



By ONOTO WATANNA

Illustrated by GENJIRO YETO

MASTERS sat at his desk. His eyes had wandered past the mass of correspondence, papers and maps before and about him. Half absently he was watching a little rift of white clouds drifting lazily across the turquoise blue of the skies, a great snowflake fallen on a blue sheet of water. Now it drifted slowly toward the west, growing ever smaller and mistier until it melted into the endless glow of the sky and became a part of it.

As it vanished from his sight Masters aroused himself from his reverie. He had been likening the flaky cloud against the blue to a piece of gauze twisted with a magic hand about the waist of a pale blue kimona of the sheerest silk.

"Ah, these skies of Japan!" he sighed with a great indrawing of his breath. He was in a sentimental mood as usual of late, for Masters was in love.

A polite Japanese looked in at him from an adjoining office, with the calm, half wondering, wholly unreadable expression of the better class. Seeing him, Masters sat up in his chair abruptly.

"Ah, Ito, come in."

Bowing profoundly, his secretary approached the desk, where he stood in respectful attention.

"You wanted to see me about some personal matter, I believe? What can I do for you?"

"If your honorship would be so kind to sign this honorable insignificant paper," said Ito, "I shall be thousand

thanks to you until before I die."

"What is it?" asked Masters, examining curiously a paper written in Ito's fine Japanese characters, deeply ruled down either side in red ink.

"That, your honorship," said Ito, without change of expression, "is one little bit betrothal contract."

"A—w—what?" exclaimed Masters, dropping the pen he had just dipped in the ink bottle. It was his custom to sign without question the various papers of the company prepared by the secretary and translated into Japanese, a language he was not completely familiar with in written form.

"Insignificant betrothal contract," repeated Ito, still unmoved.

Masters sat back in his chair with a slight frown.

"Why do you bring such things to me in the office here?" he demanded sharply.

"Your honorship forgetting," said Ito, gently, "that I beg for one private consultation with you."

"True," Masters nodded, "but what have I to do with a betrothal contract? I hope, Ito," he added, whimsically, "you are not a nekoda in disguise and are not about to trick me into a marriage."

"No, no," returned the other, hastily, "I beg your honorship's ten millions pardons. This is my own insignificant contract."

"But why should I sign it?"

"Ah, now I will take the pleasure to explain." And Ito permitted a shadowy smile to flit across his face.

"I am about to make proposal of marriage to Japanese maiden."

"Yes," said Masters, with interest.

"Vell," said Ito, "before her father giving that necessary consent unto me, I got get endorsement from you also, Master-sir."

"From me?"

"I explain further. The honorable father of this honorable lady don't quite appreciate me."

Masters smiled.

"Nevertheless," continued Ito, "he have greatest respect for your excellency." He bowed very deeply here. "Now, if you making request for me for this marriage he agoing to consent right away at once. Will your excellency honorably condescend to sign this insignificant contract?"

"Oh, very well," said Masters, picking up his pen, "glad to do anything I can to assist you, 'm sure."

As he wrote his crisp, bold signature across the bottom of the sheet he asked with mild interest: "And who is the happy bride?"

Ito did not reply.

He had taken the contract from his master and was examining his signature very carefully. He blotted it thoroughly and then slowly folded the contract.

"You say her father knows me?" asked Masters, striking a match and lighting a cigar.

"Yes, your honorship."

"What's his name?"

"Ten million pardons, but his honorable name so augustly insignificant your excellency could not remember it. Five thousand such name in Japan."

Masters smiled good humoredly.

"Keep your secret, my boy," he said.

Arising he pushed his chair against the desk. His face had a strangely sympathetic expression on it as he looked down from his height on Ito.

"As I said, Ito," he remarked kindly, "call upon me for any assistance you want. I am sure you—er—deserve this young woman, and don't blame you at all for wanting to beat down the old man's objections."

Ito began a series of intensely low bows.

"And," continued Masters, cheerfully. "I've no doubt she is charming—one of those delightful little Yum-Yum creatures, who walk on their heels and trip on their toes—cherry-lipped, peepy-eyed little witches."

Ito had ceased his low bowing. He had flushed a dark, angry red.

"She is not like that," he said, "she is one honorably insignificant grand lady."

"Anyhow," said Masters, "I wish you all kinds of luck and happiness."

He held out his hand and heartily shook the small cold

one of his secretary. Then picking up his hat he passed with his long, swinging stride out of the office into the glow of the sunlight.

Once in the street an odd fancy struck him. Why should not he have a long, formal contract also? Well, he would try his luck. He swung up the street, disdaining the whines and calls of the jinriki men who followed him with their vehicles. As he reached the great terminal station at Shimbashi a new idea occurred to him.

