

MURASAKI SHIKIBU

Murasaki Shikibu (d. ca. 1014) belonged to the northern branch of the Fujiwara lineage, the same branch that produced the regents. In fact, both sides of her family can be traced back to Fujiwara no Fuyutsugu (775–826), whose son Yoshifusa became the first regent (*sesshō*). Murasaki Shikibu's family line, however, subsequently declined and by her grandfather's generation had settled at the provincial governor, or *zuryō*, level. Murasaki Shikibu's father, Fujiwara no Tametoki (d. 1029), although eventually appointed governor of Echizen and then Echigo, had an undistinguished career as a bureaucrat. He was able, however, to make a name for himself as a scholar of Chinese literature and a poet.

Murasaki Shikibu was probably born sometime between 970 and 978, and in 996 she accompanied her father to his new post as provincial governor in Echizen, on the coast of the Japan Sea. A year or two later, she returned to the capital to marry Fujiwara no Nobutaka, a mid-level aristocrat who was old enough to be her father. She had a daughter named Kenshi, probably in 999, and Nobutaka died a couple of years later, in 1001. It is generally believed that Murasaki Shikibu started writing *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*) after her husband's death, perhaps in response to the sorrow it caused her, and it was probably the reputation of the early chapters that resulted in her being summoned to the imperial court around 1005 or 1006. She became a lady-in-waiting (*nyōbō*) to Empress Shōshi, the chief consort of Emperor Ichijō and the eldest daughter of Fujiwara no Michinaga (966–1027), who had become regent. At least half of *Murasaki Shikibu's Diary* (*Murasaki Shikibu nikki*) is devoted to a long-awaited event in Michinaga's career—the birth of a son to Empress Shōshi in 1008—which would make Michinaga the grandfather of a future emperor.

Murasaki Shikibu was the sobriquet given to the author of *The Tale of Genji* when she was a lady-in-waiting at the imperial court and is not her actual name, which is not known. The name Shikibu probably comes from her father's position in the Shikibu-shō (Ministry of Ceremonial), and Murasaki may refer to the lavender color of the flower of her clan (Fujiwara, or Wisteria Fields), or it may have been borrowed from the name of the heroine of *The Tale of Genji*.

THE TALE OF GENJI (GENJI MONOGATARI)

The title of *The Tale of Genji* comes from the surname of the hero (the son of the emperor reigning at the beginning of the narrative), whose life and relationships with various women are described in the first forty-one chapters. *The Tale of Genji* is generally divided into three parts. The first part, consisting of thirty-three chapters, follows Genji's career from his birth through his exile and triumphant return to his rise to the pinnacle of society, focusing equally, if not more, on the fate of the various women with whom he becomes involved. The

second part, chapters 34 to 41, from “New Herbs” (Wakana) to “The Wizard” (Maboroshi), explores the darkness that gathers over Genji’s private life and that of his great love Murasaki, who eventually succumbs and dies, and ends with Genji’s own death. The third part, the thirteen chapters following Genji’s death, is concerned primarily with the affairs of Kaoru, Genji’s putative son, and the three sisters (Ōigimi, Nakanokimi, and Ukifune) with whom Kaoru becomes involved. In the third part, the focus of the book shifts dramatically from the capital and court to the countryside and from a society concerned with refinement, elegance, and the various arts to an other-worldly, ascetic perspective—a shift that anticipates the movement of mid-Heian court culture toward the eremitic, religious literature of the medieval period.

The Tale of Genji both follows and works against the plot convention of the Heian monogatari in which the heroine, whose family has declined or disappeared, is discovered and loved by an illustrious noble. This association of love and inferior social status appears in the opening line of *Genji* and extends to the last relationship between Kaoru and Ukifune. In the opening chapter, the reigning emperor, like all Heian emperors, is expected to devote himself to his principal consort (the Kokiden lady), the lady with the highest rank, and yet he dotes on a woman of considerably lower status, a social and political violation that eventually results in the woman’s death. Like the protagonist of *The Tales of Ise*, Genji pursues love where it is forbidden and most unlikely to be found or attained. In “Lavender” (Wakamurasaki), chapter 5, Genji discovers the young Murasaki, who has lost her mother and is in danger of losing her only guardian until Genji takes her into his home.

In Murasaki Shikibu’s day, it would have been unheard of for a man of Genji’s high rank to take a girl of Murasaki’s low position into his own residence and marry her. In the upper levels of Heian aristocratic society, the man usually lived in his wife’s residence, in either her parents’ house or a dwelling nearby (as Genji does with Aoi, his principal wife). The prospective groom had high stakes in the marriage, for the bride’s family provided not only a residence but other forms of support as well. When Genji takes into his house a girl (like the young Murasaki) with no backing or social support, he thus is openly flouting the conventions of marriage as they were known to Murasaki Shikibu’s audience. In the monogatari tradition, however, this action becomes a sign of excessive, romantic love.

Some of the other sequences—involving Yūgao, the Akashi lady, Ōigimi, and Ukifune—start on a similar note. All these women come from upper- or middle-rank aristocratic families (much like that of the author herself) that have, for various reasons, fallen into social obscurity and must struggle to survive. The appearance of the highborn hero implies, at least for the attendants surrounding the woman, an opportunity for social redemption. Nonetheless, Murasaki Shikibu, much like her female predecessor, the author of the *Kagerō Diary*, concentrates on the difficulties that the woman subsequently encounters, in

either dealing with the man or failing to make the social transition between her own social background and that of the highborn hero. The woman may, for example, be torn between pride and material need or between emotional dependence and a desire to be more independent, or she may feel abandoned and betrayed—all conflicts explored in *The Tale of Genji*. In classical Japanese poetry, such as that by Ono no Komachi, love has a similar fate: it is never about happiness or the blissful union of souls. Instead, it dwells on unfulfilled hopes, regretful partings, fears of abandonment, and lingering resentment.

