



XXIV

ON the first day of his re-appearance in Totsuka Mr. Chéepshanks spent some time wandering restlessly about his house. He wondered where Alba had got to ; but his brain, still too shocked to function properly, suggested nothing, except that it would be useless trying to see her, as she would no doubt merely shriek improprieties at him. Although distressed and amazed, he was able to recognise an unwonted peace in the house, the familiar objects of which offered some solace in pleasantly-coloured shapes. Further, he recognised in his back the first aches of lumbago, which drove him to lie in Alba's favourite chair, and do nothing but listen to Inez across the way, who was practising hard for the concert in aid of lépers to be held next week. Round, rich, luscious, her notes hung in the air like bunches of purple grapes, each bloomed over with the most correct sentiment :

‘ Plein—de pitié—pour—la—femm’ adultèr—e
Oui—s’agenouille—et—pleure en mon chemin—
Je dis—à—ceux—qui lui jett-ent la pierr—e
Sur vô—tre—coeur—avez vous mis la main (pom
pom pom pom pom)’

and so on, to the galumphing waltz-rhythms of Gounod.

‘ Very applicable, if you knew it ’, he commented, and rising, went to the telephone to fix an appointment with Dr. Stromdahl, who must tackle his lumbago for him.

Stromdahl happened to be there, and his bass voice rattled unpleasantly in the receiver.

'Mr. Sheepshanks? Yes. Ten-thirty. Ah—Mr. Sheepshanks, Mrs. Sheepshanks refuses the operation; she is in hospital, but she refuses the operation'.

'Oh, I didn't know one was proposed'.

'Yes, she was very seek, and Dr. Müller proposed an exploratory operation; he suspected fibroma, you know. She is very seek in her mind too, and so she refuses'. Dr. Müller was fond of exploratory operations, which he found lucrative—a most ingenious idea that—opening you up on spec, finding nothing, and charging you a thousand yen.

He said nothing to Stromdahl about visiting her, but sat down to write her a letter, in which he proposed to make arrangements for final separation, and to ship her over to America when she was well enough for consultation with a doctor of repute. He agreed it was better to have nothing to say to the proposals of Dr. Müller.

On the morrow he found Stromdahl rather too interested in Alba's 'seekness of the mind'; he evidently hoped to be made confessor so that he could pour out floods of sentimental advice and talk of himself as 'an old man who has known much suffering in the world'. But Tristram, defending himself automatically, never gave him a chance, but left him victoriously with a prescription in his pocket.

Lounging along the streets, he found his course set for the station, where, it now occurred to him, he might take a 'bus for Aoyama. He arrived at the great dusty square, a dismal space, so unfinished and characterless, so disturbed with the jostling of motor-cars. There he was not surprised to see Miss Bugbird, leading Ensign Pullborough, who looked meeker than usual, from the Hochi Building; for the Hochi Building is, like Picca-

dilly Circus, one of those places where one is liable to meet, gladly or otherwise, all one's acquaintances. Tristram wished to meet as few as possible of the people who would say 'How's Alba?' or 'Have you seen Alba?' He had not, and would not at all, unless it were absolutely unavoidable.

To escape them, and also in obedience to the prompting of his stomach, he turned into the station restaurant, an inconcomely octagon, and sat down at a little table, the cloth of which showed gout of Worcester sauce. It was one of the places in Totsuka where you could get draught lager which, on the toxin against toxin principle, should do his rheumatism a lot of good. Drinking this slowly and munching a piece of bread, he took in lazily the details of the railway-baroque decoration, all in a faint bile colour, and noted the progress up an aisle of a Japanese family in Europe-style dress, with the exception of grand-mamma, who wisely retained her sober native livery. Her white hair was cut as short as that of the youngest boy, so that her head appeared to be covered with splinters of ice or nickel. She bestowed her serene, half-blind smile on everything, as though she was away with the spirits of her ancestors already, far beyond mere distinction between Japanese and foreign style—beyond any emotion save a gentle benevolence heightened at intervals by the vitalising warmth of food in her aged stomach. Pappa was splendid in frock-coat and striped trousers, brown elastic-sided boots, a green tie semé with Indian red lozenges and a tweed shooting hat. Of the three boys the eldest was a student, of the humble-minded, industrious type evidently, for his head was shorn; no greasy black locks flowed down to his shoulders—an ugly, honest-looking lad, a kind that seems to grow rare—who held his little sister protectively by the hand. The second, a middle schoolboy,

had an elfin girlish look, with the long oblique slits of eyes, pencil-thin eyebrows, but no lashes, that are characteristic of so many Japanese babies. Clearly he was of the sort that likes to cheek his elders flirtatiously, but at present he was over-awed by the solemnity of the occasion—he was going to eat in the foreign manner, in public. The baby, about three years old, was breeched in tight brown holland shorts, coming a little below the knee ; with his wizened little face and match-stalk limbs, he reminded one of a melancholy marmoset. The two girls were of sturdier build, and the skirts of both were equally brief, though the elder was obviously fifteen or more ; her stockings, which abandoned at an early stage their attempt to encase her fat legs, permitted to escape a tract of smooth brown thigh ; her high-heeled but badly blacked shoes she had trodden down on the inner side ; her thick pigtail looked like a bludgeon. The little sister was simply a smaller replica ; no mother was present, and perhaps the man was a widower, or perhaps she, too, was undergoing an exploratory operation. Cancer, like most other diseases, is rife in Japan.

