CHAPTER XVI

THE GREAT BUDDHA

Tsuki-yo yoshi
Tachitsu itsu netsu
Mitsu-no-hama.

The sea-shore of Mitsu!
Standing, sitting, or
lying down,
How lovely is the moon-
light night!

BEFORE the iris had quite faded, and before the azaleas of Hibiya were yet ablaze—in Japan they count the months by the blossoming of the flowers—Reggie Forsyth had deserted Tokyo for the joys of sea-bathing at Kamakura. He attended at the Embassy for office hours during the morning, but returned to the seaside directly after lunch. This departure disarranged Geoffrey's scheme for his friend's salvation; for he was not prepared to go the length of sacrificing his daily game of tennis.

'What do you want to leave us for?' he remonstrated.

'The bathing,' said Reggie, 'is heavenly. Besides, next month I have to go into *villegiatura* with my chief. I must prepare myself for the strain with prayer and fasting. But why don't you come down and join us?'

'Is there any tennis?' asked Geoffrey.

'There is a court, a grass court with holes in it; but I've never seen anybody playing.'

'Then what is there to do?'

'Oh, bathing and sleeping and digging in the sand and looking at temples and bathing again; and next week there is a dance.'

'Well, we might come down for that if her Ladyship agrees. How is Lamia?'

'Don't call her that, please. She has got a soul after all. But it is rather a disobedient one. It runs away like a little dog, and goes rabbit-hunting for days on end. She is in great form. We motor in the moonlight.'

'Then I think it is quite time I did come,' said Geoffrey.

So the Barringtons arrived in their sumptuous car on the afternoon before the dance of which Reggie Forsyth had spoken.

On the beach they found him in a blue bathing-costume sitting under an enormous paper umbrella with Miss Smith and the gipsy half-caste girl. Yaé wore a cotton kimono of blue and white, and she looked like a figurine from a Nanking vase.

'Geoffrey,' said the young diplomat, 'come into the sea at once. You look thoroughly dirty. Do you like sea-bathing, Mrs Barrington?'

'I have only paddled,' said Asako, 'when I was a little girl.'

Geoffrey could not resist the temptation of the blue water and the lazy curling waves. In a few minutes the two men were walking down to the sea's edge, Geoffrey laughing at Reggie's chatter. His arms were akimbo, with hands on the hips, hips which looked like the boles of a mighty oak-tree. He touched the ground with the elasticity of Mercury; he pushed through the air with the shoulders of Hercules. The line of his back was pliant as a steel blade. In his hair the sun's reflection shone like wires of gold. The Gods were come down in the semblance of men.

Yaé did not repress a sharp intake of her breath; and she squeezed the hand of the gipsy girl as if pain had gripped her.

'How big your husband is!' she said to Asako, 'What a splendid man!'

Asako thought of her husband as 'dear old Geoffrey.' She never criticised his points; nor did she think that Yaé's admiration was in very good taste. However, she accepted it as a clumsy compliment from an uneducated girl who knew no better. The gipsy companion watched with a peculiar smile. She understood the range of Yaé's admiration.

'Isn't it a pity they have to wear bathing dress?' Miss Smith went on; 'it's so ugly. Look at the Japanese.'

Farther along the beach some Japanese men were bathing. They threw their clothes down on the sand and ran into the water with nothing on their bodies except a strip of white cotton knotted round the loins. They dashed into the sea with their arms lifted above their head, shouting wildly like savage devotees calling upon their gods. The sea sparkled like silver round their tawny skin. Their torsos were well formed and hardy; their dwarfed and ill-shaped legs were hidden by the waves. Certainly they presented an artistic contrast with the sodden blue of the foreigners' bathing suits. But Asako, brought up to the strict ideals of convent modesty, said,—

'I think it's disgusting; the police ought to stop those people bathing with no clothes on.'

The dust and sun of the motor ride, the constant anxiety lest they might run over some doddering old woman or some heedless child, had given her a headache. As soon as Geoffrey returned from his dip, she announced that she would go back to her room.

As the headache continued, she abandoned the idea of dancing. She would go to bed, and listen to the music in the distance. Geoffrey wished to stay with her, but she would not hear of it. She knew that her husband was fond of dancing; she thought that the change and the brightness would be good for him.

'Don't flirt with Yaé Smith,' she smiled, as he gave her the last kiss, 'or Reggie will be jealous.'

