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IN THE CASTLE OF HIKONE'

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by

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"How lovely the little Princess Sado-Ko looks today", murmured the young Frenchman dreamily.

"If I were you", gruffly responded his companion, in an undertone, "I should not look at her so much."

The young Frenchman sighed, but his inconstant gaze wandered back to that great Chamber of Honor, which was separated from the one in which they were only by one deep step.

"There is something about her appealing and gentle", said the young Frenchman. "I am sure her voice is sweet, though I have never heard her speak. Have you, Von Bernheim?"

"Certainly not. No foreigner, or for that matter, no ordinary Japanese, can approach the ladies of the Premier's household."

The young Frenchman did not seem to hear his friend. He leaned farther forward, the better to see the little figure by the half opened screen.

"How charmingly she bends her little neck", he said. "It looks as white as milk from here."

His companion's hand closed angrily upon his arm, and he drew the young Frenchman forcibly about, so that he now faced the colossal columns of the Castle.

"You may have reasons to think of your own neck, my friend!" he growled, "if one of her kinsmen

suspect your folly. Look about you. On all sides, what do you see? Here in the Castle, beneath their silken robes, these soft-speaking Japanese carry the sword. Below, there in the vast courtyard, inside and out of the Yashiki (fortified dwelling) there are a thousand samurai, who are the servants of this Premier Ii-Kamon-no-Kami. Their faces are blank, inscrutable, as they look at us ever askance; but I will tell you of what they are thinking. They are thinking of the day, when they can throw aside the mask. One word, one look, from this Ii-Kamon-no-Kami, and our lives would not be worth that", and he snapped his fingers together in an eloquent motion.

The young Frenchman regarded the fierce old face of the German with an element of reproach.

"Why, Von Bernheim", he protested gently, "every courtesy has been shown us here. Let us not question the motives of His Excellency, while we are beneath his roof. Are we not his especially honored guests?"

"Guests!" repeated the German savagely, "Say rather -- prisoners! We did not come here to be the guests of this Japanese".

"But when he so graciously invited us to remain, we were delighted to accept".

"Are you then quite obsessed?" demanded the older man, in rising exasperation. "What can I say to you that will wake you up to the terrible realities of our situation. Surely you know as well as I what our position in the Castle Hikone is".

The air was suave and full of the essence of Spring. They were dancing in the well-lighted mansion, nestling amidst the shrubbery, and laughing voices mingled with the strains of the orchestra floated down to the boy and the girl in the moon-bathed garden.

There was a cessation to the dancing; a pause in the music. Suddenly upon the rapt stillness of the night there stole the magical strains of a haunting melody. A famous violinist was playing Schubert's Serenade. A rich mezzo soprano voice arose above the clear notes of the violin:

"Softly goes my song's entreaty
Thro the night to thee;
In the silent woods I wait thee---
Come! my love, to me!
No unfriendly ear shall listen---
Darling, have no fear!
Darling, have no fear!"

The boy made the discovery that the girl was in his arms; her fragrant cheek was against his own. Still under the spell of the throbbing music he murmured huskily:

The young Frenchman stirred uneasily.

"Since we are here", he said, "why should we not endeavor to make our enforced stay tolerable? It can do no harm to look at this little Princess Sado-Ko". He spoke the last sentence with a certain wistfulness, and, again, almost unconsciously his sentimental glance strayed back to that charming upper chamber, which was elevated like a throne, whose screens were all of gold, through which the sunlight pierced, and whose floors shone like glass. The latticed wall at back had been pushed to either side, making of the chamber an opened pavilion, and revealing the garden without. Like an exquisite, impressionistic picture of some fairy scene, a grove of cherry trees blew all pink and white against a sky of purest blue.

The air was soft and full of the essence of Spring. There was a faint fragrance in the atmosphere, a dim odor as of some subtle incense, which pervaded and made pleasant the place. It acted like a charm upon the senses, and to the romantic young Frenchman seemed the last touch to a scene that was perfect. He forgot the grumbling, warning old German at his side. His face flushed with emotion, his dark eyes humid, he gazed so ardently and compellingly at the little Princess Sado-Ko, that her head drooped like a flower and her own cheek grew warm. Under his breath, the young Frenchman murmured:

"One cannot help but look at her! It is impos-

sible to resist".

