CHAPTER IV

NAGASAKI

Hono-bono to	My thoughts are with a
Akashi no ura no	boat
Asa-giri ni	Which travels island-hid
Shima-kakure-yuku	In the morning-mist
Funa wo shi zo omou.	Of the shore of Akashi—
	Dim, dim!

AFTER Hongkong, they left the zone of eternal summer behind them. The crossing from Shanghai to Japan was rough, and the wind bitter. But on the first morning in Japanese waters Geoffrey was on deck betimes to enjoy to the full the excitement of arrival. They were approaching Nagasaki. It was a misty dawn. The sky was like mother-of-pearl, and the sea like mica. Abrupt grey islands appeared and disappeared, phantasmal, like guardian spirits of Japan, representatives of those myriads of Shinto deities who have the Empire in their keeping.

Then, suddenly from behind the cliff of one of the islands a fishing boat came gliding with the silent stateliness of a swan. The body of the boat was low and slender, built of some white, shining wood; from the middle rose the high sail like a silver tower. It looked like the soul of that sleeping island setting out upon a dream journey.

The mist was dissolving, slowly revealing more islands and more boats. Some of them passed quite close to the steamer; and Geoffrey could see the fishermen,

dwarfish figures straining at the oar or squatting at the bottom of the boat, looking like Nibelungen on the quest for the Rhinegold. He could hear their strange cries to each other and to the steamer, harsh like the voice of seagulls.

Asako came on deck to join her husband. The thrill of returning to Japan had scattered her partiality for late sleeping. She was dressed in a tailor-made coat and skirt of navy-blue serge. Her shoulders were wrapped in a broad stole of sable. Her head was bare. Perhaps it was the inherited instinct of generations of Japanese women, who never cover their heads, which made her dislike hats and avoid wearing them if possible.

The sun was still covered, but the view was clear as far as the high mountains on the horizon towards which the ship was ploughing her way.

'Look, Asako, Japan!'

She was not looking at the distance. Her eyes were fixed on an emerald islet half a mile or less from the steamer's course, a jewel of the seas. It rose to the height of two hundred feet or so, a conical knoll, densely wooded. On the summit appeared a scar of rock like a ruined castle, and, rising from the rock's crest, a single pine-tree. Its trunk was twisted by all the winds of Heaven. Its long, lean branches groped the air like the arms of a blinded demon. It seemed to have an almost human personality an expression of fruitless striving, pathetic yet somehow sinister—a Prometheus among trees. Geoffrey followed his wife's gaze to the base of the island where a shoal of brown rocks trailed out to seawards. In a miniature bay he saw a tiny beach of golden sand, and, planted in the sand, a red gateway; two uprights and two lintels, the lower one held between the posts, the upper one laid across them and protruding on either side. It is the simplest of architectural designs, but strangely suggestive. It transformed

that wooded island into a dwelling-place. It cast an enchantment over it, and seemed to explain the meaning of the pine-tree. The place was holy, an abode of spirits.

Geoffrey had read enough by now to recognise the gateway as a *'torii'*; a religious symbol in Japan which always announces the neighbourhood of a shrine. It is a common feature of the country-side, as familiar as the crucifix in Catholic lands.

But Asako, seeing the beauty of her country for the first time, and unaware of the dimming cloud of archæological explanations, clapped her hands together three times in sheer delight; or was it in unconscious obedience to the custom of her race which in this way calls upon its gods? Then with a movement entirely Occidental she threw her arms round her husband's neck, kissing him with all the devotion of her being.

'Dear old Geoffrey, I love you so,' she murmured. Her brown eyes were full of tears.

The steamer passed into a narrow channel, a kind of fiord, with wooded hills on both sides. The forests were green with spring foliage. Never had Geoffrey seen such a variety or such density of verdure. Every tree seemed to be different from its neighbour; and the hill-sides were packed with trees like a crowded audience. Here and there, a spray of mountain cherry-blossom rose among the green like a jet of snow.