At first Geoffrey was bored. He did not know many of the dancers, business people from Yokohama, most of them, or strangers stopping at the hotel. Their appearance depressed him. The women had hard faces, the lustre was gone from their hair, they wore ill-fitting dresses without style or charm. The men were gross, heavy-limbed and plethoric. The music was appalling. It was produced out of a piano, a 'cello, and a violin driven by three Japanese who cared nothing for time or tune. Each dance, evidently, was timed to last ten minutes. At the end of the ten minutes the music stopped without finishing the phrase or even the bar; and the movement of the dancers was jerked into stability.

Reggie entered the room with Yaé Smith. His manner was unusually excited and elate.

'Hello, Geoffrey, enjoying yourself?'

'No,' said Geoffrey, 'my wife has got a headache; and that music is simply awful.'

'Come and have a drink,' proposed Reggie.

He took them aside into the bar and ordered champagne.

'This is to drink our own healths,' he announced, 'and many years of happiness to all of us. It is also, Geoffrey, to drive away your English spleen, and to make you into an agreeable grass-widower into whose hands I may commend this young lady, because you can dance and I cannot. My evening is complete. This is my *Nunc Dimittis*.'

He led them back to the ball-room. Then with a low bow and a flourish of an imaginary cocked-hat he disappeared.

Geoffrey and Yaé danced together. Then they sat out a dance: and then they danced again. Yaé was

tiny, but she danced well; and Geoffrey was used to a small partner. For Yaé it was sheer delight to feel the size and strength of this giant man bending over her like a sheltering tree; and then to be lifted almost in his arms and to float on tiptoe over the floor with the delightful airiness of dreams.

What strange orgies our dances are! To the critical mind what a strange contradiction to our sheepish passion-hiding conventions! A survival of the corrobborree, of the immolation of the tribal virgins, a ritual handed down from darkest antiquity like the cult of the Christmas Tree and the Easter Egg; only their significance is lost, while that of the dance is transparently evident. Maidens as chaste as Artemis, wives as loyal as Lucretia pass into the arms of men who are scarcely known to them with touchings of hands and legs, with crossings of breath, to the sound of music Aphrodisiac or Fescennine.

The Japanese consider, not unreasonably, that our dancing is disgusting.

A nice girl no doubt, and a nice man too, thinks of a dance as a graceful exercise or as a game like tennis or hockey. But Yaé was not a nice girl; and when the music stopped with its hideous abruptness, it awoke her from a kind of trance in which she had been lost to all sensations except the grip of Geoffrey's hand and arm, the stooping of his shadow above her, and the tingling of her own desire.

Geoffrey left his partner at the end of their second dance. He went upstairs to see his wife. He found her sleeping peacefully; so he returned to the ball-room again. He looked in at the bar, and drank another glass of champagne. He was beginning to enjoy himself.

He could not find Yaé, so he danced with the gipsy girl, who had a stride like a kangaroo. Then Yaé reappeared. They had two more dances together, and

another glass of champagne. The night was fine. There was a bright moonlight. Geoffrey remarked that it was jolly hot for dancing. Yaé suggested a stroll along the sea-shore; and in a few minutes they were standing together on the beach.

'Oh! Look at the bonfires,' cried Yaé.

A few hundred yards down the sea-front, where the black shadows of the native houses overhung the beach, the lighted windows gleamed softly like flakes of mica. The fishermen were burning seaweed and jetsam for ashes which would be used as fertiliser. Tongues of fire were flickering skywards. It was a blue night. The sky was deep blue, and the sea an oily greenish blue. Blue flames of salt danced and vanished over the blazing heaps. The savage figures squatting round the fires were dressed in tunics of dark blue cloth. Their legs were bare. Their healthy faces lit up by the blaze were the colour of ripe apricots. Their attitudes and movements were those of apes. The elder men were chattering together; the younger ones were gazing into the fire with an expression of healthy stupor. A boat was coming in from the sea. A ruby light hung at the prow. It was rowed by four men standing and *yulohing*, two in the stern and two at the bow. They were intoning a rhythmic chant to which their bodies moved. The boat was slim and pointed; and the rowers looked like Vikings.

The shadows cast by the moonlight were inky black, the shadows of the beaked ships, the shadows of the savage huts, of the ape-like men, of the huge round fish-baskets like immense *amphoræ*.

Far out from land, where the wide floating nets were spread, lights were scattered like constellations. The foreland was clearly visible, with the high woods which clothed its summit. But the farther end of the beach faded into an uneven string of lights, soft and spectral

as will-o'-the-wisps. Warmth rose from the sleeping earth; and a breeze blew in from the sea, making a strange metallic rustling, which to Japanese ears is the sweetest natural music, in the gaunt sloping pine-trees, whose height in the semi-darkness was exaggerated to monstrous and threatening proportions.

