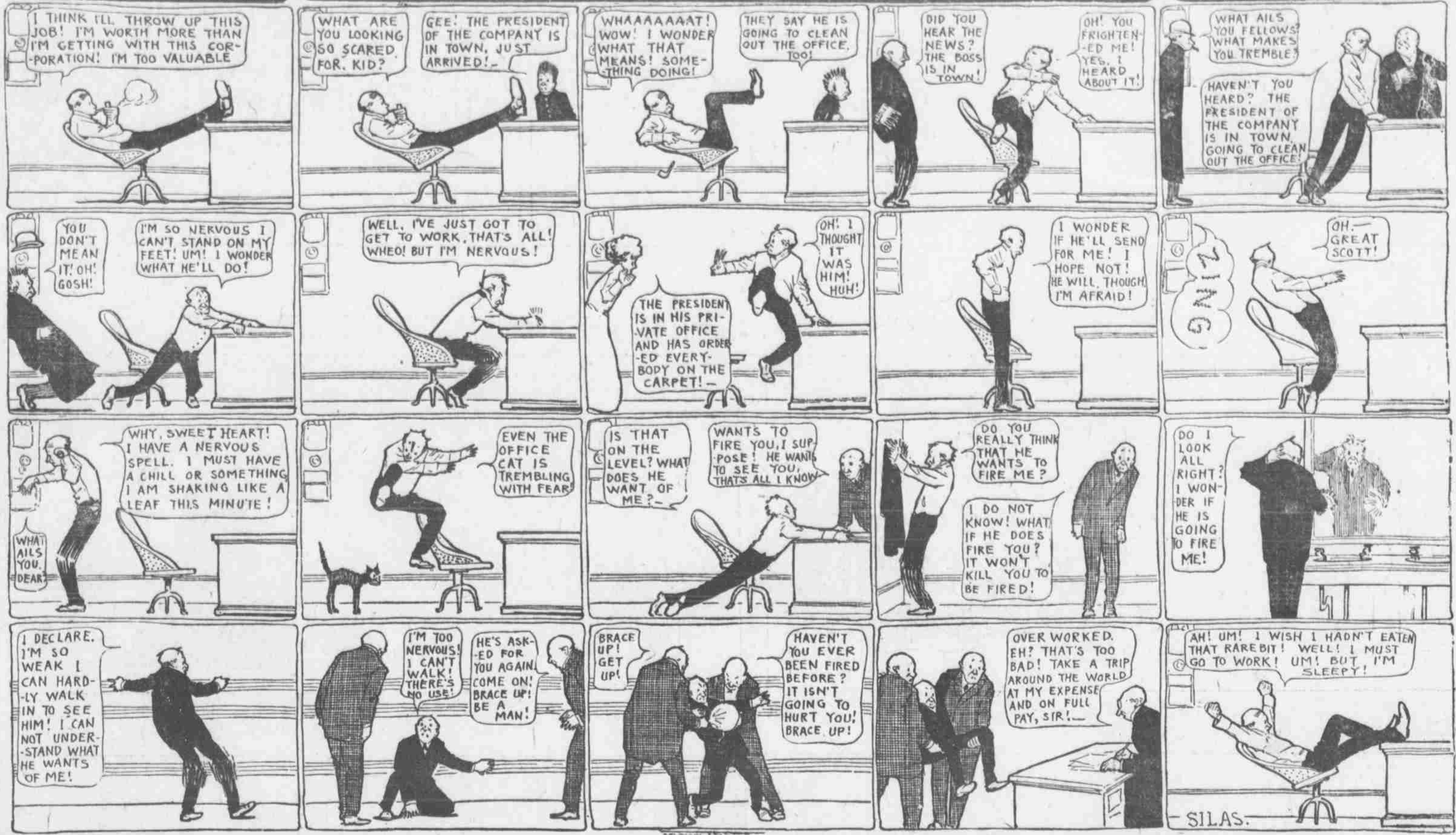

THE KINGDOM OF SLENDER SWORDS

An International Romance by Hallie Erminie Rives

Author of Satan Sanderson, Hearts Courageous, The Castaway, Etc.

