

YASUNARI
KAWABATA



THOUSAND CRANES

*THOUSAND
CRANES*

YASUNARI KAWABATA

Translated from the Japanese by

EDWARD G. SEIDENSTICKER

A Perigee Book

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A Note on the Tea Ceremony, the Backdrop for This Novel

THE BEGINNINGS of the tea cult can be traced to the thirteenth century and the beginnings of Zen Buddhism in Japan. Early Zen masters recommended tea as the beverage most excellent for cultivating the spirit, and in the centuries that followed, an elaborate symbolism and a carefully contrived ritual encouraged the Zen disciple in his aim to achieve imperturbability. Rustic utensils and surroundings were brought into harmony to remind him of the Buddhahood in a clod of earth, and the withdrawn repose of the cottage and its garden turned his mind to the permanent behind the ephemeral—to the intersection of time and eternity. If the quiet and restraint of the ideal tea ceremony are somewhat lacking in ceremonies described in this novel, Mr. Kawabata's characters nonetheless seem to pause at the intersection, marked for them by the permanence of the old tea vessels and the impermanence of the owners.

The tea ceremony is a stylized way of preparing tea from water heated over a charcoal hearth. The smallest detail, from the charcoal to the receptacle for left-over water, must be carefully planned.



The host pours water from an iron kettle into a handleless cup—here translated “bowl” because it is considerably larger than an ordinary teacup—adds powdered tea, and stirs with a bamboo whisk until an appropriate layer of foam has accumulated. The guest drinks according to a prescribed form and returns the bowl. That, on the surface, is all; but to the initiated the details of the cottage, the utensils, and the performance have given something more—perhaps only an impression of affluence, perhaps a sense of timelessness.

A Note About the Author

Yasunari Kawabata, winner of the 1968 Nobel Prize for Literature, was one of Japan's most distinguished novelists. He was famous for adding to the once fashionable naturalism imported from France a sensual, more Japanese impressionism. Born in Osaka in 1899, as a boy he hoped to become a painter—an aspiration reflected in his novels—but his first stories were published while he was still in high school, and he decided to become a writer.

He was graduated from Tokyo Imperial University in 1924. His story "The Izu Dancer," first published in 1925, appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1954. It captures the shy eroticism of adolescence, and from that time, Kawabata devoted his novels largely to aspects of love. *Snow Country*, a novel concerning the love affair of a Tokyo snob with a country geisha, was published here in 1956 and excited much praise. *Thousand Cranes* (1959) is a deeply moving story of ill-fated love. *The Sound of the Mountain* (1970) is a remarkable expression of the unique talents of this great writer, who was undisputed dean of Japanese letters.

Kawabata was found dead, by his own hand, on the evening of April 16, 1972. He left no suicide note, and no satisfactory explanation for his suicide has been offered.

A Note About the Translator

Edward George Seidensticker was born in Castle Rock, Colorado, in 1921. He received his B.A. from the University of Colorado, his M.A. from Columbia University, and has done graduate work at Harvard University and Tokyo University. He is currently professor of Japanese at the University of Michigan.

Among the important contemporary Japanese novels Mr. Seidensticker has translated are *The Makioka Sisters* by Junichiro Tanizaki and *Snow Country*, *Thousand Cranes*, and *The Sound of the Mountain* by Yasunari Kawabata. For his translation of *The Sound of the Mountain* Mr. Seidensticker received the National Book Award.

A Note on the Type

The text of this book was set on the Linotype in Janson, a recutting made direct from type cast from matrices long thought to have been made by the Dutchman Anton Janson, who was a practicing type founder in Leipzig during the years 1668-87. However, it has been conclusively demonstrated that these types are actually the work of Nicholas Kis (1650-1702), a Hungarian, who most probably learned his trade from the master Dutch type founder Kirk Voskens. The type is an excellent example of the influential and sturdy Dutch types that prevailed in England up to the time William Caslon developed his own incomparable designs from these Dutch faces.

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DRAWINGS BY FUMI KOMATSU

THOUSAND CRANES



Thousand Cranes

EVEN WHEN he reached Kamakura and the En-gakuji Temple, Kikuji did not know whether or not he would go to the tea ceremony. He was already late.



He received an announcement whenever Kurimoto Chikako offered tea at the inner cottage of the Engakuji. He had not once gone since his father's death, however. He thought of the announcements as no more than formal gestures in memory of his father.

This time there had been a postscript: she wanted him to meet a young lady to whom she was giving tea lessons.

