

24. It Is So Stifflingly Hot

It is so stifflingly hot in the Seventh Month that even at night one keeps all the doors and lattices open. At such times it is delightful to wake up when the moon is shining and to look outside. I enjoy it even when there is no moon. But to wake up at dawn and see a pale sliver of a moon in the sky – well, I need hardly say how perfect that is.

I like to see a bright new straw mat that has just been spread out on a well-polished floor.⁹⁹ The best place for one's three-foot curtain of state is in the front of the room near the veranda. It is pointless to put it in the rear of the room, as it is most unlikely that anyone will peer in from that direction.¹⁰⁰

It is dawn and a woman is lying in bed after her lover has taken his leave. She is covered up to her head with a light mauve robe that has a lining of dark violet; the colour of both the outside and the lining is fresh and glossy.¹⁰¹ The woman, who appears to be asleep, wears an unlined orange robe and a dark crimson skirt of stiff silk whose cords hang loosely by her side, as if they have been left untied. Her thick tresses tumble over each other in cascades, and one can imagine how long her hair must be when it falls freely down her back.¹⁰²

Near by another woman's lover is making his way home in the misty dawn. He is wearing loose violet trousers, an orange hunting costume, so lightly coloured that one can hardly tell whether it has been dyed or not, a white robe of stiff silk, and a scarlet robe of glossy, beaten silk. His clothes, which are damp from the mist, hang loosely about him. From the dishevelment of his side locks one can tell how negligently he must have tucked his hair into his black lacquered head-dress when he got up. He wants to return and write his next-morning letter¹⁰³ before the dew on the morning glories has had time to vanish; but the path seems endless, and to divert himself he hums 'The sprouts in the flax fields'.¹⁰⁴

As he walks along, he passes a house with an open lattice. He is on his way to report for official duty, but cannot help stopping to lift up the blind and peep into the room.¹⁰⁵ It amuses him to think that a man has probably been spending the night here and has only recently got up to leave, just as happened to himself. Perhaps that man too had felt the charm of the dew.¹⁰⁶

Looking round the room, he notices near the woman's pillow an open fan with a magnolia frame and purple paper; and at the foot of her curtain of state he sees some narrow strips of Michinoku paper and also some other paper of a faded colour, either orange-red or maple.

The woman senses that someone is watching her and, looking up from under her bedclothes, sees a gentleman leaning against the wall by the threshold, a smile on his face. She can tell at once that he is the sort of man with whom she need feel no reserve. All the same, she does not want to enter into any familiar relations with him, and she is annoyed that he should have seen her asleep.¹⁰⁷

'Well, well, Madam,' says the man, leaning forward so that the upper part of his body comes behind her curtains, 'what a long nap you're having after your morning adieu! You really are a lie-abled!'

'You call me that, Sir,' she replied, 'only because you're annoyed at having had to get up before the dew had time to settle.'

Their conversation may be commonplace, yet I find there is something delightful about the scene.

Now the gentleman leans further forward and, using his own fan, tries to get hold of the fan by the woman's pillow. Fearing his closeness, she moves further back into her curtain enclosure, her heart pounding. The gentleman picks up the magnolia fan and, while examining it, says in a slightly bitter tone, 'How standoffish you are!'

But now it is growing light; there is a sound of people's voices, and it looks as if the sun will soon be up. Only a short while ago this same man was hurrying home to write his next-morning letter before the mists had time to clear. Alas, how easily his intentions have been forgotten!

While all this is afoot, the woman's original lover has been busy with his own next-morning letter, and now, quite unexpectedly, the messenger arrives at her house. The letter is attached to a spray of bush-clover, still damp with dew, and the paper gives off a delicious aroma of incense. Because of the new visitor, however, the woman's servants cannot deliver it to her.

Finally it becomes unseemly for the gentleman to stay any longer. As he goes, he is amused to think that a similar scene may be taking place in the house he left earlier that morning.

101) Rather than use blankets, people in Heian Japan slept fully dressed (orange robe and crimson skirt) with more clothes covering them like blankets (light mauve robe).

103) Social obligations: sleep with a woman the night before, send her a letter as soon as you get back to your room

105) He is peeping on the woman from 101

107) Heian women took great precautions to avoid being seen by men (screens, fans, etc.)