At the foot of the woods, by the edge of the calm water, the villages nestled. Only roofs could be seen, high, brown, thatched roofs with a line of sword-leaved irises growing along the roof-ridge like a crown. These native cottages looked timid animals, cowering in their forms under the protecting trees. One felt that at any time an indiscreet hoot of the steamer might send them

scuttering back to the forest depths. There were no signs of life in these submerged villages, where the fight between the forester's axe and primal vegetation seemed still undecided. Life was there; but it was hidden under the luxuriance of the overgrowth, hidden to casual passers-by like the life of insects. Only by the seaside, where the houses were clustered together above a sea-wall of cyclopean stones, and on the beach, where the long narrow boats, sharp-prowed and piratical, were drawn up to the shore, the same gnome-like little men, with a generous display of naked brown limbs, were sawing and hammering and mending their nets.

The steamer glided up the fiord towards a cloud of black smoke ahead. Unknown to Geoffrey, it passed the grey Italianate Catholic cathedral, the shrine of the old Christian faith of Japan planted there by Saint Francis Xavier four hundred years ago. Anchor was cast off the island of Deshima, now moored to the mainland, where during the locked centuries the Dutch merchants had been permitted to remain in profitable servitude. Deshima has now been swallowed up by the Japanese town, and its significance has shifted across the bay to where the smoke and din of the Mitsubishi Dockyard prepare romantic visitors for the modern industrial life of the new Japan. Night and day, the furnace fires are roaring; and ten thousand workman are busy building ships of war and ships of peace for the Britain of the Pacific.

The quarantine officers came on board, little, brown men in uniform, absurdly self-important. Then the ship was besieged by a swarm of those narrow, primitive boats called *sampan*, which Loti has described as a kind of barbaric gondola, all jostling each other to bring merchants of local wares, damascene, tortoise-shell, pottery, and picture post-cards aboard the vessel, and to take visitors ashore.

Geoffrey and Asako were among the first to land. The moment of arrival on Japanese soil brought a pang of disappointment. The sea-front at Nagasaki seemed very like a street in any starveling European town. It presented a line of offices and Consulates built in Western style, without distinction and without charm. Customs' officers and policemen squinted suspiciously at the strangers. A few women, in charge of children or market-baskets, stared blankly.

'Why, they are wearing kimonos!' exclaimed Asako, 'but how dirty and dusty they are. They look as though they had been sleeping in them!'

The Japanese women, indeed, cling to their national dress. But to the Barringtons, landing at Nagasaki, they seemed ugly, shapeless and dingy. Their hair was greasy and unkempt. Their faces were stupid and staring. Their figures were hidden in the muffle of their dirty garments. Geoffrey had been told they have baths at least once a day, but he was inclined to doubt it. Or else, it was because they all bathed in the same bath and their ablutions were merely an exchange of grime. But where were those butterfly girls, who dance with fan and battledore on our cups and saucers?

The rickshaws were a pleasant experience, the one-man perambulators; and the costume of the rickshaw-runners was delightful, and their gnarled, indefatigable legs. With their tight trunk-hose of a coarse dark-blue material and short coat to match like an Eton jacket and with their large, round mushroom hats, they were like figures from the crowd of a Flemish Crucifixion.

Behind the Barrington's *sampan*, a large lighter came alongside the wharf. It was black with coal-dust, and in one corner was heaped a pile of shallow baskets, such as are used in coaling vessels at Japanese ports, being slipped from hand to hand in unbroken chain up the ship's side and down again to the coal barge. The work

was finished. The lighter was empty except for a crowd of coal-stained coolies which it was bringing back to Nagasaki. These were dressed like the rickshaw-men. They wore tight trousers, short jackets and straw sandals. They were sitting, wearied, on the sides of the barge, wiping black faces with black towels. Their hair was long, lank and matted. Their hands were bruised and shapeless with the rough toil.

'Poor men,' sighed Asako, 'they've had hard work!'

The crowd of them passed, peering at the English people and chattering in high voices. Geoffrey had never seen such queer-looking fellows, with their long hair, clean-shaven faces, and stumpy bow-legs. One more dishevelled than the others was standing near him with tunic half-open. It exposed a woman's breast, black, loose, and hard like leather.

'They are women!' he exclaimed,' what an extraordinary thing!'

