

## A PUPPET

by Czoe Sang-Dông

In a lonely suburb, which can only be reached by half-an-hour's car ride from the city of Yokohama in Japan, there was a place called Kamoba, or "The Duck Place".

I was invited by a friend of mine, G., and went there for some duck-hunting. It was not at all a sight-seeing visit to the Duck Place, but rather a pleasure-hunting of ducks. People used to go there and spend a great deal of money on eating and drinking to have good time.

G. seemed to have visited the place once or twice before, but he did not want to tell me about it and just said that I would understand all when I saw the place.

"Brother, are we visiting some place of mystery? Why won't you tell me? I'm almost losing all patience!", Miss S., G.'s younger sister complained impatiently.

"Look! Isn't this mysterious place? There is no house to be seen around here, and we are walking into a narrow lane among the reedbushes. Isn't this wonderful? Would there be any interest in seeing magic after you knew its secret?", G. replied.

"Why! You are much too proud of yourself! What will you do if we find to-day's picnic uninteresting?"

"Then your brother will surely compensate us for our loss!", I interposed clumsily.

"Hm! So you two are together against me, are you? Of course, you would both prefer my absence from this party, to make you perfectly happy. I mean, I realize that the way you two are feeling now, you think that the intrusion of a third person would destroy the interest of even the most interesting occasion, Isn't that right? Tell me if it isn't!" Thus G. rattled on to his younger sister who glared back at him, and said,

"Brother, you are a sophist!"

"That's not the answer I wanted! Tell me, yes or no?", G. said with a loud laugh, and then putting his hand to his mouth, he warned us, "Hush! You must not speak loudly from now on, and you must not smoke, either."

Our road now turned sharply to one side, and far off in the direction it led, there was a straw-roofed house. It looked like a farmer's house, but a large business sign-board, which was hung prominently across the wooden arch gate in front of the garden, showed that it was not. On the signboard were written such words as "Cuisine," "All Duck Food", and so on. There were also notices warning visitors that smoking, shouting, and the use of hunting guns were prohibited.

We went in, guided by a Japanese woman wearing a white apron, who had come out to receive us. The master of the house, looking very dignified with his beard of the Kaiser's style, came to us behind the woman who brought us tea.

G. and the Kaiser's Beard seemed to have met before, and they greeted each other.

"You are very welcome to-day. Yesterday afternoon some visitors came, and we had just one demonstration of hunting. Since then, things have been left undisturbed, so there will be plenty to catch if we try.

The master of the house chattered on like this in a business-like voice.

"How on earth do we play this game? Mr. G. has not explained it, but just told us to follow him, and so here we are now .... ", I asked the Kaiser's Beard, in an attempt to satisfy my impatience.

"Ha, ha, ha! This is your first time here, isn't it? There's nothing to it! It's just catching ducks with a duck. Well, let's not lose our chance! Let's try at once!" Kaiser's Beard hurried us along.

G. paid the man one hundred yen, and we followed him to the so-called 'Duck Place', The master led us a little way along a road through a field of reeds as high as a man and into a box-house which stood like a sentry-box on the bank of the reed-field.

"Now, look out there! There are lots of ducks, aren't there?" The master pointed through a small glass window which was fixed in the wall. We looked out through the glass and saw a stretch of water, not wide enough to be called a lake but wider than a pond or pool, with ducks, big and small, floating on the water.

"They do not seem to be domestic ducks, but they seem to have been bred like gold-fish!", G.'s younger sister whispered, much amused. Kaiser's Beard motioned with his hand, and replied, "No, they are quite wild and would fly away if they knew we were here. Now, I shall begin!"

His explanation was as fluent as that of a professor demonstrating some experiment, as he grasped a handful of unhulled rice from a ground which had been placed nearby.

"They are wild ducks, as I have already said, but just one among them is the tame one, which always keeps to this duck-place. In other words, it is my puppet. If I put these grains of unhulled rice here, and let it float on the water through that groove which leads outside, then the puppet-duck entices the stranger-ducks to come over here to eat the unhulled rice. Now, watch this! I am starting now."

Kaiser's Beard put a handful of the rice onto a flat dish made of zinc. They slipped through the narrow zinc groove which was connected to the bottom of the dish, and fell into the water which was collected underneath it.

If you can imagine the picture, this small stream was a cutting from the wide stretch of water, leading deep into the bank from which we were watching from the watch-box, and up to the spot where the grains of unhulled rice had been put in and were floating. When the grains slipped down the narrow zinc groove and fell on to the water with a very slight sound, the ducks lifted their heads with a slightly surprised expression; but, when they watched the direction from which the sound had come, and saw no sign of danger, they went on swimming merrily, playing hide-and-seek.

