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Chapter 34 - Banzai!

It was curious how the Prince's sudden departure seemed to affect almost every member of the little house party. At first it had been arranged that the Duke, Mr. Haviland, Sir Edward Bransome, and the Prince should leave in the former's car, the Prince's following later with the luggage. Then the Duchess, whose eyes had filled with tears more than once after her whispered conversation with her husband, announced that she, too, must go to town. Lady Grace insisted upon accompanying her, and Penelope reminded them that she was already dressed for travelling and that, in any case, she meant to be one of the party. Before ten o'clock they were all on their way to London.

The Prince sat side by side with Lady Grace, the other two occupants of the car being the Duke himself and Mr. Haviland. No one seemed in the least inclined for conversation. The Duke and Mr. Haviland exchanged a few remarks, but Lady Grace, leaning back in her seat, her features completely obscured by a thick veil, declined to talk to any one. The Prince seemed to be the only one who made any pretence at enjoying the beauty of the spring morning, who seemed even to be aware of the warm west wind, the occasional perfume of the hedgeside violets, and the bluebells which stretched like a carpet in and out of the belts of wood. Lady Grace's eyes, from beneath her veil, scarcely once left his face. Perhaps, she thought, these things were merely allegorical to him. Perhaps his eyes, fixed so steadfastly upon the distant horizon, were not, as it seemed, following the graceful outline of that grove of dark green pine trees, but were indeed searching back into the corners of his life, measuring up the good and evil of it, asking the eternal question--was it worth while?

In the other car, too, silence reigned. Somerfield was the only one who struggled against the general air of depression.

"After all," he remarked to Bransome, "I don't see what we're all so blue about. If Scotland Yard are right, and the Prince is really the guilty person they imagine him, I cannot see what sympathy he deserves. Of course, they look upon this sort of thing more lightly in his own country, but, after all, he was no fool. He knew his risks."

Penelope spoke for the first time since they had left Devenham.

"If you begin to talk like that, Charlie," she said, "I shall ask the Duchess to stop the car and put you down here in the road."

Somerfield laughed, not altogether pleasantly.

"Seven miles from any railway station," he remarked.

Penelope shrugged her shoulders.

"I should not care in the least what happened to you, today or at any other time," she declared.

After that, Somerfield held his peace, and a somewhat strained silence followed. Soon they reached the outskirts of London. Long before midday they slackened speed, after crossing Battersea Bridge, and the two cars drew alongside. They had arranged to separate here, but, curiously enough, no one seemed to care to start the leave-taking.

"You see the time!" the Prince exclaimed. "It is barely eleven o'clock. I want you all, if you will, to come with me for ten minutes only to my house. Tomorrow it will be dismantled. Today I want you each to choose a keepsake from amongst my treasures. There are so many ornaments over here, engravings and bronzes which are called Japanese and which are really only imitations. I want you to have something, if you will, to remember me by, all of you, something which is really the handicraft of my country people."

The Duke looked for a moment doubtful.

"It wants an hour to midday," the Prince said, softly. "There is time."

They reached St. James' Square in a few minutes. There were no signs of disturbance. The door flew open at their approach. The same solemn-faced, quietly moving butler admitted them. The Prince led the way into the room upon the ground floor which he called his library.

"It is a fancy of mine," he said, smiling, "to say goodbye to you all here. You see that there is nothing in this room which is not really the product of Japan. Here I feel, indeed, as though I had crossed the seas and were back under the shadow of my own mountains. Here I feel, indeed, your host, especially as I am going to distribute my treasures."

He took a picture from the wall and turned with it to the Duke.

"Duke," he said, "this engraving is a rude thing, but the hand which guided the steel has been withered for two hundred years, and no other example remains of its cunning. Mr. Haviland," he added, stepping to his writing table, "this lacquered shrine, with its pagoda roof, has been attributed to Kobo-Daishi, and has stood upon the writing table of seven emperors. Sir Edward, this sword, notwithstanding its strange shape and gilded chasing, was wielded with marvellous effect, if history tells the truth, a hundred and thirty years ago by my great-grandfather when he fought his way to the throne. Sir Charles, you are to go into Parliament. Some day you will become a diplomat. Some day, perhaps, you will understand our language. Just now I am afraid," he concluded, "this will seem to you but a bundle of purple velvet and vellum, but it is really a manuscript of great curiosity which comes from the oldest monastery in Asia, the Monastery of Koya-San."

He turned to the Duchess.

"Duchess," he said, "you see that my tapestries have already gone. They left yesterday for Devenham Castle. I hope that you will find a place there where you may hang them. They are a little older than your French ones, and time, as you may remember, has been kind to them. It may interest you to know that they were executed some thirteen hundred and fifty years ago, and are of a design which, alas, we borrowed from the Chinese."

The Prince paused for a moment. All were trying to express their thanks, but no one was wholly successful. He waved their words gently aside.

"Lady Grace," he said, turning to the statuette of Buddha in a corner of the room and taking from its neck a string of strange blue stones, "I will not ask you to wear these, for they have adorned the necks of idols for many centuries, but if you will keep them for my sake, they may remind you sometimes of the color of our skies."

Once more he went to his writing table. From it he lifted, almost reverently, a small bronze figure,--the figure of a woman, strongly built, almost squat, without grace, whose eyes and head and arms reached upwards.

