

14. *Hateful Things*

One is in a hurry to leave, but one's visitor keeps chattering away. If it is someone of no importance, one can get rid of him by saying, 'You must tell me all about it next time'; but, should it be the sort of visitor whose presence commands one's best behaviour, the situation is hateful indeed.

One finds that a hair has got caught in the stone on which one is rubbing one's inkstick, or again that gravel is lodged in the inkstick, making a nasty, grating sound.

Someone has suddenly fallen ill and one summons the exorcist. Since he is not at home, one has to send messengers to look for him. After one has had a long fretful wait, the exorcist finally arrives, and with a sigh of relief one asks him to start his incantations. But perhaps he has been exorcizing too many evil spirits recently; for hardly has he installed himself and begun praying when his voice becomes drowsy. Oh, how hateful!

A man who has nothing in particular to recommend him discusses all sorts of subjects at random as though he knew everything.

An elderly person warms the palms of his hands over a brazier and stretches out the wrinkles. No young man would dream of behaving in such a fashion; old people can really be quite shame-

less. I have seen some dreary old creatures actually resting their feet on the brazier and rubbing them against the edge while they speak. These are the kind of people who in visiting someone's house first use their fans to wipe away the dust from the mat and, when they finally sit on it, cannot stay still but are forever spreading out the front of their hunting costume⁷⁰ or even tucking it up under their knees. One might suppose that such behaviour was restricted to people of humble station; but I have observed it in quite well-bred people, including a Senior Secretary of the Fifth Rank in the Ministry of Ceremonial and a former Governor of Suruga.

I hate the sight of men in their cups who shout, poke their fingers in their mouths, stroke their beards, and pass on the wine to their neighbours with great cries of 'Have some more! Drink up!' They tremble, shake their heads, twist their faces, and gesticulate like children who are singing, 'We're off to see the Governor.' I have seen really well-bred people behave like this and I find it most distasteful.

To envy others and to complain about one's own lot; to speak badly about people; to be inquisitive about the most trivial matters and to resent and abuse people for not telling one, or, if one does manage to worm out some facts, to inform everyone in the most detailed fashion as if one had known all from the beginning - oh, how hateful!

One is just about to be told some interesting piece of news when a baby starts crying.

A flight of crows circle about with loud caws.

An admirer has come on a clandestine visit, but a dog catches sight of him and starts barking. One feels like killing the beast.

One has been foolish enough to invite a man to spend the night in an unsuitable place - and then he starts snoring.

A gentleman has visited one secretly. Though he is wearing a tall, lacquered hat,⁷¹ he nevertheless wants no one to see him. He is so flurried, in fact, that upon leaving he bangs into something with his hat. Most hateful! It is annoying too when he lifts up the Iyo blind⁷² that hangs at the entrance of the room,

then lets it fall with a great rattle. If it is a head-blind, things are still worse, for being more solid it makes a terrible noise when it is dropped. There is no excuse for such carelessness. Even a head-blind does not make any noise if one lifts it up gently on entering and leaving the room; the same applies to sliding-doors. If one's movements are rough, even a paper door will bend and resonate when opened; but, if one lifts the door a little while pushing it, there need be no sound.

One has gone to bed and is about to doze off when a mosquito appears, announcing himself in a reedy voice. One can actually feel the wind made by his wings and, slight though it is, one finds it hateful in the extreme.

A carriage passes with a nasty, creaking noise. Annoying to think that the passengers may not even be aware of this! If I am travelling in someone's carriage and I hear it creaking, I dislike not only the noise but also the owner of the carriage.

One is in the middle of a story when someone butts in and tries to show that he is the only clever person in the room. Such a person is hateful, and so, indeed, is anyone, child or adult, who tries to push himself forward.

One is telling a story about old times when someone breaks in with a little detail that he happens to know, implying that one's own version is inaccurate - disgusting behaviour!

Very hateful is a mouse that scurries all over the place.

Some children have called at one's house. One makes a great fuss of them and gives them toys to play with. The children become accustomed to this treatment and start to come regularly, forcing their way into one's inner rooms and scattering one's furnishings and possessions. Hateful!

A certain gentleman whom one does not want to see visits one at home or in the Palace, and one pretends to be asleep. But a maid comes to tell one and shakes one awake, with a look on her face that says, 'What a sleepyhead!' Very hateful.

