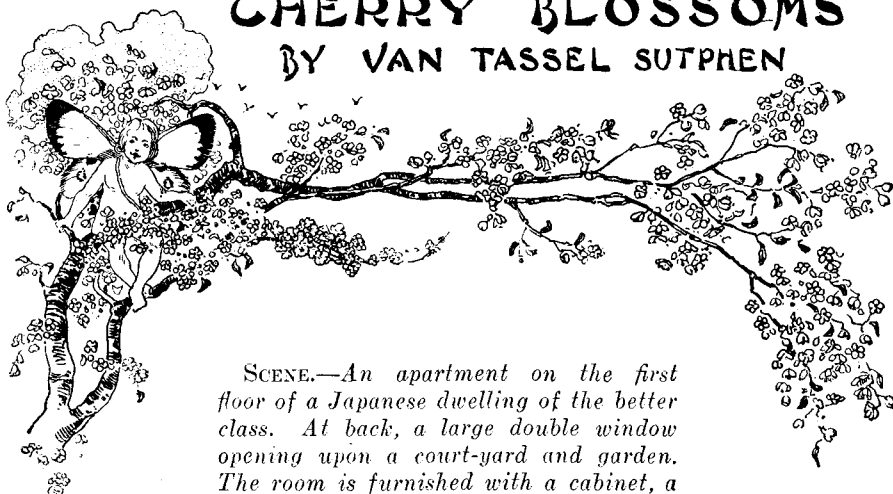


# CHERRY BLOSSOMS

BY VAN TASSEL SUTPHEN



SCENE.—An apartment on the first floor of a Japanese dwelling of the better class. At back, a large double window opening upon a court-yard and garden. The room is furnished with a cabinet, a tea-stand, and cushions. NARA is discovered sitting absorbed in thought at the large window at the back. She leans forward as though speaking to some one in the garden.

NARA. For me? Then bring it up at once.

[She goes to the street door, opens it, and a large box is handed in, which she takes and opens eagerly.

Cherry blossoms!

[She places the box on the tea-stand, kneels, and rapturously inhales the perfume of the flowers.

From him! My love, my dearest love!

[A pause.

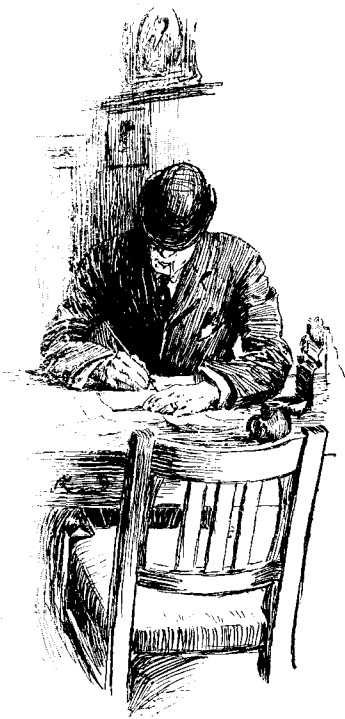
How do I know? (With a little laugh.) What a foolish question! How does the blind beggar know that the sun is shining? Ah, my little sisters, is it not a part of our birthright to understand these things? Let Love but pass through the city street, and in every house there will be a woman who will turn her head for an instant and listen—listen until the retreating footsteps have died away. And when he stops at the appointed place, she to whom he was sent will await him at the door. Ah, yes, my sisters, we know—we know.

[She takes a hand-glass from the cabinet and arranges the spray of blossoms in her hair. Then with a quick movement she snatches up the box of flowers, and partly empties out its contents.

No written message; not even a word of greeting. (A moment's silence.) But what does it matter? He has forgiven and is coming back to me; is not that enough to know? My pink and white cherry blossoms are better than a letter, for instead of one word I have a thousand and one.

[She again inhales the perfume of the flowers.





I must put them in water.

*[She claps her hands, calling loudly: Ito! Ito! Bring water and a vase, the large one with the rose-pink handles.]*

*[She places the box of flowers on the cabinet, and goes to the window, where she looks out.]*

It is already long after four by the big clock on the university building, and at five o'clock he will be here—on his way up from the club.

