CHAPTER XVII

THE RAINY SEASON

Fugu-jiru no
Ware ikite iru
Ne-zame kana !

Poisonous delicacies (last night) !
I awake
And I am still alive.

GEOFFREY BARRINGTON tried not to worry about Yaé Smith; and, of course, he did not mention the episode of the Great Buddha either to his wife or to Reggie Forsyth. He did not exactly feel ashamed of the incident; but he realised that it was open to misinterpretation. He certainly had no love for Yaé; and she, since she was engaged to his friend, presumably had no love for him. There are certain unnatural states of mind in which we are not altogether morally responsible beings. Among these may be numbered the ball-room mood, which drives quite sane people to act madly. The music, the wine, the giddy turning, the display of women's charms and the confusing proximity of them produce an unwonted atmosphere, of which we have most of us been aware, so bewildering that admiration of one woman will drive sane men to kiss another. Explanation is of course impossible; and circumstances must have their way. Scheming people, mothers with daughters to marry, study the effects of this psychical chemistry and profit by their knowledge. Under similar influences Geoffrey himself had been guilty of wilder indiscretions than the kissing of a half-caste girl.

But when he thought the matter over, he was sorry

that it had occurred; and he was profoundly thankful that nobody had seen him.

Somebody had seen him, however.

The faithful Tanaka, who had been charged by Mr Ito, the Fujinami lawyer, not to let his master out of his sight, had followed him at a discreet distance during the whole of that midnight stroll. He had observed the talk and the attitudes, the silences and the holding of hands, the glad exchange of kisses, the sitting of Yaé on Geoffrey's knees, and her triumphant return, carried in his arms.

To the Japanese mind such conduct could only mean one thing. The Japanese male is frankly animal where women are concerned. He does not understand our fine shades of self-deception, which give to our love-making the thrill of surprise and the palliation of romance. Tanaka concluded that there could be only one termination to the scene which he had witnessed.

He also learned that Yaé Smith was Reggie Forsyth's mistress, that he visited her room at night, that she was a girl of no character at all, that she had frequently stopped at the Kamakura hotel with other men, all of them her lovers.

All this information Tanaka collected with a wealth and precision of detail which is only possible in Japan, where the espionage habit is so deeply implanted in the everyday life of the people.

Mr Ito could scarcely believe such welcome tidings. The Barrington *ménage* had seemed to him so devoted that he had often despaired of his boast to his patron that he would divide the wife from her husband, and restore her to her family. Now, if Tanaka's story were true, his task would be child's play. A woman charged with jealousy becomes like a weapon primed and cocked.

If Ito could succeed in making Asako jealous, then he knew that any stray spark of misunderstanding would blast a black gulf between husband and wife, and might even blow the importunate Englishman back to his own country—alone.

The lawyer explained his plan to the head of the family, who appreciated its classic simplicity. Sadako was given to understand the part which she was to play in alienating her cousin's affections from the foreigner. She was to harp on the faithlessness of men in general, and of husbands in particular, and on the importance of money values in matrimonial considerations.

She was to suggest that a foreign man would never choose a Japanese bride merely for love of her. Then, when the psychological moment had struck, the name of Yaé Smith was to be flashed into Asako's mind with a blinding glare.

Asako had been visiting her Japanese cousins almost every day. Her conversation lessons were progressing rapidly; for the first stages of the language are easy. The new life appealed to Asako's love of novelty, and the strangeness of it to her child's love of make-believe. The summoning of her parents' spirits awakened in her the desire for a home, which lurks in every one of us, the love of old family things around us, the sense of an inheritance and a tradition. She was tired of hotel life; and she turned for relaxation to playing at Japan with cousin Sadako, just as her husband turned to tennis.

Her favourite haunt was the little tea-house among the reeds at the edge of the lake, which seemed so hidden from everywhere. Here the two girls practised their languages. Here they tried on each other's clothes, and talked about their lives and purposes. Sadako was intellectually the cleverer of the two, but Asako had seen and heard more; so they were fairly equally matched.

Often the cousins shocked each other's sense of propriety. Asako had already observed that to the Japanese mind, the immediate corollary to being married is to produce children as promptly and as rapidly as possible. Already she had been questioned on the subject by Tanaka, by *boy sans* and by shop-attendants. Even the sexual potentialities of her pet dogs had been speculated on with unabashed freedom.

