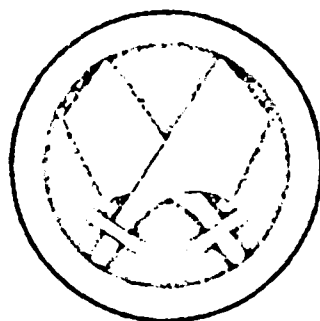


MUSASHI

By Eiji Yoshikawa

Translated from the Japanese by Charles S. Terry

Foreword by Edwin O. Reischauer



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Foreword

by Edwin O. Reischauer*

Musashi might well be called the *Gone with the Wind* of Japan. Written by Eiji Yoshikawa (1892-1962), one of Japan's most prolific and best-loved popular writers, it is a long historical novel, which first appeared in serialized form between 1935 and 1939 in the *Asahi Shimbun*, Japan's largest and most prestigious newspaper. It has been published in book form no less than fourteen times, most recently in four volumes of the 53-volume complete works of Yoshikawa issued by Kodansha. It has been produced as a film some seven times, has been repeatedly presented on the stage, and has often been made into television mini-series on at least three nationwide networks.

Miyamoto Musashi was an actual historical person, but through Yoshikawa's novel he and the other main characters of the book have become part of Japan's living folklore. They are so familiar to the public that people will frequently be compared to them as personalities everyone knows. This gives the novel an added interest to the foreign reader. It not only provides a romanticized slice of Japanese history, but gives a view of how the Japanese see their past and themselves. But basically the novel will be enjoyed as a dashing tale of swashbuckling adventure and a subdued story of love, Japanese style.

Comparisons with James Clavell's *Shōgun* seem inevitable, because for most Americans today *Shōgun*, as a book and a television mini-series, vies with samurai movies as their chief source of knowledge about Japan's past. The two novels concern the same period of history. *Shōgun*, which takes place in the year 1600, ends with Lord Toranaga, who is the historical Tokugawa Ieyasu, soon to be the Shōgun, or military dictator of Japan, setting off for the fateful battle of Sekigahara. Yoshikawa's story begins with the youthful Takezō, later to be renamed Miyamoto Musashi, lying wounded among the corpses of the defeated army on that battlefield.

With the exception of Blackthorne, the historical Will Adams, *Shōgun* deals largely with the great lords and ladies of Japan, who appear in thin disguise under names Clavell has devised for them. *Musashi*, while mentioning many great historical figures under their true names, tells about a broader range of Japanese and particularly about the rather extensive group who lived on the ill-defined borderline between the hereditary military aristocracy and the

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commoners—the peasants, tradesmen and artisans. Clavell freely distorts historical fact to fit his tale and inserts a Western-type love story that not only flagrantly flouts history but is quite unimaginable in the Japan of that time. Yoshikawa remains true to history or at least to historical tradition, and his love story, which runs as a background theme in minor scale throughout the book, is very authentically Japanese.

Yoshikawa, of course, has enriched his account with much imaginative detail. There are enough strange coincidences and deeds of derring-do to delight the heart of any lover of adventure stories. But he sticks faithfully to such facts of history as are known. Not only Musashi himself but many of the other people who figure prominently in the story are real historical individuals. For example, Takuan, who serves as a guiding light and mentor to the youthful Musashi, was a famous Zen monk, calligrapher, painter, poet and tea master of the time, who became the youngest abbot of the Daitokuji in Kyoto in 1609 and later founded a major monastery in Edo, but is best remembered today for having left his name to a popular Japanese pickle.

The historical Miyamoto Musashi, who may have been born in 1584 and died in 1645, was like his father a master swordsman and became known for his use of two swords. He was an ardent cultivator of self-discipline as the key to martial skills and the author of a famous work on swordsmanship, the *Go no sho*. He probably took part as a youth in the battle of Sekigahara, and he clashed with the Yoshioka school of swordsmanship in Kyoto, the warrior monks of the Hōzōin in Nara and the famed swordsman Sasaki Kojirō, all of which figure prominently in this book, actually did take place. Yoshikawa's account of him ends in 1612, when he was still a young man of about 28, but subsequently he may have fought on the losing side at the siege of Osaka castle in 1614 and participated in 1637-38 in the annihilation of the Christian peasantry of Shimabara in the western island of Kyushu, an event which marked the extirpation of that religion from Japan for the next two centuries and helped seal Japan off from the rest of the world.

