The Kingdom of Slender Swords

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CHAPTER XXXII.

When a Woman Dreams.

Riding with Patricia in the big victoria the next day, its red striped runner diving ahead, Barbara forgot her vague wonder at Haru's disappearance as she felt the enchanted mystery of Tokyo creep further into her heart.

Presently the horses stopped before a great gate of unpainted cedar, roofed with black and white tiles and bossed with nails of hammered copper. Above it two pine trees writhed like a Dore print. "One of the Empress' ladies-in-waiting lives here," Patricia said. "I'll walk home and on the way I can leave some 'call tickets'—Tucker's name for visiting cards. Give my love to the bishop."

She looked wistfully after Barbara as the latter bowled away toward Ts'kiji and her uncle's. Under her flyaway spirits Patricia had the warmest little heart in the world, loyal to its last beat to those she liked. Daunt was decidedly in this category. Like the rest, she had been weaving a cheerful little romance for these two friends. Since the evening at the Cherry Moon, however, when the newly arrived yacht had been talked of, she had had misgivings. Yesterday, too, Barbara, while confiding nothing, had told her of Austen Ware's coming. Patricia walked up the driveway slowly and with a puzzled frown.

But the girl driving on under cherry-stained sky and cherry-scented winds, knew, that one hour, no problems.

In her pocket was a letter. It had been brought to her that morning when she woke and she had read it over and over, kneeling in the drift of pillows, her red-gold hair draping her white shoulders, thrilling, murmuring little inarticulate answers to its phrases, looking up now and then to peer through the bamboo sudare to the white and green cottage across the lawn. He would not see her today—until evening. Then he would ask her . .

As the carriage bore her on, she whispered again and again one of the sentences he had written: "There has never been another woman to me, Barbara. There never will be! My Lady of the Many-Colored Fires!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Behind the Shikiri.

The guide came to the end of his elaborate conversation. He turned from the old servant, leaning on his pruning knife, and spoke to the man who stood waiting outside the wistaria gate in the Street of the Misty Valley.

"He say Mr. Philip Ware stay here," he announced, "but house is ownerships of his friend, Mr. Daunt, of America embassy. He regret sadly that no one are not at home."

Ware reflected. Daunt's house? He lived in the embassy compound—so they had said at dinner last night. Why should he maintain this native house in another quarter of Tokyo? There came to his mind that hackneyed phrase "the custom of the country," the foreigner's specious justification of the modern "Madame Butterfly." In this interminable city, with its labyrinthine mazes, who could tell what this or that gray roof might shelter? Was this a nook enisled, for pretty Japanese romances "under the rose?" He had loaned it to Phil—they were friends.

Ware struck his stick hard against the hedge. He scarcely knew what thought had entered his mind, so nebulous was it, so indefinable. If he had thought to use this discovery, he knew no way; if it was Daunt's covert, here was Phil in possession.

"Ask him if he has any idea where he is."

The guide translated. The servant was ignobly unacquainted as yet, with the donna-San's illustrious habits. He arrogantly presumed to suggest that he might augustly be in any one of a hundred esteemed spots.

Ware thought a moment frowningly. "Tell him I am Ware-San's brother," he said then, "and that I have just arrived in Tokyo. I shall wait in the house till he comes."

The old man bowed profoundly at the statement of the relationship. He spoke at some length to the guide. The latter looked at Ware questioningly but hesitated.

"Well?" asked the other tartly.

"He thinks better please you wait to the hotel."

Ware struck open the gate with a flare of irritation. "You can go now," he said to the guide, and disdaining the servant, strode along the gravel path to the house entrance.

The old man looked after him with an enigmatic Japanese smile. It was not his fault if the foreigners (the kappa devour them!) ate dead beasts and were all quite mad! He tucked up his kimono, stacked his gardening tools neatly under the hedge, and betook himself across the street for a smoke and a game of Go with the neighbor's betto.

Under the trailing vine Ware slid back the shoji and entered the house.

As he stood looking at the interior his lip curled. He hated the cheapness and vulgarity to which Phil turned with instinctive liking, and he had long ago come thoroughly to despise his younger brother and to relish the whip hand which the law, with its guardianship, gave him. The place fitted Phil, from the cigarette odor to the loud photograph in the dragon frame and the partly open wall closet with its significant array of bottles. It expressed his idea of "a good time!"

He slid open a shikiri. It showed a room, evidently unused, littered with tools, a dusty table with models of curious wing-like propellors, a small electric dynamo and a steel lathe. He opened another and stood looking at the room it disclosed with a faint smile. It was scrupulously clean and orderly, and, in contrast to the outer apartment, had an atmosphere of delicate refinement. On the wall hung a tiny gilt image of Kwan-on and below it on an improvised shelf an incense rod was burning with a clean, pungent odor. At one side was suspended a mosquito bar of dark green gauze, and across a low stool was laid a kimono, with silver camellias on a mauve ground. He picked this up and looked at it curiously, half conscious of a faint perfume that clung to it.

