CHAPTER XV

EURASIA

Mono-sugo ya
Ara omoshiro no
Kaeri-bana.

Queer,—
Yes, but attractive
Are the flowers which
bloom out of season.

ALTHOUGH he felt a decreasing interest in the Japanese people, Geoffrey was enjoying his stay in Tokyo. He was tired of travelling, and was glad to settle down in the semblance of a home life.

He was very keen on his tennis. It was also a great pleasure to see so much of Reggie Forsyth. Besides, he was conscious of the mission assigned to him by Lady Cynthia Cairns to save his friend from the dangerous connection with Yaé Smith.

Reggie and he had been at Eton together. Geoffrey, four years the senior, a member of 'Pop,' and an athlete of many colours, found himself one day the object of an almost idolatrous worship on the part of a skinny little being, discreditably clever at Latin verses, and given over to the degrading habit of solitary piano practising on half-holidays. He was embarrassed but touched by a devotion which was quite incomprehensible to him; and he encouraged it furtively. When Geoffrey left Eton, the friends did not see each other again for some years, though they watched each other's careers from a distance, mutually appreciative. Their next meeting took place in Lady Everington's drawing-room, where Barrington had already heard fair ladies praising the gifts and graces of the young diplomat. He heard him

play the piano; and he also heard the appreciation of discerning judgment. He heard him talking with arabesque agility. It was Geoffrey's turn to feel on the wrong side of a vast superiority, and in his turn he repaid the old debt of admiration; generosity filled the gulf and the two became firm friends. Reggie's intelligence flicked the inertia of Geoffrey's mind, quickened his powers of observation, and developed his sense of interest in the world around him. Geoffrey's prudence and stolidity had more than once saved the young man from the brink of sentimental precipices.

For Reggie's unquestionable musical talent found its nourishment in love affairs dangerously unsophisticated. He refused to consider marriage with any of the sweet young things, who would gladly have risked his lukewarm interest for the chance of becoming an Ambassador's wife. He equally avoided pawning his youth to any of the maturer married ladies, whose status and character, together with those of their husbands, license them to practice as certificated Egerias. His dangerous *penchant* was for highly spiced adventuresses, and for pastoral amourettes, wistful and obscure. But he never gave away his heart; he lent it out at interest. He received it again intact, with the profit of his musical inspiration. Thus his liaison with Véronique Gerson produced the publication of *Les demi-jours*, a series of musical poems which placed him at once in the forefront of young composers; but it also alarmed the Foreign Office, which was paternally interested in Reggie's career. This brought about his banishment to Japan. The *Attente d'hiver*, now famous, is his candid musical confession that the coma inflicted upon him by Véronique's unconcern was merely the drowsiness of the waiting earth before the New Year brought back the old story.

Reggie would never be attracted to native women; and he had not the dry inquisitiveness of his predecessor,

Aubrey Laking, which might induce him to buy and keep a woman for whom he felt no affection. The love which can exchange no thoughts in speech was altogether too crude for him. It was his emotions, rather than his senses, which were always craving for amorous excitement. His frail body claimed merely its right to follow their lead, as a little boat follows the strong wind which fills its sails. But ever since he had loved Geoffrey Barrington at Eton, it was a necessity for his nature to love some one; and as the haze of his young conceptions cleared, that some one became necessarily a woman.

He soon recognised the wisdom of the Foreign Office in choosing Japan. It was a starvation diet which had been prescribed for him. So he settled down to his memories, and to *L'attente d'hiver*, thinking that it would be two long years or more before his Spring blossomed again.

Then he heard the story of the duel fought for Yaé Smith by two young English officers, both of them her lovers, so people said, and the vaguer tale of a fiancé's suicide. Some weeks later, he met her for the first time at a dance. She was the only woman present in Japanese dress, and Reggie thought at once of Asako Barrington. How wise of these small women to wear the kimono which drapes so gracefully their stumpy figures. He danced with her, his right hand lodged somewhere in the folds of the huge bow with the embroidered peacock, which covered her back. Under this stiff brocade he could feel no sensation of a living body. She seemed to have no bones in her, and she was as light as a feather. It was then that he imagined her as Lilith, the snake-girl. She danced with ease, so much better than he, that at the end of a series of cannons she suggested that they might sit out the dance. She guided him into the

garden, and they took possession of a rustic seat. In the ballroom she had seemed timid, and had spoken in undertones only; but in this shadowy *tête-à-tête* beneath the stars, she began to talk frankly about her own life.

