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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Tale of Genji: The Flower Feast (8/9)

About the twentieth day of the second month the Emperor gave a Chinese banquet under the great cherry-tree of the Southern Court. Both Fujitsubo and the Heir Apparent were to be there. Kōkiden, although she knew that the mere presence of the Empress was sufficient to spoil her pleasure, could not bring herself to forego so delightful an entertainment. After some promise of rain the day turned out magnificent; and in full sunshine, with the birds singing in every tree, the guests (royal princes, noblemen and professional poets alike) were handed the rhyme words which the Emperor had drawn by lot, and set to work to compose their poems. It was with a clear and ringing voice that Genji read out the word 'Spring' which he had received as the rhyme-sound of his poem. Next came Tō no Chūjō who, feeling that all eyes were upon him and determined to impress himself favourably on his audience, moved with the greatest possible elegance and grace; and when on receiving his rhyme he announced his name, rank, and titles, he took great pains to speak pleasantly as well as audibly. Many of the other gentlemen were rather nervous and looked quite pale as they came forward, yet they acquitted themselves well enough. But the professional poets,

particularly owing to the high standard of accomplishment which the Emperor's and Heir Apparent's lively interest in Chinese poetry had at that time diffused through the Court, were very ill at ease; as they crossed the long space of the garden on their way to receive their rhymes they felt utterly helpless. A simple Chinese verse is surely not much to ask of a professional poet; but they all wore an expression of the deepest gloom. One expects elderly scholars to be somewhat odd in their movements and behaviour, and it was amusing to see the lively concern with which the Emperor watched their various but always uncouth and erratic methods of approaching the Throne. Needless to say a great deal of music had been arranged for. Towards dusk the delightful dance known as the Warbling of Spring Nightingales was performed, and when it was over the Heir Apparent, remembering the Festival of Red Leaves, placed a wreath on Genji's head and pressed him so urgently that it was impossible for him to refuse. Rising to his feet he danced very quietly a fragment of the sleeve-turning passage in the Wave Dance. In a few moments he was seated again, but even into this brief extract from a long dance he managed to import an unrivalled charm and grace. Even his father-in-law who was not in the best of humour with him was deeply moved and found himself wiping away a tear. 'And why have we not seen Tō no Chūjō?' said the Heir Apparent. Whereupon Chūjō danced the Park of Willow Flowers, giving a far more complete performance than Genji, for no doubt he knew that he would be called

upon and had taken trouble to prepare his dance. It was a great success and the Emperor presented him with a cloak, which everyone said was a most unusual honour. After this the other young noblemen who were present danced in no particular order, but it was now so dark that it was impossible to discriminate between their performances.

Then the poems were opened and read aloud. The reading of Genji's verses was continually interrupted by loud murmurs of applause. Even the professional poets were deeply impressed, and it may well be imagined what pride the Emperor, to whom at times Genji was a source of consolation and delight, watched him upon such an occasion as this. Fujitsubo, when she allowed herself to glance in his direction, marvelled that even Kōkiden could find it in her heart to hate him. 'It is because he is fond of me; there can be no other reason,' she decided at last and the verse 'Were I but a common mortal who now am gazing at the beauty of this flower, from its sweet petals not long should I withhold the dew of love,' framed itself on her lips, though she dared not utter it aloud.

It was now very late and the banquet was over. The guests had scattered. The Empress and the Heir Apparent had both returned to the Palace—all was still. The moon had risen very bright and clear, and Genji, heated with wine, could not bear to quit so lovely a scene. The people at the Palace were probably all plunged in a heavy sleep. On such a night it was not impossible that some careless person might have left