"To make the illusion more complete," he said, "I shall celebrate my betrothal in advance."



Ito.



The maid had put the last touch to the little shining head.

He turned out of the station, hailed a jinrikisha and gave an order to be taken to a gay tea-house in the city.

Meanwhile Ito, who had left the office a few moments after his master, arrived at the station, bought a ticket for a neighboring suburb and in half an hour had kicked his shoes into the hands of a kneeling servant in the household of Omizutani, and with low and graceful obeisances had greeted the master of the house and formally presented the contract.

Ito had deceived Masters. The document he had shown him was something more than a mere contract. It was in fact a demand couched in superlatively polite language upon his debtor, Mizutani, requiring his consent to the marriage of his daughter, O-Kiku-san, to Ito, the secretary of Masters.

Mizutani was not slow to act upon the demand. With the most extravagant expressions of good will toward Ito and his employer he sent immediately for his daughter.

The maid had put the last touch to the little shining head of O-Kiku-san. She brought a little mirror to show her mistress the effect of the elaborate butterfly coiffure. The bewitching young face smiled back at the girl from the small beveled mirror.

"I am happy," she murmured softly, "as all the gods of sunlight."

As she bowed herself before the little shrine in her room she murmured appealingly: "Oh, Kwannonsan, let not my joy pass from me but abide with me forever."

Word had just been brought to her that below in the guest room her lover awaited her. She had commanded her maid to dress her in blue, shimmering blue like the water, and to tie about her waist an obi of the finest white silk. She had one huge poppy for her hair and another for her bosom. It was thus, he had told her repeatedly, he loved to see her best.

The little, happy smile that had glistened in her eyes as though the sun had melted into their velvet depths slipped out of them dismally as she entered the guest room and paused between the parted shoji. One dazzled glance of

confusion and disappointment, then she subsided to the mats and made her prostration before her suitor.

Her father addressed her in his stately accent of command:—

"Ito Adachi," said he, "desires thy unworthy hand in marriage. It is my command that it be given to him."

O-Kiku-san's clasped hands fell apart. She raised a pair of startled eyes to Ito, bowing profoundly before her. Then bewilderingly they sought her father's. Before the deepening frown of displeasure she fancied she saw in his face her little head bowed like a flower nipped by a winter wind. She brought words of submission. Then her voice, frightening her with its shrill edge of pain, she suddenly, piteously besought her father that he would pray excuse her for one little hour that she might meditate alone. She was not feeling well; the sun had been hot upon her head in the fields that day, and she was faint and weak. When she had left them the older man turned to Ito.

"I beseech you," he said, "to pardon my daughter's honorable rudeness."

"I beseech you to feel assured that I appreciate her honorable indisposition," returned Ito.

"She is honorably grateful to you for your condescension in desiring her for a wife," said Mizutani.

"I am deeply touched," said Ito, "by the honor she does me in accepting me."

"I beg you to permit me show her this honorably magnificent letter from his excellency, the Eijinsan."

Ito with extravagant words of politeness relinquished the contract, and then with more elaborate apologies the master of the house withdrew.

Mizutani found his daughter prone before the shrine in her chamber. She was bathing the feet of the goddess with tears. He raised her gently to her feet.

"My daughter," he said, tenderly, "it was not my desire to marry you to this youth. I have consented to it only because he comes to me with a command from one who holds me in his debt. Nevertheless, I will turn him even now from my door like an honorable dog if it is thy desire."



He went a little closer to her.

"Who is the honorable creditor by whose command he comes?" she asked.

"His master, the honorable Eijin-san."

She whitened. Her hands crept out quiveringly from their long sleeves. She seized the contract and read it through. Only one tear; it fell upon the bold superscription at the end. She drew her finger across it and almost blurred it out. Then she ceased to tremble. The face she raised to her father was smiling, the eyes glassy, lips apart, revealing the straight little teeth within.

"Dear, my father," she said, "how good are the gods. They bring to me a husband, to you the favor of your creditor."

"And will you accept this young man?" inquired her father, surprised by her sudden smiles.

"Assuredly," she returned "let us hasten down to him at once and beg him to accept our most humble thanks for his condescension."

The night was sad. But who can see tears in the darkness? A cold bath in the early morning and a clever maid may bring the roses back to pale cheeks and brush away the shadows from the eyes. So the following day old Mizutani, after a piercing glance at his daughter, sighed with relief. He had no wish to lead her into a marriage that might bring her unhappiness. Whilst of ancient and noble lineage Mizutani was one of the men of new Japan, imbued with the ideas of the West. And while his daughter had been brought up with great care the old man's pet ambition was to marry her to a man of her choice as well as his own.

