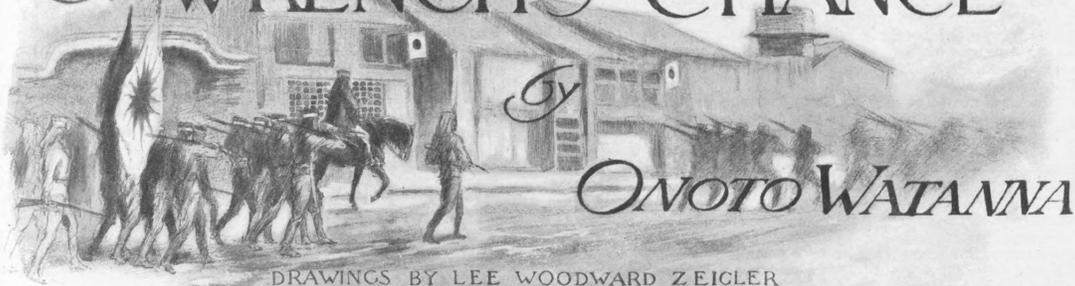


The WRENCH of CHANCE



DRAWINGS BY LEE WOODWARD ZEICLER

A JAPANESE STORY IN TWO PARTS.—PART II.—(Concluded)

II

LOVE at first sight is a usual and indeed cultivated thing in Japan. The youth and maiden ordained by fate in the persons of their respective parents to become life-partners cherish, even before they meet each other, romantic hopes, and it is more often the case than not that the electric spark of love is struck at sight.

So it was with Tahaki. Of a naturally melancholy disposition, there were latent in him all the wells of concentrated love and passion, needing only sight of the possible one to flame into life. He could not at once analyze the new emotion which possessed him. Hitherto his mind had been filled with one absorbing thought—his country! Although he had passionately longed to serve at the front, his had been the fate to see his former friends and comrades depart without him. Even the Saseho appointment failed to soften his disappointment, though the heavy work it entailed at least took his mind from the morbid thought of self-destruction.

Now into his dark-seeming life had come a new force. The world in a moment had turned rose-colored. He was conscious of a glorious upheaving of his heart, of thrilling pulses beating ecstatically within him, of vague delicious longings, of yearnings and desires to be better, worthier. This was love which had transformed him. Yet he had been Yugiri but once.

A week passed before he saw her a second time. During that period he could have learned something of her history, for she was one of the nurses in the hospital, but he was of a disposition too proud and reserved to make inquiry about a woman.

Taking a brief restful stroll one evening in the twilight he encountered two of the nurses from the hospital engaged in the same recreation.

One was in uniform and wore the nurse's cap; the other likewise was in conventional uniform, but her head was bare.

It was at her Tahaki looked. He had recognized her at once, and half unconsciously had stopped. She looked up at him in some surprise, smiled, blushed, and bowed. But Tahaki had not returned her salutation. His eyes had become riveted upon an ornament in her hair. It showed quite clearly there—the marriage! Suddenly he was conscious sharply of the truth. She was a married woman!

As she moved away he remained standing in the street motionless. He felt like one stricken with a sudden paralysis of mind. Then it came over him in a flood—he loved her!

In the early dawn of a day seven soldiers of Japan slipped out of life and started on the terrible journey to the Meido. She who had eased for them their last moments of life, and whispered words of coming comfort for their souls, knelt now by the cot of an eighth, a very young Christian who, perhaps, was to join his comrades soon. For him Yugiri was repeating a new kind of prayer—one the soldier had himself taught her. Now as the words dropped like very pearls of speech from her lips, a strange smile stole into the eyes of the dying boy. He made an effort to lift his head from the pillow, sighed, whispered, and again smiling, lay quiet—rigid.

Yugiri's dark eyes lifted from the face of the boy soldier and met those of the young surgeon on the opposite side of the bed. She spoke lowly, almost wearily:

"Do you think the gods will cruelly refuse to receive his soul, sir doctor?"

