THE KINGDOM OF SLENDER SWORDS

An International Romance by Hallie Erminie Rives

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CHAPTER XLII—Continued.

Suddenly there arose a strange rattling, a groaning of timbers. The bishop ceased reading. People were rising to their feet. The building was shifting, swaying, with a sickening upward vibration, as though it were being trotted on some Brobdingnagian knee. Barbara felt a qualm like the first touch of mal de mer. "Ji-shin! Ji-shin!" rose the cry, and there was a rush for the open air. In another moment she found herself out of doors with the frightened crowd.

It was her first experience of earthquake, and the terror had gripped her bodily. The wet trees were waving to and fro like gigantic fans, and a dull moan like an echo in a subterranean cavern seemed to issue from the very ground. A section of the tiling slid from the chapel roof with a crash. "Rather severe that, for Tokyo," said the bishop at her elbow, where he stood calmly, watch in hand. "Almost two minutes and vertical movement."

"Two minutes!" she gasped. She had thought it twenty.

The nauseating swing had ceased, but in an instant, with a vicious wrench, it began again. "The secondary oscillations," he said. "It will all be over in a * * *."

As he spoke, the air rwelled with a hideous, crunching, grinding roar, like the complaint of a million riven timbers. Across the lane a sinister dust cloud sprang into the air like a monstrous hand with spread fingers. "It is one of the temples!" said the bishop, and hurried with the rest, Barbara following him.

The paved yard was filling with a throng. Agitated priests and acolytes ran hither and thither and slate colored nuns, with shaven heads and pale, frightened faces, peered through the bamboo lattices of the nunnery. The newer temple faced the open space as usual, but across the hedged garden no ornate roof now thrust up its Tartar gables. Instead was a huddle of wreckage, upon which lay the huge roof, crumpled and shattered, like the fragments of a gigantic mushroom. From the tangle projected beam ends, codied about with painted monsters, and here and there in the cluttered debris lay great images of unfamiliar deities. Over all hung a fine yellow dust, choking and penetrating.

What was under those ruins? Barbara shivered. She was quite unconscious of the mud and the pelting rain. The bishop drew her under the temple porch, and they stood together watching the men now working with mattocks, saws and with loose beams for levers, prying up a corner of the fallen roof. It seemed an hour they had stood there, when a priest, bareheaded, his robes caked with mud, came from the clustering crowd. The Bishop questioned him in Japanese. Barbara guessed from his face what the priest had answered! She waited quiveringly.

Through the bishop's mind swift thoughts were passing. He knew by hearsay of the recluses—knew that he was not an Oriental. He had often seen the placard on the little gate: "Maker of Buddas." He had never passed it without a pang. It seemed a satrical derision of the holiest ideal of the west—a type and sign of reversion, a sardonic mockery of the Creed of Christ. He was a priest holding the torch of the true light to this alien people, and here, a dark shadow across its brightness, had stood this derisive denial. Yet now, perhaps, this man stood on the threshold of the hereafter—and he was a man of his own race!

He turned to Barbara. "Wait here for me," he said. "I am going in. I will come back to you as soon as I can."

CHAPTER XLIII.

The Golden Crucifix.

The bishop went quickly through the crowd to a gap under the great gables, where the beams had been sawed through and the rubbish shoveled to one side, making a difficult way into the interior. The enormous span of the roof had sunk sidewise, splitting its supporting beams and bending the walls outward, but its great ridge had remained intact and it now stretched, a squat, ungainly lean-to, over what had been the altar. The space was strew with brasses, fragments of fretted and carven doors, and splintered beneath a mass of tiling lay a great image of Kwan-on. The daylight came dimly in through the chinks in the ruin. The air was close and warm and had a smell of pulverized plaster, of stale incense and rotting wood. A group of priests stood on the altar platform beside a huddle of wadded mats and brocade draperies, on which a man was lying, his open eyes upturned to the painted monsters on the twisted tangle of rafters.

The bishop hesitated, then came close. The man's head turned toward him—for an instant he seemed to shrink into the cushions; then in his eyes, dark with the last shadow, came a swift yearning. He spoke to the priests and they drew back.

"Arthur," he said, "don't you know me?"

A gasping sound came from the leaning bishop. "John! John Fairfax!" he cried, composure dropping from him, and fell on his knees. "After these years!"

