CHAPTER III

EASTWARDS

Nagaki yo no
To no nemuri no
Miname-zame,
Nami nori fune no
Oto no yoki kana.

From the deep sleep
Of a long night
Waking,
Sweet is the sound
Of the ship as it rides the waves.

WHEN August snow fell upon St Moritz, the Barringtons descended to Milan, Florence, Venice and Rome. Towards Christmas, they found their way to the Riviera, where they met Lady Everington at Monte Carlo, very indignant, or pretending to be so, at the neglect with which she had been treated.

'Fairy godmothers are important people,' she said, 'and very easily offended. Then, they turn you into wild animals, or send you to sleep for a hundred years. Why didn't you write to me, child?'

They were sitting on the terrace with the Casino behind them, overlooking the blue Mediterranean. A few yards farther on, a tall, young Englishman was chatting and laughing with a couple of girls too elaborately beautiful and too dazzingly gowned for any world but the half-world. Suddenly he turned, and noticed Lady Everington. With a courteous farewell to his companions, he advanced to greet her.

'Aubrey Laking,' she exclaimed, 'you never answered the letter I wrote to you at Tokyo.'

'Dear Lady Georgie, I left Tokyo ages ago. It followed

me back to England; and I am now second secretary at Christiania. That is why I am in Monte Carlo!'

'Then, let me introduce you to Asako Fujinami, who is now Mrs Barrington. You must tell her all about Tokyo. It is her native city; but she has not seen it since she was in long clothes, if Japanese babies wear such things.'

Aubrey Laking and Barrington had been at Eton together. They were old friends, and were delighted to meet once more. Barrington, especially, was pleased to have this opportunity to hear about Japan from one who had but lately left the country, and who was moreover a fluent and agreeable talker. Laking had not resided in Japan long enough to get tired of Orientalism. He described the quaint, the picturesque, the amusing side of life in the East. He was full of enthusiasm for the land of soft voices and smiling faces, where countless little shops spread their wares under the light of the evening lanterns, where the twang of the *samisen* and the *geisha's* song are heard coming from the lighted tea-house, and the shadow of her helmet-like *coiffure* is seen appearing and disappearing in silhouette against the paper *shoji*.

The East was drawing the Barringtons towards its perilous coasts. Laking's position at the Tokyo Embassy had been taken by Reggie Forsyth, one of Geoffrey's oldest friends, his best man at his wedding and a light of Lady Everington's circle. Already, Geoffrey had sent him a post-card, saying, 'Warm up the *saké* bottle,' (Geoffrey was becoming quite learned in things Japanese), 'and expect friends shortly.'

However, when the Barringtons did at last tear themselves from the Riviera, they announced rather disingenuously that they were going to Egypt.

'They are too happy,' Lady Everington said to Laking a few days later, 'and they know nothing. I am afraid there will be trouble.'

'Oh, Lady Georgie,' he replied, 'I have never known you to be a prophetess of gloom. I would have thought the auspices were most fortunate.'

'They ought to quarrel more than they do,' Lady Everington complained. 'She ought to contradict him more than she does. There must be a volcanic element in marriage. It is a sign of trouble coming when the fires are quiet.'

'But they have got plenty of money,' expostulated Aubrey, whose troubles were invariably connected with his banking account, 'and they are very fond of each other. Where is the trouble to come from?'

'Trouble is on the look out for all of us, Aubrey,' said his companion, 'it is no good flying from it, even. The only thing to do is to look it in the face and laugh at it; then it gets annoyed sometimes, and goes away. But those two poor dears are sailing into the middle of it, and they don't even know how to laugh yet.'

'You think that Egypt is hopelessly demoralising. Thousands of people go there and come safely home, almost all, in fact, except Robert Hichens's heroines.'

'Oh no, not in Egypt,' said Lady Everington; 'Egypt is only a stepping stone. They are going to Japan.'

'Well, certainly Japan is harmless enough. There is nobody there worth flirting with except us at the Embassies, and we generally have our hands full. As for the visitors, they are always under the influence of Cook's tickets and Japanese guides.'

'Aubrey dear, you think that trouble can only come from flirting or money.'

'I know that those two preoccupations are an abundant source of trouble.'

'What do you think of Mrs Barrington?' asked her Ladyship, appearing to change the subject.

'Oh, a very sweet little thing.'

'Like your lady friends in Tokyo, the Japanese ones, I mean?'

'Not in the least. Japanese ladies look very picturesque, but they are as dull as dolls. They sidle along in the wake of their husbands, and don't expect to be spoken to.'

