

THE TALISMAN

By NADIA LAVROVA

ONE of the strangest incidents of my life happened two short years ago in Japan. I am writing it down just as it took place and withhold all comments, as I really can advance no logical explanation whatever of the whole chain of events.

During the summer of 1920 I had spent a very pleasing vacation in Kamakura, that beautiful sea resort some fifteen miles from Yokohama, famed throughout the Far East.

In company with two girl friends, I had taken a tiny little house not three minutes' walk from the golden beach.

And when, in the morning, we hastily donned native kimonos over our one-piece bathing suits and made a dash for the first plunge in the waters of the Pacific, we three lazy girls knew that by the time we came home our little house would be in perfect order and steaming hot coffee await us in Satsuma cups.

The ten fairy little fingers who did all our housework belonged to our pretty Japanese maid—Ine San.

That girl had taken a special liking to me. I don't know why, unless it was because I used to listen for hours at a time when she unfolded to me all the secrets of the weird Japanese superstitions.

My two friends used to smile condescendingly, when, squatting on the mats in Ine San's room I was becoming initiated into all the mysterious doings of the two-tailed cats and spirits of foxes who choose bodies of beautiful young girls for their permanent abode.

Sometimes, when the scoffers departed, I was granted a special favor. Ine San would take from a cupboard with sliding panels an ancient lacquered box. This was reverently placed on a silk handkerchief and ceremoniously opened. In that box were preserved amulets and charms against all evils that flesh is heir to.

Ine San could not know that all the time I was simply making a comparative study of Chinese and Japanese folk-lore, which is a very difficult thing for a white person to do, since one has first to gain the fullest confidence of one's yellow friend. She cherished the

idea that she was converting me to her beliefs.

In September my vacation ended. With a regretful sigh, I bid good-bye to Kamakura, the tiny doll-house and Ine San, and returned to my regular work in Yokohama.

I was employed on the staff of a foreign paper, being pretty much occupied during the greater part of the day, though as a special favor I was allowed to do part of the non-rush work at home.

My "home" consisted of a nice comfortable room of a boarding-house situated on the Bluff, the residential quarter of Yokohama. The place was built on an English plan with all modern conveniences, but somehow I missed very much my inconvenient little Japanese house where I had spent such a delightful summer.

One rainy morning in the end of November I was awakened by a scratch at my bed-room door. I looked at my watch. It showed half past six. Who the dickens—

The scratch, the Japanese idea of a polite knock, was repeated, and the silvery voice of Ine San begged leave to enter.

She came in, clad in a mourning kimono of lotus-white crepe with untrimmed edges that proclaimed the death of a near relative.

After the first greetings in pretty good English (she had lived in American families out in the Orient most of her life), Ine San stated the object of her visit.

"I come say goo'bye," she said. "My father's father he all dead and now family have velly long mourning. I go velly velly far—our village, must go three days and then say many prayers. I no come back long time."

I was genuinely sorry to see her go and wished her every possible happiness.

"Miss Lavrova, you always so kind to me," continued Ine San. "You no laugh Japanese beliefs. I bling you velly eciet and happy thing."

Saying this, she put on my coverlet a delicate mesh bag filled with about a hundred lilliput micans, a kind of

Japanese orange. These were so small that a silver dollar would have made a fitting dish for any of them.

I began thanking her for the delicious present when I saw that I had been guilty of a misunderstanding.

Out of the folds of her kimono Ine San had extricated a tiny something carefully wrapped in a piece of white rice-paper. Red and gold characters were drawn on it by means of a brush.

Reverently, Ine San undid the wrapping and I beheld a small chip of some rare wood rather oddly shaped. It was neither polished nor painted.

Several hieroglyphs were burned on one side of it, and even I, with my poor knowledge of Japanese, immediately saw that they were in the ancient language used in Nippon somewhere around the tenth or twelfth century.

"Oh, what have you got there, Ine San?" I exclaimed with interest.

"Velly good and strong charm, Missie, and save you life quite surely."

She began her long and rambling explanations and I, sitting up in bed, listened patiently.

It appeared that this talisman, for such it happened to be, was endowed with great mysterious powers. Sold for a few cents at an obscure ancient temple somewhere south of Tokyo, it could be secured only by a personal application to the priests.

