there until late last night and he was counting on his reward, but that now of course he would get nothing.'

Just then a messenger arrived with a note from the Empress

asking whether the snow had lasted. Mortifying as it was, I had to reply that none was left. 'Tell Her Majesty,' I said, 'that the snow, which the older women said would melt last month and in any case before New Year's Day, was still there yesterday at sunset. I don't think I did so badly. If it had actually lasted until today, my prediction would have been *too* accurate. I dare say that during the night someone removed the snow out of spite and flung it away.'

When I returned to the Palace on the twentieth, I discussed the matter with the Empress and told her how amazed I had been by the maid's prompt return and by her news. 'The cover was dangling in her hand,' I said, 'and she had put the box itself on her head like a hat. . . . I was planning to build a beautiful little snow mountain in the lid and to present it to Your Majesty with a fine poem written on white paper.'

The Empress burst out laughing and her ladies-in-waiting joined in. 'I am afraid I have earned a heavy load of sin for having spoiled everything when it meant so much to you,' she said. 'To tell the truth, on the night of the fourteenth I sent some servants to the mountain with orders to destroy it and throw away what was left. Strange that in your reply to my note you guessed exactly what happened.'

It appeared that, when the Empress's servants arrived at the mountain, the old gardener had come out, wringing his hands and begging them not to damage the snow. 'We are acting on Her Majesty's orders,' they had answered. 'And don't tell anyone, or we shall tear down your hut for you.' They then took all the snow and threw it over the wall at the south of the guard-office of the Left Division. According to the servants' report, the mountain was still quite high and the snow would certainly have lasted until the twentieth. 'In fact,' said the Empress, 'I am afraid your mountain might very well have stood there until it started snowing again next winter.' When His Majesty heard the story, he commented to his senior courtiers, 'Who would have thought of having such a strange contest?'

'Well,' said the Empress after she had told me all this, 'now

you can see that it is just the same as if you had actually won. So please let me hear your poem.'

The ladies-in-waiting joined her in asking for my poem, but I felt very unhappy and replied, 'After what I have just been told, why should I want to recite it?'

At that moment the Emperor walked into the room and addressed me. 'I have always regarded you as being like other people,' he said, 'but now I see what a remarkable woman you really are.'

This only made me unhappier about my mountain, and I felt I was going to burst into tears. 'Oh, how sad!' I exclaimed. 'What a cruel world we live in! I remember how happy I was when it snowed on New Year's Day and the mountain started getting higher, but then Your Majesty said it had come at the wrong time and gave orders that all the snow should be swept away.'

The Emperor laughed. 'The fact is,' he said, 'that she probably didn't want you to win.'

57. *Splendid Things*

Chinese brocade. A sword with a decorated scabbard. The grain of the wood in a Buddhist statue. Long flowering branches of beautifully coloured wistaria entwined about a pine tree.

Despite his low station a Chamberlain of the Sixth Rank is a splendid thing. To think that he is allowed yellowish-green robes of figured material and cloth that even young noblemen of the finest families are forbidden to wear! A mere Assistant or Subordinate Official in the Emperor's Private Office, who is the son of a commoner and who has gone completely unnoticed while serving under gentlemen of rank with official posts, becomes splendid beyond words after being appointed Chamberlain.

A Chamberlain of the Sixth Rank cuts a magnificent figure when he arrives with an Imperial mandate or when he brings the sweet chestnuts for the Great Council banquet.[226] Observing

79. *Shameful Things*

A thief has crept into a house and is now hiding in some well-chosen nook where he can secretly observe what is going on. Someone else comes into the dark room and, taking an object that lies there, slips it into his sleeve. It must be amusing for the thief to see a person who shares his own nature.[315]

Priests on night duty are often confronted with shameful things, especially if they are light sleepers.[316] For they are liable to overhear groups of young women joking about other people, abusing them, and venting their spite on them; all this is bound to arouse a sense of shame in the priest who lies next door, hearing everything they say. Some of the Emperor's elderly ladies-in-waiting angrily tell the girls not to be so noisy; but they pay no attention and continue gossiping until finally they doze off without the slightest regard for decorum. Even after they are asleep, the priest still feels it is shameful.