Ironically, Musashi in 1640 became a retainer of the Hosokawa lords of Kumamoto, who, when they had been the lords of Kumamoto, had been the patrons of his chief rival, Sasaki Kojirō. The Hosokawas bring us back to *Shogun*, because it was the older Hosokawa, Tadaoki, who figures quite unjustifiably as one of the main villains of that novel, and it was Tadaoki's exemplar Christian wife, Gracia, who is pictured without a shred of plausibility as Blackthorne's great love, Mariko.

The time of Musashi's life was a period of great transition in Japan. After a century of incessant warfare among petty daimyō, or feudal lords, three successive leaders had finally reunified the country through conquest. Oda Nobunaga had started the process but, before completing it, had been killed by a treacherous vassal in 1582. His ablest general, Hideyoshi, risen from the rank of common foot soldier, completed the unification of the nation but died in 1598 before he could consolidate control in behalf of his infant heir. Hideyoshi's strongest vassal, Tokugawa Ieyasu, a great daimyō who ruled much of eastern Japan from his castle at Edo, the modern Tokyo, then won supreme

acy by defeating a coalition of western daimyō at Sekigahara in 1600. Three years later he took the traditional title of Shōgun, signifying his military dictatorship over the whole land, theoretically in behalf of the ancient but impotent imperial line in Kyoto. Ieyasu in 1605 transferred the position of Shōgun to his son, Hidetada, but remained in actual control himself until he had destroyed the supporters of Hideyoshi's heir in sieges of Osaka castle in 1614 and 1615.

The first three Tokugawa rulers established such firm control over Japan that their rule was to last more than two and a half centuries, until it finally collapsed in 1868 in the tumultuous aftermath of the reopening of Japan to contact with the West a decade and a half earlier. The Tokugawa ruled through semi-autonomous hereditary daimyō, who numbered around 265 at the end of the period, and the daimyō in turn controlled their fiefs through their hereditary samurai retainers. The transition from constant warfare to a closely regulated peace brought the drawing of sharp class lines between the samurai, who had the privilege of wearing two swords and bearing family names, and the commoners, who though including well-to-do merchants and land owners, were in theory denied all arms and the honor of using family names.

During the years of which Yoshikawa writes, however, these class divisions were not yet sharply defined. All localities had their residue of peasant fighting men, and the country was overrun by rōnin, or masterless samurai, who were largely the remnants of the armies of the daimyō who had lost their domains as the result of the battle of Sekigahara or in earlier wars. It took a generation or two before society was fully sorted out into the strict class divisions of the Tokugawa system, and in the meantime there was considerable social ferment and mobility.

Another great transition in early seventeenth century Japan was in the nature of leadership. With peace restored and major warfare at an end, the dominant warrior class found that military prowess was less essential to successful rule than administrative talents. The samurai class started a slow transformation from being warriors of the gun and sword to being bureaucrats of the writing brush and paper. Disciplined self-control and education in a society at peace was becoming more important than skill in warfare. The Western reader may be surprised to see how widespread literacy already was at the beginning of the seventeenth century and at the constant references the Japanese made to Chinese history and literature, much as Northern Europeans of the same time continually referred to the traditions of ancient Greece and Rome.

A third major transition in the Japan of Musashi's time was in weaponry. In the second half of the sixteenth century matchlock muskets, recently introduced by the Portuguese, had become the decisive weapons of the battlefield, but in a land at peace the samurai could turn their backs on distasteful firearms and resume their traditional love affair with the sword. Schools of swordsmanship flourished. However, as the chance to use swords in actual combat diminished, martial skills were gradually becoming martial arts, and these increasingly came to emphasize the importance of inner self-control and

the character-building qualities of swordsmanship rather than its untested military efficacy. A whole mystique of the sword grew up, which was more akin to philosophy than to warfare.

