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HEARN IN MATSUE

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ABSTRACT

In which Lafcadio Hearn comes to Matsue to teach, and experiences many magic things there; and how he falls ever more in love with Old Japan; and how he suffers from the dreadful winter weather, and get married (in theory, temporarily) to the daughter of an improverished samurai family; and how he moves into an old house in the samurai quarter and begins to write about Buddhism, Shinto, and the race soul of the people; and how he never stops longing for the tropics; and why he feels it necessary to leave Matsue after just a year.

CHAPTER III - Section 3

Dear Professor Chamberlain, --

I went to Kobe by rail, and thence by jinrikisha across Japan over mountains and through valleys of rice-fields -- a journey of four days; but the most delightful in some respects of all my travelling experiences. The scenery had this peculiar effect, that it repeated for me many of my tropical impressions -- received in a country of similar volcanic configuration, -- besides reviving for me all sorts of early memories of travel in Wales and England which I had forgotten. Nothing could be more beautiful than this mingling of the sensations of the tropics with those of Northern summers. And the people! My expectations were more than realized: it is among the country people Japanese character should be studied, and I could not give my opinion of them now without using what you would call enthusiastic language. I felt quite sorry to reach this larger city, where the people are so much less simple, charming, and kindly, -- although I have every reason to be pleased with them. And in a mountain village I saw a dance unlike anything I every saw before -- some dance immemorially old, and full of weird grace. I watched it until midnight, and wish I could see it again. Nothing yet seen in Japan delighted me so much as this Bon-odori -- in no wise resembling the same performance in the north. I found Buddhism gradually weaken toward the interior, while Shinto emblems surrounded the fields, and things suggesting the phallic worship of antiquity were being adored in remote groves.

Later, a single page becomes eighteen; the journey swells from a letter into a chapter entitled Bon-Odori. But he ignores the first part, does not describe the long train ride, the five hundred blurred miles of seacoast and tea plantation, tunnel and sprawling city -- Nagoya, Kyoto, Osaka, Kobe. Better to leave behind tracks, smoke, cities, newspapers, Western clothing and faces; better to begin with two rickshaw, high in the mountains, on the journey from the Pacific to the Sea of Japan, from the nineteenth century to Izumo, the land of the Ancient Gods. This is the long route, and little frequented. Slowly the vehicles cross from one high valley to another; move beneath rice paddies terraced upwards like enormous green flights of stairs; disappear into shadowy forests of cedar and pine; emerge to pass small fields of barley, rice, indigo, and cotton. No large towns come into view -- just an occasional thatched village, tucked into a fold of hills, looking as if it has been here forever.

The eyes seek unfamiliar shapes; the brain, words to render them enchanted. Always the stress is on the odd, the picturesque, the extreme. That sky, the tenderest blue, loftier than any other; those wispy clouds, ghosts riding on the wind; these forests, night-black as in Dore's etchings. Signs of two religions edge the miles and days. Not just major structures -- the hilltop temples with enormous blue tile roofs; the weathered shrines with offerings of rice, flowers, and wine; the torii in wood and stone, marking the approaches to towns,

towering over courtyards, framing mossy stairways that climb to sacred groves. Note too the tiny stone Bodhisattva that line the roads like mileage markers; the boulders carved with ideographs; the icons smiling from leafy recesses; the statues of the three mystic apes that guard the high passes -- Mizaru, See-No-Evil; Kikazaru, Hear-No-Evil; and Iawazaru, Speak-No-Evil; the shimenawa, sacred fences of rope surrounding rice fields; the bamboo sticks that hold white paper charms to keep away both locust and bird.

Never does he forget the human landscape. Those young men who stare wonderingly from fields; those girls at roadside teahouses who giggle and turn away -- surely they have a message. So must the old men at each village stop. Out they come, a bit unsteady; bowing, smiling, bowing lower; gently reaching out to touch a jacket, shirt, or hat; posing questions in a dialect difficult for the interpreter to understand. No matter. Good feelings need no translation. Each evening at a rustic inn, Hearn is pampered by hosts and serving girls, treated with a kindness unknown in other countries, a wholly unconscious goodness that must come straight from the heart. Little wonder that the taste of rice each morning is flavored with regret. Here is the place to linger, to enjoy Japan, to find out why they always seem so smiling and content, to discover what it is they know that we have forgotten or have never learned.

The most picturesque town, the kindest people, the most magic experience -- all are saved for the final evening, a set piece in which the dance named Bon-Odori expands from three sentences to eight pages.

Down from a high ridge speeds the rickshaw and into a village directly out of old Hiroshige's picture books. The local inn, drab and dingy from the outside, has floors like mirrors, bright rooms, and stunning art works. Imagine finding a treasure of objects in this remote hamlet. Touch them, bring them close: that exquisite, lacquer-ware box for sweetmeats; the sake cups dashed with leaping shrimp in gold; the iron kettle figured with dragons; the bronze hibachi with lion-head handles; the scroll which shows Hotei, roly-poly God of Happiness, drifting in a bark down some shadowy stream. Now look through the heart-shaped window to a garden with pond, bridges, stone lanterns, and dwarf trees. No longer is it possible to stifle that insistent cliché: Here I am in ancient Japan; probably no European eyes ever looked upon these things before.

Dinner brings eggs, vegetables, rice, and apologies from the landlady. Gomen nasai. No fish because this is the first day of Bonku, the Festival of the Dead. Tonight the ghosts of ancestors return to be honored by their descendants with a sacred dance. Say no more. Wearing a cotton yukata, Hearn rushes into the street, disappears -- with his dark hair and small stature -- into the native throng. The night is -- what else? -- divine! So still, so clear, so mild -- so somehow vaster than the nights of Europe. A full moon flings down shadows of tilted eaves, horned gables, and robed figures. At the dancing ground, a great courtyard with a drum in the center suspended from a bamboo frame, spectators wait in silence. A young girl beats the drum once, and out of the darkness floats a line of

female dancers who look Greek or Etruscan in their high-girdled robes. Sandaled feet glide forward; hands wave and clap softly; long sleeves flit silently back and forth; supple bodies bow and sway until the procession circles the entire yard.

A dance -- yes it is that, and something more as well, something beyond the power of words. Later he will call it phantasmal, an evocation of spirits that belong to the unrecorded beginnings of this Oriental life, a performance full of meanings long forgotten. But at the moment what can there be but his silent astonishment, acceptance, and wonder as the dancers begin to chant, as those massed female voices move through the weirdest melodies, the oddest intervals, the strangest tunes. Call it a dream, but no dream was ever like this; claim to feel haunted, but those weaving shapes are no ghosts; say time vanishes, but can we believe him? The dance goes on forever; the ending comes too soon. A temple bell sounds. The voices grow silent; the figures still; the lines break into clusters of noisy young ladies who laugh aloud, shout to friends, call farewells, shuffle off gracelessly on wooden clogs. In the homeward throng, several girls hurry alongside to catch a glimpse of his foreign face. Damn. And double damn. Months later he will still resent both the sudden change of pace and the jarring intrusion, still feel disappointed that these visions of archaic grace, these delightful phantoms should so quickly prove to be nothing but simple country girls.

He arrives by water but never tells us that -- never describes the trip on the small steamer from Yonago across Nakaumi Lagoon and up the short stretch of the Ohashi River, never mentions his first view of the low mass of gray buildings that is Matsue. The clamor of the docks, the unloading of bags and passengers, the shouts of porters and rickshaw men, the bows and speeches of the greeting committee (if any), the short ride across the bridge to the Tomitaya Inn; the size and decor of the room where he will dwell for three months -- none of these does he choose to write about. We know, or can make a good guess, at the view from his room, for it is not much different from that of a nearby house where he will later dwell for seven months. But the excitement or depression (if either or both) of those first hours and days, or his first reactions to the people, canals, and streets, to the Black Castle on the hill, its broad moats draped with willows -- none of these do we know.

The explanation is easy enough: Hearn is neither diarist nor journalist, but a writer. His sketches, articles, and personal notebooks may be autobiographical, but they never attempt to be comprehensive. A journey, an arrival, a love affair, a marriage -- anything can be ignored or sacrificed to achieve a dramatic effect. Chronology is unimportant; the world created by his words is specific about place, hazy about time. This is also true of his personal letters, dated casually, even carelessly -- sometimes by the month or year, sometimes not at all. Like the stories that will run in magazines and later fill his books, Hearn's journals and letters are

highly literary, full of paragraphs so carefully composed, contoured, and balanced that the original experience is simultaneously revealed and hidden. Both his private and public writings make it almost impossible to know what really happened and what he wishes had happened; what he feels at any given moment and what later, pen in hand, he imagines it would have been nice, or appropriate, or interesting to feel. Equally difficult it is to know which impressions, sayings, and images in any given piece of writing may have been pulled in from some other place and time and put here because this is the place where they make the right impression.