'And have you no more intimate experience?' asked Lady Everington. 'Really, Aubrey, you have not been living up to your reputation.'

'Well, Lady Georgie,' the young man proceeded, gazing at his polished boots with a well-assumed air of embarrassment, 'since I know that you are one of the enlightened ones, I will confess to you that I did keep a little establishment *à la* Pierre Loti. My Japanese teacher thought it would be a good way of improving my knowledge of the local idiom; and this knowledge meant an extra hundred pounds to me for interpreter's allowance, as it is called. I thought, too, that it would be a relief after diplomatic dinner parties to be able to swear for an hour or so, big round oaths in the company of a dear beloved one who would not understand me. So my teacher undertook to provide me with a suitable female companion. He did. In fact, he introduced me to his sister ; and the suitability was based on the fact that she held the same position under my predecessor, a man whom I dislike exceedingly. But this I only found out later on. She was dull, deadly dull. I couldn't even make her jealous. She was as dull as my Japanese grammar; and when I had passed my examination and burnt my books, I dismissed her.'

'Aubrey, what a very wicked story!'

'No, Lady Georgie, it was not even wicked. She was

not real enough to sin with. The affair had not even the excitement of badness to keep it going.'

'Do you know the Japanese well?' Lady Everington returned to the highroad of her inquiry.

'No, nobody does; they are a most secretive people.'

'Do you think that, if the Barringtons go to Japan, there is any danger of Asako being drawn back into the bosom of her family?'

'No, I shouldn't think so,' Laking replied, 'Japanese life is so very uncomfortable, you know, even to the Japs themselves, when once they have got used to living in Europe or America. They sleep on the floor, their clothes are inconvenient, and their food is nasty, even in the houses of the rich ones.'

'Yes, it must be a peculiar country. What do you think is the greatest shock for the average traveller who goes there?'

'Lady Georgie, you are asking me very searching questions to-day. I don't think I will answer any more.'

'Just this one,' she pleaded.

He considered his boots again for a moment, and then, raising his face to hers with that humorous challenging look which he assumes when on the verge of some indiscretion, he replied,—

'The *Yoshiwara*.'

'Yes,' said her Ladyship, 'I have heard of such a place. It is a kind of Vanity Fair, isn't it, for all the *cocottes* of Tokyo?'

'It's more than that,' Laking answered; 'it is a market of human flesh, with nothing to disguise the crude fact except the picturesqueness of the place. It is a square enclosure as large as a small town. In this enclosure are shops, and in the shop windows women are displayed just like goods, or like animals in cages; for the windows have wooden bars. Some of the girls sit there stolidly like stuffed images, some of them come to the bars and

try to catch hold of the passers-by, just like monkeys, and joke with them and shout after them. But I could not understand what they said—fortunately, perhaps. The girls,—there must be several thousands —are all dressed up in bright kimonos. It really is a very pretty sight, until one begins to think. They have their price tickets hung up in the shop windows, one shilling up to one pound. That is the greatest shock which Japan has in store for the ordinary tourist.'

Lady Everington was silent for a moment; her flippant companion had become quite serious.

'After all,' she said, 'is it any worse than Piccadilly Circus at night?'

'It is not a question of better or worse,' argued Laking. 'Such a purely mercenary system is a terrible offence to our most cherished belief. We may be hypocrites, but our hypocrisy itself is an admission of guilt and an act of worship. To us, even to the readiest sinners among us, woman is always something divine. The lowest assignation of the streets has at least a disguise of romance. It symbolises the words and the ways of Love, even if it parodies them. But to the Japanese, woman must be merely animal. You buy a girl as you buy a cow.'

Lady Everington shivered, but she tried to live up to her reputation of being shocked by nothing.

'Well, that is true, after all, whether in Piccadilly or in the Yoshiwara. All prostitution is just a commercial transaction.'

'Perhaps,' said the young diplomat; 'but what about the Ideal at the back of our minds? Passion is often a grotesque incarnation of the Ideal, like a savage's rude image of his god. A glimpse of the ideal is possible in Piccadilly, and impossible in the Yoshiwara. The divine something was visible in Marguérite Gautier; little Hugh saw it even in Nana. For one thing, here

in London, in the dirtiest of sordid dramas, it is still the woman who gives, but in Japan it is always the man who takes.'

'Aubrey,' said his friend, 'I had no idea that you were a poet, or in other words that you ever talked nonsense without laughing. You think such a shock is strong enough to upset the Barrington *ménage*?'

'It will give furiously to think,' he answered, 'to poor old Geoffrey, who is a very straight, clean and honest fellow, not overused to furious thinking. I suppose if one married a monkey, one might persuade oneself of her humanity, until one saw her kindred in cages.'

