

GAUTIER

JUDITH

THE USURPER

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Judith Gautier

The Usurper An Episode in Japanese History

CHAPTER I. THE LEMON GROVE

Night was nearly gone. All slept in the beautiful bright city of Osaka. The harsh cry of the sentinels, calling one to another on the ramparts, broke the silence, unruffled otherwise save for the distant murmur of the sea as it swept into the bay.

Above the great dark mass formed by the palace and gardens of the Shogun¹ a star was fading slowly. Dawn trembled in the air, and the tree-tops were more plainly outlined against the sky, which grew bluer every moment. Soon a pale glimmer touched the highest branches, slipped between the boughs and their leaves, and filtered downward to the ground. Then, in the gardens of the Prince, alleys thick with brambles displayed their dim perspective; the grass resumed its emerald hue; a tuft of poppies renewed the splendor of its sumptuous flowers, and a snowy flight of steps was faintly visible through the mist, down a distant avenue.

At last, suddenly, the sky grew purple; arrows of light athwart the bushes made every drop of water on the leaves sparkle. A pheasant alighted heavily; a crane shook her white wings, and with a long cry flew slowly upwards; while the earth smoked like a caldron, and the birds loudly hailed the rising sun.

As soon as the divine luminary rose from the horizon, the sound of a gong was heard. It was struck with a monotonous rhythm of overpowering melancholy, – four heavy strokes, four light strokes; four heavy strokes, and so on. It was the salute to the coming day, and the call to morning prayers.

A hearty youthful peal of laughter, which broke forth suddenly, drowned these pious sounds for an instant; and two men appeared, dark against the clear sky, at the top of the snowy staircase. They paused a moment, on the uppermost step, to admire the lovely mass of brambles, ferns, and flowering shrubs which wreathed the balustrade of the staircase. Then they descended slowly through the fantastic shadows cast across the steps by the branches. Reaching the foot of the stairs, they moved quickly aside, that they might not upset a tortoise creeping leisurely along the last step. This tortoise's shell had been gilded, but the gilding was somewhat tarnished by the dampness of the grass. The two men moved down the avenue.

The younger of the pair was scarcely twenty years old, but would have passed for more, from the proud expression of his face, and the easy confidence of his glance. Still, when he laughed, he seemed a child; but he laughed seldom, and a sort of haughty gloom darkened his noble brow. His costume was very simple. Over a robe of gray crape he wore a mantle of blue satin, without any embroidery. He carried an open fan in his hand.

His comrade's dress was, on the contrary, very elegant. His robe was made of a soft white silk, just tinged with blue, suggestive of reflected moonlight. It fell in fine folds to his feet, and was confined at the waist by a girdle of black velvet. The wearer was twenty-four years old; he was a specimen of perfect beauty. The warm pallor of his face, his mockingly sweet eyes, and, above all, the scornful indifference apparent in his whole person, exercised a strange charm. His hand rested on the richly wrought hilt of one of the two swords whose points lifted up the folds of his black velvet cloak, the loose hanging sleeves of which were thrown back over his shoulders.

¹ Lord of the kingdom. This is the same title as Tycoon, but the latter was not created till 1854.

The two friends were bare-headed; their hair, twisted like a rope, was knotted around the top of their heads.

"But where are you taking me, gracious master?" suddenly cried the older of the two young men.

"This is the third time you have asked that question since we left the palace, Iwakura."

"But you have not answered once, light of my eyes!"

"Well! I want to surprise you. Shut your eyes and give me your hand."

Iwakura obeyed, and his companion led him a few steps across the grass.

"Now look," he said.

Iwakura opened his eyes, and uttered a low cry of astonishment.

Before him stretched a lemon grove in full bloom. Every tree and every shrub seemed covered with hoar-frost; on the topmost twigs the dawn cast tints of rose and gold. Every branch bent beneath its perfumed load; the clusters of flowers hung to the ground, upon which the overburdened boughs trailed. Amid this white wealth which gave forth a delicious odor, a few tender green leaves were occasionally visible.

"See," said the younger man with a smile, "I wanted to share with you, my favorite friend, the pleasure of this marvellous sight before any other eye rested on it. I was here yesterday: the grove was like a thicket of pearls; to-day all the flowers are open."

"These trees remind me of what the poet says of peach-blossoms," said Iwakura; "only here the snow-flakes of butterflies' wings with which the trees are covered have not turned rose-colored in their descent from heaven."

"Ah!" cried the younger man sighing, "would I might plunge into the midst of those flowers as into a bath, and intoxicate myself even unto death with their strong perfume!"

Iwakura, having admired them, made a slightly disappointed grimace.

"Far more beautiful blossoms were about to open in my dream," said he, stifling a yawn. "Master, why did you make me get up so early?"

"Come, Prince of Nagato," said the young man, laying his hand on his comrade's shoulder, "confess. I did not make you get up, for you did not go to bed last night."

"What?" cried Iwakura; "what makes you think so!"

"Your pallor, friend, and your haggard eyes."

"Am I not always so?"

"The dress you wear would be far too elegant for the hour of the cock.² And see! the sun has scarcely risen; we have only reached the hour of the rabbit."³

"To honor such a master as you, no hour is too early."

"Is it also in my honor, faithless subject, that you appear before me armed? Those two swords, forgotten in your sash, condemn you; you had just returned to the palace when I summoned you."

The guilty youth hung his head, not attempting to defend himself.

"But what ails your arm?" suddenly cried the other, noticing a thin white bandage wound about Iwakura's sleeve.

The latter hid his arm behind him, and held out the other hand.

"Nothing," he said.

But his companion grasped the arm which he concealed. The Prince of Nagato uttered an exclamation of pain.

"You are wounded, eh? One of these days I shall hear that Nagato has been killed in some foolish brawl. What have you been doing now, incorrigible and imprudent fellow?"

² Six hours after noon.

³ Six o'clock in the morning.

"When Hieyas, the regent, comes before you, you will know only too much about it," said the Prince; "you will hear fine things, O illustrious friend, in regard to your unworthy favorite. Methinks I already hear the sound of the terrible voice of the man from whom nothing is hid: 'Fide-Yori, ruler of Japan, son of the great Taiko-Sama, whose memory I revere! grave disorders have this night troubled Osaka.'"

The Prince of Nagato mimicked the voice of Hieyas so well that the young Shogun could not repress a smile.

'And what are these disorders?' you will say. 'Doors broken open, blows, tumults, scandals.' 'Are the authors of these misdeeds known?' 'The leader of the riot is the true criminal, and I know him well.' 'Who is he?' 'Who should it be but the man who takes a share in every adventure, every nocturnal brawl; who, but the Prince of Nagato, the terror of honest families, the dread of peaceful men?' And then you will pardon me, O too merciful man! Hieyas will reproach you with your weakness, dwelling upon it, that this weakness may redound to the injury of the Shogun and the profit of the Regent."

"What if I lose patience at last, Nagato," said the Shogun; "what if I exile you to your own province for a year?"

"I should go, master, without a murmur."

"Yes; and who would be left to love me?" said Fide-Yori, sadly. "I am surrounded by devotion, not by affection like yours. But perhaps I am unjust," he added; "you are the only one I love, and doubtless that is why I think no one loves me but you."

Nagato raised his eyes gratefully to the Prince.

"You feel that you are forgiven, don't you?" said Fide-Yori, smiling. "But try to spare me the Regent's reproaches; you know how painful they are to me. Go and salute him; the hour of his levee is at hand; we will meet again in the council."

"Must I smile upon that ugly creature?" grumbled Nagato.

But he had his dismissal; he saluted the Shogun, and moved away with a sulky air.

Fide-Yori continued his walk along the avenue, but soon returned to the lemon grove. He paused to admire it once more, and plucked a slender twig loaded with flowers. But just then the foliage rustled as if blown by a strong breeze; an abrupt movement stirred the branches, and a young girl appeared among the blossoms.

The Shogun started violently, and almost uttered a cry; he fancied himself the prey to some hallucination.

"Who are you?" he exclaimed; "perhaps the guardian spirit of this grove?"

"Oh, no," said the girl in a trembling voice; "but I am a very bold woman."

She issued from the grove amidst a shower of snowy petals, and knelt on the grass, stretching out her hands to the King.

Fide-Yori bent his head toward her, and gazed curiously at her. She was of exquisite beauty, – small, graceful, apparently weighed down by the amplitude of her robes. It seemed as if their silken weight bore her to her knees. Her large innocent eyes, like the eyes of a child, were timid and full of entreaty; her cheeks, velvety as a butterfly's wings, were tinged with a slight blush, and her small mouth, half open in admiration, revealed teeth white as drops of milk.

"Forgive me," she exclaimed, "forgive me for appearing before you without your express command."

"I forgive you, poor trembling bird," said Fide-Yori, "for had I known you and known your desire, my wish would have been to see you. What can I do for you? Is it in my power to make you happy?"

"Oh, master!" eagerly cried the girl, "with one word you can make me more radiant than Ten-Sio-Dai-Tsin, the daughter of the Sun."

"And what is that word?"

"Swear that you will not go to-morrow to the feast of the God of the Sea."

"Why this oath?" said the Shogun, amazed at this strange request.

"Because," said the young girl, shuddering, "a bridge will give way beneath the King's feet; and when night falls, Japan will be without a ruler."

"I suppose you have discovered a conspiracy?" said Fide-Yori, smiling.

At this incredulous smile the girl turned pale, and her eyes filled with tears.

"O pure disk of light!" she cried, "he does not believe me! All that I have hitherto accomplished is in vain! This is a dreadful obstacle, of which I never dreamed. You hearken to the voice of the cricket which prophesies heat; you listen to the frog who croaks a promise of rain; but a young girl who cries, 'Take care! I have seen the trap! death is on your path!' you pay no heed to her, but plunge headlong into the snare. But it must not be; you must believe me. Shall I kill myself at your feet? My death might be a pledge of my sincerity. Besides, if I have been deceived, what matters it? You can easily absent yourself from the feast. Hear me! I come along way, from a distant province. Alone with the dull anguish of my secret, I outwitted the most subtle spies, I conquered my terrors and overcame my weakness. My father thinks me gone on a pilgrimage to Kioto; and, you see, I am in your city, in the grounds of your palace. And yet the sentinels are watchful, the moats are broad, the walls high. See, my hands are bleeding; I burn with fever. Just now I feared I could not speak, my weary heart throbbled so violently at sight of you and with the joy of saving you. But now I am dizzy, my blood has turned to ice: you do not believe me."

"I believe you, and I swear to obey you," said the king, touched by her accent of despair. "I will not go to the feast of the God of the Sea."

The young girl uttered a cry of delight, and gazed with gratitude at the sun as it rose above the trees.

"But tell me how you discovered this plot," continued the Shogun, "and who are its authors?"

"Oh! do not order me to tell you. The whole edifice of infamy that I overthrow would fall upon my own head."

"So be it, my child; keep your secret. But at least tell me whence comes this great devotion, and why is my life so precious to you?"

The girl slowly raised her eyes to the King, then looked down and blushed, but did not reply. A vague emotion troubled the heart of the Prince. He was silent, and yielded to the sweet sensation. He would fain have remained thus, in silence, amidst these bird songs, these perfumes, beside this kneeling maiden.

"Tell me who you are, you who have saved me from death," he asked at last; "and tell me what reward I can give you worthy of your courage."

"My name is Omiti," said the young girl; "I can tell you nothing more. Give me the flower that you hold in your hand; it is all I would have from you."

Fide-Yori offered her the lemon twig; Omiti seized it, and fled through the grove.

The Shogun stood rooted to the spot for some time, lost in thought, gazing at the turf pressed by the light foot of Omiti.

CHAPTER II. NAGATO'S WOUND

The Prince of Nagato had returned to his palace. He slept stretched out on a pile of fine mats; around him was almost total darkness, for the blinds had been lowered, and large screens spread before the windows. Here and there a black lacquer panel shone in the shadow and reflected dimly, like a dull mirror, the pale face of the Prince as he lay on his cushions.

Nagato had not succeeded in seeing Hieyas: he was told that the Regent was engaged with very important business. Pleased at the chance, the young Prince hurried home to rest for a few hours before the council.

In the chambers adjoining the one in which he slept servants came and went silently, preparing their master's toilette. They walked cautiously, that the floor might not creak, and talked together in low tones.

"Our poor master knows no moderation," said an old woman, scattering drops of perfume over a court cloak. "Continual feasting and nightly revels, – never any rest; he will kill himself."

"Oh, no! pleasure does not kill," said an impudent-looking boy, dressed in gay colors.

"What do you know about it, imp?" replied the woman. "Wouldn't you think the brat spent his life in enjoyment like a lord? Don't talk so boldly about things you know nothing of!"

"Perhaps I know more about them than you do," said the child, making a wry face; "you haven't got married yet, for all your great age and your great beauty."

The woman threw the contents of her flask in the boy's face; but he hid behind the silver disk of a mirror which he was polishing, and the perfume fell to the ground. When the danger was over, out popped his head.

"Will you have me for a husband?" he cried; "you can spare me a few of your years, and between us we'll make but a young couple."

The woman, in her rage, gave a sharp scream.

"Will you be quiet?" said another servant, threatening her with his fist.

"But who could listen to that young scamp without blushing and losing her temper?"

"Blush as much as you like," said the child; "that won't make any noise."

"Come, Loo, be quiet!" said the servant.

Loo shrugged his shoulders and made a face, then went on listlessly rubbing his mirror.

At this instant a man entered the room.

"I must speak to Iwakura, Prince of Nagato," he cried aloud.

All the servants made violent signs to impose silence on the new-comer. Loo rushed towards him and stopped his mouth with the rag with which he was polishing the mirror; but the man pushed him roughly away.

"What does all this mean?" he said. "Are you crazy? I want to speak to the lord whom you serve, the very illustrious daimio who rules over the province of Nagato. Go and tell him, and stop your monkey tricks."

"He is asleep," whispered a servant.

"We cannot wake him," said another.

"He is frightfully tired," said Loo, with his finger on his lip.

"Tired or not, he will rejoice at my coming," said the stranger.

"We were ordered not to wake him until a few moments before the hour for the council," said the old woman.

"I sha'n't take the risk of rousing him," said Loo, drawing his mouth to one side. —

"Nor I," said the old woman.

"I will go myself, if you like," said the messenger; "moreover, the hour of the council is close at hand. I just saw the Prince of Arima on his way to the Hall of a Thousand Mats."

"The Prince of Arima!" cried Loo; "and he is always late!"