All this is to say that Hearn represents an extreme case of a problem common in biography and history (one made worse when the subject is a first-rate literary figure). How often does the desire for a good moment or story (by the subject or the biographer) lead to a certain stretching, or conflation of events, or toying just ever so slightly with evidence to get an effect that may have its own larger, even symbolic truth? Aware of the power of unconscious behavior, the biographer cannot answer this question for himself, let alone for a subject skillful with words. All he can do is point out that with Hearn, the problem goes to the heart of who he is. Remember: he has come to Matsue to write. The teaching job that brings him here is no more than a means to a long pursued end -- literary recognition. His wager -- made even before leaving America -- is on a Japan that is changeless, eternal, weighted with a tradition too subtle and complex for Westerners to grasp easily, or at all. That such a land suits his

temperament is clear; that it shapes what he sees, describes, and leaves out of his writing must never be forgotten. Nor dare we neglect something equally important -- the bulk of the evidence for his stay in Matsue comes from Hearn himself. From other sources there are only scraps -- letters by friends, reminiscences of family members, fragmentary local records. But so prolific and convincing is Hearn that every biographer has to struggle to avoid being seduced by his powerful prose, or to escape from becoming a kind of mirror that does no more than reflect back an image he wanted all readers to see.

This chapter is part of such a struggle. With less self-consciously artistic people like Griffis or Morse, the task is to construct a biographical structure from bits and pieces of evidence; with Hearn, a well-designed edifice must somehow be demolished and rebuilt at the same time. And this must be done by a biographer well aware that the new structure is also an artifact to be demolished, or, to switch the image, that his task is not to find the truth, but to create one. So he begins with trepidation, begins with the notion of Hearn as a man who has been looking for something all his life. The evidence is there in the forty years behind him, in the journalism of Cincinnati days, the illegal marriage, the broken friendships and quarrels with editors; in the passion for the occult, the ancient, the primitive, the bizarre; in the flights southward, the desire for a Latin culture that New Orleans can satisfy for only so long and the lust for the tropics that Martinique can slake only at the cost of denying him both livelihood and a sense of self-worth. All this may

simply add up to a wish for esteem, recognition, and love; for the home he lost so young and the family he never had; for mother, that dimly-remembered figure evoked indirectly in so many images of Creole, Black and Caribbean women. But this is our retrospective view. For Hearn the serious question is not past, but future: will Matsue give me subjects worthy of my art?

An answer starts to come the first morning, starts with a dull, muffled pounding that brings him awake. Later he will learn that the noise comes from the kometsuki, a huge pestle, used to clean rice. But now it is a small mystery, an annoyance that lasts no longer than the time it takes to get up, push open the shoji, and glance down at the silver rush of the Ohashi River, its banks tightly-packed with two-story buildings. Across the way, at the docks where he landed the day before, small steamers lie next to narrow fishing boats and shadowy figures move about in silence. The boom of a temple bell shakes the inn, seems to stir the town awake. Vendors stroll by to cry their wares -- daikon, vegetables, strips of kindling. At the first rays of light, people in the streets, on wharves, and along that many-pillared wooden bridge off to the right, come to a halt, clap their hands, and bow to the rising sun. Beyond the bridge, the gleam of Lake Shinji, circled with peaks that glow in the dawn.

The scene is pure Hearn, made for -- and by -- his prose. He will describe this view from the window, cherish it, long to see it again in years when Japanese mornings have become like mornings anywhere. Now its an invitation. Come out, explore, see what you have gotten into

this time. He needs little urging. A writer belongs in the streets and these promise to be rich in images. Feudalism lives here. You can see it in the castle, rising from great stone foundations, a vast and sinister shape against the sky. You can sense it in the old divisions of the city -- the district of merchant shops; the region of temples; the quarter of the samurai. You can feel it in the tales people are more than happy to relate -- that of the beautiful maiden, buried alive in the castle walls, who makes the town shudder if anyone dares to dance in the streets; that of the poor soul named Gensuke, sacrificed to the gods of the river three centuries ago to ensure the stability of the long bridge; that of the fox-god, Inari, who promised the daimyo that he would protect the town from fire in exchange for a suitable home.

Most of these stories he no doubt hears later. But as Lafcadio walks for the first time across the bridge; climbs the broad stairway to the tiny shrine where thousands of foxes, tiny and life size, in terra cotta and stone, jauntily raise their tails aloft; strolls beneath the shaggy pines of castle hill and surveys the network of streets and canals below, he has to feel pleased. Matsue seems a good place, at once remote and manageable, strange and homey. Everything that greets the eye only serves to reinforce the inviting reputation of this region. From reading Chamberlain's translation of the Kojiki, an eighth century compilation of fact, faith, and fancy, he knows that in the ages before the creation of mankind, this was the sacred land of Izumo. At one time Izanami and Izanagi, first of the deities, parents

of all the lesser gods and of human beings, came down from the Blue Plain of Heaven to dwell here, and tradition has it that somewhere within the borders of the province, Izanami lies buried.

A single day of exploration and Hearn knows he need not worry. There is plenty to see here, plenty to do, plenty to learn. And more than enough to keep his pen busy. His early letters from Matsue are cautiously optimistic -- the climate is fine, the people friendly, the landscape magic. Hidden from friends -- and himself? -- are the problematics of his situation. The only native speaker of English in this town of thirty-five thousand, Hearn has already given up on the Japanese language as too difficult, too time-consuming to learn. Yet his aim, his reason for being here is to write a book about the daily life, about what he calls the heart and soul of the common people. To attempt this without the language may be seen as audacious or foolish. Whatever the judgment, it is bound to be a challenge. But Hearn does not mention that. In vain does one scan his letters for signs of worry over the personal and artistic tasks ahead. Missing too is any sense of a major problem that can seem so obvious to us a century later: that loving the ways of an alien people from a distance is one thing, and attempting to live among them distinctly another.

Tuesday morning, September 2, 1890. Imagine Hearn nervous, full of questions and self-doubts. He is climbing the broad stairway to the second floor of the Kencho, prefectural headquarters, with English

teacher Nishida Sentaro by his side. Already he has toured the buildings, classrooms, and teacher's lounges, has met the directors and faculties of the two schools where he will work. Now it is time to pay respects to the governor of Shimane Prefecture. Together he and Nishida enter an office done in Western style -- bay windows, carpets, upholstered chairs, a wooden desk. The half dozen officials awaiting them are clad in ceremonial silk costumes -- wide trousers, robes, haori with family crests -- that make Lafcadio feel drab, ashamed of his commonplace Western garb. Such thoughts vanish when Governor Yasusada Koteda, a tall, powerful man, greets him with a hearty handshake, a cup of green tea, and a brief lecture about local history and customs. So grateful is Hearn for this reception that after a few minutes in the presence of the governor's frank face and deep, friendly voice, he is ready to pronounce Koteda the flower of the race, a man cast in the mould of old Japanese heroes.

The meeting ends with handshakes and bows, bows and more handshakes, and then its down the stairs. From the front of the Kencho Hearn can see the most Westernized part of Matsue. Here is a large, open square -- unusual enough for Japan -- edged with wooden, European style buildings: the dark gray-blue Middle School; the much larger and much handsomer snowy white Normal School, its roof topped with a cupola; and the smaller Elementary School, connected to both of the others by covered corridors. Tucked away off a corner of the square and hidden by gardens is the female branch of the Normal School. Raise the eyes just a bit and there is the castle, dating from the first

decade of the seventeenth century. As always, it is tempting to make something out of the contrast between it and these school buildings, between the warriors who for centuries peered from its high lookouts, and the smiling, friendly Nishida at his elbow. But today there is no time. Today it is necessary to hurry across the street and into the long corridors of the Middle School. As the two men enter the classroom, all the students rise and bow. Nishida calls roll and remains beside Hearn during the first day of teaching. But soon -- too soon it seems -- Lafcadio must stand alone in front of those blank, placid, still indistinguishable faces. He who is so painfully shy about his appearance, who has always avoided speaking in public, who has not been inside a classroom in twenty-seven years, must now begin to instruct them in English; he who cannot even pronounce the names of his students, must begin to teach them grammar, reading, composition, and conversation.

We don't know what he does in the classroom, but he does it well enough to have his contract renewed at the end of the year. That's the only independent confirmation of his teaching ability, the only evidence not tainted by the I-was-a-pupil-of-the-famous-American-writer syndrome which affects Japanese memoirs. Hearn will spend fifteen to twenty hours a week with the Middle School students and another five at the Normal School, but nowhere does he leave any record of how he teaches. Evidently the process of education interests him less than the results, and from the first day these promise to be good. The boys -- twelve to sixteen years old -- are well-behaved and well-prepared.

Most have been studying English since childhood, and if some have difficulty understanding what he says, all can read what he writes on the blackboard. After a single day in class, he admits teaching to be a much more agreeable task than I had imagined. After a few weeks, he is pleased to note a development that seems symbolic of his acceptance: the students have stopped addressing him as Hearn-sama (sir) and have begun to call him sensei.

