

OTHERWISE IN OTHERS' EYES

By WILLIAM JOHNSTON

Drawings by F. Foster Lincoln



I was at one of Mrs. Worthing's receptions. I paused in my conversation with the Baron to exchange greetings with Jack Edwards' wife. "You are looking particularly charming to-night," I said; "positively not a day over twenty."

As she fluttered away I could plainly see that my compliment had not in the least displeased her; but when I turned to my Japanese friend I was surprised to note a frown on his usually placid face.

"In my country," he said gravely, "that would be insult, great insult, to tell such things as those to lady."

"What!" I exclaimed in amazement. "Don't Japanese ladies like to be told how young and pretty they look? I always thought you Japanese were given to making compliments."

He shook his gray thatch decisively. "All Japanese ladies are complimented much by being told they are the older. You say to woman, 'You must be fifty,' she is much pleased. That mean she must have lived so long to have much knowledge, much culture, much poise, all things most desirable in nice lady. That a fine compliment, very great compliment. If you mention her good looks to lady, she be made very angry. It mean she have nothing else, no information, no cultivation, no verse making, nothing worth while to say something nice about."

"I can see your viewpoint, Baron," I replied, "even if I cannot agree with it. But tell me how you would greet a lady, an old friend, at such an affair as this."

The Baron gazed about him, at the gilt weighted paintings that crowded the walls, at the masses of roses and greenery, at the profusion of potted palms, at the mahogany and gold furniture, at the crush of décolleté women and black garmented men. Only the quiver of his broad nostrils betrayed the contempt he did not express. He hesitated a moment before answering my question.

"If I should wish to be very nice to lady, to the wife of one of my friends, I should say some things like these, 'I should be most happy if you would deign to honor me with your opinion of the cherry flower, Sumida. Have you seen it? Is it not glorious? I was most fortunate to see one of your verses hanging from the cherry tree.' In my country we do not say the broad thing. We hide the compliment. It is highest honor to write verses. It is the mark of social positions. How many of people here can write verses?"

"I doubt if any of them could write anything worth repeating," I had to confess. "There must be a lot of things about us Americans that seem strange to you."

The Baron let his keen eye rest for a moment on my face. His friendship for me and his confidence in me lay in the fact that many years before, in my almost forgotten childhood in Nippon, he, a young official of an awakened nation, and my father, one of the vanguard of the awakeners, had been firm friends. Yet, though this was his first visit to America, with the reserve and inborn courtesy that is characteristic of his race, never even to me had he ventured the slightest expression of criticism of habits and customs that I knew must have struck him unpleasantly.

"It would be most impoliteness," he said, "for me to tell even to you, whose honored father I knew in my country, how many things in your country are different to our thought, are unpleasant."

"Not at all, Baron," I said. "We Americans do not resent criticism. We like it. I should be delighted to hear what you really think of us, how all of this," indicating the crowded parlors, "strikes you."

"If this is not—how do you say it in American slangs?—joshuaing me," said the Baron, "it gives me pleasure to tell you it."

I hastened to assure him that I was sincere in wishing to hear his opinions, and, beginning somewhat timidly, his accumulated dissatisfaction with our ways soon vanquished his diplomatic reserve.

Display Is Vulgarly

ALL this in my country, this display," he said, "would be the most of vulgarities. I make entrance here to-night: everywhere pictures, very expensive pictures, so many of them no man looks at any picture. If Japanese man of position have pictures, many pictures, a thousand pictures, you enter his house, you see only one picture, sometimes pair of pictures in that subject. Those picture hung on wall all by himself. The color of the wall it match the pictures so that it is all beautiful. Perhaps in front of picture just one suitable flower in vase, just so. All who come they have great opportunity to see all the beauty there may be in those one picture. Here there are those many pictures, costly pictures, perhaps beautiful pictures; but those ladies and gentlemen do not look at pictures. Those pictures and those walls do not belong the same. They are so much no one can look at each. It is all bad taste."

"You must admit, though," I remarked rather resentfully, "that our women are beautiful."

"The looks of woman," he responded reprovingly, "should not be mentions unless there is nothing besides that you can make politeness of. The dress, the clothes, of these ladies here to Japanese mind is worst possible. No lady in my country makes display of clothes; only the geisha. The more rich Japanese lady, the great Japanese lady, wear always quiet, always the same clothes, the kimono. On the very big occasion like these she may put on the brocade robe, very beautiful, very expensive, once. She is most proud to show old Nishijin brocade belong in her family many years, all very beautiful. It cannot sell Nishijin brocade now. No one knows to-day how it is made just so. The low dresses of your ladies does not please us Japanese. It is very bad, very shameless. My country has not yet learned that the naked is the lovely. We have no artist, no painter, who has found the study of naked men and women for art. We do not like to look at the ladies' bare necks, bare arms. For the fear, maybe so, that we will not look at their bareness, they hang around their necks great jewels, the diamond, the emerald. They say to us, 'You must look at the bareness of the arms, the nakedness of the neck!' It is all very terrible, the most of vulgarities to us."

