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My Oriental friend

When I arrived in the Far East years ago, much against my intentions but compelled by circumstances to get a job in the Orient, I knew that I would not fall into temptation with the Orientals. No, I found no physical attraction whatever for them. I liked them however as tidy, smiling and friendly people, but I did not think that a more intimate association with them would ever be possible. The years passed by and the war came...

The first months of compulsory loneliness in a huge city were well-nigh unbearable to me. Other Europeans happened to live 20 miles apart from my place so there was no possibility of getting much in touch with them. Oriental students were soon my only companions. I began to feel sympathy for them. First, when taking a bath together as it is the custom to do there, I was glad to thus have an opportunity of talking to them. Then I found it kind of amusing the way they behaved towards me. Their hairless and slick bodies made a strong contrast with my suntanned skin and hairy chest. How they could laugh when seeing me in the bath with them! Many a pal would sit near me in the tub and touch my chest and say, his face beaming: very interesting!

One day, I was practically hypnotized by the gaze of an Oriental student. I recognized in his look something deep, sad, touching, and I could just feel that he wanted to talk to me. He was so glad when I did and he asked me whether I would be kind enough to teach him English conversation. I expected him to drop in at my place shortly afterwards, but he did not. It was only a fortnight later that he came with a small dish on which he had neatly placed a few slices of ham. He had not wished to make his first call with empty hands, and since it was already impossible to buy anything in the shops, he had to travel 30 miles to an uncle who could off and on obtain some ham from some coloured market... My Oriental friend, whom I shall call Taro, began with his English lessons full of enthusiasm. He had a Yankee accent which I tried to correct, and he had, of course, the usual difficulty of pronouncing

L. But he laughed a great deal and he said he was no good. He had a great opinion of Europeans and Americans and had but one regret in his heart i. e. to be an Oriental! He had been brought up in the Buddhist faith and one day he said to me: Reno, if it is true that, after death, we get born again somewhere else, I should like, next time, to be an American! —

When he saw my Bible, he immediately asked me questions about it. He was not like so many of us who know about this Book and ignore its wealth! No, Taro asked me to read from it, became immensely interested in its contents, grasped the meaning of Christ's message and very soon started quoting some of Jesus' most striking sentences. In the meantime, the food situation was growing from bad to worse.

Rationing was in force but there was so little to be had. The huge city we were living in had closed most of its shops and it was a disheartening sight to see nothing at all on display in the show-windows that had not yet been barricaded.

One evening, Taro did not come down for his lesson. I went upstairs to see whether he was in his room and there I beheld a most touching sight: he was lying on his sheetless bed (for bedsheets were no longer available) and was sick. As only food, I discovered a small stewpan with some boiled rice. I hurried to my room again, brought him hot tea and some sandwiches, and when Taro had partaken of this frugal meal, he felt better and his first words were to express how grateful he was. The way he grasped my hands, held them in his and the light that shone in his dark brown eyes made quite an impression on me. I gradually began to forget that he was Oriental. His slightly squint eyes rather attracted me now and his black hair no longer looked so stiff . . . We were becoming friends.

It was gratifying for me to still be in a position to prepare food for two in the evening. When I returned from the office, Taro was waiting for me on top of the building and, from the distance, I could hear his whistling and see his beckoning to me. How good it was to be home again! We had to be careful though for the Police was getting very strict. Oh! how tasty our simple meals were! In my cozy room, Taro, like a faithful dog, was watching me prepare our «one-pot» meal. We never gobbled our food down like wild cats. No, our meal was something sacred we both appreciated a great deal and Taro had also learnt the small prayer I was saying each time: «We thank Thee, our Lord, for this gift of food and for the quiet of this evening hour. Take us into Thy care for the night we pray in Jesus' name.»

As the months passed by, the general situation became more and more acute. Air alarms so often chilled our blood but each time the reassuring behaviour of Taro gave me strength and courage. It would have been dangerous and unwise to go out together. We met, instead, at night in the open on the large roof-terrace of our building. Oh, how wonderful these summer evenings were! Taro was also greatly impressed by the starry sky. We used to gaze up in the milky way and meditate about the marvels above. He was so attentive to what I was saying. He found it wonderful to hear that stars had been created by God in order to calculate time so that everything foretold by the Prophets could take place «at the appointed time». We both felt that our happiness would not last long for the war was calling more and more men to the colours. We tried to live by the Master's advice: day by day, and to forget what might lie ahead.

If vegetables and potatoes had become a national scarcity, meat had disappeared altogether from the market. Thanks to my small stock of tinned goods, I managed to make both ends meet as far as food was concerned, but was getting really worried when my salt supply reached the bottom. But here was Taro again, reassuring me with his friendly smile: «Don't worry, Reno, I shall get you some from home». And off he went on the following day, travelling 600 (sixhundred!) km in order to bring me back from his native place a small jar with unrefined salt.

When the fateful order from the Army came, Taro was more concerned about leaving me alone than going to war himself. We emptied our hearts and said all the things friends can possibly say to one another. He was leaving on the following day, so he had to spend long

hours in town for complying with all sorts of formalities. Before midnight he came into my room. He did not put on the light, placed his mandolin on my table as his souvenir, then kissed me as if he wanted to take my soul along with him. We could not speak, we could only feel the hot tears that were trickling down our cheeks, and he left me. — On the following morning I could see him for a few last seconds before he left. We did not kiss then, he simply held my hands, kissed them, and gave me a long, deep look. Oh, how faithful his look was! And because of it I could bear up with all the ensuing hardships. Taro too could leave me because of the sacred word that would unite us: «faithfulness».

My Oriental friend, through the hidden treasure of his heart, had found his way into mine. He did not fear anything during the war in order to get in touch with me and he told me that our friendship alone had given him strength and courage for bearing war's awful hardships. He also added something that will interest all our readers: that only because of the large number of comrades with our feelings was it possible for the Army in the East to keep up its morale. An Oriental soldier is like any of us: he will endure anything during the day if he knows that, at night, he will be able to rest near a beloved friend...

Reno.

LORD ALFRED DOUGLAS

*Alas! that Time should war against Distress,
And numb the sweet ache of remembered loss,
And give for sorrow's gold the indifferent dross
Of calm regret or stark forgetfulness.*

*I should have worn eternal mourning dress
And nailed my soul to some perennial cross,
And made my thoughts like restless waves that toss
On the wild sea's intemperate wilderness.*

*But lo! came Life, and with its painted toys
Lured me to play again like any child.
O pardon me this weak inconstancy.*

*May my soul die if in all present joys,
Lapped in forgetfulness or sense-beguiled,
Yea, in my mirth if I prefer not thee.*