

“The Basement Of The Pleasure Club” By Itō Ken – A Descent Into “Deviance”

Introduction by Richard William Leckie

Translation by Edwin Michielsen

Abstract: *Shanghai in the early 1930s was a city teeming with intrigue and decadence. Amidst this backdrop, Doctor B, a flamboyant physician, invites writer Shimura Yōhei on a late-night excursion to the mysterious Fortune Club. Promising an experience unlike any other, Doctor B leads Shimura through the shadowy streets to a lavish dance hall, a sanctuary for Shanghai’s international elite. As the night unfolds, Shimura is mesmerized by the club’s opulence and the eclectic mix of patrons. However, a chance encounter with a Portuguese dancer named Kate unveils a sinister secret lurking beneath the surface. Guided by a cryptic hint, Shimura ventures into the dark and eerie basement, where he discovers a hidden world of unimaginable horror—a prison for women ensnared in a web of exploitation and despair. Itō’s work critiques capitalist exploitation and the underclass’s struggles, challenging the superficial and exoticized depictions of Shanghai by his contemporaries. Through gripping narratives that reveal the exploitation beneath Shanghai’s glamorous surface, Itō aimed to counter the prevailing bourgeois narratives and expose the harsh realities of life in Shanghai, presenting a nuanced critique of social inequalities and the revolutionary potential of the city’s conflicts.*

Keywords: *Itō Ken, Proletarian Literature, Detective Fiction, Shanghai, Social Critique*

Introduction

by Richard William Leckie

Itō Ken’s “Dōraku Kurabu no Chikashitsu” (The Basement of the Pleasure Club) was first published in *Shūkan Asahi* magazine in February 1928 and later included in the short story collection *Shanghai Yawa* (Shanghai Night Stories) published by Heibonsha in December 1929. While Itō’s work remains largely ignored by researchers, *Shanghai Yawa* has

been examined in previous studies by Takeuchi Mizuho (2009) and the translator himself (2019). These studies focus mainly on two aspects of the work: its depiction of Shanghai and its merging of elements of proletarian and mystery literature.

In regard to the former, Shanghai held a special place among Asian cities in the collective consciousness of 1920s Japan. Japanese citizens could visit Shanghai without a passport, and by the late 1920s there were more than 25,000 Japanese residing in the city, comprising roughly half of its foreign population. Shanghai was also the subject of a number of literary works in this decade, including Muramatsu Shōfū’s *Mato* (Sin City, 1924) and Yokomitsu Riichi’s *Shanghai* (Shanghai, 1928–1931). While these works varied widely in focus and quality, two images of Shanghai emerge: Shanghai the cosmopolitan city, with its foreign concessions and mix of Chinese, Japanese, European and American residents; and Shanghai the city of wanton vice and debauchery, with establishments catering to every sexual proclivity. These images were not mutually exclusive. Rather, they coexist to some extent in all of these works.

Both images of the city are also evident in *Shanghai Yawa* and other works by Itō Ken, who stayed in Shanghai from July 1927 to January 1928. However, as a proletarian author, Itō was keenly interested in the social underpinnings of the city’s unique blend of globalism and debauchery, particularly capitalist exploitation and the struggles of the underclass. Despite the huge popularity of proletarian literature in late 1920s Japan, Itō chose to depict these inequali-

ties not in standard proletarian novels, but rather in works which combined elements of proletarian and popular literature, particularly the mystery novel.

Itō's critiques of his contemporaries, particularly Yokomitsu Riichi and Yoshiyuki Eisuke, as Michielsen (2019) argues, underscore his concern with the portrayal of Shanghai in literature. He criticized their works for overlooking core issues such as capitalist exploitation and resistance in Shanghai, though Yokomitsu did depict some labor unrest and other tensions in his novel *Shanghai*. Itō lamented the general lack of substantial exploration of Shanghai, singling out Muramatsu Shōfū and others for focusing too much on superficial aspects. His dissatisfaction extended to prominent writers like Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, and Satō Haruo, whom he felt were more interested in exoticizing China or dwelling on ancient Chinese culture than addressing contemporary China's struggles.

For Itō and other proletarian writers, as Michielsen (2019) shows in his article, Shanghai represented a site of revolutionary potential, offering insights into the conflicts between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Guomindang (GMD). Despite his own writings sometimes succumbing to market demands for sensationalism and orientalism, Itō aimed to fill the gaps left by bourgeois narratives about Shanghai. His stories, including the one translated below, diverged from typical portrayals, revealing the exploitation beneath Shanghai's glamorous surface. Through his *Shanghai Night Stories*, Itō sought to challenge prevailing perceptions of China as merely an unruly and lawless country, perceptions that the Imperial Japanese government exploited to justify its aggression under the guise of "civilizing" its people and liberating them from the Euro-American powers.

