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## The Kingdom of Slender Swords

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### CHAPTER XLVI. The Alarm.

As the three men listened to the swift, broken story, there was no sound save the rustle of the wind outside, the clack of a night watchman, and the ticking of the clock on the marble mantel. The crouching form, the sodden garments, the passionate intensity of the slim, clenched hands, the fire in the dark eyes—all lent effect to a narrative instinct with terrible truth. The ambassador's knowledge of the colloquial was limited, but he knew enough to grasp the story's main features. It capped the edifice of suspicion and furnished a direful solution of what had been mysterious. Once the admiral's eyes met his, and each knew that the other believed. Terrible as its meaning was—pointing to what black depths of abysmal wickedness—it was true!

The admiral listened with a countenance that might have been carved of metal, but the faces of the others were gray white. Later was to come to both the pathos and meaning of the sacrifice this frail girl had laid on the knees of her country's gods, but for the hour, all else was swallowed up in the horrifying knowledge, struck through with the sharp fact that one of the partners in this devilish enterprise, however expatriate, was of their own nation. To Daunt this was intensified by his own acquaintance with Phil. Memories swept him of that worthless, ribald career—the evil intimacy with Bersonin—the gradual dominance of the bottle, which in the end had betrayed him!

With a singular separateness of vision, he seemed, in lightning like flashes, to see that betrayal; the blind infatuation, the slow enticements, the reckless, intoxicated triumph, the final surrender. He seemed to see Haru, her secret won, running panting through the wind. He saw Phil waking at last from his drunken slumber—to what shame and penalty! He shuddered.

When the secretary entered at the crisp sound of the admiral's bell, he stared at the pallid countenances in the room. The Japanese girl stood trembling, half-supported by the admiral's arm. The latter spoke—in a voice that held no sign of feeling. It was to present the young man to the girl in the most formal and elaborate courtesy.

"The Ojo-San deigns to be for but an hour the guest of my mean abode," he said. "Instruct my karei that in that unworthy interval he may offer her august refreshment and afterward prepare her proper escort and conveyance. Meanwhile, send my aide to me."

The secretary's gleam of astonishment veiled itself under oriental lashes, and a tinge of color warmed the whiteness of Haru's cheek. He bowed to her profoundly. As he deferentially opened the door, she turned back, swayed and sank suddenly prone in a deep, sweeping obeisance.

An instant the admiral stood looking after her. "The petal of a plum blossom," he said, "under the hoof of the swine!"

His manner changed abruptly as the aide entered. He spoke in quick, curt Japanese, in a tone sharp and exact as steel shears snipping through zinc:

"Something has transpired of great moment. There is no time to deal with it by the ordinary channels. It is of the first importance—the first importance—that I reach Yokohama within the hour. You will call up Shimbashi and order a special train with right of way. This admits of no delay! Send for my carriage at once. You will accompany me. We leave in ten minutes." The aide went out quickly while he seated himself at his desk and began to write rapidly.

"Two battleships!" he said suddenly, wheeling in his seat. "With the human lives on them! Perhaps even war between two or more nations! Gods of my ancestors! All this to hang on the loyalty of a mere girl!"

The ambassador, pacing the floor, snapped the lid of his watch. "It

must still be close to two hours of sunrise," he said in an agitated voice. "Surely there is time."

The admiral was consulting an almanac when the aide reentered. "Here is a telegram," he said. "Put it on the wire at once. It must arrive before us." "Excellency," said the aide, "the train is not possible. The service to Yokohama ceased at six o'clock. The rains—there is a washout."

His chief pondered swiftly. "It must be left to others, then. Call up the emergency long distance for Yokohama and give me a clear wire at once to the governor's residence. I must make the telegraphic instructions fuller." He bent over the desk.

Trepidation was on the aide's face when he returned this time.

"Excellency, the accident to the line was the failure of the bridge over the Rokuga-gawa. It carried both the telegraph and telephone conduits. No wire will be working before noon tomorrow."

The admiral half rose. He stretched out his hand, then drew it back.

"The wireless!" exclaimed the ambassador.

The aide's troubled voice replied. Whatever the necessity he knew that it was a crucial one.

"The mast was displaced by today's earthquake," he said. "The system is temporarily useless."

There was a moment of blank silence. The admiral sat staring straight before him. The only sign of agitation was his labored breathing.

