The Lady Who Admired Vermin

Next to the place where lived the lady who admired butterflies was the daughter of the Inspector–Major Counselor, whose parents tended

her with such infinite care that she grew up to be a creature of intriguing and exceptional beauty.

This lady collected great numbers of frightful-looking vermin. "The way people lose themselves in admiration of blossoms and butterflies is positively silly and incomprehensible," she would say. "It is the person who wants the truth and inquires into the essence of things who has an interesting mind."

And she put them into different kinds of screened boxes to see how they would develop. "What intrigues me the most is the caterpillars, which have a certain appeal," she would say, and she would lay them out on the palm of her hand and watch them from morning till evening with her hair drawn back behind her ears.

Since her young ladies were dismayed at this behavior, she gathered around her a band of fearless and disreputable boys, and amused herself by giving them the vermin in the boxes to hold, asking their names and assigning names to the unfamiliar ones.

"As a rule it is wrong for people to make themselves up," she would say, and never plucked her eyebrows, and never applied tooth blackening because she thought it was bothersome and dirty. And she doted on the vermin from morning till night, all the while showing the gleaming white of her teeth in a smile.

Whenever people fled from her in consternation, this "lady" would shout at them in a very peculiar manner. The people thus frightened she would transfix with a stare from under heavy black eyebrows, calling them "Disgraceful!" "Vulgar!" so that they were bewildered all the more.

"That she should be so peculiar and behave so differently!" her parents thought. But at the same time they wondered, "Can there be some meaning in this that she has comprehended? Whenever we think that something she does is odd and tell her about it, she contradicts us no end. It makes one feel so intimidated!" And they were very embarrassed by this behavior too. "That may be," they told her. "But you are getting a strange reputation. What people like is good looks. If society were to hear that you enjoy playing with weird-looking caterpillars, it would put you in a very peculiar light."

"I don't care. Only when one examines all things and looks at their outcome do things have significance. That's being very childish, because

caterpillars turn into butterflies." She took out some in which that phase was emerging, and as she showed them, said, "The clothes that people wear by the name of 'silk' are produced by worms before they grow wings, and when they become butterflies, why then they are completely ignored and are worthless!" Against this they could find no argument and were confounded.

Nevertheless, she was lady enough not to display herself even to her parents, and she held the opinion that "Devils and women are better invisible to the eyes of mankind." Thus would she deliver herself so cleverly from behind a curtain stand set out by a slightly raised blind in the main chamber of the house.

Her young ladies would listen to all of this. "She puts on quite a show, but leaves you positively bewildered. These playthings of hers! I wonder what kind of people serve the lady who admires butterflies," said one of them who was called Hyōe, and recited:

ikade ware
tokamu kata naku
ide shi ga na
kawamushi nagara
miru waza wa seji

What means have I
to make her understand?
Oh, to go away!
I would never look upon those things
in their caterpillar stage again.

Another, who was called Little Tayū, recited laughing:

urayamashi
hana ya chō ya to
iumeredo
kawamushi kusaki
yo o mo miru ka na

I do envy them.
"Ah, the blossoms! Ah, the butterflies!"
they will be exclaiming;
while what have we to look upon
but a world that reeks of caterpillars!

"Too harsh, really," said one who was called Sakon. "Her eyebrows look like furry caterpillars all right, but her bare teeth you would think have been skinned.

fuyu kureba
koromo tanomoshi
samuku tomo
kawamushi ōku
miyuru atari wa

In wintertime
we can depend on having coats
however cold it is,
in a place like this where one can see
so many worms with furry skins.

We could easily get along without clothes, you know."

They were overheard telling each other such things by a faultfinding woman, who said, "Whatever are you young people saying! I find nothing at all admirable about a person who is supposed to admire butterflies. You are quite inexcusable! And besides, would anyone line up caterpillars and call them butterflies? It's just that they molt, you know. She examines that stage. That is good sense. When you catch a butterfly, its dust sticks to your hand and makes it very unpleasant, you know. Also, they say that if you catch a butterfly, it gives you the ague. Horrid things!"

But this only made them even more malicious in their remarks to one another.

