

The Kingdom of Slender Swords

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CHAPTER XXVI

Daunt Listens to a Song

The day had dawned sultry, with a promise of summer humidity, and Daunt was not surprised to find the barometer performing intemperate antics.

That morning had seen his first trial of his new fan propeller, and the Glider's action had surpassed his wildest expectation. The flight, of which Barbara had caught a glimpse from Thorn's garden, had been a longer one than usual—quite twelve miles against a sluggish upper current—but even that failed to bring its customary glow. Thereafter he had spent a long morning immersed in the work of the Chancery: the study of a disputed mining concession in Manchuria; a report on a contemplated issue of government bonds; a demand for a passport by a self-alleged national with a foreign accent and a paucity of naturalization papers; the daily budget of translations from vernacular newspapers, by which a home government gains a bird's eye view of comment and public opinion in the far away capitals.

But today Daunt could not exercise with the mass of detail the leering imps that plagued him. They peered at him over the edge of the code-books and whispered from the margins of decorous despatches, chuckling satirically.

"Barbara!" they sneered. "Mere acquaintances often name steam yachts for girls, don't they? Arrived the same day as her ship, eh? Rather singular coincidence! What a flush she had when Voynich spoke of Phil's brother last night at the tea house. Angry? Of course she was! What engaged girl likes to have the fact paraded—especially when she's practicing on another man? And how about the telegram? How long have you known her, by the way? Two days? Really, now!"

The weekly government pouch had closed at noon, and pouch days were half holidays, but Daunt did not go to the Embassy. An official letter had arrived from Washington which must be delivered at Kamakura. Daunt seized this excuse, plunged ferociously into tweeds and an hour afterward found himself in a railway carriage thudding gloomily toward the lower bay. In his heart he knew that he was trying to run away—from something that nevertheless traveled with him.

At Kamakura an immediate answer to the letter he brought was not forthcoming, and to kill the time he strolled far down the curved beach. Daunt knew a tea house on the very lip of the cliff, the Kinki-ro—"Inn of the Golden Turtle"—and he bent his steps lazily in its direction.

In the heavy heat the low tiled roof looked cool and inviting. Tall soft-



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eyed iris were standing in the garden overlooking the water, and against the green their velvety leaves made vivid splashes of golden blue. On a dead tree two black crows were quarreling and cherry petals powdered the paths like pink hail. The haze, sifting from the sky, seemed to wrap everything in a veil. At the hedge he paused an instant. Some one, somewhere, was humming, low-voiced, an air that he had once loved. He pushed open the gate and went on into the tremulous radiance. Then he stopped short.

Barbara was seated above him in the fork of a low camellia tree, one arm laid out along a branch, her green gown blending with a bamboo thicket behind her and her vivid face framed in the blossoms. She sat, chin in hand, looking dreamily out across the bay, and the hummed song had a rhythm that seemed to fit her thought—slow and infinitely tender.

"You!" he cried. She turned with a startled movement that dissolved into low, delicious laughter.

"Fairly caught," she answered. "I don't often revert far enough to climb trees, but I thought no one but Haru and I was here. Will you come and help me down, Honorable Fly-man?"

"Wait—" he said. "What was the song you were humming?"

She looked at him with a quick intake of breath, then for answer began to sing, in a voice that presently became scarce more than a whisper:

"Forgotten you? Well, if forgetting be hearing all the day (babble Your voice through all the strange Of voices grave, now gay— (ing If counting each moment with long Till the one when I see you again. If this be forgotten, you're right, dear! And I have forgotten you then!"

Daunt's hand fell to his side. A young girl's face nestled in creamy, pink blossoms—a sweet, shy, flushed face under a mass of curling, gold-bronze hair. "I remember now!" he said in a low voice. "I sang it to you . . . that day!"

"I am flattered!" she exclaimed. "The day before yesterday you had forgotten that you ever saw poor little me! It was Mrs. Claybourne, of course, that you sang to! Yet you were my idol for a long month and a day!"

"It was you," he said unsteadily. "I didn't know your name. But I never forgot the song. I remembered it that night in the garden, when I first heard you playing!"

CHAPTER XXVII

The Island of Enchantment

They walked together around the curving road, leaving Haru with the tea basket. "Patsy would have come," Barbara had said, "but she is in the clutches of her dressmaker." And Daunt had answered, "I have a distinct regard for that Chinaman!"

His black mood had vanished, and the eerling imps had flown. In the brightness of her physical presence,

how baseless and foolish seemed his sullen imaginings! What man who owned a steam yacht, knowing her, would not wish to name it the Barbara?

The sky was duller now. Its marvelous haze of blue and gold had turned pallid, and the sun glared with a pale, yellowish effrontery. A strange sighing was in the air, so faint, however, that it seemed only the stirring of innumerable leaves, the resinous rasping of pine needles and the lisp of the flaming petals from the century-old camellia trees, that stained the ground with hot, bleeding red. At a turn in the road stood a stone image of Jizo, with a red paper bib about his neck. Before it lay three small rice cakes; somewhere in the neighborhood was a little sick child, three years old. At its base were heaps of tiny stones, piled by mothers whose little children had died.