At the time "Dōraku Kurabu no Chikashitsu" was published, mysteries were still very much a nascent genre in Japan. The Japanese mystery novel, which was inspired by translations of Western mystery, adventure, and horror fiction, did not really begin

in earnest until the publication of Edogawa Ranpo's short story *Nisen Dōka* (The Two-Sen Copper Coin) in April 1923. In the mid and late 1920s, Japanese mysteries were still trying to establish their own identity and refute criticisms that they were merely inferior imitations of Western mystery fiction. Even the definition of the term *tantei shōsetsu*, which was used to denote mysteries at that time, was unclear. Though *tantei shōsetsu* literally means "detective novel," the presence of a detective was by no means a prerequisite at the time. In fact, many *tantei shōsetsu* of this era do not even fit into the mystery genre as it is generally defined today, and rather would be considered horror, fantasy, science fiction, adventure, or even comedy novels. Nearly any work with an element of the strange, surprising, eerie or unexpected could pass as *tantei shōsetsu*.

The first figure in proletarian literature to refer to the Japanese mystery was Hirabayashi Hatsunosuke, who was the foremost proletarian literary critic until the Great Kantō Earthquake. In August 1924, Hirabayashi published the essay "Watashi no Yōkyū Suru Tantei Shōsetsu" (My Requirements for Mystery Novels) in *Shinseinen* magazine. In the essay, he declares his love of mystery fiction and proposes six conditions for a good mystery novel. On the other hand, the proletarian author Maedakō Hiroichirō, who is best known for his 1921 novel *Santō Senkyaku* (Third-Class Ship Passengers), criticized the mystery genre in *Shinchō* magazine in December of the same year. Maedakō argued that mysteries glorified the authority of law which the ruling class employed to keep the oppressed classes down. This led to a debate with the mystery writer Edogawa Ranpo which spilled into the pages of *Shinseinen* (New Youth) and continued into June of the following year. In the January 1926 issue of *Bungei Sensen* (Literary Front) magazine, proletarian children's author Makimoto Kusurō repeated Maedakō's criticisms that mysteries validated a legal and judicial system which oppressed the proletariat, and proposed the creation of a new genre of crime fiction which looked at crime and justice from the proletarian perspective. Five years later, Itō Ken would echo

many of Maedakō and Makimoto's arguments in his article "Tantei Shōsetsu no Shinhōkō" (The New Direction of the Mystery Novel, February 2, 1931) published in *Shin-Aichi* newspaper, in which he criticizes mysteries for failing to examine the social environment and inadequacies that lead to crime.

Various developments in the late 1920s fostered the emergence of the proletarian mystery. Hirabayashi Hatsunosuke published his first mystery novel *Yoshin Chōsho* (Preliminary Report) in the January 1926 issue of *Shinseinen* and went on to write more than 20 original mysteries. Though he later distanced himself from the proletarian literature movement, elements of proletarian ideology can be seen in his early mystery novels. This is particularly true of his May 1926 work *Giseisha* (Victim), the story of a low-ranking company employee from a humble background who is falsely accused of the murder of a co-worker and cajoled into making self-incriminating statements during his interrogation.

At the same time, *Shinseinen* magazine had embarked on a new initiative which would put more proletarian authors into contact with the mystery community. In his 1949 article "Ippan Bundan to Tantei Shōsetsu" (The Literary Establishment and Mystery Novels), Ranpo recalls that *Shinseinen* began making overtures to established and veteran writers in 1924, inviting them to publish mysteries in *Shinseinen* in the hopes of raising the profile and reputation of the nascent genre. This eventually led to *Shinseinen* contacting writers in the emerging modernist and proletarian literary movements. As a result, Hayama Yoshiki, Murayama Tomoyoshi, Kobori Jinji and Hayashi Fusao, all representative authors of the proletarian literary magazine *Bungei Sensen*, published works in *Shinseinen* in 1927.

Meanwhile, the rise of popular literature prompted a collective soul searching among proletarian writers as to whether their works were actually popular and accessible enough to reach their intended audience of working-class readers. The ensuing debate over the popularization of proletarian literature, known

as *geijutsu taishūka ronsō* (the art popularization debate), started in 1925 in *Bungei Sensen* and reached its peak in 1928, when Nakano Shigeharu, Kurahara Korehito, Hayashi Fusao and others debated the merits of incorporating popular literary genres and devices into proletarian literature in the pages of *Senki* (Battle Flag) magazine. Of the three, Hayashi was the most enthusiastic proponent of the popularization of proletarian literature. Dividing the proletariat into the ideologically aware and unaware, Hayashi proposed a new form of simple, basic, and entertaining "proletarian popular literature" aimed at the latter. He even proposed that proletarian authors study the works of popular writers like Shirai Kyōji, Osaragi Jirō and Mikami Otokichi as reference. Hayashi's suggestion about the creation of the "proletarian popular novel" divided *Senki* writers, with authors like Kishi Yamaji and Tokunaga Sunao actively supporting it while Nakano Shigeharu and Kobayashi Takiji opposed it.

