

The Honorable Picnic

A 1920s Novel About Japan

Thomas Raucat

Translated by Leonard Cline



THE HONORABLE PICNIC

Penned in 1924, this has been called the best novel ever written about Japan, and its charm remains undiminished. The French author, a pilot during World War I, was sent to Japan as a flying instructor after the war, and this book is a fictionalised account with line drawings of the year he spent there. Writing in deceptively simple style and displaying an exceptional gift for observation, Raucat tells of a trip to the holiday island of Enoshima that goes badly wrong. By adopting the perspectives of different people in his narrative—the foreigner bent on seduction, the poor young girl who is the object of his interest, the station-master at the train station where the two are supposed to meet, the proprietress of a hotel, the girl's friend and her spoiled son, a geisha and a young man – he builds up a complex picture and a mood that shifts quickly from light to shadows, offering penetrating insights into the Japanese character, and capturing the heady and rarely-portrayed atmosphere of Tokyo in the Twenties.

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HONORABLE PICNIC

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THOMAS RAUCAT

Translated by
LEONARD CLINE

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Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original copies may be apparent. The publisher has made every effort to contact original copyright holders and would welcome correspondence from those they have been unable to trace.

Note

In Japanese *e* is pronounced like long *a*, and *u* like *oo*, except at the end of a word, when it is pronounced almost like the *a* in *final*. There are no diphthongs; successive vowels are sounded separately. Pronounce *ch* as in church; *g* and *s* are always hard; *b* is strongly aspirated.

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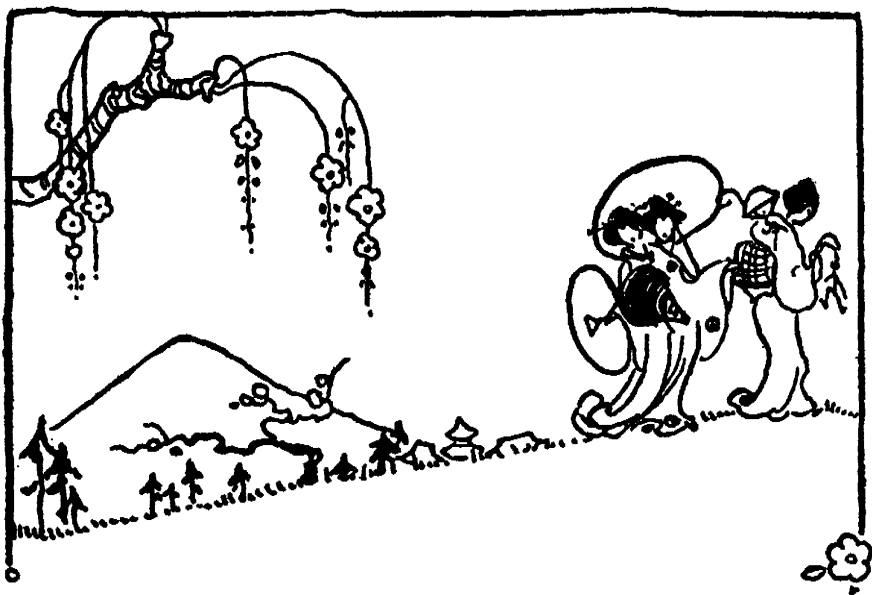
* CONTENTS *

<i>Prologue:</i> IN A HYDROPLANE	3
I YOUNG GIRL	11
II SEVERAL BOURGEOIS	40
III SEDUCER	72
IV RECEPTION	101
V THE HONORABLE-HOT-BATH	128
VI THE HAT OF TARO-SAN	149
VII GEISHA-GIRL	216
VIII O-TSUKI-SAMA	297

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The
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Prologue: IN A HYDROPLANE

TOKIO, Saturday, June 10, 1922, three o'clock in the afternoon. After the torrential downpour of the night an ardent sun is blazing.

In the public park of Ueno the Universal Peace Exposition hums its merriest. A multicolored crowd throngs about strange edifices which combine all styles of architecture and house the most diverse wares. But for the public the chief attraction is to be found on the pond of Ueno. Last summer this was still a tranquil marsh covered with pale pink lotuses. On an island stood a little hushed temple. Today the pond is cut in two by a great

concrete bridge, the Bridge of Peace. Jets of water spurt from the lake and at night the lanterns shine into its depths. All day long two noisy machines go spluttering back and forth across it while the crowd stares in amazement; these are the hydro-planes.

