

THE EMPEROR'S FAN

IN THE FIFTEENTH year of his reign, Tsotuga the Fourth, Emperor of Kuromon, sat in the Forbidden Chamber of his Proscribed Palace, in his imperial city of Chingun. He played a game of Sachi with his crony, Reiro the beggar.

The pieces on one side were carved from single emeralds; those on the other, from single rubies. The board was of squares of onyx and gold. The many shelves and taborets in the room were crowded with small art objects. There were knickknacks of gold and silver, of ivory and ebony, of porcelain and pewter, of jasper and jade, of chrysoprase and chalcedony.

In a silken robe embroidered with lilies in silver thread and lotuses in golden thread, Tsotuga sat on a semithrone—a chair of gilded mahogany, the arms of which were carved in the form of diamond-eyed dragons. The Emperor was plainly well fed, and within the hour he had been bathed and perfumed. Yet, although he had just won a game, Emperor Tsotuga was not happy.

"The trouble with you, chum," said Reiro the beggar, "is that, not having enough real dangers to worry about, you make up imaginary ones."

The Emperor took no offense. The purpose of the Forbidden Chamber was to afford him a place where he could treat and be treated by his crony as if they were ordinary human beings, without the court's stifling formality.

Nor was it an accident that Reiro was a beggar. As such, he would never try to intrigue against or murder his imperial friend in order to seize the throne.

Although a fairly competent ruler, Tsotuga was not a man of much personal charm. He was in fact rather dull save when, as sometimes happened, he lost his temper. Then he might visit dire dooms on those about him. After he had calmed down, Tsotuga would regret his injustice and might even pension the victim's dependents. He honestly tried to be just but lacked the self-control and objectivity to do so.

Reiro got along with the Emperor well enough. While the beggar cared nothing for art, save when he could filch and sell a piece of it, he was glad to listen to the Emperor's endless tales of his collection in return for the sumptuous repasts he enjoyed. Reiro had gained twenty pounds since he had become intimate with the Emperor.

"Oh, yes?" said Tsotuga. "That is easy for you to say. You are not nightly haunted by your father's ghost, threatening dreadful doom."

Reiro shrugged. "You knew the risk when you had the old man poisoned. It is all in the game, pal. For your pay, I would cheerfully submit to any number of nightmares. How does old Haryo look in these dreams?"

"The same old tyrant. I had to slay him—you know that—crc he ruined the Empire. But have a care with that flapping tongue."

"Nought I hear here goes beyond these walls. Anyway, if you think Haryo's fate be not widely known, you do but befool yourself."

"I daresay it is suspected. But then, foul play is always suspected when an emperor dies. As said Dauhai to the timorous bird, every twig is a serpent."

"Still," continued the Emperor, "that solves not my problem. I wear mail beneath my robe. I sleep on a mattress floating in a pool of quicksilver. I have given up fluttering my women, lest whilst I lie in their arms, some conspirator steal up and dagger me. The Empress, I can tell you, dislikes this abstinence. But still Haryo threatens and prophecies, and the warnings of a ghost are not to be flouted. I need some impregnable magical defense. That idiot Koxima does nought but frimigate and exorcise, which may drive out the demons but fails

to blunt the steel of human foes. Have you any counsel, Ragbag?"

Reiro scratched. "There is a dark, beak-nosed, round-eyed old hewitch, hight Ajendra, lately come to Chingun from Mulvari. He gains a scanty living by selling love potions and finding lost bangles in trances. He claims to have a magical weapon of such power that none can stand against it."

"What is its nature?"

"He will not say."

"If he have so puissant a device, why is he not a king?"

"How could he make himself ruler? He is too old to lead an army in battle. Besides, he says that the holy order to which he belongs--all Mulvanian wizards call themselves holy men, be they never such rascals--forbids the use of this armament save in self-defense."

"Has anybody seen it?"

"Nay, chum, but rumor whispers that Ajendra has used it."

"Yes? And then what?"

"Know you a police spy named Nanka?"

The Emperor frowned. "Meseems--there was something about such a man who disappeared. It is supposed that the low company he kept at last learnt of his occupation and did him in."

The beggar chuckled. "Close, but not in the gold. This Nanka was a scoundrel of deepest dye, who supplemented his earnings as an informer by robbery and extortion. He skated into Ajendra's hut with the simple, wholesome intention of breaking the old man's neck and seizing Ajendra's rumored weapon."

