

*Peking
Picnic*

CHAPTER ONE

TO LIVE IN two different worlds at the same time is both difficult and disconcerting. Actually, of course, the body cannot be in China and in Oxfordshire simultaneously. But it can, and does, travel rapidly between the one place and the other, while the mind or the heart persists obstinately in lingering where the body is not, or in leaping ahead to the place whither the body is bound. The whole man – or perhaps chiefly the whole woman – is in such circumstances never completely anywhere.

‘*La nef qui disjoint nos amours,*’ cried Mary Stuart to France from the deck of the ship in which she sailed to Scotland:

N’a ’cy de moy que la moitié.

Une part te reste – elle est tienne . . .

And the lingering spirit, summoned back by some importunate demand on the attention, brings with it a host of pictures, of scenes complete with scents and sounds, which it intrudes at the most unsought moments, so that the images of both worlds shift and change before one like drop scenes in a theatre. It is all most confusing and disabling, and so Mrs Leroy found it.

She was sitting in the garden of a large house in the Tartar City. What she saw with her bodily eyes was a small goldfish pond set in a miniature landscape of rocks and grottoes, against a background of pavilions with red pillars, painted eaves, and

tent-like roofs of green tiles, over which the formal plumed tops of two immense pines in the next courtyard showed black against the light glittering sky. A band was playing in one of the pavilions, a buffet was being served from behind and depleted from in front in another; a short stout lady and a tall thin man were receiving guests at the top of a shallow flight of marble steps. Round the grottoes people in light summer clothes sat, or shifted to and fro; a high treble roar of voices hung over the whole assembly; Chinese servants with sealed pale-green faces, silent movements, and white coats with gold sashes moved about handing ices, olives, cocktails and caviare *croûtes* with serene dignity. She was, in fact, at an At Home in the Scandinavian Legation. But she was not really seeing any of it. Sitting back in her chair under an oleander, for a moment alone, what she saw with great clearness was a green field bordered with youthful Scots pines, on which small white figures ran about with happy cries. She heard the sound of wood on leather and leather on wood, and treble voices crying, 'How's that?' and hurrahing eagerly if thinly. And most clearly of all she saw one little flushed face, broad of brow, with blue veins in the white temples where the rough brown hair stuck damp to the skin, the grey eyes set wide above the dumpy nose, which approached her with a shy entrancing smile and said, 'Might have been worse, Mummie, mightn't it?' as he settled down on the grass at her feet. Oh, *so* clear – she could see the little freckles on the white forehead and the big ones on the bridge of that snub nose, and the short broad hands, so absurdly strong for their size, that twiddled at the binding of the cricket bat.

'Have one of this fellow's cocktails, Mrs Leroy – he seems to want you to,' said a voice overhead.

Mrs Leroy said, 'No, I won't' – and then, 'Yes, I think I will' – before she looked up. The voice was familiar; she knew

that her line of vision would have to travel upwards through a considerable angle before it reached the drooping blond distinction of General Nevile's moustache and nose and eyelids, haloed by the green lining of a topi. She did, however, look up and smile, not insincerely – she liked the Military Attaché – as she took a cocktail from the tray proffered by the servant. The man bowed over the glasses and smiled brilliantly and furtively at her before he moved away.

'He seems to know you,' observed the General, directing his monocle at the servant.

'Yes, it's my Number Three,' said Mrs Leroy. 'I suppose he's a friend of the Knudsens' Number One.'

'Look here,' said General Nevile, 'I know my wife is looking for you; may I see if I can find her?'

'Do,' said Mrs Leroy, and watched his tall thin figure move away, limping a little in his white ducks. If she had hoped to remain alone, however, her hopes were frustrated – the German Counsellor came and clicked his heels before her and said that it was very hot; the Italian First Secretary kissed her hand and murmured that she looked deliciously cool; the Flemish Minister did likewise, and told her a funny story about their hostess in low, rapid and indistinct French; the Japanese Minister bowed very low and said that he regretted not to see her so distinguished husband in English which was monosyllabically correct. Mrs Leroy said that her husband was engaged on business for the Minister – and she smiled as she said it, for he was, as she knew, at that moment in the farrier's shop at the American Legation, presiding over the shoeing of his own and Sir James Boggit's polo ponies.

A very tall young man, exquisitely dressed, with an eyeglass in one of his extremely blue eyes, paused behind the Japanese Minister, and made an amiable grimace at Mrs Leroy over the little man's head.