To the boys who caught the vermin the lady gave interesting things, things they desired; and so they collected various kinds of frightful-looking creatures and presented them to her. Although the caterpillars had fine-looking fur and all, they did not suggest anything to her imagination, and for that reason she found them lacking. So they would collect such things as mantises and snails, and she had them sing loud songs about them for her to hear, and raised her voice herself to chant the ditty:

katatsuburi no tsuno no
arasou ya nazo

Why do the horns of the snail
battle each other to no avail?

She was disappointed to find that the boys' names were so ordinary, and so she named them after insects and other low creatures. She employed them under such names as Mole Cricket, Toady, Dragonfly, Grasshopper, and Millipede.

Such things became known in public, and there were people who said very disagreeable things, among them a certain young man well connected by marriage, who was high-spirited, fearless, and personable. Hearing about the lady, he said, "Well, I bet she will be afraid of this." And he fashioned the end of a sash—very beautiful to look at—into the close likeness of a snake, fixed it so that it could move and all, put it into a bag that had a scaly pattern and a string to draw it closed, and tied a note to it which read:

hau hau mo
kimi ga atari ni
shitagawamu
nagaki kokoro no
kagiri naki mi wa

Ever so slowly
creeping, creeping would I follow
by my lady's side,
I who am long in faithfulness
that stretches on without an end.

When they saw what was written, they brought it into her presence in all innocence. "These bags are always so strangely heavy just to lift!" they remarked as they drew it open. And there was the snake with its head raised up. Her people cried out in bewilderment, but the lady was very calm. "Praised be Amida Buddha! Praised be Amida Buddha!" she intoned.

"It must be an ancestor reborn in this present form. Don't carry on so!" she quavered; and averting her face, she muttered as she drew it close to her, "Right now, while it is still so young and lovely, I want to have a feeling of kinship for it. How low-minded all of you are!"

But even a woman of her temperament felt so afraid that she fidgeted up and down like a butterfly, and the strained voice in which she spoke made a terribly funny sound, so that her people broke into laughter as they fled noisily away. Whereupon the news spread.

"What an appalling, unearthly thing is this I am hearing!" exclaimed His Lordship. "How unnatural that all of them should have left her with such a creature right there in front of their eyes!" And he rushed to her, sword in hand. When he looked at the thing closely, he saw that the gentleman had fashioned it into a very good likeness; and so, taking it into his hands, he said, "How very good this person is at making things! Apparently he has done this because he heard about the wise airs you put on and the kind of things you appreciate. Write an answer and send it to him at once." And with that he took his leave.

When her people heard that it was artificial they said angrily, "What an outrageous thing to do!"

"He will be left in suspense if you don't answer him," everyone told her, and so she wrote an answer on a very stiff and coarse piece of paper. Since she had never written in a cursive hand, it was done in the angular script.

chigiri araba
yoki gokuraku ni
yukiawamu
matsuwarenikushi
mushi no sugata wa

If we are bound by fate,
one day I shall encounter you
in that good paradise.
No easy thing to get involved with
is the shape of a lowly creature.

"In the garden of bliss."

When the young man, who was the Assistant Director of the Stables of the Right, saw it, he thought, "What a curious and different sort of

letter this is!" And hoping to find some way to have a look at her, he made an arrangement with a certain Middle Captain whereby they disguised themselves as common women, proceeded to the home of the Inspector–Major Counselor at a time when he was out, and watched from a position by a latticework on the north side of the quarters where the lady resided. They noticed some boys who were doing nothing unusual, loitering about and walking among the grasses and trees, when one of them said, "Look! Here's a whole bunch of them crawling all over this tree! These are very fine ones!"

"Would you look at these?" they said, raising one of the blinds. "We've got some wonderful caterpillars for you!"

"Oh what fun!" said the lady in a brisk voice. "Bring them here!"

"I don't think we can sort them out. Would you just come and look at them here?"

At that she trod brusquely into the open.

As the men watched her push the blind outward and stare wide-eyed at the branches, they saw that she wore a mantelet over her head; and her hair, though the sidelocks made a pretty curve downward, had a prickly look about it, perhaps because she did not groom it, while her eyebrows stood out very dark in gaudy relief and looked crisp. Her mouth was attractively formed and pretty, but since she did not apply tooth blackening, it was most unconventional. One felt that had she used cosmetics she would certainly be good-looking. How depressing! What a pity it was to see that she had let herself go so badly, yet was not unattractive, but looked quite different from the ordinary, was remarkably genteel, and had an air of brightness about her. She wore robes of figured silk in pale yellow under the outer robe with a katydid design, and preferred her trousers white.[3]

She went out because she wanted to examine the worms as closely as possible. "What a splendid sight!" she said. "They are coming this way because it hurts them to be burned in the sun. Round them up, boys, and don't miss a single one!"