"I do not know," he answered; "but I am sure of one thing, madame. If you will condescend to pray for him, the gods will hear."

Following the doctor into the operating-room, she swayed slightly on the threshold. She caught at the arm of a passing nurse for support. Dr. Tahaki pushed out quickly an invalid-chair, and made her lie down at once.

"How long have you been on duty?" he asked, sharply.

"Thirty-three hours," said Yugiri, and her tired eyes did not open. It seemed as if she now heard the voices of the doctor and the nurse in a dream. Some one had said she should not be disturbed. There was a patient to be moved into another room, so that she might sleep in peace. Sleep! Why, there was work to do—work—work! Service for Dai Nippon! Soldiers of Tenshi-sama were suffering, crying, calling for her succor. There was a dearth of good nurses. She, above all, was needed—needed always. But

even as she fought against the encompassing sleep it wrapped her closely to its soothing arms, and soon came blessed oblivion.

The light of sunset had replaced the dawn when she awoke. An orderly turning on the electric lights in the room aroused her. She sprang to her feet and began examining her chart. Then, looking up at the young man:

"Omi—the young Adachi—do not tell me he is—dead?" The chart in her hand fluttered as she held it.

"Yes, madame. Adachi died at five this morning, his honorable hand happily in yours, madame. Do you not remember?"

She put her hand to her head, and stood silently a moment. Then:

"Oh, how sad—how very sad!" she said, and turned to hide her tears.

That same evening she seized an opportunity of speaking to Dr. Tahaki, with whom she was on terms of a friendship so perilously dear that she dared not analyze it at all.

"Dr. Tahaki, do you believe in dreams?"

"Sometimes, madame. Why do you ask?"

"I had a very strange dream when I slept to-day. May I tell it?"

"Please do so, madame."

"I dreamed the young Adachi and my husband were together. Their souls were homeless and wandered out into space, side by side, seeking Nirvana. This they could not find without my insignificant help. I tried to go to them, but something seemed to hold me fast to earth. I could not even move, and always they stretched their hands to me and besought my help. What is the meaning of such a dream? Why should my husband and Adachi be together?"

He regarded her sombrely a moment. Then, averting his eyes from her face:

"It is reasonable enough. Adachi recently filled your mind. His death affected you painfully. Naturally you dreamed of him. So your—the other one, madame, doubtless occupies your mind."

She shook her head.

"This must be the reason," she said; "my husband, like Adachi, has made the supreme sacrifice. He, too, is—dead."

She had turned very pale. Knowing not what to say, he did not speak. After a moment she continued, quietly:

"That must be the meaning, doctor. Adachi and my husband are together. Adachi was a Christian. My husband, too, was—a Christian."

Tahaki made a slight exclamation; but before he could say anything she added, in a tone almost of defiance and hauteur:

"Yes—a Christian. Also a foreigner—honorably Irish. I am very proud of it."

"A foreigner!"

She bowed; then with a swift, proud uplift of her chin:

"All the greater his heroism, sir doctor, for he gives his honorable life for an adopted land."

"Was not his name honorably Taganouchi?"

"That unworthily was his adopted name, sir doctor. He became a citizen of our Japan. In his own most honorable country he bore another name—augustly Michael Lenahan— Dr. Tahaki, why do you look at me so strangely?"

"Madame, condescend to repeat the name you spoke just now."

She did so twice; then, still with her eyes upon his face, she spoke tremulously:

"You have heard the name before, sir doctor?"

He bowed in silence.

"You are honorably acquainted with my husband?"

"No, madame."

"You have met him?"

"I have seen him."

"Where?"

"In Nagasaki."

"Ah, it was when he so honorably marched with the soldiers of beloved Tenshi-sama," bowing deeply as she spoke the Mikado's name.

"No—not— Madame, pardon me."

"You speak—you look strangely. You are aware my husband is a soldier?"

"I had heard so, madame."

