## CHAPTER XIV

### THE DWARF TREES

| | |
|---|---|
| *Iwa-yado ni* | O pine-tree standing |
| *Tateru matsu no ki,* | At the (side of) the stone house, |
| *Na wo mireba,* | When I look at you, |
| *Mukashi no hito wo* | It is like seeing face to face |
| *Ai-miru gotoshi.* | The men of old time. |

For the first time during the journey of their married lives, Geoffrey and Asako were pursuing different paths. It is the normal thing, no doubt, for the man to go out to his work and to his play, while the wife attends to her social and domestic duties. The evening brings reunion with new impressions and new interests to discuss. Such a life with its brief restorative separations prevents love growing stale, and soothes the irritation of nerves which, by the strain of petty repetitions, are exasperated sometimes into blasphemy of the heart's true creed. But the Barrington *ménage* was an unusual one. By adopting a life of travel, they had devoted themselves to a protracted honeymoon, a relentless *tête-à-tête*. So long as they were continually on the move, constantly refreshed by new scenes, they did not feel the difficulty of their self-imposed task. But directly their stay in Tokyo seemed likely to become permanent, their ways separated as naturally as two branches, which have been tightly bound together, spread apart with the loosening of the string.

This separation was so inevitable that they were neither of them conscious of it. Geoffrey had all his

life been devoted to exercise and games of all kinds. They were as necessary as food for his big body. At Tokyo he had found, most unexpectedly, excellent tennis-courts and first-class players.

They still spent the mornings together, driving round the city, and inspecting curios. So what could be more reasonable than that Asako should prefer to spend her afternoons with her cousin, who was so anxious to please her and to initiate her into that intimate Japanese life, which of course must appeal to her more strongly than to her husband?

Personally, Geoffrey found the company of his Japanese relatives exceedingly slow.

In return for the hospitalities of the Maple Club, the Barringtons invited a representative gathering of the Fujinami clan to dinner at the Imperial Hotel, to be followed by a general adjournment to the theatre.

It was a most depressing meal. Nobody spoke. All of the guests were nervous; some of them about their clothes, some about their knives and forks, all of them about their English. They were too nervous even to drink wine, which would have been the only remedy for such a 'frost.'

Only Ito, the lawyer, talked,—talked noisily, talked with his mouth full. But Geoffrey disliked Ito. He mistrusted the man; but, because of his wife's growing intimacy with her cousins, he felt loath to start subterranean inquiries as to the whereabouts of her fortune. It was Ito who, foreseeing embarrassment, had suggested the theatre party after dinner. For this at least Geoffrey was grateful to him. It saved him the pain of trying to make conversation with his cousins.

'Talking to these Japs,' he said to Reggie Forsyth, 'is like trying to play tennis all by yourself.'

Later on, at his wife's insistence, he attended an informal garden-party at the Fujinami house. Again he

suffered acutely from those cruel silences and portentous waitings, to which he noticed that even the Japanese among themselves were liable, but which apparently they did not mind.

Tea and ice-creams were served by *geisha* girls, who danced afterwards upon the lawn. When this performance was over, the guests were conducted to an open space behind the cherry-grove, where a little shooting-range had been set up, with a target, air-guns, and boxes of lead slugs. Geoffrey, of course, joined in the shooting-competition, and won a handsome cigarette case inlaid with Damascene work. But he thought that it was a poor game; nor did he ever realise that this entertainment had been specially organised with a view to flattering his military and sporting tastes.

But the greatest disillusionment was the Akasaka garden. Geoffrey was resigned to be bored by everything else. But his wife had grown so enthusiastic about the beauties of the Fujinami domain, that he had expected to walk straight into a paradise. What did he see? A dirty pond and some shrubs, not one single flower to break the monotony of green and drab, and everything so small. Why? He could walk round the whole enclosure in ten minutes. Geoffrey Barrington was accustomed to country-houses in England, with their broad acres and their lavish luxuriance of scent and blossom. This niggling landscape art of the Japanese seemed to him mean and insignificant.

He much preferred the garden at Count Saito's home. Count Saito, the late Ambassador at the Court of St James, with his stooping shoulders, his grizzled hair, and his deep eyes peering under the gold-rimmed spectacles, had proposed the health of Captain and Mrs Barrington at their wedding-breakfast. Since then, he had returned

to Japan, where he was soon to play a leading political rôle. Meeting Geoffrey one day at the Embassy, he had invited him and his wife to visit his famous garden.

It was a hanging garden on the side of a steep hill, parted down the middle by a little stream with its string of waterfalls. Along either bank rose groups of iris, mauve and white, whispering together like long-limbed pre-Raphaelite girls. Round a sunny fountain, the source of the stream, just below the terrace of the Count's mansion, they thronged together more densely, surrounding the music of the water with the steps of a slow sarabande, or pausing at the edge of the pool to admire their own reflection.