The Kaiser's Beard took another handful of unhulled rice and threw it into the plate. The ducks tossed their heads at this too, but their surprise was much less this time. Then he threw in another lot of grain. and this time the duck which was playing at the head murmured something. Judging by what followed, his words must have been something like:

"Friends there's a lot of delicious food falling into the water over there!"

The other ducks seemed to be careful at first, and they just looked over in the direction of the grain, half believing and half doubting. With infinite patience the Kaiser's Beard again floated some grains. Now the duck at the head swam swiftly straight towards the place where the grains were falling, just like a fast sprinter,

murmuring something as he did so. Then he picked up the floating grains and ate them without looking back at the others, and he picked up the sinking grains too by doing his hide-and seek swimming. Now all the duck which had been hesitating, raced each other to the bottom of the groove, murmuring all the time. Again judging by what followed, they must have been saying to each other something like:

"Friends, there's no need to worry! Look at the way our friend is eating, and nothing's happening to him, is it? Don't be afraid, let's eat the delicious grain! Whatever a gentleman may be, he cannot live without eating, they say!"

Ah, but alas for their dreams!

When the group of ducks had gathered almost under the groove the magician, the Kaiser's Beard, suddenly pulled a wire which had been set up in rather an odd way, and then the net, which had already been provided, covered the stream from bank to bank. A terrible tumult arose from the ducks, who were surprised to find themselves covered; some tried to fly, some to run, and some to dive under the water, all forming an orchestra of sorrowful cries, as if they had met the ducks' day of doom.

When this miserable sound had ended, the Kaiser's Beard said with a smile, "Now, let's go and see!" He went out, and we after him, and searched the net. There were five ducks altogether caught in the net. I remarked on this:

"I thought that all the ducks would die, but only five are caught, aren't they?"

"Of course., they don't allow themselves to be caught so easily, since it means certain death to them!", the Kaiser's Beard answered, and he added that the result was rather good.

"Then these five ducks are ours, are they?", G.'s younger sister said, as happy as a child, but the Kaiser's Beard answered in some surprise,

"No, wait a moment, please! I must release just this duck."

He caught the duck with the dark blue neck, and released it on the water. The liberated duck murmured something, and swiftly swam away towards the wide stretch of water where it had been.

"Why do you release the duck which you have caught with so much difficulty?", G.'s younger sister protested.

"That is the capital of our business. What other duck would take the lead and come in under the groove to pick up the grains of unhulled rice, and so entice the other ducks here? That's my puppet, indeed! Ha, ha! That's what I meant about catching ducks with a duck,"

"What a hateful fellow it is! That duck lures its friends into the way of death and alone escapes from it. It is the worst sort of betrayer, isn't it? You had better release these ducks too. What is the use of them?"

G.'s younger sister tried her best to exert her womanly mercy on behalf of the four ducks which had been caught in all their innocence.

"What's the use of them? We must bake or roast them, and eat them", G. answered.

"Oh, brother! What a thing to say! Isn't it bad enough for them to have been cheated by a friend and caught, and now, on top of that, they are to be baked or roasted."

"Sister, have you suddenly become a Nightingale? Why are you so sympathetic? These ducks have cost twenty-five yen each, haven't they? If we don't eat them, where can I get my hundred yen back from?"

"But I don't like it. I won't eat the duck!", his sister said, and she shook her

head and stepped away from the spot.

"If you don't like to eat, that's quite all right. We shall eat them all!", G. murmured and turned to face me.

I feel sorry for them too and won't eat them either." I said and stepped away.

"Hm! I won't believe that you don't like to eat duck, but my guess is that you wish to be approved of by my sister, don't you? In other words, you value my sister's love higher than ducks to eat. I understand how you feel. So then, I'll have to eat all the ducks myself, won't I?"

"You may think as you like", I answered.

His sister said to me that's the best answer! Don't you listen to my brother's sophistry anymore, but come over here, please!"

I followed her, as she waved her hand.

So at last, we decided that we could not bake or roast them in that restaurant, but that we should take them back alive. G. got some string and tied the feet and wings of the four ducks so that they could be conveniently carried, and then he went off to the toilet.

At this time, G.'s sister winked at me, called, and indicated with her eyes that I should undo the string and release them. I agreed at once, and, taking out a knife from my pocket, I cut the string quickly and released the four ducks all together.

It is not easy to forget, even now, twenty years later, the sound of wings of these four ducks and their joyous cries in the Western sky as they gradually grew fainter and fainter.

(Oct. 3rd, 1949)