"Hm. Well?"

"Well, Nanka never came out. A patrolman of the regular police found Ajendra sitting cross-legged in meditation and no sign of the erstwhile spy. Since Nanka was large and the hovel small, the corpse could not have been hidden. As it is said, the digger of pitfalls shall at last fall into one of his own."

"Hm," said Tsotuga. "I must look into this. Enough Sachi for the nonce. You must let me show you my latest acquisition!"

Reiro groaned inside and braced himself for an hour's lecture on the history and beauty of some antique bibelot. The thought of the palatial cookery, however, stiffened his resolve.

"Now, where did I put that little widget?" said Tsotuga, tapping his forehead with his folded fan.

"V/hat is it, chum?" asked the beggar.

"A topaz statuette of the goddess Amarasupi, from the Jumbon Dynasty. Oh, curse my bowels with ulcers! I grow more absentminded day by day."

"Good thing your head is permanently affixed to the rest of you! As the wise Ashuziri said, hope is a charlatan, sense a bungler, and memory a traitor."

"I distinctly remember," muttered the Emperor, "telling myself to put it in a special place where I should be sure to remember it. But now I cannot recall the special place."

"The Proscribed Palace must have ten thousand special places," said Reiro. "That is the advantage of being poor. One has so few possessions that one need never wonder where they are."

"Almost you tempt me to change places with you, but my duty forbids. Damn, damn, what did I with that silly thing? Oh, well, let us play another game instead. You take the red this time, I the green."

Two days later, Emperor Tsotuga sat on his throne of audience, wearing his towering crown of state. This plumed and winged headgear, bedight with peacock feathers and precious stones, weighed over ten pounds. It even had a secret compartment. Because of its weight, Tsotuga avoided wearing it whenever he felt that he decently could.

The usher led in Ajendra. The Mulvanian magician was a tall, gaunt, bent old man, who supported himself on a stick. Save for the long white beard flowing down from his wrinkled, mahogany-hued face, he was brown all over, from dirty brown bulbous turban and dirty

brown robe to dirty brown bare feet. His monotone contrasted with the golds and vermilions and greens and blues and purples of the Chamber of Audience.

In a cracked voice, speaking Kuromonian with an accent, Ajendra went through the formal greeting: "This wretched worm humbly abases himself before Thine Ineffable Majesty!" The wizard began, slowly and painfully, to get down on hands and knees.

The Emperor motioned him up, saying, "In respect for your years, old man, we will omit the prostration. Simply tell us about this invincible weapon of yours."

"Your Imperial Majesty is too kind to this unworthy wretch. Sees Your Majesty this?"

From his ragged sleeve, the Mulvanian produced a large painted fan. Like the others present, Ajendra kept his gaze averted from the Emperor's face, on the pretense that one who looked the ruler full in the face would be blinded by his awful glory.

"This," continued Ajendra, "was made for the king of the Gwoling Islands by the noted wizard Tsunjing. By a series of chances too long to bore Your Imperial Majesty with, it came into the unworthy hands of this inferior person."

At least, thought Tso-tuga, the fellow had learnt the polite forms of Kuromonian address. Many Mulvanians were informal to the point of rudeness. Aloud he said, "It looks like any other fan. What is its power?"

"Simple, O Superior One. Any living thing that you fan with it disappears."

"Oho!" exclaimed the Emperor. "So that is what befell the missing Nanka!"

Ajendra looked innocent. "This loathsome reptile does not understand Your Divine Majesty."

"Never mind. Whither go the victims!"

"One theory of my school is that they are translated to a higher dimension, coexistent with this one. Another holds that they are dispersed into constituent atoms, which, however, retain such mutual affinities that they can be reassembled when the signal for recall is--"

"Mean you that you can reverse the effect and fetch back the vanished beings?"

"Aye, Superhuman Sire. One folds the fan and taps one's wrists and forehead according to a simple code, and presto! there is the vanished one. Would Your Majesty see a demonstration? There is no danger to the demonstratee since this humble person can bring him back instanter."

"Very well, good wizard. Just be careful not to wave that thing at us. On whom propose you to try it?"