* But it isn't, because he never writes the letter

35. *Once I Saw Yukinari*

Once I saw Yukinari, the Controller First Secretary, engaged in a long conversation with a lady near the garden fence by the western side of the Empress's Office.¹⁵⁰ When at last they had finished, I came out and asked, 'Who was she?' 'Ben no Naishi,'¹⁵¹ he replied. 'And what on earth did you find to discuss with her for such a long time? If the Major Controller had seen you, she would have left you quickly enough.' 'And who can have told you about that business?' asked Yukinari, laughing.¹⁵² 'As a matter of fact, that is precisely what I was discussing with her. I was trying to persuade her not to leave me even if the Major Controller did see us.'

Yukinari is a most delightful man. To be sure, he does not make any particular effort to display his good points and simply lets people take him as he appears, so that in general he is less appreciated than he might be. But I, who have seen the deeper side of his nature, know what an unusual person he really is. I said this one day to the Empress, who was well aware of it herself. In the course of our conversations he often says, 'A woman yields to one who has taken pleasure in her; a knight dies for one who has shown him friendship.'¹⁵³ We used to say that our feelings for each other were like the willows on Tōtōmi Beach.¹⁵⁴

Yet the young women at Court heartily detest Yukinari and openly repeat the most disagreeable things about him. 'What an ugly man he is!' they say. 'Why can't he recite sutras and poems like other people? He really is most unpleasant.' Yukinari, for his part, never speaks to any of them.

'I could love a woman,' he said one day, 'even if her eyes were turned up,¹⁵⁵ her eyebrows spread all over her forehead, and her nose crooked. But she must have a prettily shaped mouth and a good chin and neck, and I couldn't stand an unattractive voice. Of course I would prefer her not to have any bad feature. There's really something sad about a woman with an ugly face.' As a result, all the Court ladies with pointed chins or other unattractive features have become Yukinari's bitter enemies, and some of them have even spoken badly of him to the Empress.

I was the first person he employed to take messages to the Empress, and he always called on me when he wanted to communicate with her. If I was in my room, he would send for me to the main part of the Palace, or else he would come directly into the women's quarters to give me his message. Even if I was at home, he would write to me or come himself, saying, 'In case you are not returning to Court at once, would you please send someone to Her Majesty informing her that I have such-and-such a message.' 'Surely you could tell a messenger yourself directly,' I said; but he would have none of it.

151) Ben no Naishi was known to be having an affair with the Major Controller

155) Heian beauty standards included long, narrow eyes, unnaturally small eyebrows, and a small straight nose.

On one such occasion I suggested to Yukinari that one should 'take things as they are'¹⁵⁶ and not always stick to the same habits. 'But such is my nature,' he replied, 'and that is something one cannot change.'

'Well then,' I said in a surprised tone, 'what is the meaning of "Do not be afraid"?'¹⁵⁷

Yukinari laughed and said, 'There has no doubt been a lot of talk lately about our being so friendly. But what of it? Even if we were as intimate as people think, that would be nothing to be ashamed of. Really you could let me see your face.'¹⁵⁸

'Oh no,' I replied, 'I cannot possibly do that. I am extremely ugly, and you said you could never love an ugly woman.'

'Are you really?' he said. 'In that case you had better not let me see you.'

Often thereafter, when it would have been easy for Yukinari to look at me in the normal course of things, he covered his face with a fan or turned aside. In fact he never once saw me. To think that he took what I said about my ugliness quite seriously!

Towards the end of the Third Month it becomes too warm for winter cloaks, and often Chamberlains who are on night watch in the Senior Courtiers' Chamber wear only the over-ropes of their Court costumes, leaving off their trouser-skirts and trains. Early one morning in that month, when Lady Shikibu and I had been sleeping in the outer part of a room in the Empress's Office, the sliding-door was pushed open and the Emperor and Empress entered. We were thrown into utter confusion and did not know what to do with ourselves, which greatly amused Their Majesties. Hastily we threw on our Chinese jackets, tucking our hair inside, and then we heaped the bed-clothes and everything else in a great pile. Their Majesties walked across the room and, standing behind this pile, watched the men going between the Palace and the guard-house. Several courtiers approached our room and spoke to us, without suspecting who was inside the room. 'Do not let them see we are here,' His Majesty said with a chuckle.

Before long Their Majesties left. 'Come along, both of you,' said the Empress. I replied that we would come as soon as we had made up our faces, and we stayed where we were.

156) From a classical Chinese text

157) Also from a classical Chinese text, the full quote is

"Do not be afraid to correct yourself if you are wrong."

Basically, in these two references Sei is telling him to try to fit in more and change himself to do so.

