

## CHAPTER V

### CHONKINA

<i>Modashi ite</i>	To sit silent
<i>Sakashira suru wa</i>	And look wise
<i>Sake nomite</i>	Is not to be compared with
<i>Yei-naki suru ni</i>	Drinking <i>saké</i>
<i>Nao shiharu keri.</i>	And making a riotous shouting.

As soon as the meal was over, Asako went to bed. She was tired out by an orgy of sight-seeing and new impressions. Geoffrey said that he would have a short walk and a smoke before turning in. He took the road which led towards the harbour of Nagasaki.

*Chonkina, Chonkina, Chon, Chon, Kina, Kina,  
Yokohama, Nagasaki, Hakodate—Hoi!*

The refrain of an old song was awakened in his mind by the melodious name of the place.

He descended the hill from the hotel, and crossed a bridge over a narrow river. The town was full of beauty. The warm light in the little wooden houses, the creamy light of the paper walls, illuminated from within, with the black silhouettes of the home groups traced upon them, the lanterns dancing on the boats in the harbour, the lights on the larger vessels in stiff patterns like propositions of Euclid, the lanterns on carts and rickshaws, lanterns like fruit, red, golden and glowing, and round bubble lamps over each house entrance with

Chinese characters written upon them giving the name of the occupant.

*Chonkina! Chonkina!*

As though in answer to his incantation, Geoffrey suddenly came upon Wigram. Wigram had been a fellow-passenger on board the steamer. He was an old Etonian; and this was really the only bond between the two men. For Wigram was short, fat and flabby, dull-eyed and pasty-faced. He spoke with a drawl; he had literary pretensions and he was travelling for pleasure.

'Hello, Barrington,' he said, 'you all alone?'

'Yes,' answered Geoffrey, 'my wife is a bit overtired; she has turned in.'

'So you are making the most of your opportunity, studying night-life, eh, naughty boy?'

'Not much about, is there?' said Geoffrey, who considered that a 'pi fellow' was Bad Form, and would not be regarded as such even by a creature whose point of view was as contemptible as that of Wigram.

'Doesn't walk the streets, old man; but it's there all the same. The men at the club here tell me that Nagasaki is one of the hottest spots on the face of the globe.'

'Seems sleepy enough,' answered Geoffrey.

'Oh, here! these are just English warehouses and consulates. They're always asleep. But you come with me and see them dance the *Chonkina*.'

Geoffrey started at this echo of his own thoughts, but he said,—

'I must be getting back; my wife will be anxious.'

'Not yet, not yet. It will be all over in half an hour, and it's worth seeing. I am just going to the club to find a fellow who said he'd show me the ropes.'

Geoffrey allowed himself to be persuaded. After all

he was not expected home so immediately. It was many years since he had visited low and disreputable places. They were Bad Form, and had no appeal for him. But the strangeness of the place attracted him, and a longing for the first glimpse behind the scenes in this inexplicable new country.

*Chonkina! Chonkina!*

Why shouldn't he go?

He was introduced to Wigram's friend Mr Patterson, a Scotch merchant of Nagasaki, who lurched out of the club in his habitual Saturday evening state of mellow inebriation.

They called for three rickshaws, whose runners seemed to know without instructions whither they had to go.

'Is it far from here?' asked Geoffrey.

'It is not so far,' said the Scotchman; 'it is most conveniently situated.'

Noiselessly they sped down narrow twisting streets with the same unfamiliar lights and shadows, the glowing paper walls, and the luminous globes of the gate lamps.

From the distance came the beat of a drum.

Geoffrey had heard a drum sounded like that before in the Somali village at Aden, a savage primitive sound with a kind of marching rhythm, suggestive of the swing of hundreds of black bodies moving to some obscene festival.

But here, in Japan, such music sounded remote from the civilisation of the country, from the old as from the new.

'*Chonkina, Chonkina,*' it seemed to be beating.

The rickshaws turned into a broader street with houses taller and more commanding than any seen hitherto. They were built of brown wood like big Swiss

chalets, and were hung with red paper lanterns like huge ripe cherries.

Another stage-like entrance, more fluttering of women and low prostrations, a procession along shining corridors and up steep stairways like companion-ladders, everywhere a heavy smell of cheap scent and powder, the reek of the brothel.

The three guests were installed, squatting or lounging around a low table with beer and cakes. There was a chorus of tittering and squeaking voices in the corridor. The partition slid open, and six little women came running into the room.

'Patasan San! Patasan San!' they cried, clapping their hands.

Here at last were the butterfly women of the traveller's imagination. They wore bright kimonos, red and blue, embroidered with gold thread. Their faces were pale like porcelain with the enamelling effect of the liquid powder which they use. Their black shiny hair, like liquorice, was arranged in fantastic volutes, which were adorned with silver bell-like ornaments and paper flowers. Choking down Geoffrey's admiration, a cloud of heavy perfume hung around them.

'Good day to you,' they squeaked in comical English, 'How do you do? I love you. Please kiss me. Dam! dam! dam!'

Patterson introduced them by name as O Hana San (Miss Flower), O Yuki San (Miss Snow), O En San (Miss Affinity), O Toshi San (Miss Year), O Taka San (Miss Tall) and O Koma San (Miss Pony).

One of them, Miss Pony, put her arm round Geoffrey's neck—the little fingers felt like the touch of insects—and said,—

'My darling, you love me?'

The big Englishman disengaged himself gently. It is Bad Form to be rough to women, even to Japanese

courtesans. He began to be sorry that he had come.