A newcomer pushes ahead of the other members in a group; with a knowing look, this person starts laying down the law and forcing advice upon everyone - most hateful.

71) A lacquered hat is about 12 inches tall and rigid, so it's not good for sneaking to a secret meeting

A man with whom one is having an affair keeps singing the praises of some woman he used to know. Even if it is a thing of the past, this can be very annoying. How much more so if he is still seeing the woman! (Yet sometimes I find that it is not as unpleasant as all that.)

A person who recites a spell himself after sneezing.⁷³ In fact I detest anyone who sneezes, except the master of the house.

Fleas, too, are very hateful. When they dance about under someone's clothes, they really seem to be lifting them up.

The sound of dogs when they bark for a long time in chorus is ominous and hateful.

I cannot stand people who leave without closing the panel behind them.

How I detest the husbands of nurse-maids! It is not so bad if the child in the maid's charge is a girl, because then the man will keep his distance. But, if it is a boy, he will behave as though he were the father. Never letting the boy out of his sight, he insists on managing everything. He regards the other attendants in the house as less than human, and, if anyone tries to scold the child, he slanders him to the master. Despite this disgraceful behaviour, no one dare accuse the husband; so he strides about the house with a proud, self-important look, giving all the orders.

I hate people whose letters show that they lack respect for worldly civilities, whether by discourtesy in the phrasing or by extreme politeness to someone who does not deserve it. This sort of thing is, of course, most odious if the letter is for oneself, but it is bad enough even if it is addressed to someone else.

As a matter of fact, most people are too casual, not only in their letters but in their direct conversation. Sometimes I am quite disgusted at noting how little decorum people observe when talking to each other. It is particularly unpleasant to hear some foolish man or woman omit the proper marks of respect when addressing a person of quality; and, when servants fail to use honorific forms of speech in referring to their masters, it is very bad indeed. No less odious, however, are those masters who, in addressing their servants, use such phrases as 'When you were good enough to do such-and-such' or 'As you so kindly remarked'. No doubt there are some masters who, in describing their own actions to a servant, say, 'I presumed to do so-and-so'!⁷⁴

Sometimes a person who is utterly devoid of charm will try to create a good impression by using very elegant language; yet he only succeeds in being ridiculous. No doubt he believes this refined language to be just what the occasion demands, but, when it goes so far that everyone bursts out laughing, surely something must be wrong.

It is most improper to address high-ranking courtiers, Imperial Advisers, and the like simply by using their names without any titles or marks of respect; but such mistakes are fortunately rare.

If one refers to the maid who is in attendance on some lady-in-waiting as 'Madam' or 'that lady', she will be surprised, delighted, and lavish in her praise.

When speaking to young noblemen and courtiers of high rank, one should always (unless Their Majesties are present) refer to them by their official posts. Incidentally, I have been very shocked to hear important people use the word 'I' while conversing in Their Majesties' presence.⁷⁵ Such a breach of etiquette is really distressing, and I fail to see why people cannot avoid it.

A man who has nothing in particular to recommend him but who speaks in an affected tone and poses as being elegant.

An inkstone with such a hard, smooth surface that the stick glides over it without leaving any deposit of ink.

Ladies-in-waiting who want to know everything that is going on.

Sometimes one greatly dislikes a person for no particular reason - and then that person goes and does something hateful.

A gentleman who travels alone in his carriage to see a procession or some other spectacle. What sort of a man is he? Even though he may not be a person of the greatest quality, surely he should have taken along a few of the many young men who are anxious to see the sights. But no, there he sits by himself (one can see his silhouette through the blinds), with a proud look on his face, keeping all his impressions to himself.

A lover who is leaving at dawn announces that he has to find his fan and his paper.⁷⁶ 'I know I put them somewhere last night,' he says. Since it is pitch dark, he gropes about the room, bumping into the furniture and muttering, 'Strange! Where on earth can they be?' Finally he discovers the objects. He thrusts the paper into the breast of his robe with a great rustling sound; then he snaps open his fan and busily fans away with it. Only now is he ready to take his leave. What charmless behaviour! 'Hateful' is an understatement.

