CHAPTER XXII

FUJIÑAMI ASAKO

Okite mit u
Nete mitsu kaya no
Hirosa kana.

When I rise, I look—
When I lie down, I look—
Alas, how vast is the mosquito-curtain.

ASAKO BARRINGTON was restored to the name and home of the Fujinami. Her action had been the result of hereditary instinct, of the natural current of circumstances, and of the adroit diplomacy of her relatives. She had been hunted and caught like a wild animal; and she was soon to find that the walls of her enclosure, which at first seemed so wide that she perceived them not, were closing in upon her day by day as in a mediæval torture chamber, forcing her step by step towards the unfathomable pit of Japanese matrimony.

The Fujinami had not adopted their foreign cousin out of pure altruism. Far from it. Like Japanese in general, they resented the intrusion of a '*tanin*' (outside person) into their intimacy. They took her for what she was worth to them.

Since Asako was now a member of the family, custom allowed Mr Fujinami Gentaro to control her money. But Mr Ito warned his patron that, legally, the money was still hers and hers alone, and that in case of her marrying a second time it might again slip away. It was imperative, therefore, to the policy of the Fujinami house that Asako should marry a Fujinami, and that as soon as possible.

A difficulty here arose, not that Asako might object to her new husband—it never occurred to the Fujinami that this stranger from Europe might have opinions quite opposed to Japanese conventions—but that there were very few adequately qualified suitors. Indeed, in the direct line of succession there was only young Mr Fujinami Takeshi, the youth with the purple blotches, who had distinguished himself by his wit and his *savoir vivre* on the night of the first family banquet.

True, he had a wife already; but she could easily be divorced, as her family were nobodies. If he married Asako, however, was he still capable of breeding healthy children? Of course, he might adopt the children whom he already possessed by his first wife. But the elder boy showed signs of being mentally deficient, the younger was certainly deaf and dumb, and the two others were girls and did not count.

Grandfather Fujinami Gennosuké, who hated and despised his grandson, was for sweeping him and his brood out of the way altogether, and for adopting a carefully selected and creditable *yoshi* (adopted son), by marriage with either Sadako or Asako.

'But if this Asa is barren?' said Mrs Fujinami Shidzuyé, who naturally desired that her daughter Sadako's husband should be the heir of the Fujinami. 'That Englishman was strong and healthy. They were living together for more than a year, and still a child has not been made.'

'If she is barren, then a son must be adopted,' said the old gentleman.

'To adopt twice in succession is unlucky,' objected Mr Fujinami Gentaro.

'Then,' said Mrs Shidzuyé,' the old woman of Akabo shall come for consultation. She shall see the body of this Asa, and can tell if it is possible for babies to be made.'

Akabo was the up-country village, whence the first Fujinami had come to Tokyo to seek his fortune. The Japanese never completely loses touch with his ancestral village; and for over a hundred years the Tokyo Fujinami had paid their annual visit to the mountains of the North to render tribute to the graves of their forefathers. They still preserved an inherited faith in the 'wise woman' of the district, who from time to time was summoned to the capital to give her advice. Their other medical counsellor was Professor Kashio, who held degrees from Munich and Vienna.

During the first days of her self-chosen widowhood Asako was little better than a convalescent. She had never looked at sorrow before; and the shock of what she had seen had paralysed her vitality without as yet opening her understanding. Like a dog, who in the midst of his faithful affection has been struck for a fault of which he is unconscious, she took refuge in darkness, solitude and despair.

The Japanese, who are as a rule intuitively aware of others' emotions, recognised her case. A room was prepared for her in a distant wing of the straggling house, a 'foreign-style' room in an upper story with glass in the windows—stained glass too—with white muslin blinds, a coloured lithograph of Napoleon and a real bed, recently purchased on Sadako's pleading that everything must be done to make life happy for their guest.

'But she is a Japanese,' Mr Fujinami Gentaro had objected. 'It is not right that a Japanese should sleep upon a tall bed. She must learn to give up luxurious ways.'