The Tale of Genji is remarkable for how well it absorbs the psychological dimension of the *Kagerō Diary* and the social romance of the early monogatari into a deeply psychological narrative revolving around distinctive characters. Despite closely resembling the modern psychological novel, *The Tale of Genji* was not conceived and written as a single work and then distributed to a mass audience, as novels are today. Instead, it was issued in very short installments, chapter by chapter or sequence by sequence, to an extremely circumscribed, aristocratic audience over an extended period of time.

As a result, *The Tale of Genji* can be read and appreciated as Murasaki Shikibu's oeuvre, or corpus, as a closely interrelated series of texts that can be read either individually or as a whole and that is the product of an author whose attitudes, interests, and techniques evolved significantly with time and experience. For example, the reader of the Ukifune narrative can appreciate this sequence both independently and as an integral part of the previous narrative. *Genji* can also be understood as a kind of multiple bildungsroman in which a character is developed through time and experience not only in the life of a single hero or heroine but also over different generations, with two or more characters. *Genji*, for example, attains an awareness of death, mutability, and the illusory nature of the world through repeated suffering. By contrast, Kaoru, his putative son, begins his life, or rather his narrative, with a profound grasp and acceptance of these darker aspects of life. In the second part, in the "New Herbs" chapters, Murasaki has long assumed that she can monopolize *Genji*'s affections and act as his principal wife. But *Genji*'s unexpected marriage to the Third Princess (Onna san no miya) crushes these assumptions, causing Murasaki to fall mortally ill. In the last ten chapters, the Uji sequence, Ōigimi never suffers in the way that Murasaki does, but she quickly becomes similarly aware of the inconsistency of men, love, and marriage and rejects Kaoru, even though he appears to be an ideal companion.

Murasaki Shikibu probably first wrote a short sequence of chapters, perhaps beginning with "Lavender," and then, in response to her readers' demand, wrote a sequel or another related series of chapters, and so forth. Certain sequences, particularly the Broom Tree sequence (chapters 2–4, 6) and its sequels (chapters 15 and 16), which appear to have been inserted later, focus on women of the middle and lower aristocracy, as opposed to the main chapters of the first part, which deal with Fujitsubo and other upper-rank women related to the throne.

The Tamakazura sequence (chapters 22–31), which is a sequel to the Broom Tree sequence, may be an expansion of an earlier chapter no longer extant. The only chapters whose authorship has been questioned are the three chapters following the death of Genji. The following selections are from the third part, after Genji's death, beginning with "The Lady at the Bridge" (chap. 45) and the story of the Eighth Prince, his daughters, and Kaoru.

Main Characters

- AKASHI EMPRESS:** Consort and later empress of the emperor reigning at the end of the tale. Mother of numerous princes and princesses, including Prince Niou.
- BENNOKIMI:** daughter of Kashiwagi's wet nurse, and later attendant to the Eighth Prince and the Uji princesses. Confidante of Kaoru.
- CAPTAIN:** former son-in-law of Ono nun. Unsuccessfully courts Ukifune.
- EIGHTH PRINCE:** eighth son of the first emperor to appear in the tale. Genji's half brother. Father of Ōigimi, Nakanokimi, and Ukifune. Ostracized by court society for his part in Kokiden's plot to supplant the crown prince (the future Reizei emperor). Retreats to Uji, where he raises Ōigimi and Nakanokimi and devotes himself to Buddhism.
- EMPEROR:** The fourth and last emperor in the tale, ascending to the throne after the Reizei emperor. Father of Niou.
- GENJI:** son of the first emperor by the Kiritsubo lady and the protagonist of the first and second parts.
- JIJŪ:** attendant to Ukifune.
- KAORU:** thought by the world to be Genji's son by the Third Princess but really Kashiwagi's son. Befriends the Eighth Prince and falls in love with his daughter Ōigimi but fails to make her his wife. Subsequently pursues his other daughters, Nakanokimi and Ukifune. Marries the Second Princess.
- KASHIWAGI:** eldest son of Tō no Chūjō. Falls in love and has an illicit affair with the Third Princess. Later dies a painful death. Father of Kaoru.
- KOJIJŪ:** attendant to the Third Princess and helps Kashiwagi's secret affair with the Third Princess.
- MURASAKI:** Genji's great love. Daughter of Prince Hyōbu by a low-ranking wife, and niece of Fujitsubo.
- NAKANOKIMI:** second Uji princess, daughter of the Eighth Prince. Marries Niou and is installed by him at Nijō mansion. Bears him a son.
- NIOU, PRINCE:** beloved third son of the last emperor and the Akashi empress. Looked after by Murasaki until her death. Marries Nakanokimi and later Rokunokimi. Pursues Ukifune.

- ŌIGIMI: eldest daughter of the Eighth Prince. Loved by Kaoru but refuses to marry him.
- ONO NUN: sister of the bishop of Yokawa. Takes care of Ukifune after her disappearance from Uji and attempts to marry her to the captain, her former son-in-law.
- REIZEI EMPEROR: thought to be the son of the first emperor and Fujitsubo but actually Genji's son.
- ROKUNOKIMI: sixth daughter of Yūgiri. Becomes Niou's principal wife.
- SECOND PRINCESS: Second daughter of the fourth and last emperor. Principal wife of Kaoru.
- TŌ NO CHŪJŌ: son of the Minister of the Left and brother of Aoi. Genji's chief male companion in his youth. Son-in-law of the Minister of the Right. Father of Kashiwagi.
- TOKIKATA: Niou's retainer.
- UKIFUNE: unrecognized daughter of the Eighth Prince by an attendant. Half sister of Ōigimi and Nakanokimi. Raised in the East. Pursued by Kaoru and Niou. Tries to commit suicide but is saved by the bishop of Yokawa and taken to a convent at Ono, where she becomes a nun.
- UKON: attendant to Ukifune.
- YOKAWA, BISHOP OF: high priest of Yokawa and brother of Ono nun. Discovers Ukifune, looks after her, and gives her the tonsure.
- YŪGIRI: son of Genji by Aoi. Becomes the most powerful figure at court after Genji's death. Marries his daughter Rokunokimi to Niou.

