CHAPTER XVIII

AMONG THE NIKKO MOUNTAINS

Io chikaki
Tsumagi no michi ya
Kure-nuramu;
Nokiba ni kudaru
Yama-bito no koye!

Dusk, it seems, has come
To the wood-cutter's track
That is near my hut:
The voices of the mountain-men
Going down to the shed!

GEOFFREY left early one morning in a very doubtful frame of mind, after having charged Tanaka to take the greatest care of his lady, and to do exactly what she told him.

It was not until half-way up the steep climb between Nikko and Chuzenji that his lungs suddenly seemed to break through a thick film, and he breathed fresh air again. Then he was glad that he had come.

He was afoot. A coolie strode on before him with his suit-case strapped on his back. They had started in pouring rain, a long tramp through narrow gorges. Geoffrey could feel the mountains around him; but their forms were wrapped in cloud. Now the mist was lifting; and although in places it still clung to the branches like wisps of cotton-wool, the precipitous slopes became visible; and overhead, peeping through the cloud at impossible elevations, pieces of the mountain seemed to be falling from the grey sky. Everything was bathed in rain. The sandstone cliffs gleamed like marble, the luxuriant foliage like polished leather. The torrent foamed over its wilderness of grey boulders with a splendid rush of liberty.

Country people passed by, dressed in straw overcoats which looked like bee-hives, or with thin capes of oiled paper, saffron or salmon-coloured. Their kimono skirts were girt up like fishers—both men and women—showing gnarled and muscular limbs. The complexions of these mountain folk were red like fruit; the Mongolian yellow was hardly visible.

Some were leading long files of lean-shanked horses, with bells to their bridles and high pack-saddles like cradles, painted red. Rough girls rode astride in tight blue trunk-hose. It was with a start that Geoffrey recognised their sex; and he wondered vaguely whether men could fall in love with them, and fondle them. They were on their way to fetch provisions for the lake settlements, or for remote mining-camps away beyond the mountains.

The air was full of the clamour of the torrent, the heavy splashing of raindrops delayed among the leaves, and the distant thunder of waterfalls.

What a relief to breath again, and what a pleasure to escape from the tortuous streets and the toy houses, from the twisted prettiness of the Tokyo gardens and the tiresome delicacy of the rice-field mosaic, into a wild and rugged nature, a land of forests and mountains reminiscent of Switzerland and Scotland, where the occasional croak of a pheasant fell like music upon Geoffrey's ear!

The two hours' climb ended abruptly in a level sandy road running among birch-trees. At a wayside tea-house a man was sitting on a low table. He wore white trousers, a coat of cornflower shade and a Panama hat—all very spick and span. It was Reggie Forsyth.

'Hello,' he cried, 'my dear old Geoffrey! I'm awfully glad you've come. But you ought to have brought Mrs Barrington too. You seem quite incomplete without her.'

'Yes, it's a peculiar sensation, and I don't like it.

But the heat, you know, at Tokyo, it made me feel rotten. I simply had to come away. And Asako is so busy now with her new cousins and her Japanese house and all the rest of it.'

For the first time Reggie thought that he detected a tone in his friend's voice which he had been expecting to hear sooner or later, a kind of 'flagging' tone—he found the word afterwards in working out a musical sketch called *Love's Disharmony*. Geoffrey looked white and tired, he thought. It was indeed high time that he came up to the mountains.

They were approaching the lake, which already showed through the tree-trunks. A path led away to the left across a rustic bridge.

'That's the way to the hotel. Yaé is there. Farther along are the Russian, French and British Embassies. That's about half an hour from here.'

Reggie's little villa stood at a few minutes' distance in the opposite direction, past two high Japanese hotels which looked like skeleton houses with the walls taken out of them, past sheds where furs were on sale, and picture post-cards, and dry biscuits.

The garden of the villa jutted out over the lake on an embankment of stones. The house was discreetly hidden by a high hedge of evergreens.

'William Tell's chapel,' explained Reggie, 'a week in lovely Lucerne!'

