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[illegible]

The time I like for fairy tales
Is when the day begins to die,
Just as the brilliant sunset pales,
And twilight shadows gather nigh.

When I can lie before the fire
That blazes with a ruddy light,
And hear the tales that never tire,
Of imp and fairy, gnome and sprite.

And sometimes as the shadows fall
Across the floor from every side,
A goblin dances on the wall,
And gnomes within the corners hide.

Then as the firelight blazes high
We see the shadows run away,
And silently again draw nigh,
Like spirits of the wood at play.

And when the embers faintly glow,
Upon the couch I see around
The little folk I love to know,
Who vanish at the story's end.

—Flavel Scott Mines in Harper's Young People.

FIAKI'S BIRTHDAY.

As it was winter and very cold, they had drawn around the prince the screens of precious woods in the little hall where he sat dreaming, his arms upon an elbow rest richly inlaid with pearl. Magnificent robes of soft, downy silk overlapped and crossed their many colored collars upon the breast of this daimio, and on the shoulder and embroidered in gold on the sleeves was a star formed of five balls surrounding a sixth, the well known coat of arms of the illustrious family of Kanga, who had no equals in power in all Japan save the family of Simadzu or the family of Satsouma.

Yet, this prince, who meditated thus in the depths of this palace, was very powerful, very rich and very renowned; his people admired and feared him, his vassals were ready to die for him, his least desire was a law to all surrounding him; nevertheless, today, he found himself exceedingly unhappy, helpless, poverty stricken, deplorably poverty stricken in thought and fancy; for had he not, for many days past, sought for some surprise to celebrate the birthday of his only daughter, and had been able to imagine none?

It was also true that this princess, who tomorrow would be sixteen years of age, possessed all that it was possible to possess—marvelous birds, fantastic fishes, extravagant dogs, chariots, bullocks, horses, palaces, everything that one could conceive of, and even marvels of which one did not dream brought specially for her from distant countries.

The daimio told himself, shaking his head, that he had too much indulged his beloved daughter; that he should not have indulged her thus till she had exhausted—she, hardly entered upon life—all the riches of the world. Now he had nothing to offer his child, to astonish and charm her.

Still pondering, still wandering, for a long, long while through the cloudy transparency of the window, he allowed his wearied gaze to wander over the stripped garden, under the gray and weeping heavens.

"What did she really still desire?"

Suddenly he sprang to his feet.

"We will see her," said he, "see her, and perhaps be able, without her suspecting anything, to divine her caprice."

He turned and struck the gong hanging by a silken cord from the teeth of a monster in bronze.

Immediately the panels forming the walls glided noiselessly apart, separated to each side, permitting you to see a long perspective of rooms after room filled by samourais of service, pages, guards and household domestics. The samourais—noble vassals wearing two swords—bowed profoundly before him; the pages and servants prostrated themselves, brows to the ground.

"I am going to visit my daughter," said the daimio gravely. "Come!"

And immediately the escort formed about him, while the guards ran in advance to clear the way.

Fiaki—that is to say, Ray of Sunlight—in a well closed hall of her own special palace, was seated, according to custom, upon broad white mats laid upon the floor, the long folds of her magnificent trained robes billowing and spreading about her like the leaves of a gorgeous fan, tissues, muslins, silks and satins, the most abundant of them all a sky blue gauze figured with spiders' webs, in which were caught the petals of rare flowers.

The face of this young girl was white as cream, her tiny mouth like a cherry cleft in twain, disclosing two rows of fine little rice grains; her eyebrows shaved and replaced by two little black spots made with a brush and placed high up on her brow, while her long hair, following the mode of royal fashion, was unbound and streaming down her back to lose itself in the folds of her garments.

The maids of honor formed a half circle about their mistress, and in front of her, behind a light carved balustrade, a dancer moved slowly, waving her fan in time to the notes of the orchestra, intoning a strange, weird chant, with a gotto, a biva, three kinds of flutes, a drum and a tambourine.

At the prince's entrance the symphony ceased, and Fiaki quickly concealed behind the spiders' webs of her sleeve the twin cherries of her lips, which was a salute to her father, tender and chaste.

He smiled with pleasure at the sight of the beauty and grace of his idolized child. She rose to greet him, and, like a sea agitated by a sudden tempest, the silk, satin, muslin and brocade of her skirts rustled and undulated behind her. He caressed her lovingly, heaped her with tender names, calling her his Incomparable, his Supernatural Beauty, his Fortune of Heaven; then he demanded of her if she were perfectly happy, if there was aught that she desired?