Lady Shikibu and I were still discussing how splendid Their Majesties had looked when, through a small opening in the blinds (where the frame of our curtain of state was pressed against the sliding-door in the back of the room), we noticed the dark silhouette¹⁵⁹ of a man. At first we thought that it must be Noritaka¹⁶⁰ and continued to talk without paying any particular attention. Presently a beaming face appeared through the opening in the blinds. We still took it to be Noritaka, but after a quick look we were amused to find that we were mistaken. Laughing heartily, we rearranged our curtain of state so that we were properly hidden. Too late, though. The man turned out to be none other than Yukinari; and he had seen me full-face. After all my past efforts this was extremely vexing. Lady Shikibu, on the other hand, had been looking safely in the other direction.

'Well,' said Yukinari, stepping forward, 'now I have really managed to see you completely.'

'We thought it was Noritaka,' I explained, 'and so we didn't bother to hide properly. But why, may I ask, did you examine me so carefully when in the past you said that you would never look at me?'

'I have been told,' said he, 'that a woman's face is particularly attractive when she rises in the morning. So I came here hoping for a chance to peep into one of the ladies' rooms and see something interesting. I was already watching you when Their Majesties were here, but you suspected nothing.'

Then, as I recall, he walked straight into the room.

160) Yukinari: is 4th rank, Noritaka is only 6th rank, and is around a lot, so it matters less if he sees them

51. The Captain First Secretary, Tadanobu

The Captain First Secretary, Tadanobu,¹⁸⁴ having heard certain false rumours, began to speak about me in the most unpleasant terms. 'How could I have thought of her as a human being?' was the sort of thing he used to say.

One day I learnt that he had gone so far as to speak badly about me in the Senior Courtiers' Chamber. I felt terribly ashamed, but I laughed and said, 'How distressing if what he said were correct! As it is, he's sure to find out the truth soon enough, and then he'll change his mind about me.' Shortly afterwards Tadanobu heard my voice when passing near the Black Door,¹⁸⁵ and, without even glancing at me, he covered his face with his sleeve. Despite his dislike of me, I never tried to explain matters, and let time pass without so much as looking at him.

184) Sei is known to have had an affair with Tadanobu, but only a short-term one.

Towards the end of the Second Month it rained a great deal and time hung on my hands. One day someone told me that Tadanobu was secluded in Seiryō Palace on the occasion of an Imperial Abstinence¹⁸⁶ and that he had been overheard to remark, 'After all, things do seem a bit dreary since I stopped seeing Shōnagon. I wonder if I shan't send her a message.' 'I don't believe a word of it,' I replied. Yet I spent the entire day in my room, thinking that a messenger might arrive, and by the time I went to the Empress's apartments I found that she had already retired for the night. The ladies-in-waiting on duty were seated in a group near the veranda; they had drawn up a lamp and were playing a game of parts.¹⁸⁷

'Oh, good!' they cried when they saw me. 'Come and join us!' Yet I felt depressed and wondered why I had come. Instead of joining the women, I sat down by a brazier; but presently they had all gathered round me and we started chatting to each other. Just then there was a loud cry outside the room: 'A messenger is here!'¹⁸⁸

'That's strange,' I said. 'I've only just arrived. What can have happened since I left my room?' I sent a maid to find out; when she returned, she told me that the man was from the Office of Grounds and that he had a message which he must at all costs deliver to me personally. I went out and asked the man what had happened. 'Here is a letter for you from the Captain First Secretary,' he said. 'Please answer it without delay.'

In view of Tadanobu's attitude, I wondered what sort of a letter he could have written; but, since I did not want to hurry through it then and there, I told the messenger that he could leave and that I would send my reply presently. Tucking the letter in the breast of my robe, I returned to my companions.

We were once more chatting away when the messenger returned and said, 'His Excellency, the Captain, ordered me to bring his letter back to him if there was no immediate reply. Please be quick.' It was all as strange as a tale from Ise.¹⁸⁹ I examined the letter. It was elegantly written on heavy blue paper, and there was nothing about it to worry me. I opened it and read:

With you it is slower time
As you sit in the Council Hall
'Neath a curtain of brocade.¹⁹⁰

And below this he had added, 'How does the stanza end?'

186) Day for doing nothing to avoid bad luck. An Imperial Abstinence shuts the whole court down.

187) Popular card game

189) Japanese proverb, a little like the "Florida Man" meme.

