



XVIII

MISS VOCADLO's second performance at the Takai Auditorium was deliriously successful. The support of Fargo and Sheepshanks had been invaluable, and in addition she had met but a few days previously Mrs. Harada, who had promptly and in her impulsive way fallen in love with her. The sequel to this was the reservation of the entire row, except one seat for Mr. Fargo, by the Harada clan, including the four boys and two girls, the three aunts with families, and one or two more remotely connected young men who led the intellectual clique among Taisho students; one of whom was writing a thesis on 'Gustavu Furaubert', the other translating the drama of Andreyef.

All Mrs. Harada's children were beautiful, which proves that it is incorrect to say, as many foreigners do, that the Japanese male is without exception horribly ugly. Five-sixths, perhaps, fail to conform to Western standards; the comparative absence of nose and chin, the tendency of the front teeth to meet diagonally, are unlikely to ensure a Lysippan regularity of feature. But one may see among boys—and particularly among those selected for the office of page or acolyte to a priest, faces which are girlishly pretty, with a prettiness moreover that will stand the severe test of a shaven poll.

The eldest Harada boy was by this time of a more serious order of beauty; as serious, that is to say, as a smirking Murillo Madonna; the three younger were delightful little dolls with skin like the petals of pinkish-

lemon zinnias. The two girls, in little short skirts revealing frills, and with heads of smooth, long-bobbed hair, had, one, the large Turkish eyes of the mother, the younger, the almond, sloe-black slits of her father. Both had learnt already to put them to good use; Nobuko, the elder, languishingly, Shizuko with impish mirth. Mr. Gordon Gomperz enjoyed great popularity with this throng of comely children, whom he willingly permitted at all times to romp and climb upon him; and it was at Dr. Harada's invitation that he appeared in their midst that night, piping and fluttering like some queer dunlin or oyster-catcher, with his head wrenched modestly sideways upon his long neck as though in some access of maidenly coyness at the propositions of life. He would tutor them in his spare time, imparting the elements of English and chirping freakishly rhymes from Edward Lear or Hilaire Belloc.

Dr. Harada used his considerable influence with two newspapers, the *Hochi Shimpo* and the *Jiji Shimbun*, to such good purpose that swarms of little camera-men came down from Tetsuka, with wild hair, ingratiating grins and wide, sagging trousers, exploding charges of magnesium all over the place, till the hall was veiled in acrid blue smoke, and Mr. Gomperz a nervous wreck from the recurrent detonations.

While Mr. Nishimura was exceeding the discordances of the Paris Six at the piano in subtly cacophonous glissades, Miss Vocadlo disposed her bright orange limbs so that everyone's heart leapt; and Miss Walker felt so faint that she sent her brother for a bottle of aromatic vinegar, thus ensuring that he should miss the most hair-raising contortions of the dying poetess. Mr. Fargo's applause deafened one like the spanking of a large family, while Professor McGonigle, carried back in spirit to the reels of his fatherland, interpolated at

rhythmic intervals a piercing 'Hoich!' which astonished the natives, whose own sword-dance was infinitely more decorous, and in whose language there was no glottal fricative. Long before the coda swooned and sank into repose, Mrs. Harada had decided that Nobuko, who was now thirteen and a little woman, should attend Undine's academy and modernise herself with plastic mysteries more thoroughly than she could ever hope to do with her kodaks and radio and process copies of 'The Blessed Damosel'. She should not be allowed to develop into one of those docile, dowdy, old women who never read a book, but amuse themselves by folding coloured paper cranes, the sort that, clustered in festoons decorate Buddhist temp'les.

Beside Alba, like an autumn leaf sere and with the look of having been wind-swept immeasurably far, Tristram became gradually more aware of the pageant of youthful gymnastic, so tempestuous and self-confident. In spite of himself, too, the excitement of the Russo-Japanese music stirred him deeply, until a small cyclone of resentment began to whirl hotly within him. The brick-brown nape of Mr. Podler glimmered, one or two rows in front; it looked sleek, complacent and sensual to a degree far beyond his own capabilities. The gross, sensual man, the 'hyper-suprarenal'—vile, hybrid word, was perhaps the one to collect the prizes of life and to push the 'hypo-suprarenal' and slightly 'hyper-thyroid' type of himself, sensitive and gentle, to the wall. Death was the only prize that self-effacing Tristram won for his endocrine fineness. The knowledge that 'alles vergängliche ist nur ein gleichnis' was ceasing to anaesthetise him, and pain came welling with increased violence through the disintegrating barrier.

During the interval between the 'Death of Sappho' and the 'Rape of Ganymede' (in which the eagle

was represented by a kind of Egypto-futurist Uraeus in dull gold, with mauve-pink shadings, affixed to the black background), while Undine was changing her colour from terra-cotta to the blush and bloom of a boy of fifteen, Mr. Onosato, the Italian-style tenor, regaled the assembly with pseudo-folk-songs by Vaughan Williams and a Brahms Lied or two, just to show that he could sing something else besides Donizetti. Under cover of this dull interlude, Sheepshanks rose and slipped behind the stage, turning a deaf ear to McGonigle's very audible Elizabethan salutation, 'Sir Tristram Trimtram come aloft with a whimwham; here's a knight of the land of Catito shall play at trap with any page in Europe'.