She told him about her one visit to England with her father: how she had loved the country, and how dull it was for her here in Japan. She asked him about his music. She would so like to hear him play. There was an old piano at her home. She did not think he would like it very much—indeed, Reggie was already shuddering in anticipation—or else? Would she come to tea with him at the Embassy? That would be nice! She could bring her mother or one of her brothers? She would rather come with a girl friend. Very well, to-morrow?

On the morrow she came.

Reggie hated playing in public. He said that it was like stripping naked before a multitude, or like having to read one's own love-letters aloud in a Divorce Court. But there is nothing more soothing than to play to one attentive listener, especially if that listener be feminine and if the interest shown be that personal interest, which with so many women takes the place of true appreciation, and which looks over the art to the artist.

Yaé came with the girl friend, a lean and skinny half-caste girl like a gipsy, whom Yaé patronised. She came once again with the girl friend; and then she came alone.

Reggie was relieved, and said so. Yaé laughed and replied,—

'But I brought her for your own sake; I always go everywhere by myself.'

'Then please don't take me into consideration ever again,' answered Reggie.

So those afternoons began which so soon darkened into evenings, while Reggie sat at the piano playing his

thoughts aloud, and the girl lay on the sofa or squatted on the big cushion by the fire, with cigarettes within reach and a glass of liqueur, wrapped in an atmosphere of laziness and well-being such as she had never known before. Then Reggie would stop playing. He would sit down beside her, or he would take her on his knee; and they would talk.

He talked as poets talk, weaving stories out of nothing, finding laughter and tears in what she would have passed by unnoticed. She talked to him about herself, about the daily doings of her home, its sadness and isolation since her father died. He had been the playfellow of her childhood. He had never grudged his time or his money for her amusement. She had been brought up like a little princess. She had been utterly spoilt. He had transferred to her precocious mind his love of excitement, his inquisitiveness, his courage and his lack of scruple; and then, when she was sixteen, he had died, leaving as his last command to the Japanese wife who would obey him in death as she had obeyed him living, the strict injunction that Yaé was to have her own way always and in everything.

He left a respectable fortune, a Japanese widow, and two worthless sons.

Poor Yaé! Surrounded by the friends and amusements of an English girl's life, the qualities of her happy disposition might have borne their natural fruit. But at her father's death she found herself isolated, without friends, and without amusements. She found herself marooned on the island of Eurasia, a flat and barren land of narrow confines and stunted vegetation. The Japanese have no use for the half-castes; and the Europeans look down upon them. They dwell apart in a limbo of which Baroness Miyazaki is the acknowledged queen.

Baroness Miyazaki is a stupendous old lady, whose

figure might be drawn from some eighteenth-century comedy. Her late husband—and gossip says that she was his landlady during a period of study in England—held a high position in the Imperial Court. His wife, by a pomposity of manner and an assumption of superior knowledge, succeeded, where no other white woman has succeeded, in acquiring the respect and intimacy of the great ladies of Japan. She has inculcated the accents of Pentonville, with its aitches dropped and recovered again, among the high Japanese aristocracy.

But first her husband died; and then the old Imperial Court of the Emperor Meiji passed away. So Baroness Miyazaki had to retire from the society of princesses. She passed not without dignity, like an old monarch *en disponibilité*, to the vacant throne of the Eurasian limbo, where her rule is undisputed.

Every Friday afternoon you may see her presiding over her little court in the Miyazaki mansion, with its mixture of tinsel and dust. The Bourbonian features, the lofty white wig, the elephantine form, the rustling taffeta, and the ebony stick with its ivory handle, leads one's thoughts backwards to the days of Richardson and Sterne.