Count Saito showed Geoffrey where the roses were coming on, new varieties of which he had brought from England with him.

'Perhaps they will not like to be turned into Japanese,' he observed; 'the rose is such an English flower.'

They passed on to where the azaleas would soon be in fiery bloom. For with the true gardener, the hidden promise of the morrow is more stimulating to the enthusiasm than the assured success of the full flowers.

The Count wore his rustling native dress; but two black cocker spaniels followed at his heels. This combination presented an odd mixture of English squirearchy and the *daimyo* of feudal Japan.

On the crest of the hill above him rose the house, a tall Italianate mansion of grey stucco, softened by creepers, jessamine and climbing roses. Alongside ran the low irregular roofs of the Japanese portion of the residence. Almost all rich Japanese have a double house, half foreign and half native, to meet the needs of their amphibious existence. This grotesque juxtaposition is to be seen all over Tokyo, like a tall boastful foreigner tethered to a timid Japanese wife.

Geoffrey inquired in which wing of this unequal bivalve his host actually lived.

'When I returned from England,' said Count Saito, 'I tried to live again in the Japanese style. But we could not, neither my wife nor I. We took cold and rheumatism sleeping on the floor, and the food made us ill; so we had to give it up. But I was sorry. For I think it is better for a country to keep its own ways. There is a danger nowadays, when all the world is becoming cosmopolitan. A kind of international type is springing up. His language is *Esperanto*, his writing is shorthand, he has no country, he fights for whoever will pay him most, like the Swiss of the Middle Ages. He is the mercenary of commerce, the ideal commercial traveller. I am much afraid of him, because I am a Japanese and not a world citizen. I want my country to be great and respected. Above all, I want it to be always Japanese. I think that loss in national character means loss of national strength.'

Asako was being introduced by her hostess to the celebrated collection of dwarf trees, which had made the social fame of the Count's sojourn as Ambassador in Grosvenor Square.

Countess Saito, like her husband, spoke excellent English; and her manner in greeting Asako was of London rather than of Tokyo. She took both her hands and shook them warmly.

'My dear,' she said, in her curious deep hoarse voice, 'I'm so glad to see you. You are like a little bit of London come to say that you have not forgotten me.'

This great Japanese lady was small and very plain. Her high forehead was deeply lined and her face was marked with small-pox. Her big mouth opened wide as she talked, like a nestling's. But she was immensely rich. The only child of one of the richest bankers of Japan, she had brought to her husband the opportunity

for his great gifts as a political leader, and the luxury in which they lived.

The little trees were in evidence everywhere, decorating the living rooms, posted like sentinels on the terrace, and staged with the honour due to statuary at points of vantage in the garden. But their chief home was in a sunny corner at the back of a shrubbery, where they were aligned on shelves in the sunlight. Three special gardeners who attended to their wants were grooming and massaging them, soothing and titivating them, for their temporary appearances in public. Here they had a greenhouse of their own, kept slightly warmed for a few delicate specimens, and also for the convalescence of the hardier trees; for these precious dwarfs are quite human in their ailments, their pleasures and their idiosyncrasies.

Countess Saito had a hundred or more of these fashionable pets, of all varieties and shapes. There were giants of primeval forests reduced to the dimensions of a few feet, like the timbers of a lordly park seen through the wrong end of a telescope. There were graceful maple trees, whose tiny star-like leaves were particularly adapted to the process of diminution which had checked the growth of trunk and branches. There were weeping willows with light-green feathery foliage, such as sorrowing fairies might plant on the grave of some Taliessin of Oberon's court. There was a double cherry in belated bloom; its flowers of natural size hung amid the slender branches like big birds' nests. There was a stunted oak-tree, creeping along the earth with gnarled and lumpy limbs like a miniature Dinosaur; it waved in the air a clump of demensurate leaves with the truculent mien of boxing-gloves or lobsters' claws. In the centre of the rectangle formed by this audience of trees, and raised on a long table, was a tiny wisteria arbour, formed by a dozen plants arranged in quincunx.

The intertwisted ropes of branches were supported on shining rods of bamboo; and the clusters of blossom, like bunches of grapes or like miniature chandeliers, still hung over the litter of their fallen beauty, with a few birdlike flowers clinging to them, pale and bleached.

'They are over two hundred years old,' said their proud owner, 'they came from one of the Emperor's palaces at Kyoto.'

But the pride of the collection were the conifers and evergreens—trees which have Japanese and Latin names only, the *hinoki*, the *enoki*, the *sasaki*, the *keyaki*, the *maki*, the *sugi* and the *kusunoki*—all trees of the dark funereal families of fir and laurel, which the birds avoid, and whose deep winter green in the summer turns to rust. There were spreading cedar-trees, black like the tents of Bedouins, and there were straight cryptomerias for the masts of fairy ships. There was a strange tree, whose light-green foliage grew in round clumps like trays of green lacquer at the extremities of twisted branches, a natural *étagère*. There were the distorted pine-trees of Japan, which are the symbol of old age, of fidelity, of patience under adversity, and of the Japanese nation itself, in every attitude of menace, curiosity, jubilation and gloom. Some of them were leaning out of their pots and staring head downwards at the ground beneath them; some were creeping along the earth like reptiles; some were mere trunks, with a bunch of green needles sprouting at the top like a palm; some with one long pathetic branch were stretching out in quest of the infinite to the neglect of the rest of the tree; some were tall and bent as by some sea-wind blowing shoreward. Streaking a miniature landscape, they were whispering together the tales of centuries past.