"Alas!" said the old woman; "shall we have time to dress our master?"

Loo pushed aside a sliding partition and opened a narrow passage; he then softly entered Nagato's bedroom. It was cool within, and a delicate odor of camphor filled the air.

"Master! master!" said Loo in a loud voice, "the hour has come; and besides there is a messenger here."

"A messenger!" cried Nagato, raising himself on one elbow; "what does he look like?"

"He is dressed like a samurai:⁴ he has two-swords in his sash."

"Let him come in at once," said the Prince, in a tone of agitation.

Loo beckoned to the messenger, who prostrated himself on the threshold of the room.

"Approach!" said Nagato.

But the messenger being unable to see in the dark hall, Loo folded back one leaf of a screen which intercepted the light. A broad band of sunshine entered; it lighted up the delicate texture of the matting which covered the wall and glistened on a silver stork with sinuous neck and spread wings, hanging against it.

The messenger approached the Prince and offered him a slender roll of paper wrapped in silk; then he left the room backwards.

Nagato hastily unrolled the paper, and read as follows:

"You have been here, illustrious one, I know it! But why this madness, and why this mystery? I cannot understand your actions. I have received severe reprimands from my sovereign on your account. As you know, I was passing through the gardens, escorting her to her palace, when all at once I saw you leaning against a tree. I could not repress an exclamation, and at my cry she turned towards me and followed the direction of my eyes. 'Ah!' she said, 'it is the sight of Nagato that draws such cries from you. Could you not stifle them, and at least spare me the sight of your immodest conduct?' Then she turned and looked at you several times. The anger in her eyes alarmed me. I dare not appear before her to-morrow, and I send you this message to beg you not to repeat these strange visits, which have such fatal consequences to me. Alas! do you not know that I love you, and need I repeat it? I will be your wife whenever you wish... But it pleases you to adore me as if I were an idol in the pagoda of the Thirty-three thousand three hundred and thirty-three.⁵ If you had not risked your life repeatedly to see me, I should think you were mocking me. I entreat you, expose me to no more such reproofs, and do not forget that I am ready to recognize you as my lord and master, and that to live by your side is my dearest desire."

Nagato smiled and slowly closed the roll; he fixed his eyes upon the streak of light cast on the floor from the window, and seemed lost in deep revery.

Little Loo was greatly disappointed. He had tried to read over his master's shoulder; but the roll was written in Chinese characters, and his knowledge fell short of that. He was quite familiar with the Kata-Kana, and even knew something of Hira-Kana; but unfortunately was entirely ignorant of Chinese writing. To hide his vexation, he went to the window and lifting one corner of the blind, looked out.

"Ah!" he said, "the Prince of Satsuma and the Prince of Aki arrive together, and their followers look askance at one another. Ah! Satsuma takes precedence. Oh! oh! there goes the Regent down the

⁴ Noble officer in the service of a daimio or prince.

⁵ Temple at Kyoto containing 33,333 idols.

avenue. He glances this way, and laughs when he sees the Prince of Nagato's suite still standing at the door. He would laugh far louder if he knew how little progress my master had made in his toilet."

"Let him laugh, Loo! and come here," said the Prince, who had taken a pencil and roll of paper from his girdle and hastily written a few words. "Run to the palace and give this to the King."

Loo set off as fast as his legs could carry him, pushing and jostling those who came in his way to his utmost.

"And now," said Iwakura, "dress me quickly."

His servants clustered about him, and the Prince was soon arrayed in the broad trailing trousers which make the wearer look as if he were walking on his knees, and the stiff ceremonial mantle, made still more heavy by the crest embroidered on its sleeves. The arms of Nagato consisted of a black bolt surmounting three balls in the form of a pyramid.

The young man, usually so careful of his dress, paid no attention to the work of his servants; he did not even glance at the mirror so well polished by Loo, when the high pointed cap, tied by golden ribbons, was placed on his head.

As soon as his toilette was complete he left the palace; but so great was his abstraction that, instead of getting into the norimono awaiting him in the midst of his escort, he set off on foot, dragging his huge pantaloons in the sand, and exposing himself to the rays of the sun. His suite, terrified at this breach of etiquette, followed in utter disorder, while the spies ordered to watch the actions of the Prince hastened to report this extraordinary occurrence to their various masters.

The ramparts of the royal residence at Osaka, thick, lofty walls flanked at intervals by a semicircular bastion, form a huge square, which encloses several palaces and vast gardens. To the south and west the fortress is sheltered by the city; on the north the river which flows through Osaka widens, and forms an immense moat at the foot of the rampart; on the east, a narrower stream bounds it. On the platform of the walls grows a row of centenarian cedars of a sombre verdure, their level branches projecting horizontally across the battlements. Within, a second wall, preceded by a moat, encloses the parks and palaces reserved for the princes and their families. Between this wall and the ramparts lie the houses of soldiers and officials. A third wall surrounds the private palace of the Shogun, built upon a hill. This building is of simple but noble design. Square towers with roof upon roof rise here and there from the general mass. Marble stair-ways, bordered by slender lacquer railings, and decorated at the foot by bronze monsters or huge pottery vases, lead to the outer galleries. The terrace before the palace is covered with gravel and white sand which reflects back the splendor of the sun.

In the centre of the edifice stands a large, lofty, and magnificently ornate square tower. It supports seven roofs, whose angles are bent upward; on the topmost roof two enormous goldfish⁶ writhe and twist, glittering so that they may be seen from every point of the city.

In that part of the palace nearest to this tower is the Hall of a Thousand Mats, the meeting-place for the Council.

The lords arrived from all directions, climbed the hill, and moved towards the central portico of the palace, which opens upon a long gallery leading directly into the Hall of a Thousand Mats.

This lofty, spacious hall is entirely bare of furniture. Movable partitions sliding in grooves intersect it and, when closed, form compartments of various sizes. But the partitions are always opened wide in such a way as to produce agreeable effects of perspective. The panels in one compartment are covered with black lacquer decorated in gold, in another of red lacquer or of Jeseri wood, the veins of which form natural and pleasing designs. Here, the screen, painted by a famous artist, is lined with white satin heavily embroidered with flowers; there, on a dead gold ground, a peach-tree loaded with its pink blossoms spreads its gnarled branches; or perhaps merely an irregular

⁶ These fish actually exist, and are valued at an immense sum, many placing it as high as a million dollars.

sprinkling of black, red, and white dots oil dark wood dazzles the eye. The mats which cover the floor are snow white, and fringed with silver.

The nobles, with their loose pantaloons falling below their feet, seem to move forward on their knees, and their robes brush the mats with a continuous sound, like the murmur of a waterfall. The spectators, moreover, preserve a religious silence. The *Hattamotos*, members of an order of nobility, recently instituted by the Regent, crouch in the farthest corners, while the *Samurais*, of ancient lineage, owners of fiefs and vassals of princes, pass these newly made nobles by, with scornful glances, and come perceptibly closer to the great drawn curtain veiling the platform reserved for the Shogun. The *Lords of the Earth*, princes supreme in their own provinces, form a wide circle before the throne, leaving a free space for the thirteen members of the Council.

The councillors soon arrive. They salute each other, and exchange a few words in low voices; then take their places.

On the left, presenting their profile to the drawn curtain, are the superior councillors. They are five in number, but only four are present. The nearest to the throne is the Prince of Satsuma, a venerable old man with a long face full of kindness. Next to him is spread the mat of the absentee. Then comes the Prince of Satake, who bites his lip as he carefully arranges the folds of his robe. He is young, dark-skinned, and his jet black eyes twinkle strangely. Next to him is established the Prince of Ouesougi, a fat and listless-looking man. The last is the Prince of Isida, a short, ugly-faced fellow.

The eight inferior councillors crouching opposite the throne are the princes of Arima, Figo, Wakasa, Aki, Tosa, Ise, and Coroda.

A stir is heard in the direction of the entrance, and every head is bent to the ground. The Regent advances into the hall. He moves rapidly, not being embarrassed, like the princes, by the folds of his trailing trousers, and seat's himself, cross-legged, on a pile of mats to the right of the throne.

Hieyas was at this time an old man. His back was slightly bent, but he was broad-shouldered and muscular. His head, entirely shaven, revealed a high forehead, with prominent eyebrows. His thin lips, cruel and obstinate in expression, were deeply marked at the corners with downward wrinkles. His cheek-bones were extremely marked, and his prominent eyes flashed forth abrupt and insincere glances.

As he entered, he cast an evil look, accompanied by a half-smile, towards the vacant place of the Prince of Nagato. But when the curtain rose, the Shogun appeared, leaning with one hand on the shoulder of his youthful councillor.

The Regent frowned.

All the spectators prostrated themselves, pressing their foreheads on the ground. When they rose, the Prince of Nagato had taken his place with the rest.

Fide-Yori seated himself, and motioned to Hieyas that he might speak.

Then the Regent read various unimportant reports, – nominations of magistrates, movements of the troops on the frontier, the change of residence of a governor whose term had expired. Hieyas explained briefly and volubly the reasons which had actuated him. The councillors ran their eyes over the manuscripts, and having no objection to make, acquiesced by a gesture. But soon the Regent folded all these papers and handed them to a secretary stationed near him; then resumed his speech, after first coughing: —

"I called this special meeting to-day," he said, "that its members might share the fears which I have conceived for the tranquillity of the kingdom, on learning that the severe supervision ordered over the European bonzes and such Japanese as have embraced their strange doctrine, are strangely relaxed, and that they have resumed their dangerous intrigues against the public peace. I therefore demand the enforcement of the law decreeing the extermination of all Christians."

A singular uproar arose in the assembly, – a mixture of approval, surprise, cries of horror and of anger.

"Would you witness a renewal of the hideous and bloody scenes whose terror still lingers in our minds?" cried the Prince of Satake with his wonted animation.

"It is odd to affirm that poor people who preach nothing but virtue and concord can disturb the peace of an empire," said Nagato.

"The Daimio speaks well," said the Prince of Satsuma; "it is impossible for the bonzes of Europe to have any effect upon the tranquillity of the kingdom. It is therefore useless to disturb them."

But Hieyas addressed himself directly to Fide-Yori.

"Master," said he, "since no one will share my anxiety, I must inform you that a dreadful rumor is beginning to circulate among the nobles and among the people."

He paused a moment, to add solemnity to his words.

"It is said that he who is still under my guardianship, the future ruler of Japan, our gracious lord, Fide-Yori, has embraced the Christian faith."

An impressive silence followed these words. The spectators exchanged glances which said clearly that they had heard the report, which might have a solid basis.

Fide-Yori took up the word.

"And should a calumny spread by ill-intentioned persons be avenged upon the innocent I command that the Christians shall not be molested in any way. My father, I regret it, thought it his duty to pursue with his wrath and to exterminate those unhappy men; but I swear, while I live, not one drop of their blood shall be shed."

Hieyas was stupefied by the resolute accent of the young Shogun; for the first time he spoke as a master, and commanded. He bowed in sign of submission, and made no objection. Fide-Yori had attained his majority, and if he was not yet proclaimed Shogun it was because Hieyas was in no haste to lay down his power. He did not, therefore, wish to enter into open strife with his ward. He set the question aside for the time being, and passed to something else.

"I am told," he said, "that a nobleman was attacked and wounded last night on the Kioto road. I do not yet know the name of this noble; but perhaps the Prince of Nagato, who was at Kioto last night, heard something of this adventure?"

"Ah! you know that I was at Kioto," muttered the Prince; "then I understand why there were assassins on my path."

"How could Nagato be at Osaka and at Kioto at one and the same time?" asked the Prince of Satake. "There is nothing talked of this morning but the water-party which he gave last night, and which ended so merrily with a fight between the lords and the sailors from the shore."

"I even got a scratch in the squabble," said Nagato, smiling.

"The Prince traverses in a few hours distances that others would take a day to go over," said Hieyas; "that's all. Only, he does not spare his horses; every time he comes back to the palace, his animal falls down dead."

The Prince of Nagato turned pale, and felt for the sword missing from his girdle.

"I did not suppose that your anxious care extended even to the beasts of the kingdom," said he, with an insolent irony. "I thank you in the name of my dead horses."

The Shogun, full of alarm, cast supplicating glances at Nagato. But it seemed as if the Regent's patience were proof against all trials to-day. He smiled and made no reply.

However, Fide-Yori saw that anger smouldered in his friend's soul; and dreading some fresh outburst, he put an end to the council by withdrawing.

Almost immediately one of the palace guards informed the Prince of Nagato that the Shogun was asking for him. The Prince said a pleasant word to several nobles, bowed to the rest, and left the hall without turning his head in the direction of Hieyas.

When he reached the apartments of the Shogun, he heard a woman's voice, petulant, and at the same time complaining. He caught his own name.

"I have heard all," said the voice, – "your refusal to accede to the wishes of the Regent, whom you suffered to be insulted before your very eyes by the Prince of Nagato, whose impudence is truly incomparable; and the rare patience of Hieyas, who did not take up the insult from respect for you, from pity for him whom you believe to be your friend, in your ignorance of men."

Nagato recognized the speaker as the Shogun's mother, the beautiful and haughty Yodogimi.

"Mother," said the Shogun, "turn your thoughts to embroidery and dress: that is woman's sphere."

Nagato entered hurriedly, that he might not longer be an unsuspected listener.

"My gracious master asked for me," he said. Yodogimi turned and blushed slightly on seeing the Prince, who bowed low before her.

"I have something to say to you," said the Shogun.

"Then I will retire," said Yodogimi bitterly, "and go back to my embroidery."

She crossed the room slowly, rustling her trailing silken robes, and casting as she went out a singular look at Nagato, compounded of coquetry and hate.

"You heard my mother," said Fide-Yori.

"Yes," said Nagato.

"Every one is anxious to detach me from you, my friend: what can be their motive?"

"Your mother is blinded by some calumny," said the Prince; "the others see in me a clear-sighted foe, who can outwit the plots which they contrive against you."

"It was of a plot I wished to speak to you."

"Against your life?"

"Precisely. It was revealed to me in a strange fashion, and I can scarcely credit it; yet I cannot resist a certain feeling of uneasiness. To-morrow, at the feast of the God of the Sea, a bridge will give way beneath me."

"Horrible!" cried Nagato. "Do not go to the feast."

"If I stay away," said Fide-Yori, "I shall never know the truth, for the plot will not be carried out. But if I go to the feast," he added with a smile, "if the conspiracy really exist, the truth would be somewhat difficult of proof."

