CHAPTER VIII

THE HALF-CASTE GIRL

Tomarite mo	Little butterfly!
Tsubasa wa ugoku	Even when it settles
Kocho kana!	Its wings are moving.

NEXT morning it was snowing and bitterly cold. Snow in Japan, snow in April, snow upon the cherry-trees, what hospitality was this?

The snow fell all day, muffling the silent city. Silence is at all times one of Tokyo's characteristics. For so large and important a metropolis it is strangely silent always. The only continuous street noise is the grating and crackling of the trams. The lumbering of horse vehicles and the pulsation of motor traffic are absent; for, as beasts of burden, horses are more costly than men, and in 1914 motor-cars were still a novelty. Since the war boom, of course, every *narikin* (*nouveau riche*) has rushed to buy his car; but even so, the state of the roads, which alternate between boulders and slush, do not encourage the motorist, and are impassable for heavy lorries. So incredible weights and bundles are moved on hand-barrows; and bales of goods and stacks of produce are punted down the dark waterways which give to parts of Tokyo a Venetian picturesqueness. Passengers too proud to walk flit past noiselessly in rubber-tyred rickshaws—which are not, as many believe, an ancient and typical Oriental conveyance, but the modern invention of an English missionary called Robinson. The hum of the city is dominated by

the screech of the tramcars in the principal streets and by the patter of the wooden clogs, an incessant, irritating sound like rain. But these were now hushed by the snow.

Neither the snow nor any other of Nature's discouragements can keep the Japanese for long indoors. Perhaps it is because their own houses are so draughty and uncomfortable.

This day they were out in their thousands, men and women, drifting aimlessly along the pavements, as is their wont, wrapped in grey ulsters, their necks protected by ragged furs, pathetic spoils of domestic tabbies, and their heads sheltered under those wide oil-paper umbrellas, which have become a symbol of Japan in foreign eyes, the gigantic sunflowers of rainy weather, huge blooms of dark blue or black or orange, inscribed with the name and address of the owner in cursive Japanese script.

Most of these people are wearing *ashida*, high wooden clogs perilous to the balance, which raise them las on stilts above the street level and add to the fantastical appearance of these silent shuffling multitudes.

The snow falls, covering the city's meannesses, its vulgar apings of Americanisms, its crude advertisements. On the other hand, the true native architecture asserts itself, and becomes more than ever attractive. The white purity seems to gather all this miniature perfection, these irregular roofs, these chalet balconies, these broad walls, and studies in rock and tree under a close-fitting cape, its natural winter garment.

The first chill of the rough weather kept Geoffrey and Asako by their fireside. But the indoor amenities of Japanese hotel life are few. There is a staleness in the public rooms, and an angular discord in the private sitting-rooms, which condemn the idea of a comfortable

day of reading, or of writing to friends at home about the Spirit of the East. So at the end of the first half of a desolate afternoon, a visit to the Embassy suggested itself.

They left the hotel, ushered on their way by bowing *boy sans*; and in a few minutes an unsteady motor-car, careless of obstacles and side-slips, had whirled them through the slushy streets into the British compound, which only wanted a robin to look like the conventional Christmas card.

It was a pleasant shock, after long travelling through countries modernised in a hurry, to be received by an English butler against a background of thick Turkey carpet, mahogany hall table and Bulle clock. It was like a bar of music long-forgotten to see the fall of snowy white cards accumulating in their silver bowl.

Lady Cynthia Cairns's drawing-room was not an artistic apartment; it was too comfortable for that. There were too many chairs and sofas; and they were designed on broad lines for the stolid, permanent sitting of stout comfortable bodies. There were too many photographs on view of persons distinguished for their solidity rather than for their good looks, the portraits of the guests whom one would expect to find installed in those chairs. A grand piano was there; but the absence of any music in its neighbourhood indicated that its purpose was chiefly to symbolise harmony in the home life, and to provide a spacious crush-room for the knick-knacks overflowing from many tables. These were dominated by a large signed photograph of Queen Victoria. In front of an open fireplace, where bright logs were crackling, slept an enormous black cat on a leopard's skin hearthrug.

