CHAPTER XXIV

THE AUTUMN FESTIVAL

Yo no naka ni
Ushi no Kuruma no
Nakari-seba,
Omoi no iye wo
Ikade ide-mashi?

In this world
If there were no
Ox-cart (*i.e.* Buddhist religion),
How should we escape
From the (burning) mansion of our thought?

DURING October, the whole family of the Fujinami removed from Tokyo for a few days in order to perform their religious duties at the temple of Ikégami. Even grandfather Gennosuké emerged from his dower-house bringing his wife, O Tsugi. Mr Fujinami Gentaro was in charge of his own wife, Shidzuyé San, of Sadako and of Asako. Only Fujinami Takeshi, the son and heir, with his wife Matsuko, was absent.

There had been some further trouble in the family which had not been confided to Asako, but which necessitated urgent steps for the propitiation of religious influences. The Fujinami were followers of the Nichiren sect of Buddhism. Their conspicuous devotion and their large gifts to the priests of the temple were held to be causes of their ever-increasing prosperity. The dead Fujinami, down from that great-great-grandfather who had first come to seek his fortune in Yedo, were buried at Ikégami. Here the priests gave to each *hotoké* (Buddha or dead person) his new name, which was inscribed on small black tablets, the *ihai*. One of these tablets for each dead person was kept in the

household shrine at Tokyo, and one in the temple at Ikégami.

Asako was taken to the October festival, because her father too was buried in the temple-grounds,—one small bone of him, that is to say, an *ikotsu* or legacy-bone, posted home from Paris, before the rest of his mortality found alien sepulture at Père Lachaise. Masses were said for the dead; and Asako was introduced to the tablet. But she did not feel the same emotion as when she first visited the Fujinami house. Now, she had heard her father's authentic voice. She knew his scorn for pretentiousness of all kinds, for false conventions, for false emotions, his hatred of priestcraft, his condemnation of the family wealth, and his contempt for the little respectabilities of Japanese life.

A temple in Japan is not merely a building; it is a site. These sites were most carefully chosen with the same genius which guided our Benedictines and Carthusians. The site of Ikégami is a long abrupt hill, half-way between Tokyo and Yokohama. It is clothed with *cryptomeria* trees. These dark conifers, like immense cypresses, give to the spot that grave, silent, irrevocable atmosphere with which Boecklin has invested his picture of the Island of the Dead. These majestic trees are essentially a part of the temple. They correspond to the pillars of our Gothic cathedrals. The roof is the blue vault of heaven; and the actual buildings are but altars, chantries and monuments.

A steep flight of steps is suspended like a cascade from the crest of the hill. Up and down these steps, the wooden clogs of the Japanese people patter incessantly like water-drops. At the top of the steps stands the towered gateway, painted with red ochre, which leads to the precincts. The guardians of the gate, *Ni-O*, the

two gigantic Deva kings, who have passed from India into Japanese mythology, are encaged in the gateway building. Their cage and their persons are littered with nasty morsels of chewed paper, wherever their worshippers have literally spat their prayers at them.

Within the enclosure are the various temple buildings, the bell-tower, the library, the washing-trough, the hall of votive offerings, the sacred bath-house, the stone lanterns and the lodgings for the pilgrims; also the two main halls for the temple services, which are raised on low piles and are linked together by a covered bridge, so that they look like twin arks of safety, floating just five feet above the troubles of this life. These buildings are most of them painted red; and there is fine carving on panels, friezes and pediments, and also much tawdry gaudiness. Behind these two sanctuaries is the mortuary chapel where repose the memories of many of the greatest in the land. Behind this again are the priests' dormitories, with a lovely hidden garden hanging on the slopes of a sudden ravine; its presiding genius is an old pine-tree beneath which Nichiren himself, a contemporary and a counterpart of Saint Dominic, used to meditate on his project for a Universal Church, founded on the life of Buddha, and led by the apostolate of Japan.

For the inside of a week the Fujinami dwelt in one of a row of stalls, like loose-boxes, within the temple precincts. The festival might have some affinity with the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, when the devout left their city dwellings to live in booths outside the wall.

Namu myōhō renge kyō.

(Adoration to the Wonderful Law of the Lotus Scriptures!)