Thirty passengers can be accommodated in each, sitting in a spacious car supported on floats. On each side are canvas wings, small enough so that there is no danger of flying away. The propeller whirls at terrific speed and makes a tremendous roar, and the machine moves forward—but not fast enough to overtake the black swans on the water: the motor is six horse-power and no more.

Tickets cost ten sen.* For that modest price one hears astounded the terrific back-firing which precludes the departure; then before the eyes of all one makes a tour of the pond, and one disembarks at last, laughing, one's ears still deafened and utterly convinced that one has gone aloft in an airplane. For most of the visitors this is the most beautiful memory of the Exposition.

Two girls were following the path along the

* The Japanese monetary unit is the yen, at this period worth about one dollar. The yen is equal to 100 sen, which thus correspond to one cent each.

lake, walking in the direction of the hydroplane wharf. They were dressed in gay colors and appeared to be no older than eighteen. If the one was vivacious the other was remarkably pretty. Judging by their elegant coquettishness they were not country girls but rather residents of Tokio. Viewed from behind, parasols swaying above their bodies, one of them resembled a nasturtium and the other a geranium.

Ten steps behind followed a European whose eye never left them. He was a man no longer young, but refined and well-groomed. He was tall and robust, and his clean-shaven face had the long delicate nose of a sensualist. He had been following the girls for some time and was seeking some opportunity to come up with them.

Farther back in the crowd a little man of Asiatic hue was trying to make his way through the throng of people and overtake the foreigner. He was correctly dressed in a European suit and his watch-chain was of gold. He was a well-to-do manufacturer of Tokio; he had recognized the European in passing as a man with whom he had had some business a few months previous, and he desired to wish him good-day.

When the girls arrived at the hydroplane kiosk, the crowd happened to have thinned. They got tickets at once and went laughing to find seats in the car. The foreigner was close behind and succeeded in finding room on the bench beside the prettier of the girls. He was just about to speak to her when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned. It was his Japanese friend, who had caught up with him and managed to squeeze into a seat behind.

Most deferentially the Japanese saluted the foreigner. The foreigner replied in fairly understandable Japanese. He was exasperated at the prospect of a long conversation and said briefly that he was very busy on an important mission which had sent him to Tokio; his sojourn would not soon be over.

The motor started and its noise interrupted their conversation. The foreigner turned back then to his neighbor. Being a man of some experience, he knew that the girls of Tokio seldom refuse the invitation of an outing. After some gallant preliminaries he proposed to take her to the country for luncheon some day soon, and he suggested various places where they might go.

The hydroplane slid away on its circuit of the pond. The motor crepitated in front of them, and although they did not go fast there was a considerable breeze. As loud as he could the foreigner talked, and the girl kept her eyes stubbornly on the tip of her parasol and gave no sign of listening. But when he mentioned the name of Enoshima, which is a famous resort for excursionists in the environs of Tokio, she finally lifted her face with a tiny smile. Then they discussed the matter.

If the girls of Tokio are very naïve, they are likewise very timid. The foreigner had to make many concessions to her desires. She accepted with pleasure his invitation to visit Enoshima and he named the second day following; the next day, Sunday, it would be too crowded. As she was reluctant to travel with him in the train he agreed finally that she should follow on the next one, bringing with her a friend if she pleased. It was arranged that they would meet there at a hotel.

The foreigner had never been to Enoshima and was not familiar with the hotels, so he turned cynically to his Japanese friend and asked him to rec-

commend one. And the other shouted back "The Hotel Umematsuya." *

That was enough; the foreigner had the railroad time-table with him. He would take a train at 9:45 and his neighbor would take the 10:20. Indeed that arrangement was to be preferred. Arriving first, he would be able more easily to arrange their stay at the hotel, which was the only thing that interested him.

In order that the girl should not forget and should consider herself obligated, the foreigner provided for her expenses in advance by giving her a ten-yen bill on which he had marked the train time and the name of the hotel.

