CHAPTER XXVI

ALONE IN TOKYO

Kuraki yori	Out of the dark,
Kuraki michi ni zo	Into a dark path
Iri-nu-beki :	I now must enter :
Haruka ni terase,	Shine (on me) from afar,
Yama no ha no tsuki !	Moon of the mountain fringe !

SOME days before Christmas, Asako had moved into her own little home.

To be free, to have escaped from the watchful eyes and the whispering tongues, to be at liberty to walk about the streets and to visit the shops, as an independent lady of Japan—these were such unfamiliar joys to her that for a time she forgot how unhappy she really was, and how she longed for Geoffrey's company as of old. Only in the evenings a sense of insecurity rose with the river mists, and a memory of Sadako's warning shivered through the lonely room with the bitter cold of the winter air. It was then that Asako felt for the little dagger resting hidden in her bosom, just as Sadako had shown her how to wear it. It was then that she did not like to be alone, and that she summoned Tanaka to keep her company and to while away the time with his quaint loquacity.

Considering that he had been largely instrumental in breaking up her happy life, considering that every day he stole from her and lied to her, it was wonderful that his mistress was still so attached to him, that, in fact,

she regarded him as her only friend. He was like a bad habit or an old disease, which we almost come to cherish since we cannot be delivered from it.

But, when Tanaka protested his devotion, did he mean what he said? There is a bedrock of loyalty in the Japanese nature. Half-way down the road to shame it will halt of a sudden, and bungle back its way to honour. Then, there is the love of the *beau geste* which is an even stronger motive very often than the love of right-doing for its own sake. The favourite character of the Japanese drama is the *otokodaté*, the chivalrous champion of the common people, who rescues beauty in distress from the lawless, bullying, two-sworded men. It tickled Tanaka's remarkable vanity to regard himself as the protector of this lonely and unfortunate lady. It might be said of him as of Lancelot, that,—

'His honour rooted in dishonour stood,
And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.'

Asako was glad on the whole that she had no visitors. The Fujinami were busy with their New Year preparations. Christmas Day passed by, unheeded by the Japanese, though the personality and appearance of Santa Claus are not unknown to them. He stands in the big shop-windows in Tokyo as in London, with his red cloak, his long white beard, and his sack full of toys. Sometimes he is to be seen chatting with Buddhist deities, with the hammer-bearing Daikoku, with Ebisu the fisherman, with fat naked Hotei, and with Benten, the fair but frail. In fact, with the American Billiken, Santa Claus may be considered as the latest addition to the tolerant theocracy of Japan.

Asako attended High Mass at the Catholic Cathedral in Tsukiji, the old foreign settlement. The music was crude; and there was a long sermon in Japanese. The

magnificent bearded bishop, who officiated, was flanked by two native priests. But the familiar sounds and movements of the office soothed her, and the fragrance of the incense. The centre of the aisle was covered with straw mats where the Japanese congregation was squatting. Chairs for the foreigners were placed in the side aisles. These were mostly members of the various Embassy and Legation staffs. For a moment, Asako feared recognition. Then she remembered how entirely Japanese she had become—in appearance.

Mr Ito called during the afternoon to wish a Merry Christmas. Asako regaled him with thin green tea and little square cakes of ground rice, filled with a kind of bean paste called '*an*.' She kept Tanaka in the room all the time; for Sadako's remarks about marriage with Ito had alarmed her. He was most agreeable, however, and most courteous. He amused Asako with stories of his experiences abroad. He admired the pretty little house and its position on the river-bank; and, when he bowed his thanks for Asako's hospitality, he expressed a wish that he might come again many times in future.

'I am afraid of him,' Asako had confided to Tanaka, when the guest had departed, 'because Sada San said that he wants to divorce his wife and marry me. You are to stop here with me in the room whenever he comes. Do not leave me alone, please.'

'Ladyship is *daimyo*,' the round face answered; 'Tanaka is faithful *samurai*. Tanaka gives life for Ladyship!'

