CHAPTER X

THE YOSHIWARA WOMEN

Kyushu dai-ichi no ume	The finest plum-blossom
Kon-ya kimi ga tame ni hirahu.	of Kyushu
Hana no shingi wo shiran	This night is opening for
to hosseba,	thee.
San-ko tsuki wo funde kiare.	If thou wishest to know
	the true character of
	this flower,
	Come at the third hour
	singing in the moonlight.

Yoshiwara Popular Song.

As the result of an affecting scene with his wife, Geoffrey's opposition to the Yoshiwara project collapsed. If everybody went to see the place, then it could not be such very Bad Form to do so.

Asako rang up Reggie; and on the next afternoon the young diplomat called for the Barringtons in a motor-car, where Miss Yaé Smith was already installed. They drove through Tokyo. It was like crossing London for the space of distance covered; an immense city—yet is it a city, or merely a village preposterously overgrown?

There is no dignity in the Japanese capital, nothing secular or permanent, except that mysterious forest-land in the midst of the moats and the grey walls, where dwell the Emperor and the Spirit of the Race. It is a mongrel city, a vast congeries of native wooden huts, hastily equipped with a few modern conveniences, Drunken poles stagger down the streets, waving their cobwebs of electric wires. Rickety trams jolt past,

crowded to overflowing, so crowded that humanity clings to the steps and platforms in clots, like flies clinging to some sweet surface. Thousands of little shops glitter, wink or frown at the passer-by. Many of them have western plate-glass windows and stucco fronts, hiding their savagery, like a native woman tricked out in ridiculous pomp. Some, still grimly conservative, receive the customer in their cavernous interior, and cheat his eyes in their perpetual twilight. Many of these little shops are so small that their stock-in-trade flows over on to the pavement. The toy shops, the china shops, the cake shops, the shops for women's ribbons and hairpins seem to be trying to turn themselves inside out. Others are so reticent that nothing appears save a stretch of clean straw mats, where sulky clerks sit smoking round the *hibachi* (fireboxes). Then, when the eye gets accustomed to the darkness, one can see behind them the ranks of the tea-jars of Uji, or layers of dark kimono stuff.

The character of the shops changed as the Barringtons and their party approached their destination. The native element predominated more and more. The wares became more and more inexplicable. There were shops in which gold Buddhas shone and brass lamps for temple use, shops displaying queer untensils and mysterious little bits of things, whose secret was hidden in the cabalistic signs of Chinese script. There were stalls of curios, and second-hand goods spread out on the pavement, under the custody of wizened, inattentive old men, who squatted and smoked.

Red-faced maids stared at the foreigners from the balconies of lofty inns and eating-houses near Uyeno station. Farther on, they passed the silence of old temple walls, the spaciousness of pigeon-haunted cloisters, and the huge high-pitched roofs of the shrines, with their twisted horn-like points. Then, down a

narrow alley appeared the garish banners of the Asakusa theatres and cinema palaces. They heard the yelling of the door-touts, and the bray of discordant music. They caught a glimpse of hideous placards whose crude illustrations showed the quality of the performance to be seen within, girls falling from aeroplanes, demon ghosts with bloody daggers, melodrama unleashed.

Everywhere the same crowds loitered along the pavements. No hustle, no appearance of business save where a messenger-boy threaded the maze on a break-neck bicycle, or where a dull-faced coolie pulled at an overloaded barrow. Grey and brown, the crowd clattered by on their wooden shoes. Grey and black, passed the *haikara* young men with their yellow side-spring shoes. Black and sabre-dragging, the policeman went to and fro, invisibly moored to his wooden sentry-box.

The only bright notes among all these drab multitudes were the little girls in their variegated kimonos, who fluttered in and out of the entrances, and who played unscolded on the footpaths. These too were the only notes of happiness; for their grown-up relatives, especially the women, carried an air, if not an actual expression, of animal melancholy, the melancholy of driven sheep or of cows ruminant.