Geoffrey felt a little hand in his, warm and moist.

'Shall we go and see *Dai-Butsu*' said Yaé.

Geoffrey had no idea who *Dai-Butsu* might be, but he gladly agreed. She fluttered on beside him with her long kimono sleeves like a big moth. Geoffrey's head was full of wine and waltz tunes.

They dived into a narrow street with dwellings on each side. Some of the houses were shuttered and silent. Others were open to the street with a completeness of detail denied by our stingy window-casements —women sitting up late over their needle-work, men talking round the firebox, shopkeepers adding up their accounts, fishermen mending their tackle.

The street led inland towards abrupt hills, which looked like a wall of darkness. It was lit by the round street lamps, the luminous globules with Chinese letters on them which had pleased Geoffrey first at Nagasaki. The road entered a gorge between two precipices, the kind of cleft into which the children of Hamelin had followed the Pied Piper.

'I would not like to come here alone,' said Yaé, clinging tighter.

'It looks peaceful enough,' said Geoffrey.

'There is a little temple just to the left, where a nun was murdered by a priest, only last year. He chopped her with a kitchen knife.'

'What did he do it for?' asked Geoffrey.

'He loved her, and she would not listen to him; so he killed her. I think I would feel like that if I were a man.'

They passed under an enormous gateway, like a huge barn door with no barn behind it. Two threatening gods stood sentinel on either hand. Under the influence of the moonlight the carved figures seemed to move.

Yaé led her big companion along a broad-flagged path between a pollarded avenue. Geoffrey still did not know what they had come so far to see. Nor did he care. Everything was so dreamy and so sweet.

The path turned; and suddenly, straight in front of them, they saw the God—the Great Buddha—the immense bronze statue which has survived from the days of Kamakura's sovereignty. The bowed head and the broad shoulders were outlined against the blue and starry sky; against the shadow of the woods the body, almost invisible, could be dimly divined. The moonlight fell on the calm smile and on the hands palm upwards in the lap, with finger-tips and thumb-tips touching in the attitude of meditation. That ineffably peaceful smiling face seemed to look down from the very height of heaven upon Geoffrey Barrington and Yaé Smith. The presence of the God filled the valley, patient and powerful, the Creator of the Universe and the Maintainer of Life.

Geoffrey had never seen anything so impressive. He stooped down towards his little companion, listening for a response to his own emotion. It came. Before he could realise what was happening, he felt the soft kimono sleeves like wings round his neck, and the girl's burning mouth pressing his lips.

'Oh, Geoffrey,' she whispered.

He sat down on a low table in front of a shuttered refreshment bar with Yaé on his knee, his strong arm round her, even as she had dreamed. The Buddha of Infinite Understanding smiled down upon them.

Geoffrey was too little of a prig to scold the girl, and too much of a man not to be touched and flattered by the sincerity of her embrace. He was too much of an

Englishman to ascribe it to its real passionate motive, and to profit by the opportunity.

Instead, he told himself that she was only a child excited by the beauty and the romance of the night even as he was. He did not begin to realise that he or she were making love. So he took her on his knee, and stroked her hand.

'Isn't he fine?' he said, looking up at the God.

She started at the sound of his voice, and put her arms round his neck again.

'Oh, Geoffrey,' she murmured, 'how strong you are!'

He stood up laughing, with the girl in his arms.

'If it wasn't for your big *obi*,' he said, 'you would weigh nothing at all. Now hold tight; for I am going to carry you home.'

He started down the avenue with a swinging stride. Yaé could watch almost within range of her lips the powerful profile of his big face, a soldier's face trained to command strong men and to be gentle to women and children. There was a delicious fragrance about him, the dry heathery smell of clean men. He did not look down at her. He was staring into the black shadows ahead, his mind still full of that sudden vision of Buddha Amitabha. He was scarcely thinking of the half-caste girl who clung so tightly to his neck.

Yaé had no interest in the *Dai-Butsu* except as a grand background for love-making, a good excuse for hand squeezings and ecstatic movements. She had tried it once before with her school-master lover. It never occurred to her that Geoffrey was in any way different from her other admirers. She thought that she herself was the sole cause of his emotion and that his fixed expression as he strode along in the darkness was an indication of his passion and a compliment to her charms. She was too tactful to say anything, or to try

to force the situation; but she felt disappointed when at the approach of lighted houses he put her down without further caresses. In silence they returned to the hotel, where a few tired couples were still revolving to a spasmodic music.

Geoffrey was weary now; and the enchantment of the wine had passed away.

'Good-night Yaé,' he said.