But her loyal subjects who surround her—it is impossible to place them. They are poor, they are untidy, they are restless. Their black hair is straggling, their brown eyes are soft, their clothes are desperately European, but ill-fitting and tired. They chatter together ceaselessly and rapidly like starlings, with curious inflections in their English speech, and phrases snatched up from the vernacular. They are for ever glancing and whispering, bursting at times into wild peals of laughter which lack the authentic ring of gladness. They are a people of shadows blown by the harsh winds of destiny across the face of a land where they can find no permanent resting-place. They are

the children of Eurasia, the unhappiest people on earth.

It was among these people that Yaé's lot was cast. She stepped into an immediate ascendancy over them thanks to her beauty, her personality, and above all to her money. Baroness Miyazaki saw at once that she had a rival in Eurasia. She hated her, but waited calmly for the opportunity to assist in her inevitable collapse, a woman of wide experience watching the antics of a girl innocent and giddy, the Baroness playing the part of Elizabeth of England to Yaé's Mary Queen of Scots.

Meanwhile, Yaé was learning what the Eurasian girls were whispering about so continually,—love affairs, intrigues with secretaries of South American legations, secret engagements, disguised messages.

This seed fell upon soil well-prepared. Her father had been a reprobate till the day of his death, when he had sent for his favourite Japanese girl to come and massage the pain out of his wasted body. Her brothers had one staple topic of conversation which they did not hesitate to discuss before their sister,—*geisha*, assignation houses, and the licensed quarters. Yaé's mind was formed to the idea that for grown-up people there is one absorbing distraction, which is to be found in the company of the opposite sex, culminating in the passionate secret of bodily intimacy.

There was no talk in the Smith's home of the romance of marriage, of the love of parents and children, which might have turned this precocious preoccupation in a healthy direction. The talk was of women all the time, of women as instruments of pleasure. Nor could Mrs Smith, the Japanese mother, guide her daughter's steps. She was a creature of duty, dry-featured and self-effaced. She did her utmost for her children's physical wants, she nursed them devotedly in sickness, she attended to their clothes and to their comforts. But she did not attempt

to influence their moral ideas. She had given up any hope of understanding her husband. She schooled herself to accept everything without surprise. Poor man! He was a foreigner and had a fox (*i.e.* he was possessed); and unfortunately his children had inherited this incorrigible animal.

To please her daughter, she opened up her house for hospitality with unseemly promptitude after her husband's death. The Smiths gave frequent dances, well-attended by young people of the Tokyo foreign community. At the first of the series, Yaé listened to the passionate pleadings of a young man called Hoskin, a clerk in an English firm. On the second opportunity, she became engaged to him. On the third, she was struck with admiration and awe by a South American diplomat with the green ribbon of a Bolivian order tied across his false shirt front. Don Quebrado d'Acunha was a practised hand at seduction; and Yaé's virtue passed out of her keeping soon after her seventeenth birthday, and just ten days before her admirer sailed away to rejoin his legitimate spouse in Guayaquil. The engagement with Hoskin still lingered on; but the young man, who adored her, was becoming haggard and pale. Yaé had a new follower, a teacher of English in a Japanese school, who recited beautifully and wrote poetry about her.

Then Baroness Miyazaki judged that her time was ripe. She summoned young Hoskin into her dowager presence; and, with a manner heavily maternal, she warned him against the lightness of his fiancée. When he refused to believe evil of her, she produced a pathetic letter full of half-confessions, which the girl herself had written to her in a moment of expansion. A week later the young man's body was washed ashore near Yokohama.

Yaé was sorry to hear of the accident; but she had

long ceased to be interested in Hoskin, the reticence of whose passion had seemed like a touch of ice to her fevered nerves. But this was Baroness Miyazaki's opportunity to discredit Yaé, to crush her rival out of serious competition, and to degrade her to the *demi-monde*. It was done promptly and ruthlessly; for the Baroness's gossip carried weight throughout the diplomatic, professional and missionary circles, even where her person was held in ridicule. The facts of Hoskin's suicide became known. Nice women dropped Yaé entirely; and bad men ran after her with redoubled zest. Yaé did not realise her ostracism.

The Smiths' dances next winter became so many competitions for the daughter's corruption, and were rendered brilliant by the presence of several of the young officers attached to the British Embassy, who made the running, and finally monopolised the prize.

