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THE CURSE OF KOSHIU.

A CHRONICLE OF OLD JAPAN.

BY

THE HONBLE. LEWIS WINGFIELD,

AUTHOR OF

"LADY ORIZEL," "IN HER MAJESTY'S KEEPING," "ABIGEL ROWE,"
"BARBARA PHILPOT," ETC.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I.

[BOY AND GIRL.](#)

CHAPTER II.

[THE LAST HOJO.](#)

CHAPTER III.

[MARRIED LIFE.](#)

CHAPTER IV.

THE ABBESS GIVES ADVICE.

CHAPTER V.

THE FARMER GIRDS HIS LOINS.

CHAPTER VI.

THE YOUNG MIKADO.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FARMER'S SENTENCE.

CHAPTER VIII.

DESTINY IS BUSY.

CHAPTER IX.

THE EXECUTION.

CHAPTER X.

FOREBODINGS.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CURSE BEGINS TO WORK.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DAIMIO OF NARA BEGINS TO WORK.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DESPOT OBEYS ORDERS.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MIKADO DOES BUSINESS.

CHAPTER XV.

WILL BUDDHA SPEAK?

CHAPTER XVI.

CHAPTER XVII.

UNDER THE MOON.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FACE TO FACE.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WEB IS WOVEN.

THE CURSE OF KOSHIU.

CHAPTER I.

BOY AND GIRL.

It was towards the end of the fourteenth century that the grandeur of the Hojo family rose to its acme, then fell with awful crash. The feudal story of the Land of the Rising Sun is a long dark chronicle of blood and tears, of crime and rapine, of vengeance and vendetta, out of which there glints at intervals a gleam of glorious heroism, of holy devotion, of pure love and unsullied faith.

In the stately roll of the great names of old Japan, there is none so terrible as Hojo. From time to time the patient people were ruled by one race or another of despots, cruel and selfish; the most cruel of all, the Hojos. Even now, after five hundred years of war and havoc, of vain aspirations, power misused, and wrecked ambitions, mothers still hush their babes to silence by breathing the dreaded name. The most destructive insect that ravages the fairest island in the world--the most voracious and omnivorous--is yet known as the Hojo beetle. When the first of the line erected a strong fortress--the Castle of Tsu, which will serve as background to many scenes in this our chronicle--he gave to it a bloody baptism, by burying beneath the foundations two hundred living men. Although their baleful course was marked by an ensanguined streak like a gory finger drawn across a map, they were not all black, these gruesome daimios, or even Buddha, whom we know to be deaf, and prone to somnolence, would earlier in the day have bestirred himself to punish them. Maybe Buddha drinks too much saké, for though we piously crack our finger-joints, and beat our palms, each morn at sunrise, and bang the gongs and pull the bell-strings each evening in the temple, he recks little of mere mundane worries, letting things go from bad to worse in grievous fashion. And yet, once roused to wakefulness, his vengeance is swift as the typhoon, as destructive and as sweeping.

No. The lurid Hojo cloud that for a hundred years brooded over long-suffering Japan, had silver breaks in it. The Mikados, as nominal rulers, dwelt at Kiyoto; while the Shoguns, as military viceroys, reigned at Kamakura; but the dominating family, as wire-pullers, directed their movements from behind. The father of Hojo No-Kami, last of the race, had his good points. None

of his supercilious ancestors was more superbly overbearing, more sublimely indifferent to human pain; and yet his worst enemies were compelled to admit that, if stern, his rule was sagacious. The Mikado, and his court of *kugés* or lords-in-waiting, shivered before him, for his dirk was loose in the scabbard, and the order promptly to depart into another world by uncompromising *harakiri* was ever trembling on his lips. During his career three emperors had been summoned to shave their heads and retire into monkish solitude, each puppet bowled over in its turn for daring to dispute his will; and yet the very fact of his disdain to mask the iron hand under the glove of silk, even in dealing with the highest, compelled the unwilling admiration of his turbulent and light-hearted countrymen.

The upper class--Samurai, two-sword men, hatamotos, soldiers--could appreciate his martial bearing, as, in gallant bravery of scarlet armour and gold-studded helm, he rode forth to battle, with his martial wife beside him. For the beautiful Tomoyé was a fit mother for lion whelps. Of great personal strength as well as graceful carriage, sheathed in armour like her lord, astride on a swift horse, she was ever in the van of conflict. With her own hand she cut off the head of a rival daimio who crossed swords with her; and when her lord died, pierced through the heart by an arrow she fought till she fell beside him. The lower class of the unarmed--mechanics, mere farmers, paltry merchants--could also from their inferior standpoint admire their ruler, whilst grieving at his rough treatment of the Holy Mikado--mystic head of all--for he protected the workers of the hive from the depredations of other tyrants. The burthen of taxes was nicely weighed to suit the backs of the bearers. The ken of the Hojo was as piercing, and minutely attentive to details, as it was farsighted. A petition from the elders of the meanest village was sure of immediate attention. No petty feudal master, however recklessly bold or savagely contemptuous, dared to overstep his rights.

The result of the adamant rule of the last Hojo but one was peace. The land that was given over usually to turmoil and bloodshed, with intervals of complete anarchy, enjoyed rest for fifteen years, during which the despot set himself to consolidate his power, and fix yet more firmly the family yoke on the necks of lords and people.

He had two sons, the elder of whom--by Japanese paradox--was treated as if he had been the younger. Sampei, three years older than No-Kami, was the offspring of a second wife or concubine. The latter, heir-apparent, was the whelp of the war-queen Tomoyé. Now in Japan concubinage is a recognised institution, and the son of the handmaid is no bastard. And yet the child of the bondwoman is not co-heir with the child of the free. The latter, in the case of a great family, is undisputed head of the clan, and to him the former owes allegiance, however much older in years, in the same degree as lesser clansmen. The institution is so firmly welded into the constitution of the land as, save in a few cases, to preclude jealousy.

Of course, as in all Eastern countries, ambitious men have striven to supplant their brothers--have hacked off their heads and reigned in their stead--but this does not affect the principle. The two sons of Hojo grew up side by side in perfect amity. Together they learned to ride and wield the sword and spear under the approving gaze of their martial parents. They were both soldiers--with a difference. Even Tomoyé was forced to admit that of the twain Sampei, son of the concubine, was the most promising. His nature was clear and bright as running water, simple and unsmirched, unlike that of the heir-apparent. None more brave than he, more quick and skilful with his weapons, more ready to smite hard and heavily; and yet on occasion he could be soft and tender as a woman. A polished politeness and chivalrous demeanour were so innate in him as to win the admiration of the ladies. For seductive luxury he had nothing but contempt. No-Kami, on the other hand, if brave and skilled in arms, was fierce and selfish and debauched; overfond of the harem and perfumed bath and saké cup; sullen, too, as an ill-conditioned animal; brutal to women, ruthlessly tossing them aside like shattered toys when sated with their charms. People nodded their pates and whispered of him the timeworn proverb which says that there is no seed to a great man. In sooth it has ever been a common thing in this otherwise favoured land to see a great house crumble into speedy ruin through the supineness and debauchery of its sons.

There was no need for anxiety as to the future of Sampei. A soldier and a gentleman to the tips of his trim finger-nails, his career, in the most war-ridden of countries, was carved clear before him. It came to pass that Corea, conquered long since by the Amazon Empress Jingo, threw off allegiance.. Who more fitted than doughty young Sampei to reduce the rebel to obedience? Accordingly, five years before this story opens, the gay young general, full of life and hope, and rippling with high spirits, bade a respectful farewell to the father he was never to see again, a more tender one of his fond mother, Masago, who, like many another discarded concubine, was now the Abbess of a convent, and sailed with a fleet and army for Corea, whence news arrived from time to time, praising his deeds of valour.

As for the future of No-Kami, it was more difficult to prophesy, and his parents were no little anxious. His prospects were splendid; but although his father had endeavoured to foresee contingencies, and build barriers against accidents, the path of the next tyrant must needs be beset with thorns. His *rôle* in the future would be arduous, thick strewn with snares and difficulties. To keep the *entourage* of the Mikado in subjection--to hold the daimios--powerful and wealthy princes as sturdy as the barons of the English John--in the requisite condition of meekness, would require more statecraft, diplomacy, and force of iron will, than could be expected of a model youth. And No-Kami, as we have seen, was by no means a model youth. None knew better than his astute and experienced parent how difficult to a young man this task would prove; none was more distinctly aware of the frail tenure of a despot's life. At any moment he, the

father, might be taken, and what then would happen to his boy?

Treachery stalks through the history of Japan. At any instant the dominant Hojo might be murdered under his son's eyes. Would the self-indulgent No-Kami be prepared with vigorous promptitude to avenge the slain, and, seizing the dropped reins, pursue his policy? Both father and mother sadly shook their heads. Even their partial vision could not but perceive that the hope of the house was a leper, abnormally sinful, inclined to become a sybarite. Was this young man to be left to steer the bark without a pilot? Certainly not. In case of anything unexpected arising, a staff must be prepared for him to lean upon. A man must be placed by his side, old in years and in experience, whose position and wisdom would command respect, whose interest it would be to bestow sound advice and timely sage reproof.

What better guide than a prudent father-in-law? What surer loadstone to lure an embryo debauchee from the muddy byways of low company than a beautiful patrician bride? one of the pure and slender, refined and high-bred maidens of noble lineage--fair and sweet as the fragrant mountain-lily--who now, as five hundred years ago, are the brightest glory of Japan.

A crafty combination this on the part of the warrior-statesman, which would doubtless have been crowned with success, if he had not chanced to live in a world where mischievous spirits delight in frustrating plans the most cleverly matured. Tomoyé heard, and listened dubiously. Even among the most elevated Japanese, as well as in the highest European circles, papas and mammas will differ as to the ideal bride. What was the precise article that would suit No-Kami? Unfortunately there was not time to have one specially ordered. Since perfection is chary of repetition, it was not to be expected that another Tomoyé--a stern yet loving lioness--could be found for the precious youth. Indeed, so recreant a scion was he of the stock, that he might have objected possibly to a muscular and fiery wife whose pastime was the chopping of heads. And yet not so. A true lion-whelp was he in blood enjoyment. Even the low-born *Geisha* singing girls who stocked his harem, had often cried under his buffets, and shouted shame, with tears, at his barbarous treatment of his servants.

Alas! how sad it is that even the most sapient in mundane experience will be guilty of errors sometimes that are patent to the lesser fry. Is it over-anxiety that blinds them? The problem was to put the finger on a great noble--daimio among daimios--who could compare in descent and grandeur *almost* with the line of Hojo; who, of weight in counsel, and rather cool than hot, would stem precipitate rashness. He must have no son, and but one daughter, and devoid therefore of the ambition which accompanies male issue, must adopt his daughter's husband as his son; and by thus uniting the two families in closest bonds, make their interests identical. The child of the magnate (given that the two were found) must be mentally perfect, and a vision of corporeal loveliness.

"My dear!" quoth the broad-shouldered but practical Tomoyé, as with one eye critically closed she assayed the temper of a brand new sword. The lady was apt to get vexed when her lord grew warm and garrulous. "My dear," she observed, "we have many rounds of mortal life to climb ere, reaching the summit, we attain Nirvana. Though you are good enough to be blind to my blemishes, even I am not quite perfect. Perfection, in our present low cycle, is so very scarce, you know." With this she beamed upon her lord, whilst artlessly belying her words by approvingly fingering her muscles. She was inwardly aware, with pardonable pride, that no other daimio's daughter could boast such an arm as hers.

My lord was provoked, and rubbed his nose. When you are erecting airy towers, practical people are exasperating. It was evident she had gained a point, so she proceeded to follow it up.

"Where in broad Japan do you propose to seek these paragons? This pink of perfect daimios, and his yet more model child?"

There was a tendency to irreverence in this tone, which required nipping in the bud. The eye of the Mikado's master shot forth a gleam, before which even the lioness cowered. When his mind was made up, the Hojo brooked no argument.

"Be it as you will!" Tomoyé dutifully murmured. "My lord is all-wise, all-powerful; his wife his willing slave. Go forth and seek the paragons, and let us hope you will find them soon."

To please him whom she loved best on earth, Tomoyé made believe to be convinced; and yet her woman's tact whispered down in the deep recesses of her manly bosom, that my lord, for all his wiliness, was wrong; that he was building a fool's paradise far up in Cæther, out of which her dear boy might tumble.

Curious to relate, the paragons concerning whom she was tempted to be disrespectful were not far to seek. With but little hocus-pocus father and daughter were conjured on the scene, as absolutely the "very thing," to all appearance, as the cunning Hojo had conceived them. He declared as much at least, and dutiful Tomoyé acquiesced, slightly pinching her lips in silent protest. Instead of the "very thing" which was to bring about complete success before its time in our weary pilgrimage of cycles, the mother's instinct beheld with prophetic vision, in the proposed alliance, the worst elements of discord and defeat--of so dire and dread a tragedy as should shake Japan to its centre, and annihilate the dominating house. Yet who was she, the warrior wife reflected in her humility, to set up puny instincts against the ripened statecraft of

my lord? Her muscles were better than her brains. Should she presume to know more than he who held in his hand Mikado, nobles, people?--whose nod was law in the land beloved of Buddha? who had preserved it from contamination from without? Her place was to bend before the will of the dictator, and offer prayers for her husband and her son.

* * * * *

The most perfectly poetic spot in all poetic Japan, whose ensanguined history is made beautiful to the eye of a fastidious posterity by the flora of chivalry and valour, is Nara.

Lovely and secluded, sweet-smelling and umbrageous Nara! The Nara of to-day--how much more the Nara of five hundred years ago--suggests to the incursive foreigner a bit of Eden's garden.

In very early times the central mart of Japanese opulence (which ebbed by-and-by to Ki-yoto), it came after a while to be recognised as the special home of holiness. Accepting the better part, it exchanged the shimmering sham glory of mundane ambition for the sheen reflected from above. Some twenty miles from Ki-yoto--time-honoured residence of Mikados, and therefore a sacred city--the small town of Nara stands on a plain surrounded by rugged hills. Passing through low grey streets, leaving on the left a huge and ornate pagoda, you enter a tangle of wild greenery--an ideal wood of immense cryptomerias darkling skyward after light. A jungle of variegated foliage, so sweet and fresh, masks half their altitude, while the undulating ground beneath is broken into verdant waves chequered with blossoms of all hues. This forest is vast and silent, save where a white-robed group of pilgrims saunters along its glades--undefended by barriers, save those of religious custom. And what more tough than they? If sprightly and given to skull-cracking, the Japanese live in terror of their deities, who without exception are vindictive. Buddha and the lesser lights are awful and threatening and ever-present, and the favourite hunting-grounds of Buddha are the hallowed groves of Nara.

The thickets teem with game. All kinds of coy animals which usually flee at sight of man, here hold undisputed sway. The intruder is on their territory, and they let him know it. The timorous doe stands with soft unstartled eyes across the path, sniffing with moist nostrils the expected cake. And if the white-clad pilgrim should have striven to combine economy with cure of soul by investing in cheap offerings, the scornful stag and his following will shake their ears, and bound away to relate to the gods the insult. With head on one side, birds look critically down from boughs, nor think of flight; hares, taught by impunity, instead of making off, white scut in air, groom nose with paw, undaunted.

Hidden away, centre of an intricate labyrinth--enclosed in many courts, each hung with myriad lamps in bronze-like fringes round the eaves--stands the Holy of Holies, Buddha's hunting-box, wherein a band of virgins perform weird shinto rites for the behoof of awe-struck pilgrims. At stated seasons this bevy of priestesses, emerging from strict retirement, performs the *kagura*, a slow swanlike measure, with many and intricate figures and waving of fans and bells and kerchiefs, accompanied by priestly flutes--which (doubtless good for the soul, since its weary length is interminable) is soothing also to ear and eye, for the ladies are graceful and slender in their loose red trousers and gossamer robes, their long locks flowing as they float to and fro, with a background of gold screens, and beyond the antique forest. How peaceful a life, free from sordid cares, must these holy damsels lead! Far from the fretful striving of the churlish world--its hate and jealousy and bitterness and disillusion--no call to arms or shock of war invades this calm retreat. They share ungrudgingly their Eden with the beasts and butterflies, guileless and content as they, strumming the three-stringed samisen, sailing through maze of solemn *kagura*, doing tender service in the temple.

Among the troop of maidens was one who wore no religious habit. Although she had taken no vows, priests and virgins loved her as much as if one of themselves. Brought up among them with the hares and birds for comrades, as stately and as gentle as the deer, she shared from childhood, being motherless, their pure and contemplative life. Strangers often said that the fairest thing in lovely Nara was the tall and pale O'Tei. Some compared her to the unblown white lotos as it sways dreamily in the breeze. Others dubbed her pearl; but later all agreed that young Sanjo the armourer was delivered of the neatest simile when he fashioned a white fawn of purest silver and gave it to the maiden for a hairpin. As a child she had always been still and given to day-dreams, peering into the flowers as if she could read secrets there, or gazing into the opal sky in search of angels, or watching the pallid stars as they glimmered forth out of the deepening blue. Yet was she as gay as the chirping cicadas in the trees, as light and fleet as her four-footed friends, as, pattering on dainty clogs in wayward mood, she would leave the forest for the town, and peeping in at Sanjo's, shake an arch finger at the brawny armourers, while they wiped their swart brows, and laughed.

It was by a whimsical coincidence that the celebrated family of Sanjo, from time immemorial armourers in chief to the Mikados, as the Miochins were to the Shoguns, should have set up the forge, emblem of war, hard by the sacred wood, the type of peace. But so it was. Indeed, as I write, the existing Sanjos occupy the ancestral dwelling. They are poor now. Their occupation is

gone, for civilisation and European ways have stepped in and ruined them. At the period which occupies us, the blowing of the forge-bellows and the welding of iron on the anvil were in curious contrast to the surrounding calm. Many lords who came hither in pilgrim guise to improve their soul's estate, looked in at Sanjo's ere they went away, to buy new blades and armour. The holy forest was an oasis of peace in a world of uproar; for was not the castle of the powerful lord of Nara but a mile beyond the town; and did not close by (happily concealed by a hill from his proud gaze) the fortress of the Daimio of Osaka rear its majestic front, home of his hereditary foe? Of course it was enough for two great feudal lords to dwell cheek by jowl for them to hate one another cordially. These two were as jealous as two rival beauties. The outer moat at Nara was wider than that of my lord of Osaka, but then the interior of Osaka's stronghold was the more splendid, and its armoury more richly furnished. Hence frowns and jibes and backbitings from generation to generation, varied now and then by siege or battle, accompanied by fire and massacre.

Among the many who were firm friends of the Sanjos, was, naturally enough, Sampei. Of course, so gallant a young gentleman could wear no armour but Sanjo's, could wield no sword but one that bore his mark. One morning, standing beside the anvil, and laying down the law to an obsequious audience, on military subjects, he beheld, framed in the doorway, such a delightful vision, that his heart gave a great thump, and he dropped the precious blade, whose temper he was critically testing by the bisecting of a coin. It was only for a second. Startled by the apparition of a distinguished stranger, and grown unaccountably bashful of a sudden, the blushing and beautiful O'Tei cried Oh! and, turning on her clogs, scampered back into the wood, whither the inflammable Sampei would swiftly have followed, had he not been restrained by the armourer.

"Beware!" the latter whispered, grasping him tightly by the skirt. "That maid is not for thee! The heiress of the Daimio of Nara will look higher than a soldier of fortune!"

Sampei laughed, to conceal his annoyance. It is exasperating and humiliating too, to a handsome young soldier, who as such adores the sex, to be bluntly informed that the loveliest girl whom he has ever looked upon is hopelessly out of reach. And yet he could not deny that his friend was right. The White Fawn of Nara might never be his, for one so noble and so fair could command the most splendid of *partis*. But was that any reason why he should not look at her? He was heartwhole. No doubt of that. His soul was devoted to his sword; but, as dashing young warriors have done time out of mind, he liked to dally with maidens, and the prettier they were the better. Instead of purchasing a blade and departing straightway, he all at once became fastidious. This one was too light; that one ill-balanced.

Japan is the land of blades. From the tail of the Dragon was born the sword which the Sun-goddess bestowed on the first Emperor. By the sword of the clustering clouds, Yamato-Daké subdued the East. It was quite fitting that our young general should be particular. Sanjo produced in vain his rarest achievements. There was "Knee-cutter" and "Beard-divider," unrivalled masterpieces, which Sanjo himself so loved that he had always declined to part with them. But there was no satisfying this capricious and arrogant youth. Sanjo would be good enough to set himself to work and create an inspiration; and Sampei, to whom time had all at once become no object, would remain at Nara and superintend the progress of the miracle. And so it came about that the blade, taking long to make, O'Tei (curious, after the fashion of maidens) came pattering along the street, just to see if the young warrior was gone. Oddly enough, he was still there; with face towards the door too. This was well, if strange; for he was comely; extremely civil, to boot; courteous, and vastly respectful; could troll rich snatches of merry song, and tell diverting tales with dancing eye and glittering teeth; while as for his smile, it did one good to bask under it--so bright it was, so warm and genial, exuberant with bubbling youth.

The brawny workers at the anvil vowed with grins and nudges that 'twas charming to watch these two--she, the type of the patrician beauty of her country--complexion of palest olive, nose aquiline, cheek bones a trifle high, perfectly moulded chin and throat, eyes and hair a deep black, the former raised the least little bit in the world at the outer corners--as she lounged in a steely *kimono* of finest crape drawn up over one of scarlet. And he was in his way as bonny a spectacle. Exceeding dark of skin; of low stature, as are most of the Japanese, but admirably proportioned and muscular; his luxuriant sable locks (shaven away in the centre, lest the eyes should be obscured in battle), fastened in two tresses at the back, while a becoming blue fillet bound his temples, knotted at the side in a bow.

I am afraid I must admit at once that Sampei, to whom I am very partial, was a sad flirt. He invented appalling tales of death and slaughter, for the pleasure of seeing the cheek of O'Tei grow whiter, then set himself to woo the delicate sea-shell colour back with well-timed jest; and was flattered and pleased to find that he could learn to play upon her as on some fragile instrument. To the girl his radiant advent was a strange and wondrous break in the sweet monotony of years,--a revelation like the raising of some veil that masks the infinite; and she marvelled vaguely whether the perfumed wood would hold so rich a charm when *he* was no longer there to rouse the echoes with his laughter. Hand in hand they wandered--artless children--while the soft-eyed deer peeped out at them approvingly. They visited her favourite haunts; the open glade where the glorious lilies grew in clusters--lemon-yellow, or white, brown centred; where the great jewelled butterflies tumbled low along like junks under heavy sail; where beds of scarlet blossoms like geraniums nestled in sheets on the bank of a crystal stream--home of flights of glittering dragon-flies, black and iron-blue, like the cohorts of the warlike Osaka. And then the

sharp *twee twee* of the cicadas, answering or calling one another out of the deep stillness of the canopy above, the boom of the hoarse bees, the buzzing of gossamer wings, the click of the cricket, the hum of the myriad tiny voices up in the dense green, which joining in harmonious chorus form a silence--a haven of solitude and rest.

It was not possible to linger in the shadowed aisles whose pillars were the giant cryptomerias, without feeling subdued and softened; and a suspicion flitted more than once across the mind of the young soldier that perchance the career of hurly-burly and the clash of steel were a mistake, the contemplative life a better. What happier method of getting through the cycle than to muse away the years, till called to go, with gentle O'Tei, and the forest, and the animals? And then, the sylvan influence and flash of the clear eyes removed, Sampei would wake and shake himself in distress, and know that the ground was dangerous. The contemplative life was good for girls and shaven priests, and men who had succumbed in the battle. Youths with lives spread out before like a trail of moonlight on the sea, must gird up their loins and elbow their way through the medley. Too long already had the young General dallied, wasting time. And yet, not wasting, for he and she were to be friends for life--that was quite settled--dear brother and loving sister, trusting each other without question, certain, in moments of emergency, of the completest helpfulness and sympathy. It was delicious to possess such a sister, a soft warm sunspot on his harsh career; more she might never be, and he recognised that this was well.

Her gentleness unnerved his arm, he was wont jestingly to say, for her nature was woven of such frail glass threads that just as the rush of the herd snapped the slender lily-stems, a rude puff of wind might shatter it. Some day she would find a suitable husband, and her adopted brother would love him for her sake; and then they would recline in the long grass and fall a-talking of what the lucky mortal would be like. To match with the perfection of O'Tei he must be a perfect creature. Not a bluff soldier like Sampei. No, that would never do, for like a tender plant must the dear maid be cherished. To the end must the White Fawn be screened from din of war and rude surroundings. Poor hearts! They were both so young and ignorant and hopeful. They knew not how futile a pastime is the building of air-palaces. They were unaware that Fate is a sad marplot, and that if we plan a matter in a certain way, it will surely come out quite otherwise.

The Shinto virgins were somewhat scandalised by the romantic proceedings of the fair O'Tei and the too good-looking General. They were disinclined to approve of him, for they knew he had said that, with faces painted a dead white, eyebrows at top of foreheads, and long flat hair well-oiled, they looked like the dolls of Asakusa. A ribald military person was not expected to have taste, or to know wherein lies true beauty, but he might show more respect for youthful gorgons. O'Tei did little credit, they averred, with tart displeasure, to her education. If she pined for male society, was not the temple full of holy bonzes? The heiress of Nara showed lamentable signs of incipient depravity. What business had she with Sanjo, the common armourer? She who, wayward always and inconsistent, when taught like every prospective chatelaine to wield a pike, had been wont to toss down the silver-mounted weapon, with a pout, vowing that she hated fighting.

Things could not go on as they were, for the situation was a false one. Sanjo grew nervous. If the Daimio of Nara, who as Kugé or court noble lived usually at Kiyôto in attendance on the Emperor, were to hear that his only child, instead of innocently floating through mazes of *kagura*, was using his (Sanjo's) forge for flirting purposes with an ineligible man who was the son of a concubine, there would be trouble; and Sanjo was not unaware of the parable concerning iron pots and earthen pipkins. All were relieved, therefore, except O'Tei, who was hazy as to her own sentiments, when the news arrived that the rebellion in Corea was to be quelled, and that Sampei was to command the expedition.

When brother and sister parted, O'Tei clung round the neck of the youth, and, weeping bitterly, shivered she knew not why. Lovingly he kissed her brow, and disengaged himself from her embrace, and was more than ever certain as he rode away that, perfect in a congenial sphere, as wife of some grandee who would appreciate her gentle excellence, his sweet and sensitive sister would make the worst of consoles for one whose trade was war.

CHAPTER II.

THE LAST HOJO.

Being a cunning and artful reader, you have long since guessed that the pattern maid whose benign influence was destined to reform the brutish No-Kami, was no other than O'Tei, while the paragon Daimio was Nara.

The Shinto virgins, as unjust and purblind as young gorgons may be expected to prove, were quite wrong as to O'Tei, who was no flirt. She did all credit to her rearing, for, when summoned to leave the conventual seclusion of the forest and assume the garb and responsibilities of her rank, she dutifully murmured, "Let my father's will be done," and accepted the husband of his choice. She had never been told--for the holy bonzes knew little about the subject--that in many marriages there are but two cheerful days--the first and the last--and marched straight upon her fate without a tremor.

The elder Hojo, though a crafty and long-headed statesman, made a sad mistake while arranging the affairs of his son. The air palace he built was complete and imposing, beautiful to the eye, but, as the muscular and practical Tomoyé had foreseen, its foundations were of the weakest. He forgot that old Nara, as lord in waiting, was likely to be deeply attached to the person as well as to the position of the Mikado; that he, like the rest of the Kugés, would probably treasure up the insults which were freely showered on his master, with a view to future vengeance.

Thanks to the uncompromising tactics of the despot, the reigning Mikado (there were three in exile) was a boy, a *roi fainéant*, a puppet; but he was hedged about with the intangible and mystic attributes of the Mikadoate, and the buffets he received reverberated along the line of Kugés into the hearts of the lower class. To possess the person of the Emperor was doubtless pleasing to the possessor--a trump card--but those who did not possess him felt his thralldom bitterly. That his daughter should wed the heir of the all-powerful Hojo was satisfactory and flattering to Nara. So long as the tyrant lived against whom it was hopeless to struggle, he would mask his game; but after his death, what then? He was expected to assume the functions of chief adviser, and keep the successor straight--was, in fact, to tighten the bonds about his master's limbs, for the behoof of the execrated family.

This was whimsical--illogically planned--and Hojo a fool for his pains, When he contemplated the folly of the man he hated in his heart, the grim visage of the cautious Nara was puckered into unaccustomed smiles. The advice he would give in the future--so the wily lord decided--must depend on the attitude of his son-in-law, and be guided by the course of events for the benefit of the imperial prisoner. In his mind's eye (if Hojo could only have guessed it!) he beheld with secret exultation the brutish No-Kami sinking lower and lower by sure degrees into debauchery, until the moment should arrive when the ruler would become the ruled. And then--and then! Well, time must show what then. Sufficient for the day is its labour.

Just as a Nimrod of the chase may fly safely over tremendous obstacles and be undone by a ditch at last, so was it with old Hojo. He sallied forth one day to put down an insignificant riot in never tranquil Satsuma, and received there his quietus. As already related, the faithful Tomoyé died with him, and No-Kami--juvenile, inexperienced, and cruel--was called to reign in his stead. And now, no longer restrained in the smallest degree by respect for a severe mother or fear of a fiery father, the new despot, surrounded by parasites, gave free rein to all his vices.

The unaccustomed period of peace came to an abrupt conclusion. The young Mikado having been goaded one day to remonstrate with his new jailor, the latter raised his fan and slapped the august cheek. The Kugés flew to arms to avenge their outraged lord, but No-Kami, with the aureole of his father's prestige still about him, was too much for them. The nobles who dwelt in the palace bore but little of the stamp of warriors. The astute Nara, whilst hating the young man, saw that now, while the aureole remained unfaded, it was not yet the time to strike. He assumed therefore, with much parade of zeal, the *rôle* of mediator between his master and his son-in-law. At first in vain.

An unorganised band of patriots took the field, who were speedily routed and slain; and No-Kami, like the tyrant that he was, ungenerously pursued his advantage. Thanks to Nara's intervention, he refrained from deposing the Mikado; but he made up for this act of clemency by committing outrageous deeds. Banishment and confiscation were the order of the day. The estates of those who had dared to unsheath the *katana* were distributed among the minions of the despot. All over Japan, those who loved their country heard with groans of the annihilation of the loyalists, and the pitiful condition of the Emperors. There was a puppet Mikado at Kiôto, and a nominal Shogun at Kamakura, but they were both under the tutelage of Hojo.

No-Kami, as Nara hoped and expected, flushed with easy victory, and drunk with blood, resigned himself for a while to luxury, and neglected public business. A horde of rapacious bravos and licensed bandits sucked the lifeblood and paralysed the energies of the people. The weight of taxes, that ever crushes the spirit of the Asiatic peasant, grew heavier, day by day, until existence became intolerable. How was an end to be put to this nightmare? That was the question which all were fearfully whispering, and to which there seemed no solution.

No-Kami, if self-indulgent and ruthless, was no zany. He knew that his position was to be maintained by fear and a strong hand, and that enervation meant destruction. Bundles of bamboo, when bound together, will dam a stream, though each separate stem is but a feeble wand. The insurrection of effeminate Kugés had been precipitate and foolish. If the whole country were to rise like one man, he would, as he was aware, be swept like rice chaff into the sea. In the mutual jealousy of the Daimios lay his chief safeguard. While plunging each in separate discomfort, union at all costs must be prevented. Attempts at conspiracy among the nobles, or at combinations among the lower classes, must be frustrated, and to that end he gave

strict orders to officials and tax-collectors to allow of no public meetings. The people were to pay what was demanded of them, humbly and dutifully, as best they could, but on no account were to be permitted to hold gatherings. Even the great festivals of the year were for a while to be discontinued.

Over and above these precautions, the tyrant surrounded his person with a picked body-guard of Samurai, or two-sword men; hedged his fortress with bristling defences; and recalled his brother, the brilliant Sampei, from his career of victory abroad.

Urged possibly by a spirit of contrariness, a contempt for the society of his prisoner and the Kugés--perhaps by a sense of freedom from personal danger there--the favourite abode of No-Kami was his castle of Tsu, four days' journey from the capital, over precipitous hills. Here he loved to dwell, surrounded by his brawling warriors; sojourning from time to time, when business called him to Kiyōto, at a small but superb villa, called the Golden House, which stood secluded in a park on the outskirts of the sacred city.

The castle of Tsu was one of the strongest in Japan (the outline of its foundations still remains to attest to its vast area), and covered, within the square space of the outer moat, sufficient ground to accommodate an army. This outer moat, upon which many a shallop floated, was wide and deep and sluggish on three sides, masked by a luxuriant crop of lotos; while the fourth wall was washed by a rapidly-running river, the Iwatagawa, which a couple of miles away brawled into the sea. Out of the water rose a platform of great stones, with a fringe of gnarled and rusty pines, through which were visible battlements of earth crowned by a low parapet. At each corner was a huge four-storied building, fitted with four wide roofs of sculptured copper; the walls of whitewashed plaster within frameworks of unpainted wood. Inside this outer defence was a recreation and drill-ground of sufficient extent to allow of room for jousts and spectators, as well as trees and vegetable gardens, and a village of wooden huts for soldiery and camp followers. Dwellings of a better class were clustered like seashells about the second or inner moat, which enclosed a second wall.

Within the inner square was a space of considerable size, in the centre of which uprose the castle, a four-sided tower three hundred feet in height, tapering towards the top. By reason of its many roofs or verandahs of burnished and sculptured bronze, it seemed more like a cluster of many towers, the centre one the loftiest; and a picturesque object it was, for owing to the prevalence of earthquakes, all the walls above the foundation platform were of whitened mud and plaster, enclosed like the corner buildings within frames of timber; while the middle roof reared its head with overhanging eaves to a sharp point, crowned on the apex by a great fish, fashioned of pure gold.

This fortress was, barring miracle or treachery, justly reputed impregnable. Both moats were crossed by drawbridges, as an extra caution against surprise. The outer entrance was approached round a corner, so that the gate with its side postern was doubly commanded from above. Even if the outer wall were stormed, the inner one frowned on the intruder with manifold engines, while the ground about it could be rendered untenable by missiles from the summit of the tower.

A bowshot from the outer moat, westward from the river bank, the town of Tsu, with straggling suburbs, meandered, low and grey, like a long serpent. All Japanese towns are of one colour, walls and roofs alike, of wood unpainted and weatherworn, rendered a shade more silvery by clusters of pale lichen; but Tsu was more monotonously gloomy in aspect than most, by reason of damp and misery. The country close around, with the exception of two low hills, was flat and sedgy, broken by marshes and shallow rivulets. Away, hazy, melting into blue, could be discerned the encircling peaks of the range, beyond which is Kiyōto. Grand mountains these, rugged and austere, with many a beetling crag. Mikuni Yama; Outake San; and away to the south-east Asama Yama, the majestic chief volcano of Japan.

The town of Tsu differed from others in that it displayed none of the spick-and-span cleanliness for which the land of the Rising Sun is as conspicuous as European Holland. The outlying cottages bore the stamp of squalor and ague, standing in oozy sludge. So did the people bear the brand of sorrow, as, listless and inert, they dragged their heavy feet. As a poor show of enterprise, a few unripe persimmons, which no one desired to buy, were exposed for sale in the mire; while here and there a tray of sorrel-like leaves were placed to dry (?)--a plant used for dying blue the cotton which is the common garment of the peasant. There was none of the briskness and gaiety to be seen that make rural Japan so cheery. None of the incessant chatter and laughter and pattering of clogs, the rush-and-tumble of naked brown babies, the whirr of the silk-looms, the busy hammer of the carpenters.

The houses, wide open to the street, displayed the usual raised platform of wood, smoothly planed, covered with matting, with *hibachi* or firebox in the middle; but there was no brilliant glimpse beyond of the wonderful toy gardens, with rocks and dwarfed trees and straying tortoises and gaudy flowers and crickets in tiny cages, which distinguish a prosperous village. The paper windows or screens being always pushed back in their grooves during the day, a rustic Japanese household of the lower class may be said to live in public; for, till the screens are replaced, which they usually are at dusk, there may be said to be no privacy. You have a free view of goodman or matron in the bath, or at the toilet, or eating, or sleeping, or at work, and unabashed--with innocence sometimes for only garment--they nod to you pleasantly with a

cheerful "Ohayo!" as you pass. Tsu was too degraded, steeped to the lips in grinding poverty, to have energy for work or washing, much less for the homely ornament of a single lily in a pot. Almost entirely nude the men, unkempt and frowsy, lolled and slept--such a marvellous variety of attitudes of sleep a sculptor might find there--while the housewife, thin and sallow, naked to the waist, fumbled feebly over the weaving of cheap hats, or grass sandals for man and horse.

Of course the town could boast of a superior quarter, where, in front of houses of a better kind, were flapping blue cotton awnings, each one adorned with the dominant daimio's cognisance. Into one of these, apparently the cleanest and the best, we will enter (first removing our clogs and swords), for what is proceeding within should interest us somewhat.

It is evening. The house-platform is raised on stilts as usual, two feet above ground, and the first room or ante-chamber is open to the street. When we rap with fan on the paper screen beyond, some one cries "Enter," and sliding it aside we find ourselves in a large low room, whose ceiling of unpolished cryptomeria is supported by pillars of cherry. Above the dais or recess of honour at the end, a single picture hangs, representing the thirty-three Kwannon; under it is a gilt image of Buddha; while the monotony of the one wooden wall (the others are formed by paper screens running in grooves) is broken by a wandering spray of maple foliage, painted in autumn tints.

Everything is scrupulously clean and severely simple. You only become aware that this is a superior dwelling, by remarking the fineness of the mats. In the centre, round a large *hibachi* of bronze, filled with charcoal, a group are huddled close, for the all-pervading damp is chilling to the bones. Two well-known elders of the town are there--Zembei, and Rokubei his friend--the former talking volubly; while a man of middle age, the master of the house, is listening with dubious frown. His wife, Kennui, sits by, his hand in hers; while apart in a corner, with eyes as bright as a squirrel's, and flushed cheek, stands their eldest daughter Miné. Her mind--some call her a forward damsel--is disturbed, for, impatient and annoyed, she pushes aside a screen, and clatters off into the back garden, to tease with a finger the darting gold-fish that with mosquitoes reign in a pond.

The frowning man is Koshiu, the most important farmer in these parts, broad-shouldered, grave, and grizzled, whose opinions are of weight in the province.

Zembei--aged, with face like a walnut--has brought unpleasant news; indeed he has often dropped in of late, and each time his tidings are less agreeable. It is the old story, gruesome and too familiar. The rapacious Hojo needs more money--is always demanding more. But it is quite too bad to worry the men of Tsu, his own home, the poorest district in the Empire. Already the starving population have abandoned hope. In a former life they must have been very wicked, to suffer so much in this.

After a long pause of dejection, "Maybe my lord knows not of our wretchedness," suggests the farmer's wife, by way of pouring oil upon the waters.

"Peace, Kennui!" sighs her spouse. "As well throw stones at the sun, or try to scatter a fog with a fan, as look for humanity from a Hojo! They were ever merciless."

"Too true!" groans Rokubei, the elder. "Thus the matter stands; though you have shown so little interest of late, that perchance I am wasting breath."

"Ay, that hath he!" chimes in Zembei. "Why is it? You, Koshiu, whose words were ever of moment, and treated with respect, although from your stubborn pride you were never popular, instead of helping us, have been hanging back, content with grumbling complaint. We must act now, I tell you, and rend the air no more with idle moaning, or else we perish all! Gird up your loins, man. Awake! For unless this torrent of greed be stemmed, although less poor than most, you will soon be a beggar like the rest."

"My husband," interrupted Kennui, "is misjudged. He loves the people, and grieves for them, but perceives that resistance is useless--idle remonstrance will but make their plight more pitiful."

"The beetle in combat with the bear!" laughed the farmer drearily. "Act, forsooth! All this is idle prate, believe me. What can we do but die?"

"No idle prate," retorted Zembei. "Listen. By deputation--of which you would not form one--we humbly prayed and entreated the local counsellors of my lord--the leeches--to be more lenient; but they replied that they were only tools, exactly performing his bidding. Then, after anxious thought and discussion, gathering together in secret the chiefs of a hundred villages, at peril of our heads, we resolved to draw up and send a solemn petition, signed by all, to my lord's golden dwelling at Ki-yoto, imploring justice. Twelve of the most respected elders, chosen from the assembly by lot, undertook the dangerous task. Clad in their grass rain-coats, they sallied forth, and arrived in time at Ki-yoto."

"Idiots!" scoffed Koshiu. "Did they pay a long farewell to wives and little ones?"

"Arrived at the Golden House, they were received at the gate with blows and contumely."

"What else did they expect?" inquired the farmer--"to be feasted in the room of honour? Other lords perhaps, dreading public exposure of their misdeeds, might, if pushed, hasten to repair a wrong--the Hojos never; for the Hojos have no shame."

Miné pouted, and rapped the pavement with impatient clog.

"To be sweeping is always to be unjust!" she cried shrilly, from the border of the pond. "There are good as well as bad in every family."

"Hush, child, hush! Be dutiful!" reproved her mother. "Thou wast bewitched by soft empty speeches and a bold bearing. It was a bad day for thee when the lord Sampei came among us!"

"He is good and brave and generous," returned the girl, with burning face, "my lord Sampei!"

Miné cooed out the name that was on every one's lips, with such an exceeding abandonment of tenderness as startled her father into attention.

"More words less sense!" he remarked testily. "My lord Sampei! what hast thou to do with him or his? My lord Sampei forsooth! Wouldst be a Hojo's concubine? Never! I'd see thee dead first."

"The maid speaks not untruly," nodded Rokubei. "Sampei is in all things, save his name, unlike his brother. Through his mother Masago, the holy Abbess, he has peasant blood in his veins."

"And she," chimed in the girl, "the late lord's concubine, although of peasant stock, is worthy to be noble. As good as her son is the Abbess Masago. Cold and severe, no doubt, but just and lovable."

"How the child prates!" cried Madam Koshiu. "The lord Sampei has been absent these five years, skull-cracking, and is but just returned. What canst thou know of him? When he sailed, thou wert a little maid, and even than now more foolish."

"From his mother I have heard of him," admitted the blushing girl.

"So this was thy religious fervour, praying so often at the temple!" exclaimed the angry farmer. "Take heed, thou silly wench, or I will punish thee, and grievously. What! A cur can bark loudly before its own gate, and I can defend my own. Once for all, no more of the lord Sampei, or it will go ill with thee. Banish from thy feather-pate idle worship of thy betters."

The mien of Koshiu was so stern and threatening, that though words of indignant protest rose to her lips, the girl was silent.

"What if he were prevailed upon to intercede for us?" mused Rokubei. "He is as generous as brave--no doubt of that. My lord, after his brother's career of victory, could scarce refuse him a favour."

"Five years bring about great changes," growled the farmer. "Five years ago Hojo No-Kami was no worse than others of his rank. You will never persuade me that aught of good is to be found in a Hojo, legitimate or otherwise. Enough of him. Go on with your story of the elders."

"They were received, as I told you, at the outer gate with blows and curses. Had they not fled, murder would have been done, for a posse of samurai rushed out of the guardhouse, like devils, brandishing pikes. Disconcerted, grieved, and bruised, they returned to their inn to consult. Was the journey to go for nothing? Were they to return like beaten dogs, without even seeing my lord? Peradventure face to face with him something might yet be done, and his hard heart softened by their dismal catalogue of woe. They plumed their ruffled feathers, therefore, and lay in wait, and when he rode forth citywards, emerged from a clump of trees, and kneeling humbly in the dust, presented their petition. He took it, and, grinding his teeth with eyes aflame, turned savagely to his attendants.

"Remove these wretches!" he thundered, 'who by persistent insolence have deserved more than death. By-and-by will I pass judgment on them. Torment shall reward their temerity.'"

A silence of dismay followed the elder's narrative. Koshiu was surely right--his deep hate justified. It seemed that the existing Hojo was worse than any of his ancestors--and so young too! What a gloomy future for unhappy fatherland! What a sunless roll of years!

"The land is ripe for revolt, if we could find a leader we could trust," observed Zembei, who had been nursing his knees in silence. "The other lords are weary of the Hojo, but unfortunately jealous of each other. If they would bury for a time their private feuds, things might yet come right. He who ventures not within the den, will never take the cub."

"There is no trusty leader, except the victorious General, himself a Hojo!" added the other elder. "Buddha has forgotten us. The case is beyond mortal settling. There is left for us nothing but to die."

Here was a dismal and unsatisfactory conclusion to the debate, and it seemed that there was no other, for each with dolorous visage eyed his neighbour, with nothing more to say.