*[She sinks down on a pile of cushions, fanning herself slowly.]*

How they adore their stupid club—these Englishmen. There is not much of what they call sport in Japan, and so they meet to kill time. It cannot be very amusing—nothing but pool and Nap and whiskey pegs all day long. My Justin told me all about it once, and I have forbidden him to go there, except just to glance over the foreign papers. And no pegs. A cup of tea is better, and it is always waiting for him here when the big clock counts off five.

*[She beats up the cushions and changes her position.]*

It is but just around the corner; in such a very few minutes he will be here in the garden, and under my window. It is open, and he will take the rose from his button-hole and toss it in. I look up; the rose is lying at my feet; he is here.

*[She rises, goes over to the street door, and listens. I hear his foot upon the landing, he stops, he knocks.]*

*[She puts her hand to her heart, retreating a few steps and listening.]*

Ah, my heart! It stops beating for a moment, and then begins again, so fast that I am shaken like a reed in the wind.

*[She steadies herself with one hand on the wall. There! it has passed, and he knocks again.]*

*[She looks over at the street door.]*

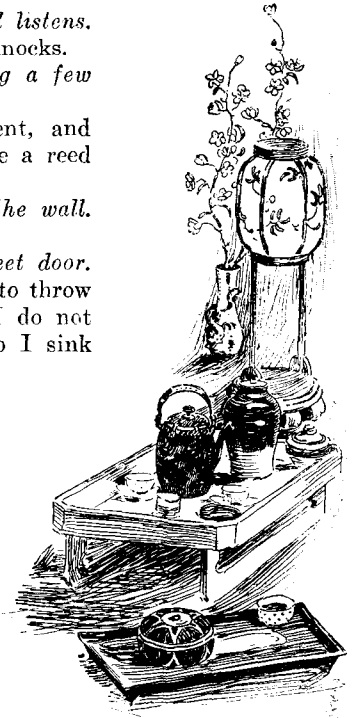
I am dying to rush to the door, to fling it open, to throw myself at his feet. But I am a woman, and I do not forget that these things are forbidden. And so I sink down again among my cushions.

*[She suits the action to the word. I wait a little longer, and then I say, very quietly, Enter.]*

*[She turns her head towards the street door, smiles, rises, and curtsies.]*

Your honorable Excellency! Be pleased to illuminate with the radiance of your presence the darkness of my unworthy dwelling.

*[She continues to bow and to walk backward, as though conducting the imaginary guest to the seat of honor.]*



Let it be your honorable pleasure to step this way. Be content, O illustrious one—

*[With an entire change of manner, and turning around.]*

But it is always at this point that he bursts out laughing, and catches me up in his arms, and I can only look ashamed, and, I am afraid, so happy.

*[She goes again to the cabinet, and bends for an instant over the box of cherry blossoms.]*

Justin will not let me burn my little stick of incense before him. He says that it is he who should kneel and kiss my hand. It is strange.

*[She stands meditating, with folded hands. With a little sigh:]*

You see, it is so difficult for the East and the West to understand each other. As between a man and a woman it is hard enough, but I am Nara, born to the east of the sun, while Justin has blue eyes and yellow hair, and came to Japan for the first time only a year ago. *[She seats herself.]*

And so it happens often that spoken words but confuse the more. We should never understand each other at all were it not for that other language which is older than either the East or the West. A look, the pressure of the hand, and all is made plain.

*[Rising and reverting to her former manner.]*

Will my lord have his tea?

*[She claps her hands.]*

Ito, the hot water.

*[She arranges the tea things upon the stand.]*

In a few minutes it will be ready.

*[Crossing.]*

My honorable friend is weary; it has been a long day at the office of the Embassy? *[Retreating a step or two.]*

No, my Justin, you must not touch me. See! I have been inventing some new steps. They are pretty, but judge for yourself. The music—you know how it goes—  
lá, lá, lá, lá—

*[She dances a few steps, and ends by taking a submissive attitude, her head bent, and her arms crossed upon her breast.]*

Is my lord pleased?

