

JUAN IN CHINA

by

ERIC LINKLATER



JONATHAN CAPE
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FIRST PUBLISHED 1937

JONATHAN CAPE LTD. 30 BEDFORD SQUARE, LONDON
AND 91 WELLINGTON STREET WEST, TORONTO

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN IN THE CITY OF OXFORD
AT THE ALDEN PRESS
PAPER MADE BY JOHN DICKINSON & CO. LTD.
BOUND BY A. W. BAIN & CO. LTD.

JUAN IN CHINA

By the same author

Novels

WHITE MAA'S SAGA

POET'S PUB

JUAN IN AMERICA

THE MEN OF NESS

MAGNUS MERRIMAN

RIPENESS IS ALL

Short Stories

GOD LIKES THEM PLAIN

Poetry

A DRAGON LAUGHED

Drama

THE DEVIL'S IN THE NEWS

Biography

BEN JONSON AND KING JAMES

MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS

ROBERT THE BRUCE

Essay

THE LION AND THE UNICORN

‘ “Fierce loves and faithless wars” — I am not sure
If this be the right reading — ’tis no matter;
The fact’s about the same, I am secure;
I sing them both, and am about to batter
A town which did a famous siege endure,
And was beleaguer’d both by land and water. . . .

It is an awful topic — but ’tis not
My cue for any time to be terrific:
For checker’d as is seen our human lot
With good, and bad, and worse, alike prolific
Of melancholy sentiment, to quote
Too much of one sort would be soporific;—
Without, or with, offence to friends or foes,
I *will not* sketch your world exactly as it goes.’

BYRON

NOTE

THE earlier adventures of Juan Motley — a lineal descendant of Byron's Don Juan — were recorded in *Juan in America*.

Towards the end of his sojourn in America, Juan met a young lady from China to whom he was much attracted. Circumstances, however, prevented him from pursuing the acquaintance.

Some weeks later, when misfortune had temporarily reduced his spirit, he was rescued from defeatism — he had almost decided to enter his grandfather's bank — by a newspaper paragraph that fortunately gave him news of Kuo Kuo and her intentions.

She was going to join a Nudist Colony, governed by the well-known Dr. Salvator, at Arroyo Beach on the coast of California. Juan immediately discovered that his plan of settling-down was premature, and determined to follow Kuo Kuo.

His meeting with her, at Arroyo Beach, is described in the introductory chapter.

END-PIECE

NAKED and ashamed, Juan had been a member of Dr. Salvador's Nudist Colony for five unhappy days. He had lived healthily in the sun, he had been urged to play solar games, to dance eurhythmically, and attend lectures on the Ethics of the Neo-Pagan Zeitgeist; and he had escaped these revolting activities only by insisting that what he most urgently needed was solitary meditation. His recent misadventures had somewhat diminished the natural fortitude of his spirit, and the proximity of so much obviously corruptible flesh was beginning to create in him an almost vegetarian disfavour. Nostalgic thoughts came to his mind of tweed suits, white waistcoats, and fine frocks for ladies; and he listened angrily to Mr. Lippincott, the oldest nudist, who sat beside him in a deck-chair.

'In the midst of an effete and decadent civilization,' Mr. Lippincott was saying, 'we nudists stand for an heroic effort to recapture the grand old virtues and the vital body-urge of primitive man.'

'I deny your assumption,' said Juan rudely. 'From China to Spain the world is seething in war and rebellion, hissing with industrial strife, bubbling over with military philosophies and martial economies. How can you say that our civilization is effete when its most obvious symptoms are the warts and pimples and boils of an indecently robust adolescence?'

'That is a very interesting point of view,' said Mr. Lippincott. 'But the unnatural standards of modern

life and the hectic gaiety of our great cities . . . Pardon me while I go fetch that ball.'

He rose from his chair and amiably pursued a large red-and-white air-ball that rolled flightily down the beach to a whispering blue sea. He was a shrivelled little man with rimless eye-glasses and a gallinaceous rump. Forty yards away, slender, expectant, and golden-brown, stood three ripely nubile girls who had lately, with graceful movements, been tossing the ball from one to another. In a rude arc of the neighbouring cliffs was another group of nudists, some twenty-five or thirty, many of them middle-aged and scarcely at ease as they squatted on the sand. They were listening to a deep-chested woman who, in a hoarse contralto, stood in their midst and recited a poem by Gertrude Stein. Her words reached faintly to the sea's antiphon that rustled on the sand:

' "If she bowed. To her brother. Which was. A fact. That is.

If she bowed. Which. If she bowed. Which she did. She bowed to her brother.

Which she did. She bowed to her brother. Or rather. Which she did. She bowed to her brother. Or rather which she did she bowed to her brother."'

Scattered along the beach, ambulatory or in supine contemplation of the sun, were the other members of the colony. Few could claim æsthetic justification for their nakedness, but those who had less cause for pride in it were more conscious of their merit in its display. Juan, bare as the others except for a hat —

the sun shone hotly — deflected his gaze from the three young women who were waiting for their ball, and looked instead at two elderly thigh-shrunken gentlemen whose conversation, as they walked to and fro, was earnestly of lumbago and the healing power of light. After five days in the colony he was still subject to occasional embarrassment.