"Can a horse get through?"

The other shook his head. "Not under three hours. It would have to be by detour—and there are no relays."

"A motor car?"

"Impossible!" exclaimed the ambassador. "By the long road and in better weather my Mercedes can not do it under eighty minutes."

The admiral lifted himself from his chair. His eyes were bloodshot and on his forehead tiny veins had sprung out in branching clusters of purple.

"In the name of Shaka! Yokohama harbor but a handful of miles away, and cut off utterly? It must be reached! I tell you! It must be reached!" His voice was low pitched, but terrible in its intensity. "Drive to the Naval college and ask for twenty cadets—the swiftest runners—to be sent after you to Shimbashi. A locomotive can take them as far as the river. If there are no sampun, they can swim. Make demand in my authority. Not a minute is to be lost." He put what he had been writing into the aide's hand. "Read this in the carriage. It will serve as instruction."

The aide thrust the paper into his breast and vanished. The admiral looked about him through stiffened, half-closed eyelids. Then, under the stress, it seemed, of a mighty shudder—the very soul of that overwhelming certainty of the peril awaiting the red dawn on that bungalow roof above the Yokohama anchorage—the racial impassivity, the restraint and repression of emotion that long generations of ingrain habit have made second nature to the Japanese, suddenly crumbled. He struck his hand hard against the desk.

"Has not Japan toiled and borne enough, that this shame must come to her?" His deep voice shook. "Your Excellency—Mr. Daunt—in all this land where heroism is hackneyed and sacrifice a fetish, there is no prince or coolie who, to turn aside this peril, would not give his body to the torture. Yet must we sit here helpless as Darumas. If man but had wings!"

Daunt stiffened. He felt his heart beat to his temples. He started to his feet with an exclamation.

"But man has wings!" he cried.

What of the long hours of toil and experiment, the gray mornings on Aoyama parade ground when his Glider had carried him circling above the tree tops? Could he do it? With no other word he darted to the hall. They heard his flying feet on the gravel and a quick command to a betto. The wind tossed back the word into the strained quiet.

"Aoyama!" exclaimed the ambassador, as the hoof beats, lashed to, an anguish of speed, died into silence. "His Glider!"

A sudden hope flashed into the admiral's face.

"The gods of Nippon aid him!" he said.

### CHAPTER XLVII.

#### Whom the Gods Destroy.

There was one whose guilty eyes were closed to the red danger so near. In the house in the Street of the Misty Valley, under the green mosquito netting, Phil lay in a log like slumber. The soft light of the paper andon flowed over the gay wadded fton, the handsome besotted face with its mark of the satyr and, at one side, a little wooden pillow of black lacquer. There was no sound save the sweep of the wind outside and the heavy breathing of the unconscious man.

He was dreaming—yellow dreams like the blackguard fancyings of the half-world—visions in which he moved a Prince a Largesse, through unending pleasures of self-indulgence. He was on an European boulevard, riding with Haru by his side in silk and pearls, and people turned to gaze as he went by.

But now, with sinister topsyturvydom, the dream changed. The cocher drove faster and faster, into a mad gallop. He turned his head and Phil saw that the face under the glazed hat was the face of his dead brother. The staring pedestrians began to pursue the carriage. They showered blow after blow on it, till the sound reverberated like thunder.

Not the ghosts of his dream, but a hand of flesh and blood was knocking. It was on the outer shoji and the frail dwelling shook beneath it. The servant, sunk in bovine sleep, heard no sound, but the chauffeur in the automobile that throbbed outside the wistaria gate, rose from his seat, and across a bamboo wattle a dog barked and scrambled venomously.

Phil's eyes opened and he sat up giddily. He went unsteadily to the door and unfastened the shoji, blinking at the great form that strode past him into the inner apartment.

Bersonin's gaze swept the room. "The girl!" he said hoarsely. "Where is she?"

Phil looked about him dazedly—at the tumbled fton, the deserted wooden pillow. Haru gone? His senses, clouded by intoxication, took in the fact dully, as a thing of no meaning.

The expert grasped him by his shoulder and shook him till the thin silk of the kimono tore under the enormous white fingers. The violence had its effect. The daze fell away. Phil broke into loud imprecations.

"Did you tell her anything?"

