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WHITE ASTER
A Japanese Epic
by Prof. Dr. K. Florenz
Published by T. Hasegawa, Tokyo.
WHITE ASTER
A JAPANESE EPIC

TOGETHER WITH
OTHER POEMS

from the German Adaptation of
Prof. Dr. Karl Florenz

By
A. Lloyd, M.A.

Published by
T. Hasegawa
10 Nihonbashi, Tokyo, Japan
Georg Ebers

in Dankbarkeit und Verehrung

zugeeignet.
Long epics are of rare occurrence in Japanese literature as in Chinese, and the few specimens in existence scarcely deserve to be ranked with our western epopees. Little stress is laid on plot or development of action: characters with very marked features seldom present themselves, and there is very little attempt to penetrate into the unfathomable depths of human passions. On the other hand, they are rich in pictures and in descriptions of natural phenomena: no sooner has the poet briefly touched upon the inward conflict of the heart, than he lets his fancy turn back at once to the visible things of the world, which he takes pleasure in describing with great rhetorical skill. In the version which is here offered to the favorable
consideration of the western reader the translator has allowed himself considerable latitude, sometimes trying to render his original accurately, and sometimes very freely; thinking that he could thus do more justice to the poets of the Far East than he could by a rigidly conscientious literal translation which would have killed all the poetical charm of the work.

"White Aster" came before the German translator in two forms. He consulted it in its Chinese original under the title of 孝女白菊の歌, "the Lay of the Pious Maiden Shirakiku" (i.e. White Aster), as composed by the great Sinologue Professor Tetsujiro Inouye; but he also had before him a rendering of this poem into classical Japanese by the eminent scholar Naobumi Ochiai (孝女白菊の歌).

Ochiai's rendering is much prized in Japanese literary circles on account of its mastery in handling the language, but to our taste Inouye's original is richer in delicate shades of thought, and the translator has therefore based his own rendering exclusively on this one. We beg therefore to offer to our readers a work in which the situations and the personages, the action and the sentiment, are all Japanese, though tinged with Chinese art and rhetoric,—always premising that every translation (and how much more does this apply to the English version?) is like silver—one always loses by the exchange.

The illustrations to this book have been designed and executed by two Japanese artists. The greater part come from the pencil of Mishima Yunosuke (三島雄ノ菊:—known in art as 蕾室 Shosui), who designed the cover, and pp. 1-71; Arai Shigiro (新井周次郎: art-name, Yoshimune 芳宗) is responsible only for the illustrations to the smaller poems, pp. 72-80.

Tokyo, Autumn of 1895.

( German Edition )  Prof. Dr. K. Florenz.

Autumn of 1897.

( English Edition )  A. Lloyd. M. A.
CANTO I.

The sun went down, and its last level rays,
As with a golden veil of mist, enveloping
The mount of Aso, lay upon the thorpe.
The wind with gentle murmurs through the trees,
Scattered the many-tinted Autumn leaves,
Like pattering raindrops, countless on the earth.

Just then, within the distant temple-grove,
Boomed forth the deep notes of a smitten bell;
When from a hut that stood upon the fringe
And outskirts of the village, crept a maid,
Straining her eyes to scan the Autumn fields.
And as she gazed, upon each eager lid
Sparkled a teardrop, that no loved one came,
That thus she stood looking abroad in vain,
The solitary inmate of the hut.
For now three weary days had dragged away
Since that her sire had climbed the mountain side
And not returned. At early dawn he went,
Shouldering his hunting nets and trusty gun,
Across the slushy fields, and where the wind
Breathed through the rustling reed-grass, whilst the moon,
Pale with its latest conflict with the dawn,
Beamed faintly o’er the temple’s hallowed roof.
Thence, by the path that leads towards the hill,
He climbed, and quickly disappeared from sight.

Then even fell — but he came not; and night
Fell, gloom’d, and broke; and once more days and nights
Passed, — yet he never came. Then she in fear,
Dreading mishap, enquired everywhere
From friends and neighbours: — None had seen
His traces.
And so now her tearful eye
Wandered in vain over the outspread scene,
Mists, cold and dark, were rising slowly up.
And with their mantle grey were wrapping o'er
The silken carpet of red maple leaves.
Then darkness fell: and gathering the dry leaves,
Wind-blown, that lay in ridges all around,
She kindles on the hearth a crackling fire.
Handles the fan with deftly moving wrist,
Awakes the slumbering gleed within the coals.
And boils the kettle for the evening tea.

Meantime the door oft rattles, and each time
She starts, thinking "Tis Father"—; but the wind
Was mocking her with idle rappings. Thus
Hours long she sat, and with her grieving eye
Gazed now upon the glowing fire, and now
Upon the rising clouds of steam that danced
Fantastic right across the darkening room,
Like those sweet dreams that fill a man with hope,
And, gaily dancing, sink to nothingness.
Deep sunk in sleep lay all the villagers,
And all around was solitary still,
Save where across the clouded heavens moved,
With mournful cries, flocks of belated geese.