'It is a great pity,' said cousin Sadako, 'that you have no baby. In Japan if a wife have no baby, she is often divorced. But perhaps it is the fault of Mr Barrington?'

Asako had vaguely hoped for children in the future; but on the whole she was glad that their coming had been delayed. There was so much to do and to see first of all. It had never occurred to her that her childlessness might be the *fault* of either herself or her husband. But her cousin went on ruthlessly,—

'Many men are like that. Because of sickness they cannot make babies.'

'What kind of sickness?' Asako asked wonderingly.

'Many men have a sickness which they take from bad women, from *jorō*. Then they cannot make children, or they make their wives sick. This thing is much feared in Japan.'

Asako shivered. This beautiful country of hers seemed to be full of bogeys like a child's dream.

Another time Sadako asked her with much diffidence and slanting of the eyes,—

'I wish to learn about—kissing.'

'What is the Japanese for "kiss"?' laughed Asako.

'Oh! There is no such word,' expostulated Sadako, shocked at her cousin's levity, 'we Japanese do not speak of such things.'

'Then Japanese people don't kiss?'

'Oh, no,' said the girl.

'Not ever?' asked Asako, incredulous.

'Only when they are—quite alone.'

'Then when you see foreign people kissing in public, you think it is very funny?'

'We think it is disgusting,' answered her cousin.

It is quite true. Foreigners kiss so recklessly. They kiss on meeting: they kiss on parting. They kiss in London: they kiss in Tokyo. They kiss indiscriminately their fathers, mothers, wives, mistresses, cousins and aunts. Every kiss sends a shiver down the spine of a Japanese observer of either sex, as we should be shocked by the crude exhibition of an obscene gesture. For this blossoming of our buds of affection suggests to him, with immediate and detailed clearness, that other embrace of which in his mind it is the inseparable concomitant.

The Japanese find the excuse that foreigners know no better, just as we excuse the dirty habits of natives. But they quote the kiss as an indisputable proof of the lowness of our moral standard, and as a sign of the guilt, not of individuals so much as of our whole civilisation.

'Foreign people kiss too much,' said cousin Sadako, 'it is a bad thing. If I had a husband, I would always fear he kiss somebody else.'

'That is why I am so happy with Geoffrey,' said Asako, 'I know he would never love any one but me.'

'It is not safe to be so sure,' said her cousin darkly, 'a woman is made for one man, but a man is made for many women.'

Asako, arrayed in a Japanese kimono, and to all appearance as Japanese as her cousin, was sitting in the Fujinami tea-parlour. She had not understood much of the lesson in tea-ceremony at which she had just assisted. But the exceeding propriety and dignity of the teacher, the daughter of great people fallen upon evil days, had impressed her. She longed to acquire that tranquillity of deportment, that slow graceful,

poise of hand and arm, that low measured speech. When the teacher had gone, she began to mimic her gestures with all the seriousness of appreciative imitation.

Sadako laughed. She supposed that her cousin was fooling. Asako thought that she was amused by her clumsiness.

'I shall never be able to do it,' she sighed.

'But of course you will. I laugh because you are so like Kikuyé San.'

Kikuyé San was their teacher.

'If only I could practise by myself!' said Asako, 'but at the hotel it would be impossible.'

Then they both laughed together at the incongruity of rehearsing those dainty rites of old Japan in the over-furnished sitting-room at the Imperial Hotel, with Geoffrey sitting back in his arm-chair and puffing at his cigar.

'If only I had a little house like this,' said Asako.

'Why don't you hire one?' suggested her cousin.

Why not? The idea was an inspiration. So Asako thought; and she broached the matter to Geoffrey that very evening.

'Wouldn't it be sweet to have a ducky little Japanese house all our very own?' she urged.

'Oh yes,' her husband agreed, wearily, 'that would be great sport.'

Mr Fujinami Gentaro was delighted at the success of his daughter's diplomacy. He saw that this plan for a Japanese house meant a further separation of husband and wife, a further step towards recovery of his errant child. For he was beginning to regard Asako with parental sentiment, and to pity her condition as the wife of this coarse stranger.

Miss Sadako was under no such altruistic delusions. She envied her cousin. She envied her money, her freedom, and her frank happiness. She had often

pondered about the ways of Japanese husbands and wives; and the more she thought over the subject, the more she envied Asako her happy married life. She envied her with a woman's envy, which seeks to hurt and spoil. She was smarting from her own disappointment; and by making her cousin suffer, she thought that she could assuage her own grief. Besides, the intrigue in itself interested her, and provided employment for her indolent existence and her restless mind. Of affection for Asako she had none at all, but then she had no affection for anybody. She was typical of a modern Japanese womanhood, which is the result of long repression, loveless marriages and sudden intellectual licence.