She slipped the bill into her girdle without looking at it; then, dropping her head with embarrassment, she thanked him. And at once she began an animated chatter with her companion.

The hydroplane completed its tour of the pond. The foreigner regretted neither the ten sen for his ticket, nor his ten yen, nor even his encounter with the gentleman who so opportunely had come to his aid with the name of a hotel.

* The House of the Pine and the Plum Tree (tokens of good luck).

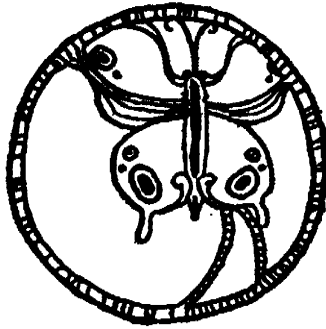
The boat landed and everybody got up to leave. At this juncture the Japanese flung himself upon the foreigner and shook both of his hands with the most anxious display of affability. Half of the previous conversation he had managed to overhear.

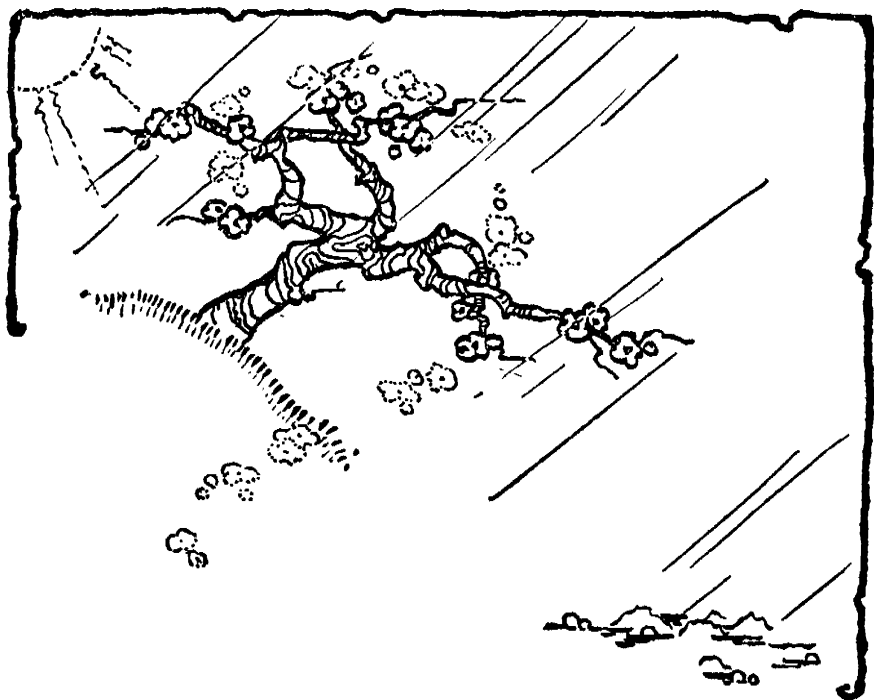
"Alas!" he ejaculated. "Your lordship does not yet know Enoshima, one of the wonders of Japan! And instead of addressing yourself to your most humble friend, who would consider it an honor to escort you there, you have given yourself over to those two working girls!

"Your egregious reticence toward me has been almost an affront! But it shall be remedied. None other than myself shall show you Enoshima! And since the day after tomorrow is convenient for you, I shall be waiting at the station for the 9:45 train, accompanied by some friends whom I shall gather in your honor. And I myself shall be your respectful host at the Hotel Umematsuya!"

Hastily the Japanese clambered out of the car and sought through all the crowds nearby for the two girls, to tell them not to put themselves to any trouble on Monday. But he sought them in vain. They were the first to hurry away, very excited and very joyous.

The foreigner, among the last to disembark, idly directed his steps toward the gate of the Exposition. He appeared to be somewhat vexed but, with the tenacity of the true gallant, he did not renounce for a minute his resolution to take in his arms on Monday this girl whom he hoped to know better.