Ajendra looked about the Chamber of Audience. There was a stir amongst ushers, guardsmen, and officials. Light winked on gilded armor and glowed on silken robes as each tried to make himself inconspicuous behind a pillar or another courtier.

"Who will volunteer?" asked the Emperor. "You, Dzakusan?"

The Prime Minister prostrated himself. "Great Emperor, live forever! This lump of iniquity has not been well lately. Moreover, he has nine children to support. He humbly begs Your Supremacy to excuse him."

Similar questions to other functionaries produced similar responses. At length Ajendra said, "If this lowly one may make a suggestion to Your Magnificence, it might be better to try it first on a beast-say, a dog or a cat."

"Aha!" said Tso-tuga. "Just the thing. We know the animal, too. Surakai, fetch that cursed dog belonging to the Empress--you know, that yapping little monstrosity."

The messenger departed on his roller skates. Soon he was back, leading on a leash a small woolly white dog, which barked incessantly.

"Go ahead," said the Emperor.

"This negligible person hears and obeys," said Ajendra, opening the fan.

The dog's yelp was cut off as the draft from the fan struck it. Surakai trailed an empty leash. The courtiers started and murmured.

"By the Heavenly Bureaucrats!" exclaimed the Emperor. "That is impressive. Now bring the creature back. Fear not if you fail. The thing has bitten us twice, so the Empire will not fall if it remain in that other dimension."

Ajendra produced from his other sleeve a small codex, whose pages he thumbed. Then he held a reading glass to his eye. "Here it is," he said. "'Dog. Two left, three right, one to head.'"

Having folded the fan, Ajendra, holding it in his right hand, rapped his left wrist twice. Transferring the fan to his left hand, he then tapped his right wrist thrice and his forehead once. Instantly the dog reappeared. Yapping, it fled under the throne.

"Very good," said the Emperor. "Leave the creature where it is. What is that, a code book?"

"Aye, supreme sire. It lists all the categories of organic beings subject to the fan's power."

"Well, let us try it on a human being--an expendable one. Mishuho, have we a condemned criminal handy?"

"Live forever, Incomparable One!" said the Minister of Justice. "We have a murderer due to lose his head tomorrow. Shall this miserable creature fetch him?"

The murderer was fetched. Ajendra fanned him out of existence and tapped him back again.

"Whew!" said the murderer. "This contemptible one must have suffered a dizzy spell."

"Where were you whilst you were vanished?" said the Emperor. "I knew not that I was vanished, great Emperor!" said the murderer. "I felt dizzy and seemed to lose my wits for an instant--and then here I was, back in the Proscribed Palace."

"Well, you disappeared, all right. In consideration of his services to the state, Mishuho, commute his sentence to twenty-five lashes and turn him loose. Now, Doctor Ajendra!"

"Aye, Ruler of the World?"

"What are the limitations of your fan? Does it run out of charge and have to be resorceled?"

"Nay, Exalted One. At least, its power has not weakened in the centuries since Tsunjing made it."

"Does it work on a large animal, say, a horse or an elephant.?"

"It does better than that. When the grandson of the Gwoling king for whom it was made, Prince Wangerr, met a dragon on Banshou Island, he swept the monster out of existence with three mighty strokes of the fan."

"Hm. Quite powerful enough, it seems. Now, good Ajendra, suppose you bring back that police spy, Nanka, on whom you employed your arts a few days ago!"

The Mulvanian shot a glance at the Emperor's face. Some courtiers murmured at this breach of decorum, but Tsotuga seemed not to notice. The wizard evidently satisfied himself that the ruler knew whereof he spoke. Ajendra thumbed through his book until he came to "Spy." Then he tapped his left wrist four times and his forehead twice.

A big, burly man in beggar's rags materialized. Nanka was still wearing the roller skates on which he had entered Ajendra's hut. Unprepared as he was for this appearance, his feet flew out from under him. He fell heavily on his back, cracking his head on the redwhite-and-black tessellated marble floor. The Emperor laughed heartily, and the courtiers allowed themselves discreet smiles.

As the informer, red with rage and astonishment, climbed to his feet, Tsotuga said, "Mishuho, give him ten lashes for trying to rob a subject. Tell him that next time it will be his head--if not the

boiling oil. Take him away. Well now, worthy wizard, what would you have for your device and its code book?"