"To be sure," said Nagato. "Still, our doubts must be set at rest; some means must be found. Is your route fixed?"

"Hieyas has arranged it."

Fide-Yori took a roll of paper from a low table and read: —

"Yedogava Quay, Fishmarket Square, Sycamore Street, seashore. Return by Bamboo Hill and Swallow bridge.

"The wretches!" cried Iwakura; "that is the bridge swung across the valley!"

"The place would be well chosen indeed," said the Shogun.

"It must be that bridge; those crossing the countless city canals would not expose you to death by crumbling under your feet, but at the utmost to a disagreeable bath."

"True," said Fide-Yori; "and from the Swallow bridge I should be hurled upon the rocks."

"Have you full trust in my friendship for you?" asked the Prince of Nagato, after a moment's thought.

"Can you doubt it, Iwakura?" said the Shogun.

"Very well, then. Fear nothing, feign complete ignorance, let them lead the way, and march straight up to the bridge. I have thought of a way to save you, and yet discover the truth."

"I trust myself to you, friend, in perfect confidence."

"Then let me go; I must have time to carry out my scheme."

"Go, Prince; I place my life in your hands untremblingly," said the Shogun.

Nagato hastened away, first saluting the king, who replied by a friendly gesture.

CHAPTER III. FEAST OF THE SEA-GOD

Next day, from early dawn, the streets of Osaka were full of movement and mirth. The people prepared for the feast, rejoicing in the thought of coming pleasures. Shops, the homes of artisans and citizens, opening full upon the street, afforded a free view of their modest interiors, furnished only with a few beautifully colored screens.

Voices were heard, mixed with bursts of laughter; and now and then some mischievous child struggled out of his mother's arms, while she was trying to dress him in his holiday attire, and frisked, and danced with glee upon the wooden stairs leading from the house to the road. He was then recalled with cries of pretended anger from within, the father's voice was heard, and the child returned to his mother, trembling with impatience.

Sometimes a little one would cry: "Mother, mother! Here comes the procession!"

"Nonsense!" said the mother; "the priests have not even finished dressing yet."

But still she moved towards the front of the house, and, leaning over the light balustrade, gazed into the street.

Carriers, naked save for a strip of stuff knotted round their waists, hastened rapidly by, across their shoulders a bamboo stick, which bent at the tip from the weight of a package of letters. They went in the direction of the Shogun's residence.

Before the barber's shops the crowd was thicker than elsewhere; the boys could not possibly shave all the chins presented, or dress all the heads offered. Customers awaiting their turn chatted gayly outside the door. Some were already dressed in their holiday garb, of bright colors, covered with embroidery. Others, more prudent, naked to the waist, preferred to finish their toilet after their hair was dressed. Vegetable-sellers and fish-merchants moved about through the throng, loudly praising their wares, which they carried in two buckets hanging from a cross piece of wood laid over one shoulder.

On every side people were trimming their houses with pennants, and streamers, and embroidered stuffs covered with Chinese inscriptions in gold on a black or purple ground; lanterns were hung up, and blossoming boughs.

As the morning advanced, the streets became fuller and fuller of merry tumult. Bearers of norimonos, clad in light tunics drawn tightly round their waist, with large shield-shaped hats, shouted to the people to make room. Samurais went by on horseback, preceded by runners, who, with lowered head and arms extended, forced a passage through the crowd. Groups paused to talk, sheltered from the sun by huge parasols, and formed motionless islands in the midst of the surging, billowy sea of promenaders. A doctor hurried by, fanning himself gravely, and followed by his two assistants carrying the medicine-chest.

"Illustrious master, are you not going to the feast!" cried the passers-by.

"Sick men pay no heed to feasts," he answered with a sigh; "and as there are none for them, there can be none for us."

On the banks of Yedogava the excitement was still greater. The river was literally hidden by thousands of vessels; the masts trimmed, the sails still unset, but ready to unfurl, like wings; the hatchways hung with silks and satins; the prows decked with banners whose golden fringe, dipped into the water, glittered in the sun, and stained the azure stream with many-colored ripples.

Bands of young women in brilliant attire came down the snowy steps of the river-banks cut into broad terraces. They entered elegant boats made of camphor-wood, set off by carvings and ornaments of copper, and filled them with flowers, which spread perfumes through the air.

From the top of Kiobassi – that fine bridge which resembles a bent bow – were hung pieces of gauze; crape, and light silk, of the most delicate colors, and covered with inscriptions. A gentle breeze softly stirred these lovely stuffs, which the boats, moving up and down, pushed aside as they passed. In the distance glistened the tall tower of the palace and the two monstrous goldfish which adorn its pinnacle. At the entrance to the city, to right and left of the river, the two superb bastions looking out to sea displayed on every tower, at each angle of the wall, the national standard, white with a scarlet disk, – an emblem of the sun rising through the morning mists. Scattered pagodas upreared above the trees against the radiant sky their many roofs, curled upward at the edge in Chinese fashion.

The pagoda of Yebis, the divinity of the sea, attracted especial attention upon this day; not that its towers were higher, or its sacred doors more numerous, than those of neighboring temples, but from its gardens was to start the religious procession so eagerly awaited by the crowd.

At last, in the distance, the drum sounded. Every ear was bent to catch the sacred rhythm familiar to all: a few violent blows at regular intervals, then a hasty roll, gradually fading and dying, then again abrupt blows.

A tremendous roar of delight rose from the crowd, who instantly took their places along the houses on either side of the streets through which the procession was to pass.

The Kashiras, district police, rapidly stretched cords from stake to stake, to prevent the throng from trespassing on the main street. The procession had started; it had passed through the Tory, or sacred gateway which stands outside the pagoda of Yebis; and soon it defiled before the impatient multitude.

First came sixteen archers, one behind the other, in two lines, each man at a convenient distance from the other. They wore armor made of plates of black horn fastened together by stitches of red wool. Two swords were thrust through their sashes, barbed arrows extended above their shoulders, and in their hands they held huge bows of black and gold lacquer. Behind them came a body of servants bearing long staffs tufted with silk. Then appeared Tartar musicians, whose advent was announced by a joyous racket. Metallic vibrations of the gong sounded at intervals, mingled with drums beaten vigorously, shuddering cymbals, conch-shells giving out sonorous notes, shrill flute-tones, and blasts of trumpets rending the air, formed such an intensity of noise, that the nearest spectators winked and blinked, and seemed almost blinded.

After the musicians came, borne on a high platform, a gigantic crawfish, ridden by a bonze. Flags of every hue, long and narrow, bearing the arms of the city, and held by boys, swung to and fro about the enormous crustacean. Following, were fifty lancers, wearing round lacquer hats, and carrying on their shoulders a lance trimmed with a red tassel. Two servants led next a splendidly caparisoned horse, whose mane, drawn up above his neck, was braided and arranged like a rich fancy trimming. Standard-bearers marched behind this horse; their banners were blue, and covered with golden characters. Then advanced two great Corean tigers, with open jaws and bloodshot eyes. Children in the crowd screamed with fright; but the tigers were of pasteboard, and men, hidden in their paws, made them move. A monstrous drum, of cylindrical form, followed, borne by two bonzes; a third walked beside it and struck the drum incessantly with his clenched fist.

Finally came seven splendidly dressed young women, who were received with merry applause. These were the most famous and most beautiful courtesans of the town. They walked one after the other majestically, full of pride, each accompanied by a maid, and followed by a man who held a large silken parasol over her. The people, who knew them well, named them as they passed.

"There's the woman with the silver teal!" Two of those birds were embroidered on the large loose-sleeved cloak which she wore over her many dresses, whose collars were folded one above the other upon her breast. The cloak was of green satin, the embroidery of white silk, mixed with silver. The fair one's headdress was stuck full of enormous tortoise-shell pins, forming a semicircle of rays around her face.

"That one there, that is the seaweed woman!"

The beautiful growth, whose silken roots were lost in the embroideries of the cloak, floated out from the stuff and fluttered in the wind.

Then came the beauty with the golden dolphin; the beauty with the almond-blossoms; the beauties with the swan, the peacocks, and the blue monkey. All walked barefooted upon high clogs made of ebony, which increased their apparent height. Their heads bristled with shell-pins, and their faces, skilfully painted, seemed young and charming under the soft shadow of the parasol.

Behind these women marched men bearing willow-branches; then a whole army of priests, carrying on litters, or under pretty canopies with gilded tops, the accessories, ornaments, and furniture of the temple, which was purified during the progress of the procession.

After all these came the shrine of Yebis, the God of the Sea, the indefatigable fisher who spends entire days wrapped in a net, a line in his hand, standing on a rock half submerged in the water. The octagonal roof was covered with blue and silver, bordered with a pearl fringe, and surmounted by a great bird with outspread wings. This shrine, containing the God Yebis invisible within, was borne by fifty bonzes naked to the waist.

Behind, upon a litter, was borne the magnificent fish consecrated to Yebis, the *Akama, or scarlet lady*, – the favorite dish of all those who are fond of dainty fare. Thirty horsemen armed with pikes ended the procession.

The long train crossed the city, followed by the crowd which gathered in its rear; it reached the suburbs, and after a long march came out upon the sea-shore.

Simultaneously with its arrival, thousands of vessels reached the mouth of Yedogava, which wafted them gently towards the ocean. The sails were spread, the oars bit the water, banners floated on the breeze, while the sun flashed myriad sparkles across the blue, dancing waves.

Fide-Yori also reached the shore by the road that skirts the river bank; he stopped his horse and sat motionless in the midst of his suite, which was but scanty, the Regent being unwilling to eclipse the religious *cortége* by the royal luxury.

Hieyas himself was carried in a norimono, as were the mother and wife of the Shogun. He declared himself ill.

Fifty soldiers, a few standard-bearers, and two out-runners formed the entire escort.

The arrival of the young Prince divided the attention of the crowd, and the procession of Yebis no longer sufficed to attract every eye. The royal headdress, a sort of oblong golden cap placed upon Fide-Yori's head, made him easily recognizable from a distance.

Soon the religious procession filed slowly before the Shogun. Then the priests with the shrine left the ranks and went close down to the water's edge.

Upon this the fishermen and river boatmen suddenly ran up with cries, bounds, and gambols, and threw themselves upon the bearers of Yebis. They imitated a battle, uttering shouts, which grew more and more shrill. The priests made a feigned resistance; but soon the shrine passed from their shoulders to those of the stout sailors. The latter with howls of joy rushed into the sea and drew their beloved god through the clear waves, while bands of music, stationed on the junks which ploughed the sea, broke into merry melody. At last the sailors returned to land, amidst the cheers of the crowd, who soon scattered, to return in all haste to the town, where many other diversions awaited them, – open-air shows, sales of all sorts, theatrical representations, banquets, and libations of saki. Fide-Yori left the beach in his turn, preceded by the two runners and followed by his train. They entered a cool and charming little valley, and took a road which, by a very gentle slope, led to the summit of the hill. This road was utterly deserted, all access to it having been closed since the evening before.

Fide-Yori thought of the plot, of the bridge which was to give way and hurl him into an abyss. He had dwelt upon it all night with anguish; but beneath this bright sun, amidst this peaceful scene, he could no longer believe in human malice. And yet the path chosen for the return to the palace was strange. "We will take this road to avoid the crowd," said Hieyas; but he had only to close another way to the people, and the King might have gone back to the castle without making this odd circuit.

Fide-Yori looked about for Nagato; he was nowhere to be seen. Since morning the Shogun had twenty times inquired for him. The Prince was not to be found.

Sad forebodings seized upon the young Shogun. He suddenly asked himself why his escort should be so scanty, why he was preceded by two runners only. He looked behind him, and it seemed to him as if the norimono-bearers slackened their pace.

They reached the brow of the hill and soon Swallow bridge appeared at the turn of the road. As his eye fell upon it, Fide-Yori involuntarily reined in his horse; his heart beat violently. The frail bridge, boldly flung from one hill to another, crossed a very deep valley. The river, rapid as a torrent, leaped over the rocks with a dull, continuous noise. But the bridge seemed as usual to rest firmly upon the smooth rocks which jutted out beneath it.

The runners advanced unshrinkingly. If the conspiracy existed, they knew nothing of it. The young King dared not pause; he seemed to hear echoing in his ears Nagato's words: "March fearlessly towards the bridge!"

But the beseeching tones of Omiti also thrilled through his mind he recalled the oath which he had uttered. Nagato's silence alarmed him above all else. How many things might occur to foil the Prince's plan! Surrounded by skilful spies who watched his slightest acts, he might have been carried off and prevented from communicating with the King. All these thoughts rushed tumultuously into Fido-Yori's brain, the last supposition making him turn pale. Then, by one of those mental freaks often noted in situations of extreme peril, he suddenly recalled a song which he had sung as a child, to make himself familiar with the chief sounds of the Japanese language. He mechanically repeated it: —

"Color and perfume fade away.
What is there in this world that is permanent?
The day which is passed, vanishes in the gulf of oblivion.
It is like the echo of a dream.
Its absence causes not the slightest distress."

"I learned that when a mere child," murmured the King; "and yet I now shrink and hesitate at the possibility of death."

Ashamed of his weakness, he urged his horse forward. Just then a loud noise was heard on the opposite side of the bridge; and, suddenly turning the corner of the road, angry horses, with flying mane and bloodshot eyes, appeared, dragging behind them a chariot laden with the trunks of trees. They hastened towards the bridge, and their furious feet rang doubly loud upon the wooden flooring.

At the sight of these animals coming towards them Fide-Yori's whole escort uttered cries of terror, the porters dropped their norimonos, the women jumped out of them in alarm, and, gathering up their ample robes, fled hastily away. The runners, whose feet already touched the bridge, turned abruptly, and Fide-Yori instinctively sprang to one side.

But all at once, like a cord which, too tightly stretched, breaks, the bridge gave way with a loud crash; it first bent in the centre, then the two fragments rose suddenly in the air, scattering a shower of pieces on every hand. The horses and the car were plunged into the river, the water dashing in foam to the very brow of the hill. For some moments one animal hung by his harness, struggling above the gulf; but his bonds gave way and he fell. The tumultuous stream quickly bore to the sea horses, floating tree trunks, and all the remnants of the bridge.

"Oh, Omiti!" cried the King, motionless with horror, "you did not deceive me! This then was the fate reserved for me! Had it not been for your devotion, sweet girl, my mangled body would even now be flung from rock to rock."

"Well, master, you possess the knowledge that you wished. What do you think of my team?" cried a voice close beside the King.