Out of this sea of easy circumstances rose Lady Cynthia. A daughter of the famous Earl of Cheviot, hers was a short but not unmajestic figure, encased in

black silks which rustled and showed flashes of beads and jet in the dancing light of the fire. She had the firm pose of a man, and a face entirely masculine with strong lips and chin and humorous grey eyes, the face of a judge.

Miss Gwendolen Cairns, who had apparently been reading to her mother when the visitors arrived, was a tall girl with fair *cendré* hair. The simplicity of the cut of her dress and its pale green colour showed artistic sympathies of the old æsthetic kind. The maintained amiability of her expression and manner indicated her life's task of smoothing down feelings ruffled by her mother's asperities, and of oiling the track of her father's career.

'How are you, my dears?' Lady Cynthia was saying; 'I'm so glad you've come in spite of the tempest. Gwendolen was just reading me to sleep. Do you ever read to your husband, Mrs Barrington? It is a good idea, if only your voice is sufficiently monotonous.'

'I hope we haven't interrupted you,' murmured Asako, who was rather alarmed at the great lady's manner.

'It was a shock when I heard the bell ring. I cried out in my sleep,—didn't I, Gwendolen?—and said, "It's the Beebees!"'

'I'm glad it wasn't as bad as all that,' said Geoffrey, coming to his wife's rescue; 'would that have been the worst that could possibly happen?'

'The very worst,' Lady Cynthia answered. 'Professor Beebee teaches something or other to the Japanese, and he and Mrs Beebee have lived in Japan for the last forty years. They remind me of that old tortoise at the Zoo, who has lived at the bottom of the sea for so many centuries that he is quite covered with seaweed and barnacles. But they are very sorry for me, because I only came here yesterday. They arrive almost every

day to instruct me in the path in which I should go, and to eat my cakes by the dozen. They don't have any dinner the days they come here for tea. Mrs Beebee is the Queen of the Goonies.'

'Who are the Goonies?' asked Geoffrey.

'The rest of the old tortoises. They are missionaries and professors and their wives and daughters. The sons, of course, run away and go to the bad. There are quite a lot of the Goonies, and I see much more of them than I do of the *geishas* and the *samurais* and the *harakiris* and all the Eastern things which Gwendolen will talk about when she gets home. She is going to write a book, poor girl. There's nothing else to do in this country except to write about what is not here. It's very easy, you know. You copy it all out of some one else's book, only you illustrate it with your own snapshots. The publishers say that there is a small but steady demand, chiefly for circulating libraries in America. You see, I have been approached already on the subject, and I have not been here many months. So, you've seen Reggie Forsyth already, he tells me. What do you think of him?'

'Much the same as usual; he seemed rather bored.'

Lady Cynthia had led her guest away from the fireside, where Gwendolen Cairns was burbling to Asako.

Geoffrey could feel the searchlight of her judicial eye upon him, and a sensation like the pause when a great man enters a room. Something essential was going to invade the commonplace talk.

'Captain Barrington, your coming here just now is most providential. Reggie Forsyth is not bored at all, far from it.'

'I thought he would like the country,' said Geoffrey guardedly.

'He doesn't like the country. Why should he? But he likes somebody in the country. Now do you understand?'

'Yes,' agreed Geoffrey, 'he showed me the photograph of a half Japanese girl. He said that she was his inspiration for local colour.'

'Exactly, and she's turning his brain yellow,' snapped Lady Cynthia, forgetting, as everybody else did, including Geoffrey himself, that the same criticism might apply to Asako. However, Geoffrey was becoming more sensitive of late. He blushed a little and fidgeted, but he answered,—

'Reggie has always been easily inflammable.'