But the children of Nagasaki,—surely there could be no such disillusionment. They are laughing, happy, many-coloured and ubiquitous. They roll under the rickshaw wheels. They peep from behind the goods piled on the floors of the shops, a perpetual menace to shopkeepers, especially in the china stores, where their bird-like presence is more dangerous than that of the dreaded bull. They are blown up and down the temple-steps like fallen petals. They gather like humming-birds round the itinerant venders of the streets, the old men who balance on their bare shoulders their whole stock in trade of sweetmeats, syrups, toys, or singing grasshoppers. They are the dolls of our own childhood, endowed with disconcerting life. Around their little bodies flames the love of colour of an Oriental people, whose adult taste has been disciplined to sombre browns and greys. Wonderful motley kimonos they make for their children with flower patterns, butterfly patterns,

toy and fairy-story patterns, printed on flannelette—or on silk for the little plutocrats—in all colours, among which reds, oranges, yellows, mauves, blues and greens predominate.

They invaded the depressing atmosphere of the European-style hotel, where Geoffrey and Asako were trying to enjoy a tasteless lunch,—their grubby, bare feet pattering on the worn lino.

It pleased him to watch them, playing their game of *Jonkenpan* with much show of pudgy fingers, and with restrained and fitful scamperings. He even made a tentative bid for popularity by throwing copper coins. There was no scramble for this largesse. Gravely and in turn, each child pocketed his penny; but they all regarded Geoffrey with a wary and suspicious eye. He, too, on closer inspection found them less angelic than at first sight. The slimy horror of unwiped noses distressed him, and the significant prevalence of scabby scalps.

After their dull lunch in this drab hotel, Geoffrey and his wife started once more on their voyage of discovery. Nagasaki is a hidden city; it flows through its narrow valleys like water, and follows their serpentine meanderings far inland.

They soon left behind the foreign settlement and its nondescript ugliness to plunge into the labyrinth of little native streets, wayward and wandering like sheep-tracks, with sudden abrupt hills and flights of steps which checked the rickshaws' progress. Here, the houses of the rich people were closely fenced and cunningly hidden; but the life of poverty and the shop-keepers' domesticity were flowing over into the street out of the too narrow confines of the boxes which they called their homes.

With an extra man to push behind, the rickshaws had brought them up a zigzag hill to a cautious wooden gateway half open in a close fence of bamboo.

'Tea-house!' said the rickshaw-man, stopping and grinning. It was clearly expected of the foreigners that they should descend and enter.

'Shall we get out and explore, sweetheart?' suggested Geoffrey. They passed under the low gate, up a pebbled pathway through the sweetest fairy garden to the entrance of the tea-house, a stage of brown boards highly polished and never defiled by the contamination of muddy boots. On the steps of approach a collection of *geta* (native wooden clogs,) and abominable side-spring shoes told that guests had already arrived.

Within the dark corridors of the house there was an immediate fluttering as of pigeons. Four or five little women prostrated themselves before the visitors with a hissing murmur of *'Irrasshai!* (Condescend to come!).'

The Barringtons removed their boots and followed one of these ladies down a gleaming corridor with another miniature garden in an enclosed courtyard on one side, and paper *shoji* and peeping faces on the other, out across a further garden by a kind of Oriental Bridge of Sighs to a small separate pavilion, which floated on a lake of green shrubs and pure air, as though moored by the wooden gangway to the main block of the building.

This summer-house contained a single small room like a very clean box with wooden frame, opaque paper walls, and pale golden matting. The only wall which seemed at all substantial presented the appearance of an alcove. In this niche there hung a long picture of cherry-blossom on a mountain side, below which, on a stand of dark sandalwood, squatted a bronze monkey holding a crystal ball. This was the only ornament in the room.

Geoffrey and his wife sat down or sprawled on square silk cushions called *zabuton*. Then the *shoji* were thrown open; and they looked down upon Nagasaki.

It was a scene of sheer enchantment. The tea-house was perched on a cliff which overhung the city. The light pavilion seemed like the car of some pullman æroplane hovering over the bay. It was the brief half-hour of evening, the time of day when the magic of Japan is at its most powerful. All that was cheap and sordid was shut out by the bamboo fence and wrapped away in the twilight mists. It was a half-hour of luminous greyness. The skies were grey and the waters of the bay and the roofs of the houses. A grey vapour rose from the town; and a black-grey trail of smoke drifted from the dockyards and from the steamers in the harbour. The cries and activities of the city below rose clear and distinct but infinitely remote, as sounds of the world might reach the Gods in Heaven. It was a half-hour of fairyland when anything might happen.

