The Kingdom of Slender Swords

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Barbara, left alone for the evening, amuses herself at the piano. Duke Daunt, passing by, hears her playing, and, unconsciously, begins to sing. Barbara hears him and steps to the piazza just as the Ambassador's wolf-hound breaks his chain. Daunt saves her and the dog mysteriously disappears when he springs at the Doctor. Ishida, one time student in Monterey, Cali., now in special secret service, but acting as the Doctor's servant, learns a little more of the expert's plans.

He had remembered that a guest had been expected to arrive that day from America and knew that this must be she. But, strangely enough, it did not seem as if they had never before met. Nor had he the least idea that, since that short sharp scene, they had exchanged scarcely a dozen words. In its curious sequel, as he stood listening to the echo of Berson-in's strange laughter, he had momentarily forgotten all about her. Then he had remembered with a shock that he had left her perched, in evening dress, on the high railing of the arbor.

"I wonder if you are in the habit," she had said with a little laugh, "of putting unchaperoned girls on the tops of fences, and going away and forgetting all about them."

Her laugh was deliciously uneven, but it did not seem so from fright. He had answered something inordinately foolish, and had lifted her down again—not holding her so closely this time. He remembered that on the first occasion he had held her very tightly indeed. He could still feel the touch of a wisp of her hair which, in his flying leap, had fallen against his cheek. It was red bronze and it shone now in the moonlight like molten metal. Her eyes were brown, and when she smiled—

He wrenched his gaze away with a start. But it did not stray far—merely to the point of a white-beaded slipper peeping from the edge of a ruffle of gauze that had mysteriously imprisoned filmy sprays of lily of the valley.

He looked up suddenly, conscious that she was laughing silently. "What is it?" he asked.

"We seem so tremendously acquainted," she said, "for people who—" She stopped an instant. "You don't even know who I am."

In the references to her coming he had heard her name spoken and now, by a sheer mental effort, he managed to recall it.

"You are Miss Fairfax," he said. "And my name, perhaps I ought to add, is Daunt. I am the Secretary of Embassy. I hope, after our little effort of tonight, you will not consider diplomacy only high-class vaudeville. Such comedy scarcely represents our daily bill."

"Poor brute!" she said. "I hope he will injure nobody."

"Luckily, the children are off the streets at this hour," he answered. "He'll not go far; the police are numerous. I am afraid our very efficient performer is permanently retired from the company. But I haven't yet congratulated you. You didn't seem one bit afraid."

"I hadn't time to be frightened. I—was thinking of something else! The fright came afterward, when I saw you—when you left me on the railing." She spoke a little constrainedly, and went on quickly: "I really am a desperate coward about some things. I should never dare to go up on an aeroplane, for instance, as Patsy tells me you do almost every day. She says the Japanese call you the 'Honorable Fly-Man.'"

"There's no foreign theater in Tokyo and no winter opera," he said lightly. "We have to amuse one another, and the Glider is by way of contributing my share of the entertainment. It is certainly an uplifting performance." He smiled, but she shook her head.

"Ah," she said, "I know! I was at Fort Logan last summer the day Lieutenant Whitney was killed. I saw it."

The smile had faded and her eyes had just the look he had so often fancied lay in those eyes he had been used to gaze at across the burning driftwood—his "Lady of the Many-Colored Fires." He caught himself longing to know that they would mist and soften if he too should some day come to grief in such sudden fashion.

"How brazen you must have thought it!" he exclaimed. "My impromptu solo, I mean. I hardly know how I came to do it. I suppose it was the moonlight (it does make people idiotic sometimes, you know, in the tropics) and then when you played—that dear old song! I used to sing it years ago. It reminded me—"

"Yes—?"

"Of the last evening at college. It was a night like this, though not so lovely. I sang it then—my last college solo."

"Your last?" She was leaning toward him, her lips parted, her eyes bright on his face.

"Yes," he said. "I left town the next day."

Her eyes fell. She turned half away, and put a hand to her cheek. "Oh," she said vaguely. "Of course."

