

THE LOVE OF AZALEA

By Onoto Watanna

IN THREE PARTS

CHAPTER I.

IT was drowsy in the little mission church, and the gentle mellifluous voice of the young preacher increased rather than dispelled the sleepy peacefulness. The church, if such it could be styled, was well filled. The people of Sanyo knew it for the coolest of retreats. They drifted aimlessly in and out of the church, making no pretense of either understanding or appreciating the proceedings. It was a curious congregation, one which, innocently enough, never thought of assisting the pastor. They came to see the white priest, not to listen to the pleading message he brought, which as yet they could not understand. His Japanese was too correct. Spoken slowly and painfully in the unfamiliar accent of the Caucasian, it was often quite unintelligible. But, as was said, the church was cool, the villagers curious, and the minister an unending source of wonder to them. If some of the congregation waited patiently throughout the length of the sermon, it was not because they deemed this the proper thing to do, but because they knew they would be treated to another form of entertainment, which they childishly enjoyed. For, after the sermon, the minister closing the large black book before him and opening a small red one, would raise his voice, throw back his head, open his mouth, and sing aloud in a voice which had never lost its fascination for his hearers. He had done this from the first, leading an unresponsive congregation in hymns of praise; but singing to the end alone. No aiding voice took up the refrain with him nor was there even the music of an organ to bear his clear voice company. Through the opened windows the chirp of the birds floated. Sometimes a baby, grown restless, laughed and crowed aloud.

On this particular Sunday, however, the minister, who appeared unusually happy, had introduced an innovation. As its nature had been whispered about the

village, the service in consequence was well attended. Behind the minister's small sandal-wood pulpit a bench had been placed upon which the people saw seated five of the most disreputable waifs of the town. At first they were hardly recognisable. From smudgy-faced, soiled and tattered bits of flotsam, they were transformed in garments of white—miniature surplices they were.

The minister beamed upon them. The boys looked stoically back at him. This day those in the church forgot to look about at the various objects of interest, forgot to drowse, for all eyes were intent upon that little row behind the priest. When the sermon was ended and the minister turned to the red hymn book, the boys arose to their feet, and as his baritone voice was raised, five piping and discordant minor voices joined with him.

The result of the minister's effort for a choir was immediate. It broke up the apathy of the congregation.

Groups lingered about the mission house after the service—groups of curious child-women for the most part. The question discussed from every standpoint was the seeming elevation of these most unsavory and godless of town waifs. How could these good people guess that the young minister, restless at the seeming fruitlessness of his labours, had given of his own meagre salary to induce the hungriest of the town, for so many sen, to be respectable for one day in the week? What would not a Japanese vagabond do for a sen or a sweet potato? Submit to a bath, a robe too clean to touch, and the pleasure—sometimes pain—of mimicking the voice of the white man.

The mellow tinkling of temple bells disturbed the gossips. It was the hour of noon, when the gods were good and for a little prayer would give them sweet food and excellent appetites. So straight from the temple of the white priest they dispersed, through the valley to the opposite hill where the Shinto Temple, golden-tipped, beckoned them to the prayers they mechanically understood; a mo-

ment only in the temple, nodding heads and prostrating bodies, and after that, home and the noon-day meal. Thus every day. Only on the Sunday, since the coming of the foreign priest, they had added to the routine this weekly pilgrimage of curiosity to the white man's temple. Strange, indeed, were the ways of the foreign devils!

"Let us wait a little while," said a round-faced, merry-eyed maid of fifteen, grasping the sleeves of girl friends.

Azalea was departing slowly when recalled by the raised voice of her friend. At a short distance from the other girls she paused and looked back inquiringly.

"Wait till they come out," continued the speaker, Umé-san by name, "those beggars, and we will have some fun."

"Oh, good!" agreed Koto, snapping her fan upon her hand—"we will find out what the white beast says to them."

"Perhaps," suggested Luji, stretching herself—she was fat and indolent and the church seat was hard—"he pays them."

Azalea looked interested.

"I wish," said she wistfully, "he would pay *me* something."

"Perhaps he will," said Luji, nodding her head slowly; "my honourable father says he is rich—very rich."

"And my honourable father says so, too," said Umé.

"Oh, all foreign devils are," declared Koto conclusively.

"Well, but Matsuda Isami says he is not," said Azalea. "And Matsuda knows surely."

"Matsuda is jealous," said Koto. "He wants to be always the richest. The gods despise avarice."

Azalea was fluttering her fan somewhat nervously. She regarded it thoughtfully, then closed it sharply.

"I am avaricious," she said, with the point of her fan touching her pretty red underlip.

Her friends laughed at her, and she blushed.

"Yes," she said, "I am avaricious. The gods will despise me truly. I adore money! I would like to have one hundred yen all to myself."

"What would you do with it?" questioned Umé, the oldest of the four.

"I would leave my step-mother's house," said Azalea simply.

"Here they come!" cried Koto. The girls fell into an excited little line by the church door, one behind the other. Out came the choir, their surplices doffed, their washed faces wide with smiles and their little eyes shining. Five sen rattled in the sleeve of each. The girls had drawn in hiding behind the church portico in order to surprise them. Now they sprang out into view, and grasped the boys by the sleeves. Thinking they were being set upon for their hard-earned sen, a series of angry shrieks and snorts burst out. Their faces set at rest by the merry laughter of the girls, they were finally induced to tell all they knew. The minister, it seems, had brought them to his house at various times, had fed them on sweet potatoes and rice cakes, and had taught them to sing just as he did. For this public effort in his temple, he had given them each—well, they did not propose to tell any one how much he had given, but the intimation was that it was a sum sufficient to keep them in luxury for some time to come. Furthermore, they, the members of his choir, were to have this same sum given to them as a weekly income, for singing, just like the white priest, in his church, each Sunday.