In April 1929, a magazine in line with Hayashi's aspirations was launched. Titled *Taishū* (The Masses) and edited by Haraguchi Kenzō, the magazine offered up "proletarian popular novels," "proletarian mysteries," "proletarian historical novels," and other fare under the twin slogans of "popularizing proletarian literature" and "the proletarian entertainment magazine." These included Itō Ken's own "Sobagara Jiken" (The Buckwheat Husk Incident, October 1929), which was later included in the collection *Shin Shanhai Yawa* (New Shanghai Night Stories), a sequel to *Shanhai Yawa* published by Hakueidō Shoten in February 1933.

In this context, the stories of *Shanhai Yawa*, including "The Basement of the Pleasure Club," are not particularly unique in their blending of proletarian literature and popular or mystery elements. However, there are certain aspects of Itō's life and career that uniquely characterize his work. The first is that unlike most of the writers mentioned here, Itō only published sporadically in proletarian literary magazines and instead spent much of his early career as a writer for the magazine *Hentai Shinri* (Abnormal

Psychology). The popularity of *Hentai Shinri* (published 1917–1926) and its sister magazine *Hentai Seiyoku* (Abnormal Sexuality, 1922–1925), as well as the 1913 Japanese translation of Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s 1886 work *Psychopathia Sexualis*, reflected a keen public interest in what was then perceived as “deviant” behavior. While Krafft-Ebing’s work is considered groundbreaking and the two magazines were fairly serious endeavors published by the Japan Psychiatric Association, more sensational depictions began appearing in literature. The most celebrated examples are the depictions of fetishism and sadomasochism in Tanizaki Jun’ichirō’s early works, but the theme of *hentai* (deviance) was most enthusiastically embraced by mystery writers and underground publishers in the late 1920s. Ranpo and other writers actively incorporated “abnormal” psychology and sexuality into their mysteries, while Umehara Hokumei, the king of underground publishing of that era, published a variety of salacious members-only publications with *hentai* in their titles. Umehara was also a leftist and published the literary magazine *Bungei Shijō* (Literary Market), which prominently featured the works of proletarian authors. While there is little to be found of Itō in famous proletarian literature magazines like *Bungei Sensen* and *Senki*, he contributed frequently to *Bungei Shijō* and wrote a number of underground *hentai* publications. In this way, Itō’s career is inextricably linked with the theme of *hentai*.

In Shanghai, Itō discovered a vibrant world of *hentai*. Besides the city’s reputation as a haven for political activism, the city was renowned for its nightlife, prostitution, gambling, smuggling, drugs, and crime. Often referred to as the “Paris of the East,” Shanghai epitomized cosmopolitanism, exoticism, and adventure, attracting numerous Japanese tourists and housing one of the largest Japanese expatriate communities in a Chinese city, thanks to its proximity and accessibility. During his stays in Shanghai, Itō reported extensively for Japanese journals on various aspects of the city, including its cuisine, fashion, publishing industry, politics, and crime (Michielsen, 2019). Shanghai emerged as an obvious choice

for Itō and many other Japanese detective writers (Fujita, 2006), as it resonated deeply with Japanese readers and served as an ideal microcosm of the modern world.

The second point of note is an entry in the Itō Ken Research Society’s biography of the author (Itō Ken Kenkyūkai, 2001: 5). According to the biography, Itō led a dissolute life from the age of 17, but reformed at the age of 20 after contracting a sexually transmitted disease and witnessing the horrifying condition of sex workers in the syphilis ward. Itō’s first book, *Jigoku no Dekigoto* (Happenings in Hell, 1923), depicted the terrible realities of sex work. When reading Itō’s depiction of the room full of disheveled and emaciated women under the pleasure club, it is hard not to think of Hayama Yoshiki’s description of the terminally ill woman lying in the warehouse in “Inbaifu” (Prostitute, 1925) or the sex workers shut up in the ship’s chain locker in *Umi ni Ikuru Hitobito* (Those Who Live on the Sea, 1926). However, it is clear that Itō had an interest in this theme which predates these famous works.

The three main characters of “The Basement of the Pleasure Club” are also of note. Shimura, both because he is Japanese and because he declares himself to not have “abnormal sexual preferences,” is clearly the “normal” gaze through which readers are intended to view this foreign world of deviant behavior. His guide to the pleasure club is Doctor B, a man of mixed English and Chinese heritage who has studied in Japan and Germany. In her study, Takeuchi (2009) states that mixed race characters play an important role in the stories of *Shanghai Yawa*, with their mixed heritage acting as a sort of passport allowing them to navigate the multicultural landscape of the city. Finally, it is the dancer Kate who guides Shimura to witness the hidden horrors of the club. Kate is not a local but rather a Portuguese woman educated in France, and, as Michielsen (2019) points out in his study, subverts readers’ stereotypes of a dancing girl by showing herself to be an intellectual who is well-versed in literature.