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CHAPTER IX—Continued.

For an hour Bersonin sat smoking in the silent room—one cigar after another, deep in thought, his yellow eyes staring at nothing. Into his countenance deep lines had etched themselves, giving to his coldly repellant look an expression of malignant force and intention.

All at once there came a chirp from the cage in the corner and its tiny occupant, waked by the electric light, burst into song as clear and joyous as though before its free wing lay all the meads of Eden. A look more human, soft and almost companionable, came into its master's massive face. Bersonin rose and, whistling, opened the cage door and held out an enormous forefinger. The little creature stepped on it, and, held to his cheek, it rubbed its feathered head against it. For a moment he crooned and whistled to it, then held his finger to the cage and it obediently resumed its perch and its melody. The expert took a dark cloth from a hook and threw it over the cage and the song ceased.

Bersonin went to the door of the room and fastened it, then unlocked a desk and spread some papers on the table. One was a chart, drawn to the minutest scale, of the harbor of Yokohama. On it had been marked a group of projectile-shaped spots suggesting a flotilla of vessels at anchor. For a long time he worked absorbedly, setting down figures, measuring with infinite pains, computing angles—always with reference to a small square in the map's inner margin, marked in red. He covered many sheets of paper with his calculations. Finally he took another paper from the safe and compared the two. He lifted his head with a look of satisfaction.

Just then he thought he heard a slight noise from the hall. Swiftly and noiselessly as a great cat he crossed to the door and opened it.

Ishida sat in his place scratching laboriously with a foreign pen.

Bersonin's glance of suspicion altered. "What are you working at so industriously, Ishida?" he asked.

The Japanese boy displayed the sheet with pride.

It was an ode to the coming squadron. Bersonin read it:

> Welcome, foreign men-of-war!
> Young and age,
> Man and woman,
> None but you welcome!
> And how our reaches know you but to satisfy,
> Nor the Babylon nor the Parisian you to treat,
> Be it ever so humble,
> Yet a tidbit with our heart!
> What may not be accomplishment Rising Sun?
> —By H. Ishida, with best compliment.

Bersonin laid it down with a word of approbation. "Well done," he said. "You will be a famous English scholar before long." He went into the dressing room, but an instant recollected the papers on the table. The servant was in the laboratory when his master hastily re-entered; he was methodically removing the coffee tray.

Alone once more, Ishida reseated himself at his small desk. He tore the poem carefully to small bits and put them into the waste paper basket. Then, rubbing the cake of Indai ink on its stone tablet, he drew a with brush held vertically between thumb and forefinger, began to trace long, delicate characters at the top of the first sheet. In the Japanese phrase this might literally have been translated as follows:

"Cross-current of, laying water thunder on, work effect left hand respectfully."

Which in English is to say:

"A study of cross-currents in their effect on submarine mines submitted with deference."

This finished, he sealed it in an envelope, took a book from the breast of his kimona and began to read. Its cover bore the words: "Second English Primer, in words of Two Syllables." Its inner pages, however belied the legend. It was Mahan's "Influence of Sea Power on History."

Yet Lieutenant Ishida of the Japanese imperial navy, one-time student in Monterey, Cal., now in the special secret service, read abstractedly. He was wondering why Dr. Bersonin should have in his possession a technical naval chart and what was the meaning of certain curious markings he had made on it.

CHAPTER X.

In a Garden of Dreams.

In the garden the moon's faint light glimmered on the broad, satiny leaves of the camellias and the delicate traceries of red maple foliage. At its farther side, amid flowering bushes which cast long indigo shadows, stood a small pagoda, brought many years before from Korea, and toward this Daunt and the girl whom he had held for a breathless moment in his arms, strolled slowly along a winding, pebbled path tremulant with the flickering shadows of little leaves. The structure had a small platform, and here on a bench they sat down, the fragrant garden spread out before them.

