

PETER MILWARD

JAPAN

ISLANDS IN THE MIST



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Collins English Library

Collins English Library

Series editors: K R Cripwell and Lewis Jones

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PETER MILWARD

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ISLANDS IN THE MIST

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2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Printed and published in Great Britain by
William Collins Sons and Co Ltd
Glasgow G4 0NB

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First published in Collins English Library 1984

ISBN 00 370155 7

Cover photograph by Japan Airlines

Cover design by Dan Lim

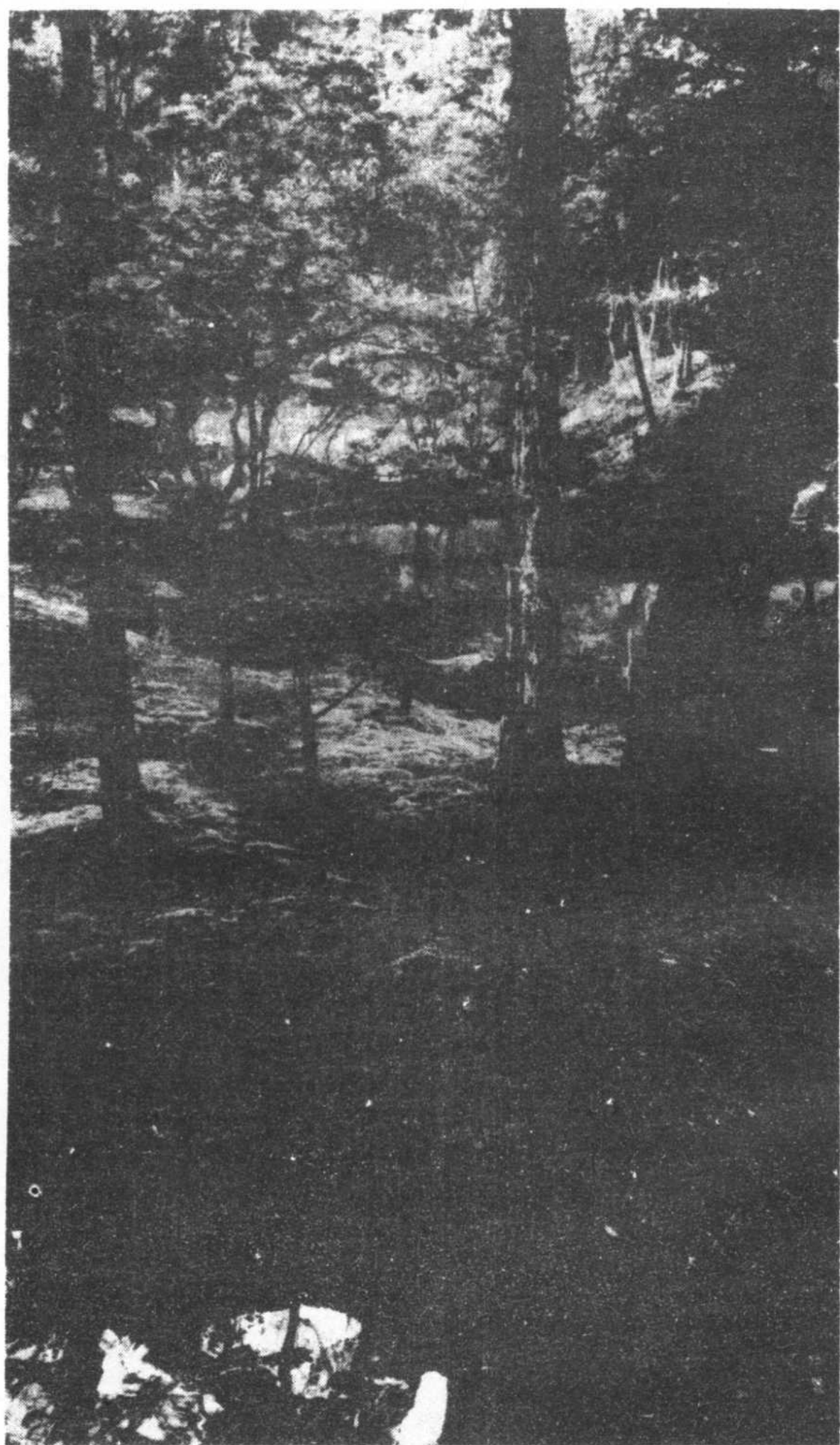
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Organization

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We would also like to thank Hodder and Stoughton
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Chapter One

The Islands and the Islanders

“Japan at last!” At last, after so many days at sea, we caught sight of land. It seemed a long time since we had left Manila, our last port of call in Asia. And now we were moving at last into Tokyo Bay.