Two little maids brought tea and sugary cakes, green tea like bitter hot water, insipid and unsatisfying. It was a shock to see the girls' faces as they raised the tiny china teacups. Under the glaze of their powder they were old and wise.

They observed Asako's nationality, and began to speak to her in Japanese.

'Their politeness is put on to order,' thought Geoffrey, 'they seem forward and inquisitive minxes.'

But Asako only knew a few set phrases of her native tongue. This baffled the ladies, one of whom after a whispered consultation and some giggling behind sleeves went off to find a friend who would solve the mystery.

'*Nésan! Nésan!* (elder sister!)' she called across the garden.

Strange little dishes were produced on trays of red

lacquer, fish and vegetables of different kinds artistically arranged, but most unpalatable.

A third *nésan* appeared. She could speak some English.

'Is *Okusama* (lady) Japanese?' she began, after she had placed the tiny square table before Geoffrey, and had performed a prostration.

Geoffrey assented.

Renewed prostration before *okusama*, and murmured greetings in Japanese.

'But I can't speak Japanese,' said Asako laughing. This perplexed the girl, but her curiosity prompted her.

'*Danna San* (master) Ingiris'?' she asked, looking at Geoffrey.

'Yes,' said Asako. 'Do many Englishmen have Japanese wives?'

'Yes, very many,' was the unexpected answer. 'O Fuji San,' she continued, indicating one of the other maids, 'have Ingiris' *danna san* very many years ago: very kind *danna san*: give O Fuji plenty nice kimono: he say, O Fuji very good girl, go to Ingiris' with him: O Fuji say, No, cannot go, mother very sick: so *danna san* go away. Give O Fuji San very nice finger ring.'

She lapsed into vernacular. The other girl showed with feigned embarrassment a little ring set with glassy sapphires.

'Oh!' said Asako, dimly comprehending.

'All Ingiris' *danna san* come Nagasaki,' the talkative maid went on, 'want Japanese girl. Ingiris' *danna san* kind man, but too plenty drink. Japanese *danna san* not kind, not good. Ingiris' *danna san* plenty money, plenty. Nagasaki girl very many foreign *danna san*. *Rashamen wa Nagasaki meibutsu* (foreigners' mistresses famous product of Nagasaki). Ingiris' *danna san* go away

all the time. One year, two year—then, go away to Ingiris' country.'

'Then what does the Japanese girl do?' asked Asako.

'Other *danna san* come,' was the laconic reply. 'Ingiris' *danna san* live in Japan, Japanese girl very nice. Ingiris' *danna san* go away, no want Japanese girl. Japanese girl no want go away Japan. Japanese girl go to other country, she feel very sick; heart very lonely, very sad!'

A weird, unpleasant feeling had stolen into the little room, the presence of unfamiliar thoughts and of foreign moralities, birds of unhealth.

The two other girls who could not speak English were posing for Geoffrey's benefit; one of them reclining against the framework of the open window with her long kimono sleeves crossed in front of her like wings, her painted oval face fixed on him in spite of the semblance of downcast eyes; the other squatting on her heels in a corner of the room with the same demure expression and with her hands folded in her lap. Despite the quietness of the poses they were as challenging in their way as the swinging hips of Piccadilly. It is as true to-day as it was in Kæmpffer's time, the old Dutch traveller of two hundred and fifty years ago, that every hotel in Japan is a brothel, and every tea-house and restaurant a house of assignation.

From a wing of the building near by, came the twanging of a string, like a banjo string being tuned in fantastic quarter tones. A few sharp notes were struck, at random it seemed, followed by a few bars of a quavering song, and then a burst of clownish laughter. Young bloods of Nagasaki had called in *geisha* to amuse them at their meal.

'Japanese *geisha*,' said the tea-house girl, 'if *danna san* wish to see *geisha* dance—?'

'No, thank you,' said Geoffrey, hurriedly, 'Asako darling, it is time we went home: we want our dinners.'