"It is so. I tell you so. Why, you look—as if—do you not believe me?"

Tahaki spoke slowly and carefully, as if choosing words wherein

he might speak the truth to her and still spare the laceration of her heart:

"Sooner would I tear my miserable tongue out than give you pain. Yet truth, though harsh, is better for you to hear, dear madame, than a lie. The man whose name you mention is not a soldier of Japan."

For a moment she seemed about to swoon, then the proud blood flew to her cheeks and brow. She drew herself proudly erect.

"You make mistake, sir doctor. I, his wife, know."

Tahaki bowed in silence; then, as he moved coldly away, she went quickly after him, caught his sleeve and held it with trembling hands. For a moment he stood looking down at her in silence; then, as if he could not help himself, her name escaped his lips passionately:

"Yugiri-san!"

She dropped his sleeve as if it were something unclean. "Now I know," she said, "that you—that you—lied to me, and also the unworthy reason why."

He smiled bitterly. "Listen to me, madame. I am a gentleman—a soldier. It is not possible for me to lie. I claim the right to speak your name, and you are free to hear me. The law gives you just freedom. The beast deserted you. You are divorced."

"Who calls enlistment in Mikado's army desertion?" was her passionate rejoinder.

"Madame, knowing who was your husband, I will not believe you deigned to care for him. Therefore I will not hesitate to speak the truth. The day you thought your husband enlisted in the army, that day he took ship for his home. I with two of my comrades heard him boast of his intentions in a Nagasaki tea-house."

She looked him fully in the face.

"It is not true," she said. "I do not believe you, Dr. Tahaki."

But within an hour she had come into the little office of the doctors. About her whole personality there was a subtle change. Shame, pride, joy—all were reflected in her face as she went slowly toward him. He was alone in the office, and rose as she entered. He took the hand she proffered, and enclosed it with both his own.

"Dr. Tahaki, I should have known that he could do no worthy thing. And you—why, how could I misjudge you, knowing you?"

Their hands clung, tingled and thrilled in the clasp of each other, then fell grudgingly apart. But each understood the heart of the other.

III

In a little Chinese farmhouse at the base of a hill there was an outpost of forty-two men, sleeping on the floor in their clothes. The lieutenant in charge of them was the only one of the company awake. He had made an effort to sleep, but had found it impossible, owing to the noisy snoring of one of his men. This fellow was sleeping on his back. His mouth was wide open.

Lieutenant Sato marvelled that his companions could sleep near him. Smiling half irritably, he walked over to the fellow, struck a match, and bent to examine him. The light revealed what at first looked like a mass of tangled wool of a ruddy color—the curious red hair of the soldier. Instantly Sato drew back, frowning slightly. He did not attempt to sleep after this, but began to pace the floor back and forth, his hands behind him, his head bent, as though he were plunged in some reverie.

About two in the morning he was startled by an unmistakable sound—the challenging of his picket. He rushed across the room, thrust his head out of the window, and saw the Russian column.

If the Japanese soldiers had slept soundly, undisturbed by the snores of their comrade, they knew at least, even in sleep, that other sound. They were all upon their feet, with their rifles and ammunition. Almost in a flash they had sprung out and had gone to meet the head of the column. They had no notion of the size of the enemy; they knew only that they must overcome him, and unhesitatingly they went, all—save one.

That one, unlike his comrades, had neither heard nor answered the call to arms. Mouth agape, he still slept loudly on. Not even the noise of the going of his comrades had awakened him, nor the frenzied kicking at his shins administered by the departing ones.

A Chinaman rushed down from an upper floor to give the alarm.