The sky had changed its dress, and suddenly
Wrapped round itself a cloak of black rain clouds:
Noisily shrilled the cold autumnal blast.
Bowed low the leaves, ducking, as though in fear,
And loudly storming fell the rain to earth.
White-Aster heard it, shuddering, and with pain
Thought of her father's suffering (who can tell?):
Nor longer, thus inactive, can she bear
To hear the rain splash, and the howling wind
With patience. Hastily resolved, she throws
Her blue cloak o'er her shoulder; on her head,
A hat of red bamboo, and thus goes forth
Adown the village-street and from the street,
Through field and bush and grove, towards the hills.
Here the steep path winds with a swift ascent:
Towards the summit—the long grass that grew
In tufts upon the slopes, shrivelled and dry,
Lay dead upon her path—; hushed was the voice
Of the blithe chafer.—Only sable night

Yawned threatening from the vale. Nor voice of man,
Nor cry of beast, gives token of a life
Existing in the waste. The wind alone
Howls in the cypresses and rocking pines,
With roaring voice, as of the storm-thrashed waves.
Then by degrees the downpour ceased,—and lo!
The sombre veil of clouds was rent, and through
The widening rifts peered out the moon and stars,
To find a mirror in the crystal stream,
That glided smoothly o'er its bed of rock.

Now to a bridge she came, that, built of stone,
Stood hoar with mossy age, and crossing it
Followed the crooked path against the stream.
That rushed down chattering to his rocky friends.
Where should she seek the footsteps of her sire?
Salt tears of anguish rose, and from her eyes
Flowed, in a copious stream, adown her cheeks,
Staining the sleeves that strove to stem their flood.
So roamed she aimless, up and down the hills,
Until, at length, within a little grove
The narrow path was lost. But in the grove,
O'er-shadowed by the gloomy cypresses
And branching camphor-trees, she spied from far
A temple, and a voice come thro' the air,
As of a priest intoning on his book.

Bleached bones lay on the ground, and rows of graves
Stood like gray ghosts; with downward stretching arms
The weeping willows kissed the impure earth
That breathed corruption; mouldering stood the roof;
The rotten pillars stood aslant; the wind
Piped through the broken paper window panes,
Through which there gleamed a faintly glimmering light.
Pushing aside the wanton-growing hedge,
She stumbled up the broken steps of stone.
That lead within the silent temple-yard:
The moonlight shining on her through the trees,
Tinted her face with its own ghostly hue.

But when the anchorite within perceived
The sound of steps, he rose up from his desk,
Candle in hand, half-opening the crank door,
And saw a shadow moving o’er the ground.

Then feared he, and his face grew ashy pale:
“Avaunt! fox-ghost,” he cried; “Thou mock’st me not:
“No tender maid of human birth would thus
Brave the wild humours of this stormy night.”

To whom, with gently pleading voice, the maid:
“I am a poor and solitary maid:
No spirit I, that with deceitful charms
Draws near to lure thee to perdition foul.
Be not alarmed that I thus all alone,
At such an hour, should break upon thy peace:
I seek my father on these mountain tracts;
And therefore wander thus o’er desert paths.”
So spake she. As with modest mien she stood
Thus before him in homely country dress,
All unadorned, save with pure Nature's grace,
What man her beauty's charms could have resisted?
"'Tis clear she comes of noble family:
Her eyebrows are as twin half moons: her hair
Lies on her snowy temples, like a cloud:
In charm of form she ranks with Sishih's self,
That pearl of loveliness, the Chinese Helen."

Wondering, the monk fixed his dark eye on her
And asked, astonished, "Maiden, whence art thou?"
Much of her story was he fain to ask,
Yet first he led the maid within the shrine,
And bade her sit before the sanctuary.

Shrieked through the broken panes the mountain wind,
Flickered the dull flame in the dingy lamp,
Black pitchy darkness filled the empty hall,
Save where the lamplight on the idols fell.
Without, a brook was rushing down the rocks,
With noise that pierced the flimsy walls, the bats
Flew to and fro, and their dark-wandering wings
With light breath touched her hands and weary cheeks.

At Buddha's feet the maiden sat and dried
Her moistened eyes, from which the copious tears
Flowed silent down her cheeks, and, with forced calm,
Thus to the monk began her mournful tale:
I am the daughter of a Samurai:
Where the famed towers of Kumamoto raise
Their proud heads heavenward, in the southern isle,
There was I cradled—in a stately house,
Richly set out, with costly palanquins,
And neighing steeds, pure bred; abundant stores
Of toothsome dainties for all appetites.
No sad mischance befalling e'er disturbed
Our home's perennial peace:—with equal ray,
Warming and bright, the friendly sun beheld
Our broad verandah, gay with velvet tints
Of blooming peonies—and hanging blinds
Of rushes, bound with silk, softened the glare
That blazed too fiercely in the summer noon.

Here dreamed I my young life, foreboding ill.
Then suddenly the sounds of warfare filled
The land,—soldiers were marching—and the dust
Of combat, rising, darkened all the air.
But few escaped the all-devouring death
That drank the life-blood of the country, and
Incarnadined the fields with streams of blood.
Strewed with the whitening bones of slaughtered men.
The battle-fields were marked,—on all sides round,
Ruined and charred, the barns and homesteads stood
Black monuments of war;—while shrieking crows
Flying in thousands o'er the desert roads
Swooped down to forage. Young and old alike
Fled, leaving home and fields and goods,
In panic-stricken troops, from where the foe,
Stood round the moated castle. 'Twas no time
For dangerous hesitancy: I, too, fled,
So did my mother, and with her I sought
A sheltering refuge. The cold Autumn wind
Blew, and the leaves fell countless, when one eve
We spied an ancient temple. Overhead,