The Lady at the Bridge

There was in those years a prince of the blood, an old man, left behind by the times. His mother was of the finest lineage. There had once been talk of seeking a favored position for him; but there were disturbances and a new alignment of forces,¹⁵⁷ at the end of which his prospects were in ruins. His supporters, embittered by this turn of events, were less than steadfast: they made their various excuses and left him. And so in his public life and in his private, he was quite alone, blocked at every turn. His wife, the daughter of a former minister, had fits of bleakest depression at the thought of her parents and their plans for her, now of course in ruins. Her consolation was that she and her husband were close as husbands and wives seldom are. Their confidence in each other was complete.

But here too there was a shadow: the years went by and they had no children. If only there were a pretty little child to break the loneliness and boredom, the prince would think—and sometimes give voice to his thoughts. And then, surprisingly, a very pretty daughter was in fact born to them. She was the delight of

157. The reference is to the accession of the Reizei emperor after Genji's return from exile.

their lives. Years passed, and there were signs that the princess was again with child. The prince hoped that this time he would be favored with a son, but again the child was a daughter. Though the birth was easy enough, the princess fell desperately ill soon afterward, and was dead before many days had passed. The prince was numb with grief. The vulgar world had long had no place for him, he said, and frequently it had seemed quite unbearable; and the bond that had held him to it had been the beauty and the gentleness of his wife. How could he go on alone? And there were his daughters. How could he, alone, rear them in a manner that would not be a scandal?—for he was not, after all, a commoner. His conclusion was that he must take the tonsure. Yet he hesitated. Once he was gone, there would be no one to see to the safety of his daughters.

So the years went by. The princesses grew up, each with her own grace and beauty. It was difficult to find fault with them, they gave him what pleasure he had. The passing years offered him no opportunity to carry out his resolve.

The serving women muttered to themselves that the younger girl's very birth had been a mistake, and were not as diligent as they might have been in caring for her. With the prince it was a different matter. His wife, scarcely in control of her senses, had been especially tormented by thoughts of this new babe. She had left behind a single request: "Think of her as a keepsake, and be good to her."

The prince himself was not without resentment at the child, that her birth should so swiftly have severed their bond from a former life, his and his princess's.

"But such was the bond that it was," he said. "And she worried about the girl to the very end."

The result was that if anything he doted upon the child to excess. One almost sensed in her fragile beauty a sinister omen.

The older girl was comely and of a gentle disposition, elegant in face and in manner, with a suggestion behind the elegance of hidden depths. In quiet grace, indeed, she was the superior of the two. And so the prince favored each as each in her special way demanded. There were numerous matters which he was not able to order as he wished, however, and his household only grew sadder and lonelier as time went by. His attendants, unable to bear the uncertainty of their prospects, took their leave one and two at a time. In the confusion surrounding the birth of the younger girl, there had not been time to select a really suitable nurse for her. No more dedicated than one would have expected in the circumstances, the nurse first chosen abandoned her ward when the girl was still an infant. Thereafter the prince himself took charge of her upbringing.

Years pass, and the prince refuses to marry again, despite the urging of the people around him. He spends much of his time in religious observances but cannot bring himself to renounce the world. His daughters are his principal companions. As they grow up, he notices that although both are quiet and reserved, the elder, Ōigimi, tends to be moody, and the younger, Nakanokimi, possesses a certain shy gaiety.

He was the Eighth Prince, a younger brother of the shining Genji. During the years when the Reizei emperor was crown prince, the mother of the reigning emperor had sought in that conspiratorial way of hers to have the Eighth Prince named crown prince, replacing Reizei. The world seemed hers to rule as she wished, and the Eighth Prince was very much at the center of it. Unfortunately his success irritated the opposing faction. The day came when Genji and presently Yūgiri had the upper hand, and he was without supporters. He had over the years become an ascetic in any case, and he now resigned himself to living the life of the sage and hermit.

There came yet another disaster. As if fate had not been unkind enough already, his mansion was destroyed by fire. Having no other suitable house in the city, he moved to Uji, some miles to the southeast, where he happened to own a tastefully appointed mountain villa. He had renounced the world, it was true, and yet leaving the capital was a painful wrench indeed. With fishing weirs near at hand to heighten the roar of the river, the situation at Uji was hardly favorable to quiet study. But what must be must be. With the flowering trees of spring and the leaves of autumn and the flow of the river to bring repose, he lost himself more than ever in solitary meditation. There was one thought even so that never left his mind: how much better it would be, even in these remote mountains, if his wife were with him!

“She who was with me, the roof above are smoke.
And why must I alone remain behind?”

So much was the past still with him that life scarcely seemed worth living.