Sewing in the sunlight of her little garden she started suddenly at the sound of quick, firm steps coming up the gravelled path. The color faded from her face and the sewing dropped from her nerveless hands. Masters approached just in time to restore to her the little spool of silk that had rolled to his feet. His smile was like the sunlight and he looked so masterful and big that all the resentment and anger of the night passed from the girl's mind like a cloud dissolving in the mist.

"Last night," he said, "I indulged

myself in a strange—ah—celebration."

He went a little closer to her and endeavored to look under the drooped lids.

"Can you guess," said he, "what I was doing?"

"I am honorably stupid," she apologized simply.

"I celebrated my betrothal," he said smiling joyously. "Unique idea, wasn't it?"

She nodded as though she understood, though she was only vaguely conscious of what he was saying.

"Wasn't it though?" he added as though she had assented. "Fancy a fellow celebrating his betrothal all alone: that is, except of course for—er—incidental entertainers and—er—servants to wait on one."

"And—and—you're betrothed, was she not present?" she essayed timidly.

"Well, you see, she isn't my betrothed yet. I intended asking her last night. Then I got a fancy that it would be a good idea to draw up some sort of contract first, like my secretary did. Had a little dinner all alone first of all to put me in tune, and then—behold—see."

He suddenly put into her hands a most extraordinary document. He had fashioned it somehow after the manner of Ito's, with deep red lines running down either side.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he asked boyishly.

She looked at it almost fearfully.

"Now," continued Masters with his winning smile, "that I've drawn up the contract, I believe I ought to propose to the girl's—ancestors."

"Her honorable parents, you mean," corrected O-Kiku-san, and she pricked her finger with her needle till the blood fell.

"Oh, we call them ancestors; same thing, isn't it?"

She shook her head.

"Too old-fashioned," she said and smiled faintly. "Anyhow," she added, "you are English gentlemen—why, pray, do you keer mek Japanese contract?"

"There you're mistaken," said Masters, "if you please—born in Japan."

She sighed. "You Japanese citizen sure thing," she admitted grudgingly, and then without waiting for him to speak, she added quickly, "all the same you jus' foreigner, all the same."

"Well, I like that," said Masters indignantly.

"You honorable ancestors western barbarians," said O-Kiku-san.

"True," agreed Masters, "but you see in the progress of our ascent it is only natural that I, the latest descendant, should be born in Japan. The next of our line possibly may be partly Japanese, and the next."

"You makin' ridigulous nonzenze ad me," she said reproachfully.

"No I am not," protested Masters, "but you are very unkind. You are trying to rob me of my birthright. Am I or am I not Japanese?"

"Japanese citizen, yes," she admitted. "Japanese man? No, naever."

"Why not!" he inquired angrily. "Isn't this blessed spot my home?"

"Yes," she admitted, "bud you bin edicated away." She waved her hand vaguely seaward.

"What's half a dozen or even a dozen years, to be more exact, compared with all the years of my life here?"

She shook her head, smiling sadly at his persistence.

"Why am I not Japanese, then?" demanded Masters.

"Because you live mos' you honorable life wiz thad English colony ad Japan."

"Nonsense. Haven't I known you ever since you were a little pickaninny

with a flower ornament in your little hair and a parasol of all the colors of the rainbow?"

"My honorable fadder was a member thad English colony," she said slowly.

"He worg wiz you honorable fadder."

"Then, see here, if you've lived most of you're life among the English in Japan, and I— Well, you must see how it is. You can't get around it, you know. I certainly am a Jap," and his blue eyes snapped merrily.

"You certainly is," agreed Kiku, pressing her lips tightly together.

Masters promptly possessed himself of her hands, needle, thread and all.

"Now," said he, "that we've come to the conclusion that I myself am a Jap, do you see any reason why I shouldn't marry a Japanese maiden?"

Kiku shook her head mutely. She let her hands remain passively in his. She had long ago recognized the futility of gainsaying him in even the smallest way.

"Very good then," said Masters. "Why, then, shouldn't we—

you and I—get married?"

She lifted her head with a startled movement.

"Pray, why," she inquired piteously, "do you mek such silly nonzenze ad me?"

"Nonsense?" repeated Masters, "I never was more earnest in my life."

An expression of horror crept into her eyes. Her head drooped forward lower and lower until it fell upon her hands.

"Answer me," commanded Masters, with the first note of alarm in his voice. Her strange attitude mystified him.



With a flower ornament and a parasol of all the colors of the rainbow.

"Will you marry me, Kiku?"

"I already betroth," she said in the smallest voice.

Masters dropped her hands as if they were those of one dead.

"You mean," he said, "that you—I can't believe it. It was always an understood thing between us that we—Do you mean to tell me that you have been deceiving me and that you have been betrothed all the time?"