It was the week before New Year. All along the Ginza, which is the main thoroughfare of Tokyo, along the avenue of slender willow-trees which do their gallant utmost to break the monotony of the wide ramshackle street, were spread every evening the stock-in-trade of

the *yomisé*, the night-shops, which cater their most diverse wares for the aimless multitudes sauntering up and down the side-walks. There are quack medicines and stylograph pens, clean wooden altar cabinets for the kitchen gods, and images of Daikoku and Ebisu; there are cheap underclothing and old hats, food of various kinds, boots and books and toys. But most fascinating of all are the antiquities. Strewn over a square six feet of ground are curios, most attractive to the unwary, especially by the deceptive light of kerosene lamps. One in a thousand perhaps may be a piece of real value; but almost every object has a character and a charm of its own. There are old gold screens, lacquer tables and cabinets, bronze vases, gilded Buddhas, fans, woodcuts, porcelains, *kakémono* (hanging pictures), *makimono* (illustrated scrolls), *inro* (lacquer medicine-boxes for the pocket), *netsuké* (ivory or bone buttons, through which the cords of the tobacco-pouch are slung), *tsuba* (sword-hilts of iron ornamented with delightful landscapes of gold and silver inlay). The Ginza at night-time is a paradise for the minor collector.

'*Kore wa ikura?* (How much is this?)' asked Asako, picking up a tiny silver box, which could slip into a waistcoat pocket. Inside were enshrined three gentle Buddhas of old creamy ivory, perfectly carved to the minutest petal of the full-blown lotus upon which each reposed.

'Indeed, it is the end of the year. We must sell all things cheaply,' answered the merchant. 'It is asked sixty *yen* for true ancient artistic object.'

'Such a thing is not said,' replied Asako, her Japanese becoming quite fluent with the return of her light-heartedness. 'Perhaps a joke is being made. It would be possible to give ten *yen*.'

The old curio vender, with the face and spare figure of Julius Cæsar, turned aside from such idle talk with a

shrug of hopelessness. He affected to be more interested in lighting his slender pipe over the chimney of the lamp which hung suspended over his wares.

'Ten *yen*! Please see!' said Asako, showing a bank-note. The merchant shook his head and puffed. Asako turned away into the stream of passers-by. She had not gone ten yards, however, before she felt a touch on her kimono sleeve. It was Julius Cæsar with his curio.

'Indeed, *okusan*, there must be reduction. Thirty *yen*: take it, please.'

He pressed the little box into Asako's hand.

'Twenty *yen*,' she bargained, holding out two notes.

'It is loss! It is loss!' he murmured; but he shuffled back to his stall again, very well content.

'I shall send it to Geoffrey,' thought Asako; 'it will bring him good luck. Perhaps he will write to me and thank me. Then, I can write to him.'

The New Year is the greatest of Japanese festivals. Japanese of the middle and lower classes live all the year round in a thickening web of debt. But during the last days of the year these complications are supposed to be unravelled, and the defaulting debtor must sell some of his family goods, and start the New Year with a clean slate. These operations swell the stock-in-trade of the *yomisé*.

On New Year's Day, the wife prepares the *mochi* cakes of ground rice, which are the specialities of the season; and the husband sees to the erection at his door-posts of the two *kadomatsu* (corner pine-trees), little Christmas trees planted in a coil of rope. Then, attired in his frock-coat and top-hat, if he be a *haikara* gentleman, or in his best kimono and *haori*, if he be an old-fashioned Japanese, he goes round in a rickshaw to pay his complimentary calls, and to exchange *o medetō* (respectfully lucky!),

the New Year wish. He has presents for his important patrons, and cards for his less influential acquaintances. For, as the Japanese proverb say, 'Gifts preserve friendship.' At each house, which he visits, he sips a cup of *saké*, so that his return home is often due to the rickshaw-man's assistance, rather than to his own powers of self-direction. In fact, as Asako's maid confided to her mistress, 'Japanese wife very happy when New Year time all finish.'

On the night following New Year snow fell. It continued to fall all the next morning until Asako's little garden was as white as a bride-cake. The irregularities of her river-side lawn were smoothed out under the white carpet. The straw coverings, which a gardener's foresight had wrapped round the azalea shrubs and the dwarf conifers, were enfolded in a thick white shroud. Like tufts of foam on a wave, the snow was tossed on the plumes of the bamboo clump, which hid the neighbour's dwelling, and made a bird's nest of Asako's tiny domain.

Beyond the brown sluggish river, the roofs and pinnacles of Asakusa were more fairy-like than a theatre scene. Asako was thinking of that first snow-white day, which introduced Geoffrey and her to the Embassy and to Yaé Smith.

She shivered. Darkness was falling. A Japanese house is a frail protection in winter time; and a charcoal fire in a wooden box is poor company. The maid came in to close the shutters for the night. Where was Tanaka? He had gone out to a New Year party with relatives. Asako felt her loneliness all of a sudden; and she was grateful for the moral comfort of cousin Sadako's sword. She drew it from its sheath and examined the blade, and the fine work on the hilt, with care and alarm, like a man fingering a serpent.