*[A pause. She draws aside a little and smiles.]*

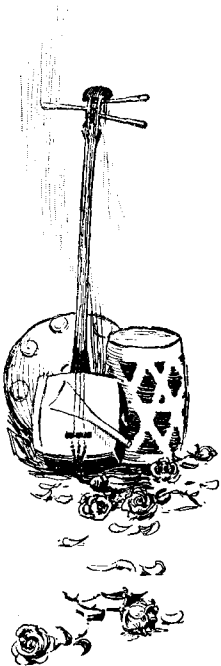
And then—and then—he springs to his feet, he puts out his hand, he draws me—oh—

*[She lets her hands fall as though suddenly weary, and turns away with a half sob.]*

How foolish I am! A day-dream to be blotted out so soon by the coming of the night. And with the night, the dreadful "Hour of the Ox"—that hour before the dawn, when the blood runs chill and the pulse beats slowly and yet more slowly. Oh, Nara, foolish indeed!

*[She sinks down among the cushions.]*

It must be decided now—finally and for aye. My father





will never consent. He is bound in honor to Watairo, my cousin, and I am the pledge of their bargain; yes, I, Nara, who love Justin, the Western stranger, him with the fair hair and the big laugh.

And Justin, he is just as unreasonable; he will not brook to wait, as a woman learns so soon to do. He will have it that I go with him now before his priest, and then away over the black water, across the rim of the setting sun. And I—I am afraid.

*[She rises and paces restlessly up and down the room.]*

It is twice now that he has asked me to do this thing, and twice that I have refused. He went away angry that last

time; it is four whole days since I have had even a sign from him. Now he is coming to-day—for the third time. And I am still unready.

*[She stops at the cabinet, and continues in a half whisper:]* I had another message to-day. It was from my cousin Watairo, and until now I have not had the courage to read it.

*[She takes a small lacquer box from a drawer in the cabinet, and looks at it in silence; then, with passionate vehemence:]* It was for the advancement of family interests that we were affianced in infancy—my cousin Watairo and I. It was our parents who planned it all, and he was a dutiful son, and I a dutiful daughter. If afterwards he grew to desire what I was only willing to endure—was that my doing? Then came the day when Justin stood between us, and I knew that I had become a woman.

*[She puts the box on the cabinet and comes down slowly.]* A woman! Men say of us that we are incomprehensible creatures; they forget that we do not understand ourselves—until we have learned to suffer. It is curious, too, that my cousin Watairo has divined so surely what it is in my heart to do. And, unlike Justin, he knows how to wait.

*[She shivers, and looks back over her shoulder.]* Yes, it is Watairo who waits and who listens and who understands.

Presently he will begin to speak.

*[She covers her ears with her hands.]* He is speaking now.

*[She lets her hands fall with a despairing gesture.]*

And I must listen to what he says, whether I will or no.

*[She goes resolutely to the cabinet and takes the box.]*

Since it is to be.

*[She opens the box and draws out a small object wrapped in a square of silk, and a letter tied and sealed. She unwraps the former and discloses a gold bracelet fashioned in the form of a coiled serpent.]*



It is pretty: my cousin Watairo has good taste.

*[She lays it down and opens the letter. Reading:]*

"You must choose between us—the bracelet and your unworthy servant. And the choice must be made before the falling of the cherry blossoms—remember that. I kiss your hand, and remain your cousin and ever faithful

WATAIRO."

*[She again takes up the bracelet and examines it carefully.]*

It is of the ancient make.

*[She unclasps it.]*

How beautifully the old goldsmiths did their work! But that pin point—it is just where it might scratch my arm, if I were in too great a hurry to snap down the clasp. An oversight on the jeweller's part? Perhaps the mistake of a careless apprentice? Only I know better; I know what it means.