Equally disagreeable is the man who, when leaving in the middle of the night, takes care to fasten the cord of his head-dress. This is quite unnecessary; he could perfectly well put it gently on his head without tying the cord. And why must he spend time adjusting his cloak or hunting costume? Does he really think someone may see him at this time of night and criticize him for not being impeccably dressed?

74) The phrasing of these sentences would usually be used for someone higher rank than you, so it makes the servants feel superior

75) Using "I" is not polite in formal Japanese. One either uses elaborate grammar work-arounds or refers to oneself in 3rd person.

A good lover will behave as elegantly at dawn as at any other time. He drags himself out of bed with a look of dismay on his face. The lady urges him on: 'Come, my friend, it's getting light. You don't want anyone to find you here.' He gives a deep sigh, as if to say that the night has not been nearly long enough and that it is agony to leave. Once up, he does not instantly pull on his trousers. Instead he comes close to the lady and whispers whatever was left unsaid during the night. Even when he is dressed, he still lingers, vaguely pretending to be fastening his sash.

Presently he raises the lattice, and the two lovers stand together by the side door while he tells her how he dreads the coming day, which will keep them apart; then he slips away. The lady watches him go, and this moment of parting will remain among her most charming memories.

Indeed, one's attachment to a man depends largely on the elegance of his leave-taking. When he jumps out of bed, scurries about the room, tightly fastens his trouser-sash, rolls up the sleeves of his Court cloak, over-robe, or hunting costume, stuffs his belongings into the breast of his robe and then briskly secures the outer sash - one really begins to hate him.

32. Unsuitable Things

A woman with ugly hair wearing a robe of white damask.
Hollyhock worn in frizzled hair.

Ugly handwriting on red paper.

Snow on the houses of common people. This is especially regrettable when the moonlight shines down on it.¹⁴²

A plain wagon¹⁴³ on a moonlit night; or a light auburn ox harnessed to such a wagon.

A woman who, though well past her youth, is pregnant and walks along panting. It is unpleasant to see a woman of a certain age with a young husband; and it is most unsuitable when she becomes jealous of him because he has gone to visit someone else.

An elderly man who has overslept and who wakes up with a start; or a greybeard munching some acorns that he has plucked.
An old woman who eats a plum and, finding it sour, puckers her toothless mouth.

A woman of the lower classes dressed in a scarlet trouser-skirt. The sight is all too common these days.

A handsome man with an ugly wife.

An elderly man with a black beard and a disagreeable expression playing with a little child who has just learnt to talk.

It is most unseemly for an Assistant Captain of the Quiver Bearers¹⁴⁴ to make his night patrol in a hunting costume. And, if he wanders outside the woman's quarters, ostentatiously clad in his terrifying red cloak, people will be sure to look down on him. They disapprove of his behaviour and taunt him with remarks like 'Are you searching for someone suspicious?'

A Lieutenant in the Imperial Police who serves as a Chamberlain of the Sixth Rank, and therefore has access to the Senior Courtiers' Chamber, is regarded as being splendid beyond words.¹⁴⁵ Country folk and people of the lower orders believe that he cannot be a creature of this world: in his presence they tremble with fear and dare not meet his eyes. It is very unsuitable that

such a man should slink along the narrow corridors of some Palace building in order to steal into a woman's room.¹⁴⁶

A man's trouser-skirt hanging over a curtain of state that has been discreetly perfumed with incense.¹⁴⁷ The material of the trouser-skirt is disagreeably heavy; and, even though it may be shining whitely in the lamp-light, there is something unsuitable about it.

An officer who thinks he is very fashionable in his open over-robe and who folds it thinly as a rat's tail before hanging it over the curtain of state - well, such a man is simply unfit for night patrol. Officers on duty should abstain from visiting the women's quarters; the same applies to Chamberlains of the Fifth Rank.

145) "splendid beyond words"
is meant sarcastically; they
are low-rank, but allowed
to be around high-rank people,
and Sei^o thinks they are too
arrogant

146) Because he doesn't deserve
to have an affair with a
palace lady.

147) The incense means ~~he~~ he
left them hanging in a
lady's room overnight.
if you know what I mean.

57. *Splendid Things*

Chinese brocade. A sword with a decorated scabbard. The grain of the wood in a Buddhist statue. Long flowering branches of beautifully coloured wistaria entwined about a pine tree.