The latter turned. He was alone, all his servants had abandoned him; but he saw a head rising from the valley. He recognized Nagato, who quickly climbed the stony elope and stood beside the King.

"Ah, my friend! my brother!" said Fide-Yori, who could not restrain his tears. "What have I ever done to inspire such hatred? Who is the unhappy man whom my life oppresses, and who would fain hurry me from the world?"

"Would you know that wretch? – would you learn the name of the guilty man?" said Nagato with a frown.

"Do you know him, friend? Tell me his name."

"Hieyas!" said Nagato.

CHAPTER IV. THE SISTER OF THE SUN

It was the warmest hour of the day. All the halls of the palace at Kioto were plunged in cool darkness, thanks to the lowered shades and open screens before the windows.

Kioto is the capital, the sacred city, the residence of a god exiled to earth, the direct descendant of the celestial founders of Japan, the absolute sovereign, the high priest of all the forms of religion practised throughout the kingdom of the rising sun, in fact, the Mikado. The Shogun is only the first among the subjects of the Mikado; but the latter, crushed beneath the weight of his own majesty, blinded by his superhuman splendor, leaves the care of terrestrial affairs to the Shogun, who rules in his stead, while he sits alone, absorbed in the thought of his own sublimity.

In the centre of the palace parks, in one of the pavilions built for the nobles of the court, a woman lay stretched upon the floor which was covered with fine mats. Suddenly she rose upon her elbow and plunged her dainty fingers in the dark masses of her hair. Not far from her, an attendant, crouched on the ground, was playing with a pretty dog of a rare species, which looked like a ball of black and white silk. A koto, or musical instrument with thirteen strings, a writing-case, a roll of paper, a fan, and a box of sweetmeats were scattered over the floor, which no furniture concealed. The walls were made of cedar wood, carved in open work or covered with brilliant paintings enhanced by gold and silver; half-closed panels formed openings through which other halls were visible, and beyond these still other apartments.

"Mistress, you are sad," said the attendant. "Shall I strike the koto-strings, and sing a song to cheer you?"

The mistress shook her head.

"What?" cried the maid, "Fatkoura no longer loves music? Has she then forgotten that she owes the light of day to it? For when the Sun-goddess, enraged with the gods, withdrew into a cavern, it was by letting her hear divine music for the first time that she was led back to heaven!"

Fatkoura uttered a sigh, and made no answer.

"Shall I grind some ink for you? Your paper has long remained as stainless as the snow on Mount Fusi. If you have a grief, cast it into the mould of verse, and you will be rid of it."

"No, Tika; love is not to be got rid of; it is a burning pain, which devours one by day and by night, and never sleeps."

"Unhappy love, perhaps; but you are beloved, mistress!" said Tika, drawing nearer.

"I know not what serpent hidden in the depths of my heart tells me that I am not."

"What!" said Tika in amaze, "has he not revealed his deep passion by a thousand acts of folly? Did he not come but lately, at the risk of his life, – for the wrath of the Kisaki might well prove fatal, – merely to behold you for one instant?"

"Yes; and he vanished without exchanging a single word with me, Tika!" added Fatkoura, seizing the young girl's wrists in a nervous grasp. "He did not even look at me."

"Impossible!" said Tika; "has he not told you that he loved you?"

"He has; and I believed him, because I was so eager to believe. But now I believe him no longer."

"Why?"

"Because if he loved me he would have married me long since, and taken me to his estates."

"But the affection which he bears his master keeps him at the Court of Osaka!"

"So he says; but is that the language of love? What would I nob sacrifice for him!.. Alas! I thirst for his presence! His face, so haughty, and yet so gentle, floats before my eyes! I long to fix it, but it escapes me! Ah! if I might but spend a few happy months with him, I would gladly kill myself

afterwards, lulling myself to sleep with my love; and my past happiness would be a soft winding-sheet for me."

Fatkoura burst into sobs and hid her face in her hands. Tika strove to console her. She threw her arms around her, and said a thousand affectionate things, but could not succeed in calming her.

Suddenly a noise was heard at the other end of the room, and the little dog began to yelp.

Tika rose quickly and ran out, to prevent any servant from entering and seeing the emotion of her mistress; she soon returned beaming.

"It is he! it is he!" she exclaimed. "He is here; he wishes to see you."

"Do not jest with me, Tika!" said Fatkoura, rising to her feet.

"Here is his card," said the young girl; and she offered a paper to Fatkoura, who read at a glance: —

"Iwakura Teroumoto Mori, Prince of Nagato, entreats the honor of admission
to your presence."

"My mirror!" she cried frantically. "I am horrible thus, — my eyes swollen, my hair disordered, dressed in a robe without embroidery! Alas! instead of weeping, I should have foreseen his coming, and busied myself with my toilette from early dawn!"

Tika brought the mirror of burnished metal, round as the full moon, and the box of perfumes and cosmetics.

Fatkoura took a pencil and lengthened her eyes. But her hand trembled, she made too heavy a line; then, wishing to repair the mistake, only succeeded in smearing her whole cheek with black. She clenched her fists with rage, and ground her teeth. Tika came to her aid, and removed the traces of her awkwardness. She placed upon the lower lip a little green paint, which became pink on contact with the skin. To replace the eyebrows, which had been carefully plucked out, she made two large black spots very high upon her forehead; to make the oval of her face longer, she sprinkled a little pink powder on her cheek-bones; then rapidly removed all the apparatus of the toilette, and threw over her mistress's shoulders a superb kirimon. Then she left the hall at full speed.

Fatkoura, trembling violently, stood beside the gotto as it lay on the floor, one hand holding up her mantle heavy with ornament, and eagerly fixed her gaze on the entrance.

At last Nagato appeared. He advanced, placing one hand on the golden hilt of one of his two swords, and, bowing with graceful dignity, said: "Pardon me, fair Fatkoura, if I come like a storm which sweeps across the sky unannounced by any foreboding clouds."

"You are to me like the sun when it rises from the sea," said Fatkoura, "and you are always expected. Stay! but a moment since I wept for your sake. See! my eyes are still red."

"Your eyes are like the evening and the morning stars," said the Prince. "But why did they drown their rays in tears? Can I have given you any cause to grieve?"

"You are here, and I have forgotten the cause of my sorrow," said Fatkoura, smiling; "perhaps I wept because you were far away."

"Why can I not be always here?" cried Nagato, with such an accent of truth that the young woman felt all her fears vanish, and a flash of joy illumined her countenance. Perhaps, however, she mistook the meaning of the Prince's words.

"Come closer," she said, "and rest upon these mats. Tika will serve us with tea and a few delicacies."

"Could I not first send the Kisasi a secret petition of the utmost importance?" asked Nagato. "I seized upon the pretext of this precious missive in order to get away from Osaka," he added, seeing a shadow on Fatkoura's brow.

"The sovereign has been vexed with me since your last appearance; I dare not approach her, or send any of my servants to her."

"And yet this note must be in her hands with the briefest possible delay," said Nagato, with a slight frown.

"What shall we do?" said Fatkoura, whom this trifling mark of distress had not escaped. "Will you come with me to one of my illustrious friends, the noble Iza-Farou No-Kami? She is in favor just now; perhaps she will help us."

"Let us go to her at once," said the Prince.

"Let us go," said Fatkoura with a sigh.

The young woman called Tika, who had remained in the next room, and signed to her to draw a sliding-panel, which opened upon a gallery encircling the pavilion.

"Are you going out, mistress?" said Tika. "Shall I summon your suite?"

"We are going incognito, Tika, to take a walk in the orchard. Really," she added, with her finger on her lips, "we are going to visit the noble Iza-Farou."

The maid bent her head in token of understanding. Fatkoura bravely set foot on the balcony, but sprang back hastily with an exclamation.

"It's a furnace," she cried.

Nagato picked up the fail lying upon the floor.

"Courage!" he said; "I will cool the air nearest your face."

Tika took a parasol, which she opened over her mistress's head, and Nagato waved the huge fan. They set out, sheltered at first by the projecting roof. Fatkoura led the way. Now and then she touched her finger-tips to the open-work cedar balustrade, and uttered a baby shriek at its burning contact. The pretty silken-haired dog, who had felt obliged to join the party, followed at a distance, growling, doubtless, remarks upon the madness of a walk at such an hour of the day.

They turned the corner of the house, and found themselves in front of it, at the top of a broad staircase leading to the garden, between two balusters ornamented with copper balls; a third baluster, in the centre of the staircase, divided it into two parts.

In spite of the intolerable heat and the vivid light, whose reflection from the sandy soil fairly blinded them, Fatkoura and the Prince of Nagato pretended to be walking with no other object than to pick a few flowers and admire the charming prospect which lay before them at every step. Although the gardens were deserted, they knew that the eye of the spy was never closed. They made haste to reach a shady alley, and soon arrived at a group of sumptuous pavilions scattered among the trees and connected by covered galleries.

"It is here," said Fatkoura, who, far from looking in the direction of the buildings of which she spoke, was leaning over a little pond filled with water so clear as to be almost invisible.

"Just see that pretty fish!" she said, purposely raising her voice; "I should think he was carved from a block of amber. And that one who looks like a ruby sprinkled with gold! he seems hanging in mid air, the water is so transparent. See, his fins are like black gauze, and his eyes like balls of fire! Decidedly, of all the dwellers in the palace, Iza-Farou has the finest fish."

"What, Fatkoura!" cried a feminine voice from the interior of a pavilion, "are you out at such an hour? Is it because you are a widow that you take so little care of your skin, and let it be destroyed by the sun?"

A blind was half raised, and Iza-Farou thrust out her pretty head, bristling with light tortoise-shell pins.

"Ah!" she said, "the lord of Nagato! You will not pass by my house without honoring me by entering," she added.

"We will come in with pleasure, thanking the fate which led us in this direction," said Fatkoura.

They went up the steps leading to the pavilion, and moved on through the flowers filling the balcony.

Iza-Farou came towards them.

"What had you to tell me?" she said to her friend in a low voice, as she gracefully saluted the Prince.

"I need your help," said Fatkoura; "you know I am in disgrace."

"I know it; shall I sue for your pardon? But can I assure the Queen that you will never again commit the fault which angered her so deeply?" said Iza-Farou, casting a mischievous glance at Nagato.

"I am the only criminal," said the Prince, smiling. "Fatkoura is not responsible for the actions of a madman like me."

"Prince, I think she is proud to be the cause of what you call mad acts; and many are the women who envy her."

"Do not jest with me," said Nagato; "I am sufficiently punished by having drawn down the wrath of her sovereign upon the noble Fatkoura."

"But that is not the question in point," cried Fatkoura. "The Lord of Nagato is bearer of an important message which he wishes to transmit to the Kisasi secretly. He first came to me; but as I cannot approach the Queen just now, I thought of your kind friendship."

"Trust the message to me," said Iza-Farou, turning to the Prince; "in a very few moments it shall be in the hands of our illustrious mistress."

"I am overcome with gratitude," said Nagato, taking from his bosom a white satin wrapper containing the letter.

"Wait here for me; I will return soon."

Iza-Farou took the letter, and ushered her guests into a cool and shady hall, where she left them alone.

"These pavilions communicate with the Kisasi's palace," said Fatkoura; "my noble friend can visit the sovereign without being seen by other eyes. May the gods grant that the messenger bring back a favorable answer, and I may see the cloud which darkens your brow vanish!"

The Prince seemed, in fact, absorbed and anxious; he nibbled the tip of his fan as he paced the room. Fatkoura followed him with her eyes, and her heart involuntarily stood still; she felt a return of the dreadful agony which had so recently wrung tears from her, and which the presence of her beloved had suddenly calmed.

"He does not love me," she murmured in despair; "when his eyes turn towards me, they alarm me by their cold and almost contemptuous expression."

Nagato seemed to have forgotten the presence of the young woman; he leaned against a half-open panel, and seemed lost in a dream, at once sweet and poignant.

The rustle of a dress upon the mats that covered the floor drew him from his reverie. Iza-Farou returned; she seemed in haste, and soon appeared at the corner of the gallery. Two young boys, magnificently attired, followed her.

"These are the words of the divine Kisasi," said she, as soon as she was within speaking distance of Nagato: "'Let the suppliant make his request in person.'"

At these words Nagato turned so pale, that Iza-Farou, frightened, thinking that he would faint, rushed towards him, to prevent him from falling.

"Prince," she cried, "be calm! Such a favor is, I know, enough to cause your emotion: but are you not used to all honors?"

"Impossible!" muttered Nagato, in a voice which was scarcely audible; "I cannot appear before her."

"What!" said Iza-Farou, "would you disobey her command?"

"I am not in court-dress," said the Prince.

"She will dispense with ceremony for this time only, the reception being secret. Do not keep her waiting longer."

"So be it; lead the way!" suddenly exclaimed Nagato, who had now apparently conquered his emotion.

"These two pages will conduct you," said Iza-Farou.

Nagato left the room rapidly, preceded by the Kisasi's two servitors; but not so rapidly that he did not hear a stifled cry which broke from the lips of Fatkoura.

After walking for some time, and passing through the various galleries and halls of the palace without paying the slightest heed to them, Nagato came to a great curtain of white satin, embroidered in gold, whose broad folds, silvery in the light, leaden-hued in the shade, lay in ample heaps upon the ground.

The pages drew aside this drapery; the Prince advanced, and the quivering waves of satin fell together again behind him.

The walls of the hall which he entered glittered faintly in the dim light; they gave out flashes of gold, the whiteness of pearls and purple reflections, while an exquisite perfume floated in the air. At the end of the room, beneath curtains fastened back by golden cords, sat the radiant sovereign in the midst of the silken billows of her scarlet robes; the triple plate of gold, insignia of omnipotence, rose above her brow. The Prince grasped the vision with one involuntary look; then, dropping his eyes as if he had gazed upon the sun at noon, he advanced to the centre of the room and fell upon his knees; then slowly his face sank to the ground.

"Iwakura," said the Kisasi, after a long pause, "what you ask of me is serious. I desire certain explanations from your own lips before I prefer your request to the sublime master of the world, the son of the gods, my spouse."

The Prince half rose, and strove to speak, but could not; he felt as if his bosom would burst with the frantic throbbing of his heart. The words died on his lips, and he remained with downcast eyes, pale as death.

"Is it because you think me angry with you that you are so much alarmed?" said the Queen, looking at the Prince for an instant with surprise. "I can forgive you, for your crime is but slight. You love one of my maidens, that is all."

"Nay, I do not love her!" cried Nagato, who, as if he had lost his senses, raised his eyes to his sovereign.

