

CHAPTER XIX

YAE SMITH

*Nusubito wo
Toracts mireba
Waga ko naré.*

The thief—
When I caught him and
looked at him,
Lo! my own child!

A WEEK of very hard work began for Reggie. The Ambassador was reporting home on every imaginable subject from political assassination to the manufacture of celluloid. This was part of Lady Cynthia's scheme. She was determined to throw Yae Smith and Geoffrey Barrington together all the time, and to risk the consequences.

So Yae, though she had her room at the hotel, became an inmate of Reggie's villa. She took all her meals there, and her siesta during most of the afternoons. She even passed whole nights with Reggie; and their relations could no longer be a secret even to Geoffrey's laborious discretion.

This knowledge troubled him; for the presence of lovers, and the shadows cast by their intimacies are always disquieting even to the purest minds. But Geoffrey felt that it was no business of his; and that Reggie and Yae being what they were, it would be useless hypocrisy for him to censure their pleasures.

Meanwhile, Asako was writing to him bewailing her loneliness. So one morning at breakfast he announced that he must be getting back to Tokyo. A cloud passed over Yae's face.

'Not yet, big captain,' she expostulated, 'I want to

take you right to the far end of the lake where the bears live.'

'Very well,' agreed Geoffrey, 'to-morrow morning early, then; for the next day I really must go.'

He wrote to Asako a long letter with much about the lake and Yae Smith, promising to return within forty-eight hours.

At daybreak next morning Yae was hammering at Geoffrey's door.

'Wake up, old sleepy captain,' she cried.

Geoffrey got the boat ready; and Yae prepared a picnic breakfast to be eaten on the way. Poor Reggie of course had work at the Embassy: he could not come.

It was an ideal excursion. They reached Senju, the woodcutter's village at the end of the lake. They ascended the forest path as far as the upper lake, a mere pond of reeds and sedges, which the bears are supposed to haunt.

Geoffrey and Yae however saw nothing more alarming than the village curs.

'Returned in safety from the land of danger!' cried the girl, as she sprang ashore at the steps of the villa.

The air and exercise had wearied Geoffrey. After lunch he changed into a kimono of Reggie's. Then he lay down on his bed, and was soon fast asleep.

How long he slept he could not say; but he awoke slowly out of confusing dreams. Somebody was in his room. Somebody was near his bed. Was it Asako? Was it a dream?

No, it was his comrade of the morning's voyage. It was Yae Smith. She was sitting on the bed beside him. She was gazing into his face with her soft, still, cat-like eyes. What was she doing that for? She was stroking his arm. Her touch was soft. He did not stop her.

Her hair was let down to below her waist, long black

hair, more silky in texture and more wavy than that of a pure Japanese woman. Her kimono was wide open at the throat, disclosing the shaded rotundities of breasts like 'lotus buds' according to Reggie's expression. A sweet fragrance exhaled from her body.

'Big captain, may I?' she pleaded.

'What?' said Geoffrey, still half asleep.

'Just lie by your side—just once—just for the last time,' she cooed.

Without waiting for a refusal, she tucked up her little limbs on the bed beside him, and laid her head down in line with his own.

Geoffrey was for going to sleep again, well pleased with his dream. But Yaé slipped an arm across his chest, and caught his shoulder in her hand. She nestled closer to him.

'Geoffrey,' she murmured, 'I love you so much. You are so strong and so big, Geoffrey. I want to stay like this always, always, holding on to you till I make you love me. Love me just a little, Geoffrey. Nobody will ever know. Geoffrey, it must be nice to have me near you. Geoffrey, you must, you must want to love me.'

She was hugging his body now in an embrace astonishingly powerful for so small a creature. It was this pressure which finally awoke Geoffrey. Gently he disengaged her arms and sat up in the bed.

She was clinging to his neck now, wild-eyed like a Mænad. He felt pitifully ridiculous. The rôle of Joseph is so thankless and humiliating. A month ago he would have ordered her sternly to get out of the room and behave herself. But the hot month in Tokyo had relaxed his firmness of mind; and familiarity with Reggie's Bohemian morality has sapped his fortress of Good Form.

'Don't be so naughty, Yaé,' he said feebly. 'Reggie may be coming. For God's sake, control yourself.'

Her voice was terrible now, like a cat's hoarse purr when it is mating.

'Geoffrey, I must, you must. All the time I have been thinking of you, ever since Kamakura. I have wanted you and wanted you. And here this time I can see in your eyes that you want me. They all look at me like that when they want me. It's like fire. It burns me; and my body aches and aches until I have you. Geoffrey darling, just this once. I will never be naughty again. Reggie doesn't matter. He's not like that. He's not like men. I have told him. I have said, "I love Geoffrey"; and he has said, "So do I."'