As the boys knocked them off they fluttered to the ground. She held out a white fan with calligraphy on it that she had practiced in black strokes of India ink. "Pick them up and put them on this," she commanded, and the boys got them out.

3. The pale colors were appropriate for a middle-aged or older woman.

The two gentlemen were appalled. "How extraordinary in a place that has misfortune enough!" they thought; and in their opinion of her, as far as the gentlemen were concerned, she was incredible.

One of the boys, who was standing there, looked at them suspiciously and said, "Over there alongside that latticework some good-looking but strangely dressed men are standing and peeking at us!"

"How awful! I fear Milady is exposed to view because of her interest in playing with vermin the way she does. I shall go and inform her," said Lady Tayū; and when she came into her mistress's presence she found her outside the blind as usual, shouting and having the caterpillars brushed off so that they fell to the ground. Since they frightened her very much, she announced without coming too close, "Come inside, Madam! The veranda is exposed to view."

Believing that she spoke only to restrain her from what she was doing, the lady replied, "Well, what of it! I am not ashamed."

"Oh, what a sorry business! Do you think I am lying? Why do you act this way when they say that some very magnificent-looking persons are over by the latticework! Come inside and look!"

"Mole Cricket, go over there and take a look!" said the lady.

He ran over and then reported, "They are really there!"

At this the lady jumped to her feet, and the caterpillars she gathered up and put into her sleeve before she ran inside. Her figure was nicely proportioned, and her hair fell very abundantly the full length of her robes. Since it was untrimmed at the edges, it did not form a cluster, yet it flowed evenly and looked only the more beautiful.

"Most people are not this well favored. Is it so regrettable that they try to improve their personal appearance and manner? One ought really to be repelled by her appearance, yet she is very nice looking and genteel, and it is surely only her troublesome qualities that make her different. Oh, how regrettable! Why does she have such a weird mind, and when she looks so nice too!"

So the gentlemen thought. The Assistant Director was highly dissatisfied with the prospect of just going away. He would at least let her know that he had seen her. Therefore he used the juice of a plant to write on a sheet of folded paper:

kawamushi no
kebukaki sama o
mitsuru yori

Now that I have seen
significant depths in caterpillar fur,
I have every hope

torimochite nomi
mamorubeki ka na

that I may keep yours in hand for good
to watch and guard with tender care!

He tapped with his fan, whereupon a boy appeared. "Present this to the lady," he said, giving it to him.

The lady called Tayū accepted it from the boy as he told her, "The person standing over there says to present this to Her Ladyship."

"Oh, how awful!" she said. "This does indeed seem to be the work of the Assistant Director of the Stables of the Right. He must have seen your face, Madam, while you were amusing yourself with those wretched bugs!" And she told her mistress a thing or two.

To which the lady replied, "When one thinks things through, one realizes that nothing is shameful. Who among men can stay long enough in this dreamlike and illusory world to look at bad things or look at the good and wonder about them?"

There was no point in saying anything to that, and her young people turned to each other in despair. The men stood by for a while on the off chance that there might be a reply, but the ladies called all the boys inside. "A sorry business!" they said to one another.

There must have been some among those present who understood what was required, for one of them did rise to the occasion and out of sympathy wrote:

hito ni ninu
kokoro no uchi wa
kawamushi no
na o toite koso
iwamahoshikere

The depths of a heart
so unlike the hearts of other human beings
I certainly wish to reveal;
but only when I have asked the person's name
as I do with caterpillars whom I do not know.

The Assistant Director recited:

kawamushi ni
magiruru mayu no
ke no sue ni
ataru bakari no
hito wa naki ka na

No one at all
could equal the tip of a single hair
growing on those eyebrows,
which are all but indistinguishable
from furry caterpillar forms!

Then, laughing, he apparently went home.

What happened next you shall read in Scroll Two.