'Oh, in England, perhaps, it's good for a boy's education; but out here, Captain Barrington, it is different. I have lived for a long time East of Suez; and I know the danger of these love episodes in countries where there is nothing else to do, nothing else to talk about. I am a gossip myself; so I know the harm gossip can do.'

'But is it so serious, Lady Cynthia? Reggie rather laughed about it to me. He said, "I am in love always—and never!"'

'She is a dangerous young lady,' said the Ambassadress. 'Two years ago a young business man out here was engaged to be married to her. In the autumn his body was washed ashore near Yokohama. He had been bathing imprudently, and yet he was a good swimmer. Last year two officers attached to the Embassy fought a duel, and one was badly wounded. It was turned into an accident of course; but they were both admirers of hers. This year it is Reggie's turn. And Reggie is a man with a great future. It would be a shame to lose him.'

'Lady Cynthia, aren't you being rather pessimistic? Besides, what can I do?'

'Anything, everything! Eat with him, drink with him, play cards with him, go to the dogs with him—no, what a pity you are married! But, even so, it's better than nothing. Play tennis with him; take him to the

top of Fujiyama. I can do nothing with him. He flouts me publicly. The old man can give him an official scolding; and Reginald will just mimic him for the benefit of the Chancery. I can hear them laughing all the way from here when Reggie is doing what he calls one of his 'stunts.' But you—why, he can see in your face the whole of London, the London which he respects and appreciates in spite of his cosmopolitan airs. He can see himself introducing Miss Yaé Smith in Lady Everington's drawing-room as Mrs Forsyth.'

'Is there a great objection?' asked Geoffrey.

'It is impossible,' said Lady Cynthia.

A sudden weariness came over Geoffrey. Did that ruthless 'Impossible' apply to his case also? Would Lady Everington's door be closed to him on his return? Was he guilty of that worst offence against Good Form, a *mésalliance*? Or was Asako saved—by her money? Something unfair was impending. He looked at the two girls seated by the fireside, sipping their tea and laughing together. He must have shown signs of his embarrassment, for Lady Cynthia said,—

'Don't be absurd, Captain Barrington. The case is entirely different. A lady is always a lady, whether she is born in England or Japan. Miss Smith is not a lady; still worse, she is a half-caste, the daughter of an adventurer journalist and a tea-house woman. What can one expect? It is bad blood.'

After taking leave of the Cairns, Geoffrey and Asako crossed the garden compound, white and Christmas-like under its covering of snow. They found their way down the by-path which led to the discreet seclusion of Reggie Forsyth's domain. The leaping of fire shadows against the lowered blinds gave a warm and welcoming impression of shelter and comfort; and still more

welcoming were the sounds of the piano. It was a pleasure for the travellers to hear, for they had long been unaccustomed to the sound of music. Music should be the voice of the soul of the house; in the discord of hotels it is lost and scattered, but the home which is without music is dumb and imperfect.

Reggie must have heard them coming, for he changed the dreamy melody which he was playing into the chorus of a popular song which had been rife in London a year ago. Geoffrey laughed. 'Father's home again! Father's home again!' he hummed, fitting the words to the tune, as he waited for the door to open.

They were greeted in the passage by Reggie. He was dressed in all respects like a Japanese gentleman, in black silk *haori* (cloak), brown wadded kimono, and fluted *hakama* (skirt). He wore white *tabi* (socks), and straw *zori* (slippers). It is a becoming and sensible dress for any man.

'I thought it must be you,' he laughed, 'so I played the watchword. Fancy you're being so homesick already. Please come in, Mrs Barrington. I have often longed to see you in Japan, but I never thought you would come; and let me take your coat off. You will find it quite warm indoors.'