"But it was brazen," he finished lamely. "I promise never to do it again."

A dulled, weird sound from the street reached their ears—the monotonous hand-tapping of a small, shallow drum.

"Some Buddhist devotee," he said, "making a pious round of holy places. He is stalking along in a dingy, white cotton robe with red characters stamped all over it—one from each shrine he has visited—and here and there in a doorway he will stop to chant a prayer in return for a handful of rice."

"How strange! It doesn't seem to belong, somehow, with the telegraph wires and the trolley cars. Japan is full of such contrasts, isn't it? It seems to be packed with mystery and secrets. Listen!" The deep, resonant boom of a great bell at a distance had throbbed across the nearer strumming. "That must be in some old temple. Perhaps the man with the drum is going there to worship. Does any one live in the temples? The priests do, I suppose."

"Yes," he answered. "Sometimes other people do, too. I know of a foreigner who lives in one."

"What is he? European?"

"No one knows. He has lived there fifteen years. He calls himself Aloysius Thorn. I used to think he must be an American, for in the Chancery safe there is an envelope bearing his name and the direction that it be opened after his death. It has been there a long time, for the paper is yellow with age. No doubt it was put there by some former Chief-of-Mission at his request. He has nothing to do with other foreigners; as a rule he won't even speak to them. He is something of a curiosity. He knows some lost secret about gold lacquer, they say."

"Is he young?"

"No."

"Married?"

"Oh, no! He lives quite alone. He has one of the loveliest private gardens in the city. Sometimes one does not see him for months, but he is here now."

She was silent, while he looked again at the white toe of the slipper peeping from a gauzy hem. The silence seemed to him an added bond between them.

"It can't always be so beautiful in Japan!" she said at length.

"No, indeed," he agreed cheerfully. "There are times, when, as my number one boy says, honorable weather are disgust.' In June the nubai, the rainy season, is due. It will pour buckets for three weeks without a stop and frogs will sing dulcet songs in the streets."

"Yet now," she said softly, "it seems too lovely to be real. I shall wake presently to find myself in my berth on the Tenyo Mary with Japan two or three days off."

He fell into her mood. "We are both asleep. That was why the dog vanished so queerly. Dream-dogs always do. And I don't wonder at my singing, either. People do exactly what they shouldn't when they are asleep. But no! I really don't like the dream version at all. I want this to be true."

"Why?"

Her tone was low, but it made him tingle. A sudden melee of daring, delicious impulses swept over him. "Because I have dreamed too much," he said, in as low a voice. "Here in the east the habit grows on one; we dream of what all the beauty somehow misses—for us. But to-night, at least, is real. I shall have it to remember when you have gone, as I—I suppose you will be soon."

She leaned out and picked a slender maple leaf from a branch that came in through the open side of the pagoda, and, holding it in her fingers, turned toward him. Her lips were parted, as if to speak. But suddenly she tossed it from her, rose and shook out her skirts with a laugh. Carriage wheels were rolling up the drive from the lower gate.

"Thank you!" she cried gaily. "But no hint shall move me. I warn you that I intend to stay a long time!"

In the lighted doorway, as Patricia and her mother stepped from the carriage, she swept him a courtesy.

"Honorably deign to accept my thanks," she said, "for augustly saving my insignificant life! And now, perhaps, we can be properly introduced!"

CHAPTER XI.

Ishikichi.

Under the frail moon that touched the Embassy garden to such beauty, Haru walked home to the house "so-o-small, an' garden 'bout such big" in the Street-of-Prayer-to-the-Gods.

On Reinazaka Hill the shadows were iris-hearted. From its high-walled gardens of the great came no glimpses of phantom-lighted shoji, no sound of vibrant strings from tea-houses nor gleams of painted lips and fingers of geisha.