He was, moreover, worried by the non-appearance of Kuo Kuo. He had come to Arroyo Beach in the expectation of finding her already in residence, but despite the difficulty of recognizing anybody except the most intimate of friends, he had soon made sure that she was not there. Now he wondered uneasily whether she had changed her mind and had no intention of coming. If that were so, he was wasting his time in this unnecessary New Congo, and had shocked his modesty for nothing. He had no faith in the benefit of gregarious nakedness, and there was no pleasure to be got from looking at it. To contemplate it was either æsthetically distressing or socially disconcerting. He wished he had been less headstrong in his movements, and had learnt what Kuo Kuo's plans really were before trying to anticipate them.

Mr. Lippincott returned to his chair. 'As I was about to say,' he continued, 'the current trend towards elementals is an index of man's capacity for survival. There is, in our racial preconsciousness, a system closely akin to the traffic lights in our great cities. We call that system Instinct or Intuition, and when it shows the red light we know it's time to turn around and ride back to Nature. . . .'

Again Mr. Lippincott was interrupted. With a

sudden exclamation Juan sat up and stared at two figures walking towards them along the level beach. One was Dr. Salvator, decently clothed in the lion-skin he used for the receiving of visitors; the other, slim as a reed, was a girl in a pale green Chinese dress, a narrow dress as straight and nearly as simple as the green skin of a reed. She came nearer with small quiet movements, like tall grass shaken by the wind, and her hair was bright as black lacquer in the sun. Juan was immediately torn by the most painfully conflicting emotions. He was delighted to see her, and appalled at the prospect of being seen. He was very excited, and exceedingly abashed. He acutely despised the disorder of his mind, and was ill-naturedly jealous of Mr. Lippincott's equanimity. 'An Oriental, I presume,' said Mr. Lippincott. 'There's room for many guests in Nature's mansion.' Juan was tempted to flee, and prevented by fear of seeming still more ridiculous. Before he could resolve his emotions Dr. Salvator had turned towards them, waved a muscular arm in their direction, and confronted them with a countenance as leonine as his costume.

'Mr. Lippincott and Mr. Motley,' he exclaimed. 'Let me present Miss Kuo Kuo; Mr. Lippincott, Mr. Motley. Miss Kuo Kuo is a visitor from China.'

Juan raised his hat. 'How do you do,' he said. 'I don't know if you remember me. . . .'

Suddenly as the serenity of a goldfish-bowl is ruffled by a cat's paw, the ivory smoothness of her face was ruffled by laughter. Neither recognition, nor surprise at the circumstances of recognition, had changed the placidity of her eyes or the soft firmness

of her lips, but laughter in a moment took and dispossessed them of calm. She laughed aloud, and louder than anyone could have expected. It was very musical and pleasant laughter. At another time and in another place it might have been compared to the ringing of many little bells among a greenery of bamboos; or to the filling of the summer air with the music of pigeon-wing pipes, as the Chinese so agreeably practise. But it was more unexpected than the former, and louder than the latter. It was incongruously loud and hearty, coming as it did from a person of so delicate a shape and such exquisite features. Dr. Salvator was manifestly indignant. Mr. Lippincott took off his eye-glasses, felt for a handkerchief with which to polish them, and failed to find one. And all the surrounding nudists, rising like penguins at a zoo when the keeper comes with fish, rose and came slowly, slow and bewildered, towards the noise of the little bells in the spinney of bamboos, to the shrilling of the pigeon-wing pipes.

Furiously angry, Juan put on his hat and walked stiffly away. He squared his shoulders. His demeanour was extraordinarily dignified, but his straw hat seemed either redundant or inadequate. He felt, in his dignified retreat, its redundancy — or inadequacy — and threw it away. Kuo Kuo was still laughing.

'To hell and disaster with nudism!' Juan exclaimed. 'That's the finish of it for me. I'll take off my clothes to swim and to sleep and to die and make love, but God forsake me if ever again I undress on principle.'

With force and ingenuity he continued to curse

himself for his folly and Dr. Salvator for his charlatanism till he came to the colony's headquarters. There, from a Filipino servant, he demanded his suit-cases, and rapidly dressed. After the indignity of five days of nudism, the humiliation of being laughed at was unbearable. He was going to leave the colony at once.

He filled the tank of his shabby second-hand motor-car with Dr. Salvator's petrol, and drove to the imposing iron gates that protected the nudists from the world without. While he was waiting for them to be opened he heard Salvator's voice booming and thundering behind him, and turning he saw the Doctor and Kuo Kuo, with servants pursuing them who carried a steamer trunk, a cabin-trunk, three suit-cases, a dressing-case, and a couple of hat-boxes. Perceiving the civilized profusion of Kuo Kuo's wardrobe, and correctly guessing that she had already been expelled from the colony, Juan was immediately conscious of a warm and grateful sympathy with her. — Being decently dressed, he was again capable of generous emotion. — He got out of his car and waited.

'Why, Mr. Motley, you're not leaving us, are you?' said the Doctor.

'I am,' said Juan.

'Now I realize you've been grossly insulted, and believe me I deplore it. But this is the first time our colony has been profaned by foolish laughter, and I give you my word that never again will you suffer a like embarrassment.'

'I certainly shall not.'

'The human body —'