"You are mad -- mad", said the German, staring at him, with an enraged and indignant expression.

"Ah, good friend", said the young Frenchman gently, "have not you in your time loved? Look! She is turning this way now! How pretty she is! How incredibly pretty! I did not think it was possible for a Japanese woman to be so lovely. I never see her soft little cheek, but I long to touch it -- to press it. I am sure it is as fragrant as a flower!"

Von Bernheim's voice was hoarse.

"And while you are mooning over the cheek of this Japanese princess", he said, "you forget what may be happening to your fellow-countrymen in Japan!"

Slowly the young Frenchman turned, his long patrician face paling.

"No, no, good Von Bernheim, do not suggest anything horrible. The day is so lovely. There is a friendliness and kindness in the faces of all about us. I feel -- I feel so strangely light and happy, like one who is being drawn up to some blissful height. I am sure that everything is good and well with our people. Why do you suggest something that is sinister and horrible?"

"I do not suggest -- I assert! Our people are in dire peril. You yourself realized that before we came to Castle Hikone. You know what our mission was here. Were we not warned by our friends -- friends we could trust and believe, even though they were Japanese -- "He added the last with a fierce reluctance, "that a massacre of the

White people in Japan was impending? We came here to demand protection for our people. With flattering promises and assurances he has kept us here --- as his honored guests! Why? That is the question I keep asking myself".

"It may be", eagerly declared the young Frenchman, "that he wishes to demonstrate his friendship. His liking for the white people is well known. It was he who signed the Treaties that have made the trouble".

"He dared not do otherwise, while the allied fleet was afloat in the waters of Japan. Now he must placate the enraged Japanese. His is a dangerous position. It is said he is the worst hated man in Japan. But whatever may be his reasons for keeping us here, whether to protect us, or as hostages while demands are made upon our people -- I cannot say -- let us, at least, do nothing that may arouse his antagonism. Let us capitalize our time by guarding every word, every look -- every thought. Ah, my young friend, I speak only for your good."

"I know you do, Von Bernheim", said the young Frenchman in a low voice. "Pardon me that I have tried your patience".

"This is what troubles me the most -- what gives me no rest, day or night --- the thought of what may be happening to those we left. Oh my friend, with the passing of each day -- each hour, I seem to feel a sense of terrible disaster rushing upon us."

Impulsively, the young Frenchman cried out at that:
"Let us go. Let us leave this place, Von Bernheim. We should not be here. You are right. I did wrong to think of anything save those who trusted me. Let us go to them now. Let us not stay another moment. Traitor that I am, I had lulled my conscience to sleep with pretty dreams and fancies. I see now the danger that encircles us."

"Even if we could freely pass the countless doors of the Castle Hikone", said the German, shaking his head gravely, "we would be simply throwing ourselves upon the waiting swords without. It would be suicidal and useless. It might prove to be a signal for a general attack upon those we wish to save. No -- we cannot leave. Here is our place for the present. Yet, while we are here, I beg you do no single act that may hurt us. Keep your young eyes from this Princess Sado-Ko. Lovely she may be, but do not forget, she is Japanese, and hence our enemy."

"Ah Von Bernheim", pleaded the young Frenchman, "do not think too hardly of these people. I am sure we have many friends among them. Let us not judge a race by the acts of individuals".

Said the German doggedly and bitterly: "I know these people well. I have studied them as under a microscope. Beneath their silken veneer of smiles and purring flattery, they are a race of savages! You will see! You have seen already! How many of our good friends, who blindly trusted them, as you are doing, have paid for their trust with their lives. Not in open fights -- as we white

men meet our foes -- as man to man, in the square light of day! We've been cut down in the dark -- stabbed in the back by unseen assassins!"

The young Frenchman was silent. He stood with his slender hand cupping his chin, in some troubled thought. Half protestingly, half conciliating, at last he spoke:

"It is pleasant to think of the men of our race who have died in Japan as martyrs; yet, we foreigners should be honest, at least, with ourselves. We know that most of these acts of violence were cruelly provoked. Have we not acted here as disdainful conquerors, rather than friends? Have we not arrogantly usurped to ourselves insolent authorities? There is a Japanese proverb peculiarly applicable, Von Bernheim, in our case: 'Our actions are followed by their consequences as surely as a body by its shadow!'"