No sooner was the house silenced, than the wind

arose. It smote the wooden framework with an unexpected buffet almost like an earthquake. The bamboo grove began to rattle like bones; and the snow slid and fell from the roof in dull thuds.

There was a sharp rap at the front-door. Asako started, and thrust the dagger into the breast of her kimono. She had been lying full-length on a long deck-chair. Now, she put her feet to the ground. O Hana, the maid, came in and announced that Ito San had called. Asako, half-pleased and half-apprehensive, gave instructions for him to be shown in. She heard a stumbling on the steps of her house; then Ito lurched into the room. His face was very red, and his voice thick. He had been paying many New Year calls.

'Happy New Year, Asa San, Happy New Year!' he hiccoughed, grasping her hand and working it up and down like a pump-handle. 'New Year in Japan very lucky time. All Japanese people say New Year time very lucky. This New Year very lucky for Ito. No more dirty business, no more Yoshiwara, no more pimp. I am millionaire, madame. I have made one hundred thousand pounds, five hundred thousand dollars gold. I now become *giin giin* (Member of Parliament). I become great party organisator, great party boss, then *daijin* (Minister of State), then *taishi* (Ambassador), then *soridaijin* (Prime Minister). I shall be greatest man in Japan. Japan greatest country in the world. Ito greatest man in the world. And I marry Asa San tomorrow, next day, any day.'

Ito was sprawling in the deck-chair, which divided the little sitting-room into two parts and cut off Asako's retreat. She was trembling on a bamboo stool near the shuttered window. She was terribly frightened. Why did not Tanaka come?

'Speak to me, Asa San,' shouted the visitor; 'say to me very glad, very, very glad, will be very nice

wife for Ito. Fujinami give you to me. I have all Fujinami's secrets in my safe box. Ito greatest man in Japan. Fujinami very fear of me. He give me anything I want. I say, give me Asa San. Very very love.'

Asako remaining without speech, the Japanese frowned at her.

'Why so silence, little girl? Say, I love you, I love you, like all foreign girls say. I am husband now. I never go away from this house, until you kiss me. You understand?'

Asako gasped.

'Mr Ito, it is very late. Please, come some other day. I must go to bed now.'

'Very good, very good. I come to bed with you,' said Ito, rolling out of his chair and putting one heavy leg to the ground. He was wearing a kimono none too well adjusted, and Asako could see his hairy limb high up the thigh. Her face must have reflected her displeasure.

'What?' the Japanese shouted; 'you don't like me. Too very proud! No dirty Jap, no yellow man, what? So you think, Madame Lord Princess Barrington. In the East, it may be, ugly foreign women despise Japs. But New York, London, Paris—very different, ha, ha! New York girl say, Hello Jap, come here! London girl say, Jap man very nice, very sweet manner, very soft eyes. When I was in London, I had five or six girls, English girls, white girls, very beauty girls, all together, all very love! London time was great fine time!'

Asako felt helpless. Her hand was on the hilt of her dagger, but she still hoped that Ito might come to his senses and go away.

'There!' he cried, 'I know foreign custom. I know everything. Mistletoe! Mistletoe! A kiss for the mistletoe, Asa San!'

He staggered out of his chair, and came towards her, like a great black bird. She dodged him, and tried to escape round the deck-chair. But he caught hold of her kimono. She drew her sword.

'Help! Help!' she cried. 'Tanaka!'

Something wrenched at her wrist, and the blade fell. At the same moment the inner *shoji* flew open like the shutter of a camera. Tanaka rushed into the room.

Asako did not turn to look again until she was outside the room with her maid and her cook trembling beside her. Then, she saw Tanaka and Ito locked in a wrestler's embrace, puffing and grunting at each other, while their feet were fumbling for the sword which lay between them. Suddenly, both figures relaxed. Two foreheads came together with a wooden concussion. Hands were groping where the feet had been. One set of fingers, hovering over the sword, grasped the hilt. It was Tanaka; but his foot slipped. He tottered and fell backward. Ito was on the top of him. Asako closed her eyes. She heard a hoarse roar like a lion. When she dared to look again, she saw Tanaka kneeling over Ito's body. With a wrench he pulled Sadako's dagger out of the prostrate mass. It was followed by a jet of blood, and then by a steady trickle from body, mouth and nostrils, which spread over the matting. Slowly and deliberately, Tanaka wiped first the knife and then his hands on the clothes of his victim. Then, he felt his mouth and throat.

'*Sa! Shimatta!* (There, finished!)' he said. He turned towards the garden side, and threw open the *shoji* and the *amado*. He ran across the snow-covered lawn; and from beyond the unearthly silence which followed his departure, come the distant sound of a splash in the river.