I. YOUNG GIRL

*Sun and wind, rain and mud,
The cherry blossom shaking
down
Its petals of white . . .*

HEAVENS! Already five o'clock! How quickly time passes! I'll never have time to get dressed this morning before the ten o'clock train goes! And yet I must not disappoint the gentleman who invited me, especially the two honorable-friends that I have the pleasure of taking with me. One of them is

Otoku-San,* my dear friend, who happened to be with me at the Exposition when the miracle took place; I could do no less than ask her to come. And I had the happiness too of inviting one of our neighbors, a married woman. The fresh air will be good for her and for her little boy.

First I must sew the lining of my obi; † then I must comb and coil my hair very carefully, kneeling before the mirror. And there is always some hitch. It is so hard to place all the pins elegantly! And at the same time I must whiten my face and throat with beauty-cream; that is absolutely necessary.

It will not take so very long to dress. Of course you must knot the obi just so, prettily, on your back, turning to look over your shoulder into the mirror. But I will have to study myself patiently a long time in the glass. However successful your toilet may seem, the least little touch that you overlook is enough to make you ridiculous. And there are so many details! I am far from being ready, still.

How long this obi is to sew! But what a magnificent day it is! A little while ago when I got up

* Miss Honorable-Kindness.

† A long wide sash, by far the most precious part of feminine apparel.

the moon, white as silk, was floating in a pale sky. I was so excited: there will be sunshine for our outing! And yet we are still in the season which they call the Rain-of-Plums!

Think of going to Enoshima! They say it is wonderful. It's an island quite close to the coast. There must be twisted pines there and rocks of all colors . . . Maybe I'll never have another chance to take such an outing. It takes money, unfortunately.

My honorable-father is an agent in the custom-house at Fusan in Korea, and although he wears a uniform all braid and brass buttons, he doesn't make enough to send me much money. Of course since the death of my honorable-mother he has remarried twice and now he has seven other children to bring up. I haven't even met all of them. Just the same my honorable-father is very considerate of me and every time he writes I find a small check in the letter, without any explanation. My honorable-brother is not very rich either. He is married and lives in Tokio. I don't see him often, but sometimes he gives me a little present of money—although according to family custom it is I who should work for him.

I could live at the home of my honorable-grand-

mother, who is rich. She manages one of the restaurants in the town of Kozu. I could live there without doing any work. But I would rather live here in Tokio where I feel much happier. To come from Tokio is such a distinction! When I go to Kozu for a visit everybody respects me as a person from the capital.

So I live here with my uncle and he gives me room and board; in return I am asked to help the maid now and then with the cleaning and cooking. That takes only a little while and is not hard work. Beyond that my aunt doesn't bother herself much with me. And I am on very friendly terms with my cousins, their two honorable-children: a young gentleman of twenty who clerks in the honorable-shop, and a young lady of thirteen who goes to school every day.*

My honorable-uncle is a watchmaker; he lives in the Ryogoku quarter, which is quite pleasant. It's a little too popular, but it is very gay. We are in the neighborhood of the honorable-wrestlers' houses, and quite close to the Sumida River. When there is a wrestling match or a fête on the river many peo-

* The Japanese calculate age in a special manner. Subtract one year to find the age as we calculate it.

ple come to the quarter and it is very diverting. . . .

Oh, Mister Cricket! * Why don't you sing in your cage? You are tired, you are hungry. I'll go down to the kitchen and bring you back a bit of peach. . . .

This obi takes long to sew but little by little it is becoming so pretty! One's dress is exacting but thrilling. It is the only important thing in life. You are never done thinking about it; and yet every time I only think about the next one, not at all about the ones to come later.

One ought to wear different clothes every day, but I am not rich enough for that. So whenever I go out I change something about in order never to look quite the same. But in any case the New Year costume must be entirely new, and it includes not only robe, but also sash and cords, scarf, little bag, parasol or umbrella, stockings, geta,† and hair-pins. Also underclothes. You only catch a glimpse of these now and then when the kimono flutters apart as you walk. But it is just such small details

* During the summer it is customary in Japan to hang crickets in cages in the house.

† Small boards raised from the ground which serve as sandals.

that you must be most careful about. It is these that other people look at and that give you a smart appearance.