"What matters it to me?" said the Kisasi abruptly. For one second their gaze met; but Nagato closed his guilty eyes, and trembling at his own audacity, awaited its punishment.

But after a pause the Kisasi went on in a quiet voice: "Your letter reveals to me a terrible secret; and if what you imagine is true, the peace of the kingdom may be deeply affected."

"That is why, Divine Sister of the Sun, I had the boldness to beg for your all-powerful intercession," said the Prince, unable completely to master the quiver in his voice. "If you grant my prayer, if I obtain what I ask, great misfortunes may be prevented."

"You know, Iwakura, that the Celestial Mikado is favorable to Hieyas; would he believe in the crime of which you accuse his favorite I and would you be willing to maintain in public the accusation hitherto kept secret?"

"I would maintain it to Hieyas' very face," said Nagato firmly; "he is the instigator of the odious plot which came near costing my young master his life."

"That affirmation would endanger your own life. Have you thought of that?"

"My life is a slight thing," said the Prince. "Besides, the mere fact of my devotion to Fide-Yori is enough to attract the Regent's hatred. I barely escaped assassination by his men a few days ago, on leaving Kioto."

"What, Prince! is that indeed possible?" said the Kisasi.

"I only mention the unimportant fact," continued Nagato, "to show you that this man is familiar with crime, and that he is anxious to rid himself of those who stand in the way of his ambition."

"But how did you escape from the murderers?" asked the Kisasi, who seemed to take a lively interest in the adventure.

"The sharp blade of my sword and the strength of my arm saved my life. But why should you waste your sublime thoughts upon so trifling an incident?"

"Were the assassins numerous?" inquired the Queen, curiously.

"Ten or twelve, perhaps. I killed several of them; then I gave my horse the spurs, and he soon put a sufficient distance between them and me."

"What!" said the Kisasi meditatively, "is the man who has the confidence of my divine spouse so fierce and treacherous? I share your fears, Iwakura, and sad forebodings overwhelm me; but can I persuade the Mikado that our presentiments are not vain? At least I will try to do so, for the good of my people and the salvation of the kingdom. Go, Prince; be at the reception this evening. I shall then have seen the Lord of the World."

The Prince, having prostrated himself, rose, and with his head still bent towards the earth, withdrew backwards from the room. As he reached the satin curtain, he once more almost involuntarily raised his eyes to the sovereign, who followed him with her gaze. But the drapery fell and the adorable vision disappeared.

The pages led Iwakura to one of the palaces reserved for sovereign princes passing through Kioto. Happy to find himself alone, he stretched himself upon a pile of cushions, and, still deeply moved, gave himself up to a delicious reverie.

"Ah!" he murmured, "what strange joy fills my soul! I am intoxicated; perhaps it comes from breathing the air that surrounds her! Ah! terrible madness, hopeless longing which causes me such sweet suffering, how much you must be increased by this unexpected interview! Already I had often fled from Osaka; exhausted, like a diver perishing for want of air, I came hither, to gaze upon the palaces which hide her from my sight, or to catch an occasional glimpse of her in the distance as she leaned over a balcony, or paced the garden paths surrounded by her women; and I bore hence a store of happiness. But now I have breathed the perfume which exhales from her person, her voice has caressed my ear, I have heard my name tremble on her lips! Can I now be content with what has hitherto filled up my life? I am lost; my existence is ruined by this impossible love; and yet I am happy. Soon I shall see her again, no longer under the constraint of a political audience, but able to dazzle myself at my ease with her beauty. Shall I have strength to conceal my agitation and my criminal love? Yes, divine sovereign, before thee only my haughty spirit falls prostrate, and my every thought turns towards thee as the mists to the sun. Goddess, I adore thee with awe and respect; but alas! I love thee as well, with a mad tenderness, as if thou wert but a mere woman!"

CHAPTER V. THE KNIGHTS OF HEAVEN

Night had come; to the heat of the day had succeeded a delicious coolness, and the air was full of perfume from the garden flowers, wet with dew.

The balconies running outside the palace halls in which the evening diversions were to take place, were illuminated, and crowded with guests, who breathed the evening air with delight. The Prince of Nagato ascended the staircase of honor, bordered on either hand by a living balustrade of pretty pages, each holding in his hand a gilded stick, at the end of which hung a round lantern. The Prince passed through the galleries slowly, on account of the crowd; he bowed low when he encountered any high dignitary of the Court, saluted the princes, his equals, in friendly phrase, and approached the throne room.

This hall shone resplendent from the myriad rays of lanterns and of lamps. A joyous uproar filled it as well as the neighboring apartments seen through the widely opened panels.

The maids-of-honor chattered together, and their voices were-blended with the slight rustle of their robes, as they arranged the ample folds. Seated on the right and left of the royal dais, these princesses formed groups, and each group had its hierarchic rank and its especial colors. In one the women were arrayed in pale-blue robes flowered with silver; in another in green, lilac, or pale-yellow gowns.

Upon the dais covered with soft carpets, the Kisasi shone resplendent in the midst of the waves of satin, gauze, and silver brocade formed by her full scarlet and white robes, scintillating with precious stones. The three vertical plates surmounting her diadem looked like three golden sunbeams hovering above her brow.

Certain princesses had mounted the steps to the throne, and, kneeling upon the topmost one, talked merrily with their sovereign; the latter sometimes littered a low laugh, which scandalized some silent old prince, the faithful guardian of the severe rules of etiquette. But the sovereign was so young, not yet twenty years old, that she might readily be pardoned if she sometimes ceased to feel the weight of the crown upon her head; and at her laughter, joy spread on every side, as the songs of the birds break forth with the first rays of the sun.

"The supreme gods be praised!" said one princess in an undertone to her companions, "the sorrow that oppressed our sovereign has passed away at last; she is gayer than ever this evening."

"And in what a clement mood!" said another. "There is Fatkoura restored to favor. She mounts the steps to the throne. The Kisasi has summoned her."

In fact Fatkoura stood upon the last step of the royal dais; but the melancholy expression of her features, her fixed and bewildered gaze, contrasted strangely with the serene and happy look imprinted upon every face. She thanked the Kisasi for granting her pardon; but she did it in a voice so sad and so singularly troubled that the young Queen trembled, and raised her eyes to her former favorite.

"Are you ill?" she asked, surprised at the change in the young woman's features.

"With joy at winning forgiveness, perhaps," stammered Fatkoura.

"You need not remain for the feast if you are not well."

"I thank you," said Fatkoura, bending low, as she moved away and was lost in the crowd.

The notes of a hidden orchestra were soon heard, and the entertainment began.

A curtain was drawn aside in the wall opposite the throne, and revealed a charming landscape.

Mount Fusi-yama appeared in the background, rearing its snow-sprinkled peak above a necklace of clouds; the sea, of a deep blue, dotted with a few white sails, lay at the foot of the mountains: a road wound along among trees and thickets of flowering shrubs.

Then a young man entered; he hung his head; he seemed tired and sad. The orchestra was silent. The young man lifted up his voice. He told how misfortune had pursued him. His mother died of grief because the fields cultivated by her husband grew more and more sterile. He followed his mother's coffin with tears, then almost killed himself with work to support his aged father; but the father died in his turn, leaving his son so destitute, that he had not money enough to bury him. He then sold himself as a slave, and with the price of his liberty paid the last marks of respect to his father. Now he was on his way to his master to comply with the terms of the contract. He was going off, when a most beautiful woman appeared in his path. The young man gazed at her in mute admiration.

"I have a favor to beg of you," said the woman. "I am alone and forsaken; accept me for your wife: I will be devoted and faithful to you."

"Alas!" said the young man, "I have not a single possession, and even my body is not my own. I have sold myself to a master, to whom I am now on my way."

"I am skilled in the art of weaving silk," said the unknown; "take me to your master; I will manage to make myself useful."

"I consent with all my heart," said the youth; "but how comes it that a woman so beautiful as you is willing to take a poor man like me for her husband?"

"Beauty is nothing in comparison with the qualities of the heart," said the woman.

"In the second part, the husband and wife are seen working in their master's gardens, – the man cultivating flowers, the wife embroidering a marvellous tissue which she had woven. The master walked about, overlooking his slaves; he approached the young woman and examined her work.

"Oh, what splendid stuff!" he exclaimed; "it is of inestimable value."

"I would gladly exchange it for our liberty."

The master agreed to the bargain, and set them free. Then the husband fell at his wife's feet; he thanked her enthusiastically for having thus delivered him from bondage. But the woman was transformed; she became so brilliant, that the young man, dazzled, could look at her no longer.

"I am the celestial weaver," said she; "your courage and industry and your filial piety touched me, and, seeing your misery, I descended from heaven to help you. All that you may henceforth undertake shall succeed if you never depart from the path of virtue."

So saying, the divine weaver rose to heaven and resumed her place in the house of the silkworms.⁷

The orchestra then played a dance. The curtain fell, and soon rose again. It revealed the garden of a pagoda, with its thickets of bamboos, its light edifices, with their huge roofs supported by a vast number of beams of every hue. Then scene followed upon scene in pantomime, one having no connection with the other. Religious or military legends were represented, fabulous heroes and symbolic characters appeared in antique costume, some wearing the egg-shaped mitre and the tunic with long open sleeves, others having on their head the old-fashioned crestless helmet, with its gold ornaments, which protected the nape of the neck, or wearing a fantastic headdress, broad and high, in the form of a pyramid of gold, decorated with fringes and tiny bells.

Then the stage was cleared; and after a prelude from the orchestra, young and lovely dancing-girls appeared, clad in gorgeous dresses, with the wings of birds or butterflies on their shoulders, and long antennas on their foreheads which quivered gently above their golden crowns, wrought in open-work. They performed a slow graceful dance, full of undulating rocking movements; their figure ended, they formed groups on either side of the stage, while comic dancers, disguised in false noses and extravagant costumes, entered and concluded the spectacle by a wild dance full of blows and tumbles.

⁷ Constellation of the Scorpion.

From the beginning of the representation the Prince of Nagato had leaned against a wall near the stage, and, half hidden in the folds of a curtain, while every eye was fixed upon the mimic scene, he gazed ecstatically upon the smiling and radiant sovereign.

It seemed as if the Queen felt oppressed by this ardent and tenacious gaze, for she turned her head, and her eyes rested on the Prince.

The latter did not lower his eyes – an all-powerful charm prevented him from doing so; that look, descending towards him like a sunbeam, scorched him. For a moment he felt as if he had lost his senses; it seemed as if the Kisaki smiled upon him very faintly. She instantly cast down her eyes and examined the bracelet encircling her arm; then, lifting her head, she appeared to follow the course of the performance attentively.

When the curtain fell for the last time, in the midst of the hubbub of conversation renewed after a prolonged silence, a woman paused before Nagato.

"I know your secret, Prince!" she said, in a low, but threatening tone.

"What do you mean?" cried Nagato; "I do not understand you, Fatkoura."

"You understand me very well," replied Fatkoura, looking steadily at him; "and you may well turn pale, for your life is in my hands."

"My life!" murmured the Prince; "I would bless any one who would rid me of it."

The young woman had moved away; but a great stir now occurred around the Queen. All the maids-of-honor had risen, and silence again fell upon the assembly.

The Kisaki stepped down from her throne; she advanced slowly through the hall, dragging a weight of satin after her. The princesses in groups, according to their rank, followed at a distance, stopping whenever she stopped. All the guests bowed low as she passed. She spoke a few words to an illustrious Daimio or a lady of high rank, then went on; in this way she reached the Prince of Nagato.

"Iwakura," said she, drawing from her bosom a sealed letter wrapped in a piece of green satin, "give this paper to the Shogun's mother from me." And she added in a lower tone: "It is what you asked for. The Mikado's orders are that you shall only make use of this document when you are sure that Hieyas is about to perjure himself."

"Your orders shall be faithfully executed," said Nagato, tremblingly taking the letter. "This very night I will return to Osaka."

"May your journey be prosperous!" said the Kisaki in a strangely gentle voice. Then she passed on; the Prince still heard the rustle of her dress on the mats for a brief moment.

An hour later Nagato left the Dairi,⁸ and was on his way.

In traversing the city he was obliged to keep his horse to a walk, lest he should run over some of the merry throng that blocked the streets.

Huge lanterns of glass, paper, gauze, or silk shone on every hand; their many-colored lights cast odd reflections upon the faces of the passers, who, as they changed position, looked pink, blue, lilac, or green. The horse was somewhat frightened by the deafening uproar that pervaded Kioto. There were shouts of laughter from women standing before a puppet-show; a tambourine ringing an incessant accompaniment to the marvellous feats of a band of conjurers; angry cries from a quarrel degenerating into a brawl; a silver bell struck by the finger of fate in response to some sorcerer who foretold the future to an attentive circle; the shrill songs of the priests of Odji-gongem performing a sacred dance in the garden of a pagoda; then the clamor of a whole army of beggars, some mounted on stilts, others accoutred in historic costume, or wearing in lieu of hat a vase containing a flourishing shrub in full bloom.

Here were mendicant friars, clad in red, with shaven head, puffing up their cheeks and drawing from silver whistles sounds, whose acuteness pierced the tumult and rent the ear; priestesses of the national form of worship passed along, singing and waving a holy-water sprinkler of white paper, –

⁸ Royal residence.

the symbol of purity; a dozen young bonzes playing on all sorts of instruments, listened eagerly, to catch the measure of the melody which they were executing in spite of the general commotion, while farther on a tortoise-charmer beat a tam-tam with rapid strokes, and blind men, sitting at a temple door, thumped with all their might on bells bristling with bronze pimples.

From time to time nobles of the Mikado's Court forced their way through the crowd; they were going incognito to the theatre or to one of the tea-houses which were kept open all night, and in which, set free from the rigors of etiquette, they could drink and enjoy themselves at their ease.

Nagato, too, travelled incognito and alone; he had not even an out-runner to disperse the crowd before him. He managed, however, to leave the city without injuring any one. Then he gave the reins to his impatient steed, who galloped quickly along a magnificent avenue of sycamores, bordered by pagodas, temples, and chapels, which glided swiftly by to right and left, and from which a fragment of prayer or sacred song reached his ear. Once he turned and cast a long look behind. He saw through the branches the tomb of Taiko-Sama, Fide-Yori's father; he thought that the ashes of that great man must quiver with joy as he who bore safety to his son passed by. He left the suburbs behind him and climbed a low hill.