Mountain upon mountain separated his dwelling from the larger world. Rough people of the lower classes, woodcutters and the like, sometimes came by to do chores for him.¹⁵⁸ There were no other callers. The gloom continued day after day, as stubborn and clinging as “the morning mist on the peaks.”¹⁵⁹

There happened to be in those Uji mountains an abbot,¹⁶⁰ a most saintly man. Though famous for his learning, he seldom took part in public rites. He heard in the course of time that there was a prince living nearby, a man who was teaching himself the mysteries of the Good Law. Thinking this a most admirable undertaking, he made bold to visit the prince, who upon subsequent interviews was led deeper into the texts he had studied over the years. The

158. There is possibly a suggestion that their manner was more familiar than their station should have allowed.

159. Anonymous, *Kokinshū*, no. 935: “My gloomy thoughts run on and on, unbroken as the morning mist on the peaks the wild geese pass.”

160. *Ajari* (Skr. *acarya*). In general, any monk of sufficient learning to act as a preceptor; and in the Shingon and Tendai sects a specific clerical rank.

prince became more immediately aware of what was meant by the transience and uselessness of the material world.

"In spirit," he confessed, quite one with the holy man, "I have perhaps found my place upon the lotus of the clear pond; but I have not yet made my last farewells to the world because I cannot bring myself to leave my daughters behind."

The abbot was an intimate of the Reizei emperor and had been his preceptor as well. One day, visiting the city, he called upon the Reizei emperor to answer any questions that might have come to him since their last meeting.

"Your honored brother," he said, bringing the Eighth Prince into the conversation, "has pursued his studies so diligently that he has been favored with the most remarkable insights. Only a bond from a former life can account for such dedication. Indeed, the depth of his understanding makes me want to call him a saint who has not yet left the world."

"He has not taken the tonsure? But I remember now—the young people do call him 'the saint who is still one of us.'"

Kaoru chanced to be present at the interview. He listened intently. No one knew better than he the futility of this world, and yet he passed useless days, his devotions hardly so frequent or intense as to attract public notice. The heart of a man who, though still in this world, was in all other respects a saint—to what might it be likened?

The abbot continued: "He has long wanted to cut his last ties with the world, but a trifling matter made it difficult for him to carry out his resolve. Now he has two motherless children whom he cannot bring himself to leave behind. They are the burden he must bear."¹⁶¹

The abbot himself had not entirely given up the pleasures of the world: he had a good ear for music. "And when their highnesses deign to play a duet," he said, "they bid fair to outdo the music of the river, and put one in mind of the blessed musicians above."

The Reizei emperor smiled at this rather fusty way of stating the matter. "You would not expect girls who have had a saint for their principal companion to have such accomplishments. How pleasant to know about them—and what an uncommonly good father he must be! I am sure that the thought of having to leave them is pure torment. It is always possible that I will live longer than he, and if I do perhaps I may ask to be given responsibility for them."

He was himself the tenth son of the family, younger than his brother at Uji. There was the example of the Suzaku emperor, who had left his young daughter in Genji's charge. Something similar might be arranged, he thought. He would have companions to relieve the monotony of his days.

161. The abbot here uses an unusual verb form that apparently gives his speech a somewhat stilted or archaic flavor.

Kaoru was less interested in the daughters than in the father. Quite entranced with what he had heard, he longed to see for himself that figure so wrapped in the serenity of religion.

“I have every intention of calling on him and asking him to be my master,” he said as the abbot left. “Might I ask you to find out, unobtrusively, of course, how he would greet the possibility?”

“And tell him, please,” said the Reizei emperor, “that I have been much affected by your description of his holy retreat.” And he wrote down a verse to be delivered to the Eighth Prince.

“Wearily, my soul goes off to your mountains,
and cloud upon circling cloud holds my person back?”

With the royal messenger in the lead, the abbot set off for Uji, thinking to visit the Eighth Prince on his way back to the monastery. The prince so seldom heard from anyone that he was overjoyed at these tidings. He ordered wine for his guests and side dishes peculiar to the region.

This was the poem he sent back to his brother:

“I am not as free as I seem. From the gloom of the world
I retreat only briefly to the Hill of Gloom.”¹⁶²

He declined to call himself one of the truly enlightened. The vulgar world still called up regrets and resentments, thought the Reizei emperor, much moved.¹⁶³

The abbot also spoke of Kaoru, who, he said, was of a strongly religious bent. “He asked me most earnestly to tell you about him: to tell you that he has longed since childhood to give himself up to study of the scriptures; that he has been kept busy with inconsequential affairs, public and private, and has been unable to leave the world; that since these affairs are trivial in any case and no one could call his career a brilliant one, he could hardly expect people to notice if he were to lock himself up in prayers and meditation; that he has had an unfortunate way of letting himself be distracted. And when he had entrusted me with all this, he added that, having heard through me of your own revered person, he could not take his mind from you, and was determined to be your pupil.”

“When there has been a great misfortune,” said the prince, “when the whole world seems hostile—that is when most people come to think it a flimsy facade, and wish to have no more of it. I can only marvel that a young man for whom

162. The poem contains a common pun on Uji, which suggests gloom. There also is a reference to a poem by Kisen, *Kokinshū*, no. 983: “In a hut to the south and east of the capital I dwell; the place is known as the Hill of the World of Gloom.”

163. The Reizei emperor seems to think that the Eighth Prince’s poem refers to the rivalry over the succession.

everything lies ahead, who has had everything his way, should start thinking of other worlds. In my own case, it often seems to me, the powers deliberately arranged matters to give my mind such a turn, and so I came to religion as if it were the natural thing. I have managed to find a certain amount of peace, I suppose; but when I think of the short time I have left and of how slowly my preparations creep forward, I know that what I have learned comes to nothing and that in the end it will still be nothing. No, I am afraid I would be a scandalously bad teacher. Let him think of me as a fellow seeker after truth, a very humble one.”

Kaoru and the prince exchanged letters and presently Kaoru paid his first visit.