The other lifted his hand and touched the bishop's pale, smooth-shaven face.

"I am going, Arthur," he said. "I never intended to speak, though I've seen you often * * * I thought it was best. Did she—did my wife never tell you?"

"Never a word, John! I have never known!" cried the bishop, in a shaken voice.

"It was my fault. All mine! I—never believed as she did, Arthur, and here in the end what was breath and bread to her, to me came to seem all mumbo-jumbo. I had had a hard life, and I wanted comfort for her. Then I found out about the gold lacquer."

He paused to gather the strength that was fast ebbing.

"I got the formula from a crazy priest, and I began in a small way—the usual way, I mean. I had a shop at Saga. At first it was only for the mandarins in the China trade, and * * * no one knew. But the lacquer grew famous, and within a year I was shipping to Rangoon and Tibet. I made all sorts of praying-tackle. Then—then I quarreled with my agent, and—he told my wife. She didn't believe it, but one day * * * he brought her to where I was at work. I was modeling an Atsuta for a temple in Nagasaki!"

He threw an arm across his face and groaned.

"She left me that night. A ship was in the harbor. I * * * never saw her again. I never knew I had a daughter till a week ago! * * * I never knew!"

There was a silence.

"I have seen her. She must never guess, Arthur! She thinks I * * * died in Nagasaki. It's better so. Promise me!"

"I promise, John," said the bishop. "I promise."

The bell of the temple across the inclosure began to strike. "It sounds * * * like the bell of the old Greek church," the failing voice said. "When I left home the priest said I would do nothing good. But—" the grim ghost of a smile touched his lips—"I made * * * good idols, Arthur!" The smile flickered out. "My little girl! My own, own daughter! Don't you * * * think it was cruel, Arthur?"

"Would you like to see her?" asked the bishop. "She is just outside."

The wan face was illuminated. "Yes, yes," he said. "God bless you, Arthur! Bring her—but quickly."

For a few moments there was stillness. The priests whispered together, but approached no nearer. In the other temple, the Bisiki-Fuji, the Buddhist ceremony of Sick-Healing, had begun for the injured man, and the muffled pounding of the mok'gyo came dully into the propped ruins. The dying man's eyes were closed when Barbara knelt down and took his chilling hand between hers.

"It is I," she said softly.

His face was dimming, but he knew her. "I can't see your face much longer," he said, "but I can feel your hands. How long ago it seems * * * our Flower-of-Dream. It bloomed today, my dear."

She was weeping silently. There was a pause, in which the wind droned through the shattered timbers. The dying man's free hand wandered feebly at his side, found a gold-lacquer crucifix, and drew it closer.

"The white cross on the roof. It * * * called me back. He tried to life the garden crucifix. "I've meen * * * making this for a long time. I was outside when the shock came, but I * * * went back to save it. * * * I should like to be * * * in your Chapel, Barbara."

She laid her young cheek against his hand; she could not speak.

Across the silence the bishop's low and broken voice rose in the Prayer for the Sick:

"O most merciful God, who, according to the multitude of Thy mercies, dost so put away the sins of these who truly repent, that Thou remembrest them no more: Open Thine eye of mercy * * * Renew in him, most loving Father * * * Impute not unto him his former sins * * *."

"Are you still there, Barbara?"

"Yes."

"A little longer." Death was heavy on his tongue. "Namu Amida Butsu!" he muttered. "But at the end—the old things—the old faith—"

The tears ran down the bishop's face.

"They are all dead now," came the broken whisper through the circling darkness. "There is no one to forgive me, except—"

"God will forgive you," said the bishop. But the idol-maker did not hear.

CHAPTER XLIV.

"If This is Forgetting.

The sailing master of the yacht Barbara, with his mate and crony, sat in the main saloon, whiling away a tedious hour.

The room bore all the earmarks of "a rich man's plaything." It was tastefully and luxuriously furnished. The upholstery was of dark green brocade, thin Persian prayer-rugs were on the hardwood floor, and electric bulbs in clusters were set in silver sconces, which swung with a long, slow motion as the yacht rocked to the deepening respiration of the sea. At one side a small square table held the remains of a comfortable refection, and by it, on a stand, sat a phonograph with which the two men had been gloomily diverting themselves.