A man's heart is a shameful thing. When he is with a woman whom he finds tiresome and distasteful, he does not show that he dislikes her, but makes her believe she can count on him. Still worse, a man who has the reputation of being kind and loving treats a woman in such a way that she cannot imagine his feelings are anything but sincere. Yet he is untrue to her not only in his thoughts but in his words; for he speaks badly about her to other women just as he speaks badly about those women to her. The woman, of course, has no idea that she is being maligned; and, hearing his criticisms of the others, she fondly believes he loves her best. The man for his part is well aware that this is what she thinks. How shameful!

When a woman runs into a lover with whom (alas!) she has broken for good, there is no reason for her to be ashamed if he regards her as heartless. But if the lover shows that he has not been even slightly upset by their parting, which to her was so sad and painful and difficult, she is bound to be amazed by the man and to wonder what sort of a heart he can have. Oblivious

of his own callous attitude, her abandoned lover carri glib conversation in which he criticizes the behaviour men.

How shameful when a man seduces some helpless Court lady and, having made her pregnant, abandons her without caring in the slightest about her future!

80. *Things That Have Lost Their Power*

A large boat which is high and dry in a creek at ebb-tide.

A woman who has taken off her false locks to comb the short hair that remains.

A large tree that has been blown down in a gale and lies on its side with its roots in the air.

The retreating figure of a *sumō* wrestler who has been defeated in a match.[317]

A man of no importance reprimanding an attendant.

An old man who removes his hat, uncovering his scanty top-knot.

A woman, who is angry with her husband about some trifling matter, leaves home and goes somewhere to hide. She is certain that he will rush about looking for her; but he does nothing of the kind and shows the most infuriating indifference. Since she cannot stay away for ever, she swallows her pride and returns.

81. *Awkward Things*

One has gone to a house and asked to see someone; but the wrong person appears, thinking that it is he who is wanted; this is especially awkward if one has brought a present.

One has allowed oneself to speak badly about someone without really intending to do so; a young child who has overheard it all goes and repeats what one has said in front of the person in question.

I should be able to enjoy the dances fully. Yet, when the time came, I was totally absorbed by their beauty.

'It is always so sad when the Special Festival at Iwashimizu comes to an end,' remarked one of the ladies-in-waiting. 'Why don't the dancers give a repeat performance after they return to the Palace? What a delight that would be! I find it such a shame to see the dancers leaving one after another as soon as they've received their rewards.'

Hearing this, the Emperor said that he would summon the dancers after they returned on the following day and order them to perform. 'Will you really do that, Your Majesty?' said the lady. 'Oh, how splendid!' The ladies-in-waiting were all delighted with this decision, and they crowded round Her Majesty, begging her to make sure that the Emperor would not change his mind.

As a result we had the great pleasure of seeing the dancers give a special performance on their return from the Shrine.[373] The ladies, however, had not really expected that the extra dance would really take place, and when they heard that the dancers had been summoned into the Presence they were not prepared. In their eagerness to reach the hall, they bumped into things and behaved in the most insane way; those who had been in their rooms when the news came rushed helter-skelter to the Palace and, not caring in the slightest that they could be seen by courtiers, attendants, and others whom they passed, lifted their skirts over their heads as they ran.[374] No wonder that people laughed at them!

94. *When His Excellency, the Chancellor, Had Departed*

When His Excellency, the Chancellor, had departed from among us, there was much stir and movement in the world.[375] Her Majesty, who no longer came to the Imperial Palace, lived in the Smaller Palace of the Second Ward.[376] Though I had done

nothing to deserve it, things became very difficult for me and I spent a long time at home. One day, when I was particularly concerned about Her Majesty and felt I could not allow our separation to continue, the Captain of the Left Guards Division came to see me. 'I called on Her Majesty today,' he said, 'and found it very moving. Her ladies were dressed as elegantly as ever, with their robes, skirts, and Chinese jackets perfectly matching the season. The blind was open at the side and, when I looked in, I saw a group of about eight ladies, elegantly seated next to each other. They wore Chinese jackets of tawny yellow, light violet skirts, and robes of purple and dark red. Noticing that the grass in the garden outside the palace had been allowed to grow very high and thick, I told them they should have it cut. "We've left it like this on purpose so that we might admire the dew when it settles on the blades." The voice was Lady Saishō's and I found her reply delightful.

