

Sakura, sakura!

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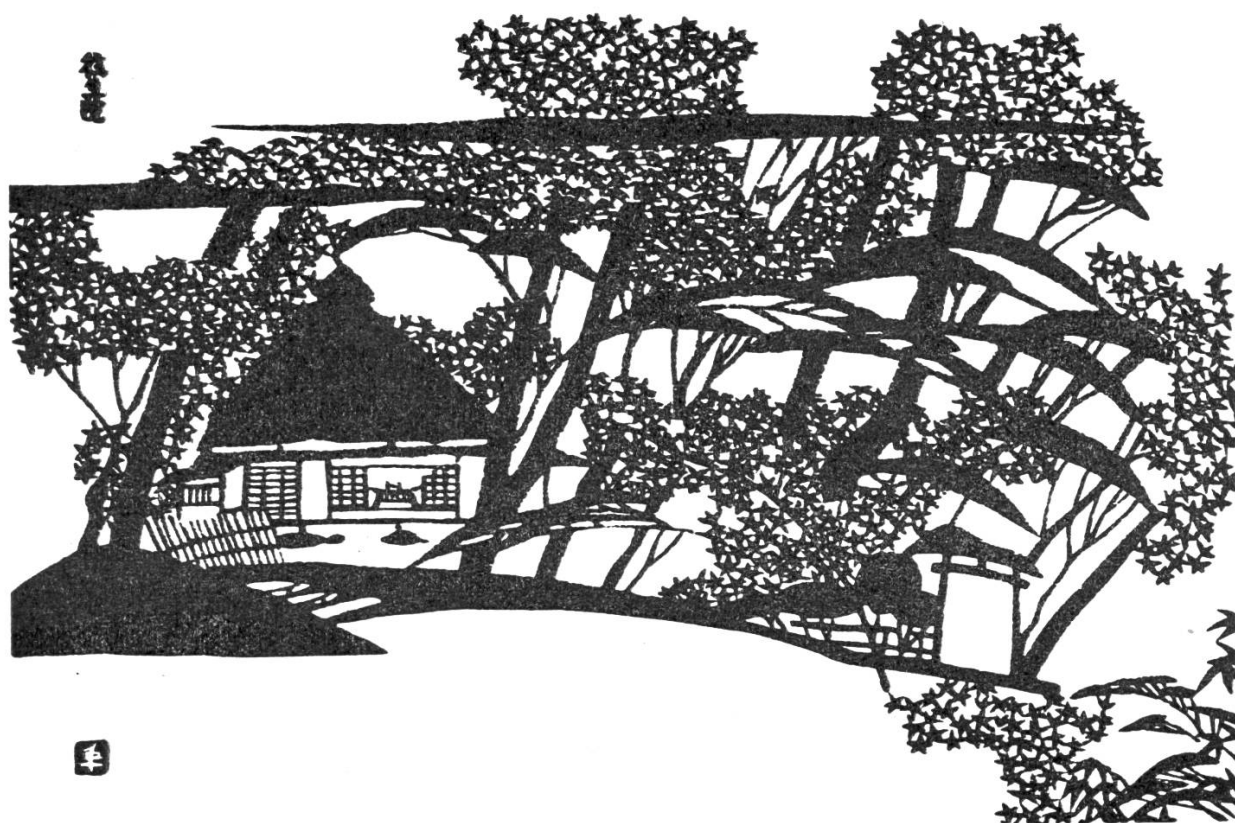
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SAKURA, SAKURA!

Have you ever dreamed of a land where no one had heard of the Sodom legend or of Harry Labouchere, where both the Law and Public Opinion left questions of personal morals to the persons concerned, and where the word 'sin' was merely an exotic religious term, as meaningless to the great majority as, say, the word 'karma' to the average Englishman? A few years ago I had a tantalizing glimpse of such a country, and every Spring my thoughts turn nostalgically Eastward to that lovely land where I left my heart among the cherry-blossoms.

I visited Japan as one of ten passengers in a cargo-liner, arriving quite uninformed except that there were earthquakes and a volcano called Mount Fuji, and that the inhabitants were heathens with a bad war record, who also flooded world markets with cheap rubbish. I was quite prepared to hate them on sight and pictured myself not bothering to go ashore in Japan at all, even though we were visiting four ports.