190) Classical Chinese poem, so not normal for communication between men and women.

I was at a complete loss. If Her Majesty had been there, I should have asked her to look at the letter and give her opinion; but unfortunately she was asleep. I had to prove that I knew the next line of the poem, but were I to write it in my somewhat faltering Chinese characters it would make a bad impression. I had no time to ponder since the messenger was pressing for a reply. Taking a piece of burnt-out charcoal from the brazier, I simply added the following words at the end of Tadanobu's letter:

Who would come to visit
This grass-thatched hut of mine?*

Then I told the messenger to take it back to Tadanobu. I waited for a reply, but none came.

I spent the night in the Empress's apartments with the other ladies-in-waiting. Very early on the following morning, when I had returned to my own room, I heard Captain Tsunefusa call in a booming voice, 'Is Grass Hut here? Is Grass Hut here?'

'How could anyone with such a vulgar name be staying here?' I asked. 'Now, if you were to ask for Jade Tower, you might get a reply.'¹⁹¹

'Ah, good!' said Tsunefusa. 'So you are in your room. I was prepared to go all the way to the Palace to find you.' He then told me what had happened on the previous evening. He and several officials of the Sixth Rank and above (all of them gentlemen of some talent) had been with Tadanobu in the Captain's night-duty room. In the course of their conversation, while they were discussing various people and events, Tadanobu said, 'I have completely broken with Shōnagon. But even now that it is all over between us I find it hard to leave things as they are. I have been waiting for her to make some move to bring us together again, but she does not seem to give it the slightest thought. Really, I find this indifference of hers most galling. . . . Well, tonight I am going to make up my mind about her once and for all and settle things properly.'

'We all discussed the matter,' continued Tsunefusa, 'and it was decided that he should put you to the test by means of a letter. But, when the messenger returned, he told us that you had gone back to your room and could not read the letter at once. Hearing this, Tadanobu sent the man back again with the instructions, "This time seize her by the sleeve and get a reply from her willy-nilly! But in any case bring back my letter!"'

* This is close to the original ending, but altered to imply that Tadanobu being angry with her has made her wretched

191) While her poem is self-deprecating, to a messenger she has pride

192) Since Sei sent 2 lines of 7 syllables each, it is up to men to write the 5-7-5 syllable lines, per poetry exchange tradition.

'Despite the heavy rain the messenger was soon back in the night-duty room. "Here it is," he said, producing a letter from the folds of his robe. It was the same blue piece of paper that Tadanobu had sent. We wondered whether you had returned it without perusal. But, when Tadanobu unfolded it, he gave an exclamation of surprise, and we all gathered round him curiously. "What a rogue she is!" he said. "How can one break with a woman like that?" We examined the letter excitedly. "We'll have to send it back to her with the first three lines added,"¹⁹² said someone. "Come, Captain Tsunefusa, you provide the missing lines!" We stayed up until late at night cudgelling our brains for the right words, but in the end we had to give up. We then decided that this was an incident that people must hear about.'

I was quite embarrassed by Tsunefusa's praise. 'So now,' he added, as he hurriedly took his leave, 'you have acquired the name of Grass Hut.' 'That's all very well,' thought I, 'but it's hardly a name I should like to keep indefinitely.'

Just then Norimitsu, the Assistant Master of the Office of Palace Repairs,¹⁹³ arrived in my room, 'I thought you would be in the Palace,' he said, 'and I have just been there to tell you how delighted I was by the news.' 'Why so delighted?' I said. 'I haven't heard about any official appointments. What post did you get?' 'No, no,' replied Norimitsu. 'It's about your answer to Tadanobu yesterday evening. I've been waiting all night to tell you how pleased I was. There's never been anything like it.'

He then related the whole story that I had heard from Captain Tsunefusa. 'Tadanobu told us that he would finally make up his mind about you depending on your reply to his letter. If it turned out to be unsatisfactory, he was going to break with you once and for all. When the messenger came back the first time empty-handed, I decided that this was in fact a good sign. The next time, when he returned with your answer, I was so curious to know what you had said that my heart was pounding. To tell the truth, it occurred to me that, if your answer was inadequate, this would reflect on me too as your elder brother. As it turned out, it was not merely adequate; it was outstanding. Everyone in the room praised it warmly, and one of the old men told me, "This is something for you to hear since you're her elder brother."

193) Norimitsu was definitely Sei's lover at one point, and they are known to be close by the court, since they refer to him as her "elder brother." This might mean they were married, but scholars debate this, and they are definitely not married during the time period described in this book.