She had come to the newly built Chapel. Her father's name was on the household list of the temple across the way, but she herself walked each Sunday to Ts'kiji, to attend the bishop's Japanese service in the Cathedral. When, influenced by a schoolmate, she had wished to become a Christian, the old samurai had interposed no objection. With the broad tolerance of the esoteris Buddhist, to whom all pure faiths are good, he had allowed her to choose for herself. She had grown to love the strangely new and beautiful worship with its singing, its service in a tongue that she could understand, its Bible filled with marvelous stories of old heroes, and with vivid imagery like that of the Kojiki, the "Record of Ancient Matters" or the Man-yoshu, the "Collection of a Myriad Leaves," over whose archaic characters her father was always poring.

For many days Haru had watched the progress of the Chapel building. The Cathedral was a good two miles distant, but this was near her home; here she would be able to attend more than the weekly Sunday service. To-night, as she looked at the cross shining in the moonlight, she thought it very beautiful. A tiny symbol like it, made of white enamel, was hung on a little chain about her neck. It had been given her by the bishop the day of her confirmation. She drew this out and swung it about her finger as she walked on.

In the Street-of-Prayer-to-the-Gods were no huge and gloomy compounds. It was a roadway of humbler shops and homes, bordered with mazes of lantern fire, and lively with pedestrians. At a meager shop, pitifully small, whose shoji were wide open, Haru paused. A smoky oil lamp hung from the ceiling and under its glow, a woman knelt on the worn tatame. Beside her, on a pillow, lay a new-born baby, and she was soothing its slumber by softly beating a tiny drum close to its ear. She nodded and smiled to Haru's salutation.

"Hai! Ojo-San," she said. "Go kigen you! Deign augustly to enter."

"Honorable thanks," responded Haru, "but my father awaits my unworthy return. Domo! Aka-San des'ka? So this is Miss Baby! Ishikichi will have a new comrade in this little sister."

"Poison not your serene mind with contemplation of my uncomely last-sent one!" said the woman, pridefully tilting the pillow so as to show the tiny, vacuous face. "Are not its hands degradedly well formed?"

"Wonderfully beyond saying! The father is still exaltedly ill?"

"It is indeed so! I have not failed to sprinkle the holy water over Jizo, nor to present the straw sandals to the Guardians-of-the-Gate. Also I have rubbed each day the breast of the health-god; yet, O-Binzuru does not harken. Doubtless it is because of some sin committed by my husband in a previous existence! I have not knowledge of your Christian God; or I would make my worthless sacrifices also to Him."

"He heals the sick," said Haru, "but He augustly loves not sacrifice—as He exaltedly did in olden times," she hastily supplemented, recalling certain readings from the Old Testament.

"The gods of Nippon divinely change not their habit," returned the woman. "Also my vile intellect can not comprehend why the foreigners' God should illustriously concern Himself with the things of another land."

"The Christian Divinity," said Haru "is a God of all lands and all peoples."

The other mused. "It passes in my degraded mind that He, then, would lack a sublime all-sympathy for our Kingdom-of-Slender-Swords. You are transcendently young, Ojo-San, but I am thirty-two, and I hold by the gods of my ancestors."

"Honorably present my greetings to your husband," Haru said, as she bowed her adieu. "May his exalted person soon attain divine health! Tomorrow I will send another book for him to read."

The woman watched her go, with smile on her tired face—the Japanese smile that covers so many things. She looked at the baby's face on the pillow. "Praise Shaka," she said aloud, "there is millet yet for another week. Then we must give up the shop. Well—I can play the samisen, and the gods are not dead!"

Behind her a diminutive figure had lifted himself upright from a f'ton. He came forward from the gloom, his single sleeping-robe trailing comically and his great black eyes round and serious. "Why must we give up the shop, honorable mother?"

"Go to speel, Ishikichi," said his mother. "Trouble me not so late with your rude prattle."

"But why, Okka-San?"

"Because rent money exists not, small pigeon," she answered gently. "So long as we have ignobly lived here, we have paid the banto who brings his joy-giving presence on the first of each month. Now we have no more money and can not pay."

"Why have we no more money?"

"Because the honorable father is sick and you are too small to earn. But let it not trouble your heart, for the gods are good. See—we have almost waked the Aka-San!"