Yoshikawa's account of Musashi's early life illustrates all these changes going on in Japan. He was himself a typical rōnin from a mountain village and became a settled samurai retainer only late in life. He was the founder of a school of swordsmanship. Most important, he gradually transformed himself from an instinctive fighter into a man who fanatically pursued the goals of Zen-like self-discipline, complete inner mastery over oneself, and a sense of oneness with surrounding nature. Although in his early years lethal contests reminiscent of the tournaments of medieval Europe, were still possible, Yoshikawa portrays Musashi as consciously turning his martial skills from service in warfare to a means of character building for a time of peace. Martial skills, spiritual self-discipline and aesthetic sensitivity became merged into a single indistinguishable whole. This picture of Musashi may not be far from the historical truth. Musashi is known to have been a skilled painter and accomplished sculptor as well as a swordsman.

The Japan of the early seventeenth century which Musashi typified has lived on strongly in the Japanese consciousness. The long and relatively stable rule of the Tokugawa preserved much of its forms and spirit, though in somewhat ossified form, until the middle of the nineteenth century, not much more than a century ago. Yoshikawa himself was a son of a former samurai who failed like most members of his class to make a successful economic transition to the new age. Though the samurai themselves largely sank into obscurity in the new Japan, most of the new leaders were drawn from this feudal class, and its ethos was popularized through the new compulsory education system to become the spiritual background and ethics of the whole Japanese nation. Novels like *Musashi* and the films and plays derived from them aided in the process.

The time of Musashi is as close and real to the modern Japanese as is the Civil War to Americans. Thus the comparison to *Gone with the Wind* is by no means far-fetched. The age of the samurai is still very much alive in Japanese minds. Contrary to the picture of the modern Japanese as merely group oriented "economic animals," many Japanese prefer to see themselves as fiercely individualistic, high-principled, self-disciplined and aesthetically sensitive modern-day Musashis. Both pictures have some validity, illustrating the complexity of the Japanese soul behind the seemingly bland and uniform exterior.

Musashi is very different from the highly psychological and often neurotic novels that have been the mainstay of translations of modern Japanese literature into English. But it is nevertheless fully in the mainstream of traditional Japanese fiction and popular Japanese thought. Its episodic presentation is not merely the result of its original appearance as a newspaper serial but is a favorite technique dating back to the beginnings of Japanese storytelling. The romanticized view of the noble swordsman is a stereotype of the feudal past enshrined in hundreds of other stories and samurai movies. Its emphasis on the cultivation of self-control and inner personal strength through auster-

Zen-like self-discipline is a major feature of Japanese personality today. So also is the pervading love of nature and sense of closeness to it. *Musashi* is not just a great adventure story. Beyond that, it gives both a glimpse into Japanese history and a view into the idealized self-image of the contemporary Japanese.

January 1981

Book I



EARTH

The Little Bell

Takezō lay among the corpses. There were thousands of them.

"The whole world's gone crazy," he thought dimly. "A man might as well be a dead leaf, floating in the autumn breeze."

He himself looked like one of the lifeless bodies surrounding him. He tried to raise his head, but could only lift it a few inches from the ground. He couldn't remember ever feeling so weak. "How long have I been here?" he wondered.

Flies came buzzing around his head. He wanted to brush them away, but couldn't even muster the energy to raise his arm. It was stiff, almost brittle, like the rest of his body. "I must've been out for quite a while," he thought, wiggling one finger at a time. Little did he know he was wounded, with two bullets lodged firmly in his thigh.

Low, dark clouds shifted ominously across the sky. The night before, sometime between midnight and dawn, a blinding rain had drenched the plain of Sekigahara. It was now past noon on the fifteenth of the ninth month of 1600. Though the typhoon had passed, now and then fresh torrents of rain would fall on the corpses and onto Takezō's upturned face. Each time it came, he'd open and close his mouth like a fish, trying to drink in the droplets. "It's like the water they wipe a dying man's lips with," he reflected, savoring each bit of moisture. His head was numb, his thoughts the fleeting shadows of delirium.

His side had lost. He knew that much. Kobayakawa Hideaki, supposedly an ally, had been secretly in league with the Eastern Army, and when he turned on Ishida Mitsunari's troops at twilight, the tide of battle turned too. He then attacked the armies of other commanders—Ukita, Shimazu and Konishi—and the collapse of the Western Army was complete. In only half a day's fighting, the question of who would henceforth rule the country was settled. It was Tokugawa Ieyasu, the powerful Edo daimyō.

Images of his sister and the old villagers floated before his eyes. "I'm dy-

ing," he thought without a tinge of sadness. "Is this what it's really like?" He felt drawn to the peace of death, like a child mesmerized by a flame.