'Of course I was delighted, but I kept it to myself and simply said, "I am totally incompetent in matters of this kind." "We aren't asking for your criticism," was the reply, "and we don't even expect you to understand what she wrote. But we do want you to tell people about it." This was rather mortifying for your elder brother, but I found some satisfaction in the difficulties they themselves had in framing a reply. "We simply can't find the right opening lines," they said. "But, after all, is there any special reason that we have to send a return poem?"¹⁹⁴ Still they did not give up. Since they realized that to produce a feeble reply would be worse than nothing at all, they stayed there till the middle of the night racking their brains for the proper words.

'Well now, surely we both have good cause to rejoice. Even if I had been given a promotion during the period of official appointments, it would have been as nothing compared to this.' Listening to Norimitsu, I was most vexed at the idea that all these men had been sitting in judgement on me without my knowledge.

(As for the matter of 'younger sister' and 'elder brother', everyone from the Emperor and Empress down knew about it, and even in the Palace people called Norimitsu 'elder brother' instead of designating him by his office.)

Norimitsu and I were still talking when a servant came to my room and told me to report at once to Her Majesty. As soon as I was in her presence I realized that she had called me to discuss what I had written to Tadanobu. 'The Emperor has been here,' she said, 'and he told me that all his gentlemen have your reply written on their fans.' I was amazed and wondered who could have spread the news.

Thereafter Tadanobu no longer hid his face behind his sleeve when we met and he seemed to have altered his opinion of me.

194) Since her 7-7 was a reply, it makes the rules unclear. And they want an excuse.

52. On the Twenty-Fifth of the Second Month

On the twenty-fifth of the Second Month in the following year Her Majesty moved to the Empress's Office. I did not accompany her but stayed behind in Umetsubo Palace.¹⁹⁵ On the next day a message came from Tadanobu: 'Last night I visited the temple at Kurama. Since the direction to the capital is closed this evening, I am taking a detour and expect to be back before dawn.¹⁹⁶ There is something I must tell you. Please wait for me and be ready to open the door as soon as I knock.'

196) If a direction was declared unlucky, you could not travel there. This is a widely believed custom that comes up a lot in Heian writing

It happened, however, that Her Highness, the Mistress of the Robes,¹⁹⁷ sent me a message. 'Why stay alone in your room?' she wrote. 'Come and spend the night here.' Accordingly I went to her.

It was late on the following morning when I got up and returned to my room. My maid was waiting for me. 'Last night,' she said, 'someone was knocking very loudly at the door. In the end I had to get up. The visitor ordered me to announce to my mistress that the man who had promised to come had now arrived. I replied that you would pay no attention to such a message and went back to bed.'

I was feeling very annoyed about all this when a messenger came from the Office of Grounds and said, 'His Excellency, the First Secretary, wishes to inform you that he has to leave at once but that first he has something he must tell you.'

If Tadanobu were to visit me in my own room, he would probably open the blinds and do other such bothersome things. The idea made me nervous, so I told the messenger that I was going to the Palace on business; if His Excellency wanted to see me, he should come there. I then went to Umetsubo Palace and had just opened the half-shutters at the east end of the main room when Tadanobu arrived. I asked him to approach the blinds behind which I was sitting. He looked magnificent as he came towards me. His resplendent, cherry-coloured Court cloak was lined with material of the most delightful hue and lustre; he wore dark, grape-coloured trousers, boldly splashed with designs of wistaria branches; his crimson under-robe was so glossy that it seemed to sparkle, while underneath one could make out layer upon layer of white and light violet robes. As the veranda on which he sat was very narrow, he leaned forward so that the top part of his body came almost up to the blind and I could see him clearly. He looked like one of the gentlemen who are depicted by painters or celebrated by the writers of romances.

The plum blossoms in front of the Palace (red ones on the left and white ones on the right) were just beginning to scatter; yet they were still very beautiful. The sun brilliantly lit up the whole scene - a scene that I should have liked everyone to view. To make it still more charming, the woman nestling close to the blinds should have been a young lady-in-waiting with beautiful, long hair cascading over her shoulders. Instead it was I, an old woman who had long since seen her best years, and whose hair had become so frizzled and dishevelled that it no longer looked as if it belonged to her head.¹⁹⁸ To make matters worse, we were still in mourning¹⁹⁹ and most of the ladies at Court wore special clothes, mine all being of such a light grey hue that they hardly seemed to have any colour at all and one could not tell one garment from another. Since Her Majesty was away, I was wearing an ordinary long robe without a formal skirt and train. Alas, there was not one good thing about me, and I quite spoiled the beauty of the scene!