It was a Japanese house, another skeleton. From the wicket gate, Geoffrey could see its simple scheme open to the four winds, its scanty furniture unblushingly displayed; downstairs, a table, a sofa, some bamboo chairs and a piano—upstairs, two beds, two wash-stands, and the rest. The garden consisted of two strips of wiry grass on each side of the house; and a flight of steps ran down to the water's edge, where a small sailing-boat was moored.

The landscape of high wooded hills was fading into evening across the leaden ripples of the lake.

'What do you think of our highland home?' asked Reggie.

There was not a sign of life over the heavy waters, not a boat, not a bird, not an island even.

'Not much doing,' commented Geoffrey, 'but the air's good.'

'Not quite like a lake is it?' his host reflected.

That was true. A lake had always appealed to Geoffrey, both to his sense of natural beauty, and to his instinct for sport. There is a soothing influence in the imprisoned waters, the romance of the sea without its restlessness and fury. The freshness of untrodden islands, the possibilities of a world beneath the waters, of half-perceived Venetas, the adventure of entrusting oneself and one's fortunes to a few planks of wood, are delights which the lake-lover knows well. He knows, too, the delicious sense of detachment from the shore—the shore of ordinary affairs and monotonous people—and the charm of unfamiliar lights and colours and reflections. Even on the Serpentine he can find this glamour, when the birds are flocking to roost in the trees of Peter Pan's island.

But on this lake of Chuzenji there was a sullen brooding, an absence of life, a suggestion of tragedy.

'It isn't a lake,' explained Reggie, 'it's the crater of an old volcano which has filled up with water. It is one of the earth's pockmarks healed over and forgotten. But there is something lunar about it still, some memory of burned-out passions, something creepy in spite of the beauty of the place. It is too dark this evening to see how beautiful it is. In places the lake is unfathomably deep, and people have fallen into the water and have never been seen again.'

The waters were almost blue now, a deep dull greyish blue.

Suddenly, away to the left, lines of silver streaked the surface; and, with a clapping and dripping commotion, a flight of white geese rose. They had been dozing under the bank, and some one had disturbed them. A pale figure like a little flame was dimly discernible.

'It's Yaé!' cried Reggie; and he made a noise which was supposed to be a *jodel*. The white figure waved an answer.

Reggie picked up a megaphone which seemed to be kept there for the purpose.

'Good night,' he shouted, 'same time to-morrow!'

The figure waved again and disappeared.

Next morning Geoffrey was awakened by the boom of a temple bell. He stepped out on to his balcony, and saw the lake and the hills around clear and bright under the yellow sunshine. He drank in the cool breath of the dew. For the first time after many limp and damp awakenings he felt the thrill of the wings of the morning. He thanked God he had come. If only Asako were here! he thought. Perhaps she was right in getting a Japanese home just for the two of them. They would be happier there than jostled by the promiscuity of hotels.

At breakfast, Reggie had found a note from the Ambassador.

'Oh damn!' he cried, 'I must go over and beat a typewriter for two or three hours. I must therefore break my tryst. But I expect you to replace me like the immortal Cyrano, who should be the ideal of all soldiers. Will you take Yaé for an hour or two's sail? She likes you very much.'

'And if I drown your fiancée? I don't know anything about sailing.'

'I'll show you. It's very easy. Besides, Yaé really knows more about it than I do.'

So Geoffrey, after a short lesson in steering, tacking, and the manipulation of the centre-board, piloted his host safely over to British Bay, the exclusive precinct of the temporary Embassy on the opposite shore of the lake. He then made his way round French Cape past Russia Cove to the wooden landing-stage of the Lakeside Hotel. There he found Yaé, sitting on a bench, and throwing pebbles at the geese.

She wore the blue and white cotton kimono, which is the summer dress of Japanese women. It is a cheap garment but most effective—so clean and cool in the hot weather. Silk kimonos soon become stale-looking; but this cotton dress always seems to be fresh from the laundry. A rope of imitation pearls was entwined in her dark hair; and her broad sash of deep blue was secured in front with an old Chinese ornament of jade.