Sadako protested that her cousin's health was not yet assured; and so discipline was relaxed for a time.

Asako spent most of her days in the tall bed, gazing

through the open doorway, across the polished wood veranda like the toffee veranda of a confectioner's model, past the wandering branch of an old twisted pine-tree which crouched by the side of the mansion like a faithful beast, over the pigmy landscape of the garden, to the scale-like roofs of the distant city, and to the pagoda on the opposite hill.

It rested her to lie thus and look at her country. From time to time Sadako would steal into the room. Her cousin would leave the invalid in silence, but she always smiled; and she would bring some offering with her, a dish of food—Asako's favourite dishes, of which Tanaka had already compiled a complete list—or sometimes a flower. At the open door she would pause to shuffle off her pale blue *zori* (sandals); and she would glide across the clean rice-straw matting shod in her snow-white *tabi* only.

Asako gradually accustomed herself to the noises of the house. First, there was the clattering of the *amado*, the wooden shutters whose removal announced the beginning of the day, then the gurgling and the expectorations which accompanied the family ablutions, then the harsh sound of the men's voices and their rattling laughter, the sound of their *geta* on the gravel paths of the garden like the tedious dropping of heavy rain on an iron roof, then the flicking and dusting of the maids as they went about their daily *soji* (house-cleaning), their shrill mouselike chirps and their silly giggle; then the afternoon stillness when every one was absent or sleeping; and then, the revival of life and bustle at about six o'clock, when the clogs were shuffled off at the front door, when the teacups began to jingle, and when sounds of swishing water came up from the bath-house, the crackle of the wood-fire under the bath-tub, the smell of the burning logs, and the distant odours of the kitchen.

Outside, the twilight was beginning to gather. A big black crow flopped lazily on to the branch of the neighbouring pine-tree. His harsh croak disturbed Asako's mind like a threat. High overhead passed a flight of wild geese in military formation on their way to the continent of Asia. Lights began to peep among the trees. Behind the squat pagoda a sky of raspberry pink closed the background.

The twilight is brief in Japan. The night is velvety; and the moonlight and the starlight transfigure the dolls' house architecture, the warped pine-trees, the feathery bamboo clumps, and the pagoda spires.

From a downstair room there came the twang of cousin Sadako's *koto*, a kind of zither instrument, upon which she played interminable melancholy sonatas of liquid detached notes, like desultory thoughts against a background of silence. There was no accompaniment to this music and no song to chime with it; for, as the Japanese say, the accompaniment for *koto* music is the summer night-time and its heavy fragrance, and the voice with which it harmonises is the whisper of the breeze in the pine-branches.

Long after Sadako had finished her practice, came borne upon the distance the still more melancholy pipe of a student's flute. This was the last human sound. After that, the night was left to the orchestra of the insects—the grasshoppers, the crickets and the *semi* (cicadas). Asako soon was able to distinguish at least ten or twelve different songs, all metallic in character, like clock-springs being slowly wound up and then let down with a run. The night and the house vibrated with these infinitesimal chromatics. Sometimes Asako thought the creatures must have got into her room, and feared for entanglements in her hair. Then she remembered that her mother's nickname had been 'the *Semi*,' and that she had been so called because she was

always happy and singing in her little house by the river.

This memory roused Asako one day with a wish to see how her own house was progressing. This wish was the first positive thought which had stirred her mind since her husband had left her; and it marked a stage in her convalescence.

'If the house is ready,' she thought, 'I will go there soon. The Fujinamis will not want me to live here permanently.'

This showed how little she understood as yet the Japanese family system, whereby relatives remain as permanent guests for years on end.

'Tanaka,' she said, one morning, in what was almost her old manner, 'I think I will have the motor-car to-day.'