The old German diplomat had removed his glasses and polished them fiercely. Now he shook them in the face of the young Frenchman.

"Men like you should remain at home. We white men must be served by our partisans, not dreamers. It does not matter whether we have done right or wrong, whether our desserts should be good or bad. That is not the problem we face now, and we cannot give a thought to the causes that have precipitated the trouble. All that we can think of now, is that these Japanese contemplate an assault upon our people. What are we to do? How prevent this horrible calamity?"

"Let us go -- to our friends", said the young Frenchman, with emotion.

"No -- this is the only place of safety for us at least", declared the other.

"Ah, but I do not wish to be safe when our friends are in peril", said the Frenchman.

Von Bernheim made a hopeless motion with his hands, and then cautiously signalled for the other to be silent. A group of young courtiers, their silken robes of many colors trailing in the ancient style from their shoulders, and their fans fluttering like butterflies, came from out the quarters of the Kugé (Nobles) of the Castle Hikone, paused to bow with deep respect before the elevated room of the Princess Sado-Ko and passed the white men with flattering bows and hissing intakes of breath, ere they descended, whispering behind their fans, down into the Court yard below.

The ladies of the Princess Sado-Ko craned their little necks at the passing nobles, peeped from behind their fans, and fell to chattering among themselves, laughing and teasing each other like a lot of playful children. Their merry, musical voices, floated down to the two men by the balustrade, and the young Frenchman turned slowly about, as if reluctantly charmed. Even as he turned, the Princess Sado-Ko looked up suddenly from her work, and for the space of a long moment, her bright dark eyes rested upon his own. It seemed to the young Frenchman at that moment as if he stood under some gloriously hued rainbow, that all the world had turned once more fair and charming, and that above all

else eyes that were full of a sweet mystery dumbly spoke across a great abyss to him a story that was like the passionate song of Lorelei. He scarcely heard the words of the German in his ear. He was conscious only of a ruthless, stabbing pain, as mechanically, true to his promise to his friend, he tore his gaze from the face of the Princess Sado-Ko, and as if forever to emphasize his heroic resolve, turned his back harshly upon her.

And she? She had wondered much lately over this strange, exquisite tumult that had come floodingly to her heart. All through the golden days of this Season of Clear Weather, she had been warmly conscious of those long, yearning glances of the young Frenchman. She knew not why, as she sat among her maidens, her mind had ever wandered from her work to question with gentle wonder this blissful radiance that quivered within her. And now, it seemed to her at this moment, a calamity had suddenly befallen. Her eyes very wide and dark turned not away from that averted face. A strangely piteous look crept across her sensitive features. Abstractedly, she leaned forward. The ball of silk fell from her knee and the needle stuck idly in the embroidery frame. As still, stiffly, rigidly, sternly, the young Frenchman's face remained turned from her, a sigh that was very long and woful came from the lips of the Princess Sado-Ko. Her little world of sun and glitter seemed to swim about her. Something came welling up to her sweet long eyes and dropped upon the head of her little handmaiden kneeling at her feet. The child looked up, startled, an unuttered question upon

her lips.

"Alas!" said the Princess Sado-Ko, "the honorable needle was sharp. It had pricked me!"

"Where is it your graciousness has wounded her celestial self?" queried the anxious little maid, seizing the hands of her mistress and eagerly examining them.

"Ah, nay!" said the Princess Sado-Ko, arising and standing very straight and white among her maidens, her gaze still upon the young Frenchman, "it is not my miserable hands I have hurt, my ladies!"

With fluttering murmurs of sympathy they came about her, asking solicitously what especial part of her most august anatomy the sacriligious needle had dared to pierce. But the Princess Sado-Ko did not answer her maidens. She had drawn her little white hands --- they were soft and fragrant as sweet slender lilies --- from the grasp of the kneeling child at her feet, and now she laid them crushingly upon her heart.