But though the repertoire of the instrument was extended, it had brought little satisfaction tonight. The last irksome fortnight of inactivity had made each selection trite and familiar. Moreover, the captain's spirits were not of the best. The abrupt change of ownership followed hard by the death of the yacht's former master, was a bouleversement that had confused his automatic temperament, and the sight of the double-locked cabin door in the saloon was a daily depressant. He had never seen the yacht's new owner, though she had written him that he might expect her at any time, and the enigma of a future under a woman's orders troubled his sturdy and unimaginative mind.

"Wish to the Lord she'd come, if she's ever coming!" he muttered, as the phonograph ran down with a wheeze. "This is two days I've kept the dinghy lying at the hatchs."

The mate nodded. It was not the first time the remark had been made. "I wonder why she ordered his cabin door kept locked?" he said.

"Papers," returned the captain sapiently. "Wants to seal 'em up for the executor. New owner must be rich, I guess. I'd like to know what she paid for the outfit. First time I ever signed under a new skipper sight unseen!"

"Miss Barbara Fairfax," mused the mate. "Nice name. Curious only one piece of mail should come for her—and second class, too." He picked up a thin package from the table, folded in dark paper. This had been made sodden by the rain; now it parted and a flat, black disk of hard rubber slipped from it and rolled across the floor.

"Blamed if it isn't a phonograph record," he said, as he picked it up. "It's out of the wrapper now—let's try it." He set it in place and newound the spring, and the saloon filled with a chorus of chirps and tinklings from quivering catgut anklets by ivory plectrons.

"Samisen!" said the captain. "I've heard 'em in the tea houses. Give me a fiddle for mine, any day."

The yacht's cabin boy entered. "The dinghy's coming, sir," he said. "Lady and gentleman aboard of her."

The captain got up hastily, put out a hand and stopped the machine. "Take away those dishes, and be quick about it," he ordered. "Mr. Rogers, pipe up the men."

He hurried on deck and watched the bobbing craft approach. Under the rising wind the sea was lifting rapidly and the dinghy buried its nose in the spray. Presently he was giving a helping hand to the visitors at the break in the rail, looking into a pair of brown eyes that he thought were the saddest he had ever seen, and replying to a voice that was saying:

"I am Miss Fairfax, Captain Hart, and this is my uncle, Bishop Randolph."

The train which brought Barbara and the bishop from Tokyo had crawled for miles along what seemed a narrow ribbon laid on a yellow floor. The steady, continuous downpour had flooded the rice fields and the landscape was a waste of turbid freshet, the rivers deep and swollen torrents. At one bridge a small army of workmen were dumping loads of stone about a pier-head and shoring up the track with heavy timbers. The train crossed this at a snail's pace, that inspired anxiety.

"I'm not an engineer," the bishop had said, "but I prophesy this bridge won't be safe tomorrow unless the water falls."

The early daylight dinner at the hotel had been well nigh a silent ceremonial. That day, with the temple solitary, Barbara had gone down into a deeper Valley of Shadow. Just as her longing to go to him in her trouble had seemed to her overwrought, so now her grief was strangely poignant. When she thought of him her mind was a confusion of tremulous half thoughts and new emotions. She could not know that the voice she dimly heard was the call of blood—that she was in the grip of that mighty instinct of filiation which strengthens the life currents of the world.

As she stood at length, with her task, in the cabin whose door had been so long locked, she remembered the story she had heard of the white-robed priests of Kodan Hill, stalking bare-footed across the hot coals. Her soul, she thought, must tread a fiery path on which rested no miracle of painlessness, and which had no end. Above her she could hear the irregular foot falls of the bishop on the tilting deck, and the shrill humming of the wind in the ventilators. It seemed to be mocking her. Before the world she was living a painful pretense. Even her uncle believed her to be grieving for the man whose life had gone out that night at Nikko.

When all had been done and the papers sealed in a portmanteau for delivery to the consul general, Barbara came into the brilliant saloon. The yacht was pitching heavily and she could stand with difficulty. Steadying herself against the table, she saw the empty wrapper addressed to herself. It bore a Nikko postmark. Who could have sent it here? As she stood holding the paper in her hand, the bishop entered.

"Captain Hart thinks we would better stay aboard tonight, Barbara," he said. "There is a nasty sea and we should be sure of a drenching in the dinghy. We have no change of clothing, you know."