He shut his teeth. The camellia had always been Barbara's favorite flower!

Meanwhile the girl thus incongruously in his thought had felt a gray shadow across her sunshine. She found her uncle greatly perplexed and troubled. Haru's bible, found on the chapel doorstep, had been brought to him that morning. He had sent at once to the Street of Prayer to the Gods and the messenger had returned with news of her disappearance. The fact that she had taken clothing with her showed that the flight was a deliberate one.

It pained him to think what the return of the book and the little cross might mean. In his long residence in Japan the bishop had grown accustomed to strange denouements, to flashing denouements, to flashing revelations of subtle deeps in oriental character. But save for one instance of many years ago—which the sight of Barbara must always recall to him—he had never been more saddened than by today's disclosure. What he told her had left Barbara with an uneasy apprehension. She drove away pondering. The anxious speculation blurred the glamour of the afternoon.

Suddenly Barbara rose to her feet in the carriage. She had seen a girl emerge from a small temple and turn into a side street.

"Fast! Drive fast, Taka," she called quickly. "The street to the left!" He obeyed, but a saba-ya had halted his shining copper cart of steaming buckwheat and momentarily delayed them.

The hastening figure was farther away when they rounded the turning. Barbara clasped her hands together. "It was Haru. It was Haru I am sure!" she whispered.

The girl slipped through a gateway hung with wistaria. As Barbara sprang to the ground she was hurrying through the garden.

"Haru!" But the flying figure did not seem to hear the call.

Barbara ran quickly after her along the gravel path.

In the house, Austen Ware, standing with the kimono in his hands, had heard the rumble of carriage wheels. He had left the outer shoji open, and through the aperture he saw the slim form hastening toward the doorway. An exclamation broke from his lips. Behind her, just entering the gate, was Barbara.

For a breath he stared. A cool, thriving suspicion—one bred of his anger and humiliation, that shamed his manhood—ran through him. Barbara there? Was it another rendezvous, then? The fierce, self-dishonoring doubt merged into the mad jealousy that already burned him like a brand.

He dropped the kimono, drew back the shikiri of the unused apartment and stepped inside.

Swiftly and noiselessly the light partition slipped into place behind him.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

The Japanese Characters.

Through the thin paper pane, parted by his moistened fingers, Ware's hot, hollow eyes saw the Japanese girl come into the room. She had not waited to shut the shoji behind her. She drew quick sobbing breaths and her eyes had the desperate look of a hunted animal. She ran into the sleeping apartment and closed its shikiri.

Barbara had halted at the doorway. As she stood looking in, her eyes fell on the mauve kimono with its silver camellias. It was the robe Haru had worn the first evening she came to her. If she had doubted, all doubt was now gone. An instant she hesitated, then, with sudden resolution, knocked on the grill and stepped across the threshold.

A man who watched could not solve the puzzle, but in that instant the sick suspicion he had harbored became a cold and lifeless thing in his breast. A sense of shame rushed through him as he saw her gaze wander about the interior with its veneer of the foreign; to the disordered desk—the lounge and its litter of books—the photographs on the wall—the open panel with its champagne bottles. In her glance distaste had grown to a quick question. The coarse suggestions of the place were welling over her. Whose house was this? Had Haru seen her and was she hiding from her?

Suddenly she saw the man's cap and gauntlet in the corner. Her cheeks rushed into flame. She seemed to see Haru's innocent face smiling at her over the throbbing samisen. All at once she took an abrupt step forward. She was looking at the round glass lantern just outside the doorway, painted with Japanese characters.

She chilled as if ether had been poured in her veins. The name they stood for—Daunt—had been her first lesson in Japanese—which Haru had taught her! She snatched up one of the volumes from a chair. It was Lillienthal's Conquest of the Air. She opened it to the title page.

Ware, watching, saw with surprise that she was trembling violently. She had grown pale to the lips. The book slipped from her fingers and crashed on the tatame. It lay there, open as she had held it, and he saw what was written across the white leaf. It was Daunt's name.

His thought leaped as if at the flick of a lash. Daunt's book! What was she thinking? The piteous pallor that swept her face like an icy wave answered him. Why she was there—her interest in this Japanese girl who fled from her—he could not guess. But it was clear that she had not known the house was Daunt's, and that with the knowledge, she was face to face with what must seem a damning complicity. Perhaps some hint of this retreat had come to her—he knew how gossip feathered its shafts!—some covert allusion, some laughing ouidire, to which her coming had now given such verity. Phil was the deus ex machina of the situation. His Japanese amour she was now laying at Daunt's door! All this flashed through his mind in an instant. He watched her intently.