Success at school lets him relax and enjoy the glories of the season -- the clear, sunny September days, cooled by breezes off Lake Shinji; the mild, festive nights full of the off-key voices of men whose hearts have been made merry by wine. Life here is sweet. Officials, colleagues, merchants, and students -- all make him feel welcome and at home, a useful member of the community with an important role to play. Nishida, always there to help, goes from being a congenial companion to friend; the governor invites Hearn to dinner and shares with him a large collection of old, delicious lacquer work; the governor's daughter presents Lafcadio with a rare bird named the uguisu, whose song is supposed to sound like the chanting of a Buddhist sutra; the Educational Association asks him to deliver a speech, then has it translated and printed for general distribution; the local press carries weekly articles (it seems) on the doings and habits of the foreign teacher. All this is heady stuff, and Hearn must strive to keep his feelings confined within the bounds of modesty. To Chamberlain he confides: I am being for the moment perhaps much more highly considered than I ought to be.

Mild weekends are a good time to explore the countryside. Hearn likes to chronicle his jaunts to hot springs, pottery villages, and seaside resorts in short articles for the Yokohama Weekly Mail, a newspaper which seems happy to print any scraps of information from the interior. The most important of these trips -- what he calls my first great Japanese experience -- takes him to Kitzuki, site of Izumo Taisha, that oldest of all shinto shrines and the one to which all eight million deities are supposed to return each October for an annual gathering. To get there takes more than half a day -- first, a tiny afternoon steamer across Lake Shinji; then a rickshaw over an open plain, dreamy and silent save for the infinite bubbling of frogs in twilight rice fields. Hearn stops at the best of Kitzuki's inns and retires early in preparation for something special. Nishida has arranged for him to meet the Guji, or head priest of Taisha, a holy figure revered in past ages as a living deity. The current occupant of the office, Senke Takamori, is eighty-second in a family line that in theory goes back to Amaterasu, Goddess of the Sun.

The first day at Taisha brings out the best and worst in Hearn. Inextricably mixed together are his remarkable ability to take seriously the rituals of a tradition that to most Westerners can seem wholly alien; and his striking inability to describe such a tradition, its representatives, artifacts and his own experience of them, in any but grandiose terms. So when, on a bright morning, he approaches Taisha flanked by his own interpreter and a young priest, the torii they pass under is magnificent, the path they stroll a grand avenue,

the trees above them astounding in their majesty, the surrounding groves vast, the gateway into the main compound massive, the buildings there immense, constructed of colossal timbers. (Go today and walk that same path through those same grounds. April is a perfect time. Then the small groves of trees are stained white with cherry blossoms and the tiny ponds reflect the clouds of the spring sky. When you pass the gate into the main compound and stand before those wooden structures gray with age, you are likely to think -- yes, for shinto shrines these are rather large.)

On the steps leading into Haidan, the great Hall of Prayer, Hearn is met by a line of priests robed in purple and gold. Within the sanctuary, a vast and lofty apartment, awaits a majestic, bearded figure clad in white. Instinctively? -- theatrically? -- Lafcadio prostrates himself and is saluted in return with a gesture of courtesy that puts him at ease. Now they sit near each other on the matted floor, the clumsy barbarian and the elegant, dignified priest. Who knows how long they talk? The hours are out of a story book, a tale told by a descendant of deities. The initial question may be the most important: yes, Hearn is the first Westerner ever to be admitted inside the dwelling of the god. This is a shrine whose origins lie in a period long before recorded history. The Guji explains that Taisha has been rebuilt according to the same exact specifications every sixty-one years, and there are records of twenty-eight such reconstructions. He then shares with his visitor the name of each court, fence, holy grove, and temple pillar, and shows Hearn many

relics -- pre-historic bronze mirrors and jewels; a fire drill for kindling the sacred flame; swords presented to Taisha by Emperors and Shoguns; and documents in the handwriting of military conquerors Yoritomo, Hideyoshi, and Iyeyasu Tokugawa. After a virgin priestess performs a dance of divination to the sob and shrill of weird flutes, the Guji sends Lafcadio away with two ofuda, charms with the images of the chief deities of the shrine.

Back to Matsue he goes, touched with enthusiasm, ecstasy, perhaps even a hint of disbelief. The things he has read about in books -- the legends, myths, and astonishing acts of faith -- have come true. Here is a subject worthy of investigation, explanation. Every writer on Japan has done Buddhism, but nobody has really tackled Shinto. Not that Hearn knows exactly what it is -- but then, who does? Ancestor worship and Emperor worship, an animism that makes trees and mountains into gods -- all are part of Shinto. Such practices may shock Westerners, but in reality they are delightfully natural, reminiscent of beliefs and rituals in the antique world. Surely Shinto expresses just that heart and soul of Japan he wishes to capture. Just look around and see that every house in Matsue has a kamidana, or god shelf, for ancestors; just notice that everyone who goes to Buddhist temples also attends Shinto services. And remember: this native faith predates Buddhism by millennia. Long before Buddha woke up to his name, long before Buddhism arrived from India via China and Korea in the seventh century, Shinto was part of the life of these islands. At

that time it needed no name, but was simply kami-no-michi, the way of the gods.

The passion for Shinto helps to structure Hearn's research and travels. He begins to gather material on the local fox cult; regularly visits the shrine to Inari on the grounds of the castle; undertakes pilgrimages to nearby spots like Yaegaki Jinja, where men and women go to pray for fulfillment in love, and where the statues are too phallic and the ofuda too explicitly erotic to be described in any detail by the written word. Time spent like this draws him into the culture, but only as a spectator, an outsider. At school, he comes closer to really feeling Japanese. Between class hours he relaxes at his desk in the teacher's room and imitates colleagues as they light tiny metal pipes with coals from a hibachi and sip tea in silence. When six thousand students from all over the prefecture descend on Matsue in mid-October for an athletic meet, he is there, among the cheering crowds of spectators. A few days later, at the formal public ceremony where Governor Koteda reads Emperor Meiji's Rescript on Education, a document that stresses the continuity of modern subjects with traditional values, Hearn rises to sing the national anthem. On the Emperor's birthday he joins with other teachers as they march to the front of the assembly hall and bow deeply to the portrait of His Imperial Majesty.

Moving into his own house is another way of feeling like a native. Early in November, Hearn leaves the inn for a nearby dwelling -- dainty as a bird cage -- that fronts the lake. Here, after school hours, students come to visit. Lafcadio has a servant bring tea and cake

while he squats on a cushion and tries to draw out his young visitors. Shyly, they talk of their families and personal dreams; show him heirlooms -- carvings, prints, and scrolls; or sit in silence, that special full silence of the Japanese, who take simple pleasure in being comfortable with a friend. These youngsters seem a plucky lot. They work harder and live more frugally than students at home. To reach the Middle School, they must spend seven full years mastering kanji, the ideographs taken from Chinese, then tackle native history and literature along with all the subjects imported from the West -- arithmetic, geometry, physics, chemistry, natural history, and geography. Worse, they must study English, a language so different from their native tongue that the simplest phrase cannot be translated from one to the other without altering the form of the thought. And this they do while clad in thin cotton garments, even in the coldest of months, and living on rice, vegetables, and bean curd, foods woefully inadequate for acquiring knowledge that was discovered, developed, and synthesized by minds strengthened upon a costly diet of flesh.

Admiration tends to obliterate any obvious shortcomings of either these young men or the system of education that shapes them. In and out of the classroom, the boys have a good deal to teach their foreign sensei, even beyond the obvious need to speak slowly and distinctly, to avoid idioms and always use simple phrases. Their conversations are full of treasures for a writer -- old sayings, folk tales, family stories, legends, customs, superstitions, the doings of local gods and heroes. Regularly they raise cultural comparisons large and small. Do

European men really love their wives more than their parents? (We think that is immoral.) Why do Western women carry babies in their arms? (If they put children on their backs, like we do, their hands would be free for other things.) Why did our former teacher, a missionary, call us savages for revering the Emperor? (We think it a privilege to die for him!)

It does not take long to realize that such questions are not exactly a matter of personal curiosity. They are more an expression of a conventionalized national sentiment that also pervades the students' weekly compositions. Ideas on almost any topic -- fireflies, dragons, frogs, the moon, trees, the aim of life -- seem less individual than collective; the language, comparisons, and moral lessons, the very images and metaphors, recur in many papers. Obviously, originality is not important here. The imagination of a Japanese -- it seems -- was made for him long centuries ago -- partly in China, partly in his native land. During boyhood a youngster learns to see nature -- dawn, evening, mountains, birds -- through the eyes of great artists. In school he commits to memory the most beautiful thoughts and comparisons to be found in the native literature. So everyone knows Mount Fuji is a white, half-opened fan hanging in the sky, or that cherry trees in bloom look as if clouds were caught in their branches.