Despite his low station a Chamberlain of the Sixth Rank is a splendid thing. To think that he is allowed yellowish-green robes of figured material and cloth that even young noblemen of the finest families are forbidden to wear! A mere Assistant or Subordinate Official in the Emperor's Private Office, who is the son of a commoner and who has gone completely unnoticed while serving under gentlemen of rank with official posts, becomes splendid beyond words after being appointed Chamberlain.

A Chamberlain of the Sixth Rank cuts a magnificent figure when he arrives with an Imperial mandate or when he brings the sweet chestnuts for the Great Council banquet.²²⁶ Observing how he is treated and entertained, one could imagine that he has come down from heaven.

A girl of noble birth has been chosen as Imperial consort; but she is still living at home, where they refer to her as 'Princess'. When a Chamberlain visits her with a message from the Emperor, her lady-in-waiting, before even delivering the letter, first pushes out a cushion for him from behind the blinds. As she does so, she displays the sleeves of her dress - a rare sight for a man of such humble rank.

If, in addition to being a Chamberlain, the messenger belongs to the Imperial Guards, things are still more impressive. He sits down on the cushion, spreading out the skirts of his under-robe, and it is the master of the house himself who gives the man a wine cup. What must be his delight on receiving such treatment!

A Chamberlain can keep company with young noblemen as if he were their equal - yes, with those same young noblemen whose very sight used to overawe him and who in the past would not have deigned to sit in the same room with someone of such low rank. Now it is he who inspires jealousy, especially when people see how closely he attends the Emperor, fanning His Majesty and rubbing the inkstick for him when he wishes to write a letter.

The Chamberlain's term of office is three or four years. During this time he is poorly dressed and there is nothing very elegant about his personal effects; yet he can mix freely with senior courtiers and other superiors. But what does he have to show for it all when his term has expired? I am sure that, as the time approaches for him to receive the head-dress of nobility and forgo the privilege of being admitted into the Presence, he feels sorer than if he were to lose his own life. It is sad to see how he hustles about the Palace in a frantic effort to secure some last favours from the Emperor. In the past, Chamberlains began lamenting the loss of their privileges from the very beginning of the year when they were to relinquish their posts. Nowadays they compete for new appointments.

I need hardly say how splendid I find a learned Doctor of Literature.²²⁷ He may be of lowly appearance, and of course he is of low rank; but the world at large regards him as an impressive figure. As an Imperial Tutor, he is consulted about all sorts of special matters, and he is free to approach the most eminent members of the Emperor's family. When he has composed one of his prayers for the Emperor or the introduction to some poem, he becomes the object of universal praise.

A learned priest is also splendid. It is impressive enough when he reads his breviary by himself, but how much more so when he is among several Lectors officiating in the Sacred Readings²²⁸ at one of the fixed periods! It is getting dark. 'Why haven't they brought the oil?' says one of the Lectors. 'How late they are in lighting the lamps!' All the Lectors stop reading, but the learned priest continues quietly reciting the scriptures from memory.

An Imperial Procession by the Empress in daytime.

The Empress's birth chamber.²²⁹

The ceremony of installing a new Empress.²³⁰ On this occasion tables are arranged in front of her dais together with the lion and the Korean dog. Then the people from the Table Office bring in the Imperial Cauldron. As one watches all this, it is difficult to believe that this same Empress was recently an ordinary person known simply as 'Princess'.

The procession of the First Man. His pilgrimage to Kasuga Shrine.

Grape-coloured material.

Anything purple is splendid, be it flowers, thread, or paper. Among purple flowers, however, I do not like the iris despite its gorgeous colour. What makes the costume of Sixth Rank Chamberlains so attractive when they are on night duty is the purple trousers.

A large garden all covered with snow.

The eldest son of our present Emperor is still a child, but how splendid he looks when he is in the arms of Their Excellencies, his handsome young uncles, when he is being served by senior courtiers, or when his horse is led out for inspection! Seeing the young Prince at such times, one would say that nothing unpleasant could ever happen to him.²³¹

228) Continuous readings that take place at certain festivals

229) There are a lot of rituals and ceremonies as the Empress gives birth

226) This banquet is for appointing new officials, and the Chamberlain is in charge of giving out favours from the Emperor to the new officials

62. Annoying Things

One has sent someone a poem (or a reply to a poem) and, after the messenger has left, thinks of a couple of words that ought to be changed.