some door unfastened, some shutter unbarred. Cautiously and stealthily he crept towards Fujitsubo's apartments and inspected them. Every bolt was fast. He sighed; here there was evidently nothing to be done. He was passing the loggia of Kōkiden's palace when he noticed that the shutters of the third arch were not drawn. After the banquet Kōkiden herself had gone straight to the Emperor's rooms. There did not seem to be anyone about. A door leading from the loggia into the house was standing open, but he could hear no sound within. 'It is under just such circumstances as this that one is apt to drift into compromising situations,' thought Genji. Nevertheless he climbed quietly on to the balustrade and peeped. Every one must be asleep. But no; a very agreeable young voice with an intonation which was certainly not that of any waiting-woman or common person was softly humming the last two lines of the *Oborozuki-yo*.¹ Was not the voice coming towards him? It seemed so, and stretching out his hand he suddenly found that he was grasping a lady's sleeve. 'Oh, how you frightened me,' she cried. 'Who is it?' 'Do not be alarmed,' he whispered. 'That both of us were not content to miss the beauty of this departing night is proof more clear than the half-clouded moon that we were meant to meet,' and as he recited the words he took her gently by the hand and led her into the house, closing the door behind them. Her surprised and puzzled air fascinated him. 'There is someone there,' she whispered tremulously, pointing to the inner room. 'Child' he answered, 'I am allowed to go wherever I

please and if you send for your friends they will only tell you that I have every right to be here. But if you will stay quietly here....' It was Genji. She knew his voice and the discovery somewhat reassured her. She thought his conduct rather strange, but she was determined that he should not think her prudish or stiff. And so because he on his side was still somewhat excited after the doings of the evening, while she was far too young and pliant to offer any serious resistance, he soon got his own way with her.

Suddenly they saw to their discomfiture that dawn was creeping into the sky. She looked, thought Genji, as though many disquieting reflections were crowding into her mind. 'Tell me your name' he said. 'How can I write to you unless you do? Surely this is not going to be our only meeting?' She answered with a poem in which she said that names are of this world only and he would not care to know hers if he were resolved that their love should last till worlds to come. It was a mere quip and Genji, amused at her quickness, answered 'You are quite right. It was a mistake on my part to ask.' And he recited the poem 'While still I seek to find on which blade dwells the dew, a great wind shakes the grasses of the level land.' 'If you did not repent of this meeting,' he continued, 'you would surely tell me who you are. I do not believe that you want....' But here he was interrupted by the noise of people stirring in the next room. There was a great bustle and it was clear that they would soon be starting out to fetch Princess Kōkiden back from the Palace. There was just time to

exchange fans in token of their new friendship before Genji was forced to fly precipitately from the room. In his own apartments he found many of his gentlemen waiting for him. Some were awake, and these nudged one another when he entered the room as though to say 'Will he never cease these disreputable excursions?' But discretion forbade them to show that they had seen him and they all pretended to be fast asleep. Genji too lay down, but he could not rest. He tried to recall the features of the lady with whom he had just spent so agreeable a time. Certainly she must be one of Kōkiden's sisters. Perhaps the fifth or sixth daughter, both of whom were still unmarried. The handsomest of them (or so he had always heard) were Prince Sochi's wife and the fourth daughter, the one with whom Tō no Chūjō got on so badly. It would really be rather amusing if it did turn out to be Chūjō's wife. The sixth was shortly to be married to the Heir Apparent. How tiresome if it were she! But at present he could think of no way to make sure. She had not behaved at all as though she did not want to see him again. Why then had she refused to give him any chance of communicating with her? In fact he worried about the matter so much and turned it over in his mind with such endless persistency that it soon became evident he had fallen deeply in love with her. Nevertheless no sooner did the recollection of Fujitsubo's serious and reticent demeanour come back to his mind than he realized how incomparably more she meant to him than this light-hearted lady.

That day the after-banquet kept him occupied till late at night. At the Emperor's command he performed on the thirteen-stringed zithern and had an even greater success than with his dancing on the day before. At dawn Fujitsubo retired to the Emperor's rooms. Disappointed in his hope that the lady of last night would somewhere or somehow make her appearance on the scene, he sent for Yoshikiyo and Koremitsu with whom all his secrets were shared and bade them keep watch upon the lady's family. When he returned next day from duty at the Palace they reported that they had just witnessed the departure of several coaches which had been drawn up under shelter in the Courtyard of the Watch. 'Among a group of persons who seemed to be the domestic attendants of those for whom the coaches were waiting two gentlemen came threading their way in a great hurry. These we recognized as Shii no Shōshō and Uchūben, so there is little doubt that the carriages belonged to Princess Kōkiden. For the rest we noted that the ladies were by no means ill looking and that the whole party drove away in three carriages.' Genji's heart beat fast. But he was no nearer than before to finding out which of the sisters it had been. Supposing her father, the Minister of the Right, should hear anything of this, what a to-do there would be! It would indeed mean his absolute ruin. It was a pity that while he was about it he did not stay with her till it was a little lighter. But there it was! He did not know her face, but yet he was determined to recognize her. How? He lay on his bed devising and