‘Well, *au revoir*, Excellency,’ she said, winding up the interview deftly. ‘I shall give my husband your love. Good afternoon, Derek.’

‘Good afternoon, *ma chère*,’ said the young man, raising his hat and showing a head as black and curly as a spaniel’s. ‘Where are your *Kuniangs*?’

‘I sent them to the Summer Palace,’ said Mrs Leroy, in her usual slow tones. ‘Miss Parke is going to tell them about the Empress Dowager. I thought it would amuse them more.’

‘I should think that highly probable,’ said Derek Fitzmaurice, sitting down beside her. ‘I should like to give a party for them next week,’ he went on. ‘Will they still be here?’

‘Yes, they have another month here, you know,’ she said. ‘How nice of you, Derek.’

‘Would Thursday do?’ he inquired. ‘Are you free then?’

‘You don’t mean *I’m* to come?’ She spoke in dismay, or something like it.

‘But of course – why not? Do come, my dear. There’s going to be a really good film at the Chen-Kuang.’

In Peking the cinema takes the place of the theatre, opera and concert hall combined. None of these exist, and on the first night of a famous film the grand circle of the Chen-Kuang might be Covent Garden, so full is it of diamonds, *décolletages* and diplomatists.

Mrs Leroy was not tempted, however.

‘No,’ she said, ‘I’m busy all next week, I’m sure. But do have the *Kuniangs* – they will enjoy it. Our parties are very dull for them.’

‘I should have thought you would want them chaperoned to my establishment,’ he said rather resentfully.

‘Oh no – they can chaperon one another. Your establishment!’ She gave a little laugh. ‘Don’t have too many of your Russians that night.’

‘I’ll tell you who I want to have,’ said the young man, leaning towards her confidentially. ‘Number Twenty-three! I’ve met her at last and she’s an absolute peach. She really is *too* lovely.’

‘Which is Number Twenty-three? I’ve seen two or three of them about. Is it the tall one with an immense forelock and gold brocade, or the little one with a round face like a flower?’

‘That’s her!’ he said enthusiastically. ‘I do want you to see her. She has the most comical mind. Isn’t she lovely, Laura?’

‘She is, most lovely – but I won’t meet her at your house,’ said Mrs Leroy slowly. ‘You really have very little sense, Derek. Concubines are going too far. Besides, you’ll embroil us all with Li-Ching-Hui if you carry on publicly with his ladies. I don’t think you ought to have her to the Legation at all – certainly not to meet the Kuniangs.’

‘Oh, very well.’ He looked rather crestfallen and cross.

‘I don’t mind meeting her casually and accidentally at tea at the Wagons-Lits,’ said Mrs Leroy. ‘Indeed, I should like to. You can arrange that some time. I shall drift in and you can invite me to your table.’

She said this not because she very much wanted to meet the beautiful concubine, but to smooth Fitzmaurice’s ruffled feathers. He had taken off his hat, in the shade of the oleander, and again, as she looked at him, she thought how like he was to a disgruntled spaniel. How likeable he was really – there were genuine qualities underlying his exquisite appearance and his absurd preoccupation with women. She thought his attitude to that side of life all wrong and quite fantastically silly, but she never tried to alter it. Looking at him now she quite forgot, as too often happened, that they were in the middle of a conversation, and let her mind run off by itself. She always tried to conceal from him the embarrassments in which his confidences about his various loves sometimes involved her, and she wondered now if she need have been so short with

him about Number Twenty-three. Yes; someone had to tell him these things. Fitzmaurice was rather *mal vu* by most of the Legation ladies, and responded by treating them with a marked lack of that polite attentiveness which is supposed to be their due from young secretaries. On her, on the contrary, he conferred almost too much of his confidence; he had the run of her house, and what was more costly, of her leisure and attention. 'Still, why should they bar him and cold-shoulder him?' she reflected. As usual her thoughts flew to Tim at the same time, how he would one day be grown up and almost certainly extravagant and silly in some way; she revolted in advance against the way the married women in some remote place overseas would probably treat him. 'Why do we give ourselves such airs, merely because we are older, and have scrounged some wretched man as a husband?' she thought, frowning a little. 'Age has no merit, unless we make it lovely and wise.' 'Unless age brings charity,' she thought, 'it brings very little; so much that is best goes with youth.'