Over Barbara was sweeping a hideous chaos of mocking voices, bits of recollection barbed with agony. The little house near Aoyama parade ground—the carriage had passed the great empty plaza a few moments ago—that he had kept from "sentiment!" The house she had asked him to show her, when he had evaded the request. And Haru! A feeling of physical anguish like that of death came to her; a dull pain was in her temples and the floor seemed to be rising up with her toward the ceiling. Daunt? He whose lips had lain on hers, whose letter was in her bosom—it burned her flesh now like a live coal! "There has never been another woman to me, Barbara. There never will be!" The words seemed to launch themselves from the air, stinging like fiery javelins.

Behind the shikiri a weird, malevolent clamor was shouting through Ware's brain. He stood alone with his temptation. What had he to do with Daunt, or with her belief in him? She had accepted his own advances, beckoned him half around the world—for what? To discard him for this man whom she had known but a handful of days! Chance had arranged this mise en scene. Was he to tell her the truth—and lose her? The key to the situation was in his hand. He had only to keep silence!

At that moment he felt crumble down in some crude gulf within the fabric of his self-esteem—the high-built structure of years. Something colder, formless and malignant, came to sit on its riven foundations. A savage elation grew in him.

Suddenly a shikiri was flung aside. Haru stood there, her face deathly pale, her hands wrenching and tearing at her sleeves. She laughed, a high, gasping, unnatural treble.

"So-o-o, Ojo-San! You come make visiting-ne?" The shrill voice rang through the silent room. "My new house now, an' mos' bes' master. No more Christian! My bad—oh, ve-ree bad Japan girl!" With another peal of laughter she pointed to the knot of her obi. It was tied in front.

Barbara ran down the garden path as if pursued. She stepped into the carriage blindly. The Fox Woman! Votary of the Fox God, at whose candle-lighted shrine she had refused tribute!

This, then, was the end. It came to her like the striking of a great bell. Tomorrow the streets would lie as vivid in the sunlight, the buglers would march as blithely, the bent pines would wave, the lotos pads in the moat glisten, the gorgeous geisha flash by; she alone would know that the sun had died in the blue heaven!

"Home, Taka," she said, and leaned back and closed her eyes.

Behind her Haru's laughter had broken suddenly. She rushed into the little sleeping room and threw herself on the tatame before the tiny image of Kwan-on, in a wild burst of sobbing.

Ware opened the shikiri softly and with noiseless step, passed out of the house.

CHAPTER XXXV.

The Lady of the Many Colored Fires.

The spacious residence of the Minister of Marine that night was a maze of light. All social Tokyo would be at the ball in honor of the admiral and officers of the visiting squadron.

It was late when Daunt turned his steps thither through the fragrant evening. The deciphering of a voluminous telegram had kept him at the chancery until eleven.

All that day he had worked with a delicious exhilaration rioting in his pulses. He had not seen Barbara, but her face had seemed always before him—quivering passionate as he had seen it in Ben-ten's cave, hazed with daring softness as it had turned to his on the steps of the railway carriage. There had been moments when some aroma of the spring air made him catch his breath, mindful of the crisp, sweet scent of her hair or the maddening fragrance of her lips.

Daunt had seen many such affairs where the blending of colors and sounds, the scintillant shifting of forms, had been but a maze. Tonight's however, was wound in a glory. All these decorative people, this scented echo of laughter and music, existed only to form a kaleidoscopic setting for the one woman. He went to search for her with his handsome head erect, his shoulders square and a color in his face.

He passed through several rooms, revealing one oriental picture after another. These rooms were filled with the social world of the capital, a gay glimmer of urbanity set off against masses of all the blossoms of spring. In the last room the host stood with the visiting admiral and several ambassadors. He was a perfect type of modern Japanese of affairs, a diplomatist as well as a seasoned admiral. He had been at Annapolis in '75 and his wife was a graduate of Wellesley. He was one of the strongest of the powerful coterie which was shaping the destinies of new Japan. Daunt greeted him and paused to chat a while with his own chief and Mrs. Dandridge.

He entered a veranda where people sat at little tables eating ices frozen in the shape of Fuji, under fairy lamps whose tiny bamboo and paper shades were delicately painted with swords of water and swimming carp. From one group the Baroness Stroloff waved a hand to him, but Barbara was not there. Daunt turned back, threaded the hall and entered the ball room.

There, through the shifting crowd, over flashing uniforms and diamonded tiaras, he saw her. In the clear radiance Barbara stood almost surrounded. Her white satin gown shimmered in the light, which caught like globes of fire in the gold passion flowers with which it was embroidered. A new sense of her beauty poured over him.

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