



Edogawa Rampo
Beast in
the Shadows

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EDOGAWA RAMPO

Beast in the Shadows

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Penguin
Random House
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This translation first published by Kurodahan Press 2006

This edition published 2023

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Set in 11.25/14 pt Dante MT Std

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

ISBN: 978-0-241-65691-4

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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I

It sometimes seems to me that there are two types of detective novelist. One, you could say, is the criminal sort, whose only interest is in the crime and who cannot be satisfied when writing a detective story of the deductive kind unless depicting the cruel psychology of the criminal. The other is the detective type, an author of very sound character whose only interest is in the intellectual process of detection and who is indifferent to the criminal's psychology.

Now the detective novelist I am going to write about, Ōe Shundeī, belongs to the former category, while I fall into the latter.

Accordingly, while my business is concerned with crime, I am in no way a bad person, for my interest is in the scientific deduction of the sleuth. Indeed, it might even be apt to say there are few as virtuous as me.

The real mistake is that such a well-meaning person as me accidentally became involved in this case. Were I somewhat less virtuous, had I within me the slightest trait of evil, I could perhaps have come through without such regrets. I might not have sunk into this fearful pit of suspicion. Rather, I might now be living in the lap of luxury, blessed with a beautiful wife and great wealth.

Quite some time has passed since everything ended and while the awful suspicions may not have disappeared the raw

reality is fading into the distance and becoming to some extent a thing of the past. Accordingly, I have decided to set this down as a kind of record and I think it could even be made into a very interesting novel, though even if I completed the work I would not have the courage to release it immediately. You see, the strange death of Oyamada that forms a crucial part of this record still lingers in people's memories and no matter how names were changed and disguising layers applied nobody would take it as simply a work of fiction.

Thus, there may well be people who could be bothered by this novel and I would be embarrassed and disturbed to discover this. To tell the truth, though, it is more that I am frightened. For not only was the incident itself strangely meaningless and as unfathomable as a dream in broad daylight, the fantasies I built up around it were so terrifying as to discomfort even myself.

Even now, when I think of it this world transforms into something peculiar. Rain clouds fill the blue sky, a sound as of drumming beats within my ear, and all darkens before my eyes.

Anyway, while I am not of a mind to publish this record right away, sometime, just once, I would like to use it to write one of the detective novels in which I specialize. These are simply what you might call the notes for it. Nothing more than a moderately detailed *aide-mémoire*. I intend to write much as if keeping a long diary in an old notebook, blank but for the section around New Year.

Before I describe the case, it would probably be useful to provide a detailed explanation of Ōe Shundeï, the detective story author who is the protagonist in this case, of his style, and also of his somewhat unusual manner of life. While I had known him prior to the incident and had even engaged him in discussions in magazines, we had not had any exchanges at a personal level and I knew little of his daily life. I became somewhat more

informed about this through a friend called Honda after the events took place. Accordingly, with regard to Shundeï I think it most fit that I write about these things in the order in which they occurred and as it was the occasion that led to my becoming caught up in this strange case I will describe the facts I noted when I went to interview Honda.

It was in the autumn of last year, around mid October.

I had a notion to look at some old sculptures of Buddha so I went to the Imperial Museum in Ueno where I walked through the gloomy, cavernous rooms trying to muffle my footsteps. In the large deserted halls, the slightest sound echoed fearfully and I felt like suppressing not only my footsteps but also any impulse to clear my throat.

So deserted was the place, I could not help but ponder why it is that museums are so unpopular. The large glass plates of the display cabinets shone coldly and not a speck of dust had fallen on the linoleum. The building's high ceilings were reminiscent of a temple's main hall and the silence flowed back as if one were deep under water.

I was standing in front of a display case in one of the rooms gazing at an aged wooden bodhisattva that had a dreamlike eroticism. Hearing a muffled footfall behind me, I sensed someone approach with a light sound of swishing silk.

I was startled to see the reflection of a person in the glass in front of me. Projected over the bodhisattva was the image of a woman of class wearing a lined kimono of yellow silk and with her hair done in the *marumage* style denoting a married lady. She drew level with me and stared intently at the Buddhist form. I am embarrassed to admit that while pretending to look at the image I could not prevent myself from snatching occasional glances at her. That was how much she captivated me.

Her face was pale, but I had never seen such an attractive paleness. If mermaids exist, then I believe they must have

charming skin like that of this woman. She had the oval face of the beauties of the past and every line, whether of her brows, nose, mouth, neck, or shoulder, had that feminine delicacy described by the writers of old that suggested she might disappear if touched. Even now I cannot forget her dreamlike, long-lashed eyes.

Oddly, I do not now recall which of us spoke first, but perhaps I created some pretext. A brief interchange about the objects in the display case formed a link, and after doing the rounds of the museum together we exited and chatted about many things. Our paths remained the same for a considerable time on the walk from Sannai down toward Yamashita.

As we spoke, the air of beauty she evoked deepened further. When she laughed there was something graceful and shy that produced a strange sensation in me as though I were gazing at an old oil painting of a saint or that reminded me of the mysterious smile of the Mona Lisa. When she laughed, the edges of her lips caught on her large, pure white eye teeth, creating a fascinating curve. A large beauty spot on the pale white skin of her right cheek set off that curve to create an ineffable expression at once gentle and nostalgic.

However, were it not for something odd I discovered on the nape of her neck, my heart would not have been attracted by her so powerfully and she would have seemed but a genteel and tender beauty likely to vanish if touched.

She concealed it with a skilful arrangement of her collar that betrayed no artifice, but as we passed through Sannai I caught a glimpse.

Visible on the nape of her neck was a swollen line like a red weal that looked as though it went deep down her back. While it seemed to be a birthmark, I also wondered whether it might not actually be a recent scar. The dark red weal wormed over the smooth white skin of her soft nape, and strangely the