*[She opens and shuts the bracelet absently.]*

Just a pin-prick—the merest scratch. Nothing in that of which to be afraid—oh, surely not! And my cousin Watairo is most generous to give me the choice between himself and—that little scratch from a pin.

*[She springs to her feet, letting the bracelet fall.]*

What was that?

*[She recoils, trembling.]*

The snake! It seemed to be alive; it was seeking to coil itself around my arm. *[She recovers herself, with a little laugh.]* I think that I must have been a little mad just now. I have not given the sacred words to my cousin Watairo; he has not yet the power or the right to strike. He can only wait, patiently wait for his hour to come.

*[A distant clock strikes five. She listens, counting the strokes on her fan. Triumphantly:]*

My cousin Watairo is very patient, but it is the hour of Justin that comes.

*[She passes her hand over her eyes.]*

It is gone—the cloud that darkened my eyes. The sun is shining again, and the cherry-trees are still in bloom.

*[She goes up to the window.]*

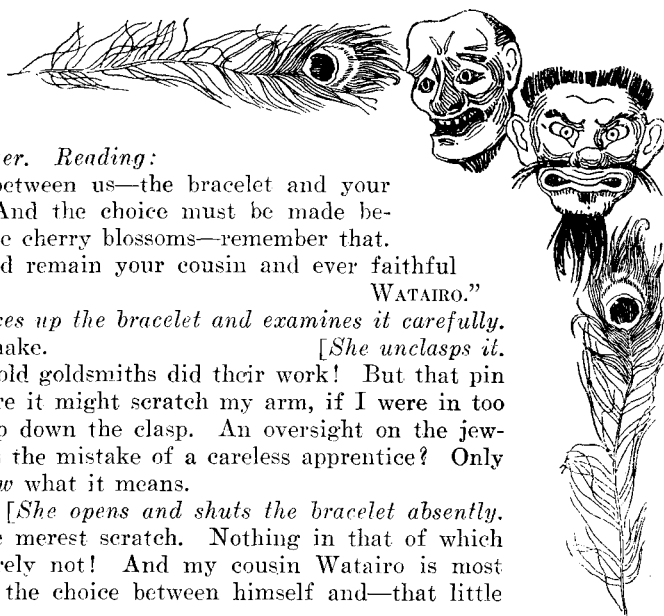
See! Not a single petal has fallen. Not to-day, then, shall I be obliged to choose between my cousin Watairo and his bracelet. And there is no to-morrow, for Justin is coming. Perhaps my lips will still say him nay, but he will not regard them; he will look into my eyes, where my soul is speaking, and he will understand; he will take me, and I shall be safe.

*[She looks over towards the door of the interior apartment and nods.]*

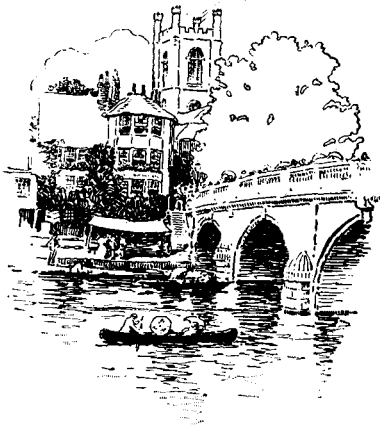
My honorable father, you must not be angry with little me. I am but a leaf in the north wind, and my cousin Watairo is waiting.

*[She crosses to the cabinet and bends over the box of flowers.]*

My dear cherry blossoms, they are still waiting for their water. Ito! Ito!







*[She claps her hands impatiently.*

*Then, looking off:*

O miserable one! is it thus that I am served in my father's house? Water, I say, and the vase with the rose-pink handles. Quickly, now!

*[As she turns, the sleeve of her kimono sweeps the box of flowers to the floor, and the contents are scattered.*

Oh! *[She kneels to pick up the flowers. A folded sheet of paper is among them, and she seizes it eagerly.*

Then he did write! How stupid of me not to have found it at the first!

*[She unfolds the note and reads, slowly spelling out the unfamiliar words.*

They take so long to read—these dreadful English words. Sit-u-a-tion, in-sup-port-a-ble, com-pre-hen-ded—What does all that mean? What does it mean?