Azalea sighed and sitting on the church steps looked at the fortunate boys with envious and wistful eyes.

"And does not the white beast want females also to sing?" she asked.

"Females!" repeated one of the boys. "Did the gods ever favour females?"

"The foreign devil is not a god," said Azalea thoughtfully. "Who knows, perhaps he would pay *me* also to sing with him."

"Time to go home," said Koto, and she pulled Umé's sleeve. "Are you not hungry? Come Azalea!"

"She won't give *me* to eat, my most honourable mother-in-law," said Azalea. "I need not go there."

"You will soon be a beggar, too, Azalea," laughed Koto, "and the white man will give you charity. But come, girls."

Clinging to each other's hands and almost tripping over each other's heels, the three girls fluttered homeward down the hill, leaving Azalea sitting alone, looking

moodily and reflectively at the choir boys, now counting their money. She knew that they, like her, were orphans. Unlike her, they had not an uncharitable roof, called by her ungracious step-parent a home for her. Shelter beneath it was only grudgingly accorded, because Azalea's step-mother was vain and feared the criticism of neighbours and the wrath of the gods should she turn Azalea out. As it was the young girl was only half fed and her clothes were those half worn ones thrown to her by arrogant and fortunate step-sisters, yet the girl's nimble fingers made those same threadbare garments objects of attractiveness, which set off her own appealing beauty. But she was 17, unmarried and unhappy. Something must be done soon, or she would become the bride of the river. Her step-mother's scoldings grew with the girl's increasing beauty and grace. She did not know this was the cause, only she knew life was becoming unbearable.

The choir boys had already shuffled a portion of the way down the hill slope, when she sprang to her feet and ran after them.

"Gonji!" she called one of them by name. "Wait just a moment."

They stopped and she overtook them. She was breathless when she reached them.

"Is it because you are beggars," she said, "that this priest favours you?"

Gonji nodded.

"I," said Azalea, spreading out her little hands, "am also a beggar."

They laughed at her. Only the homeless were beggars in their eyes. In addition, members of her sex were received among them only when they had reached the old witch age. The country knew many old women beggars, who drifted, whining, upon their staffs from town to town. Often they were blind and clung to the rope about the neck of a tailless cat, which led them. Who had ever heard of a maiden beggar? So Azalea's statement was received in laughter.

"How much did the minister give?" she demanded, ignoring their jeers.

"Five—ten—maybe one hundred sen," glibly lied Gonji.

Her eyes widened and shone.

"Oh!" she said.

"That's only for the singing," said

Gonji, "*if* we become convert to his religion he will pay more."

He turned to his companions for verification. They had moved on their way and he made to join them.

"No, no, don't go! Wait a little while, please!"

"Well?"

"What is 'convert?'"

"Why," the Japanese boy of sixteen racked his brain for an explanation of the word, "why that's to—ah—that's just abandoning the gods for a new one."

"Oh!" His sleeve dropped from her grasp and she drew back, her face somewhat blanched.

"Abandon the gods!" she repeated. "But if we do that, then the gods will be angry with us."

"That is true," nodded Gonji reflectively. "It's bad business," he added.

"Perhaps," she essayed almost timidly, "that new God is also kind and good."

Gonji shook his head skeptically.

"The priest at the temple says that he is really an evil spirit."

The girl shuddered. She turned away from Gonji and he resumed his way down the hill.

Azalea walked listlessly back to the mission house. When she had reached it, she paused irresolute. A sudden idea had come to her. Why should she not *pretend* to be converted? When the barbarian priest had paid her she would go to the shrine of Kwannon and confess her lie. She would give half of the money to the gods, who would forgive her; she was hungry and ill-treated and she wished to leave the home of her step-mother, who was cruel to her. If money could be earned by a little lie, why should she not earn it? She would! She would!

The young minister closed and locked the door of the church. Turning on the threshold, he paused a moment before descending the little flight of steps, and looked about him at the smiling, sunny landscape.

The bells of the neighbouring temple were melodious and he found himself absently listening to them. With his hands clasped behind, and his head somewhat bent, Richard Varley turned slowly towards his home.

It was only the length of an iris field

from the church, a pleasant saunter. The minister was wont to dream upon these walks—dream of the future harvest which would repay his earnest labours.

He had come quite close to his garden gate before he perceived the little figure waiting there. It was her voice—her odd, breathless voice, which called his attention to her—though he heard the one word “convert” spoken in English. The rest of her speech was unintelligible.

She stood in the sunlight, her cheeks vividly red, her eyes wide with excitement and with fright. It was that fearful, piteous something about her whole attitude which from the first reached and appealed instantly to the sympathies of the minister.

“You wish to speak to me?” he asked.

“Yaes,” she said, nodding her head, and then very swiftly as though she had learned the words by rote—“I am convert unto you, Excellency.”

“Convert!” His eyes kindled and he stared at her without speaking a moment. Her head drooped, as if from its own small weight.