Tanaka had become her body-servant as in the old days. At first, she had resented the man's reappearance, which awakened such cruel memories. She had protested against him to Sadako, who had smiled and promised. But Tanaka continued his ministrations; and Asako had not the strength to go on protesting. As a matter of fact, he was specially employed by Mr Fujinami Gentaro to spy on Asako's movements, an easy task hitherto, since she had not moved from her room.

'Where is the motor-car, Tanaka?' she asked again.

He grinned, as Japanese always do when embarrassed.

'Very sorry for you,' he answered; 'motor-car has gone away.'

'Has Captain Barrington——?' Asako began instinctively; then, remembering that Geoffrey was now many thousands of miles from Japan, she turned her face to the wall and began to cry.

'Young Fujinami San,' said Tanaka, 'has taken motor-car. He go away to mountains with *geisha*-girl. Very bad, young Fujinami San, very *roué*.'

Asako thought that it was rather impertinent to borrow her own motor-car without asking permission, even if she was their guest. She did not yet understand that she and all her possessions belonged from henceforth to her family—to her male relatives, that is to say; for she was only a woman.

'Old Mr Fujinami San,' Tanaka went on, happy to find his mistress, to whom he was attached in a queer Japanese sort of way, interested and responsive at last, 'old Mr Fujinami San, he also go to mountain with *geisha*-girl, but different mountain. Japanese people all very *roué*. All Japanese people like to go away in summer season with *geisha*-girl. Very bad custom. Old Mr Fujinami San, not so very bad, keep same *geisha*-girl very long time. Perhaps Ladyship see one little girl, very nice little girl, come sometimes with Miss Sadako and bring meal-time things. That little girl is *geisha*-girl's daughter. Perhaps old Mr Fujinami San's daughter also, I think: very bastard: I don't know!'

So he rambled on in the fashion of servants all the world over, until Asako knew all the ramifications of her relatives, legitimate and illegitimate.

She gathered that the men had all left Tokyo during the hot season, and that only the women were left in the house. This encouraged her to descend from her eyrie, and to endeavour to take up her position in her family, which was beginning to appear the less reassuring the more she learned about its history.

The life of a Japanese lady of quality is peculiarly tedious. She is relieved from the domestic cares which give occupation to her humbler sisters. But she is not treated as an equal or as a companion by her menfolk, who are taught that marriage is for business and not for pleasure, and consequently that home-life is a bore. She is supposed to find her own amusements,

such as flower-arrangement, tea-ceremony, music, kimono-making, and the composition of poetry. More often, this refined and innocent ideal degenerates into a poor trickle of an existence, enlivened only by scrappy magazine reading, servants' gossip, empty chatter about clothes, neighbours and children; backbiting, envying and malice.

Once Sadako took her cousin to a charity entertainment given for the Red Cross at the house of a rich nobleman. A hundred or more ladies were present; but stiff civility prevailed. None of the guests seemed to know each other. There was no friendly talking. There were no men guests. There was three hours' agony of squatting, a careful adjustment of expensive kimonos, weak tea and tasteless cakes, a blank staring at a dull conjuring performance, and deadly silence.

'Do you ever have dances?' Asako asked her cousin.

'The *geisha* dance, because they are paid,' said Sadako primly. Her pose was no longer cordial and sympathetic. She set herself up as mentor to this young savage, who did not know the usages of civilised society.

'No, not like that,' said the girl from England, 'but dancing among yourselves, with your men friends.'

'Oh no, that would not be nice at all. Only tipsy persons would dance like that.'

Asako tried, not very successfully, to chat in easy Japanese with her cousin; but she fled from the interminable talking-parties of her relatives, where she could not understand one word, except the innumerable parentheses—*naruhodo* (indeed!) and *so des'ka* (is it so?)—with which the conversation was studded. As the realisation of her solitude made her nerves more jumpy, she began to imagine that the women were for ever talking about her, criticising her unfavourably and disposing of her future.

The only man whom she saw during the hot summer months, besides the inevitable Tanaka, was Mr Ito, the lawyer. He could talk quite good English. He was not so egotistical and bitter as Sadako. He had travelled in America and Europe. He seemed to understand the trouble of Asako's mind, and would offer sympathetic advice.