At last, Asako said helplessly,—

'Is he dead?'

The cook, a man, was glad of the opportunity to escape.

'I go and call doctor,' he said.

'No, stay with me,' said Asako; 'I am afraid. O Hana can go for the doctor.'

Asako and the cook waited by the open *shoji*, staring blankly at the body of Ito. Presently, the cook said that he must go and get something. He did not return. Asako called to him to come. There was no answer. She went to look for him in his little three-mat room near the kitchen. It was empty. He had packed his few chattels in his wicker basket, and had decamped.

Asako resumed her watch at the sitting-room door, an unwilling Rizpah. It was as though she feared that, if she left her post, somebody might come in and steal Ito. But she could have hardly approached the corpse even under compulsion. Sometimes it seemed to move, to try to rise; but it was stuck fast to the matting by the resinous flow of purple blood. Sometimes, it seemed to speak,—

'Mistletoe! Mistletoe! Kiss me, Asako San!'

Gusts of cold wind came in from the open windows, touching the dead man curiously, turning over his kimono sleeves. Outside, the bamboo grove was rattling like bones; and the caked snow fell from the roof in heavy thuds.

O Hana returned with a doctor and a policeman. The doctor loosened Ito's kimono, and at once shook his head.

The policeman wore a blue uniform and cape; and a sword dragged at his side. He had produced a notebook and a pencil from a breast-pocket.

'What is your name?' he asked Asako. 'What is your age? your father's and mother's name? What is your

address? Are you married? Where is your husband? How long have you known this man? Were you on familiar terms? Did you kill him? How did you kill him? Why did you kill him?'

The questions buzzed round Asako's head like a swarm of hornets. It had never occurred to the unfortunate girl that any suspicion could fall upon her. Three more policeman had arrived.

'Every one in this house is arrested,' announced the first policeman.

'Put out your hands,' he ordered Asako. Rusty handcuffs were slipped over her delicate wrists. One of the policemen had produced a coil of rope, which he proceeded to tie round her waist and then round the waist of O Hana.

'But what have I done?' asked Asako plaintively.

The policeman took no notice. She could hear two of them upstairs in her bedroom, talking and laughing, knocking open her boxes and throwing things about.

Asako and her maid were led out of the house like two performing animals. It was bitterly cold, and Asako had no cloak. The road was already full of loafers. They stared angrily at Asako. Some laughed. Some pulled at her kimono as she passed. She heard one say,—

'It is a *geisha*; she has murdered her sweetheart.'

At the police station, Asako had to undergo the same confusing interrogatory before the chief inspector.

'What is your name? What is your age? Where do you live? What are your father's and mother's names?'

'Lies are no good,' said the inspector, a burly unshaven man; 'confess that you have killed this man.'

'But I did not kill him,' protested Asako.

'Who killed him then? You must know that,' said the inspector triumphantly.

'It was Tanaka,' said Asako.

'Who is this Tanaka?' the inspector asked the policeman.

'I do not know: perhaps it is lies,' he answered sulkily.

'But it is not lies,' expostulated Asako, 'he ran away through the window. You can see his footmarks in the snow.'

'Did you see the marks?,' the policeman was asked.

'No: perhaps there were no marks.'

'Did you look?'

'I did not look actually, but——'

'You're a fool!' said the inspector.

The weary questioning continued for quite two hours, until Asako had told her story of the murder at least three times. The unfamiliar language confused her, and the reiterated refrain,—

'You now confess; you killed the man!'

Asako was chilled to the bone. Her head was aching; her eyes were aching; her legs were aching with the ordeal of standing. She felt that they must soon give way altogether.

At last, the inspector closed his *questionnaire*.

'*Sa!*' he ejaculated, 'it is past midnight. Even I must sleep sometimes. Take her away to the court, and lock her in the 'sty.' To-morrow the procurator will examine at nine o'clock. She is pretending to be silly and not understanding; so she is probably guilty.'

Again the handcuffs and the degrading rope were fastened upon her. She felt that she had already been condemned.

'May I send word to my friends?' she asked. Surely even the Fujinami would not abandon her to her fate.

'No. The procurator's examination has not yet taken place. After that, sometimes permission can be granted. That is the law.'

She was left waiting in a stone-flagged guard-room, where eight or nine policemen stared at her impertinently.

'A pretty face, eh?' they said, 'it looks like a *geisha*! Who is taking her to the court? It is Ishibashi. Oh, so! He is always the lucky chap!'

A rough fellow thrust his hand up her kimono sleeve, and caught hold of her bare arm near the shoulder.

