

[from *Tsutsumi Chūnagon Monogatari*]

Next door to the lady who loved butterflies was the house of a certain provincial inspector. He had an only daughter, to whose upbringing he and his wife devoted endless care. She was a strange girl, and used to say: "Why do people make so much fuss about butterflies and never give a thought to the creatures out of which butterflies grow? It is the natural form of things that is always the most important." She collected all kinds of reptiles and insects such as most people are frightened to touch, and watched them day by day to see what they would turn into, keeping them in various sorts of little boxes and cages. Among all these creatures her favorite was the common caterpillar. Hour after hour, her hair pushed back from her eyes, she would sit gazing at the furry black form that nestled in the palm of her hand. She found that other girls were frightened of these pets, and her only companions were a number of rather rough little boys, who were not in the least afraid. She got them to carry about the insect-boxes, find out the names of the insects or, if this could not be done, help her to give them new names. She hated anything that was not natural. Consequently she would not pluck a single hair from her eyebrows nor would she blacken her teeth, saying it was a dirty and disagreeable custom. So morning, noon, and night she tended her insects, bending over them with a strange, white gleaming smile.¹ People on the whole were frightened of her and kept away; the few who ventured to approach her came back with the strangest reports. If anyone showed the slightest distaste for her pets, she would ask him indignantly how he could give way to so silly and vulgar a prejudice, and as she said this she would stare at the visitor under her black, bushy eyebrows in a way that made him feel extremely uncomfortable.

Her parents thought all this very peculiar and would much rather

¹ Because of her unblackened teeth.

she had been more like other children; but they saw it was no use arguing with her. She for her part took immense trouble in explaining her ideas, but this only resulted in making them feel that she was much cleverer than they. "No doubt," they would say, "all you tell us is quite true, and so far as we are concerned you may do as you please. But people as a rule only make pets of charming and pretty things. If it gets about that you keep hairy caterpillars you will be thought a disgusting girl and no one will want to know you." "I do not mind what they think," she answered. "I want to inquire into everything that exists and find out how it began. Nothing else interests me. And it is very silly of them to dislike caterpillars, all of which will soon turn into lovely butterflies." Then she again explained to them carefully how the cocoon, which is like the thick winter clothes that human beings wear, wraps up the caterpillar till its wings have grown and it is ready to be a butterfly. Then it suddenly waves its white sleeves and flits away. . . .

This was no doubt quite accurate, and they could think of nothing to say in reply; but all the same her views on such matters made them feel very uncomfortable. She would never sit in the same room with her elders, quoting in self-defense the proverb, "Ghosts and girls are best unseen"; and the above attempt to bring her parents to reason was made through a chink in the half-raised blinds of the living room. Hearing of such conversations as this, the young people of the district were amazed at the profundity of her researches. "But what things for a girl to play with!" they said. "She must be an oddity indeed. Let us go and call upon the girl who loves butterflies."

Hearing some of the unflattering comparisons that were being made between herself and the butterfly lady, she rejoined: "I do not see anything very admirable in making a fuss over butterflies. Even those young men must know by now that the prettiest butterflies are but the sheddings of creatures like my hairy caterpillars, who discard them as a snake drops its skin. And caterpillars are much friendlier playthings. For it you catch hold of a butterfly it frees itself as soon as it can, leaving its golden powder on your hand, and this powder is very dangerous, often causing fevers and agues. Fancy trying to make pets of butterflies! It is horrible to think of."

To the little boys who formed her retinue she would give pretty things such as she knew they wanted, and in return they would give her all kinds of terrifying insects. She said the caterpillars would be unhappy if there were no creatures with them to admire their glossy coats, and she therefore collected a number of snails, and also of grass-crickets whose ferocious and incessant cries seemed to suggest that they were at war with one another, thus recalling to her mind the line, "For the ground between a snail's horns what use to fight?"² She said she was tired of ordinary boys' names and called her servitors by insect-names, such as Kerao (mole-cricket boy), Inagomaro (locust-man), Amabiko (centipede), and the like. All this was thought very queer and stupid.

Among those who had heard gossip about the girl and her odd pets was a certain young man of good family who vowed that, fond of strange creatures though she might be, he would undertake to give her a fright. So saying he made a marvelously lifelike snake with joints that moved and putting it into a scaly bag sent it to her with the poem: "Creeping and crawling I shall sneak my way to your side, for my persistence³ is tireless as my body is long." The servant who brought the bag had no idea what it contained. "I wonder what can be in it," he said, as he untied the string. "Certainly something remarkably heavy!" The bag was opened, and to the horror of everyone present a snake protruded its head. But the lady was not at all put out, and having repeated several times the prayer *Namu Amida Butsu* she said, "Do not be frightened! Remember that any one of you may have been a snake in his former existence. Look at the kindly expression of his face and how he is making himself tremble all down his back. Could anything be clearer than that he is signaling to you not to be afraid? I am amazed that anyone should not understand him." So she muttered to herself, and drew the bag toward her. But all the same it seemed as though even she were a little bit afraid, for now she hovered near the creature and now fluttered away again, like a moth at the candle, crooning to it all the while in a low insect voice.

