

The Kingdom of Slender Swords

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CHAPTER XXIV.

Like the Whisper of a Bat's Wings.
On the other side of Tokyo that night Doctor Bersonin sat with Phil in his great laboratory. Dinner had been laid on a round table at one end of the room. This was now pushed into a corner; they sat in deep leather chairs with slim liquor glasses of green creme de menthe on a stand between them, with a methyl lamp and cigars.

Bersonin spoke. His voice was cold and measured; the only sign of agitation was in the slow, spasmodic working of the great white fingers against the dark wood.
"I have brought you here tonight," he said, "to make you a proposition. I have need of help—a kind—that you can give me. It will require certain qualities which I think you possess—which we possess in common. I have chosen you because you are not troubled with what the coward calls conscience—that fool's name for fear!"

Phil touched his dry lips with his tongue. "I have as little of that as the next man," he replied. "I never found I needed much."

Bersonin continued:
"What I have to say I can say without misgiving. For if you told it before the fact there is possibly but one man in Japan who would think you sane; and if you told it after—well, for your own safety, you will not tell it then! Your acceptance of my proposition will have a definite effect on your prospects, which, I believe, can scarcely be looked on as bright."

Phil muttered an oath. "You needn't remind me of that," he said with surly emphasis. "I've got about as much prospects as a coolie stevedore. Well, what of it?"

Bersonin leaned forward, his hands on the stand. It rocked under his weight. "I have talked of money. I will show you a quick way to gain it—not by years, but by days!—wealth such as you have never dreamed, enough to make your brother poor beside you! Not only money, but power and place and honors. Is the stake big enough to play for?"

Phil stared at him, fascinated.
"What do you want me to do?" he almost gasped the words.

The expert looked him in the eye a full moment in silence, his fingers crawling and twitching. Then, with a quick, leopard-like movement, he went to the wall safe, opened it and took out what seemed a square metal box. In its top was set an indicator, like the range finder of a camera. Its very touch seemed to melt his icy control. His paleness flushed; his hand trembled as he set it upon the desk.

"Wait!" he said. "Wait!"
He looked swiftly about the room. His eye rested on the bamboo cage and a quick gleam shot across his face. He opened the wire door and the little bird hopped to his finger. He moved a metal pen rack to the very center of the desk and perched the tiny creature on it. It burst into song, warbling full-throated, packed with melody. Bersonin set the metal case a little distance away and adjusted it with minutest care.
"Sing, Dick!" he cried loudly; "sing! sing!"

The song stopped. There had come a thrill in the air—a puff of icy wind on Phil's face—a thin chiming like a fairy cymbal. Phil sprang up with a cry. The fluffy ball, with its metal perch, had utterly disappeared; only in the center of the desk was a pinch of reddish-brown powder like the dust of an emery wheel, laid in feathery whorls.

He stared transfixed. "What does it mean?" he asked hoarsely.

The doctor's voice was no longer toneless. It leaped now with an evil exultation. "It means that I—Bersonin—have found what physicists have dreamed of for fifty years! I have solved the secret of the love and hatred of atoms. That box is the harness of a force besides which the engines of modern war are children's toys!"

He grasped Phil's arm with a force that made him wince. The amber eyes glittered.

"At first I planned to sell it to the highest bidder among the powers. I was a fool to think of that! The nation that buys it, to guard the secret for itself, must wall me in a fortress! That would be the reward of Perseus—the great Bersonin, who has wrested from nature the most subtle of her secrets! But I am too clever for that! 'It must be I—alone—who holds the key!' It shall bring me many things, but the first of these is money. I must have funds—unlimited funds. The money I despise, except as a stepping stone, but the money you love and must have! Well, I offer it to you!"

Phil's heart was beating hard. The tension of the room had increased; a hundred suffocating atmospheres

seemed pressing on it. "How—how—" he stammered.

Bersonin took a paper from his pocket, unfolded it and laid it on the stand. It was a chart of Yokohama harbor. A red square was drawn in the margin, and from this a fine, needle-like ray pointed out across the anchorage. With his pencil the Doctor wrote two words on the red square—"The Roost."

Phil shrank trembling into his chair. He seemed to see the other looking at him over clinking glasses at the Club, while voices spoke from the next room. "What if one of those Dreadnaughts should go down in this friendly harbor!" It came from his lips in a thin whisper, almost without his volition—the answer to the question that had haunted him that day.

