

AI-Generated Graded Readers

Masaru Uchida, Gifu University

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About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice. The text was translated from Japanese into English and simplified using ChatGPT for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

The adaptation aims to improve readability while preserving the narrative content and spirit of the original work.

Source Text

Original work: Konjiki no Shojo (金色の処女), Hanami no Adauchi (花見の仇討), Komoriuta (子守唄), Kushi no Moji (櫛の文字), Ningyo no Shi (人魚の死), Furisode Genta (振袖源太), Heiji Toso Kigen (平次屠蘇機嫌), Heiji Jonan (平次女難), Yari no Ore (槍の折れ), Shōbengumi Teijo (小便組貞女)

Author: Nomura Kodō (野村胡堂)

Source: Aozora Bunko (青空文庫)

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/>

Original Japanese text available at:

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/001670/card56372.html> (Konjiki no Shojo)

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/001670/card54610.html> (Hanami no Adauchi)

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/001670/card54753.html> (Komoriuta)

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/001670/card54665.html> (Kushi no Moji)

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/001670/card56293.html> (Ningyo no Shi)

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/001670/card55682.html> (Furisode Genta)

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/001670/card54598.html> (Heiji Toso Kigen)

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/001670/card56309.html> (Heiji Jonan)

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/001670/card56399.html> (Yari no Ore)

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/001670/card55688.html> (Shōbengumi Teijo)

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Nomura Kodō, *The Casebook of Detective Zenigata Heiji: Selected Stories [Zenigata Heiji Torimono-Hikae]* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified from Japanese by ChatGPT)

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The Golden Maiden [Konjiki no Shojo]

Part 1

“Heiji, I have an important request. Will you take it?” Sasano Shinzaburo asked in a low voice. The young detective lifted his face and looked carefully at the man before him. Sasano was a high officer, calm and noble, but today even he looked troubled. “If this goes wrong,” he said, “not only our magistrate, but great men in the government will be in danger. I ask you to work on this as if you were ready to throw away your life.” Zenigata Heiji moved forward on his knees at once and bowed. He answered that he owed much to Sasano’s house and that his own life was a small thing if he could be useful.

Sasano then told him the heart of the matter. The shogun had recently gone hawking near Zoshigaya, and during that outing a sudden arrow had flown out of nowhere and almost struck him. The arrow had passed close to his shoulder, hit the metal inside his hat, and fallen only a few steps away. Men had searched everywhere, but the attacker had vanished. Later they found that the arrow was a real war arrow, not a hunting one, and poison had been put on its head. “And now,” Sasano said, “before we have found that criminal, the shogun has ordered another hawking trip in the same place.”

Many men around the shogun had begged him to change his mind, but he refused. Once he decided something, he would not turn back. So the senior men of the government had ordered Sasano and the magistrate to find the hidden attacker before the next outing. If they failed, shame and punishment would follow. Heiji listened without moving, but his eyes grew sharp. Then he asked the first question that came to his mind. “Why must the shogun go to Zoshigaya again? There are birds in other places too. Why only there?”

Sasano told him to lower his voice, but he also knew the question was right. After a short silence, he explained that the shogun always stopped on the way back at the Otsuka medicinal garden. Inside that great garden stood a fine building called Takada Palace, where the shogun liked to rest and drink medicine prepared

there. Then Sasano gave the final piece of news. The keeper of the garden, a famous scholar of herbs named Toge Sojuken, had a daughter called O-Sayo. People said there was no beauty in all Edo to match her. Heiji gave a quick little smile and said that now he could see the line of the matter more clearly.

But his smile did not mean the case was easy. “I know a little about that young woman,” he said. “She is not a woman who can be handled in a simple way.” Even so, he accepted the work without fear. Sasano told him the next hawking trip would be the day after tomorrow and warned him not to be careless. Heiji answered that he would do everything he could, even if it cost him his life. The two men looked at each other and smiled, not as officer and street detective, but as two men who understood danger and skill. Then Heiji left at once and went toward Otsuka.

The medicinal garden was a place of power and mystery. Its wide grounds held sacred buildings, rare herbs, and a splendid palace for the shogun’s visits. A common detective could not simply walk in. Heiji spent half a day near the outer wall, studying the place, hoping to find some weak point. He looked at the guards, the gates, the paths, and the smell of strange plants that drifted over the wall. But the place was too large, too strict, and too well protected. By noon he was tired, irritated, and no closer to the truth than before.

At last he took out an old coin and tossed it in his hand. He often did that when he stood at a hard turning in a case. He caught the coin and looked at it as if it might answer him. “So I should go back, should I?” he muttered. He turned away from the wall and walked down the road with long, unhappy steps. Then, near the foot of Mejirozaka, something caught his eye. A new cosmetics shop stood there with rich blue curtains and bright signs, and one sign advertised water made from plants of the medicinal garden, another offered foreign face powder, and a third promised secret medicines from the house of Toge. Heiji stopped at once. “This is it,” he thought.

He understood only one thing clearly, but that was enough to move him. If the garden itself could not be entered, then perhaps a path from the garden reached outside through this shop. He needed eyes inside the place, and he needed them

quickly. So he went to Ryogoku and called for a young woman named Oshizu at a waterside teahouse. She came out at once, bright and pretty, with a fresh and open face. Heiji spoke lightly at first, but soon his tone changed. He asked whether she had ever been to the famous shop called Karahanaya. She said no, though many girls had gone there to buy powder and lotion.

Then Heiji asked a serious favor. He wanted her to go there as a customer and look around as carefully as she could. Oshizu agreed with easy courage, perhaps because she trusted him more than she feared the errand. They rode part of the way and then walked the rest so that she would seem like an ordinary young woman out shopping. By the time they reached the shop, the evening light was already fading. Heiji stayed at a distance near the slope below, watching her yellow robe and red sash as she passed under the curtain and disappeared inside. At that moment a dark feeling crossed his heart. He had no proof against the shop yet, but his instincts told him that he might be sending her into a dangerous place.

Oshizu, however, showed none of his fear. She sat down like an ordinary customer and asked first for the famous plant water, then for face powder, and then for rouge. The men in the shop became lively at once. They brought out goods, spoke politely, and watched her from every side because she was such a beautiful girl. While they served her, Oshizu quietly studied the room. The shop looked new and rich, yet something in it felt cold, dark, and too strong, as if it had been built for more than simple trade.

Soon a young clerk brought her tea in a fine cup. Because Oshizu worked in a teahouse, taking and serving tea was natural to her, and she did not hesitate. She thanked him and drank. At once she felt something strange. The tea was sweet in an unnatural way, and its smell was not right. By the time she noticed that, she had already swallowed too much. A heavy sleep came over her so suddenly that her head fell forward before she could even reach for the money in her sash.

Then the shop changed its face. Orders were spoken in low, quick voices. Men rose from their places with the skill of people who had done such work before. Two clerks lifted Oshizu's limp body as if they had found some precious thing buried in the earth. Outside, in the deepening dusk below the slope, Zenigata Heiji

watched with burning eyes and a heart full of dread. He still did not know the whole truth, but he knew one thing now with terrible certainty. He had sent Oshizu into the tiger's mouth.