The “mystery” of the novel revealed by these three characters proves to be almost frustratingly vague. What is the room under the pleasure club? Takeuchi calls it a cell where women who contract syphilis or other infections are confined until they die in order to hide the men’s misdeeds (2009), while Michielsen states that “this is where the gentlemen commit their crimes by buying girls as their toys and locking them up” (2019). In fact, the text does not allow for any definite interpretation. It is also unclear whether these misdeeds should be attributed to a relatively small group of “pleasure-seeking gentlemen” or to society at large. One can surmise that some of this vagueness is intentional to increase the work’s air of mystery. Another reason may be the work’s publication in *Shūkan Asahi* (Weekly Asahi), a general weekly magazine which was friendly to works with a popular sensibility, but not necessarily to overtly ideological or problematic ones.

Nevertheless, there is something undeniably memorable and haunting about the image of Kate opening the door to the corridor lined with “rooms like those in a hotel,” then sending Shimura off with a smile toward the hellish room in the basement, never to be seen again. It is her fate, and the juxtaposition of her image with the unspoken horrors of those rooms and corridors, that makes “The Basement of the Pleasure Club” a standout among Japanese proletarian mysteries.

“The Basement of the Pleasure Club – Itō Ken” Translation by Edwin Michielsen

1.

When he set down his cup of Shaoxing wine, Doctor B’s face, reddened from the drink, cast a drowsy shadow. He turned to writer Shimura Yōhei, who was sitting on the other side of the small table, and asked, “Do you know about the Fortune Club in the P-neighborhood? You know, that famous gentlemen’s club on Laobazi Road (Range Road)?”

“Fortune Club...? I’ve never heard of such a place.”

“That’s a shame. Well then, I’ll take the liberty of introducing you. It’s a splendidly extravagant and indulgent establishment. If you view it with disdain, it may seem foolish, but, well, it’s worth a visit for reference. Instead of explaining, it’s better to see for yourself. How about going now? I’m not a member there, but I recognize most of the members’ faces, so it shouldn’t be a problem. It’s currently 12:20 am. Perfect timing. Alright, straighten your necktie and stand like a true gentleman.”

“Is this another place with bizarre performances like before? I can’t tolerate such unsettling things because I don’t have any abnormal sexual preferences.”

“You’re showing quite a bit of humanistic timidity there. No, this time it’s a dance hall. However, compared to a typical dance hall, it’s unique in its extravagance. Well, let’s go.”

When Doctor B slowly rose from his seat, his beer belly resembling a log, he called over a bellboy to settle the bill. Then, he led the way down the dark and narrow staircase of the bar.

“Come on, hurry up.”

“Don’t rush me like that. There’s no need to hurry. I’ll go with you. How are we getting there?” Shimura followed him but made slow progress.

“By car.”

Doctor B was of mixed English and Chinese heritage, having graduated from the Medicine Department at the Imperial University in Japan before studying in Germany. At the time he was working at a first-class hospital in Shanghai known as F. He was an eccentric character, single by choice, fond of drinking, and an expert in new economics. Doctor B was approaching fifty, but he always appeared lively and well-groomed, much like a young man.

Just three or four months ago, Shimura met Doctor B for the first time in a dingy bar nestled in the back alleys of Nanshi, a place frequented mostly by thugs and coolies. Donning a Chinese laborer attire, Shimura was leisurely sipping Shaoxing wine, seated alone at one of the corner tables in the somewhat dirty and disorderly bar. Suddenly, a well-dressed man, appearing entirely out of place in his neat Western clothes, staggered in, shook Shimura's hand, and promptly took a seat beside him. He began speaking in a medley of English, Japanese, Chinese, and German. This was Doctor B. Since that encounter, Shimura and Doctor B had developed a friendly rapport, as if they had been *pengyou* (friends) for a decade."

When Doctor B's car departed from Sima Road, leaving behind the bustling Nanking Road, it ventured onto the road along the quiet Suzhou River, under the starry December sky, creating an atmosphere akin to a Japanese autumn. Progressing northward along the main stretch of North Sichuan Road, they finally halted at the intersection with Laobazi Road. This district, in close proximity to Hospital F where Doctor B worked, was home to a relatively large population of Russians and Germans.

"Alright, we'll walk from here. Goodbye, Mister Driver (*qiche*)," Doctor B said with a playful tone, patting the old car's rear. They turned the corner, passing a large variety store and a currency exchange bureau, proceeding past a Russian café, a Russian club, and a second-floor Western clothing store with a sign that read "room for rent." Upon reaching an uncommon empty lot in the vicinity,

"Turn to the right. Enter this narrow path, but be mindful of the train, Mr. Shimura," Doctor B cautioned, even though he himself appeared to be in peril as he crossed the road.

