

Wingfield Lewis

The Curse of Koshiu: A Chronicle of Old Japan



Lewis Wingfield

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Содержание

CHAPTER I.	5
CHAPTER II.	13
CHAPTER III.	21
CHAPTER IV.	28
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	32

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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 Kiyôto; 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 disdaining 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 Æther, 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 beauteous 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 Kiôto 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 Kiôto, 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 Kiôto. 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 drearly. "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 Kiyôto."

"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 Koshiu, 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 Ki-yoto, and make another effort. Learn, O stubborn Koshiu, 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 Koshiu? – 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 Ki-yoto, 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 Koshiu. '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 Koshiu 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 Koshiu. 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 baulked 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 Kiôto quarrelling with other daimios, browbeating his imperial lord.

For her part, reared in retirement, and a stranger to town gaieties, 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 whisp 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 Kiôto, 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 impunity 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 Koshiu, the farmer?"

Miné, Koshiu'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 Koshiu, 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 pother 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 refection 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 grovellings, 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.

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