"Ten thousand golden dragons," said Ajendra, "and an escort to my own country."

"Hm. Is that not a lot for a holy ascetic?"

"It is not for myself that this humble being asks," said the Mulvanian. "I would build and endow a temple to my favorite gods in my native village. There I shall pass my remaining days in meditation on the Thatness of the All."

"A meritorious project," said Tsotuga. "Let it be done. Chingitu, see that Doctor Ajendra has a trustworthy escort to Mulvan. Have them get a letter from the King of Kings testifying that they delivered Ajendra safely and did not murder him for his gold along the way."

"This despicable one hears and obeys," said the Minister of War. For the next month, things went smoothly at court. The Emperor kept his temper. No one, knowing of the magical fan that the testy monarch carried, cared to provoke him. Even Empress Nasako, although furious at her husband's callous use of her dog, kept her sharp tongue sheathed. Tsotuga remembered where he had hidden the statuette of Amarasupi and so for a time was almost happy.

But, as said the philosopher Dauhai back in the Jumbon Dynasty, everything passes away. The day came when, in the Emperor's study, Minister of Finance Yaebu tried to explain the workings of that marvelous new invention, paper money. The Emperor demanded to know why he could not simply abolish all taxes, thus pleasing the people, and pay the government's bills with newly printed currency notes. Tsotuga was irascible as a result of having mislaid another of his prized antique gimcracks.

"But, Your Divine Majesty!" wailed Yaebu. "That was tried in Gwoling half a century ago! The value of the notes dropped to nought. None would offer aught for sale, since none wished to accept worthless paper. They had to go back to barter."

"We should think a few heads on poles would have fixed that," growled Tsotuga.

"The then king of Gwoling tried that, too," said Yaebu. "It accomplished nought; the markets remained empty of goods. City folk starved. . . ."

The argument continued while the Emperor, who had little head for economics, became more and more restless, bored, and impatient. Ignoring these signs, Yaebu persisted in his arguments.

At last the Emperor exploded, "Curse your arse with boils, Yaebu! We will show you how to keep saying 'nay' and 'however' and 'impossible' to your sovran! Begone, sirrahl!"

Tsotuga whipped out his fan, snapped it open, and fanned a blast of air at Yaebu. The minister vanished.

Hm, mused Tsotuga, it really does work. Now I must fetch Yaebu back, for I did not really mean to destroy the faithful fellow. It is just that he irritates me so with his everlasting "if's" and "but's" and "can't's." Let me see, where did I put that code book? I remember hiding it in a special place where I could be sure of finding it again. But where?

The Emperor looked first in the deep, baggy sleeves of his embroidered silken robe, which in Kuromon served the Office of pockets. It was not there.

Then the Emperor rose from his business throne and went to the imperial wardrobe, where a hundred-odd robes hung from pegs. There were silken robes for official use, thin for summer and quilted for winter. There were woolen robes for outdoor winter use and cotton robes for outdoor summer use. They were dyed scarlet and emerald, saffron and azure, cream and violet, and all the other colors in the dyers' armory.

Tsotuga went down the line, feeling in the sleeves of each

robe. A tireman hurried in, saying, "O Divine Autocrat, permit this filthy beggar to relieve you of this menial chore!"

Tsotuga: "Nay, good Shakatabi; we entrust this task to none but ourselves."

Laboriously, Tsotuga continued down the line until he had examined all the robes. Then he began the rounds of the Proscribed Palace, pulling out the drawers of desks and dressers, poking into cubbyholes, and shouting for the keys to chests and strongboxes.

After several hours, exhaustion forced the Emperor to desist. Falling into the semithrone of the Forbidden Chamber, he struck the gong. When the room was jam-packed with servants, he said, "We, Tsotuga the Fourth, offer a reward of a hundred golden dragons to him who finds the missing code book that goes with our miraculous fan!"

That day, the Proscribed Palace saw a great scurrying and searching. Scores of felt-slipped servants shuffled about, opening, poking, prying, and peering. When night fell, the book had not been found.

Beshrew me! said Tsotuga to himself. Poor Yaebu is lost unless we find the accursed book. I must be more careful with that fan.