The famous formula of the priests of the Nichiren sect was being repeated over and over again to the accompaniment of drums; for in the sacred text itself lies the only authentic Way of Salvation. With exemplary insistence Mr Fujinami Gennosuké was beating out the rhythm of the prayer with a wooden clapper on the *mokugyō*, a wooden drum, shaped like a fish's head.

Namu myōhō renge kyō.

From every corner of the temple *enclave* the invocation was droning like a threshing-machine. Asako's catholic conscience, now awakening from the spell which Japan had cast upon it, became uneasy about its share in these pagan rites. In order to drive the echo of the litany out of her ears, she tried to concentrate her attention upon watching the crowd.

Namu myōhō renge kyō.

Around her was a dense multitude of pilgrims, in their hundreds of thousands, shuffling, chaffering and staring. Some, like the Fujinami, had hired temporary lodgings, and had cooks and servants in attendance. Some were camping in the open. Others were merely visiting the temple for the inside of the day. The crowds kept on shifting and mingling like ants on an ant-hill.

Enjoyment, rather then piety, was the prevailing spirit; for this was one of the few annual holidays of the industrious Tokyo artisan.

In the central buildings, five feet above this noisy confluence of people, where the golden images of the Buddhas are enthroned, the mitred priests with their copes of gold-embroidered brown were performing the rituals of their order. To right and left of the high altar, the canons squatting at their red-lacquered praying-desks, were reciting the *sutras* in strophe and antistrophe. Clouds of incense rose.

In the adjoining building an earnest young preacher was exhorting a congregation of elderly and somnolent ladies to eschew the lusts of the flesh and to renounce the world and its gauds, marking each point in his discourse with raps of his fan. Foxy-faced satellites of the abbey were doing a roaring trade in charms against various accidents, and in sacred scrolls printed with prayers or figures of Nichiren.

The temple-yard was an immense fancy-fair. The temple pigeons wheeled disconsolately in the air or perched upon the roofs, unable to find one square foot of the familiar flagstones, where they were used to strut and peck. Stalls lined the stone pathways and choked the spaces between the buildings. Merchants were peddling objects of piety, sacred images, charms and rosaries; and there were flowers for the women's hair, and toys for the children, and cakes and biscuits, *bíru* (beer) and *ramuné* (lemonade) and a distressing sickly drink called 'champagne cider' and all manner of vanities. In one corner of the square a theatre was in full swing, the actors making up in public on a balcony above the crowd, so as to whet their curiosity and attract their custom. Beyond was a cinematograph, advertised by lurid paintings of murders and apparitions; and farther on there was a circus with a mangy Zoo.

The crowd was astonishingly mixed. There were prosperous merchants of Tokyo with their wives, children, servants and apprentices. There were students with their blue and white spotted cloaks, their *képis* with the school badge, and their ungainly stride. There were modern young men in *yōfuku* (European dress), with panama hats, swagger canes, and side-spring shoes, supercilious in attitude and proud of their unbelief. There were troops of variegated children, dragging at their elders' hands or kimonos, or getting lost among the legs of the multitude like little leaves in an eddy. There

were excursion parties from the country, with their kimonos caught up to the knees, and with baked earthen faces stupidly staring, sporting each a red flower or a coloured towel for identification purposes. There were labourers in tight trousers and tabard jackets, inscribed with the name and profession of their employer. There were *geisha*-girls on their best behaviour, in charge of a professional auntie, and recognisable only by the smart cut of their cloaks and the deep space between the collar and the nape of the neck, where the black *chignon* lay.

Close to the tomb of Nichiren stood a Japanese Salvationist, a zealous pimply young man, wearing the red and blue uniform of General Booth with *kaiseigun* (World-Saving Army) in Japanese letters round his staff-cap. He stood in front of a screen on which the first verse of 'Onward, Christian soldiers' was written in a Japanese translation. An assistant officiated at a wheezy harmonium. The tune was vaguely akin to its Western prototype; and the two evangelists were trying to induce a tolerant but uninterested crowd to join in the chorus.

Everywhere, beggars were crawling over the compound in various states of filth. Some, however, were so ghastly that they were excluded from the temple enclosure. They were lined up among the trunks of the cryptomeria trees, among the little grey tombs with their fading inscriptions and the moss-covered statues of kindly Buddhas.