She was holding the lapels of his coat, and she would have dearly loved to kiss him again. But he stood like a tower without any sign of bending down to her; and she would have had to jump for the forbidden fruit.

'Good-night, Geoffrey,' she purred, 'I will never forget to-night.'

'It was lovely,' said the Englishman, thinking of the Great Buddha.

Geoffrey retired to his room, where Asako was sleeping peacefully. He was very English. Only the first surprise of the girl's kiss had startled his loyalty. With the ostrich-like obtuseness, which our continental neighbours call our hypocrisy, he buried his head in his principles. As Asako's husband, he could not flirt with another woman. As Reggie's friend, he would not flirt with Reggie's sweetheart. As an honourable man, he would not trifle with the affections of a girl who meant nothing whatever to him. Therefore the incident of the Great Buddha had no significance. Therefore he could lie down and sleep with a light heart.

Geoffrey had been sleeping for half an hour or so when he was awakened by a sudden jolt, as though the whole building had met with a violent collision, or as though a gigantic fist had struck it. Everything in the room was in vibration. The hanging lamp was swinging like a pendulum. The pictures were shaking on the walls.

A china ornament on the mantelpiece reeled, and fell with a crash.

Geoffrey leapt out of bed to cross to where his wife was sleeping. Even the floor was unsteady like a ship's deck.

'Geoffrey! Geoffrey!' Asako called out.

'It must be an earthquake,' her husband gasped, 'Reggie told me to expect one.'

'It has made me feel so sick,' said Asako.

The disturbance was subsiding. Only the lamp was still oscillating slightly to prove that the earthquake was not merely a nightmare.

'Is any one about?' asked Asako.

Geoffrey went out on to the veranda. The hotel, having survived many hundreds of earthquake shocks, seemed unaware of what had happened. Far out to sea puffs of fire were dimly seen like the flashes of a battleship in action, where the island volcano of Oshima was emptying its wrath against the sky.

There were hidden and unfamiliar powers in this strange country, of which Geoffrey and Asako had not yet taken account.

Beneath a tall lamp-post on the lawn, round whose smooth waxy light scores of moths were flitting, stood the short stout figure of a Japanese, staring up at the hotel.

'It looks like Tanaka,' thought Geoffrey; 'by Jove, it is Tanaka!'

They had definitely left their guide behind in Tokyo. Had Asako yielded at the last moment, unable to dispense with her faithful squire? Or had he come of his own accord? and if so, why? These Japs were an unfathomable and exasperating people.

Sure enough next morning it was Tanaka who brought the early tea.

'Hello,' said Geoffrey, 'I thought you were in Tokyo.'

'Indeed,' grinned the guide, 'I am sorry for you.

Perhaps I have commit great crime so to come. But I think and I think Ladyship not so well. Heart very anxious. Go to theatre, wish to make merry, but all the time heart very sad. I think I will take last train. I will turn like bad penny. Perhaps Lordship is angry.'

'No, not angry, Tanaka, just helpless. There was an earthquake last night?'

'Not so bad *jishin* (earth-shaking). Every twenty, thirty years one very big *jishin* come. Last big *jishin* Gifu *jishin* twenty years before. Many thousand people killed. Japanese people say that beneath the earth is one big fish. When the fish move, the earth shake. Silly fabulous myth! Tanaka say, "It is the will of God!"'

The little man crossed himself devoutly.

A few minutes later there was a loud banging at the door, followed by Reggie's voice, shouting,—

'Are you coming down for a bathe?'

'Earthquakes are horrible things,' commented Reggie, on their way to the sea. 'Foreigners are supposed always to sleep through their first one. Their second they find an interesting experience; but the third and the fourth and the rest are a series of nervous shocks in increasing progression. It is like feeling God—but a wicked, cruel God! No wonder the Japanese are so fatalistic and so desperate. It is a case of "Eat and drink, for to-morrow ye die."'

The morning sea was cold and bracing. The two friends did not remain in for long. When they were dried and dressed again, and when Geoffrey was for returning to breakfast, Reggie held him back.

'Come and walk by the sea,' he said, 'I have something to tell you.'

They turned in the direction of the fishing village,

where Geoffrey and Yaé had walked together only a few hours ago. But the fires were quenched. Black circles of charred ashes remained; and the magic world of the moonlight had become a cluster of sordid hovels, where dirty women were sweeping their frowsty floors, and scrofulous children were playing among stale bedding.

'Did you notice anything unusual in my manner last night?' Reggie began very seriously.

'No,' laughed Geoffrey, 'you seemed rather excited. But why did you leave so early?'