He had remembered that a guest had been expected to arrive that day from America, and knew that this must be she. But, strangely enough, it did not seem as if they had never before met. Nor had he the least idea that, since that short, sharp scene, they had exchanged scarcely a dozen words. In its curious sequel, as he stood listening to the echo of Bersonin's strange laughter, he had momentarily forgotten all about her. Then he had remembered with a shock that he had left her perched, in evening dress, on the high railing of the arbor.

"I wonder if you are in the habit," she had said with a little laugh, "of putting unchaperoned girls on the tops of fences and going away and forgetting all about them?"

Her laugh was deliciously uneven, but it did not seem so from fright. He had answered something inordinately foolish, and had lifted her down again—not holding her so closely this time. He remembered that on the first occasion he had held her very tightly indeed. He could still feel the touch of a wisp of her hair which, in his flying leap, had fallen against his cheek. It was red-bronze and it shone now in the moonlight like molten metal. Her eyes were brown and when she smiled—

He wrenched his gaze away with a start. But it did not stray far—merely to the point of a white-beaded slipper peeping from the edge of a ruffle of gauze that had mysteriously imprisoned filmy sprays of lily-of-the-valley.

He looked up suddenly, conscious that she was laughing silently. "What is it?" he asked.

"We seem so tremendously acquainted," she said, "for people who—" she stopped an instant. "You don't even know who I am."

In the references to her coming he had heard her name spoken and now by a sheer mental effort he managed to recall it.

"You are Miss Fairfax," he said. "And my name, perhaps I ought to add, is Daunt. I am the secretary of embassy. I hope, after our little effort of tonight, you will not consider diplomacy only high class vaudeville. Such comedy scarcely represents our daily bill."

"Poor brute!" she said. "I hope he will injure nobody."

"Luckily the children are off the streets at this hour," he answered. "He'll not go far; the police are too numerous. I am afraid our very efficient performer is permanently retired from the company. But I haven't yet congratulated you. You didn't seem one bit afraid."

"I hadn't time to be frightened. I—was thinking of something else! The fright came afterward, when I saw you—when you left me on the railing." She spoke a little constrainedly, and went on quickly: "I really am a desperate coward about some things. I should never dare to go up in an aeroplane, for instance, as Patsy tells me you do almost every day. She says the Japanese call you the 'Honorable Fly-

"There's no foreign theater in Tokyo, and no winter opera," he said lightly. "We have to amuse one another, and the Glider is by way of contributing my share of the entertainment. It is certainly an uplifting performance." He smiled, but she shook her head.

"Ah?" she said. "I know! I was at Fort Logan last summer the day Lieutenant Whitney was killed. I saw it."

The smile had faded and her eyes had just the look he had so often fancied lay in those eyes he had been used to gaze at across the burning driftwood—his "Lady of the Many-Colored Fires." He caught himself longing to know that they would m'st and soften if he, too, should some day come to grief in such sudden fashion.

"How brazen you must have thought it!" he exclaimed. "My impromptu solo, I mean. I hardly know how I came to do it. I suppose it was the moonlight (it does make people idiotic sometimes, you know, in the tropics!) and then when you played—that dear old song! I used to sing it years ago. It reminds me—"

"Yes—?"

"Of the last evening at college. It was a night like this, though not so lovely. I sang it then—my last college solo."

"Your last?" She was leaning toward him, her lips parted, her eyes bright on h s face.

"Yes," he said. "I left town the next day."

Her eyes fell. She turned half away and put a hand to her cheek. "Oh," she said vaguely. "Of course."

"But it was brazen," he fin'shed lamely. "I promise never to do it again."

A dulled, weird sound from the street reached their ears—the monotonous hand-tapping of a small, shallow drum.

"Some Buddhist devotee," he said, "making a pious round of holy places. He is talking along in a dingy, white cotton robe with red characters stamped all over it—one from each shrine he has visited—and here and there in a doorway he will stop to chant a prayer in return for a handful of rice."