He then cast a last look on that city so dear to his heart. It was wrapped in a luminous fog, red in the midst of the blue light cast by the moon upon the surrounding mountains. On the slopes, among the trees, scattered roofs of pagodas shone like mirrors. The golden chrysanthemum which surmounts the door of the Dairi caught a ray, and looked like a star suspended over the city. But all disappeared behind the brow of the hill; the last sound from Kioto faded and died.

The Prince heaved a sigh; then, urging his horse, he flew like an arrow through the land. He passed through several villages huddled by the roadside, and at the end of an hour reached Yodo. He traversed the town without slackening pace, and rode by a castle, whose lofty towers were brilliantly lighted, while the water in the moats glittered back a reflection.

This castle belonged to Yodogimi, the Shogun's mother; it was then inhabited by General Harounaga, a favorite of that princess.

"I have little confidence in the valor of the handsome warrior who sleeps behind those ramparts," muttered the Prince, glancing at the silent castle. A moment later he was galloping through a rice-field. The moon was mirrored on every side in the pools of water from which the slender blades grew. The rice-plantation looked like a vast pond; delicate white vapors floated here and there in sheets close to the ground, and a few great black buffaloes lying half in the water slept quietly.

Nagato checked his panting horse; soon he dropped the bridle on its neck, and bowing his head, plunged anew into his despotic reverie. The animal fell into a walk, and the pre-occupied Prince left him to his own gait.

Nagato saw once more the brilliant palace halls, and the sovereign advancing towards him; he fancied he heard again the rustle of her robes. "Ah!" he exclaimed suddenly, "this letter which has lain in her bosom now rests on my heart and burns me."

He drew the letter hastily from his breast.

"Alas! I must part with this priceless relic," he murmured.

All at once he pressed it to his lips. The touch of the soft stuff, the familiar perfume exhaled from it, sent an ardent thrill through the Prince's veins. He shut his eyes, overcome by a delicious ecstasy.

An uneasy neigh from his horse roused him from his dream.

He restored the royal missive to his bosom and looked around him. Fifty paces in front of him, a group of trees cast its shadow across the road. Nagato thought he saw something stir in that shadow. He seized the pike fastened to his saddle, and urged on his horse, which plunged and reared, reluctant to advance.

The Prince's doubts were soon solved: armed men awaited his coming.

"What, again!" he cried. "The Regent must be very anxious to get rid of me."

"This time he will not fail!" replied one of the assassins, riding full upon him.

"You have not got me yet!" said Nagato, turning his horse aside.

His opponent, borne onwards by the impetus of his sally, passed close by him without reaching him.

"Rash fool that I am," muttered the Prince, "thus to expose this precious paper to the chances of my fate!"

Naked swords gleamed around him. His assailants were so numerous that they could not all approach the object of their attack at once.

Nagato was the most skilful fencer in the entire kingdom; he was both cool and daring. Whirling his pike about him, he broke several sword-blades, the splinters falling in a shower of blood; then, forcing his horse to execute a series of rapid leaps, he escaped for a moment the blows which were aimed at him.

"I can certainly defend myself for a few instants more," he thought, "but I am plainly lost."

A buffalo, aroused, uttered a long and melancholy bellow; then nothing more was heard but the clink of steel and the stamping of horses.

But suddenly a voice rang through the darkness. "Courage, Prince!" it cried; "we come to your aid!"

Nagato was covered with blood, but he struggled bravely still. The voice lent him new strength, while it paralyzed the assassins, who exchanged anxious glances.

The rapid beat of horses' hoofs was heard, and before any recognition was possible, a body of horsemen fell upon the assailants of the Prince.

Nagato, exhausted, withdrew slightly to one side, and with surprise and confusion watched the defenders who had arrived so opportunely.

These men were beautiful to behold in the moonlight, which illumined the rich embroideries of their dress, and drew azure sparkles from their light helmets, decorated in open-work. The Prince recognized the costume of the Knights of Heaven, the Mikado's guard of honor.

Soon nothing was left of the assassins despatched by the Regent, but corpses. The conquerors wiped their weapons, and the leader of the troop approached Nagato. "Are you seriously wounded, Prince?" he asked.

"I do not know," replied Nagato; "in the heat of battle I felt nothing."

"But your face is bathed in blood."

"True," said the Prince, putting his hand to his cheek.

"Will you dismount?"

"No; I am afraid I should not be able to remount. But talk of me no more; let me thank you for your miraculous intervention, which saved my life, and ask you by what chain of circumstances you were on this road at this hour."

"I will tell you all soon," said the knight; "but not before you have dressed the wound which has bled so profusely."

Water was brought from a neighboring pool, and the Prince's face was washed with it; a tolerably deep Cut was found on his forehead, near the temple. Nothing could be done for the time being but to bandage his head tightly.

"You have other wounds, have you not?"

"I think so; but I feel strong enough to reach Osaka."

"Very well, let us be off!" said the knight; "we will talk as we ride."

The little troop took up the line of march.

"You intend to escort me then?" said Nagato.

"We are ordered not to leave you, Prince; but the accomplishment of that duty is a pleasure to us."

"Will you do me the honor to acquaint me with your glorious name?" said Nagato, bowing.

"You know me, Nagato; I am Farou-So-Chan, Lord of Tsusima."

"The husband of the lovely Iza-Farou, whom I had the honor of seeing this very day!" exclaimed Nagato. "Forgive me! I should have recognized you by the terrible blows that you dealt my opponents; but I was blinded by blood."

"I am proud and happy to have been chosen to help you, and to prevent the unfortunate results which your reckless daring might have caused."

"I acted with unpardonable levity indeed," said Nagato; "I had a right to risk my life, but not to expose the precious message which I bear."

"Let me tell you, dear Prince, that the envelope which you carry contains nothing but a blank paper."

"Is it possible?" cried Nagato; "have I been tricked? In that case I cannot survive the affront."

"Calm yourself, friend," said the Prince of Tsusima, "and hear me. After the feast this evening, no sooner had she re-entered her apartments, than the divine Kisasi summoned me: 'Farou,' she said, 'Prince Nagato leaves Kyoto to-night. I know that his life is in danger, and that he may fall into an ambush. Therefore, instead of the message which he supposes he is bearing, I have only given him an empty envelope. The true letter is here,' she added, showing me a little casket. 'Take fifty men with you, and follow the Prince at a distance. If he is attacked, go to his rescue; if not, rejoin him at the gate of Osaka, and give him this casket without letting him know that you have borne him escort.' I have it here, Prince; only you have a matchless horse, and we almost came too late to help you."

Nagato was deeply moved by this revelation; he remembered how sweetly the sovereign had wished him a prosperous journey, and could not help seeing a sign of interest in his safety in what had taken place. And then he thought that he might now retain that treasure, that letter which she had worn upon her heart for a whole evening.

The rest of the journey was silent. Fever had seized Nagato; the chill of coming dawn made him shiver, and he began to feel weakened by the loss of blood. When they reached the gates of Osaka, the sun had risen. Tsusima took from his saddle-bow a tiny crystal box, closed by a cunningly knotted silk cord.

"Here, Prince," said he, "the precious letter is contained in this box. Farewell! May your wounds be speedily healed!"

"Farewell!" replied Nagato; "thanks once more for risking your precious life for mine, which is of small worth."

Having saluted each of the little band of horsemen, Nagato made his way through one of the city gates, and pricking his horse, soon reached the palace.

When Loo saw his master enter, pale as a ghost, and covered with blood, he fell on his knees, where he remained mute with amazement.

"Come," said the Prince, "shut your gaping mouth, and get up; I am not dead yet. Call my servants, and run for the doctor."

CHAPTER VI.

THE FRATERNITY OF BLIND MEN

A few hours later, groups of courtiers stood beneath the veranda of the palace of Hieyas; anxious to be the first to greet the real master, they awaited his wakening. Some leaned against the cedar columns that supported the roof, others, standing firm on their legs, one hand on their hip, crumpling the silky folds of their loose tunic, listened to one of their number as he told an anecdote, doubtless very entertaining, for it was followed with the utmost attention, and the auditors let fall an occasional laugh, instantly stifled out of respect for the slumbers of the illustrious sleeper.

The narrator was the Prince of Tosa, and the Prince of Nagato the hero of the adventure that he recounted.

"Yesterday," he said, "the sun was setting when I heard a noise at my palace gate. I went to the window, and saw my servants wrangling with a troop of blind men. The latter were bent on entering, and all talked at once, striking the flagstones with their sticks; the lackeys shouted to drive them off, and no one heard what the other said. I was beginning to lose my temper at the scene, when the Prince of Nagato appeared; my servants at once bowed low before him, and at his order admitted the blind men into the pavilion used as a stable for the horses of my visitors. I went out to meet the Prince, curious to hear an explanation, of this comedy.

"Make haste!" he said as he entered, throwing a bundle on the floor; 'let us take off our robes, and dress in these costumes.'

"But why?" I asked, looking at the costumes, which were little to my taste.

"What!" said he, 'is not this the hour when we may drop the weary pomp of our rank, and become free and happy men?'

"Yes,' said I; 'but why use our liberty to muffle ourselves in that ugly garb?'

"You shall see; I have a scheme,' said the Prince, who was already disrobing; then, putting his lips to my ear, he added, 'I marry, to-night. You'll see what a lark it will be.'

"What! you're going to be married, and in that dress?" I cried, looking at the Prince in his beggarly disguise.

"Come, hurry,' he said; 'or we sha'n't find the bride.'

The Prince was half way downstairs. I quickly donned a dress like his, and, urged by curiosity, followed him.

"But,' I exclaimed, 'all those blind men whom you quartered in the stable?'

"We will join them.'

"In the stable?' I asked.

"I did not understand a blessed thing; but I had confidence in the whimsical fancy of the Prince, and I patiently waited for him to solve the mystery. The blind men had collected in the great courtyard of the palace, and I saw that we were dressed precisely like them. The poor fellows had the most comical faces imaginable, with their lashless eyelids, their flat noses, their thick lips, and their stupidly happy expression. Nagato put a staff in my hand, and said: 'Let us be off.'

"The gates were thrown open. The blind men, holding one another by the skirt, started out, tapping the ground with their sticks as they went. Nagato, bending his back and shutting his eyes, followed in their rear. I saw that I was expected to do the same, and I tried my best to imitate him. There we were in the streets in the train of that band of blind men. I could restrain myself no longer. I was seized with a frantic fit of laughter, which all my comrades soon shared."

"Nagato has certainly lost his senses!" cried the Prince of Tosa's hearers, writhing with laughter.

"And Tosa was scarcely better!"

"The Prince of Nagato, he never laughed," continued the story-teller; "he was very angry. I tried to find out something of the Prince's plans from the blind man nearest me, but he knew nothing of them. I only learned that the corporation of which I formed a part belonged to that confraternity of blind men whose business it is to go among the middle classes to rub sick people and those who are not strong. The idea that we might perhaps have to rub some one, sent me off again into such a fit of merriment that, in spite of my efforts to keep a straight face to please the Prince, I was obliged to stop and sit down on a stone to hold my sides.

"Nagato was furious. 'You'll put a stop to my marriage,' he said.

"I set off again, winking my eyes and imitating the gait of my strange fellow-travellers as best I could. They struck the ground with their sticks, and, at this noise, people leaned from their windows and called them in. In this way we came to a house of poor appearance. The noise of sticks was redoubled. A voice demanded two shampooers.

"'Come,' said Nagato to me; 'this is the place.'

"Leaving the band, we went up a few steps and found ourselves in the house. I saw two women, whom Nagato awkwardly saluted, turning his back to them as he did so. I hastily shut my eyes and bowed to the wall. But I managed to half open one eye again, prompted by curiosity. There were a young girl and an old woman, probably her mother.

"'Take us first,' said the latter; 'you shall rub my husband later.'

"She then squatted on the floor and bared her back. I foresaw that the old woman would fall to my lot, and that I must certainly play the part of shampooer. Nagato was lost in salutations.

"'Ah! ah! ah!' he mumbled, as inferiors do when saluting a person of high rank.

"I began to rub the old lady violently, and she uttered lamentable groans; I struggled bravely to resist the laugh which again rose in my throat and nearly choked me. The girl had uncovered one shoulder, modestly, as if we had had eyes.

"'It is there,' she said; 'I gave myself a blow, and the doctor said that it would do me good to be rubbed.'

"Nagato began to rub the young girl with amazing gravity; but all at once he seemed to forget his rôle of blind man.

"'What beautiful hair you have!' said he. 'There's one thing certain: if you were to adopt the headdress of noble women, you would not have to resort, as they do, to all sorts of devices for lengthening your hair.'

"The young girl gave a shriek and turned round; she saw Nagato's very wide open eyes fixed upon her.

"'Mother!' she exclaimed, 'these are no blind men!'

"The mother fell flat on the floor; and surprise taking away all her senses, she made no effort to rise, but began to utter yells of rare shrillness.

"The father ran in in a fright.

"As for me, I gave free vent to my mirth, and rolled on the ground, unable to hold in longer. To my great surprise, the Prince of Nagato threw himself at the workman's feet.

"'Forgive us,' said he. 'Your daughter and I want to be married; and as I have no money, I resolved to follow the custom of the country and carry her off, to avoid wedding expenses. According to custom also, you must forgive us, after playing the stem parent for a little while.'

"'I marry that man!' said the girl; 'but I don't know him in the least.'

"'You think my daughter would take a scamp like you for a husband?' cried the father. 'Be off! out of the house in a trice, if you don't want to be acquainted with my fists.'

"The sound of his angry voice began to attract a crowd before the house. Nagato gave a long-drawn whistle.

"'Will you go!' cried the man of the people, scarlet with rage; and, amidst the most vulgar insults and oburgations, he raised his fist upon Nagato.

"Do not strike one who will soon be your son,' said the Prince, catching him by the arm.

"You, my son! You will sooner see the snow on Fusiyama blossom with flowers.'

"I swear that you shall be my father-in-law,' said the Prince, throwing his arms round the fellow's waist.

"The latter struggled in vain; Nagato bore him from the house. I then approached the balustrade, and saw the crowd collected outside, dispersed by the runners preceding a magnificent procession, – music, banners, palanquins, all bearing the Prince's arms. The norimonos stopped at the door, and Nagato stuffed his father-in-law into one of them, which he closed and fastened with a pad-lock. I saw what I was to do; I clutched the old woman and settled her in another palanquin, while Nagato went back to get the girl. Two norimonos received us, and the procession set out, while the music sounded gayly. We soon reached a charming establishment in the midst of the prettiest garden I ever saw. Everything was lighted up; orchestras hidden among the foliage played softly; busy servants ran to and fro.