This lack of originality does not worry Hearn. But somehow it ties into an elusive feeling he has had ever since the first days of teaching. For all the early worries and doubts over how and what to teach, he has always found it strangely pleasant to stand before a

class here. The exact sensation takes a long time to identify, and longer still to render in words. Those placid faces before him always seem soft in outline compared to Occidental faces; they are neither aggressive nor shy, neither curious nor indifferent. Somehow, they just are. Impersonal is the only word that seems to describe them, just as it is the appropriate word for those student compositions. Call this a vague, imprecise, even meaningless concept. But remember: to Hearn it is an important insight, a glimpse at the inner structure -- what he likes to call the race-soul -- of these people. To him the Japanese are pleasant precisely because they are impersonal. A classroom here -- indeed any public gathering, large or small -- lacks a kind of pressure that seems to pervade every situation at home. In Matsue, Lafcadio always is at ease; he experiences a rare psychic comfort, a feeling apparently born of an acceptance of who and what he is in his role, no questions asked. How difficult to explain this -- impossible, really, unless one is willing to use an analogy. He is and does. To live in Japan is to feel some odd kind of relief. More than once he likens it to the sensation one has when, after a long time in a hot, stuffy room, you suddenly emerge outdoors into clear, free, living air.

Life is not like that, not a matter of ceremonies and track meets, encounters with students and insights all brought together neatly from October, February, May, and September. It is getting up in the

morning, every morning, but you have shown that once already; it is walking to school, but you do not know the route he takes, or what bridges he crosses, or what shops he visits, what vendors he sees, and do they smile and does he nod hello? Later he will mention bands of pilgrims with straw hats and white leggings, but not if he sees them once or often. He will describe Mount Daisen, the Fuji of Izumo, as a stupendous ghost, always covered with snow (of course). He will name the major thoroughfares, but not say when he walks them -- the Street of New Lumber, where the houses are more than a century old and the nets of fishermen, strung on poles, seem like giant spider webs; Teramachi, with its row of temples from the different sects of Buddhism -- Nichiren, Shingon, Tendai, Zen, and Shinshu; Tenjin machi, the Street of Rich Merchants, where the shop doors are draped in blue cloth and a line of white telegraph poles recedes into the distance. He watches wrestling matches in temple courtyards and sees companies of smartly-clad soldiers marching behind buglers, but never does he say what he eats for lunch, or how he feels after a day of teaching, or where he walks on any particular afternoon, or when he writes, or who -- if anyone of either sex -- he visits day or night.

So you cannot do the day exactly, but must imagine it, or them, one by one, a feast of new sights that become routine; a stroll, an antique shop, a group of tots in kimono walking in pairs hand-in-hand; a special moment on a bridge where a young woman prays for her dead child, dropping one by one into the current one hundred tiny papers with an image of Jizo, guardian deity of children, and while they

flutter downward her voice intones the prayer Namu Jizo, Dai Bosatsu. You know he likes to watch sunsets over the lake from a little soba shop at the south end of town, likes to attempt to capture the subtleties of the fading light in words. You know that strolling homeward at twilight, he likes to record the cries of vendors who sell noodles, sweet syrup, and sake, and of fortune tellers who will improve your love life or bring you wealth. After dark, he likes to look out at the paper lanterns along the bridge, and watch the reflections trembling in the dark waters, and while he waits to catch the silhouettes of women on the shoji of nearby houses, he fervently prays that window glass will always remain foreign to Japan.

There has to be a catch, and there is: the weather. Cold rain in late autumn, enormous amounts of snow after New Year. Drifts four feet deep pile against the thin walls of Hearn's house; icy winds off the lake blow through the narrow rooms until they are cold as cattle barns. Those Japanese heating devices, the hibachi and kotatsu, prove to be more charming in theory than useful in practice; together they provide mere shadows of heat -- ghosts, illusions. Soon it becomes a struggle to keep up morale. Lafcadio attempts to believe what the natives say, that this is exceptional weather, the worst in fifteen years. He comforts himself with the beauty of the winter landscape and the stunning, if occasional views of Mount Daisen (usually hidden behind gloomy clouds, as he ruefully admits). He even boasts about his

immunity from illness -- prematurely. When snow turns to rain and sleet in mid-January, he comes down with a serious case of influenza -- touched where I thought myself strongest -- in my lungs.

Weeks in bed leave him with a bad case of the blues. Friends and officials are astonishingly kind -- colleagues visit, their wives send special food, his classes are covered by someone else. But nothing helps to make the future look cheery: A few more winters of this kind will put me underground. From late January to April, Hearn writes no letters (or none that survive), makes no significant entries in a journal, and pens but a single article for the Weekly Mail, a piece which celebrates the mild winds and spring flowers that mark the beginning of March. Nowhere does he record, or even hint at, the major event of this period (if not his life). Even today it is impossible to name with any certainty the exact date, or even the month, of Lafcadio Hearn's marriage to Setsuko Koizumi.

The weather, illness, and loneliness, the natural need of a middle-aged bachelor for companionship and a mate -- these are the usual explanations that biographers give for the marriage. All seem reasonable, but none begins to explain Hearn's long silence on the subject, one that lasts at least until mid-summer. For a man who has always equated creation with the female, for one who wishes to write about the heart of this civilization, a relationship with a native woman must surely be in order. Sometime since landing -- in Yokohama no doubt -- Hearn enjoyed and suffered a brief, passionate fling, a delusion of the senses. Now he is ready for something deeper and more

durable. But just a bit. Its important to be clear about this. Like many arrangements in Treaty Ports between local girls and Westerners, Hearn's arrangement is originally meant to be temporary. How else to explain the fact that during all his time in Matsue, the local newspapers will refer to Setsuko by the word aishō, which means not wife but beloved concubine.

Like any marriage in Japan, temporary or permanent, this one is arranged by a nakodo, or go-between, and solemnized simply with the ritual exchange of sips of wine from the same cup. All biographers agree that Nishida plays this role, just as all agree that from the first, Setsu lives in the house as a wife rather than some kind of playmate. This is tradition, too, and certainly the role for which she has been trained. Twenty-two and not especially attractive, Setsu is the well-bred daughter of a samurai family fallen on hard times. Her grandfather was a tutor for the family of the castle lords, but his descendents, like so many of their class, have been unable to make a successful transition from feudalism to an open-market economy. What nobody mentions is that her family must not just be poor -- they must be desperately impoverished to allow their daughter to marry a foreigner. By local financial standards, Hearn is undoubtedly a catch. But just thirty years before -- the blink of an eye in a nation with more than a thousand years of recorded history -- native women were ostracized for sleeping with any despised overseas barbarian. The world may be different in 1891, but in a remote town like Matsue, such attitudes are not entirely forgotten.

Happily no interracial issue ever seems to arise for Hearn; at least he never mentions being confronted with any unpleasantness. To the extent that it might make early biographers edgy, they are able to stress Setsu's aristocratic background and upbringing. What everyone ignores is the far more important and interesting issue -- their early behavior as man and wife. How to imagine those first hours and days together? The solitary report is hers, written fifteen years later: When I went to him, I found only one table and a chair, a few books, one suit of clothes, and one set of Japanese kimono. Nothing here about her expectations or his; nothing about those strange and awkward moments when they first face each other alone, across a kotatsu or in a futon. Remember: they can barely talk to one another. So they must be mostly silent -- or is there amusement, tender laughter, a recognition of the oddity of their situation? -- as she dishes out his rice, hands him a bowl of soup, lies down beside him in the dark. Their first knowledge of each other must be of eyes, hands, bodies, at rest and in motion, the kind of knowledge that will outlast words.

Never will they fully understand one another, but that is not just a matter of language and background. Later Lafcadio will confess, My little wife remains a mystery to me, but what husband -- or wife? -- has not said the same of a spouse? More important, they will come to accept one another, to love one another for the differences they share. But that will happen only after years of adjustments, large and small. Trained to obedience, Setsu will do the most overt yielding, will accept his foreign ways even when embarrassed by them. And Hearn's

behavior can seem odd, especially in their early days together. He is too individualistic, too honest to follow Japanese social norms. In public he will openly insult a man he does not like (violating the idea of harmony), or insist that Setsu walk beside him in the streets (rather than behind, as is appropriate for a married woman), or praise her accomplishments (one must always denigrate one's wife to others). His oddities can be private as well. Once Setsu awakens in the middle of the night to find him in a trance-like state at his desk, unable or unwilling to communicate with her. When she confesses to Nishida that such behavior makes her fear for her husband's sanity, Hearn's colleague brushes aside her fears: Lafcadio is not mad -- but just a typical writer.