Miné, tossing off her *geta* on the garden stones, and springing up with pretty pink feet upon the matted floor, came forward.

"I am but a girl," she said timidly, "and, my father tells me, foolish. Yet from mouths of fools sometimes come words of wisdom. You can die, you say. Is not death the last resource, when all else has failed, for escaping from earthly woe? Masago, the dear Abbess, is worshipped for miles around. Prejudiced though you are, you have nought to say but praise of her goodness and her piety. Sampei is her son--nay, I will speak--and who should know a son better than his mother? In your grief you are prone to believe evil, and speak harsh and unjust words of him you know not. Seek him out, and implore his intercession with his brother. Seek out the lady O'Tei--an angel come to earth. She, the chatelaine, is now at the castle yonder. Entreat her help as well, and sure betwixt the two that stony heart shall melt."

Miné blushed like a tea-rose at finding herself thus boldly haranguing a trio of grizzled pates, and flinging herself down by her mother's side in sudden bashfulness, buried her hot face in her bosom.

"Buddha is not asleep," observed Madame Koshu, with conviction, as she stroked her daughter's head. "Verily the child speaks wisely words that are put into her mouth."

"We will follow her counsel," assented the marvelling Zembei, "for the gods--whose names be praised--are with us. Urged by his brother and his wife, my lord will surely give us the lives of the devoted elders. We--Rokubei and Zembei--will journey ourselves to Kiyoto, and make another effort. Learn, O stubborn Koshu, a lesson from thy child, who has given us the counsel that we needed."

The farmer shook his head.

"Cursed be the tree of Hojo, root and branch!" he cried. "Its fruit is crime, its blossom, wickedness. My lord Sampei and my lord No-Kami are scourges both! Go your ways, and do as you think fit. I tell you your errand will be vain."

Was there ever any one so obstinate as this sturdy Koshu?--a man who could only rail instead of bestowing help. The two elders were about to upbraid him for his mulishness, for they, like others, had naught but admiration for Sampei, when, raising his hand, he said,--

"Listen, wife and friends. You deem me supine,--my judgment warped by bias. In this you wrong me. I am ready to lay down my life, if need be, for the common good, but not to fling it uselessly away. Try your plan first: go to Kiyoto, and fail; then it shall be my turn. The arrogance of my lord reached its highest point when, some brief while ago, he smote with his fan the face of the revered one. For that sin, vengeance, if tardy, will be complete some day. The horror that flowed over the land warned him of the danger of his folly, of which, for safety's sake, he will never again be guilty. The Hojos are merciless--you will gain nothing from them but stripes. Here is my plan. I will gird my loins, and journey alone to the capital, and, biding my time in secret, will, with Heaven's help, thrust a copy of the petition into the hand of the Mikado himself, as in a litter he takes the air. Then will he, grieving for us, demand a public explanation from my lord as to why the poorest portion of the country should be ground down with such heavy burthens. So will my lord, weary with much admonishing, be stirred to lighten our backs."

The farmer's wife, hearkening to his decision, groaned and wept, for she felt that the tyrant, even if he gave way under strong pressure, would seek a victim for his wrath--that one the weakest. The elders saw the situation in the same light. They did not strive, however, to combat his resolve, for though their friend would probably be sacrificed, themselves would be gainers by his deed. If he chose to immolate himself, why not? They expressed approval, therefore, nodding topknots in unison, and, rising, departed to their homes, gossiping in whispers by the way.

What a relief to know that they had been deceived in Koshu. 'Twas a boldly-devised scheme that, whereby a peasant was to dare in person to address the Holy One. Peradventure he would be cut down by the guards ere he could present the paper. Well, well, time would show; and if, in the people's cause, he perished, his name would go down with blessings to posterity.

His decision was a relief, in other ways, as the two friends agreed, pattering side by side in the quiet of the night. It was vastly heroic on their part, considering what had already been undergone by the other elders, to declare that they would cast themselves in the breach. If my lord Sampei could be induced to interest himself, they would be the bearers of his missive to his brother, and so gain credit in the town for wondrous devotion to the people's cause. Not that for them there would be real danger (they had made up their minds of that), for No-Kami, however ferocious, would surely refrain from maltreating his brother's messengers. And yet now as they walked along, it seemed wise to give up the risk. Caution becomes old men. The independent Koshu was resolved to make a journey on his own account: clearly there was nothing to be gained by everybody going. They would let him go, for obstinate men will have their way. All things considered, themselves having gained credit by proposing to go, would stop at home and do honour, by-and-by, to the escaped elders, when released.

This much satisfactorily settled, they gabbled of other things. Only to think of that little Miné being so clear-headed. Verily love works wonders. A comely maid, if unduly ambitious, and warm,

to boot, of temper. How her blood mantled at her father's railing. How undaunted was her defence of the young General. She must love him much to be stung into bearding, for his sake, her sturdy parent. He must have won her heart before he sailed, and had long since, no doubt, forgotten her.

A silly wench to look so high. A great General might stoop to pluck a flower as he passed, but, loosely caught, it would speedily fall from his breast, and he unwitting of the loss. She certainly was pretty; would develop some day, obstinate and headstrong like her father, into a shrew. Yes, she was young and fair to look upon at present, and, perhaps, were she so brazen as to cast herself at the young man's feet, he might deign to raise her for a moment.

Chattering thus, the cronies parted, each trudging his own way by the glimmer of his paper lantern. Could they have delved into the mind of the farmer's daughter, and have seen what was passing there, they would have had genuine cause for wonder.

Miné, as with frowning brow and dejected step she moved among the stones in the garden, struck her palms impatiently together.

"I cannot bear it, and I will not!" she muttered. "Hard and unjust and narrow is my father! Of these taunts there shall be an end. I gave my heart to *him* to trample on, and do not regret the gift. His I am or no one's until death. Each day and hour to hear him and his reviled and vilified, is constant torture. I will leave a home that is not to be endured, and take refuge for the present with the Abbess."

Miné was a true daughter of Koshu. Once her mind made up, there was no further indecision. Wrapping a mantle around her, she moved on tiptoe to where her three brothers slept, and then stealing forth into the night, closed the shutters behind her.

"Adieu, my darlings, perchance for ever!" she murmured tenderly; "for better or for worse the die is cast. He will soon visit the temple to see the mother whom he loves. If he will have me, I am his, to do with according to his pleasure; if not, I will remain to pray for him within the temple, in the garb of Buddha's handmaid."

CHAPTER III.

MARRIED LIFE.

The meek obedience of O'Tei to her father's wishes was but ill requited. The gulf between past and present was so wide that for a while she was dazed and stunned. It seemed to her that she must have passed in sleep through the gates of Death, and have been born again into a new dark world--desolate and drear--which was all evil. How calm and happy by contrast appeared that other life, as she recalled to mind the company of prim priestesses slowly floating in the dance; the lazy, sweet-tempered bonzes tinkling on bells, droning amiably through noses--their weightiest duty, adoration of the sun with foreheads in the dust; their loving labour, the cleaning of temple precincts; their pastime, the gentle craft of gardening. Now she found herself surrounded by a roistering crew of fierce, rough, ignorant retainers--scowling, swearing, swaggering samurai--swash-bucklers who were eternally cleaning and polishing their two swords and dirk, or practising some horribly nimble feat of arms, or with set teeth in sudden rage like red-eyed rats flying at one another's throats.

Nuptial pomp and ceremony over, bride and groom retired to their castle, where, with the laudable intent of making other magnates jealous, a series of sham fights and sumptuous jousts were inaugurated, whose unaccustomed din confused the brain of the chatelaine. For a space No-Kami appeared in his best light, for he was subjugated by the beauty of his young wife, and unconsciously a little afraid of her quiet high-bred demeanour. Bravely she strove to interest herself in his pursuits; with unflagging patience watched the retainers wrestling or riding at the ring; compelled herself to bestow applause on bouts at quarter-staff which wearied her. And yet, discipline herself as she would, the constant thud of stick on skull, or blade on helm--the guttural shrieks and execrations--chilled her to the marrow. There could be no sympathy 'twixt the sensitive and poetic nature reared in the sacred groves, and these grim and savage warriors. And, sharp to read faces, if ignorant of letters, they knew it as well as she, for her virtues were strange riddles beyond their comprehension. What they could be sure of was that their lady was regrettably white and slender,--too soft and delicate for a hard world of struggle, where the weak were deservedly mangled. Sorrowfully they compared her with the late chatelaine, unhappily deceased, the lioness Tomoyé, much (as is the usual practice) to the disadvantage of the living one. There is nothing that such men hold in more withering contempt than weakness. The

chivalry of mediæval Europe was mostly theory. Discontented, they did their liege lady a pathetic and grudging service, ashamed of her as unsuited to her station.

One day as she sat listless, wondering at the emptiness of life, No-Kami strode into her bower to claim admiration for a new and wondrous sword, fresh from Sanjo's anvil. In his nervous grasp it whizzed through the air with diabolic whistling sound, as he showed exultantly how he meant to slash off the head with it of the Daimio of Bizen, and other abominable rivals.

Now although O'Tei, in careless girlish fashion, had been rather fond of watching the armourers at work (the more perhaps because of the disapproval of sniffing gorgons), she had never clearly associated the results of their skill with their true purpose. She had always been bidden to observe the spring of the glittering blade, the clouded lines so deftly worked into the steel; the patterned *kogai* or stilettoes fitted in the scabbard; the elaborately ornate *tsuba* or hilt-guard; and saw as she admired details beautiful works of art fit to adorn a dwelling. But now when she beheld her husband making fierce passes, with a blood-curdling expression of ferocity upon his face, she became aware, for the first time, of his animal greed for blood, and shuddered as she looked, turning a shade more pale. To this wild beast she had been tied for life. What sort of existence could she hope for in the future? Would it be possible to go on to the end pretending to sympathise with that which in her heart she loathed? Power, unless kept in leash by thongs and bridles, degenerates into a tyranny that, feeding on itself, grows every day more infamous. She had learnt by report that her lord was a tyrant, and disliked by many, though as yet she knew no details.

She had been taught vaguely by the learned bonzes that the human animal is by nature a beast of prey, blood-raw till cooked by education. The man before her was as ignorant, and more lawless than his own retainers. Was it her task to show him the right path?--to wean him to better things by gentle influence? A noble mission, for one who was strong of purpose, firm of will. The girl resolved that she would try, but felt, with a sinking of the heart, that the task was beyond her strength. No-Kami discerned upon her features a look of pained bewilderment out of tune with the occasion, and bluntly growled his discontent. He was surprised and angry. When a chatelaine is called on to sympathise and exult with her lord, why does she show disgust? It came suddenly upon him that there was a barrier between them which, though intangible, neither might ever pass. A pretty helpmeet for a Hojo was this degenerate child of Nara's! Strolling through the well-appointed armoury, displeased and concerned, he selected the light silver-mounted lance which his grandam had used to splendid purpose when, in the absence of her spouse, she defended this very castle. More doughty even than the much-regretted Tomoyé had been this grandam, and no wonder, for, of noblest lineage, was she not the direct descendant of that famous Empress Jingo, who, leaving her new-born babe in the charge of her ministers, sallied forth armed *cap-à-pié* to conquer Corea?

"Did O'Tei know even how to hold a lance?" sneered No-Kami.

Of course she did, she replied, with a forced smile. Was not every noble damsel taught how to defend her home?

At the outset she had made a mistake by showing her thoughts upon her features, an error that might be yet retrieved. To smooth the disappointed furrows from his wrinkled brow, she took the lance from him, and straightway went through the exercise. For a moment it pleased his vanity to watch the graceful movements of her tall lithe form as, gathering in one hand the ample folds of her long robe, she ran forward, thrust, and recovered. And then, happening to glance at the tell-tale countenance, he cursed and ground his teeth, for her martial exercise was a sham.

Her thoughts were far away. Like a patient automaton wound up with a spring, she half consciously did what was required, but clearly found no pleasure in the act. With a great oath he roughly wrenched the weapon from her, and bade her go mind her distaff.

She sighed, and, obeying with aggravating meekness, retired to her chamber; and from this moment there grew up between the wedded pair a thicket which waxed stronger each day and thicker. The parasites--braggart samurai, turbulent officers and soldiers, and truculent hangers-on--were quick to perceive a change with which they sympathised, and prompt to act upon it. Boisterous, rude, ill-mannered at the best, they saw that, like themselves, their lord was ashamed of his handsome and cold but fragile wife, and by insensible gradations--he unwitting of it--their perfunctory respect dropped from them. No-Kami was heard one day, in unguarded whirl of wrath, due to balked hope and disappointment, to dub her "Puling baby-face," and loud was the laughter at the *sobriquet*, for one and all they unconsciously chafed under a refinement of which they had no experience, and came to hate her for her gentleness.

And so it came about that, abandoning as hopeless at the initial stage the mission for which (by the late statesman's cunning) she had been destined, O'Tei withdrew from serious attempts at influencing the despot, and made the first fatal downward step on her dark and stony road.

Entrenching herself behind a screen of pride, she withdrew herself from contact with the samurai, by whom she was treated with a surly carelessness that was insult but half concealed. When etiquette required it, she appeared in public beside No-Kami, whose attitude was sulky and displeased; at other times she abode in her own bower overlooking the swift river, a retreat where she could not hear the yells and sword-thuds, embroidering among her maidens, or

reading poetry, or playing on the three-stringed samisen. Though secluded, it was by her own choice, and she in no sense a prisoner. No-Kami, when in amiable mood--which, as time went on, became a more and more unusual circumstance--displayed for his wife an uncouth, sulky, snarling respect, like that of a wolf under a whip; for instinct whispered that he was totally unworthy,--that as she came to read him better she would despise him more,--that already she saw with those calm clear eyes his many faults and mental smallness, though too well-mannered and too haughty to admit it. A rude and proud as well as licentious and undisciplined man finds contempt from her who should be his congenial helpmeet a constantly galling spur.

If O'Tei, descending from that lofty pedestal, would only have abused him roundly,--have bandied sharp words,--have stooped to scold him, he would have breathed more freely. The air would have been cleared of its oppressiveness, for he would have known himself nearer to her level. How exasperating was it to the self-indulgent and unscrupulous tyrant to have this pale and silent and superior woman always at his elbow dispassionately contemplating his peccadilloes with disapproval peeping from her eyes. The worst of it was that he knew her to be right in her estimate of him, and secretly admired his chill and independent wife. Yet at the same time her presence was irksome, and goaded her spouse to flashes of rage which drove him, as it were in protest, to deeds of violence. It was the old story, which is ever new, of the 'little rift;' of two young lives starting side by side from standpoints far as the poles, with mutual misunderstanding and distrust, that increase like a rolling snowball till they grow into active detestation.

The Hojo neglected and avoided his consort, but was not wilfully cruel. If he chanced to have it by him, he would, when asked, give her money for charities; for, like many another misunderstood lady, she sought a salve for lacerated feelings in good works. It would have been most impolitic to have been patently unkind to her, because it was not well to make a foe of Nara by openly ill-using his heiress. He wist not of the conduct of the samurai, who took their cue from him; but he certainly saw as little as he conveniently could of his beautiful better half, spending considerable time at Kiyoto quarrelling with other daimios, browbeating his imperial lord.

For her part, reared in retirement, and a stranger to town gaities, she preferred the castle--when No-Kami was absent with his scowling retinue. Then, her own mistress, she would order her kago,--a heavy gorgeous litter, gold lacquered and emblazoned, adorned with rich curtains, and cushions, and tassels, borne on the shoulders of twelve staggering men--and penetrating, when the fancy seized her, along the centipede street of Tsu, make for a garden beyond, to which she had taken a liking. Reaching the favoured spot was the difficulty, for it was necessary to pass along two miles and more of straggling street and suburb, where poverty, if speechless, was rampant. To her pale face, though, it always showed its less hideous side, for the poor of Tsu (how many there were of them!) soon learned to adore their chatelaine.

She could not with her feeble force even attempt to stem the tide of suffering due to my lord's oppression; but the crushed creatures knew right well that behind the marble mask was a deep fund of pity--that their lady would sometimes go dinnerless herself for the sake of starving children. When she passed by, the toilworn women would look up, and show their blackened teeth in a wan smile; and the brown naked children, with their comical shaved pates and elf-locks--their bat-ears, wide mouths and eyes à *fleur de tête* like slits--would come trooping and crowing about her. She was always interested in the details of their poor homes,--ready with soothing words, and such money as she happened to possess; would converse with the old men as they wove sandals, the two straw loops caught on their great toes; criticise the painting of the phoenixes on the umbrellas of oil paper, an industry in vogue in these parts; exhort the languishing men to renewed courage and hope; and all the while her revolted soul died within her at contemplation of the wretched huts of mud and bamboo, some of them mere mats stretched on sticks, and stiffened with wire, with rotten crumbling roofs of decayed rice thatch, and mud floors that were never dry. Her heart bled for the patient, suffering people, and she was glad to get away to her garden, where the sun shone forth with halcyon brightness, and nature at least was happy. For Tsu, I would have you know, is not all ugliness. Passing out of the low-lying oozy suburb, you reach a wooden bridge over one of the numberless streams that intersect the marsh, and a little further on come to rising ground, well wooded with the luxuriant vegetation which in Japan is the lavish gift of the rain-god. At the top of the hill, under the lee of a group of ancient pines, much tossed and wind-beaten, is a summer-house. From the road it is not visible, so deeply is it embowered in cherry and maple, each so glorious and lovely in its season, the which are closely tangled and entwined with such cataracts of purple wisteria as no western mind can realise. This hill or hillock, and another one hard by, stand alone on a wide plain, and from them may be gained a singularly varied view of flat marsh, and sedge, and vivid green rice fields, and scattered villages, and far-off hazy mountains. In front--and this was the view that brought back peace into the empty breast of the young chatelaine, the ground shelved gradually, thick strewn with flowers, until--a semicircle of yellow sand--it was washed by the softly-rippling waves of a blue bay, land-locked. Here nature, casting her golden glamour over all, masked the prevailing squalor. No typhoon ever vexed these enchanted waters, that washed to and fro in slow cadence the clumps of bamboo with which their edge was feathered. The tiny toy villages on the opposite brink were mirrored in long shadow. The festooned sails of the little fishing-boats, and trim white junks, were pictured in quivering double four times their height. The mountains beyond, of a deep reddish purple, without detail in the haze, were topped with strange silhouettes of single pines, clear against opal ether, or sharp cut against the blue with chasm and precipice. Many rocky islets were dotted here and there--volcanic, peaked, flat-topped--each with its long reflection, fringed with feathery foliage, hanging apparently to nothing--around, a flight

of boats, like sea-birds floating. Sitting for hours gazing down on the fairy scene, her stalwart naked kago-bearers asleep like statues of warm bronze away in the shade, O'Tei could forget her disillusion; but then with setting sun the shadow darkened, for the time was arrived when she must go home again, and with a return to the panoply of war, and swagger of the sentinels, peace and light faded out, and her heart was as sick as ever. Sometimes, more sad than usual, she would make to the sister hill a pilgrimage.

The gateway or torii at the bottom (one heavy beam curled at the corners, resting on two others) and the long straight flight of stone steps leading to a building with huge top-heavy roof, nestling in a grove of cryptomerias, showed that this was a holy hill surmounted by a temple. A very important temple too, with an immense gilt Buddha looming out of twilight on a bronze lotus, in an attitude of perpetual repose; gardens; fish-ponds, crowded with lotus plants; and a long low building glinting through the trees, wherein dwelt an abbess and her nuns.

What would happen to the Japanese if the lotus were banished from their midst? In winter, a mere yellow whip languishing in mud; in early summer there rises a fairy thing from out the ooze--a concave shield of vivid green, with a blue down as of a grape, and dewdrops glistening like diamonds. Then a round ball appears, which slowly opens, trembling upon the water, and gradually reveals the loveliest flower that blows. To the Japanese child who strives to pluck its white or roseate blossom, it is a picture of unearthly loveliness; to the adult it is the symbol of religious truth, the emblem of the eternal calm which is the highest ultimate reward. Taught from earliest childhood to love its beauty, the mature Buddhist sees in its petals creative power and world growth, and knows that when his mortal body approaches the cremation house, his weary cycle done, a stone carved to represent a lotus flower will support his bier and receive the last ashes of his fleshly prison-house.

During her three years of married life, O'Tei had made, under shadow of these groves, a firm and steady friend, without whose support she thought sometimes that she must lie down and die--the cold but kindly Abbess Masago.

As has been told, the second wife or concubine of the late Hojo, so soon as her fickle lord grew weary of her, shaved off her hair and donned the Buddhist habit. Monastic life in Japan is a strange anomaly. Many an abbess or abbot, supposed to have retired from the world, bestows from the seclusion of the grove mundane advice and counsel. Some, indeed, gain weight and influence of an important political kind with the loss of their shaven hair; and so it was with Masago. As Abbess of Tsu, many of the weary or unstable of lofty lineage came to crave counsel of her--lords and dames who would have scoffed at the concubine of Hojo. The religious establishments of Japan become asylums for the afflicted or the persecuted. In them the defeated soldier or refugee from the vendetta finds inviolate sanctuary. Many a man hopelessly crossed in love, or a grief-stricken father, or fallen minister, has--mundane illusions vanished--devoted himself to a priestly life. To the nunneries, widowhood furnishes the greater number of fervent nuns; but a necessity of evading an uncongenial match, or the brutal lusts of rude men in unsettled times, gave many an inmate to the convents.

Often enough, after communing with Masago under the solemn cryptomerias, O'Tei had gone home comforted. There was something consoling and supporting in the low-toned strong voice of the Abbess, in the touch of her firm white hand. Her face was more set and stern than Sampei's, but his kindly eyes looked out from under the shaven brows, and O'Tei could feel almost as if her dear adopted brother was walking hand-in-hand with her as in the good old days. Ah, me, how far away they seemed, those days of five years ago! The gleeful white fawn was a hundred years older, at least, than then, stricken and grievously wounded. Her breast was empty; nobody cared whether she was alive or dead; she loved none, had none to love, and yet there was a longing within that was positive physical pain, to twine her affectionate tendrils around something, and exhale to it the treasures of her sweetness.

Alack, what a cycle is this; what a hard and rugged stage in the long journey! What are we to think, when injustice rules paramount?--when we see in this life how many are punished for their virtues, as a set-off to the peculiar manner in which others are rewarded for their vices?

On a certain morning, which must now occupy us, our stately lily was lying disconsolate. Acutely suffering, and much perturbed in mind, power of judging and weighing all agog, O'Tei crouched on the mat of her favourite summer-house, watching the swaying waves, yet seeing nothing; on her finely-chiselled features a grey pallor.

As a rule, the misery through which her bearers carried her was chary of complaint, for the poor folk had room in their sorrowing hearts for pity for their solitary lady; but on this morning she had come on such a scene of anguish that she stopped her kago and alighted. The housewife was tearing her dishevelled hair, and wringing hands, and writhing her tortured body, while a young family stood grouped around in varied attitudes of woe. What could this mean? The house was of the better kind; there was rice in the brazen pot; unless she was mistaken, it was the dwelling of one of the elders.

Yes. It was the dwelling of an elder--was--who never would dwell there more--was dead now, probably. He had dared to go to Kiyoto, and make one of a set of insolent varlets who had presumed to waylay their lord, despite of warnings, and, with brow in dust, present a written prayer. His lord had resented the impertinence, had incarcerated him and his audacious fellows,

with a view to making an example of such wretches by an end of exquisite torment. For him it was not so bad, for he would shuffle out of yet another life--one more of that dreary series so many of which have yet to be endured before we reach Nirvana. But what of his wife and family without the breadwinner? Like a faithful spouse, she had borne many children; how now was she to fill their mouths? Would the dear and noble lady vouchsafe to lend a hand, and implore her husband's clemency?

O'Tei turned deathly pale, and, catching her breath painfully, leant against the screen. She would indeed have fallen, if one of the kago-bearers had not presumed to catch and hold her in his arms. Her lord! How long was it ago that she had disdainfully given up all hope of influencing him? She was weak and wrong. It was a crime--she saw it now--but too late--too late! That separating thicket had grown so dense, that there was no hewing a passage through it. If the harrowed wife of the victim was suffering, how much more the sensitive young chatelaine, whose nerves were so highly strung! The man, if he perished, was a martyr in the cause of right. Each new delinquency of the Hojo was a fresh hammer-stroke on his wife's heart.

Out of his sight, O'Tei strove to forget his wickedness, the full measure of which she had learned to guess by this time. On her frequent visits to the temple she prayed with sweat of agony for his reformation, for the repentance of him who, alas! was bone of her bone for life. She was his--part and parcel of himself--and yet she saw, with a sickening horror and sense of self-upbraiding, that he grew worse and worse--more cruel and more reckless--while she, with folded hands, looked on. In a vague, terror-stricken way she wondered what grisly phantom lurked behind the veil, what vengeance would fall from heaven. And might not this moral descent be in some sort her own doing, in that, while interference might have been of service, she had been too hurt and proud to attempt to stay his course? If he had no conscience, she had enough for both. Oh, for a dose of Tomoyé's spirit--of the unbending pluck of the militant grandam concerning whom the samurai were always trolling ditties.

But no!--the warriors were right--she unfitted for her station. Her burthen--the sooner the better--might crush and kill her. She quailed at the thought of ever seeing again the tyrant in whom there were no bowels of compassion, and who seemed to take delight in augmenting the calamities of his fellows.

Herself as grey as a corpse, she bent down and kissed the writhing woman, and without a word (how could she console her?), with parched lips and catching breath, swung away to her garden on the mountain. What was she to do? What could she do? If, by giving over her own tender body to the pincers of the torturers, she could assuage the growing trouble of the people, how gladly would she bare her breast. But no--she was condemned to sit and watch, with idle hands and dread forebodings, a horror-stricken spectator of her husband's deepening sin, and the lingering anguish of his victims.

What was she to do? What could she do? If madness might be wooed, it would bring oblivion and relief. Who would have thought that a delicate and tender girl, so little used to suffering, could bear such pain and live? As she lay upon the mat, she revolved that unanswerable question which worries a good many of us. What could she have done in a previous phase of existence to make the present one so exceedingly painful? To lie thus in dumb pain was intolerable: action of some kind was imperative. She would go to the temple and pray, and ask the advice of Masago.

Turning towards the other hill, she was astonished to see on the top of the long flight of steps a man--by his dress apparently a noble--who slowly descended, and mounting a horse, trotted in the direction of the summer-house. Her heart gave a great bound, then seemed to stand still. Could it be? Yes! it was Sampei--returned home at last--and he was coming here!

Yes, it was the victorious Sampei, who, having duly visited his mother, was coming to see his sister. For she was really his sister now; and he had heard from the Abbess an account of the condition of things, which, though guarded, pleased him little. When far away, he had received the news of the marriage, he had been amazed, and laughed; annoyed somewhat, he scarcely knew why. To think that the destined husband should be his own brother! And then he had felt grave doubts as to the success of the union; and then, light and *débonnaire*, and occupied with much cheerful splitting of skulls, he had put the subject from him. He was no marrying man--not he. His sword was his true love; to others he had not the smallest intention of being true. To cull the most fragrant flowers while the sun was shining--as many and as various as possible--and get others when they were faded, was his soldierly but scarcely moral code of ethics. And yet, while gaily slaughtering the Coreans, he had time now and then to hope that all was right at home, and that his white fawn was happy; and it was gruesome now on his return to discover that she was wretched instead of happy--his half-suspected previsions justified.

He flung his bridle to his betto, and striding with the firm and springy step of buoyant youth through the plantation of cherries and maples, stood still to take in the scene. And a pretty picture it was that his vision lighted on. An awning of fine blue linen, brodered with deer, in memory of beloved Nara, cast a shadow upon the mats of the summer-house, which were further shaded by a natural cascade of wisteria. Around the raised platform were tall camellias in full blow, scarlet and white; and within, the carved but unvarnished woodwork showed its grain like the pattern on watered silk. A low gilt screen, painted with chrysanthemums, divided the floor in two, in the front part of which was a firebox in finest bronze, representing a dragon coiled round a blossom of the lotus. A long flat *koto*, with thirteen strings, encrusted with gold and ebony,

stood close by; and on the yellow matting, half raised expectantly, reclined the young mistress of the hermitage. The eyes of Sampei moistened with unaccustomed tears, and a knot rose in his throat as he contemplated his old ally. She was matured--fairer than of yore, paler and thinner, and more delicately beautiful; but there was that about her that seemed too ethereal, stamped with predestined misfortune. He seemed to be aware of a something, reflected in light from the glow of another world. The roundness of youth was gone. The arch wayward tricks of irresponsible maidenhood had given place to a reserved and haughty dignity that was unnaturally still. The eyes were unduly large, and, surrounded with bistre circles, glistened with feverish lustre. Sampei's affectionate gaze could mark all this, though the winsome face was brightened now with the radiance of a glad surprise.

Sampei, bluff and careless though he generally was, could not but trace with sinking of the heart the line of precocious sorrow ploughed large and deep upon it. The coils of massive hair appeared heavier and more sombre by contrast with the ivory whiteness of the skin, slightly relieved as they were by a bunch of fresh red blossoms, which the loving hand of a tirewoman had tucked under the comb.

In accordance with the exigencies of her rank, she wore four under-ropes of silk, the edges of which, in stripes of varied colour, showed at throat and open sleeves, while the ample folds of the heavy and voluminous outer robe, brodered in a design of fans, were held together by a magnificent obi--pale brown, bedizened with black butterflies.

Never had Sampei, whom a wide experience had made an expert in such matters, looked on a more complete embodiment of patrician womanhood. Strange! He, so well versed in female charms, so used to the spectacle of beauty in all ranks and phases, felt his heart throb in quite unaccustomed fashion, and yearn unaccountably towards his sister.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ABBESS GIVES ADVICE.

With a great sob O'Tei sprang up, and, clinging closely to Sampei, burst into tears, while he, embarrassed and somewhat shy, stood waiting. Why this display of trouble so deep that it racked her frame? Had his mother concealed aught? She had not led him to suppose that it was as bad as this. Could No-Kami, careless of the treasure he possessed, have done her some grievous wrong? At the thought, the young General's dark face grew darker, and as a flood of wrath surged over him, he looked a genuine Hojo. And with it came a sense of something new and astonishing, which was to himself a riddle. Careless and light of heart, accustomed to look at things from their best point, and to delve no lower than was needful, he never dreamed of his old playfellow in her new sphere as wan and wasted and miserable, and with the feeling of indignation against his brother there was mixed a whimsical regretful longing. Had he not been wrong, when he might have taken the maid himself, to leave her for another?

Worldly-wise Sanjo had warned him that so dainty a dish was not for a soldier of fortune, and he had seen the prudence of the warning. But cold prudence is a mistake sometimes, as who should know better than a soldier? He felt sure that if, when playfully talking in the sylvan glades, he had led her to a pool, and, showing her the two faces reflected there, had pictured himself as the future lucky one, his playfellow would have returned his hand-clasp, and submitted to a lover's embrace. And when a maiden and a youth are of one mind, and the latter is energetic and determined, nine chances are in his favour, despite opposition of parents. It was diffidence that had undone him, and her. Although a rough soldier, he would, at home, have softened his roughness for her sweet sake, and if careful striving could have done it, have made her life a pleasant one. And now, fool that he had been, it was too late! Some such surprising thoughts as these--dark regretful visions of possibilities vanished--flitted across the mind of the young man as, her breast against his in perilous proximity, he kissed her perfumed hair. Scales seem to fall from his eyes as he questioned his own heart. In his brief career he had adored many a damsel, and had sworn to each to worship none but her; but with O'Tei it was quite different. With thought of her was mingled a respect he had never felt for other women. Once his very own, he could and would have been true to her,--have made it the joy of life to give her every pleasure, to watch and guard and shelter her from the blustering winds of the world--and it was too late! She was the wife of his own brother,--of him to whom, independent of natural affection, he owed allegiance as head of his clan. To her also then he in some sort owed faithful service. Yes, and he would be true and loyal. He swore it now, silently but fervently, as she lay upon his bosom. She had never known that he loved her otherwise than as a brother should. He would be her own true knight, with the privilege of bestowing all succour and comfort and counsel. Of the three, alas! she now

stood in bitter need.

On his return from his arduous campaign of five years, he had been received with acclamation by the people, to whom glorious feats of arms were as the odour of the lily in the nostrils. They had knocked their foreheads in the dust, had pursued him with shouts in the streets, nearly tearing his garments from off his back; in their enthusiasm had well nigh forgotten that he came of the blood of Hojo; but the sweets of well-earned popularity were no little embittered by the proceedings of the head of his house. The tales he heard on his arrival filled him with shame and horror, and his honest soul was sore perplexed, torn as it was between the traditional blind obedience to the head of the clan, and indignant disapproval of his acts. He could not turn against his brother. Death would be better than disloyalty, and yet it was very terrible by silence to seem to acquiesce in his misdeeds. When fitting opportunity offered, he would remonstrate with No-Kami,--point out to him that his course must end in civil war,--that in his next life he would of a surety be a bear or pig, as a just and dire retribution for recklessly plunging his country in blood. It was his duty to remonstrate, and he would do so gently but firmly, come what might. Not that much good would come of it. He knew No-Kami to be as headstrong as he was fierce. There would be high words, and possible estrangement. Estrangement! no, for the sake of this girl, that must be avoided at all hazards. He must cultivate diplomacy--he, the simple Sampei. If it was only the pounding of an enemy, something bluff and straightforward, he would be in his element. But to smile when inclined to curse, to be compelled to bite your lip and swallow down the burning words of just anger, to Sampei would be very difficult. He must try though. His poor sweet sister. Her sobs were due on this occasion, happily, to joy and relief at his return, in that she, the lonely and forlorn, had a trusty champion by her side. Instinct told him this.

For her sake, then, he must not break with his brother, for, forbidden access to his sister-in-law, he would be of no service in extremity. In extremity! What prophetic foreboding was it that whispered to him of something terrible behind, wherein she would need all the help that his strong arm could give her? Ah! if he had spoken when he might, how different it would all have been. Too late--that chapter was closed. He was to be her knight--vigilant and true. With a deep sigh, he raised her tear-stained face, and kissed her lips, then put her gently from him.

Side by side, and hand in hand, as in the old days, they reclined upon the mat, and the frown deepened on his brow as she told her story,--the uncomely story of selfishness, and greed, and cruelty, and wrong, waxing with impurity daily worse, till even sleepy Buddha must needs wake soon, and be impelled to hurl his thunderbolts. She told of the starving multitudes, to whom the son of the horse-leech cried "Give"; of the petition, and his brutal treatment of the elders. "If only I could serve as sacrifice," she said, in conclusion, with a fresh burst of tears, "how gladly would I lay down my life. But my lord and I are strangers. I dwell here, and he at Ki-yoto. Does not that tell its tale? The wind might as well preach to him as I. At first he liked me a little, but that soon passed. Of late his presence--knowing of what he is capable--has filled me with a nameless terror, for I seem to detect something in his eye that suggests a brain distracted. He is blood-drunk; his very laugh conceals a sword. And yet 'tis an awful thing for me, his wife, to sit by, attempting nothing."

No doubt the chatelaine ought to do something--what? Like Philippa, at Calais, she should wring, by pleading, from her lord, the lives of the condemned. Yet if the pair were so estranged, would she not be laying herself open uselessly to some insult, some rebuff? She admitted that she was growing afraid of her husband. That was bad. The situation was too many-sided for the soldier's unpolished wits. He pondered, and held his peace, and looked up with a sense of relief when, a shadow darkening the light, he beheld his mother, Masago.

The ascetic Abbess gazed proudly and fondly on her son, but with a tinge of concern. She had followed him from the temple, seeing that he turned his horse towards the summer-house; for she loved O'Tei, and was aware of the early passages which had passed between girl and boy. Sampei had such a free way of making love to every woman, that she, elderly and sensible, saw keenly the danger to both, if the neglected wife and pitying brother-in-law were thrown too much together. Side by side, hand clasped in hand, exchanging confidences. An ominous beginning. It was well that she had come, for these young people must be protected against themselves.

While O'Tei, with a ghostly revival of coquetry, was arranging her tumbled hair by aid of a silver mirror, the Abbess drew her son aside, pleading urgent and important business.

"My boy," she said, as, out of earshot, the two paced slowly in the shade, "you are as brave and true as even I could desire, and gratefully I thank the gods for it; but you are guileless; your arm is stronger than your head, and your blood is overwarm."

Perceiving a ludicrous expression of bewilderment on the honest face of her son at this mysterious preamble, she gently smiled, and shook her head at him.

"The best friend a man has," she observed, "is his mother; for a mother's love, undervalued often, is tinged with no selfish taint. Child, child," she sighed, placing a fond hand on his broad shoulder, "take warning while there's time. Do not think me blind, or foolishly importunate. You love O'Tei, and, for sake of both, had better keep apart. Think what tragedy might follow if your brother had cause for jealousy."

Love O'Tei! Was it so patent, then?--he the last to know it? The General in silence walked up

and down, while his mother gazed upon him wistfully. There was a deep sadness on his face that pained her. Perhaps in speaking out so plainly, she had been precipitate. Yet no; she had never been one to beat about a bush. Her stern creed admitted no half measures. Presently Sampei spoke.

"For once, most dear and wise of mothers, you are wrong," he said. "I love her; yes, I will not deny it--how much I did not know until ten minutes since. My love is so true and pure, that to save her a momentary grief I would fling myself off yonder rock. Be not afraid; no harm shall come to her through me."

"Noble and chivalrous in intent, just like my boy," nodded the sapient Abbess. "Maybe you are strong enough to carry out your resolve unflinchingly; but what of her? What if she, less prudent and more weak, were to bestow her heart on you? It would lead to general wretchedness, if not to her undoing."

Sampei had not considered it from that point, and ruefully rubbed his nose. It would no doubt be very awkward if O'Tei were to become enamoured of him. In that case, heroic leaps off rocks would be of little service. Then he burst into a loud shout of laughter.

"How like a mother!" he crowed. "Her own offspring being, of course, perfect--a full-plumaged phoenix--all must needs fall down and worship. Believe me, she is as pure as the dawn; her affection that of a sister."

"Now, perhaps, and I sincerely hope so," replied the Abbess quietly; "but you have no right to place her in temptation. So you deem me a silly old woman, too partial to her featherpated son? Well, then, I am forced to tell you, as a warning, that which I intended to conceal, to show that you are over-modest. I trow there are maids galore who wear the willow in secret for the most brilliant soldier in Japan. There is one luckless girl I wot of, who has flung her foolish heart at you--who weeps and languishes for love of you--swears she will have no other lord. Fie! She is a good and honest girl, who would never have thus bestowed herself without encouragement."

"Bestowed herself on *me*?" exclaimed Sampei, round-eyed, and feeling guilty.

"Her name is Miné."

"Miné!" ejaculated the careless scapegrace. "Tush! I know no Miné."

"For shame! Oh, light and fickle, it is as I guessed," returned the Abbess, with a head-shake that would have been solemn but for a sly flash of merriment in the usually stern eyes. "I have no excuse for the maid, since 'tis vastly reprehensible to throw your heart at one who does not want it; and yet, when her only child is so extremely fascinating, a mother must be indulgent." Sampei appearing quite mystified, Masago pursued more gravely,--"You used to single the poor thing out, bad boy, she says, at the rustic festivals here five years ago, and give her fans and hairpins. Unfortunate Miné! You turned her head, and have forgotten even her name. Do you remember Koshu, the farmer?"

Miné, Koshu's daughter. Dear me! a pretty little thing, with a temper that it was such sport to play upon. Of course Sampei remembered now, for indeed the too independent Koshu, dreading some such misfortune as had come to pass, had testily turned upon the dallying swain, which had mightily offended his lordship.

And for hopeless love of him this silly soul had been sighing all these years, with nothing to feed on but a few idle compliments. Sampei felt a twinge of conscience, was angry with himself, for perhaps he had been too ardent. Then he felt annoyed with the too-confiding maiden too easily won. A few common-place attentions, that was all, out of mere idleness. A pretty pass if all the young women whom one ogles were to insist on claiming one for life. What a pothor about nothing. It is extremely immodest and indecent of maidens to give themselves away unasked.

And then his thoughts reverted to that other lady, sitting yonder before the mirror, and a pang of distress swept over his features as he dreamed again of what might have been; the which perceiving the Abbess whispered,--"Be of good cheer, my son. By divine grace it will be for the best. My prayers added to hers, the maiden's mind will recover calm, and through the black passage of this hopeless love be led from earth to heaven. As a daughter of the people who has bestowed herself on you, I will cherish her. Already she has sought refuge under our roof, and ere long will become one of us for life."

He then, the light and jovial, was to be responsible for making of the poor maid a nun.

Sobered and saddened, and made uncomfortable internally by all he had seen and heard since his return, Sampei led his mother back towards the summer-house, where the young chatelaine was beginning to marvel at the length of their private colloquy. In this retreat, where she expected no visitors, O'Tei dispensed with the service of her ladies, for it was a relief to think out her dreary thoughts with none to read them on her countenance. Now, with a new sprightliness to which she had been long a stranger, she busied herself with hospitable cares. Placing on the firebox a daintily-wrought kettle of fine bronze, she produced from a gold-lacquered cabinet three fairy cups of the eggshell white porcelain of Hirado, placed a pinch of tea in each, and waiting for the water to boil, made ready to play the hostess.

It was with a tightening about the heart that Sampei watched her long fingers arranging sweetmeats on a tray, pouring water on the leaves, which straightway expanded, and turned the liquid of a pale straw colour. Had he not been so diffident and addleheaded while there was time, she would not now have been so thin and wan; those teacups might have been his teacups, and--well, well. He was till death her own true knight, demanding nothing in exchange for his unselfish devotion. To his heart he would repeat this o'er and o'er again till it was used to it. What might have been was not to be. There was nothing now to be gained by brooding or railing against his own stupidity.

Over their refectation the trio returned to the all-engrossing topic,--what was to be done for the poor suffering people?--how was the despot to be softened, and the imprisoned elders saved? Sampei related that the news of his coming must have preceded him, for no sooner had he clattered over the long wooden bridge which gives access to the main street of Tsu, than two ancient men had stopped him, and craved an immediate audience. Unlike my lord No-Kami, he had drawn rein at once, and listened; and the ancient men, with profuse grovelling, had implored my lord Sampei to use his personal influence for the rescue of the incarcerated headmen. It was indeed a heinous deed of insolence, they admitted with groans, to have sinned to the extent of imploring to be lightened of their burthens, but death of any kind was preferable to such a life as they endured at present. They reverently allowed that torments were deserved, but humbly implored mercy and consideration, for the sake of wives and children Sampei had been much shocked, for, to his generous nature, grovelling humility was offensive; and did not know what to do. He, as well as O'Tei, was resolved that something must be done for the sake of humanity, as well as to rescue from execration the unpopular name of Hojo. Perhaps the Abbess, the wise counsellor, would be good enough to settle what.

Now if Masago had a weakness (I am not prepared to say she had not), it was an appreciation of her position as chief adviser to every one. She therefore drank another cup of tea, then clearing her throat, began,--

"My counsel is this. My lord Hojo No-Kami must be brought to yield. Probably he will not be sorry of an excuse to do so, considering that after such an act of clemency as the remitting of torment, the elders, cowed and abashed, will be too frightened to say more about the taxes; whereas, if the men suffer, there will be further outcry, and the tax question will come yet more prominently forward, producing lamentable results. Hence my lord will probably, as I say, be glad of an excuse to send the people back, if they promise to be more amenable in future. It would be well if he owed his way out of the difficulty to his wife, for it would soften his animosity against her, and would cause the people to venerate her even more than they do already. My son, Sampei, could not be more popular than he is--praise be to the gods--but it would be pleasing to his mother if he were joined in the work of mercy. I therefore propose that the Lady O'Tei forthwith do indite upon a roll a personal request to her husband, craving as a boon the lives of the condemned, and tying it in a box of tortoiseshell, do consign it to her brother-in-law, that he may ride with all speed to Kiyoto, and, delivering the box, do add his own entreaties to his sister's--so may we be sure to gain our end, and avert a serious danger."

So succinct an oration, brief, and to the point, and patly delivered, deserved another cup of tea, and while she sipped it leisurely, Masago improved the occasion.

"My dear," she said, "I saw you shudder. This will never do. It is the greatest of mistakes to let such a man as Mylord No-Kami know that you are afraid of him. I noted in his childhood how he always treated more scurvily the hirelings who cringed."

"I never cringed!" exclaimed O'Tei proudly.

"No; but if I mistake not, you have let him perceive fear, under a veil of contempt. Should he realise this, he will follow up the advantage, and all will indeed be lost. You should have coped with him at first, my lily. It would have been better for both, believe me."