"You will be quite comfortable," Miss Fairfax," the captain's voice spoke deferentially from the doorway. "The guest-rooms are always kept ready."

"Very well," she said, a little wearily. "That will be best, no doubt." She held up the torn wrapper. "What was in this, I wonder?"

The captain confessed his indiscretion with embarrassment, and she absolved him with a smile that covered a sharper pang than she had yet felt that evening. For that thin disk had been on the hillside that Nikko night—perhaps had heard the quarrel, had seen that blow, had watched a man crawling, staggering foot by foot, till he collapsed against the frame that held it. By what strange chance had it been sent to her here?

Her uncle bade her good night presently, being an indifferent sailor, and betook himself to bed. The room that had been prepared for her opened into the saloon. She was too restless to retire, and after a time she climbed up the companion-way to the windy deck.

The vaulted sapphire of the sky had been swept clean of cloud and the stars sparkled whitely. Off at one side, a flock of sinister shadows, she could make out the squadron of battleships, and beyond, in a curving line, the twinkling lights of the Bund. Could it ever again be to her that magical shore she had first seen from a ship's deck, with hills which the cherry trees made fairy tapestries of green rose, and mountains creased of purple velvet and veined with gold?

Her love would come back to her only in bitter memories, in painful thoughts that would shame and burn. All else beside, she had been Austen Ware's promised wife. How could she still feel love for the man who had caused his death? Yet—if she must—if she could never tear that image from her breast!

Like the reflection of a camera-obscura, memory painted a sudden picture on the void: she saw herself sitting amid the branches of a tulip tree, while some one sang—a song of wind was humming in the cordage:

"Forgotten you? Well, if forgetting
Be yearning with all my heart,
With a longing, half pain and half rapture,
For the time when we never shall part;
If the wild wish to see you and hear you,
To be held in your arms again—
If this be forgetting, you're right, dear,
And I have forgotten you then."

Great, slow tears gathered in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

CHAPTER XLV.

While the City Slept.

Daunt accompanied his chief that evening to a dinner at the Nobles' club—a "stag," for conventional functions had been discontinued since the royal death had cast a pall over the stay of the squadron. As they drove thither a nearer shadow was over the ambassador's spirits. His thoughts would stray to Barbara and her misfortune, which seemed so deep and irreparable. He had eventually accepted his wife's diagnosis as to Daunt's tenderness, but he had a confidence that his secretary of embassy, though hard hit, would bear no scars. He could not guess all that lay beneath the brave domino Daunt was wearing.

The affair was a late one, with various native divertisements; top spinners, painters whose exquisite brush etchings, done in a few seconds, were given as mementoes to the guests, and jugglers who, utterly without paraphernalia, caused live fowl to appear in impossible places. Toward the close the ambassador found himself seated beside the minister of marine.

"Very clever," he said, as a Chinese pheasant flew out of an inverted opera hat. "I almost believe he could produce my missing dog if he were properly urged."

"Have you lost one?" asked the admiral. "I'm sorry."

The ambassador laughed. "It was really something of a relief," he said, and told the story of the Russian wolf hound which had so curiously disappeared on the evening of Dr. Bersonin's call. "The oddest thing about it," he ended, "is that though the name of the embassy was on his collar, nothing has been heard of him."

The two men chatted for some time on things in general, the conversation veering to the squadron. The ambassador thought the other seemed somewhat distrait. At 2 the affair ended and the carriages drew up to the windy porte-cochere. There was a confidential matter which the ambassador wished to speak of with his host. He had mentioned it, but no fitting opportunity had occurred. At the door the admiral recalled it, suggesting with a quizzical reference to the other's American fondness for late hours that, as his house was on the way, the ambassador stop there, while they had their talk over a cigar. The latter, therefore, departed in the admiral's carriage, and Daunt drove alone to the embassy, directing the coachman to go in a half hour for his chief.