Part 2

As Zenigata Heiji stood in the dark below the slope, a terrible thought came to him all at once. In recent months, several beautiful young women in Edo had vanished without a trace. They had left no letters behind, and no one had known where they had gone. Then, after three days, or sometimes after a week, their bodies had been found in rivers, deep woods, or even in the middle of the road. People said their whole bodies had once been covered with gold leaf before they were killed. Now, seeing Oshizu carried away like a treasure stolen in the night, Heiji understood that these strange crimes were all tied together.

He pressed himself against the shadows and watched the back of the shop. Before long a palanquin came out without any light. It moved quickly along the rear streets of Otoiwa, and Heiji followed it like a hunting dog that had found the true trail. He did not need to see inside. He already knew Oshizu was hidden there, sleeping under the drug they had made her drink. The palanquin went straight toward the rear gate of the great medicinal garden and slipped inside as if the place had been waiting for it.

For one moment Heiji thought of running back to Sasano Shinzaburo and asking for official force. But the medicinal garden was too important, too highly placed, and too well guarded. By the time permission came, Oshizu might already be dead. He could not bear that thought. So he made his choice with the speed of love and fear together. He climbed the wall under the trees, dropped silently into the darkness, and began to search the enormous garden alone.

The place was like another world. Strange plants grew everywhere, giving off rich and bitter smells in the night air. Heiji pushed through rows of herbs and bushes whose names he did not know, brushing leaves with his sleeves and knees as he went. The paths twisted, the buildings stood apart in silence, and the

darkness seemed full of secrets. At last he saw a little light and moved toward it, careful as a thief in a rich man's house.

The building he entered was almost certainly the famous Takada Palace. It was large, elegant, and at the same time deeply cold, as if it had been built to hide dangerous pleasures. Heiji passed through corridor after corridor, staying away from voices and lamps, until he climbed into a space above a great hall. There he suddenly found himself trapped. The walls were thick wooden boards on every side, and there was no clear door, no window, and no crack wide enough even for an ant. He cursed under his breath, then forced himself to sit still and think.

As his eyes grew used to the dark, he noticed faint points of light below him. The floor had small glass openings set into it, and through them he could look down into the hall beneath. What he saw there made even his brave heart tighten. In the center stood a hideous idol, ugly beyond easy description, lit by black candles that burned with red flames. Near it lay sickening offerings, and on a great white board rested a naked baby, smiling softly in the middle of that evil place. A large knife had been driven into the board beside the child, and the bright blade shone in the candlelight.

Then a low, dreadful chant began, and a line of masked men and women entered the hall. Their clothes were black, and only their eyes could be seen. After them came four women dressed in bright red cloth, almost bare, leading another figure between them. The figure moved like a dreamer and did not resist. When they pushed her up onto a platform, Heiji saw with horror that it was Oshizu in her town-girl clothes. He almost cried out, and if he could have broken the ceiling with his hands, he would have done it then.

The chanting rose and fell again. The masked people moved in a circle around the idol and around Oshizu, who stood still as if her soul had been taken out of her body. Then the circle broke apart, and black-clothed hands began pressing gold leaf onto the skin of her young body. She did not move. She only stood with her face slightly lifted, like a doll made for some cruel play. Heiji bit his lip until he tasted blood, but still he could not find any way to break out of the hidden room.

After the upper part of her body had been covered with gold, one tall man stepped forward and removed his mask. Heiji stared down and felt as if he were looking at a demon from hell. The man had burning red hair, pale skin, and blue eyes. Then another man removed his mask, and this one Heiji knew at once. It was Toge Sojuken, the keeper of the medicinal garden, the father of the beautiful O-Sayo. The foreign man and Sojuken both bent and touched their lips to the shoulder of the golden girl, and then the others did the same, one after another, in a shameful rite that filled Heiji with rage.

He began searching every corner of the hidden room like a madman, trying to find the entrance, the latch, any weakness in the walls. Nothing yielded. Time passed, though he could not tell how much. Below him the ceremony changed again. The four women in red began a wild dance around the idol and around Oshizu, and strange incense was thrown again and again into a great burner. The smoke rose upward through the hidden openings, and its smell drifted into Heiji's prison above.

At first he fought it. He struck his own arms, clenched his fists, and opened his eyes as wide as he could. But the scent was too strong, heavy and sweet, and it entered his head like wine. Several times he woke enough to look down and see broken pieces of the dance, the gold on Oshizu's body, the red cloth, the dark masks, and the horrible idol. Each time he tried to hold on to his senses, and each time the smoke pulled him back into sleep. The shameful rite, the golden maiden, and Oshizu's helpless figure burned themselves into his eyes and ears, then slowly drifted away into darkness as if they belonged to a far-off dream.

Part 3

When Zenigata Heiji opened his eyes again, he did not know how much time had passed. The evil smoke was weaker now, but his head still felt heavy and dull. For a moment he could not remember where he was. Then the memory came back all at once: the hidden room, the black candles, the idol, the golden skin of Oshizu, and the terrible night ceremony below. He bit the inside of his mouth and forced

himself fully awake.

Then he heard a whisper moving through the building like a small cold wind. “The Lord has arrived,” someone said. That meant the shogun’s hawking trip had ended without trouble. Heiji felt sudden relief, but only for one breath. “Then the danger is here,” he thought. “If the first attack failed, the next one must happen inside this palace.”

He began moving again through the dark spaces above the rooms. He crawled like a cat from beam to beam, careful not to make a sound. At last he found a loose place in the boards and slipped out under the eaves of a separate room. One sliding door stood a little open. Through that narrow opening he could see rich mats, soft light, and the black silk knees of a man sitting above the others. Heiji pulled back at once. “That is the shogun,” he thought.

He looked again, slowly this time. O-Sayo had entered the room with a bowl of medicine and had placed it before the man with a calm smile. She wore a bright robe with pine, bamboo, and plum stitched all over it, and she looked gentle and beautiful enough to fool any man. In that quiet room nothing seemed broken or ugly. Yet outside the room, crouching low like a shadow, waited Toge Sojuken, his face turned toward the bowl and his eyes shining with a terrible light. When the seated man lifted the bowl toward his lips, Sojuken’s mouth twisted as if he already tasted victory.

“Poison,” Heiji thought at once. But to jump in front of the shogun was impossible. He was only a street detective, and one wrong move might create such sudden confusion that the conspirators would strike wildly and kill the real target after all. He could not even be fully sure from sight alone. Still, he knew that if he waited one heartbeat longer, the man inside might drink. So he put his hand to his belt and searched for the thing that had saved him many times before.

By bad luck he had no throwing coin fit for his hand. What he found instead were a few small coins and one gold piece that Sasano Shinzaburo had given him for the work. It was a great sum for a man like Heiji, almost part of his whole life. But that did not matter now. He wet the edge with his tongue, held it between thumb and finger, and sent it flying with all his strength. The gold piece cut

through the air and struck the bottom of the medicine bowl so sharply that the bowl jumped and broke its order in an instant.

The medicine flew across the mat and onto the rich cushions. The man inside did not cry out. He only raised his face and looked hard toward the place from which the gold had come. O-Sayo, however, sprang up in alarm. She rushed close and threw her fine robe over his knees as if trying to protect him. But the next second she leaped back with a bitter cry. The man she had tried to poison was not the shogun at all.