Girls should have new costumes for the February festivals, and others in April for the cherry-tree fête. The patterns of the obi then are cherry blossoms. Next is the festival of the little boys, and after that the festival of the soybean; and then comes summer. Now the styles become lighter and more flashy. In autumn the sash once more reflects the motives of the season. No more butterflies, but red maple leaves and then chrysanthemums. This is the Feast of the New Rice. And at last comes the snow costume.

Next year none of these costumes will do, because you grow older. The colors must be less lively and the designs smaller. And at that you never like to wear a costume from the year before. Anything that has been shown a single time is worn out by that fact alone.

Among all my obi there is just one lovely piece left. It is an obi with a chrysanthemum pattern that my honorable-grandmother gave me last fall; she made me pick it out when I was visiting her at Kozu. I have had no chance to wear it here in Tokio

because the season was over; the Chrysanthemum Show had ended. That enables me to wear it still this year. It cost the high price of 42 yen and it is therefore very beautiful, but I shall feel a little ashamed of deceiving the passersby when I wear it as if it were new.

It happens very rarely that I have the chance to dress up and go on an outing, I am so poor. And then too I would not dare. The last fine excursion that I remember was at the cherry-tree festival. My honorable-uncle took me. It was splendid. He closed the shop and he even got a beautiful geisha-young-lady,* who came with us carrying her mandolin wrapped in a great piece of white silk. There was my honorable-cousin and another honorable-young-man, a friend of his. Then my honorable-aunt who carried some sake,† kept warm in a thermos bottle, in a bandoleer. My other honorable-cousin, the little girl, carried some cakes of rice paste and dried potato. You can buy very good cakes at the park but they are more expensive. As for me, I carried the mat of straw on which we would kneel at the picnic; the ground is so dirty.

* A kind of actress.

† A light wine made of rice and served warm.

We took the train and got off beside the Tokio city water-supply canal.

Through all its length the lane of cherry trees was an inspiring picture. Great trees all rosy and white as far as you could see, more brilliant than you would ever imagine. They fairly burn your eyes. And beneath them people, drinking and singing joyously. In cherry-blossom time everybody ought to be happy; there is nothing to prevent it. My cousin had dressed himself up in a masquerade costume of red paper covered with stars and white moons. He was very funny. He had brought for me a green paper hat like the ones American women wear. But I did not wish to put it on. Even to have a good time, I do not care to make people laugh at me.

We had a hard time finding an empty place beneath a cherry tree, there were so many people. Finally I spread the mat on the grass and we knelt in a circle upon it. The geisha-young-lady was placed in the centre and all day she played and sang for us songs suited to the occasion, modern tunes as well as the old traditional ones, and especially the Dance from the time of the Gen-roku, a melody that I love, turn by turn so gay and so melancholy.

The gentlemen drank all the sake; it was necessary indeed to buy more three times. The geisha-young-lady drank a little and the honorable-friend of my cousin tried to make me sip from his cup. But ladies don't drink sake; it isn't done. And so we others ate many rice-cakes and drank lemonade.

There was a little breeze and the petals came fluttering down from the trees and fell on our shoulders. People stopped and knelt beside us in order to listen to the music, and a young gentleman who was disguised and who had been drinking actually tried to make me get up and dance with him, as the Americans do. But to dance with a man is outrageous. One may dance only by oneself. So I just laughed at him and stayed decorously on my knees.

What a lovely fête! The honorable-peddlers with their great colored baskets crying their wares. Everywhere the strumming of mandolins. Little children scampering merrily about and brandishing their red toys. And above, the cherry blossoms shining in the sun.

Toward five o'clock in the afternoon the geisha-young-lady took leave of us, having another engagement elsewhere. It began to get a bit cool and

we too turned home. The train was crowded with people, tired out but happy, and some of them a little drunk. All were carrying branches of cherry blossoms.

The party ended as magnificently as it began. My uncle wanted to have it perfect to the last minute. At the railroad station he called a taxicab to take my aunt, my little cousin and myself home. A taxicab: and without a thought for the expense!

For his part he took the young honorable-gentlemen to spend the evening in the finest joroya in the segregated district in Susaki, a suburb of Tokio. He chose this particular one because between the houses runs a famous lane of cherry trees. He himself only ate some rice and drank some more sake; but he helped the young gentlemen select the prettiest girls: and he stayed until they were ready to come home. Next day my cousin told me that from the chamber he occupied he could see the row of cherry trees gleaming under the moon. It seems to have been quite lovely.