'I am on my way to the Empress's Office,' said Tadanobu. 'Do you want me to take a message? And when will you be going yourself?'

'Well,' he continued, 'it was not yet dawn when I left the place where I stayed last night. Since I had already told you my plans, I expected that you would be waiting for me. It was a clear

moonlit night. As soon as I arrived from the West City,²⁰⁰ I came and knocked on your door. It took me a long time to arouse your maid. When she finally got out of bed, what a vulgar creature she turned out to be and how rudely she answered me!' Tadanobu laughed, and went on: 'It was a terrible disappointment. How can you have left someone like that in your room?'

Tadanobu had good reason to be annoyed, and as I heard his story I was both sorry for him and amused. He left soon after. It occurred to me that the people who had noticed him from the outside must have wondered what sort of delightful woman could be hidden by the screens, while those who were in the back of the room and could see me from behind would never have imagined that there was such a splendid gentleman on the veranda.

At sunset I went up to the Empress's Office. Her Majesty was surrounded by a group of ladies-in-waiting, who were arguing about various romances and citing passages that impressed them as good or clumsy or disagreeable. The Empress herself discussed the qualities and defects of Suzushi and Nakatada.²⁰¹ 'Well, Shōnagon,' said one of the ladies-in-waiting, 'let's hear your opinion of these characters. You must tell us at once. Her Majesty is always talking about Nakatada's mean upbringing. What do you think?'

'For my part,' I replied, 'I don't see anything so wonderful about Suzushi. I admit that he may have succeeded in bringing a heavenly maiden down from the sky by his music, but when did he ever do anything important enough to win the hand of an Emperor's daughter?'

'Good!' exclaimed the lady-in-waiting, realizing that I was on Nakatada's side in the debate.

'If you'd seen Tadanobu when he came here today,' the Empress said, 'you would have found him far more splendid than all these romantic heroes.' 'Yes indeed,' put in another of the ladies-in-waiting, 'today he was even more magnificent than usual.'

'It was just so that I could let Your Majesty know at once about Tadanobu's visit that I came here this evening,' I said, 'but I became involved in your discussion about romances.' Thereupon I told them everything that had happened.

'We've all seen him,' they said, laughing, 'but how could we possibly have pieced the whole story together?' Then they described Tadanobu's visit. 'Oh, the desolation of the West City!' he had said to them. 'If someone had been there to share it with me. . . . The fences are all broken and everything is overgrown with moss.' 'And was there any fern on the tiles?' Lady Saishō²⁰² had asked. Extremely impressed by her question, Tadanobu had hummed the line, 'It is not far from the city's western gate. . .'

The women were all loud in praising this exchange, and I found their enthusiasm delightful.

201) Characters in a popular romance novel

202) Classical poetry reference

53. When I Stayed Away from the Palace

When I stayed away from the Palace,²⁰³ I frequently received visits from senior courtiers and other gentlemen. The people of the household where I was staying used to complain about this and criticize me. If my visitors had included anyone to whom I was particularly attached, I should have resented their complaints, but such was not the case. As it happened, I had no desire to meet them. Yet, if a gentleman comes all the way to see one both during the daytime and at night, is it possible to reply that one is not at home and to send him away embarrassed?

Some of the men who visited my house were almost total strangers, and in the end it became too much for me. On the next time when I left Court I therefore decided not to announce where I was going – in fact I told hardly anyone except Tsunefusa and Narimasa.

On one occasion during my absence the Lieutenant of the Guards, Norimitsu, came to see me. In the course of our conversation he mentioned that on the previous day His Excellency the Imperial Adviser, Tadanobu, had insistently questioned him about my whereabouts. 'After all,' Tadanobu had said, 'it hardly seems likely that you would not know where your own sister is staying.' Norimitsu had continued to protest his ignorance, but Tadanobu had become cross and only pressed him the harder. 'I really had a difficult time hiding the truth from him,' said Norimitsu. 'It was all I could do not to burst into laughter. To make matters worse, Tsunefusa was sitting directly next to us with an unconcerned, innocent look. I knew that if I so much as glanced at him I should start giggling. To save myself, I snatched from the table a common piece of seaweed²⁰⁴ and popped it into my mouth. It must have looked odd, but my ruse saved me from giving away your secret. As it was, Tadanobu decided that I really did not know where you were. I found it all most amusing.'