To the left of the narrow path, a three-story modern tenement building stood tall, housing splendid barber shops and stylish confectionery stores, forming a thriving commercial street. However, all the

residences and shops had already closed up for the night. The houses on the second and third floors, faintly lit, probably indulged in *mahjong* games.

"It's rather peculiar that this place hosts such establishments..." Shimura remarked, scanning his surroundings. Meanwhile, Doctor B veered right, heading towards a substantial white structure that seemed to be a café or something similar, adjoining the barber shop and leading to an open area.

The path was paved with unique Ningbo stones from China, and the surroundings remained as dark as a tunnel, with two or three small electric lights resembling mysterious eyeballs, emitting dim rays. The pavement felt as slippery as an oil-coated surface, accompanied by a pungent odor of urine.

Upon Shimura's pivot from the brick wall toward the rear door, an oddly top-heavy building loomed overhead, projecting intense straight and curved lines into the sky, reminiscent of an expressionist backdrop. The stars glittered like epaulets, communicating with the boundless cosmos.

Doctor B looked back at Shimura and said, "Please wait a moment."

Then, he climbed up three or four stone steps, stood in front of a pitch-black heavy door that was tightly closed, and pressed a doorbell that looked like a dog's nipple. In front of the doctor's eyes, a square of light about one foot in size appeared, and from inside, a whispering voice spoke in Chinese, "Who is it?"

The doctor took off his gloves, took out his business card from his coat pocket, and silently handed it over.

"Just a moment, please."

As he said that, the small window closed with a click. However, after two or three minutes, the door began to open without a sound.

“Please come in, Mr. Shimura.”

Doctor B slightly pulled Shimura’s right arm and entered smoothly.

When Shimura entered, he looked up under the electric light and saw a small bronze sign with the beautifully written characters “Fortune Club.”

“Isn’t it a pleasure club? It doesn’t seem like a decent place.”

“Yes, but come on.”

Doctor B chuckled at the boy while handing over a coat and a hat.

2.

It was like being inside something, a dark and cold barren corridor. Winding through it like a snake, they emerged into what seemed like a waiting room for hospital patients. In the center of the empty hall, there was a large potted plant, quite mysterious in its presence. To the left of the hall, there was a similar staircase, and under each one, there was a single chair, but there was no one around.

“Um, who could it have been?” Doctor B muttered, looking up the right staircase with a puzzled expression. Just then, an old waiter in a black Chinese-style suit came down the left staircase while smoking a cigarette. Upon seeing Doctor B’s face, he mumbled a greeting in his mouth and then returned to his guide-like demeanor, ascending the spiral staircase again.

Reaching the top of that staircase, they found themselves in a hallway that resembled a theater, with the sound of voices coming from somewhere and faint music playing. The old boy, without turning into that hallway, opened a door that looked like a telephone booth and passed by a room with signs that read “Dressing Room,” “Members’ Lounge,” and “Accounting Office.” He then pushed open a door with

an inlaid wooden design that said “Dining Hall” at the far-left end.

Suddenly, a splendid and magnificent hall filled with music, the scent of makeup, the clinking of glasses, and the warm breath of people came into view. An unusually beautiful waitress, looking like a French modern girl, showed them to a marble table close to the dance floor. Gentlemen from various countries were sitting around the thirty or so well-polished round marble tables, accompanied by young red-haired dancers and elegant Chinese beauties, making kissing sounds and chatting energetically.

Sitting down on the recommended chair, Shimura was completely amazed by the extravagance and opulence of this room. He had been taken to the dance hall of the Majestic Hotel, which was said to be the finest café in the East by an Italian gentleman he had befriended in this area, and had been astonished by the grandeur and decoration there. However, in a sense, this place was even more luxurious than the Majestic Hotel. This hall that could be called a nest of pleasure, was drenched in sensual colors and unified by a modern erotic taste, likely the design of a French-inspired pannier. The walls were decorated with a pattern of spring flowers, the ceiling was covered with nude paintings, and three large chandeliers adorned with lilies bathed the entire room in rich waves of light.

The dance floor was located a couple of steps down and had an Eastern-style plum shape. It appeared to be made of well-polished rosewood or something similar, and it gleamed a faint purple in the light of the large chandeliers. The music platform was on a two or three-tiered raised area opposite the dining tables, shaped like a siren’s ship, and rows of female musicians resembling sea nymphs were waiting there.