Alba was not surprised to see him go, yet, though he was nothing to her, she remembered Miss Walker's tale, and was both annoyed at his boldly visiting Undine before the public, and pleased to manufacture of this yet one more excuse for abandoning him. And there, sure enough, was Miss Walker's horse-face turned towards her with a significant tightness at the lips. As the lights were lowered for Ganymede's entry, he stole back to his place.

The abduction of the youth was interpreted spiritually, allegorising, as the programme informed one, the identification of the soul with the divine principle. 'Though why', Sir Birinus was heard to complain, 'the soul can't identify itself with the divine principle without prannsing about half-naked in a tennis-shirt', for so he designated the short Doric chiton in which Undine, with her usual contempt for archaeology, interpreted the part, 'is a mystery to me'. Mr. Kurrie-Lewer, after a struggle, had induced him to be present, by appealing to his loyalty; it was an Atlantean, or at least a foreign exhibition. 'I'm not so sure of that either; the young

wumman has the racial characteristics of two hemispheres, if not maar', he said, but yielded.

Hardly had Undine, in a transport of union with the father of the gods, abandoned herself dreamily to the caress of the folding, eagle-prankt curtains, than her face reappeared through the dividing line.

'I have been specially requested to finish the performance by dancing Chopin's "Marche Funèbre";' ('Divine!' 'Vieux jeu!' murmured opposing parties in the audience); 'and would crave your indulgence for a few moments while I prepare. Meanwhile, Mr. Onosato will oblige with "Under the Wide and Starry Sky".'

Tumultuous applause and a few intellectual cat-calls. The romantically quavering tenor of Mr. Onosato fluttered down to the close of the banal cadence that someone—Graham Peel, perhaps, had provided, 'Thah hun-tar home from thah heel'; and, after the clapping had died away, Mr. Nishimura struck a gloomy minor chord. As he did so the whole of the lights went out; the after-tones of the piano wailed and faded through intense darkness. The startled audience perceived, little by little, a whiteness mitigating the obscurity before them; an oval, lime-white mask, a face devoid of all expression. To the opening bars of the march ('Rum', crooned Miss Walker, beating time with her programme to show her familiarity with 'Classical Music', 'tomty-tum, tomty tomty tumty tum') the faint radiance rather than the figure seemed to advance and swell in slow accretion. Death was becoming incarnate on the stage.

Mr. Nishimura, remarkably quick at catching atmospheres, managed to impart to the hackneyed music an eerie, other-worldish flavour; it was as though a chill from beyond the grave had crept into the hall, suggesting to its occupants vague notions of dismay and ghostly

peri' *Pulvis et Umbra!* Enough light had gathered about Undine to reveal her black swathings; two dead-white hands were folded, corpse-like, on her bosom, whence they moved as stiffly and flatly as though they belonged to a museum skeleton. On them and on her cheeks slight shades of a purplish hue hinted at the beginnings of decay. Her mouth, in a sense expressionless, conveyed nevertheless an inhuman sadness, in depth far beyond the ordinary limits of human experience, together with an aspect of senility—a thousand years of suffering, and a thousand years as the un pitying witness of misery. The eye-sockets enclosed darkness as though the skull were already denuding itself. The lower jaw fell slowly, parting the lips in a vacant, moron-like gape; but it was not so much this that sent a wave of alarm through the assembly, as the fact that the gape revealed nothing but blackness; the mouth of Death was a toothless cavern.

Undine's idea of blacking out her teeth—indeed, her general 'raw-head and bloody bones' conception of the pantomime, might have been cheap, but it was immensely effective. 'What an unpleasant young person', the Counsellor snorted. But the Japanese, with a hearty and healthy taste for the macabre, and unable to contain themselves longer, broke into a storm of acclamation in the middle. Sobs were heard, as of a lady in acute distress; but it was only Mr. Gomperz yielding at length to his threatened attack of nerves.

A surge of intense gratitude brought an aching to the throat of Mr. Sheepshanks, who rejoiced that she at least should be a loyal, warm-hearted creature, and had done her 'damnedest' to please him. She was excelling herself at his request; it might be crude and spookish, but it went down with an Eastern audience. Of course her opportunity of impressing Mr. Fargo must be taken

into account as well ; but she was not one to desert a friend.

As the cloying middle theme developed, Undine swept more purposefully, like the wraith of a bat-winged Stryx, luring its victims nearer to the frontier beyond which they must wander eternally, squeaking and gibbering, in abhorrence of their own emptiness. With the relapse into the minor her cere-cloth rigidity was once more assumed ; as the illumination waned, the outlines of her form disappeared, shadow upon shadow, until nothing remained but a round of leprous pallor ; it was as though one molecule followed another back to the original nothing, until even the spectre ceased to be.