There was a festival in the streets below that night. They called it: "A Festival of the Lanterns", but to the two men, looking over the ballustrade, those dancing flames seemed something more than the friendly light of lanterns. Why did they run so fleetly, those brown, whispering people, and what gave to their voices that exultant snarl, as of fanatic madmen bent upon some conquering course? How horribly menacing seemed their savage faces under the threatening light of the angry, waving torches. A crowd had

gathered directly under the gates of the Castle Hikone, and suddenly a crier's voice, shrill and sweet as a woman's, but with a throbbing note of wild defiance, rang out upon the air, drowning the rumbling murmurs of the throng.

"Ii-Kaon-no-Kami!" cried the shrill, fierce voice, "friend of the white barbarians, make your peace with the Eternal Gods!"

The cry was caught up by a hundred throats, till it seemed to come thundering against the iron gates of the Castle and to sweep beyond them into the fortified Yaskiki of the Premier Prince of Japan. A file of Samurai passed along the walls of the courtyard and slipped out of the gates into the street. A hubub arose without -- angry, defiant outcries, strangling shrieks, and the savage clatter of sword meeting sword; then the clacking patter of a hundred clogs beating in hurried retreat upon the pavement. The light of the angry torches died away. A silence fell all about the Castle Hikone.

To the two white men, looking with haggard faces and straining eyes off over the marble balustrade of the second enciente of the Castle, that silence was more appalling than the menacing cries of before. Waiting for they knew not what terror, scarcely breathing, they tried to pierce the thick darkness. Suddenly the older man gripped the arm of the younger and pointed off toward the west. Like a snake, against the blackness of the sky, a flame had suddenly leaped. It spread like forked lightning, licking its zigzag way across

the darkness, and joined in one dark blur of smoke and flame.

"My God!" cried the young Frenchman stranglingly,
"the legations are afire!"

Like some wild, enraged beast, prodded and beaten beyond hurt, up leaped the old German, ran with his great head lowered almost as a battering ram before him, blindly along the parapet, till he reached the forbidden stairs. Darkness was beneath him, but he plunged down, down, into that mad pandemonium of hoarsely shouting, moving shapes that were pouring out through the now wide open gates of the Castle Hikone.

For a moment only the young Frenchman hesitated. Then with a cry: "Von Bernheim, my friend!" he started to follow. Something seemed to blow like a fluttering bird across his path, holding and staying his progress.

Under the reflected light of that fearful flame in the west, he saw her face, white and wild, close to his own. Her little hands had somehow found their way to his shoulders. He tried to shake them off but there they clung resistlessly.

"Outside country-man!" she whisperingly cried, "go not outside the Castle Hikone tonight!"

He tried to speak, to turn his head back toward that flaming west, but the little frantic hands, clutching at his shoulders, drew him ever along, farther and farther back toward that golden room, where always she had sat among her maidens. Her face was so close to his own. Her soft, black hair came blowing against his lips. Like the wings of a bird, her long, silken sleeves seemed to reach out and

enwrap him to her. Dazed and charmed he moved along with her, but ever as he moved, he murmured hoarsely, like one who speaks in a dream.

"Ah -- my people! my people! I must go to them!"

"No, no" she said, "it is here you shall remain".

"If I could -- if I dared -- how gladly would I stay" he stammered, like one in a sweet bewilderment, "but -- my people---my people---".

"They shall be saved" she said. "In my father's name I promise it. He himself will personally go to them. Rest you in confidence and safety, outside country-man. I and my maidens will guard you from all harm!"

He awoke with a start. The dim, grey light of dawn had fallen. A robin twittered and called. A dull, slow rain fell soundlessly. Everywhere he was enclosed by screens that were so freighted with gold and lacquer that they shone even in the dark. For a long time he stared before him, like one struggling to awaken from a trance. Then gradually there crept across his mobile features a strangely startled look -- the look of one mortally afraid. Blotting out all memory of that strange, sweet night of ecstasy, there came up suddenly to his mind with scorching vividness that flaming sky of the West.

What was he doing here, resting among these silken futons, like a child soothed to sleep by asong? He reached out a hand and cautiously shoves aside a screen. Without, still asleep, those she had set to guard and care for him lay, like a barriacade in his path. He stepped across them,

holding his breath, fearing with every move to awaken them. He came to a latticed shoji, and pushed it along its groove. It was still dark without, and the rain fell sullenly. All about him was silence, save for the twittering robin. Along the wide verandah that stretched without the apartments of the Princess Sado-Ko, he felt his way, till he came to the rampart of the Castle and crept along the ballustrade to the stairs.

