CHAPTER XXVII

LADY BRANDAN

Haru no hi no	The long thoughts
Nagaki omoi wa	Of the spring days
Wasureji wo,	Will never be forgotten
Hito no kokoro ni	Even when autumn comes
Aki ya tatsuramu.	To the hearts of the people.

THE low-flying clouds of hallucination had fallen so close to Asako's brain, that her thoughts seemed to be caught up into the dizzy whirlwind and to be skimming round and round the world at the speed of an express aeroplane. Like a clock whose regulation is out of order, the hour-hand of her life seemed to be racing the minute-hand, and the minute-hand to be covering the face of the dial in sixty seconds or less, returning incessantly to the same well-known figures, pausing awhile, then jerking away again at an insane rate. From time to time the haze over the mind began to clear; and Asako seemed to look down upon the scene around her from a great height. There was a long room, so long that she could not see the end of it, and rows of narrow beds, and nurses, dressed in white with high caps like bishops' mitres, who appeared and disappeared. Sometimes they would speak to her and she would answer. But she did not know what they said, nor what she said to them.

A gentle Japanese lady with a very long, pock-marked face, sat on her bed and talked to her in English. Asako noticed that the nurses and doctors were most deferential to this lady; and that, after her departure, she was treated much more kindly than before. A name kept peeping

out of her memory, like a shy lizard out of its hole; but the moment her brain tried to grab at it, it slipped back again into oblivion.

Two English ladies called together, one older and one younger. They talked about Geoffrey. Geoffrey was one of the roman figures on the clock dial of her mind. They said good things about Geoffrey; but she could not remember what they were.

One day, the Japanese lady with the marked face and one of the nurses helped her to get out of bed. Her legs were trembling, and her feet were sorely plagued by pins and needles; but she held together somehow. Together they dressed her. The lady wrapped a big fur cloak round her; and with a supporter on either side she was led into the open air, where a beautiful motor-car was waiting. There was a crowd gathered round it. But the police kept them back. As Asako stepped in, she heard the click of cameras.

'Asa Chan,' said the lady, 'don't you remember me? I am Countess Saito.'

Of course, Asako remembered now—a spring morning with Geoffrey and the little dwarf trees.

The notoriety of the Ito murder case did Asako a good turn. Her friends in Japan had forgotten her. They had imagined that she had returned to England with Geoffrey. Reggie Forsyth, who alone knew the details of her position, had thrown up his secretaryship the day that war was declared, and had gone home to join the army.

The morning papers of January 3rd, with their high-flown account of the mysterious house by the river-side and the Japanese lady who could talk no Japanese, brought an unexpected shock to acquaintances of the Barringtons, and especially to Lady Cynthia Cairns and to Countess Saito. These ladies both made inquiries, and learned that Asako was lying dangerously ill in the

prison infirmary. A few days later, when Tanaka was arrested and had made a full confession of the crime, Count Saito, who knew how suspects fare at the hands of a zealous procurator, called in person on the Minister of Justice, and secured Asako's speedy liberation.

'This girl is a valuable asset to our country,' he had explained to the Minister. 'She is married to an Englishman, who will one day be a peer in England. This was a marriage of political importance. It was a proof of the equal civilisation of our Japan with the great countries of Europe. It is most important that this Asako should be sent back to England as soon as possible, and that she should speak good things about Japan.'

So Asako was released from the procurator's clutches; and she was given a charming little bedroom of her own in the European wing of the Saito mansion. The house stood on a high hill; and Asako, seated at the window, could watch the multiplex activity of the streets below, the jolting tramcars, the wagons, the barrows and the rickshaws. To the left was a labyrinth of little houses of clean white wood, bright and new, like toys, with toy evergreens and pine-trees bursting out of their narrow gardens. This was a *geisha* quarter, whence the sound of *samisen* music and quavering songs resounded all day long. To the right was a big grey-boarded primary school, which, with the regular movement of tides, sucked in and belched out its flood of blue-cloaked boys and magenta-skirted maidens.

Count and Countess Saito, despite their immense wealth and their political importance, were simple, unostentatious people, who seemed to devote most of their thoughts to their children, their garden, their dwarf trees, and their breed of cocker spaniels. They took their social duties lightly, though their home was a Mecca for needy relatives on the search for jobs. They

gave generously; they entertained hospitably. Good-humour ruled the household; for husband and wife were old partners and devoted friends.

Count Saito brought his nephew and secretary, a most agreeable young man, to see Asako. The Count said,—

'Asa Chan, I want you to tell to Mr Sakabé all about the Fujinami house and the way of life there.'

So Asako told her story to this interested listener. Fortunately, perhaps, she could not read the Japanese newspapers; for most of her adventures reappeared in the daily issues almost word for word. From behind the scenes, Count Saito was directing the course of the famous trial which had come to be known as the Fujinami Affair. For the Count had certain political scores of his own to pay off; and Asako proved to be a godsend.