Doctor B seemed to know most people and exchanged glances and greetings with the gentlemen around. He even went out of his way to shake hands with some of them. And when he spotted the man-

ager, he went over without reservation, pulling an American man who resembled Gotō Shinpei in some way and introduced Shimura. The manager glanced briefly at Shimura through his nose glasses, and upon seeing Shimura's ungentlemanly appearance, he wore an expression of annoyance and disdain as if to say, 'You've brought another one like this, I see,' and reluctantly said, "Nice to meet you..."

Once Doctor B finally took his seat, he said, "Well, let's get started. Let's drink a lot from the pockets of this debauched gentleman." He called a waitress and ordered champagne and five or six French dishes.

By the time their champagne was uncorked with a refreshing sound, the surrounding gentlemen had taken the hands of their favored dancers and descended to the dance floor. Along with this, the lights went out, as delicate peach-colored light waves adorned the dance hall, and the music began.

Doctor B leaned on the table with both elbows, drinking champagne, and whispered in Shimura's ear. "Hey, old friend, although the world is heading into winter, this place is like spring in a frightening way. After all, it's like this all year round, and it's awe-inspiring. Looking at it like this, you can understand how the power of money can make people foolish and demonic. What do you think of the behavior of these gentlemen here...?" he said with a laugh that was hard to resist.

Then, he gently patted Shimura's shoulder and said, "Mr. Shimura, you look quite gloomy. Hold on a little longer; I'll teach you something good." He comforted him and continued, "Hey, do you see that bald, middle-aged, plump American man performing in half-naked frenzy over there? He's the top shareholder of the famous S department store and the mastermind behind jewel smuggling." He went on to reveal the sins of the rich as far as he knew and the secrets of this kind of debauched lifestyle, such as 'That young man with a room full of pretty Russian girls hanging on him is D's purchasing agent's son,

a moron.' He shared all the information he had about the wealthy.

While they were having such a conversation, the large chandelier above their heads lit up and went out repeatedly, at least seven or eight times, in sync with the music. When the overture of *Traviata* ended, it seemed to be a break, and the gentlemen accompanied by dancers returned to the dining tables. Some of them disappeared with their dancers.

Shimura had heard before that the so-called gentlemen of Shanghai had set up a secret club somewhere and were leading an extremely luxurious life of debauchery, but now he was seeing the truth for the first time. It was truly an indescribable state of decadence.

"Doctor, where do the dancers here come from? Do you frequent other dance halls as well?" Shimura asked, as he found it suspicious that the dancers here were more beautiful and dressed in much more glamorous attire compared to the women at other dance venues.

"Well, to be honest, I still don't quite understand that part. According to rumors, they buy them just like Japanese courtesans, keep them here until they get bored, but the details are rather elusive..."

Doctor B, seemingly intoxicated again, replied with a habit of using his upper eyelids a bit while glaring at the other person.

At that moment, in the back, Shimura heard the passionate call of a young woman, followed by the cackling laughter of an elderly man resembling a goose. He turned to look, and there was an elderly gentleman, thoroughly intoxicated, trying to embrace a Portuguese dancer with eyes like nightingales. However, when that dancer suddenly made eye contact with Shimura, she had an expression that said, 'You're not someone I've ever seen,' but in reality, she seemed intent on escaping the persistent advances of the old man. She acted as if she knew

them and, speaking in clear French with a distinctive accent, said, “Good evening, you’re quite welcome here.”

“Hey, sit down, sit down,” Doctor B offered a chair to rescue her. The elderly gentleman in the back stood up, overturned the chair, and called out to other dancers with a booming voice. She, with a cute sidelong glance, looked at the elderly gentleman’s antics and smirked, directing a ‘What an annoying guy’ look towards them. Doctor B confirmed it with a nod and filled their three glasses with champagne, then handed them to her and Shimura, saying, “For our lovely little bird... Bravo!” and shouted. She happily finished her drink and then raised a toast for Shimura and Doctor. Once that was done, Doctor B introduced himself first and then introduced Shimura. When she heard that they were a doctor and a novelist, she said with a smile while extending her hand,

“Both of you are gentlemen I need in my life. I apologize for the delay; I was born in Portugal and graduated from France’s Seika Conservatory. My name is Kate, nice to meet you.”

After that, Kate listed names like Hugo, Maupassant, Philippe, Morand, and Claudel, discussing French novels. Shimura realized that she was a very bright and humorous woman as they talked.

As Shimura, with the curiosity of a novelist, was about to inquire about her background and her outlook on life, a waitress came to summon her.

“I’m sure the manager’s being a meanie, but I don’t mind,” she said. She took three German cigars, seemingly conjured from somewhere in her light blue dance attire, and offered them to Doctor B and Shimura, not bothering to get up. However, Shimura’s conversation abruptly dwindled at an odd moment, and it didn’t flow as insistently as before. A slight, lingering silence settled in the depths of his heart. Then a silver bell signaled, and people rose noisily to start dancing.