² From one of five drinking songs written by the Chinese poet P. Chü-i about 829.

³ "Persistence" is "length of heart" (*kokoro-nagasa*) in Japanese.

Seeing several of the servants rush out of her room tumbling over one another and screaming with laughter the lady's father asked them what had happened, and at the mention of a snake exclaimed in great consternation, "A nice trick to play upon a young woman! I cannot understand anyone doing such a dastardly thing. A fine pack of rascals you are, to run off like this and leave her with a dangerous viper in the room." So saying, he seized his sword and brandishing it over his head rushed to his daughter's side. But the moment he saw the snake a doubt crossed his mind and examining it attentively he discovered it was only an extremely well-made toy. Picking it up he said, "I remember now that I have heard people say how clever the fellow is at making things of this sort. You must be sure to write at once and thank him for his kindness." When it was known that the snake was only a toy the people who had run away from it declared the joke to be a very silly one. But the lady agreed that it would be rude not to reply and taking a stout, sensible-looking sheet of paper she wrote the following poem, not in *hiragana*, which she never used, but in *katakana*:⁴ "If indeed we are fated to meet, not here will it be, but in Paradise, thou crafty image of a snake." And at the side was written: "In the Garden of Blessings you must plant your seed."⁵

It happened that a certain Captain of Horse saw this letter and being much struck with it he determined to obtain an interview with the writer. Choosing a time when he knew her father to be busy elsewhere, he posted himself at a wattled gate on the woman's side of the house and peeped in. Several little boys were poking about among some very dull-looking bushes and shrubs. Presently one of them called out, "Just look at these bushes! They're simply covered with creatures. It's the best place we have ever found." And going to the window he pulled the blind. "Do look at them," he said again. "You can see them from the window. Aren't they the loveliest caterpillars you ever saw?" "Yes, they're not at all bad," said a voice from within. "You may bring them in here if you like." "I've noth-

⁴ A square, inelegant, but eminently "sensible" form of syllabary, now used for telegrams, etc.

⁵ The snake must by good behavior get itself reborn in some more dignified incarnation.

ing to put them in," said the boy. "You must look at them where they are." Presently the blind was pulled right aside and a girl appeared at the window, craning out toward the nearest boughs of the shrubbery. She had pulled her mantle over her head, but her hair hung loose beneath it, and very lovely hair it was too, but rather untidy-looking, and the Captain thought it must be a long time since she had combed it. Her thick, very dark eyebrows gave her face a rather forbidding air. Her other features were by no means bad. But when she smiled her white teeth gleamed and flashed in a manner that rather disgusted him, for there was something wild and barbaric about it.

"What a sad case!" thought the Captain. "If only she took an ordinary amount of trouble with herself she really would not be bad-looking." Even as she was he did not find her altogether unattractive; for there was about her a strange kind of vehemence, a liveliness of expression, a brilliance of complexion and coloring that could not fail to make some impression on him. With her clothes in themselves there was nothing wrong. She wore a robe of soft, glossy silk, with a spinner's jacket, and white trousers. In order to get a good view of the caterpillars she leaned right out of the window, crying, "Aren't they clever! They've come here in order to be out of the sun. Boy, you might just bring me that one there. I should like to have a better look at him. Be sure not to let him fall." Upon which the boy at once bumped into something and the caterpillar fell with a thud upon the ground. She then handed him a white fan with some Chinese characters written upon it in black ink, saying, "Pick him up quickly and carry him in on this."

It was only now that she caught sight of the Captain, who was still loitering at the wicker gate. To see anyone there was a considerable surprise, for the young men of the neighborhood had long ago decided that she was what they called "a disastrous character," and it was seldom indeed that anyone came that way. The little boy, too, had become aware of the visitor's presence and cried out in astonishment, "Look, there's a gentleman standing at the wicker gate. I can't make out what he is doing. He seems to be staring at us." One of the maids now came along and began to scold her. "Fie upon

you," she said, "I shall go straight to your father and tell him you're busy with your nasty insects again, and leaning right out of the window where anyone can see you." But the girl continued to fiddle about with the hairy caterpillars on the bushes near the window. The maid, who had a horror of such creatures, was far too frightened to come any closer, but called again, "Madam, go in this instant. You can be seen!" "Well, what if I can be seen? I am not doing anything to be ashamed of." "I'm not joking, I assure you," said the maid indignantly. "There's a fine gentleman standing right there at the gate. Go away from the window at once!" "Kerao," said the girl at last, "just go to the gate and see if there is still someone there." He ran a little distance toward the gate and presently called out, "It's quite true, there is somebody." Upon which she gathered several caterpillars in her sleeve and stepped back into the interior of the house.

For a moment he saw her at full length. She was rather tall. Her hair floated out behind her as she moved. It was very thick, but the ends were somewhat wispy, no doubt through lack of trimming. But with a little more looking after it would have made (he thought) a fine crop of hair. Certainly she was no great beauty, but if she dressed and behaved like other people she would, he was sure, be capable of cutting quite a decent figure in society. What a pity it was! Where had she picked up the distressing opinions that forced her to make such a melancholy spectacle of herself?