Again, as spring advanced, things went smoothly for a while. But the day came when Tsotuga was rollerskating about the paths of the palace gardens with Minister of War Chingitu. Questioned sharply about the recent defeat of the Kuromonian army by the nomads of the steppes, Chingitu offered excuses that Tsotuga knew to be mendacious. Away went Tsotuga's temper. "The real reason," roared the Emperor, "is that your cousin, the Quartermaster-General, has been grafting and filling posts with his worthless relatives, so that our soldiers were ill armed! And you know it! Take that!"

A wave of the fan, and no more Chingitu. In like manner, shortly thereafter, perished Prime Minister Dzakusan.

The want of properly appointed ministers soon made itself felt. Tsotuga could not personally supervise all the hundreds of bureaucrats in the now-headless departments. These civil servants devoted themselves more and more to feuding, loafing, nepotism, and peculation. Conditions were bad in Kuromon anyway, because of the inflation brought about by Tsotuga's paper-money scheme. The government was fast becoming a shambles.

"You must pull yourself together, lord," said Empress Nasako, "ere the pirates of the Gwoling Archipelago and the brigands from the steppes divide Kuromon between them, as a man divides an orange."

"But what in the name of the fifty-seven major deities shall I do?" cried Tsotuga. "Curse it, if I had that code book I could bring back Yaebu, who would straighten out this financial mess."

"Oh, forget the book. If I were you, I should burn that magical fan ere it got me into more trouble."

"You are out of your mind, woman! Never!"

Nasako sighed. "As the sage Zuiku said: Who would use a tiger for a watchdog to guard his wealth will soon need neither wealth nor watchdog. At least appoint a new prime minister to bring order out of this chaos."

"I have gone over the list of possible candidates, but every one has a black mark against him. One was connected with that faction that conspired my assassination nine years ago. Another was accused of grafting, although it was never proved. Still another is ailing--"

"Is Zamben of Jompei on your list?"

"I have never heard of him. Who is he?"

"The supervisor of roads and bridges in Jade Mountain Province. They say he has made an excellent record there."

"How know you about him?" snapped the Emperor suspiciously. "He is a cousin of my first lady-in-waiting. She has long urged his virtues upon me. I brushed her suit aside, knowing my lord's dislike of letting my ladies exploit their position by abetting their kinsmen's interests. In your present predicament, though, you could do worse than look the fellow over."

"Very well, I will."

Thus it happened that Zamben of Jompei became prime minister. The former supervisor of roads and bridges was younger by a decade than the Emperor. He was a handsome, cheerful, charming, rollicking person who made himself popular with the court, save for those determined to hate the favorite of the moment. Tsotuga thought Zamben was rather too lighthearted and lacking in respect for the labyrinthine etiquette. But Zamben proved an able administrator who soon had the vast governmental machine running smoothly.

But it is said that the thatcher's roof is the leakiest in the village.

What the Emperor did not know was that Zamben and Empress Nasako were secret lovers. They had been before Zamben's elevation. Circumstances made it hard to consummate their passion, save rarely in one of Nasako's summer pavilions in the hills.

In the Proscribed Palace, it was even harder. The palace swarmed with menials who would be glad to carry tales. The amorous pair had to resort to stratagems. Nasako announced that she had to be left entirely alone in a summer house to compose a poem. The versatile Zamben wrote the poem for her as evidence before he hid himself in the summer house in advance of her arrival.

"That was worth waiting for," said the Empress, donning her garments. "That fat old fool Tsotuga has not touched me in a year, and a full-blooded woman like me needs frequent stoking. He has not even fattered his pretty young concubines, albeit he is not yet fifty."

"Why? Is he prematurely senile?"

"Nay, it is his fear of assassination. For a while, he tried doing it in the seated position, so that he could keep looking about for possible assailants. But since he insisted on wearing his armor, it proved too awkward to please anyone. So he gave it up altogether."

"Well, the thought of a stab in the back is depressing to more than just a man's spirit. If-which the gods forbend-an accident should befall His Divine Majesty-

"How?" said Nasako. "No assassin dares approach him whilst he has that fan."

"Where does he put it at night?"

"Under his pillow, and he sleeps clutching it. It would take a winged demon to get at him anyway, floating in that pool of quicksilver."

"A hard-driven crossbow bolt, shot from beyond the fan's range-

"Nay, he is too well guarded to let an arbalester get within range, and he even sleeps in his mail."