When the lights went up the stage was observed to be empty. The house showed itself to be as enthusiastic as could be desired, and Undine, after hastily altering her face, appeared to bow before ' bravos ' and pyramids of flowers. Mr. Fargo darted through a side door, to return with a gigantic wreath of blood-tipped odontoglossums and gypsophila, brought down by special messenger from the most exorbitant florist in Totsuka. He'd sure had his fill of highbrow art. My ! if the folks way down home could have seen it !

' Well ', Mrs. Ditchling said to Miss Walker, ' fancy making such a fuss about a mixture of the Grand Guignol and the Diaghilef ballet—both hopelessly out of date '.

' Derivative ; just derivative '. Mr. Ditchling shook his head wisely.

' I call it indecent, and I shall say as much in the *Argus* '.

A twinkling little brown gentleman in green tartan tweeds that mocked the thermometer thrust himself forward into the group that surrounded Undine. To her he exclaimed, ' Sar, I manager of Dai Nippon Cinema Co. Very please to meet you '. He held out his card as

a patient playfully holds a lollipop before an infant ; it bore the name of Yamada. 'I desire beautiful English lady'. Sensation. 'He will play part of Vamp ; he seduce the Japanese young man. Eet ees ver' sad. I eentend to play you'.

Mr. Fargo was evidently taken aback at this proposition ; but Mr. Yamada had now caught sight of the striking profile of Sir Birinus, to whom he offered at once the part of 'The Admiral Jericho ; Japanese navy confrikt to English navy, your sheep he will blow up. Eet ees ver' sad. Please excuse my rudeness'.

'I'll be damned if I do', replied the Counsellor, extremely nettled as, turning on his heel, he stalked out of the building. Mr. Yamada, no whit abashed, continued to canvass a cast for his 'super-firruns'. It was fortunate that no one took him seriously, as he was arrested a fortnight later for obtaining money on false pretences from Japanese actresses, who had been taken in, no doubt, by the covenanting aspect of his 'Cameronian' trousers.

Mr. Fargo was doing things uncommonly lavishly at the hotel ; a prodigious number of quarts of Moet and Chandon roosted on the ice. The bar-boy in a frenzy, was shaking Martinis and Manhattans, while the three tables put together in the dining-room supported with difficulty glazed ducks, lobsters and prawns, iced consommé, devilled 'rooster', as they prudishly called it in Oregon, a turreted game pie and a mock 'Fuji' of vegetable salad, coupe Jacques, sorbet au marasquin, mangoes and papayas, while plates of caviare, sardine, olive and paprika canapés littered the lounge. In the middle of all flew gallantly his own 'Old Glory' alongside the rising sun of Japan. He was going to give his friends a rousing time.

As the first guest crossed the threshold, he let loose

the automatic pianola, roaring, jiggling and tobogganing out the tune that is sung either to the words of 'John Brown's Body', or the sadly mawkish verses of Julia Ward Howe; a happy thought.

Undine, more subdued than usual, entered with Alba Sheepshanks and Mr. Podler, both of whom seemed well disposed toward her as an instrument of their destiny.

Tristram, unable to face this ordeal, had invented neuralgia and vanished, apologising, into the darkness. There followed the Mileses and Malvina Bugbird, the Cavaras, Messrs. McGonigle, Kurrie-Lewer, Pullborough, Takamatsu and Nisihmura and Dr. and Mrs. Harada, all prepared to be jolly at the millionaire's expense, and to invest him with that halo of popularity which, as a new-comer to the island, was especially grateful to him.

Mr. Fargo did not shake hands with his guests, but wore the expression of one who restrains something with difficulty. Planting himself on the mat in front of the radiator he cleared his throat, rose twice up and down on his toes, and spoke as follows :

' Say, friends, I'm real glad to meet you all here, as I wonner tell you something that'll make ye lehf. I came awver here as a c'lector, but your accahmplished cahmpatriot's bin and c'lected me. I never thaht she'd have gahten away with ut, eether '.

Prolonged cheers cut short his avowal, through which the hoarse roaring of the McGonigle, ' I've won that bet : Kurrie-Lewer, laddie, fork out your ten yen ! ' was scarcely audible.

Cocktails were drained with shouts of congratulation, and the pianola, switching more frivolously into the measure of :

' Who takes care of the caretaker's daughter when the Caretaker's busy taking care ? '

Alba seized hold of her embarrassed James, and whirled him round the vacant spaces of lounge and dining-room. Kurrie-Lewer led out Inez, Ensign Pullborough with Malvina traced a bored and disconcertingly zig-zag course, in a pedestrian style, while Mr. Fargo, held strongly by his fiancée, jogged ponderously up and down like a performing bear.

During supper a couple would now and then rise and take a couple of turns to the diligent clatter of the mechanical music ; but James and Alba sat still holding hands under the table and dreaming of the happy times that awaited them, in the tropics, in the Alps, it scarcely mattered where ; a leisured honeymoon, far beyond the reach of all this trivial crowd. A week, perhaps, and the miracle would have come to pass.