One has sewn something in a hurry. The task seems finished, but on pulling out the needle one discovers that one forgot to knot the end of the thread. It is also very annoying to find that one has sewn something back to front.

One day when the Empress was staying in the Southern Palace,²⁴² she went to visit His Excellency, her father, in the western wing. I and the other ladies-in-waiting were gathered in the main building with nothing particular to do. We wandered along the corridors, trying to distract ourselves in one way or another. Then a messenger came from Her Majesty. 'A robe is wanted in a hurry,' we were told. 'All of you are to get together and make sure that it is delivered to the Empress, fully sewn, before the next watch.' We were then given some plain silk material.

My companions and I assembled at the front of the main hall, each of us taking a piece of silk and each determined to be the first to finish her work. We sat side by side, not facing each other, and started sewing at great speed. Nurse Myōbu, who did the wide sleeves, finished her work before anyone else. In her haste, however, she did not notice that she had sewn one piece of material inside out. Without even tying the final knot, she laid down the sleeves and stood up.

When it came to putting the different parts of the dress together at the back, we soon realized that there had been a mistake. The ladies laughed and scolded the nurse, saying, 'You'd better do it over again properly.' 'And who do you suppose would admit she had made a mistake in sewing?' said the nurse. 'With patterned silk, of course, one would have to start again if one had mistaken the front for the back, but with plain material like this what does it matter? If anyone has to do her work again, I don't see why it should be me. Ask the girls who still haven't finished their sewing.'

Since she could not be persuaded, the rest of us had to start our work over again. It was really amusing to watch the expressions of Gen Shōnagon, Shin Chūnagon, and the others as they sat there plying their needles and muttering, 'How does she think she can get away with it?' All this because Her Majesty intended to visit the Emperor that evening and had said, 'I shall know that the one who gets her work done first really loves me.'

It is annoying when a messenger delivers a letter to a person not meant to see it. If he simply admitted his mistake, it would not be so bad. But when he begins insisting that he merely carried out orders, it is really infuriating. If I were not afraid that someone might see me I should rush up and strike him.

242) Part of the Imperial
Compound, but separate,
and residence of her
father

One has planted some nice clover or *susuki* grass and goes to have a look at it. What a painful and annoying experience to find someone with a long box and a spade who has carefully dug up the plants and is now carrying them away! If a gentleman were present, the fellow would not dare act like this. On being reproached, he answers, 'I've only taken a little,' and hurries off.

A retainer of some grand family comes to the house of a provincial official and speaks to him rudely with an expression implying, 'You may find my manner annoying, but what can you do about it?'

A man snatches a letter that one does not want him to see and takes it into the garden, where he stands reading it. One runs after him in a rage. But one cannot go beyond the curtains; and there one stops, wishing that one could leap out at the man.

A woman is angry with her lover about some trifle and refuses to continue lying next to him. After fidgeting about in bed, she decides to get up. The man gently tries to draw her back, but she is still cross. 'Very well then,' he says, feeling that she has gone too far. 'As you please.' Full of resentment, he buries himself under his bedclothes and settles down for the night. It is a cold night and, since the woman is wearing only an unlined robe, she soon begins to feel uncomfortable. Everyone else in the house is asleep, and besides it would be most unseemly for her to get up alone and walk about. As the night wears on, she lies there on her side of the bed feeling very annoyed that the quarrel did not take place earlier in the evening when it would have been easy to leave. Then she begins to hear strange sounds in the back of the house and outside. Frightened, she gently moves over in bed towards her lover, tugging at the bedclothes, whereupon he annoys her further by pretending to be asleep. 'Why not be stand-offish a little longer?' he asks her finally.

63. Embarrassing Things

While entertaining a visitor, one hears some servants chatting without any restraint in one of the back rooms. It is embarrassing to know that one's visitor can overhear. But how to stop them?

A man whom one loves gets drunk and keeps repeating himself.

To have spoken about someone not knowing that he could overhear. This is embarrassing even if it be a servant or some other completely insignificant person.

To hear one's servants making merry. This is equally annoying if one is on a journey and staying in cramped quarters or at home and hears the servants in a neighbouring room.

Parents, convinced that their ugly child is adorable, pet him and repeat the things he has said, imitating his voice.