"Well, we shall see," said Zamben. "Meanwhile, Nako, how would my love like another?"

"What a man you are!" cried Nasako, beginning to cast off her just-donned garments.

During the next two months, the court noted that Zamben, not content with being the second most powerful man in the Empire, had also ingratiated himself with the Emperor. He did so well as to oust Reiro the beggar from his position as Emperor's crony. Zamben even became an expert on the history of art, the better to admire Tsotuga's prized gewgaws.

The favorite-haters at court muttered that for an emperor to make a personal friend of a minister was a violation of sound method. Not only was the mystical balance among the Five Elements upset, but also Zamben might entertain usurpatory notions, which his friendship might enable him to put into effect. But none dared to broach the subject to the explosive-tempered Tsotuga. They shrugged, saying, "After all, it is the Empress's duty to warn him. If she cannot, what chance have we?"

Zamben went his smiling way, smoothly running the government by day and fraternizing with the Emperor by night.

At last came his opportunity. The Emperor was toying with his fan over a game of Sachi. Zamben dropped a piece-an elephant-on the floor so that it rolled under the table.

"Let me get it," said Tsoyuga. "It is on my side."

As he bent to fumble for the piece, he dropped his fan. He straightened up holding the piece, to find Zamben holding the fan out to him. Tsoyuga snatched it back. "Excuse my discourtesy," said the Emperor, "but I am fain not to let that thing out of my hands. It was stupid of me not to have put it away ere reaching for your elephant. It is still your move."

Days later, in the summer house, Empress Nasako asked, "Did you get it?"

"Aye," replied Zamben. "It was no trick to hand him the duplicate."

"Then what are you waiting for? Fan the old fool away!"

"Tut, tut, my sweet. I must assure the loyalty of my partisans. It is said that he who would swallow a pumpkin with one bite shall reap the reward of his gluttony. Besides, I have scruples."

"Oh, pish-tush! Are you just a pillow-warrior, strong in the yard but weak in the sword arm?"

"Nay, but I am a careful man who avoids offending the gods or biting off more than he can chew. Hence I would fan away only one who tried to do me ill. Knowing your imperial spouse, madam, I am sure he will soon force me to defend myself."

The evening came when Zamben, whose skill at Sachi had never seemed remarkable, suddenly beat the Emperor five games in a row.

"Curse you!" bawled Tsoyuga as he lost his fifth king. "Have you been taking lessons? Or were you more skilled all along than you seemed?"

Zamben grinned and spread his hands. "The Divine Bureaucrats must have guided my moves."

"You-you-" Tsoyuga choked with rage. "We will show you how to mock your emperor! Begone from the world!"

The Emperor whipped out his fan and fanned, but Zamben failed to disappear. Tsoyuga fanned some more. "Curse it, has this thing lost its charge?" said Tsoyuga. "Unless it be not the real-"

His sentence was cut off as Zamben, opening the true magical fan, swept the Emperor out of existence. Later, Zamben explained to the Empress, "I knew that when he found that his fan did not work, he would suspect a substitution. So there was nought to do but use the real one."

"What shall we tell the court and the people?"

"I have thought all that out. We will give out that, plagued by the summer's heat, in an absentminded moment he fanned himself."

"Would it work that way?"

"I know not; who were so rash as to try it? In any case, after a decent interval of mourning, I shall expect you to carry out your end of the bargain."

"Right willingly, my love."

Thus it came to pass that the widowed Empress wedded Zamben of Jompei, after the latter had, at her demand, put away his two previous wives. The minister acquired the courtesy title of "Emperor" but not the full powers of that office. Technically he was the consort of the Dowager Empress and guardian of and regent for the heir.

As to what would happen when the fourteen-year-old Prince Wakumba reached his majority, Zamben did not worry. He was sure that, whatever betid, he could charm the young Emperor into continuing his power and perquisites.

He thought of having the Prince murdered but quickly put that plan aside. For one thing, he feared that Nasako would have him killed in turn, for her supporters far outnumbered his. He had a hard enough task just keeping on good terms with her. She was disillusioned to find that in her new husband she had obtained, not an ever-

panting satyr, but merely an ambitious politician so immersed in political maneuvers, administrative details, and religious rituals that he had little time and strength left over for stoking her fires. When she complained, he spoke of his "essential new project."