The crowds were growing denser. Their faces were all set in one direction. At last the whole roadway was filled with the slow-moving tide. The Barringtons and their friends had to alight from their car and continue the rest of the way on foot.

'They are all going to see the show,' Reggie explained to his party, and he pointed to a line of high houses, which stood out above the low native huts. It was a square block of building some hundreds of yards long, quite foreign in character, having the appearance of factory buildings, or of a barracks or workhouse.

'What a dismal-looking place!' said Asako.

'Yes,' agreed Reggie, 'but at night it is much brighter. It is all lit up from top to bottom. It is called the Nightless City.'

'What bad faces these people have!' said Asako, who was romantically set on seeing evil everywhere. 'Is it quite safe?'

'Oh yes,' said their guide, 'Japanese crowds are very orderly.'

Indeed they suffered no inconvenience from the crowd beyond much staring, an ordeal which awaits the foreigner in all corners of Tokyo.

They had reached a very narrow street, where raffish beer-shops were doing a roaring trade. They caught a glimpse of dirty table-cloths and powdered waitresses wearing skirts, aprons and lumpy shoes—all very *haikara*. On the right hand they passed a little temple from whose exiguous courtyard two stone foxes grinned maliciously, the temple of the god Inari, who brings rich lovers to the girls who pray to him.

They passed through iron gates, like the gates of a park, where two policemen were posted to regulate the traffic. Beyond was a single line of cherry-trees in full bloom, a single wave of pinkish spray, a hanging curtain of vaporous beauty, the subject of a thousand poems, of a thousand allusions licentious, delicate and trite,—the cherry-blossoms of the Yoshiwara.

At a street corner stood a high white building plastered with golden letters in Japanese and English—'Asahi Beer Hall.'

'That is the place,' said Yaé, 'let us get out of this crowd.'

They found refuge among more dirty table-cloths, Europeanised *mousmés*, and gaping guests. When Yaé spoke to the girls in Japanese, there was much bowing and hissing of the breath; and they were invited upstairs on to the first floor where was another beer-hall,

slightly more exclusive-looking than the downstair Gambrinus. Here a table and chairs were set for them in the embrasure of a bow-window, which, protruding over the cross-roads, commanded an admirable view of the converging streets.

'The procession won't be here for two hours more,' said Yaé, pouting her displeasure.

'One always has to wait in Japan,' said Reggie. 'Nobody ever knows exactly when anything is going to happen; and so the Japanese just wait and wait. They seem to like it rather. Anyhow they don't get impatient. Life is so uneventful here that I think they must like prolonging an incident as much as possible, like sucking a sweet slowly.'

Meanwhile there was plenty to look at. Asako could not get over her shock at the sea of wicked faces which surged below.

'What class of people are these?' Geoffrey asked.

'Oh, shop-people, I think, most of them,' said Yaé, 'and people who work in factories.'

'Good class Japanese don't come here, then?' Geoffrey asked again.

'Oh no, only low class people and students. Japanese people say it is a shameful thing to go to the Yoshiwara. And, if they go, they go very secretly.'

'Do you know any one who goes?' asked Reggie, with a directness which shocked his friend's sense of Good Form.

'Oh, my brothers,' said Yaé, 'but they go everywhere; or they say they do.'

It certainly was an ill-favoured crowd. The Japanese are not an ugly race. The young aristocrat who has grown up with fresh air and healthy exercise is often good-looking, and sometimes distinguished and refined.

But the lower classes, those who keep company with poverty, dirt and pawnshops, with the pleasures of the *saké* barrel and the Yoshiwara, are the ugliest beings that were ever created in the image of their misshapen gods. Their small stature and ape-like attitudes, the colour and discolour of their skin, the flat Mongolian nose, their gaping mouths and bad teeth, the coarse fibre of their lustreless black hair, give them an elvish and a goblin look, as though this country were a nursery for fairy changelings, a land of the Nibelungen, where bad thoughts have found their incarnation. Yet the faces have not got that character for good and evil as we find them among the Aryan peoples, the deep lines and the firm profiles.