The land appeared faintly on either side of the ship. It was partly hidden in mist. The weather was unusually cool for that time of the year, early September. But for us, the sight of the land was enough. We had been waiting for this ever since we had left Southampton, England, six weeks before.

To the left of us we saw mountains in the distance. The shape of one of them clearly stood out from the others. Its slopes were so smooth and regular. Could it be? Yes, it was none other than the holy mountain of the Japanese, Mount Fuji!

Yes, we had come to Japan – at least, we were in sight of Japan – on the first of September, 1954. We had come by ship all the way from

England; it was still the old days, before air travel became common. Today, you leave England one day and arrive in Japan the next day. It is *too* sudden! But in those days it was a gradual experience for us. Before reaching Japan we had stopped at many sea-ports in Europe and Asia on the way. And each of them had had its own special interest.

Now at last we had come to our journey's end, Yokohama. We expected this to be the most interesting sea-port of all. In all the sea-ports in Asia we had found another world. Each had been so different from our familiar English world. And now we were approaching the farthest sea-port in the farthest land from England.

At first, however, we were disappointed. We were informed we would arrive that evening; and we did arrive that evening. But by then it was too late to go ashore. We had to spend the night waiting outside the harbour. It was such a long wait, almost longer (we felt) than the whole journey from Southampton. But at last the day dawned. When we woke up, we were free to go ashore.

Once again "At last!" At last, we set foot on Japanese soil. But once again, under a cold grey sky, we felt disappointment. It was raining, but we didn't mind the rain so much. It was what we saw that disappointed us. Here was just another sea-port, not unlike Southampton. It wasn't at all

what we were expecting.

We had a long wait for our belongings. They had first to pass through customs, after they were brought ashore. So we had plenty of time to look round the harbour area. It was so much like any other harbour, even in England. But the buildings were all in need of repair, and the roads were full of holes. After all, ten years hadn't yet passed since the end of the war. What we saw was still the old Japan, or the ruins of old Japan.

The signs on the buildings were all written in strange characters. In their silence, they told us we were indeed in Japan. Some of them were written downwards, and others were written across – almost as in a crossword puzzle. They were certainly a puzzle for us!

Then, we noticed the people working in the harbour area. Most of them were small in size, as I expected, but they weren't so yellow. People sometimes speak of the Japanese as a yellow race; but these were mostly brown, no doubt after a hot summer. Some Japanese women who passed us seemed almost pink, like English women.

In the faces of these Japanese, I especially noticed their eyes and their noses. Their eyes were narrow and wide apart. Their noses were so short, they hardly seemed to have any. And then, they were so silent. They reminded me of a society of ever-busy insects.