Money Is Bad Form

SO wrought up was the Baron becoming that I was glad of the diversion caused by the approach of our host, who insisted upon the Baron's inspecting a colonial chair he had just acquired.

"Isn't it a wonder?" he exclaimed. "It cost me a pretty penny too. I had to give over four hundred dollars for it; but it is well worth the price. It is two hundred and fifty years old. How do you like it?"

Eagerly I awaited the reply. In the castle a few miles outside of Tokio, where the Baron and his ancestors had dwelt for centuries, I knew that there were hundreds of pieces of wonderful carving that were old before America had colonies.

"It must be great satisfactions," he said, "to acquire that which you regard thus beautiful."

Mr. Worthing, well pleased with the doubtful compliment, turned to drag in some one else to admire his treasure, permitting us to escape.

"The money, the cost of such," said the Baron, "is the very bad form. We pretend that money is dislikeful to us. I never touched the coins until I was almost a man. The rich man with us does not make displays of so much money he has, so much money he pays. The more wealthy a Japanese gentleman are, the more he tries to hide those fact. The head of my clan was the most rich, very rich gentleman. Always he wore cotton clothes with no colors. You saw the man, you saw the face only. There was nothing in appearance or colors of the clothes you would remember. Not until he grew old did he wear silk; then only within for the warmth. If you should happen to notice the same he would explain that it was for the warmth of it, making apologies for the number of his years."

"But what does a rich man in Japan do with his money?" I asked.

"He has many ways of great usefulness. If his mind is so, he collects a great, very great, library. Perhaps it is to develop the chrysanthemum. Many Japanese gentlemen spend much money in making the flower perfect, just so. Most often he collects swords. My people very fond of swords. We have collect some wonderful swords. The rich gentleman oftentimes he have designed for him jeweled swords, oftentimes he collect old, very old, swords. There are many ways Japanese gentlemen use wealth; but never make vulgar display like these."

Gambling in Japan

I HAVE heard that your people are great gamblers. I understand that bridge is popular over there now. Surely you must use money for gambling?"

Sadly the Baron nodded affirmatively. "Your



people have brought the bridges, the poker, to my country. In the quick sets now both these men and these women play for the money. It was not used to be so. One time all men of position play 'go.' The men sit maybe sometimes one week at one game of the 'go,' each gentleman placing his 'go' stones just so. Many things are wagered on the games. One time I recall the lord of the clan, who was very great 'go' player, was challenged by the mendicant. They make the bets. The lord of my clan bets the summer place—how do you say it, the château?—against the sandals of the mendicant, each just so he can. The mendicant defeats my honorable ancestor. The lord of the clan was very glad. He says, 'Now I will have dwelling in the summer château a man who is better than I—how you say it?—a foemans worth my steel!' The mendicant, though, very proud man. He refuse the summer chateau and go on his way, so much to say it is not worth while to stay here, where no good 'go' players are. In American slangs he rubs in. My ancestor feel very bad."

The shrill, mechanical notes of a daughter of the household singing a solo interrupted our conversation. The Baron sat in pensive mood until it was finished. I had supposed he was pondering on the mendicant's insult to his honorable ancestor; but as Miss Worthing's shrill notes gave way to a round of applause he asked: "Why do they thus? Do all people here like these singing?"

Candidly I told him that I for one did not and that I believed there were many others who agreed with me. "We pretend to like it for politeness' sake," I explained. "Don't you have singing at receptions in your country?"

At Japanese Receptions

JAPANESE gentlemen and ladies at enjoyable times do not have the things which they do not like. The gentlemen and ladies do not perform so to entertain their friends. In my country, if there is to be the singing and the dancing, we hire the women for that. It is much better so. I do not understand why one should listen to the bad singing or tire oneself with the dancing for the sake to enjoy himself."

"What do they do at receptions in your country, Baron?" I asked curiously.

"In my country ways are much better, more refined, just so. Sometimes it is to play 'go,' and the evenings is most enjoyable. To play the 'go' well is to be a gentleman. It is the mark of the high social position. A man who does not well at the game is not to be tolerated. Oftentimes we play the cards; not the cards you play, but the hundred classic couplets. Such is a very fine game. One is the reader, and the others sit around the mat where the half, the end half, of the couplet is on cards, scattered all over the mat, just so. The reader tells the first part of the couplet. Who knows and finds the other part most quickly the most times wins the game. It is very fine for much education and much culture. These same couplets are all very beautiful; but not all fine poems have two parts. Perhaps the most fine the one about the old pond, the frog jumping in, the ripple on the water. That the very finest hokku in Japanese language. Only one part to that."

He must have seen that my appreciation of the hundred classic couplets did not meet his own; for he hastened on to tell of a third form of amusement.

"Perhaps most often at these receptions we have the flower arrangement; that the very grandest form of enjoyment. It is mark of high social position to know nice flower arrangement." He waved one disgusted hand