“You finally see it,” the false shogun said quietly. He rose in one movement and caught O-Sayo by the belt before she could escape. “I am Sasano Shinzaburo,” he told her. “I borrowed my lord’s appearance so I could uncover the plot of you and your father.” He should not have spoken his name, but the words came out in the heat of success. That one mistake changed everything. O-Sayo screamed toward the garden, “Father, we are discovered. Quickly, the mine fire.”

Toge Sojuken answered at once and jumped from his crouching place. At that same moment Zenigata Heiji dropped from the eaves and seized him. “Where are you going?” Heiji shouted. The old man was much stronger than he looked, and Heiji himself was near the end of his strength. He had been without food for almost two days, he had breathed the drugged smoke all night, and when he jumped down he twisted his foot badly. Even so, he held on. The two men struggled together while the others in the palace were still too shocked to move.

In the same moment, O-Sayo twisted like a bird escaping a snare. Sasano Shinzaburo was left holding a heavy silver plate from her belt while she slipped free and ran inward through the rooms. “Father, I will light it,” she cried. “Do it,” Sojuken answered. “And do not let the sacrifice escape.” That one word struck Heiji like a knife. If they meant to blow up the whole palace, then Oshizu was still hidden somewhere inside it. He threw Sojuken hard to the grass and shouted to Sasano to keep the old man down. Then he ran after O-Sayo, dragging his injured foot behind him.

The great hall smelled of powder now. The fuse had already been lit somewhere. Heiji knew the danger at once, but he did not know where Oshizu

had been hidden. The hall looked different in daylight, but the evil of the night still clung to it. The strange idol was gone, yet the place still felt dirty and cruel, as if the walls remembered everything they had seen. He searched wildly with his eyes, but he could not find even the smallest sign of the girl he had come to save.

Then O-Sayo laughed. She stood before a great folding screen painted with a dark sea and high blue waves, her hair loose and her robe torn at the front. She no longer looked like a gentle beauty. She looked like a mad woman who had thrown away the world. "It is finished," she said. "You cannot save her now. You and your pretty girl will die together." Heiji demanded to know where Oshizu was, but O-Sayo only laughed harder. She said the girl had spoken his name again and again like a person in fever, and for that very reason she would be broken into pieces with the palace itself.

For one instant even Zenigata Heiji stepped back. O-Sayo's face was beautiful, but it was the beauty of poison and fire. The smell of powder was stronger now, and time was almost gone. Still, he forced himself to stop and think. If O-Sayo remained in front of that screen, then she was guarding something. He fixed his eyes on hers and stood very still. Her laughter grew sharper, but in the middle of it he saw fear, and in that fear he suddenly understood where the answer had been hidden all along.

Part 4

"You are Zenigata Heiji, but it is too late now," O-Sayo cried. She stood in front of a great folding screen painted with a dark wild sea, and her hair and robe were in disorder. Her face was still beautiful, but now it was the beauty of madness. She said that Oshizu was somewhere inside the palace and would be blown to pieces with it. The smell of powder grew stronger every moment, and even Heiji felt death coming near.

Even so, Heiji did not rush forward at once. He fixed his eyes on O-Sayo and watched her with all the strength in his mind. She laughed, shouted, and tried to frighten him, but she did not move away from the folding screen. Then he

understood. She was not standing there by chance. She was guarding the place where Oshizu had been hidden.

“I know now,” he said, and sprang at her with all his force. He pushed her aside, seized the great folding screen, and threw it down. Behind it stood a large official chest marked for medicinal herbs. He tore the lid open, and there inside lay the golden maiden herself. Oshizu’s whole body had been covered with gold leaf, and she was still alive, though only half-conscious and very close to death.

O-Sayo screamed and tried to stop him. She clung to him from behind, but Heiji kicked her away and pulled Oshizu out of the chest. Then, with the helpless girl in his arms, he dragged his injured leg across the room and ran for the open air. He had only just made it out when the palace exploded behind him. The roar shook the ground, flames leaped into the sky, and the great Takada Palace broke apart in one moment.

Later the full truth became clear. Toge Sojuken had once served Tadanaga, the lord who hated the shogun. After his master’s death, Sojuken studied herbs and medicine in Kyoto, hid his old name, and rose high enough to become keeper of the medicinal garden. But he never gave up his desire for revenge. Everything he did in that garden had been leading toward one dark purpose.

In the port town of Sakai he had become close to a Portuguese man named Sudero. Together they brought into Japan an evil foreign form of worship centered on the devil, with secret rites, strange images, and many sacrifices. They built an altar inside the palace and used hidden ceremonies to try to destroy the shogun by curse and fear. The ugly idol, the black candles, the smoke, and the cruel dance that Heiji saw were all parts of that plan.

Karahanaya, the cosmetics shop in Otowa, was only a trap. Beautiful women from all over Edo were drawn there with lotions, powders, and other goods linked to the garden. The finest of them were stolen and used as victims in the night rites. When the magic failed to kill the shogun, the plotters tried more direct ways. They used a poisoned arrow before, and now they planned to use O-Sayo’s beauty and a bowl of poisoned medicine.

But Sasano Shinzaburo and the magistrate had prepared a counterplan of

their own. Because Sasano looked somewhat like the shogun, he took the shogun's place inside the palace and received the bowl from O-Sayo. That was why the poison failed. After the plot was broken, Sudero was handed over to a Portuguese ship, and Sojuken killed himself before full questioning could end. O-Sayo vanished and was never found again.

The medicinal garden itself did not last long after that. It was destroyed soon afterward, and the place later became the land of Gokokuji. The evil foreign rite also disappeared little by little under the strict laws of the shogunate. In that way the dark worship that had hidden itself inside Edo came to an end. The fires died, the secret rooms were emptied, and the terror that had taken so many women was finally broken.

Zenigata Heiji had saved the ruler of the land and uncovered a terrible enemy, but he could not receive open praise. He had not caught the attacker before the day of the hawking trip, and the whole matter was too dangerous and shameful to speak about in public. Even so, the name of Zenigata Heiji remained in the shogun's memory. And for the young detective, one more thing mattered just as much: he had saved Oshizu and won her heart for good.

Vendetta Under the Blossoms [Hanami no Adauchi]

Part 1

“Boss!” Hachigoro came running so fast that he could hardly breathe. The rest of his words would not come out at once, but his face was already saying that something was badly wrong. Zenigata Heiji had just left Asukayama after a day of cherry-blossom viewing and was walking toward Yanaka in the soft light of evening. Hachigoro, who had stayed behind to help with the things they had brought, came swimming through the crowd with a red mat over his shoulder. At last he gasped, “Please come back. There has been a vendetta on the hill.” Heiji stopped at once and stared at him.

“A vendetta?” he said. Hachigoro nodded wildly and said that a young man dressed as a pilgrim had been cut down by a man in the dress of a wandering flute monk. The whole hill was in an uproar. Heiji handed off his small bundle to some people from the neighborhood and turned back without another word. He went up the slope like a hunting dog that had caught a living scent. Around him cherry petals flew in the evening wind, and the purple sky in the north made the spring scene look strangely sad and beautiful.

But when the two men reached the hill, the beauty of spring had already changed into something cold and ugly. The crowd was in complete confusion. Some people were running away because they feared trouble with the authorities, while others pushed forward because they wanted one more look at blood and death. The noise was oddly broken, as if fear had bitten the voices into pieces. At the center, a patrol officer named Kashiya Sanshichiro had already arrived and was directing his men around the body. He called to Heiji at once and asked for help.