And she went on reflecting about youth and age. But though she bracketed herself so definitely with the elderly, to look at her no one would have taken Mrs Leroy for even her age, which was thirty-seven. Very long, very thin, very dark, she leant back in her chair in the easy attitude of a strong and supple body, which no skill in corseting can counterfeit or replace. Her dark brows were still drawn a little together above her grey eyes, an expression of contempt for the behaviour of *T'ai-t'ais* (married women) compressed her thin unreddened lips. Fitzmaurice watched her. He was accustomed to her vague fits and did not object. He knew it was useless to try any more to make her come to his party, and that he was 'planted with the Kuniangs', as he would have expressed it – but his feathers *were* smoothed.

'Hullo! who's that?' he asked suddenly. An excessively tall, very pretty girl, with an exquisite figure, had appeared from

round a small pagoda, and stood, her white dress patterned with the moving zigzag shadows of bamboo leaves, at a little distance among the crowd.

‘Oh, that’s Little Annette, Nina Nevile’s niece,’ said Mrs Leroy.

‘Annette who? – or Annette what?’ asked Fitzmaurice, sticking his eyeglass in more firmly, the better to examine her.

‘I can’t remember,’ said Mrs Leroy. ‘Yes, Ingersoll – anyhow she’s staying with them.’ At this moment the young woman in question caught sight of Mrs Leroy, and her rather impassive face brightened into a smile as she moved towards her. ‘Why, hullo, Mrs Leroy!’ she exclaimed; ‘aren’t you cool there in the shade!’

‘Sit down and be cool too,’ said Mrs Leroy. ‘Let me introduce Mr Fitzmaurice, of our Legation.’

‘Why, I’d love to sit,’ the girl answered, shaking hands with Fitzmaurice with an absent-minded ‘Pleased to meet you!’ ‘but I have to ride with the La Tours. Have you seen Nina? She’s making inquiries for you.’

‘No, but I daresay I shall, if I go on sitting here,’ said Mrs Leroy.

The girl broke into a laugh.

‘Dear Mrs Leroy, isn’t that English?’ she exclaimed. All her remarks were made in the same high soft voice, pretty and colourless. ‘Why, if I heard someone was wanting me I should be all around after them.’

‘Well then, go “all around” now with Mr Fitzmaurice, and bring Nina here if you find her,’ said Mrs Leroy.

‘I will – if you will?’ to Fitzmaurice, with the little automatic glance of coquetry which seems to be as much a part of the female American’s social equipment as a frock. Fitzmaurice expressed himself as delighted, and they moved off together, a few notes of the high voice informing Mrs Leroy from a distance that Little Annette considered her to be ‘the *loveliest* woman in

Peking'. 'How *incredible* Americans are, really,' she murmured, but paused, remembering how fond she was of Nina, who was also an American. And Little Annette's beauty and simplicity had a certain charm. 'She looks full of life,' she thought, and was wandering back to her interrupted meditation on youth when she was again interrupted. An At Home is not a good place for meditation.

This time it really was Nina. A little fairy of a woman, with a blond head, Parisian chic, and a queer irregular Hogarth face – broad mouth, runaway nose, wide-set eyes – darted upon her from behind. 'Dearest Laura, *here* you are!'

'My dear, I told you she was here as soon as I found you,' observed General Nevile, taking off his topi and fanning himself with it. 'Yes – I'll have one of those,' to a servant who paused with another tray of cocktails. 'You, Nina?'

'Most certainly yes! You have one too, Laura – you'll need it.'

'Why?' said Mrs Leroy, taking the cocktail and lighting a cigarette in a long ivory holder.

'Well – to dispose you favourably! Now listen – I've got a plan, and you must say Yes. We want you to come to Chieh T'ai Ssu with us next weekend.'

'Oh, I don't think I can,' said Mrs Leroy, in her most languid voice. 'I'm frightfully busy, you know.' Her first impulse was always to say No to any projected engagement. 'I don't see how I can get away.' She sipped her cocktail. 'What's the party?' she inquired, after a moment.

'Well, will she come, Nina? Have you persuaded her?' inquired a crisp clear voice, which conformed regrettably to the adjective 'melodious'. A short fair man in riding clothes, with the most completely military figure and appearance it is possible to imagine, had come up to the group under the oleander, and stood darting bright bird-like glances of inquiry from face to face.

‘Mrs Leroy hasn’t really heard what it’s all about yet,’ said the General, pulling his moustache gloomily.