"What is this enchanting palace?' said I to Nagato.

"Oh! a trifle,' he answered scornfully; 'it is a little house which I bought for my new wife.'

"He is crazy,' thought I, 'and will utterly ruin himself; but that's not my affair.'

"We were led into a room, where we put on splendid dresses; then we went down into the banquet-hall, where we met all Nagato's young friends, Satake, Fungo, Aki, and many others. They received us with enthusiastic shouts. Soon the bride, superbly dressed, entered, followed by her father and mother, stumbling over the folds of their silken robes. The father seemed quite calm, the mother was flurried, and the young girl so astounded that she kept her pretty mouth wide open. Nagato declared that he took her for his wife, and the marriage ceremony was complete. I never saw so merry a one. The feast was most delicate, everybody was soon drunk, and I among the rest; but I had myself carried back to the palace about three o'clock for a brief rest, for I wanted to be present this morning at the Regent's levee."

"That is the most absurd story I ever heard," said the Prince of Figo. "There is certainly no one like Nagato for knowing how to carry out a joke."

"And he is really married?" asked another lord.

"Very really," said the Prince of Tosa; "the marriage is legal, in spite of the woman's low rank."

"The Prince invents new follies every day, and gives splendid feasts; he must come to an end of his vast fortune ere long."

"If he is ruined, it will please the Regent, who does not love him over much."

"Yes; but it will grieve the Shogun, who is exceedingly fond of him, and who will never let him want for money."

"Hollo!" cried the Prince of Tosa, "there comes Nagato back to the palace."

A procession was indeed passing through the gardens. On the banners and on the norimono, borne by twenty men, were visible the insignia of the Prince, – a black bolt surmounting three balls in pyramidal form. The *cortège* marched quite near the veranda which sheltered the nobles, and through the curtains of the norimono they saw the young Prince dozing on his cushions.

"He surely won't come to the Regent's levee," said one lord; "he would run the risk of falling asleep on the shoulder of Hieyas."

"Nagato never comes to pay his respects to Hieyas; he detests him profoundly; he is his avowed enemy."

"Such an enemy is not much to be feared," said the Prince of Tosa. "On his return from these nightly escapades he is only fit for sleeping."

"I don't know whether that is the Regent's opinion."

"If he thought otherwise, would he endure from him insults serious enough to condemn him to hara-kiri? If the Prince still lives, he owes it to the clemency of Hieyas."

"Or to the loving protection of Fide-Yori."

"Doubtless Hieyas is only generous through regard for the master; but if all his enemies were of Nagato's mind, he might esteem himself happy."

While the courtiers thus chatted away the time of waiting for his waking, Hieyas, who had risen long before, paced his chamber, anxious, uneasy, bearing on his care-worn face the marks of sleeplessness.

A man stood near the Regent, leaning against the wall; he watched him stride up and down; this man was a former groom, named Faxibo. Hostlers had enjoyed considerable favor since the accession to power of Taiko-Sama, who was originally an hostler. Faxibo was deeper than any other person in the confidence of the Regent, who hid nothing from him, and even thought aloud in his presence.

Hieyas constantly raised the blind from the window and looked out.

"Nothing," he said impatiently; "no news. It is incomprehensible."

"Be patient for a few moments more," said Faxibo; "those whom you sent out upon the Kioto road cannot have returned yet."

"But the others! There were forty of them, and not one has returned! If he has escaped me again, it is maddening."

"Perhaps you exaggerate the man's importance," said Faxibo. "It is a love-affair that attracts him to Kioto; his head is full of follies."

"So you think; and I confess that this man terrifies me," said the Regent vehemently, pausing before Faxibo. "No one ever knows what he is doing; you think him here, he is there. He outwits the most cunning spies: one declares that he followed him to Kioto, another swears that he has not lost sight of him for an instant, and that he has hot left Osaka; all his friends supped with him, while he was fighting on his return from the Miako⁹ with men stationed by me. I think him asleep, or busy with his own affairs: one of my schemes is on the eve of success; his hand descends upon me at the last, moment. The empire would long since have been ours if it had not been for him; my partisans are numerous, but his are no less strong, and he has the right on his side. Stay: that plan which I had so skilfully arranged to rid the country, under the guise of accident, of a sovereign without talent and without energy, – that plan which was to throw the power into my hands, – who frustrated it? Who was the accursed coachman who urged that infernal team across the bridge? Nagato! He, always he. However," added Hieyas, "some one else, one of my allies, must have played the traitor, for it is impossible that any other can have guessed the scheme. Ah! if I knew the villain's name, I would at least gratify myself by an awful revenge."

"I told you what I was able to discover," said Faxibo. "Fide-Yori exclaimed at the moment of the crash: 'Omiti, you were right!'"

"Omiti! Who is Omiti? I do not know the name."

The Regent had advanced into the hall adjoining his chamber, which was divided, by a large screen only, from the veranda where the nobles were awaiting his coming. From within, this screen admitted of seeing without being seen. Hieyas heard the name of Nagato uttered; he approached eagerly, and signed to Faxibo to come close to him. Thus they heard the whole story of the Prince of Tosa.

"Yes," muttered Hieyas; "for a long time I took him for a man of dissolute morals and of no political importance; that was why I at first favored his intimacy with Fide-Yori. How deeply I repent it, now that I know what he is worth!"

"You see, master," said Faxibo, "that the Prince, doubtless warned of your project, did not quit Osaka."

"I tell you he was at the Miako, and did not leave there until far on in the night."

"And yet the Prince of Tosa was with him until very late."

⁹ That is to say, the capital.

"One of my spies followed him to Kioto; he entered the city in broad daylight, and remained there until midnight."

"It is incomprehensible," said Faxibo. "Stay! there he is, going home," he added, seeing Nagato's procession.

"Is it really he who occupies the litter?" asked Hieyas, trying to look out.

"I think I recognized him," replied Faxibo.

"Impossible! it cannot be the Prince of Nagato, unless it be his corpse."

At this moment a man entered the chamber, and prostrated himself with his face on the ground.

"It is my envoy," cried Hieyas. "Speak quickly, come I What have you learned?" he cried to the messenger.

"I went to the part of the road to which you directed me, all-powerful master," said the envoy. "At that spot the ground was strewn with corpses; I counted forty men and fifteen horses. Peasants were hovering around the dead; some felt of them, to see if there were no lingering trace of life. Others pursued the wounded horses, which were running about the rice-fields. I asked what had happened. They told me that no one knew; but at sunrise they saw a band of horsemen pass, belonging to the divine Mikado; they were on their way to Kioto. As for the corpses lying by the roadside, red with their blood, they all wore dark costumes, without any armorial bearings, and their faces were half hidden by their headdress, after the fashion of bandits and assassins."

"Enough!" exclaimed Hieyas, frowning; "go!"

The envoy retired, or rather fled.

"He has escaped me again," said Hieyas. "Well! I must deal the blow with my own hand. The end which I would attain is so noble, that I should not hesitate to use infamous means to overthrow the obstacles which rise in my path. Faxibo," he added, turning to the ex-groom, "usher in those who wait. Their presence may drive away the sad forebodings which oppressed me all night."

Faxibo lifted aside the screen, and the nobles entered one after another to greet the master. Hieyas observed that the courtiers were less numerous than usual; none were present except those princes who were wholly devoted to his cause, and some few indifferent people who sought a special favor of the Regent.

Hieyas, still talking with the lords, moved out upon the veranda and looked around.

It seemed to him that an unusual bustle pervaded the palace courts. Messengers were starting off every moment, and princes coming up in their norimonos, in spite of the early hour. All were proceeding towards Fide-Yori's palace.

"What is the matter?" thought he; "whence comes all this stir I what mean these messengers bearing orders of which I know nothing?" And, full of alarm, he dismissed the lords with a gesture.

"You will excuse me, I know," he said "the interests of the country call me."

But before the princes had taken leave, a soldier entered the room.

"The Shogun, Fide-Yori, begs the illustrious Hieyas to be good enough to come before his presence at once," said he; and without waiting for an answer, he departed.

Hieyas stopped the lords who were about to leave.

"Wait for me here," he said; "I do not know what is going on, but I am devoured by anxiety. You are devoted to me; I may possibly need you."

He saluted them with a wave of the hand, and went slowly out, his head bent, followed only by Faxibo.

CHAPTER VII. PERJURY

When he entered the hall where Fide-Yori was waiting for him, Hieyas saw that something important was about to occur.

All the party devoted to the son of Taiko-Sama were assembled there.

Fide-Yori wore for the first time, that warlike and royal costume which he alone had the right to assume. The cuirass of black horn girt his body, and heavy skirts, made of a series of plates fastened together by stitches of red silk, fell over a pair of loose trousers confined from the ankle to the knee by velvet gaiters. He had a sword on his left side, and another on the right. Three golden stars glittered on his breast; his hand rested upon an iron wand. The young man was seated on a folding stool such as warriors use in their tents.

On his right stood his mother, the beautiful Yodogimi, pale and nervous, but splendidly arrayed; on his left, the Prince of Mayada, who shared the regency with Hieyas; but being very old, and for some time past an invalid, this Prince held himself aloof from business matters. He however kept watch over Hieyas, and maintained the interests of Fide-Yori as far as possible.

On one side were the princes of Satsuma, Satake, Arima, Aki, and Issida; on the other, the warriors, – General Sanada-Sayemon-Yoke-Moura at their head, – in battle array; Aroufza, Moto-Tsoumou, Harounaga, Moritzka, and a very beautiful and serious young man, named Signenari.

All the Shogun's friends, in fact, and all the mortal enemies of the Regent were assembled; yet Nagato was absent.

Hieyas cast a haughty glance around the assembly.

"Here I am," he said, in a firm voice; "I am waiting. What are your wishes?"

A profound silence was the only answer. Fide-Yori turned away his eyes from him in horror.

At last the Prince of Mayada began to speak.

"We wish nothing from you but justice," said he; "we would simply recall to you a fact which you seem to have forgotten, – that your term of regency as well as mine, expired some months since, Hieyas; and in your zeal for governing the empire you have not heeded this. The son of Taiko-Sama is now of a fit age to reign; your rule is therefore over. It only remains for you to lay down your powers at the master's feet, and render him an account of your conduct, as I shall render an account of my actions while he was under our tutelage."

"You do not consider what you say," cried Hieyas, his face growing purple with rage; "you apparently mean to urge the country to its ruin!"

"I have spoken gently," replied Mayada; "do not force me to assume a different tone."

"You desire an inexperienced child," continued Hieyas, heedless of the interruption, "to wield the power before he has had any practice in the difficult profession of the head of a nation. It is as if you put a heavy porcelain vase into the hands of a new-born babe: he would let it fall to the ground, and the vase would break into a thousand bits."

"You insult our Shogun!" exclaimed the Prince of Satake.

"No," said Hieyas; "Fide-Yori himself will agree with me. I must initiate him slowly into my labors, and point out to him the possible solutions of the questions now in debate. Has he ever paid any heed to the affairs of the nation? His young intelligence was not yet ripe, and I spared him the fatigues of government. I alone possess the instructions of the great Taiko, and I alone can carry on the vast work which he undertook. The task is not yet accomplished. Therefore, in obedience to that venerated chief, I must, in spite of your opinion, retain in my own hands the power intrusted to me by him; but, to show you how highly I esteem your advice, from this day forth the youthful Fide-

Yori shall share the grave cares whose burden I have hitherto borne alone. Answer, Fide-Yori," added Hieyas; "say for yourself if I have spoken after your own heart."

Fide-Yori slowly turned his ashen face towards Hieyas and gazed at him fixedly. Then, after a moment's silence, he said in a voice somewhat trembling, although full of scorn: "The noise made by Swallow bridge as it fell beneath my tread has not made me deaf to your voice."

Hieyas turned pale before him whom he had striven to send to his death; he was humbled by his crime. His lofty intelligence suffered from these spots of blood and dirt which bespattered it; he saw them in the future darkening his name, which he longed to render glorious, certain that his duty towards his country was to keep in his own hands the power of which he was worthier than any other. He felt a sort of indignation at being obliged to compel by force that which public interest should have eagerly required of him. However, resolved to struggle to the end, he raised his head, bowed for an instant beneath the weight of tumultuous thoughts, and cast a savage and overbearing glance around the room.

A threatening silence had followed the Shogun's words. It was prolonged until it became painful; the Prince of Satsuma broke it at last.

"Hieyas," he said, "I summon you in my master's name to lay down the powers with which you were invested by Taiko-Sama."

"I refuse!" said Hieyas.

A cry of amazement escaped from the lips of all the nobles. The Prince of Mayada rose; he advanced slowly towards Hieyas, and drew from his breast a paper yellowed by age.

"Do you recognize this?" said he, unfolding the writing, which he held before the eyes of Hieyas. "Was it indeed with your blood that you traced your traitorous name here side by side with my loyal one? Have you forgotten the form of the oath, – 'The powers which you intrust to us we will restore to your child upon his majority; we swear it on the remains of our ancestors, before the luminous disk of the sun'? Taiko fell peacefully asleep when he saw those few scarlet lines; to-day he will rise from his tomb, perjurer, to curse you."

The old man, trembling with anger, crumpled in his hands the oath written in blood and flung it in Hieyas' face.

"But do you really think that we shall let you thus despoil our child before our eyes?" he continued. "Do you think, because you do not choose to give up what you have taken, that we will not wrest it from you? The crimes which you plot have clouded your intellect; you have no soul or honor left; you dare to stand erect before your master, – before him whom you strove to kill!"

"He not only tried to take my life," said Fide-Yori; "that man, more savage than the tiger, has this night caused the murder of my most faithful servant, my dearest friend, the Prince of Nagato!"

A shudder of horror passed over the assembly, while a flash of joy illumined the eyes of Hieyas.

"Rid of that formidable foe," he thought, "I shall soon master Fide-Yori."

As if replying to his thought, the voice of Nagato was heard. "Do not rejoice too soon, Hieyas," it said; "I am alive, and still in condition to serve my young master."

Hieyas turned quickly, and saw the Prince, who had just lifted a heavy curtain, and now entered the hall.

Nagato looked like a ghost; his eyes, glittering with the light of fever, seemed larger and blacker than usual. His face was so pale that it could hardly be distinguished from the narrow white bandage spotted with blood which bound his head. A spasm of pain shook his limbs, and caused a crystal box that sparkled in his hand to quiver.

General Yoke-Moura ran to him.