'Well,' I said, still more emphatically, 'whatever you do, don't tell him!'

Several days passed. Then late one night I heard a loud knocking at the gate. I wondered why anyone should make such a terrible disturbance, especially since the gate was quite near the house and an ordinary knock would have sufficed. I sent one of the servants to find out who was there. It turned out to be a

203) A woman had to leave the palace if she was sick or menstrating

204) This is the set up for Sei's return message later

messenger, a soldier in the Imperial Guards, with a letter from Norimitsu.²⁰⁵ Since everyone was asleep, I drew up a lamp for myself and opened the letter. 'Tomorrow,' I read, 'is the Day of Conclusion of the Sacred Readings.²⁰⁶ Tadanobu is bound to spend all day in the Palace to attend the Emperor and Empress during their abstinence. If he urges me again to tell him where my younger sister is, there will be no help for it. I shall certainly not be able to hide it this time. Is it all right to let him know where you are? What shall I do? I shall act according to your instructions.'

By way of reply I merely wrapped a little seaweed in a piece of paper and sent it to him.²⁰⁷ When Norimitsu came to see me later, he told me that all night long Tadanobu had been after him for information. 'Without even waiting to find a suitable place,' said Norimitsu, 'His Excellency took me aside and began interrogating me. I can assure you that it was most disagreeable to be put to the question like that. Besides, you never told me what I should answer, but simply sent that silly bit of seaweed wrapped in paper. I suppose you did it by mistake.'

'What a strange mistake that would be!' I thought. 'Who would ever wrap up such an object and send it to someone?' I was really disgusted with Norimitsu for having so completely missed the point, and without a word I took a piece of paper that was lying under the inkstone and wrote the following poem:

Tell no man where she lives –
The diver in the water's depths –
Such must have been the meaning of her glance.²⁰⁸

I gave it to Norimitsu, but he pushed it back with his fan, saying, 'Ah, you have been good enough to write one of your poems for me. But I have no intention of reading it.' And he hurried out of the room.

Norimitsu and I had always been on close terms and tried to help each other, but now, without anything particular having happened, a coolness came between us. Shortly afterwards I received this note from him: 'I know that I may have put you out in some way, but please do not forget our pact. Even though we are apart, remember that I have been your elder brother.'

I have heard Norimitsu say, 'People who are fond of me should spare me their poems or I shall have to regard them as enemies. When you feel that the time has come to break with me, just send one of those things.' So it is possible that Norimitsu never actually read the following poem that I sent in reply to his note:

Smoothly runs the river of Yoshino
Between Mount Imo and Mount Se.*
Yet, should those mountains crumble,
The river too would vanish from our sight.²⁰⁹

In any case he never answered it. At about the same time he was awarded the head-dress of nobility and appointed Assistant Governor of Tōtōmi; and so we parted while still on bad terms.

* 'Younger Sister' and 'Older Brother'.

207) Meaning he should do like
204 and not tell him.
209) Meaning if they stop being
close, she wouldn't recognize
him.

88. On the Tenth Day of Each Month³³⁸

On the tenth day of each month the Empress ordered that Dedications of Sutras and of Images be made on behalf of the late Chancellor. In the Ninth Month the service was held in the Empress's Office with many Court Nobles and senior courtiers in attendance. Seihan was the preacher, and his sermon was so sad that everyone wept, including the young people, who as a rule are not very sensitive to the pathos of things.³³⁹

When it was finished, the gentlemen drank wine and recited Chinese poems. Captain Tadanobu quoted the lines,

Where is he now
When moon and autumn have returned at the appointed time?³⁴⁰

It was splendid, and I wondered how he could have thought of such an appropriate passage. I made my way through the crowd of ladies to where the Empress was standing, and found that she was on the point of leaving. 'Wasn't he magnificent?' she said. 'Those lines were just right for the occasion.' 'Yes, Your Majesty,' I said. 'I wanted to tell you about it, so I had a quick glance at the ceremony and then came to look for you. The more I think about his quotation, the more impressed I am.'

'Indeed,' said Her Majesty, 'I can see why you would be more impressed than anyone.'³⁴¹

One day Tadanobu sent someone especially to ask for me, but I did not go. Later when we met by accident he said, 'Why do you refuse to be on close terms with me? It is very strange, for I know you do not dislike me. Surely a friendship that has lasted all this time cannot end so coldly. At present I can visit you here whenever I want, but the time may come when that will be impossible and then what will there be to show for our relationship?'