But this mood did not last long, and I was soon away seeing the sights with my neighbour. He was twenty-five, full of zest for living, and our daylight hours were filled with sightseeing of every kind. If it was fine, we toured the mountains and lakes near the ports or wandered around castles and shrines, many of which we were surprised to learn were older than Westminster Abbey. If it rained, we visited shops and department stores, finding the latter in no way inferior to ours.

I was delighted with the place and no less charmed with the people. I found them good-looking, good-natured, obliging and exquisitely polite, as much to each other as to visitors. Their views on sex appeared to be Garden of Eden (pre Serpent) standard, something of a shock to the Englishman. One day I visited a bath-house, a uniquely Japanese institution where I left my shoes and clothes in

lockers and went into a large tiled room where men were soaking themselves in a large pool of scalding water, getting out, soaping, rinsing, then hopping back in for a final soak before getting dressed. In the midst of this bevy of naked Oriental beauty wandered quite unconcernedly a girl with a bucket and mop. She passed the time of day with the regulars who paid no more attention to her, or vice-versa, than if she had been another man. The cashier, before whom all dressed and undressed, was also a woman. She looked me over casually, with the same passing interest as she would have looked over a lone European woman in the female side of the house. I was told that in country villages there was no female side, and that men and women still bathed all in together.

Apart from organised visits to Kabuki &c., I spent my evenings aboard as I was generally tired out by my day's exertions. My neighbour, however, frequented the bars, to which I accompanied him on a couple of occasions as part of my education. In these establishments where lights were dim but smiles were bright, one could relax in charming company! They were not to be confused with brothels, although the girls in the bars were for hire. They were perfect little ladies, dainty, well-mannered: there were very few whom I should have been at all ashamed to be seen out with. In the bar they acted as hostesses and would hold hands and make small talk for the price of a few drinks. They took nothing themselves but an insipid cordial which cost the customer about fiveshillings, and received a share of the profit. Some of the larger bars also owned hotels, to which their girls directed customers wishing to spend the night with them. It was a very well-organised business.

On what was to have been the last day in Japan I met an American tourist whom it did not take long to recognise as one of ourselves. He was detestably conceited and loud-mouthed, but I decided to put up with his condescension until he had taken me to a 'gay bar' he mentioned. My neighbour was shopping with his current bar-girl, so I had no explaining to do.

We met at eight and went into a small, rather obscure bar. Its exterior lacked any colourful sign or neon lighting. In fact, with merely a single light over the door and a small plaque inscribed BAR SAKURA, it looked rather like the entrance to a doctor's surgery. Inside, it was decorated with sketchy brown murals and was austere furnished. A few boys in white coats eyed us coldly as we entered. Only the barman displayed any interest. The American looked the boys over appraisingly, beckoned to one and told him peremptorily to «Come here!» The boy did so, accepted a drink, and left with him after some money had been handed to the barman.

The atmosphere changed immediately. My companion, I discovered, had been a 'butterfly boy'. Detested by bar-girls and boys alike, these people would not settle down with one of them for the duration of their stay in a place, but had to spend every night with a different person. Word soon got around, and if they could get a partner at all in the end it was only at a price.

The boys introduced themselves. Of those I remember, there was Tatsu, small, sweet-faced, a sort of male Bardot. He tousled my hair, asked for a drink, kissed me, wriggled into my lap and said what about coming out for short time, eh? I said no, but he made it hard! Then Ichiro, rather good-looking and who spoke very good English. He also asked for a drink, held my hand, nuzzled up to me and suggested the same thing. I said no, I didn't think so. Having had some rather ghastly experiences with prostitutes at home and on the Continent, I thought just larking about like this was going quite far enough. Worthy of men-

tion was Masao, who wore glasses. «Donnez-moi un baiser!» he exclaimed in fractured French. I complied, asking where he had learned it, and received the astonishing reply that he was studying English and French at High School!

Customers came and went. Masao was soon invited out by a pleasant-faced Danish seaman, and Tatsu and Ichiro were sitting one astride each knee of the fattest Japanese I have ever seen, with whom they presently left. I bought another drink and sat morosely over it, thinking it was a pretty futile evening after all and that I might as well have stayed aboard.

«You very quiet,» said a voice. Looking up, I saw a man with a tray clearing empty glasses from the tables. He was taller than the others and quite a bit older. Yes, I supposed disagreeably, I was. «Me quiet, same!» He smiled, a slow, warming smile which spread over his face and shone down into my heart like a ray of sunshine, and then he was gone.