Two days later, indeed, I took three of my friends, Kimi-San, Shizue-San and O-moto-San; *

* Miss Prince, Miss Peaceful-River, Miss Honorable-Fountainhead: feminine prænomena.

and we went to see the place by night. Truly I would never have believed there existed in Tokio cherry trees so big and so old! And we looked at the houses too. In the old days the pretty girls themselves sauntered and smiled in front of the houses; now, alas! you can admire them only in their photographs. But how large their portraits are and how expensive! And how well dressed they are! We were a little envious of their lot.

The next festival for which I must find a costume is that of All Souls. At Tokio it comes in the middle of July, which is a month away. And that night all the honorable-Spirits of the dead come to visit the earth and see how the living are behaving themselves. They themselves have become gods, because they are dead.*

Every year the city of Tokio puts on a great display of fireworks along the river for the honorable-Spirits of its former citizens; that serves to bring them together and do them honor. It is a magnificent fête. This year, according to the papers, on the holy night the Government will send military aviators to fly above the city and try

* The popular religion of Japan is a combination of Buddhist and Shinto beliefs.

to break the altitude records. Each of them will have as passengers a venerable-bonze who will keep setting off sky-rockets. I am sure none of the honorable-Spirits will miss this spectacle—they will all come to admire it.

The living also are permitted to watch the fireworks and a great throng will gather. Everybody laughs and sings; and gentlemen who can afford it drink sake in illuminated gondolas on the river, in the midst of dainty geisha-girls who play their mandolins. The honorable-Spirits of the dead are proud when they see how merry everyone is in their honor.

When the fête is over you go back home, where earlier in the evening you have lighted up the little Temple of the Ancestors and made it ready with offerings of rice paste and fruits. The Spirits of the honorable-dead-ancestors come in the night to visit your house. If the shrine is quite new and the offerings are nice, and if you are very gay, they are sure that you have been thinking of them and by way of thanks they give you happiness the whole year long.

For a woman, the only courtesy you can do toward the honorable-Spirits is to wear clothes just as

beautiful as the clothes which they themselves wear and which nobody can see. Moreover the Night of All Souls introduces the summer styles.

I myself am very much embarrassed this year; for I have not yet been able to get together a suitable costume. I bought a kimono in blue and white squares, for the fashion has reverted from stripes to checks. My cousin is happy; our proverb says that when checks come in style business must improve. But unfortunately I have no obi. I must have a summer obi, unlined and of Hakata silk braid. I want it mauve with a pattern of flowers in open-work. I can't do without it and yet it will cost so much! In order to buy it I am going to have to work every day at dressmaking during the month that remains. And I will ask them not to pay me until the end, so that I will not spend all the money as I get it. I will have to work very hard, but it is necessary. Otherwise, how could I go to the beautiful festival? And I shall be happy no matter how tired I am, for always I shall be thinking about my new obi.

This wonderful excursion today is something I never dreamed would happen. What a tangle of coincidences! How did I happen to be at the Uni-

versal Peace Exposition just at that time? It is a miracle. I had received a letter from my honorable-father which told me very formally of the birth of another baby, and by good fortune it was once again a boy. In the letter was a note of five yen, but it was not for me. My father asked me to take it for him to the temple of His Majesty the Emperor Meiji * as a thank-offering for having given him a son. That was the proper thing to do.

The Meiji Temple is at Aoyama, at the other end of Tokio, at least an hour and a half by tramway from the honorable-shop. On a fine day it's a splendid trip.

Saturday morning I put on a pretty costume and about nine o'clock Otoku-San and I left for Aoyama. We were very gay and proud to make so glorious a pilgrimage. The park in which the Meiji Temple stands is very lovely: the long road zig-zagging through it bordered by lofty trees; the lanterns of white stone, the great torii or consecrated porticos of wood, all new . . .

The temple itself is even more impressive and more new. A marvel of carven wood. After rinsing hands and mouth at the fountain in the court, you

* Meiji was the founder of the modern Japanese Empire.