CHAPTER VII

THE EMBASSY

Tsuyu no yo no — While this dewdrop world
Tsuyu no yo nagara — Is but a dewdrop world,
Sari nagara! — Yet—all the same!—

THE fabric of our lives is like a piece of knitting, terribly botched and bungled in most cases. There are stitches which are dropped, sometimes to be swallowed up and forgotten in the superstructure, sometimes to be picked up again after a lapse of years. These stitches are old friendships.

The first stitch from Geoffrey's bachelor days to be worked back into the scheme of his married life was his friendship for Reggie Forsyth, who had been best man at his wedding and who had since then been appointed Secretary to the Embassy at Tokyo.

Reggie had received a telegram saying that Geoffrey was coming. He was very pleased. He had reached that stage in the progress of exile where one is inordinately happy to see any old friend. In fact, he was beginning to be 'fed up' with Japan, with its very limited distractions, and with the monotony of his diplomatic colleagues.

Instead of going to the tennis-court, which was his usual afternoon occupation, he had spent the time in arranging his rooms, shifting the furniture, re-hanging the pictures, paying especial care to the disposition of his Oriental curios, his recent purchases, his last enthusiasms in this land of languor. Reggie collected

Buddhas, Chinese snuff-bottles, and lacquered medicine-cases—called *inro* in Japanese.

'Caviare to the general!' murmured Reggie, as he gloated over a chaste design of fishes in mother-of-pearl, a pseudo-Korin. 'Poor old Geoffrey! He's only a barbarian; but perhaps she will be interested. Here, Tō!' he called out to an impassive Japanese man-servant, 'have the flowers come yet, and the little trees?'

Tō produced from the back regions of the house a quantity of dwarf trees, planted as miniature landscapes in shallow porcelain dishes, and big fronds of budding cherry-blossom.

Reggie arranged the blossom in a triumphal arch over the corner table, where stood the silent company of the Buddhas. From among the trees he chose his favourite, a kind of dwarf cedar, to place between the window, opening on to a sunny veranda, and an old gold screen, across whose tender glory wound the variegated comicality of an Emperor's travelling procession, painted by a Kano artist of three centuries ago.

He removed the books which were lying about the room,—grim Japanese grammars, and forbidding works on International Law; and in their place he left volumes of poetry and memoirs, and English picture-papers strewn about in artistic disorder. Then he gave the silver frames of his photographs to Tō to be polished, the photographs of fair women signed with Christian names, of diplomats in grand uniforms, and of handsome foreigners.

Having reduced the serious atmosphere of his study so as to give an impression of amiable indolence, Reggie Forsyth lit a cigarette and strolled out into the garden, amused at his own impatience. In London he would never have bestirred himself for old Geoffrey Barrington, who was only a Philistine, after all, with no sense of the inwardness of things.

Reggie was a slim and graceful young man, with thin fair hair brushed flat back from his forehead. A certain projection of bones under the face gave him an almost haggard look; and his dancing blue eyes seemed to be never still. He wore a suit of navy serge fitting close to his figure, black tie, and grey spats. In fact, he was as immaculate as a young diplomat should always be.

Outside his broad veranda was a gravel path, and beyond that a Japanese garden, the hobby of one of his predecessors, a miniature domain of hillocks and shrubs, with the inevitable pebbly water-course, in which a bronze crane was perpetually fishing. Over the red-brick wall which encircles the Embassy compound the reddish buds of a cherry avenue were bursting in white stars.

The compound of the Embassy is a fragment of British soil. The British flag floats over it; and the Japanese authorities have no power within its walls. Its large population of Japanese servants, about one hundred and fifty in all, are free from the burden of Japanese taxes; and, since the police may not enter, gambling, forbidden throughout the Empire, flourishes there; and the rambling servants' quarters behind the Ambassador's house are the Monte Carlo of the Tokyo *betto* (coachman) and *kurumaya* (rickshaw-runner). However, since the alarming discovery that a professional burglar had, Diogenes-like, been occupying an old tub in a corner of the wide grounds, a policeman has been allowed to patrol the garden; but he has to drop that omnipotent swagger which marks his presence outside the walls.