Asako thought her charming, because she had not yet learned to discern. She confided to her all her ideas about the new house; and together the two girls explored Tokyo in the motor-car which Ito provided for them, inspecting properties.

Asako had already decided that her home was to be on the bank of the river, where she could see the boats passing, something like the house in which her father and mother had lived. The desired abode was found at last on the river-bank at Mukojima just on the fringe of the city, where the cherry-trees are so bright in Springtime, where she could see the broad Sumida river washing her garden steps, the fussy little river boats puffing by, the portly junks, the crews of students training for their regattas, and, away on the opposite bank, the trees of Asakusa, the garish river restaurants so noisy at nightfall, the tall peaceful pagoda, the grey roofs and the red plinths of the temple of the Goddess of Mercy.

Just when the new home was ready for occupation, just when Asako's enthusiasm was at its height and the purchases of silken bedding and dainty trays were almost complete, Geoffrey suddenly announced his intention of leaving Japan.

'I can't stick it any longer,' he said fretfully, 'I don't know what's coming over me.'

'Leave Japan?' cried his wife, aghast.

'Well, I don't know,' grunted her husband, 'it's no good stopping here and going all to seed.'

The rainy season was just over, the hot season of steaming rain which the Japanese call *nyubai*. It had played havoc with Geoffrey's nerves. He had never known anything so unpleasant as this damp relaxing heat. It made the walls of the room sweat. It impregnated paper and blotting-paper. It rotted leather; and spread mould on boots and clothes. It made matches unstrikeable. It drenched Geoffrey's bed with perspiration, and drove away sleep. It sent him out on long midnight walks through the silent city in an atmosphere as stifling as that of a green-house. It beat down upon Tokyo its fetid exhalations, the smell of cooking, of sewage and of humanity, and the queer sickly scent of a powerful evergreen tree aflower throughout the city, which resembled the reek of that Nagasaki brothel, and recalled the dancing of the *Chonkina*.

It bred swarms of bloodthirsty mosquitoes from every drop of stagnant water. They pursued Geoffrey with a fierce racial hatred. They found their way through the musty mosquito-net which separated his bed from Asako's. They eluded his blow in the evening light; and he could only wreak his vengeance in the morning, when they were heavy with his gore.

The colour faded from the Englishman's cheeks. His appetite failed. Tennis was a pain and a weariness. He was becoming, what he had never been before, cross and irritable.

Reggie Forsyth wrote to him from Chuzenji,—

'Yaé is here, and we go in for yachting in a kind of winged punt, called a 'lark.' For five pounds you can become a shipowner. I fancy myself as a skipper, and

I have already won two races. But more often we escape from the burble of the diplomats, and take our sandwiches and *thermata*—or is *thermoi* the plural?—to the untenanted shores of the lake, and picnic *à deux*. Then, if the wind does not fall we are lucky; but if it does, I have to row home. Yaé laughs at my oarsmanship; and says that, if you were here, you would do it so much better. She will not believe that I once coxed the *Victory* on the Fourth of June, with a lovely bouquet like a leading lady, when you were only a dry bob. You are a dangerous rival, but for this once I challenge you. I have a spare pen in my rabbit-hutch. There is just room for you and Mrs Barrington. You must be quite melted by now. Up here the air is fresh. At night it is quite cold, and there are no mosquitoes.'

But Asako did not want to go to Chuzenji. All her thoughts were centred on the little house by the river.

'Geoffrey darling,' she said, stroking his hair with her tiny waxen fingers, 'it is the hot weather which is making you feel cross. Why don't you go up to the mountains for a week or so, and stop with Reggie?'

'Will you come?' asked her husband, brightening.

'I can't very well. You see they are just laying down the *tatami*: and when that is done the house will be ready. Besides, I feel so well here. I like the heat.'

'But I've never been away without you!' objected Geoffrey, 'I think it would be beastly.'

This side of the question had not struck Asako. She was so taken up with her project. Now, however, she felt a momentary thrill of relief. She would be able to give all her time to her beloved Japanese home. Geoffrey was a darling, but he was so uninterested in everything.

'It will only be for a few days,' she said, 'you want the change; and when you come back it will be like being married again.'