Suddenly one of the nearby corpses raised its head. "Takezō."

The images of his mind ceased. As if awakened from the dead, he turned his head toward the sound. The voice, he was sure, was that of his best friend. With all his strength he raised himself slightly, squeezing out a whisper barely audible above the pelting rain. "Matahachi, is that you?" Then he collapsed, lay still and listened.

"Takezō! Are you really alive?"

"Yes, alive!" he shouted in a sudden outburst of bravado. "And you? You'd better not die either. Don't you dare!" His eyes were wide open now, and a smile played faintly about his lips.

"Not me! No, sir." Gasping for breath, crawling on his elbows and dragging his legs stiffly behind him, Matahachi inched his way toward his friend. He made a grab for Takezō's hand but only caught his small finger with his own. As childhood friends they'd often sealed promises with this gesture. He came closer and gripped the whole hand.

"I can't believe you're all right too! We must be the only survivors."

"Don't speak too soon. I haven't tried to get up yet."

"I'll help you. Let's get out of here!"

Suddenly Takezō pulled Matahachi to the ground and growled, "Play dead! More trouble coming!"

The ground began to rumble like a caldron. Peeking through their arms, they watched the approaching whirlwind close in on them. Then they were nearer, lines of jet-black horsemen hurtling directly toward them.

"The bastards! They're back!" exclaimed Matahachi, raising his knee as if preparing for a sprint. Takezō seized his ankle, nearly breaking it, and yanked him to the ground.

In a moment the horses were flying past them—hundreds of muddy lethal hooves galloping in formation, riding roughshod over the fallen samurai. Battle cries on their lips, their armor and weapons clinking and clanking, the riders came on and on.

Matahachi lay on his stomach, eyes closed, hoping against hope they would not be trampled, but Takezō stared unblinkingly upward. The horses passed so close they could smell their sweat. Then it was over.

Miraculously they were uninjured and undetected, and for several minutes both remained silent in disbelief.

"Saved again!" exclaimed Takezō, reaching his hand out to Matahachi. Still hugging the ground, Matahachi slowly turned his head to show a broad, slightly trembling grin. "Somebody's on our side, that's for sure," he said huskily.

The two friends helped each other, with great difficulty, to their feet. Slowly they made their way across the battlefield to the safety of the wooded hills, hobbling along with arms around each other's shoulders. There they collapsed but after a rest began foraging for food. For two days they subsisted on wild chestnuts and edible leaves in the sodden hollows of Mount Ibuki. This kept

them from starving, but Takezō's stomach ached and Matahachi's bowels tormented him. No food could fill him, no drink quench his thirst, but even he felt his strength returning bit by bit.

The storm on the fifteenth marked the end of the fall typhoons. Now, only two nights later, a cold white moon glared grimly down from a cloudless sky.

They both knew how dangerous it was to be on the road in the glaring moonlight, their shadows looming like silhouette targets in clear view of any patrols searching for stragglers. The decision to risk it had been Takezō's. With Matahachi in such misery, saying he'd rather be captured than continue trying to walk, there really didn't seem to be much choice. They had to move on, but it was also clear that they had to find a place to lie low and rest. They made their way slowly in what they thought was the direction of the small town of Tarui.

"Can you make it?" Takezō asked repeatedly. He held his friend's arm around his own shoulder to help him along. "Are you all right?" It was the labored breathing that worried him. "You want to rest?"

"I'm all right." Matahachi tried to sound brave, but his face was paler than the moon above them. Even with his lance for a walking stick, he could barely put one foot in front of the other.

He'd been apologizing abjectly over and over. "I'm sorry, Takezō. I know it's me who's slowing us down. I'm really sorry."

The first few times Takezō had simply brushed this off with "Forget it." Eventually, when they stopped to rest, he turned to his friend and burst out, "Look, I'm the one who should be apologizing. I'm the one who got you into this in the first place, remember? Remember how I told you my plan, how I was finally going to do something that would really have impressed my father? I've never been able to stand the fact that to his dying day he was sure I'd never amount to anything. I was going to show him! Ha!"