Asako gave a penny into the crooked hand of one poor sightless wretch.

'Oh, no!' cried cousin Sadako; 'do not go near to them. Do not touch them. They are lepers.'

Some of them had no arms, or had mere stumps ending abruptly in a red and sickening object like a bone which a dog has been chewing. Some had no legs, and were pulled along on little wheeled trolleys by their less dilapidated companions in misfortune. Some had no

features. Their faces were mere glabrous disks, from which eyes and nose had completely vanished; only the mouth remained, a toothless gap fringed with straggling hairs. Some had faces abnormally bloated, with powerful foreheads and heavy jowls, which gave them an expression of stony immobility like Byzantine lions. All were fearfully dirty and covered with sores and lice.

The people passing by smiled at their grim unsightliness, and threw pennies to them, for which they scrambled and scratched like beasts.

Namu myōhō renge kyō.

Asako's relatives spent the day in eating, drinking, and gossiping to the rhythm of the interminable prayer.

It was a perfect day of autumn, which is the sweetest season in Japan. A warm bright sun had been shining on the sumptuous colours of the waning year, on the brilliant reds and yellows which clothed the neighbouring hills, on the broad brown plain with its tesselated design of bare rice-fields, on the brown villas and cottages huddled in their fences of evergreen like birds in their nests, on the red trunks of the cryptomeria trees, on the brown carpet of matted pine-needles, on the grey crumbling stones of the old graveyard, on the high-pitched temple roofs, and on the inconsequential swarms of humanity drifting to their devotions, casting their pennies into the great alms-trough in front of the shrine, clanging the brass bell with a prayer for good luck, and drifting home again with their bewildered, happy children.

Asako no longer felt like a Japanese. The sight of her countrymen in their drab monotonous thousands sickened her. The hiss and cackle of their incomprehensible tongue beat upon her brain with a deadly incessant sound, like raindrops to one who is impatiently awaiting the return of fine weather.

Here at Ikégami, the distant view of the sea and the Yokohama shipping invited Asako to escape. But where could she escape to? To England? She was an Englishwoman no longer. She had cast her husband off for insufficient reasons. She had been cold, loveless, narrow-minded and silly. She had acted, as she now recognised, largely on the suggestion of others. Like a fool, she had believed what had been told. She had not trusted her love for her husband. As usual, her thoughts returned to Geoffrey, and to the constant danger which threatened him. Lately, she had started to write letters to him several times, but had never got further than 'Dearest Geoffrey.'

She was glad when the irritating day was over, when the rosy sunset clouds showed through the trunks of the cryptomerias, when the night fell and the great stars like lamps hung in the branches. But the night brought no silence. Paper lanterns were lighted round the temple; and rough acetylene flares lit up the tawdry fairings. The chattering, the bargaining, the clatter of the *geta* became more terrifying even than in daytime. It was like being in the darkness in a cage of wild beasts, heard, felt, but unseen.

The evening breeze was cold. In spite of the big wooden fireboxes strewn over their stall, the Fujinami were shivering.

'Let us go for a walk,' suggested cousin Sadako.

The two girls strolled along the ridge of the hill as far as the five-storied pagoda. They passed the tea-house, so famous for its plum-blossoms in early March. It was brightly lighted. The paper rectangles of the *shoji* were aglow like an illuminated honeycomb. The wooden walls resounded with the jangle of the *samisen*, the high screaming *geisha* voices, and the rough laughter of the guests. From one room the *shoji* were pushed open; and drunken men could be seen with kimonos thrown back

from their shoulders showing a body reddened with *saké*. They had taken the *geishas'* instruments from them, and were performing an impromptu song and dance, while the girls clapped their hands and writhed with laughter. Beyond the tea-house, the din of the festival was hushed. Only from the distance came the echo of the song, the rasp of the forced merriment, the clatter of the *geta*, and the hum of the crowd.

Starlight revealed the landscape. The moon was rising through a cloud's liquescence. Soon the hundreds of rice-plots would catch her full reflection. The outline of the coast of Tokyo Bay was visible as far as Yokohama; so were the broad pool of Ikégami and the lumpy masses of the hills inland.

