

# THE WOOING OF KOTO

## A Romance of Modern Japan

By Ethel Watts Mumford

I HAD lived so long in semi-European hotels that I longed for a retreat of real privacy—a place all my own; hence my determination to buy some little spot that I could call "home." Distances are so great in Tokio that to be pleasantly sylvan yet within easy running distance of business and court centers is almost impossible.

At last, after diligent search, Shigahira found a small villa near the Maple club. The cryptomerias that lined the avenue were magnificent, and the backyard was a paradise. The house was situated at the top of a steep hill commanding a delightful view of the western portion of the town, delicately mist-covered and poetic as only a Japanese city can be. With Shig's help I engaged my servants, and secured a cat for luck—a pleasing young person with beautiful manners and a stumpy little button of a tail that was nevertheless very conversational and agitated.

I moved in and settled myself. My back-yard, as I have said, was a veritable paradise, laid out with an artistic appreciation that was lost on me then, for I was still a Goth and Vandal, as will appear later. There were little paths, neatly pebbled, and wonderful stones, strangely smooth yet contorted, brought provisionally from the beds of distant torrents. One in particular had a startling silhouette of a begging dog, and at dusk was realistic. Close to the house grew a bent and twisted pine tree. It was altogether too large for the garden, and I was surprised that it had not been removed, for the Japanese gardener rarely permits anything to clash with the scale of his miniature landscapes. This tree annoyed me. Its lower branches projected under the veranda roof, and the outer partitions of the house could be closed only after pushing back its inquisitive limbs; moreover, it impeded my view of the hill-slope and the beauties of my neighbor's premises.

The villa that adjoined mine was of some pretensions; its grounds were spacious and laid out with taste. Maple trees predominated in the foliage scheme, and there were a number of sweet-smelling shrubs that were new to me. My house had formerly been a part of this estate—built perhaps to accommodate a son, who, having taken unto himself a wife or so, had preferred to be somewhat isolated. A new bamboo fence had been erected between the dwellings, making an unobtrusive, picturesque boundary line.

On the day after my installation Shig called for a moment and glanced over the place. He smiled in a superior way at some of my attempts at decoration; advised me to stick to *kakemonos* and not to hang up photographs, and insisted that all my lamps swing from chains, in case of earthquake. As he left he called from his 'rickshaw: "Your neighbors will probably come to see you; they are very nice people. He's a captain, and his regiment will probably be called out soon. Be nice to them."

It was at the outset of the war with China, and I was glad of the opportunity of asking questions of someone likely to be conversant with native military methods. I walked around the house intending to glance at my neighbor's dwelling with renewed interest. As I turned the angle of the veranda, my foot caught in an upreared root of the pine, and I pitched forward, dealing my head a crushing blow against its trunk.

I arose extremely angry, as angry as if the tree had hit me of its own free will. It is extraordinary what personal rage an inanimate object can provoke. I swung back my foot and dealt a vicious kick at the offending root, thereby bruising my toe and adding to my vexation. This was enough. I determined that the tree should fall at once. I had made up my mind that it should go when I had first seen it, now I was too impatient to wait another instant. I went to my tool-chest, procured a small, sharp ax, and returned to the object of enmity. With a fiendish delight I heard the dry bark of the hatchet as it bit into the wood. From the house opposite the echo came back sharp and clear, like a slap. I pulled out the weapon and struck again. A V-shaped block fell at my feet, and I saw the amber sap bubbles swell in the raw cut. Crossing to the other side, I swung back my arm. Chop! The ax sank into the yielding wood. A sharp cry behind me made me turn so suddenly that I nearly fell over the offending root for the second time.

At the fence stood a Japanese girl. Her face was so full of consternation and terror that I was taken aback.

"Ohayo," I said politely.

"Oh, honorable sir!" she burst out, "I beg of you touch not the august tree with your noble hatchet. Oh, honorable sir, the tree is holy; it is a living tree!

Oh, see!" and she tremblingly pointed to the gaping wound: "it bleeds—it is human!"

I looked. Certainly the sap had an extraordinary red color. Some freak of nature, of course; but the girl was evidently agitated.