"How strange! It doesn't seem to belong, somehow, with the telegraph wires and the trolley cars. Japan is full of such contrasts, isn't it? It seems to be packed with mysteries and secrets. Listen!" The deep, resonant boom of a great bell at a distance had throbbed across the nearer strumming. "That must be in some old temple. Perhaps the man with the drum is going there to worship. Does any one live in the temples? The priests do, I suppose."

"Yes," he answered. "Sometimes other people do, too. I know of a foreigner who lives in one."

"What is he? European?"

"No one knows. He has lived there fifteen years. He calls himself Aloysius Thorn. I used to think that he must be an American, for in the chancery safe there is an envelope bearing his name and the direction that it be opened after his death. It has been there a long time, for the paper is yellow with age. No doubt it was put there by some former Chief-of-Mission at his request. He has nothing to do with other foreigners; as a rule he won't even speak to them. He is something of a curiosity. He knows some lost secret about gold lacquer, they say."

"Is he young?"

"No."

"Married?"

"Oh, no! He lives quite alone. He has one of the loveliest private gardens in the city. Sometimes one doesn't see him for months, but he is here now."

She was silent, while he looked again at the white toe of the slipper peeping from a gauzy hem. The silence seemed to him an added bond between them.

"It can't always be so beautiful in Japan," she said at length.

"No, indeed!" he agreed, cheerfully. "There are times when, as my No. 1 boy says, 'honorable weather are disgust.' In June the nubai, the rainy season, is due. It will pour buckets for three weeks without a stop and frogs will sing dulcet songs in the streets."

"Yet now," she said, softly, "it seems too lovely to be real! I shall wake presently to find myself in my berth on the Tenyo Maru, with Japan two or three days off."

He fell into her mood. "We are both asleep. That was why the dog vanished so queerly. Dream-dogs always do. And I don't wonder at my singing, either. People do exactly what they shouldn't when they are asleep. But, no! I really don't like the dream version at all. I want this to be true."

"Why?"

Her tone was low, but it made him tingle. A sudden melee of daring, delicious impulses swept over him. "Because I have dreamed too much," he said, in as low a voice. "Here in the east the habit grows on one; we dream of what all the beauty somehow misses—for us. But tonight, at least, is real. I shall have it to remember when you have gone, as I—I suppose you will be soon."

She leaned out and picked a slender maple leaf from a branch that came in through the open side of the pagoda, and, holding it in her fingers, turned toward him. Her lips were parted, as if to speak. But suddenly she tossed it from her, rose and shook out her skirts with a laugh.

Carriage wheels were rolling up the drive from the lower gate.

"Thank you!" she cried, gaily. "But no hint shall move me. I warn you that I intend to stay a long time!"

In the lighted doorway, as Patricia and her mother stepped from the carriage, she swept him a courtesy.

"Honorably deign to accept my thanks," she said, "for augustly saving my insignificant life! And, now, perhaps, we can be properly introduced!"

CHAPTER XI.

Ishikichi.

Under the frail moon that touched the embassy garden to such beauty, Haru walked home to the house "so-o-o small, an' garden 'bout such big" in the Street-of-Prayer-to-the-Gods.

On Reinanzaka hill the shadows were iris-hearted. From its high-walled gardens of the great came no glimpses of phantom-lighted shoji, no sound of vibrant strings from tea houses nor gleams of painted lips and fingers of geisha.

She had come to the newly built chapel. Her father's name was on the household list of the temple across the way, but she herself walked each Sunday to Ts'kiji, to attend the bishop's Japanese service in the cathedral. When, influenced by a schoolmate, she had wished to become a Christian, the old samurai had interposed no objection. With the broad tolerance of the esoteric Buddhist, to whom all pure faiths are good, he had allowed her to choose for herself. She had grown to love the strangely new and beautiful worship, with its singing, its service in a tongue that she could understand, its Bible filled with marvelous stories of old heroes and with vivid imagery like that of the Kojiki, the "Record of Ancient Matters," or the Man-yoshu, the "Collection of a Myriad Leaves," over whose archaic characters her father was always poring.