The dead man lay under a trampled cherry tree in a pool of dark blood. He was dressed as a pilgrim from head to foot, with white face paint, carefully drawn eyebrows, and all the little things needed for the part. In his right hand he still held a bamboo sword covered with silver paper, but it had been cut across in one blow.

There was a shallow wound on his shoulder and a deep thrust in his chest, and the red stain had spread across his costume as if someone had poured dye over him. Heiji crouched beside the body and looked without haste, his sharp eyes missing nothing. Then he asked quietly who the man was. Sanshichiro told him that the victim was Sojiro, the young master of a thread merchant named Izumoya in Mado.

The officer then explained the strange shape of the case. This had not been meant as a real vendetta. It had been a flower-viewing performance, a little comic play arranged for fun. Sojiro had planned to appear as the pilgrim who met his enemy at last, and the man playing the monk had been supposed to fight him with a harmless bamboo sword. Then another man dressed as a woman would step in to stop the fight, music would begin, and food and drink would come out for the group. Instead, the “enemy monk” had cut Sojiro down with a real sword and then vanished. That was why the whole thing felt both foolish and terrible at the same time.

Sanshichiro pointed to two performers who had been kept nearby. One was the man who should have played the monk, a tall oil dealer named Kanekichi. The other was the fellow who had dressed as the “stopping woman.” Kanekichi looked pale and shaken, and one of the officers’ helpers stood close to him as if ready to bind him with rope at any moment. The evening was growing dim, and the white cherry blossoms had already lost their warm color. Soon lamps were lit here and there on the hill, and a large moon climbed into the mist like a painted moon in a cheap stage play. It was a lively flower-viewing place, yet at that moment it felt dark enough for ghosts.

Heiji turned first to Kanekichi. The man said that the idea for the mock vendetta had come from Sojiro himself, who had wanted a fresh sort of fun for this year’s blossom outing. Since Sojiro was handsome, he had taken the role of the pilgrim seeking revenge, while Kanekichi, with his large frame and rough look, had taken the role of the enemy monk. They were supposed to meet at half past five, exchange set lines, cross bamboo swords, and then stop when the “woman” entered and played the shamisen. Kanekichi even handed over his own sword for

inspection, and it was indeed nothing but a bamboo toy. So far, his story matched the dead man's broken weapon on the ground.

Then Kanekichi told the part that sounded most suspicious. On his way to the hill, he said, a messenger had called him back home on false business. He had gone all the way back, only to learn that his wife had sent no message at all. By the time he returned to Asukayama, the murder had already been done. He claimed that someone must have used his delay, dressed in a monk's costume like his own, and come in his place to kill Sojiro. It was a neat story, but almost too neat. Heiji did not show what he thought. He only turned toward an old man who kept a tea stall nearby and asked what he had seen.

The tea-stall keeper had watched from the start of the performance. He said the pilgrim had cried out lines like those in a play, something about meeting the enemy at last. But the monk had said nothing at all. He had drawn his sword in silence, cut through the bamboo blade in a flash, and then struck again with deadly force. The pilgrim, suddenly frightened, had cried that there must be some mistake and begged the attacker to say if he had the wrong man. But the monk had chased him and driven the sword into his chest. By the time the watchers understood that the blood was real, the killer had already disappeared.

"Was it this man?" Heiji asked, pointing to Kanekichi. The old tea seller hesitated. He said the killer had been a fairly tall man, and the clothing, the flute basket, and the costume had looked much the same, but he would not swear that it had truly been Kanekichi. Heiji saw Kanekichi's painted face turn almost blue under the powder. Just then another man came up, a wandering masterless samurai named Shitomi Hanjiro, who lived at Izumoya's house as a dependent guest. He spoke boldly, even carelessly, and after looking over the body he said that the shoulder wound was only a scratch and that the deep stab to the chest looked like the work of a townsman rather than a trained swordsman. That cool remark stayed in Heiji's mind.

After that Heiji also heard from the man who had dressed as a pilgrim's companion and from the fellow who had played the woman's part. One carried a staff with a hidden blade inside, though it was clean of blood. The other, a small

and lively man named Ryosuke, said that he too had been called back by a strange false message and had lost time before reaching the hill. Little by little the case grew more twisted, not less. Too many people had reasons to hate Sojiro, and too many movements had been disturbed by unseen hands. By the time the officer led Kanekichi away for further questioning, Zenigata Heiji had only one thing he could say with certainty: the murder had been planned, and the stage play of revenge had been chosen because it gave a killer the perfect mask.

Part 2

After Shitomi Hanjiro had spoken, the questioning continued. The next man was Kuramatsu, who had played the traveling priest. He was built somewhat like Kanekichi, and one of the officers suddenly found that his pilgrim's staff held a real blade inside it. For a moment everyone stiffened, but when they pulled it out, there was no blood on it at all. Kuramatsu gave a weak smile and said it was only an old thing he happened to have. Zenigata Heiji watched his face closely, yet the weapon itself did not prove enough.

Then Heiji turned to the "woman" of the performance, a small, lively man named Ryosuke. Without the wig, with thick makeup still on his face and a bright long-sleeved robe hanging loosely around him, he looked strange and almost comic, but there was nothing funny in the murder now. Hachigoro whispered that Ryosuke was really just an idle pleasure-seeker, not a serious actor at all. Heiji sharply told him to be quiet and made Ryosuke speak for himself. Ryosuke admitted that he lived alone and that he too had been delayed by a strange false message. On his way toward the hill, a boy he did not know had run after him and told him to hurry back home, only for him to find no message and no visitor there at all.

Ryosuke's story sounded too much like Kanekichi's to be chance. He said he had gone back to his room in Mado, found everything unchanged, and then hurried again to Asukayama, only to find the hill in uproar. He also explained that he could not walk the streets of his own neighborhood dressed as a flower-viewing woman,

so he had carried the robe and wig in a bundle and changed at a teahouse in Oji called Sanoya. That detail was useful, because it gave a place where his movements might be checked. The men who had come from Izumoya's shop, and a few other neighbors, seemed plain and ordinary enough and had come out together in their everyday clothes. None of them gave Heiji anything solid to seize.

Just then the officers who had spread across the hill returned with news that changed the whole shape of the case. No one had seen a flute monk leave the hill. The guards at the paths, the men who watched the edges of the grounds, and the people at the tea stalls all agreed on that point. Most of the flower-viewing crowd had already run home in fear, and the hill was surrounded well enough that a suspicious man should not have escaped easily. Kashiya Sanshichiro turned at once toward Kanekichi in his monk's clothes. Kanekichi went pale again, for now the simplest answer was that the killer was standing right there among them.

Yet Heiji did not accept the easy answer. He said only that he still did not understand the trick. Sanshichiro, with no better choice at hand, took Kanekichi away for further questioning and warned the others not to go far. When the officer left, the hill suddenly felt much emptier, though the moon was high and the blossoms still lay white all around. Hachigoro asked if they should search the hill again, but Heiji shook his head. "There is no hole on this hill where a flute monk could hide," he said. Instead he sent Hachigoro back to Mado to ask questions about Sojiro, about the men in the performance, and about Shitomi Hanjiro as well. He wanted to know who hated the dead man, who gained by his death, and who had been missing during the afternoon.