'It is the absence of something rather than its presence which appals and depresses us,' Reggie Forsyth observed, 'an absence of happiness perhaps, or of a promise of happiness.'

The crowd which filled the four roads with its slow grey tide was peaceable enough; and it was strangely silent. The drag and clatter of the clogs made more sound than the human voices. The great majority were men, though there were women among them, quiet and demure. If ever a voice was lifted, one could see by the rolling walk and the fatuous smile that its owner had been drinking. Such a person would be removed out of sight by his friends. The Japanese generally go sight-seeing and merry-making in friendships and companies; and the *Verein*, which in Japan is called the *Kwai*, flourishes here as in Germany.

Two coolies started quarrelling under the Barringtons' window. They too had been drinking. They did not hit out at each other like Englishmen, but started an interchange of abuse in gruff monosyllables and indistinguishable grunts and snorts.

'*Baka! Chikushōmé! Kuso!* (Fool! Beast! Dung!)'

These amenities exasperating their ill humour, they began to pull at each other's coats and to jostle each other like quarrelsome curs. This was a sign that affairs were growing serious; and the police intervened. Again each combatant was pushed away by his companions into opposite byways.

With these exceptions, all tramplings, squeezings, pushings and pokings were received with conventional grins or apathetic staring. Yet in the paper next day it was said that so great had been the crowd that six deaths had occurred, and numerous persons had fainted.

'But where is the Yoshiwara?' Geoffrey asked at last. 'Where are these wretched women kept?'

Reggie waved his hand in the direction of the three roads facing them.

'Inside the iron gates, that is all the Yoshiwara, and those high houses and the low ones too. That is where the girls are. There are two or three thousand of them within sight, as it were, from here. But, of course, the night time is the time to see them.'

'I suppose so,' said Geoffrey vaguely.

'They sit in shop windows, one might say,' Reggie went on, 'only with bars in front like cages in the Zoo. And they wear gorgeous kimonos, red and gold and blue, and embroidered with flowers and dragons. It is like nothing I can think of, except aviaries full of wonderful parrakeets and humming birds.'

'Are they pretty?' Asako asked.

'No, I can't say they are pretty; and they all seem very much alike to the mere Westerner. I can't imagine anybody picking out one of them and saying, "I love her —she is the loveliest." There is a fat, impassive type like Buddha. There is a foxy animated type which exchanges *badinage* with the young nuts through the bars of her cage; and there is a merely ugly lumpy type, a kind of cloddish country-girl who exists in all countries.

But the more exclusive houses don't display their women. One can only see a row of photographs. No doubt they are very flattering to their originals.'

Asako was staring at the buildings now, at the high square prison houses, and at the low native roofs. These had each its little platform, its *monohoshi*, where much whitewashing was drying in the sun, cotton kimonos, towels and flannel underclothing.

At the farther end of one street a large stucco building, with a Grecian portico, stood athwart the thoroughfare.

'What is that?' said Asako; 'it looks like a church.'

'That is the hospital,' answered Reggie.

'But why is there a hospital here?' she asked again.

Yaé Smith smiled ever so little at her new friend's ignorance of the wages of sin. But nobody answered the question.

There was a movement in the crowd, a pushing back from some unseen locality, like the jolting of railway trucks. At the same time there was a craning of necks and a murmur of interest.

In the street opposite, the crowd was opening down the centre. The police, who had sprung up everywhere like the crop of the dragons' teeth, were dividing the people. And then, down the path so formed, came the strangest procession which Geoffrey Barrington had ever seen on or off the stage.

High above the heads of the crowd appeared what seemed to be a life-size automaton, a moving waxwork magnificently garbed in white brocade with red and gold embroidery of phenixes, and a hugh red sash tied in a bow in front. The hem of the skirt, turned up with red and thickly wadded, revealed a series of these garments fitting beneath each other, like the leaves of an artichoke. Under a monumental edifice of hair, bristling like a

hedgehog with amber-coloured pins and with silver spangles and rosettes, a blank impassive little face was staring straight in front of it, utterly expressionless, utterly unnatural, hidden beneath the glaze of enamel—the china face of a doll.