Phil's tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. "What is—what makes you think—" he stammered.

Bersonin's face was a greenish hue. His great hands shook.

"Tonight," he said in a whisper, "tonight—an hour ago—I saw her on the street. I wasn't sure at first, but I know now it was she. A naval officer was with her. He took her into the house of the minister of marine!"

The other gave a low cry. A chalky pallor overspread his features. "Haru?—no, Bersonin! You're crazy, I say, she—she would never tell!"

Fury and terror blazed out on the big man's countenance. A sharp moan came from his lips.

"So she did know! You told her then! O, incredible fool!"

For an instant the demon of murder looked from the doctor's eyes. Phil quailed before him. A frenzy of fear twisted his features, he felt the passion that had been his undoing shrivel and fade like a parchment in a flame. His voice rose in a kind of scream:

"Don't look at me like that!" he raved. "I was a fool to trust her, but it's done now. It's done, I tell you, and you can't undo it! What can they do to us? They may find the machine, but what can they prove? We're foreigners! They can't touch us without proof!"

He had no thought now of the millions that were to have been his. All the grandiloquent pictures he had painted of the future had faded in panic. He trembled excessively.

"Proof!" sneered Bersonin savagely. "There would have been none if it happened! I had arranged that! In its operation the machine destroys itself! And neither of us is in Yokohama tonight!"

Phil's ashen face set; his tongue curled round his parched lips. "What is to be done? Can we still—"

"Listen," said the doctor. "A single hour more, even with your cursed folly, and all would have been well, for no trains are running and all wires are down. I heard this afternoon, too, that the wireless is out of order."

"Then—then—they can not—" Phil's voice shook with a nauseous eagerness.

"Wait! When I saw the girl there, I was suspicious. I watched. In a little while your friend Daunt came from the gate. In some way he happened to be there. The betto was flogging the horses like a crazy man. He came in this direction!—Can't you understand? His aeroplane! He is going to use it as a last chance. If he succeeds, we may spend our lives in the copper mines. If he can be stopped, we may win yet! There will be nothing but the tale of a Japanese drab—that and nothing else!"

Phil flung on his clothing in a madness of haste. The desperate dread that had raged in him was become now a single fixed idea, frosted over by a

cold, demented fury. Unhealthy spots of red sprang in his white cheeks; his eyes dilated to the mania of the paranoiac.

Hatless he rushed through the little garden, cleared the rear hedge at a bound, and fled, like a runaway from hell, toward the darkness of the vast parade ground.

### CHAPTER XLVIII.

#### The Laugh.

As Bersonin stood by the wistaria gate beside the pulsing motor, confused thoughts rushed through his mind into an eddying phantasmagoria. The fear and agitation which he had kept under only by an immense self-control returned with double weight.

All was known—thanks to the brainless fool in whom he had relied! The government knew. The wild tale the Japanese girl had told had been believed! Had there been suspicious before? He thought of the espionage he had fancied had been kept of late on his movements, of the silent, saturnine faces he had imagined dogged his footsteps. Even his servants, even Ishida, with his blank visage and fantastic English, might be—

He looked sharply at the chauffeur. He was lighting a cigarette in the hollow of his hand; the ruddy flare of the match lit the brown placid face, the narrow, secret-keeping eyes.

He tried to force his mind to a measure of control, to look the situation in the face.

If Phil failed. If the aeroplane won against darkness and wind—if the bungalow was reached in time, and the machine made harmless. Nothing would happen. Who, then, would believe the girl's wild story? Who could show that he had made it? He had worked at night, alone in his locked laboratory. Besides, it would tell nothing. It would yield its secret only to the master mind. And if its presence on the roof danned anybody, it would not be him. He had not put it there. He had not been in Yokohama in three days!

If the aeroplane did not start—he remembered the look on Phil's face when he rushed away!—or if it failed. With its own deadly ray, the very machine would vanish. Phil had not known this—could not have told. The searchers would find nothing! The news would have flashed along the cables that must roll up for him vast sums in the panic of markets. And there would be nothing to bring the deed home to him!