“Yaes,” she said in the lowest, the faintest of voices, “I am convert—Christian!”

He seized both her hands, and held them warmly in his own.

“Come into my house, my child,” he said. “Let us talk it over.”

Her hands fluttered in his, then she suddenly withdrew them. They slipped back into her sleeves. She stood uncertainly before him, hesitating to pass through the gate he had opened for her.

“Come!” he urged, gently.

CHAPTER II.

Even while the minister in the coolness of his study softly and gently questioned his faltering “convert,” a wily and smooth-speaking Nakoda was visiting her step-mother. Madame Yamada, as the latter was called, knew the marriage broker well, and being the mother of two daughters by a marriage previous to that with Azalea’s father, she welcomed him with more than usual cordiality.

Would not the estimable Mr. Okido remove his shoes and eat the noon meal within her humble house?

The estimable Mr. Okido would.

Madame Yamada sent a scullery maid flying to his feet, where, kneeling in the humblest attitude, she removed his dusty sandals. Then she brought fresh water with which to bathe his feet.

Madame Yamada, who had not engaged the services of Okido, was curious to know the nature of his mission to her. She disguised her curiosity, however, under the blandest of manners. With swift acuteness she introduced her daughters into the room and had them serve the man, throughout the meal glancing under her eyelashes to watch the effect of her daughters’ sundry charms upon the Nakoda, who she knew would not fail to dwell upon all such points with his employer. But strangely enough, Okido scarcely seemed to notice the presence of her daughters and ate his meal in somewhat stolid silence. After the repast he permitted the pipe to be lighted for him and proceeded to smoke at his leisure.

Madame Yamada could contain her curiosity no longer. At a sign from her, her daughters withdrew. Then she addressed the Nakoda.

“In what way,” she asked, “is the humblest one indebted to the esteemed Okido for his honourable visit?”

Okido put down the pipe on the hibachi and turning toward Madame Yamada looked at her keenly.

“You have daughters, Madame Yamada.”

“Two,” she answered, promptly.

“Three,” said Okido, slowly.

The esteemed one was mistaken. The gods had only blessed her with two.

Nay the gods had been kinder. Were there not three, including her step-daughter?

“Ah, yes,” Madame Yamada smiled coldly.

“Let me repeat,” he said, slowly.

“You have daughters.”

“Yes,” she allowed the word to escape her lips impatiently. Would the stupid broker never come to his business?

“And, I,” said Okido, “have a client who desires the hand of one of your daughters.”

A red spot appeared in either of Madame Yamada’s cheeks.

“What is the name of his honourable

parent?" she asked, no longer attempting to conceal her interest.

Okido leaned toward her impressively. "His name is Matsuda Isami."

Madame Yamada's hands trembled. She scarcely could control her voice.

"What—the——"

"Yes, the rich Matsuda Isami."

The woman thrilled with maternal pride. Her bosom heaved. "And which of my daughters," she asked, "has pleased the taste of the exalted Matsuda?"

Okido rubbed his hands softly.

"That one," he said, "who is augustly named Azalea."

Madame Yamada started to her feet with a cry. Then recalling herself she sat down again and for a space of a long moment did not stir. She regarded the Nakoda with baleful eyes. Suddenly she found her voice.

"Excellent Okido," she said, "the humble one cannot marry the youngest of her daughters first. Pray return to the exalted Matsuda and say from me that I am willing to consent to his marriage to my oldest daughter."

"What," cried the amazed Okido, "you refuse?"

"Who spoke of refusing?" she asked in an agitated voice.

"Your answer is a refusal, Madame."

The woman was silent, her mind busily at work.

"Listen, Okido," she finally said, "a promise was made by me to the august father, now dead, of the girl Azalea. He bade me promise him that Azalea should be given to no one in marriage save with her own consent. So! I withdraw the offer of my oldest daughter as bride to Matsuda, and instead say this: Bid the exalted one win first the consent of Azalea. He is then welcome to her."

"Good!" said Okido, arising and shaking the crumbs from his hakama. "We will make direct suit to the maiden."

Madame Yamada had arisen also. "Yes, that is it," she said, "and for that purpose heed the advice of one experienced in such matters. Let his Excellency visit much the home of the humblest, and, in person, press the suit."

Okido regarded her uneasily. "My business——" he began.

"Oh, Excellent Okido," interrupted the woman, "I promise you that you will earn your fee. Further, should the suit of your client fail—should the girl be obstinate and refuse his proposal, bear in mind, good Okido, that a double fee will be in your palm if my oldest daughter finds favour in the eyes of Matsuda."

Okido nodded his head slowly. He was thoughtful as the maid slipped on his sandals. As he left the house he stopped at the threshold and looked back at Madame Yamada. Her colourless face was drawn into strange lines. Her long eyes were half closed. Upon her face there was calculation—cold, cruel. She slowly repeated her words. Again nodding understanding, if not assent, the marriage broker went on his way pensively toward the house of Matsuda Isami.

CHAPTER III.

As Azalea walked homeward from the minister's house, she could still hear in dreamy fancy the eloquent tones of his voice. She found that though beyond his presence she still thrilled at the very memory of his face. He had cast a spell upon her, she told herself. He was a disciple of the Evil One. She must go to the temple of Kwannon for help. Possibly the priests there would give her some talisman which would preserve her from any spell the barbarian might cast upon her. For though her ruse had failed and her sleeves were empty of yen, yet still she had promised the minister to visit him again the following day. Now she found herself wishing that the morrow would come speedily.