'Several of the ladies spoke about you and said it was a shame you were staying at home. "Now that Her Majesty is living in a place like this," they told me, "she feels that Shōnagon should come back into waiting regardless of what business she may have at home. Why won't she return when Her Majesty wants her so much?" I definitely had the impression that they wanted me to pass this on to you. So please go. There's a charm about the place that will stir you deeply. The peonies in front of the terrace have a delightful Chinese air.'

'No,' I replied. 'Since they dislike me so much, I've come to dislike them.'

'You must try to be generous,' he said with a smile.

Shortly afterwards I visited the Empress. I had no way of telling what she thought about it all; but I did hear some of her ladies-in-waiting whisper, 'She is on close terms with people who are attached to the Minister of the Left.'[377] I was coming from my room when I saw them all standing there muttering to each other. Noticing me, they became silent and each of them went about her own business. I was not used to being treated like this and found it most galling. Thereafter Her Majesty

summoned me on several occasions, but I paid no attention, and a long time passed without my visiting her. No doubt the ladies-in-waiting made out that I belonged to the enemy camp and told all sorts of lies about me.

One day, when there had been an unaccustomed silence from the Empress and I was sitting at home sunk in gloomy thoughts, a housekeeper brought me a letter. 'Her Majesty ordered that this should be sent to you secretly by Lady Sakyō,' she told me. Yet there could be no reason for such secrecy when I was living at home. Examining the letter, I gathered that it was a personal message from Her Majesty and my heart was pounding as I opened it. There was nothing written on the paper. It had been used to wrap up a single petal of mountain rose, on which I read the words, 'He who does not speak his love.'[378] I was overjoyed; what a relief after the long, anxious days of silence! My eyes filled with 'the things that one knows first of all'.[379] 'The ladies-in-waiting are all wondering why you have stayed away so long,' said the housekeeper, who had been watching me. 'They consider it very strange, especially since you know how much Her Majesty is always thinking of you. Why don't you go?' Then she added, 'I have a short errand near by. I'll be back for your answer presently.'

But as I prepared to write my answer, I realized that I had completely forgotten the next line of the poem. 'Amazing!' I muttered. 'How can one possibly forget an old poem like that? I know it perfectly well and yet it just won't come.' Hearing this, a small page-boy who happened to be in the room said, '"Yet feels its waters seething underneath" – those are the words Madam.' Of course! How on earth could they have slipped my mind? To think that I should have to be taught by a mere child!

Shortly after sending my reply, I visited the Empress. Not knowing how she would receive me, I felt unusually nervous and remained half hidden behind a curtain of state. 'Are you a newcomer here?' asked Her Majesty with a laugh. 'I am afraid it was not much of a poem,' she went on, 'but I felt it was the sort of

thing I should write. When I do not see you, Shōnagon, I am wretched all the time.'

Her Majesty had not changed. When I told her about the page-boy who had reminded me of the missing words, she was most amused. 'That's just the sort of thing that can happen,' she said, laughing, 'especially with old poems that one considers too familiar to take seriously.'

Then she told me the following story: 'Some people were organizing a game of riddles[380] when one of them, a clever man and a good player, said that he would like to set the first riddle presented by the team of the left, to which he belonged. His team-mates cheerfully agreed, feeling confident that he would produce something good.

'When all the people in the team of the left had made up their riddles, they began to select the ones that would actually be used. "Please tell us what yours is going to be?" they said to the man. "No," he replied. "You must simply trust me. After speaking as I did, I am hardly likely to come out with something that will disappoint you." His team-mates assumed that he must be right; but, when the day of the game drew near, they again asked him to let them know his riddle. "What if you should have produced something very strange?" they said. "Well," he said angrily, "I don't know. If you are so uncertain about my riddle, you had better not depend on me at all." When the day arrived, his partners were very worried about what he would do.

'The participants, men and women of quality including several senior courtiers, were divided into two teams and seated in rows. The time came to present the first set of riddles, and our man was chosen to lead off for the team of the left. He looked as if he had prepared his entry with great care, and all the players gazed at him anxiously, wondering what they would hear. "Your riddle! Your riddle!" they said impatiently.

