

The Invisible Japanese Gentlemen

Graham Greene

There were eight Japanese gentlemen having a fish dinner at Bentley's. They spoke to each other rarely in their incomprehensible tongue, but always with a courteous smile and often with a small bow. All but one of them wore glasses. Sometimes the pretty girl who sat in the window beyond

5 gave them a passing glance, but her own problem seemed too serious for her to pay real attention to anyone in the world except herself and her companion.

She had thin blonde hair and her face was pretty and *petite* in a Regency way, oval like a miniature, though she had a harsh way of

10 speaking - perhaps the accent of the school, Roedean or Cheltenham Ladies' College, which she had not long ago left. She wore a man's signet-ring on her engagement finger, and as I sat down at my table, with the Japanese gentlemen between us, she said, 'So you see we could marry next week.'

15 'Yes?'

Her companion appeared a little distraught. He refilled their glasses with Chablis and said, 'Of course, but Mother . . . ' I missed some of the conversation then, because the eldest Japanese gentleman leant across the table, with a smile and a little bow, and uttered a whole paragraph like the

20 mutter from an aviary, while everyone bent towards him and smiled and listened, and I couldn't help attending to him myself. The girl's fiancé" resembled her physically. I could see them as two miniatures hanging side by side on white wood panels. He should have been a young officer in Nelson's navy in the days when a certain weakness and

25 sensitivity were no bar to promotion. She said, 'They are giving me an advance of five hundred pounds, and they've sold the paperback rights already.' The hard commercial declaration came as a shock to me; it was a shock too that she was one of my own profession. She couldn't have been more than twenty. She deserved

30 better of life.

He said, 'But my uncle . . . '

'You know you don't get on with him. This way we shall be quite independent.'

You will be independent, he said grudgingly.

'The wine-trade wouldn't really suit you, would it? I spoke to my

5 publisher about you and there's a very good chance . . . if you began with some reading . . . '

'But I don't know a thing about books.'

'I would help you at the start.'

'My mother says that writing is a good crutch . . . '

10 'Five hundred pounds and half the paperback rights is a pretty solid crutch,' she said.

'This Chablis is good, isn't it?'

'I daresay.'

I began to change my opinion of him - he had not the Nelson touch. He

15 was doomed to defeat. She came alongside and raked him fore and aft. 'Do you know what Mr Dwight said?'

'Who's Dwight?'

'Darling, you don't listen, do you? My publisher. He said he hadn't read a first novel in the last ten years which showed such powers of

20 observation.'

'That's wonderful,' he said sadly, 'wonderful.'

'Only he wants me to change the title.'

'Yes?'

'He doesn't like *The Ever-Rolling Stream*. He wants to call it *The*

25 *Chelsea Set*'

'What did you say?'

I agreed. I do think that with a first novel one should try to keep one's publisher happy. Especially when, really, he's going to pay for our marriage, isn't he?'

30 'I see what you mean.' Absent-mindedly he stirred his Chablis with a fork - perhaps before the engagement he had always bought champagne.

The Japanese gentlemen had finished their fish and with very little English but with elaborate courtesy they were ordering from the middle-aged waitress a fresh fruit salad. The girl looked at them, and then

35 she looked at me, but I think she saw only the future. I wanted very much to warn her against any future based on a first novel called *The Chelsea Set*. I was on the side of his mother. It was a humiliating thought, but I was probably about her mother's age. I wanted to say to her, Are you certain your publisher is telling you the

truth? Publishers are human. They may sometimes exaggerate the virtues of the young and the pretty. Will *The Chelsea Set* be read in five years? Are you prepared for the years of effort, 'the long defeat of doing nothing well'? As the years pass writing will not become any easier, the daily

5 effort will grow harder to endure, those 'powers of observation' will become enfeebled; you will be judged, when you reach your forties, by performance and not by promise.

'My next novel is going to be about St Tropez.'

'I didn't know you'd ever been there.'

10 'I haven't. A fresh eye's terribly important. I thought we might settle down there for six months.'

'There wouldn't be much left of the advance by that time.'

'The advance is only an advance. I get fifteen per cent after five thousand copies and twenty per cent after ten. And of course another

15 advance will be due, darling, when the next book's finished. A bigger one if *The Chelsea Set* sells well.'

'Suppose it doesn't.'

'Mr Dwight says it will. He ought to know.'

'My uncle would start me at twelve hundred.'

20 'But darling, how could you come then to St Tropez?'

'Perhaps we'd do better to marry when you come back.'

She said harshly, 'I mightn't come back if *The Chelsea Set* sells enough.'

'Oh.'

She looked at me and the party of Japanese gentlemen. She finished

25 her wine. She said, 'Is this a quarrel?'

'No.'

'I've got the title for the next book - *The Azure Blue*,

'I thought azure was blue.'

She looked at him with disappointment. 'You don't really want to be

30 married to a novelist, do you?'

'You aren't one yet.'

'I was born one - Mr Dwight says. My powers of observation . . .'

'Yes. You told me that, but, dear, couldn't you observe a bit nearer home?

Here in London.'

35 'I've done that in *The Chelsea Set*. I don't want to repeat myself.'

The bill had been lying beside them for some time now. He took out his wallet to pay, but she snatched the paper out of his reach. She said. 'This is my celebration.'

'What of?'

The Chelsea Set, of course. Darling, you're awfully decorative, but sometimes -well, you simply don't connect.'

'I'd rather . . . if you don't mind . . .'

'No, darling, this is on me. And Mr Dwight, of course.'

5 He submitted just as two of the Japanese gentlemen gave tongue simultaneously, then stopped abruptly and bowed to each other, as though they were blocked in a doorway.

I had thought the two young people matching miniatures, but what a contrast in fact there was. The same type of prettiness could contain 10 weakness and strength. Her Regency counterpart, I suppose, would have borne a dozen children without the aid of anaesthetics, while he would have fallen an easy victim to the first dark eyes in Naples. Would there one day be a dozen books on her shelf? They have to be born without an anaesthetic too. I found myself hoping that *The Chelsea Set* would prove

15 to be a disaster and that eventually she would take up photographic modelling while he established himself solidly in the wine-trade in St James's. I didn't like to think of her as the Mrs Humphrey Ward of her generation - not that I would live so long. Old age saves us from the realization of a great many fears. I wondered to which publishing firm 20 Dwight belonged. I could imagine the blurb he would have already written about her abrasive powers of observation. There would be a photo, if he was wise, on the back of the jacket, for reviewers, as well as publishers, are human, and she didn't look like Mrs Humphrey Ward.

I could hear them talking while they found their coats at the back of the 25 restaurant. He said, 'I wonder what all those Japanese are doing here?'

'Japanese?' she said. 'What Japanese, darling? Sometimes you are so evasive I think you don't want to marry me at all.'