Her step-mother met her at the door of the house. Her lips were drawn in a strange fashion apart and her long teeth showed. This was her manner of smiling. It was uglier and more sinister than a frown. Azalea quickened her steps, the colour beating up into her face. When she saw that set smile upon Madame Yamada's face she stopped abruptly before the woman. But her step-mother spoke in the most amiable of tones:

"You must be hungry, my daughter,

since you have not had your noon meal."

The girl raised her eyes inquiringly toward the woman. Then she answered simply:

"Yes, mother-in-law, I am hungry."

"Come into the kitchen then, Azalea. The maid has kept your rice warm."

Azalea was too much accustomed to the vicissitudes of fortune to wonder at the sudden generosity of the step-mother. She ate the rice and sipped the fragrant tea with mechanical relish. The meal was unexpected, but none the less palatable to a hungry young girl. She suspected that her step-mother required something of her, but her mind occupied with its late thoughts of the minister had no reason for speculation over the motives of her step-mother. She let Madame Yamada herself open the subject.

"Daughter," said the woman, "would you enjoy a trip to Tokyo?"

Azalea looked up quickly; then she answered shortly:

"No."

Madame Yamada's eyes narrowed. She controlled her feeling however.

"What, Azalea! You do not wish to go to Tokyo, where everything is so gay and bright and beautiful?"

Azalea rested her chin upon her hand and looked out from the kitchen shoji across the fields. She did not answer.

"You are becoming old," said the step-mother. "You will have to earn your living soon."

Azalea did not move, but her step-mother knew she was listening to her words.

"Here," she continued, "there is no way in which you could earn money, for you are of samurai descent and your august ancestors would not rest easily should you be reduced to manual labour."

"Mother-in-law," said the girl, quietly, "you would be ashamed before our neighbours if I were to obtain work here. My august ancestors would feel no shame."

"What could you do here?"

Azalea looked at her small white hands thoughtfully.

"I could work in the mills," she said, and added with a girlish sigh, "but it would maim my hands."

"Yes, and also your back, your knees, and afterwards your spirit. Let the stout

peasant women labour that way, Azalea. Such employment is not for one of gentle birth. You shall go to Tokyo."

"What shall I do there?" inquired the girl.

"You have beauty and youth," said Madame Yamada, slowly.

The girl moved uneasily and then catching sight of the expression upon her mother's face, she made as if to arise; but the other held her by the sleeve.

"Why do you start so?" she inquired gruffly. "Do you suppose I referred to the yoshiwasa?"

"Yes," said Azalea, white to the lips. Her voice became passionate. "I will not go there," she said. "You shall not sell me. I am the daughter of a samurai."

"Foolish child! Who spoke of selling you to the yoshiwasa?"

"Ah, your eyes spoke, mother-in-law. Besides what other employment could my youth and beauty find in Tokyo?"

"Are there not geishas and tea house girls, and is not their employment esteemed admirable?"

"Yes, but I have not their accomplishments and I am too old to learn how to dance. To be a geisha, I have heard, one must apprentice at the age of twelve. I am eighteen years. Yes, I am getting old," she finished.

Madame Yamada, who sat behind her, looked at her with eyes that held no mercy. In some manner the girl must be sent away. Matsuda should then be told that she preferred the life of gayety in Tokyo to marriage with him. After that, Yuri-san, the oldest daughter, would console and win him. Azalea had always appeared passive and obedient by nature. This sudden impulse of stubbornness was as unexpected as it was disturbing to her step-mother. What if this slim young girl with her childish face of innocence should develop the strong will of her samurai parent? Madame Yamada smiled unpleasantly at the prospect, and her smile boded no good for the young girl.

Meanwhile Azalea continued to look out dreamily through the opened shoji toward the hill, upon whose slope stood the little peaked mission house. The

words of the minister kept repeating themselves in her head.

"There is only one true God. He it was who created the world—and you. He loves you, and will watch over and care for you always."

Ah, if it were only true, thought Azalea. If this new God would only be kinder than those she had known, then she might even close the eyes of her heart to the words of the priests of Kwannon, and forget they had told her the God of the barbarians was an evil spirit. She would prove Him. If He proved unkind to her she would believe it, but if it were otherwise, why how could the evil one be kind? It was not possible.

"Answer when you are spoken to," broke in her step-mother's sharp voice.

Azalea started.

"I did not hear you speak, honourable step-mother."

"Your ears are accommodatingly dull. You did not care to hear."

Azalea sighed, then pressed her lips together, as if to prevent the retort that might have escaped them.

Madame Yamada bent toward her.

"Do you wish to marry?"

Azalea reflected.

"No—o," she said, softly, and then "perhaps, yes. It would be a solution of my troubles, step-mother, would it not?"

"Would you marry any one who asked you, then? You appear to lack the common qualities of maiden modesty."

"I did not say I would marry any one," said the girl, flushing, "but almost any one would be kinder than you."

They were daring words and she anticipated their effect upon her step-mother, for after having spoken them she made a frightened motion from the older woman, who had seized her arm and was cruelly pinching it. Tears of pain came into the girl's eyes, but she made no outcry. Suddenly Madame Yamada flung the girl's arm from her.

"Did my touch hurt then?" she inquired.