An ignoramus who in the presence of some learned person puts on a knowing air and converses about men of old.

A man recites his own poems (not especially good ones) and tells one about the praise they have received - most embarrassing.

Lying awake at night, one says something to one's companion, who simply goes on sleeping.

In the presence of a skilled musician, someone plays a zither just for his own pleasure and without tuning it.

A son-in-law who has long since stopped visiting his wife runs into his father-in-law in a public place.

64. *Surprising and Distressing Things*

While one is cleaning a decorative comb, something catches in the teeth and the comb breaks.

A carriage overturns. One would have imagined that such a solid, bulky object would remain forever on its wheels. It all seems like a dream – astonishing and senseless.

A child or grown-up blurts out something that is bound to make people uncomfortable.

All night long one has been waiting for a man who one thought was sure to arrive. At dawn, just when one has forgotten about him for a moment and dozed off, a crow caws loudly. One wakes up with a start and sees that it is daytime – most astonishing.

One of the bowmen in an archery contest stands trembling for a long time before shooting; when finally he does release his arrow, it goes in the wrong direction.²⁴³

79. *Shameful Things*

A thief has crept into a house and is now hiding in some well-chosen nook where he can secretly observe what is going on. Someone else comes into the dark room and, taking an object that lies there, slips it into his sleeve. It must be amusing for the thief to see a person who shares his own nature.³¹⁵

Priests on night duty are often confronted with shameful things, especially if they are light sleepers.³¹⁶ For they are liable to overhear groups of young women joking about other people, abusing them, and venting their spite on them; all this is bound to arouse a sense of shame in the priest who lies next door, hearing everything they say. Some of the Emperor's elderly ladies-in-waiting angrily tell the girls not to be so noisy; but they pay no attention and continue gossiping until finally they doze off without the slightest regard for decorum. Even after they are asleep, the priest still feels it is shameful.

A man's heart is a shameful thing. When he is with a woman whom he finds tiresome and distasteful, he does not show that he dislikes her, but makes her believe she can count on him. Still worse, a man who has the reputation of being kind and loving treats a woman in such a way that she cannot imagine his feelings are anything but sincere. Yet he is untrue to her not only in his thoughts but in his words; for he speaks badly about her to other women just as he speaks badly about those women to her. The woman, of course, has no idea that she is being maligned; and, hearing his criticisms of the others, she fondly believes he loves her best. The man for his part is well aware that this is what she thinks. How shameful!

When a woman runs into a lover with whom (alas!) she has broken for good, there is no reason for her to be ashamed if he regards her as heartless. But if the lover shows that he has not been even slightly upset by their parting, which to her was so sad and painful and difficult, she is bound to be amazed by the man and to wonder what sort of a heart he can have. Oblivious of his own callous attitude, her abandoned lover carried on a glib conversation in which he criticizes the behaviour of other men.

How shameful when a man seduces some helpless Court lady and, having made her pregnant, abandons her without caring in the slightest about her future!

80. *Things That Have Lost Their Power*

A large boat which is high and dry in a creek at ebb-tide.

A woman who has taken off her false locks to comb the short hair that remains.

A large tree that has been blown down in a gale and lies on its side with its roots in the air.

The retreating figure of a *sumō* wrestler who has been defeated in a match.³¹⁷

A man of no importance reprimanding an attendant.

An old man who removes his hat, uncovering his scanty top-knot.

A woman, who is angry with her husband about some trifling matter, leaves home and goes somewhere to hide. She is certain that he will rush about looking for her; but he does nothing of the kind and shows the most infuriating indifference. Since she cannot stay away for ever, she swallows her pride and returns.

81. *Awkward Things*

One has gone to a house and asked to see someone; but the wrong person appears, thinking that it is he who is wanted; this is especially awkward if one has brought a present.

One has allowed oneself to speak badly about someone without really intending to do so; a young child who has overheard it all goes and repeats what one has said in front of the person in question.

Someone sobs out a pathetic story. One is deeply moved; but it so happens that not a single tear comes to one's eyes – most awkward. Though one makes one's face look as if one is going to cry, it is no use: not a single tear will come. Yet there are times when, having heard something happy, one feels the tears streaming out.

316) Priests were also doctors, so some were always at the palace in case a member of the Imperial household became sick.