THE GARDEN OF ASIA

I

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ACROSS the waste of waters a mass of broken grey sketches itself dimly against the turbulent clouds. It is the wanderer's first sight of Japan—the Island of Goto, precipitous and craggy. As it fades into the greynesses behind, there rises far away the high and jagged coastline of Japan; and, after skirting islets and fantastic pinnacles of rock, the vessel glides under a wild sky of violet and flaming orange into the harbour of Nagasaki. The harbour of Nagasaki is a dream of loveliness, marred by the reality of coal and belching steamers wallowing in the polluted sea. High on three sides rise the steep green hills, clothed with flowering trees and thick plantations of graves. The mouth of the haven is peppered with islets, up whose pinnacles the pine goes climbing everywhere. In that glorious place the town is a plague-spot, a taint of leprosy upon
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the cheek of Helen. Squalid and foul it is, with all the hedonistic opportunities that the simple heart of the European sailor craves. Here is the home of Madame Chrysanthème, that most un-Japanese of Japanese. Nagasaki is an annexe of Portsmouth, set down at the entrance of Paradise.

From Nagasaki the coast is steep and rugged. The landscape has the inevitable charm of Japan. The pines seem to make a point of growing along the skyline, and the headlands are contorted and fretted into monstrous arches, pinnacles, and caverns. The air is clear and yet full of moisture. The country has the crystalline sharpness of outline that distinguishes the Riviera, without any of the Riviera’s stern and harsh aridity of tone. Through the intense clarity of the Japanese atmosphere, colour strikes the eye with a rich and restrained purity, in which the blues and deep greens take a depth of beauty that they have nowhere else. In Japan one seems to be looking upon a transfigured landscape through a middle distance of perfectly calm, clear water, which gives each mass of azure or violet a redoubled opulence of soft colour. The Riviera has outline, but no atmosphere. There everything is drawn in the same plane, is vivid and glaring in its unmitigated acridity of light. But in Japan lines are softened and colours mellowed by the infinite varieties of atmosphere. At dawn the effect so familiar in all Japanese pictures becomes clearly recognisable. For in every
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dell, fold of the hills, or low-lying valley, floats a very delicate film of mist, from which the outlines of the trees emerge gradually towards their tops, fixed in a ghost-like uniformity, where nothing of detail is seen, only a fairy shape, motionless, yet hardly consolidated out of the shadows against which it stands with such vague precision of un-relieved colouring. For this is not a mist after our western sense, that gives the name to a fat roll of white wadding, obliterating a whole landscape in the solid, thorough-going manner of a respectable Anglo-Saxon vapour. The Japanese mist is a very frail film, whose interposition mollifies details and purifies colour into the harmonised tenderness of its dominant note. Japanese atmosphere at sunrise is like a curtain in the theatre of dreams—it is airy, remote, incredible in its dainty unreality. Then gradually the curtain rolls up, and the trees, hills, and rivers spring to active existence, when they are no less beautiful than in the strange opalescent modulations of the dawn. Only one thing in air has such beauty in the West: and that is the blue vapour that etherealises London into a vision of Turner. But this is uniform in its scope, whereas the Japanese mist lightens from the earth so that each tree emerges very softly from invisibility into a graduated visibility that only reaches a doubtful completeness with the topmost branches, which stand clear indeed, but without jarring obtrusion of detail.
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The Inland Sea is a subject for general rhapsody. Like most places on which the tourist lavishes his epithets, it is undeserving of them. One enters it through the narrow straits of Skimonoseki, whose woods are splashed in spring with the rose and white of cherries and almonds. One emerges into a vast sea dotted with arid little gravelly islands, sparsely covered with morbid little trees. The coast is equally nude, while its outline is less beautiful than almost any other in Japan. At Kobe we come again into the Pacific, and so up the outer coast towards Yokohama. The next morning the cosmopolite steward leads one to a porthole, and murmurs in hieratic tones: "There is Fuji—Holy Mountain, with snow upstairs." And there indeed, pale in the dawn, Fuji-yama towers up far above the land and the sea. He is ghostly and white, holding his magnificent pose with the lightness of a momentarily arrested phantom, whom the development of day must dissipate in the course of half an hour. The great White Mountain looks too beautiful to be permanent. It must float away in a moment into the wrack of night. It is so airy, so fantastic in its beautiful immobility, so unearthly in the clear perfection of its outline, that one feels it to belong more to the imagination of a God than to the reality of this workaday world. It is true that the glories of Fuji-san are spattered, and stained, and degraded by persistent streams of inept human patronage.
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But that is his own desert. Not even the fattest witted of Anglo-German tourists could refrain from adoring his tremendous beauty in some fatuous phrase or other. And beauty does not cease to be beauty when it becomes obvious. Not even the trite coinage of a globe-trotter’s praise can deprive the Holy One of his splendour, any more than roses lose their value by frequency, or diamonds their urbane glory from the too common wearing of too common women. So one cannot blame either tourists or Mountain for the fact that he is the keynote of all Japanese impressions; if he enslaves to his praise half the epithets in the dictionary, or causes the serious-minded to flog their brains for something to say of him that shall not be stale or hysterical in exaggeration of silliness. But to ask anyone who has been to Japan to refrain from adoration of Fuji-san is to demand the impossible. Pity, then, for those who are between the devil of impossibility on the one side and the deep sea of heart-breaking difficulty on the other. May their efforts inoffensively to discharge an offensive but inevitable duty be looked upon with mercy! The Holy Mountain has no right, being a thing of earth, and coming within our frail human scope, to be so unearthly, so inhuman in the triumphant supremacy of his beauty. No colours can fitly paint a God, but must without fail produce a dowdy caricature or a squalling kaleidoscope of garishness. Our language has
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not the purity of tone to render faithfully the ghostly radiance of so divine a model.