O'Tei twined her fingers together in distress. Had not the small voice within her whispered this long since. She did fear him, and dislike him, and despise him. Cope with him forsooth! How could she do it now? How could she ever have summoned sufficient moral courage? No; having retired into her shell of pride, she would stop there to the end, but in this matter of the elders she might bestir herself. Drawing forth a roll of paper, O'Tei and Sampei, with heads closer together than Masago approved, proceeded to concoct a warily-worded epistle.

Masago was truly an extremely clever old dame, for with her one stone she slew a variety of birds. O'Tei would be the happier in that she had been induced to intercede. She would gain points in the affections of the people, and so would the beloved Sampei. The latter, as bearer of the missive, would be removed forthwith from perilous association with his sister-in-law; he would also be removed from the temptation to reconnoitre Miné, who, the Abbess firmly resolved, was to shave her head immediately. This, being obstinate like her father, she would, doubtless, decline to do if the too warm-blooded warrior were to see and fancy her afresh.

The combination was artful from all points of view, and did credit to the adviser of every one. The elders would return unharmed, and, after a severe lesson, would be more dutiful. The storm would blow over, and all might repose in peace.

Alack! Masago knew nothing of the resolve of Koshiu. Had she known that he proposed to call, if necessary, for the individual intervention of the sublime Mikado himself, her eyes would have goggled in her head at his audacity, and her counsel might have been of a different order.

CHAPTER V.

THE FARMER GIRDS HIS LOINS.

The journey from Tsu to Kiyōto may be made by one in haste, mounted on a strong horse, in two days, but in a land where trade is carried on in perfunctory fashion, time is and ever was a cheap commodity. In a shop the traders squat smoking on the mat, grin, prostrate themselves with head-knockings on your entrance, offer a cup of tea and a pipe, and consider that all has been done that may in fairness be required of them. In need of goods, you must search yourself, pull things from shelves, till you do or do not find the object you require. As with trade so is it to this day with travel. An energetic foreigner, by a liberal showering of yens, may induce his kuruma-runners to cover thirty miles per diem; but the Japanese of all ranks prefer to journey quietly, jogging along in kagos, at the favourite and decorous pace of the familiar snail. Indeed the higher the social status of the traveller, the slower will be his progress, for impedimenta are symbols of dignity.

Our magnificent young General, although on horseback, was surrounded and followed by a rabble, who for the most part were on foot. There was the inevitable bodyguard of swaggering samurai, who, with hair shorn from temples, and swords in red lacquer scabbards ostentatiously displayed, cultivated a scowling expression of perpetual defiance, incarnation of haughtiness, fanatical patriotism, and contempt of everybody but themselves. Then there were cotton-coated and straw-sandalled baggage-men by scores in charge of strings of packhorses; a group of sutlers; and, swaying in rear of the procession, an unwieldy but gaily-bedizened kago, for my lord to recline in when fatigued.

There being no professional fun toward, neither master nor men were in a hurry. To come upon a roadside tea-house, with its bevy of laughing waitresses, meant the performance of a variety of operations: tea-sipping, smoking, drowsy lounging, jesting, active dallying, and then unlimited sleep.

At first the method of progression was of the slowest, for the marshy plain was cut by various rivers, which had to be crossed in barges; then came a stretch of paddy, or rice fields; a green sea of slush bisected by a narrow gangway of stones, along which two men were unable to trudge abreast. Then, the foot of the hills being reached, there was a long and weariful ascent of rock and sliding stones--a climb over precipice and crag by a way that could scarce be called a path--and a descent on the other side as difficult. This feat accomplished, it was, of course, necessary to bathe, and worship in an adjoining temple, and rest and sleep again, and so it took more than a week for the cavalcade to reach the capital.

At approach of the noisy procession the mountaineer cottagers peeped out of their secluded dwellings, but perceiving the company of samurai, speedily put up their paper shutters, and made believe to be not at home. For the two-sword man was apt to ape the vices of his betters, and leave behind a trail of ruin such as marks the passage of the locust.

Sampei was too busy with his own thoughts--which were gloomy enough, in sooth--to take heed of those he passed; and even if he had done so, would probably have failed to recognise an elderly pedestrian, who glared with hate from under beetle-brows, at the young noble riding by. Having forgotten even the name of the luckless Miné, it was not likely that he would quickly recognise her father, clad now in dusty pilgrim garb of white, and wide mushroom hat of rice straw. For Koshiu, true to his resolve, was also going to Kiyōto to watch events, and fulfil, if need were, his self-imposed and dangerous mission. Like all fervent worshippers of Buddha, the sturdy farmer had no fear of death; like other natives of Japan, he was eminently superstitious. Among the Asiatic poor, where ceaseless drudgery, and hunger never fully satisfied, are the common lot; where the tax-gatherer and the avaricious noble are the representatives of government; where earthquake and typhoon cause the forces of nature to be feared as malignant influences; life is not so pleasant as to cause the earthly wayfarer to long for its continuance.

The announcement of the Christian dogma that "the gift of God is eternal life," would rather pain than delight a Japanese, for to him life in any form is to be dreaded--not because death is at the end of it, but because another birth and death must follow (possibly more painful still)--then other births and deaths--links in a long and weary chain, before attaining the ultimate haven. The

moral pang that may possibly attend decease, consists in the parting from those whom he holds dear, and will, save under miraculous circumstances, never see again; for the Christian hope of meeting in a better world finds place but rarely in the Buddhist's mind. The chief deity, if slow and somniferous was just, and would (Koshiu argued) surely protect the family of him who was sacrificed for the common weal. There is a temple even now at Ki-yoto, standing on a dizzy height, whose terrace is protected by a strong pallisade, for, unless prevented, it is the practice of the faithful to crave a boon of the god, then fling themselves over the precipice, in the firm belief that--if the boon is to be granted--the deity will hold them scathless. It is strange that the number of bodies shattered on the stones below should not have shaken their faith either in the goodness or the power of the god. Having made up his mind that, if need were, he, the humble peasant, would invoke the sacred and mysterious Mikado's aid, Koshiu passed a night in prayer, then washed and dressed himself in the attire common to high and low who are engaged on a holy mission, and took a tender farewell of his family. There was his dear wife, Kennui; his three boys, Gennosuké, Sôkei, and Kibachi, ranging in years from thirteen to seven. Miné was unaccountably absent, but she was always a froward and unruly maid, wild and disobedient. On this solemn occasion, however, her father left for her a tender message of farewell, and amid the tears and outcries of those who feared that they never again might look on him, tore himself away.

This was on the day before Sampei's arrival,--on the morning which followed the consultation in the farmer's dwelling. The elders, filled with admiration for the single-minded heroism of the man whom they had deemed slow and selfish, went with him, marshalled by Rokubei and Zembei, to the entrance of the town, and with many blessings and prayers, wished the traveller success.

Urged on to speed by an engrossing object, he caught up, and, strong and stout of limb, passed the straggling array of Sampei, arriving in the capital two days before him. The imprisoned envoys were still in durance, he learned from one of those who had escaped, and lurked in hiding. My lord No-Kami--orders having in heat been issued for seizure and incarceration--had apparently forgotten their existence. The threatened vengeance of torment had not been wreaked, and yet their position was no pleasing one, for my lord's soldiers--the peasants and the military class were never friendly--amused themselves with the poor wretches, as cats play with mice--haling them out for diversion--depriving them of drink--pretending to offer saké, and when they held out eager hands for it, playfully pricking them with dirks. At the relation, the blood of Koshiu boiled within him.

These men--honoured and revered at home--who had done naught save humbly to implore redress of grievances, were being murdered piecemeal. It mattered not that my lord had never ordered it. His lawless myrmidons took from him their cue, satisfied that they would not be punished. If the poor things must die, the more speedily the better; but Koshiu swore, with oaths that terrified his listeners, that their deaths should be avenged. Alack! Koshiu must be mad. He prated as if himself a daimio, or a least a samurai or hatamoto! A mosquito on a wall might as well shake a paw, and vow to avenge the slaughter of his fellows! And then at the boldness of his speech they shivered, considering whether it would not be more prudent to withdraw from the society of so rash a person, and sneak back to their crumbling homes. Of a certainty it would, for with even the Mikado himself, the revered and mystical, the insect presumed to find fault. Next he would be falling foul of Buddha, who, putting out a finger, would crush him--and them along with him--the blasphemer; and what then would be their fate in the next cycle? In horror and dread they wrung their hands, and banged their apologetic foreheads on the floor, and, drawing forth beads, told them with feverish rapidity.

These were the words that entered their astounded ears. "For generations stretching back into the shadow of time," the over-bold farmer said, "has our master dwelt behind a screen, looked on by no eyes but those of the kugés and his attendants. Nothing outside the screen penetrates to him save through the mouths of these. Being a mortal, if a highly-privileged one, he cannot see all, like Buddha, himself unseen. We are his, and we revere him, but he knows naught of us, and can know naught, secluded and fenced about, and thereby neglects his duty--for even he has duties; and if, which is unhappily true, the latter-day Mikados have been evilly entreated and dethroned and sent into banishment, 'tis by reason of this sin, and the vile Hojos have been but instruments of retribution in the hand of an offended deity."

What subversive doctrines were these uttered by a presuming pigmy? The horror-stricken elders glanced furtively one at the other with the same thought. Instead of a possible saviour, this man was a firebrand who would involve others in his well-merited ruin. Perchance it would be well to betray him at once to my lord No-Kami, and thereby earn their pardon? Koshiu read their thoughts, and sighed, wishing them no evil. The views of the sturdy farmer were beyond them. As well talk to the trees--better, for the leaves would not shake with terror, and consider the expediency of treachery. He resolved to shut up his opinions therefore within his own bosom, and calmly discussed, without further blasphemy, what the next move should be.

As there was no possibility of, for the present at least, making any move at all, they were still idly chattering when, a few days later, they were startled by the appearance of the very envoys whose rescue was under discussion. They were thin, and gnarled, and haggard, and wrinkled--but then a Japanese peasant over the age of twenty is never a pretty object--yet in health seemed well enough. The tale of the saké and dirks must have been the invention of the foe. And yet to Koshiu these village elders looked suspiciously meek and lowly, more so than the humblest peasant should; indeed their bearing was not unlike that of a mongrel dog, that still smarts under severe correction. At first it was impossible to get anything out of them but fawning praise of the Hojo,

uttered in trembling accents, in which fear battled with incoherence. Hojo was excellent and merciful. Had he not deigned to forgive their unpardonable sin, and set them free unhurt? Let them live under their own hats and be content, he had declared. If there were any noble individuals more admirable than the gracious lord No-Kami--and that was scarcely possible--those two were their liege lady and the General Sampei; for 'twas through the intervention of these that my lord had condescended to remember the existence of his humblest tenants, who might otherwise have been still in duress.

With lowering brow Koshiu looked upon his fellows, for these cringing, spirit-broken villagers belonged to the same class as he. Were they worth saving, at the risk of his own life? And then a vision of the misery at Tsu, the growing suffering of all down-trodden Japan, rose upon his vision. No-Kami, thanks to the pleading of his wife and brother, had been pleased, after outrage and ignominy, to release the men who had committed no crime. But what of their petition? The petition? Let it go hang! The well-whipped hounds preferred that the subject should be dropped. How ill-timed was any mention of the petition. It had brought nothing but trouble--the less said about it the better. All they desired was to depart with speed. The sportive samurai might swoop again. Baring their arms, the envoys showed their wounds. The story of the saké was true, then. Little wonder if the starved wretches had had enough of the facetious horseplay of the soldiers.

Koshiu paced the mat with folded arms. Yes, they were right, and had better go and save their wizened carcasses. Here they were of no service, only butts for scoffers. My lady O'Tei all knew to be an angel; but that the newly-arrived General should interest himself in peasants, was curious; and then the thought flashed suddenly on the indignant father that the absence of Miné from her home had coincided with the arrival of Sampei. Her tender pronunciation of his name, and constant championship, recurred to his memory, and he shrank as from strokes of the bamboo. As profligate as all the Hojos, he had, of course, signalled his return by the seduction of an innocent and too-trusting maiden, who, by-and-by, he would fling away. Perhaps from out that curtained kago on the road his erring daughter may have peeped at him. If it were so, never, never would he forgive his child. Had he not warned her of his undying hatred of Hojos, of all connected with bloodthirsty brutal tyrants? With difficulty controlling his emotions, while his comrades more than ever deemed him dangerously insane, he told them they were right. Since they could serve no further purpose, they had better go back to Tsu, and speedily. For his own part, he would remain, and bide his time, and, when opportunity offered, present the petition to the Emperor.

And so, after a sad and parting feast, the band of elders returned to their place, and Koshiu dwelt alone, brooding over his wrongs, over the oppression of his class, and the ruin of his daughter, while his family bewailed at home. His impression was that the Mikado's supineness rose not from weakness but from indifference, out of which he might be roused. One day arrived a pedlar with news from Tsu, and a melancholy message from his wife, the faithful Kennui, which completely satisfied his mind that his suspicions were but too well founded. Miné had never again sought the legitimate shelter of her parents' roof, but was dwelling, if report spoke truly, with the mother of Sampei. Even she, then, the peasant-born, suffered under the taint which enveloped that hated race. The Abbess, who pretended to be pious, could stoop to shield his daughter's infamy, and give shelter to the mistress of her son. Poor soul, had she not been herself a concubine, and debased by pernicious surroundings? Ah, but the position of second wife--acknowledged concubine--was different from that of his own degraded daughter. No fixed position was hers, of course, or ever would be, since she had been so misguided as to throw herself into her lover's arms. And when he was weary of her? It would not bear thinking of, for Koshiu in his way was proud as any noble. Sampei and his mother were as bad as the rest, worthy to wear the cognisance of Hojo. The longer the farmer brooded, the harder grew his heart, the more bitter his resentment, and he hailed with fierce joy the news, at last, that the Mikado was to visit Nara.

It was a solemn ceremony the pilgrimage of the Emperor to the Sacred Groves of Nara, one which, although the distance was short, he was expected to perform but once or twice during his career. Unlike lesser magnates, who were content with kagos--litters, more or less sumptuous, borne on men's shoulders--the Mikado travelled in a ponderous carriage on huge cumbrous wheels, its roof thatched with the long grey straws of a peculiar grass, its wood-work elaborately lacquered with the imperial crest, its windows closely curtained with the finest matting, which flapped with many tassels. The progress of so unwieldy a machine over a primitive road was slow. In front went a bodyguard on foot, followed by soldiers on horseback; then came the weighty kagos of the kugés in attendance, brave with banners and devices; then the Mikado's swaying uneasy carriage, drawn by eight horses in broided housings; then more heavy litters and more soldiers, and a long straggling tail like that of a kite, composed of servants and rabble. It took many hours to penetrate through the tortuous and squalid suburbs of the capital, consisting for the most part of the shops of pawnbrokers and vendors of cheap toys and idols, jutting at will into the road, the procession stopped from time to time by hosts of the faithful on their faces.

Once free of buildings, the imperial *cortége* advanced by a wide way straight as an arrow across a plain devoted to the cultivation of tea, and by nightfall reached Uji. Here there was a villa overhanging with wide, wooden balconies a rushing stream--the Uji-Kawa, which rises in lake Biwa--spanned by a semicircular bridge formed of an intricate network of heavy timbers, for in winter this river swells into a torrent, sweeping all that is weak before it. This villa was for the special use of the sovereign, as might be guessed, from its lack of adornment. So high is the

Mikado, that, in a general way, he is above the employment of ornament. His villas and summer-houses (unlike those of his brother of China) are as conspicuous for simplicity as his dress. Everything is of the very best that skill can produce, the woodwork of the very finest which the hand of man can command, the mats trimmed with a red and white braid forbidden to other men. His eyes look upon no pictures or porcelains or bronzes, for to one who communes at will with deities or spirits, and may peep even sometimes into Nirvana, such trivialities are, of course, superfluous. In the Imperial Palace of Kiyôto it is different, for there he deigns to associate in a degree with mere common nobles and wives, to whom austere simplicity would be depressing if not soul-withering. In this villa, the Emperor, by time-honoured custom, was to pass the night, his *cortège* camping around for the protection of the sacred person.

Now Koshiu, whose object in life was the presenting of a memorial which should lead to the abrogation of imposts, and the holding up of the Hojos to deserved obloquy, knew right well that there was no reaching the imperial ear, either in Kiyôto or on the road to Uji, by reason of a throng of guards. During the next day's route over the mountains, on the other side of which was Nara, the cumbrous carriage would be prevented from toppling over by myriad hands pressed on either wheel, but the brilliant idea had occurred to the farmer that in crossing the timber bridge, whose width was just sufficient for the passage of the vehicle, there would be none to defend either of the curtained windows, the guards of necessity passing on in front or dropping behind until the stream was crossed, and that here lay his only chance. In the night therefore, after prayers and ablutions, he took advantage of the darkness to swim into mid-stream unnoticed, and being washed against one of the pillars, to make good his footing, and climbing on the bridge, to secrete himself under a convenient shadow. Then with his knife he pruned a long bamboo, split it at the top, and inserting the memorial therein, awaited day.

The journey was yet long to Nara, and over the mountains fraught with possible disaster, so all were early astir. With wildly-beating heart and throbbing temples Koshiu heard the clatter of horses overhead, the rhythmed step of infantry, and then the thunder of the great wheels grinding under their heavy load. Now or never. Calculating his time to a nicety, the farmer nimbly climbed upon the parapet, and before the astonished guards could stop him, lifted a corner of the mat, and inserting his bamboo, cried in a loud voice,--

"Take, O great Mikado! Fountain of Honour, this the petition of your humblest slave. Have pity on your people, O sovereign lord, ground down by the wicked Hojo!"

The driver of the horses, aghast, stopped open-mouthed; the cavalcade stood still; the guards, with a yell, dashed clambering forward, to fling into the stream this audacious one, riddled with sword-thrusts; but the old Daimio of Nara, who, disdainingly a kago, rode close behind, spurred quickly through the men, and, raising both hands, bade them refrain. He had caught the words "wicked Hojo," saw that what might have been a spear was already withdrawn, and was no more than a cleft stick, and guessed the purport of the attempt.

"'Tis a petition," Nara cried. "Our imperial lord already holds the man's paper in his sacred hand. It is for him, and not for us, to decide upon his fate."

Clutched by a dozen fists, Koshiu remained poised and stifled on the parapet, and presently a low voice issued from the shadow.

"I will read the petition on my return from the sacred groves. Keep the man close and safe. See that no harm comes to him."

The Daimio of Nara, with a cunning smile lurking about his lips, gave orders that the pilgrim should be safely conducted to his own private apartment in the palace, and then the ponderous procession moved on again, and crawled up the mountain.

CHAPTER VI.

THE YOUNG MIKADO.

Tomoyé, the brawny but practical, proved herself more clear-sighted than the statesman-warrior her husband. Hojo, the elder, certainly made the most serious blunder of his life when he arranged that marriage for his heir. A gulf 'twixt a husband and a wife cannot but widen daily, and the part of the latter, right or wrong, is sure to be espoused by her father. The admirable combinations that were to result from an alliance of the houses of Hojo and Nara were conspicuous by absence. As time went on, the haughty No-Kami, averse at all times to advice, showed to his wife's parent his most aggressive side, lest he should presume to lecture.

Although the Daimio of Nara had seen but little of his child, he had received from time to time such affectionate reports concerning the maiden, from the priests and priestesses who had supervised her education, that he was fully conscious of her worth. Between the two lords there was a show of courtesy, which masked on the one side jealousy of interference, on the other, hate. The father of O'Tei, although he pretended to perceive nothing, resented bitterly the scornful neglect with which she was treated by her spouse. During the rare visits of the young chatelaine to the capital, he could see how sad she was, and worn and listless, instead of vivacious and gay, as became her years; and in his heart, antipathy for the despot, implanted by cruelty to the Mikado, increased a hundredfold. He was too wary to quarrel yet with Hojo, but whenever he vouchsafed advice (as he did now and then, for the sake, as he said, of the departed), it was of a kind which rendered No-Kami more execrated still, more unpopular with the people he oppressed. The return of Sampei, and the demeanour of that warrior, produced fresh combinations in the subtle brain of Nara. It was plain that he was shocked by the excesses of his brother. He came of ambitious stock, and the long bloody tale of the history of Japan is full of the rivalry of brothers. What if he could be cajoled or goaded to take arms against him? The unruly army which he had brought back from Corea, accustomed to plunder and lawless licence, would have to be employed somehow, for idleness begets mischief. So long as Mikado and Daimios remained quiescent, the swash-bucklers could not be used against them, and, unemployed they would soon be a source of trouble. What if, by waiting, the enemies of the Hojo could succeed in turning against him the very troops he had summoned for his defence; and what if, by crafty manœuvring, the disgust of Sampei could be raised to such a pitch as to induce him to resume their command?

As the general who had led them from victory to victory, his soldiers adored Sampei. In time, they might probably be made useful as a scourge for Hojo, without their commander, by prospect of pillaging castles, but if he whom they idolised were to summon them forth in the direction of their inclinations, there was no doubt they would follow in a mass. While his master was telling his beads before the great bronze idol in the Nara temple, the thoughts of the lord of the soil were engaged elsewhere, and he resolved on the first opportunity to sound Sampei, and to arrange his plans accordingly.

It was a fortnight after the incident on the bridge of Uji that the imperial *cortége* wound down the mountain, and returned to the palace in the capital. What a dreary spot this same palace, more like a prison than a free residence, well suited to the ghastly life of blank monotony led by its miserable occupant.

The chief abode of the Mikado occupies a vast space of ground in the centre of the city of Kiyōto, surrounded by a high white wall, devoid of windows. Passing through a postern in a huge and highly-decorated gate, crowned by an immense tiled roof, you find yourself in a labyrinth, where you would speedily be lost without a guide, for long low buildings meander in and out, and meet at angles, one exactly like another, forming a series of little courtyards, adorned with prim grey bushes. The walls of these are of one pattern, formed of white plaster in timber settings, with heavy roofs and eaves. None of the buildings boast of more than a single storey, which is elevated on posts, a yard above the ground; this by reason of earthquakes, and unclean insects, which have no respect for Emperors. The long outer passages are protected from the weather by verandahs, because persons below a certain rank may not venture to breathe under the same roof as the Fountain of Honour, but must squat humbly in the air without. All the inner wood-work is of pine, smoothly planed, and left unpolished, set at points of junction with sumptuously sculptured nails; while mats are of the finest kind, trimmed white and red with the imperial braid. Within, the sliding screens which at will divide most of the space into small or large chambers, are of drab silk, spotted with gold dots, in form of clouds. There is no furniture, except a few low red lacquer tables.

The private suite of the Mikado saddens the soul, so small, and dismal, and uncomfortable are the rooms, or rather hutches, with no prospect or view outside, but three bare walls, a flag-pavement, and half-a-dozen bushes; and the mind turns involuntarily to the thought of Spanish Queens, whose drear existences must have been hilariously gay when compared with those of the Mikados. Sure many of these must have gone melancholy mad, or have sought relief from despondency by drowning care in the saké-cup. For the better protection of the Fountain of Honour, the two closets he inhabits are buried away in the centre of the labyrinth. There is nothing for him to hear but low, respectful sibilation, and the tramp of guards; nothing to see but nobles sprawling on their faces, with a glum background of whitewash, and a few tortoises wandering over the stones.

At the period which now concerns us, the Mikado usually sat upon a chair, while the kuges, in court trousers (Uye no Bakama) many yards under their feet, wearing high black crape hats, and brocaded trains--narrow and stiff, and of exceeding length--(kiyō) reclined around him on the mat. When the potentate felt more bored than usual, he retired into a square tent (of the size of an old-fashioned European bed) in the middle of the room; which tent was composed of snowy silk, embroidered with bamboo and storks, and garnished with long streamers, red and black, decorated with butterflies. Inside the tent was placed a chair, and two low stools.

A few yards off is a dark place surrounded by gilt folding screens, in which is another tent. This was for the Fountain of Honour when boredom reached a climax, and he felt compelled to flee mankind. On state occasions he moved into a spacious hall at the back, whose sliding screens are painted with portraits, full length, of Chinese sages, and whose look-out is a shade more

cheerful; for beyond there is a garden, with a lake full of speckled fish, some groups of pines, and quaint stone bridges. In the centre of the hall is yet another tent, precisely similar to the others--for the purpose of special audience, for the room is so large, that neither the elect, who knelt around, or the unelect, who crouched in the verandah, could overhear what passed within the curtains.

Into this hall, on the day after the return, trooped all who possessed the privilege, while the yards and passages were full of hatamotos and retainers; for the Fountain of Honour, refreshed by prayer and change of scene, declared he would attend to business.

In the first place, audience must be vouchsafed to the victorious General, that he might relate his deeds of valour, and receive thanks for faithful service; and then a consultation must be held, with closed doors, on the subject of the peasant and his petition. At mention of the audacious peasant, Nara smiled quietly, for he thought he saw his way to make a weapon of him wherewith to vex the enemy.

Owing to the ruin and banishment of three Emperors, the present reigning one was a cowed youth, a pale and depressed boy, with a look of constant apprehension lurking in his eyes. So well drilled was he that the sound of his tyrant's footfall caused him to tremble; so acutely did he feel his equivocal position, that many a time, after a period of reverie, he would start and wince, as if expecting the descent of the blade that was suspended over his head. Poor Koshiu! Could he have looked on the liege lord--so timorous and helpless--who was awful, because invisible, he would probably have thought twice before making that rash attempt.

When Sampei, after prostration and the orthodox nine head-knockings of humility, was invited to occupy a stool within the tent, Nara was bidden, by a wave of the august fan, to take the other, and thus withdrawn from inquisitive eyes and ears, the Daimio of Nara deemed this to be a propitious moment for peering into the future. He drew out the modest General, and, as mouthpiece of his master, made pretty speeches, while the Mikado was anxiously scanning his face, seeking his brother's features.

Presently the Emperor gave a sigh of relief. It was a good-natured open visage, considerably tanned, ornamented (from a military point of view) by a deep scar across the brow, scored by a Korean spear. Although a Hojo, it was possible to feel comfortable in his presence, and the heart of the sad recluse quite warmed to him when Nara, with insidious flattery, related an episode of his career. He told of how young Sampei, in camp one day, investing the Taira forces, beheld a warrior whose crimson armour and golden cognisance marked him for a Taira noble. "Come hither and fight!" he cried, and both charged fiercely one at the other with gleaming blades. After a few passes, the Taira dropped his sword, and Sampei, chivalrous always, flung his away and rushed to clasp his foe. Close-locked they fell from their saddles on the sand, the Hojo uppermost. Tearing off the bedizened helm, with intent to strike, he was amazed to see not a hardy old campaigner but a delicate and lovely boy! Rising, and handing to the vanquished his headgear. "So young," he said, "thy mother yet lives, doubtless. To her I give thee--go!"

Sampei looked down and blushed, not ill-pleased that his lord should learn to like him; while the Mikado muttered behind his fan, "Can this be the brother of No-Kami?"

After this jocund opening symphony, Nara changed his tune, and as he spoke of the suffering people, the General's face grew dark and sorrowful.

"And all this is due," Nara concluded, with emphasis, "to the head of the house of Hojo, whom the gods have made pre-eminent. The greater the gift, the greater will be the punishment for opportunities misused. Dare you deny that it is so?"

Sampei shuffled on his seat, with lowered head.

"My brother is unduly harsh," he stammered,--"perchance is ignorant--"

"What of the elders, then, and their petition?" demanded Nara.

"He has sent them home unhurt!" quickly responded Sampei.

"Ay, but with wrongs unredressed."

The young General was silent.

"You are the senior in years," observed the Daimio, pursuing his advantage, "and should claim some authority; further, even, if need be--"

Sampei drew himself up with dignity.

"You, the Daimio of Nara," he said proudly, "should know what is due from a vassal to his feudal chief. I am older in years, but not pure in blood. On my mother's side I am a peasant. I may grieve over my brother's follies, even chide with respectful gentleness, further than that I may not venture, as none should know better than yourself."

Nara felt angry and disappointed, for this was not what he expected. Could this brilliant fellow

be destitute of personal ambition? Perhaps, more cunning than he seemed, he was waiting for something more explicit.

"You, then, an honest man," sneered the Daimio, "are prepared to stand by and see your flesh and blood perform the work of fiends? Perhaps I have made of your character a wrong estimate. Can it be that you enjoy the grievous plight of those to whose class, as you say, you partially belong? In crime an appreciative partner--perhaps even my lord Hojo's willing executioner?"

The Daimio laughed hoarsely, while the Mikado listened with pursed lips. Apparently the young soldier was not to be roused by taunts, for with a sigh he replied sadly,--

"You wrong me. If I cannot aid, I can perish with them, and so escape dishonour."

"By hara-kiri?" retorted Nara, with impatience, "a vastly useful way of helping the afflicted! When all is lost, death by the dirk is the only appropriate end to a high-born gentleman; but an honest man and a brave may not declare that things are hopelessly wrong until he has tried to right them. That they are wrong at present you will admit, after perusing this memorial, humbly presented to our common lord by one of Hojo's vassals."

Sampei took the paper, and, as he read, grew hot and cold with pity and indignation. And it was his own flesh and blood, as Nara said, who could act thus! The indictment was terrible in its straightforward simplicity. No wonder that the gentle wife of the tyrant, knowing what she must know, was fading slowly. And there was more trouble brewing--even simple Sampei could foresee that. If No-Kami had been so incensed at the elders daring to present a petition to himself, what would his feeling be when he knew that another had been handed to the Emperor? The Mikado having publicly received, would be bound to take some notice of it,--to make some attempt to check the excesses of the despot. And, knowing his brother as he now learned to know him, Sampei looked forward in dismay, for the wheel set rolling down a hill may not be stopped, and it was but too probable that, goaded by passion uncontrolled, crime heaped upon crime would, as O'Tei had suggested, induce some dire catastrophe.

A furtive glance at the dull weak face of the Emperor was not comforting. There was vacillation in every line of it. A gleam from No-Kami's wrathful eyes and he would shrivel up. Was it indeed the duty of his elder brother to stand forward and attempt to stay his junior's downward course? 'Tis a terrible thing when two of the same kin hold swords at one another's throats. And languishing O'Tei, what of her, whom he had secretly sworn to guard and cherish? Perhaps, by slaying her husband, he would be doing her a service as well as freeing the oppressed; but that husband his brother! To slay his brother! As the picture appeared upon his mental retina, Sampei shuddered; and then the thought flashed on him with vivid clearness that the stroke which slew his brother would delve for aye an impassable chasm 'twixt himself and her he loved. The young man heaved a sigh of relief, and raised his head. He was rescued from temptation for the time being, O'Tei the saving talisman. And then, his eye falling on the petition, he grew sorely perplexed. Was the old man right? Was it his bounden duty to interfere between the tyrant and his victims? What good would come of interference? Had he not intervened already for the behoof of the unlucky elders? It was not likely that the head of his house would brook incessant meddling. Slow-witted at the best, Sampei, the more he pondered, grew more wretched and uncertain. Nara marked with approving eye the extent of his uncertainty, and cast a keen glance of intelligence at his master. The poison instilled would slowly work, or Nara had mistaken his man. The seed was sown--must be left to swell and burst. Enough was done for the present.

Obedient to the signal of his most trusted counsellor, the Mikado graciously dismissed his General, with hope revived in the future. But the hope was short-lived. Scarcely had he emerged with lightened heart from out the tent, and, summoning the kuges together, had commanded the shutters to be closed, that the petition might be privately considered, than the sound of the awful footstep was heard on the creaking boards, and the soul of the hapless Emperor died within him. He writhed and turned scarlet under the insult, when, pushing back the shutter with a crash, No-Kami unannounced strode in.

"What is this?" he cried, in a harsh voice, omitting the customary obeisance. "I should not believe it, if I did not see you shivering there, red with conscious guilt. Leniency to the scum is worse than a crime--it is a fault. It was to please your daughter, Nara--that she should condescend to plead for such insolent vermin, says little for her rearing--that I forgave those villagers. And no sooner have I committed that insensate act, than I am most justly punished for it. Where is he--he who presumed to present to you a paper? He shall never present another."

The trembling Mikado looked piteously at Nara, who, stolid, and apparently both deaf and blind, moved no muscle.

"My lord No-Kami--" began the Emperor, but was quickly silenced.

"I ask no explanation," remarked the tyrant sternly, waving away argument. "I demand the paper and the man. He is my vassal and my chattel: where is he?"

"Here, under my protection. You forget yourself, my lord!" cried the Emperor, who, deserted by Nara, was stung to a poor show of self-assertion. "Under this roof he is safe."

No-Kami raised his brows slightly, and with stiff politeness said,--

"Since when may peasants enter where knights and samurai may not? These be new manners that we can scarce approve. You, my lord Nara, I believe took charge of the man. I thank you for your courtesy, and herewith reclaim my own."

To the consternation of the Emperor, who expected that now, at least, the one to whom he pinned his faith would speak boldly, the Daimio of Nara gravely bowed, and said,--

"If such is the pleasure of our master, be it so."

Put to the test, then, Nara was a windbag that had burst! The Mikado groaned in spirit.

"You will promise that he shall not be injured," stammered he, as, wincing under the basilisk eye, and seeking support in vain, the poor boy grew sick and giddy.

"You see, Lord Nara, that 'tis our master's wish," responded No-Kami bluntly. "I make no promises. My time is valuable, and my retinue without is waiting. See that the wretch is handed over instantly for immediate transport to my *yashiki*." And with this the Hojo turned and strode away, without deigning to await an answer.

The cup was full. The Fountain of Honour overflowed in a torrent of brackish tears. To be insulted thus before all the court; to be treated like a child; to be bearded with such dour disdain! The fate of his three predecessors, in their tranquil monastery, was preferable to his, alone upon the rack in the midst of empty grandeur. When Nara attempted to instil words of comfort, he turned on him with the swift, unreasoning vituperation of the weak.

"You on whom I leaned," he sobbed,--"who are ever prating of the wondrous things that you are going to do! Before him you tremble more than all the rest, and sit mumchance! The man will be tormented, and I thereby eternally disgraced, since I took him under my protection. When they hear of it, what will my people say, seeing me that monster's puppet?"

"They, will pity you," replied Nara quietly, "as they pity the other three. I am not so craven as you think. What if the man be tortured? He is but a boor of little consequence, and will be none the worse for martyrdom. Let be, let be--a little patience only. The more scurvily the man is treated, the better in the end; the deeper the universal execration for him we all detest. A little time, a little time, and all will be well, believe me. We have but to sit with hands devoutly folded, and wait; for the Hojo is preparing his own undoing,--carving out his own destruction!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE FARMER'S SENTENCE.

Perhaps the Daimio of Nara was right in his prognostications of the probable. Although the lives of a few peasants are to Japanese patricians of but small account, there had been considerable excitement among the daimios over Hojo's high-handed treatment of the village elders, a tornado of lamentation among the lower and unarmed classes. Had the action of the despot been voted orthodox, had he unwaveringly pursued his course, the other lords would have done the same as he with joy, to wring out additional sums for pleasant uses; but as No-Kami gave way with little pressing, and thereby stultified his action, there was a general chorus of disapproval. If, excited and cruel, he were now to inflict signal vengeance on the unfortunate farmer, there would be still further uproar; and each fresh demonstration tended to a universal rising, for the destruction of the terrible octopus. Nara was old enough to have learned that the waiting game is generally best in the end, and preached sage wisdom to his master, who wept, being foolish, and young, and also uneasy in his mind.

No-Kami was frantic with wrath when he considered Koshu's sin. What a deplorable precedent was this! A petty farmer, little better than the common labourer, who strews the paddy field with filth, and grubs on hands on knees like a pig in the mud when the young rice begins to sprout; this abject, well-nigh four-footed, grovelling creature had absolutely, erect upon hind legs, dared to approach the head of the state--the nominal head--with a writing wherein he, the reignina Hojo--the real head of the state--was impeached and accused of misdemeanours,--even of deeds called CRIMES! Such audacity to the most nimble imagination was all but inconceivable. It was no less preposterous and ludicrous than if the brisk and too sprightly flea were, with his tiny mandibles, to assault the elephant. As he revolved the circumstance, the Daimio was so tickled that, as he paced a path in his garden outside Kiyoto, he laughed a hard and grating cachination, that was half a snort, and shouted for a cup of warm saké, the which was brought, with the humblest of genuflections; for my lord's laugh clanked like rusty chains, and was precursor

usually of bloodshed. But this was really too amusing, or would have been, if not so impudent. As he drained cup after cup of wine, my lord's mind became more active, the heat of his resentment more whitely glowing. What punishment was severe enough for such a caitiff? What was mere death, even the slowest, with ingeniously long-drawn agonies, but absurdly insufficient. The doom of the farmer must be something calculated to appal,--to spread terror broadcast, or his pestilent example might be followed by other swine. He would be a good riddance, this Koshiu, for he had always been a dangerous character,--one who dared to think for himself, actually to think, and frame views and theories of an independent and subversive kind. Oh for some brilliant idea, some happy thought, startling and awe-inspiring,--something at which the ordinary mind would revolt, then shrink down cowering! Decidedly this was an occasion on which the culprit must be made a genuine "example;" and as he paced the garden path, the brain of No-Kami was much exercised to find some awful sentence worthy of his reputation and his name.

His heart was so hardened by schemes of revenge that the scene around was powerless to calm his ruffled soul; and yet his villa without Kiyo, known as the Golden House (it exists to this day), was a spot where loving nature had freely given of her best.

On the plain between the city and the mountains is a wood, some three miles square, wherein branching umbrella pines and lofty cryptomerias and black-pointed cypresses are mingled in calculated confusion with the ensanguined foliage of the maple, and a luxuriant shrub covered with yellow blossoms, which has a scent resembling that of the apricot. The underbrush being carefully removed, the feet of the trees stand clear, rising from a tumbled surface of rich moss and rock and knoll, through which meander crystal streams shaded by grass and ferns. In a secluded portion of the wood is a large oblong pond, half-covered with dense reeds, and full of fish and tortoises. In this, between the reed-beds, is mirrored a fairy cot--very small, as suitable for fairies--with the usual heavy roof and posts, and with windows inlaid with oyster shell. The peculiarity of the villa, at the time which occupies us, was that inside and out it was entirely gilt, which, against the sombre green background, in the limpid atmosphere, gave it the aspect of an enchanted dwelling. The rooms were of the smallest, and as naked and uncomfortable as Japanese rooms always are; and yet, in miniature, there was naught neglected. There was the porter's lodge, wherein lounged the armed retainers, and where upright, clean, and ready were the three formidable instruments designed to entangle, throw down, and pin a quarrelsome or unwelcome visitor. Stout quarter staves were also ready wherewith to belabour a struggling wight. There were bows and arrows in plenty, while in a row hung wooden tickets inscribed with the names of the soldiers in residence, which, were handed to the keeper of the gate, in token of absence, as the men passed out. In one corner was a bath--a mere rude tub--wherein, after the Daimio had bathed, others might be allowed to plunge; while further on, in the *tokonoma*, or recess of honour, were ranged in glittering state, ready always for use, the armour of my lord--his cuirass and greaves, helmet, chainmail, and swords.

As he paced up and down under shadow of the trees, No-Kami had an inspiration; and summoning his favourite samurai, he bade him produce the prisoner. With arms crossed on his broad chest, and a mien of sullen defiance, Koshiu emerged, and having approached, stared hard into his oppressor's eyes with such undaunted boldness that Hojo felt almost sorry. It was a pity to have to annihilate so bold a varlet; and yet the independent ways of these same bold varlets are pestilent,--dangerous to the lords who are set over them.

"What hast thou to say--what excuse to make?" demanded the imperious No-Kami.

"The performance of duty calls for no excuse," replied the bluff farmer.

"Duty!"

"Yes, duty,--to myself, to my fellow-sufferers, to the sublime Mikado, who, unless told, knows naught--for he dwells apart--of the wicked such as thee."

"By Buddha's crown, but thou art mad! instead of suing for mercy, aggravating thy offence."

"The Hojos never knew mercy--thou least of all--and I expect none."

"Will none make a lid for this rascal?" cried the Daimio, his small stock of patience ebbing. Then, seeing half a score of bright blades flashing in the sun, he waved them back into their scabbards. "Nay, nay," he grumbled; "sully not your steel."

"The Hojos were ever bad," observed Koshiu, without blenching. "Thou and thy brother are the worst."

"Sampei!" exclaimed No-Kami, in surprise. "Why he is half of thy caste himself, and is adored by the populace. What evil hath he done to thee?"

"He robbed me of my eldest child, whom I held dear. She has vanished, seduced by him."

No-Kami laughed long and loud, that very ugly laugh.

"So, so. The General is sly, and keeps his counsel, and hath done thee and thine far too much honour, ingrate! See, here he comes to answer for himself."

It was indeed Sampei, who, in extreme haste and heat, was crashing through the ferns. How unfortunate that the Emperor should not have detained him ten minutes longer. He would have expostulated with his brother then and there, in the Imperial presence,--have entreated the Fountain of Honour not to give up the captive. For in Hojo's greedy desire to obtain possession of him there was lurking something sinister. No-Kami's temper was so warm. For his sake, and the name they both bore, he must be prevented from going to extremities. Thanks to the gods, he was in time, for there the man stood, unharmed as yet. Ere he reached the spot where the two were standing, with retainers grouped in a circle, Sampei cried out, in his strong voice,--

"No-Kami, my brother, give me this man's life!"

"Again," laughed No-Kami. "What a glutton for the lives of prisoners. Not this one; no, his is a special case; but I'll give thee his little wanton."

"What wanton?" And then of a sudden the young soldier remembered his mother's news which had so startled him. This was the father of the maid whose heart he had unconsciously captured, and whose parent had five years ago denied to him his doors. It was with a whimsical smile that he shrugged his shoulders, and said,--"Miné' is no wanton that I know of. She is as pure for me as Fuji, the holy and snow-capped mountain."

"Liar!" shouted Koshu. "What have Hojos to do with truth?"

Whereupon, with a low growl, the retainers drew their dirks and pressed close round.

Sampei grew a shade paler, but, controlling himself, quietly said,--

"Let be, men! Sheathe your blades! The man labours under a mistake, and will know better by-and-by. Grant me his life, my brother!"

"Why, of what parentage art thou?" exclaimed No-Kami, with a gesture of scorn. "He dubbed thee liar! Well, well! A drop of low peasant blood mingled with the best envenoms the entire stream. Yet am I ashamed, that thou, who art said to have done deeds of exceeding prowess, should tamely accept such insolence! And yet--and yet! I see now that I was wrong, precipitate. So mean a target is not worth your arrows. Fear not, my sober brother, I will myself avenge thee. Stand forth thou, and hear thy sentence. Whereas thou--audacious and stiff-necked--hast set thyself up as a champion and head of the villagers; and whereas thou hast dared to make light of me, thy feudal lord, by petitioning the Emperor directly; and whereas thou hast been guilty of conspiracy--three heinous crimes--it is decreed that thou shalt be taken in chains to Tsu, in a litter covered with a net of shame, and there suffer death by crucifixion. Thy wife will suffer likewise. Thy children shall merely be beheaded. The girl--what is her name? Miné--alone shall live, since I have bestowed her as a boon upon my brother."

The samurai knelt down and rested their foreheads on the grass, clasping their hands in token of admiration and respect; Sampei covered his glowing face with quivering fingers; the farmer turned ashen grey. A thunderbolt hurled down to annihilate a family. For himself he cared not: his life he had known was forfeit. But wife and innocent babes! Gennosuké, the sturdy little lad; and pretty Sohei, and Kihachi, who could barely toddle! The unexpected blow was paralyzing--stupefying with overwhelming sweep; and No-Kami, who saw with delight that the bolt went home, motioned for the condemned to be removed. Sampei felt stunned,--torn between horror, and the instinct of blind loyalty to his chief, his creed--the creed in which he had carefully been nurtured. The innocent and the guilty involved in one common doom. It was horrible--unjust! Less vindictive by-and-by, the Daimio would repent him of his severity. Sampei saw clearly that the man must go. That could not be helped: he had brought on himself his punishment. But the wife and children! Sampei had hurried hither to endeavour to rescue the man, and on behalf of the innocent had not found a word of protest. Thank goodness that, owing to a mistake, Miné at least was safe. As to the wife and children, he and O'Tei must combine ere the sentence was carried out, and make a strenuous effort. There was no help to be looked for from the weak Mikado. What a pity that he was such a feeble creature! But then, had he been more formidable, he would have shared the fate of the others long ago. The Hojo looked so surly, that Sampei felt the moment unpropitious for remonstrance. Incensed as my lord now was, prayers would but aggravate him further. Sampei seemed, therefore, to acquiesce in the decision of the Daimio, and turned to another topic.

"A new eye sees things," he remarked, as they strolled under the trees, "which escape the ken of him to whom surrounding objects are familiar. Powerful as you are, swaying with a nod affairs of state, you strike me as less secure than was our father."