'Oh, big captain,' she cried, 'I am so glad it is you. I heard you were coming.'

She stepped into the boat, and took over the tiller and the command. Geoffrey explained his friend's absence.

'The bad boy,' she said, 'he wants to get away from me in order to think about a lot of music. But I don't care!'

Under a steady wind they sheered through the water. On the right hand was Chuzenji village, a Swiss effect of brown chalets dwarfed to utter insignificance by the huge wooded mountain dome of Nantai San which rose behind it. On the left the forest was supreme already, except where in small clearings five or six houses, tenanted by foreign diplomats, stood out above the lake. A little farther on, a Buddhist temple slumbered above a flight of broad stone steps. The sacred buildings were freshly

lacquered, and red as a new toy. In front, on the slope of golden sand, its base bathed by the tiny waves, stood the *torii*, the wooden archway which is Japan's universal religious symbol. Its message is that of the Wicket Gate in the Pilgrim's Progress. Wherever it is to be seen—and it is to be seen everywhere,—it stands for the entering in of the Way, whether that way be '*Shinto*' (The Way of the Gods), or '*Butsudo*' (The Way of the Buddhas), or '*Bushido*' (The Way of the Warriors).

There was plenty of breeze. The boat shot down the length of the lake at a delicious speed. The two voyagers reached at last a little harbour, Shōbu-ga-Hama—The Beach of the Lilies—a muddy shore with slimy rocks, a few brown cottages and a saw-mill.

'Let's go and see the waterfall,' suggested Yaé, 'it's only a few minutes.'

They walked together up a steep winding lane. The fresh air and the birch trees, the sight of real Alderney cows grazing on patches of real grass, the distant rumble of the cataract brought back to Geoffrey a feeling of strength and well-being to which he had for weeks been a stranger.

If only the real Asako had been with him, instead of this enigmatic and disquieting image of her!

The Japanese, who have an innate love for natural beauty, never fail to mark an exceptional view with a little bench or shelter for travellers, whence they can obtain the best perspective. If sight-seers frequent the spot in any number, there will be an old dame *en guérite*, with her picture post-cards and her Ebisu Beer, her 'Champagne Cider,' her *sembei* (round and salted biscuits) and her tale of the local legend.

'*Irrasshai! Irrasshai!*' she pipes, 'Come, come, please rest a little!'

But the cascade above Shōbu-ga-Hama is only one among the thousand lesser waterfalls of this mountain

country. It is honoured merely by an unsteady bench under a broken roof, and by a rope knotted round the trunk of a tall tree in mid-stream to indicate that the locality is an abode of spirits, and to warn passers-by against inconsiderately offending the Undine.

Geoffrey and Yaé were balancing themselves on the bench, gazing at the race of foam and at the burnished bracken. The Englishman was clearing his mind for action.

'Miss Smith,' he began at last, 'do you think you will be happy with Reggie?'

'He says so, big captain,' answered the little half-caste, her mouth queerly twisted.

'Because if you are not happy, Reggie won't be happy: and if you are neither of you happy, you will be sorry that you married.'

'But we are not married yet,' said the girl, 'we are only engaged.'

'But you will be married sometime, I suppose?'

'This year, next year, sometime, never!' laughed Yaé. 'It is nice to be engaged, and it is such a protection. When I am not engaged, all the old cats, Lady Cynthia and the rest, say that I flirt. Now when I am engaged, my fiancé is here to shield me. Then they dare not say things, or it comes round to him, and he is angry. So I can do anything I like, when I am engaged.'

This was a new morality for Geoffrey. It knocked the text from under the sermon which he had been preparing. She was as preposterous as Reggie; but she was not, like him, conscious of her preposterousness.

'Then, when you are married, will you flirt?' asked her companion.

'I think so,' said Yaé gravely. 'Besides, Reggie only wants me to dress me up and write music about me. If I am always the same like an English doll wife, he won't get many tunes to play. Reggie is like a girl.'

'Reggie is too good for you,' said the Englishman, roughly.

'I don't think so,' said Yaé; 'I don't want Reggie, but Reggie wants me.'