One thing is certain: from the day Setsu enters the house, Lafcadio's life becomes easier, more pleasant. She takes care of everything practical; she shops, cooks, cleans, sews, nurses him, manages his money, hands him clothing as he dresses in the morning, heats his bath in the evening, waits up for him when he is out with colleagues at a banquet. She creates a place called home and provides good reasons to come there other than to write or sleep. Now it is always a pleasure to return from school, to change from a suit into a kimono, sit on a zabuton, and smoke a pipeful of tobacco. Under Setsu's care Hearn flourishes, and -- in her words -- draws nearer and nearer to the Japanese style of living. Sometimes he seems to love the old traditions more than any native. Years later she remembers his

repeated comment: There are many beautiful things in Japan. Why do they imitate Western things?

Spring is beautiful that year, and not just because of cherry blossoms. Change, restlessness, and growth; creation and destruction; a hint of new possibilities -- all are part of the season, and what you see depends upon whether you look at things near or far, at individuals or crowds, and if you can accept that at times biography and history run in different directions. The married man thrives, grows expansive, insists on buying his wife new kimono and taking her everywhere with him. On April third they attend the celebration that marks the opening of the first iron bridge over the Ohashi, enjoy along with one hundred thousand visitors a day of artillery salutes, fireworks, food, drink, and dance. Two weeks later, the couple are at a local crafts exhibition displaying so many treasures old and new that Lafcadio can comment, How fine a sense of art we have even in this little country province. Maybe the contrast between past and present, artworks and the iron bridge, are a spur to action; or maybe the house on the lake is really too cramped; or maybe he knows it is time to follow custom and have Setsu's parents move in with them. Whatever the reason, the next weeks are busy ones. While an armed assassin makes an attempt on the life of the visiting Prince Imperial of Russia in Tokyo; and while the nation goes into a kind of mourning in sympathy with an aggrieved Emperor; and while a young woman revives the spirit of past times by committing suicide on the steps of the old Imperial Palace in Kyoto to obliterate the national shame, the Hearn's are house-hunting. Late in

May they join what seems to be the entire population of Matsue, which lines the river banks and bridges, fills the windows and balconies to wave and shout goodbye to the steamer bearing Governor Koteda away towards a new post in Niigata. A few days later, Lafcadio and Setsu, along with her parents and grandparents, move together into a larger home.

Kitabori is the name of their new neighborhood. Hearn prefers the word in the original, for in English it simply means North Moat, an accurate -- if too literal -- description of what seems a most romantic part of the old samurai quarter. Across the street lies a wide section of Matsue's innermost waterway; above that, Castle Hill, covered with tall pines. Once this was the residence of a high retainer of the daimyo. The impressive gateway was designed to keep out intruders; those heavily-barred lookout windows set into the thick, high wall, were manned by armed guards, day and night. Not so long ago, elegant women graced the fourteen lofty, spacious, and beautiful rooms; sat on those broad engawa to play the koto while their men dashed off haiku on the beauties of the September moon. Thoughts like these come with the establishment. So does a feeling of affluence. Proud at being able to afford such luxury, Lafcadio -- uncharacteristically -- brags to friends in America: I am able to keep up nearly the nicest house in town, -- outside of a very few rich men, -- to have several servants, to give dinners, and to dress my little wife tolerably nicely. (To some he will say, like a queen.)

To live like this is to fulfill a grand dream, even if it is one that belongs to someone else. (But let's momentarily forget the fact that Lafcadio still aches for the tropics, for jungles, bright birds, and vivid sunsets.) Now and ever after Kitabori will represent for him the exquisite taste of traditional Japan. Never does he describe its rooms, but you can visit them today, can see them as they were in his time -- spare, elegant, and simple. This is Hearn's domain, the realm where he is treated like a great lord. Every morning, his wife and servants line up by the door to bow him off to work; every evening, after his leisurely stroll back from school, through the overgrown, tangled park that is the castle grounds, they bow him home again. Time now to relax. Wearing a yukata, he squats on the engawa to enjoy the worlds of three separate gardens -- the two cherry trees; the huge, gnarled plum; the pond with water lily and lotus; the stone lantern; the raked pebbles; the forest of bamboo climbing the hill behind the house. Twilight is his favorite time of day. The garden walls shut out the murmur of city life and all he can hear are the calls of the crows, swallows, and wild doves; the persistent shrill of the cicada; the tiny, splashes of frogs diving into pools. (Can it really be this way? Yes, really.)

For a writer on Japan, this has to be the perfect setting, the ideal way of life. All needs are taken care of, sometimes before Hearn even knows he has them -- meals appear, rooms are cleaned, the garden is trimmed and raked, unwanted visitors are kept away. True, more energy than he cares to give must go into his job, especially during

examination periods. But once at home on the matted floor of his study, notebooks, paper, and pens on the low table before him, Lafcadio is left alone to wrestle with the demons of his art. Now there is no excuse not to produce except the traditional one -- what shall I write? The broad subject may be given, but the problem is this: how to slice it up into manageable sections; how to handle the complexities of such enormous topics as Shinto, Buddhism, the arts, history, and legend; how to blend personal adventures and insights with what he can glean from so many sources -- books in English; the compositions of students; the information conveyed by colleagues when they accompany him on a trip; the translations of talks with priests, innkeepers, fishermen, gardeners, and woodcarvers; the stories that Setsu has -- in response to urging -- begun to relate in what he calls the Hearnian dialect, a pidgin-like mixture of childish Japanese and English that they develop together.

To capture a nation in words, to make sense of it for oneself and shape it for a reader -- this is a formidable (impossible?) task. Hearn will write literally thousands of pages as he attempts to locate an approach and suitable form for the pieces that will make up his first collection on Japan. And he does so laboring under an unusual pressure, one born out of self-consciousness. He is, despite a reputation to the contrary, no simple-minded antiquarian. Sitting in his study with the shoji thrown open wide, he understands that the garden before him is a relic of seventeenth century life. Beyond the wall lies a less pleasant Japan, one with telegraph wires, newspapers,

and steamships. The world he chooses to write about will soon vanish. He knows that a railroad will someday reach Izumo, worries that the city will grow larger and more commonplace, -- fears the old mansions of the samurai quarter will be torn down and the land used for factories. And Matsue is only a microcosm of the nation. The old ways, the civilization so full of charm and grace, is doomed to pass away. He knows that, almost seems to sense -- but never says directly -- that writing itself is a kind of paradoxical act, a vain bet cast against the certainty of chaos. He has come to believe the underlying philosophy of this Buddhist culture: Impermanency is the nature of all things. Well he knows that Japan will have to change and so will he. And maybe he also understands this (at least he acts as if he does): a writer is a man who must write, even if he thinks the world is about to vanish (as it someday must).

(Come to a banquet, but don't ask where or when. It doesn't matter, really. After a while they are all the same. But this is a special one; this is Hearn's, the sum and substance of the many he attends; a window into the culture for him, his readers, and us; a way of linking present and past, a single evening and countless evenings; an exploration of all those others and ourselves.)

It begins -- they all begin -- in the silence of a private banquet house surrounded by gardens. Men in formal kimono kneel upon cushions. Serving girls noiselessly move about, placing small, individual lacquer

tables before the guests. The host breaks the hush by bidding his guests to eat. Everyone bows, takes up hashi, and begins. Few words are spoken until the fusuma slides open and in comes a group of women whose gorgeous silk kimono and elaborate coiffures, decked with mock flowers, wonderful combs, and jewelled pins mark them as geisha. Immediately they begin to pour sake; to jest, laugh, offer toasts, and utter funny little cries. They play samisen and hand drum; they dance and posture; they pour more sake. Soon the banquet livens up. Everyone begins to talk at once, to laugh and shout. Men get up, move around the room, form small groups; some sing old songs, or recite poems, or tuck up their robes and dance across the tatami; some engage in drinking contests, play children's games, happily chase the girls around the room. The music grows faster, the guests louder, the actions more disjointed until the room is a merry tumult. But as the hour grows towards midnight, the guests slip away, the din dies down, the music stops, the geisha stand at the door and cry sayonara to the last of the revellers. Only then do these girls sit down to rest and eat a meal in the deserted hall.

(That's a banquet -- every banquet -- all right, but not yet an article or story -- not if you are Hearn. Too much surface here; too much present tense. It lacks thickness; it needs more layers. Any writer could do a banquet like this, but he is after something more. So come along again. Let's go from guests to geisha; let's get her away from the circle of banquet lights, away from judgments made under

the influence of wine. Let's get the real story, the one beneath the surface.)

To some she may seem the most desirable of creatures, but the geisha is no more than what she has been made, a result of the human (read male) desire for love mixed with youth and grace, but without regrets or responsibilities. The cost of this illusion, of beauty, smiles, and perpetual merriment, is high -- the geisha is essentially a slave. As a pretty child, she is bought from poor parents under a contract that can last up to twenty-five years. She is fed, clothed, and housed in a building run by older geisha; she is trained and disciplined, given rigorous lessons in dance, song, polite speech, grace, and etiquette, in drum and samisen. At the age of eight or nine she begins to attend banquets to serve wine; at thirteen she sings and dances; at seventeen she is in full bloom, an artist with a reputation, though she does not even own the clothes she wears. Hers is a world of darkness and artificial light. Every night she attends entertainments, drinks wine without ever losing her head, never swallows a morsel during the longest feasts, never permits a cross word to reach her lips or a negative feeling to show. She has lovers, some of them rich and powerful. They give her expensive gifts, but her dream is of freedom, not wealth, and her greatest wish that someone will buy up her contract. Sometimes this happens, and a geisha becomes respectable. But more often . . . Oh, better leave her young and attractive, when she can still charm us. For the rest of her story is too often

unpleasant, too often a mixture of degradation, a slow, humiliating slide towards death.