The landscape was alive with lights, lights dim, lights bright, lights stationary, lights in swaying movement round each centre of population. It looked as if the stars had fallen from heaven, and were being shifted and sorted by careful gleaners. As each nebula of white illumination assembled itself, it began to move across the vast plain, drawn inwards towards Ikégami from every point of the compass as though by a magnetic force. These were the lantern processions of pilgrims. They looked like the souls of the righteous rising from earth to heaven in a canto from Dante.

The clusters of lights started, moved onwards, paused, re-grouped themselves, and struggled forward, until in the narrow street of the village under the hill Asako could distinguish the shapes of the lantern-bearers and their strange antics, and the sacred palanquin, a kind of enormous wooden bee-hive, which was the centre of each procession, borne on the sturdy shoulders of a swarm of young men to the beat of drums and the inevitable chant.

Namu myōhō renge kyō.

Slowly the processions jolted up the steep stairway, and came to rest with their heavy burdens in front of the temple of Nichiren.

'It is very silly,' said cousin Sadako, 'to be so superstitious, I think.'

'Then why are we here?' asked Asako.

'My grandfather is very superstitious; and my father is afraid to say "No" to him. My father does not believe in any gods or Buddhas; but he says it does no harm, and it may do good. All our family is *gohei-katsugi* (brandishers of sacred symbols). We think that with all this prayer we can turn away the trouble of Takeshi.'

'Why, what is the matter with Mr Takeshi? Why is he not here? and Matsuko San and the children?'

'It is a great secret,' said the Fujinami cousin, 'you will tell no one. You will pretend also even with me that you do not know. Takeshi San is very sick. The doctor says that he is a leper.'

Asako stared, uncomprehending. Sadako went on,—

'You saw this morning those ugly beggars. They were all so terrible to see, and their bodies were so rotten. My brother is becoming like that. It is a sickness. It cannot be cured. It will kill him very slowly. Perhaps his wife Matsu and his children also have the sickness. Perhaps we too are sick. No one can tell, not for many years.'

Ugly wings seemed to cover the night. The world beneath the hill had become the Pit of Hell, and the points of light were devils' spears. Asako trembled.

'What does it mean?' she asked. 'How did Takeshi San become sick?'

'It was a *tenbatsu* (judgment of heaven),' answered her cousin. 'Takeshi San was a bad man. He was rude to his father, and he was cruel to his wife. He thought only of *geisha* and bad women. No doubt, he became sick from touching a woman who was sick. Besides, it is the bad *ingé* of the Fujinami family. Did not the

old woman of Akabo say so? It is the curse of the Yoshiwara women. It will be our turn next, yours and mine.'

No wonder that poor Asako could not sleep that night in the cramped promiscuity of the family shed.

Fujinami Takeshi had been sickly for some time; but then, his course of life could hardly be called a healthy one. On his return from his summer holiday, red patches had appeared on the palms of his hands, and afterwards on his forehead. He had complained of the irritation caused by this 'rash.' Professor Kashio had been called in to prescribe. A blood test was taken. The doctor then pronounced that the son and heir was suffering from leprosy, and for that there was no cure.

The disease is accompanied by irritation, but by little actual pain. Constant application of compresses can allay the itching, and can often save the patient from the more ghastly ravages of disfigurement. But, slowly, the limbs lose their force, the fingers and toes drop away, the hair falls, and merciful blindness comes to hide from the sufferer the living corpse to which his spirit is bound. More merciful yet, the slow decay attacks the organs of the body. Often consumption intervenes. Often just a simple cold suffices to snuff out the flickering life.

In the village of Kusatsu, beyond the Karuizawa mountains, there is a natural hot spring, whose waters are beneficial for the alleviation of the disease. In this place there is a settlement of well-to-do lepers. Thither it was decided to banish poor Takeshi. His wife, Matsuko, naturally was expected to accompany him, to nurse him and to make life as comfortable for him as she could. Her eventual doom was almost certain. But there was no question, no choice, no hesitation and no praise. Every Japanese wife is obliged to become an Alcestis, if her husband's well-being demand it. The children were sent to the ancestral village of Akabo.