Takezō's father, Munisai, had once served under Lord Shimmen of Iga. As soon as Takezō heard that Ishida Mitsunari was raising an army, he was convinced that the chance of a lifetime had finally arrived. His father had been a samurai. Wasn't it only natural that he would be made one too? He ached to enter the fray, to prove his mettle, to have word spread like wildfire through the village that he had decapitated an enemy general. He had wanted desperately to prove he was somebody to be reckoned with, to be respected—not just the village troublemaker.

Takezō reminded Matahachi of all this, and Matahachi nodded. "I know. I know. But I felt the same way. It wasn't just you."

Takezō went on: "I wanted you to come with me because we've always done everything together. But didn't your mother carry on something awful! Yelling and telling everybody I was crazy and no good! And your fiancée Otsū, and my sister and everybody else crying and saying village boys should stay in the village. Oh, maybe they had their reasons. We are both only sons, and if we get ourselves killed there's no one else to carry on the family names. But who cares? Is that any way to live?"

They had slipped out of the village unnoticed and were convinced that no

further barrier lay between themselves and the honors of battle. When they reached the Shimmen encampment, however, they came face to face with the realities of war. They were told straightaway they would not be made samurai not overnight nor even in a few weeks, no matter who their fathers had been. To Ishida and the other generals, Takezō and Matahachi were a pair of country bumpkins, little more than children who happened to have got their hands on a couple of lances. The best they could wangle was to be allowed to stay on as common foot soldiers. Their responsibilities, if they could be called that, consisted of carrying weapons, rice kettles and other utensils, cutting grass, working on the road gangs and occasionally going out as scouts.

"Samurai, ha!" said Takezō. "What a joke. General's head! I didn't even get near an enemy samurai, let alone a general. Well, at least it's all over. Now what are we going to do? I can't leave you here all alone. If I did, I could never face your mother or Otsū again."

"Takezō, I don't blame you for the mess we're in. It wasn't your fault who's lost. If anybody's to blame, it's that two-faced Kobayakawa. I'd really like to get my hands on him. I'd kill the son of a bitch!"

A couple of hours later they were standing on the edge of a small plain, gazing out over a sea of reedlike miscanthus, battered and broken by the storm. No houses. No lights.

There were lots of corpses here too, lying just as they had fallen. The head of one rested in some tall grass. Another was on its back in a small stream. Still another was entangled grotesquely with a dead horse. The rain had washed the blood away, and in the moonlight the dead flesh looked like fish scales. All around them was the lonely autumn litany of bellrings and crickets.

A stream of tears cleared a white path down Matahachi's grimy face. He heaved the sigh of a very sick man.

"Takezō, if I die, will you take care of Otsū?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I feel like I'm dying."

Takezō snapped, "Well, if that's the way you feel, you probably will." He was exasperated, wishing his friend were stronger, so he could lean on him once in a while, not physically, but for encouragement. "Come on, Matahachi. Don't be such a crybaby."

"My mother has people to look after her, but Otsū's all alone in the world. Always has been. I feel so sorry for her, Takezō. Promise you'll take care of her if I'm not around."

"Get hold of yourself! People don't die from diarrhea. Sooner or later we're going to find a house, and when we do I'll put you to bed and get some medicine for you. Now stop all this blubbering about dying!"

A little farther on, they came to a place where the piles of lifeless bodies made it look as if a whole division had been wiped out. By this time they were callous to the sight of gore. Their glazed eyes took in the scene with cold indifference and they stopped to rest again.

While they were catching their breath, they heard something move among the corpses. Both of them shrank back in fright, instinctively crouching down with their eyes peeled and senses alerted.

The figure made a quick darting movement, like that of a surprised rabbit. As their eyes focused, they saw that whoever it was was squatting close to the ground. Thinking at first it was a stray samurai, they braced themselves for a dangerous encounter, but to their amazement the fierce warrior turned out to be a young girl. She seemed to be about thirteen or fourteen and wore a kimono with rounded sleeves. The narrow obi around her waist, though patched in places, was of gold brocade; there among the corpses she presented a bizarre sight indeed. She looked over and stared at them suspiciously with shrewd catlike eyes.

Takezō and Matahachi were both wondering the same thing: what on earth could bring a young girl to a ghost-ridden, corpse-strewn field in the dead of night?

For a time they both simply stared back at her. Then Takezō said, "Who are you?"