It was an even sadder place than the abbot's description had led him to expect. The house itself was like a grass hut put up for a few days' shelter, and as for the furnishings, everything even remotely suggesting luxury had been dispensed with. There were mountain villages that had their own quiet charm; but here the tumult of the waters and the wailing of the wind must make it impossible to have a moment free of sad thoughts. He could see why a man on the way to enlightenment might seek out such a place as a means of cutting his ties with the world. But what of the daughters? Did they not have the usual fondness for delicate, ladylike things?

A sliding partition seemed to separate the chapel from their rooms. A youth of more amorous inclinations would have approached and made himself known, curious to see what his reception would be. Kaoru was not above feeling a certain excitement at being so near; but a show of interest would have betrayed his whole purpose, which was to be free of just such thoughts, here in distant mountains. The smallest hint of frivolity would have denied the reason for the visit.

Deeply moved by the saintly figure before him, he offered the warmest avowals of friendship. His visits were frequent thereafter. Nowhere did he find evidence of shallowness in the discourses to which he was treated; nor was there a suggestion of pompousness in the prince's explanations of the scriptures and of his profoundly significant reasons, even though he had stopped short of taking the tonsure, for living in the mountains.

The world was full of saintly and learned men, but the stiff, forbidding bishops and patriarchs¹⁶⁴ who were such repositories of virtue had little time of their own, and he found it far from easy to approach them with his questions. Then there were lesser disciples of the Buddha. They were to be admired for observing the discipline, it was true; but they tended to be vulgar and obsequious in their manner and rustic in their speech, and they could be familiar to the point of rudeness. Since Kaoru was busy with official duties in the daytime, it was in the quiet of the evening, in the intimacy of his private chambers, that he liked to have company. Such people would not do.

164. Sōzu, Sōjō.

Now he had found a man who combined great elegance with a reticence that certainly was not obsequious, and who, even when he was discussing the Good Law, was adept at bringing plain, familiar similes into his discourse. He was not, perhaps, among the completely enlightened, but people of birth and culture have their own insights into the nature of things. After repeated visits Kaoru came to feel that he wanted to be always at the prince's side, and he would be overtaken by intense longing when official duties kept him away for a time.

Impressed by Kaoru's devotion, the Reizei emperor sent messages; and so the Uji house, silent and forgotten by the world, came to have visitors again. Sometimes the Reizei emperor sent lavish gifts and supplies. In pleasant matters having to do with the seasons and the festivals and in practical matters as well, Kaoru missed no chance to be of service.

Three years went by. It was the end of autumn, and the time had come for the quarterly reading of the scriptures.¹⁶⁵ The roar of the fish weirs was more than a man could bear, said the Eighth Prince as he set off for the abbot's monastery, there to spend a week in retreat.

The princesses were lonelier than ever. It had been weighing on Kaoru's mind that too much time had passed since his last visit. One night as a late moon was coming over the hills he set out for Uji, his guard as unobtrusive as possible, his caparison of the simplest. He could go on horseback and did not have to worry about a boat, since the prince's villa was on the near side of the Uji River. As he came into the mountains the mist was so heavy and the underbrush so thick that he could hardly make out the path; and as he pushed his way through thickets the rough wind would throw showers of dew upon him from a turmoil of falling leaves. He was very cold, and, though he had no one to blame but himself, he had to admit that he was also very wet. This was not the sort of journey he was accustomed to. It was sobering and at the same time exciting.

“From leaves that cannot withstand the mountain wind
the dew is falling. My tears fall yet more freely.”

He forbade his outrunners to raise their usual cries, for the woodcutters in these mountains could be troublesome. Brushing through a wattle fence, crossing a rivulet that meandered down from nowhere, he tried as best he could to silence the hoofs of his colt. But he could not keep that extraordinary fragrance from wandering off on the wind, and more than one family awoke in surprise at “the scent of an unknown master.”¹⁶⁶

165. There was no fixed time for this. The meaning is that winter is coming, and if he does not hurry he will have missed the autumn observances. Autumn (see the next sentence) was the fishing season.

166. Sosei, *Kokinshū*, no. 241: “Purple trousers—left behind by whom?—give sweetly forth the scent of an unknown master.”

As he drew near the Uji house, he could hear the plucking of he did not know what instrument, unimaginably still and lonely. He had heard from the abbot that the prince liked to practice with his daughters, but somehow had not found occasion to hear that famous koto. This would be his chance. Making his way into the grounds, he knew that he had been listening to a lute, tuned to the *ōjiki* mode.¹⁶⁷ There was nothing unusual about the melody. Perhaps the strangeness of the setting had made it seem different. The sound was cool and clean, especially when a string was plucked from beneath. The lute fell silent and there were a few quiet strokes on a koto. He would have liked to listen on, but he was challenged by a man with a somewhat threatening manner, one of the guards, it would seem.

The man immediately recognized him and explained that, for certain reasons, the prince had gone into seclusion in a mountain monastery. He would be informed immediately of the visit.

"Please do not bother," said Kaoru. "It would be a pity to interrupt his retreat when it will be over soon in any case. But do tell the ladies that I have arrived, sodden as you see me, and must go back with my mission unaccomplished; and if they are sorry for me that will be my reward."

The rough face broke into a smile. "They will be informed."

But as he turned to depart, Kaoru called him back. "No, wait a minute. For years I have been fascinated by stories I have heard of their playing, and this is my chance. Will there be somewhere that I might hide and listen for a while? If I were to rush in on them they would of course stop, and that would be the last thing I would want."

His face and manner were such as to quell even the most untamed of rustics. "This is how it is. They are at it morning and night when there is no one around to hear. But let someone come from the city even if he is in rags, and they won't let you have a twang of it. No one's supposed to know they even exist. That's how His Highness wants it."