Geoffrey had lost the first moment when he might have been stern with her. Clumsily he tried to loosen her embrace. But for the first time in his life he was in the grip of an elemental natural force, a thing foreign to his experience of women in marriage or out of it.

'Yaé, don't,' he gasped, pushing the girl away. 'I can't; I'm married.'

'Married!' she screamed. 'Does marriage hurt like this? Love me, love me, Geoffrey. You must love me, you will!'

She threw her kimono open and dashed her body against his, as though she would take him by force.

'The rhapsody is ended!'

A voice which nobody would have recognised as Reggie's put a sudden end to this frantic assault.

He was standing in the doorway smiling queerly. He had watched the two from the garden, whence indeed all Chuzenji could have seen them in the open bedroom. He had slipped off his shoes, and had stolen up quietly in order to listen to them. Now he judged it time to intervene.

Yaé started up from the bed, all dishevelled. For a

moment she hovered on the edge, uncertain of her tactics. Geoffrey stared, one hand to his forehead. Then the girl darted across the room, fell at Reggie's feet, clasped his knees, and sobbed convulsively.

'Reggie, Reggie, forgive me!' she cried. 'It's not my fault. He's been asking me and asking me to do this—ever since Kamakura—and all the time here. This is what he came to stay here for. Reggie, forgive me. I will never be naughty again.'

Reggie looked across at his friend for confirmation or denial. The queer smile had vanished. Good Form decreed that the man must lie for the woman's sake, if necessary, till his soul were damned. But, with Geoffrey, Good Form had long since been thrown to the winds, like International Law in war time. Besides, the woman was no better than a *cocotte*; and Reggie's friendship was at stake.

'No,' he said huskily, 'that is not true. I was quietly sleeping here, and she came up to me. She is man-mad.'

The tangled heap at Reggie's feet leapt up, her green eyes blazing.

'Liar!' she cried; 'Reggie, do you believe him? The hypocrite, the goody-goody, the white slave man, the pimp!'

'What does she mean?' said Geoffrey. Thank God, the woman was clearly mad.

'Fujinami! Fujinami!' she yelled. 'The great girl king! The Yoshiwara *daimyo*! Every scrap of money which his fool wife spends on sham curios was made in the Yoshiwara, made by women, made out of filth, made by whores!'

The last word brought Geoffrey to his feet. In his real agony he had quite forgotten his sham sin.

'Reggie, for God's sake, tell me; is this true?'

'Yes,' said Reggie quietly, 'it is quite true.'

'Then why did no one tell me?'

'Husbands,' said the young man, 'and prospective husbands are always the last to learn. Yaé, go back to the hotel. You have done enough harm for to-day.'

'Not unless you forgive me, Reggie,' the girl pleaded; 'I will never go unless you forgive.'

'I can't forgive,' he said, 'but I can probably forget.'

The wrath of these two men fascinated her. She would have waited if she could, listening at the door. Reggie knew this.

'If you don't clear out, Yaé, I will have to call Tō to take you,' he threatened.

To his great relief she went quietly.

Reggie returned to the bare bedroom, where Geoffrey with bowed head was staring at the floor. In Reggie's short kimono the big man looked decidedly ridiculous.

'Good,' thought Reggie. 'Thank God for the comic spirit. It will be easier to get through with this now.'

His first action was to wash his hands. He had an unconscious instinct for symbolism. Then he sat down opposite his friend.

The action of sitting reduces tragedy to comedy at once—this was one of Napoleon's maxims.

Then he opened his cigarette case and offered it to Geoffrey. This, too, was symbolic. Geoffrey took a cigarette mechanically, and sucked it between his lips, unlighted.

'Geoffrey,' said his friend very quietly, 'let us try to put these women and all their rottenness out of our heads. We will try to talk this over decently.'

Geoffrey was so stunned by the shock of what he had just learned that he had thought of nothing else. Now, all of a sudden he remembered that he owed serious explanations to his friend.

'Reggie,' he said dully, 'I'm most awfully sorry. I

had never dreamed of this. I was good pals with Yae because of you. I never dreamed of making love to her. You know how I love my wife. She must have been mad to think of me like that. Besides,' he added sheepishly, 'nothing actually happened.'

'I'm sure I don't care what actually happened or did not happen. Damn actual facts. They distort the truth. They are at the bottom of every injustice. What actually happened never matters. It is the picture which sticks in one's brain. True or false, it sticks just the same; and suddenly or slowly it alters everything. But I can wipe up my own mess, I think. It is much more serious with you than with me, Geoffrey. She has bruised my heel, but she has broken your head. No, don't protest, for Heaven's sake! I am not interested.'

