

# ESSAYS IN IDLENESS

BY THE TSUREZUREGUSA OF KENKO

SELECTIONS TRANSLATED BY DONALD KEENE

What a strange, demented feeling it gives me when I realize I have spent whole days before this inkstone, with nothing better to do, jotting down at random whatever nonsensical thoughts have entered my head.

## 1

It is enough, it would seem, to have been born into this world for a man to desire many things. The position of the emperor, of course, is far too exalted for our aspirations. Even the remote descendants of the imperial line are sacred, for they are not of the seed of man. Ordinary nobles of a rank that entitles them to retainers—let alone those who stand in the solitary grandeur of the chancellor—appear most impressive, and even their children and grandchildren, though their fortunes may decline, still possess a distinctive elegance. Persons of lower rank, fortunate enough to achieve some success in keeping with their station, are apt to wear looks of self-satisfaction and no doubt consider themselves most important, but actually they are quite insignificant.

No one is less to be envied than a priest. Sei Shonagon wrote of priests that they seemed to outsiders "like sticks of wood," an apt description. The clerics impress nobody, even when they flaunt their authority and their importance is loudly proclaimed. It is easy to see why the holy man Soga should have said that worldly fame is unseemly in priests, and that those who seek it violate the teachings of Buddha: A true hermit might, in fact, seem more admirable.

It is desirable that a man's face and figure be of excellent beauty. I could sit forever with a man, provided that what he said did not grate on my ears, that he had charm, and that he did not talk very much. What an unpleasant experience it is when someone you have supposed to be quite distinguished reveals his true, inferior nature. A man's social position and looks are likely to be determined at birth, but why should not a man's mind go from wisdom to greater wisdom if it is so disposed? What a shame it is when men of excellent appearance and character prove hopelessly inept in social encounters with their inferiors in both position and appearance, solely because they are badly educated.

A familiarity with orthodox scholarship, the ability to compose poetry and prose in Chinese, a knowledge of Japanese poetry and music are all desirable, and if a man can serve as a model to others in matters of precedent and court ceremony, he is truly impressive. The mark of an excellent man is that he writes easily in an acceptable hand, sings agreeably and in tune, and, though appearing reluctant to accept when wine is pressed on him, is not a teetotaler.

## 7

If man were never to fade away like the dews of Adashino, never to vanish like the smoke over Toribeyama, but lingered on forever in the world, how things would lose their power to move us! The most precious thing in life is its uncertainty. Consider living creatures—none lives so long as man. The May fly waits not for the evening, the summer cicada knows neither spring nor autumn. What a wonderfully unhurried feeling it is to live even a single year in perfect serenity! If that is not enough for you, you might live a thousand years and still feel it was but a single night's dream. We cannot live forever in this world; why should we wait for ugliness to overtake us? The longer man lives, the more shame he endures. To die, at the latest, before one reaches forty, is the least unattractive. Once a man passes that age, he desires (with no sense of shame over his appearance) to mingle in the company of

others. In his sunset years he dotes on his grandchildren, and prays for long life so that he may see them prosper. His preoccupation with worldly desires grows ever deeper, and gradually he loses all sensitivity to the beauty of things, a lamentable state of affairs.

## 8

Nothing leads a man astray so easily as sexual desire. What a foolish thing a man's heart is! Though we realize, for example, that fragrances are short-lived and the scent burnt into clothes lingers but briefly, how our hearts always leap when we catch a whiff of an exquisite perfume! The holy man of Kume lost his magic powers after noticing the whiteness of the legs of a girl who was washing clothes; this was quite understandable, considering that the glowing plumpness of her arms, legs, and flesh owed nothing to artifice.

## 10

A house, I know, is but a temporary abode, but how delightful it is to find one that has harmonious proportions and a pleasant atmosphere. One feels somehow that even moonlight, when it shines into the quiet domicile of a person of taste, is more affecting than elsewhere. A house, though it may not be in the current fashion or elaborately decorated, will appeal to us by its unassuming beauty—a grove of trees with an indefinably ancient look; a garden where plants, growing of their own accord, have a special charm; a verandah and an open-work wooden fence of interesting construction; and a few personal effects left carelessly lying about, giving the place an air of having been lived in. A house which multitudes of workmen have polished with every care, where strange and rare Chinese and Japanese furnishings are displayed, and even the grasses and trees of the garden have been trained unnaturally, is ugly to look at and most depressing. How could anyone live for long in such a place? The most casual glance will suggest how likely such a house is to turn in a moment to smoke.