"He governed, as was necessary, with an iron hand, and so do I," retorted No-Kami.

"His was not so wet with blood," suggested the other gently.

"Can this be indeed the successful soldier?" asked the Daimio, stopping in amaze. "More like that puling wife of mine. A pity you did not wed her!"

Sampei started and winced. Could his brother guess. There was no trace of suspicion on his visage. His secret was safe. It was only a stray shot.

"The daimios," he observed quietly, "hate you, and they are treacherous."

"The daimios always hate him who is in power," replied the other with composure, "and burn to oust him. And people say that all Japanese are treacherous. They must be curbed by fear. Hence my severity just now. Nay, do not speak or waste your breath and anger me. On that my mind is fixed. I was too mild and compassionate with those elders, and look on the result! A stupid blunder, due to over-kindliness. The new-born arrogance of those tillers of the soil must be sternly checked. Clemency would be construed into a sign of weakness. He who rules with the sword must not be afraid to use it."

"I would warn you to mistrust Nara," observed Sampei, after a pause of thought; "he does not wish you well."

"Nara!" echoed the Daimio. "He who our astute father selected as my special counsellor! You are too suspicious. For Nara I have nothing but contempt--for him as for his counsel. He assumes sapient airs, and beneath them is a coward and a fool. Sometimes, in sport, I press down my heel on him, and he affords no sport, for he does not even writhe. Since you are a man of valour--the hero of the hour, though I vow you are more like a girl--furbish up your arms, and drill your cohorts, and leave policy to me. Drill your troops for my protection, most doughty of Hojos. As for statecraft, believe me, meddle not with a complicated tangle which you have not the skill to unravel. Your arm is more exercised than mine, but of heads, mine is the better."

CHAPTER VIII.

DESTINY IS BUSY.

When the slow procession of armed men with a guarded litter in its midst was discerned approaching Tsu, great was the curiosity excited, for though none spoke of him, the absent farmer, devoted to a forlorn hope, was uppermost in the minds of all. A vague report gained ground that he had actually been permitted to see the face of the Sublime One, who, as just as he was holy, had listened to the tale of wrong. The stricken people, accustomed to adversity, were dazed by the gleam of fortune. Buddha had hearkened at last unto their groaning, had pitied their misery! The Hojo was not so bad after all, for the extra weight of taxes would doubtless be removed; the elders had returned forgiven; Koshiu was coming in triumph to his home, where a fitting reception should be accorded him. The listless men rose up upon their feet, the hammer and the gong resounded once again, amid blessings on the name of Koshiu.

The only one who was not joyous was Kennui, the farmer's faithful wife. She had heard so much from her spouse about the wickedness of the Hojos, that unconsciously she echoed his words, shaking her head as she muttered, "The Hojos know not mercy!" As the approaching procession became clearer to the view, defiling with clank of iron down the street, she gave a wild shriek, and fell swooning; for in the litter, under the fatal net, she had recognised the grizzled head and burly shoulders of him she loved best on earth. Awe-stricken, fearing they knew not what, the town turned out *en masse* and silently followed the procession, until, crossing the bridge that led over the outer moat of the castle, the ponderous doors closed upon it and the prisoner. For, strange and incomprehensible as it appeared, there was no doubt that Koshiu was a prisoner. The net and chains, and scowling escort told as much. Why? Was the report a false one? Had he not succeeded in communicating with the Sublime One? Sure he who was the Fount of Honour had not spurned the humble prayer! If he had been gracious, why was the victim brought to his home with sinister pomp and circumstance? While the crowd in scattered knots were discussing the enigma, the gates opened again, a band of samurai rushed forth, and presently returned with--wonder of wonders!--Kennui and her little children, who, driven at point of spear, like the farmer vanished.

Curiosity and impatience were getting the better of alarm, and some of the elders were about to cross the bridge, and knocking, make inquiries, when again the door swung upon its hinges, a man posted up a paper, and the gate was again shut to. A thrill of horror and consternation shivered over the crowd, as some one, mounting on a riding block, read aloud the proclamation. Crucifixion for the patriot and his innocent wife--the annihilation of his family and name! The injustice and brutality of such a sweeping sentence cried aloud to Heaven. Japan should ring with it. Come what might, the elders would remonstrate,--would lift up their voices in supreme protest against the iniquity of the cold-blooded tyrant.

The head men of the town and surrounding villages assembled, one hundred and thirty in number, and drew up an appeal, affixing thereto their seals, and Rokubei and Zembei, whose

consciences smote them somewhat, travelled with it themselves to Kiyōto. There the streets were in commotion, business was put aside, and men sat on the mats in groups discussing the darkening future. In whispers, with furtive glances over the shoulder, they murmured that there must be an end of it; anything was preferable as a change to such a life as No-Kami prepared for the people. Submission was making matters worse instead of better. Letters must be sent to the surrounding provinces. They must shake off sloth, and rise as one to free themselves and their Mikado.

Sampei, riding to the Golden House, told his brother of the hubbub. As he heard, the brow of the despot darkened; his eyeballs became bloodshot, like those of the demon Razetsu, as in obstinate fume he gnashed his teeth.

"What?" he cried. "Oh, girl in man's attire, I have borne too long with your puling! You dare to come hither, and take the part of the scum against me, your feudal lord! A shivering coward, who calls himself a soldier! Not a word more, or, despite the army at your back, I'll have you seized and scourged, and your head flung to the jackals."

Hot words rose in Sampei's throat, but the mournful face of his pale love rose before him, and he choked them down. His brother was distraught with passion,--knew not what he said. His feudal lord! Yes, that much was true. If danger was brewing, his place was by the side of his brother, to save him, if might be, from the consequences of the wickedness instilled by demons; if not, to assist him in his death.

The silence and sullen submission of the young General irritated the Daimio to frenzy. He cursed and growled like some savage animal, became the more furious from the conviction that in this matter he had been precipitate and wrong,--had been guilty of a mistake in state-craft,--of over-harshness. And yet it would never do to give to the scum the victory--to the low mechanics, and mean, unarmed artificers, who were assuming a threatening attitude. What would the other daimios say, who were eagerly watching the next move, if the ruler were again to give way,--to succumb like a woman before the outcry of a few rustics? The prestige of the Hojos would be gone for ever, and the bearer of the name would be sucked under and drowned by the torrent which would assuredly break loose. Give way! That, by the crown of Buddha, he swore he never would; and yet, perceiving too late the danger, in his heart he longed for a compromise. Hearing that Rokubei and Zembei, venerable elders, had dared to come pestering, and that a deputation of priests, headed by the bonzes of Tsu, awaited his pleasure, he smothered his rage, and bade Sampei admit them. He even deigned to summon his father's friend, and solicit counsel, placing the case before him.

Concealing his exultation under an air of sympathy, Nara arrived with promptitude, and, true to his tactics, gave advice which was calculated to undo his enemy.

"The peril is extreme," he said, "so I will speak plainly. 'Tis easier to raise a storm than quell it."

"If you are here to talk platitudes, begone," interrupted No-Kami.

"Be patient, my almost son, and attend," the malicious Daimio responded, with inward laughter. Like a bear in the toils his foe was caught, and it should be no fault of his if he became not more closely enmeshed. "You are right in this," he continued. "It will not do to lower the proud standard of the Hojos before the rabble; and yet you must provide them with a sop. Let the sentence stand. What is decreed should be irrevocable; but grant the boon in the memorial. Remove the obnoxious taxes. So will you seem clement, as well as stern and strong. They will fear you more than ever, while compelled to praise your bounty."

The advice jumped with No-Kami's inclination. The more he considered it, the more crafty it appeared; but, true to his principle of blood-letting and tyrannising over the weak, he slightly improved on it. He would pretend to have known nothing of these taxes, and, as an example, would bring to condign punishment the bailiffs and tax-gatherers who had so harshly oppressed his vassals.

A master-stroke worthy of his sapient father this. A touch of genius. He accordingly harangued the deputations; declared his surprise as well as sympathy and love with such assurance that they scarce could believe their ears. The sentence, if somewhat harsh, must stand, he said, for 'twas a grievous crime in a vassal to hold up to obloquy his feudal lord. The property of the offending farmer should, however, not all be confiscated, but a part would be handed over to the girl Miné, who was spared, thanks to his brother's pleading. He assured his amazed listeners that he grieved over the rapacity of his officers--of whom he would make an example--in that they had invented new imposts on their own account, to the detriment of their lord's repute. He was sorry that the full details of the case had not reached him before. The town councillors of Tsu would be dismissed from their posts. Four district governors and three bailiffs would be banished to the northern island. The chief bailiff of Tsu and one particularly-sinful officer would be invited to perform harakiri. The objectionable taxes were abolished.

With this, while his audience stood aghast and dumb, my lord waved his fan with courteous condescension, in token of dismissal, and retired, flattering himself that he had got extremely well out of rather an awkward hobble.

The news which the deputations brought back with them to Tsu was received with mixed feelings. It was sad that the farmer's family must perish, but Koshiu would know that they had not died in vain. For the public good he and his were made a sacrifice. Many litanies should be chanted in the temples; the martyr should be canonised, enrolled on the list of saints.

One who was inconsolable was Miné. Spurned by him at whose feet she had cast herself--for Sampei had never deigned to inquire after her--she was compelled to admit that her father was right in his estimate of the reigning family. If he whom she elected to worship as a hero had not been as cruel as his brother, he would not stand by--he, a powerful general in command of many soldiers, while so wicked a sentence was promulgated. Father, mother, brothers--all. And she had loved this man! Distracted, she rushed to the castle, and braving the obscene jests of the samurai, implored to be admitted to her parents. She had done wrong, and must die heartbroken if deprived of their forgiveness.

A soldier, softened by the maiden's anguish, carried her entreaty, and returned with the message that her father refused to see her. She who was the chattel of a Hojo was no child of his, he had declared. Three beloved sons were his, but no daughter. Miné battered with weak hands upon the closing door. Her father had judged too harshly, for--alas! to confess such infamy--the Hojo had repulsed her. She was not his mistress,--had never even seen him since he sallied forth to war. The samurai laughed loud at the confession, and gibed at the hapless maid, bandying foul pleasantries. A likely story. Since, owing to the General's intervention, she was to have the property, she would doubtless find some one to pick up that which my lord Sampei had tossed into the mire. How much would she be worth? Would she set herself up to auction? By-and-by she could purchase for herself a husband, if not now a messenger. Her father declined to see her, so if yet she had a shred of shame left she had best depart, and quickly. If not, the soldiery would take her in, and for their own delectation keep her there. In terror she sped away, nor stopped till she reached the temple; and when in the gloaming the spectral line of nuns and Abbess entered for the evening prayer, Masago lifted the exhausted and fainting girl, and pressing cold lips upon her brow, bade her take rest and comfort. Henceforth she was theirs and Buddha's.

To show that, although clement, he was not to be intimidated, No-Kami resolved to make of the prospective execution a wholesome precedent, and to that end journeyed to Tsu in person. He was determined that the spectacle should abide in the minds of those who were privileged to witness it, as an ineffaceable lesson and an awful memory. It should take place within the castle boundaries, he decreed, in the presence of the Daimio and his suite, in gala robes, and all and sundry were invited to attend this new and engaging form of public festival.

As the fatal day approached, the fiery temper of the despot was severely tried, and grew hotter under the trial; for although the truculent retinue applauded, and looked forward with glee to a rare frolic, there was hanging over the land a shadow that might be felt.

Men spoke together in isolated knots, scudding away like hares if the gallop of my lord's escort was heard returning from the chase. This showed a wholesome and gratifying fear; but there were some who took no pains to cloke their insolence. The friends of the tax-gatherers and others who had been condemned, raised an outcry, vowing that they had obeyed to the letter their lord's behest, and that 'twas hard to suffer for being only too faithfully obedient. No-Kami increased the number of his personal attendants, daring no longer to go forth alone, lest haply some wailing relative should cling to his stirrup, and decline to be beaten off. Even behind the bristling defences of the castle he was not secure. Masago and her nuns arrived in solemn procession at the gate, and the soldiers, hardened though they were, were afraid to refuse them entrance. The austere Abbess was not to be browbeaten. Calm and cold, with inflexible mien she looked No-Kami in the eyes, and in presence of his warriors, in the name of her dead lord his father, dared him to fulfil his purpose. Solemnly she warned him of divine rancour. She had had a dream, and, as all the world knows, the soul during sleep is in active communication with the departed. Even now, at the eleventh hour, she urged that there was still time to avert the vengeance of the gods. The growing anger of Buddha might be appeased by pilgrimage and prayer, self-humbling, and precious gifts.

But Masago might as well have preached to the lotuses. Her speech was met with uneasy ribaldry, and smouldering ire.

"Bah! Threats from a troop of women! A made-up ghost to affright children with. Ye are hungry for the good things of this world," snarled the Daimio, "like all the priesthood. Be off! I care not for nuns or bonzes, self-appointed messengers from Heaven. Chatterers, get you gone while ye have time, or despite your garb your bodies shall feel the whip."

With that he bade the doorkeepers open wide the gate, that his guards might drive forth the embassy.

The unfortunate chatelaine, although none of the castle denizens cared to know it, was the one who was most hardly stricken by her husband's culminating sin. When the sad procession arrived with in its midst the patriot, she was boating outside the walls, deftly guiding her shallop with a slender pole through the luxuriant floating greenery. The elders having been spared at her written request, the horizon seemed less black. This was a first step towards the reclaiming of No-Kami--by-and-by, little by little, she would by tact and persistent effort regain over him the influence which at first she had too quickly abdicated. As she pondered, she blamed herself for

lack of patient perseverance.

What was her own petty pride to the people's good? She had misjudged No-Kami, for on receipt of her letter he had given way at once. So he would again, and yet again, till drawn out of himself by tenderness, he would cast aside his wicked self like a foul garment, and live a cleanly life. Then she fell a-weaving of plans for assuaging the misery of her people, and all at once there fell the thunderbolt, and her new calm was rudely broken.

This horror was worse than all. Retiring to her bower, and dismissing her maidens, she cast herself upon the floor, and, numbed by despair, remained inanimate for hours. Had the gods no pity for such frail things as she? The contemplation of her husband, of the man who could deliberately plan and execute so vile an atrocity as this, caused her flesh to creep, her soul to shudder. He proposed, moreover, to accomplish the dreadful deed *here*, within the precincts of her house. The smell of the blood would never fade, its stain might never be effaced; and she was doomed to endure its constant presence for long years, unless the gods were clement. Some rail at the brief span of life. To some it seems too short, to others interminable. How earnestly, lying prone, did O'Tei entreat release. A long vista of grim dreadful years. No, at bay, she would revolt against the nightmare, would leap into the waves, and make an end of it. Since men may relieve themselves with the dirk of a too heavy existence, might not women seek relief in the embrace of the blessed sea?

He was coming here soon, her husband, to superintend the shocking details. He would touch, perhaps clasp her in his arms. Oh, no! And yet, why not? Clutched by him, pressed to the hard heart of the monster, inhaling the poison of his breath, she must surely wither; and if her soul were freed, what signified the horror of the means?

Sinking into a condition of dull lethargy, she went forth no more, but brooded in the quiet of her chamber, from which she could see the hill crowned by the temple groves. Dim and distant, like the roar in a sea-shell, she heard the noise of arrival, the neighing of steeds, and clank of iron, the braying of hoarse throats, the shouts and laughter at carousal. With sick apprehension she awaited the dreaded footsteps which soon must cross the threshold. But time went on and it came not, and she thanked the gods for that. He had inquired for her, the maidens said, and they had replied that their lady was ill. He had said no more, and had seemed satisfied. Truth to tell, he was as much relieved as she at the postponement of a meeting. For, worried and annoyed by the abominable behaviour of the scum, he was in no mood for whining, and instinct whispered that on such an occasion as the forthcoming festival the degenerate O'Tei would whine. When it was past and over, she would know better than to whimper, since what is done is done; and once resolved, no whining of silly women-folk should turn him from his purpose. Whilst dreading the creak of one footfall, she listened wistfully for another. Where was Sampei, her childhood's friend? Sure, he would sympathise, for his kind heart would tell him of the direful condition of his sister. Had he, disgusted with his brother, deserted him? It was likely; and yet not so, for Sampei--who should know better than she?--was loyal and true. He had arrived with my lord; the maidens had seen and admired him, and had grieved to perceive that he was dejected, the noble young hero. How strange then that he should not visit his old playmate.

Alack! Sampei avoided O'Tei as diligently as did No-Kami. What could he say to her that would not increase her sorrow? Fully appreciating her highly-wrought and reserved and sensitive nature, he knew too well what she must be suffering; and the sight of her tears, since he might not dry them, would cut him like a sword-thrust. Moreover, the seed his mother had prudently sown had taken deep root in his light soil, by reason of Miné's foolishness. On every account it was well to avoid personal contact with O'Tei. Without being conceited, the fact was patent that if one woman fell in love with him without encouragement, another might. In his ordinary frame of mind, he would cheerfully have said, "The more the better," and have basked with joy in the sunshine of unlimited loveliness. But he knew now that he adored O'Tei with an affection so pure and deep that there was no selfishness in it,--that, rather than cause her a pang, he would himself make any sacrifice. Her heart, he knew, was empty. As the Abbess had hinted, it was not at all impossible that if tempted she might grow to love her brother-in-law in unbrotherly fashion; and then, what pain to her, to him, to all? For once the young soldier would be prudent. Near, but unseen, he would shield his beloved as much as possible,--commune with her as little as might be,--come forward only in emergency.

With regard to No-Kami, he grew grievously perplexed, marvelling sometimes whether his brother was sane. The practice of cruelty upon the weak, for the enjoyment thereof, was something so foreign to his own open character that he could not comprehend the motives which moved the Daimio, nor his fits of frenzy when thwarted. Once, since their arrival at Tsu, he had remonstrated fearlessly with his chief, who had thereupon threatened to dismiss him into banishment. For the sake of the chatelaine, in the quickly-clouding future, this must not be. So Sampei, at his wits' end, like a dutiful son, climbed the temple stairs and unlocked the secrets of his heart before the shrewd ken of the Abbess. Masago surveyed him anxiously, then unaccustomed tears for a moment dimmed her vision as she gave praise to the gods in that she had been given such a son. Truth and trust looked from out his eyes. The noble fellow. Placing her firm white hand upon his shoulder, she kissed his brow.

"The situation is dark," she said; "the skein is tangled. The gods have marked down for destruction my lord of Tsu. That much is clear to me. Blindfold he marches to the edge of the abyss. I am a weak, purblind woman groping in the dark, unable to give counsel in so difficult a

strait. My voice has been raised in vain: he thrust us forth like dogs. I will pray. Maybe that through prayer and vigil I may learn to know; and when I know, then will I tell thee, child. Peradventure divine wrath may yet, by diligent pleading, be turned aside. The farmer and his family must perish, thou a dumb spectator. That much cannot be helped. Be patient. Wait. I will prostrate myself before the altar, that the veil of the future may be rent."

One morning a lull of unaccustomed quietude informed O'Tei that my lord and all his following had gone scouring over the plain, and her maids, seeing her listless and sad-eyed, implored their mistress to mount to the top of the tower, and breathe the fresher air. From the upper gallery, shaded by the huge copper roof, the weary recluse gazed over the flat towards the twin hills with an intense longing. Since my lord's coming, she had not visited her summer-house, for she could not bear the sight of the mourning which she knew overhung the town. She yearned to steal forth now and gaze on the lovely view, with its sequestered temple, and placid land-locked waters, and fishers, and sunny islets. Alas! all labour was abandoned. The fishers were too wretched to pursue their avocation. Their boats were drawn up upon the beach untenanted. She could see them, a white fringe upon the yellow. Then, as her eye moved homeward, she started, and cried aloud, and wrung her hands, for down below in the courtyard rose, gaunt and terrible, the symbols of oppression. In a corner of the space within the outer moat stood ready a pair of crosses. The preparations were made then?--the consummation of the tragedy was imminent; and she, cowering and cowardly, had never attempted to stem the new tide of the Daimio's anger. A tacit connivance at this villainy!

Shaking herself as from the drowsy clog of sleep, she swiftly descended the stair with head erect, distended eye, and face as grey as ashes, and, to the surprise of the sentinels, crossed the first drawbridge as one in a trance, and made for the place of execution.

It occupied an extreme corner, far from the huts of the soldiers, and was masked from the path in common use by a belt of trees, concerning which there were fearsome legends. So many terrible events had taken place beneath their shade that they were said to be tenanted by souls of criminals,--to groan at times, and ooze with gore, and be accursed. To the Asiatic peasant all streams and woods are peopled with visionary forms,--are the homes of demons or of angels. It was well known that a sacrilegious cutter had striven once to fell one of these gnarled trunks, and had been blasted as if by lightning. It was an equally established fact that their vicinity impelled to suicide, for many men had, apparently without reason, hung themselves upon their branches, fascinated to self-destruction by some dread and secret spell.

O'Tei passed under their shade, and, shivering, recalled the legend, for though there seemed no wind, they swayed and creaked, spreading gaunt arms over her head, with trails of grey-green spindles, like uncanny mildewed hair. Why she had come she knew not--it was in obedience to no volition of her own. Her heart and temples were throbbing wildly. Within her swimming brain there was room for but one idea. The web of a terrible fate was being spun with ruthless fingers around my lord and her to choke them both. Was she to be permitted again to intervene between him and his victims?--or, to tear the meshes which encircled them, were they destined to writhe in vain? Advocate of mercy, how sweet a privilege! What could she do? Had she the courage to face that sin-stained man? Irresolute and trembling, she stood staring at the crosses, marking their shadows as they lengthened, till, with a gasp and sob, she heard the tread of horses, accompanied by shouts and laughter.

He had returned from the chase--the tyrant--and it was well that she was here. She would try not to fear him,--strive hard to do her duty. They must meet now, and, summoning her puny strength, she would endeavour to push him from the precipice.

The cavalcade swept past in a cloud of dust--a brilliant, uproarious company--and clattered across the moat. Two riders were following a little behind the rest, when one, catching sight of a familiar drapery among the trees, pulled back his horse upon its haunches.

"The lady O'Tei," he exclaimed, "beneath that baleful canopy!"

And straightway Sampei dismounted, and held the stirrup for his brother.

And thus they met again, those three, on this fateful day for all--my lord in an evil mood, for even to him there was something oppressive in the air. A pall, as of the shadow of death, hung murky over the land.

With trembling, blue lips, more like a spectre than a woman, O'Tei awaited my lord's approach, and turning, flung herself upon her knees, clinging about his feet.

No-Kami glared down in surprised dudgeon, while the soul of Sampei was thrilled with pity to perceive how wan she looked.

"My lord!" she murmured low, with fluttering heart, "a boon. Oh! spare them--for my sake--for your own--spare them--spare them--spare them! Give me at least the lives of the woman and her babes. If the man must suffer, be it so. You see that for him I say no word, not one--the gods forgive me! For his act he knew and weighed the penalty. But those innocents are not to perish. Say 'twas but a pleasantry, and I will kiss your feet, and bless you."

The visage of No-Kami grew purple as he glowered down upon his wife, and then, with

grinding teeth, he glanced furtively around. There was no witness to the interview.

"It is well," he hissed, "that the company has gone before, and that I am spared humiliation in their eyes. Fie! what shameful folly's this? Can this grovelling thing, like a slave in the dust, be Hojo's wife, child of the Daimio of Nara? Nay! it is some mean Eta woman, pariah and outcast. Sampei, raise her up, and quickly, and let us both forget this spectacle. Arise!" he cried, spurning the prostrate figure with his foot. "Even among the Etas obedience is a wife's first duty."

Sampei stooped, and gently raising his distracted sister, supported her upon his breast, whilst the furious despot continued dryly,--

"Know that your existence is a blot on my name and your own. It is well that you have borne no children to perpetuate disgrace. If any of the bold samurai had seen you but now, what would they have thought of me?--of you? how could they respect their lady? Shame, shame! Pluck up a spirit--borrow one--and make at least pretence to assume a fitting dignity. The condemned are to die at sundown; no more on that score; even now the spectators are trooping hitherward. Go; tire your hair and don your gala robes. When all is ready, I will send for you."

"For me!" gasped O'Tei, turning a shade more white.

"As chatelaine of Tsu, your place is by my side," announced the Daimio sternly. "Be my will your law. Go now, and try not to degrade us."

His unhappy sister-in-law cast an imploring glance at Sampei, who stood with head bowed and sullen averted gaze. His blood was coursing through his veins at fevered speed. Patience, his mother had said, and wait. How could he wait and practise patience, seeing her he loved so outraged? Was she to be forced, by the whim of a madman, to give the sanction of her gracious presence to the deed which all deplored?

Masago, as usual, had been right. The Divine finger was in it, or why should the heiress of Nara, belying her own pride and the traditions of her haughty lineage, have selected the very means of interference which was most sure to offend her lord, and frustrate her own desires?

Had she, with imperious attitude and supercilious air, demanded the lives of the woman and her offspring, No-Kami might, touched by the proud beauty of her who was his bone, have, even so late as this, been surprised into some clemency. Sampei himself, to whom all she did was dear, felt a sharp twinge of mortification as, burning with sorrowful regret, he had quickly lifted her.

Both brothers, jealous of the name they bore, suffered in their tenderest point on seeing her thus prostrate. O'Tei must have been overcome with grief indeed ere she could have been guilty of so grave an error. But the Daimio's last demand must be rescinded. He must not insist upon her being present at the ceremony, or she might succumb under the ordeal.

Angry words of protest rose to the General's lips, but for her sake (remembering his mother's injunctions) he mastered them, and, as the trio moved slowly to the castle, strove to speak with a steady voice and dispassionate temperance.

"Far be it from me," he began, "to interfere between a wife and her spouse, or fatigue my lord with argument, yet would I suggest this much to my brother. Alas! see how weak she is--feeble in health. Nerves overstrung are not under complete control. But for this, the heiress of Nara would never have given just cause for a husband's displeasure by an act which we will all forget. Do not insist upon her witnessing the ceremony, for she has dwelt of late in such strict retirement that none will expect her presence."

A look at No-Kami cut him short. There was a lurid glitter in his glance that boded serious mischief if thwarted, threatening a new burst of frenzy. How difficult it was to be prudent, to steer without shipwreck in such troubled waters. Again for a space was the General torn between contending duties. Was he bound blindly to follow the head of his clan in his mad recklessness, lead where he would? Could he be excused were he to look on and refrain from action while the soul of his love was tortured? Was it not craven idly to mark her growing misery? Her true knight, forsooth! A knight unarmed, his spear a rotten bulrush. Was it destined that he might never afford her help? Better go away then, back to Corea, or farther still. Yet how would that be possible, she in this desperate quandary? Like a green flash of pallid light it broke upon him clearly, as he walked beside his chief, that the day might come when, the weapon in the grasp of a higher power, he would be compelled to smite his brother. With the thought came a grisly dread. Desperation drives men to acts for which a long life of penitence may not atone. Fate is fate, and man may not master it.

Sampei thought of his mother, and, like her, prayed to be enlightened. Was the doomed No-Kami indeed to fall by the treacherous hand of him who should be the first to help? And, ah! what a grievous punishment would follow, since by the very act of freeing her he would cut himself off from her for ever. A brother's widow and a brother's murderer. Wait, the Abbess had said. Wait! How long? Events rolling onward with the turbid tide, would it be possible to wait?

The toils of destiny were wrapped around the three, clasping them closer and more close, as, gloomy and tempest-tossed, they passed under the gateway of the castle.

CHAPTER IX.

THE EXECUTION.

The Daimio was well served by his subordinates. Nothing was omitted which could add impressiveness to the coming rite. The two crosses stood facing the west, gaunt and forbidding, at a convenient distance one from the other, backed by the green trees, and around them was spread thick paper, to save the earth from pollution. It had been a knotty question with the chief samurai, who acted as master of the ceremonies, as to the exact shade of punctilio which it would be fitting to employ on the occasion. All the world knows that the most minute instructions were laid down in 1336 by Ashikaga for the guidance of those of upper or military class who were to assist either as principals or seconds at harakiri, or suicide by disembowelling. The exact hour, the place, the number of lights, of mats, of screens and hangings, bows and genuflections, according to the rank of the sufferer, were arranged by him in the form of a long code, and so complete and comprehensive were these instructions that no room was left for doubt as to the most trifling detail. But here was a case without precedent, for the sufferers were plebeians, too low and common to be worthy of the smallest candle or commonest mat, or, indeed, of anything whatever except an ignominious slaughter like swine. But then the Daimio had insisted that the spectators should be regaled with pomp and circumstance,--that the criminals should have the honour of being done to death within the castle precincts, and therefore the chief samurai was obliged to hold a council with his fellows for the fixing of this weighty matter.

In the first place, the farmer and his wife were of too mean a stock to be permitted to put an end to themselves, just as the children were too young to perform the act, even if accorded the privilege. No, they must be handed over to the Etas, members of the lowest class in Japan--people who dig graves and kill animals--social outcasts beyond the pale of society, filthy and degraded, who are never allowed to enter a house, or eat or drink or cook at any fire in company with decent persons. Being unworthy of mats or hangings, the device of the paper was an ingenious thought, for the blood of mere peasants must not defile the private ground of my lord, and yet the spirits of the departing must not be overcomforted by too much consideration. As the execution was to take place at the hour of the cock, or sundown, it would be necessary to have lights, but not too many, or of too grand a kind, for excessive illumination would be indecorous. Four tall bamboo poles, carrying lanterns of plain white, were placed at four corners, while behind a screen were concealed a lance, a dirk upon a tray, buckets to contain the heads, an incense burner, cloths, and a pail of water. In the centre of the space facing the crosses, thick mats were laid, covered with rich embroideries, for the accommodation of my lord and his party, behind which was to be arranged, standing in rows, his brilliant retinue in their most splendid and glittering array. Down the sides, behind a low barrier, were mats of a coarser kind for the town's-people, with fire boxes or hibachis, and bronze kettles and tea things, and cakes and sweetmeats on trays of gold lacquer, in order that none of his vassals might accuse his benignant lord of want of hospitality or lack of thought for their comfort.

It was a beautiful and still evening in autumn, with the opalescent sky of crystalline clearness, which so often in Japan gives us a hint of the infinite. The sun was just dipping behind the outer wall, flanked by its massive towers, tipping with gold the eddies of the brawling river which protected the side of the square opposite the crosses, when a flourish of conch shells announced that the time was come.

With a thunder of hoofs over the wooden drawbridge, first there defiled a troop of cavalry with tapering lances and pennons, in glistening black armour and housings, each helmet adorned with the badge of Hojo, the face of each horse covered by a gilded mask of frowning and horrific aspect. Solemnly the horsemen manoeuvred, forming a hollow square of gold and sable; then at a signal the outer gates were opened, and with clatter of many clogs there poured in from the town a sea of men and women, old and young, with anxious pallid faces. The invitation had been accepted by all classes. Fishermen there were in short blue cotton shirts and tight gaiters, and mushroom hats roughly bedizened in colour with tigers or twisting dragons. Old dames and young rosy girls jostled and fought for places, for sure never had the oldest inhabitant been bidden to so strange a mummery. Artisans there were too, burly and bronzed, naked, save for a loin-cloth and loose jacket; and merchants and superior persons, in long crape kimonos, adorned with curious designs, bound round the waist with scarves of silk. The black phalanx looked down with scorn but half concealed, for never had so motley a rabblement been admitted within these walls, and many a timid wight glanced trembling at the swart fierce visages under shadow of the casques, wishing he had stayed away. There was one, however, conspicuous for gay attire and many hairpins, who, no whit abashed, looked saucily along the line, making loud remarks, with pointed finger, as if the motionless figures were statues. A very pretty little lady like a humming

bird, with dancing eyes and silvery laugh, and hair tricked out and stiffened with pomade, who, by her gay dress, was a geisha or professional dancing-girl. All about her was small, but neat and natty and trim, from her tiny feet and lacquered clogs to her impudent little nose. It was plain that she was afraid of nothing, taking life lightly, resolved upon enjoying the day, however dark its setting; for, elbowing her way to the front, she commenced, with a comical assumption of haughtiness, to criticise the arrangements, as if all her short career had been passed in castles and palaces.

The chief samurai was uncertain how to act respecting her, for she presumed to mock at him, and mimic his rolling swagger and pompous stride, rating him the while for tardiness,--a lamentable lack of punctuality. Who was this forward wench? he asked, awaking from dumb amazement, who, respecting neither place nor persons, mumbled sweetmeats between cherry lips, and, tapping a garish fan, shouted for the performance to commence! It was O'Kikú some one said, a celebrated dancer and spoilt beauty from distant Kamakura, who was in the habit of walking upon hearts, of attaching herself to richest youths like a tarantula, and quickly sucking them dry. She was on a pilgrimage to the groves of Isé--for even frail and flighty young ladies have souls that require doctoring--but hearing of what was toward, and the temptation great, had gaily tossed aside her pilgrim robes of white, and postponed her journey and her prayers.

But now, even naughty and irrepressible O'Kikú was hushed to silence, for there was another flourish, and, stately and slow, with all the pomp of state, the procession of the Daimio marched across the bridge. Very handsome the two brothers looked as, in full dress, and wearing the courtly Naga-bakama (full long trousers of red silk), they moved with a lady between them--a lady who, by her exceeding stateliness and unusual pallor, riveted the attention of the geisha.

"Patrician to the finger ends," muttered the latter approvingly. "I have never seen so high-bred a lady--no, not even among the gorgeous court of the Shogun in distant Kamakura--as noble in bearing as her two supporters. Which is the Daimio, I wonder? The older one, of course."

The older one. Her heart--or what served as such--went straight out to him; and from her worldly point of view, in which inclination and interest seemed in unaccustomed fashion to mingle, she decided, as rustic Miné had done before her, that he, and he only, should be her master. The handsome stalwart fellow, bronzed and weather-worn, his brow crossed by a deep and honourable cicatrice! A typical soldier he, whom 'twould be a joy to love. The other one? Well, handsome too, but ill-tempered evidently; as rich in scowls as a tiger in stripes; a wild beast, whose taming might amuse. And yet toying with wild beasts is dangerous, for when they scratch they tear. Brothers apparently. The wife of which was the patrician lady? For a second the world-worn geisha felt the prick of a curious and new sensation. Could it be jealousy? If she were the wife of the soldier, she was a rival whom it would be necessary to fight and crush. Cold--almost inanimate; a doll--stupid probably--entirely wrapped, like so many of her station, in contemplation of the family tree. Pooh! an absurd rival; for sure no man could love an icicle. Were they newly married? This bridegroom with the scar was delectably attentive to his bride. How mawkish! And then the observant little woman noticed that the scowls of the younger brother were specially turned upon the icicle. Why was that? There was an air about him of discontented proprietorship. Suddenly she became aware of the richness of his attire as he took his place in the centre, amid the bows and genuflections of the spectators.

So the younger of the twain was the Daimio, and the icicle his wife. What a pity that it was not the elder. It was with a twinge of genuine regret that the geisha turned from the bronzed hero to examine the chief of the clan. A forbidding savage! Clearly he did not love the icicle. He was fancy free. Inclination and interest as usual did not mingle. Heigho! must we always throw over romance for the better filling of our pockets? An unsatisfactory world, in sooth, where things have such a provoking way of clashing. A good-looking aristocratic person this head of the clan, if cross.

"I did well to drop my foolish prayers; this is the moment for business," she inly murmured. "I shall have first to ensnare the chief, and his stalwart brother after."

Her line of action thus promptly and practically decided, the young woman prepared her batteries.

Even No-Kami, with much cause, as he told himself, for displeasure, could find little room for carping in the attitude of his consort, now frozen into compliance with his mandate. She had, as it were, gone out of herself, leaving a stiffened body, moved by automatic springs. Condemned to do awful penance, she walked mechanically, leaning on the arm of her brother, who glanced from time to time at her, with mixed satisfaction and surprise. He had dreaded lest, her task beyond her strength, she should quail and break down, object of derision to samurai; but no--the struggle was past--the blood of the Daimios of Nara asserted itself. Of what use was it for a girl to struggle against destiny? What must be, will be, despite our feeble protests. To beat soft palms against a wall is but to bruise and maim them. One who drowns, battles with futile strength among the waters, then drifts quiescent beyond the pale, power of resistance gone.

The watchful warriors smiled, relieved, behind their iron-mounted tans, as silently they dropped into their places. For once their chatelaine was as chill and disdainful and impassable as the chatelaine of Tsu should be.

No-Kami cast his eyes, gleaming tawny with malice satisfied, over the throng. He was well-pleased. As a pageant the affair was a distinct success, for, hemmed round by the swart square, his vassals were learning a lesson of fear that should stem their insolence in future.

The executioner and his aids stood ready on their lengthening shadows, chosen from among the Etas for their breadth of beam. Their athletic bodies stripped to the waist, dark as burnished bronze, tattooed in intricate designs, with loins girt up, and hair loosely knotted, and sandalled feet apart, they awaited the signal of their lord.

The Daimio raised his arm; the shells sent forth a blast, and at the warning all heads were turned, for there appeared from among the grey and ghostly trees the sad procession of the doomed.

First, with chains about their ankles, and wrists fast bound, came the unlucky officials who for too slavishly literal obedience were to serve as a sop to the people. A purr of applause, a drawing in of the breath, like the sibillation of the plashing wave, went round the throng, as the heads of the condemned were severed; for there is no denying that it is delicious to enjoy the discomfiture of foes. But this act of popular justice accomplished, there was a pause, and then the assemblage, changing its tone, sent up a protesting moan of tribulation, accompanied by tears; for, smiling, with head well poised and brawny shoulders bare, the patriot, who was one of themselves, advanced to martyrdom. By his side, in mien as brave as he, walked in her best kimono his wife, the hapless Kennui, leading in each hand a child, pathetically crowned with simple field-flowers. Ah me! How grievous a spectacle was this of innocence marching to the slaughter.

There was a rustle and ripple as of wind over a rice field. O'Tei alone of all appeared unmoved. But for the twitching of slightly-contracted brows, her delicate features might have been carven, as, peering into space and seeing nothing, she sat motionless with bloodless lips.

Even the fair and outrageously irreverent and saucy O'Kikú, who had made so merry, with that musical strong voice of hers, Over the rueful plight of the tax-gatherers, as to draw on herself the flattering attention of the Daimio, was obliged, at sight of the babes, to dash away one tiny crystal drop; but then remembering that weeping makes pink the nose, and that life at best is brief, she resumed the reins of composure. More, for she succeeded in emitting such a jocund and appropriate peal of laughter as disconcerted the mob and wrung for behoof of the stranger a gratified inclination from my lord. Who was this bewitching creature? he began to ask. As good-looking as sensible. The eyes of the pretty girl beyond the common barrier and those of the great man on the mat of honour met, and from beneath a silky curtain the former shot forth a languishing glance of modest and reluctant but uncontrollable admiration, which was answered by a brazen ogle.

O'Kikú blushed like a budding peony, which made her look more engaging than ever, and lowering her lids behind her fan, began seriously to congratulate herself. How clever she had been, adapting herself to circumstances, to postpone those tiresome prayers at Isé; for 'twas more and more evident that the great man cared nothing for the stony image by his side, and was susceptible to the blandishments of beauty. It was rather fortunate, too, that that other one with the scar upon his brow should be glumly engrossed in contemplating the heavens. Had she not, with a precision of judgment that was worthy of all praise, arranged that she would ensnare the great man first, and dally with the other afterwards? Even so well skilled a person as the geisha would have found it difficult to angle for both in the presence of one another. The Daimio caught and landed, fishing for the elder brother would be a delightful pastime. Yes. Business first and pleasure afterwards. Buddha is always on his lotus, calm and cross-legged, and to him, in matter of favours asked, all times are one, for is he not eternal? Whereas it must be evident to the smallest capacity that the great ones of the earth are not always accessible, but, within range, must be shot flying as they pass.

Her plans arranged with accuracy and speed, the wily damsel commenced such a series of arch manœuvres with eyes and fan as a long and varied experience had taught were deadly; a silent yet eloquent language, which pleasantly titillated the nerves of the first of her intended victims. When public opinion and your own conscience upbraid your act, it is consoling to be encouraged by a pair of lustrous orbs. Sympathy, always sweet, is doubly so when we secretly know that we are wrong. By contrast, O'Tei's recent behaviour now seemed doubly execrable to No-Kami. Her cold glance, even in the early days had betrayed a polite indifference, which gradually changed, as he remembered now with sullen ire, into an expression of scorn half veiled, varied with dread and horror. As he gazed on the dazzling geisha, his spirits rose to blytheness.

How whimsical are the arrangements of Nature! He could see now why his wife, despite her beauty, had always been repellent. She was tall and frigid, with an assumption of faultlessness which cannot but be disapproved by those who make no pretence to phœnixdom; whereas there, opposite, sent by the gods to comfort his loneliness, was a fairy vision replete with glowing perfections, accentuated by the piquancy of frailty, which he yearned to clasp in his arms. Sure so fragile an atomy would melt away in the fervour of a hot embrace? Yet no. The flesh was flesh-warm with life, deliciously solid and plump and peachen, if sylph-like in contour.

Thrilled with desire of possession, the pageant interested my lord no more save for the amusement it afforded to the stranger. Somewhat vexed and annoyed by the ill-timed gurgles of the scum (yet what can you expect of low people but vulgarity?), he was pleased to perceive, by

engaging little pouts and shoulder-shrugs and entrancing nose-wrinklings, that the stranger from afar was with him. It was evident that she deemed the sentence just--his severity wise and opportune. Stealing a glance at the chill statue by his side, upon which the anxious gaze of his brother was fixed, he became much annoyed; for in every line of O'Tei's suffering face was imprinted remonstrance and despair. Sampei, too, the milksop, appeared quite as miserable. It was a fortunate chance indeed that had brought the geisha to the castle.

From afar there boomed across the flat a sweet but solemn sound that stirred the hearts of all; for was not the peal of the great bronze bell of Buddha a mystic friend close woven in the life of each? Every day its toll awoke the slumbering peasants for miles around, preaching with mellow voice a life of honest labour; and, ablutions over, each simple man and woman, with fervent face turned to the rising sun, clapped palms together, craving a blessing on their toil.

To the superstitious Japanese the bronze temple bell is a living entity. It breathes with their breath, joys with their joy, grieves with their sorrow. As wood and brook are peopled, so are the temple and groves; and the great bronze bell is the voice of the myriad spirits, messengers of Buddha's will. How exasperatingly pestilent, therefore, was it now of Masago to give to the festivity a mournful turn of warning by slowly beating the bell as if for some popular calamity.

A shudder passed over the crowd. Hark! What was that? The sougling of the wind? The twee-twee of the shrill cicada? No. A faint and distant chant, growing each moment louder; and, as he heard, the face of my lord grew purple and his brow black with rage, which he was vainly seeking to control. He, like the others, guessed the purport of the music, and his fingers mechanically sought his sword-hilt. That abominable Abbess, not to be daunted by recent contumely, was again coming to the castle with all her bonzes and her maidens to demand at least the lifeless bodies of those who were about to die. Nothing could be more inopportune,--better calculated to mar the pageant; for of what use were sweetmeats and fruit and the best tea as concomitants to a grim enjoyment made fascinating by wholesome terror, if the occasion were suddenly to be turned into one of open mourning? What was to be done? If 'twas but a bevy of priests, a few deft taps in tender places with the bamboo would send them squealing; but the voices were those of women, and even a tyrannical daimio will not gain in dignity by the scourging of a posse of girls. For an instant he breathed a deep curse upon all women--universal marplots; but, catching the glance of the stranger, he recanted. Even she found it difficult to combat her emotion. Her cheek had blanched, her lovely bosom heaved under the crape kimono; but being a damsel of strong will, gifted with a power of seeing ahead, she forced an arch flash from her eye, for the comfort of her new adorer. By a swift signal she bade him know that her sympathy was with him still. By instinct born of new affection, he seemed to read her thoughts. Abbesses are cross-grained, churlish hags, she seemed to say,--disappointed because youth has fled. Yet, in her heart, she could not but be aware that things were going badly, and that the effect produced by that gruesome festivity was far from the one intended. Well, so much the better, for her sympathy was rendered thereby more precious. Instead of accepting their harsh lesson with humble and meek duty, the fractious mob of artizans and mean persons, who should have been awed by mere admission within the castle, were presuming, with sighs and lamentations, openly to side with the convicted! With sobs and streaming cheeks the spectators leaned over the barriers, and, with low murmurs of "Cruel!" and "Pitiless!" threw their sweetmeats to the little ones.