Kaoru smiled. "Now there is an odd sort of secret for you. The whole world knows that two specimens of the rarest beauty are hidden here. But come. Show me the way. I have all the best intentions. That is the way I am, I assure you." His manner was grave and courteous. "It is hard to believe that they can be less than perfect."

"Suppose they find out, sir. I might be in trouble."

Nonetheless he led Kaoru to a secluded wing fenced off by wattled bamboo and the guards to the west veranda, where he saw to their needs as best he could.

A gate seemed to lead to the princesses' rooms. Kaoru pushed it open a little. The blind had been half raised to give a view of the moon, more beautiful for the mist. A young girl, tiny and delicate, her soft robe somewhat ruffled, sat shivering at the veranda. With her was an older woman similarly dressed. The

167. Or *ōshiki*. The tonic is A.

princesses were farther inside. Half hidden by a pillar, one had a lute before her and sat toying with the plectrum.¹⁶⁸ Just then the moon burst forth in all its brilliance.

“Well, now,” she said. “This does quite as well as a fan for bringing out the moon.” The upraised face was bright and lively.

The other, leaning against an armrest, had a koto before her. “I have heard that you summon the sun with one of those objects,¹⁶⁹ but you seem to have ideas of your own on how to use it.” She was smiling, a melancholy, contemplative sort of smile.

“I may be asking too much, I admit, but you have to admit that lutes and moons are related.”¹⁷⁰

It was a charming scene, utterly unlike what Kaoru had imagined from afar. He had often enough heard the young women of his household reading from old romances. They were always coming upon such scenes, and he had thought them the most unadulterated nonsense. And here, hidden away from the world, was a scene as affecting as any in a romance. He was dangerously near losing control of himself. The mist had deepened until he could barely make out the figures of the princesses. Summon it forth again, he whispered—but a woman had come from within to tell them of the caller. The blind was lowered and everyone withdrew to the rear of the house. There was nothing confused, nothing disorderly about the withdrawal, so calm and quiet that he caught not even a rustling of silk. Elegance and grace could at times push admiration to the point of envy.

He slipped out and sent someone back to the city for a carriage.

“I was sorry to find the prince away,” he said to the man who had been so helpful, “but I have drawn some consolation from what you have been so good as to let me see. Might I ask you to tell them that I am here, and to add that I am thoroughly drenched?”

The ladies were in an agony of embarrassment. They had not dreamed that anyone would be looking in at them—and had he even overheard that silly conversation? Now that they thought of it, there had been a peculiar fragrance on the wind; but the hour was late and they had not paid much attention. Could anything be more embarrassing? Impatient at the woman assigned to deliver his message—she did not seem to have the experience for the task—Kaoru decided that there was a time for boldness and a time for reserve; and the mist was in his favor. He advanced to the blind that had been raised earlier and knelt deferentially before it. The countrified maids had not the first notion of what to say to

168. This is a much debated passage. We have been told that the older sister is a master of the lute; the younger, of the koto. But the description of the girl with the plectrum seems to fit the younger girl better.

169. This is obviously an allusion, but it has not been traced.

170. There are three sound holes on the face of a biwa lute, two known as half moons, the other as the full or “hidden” moon.

him. Indeed they seemed incapable of so ordinary a courtesy as inviting him to sit down.

“You must see how uncomfortable I am,” he said quietly. “I have come over steep mountains. You cannot believe, surely, that a man with improper intentions would have gone to the trouble. This is not the reward I expected. But I take some comfort in the thought that if I submit to the drenching time after time your ladies may come to understand.”

They were young and incapable of a proper answer. They seemed to wither and crumple. It was taking a great deal of time to summon a more experienced woman from the inner chambers. The prolonged silence, Ōigimi feared, might make it seem that they were being coy.

“We know nothing, nothing. How can we pretend otherwise?” It was an elegantly modulated voice, but so soft that he could scarcely make it out.

“One of the more trying mannerisms of this world, I have always thought, is for people who know its cruelties to pretend that they do not. Even you are guilty of the fault, which I find more annoying than I can tell you. Your honored father has gained deep insights into the nature of things. You have lived here with him. I should have thought that you would have gained similar insights, and that they might now demonstrate their worth by making you see the intensity of my feelings and the difficulty with which I contain them. You cannot believe, surely, that I am the usual sort of adventurer. I fear that I am of a rather inflexible nature and refuse to wander in that direction even when others try to lead me. These facts are general knowledge and will perhaps have reached your ears. If I had your permission to tell you of my silent days, if I could hope to have you come forward and seek some relief from your solitude—I cannot describe the pleasure it would give me.”

Ōigimi, too shy to answer, deferred to an older woman who had at length been brought from her room.

There was nothing reticent about her. “Oh no! You’ve left him out there all by himself! Bring him in this minute. I simply do not understand young people.” The princesses must have found this as trying as the silence. “You see how it is, sir. His Highness has decided to live as if he did not belong to the human race. No one comes calling these days, not even people you’d think would never forget what they owe him. And here you are, good enough to come and see us. I may be stupid and insensitive, but I know when to be grateful. So do my ladies. But they are so shy.”

Kaoru was somewhat taken aback. Yet the woman’s manner suggested considerable polish and experience, and her voice was not unpleasant.

“I had been feeling rather unhappy,” he said, “and your words cheer me enormously. It is good to be told that they understand.”

He had come inside. Through the curtains, the old woman could make him out in the dawn light. It was as she had been told: he had discarded every pretense of finery and come in rough travel garb, and he was drenched. A most extraordinary fragrance—it hardly seemed of this world—filled the air.