Certainly it was never destined to fall into the impious hands of a white person such as myself. And only the fondness my little Japanese friend bore me could have made such an unlikely event possible.

"And what does the charm protect from?" I asked Ine San, not wanting to hurt her feelings and desirous to keep up an interest in the thing. Anyway, I reflected, it would do very nicely for my little curio collection.

"Him saves life, Missie," repeated Ine San. "You going get killed. You not get hurt and charm all break."

This was something new. I had never heard of such a talisman before, so I began asking questions.

Yet I elicited nothing much except what Ine San had already stated. The

piece of wood was to be carefully preserved. The best way was to sew it inside a garment you wore most often. Then, if anything threatened your bodily welfare, mysterious forces would protect you. As a sign of danger averted, you would find the talisman split in two through the middle even if nothing had touched it. The hieroglyphs were an ancient exorcism to ward off evil.

As soon as you found the talisman broken, however, you were immediately to wrap it in a piece of clean paper and drop it into flowing water lest dire misfortune overtake you and the house you lived in.

The thing seemed really too childish. But I wouldn't for worlds have made light of Ine San's beliefs.

"Have you ever seen it work, Ine?" I asked rather sleepily. It was so early, and I had been up late the evening before.

"Oh, missee!" she exclaimed in a hurt tone; "all our people knows this saving holy thing. My family all keep it."

It developed further that a neighbor's daughter had been lifted just in time out of a pond into which she had tumbled. Also a distant cousin had been miraculously left uninjured during a railway accident. Needless to say, both carried the charm. It sounded particularly unconvincing, and in my heart I pitied poor little Ine San for taking her knickknacks so seriously.

Finally she got up, and, proffering several ceremonious bows, bade me good-bye. The door closed and I curled up in bed for half an hour's sleep.

When, two hours later, I dashed up to my room for a forgotten handkerchief, I perceived the charm neatly wrapped in its white covering, lying on my night-table. Grabbing it, I dropped it into the spacious pocket of my blue tailormade.

"The garment I wear 'most often,' I chuckled. "With the money I am receiving now, it will probably be the only dependable thing in my wardrobe."

At dinner that night I boasted of my new acquisition to the boarders, among whom there were collectors of Japanese curios. None of the foreigners had seen just such a charm, though they were familiar with dozens of others. Most of the guests began to tesse, calling out to Bert never to invite me out with him any more, as I was now fully protected against evil influences.

Amidst laughter and jokes, I stuffed the charm carelessly back into my

pocket. Lifting up my head, unaware, I perceived the dark eyes of Mitsu San, the amah, fixed upon me. I thought I read astonishment in that glance, and then reproof, even resentment.

But while I was still looking she turned away and began stolidly to wipe a plate. I comforted myself with the thought that the strange expression of her eyes was only a trick my imagination had played me.

ABOUT ten uneventful days had passed when, on a foggy afternoon, I returned home from my office earlier than usual.

Under my left arm was tucked a large package of newspapers—the latest mail from England and the United States.

The paper I worked on was especially interested in the newest developments in Siberia, and I had been given the assignment to gather up all the current news in the papers and to make it up into a short and concise article. This kind of work I always used to do at home far from the bustle of the editorial office.

After Mitsu San had finished "make fire" in my grate and withdrew, I curled up on my favorite settee, laid out the papers, a memorandum-pad, a red pencil and a fountain pen all around me and set to work.

The room was warm and cosy, the flames in the fire-place danced merrily, and sometimes I could even hear the distant clatter of teaspoons from the far-off dining-room.

The settee was my favorite corner for rest as well as work when I was at home.

The former owner of the house, an Englishman, had fixed just above it a large and heavy row of shelves artistically carved out of good solid English oak. They contained dozens of volumes of standard authors and some of the newest Anglo-American novels. On top of the shelves were several fine ancient bronzes.

Soon I was deeply engrossed in an article dealing with the Japanese attitude in Siberia—just the thing I had been looking for—and was busily making notes.

I now come to the incident I find most difficult to describe.