"Yes," said Azalea briefly, her arm still sore though released.

"Yet," said her step-mother, "the pain inflicted by a woman who is weak, is nothing to that inflicted by a man. What

will you do when your husband beats you?"

"I do not know," said Azalea mechanically, and then added slowly, "but I should not weep, mother-in-law. I would not give him that pleasure. But," she paused, "all husbands do not beat their wives. Perhaps the gods will favour me with a kind one. I should not marry him otherwise."

"How will you test his kindness?" asked her mother scornfully.

"I will know," she answered. "I will see him and love him before I marry him."

She arose and fluttered her sleeves back and forth. Her arm was in pain. She moved it thus mechanically as a nervous method of relief, but Madame Yamada had seen the figure coming along the white road toward their house, and she leaped to her feet like a savage.

"What!" she cried. "You stand shamelessly in the open doorway shaking your arms in unmaidenly fashion because a man approaches."

"I did not even see him," said Azalea, shrinking before the anger of her step-mother's expression, "and mother-in-law, see for yourself. The man is Matsuda Isami. Is it likely I would fling my sleeves at him?"

"At him most of all," said her step-mother hoarsely. "Do not deny it, shameless girl?"

Before Azalea could recover from the surprise occasioned by these words, Madame Yamada with one black look cast back at her, had left the kitchen, and was hastening to the front part of the house, there to prostrate herself with slavish sweetness and politeness before the exalted Matsuda Isami.

CHAPTER IV.

Matsuda Isami was a small, sharp-eyed man of possibly forty. He was rich and powerful, the landlord of many of the families in Sanyo. The people feared him while they respected his employment of hundreds of coolies, and it was said his parsimony had made him rich and kept the whole community poor. In some way direct or indirect nearly every one in the community was in his service or debt. He was the magnate of the

town, and accordingly hated, feared, dreaded. He had come on foot to the humble home of Madame Yamada, he, the taciturn, cold-hearted head man of the town, and all because Azalea, walking in the sun, in a kimono, patched, faded but pretty, had turned her head toward him quite recently and smiled with childish impudence. Few people smiled upon Matsuda. This shabby daughter of a samurai, who in the early days had made no secret of his lordly contempt for the rich tradesman, had captivated Matsuda by one fleeting innocent smile. Matsuda desired her now above all things, and swore by all the gods that he would have her.

Wealth and power, after all, were not sufficient to gratify the insatiable greed of his nature. He was desirous of something more priceless, and for which he would have given up all his possessions—this beautiful young girl, Azalea.

With impatience he listened to Madame Yamada's servile words of compliment and welcome. Hardly had he seated himself, and with a gesture refused the proffered pipe, when he spoke of the object of his visit.

In accordance with her suggestion conveyed to him through the Nakoda, he had come in person to make his suit to her daughter. He desired to see her at once.

The prevaricating words of temporising that came to Madame Yamada's lips were not even listened to by him.

Her daughter not at home? Very well, he would go then at once. Thereupon he arose. Madame Yamada bit her lip until the blood came. Then she clapped her hands and bade the maid who answered tell the eldest daughter of the house to hasten at once to assist the most exalted Matsuda with his clogs. The latter, however, kicked his feet into the door, returning only a curt nod to peared, he went shuffling in them toward the door, returning only a curt nod to her deep and graceful obeisance. Madame Yamada, clasping her hands in despair, followed him to the door.

Would not His Excellency wait a little while?

No, His Excellency would not—that is to say—yes, His Excellency would; for, just at that moment His Excellency, cast-

ing a keen glance about him, saw a little figure sitting on the door-step in the garden to the rear of the house.

"Your daughter, I perceive," he said, indicating Azalea, "has returned."

The angry blood buzzed in Madame Yamada's ears, but she answered calmly enough:

"Why, yes, it is true, Excellency." Then raising her voice she called to the girl: "Azalea!"

Matsuda, returning to the interior of the house, seated himself in the guest room, lighted his pipe and drew a long whiff. Then he looked at Azalea sitting before him pensively. His little keen eyes going from her to her step-mother, and catching the glance of baffled fury bestowed by Madame Yamada upon her daughter Yuri, he allowed a sound which was oddly like a chuckle to escape him. Then he put the pipe down and again regarded the maiden Azalea. He said:

"It is the wish of your step-mother that I address you personally."

She looked at him with eyes of inquiry. What had Matsuda Isami to say to her? She did not dream that a man as old as her father, and one who was so exalted in public opinion, would deign to propose marriage with her, so insignificant and humble.

"I wish to marry you," said Matsuda, bluntly.

Her lips parted and her eyes enlarged.

"Me?" she said, faintly, and repeated the little word. "Me?"

"Yes," he smiled. "Marry you, Azalea."

The colour came in a frightened ebb to her face. She looked at her mother and sister fearfully. Their faces were absolutely cold and impassive. In a flash she understood her step-mother's attitude of a moment since. It was all clearer than daylight. Azalea arose and bowed extravagantly down to the very mates. Then with her head almost at Matsuda's feet she said:

"The humblest one is altogether too insignificant and small to become the wife of so exalted a personage."

The words pleased Matsuda. Plainly this girl would make a most excellent and humble wife. He bent graciously

and touched her head, patting it. She slipped under his hand to her knees, and then to a sitting position. But her head was still bent far over, and if the suitor could have seen that dimpling face, its expression would have perplexed him.