So Shimura got up, intending to go to the restroom. And assuming it was in the back, he headed toward the wall decorated with autumn grasses. Kate followed him through the green light, moving like a fish, and opened the door right next to the dining room, which was opposite to the door they had entered earlier. There, a quiet corridor stretched ahead, lined with many rooms like those in a hotel.

With the door half-open, she gazed at Shimura intently, her crimson lips parting slightly like a small shell as she smiled with a meaningful look. In French-accented English, she said, “The restroom? Keep going straight to the right. It’s down there.”

“Thank you,” Shimura replied. Following her instructions, he descended a long, lonely corridor that felt somewhat chilly. When he reached a dimly lit stone staircase, he couldn’t help but think that it was a bit strange for such a splendid building not to have restrooms on the third floor. Maybe he took a wrong turn. But those imperative words, ‘keep going straight to the right,’ were etched in his mind, so he continued down the strangely quiet and somewhat cold stone steps, which seemed to linger in the depths of his heart.

Upon reflection, he realized that she had intentionally shown him that place. Still, he couldn’t help but wonder why she had shown him such a secret place. Was it just a playful curiosity, or did it have a deeper intention? Her expression alone provided no easy answers. However, the only conclusion Shimura could draw was that she deliberately showed it. If that were the case, then perhaps by revealing the dark side of their lives through that terrifying secret place, she sought some form of salvation. In the end, that was the interpretation he settled on.

Shimura, filled with suspicion, anxiety, and a curious interest, reached the bottom of the gray staircase and saw a small sign that read “Basement.” He was a little puzzled but continued down the sooty, dimly lit corridor, walking straight ahead.

3.

The corridor in the basement was eerily quiet, as if even the footsteps of a mouse would resonate loudly. Thick wooden walls lined both sides, and dim, gloomy light bulbs were sporadically lit. The corridor was so narrow that only two people could pass side by side, and due to the dampness of the floor, one had to walk carefully, or it felt as if they might slip and slide. He suddenly recalled a passage he had read in Tolstoy's *Resurrection* or something similar about Russian fortress dungeons. He thought he detected the scent of opium emanating from somewhere, but he couldn't tell if it was coming from this room or if it was lingering from that room on the third floor.

Shimura continued down the eerie corridor, with an unsettling feeling in his gut. As he reached the end of the corridor against the same wooden wall, he turned left into a narrow passageway and heard the hushed voices of seven or eight women.

"Oh, what could it be?" he thought, sensing something unusual, and a shiver ran down his spine. However, the moment the voices' owners noticed his approaching footsteps or sensed a presence, they fell silent as quietly as autumn insects. Gathering his courage, he cautiously moved toward the source of the voices.

He instinctively quieted his footsteps, and as he took several steps forward, he discovered a room on his right that resembled a ten-tatami-mat-sized cell. Without intending to, he glanced inside, and in that split second, he saw a group of women, as pale and emaciated as ghosts, huddled together and staring in his direction from the back of the room. From the low ceiling above, there hung a dim light bulb, casting a yellowish, feeble glow that only illuminated the central area, leaving the corners shrouded in infinite darkness. In the lingering afterglow of that dim light, they appeared with their hair disheveled like a bird's nest, wearing white garments, and their feet exposed. They stood there like a row of hanged

figures on a single branch, staring at him as if they were terrified sheep. From within the room, a nauseating stench akin to a pigsty and the sickly heat of the patients wafted out.

When he first saw them, Shimura was on the verge of exclaiming in shock, but as his heartbeats calmed a bit, he began to survey the scene, murmuring, "What a horrifying and pitiful sight. It's like something out of a painting. Where on earth is this?"

However, the women continued to embrace each other and silently gazed at him. At that moment, Shimura recalled a story he had heard from a Taiwanese friend about the savage indigenous tribes in Taiwan who had a preference for women of exceedingly delicate constitution. They would buy beautiful women from town and then confine them in a cell, forcing them to become pathologically thin. But this place seemed too secure for such practices. This setup was more akin to something that would not only emaciate but potentially kill the women.

In that instant, a phrase he had heard somewhere before, "purchased dancers," flashed through his mind like a sudden revelation.

"I see. The women imprisoned here are probably the unfortunate ones from the ladies in that hall on the third floor. I'm certain those gentlemen from the 'Fortune Club' have their way with girls they buy from the streets, and when they finally fall ill, they storm into this underground chamber to keep their crimes hidden from the world."

Oh, how pitiful these women are... Shimura, with typical novelist-like presumption, concluded that they must undoubtedly be the girls who had fallen into the hands of those cruel men. Regardless, he wanted to ask them why they were in such a place, so he approached the rough lattice.