It was warm indeed. There was the heat of a greenhouse in Reggie's artistically ordered room. It was larger too than on the occasion of Geoffrey's visit; for the folding doors which led into a further apartment were thrown open. Two big fires were blazing; and old gold screens, glittering like Midas's treasury, warded off the draught from the windows. The air was heavy with fumes of incense still rising from a hugh brass brazier, full of glowing charcoal and grey sand, placed in the middle of the floor. In one corner stood the Buddha table twinkling in the firelight. The miniature trees were disposed along the inner wall. There was no other

furniture except an enormous black cushion lying between the brazier and the fireplace; and in the middle of the cushion—a little Japanese girl.

She was squatting on her white-gloved toes in native fashion. Her kimono was sapphire blue, and it was fastened by a hugh silver sash with a blue and green peacock embroidered on the fold of the bow, which looked like great wings and was almost as big as the rest of the little person put together. Her back was turned to the guests; and she was gazing into the flames in an attitude of reverie. She seemed unconscious of everything, as though still listening to the echo of the silent music. Reggie in his haste to greet his visitors had not noticed the hurried solicitude to arrange the set of the kimono to a nicety in order to indicate exactly the right pose.

She looked like a jewelled butterfly on a great black leaf.

'Yaé—Miss Smith,' said Reggie, 'these are my old friends whom I was telling you about.'

The small creature rose slowly with a dreamy grace, and stepped off her cushion as a fairy might alight from her walnut-shell carriage.

'I am very pleased to meet you,' she purred.

It was the stock American phrase which has crossed the Pacific westwards; but the citizen's brusqueness was replaced by the condescension of a queen.

Her face was a delicate oval of the same creamy smoothness as Asako's. But the chin, which in Asako's case receded a trifle in obedience to Japanese canons of beauty, was thrust vigorously forward; and the curved lips in their Cupid's bow seemed moulded for kissing by generations of European passions, whereas about Japanese mouths there is always something sullen and pinched and colourless. The bridge of her nose and her eyes of deep olive green, the eyes of a wild-cat, gave the lie to her mother's race.

Reggie's artistry could not help watching the two women together with appreciative satisfaction. Yaé was even smaller and finer-fingered than the pure-bred Japanese. Ever since he had first met Yaé Smith, he had compared and contrasted her in his mind with Asako Barrington. He had used both as models for his dainty music. His harmonies, he was wont to explain, came to him in woman's shape. To express Japan he must see a Japanese woman. Not that he had any interest in Japanese women, physically. They are too different from our women, he used to think; and the difference repelled and fascinated him. It is so wide that it can only be crossed by frank sensuality or by blind imagination. But the artist needs his flesh-and-blood interpreter if he is to get even as far as a misunderstanding. So in figuring to himself the East, Reggie had at first made use of his memory of Asako, with her European education built up over the inheritance of Japan. Later he met Yaé Smith, through the paper walls of whose Japanese existence the instincts of her Scottish forefathers kept forcing their unruly way.

Geoffrey could not define his thoughts so precisely; but something unruly stirred in his consciousness, when he saw the ghost of his days of courtship rise before him in the deep blue kimono. His wife had certainly made a great abdication when she abandoned her native dress for plain blue serges. Of course he could not have Asako looking like a doll; but still—had he fallen in love with a few yards of silk?

Yaé Smith seemed most anxious to please in spite of the affectation of her poses, which perhaps were necessary to her, lest, looking so much like a plaything, she might be treated as such. She always wanted to be liked by people. This was her leading characteristic. It was at the root of her frailties,—a soil over-fertilised from which weeds spring apace.

She was voluble in a gentle catlike way, praising the rings on Asako's fingers, and the cut and material of her dress. But her eyes were for ever glancing towards Geoffrey. He was so very tall and broad, standing in the framework of the folding doors beside the slim figure of Reggie, more girlish than ever in the skirts of his kimono.

Captain Barrington, the son of a lord! How fine he must look in uniform, in that cavalry uniform, with the silver cuirass and the plumed helmet like the English soldiers in her father's books at home!

'Your husband is very big,' she said to Asako.

'Yes, he is,' said Asako, 'much too big for Japan.'