For many days Haru had watched the progress of the chapel building. The cathedral was a good two miles distant, but this was near her home; here she would be able to attend more than the weekly Sunday service. Tonight, as she looked at the cross shining in the moonlight, she thought it very beautiful. A tiny symbol like it, made of white enamel, was hung on a little chain about her neck. It had been given her by the bishop the day of the confirmation. She drew this out and swung it about her finger as she walked on.

In the Street-of-Prayer-to-the-Gods were no huge and gloomy compounds. It was a roadway of humbler shops and homes, bordered with mazes of lantern fire, and lively with pedestrians. At a meager shop, pitifully small, whose shoji were wide open, Haru paused. A smoky oil lamp swung from the ceiling, and under its glow a woman knelt on the worn tatami. Beside her on a pillow lay a new-born baby, and she was soothing its slumber by softly beating a tiny drum close to its ear. She nodded and smiled to Haru's salutation.

"Hai! Ojo-San," she said. "Go higen yo! Deign augustly to enter."

"Honorable thanks," responded Haru, "but my father augustly awaits my unworthy return. Domo! Aka-San des'ka? So this is Miss Baby! Ishikichi will have a new comrade in his little store."

"Poison not your serene mind with contemplation of my uncomely last-sent one!" said the woman, pridefully tilting the pillow so as to show the tiny, vacuous face. "Are not its hands degradedly well-formed?"

"Wonderfully beyond saying! The father is still exaltedly ill?"

"It is indeed so! I have not failed to sprinkle the holy water over Jizo, nor to present the straw sandals to the Guardians-of-the-Gate. Also I have rubbed each day the breast of the health-god; yet O-Binzuru does not hearken. Doubtless it is because of some sin committed by my husband in a previous existence! I have not knowledge of your Christian God, or I would make my worthless sacrifices also to Him."

"He heals the sick," said Haru, "but He augustly loves not sacrifice—as He exaltedly did in olden time," she hastily supplemented, recalling certain readings from the Old Testament.

"The gods of Nippon divinely change not their habit," returned the woman. "Also my vile intellect can not comprehend why the foreigners' God should illustriously concern Himself with the things of another land."

"The Christian Divinity," said Haru, "is a God of all lands and all peoples."

The other mused. "It passes in my degraded mind that then, would lack a sublime all-sympathy for our Kingdom-of-Slender-Swords. You are transcendently young, Ojo-San, but I am 22, and I hold by the gods of my ancestors."

"Honorably present my greetings to your husband," Haru said, as she bowed her adieu. "May his exalted person soon attain divine health! Tomorrow I will send another book for him to read."

The woman watched her go, with a smile on her tired face—the Japanese smile that covers so many things. She looked at the baby's face on the pillow. "Praise Shaka," she said, aloud, "there is millet yet for another week. Then we must give up the shop. Well—I can play the samisen, and the gods are not dead!"

Behind her a diminutive figure had lifted himself upright from a f'ton. He came forward from the gloom, his single sleeping robe trailing comically and his great black eyes round and serious. "Why must we give up the shop, honorable mother?"

"Go to sleep, Ishikichi," said his mother. "Trouble me not so late with your rude prattle."

"But why, Okka-San?"

"Because rent money exists not, small pigeon," she answered, gently. "So long as we have ignobly lived here, we have paid the banto who brings his joy-giving presence on the first of each month. Now we have no more money and can not pay."

"Why have we no more money?"

"Because the honorable father is sick and you are too small to earn. But let it not trouble your heart, for the gods are good. See—we have almost waked the Aka-San!"

She bent over the pillow and began again the elfin drumming at the infant's ear. But Ishikichi lay open-eyed on his f'ton, his baby mind grappling with a new and painful wonder.

CHAPTER XII.

In the Street-of-Prayer-to-the-Gods.

Haru unlatched a gate across which twisted a plum branch with tarnished silver bark. It hid a garden so tiny that it was scarcely more than a rounded boulder set in moss, with a clump of golden lotus shrubs. She rang a bell which hung from a cord.

