

THE TEMPLE OF THE GOLDEN PAVILLION

TRANSLATED BY IVAN MORRIS.

face de l'homme, elle lui présenta le thé. La chose faite dans les règles, elle retourna s'asseoir à sa place. L'homme dit quelque chose, mais ne toucha pas encore au thé. Ces minutes me parurent étrangement longues, étrangement tendues. La femme inclinait très bas un front plein de déférence.

C'est alors que l'incroyable se produisit. Sans rien changer à sa pose parfaitement protocole, la femme, tout à coup, ouvrit le col de son kimono. Mon oreille percevait presque le crissement de la soie frottée par l'envers raide de la ceinture. Deux seins de neige apparurent. Je tins mon souffle. Elle prit dans ses mains l'une des blanches et opulentes mamelles et je crus voir qu'elle se mettait à la pétrir, l'officier, toujours agenouillé devant sa compagne, tendit la tasse d'un noir profond. Sans prétendre l'avoir, à la lettre, vu, j'eus du moins la sensation nette, comme si cela se fût déroulé sous mes yeux, du lait blanc et tiède giclant dans le thé dont l'écume verdâtre emplissait la tasse sombre — s'y apaisant bientôt en ne laissant plus traîner à la surface que de petites taches —, de la face tranquille du breuvage troublé par la mousse laiteuse.

L'homme éleva la tasse et but jusqu'à la dernière goutte cet étrange thé. La femme remplaça ses seins dans le kimono.

Le dos raidi, nous regardions, fascinés. Plus tard, à repenser méthodiquement la chose, il nous parut qu'il devait s'agir de la cérémonie d'adieu d'un officier sur le point de partir au front et de la femme qui lui avait donné un enfant. Mais sur le moment, nous étions trop bouleversés pour trouver une explication quelconque. Si tendus étaient nos regards, nous n'eûmes pas le loisir de remarquer que le couple avait disparu de la pièce où ne restait plus que le grand tapis rouge.

Le blanc relief de ce profil... Cette incomparable et blanche poitrine... La femme disparue, une idée m'obséda tout le reste du jour, et le jour suivant, et le lendemain encore : l'idée que cette femme était Uiko resuscitée et personne d'autre.

I remember an episode that took place in Kyoto towards the end of the war. It was something quite unbelievable, but I was not the only witness. Tsurukawa was next to me.

One day when the power supply was cut off, Tsurukawa and I went to visit the Nanzen Temple together. This was our first visit to the Nanzen Temple. We crossed the wide drive and went over the wooden bridge that spanned the incline where boats used to be launched.

It was a clear May day. The incline was no longer in use and the rails that ran down the slope were rusty and almost entirely overgrown with weeds. Amid the weeds, delicate little cross-shaped flowers trembled in the wind. Up to the point where the incline started, the water was dirty and stagnant, and the shadows of the rows of cherry trees on our side of the water were thoroughly immersed in it.

Standing on the small bridge, we gazed absently at the water. Amid all one's wartime memories, such short absent moments leave the most vivid impression. These brief moments of inactive abstraction lurked everywhere, like patches of blue sky that peep through the clouds. It is strange that a moment like this should have remained clearly in my mind, just as though it had been an occasion of poignant pleasure.

"It's pleasant, isn't it?" I said and smiled inconsequentially.

"Uh," replied Tsurukawa, and he too smiled. The two of us felt keenly that these few hours belonged to us.

Beside the wide gravelled path ran a ditch full of clear water, in which beautiful water plants were swaying with the flow. Soon the famous Sammon Gate reared itself before us. There was not a soul to be seen in the temple precincts. Among the fresh verdure, the tiles of the temple roof shone luxuriantly, as though some great smoked-silver book had been laid down there. What meaning could war have at this moment? At a certain place, at a certain time, it seemed to me that war had become a weird spiritual incident having no existence outside human consciousness.

Perhaps it was on top of this Sammon Gate that the famous robber of old, Ishikawa Goémon, had placed his feet on the railing and enjoyed the sight of flowers below in their full blossom. We were both in a childish mood and, although it was already the season in which the cherry trees have lost their blossoms and are covered in foliage, we thought that we should enjoy seeing the view from the same position as Goémon. We paid our small entrance fee and climbed the steep steps whose wood had now turned completely black. In the hall at the top, where religious dances used to be performed, Tsurukawa hit his head on the low ceiling. I laughed and immediately afterwards bumped my own head. We both made another turn climbed to the head of the stairs and emerged on top of the tower.

It was a pleasant tension, after climbing the stairs, which were as cramped as a cellar, to feel our bodies suddenly exposed to the wide outside scene. We stood there for a time gazing at the cherry trees and the pines, at the forest of the Heian Shrine that stretched tortuously in the distance beyond the rows of buildings, at the form of the mountain ranges—Arashiyama, Kitanokata, Kifune, Minoura, Kompira—all of them rising up hazily at the extremities of the streets of Kyoto. When we had satisfied ourselves with this, we removed our shoes and respectfully entered the hall like a couple of typical acolytes. In the dark hall twenty-four straw mats were spread out on the floor. In the centre was a statue of Sâkamuni, and the golden eyes of sixteen Arhants gleamed in the darkness. This was known as the Gohoro or the Tower of the Five Phoenixes.