In the last three days Daunt had fought a constant battle. Every feature of that night at Nikko was stamped indelibly on his mind. The passionate resentment, the agony of protest that had come to him at the hall, when he had received the torn fragments of his letter to Barbara, returned in double force, opposing a strange, new sense of shame that his thought should follow her even into the tragic shadow where she now dwelt. Yet—for fancy will not be denied—his brain wound again and again circle the same somber treadmill:

We have done those things which we ought not to have done! He seemed to hear her say it on the dark hillside. Her voice had had that in it which, against his will, had thrilled him. What had she done that she regretted? She had spoken of the day in the cave at Enoshima—had seemed to wish him to believe that she had not then been acting a part. Could anything have happened in that one day's interval so utterly to change her? She had been unhappy, for he had surprised her weeping. What was it she had wished to "confess?" So tonight his gloomy reflections ran—to their submerging wave of self-reproach.

He let himself into the Chancery with his latch-key, to get his evening's mail. A telegram had been laid on his desk. It was a cipher from Washington, and he opened the safe at once and from the inner drawer took out the official code books. He sat down at one of the desks and began the decoding of the text. For a time he worked mechanically—as it were, with but one-half of his brain—tracing each group of figures in the bulky volume, transposing by the secret key, dragging, in the complicated process, sense and coherency from the meaningless digits. Then he sat staring at the result:

"Large short selling today in European bourses and in New York (comma) unexplainable on usual grounds (comma) is creating anxiety (period) Can scarcely be explained except on hypothesis that secret group of dealers have suddenly come into possession of information which leads them to consider the international situation ominous (period) Newspapers in ignorance of anything extraordinary (period) London and Paris evidently puzzled (period) Has situation developed new phases and in your opinion does it contain possible element of danger (period) Hasten reply."

A full five minutes Daunt sat motionless, revolving the matter in all its bearings. An answer must be sent without delay. A part of that answer might be found in the departure of the squadron. The newspapers had announced its receipt of sailing orders, but the news had yet to be verified. The naval minister could give this verification.

He went at once to the stables, where the carriage was about to start for the ambassador. He sprang in. A little later he was at the admiral's official residence and his chief was perusing the message. After a moment's thought the ambassador read it aloud. Daunt had made a move to retire, but the admiral stopped him.

"Pray don't go yet," he said. "There is something I should like to say on this matter, and I count on your discretion, Mr. Daunt, as on his excellency's. Since the American government attaches significance to that peculiar incident, I think no harm can come from an exchange of opinion. It may help us both." He paused a moment, his foot tapping the floor.

"The news contained in that telegram," he continued presently, "for the last two days has caused my government great concern. Your excellency will understand when I say that the particular objects of this attack (if I may so call it) are precisely those securities which would suffer most were Japan's peace or prosperity threatened. There has seemed to be a concurrence in it not purely fortuitous. Back of this selling is no mere opinion—it is too assured for that. Some interest or individual abroad is apparently banking heavily on a belief that Japan is about to enter a period of stress!"

The ambassador spoke for the first time. "Aboard?" he said shrewdly.

The admiral looked at him an instant without speaking. His expression changed swiftly. He rose and went quickly to the telephone in the next room.

"He is talking with the secret service," said Daunt, in a low tone.

In a few moments their host returned. There was something in his face that made the ambassador's keen eye kindle. "The suggestion was most pertinent," he said. "There is one man in Japan who, exclusive of the commercial codes, has sent in the last two days cipher telegrams to New York, London and Berlin."

He took a short turn about the room in some agitation. "Your excellency," he said, stopping short, "I make a confident of you. That man is Dr. Bersonin."

The ambassador started.

"Pray absolve me," said the admiral quickly, "from an apparent indiscretion. Dr. Bersonin is no longer in the Japanese service. His contract expired at noon today. It will not be renewed. As one of my government I speak to you, as the representative of your government, concerning a private individual whose acts are in the purview of us both. The circumstances are extraordinary, but I think the occasion justifies this conversation."

He rang a bell sharply and his private secretary entered. "Bring me," he said in Japanese, "report number eleven of Lieutenant Ishida Hetaro."

When it was brought, he turned to a leaf underscored with red. "Your excellency," he said, "interested me profoundly this evening by the account of the disappearance of your dog. I am going to ask Mr. Daunt—who reads Japanese so fluently—to give a running translation of this."

Daunt took the manuscript—as perfectly executed as an insertion in Uncial Greek—and began to read. As he translated, his breath came more quickly, and the ambassador leaned forward across the table. Yet the words chronicled nothing more than the curious disappearance from the laboratory of a tiny song bird—and a steel pen reel. The close of the narrative drew an exclamation from the ambassador's lips. For it told of feathery sprays of reddish-brown powder on the expert's desk, and he seemed to see himself, his study lamp in his hand, bending over curious whorls of dust on his own piazza.