'What do you want then?'

'I want a great big man with arms and legs like a wrestler. A man who hunts lions. He will pick me up like you did at Kamakura, big captain, and throw me in the air and catch me again. And I will take him away from the woman he loves, so that he will hate me and beat me for it. And when he sees on my back the marks of the whip and the blood, he will love me again so strongly that he will become weak and silly like a baby. Then I will look after him and nurse him; and we will drink wine together. And we will go for long rides together on horseback in the moonlight, galloping along the sands by the edge of the sea!'

Geoffrey was gazing at her with alarm. Was she going mad? The girl jumped up and laid her little hands on his shoulder.

'There, big captain,' she cried, 'don't be frightened. That is only one of Reggie's piano tunes. I never heard tunes like his before. He plays them, and then explains to me what each note means; and then he plays the tune again, and I can see the whole story. That is why I love him—sometimes!'

'Then you *do* love him?' Geoffrey was clutching pathetically for anything which he could understand or appeal to in this elusive person.

'I love him,' said Yaé, pirouetting on her white toes near the edge of the chasm, 'and I love you, and I love any man who is worth loving!'

They returned to the lake in silence. Geoffrey's sermon was abortive. This girl was altogether outside the circle of his code of Good Form. He might as well preach vegetarianism to a leopard. Yet she fascinated

him, as she fascinated all men who were not as dry as Aubrey Laking. She was so pretty, so frail and so fearless. Life had not given her a fair chance; and she appealed to the chivalrous instinct in men, as well as to their less creditable passions. She was such a butterfly creature; and the flaring lamps of life had such a fatal attraction for her.

The wind was blowing straight against the harbour. The bay of Shōbu-ga-Hama was shallow water. Try as he might, Geoffrey could not manœuvre the little yacht into the open waters of the lake.

'We are on a lee-shore,' said Geoffrey.

At the end, he had to get down and wade bare-legged, towing the boat after him until at last Yaé announced that the centre-board had been lowered and that the boat was answering to the helm.

Geoffrey clambered in dripping. He shook himself, like a big dog after a swim.

'Reggie could never have done that,' said Yae, with fervent admiration; 'he would be afraid of catching cold.'

At last they reached the steps of the villa. They were both hungry.

'I am going to stop to lunch, big captain,' said Yaé, 'Reggie won't be back.'

'How do you know?'

'Because I saw Gwendolen Cairns listening last evening when he spoke to me through the big trumpet. She tells Lady Cynthia, and that means a lot of work next day for poor Reggie; so that he can't spend his time with me. You see! Oh, how I hate women!'

After lunch, at Chuzenji, all the world goes to sleep. It awakes at about four o'clock, when the white sails come gliding out of the green bays like swans. They

greet, or avoid. They run side by side for the length of a puff of breeze. They coquet with one another like butterflies; or they head for one of those hidden beaches which are the principal charm of the lake, where baskets are unpacked and cakes and sandwiches appear, where dry sticks are gathered for a rustic fire, and after an hour or more of anxious stoking the kettle boils.

'Of all the Japanese holiday places Chuzenji is the most select and the most agreeable,' Reggie Forsyth explained; 'it is the only place in all Japan, where the foreigner is genuinely popular and respected. He spends his money freely, he does not swear or scold. The woman-chasing, whisky-swilling type, who has disgraced us in the open ports, is unknown here. These native mountaineers are rough and uneducated savages, but they are honest and healthy. We feel on easy terms with them, as we do with our own peasantry. In the village street of Chuzenji I have seen a young English officer instructing the sons of boatmen and woodcutters in the mysteries of cricket.'

In Chuzenji, there are no Japanese visitors except the pilgrims who throng to the lake during the season for climbing the holy mountain of Nantai. These are country people, all of them, from villages all over Japan, who have drawn lucky lots in the local pilgrimage club. One can recognise them at once by their dingy white clothes, like grave-clothes—men and women are garbed alike—by their straw mushroom hats, by the strip of straw matting strapped across their shoulders, and by the long wooden staves which they carry and which will be stamped with the seal of the mountain-shrine when they have reached the summit. These pilgrims are lodged free by the temple on the lake-side, in long sheds like cattle-byres.