Except for Reggie Forsyth's exotic shrubbery, there is nothing Japanese within the solid red wall. The Embassy itself is the house of a prosperous city gentleman and might be transplanted to Bromley or Wimbledon. The smaller houses of the secretaries and the

interpreters also wear a smug, suburban appearance, with their red brick and their black-and-white gabling. Only the broad verandas betray the intrusion of a warmer sun than ours.

The lawns were laid out as a miniature golf-links, the thick masses of Japanese shrubs forming deadly bunkers, and Reggie was trying some mashie shots, when one of the rare Tokyo taxi-cabs, carrying Geoffrey Barrington inside it, came slowly round a corner of the drive, as though it were feeling its way for its destination among such a cluster of houses.

Geoffrey was alone.

'Hello, old chap,' cried Reggie, running up and shaking his friend's big paw in his small nervous grip, 'I'm so awfully glad to see you; but where's Mrs Barrington?'

Geoffrey had not brought his wife. He explained that they had been to pay their first call on Japanese relations, and that they had been honourably out; but even so the strain had been a severe one, and Asako had retired to rest at the Hotel.

'But why not come and stay here with me?' suggested Reggie. 'I have got plenty of spare rooms; and there is such a gulf fixed between people who inhabit hotels and people with houses of their own. They see life from an entirely different point of view; their spirits hardly ever meet.'

'Have you room for eight large boxes of dresses and kimonos, several cases of curios, a French maid, a Japanese guide, two Japanese dogs and a monkey from Singapore?'

Reggie whistled.

'No, really, is it as bad as all that? I was thinking that marriage meant just one extra person. It would have been fun having you both here, and this is the only place in Tokyo fit to live in.'

'It looks a comfortable little place,' agreed Geoffrey.

They had reached the secretary's house, and the newcomer was admiring its artistic arrangement.

'Just like your rooms in London!'

Reggie prided himself on the exclusively Oriental character of his habitation, and its distinction from any other dwelling-place which he had ever possessed. But then Geoffrey was only a Philistine, after all.

'I suppose it's the photographs which look like old times,' Geoffrey went on. 'How's little Véronique?'

'Veronica married an Argentine beef magnate, a German Jew, the nastiest person I have ever avoided meeting.'

'Poor old Reggie! Was that why you came to Japan?'

'Partly; and partly because I had a chief in the Foreign Office who dared to say that I was lacking in practical experience of diplomacy. He sent me to this comic country to find it.'

'And you have found it right enough,' said Geoffrey, inspecting a photograph of a Japanese girl in her dark silk kimono with a dainty flower pattern round the skirts and at the fall of the long sleeves. She was not unlike Asako; only there was a fraction of an inch more of bridge to her nose, and in that fraction lay the secret of her birth.

'That is my latest inspiration,' said Reggie. 'Listen!'

He sat down at the piano, and played a plaintive little air, small and sweet and shivering.

'*Japonaiserie d'hiver*,' he explained.

Then he changed the burden of his song into a melody rapid and winding, with curious tricklings among the bass notes.

'Lamia,' said Reggie, 'or Lilith.'

'There's no tune in that last one: you can't whistle it,' said Geoffrey, who exaggerated his Philistinism to throw Reggie's artistic nature into stronger relief. 'But what has that got to do with the lady?'

'Her name is Smith,' said Reggie, 'I know it is almost impossible and terribly sad; but her other name is Yaé. Rather wild and savage—isn't it? Like the cry of a bird in the night-time, or of a cannibal tribe on the warpath?'

'And is this your Oriental version of Véronique?' asked his friend.

'No,' said Reggie, 'it is a different chapter of experience altogether. Perhaps old Hardwick was right. I still have much to learn, thank God. Véronique was personal; Yaé is symbolic. She is my model, just like a painter's model, only more platonic. She is the East to me; for I cannot understand the East pure and undiluted. She is a country-woman of mine on her father's side, and therefore easier to understand. Impersonality and fatalism, the Eastern Proteus, in the grip of self-insistence and idealism, the British Hercules. A butterfly body with this cosmic war shaking it incessantly. Poor child! no wonder she seems always tired.'