He reappeared after some time with a case of beer which he placed behind the bar. I waved him over, ordered another drink and invited him to have one. «No can good English do,» he warned as he came over with two glasses and sat down. Having asked my age (the first thing anyone asks you in Japan) and decided that thirty-three was a very good age to be, he told me his name was Michiya, aged twenty-five, and that the loves of his life were baseball, the piano and photography. Conversation was rather laboured, but I had a pocket dictionary and found it pleasant and rewarding thus to converse with this refined and attractive young man. I am quite ignorant of baseball, but as music is my living and photography my hobby I was able to meet him on much common ground. In Schubert we shared a favourite composer, and without attracting attention we hummed little snatches of this and that. He regretted my departure, as there was soon to be a photographic exhibition in which he had several entries. Perhaps we could have played some Schubert, too... We talked on, our drinks forgotten. Tatsu and Ichiro came back, Ichiro's breath leaving no doubt about how he had been occupied. They came over, holding hands and so on, and asking for drinks. I ordered a round and Michiya went over to get them. He made no attempt to compete with the others' attentions, and obviously could not have cared less whether I bought him a drink or not. I said good-bye with genuine regret that I had not met him sooner and spent more time there. How often does one meet such a person on the last night in a strange town!

My neighbour informed me at breakfast that sailing had been postponed from noon until 8 a.m. the following day. Having in ignorance farewelled his lady-love, he invited me to spend this final evening doing the rounds of the tea-houses, which we had still never visited. He was spending the day with a married couple, but would meet me for dinner aboard. I accepted gladly; I was fond of him and enjoyed his company. Having also said my own farewell I decided it was better not to go back to the bar, nor did I want him asking questions if I put him off in favour of an undisclosed assignation.

My last day in Japan was fine and perfect. Following directions in the Japan Guide Book I climbed to a reservoir behind the town and saw cherry-blossoms in all their glory. All around it grew the cherry-trees, shrouding the banks in a pink mist, reflected in the water as in a mirror.

On my way down I passed through the grounds of a Buddhist temple, also planted with the lovely trees. Petals were falling, carpeting the ground in pink and white. I sat down to rest beside an old monk who was enjoying the sun.

He addressed me in English, and in conversation I admired the cherry-blossoms. «Yes,» he said, «the Japanese love flowers very much. The Chrysanthemum is the Imperial symbol. Buddhists revere the Lotus, which although it grows in the mud and filth is not corrupted by it, but remains clean and pure. And the Sakura,» he indicated the cherry, «illustrates the transience of life. For a brief period it is glorious, then all so soon it is gone from us. The Japanese admire the Sakura because it never withers, but falls cleanly from the tree instead of clinging rotting to the stalk.»

I pondered his words as I returned to the ship. The incorruptible lotus, the transient, suicidal cherry: in these few minutes' conversation I had found a pointer to the inner Japanese nature which I had failed to discover in the guide-books. One of these, however, contained some Japanese sayings. I had read them over many times, but only now saw the implication of the proverb 'A fallen flower returns not to the branch'.

Back aboard, a note was wedged in my door: «*Sorry old man, but I'm afraid the tea-houses are off. Decided to have a final fling with Teruko and have just dashed back for more money. See you! G.*» I felt bitterly disappointed. It was only a trivial thing which any normal man would have dismissed with a shrug. But I am not a 'normal' man, and it is always trifles that upset me.

The ship had moved out to a buoy and could now be reached only by service launch. One would be leaving in five minutes. I collected all my remaining yen, picked up my overcoat, locked my cabin and walked resolutely to the gangway.

The barman translated my invitation and Michiya said he would be delighted. I paid the bar 1000 yen (£1) to let him go, and out we went. We had a lovely evening. Tea-houses charge an admission price entitling the customer to refreshments plus entertainment, which ranges from bawdy Japanese sketches, pops and jazz, to recitals of concert pieces. We took in most of them. When I finally suggested going to a hotel, Michiya asked what price I had in mind. I said I wasn't particular, adding: «But the more I spend on the hotel, the less there'll be left for you!» «You no speak money!» he cried. «This no work! You my friend!»

Had the barman mistranslated me? I thought I had made it clear enough what I wanted. But while the other boys had immediately come to terms of intimacy, Michiya had not even shaken hands. Was it his practice to go to bed with customers, then? Perhaps I should go back to the landing-stage. «Michiya,» I said very slowly, «will you stay with me?» I wondered whether a flicker of disappointment passed over his face, but his eyes revealed nothing. «Yes,» he said shortly, after a pause, «I stay. We go hotel, or Japanese inn?»