She blinked a couple of times, got to her feet and sped away.

"Stop!" shouted Takezō. "I just want to ask you a question. Don't go!"

But gone she was, like a flash of lightning in the night. The sound of a small bell receded eerily into the darkness.

"Could it have been a ghost?" Takezō mused aloud as he stared vacantly into the thin mist.

Matahachi shivered and forced a laugh. "If there were any ghosts around here, I think they'd be those of soldiers, don't you?"

"I wish I hadn't scared her away," said Takezō. "There's got to be a village around here somewhere. She could've given us directions."

They went on and climbed the nearer of the two hills ahead of them. In the hollow on the other side was the marsh that stretched south from Mount Fuwa. And a light, only half a mile away.

When they approached the farmhouse, they got the impression that it wasn't of the run-of-the-mill variety. For one thing, it was surrounded by a thick dirt wall. For another, its gate verged on being grandiose. Or at least the remains of the gate, for it was old and badly in need of repair.

Takezō went up to the door and rapped lightly. "Is anybody home?"

Getting no answer, he tried again. "Sorry to bother you at this hour, but my friend here is sick. We don't want to cause any trouble—he just needs some rest."

They heard whispering inside and, presently, the sound of someone coming to the door.

"You're stragglers from Sekigahara, aren't you?" The voice belonged to a young girl.

"That's right," said Takezō. "We were under Lord Shimmen of Iga."

"Go away! If you're found around here, we'll be in trouble."

"Look, we're very sorry to bother you like this, but we've been walking a long time. My friend needs some rest, that's all, and—"

"Please go away!"

"All right, if you really want us to, but couldn't you give my friend some medicine? His stomach's in such bad shape it's hard for us to keep moving."

"Well, I don't know. . . ."

After a moment or two, they heard footsteps and a little tinkling sound receding into the house, growing fainter and fainter.

Just then they noticed the face. It was in a side window, a woman's face, and it had been watching them all along.

"Akemi," she called out, "let them in. They're foot soldiers. The Tokugawa patrols aren't going to be wasting time on them. They're nobodies."

Akemi opened the door, and the woman, who introduced herself as Otsū, came and listened to Takezō's story.

It was agreed that they could have the woodshed to sleep in. To quiet their bowels, Matahachi was given magnolia charcoal powder and thin rice gruel with scallions in it. Over the next few days, he slept almost without interruption, while Takezō, sitting vigil by his side, used cheap spirits to treat his bullet wounds in his thigh.

One evening about a week later, Takezō and Matahachi sat chatting.

"They must have a trade of some kind," Takezō remarked.

"I couldn't care less what they do. I'm just glad they took us in."

But Takezō's curiosity was aroused. "The mother's not so old," he went on. "It's strange, the two of them living alone here in the mountains."

"Umm. Don't you think the girl looks a little like Otsū?"

"There is something about her that puts me in mind of Otsū, but I don't think they really look alike. They're both nice-looking, that's about it. Why do you suppose she was doing the first time we saw her, creeping around those corpses in the middle of the night? It didn't seem to bother her at all. Ha! I can still see it. Her face was as calm and serene as those dolls they make in Kyoto. What a picture!"

Matahachi motioned for him to be quiet.

"Shh! I hear her bell."

Akemi's light knock on the door sounded like the tapping of a woodpecker. "Matahachi, Takezō," she called softly.

"Yes?"

"It's me."

Takezō got up and undid the lock. She came in carrying a tray of medicine and food and asked them how they were.

"Much better, thanks to you and your mother."

"Mother said that even if you feel better, you shouldn't talk too loud or go outside."

Takezō spoke for the two of them. "We're really sorry to put you to so much trouble."

"Oh, that's okay, you just have to be careful. Ishida Mitsunari and some of the other generals haven't been caught yet. They're keeping a close watch on this area and the roads are crawling with Tokugawa troops."

"They are?"

"So even though you're only foot soldiers, Mother said that if we're caught hiding you, we'll be arrested."

"We won't make a sound," Takezō promised. "I'll even cover Matahachi's face with a rag if he snores too loudly."

Akemi smiled, turned to go and said, "Good night. I'll see you in the morning."

"Wait!" said Matahachi. "Why don't you hang around and talk awhile?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Mother'd be angry."