Tanaka was tried for murder; but it was established that he had killed Ito in defending his mistress's honour; and the court let him off with a year's hard labour. But the great Fujinami bribery case, which developed out of the murder trial, ruined a Cabinet Minister, a local governor, and a host of minor officials. It reacted on the Yoshiwara regulations. The notoriety of the case has gone far towards putting an end to public processions of *oiran*, and to the display of prostitutes in the windows of their houses. Indeed, it is probably only a question of time for the great pleasure quarters to be closed down, and for vice to be driven into secrecy. Mr Fujinami Gentaro was sentenced to three years' imprisonment for causing bribes to be distributed.

Meanwhile Countess Saito had been in correspondence with Lady Everington in England. On one bright March morning, she came into Asako's room with a small flower-pot in her hands.

'See, Asa Chan,' she said in her strange hoarse voice, 'the first flower of the New Year, the plum-blossom.

It is the flower of hope and patience. It blooms when the snow is still on the ground, and before it has any green leaves to protect it.'

'It smells sweet,' said Asako.

Her hostess quoted the famous poem of the exiled Japanese statesman, Sugawara no Michizané,—

'When the East wind blows,
Send your perfume to me,
Flower of the plum;
Even if your master is absent,
Do not forget the spring.'

'Asako dear,' Countess Saito continued, 'would you like to go to England?'

Asako's heart leaped.

'Oh yes!' she answered gladly.

Her hostess sighed reproachfully. She had tried to make life so agreeable for her little visitor; yet from the tone of her voice it was clear that Japan would never be home for her.

'Marchioness Samějima and I,' continued the Japanese lady, 'have been arranging for a party of about twenty-five Red Cross nurses to visit England and France. They are all very good, clever girls from noble families. We wish to show sympathy of Japan for the poor soldiers who are suffering so much; and we wish to teach our girls true facts about the war and how to manage a hospital in war-time. We thought you might like to go as guide and interpreter.'

It needed no words to show how joyfully Asako accepted this proposal. Besides, she had heard from Geoffrey. A letter had arrived thanking her for her Christmas gift.

'Little darling Asako,' her husband had written, 'It

was so sweet of you and so like you to think of me at Christmas time. I hope that you are very happy and having a jolly good time. It is very rotten in England just now with the war going on. It had broken out before I reached home; and I joined up at once with my old regiment. We have had a very lively time. About half my brother officers have been killed; and I am a colonel now. Also, incidentally, I have become Lord Brandan. My father died at the end of last year. Poor old father! This war is a ghastly business; but we have got them beat now. I shall be sorry in a way when it is over; for it gives me plenty to do and to think about. Reggie Forsyth is with his regiment in Egypt. Lady Everington is writing to you. I am in the north of France, and doing quite a lot of *parley-voo*. Is there any chance of your coming to England? God bless you, Asako darling. Write to me soon.

'Your loving Geoffrey.'

With this letter folded near her heart, Asako was hardly in a mood to admire plum-blossoms. It was with difficulty that she could summon sufficient attention to give the little Saito children their daily lessons in English and French.

Long rides in the motor-car through the reviving country-side to the splendid gorge of Miyanoshita or to the beaches of Oiso, where Count Saito had his summer villa, long days of play with the children in the hanging garden, the fascinating companionship of the dwarf trees and the black spaniels, and the welcome absence of espionage and innuendo, had soon restored Asako to health again.

'Little Asa Chan,' Count Saito said one day, beckoning his guest to sit down beside him in the sunlight on the terrace, 'you will be happy to go back to England?'

'Oh yes,' said the girl.

'It is a fine country, a noble country; and you will be happy to see your husband again?'

Asako blushed and held down her head.

'I don't think he is still my husband,' she said, 'but oh! I do want to see him so.'

'I think he wants to see you,' said the Count. 'My wife has received a letter from Lady Everington, which says that he would like you very much to come back to him.'

The Count waited for this joyful news to produce its effect, and then he added,—

'Asa Chan, you are going to be a great English lady; but you will always remain a Japanese. In England, you will be a kind of ambassador for Japan. So you must never forget your father's country, and you must never say bad things about Japan, even if you have suffered here. Then the English people will like you; and for that reason, they will like Japan too; and the two countries will stand side by side, as they ought to, like good friends. The English are a very great people, the greatest of all; but they know very little about us in the East. They think that because we are a yellow people, therefore we are inferior to them. Perhaps, when they see a Japanese lady as one of their peers' wives and a leader in society, they will understand that the Japanese also are not so inferior; for the English people have a great respect for peers. Japan is proud to be England's younger brother; but the elder brother must not take all the inheritance. He must be content to share. For perhaps he will not always be the strong one. This war will make England weak, and it will make Japan strong. It will make a great change in the world, and in Asia most of all. Already the people of Asia are saying, Why should these white men rule over us? They cannot rule themselves; they fight among themselves like drunkards; their time is over and past. Then, when the white rulers are

pushed out of Asia, Japan will become very strong indeed. It will be said then that England, the elder brother, is become *inkyo* (retired from active life), and that Japan, the younger brother, is manager of the family. I think you will live to see these things, Asa Chan. Certainly your children will see them.'

'I could never like Japan,' Asako said honestly.

The old diplomat shrugged his shoulders.

'Very well, Asa Chan. Just enjoy life, and be happy. That will be the best propaganda.'