“I would not want you to think me forward,” she said, and there were tears in her voice; “but I have hoped over the years that the day might come when I could tell you a little, the smallest bit, of a sad story of long ago.” Her voice was trembling. “In among my other prayers I have put a prayer that the day might come, and now it seems that the prayer has been answered. How I have longed for this moment! But see what is happening. I am all choked up before I have come to the first word.”

He had heard, and it had been his experience, that old people weep easily. This, however, was no ordinary display of feeling.

“I have fought my way here so many times and not known that a perceptive lady like yourself was in residence. Come, this is your chance. Do not leave anything out.”

“This is my chance, and there may not be another. When you are my age you can’t be sure that you will last the night. Well, let me talk. Let me tell you that this old hag is still among the living. I have heard somewhere that Kojijū, the one who waited upon your revered mother—I have heard that she is dead. So it goes. Most of the people I was fond of are dead, the people who were young when I was young. And after I had outlived them all, certain family ties¹⁷¹ brought me back from the far provinces, and I have been in the service of my ladies these five or six years. None of this, I am sure, will have come to your attention. But you may have heard of the young gentleman who was a guards captain when he died. I am told that his brother is now a major counselor.¹⁷² It hardly seems possible that we have had time to dry our tears, and yet I count on my fingers and I see that there really have been years enough for you to be the fine young gentleman you are. They seem like a dream, all those years.

“My mother was his nurse. I was privileged myself to wait upon him. I did not matter, of course, but he sometimes told me secrets he kept from others, let slip things he could not keep to himself. And as he lay dying he called me to his side and left a will, I suppose you might call it. There were things in it I knew I must tell you of someday. But no more. You will ask why, having said this much, I do not go on. Well, there may after all be another chance and I can tell you everything. These youngsters are of the opinion that I have said too much already, and they are right.” She was a loquacious old person obviously, but now she fell silent.

It was like a story in a dream, like the unprompted recital of a medium in a trance. It was too odd—and at the same time it touched upon events of which he had long wanted to know more. But this was not the time. She was right. Too many eyes were watching. And it would not do to surrender on the spot and waste a whole night on an ancient story.

171. The old woman, Bennokimi, is a first cousin of Kojijū and of the Eighth Prince’s deceased wife.

172. Kashiwagi was a guards captain, and his brother is Kōbai.

“I do not understand everything you have said, I fear, and yet your talk of old times does call up fond thoughts. I shall come again and ask you to tell me the rest of the story. You see how I am dressed, and if the mist clears before I leave I will disgrace myself in front of the ladies. I would like to stay longer but do not see how I can.”

As he stood up to leave, the bell of the monastery sounded in the distance. The mist was heavy. The sadness of these lives poured in upon him, of the isolation enforced by heavy mountain mists. They were lives into which the whole gamut of sorrows had entered, he thought, and he thought too that he understood why they preferred to live in seclusion.

“How very sad.

“In the dawn I cannot see the path I took
to find Oyama of the Pines in mist.”

He turned away, and yet hesitated. Even ladies who saw the great gentlemen of the capital every day would have found him remarkable, and he quite dazzled these rustic maids. Ōigimi, knowing that it would be too much to ask one of them to deliver it for her, offered a reply, her voice soft and shy as before, and with a hint of a sigh in it.

“Our mountain path, enshrouded whatever the season,
is now closed off by the deeper mist of autumn.”

The scene itself need not have detained him, but these evidences of loneliness made him reluctant to leave. Presently, uncomfortable at the thought of being seen in broad daylight, he went to the west veranda, where a place had been prepared for him, and looked out over the river.

“To have spoken so few words and to have had so few in return,” he said as he left the princesses’ wing of the house, “makes it certain that I shall have much to think about. Perhaps when we are better acquainted I can tell you of it. In the meantime, I shall say only that if you think me no different from most young men, and you do seem to, then your judgment in such matters is not what I would have hoped it to be.”

His men had become expert at presiding over the weirs. “Listen to all the shouting,” said one of them. “And they don’t seem to be exactly boasting over what they’ve caught. The fish¹⁷³ are not cooperating.”

Strange, battered little boats, piled high with brush and wattles, made their way up and down the river, each boatman pursuing his own sad, small livelihood at the uncertain mercy of the waters. “It is the same with all of us,” thought Kaoru to himself. “Am I to boast that I am safe from the flood, calm and secure in a jeweled mansion?”

173. *Hiuo* (literally, “ice fish”). The young of the *ayu* (sweet fish).

After his return to the city, Kaoru sends a note to Ōigimi in which he expresses the hope that he might appear before the princesses more freely in the future. The Eighth Prince, seeing the letter, chides Ōigimi for her treatment of the serious young man—he is no trifler, and the Eighth Prince has already hinted to him that he would like him to take care of the princesses after his own death. Kaoru tells his friend Niou, who has a reputation for amorousness and is “always mooning about the possibility of finding a great beauty lost away in the mountains,” about the princesses. Niou is interested.

Kaoru makes another visit to Uji near the beginning of the Tenth Month. He hints to the prince that he would like to hear another sample of the princesses’ music, but they refuse to accommodate him. Again, the prince mentions his concern about what will become of them when he is gone, and Kaoru renews his promise to look out for them.

When the prince had withdrawn for matins, Kaoru summoned the old woman. Her name was Bennokimi, and the Eighth Prince had her in constant attendance upon his daughters. Though in her late fifties, she was still favored with the graces of a considerably younger woman. Her tears flowing liberally, she told him of what an unhappy life “the young captain,” Kashiwagi, had led, of how he had fallen ill and presently wasted away to nothing.

It would have been a very affecting tale of long ago even if it had been about a stranger. Haunted and bewildered through the years, longing to know the facts of his birth, Kaoru had prayed that he might one day have a clear explanation. Was it in answer to his prayers that now, without warning, there had come a chance to hear of these old matters, as if in a sad dream? He too was in tears.