'It is difficult to go to school, when we are no longer children,' he would say sententiously. 'Asa San must be patient. Asa San must forget. Asa San must take Japanese husband. I think, it is the only way.'

'Oh no,' the poor girl shivered, 'I wouldn't marry again for anything.'

'But,' Ito went on relentlessly, 'it is hurtful to the body, when once it has custom to be married. I think that is reason why so many widow-women are unfortunate and become mad.'

Every day he would spend an hour or so in conversation with Asako. She thought that this was a sign of friendliness and sympathy. As a matter of fact, his object at first was to improve his English. Later on, more ambitious projects developed in his fertile brain.

He would talk about New York and London in his queer stilted way. He had been a fireman on board ship, a teacher of *jiujitsu*, a juggler, a quack dentist, Heaven knows what else. Driven by the conscientious inquisitiveness of his race, he had endured hardships, contempt and rough treatment with the smiling patience inculcated in the Japanese people by their education. 'We must chew our gall, and bide our time,' they say, when the too powerful foreigner insults or abuses them.

He had seen the magnificence of our cities, the vastness of our undertakings, and had returned to Japan with great relief to find that life among his own people was less strenuous and fierce, that it was ordered by circumstances and the family system, that less was left to

individual courage and enterprise, that things happened more often than things were done. The impersonality of Japan was as restful to him, as it is aggravating to a European.

But it must not be imagined that Ito was an idle man. On the contrary, he was exceedingly hard-working and ambitious. His dream was to become a statesman, to enjoy unlimited patronage, to make men and to break men, and to die a peer. When he returned to Japan from his wanderings with exactly two shillings in his pocket, this was his programme. Like Cecil Rhodes, his hero among white men, he made a will distributing millions. Then, he attached himself to his rich cousins the Fujinami; and very soon he became indispensable to them. Fujinami Gentaro, an indolent man, gave him more and more authority over the family fortune. It was dirty business, this buying of girls and hiring of pimps, but it was immensely profitable; and more and more of the profits found their way into Ito's private account. Fujinami Gentaro did not seem to care. Takeshi, the son and heir, was a nonentity. Ito's intention was to continue to serve his cousins until he had amassed a working capital of a hundred thousand pounds. Then, he would go into politics.

But the advent of Asako suggested a short cut to his hopes. If he married her, he would gain immediate control of a large interest in the Fujinami estate. Besides, she had all the qualifications for the wife of a Cabinet Minister, knowledge of foreign languages, ease in foreign society, experience of foreign dress and customs. Moreover, passion was stirring in his heart, the swift stormy passion of the Japanese male, which, when thwarted, drives him towards murder and suicide.

Like many Japanese, he had felt the attractiveness of foreign women when he was travelling abroad. Their independence stimulated him, their savagery and their

masterful ways. Ito had found in Asako the physical beauty of his own race together with the character and energy which had pleased him so much in white women. Everything seemed to favour his suit. Asako clearly seemed to prefer his company to that of other members of the family. He had a hold over the Fujinami which would compel them to assent to anything he might require. True, he had a wife already; but she could easily be divorced.

Asako tolerated him, *faute de mieux*. Cousin Sadako was becoming tired of their system of mutual instruction, as she tired sooner or later of everything.

She had developed a romantic interest in one of the pet students, whom the Fujinami kept as an advertisement and a bodyguard. He was a pale youth with long greasy hair, spectacles, and more gold in his teeth than he had ever placed in his waist-band. Propriety forbade any actual conversation with Sadako; but there was an interchange of letters almost every day, long subjective letters describing states of mind and high ideals, punctuated with shadowy Japanese poems and with quotations from the Bible, Tolstoy, Nietsche, Bergson, Eucken, Oscar Wilde and Samuel Smiles.

Sadako told her cousin that the young man was a genius, and would one day be Professor of Literature at the Imperial University.