'Oh, I should like that,' said the little Eurasian, 'it must be nice.'

There was a warmth, a sincerity in the tone which made Asako stare at her companion. But the childish face was innocent and smiling. The languid curve of the smile and the opalescence of the green eyes betrayed none of their secrets to Asako's inexperience.

Reggie sat down at the piano, and, still watching the two women, he began to play.

'This is the Yaé Sonata,' he explained to Geoffrey.

It began with some bars from an old Scottish song :—

'Had we never loved so sadly,
Had we never loved so madly,
Never loved and never parted,
We had ne'er been broken-hearted.'

Insensibly the pathetic melody faded away into the *staccato* beat of a *geisha's* song, with more rhythm than tune, which doubled and redoubled its pace, stumbling and leaping up again over strange syncopations.

All of a sudden the musician stopped.

'I can't describe your wife, now that I see her,' he said.

'I don't know any dignified old Japanese music, something like the *gavottes* of Couperin only in a setting of Kyoto and gold screens; and then, there must be a dash of something very English which she has acquired from you—"Home, Sweet Home" or "Sally in our Alley."

'Never mind, old chap!' said Geoffrey, 'play "Father's home again!"

Reggie shook himself; and then struck up the rolling chorus; but, as he interpreted it, his mood turned pensive again. The tone was hushed, the time slower. The vulgar tune expressed itself suddenly in deep melancholy. It brought back to the two young men, more forcibly than the most inspired *concerto*, the memory of England, the sparkle of the theatres, the street din of London, and the warmth of good company,—all that had seemed sweet to them in a time which was distant now.

Reggie ceased playing. The two girls were sitting together now on the big black cushion in front of the fire. They were looking at a portfolio of Japanese prints, Reggie's embryo collection.

The young diplomat said to his friend,—

'Geoffrey, you've not been in the East long enough to be exasperated by it. I have. So our ideas will not be in sympathy.'

'It's not what I thought it was going to be, I must admit. Everything is so much of a muchness. If you've seen one temple, you've seen the lot, and the same with everything here.'

'That is the first stage, Disappointment. We have heard so much of the East and its splendours, the gorgeous East and the rest of it. The reality is small and sordid, and like so much that is ugly in our own country.'

'Yes, they wear shocking bad clothes, don't they, directly they get out of kimonos; and even the kimonos look dingy and dirty.'

'They are,' said Reggie. 'Yours would be, if you had to keep a wife and eight children on thirty shillings a month.'

Then he added,—

'The second stage in the observer's progress is Discovery. Have you read Lafcadio Hearn's books about Japan?'

'Yes, some of them,' answered Geoffrey. 'It strikes me that he was a thorough-paced liar.'

'No, he was poet, a poet; and he jumped over the first stage to dwell for some time in the second, probably because he was by nature shortsighted. That is a great advantage for discoverers.'

'But what do you mean by the second stage?'

'The stage of Discovery! Have you ever walked about a Japanese city in the twilight when the evening bell sounds from a hidden temple? Have you turned into the by-streets and watched the men returning to their wise little houses and the family groups assembled to meet them and help them change into their kimonos? Have you heard the splashing and the chatter of the bath-houses which are the evening clubs of the common people and the great clearing-houses of gossip? Have you heard the broken *samisen* music tracking you down a street of *geisha* houses? Have you seen the *geisha* herself in her blue cloak sitting rigid and expressionless in the rickshaw which is carrying her off to meet her lover? Have you heard the drums of Priapus beating from the gay quarters? Have you watched the crowds which gather round a temple festival, buying queer little plants for their homes and farthing toys for their children, crowding to the fortune-teller's booth for news of good luck and bad luck, throwing their penny to the god and clapping their hands to attract his attention? Have you seen anything of this without a feeling of deep pleasure and a wonder as to how these people live and

think, what we have got in common with them, and what we have got to learn from them?'