'She is a half-caste?' asked Geoffrey.

'Bad word, bad word. She isn't half-anything; and caste suggests India and suttees. She is a Eurasian, a denizen of a dream country which has a melodious name and no geographical existence. Have you ever heard anybody ask where Eurasia was? I have. A travelling Member of Parliament's wife at the Embassy here only a few months ago. I said that it was a large undiscovered country lying between the Equator and Tierra del Fuego. She seemed quite satisfied, and wondered whether it was very hot there; she remembered having heard a missionary once complain that the Eurasians wore so very few clothes! But to return to Yaé, you must meet her. This evening? No? To-morrow then. You will like her because she looks something like Asako; and she will adore you because you are utterly unlike me. She comes here to inspire me once

or twice a week. She says she likes me because everything in my house smells so sweet. That is the beginning of love, I sometimes think. Love enters the soul through the nostrils. If you doubt me, observe the animals. But foreign houses in Japan are haunted by a smell of dust and mildew. You cannot love in them. She likes to lie on my sofa, and smoke cigarettes, and do nothing, and listen to my playing tunes about her.'

'You are very impressionable,' said his friend. 'If it were anybody else I should say you were in love with this girl.'

'I am still the same, Geoffrey; always in love—and never.'

'But what about the other people here?' Barrington asked.

'There are none, none who count. I am not impressionable. I am just shortsighted. I have to focus my weak vision on one person and neglect the rest.'

A rickshaw was waiting to take Geoffrey back to the hotel. Under the saffron light of an uncanny sunset, which barred the western heavens with three broad streaks of orange and inky-blue like a gipsy girl's kerchief, the odd little vehicle rolled down the hill of Miyakezaka which overhangs the moat of the Imperial Palace.

The latent soul of Tokyo, the mystery of Japan, lies within the confines of that moat, which is the only great majestic thing in an untidy rambling village of more than two million living beings.

The Palace of the Mikado—a title by the way which is never used among Japanese,—is hidden from sight. That is the first remarkable thing about it. The gesture of Versailles, the challenge of '*L'Etat c'est moi*,' the majestic vulgarity which the millionaire of the moment can mimic

with a vulgarity less majestic, are here entirely absent; and one cannot mimic the invisible.

Hardly, on bare winter days, when the sheltering groves are stripped, and the saddened heart is in need of reassurance, appears a green lustre of copper roofs.

The *Goshō* at Tokyo is not a sovereign's palace; it is the abode of a God.

The surrounding woods and gardens occupy a space larger than Hyde Park in the very centre of the city. One well-groomed road crosses an extreme corner of this estate. Elsewhere only privileged feet may tread. This is a vast encumbrance in a modern commercial metropolis, but a striking tribute to the unseen.

The most noticeable feature of the Palace is its moats. These lie in three or four concentric circles, the defences of ancient Yedo, whose outer lines have now been filled up by modern progress and an electric railway. They are broad sheets of water as wide as the Thames at Oxford, where ducks are floating and fishing. Beyond is a *glacis* of vivid grass, a hundred feet high at some points, topped by vast iron-grey walls of cyclopean boulder-work, with the sudden angles of a Vauban fortress. Above these walls the weird pine-trees of Japan extend their lean tormented boughs. Within is the Emperor's domain.

Geoffrey was hurrying homeward along the banks of the moat. The stagnant viscous water was yellow under the sunset, and a yellow light hung over the green slopes, the grey walls and the dark tree-tops. An echelon of geese passed high overhead in the region of the pale moon. Within the mysterious *enclave* of the 'Son of Heaven' the crows were uttering their harsh sarcastic croak.

Witchery is abroad in Tokyo during this brief sunset hour. The mongrel nature of the city is less evident. The pretentious Government buildings of the New Japan

assume dignity with the deep shadows and the heightening effect of the darkness. The untidy network of tangled wires fades into the coming obscurity. The rickety trams, packed to overflowing with the city crowds returning homeward, become creeping caterpillars of light. Lights spring up along the banks of the moat. More lights are reflected from its depth. Dark shadows gather like a frown round the Gate of the Cherry Field, where Ii Kamon no Kami's blood stained the winter snow-drifts some sixty years ago, because he dared to open the Country of the Gods to the contemptible foreigners; and in the cry of the *tōfu*-seller echoes the voice of old Japan, a long-drawn wail, drowned at last by the grinding of the tram wheels, and the lash and crackle of the connecting-rods against the overhead lines.