'I have brought two very dear friends of mine,' said Patterson to all the world, 'for pleasure artistic rather than carnal; though perhaps I can safely prophesy that the pleasure of the senses is the end of all true art. We have come to see the national dance of Japan, the Nagasaki reel, the famous *Chonkina*. I myself am familiar with the dance. On two or three occasions I have performed with credit in these very halls. But these two gentlemen have come all the way from England on purpose to see the dance. I therefore request that you will dance it to-night with care and attention, with force of imagination, with a sense of pleasurable anticipation, and with humble respect to the naked Truth.'

He spoke with the precise eloquence of intoxication, and as he flopped to the ground again Wigram clapped him on the shoulder with a 'Bravo, old man!'

Geoffrey felt very silent and rather sick.

*Chonkina! Chonkina!*

The little women made a show of modesty, hiding their faces behind their long kimono sleeves.

A servant girl pushed open the walls which communicated with the next room, an exact replica of the one in which they were sitting. An elderly woman in a sea-grey kimono was squatting there silent, rigid and dignified. For a moment Geoffrey thought that a mistake had been made, that this was another guest disturbed in quiet reflection and about to be justly indignant.

But no, this Roman matron held in her lap the white disc of a *samisen*, the native banjo, upon which she

strummed with a flat white bone. She was the evening's orchestra, an old *geisha*.

The six little butterflies lined up in front of her and began to dance, not our Western dance of free limbs, but an Oriental dance from the hips with posturings of hands and feet. They sang a harsh faltering song without any apparent relation to the accompaniment played by that austere dame.

*Chonkina! Chonkina!*

The six little figures swayed to and fro.

*Chonkina! Chonkina! Ho!*

With a sharp cry the song and dance stopped abruptly. The six dancers stood rigid with hands held out in different attitudes. One of them had lost the first round and must pay forfeit. Off came the broad embroidered sash. It was thrown aside, and the raucous singing began afresh.

*Chonkina! Chonkina! Ho!*

The same girl lost again; and amid shrill titterings the gorgeous scarlet kimono fell to the ground. She was left standing in a pretty blue under-kimono of light silk with a pale pink design of cherry-blossoms starred all over it.

*Chonkina! Chonkina!*

Round after round the game was played; and first one girl lost and then another. Two of them were standing now with the upper part of their bodies bare. One of them was wearing a kind of white lace petticoat, stained and sour-looking, wrapped about her hips; the

other wore short flannel drawers, like a man's bathing-pants, coloured in a Union Jack pattern, some sailor's offering to his *inamorata*. They were both of them young girls. Their breasts were flat and shapeless; and against the yellow skin the violet nipples glowed like poisonous berries. The yellow skin ended abruptly at the throat and neck with the powder line. For the neck and the face were a glaze of white. The effect of this break was to make the body look as if it had lost its real head under the guillotine, and had received an ill-matched substitute from the surgeon's hands.

*Chonkina! Chonkina!*

Patterson had drawn nearer to the performers. His red face and his grim smile were tokens of what he would have described as pleasurable anticipation. Wigram, too, his flabby visage paler than ever, his large eyes bulging, and his mouth hanging open, gazed as in a trance. He had whispered to Geoffrey,—

'I've seen the *danse du ventre* at Algiers, but this beats anything.'

Geoffrey from behind the fumes of the pipe-smoke watched the unreal phantasmagoria as he might have watched a dream.

'Let it rip! Let it rip!' cried Patterson; 'don't be afraid. We know what you're hiding!'

*Chonkina! Chonkina!*

The dance was more expressive now, not of art but of mere animalism. The bodies shook and squirmed. The faces were screwed up to express an ecstasy of sensual delight. The little fingers twitched into immodest gestures.

*Chonkinal Chonkinal Ho!*

The girl in the tight drawers had lost. She peeled them off with an affectation of modesty, which was indecency's climax. Then, grotesquely nude, she posed in the middle of the group, a flat denial of all the canons of Hellenic beauty.

Geoffrey had never gazed on a naked woman except idealised in marble or on canvas. The secret of Venus had been for him, as for many men, an inviolate Mecca towards which he worshipped. Glimpses he had seen, visions of soft curves, mica glistenings of creamy skin, but never the crude anatomical fact.

An overgrown embryo she seemed, a gawkish ill-moulded thing.

Woman, thought Geoffrey, should be supple and pliant, with a suggestion of swiftness galvanising the delicacy of the lines. Atalanta was his ideal woman.

But this creature had apparently no bones or sinews. She looked like a sawdust dummy. She seemed to have been poured into a bag of brown tissue. There was no waist line. The chest appeared to fit down upon the thighs like a lid, the big navel staring like an impudent eye. The legs hung from the hips like trouser-legs, and seemed to fit into the feet like poles into their sockets. The turned-in toes were ridiculous and exasperating. There was no shaping of breasts, stomach, knees and ankles. There was nothing in this image of clay to show the loving caress of the Creator's hand. It had been modelled by a wretched bungler in a moment of inattention.

Yet it stood there, erect and challenging, this miserable human tadpole, usurping the throne of Laïs and crowned with the worship of such devotees as Patterson and Wigram.

Are all women ugly? The query flashed through



Geoffrey's brain. Is the vision of Aphrodite Anadyomene an artist's lie? Then he thought of Asako. Stripped of her gauzy nightdresses, was she like this? A shame on such imagining!

Patterson was hugging a half naked girl on his knee. Wigram had caught hold of another. Geoffrey said— but nobody heard him,—

'It's getting too hot for me here. I'm going.'

So he went.

His little wife was awake, and disposed to be tearful.

'Where have you been?' she asked; 'you said you would only be half an hour.'

'I met Wigram,' said Geoffrey, 'and I went with him to see some *geisha* dancing.'

'You might have taken me. Was it very pretty?'

'No, it was very ugly; you would not have cared for it at all.'

He had a hot bath, before he lay down by her side.