Meanwhile, some friends had come to meet us

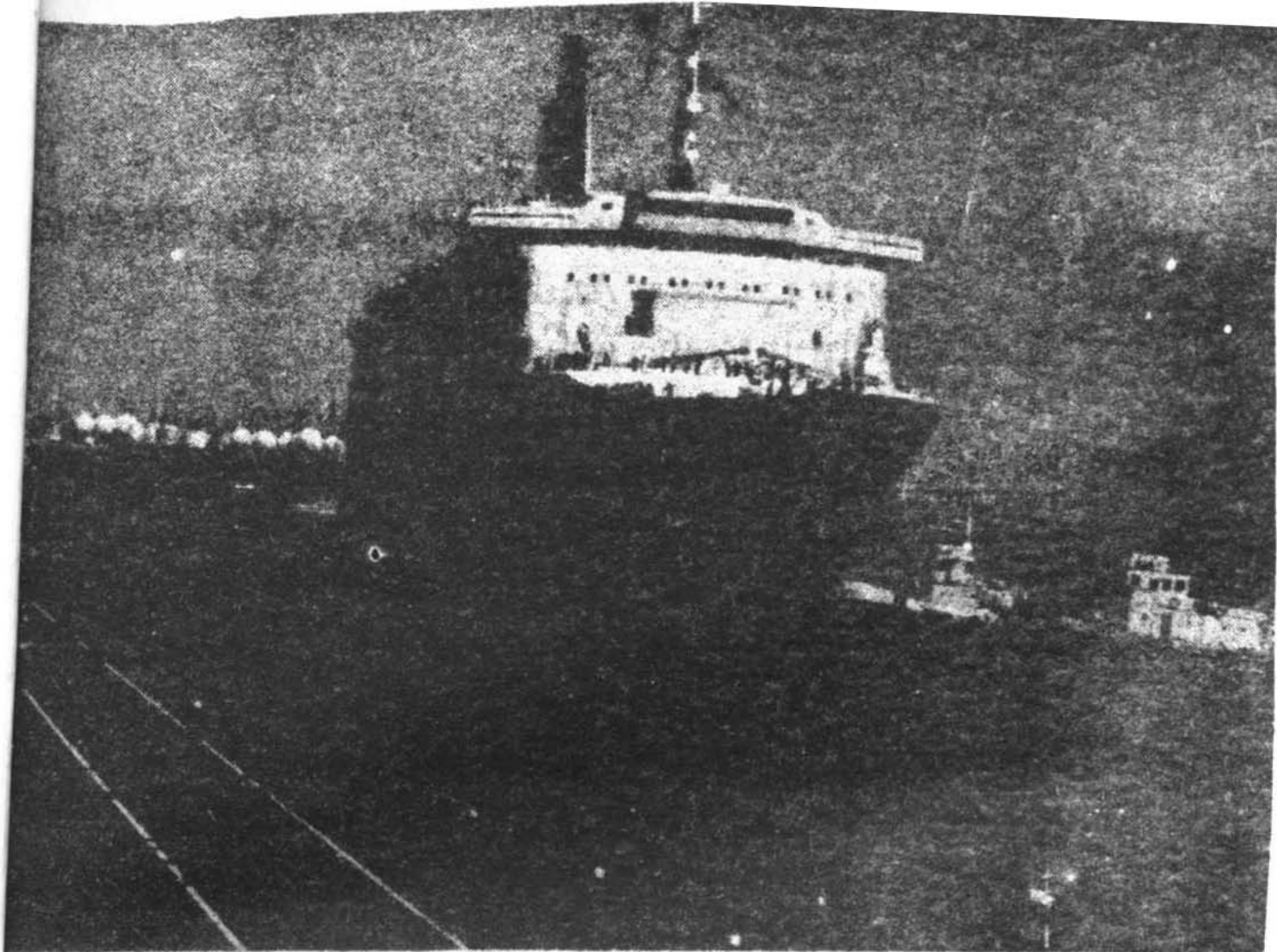
in an old car. Today we are so used to Japanese cars. They are everywhere, not only in Japan but also in America and England. But then there were no Japanese cars. The few we saw on the streets of Yokohama had been made, years before, in America or England. Our car was American.

Getting in, I found myself sitting by a window with no glass in it. It was still raining, and I had no shelter from the rain. But at least we were moving, on the way to our new home.