(That's closer, but still not there. Hearn likes a certain kind of balance, a certain kind of moral. No joy without sorrow, life without death, art without pain. And no article, if he can help it, without something from the past -- history, legend, folk-tale, it matters not, as long as one can summon up the richness of those centuries gone by. So wait -- here comes the story of an early day geisha who lived before the social role of her kind was fixed and regulated.)

Once upon a time a great many years ago, a poor, young artist was following the old custom of traveling about the country on foot to sketch famous scenery. Long after sunset one evening in a mountainous region with neither inn nor temple in sight, he stops to ask for shelter at a lonely house. A beautiful woman makes him welcome in the humble, but clean cottage; she feeds him a meager supper and gives him a bed behind a screen. In the middle of the night he is startled awake by the sound of moving feet. Peering around the edge of the screen, he sees the woman, now magnificently dressed, dancing with her back to him, dancing in front of an altar like a creature possessed, dancing so wonderfully that he can neither talk nor take his eyes off of her. Suddenly she turns and sees him, and after he apologizes for watching, she tells the story of her life.

Once she was the most famous dancer in Kyoto, the darling of the city. But she fell in love with a poor youth and the only way they

could be together was to flee to the remote country. Together they built this house, and lived their days wholly for each other. Every evening it was her great pleasure to dance for him and his to watch her, but such happiness as theirs could not last. One cold winter he fell sick and passed away. Ever since, she has lived only for his memory. Daily she places offerings before his funerary tablet, and nightly she dances before the Butsudan to please him, as of old.

Deeply moved by her gentleness, devotion, and beauty, the young man somehow wishes to help, but he realizes there is nothing that can be done for such a profound sorrow. Nor will she even let him pay for the hospitality when he departs the next morning, walks down from the mountain and into a brilliant career. Many years later, when he is rich and famous and the incident long forgotten, an old woman in rags comes to his house and asks to have her portrait painted. She has no money, can in fact pay him only with some rich, quaint garments of silk that he immediately recognizes. Yes, it is her and these are the robes she wore for that marvelous dance. Now she explains that years ago she lost both her money and house, and had to return to Kyoto to live as a beggar. Each night she continued to dance for her beloved, but, now too old to move very well, she wants a picture of herself to hang before the Butsudan. Happy to repay his debt and to honor such devotion, the artist uses all his powers to depict her as he saw her years before -- young, beautiful, full of the dance of life. Once again he offers her money and, just as years before, she refuses. Not to be denied this time, he has a servant follow her home. The next

day, bearing gifts, the painter goes to the hovel where she lives. He finds the old woman dead, a sweet, unearthly smile on her lips. In the dim light of a tiny oil lamp, his painting glows before the altar. The flesh is gone, but the work of art remains.

(There now, that's complete. And if you want to find it symbolic and/or autobiographical, go right ahead.)

Summer vacation. July and August blessedly free of classes. Days often so hot and humid that, during the haze of an afternoon nap, you can imagine yourself in the tropics. Lizards and snakes slip in from the garden to visit; spiders spin webs in the high corners of rooms; huge moths hover near kerosene lamps; mosquitos sit hungrily all night long on the netting over the futon. Plenty of time to write now; plenty of time to travel. The two activities are connected. Each jaunt involves a search for new topics, or for more details on older ones. But not every trip is productive or pleasant. Tamatskuri, renowned for its hot springs and agate jewelry, somehow does not stir the imagination, so all that comes out are a few straightforward, descriptive paragraphs for the Weekly Mail. Some spots -- the resort of Togo-Iki is one -- are so detestable that Hearn does not dare mention his reactions to them in print, but only in the privacy of letters. The worst is Otsuka, a primitive, stony village, where an ill-tempered crowd begins to jeer and to pelt the outsider with mud and

sand: It gave me the first decidedly unpleasant sense of being an alien that I have ever had in Japan.

Seaside resorts and remote religious sites -- these are his real loves. Hearn savors little drowsy sea villages -- sleeping, eating, drinking sake, and bathing. He is a good swimmer who likes to venture out far beyond the breakers while natives stand on the shore to watch; a bit of a show-off who is disappointed in a town where the local boys upstage him by hauling boards out to the high surf and riding in on the crests of waves after the fashion of Polynesian Islanders. One of his deepest, most persistent desires is to find a spot never before visited by Westerners, but in 1891 this is not easy to do. From Ichibata on the far shore of Lake Shinji, he hopefully struggles up a long mountain trail, then climbs six-hundred-forty stone steps to reach the windy shrine of Yakushi Nyorai. Here the magnificent view of far off peaks dims just a touch when the local priest explains that a group of German Naval officers made the same trek a decade before. In midsummer when he enters a quiet village with a superb beach that appears in no travel guides, Lafcadio dashes off a note to Chamberlain: I have discovered Yabase. No European seems to have ever been here before. Alas -- this proves not to be true. Before the letter goes in the mail, it bears a postscript: Some detestable missionary was here before me -- for one hour only, it is true, but he was here!

The place with the strongest pull is Kitzuki. He spends the first weeks of the holiday swimming in Inasa Bay and exploring the extensive grounds and numerous shrines -- tiny and huge -- of Izumo Taisha.

Daily he can watch the Guji take to the sea, alone and robed, in front of a private bathhouse far from the public beach. A remote figure to most people, the head priest remains generous and friendly to Hearn. Upon request, he has special photographs taken of the Miko, that white apparition of a priestess who danced at their first meeting. Late in July, he welcomes Lafcadio to a private pavilion to view Honen-dori, a night-long harvest dance at the festival of Tenjin, god of calligraphy and scholarship. Questions about things Hearn sees, and lots of things he cannot, go to one of the Guji's assistants, a learned priest named Sasa. From him come stories that blend history and legend, fact and fancy. Sasa describes the choice and training of priestesses and the practices of divination; he recounts ancient tales of carved dragons that come to life and bronze horses that can be ridden only by the gods; he relates the adventures of O-Kuni, the sixteenth century Miko who fled to Kyoto with a lover, became a popular dancer and the founder of Kabuki, and later -- after the lover's death -- returned to Kitzuki to live in a small temple as a poet and nun.

Details like these go first into notebooks, then into articles and sketches. By now Hearn has found a good Japanese word for his literary aims, one that cannot be translated into English without linking two concepts usually kept distinct in the Western tradition. The word is kokoro and it means both mind and heart. Lafcadio's goal is to get at the kokoro of the common people, to render their religious and emotional home life. To do that, he must focus on Shinto, but this is no act of personal preference. His own religious taste is for

Buddhism. Its doctrines of acceptance; its reverence for all forms of life; its apparent ability to foster calmness and quiet -- these let him exclaim he would be a Buddhist if it were possible for me to adopt a faith. But Shinto is Japan. Not the recent variety; not the nationalistic Emperor worship being fostered by Meiji leaders. No, he is interested in the local traditions and manifestations of this vast, extraordinary force that even experts cannot pin down: It is not at all a belief, nor all a religion; it is a thing as formless as a magnetism and as indefinable as an ancestral impulse. It is part of the Soul of the Race. It means all the loyalty of the nation to its sovereigns, the devotion of retainers to princes, the respect to sacred things, the conversation of principles, the whole of what an Englishman would call his sense of duty. Shinto, he believes, makes people willing to sacrifice their lives for loyalty, duty, and honor; Shinto, he hopes, will help to preserve tradition and keep the nation culturally intact: It is the irrefragable obstacle to the Christianization of Japan (for which reason I am wicked enough to love it.)

On the last summer trip, Setsu is with him, though you would never know it from what he writes, always the story of a Western man exploring Japan alone. It is not quite fit for a wife to travel with a husband, but Nishida is off in Kyoto and she has to go along as companion, interpreter, and caretaker. By now she is growing used to his ways; when he storms precipitously out of an inn he dislikes, she is embarrassed but forgiving; when he leaves silver coins and bank

notes strewn about a hotel room, she is amused that he has no mind for so common a thing; when he sulks for two days after she prevails upon him not to swim in a sacred cave where there may be sharks, she has to remind herself how child-like he can be. But that is one of the things she admires. Hearn has, she says, more delicate and kindly sentiments than a girl; he is always kind to animals, cats, birds, and even to snakes and frogs.

