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The New Pictures

Yang Kwei Fei (Daiei; Buena Vista). Once upon a time, a thousand years ago, there lived a lonely emperor in old Cathay. His wife had died in the bloom of her youth, and he was inconsolable. In the morning when his ministers brought him the leading questions of the day, in the evening when they brought him the fairest maidens of the realm, the emperor only sighed and sent them away. Only in his music could he find surcease, and with his lute he whiled the sorrowing hours away. Aha, thought an ambitious general, if I can find the woman who can charm away his grief, my star will rise.

One day the general was discussing the problem with a political associate, whose three proud and beautiful cousins had been rejected by the emperor. All at once he found himself staring at a kitchen wench who was tending the fire. He seemed to detect under the soot a delicate beauty. "But who is this girl?" he demanded excitedly of his host. "Why, nobody at all," the other replied. "She is only a little serving girl, fresh up from the country." The general seized the frightened child and wiped the soot off her face. "I have found a pearl!" he cried.

Soon the girl, who was given the name of Yang Kwei Fei, was dressed in robes of finest silk, and sent to wait upon the emperor where he took his tea among the flowering plums. He took up his lute and made a hymn to the budding grove. The maiden, listening, was pierced to the heart by his music. She thought, "He must be seeking sincerity." That night she was sent to wait upon the emperor in his bed-chamber. When he came to bed and saw her fresh and tender as a flowering branch, he staggered back. "Who sent you here?" he gasped. His heart was pounding, but he told her: "Go away!" The maiden bowed her head and went, but in the ante-chamber she knelt lightly on a pillow, and taking up the emperor's lute, she played the melody that he had made in the plum garden. And as she played, his grief was healed. "You have consoled me by playing my music," the emperor said when she had done. "Stay with me, I beg you, and be my friend."

In the years that followed, Yang Kwei Fei and the emperor lived together in the light of love; but all the while, though neither of them knew it, the light cast a lengthening shadow across the land. In gratitude to his favorite, the emperor had made her former master his prime minister, and that rapacious man had made the name of Yang a byword and a hissing in every corner of the empire. At last there was a revolution. The emperor's own guard put the tyrant to death, and demanded the life of Yang Kwei Fei as well. The emperor, desperate, begged them to spare her, but in vain. She was hanged with her own silk scarf from a young plum tree. "Oh God!" cried the emperor, his heart broken, when they brought her



MACHIKO KYO & THE EMPEROR
On the plum tree, a pearl.

body to him. "Will this bring peace to my people?"

This luminous little legend, so much like the Western Cinderella story and yet so much more, has been made into a slow (perhaps too slow) and stately motion picture by the same Japanese company that produced *Rashomon*, *Ugetsu* and *Gate of Hell*. The film has the quality of endless resonance that distinguishes the true myth. Like a gong, it is small in itself, but the sound of it carries a

very long way. The reverberations of the culminating symbol: the tree of life that bears the fruit of death, a death whose other name is love. For Western moviegoers, the reading of such symbolic language is apt to be as tiresome as the study of Chinese script; but fortunately, Director Kenji Mizoguchi (who also made *Ugetsu*) has provided the picture with physical as well as spiritual beauties. It has colors that are often exquisite; and it has Machiko Kyo, the heroine of almost every important Japanese film of recent years, who is surely one of the loveliest women ever seen on the screen.