"Why worry about her? How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Small for your age, aren't you?"

"Thanks for telling me."

"Where's your father?"

"I don't have one anymore."

"Sorry. Then how do you live?"

"We make moxa."

"That medicine you burn on your skin to get rid of pain?"

"Yes, the moxa from hereabouts is famous. In spring we cut mugwort on Mount Ibuki. In summer we dry it and in fall and winter make it into moxa. We sell it in Tarui. People come from all over just to buy it."

"I guess you don't need a man around to do that."

"Well, if that's all you wanted to know, I'd better be going."

"Hold on, just another second," said Takezō. "I have one more question."

"Well?"

"The other night, the night we came here, we saw a girl out on the battlefield and she looked just like you. That was you, wasn't it?"

Akemi turned quickly and opened the door.

"What were you doing out there?"

She slammed the door behind her, and as she ran to the house the little bell rang out in a strange, erratic rhythm.

The Comb

At five feet eight or nine, Takezō was tall for people of his time. His body was like a fine steed's: strong and supple, with long, sinewy limbs. His lips were full and crimson, and his thick black eyebrows fell short of being bushy by virtue of their fine shape. Extending well beyond the outer corners of his eyes, they served to accentuate his manliness. The villagers called him "the child of a fat year," an expression used only about children whose features were larger than average. Far from an insult, the nickname nonetheless set

him apart from the other youngsters, and for this reason caused him considerable embarrassment in his early years.

Although it was never used in reference to Matahachi, the same expression could have been applied to him as well. Somewhat shorter and stockier than Takezō, he was barrel-chested and round-faced, giving an impression of joviality if not downright buffoonery. His prominent, slightly protruding eyes were given to shifting when he talked, and most jokes made at his expense hinged on his resemblance to the frogs that croaked unceasingly through the summer nights.

Both youths were at the height of their growing years, and thus quick to recover from most ailments. By the time Takezō's wounds had completely healed, Matahachi could no longer stand his incarceration. He took to pacing the woodshed and complaining endlessly about being cooped up. More than once he made the mistake of saying he felt like a cricket in a damp, dark hole, leaving himself wide open to Takezō's retort that frogs and crickets are supposed to like such living arrangements. At some point, Matahachi must have begun peeping into the house, because one day he leaned over to his cellmate as if to impart some earth-shattering news. "Every evening," he whispered gravely, "the widow puts powder on her face and pretties herself up!" Takezō's face became that of a girl-hating twelve-year-old detecting defection, a budding interest in "them," in his closest friend. Matahachi had turned traitor, and the look was one of unmistakable disgust.

Matahachi began going to the house and sitting by the hearth with Akeru and her youthful mother. After three or four days of chatting and joking with them, the convivial guest became one of the family. He stopped going back to the woodshed even at night, and the rare times he did, he had sake on his breath and tried to entice Takezō into the house by singing the praises of the good life just a few feet away.

"You're crazy!" Takezō would reply in exasperation. "You're going to get killed, or at least picked up. We lost, we're stragglers—can't you get that through your head? We have to be careful and lie low until things come down."

He soon grew tired of trying to reason with his pleasure-loving friend, however, and started instead to cut him short with curt replies:

"I don't like sake," or sometimes: "I like it out here. It's cozy."

But Takezō was going stir-crazy too. He was bored beyond endurance, and eventually showed signs of weakening. "Is it really safe?" he'd ask. "The neighborhood, I mean? No sign of patrols? You're sure?"

After being entombed for twenty days in the woodshed, he finally emerged like a half-starved prisoner of war. His skin had the translucent, waxen look of death, all the more apparent as he stood beside his sun-and-sake-reddened friend. He squinted up at the clear blue sky, and stretching his arms broadly yawned extravagantly. When his cavernous mouth finally came closed, he noticed that his brows had been knit all the while. His face wore a troubled air.

taking a big risk having us around. I think we should start for home."

"I guess you're right," said Matahachi. "But they're not letting anyone through the barriers unchecked. The roads to Ise and Kyoto are both impossible, according to the widow. She says we should stay put until the snow comes. The girl says so too. She's convinced we should stay hidden, and you know she's out and about every day."

"You call sitting by the fire drinking being hidden?"