Beyond the outer wall, glinting through embrasures in the masonry, the rapid river rushed red and golden, flushed by the sinking sun. Its glitter was reflected in the eyes of Koshiu, who, with a martyr's smile, hearkened to the swell of the dirge. How comforting it was! How good of Buddha, the silent and watchful, thus to have inspired his priestesses! The will of a wicked man could keep them beyond the moat, but their voices, preternaturally clear with words from beyond the grave, floated over bolts and barriers. 'Twas with exultation and glee, as of one heated with warm wine, that, drawing his burly form to its full height, Koshiu turned him to his wife as both were bound to their crosses.

"Cheer thee, dear Kennui!" he gaily laughed. "A spasm, and then happiness. It is given me to see, and I behold. Our poor transient lives are forfeit in this dim world of twilight, but our end is gained. The odious taxes are removed, and our brethren, not yet ripe for flitting, may rise upon their feet; for my lord is banned, the days of his oppression numbered. With deep humility and praise I see a miracle. In the next cycle--which is but a tiny step--we are rich and prosperous, ay and, oh wonder! reunited. Gennosuké will be reborn to us, and our little Sohei and dear Kihachi, in a clime where the Hojos are not."

As the chant pealed louder yet, the chief victim was wrapped in ecstasy, shared as it seemed by his faithful helpmeet, for with bright eyes fixed on him she forgot her children's suffering, wistfully awaiting their rebirth.

Not so the appalled audience, who, shivering with terror, watched the Etas at their work. Who may presume to gauge the designs of the Eternal? For his own mysterious ends--upright on his lotos--he was permitting this great wickedness; but whilst permitting, and lest mortals should lose their trust, and topple into unbelief, he deigned to raise a corner of the veil. 'Twas clear that the doomed farmer was big with prophecy. What words would next drop from his lips? And about the heads of the children too--the innocents--there gleamed a mystic radiance. When, to accompany their feudal leader on his passage of the river Sandzu, the privileged members of his bodyguard perform the rite of harakiri, 'tis the deliberate act of mature men, whose hands are steadied by faith unwavering. As such, it inspires respect and awe in which there is no fear. But

to look on at ignorant and helpless infants butchered! oh, woeful sight! And, while the dread deed is being done, to hearken to the prophetic words of him who stands beside them on the brink. Well may the cheek blanch and the breast heave of those privileged to witness such a spectacle! Sure 'twas supported by the holy finger of the Unseen himself that Gennosuké assumed a manly dignity beyond his thirteen years as, stretching forth his head to the knife, he looked calmly up at the executioner. "Oh, father and mother," he simply said, "and little brothers, I go first, to wait for you, and will put forth my hand to help you across the river. All you who have come to see us die, farewell! and to you, sir, also a kind farewell. Hurt me as little as you may."

Even the headsman, a stalwart Eta, brutalised by his bleeding and long years of taunts and flouts, turned a glassy eye of appeal upon his lord, but seeing no mercy on his gloomy visage, was fain, unnerved and stricken to the heart, to do his revolting duty. A gleam through the still air, and straightway a piteous wail from the onlookers, in harmony with the distant dirge.

Then said the second lad, miraculously brave,--"I know not how to die, sir, and I beg you teach me." His blood was quickly swallowed by the greedy sand; and then 'twas the turn of the babe--the wee naked urchin with skin so berry-brown, who wist so little what was forward that, as he stretched his tiny fingers for a persimmon that was tossed to him, he was sent to rejoin his brethren.

Roused by the groan that was forced from many breasts, Kennui spoke, her eyes fixed steadily upon her husband. "Mourn not," she said, as one who beholds a vision. "How blessed are we! From the first you foresaw this fate. A little wrench--no more. Man lives but for a lifetime, his good name for many, and that is more precious than life!"

The voice of Kennui waxed faint, for, tight bound as she was, the spear of the Eta was more kindly than the Hojo; and it was only when he knew himself alone--all those he loved waiting on the further shore--that the farmer roused himself from musing.

Twisting his body towards my lord so far as his bonds permitted, he slowly wagged his head and laughed low and long. "Could I live here five hundred lives in pomp like thee," he said, "I would not, knowing that which will come after. Oh, cruel one! oh, pitiless!--steeped to the lips in crime. Fence thee with walls, and moats, and barriers of stone, my spirit shall burst them all to avenge thy deed this day! Hearken to my voice. Mark my red eyes. Waking and sleeping--in the din of battle--in thy secret chamber--they shall be with thee. When they fade, know that thy end is nigh. Thy time is brief. All-patient Buddha sickens at thee. Last of thy race. Thou and thine--all, all--shall perish miserably--thy name a horror for all time."

The voice of the martyr choked. The sable phalanx of grim warriors quaked and rustled in their armour like leaves before the coming storm. The Eta, scarce knowing what he did, beside himself with fear, plunged the lance into his side.

The head of the farmer drooped; his eyes filmed, then opened wide lurid, reflecting the crimson sunset. "See yonder river," he gasped, "and take a sign. 'Tis tinged with blood already, sucked from thy fortress stones. See how red it flows! A day shall come when it will lap those stones no more. Then shall thy house fall, a shapeless ruin. Cursed, thrice cursed, be the long line of Hojo! In cycles yet to come may they stumble and wander, led astray, hopeless, and blind, and never attain oblivion!"

The Daimio, with lightning in his glance, and terror in his heart, rose up, and, speechless with passion, stretched forth his hand. The trembling Eta again thrust in his weapon, and the voice of menace was hushed. But the sightless eyes still gazed at him, who was accursed as from out of the infinite, and the reflection from the river shone forth, cast back ensanguined, from them.

A panic fell on the spectators. The men, fearing they knew not what, grew pale; the women shrieked, and stuffed fingers into ears, or clung wildly one to another. The samurai, grouped behind their lord, placed hands on swords, irresolute; for there was no foe worthy of their steel. A regrettable *dénouement*. 'Twas the Eta's fault--the tardy caitiff! His life should pay the penalty. Then of a sudden there was a diversion. The lady O'Tei, who, statue-like and numb, had witnessed the scene as one who saw not, willowed forward with a moan, and fell on her face unconscious.

No-Kami looked around, his eyes bloodshot like the dead. Humiliation on humiliation. So intense was the depth of his impotent wrath, that his hands trembled, and his nerves were wrung with agony. What? He? Hojo No-Kami--tyrant of broad Japan, master of the Emperor himself--before whom all daimios and kugés and hatamotos were wont to bow, was to be bearded--openly insulted--by a low peasant fellow within the precincts of his castle, before his assembled vassals! The wretch was dead, worse luck, out of reach of further torment, bleeding from many spear-wounds; but ere he died he had covered his lord with ridicule. How different was the result of the pageant from that which had been proposed. The superstitious people clearly believed that the body hanging by its ropes was that of a martyred saint, who had spoken the words of Buddha; not of an insolent varlet who had perished with deserved ignominy. They believed the absurd threat about the river, and looked with awe for the accomplishment of the prophecy. The only dignified way out of the dilemma was by treating it with light contempt, turning it off as a sorry jest, with a peal of disdainful merriment. The attitude of Sampei was worthy of his stock. Involved with his brother in the curse, he had raised his brows in angry scorn, while his fingers moved towards his

dirk. Then of a sudden, his manner had lamentably changed. With a sibillation of dismay, he had knelt over the swooning chatelaine, striving to call her to herself with gentle words of comfort. O'Tei! Ah, there was the worst point of all! By fainting thus inopportunately, she had accentuated the falseness of the position. That she (the chatelaine of Tsu) should cower under the anathema of a peasant. How different would have been the conduct of the bellicose Tomoyé. To swoon thus in public, was to betray unfitness for her rank,--to allow the scum to perceive that she believed in the curse, and its justice,--that she disapproved the fiat of my lord,--regretted his well-timed severity. Sampei was right when he pleaded for the too weak O'Tei. So scalding was the shame of the Daimio, that, but for the intervening figure of his brother, he would then and there have struck the craven chatelaine. And yet not so. His loathing and hatred for his unworthy partner was so intense, that contact even with her robe-hem would at this juncture have been most distasteful. Glancing about for consolation, his eyes met those of O'Kikú, and there shot into his heart a glow of solace which to its emptiness had been long unknown.

Circumstances were assisting the manœuvres of the cunning geisha more than she could have dared to hope. The helpless misery of No-Kami, as he looked down upon his wife, was a confirmation of her conjectures. A chicken-hearted rival, easily vanquished, this high-bred chatelaine would prove, since she would obtain no support from her spouse. The brother was unnecessarily affectionate. What did this portend? O'Kikú's smooth brow was wrinkled by a frown. Pooh! She had heard much of the General, whose name was Sampei--the name she learned from the crowd. He was good-natured and generous, no more. This was not the moment to dream of him, since the head of his clan was standing by in need of moral support.

O'Kikú had lived an eventful life, if a short one, and was not one to be alarmed by spectres. Taken aback for a moment, somewhat frightened by the scene, involved for a few seconds in the unreasoning panic of the mob, she had quickly regained aplomb.

Tapping her fan against the barrier with a peevish shrug of shapely shoulders, she demanded, in a chirruping voice, as loud and clear as musical, to be instantly rescued from contamination.

"It serves me right," she cried, tossing her chin, "for abandoning the realm of fashion. Faugh! Was there ever anything so disgusting as these rustics? The country with its evil-smelling rice paddy and foul slush was fit for them, and they for it. What a ridiculous pother, to be sure, over one paltry man's impertinence! The ways of the coolies were nauseous. Thank the gods, she was unaccustomed to coolies. If some one would have the gallantry to remove her from their contact, she would skip into her kago, and return to Kamakura forthwith." Oh, intriguing and long-headed O'Kikú! Ah, if O'Tei had had presence of mind to accept the situation in this spirit! Could No-Kami ever lavish sufficient gratitude for so signal a service rendered in the nick of time?

The bewitching tourist had touched the right note, and saved the Daimio from embarrassment. With a smile of thanks, he bowed, and commanded an officer without delay to extricate the lady from the scum. With courteous apologies and well-turned compliments he descended from the dais, and, taking the stranger by the finger-tips, led her to the place of honour. Ignoring his wife, who, seemingly as lifeless as the farmer's family, was being gently borne away, under the tender surveillance of his brother, he was free to superintend the stranger's comfort, to see that the new-comer was provided with tea, in a cup of the best hirado, and plied with the choicest sweetmeats. A blush of gratified vanity served to add piquancy to her beauty, as, with an engaging air of bashfulness that went well with long lashes and sly glances, she seemed to deprecate attention.

"I was so sorry for you," she gently purred; "but 'tis the penalty of greatness to be misinterpreted."

Fanning herself with demure grace, she turned her pretty head aside to hearken to the words of her host, gazing the while with studied nonchalance at the proceedings of the Etas as they placed the heads in buckets, piled the bodies of the infants behind a convenient screen, did away with tokens of the sacrifice. The hollow square of dark-mailed men remained motionless till it should please their lord to move; but under many an iron vizard was a smile lurking, for the conduct of the saucy lady was approved by all, and the admiration of No-Kami no more than natural. Unlike the one who had been borne away, she was an honour to her sex, a vision of brightness and of courage, and gladly would one and all have hailed such as she for their mistress.

"You were cruel just now," whispered No-Kami; "though, after what has happened, 'twas your right."

"Cruel? Poor little I?" exclaimed the artless geisha. "Why, I never hurt so much as a buzzing mantis when it tumbled on my head, as the vexatious insects will! I cruel indeed!"

"You said you would depart forthwith; but you forgot that within these walls you are our prisoner."

"I was on my way to pray at Isé," remarked the demure damsel; "sure you would not balk so pious an intent?"

"That can wait--and must!" returned the Daimio. "Bad impressions must be effaced. You must

not relate to the Shogun, on your return to Kamakura, how the lion of Tsu was bearded. For a few days, at least, you stay as our guest, or else our captive."

O'Kikú laughed a rippling laugh, as she considered within herself as to which was likely to be the captive.

"When a great lord commands," she murmured, "a poor weak girl obeys."

Exultant glee pervaded the bosom of the Daimio. The welcome new-comer should be his guest--his honoured guest--and the pusillanimous O'Tei should be taught manners by example. He was about to move towards the castle, conducting with due ceremony the lady thither, when, with a familiar fan-tap on the arm, she stayed his progress.

"You are so good and kind,--so generous, and so wickedly misinterpreted," she whispered hurriedly, "that I take courage, although a stranger, to crave a boon. Your object accomplished, 'tis the moment to show clemency, and disclaim the stigma of the tyrant. Those nuns still sing without, awaiting the bodies for interment. Let them be delivered up to them. The first favour I ever asked," she added gently, seeing the Daimio hesitate. "Believe me, 'twould be an act of policy, and stay farther clamour."

No-Kami looked down into the deep dark well of her eyes, from which he could see peeping his own pleased reflection. Why, what a treasure was this--a wise little counsellor! More than ever was he disgusted with the absent chatelaine, who could only implore, and writhe, and groan, and grovel on the ground in intervals of stony glaring. Practical, and shrewd, and plump, and purring was this fairy by his side. She should have her boon, and welcome, with many thanks for the suggestion.

The Daimio having been pleased to announce that, yielding to the intercession of his charming guest, Masago might be permitted to remove the corpses, he crossed the inner moat, followed by his brilliant train, while the grim samurai laughed behind their vizards, wondering how the ladies would agree.

CHAPTER X.

FOREBODINGS.

It was with feelings strangely mingled that the concourse prepared to depart. For their good, the farmer had suffered martyrdom; himself and his family were swept like insects from the earth, but not from the grateful memories of the people. No sooner was the inner drawbridge raised behind the departing despot, than with one accord all meekly knelt while the Abbess issued orders. Her brow was more sombre than its wont, her jaw more firmly set, as the troubled elders related what had happened. She had prayed for light, but Buddha had vouchsafed no answer. What was this coil that was winding slowly but surely round the son of him who had been her husband? Ay, round her own son as well, the noble Sampei. It was under misapprehension that Koshui had included him in his anathema, supposing him the seducer of his child; yet here was the child, clad now in the crape of a nun, as pure as she had ever been. The farmer was in error, and surely idle curses recoil on those who launch them. Sampei, the brave and generous, was without reproach. Even sleepy Buddha must know that. Perchance he was at this moment rating Koshui, on the further bank of the mystic Sandzu, for his precipitate injustice. Masago strove to persuade herself that it must be so, whilst striving to console the terror-stricken Miné, and yet at the bottom of her heart there was apprehension, a dull weight of cold foreboding.

The ways of Heaven are so strange, so unaccountable sometimes, and to our purblind vision so unjust, that the most robust of faith is sometimes sorely shaken. Miné wrung her hands, refusing comfort. As with trembling fingers she untied the bonds which supported her dead father, she prayed to him with cries and lamentations. It was through her own wrongheaded madness that the mistake had occurred. Sure her parent knew it now. If the curse must fall on one of the two, let it be on her, for she was in fault, not the glorious young General. Could he hear her now, her father? Oh, for some sign that he could hear and would grant her humble petition! Wretched, wretched child! Her punishment was already greater than she could bear, for was not she doomed to drag on a sad existence, stripped of all her kin. Had she but behaved as a dutiful daughter should, instead of grieving now, heart-broken, she would be standing on the further bank of the river of death along with Gennosuké, and little Sohei, and sweet Kihachi. Alack! alack! While the bereaved daughter raved, distracted, the elders of Tsu and the outlying villages were taking counsel. A notice had been handed to them, on the part of their lord, which ran thus:--"The property of the deceased, his rice fields and corn fields, and forest and mountain land, shall

be sold without delay, and divided into two parts; one shall be paid over to the lord of the estate; the other, by his extreme condescension, shall be the portion of the culprit's daughter, who has been permitted to live. This is to show how godlike and noble is your master; and it is hereby strictly forbidden to make comments on the sentence, or find fault with this his decision."

One-half for Miné, who was in some sort an heiress, then. Poor heart! She little recked of her good fortune. The temple yonder would be the richer for her portion, for she was Buddha's servant now,--his handmaid till her spirit was released. With regard to the dead, the elders consulted awhile, and then with calm decision Zembei, supported by Rokubei, rose from his knees and spoke.

"Dear friends," he said, "Koshiu, who suffered this day, bruised his bones and crushed his soul for your sakes. In appealing direct to the Most Holy Mikado he sinned greatly, but 'twas from excess of zeal; and in being compelled to see those he loved massacred before his eyes, his punishment was in excess of his misdemeanour. We have decided that honour shall be paid to him, for indeed before his death he was the mouthpiece of the Eternal, who deigned to speak through his lips. It is meet therefore that we, his old friends, who loved him and his as ourselves--though perhaps on one occasion we were unduly selfish--should undertake this matter. We will leave our homes and lands in possession of our heirs, and, shaving our heads, will retire for a while to the top of the holy mountain; and after a period of probation, will descend from Mount Kôya in Kishiu, and, becoming priests, will wander from town to town, praying at every shrine for the souls of the departed, collecting as we go from the charity of all good people. And then, having collected enough, we will erect a temple over their bones, with six Buddhas in bronze to do them honour, and there shall prayers be offered up for ever for them, and also for us."

The people listened to the oration, and bowed their heads without a word, for the decision of the elders was good and natural. All therefore lighting paper lanterns, for it was dark now, turned to follow across the outer moat, away along the straggling interminable street, the procession of the dead.

Masago had accepted a temporary trust, and it was well. Within the darkling groves of her sacred pines should the victims lie at peace, until such time as, by divine grace, the elders should return to fulfil their holy task; and it behoved those here assembled, who had witnessed the sacrifice, to offer a prayer together, and commence among themselves a collection for the building of a shrine.

Solemn and slow, like an army of glow-worms, the procession wended along to the sad chant of nuns and bonzes; and, unknown to them, as the simple people marched, there followed a fervent benison from the lips of one despairing. The dreary chatelaine was sitting at an upper casement of the castle, wistfully gazing into the night.

Recovering consciousness, the Lady O'Tei found herself in her bower, surrounded by grieving maidens, and was relieved, glancing fearfully around, to miss the figure of my lord. She was spared his hateful presence. For that small mercy, thanks. For, still and self-possessed as she had appeared during the ordeal, thereby winning the admiration of Sampei, and, even for a time, the grudging approval of No-Kami, the chatelaine had suffered so intensely as to produce a crisis in her nature.

During the short while that the scene lasted, years seemed to have passed over her head. Hitherto she had been weary and empty and unhappy--deeply miserable, but yet with a germ of hope half stifled. That germ was quite dead now, shrivelled and black. She was beset with an intense craving for rest and sleep,--for the fragrant perfume of the earth. Although the execrated name of Hojo was hers, the scathing curse on all who bore the name passed harmless over her. Her conscience was clear. She had done all that within her lay to save the victims, and, calm and still in outward aspect, had suffered far more than they. A threat of proximate death?--release! The world, whose beauty she had so intensely enjoyed ages ago at Nara, was repellent now,--a hideous mockery,--a skull crowned with flowers. For how false was its song of sweetness, since such wickedness and injustice flourished in its midst. A world of disease and pain and sorrow. In this life are not many punished for their virtues, as a set-off to the manner in which others are rewarded for their vices? What wonder if people fall under burthens too heavy for their backs?

Koshiu and his had already entered on a new and smiling existence; if his dying words might be believed, had started under sunny auspices on the next round of life. And at the same time he had prophesied that no Hojo henceforth might ever win peace. They were doomed to wander from one globe to another, gaining no step, rising no higher on the earth, for all eternity! How horrible! So dread a bolt overshoot its mark; for sure the universe must be ruled by fiends if those whose crime is to bear an execrated name are for that to be undone for ever. To die, and try again, and yet again, in vain--a weary prospect. The sooner the better, after all, for no future phase could be less tolerable to the Lady O'Tei than the present one. She was condemned, as it seemed, never to attain aught that she desired; never to have a prayer answered, or a wish gratified. And all that she now longed for was repose. Ah, how vain that wish! For never may we enjoy perfect rest save in far-off Nirvana--away in the incalculable and limitless Nirvana! where, when time is dead for us, refined and freed from the last speck of dross, we are to achieve the reward of nonexistence.

O'Tei had learned to despise her husband more and more, but now she had a new and positive

feeling for him--active and sore and gnawing--one of *intensest hatred*. And she was his--bound to obey his whim. How long? For his part, he took little trouble to conceal that he hated her, and would be glad to be rid of an encumbrance. Should she fling herself at his feet, and, baring her white bosom, implore the mercy of his dirk? No. She shuddered as she thought that he would laugh--that fierce and ugly laugh of his that made her blood run cold--would spurn and revile, hissing forth *recreant*, but yet would forbear to strike her. There was nothing for it but plodding patience,--a stringing of the nerves to endurance--slow, continuous, monotonous--the hardest of all tasks to an overwrought and nervous woman.

Meanwhile Masago, moving like a tall still ghost at the head of the procession, was disturbed and exercised in mind. How strangely things were going. If she might only be allowed to see. What thunderous clouds were gathering? Was the appalling prophecy to be accomplished to the letter? Like the chatelaine, her being rose in protest. Was her own brave boy, innocent of all wrong, to be involved with the rest, simply because his name was Hojo--the guiltless suffering for the guilty? Why, so was hers. Though but a second wife or concubine, she was mother of a Hojo--proud to call herself Hojo--jealous of the family honour, although of plebeian birth. She could quite understand the feelings of the rough warriors towards a chatelaine who was to them a riddle; but she, discerning, renowned for subtle acumen, could see under the rind what a fragrant nature was O'Tei's, if it had not been nipped half-blown. She sighed heavily as she walked, and pondered of O'Tei. What of this new element introduced into the castle--of discord surely? Not of necessity so. Should No-Kami elect to take the new-comer to himself, as folk already whispered, what of it? Had not his father done the same? And she, Masago (concubine), and the bellicose Tomoyé (wife) had never quarrelled.

But then O'Tei was so different from her predecessor. She was so odd and sensitive and self-contained, given to contemplative fancies which served no good purpose. Masago, the sage, was quite angry sometimes when she considered the education of O'Tei. She, an abbess, should know something of such matters, and there was no doubt about it that the bonzes and priestesses of Nara had blundered. The heiress of Nara was destined by her birth to a grand alliance, to reign in a world of strife, and they should have combated, while the nature of their pupil was yet malleable, such tendencies as might be likely to interfere with the young lady's future happiness. Dancing the kagura in a wood was all very well for priestesses, but in a fierce age, when every man's hand is at his fellow's throat, the female head of a warlike household should be taught to hold her own. Poor O'Tei had never been properly prepared, and was in truth no more fit to cope with the difficulties of her high position than would be the merest coolie's daughter.

In the candour of self-communing Masago admitted this much to herself, making apologies the while for the shortcomings of her favourite, and laying the blame upon the priesthood.

And again the question would assert itself--Was the new element for harmony or discord? If she could only know, and help to keep matters straight. If O'Tei were sensible, she would accept the second wife with gratitude, for she would be relieved of the society of one whom she abhorred. But then O'Tei was so peculiar. And so much depended on the attitude assumed by the second wife, if second wife she were to be. She, Masago, and Tomoyé had got on so splendidly that, as she thought of the past, a faint blush of self-complacency tinged the Abbess's ascetic cheek. No doubt about it. She, Masago, had displayed, as she usually did, consummate tact. In fact, in their instance, the two wives completed each other. Each had the talent which was denied to her companion, for Tomoyé often declared that though her muscle was a marvel her brain was wanting, while Masago was the best of advisers, although no warrior. Hence, whilst both adoring their lord from their own point of view, they could perfectly trust each other without jealousy, and play into one another's hands--a fact which was clearly proven when the regnant Hojo wearied of his concubine. Tomoyé did her best to retain the second wife (not knowing what the next fancy of her lord might be), and constantly sought counsel from Masago after her assumption of the crape.

Masago therefore, as she walked, summoned to her side the devoted elders who were so soon to embrace the priesthood, and cross-questioned them narrowly. They had observed, had they, in my lord's visage, how desperately he had become enamoured? They were certain that his sudden passion would insist on being gratified? But what if the travelling geisha were a light-o'-love to be picked up too easily to-day and cast forth to-morrow? Rokubei shook his head. The astute Masago--all-wise counsellor--would never venture so futile a suggestion had she once scanned the lady with her searching scrutiny. Oh, a cunning and fascinating lady! A petulant and wilful lady, and an obstinate! Ay, and a circumspect. What object could she have had in insisting on the bodies being given up, except to ingratiate herself with the lower lieges? What cared she, a stranger from afar, for a farmer of Tsu or his family? And then, that way she had of sending gleams out of her dark velvet eyes from under the deep fringes. Even he, Rokubei, who spoke, and who shortly on the holy hill was to have his pate shaven, was fain to admit, under the seal of secrecy, that his own, for the future ascetic, bosom had been pervaded by inconvenient warmth under the glamour of those lightning shafts, and all the while he knew that they were intended for another. And my lord, so inflammable, so given to indulgence, who knew so little of the curb! Masago might believe, or not, the speaker, but it was clear to him that in a few days--nay, hours--the too fascinating geisha O'Kikú would rule the Daimio and his vassals, whether for good or evil was as yet in the womb of time.

Masago listened, and became more and more uneasy. Could it be possible that she, who had that day only appeared upon the scene, was the chosen instrument--selected beforehand and

arrived exactly in time--for the fulfilment of the prophecy? Was she to undermine with her pink little fingers the great dynasty of Hojo? and, if so, how? For the advantage of the dynasty she, the discarded second wife, would gladly sacrifice herself and wear her fingers to the bone; would even surrender the life of her dearly-beloved son Sampei for its advantage. Fool! unreasoning woman, and incorrigible fool! Who was she to presume to combat Destiny?--to raise her weak hand in feeble protest against the finger of Buddha, the all-seeing? Although the blasphemous suggestion had unbidden entered her brain, vigils and much praying would be needed to atone for its presence. She would kneel on the stones throughout the ensuing darkness, praying for pardon and for light. How may we, however watchful, guard against presumption--against pitting our puny sagacity against the Infinite?

And though she fulfilled her self-imposed penance, remaining until dawn, despite years and infirmities, with forehead resting on the stones, maternity struggled with asceticism. Her bowels yearned over Sampei--the pride, the flower of Japan--and she prayed as only a mother can pray that her boy might escape the curse. How willingly, she pleaded, would she herself submit for his dear sake to recommence the ladder from the bottom. She knew not, of course, how high she had attained by long and painful climbing, but from her present consideration and eminence she must be considerably advanced on her pilgrimage. She would sacrifice all--all--with what ecstatic joy--for his sake. And as she lay convulsed in the dark, with the drops of a mother's travail coursing down her wrinkled brow, she never dreamed that in the pure intensity of undimmed devotion she might be in the act of rising yet another step. In the morning, feeble and exhausted, she turned her to the newborn orb as he showed above the glorious sea, and, vaguely relieved, sat basking in his beams. Then struggling up she groped to her cell with lagging feet, and sank into a stupor of fatigue.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CURSE BEGINS TO WORK.

And Sampei, what of him, under the new *régime*, inaugurated so unexpectedly? Could his mother have delved into his storm-riven soul, she would have won no comfort by her prayers. Never was luckless warrior so hedged about with difficulties, which might not be vanquished with the sword. His influence over No-Kami was proved to be practically nil, for the latter was unable to comprehend his brother's character any better than that of his wife. What good then was to be gained by lingering at Tsu? The question had propounded itself before, to be set aside. Why shun it now? More than once Sampei determined that flight is in some cases the truest valour, and on every occasion the haunting and ever-present face of his early love upbraided him for selfishness, in that he was her only champion.

It was a fine specimen of bravery, in sooth, to be self-elected "own true knight," and run away at the first appearance of the enemy. That the new-comer would prove an enemy there was little room for doubt. Such a reproach should never be hurled at our young General, he doughtily determined. The more he saw of the fair O'Kikú, the more uneasy did he grow. There was no knowing how soon O'Tei might require protection from her. He might be of use. That was enough. Under the circumstances, despite his mother's warnings, Sampei resolved to stay--moth dancing round a candle--and keep an eye upon the geisha.

The proceedings of that winsome fairy, when installed within the castle, bade fair to set its inmates by the ears. With a vast parade of prudery she insisted at first upon apartments being provided as remote as might be from my lord's. A series of pleading messages, mingled with threats, were required ere she would consent to appear in the hall and perform graceful measures, or sing and play upon the samisen. Her performance finished, she would smile, and bow, and kiss her finger tips, and then flee like the timid hare. When No-Kami, who, tantalised, grew hourly more amorous, chid his guest for suspicion of his motives, she shrugged her shoulders, and imperiously demanded her kago. "I am detained here against my will," she would remark pouting. "'Tis monstrous dull, and to return to delightful Kamakura is my most ardent wish." And then with distracting little sighs wrung from a plump heaving bosom, she would dilate upon the glories of the Shogun's court,--tell of the tiltings, the hawking parties--constant flow of jocund gatherings--till the undisciplined Daimio clenched his nails into his palms with jealousy, and the lady laughed behind her fan.

Before many days had passed, it was announced that O'Kikú had consented to remain at Tsu, the acknowledged second wife; and the samurai congratulated one another, looking forward to a period of liveliness. As for their chatelaine, they thought no more of her; took no heed of her incomings or outgoings; for she drew the curtains of her litter close, and rarely went forth at all

except on some charitable errand. Really such mean-spirited conduct in a Hojo's wife was a distinct besmirching of the name; and the younger and more unruly of the warriors purposely turned their backs upon her kago, to avoid saluting its passage.

The Lady O'Tei, as proud as any of them, though they wist it not, marked their growing insolence, and stored their insults in her embittered heart; and more than ever loathed her lord, on account of her false position, as well as his new favourite. From the moment of the latter's advent O'Tei abandoned for ever any idea of attempting to exert influence over him. On that last occasion when she bowed her pride and humbled herself to the very dust before No-Kami, the attempt was crowned with disaster. It was decreed that she must live, must breathe the same air as he. What must be must; but she would look on him in future as little as she might. That he should choose to take a second wife, the first or legitimate one proving barren, was not surprising. The latter had neither right nor desire to object; but it was clearly his duty to see that the introduction of the second spouse brought no slight upon the first. Instead of demanding her rights, and boldly grappling at once with a situation that was ominous of evil, and so defining the geisha's place without more ado, O'Tei made another mistake. Haughtily she withdrew within herself and brooded over her wrongs, leaving to the intruder a clear field, of which she was not slow to take advantage.

Having achieved the position for which she had so cleverly angled, O'Kikú threw down the mask, shook off her bashful ways. Wherever my lord could go, the damsel argued, so could she, for was she not young and active? By his side in the chase she rode, untiring. When he reviewed his men within the outer moat, she stood beside him, and with amusing sharpness rated them all soundly for their awkwardness. Accustomed to a disdainful mistress who interested herself not at all in their doings, the warriors were surprised and enchanted. She would even condescend to come down sometimes, looking so fresh and bright and cheery, into the outer hall, where the soldiery lounged, yawning, and administer reviving draughts. The throat of the soldier, she would laughingly observe, is curiously parched, always yearning for saké,--quite a serious disease, and catching too; one which was common in the army. And then she would familiarly take their swords from them--the swords which are the souls of the samurai--and closely examining the blades, demand the genealogy of each.

No-Kami was flattered when he observed what a favourite his choice was becoming with high and low alike. The men, one and all, adored her, some of them declaring that she was a sunbeam detached miraculously from the orb of life to illumine the darkness of their fortress.

At this moment the ambition of O'Kikú should have been satisfied, for she could wind my lord and all his men around her finger, ruling them as she listed. She held in supremest contempt the real chatelaine, as an enemy not worthy of her steel--usurping her position and her duties; taking pleasure in exposing her to ridicule. Low born as she was herself--sprung from the gutter--there was something particularly delightful in insulting the heiress of Nara; but the sharp, tiny pins did not seem to rankle. This was annoying. Egged on little by little, piqued by O'Tei's attitude of scornful indifference, the concubine went dangerously far. She gathered around her a bevy of maidens more numerous and more splendidly attired than those of her superior; she exacted from the soldiery special homage which was due to the legitimate chatelaine alone; even presumed, after a time--culminating impertinence--to take unto herself the best litter, the one emblazoned with the Hojo badge upon gold lacquer and the gilded poles and brocaded curtains, declaring that since O'Tei chose to go only into the low purlieu of the town, a less resplendent equipage was better suited to her degraded taste.

O'Kikú should have been quite happy. But when is a vulgar-minded, low-born woman happy who is consumed in the ratio of pampering by ambition and greed and caprice? Having attained the summit of present desire as planned on her arrival, she set herself to gratify her fancy in another way. At first sight she had been smitten with Sampei; but, on discovering that, though the elder, he held the second place, had prudently postponed his conquest until a more convenient period. That moment was now come. She had abundant leisure for the task. Sure a warrior should be a willing slave of beauty. Yet when she warily reconnoitred the ground, she marvelled at his coldness. Every inch a splendid young soldier, he should have been less chill. She made purring advances, favoured him with a few of the arrows under which his brother had succumbed; and these shafts fell so short that she guessed at once, with quick jealousy, that she had a rival. His heart was not his to give. How provoking! for she had so cleverly arranged that the two--he and she--were to become such friends!

On his side, Sampei (an adept in such matters) was not slow to read her purpose, and, horrified at her calculating treachery, boldly reviled her with rough words. She smarted and winced under the whip, and wished for him all the more. It was idle to feign, and her speech was as plain as his. She did not love her husband--O'Tei herself did not gauge his low worth more clearly--she loved him, Sampei, and gloried in it. See! For a caress she would be his slave, and fawn at his feet like a dog. No Eta could be more abject than she, if he would but look on her with love. A little--a very little--and she would be so grateful, since, on her side, there was enough for both. Wreathing her white arms about him, while his body quivered with disgust, she cooed and prayed and worshipped, and uttered a sharp cry of pain as, unable to endure the ordeal, he flung her rudely on the ground. *She* prate of love! he cried. How dared she defile the holy word with such foul lips as hers?

Furious--burning with shame at her repulse--she scoffed at him.

"You talk big of virtue," she sneered, with cruel lines about her mouth, "not knowing that I can read your secret. Treachery? What is my treachery to yours? I am but a concubine. You love your brother's wife--the mawkish doll of wax!--and she, as guilty as yourself, has doubtless fallen an easy prey, since 'tis plain that she hates my lord."

That shaft, at least, went home, for Sampei turned pale. Was it written so plainly on his face that all who ran might read? A useful champion--a true knight--whose faithful service it would be to guide his mistress to her ruin. He must go away--far away--since his tell-tale features could not keep the secret. And yet--to leave her here at the mercy of this wicked woman!

O'Kikú perceived what was passing in his mind, and was for the moment satisfied. She held revenge within her palm whenever she should choose to use it. Sampei had spurned her. Well, she could afford to wait; for what he had been powerless to deny might prove an invaluable discovery. Sampei and O'Tei loved each other. Judging others from her own standpoint, she had no doubt of their guilt. Perchance he would soon tire of such an icicle, and she might woo and win him after all. If not, she could use her discovery to avenge the slight, and free herself of the inconvenient presence of both wife and paramour. It would be so easy to open the eyes of the unsuspecting Daimio, and goad him deftly on until the two brothers were at open enmity.

For a time she must abandon her designs upon the General, and lull the pangs of disappointment and injured vanity by drowning thought in excitement. Since she had bared her spotted heart to him, there was no use in assuming a mask. On the contrary, her recklessness would sting him like a serpent's bite since, knowing what she knew, he dared not betray her to No-Kami. It pleased O'Kikú, therefore, to abandon prudence, and cast shame aside. Secure of unlimited sway over the infatuated despot, who would gladly accept such explanations as she vouchsafed, she selected lovers from among the soldiery as they struck her wanton fancy, disdainingly to cloak her proceedings from the shocked Sampei, who hourly grew more troubled and uneasy.

On which side lay his duty? How should he act? Were he to denounce the geisha to his brother in the matter of her declaration to himself, she would swear it was spitefully conceived, and No-Kami would refuse to be convinced. 'Twas fortunate that O'Tei dwelt in such strict seclusion, enveloped in the armour of purity, innocent of guile. But what was to be the upshot of it all? As the falling stone increases in velocity, so would the insolence of the concubine unchecked in shamelessness. The tempest growled on the horizon, and grew apace; the cloudlet was spreading over the heavens. Awe-stricken by the sinister turn which, so rapidly, events were taking, the martyr's anathema rung in Sampei's ears. The house of Hojo was to fall. Already, in his mind's eye, could he see it reel, hear the crash of its disruption. For a long time past the conduct of the head of the clan had been indefensible. Buddha, awakened by clamour, was angry--and no wonder!

In his perplexity and indignation an ensanguined mist passed across the vision of Sampei. The hint thrown out by Nara some time since festered within his breast. The history of Japan teems with the enmity of brothers, he had said. Was it indeed written that the last of the Hojos was to perish by a fraternal hand? For the honour of the name which they both bore, must the cord of an unworthy career be severed, and by him? It would be well for the suffering land that No-Kami's catalogue of misdeeds should be closed, but not by the hand of a brother. Not murder! The honest soul of Sampei recoiled before the insidious vision. It was vain to seek counsel of the Abbess, since she confessed herself as perplexed as he. *Wait* was all she could advise. If the curse of Koshiu was to be accomplished, it would be accomplished, whatever the efforts of the doomed. If his was decreed to be the avenging sword, was he not a helpless infant in the grip of destiny? The will of Heaven would be pronounced more clearly soon. Meanwhile, there was nothing for it but to wait. Peering sadly into the dark-lined future, Sampei waited in suspense, gloomy on the threshold of despair.

Tidings reached Masago in her dim retreat of what was passing, and she sighed. The finger of an outraged God was on them, that was becoming certain. The fate of Hojo was to be a warning lesson to generations yet unborn. By-and-by a rumour came, she could not tell from whence, that the Daimio was going mad. In sooth, he was never sane, and could scarce be held accountable for his growing pile of crimes. In accordance with the rearing which befitted his rank and station, he had scoffed with ribald laughter at a peasant's prophecy, treating with levity the wild words of one who had deservedly been punished. And yet there were moments when, though he fought against the illusion, he was haunted by the dying face,--when those glazing eyes that reflected the sunset shone out of the dark like glowing coals, to wither and scorch his soul. In the night he would wake, seeming to hear again louder than temple bell the words of evil omen, and then he would hug so fiercely the form of the slumbering O'Kikú upon the mat beside him, that she would turn on him with peevish reproach.

The visions and the voices increased, till he was afraid to be left alone. His brutish nature became yet more vindictive and morose, and the geisha, vowing that as a companion, after his paroxysms of unreasoning fear, he grew intolerable, freely dosed him with saké, to subdue his importunate tremors. In his chamber she would leave him chained by drunken stupor, while she, with the favourite of the hour, caroused below. This proved so convenient an arrangement, that to obtain for herself a liberty of action yet more complete, she tempted her lord to increased potations, till there arrived at length a period when he was scarcely ever sober.

But then constant inebriety has its intermittent moments of recoil, when the stomach sickens at the drink, yet craves for it, and at such dismal times the smile would fade even from the brazen visage of the baleful enchantress, for my lord would then pass without warning from the extreme of grovelling anguish to the fury of mania; and O'Kikú wondered, with blanched cheek, whether, perhaps, some day in one of these mad fits the Daimio would rise and slay her.

One evening he woke with chattering teeth, and finding himself alone in the quickly-gathering shadows, stumbled upon his feet, with curses on the concubine in that she deserted him in his extremity. Did she not know how much he feared the darkness, and how necessary it was on many counts to conceal his condition from his warriors? Had he not raised her up to be partner of his bed, giving her all she desired, gratifying her every whim? And yet what recked the selfish creature of his wishes, of his terrors, his requirements? Naught! Regardless of his agony, she could quietly go away and amuse herself, leaving her lord and benefactor a prey to goblins. Shivering, with swimming brain, he groped his way in search of her; and somehow found himself, ere he was aware, upon the drawbridge that led beyond the moat.

A chill wind was blowing from the river that lapped the frowning walls--a singing murmur seemed to whisper "Come!" Shuddering, obedient to a spell against which his will was powerless, he stumbled on. How dismal dark it was! From the windows of the hall came a ruddy line of light which served to intensify the black. There was a faint sound of brawling within, a clash of steel, a din of bandied threats, followed by the long rippling laugh of the geisha, and then the twang of her samisen. "Always in that hall among the soldiers," No-Kami querulously muttered. "She loves me less and less--cares nothing for my trouble." Since her arrival, he reflected, there had been a gradual and grievous decrease of discipline among the samurai,--a growing tendency to quarrel and snarl in open disrespect of *him*. Had she betrayed his secret? Had she divulged the nameless horror, and the cowardice which unnerved his arm, unsettled his reason, and undermined his strength? Impulse bade him turn and stride into the hall, and there assert himself; and then the breeze, like clammy fingers, stroked his cheek and murmured, "Come!" Whither was he to proceed? Was it the water that summoned him? No! had not the farmer said that the river should ebb away? Folly! why, what was this? Was he, the head of the Hojos, as infatuated as others? Did he believe in the threats of the martyr? On--on, away to the left--whither? To the dim belt of grim grey trees that reared gnarled arms aloft, groaning and swaying in the wind. The accursed trees--home of malevolent ghosts! The trees that chanted ever their loving call to ignominious death.

With beads of sweat upon his brow No-Kami listened, and, not knowing what he did, unwound his long silk sash. Then out of the dark shone forth, like glowing coals, the eyes he knew too well, and then there pealed upon the night a mocking shout. Hist! what was that? The voice of Futen, the wind imp? or Raiden, king of thunder, beating upon his drums? What was he doing with that sash?--he, the proud No-Kami? Horror! he, the head of the Hojos, was about to hang himself--to disgrace his line for ever!

With a growl of fear No-Kami sped away, his fingers in his ears, back toward the light--and the saucy geisha, seeing a crouching shadow pass, complained of some unclean animal. With stealthy speed, born of terror and shame, the Daimio crept away, nor stopped to draw breath till, safe in the sanctuary of his chamber, he fell panting, prostrate on the mat. Another instant, and, unconscious of what he did, he would have swung on the fateful tree. Strange that it should have been the warning voice of Koshiu that had averted supreme disgrace. Why? Was he reserved for something yet more infamous? Better now, at once, to make an end of it--perish as a Daimio should when driven to bay by his own well-tempered steel. Groping with aspen hands for the sword-rack, he took his dirk, and unsheathing it, passed a finger on its edge. A blade of Sanjo's, a masterpiece. Yes. Here in the dark, alone, he would perform the rites of harakiri, and join with unsmirched brow the line of haughty ancestors.

Footsteps, a yellow glimmer through the paper of the sliding doors. O'Kikú's tardy feet? No, the heavier footfall of a man. A panel was pushed aside. Sampei, shading with his hand the flickering flame of a candle. The latter peered in, and uttered a cry. The dirk, the body bared, the kneeling posture. The intention of the Daimio was evident, though rising with a fierce curse he strove to conceal his purpose.

"I am glad I was in time," Sampei remarked, with cold composure. "Would the chief of our clan commit harakiri without a second? Where is he? I see no kaishaku. Pah! When all is lost 'tis time to think of dying. If you wish it, and have courage, things are not yet past remedy."

"What do you want?" snarled the Daimio, as with a scowl he retreated into a corner.

"My lord of Nara has arrived, and is now closeted with his daughter. Though you seem to have abdicated your dignities, it is right that you should be informed of it.

"Sent for by her?" inquired No-Kami.

"No!" replied Sampei bitterly. "With all your arrogant parade, she is more proud than you, and would never stoop to complain of your many cruelties."

"Sent for more like by *him*!--snake in the grass!" gibed a voice behind, and the two brothers, turning, beheld the geisha, a frown puckering her brow, a red spot of annoyance on either cheek bone. "Yes, snake in the grass!" repeated she, lashed to imprudence by resentment. "He does

well to play the part of the lady O'Tei's interpreter--he who knows her so much better than others!"

Sampei was silent, while the suspicious gaze of the Daimio was turned to his brother from the concubine.

"O fool!" she laughed. "To be fooled by women is the lot of the haughtiest among ye! I vow I pity such blindness. Know that the crust of a proud woman's nature often conceals a furnace. The lady O'Tei has kindled a fire on the altar of her heart in honour--well, not of you!"

"You lie!" cried the General, kindling, yet striving still to control himself for *her* sake. "It was an evil day for the house of Hojo when this strumpet came among us!"

"We are not all so blind as my lord," gibed O'Kikú. "When my lady goes forth, in what direction do the bearers carry her? To the temple of the vixen Masago, to offer up prayers, of course. A curious coincidence! My lord Sampei, returning from the chase, pays dutiful visits to his mother. A pattern son. There, there! be hoodwinked no more. Stupid mole that you are, he loves O'Tei and she loves him. Look in his face, man; is it not eloquent enough?"