Heiji had only just turned away when a woman's voice called softly from behind him. It was a low, warm, dangerous voice, the kind that could stroke the back of a man's neck like a feather. He stopped and turned in the moonlight on the road between the pines and the cherry trees. There stood O-Taki of Oji, a famous female pickpocket, full of ripened beauty and false sweetness. She laughed and teased him for not noticing her, and Heiji answered in a dry voice that he had no time for games. She stepped lightly in front of him and said she had come to help.

O-Taki said that Kashiya was making a mistake if he meant to tie up Kanekichi. The oil seller, she said, had had no chance to hide a bloody sword and no blood on him either. Then she offered another theory. What if the real killer had been a real flute monk with a real enemy on his mind? What if Sojiro, not knowing that Kanekichi had been delayed, had stepped before that stranger, called out a challenge like an actor, and waved his shiny bamboo sword? A frightened or hunted man might have believed the attack real and killed first to save himself. It was a clever idea, and for a moment it sounded almost possible.

But Heiji pulled the idea apart piece by piece. A true stranger, he said, would have had no need to change clothes after the killing. He could have fled at once while everyone still thought the blood was stage blood. If someone had taken off the basket hat, hidden the flute, and changed appearance, then it was because he feared being known by face. That meant the killer was not some chance wanderer from the road. It meant the killer belonged to Izumoya's world or to the little group that had arranged the flower-viewing play. O-Taki lowered her head at that and said no more. Heiji told her sharply that she was trying to save someone and warned her not to make the matter worse.

Still, he did not trust her. He walked off toward Yanaka with loud, clear steps, then quietly turned back and followed her through the moonlit haze. O-Taki did not climb the hill again. She passed around its foot, went into the town of Oji, and slipped into the flower-viewing teahouse called Sanoya. After waiting a little, Heiji went in after her and asked the staff whether O-Taki had just entered. The clerk bowed too quickly and said she had indeed come, begging to be let out the back because some love-crazy man was following her. Heiji laughed at that, but then at once turned the talk to more useful things and asked when Ryosuke had changed into his woman's costume there.

The answer mattered. The clerk and a serving girl both said that Ryosuke had changed clothes there shortly before six, and that the noise from the hill had not reached the teahouse until after that. In other words, Ryosuke had probably still been at Sanoya during the very time the murder was being done. He had left behind only the clothes he had worn before changing, nothing more. That

weakened the case against him greatly, and Heiji came away from the teahouse feeling that O-Taki had led him around by the nose, though not without giving him one useful truth. The killer in monk's dress had been a tall man, not a small one like Ryosuke, and someone had taken pains to delay both Kanekichi and Ryosuke by the same trick.

When Heiji returned home, Hachigoro was waiting for him with fresh information. He blurted out that almost every man in the flower-viewing party had a reason to hate Sojiro. Kanekichi had long been crushed by heavy interest on money he had borrowed from Izumoya. Kuramatsu, a strong neighborhood man, had often clashed with Sojiro and would likely breathe easier with him gone. Ryosuke too had reason for bitterness, because the woman now living at Izumoya had once been deeply tied to him. Heiji listened in silence as one grudge after another came into the room, and the case grew darker, not clearer. By the end of the night he knew this much: the mock vendetta had not hidden one secret hatred, but a whole nest of them.

Part 3

Back in Kanda, Hachigoro poured out what he had learned, and the news only made the case darker. Almost every man in the flower-viewing party had some reason to hate Sojiro. Kanekichi had borrowed money from Izumoya and had been crushed for years under heavy interest. Kuramatsu, the strong neighborhood man, had often fought with Sojiro and would not have been sad to see him dead. Ryosuke too carried resentment because a woman now living at Izumoya had once been deeply tied to him.

Hachigoro also added more names. The chief clerk Ki-hachi was said to have been cheating the business and feared discovery. Sojiro's wife O-Natsu, once an entertainer, had a reputation for fierce jealousy and could not bear his careless ways with women. Hearing all this, Hachigoro threw up his hands and said that if all motives were counted, half the world might have wanted Sojiro dead. Zenigata Heiji sat silent for a while and let the tangle settle in his mind. Then he began

quietly cutting away what could not be true.

He first removed Ryosuke from the center of suspicion. The time at Sanoya had been checked, and Ryosuke had only changed there when the uproar on the hill had already begun. He was too small to match the tea-stall old man's account of a tall monk, and he had nowhere to hide a monk's basket hat, flute, and blood-stained sword. Kuramatsu too looked less likely. He had come straight from Mado with the others, and though his staff held a blade, it was clean. That left Kanekichi and the ronin Shitomi Hanjiro standing nearest the center of the storm.

Yet even Kanekichi did not fully satisfy Heiji's mind. If he had truly killed Sojiro, then why had he said nothing at all when Sojiro called out his stage lines? Why should a common oil seller, dressed in a role, suddenly cut down his victim in silence and then somehow return in the same costume without blood on his body? And where had the real sword gone? A nervous amateur might kill in anger, but he could not wipe away every trace in the middle of a crowded hill. Heiji said at last that the man who seemed most obvious was often innocent in just such a case.

So suspicion turned toward Shitomi Hanjiro. He was a samurai by training, sharp-faced and wary, living at Izumoya as a dependent guest and something like a guard. Hachigoro was pleased with this new line and asked if they should seize him at once. Heiji shook his head. "A two-sword man is not so easily tied," he said. "And there is something wrong even there." The wound in Sojiro's chest had not looked like the work of a practiced swordsman. It was hard, direct, and rough, more like the blow of a frightened or angry common man than the smooth death a trained warrior could give.

Even so, the next morning Heiji and Hachigoro went again to Izumoya. Hanjiro was there, already smelling of drink, and from the moment they entered he attacked them with words. He had heard that Hachigoro had been asking where he had been on the afternoon of the crime, and he was furious that a street detective should dare pry into a samurai's movements. Heiji answered as politely as he could, but the ronin only grew louder, speaking of old service to a western lord and of the shame of being questioned by commoners. There was no getting

sense out of him, and forcing the matter would only make noise and enemies.

So Heiji stepped away and spoke instead with the young clerk Sakiichi in secret. From him he learned that Hanjiro had been kept less as a proper bodyguard than as a useful sword at hand, because Sojiro had made many enemies both in money matters and in affairs with women. That information broadened the field again instead of narrowing it. Ki-hachi's room showed nothing helpful either. If the chief clerk had truly lain ill all afternoon, then he could not have run to Asukayama, played the flute monk, and returned unseen. By the time they left Izumoya, the case seemed to be slipping back into mist.

As they walked away, Hachigoro muttered that perhaps the ronin had still done it after all. Heiji answered no, and this time he spoke more firmly. A skilled swordsman does not hide his hand completely when he kills; training shows itself whether he wishes it or not. The rough shoulder cut, the clumsy heavy thrust, and the whole strange manner of the attack felt wrong for a warrior. Also, whoever had done it needed not only a sword but a place to become someone else and then become himself again. That last thought made Heiji stop in the road as if he had been struck. He turned sharply to Hachigoro and asked what he had just said.

Hachigoro blinked and repeated it awkwardly. He had only wondered whether there had been some place nearby where a man could quietly change clothes. Heiji's eyes flashed at once. "That is it," he said. "After we throw away all the things that cannot be, what remains must be the path, even if it first looks impossible." He had been looking too hard at the people in the play and not hard enough at the ground under their feet. The killer had not escaped from the hill dressed as a monk. The killer had stopped being a monk before anyone knew to look.