'Then what she says is absolutely true?' said Geoffrey, lighting his cigarette at last, and throwing the match aside as if it were Hope. 'For a whole year I have been living on prostitutes' earnings. I am no better than those awful *ponces* in Leicester Square, who can be flogged if they are caught, and serve them right too. And all that filthy Yoshiwara, it belongs to Asako, to my sweet innocent little girl, just as Brandan belongs to my father; and with all this filthy money we have been buying comforts and clothes and curios and rubbish.'

Reggie was pouring out whiskies and sodas, two strong ones. Geoffrey gulped down his drink, and then proceeded with his lamentation,—

'I understand it all now. Everybody knew. The secrecy and the mystery. Even at my wedding they were saying, "Don't go to Japan, don't go." They must have all known even then. And then those damned Fujinami, so anxious to be civil for the beastly money's sake, and yet hiding everything and lying all the time. And you knew, and the Ambassador, and Count Saito, and the servants too—always whispering and laughing

behind our backs. But you, Reggie, you were my friend, you ought to have told me.'

'I asked Sir Ralph,' said Reggie candidly, 'whether you ought to be told. He is a very wise man. He said, "No." He said, "It would be cruel and it would be useless. They will go back to England soon, and then they will never know." Where ignorance is bliss, you understand?'

'It was unfair,' groaned Geoffrey, 'you were all deceiving me.'

'I said to Sir Ralph that it seemed to me unfair and dangerous. But he has more experience than I.'

'But what am I to do now?' said the big man helplessly. 'This money must be given up, yes, and everything we have. But whom to? Not to those filthy Fujinami?'

'Go slow,' advised Reggie. 'Go back to England first. Get your brain clear. Talk it over with your lawyers. Don't be too generous. Magnanimity has spoiled many noble lives. And remember that your wife is in this too. You must consider her first. She is very young and she knows nothing. I don't think that she wants to be poor, or that she will understand your motives.'

'I will make her understand then,' said Geoffrey.

'Don't talk like a brute. You will have to be very patient and considerate for her. Go slow!'

'Can I stop here to-night, then?' asked Barrington plaintively.

'No,' said Reggie with firmness, 'that is really more than I could stick. I told you,—truth or untruth, the mind keeps on seeing pictures. Pack up your things. Call a coolie. The evening walk down to Nikko will do you more good than my jawing. Good-bye.'

An unreal handshake—and he was gone.

Then, of a sudden, Geoffrey realised that, however

unwittingly, he had deeply wronged this man who was his best friend and upon whom he was leaning in his hour of trial. Like Job, his adversities were coming upon him from this side and from that, until he must curse God and die. Now his friend had given him his dismissal. He would probably never see Reggie Forsyth again.

As he was starting on his long walk downhill, a motor-car passed him. Only one motor-car that season had climbed the precipitous road from the plains. It must be Yaé Smith's. Just as it was passing, the girl leaned out of the carriage and blew a kiss to Geoffrey.

She was not alone. There was a small fat man in the car beside her, a Japanese with a round impertinent face. With a throb of bitter heart-sickness, Geoffrey recognised his own servant, Tanaka.

Next morning Reggie Forsyth crossed the lake as usual to his work at the Embassy. He met the Ambassadress on the terrace of her villa.

'Good morning, Lady Cynthia,' he said, 'I congratulate you on your masterly diplomacy.'

'What do you mean?'

Her manner nowadays was very chilly towards her former favourite.

'In accordance with your admirable arrangements,' he said, 'my marriage is off.'

'Oh, Reggie,' her coolness changed at once, 'I'm so glad——'

He held up a warning hand.

'But—you have broken a better man than I.'

'Why, what do you mean?'

'Geoffrey Barrington. He has learned who the Fujinami are, and where his money comes from.'

'You told him?'

'I'm not such a skunk as all that, Lady Cynthia.'

Her Excellency was pondering what had better be done for Geoffrey.

'Where is he?' she asked.

'He stopped the night at Nikko. He is probably in the train for Tokyo by now.'

If she were a hero, a real theatre hero, as Geoffrey had been apparently, she would go straight off to Tokyo also; and perhaps she would be able to prevent a catastrophe. Or perhaps she would not. Perhaps she would only make things worse. On the whole, she had better stop in Chuzenji, and look after her own husband.

'Reggie,' she said, 'you've had a lucky escape. How did you know that I had any hand in this? You're more of a girl than a man. A rotten marriage would have broken you. Geoffrey Barrington is made of stronger stuff. He is in for a bad time. But he will learn a lot which you know already; and he will survive.'