“It is hard to believe—and I must admit that it is a little alarming too—that someone who remembers those days should still be with us. I suppose people have been spreading the news to the world—and I have had not a whisper of it.”

“No one knew except Kojijū and myself. Neither of us breathed a word to anyone. As you can see, I do not matter; but it was my honor to be always with him, and I began to guess what was happening. Then sometimes—not often, of course—when his feelings were too much for him, one or the other of us would be entrusted with a message. I do not think it would be proper to go into the details. As he lay dying, he left the testament I have spoken of. I have had it with me all these years—I am no one, and where was I to leave it? I have not been as diligent with my prayers as I might have been, but I have asked the Blessed One for a chance to let you know of it; and now I think I have a sign that he is here with us. But the testament: I must show it to you. How can I burn it now? I have not known from one day to the next when I might die, and I have worried about letting it fall into other hands. When you began to visit His Highness I felt somewhat better again. There might be a chance to speak to you. I was not merely praying for the impossible, and so I decided that I must keep what he had left with me. Some power stronger than we has brought us together.” Weeping openly now, she told of the illicit affair and of his birth, as the details came back to her.

“In the confusion after the young master’s death, my mother too fell ill and died; and so I wore double mourning. A not very nice man who had had his eye on me took advantage of it all and led me off to the West Country, and I lost all touch with the city. He too died, and after ten years and more I was back in the city again, back from a different world. I have for a very long time had the honor to be acquainted indirectly with the sister of my young master, the lady who is a consort of the Reizei emperor, and it would have been natural for me to go into her service. But there were those old complications, and there were other reasons too. Because of the relationship on my father’s side of the family¹⁷⁴ I have been familiar with His Highness’s household since I was a child, and at my age I am no longer up to facing the world. And so I have become the rotted stump you see,¹⁷⁵ buried away in the mountains. When did Kojijū die? I wonder. There aren’t many left of the ones who were young when I was young. The last of them all; it isn’t easy to be the last one, but here I am.”

Another dawn was breaking.

“We do not seem to have come to the end of this old story of yours,” said Karu. “Go on with it, please, when we have found a more comfortable place and no one is listening. I do remember Kojijū slightly. I must have been four or five when she came down with consumption and died, rather suddenly. I am most grateful to you. If it hadn’t been for you I would have carried the sin¹⁷⁶ to my grave.”

The old woman handed him a cloth pouch in which several mildewed bits of paper had been rolled into a tight ball.

“Take these and destroy them. When the young master knew he was dying, he got them together and gave them to me. I told myself I would give them to Kojijū when next I saw her and ask her to be sure that they got to her lady. I never saw her again. And so I had my personal sorrow and the other too, the knowledge that I had not done my duty.”

With an attempt at casualness, he put the papers away. He was deeply troubled. Had she told him this unsolicited story, as is the way with the old, because it seemed to her an interesting piece of gossip? She had assured him over and over again that no one else had heard it, and yet—could he really believe her?

After a light breakfast he took his leave of the prince. “Yesterday was a holiday because the emperor was in retreat, but today he will be with us again. And then I must call on the Reizei princess, who is not well, and there will be other things to keep me busy. But I will come again soon, before the autumn leaves have fallen.”

“For me, your visits are a light to dispel in some measure the shadows of these mountains.”

174. Her father was the uncle of the Eighth Prince’s wife.

175. Kengei, *Kokinshū*, no. 875: “The form is a rotted stump, in mountains deep; you can, if you try, make the heart come back to life.”

176. The sin of not having properly honored his real father.

Back in the city, Kaoru took out the pouch the old woman had given him. The heavy Chinese brocade bore the inscription “For My Lady.”¹⁷⁷ It was tied with a delicate thread and sealed with Kashiwagi’s name. Trembling, Kaoru opened it. Inside were multi-hued bits of paper, on which, among other things, were five or six answers by his mother to notes from Kashiwagi.

And, on five or six sheets of thick white paper, apparently in Kashiwagi’s own hand, like the strange tracks of some bird, was a longer letter: “I am very ill, indeed I am dying. It is impossible to get so much as a note to you, and my longing to see you only increases. Another thing adds to the sorrow: the news that you have withdrawn from the world.

“Sad are you, who have turned away from the world,
but sadder still my soul, taking leave of you.

“I have heard with strange pleasure of the birth of the child. We need not worry about him, for he will be reared in security. And yet—

“Had we but life, we could watch it, ever taller,
the seedling pine unseen among the rocks.”

The writing, fevered and in disarray, went to the very edge of the paper. The letter was addressed to Kojijū.

The pouch had become a dwelling place for worms and smelled strongly of mildew; and yet the writing, in such compromising detail, was as clear as if it had been set down the day before. It would have been a disaster if the letter had fallen into the hands of outsiders, he thought, half in sorrow and half in alarm. He was so haunted by this strange affair, stranger than any the future could possibly bring, that he could not persuade himself to set out for court. Instead he went to visit his mother. Youthful and serene, she had a sutra in her hand, which she put shyly out of sight upon his arrival. He must keep the secret to himself, he thought. It would be cruel to let her know of his own new knowledge. His mind jumped from detail to detail of the story he had heard.

Beneath the Oak

In the Second Month of the following year, Niou goes on a pilgrimage to Hatsuse and stops at Uji, hoping to have an opportunity to pay a call on the princesses, but the size of his entourage prevents him from getting away. Kaoru, who is with him, delivers a note

177. It bears the character for “up” or “over” (*ue*). There are several theories as to what it might mean, of which this seems the most credible.