At once Heiji set his new plan in motion. He sent Hachigoro back to the same cherry tree and told him to stay there all day until evening, doing nothing clever and hiding nothing. He was to watch the old tea-stall keeper, drink tea there if he liked, talk nonsense if necessary, and never let the stall pass out of his sight. Hachigoro was puzzled, but the small coins Heiji dropped into his hand made the order easier to follow. Then Heiji himself went off toward Yoshiwara to ask

questions of his own and to think in peace.

Half a day later, when the evening bell sounded from Ueno, Hachigoro left the stall with a cheerful farewell and came down the hill. He had watched the old man through crowds, tea, dumplings, and idle talk, and still nothing strange had happened. Then, out of nowhere, Zenigata Heiji appeared from the shadows and told him to stay still a little longer. The two men hid and watched. Before long the tea-stall old man closed up for the day, rolled his red mats, lifted a large box, and went down into the farming fields with the careless step of a harmless poor man.

Heiji signaled for silence and followed at a distance. The old man did not seem to notice them. In the fading light he walked on and on until he reached a poor little hut in Mikawashima, opened the door, lit a lamp, and sank beside it as if all strength had gone out of his body. Then Heiji stepped in after him and said quietly, "Do not be frightened, old man. I have come to see what is inside that rolled mat." The old man looked up as if death itself had entered the room. For the first time since the murder at Asukayama, the true shape of the crime stood close enough to touch.

Part 4

The old tea seller stared at Zenigata Heiji with wide, frightened eyes. For a moment he seemed unable even to breathe. Then his head dropped, and his whole body sagged as if the bones had been taken out of it. Heiji quietly told him the full trick. The killer had bought the tea stall the day before for a large sum, had listened to the plan for the mock vendetta, had used the monk's basket hat to hide the face, had killed Sojiro before many eyes, and had slipped behind the stall to change clothes in no more time than it took to smoke two or three pipes. The hat, the flute, the blood-stained sword, and the crest-marked robe had then been hidden in the stall until a safe time came to move them.

At last the old man broke. He pressed both hands to the floor and confessed that Sojiro deserved death. He said Sojiro had ruined his daughter Koi-ne, a geisha once known in Yoshiwara, then cast her aside the previous autumn. Driven mad

by misery, she had killed her own child and then thrown herself into the water. The old man's voice shook with grief and anger as he spoke, and Hachigoro, standing in the little hut, felt the truth of that pain even before he understood all of it. Heiji listened without interrupting, because now the deepest wound in the case had opened before him.

Yet when the old man asked for rope and punishment, Heiji refused him. "No," he said. "You did not kill Sojiro." The old man tried to insist that he had done it alone, but Heiji would not bend. He said the real killer would almost certainly come near the hut that night to see what had happened. At those words the old man suddenly leaped back, snatched a sword hidden in the rolled red mat, and tried to drive the still blood-marked blade into his own throat.

Heiji moved first. He struck the sword aside and tore it from the old man's hands before the man could die. Then, while the old fellow trembled and Hachigoro stood speechless, Heiji explained how he had come to the truth. When Kanekichi, the oil seller, had been about to fall under false suspicion, someone had rushed to Heiji and spun the clever story of a real wandering monk taking the mock vendetta as truth. That person had not been trying to protect the real killer from justice alone. That person had been trying to save an innocent man from ruin.

Heiji said he understood that feeling. Sojiro had indeed been a cruel man. He had squeezed men dry with harsh interest, and he had charmed women with his good looks only to throw them away after half a year or a year. Koi-ne had not been his only victim. There had been others before her, and there would have been others after her if he had lived. Still, Heiji said, even a wicked man could not be killed without stain falling on the killer's soul.

Then he spoke more softly, as if he were speaking not to the old man in front of him, but to the unseen person standing just outside the reach of the light. He said that the younger sister who had avenged Koi-ne must not go on living as if revenge were enough. She must either surrender and confess or cut herself off from the old life and become another person entirely. He even said that shaving off a smart young woman's fine hairstyle would be sad, but losing her head would be worse. Hachigoro finally understood, and his eyes jumped toward the dark

doorway. The one Heiji was speaking to was not the old man at all. It was O-Taki.

The old man began to cry then, not like a criminal caught in a trick, but like a father who had carried too much pain for too many years. He thanked Heiji again and again, and Heiji told him firmly that this was the last time he would forgive such a path. If O-Taki went on living by theft and slipping under the law, then Zenigata Heiji would not overlook it again. The old man bowed his head until it nearly touched the floor. Outside, the pale moonlight lay across the earth like cold water.

“Come on, Hachigoro,” Heiji said at last. “We are going home.” Hachigoro, still confused and troubled, asked if that was truly the end of it. Heiji answered that what remained would now be left to the gods. So the two men stepped out of the poor hut and began walking back toward Edo under the dim spring moon. Their shoulders almost touched as they went, and neither of them looked back at first.

But behind them, before the hut, two shadows stood in silence. One was the bent old tea seller, still wet-faced from tears. The other was the shadow of a young woman, fragrant and quiet in the moonlight. She did not call out, and Heiji did not turn around, but each knew the other was there. In that way the case ended, not with ropes and public praise, but with a life spared and a warning given.

So the mock vendetta under the blossoms came to its true end. Kanekichi was saved from a false charge, the trick of the tea stall was laid bare, and Sojiro’s hidden cruelty was paid for in blood. Yet Zenigata Heiji gained no loud reward from it. Once again he let a clear handhold slip from his fingers because he judged the human heart more important than an easy arrest. That was why, as often happened, he solved the case completely and still threw away one more fine chance for fame.

Lullaby [Komoriuta]

Part 1

“Boss, you must not laugh,” Hachigoro said as he rushed into Zenigata Heiji’s house. The words themselves were foolish enough, but what made them worse was that he was already laughing before he finished them. Heiji, who was in no mood for nonsense, told him sharply to stop. Hachigoro only shook with more laughter and said that he had made a bet with a young woman, and now he had no choice but to bring the matter before the boss himself.

The story, when it came out at last, was a strange one. A girl named O-Gin had said that this was not a matter for ordinary eyes or even for learned experts. She said only Zenigata Heiji could settle it, and she had even added that she wanted to see for herself whether the famous detective was really as young and handsome as people said. Hachigoro had lost a game and so had been forced to come as her messenger. Heiji pretended to be more annoyed than he really was, but in truth he already knew that Hachigoro often used such foolish talk to drag him into cases he might otherwise refuse.

“Where am I supposed to go?” he asked at last. Hachigoro straightened up proudly, happy that the first wall had fallen. He said the case concerned Shoji Izaemon of Azabu Roppongi, a wealthy landowner from an old family. Many years ago, before he became master of the house, Izaemon had made a servant girl bear him a daughter. The girl had been called O-Fuji, and for a short time she was kept near him, but after he took a proper wife, things became difficult inside the household.

At last the child was sent away. When O-Fuji was three years old, she was given with ten ryo to a farmer’s family in Chofu, under a hard promise that there would be no contact again for the rest of her life. In later years the old people of the house died, Izaemon became full master, and his business grew richer and stronger. But there was one sadness in the home. His wife O-Moyo, who had once been troubled by the presence of another woman’s child, never bore a child of her

own, and in time she came to believe that this was punishment for not raising her husband's daughter with kindness.