The Japanese art of cultivating these tiny trees is a weird and unhealthy practice, akin to vivisection but

without its excuse. It is like the Chinese custom of dwarfing their women's feet. The result is pleasing to the eye; but it hurts the mind by its abnormality, and the heart by its ruthlessness.

Asako's admiration, so easily stirred, became enthusiastic as Countess Saito told her something of the personal history of her favourite plants, how this one was two hundred years old, and that one three hundred and fifty, and how another had been present at such and such a scene famous in Japanese history.

'Oh, they are lovely,' cried Asako. 'Where can one get them? I must have some.'

Countess Saito gave her the names of some well-known market gardeners.

'You can get pretty little trees from them for fifty to a hundred yen (£5 to £10),' she said. 'But of course the real historical trees are so very few; they hardly ever come on the market. They are like animals, you know. They want so much attention. They must have a garden to take their walks in, and a valet of their own.'

This great Japanese lady felt an affection and sympathy for the girl, who, like herself, had been set apart by destiny from the monotonous ranks of Japanese women and their tedious dependence.

'Little Asa Chan,' she said, calling her by her pet name, 'take care; you can become Japanese again, but your husband cannot.'

'Of course not, he's too big,' laughed Asako, 'but I like to run away from him sometimes, and hide behind the *shoji*. Then I feel independent.'

'But you are not really so,' said the Japanese, 'no woman is. You see the wisteria hanging in the big tree there. What happens when the big tree is taken away? The wisteria becomes independent, but it lies along the ground and dies. Do you know the Japanese name for wisteria? It is *fuji*—Fujinami Asako. If you have any

difficulty ever, come and talk to me. You see, I too am a rich woman; and I know that it is almost as difficult to be very rich as it is to be very poor.'

Captain Barrington and the ex-Ambassador were sitting on one of the benches of the terrace when the ladies rejoined them.

'Well, Daddy,' the Countess addressed her husband in English, 'what are you talking about so earnestly?'

'About England and Japan,' replied the Count.

As a matter of fact in the course of a rambling conversation Count Saito had asked his guest,—

'Now, what strikes you as the most surprising difference between our two countries?'

Geoffrey pondered for a moment. He wanted to answer frankly, but he was still awed by the canons of Good Form. At last he said,—

'This Yoshiwara business.'

The Japanese statesman seemed surprised.

'But that is just a local difference in the manner of regulating a universal problem,' he said.

'Englishmen aren't any better than they should be,' said Geoffrey, 'but we don't like to hear of women put up for sale like things in a shop.'

'Then you have not actually seen them yourself?' said the Count. He could not help smiling at the characteristic British habit of criticising on hearsay.

'Not actually; but I saw the procession last month.'

'You really think that it is better to let immoral women stray about the streets without any attempt to control them and the crime and disease they cause?'

'It's not that,' said Geoffrey; 'it seems to me horrible that women should be put up to sale and exposed in shop-windows ticketed and priced.'

Count Saito smiled again and said,—

'I see that you are an idealist like so many Englishmen. But I am only a practical statesman. The problem of vice is a problem of government. No law can abolish it. It is for us statesmen to study how to restrain it and its evil consequences. Three hundred years ago, these women used to walk about the streets as they do in London to-day. They used to carry a little straw mat on their backs so as to make a bed in any convenient place. Tokugawa Iyeyasu, the greatest of all Japanese statesmen, who gave peace to the whole country, put in order this untidiness also. He had the Yoshiwara built, and he put all the women there, where the police could watch both them and the men who visited them. The English might learn from us here, I think. But you are an unruly people. It is not only that you object for ideal reasons to the imprisonment of these women; but it is your men who would object very strongly to having the eye of the policeman watching them when they paid their visits.'

Geoffrey was silenced by the experience of his host. He was afraid, as most Englishmen are, of taking his stand upon his idealism, and of arguing that the British determination to ignore vice, to leave it unacknowledged and homeless in our midst, however disastrous in practice, is a system infinitely nobler in conception than the acquiescence which admits for the evil its right to exist, and places it among the commonplaces of life.

'And how about the people who make money out of the place?' asked Geoffrey. 'They must be contemptible specimens.'

The face of the wise statesman, which had grown hard in the course of his argument, became gentle all of a sudden.

'I really don't know much about them,' he said. 'If we do meet them, they do not boast about it.'