Bon-Odori is the aim of this mid-August jaunt. He wants to relive the year before, to have once again that ghostly experience at a Dance of Souls. The search takes them east, along blanched roads to towns by the shore and towns in the mountains; to villages with enormous cemeteries whose silent populations far outnumber the folks of the Hamlets to which they belong; to fishing settlements with rows of neat gravestones for men lost at sea. They stay in beautiful inns and common ones; hear stories of great tempests; learn that cats are kept aboard vessels as a means of scaring away the ghosts of the drowned; examine elaborate shorybune, model boats used to carry the souls of the dead out to sea. They revisit towns he saw on the way to Matsue -- Shimoichi and Kamaichi -- and get as far as Hamamura without finding a decent Bon-Odori. Almost everywhere the dance has been banned by the police, either through fear of spreading cholera (as Hearn says in his first book), or because of a desire to get rid of a ritual not suited for the modern world (as Setsu suggests years later in her memoir). He either accepts this understandingly (his book) or blames the police for destroying old customs -- they cast aside all the Japanese ways, and

try to imitate Western things (her version). Either way, he is dreadfully disappointed. Perhaps Lafcadio senses that never again will he see a Bon-Odori as exciting as the one the year before. Perhaps he knows that no Bon-Odori could possibly be as thrilling as the one still dancing in his mind.

By now you know it too: there are lots of Lafcadio Hearn's; perhaps too many for a single book. There is the feeling Hearn and the thinking Hearn, the Hearn who loves and the one who hates, the settled Hearn and the one who is ready to flee all obligations. There is the pessimist and the optimist, the realist and the dreamer; the Hearn who writes stories and sketches aimed at the Atlantic Monthly and publishers in Boston; the one who reports on Matsue life for the Weekly Mail in Yokohama; the one who writes long and detailed letters to friends. There is the modest Hearn of the sketches and the more confident Hearn of the letters; the story teller who explains and the theorist who asks questions; the evolutionist who knows that Progress is inevitable and the antiquarian who wants to hold it back. One Hearn hopes to be a great writer, and another doubts that that will happen, and a third says go on and try. And all these Hearn's can claim to be the real one; all demand our attention and want to have their say.

Up to this point, one of the most difficult Hearn's -- the thinker and theorist -- has been avoided. Admit it: explicating ideas tends to slow up the narrative. But that is not the only reason. Let's

consider the question: does it make sense to try to make sense of his ideas? To do this you usually bring together disparate comments from letters written in different seasons, moods, settings, times of day, and states of sobriety -- and you make them say Here! Here is what the man thinks! This is how he feels about Japan, its people, himself, the future. This method gives a nice sense of balance by turning a chaotic jumble of impressions into something systematic and coherent. But to really express how he feels and thinks, you have to do the reverse -- jam the incompatible elements together and admit the contradictions can never be smoothed away. So you can say he loves the Japanese and hates them, finds them pleasant to be with but often oh so boring, because most of them have nothing to say. No doubt about it, he is always high on the females. Ad nauseum he repeats, How sweet the Japanese woman is! But the men -- you never get to know them. You cannot clap them on the back, or chuck them under the ribs, or old boy them, or even really feel close, and after all these months they still smile and bow and keep their distance. How lonely one gets for the touch of another male, for a good cigar and your feet up on the desk and your vest unbuttoned. And the mind, too, for that matter -- and the mind too.

Let's try to take Hearn's ideas seriously because he did (at least from time-to-time). Not that they are his ideas alone. Like anyone, he inherits most of what he thinks, takes notions in through the eye and ear for so many years that it is impossible to say where they come from. Difficult it is to prove what he reads, but you can give the names of scientists, historians, philosophers, and anthropologists who

appear in his letters: Schopenhauer, Darwin, Huxley, Renan, Fustel de Coulanges, E. B. Tylor. The single thinker he turns to again and again is Herbert Spencer, that greatest of systematizers in an age of great systematizers, that exponent of evolution before the publication of The Origin of Species, that man whom Darwin himself considered among the most impressive of philosophers. In the name of science, Spencer has managed to fit all phenomena into a grand spectacle of Cosmic Evolution. One-celled creatures, human beings, and entire civilizations -- all follow the same laws of behavior, the same patterns of growth and decay.

The science, the drama, the very reach and scope of Spencer are equally important to Hearn. He has not called himself a Christian since the age of fifteen, but for five years now Cosmic Evolution has been a new kind of faith, one with no promise of individual salvation but long-range hope for the progress of the species. Spencer shows everything to be part of a pattern: the social problems of Cincinnati and New Orleans, the movement of Western countries into Asia, the trials of a Greek-Anglo-Irish-American writer with one eye -- all are connected and explicable. How dismaying, then, to find that his theories do not apply to Japan. Spencer's brief reference to the land depicts it as an example of how, when a passive phenomenon meets an active one, the former disintegrates. What this means is that under the impact of European civilization -- its arms, commercial demands, and superior ideas -- long-static Japan is in the process of dissolution; literally and figuratively, it is coming apart. But hold

on. Hearn sees quite the contrary: a nation growing stronger and more vital. In this conflict between theory and belief, Lafcadio must turn against his own philosophy. He predicts that Japan will be a magnificent exception to Spencer's general law. As she did with Chinese culture a thousand years before, the nation will absorb the lessons of the West and create a vital, new civilization that will somehow retain all its traditional values.

Spencer is not the only example of theory gone away. Hearn is beginning to see that Japan has a way of eluding theories -- or turning them upside down. Take those of Percival Lowell. His book, Soul of the Far East, was an important factor in Lafcadio's decision to come here. To Boston Brahmin Lowell (his brother is President of Harvard), the key to Japan -- the Soul of his title -- is the impersonality of the Japanese, their lack of individuality as it is manifest in the West. Charming, polite, moral, and artistic, they are wholly lacking in the personal quirks (or genius, or imagination) that would let them be any other way. But, says Lowell the Darwinist, Individuality is a late state of evolution, a measurement of the place of a people in the great march of the mind. By this standard, the Japanese are backwards. Unless they change, become more individualistic, more like Europeans and Americans, their country will be unable to meet the challenge of modern, scientific civilizations (dependent upon the creativity of individuals), and will disappear before the advancing nations of the West.

Nonsense. That's what Hearn can say after a year in Matsue. Yes, he accepts the idea of impersonality, uses it to describe his students and their work, their weaknesses and strengths. But his inclination is to turn the argument around. For him the absence of individuality is a social plus. Because people here are less pushy and aggressive than Westerners, they are more civilized, more pleasant to be with. Yet the real question raised by living here, the deeper one, is whether individualism -- that glory of the West -- is at all a desirable tendency. The view from Asia suggests not. Rather than judge Japan by Occidental standards, Hearn is prepared to do the reverse. He likes to quote a recent article by a Meiji politician which denounces Western civilization for cultivating the individual at the expense of the mass. To a Japanese, the results are negative in the extreme -- unbounded opportunities (for) human selfishness, unrestrained by religious sentiment, law, or emotional feeling.

A Japan-based critique of the West is easy to make, especially for a man like Hearn, so long at odds with Anglo-Saxon culture. For him to see the carefree sensuality of a people who lack notions of guilt or original sin is to fuel longtime doubts about sexual morality at home. To dwell among a people who peacefully follow two religions and have never hated any faith is to highlight the schisms, wars, and inquisitions so characteristic of Christianity, that religion of love. (Yes, he can be ironic.) To know Japanese women is to question that oppression (for they are both oppressed and suppressed) is bad -- how much sweeter and more giving are these females than those objects of

idolatry, those diamond hard American women. To live here is to rethink major goals both personal and cultural: What is really the main object of life? or what should be one's main purpose in life? To succeed in money-making by imposing on others, or to waste one's existence to win empty praise when one gets old, or to simply cultivate one's self as far as possible for the better, and enjoy all one can? The last seems to me much the more rational and moral, and it seems to be somewhat Japanese.

Judgments, insights, perceptions -- that's all. Hearn is no systematic theorist. Never does he attempt a coherent critique of the West, and not for another decade will try a detailed approach to Japan. Love and admiration tend to flavor everything he currently writes for publication about this land, while all criticisms are confined to private letters. Partly this is self-interest: he has chosen a role as explicator and celebrator of this civilization. Partly it is humility: one and a half years here are just enough to let him glimpse all the things he does not -- sometimes fears cannot -- ever know. Most important: his discontents are so vague and inchoate that words can do no more than hint at what they might mean. How to explain the gnawing feeling that people here are less interesting and profound than people at home? He can say, without illuminating much, that depth does not exist in the Japanese soul-stream; he can complain that they are essentially unspeculative, that they do not seem to find pleasure in the suggestions of philosophy or in studying the relations of things. But even such notions are difficult to hold onto, let alone prove. In

truth, his moods and judgments are in a state of perpetual oscillation. This means plenty of self-contradiction and the nagging feeling that the Japanese will always elude him: There are times when they seem so small! And then again, although they never seem large, there is a vastness behind them. -- a past of indefinite complexity and marvel, -- an amazing power of absorbing and assimilating, -- which forces one to suspect some power in the race so different from our own that one cannot understand that power.