The soul of No-Kami, already torn, writhed and quivered. Could it be true, this dreadful thing? Miné already ruined, a mere pretty peasant, a passing fancy, suitable toy enough--and now O'Tei! Had the lawless libertine dared to aspire to the legitimate wife of his lord? The dirk was still in the Daimio's grasp. Tottering forward a step, with heaving breast and distracted features, he narrowly scrutinised his brother.

"If I thought this was true," he slowly growled between his teeth, "I would have speedy and ample vengeance. Sampei, why do you look confused? Yonder, on the rack, is a sword!"

Again the mist of blood passed across the vision of the General. It was decreed. No-Kami rushed upon his fate. He himself pointed out the blade, lying so ready to the hand. A pass or two, and O'Tei, the long-suffering, would be freed from her grinding bondage. Involuntarily he stretched forth his arm, while No-Kami stood waiting. He touched the sword; his hand recoiled, his arm dropped by his side inert, for beyond the taunting visage of the geisha he seemed to behold, tearless and pale, the shadowy figure of O'Tei. No, this was a trap deliberately set by that wicked woman for her undoing and his. If, in the combat, it was his lot to fall, her fair fame would be for ever blasted. It would be skilfully bruited abroad by O'Kikú that the Daimio had avenged his honour. Forcing himself to calmness by strength of will, aided by an all-absorbing love, Sampei crossed his arms upon his labouring chest, and sadly shook his head.

"You are insane," he sighed,--"beguiled to frenzy by the glamour of this sorceress. You know, if you have power to think, that the dawn is no purer than your wife. What madness is it that has so mastered you that you would rather believe this harlot--for she is a harlot, and a shameless one, as every one in the castle knows except yourself? Rave as you will, I shall not gratify her spleen by fighting with you. Should the necessity be forced on me, I will summon the samurai to bind you, for your own protection. Cudgel your distempered brain, my brother, and see the snare. Your father was mine before you--unhappily--were born. The honour of our name is mine as well as yours, and for me it shall remain untarnished. Alas, we are under a ban, indeed! I can surely trace the finger of the Eternal; this harlot, the instrument of ruin."

Foiled spite and impotent rage leapt up and invaded the calculating spirit of the geisha. That he, so hot and careless usually, should be able to school himself to prudence. How he must adore that pale-face!

It was humiliating to one who justly prided herself on cunning, to be outwitted by truth and manhood. No doubt it was satisfactory to mark how firm was her hold upon No-Kami. He had hearkened to her accusation of his wife and brother, but the countercharge brought by the latter against herself had remained unnoticed. And yet Sampei had had the best of it. She was obliged to confess with self-upbraiding that, exasperated by the appearance of Nara, whose unexpected arrival seemed like to mar her plots and upset her calculations, she had been precipitate--led into a foolish error.

The moment chosen was curiously ill-timed for bringing about a quarrel. Not that she would have permitted blood to flow. Not so silly as that. At the first onset she would have rushed out with clamour and shrill cries to summon the sleepy attendants,--have sworn that Sampei had attacked his feudal lord,--have created such a coil as would have led to the former's banishment. But, devoted to the paleface, he had for her sake curbed his heat. Noble and severe in bearing, his dark brow seamed by battle scars, he was just the man to master a turbulent plebeian woman of strong passions. As he stood, erect and self-possessed, O'Kikú adored yet hated him. His scathing antipathy to her he did not care to mask, and who should know as well as she how well it was deserved. A man such as this might have wrought a miracle upon her nature. She could have hugged her gyves, glorying in his tyranny. Could have! He had repulsed her,--shrunk with loathing undisguised as from a reptile, and all for love of the pale-face. The dregs of her low nature bubbled to the surface in a rising surge of abhorrence. At this moment, as she contemplated his still dignity, she could have stabbed him to the heart with joy.

As schemes and combinations passed swiftly through her brain, the geisha hotly blamed

herself. A short-sighted novice! An awkward bungler! The merest tyro could have warned her of the imprudence of airing family feuds before outsiders. What a moment this, when the powerful and astute noble of Nara was on the spot, to suggest charges against his heiress. Well, well, it was for the best that Sampei had kept his temper. The seed, dropped into the mind of No-Kami, would swell and burst and blossom by-and-by--the grain of suspicion which at a fitting season was to make of these brothers enemies. For the present it was best to drop the subject, to turn it off with a jest; then to make much of the illustrious visitor, and get rid of him as soon as possible.

O'Kikú, therefore, suddenly changed her tactics. With a careless laugh and a wave of shapely arms she swept aside the dangerous topic, and remarked: "Perhaps I was wrong,--too prone to believe evil. Your brother was before me with the news. The Daimio of Nara is here, and must be made welcome. If you will do him honour, I will see to the bestowing of his retinue. As you are her friend, Sampei--if really nothing more--I trust you will beg his daughter to refrain from telling lies of us." With this, awaiting no reply, she vanished, and, resuming the demureness of the past and assuming a meek and gracious air that befitted the position of the concubine, proceeded to charm the retainers of Nara as she had already conquered Hojo's.

What was he here for, this inconvenient guest? What could his object be in swooping down on Tsu? The question buzzed in her head as she moved hither and thither, on hospitality intent. He must know that he, was little welcome. Had the chatelaine been goaded at last out of her silence? Did the tiny pins at last lacerate her skin? Had she summoned her father to rescue her from a position that was unbearable?

What then? Would Nara, interfering on his child's behalf, insist upon the prompt suppression of the second wife? And if he did, would his mandate be obeyed, or was No-Kami still strong enough to do battle for his siren? The prestige of Japan's despot had not paled as yet, for the secret of his peculiar mental condition was well kept. Such precautions had been taken that, though many knew the Daimio to be ill, none but O'Kikú and Sampei were aware of his critical state. Had Sampei, pursuing a tortuous game of his own, summoned Nara to council? The traitor! And what a simpleton she not to have foreseen and parried such a stroke. Nara present and siding with Sampei--made aware of No-Kami's weakness--what easier for the twain than to seize the reins and fling forth the offending concubine? Again was O'Kikú compelled to admit with tingling cheeks how unskilfully she had developed plans which at the start had seemed so promising. By pandering to his fears, and plying my lord with drink, she gained no doubt a measure of extra liberty, but purchased at what a cost! At a time when every man's hand was at his neighbour's throat, to lose your nerve was to lose respect and be toppled over in the fray. Execrated as she knew my lord to be, with myriad and lynx eyes watching for a cranny in his armour, why had she not foreseen that there would be traitors in the camp? O'Kikú had been so careless because she reckoned on her rival's unpopularity. Not a swaggerer among the samurai--as she had long since learned--but looked on his liege mistress with uncomprehending pity. To think that bluff, single-minded Sampei--so skilful in the field, so blundering at home--should have had the inspiration to summon Nara! But had he? Sure his surprise on the arrival of the cavalcade was not feigned? If it were, then was he a dangerous enemy indeed--concealing consummate craft under an appearance of simplicity.

The more O'Kikú pondered and considered, the more nebulous grew the result of her meditations, and on the morrow she was brought to the highest stage of bewilderment by the departure of the Daimio of Nara as abruptly as he had arrived, and in a friendly manner too. Gazing through the hole made by a wetted finger in her paper-covered casement, she had striven to read on the faces of those concerned the result of their interview: and her jaw dropped in sheer amazement. Was the lady O'Tei even more mean-spirited and craven than her rival had supposed? Fearful of retribution and ill-usage in the future, had she masked her wounds from her parent, vowing she was well and happy, when her very looks should betray the truth? In that case, neither she nor her paramour had summoned Nara. Why then was he come? Could it have been of his own accord, so speedily to go away, with no result from his advent? The more she considered, the more knotty did the problem grow--one that her low instincts could never fathom. She wist not that a proud nature, instead of crying out with shrill uproar, will conceal stabs dealt in private by her legitimate lord from the scrutiny even of a father; the more when her parent bears only the name, since he has never won her love.

How surprised would the geisha have been could she have read the riddle aright. It was Masago, the Abbess, who had given the hint. She, who was but too well aware of the position of her favourite, could see that she was dying slowly of a breaking heart, for each time that she visited the temple O'Tei was more frail and wan, more spiritual in aspect; her step more slow and feeble. Moreover, over and above personal affection for her, was it not the duty of the Abbess to give warning to the lady's natural protector, lest her own dear boy Sampei should be goaded to leap into the breach? Knowing all she knew, it was a subject for marvel that Sampei should have refrained till now. School himself as he would, he could not conceal from a mother's anxious gaze the canker that gnawed his entrails. So far as he was concerned, the arrows of O'Kikú had not missed their mark. He pined with sympathy,--was wrung with anguish at the drawn expression of the wistful face, the dimmed eyes that were once so bright, in which hope was quite extinguished.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DAIMIO OF NARA IMITATES THE SPHYNX.

What a pity it is that in our odd world the wicked should be so much more clever than the good,—that the combinations of sinners should so easily outwit the simply virtuous. But then, were not the good so naïve, they might not possibly submit so quietly to the unhappiness which is usually their portion. They might scream, and rail, and wax obstreperous, point out the cases of flagrant injustice too often to be observed among their ranks, and become unedifying texts and examples.

Poor Sampei, being less cunning than the geisha, and not perceiving the advantage of which he might have availed himself, naturally did not seize it. It never occurred to him that the appearance of Nara on the scene might have brought about the salvation of his family,—that he and Sampei united might have ousted the female marplot. Clearly this lack of discrimination was due to the interference of the gods.

Sampei was quite as surprised as the concubine at singular conduct of Nara. He took no umbrage at his sullen reception by the lord of Tsu; seemed not to perceive how little he was welcomed; showed a disposition to be easily pleased, a slowness to take offence, such as ill became a daimio. Closeted with his daughter, he refrained from searching questions, conversed about the pleasures of Kiyôto, and the probabilities of a visit in the summer, while she, stony and indifferent, as reticent as her parent, and dreamily gazing into vacancy, replied in monosyllables. With studied ceremony he took leave of her as though she were a stranger, bade farewell of his sulky host with suave courtesy, and, followed by his brilliant retinue, journeyed slowly up into the mountains. So cautious was he, even under the glances of his own people, that it was not until, resigning his horse to a betto, he retired into a litter, and drew the curtains close, that he permitted his thoughts to appear upon his features. "It is very nearly time," he murmured, "very nearly time, and then shall my child—ay, and all Japan—be avenged, and signally." With gleeful exultation he rubbed his hands together as he revolved a host of little points which had not escaped the eagle ken of his experience. A drunken dissolute cohort now, the redoubtable warriors of Tsu.

Arriving unawares by night, he had found no sentries at the gate. His men had blown the horn, and hammered with lances, and shouted till their throats were hoarse, ere any one had appeared upon the walls; and what a scurry then! The castle, left unprotected in the silent watches, would have fallen without a struggle into the hands of a skilful foe. And—the cognisance and titles of the father of the chatelaine having been recognised, and the drawbridge lowered—the relaxation of discipline everywhere apparent within did not escape his practised eye. Before the presence of a stranger was made known, he had heard sounds of wassail and of quarrelling,—had seen the abandoned concubine of the Hojo toying with the common soldiers. And he was enchanted. What mattered it that his child looked wretched?—women must suffer for the common good. Patience—a little patience—and her burthen would soon be removed.

The Abbess, proud as she was of considering herself in some sort a Hojo, had naturally turned, in her anxiety, to him who had been selected by her now departed lord as the prime adviser of the family. Unwitting of what she did, it was her finger that first pointed out how the joints in the harness were loosening; and with a savage laugh Nara gave her thanks for it.

The young General, who had never learned the arts of diplomacy, blushed crimson as the eyes of the new arrival took in the situation, and stammered awkward excuses. His brother was ill, had for some time past been unable to occupy himself with affairs, and was, moreover, so jealous of interference, that for a while he, the elder, had let things go. But now that my lord had come, his father's friend, the twain would remonstrate, and arrange together. And then, from under the white beetle-brows of the old man there shot a meaning leer which chilled the words upon the lips of the younger, and brought to his mind an earlier interview which had seemed ominous of complications. Was this man a friend, or the worst of enemies, one who wears disguise? Buffeting in a sea of knavery, wherein fraud and chicane and stratagem and pitfall boil into a seething broth, what wonder if the true and single-minded grow bewildered and confused? Sampei was so little skilled in double-dealing, that, lulled by specious sentences, mystified, he concluded that he had been wrong, had misunderstood the purport of lord Nara's talk in the palace. Was he not his father's ally,—the man specially picked out for the guidance of the Hojo's sons? The old Daimio, ever quick to read thoughts, pressed the hand of his young friend with touching affection.

"All will be well by-and-by," he murmured. His dear young General, of whom he and Japan were so justly proud, must sit quiet, and hope for the best. He too, then, was preaching patience. Sure, the venerable Abbess and the hoary statesman must be right—of course they were. The loyal Sampei blamed himself accordingly, and put his suspicions from him.

Although no open confidences passed between the pair, Nara was satisfied, for he could detect a change in the young man. His easy confidence in the direction of the straight and honest course was gone, had given place to a pained perplexity which boded well for the future. The arrow which the astute kugé had planted during the interview at the palace, was festering. He seemed to perceive that much. Sampei's sense of right and wrong had been disturbed. He was uncomfortable, and half-suspecting he knew not what, held his peace moodily, while his brain groped in darksome byways. Yes, he was mistaken when he deemed Nara to be a foe. Yet how was it possible he could be really friendly, perceiving as he must how bad was his daughter's treatment, how outrageous on every count were the proceedings of her spouse? Could any one who loved Japan be Hojo's friend? Alack, even he, Sampei, his only brother, was but too well aware that he was his country's scourge--that one who should remove the incubus would earn his country's gratitude.

The old Daimio, guessing what knotty problem it was that so vexed the young soldier's mind, evolved a stroke of genius. Suave and sweet in manner, with an engaging air of candour, he communed with himself aloud, "What a sad thing it is," he mused abstractedly, "that the history and the literature of our country should so teem with the enmity of brothers! And yet, in the main, a happy land, more privileged than the dim fog-bound realms of the west." Again, how bewildering was this to one who was groping so anxiously for light.

Looking in the wrinkled face, Sampei could see no meaning there--no special meaning--addressed to himself especially. And then, as the two strolled about the precincts of the castle, Sampei became more bewildered yet and more uneasy, for in some unaccountable way it had come about, without his knowing how, that old Nara concealed no longer that he was No-Kami's enemy, that he was aware of the ill-treatment of his child, and grateful for the sympathy of his companion. He even, as a matter of course, affected to look on him as a willing accomplice; gave him no chance of disavowal. And then, tacit consent to this being given, he dropped mysterious hints. Verily the future was growing strangely dark, the skein of the race more tangled hourly. With helpless resignation Sampei was fain to allow that the fiat had gone forth, that the days of the Hojos were numbered. If, as was growing every moment plainer, the prophecy of the farmer was to be fulfilled to the minutest detail, what was to be gained by struggling?

Patience was in very truth the only virtue which it became the doomed to cultivate. Humbled, therefore, and filled with murky presage, the young man bowed his neck and folded his hands, resolved to float with the stream, obedient to the whim of destiny.

Thus Nara--kugé and devoted servant of the Holy Mikado--having been warned by the Abbess of Tsu of the tottering condition of her house, came and spied out the land, and returned home delighted; while she, hearing in due course how he had come and gone, smiling and dangerously courteous, fell a prey to vague misgivings, and betook herself to prayer and abstinence. Vainly she cross-examined O'Tei, grown stonier and whiter. Since her father's unsatisfactory visit, the unhappy lady appeared to wake from a frozen trance to a sense of feverish existence, only when prostrate on the temple floor praying for the untying of her bonds. The words of Koshiu were seared as by an iron on her heart; sleeping or waking, she saw them burning on the wall.

The scene within the grey circle of weird trees was never absent from her vision. What had she done to deserve the ban? The full horror of the anathema ate into her being slowly. In succeeding cycles she was destined to be accursed. Little by little she realised her doom; for her there was to be no rest, no peace, no change for the better. Why? Because, obedient to her father's commands, she had bestowed her hand upon a tyrant. For blind obedience, punished for all time; for more than time--for ever!

There was no justice, then, in this life, or in the realms beyond the grave. She was created for misfortune and misery, specially picked out for all the worst evils that beset mortality. If accursed in future cycles, she might never rise,--never win Nirvana,--never hope for oblivion. The unflecked blackness of the despair that settled down like a foldless sable curtain upon O'Tei, caused the heart of Masago to bleed for her. The gentlest, noblest, most patient, as well as the most innocent of ladies! Truly the ways of the Eternal are inscrutable. The austere Abbess strove to instil comfort into the numbed soul--without avail. Her arguments, after all, were shallowest platitudes, to be tossed aside by O'Tei with easy scorn. What to her were the puny arts of O'Kikú the second wife? Shielded by the buckler of such suffering as hers, the tiny pins of the geisha fell harmless. Pity that 'twas so, for wholesome indignation might have wakened her from the stupor which, unless broken, must shortly end in dissolution.

Pondering as she paced the silent groves, the Abbess sought for a clue in vain. If the family was doomed to be smitten root and branch, it was doomed. But what a store of faith is needed humbly to acquiesce in the monstrous belief that the innocent must suffer for the guilty,--that generations yet unborn are to come into the world for the express purpose of bearing on their backs the guilt of their ancestors. With terror Masago felt that she was growing rebellious,--that her faith was trembling,--that she could no longer gaze with trustful veneration upon Buddha, the expressionless and the impassible, reposing cross-legged on his lotus. Herself, O'Tei, the dearly-loved Sampei, were all to suffer for No-Kami. Sure Tomoyé must be writhing on some other sphere for being the mother of such a cockatrice! And so it naturally came about that Masago, as well as others, looked forward to the sacrificing of Hojo--the chief to whom they owed allegiance,--of the head of the family of which she was proud to be one,--that she even prayed for the death of No-Kami as the only possible solution of the problem.

O'Kikú was not above profiting by the lesson which had been taught by Nara's visit. Instead of being permitted to subside into hopeless imbecility, her lord must be aroused,--must be exhorted to tighten the cords of his nervous system, in preparation for a sudden strain. Accordingly, after a period of wonder at Nara's visit and its apparent abortiveness, she began to suspect that, courteous as his manner was, and suavely ceremonious his departure, they had not yet heard the last of the kugé's irruption; and that it behoved her, as the guiding spirit of the castle, to practise caution. That snake, Sampei, was wriggling in the grass in inconvenient proximity, darting glances of adoration at the chatelaine. For the dignity of her dear lord's name (and her own future comfort), she must accentuate and renew her exposure of the villain and his paramour, now that the coast was clear. To this end, in order that vengeance might be tempered with *sang froid*, their deluded victim must be taught to mingle vigilance with circumspection, which would require a measure of sobriety. It would be vexatious to have to resign a modicum of personal liberty, but the sacking of the castle by a watchful enemy, who knew of its master's sottishness, would be a worse evil. It behoved her for her own sake to protect my lord from the enemy within the citadel. Arguing from her own ways of thought, it was a logical deduction that, in love with No-Kami's wife, Sampei must desire his death.

The geisha, adapting herself to the circumstances of the moment, became outwardly more circumspect in her behaviour; watched over her lord with affectionate care; exhorted and chid him with tender patience till his paroxysms of fear were past; made herself so absolutely needful to his existence, that he could not but fondly mark the contrast betwixt her and his legitimate consort. And she was not slow in administering the deadly drops when occasion served. What should the lady O'Tei care? she would babble artlessly, that her lord was well or ill, since her affections were engrossed by another, who all along had possessed her heart. The silent twilight of cryptomeria groves is conducive to holy meditation, but is also vastly convenient for mundane dallying. But no! he must not excite himself. Why should my lord exercise his shattered nerves, and pace like a caged bear? What mattered it what they did, or how frequently they met? For her part, his faithful O'Kikú thought it very diverting that any warm-blooded man should elect to fall in love with an icicle.

No-Kami hearkened, and although his reason rejected the geisha's hints, they set him pondering. Of O'Tei's character he had never seen any side, after the first few days, but the cold, repellent one, made more obnoxious sometimes by that lack of proper pride, which to his nostrils was as an evil savour. His brother was also a riddle; as a soldier brave to a fault, in other concerns hesitating, even timid, beset with petty scruples incomprehensible to the broader views of his feudal master. At the bottom of his heart he was afraid of his first wife, and disliked his brother, who, instinct whispered, was more worthy than himself. But to suspect those two of love passages! O'Kikú, unable to read correctly the characters of either, was led astray by over anxiety on his behalf. And yet, what if she were right?

That dreadful curse that was ringing ever in his ears. Was this one of the ways in which he was to be stricken? Was he to be held up by wife and brother as a laughing-stock in the eyes of his assembled warriors? He had been weak, unnerved; had groaned and grovelled, forgetting his name and lineage; had all but been lured to submit to degradation that night among the enchanted trees. He would battle with the phantoms now, like a true son of his father and Tomoyé--would conquer, by force of indomitable will, even the goblins that pursued him. Rising up, and girding his loins, thankful that the samurai had never beheld his throes of terror, he appeared once more in the hall, overbearing and stern and firm of step--as fierce and harsh as heretofore, if haggard and ashen of hue.

Sampei marked the change with approval; for the idea that the head of the house was to turn coward seemed the most grievous of possibilities in connection with the martyr's curse. At this juncture an event occurred which added yet further to his relief. The lord of Tsu was summoned, by sudden mandate of the Mikado, and was ordered to present himself in the sacred precincts of Kiyoto without delay, accompanied by a small following. This order, publicly given, he must perforce obey, and, removed from the bad influence of the favourite, there was no knowing what happy turn might follow. Though polygamy was a recognised institution, it was not etiquette for any other than the first wife to hold communion with the ladies of the imperial court.

The peremptory nature of the summons surprised and offended the lord of Tsu. Old Nara, doubtless, had perceived how unstrung he was, had whispered to the silly babbling kugés and their infatuated head that the lion was toothless, that the poison-bag of the serpent was removed. A sense of their mistake, and the speedy discomfiture of the feeble gang, acted on the system of the despot like a dash of fresh salt brine. He laughed aloud, as, detaching the clinging arm of the siren from about his neck, he leapt lightly on Typhoon, his war-horse. The day was crisp and brightly cold--exhilarating--the sky cloudless, as he galloped towards the hills. In the frosty reviving air of the mountains the vengeful shades were exorcised; Koshiu and Kennui and their baleful family lingered behind in the plains, and stretch forth in vain their talons. The ghosts faded into thin vapour--nightmare was shaken off--No-Kami felt ten years younger than yesterday. A fig for the farmer and his curse! The tyrant of Japan must have been sick indeed to have shivered under a peasant's puling!

Of a surety a signal change had come over my lord. Peradventure there was to be an alteration in the mind as well as the body--greater miracles have come to pass. So mused Sampei--strangely relieved--while he watched the knot of horsemen as they wound upwards and over the sky-line. The gods grant it! O'Kikú also mused as she stood watching. My lord was better--that was a

comfort,--would prove to the trembling courtiers that they had reckoned wrongly. She had a secret for him on his return which should bind him yet closer to her. Meanwhile she could enjoy a time of absolute freedom, give vent to her proclivities, whilst narrowly watching the young General and his love, and weaving the web of her intrigues.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DESPOT OBEYS ORDERS.

The little cavalcade sped swiftly on, for the frost-bound roads were pleasant travelling, and towards evening a dim mass appeared on the horizon, which presaged a fall of snow. It behoved the Daimio and his escort to ascend the wild and rugged pass, and seek the sheltered plains, before the coming of the storm.

Yes, No-Kami was himself again. The eyes, like burning coals, no longer glared at him. The good horse Typhoon, idle too long, chafed under the bit, buffeted with his lord for mastery. A distempered dream, no more, one that was past and gone. Light of heart and jovially inclined, he gratified his taste for cruelty by lashing his steed into a fever. Even he, the horse, was aware how sick he had been--was mutinous and restive--needed a sharp lesson. The samurai, he remarked, were more familiar than of yore. There was a shade less of submission in their manner. One went so far as to bandy a broad jest, putting forth lips too close to his master's ear, upon which he received a smart blow upon the cheek, as a hint to keep his distance.

Their lord was himself again, and the warriors were glad. That he should be fooled by a wanton to their benefit was amusing for a while, but with satiety rose a feeling of disgust. The fascinating geisha's heart had room for too many occupants, and the warriors began to reflect some while since that, by betraying their lord in their society, she was shaming the house they served. As the charm of novelty waned, they began to see her as she was. Removed from the range of O'Kikú's orbs, the more sober among them grieved about that second marriage. As a dancing-girl--a passing fancy--O'Kikú was all that could be desired--but as a permanent second wife?--no. On the whole, even the mawkish chatelaine was less grievous as a mistress. Her sins were of omission only. Never by word or look had she disgraced the name she bore. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for the concubine.

My lord was himself again, and, being so, was desperately tetchy. This was untoward. Otherwise, a wary hint might have been thrown out by the trusted and war-beaten officer who rode beside him as to the reckless proceedings of his favourite. In the present condition of his temper, interference might produce explosion. Well, time is the best guide. If detained at Kiyôto, he might see some one he liked better, and forget O'Kikú, and then she could be relegated to a convent as lumber is removed to a godown.

The samurai were in high spirits, and noisy withal, and the Daimio observed with displeasing the effect of discipline relaxed. So soon as he returned home he would set his castle in order, he resolved,--suppress undue lawlessness,--check familiarity. When he returned? Would the nightmare crush him again--numbing his limbs, breaking his spirit? Surely not. Why should he ever return? Was he not lord of other castles? Could he not appropriate at will, with the strong hand of might, any stronghold that should take his fancy? Tsu could be left to O'Tei and to the goblins. Henceforth it was a hateful spot, recalling humiliation and pain. And then he mused about O'Kikú--entrancing little fairy! A pity she was unreasonably jealous, for all those stories about his wife and his brother were too absurd to be believed. Yet were they? What, after all, if the concubine were right, and Sampei's air of offended dignity a piece of clever masquerading? Had he, the chief, not seemed to detect something like commiseration on the bronzed features of his warriors? Why should they pity him? Perhaps they knew too well that, behind his back, his wife and brother held clandestine meetings. Of course, this must be it. Scales fell from his eyes, and he trembled with passion. His first wife was deceiving him, and with his brother! Hence their waning respect and covert pity. And, fool that he was, he had left the two together. Grinding his teeth, he twitched the rein so sharply that Typhoon, beflashed with foam, fell back upon his haunches. And then, in fitful mood, he laughed again. To Kiyôto first to tie up loosened strands, then back to Tsu with furtive speed! He would swoop upon both the guilty ones, catch them off their guard, and make of them an example for all time.

The peasants, scared out of their wits by the truculent bearing of the soldiery, betook them to the woods, and lurked in hiding till the enemy had passed. At the top of the mountain, just where the way is level, before dipping down through a thicket of wind-tossed pines, there stood a modest tea-house where my lord was wont to sleep on his journeys between his castle and the

capital. Here he resolved to stop as usual, and, after bathing, enjoy his dinner. The landlord and his daughters came smiling forth, and, clapping palms upon their thighs, knelt down and rapped foreheads on the floor. My lord was paler than his wont, observed mine host, with profuse sighing; and thin, which tore in twain the hearts of his loyal vassals; indeed they had heard that he was grievously sick--almost unto death. Had not my lord of Nara gone by recently and brought the evil tidings! One and all had wept, and offered prayers for his recovery. But my lord was young, and would speedily recover, thanks to the elasticity of youth. And so on, with many genuflections and drawings in of the breath; sibillations, and head-rappings; while No-Kami's face grew purple, and he growled a string of curses.

Nara dared--the insolent dotard!--he dared to spread reports among the people to the detriment of him, the Hojo! Sick unto death, forsooth! He burned to continue his journey forthwith, that the old schemer might be swiftly punished. Hark! What was that? A clatter of hoofs on the hard road. A betto, breathless, wearing the badge of Tsu. What had chanced? Not an accident to the fair O'Kikú? Anything but that. The anxiety of No-Kami caused the warriors to glance with grim meaning from one to another, and shake their heads. How infatuated was their lord with that brazen hussy! A lacquer box, bound with a red cord, containing a roll--a letter scrawled by the dear one. The darling faithful fairy was pining in the absence of her love! Retiring to the inner chamber, with its fine white mats, and gold ceiling painted with many fans, he proceeded to peruse the scroll. "He must not be angry with his little slave in that she perforce must write to him." (Angry! and with her? At home he might have snarled, but now time and distance were between them.) "She was not so well-disciplined, springing from the warm-hearted people, as my lady, the chill chatelaine." (No, in sooth! O'Tei would be long ere she despatched love-missives to her husband.) "She was silly enough to adore my lord so well that each moment out of his company was like a dagger-stab; and yet, *she had comfort in his absence!*"

Here was a mystery concerning which he must not be jealous, since the comfort of which she spoke would affect him as well as her. My lord must give way before her whim, and be patient, or if not patient, must hasten home the sooner, that the grand secret of joy might be divulged. Softened, he laid the paper down. He must be a brute indeed who hath not a tender spot in his ruggedness for one who so unselfishly adored! The guileless, silly child! What was the grand secret that was to be the harbinger of doubly-concentrated bliss? Stay! there was a postscript to the letter, and the Hojo scrunched its frail tissue in his palm. Under the green leaf lies the scorpion. "Since my lord went they are at ease, and the Abbess a shameless pander!" That was all, but it was enough to remove the sweetness from the rest,--the one drop of gall that could turn a whole dish sour.

At ease, were they! Not for long--not for long! Squatting on the mat, with a futon, or wadded quilt, about his shoulders, and his cold hands spread over the hibachi, where charcoal ashes distributed a mockery of warmth, No-Kami quivered now in every racked sinew. Did everybody unite to beard him? He was fallen so low as that! The prestige due to wholesome fear was paling. He had been too lenient. That pageant had somehow been a failure. Only just in time had he recovered from his illness. It was time to turn over a new leaf and coerce the rebellious and unruly with an increase of severity. A plague on the noisy soldiery! They were as insolent as all the rest. The world was out of gear. What hideous din was that in the outer chamber? Springing to his feet, the Daimio flung back in their grooves the paper-covered doors, and in a voice of thunder demanded the cause of the uproar. A disgraceful scene, in truth! The landlord, but now so smiling and obsequious, was tied and gagged. So were the plump girls, his daughters, whose bosoms heaved with terror-stricken sobs, while tears coursed down their cheeks, and their locks, though plastered thick with oil, were bereft of pins and ornaments.

What was the meaning of this? stammered their outraged lord, so soon as indignation permitted of speech. Sure they must be out of their senses! He had borne with their impudence upon the road,--their offensive, rollicking gait and vulgar swagger; but now they had gone too far, and should feel the weight of his displeasure. Were they samurai--faithful and obedient henchmen--or ronins--bandits? There had been more than enough quarrelling of late between the soldiers and the lower class. Landlord and maidens must be instantly released with full apologies, with substantial damages in the future, which should be extorted from the pay of the truculent and peccant braves.

The Hojo was awful in his indignation--a whirlwind! Sure the thunder-god looked like this while deafening with his gongs the firmament. The girls were set free with tardy sullenness, and cowered together, trembling; but the man who menaced the landlord clutched him still, with the point of a dirk at his throat, while he who was in command approached his lord with extreme humility, begging to be permitted to explain.

"We were toying with the maidens," he bluntly urged--"surely an appropriate amusement for soldiers--when one, too roughly pinched, perhaps, turned on the aggressor with a jibe. 'Take heed,' she shrieked, in shrill resentment at that which was only gallantry, 'lest you strutting fowls get your fine feathers clipped!' She would have said more, but her sire, in fear, clapped a hand upon her mouth, exhorting her to prudence. She had betrayed herself--uttered a dark threat, whose meaning it became us to learn. With the steel at his throat the man had made confession--and a pretty coil it was! The clans are gathering, he says; silently, by detachments, in the mountains, ready, at given signal to fall unawares upon my lord. That was why the Daimio of Nara deigned to visit us. He came to reconnoitre the ground, to see if we were prepared and vigilant. While we reposed in false security (this varlet hath confessed) the hostile daimios have

been summoning their men, have enrolled in their service paid auxiliaries; disbanded, wandering ronins; soldiers of fortune, ruffians. And this, as it seems (though one can scarce believe it), with the tacit consent both of the Holy Mikado and of the Shogun at Kamakura. This summons to Kiyōto is a snare, detected luckily in time. May it please my lord--pardoning the arrogance of his poor servant in advising--to take horse at once, and, riding quickly home prepare for danger. Finding their plot discovered, they will follow, striving, by myriads like locusts, to undo us. But the walls of Tsu are strong. Behind them we may laugh, secure."

Having made this long oration, the chief of the samurai bent down, touched with his lips the hem of my lord's hanging girdle, and then rising, with bowed neck awaited orders. A discovery indeed! When closeted with his child the crafty Nara had doubtless explained the plot, had held out the hope of freedom to the prisoner; and she, as consummate in dissimulation as her parent, had seen without a quiver of an eyelid her husband riding to his death. Perhaps Sampei knew also of it--of course he did. Ambitious for himself, a willing tool of Nara's! Faithless traitors all! O'Kikū was the only true one!

His brows knitted in deep concern, the Daimio waved his hand, and retired for a while to think. The suddenly-opened chasm that yawned before his feet completed the recovery of No-Kami. His wife, his brother, false. That was evident now. The adviser selected by his parent convicted of treason. Incensed Japan ready to rise as one to shake off a weakened despot. Nobody but himself to trust to; no arm but his own to succour him. Return with all speed to Tsu, and place that impregnable stronghold in a condition to endure a siege? Prudent advice enough; but what if the hovering ghosts should on his re-entrance there claim and clutch him for their own. Then would he be undone indeed. But the ghosts had ceased to worry. No-Kami thrilled with glee as he realised the imminence of his peril. How mistaken in their estimate they were of him who held them leashed. What! Catch a Hojo like a rat in a trap? Not they. Not all the united prowess of Japan should succeed in doing it, provided goblins were kept aloof from the contest. Return at once to Tsu. No! 'Twould be a sign of weakness. Instead of retiring, it behoved him to assume the offensive. He would invade the Mikado, as he had often done before, and cow with his scowl alone the poor timid array of hares. By the prestige of his name and the uncompromising power of his will he had held his own since the demise of his father and Tomoyé. It is a mistake for a despot to hide his frown too long. The past should be retrieved by a blow so heavy and unexpected that the hares, quaking with apprehension, would scuttle off without a sound.

Striding forth again from retirement, No-Kami issued orders so prompt and to the purpose that there was no gainsaying them.

The betto was to return to Tsu at the top of his speed, with private instructions to the officers as to increased watchfulness. This scroll he would deliver to Sampei, and instruct him, at the peril of his life without delay to join his brother at the capital. The letter was so sternly worded that he would perceive he had been betrayed,--that the head of his clan was aware of his perfidy, and he would accordingly throw up the game, confess, and sue for mercy.

The Daimio himself and his following would, after a few hours of repose, push on to Kiyōto. The rice of the men consumed, the horses fed, and a cup of saké all round, and then, away!

The landlord and his daughter; what of them?

The miserable peasant was quaking on the mat, groaning and wringing hands with incoherent supplications, deeply distressed in mind to think that through the blabbing of him and his the tyrant should have received timely warning.

To all posterity would their names go branded down, since but for their folly the bonds of their land would have been loosened. The girls, beside themselves with fear, crawled on hands and knees, imploring clemency.

Folding his arms, No-Kami looked down upon the supplicants, while his features were contracted by a spasm that might pass for a malignant grin.

"What of these?" he glowered. "Slash the father's throat; 'tis given to garrulity and chattering. The girls? Serve them as you will. What have I to do with vermin?"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MIKADO DOES BUSINESS.

Since the return of Nara from his mysterious excursion, the interior of the sad prison-house of the Mikado was quite lively. The kneeling kugés chirruped like birds; their tall black headdresses waved and nodded like sable plumes in the wind. Excitement being contagious, the un-elect, who might not step within the sacred halls, laughed too and gabbled on the outer verandahs, showing their white teeth, and gossiping hopefully. They wist not why they were so light of heart; but if the privileged denizens of the lugubrious dwelling, usually so glum, were gay, it meant that the Holy Mikado was well pleased; and if the Fountain of Honour was content, it was clearly the duty of them, his lowly faithful ones, to vie one with another in sympathy.

After that terrible interview when he was publicly insulted before his court, the miserable Mikado retired into darkness, declining to emerge or to be comforted. He vowed that the three deposed Emperors who were mumbling prayers in remote monasteries were far better off than he, for they at any rate were left in peace, so long as they submitted quietly, and were pitied as well as loved by the Empire. The actual Emperor, so long as he seemed to reign, was held responsible for what was done, and he, unfortunately for himself, was of a conscientious turn of mind. The peasant man who, alas, too trusting, had confided himself to the safe keeping of the Holy One, had been torn from sanctuary, ignominiously executed, together with his innocent family, and the Fountain of Honour was aware that in the eyes of the people he must be a willing accomplice, or else the meanest of puppets. His conscience was torn by pincers. He ought somehow to have saved that family. Humiliation and shame gnawed into his vitals, as rusty gyves into the wrists. No slavery, he declared, while he crouched in his dark chamber, with drops of sweat upon his brow, could possibly be worse than his. A change of masters, if master he must have, would be for the better, since his plight could not be altered for the worse. Not the lowest coolie,--the meanest Eta in his dominions, was of less account than he. If all these chattering kugés, who prostrated themselves so humbly, drawing in breath like humming insects, professing profound devotion, would only do something practical, then would he, the Fountain, sparkle with gratitude, and profusely distribute benedictions.

Nara was a provoking person. Wise as an owl in aspect, his wisdom was much an imposture as that of the sapient bird. As usual he exhorted to patience, droned platitudes through his nose. The friends of that much-tried individual on a dunghill, whom Christians had been heard to prate about, were no more exasperating. When the octopus holds you with his tentacles in fell embrace, you must summon all your strength in a supreme effort to tear him piecemeal. A series of small struggles are mere waste of tissue. The Hojo, as all within the holy prison house were painfully aware, was a portentous octopus, more awful than any of the forbidding monsters, with arms of five feet and more, that are to be seen any day in the fish-market.

Those who would measure lances with him must be cautious--very cautious. Perhaps, looking back on history, the Fountain might remember Yoriyé, son of Yoritomo the Great, who, banished to the temple of Idzu, was compelled to shave off his hair. Objecting, he rebelled, and, to the general dismay, was found strangled one morning in his bath. The present Fountain was young and impetuous, a boy, and ignorant, and must learn to smile and wait--to smile and smile--and *strike!* That he should have resolved on a change at any cost, was well. His trusty lords would beat about and see what was to be done. Doth not the ratcatcher's cat hide her claws?--to serve her end perform miracles? With the stirring of the wind the heron rises from the stream. A little faith, and patience.

It was fortunate for the conspirators, headed by Nara, that after his deplorable exhibition of cruelty at Tsu the tyrant should remain quiescent. The snake, for the moment gorged, was comatose. Taking advantage of his absence and inaction, the Daimio of Nara threw his spies broadcast over the land--sent letters to absent magnates inviting them to unite and march for the emancipation of their lord from serfdom. He even sent privately to the Shogun at Kamakura, declaring that if any one was despot in future it should be he, since, by virtue of his post, he was the first General of the Empire, the legitimate leader of her armies. If the Hojo had been at Kiýoto, and awake, these proceedings would have been at once detected, and crushed with an iron hand. Why was he so quiet in his distant castle?

When the message from Masago arrived, declaring that the Daimio of Tsu was sinking into lowest debauchery, willing victim of a harlot, Nara thanked the gods, and rushed to his imperial master. The other item in the communication--concerning the position of his own daughter--was a trifle. She also must practise patience. She would be amply avenged for present torment at the same time as the Holy Mikado. Was not this grand news, well worth a little waiting--a little suffering? Had he not been right--he, the hoary one, the sage, the experienced, the prudent? They had waited, and the moment was at hand. In exultant joy he flung himself headlong on the mat, and embraced his master's feet.

Of course the latter was glad that evil should befall his tyrant; but Nara was always more glib with tongue than sword. A little patience, quotha. For patience the times were out of joint. A little action now. Answers arrived from east and west, from north and south--some bellicose and ardent, some timid and time-serving. The Fountain of Honour deigned to come out of darkness like a snail out of its shell; but as he lay supported on his hand in the centre of the floor, his mien was so troubled, his young brow so puckered and scowling, that the kugés squatting around in a circle sat wistful, with heads on one side--motionless. For hours and hours he remained as inanimate as they--lost in gloomy thoughts and dumb abstraction. The prospect was too halcyon. The tyrant, firm in the toils of a low woman, might become sodden and besotted. What of the other--no less than he a Hojo--the idol of the army, bravest of the brave? The soul of loyalty (or

his face belied him), he would stand by his brother, a tower of strength in an emergency.

Plausible and garrulous and self-deceiving as old men are wont to be, Nara had been quite wrong in his estimate of General Sampei. He, the General, had appeared distressed at the proceedings of his feudal superior. And yet could it be denied that he had calmly attended and approved that shocking massacre--had stood by with hands before him while infants were slaughtered--had remained on the premises ever since, perfectly composed and comfortable? His face was a lying mask then. He was as bad, every bit, as his brother--as much to be feared and hated; for since it was clear that he approved his acts, he would, of course, stand by him to the death.

Nara rubbed his chin, and whilst confessing that that much of the problem was at present not quite so clear as was desirable, stoutly declared that if the distant chiefs could succeed in quietly gathering their adherents, and, unsuspected, mass them within distance of the capital the desired end would be attained, Sampei or no Sampei. The Hojo must be lulled in false security, and awake to a sense of danger only in time to perish. In order to reconnoitre the ground, he, the veteran, would stir his old bones and pay a visit to his son-in-law. There would be naught in this to raise suspicion, for what could be more natural than that a fond parent should make a pilgrimage to visit his only child?

He went, as we have seen, and in due course returned, so jubilant and radiant that even his glum master perforce believed in him. Their prayers were heard. The gods were sick of tyranny. The despot, blindfold, was marching to his fate. His foot was on the edge of the abyss. As the Fountain of Honour in his inspired wisdom had pointed out, Sampei was loyal to his chief, so far, but he was evidently full of disgust, uncertain what he ought to do, harried and worried, wretched. The citadel was more than half undermined already. He, the brilliant general, soldier to his finger nails, moved in a centre of undisciplined debauchery; listless, unshocked, uninterested. Why, a handful of ronins could take and sack in a trice the castle once deemed impregnable! The guards were wrapped in drunken sleep, the sentinels, absent from their posts, were engaged in uproarious wassail. Not a peasant for miles around but would hail with joyous relief the advent of a new master; not a farmer or artizan but, with full faith in Koshu's dying words, would look on No-Kami's downfall as retribution heaven-born. Nothing would be easier than, guided by peasants, to march trusty troops by night through the mountain defiles and take the castle by surprise. Sampei, half-hearted as he was, and preternaturally listless, would acquiesce in the inevitable (would be only too glad to do so), and, his brother slain--no longer tied by fealty--would appear in his true colours. In the absence of their hereditary chief, the braves of Tsu would lose their heads, throw down their arms. For the stronghold must fall in the absence of the Hojo, or the prestige that hung around his dignity might save him after all. Just see how cautiously and well-prepared were the plans of the veteran counsellor. Hojo must be summoned to Kiyo to on some business; then sent back with a reproof, to fall into a skilfully-set trap. Admitted within the walls that were once his own--but which would have surrendered in his absence--he could be seized and bound, and, in this plight, covered with the green net of dishonour, be exhibited before awed crowds, as a sermon against vaulting ambition.

So fluent was the old man, so completely self-convinced, that the Mikado revived and sat up, while the eyes of the circle of kugés goggled in their heads with mingled admiration and alarm. No-Kami, as we have seen, was sent for in peremptory fashion. The Fountain suggested timidly that this was rash, perhaps; and then old Nara laughed loud and long and savagely.

"Time was, O Holy One!" he cried, with wagging headpiece, "when 'twas I who prated of prudence. Now I say be brave! There is naught to fear: his claws are cut. I have looked on him! There is terror in his bloodshot eyes, dread in his shaking hands and shuffling footsteps. The dying farmer called down a curse, and it works visibly, for his confidence in himself has gone--his belief in a lucky star!"

All this was vastly refreshing to the inhabitants of the palace, accustomed as they were to groaning. The Mikado, with mind at ease, sat on his lacquered chair within the white-curtained tent, and gave audience to all and sundry. The weather was bitterly cold.