The ambassador went to him hurriedly, but Bersonin shook off the hand on his shoulder and rising, still emitting his dreadful laughter, staggered across the lawn and out of the gate.

The appalling mirth re-echoed from far down the quiet road.

"Hai-ai-ai-ai-ee!" sounded a long-drawn voice from within, and in a moment a little maid slid back the shoji and bobbed over to the threshold.

Her mistress stepped from her getas into the small anteroom. A voice was audible reciting in a droning monotone. It stopped suddenly and called Haru's name.

She answered instantly, and parting the panels, passed into the next room, where her father sat on his mat reading in the faint soft light of an andon. He was an old man, with white head strongly poised on gaunt shoulders. Broken in fortune and in health, the spirit of the samurai burned inextinguishably in the fire of his sunken eyes. He took her hand and drew her down beside him. She knew what was in his mind.

"Be no longer troubled," she said. "The American Ojo-San is as lovely as Amaterasu, the sun goddess, and as kind as she is beautiful. I shall be happy to be each day with her."

"That is good," he said. "Yet I take no joy from it. You are the last of a family that for a thousand seasons has served none save its emperor and its daimyo."

"I am no servant," she answered quickly. "Rather am I, in sort, a companion to the Ojo-San, to offer her my tasteless conversation and somewhat to go about with her in this unfamiliar city. It is an honorable way of acquiring gain, and thus I may unworthily pay my support, for which now from time to time you are brought to sell the priceless classics in which your soul exaltedly delights."

His face softened. "I have lived too long," he said. "My hand is palsied—I, a two-sword man of the old clan! I should have died in the war, fighting for Nippon and my emperor. But even then was I too dishonorably old! Why did not the gods grant me a son?—me, who wearied them with sacrifices?"

She did not answer for a moment. Nothing in her cried out at this reiterated complaint, for she was of the same blood. If she had been a son, that wound in her father's heart had been healed. Through her arm the family would have fought. Her glorious death-name might even now be written on an that on the Budda-shelf, her glad soul swelling the numbers of that ghostly legion whose spiritual force was the true vitality of her nation.

"Perhaps that, too, might be," she said presently in a low voice. "Should I augustly marry one lot of too exalted a station, he could receive adoption into our family."

He looked into her deeply flushing face. "You think of the Lieutenant Ishida Hetaro," he said. "It is true that the go-between has already deigned to sit on my hard mats. He is, I think, in every way worthy of our house. I would rather he were in the field, with a sword in his hand—I know not much of this 'Secret Service.' What are his present duties? Doubtless"—with a spark of mischief in his hollow, old eyes—"you are better informed than I."

"He is in the household of one named Bersonin, a man-mountain like our wrestlers, whose service Japan pays with a wage."

His face seemed clouded: "To cunningly watch the foreigner's incomings and his outgoings, and make august report to the Board of Extraordinary Information," he continued, with a trace of bitterness. "To play the clod when one is all eyes and ears. Honorable it is, no doubt, yet to my old palate it savors too much of the actor strutting on the circular stage. But times change, and if, to live, we must ape the foreigners, why, we must borrow their ways till such time—the gods grant it be soon!—when we can throw them on the dust heap. And what am I, to set my debased ignorance against my princess and my emperor!" He paused a moment and sighed. "Ishida is well esteemed," he continued presently. "He has dwelt in America and learned its tongue—a necessity, it seems, in these topsy-turvy times. Yet, as for marriage, waiting still. These are evil days for us, my child. From whence would come the gifts which must be sent before the bride, to the husband's house? Your mother"—he paused and bowed deeply toward the golden butsu-dan in its alcove—"may she rest on the lotos-terrace of Amida!—came to my poor house with a train of coolies bearing lacquer chests: silken f'ton, kimono as soft and filmy as mist, gowns of cloth and of cotton, cushions of gold and silver patternings, jeweled girdles, velvet sandals and all lovely garniture. Shall her daughter be sent to a husband with a chest of rags? No, no!"

(To Be Continued.)