"Ah! illustrious prince! adored father!" Fiaki responded, bending backward her supple body in a pretty movement of sorrow, "how can any one be happy when the earth suffers as now and the sky continually drops tears! The gods have been cruel in requiring women, who were the purity of the snow can create for me an illusion of my vanishing spring."

The daimio listened thoughtfully, then, in a deeper reverie still, returned to his apartment.

"It is certain," said he to himself "certain that spring, and spring only is all that Fiaki desires."

And he stopped to lend an ear to the sharp wind blowing against the palace walls.

Already the twilight was far advanced, the gray dawn waiting to take the gray evening's place.

"Yes, spring, spring only," murmured the unhappy daimio, dejectedly resuming the seat that he had quitted a while ago.

Suddenly his sorrow changed to anger, and he summoned his prime minister. Nai-Dai-Tsin ran, bending low his back and acquiring nothing good for himself or others from the gloomy face of his master. The daimio was silent a moment, as if hesitating to give an order so extraordinary; but soon, with an irritated shrug of the shoulders, he spoke:

"Tomorrow, Nai-Dai-Tsin," said he, "will be my daughter's birthday. I desire—do you hear me?—I desire, I say, that dawn shall break on the trees and bushes of the park and all the country round about the palace covered with flowers, as in the first months of spring. Go!"

"You shall be obeyed, master," replied the prime minister, bowing himself out backward.

But once outside consternation seized him, and he let his arms fall helplessly in the long sleeves of his gown.

"It is exile, it is death," murmured he; "yes, death! For I have not the time to fly sufficiently far away, and thunder has fallen upon me from the clear sky of full prosperity!"

His legs bent under him; he caught at the walls to keep from sinking.

"What could he do to avoid disgrace? Nothing, nothing," he told himself, after he had thought over the matter carefully. For the pleasure of his child his royal master had seriously commanded spring! For a long while he stood without thought, his head hanging like a ball of lead on his miserable breast; then he cast lethargy from him and turned with a resolute air.

"Come, courage, Nai-Dai-Tsin," said he. "A Japanese does not tremble before death. Quick, the sabre first, the stroke in the stomach; the poinard for the throat!"

He drew out the weapon and prepared for the stroke, but paused reflectively.

Was it really impossible to simulate spring, and thereby, instead of ruin and suicide, conquer eternal fortune? No use to despair too quickly; there was always time to die.

But he could not repress a start of terror on seeing how deep the shadow had grown beyond the palace and how rapidly the lights were springing up, like fireflies in the darkness.

"All the park and all the country round about," murmured he; "and only one night!"

Then, on the run, he regained his dwelling, called the council together and, without giving them time even to seat themselves, imparted to them the extraordinary order transmitted to him by the prince.

"An order to be executed under penalty of death before the dawn of the day," said he, recklessly indifferent to the terrified faces of those surrounding him. "The prince's humor is not to be trifled with; he will hear to no reason. But listen and fully take in the idea that has come to me, which may be the salvation of all. Go from here and set to work at once in all the country round about—men, women, children, nobles, laborers, merchants and peasants, with silk, cloth, satin, velvet, paper or gauze—to work at once, I say, manufacturing artificial flowers. If stuff be lacking let them cut up their clothes, their hangings, their screens, their rugs for the floor—briefly, all that may seem to them necessary or good. Then all these flowers, before daybreak, too, must be tied, nailed, glued or sewed upon the trees, plants and bushes, the smallest along the edges of the roads, the tallest farthest away in the fields, all the artists and painters in the neighborhood following upon their steps to direct the decoration and give finishing touches of the brush wherever needful. I, in person, will watch over and foresee everything; our safety depends upon it."

Less than an hour later there was not a palace, a house in the city or a hut in the country where they were not feverishly occupied manufacturing flowers, and whoever had looked from the tower of the Kanga palace, shortly after the turn of the night, into the park and neighborhood would have believed himself in a sea of lanterns, which surged and leaped from tree to thicket—an array of fireflies chased by foxes.

But at this hour the illustrious daimio snored peacefully behind his screen of gold incrusted ironwood; and the Incomparable princess, in the softened rays of light sifting through the frail pearl leaves of a swinging lampadaire, reclined upon cushions and sought to compose in her dreams a fitting poem on spring.

Her women had just finished dressing her next morning when the Princess Fiaki heard under her window the notes of an orchestra and the chant of many voices.

"Ah!" said she, with a wearied gesture, "I remember! My birthday today! Why was I born in winter?"

The maids of honor threw wide the window sashes.

"True, mistress," returned they, "but see, the beautiful weather!"