'Finally he came out with "A bow drawn in the sky", which delighted the members of the opposing team. His partners were dumbfounded and disgusted with him. Surely, they thought, he

must be working for the other side and trying to make his own team lose.

'Meanwhile his opponent on the team of the right was laughing at him. "Dear me!" he said, beginning to pout. "I haven't the slightest idea." And, instead of answering the riddle, he began making jokes.

'"I've won!" cried the man who had posed the riddle. "A point for our side!" A token was duly given to the team of the left.[381]

'"Disgraceful!" said the members of the other team. "Everyone knows the answer to that riddle. They certainly shouldn't get a point."

'"But he said he did not know," replied the man. "How can you claim he hasn't lost?" In this and in each of the subsequent contests he argued so effectively that his side won.

'Later the player who had failed to answer the first riddle was being taken to task by his team-mates. "We admit," they said, "that people can forget the answers to the most obvious questions and have to concede defeat. But what possible reason could you have to say you didn't know?"[382] And they made him pay a forfeit.'

When the Empress had finished her story, all the ladies burst out laughing. 'The people on the team of the right had good reason to be annoyed with their man,' said one of them. 'I can see why they were disappointed. And how furious the other team must have been to hear their candidate lead off with such a silly riddle!'

'Indeed,' I thought, 'how could anyone possibly forget something so simple and commonplace?'

95. *On the Tenth Day of the First Month*

On the tenth day of the First Month there were thick clouds in the sky but the sun shone through brightly. In a rough, uncultivated field behind a poor dwelling-house grew a young peach

tree. Little branches sprouted thickly all over it; I noticed that the leaves were green on one side while on the other they were dark and glossy as if coloured with a deep red dye.

A slender youth, with beautiful hair and wearing a torn hunting costume, had climbed the tree. At the foot stood a little boy; he had on short clogs, and over a plum-red under-robe he wore a white hunting costume tucked up so that it bulged at the waist. 'Come on!' he called to the youth in the tree. 'Cut me a nice branch.'

Just then a small group of girls arrived. They too had pretty hair and their jackets were torn; though their skirts were faded, the colours still looked quite attractive. 'Please cut us some branches,' they shouted to the lad. 'Choose some that we can make into nice hare-sticks. Master sent us for them.'

When the youth in the tree started to throw down branches, the children ran for them helter-skelter, each taking her share and crying, 'Lots for me! Lots for me!' It was a delightful scene.

Then a man in a dirty trouser-skirt came running along and said that he too wanted some branches. The boy asked him to wait for a moment, whereupon the man began shaking the tree. The boy was terrified and clung on like a monkey, which I found most amusing. One is likely to come across similar scenes when the plum trees start bearing fruit.

96. *Two Handsome Men*

Two handsome men are absorbed in a game of backgammon. Though they have been playing all day, they still do not seem tired and order a servant to light the lamp on a short stand. One of the players holds the dice in his hand and, before finally placing them in the box, prays earnestly for a good throw. The other player puts his dice-box on the board. As he sits there waiting, he tucks in the collar of his hunting costume, which has begun to creep up over his face,[383] and shakes his sagging lacquered cap. 'How could anyone possibly lose after reciting all

and examined the brazier, then returned with this delightful poem, which she recited to the Emperor:

> What do I see in the open sea,
> Or aflame in the open fire?
> It must be a frying frog I see,
> Or a woman diver rowing home.[419]

In fact a frog had jumped into the fire and was burning away.

116. *When I First Went into Waiting*

When I first went into waiting at Her Majesty's Court, so many different things embarrassed me that I could not even reckon them up and I was always on the verge of tears. As a result I tried to avoid appearing before the Empress except at night, and even then I stayed hidden behind a three-foot curtain of state.

On one occasion Her Majesty brought out some pictures and showed them to me, but I was so ill at ease that I could hardly stretch out my hand to take them. She pointed to one picture after another, explaining what each represented. Since the lamp had been put on a low tray-stand, one could view the pictures even better than in the daytime, and every hair of my head was clearly visible. I managed to control my embarrassment and had a proper look. It was a very cold time of the year and when Her Majesty gave me the paintings I could hardly see her hands;[420] but, from what I made out, they were of a light pink hue that I found extraordinarily attractive. I gazed at the Empress with amazement. Simple as I was and unaccustomed to such wonderful sights, I did not understand how a being like this could possibly exist in our world.