'I think I know what you mean,' said Geoffrey. 'It's all very picturesque, but they always seem to be hiding something.'

'Exactly,' said his friend, 'and every man of intelligence who has to live in this country thinks that he need only learn their language and use their customs, and then he will find out what is hidden. That is what Lafcadio Hearn did; and that is why I wear a kimono. But what did he find out? A lot of pretty stories, echoes of old civilisation and folk-lore; but of the mind and heart of the Japanese people—the only coloured people, after all, who have held their heads up against the white races—little or nothing until he reached the third stage, Disillusionment. Then he wrote, *Japan, an Interpretation*, which is his best book.'

'I haven't read it.'

'You ought to. His other things are mere melodies, the kind of stuff I can play to you by the hour. This is a serious book of history and political science.'

'Sounds a bit dry for me,' laughed Geoffrey.

'It is a disillusioned man's explanation of the country into which he had tried to sink, but which had rejected him. He explains the present by the past. That is reasonable. The dead are the real rulers of Japan, he says. Underneath the surface changing, the nation is deeply conservative, suspicious of all interference and unconventionality, sullenly self-satisfied; and above all, still as much locked in its primitive family system as it was a thousand years ago. You cannot be friends with a Japanese unless you are friends with his family; and you cannot be friends with his family unless you belong to it. This is the deadlock; and this is why we never get any forwarder.'

'Then I've got a chance since I've got a Japanese family.'

'I don't know, of course,' said Reggie, 'but I shouldn't think they would have much use for you. They will receive you most politely; but they will look upon you as an interloper and they will try to steer you out of the country.'

'But my wife?' said Geoffrey, 'she is their own flesh and blood, after all.'

'Well, of course I don't know. But if they are extremely friendly, I should look out, if I were you. The Japanese are conventionally hospitable, but they are not cordial to strangers unless they have a very strong motive.'

Geoffrey Barrington looked in the direction where his wife was seated on a corner of the big cushion, turning over one by one a portfolio full of parti-coloured woodprints on their broad white mounts. The firelight flickered round her like a crowd of importunate thoughts. She felt that he was looking at her, and glanced across at him.

'Can you see in there, Mrs Barrington, or shall I turn the lights on?' asked her host.

'Oh, no' answered the little lady, 'that would spoil it. The pictures look quite alive in the firelight. What a lovely collection you've got!'

'There's nothing very valuable there,' said Reggie, 'but they are very effective, I think, even the cheap ones.'

Asako was holding up a pied engraving of a sinuous Japanese woman, an Utamaro from an old block recut, in dazzling raiment, with her sash tied in front of her and her head bristling with amber pins like a porcupine.

'Geoffrey, will you please take me to see the Yoshiwara?' she asked.

The request dismayed Geoffrey. He knew well enough what was to be seen at the Yoshiwara. He

would have been interested to visit the licensed quarter of the *demi-monde* himself in the company of—say Reggie Forsyth. But this was a branch of inquiry which to his mind should be reserved for men alone. Nice women never think of such things. That his own wife should wish to see the place and, worse still, should express that wish in public was a blatant offence against Good Form, which could only be excused by her innocent ignorance.

But Reggie who was used to the curiosity of every tourist, male and female, about the night-life of Tokyo, answered readily,—

'Yes, Mrs Barrington. It's well worth seeing. We must arrange to go down there.'

'Miss Smith tells me,' said Asako, 'that all these lovely gay creatures are Yoshiwara girls; and that you can see them there now.'

'Not that identical lady of course,' said Reggie, who had joined the group by the fireside, 'she died a hundred years ago; but her professional great-granddaughters are still there.'

'And I can see them!' Asako clapped her hands. 'Ladies are allowed to go and look? It does not matter? It is not improper?'

'Oh no,' said Yaé Smith, 'my brothers have taken me. Would you like to go?'

'Yes, I would,' said Asako, glancing at her husband, who however showed no signs of approval.