*[She turns over the page and scans it, her lips moving rapidly. Then aloud and slowly:*

“The impossible—we have been trying to realize it, and we have failed. That was to have been expected, and we have now to face the truth. You cannot yield; no more can I. What remains, then, but to part, for Love may not work his will except through love, and the battle is lost the instant that the sword is drawn.

“I have not dared to come and tell you this by word of mouth; it would mean only a renewal of the ignoble struggle, the doubt, the pain, the tears. Is it not true that there can be no perfect understanding between you of the East and me of the West? The world itself lies between us. There was a time when I would not acknowledge this, but you saw clearly, and I know now that you were right.”

*[She looks up for a moment.*

To know that I was right! It is a woman's greatest triumph—and sorrow—to know *that*.

*[She resumes her reading:*

“What more is there to say? We cannot go forward; still less can we stand still. I am a coward, and so I am running away. The *Rangoon* sails for Hong-kong this afternoon at five o'clock, and I shall be a passenger—”

*[She crumples up the letter in her hand and rises quickly.*

At five! The steamer must be now passing the lower forts. I should see her smoke from the window.

*[She goes to the window.*

I can see nothing. Surely it is unusually dark.

*[She gazes at the sky.*

The clouds have gathered; it is about to rain. There comes the wind; the trees are bending, the petals are drifting away—it is the falling of the cherry blossoms.



*[She takes the spray of cherry blossoms from her hair and tosses it out of the window.]*

It is the last one.

*[She arches her hands above her eyes and looks out.]*

It is raining now—out upon the bay. There is a little smudge of smoke just beyond the second light—perhaps the Rangoon going out.

*[She comes down slowly and picks up the bracelet.]*

It will be perhaps an hour before my cousin Watairo can arrive. If I could only be sure, little snake, that your poisoned tongue would do its work quickly. There are two or three things that I should like to attend to—my father—

*[She considers a moment.]*

Yet after all there is but one that is really important—my choice. The bracelet is here, and my cousin Watairo is coming. So it seems that the question is decided for me.

*[She sits down and unclasps the bracelet and holds it up.]*

Courage, my heart! This pretty little golden snake bites but once, and then so gently that you may never feel it at all—so.

*[She clasps the bracelet on her arm.]*

See, it was nothing! I have pricked my finger with my needle more sorely a score of times.

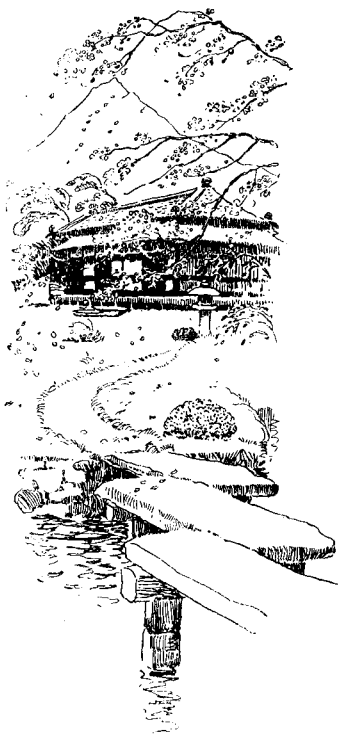
*[She pushes up the bracelet as though to examine the wound.]*

I can scarcely see it—a tiny dot of red. A small gateway surely for the entrance of the King of Terrors. But already it is growing wider; there is a purple circle now about the scratch, and it spreads even while I look at it. Bah! Why should I look at all? I must not be foolish.

*[She draws down the sleeve of her kimono and shades her eyes for a moment with her fan. She looks around suddenly.]*

The rain is passing by; there comes the sun. *[She rises and goes to the window.]* So it was only April pouting for a moment. The smiles came back before the tears had a fair chance to flow. And the cherry blossoms? A few of the weaker petals have fallen, but the thousands yet remain. I could have waited a little longer, then,—until to-morrow, perhaps, or even the day after.