At dawn I was about to hurry back to my room when Her Majesty said, 'Even the God of Kazuraki would stay a little longer.' So I sat down again, but I leant forward sideways in such a way that Her Majesty could not see me directly, and kept the

lattice shut. One of the ladies who came into the room noticed this and said that it should be opened. A servant heard her and started towards it, but Her Majesty said, 'Wait. Leave the lattice as it is.' The two women went out, laughing to each other.

Her Majesty then asked me various questions and finally said, 'I am sure you want to return to your room. So off you go! But be sure to come again this evening – and early too.'

As soon as I had crept out of Her Majesty's presence and was back in my room, I threw open all the lattices and looked out at the magnificent snow.

During the day I received several notes from Her Majesty telling me to come while it was still light. 'The sky is clouded with snow,' she wrote, 'and no one will be able to see you clearly.'

Noticing my hesitation, the lady in charge of my room[421] urged me, saying, 'I don't know how you can stay shut up like this all day long. Her Majesty has granted you the extraordinary good fortune of being admitted into her presence, and she must certainly have her reasons. To be unresponsive to another person's kindness is a most hateful way to behave.' This was enough to make me hurry back to the Empress; but I was overcome with embarrassment, and it was not easy for me.

On my way I was delighted to see the snow beautifully piled on top of the fire huts. When I entered Her Majesty's room, I noticed that the usual square brazier was full to the brim with burning charcoal and that no one was sitting next to it. The Empress herself was seated in front of a round brazier made of Shen[422] wood and decorated with pear-skin lacquer. She was surrounded by a group of high-ranking ladies who were in constant attendance upon her. In the next part of the room a tightly packed row of ladies-in-waiting sat in front of a long, rectangular brazier, with their Chinese jackets worn in such a way that they trailed on the floor. Observing how experienced they were in their duties and how easily they carried them out, I could not help feeling envious. There was not a trace of awkwardness in any of their movements as they got up to deliver

notes to Her Majesty from the outside and sat down again by the brazier, talking and laughing to each other. When would I ever be able to manage like that, I wondered nervously. Still further in the back of the room sat a small group of ladies who were looking at pictures together.

After a while I heard the voices of outrunners loudly ordering people to make way. 'His Excellency, the Chancellor, is coming,' said one of the ladies, and they all cleared away their scattered belongings. I retired to the back of the room; but despite my modesty, I was curious to see the great man in person and I peeped through a crack at the bottom of the curtain of state where I was sitting. It turned out that it was not Michitaka, but his son, Korechika, the Major Counsellor. The purple of his Court cloak and trousers looked magnificent against the white snow. 'I should not have come,' he said, standing next to one of the pillars, 'because both yesterday and today are days of abstinence. But it has been snowing so hard that I felt bound to call and find out whether all was well with you.'

'How did you manage?' said Her Majesty. 'I thought that all the paths were buried.'

'Well,' replied Korechika, 'it occurred to me that I might move your heart.'[423]

Could anything surpass this conversation between the Empress and her brother? This was the sort of exchange that is so eloquently described in romances; and the Empress herself, arrayed in a white dress, a robe of white Chinese damask, and two more layers of scarlet damask over which her hair hung down loosely at the back, had a beauty that I had seen in paintings but never in real life: it was all like a dream.

Korechika joked with the ladies-in-waiting, and they replied without the slightest embarrassment, freely arguing with him and contradicting his remarks when they disagreed. I was absolutely dazzled by it all and found myself blushing without any particular reason. Korechika ate a few fruits and told one of the servants to offer some to the Empress. He must have asked who was behind the curtain of state and one of the ladies must

have told him that it was I; for he stood up and walked to the back of the room. At first I thought he was leaving, but instead he came and sat very close to me; he began to talk about various things he had heard about me before I came into waiting and asked whether they were true. I had been embarrassed enough when I had been looking at him from a distance with the curtain of state between us; now that we were actually facing each other I felt extremely stupid and could hardly believe that this was really happening to me.