It parted the grey multitude like a pillar of light. It tottered forward slowly, for it was lifted above the crowd on a pair of black-lacquered clogs as high as stilts, dangerous and difficult to manipulate. On each side were two little figures, similarly painted, similarly bedizened, similarly expressionless, children of nine or ten years only, the *komuro*, the little waiting-women, too young, one would imagine to realise the meaning of this moving Calvary in which they held the position of the two thieves. They served to support the reigning beauty, and at the same time to display her long embroidered sleeves, outstretched on either side like wings.

'I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me,' Reggie Forsyth could not repress the blasphemy.

The brilliant figure and her two attendants moved forward under the shade of a huge ceremonial umbrella of yellow oiled paper, which looked like a membrane or like old vellum, and upon which were written in Chinese characters the personal name of the lady chosen for the honour and the name of the house in which she was an inmate. The shaft of this umbrella, some eight or nine feet long, was carried by a sinister being, clothed in the blue livery of the Japanese artisan, a kind of tabard with close-fitting trousers. He kept twisting the umbrella-shaft all the time with a gyrating movement to and fro, which imparted to the disc of the umbrella the hesitation of a wave. He followed the Queen with a strange slow stride. For long seconds he would pause with one foot held aloft in the attitude of a high-stepping horse, which, distorted his dwarfish body into a diabolic convulsion, like Dürer's angle of horror. He seemed a familiar

spirit, a mocking devil, the wicked *Spielmann* of the 'Miracle' play, whose harsh laughter echoes through the empty room when the last cup is emptied, the last shilling gone, and the dreamer awakes from his dream.

Behind him followed five or six men carrying large oval lanterns, also inscribed with the name of the house; and after them came a representative collection of the officials of the proud establishment, a few foxy old women and a crowd of swaggering men, spotty and vicious-looking. The *Oiran* (Chief Courtesan) reached the cross-roads. There, as if moved by machinery or magnetism, she slowly turned to the left. She made her way towards one of a row of small, old-fashioned native houses, on the road down which the Barringtons had come. Here the umbrella was lowered. The beauty bowed her monumental head to pass under the low doorway, and settled herself on a pile of cushions prepared to receive her.

Almost at once the popular interest was diverted to the appearance of another procession, precisely similar, which was debouching from the opposite road. The new *Oiran* garbed in blue, with a sash of gold and a design of cherry-blossom, supported by her two little attendants, wobbled towards another of the little houses. On her disappearing a third procession came into sight.

'Ah!' sighed Asako, 'what lovely kimonos! Where do they get them from?'

'I don't know,' said Yaé, 'some of them are quite old. They come out fresh year after year for a different girl.'

Yaé, with her distorted little soul, was thinking that it must be worth the years of slavery and the humiliation of disease to have that one day of complete triumph, to be the representative of Beauty upon earth, to feel the admiration and the desire of that vast concourse of men rising round one's body like a warm flood.

Geoffrey stared fascinated, wondering to see the fact

of prostitution advertised so unblushingly as a public spectacle, his hatred and contempt breaking over the heads of the swine-faced men who followed the harlot, and picked their livelihood out of her shame.

Reggie was wondering what might be the thoughts of those little creatures muffled in such splendour that their personality, like that of infant queens, was entirely hidden by the significance of what they symbolised. Not a smile, not a glance of recognition passed over the unnatural whiteness of their faces. Yet they could not be, as they appeared to be, sleep-walkers. Were they proud to wear such finery? Were they happy to be so acclaimed? Did their heart beat for one man, or did their vanity drink in the homage of all? Did their mind turn back to the mortgaged farm and the work in the paddy-fields, to the thriftless shop and the chatter of the little town, to the *saké*-sodden father who had sold them in the days of their innocence, to the first numbing shock of that new life? Perhaps; or perhaps they were too taken up with maintaining their equilibrium on their high shoes, or perhaps they thought of nothing at all. Reggie, who had a poor opinion of the intellectual brightness of uneducated Japanese women, thought that the last alternative was highly probable.