A man's character, as a rule, may be known from the place where he lives. The Gotokudaiji minister<sup>1</sup> stretched a rope across his roof to keep the kites from roosting. Saigyō<sup>2</sup>, seeing the rope, asked, "Why should it bother him if kites perch there? That shows you the kind of man this prince is." I have heard that Saigyō never visited him again. I remembered this story not long ago when I noticed a rope stretched over the roof of the Kosaka palace,<sup>3</sup> where Prince Ayanokoji<sup>4</sup> lives. Someone told me that, as a matter of fact, it distressed the prince to see how crows clustering on the roof would swoop down to seize frogs in the pond. The story impressed me, and made me wonder if Sanesada may not also have had some such reason.

## 11

About the tenth month I had the occasion to visit a village beyond the place called Kurusuno. I made my way far down a moss-covered path until I reached a lonely-looking hut. Not a sound could be heard, except for the dripping of a water pipe buried in fallen leaves. Sprays of chrysanthemum and red maple leaves had been carelessly arranged on the holy-water shelf. Evidently somebody was living here. Moved, I was thinking, "One can live even in such a place," when I noticed in the garden beyond a great tangerine tree, its branches bent with fruit, that had been enclosed by a forbidding fence. Rather disillusioned, I thought now, "If only the tree had not been there!"

## 22

In all things I yearn for the past. Modern fashions seem to keep on growing more and more debased. I find that even among the splendid pieces of furniture built by our master cabinetmakers, those in the old forms are the most pleasing. And as for writing letters, surviving scraps from the past reveal how superb the phrasing used to be. The ordinary spoken language has also steadily coarsened. People used

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<sup>1</sup> Fujiwara no Sanesada (1139-91), a poet.

<sup>2</sup> Saigyō (1118-90), one of the greatest Japanese poets.

<sup>3</sup> Another name for the Tendai temple Myōhō-in. Some scholars read the name as Osaka.

<sup>4</sup> The prince was a son of the Emperor Kameyama (1249-1305), and was also known by his Buddhist name, Shoe. An imperial prince still resides at Myōhō-in.

to say "raise the carriage shafts" or "trim the lamp wick," but people today say "raise it" or "trim it." When they should say, "Let the men of the palace staff stand forth!" they say, "Torches! Let's have some light!" Instead of calling the place where the lectures on the Sutra of the Golden Light are delivered before the emperor "the Hall of the Imperial Lecture," they shorten it to "the Lecture Hall," a deplorable corruption, an old gentleman complained.

## 29

When I sit down in quiet meditation, the one emotion hardest to fight against is a longing in all things for the past. After the others have gone to bed, I pass the time on a long autumn's night by putting in order whatever belongings are at hand. As I tear up scraps of old correspondence I should prefer not to leave behind, I sometimes find among them samples of the calligraphy of a friend who has died, or pictures he drew for his own amusement, and I feel exactly as I did at the time. Even with letters written by friends who are still alive I try, when it has been long since we met, to remember the circumstances, the year. What a moving experience that is! It is sad to think that a man's familiar possessions, indifferent to his death, should remain unaltered long after he is gone.

## 32

About the twentieth of the ninth month, at the invitation of a certain gentleman, I spent the night wandering with him viewing the moon. He happened to remember a house we passed on the way, and, having himself announced, went inside. In a corner of the overgrown garden heavy with dew, I caught the faint scent of some perfume which seemed quite accidental. This suggestion of someone living in retirement from the world moved me deeply.

In due time, the gentleman emerged, but I was still under the spell of the place. As I gazed for a while at the scene from the shadows, someone pushed the double doors open a crack wider, evidently to look at the moon. It would have been most disappointing if she had bolted the doors as soon as he had gone! How was she to know that someone lingering behind would see her? Such a gesture could only have been the product of inborn sensitivity.

I heard that she died not long afterwards.