"Pardon me my rudeness, the tree is augustly yours," she went on; "but it has been a tradition in our family—it is not an ordinary plant—spare it, honorable sir!"

"Certainly," I replied, trying hard not to forget the due honorifics. "The august tree belonged to your honorable family, and it shall be well treated. Surely you should know if it is a spiritual tree."

She raised her tear-filled eyes to mine. "Good, stranger gentleman, suffer me to bind its wound that it may not die."

I hastily pushed aside the flexible pickets of the fence. "If the high-born lady will honor my poor garden," I said.

She was very pretty. Her soft, black hair was beautifully dressed, and her sweet, high-bred face was so full of gentleness and pity that I felt very contrite for what I had done. She knelt down by the trunk, took up the block I had hacked from it and replaced it, with many apologetic words and soothing cooings. The red sap stuck to her hands, and I noticed her terrified glance at the spots. Anxious to do something, I pulled out my handkerchief and tore it into strips.

"I beg you bind the honorable tree with my mean handkerchief."

She nodded sedately, accepted the linen and deftly bound it about her patient. I watched her beautiful hands and graceful wrists with satisfaction. Her neck was so small and round that it seemed too slight to hold her head with its heavy convolutions of thick, black hair—so like a flower-stalk, burdened with too perfect a bloom. Her dress was of vague, quiet blue, and her sash a deeper tone of the same shade, with little vertical black lines running through it. From beneath her skirt peeped her little feet in their spotless white *tabi*, shod with walking sandals of wood with velvet thongs. I see her so plainly as I recall the scene—dear, little, superstitious, kind-hearted Koto!

I envied the tree her gentle touch; it was on my tongue to tell her so, but I feared to disturb her confidence and simplicity.

Skilfully she wrapped, while in a low voice of reverence and sympathy she told me the legend of the tree.

"Long ago," she said, "the feudal lord my forefathers served had a daughter, and her father planned to marry her to another great *daimyo*, for she was very beautiful. But she fell in love with a young retainer, and it came about that the two planned to escape together.

"In those days my forefather stood high with his lord, and was his most trusted vassal, and it came to his ears that the lady Hi-Ku loved beneath her rank. He could not bear that the great and noble house of the Toda should be humbled by this mean alliance, so he set about remedying the matter. He did not dare to speak to his master of the case, knowing that his lord, though just, was quick to anger, and might in the first heat of his wrath cause the maid to be slain. So he bode his time, and when the lovers had made all ready for their escape he intercepted them as they crossed his garden, and drawing his sword bade the youth begone. This he would not do, for he was of brave heart, but drawing his blade gave battle. Alas! He was young and unskilled as compared with my forefather, who at last beat down his guard and slew him.

"Then he left the body and taking the maiden, who wept and would not be comforted, he conducted her

to her handmaidens and left her. He then thought to hide the body of the youth. But, behold! the corpse was gone!

and in its place stood a young pine tree. It was sorely cut and from the wounds dripped blood.

"Ever since that time the tree has grown before the eyes of my people. See!" she pointed to a rough scar in the bark, "this is the wound that slew the youth—and even now he speaks sometimes. I have heard him whispering to himself, telling of his lost love; for the gods have left the blessing of memory as reward to the youth who gave his life for his betrothed."

I looked at the pine with a new and warm sympathy. "I am very, very sorry—" I began.

The girl rose to her feet. "Oh, honorable sir, how should you know? My father should have made mention of it when he sold his poor land to the



"Honorable Sir, I Beg of You Not to Touch the August Tree With Your Noble Hatchet"

noble Mr. Shigahira. You cannot be to blame."

She said this with the serious air of a judge delivering his considered opinion—her eyes very solemn, her hands crossed before her, the incarnation of gentle dignity. But at that moment came a diversion in the form of my kitten. With a pounce the irreverent thing leaped from under the veranda where he had been savagely stalking, threw two velvet paws about the small, white ankle of my guest, and bounded off in a series of stiff jumps, like a mechanical toy. My lady gave a little shriek of surprise, her grave face at once relaxing into a look of childish delight.