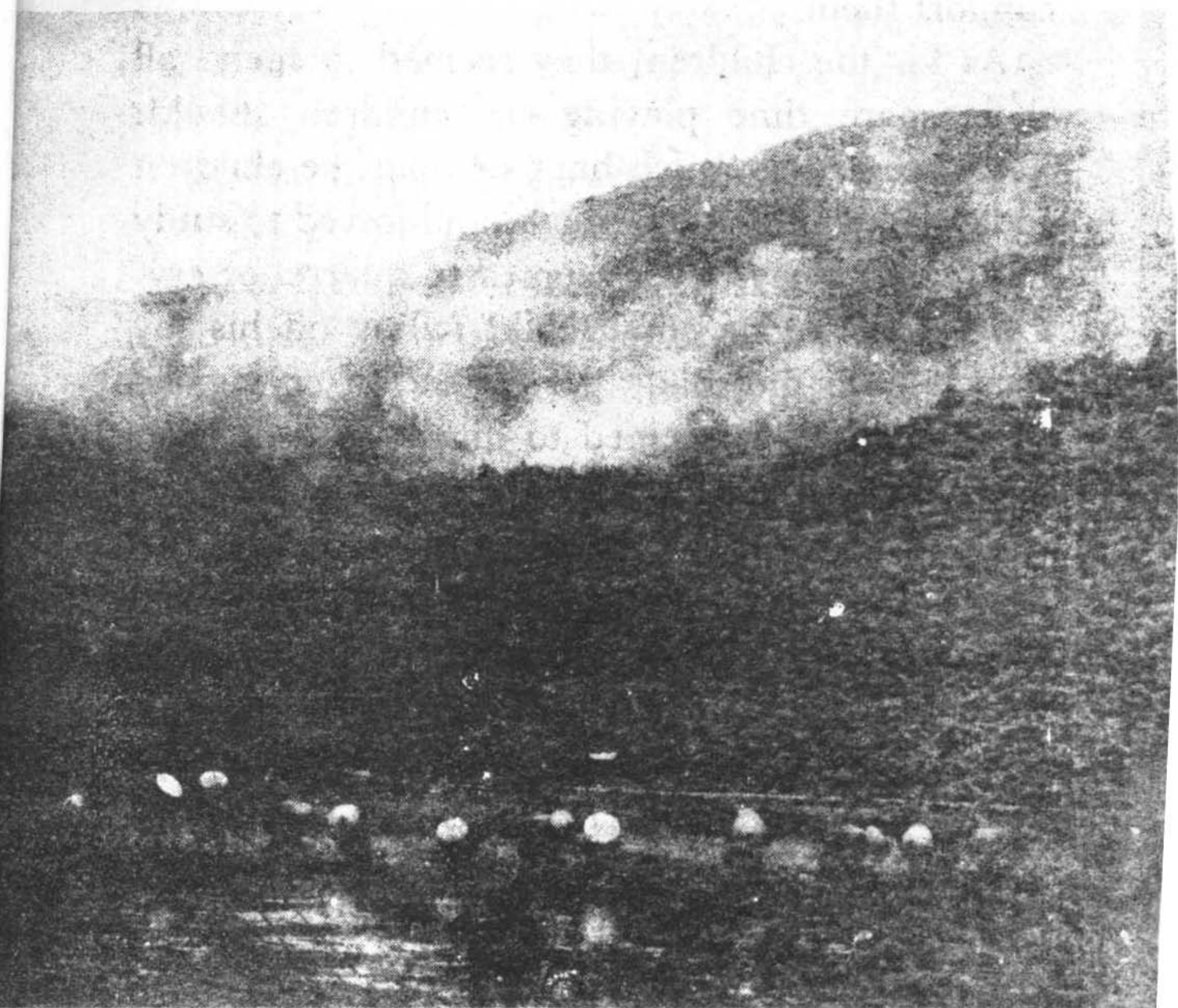
Once we were out of Yokohama, I could feel I was at last in Japan. The city had been so Western in appearance, though in need of repair. But the countryside was Eastern, as it had always been. Here was the old, the real Japan, where the Japanese were really themselves, I thought.

It was raining all the time, and there was thick mist everywhere. It seemed to me that the mist was part of the countryside. It was (I felt) what had made Japan. It must have entered into the minds and hearts of the Japanese from the dawn of their history. It rose all round us, like the ghost of old Japan. It even seemed about to enter into our minds and hearts, too.

The mist not only came down from the clouds: it also rose up from the rice fields. The Japanese almost lived on rice, now in these post-war years more than ever before. They were all little fields, many of them together, but between them people had made banks of earth, and little streams of



The sea-port of Yokohama.



The mist rises from the rice fields.

water. The streams brought water into the fields for the thirsty rice plants. And from all this water, the mist rose up into the air.

There were many houses, too, by the roadside. Almost all of them were poor houses, made of wood, with roofs of tin. In them we could see the poverty of post-war Japan. Here and there we passed an open door. Inside, everything seemed so neat. ;

Although the Japanese were poor, they were happy enough. They seemed to be busy all the time, with no free time to be lazy. At least they were able to live. They were close to nature in the countryside. And they had many children to comfort them.