The Courtyard was strangely still and empty. Not a guard patrolled the inner walls, and the gates gaped wide open, unguarded. He stayed not to question this strange dereliction of the servants of his host, but, glancing upward, suddenly, his agonized gaze fell upon something that sent him for a moment staggering back. Swinging on a line drawn from post to post of the great gates of the Castle Hikoné, hung by his long, damp hair, was the head of the Baron Ii-Kamon-no-Kami, the friend of the white men!

For a moment the young Frenchman stared up at this ghastly object, and then, his head dropping, as Von Bernheim's had done, he dashed out of those terrible gates. ~~Out into~~ ^{the dark} and silent streets sped the young Frenchman. As the Castle Hikoné had been, so seemed this whole city, enwrapped in a stillness and silence that was not merely of the dawn.

On and on, through the deserted streets, blindly ran the young Frenchman.

The sun came up in the eastern sky, and showed a dim questioning face through the mist. Far off in the hills

came the dull booming of a Temple bell, but its mellow chant found no response from the temples of this haggard city which dared not to awake.

On and on, over miles of streets and bare stretches of land, up endless hills and down through dales and valleys, and again through streets that never seemed to end, until at last (but not, alas! like one who has run a great race -- home!) he dashed into the debris and the smouldering ruins of "The Street of White Devils", as they had named it in Japan.

"My God, My God, My God!" he cried like one gone mad.

There as a great dismantled litter in the center of the street, once doubtless, the norimon of some personage of high rank. In his distraction, the young Frenchman neither saw nor recognized that luxurious equipage, that had so often pleased and interested his fancy. His glance went wildly from one stricken form to another. Here was a white woman, her bare arms and shoulders still gleaming like white ivory above her beautiful gown, lying with her tortured face all torn, Here was a man he had known well -- one of Japan's truest friends -- and here was a child -- a little boy, whose small, chubby hand still grasped a toy -- an American war-boat! How many times the young Frenchman had held the little fellow upon his knee and played with him! And here -- and here was one he had known better than all -- Von Bernheim! So he had come in time, in time to die with those he loved. Never again would the young Frenchman hear his biting voice or laugh at his quaint accent. How gallant he looked, even in

death! How clean -- and strong!

The young Frenchman burst into frantic tears, crying with the unbounded grief of one who never again may be comforted, and calling upon his friend to speak to him but once -- to forgive him!

And as he wept, one crept from under that dismantled norimon, paused a moment to look at the young Frenchman with a brooding, passionate gaze, and then with her hand to her cheek, her dark eyes wide and sunken in her withered little face, the Princess Sado-Ko crept on her knees to his feet.

It seemed not strange to him that she should be there, in this place of horror, she who had saved him at the expense of his honor. He covered his face with his hands, lest he should see hers, which he knew to be too fair. Her voice was like a thin thread of melody that comes from very far away.

"Outside countryman" she said, "do not lose faith in our Japan. We are not all base. See, here are the native servants and body guard of the foreigners, who have fought and died for them. Japan stands at the dawn of a new era! We are going to be born again. Do not forget that at the time of the rebirth of a nation, there are always madmen who seek to destroy where our leaders strive to uplift us."

Against his will, he had permitted her to draw him close to that wrecked norimon, and now, very calmly, she drew aside the curtains, and showed him what was within.

"See---here is my father, the Premier of the

Shogun, lying headless in his own blood. He came here to help your countrymen. He was a friend of the white men, and of the Japanese; but there he lies, a great martyr, a far-seeing patriot! May his journey to the Lotus Land be one of bliss!"

He turned with a sick shudder from that fearful sight. He was conscious of a heavy sense of lassitude and despair. The charming sunny world had turned all black to him. Never again would his heart beat high with ambition and desire. In a single night Youth had leaped away from him.

Now the day had fully dawned. The rain was quenched, and a bright red sun sailed out across the sky. Under its light, the pallid, steaming ruins showed in all their hideous nakedness. The young Frenchman threw up his arm, and cowered against it, then staggering, swaying, looking back not once at that desolate figure there alone among the ruins, he found his way through the deserted streets down to the harbor, where the ships of the white nations were vengefully pulling in to the shore.