

## CHAPTER XII

### SOME FOREIGN POEMS ON JAPANESE SUBJECTS

THE Western poet and writer of romance has exactly the same kind of difficulty in comprehending Eastern subjects as you have in comprehending Western subjects. You will commonly find references to Japanese love poems of the popular kind, made in such a way as to indicate the writer's belief that such poems refer to married life or at least to a courtship relation. No Western writer who has not lived for many years in the East, could write correctly about anything on this subject; and even after a long stay in the country he might be unable to understand. Therefore a great deal of Western poetry written about Japan must seem to you all wrong, and I cannot hope to offer you many specimens of work in this direction that could deserve your praise. Yet there is some poetry so fine on the subject of Japan that I think you would admire it and I am sure that you should know it. A proof of really great art is that it is generally true—it seldom falls into the misapprehensions to which minor art is liable. What do you think of the fact that the finest poetry ever written upon a Japanese subject by any Western poet has been written by a man who never saw the land? But he is a member of the French Academy, a great and true lover of art, and without a living superior in that most difficult form of poetry, the sonnet. In the time of thirty years he produced only one very small volume of sonnets, but so fine are these that they were lifted to the very highest place in poetical distinction. I may say that there are now only three really great French poets—survivals of the grand romantic school. These are Leconte de Lisle, Sully-Prudhomme, and José-Maria de Heredia. It is

the last of whom I am speaking. As you can tell by his name, he is not a Frenchman either by birth or blood, but a Spaniard, or rather a Spanish creole, born in Cuba. Heredia knows Japan only through pictures, armour, objects of art in museums, paintings and carvings. Remembering this, I think that you will find that he does wonderfully well. It is true that he puts a woman in one of his pictures, but I think that his management of his subject is very much nearer the truth than that of almost any writer who has attempted to describe old Japan. And you must understand that the following sonnet is essentially intended to be a picture—to produce upon the mind exactly the same effect that a picture does, with the addition of such life as poetry can give.

### LE SAMOURAÏ

*C'était un homme à deux sabres.*

D'un doigt distrait frôlant la sonore biva,  
A travers les bambous tressés en fine latte,  
Elle a vu, par la plage éblouissante et plate,  
S'avancer le vainqueur que son amour rêva.

C'est lui. Sabres au flanc, l'éventail haut, il va.  
La cordelière rouge et le gland écarlate  
Coupent l'armure sombre, et, sur l'épaule, éclate  
Le blason de Hizen ou de Tokungawa.

Ce beau guerrier vêtu de lames et de plaques,  
Sous le bronze, la soie et les brillantes laques,  
Semble un crustacé noir, gigantesque et vermeil.

Il l'a vue. Il sourit dans la barbe du masque,  
Et son pas plus hâtif fait reluire au soleil  
Les deux antennes d'or qui tremblent à son casque.

“Lightly touching her *biva* with heedless finger, she has perceived, through the finely woven bamboo screen, the conqueror, lovingly thought of, approach over the dazzling level of the beach.

“It is he. With his swords at his side, he advances, holding up his fan. The red girdle and the scarlet tassel appear

in sharply cut relief against the dark armour; and upon his shoulder, glitters a crest of Hizen or of Tokungawa.

“This handsome warrior sheathed with his scales and plates of metal, under his bronze, his silk and glimmering lacquer, seems a crustacean gigantic, black and vermilion.

“He has caught sight of her. Under the beaver of the war mask he smiles, and his quickened step makes to glitter in the sun the two antennæ of gold that quiver upon his helmet.”

The comparison of a warrior in full armour to a gigantic crab or lobster, especially lobster, is not exactly new. Victor Hugo has used it before in French literature, just as Carlyle has used it in English literature; indeed the image could not fail to occur to the artist in any country where the study of armour has been carried on. But here the poet does not speak of any particular creature; he uses only the generic term, crustacean, the vagueness of which makes the comparison much more effective. I think you can see the whole picture at once. It is a Japanese colour-print,—some ancient interior, lighted by the sun of a great summer day; and a woman looking through a bamboo blind toward the sea-shore, where she sees a warrior approaching. He divines that he is seen; but if he smiles, it is only because the smile is hidden by his iron mask. The only sign of any sentiment on his part is that he walks a little quicker. Still more amazing is a companion picture, containing only a solitary figure :

## LE DAÏMIO

*Matin de bataille.*

Sous le noir fouet de guerre à quadruple pompon,  
L'étalon belliqueux en hennissant se cabre  
Et fait bruire, avec de cliquetis de sabre,  
La cuirasse de bronze aux lames du jupon.

Le Chef vêtu d'airain, de laque et de crépon.  
Otant le masque à poils de son visage glabre,  
Regarde le volcan sur un ciel de cinabre  
Dresser la neige où rit l'aurore du Nippon.

Mais il a vu, vers l'Est éclabussé d'or, l'astre,  
 Glorieux d'éclairer ce matin de désastre,  
 Poindre, orbe éblouissant, au-dessus de la mer ;

Et, pour couvrir ses yeux dont pas un cil ne bouge,  
 Il ouvre d'un seul coup son éventail de fer  
 Où dans le satin blanc se lève un Soleil rouge.

“Under the black war whip with its quadruple pompon, the fierce stallion, whinnying, curvets, and makes the rider's bronze cuirasse ring against the plates of his shirt of mail, with a sound like the clashing of sword blades.

“The Chief, clad in bronze and lacquer and silken crape, removing the bearded masque from his beardless face, turns his gaze to the great volcano, lifting its snows into the cinabar sky where the dawn of Nippon begins to smile.

“Nay! he has already seen the gold-spattered day star, gloriously illuminating the morning of disaster, rise, a blinding disk, above the seas. And, to shade his eyes, on both of which not even a single eyelash stirs, he opens with one quick movement his iron fan, wherein upon a field of white satin there rises a crimson sun.”

Of course this hasty translation is very poor ; and you can only get from it the signification and colour of the picture—the beautiful sonority and luminosity of the French is all gone. Nevertheless, I am sure that the more you study the original the more you will see how fine it is. Here also is a Japanese colour-print. We see the figure of the horseman on the shore, in the light of dawn ; behind him the still dark sky of night ; before him the crimson dawn, and Fuji white against the red sky. And in the open fan, with its red sun, we have a grim suggestion of the day of blood that is about to be ; that is all. But whoever reads that sonnet will never forget it ; it burns into the memory. So, indeed, does everything that Heredia writes. Unfortunately he has not yet written anything more about Japan.

I have quoted Heredia because I think that no other poet has even approached him in the attempt to make a Japanese



picture—though many others have tried; and the French, nearly always, have done much better than the English, because they are more naturally artists. Indeed one must be something of an artist to write anything in the way of good poetry on a Japanese subject. If you look at the collection, "Poems of Places," in the library, you will see how poorly Japan is there represented; the only respectable piece of foreign work being by Longfellow, and that is only about Japanese vases. But since then some English poems have appeared which are at least worthy of Japanese notice.