He seated himself opposite to her.

"The marriage," he said, "can be speedily arranged. I do not like delays in any of my affairs."

Madame Yamada interposed, desperately.

"Time will be needed to make her marriage garments, to call together her august relatives, for maidenly meditation, and for preparation for the marriage feast."

"We can dispense with all these things," said Matsuda, suavely.

"Too early a marriage would be unseemly," said Madame Yamada.

"Madame Yamada exaggerates public opinion," was Matsuda's response.

The woman's voice was barely controlled in its harshness.

"You, Azalea, what have you to say?"

Azalea opened her fan and looked at it thoughtfully, almost as though in the painted pictures upon it she found an answer. Suddenly she raised her head.

"I do not wish to marry," she said, and added as an afterword: "— yet."

At that moment her step-mother could have embraced her.

Matsuda cleared his throat.

"When then will it suit you?" he asked, respectfully.

The girl's eyes were still upon her fan, and without raising them she replied with a slight shrug of her small bewitching shoulders:

"I do not know when. Maybe in one year; maybe in ten. I do not wish to marry—yet."

Matsuda arose.

"For one year," he said, "or for ten years, or as long as your caprice may make it, I will wait for you."

Azalea's fan fluttered closed. She bowed her head upon it.

"Excellency is very faithful."

"Once," said Matsuda, looking at her with half closed eyes, "your august samurai father deigned to call me 'Dog.' You will learn, maiden, that I shall prove my title to 'Dog' by my watchfulness and

faithfulness. I have sworn to possess you, and possess you I will."

The moment he was gone Azalea turned toward her step-mother, upon whose countenance a look of sweetest benevolence toward her step-daughter was slowly appearing.

"Mother-in-law," said the girl, "you need not fear that I will marry *him*. No, my father spoke true words. He is a dog. He has only the instincts of a tradesman, and as such he comes here to buy the daughter of a samurai."

"Your words are wise, Azalea," said the step-mother, "and you win my maternal affection. Matsuda is not the fit husband for a warrior's daughter. Yet Azalea, bear in mind that Yuri, your sister, had for father one less elevated than a samurai—one indeed who was a mere tradesman. She is well fitted to be the wife of Matsuda Isami. Therefore, you can help or hinder this our ambition."

"I will neither help nor hinder," said Azalea, crossing the room, and looking through the shoji. "Mother-in-law, I have no interest in the matter," she added.

Madame Yamada was behind her and had touched her arm, the arm she had lately pinched so viciously.

"Promise to be steadfast in your refusal of Matsuda. Promise that, Azalea, and you will find that harshness is an unknown quality in this household."

"Oh, I will promise that, easily," said Azalea. "I will not even look at or speak to the man. Other things now occupy my insignificant head."

CHAPTER V.

It was in the springtime, when the little leaves upon the trees were of the most entrancing shade of green and the wild plum and cherry blossoms blew in clouds of pink and white, making an impressionistic picture against the deep blue sky so lovely and entrancing, that even such a serious minded, earnest worker as the Rev. Richard Varley became unconscious of the sermon he had been writing and smiled out at the landscape.

Nature oftentimes from her very beauty distracts one from the work of composition, though one would call her

lovingly an inspiration. How could the young missionary continue the writing of his sermon, when the alluring breezes of the spring softly slipped into his room and insistently drew the pencil from his hand. And so he sat there smiling at his desk and dreaming. He was not conscious of his dreams. He only knew the world seemed very good and fair. His pen trailed over the paper for a space, then paused, to continue again. Idly, and unconsciously, he had covered a sheet of foolscap.

The slight noise of the opening of his sliding doors caused him to come to life with a guilty start. His usually pale face was flooded with colour, as for the first time he saw what he had written on the page. He turned it over quickly, though he did not lay this last sheet among the previous pages of his sermon.

A face of prodigious fatness was thrust between the shoji.

"What is it, Matsu?" asked the minister in Japanese.

"The girl Azalea," she answered. "I have told her Your Excellency is most busy, but she still stays."

"That is right," he said, quietly. "I am expecting her."

The servant pressed her lips and her round cheeks expanded till her little eyes were almost hidden. She muttered discontentedly. "Again, Excellency?"

"Yes," he said, "again. What are you waiting for?"

She shuffled unwillingly from the room, drawing the doors behind her. Suddenly she opened them again.

"Excellency," she said, "she is not truly converted—no! That is a lie!"

He smiled. The maid's jealousy of all his parishioners gave him amusement. She was envious even of their possible conversion.

"That will do, Matsu," he said. "Don't keep our visitor waiting."

The woman muttered ill-temperedly as she passed along the hall.

The minister waited in pleasing anticipation. He had not expected her at this hour. She came usually in the afternoon. He remembered with what fearful shyness she had first entered his house, and the tremulous, almost breathless fashion in which she had replied to his questions. He was of a hopeful,

sanguine disposition. Though he knew that his small congregation consisted of those induced by sen to come to church, those who came from curiosity and others still—young boys and girls, from mischief solely, still he believed that his labour would bear eventual fruit, and lo, at last a convert! She was very young, somewhat fragile, and in her own strange fashion lovely. From the first he had likened her to a timid wild bird. Even after she had entered his house, she had turned backward as though to retreat; then as his deep, serious eyes met hers she spoke as if urged by some impulse, and repeated her faltering words in English.

"Minister, I am convert unto you!"