Geoffrey, sitting back in his rickshaw, turned up his coat-collar, and watched the gathering pall of cloud extinguishing the sunset.

'Looks like snow,' he said to himself; 'but it is impossible!'

At the entrance to the Imperial Hotel—a Government institution, as almost everything in Japan ultimately turns out to be—Tanaka was standing in his characteristic attitude of a dog who waits for his master's return. Characteristically also, he was talking to a man, a Japanese, a showy person with spectacles and oily buffalo-horn moustaches, dressed in a vivid pea-green suit. However, at Geoffrey's approach, this individual raised his bowler-hat, bobbed and vanished; and Tanaka assisted his patron to descend from his rickshaw.

As he approached the door of his suite, a little cloud of hotel *boys* scattered like sparrows. This phenomenon did not as yet mean anything to Geoffrey. The native servants were not very real to him. But he was soon to realise that the *boy san*—Mister Boy, as his dignity

now insists on being called—is more than an amusing contribution to the local atmosphere. When his smiles, his bows, and his peculiar English begin to pall, he reveals himself in his true light as a constant annoyance and a possible danger. Hell knows no fury like the untipped '*boy san.*' He refuses to answer the bell. He suddenly understands no English at all. He bangs all the doors. He spends his spare moments in devising all kinds of petty annoyances, damp and dirty sheets, accidental damage to property, surreptitious draughts. And to vex one *boy san* is to antagonise the whole caste; it is a boycott. At last the tip is given. Sudden sunshine, obsequious manners, attention of all kinds—for ever dwindling periods, until at last the *boy san* attains his end, a fat retaining-fee, extorted at regular intervals.

But even more exasperating, since no largesse can cure it, is his national bent towards espionage. What does he do with his spare time, of which he has so much? He spends it in watching and listening to the hotel guests. He has heard legends of large sums paid for silence or for speech. There may be money in it, therefore, and there is always amusement. So the only house-work, which the *boy san* does really willingly, is to dust the door, polish the handle, wipe the threshold, —anything in fact which brings him into the propinquity of the keyhole. What he observes or overhears, he exchanges with another *boy san*; and the hall-porter or the head-waiter generally serves as Chief Intelligence Bureau, and is always in touch with the Police.

The arrival of guests so remarkable as the Barringtons became, therefore, at once a focus for the curiosity and the ambition of the *boy sans*. And a rickshaw-man had told the lodge-keeper, whose wife told the wife of one of the cooks, who told the head-waiter, that there was some connection between these visitors and the rich Fujinami. All the *boy sans* knew what the Fujinami

meant; so here was a cornucopia of unwholesome secrets. It was the most likely game which had arrived at the Imperial Hotel for years, ever since the American millionaire's wife who ran away with a San Francisco Chinaman.

But to Geoffrey, when he broke up the gathering, the *boy sans* were just a lot of queer little Japs.

Asako was lying on her sofa, reading. Titine was brushing her hair. Asako, when she read, which was not often, preferred literature of the sentimental school, books like *The Rosary*, with stained glass in them, and tragedy overcome by nobleness of character.

'I've been lonely without you, and nervous,' she said, 'and I've had a visitor already.'

She pointed to a card lying on a small round table, a flimsy card printed—not engraved—on cream-coloured pasteboard. Geoffrey picked it up with a smile.

'Curio-dealers?' he asked.

Japanese letters were printed on one side, and English on the other.

S. ITO
Attorney of Law.

'Ito, that's the lawyer fellow, who pays the dividends. Did you see him?'

'Oh no, I was much too weary. But he has only just gone. You probably passed him on the stairs.'

Geoffrey could only think of the vivid gentleman who had been talking with Tanaka. The guide was sent for and questioned, but he knew nothing. The gentleman in green had merely stopped to ask him the time.