

Wooden Pillow, By Carl Fallas

A Review

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Life, in the village of Kanagawa, is presented in swift, colorful strokes to Mr. Grier, a young English visitor in Japan. Unlike the figures in the quaint Japanese prints, however, he learns that these people have hearts beating in them and that their wan, oval faces conceal deep and sensitive feelings. Like a boy at the theatre, he enjoys the panorama. He loves to listen to the legend of the swimmer, Ito, and his sweetheart, Tekona, whom the people believed to be a fox woman. He is amused by Chika, the girl acrobat who grew too clumsy to tumble with her famous brothers. He is entertained by the Gieshas at the House Of The Playful Kitten, and horrified by the shriveled hag, Toni, with her black polished teeth. Grier is even mildly charmed by Setsu San's note, "In duty to my parents, I return your love which I am not allowed to accept. Nevertheless, indelibly in my heart is the memory of your august image, white as a cloud fleece." But always he returns unmoved to the comforts of his hotel, vowing to his friend Jessel, a young German doctor of philosophy, that these people are yellow puppets—immaculate dolls. And the women! Who cared about their exaggerated obeisance to their spouses—their graceful comedies in courtesy—their silk kimonos embroidered with leaf and bird—their shining convergent eyes. Did they ever feel anything?

Then one warm night when rumbling volcanoes are shaking the hotel guests out of their beds, when a white owl beats its wings against the embroidered screens of Grier's room,

he climbs to the window of the naive and lovely O Kaya San to find out why she always looks so sad. He discovers that she cannot speak English, so to tease her, he carries away her tiny padded head-rest, and around this wooden pillow is spun an enchanting love story.

The background is perfect. Miniature hills, toy bridges, and century-old trees a foot high; Nanten bushes, into whose curling leaves one whispers to dispel unhappy dreams; plum trees and cherry blossoms; wisteria and iris feasts; the season of the Gentle Rain, the anniversary of the Ghost Tide, all weave a charming picture of Japanese life. Grier learns that O Kaya San's love for him is nobler than his—finer than any feeling he can ever achieve. "Not this love of kisses, this low class love," old Marikara tells him, "we love for many lives—even in all the lives beyond this."

The story is a series of Japanese pictures, intermingled with curious legends, and with the fragrance of wisteria and the chirruping song of the cicadas running through it.

When Grier sails, the proud and tiny O Kaya San, afraid that he suspects her grief, shields her head with her gay kimono sleeve to hide what is happening to her face. The second day at sea he has forgotten her, and as he drops an orange from the top deck of the steamer to a group of chattering Japanese girls, he grins casually at their gracious response, "Be courteously pleased to accept our thanks for the gift of the honorable orange."