*[She comes down, and once or twice sways to one side as though dizzy. She stands motionless for an instant.]* •





Only there was nothing for which to wait. I had forgotten that. So it does not matter if I were in a little bit of a hurry—no matter.

*[She sinks down among the cushions.]*

It is delicious to feel tired—so tired. I am satisfied just to lie here and wait. For what? I do not know—for whatever may come next.

*[She remains silent. Then starting up with a little cry, her hand on her heart.]*

Oh!

*[She half rises.]*

What a coward I am! It was but for the moment; now I can breathe again. The air, though, is so heavy; if I could but get to the window.

*[She turns to the window at the moment that a rose is thrown through the open casement, falling at her feet. She looks at it doubtfully; then, in a half whisper:]*

A rose! Justin! *[She snatches it up and holds it to her lips.]*

It has been a mistake, then,—from the beginning. He is here; he is calling for me. *[She struggles to her feet, speaking breathlessly.]*

Perhaps, too, my cousin Watairo was but jesting. See! I can stand and walk, oh, so very well.

*[She runs to the cabinet and catches up a small hand-mirror.]*

I am not really pale; I always go white like this—when he is coming. It is that horrible bracelet—it fits so tightly—it hurts—there!

*[She snatches it off and throws it across the room. She listens. He is coming! His foot is on the stair; now he is stopping at the door; he is about to knock.]*

*[She advances a few steps and listens again.]*

Yes; I am here.

*[She falls. A knock is heard. She draws herself into a sitting posture, but falls back. A second knock. She drags herself a little way towards the door; then, in a whisper:]*

Justin!

*[She sinks down, one hand stretched out towards the rose lying just beyond. A third knock. A cloud of pink and white cherry blossoms drifts in at the open window. Silence. The curtain falls slowly.]*







"TO the health of the 'loups-garoux'!"

Arms stretch across the table. Glasses clink.

"To yours, 'dévorants'!"

And "wolves" and "devourers" drain their glasses at a gulp.

The men who exchange these greetings are seated around a table of an inn, lined with bottles and filled with greasy smoke from the soup-pots. Half-famished mouths bend over the plates. The clinking of glasses accompanies the jingling of the forks and spoons. The men, sprawling their elbows over the table, eat and talk at the same time. Dishes are passed from one to the other.

.... "Eh! les dévorants, passez le plat!" ....

And these mighty appetites gorge the soups, massacre the ham-bones, and pillage the "ragoûts." A big lamp hung from the ceiling projects the half-shadowed outlines of their heads across the plates. The "faïences" glisten; eyes and knives shine; and the black bottles sparkle like diamonds.

In the smoky room forms come and go. Sacks, packs, and heavy sticks are piled together near the fireplace, where a fagot crackles and snaps. The coppers gleam. A trap, half open, yawns like the entrance to a cavern. It is like a den of robbers who are feasting and dividing their spoils in the midst of drunken carousal.

In fact, it is only a band of jolly workmen—the "companions" of the "tour of France." Their motto: No care till the morrow! To-morrow they will try again the luck of the highway; to-morrow they will shoulder again their packs and sticks. To-night—hey! ho! for a jolly good time!

The talk is animated. Something must have happened just now—outside—just before dinner. There are some black eyes; some of their clothes are torn. Evidently the fight was a fierce one! . . . . .

For the "companions" are *fighters*—good fellows, but *fighters*. It is their tradition. Jealousies between the workmen's corporations result in "Homeric" combats, bloody battles. It is the one bad side of an institution that is otherwise so truly fraternal.

They start out in companies, rarely alone, to make their "tour of France."

Before coming back to continue their work in their own villages, the young apprentices go together from town to town, to study on the ground the masterpieces of their trade, and to see the best that the genius of their ancestors has produced. It is the poetic phase, the voyage of adventures, the "knight-errantry" of the workman.

He earns his living *en route*, perfects himself in his profession, learns from one master and another, sees, compares, studies, admires. He gathers his