"Sure. You know what I did? The other day some of Tokugawa's men—they're still looking for General Ukita—came snooping around. I got rid of the bastards just by going out and greeting them." At this point, as Takezō's eyes widened in disbelief, Matahachi let out a rolling belly laugh. When it subsided, he went on. "You're safer out in the open than you are crouching in the woodshed listening for footsteps and going crazy. That's what I've been trying to tell you." Matahachi doubled up with laughter again, and Takezō shrugged.

"Maybe you're right. That could be the best way to handle things."

He still had his reservations, but after this conversation he moved into the house. Okō, who obviously liked having people, more specifically men, around, made them feel completely at home. Occasionally, however, she gave them a jolt by suggesting that one of them marry Akemi. This seemed to fluster Matahachi more than Takezō, who simply ignored the suggestion or countered it with a humorous remark.

It was the season for the succulent, fragrant *matsutake*, which grows at the bases of pine trees, and Takezō relaxed enough to go hunting the large mushrooms on the wooded mountain just behind the house. Akemi, basket in hand, would search from tree to tree. Each time she picked up their scent, her innocent voice reverberated through the woods.

"Takezō, over here! Lots of them!"

Hunting around nearby, he invariably replied, "There are plenty over here too."

Through the pine branches, the autumn sun filtered down on them in thin, slanting shafts. The carpet of pine needles in the cool shelter of the trees was a soft dusty rose. When they tired, Akemi would challenge him, giggling. "Let's see who has the most!"

"I do," he'd always reply smugly, at which point she'd begin inspecting his basket.

This day was no different from the others. "Ha, ha! I knew it!" she cried. Gleefully triumphant, the way only girls that young can be, with no hint of self-consciousness or affected modesty, she bent over his basket. "You've got a bunch of toadstools in your batch!" Then she discarded the poisonous fungi one by one, not actually counting out loud, but with movements so slow and deliberate Takezō could hardly ignore them, even with his eyes closed. She flung each one as far as she could. Her task completed, she looked up, her young face beaming with self-satisfaction.

"Now look how many more I have than you!"

"It's getting late," Takezō muttered. "Let's go home."

"You're cross because you lost, aren't you?"

She started racing down the mountainside like a pheasant, but suddenly stopped dead in her tracks, an expression of alarm clouding her face. Approaching diagonally across the grove, halfway down the slope, was a mountain of a man; his strides were long and languorous, and his glaring eyes were trained directly on the frail young girl before him. He looked frighteningly primitive. Everything about him smacked of the struggle to survive, and he had a distinct air of bellicosity: ferocious bushy eyebrows and a thick, curled upper lip; a heavy sword, a cloak of mail, and an animal skin wrapped around him.

"Akemi!" he roared, as he came closer to her. He grinned broadly, showing a row of yellow, decaying teeth, but Akemi's face continued to register nothing but horror.

"Is that wonderful mama of yours home?" he asked with labored sarcasm.

"Yes," came a peep of a reply.

"Well, when you go home, I want you to tell her something. Would you do that for me?" He spoke mock politely.

"Yes."

His tone became harsh. "You tell her she's not putting anything over on me trying to make money behind my back. You tell her I'll be around soon for my cut. Have you got that?"

Akemi said nothing.

"She probably thinks I don't know about it, but the guy she sold the goods to came straight to me. I bet you were going to Sekigahara too, weren't you little one?"

"No, of course not!" she protested weakly.

"Well, never mind. Just tell her what I said. If she pulls any more fast on me I'll kick her out of the neighborhood." He glared at the girl for a moment, then lumbered off in the direction of the marsh.

Takezō turned his eyes from the departing stranger and looked at Akemi with concern. "Who on earth was that?"

Akemi, her lips still trembling, answered wearily, "His name is Tsujikawa. He comes from the village of Fuwa." Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"He's a freebooter, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"What's he so worked up about?"

She stood there without answering.

"I won't tell anybody," he assured her. "Can't you even tell me?"

Akemi, obviously miserable, seemed to be searching for words. Suddenly she leaned against Takezō's chest and pleaded, "Promise you won't tell anyone?"

"Who am I going to tell? The Tokugawa samurai?"

"Remember the night you first saw me? At Sekigahara?"

"Of course I remember."

"Well, haven't you figured out yet what I was doing?"

"No. I haven't thought about it," he said with a straight face.

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