They sat down with some pomp at a long table ; all eyes were at once fixed on pappa. He tucked his napkin-corner in at his neck, and the family, like a platoon of Guards at Chelsea, imitated the motion smartly and together. And now he was meditating, amid breathless expectation, a more complex manoeuvre. He took in his left hand a knife, in his right a fork, resting them with the handles on the table vertically. Instantly the board bristled with these weapons at the 'carry'. But it proved to be a false start when soup was set before them. At pappa's lead, spoons were substituted with a martial clatter, and the anthem of soup-sucking from both Cantoris and Decani soothed the appreciative ear of Mr. Sheepshanks.

Influenced by this and the beer, he began to speculate without effort on the future. Firstly, it was impossible that he and Alba should live together. She knew she could not last long, and that would make her all the more determined never to forgive him for having robbed her of her lover, or for having thus given her the shock that had hastened the crisis of which Stromdahl had warned her. She had not liked him before, but now she very plainly hated him. 'Get out, you filthy . . .' Yes, she must be shipped across to California as soon as possible. As for him, he was surprised to find that he viewed with equanimity the prospect of living alone, as long as he did not have to stay in Japan. He would write at once to Sir Chidiok, craving permission to return. The El Greco excitement had probably died down long ago, and the artistic mission was now so well established that it would pay its way as long as it was not managed by an utter incompetent. He didn't need the money; far better that some young and energetic person with no private income should be given the chance of 'making good'. He yearned for a quiet period in England, in which to purge himself of the nightmare flavours of Japan, Alba, Podler and all the horrors that had so nearly entrapped him. England, where the fields are green and the sand is white, and the solid villas gleam rubiously in the spring showers, their rigid little gardens glorious with laburnum, red may and lilac; where blackbirds sing, and refuse is scavenged.

Whenas the rye reach to the chin
And chopcherry, chopcherry ripe within,
Strawberries swimming in the cream,
And schoolboys swimming in the stream.

To wander once more in the Quiller-Couch country,
the Eden Philpotts country, the Hardy country, or even

in suburban Sussex, the literary possession of which had been so hotly contested by Kipling, Belloc and Sheila Kaye-Smith; to drink swipes in country pubs like a romantic undergraduate; to dream again in the more sedative parts of western Europe, Bruges, Ghent, and Amsterdam, and hear the great organ at Haarlem trumpeting out Bach's Toccata in G minor; or then again to take a fishing punt after the barbel of the drowsy Touraine rivers, in reaches unknown to the Cocteur tourist. What bliss, what spiritual refection!

As, pleasantly replete, he was lighting a cigar, his reverie was interrupted by deep and vibrant tones,

'Ah! there is our hero restored. I see he has been restoring himself. There is nothing like good beer and a good cigar. You should taste our "Gueuse-lambique" in Belgium.'

It was M. Fabre who, on his round of all the restaurants within a convenient radius, on the chance of a pick-up, was due to-day at this one in accordance with the roster.

Sheepshanks was not at all delighted to be hailed as a hero, and shook hands a trifle coldly. Why do Continentals always imagine that the English want to 'shake-hand?'

Fabre followed his gaze, directed toward the Japanese family. 'There we see the death of old Yedo. Looking at those geurls with their ridiculous legs, I seem to hear the clank of your Protestant tin tabernacle. Good-bye to the old embossed bronze bell of the temple, with its lovely green patina; soon it will not boom any more over the mossy stones and through the cryptomeria. Nikko is already dead. In a little while you, my dear seurr, will be the only romantic thing left in Japan.'

'Why me?'

'Because you have done what I would wish to have

done, but would have scarcely dared, if I had been in your position'.

• 'I've no idea what you're driving at'.

'Oh yes, I think so'. M. Fabre scratched conspiratorially the tip of his nose. 'You have done what I would have liked to have done to any man who molests my wife, if I had one—you drown him like a puppy. Very good'.

'What on earth do you mean? Really, I can't have you saying things like that, I...'

'I mean—you know what; don't pretend. We know. I saw the culpable pair together. But do not be alarmed, old Sheepshanks; I admire you. Good little hero'.

'Look here, Fabre; this sort of thing won't do. Do you know what you're implying? You're implying that...'

'Pooh! Do not make a fuss about a little thing. I understand you, of course. You must save your face, as we say in the East. But you were not quite thorough enough in your act of righteous vengeance. If I had been you I should have drowned the culpable madame as well. Oh yes, like another puppy'. He went off into fits of laughter.

Tristram paid his bill and hastily retreated, vowing that there should be no delay about the letter to Sir Chidiack. Here was Fabre, one man at least, who did not lack gall to make oppression bitter; and if Japan was going to spring any more of these unpleasant surprises on him he would contract serious neurasthenia. In this sinister land, the sword and the lingam bristled far too near the surface for his taste.

As he left the restaurant he noticed, as he glanced back for a moment, that Fabre was still laughing to himself as he gazed at the ceiling.