"They went laughing like two children, down the zigzag stone steps, past innumerable uomitei—crimson-benched 'rest houses,' where grave Japanese pedestrians sat eating stewed eels and chipping hard-boiled eggs—to the rocky edge of the tide, which now rolled in with a measured, sullen booming. He pointed to a gloomy fissure which ran into the mountain, at a little distance.

"O Maiden, journeying to Holy Ben-ten," he said, "behold her shrine!"

"How disillusioning!"

"People find love so, sometimes."

She slowly shook her head. "Not all of them," she said softly. "I am old-fashioned enough not to believe that." Her brown eyes were wistful and a little troubled, and her voice was so adorable that he could have gone on his knees to her.

"We will ask Ben-ten about it," he said.

"Oh, but not 'we!'" she cried. "I must go alone. Don't you know the legend? People quarrel if they go together."

"I can't imagine quarreling with you. I'd rather quarrel with myself."

"That would be difficult, wouldn't it?"

"Not in some of my moods. Ask my head-boy. Today, for instance—"

"Well?" For he had paused.

"I was meditating self-destruction when I met you."

"By what interesting method, I wonder?"

"I was about to search for a volcano to jump into."

"I thought the nearest active crater is a hundred miles away."

"So it is, but I'm an absent-minded beggar."

She laughed. "May I ask what inspired today's suicidal mood?"

"It was—a telegram."

"Oh!" She colored faintly. "I hope it held no bad news."

He looked into her eyes. "I hope not," he said. "Something else was on his tongue, when, 'Look!' she exclaimed. 'How strange the sea looks off there!'"

A sinister, whitish bank, like a mad drift of smoke, lay far off on the water, and a tense, whistling hum came from the upper air. A drop of water splashed on Daunt's wrist. "There's going to be a blow," he said. "The seaweed gatherers are coming in, too. Ben-ten will have to wait, I'm afraid. See—even her High Priest is forsaking her!"

From where they stood steps were roughly hewn into the rock, winding across the face of the cliff. Beside these, stone pillars were socketed, carrying an iron chain that hung in rusted festoons. Along this precarious pathway from the cavern an old man was hastily coming, followed by a boy with a sagging bundle tied in a white cloth. "That parcel, no doubt," said Daunt, "contains the day's offerings. Wait! You're not going?" For she had started down the steps.

She had turned to answer, when

with the suddenness of an explosion, a burst of wind fell on them like a flapping weight, spattering them with drops that struck the rock as if hurled from a sling full of melted metal. Barbara had never in her life experienced anything like its ferocity. It both startled and angered her, like a personal affront.

Daunt had sprung to her side and was shouting something. But the words were indistinguishable; she shook her head and went on stubbornly, clinging to the chain, a whirl of blown garments. She felt him grasp her arm.

"Go back!" she shrieked. "It's—bad—luck!"

As he released her there came a second's menacing lull, and in it she sprang down the steps and ran swiftly out along the pathway. He was after her in an instant, overtaking her on a frail board trestle that spanned a pool, where the cliff was perpendicular. Here the wind, shaggy with spume, hurled them together. Daunt threw an arm about her, clinging with the other hand to the wooden railing. Her hair was a reddish swirl across his shoulder and her breath, panting against his throat, ridged his skin with a creeping delight. The rocks beneath them, through whose fissures tongues of water ran screaming, was the color of raspberries and tawny with seaweed. There was only a weird, yellow half-light, through which the gale howled and scuffled, like dragons fighting. A slather of wave licked the palsied framework.

He bent and shouted into her ear. All she caught was: "Must—cave—next lull—"

She nodded her head and her lips smiled at him through the confused obscurity. A thrill swept her like silver rain. Pulse on pulse, an emotion like fire and snow in one thrilled and chilled her. She closed her eyes with a wild longing that the wind might last forever, that that moment like the ecstasy of an opium dream, might draw itself out to infinite length. Slowly she felt the breath of the tempest ebb about them, then suddenly felt herself lifted from her feet, and her eyes opened into Ben-ten's. Her cheek lay against his breast, as it had done in that short moment in the embassy garden. She could feel his heart bound under the rough tweed. Once more the wind caught them, but he staggered through it, and into the high, rock entrance of the cave.

Inside its dripping to him the sudden cessation of the wind seemed almost uncanny, and the boom of the surf was a dull thunderous roar. He set her on her feet on the damp rock and laughed wildly.

"Do you realize," she said, "that we have transgressed the most sacred tenet of Ben-ten by coming here together? We are doomed to misunderstanding!"

"Now that I recollect, that applies only to lovers," he answered. "Then we—"

Continued Next Week.

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