In the past, when I had gone to watch Imperial Processions and the like, Korechika had sometimes glanced in the direction of my carriage; but I had always pulled the inner blinds close together, and hidden my face behind a fan for fear that he might see my silhouette through the blinds. I wondered how I could ever have chosen to embark on a career for which I was so ill-suited by nature. What on earth should I say to him? I was bathed in sweat and altogether in a terrible state. To make matters worse, Korechika now seized the fan behind which I had prudently hidden myself, and I realized that my hair must be scattered all over my forehead in a terrible mess; no doubt everything about my appearance bespoke the embarrassment I felt at that moment.

I had hoped Korechika would leave quickly, but he showed no sign of doing so; instead he sat there, toying with my fan and asking who had done the paintings on it. I kept my head lowered and pressed the sleeve of my Chinese jacket to my face – so tightly indeed, that bits of powder must have stuck to it, making my complexion all mottled.

The Empress, who no doubt realized how desperately I wanted Korechika to leave, turned to him and said, 'Look at this notebook. Whose writing do you suppose it is?' I was relieved to think that now he would finally go; but instead he asked her to have the book brought to him so that he could examine it. 'Really,' she said. 'You can perfectly well come here yourself and have a look.' 'No I can't,' he replied. 'Shōnagon has got hold of me and won't let go.' It was a very fashionable sort of

joke but hardly suited to my rank or age, and I felt terribly ill at ease. Her Majesty held up the book, in which something had been written in a cursive script, and looked at it. 'Well indeed,' said Korechika, 'whose can it be? Let's show it to Shōnagon. I am sure she can recognize the handwriting of anyone in the world.' The aim of all these absurd remarks, of course, was to draw me out.

As if a single gentleman were not enough to embarrass me, another one now arrived, preceded by outrunners who cleared the way for him. This gentleman too was wearing a Court cloak, and he looked even more splendid than Korechika. He sat down and started telling some amusing stories, which delighted the ladies-in-waiting. 'Oh yes,' they said, laughing, 'we saw Lord So-and-so when he was –.' As I heard them mention the names of one senior courtier after another, I felt they must be talking about spirits or heavenly beings who had descended to earth. Yet, after some time had passed and I had grown accustomed to Court service, I realized that there had been nothing very impressive about their conversation. No doubt these same ladies, who talked so casually to Lord Korechika, had been just as embarrassed as I when they first came into waiting, but had little by little become used to Court society until their shyness had naturally disappeared.

The Empress spoke to me for a while and then asked, 'Are you really fond of me?' 'But Your Majesty,' I replied, 'how could I possibly not be fond of you?' Just then someone sneezed loudly in the Table Room. 'Oh dear!' said the Empress. 'So you're telling a lie.[424] Well, so be it.' And she retired into the back of the room.

To think that Her Majesty believed I was lying! If I had said that I was *fairly* fond of her, that would have been untrue. The real liar, I thought, was the sneezer's nose. Who could have done such a terrible thing? I dislike sneezes at the best of times, and whenever I feel like sneezing myself I deliberately smother it. All the more hateful was it that someone should have sneezed at this moment. But I was still far too inexperienced to say anything that might have repaired the damage: and, since the day was dawning, I retired to my room. As soon as I arrived, a servant brought me an elegant-looking letter, written on fine, smooth paper of light green. 'This is what Her Majesty feels,' I read.

> How, if there were no God Tadasu in the sky,
> And none to judge what is the truth and what a lie,
> How should I know which words were falsely said?

My emotions were a jumble of delight and dismay, and once again I wished I could find out who had sneezed on the previous night. 'Please give Her Majesty the following reply,' I said, 'and help me to make up for the harm that has been done.

> "A simple sneeze might give the lie
> To one whose love is small,
> But sad indeed that she who truly loves,
> Should suffer from so slight a thing![425]

The curse of God Shiki[426] is of course very terrible."'

Even after I had sent my reply I still felt most unhappy and wondered why someone should have had to sneeze at such an inopportune moment.

117. *People Who Look Pleased with Themselves*

A man who sneezes before anyone else on the morning of New Year's Day.[427]

A man who has obtained an appointment as Chamberlain for his dear son at a time when the competition is very keen.

A man who has received the governorship of one of the first-class provinces that is being offered in the current period of official appointments. 'What a splendid appointment!' people say and congratulate him warmly, to which he smugly replies, 'How so? I've been ruined.'

A young man who has been chosen out of several candidates to be adopted as son-in-law.