At first her visits had been irregular and spasmodic. She would come as far as the hill, then turn back. Again, her courage emboldened, she would reach his garden gate, there to linger but a moment, the antagonistic face of the minister's servant affrighting her. But in the absence of the maid, Azalea would daringly pass beyond the gate. A few moments later the minister would meet her in the path and lead her into his house.

The minister hearing the light glide of her little feet now outside the doors, hastened to slide back the shoji.

She stood upon the threshold, her eyes widened, her cheeks glowing with the tremulous excitement that always assailed her upon the occasion of these visits. He held out his large hand in silence, and she, the colour fluttering wildly now over her face, slowly and timidly lifted her little one from the folds of her sleeve and put it into his. He drew her towards his desk. Still holding her hand, he seated himself and looked up at her, without speaking, but smiling very tenderly. Her eyes turned from his and her lips trembled. She tried to withdraw her hand, but he held it firmly and then suddenly enclosed it completely with his other hand.

Fright assailed the girl. She slipped to the floor, her head dropping on a level with his knees. Then Richard Varley bent and spoke to her in his strangely tender voice, which somehow always seemed to penetrate and still her beating little heart.

"Azalea!" He spoke her name so softly. "Lift your face, my little girl," he

said. "I want to see it, while I tell you something."

She obeyed him like a child, but the eyes that met his were mutely appealing.

"What do you think I am going to say to you to-day?" he asked, smiling a trifle.

"About those honourable commandments?"

He shook his head.

"No. You already have learned them well, have you not?"

"Yes. You like hear me say them mebbe?"

"Not to-day. I wish to speak to you about another matter."

She looked at him apprehensively.

"Oh," she said, "mebbe your august God tell you I also visit at the temple that other day?"

He looked a trifle startled.

"What temple?—what do you mean?"

"Your God sees all things?"

"All things," he said, solemnly.

Her eyes expressed momentary fright. She drew her hands forcibly from his and sat backward a little way from him, her head bent.

"Then," she said, "you already know about—about my—my lie?"

"Lie?"

He leaned forward in his chair.

"Yaes—yaes—your God told you."

"Tell me what you mean."

The face she raised was pitiful.

"Excellency, that was velly wicked lie I tell you wen I say that I am convert unto you."

He stared at her blankly. She could not bear the expression on his face and pushed herself nearer to him on her knees. Her hands fluttered above and then timidly touched his.

"Excellency, I sawry—sawry——"

There was a sob in her voice now, and her eyes were misty. "Pray you be like unto the gods and forgive that lie."

He stood up mechanically, then sat down again, turning in his seat toward the desk and resting his clasped hands there. She, from her kneeling posture, reached up to touch his arm.

"Pray——" she began and broke off, as though she could not finish. He turned his head and looked at her curiously. Still he did not speak.

"Listen," she continued in her low, almost sighing voice, which he no longer wished to hear. "I tell you only one lie—one liddle bit lie. Thas not velly much. Also I beseech the gods to pardon that lie—and I beseech also your mos' kind God pardon me." She broke off distressfully—"Excellency, will you not hear me?"

"I am listening," he said, heavily.

"Your voice so hard," she said.

His eyes were still stern. He spoke mechanically.

"I was going to say something—something personal to you to-day. You have shocked me. That is all. But I want to hear what you have to say. There may be extenuating—well, tell me, how it came about that you pretended conversion."

"I wanted moaney," she said.

She saw his hands clinch and shrank before the look upon his face. She shook her head uncertainly.

"For money!" he repeated.

"Yaes, I needed some velly much. Gonji say you pay big moaney to convert, and so—and so—I become convert."

The minister closed his eyes, then covered them spasmodically with his hand. Sitting back in his seat he remained with his face thus half shielded while she spoke on.

"But," she said, "you din not give me moaney; no not even one-half sen." She laughed a little, almost joyously.

"Ah, I am so glad you din nod give," she said. "I doan want that moaney. After that first day my honourable step-mother doan be unkind no more. Also she give me plenty to eat, an' new dress, also Matsuda Isami ask me marry wiz him evelly day in those weeks."

The minister uncovered his eyes and looked at her. The expression of his face must have been less forbidding for she moved confidently nearer to him.

"What do you think now?" she asked.

His voice was husky.

"You spoke of marrying some one."

She shook her head.

"No. Some one want marry wiz me. I doan desire. But sinz he want, my honourable mother-in-law is mos' kind unto me, and I doan starve no more.

Therefore I doan wan no moaney—be convert now.”

“Ah, why do you keep up the pretense then?”

“Pretense?” She could not understand the word, as her English vocabulary was limited to words acquired from the minister’s predecessor, a woman missionary.

“Why do you still pretend to be a Christian? Why do you continue to come here if it is no longer necessary for you to obtain money?”

“Because,” said Azalea, smiling up at him, “I *want* do so. Also, I kinnod stay away. My august feet bringing me back all those times.”

He sighed. Her face with its quickly changing expressions became wistful.

“Excellency, I am glad thad honourable God telling you thad about those moaneys. Perhaps he also tell you that I *want* be convert an’ doan’ want no moaney.”

He wavered toward her a moment, and then turned his eyes from her. He had been beguiled too long.

“Mebbe your God doan desire me?—mebbe,” she said.

He did not answer. To recall him to her she touched his knee. His voice was hoarse.

“Salvation is free to all,” he said, dully.