At that moment, a clearing of the throat sounded right behind him, and a tall, fierce-looking Chinese guard appeared.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” The old man, apparently flustered by the discovery of the secret, tried to hide his embarrassment by barking angrily. His distinctively raspy voice reverberated throughout the underground chamber. Shimura, understanding the guard’s reason for confusion, felt oddly at ease and responded, “I got lost trying to find the restroom. But what exactly is this place for?”

However, the guard appeared as if Shimura’s Chinese was entirely incomprehensible.

“Come on, get out of here. This is no place for visitors,” he replied.

“But it’s strange to have something like this in such a place.”

“Now, hurry back. Your life is in danger if you linger.”

Shimura argued with the guard in various ways but was eventually forced to leave. Inside the dark room, the women realized that he was not one of the gentlemen from the third floor but rather an outsider. They called out to him in English and Chinese, crying and screaming. He took a few steps back but was driven away by the guard once again.

The guard shouted at the women, who clung to the bars and pleaded, and followed Shimura to the entrance of the underground chamber. He muttered something about his own mistake under his breath and closed the iron door tightly with a somewhat bitter expression.

As he climbed the stairs, Shimura couldn’t help but feel as if he had just witnessed a nightmarish, mud-colored dream. Was that really reality? It seemed that way because the scene was so tragic. But he hadn’t been dreaming; he had definitely witnessed the truth. The emaciated women in that ‘basement’ remained vividly etched in his mind and wouldn’t let go.

With a pale face and trembling lips filled with excitement, he returned to the dining room and told Doctor B the story, practically shoving his face into Doctor B’s.

Doctor B, however, seemed to sober up all at once, wearing an expression of melancholy on his forehead. He muttered in Chinese, “Hmm, you’ve seen something terrifying. It seems the rumors were true...”

Not bothered by such things, the debauchery and revelry in the hall grew even more intense. At this point, neither Shimura nor Doctor B could stay in such a place for even a minute longer. They immediately got up and made their way out.

When Shimura left the Pleasure Club, he tried to find Kate, but she was probably dancing somewhere in that faint purple light, entangled with the old gentleman. He couldn’t find her in the end.

“Kate, thank you for earlier. I was shown a very strange restroom... Young Kate, please take care of yourself,” Shimura whispered in a sentimental mood towards the area where Kate was dancing.

As they emerged outside, it was already past four o’clock. The sky had started to brighten slightly, with the morning star shining brightly. The city trees were waking up from the morning mist, and the chilly breeze of dawn gently rustled their leaves. The dimly lit streets were still wet with dew, and the dull faces of pale, faded houses were illuminated by the lights at their eaves. Coolies who had lost their jobs were sleeping under the alleys and the eaves of banks, while drowsy rickshaw pullers sounded their horns loudly into the morning sky as they sped away in their cars.

In the midst of this lonely early morning, the two of them walked towards their respective lodgings in silence, feeling gloomy.

4.

Eventually, at the end of that year, Shimura Yōhei returned to Japan. Those who have traveled abroad tend to be concerned about the circumstances of their foreign destinations for some time. Like most people, Shimura noticed various issues related to China when he read newspapers and magazines.

One day in March, Shanghai, where he had been, had become the epicenter of the conflict between the Northern and Southern armies, turning into a battlefield. While reading a bundle of Chinese newspapers sent by a friend at the Japan Newspaper Company in Shanghai, he came across an article reporting that the Southern Revolutionary Army, known as the “Beiyang Army,” had captured the entire North Sichuan Road.

As he read this article, he couldn’t help but think about the lives of the foreigners residing in Shanghai. He also recalled the underground chamber of the ‘Fortune Club’ near Laobazi Road. He wondered what had happened to all those dancers and what about Kate and the others? These thoughts began to trouble him. He hoped that, as mentioned in the article, the Southern Revolutionary Army would turn out to be righteous warriors.

On that day, Shimura wrote a letter to Doctor B inquiring about the Pleasure Club of the Shanghai gentlemen. Then, after waiting for two or three months, he finally received a reply. According to the long-awaited letter, Doctor B had been extremely busy at the hospital since the outbreak of the war, to the point where his head was spinning, and he couldn’t drink as much alcohol as he wanted or focus on his research. However, Shimura felt relieved that he was safe and sound. Yet, when he read the Doctor B’s postscript, Shimura was overcome by an unpleasant frustration, much like when he closed the steel door of the ‘basement’ in Shanghai’s Pleasure Club.

“Postscript: The ‘Fortune Club’ you had inquired

about had temporarily disbanded at the outbreak of the war. Regrettably, the infamous den of hedonistic gentlemen (Epicureans) had fallen into the hands of a Chinese showman and had become a public dance hall (on the third floor) and a moving picture theater (on the second floor). From this situation alone, one might say that there was some good fortune in the rest and reprieve, but I speculate that the pleasure-seeking gentlemen, deeply entrenched in their vices, will undoubtedly establish similar hidden establishments elsewhere. This is a lamentable situation.”

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