"Miss Penelope," he said, "to you I make my one worthless offering. This statuette has no grace, no shapeliness, according to the canons of your wonderful Western art. Yet for five generations of my family it has been the symbol of our lives. We are not idol worshippers in Japan, yet one by one the men of my race have bent their knee before this figure and have left their homes to fight for the thing which she represents. She is not beautiful, she does not stand for the joys and the great gifts of life, but she represents the country which to us stands side by side with our God, our parents, and our Emperor. Nothing in life has been dearer to me than this, Miss Penelope. To no other person would I part with it."

She took it with a sudden hysterical sob, which seemed to ring out like a strange note upon the unnatural stillness of the room. And then there came a thing which happened before its time. The door was opened. Inspector Jacks came in. With him were Dr. Spencer Whiles and the man who a few days ago had been discharged from St. Thomas' Hospital. Of the very distinguished company who were gathered there, Inspector Jacks took little notice. His eyes lit upon the form of the Prince, and he drew a sigh of relief. The door was closed behind him, and he saw no way by which he could be cheated of his victory. He took a step forward, and the Prince advanced courteously, as though to meet him. The others, for those few seconds, seemed as though they had lost the power of speech or movement. Then before a word could be uttered by either the Inspector or the Prince, the door was opened from the outside, and a man came running in,--a man dressed in a shabby blue serge suit, dark and thin. He ran past the Inspector and his companions, and he fell on his knees before his master.

"I confess!" he cried. "It was I who climbed on to the railway car! It was I who stabbed the American man in the tunnel and robbed him of his papers! The others are innocent. Marki, who brought the car for me, knew nothing. Those who saw me return to this house knew nothing. No man was my confidant. I alone am guilty! I thought they could not discover the truth, but they have hunted me down. He is there--the doctor who bandaged my knee. I told him that it was a bicycle accident. Listen! It was I who killed the young American Vanderpole. I followed him from the Savoy Hotel. I dressed myself in the likeness of my master, and I entered his taxi as a pleasant jest. Then I strangled him and I robbed him too! He saw me--that man!" Soto cried, pointing to the youth who stood at the Inspector's left hand. "He was on his bicycle. He skidded and fell through watching me. I told my master that I was in trouble, and he has tried to shield me, but he did not know the truth. If he had, he would have given me over as I give myself now. What I did I did because I love Japan and because I hate America!"

His speech ended in a fit of breathlessness. He lay there, gasping. The doctor bent forward, looking at him first in perplexity and afterwards in amazement. Then very slowly, and with the remnants of doubt still in his tone, he answered Inspector Jacks' unspoken question.

"He is the image of the man who came to me that night," he declared. "He is wearing the same clothes, too."

"What do you say?" the Inspector whispered hoarsely to the youth on his other side. "Don't hurry. Look at him carefully."

The young man hesitated.

"He is the same height and figure as the man I saw enter the taxi," he said. "I believe that it is he."

Inspector Jacks stepped forward, but the Prince held out his hand.

"Wait!" he ordered, and his voice was sterner than any there had ever heard him use. There was a fire in his eyes from which the man at his feet appeared to shrink.

"Soto," the Prince said, and he spoke in his own language, so that no person in that room understood him save the one whom he addressed,--"why have you done this?"

The man lay there, resting now upon his side, and supporting himself by the palm of his right hand. His upturned face seemed to have in it all the passionate pleading of a dumb animal.

"Illustrious Prince," he answered, speaking also in his own tongue, "I did it for Japan! Who are you to blame me, who have offered his own life so freely? I have no weight in the world. For you the future is big. You will go back to Japan, you will sit at the right hand of the emperor. You will tell him of the follies and the wisdom of these strange countries. You will guide him in difficulties. Your hand will be upon his as he writes across the sheets of time, for the glory of the Motherland. Banzai, illustrious Prince! I, too, am of the immortals!"

He suddenly collapsed. The doctor bent over him, but the Prince shook his head slowly.

"It is useless," he said. "The man has confessed his crime. He has told me the whole truth. He has taken poison."

Lady Grace began to cry softly. The air of the room seemed heavy with pent-up emotions. The Prince moved slowly toward the door and threw it open. He turned towards them all.

"Will you leave me?" he asked. "I wish to be alone."

His eyes were like the eyes of a blind man.

One by one they left the room, Inspector Jacks amongst them. The only person who spoke, even in the hall, was the Inspector.

"It was the Prince who brought the doctor here," he muttered. "He must have known! At least he must have known!"

Mr. Haviland touched him on the arm.

"Inspector Jacks!" he whispered.

Inspector Jacks saluted.

"The murderer is dead," he continued, speaking still under his breath. "Silence is a wonderful gift, Mr. Jacks. Sometimes its reward is greater even than the reward of

action."

They passed from the house, and once more its air of deep silence was unbroken. The Prince stood in the middle of that strange room, whose furnishings and atmosphere seemed, indeed, so marvellously reminiscent of some far distant land. He looked down upon the now lifeless figure, raised the still, white fingers in his for a moment, and laid them reverently down. Then his head went upward, and his eyes seemed to be seeking the heavens.

"So do the great die," he murmured. "Already the Gods of our fathers are calling you Soto the Faithful. Banzai!"