'For various reasons,' said his friend. 'First, I hate dancing, but I feel rather envious of people who like it. Secondly, I wanted to be alone with my own sensations. Thirdly, I wanted you, my best friend, to have every opportunity of observing Yaé and forming an opinion about her.'

'But why?' Geoffrey began.

'Because it would now be too late for me to take your advice,' said Reggie mysteriously.

'What do you mean?' Barrington asked.

'Last night I asked Yaé to marry me; and I understand that she accepted.'

Geoffrey sat in the sunlight on the gunwale of a fishing-boat.

'You can't do that,' he said.

'Oh, Geoffrey, I was afraid you'd say it, and you have,' said his friend, half laughing. 'Why not?'

'Your career, old chap.'

'My career,' snorted Reggie, 'protocol, protocol and protocol. I am fed up with that, anyway. Can you imagine me a be-ribboned Excellency, worked by wires from London, babbling platitudes over teacups to other old Excellencies, and giving out a lot of gas for the F.O. every morning. No, in the old days there was charm and power and splendour, when an Ambassador was really plenipotentiary, and peace and war turned upon a

court intrigue. All that is as dead as Louis Quatorze. Personality has faded out of politics. Everything is business now, concessions, vested interests, dividends and bondholders. These diplomats are not real people at all. They are shadowy survivals of the *grand siècle*, wraiths of Talleyrand; or else just restless bagmen. I don't call that a career.'

Geoffrey had listened to these tirades before. It was Reggie's froth.

'But what do you propose doing?' he asked.

'Doing? Why, my music of course. Before I left England some music-hall people offered me seventy pounds a week to do stunts for them. Their first offer was two hundred and fifty, because they were under the illusion that I had a title. My official salary at this moment is two hundred *per annum*. So you see there would be no financial loss.'

'Then are you giving up diplomacy because you are fed up with it? or for Yaé Smith's sake? I don't quite understand,' said Geoffrey.

He was still pondering over the scene of last evening, and he found considerable comfort in ascribing Yaé's behaviour to excitement caused by her engagement.

'Yaé is the immediate reason: utter fed-upness is the original cause,' replied Reggie.

'Do you feel that you are very much in love with her?' asked his friend.

The young man considered for a moment, and then answered,—

'No, not in love exactly. But she represents what I have come to desire. I get so terribly lonely, Geoffrey, and I must have some one, some woman, of course; and I hate intrigue and adultery. Yaé never grates upon me. I hate the twaddling activities of our modern women, their little sports, their little sciences, their little earnestnesses, their little philanthropies, their little imitations

of men's ways. I like the seraglio type of woman, lazy and vain, a little more than a lovely animal. I can play with her, and hear her purring. She must have no father or mother or brothers or sisters or any social scheme to entangle me in. She must have no claim on my secret mind, she must not be jealous of my music, or expect explanations.' Still less explain me to others,—a wife who shows one round like a monkey, what horror!'

'But Reggie! old chap, does she love you?'

Geoffrey's ideas were stereotyped. To his mind, only great love on both sides could excuse so bizarre a marriage.

'Love!' cried Reggie. 'What is Love? I can feel Love in music. I can feel it in poetry. I can see it in sunshine, in the wet woods, and in the phosphorescent sea. But in actual life! In the marriage-bed, in the interchange of sweat and sentiment, as Napoleon used to say! I think of things in too abstract a way ever to feel in love with anybody. So I don't think anybody could really fall in love with me. It is like religious faith. I have no faith, and yet I believe in faith. I have no love, and yet I have a great love for love. Blessed are they who have not seen, and yet have believed!'

When Reggie was in this mood Geoffrey despaired of getting any sense out of him, and he felt that the occasion was too serious for smiles.

They were walking back to the hotel in the direction of breakfast.

'Reggie, are you quite sure?' said his friend, solemnly.

'No, of course I'm not. I never could be.'

'And are you intending to get married soon?'

'Not immediately, no: and all this is quite in confidence, please.'

'I'm glad there's no hurry,' grunted Geoffrey. He knew that the girl was light and worthless; but to have shown Reggie his proofs would have been to admit his

own complicity; and to give a woman away so callously would be a greater offence against Good Form than his momentary and meaningless trespass. The foundation for Reggie's romance was so clearly unsubstantial. If only the marriage could be delayed, time would undermine the frail structure.

'But there's one thing you have forgotten,' said Reggie, rather bitterly.

'What's that, old chap?'

'When a fellow announces his engagement to the dearest little girl in all the world, his friends offer their congratulations. It's Good Form,' he added maliciously.