A cutting wind blew down from the hills, sheeted last night with snow. Nevertheless, so benignantly disposed was he, that the Fountain of Honour ordered the shutters of the Great Hall to be removed, that those without might see him, and fall in ecstasy upon their faces. With a hibachi of fine bronze before him, clad in wadded robes with seven linings, his wizened visage was cut clear against the background by the towering black gauze leaf that he only of mortals was permitted to wear erect. Despite his wadding and his charcoal he was chilly; but what matters that when the heart is warm, the spirits high? The moment of triumph was approaching when he would claim an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth--exact a cry of pain for each that himself had uttered. Since the despot was already so stricken by outraged Buddha as to be spiritless, he, the Fountain, would improve the occasion when the culprit arrived, in order that all might perceive and applaud the seasonable resumption of his free will and dignity. Openly now he discussed with assembled kugés each succeeding step. Troops were already moving silently, under cover of the dark, towards the castle. Others were approaching from afar in the direction of the central rendezvous. On the arrival of the culprit--news had already been received of his starting--he should be solemnly arraigned and admonished, then banished in disgrace to his lands at Tsu. There he would fall into the snare, be brought back with every mark of insult and ignominy to the capital--and then--and then! What was to happen after that was too delicious to

be too promptly settled. It was a morsel to be turned over and over on the tongue, not swallowed with a gulp.

Both Fountain and attendant kugés were never weary now of discussing "what then?" Of course, the last thing of all was to be harakiri. This means of final exit he could justly claim by right of name and lineage. But before the final tragedy there might, if skilfully thought out, be endless shades of moral torture; and the kugés, squatting in a row, crumpled their foreheads and stared at the gold ceiling in the delightful travail of conception. Every one had an idea which required to be examined and considered, sifted, accepted, or rejected. Meanwhile the Fountain dribbled out wisdom, encouraged brains to nimbleness, distributed applause. One of the nobles had an inspiration, whereon all his fellows cackled. There was a punishment that none had endured for years, but which might be revived with advantage for the behoof of the fallen Hojo. In a public place, before the assembled populace, a series of the lowest and dirtiest Etas were to be placed in a long line, with straddled legs, and under the arcade thus formed--a pilgrimage of consummate degradation--the humbled noble, on hands and knees, was to be condemned to crawl. An admirable suggestion! Traitorous nobles condemned to this ordeal had been known to die from very shame--their soul crushed out of them, ere half the journey was accomplished. Sure the proud-stomached Hojo would not survive, and thus would go out of the world deprived of the honour of harakiri.

The Mikado, enchanted, could conjure up the scene. He longed for the moment to arrive when the culprit, erst so domineering, would shuffle in, nervous and unstrung. A new and charming sensation this to one who was wont himself to quiver. Yes, he longed for the moment, but the wretch should not be admitted at once. Certainly not. He should be shown his place; he who had ridden roughshod should be kept waiting in an ante-room. He----Hark! what sound was that? Rapid and dreadfully familiar? Could it indeed be? A footfall, too well known, was creaking quickly along the bare boards of the corridor. Shuffling, forsooth! it was as brisk and elastic as of yore. With a glance of dismayed reproach the Mikado turned to Nara, then concealed behind a fan his burning face. Nara frowned, surprised. The crouching kugés twittered.

Mice gambol when their hereditary foe is slumbering; then, when the green gleaming eyes reopen, scuffle into holes. For these poor mice there were no holes. The footstep was crunching--crunching on their hearts. Though it approached more near, more near, with dreadful swiftness, they might not move, since no shelter was at hand, and they had not wings to fly. Alack! with idle presumption they had uncorked a bottle, and out had popped a gin that spread his bat's pinions over the sky with stifling sulphurous stench.

Dread in his shaking hand indeed! Oh, Nara! Nara! Peeping nervously between his fan-sticks, as the commanding figure that he knew too well darkened the doorway, the Fountain of Honour perceived a threatening outline in which there was no sign of decadence. As with hand lightly poised on hip, and proud head raised, the Hojo strode into the Presence, the Mikado marked that he was pale and thin, but his eye, if bloodshot, was piercing as ever--fierce as the untamed eagle's. That Nara, who boasted of experience and acumen, should be so grievously taken in. Well, well! it was all the fault of that old fool. The embroglio was of his making; it must be for him to get them out of the hobble.

But Nara, save for a deepening line between the brows, and teeth that bit the lip, seemed unaware of the apparition. Red and wrinkled lids blinked over glazed eyes which stared stonily into space from under a white and shaggy penthouse. The Daimio of Tsu, erect and menacing, glanced slowly down at the assembled lords, who, with bent backs, were contemplating the floor--then at the fan and bundle of silks which concealed the Fountain of Honour--then at the crowd without, who stood with craned necks on the verandahs, or grouped about the garden. From between his fan-sticks the Mikado followed the motions of the despot with increasing trepidation.

If only he dared to command the closing of the doors--but his tongue refused its office. Instinct told him that the cup of disgrace was again to be presented to his lips, and that it would be more bitter than ever to the taste. How hard was fate! Every one of the court circle--hatamotos, lords, knights, dependants--was to witness the unpleasing ceremony.

As the Daimio stood quietly glancing round without a word, the silence became each second less endurable. By bearing and power of eye, combined with an eloquent past, the tyrant held them cowed. Insolent! He had presumed to appear in the presence in ordinary garb,--had not deigned to don the *Uye-no-Bakama*; or the regulation white silk shirt, or *Ō Katabira*. And the attitude of the courtiers, too! A pack of grovelling cowards! fine weather friends. A minute since they were gabbling, one against another, of future deeds of prowess--of dazzling achievements; now not one among the startled herd had courage to sacrifice himself--to save his lord from the dilemma. Piteously the Mikado looked at Nara, who made no response; then--since it was absolutely essential that some one should break the silence--he closed his fan and whispered meekly,--

"Lord Hojo, you are welcome."

No-Kami smiled, and remarked shortly,--

"Very welcome, doubtless. As I came hither I heard a sound of mirth--now all sit mumchance. Had I not received a special summons, I should have deemed I had intruded."

The smile and accents of studied courtesy were more galling than rude speech, to which all were well accustomed. 'Twas as when a tamer of animals flicks them playfully with a wand. They are too docile to need whipping, yet, pending possible contingencies, 'tis wholesome that they should receive a tap.

Suddenly dropping the tone of banter, the Daimio strode nearer to his master, and sternly said,--

"May I know why I was summoned? No matter. I have come, and, being here, will ask a question. We are at peace, I think. During the weeks of my retirement I have heard no news of war. Why, then, a stir of arms,--a movement of troops,--marching, countermarching in the night? What is the subject of offence?--is it with China or Corea?"

The sinister eye of No-Kami fell upon Nara, who calmly responded,--"I know nothing."

"You lie!" retorted the Hojo fiercely. "Oh, base and double-faced and craven! False and deceitful is the blood of Nara--rotten is stock and branch! You and your daughter are alike."

Without changing his attitude one tittle, the old man slightly raised his brows.

"My daughter!" he said, with exceeding calm. "Forbear to breathe her name. You have broken her heart; driven her to the gate of Death. I ought to have known that none but a savage was a fit mate for Hojo."

"Pretty innocent!" sneered No-Kami, lashing himself to frenzy as he advanced towards Nara, hand raised as if to smite. "Know that your pure white blossom is my brother's paramour!"

A flush passed over the grim features of the old Daimio, then left them pale. His master nervously scanned the kugés, whose heads were bent lower than ever. From no quarter was there succour against this octopus. The Mikado fairly jumped in his seat when No-Kami spoke again.

"You, boy," he said, "see to this matter of the troops. They were summoned without your knowledge, I am willing to believe, by others, who never troubled to consult one so feeble. Or shall I, since you have called me to your side, undertake to relieve you of the task? Letters shall be despatched forthwith to the effect that 'twas a false alarm, bred of mischief and malice,--that the ronins may be disbanded, the men returned to their homes. I shall remain for the present at the Golden House, ready with my humble service when required. With you and yours, my lord, I will settle later."

With a show of exaggerated humility, which was worse than knife-stabs, and a glare at Nara, the despot departed as he came, leaving in his wake, as he scrunched away, a trail of terror and discomfiture. The sliding doors were closed in haste. For a while, the assembly remained frozen, then the unhappy Mikado heaved a deep sigh, which was met by a flutter of moaning. He was gone for the present, that was a small mercy; but then he might return at any moment, abusive and vindictive instead of caustic. The shuffling step and trembling hand. Oh, Nara, Nara! Broken reed, false friend; vain, impotent wind-bag; purblind, blustering dotard!

Gushing with torrents of weak tears, the Fountain relieved his pent-up anguish with trickling reproaches and sobs, to which the old Daimio listened gloomily. No doubt, he had been wrong in some measure, he admitted with hesitation, for so rapid a recovery had never entered into the complex web of his calculations. Perchance it was but the bright temporary flicker of the expiring lamp. The Fountain of Honour must not be too severe on his aged servant. Had he not kept his temper under grievous provocation, blows would have been exchanged in the holy presence, imperial prestige in the eyes of the whole court would have been lowered.

"Rubbish! A paltry excuse! Why, as he stood there, did none of you rid me of him?" groaned the Fountain, whereupon the abject circle groaned in echo.

"Of a truth, some one should have done it," bleated one; but surprise, after what they had heard, unnerved each arm; and, indeed, the Hojo was a terrible person, an ogre to terrify the doughtiest.

"Bluster and cowardice are sisters!" continued the lamenting Mikado. He could never trust any of them any more--never, never--the cravens! His chains, heavy and numbing, were riveted with adamantine links! and so forth--with a chorus of bleating.

When you know that you have done your best,--that but for some one unforeseen and ineradicable speck your carefully-wrought blade would be faultless, a shimmering masterpiece--it is vastly vexatious for people whom you despise, although they wear the aureole, to go on ungenerously drivelling anent that one undeniable blemish. Nara, as he said, had endured a great deal at the hard hand of Hojo, but to sit calmly any longer under the futile reproaches of the Holy One was beyond his stock of that patience he was so fond of recommending to others.

Moreover, is not the putting aside of what is past and unpleasant a principle approved of by sages? What is done is done. Even after the late scene, wherein a brutal keeper disported himself among his animals, and departed triumphing, all was not lost, The Fountain had been compelled

to imbibe another sip of a nauseous draught with which he was so familiar, that surely it did not signify, at any rate, it should be the last His faithful Nara promised it. How the never-sufficiently-to-be-accursed Hojo had ever discovered the approaching advent of cohorts was a puzzle. But the cohorts were near by this time, and they must even make an open stand against the tyrant, since the scheme of treachery had failed. He, the domineering Hojo, would write angry and imperious letters to the approaching daimios, bidding them begone; but in the name of the Holy One letters could also be sent--secretly, of course--exhorting them to ride all the quicker, since the situation had become acute.

"I will gird my old sword again, despite my many winters," Nara concluded pompously. "Dost think that because my hair is white my heart is frozen? Under the snows of Shirané-San and Asama-Yama smoulder the hidden fires. This man's father has immured three Emperors, and he himself is preparing to depose a fourth. He has insulted me, and broken my daughter's heart. A little craft--a very little more--and the crest of the despot is laid low."

The hapless Mikado suffocated. Tears of impotent wrath welled from his august eyelids. Cowardice and bluster to the end, and broken reeds to lean on, while he drained the nauseous cup! Verily the banished Emperors were to be envied. The young man rose, and retired to his inner chamber, and lay prone with moans in darkness.

CHAPTER XV.

WILL BUDDHA SPEAK?

Meanwhile affairs at Tsu were not prospering. Sampei, tossed like a shuttlecock, formed, as usual, a dozen resolutions daily, and broke them all. At one moment he was for the flight of O'Tei from the doomed castle--become now a hell of untrammelled debauchery--and her installation with his mother at the temple. There she would be in sanctuary, whence even her husband durst not wrest her. But then what a triumph for O'Kikú! He felt that O'Tei would never consent to a step which would be a tacit admission of defeat, for she was a Nara of pure blood, with all the pride of her race. No. She must stop where she was, and await the unrolling of events; and yet what a life was hers, compelled to remain much in her bower, lest she should be insulted by O'Kikú or the braves. As Nara hoped, the evil germ was working inwardly. A regret rose within the mind of Sampei which scorched and blackened it. Is a faithful clansman and an honest man ever justified in turning on his chief? Before there was no question of it: now he was in more than doubt. May a brother ever be pardoned for taking his brother's life? Cases of fratricide were common enough, as Nara had hinted--there were precedents galore--but then the ruling feature of Sampei's character had always been loyal honesty. The gods in their wisdom had set over him certain superiors. What would be said to him when the end came, and accounts were totted up upon the abacus, if he had rebelled? Buddha, frowning, would demand to know how he dared move out of his place, arrogantly assuming to be the wiser.

His first duty was to the head of his house: surely there should be no doubt whatever about that. But what if another urgent duty had been imposed by his heart--an imperative duty, clashing with the first? There lay the rub, a problem beyond the solving of the simple General. And since the shocking suggestion had been spread by the wily geisha that there were unholy bonds 'twixt him and her whom it was only too plain he loved, the situation had become so strained as to fill him with foreboding and dismay. To save her fair fame ought he indeed to go? To leave her a helpless waif on this whirlpool of black wickedness was out of the question. And yet how was she benefited by his staying, since he dared not approach without compromising her? So miserable did the poor man feel, racked and torn by a difficulty with which he was incapable of coping, that the light was dark to him, his heart stone cold. He knew himself as weak as she, a ball at the foot of Fate; and so he wandered aimless and disconsolate, hearing and seeing nothing, caring not what befell, waiting--as the rudderless do--to see what would happen next.

Oh, heart of man, centre of suffering! When one is said to be heartless, 'tis looked upon as a reproach, instead of a matter for gratulation! The heart of man! 'Tis barely enough for a kite's dinner, yet the whole world is not sufficiently large to satisfy its lust, its greed, its ambition--and how it suffers!

When he sailed so blythely for Corea with his enthusiastic army, how halcyon was the world to Sampei; what wonders he was going to perform; what a career of ambition was before him. And now, ambition was dead. Life had become Endurance. His candid spirit was warped by suspicion. He, once so open and trustful, saw in everything a hidden meaning; in every event an occult snare.

In due course the betto brought him the letter of his chief, and he smiled with pitying derision. Was he to be taken in so easily? Had he not seen the betto ride off with the missive of O'Kikú? Had he not heard the woman herself urging the servant to speed? A puerile trick. The letter had counselled the infatuated Daimio to remove his brother from her path, that O'Tei, left unprotected and alone, might lie at her mercy. What other reason could there be for so sudden a summons to Kiyoto? With disdain he tore the letter up, resolved more firmly than ever to stick to his post, to carry out his mission to the end. When my lord should return, there would be time enough for explanations. They were burning to be rid of O'Tei--the guilty couple. From this crowning sin, at least, Sampei would save his brother.

It required no little resolution unblenchingly to follow the straight but rugged path. O'Kikú smarted more than ever under his cold and implacable disdain. All her arts were useless. Maddened, she strove to pique him by excesses of abandonment under his very nose, and was convulsed by fits of corroding acrimony to discover how futile were her efforts. Against all her attacks he was armed *cap-à-pié*. If my lord would but return, that she might wreak venomous spite upon these two, whom now with her whole soul she hated! Meanwhile the only result produced by her reckless behaviour was that the samurai, for the most part, disapproved of her more and more; while Sampei, to shun the sight of one so odious, devoted himself to excursions and the chase.

Away upon the hill, with its temple and solemn arcades of greenery, as in the hum of the houses below, the cloud of anxiety was thickening.

The still dim shrine no longer lulled to devout prayer the soul of Masago. In the midst of supplication her mind turned worldwards. She yearned over her son and the tottering family. She grieved so for O'Tei, when the chatelaine arrived for prayers, that her hard face grew wondrous soft, and she marvelled at the stoniness of destiny. Seeing now with clearer ken than in the past, when she had admired the warlike Tomoyé, adored her rude lord, had almost persuaded herself to believe that all that he did was good, she began to have a dented perception of his crimes, mingled with a startled regret. He had been guilty of much that was deplorable. No-Kami had been brought up in his father's school, had from the first gone lengths that were much more regrettable, to end in deeds which she preferred not to contemplate. He deserved to be accursed, and was accursed. Our sins, like sable ravens, return to roost. Ever since the culminating crime, events had moved so directly towards a visible goal that the finger of fate was plain. But why Sampei? Why the fair and good O'Tei, a symbol of all that was pure? These questions, so bewildering, would rise persistently to the surface. Why should these two, mixed up in this horror, without overt act of theirs, be marched as victims to the sacrifice?

She had heard from Sampei that my lord had rallied suddenly before he went to Kiyoto, and this started a fresh train of thought. O'Kikú, the baleful geisha, was at the bottom of all the trouble. She had suddenly appeared, emissary of devils, on the fatal day, and ever since had been a scourge. Thanks to an inspiration from above, the Abbess had been the means of separating my lord from his concubine. Oh, what if, Heaven relenting, the separation might become final--No-Kami himself reformed? The soul of Masago gave a great leap. Yes, she saw light at last--the light for which she had besought so fervently. *She* was to be the humble means of unravelling the tangle, of saving the family honour.

But how was this to be accomplished? With trepidation she remembered that she was in her sixty-first year, which, as all the world knows, is the last of the yaku doshi, or evil years, after which a woman may be at peace. During her thirty-third and forty-second (the other yaku-doshi--happily passed) she had been very careful lest, tempted by Ratatzu, she should be capable of something dreadful, that would ruin her and hers. And now it was terrible to think that in this last year of ordeal--the one of a long life which was most beset with brambles--she was called upon to act with decision, to stand forth for the succour of the innocent, for the shriving and salvation of the guilty. This state of things would call for much vigil, much putting off of earth-trammels, and adoration of the sun-god at his rising, that her old eyes might clearly see.

The more she pondered--a slow, tall figure pacing among the moss-grown tombs, under the stately criptomeras--the more plain her duty seemed. Thanks to the benign deities, her prayers for light were answered, and she saw. It was by Heaven's decree that the geisha had travelled hitherward, an agent for the fulfilling of a purpose pre-ordained. Buddha, with omniscient vision, had caused her to come to Tsu for the accomplishment of the curse of the martyr. But now, through the prayers and entreaties of his humble handmaid, he had relented,--been turned from his intent. What a scaffold was the Abbess raising. When No-Kami should come back, his evil genius would be gone. This favour granted, Buddha would vouchsafe another. By force of supplication Masago would obtain that the temper of the Hojo might be changed. He would repent him of his evil ways, and atone in the future for the past. Then it should be her proud privilege to bring together again the husband and the wife. O'Tei must be taught to forgive, to break down the barrier of ice behind which her better nature had been shrouded. Warming in the radiance of a new happiness her frozen petals would unfold, give forth their sweetness, and No-Kami would come to know the treasure that he had ignorantly tossed aside. The wan cheek of the old Abbess was flushed, her dimmed eyes sparkled, as she revolved these things, devoutly giving thanks to Heaven. Is it not the greatest joy that may be tasted by mortals--the permission to intervene in the house of discord, and bring to it peace and happiness? The end was plain to the prophetic vision of Masago, but the way to it was long. The gentle O'Tei would be brought with little trouble to play her part.

The difficulty lay with the geisha. The Abbess, mindful of yaku doshi, resolved to be prudent and cautious--not precipitate; and yet, whatever had to be done must be done before the return of No-Kami to the castle. There was not time then for protracted cogitation. She would appeal in person to the siren,--speak words inspired from on high which should touch her flinty heart. Seizing her staff, the gaunt figure in its flowing draperies of crape descended the long flight of stairs, passed under the torii at the bottom, and strode, buoyed by celestial fervour, along the winding street which led to the castle gate. O'Kikú was in a boat upon the river---O'Tei's own favourite shallop, which she had robbed her of, as of other things--and marvelled greatly to behold the Abbess of the temple beckoning to her from the shore.

Approaching, she reclined idly at the bottom of the boat, toying with some winter blossoms she had plucked; dipping, in saucy contempt of cold, the fingers of the other hand into the running water. She was muffled in a robe of furs, her head swathed in a kerchief of thick silk; and Masago remarked that she looked worn,--had lost that freshness which had been her most piquant charm. Earnestly the Abbess spoke; pleaded for the family honour on the verge of wreck; discoursed with proud eloquence of the illustrious house of which she was a lowly member; reminded her hearer that she, O'Kikú, also now was one of the house, in precisely the same position as she, the speaker, had been. There were two ways open to her. Lest she should bring upon herself the reproach of having brought a great family to ruin, she must turn over a new leaf, and eschew in future the vices for which she was notorious; or, if waywardness was in her blood, she must depart, and by self-sacrifice atone for the past, and save the family. Amused with the thought that the Abbess must be mad, the geisha lay listening, a sly smile playing about her lips, until the unlucky pleader began to talk about her son. Then starting, as if bitten by an adder, uprose the concubine, and, taking up the pole, leisurely pushed off from the bank.

"Sampei, forsooth! A ridiculous old lunatic!" she scoffed, with a superb head-toss. "You must be very insane. What! You'd have me go hence and prison myself for the behoof of the pale idiot yonder? Even if I were myself mad enough to consent, my lord would never love her. The contemptible creature is barren; whereas I, the second wife--" and with a trail of mocking merriment, and an attempt to raise a blush, she smiled at the astounded Abbess, and propelled her bark into the stream.

Masago remained standing, her tall figure mirrored in the water, her shrunken hands crossed upon her breast, amazed and troubled. What was this new factor in the embroglio? She was with child--the interloper. There would soon be a new bond, a fresh silver link to unite more closely the pair whom she was bound to separate. The woman's influence over my lord would be greater than ever; and, all for evil as of yore. The breach between No-Kami and O'Tei would grow wider. As in a dream--with slow gait and corrugated brow--the Abbess passed back towards the grove, heedless of the salutations of the peasants,--of the brown urchins that plucked at her skirts. A child--a son, perhaps--that woman's son! Swiftly there passed through her brain a sense of the results that would accrue. The wife, ambitious and unscrupulous, who was a mother, would become all-powerful. Fresh insults would day by day be heaped on the one who was not thus blessed among women. In her mind's eye Masago beheld a long train of disasters and calamities, O'Kikú the active agent. Crouched down before the altar, her chin supported by her palms, she gazed at the bronze symbol that sat so calm and still and upright, with mouth shut and eyelids closed.

"Oh, if you would vouchsafe to speak," she murmured imploringly, "one little word of guidance. One other ray of light; one little, little ray! During years of unflinching devotion has my life been given to your service. I know that I have earned nothing save, perhaps, one touch of pity!"

With sore and heavy heart the Abbess sighed, for the bronzed lips remained tight shut, the eyelids closed. He was asleep and deaf. There was no sound of comfort or of counsel.

Presently she distinguished the patter of clogs upon the outer stairs, and, after a while a man, pushing aside the curtain, stood framed in the doorway.

"Sampei!" Her boy! Was this the reply of Buddha? Ashy pale, trembling like a leaf, the old woman bent to the stones with moving lips; while the General, reverently doffing his geta, and beating his hands together, approached and knelt. She took his warm broad hand between her cold ones, and earnestly scrutinised his face. Her thoughts were in such a turmoil that, though she heard his words, they seemed to reach her ears from a distance, through a tunnel. Riding listlessly, as was his wont, with no settled purpose, he had been astonished to see the geisha in conference with his mother. What could those two have had to say to each other? Greatly marvelling, he had watched, and then turned his horse towards the temple. What ailed his mother, that her features were grey-green? Was she ill? She looked so scared and strange and terrified. Was it some ghost she saw that caused that look of awe?

Without taking her eyes from her son's, the Abbess rose, and like one in a trance led him behind the altar, down the open corridor, into her own quiet chamber. Nothing could be more simple than its furnishing. The woodwork was unadorned, but scrupulously clean, so were the mats and screens. A plain fire-box of iron stood in the centre. Above the low dais in the tokonoma, or place of honour, there hung a single and very ancient kakemono, representing Kwannon, the thousand-handed; and under it, upon the dais, stood in a lacquered sword-rack, a

dirk in its silken case.

Floating before Sampei she lifted the weapon, pressed it to her bosom, then slowly unfastening the case, drew forth the dirk, which, with a cry, he recognised. It was a precious blade, forged by Miochin himself, adorned with a hilt minutely worked with gold--a dirk which in childhood he had been wont to play with.

"My father's!" he murmured, and pressed it to his lips and forehead.

"Your father's!" echoed the Abbess, in a whisper, drawing herself to the full height of her commanding stature, and placing on the bent head of her son a trembling hand. "Your father, and *his*, wore yonder blade in many a fray, and it was never sullied with dishonour. To you, my dear son, do I surrender it. The gods have spoken. She must die!"

As pale as his mother, who looked on him now with a rapt and solemn smile, Sampei heaved a sigh of relief. *She*. His nerves tingled to his finger ends, for he had thought that the deed must be done which had so often crossed his mind, and which he had always put away from him with dread. It was not his brother--thanks to the gods for that--but the wicked concubine, whose blood was required in atonement.

Then the two sat down, and the inspired priestess spoke.

"The honour of the family was to be saved by him--Sampei. Buddha himself had deigned to settle it. He must bide his time, and wait and watch, and when occasion offered he must, with his father's dirk, slay the baleful sorceress. With his own hand must the deed be done--not be trusted to a hireling, even to a samurai. It might be some time before the fitting opportunity presented itself, for the braves, whom she still debauched, would defend her doubtless with their lives. There must not be too long delay, lest my lord No-Kami should come home. The avenging hand must be sure and steady; the result not a mere wound, but--death."

Nodding, Sampei placed the weapon in his obi, and, embracing his mother, departed with proud step. It was to be his privilege--by Buddha's own decree--to save the honour of the house,--to rescue his infatuated brother,--to bestow upon the dear O'Tei a measure of future happiness.

Masago, calm now, returned to the temple, and spent the night in vigil. Blessed be Buddha; for his mercy thrice-blessed! He had spoken through the silent lips. The course and conscience of his handmaid were clear as crystal now.

CHAPTER XVI.

MASAGO TAKES THE REINS.

Now it came to pass that after the mental torture she had endured, the soul-racking perplexities, the days of prayer and nights of vigil, the strong frame of the Abbess gave way under her burthen. She was deeply thankful for the god's decision,--that her prayers had been heard and answered. But her body was worn out--the lamp was burning low, and she was compelled to remain in her chamber, wrapped in many quilts, with Miné, hapless victim of unrequited love, in anxious attendance on her. That unfortunate maiden had never recovered the effect of the dreadful day,--the massacre of her dear ones,--her parents' departure, unforgiving. She moved about her sacred duties like a phantom, with remorse gnawing at her vitals. No need now to keep watch over her lest she should again fling herself into the reluctant arms of the too fascinating young General. He was no more to her seared heart than any other man, for it had lost all sense of feeling. It was scorched out of life on the day of the massacre, and she bore only its ashes in her breast.

Masago had sunk into that deep sleep which is the greatest boon to unhappy mortality, and Miné, bending over the hibachi, was stirring the charcoal with a rod, immersed in sad reflection, when there entered a certain bonze who enjoyed reputation as a doctor. He was a learned and a holy man, who dwelt in a monastery on the mountain,--was wise of counsel, and learned in the use of simples.

Hearing by chance that the venerated Abbess of Tsu was lying sick, he took his bundle, his lacquered medicine-box, and his staff; put on his tall clogs, and great mushroom priestly hat, and hied towards the convent. Sleep, he observed, after a brief survey, was a better anodyne than simples, and he would therefore await the waking. Warming his fingers: over the glow he chatted with Miné in undertones, exchanged the gossip of Tsu for the last reports from Kiôto, inquired of

what new atrocity my lord the Daimio had been guilty. Oh, yes; he was aware that my lord was away,--summoned to the capital; and added, with mysterious head-shakings, that a surprise was preparing for his return. "You should be pleased to hear of it," went on the good garrulous old gentleman, "after all that your family have suffered at his hands--'tis only fitting retribution;" and then, chattering in whispers, he proceeded to tell of soldiers' shadowy cohorts, who by night had marched past the monastery. "They are massing troops in all the defiles," he whispered. "Your father's anathema has taken effect. The race of the Hojos is run."

The bonze was so intent upon his tale, and so long-winded in the telling of it, that he, as well as his listener, forgot all about the patient. Though deep wrapt in slumber, she moved now and again uneasily, tossing from off a surcharged bosom the multitude of futons that covered it. Then gradually the sleep-goddess relaxed her embrace, folded her arms less closely, and she of dreams spread forth the shadow of her pinions. The Abbess dreamed a dreadful dream, offspring of trouble and of fever. She thought that her own lord was alive again,--that, covered with crimson stains streaming from many a wound, he stood over dead Tomoyé. Why was Tomoyé dead? In sober truth of history past and gone, it was she who had stood over him. There he stood, however, reeling from loss of blood, his favourite katana hacked and notched from the battle. Then there appeared the boy No-Kami, also gashed and wounded. To her, the sleeper, turned her revered lord, stretching forth imploring hands. "Save *him*," he hoarsely gasped. "My time and hers is come, and it is well; but he is on the threshold of his life!" She, the dreamer, could not save him, for she was bound herself with cords, the which perceiving, her lord looked down reproachfully, and died; and then from out a crystal brook there rose a silver form that clasped the boy, and his wounds closed,--a slim shimmering form, daughter of the moon, which, shaping itself out of argent vapour, became O'Tei the chatelaine.

Bedewed with sweat the old woman awoke, and for a space lay panting. What awful vision was this? All good Buddhists know that when we are asleep the soul goes forth upon its errands. If we waken a person too suddenly he will die, because the wanderer cannot return with needful quickness to his tenement. When the soul is merely out at play the dream is of no importance, and its pictures are rapidly effaced; but when the truant is on serious duty bent, the vision remains distinct, and it behoves us to accept its lesson. Waking, the portrayal of O'Tei closing No-Kami's wounds was as distinct as if the two were standing there before her; also the reproachful gaze of her dear lord ere he gave up his spirit. The gods were indeed good to speak so plainly to their handmaid. It was the honour of her dear lord's name that she desired saved at any cost, wishing for his son no ill. The geisha was to die, No-Kami to repent, and O'Tei was somehow to dissect the tangle. Masago found herself to-day more weak than usual, and much unhinged. Perchance her time was near. It behoved her to see the chatelaine, to reason with her while yet her voice was strong, her brain still clear. Then there rose upon her dimmed senses a sound of whispering, and she distinctly heard some one say, "The race of the Hojos is run."

The long moan which burst from her breast recalled the attention of the watchers. The bonze was full of solicitude,--grieved to perceive how fluttering was the patient's pulse,--vastly busy in the preparation of remedies. He could have bitten his tongue through for his imprudence. How could he have been such a fool as to forget that the patient was herself a Hojo, and that fevered sleep is treacherous? He chattered and chirruped to and fro, shot forth his most brilliant sallies, showed his teeth as he twanged bolts of merry satire at that unreceptive target Miné. The eyes of the old woman--smileless now--knit in intense inquiry, never left his face, while with feeble persistence she repeated the question,--"How are the Hojos doomed?"

Having committed one egregious error, he was not going to be guilty of another. Regardless of the severe course of penance which followed lying, he boldly averred that he had never mentioned Hojo at all, or the race,--that he was talking about the Daimio of Osaka, who was hovering on the verge of the grave,--that under no circumstances whatever would he have breathed a syllable about the Hojos in the presence of the late lord's wife. And twittering thus, he at length retired, with good wishes for the patient's recovery, glad that by wonderful presence of mind he had lulled the Abbess's suspicions.

But Masago knew better than to be hoodwinked by the plausible gabble of a blundering bonze. Out of delicacy she would refrain from cross-questioning Miné. Well, the warning was twofold. The Hojo was in imminent peril of some kind, from which apparently he was to be rescued by his wife.

For many hours she lay staring upwards in deep thought. The wintry light was quickly waning. Who might tell how near the peril was? Her own strength was ebbing rapidly. She must see the chatelaine at once.

The brief twilight of Japan was darkening over the bleak landscape like a sable veil, when a breathless messenger arrived at the drawbridge of the fortress, demanding an interview with the lady.

"With the lady!" jeered the soldier, who had been so long upon his watch as to be glad to chat with any one. "She has other things to do just now, our lady, than listen to beggars from the town. Was ever such a lady--so restless, so domineering, so devoted to pleasure--always seeking new excitement in the dreary absence of my lord? The moon rises late, and will be full to-night, and what must she do, dost think, heedless of her delicate situation, but go to the tea-house by the river, to gaze at the light upon the snow? 'Tis a lovely sight, no doubt, dear to the eyes of our

people, be they high or low,--the green glimmer on the water, the black banks of reeds, and white expanse beyond; but plaguey cold. Of course there will be supper when she returns, and singing and wassail and jollity, warming to the cockles of the heart. Ah, well! if such as I were admitted to the junketings, I'd not mind this weary watch."

"'Tis with the lady O'Tei that I must speak, and quickly," said the messenger.

The sentinel, leaning over the parapet, discerned by the conical shape of the speaker's hat that he was a priest.

"Oh!" he grumbled, "some wretched coolie sick? Such vermin as these don't come after the lady O'Kikú. You may come in and seek her, an you will. She's likely in her bower--we've not seen her this many a day."

As the priest sped with clattering clogs across the paved courtyards, he perceived that there was feasting toward. The interior of the great hall, brilliantly illumined, threw gay streaks of yellow out across the white. Servants moved to and fro, bearers of viands; the saké cup was already passing freely. By the principal entrance loomed the unwieldy mass of my lady's kago, gay with banners and streamers, and looped curtains and lacquered poles--the same gaudy equipage belonging to O'Tei which, on her arrival, the geisha in her insolence had appropriated to herself. Hard by, in groups, stamping and clapping hands for warmth, were the two sets of bearers--sturdy coolies selected for speed and staying power--each with his head muffled in blue cotton under his hat, his grass rain-coat bound round his waist, the handle of his sword carefully protected by oiled paper, strong sandals of straw upon his feet. Some were bringing wraps and cushions; some trimming paper lanterns; all shouting with the shrill distractive hubbub so dear to low-class Japan. The geisha he could see as he went by, was surrounded by her maidens and an outer circle of braves, armed ready to attend her. Muffled to the eyes in a thick mantle of deep maroon, she stood waiting till all was ready, a saké-cup in hand. Past this noisy assemblage to the remote corner of the tower which faced the river trotted the messenger. In vivid contrast to the hall, with its warm reek of heated wine, dark and silent was the bower of the chatelaine. Was she asleep already, the sad recluse?

Not so. There was a twinkling tiny light above, and like the hum of an insect there reached his ear the tinkle of a distant samisen. He knocked, and the sound ceased; a paper window was pushed aside; a maiden's head peeped forth.

"Who dares at this hour," she inquired angrily, "to intrude upon my lady's privacy? A pretty pass! Was not the castle large enough for its debauched inmates that this retired eyrie might not be treated with respect?"

"I come from Masago," the messenger said. "She is very sick, and has somewhat of grave import to say to the chatelaine."

Admitted, the priest followed the maiden to the upper floor, where, surrounded by books and embroidery, and choice blossoms and graceful nicknacks, sat, in a soft mellow light, she for whom the peasants sorrowed. Since last we looked on her, she was much changed--improved--for there was something celestial now---refined and dreamy, as if reflected from some other world--about her loveliness. Her manner had that still, self-contained, dignity which is only to be acquired through much trouble. With grieved concern in her dark eyes, she hearkened to the messenger. Masago on the verge of death! Was she, O'Tei, to be left friendless? Of course she would go to her at once. Ah, if she might change places with the holy Abbess, and depart out of a sphere where no one wanted her! But it is always those who have no wish to stay who are kept loitering here. Was Masago so ill, and she not told of it? This was wrong, for at any hour of the day or night she would have gladly sought her friend. Not a moment was to be lost. Quick, quick! Her litter. Her bearers, where were they? Wandering in the town, possibly, chattering in some tea-house, their daily duty over.

"There is a litter below," suggested the priest timidly. "The one that in old times my lady used to use. Its bearers are standing ready with lanterns lit. Perhaps my lady O'Kikú--"

A look of unusual sternness passed over the features of O'Tei, and a shadow veiled her eyes.

"O'Kikú!" she muttered, "O'Kikú! My state litter is ready, you say? Then I will use it; come!"

And to the amazement of the maidens, the chatelaine took from a screen a mantle of costly furs, and bidding her attendants follow with a candle, moved rapidly away down a dark corridor which led to the centre of the castle.

The geisha was so astonished at the apparition which suddenly presented itself before her that the saké-cup dropped from her fingers. She turned red and white, and tried, with but poor success, to laugh off her confusion. With heaving breast and dark brows knit, O'Tei looked down on her with disdain ineffable.

"You have ordered my kago. Thank you," she said shortly, "for I want it. Tell the bearers I am ready; and you, priest, proceed before. I go but to the temple, so shall not want the soldiers."

With that she moved with stately step to where, in a stream of light, the kago stood.

The braves were breathless, for they beheld the heiress of proud Nara now, no longer the recluse; and there was an easy air about her of natural command, which they knew how to admire and appreciate. Not one had a word to say against the firmly-expressed resolution of their liege-lady, but stood by sheepishly. O'Tei was the real chatelaine, and, in absence of her lord, supreme mistress of castle and of warriors. The bewitching O'Kikú, as if by magic, shrank down into her natural insignificance. No doubt about it; she was the concubine, low of birth and common of breeding--the crow by the side of the falcon. The geisha tingled with exasperated shame, for her quick instinct could read at a glance the open faces of the braves. Had she toiled and schemed and wormed and manoeuvred for this?--to be swept with a hand-wave like a beetle from the path by the rival she had so undervalued! Oh, when my lord returned, an effort must be made to save the situation! Clearing her husky throat, she said sourly,--

"I was about to view the snows by moonlight, but if yours is an urgent errand, I will gladly give up my litter. The weather is clear, but for a few sailing clouds; the moon will serve to-morrow."

Her foot upon the step, the chatelaine turned.

"I take my own, and crave of you no favour," she remarked haughtily. "To the temple, by way of the river bank. I myself will see the snows."

The scene had passed so swiftly that 'twas over as soon as begun. There was naught to tell the tale of the geisha's discomfiture but the shattered saké-cup. Yes, there was the absent kago, the marks of many feet where it had stood; the sheepish faces of the warriors. There was the group, too, of O'Tei's maidens huddled behind, where they chattered in high glee. The ambitious and presumptuous geisha had been put down into her place at last, firmly and quietly by her superior. That was the plain truth which there was no denying. It was written on the visages of the maidens as well as on those of the samurai. Accustomed to reign unchallenged, the blow was hard to bear. Bursting into a torrent of tears, brackish with impotent mortification, O'Kikú sank upon a cushion, and was as racked by sobs as if she had possessed a heart.

CHAPTER XVII.

UNDER THE MOON.

The road by way of the stream was a longer one than that by the street, for the river wound with many a turn and twist, as if loth to reach the sea. It was no more than a path, stony in some places and muddy in others--rough throughout; and there were spots where the unwieldy vehicle was in danger of overturning. The Japanese are so innately poetic that even the least educated find pleasure in gazing upon nature in its sweetest moods. On Lake Biwa, not far from Kiyôto, there is, while I write, a tea-house on a hill, which, at certain seasons, does a thriving trade, because from that particular spot an entrancing view may be obtained of moon and foliage and water. And it is not the cultured class alone that enjoys this refined amusement. The common horny-handed field coolie may be seen smoking his pipe, beaming with satisfaction, upon the mat, surrounded by wife and children, all equally enchanted by the spectacle.

On the river-bank, built out over the stream, not far from Tsu, there was just such another tea-house, from which a view was obtained of land-locked bay and rocks and feathery bamboo--the self-same picture which O'Tei used to enjoy from her own garden near the temple, seen from another point. It was to this tea-house that O'Kikú had proposed to conduct the rollicking samurai, to sit there a while with quip and jest, and thence return to supper. Preparations had been made on a grand scale; coolies had been sent to repair the path in rotten places with bundles of rushes, to clear away stones; and therefore the expedition was a matter of talk for several days before among those who dwelt in the castle. It was in obedience to a whim--in order more completely to crush her rival--that O'Tei had elected to choose this route. A vision of her favourite landscape had appeared before her. It was so long since she had seen it that she yearned to look on it again. As the procession moved swiftly and silently over the snow, she became lost in reverie. She had been happy once in her garden in a negative sort of way. How long ago it seemed! And since those early days (sure a century since) what a catalogue of suffering and crime! Yes, it must be a century, not a few years only. She was an old, old woman, seared and world-worn, longing for the mysterious change. Her ordeal on this planet would soon be over. How gladly would she move elsewhere.

The cold was intense. She drew over her head a purple kerchief, for the beauty of the scene must not be blocked out by curtains. The well-skilled bearers marched with a steady, gentle sway, picking their steps with cat-like caution. Their straw shoes made no sound on the soft

snow. The regular rhythm of their breathing lulled to repose. Leaning back her weary head upon the cushions, O'Tei fell fast asleep.

At the last turn of the river, before reaching the spot whereon stood the tea-house, it sweeps in a wide bend, leaving a large flat space--a dangerous pitfall; for, firm though it appears to the unwary, between the pools it is a quagmire, a bog of thick ooze which forms a kind of quicksand. The bearers knew this right well, for skirting the water close they hugged a narrow causeway of masonry, the group that bore the pole walking one before the other, keeping time with monotonous chant, the rest of the party falling back, following in single file. It was necessary to move slowly now, for a false step would precipitate the top-heavy vehicle into the water. Two bettos pioneered in front, stepping deftly backwards, holding their lanterns aloft above their heads. "Steady, lads, steady!" one of them exhorted cheerily. Forty yards farther on the path would widen again, and the rest of the journey was plain-sailing.

Whirr! The bettos turned round startled. What was that? nothing; a stream of awakened wild-fowl scudding across the flat. The night was so solemnly silent that their wings rent the stillness with a loud sharp tearing as of linen.

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For hours past, from out a brake of sedge and reeds two bright eyes had been intently watching. Heedless of cold and wet a man had been lying concealed with face turned towards the castle. From this point the fortress loomed out of the river in a dense mass against the sky, in full sombre majesty of battlement and ponderous roof and storied tower, with fish of gold upon its summit; for it was on this side that the stream laved its foundation wall of Cyclopean stones as it brawled towards the sea.

From where he lay, wrapped in a coolie's rain-coat, the man could mark the procession from afar, a line of swart insects on the white, glow-worms with twinkling lights. As they approached, winding with the river's windings, he counted the number of men who bore the litter, and observed with surprised exultation that the guards had been left behind. There was no panoply of spear and streaming banner and glancing lance-head, no clatter of armed horsemen such as usually attends the progress of a noble's kago.

"My task will be the easier," he muttered, unfastening the thongs of his rain-coat, and taking in the corners of his mouth the ends of the cloth about his head. The man's attire was strange and incongruous, for though his garb was that of a peasant, the cloth from out of which his sharp eyes peered was of silk broided with silver. He rose stealthily upon his knees, felt for a dirk in his obi, drew forth the blade and ran a finger along the edge, then laid the scabbard in the water.

"How slow they are," he murmured.

Nearer--nearer still. The bearers were intent upon their task, for there had been a frost last night, and the stones were slippery. Clouds had been rising in banks, masses of cumuli that passed fitfully across the moon. Snowflakes began to fall.

Hist! what was that, another batch of waterfowl? No; a cry as of frightened animals. A commotion--a rush--a panic. Robbers! a gang--a multitude.

Stabbed in the back, the two bettos dropped without a struggle. For an instant the attendants strove to free themselves from cumbrous grass-coats, to disengage their swords from oiled paper coverings, in vain; for it must be at least a dozen nimble blades, wielded by unseen hands, that were swirling through the air with such deadly purpose. Who could have foreseen that on this quiet track assassins were in ambush? With a howl and a cry of treachery the cohort of poltroons abandoned the litter, which fell heavily on its side, and fled over the quicksand, where they buffeted, to lie engulfed. The man, for there was but one--or was it not the god of thunder?--dashed at the fallen kago, tore back with one hand its half-closed curtains, from whose folds there emerged a woman. A sway of two tussling figures, as the clouds swept over the moon, and the snow fell thickly. A tossing of white arms and clutching fingers clasped in a grip of death. A gurgle, a long wild shriek--so terrible a cry of anguish, as a soul was forcibly rent from out its tenement, that boors within their huts crept close together and prayed for protection against goblins. Even the austere figure of the avenger remained for a second spellbound, as, standing erect to wipe his dirk, his ear followed that last piteous wail of agony that faded in the music of the stream.

His task was successfully accomplished: to the gods all gratitude. He peered anxiously around, while he bound up something in a purple kerchief, then, drawing the pick from his katana's sheath, thrust it through the silk for easier carrying. He was alone with slumbering nature, and with it. The relay had fled to give alarm. There was nought to be seen of the others save distant circles on the watery quagmire, with here and there a hand whose groping soon was stilled. At his feet lay the two dead bettos and a heap of sumptuous furs, from out of which there trickled a thick stream that meandered slow over the stones.