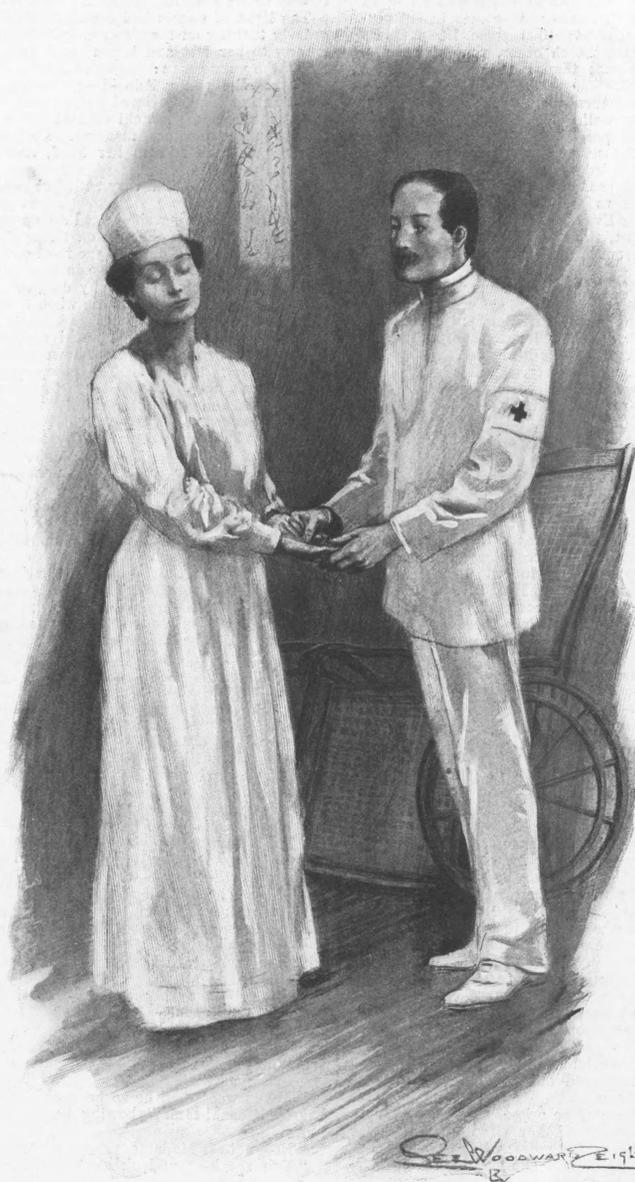
He saw the place was apparently deserted, and hearing the unearthly music of the sleeping one, stood for a moment petrified with superstitious fright. Then emitting a loud squeal of terror, he scuttled across the room, and fled up the little rickety steps down which he had come.

The shriek of the Chinaman awoke the sleeper. He stirred, turned over on his side, sat up. For a moment he remained stupidly blinking, then suddenly bounded clumsily to his feet. His head struck the ceiling, revealing the fact that he was a giant in stature. For a moment he stood listening, his big hand at his ear. Then clumsily he secured his rifle, stuck out his foot to make sure he was treading on no one, found by instinct the door, kicked it open with his foot, and sprang out into the night.

The little handful of men who had gone forth in the darkness to meet the enemy were now engaged in hand-to-hand fighting. That is, they had literally fastened themselves upon the Russians, and were using their bayonets, fighting unknown numbers of a column coming up the hill. The Russians for the moment were stopped by the sudden onslaught of the outpost.

Now as they fought—the Japanese in silence, the Russians with grunts and mutterings—a strange and almost eerie sound reached their ears. At first it seemed the harsh calling of some bird of prey, but as it drew nearer, the little band of Japanese engaged recognized it.

Nearer and nearer came the sound, and now the Russians, too, must have recognized it—the wild singing of a soldier gone mad



Lee Woodward Zeigler

Drawn by Lee Woodward Zeigler

THEIR HANDS CLUNG, TINGLED AND THRILLED IN THE CLASP OF EACH OTHER, THEN FELL GRUDGINGLY APART

with the fighting fever. Soon he had sprung into their midst, a great gaunt giant, whose tawny hair glistened redly in the moonlight. As he lunged and thrust right and left he kept on singing—singing as though he were a boy playing some joyous game:

“Oh, Paddy dear, an’ did you hear
The news that’s going round?
The Irish are forbid by law
To walk on British ground.”