'Here, Ishibashi,' he cried; 'you have caught a fine bird this time.'

The policeman Ishibashi picked up the loose end of the rope, and drove Asako before him into a closed van, which was soon rumbling along the deserted streets.

She was made to alight at a tall stone building, where they passed down several echoing corridors, until, at the end of a little passage a warder pushed open a door. This was the 'sty,' where prisoners are kept pending examination in the procurator's court. The floor and walls were of stone. It was bitterly cold. There was no window, no light, no fire-box, and no chair. Alone, in the petrifying darkness, her teeth chattering, her limbs trembling, poor Asako huddled her misery into a corner of the dirty cell, to await the further tender mercies of the Japanese criminal code. She could hear the scuttering of rats. Had she been ten times guilty, she felt that she could not have suffered more!

Daylight began to show under the crack of the door. Later on, a warder came and beckoned to Asako to follow him. She had not touched food for twenty hours, but nothing was offered to her. She was led into a room with benches like a schoolroom. At the master's desk sat a small spotted man with a cloak like a scholar's gown, and a black cap with ribbons like a Highlander's bonnet. This was the procurator. At his side, sat his clerk, similarly but less sprucely garbed.

Asako, utterly weary, was preparing to sit down on one of the benches. The warder pulled her up by

the nape of her kimono. She had to stand during her examination.

'What is your name? What is your age? What are your father's and mother's names?'

The monotonous questions were repeated all over again; and then,—

'To confess were better. When you confess, we shall let you go. If you do not confess, we keep you here for days and days.'

'I am feeling sick,' pleaded Asako; 'may I eat something?'

The warder brought a cup of tea and some salt biscuit.

'Now, confess,' bullied the procurator; 'if you do not confess, you will get no more to eat.'

Asako told her story of the murder. She then told it again. Her Japanese words were slipping from the clutch of her worn brain. She was saying things she did not mean. How could she defend herself in a language which was strange to her mind? How could she make this judge, who seemed so pitiless and so hostile to her, understand and believe her broken sentences? She was beating with a paper sword against an armed enemy.

An interpreter was sent for; and the questions were all repeated in English. The procurator was annoyed at Asako's refusal to speak in Japanese. He thought that it was obstinacy, or that she was trying to fool him. He seemed quite convinced that she was guilty.

'I can't answer any more questions. I really can't. I am sick,' said Asako, in tears.

'Take her back to the 'sty,' while we have lunch,' ordered the procurator. 'I think this afternoon she will confess.'

Asako was taken away, and thrust into the horrible cell again. She collapsed on the hard floor in a state which was partly a fainting-fit, and partly the sleep of

exhaustion. Dreams and images swept over her brain like low-flying clouds. It seemed to her distracted fancy that only one person could save her—Geoffrey, her husband! He must be coming soon. She thought that she could hear his step in the corridor.

'Geoffrey! Geoffrey!' she cried.

It was the warder. He stirred her with his foot. She was hauled back to the procurator's court.

'So! Have you considered well?' said the little spotted man. 'Will you now confess?'

'How can I confess what I have not done?' protested Asako.

The remorseless inquisition proceeded. Asako's replies became more and more confused. The procurator frowned at her contradictions. She must assuredly be guilty.

'How many times do you say that you have met this Ito?' he asked.

Asako was at the end of her strength. She reeled and would have fallen; but the warder jerked her straight again.

'Confess, then,' shouted the procurator, 'confess and you will be liberated.'

'I will confess,' Asako gasped, 'anything you like.'

'Confess that you killed this Ito!'

'Yes, I confess.'

'Then, sign the confession.'

With the triumphant air of a sportsman who has landed his fish after a long and bitter struggle, the procurator held out a sheet of paper prepared beforehand, on which something was written in Japanese characters.

Asako tried to move towards the desk that she might write her name; but this time, her legs gave way altogether. The warder caught her by the neck of her kimono, and shook her as a terrier shakes a rat. But

the body remained limp. He twisted her arm behind her with a savage wrench. His victim groaned with pain, but spoke no distinguishable word. Then he laid her out on one of the benches, and felt her chest.

'The body is very hot,' he said; 'perhaps she is indeed sick.'

'Obstinate,' grunted the procurator; 'I am certain that she is guilty. Are not you?' he added, addressing the clerk.

The clerk was busy filling up some of the blanks in the back evidence, extemporising where he could not remember.

'Assuredly,' he said, 'the opinion of the procurator is always correct.'

However, the doctor was summoned. He pronounced that the patient was in a high fever, and must at once be removed to the infirmary.

So the preliminary examination of Asako Fujinami came to an abrupt end.