Then misfortune struck again. O-Moyo died suddenly the previous winter, falling in the kitchen while giving orders for the New Year cooking. She died so quickly that she could not even leave proper last words behind. Once she was gone, Izaemon had no reason to hide his old regret any longer. He decided to search for O-Fuji, bring her back, and marry her to his adopted heir Isaburo, so that the Shoji house might at last have a settled future.

But when men were sent to Chofu, they found only confusion. The farmer Jinbei, who had taken the child, had disappeared years before after some bad business, and the girl O-Fuji had been sent away even earlier. There seemed to be no trail left anywhere. Then, all at once, what should have been impossible happened. Two young women appeared, and each claimed to be the lost daughter of Shoji Izaemon.

Hachigoro grinned as he told this part, for he enjoyed the madness of it. One of the women was O-Gin, the lively girl who had spoken so boldly of Zenigata Heiji and who had been found in the Odawara direction by the chief clerk Kingoro. She was cheerful, quick, full of spirit, and not at all shy. The other was O-Fune, found from the Hachioji side by a different line of search. She was quieter, more modest in manner, and in some ways looked more like the daughter of a respectable old house. Before long the Shoji household had become a battlefield of smiles, tears, claims, doubts, and private plans.

"And each has proof," Hachigoro said, lowering his voice now that the foolish laughter had run out of him. O-Gin possessed a silver hairpin with a carved bamboo-gentian design and said it had come from her birth mother, the servant woman with whom Izaemon had once been involved. But nobody in the Shoji house actually remembered such a thing, and no firm story about it had been handed down, so its value as proof was weak. O-Fune, however, carried an old brass tag, green with age, and on it were words naming Shoji Izaemon of Azabu Roppongi and a daughter called O-Fuji, together with a birth date. That looked far stronger, at least on the surface.

Even so, the matter had not become simpler because of that. A strong piece of evidence can be true, but it can also be prepared by a clever hand. A weak piece of evidence can be false, but it can also be all that remains of a broken life. Hachigoro admitted that he himself could make nothing of it. He had seen both women, heard both sides, and come away more confused than before. The more he looked, the less he trusted his own eyes.

Zenigata Heiji listened to the whole story without laughing once. By the time Hachigoro finished, the case no longer sounded silly at all. A rich house without a true heir, one lost child, two women claiming the same name, and servants already taking sides—such things could not remain peaceful for long. Heiji rose at last and said they would go to Azabu Roppongi at once. If the Shoji house truly held two daughters where there should have been only one, then before long someone there would begin to fear the truth enough to kill for it.

Part 2

Four or five days passed, and the city changed fully into early summer. Young rice plants were being sold in the streets, and the warm wind carried their voices from far away. Then Hachigoro came bursting into Zenigata Heiji's house again, this time with no laughter on him at all. He cried that the master of the Shoji house, Shoji Izaemon, had been murdered. Heiji clicked his tongue, told him not to waste time blaming him, and at once prepared to go to Roppongi.

It was already past noon when they reached the great house. It was old, rich, and dark in the way old rich houses often are, with long shadows in the halls and secrets thick in the air. The adopted heir Isaburo came to meet them, together with the chief clerk Kingoro, but neither man looked deeply broken by grief. In the detached back room where Izaemon's body had been laid, the whole little knot of the case was waiting for them: Isaburo, Kingoro, the young ronin Iori Heitaro, and the two girls, O-Gin and O-Fune, each still claiming to be O-Fuji. Heiji lit incense for the dead, then looked at the body only once and understood a great deal.

The dead man's face had twisted in agony, and the skin and mouth told a clear story to trained eyes. He had been poisoned with arsenic, the common rat poison people called "Iwami silver-mine rat killer." Heiji returned the cover over the body and sat down without a word. Then he looked around the room slowly, making each face meet his own in turn. At last Kingoro, the chief clerk, began to explain what had happened the night before.

According to Kingoro, Izaemon had eaten supper alone in that room a little after six. A maid named O-Ito had served the meal, and at that time the master had been in especially good spirits. Later, near ten o'clock, he had followed his usual habit since his wife's death: he took a bath, warmed a little sake, and drank only one cup before bed because he often could not sleep. O-Ito prepared the sake early in the evening, but Izaemon himself heated it and drank it. Soon after lying down, he was seized with terrible pain, and though two doctors were called, nothing could save him before dawn.

Heiji asked where the bath was, how the rooms were connected, and who was allowed to attend the master at night. The answers all pointed toward O-Ito. She alone handled his small personal needs, and Izaemon had become difficult and suspicious in recent years. He trusted neither of the two girls calling themselves O-Fuji and allowed few people close to him after dark. Even so, Heiji did not show much surprise. A servant near the master is always the easiest person to blame in a house full of fear.

Just then the local detective Tomegoro burst in with the proud face of a man who thought the case already finished. He declared that there was no longer any need for help, because the poisoner had all but been found. In the bottom of a young maid's chest, wrapped in paper, his men had discovered leftover rat poison. Before long O-Ito was dragged into the room by the hair, crying that she knew nothing and asking why they were hurting her. She was only seventeen or eighteen, country-brown, simple-looking, and not polished like city girls, but she had the soft strength of an honest working girl.

Isaburo sprang up at once and begged for mercy, saying O-Ito could not have done such a thing. Tomegoro argued that she had served the meal and prepared

the night sake, and that the poison must have entered the food or drink between the kitchen and the dead man's room. Hachigoro began to object, but Heiji sharply silenced him. He said only that it was strange for a true poisoner to keep the used poison in her own chest where it could be found so easily. Even so, Tomegoro led O-Ito away under rope, determined to force a confession out of her.

The room felt different after she was gone. O-Gin, rounder and brighter than before, was the first to speak and said lightly that the poor girl was to be pitied. O-Fune said nothing, only lowered her eyes with a pale and sorrowful look that made her seem all the more delicate. Heitaro, the ronin who had brought O-Fune from Hachioji, watched everything with smooth self-control. Heiji noticed each of these reactions and stored them away without comment.

Then he rose and began examining the room and its outside carefully. The dead man's rooms were reached by a short corridor from the main house, and there were several points where people would naturally see anyone passing. Outside, the earth under the eaves was still soft from the long spring rains, yet there were no footprints at all. Only in one place near the eastern shutters was there a strange mark, as if a flat board about one foot wide and three feet long had briefly been laid on the ground. The rain shutters had all been fastened from inside, and the narrow transom spaces above them were far too small for a grown person to pass through.

Hachigoro checked the transom ledges from inside, standing on a step, but found no rubbed dust and no sign that anyone had climbed there. Isaburo explained that his father was severe even about cleaning and had the servants wipe every rail and beam; in fact, the transoms had been cleaned the very day before. Heiji next went through the bath side, the servants' rooms, the rooms of Isaburo, O-Gin, and O-Fune, and finally the kitchen. He asked for the remains of the sake, the bottle, and the cup, but everything had already been washed clean. There was not a drop left to test and not a stain left to study.

Standing in the corridor, Heiji asked Isaburo a question that made the young man uneasy. If one of the two girls was false, which one did he think it was, or at least which one did he like better? Isaburo answered honestly that he liked neither

of them. What troubled him more was O-Ito, because his late mother had cared for the girl as if she were her own daughter, and after his mother's death his father had come to rely on O-Ito for nearly everything. It was plain enough that Isaburo himself cared for the girl deeply as well, though he tried not to say so directly.