All at once, without any reason whatsoever, I sprang up in feverish haste from the settee, scattering the papers in all directions. I just flew across the room and found myself near the opposite wall before I had time to consider what I was doing—and why. It was as if some superior will had thrown me

out of my seat and precipitated me across the room.

My memorandum-book was still in my hand as I halted before the wall.

"What in the world—!" I began saying to myself, full of astonishment, when I heard a dull heavy thud behind me.

Whirling around, I beheld a sight that left me breathless:

The weight of that oak set of shelves had proved too much for the several nails on which it had been hanging for some years. The nails had been wrenched from their sockets, and shelves, books, bronzes and all, weighing no less than some 400 pounds had been hurled on the settee at the exact place where I had been sitting several seconds before.

I would have been simply wiped out if that terrible avalanche had descended upon my head!

The room was quiet and cheery once more. The distant clatter of spoons could still be heard from afar. Yet the Angel of Death had passed through that room, and I had sensed the flutter of its wings.

When the full realization of the danger I had just miraculously escaped came to me, I sank weakly into a chair.

Of course the whole boarding-house, servants and all, flocked to my room to view the disaster. And it took two strong men, not to mention Mitsu San, to lift and fix up those shelves.

The rest of that evening I neglected my work. I was in no mood for it and went early to bed.

About four in the morning I awoke and found that even in my sleep I had been thinking of last night's happening.

There was something unexplainable about it. Why had I jumped out of my seat barely three seconds before?

And all at once I remembered Ine San's charm.

A cold little shiver prickled through the roots of my hair. What had that small piece of wood to do with it? And yet—

I wondered. And wanted passionately to find out.

Sure enough, I had my blue tailormade on when the accident had occurred. And later, when I undressed, I had hung it outside the door for Mitsu San to brush in the morning. And that talisman had reposed forgotten in the pocket of the blue tailormade since that day Ine San had given it to me.

Well, I would find out in the morning. If the charm had really split in two, why—it would be rather uncomfortable, to say the least.

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"*Wak arimasen* (I don't understand)," she replied indifferently, and I turned angrily away. When a Japanese suddenly fails to understand English it is a certain sign he or she does not wish to understand.

Yet after my coffee I decided to use all patience and diplomacy I could lay claim to and interview Mitsu San once again. I somehow felt sure she knew more than she wanted to tell. But when I glanced, in passing, through the window I beheld Mitsu San hurrying down the Bluff toward the water-front. Decidedly luck was against me.

But I would not acknowledge myself beaten. The charm was in my pocket yesterday. For the matter of that, it had been there all these days, brushing or no brushing. I knew Japanese servants rarely if ever take anything belonging to a foreigner. Maybe the charm had been dropped somewhere on the premises and I might still be able to recover it.

I did a bit of quick thinking. Then I went downstairs for a talk with the owner of our boarding-house.

"Mrs. Brown," I began, "I have lost a very valuable—"

"In my house? Impossible!" exclaimed that good lady with a great show of horror.

I hastened to reassure her.

"It was just a wooden Japanese keep-sake of no value whatever to any one but myself. It has been mislaid entirely through my fault. I beg to note this and not lay the blame on servants. Yet I want to recover it very badly and am prepared to offer a money reward to the person who brings it to me whole—or broken."

"This is very unusual," replied the flustered Mrs. Brown, "I shall ring for the housekeeper. She may be able to advise us."

Soon the housekeeper, a very matter-of-fact Scotch woman, appeared. I repeated to her what I had said to Mrs. Brown.

"Are you speaking of that wooden chip you showed your friends the other day?" she inquired. I hastened to assent.

"Why, I have seen it half an hour ago in the servants' quarters," she said.

I felt a surge of excitement shoot through me.

"Mitsu San was just wrapping it up in a piece of white paper when I happened to enter her room. I recognized it at once, but thought you had given it to her to throw away. For you see it was broken clean through the middle."

THE TALISMAN

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Imagine, then, my disappointment when in the morning I thrust my hand into the pocket to find it empty.

"Mitsu San," I turned to the amah who was ordering my room, "you must remember that Japanese charm I had all these days." And proceeded to describe it. "Maybe you have seen it or perhaps it fell out when you were brushing that dress? I have lost it and want to see it again very much."

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