"What madness, Prince!" he cried, "to rise and walk, after losing so much blood, and in spite of the orders of your doctors!"

"Bad friend!" said Fide-Yori, "will you never cease to play with your life?"

"I will become the slave of the doctors in obedience to the undeserved interest that you take in me," said the Prince, "when I have fulfilled the mission with which I am charged."

Hieyas, filled with alarm, had taken refuge in utter silence; he watched and waited, casting frequent glances at the door, as if anxious to escape.

"I should offer you this casket on my knees, and you should receive it on your knees," said the Prince; "for it contains a message from your lord and master and ours, from him who holds his power from Heaven, from the all-powerful Mikado."

Nagato prostrated himself and offered the casket to the Shogun, who bent his knee as he took it.

Hieyas felt sure that this casket contained his final doom; and he thought that now, as always, it was the Prince of Nagato who triumphed over him.

Meanwhile Fide-Yori had unfolded the Mikado's message and ran his eye over it. An expression of joy irradiated his countenance. He raised his eyes, wet with tears, to Nagato, thinking in his turn that it was always through him that he triumphed.

"Prince of Satsuma," said he, extending the letter to the aged lord, "read this divine writing aloud to us."

The Prince of Satsuma read as follows: —

"I, the direct descendant of the Gods who founded Japan, I lower my eyes to the earth, and I see that much time has elapsed since the death of that faithful servant of my dynasty, Taiko-Sama, whom my predecessor named General-in-chief of the kingdom. The son of that illustrious leader, who rendered great services to the country, was six years old when his father died; but time has sped for him as for all men, and he is now of an age to succeed his father; wherefore I name him in his turn General-in-chief of the kingdom.

"In a few days the knights of Heaven shall solemnly announce to him my will and pleasure, that none may be ignorant of it.

"Now, trusting to Fide-Yori the cares of government, I replunge myself in the mysterious absorption of my superhuman dream.

"Given at the Dairi, in the nineteenth year of Nengo-Kai-Tio (164).

"GO-MITZOU-NO."

"That is unanswerable," said Hieyas, bowing his head; "the supreme master has ordered, — I obey. I lay down the powers which were confided to me; and after the insults to which I have submitted, I know what remains for me to do. I hope that those who have managed this matter may not repent their success some day, and that the country may not have cause to groan under the weight of misfortune which may befall it."

He went out, after uttering these words, and all the lords rejoicing, gathered around the young Shogun and congratulated him.

"You should congratulate my friend and brother, Nagato," said Fide-Yori; "it was he who accomplished everything."

"All is not ended yet," said Nagato, who seemed thoughtful; "you must instantly sign Hieyas' death-warrant."

"But you heard what he said, friend; he said that he knew what remained for him to do. He is even now about to perform the hara-kiri."

"Certainly," said the Prince of Satsuma.

"He knows the code of nobility," said the Prince of Aki.

"Yes; but he despises its customs, and will not conform to them," said Nagato. "If we do not promptly condemn that man, he will escape us; and once free, he is capable of daring anything."

The Prince of Nagato had unfolded a roll of white paper, and offered a brush dipped in ink to the Shogun.

Fide-Yori seemed to waver. "To condemn him thus without a trial!" he said.

"A trial is of no avail," replied Nagato. "He has perjured himself, and failed in respect to you before the whole Council; moreover he is an assassin."

"He is my wife's grandfather," murmured the Shogun.

"You can repudiate your wife," said Nagato. "While Hieyas lives, there can be no peace for you, no safety for the country."

Fide-Yori seized the brush, wrote the warrant, and signed it.

Nagato handed the order to General Sanada-Sayemon-Yoke-Moura, who instantly left the room.

He soon returned, his countenance disfigured by wrath. "Too late!" he cried; "the Prince of Nagato was right: Hieyas has fled!"

CHAPTER VIII. THE CASTLE OF OWARI

On the shores of the Pacific Ocean, at the top of a rocky cliff, stands the fortress of the Princes of Owari. Its walls, pierced with loopholes, are so constructed as to follow the lay of the land. They are masked here and there by groups of trees and shrubs, whose fresh verdure is in happy contrast with the ragged walls of rust-colored rock.

From the summit of the fortress the view is very fine. A little bay rounds to the foot of the hill, and affords safe shelter for the junks and barks which skim the clear water in all directions; farther away the blue waves of the Pacific trace a darker line against the sky. On the land-ward side rises a chain of mountains, cultivated in patches to their very tops. Between the mountains lie valleys, where we may see villages nestling in a grove, near a brook; then the valleys end in the heart of more hills.

A broad and well-kept road winds along the undulating ground to the foot of the castle of Owari. This road, known as the Tokaido, was built by Taiko-Sama; it intersects the entire kingdom, traversing the domains of the Daimios, and is under the sole jurisdiction of the Shogun.

The Prince who ruled over the province of Owari was at this time living in his castle.

About the third hour after noon on the day that Hieyas fled from Osaka, the sentinel posted on the loftiest tower of the palace of Owari cried out that he saw a troop of horsemen galloping along the Tokaido. The Prince was at the moment in one of the courts of the castle, crouched upon his heels, his hands resting on his thighs. He was attending a lesson in *hara-kiri* taken by his young son.

The child, seated on a mat in the centre of the court, held in both hands a short, blunt sword, and raised his pretty artless face, already serious in its cast, towards his instructor, seated opposite him. Women were looking on from a gallery above; and their dresses made bright spots of color against the delicate tints of the carved wood-work. Enormous butterflies, birds, flowers, or variegated balls were embroidered on their robes; every head was bristling with big yellow tortoise-shell pins. They chattered together with a thousand bewitching airs and graces.

In the court, leaning against the upright post of a bronze lantern, a young girl in a closely fitting dress of sky-blue crape, with all the folds drawn to the front, fixed an absent gaze upon the little lord; in her hand she held a screen, upon which was painted a humming-bird.

"Hold the sword firmly," said the teacher; "apply it by the point, below the left ribs; be careful that the edge of the blade is turned to the right. Now grasp the hilt in your hand, and bear on with all your strength; then quickly, without moderating your pressure, move your weapon horizontally towards your right side. In this way you will cleave your body in twain according to strict rule."

The child went through the motions with such violence that he tore his robe.

"Good! good!" exclaimed the Prince of Owari, striking his thighs with his open hands. "The little fellow has plenty of courage!"

At the same time he raised his eyes to the women leaning from the balcony, and imparted his impression to them by a sign of the head.

"He will be brave and intrepid as his father," said one of them.

It was just then that news was brought to the Prince of the appearance of a band of horsemen on the royal road.

"Doubtless a neighboring lord coming to visit me incognito," said the Prince; "or else these horsemen are merely passing travellers. At any rate, there is no reason to interrupt the lesson."

The teacher then made his pupil repeat the list of incidents which oblige a man of noble race to rip himself open; namely, to incur the displeasure of the Shogun, or receive from him a public reprimand; to disgrace himself; to avenge an insult by slaying its originator; voluntarily or involuntarily to permit the escape of prisoners intrusted to one's care; and innumerable other nice cases.

"Add," said the Prince of Owari, "to be wanting in respect to one's father. In my opinion, a son who insults his parents can only expiate that crime by performing hara-kiri."

At the same time he cast another look at the women, which meant: "It is well to inspire children with a dread of paternal authority."

At this moment a loud noise of horses pawing the pavement was heard in an adjoining courtyard, and an imperious voice called out: "Lift the drawbridge! Close the gates!"

The Prince of Owari sprang to his feet.

"Who gives orders in my house?" said he.

"I!" answered the same voice.

And at the same time a group of men entered the second court.

"The Regent!" cried the Prince of Owari, falling prostrate.

"Rise, friend!" said Hieyas, with a bitter smile; "I have no longer any right to the honors that you render me; I am, for the moment, your equal."

"What has happened?" anxiously inquired the Prince.

"Dismiss your women," said Hieyas.

Owari made a sign; the women disappeared.

"Take your brother away, Omiti," said he to the young girl, who had turned terribly pale at the entrance of Hieyas.

"Is your daughter's name Omiti?" exclaimed the latter, his face growing suddenly purple.

"Yes, master. Why do you ask?"

"Call her back, I beg."

Owari obeyed. The young girl returned, trembling, and with downcast eyes.

Hieyas looked at her fixedly with an expression on his face which would have alarmed any one who knew the man. The maiden, however, raised her head, and an undaunted spirit was apparent in her eyes, – a sort of self-renunciation.

"It was you who betrayed us," said Hieyas in a dull, heavy voice.

"Yes," said she.

"What does this mean?" cried the Prince of Owari with a start.

"It means that the plot so carefully contrived within these castle walls, so mysteriously concealed from all, was surprised and revealed by her."

"Wretch!" cried the Prince raising his clenched fist against his daughter.

"A woman, – a child, – to ruin a political conspiracy!" continued Hieyas. "A vile pebble, to make you stumble, and hurl you headlong to the ground! It is a mockery!"

"I will kill you!" yelled Owari.

"Kill me! what will it matter?" said the girl. "I have saved the King. Is not his life worth mine? I have long awaited your vengeance."

"You shall wait no longer!" said the Prince, seizing her by the throat.

"No; do not kill her!" said Hieyas. "I will take her punishment into my own hands."

"So be it!" said Owari; "I abandon her to you."

"It is well!" said Hieyas, signing to Faxibo not to lose sight of the young girl. "But let us leave what is past and gone; let us look towards the future. Are you still devoted to me?"

"Can you doubt it, master? And must I not now struggle to repair the wrong done you by one of my family without my knowledge?"

"Listen, then. A conspiracy has suddenly wrested the power from my hands. I contrived to escape the death that threatened me, and fled in the direction of my principality of Mikawa. Your domains lie between Osaka and my province. Your fortress overlooks the sea, and can bar the passage of soldiers coming from Osaka; that is why I stopped here, to bid you collect your troops as quickly as possible and put your country in a state of defence. Guard your castle well. I will stay here, where I am safe from sudden attack, while my faithful comrade, Ino-Kamo-No-Kami" (Hieyas pointed to

a nobleman in his escort, who bowed low to the Prince of Owari, the latter returning his salute), "proceeds to the castle of Mikawa, fortifies the whole province, and gives the alarm to all the princes my allies."

"I am your slave, master; dispose of me."

"Give orders to your soldiers at once."

The Prince of Owari left the courtyard. Servants ushered their master's guests into cool, airy apartments, and served them with tea, sweetmeats, and a light meal.

Soon Ino-Kamo-No-Kami took leave of Hieyas, who gave him his final instructions; and taking with him two of the lords who had accompanied them thither, he remounted his horse and left the castle.

Hieyas then called Faxibo.

The latter was engaged in devouring a honey-cake, never taking his eyes from Omiti, as she sat in a corner of the room.

"Can you disguise yourself so that none shall know you?" he asked him.

"So that you yourself would not know me," said Faxibo.

"Good! To-morrow morning you will return to Osaka and arrange to learn all that goes on in the palace. Moreover, you will travel with a woman."

Hieyas leaned towards the ex-groom and whispered in his ear.

An evil smile hovered upon Faxibo's lips.

"Good, good!" he said; "to-morrow at dawn I will be ready to start."

CHAPTER IX. THE TEA-HOUSE

In one of the suburbs of Osaka, not far from the beach whose white sandy slope stretches down to the sea, stood an immense building, whose roofs, of various heights, rose far above the level of the neighboring houses. The front of this edifice opened full upon a busy street, always crowded, and full of noise and confusion.

The first floor had a series of broad windows, closed by gay-colored blinds, which were often opened wide by a push from one of the inquisitive young women whose peals of laughter rang upon the air.

At the corners of the various roofs banners floated and large lozenge-shaped lanterns swung; the ground-floor consisted of a wide gallery open to the street and protected from the sun and wind by a light roof. Three big black characters, inscribed on a gilded panel, formed the sign of the establishment, and ran as follows, – "The Day-Break Inn. Tea and Saki."

Towards noon the balcony was crowded with customers; they sat with crossed legs upon the mat which covered the floor; they drank saki, or hid their faces in the cloud of steam rising from the cup of tea, upon which they blew lustily, to cool it. Women, coquettishly arrayed and carefully painted, moved gracefully about from group to group, carrying the hot drink. In the background you might see smoking stoves and pretty china cups and dishes arranged upon sets of red lacquer shelves.

Every moment fresh passers-by, cango-bearers, and men carrying burdens would stop, ask for a drink, pay, and hurry off again.

Sometimes a quarrel would arise in front of the inn and degenerate into a brawl, to the great delight of the patrons.

For instance, a pedler ran against a dealer in shells and cuttle-fish; his basket of wares was upset, and all the fish fell to the ground and rolled in the dirt.

High words rained on either side, traffic was hindered, a crowd collected and took sides with one or the other of the contending parties, and soon two hostile armies were ready to try the fate of arms.

But a shout arose: "The cable! the cable! Don't fight; bring a cable!"

Some of the spectators hurried off, hustled into one house after another, and at last, finding what they wanted, came running back with a large rope.

Then the lookers-on took up their stand in front of the houses, leaving a free space for those who were to struggle. The latter seized the rope in both hands, there being fifteen on each side, and began to pull with all their might and main. The rope stretched and shook, then held firm.

"Courage! Hold tight! Don't let go!" was the cry on every side.

However, after struggling long against fatigue, one of the parties suddenly let go the rope. The victors fell all together in a heap, with their legs in the air, amidst the shouts and laughter of the mob, who ran to their rescue. They were helped to their feet, and a reconciliation was signed and sealed by copious draughts of saki.

The inn was thronged, and the maids were beside themselves with such an overflow of custom.

Just then an old man, leading a girl by the hand, contrived to stop a waitress as she passed, and catch her by the sleeve.

"I want to speak to the master of this establishment," he said.

"You choose your time well," said the girl, with a roar of laughter.

By a sudden movement she freed herself, and was gone before the old man could add another word.

"I will wait," said he.

A cask of saki was staved in, and the jolly drinkers talked and laughed noisily.

But all at once silence fell upon them; the shrill sound of a flute and the music of a stringed instrument were heard. The sounds came from the rooms above.

"Listen! listen!" was the general cry.

Some of the passers stopped to hear. The sound of a woman's voice was heard. The words of the song were clearly audible: —

"When Iza-Na-Gui descended to earth, his companion, Iza-Na-Mi, met him in a garden.

"How delightful to meet such a handsome young man!' she exclaimed.

"But the God, in displeasure, replied: 'It is not fitting for the woman to speak first; meet me again.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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