'Poor little Asako, my latest god-daughter!' cried Lady Everington. 'Really, Aubrey, you are very rude!'

'I did not mean to be,' said Laking penitently. 'She is a most ingratiating little creature, like a lazy kitten; but I think it is unwise for him to take her to Japan. All kinds of latent orientalisms may develop.'

The spring was at hand, the season of impulse, when we obey most readily the sudden stirrings of our hearts. Even in the torrid climate of Egypt, squalls of rain passed over like stray birds of passage. Asako Barrington felt the fresh influence and the desire to do new things in new places. Hitherto she had evinced very little inclination to revisit the home of her ancestors. But on their return from the temples of Luxor, she said quite unexpectedly to Geoffrey,—

'If we go to Japan now, we shall be in time to see the cherry-blossoms.'

'Why, little Yum Yum,' cried her husband, delighted, 'are you tired of Pharaohs?'

'Egypt is very interesting,' said Asako, correctly; 'it is wonderful to think of these great places standing

here for thousands and thousands of years. But it makes one sad, don't you think? Everybody here seems to have died long, long ago. It would be nice to see green fields again, wouldn't it, Geoffrey dearest?'

The voice of the Spring was speaking clearly.

'And you really want to go to Japan, sweetheart? It's the first time I've heard you say you want to go.'

'Uncle and Aunt Murata in Paris used always to say about now, "If we go back to Japan we shall be in time to see the cherry-blossoms."'

'Why,' asked Geoffrey, 'do the Japanese make such a fuss about their cherry-blossoms?'

'They must be very pretty,' answered his wife, 'like great clouds of snow. Besides, the cherry-flowers are supposed to be like the Japanese spirit.'

'So you are my little cherry-blossom—is that right?'

'Oh no, not the women,' she replied, 'the men are the cherry-blossoms.'

Geoffrey laughed. It seemed absurd to him to compare a man to the frail and transient beauty of a flower.

'Then what about the Japanese ladies,' he asked, 'if the men are blossoms?'

Asako did not think they had any special flower to symbolise their charms. She suggested,—

'The bamboo, they say, because the wives have to bend under the storms when their husbands are angry. But, Geoffrey, you are never angry. You do not give me a chance to be like the bamboo.'

Next day, he boldly booked their tickets for Tokyo.

The long sea voyage was a pleasant experience, broken by fleeting visits to startled friends in Ceylon and at Singapore, and enlivened by the close ephemeral intimacies of life on board ship.

There was a motley company on board *S.S. Sumatra*;

a company whose most obvious elements, the noisy and bibulous pests in the smoking-room and the ladies of mysterious destination with whom they dallied, were dismissed by Geoffrey at once as being terrible bounders. Beneath this scum more congenial spirits came to light, officers and Government officials returning to their posts, and a few globe-trotters of leisure. Everybody seemed anxious to pay attention to the charming Japanese lady; and from such incessant attention it is difficult to escape within the narrow bounds of ship life. The only way to keep off the impossibles was to form a bodyguard of the possibles. The seclusion of the honeymoon paradise had to be opened up for once in a way.

Of course, there was much talk about the East; but it was a different point of view, from that of the enthusiasts of Deauville and the Riviera. These men and women had many of them lived in India, the Malay States, Japan, or the open ports of China, lived there to earn their bread and butter, not to dream about the Magic of the Orient. For such as these the romance had faded. The pages of their busy lives were written within a mourning border of discontent, of longing for that home land, to which on the occasion of their rare holidays they returned so readily, and which seemed to have no particular place or use for them when they did return. They were members of the British Dispersion; but their Zion was of more comfort to them as a sweet memory than as an actual home.

'Yes,' they would say about the land of their exile, 'it is very picturesque.'

But their faces, lined or pale, their bitterness and their reticence, told of years of strain, laboriously money earning, in lands where relaxations are few and forced, where climatic conditions are adverse, where fevers lurk, and where the white minority are posted

like soldiers in a lonely fort, ever suspicious, ever on the watch.

The most faithful of Asako's bodyguard was a countryman of her own, Viscount Kamimura, the son of a celebrated Japanese statesman and diplomat, who, after completing his course at Cambridge, was returning to his own country for the first time after many years.

He was a shy gentle youth, very quiet and refined, a little effeminate, even, in his exaggerated gracefulness and in his meticulous care for his clothes and his person. He avoided all company except that of the Barringtons, probably because a similarity in circumstances formed a bond between him and his country-woman.

