The Archive of Nicholas Roerich Museum

Reprinted from The Scholar, January 1940.

Fragrance

By NICHOLAS ROERICH

ARDENS have ceased being fragrant." Thus said Mrs. Eiskaff in her lecture in the American Women's Club.

She continued: "In ancient times the wealthy men and administrative officials of China cultivated gardens in order to create around their homes the illusion of the natural hills and fields of their provinces.

Taking pleasure in this recreation and change of atmosphere within the boundaries of the city, they furnished enjoyment to their wives also. Especially for Chinese women, obliged to lead a secluded life, these gardens added beauty to their existence.

In constructing the gardens, the Chinese strove to come as near possible to imitating that scenery which was particularly pleasing to them.

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In constructing the gardens, the Chinese strove to come as near possible to imitating that scenery which was particularly pleasing to them.
These gardens did not occupy a large space. The Chinese valued land too much, as an area suitable for agriculture. Yet on a comparatively small plot of ground, the art of the Chinese gardener enabled him to create true works of art.

For example, Mrs. Eiskaff mentions the garden of a certain Kan-Ena, grown by him within the limits of Shanghai, in the year 1577. "In this garden were brooklets and ponds, hillocks and valleys, bamboo groves, subtropical flora, pavilions."

Speaking about Chinese women, she expresses regret that at present they have become so changed from what they were in the old gardens. Strange as it may seem, though the Chinese women are incomparably more emancipated now than they formerly were, nevertheless they have lost much of that influence which they had in country life. Formerly almost without exception leading a secluded life, they still knew how to exert the requisite influence on their husbands.

The lecture of Mrs. Eiskaff takes on still greater interest in that she is a well-known translator of the ancient Chinese poets, occupying the post of honorary librarian of the "Royal Asiatic Society," as the journal takes note.

Once when I was asked—what is the difference between East and West? I said: "The best roses of East and West are alike fragrant." We have had occasion to read very condemnatory books about different countries. Each such condemnation has immediately provoked a rebuff from the censured country. A new book, sometimes very hastily written, has appeared, full of the most frightful judgements.

One book-collector displayed in his library a special shelf of varicoloured books, saying "here is the collection of condemnation." Thus the books were set apart in a series of negatives and reproaches.

The collector or philosopher marked off in this sequence in a costly fashion how much is spread the poison of condemnatory judgement. Chronologically examining these singular collections, one can see authors have hastened to enlist only on the negative sides. Let us even admit that they have not intentionally wished to tell lies, but they have employed only the singular lexicon of negatives. Occasionally such censorious collections remind one of a certain jocose critic who counted up in a certain book how many times the negative "no" was used, and pathetically concluded "well, perhaps this can be a good book, in which the word "no" has been spoken seven hundred times."

Indeed, in his condemning mood, the critic did not try to count up how many times in this book was said the word "yes." In any case, when you see an entire section of a library composed of mutual negations, then it becomes horrible. Of course some negations are not comforting in the thought that without pronouncing a panacea we have had no right to criticize.

In the complexity of life there can be found new monstrosities, and yet let us not be in the position of pronouncing any general condemnation. The author of "Good Earth" has tried to set up in opposition two as it were mutually exclusive currents. This is not passing in judgment but comparison. In general we ought not to say simply that something is bad without saying what is good or how it can be made good.

In each garden there occur periods when the blossoms have not opened out and when leaves and buds are not even visible, yet the gardener will tell you that within three months you would not even recognize the garden. Everything blossoms, opens out, takes on new forms. The experienced gardener provides a multitude of examples which are applicable in all life. A winter's tale about summer gardens will always bear a particular verbal expression. Especially in winter does one dream about summer.

And likewise about woman's task, about the destination of women. Often more and more is required of woman in view of the fact that in an inner sense she bears a special significance. Right now equal rights for women are spoken about everywhere. Already this formula sounds somewhat old-fashioned. Already it becomes impossible to speak in general about them. And how otherwise? Where can equal rights be inadmissible? Sometimes it is customary to say that grandmothers knew something better than their grandchildren. And this comparison will be absolutely conventional. The best roses are identically beautiful. Here outside the window the ground is already growing green, the cherry trees are covered with their floral finery, and there can be no garden without fragrance.

Let there be a garden, let the deserts blossom, let the life-giving underground streams again rush forth.

The gardens will be fragrant.