Looking upward at the moon, which now unveiled again, the man, smiling softly, pressed to his lips the dirk. "Old friend," he murmured, "beloved of my father, thou hast saved his honour and ours, an evil life the ransom. With speed to my mother now, that she may know the atonement is complete."

He sought for a moment leisurely among the reeds, and seeing the scabbard gleam, replaced it with the dirk within his belt. Then swinging his burthen in his hand, he strode quickly away towards the temple.

His mind was relieved of a great anxiety, and he felt happier than for many a day. All had gone well. In the scurry not one had seen his face, swathed as it was by a cloth. There was nothing to betray whose arm had been that which had struck the ghastly blow. There would be turmoil and uproar among the samurai, a hot pursuit of the assassins; then, search proving vain, silence, and oblivion. The family honour was safe. The concubine would be speedily forgotten, and it would be as if the shadow of the wicked geisha had never crossed their path.

Under the torii, up the long straight flight of stairs, through the temple where Miné and the nuns were praying audibly, to the corridor beyond, off which was the chamber of the Abbess.

A light was flickering. She was awake, anxious for the arrival of the chatelaine. Her ascetic visage was wrapped in holy calm, as with closed eyes she told her beads. The sound of her son's dear footfall, as he strode across the floor, aroused her, and she looked on him with fond inquiry.

"My mother, it is done," he whispered, out of breath. "Here have I brought the proof that your instructions have been obeyed."

Masago, raising herself with difficulty, stretched forth eager hands to claim the bundle, and, her fingers trembling with exultation, hastened to untie its knots. Then from her breast was wrung a wail, racked with the ring of unavailing grief, echo of that shriek along the water.

Out of her grasp, upon the mat, there rolled a woman's head, bloody and waxen. Its delicate features were warped, convulsed in the life battle. Stretched wide in terror were its glassy eyes, its parted lips distorted.

Stunned and dazed, crowned with the brain-ache of a hopeless sorrow, the icy grip about his heart of a despair that might never be assuaged, Sampei sank slowly on his knees.

For the eyes that stared upon him now in mute imploring were those he loved best on earth.

The face was the face of O'Tei, the fair, and gentle, and unfortunate.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FACE TO FACE.

When the panic-stricken servants rushed into the castle with their appalling tale, there was general consternation. They had been attacked, they swore, by a band of at least fifty ronins. By the last act of the doomed chatelaine she had won back the respect of the warriors, for they perceived, too late, that her gentleness had naught akin with cowardice. Resuming her fit position by force of princely dignity, she had become a liege lady of whom they could be proud. They felt pangs of remorse, too, in having allowed her to sally forth by night unprotected by soldiers. Yet, if they had not cared for her, it was well known that the peasants did, who vowed she was a saint. And sure none could ever have supposed that there were any, even in this bad world, who could be so wicked as to do her to death thus cruelly. The country far and near was scoured, but no trace of a gang was found. The thickly-falling snow had obliterated footmarks. On the fatal spot, seek as they would, nothing was to be found but the overturned litter and mutilated remains of their mistress--hats and garments scattered here and there--and the bodies of the drowned bearers. At dawn, the sad *cortége* returned home with its freight, having learned nothing; and then a feeling of uneasiness came over the samurai as to what my lord would say. He neglected and disliked his wife, but would surely retaliate swiftly and fearfully upon those whose carelessness had led to so gruesome a catastrophe.

As for O'Kikú, whom all avoided now as if she were plague-stricken, she remained secluded in her chamber, transfixed with growing wonder. The blows of the assassins were aimed at herself--of that she had no doubt--and she had been saved by a miracle. Yet who could there be who wished to kill her, unless it were O'Tei or Masago? Of course, it was not O'Tei, or she would

never have marched thus deliberately to her own undoing; and as she was on her way to the temple, summoned thither, it could not be a plot of Masago's, for Masago loved her dearly. The more she thought it out, the more incomprehensible grew the whole affair, and at last she was fain to put it from her as a mystery which time might some day decipher. One thing, however, was plain. By a wondrous stroke of luck, the position of herself, O'Kikú, had vastly improved. A stumbling-block that threatened to become troublesome was swept out of her path. So soon as my lord should learn her secret, he would, if skilfully wheedled, take to his arms, as his first wife, the mother of his child. She would be consort of the Hojo, chatelaine of Tsu, and as she thought of it, her bosom glowed with gratified ambition, and she there and then determined that in the smiling future the castle should contain no concubine.

At early dawn the good-natured bonze hied him down from the mountain to visit his revered patient, and greatly was he shocked by the spectacle that met his view. On the threshold of the Abbess's chamber stood Miné, with finger on lip, and a far-off vacant look of dread that betokened incipient madness. Her father's curse was falling with leaden weight upon the members of the devoted family, and as she beheld the swoop of stroke after stroke her soul was withered within her. She too--she whom he had repulsed unpardoning--she too was doomed with them. What would her end be? Entering the room of Masago with accustomed listless step to attend to duties, she had stood riveted as she read the full horror of the scene. On the floor was Masago, delirious; close by crouched her shuddering son, clasping something--something terrible--in his arms.

From that moment till the arrival of the friendly bonze, Miné had stood a faithful sentinel, lest peradventure prying nuns might learn and spread the truth. Should it become known that Sampei--the once dear Sampei--had been guilty of this awful crime, the town would arise as one man to tear him limb from limb. The young priestess was not capable of deciding what was to be done, but the friendly bonze would think for her, and propound the words of wisdom. Little by little the first distracting throes of misery passed. The Abbess grew calm, and with the death-sweat came resignation.

The gods, ungenerous and mocking, had fooled their handmaid. Instead of being turned from their purpose by her puny supplications, as she had arrogantly dared to hope, they had singled her out, with a consummate refinement of cruelty as their chief implement of vengeance. By her hand--the hand of the mother and the friend--were stricken down the apple of her eye--her son, and the sweet lady who had loved and trusted her. And in them was she not herself smitten--ay, so crushed and beaten that naught could hurt her more? Alas! alas! that she should have been so blinded as not to take warning by the fateful year--the last of yaka doshi, and have kept herself from dangerous meddling. What should chance henceforth she cared not. Since all were condemned, the sooner fell the last and fatal stroke the better,--on the dear head of the son she loved so fondly--on all. As for Sampei, he appeared as if changed to stone. In the presence of so intense a depth of black despair, Miné trembled--the kindly bonze was awed; for sure there is no sight so pitiful in nature as the whirl and flood of human anguish whose torrent we may not stem.

It was essential that some plan of action should be decided on forthwith; and the bonze was of opinion that the secret of who it was that had done the deed for the present must be kept. Gently raising Sampei from his attitude of utter abandonment, and taking his treasure from him, he led him into the temple, and placed it within a bronze coffer of exceeding sanctity which stood beside the altar.

"He alone who can act," he said, "in such a crisis, is my lord of Nara. To him will I go forthwith."

On foot, with staff and scrip, he made the pilgrimage to Kiyôto, wrapped as he journeyed in holy ecstasy, thanking the gods for their goodness. Were not the wicked who are set in high places sometimes to receive their meed, the faith of man in truth and God and justice would wane and crumble. As the dragon that browses on the white flesh of innocent young maids is slain at last, so was it to be with the Hojos. Their cup was full. For some good and occult purpose beyond purblind human ken, the scourge for generations had afflicted the earth, but now was the limit placed. Awakening Buddha had said, "So far shalt thou go and no farther, for the punishing of the transgressions of the people." The limit was reached, and now Buddha, merciful, would hold his hand. But how subtle was the means of retribution--so subtle, that as he contemplated it, the bonze was overcome with wonder. Not only was each member of the family to perish miserably, but the nearest and dearest the agent! A woman was to be butchered by him who to save a hair of her dear head would gladly have sacrificed his life. A man was to be brought to a condition worse far than the most lingering of deaths, by the mother who, to save him from a pang, would have bartered her hope of Nirvana.

The bonze, travel-stained and weary, sought my lord of Nara at the Mikado's palace, and found him without difficulty; for it was the policy of that crafty daimio to be of easy access to the people. He was buried to the lips in papers and despatches, for the die was cast now; it was to be a hand-to-hand tussle for existence. Either the Hojo must fall, or they would all be sacrificed. Answers had been received from country magnates. Despite peremptory orders from the Hojo, they were advancing by forced marches. They had gone too far for retreat. To obey the tyrant without a struggle for freedom was to condemn themselves to life-long bondage. What of the Corean army once commanded by Sampei? the magnates inquired. What of the thousands of disbanded ronins? Would they side with the despot, or unite for the saving of their Emperor?

"Tush!" Nara muttered, as he wrote replies. "Have not I, the shrewd and the astute, considered these matters? The mountains about Tsu are teeming with faithful men in ambush. When these marching daimios reach their appointed posts, the Holy City will be surrounded by a protecting girdle; and then--and then--we may act!"

But Destiny amused herself as usual by thwarting the intricate plans so carefully conceived by mortal ingenuity. Is it not always so? If we arrange a sequence of events for ourselves, does not something always intervene to mar and derange the scheme? Perhaps in the next life, or the next after, we may be permitted to settle things for ourselves. Clearly in this one it is forbidden. First it had been arranged that the Hojo was to be caught in a trap in his own castle. Since then the aspect of affairs was altered; for after a few days passed in the Golden House among his vassals, their master had again mysteriously gone into retirement. Spies informed Nara that he was heard to groan at night,--that he saw visions, and dreamed dreams of strange and mystic import. He had relapsed into the previous state, as before he came up from Tsu. Had not wise Nara said that his energy was the expiring of the lamp. This being so, difficulties were delightfully smoothed, and Nara was able to improve the occasion for his master's benefit, by pointing out how admirably sage he had been in the keeping of his temper. Is not time the healer of all wounds? A scandal in the palace had been averted. The claws of the bear were rotting piecemeal. So soon as the circle of iron was complete it should close in and crush the tyrant, while a simultaneous movement would be made on Tsu for the capture of his brother and retainers.

And a few hurried sentences from the lips of a simple bonze upset all these elaborate calculations. He hearkened to the dolorous tale, with a choler that might not be suppressed. This was too much! Old Nara had allowed himself to be bearded. Under great provocation, he had curbed his wrath,--had swallowed his pride, and waited. But now he might wait no more. What, his heiress, his only child, the only bearer of his august and honoured name, was to be openly and cruelly slain, because her lord was weary of her, and wished to please a wanton! As with hands behind his back, and distended nostrils, the stately veteran strode hither and thither in the chamber, his old eyes flashed fire as of yore. In truth, under the snows, the volcano had slept, and, stirred to its centre, now blazed forth. Come what might, with his own shrivelled arm, since he had no son, would he wipe out this stain, or be dishonoured for aye in the noble annals of Japan. Narrowly he questioned the priest. Then the bonze had no idea, he said, who had been the butcher? It mattered not. There was no one but the Hojo and his wanton who desired the poor lady's death. It was at their bidding that the crime had been committed. First the Hojo and then his harlot. The fortress should be demolished stone by stone, the geisha executed on its ruins.

As he hearkened to the wrathful diatribes of the now furious lord, the bonze mused in ever-increasing admiration. Verily the working of the divine decrees is worthy of humble worship. The priest had promised Miné that Sampei should not be betrayed, 'Twas probable that when he rallied, as human nature will rally, to some small extent, however severe the shock, the rest of his days would be spent in the holy garb, and that comfort would come to him at last. For public edification and example, the soldier's remaining years were to be passed in prayer. The Hojo himself was to fall by the hand of Nara; that much was evident now, and it was fitting as well as just.

He who was wont to be over-prudent, even under stress of extreme and unendurable provocation, now threw prudence to the winds. Without delay he girded on his swords and dirk, mounted his horse, and galloped to the Golden House. Consequences were as rice straw in the wind. To fight and kill another daimio within the sacred city--within a given distance of the palace, meant death by harakiri. Himself to be slain meant confiscation of all his goods. His goods! a fig for them! He was childless now, and honour is worth more than goods. Peradventure when the stain had been wiped out, the Holy Mikado would forgive, in consideration for past service. No doubt he would be grateful for the removal of the incubus. If not, what mattered it? The childless old man would die, having saved at least his honour, and to the paltry dross of this world his sovereign lord was welcome.

Hearing the clatter of a single horseman's hoofs, the watchful samurai at the gate of the Golden House came forth and shaded their eyes with their palms to reconnoitre the visitor. Among themselves they were somewhat disturbed, for rumours of approaching troops were rife; the warriors of other magnates were unfriendly to the dominating one; and their lord was curiously inactive. Indeed, for the last day or two, he had not stepped abroad. That he was at home, and sick, was evident, for they could hear his muffled ejaculations; and now and then his distempered visage peered from an upper window with disordered mien, gazing on the wood and lake. The Daimio of Nara, with care upon his brow--in haste--unattended--alone? Strange! But events were moving strangely. The father-in-law of my lord; his parent's chosen guide and counsellor. With respectful salutes and genuflections the Daimio was allowed to pass. For of a certainty my lord required helpful counsel, and Nara, all agreed, was the very prince to give it.

The new-comer dashed past without deigning notice, nor drew rein till he reached the entrance of the villa. The heavy foliage of the surrounding pines was bowed down with a glittering burden; the picturesque lake, with its rocks and tiny islets, was frozen over, and on its surface wandered painfully and slow the myriad of black tortoises that usually slept beneath. A haven of peace and rest, an oasis of silence in a sea of turmoil. Even the sentries, who slowly marched before the doors, seemed under the spell of winter, their senses blunted by the nipping air.

The whirling mind of Nara was too much engrossed to heed such trivial matters. Flinging his bridle to a sentinel, he inquired where was his master. The man pointed upward with his lance, but added in troubled accents, that my lord was sick--had given special orders that he was on no account to be disturbed.

"I have come to cure his sickness," the old man said, with a grim smile of peculiar meaning. "I have brought him medicine. See that we are left alone."

The Golden House, as we saw when we were here some time since, is a dwelling of small proportions on the lake bank, built of wood, with a huge towering roof bedizened with much gold. The upper chambers are reached by a ladder-stair of extreme exiguity, so frail and narrow that one person only can mount at a time, and only then by bowing his head.

Nara's tall and bulky form had much ado to reach the landing; but, arrived there, he loosed his katana in its sheath, and, with a strength, for which none would have credited him, seized the ladder, and, wrenching it from its iron fastening, hurled it clattering down.

The paper windows were closed; the light was dim; a voice, tuned low by world-worn weariness, demanded who was there.

Nara strode into the inner room where, wrapped in quilts, the Hojo lay, a hibachi close at hand, his swords in their rack beside him.

"*You!*" he said, rising to a sitting posture.

"I," was the rejoinder. "I, *murderer!* The father of O'Tei, the wife whom you have slaughtered."

No-Kami looked dreamily at the figure that stood over him, then felt his garb with a vague, uncertain movement of twitching fingers.

"Murderer?" he muttered, with a cynic's laugh.

The wrath of the old man flared up. Grinding his teeth, he spurned the prostrate figure.

"Yes, murderer!" he hissed, "and I, the father of your victim. No one can interrupt us. O'Tei is dead--you know it--and by your decree. Only one, if one, will leave this room alive. Have you any manhood left, degenerate spawn of tyrants? Take up your sword, and quickly, or I'll slay you like a dog, as you deserve."

Had not the old man been so distraught he would have seen by No-Kami's face that the intelligence was bewildering news to him. He sat gazing at his persecutor open-mouthed, till he, goaded beyond control, smote him with flat blade across the face.

It left a livid mark, the rest of the visage purple, the veins swollen and congested. With a hoarse growl like an animal at bay, No-Kami sprang to his feet, seized his katana, and attacked the aggressor with set teeth. Glaring one at the other, with starting eyeballs and foaming lips, the two--the old man and the young--fought on in the small space and the dim light. Both were too furious for caution, and hacked each at each, smearing walls and floor, without a sound but labouring breath and clashing steel. The old man, taller, with longer arm, was getting the mastery. He had step by step driven No-Kami to the corner, where stood an idol of bronze, against which he leaned. Uncovering himself to deliver the final blow, he slipped in the blood upon the floor, and received the point of the Hojo right through his breast, below the nipple. Dropping his weapon, and flinging up his arms, he fell with a sob upon his back.

No-Kami withdrew his sword and wiped it carefully, then sat him down to think.

O'Tei murdered! By whom? what for? It must be true, or the crafty old lord would never have been driven to such frenzy. It was quieted now, that same frenzy, however. He lay still enough, his skin as grey as was his hair. "Not my fault," No-Kami murmured, with compunction; for, debauched though he was, the Hojo had respect for bravery. "He has brought his end upon himself. Now, what of me? Who will believe me if I say that one who was the soul of caution came and smote me like a rat? Within the prohibited distance, the Mikado's favourite counsellor, and I so ill, so spectre-ridden." Claspng his burning forehead in his hands, No-Kami looked hungrily at the dirk which seemed to invite him from its rack, and thought, as he had once done before, that it would be well to make an end on't. Not yet. He was taken by an uncontrollable desire to know more of the tragedy at home. O'Tei murdered! The words seemed burnt into his brain; and as he contemplated them, with her father dead at his feet, an ineffable sadness--a cold sense of extreme loneliness--crept over his soul. The past rose up before his vision. For a little while they had been happy, he and the fair O'Tei. She had been cold and haughty and repellent, despising him always, and that had maddened him. And was she not right to do so--fully justified? She was better than he,--far above his level, and it was this that had made him hate her. But did he hate her? No! Now that she was gone, he became aware of a singular sensation. Down in the deeps of his being there was a profound pity for her fate. Why did he feel so lonely? Why did he shudder at the shadows whose chills encompassed him about?

Who had planned her murder? Like a green ray of lightning it flashed on him--O'Kikú! His curse and hers. Oh, wretched, infatuated man--O'Kikú! Poor O'Tei, murdered by her rival! The

punishment of the concubine was the only reparation possible. She should be punished. If he was to leave Kiyōto unmolested, there was not a minute to be lost. The ladder was gone, the distance to the ground but small. No-Kami, his nerves strung again by a distinct purpose, moved to the verandah, and swung himself down its column. With steady tread he appeared before the sleepy sentinel, and with stern, sharp accents issued his instructions.

"My horse Typhoon, quick. I need no followers. The Daimio of Nara has gone the other way. Close up the house--nay, I will myself fasten it. Double the sentries. Keep watch and ward. Let none, on whatever pretext, set foot within the boundaries."

As he clattered away on his favourite charger at full speed, the samurai looked after him.

"Ticklish times," muttered he who was in command, "each moment fraught with peril. My lord of Nara, no doubt, has given the best advice. My lord is gone to act on it. Well, well, the gods be praised, our chief is himself again!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WEB IS WOVEN.

Typhoon was the best charger in the Daimio's stable, and worthy of his name; but this was his last journey. He was so hard pressed by his frantic master, that at the castle gate he sank and died.

The sudden arrival of my lord, a fugitive, without a single follower, created within the fortress a commotion which was no little aggravated by the news of which he was the bearer. How swift was the cumulation of events. My lord of Nara and his heiress murdered. A siege in immediate prospect, and after that--what? A long course of excess and idleness had sapped the discipline of the braves, and instead of hailing the coming fray with the joy that becomes heroes, they showed signs of sullen discontent. No-Kami had slain in a secret manner, without witnesses, the venerable Nara, the esteemed friend of the Holy Mikado.

This was going too far, even for so overbearing a despot. Even the samurai of Tsu were aware that Japan at bay would arise and shake off its incubus. The castle would be invested by the foes of Hojo, who were legion. Look where he would, there was no single ally who could be counted on for succour. There was but one consummation possible. An iron wall would hem the fortress, and all within would perish. Under these circumstances, the warriors (privately discussing the situation) were divided in opinion. Would it be well to accept the inevitable and bow the neck at once, suing for mercy; or would it perchance be better to baulk the foe, to act as the celebrated forty-seven ronins did--revered for ever by the Japanese--namely, to perform harakiri in concert? Thus it will be seen that the glamour of evil fortune had wrapped the castle like a mist. Even the bold retainers of the crumbling family lost heart, and if they prepared to show any resistance at all, it was owing to the presence of Sampei, the heroic subduer of Corea.

Even Sampei, whilom bravest of the brave, showed no enthusiasm. He had stumbled along the stony road of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and seemed to look down from afar upon the petty frettings of humanity, as you might idly watch the proceedings in an opened anthill.

The first acute bitterness waned insensibly, and he grew resigned to life-long pain. Had it not been so, reason would have fallen from her throne. He could think of O'Tei not as corruption but as *transformed*. The sap of a tree, the glow of a gem, the plumage of a bird, contained her outward part. Nature had taken back and set to other purpose that which she had lent. As to the other, who might tell where it wandered? Where was her pure soul hovering?

Was the gulf that yawned in front as dark as the path already trodden? If the gods were really good, they could not but be mild to one who was so gentle. After all, for himself it mattered not. What, to a mortal so maimed as he, was a little more or less of suffering, after that wound from which the life-drops of his heart were slowly dripping?

He would not desert his brother, Sampei declared with quiet gravity. So long as the gods willed that he should fight, he would fight; but the sooner suspense was over, the greater the relief for all.

The bewitching O'Kikú when, rosy and wreathed with smiles, she flew from her bower in the most becoming of costumes to embrace her love, was considerably disconcerted by her reception. She had carefully gone over details, and planned within her mind exactly how it was all to be. He

would be a little upset, possibly, on his arrival, to hear of the sudden and mysterious end of his icicle. He would pretend concern, and probably show anger, relieved all the while by her flitting. She, O'Kikú, would condole, clasp her husband--all her own now--in white arms, and, breast to breast, divulge the delicious secret. He would be enchanted, of course. She would make herself so agreeable bringing forth the entire armoury of her blandishments for his behoof, that memory of O'Tei would speedily be relegated to the limbo prepared for the ghosts of marplots. This point reached, she would summon all her skill and tact, wheedle and cajole and flatter, so as to achieve the desired prize.

By making herself absolutely necessary to No-Kami, then turning on the tap of tears, the living wife would advance a step, be lifted to the dead one's place. And he should never have cause to regret the signal favour. His interests would then be hers completely. No prospect in the future, then, of being put away,--compelled, like Masago, to assume the crape. She would take her lord in hand,--be a long-headed little counsellor, chide his faults with gentleness, teach him to curb his passions, help him to replace on the neck of struggling Japan the yoke that was ominously-loose. And lo! how quickly did her toy palace tumble! No-Kami looked twenty years older than when he went away. There was a haggard wildness in his face--an expression, as he glanced at the enchantress, curiously akin, if it were possible, to aversion. His hands twitched; foam gathered on his lips. When, cooing, she laid her head upon his bosom, her hair new dressed with fresh camellia oil, he pushed her so rudely from him, that, reeling, with bruised arms, she tottered against the wall.

Could it, oh could it be, that he could have ever loved that woman? Could it be that his fiery nature was consuming, torn by the pincers of remorse? Surely he could feel naught at most for an icicle but a cold regret that would soon pass. Was it possible that in a revulsion of feeling he had actually come to detest the enchanting siren who so easily had won him? Verily it seemed like it. With eyes lowered in antipathy, he seemed to avoid her gaze with loathing. And what was that he muttered as he so roughly threw her off. Was it *murderess*? And what a look accompanied the word. Her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth, and though she ardently wished to repel the accusation, her lips refused their office. Did he really believe her guilty of such a foolish prank, of such a stupid blunder? She had no doubt arranged to oust the rival, to procure her expulsion from the castle; but to shed her blood and create a scandal, that would have been too foolish. Before she had time to recover from shocked surprise, my lord was gone. He gave a few brief husky orders, then groped his way, as if in darkness, to the retired eyrie where had dwelt the vanished chatelaine. Thither she felt that she dared not follow him. With forebodings gathering within her breast, O'Kikú withdrew to her apartments, fearing she knew not what.

There, on the mat, where she had laid it down, was O'Tei's samisen, encrusted with gold and ivory; yonder her broidery-frame, a book of poems open, a hundred pathetic evidences, eloquent of her who was gone. Far removed from the hum of preparation, No-Kami sat, dumbly gazing from the casement across the river towards the sea.

And then, for the first time, there passed across the mental ken of Hojo the phantoms of a gloomy retrospect. He seemed, as they swept by, to hear a forlorn chant, with the saddest of refrains--"Too late!"

He had been given a life full of brilliant opportunities and had cast them all away. His name was a byword in the land. There was not one living thing that loved him, while thousands clamoured for his death. The chill of a desolation, novel and surprising, crept over his heart, as, glancing around the bower, small objects recalled the past. Why had they tied him to O'Tei? With one more congenial the asperities of his character might have softened. O'Tei, the soft and clinging, had never loved him; no--never--not for a single moment. Something whispered now that, had he been more kind, she might have come to like him. Then, as if stung by an adder, he sprang upon his feet, with beads of perspiration on his forehead. Fool! what spell was this?--what disgraceful, infatuated weakness? Had he been more kind! *Had she not loved his brother*? The poison instilled by the geisha, dormant through the rapid passage of stirring events, throbbled through his veins, and he gasped and grew faint under the pain of it. Both false--his wife and brother. *She* was dead; no wonder *he* looked so glum! Perturbed though his own mind was, No-Kami could not but notice the change which had come over the face of Sampei. The sharp iron share of an ineffable sorrow had passed over his features, ploughing deep lines of grief.

On second thoughts, it was well that she was dead. She had sinned, and was justly punished. Thus far was his honour satisfied. The murderess must suffer also. By-and-by, when there should be breathing time. And the paramour as well. With staggering steps the Daimio roamed like a caged animal about the chamber, revolving direful designs. Then suddenly stopping, he laughed aloud and clapped his palms together. By-and-by, in the future! Was there any future except a yawning, bottomless gulf down which he and his were sliding? Honour, forsooth! He and his had as little to do with honour as with a future, or with life.

From far away across the sunlit waters a voice whispered mockingly, "Accursed and doomed! betrayed and friendless! Oh, desolate, solitary soul, the gods have set their brand on thee! In worlds to come an outcast!"

Trembling, the Daimio peered around. Some one had spoken. Who? No one in the corridor without. No one beneath the window. That unearthly jibing merriment! Two bloodshot eyes glaring from the cloudless sky. Cursed and doomed! Predestined to endless travail! Moaning, the

Daimio cowered down and rocked himself in terror.

It was soon understood that, my lord being unhinged, and grievously sick in body and mind, Sampei would assume command. So long as the gods willed it, there should be defence, the General had determined, and to that end he moved hither and thither with forced calm, arranging details by the light of a shrewd experience; steady as some strong machine that does its work unconsciously.

The contents of the armoury were overhauled and furbished. Seasoned wood was sought throughout the town, for the making of countless arrows; thick porous paper for dressing wounds, according to the standard rules of rough field surgery. The ground within the inner moat was covered over with boards and canvas, to conceal what was done inside; for an investing army is ever full of stratagems for learning the weak points of the besieged. Lofty trees, or high peaks of rock, were sure to be occupied at once, tall towers to be erected on points of vantage. It was even a common thing to fly huge kites, large enough to support a man, and so obtain a bird's-eye view of the interior of an enemy's castle. Sampei organised a band of scouts, and sent them forth to crawl by night along the narrow causeways that intersected the oozy rice fields, bidding them return with earliest information with regard to the coming of the foe. Parties of braves were despatched in all directions to annex the scanty stores which oppression had left to the peasantry. All possible precautions taken, he divided his men into watches, taught each his post and duty, then waited for the future to unroll.

Nor had he long to wait. As though rising by magic through the ground, an army of combatants appeared, who surrounded the fortress with their engines. From the top of the central tower, crowned with its copper roof and golden fish, could be descried a host so numerous and well-equipped that Sampei stood marvelling how they could be here so quickly. It soon became manifest that they had no intention of endeavouring to storm the place, at least not yet, for they methodically set about the forming of a line of pallisades, consisting of heavy planks propped by hinged supports, behind which they could safely repose, and starve the foe to extremity.

There is nothing so soul-depressing to those hemmed in as a siege thus coldly carried out. The sense of being an animal shut in a trap, the lack of incident and excitement, the feeling of being without the pale of busy humanity, damp the courage, and chill the spirits. There is something so prosaic about a war waged against the stomach. The samurai of Tsu, disorganised already, their native prowess undermined, soon felt the pinch, and began to brawl and murmur. Their lord they saw no more, for, reason rocking on its pedestal, he remained shut up, refusing consolation, within the apartments of the deceased. But for the prestige that clung like a halo round his brother, and enforced a surly and half mutinous obedience, the braves would have thrown open the gates, have attempted to fraternise with the host of invading warriors. But the stoutest among them stood in dread of Sampei,---quailed before the bluff, uncompromising severity which, without the wink of an eyelid, would have made an example of traitors. The vassals of the Hojo fought, discharging arrows and javelins, occasionally making a feeble show of a sortie: but all knew that the end was imminent, that suspense would soon be over.

O'Kikú, grasping, sly, and unheroic, fretted, as may be imagined, bitterly. How different was the present state of things from her cherished rainbow-dream. That sharp repulse, followed by utter neglect, upset her calculations. She appeared of a sudden to have lost influence over all her willing slaves. My lord, absorbed in his own troubles, ignored the fact of her existence. The braves, with whom she was once so popular--many of whom, it must be confessed, were vain at one time of being numbered among her lovers--now gnashed their teeth in her face, and poured on her head twofold the obloquy that had been the portion of O'Tei.

And why was this? Doubtless the truculent and unlettered samurai could scarcely be expected to be logical. Yet having witnessed the passage-of-arms between the ladies, they must know as well as she that the concubine was innocent of the catastrophe. And yet somehow or other it had become plain to their obtuse intelligence that the siren was at the bottom of the trouble. There was no arguing the point, since none could deny that it was from her advent that the run of disaster must be dated. Accustomed to be pampered and petted, she was devoured with smouldering rage, and unreasoning hate of Tsu and Hojo, and all connected with the race, in finding herself treated like a leper. What a pity it was that, lured by a sham glitter, she should have turned aside from the pilgrimage to Isé, for the gathering of mundane baubles. What had she gained by it? Troubles and disappointments, and illusions roughly shattered. And perhaps in the background something even worse was lurking; for she realised with apprehension that she was hedged round with a phalanx of enemies, who persisted in connecting her, in spite of evidence, with the untimely death of the chatelaine. Was there ever anything so unreasonable, and yet fraught with graver peril? My lord was a madman, beset by absurd hallucinations; a furious tiger, accustomed to batten upon blood, as devoid of conscience as of scruple. He had called her murderess, and in the crooked recesses of his muddy brain was concocting some frightful retribution; There was no escape for her by flight, for she was in the position of a kid locked in a den of lions.

In case of personal peril, to whom might O'Kikú turn for succour? Sampei was honest and upright, but on his worn face, when turned to her, was a horrible expression of icy vindictiveness. That he had idolised O'Tei none knew better than she, and she was in some manner connected in his mind with that most unfortunate murder. He also was evidently brooding over some

unpleasant form of reprisal. Enemies--nothing but enemies--inside and out; she their future target. At all events Sampei could be counted upon as straight and above mean treason. Gulping down the lees of offended vanity, O'Kikú resolved to clear herself in his eyes from any complicity in the tragedy. He would believe her--for once in her life she would really speak the truth--and he would stand by her if assaulted by the madman. But when, waylaying him one day, with a poor ghostly show of the old coquetry, she entered on the subject, such a wave of blank despair seemed to sweep over him that the words froze on her lips, and he was gone before she had recovered.

Condemned to inaction, deprived of amusement and male companionship, relegated to the uninteresting society of tire-women, the unhappy geisha pined as well as fretted. If they would only let her out,--set the caged bird free! Dreams of ambition faded, she now desired no more than liberty. Several times each day she climbed to the top of the central tower, just under the fish of gold, and gazed--oh, with what longing--at the cohorts of the invading host. The strictest guard was kept at the openings in the palisading, but soldiers off duty were free to amuse themselves. She could see bands of them engaged in military sports. Some went a-hunting, and returned laden. Oh, if she were only with them, outside these horrid walls, beyond which lay tantalising freedom! And what was to be the end? There was only one end possible. All could see that now. Scanty stores, hastily collected, were waning. What then? Gaunt famine stalked already. Would those without linger inactive till the besieged were dead to a man, then march in over the corpses? or would they in a more martial spirit wait only till the braves were weak, and then take the place by escalade? It was too revolting to die thus by inches. The idea suddenly flashed upon the wretched woman, whose moral sense, never acute, was blunting hourly, that the key of the situation was in her own little hand. Why should she not open the postern, let in the foe, who in gratitude would spare her life--maybe applaud and treat her with homage as a heroine? What to her were the Hojos; their illustrious name which was hers--that name about which the silly Masago had preached so loftily--now that they were on the brink of ruin? She had good cause to hate the Hojos. Many a lady in the annals of Japan has bared her breast to her husband's dirk in just such an emergency as this. When the famed Shibata knew all was lost, he gave a final banquet, at the conclusion of which he said to his wife, "You women must go, for it is time for us men to die." And what answer made she? With tears she thanked her lord, she, the sister of Nobunago the Great, composed a farewell verse of poetry, and received his sword into her bosom.

But then O'Kikú was not of noble birth, and such flights did not suit her fancy. She knew herself to be still young and lovely, and full of life, and burning for fresh fields to conquer. If all had gone well, and she had stepped into the dead one's place, she would, outwardly at least, have been henceforth as demure as prudery could desire. Rank and honour and power and appetites pampered, form one condition of things. Untimely death, trapped within four walls, is quite another. It would be merciful,--a deed worthy of commendation, to let the enemy in, and put these doomed ones out of misery. My lord, a prey to goblins, was become quite too contemptible. What a delight to be present at the slaying of the hateful Sampei! Doubtless in yonder host there were many as noble as he who would, when opportunity offered, vie with one another for her favours. Her mind was made up. A fig for the race of Hojo. She would start upon her scheme forthwith.

Changing her tactics, the geisha, braving the scowls of the samurai, became interested in military operations, and despite their new-born dislike of one whom they had come to esteem as a bad angel, it was cheering to be commended by the lips of a pretty woman. She organised her maidens into a band of mercy for the relief of those who were wounded; helped with her own hands to prepare and carry food; filled and passed the saké-cup, declaring that wine gives strength. Sampei observed these proceedings with displeasure, but did not interfere. One morning when the commander was busy, and she knew herself unwatched, O'Kikú crept to the top of the tower with her dainty bow, and discharged into the air an arrow, round which was wrapped a paper. As she marked its flight, and perceived that it fell beyond the palisade, "So far well," she murmured. "This suspense will conclude to-night."

The weather was exceeding cold, the blood of the soldiers thin, by reason of under-feeding. Both food and drink were scrupulously measured now in gradually shrinking rations. But the wily damsel had a private supply of *saké*, remnant of that with which she used to ply my lord before his late visit to Kiyôto. She prepared and warmed a pot of it, in which she distilled some seeds, and waited with philosophic patience for the night. Then, robed in a dark soft kimono, she stole through the first gate, and round under shadow of the fatal belt of trees, regardless of their wooing and their sighing (she was not one to be tricked to suicide), and thus reached unseen the corner of the outer gate. The muffled sentinel was leaning upon his lance against the parapet, and started from doleful reverie as she appeared before him.

"Hush," she murmured rapidly, "it is I, O'Kikú. You used to love me once--false that you are--or told me so. See how I love you still. Risking my good name for you, I have brought you this, lest haply you be frozen by the morning."

The man looked at her with feelings of self-reproach. Yes, he had fancied her once, more fickle apparently than she; and as she stood before him now, so small and dark, with eyes of mouse-like brightness, and ravishing dimples playing at hide-and-seek, he liked her yet again. But she fluttered like a bird in his embrace.

"No, no," she whispered, as she passed over his rough face caressing fingers. "Remember duty, and the plight we are in. Folly is over, and stern reality is here. You wronged me in your thoughts, deeming I had forgotten you. Admit you did. Fie, fie--for shame! There, you are forgiven! Drink!"

She held forth the saké pot, kept warm with a woollen covering. He took a long draught, his gaze on her the while, and she shook her shapely head in arch reproach. And then, with set teeth and no dimples showing now, she caught the saké-pot as it escaped from his hand, and he fell insensible upon his back.

"Idiot!" she said, with a curl of her full lip, "lie there undisturbed until your foolish throat is cut," and peering cautiously around, descended quickly to the postern.

It will be remembered that the outer gate stood at right angles to the road, for the better purpose of defence, but that there was a small postern in the angle facing it. In her outgoings and incomings she had always, as a matter of convenience, used this postern, and had kept the key of it. How provoking were these plaguy clouds over the moon. At one moment it was dark--at another as light as day--dazzling, puzzling. She stood in the open doorway peeping forth, when a mailed man in ambush seized her by the arm, and pinched it so suddenly that she had much ado to suppress a scream.

"I have you!" he said; "you are our hostage. We got your billet, and are ready."

"You hurt me, sir," she answered, struggling. "Brute! let me go. The door is open as I promised. Here is the key of the inner gate."

She endeavoured to shake off the iron grip and flee in the direction of liberty, but the man held her as in a vice.

"Softly, softly!" he chuckled, "or this tender flesh will suffer. She who can wantonly betray her people may not be trusted. You shall go before and lead us to the inner gate. When once we are within the citadel you shall receive reward, I promise."

A cry of vexation and abortive spite rose in the geisha's throat, and choked her. What hardened brutal wretches soldiers are! She who expected effusive gratitude for a signal favour was to be treated like a common spy. The biter was bit. The man--an officer of rank, as was evident by the glittering badge upon his casque--took no pains to conceal his lack of consideration for the agent whom he stooped to employ. He looked on her, it was but too evident, as on some reptile--of service for the moment, which was to be used, then crushed under the heel. Careless of her pain, he held her soft arm as tightly in his armoured hand as if he meant to snap the bone.

"Lead on," he threatened, "or--"

There was no help for it. With the sharpest twinge of self-upbraiding that she had ever felt, O'Kikú turned and led the officer under shadow of the wall, under the belt of devilish trees that swayed now, and wheezed and croaked in ghastly merriment, till they reached the inner moat. She could tell by the dull thud behind that the cohorts were silently following. One, tripping over the snoring sentinel, gave him his *coup de grâce*. The outer space within the range of huts was black with the ranks of the invader. Sampei, going his rounds, and hearing a strange sound, glanced over the parapet, and pressed his two hands upon his heart to still the commotion there.

It was all over then! So much the better--oh, so much the better--since the gods were ruthless. By treachery from within all was lost. The moment he had so yearned for was come at last, when he would be freed from the bondage that was rotting him.

"My love!" he murmured, spreading wide his arms towards the stars, while tears poured down his cheeks. "Wait for me, O'Tei, upon the other bank. Be patient for a few moments more. Stretch forth thy hand to me, my own; surely such love as mine should win its guerdon. In the next life we shall be re-united."

The clouds were rent like a curtain, and the light streamed forth. The whole outer space was covered now by a moving army as of locusts. Sampei could detect on fluttering banners the butterfly of the Lord of Bizen, the badges of Shioshiu, and of Satsuma. The moment had arrived for which his soul had pined, and he was glad. But for his vigilance, mutiny would have broken out long since; and now that treachery had unlocked the gates, resistance would be small. He knew full well that his men would not stand for a moment against panic. There would be a stampede, a massacre, unless the braves were permitted to make terms. Befall what might as to the rest, he and his must not be taken alive, for who might tell what ignominy was prepared for the fallen Hojos? Hastily summoning his captains, he pointed over the parapet, and laid a hand upon his dirk with a motion understood by all.

"Act for yourselves," he said; "and the gods, who have deserted us, be with you, old comrades."

As he rapidly strode away towards the distant corner by the river, where dwelt No-Kami, there were tears in the eyes of the veterans. Was this their final parting from the bravest of the brave?

Ought they not to follow, and claim participation in the rites?

"No," a white-haired warrior said. "Let his last wishes be obeyed by us who love him. Be our last task to keep the gate, in order that they may not be interrupted. If we do not fall in the assault, and our lives are given us, it will be time then to follow our chiefs along the road which they have chosen."

With quick and steady foot Sampei ascended the stair, which to him was sanctified by the abiding presence of O'Tei. Pushing back the screen, he entered, and, looking on his brother, there was upon his face a newborn tenderness.

"The moment has come," he announced abruptly. "The foe is within the gate."

A great shout went up into the stillness--a double cry--a scream of fear, a yell of victory. How strangely close the air was--despite the cold, heavy and sulphurous. Now that the banks of inky cloud had completely rolled away, the sky was unnaturally clear, the stars like specks of steel, while low along the bases of the hills was a dense white vapour rising. Sampei clasped his throat and gasped for air, for he was suffocating. Shaking back his locks, which, untied, had drifted about his clammy brow, he took a candle and set fire to the dry woodwork of the room, which crackled and flared, while No-Kami, in a daze, looked on.

"You will be my kaishaku?" demanded the Hojo shortly.

"Not I!" returned his brother, with strange emotion. "Each one for himself now. You take your dirk; I mine. We will have no seconds. Quick! Each moment's golden."

"I am your feudal chief, as well as brother," No-Kami said, with supreme haughtiness, shaking off lethargy like an ill-fitting garment, "and as such I claim obedience. Shall it be said that the last Hojo passed away without befitting rites? Would you dare to refuse the last service to your departing lord?"

There was a tumult in the elder's breast. No, he dared not refuse the last offices which were claimed thus solemnly. The final tribute of respect due from the nearest kinsman to the head of a great house was to act as his kaishaku or executioner. And yet, how hard! O'Tei was waiting on the other bank. No-Kami would be there before him. Not far ahead, though, for Sampei disdained a kaishaku. His brother gone, he would not linger.

"Be it so," he said; and No-Kami nodded gratefully.

The heat of the curling flames was stifling. The air was thick with smoke,--dense with an overpowering and scorching weight, like the fumes belched out by a volcano.

Gently the lord of Tsu took from its rack his dirk, while his brother removed the sleeve from his own right arm and drew his sword, and, left foot forward, narrowly watched his movements. No-Kami, with dreamy deliberation, kneeled, supporting his weight upon his heels, and allowing his upper garment to drop down, tucked the sleeves under his knees, to save himself from falling backwards. Then, balancing the dirk, he looked on it with affectionate wistfulness, and, collecting his thoughts, hearkened musingly to the increasing turmoil. A clash of arms hard by; a hubbub of approaching voices; a volley of wild shouts and guttural curses, ever nearer--nearer.

"Despatch!" cried the elder, with impatience, as he tightened the grip upon his hilt.

No-Kami glanced round at him with a slow, proud smile, in which there was more of human softness than his features had ever worn. Then, stabbing himself below the waist on the left side, he drew the dirk with firm and unswerving hand across, and, twisting it in the wound, gave it a slight turn upwards.

The eager eyes of his brother sparkled. A flash in the air; a heavy thud; a crash. No-Kami was gone; his sin-stained soul had flown. His blood welled out over the floor from his headless trunk.

Sampei reeled, sick and giddy. Strange that the crisp air of a winter night should be so oppressive!

What sinister new noise was that? A low, rumbling sound, like a great tremulous sigh--a heaving as though the panting soil were labouring for breath.

For an instant of awful silence the human storm was stilled, then in a combined shriek rose heavenward. With swimming eyes Sampei gazed forth, clinging to the casement for support. A boom, a roar, a rush of boiling waters. A sweeping blast, a whirlwind--like a conflict of spirits for a soul. With a groan as of a giant in pain, the hillside opposite yawned. He beheld the wood of ancient cryptomerias, from childhood so familiar, slowly descend, leaving in its place a scar. He saw it slide down with majestic movement into the plain, turning from its bed the river. As though propelled by hurricane force, trees and rocks fell thundering, piled in heaps upon the flat, while through opening gaps and fissures new-born streams gushed out.

Another shock, a long shuddering spasm, a wail of strong men for mercy. Then with deafening din the central tower rocked and swayed and split from top to bottom. The huge timbers cracked

like wands, and parted. The ponderous copper roofs and sculptured eaves were torn and rent, and, toppling upon the crouching multitude, rolled over into the abyss. Forked tongues of flame shot up with a wild whirl of sparks, and died; and then from a common grave there curled a dense column of black smoke. Of all who were within the walls of Tsu not one escaped. At the gods' behest, nature had arisen in her strength. When the hail of destruction ceased, nothing remained of the impregnable fortress but a heap of shapeless ruin. The pride of Hojo was abased; its cherished home was become a charnel-house; its stronghold a sepulchre; a wreck its monument.

* * * * *

Thus was the prophecy fulfilled,—the death-cry of the martyr answered. Buddha was awake, the while he seemed to sleep. By grim decree of outraged Heaven the race of tyrants was extinguished, leaving no rack behind save a loathed and dishonoured name.

THE END.

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