The companies on the hill and in the grove near at hand had heard the few shots that had been fired. They now charged down toward the fighting-zone. When they reached it, fifteen of the outpost of forty-two were still standing their ground, but the voice that had strengthened their arms by a thread of Irish melody was heard no more.

Presently it was done. The Russians had been repulsed.

A streak of gold crept up the eastern sky, hung glimmering over the hills, and spread in the glow of morning over the land. It was almost silent on the field of battle now—a small engagement it had been, but the sight the rising sun looked down upon was awful. Here and there in every direction forms were lying, some of them face downward to the earth, others with their stark faces upturned to the sky. And in the very heart of the field a mountain of forms lay massed together.

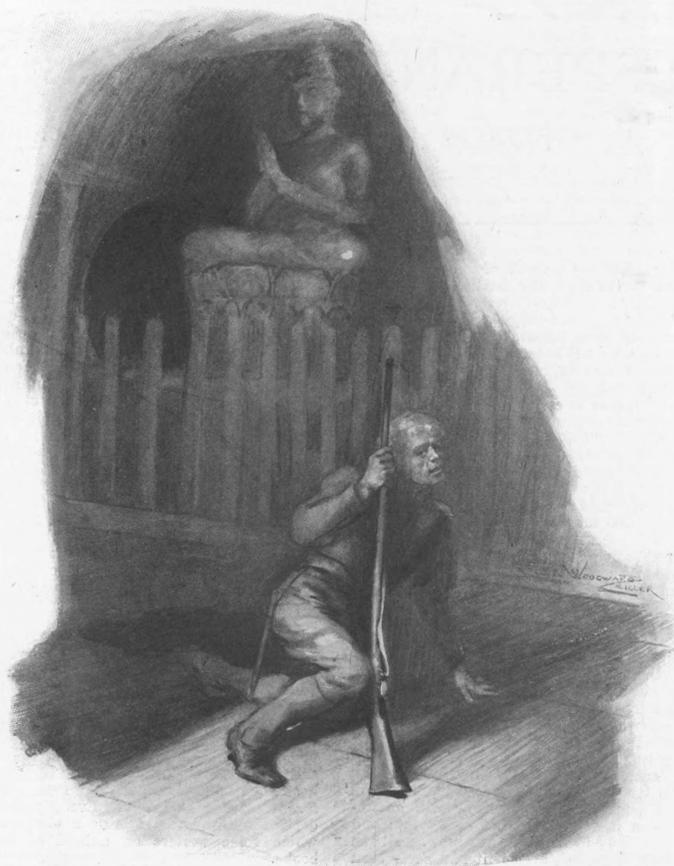
Lieutenant Sato had abandoned the heroic fifteen left of his little band. From one soldier to another he went, turning them over and examining their faces. His sword hung by his side—the blade was nicked and broken; a streak of blood ran down his face; his cap was gone. But forgetful of everything save his one object, he sought among the dead and wounded.

As he came to that human mountain, he stopped. He set to work, pulling the forms apart. Two soldiers close at hand fell to helping him. It was slow and terrible work, for some of them were still alive. One by one they were moved. At the very bottom of them all was Michael Lenahan.

Sato threw himself upon the ground and burst into tears. One of the men who had assisted him made a pillow of twigs and put it under Michael’s head. The other went to fetch a litter.

Of a little Chinese temple on the hill they had made a Red Cross hospital, and now rude litters, some of them made of four sticks, were bearing the wounded, victor and vanquished alike. One knew who was Japanese on this litter, who Russian on that; for the wounded Japanese were silent as the dead, while the groans of the Russian made the sound of mourning loud in the air. But from the stretcher of Michael Lenahan there arose a new kind of sound—one not often heard on a battle-field. Snatches of song floated upward from beneath the Russian coat thrown over him. Sometimes there would be a short silence, followed by muttering—an oath. Again a bit of song would ring out. Then, after a longer silence, a voice softened to the tenderness in tone of a woman: “Giri!” said Michael, softly, “Giri, my girl! I’m coming back for you. Giri—my girl—my wife!”