"I only gitting betrothed yistidy," said Kiku.

"Who the devil is he?" demanded Masters, savagely.

"That not perlite, call my betrothed debbil, excellency—"

"I'm not an excellency, and I'll call your b—, and you haven't got any betrothed. I'll go and see your father now, and I'll wring his little neck if he's sold you to any one except me."

He burst in upon his father's old partner like a thunderbolt. His voice shook the fragile house with its thunder. The old man was dumfounded. So surprised and shocked was he in fact that it took him several minutes before he could explain to Masters that he had betrothed his daughter to Ito at Masters's own solicitation, he having graciously condescended to sign the contract.

"It's a — trick," said the young man, beside himself with rage at his secretary, "and I'll fire that fellow tomorrow."

"But my honorable daughter?" squealed Mizutani, "what before all the gods she goin' to do?"

"She? She'll marry me."

"But, my lord, pray have little pity."

"Pity?"

"I think my daughter giving her honorable heart unto her lubber."

"What?"

"She tell me so."

"She told you so?"

Mizutani bowed his head.

"She told you she cared for—that little mannikin—for—"

"Yes, excellency."

Masters was silent for the first time.

"That alters everything," he said, suddenly. "Good day!"

Mizutani sent at once for his daughter.

He wrung his hands in the utmost distress. He almost fell on his knees before her.

"Eijinsan will ruin us, oh, my daughter," he shrieked.

"What can we do?" said Kiku.

Her father tried to appear commanding.

"You must fly," he said, waving his hands, "to the Eijinsan. Hasten with the speed of wings to his honorable residence. There you must beat your head at his feet and implore his honorable pardon. Then if he is still unrelenting you must make the grand sacrifice."

"Yes?"

"You must break your betrothal with Ito Adachi and marry his master."

O-Kiku-san bowed her head with meek joy.

They were soon seated in their jinrikisha and speeding toward the city. Kiku was silent and thoughtful, one moment intensely sad, the next trembling with joy. The old man was so completely agitated by his fear of Masters and his pity for his daughter, who he thought must loathe the prospect of marriage with a barbarian, that he was shivering.

On arriving at his office Masters had rung his bell for his secretary.

"Ito," he said, "I don't like the way in which you tricked me into signing that so-called contract yesterday."

He waited for the other to reply, but his secretary merely bowed politely.

"However," continued Masters, fumbling with the pencil in his hand, "all being fair in love and war, I suppose I'd have done the same in your place. As she admits she cares for you, of course you had a right to override her father's objections."

Again Ito bowed deeply. Masters flung around in his chair.

"I congratulate you and— If you'll stop doubling yourself up you'll be able to listen to me. I'm going on a triper—across the ocean, and—what are you salaaming about now?"

Another clerk thrust in a pert head.

"Mister Mizutani and lady," he announced.

In his excitement Masters knocked

over his chair as he leaped to his feet. Mizutani walked behind his daughter, but he almost jumped forward at Masters' sharp, "Well, what is it now?"

"We come to beg one little interview with you," said the old man.

Masters nodded curtly. He kept his eyes off Kiku, who was the only one in the room smiling.

"Will you kindly make honorable excuse to Mr. Ito," said Mizutani.

"No," said Masters, "he has a right to hear anything you have to say."

"As your excellency desires," said Mizutani.

He fidgeted a moment, then tremblingly laid his hand on his daughter's sleeve.

"Excellency," he said, "my daughter begs ten million pardons of you; also she rady mek marriage wiz you."

For the first time the impassive Ito started.

"She is betrothed to me," he said quickly.

"A million pardons," said Mizutani, "my daughter no longer betroth to you."

"This is a pretty business," said Masters, "I'd like to know just what it means."

"My daughter like to make marriage

wiz you," said Mizutani with diffidence.

"She wants to marry you for your money," said Ito boldly. "She loves me."

The short silence that ensued was broken by Kiku.

"Excellency, don't believe him," she said.

"But you told your own father so," said Masters slowly. And the old man hung his head.

"I doan keer mek him tears," said Kiku bravely.

"What do you mean?"

"Thad honorable lubber," she indicated Ito, "mek proposal unto my fadder. Thad fadder 'fraid offend you and he betroth me. Therefore I kin nod disobey, o' coorse nod. Also I desire that he nod know I brekin' my heart, so I laugh like big bebby. Say I glad, I de-lighted. Ver good hasten that honorable marriage of love."

Masters burst out laughing.

"Well, I ought to have known Kiku; and as for you—" he turned to Ito, who bowed as politely as ever—"you see how it is. What are you going to do about it?"

"Commit suicide!" said Ito promptly.

"Nonsense," said Masters.