"May I ask," said the admiral, "whether the episode of the dog suggested to your excellency the possibility that your caller might himself be able to solve the mystery of the animal's disappearance?"

The ambassador's reply came slowly, but with deliberate emphasis:

"It did. The more so, from our previous conversation. In my study I have the model of a Dreadnaught. We were discussing this, and the doctor described the fighting machine of the future—an atomic engine which should utilize some newly discovered law of molecular action, a machine that might be carried in a single hand, to which a battleship would be, as he expressed it, 'mere silly shreds of steel.' He spoke, I thought, with a strange confidence that seemed almost unbalanced. In connection with the conversation, the later incident, I confess, left a deep impression. Yet the idea it suggested was so incredible that I have never spoken of it to any one before."

"Suppose," said the admiral, "that the man we are discussing has actually constructed such a machine. What possible connection can there be between that and a confidence in some near event which will lower Japan's credit in the eyes of the world?"

Before the ambassador replied there was the sound of voices outside—a sudden commotion and a woman's agitated protestations. The secretary came in hurriedly and whispered to the admiral. A door slammed in the hall, there was the sound of a short struggle, and a girl burst into the room. She threw herself at the admiral's feet, panting broken sentences. Her kimono was torn and muddied, her blue-black hair was loosened and her face white and pitifully working.

A man had darted after her—he was the admiral's aide. He grasped her arm. "She has been at the department," he said in English, with a glance at the visitors. "They detained her there, but she got away. They have telephoned a warning that she might attempt to see you."

She struggled against him, her eyes sweeping the circle about her with a passionate entreaty. Suddenly she saw the ambassador. She lifted her face, swollen with crying, to him:

"You—not know me—Haru?" she faltered, "me? Say so!"

"Haru!" he exclaimed. Then, turning to the admiral, "I know the child," he said. "She was companion to one of our house guests till a week ago, when she disappeared from her home."

His host made an exclamation of pity. "It is no-hyp, no doubt," he said, using the word for the strange Japanese brain fever which is akin to madness. "She must be cared for at once." He leaned and spoke soothingly to her.

A spasm seized Haru. She tore herself from the aide's grasp and, falling prone, beat her small fists on the floor. "They will none of them listen! They will none of them listen!" she screamed, in Japanese. "They call it the fever, and they will not hear! And tomorrow it will be too late!" A peal of hysteric laughter shook her, mixed with strangling sobs. "Are all the gods with Bersinon-San?"

At that name the admiral's face changed swiftly. "Leave her with me," he said, "and wait in the ante-room."

"But, excellency—"

The other lifted his hand, and the aide withdrew with the secretary. His two callers had risen, but he stayed them. "We have gone far along the road of confidence tonight," he said in a low tone. "If you are willing, we will go on to the end."

He bent and drew the girl to a sitting posture.

"Tell us," he said gently, "what brought you here."

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, clutched 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 climax of suspicion and furnished a direful solution to 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 clap 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 Oji-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. Meantime, send my nibe 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, swaying 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 silk:

"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 re-entered. "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 6 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 Rokugawa. 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—its swiftest runners—to be sent after you to Shimbashi. A locomotive can take them as far as the river. If there are no sampan, 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 boy. The wind toss'd 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 futon, the handsome besotted face with the 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 of Larfeesse, 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 shewered 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 wisteria 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 futon, 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! Oh, incredible fool!"

For an instant the gleam 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 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 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 wisteria 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 suspicions 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 hands; 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 damned anybody, it would not be him! He had not put it there. He had not been in Yokahama 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 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 teahouse. 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 desperate longing for the touch of a deck beneath his feet, a bulwark of blue water between him and possible vengeance. At Kisarie on the Chiba road, a dozen miles to the north in the curve of the bay, was his summer villa, his frequent resort for week-end. His nagoya 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 banks of darkened shoji, with here and there a barred yellow square; by lanterned tea houses, slight and tinkling, past stolid pacing watchmen in white duck clothing, and straggling groups of nightwalk 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 shoot a man stepped into the roadway waving a hand. It was no more than a warning against overspeed, 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.

(To Be Continued.)