We went to an inn. Leaving our shoes in the porch, we put on house slippers and were taken to a room. Michiya, assuming an air of complete authority, inspected the bed and the towels, ordered a bath and some tea, and asked for an extra kimono for me as he thought I might feel the cold. The maid returned with a pot of tea, two small handleless Japanese cups, a thick kimono and my change. No questions were asked, no eyebrows raised. We were simply cash customers and that was that.

Our room was large and airy. Its plain walls were adorned only by a scroll hanging in a small alcove, in which was also a dwarf tree in a pot. The floor was covered with thick, springy reed-matting. The room could be divided in two by sliding screens, and on the floor in the larger part was a double mat-

tress made up with an eiderdown, German style. By the bed, also on the floor, were a telephone and a reading-lamp. In the smaller part, with a cushion either side of it, stood a little table about a foot high on which the tea-tray had been placed.

We undressed before taking tea. Michiya stripped well; his body was finely proportioned and his baseball evidently kept him very fit. His underwear was well-worn, but of snowy whiteness. He helped me into my kimonos, showing me how to fasten the thick one over the thin one in the proper manner. Feeling like a Samurai in my robes, and probably looking a perfect ass, I squatted clumsily on my cushion. Michiya, in the manner born, sat comfortably back on his heels. His Japanese posture, calm features and grey kimono, the little table and tea-set, reed-matting and all, presented a study in harmony in which I myself struck the only jarring note.

The bathroom was a miniature of the one I had visited, containing a tiled pool for two people. After washing and rinsing we sat side-by-side, up to our shoulders in the hot water. We were hardly three inches apart; I could feel the little eddies of water as he breathed and moved his limbs. We were unclothed and together — but somehow not together. I wanted him badly, yet could break neither into his reserve nor out of my own. We talked and laughed good-humouredly, but there was a line which neither could bring himself to cross.

Bed was no better. Unreasonably, I raged inwardly that I had chosen this cold, aloof man. Goodness me, the others had been more oncoming in the bar itself! What would Tatsu, for instance, be up to now? Masao, too, would certainly be groping about, and not altogether for want of his glasses! Michiya's face was about a foot away from mine. It was a thin, rather rectangular face with a tall, straight nose, firm mouth and the real sloe eyes, beautifully set under a high forehead. There he was, for the taking! But I was as nervous as a bridegroom. His words 'You my friend' rang in my ears, and although I should never see him again I felt that to part friends was the most important thing in the world. I looked into his eyes, trying to tell him of my distress, and of the affection and the respect from which it stemmed. Perhaps he read my message, for he took my hand lightly in his and laid it gently against his cheek. «Oh, Michiya, Michiya!» I choked, as we sought each other's arms and lips in the consummation of our friendship.

I have had more passionate lovers, but never one more generous, more inspiring, more satisfying. He seemed to be exploring, discovering for himself the wonder of sex, the nobility of a relationship between males. It was a fiction, of course: how could a man in his profession have anything left to discover? Art was concealing art, and never had it been more beautifully concealed. But everything he did showed the same proficiency: his photography was exhibition class; his piano repertoire included Schubert; he was a reserve-member of a baseball team. Was it surprising that he excelled in this field also? He was completely uninhibited, yet without the slightest hint of lewdness or of impropriety. The feeling communicated itself to me, also, filling me with an innocent delight.

Enfolded in a mantle of tenderness, we lay once more looking into each other's faces before turning out the light. A ship's siren sounded distantly from the harbour. «That sad sound,» he sighed. «It mean somebody friend go away.» Throwing an arm around me, he drew himself close.

Sharp at six I awoke. Michiya's arm was still around me in his last waking act of affection, and the beauty of a peacefully-sleeping man hung over him

like a halo. To disturb such a picture was a sacrilege, but the launch left at seven. He opened his eyes and stretched luxuriously, and our lips met for the last time.

We got out of the tram with time to spare, so walked round the square for a last few minutes together. I gave him all the Japanese money I had left, which amounted to about 5000 yen. He thanked me absently and put it in his pocket without looking at it. We walked in silence: it was more expressive than any mere words. I felt as if my heart were breaking.