'I wonder what those little houses are where they pay their visits,' Reggie said.

'Oh, those are the *hikité chaya*,' said Yaé glibly, 'the Yoshiwara tea-houses.'

'Do they live there?' asked Asako.

'Oh, no; rich men who come to the Yoshiwara do not go to the big houses where the *oiran* live. They go to the tea-houses; and they order food and *geisha* to sing, and the *oiran* to be brought from the big house. It is more private. So the tea-houses are called *hikité chaya*, "tea-houses which lead by the hand."'

'Yaé,' said Reggie, 'you know a lot about it.'

'Yes,' said Miss Smith, 'my brothers have told me. They tell me lots of things.'

After a stay of about half an hour, the *oiran* left their tea-houses. The processions reformed; and they slowly tottered back to the places whence they had come. Across their path the cherry petals were already falling like snowflakes; for the cherry-blossom is the Japanese symbol of the impermanence of earthly beauty, and of all sweet things and pleasant.

'By Jove!' said Geoffrey Barrington to the world in general, 'that was an extraordinary sight. East is East and West is West, eh? I never felt that so strongly before. How often does this performance take place?'

'This performance,' said Reggie, 'has taken place for three days every Spring for the last three hundred years. But it is more than doubtful whether it will ever happen again. It is called *Oiran Dochu*, the procession of the courtesans. Geoffrey, what you have seen to-day is nothing more or less than the Passing of Old Japan!'

'But whom do these women belong to?' asked Geoffrey. 'And who is making money out of all this filth?'

'Various people and companies, I suppose, who own the different houses,' answered Reggie. 'A fellow once offered to sell me his whole establishment, bedding and six girls for £50 down. But he must have been having a run of bad luck. In most countries it is a most profitable form of investment. Do you remember Mrs Warren's Profession? 35 per cent I think was the exact figure. I don't suppose Japan is any exception.'

'By Jove!' said Geoffrey. 'The women, poor wretches, they can't help themselves; and the men who buy what they sell, one can't blame them either. But the creatures who make fortunes out of all this beastliness and cruelty, I say, they ought to be flogged round the place with a cat-o'-nine-tails till the life is beaten out of them. Let's get away from here!'

As they left the beer-house, a small round Japanese man bobbed up from the crowd, raised his hat, bowed and smiled. It was Tanaka. Geoffrey had left him behind on purpose, that his servants at least might not know where he was going.

'I think—I meet Ladyship here,' said the little man, 'but for long time I do not spy her. I am very sorry.'

'Is anything wrong? Why did you come?' asked Geoffrey.

'Good *samurai* never leave Lordship's side. Of course, I come,' was the reply.

'Well hurry up and get back,' said his master, 'or we shall be home before you.'

With renewed bowings he disappeared.

Asako was laughing.

'We can never get rid of Tanaka,' she said, 'can we? He follows us like a detective.'

'Sometimes I think he is deliberately spying on us,' said her husband.

'Cheer up,' said Reggie, 'they all do that.'

The party dispersed at the Imperial Hotel. Asako was laughing and happy. She had enjoyed herself immensely as usual; and her innocence had realised little or nothing of the grim significance of what she had seen.

But Geoffrey was gloomy and distrait. He had taken it much to heart. That night he had a horrible dream. The procession of the *oiran* was passing once more before his eyes; but he could not see the face of the gorgeous doll whom all these crowds had come out to admire. He felt strangely apprehensive, however. Then at a corner of the street, the figure turned and faced him. It was Asako, his wife. He struggled to reach her and save her. But the crowds of Japanese closed in upon him; he struggled in vain.