She bent over the pillow and began again the elfin drumming at the infant's ear. But Ishikichi lay open-eyed on his f'ton, his baby mind grappling with a new and painful wonder.

CHAPTER XII.

In the Street of Prayer to the Gods

Haru unlatched a gate across which twisted a plum branch with tarnished silver bark. It hid a garden so tiny that it was scarcely more than a rounded boulder set in moss, with a clump of golden icho shrubs. She rang a bell which hung from a cord.

"Hai-ai-ai-ai-ee!" sounded a long drawn voice from within, and in a moment a little maid slid back the shoji and bobbed over to the threshold.

Her mistress stepped from her geta into the small anteroom. A voice was audible, recting in a droning monotone. It stopped suddenly, and called Haru's name.

She answered instantly and parting the panels, passed into the next room where her father sat on his mat reading in the faint soft light of an andon. He was an old man with white head strongly poised on gaunt shoulders. Broken in fortune and in health, the spirit of the samurai burned inextinguishably in the fire of his sunken eyes. He took her hand and drew her down beside him. She knew what was in his mind.

"Be no longer troubled," she said. "The American Ojo-San is as lovely as Ama-terasu, the Sun Goddess, and as kind as she is beautiful. I shall be happy to be each day with her."

"That is good," he said. "Yet I take no joy from it. You are the last of a family that for a thousand seasons has served none save its Emperor and its daimyo."

"I am no servant," she answered quickly. "Rather, I am, in sort, a companion to the Ojo-San, to offer her my tasteless conversation and somewhat to go about with her in this unfamiliar city. It is an honorable way of acquiring gain, and thus I may unworthily pay my support, for which now from time to time you are brought to sell the priceless classics in which your soul exaltedly delights."

His face softened. "I have lived too long," he said. "My hand is palsied—I, a two-sword man of the old clan! I should have died in the war, fighting for Nippon and my emperor. But even then I was too dishonorably old! Why did not the gods grant me a son?—me, who wearied them with my sacrifices?"

She did not answer for a moment. Nothing in her cried out at this reiterated complaint, for she was of the same blood. If she had been a son, that wound in her father's heart had been healed. Through her arm the family would have fought. Her glorious death name might even now be written on an ihai on the Buddha-

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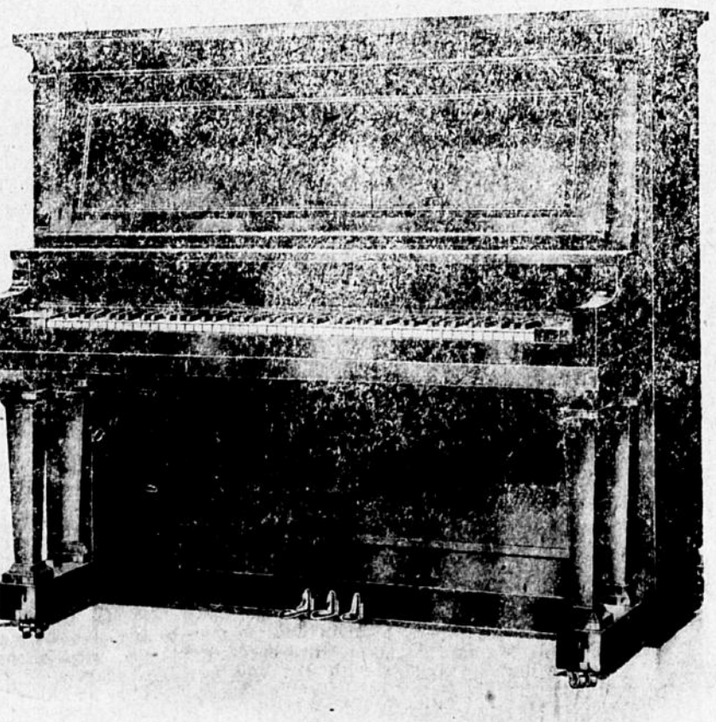

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