As he read it, Kikuji thought of Chikako's birthmark.

Had he been eight, perhaps, or nine? He had been taken by his father to visit Chikako, and they had found her in the breakfast room. Her kimono was open. She was cutting the hair on her birthmark with a small pair of scissors. It covered half the left breast and ran down into the hollow between the breasts, as large as the palm of one's hand. Hair seemed to be growing on the purple-black mark, and Chikako was in process of cutting it.

"You brought the boy with you?"

In surprise, she snatched at the neck of her kimono. Then, perhaps because haste only complicated her efforts to cover herself, she turned slightly away and carefully tucked kimono into obi.

The surprise must have been less at Kikuji's father than at Kikuji. Since a maid had met them at



the door, Chikako must have known at least that Kikuji's father had come.

Kikuji's father did not go into the breakfast room. He sat down in the next room instead, the room where Chikako gave lessons.

"Do you suppose I could have a cup of tea?" Kikuji's father asked absently. He looked up at the hanging in the alcove.

"Yes." But Chikako did not move.

On the newspaper at her knee, Kikuji had seen hairs like whiskers.

Though it was broad daylight, rats were scurrying about in the hollow ceiling. A peach tree was in bloom near the veranda.

When at length she took her place by the tea hearth, Chikako seemed preoccupied.

Some ten days later, Kikuji heard his mother telling his father, as if it were an extraordinary secret of which he could not have known, that Chikako was unmarried because of the birthmark. There was compassion in her eyes.

"Oh?" Kikuji's father nodded in apparent surprise. "But it wouldn't matter, would it, if her husband were to see it? Especially if he knew of it before he married her?"

"That's exactly what I said to her. But after all a woman is a woman. I don't think I would ever be



able to tell a man that I had a big mark on my breast.”

“But she’s hardly young any more.”

“Still it wouldn’t be easy. A man with a birthmark could probably get married and just laugh when he was found out.”

“Did you see the mark?”

“Don’t be silly. Of course not.”

“You just talked about it?”

“She came for my lesson, and we talked about all sorts of things. I suppose she felt like confessing.”

Kikuji’s father was silent.

“Suppose she were to marry. What would the man think?”

“He’d probably be disgusted by it. But he might find something attractive in it, in having it for a secret. And then again the defect might bring out good points. Anyway, it’s hardly a problem worth worrying about.”

“I told her it was no problem at all. But it’s on the breast, she says.”

“Oh?”

“The hardest thing would be having a child to nurse. The husband might be all right, but the child.”

“The birthmark would keep milk from coming?”

“Not that. No, the trouble would be having the



child look at the birthmark while it was nursing. I hadn't seen quite so far myself, but a person who actually has a birthmark thinks of these things. From the day it was born it would drink there; and from the day it began to see, it would see that ugly mark on its mother's breast. Its first impression of the world, its first impression of its mother, would be that ugly birthmark, and there the impression would be, through the child's whole life."

"Oh? But isn't that inventing worries?"

"You could nurse it on cow's milk, I suppose, or hire a wet nurse."

"I should think the important thing would be whether or not there was milk, not whether or not there was a birthmark."

"I'm afraid not. I actually wept when I heard. So that's how it is, I thought. I wouldn't want our Kikuji nursing at a breast with a birthmark on it."

"Oh?"

At this show of ingenuousness, a wave of indignation came over Kikuji, and a wave of resentment at his father, who could ignore him even though he too had seen the mark.

Now, however, almost twenty years later, Kikuji was able to smile at the thought of his father's confusion.



From the time he was ten or so, he often thought of his mother's words and started with uneasiness at the idea of a half-brother or half-sister sucking at the birthmark.

It was not just fear of having a brother or sister born away from home, a stranger to him. It was rather fear of that brother or sister in particular. Kikuji was obsessed with the idea that a child who sucked at that breast, with its birthmark and its hair, must be a monster.

Chikako appeared to have had no children. One could, if one wished, suspect that his father had not allowed her to. The association of birthmark and baby that had saddened his mother might have been his father's device for convincing Chikako that she did not want children. In any case, Chikako produced none, either while Kikuji's father lived or after his death.

Perhaps Chikako had made her confession so soon after Kikuji had seen the birthmark because she feared that Kikuji himself would tell of it.

Chikako did not marry. Had the birthmark then governed her whole life?

Kikuji never forgot the mark. He could sometimes imagine even that his own destinies were enmeshed in it.

When he received the note saying that Chikako meant to make the tea ceremony her excuse for