He felt that he must at any rate let her know that he had seen her; and using the juice of a flower stem as ink he wrote the following poem on a piece of thickly folded paper: "Forgive me that at your wicker gate so long I stand. But from the caterpillar's bushy brows I cannot take my eyes." He tapped with his fan, and at once one of the little boys ran out to ask what he wanted. "Take this to your mistress," he said. But it was intercepted by the maid, to whom the little boy explained that the poem came from the fine gentleman who had been standing about near the gate. "Woe upon us all," cried the maid, "this is the handwriting of Captain So-and-So, that is in the Horse Guard. And to think that he has been watching you mess about with your nauseous worms!" And she went on for some time

lamenting over the girl's deplorable oddity. At last the insect-lover could bear it no longer and said, "If you looked a little more below the surface of things you would not mind so much what other people thought about you. The world in which we live has no reality, it is a mirage, a dream. Suppose someone is offended by what we do or, for the matter of that, is pleased by it, does his opinion make any difference to us in the end? Before long both he and we shall no longer even appear to exist."

Several of the younger servants had by now gathered round. They found her argument hard to answer, but secretly felt that this was a very dismal view of life. It was not thought likely that she would send an answer, but the Captain was still waiting at the gate and the little boys, who had now all been called back into the house, said the gentleman was looking very unhappy; upon which everyone urged her to write something, and very reluctantly she sent the poem, "By this you may know the strangeness of my mood. Had you not called me *kawamushi*,⁶ I would not have replied." To which he answered, "In all the world, I fear, exists no man so delicate that to the hairtips of a caterpillar's brow he could attune his life." Then he went back laughing to his home.

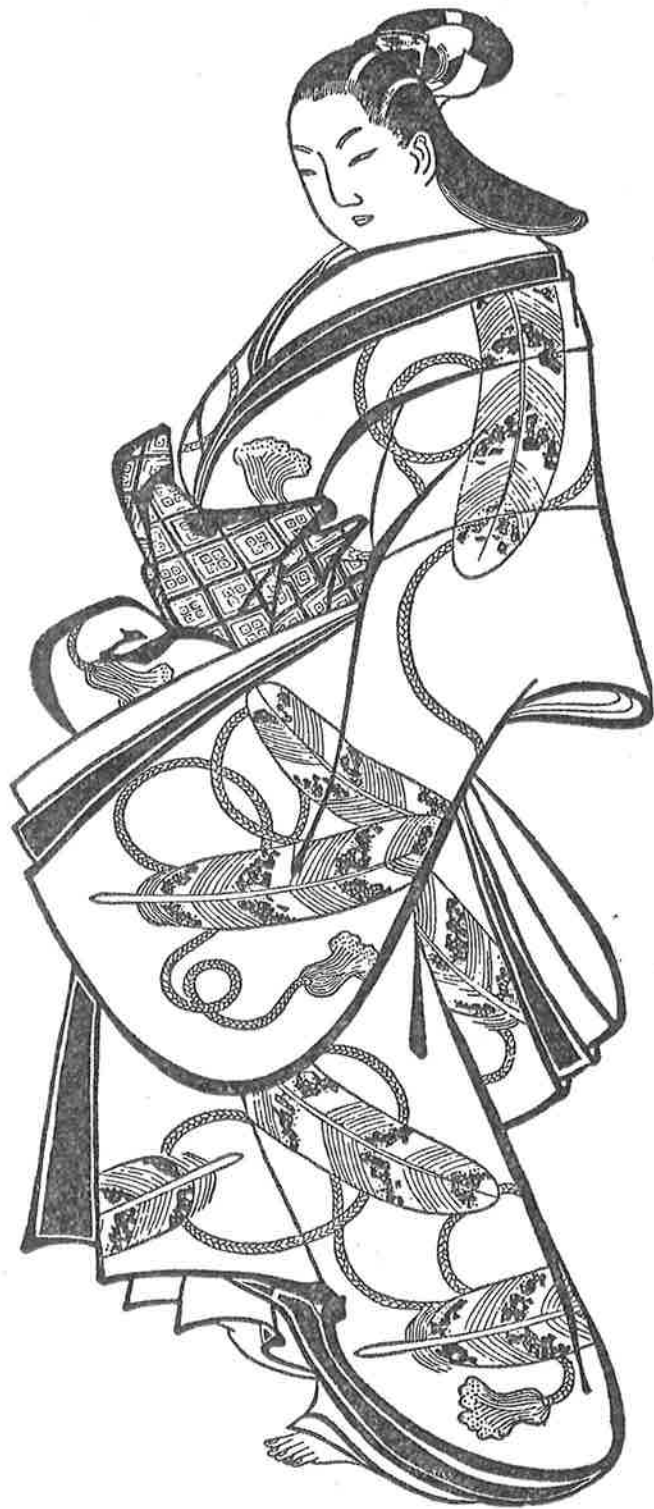
What happened next will be found in the second chapter!⁷

Anonymous (Twelfth Century)

TRANSLATED BY ARTHUR WALEY

⁶ Hairy caterpillar.

⁷ No second chapter exists.



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