Only one idea remains constant through the moodswings of the passing months: the Japanese are the happiest people in the world. Self-restraint, the willingness to live within well prescribed social limits, the ability to enjoy fully the simple things of life -- these are the reasons he gives for such a blessed condition. Social and economic life here lacks the clash and struggle to the death -- literal and figurative -- that seem so marked at home. Or so he naively thinks. Like most of his judgments, this says much more about Hearn than Japan. Repeatedly he uses the image of this land as a refuge, a place of escape from the high pressures of Western life. Whenever doubts and vexations trouble him, he retreats to this comforting notion: They are the best people to live with. But nowhere does he acknowledge what seems so obvious to us -- that only an outsider could ever make such a statement.

Maybe he knows on the first day of class that something is coming to an end. The faces before him on September 4 seem familiar. Did he not see them last year? -- fresh, soft, placid, sweet. But no, many of the names are different and lots of his favorites are missing; some have graduated or moved, others are sick with cholera; a couple have died. So its the same but different. He knows the routine now, needs no help finding classrooms, calling roll, or getting started. He suffers no fears of not succeeding and also harbors no expectations. Maybe that's the problem -- he already knows too much. When Hearn asks a question in class, there is little doubt what the answer will be; when he assigns an essay topic Yes, that's it. He can go on living as a teacher here, but by now he has to be aware that Matsue has nothing more to teach him. Except the possible lesson of what it is to go on. And on. Something he may not yet be ready to learn.

School means less time to write than during the summer, but he has more than at the beginning of last year. Setsu has the house so well under control. He owes her so much, but gratitude cannot keep fantasies away. The tropics still tug at him; the old dreams return. Recurrently, he aches with the old desire to steam up the Amazon and Orinoco, to haunt those crumbling cities with Spanish and Portuguese names, to spend his time pursuing romances nobody else could find. Yes, the Latin countries were his real field. He could have done it; he could do it still. Yet perhaps its all for the best. Last year an enormous earthquake in Martinique flattened St. Pierre and no doubt killed everyone he knows. He might have been caught in that. And

besides, there are tropics on this side of the world. Not so far away, when you come to think of it; not so far to the Phillipines, the Straits settlements. When will he get to them? When I get rich.

This is a season of doubt. Sometimes he worries over the impertinence of writing on a people whose language he does not know, fears the subject of Japan is too broad to master. But he will do it, by God. No one else has tried to tackle the common people; no one else has lived upon the floor, eaten the food, enjoyed (and suffered) the ritual courtesies of daily life. He will succeed, but when? There is so much work ahead and it goes so slowly. Once, long ago, in the tropics, he had a pen of fire. But not now: "I've lost it. Well, the fact is, it is no use here. Japan is wrapped in fog and smoke, a place with no sharp lines between things or people: It is all soft, dreamy, quiet, pale, faint, gentle, hazy, vapory, visionary. Here people really do eat lotuses; here the seasons are feeble and ghostly. No fine inspirations move him; no profound joys or pains trouble his days. Writing is no fun, but dry, bony, hard, dead work. To make a decent book will require years of steady effort devoid of excitement, flash, ecstasy. So complex is the culture, so vastly different from the West, that each piece he writes must be burdened with too much explanation. The result is deadly: I must try another method -- but some stimulus is wanting, the stimulus of strong emotions.

Perhaps. Or perhaps strong emotions get in the way of good writing. To judge by results, Hearn does better when it is necessary to reach for emotion, to create it rather than have it overwhelm him.

Remember his difficulties working in Martinique. For all the complaints and worries, Lafcadio in the early fall mails a fifteen hundred page manuscript to Houghton Mifflin in Boston -- not bad for a dry year, one devoid of inspiration. Of course even if the publisher takes it (and eventually they will), rewrites will be necessary. Far too many books on Japan, he thinks, are full of first impressions, and you cannot trust first impressions here. They are misleading, for nothing in Japan is exactly what it seems. To finish his own volume will take at least a couple of more years. So he has to prolong his stay. His art, his reputation (the one he wants), and his understanding all demand it.

This is not the only reason he cannot leave Japan. For the first time in life -- if you ignore those few weeks with Mattie Foley -- Hearn has an obligation to something other than the self. Marriage is a burden, but oddly fulfilling too. Say it simply: Setsu makes him happy. She lets him -- helps him -- write. The cost is this: what once seemed temporary has begun to take the shape of something unbreakable and to bind me very fast here at the very time when I was beginning to feel like going away. Nor can he think of taking Setsu with him to another country; clearly she would be unhappy away from her gods and her people. So it is necessary to face a truth at once unpleasant and comforting: It does not now seem possible for me ever to go away . . . And to separate from her would be equally out of the question. Indeed, maybe he will do the reverse. For her sake and the sake of any future children -- I'll never have any, perhaps, but just

for illustration -- Lafcadio has begun to think of becoming a Japanese citizen. One potential problem makes him hesitate. He fears the government might try to take advantage and cut down my salary, might pay him as a Japanese rather than as a foreigner.

If one has an itch to move, there are places not so far away, plenty of other cities in Japan that would like to have foreign teachers. We do not know exactly when Hearn first asks Professor Chamberlain to help him find another job, but by early October he has an offer from the Government College in Kumamoto, on the Island of Kyushu, at two hundred dollars a month, double his Matsue salary. Weather and health are the official reasons given for the change (and Hearn's biographers find them convincing enough). Kumamoto, far to the south, is reported to have a milder climate and almost no snowfall, and sometimes Hearn can sound as if he thinks Kyushu is a tropic isle. But this is fantasy; this is too simple; this cannot be the whole story. Search a little for other clues to this decision and you find a letter from Hearn to Chamberlain, who is leaving for a long stay in England: About 'seeing Japan from a distance' -- I envy you your coming chance. I could not finish my book on the West Indies until I saw the magical island again through regret, as through a summer haze . . . I should not be surprised should the experience result in the creation of something which would please your own feelings as an author better than any other work you have made.

The man who had to leave Martinique to write about it; who could only complete his manuscript about the West Indies while living in

Philadelphia; and who knows that this was his first -- so far his only -- successful book, is doing more here than wishing godspeed to a friend. Hearn is not one to use words lightly. Maybe they rise unknowingly out of the unconscious; maybe he does not apply them to himself; maybe he never connects them to his own decision. But there they are for all to see. And interpret. Ultimately, emotion and its opposite can only be recollected in tranquillity. Does it seem an exaggeration to insist upon this point: To turn Matsue -- his Japan, after all -- into a work of art, Hearn somehow knows he must be living somewhere else.

Later he will do the departure, will use it as the final chapter of his first book on Japan, will entitle it Sayonara! He will do the doubts, will admit that he refuses to dwell upon the thought of never again seeing the quaint old city, will try to believe -- knowing it is not true -- that he will someday return to his house in Kitabori. He will describe the gift from the teachers, two huge antique vases made at Rakusan, and the one from the students, a feudal sword with silver and gold inlay. He will quote the speech of the students to him, and his reply, full of regrets at leaving and advice that they revere their ancestors and honor their government. He will do the banquets, and the farewell addresses in English, and the poems in Japanese, and the singing of Auld Lang Syne. And he will do the last morning, when two hundred students and teachers assemble before his gate and escort him to the wharf near the long white bridge. He looks at the crowds and

remembers all the kindness and courtesy extended to him, and recalls that nobody has ever addressed him a single ungenerous word, and he asks (then or later) a question that can have only one answer: Could I have lived in the exercise of the same profession for the same length of time in any other country, and have enjoyed a similar unbroken experience of human goodness?

The steamer shrieks for its passengers. Lafcadio shakes hands with the directors of the schools, the teachers, his favorite students. It is November 15, a gray morning, sharp with the first chill of winter. From the deck he can see bridges, the peaked host of queer dear old houses, the sails of junks gold-tinted in the early sun. Mist rises from the lake, hangs in bands before the mountains -- sky and earth so strangely intermingle that what is reality may not be distinguished from what is illusion. It is a magic land -- how many times has he thought that, written it? The steamer shrieks again, puffs black smoke, backs into midstream, moves away from the wharves while students wave caps and shout Banzai, Banzai, -- ten thousand years to you, ten thousand years! Out on the river they go and into the lake, and the faces, the voices, the wharves, the bridges are suddenly part of the past. For a while he can see the crest of the castle, the shaggy pines, the long blue roofs of the school buildings. And then they too are gone, replaced by memories -- the smiles of colleagues, the dog that waits by the gate every evening, the garden with its blooming lotus and cooing doves, the songs of children at play, the afternoon shadows on streets, the long glowing lines of

festival lanterns, the sound of geta on a windy bridge -- all are part of him as the steamer picks up speed and bears Hearn more and more swiftly, ever farther and farther from the province of the Gods.