He had a high, intellectual forehead, the beautiful deep brown eyes of Asako, curling, sarcastic lips, a nose almost aquiline but starting a fraction of an inch too low between his eyes. He had read everything, he remembered everything, and he had played lawn tennis for his university.

He was returning to Japan to be married. When Geoffrey asked him who his fiancée was, he replied that he did not know yet, but that his relatives would tell him as soon as ever he arrived in Japan.

'Haven't you got any say in the matter?' asked the Englishman.

'Oh yes,' he answered. 'If I actually dislike her, I need not marry her; but, of course, the choice is limited, so I must try not to be too hard to please.'

Geoffrey thought that it must be because of his extreme aristocracy that so few maidens in Japan were worthy of his hand. But Asako asked the question,—

'Why is the choice so small?'

'You see,' he said, 'there are not many girls in Japan who can speak both English and French, and as I am

going into the Diplomatic Service and shall leave Japan again shortly, that is an absolute necessity; besides, she must have a very good degree from her school.'

Geoffrey could hardly restrain himself from laughing. This idea of choosing a wife like a governess for her linguistic accomplishments seemed to him exceedingly comic.

'You don't mind trusting other people,' he said, 'to arrange your marriage for you?'

'Certainly not,' said the young Japanese, 'they are my own relatives, and they will do their best for me. They are all older than I am, and they have had the experience of their own marriages.'

'But,' said Geoffrey, 'when you saw your friends in England choosing for themselves, and falling in love and marrying for love's sake—?'

'Some of them chose for themselves and married barmaids and divorced persons, just for the reason that they were in love and uncontrolled. So they brought shame on their families, and are probably now very unhappy. I think they would have done better if they had let their relatives choose for them.'

'Yes, but the others who marry girls of their own set?'

'I think their choice is not really free at all. I do not think it is so much the girl who attracts them. It is the plans and intentions of those around them which urge them on. It is a kind of mesmerism. The parents of the young man and the parents of the young girl make the marriage by force of will. That also is a good way. It is not so very different from our system in Japan.'

'Don't you think that people in England marry because they love each other?' asked Asako.

'Perhaps so,' replied Kamimura, 'but in our Japanese language we have no word which is quite the same as your word Love. So they say we do not know what this

Love is. It may be so, perhaps. Anyhow Mr Barrington will not wish to learn Japanese, I think.'

Geoffrey liked the young man. He was a good athlete, he was unassuming and well-bred, he clearly knew the difference between Good and Bad Form. Geoffrey's chief misgiving with regard to Japan had been a doubt as to the wisdom of making the acquaintance of his wife's kindred. How dreadful if they turned out to be a collection of Oriental curios with whom he would not have one idea in common!

The company of this young aristocrat, in no way distinguishable from an Englishman except for a certain grace and maturity, reassured him. No doubt his wife would have cousins like this; clean, manly fellows who would take him shooting and with whom he could enjoy a game of golf. He thought that Kamimura must be typical of the young Japanese of the upper classes. He did not realise that he was an official product, chosen by his Government and carefully moulded and polished, not to be a Japanese at home, but to be a Japanese abroad, the qualified representative of a First Class Power.

Kamimura left the boat with them at Colombo and joined them in their visit to some tea-planting relatives. He was ready to do the same at Singapore, but he received an urgent cable from Japan recalling him at once.

'I must not be too late for my own wedding,' he said, during their last lunch together at Raffles's Hotel. 'It would be a terrible sin against the laws of Filial Piety.'

'Whatever is that?' asked Asako.

'Dear Mrs Barrington, are you a daughter of Japan, and have never heard of the Twenty-four Children?'

'No, who are they?'

'They are model children, the paragons of goodness, celebrated because of their love for their fathers and

mothers. One of them walked miles and miles every day to get water from a certain spring for his sick mother; another, when a tiger was going to eat his father, rushed to the animal and cried, "No, eat me instead!" Little boys and girls in Japan are always being told to be like the Twenty-four Children.'

'Oh, how I'd hate them!' cried Asako.

'That is because you are a rebellious, individualistic Englishwoman. You have lost that sense of family union, which makes good Japanese, brothers and cousins and uncles and aunts, all love each other publicly, however much they may hate each other in private.'

'That is very hypocritical!'

'It is the social law,' replied Kamimura. 'In Japan the family is the important thing. You and I are nothing. If you want to get on in the world you must always be subject to your family. Then you are sure to get on however stupid you may be. In England you seem to use your families chiefly to quarrel with.'

'I think our relatives ought to be just our best friends,' said Asako.

'They are that too in a way,' the young man answered. 'In Japan it would be better to be born without hands and feet than to be born without relatives.'