Beautiful indeed, the sky, for once, as if it had been a quarter clothed for the fete in a heavenly blue, across which a gay sun rolled of a gold a trifle pale. Languidly the princess advanced to the outer gallery and leaned from the balustrade. But then, what a cry of surprise and joy! What was all this she saw before her? Was it possible? Flowers, flowers everywhere! The spring, then had come!

"What!" said she, turning from side to side and running from end to end of the gallery, "almond trees red and white, peach blooms, lilies, apple blossoms! What a miracle!"

Moreover, through all these spring roads and pathways gaily dressed throngs were hurrying to pay their respects to their prince's daughter: the great seigneurs on horseback, the noble dames in bullock cars or the regular [illegible].

Fiaki hastened to descend. The daimio met upon the terrace steps and she threw herself into his arms with a cry of, "Father! father! thou art in truth a god!"

Then they strolled the park and gardens to admire this magic spring. Fiaki laughed and danced and clapped her hands like a child, and immediately a great chariot shaped like a pavilion, all aglow with gold stars and drawn by white bullocks, drew up at the terrace steps for the princess and her maids of honor to take a ride through the country. Then the visitors entered their cars and fell in line and it was one long joyous, brilliant and interminable procession.

The prince led the way, the prime minister beside him, grave and impassible in his triumph. The scene of enchantment was the same along all the roads, the warmth of the sun and the light golden fog that faintly veiled the face of nature rendering still more complete the illusion of spring, richer, more flowery, more generous in all respects than the real springtime.

"And what a delicious perfume!" cried the happy little princess, every instant thrusting her pretty little head out of the chariot to see the better. "What a delicious perfume floats in the air from all these flowers!"

Delicious indeed! The daimio himself smelled it—sweet fountains and streamlets, in fact, hidden in the furrowing of the flowers, the spray from which mingled itself with the breath of the animals.

Ever and ever so far they went into the country. Wild with delight, Fiaki could not abridge her happiness. Thus she wanted to return by another road—was it possible?

A little uneasy, the prince regarded his impassible minister.

"Does the princess desire," demanded he, "to return by the hills or the orchards?"

"The orchards, by all means," the young girl responded; "it is further and more beautiful."

And by the orchards they returned; as Fiaki had said, more beautiful than all they had seen. Soon the pink blossoms of a plum tree caught the princess' attention.

"I must have it," she cried, "a branch of that plum tree to carry with me as a souvenir of this wonderful spectacle."

"The game is up!" muttered the prime to himself, throwing an appealing glance upon his minister.

But the minister had neither paled nor trembled.

"I will do myself the honor of plucking it for you," said he, putting spurs to his horse and returning a moment later with a superbly flowered branch.

No sooner done than the maids of honor wanted a piece, and then all the noble dames, seeing that they were really permitted to pluck the blossoms, leaped from their cars and demanded fragrant souvenirs on their own account.

Really this was too much. The prince paled with anger and was going to order them to move on, but the minister reassured him with an imperceptible sign; he knew women well—he had foreseen this also, and at a sign to an assistant a cart drove up loaded to the top with dewy blossoms, and all were provided with that which they demanded.

Nai-Dai-Tsin had unhesitatingly pillaged all the conservatories of the palace and had men mingling with the crowd with bags full of flowers till the word was given. The prince, who had not divined this very simple device, was speechless with amazement.

"Thou art truly a wonderful man," he murmured in the minister's ear, as they re-entered the palace, "and thou hast done far more than I could possibly have hoped, but even in the delight of this wonderful fete, there has been in me a dull disquiet—how shall we ever be able to surpass this spectacle for the coming year?"

Meanwhile as the daimio turned to speak to his minister, Fiaki descended from her chariot; at the same time the son of the prince of Satsouma, who had far to come and who had just arrived at the palace with a brilliant escort, advanced to salute her.

A very handsome young man, too, and so brave that in spite of his youth he was already much talked about. Deeply moved at so much beauty, he stood before Fiaki, and she, no less blushing and confused, buried her face in the fragrant blossoms in her hand and could say not a word.

Nai-Dai-Tsin, who seemed to see everything, called the prince's attention to them, and to the mutual tremulous disturbance that seemed to leave them both tongue tied.

"When the seventeenth year of your daughter arrives for her, my lord," said he, "give her for husband that handsome prince there, and she will love him more than today she loves the spring."

The daimio's face broadened into a delighted smile and he hurriedly thrust a gold and bronze trinket into the prime minister's hand.

"The key of my treasure box, Nai-Dai-Tsin," said he; "take it, use what you will, and heed my advice—be not too modest!"—Translated from the French of Judith Gautier by E. C. Waggener for Short Stories.

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