As for the children, they seemed to spend all their spare time playing – as children should. They seemed so much happier than the children today, who are fed too much, and forced to study too much. They never seemed to quarrel or cry. Once I noticed a small child falling off his toy bicycle onto the road. Yet instead of crying, he was laughing. It seemed to him a kind of joke, even if it brought him some pain.

Then we came to the mountains. Perhaps in height they were only hills, but to me they looked like mountains. They rose suddenly and sharply from the plain. In England the countryside is usually rolling, never quite flat and rarely steep. But here the plains, with rice fields in them, were

perfectly flat. Then, when the mountains began, they rose up steeply into the sky. Their tops were hidden from us in the mist.

“Japan,” I was informed by my friends, “is a largely mountainous country. Almost two-thirds of the country is taken up by mountains; only a third is left for the people to live in. So they are crowded together in the plains and the valleys. There are a hundred million of them, living together in an area smaller than England. So they have to be careful not to step on each other’s toes.”

“Yes,” I thought, “but how happy they are to be living so close to the mountains. They may feel like prisoners in the cities, but they can always escape to the mountains from time to time. And there they can feel free.”

The sea, too, is always around them. For Japan is, as her people fully realise, an island country. She is, in fact, not one but many islands. We were in the main island of Honshu. But there were also the islands of Hokkaido in the North, Shikoku in the West, and Kyushu in the South, besides little islands without number. I felt a similarity with the British Isles.

“Yes,” I said to myself again, “I have travelled halfway across the world, from the West to the East, to Japan. Here, the people and their country are so different from England. But are they really so different? After all, we are both

island countries; and that says a lot. I have seen so many differences now. But in time, perhaps I will realise the deeper similarities that unite us as human beings."

That is just what I have found. The differences between the English and the Japanese can be seen by anyone. But the similarities are deep in the heart of man. And for me, both the differences and the similarities are precious.

Chapter Two

The Language of the Islanders

By the time we reached our new home, it had stopped raining. The sun was even kind enough to appear from among the clouds. We got out of the car and looked around us. The Japanese navy used to have a base here, beside a harbour like the one at Yokohama. One of the buildings looked older than the others and in need of a fresh coat of paint. It was to be our new home.

It was also to be our language school. Here we would live for the next two years, and study the Japanese language. I saw it as a kind of prison; we

were the prisoners, and the study of Japanese was our form of punishment. Still, it wasn't too bad. At least, it was next to the sea and surrounded by mountains. From time to time, we could leave our work and go for walks up the mountains. There, like the Japanese, we could feel free.

When I say "we", I now mean not only the three of us who had just come by ship all the way from England. There were many others, of different nations, waiting to welcome us at the language school – some thirty students in two years. We had all come to spend our lives in Japan. So we were ready to give up two full years to learn Japanese.

"After all," I said to myself, "what have I seen so far of Japan and the Japanese? Only the surface. I still understand nothing about the land and her people. I am just like a tourist. In order to know the heart of this people, there is only one way; I must learn their language. Then I can speak with them in their own words, and they can speak with me, heart to heart."

Our language school was next to a high school for boys. Term-time had just begun. It was their second term, as in Japan the school year starts in April. The boys were between the ages of twelve and eighteen, and every day we saw them coming along the road to the school or going home. They were always talking, laughing and playing on the way. They seemed so different from the older

Japanese in the harbour area at Yokohama. They were the new Japan.

They also provided us with pleasant surroundings for our study of Japanese. We were much older than them, but in our study of Japanese, we felt no different from them. We seemed to be children again. Here was a completely new language for all of us in the first year. And we were in a new country, surrounded by new people. So we felt gradually renewed in mind and heart.

The first sentence we had to learn in Japanese was '*Kore wa hon desu*' – 'This is a book'. It reminded me of the first sentence I learned in French at the age of seven: 'This is the pen of my aunt.' '*Kore wa*' means 'this'; '*hon*' means 'book'; and '*desu*' means 'is'.

But these two sentences in English and Japanese are by no means the same. What is the '*wa*' doing in the Japanese sentence? And where is the English word 'a'? And why is the order of words different in Japanese, with 'is' at the end?

Here, in my first Japanese sentence, I found three basic differences between English and Japanese. Let me explain them one by one.

In the first place, the Japanese '*wa*' isn't expressed in English. It takes the place of the emphasis we put on words. The Japanese never emphasise their words. So when Japanese