Henceforth the coast is dominated by the Holy One. He soars up into the misty blue above the low purple line which we know to be the high mountains of the coast. A faint fume of mist lies round his base and lifts him higher into the untrammelled heavens. He seems to have no connection with the world below him. Clearly he is the guardian God of Japan, keeping watch and ward over the approaches to the Capital. One feels that worship is the obvious instinct, and has full sympathy with the crowds who yearly ascend the Mountain to adore his spirit at the shrine on the summit. In the days of his whiteness all approach is forbidden. It is only when the snows are little more than runnels upon his slopes that his priests declare the God to be at home. Previously he is supposed to be diplomatically absent, indisposed to receive his visitors. But with late summer he extends his welcome, and the pious troop devoutly up his cindery sides to the holy place. His aspect demands worship, far more cogently than the fear of his anger. It is for his height and his beauty that he is adored. But there are ominous signs that the giant is stirring now from his long sleep. He is not dead, but dormant. It is barely two hundred years since he last spoke, and filled Yeddo, eighty miles away, with soft ashes and the roar of inexorable thunders. Now once more he gives suspicion of
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his mood. His heart is hotter year by year, and a tiny film of steam develops and increases in the crater. Evil tremors of the ground betray the awakening of the Holy One, and his neighbours are beginning to shift from his immediate proximity. Possibly the years may be few before the God awakes with a roar from his slumbers, and, raging up to heaven, makes of Tokio and Yokohama a new Pompeii and a new Herculaneum.

At last the ascent of the coast is finished, and rounding a long low bluff, clad with trees, and speckled with the pink brick houses without which no good European is happy, the vessel glides placidly across the golden water and comes to anchor in Yokohama Bay. Yokohama is a European town, built by Europeans for Europeans, and demanding no notice except for its ugliness and the insolence with which its dwellings pollute one of the most glorious prospects upon earth. The Bluff is a masterpiece of crime against the immortal Fuji-san. Yokohama is the business city. Here the consuls dispense money to the undeserving but needy, and the banks reprove to the needy but deserving. It is full of Orientalised Europeans. It is generally hateful, crammed with gaudy and inferior “curios,” and dotted with notorious brothels. It is an excellent place to leave. With joy indeed do we depart hurriedly for Tokio.
II

THE METROPOLIS OF JAPAN

AFTER an hour, or a little more, the train ceases to rattle between the rice fields and sweeps into the Shimbashi station of Tokio. The station is on the European plan, bare and bald, with a mingled odour of grime and desolation. But outside goes roaring the full tide of Japanese life. Though, in this quarter, the houses are many of them built after Western models, and tramways run perilously round the corners, yet the whole tone is purely Japanese. The crowds, beneath their flapping felt hats and umbrellas, patter along upon wooden clogs, dressed in all the garments of old Japan. The streets are thick with people, men and women and children pervading the pavement. This quarter of Shimbashi has suffered more disastrously than almost any other from the official passion for Western methods. Whole streets have been rebuilt in squalid little frightful European houses. One main street of the quarter is built entirely of brick and stone. It is called by observers with an apt eye for simile “the Japanese Broadway.” If this be a true comparison,
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one can only pray that a kind Providence may continue to spare us from seeing the prototype. Its shops are foolish and terrible, offering for sale bowler-hats and shawls of magenta plush, edged with chenille balls, and uniforms and bicycles and phonographs and all the other glorious achievements by which we have vindicated our mastery of art. But the Ginza is only a very small fraction of Tokio, and even this becomes charming at night, when the pavement is lined with little open booths, each illuminated by a flaring lamp. Behind, the hideousness of the shop-fronts has been softened off by the deep blue shadows of the Japanese night, except where a chain of swinging lanterns hovers above some bazaar—a festoon of round and blazing rubies in the intenser darkness that surrounds them. By each booth squats its owner, offering his wares. And, if the shops of the Ginza be European, these stalls are of the most typical Japanese fascination. Every manner of attractive rubbish they display—old odds and ends, that are all things of beauty. Here one may buy an aureoled Amida in bronze, or a wonderfully cast cock and hen; there are pictures, and toys, and heavy tea-kettles of iron, moulded with shells or dragons, or fishes, that, on the rough surface of the vessel, look like incrustations formed by the ages in the depths of the sea; or cups and bowls in china or in lacquer; books, purses, pouches with knobs of carved ivory, and little sliding balls of
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enamel: sweets and cakes and many-tailed gold fishes in globes; lanterns plain and lanterns painted; lanterns round and lanterns long—every conceivable object of one's affection can be found by night, in the Ginza.

Small wonder if a visitor's impression of Tokio be disorderly. One's first affliction is the enormous size of the city. It is bewilderingly vast, and rambles away over the mileage in a manner distractingly desultory to the orderly mind, which expects any properly constructed city to be a city—a serried congestions of houses tightly packed in rows, with occasionally a neat and well-defined parallelogram of open space occupied by grass, upon which one must not walk, and by trees beneath whose shade one is allowed to sit for a penny. But Tokio is a very leisurely city. Here and there are cobwebs of streets. But everywhere there are gardens, and gardens, and gardens: gardens large and gardens small, and gardens that are really parks, and great open tangles of vegetation. In the politer quarters every house has its domain, and some of them are of princely size. The streets through which a rickshaw carries one are not thronged with houses as at home. The buildings line the way decorously, not like a crowd at a royal procession, but in a leisurely manner suggesting no rush for occupation. They are all absolutely Japanese, these houses—open shops debouching upon the street, within whose cavernous depths of