The Nanzen Temple belonged to the same Rinzaï sect as the Golden Temple, but whereas the latter adhered to the Sokokuji school, this was the headquarters of the Nanzenji school. In other words, we were now in a temple of the same sect as our own but of a different school. We stood there like two ordinary middle-school students, with a guide book in our hands, looking round at the vividly coloured paintings on the ceiling, which are attributed to Tanya Morinobu of the Kano school and to Hogan Tokuetso of the Tosa school. On one side of the ceiling were paintings of angels flying through the sky and playing the flute and the ancient Biwa. Elsewhere, a Kalavinka was fluttering about with a white peony in its beak. This was the melodious bird that is described in the sutras as living on Mount Session: the upper part of its body is that of the plump girl and its lower part has a bird's form.

In the centre was the bird on the summit of the Golden Temple; but this one was like a gorgeous rainbow, utterly different from that solemn golden bird with which I was so familiar.

Before the statue of Sâkamuni we knelt down and folded our hands in prayer. Then we left the hall. But it was hard to drag ourselves down from the top of the tower. We leaned against the railing facing south by the top of the steps that we had climbed. I felt as though somewhere I could see a small, beautiful, coloured spiral before my eyes. It must have been an after-image of the magnificent colours that I had just seen on the ceiling paintings. This feeling that I had of a condensation of rich colours was as though that Kalavinka bird were hiding somewhere amid those young leaves or on some branches of those green pines that spread out everywhere below, and as though it were letting me glimpse a corner of its splendid wings.

But it was not so. Across the road below us was the Tenju Hermitage. A path, paved with square stones, of which only the corners touched each other, bent its way across a garden, where low, peaceful trees had been planted in a simple style, and led to a large room with wide-open sliding-doors. One could see every detail of the alcove and of the staggered shelves in the room. A bright-scarlet carpet was spread out on the floor: evidently the room was frequently used for tea dedications and rented for tea ceremonies. A young woman was sitting there. It was she that had been reflected in my eyes. During the war one never saw a woman dressed in such a brilliant, long-sleeved kimono as she was wearing. Anyone who went out dressed as she was would almost certainly be rebuked for lack of patriotic sobriety and would have to return home and change. So gorgeous was her form of dress, I could not see the details of the pattern, but I noticed that flowers were painted and embroidered on a pale blue background, almost as though the surrounding air were illuminated by the brilliance of her costume. The beautiful young woman was sitting on the floor in a position of perfect elegance; her pale profile stood out in relief as if it were carved, and at first I could not help wondering whether she was really a living person.

"Good heavens!" I said, stuttering badly. "Can she really be alive?"

"That's just what I was thinking. She's exactly like a doll, isn't she?" replied Tsurukawa, who stood leaning heavily against the railing without taking his eyes off the woman.

Just then a young army officer appeared in uniform from the back of the room. He sat down with stiff formality a few feet away from the woman and faced her. For a while the two of them sat facing each other quietly.

The woman stood up and disappeared silently into the darkness of the corridor. After a time, she returned holding a teacup in her hands; her long sleeves swayed to and fro in the breeze. She knelt directly in front of the man and offered him the tea. Having presented him with the teacup according to etiquette, she returned to her original place. The man said something. He still did not drink the tea. The moment that followed seemed strangely long and tense. The woman's head was deeply bowed.

It was then that the unbelievable thing happened. Still sitting absolutely straight, the woman suddenly loosened the collar of her kimono. I could almost hear the rustling of silk as she pulled the material of her dress from under the stiff sash. Then I saw her white breasts. I held my breath. The woman took one of her full white breasts in her own hands. The officer held out the dark, deep coloured teacup, and knelt before her. The woman rubbed her breast with both hands.

I cannot say that I saw it all, but I felt distinctly, as though it had all happened directly before my eyes, how the white warm milk gushed forth from her breast into the deep-green tea which foamed inside that cup, how it settled into the liquid, leaving white drops on the top, how the quiet surface of the tea was made turbid and foamy by that white breast.

The man held the cup to his mouth and drank every drop of that mysterious tea. The woman hid her full breast in the kimono.

Tsurukawa and I gazed tensely at the scene. Later when we examined the matter systematically, we decided that this must have been a farewell ceremony between an officer who was leaving for the front and the woman who had conceived his child. But our emotions at that moment made any logical explanation impossible. Because we were staring so hard, we did not have time to notice that the man and woman had gone out of the room, leaving nothing but the great red carpet.

I had seen that white profile of hers in relief and I had seen her magnificent white breast. After the woman left, I thought persistently of one thing during the remaining hours of that day and also during the next day and the day after. I thought that this woman was none other than Uiko, who had been brought back to life.