A gleam like the fire of unholy altars came in Bersonin's eyes.

"Not one—two! A bolt from a blue sky, that will echo over Europe! And what then? A fury of popular passion in one country; suspicion and alarm in all. Rumors of war, fanned by the yellow press. The bottom dropping out of the market! It means millions at a single coup, for, in spite of diplomatic quibbles, the market is like a cork. The Paris bourse is soaring. Wall Street will make a new record to-morrow. In London, Consols are at Ninety-two. My agents are awaiting my word. I have many, for that is safer. I shall spread selling orders over five countries—British bonds in Vienna and New York, and steel and American railroads in London. I risk all and you—nothing. Yet if you join hands with me in this we shall share alike—you and I! And with the winnings we get now we shall get more. Trust me to know the way! Money shall be dirt to you. The pleasure cities of every continent shall be your playgrounds. You shall have your pretty little Japanese peri, and fifty more besides."

Phil's face had flushed and paled by turns. He looked at the expert with a shivering fascination. But there are—there will be—men aboard these ships. . . . He shuddered and wrenched his gaze away.

Bersonin put out his great hand and laid in on the other's shoulder—its weight seemed to be pressing him down into the chair.

"Well?" he said, in a low intense voice. "What if there are?"

CHAPTER XXV

The Forgotten Man

Barbara pushed open the bamboo gate of the temple garden, then paused. The recluse with whom she had talked yesterday sat a little way inside, while before him, in an attitude of deepest attention, stood the diminutive figure on the huge clogs whose morning acquaintance she had made from her window. Thorn was looking at him earnestly with his great myopic eye, through a heavy glass mounted with a handle like a lorgnette.

"My son," he said, "why will you persist in eating ame, when I have taught you the classics and the true divinity of the universe? It is too sweet for youthful teeth. One of these days you will be carried to a dentist, an esteemed person with horrible tools, prior to the removal of a small hell, containing several myriads of lost souls, from the left side of your lower jaw!"

Barbara's foot grated on a pebble and he rose with a startled quickness. The youngster bent double, his face preternaturally grave. Thorn thrust the glass into his sleeve and smiled.

"I am experimenting on this oriental raw material," he said, "to illustrate certain theories of my own. Ishikichi-San, though a slave to the sweet meat dealer, is a learned infant. He can write forty Chinese characters and recite ten texts of Mencius. He also knows many damnable facts about figures which they teach in question that Confucius was too wise school. He has just propounded a to answer: 'Why is poverty?' Not being so wise as the Chinese sage, I attempted its elucidation. Thus endeth our lesson today, Ishikichi Sayonara."

Barbara looked after him smilingly. "Is Ishikichi in straitened circumstances? Or is his bent political economy?"

"His father has been ill for a long time," Thorn replied. "He keeps a shop, and in some way the child has heard that they have to give it up. It troubles him, for he can't imagine existence without it."

"What a pity! I would be so glad to—do you think I could give them something?"
He shook his head. "After you have been here a while, you will find that simple charity in Japan is not apt to be a welcome thing."

"I am beginning to understand already," she said, as they walked along the stepping stones, "that these gentle mannered people do not lack the sterner qualities. Yet how they grace them! The iron hand is here, but it has the velvet glove. Courtesy and kindness seem almost a religion with them."

"More," he answered. "That is the only country I have seen in the world whose people, when I walk the street,

do not seem to notice that I am disgraced!"

She made no pretense of misunderstanding. "Believe me," she said gently, "it is no disgracement. But I understand. My father lived all his life in the dread of blindness."

A faint sound came from him. She was aware, without lifting her eyes to his, that he was staring at her strangely.

"All his life. Then your father is not . . . living?"

"He died before I was born."

She glanced at him as she spoke, for his tone had been muffled and indistinct. There was a deep furrow in his forehead which she had not seen before.

"Do you look like him?"

"No, he was dark. I am like my mother."

Thorn was looking away from her, toward the lane, where, beyond the hedge, a man was passing, half singing, half chanting to himself in a represses, sepulchral voice.

"My mother died, too, when I was a little girl," she added, "so I know really very little about him."

She was looking out across the wide space where the roofs sank out of sight—to the foliaged slope of Aoyama. Suddenly a thrill, a curiously complex motion, ran over her. Above those far tree-tops, sailing in slow, sweeping, concentric circles, she saw a great machine, like a gigantic vulture. She knew instantly what it was, and there flashed before her memory and there flashed before her the memory of a day at Fort Logan when a brave young lieutenant had crashed to death before her eyes in a shattered aeroplane.