'Indeed,' I replied, 'it would not be difficult for us to come together. But, if we did, I could no longer go on praising you, and that would be a great shame. As things are, when I am in Her Majesty's presence with all the other ladies gathered about, I am forever singing your praises as though it were my function in life. But, if we did as you want, how could that continue? Then it would go against my conscience to say anything nice about you. So please just think of me fondly and don't take things any further.'

'How so?' he said, laughing. 'There are many people on intimate terms who praise each other far more than mere acquaintances ever do.'

'If I did not find that sort of thing so distasteful,' I replied, 'I should certainly accept your proposal. But I can't stand men or women who praise their lovers and who get angry if someone says the slightest thing against them.'

'That doesn't make you sound very dependable,' said Tadanobu, which amused me greatly.³⁴²

342) Sei's attitude is the more
normal one, excessively
praising a lover was seen as
covering up for being unfaithful.

89. *One Evening Yukinari, the Controller First Secretary*

One evening Yukinari, the Controller First Secretary, came to the Empress's Office and stayed there talking until late at night. 'Tomorrow is a day of Imperial Abstinence,' he said as he left, 'and I have to remain in the Palace. I must certainly go home before the Hour of the Ox.'³⁴³

On the following morning a messenger brought me several sheets of Kōya paper of the type the Chamberlains use in the Emperor's Private Office. 'Today,' I read, 'my heart is full of memories of our meeting. I had hoped that I might stay until the morning telling you of bygone tales, but the cock's crow forced me to take my leave. . .'³⁴⁴ It was a long letter, very elegantly written and contrived to give an impression that was quite contrary to the truth.³⁴⁵ I was much impressed and replied, 'Can the cock's crow that we heard so late at night be that which saved the Lord of Meng-ch'ang?'³⁴⁶ Yukinari answered, 'It is said that the cock's crow opened the barrier of Han Ku and allowed the Lord of Meng-ch'ang to escape in the nick of time with his three thousand followers.'³⁴⁷ But we are concerned with a far less distant barrier - the Barrier of Ōsaka.* I then sent him this poem:

There may be some who are deceived
By the cock's crow that falsely breaks
The stillness of the night.
But such a fraud will not beguile
The Barrier of Ōsaka,
Where lovers have their trysts.

And as a postscript: 'I am told that the gate-keeper is a very shrewd man.'

343) 2 am

344) This letter heavily implies they slept together

345) She is saying they did not

346) The crow in this story was a trick Meng-ch'ang used to escape, Sei accuses him of being equally tricky/deceitful.

347) Adding detail to show he gets her reference.
Ōsaka = slope of meetings

Yukinari promptly replied:

I have heard it said
That Ōsaka's Barrier can be freely crossed.
No need here for the cock to crow:
This gate is ever opened wide,
And waits each wanderer who comes.³⁴⁸

Bishop Ryūen was much impressed by this exchange. Bowing deeply, he took the first of the letters and brought it to the Empress; later he showed her all the others also.

When I met Yukinari a little later, he laughed and said, 'I am sorry that my poem was too much for you and that in the end you never answered. By the way, all the senior courtiers have seen your letters.'

'Well then,' I replied, 'you must have a very high opinion of me. If one has been impressed by a letter one finds it a shame not to let other people see it. Since *your* letters, on the other hand, were rather poor, I hid them carefully and didn't let anyone get a glimpse. So our intentions were equally good.'

Yukinari laughed. 'You really have an unusual way of thinking things out before you speak,' he said. 'Most women would have answered with something like, "I did not like your letters. They are too shallow."'

'Far from resenting that comment,' I said, 'I am most grateful for it.'

'Well,' said Yukinari, 'it's a good thing you've hidden my letters. It would have been very sad and painful for me if you had shown them to anyone. Please go on hiding them in future.'

Not long afterwards I met Captain Tsunafusa. 'Did you know that Yukinari has been singing your praises?' he said. 'He told me about the conversation after your exchange of letters the other day. It is a great pleasure to hear people praising a woman one loves.'

I was delighted by his sincere manner and said, 'So now I have two things to make me happy: first being praised by Yukinari and secondly being included among those you love.'

'That's strange,' Tsunafusa said. 'You speak as though it were something new.'

348) He is accusing her of sleeping with anyone.