"What is that?" she demanded.

"I will not," he said, "waste more time in searching for that code book. Instead, I shall reconstruct the code by trial and error."

"How?"

"I shall try combinations of raps and note what I get each lime. In the centuries that the fan has existed, hundreds of beings must have been fanned away."

The next day Zamben, flanked by six heavily armed palace guards, sat in the Chamber of Audience, which had been cleared of all others save two secretaries. Zamben tapped his left wrist once. A beggar appeared on the floor before him.

The beggar screamed with terror and fainted. When the man had been revived, it was found that he had been fanned out of existence more than a century before, in a fishing village on the shore of the ocean. He was astounded suddenly to find himself in a palace.

Zamben commanded, "Write: one tap on left wrist, beggar. Give him one golden dragon and show him out."

Two taps on the left wrist produced a swineherd, and so it was recorded. During the day, persons of all sorts were rapped into existence. Once a leopard appeared, snarling. Two guardsmen rushed upon it, but it sprang out the open window and vanished.

Some combinations of raps failed to bring results. Either they were not connected with victims of any definite kind, or no beings of that kind had ever been fanned away and not recalled.

"All right so far," said Zamben to the Empress that night.

"What if your experiments bring back Tsotuga?"

"By the fifty-seven major deities, I had not thought of that! An emperor, I suppose, needs a combination of many taps to bring him back. The instant I see him, I will fan him back to limbo."

"Have a care! I am sure that fan will sooner or later bring evil upon him who uses it."

"Fear not; I shall be cautious."

The next day, the experiments continued and the secretaries' lists of formulae lengthened. Three taps each on left wrist, right wrist, and forehead produced the missing Finance Minister Yaebu, much shaken.

Following Yaebu came an ass and a fuller. When the ass had been captured and led out, and the fuller had been soothed and sent away with his fee, Zamben tapped his left and right wrists each three times and his forehead four times.

There was a rush of displaced air. Filling most of the Chamber of Audience was a dragon. Zamben, his jaw sagging, started to rise. The dragon roared and roared, and the guards fled clattering.

Through Zamben's mind flashed a tale he had heard about the fan. Centuries before, it had saved the Gwoling prince, Wangerr, from a dragon on Banshou Island. This must be the same.

Zamben began to open the fan, but astonishment and terror had paralyzed him a few seconds too long. The great, scaly head swooped; the jaws slammed shut.

The only person left in the chamber was one of the secretaries, cowering behind the throne. This man heard a single scream. Then the dragon hunched itself out the window with a crashing of broken window frame and—since the aperture was still too small for it—of a goodly part of the wall. The scribe peeked around the throne to see the scaly tail vanishing through the jagged gap that yawned where the window had been, and a cloud of brick and plaster dust filling the Chamber of Audience.

Yaebu and Nasako became co-regents. Lacking a man, the lusty Dowager Empress took up with a handsome groom from the imperial

stables, half her age but well equipped to pleasure her, having no thoughts to distract him from his lectual duties. Yaebu, a conservative family man with no lust for exalted adultery, became prime minister. He ran the Empire in a somewhat hesitant, bumbling way but not unsuccessfully.

Since there was no emperor, even a nominal one, young Prince Wakumba had to be enthroned forthwith. After the day-long ceremony, the lad slowly pulled off the plumed and winged crown of state. He complained, "This thing seems even heavier than usual." He poked about inside it.

Yaebu hovered anxiously, murmuring, "Have a care, my liege! Watch out that you harm not that holy headgear!"

Something went spung, and a metal flap snapped up inside the crown.

"Here is that secret compartment," said Wakumba, "with a-what is this?-a book in it. By the fifty-seven divinities, this must be that code book that Dad was hunting!"

"Let me see!" cried Yaebu and Nasako together.

"That is it, all right. But since the dragon ate the fan along with my stepfather, the book is of no use. Let it be put in the archives with other curios."

Nasako said, "We must ask Kozima to make another magical fan, so that the book shall again be useful."

It is not, however, recorded that the court wizard of Kuromon ever succeeded in this endeavor. For aught I know, the code book still reposes peacefully in the Kuromonian archives in Chingun, and those who, like Tso-tuga and Dzakusan, were fanned away and never brought back, still await their deliverance.