The endless files of lean pack-horses, laden with bags of rice and other provisions, the ruddy sexless girls who

lead them, and the women who have been foraging for wood and come down from the mountain with enormous faggots on their bent shoulders, provide a foreground for the Chuzenji landscape.

Geoffrey was sleeping upstairs in his bedroom. Yaé was sleeping downstairs on the sofa. He had expected her to return to the hotel after lunch, but her attitude was that of '*J'y suis, J'y reste.*'

He awoke with a start to find the girl standing beside his bed. Afterwards, he became sure that he had been awakened by the touch of soft fingers on his face.

'Wake up, big captain,' she was saying. 'It is four o'clock; and the Ark's coming.'

'What Ark?' he yawned.

'Why, the Embassy boat.'

Out of sheer devilry, Miss Smith waited for the arrival of Lady Cynthia. The great lady paid no more attention to her existence than if she had been a piece of the house. But she greeted Geoffrey most cordially.

'Come for a walk,' she said in her abrupt way.

As they turned down the village street, she announced,—

'The worst has happened, I suppose you know.'

'About Reggie?'

'Yes, he's actually engaged to be married to the creature. Has he told you?'

'In the greatest confidence.'

'Well, he forgot to bind his young lady to secrecy. She has told everybody.'

'Can't he be recalled to London?'

'The old man says that would just push him over the edge. He has talked of resigning from the service.'

'Is there anything to be done?'

'Nothing! Let him marry her. It will spoil his career

in diplomacy, of course. But he will soon get tired of her fooling him. He will divorce her, and will give up his life to music to which, of course, it belongs. People like Reggie Forsyth have no right to marry at all.'

'But are you sure that she wants to marry him?' said his friend; and he related his conversation with Yaé that morning.

'That's very interesting and encouraging,' said Her Excellency. 'So she has been trying her hand on you already.'

'I never thought of that,' exclaimed Geoffrey. 'Why, she knows that Reggie is my best friend; and that I am married.'

The judicial features of Lady Cynthia lightened with a judicial smile.

'You have been through so many London seasons, Captain Barrington, and there is still no guile in you!'

They walked on in silence past the temple terraces down a winding country lane.

'Captain Barrington, would you care to play the part of a real hero, a real theatre hero, playing to the gallery?'

Geoffrey was baffled. Had the talk suddenly swung over to amateur theatricals? Lady Cynthia was a terrible puller of legs.

'Did you ever hear of Madge Carlyle?' she asked, 'or was she before your time?'

'I have heard of her.'

She was a famous London *cocotte* in the days when mashers wore whiskers and 'Champagne Charlie' was sung.

'At the age of forty-three,' said Lady Cynthia, 'Madge decided to marry for the third or fourth time. She had found a charming young man with plenty of money and a noble heart, who believed that Madge was a much slandered woman. His friends were sorry for the

young man; and one of them decided to give a dinner to celebrate the betrothal. In the middle of the feast an urgent message arrived for the enamoured one, summoning him to his home. When he had gone the others started plying poor Madge with drinks. She was very fond of drinks. They had splendid fun. Then one of the guests—he was an old lover of Madge's—suggested that there was a sumptuous bedroom upstairs. Wouldn't it be rather a lark? Just for the last time? Good-bye to the old days and the rest of it! Another guest was sent off full speed to find the young man. And he came, and he saw with his own eyes, and the marriage was stopped.'

'But what did he think of his friends?' asked Geoffrey. 'It seems a low-down sort of trick.'

'He was very sore about it at the time,' said Lady Cynthia; 'but afterwards he understood that they were heroes, real theatre heroes.'

'It looks like rain,' said Geoffrey, uneasily.

So they turned back, talking about London people.

The first drops fell as they were passing through the wicket gate; and they entered the house during a roar of thunder. Reggie was alone.

'I see that my fate is sealed,' he said, as he rose to meet them. '"The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes!"'