Most of the other single male passengers were on the pier, looking cross and bleary-eyed. I noted with secret satisfaction that no ladies had come to see their men off. My neighbour greeted me with some surprise and called me 'a dark horse'. «Yes,» I said, «you never know, do you!» Michiya wrung my hand in a firm clasp as the launch came alongside. «Sayo nara,» he said in a low voice. I could not answer. His eyes were very bright. Could it be that there were tears in them?

No, the tears were in mine. To him I could only be one of many customers; he had his own circle of friends in music and baseball. But for those twelve wonderful hours he had given himself to me without reserve. I had left the ship feeling rejected, dispirited and desperately lonely. In Michiya's presence I had felt wanted, felt loved, and had learned once more that sex could be beautiful. There was something of the lotus in his make-up, surely, that in a profession which cannot but have its sordid aspect, he should have remained so essentially clean-minded and gentlemanly.

He waved in farewell as the launch pulled away, then was lost to sight as it swung out towards the ship. I did not look back. «Who was that?» my neighbour had asked as I waved too. «Oh, just the porter from the hotel where I stayed the night,» I answered. «They give you wonderful service, don't they!»

In contrast to yesterday's sun, a leaden sky threatened rain. After breakfast I went to bed. There was no hope of any photos, and I had no wish to see my heart's resting-place receding from view. Better make a clean break, and not look at it again.

Yes — make a clean break! Alone in my bunk, I thought over the night's doings. My fleeting romance would never wither, never lose its fragrance; its petals had been scattered at the height of its brief glory. Could any name for our meeting-place have been more appropriate than 'Bar Sakura'? We knew only each other's first names and it was very unlikely that I should ever visit Japan again, so this was good-bye for keeps. The fallen flower would never return to the branch.

Back in London the war-drums were beating, and the words 'vice', 'perverts', 'degenerates' and others were being bandied about in the newspapers. On one side of the page the churches were saying that a man's morals were not the Law's business, while on the other they were damning homosexual practice as 'sin'. I was sickened of the whole business. To my mind the greatest sin, if indeed such a thing exists, is the implanting of the seeds of doubt, mistrust and intolerance in the human mind. Michiya lived with his parents, who knew all about his employment; he had never been told he was doing wrong, either legally or morally. I, conversely, had been told so often that I had come close to believing it myself.

By way of protest, I refused a donation to a Foreign Missions collector and threw an accumulation of their literature into the dustbin. If this was what

we were offering Japan, I did not want a part in it. But it could be no more than a gesture. Japan was already changing, and the scene I describe may even now no longer exist. As her ancient culture falls a prey to Westernism and her optimistic folk-religion is encroached upon by Christianity and its handmaiden Mrs Grundy, standards are changing. The bar-girl will come to be looked upon as a Scarlet Woman, a corollary to which will be the attachment of the new-found label of 'sin' to the love of man for man.

*

Once again it is Spring. The cherry-blossom is overhead, and on this same seat is sitting a neat little Japanese. But this is not Japan, it is Regent's Park; I suppose he is an Asian student. He smiled at me when he sat down. Shall I try him with the only sentence I remember from my phrase-book: «Sakura wa kirei desu, ne?»

Perhaps he, too, is thinking of a far-away land. One gets homesick for Japan at the time of the cherry-blossoms.

by «Centaur»

Book Review

THE GOLD-RIMMED SPECTACLES

by Giorgio Bassani

(Atheneum New York 1960 — 143 pages)

This slim novel, lucidly translated by Isabel Quigley from the Italian, is most subtle in its penetration of two minorities: homosexual and Jewish.

Dr. Fadigate is well liked by his fellow citizens in Ferrara, who become aware of his homosexual proclivities only gradually. The discovery does not militate against him, as he is a model of sobriety—until he falls in with the handsome Deliliers, a student friend of the narrator. The doctor's infatuation with this irresponsible rascal, at a seaside resort where they spend the summer, is a degrading experience for him.

The parallel between his ill-fated liaison and the tragedy of the young Jewish adolescent caught in the wave of antisemitism enkindled by Germany before the war is delicately drawn. Fadigati's suicide at the end is fitting, in view of the holocaust soon to be unleashed on Europe.

The only slightly false note in the book is the improbability of the link drawing together a young university student and an elderly doctor, between whom there is no fleshly bond. Perhaps this is a minor flaw in a story that sympathetically and sensitively explores the plight of misunderstood minorities.

Diego de Angelis