She laughed almost joyfully.

“I make nudder confession,” she said, eagerly. “Sometimes I ’fraid of your God. The priest tell me he is evil spirit and I getting skeered. Well, wen I come unto your house I know that your God gitting hold of my heart, for it beating so hard, I doan know wha’s matter wis me. I doan know whether I lidder bit skeered of your honourable God, or—or—of *you* augustness. So that other day wen you take my hand this away.” She tried to illustrate, but found him unresponsive. Her voice toiled forlornly. “I so ’fraid of tha’s influence of your God. I run so quick from your house I kinnod see, and then I came to thad temple and prostrate myself before Kwannon and beseech her save me from all those powers of evil spirits. Then I go home, and I know I juld silly, foolish girl. Thad God you tell me ’bout is *not* evil spirit. No—*no!* You say

nod, an’ I jus’ foolish, skeered, because, mebbe jus’ because I am thad happy.”

“Happy! Why were you happy?”

He could not resist the expression of her eyes and almost unconsciously allowed her hands to slip back into his.

“Because *you* so kind unto me,” she said, “you touching my hand this way—so warm—so nize! Tha’s why I coon nod speag. Tha’s stop my heart.”

“I love you!” he said, the words escaping his lips almost without his volition. “I cannot help it. That was what I wanted to say to you to-day.”

She clung to his hands. Her lips parted. The colour was wild in her face.

“Oh,” she said, “you *love me!* Tha’s a most beautifulest thought, Excellency. Mebbe also your God love me—jus’ *me*—also?”

He drew her into his arms and held her there a moment. He forgot everything else as he kissed her willing, questioning face and little hands. Then after an interval:

“What does it matter—what does anything matter now?” he said. “I love you. I know that you love me. Your eyes do not lie.”

When he released her, her hands fell limply on his knees.

“No one,” she said, breathlessly, her eyes shining, “aever clasping me like thad.”

He laughed as joyously as he could. With his arm about her, as she knelt before him, he showed her the sheet of paper covered with his writing of her name.

“That,” he said, almost boyishly, “is how the Rev. Richard Varley wrote his sermon to-day—‘Azalea, Azalea, Azalea, Azalea’—nothing but ‘Azalea!’”

“Tha’s me! *I* am Azalea!” she said. “Oh, thas so nize be your convert.”

He laughed, then sighed.

“You will be that in time, I promise,” he said, “and meanwhile, well, meanwhile, we will be married.”

She looked up at him with frightened eyes.

“Married! You also marry me?” she asked.

“Why, yes, of course. We will make a little trip to a town where there’s another minister, or possibly I can have the ceremony here.”

"Oh! Pray you doan make other converts. *Please* doan."

"Why?"

"Because perhaps you also marry them—yaes?"

He laughed again and kissed the tip of her little pointed chin. There was a bewitching dimple in it, and he had always desired to kiss it.

"When you are my wife, you will, in time, become my helper. You too will make converts."

"You gotter git consent my honourable mother-in-law," she interrupted.

His face fell.

"Also," she said, "I gotter git those marriage garments, and you must buy me lots presents."

"No, I'll marry you in the gown you have on."

"This!" She touched it in dismay. "Why thad would be disgrace upon me."

"Very well, you shall be disgraced then. Now come—we'll go to your step-mother right away. There's no time to be lost."

She hesitated as they reached the door.

"Wait," she said. He paused with the sliding door half open.

"*You* bedder not come also. Let *me* speag to her alone. Tha's bedder. *If* she doan consent, then I skeer her and say I marry wiz Matsuda. She doan wish that. She desire him for Yuri."

"Oh, I see."

"Ah—bah!" (Good-bye!) she said, passing through the opening. He drew her back.

"Is that the way to say 'good-bye?'" he asked, reproachfully.

She was puzzled.

"This is the American way," he said, boyishly, and stooping kissed her.

"Tha's nicer way," she smiled. "I like say American good-a-bye all the time." He laughed and bade her "American good-bye" again. He watched her disappearing down the corridor. Her little steps were soundless. What a light, tiny, butterfly soul was hers, he thought, and how deep, how strong, how resistless the love he bore her!

He heard her voice outside. She was calling to him. He threw apart the shoji of his study and leaped to the ground outside.

"I want say 'American good-a-bye' again," she said, and raised her face upward to be kissed, her hands upon his.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TITLES AND SOME RECENT BOOKS

AN extensive monograph might be written upon the titles of novels, regarded as a serious factor in the popularity of the books themselves. But it would be largely a study of lost opportunities. The average author does not seem to realize that a successful title rests upon the same principles that underlie the whole psychology of advertising; and that when he chooses a name and inscribes it upon the cover of his manuscript he is really penning his first and most far-reaching advertisement. The title is really the author's most direct opportunity to address his prospective reader, his best chance to explain just what his purpose

has been in writing the book. If he has a clearcut central idea, he may embody it in one terse word or phrase, so unique and suggestive that it will refuse to be forgotten. Of course, the cleverest title in the world will not force a worthless book upon the public, any more than the cleverest street-car posters could make us go on indefinitely buying a worthless soap or baking powder. And, on the other hand, if a story has real genius in it, the readers will sooner or later find it out, in spite of a colourless or inane label on the cover. And yet, there is no doubt that a majority of novels are sent forth, handicapped with an inadequate, if not actually a misleading, title.