‘Why, we have this Professor coming tomorrow,’ said Mrs Nevile, ‘and we must do something about him. I thought we would take him to the hills for the weekend and give him a real Peking picnic. So there would be him, and we two, and you, and Touchy here (the military man saluted), and perhaps Henri.’

‘Laura, you must come,’ said the man referred to as Touchy. ‘Chieh T’ai Ssu will be like Heaven now with all the fruit blossom out. And there’s a moon – think of moonlight on the terrace, and the white pine!’

‘Well, I don’t know – I might manage it,’ said Mrs Leroy. ‘Is that all? And what is your Professor?’

‘Oh, he’s just some learned man from England – the Minister has been told about him, and he’s planted us with him,’ said Mrs Nevile airily. ‘He’s inquiring into something, like they do.’

‘It’s Vinstead of Cambridge,’ said General Nevile, who, after twelve years of marriage, was still troubled by his wife’s inaccuracies. ‘He has one of those travelling Fellowships, and has come out to study Oriental psychology. It’s a semi-official thing in this case, but Sir James looked him up in *Who’s Who*, and when he saw the names of his books’ – a smile appeared for a moment under the General’s moustache, making his lean gloomy face suddenly charming – ‘he said he thought “the felloh had better stay with someone who could talk to him,” so he has turned him over to us.’

Mrs Leroy laughed out loud.

‘Is that complimentary?’ inquired the General, fixing his eyeglass on her.

‘Very, I should say!’ she said, still laughing. ‘I must have him and Sir James to dine and hear them talk to one another.’

‘But will you come and talk to him at Chieh T’ai Ssu? That’s the point,’ said the General.

‘Yes, and Miss Hande – Big Annette,’ said Nina Nevile. ‘She *will* talk to you, Laura, and she’s such a bad mixer.’

‘Is Miss Hande coming too, then?’ Mrs Leroy inquired.

‘Why yes – I must take her. And Little Annette – didn’t I say so?’

‘No, you didn’t, my dear,’ said the General. ‘Now you know the worst, Mrs Leroy; will you come?’

It was characteristic of General Nevile that in a society which dealt almost exclusively in Christian names, he should have continued to call the woman whom, except his wife, he knew best, and perhaps liked most, by her formal prefix. It belonged to his rather Edwardian character and appearance to do this, and Mrs Leroy liked it, if only for that reason. She marvelled perpetually at the tendency of Peking society, as of other small societies, to invent and use nicknames, and had formed a theory that it was because they seemed somehow to give the impression of a larger number of people. Major La Touche, for instance, who was now standing in front of her, measuring the distance between the top of his riding boots and the bottom of his drill jacket on his riding whip with great care and persistence, had two perfectly good names. You could call him Major La Touche, or you could call him James; you might even call him Jim; but no one ever called him anything but Touchy, which was not in the least appropriate to his character. Then there was this business of the Annettes. They were not related; they were not alike. Miss Anna Hande, who had been referred to as Big Annette, was a middle-aged and eminent American novelist (in her own country she was called ‘the American Hardy’) – if anything she was small of stature, and a most uncompromising subject for a nickname. But just because she happened to be visiting the Neviles in Peking at the same time as Annette Ingersoll, Nina’s niece, she had to be, it appeared, ‘Big Annette’, while the immensely tall Miss

Ingersoll became, with equal incongruity, 'Little Annette'. Mrs Leroy used the current nicknames, like everyone else, but they added to the sense of theatricality which sometimes overcame her. At that moment, for instance, she saw the figures about her, spattered with the irregular starry shadows of the oleander leaves – the General, standing, because his lame leg made it too much trouble to lower himself into any seat for a short time; his wife in a chair, her hat, which she had pulled off, on her lap, showing her childish waved yellow head, sipping her cocktail; Major La Touche, now, his foot on the tub of the oleander, measuring his riding boot with his whip – like figures on a stage; they seemed to her, in the subdued wavering light, against the background of fantastic architecture and shifting crowd, with the music from the band spraying over them, completely unreal, artificial presentations of types. She listened, as to a stage dialogue, to the chatter exchanged between Mrs Nevile and La Touche, and almost started when she heard herself again addressed.

'Well, Laura, you'll come, will you?'

Mrs Leroy roused herself with sudden decision. 'If I come,' she said, 'I must bring my Kuniangs.'