If Daunt was to fall . . . what would it mean to her! In that instant the garden about her, Thorn, the blue sky above, faded, and she stared dismayed into a gulf in whose shadows lurked the disastrous, the terrifying, the irreparable. "I love him! I love him!"—it seemed to peal like a temple bell through her brain. Even to herself she could not deny it again!

She became aware of music near at hand. It brought her back to the present, for it was the sound of the organ in the new Chapel across the way.

Looking up, she was struck by the expression on Thorn's face. He seemed, listening, to be held captive by some dire recollection. It brought to her mind that bitter cry:

"I can not but remember such things were,
That were most precious to me!"

She rose with a sudden swelling of the throat.

"I must go now," she said. "The Chapel is to be dedicated this morning. The organ is playing for the service now."

She led the way along the stepping stones to the bamboo gate. As they approached, through the interstices of the farther hedge she could see the figure of the Ambassador, with Mrs. Dandridge, among the kimono entering the chapel door. In the temple across the yard the baton had begun its tapping and the dulled, monotonous tom-tom mingled weirdly with the soaring harmonies of the organ.

With her hand on the paling she spoke again:

"One thing I didn't tell you. It was I who built the Chapel. It is in the memory of my father. See, there is the memorial window. They were putting it in place when I came a little while ago."

She was not looking at Thorn, or she would have seen his face overspread with a whiteness like that of death. He stood as if frozen to marble. The morning sun on the Chapel's eastern side, striking through its open casements, lightening the iridescent rose window with a tender radiance, gilding the dull yellow aureole about the head of the Master and giving life and glow to the face beside him—dark, beardless, and passionately tender—at which Thorn was staring, with what seemed almost an agony of inquiry.

"St. John," she said softly, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." She drew from the bosom of her dress the locket she always wore and opened it. "The face was painted from this—the only picture I have of my father."

His hand twitched as he took it. He looked at it long and earnestly—at the name carved on its lid. "Barbara—Barbara Fairfax!" he said. She thought his lips shook under the gray mustache.

"You—are a Buddhist, are you not?" she asked. "And Buddhists believe the spirits of the dead are always about us. Do you think—perhaps—he sees the Chapel?"
He put her locket into her hands hastily. "God!" he said, as if to himself. "He will see it through a hundred existences!"
Her eyes were moist and shining. "I am glad you think that," she said.

In the Chapel the bishop's gaze kindled as it went out over the kneeling people.

"We beseech Thee, that in this

place now set apart to Thy service, Thy holy name may be worshipped in truth and purity through all generations."

The voice of the bishop carried across the lane and entered the window of a temple loft, where a man sat, still and gray and quiet. He threw himself on his face with a terrible cry.

"My child!" he cried in a breaking voice. "My little, little child, whom they have robbed me of—whom I have never known in all these weary years! You have grown away from me—I shall never have you now! Never . . . never!"

Continued Next Week.

ED HOWE PARAGRAPHS.

(From The Atchison Globe.)

You can't hustle when you're dead on your feet; you can only drag around and long for bedtime.

A man should quit amateur singing after 30. A woman may keep it up a little longer; but not much.

It may not do a poor man any good to abuse a rich man, but it cannot be denied that it is mighty comforting.

Any man is willing to admit that he doesn't write a good "hand." Bad writing is generally regarded as a mark of genius.

If you want to hear "talk," you should hear the women when they get to going about a woman who is trying to butt into society.

You have only to say that a woman is pretty to hear some one in the crowd say, "Yes, but she hasn't much sense."

A very jealous woman will often say, "I have not a jealous bone in my body." A woman who is not jealous never says anything about it.

You are just beginning to have a little sense when you refuse to attend a midnight lunch consisting of beer, dried beef, summer sausage and cheese.

No afternoon reception attended by women was ever more idle and ridiculous than a session of congress.

You can take your choice; it is usually that you will have a good stomach and no food, or good food and a poor stomach.

An old-fashioned man made this remark about another man who is doing well after a streak of hard luck: "Water is running on his wheel again."

Muslin Window for Cow Stables.

Cows should not stand facing a window unless the window be covered with muslin. By the way, the muslin window in a cow stable is better by far than glass. It gives a subdued light and furnishes ideal ventilation.

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