rejecting endless schemes. Murasaki too must be growing impatient. Days had passed since he had visited her and he remembered with tenderness how low-spirited she became when he was not able to be with her. But in a moment his thoughts had returned to the unknown lady. He still had her fan. It was a folding fan with ribs of hinoki-wood and tassels tied in a splice-knot. One side was covered with silverleaf on which was painted a dim moon, giving the impression of a moon reflected in water. It was a device which he had seen many times before, but it had agreeable associations for him, and continuing the metaphor of the 'grass on the moor' which she had used in her poem he wrote on the fan—'Has mortal man ever puzzled his head with such a question before as to ask where the moon goes to when she leaves the sky at dawn?' And he put the fan safely away. It was on his conscience that he had not for a long while been to the Great Hall; but fearing that Murasaki too might be feeling very unhappy he first went home to give her her lessons. Every day she was improving not only in looks, but also in amiability of character. The beauty of her disposition was indeed quite out of the common. The idea that so perfect a nature was in his hands, to train and cultivate as he thought best, was very attractive to Genji. It might however have been objected that to receive all her education from a young man is likely to make a girl somewhat forward in her manner.

First there was a great deal to tell her about what had happened at the Court entertainments of the last few days. Then followed her music lesson, and already it was

time to go. 'Oh why must he always go away so soon?' she wondered sadly, but by now she was so used to it that she no longer fretted as she had done a little while ago.

At the Great Hall he could, as usual, scarcely get a word out of Aoi. The moment that he sat idle a thousand doubts and puzzles began to revolve in his mind. He took up his zither and began to sing:

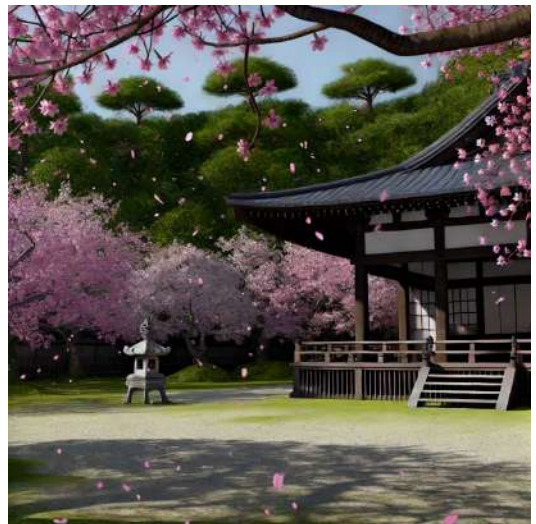
Not softlier pillowed is my head

That rests by thine, unloving bride,

Than were those jagged stones

my bed

Through which the falls of Nuki
stride.



At this moment Aoi's father came by and began to discuss the unusual success of the recent festivities. 'Old as I am,' he said—'and I may say that I have lived to see four illustrious sovereigns occupy the Throne, I have never taken part in a banquet which produced verses so spirited or dancing and music so admirably performed. Talent of every description seems at present to exist in abundance; but it is creditable to those in authority that they knew how to make good use of it. For my part I enjoyed myself so much that had I but been a few years younger I would positively have joined in the dancing!' 'No special steps were taken to discover the musicians,' answered Genji. 'We merely used those who

were known to the government in one part of the country and another as capable performers. If I may say so, it was Chūjō's Willow Dance that made the deepest impression and is likely always to be remembered as a remarkable performance. But if you, Sir, had indeed honoured us a new lustre would have been added to my Father's reign.' Aoi's brothers now arrived and leaning against the balustrade gave a little concert, their various instruments blending delightfully. Fugitive as their meeting had been it had sufficed to plunge the lady whose identity Prince Genji was now seeking to establish into the depths of despair; for in the fourth month she was to become the Heir Apparent's wife. Turmoil filled her brain. Why had not Genji visited her again? He must surely know whose daughter she was. But how should he know which daughter? Besides, her sister Kōkiden's house was not a place where, save under very strange circumstances, he was likely to feel at all at his ease. And so she waited in great impatience and distress; but of Genji there was no news.