Michael had crouched in the corner of a little “heathen” cell, cowering with the terror of the pursued. He had fled with the fear of a wild beast at the mere sight of an English ship in a Japanese harbor. For twenty years he had hidden himself in a little inland hamlet of Japan; always in his heart had lurked the dread and fear of the fugitive from justice. Most of us believe that he is a coward who will strike a woman. Michael differentiated not between the sexes, save in this: Woman was the weaker, therefore she might be beaten with impunity. He had, in fact, oddly enough,



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MICHAEL HAD CROUCHED IN THE CORNER OF A LITTLE “HEATHEN” CELL, COWERING WITH THE TERROR OF THE PURSUED

somewhat the same regard for the sex as the people among whom he had lived for twenty years, but his foot was bigger, his fist heavier, and hence the lot of his woman the harder.

Yet this shivering refugee, this wife-beater and drunkard, in the face of an actual torrent of battle plunged into the heart of it, with never a thought of fear in his heart, and on his lips a song.

IV

“Your eyes look tired, beloved,” said Tahaki. They were alone for a moment. All the night they had worked side by side. Outside in the hall the white-frocted nurses rustled back and forth. They who had been on duty with Tahaki and Yugiri through the night had now retired. Yugiri had expressed her determination of staying on through the day. She smiled now at her lover, and shook her head without speaking. He was not ready to cease work, and she would drop by his side with weariness sooner than abandon him.

“Do take a little rest,” he urged. “The day nurses will be here in a moment. There is no need for you to remain.”

“But you,” she said, “have had no rest at all. My place is by your side.”

“There is one more case,” he replied. “After that, perhaps—”

“Well, then, I will wait also.” Nurses and a surgeon pushed a wheel-stretcher into the room and ranged it beside the operating-table. Dr. Tahaki turned, looked casually at the form upon it, then scrutinized it sharply. Covered with a sheet, it was still and silent as a corpse; so still, indeed, that the trained eye of the surgeon guessed the truth before they had drawn aside the linen. Uneasily the nurses looked from one to another. Dr. Tahaki, frowning slightly, was drawing over his hands a pair of rubber gloves.

“Are there two patients here?” asked Yugiri, in surprise. “How long the honorable body is!”

“A giant,” whispered another nurse; then, shivering, “How still he is—perhaps unconscious.”

“But a moment since,” said another, “I had to cover my ears from his sounds. A loud crying! I could not bear to hear it!”

“Crying!” said Yugiri. “A Japanese soldier cry! Surely you make mistake, Miss Sono.”

Tahaki and the other surgeon were now ready. With the assistance of the nurses the body was rolled from the stretcher to the table. The sheet fell backward from the lower part of the body, revealing the great ungainly feet and limbs.

As if forced, Yugiri’s eyes from the feet moved slowly toward the head. Like one in a trance she stood, unable to speak or move. One of the nurses pushed her lightly aside, then drew the sheet carefully from the body. The great red head was now uncovered.

Yugiri-san had moved slowly toward the head, and now, with her fingers trembling, she touched it—turned its face toward her; and there she stood, her eyes riveted upon the face of her husband.

A hush had fallen upon the operating-room. The two nurses who had brought the patient looked blankly at each other. Tahaki, at the foot of the table, was staring at the face with distended eyes. The younger surgeon spoke lowly:

“He has come too late to us, Tahaki. Dead—as you see.” Then in a very gentle voice: “A sei-yo-gin! Yet—a soldier of Japan! The gods reward him!”

He looked up to give an order to the nurse, but stopped, startled by her attitude. Her hands rested flatly over the face of the dead; she was leaning over, but her face was uplifted, and her eyes, full of a terrible reproach, were fixed upon Tahaki.