Nothing? The warning had been given before the fact. The government had taken alarm. Bureaus were buzzing already. Sooner or later the accusation would be running through the street, swiftly and stealthily, from noble to merchant, from coolie to beggar, from end to end of this seething oriental city—wherein he was a marked man! What mattered it whether there were evidence on which a court would condemn him? The story of his huge coup in the bourses would be told—would rise up against him. He remembered suddenly a tale he had heard—of a traitor to Japan cut to pieces in a tea house. An icy sweat broke out on his limbs.

Where was there any refuge? On a foreign ship? There were many in the bay. He longed with a desperate longing for the touch of a deck beneath his feet, a bulwark of blue water between him and possible vengeance. At Kisaraz' on the Chiba road, a dozen miles to the north in the curve of the bay, was his summer villa, his frequent resort for weekend. His naphtha launch lay there, always ready for use. He could reach it in an hour.

"Get into the tonneau," he said to the chauffeur, "I'll drive myself."

He took the wheel the other resigned, threw on the clutch, and the clamorous monster moved off down the quiet lane. Past ranks of darkened shoji, with here and there a barred yellow square; by lanterned tea houses, alight and tinkling, past stolid, pacing watchmen in white duck clothing, and sauntering groups of night-hawk students chanting lugubrious songs—faster and faster, till the chauffeur clutched the seat with uneasiness.

The fever of flight was on his master now. He began to imagine voices were calling after him. From a police box ahead a man stepped into the roadway waving a hand. It was no more than a warning against over-speed, but the gesture sent a thrill of terror through the big man at the wheel. He swerved sharply around a corner, skidding on two wheels.

Bersonin muttered a curse as he peered before him, for the stretch was brilliantly illuminated. He was on the Street of Prayer to the Gods, which tonight seemed strangely alive with hubub.

That afternoon, with the passing of the rain, there had been held a neighborhood hanami, a "flower viewing excursion." A score of families, with picnic paraphernalia, had trooped to the wistaria arbors of far distant Kamiedo, to return in the small hours laden with empty baskets and somnolent babies. Tomorrow, like today, would be a holiday, when school and work alike should be forgotten. The cavalcade had just returned—afoot,

since the trams had ceased running at midnight—the men merry with sake and the women chattering. A few children, still wakeful, scampered here and there.

The chauffeur leaned forward with an exclamation—they had all but run down a hobbling figure.

"Keep your hands off!" snarled Bersonin. "Let them get out of the way!" The automobile dashed on, the people scattering before it.

There was a small figure in the road however, of whom no one took account—a six year old. Ishikichi had not gone to the hanami that day. For many hours that long afternoon, while his mother cared for the sick father, he had beat the tiny drum that soothed a baby's fret, comforted by the promise that he should be waked in the great hour when the crowd came home. Stretched on his worn fton that night, he had puzzled over the situation—the hard blank fact that because they had no money, they must give up the shop, which was the only home he knew. When they took his father away to the byo-in, the sick house, what would his mother and the baby San do? Would they stand, like the kadots'ke, playing a samisen at people's doors? It was not honorably pleasant to be a kadots'ke! Only men could earn money, and it would be so long before he became a man. So he had been pondering when he went to sleep. Now, standing in the road, he heard the hum of the rushing motor, and a quick thought—born of that instinct of sacrifice for the parent, that

is woven, a golden thread, in the wool of the Japanese soul—darted into his baby brain. One of the big fire wagons of the seiyo-jin was coming! When the carriage killed Toru, his playmate, the foreigner had sent much money to Toru's house. He was not sorry any more, because the white-faced man whom he liked, who lived in the temple, had told him what a fine thing it had been. For Toru's honorable father had been fighting with the Gaki, the no-vice devils—it was almost like a war—and Toru had died just as the brave soldiers did in battle. A great purpose flooded the little soul. Was he not brave, too?

So, as Bersonin, with a snarl, shook off the hand of the chauffeur and threw the throttle wide open, Ishikichi did not scamper with the rest. With his hands tightly clenched in his patched kimono, his huge clogs clattering on the roadway, he ran straight into the path of the hurtling mass of steel.

There was a sudden, sickening jolt. The car leaped forward, dragging something beneath it that made no sound. The chauffeur hurled himself across the seat on the gear, and the automobile stopped with a grinding discord of screeching pistons. A surge of people came around it—a wave without outcry, but holding a hushed murmur like the sea. Shoji were opening, doorways filled the streets with light. A man bent and drew something gently from between the wheels.

Continued Next Week.

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