About the twentieth day of the third month her father, the Minister of the Right, held an archery meeting at which most of the young noblemen and princes were present. It was followed by a wistaria feast. The cherry blossom was for the most part over, but two trees, which the Minister seemed somehow to have persuaded to flower later than all the rest, were still an enchanting sight. He had had his house rebuilt only a short time ago when celebrating the initiation of his

grand-daughters, the children of Kōkiden. It was now a magnificent building and not a thing in it but was of the very latest fashion. He had invited Genji when he had met him at the Palace only a few days before and was extremely annoyed when he did not appear. Feeling that the party would be a failure if Genji did not come, he sent his son Shii no Shōshō to fetch him, with the poem: 'Were my flowers as those of other gardens never should I have ventured to summon you.' Genji was in attendance upon the Emperor and at once showed him the message. 'He seems very pleased with himself and his flowers,' said his Majesty with a smile; adding 'as he has sent for you like this, I think you had better go. After all your half-sisters are being brought up at his house, and you ought not to treat him quite as a stranger.' He went to his apartments and dressed. It was very late indeed when at last he made his appearance at the party. He was dressed in a cloak of thin Chinese fabric, white outside but lined with yellow. His robe was of a deep wine-red colour with a very long train. The dignity and grace with which he carried this fancifully regal attire in a company where all were dressed in plain official robes were indeed remarkable, and in the end his presence perhaps contributed more to the success of the party than did the fragrance of the Minister's boasted flowers. His entry was followed by some very agreeable music. It was already fairly late when Genji, on the plea that the wine had given him a head-ache, left his seat and went for a walk. He knew that his two step-sisters, the daughters of

Kōkiden, were in the inner apartments of the palace. He went to the eastern portico and rested there. It was on this side of the house that the wistaria grew. The wooden blinds were raised and a number of ladies were leaning out of the window to enjoy the blossoms. They had hung bright-coloured robes and shawls over the window-sill just as is done at the time of the New Year dancing and other gala days and were behaving with a freedom of allure which contrasted very oddly with the sober decorum of Fujitsubo's household. 'I am feeling rather overpowered by all the noise and bustle of the flower-party' Genji explained. 'I am very sorry to disturb my sisters, but I can think of nowhere else to seek refuge ...' and advancing towards the main door of the women's apartments he pushed back the curtain with his shoulder. 'Refuge indeed!' cried one of the ladies laughing at him. 'You ought to know by now that it is only poor relations who come to seek refuge with the more successful members of their family. What pray have you come to bother us for?' 'Impertinent creatures!' he thought but nevertheless there was something in their manner which convinced him they were persons of some consequence in the house and not, as he at first supposed, mere waiting-women. A scent of costly perfumes pervaded the room; silken skirts rustled in the darkness. There could be little doubt that these were Kōkiden's sisters and their friends. Deeply absorbed, as indeed was the whole of this family, in the fashionable gaieties of the moment, they had flouted decorum and posted themselves at the

window that they might see what little they could of the banquet which was proceeding outside. Little thinking that his plan could succeed, yet led on by delightful recollections of his previous encounter he advanced towards them chanting in a careless undertone the song:

At Ishikawa, Ishikawa

A man from Koma took my belt away....

But for 'belt' he substituted 'fan' and by this means he sought to discover which of the ladies was his friend.

'Why, you have got it wrong! I never heard of that Korean' one of them cried. Certainly it was not she. But there was another who though she remained silent seemed to him to be sighing softly to herself. He stole towards the curtain-of-state behind which she was sitting and taking her hand in his at a venture he whispered the poem: 'If on this day of shooting my arrow went astray, 'twas that in dim morning twilight only the mark had glimmered in my view.' And she, unable any longer to hide that she knew him, answered with the verse: 'Had it been with the arrows of the heart that you had shot, though from the moon's slim bow no brightness came would you have missed your mark?' Yes, it was her voice. He was delighted, and yet....