Next year the Smiths acquired a motor-car which soon became Yaé's special perquisite. She would disappear for whole days and nights. None of her family could restrain her. Her answer to all remonstrances was,—

'You do what you want: I do what I want.'

That summer two English officers whom she especially favoured fought a duel with pistols—for her beauty or for her honour. The exact motive remained unknown. One was seriously wounded; and both of them had to leave the country.

Yaé was grieved by this sudden loss of both her lovers. It left her in a condition of double widowhood from which she was most anxious to escape. But now she was becoming more fastidious. The school-teachers and the dagos fascinated her no longer. Her soldier friends had introduced her into Embassy circles, and she wished to remain there. She fixed on Aubrey Laking for her next attempt, but from him she received her

first rebuff. Having lured him into a *tête-à-tête*, as her method was, she asked him for counsel in the conduct of her life.

'If I were you,' he said dryly, 'I should go to Paris or New York. You will find much more scope there.'

Fortunately, fate soon exchanged Aubrey Laking for Reggie Forsyth. He was just what suited her—for a time. But a certain impersonality in his admiration, his fits of reverie, the ascendancy of music over his mind, made her come to regret her more masculine lovers. And it was just at this moment of dissatisfaction that she first saw Geoffrey Barrington, and thought how lovely he would look in his uniform. From that moment desire entered her heart. Not that she wanted to lose Reggie; the peace and harmony of his surroundings soothed her like a warm and scented bath. But she wanted both. She had had two before, and had found them complementary to one another and agreeable to her. She wanted to sit on Geoffrey's knee, and to feel his strong arms round her. But she must not be too sudden in her advances, or she would lose him as she had lost Laking.

It is easy to condemn Yaé as a bad girl, a born *cocotte*. Yet such a judgment would not be entirely equitable. She was a laughter-loving little creature, a child of the sun. She never sought to do harm to anybody. Rather was she over-amiable. She wished above all to make her men friends happy and to be pleasing in their eyes. She had found that a sure way to this end was the gift of her person; and she rarely refused. She was never swayed by mercenary motives. She was to be won by admiration, by good looks, and by personal distinction, but never by money. If she tired of her lovers somewhat rapidly, it was as a child tires of a game or of a book, and leaves it forgotten to start another.

She was a child with bad habits, rather than a mature sinner, a fairy's child from some goblin world which does not recognise our moral laws and where promiscuity gives no more offence than the kaleidoscopic intercourse of drifting clouds. It never occurred to her that, because Geoffrey Barrington was married, he at least ought to be immune from her 'attack. In her dreams of an earthly paradise there was no marrying or giving in marriage, only the unrestrained enlacement of warm bodies, the sweet mingling of breath, the delirious aching of the flesh, the quickening of the heart-beats like the pulsation of her beloved motor-car, the sound as of violin arpeggios rising higher and ever higher, the pause of the ecstatic moment when the sense of time is lost,—and then the return to earth on lazy languorous wings like a sea-gull floating motionless on a shoreward breeze. Such was Yaé's ideal of Love and of Life too. For her short experience had been sufficient to bring her into complete agreement with the axiom of her late father that existence is after all a monotonous business, sweetened only by the delights of physical passion. It is not for us to condemn Yaé, whose thoughts we have many of us shared to the limits of our daring; but rather should we censure the blasphemy of mixed marriages which has brought into existence these thistledown children of a realm which has no kings or priests or laws or Parliaments or duty or tradition or hope for the future, which has not even an acre of dry ground for its heritage or any concrete symbol of its soul—the Cimmerian land of Eurasia.

Reggie Forsyth understood the pathos of the girl's position; and being a rebel and an anarchist at heart, as men of creative artistic genius are bound to be, he readily condoned the faults which she confided to him frankly. From the beginning her unique appearance had fascinated him. Gradually Pity, most dangerous

of all counsellors, revealed her to him as a girl romantically unfortunate, who never had a fair chance in life, who had been the sport of bad men and fools, who needed only a measure of true friendship and affection for the natural sunshine of her disposition to scatter the rank vapours of her soul's night. What Reggie grasped only in that one enlightened moment when he had christened her Lamia, was the tragic fact that she had no soul.