That answer sent Heiji's mind in a new direction. He asked whether a wet nurse had been hired when the little girl O-Fuji had lived in the house long ago. Isaburo said he believed one had indeed been taken from a farming family near Meguro, though he knew little more. At once Heiji ordered Hachigoro to find that woman and bring her in, and he also told him to arrange watchers for the two men who were supposed to investigate the stories of O-Gin and O-Fune in Odawara and Hachioji. If the truth of the lost child could be settled, he said, then the poisoner might show himself naturally.

Before leaving, Heiji questioned Kingoro and then O-Gin and Heitaro more closely about how the two girls had been found. Kingoro insisted that he had traced O-Gin honestly from Chofu to Odawara and then to an inn where she was working. O-Gin laughed and admitted freely that she had lived a hard life and now meant to enjoy wealth if fortune offered it. Heitaro spoke with more dignity, but he gave a different story entirely. He said the child had not been sold to a merchant at all, but to a traveling showman called Kiten-sai, and that after three months of searching he had finally found O-Fune in Hachioji and had paid fifty ryo to take her away.

Heiji then asked O-Fune herself, but she only twisted her thin body shyly and said little beyond what Heitaro had already said for her. The two pieces of proof were produced again. O-Gin had the silver hairpin carved with a bamboo-gentian design, said to have come from her birth mother, but no one in the house remembered such a thing. O-Fune had the far stronger-looking object: an old brass tag, green with age, engraved with the name of Shoji Izaemon of Azabu Roppongi, a daughter named O-Fuji, and the birth date. When Heiji left the house that day, he had opened many doors, but not one of them yet led straight to the truth.

Three more uneasy days went by. The clerk sent to Odawara had not returned, and the man sent toward Hachioji had not returned either. The Shoji house somehow managed to complete Izaemon's funeral, but the air inside only grew heavier. Isaburo, the ronin Iori Heitaro, and the two girls who both claimed to be O-Fuji all remained in the same house, looking at one another with silent distrust. It was as if the whole place were waiting for a second blow.

Then Hachigoro came back at last from his search for the old wet nurse. He had found her, but not in the state anyone had hoped for. Once she had lived near Meguro, then drifted to Honjo, and after that even farther away into poverty and forgetfulness. She was only forty-six, yet hardship had worn her down so badly that she could hardly remember her own name. Hachigoro complained bitterly that after four full days of work he had brought back someone who seemed to know no one at all.

Even so, the old woman, O-Moto, was taken to the Shoji house. But when O-Gin stood before her, she showed no sign of joy or recognition. When O-Fune was brought before her, it was the same. At last she even muttered that she did not know these people. Hachigoro was furious, but Zenigata Heiji only told him not to lose heart. A useless thing can sometimes become useful at the very moment when all other tools fail.

The next morning a boy came running from Roppongi with another message from Isaburo. This time it was the ronin Iori Heitaro who had been killed. Heiji and Hachigoro hurried there at once and were led to a room built onto the back of the shop. Heitaro lay on his back on the floor, dead from a single thrust to the heart made with his own short sword. His eyes were wide open, but his face held almost no sign of struggle, as if death had reached him before he even had time to cry out.

The room had been arranged to tell a simple story, but it told it too loudly. Muddy footprints ran across the tatami and the veranda, and one rain shutter had been roughly forced open from outside with a chisel. Bright midday sun poured in through the opening, making the whole scene look more like a performance

than a true midnight attack. Hachigoro at once said the name Kiten-sai, the traveling showman from whom O-Fune had supposedly been bought. Heiji ordered him to get news through the street showmen's world, but even before the answer came, doubt was already plain on his face.

Rokuboku's local detective soon came in and proudly reported that he had already sent out a full search for Kiten-sai. Heiji thanked him, but quietly said that the effort might only comfort the mind, not solve the crime. If a samurai had truly been attacked in his room by a dangerous outsider, it was strange that he had not raised any cry, stranger still that the intruder had taken such crude trouble to break open a shutter, and stranger than all that he had left such clumsy footprints everywhere. A real killer from outside would have killed more cleanly or escaped more naturally. The whole scene smelled of hands inside the house.

That was not all. Heiji had already heard Heitaro boast that Kiten-sai feared him and that he himself had forced the showman to give up O-Fune. Such a man was vain, weak, and full of stage words, but not altogether a fool. If danger truly threatened him from outside, he should have been more wary. Instead he had died in a room made to look invaded after the fact. The more Heiji looked, the more he felt that Heitaro had not been killed by an old enemy from the road, but silenced by someone much nearer.

While these thoughts were turning in his mind, another small thing happened that mattered more than the bloody room. Someone came softly to the edge of the old nurse's room and sank down at the threshold. The figure bowed with both hands to the floor and muttered something under the breath. Then that person lifted the eyes, and the old woman O-Moto, who had seemed empty only moments before, suddenly spoke out in a quick, startled voice. "Ah, you are—?" she said, and then at once turned away in confusion, shaking her gray head and hiding behind broken words.

It was only a tiny scene, and anyone less watchful than Zenigata Heiji might have missed it. But he did not miss such things. A woman who could not remember either claimant to the Shoji name had responded in a different way to this visitor at the threshold. The reaction was faint, uncertain, and quickly gone,

but it was real. Heiji gave no sign that he had noticed, and he asked no questions yet. Instead he stored the moment away and let the house go on pretending that nothing had happened.

After that he sent Hachigoro home. There was no point in filling the house with noise, and no use in letting the others know that one loose thread had begun to move under his fingers. Heiji himself remained behind in the Shoji house, saying only that he wished to watch the course of things a little longer. That day passed quietly, and the next day did too. Even on the third day nothing broke, and after the funeral of Heitaro the house fell into an uneasy stillness, more dangerous than open confusion.

During that time Heiji spoke gently with the worn-out nurse and tried to stir the old ashes of her memory. When he and Isaburo handled her with patience instead of force, they began to draw out broken pieces from the past. The servant who had borne the child had been named O-Shino. O-Shino had owned a silver hairpin carved with a bamboo-gentian design. And O-Moto herself remembered having a brass lost-child tag made for little O-Fuji and placing it secretly in a charm bag for her. Those small fragments struck Heiji like light from two different sides at once.

Then, late that same night, the old nurse remembered one thing more. When the child had been sent away, some toys and little clothes had been left behind because everything could not be carried. O-Moto, dismissed from service soon after, had hidden those things in a black lacquer box in the corner of the storehouse, keeping them as a kind of memory of the child she had raised. Heiji and Isaburo went there at once, found the box exactly where she said, and opened it. Looking down at those untouched little things from sixteen years before, Heiji made his decision. He gathered the household and announced that on the following day the contents of the box would be used to decide which girl was truly O-Fuji. Then, with the whole house listening in silence, the next turn of the case began to move.

Part 4

The next morning the people of the Shoji house gathered again in the back eight-mat room. The black lacquer box stood before them, quiet and closed, like a little coffin full of an old life. Zenigata Heiji said that inside it were the toys and clothes that had belonged to O-Fuji until the day she was sent away at three years old. He told O-Gin and O-Fune to write down whatever things they remembered from that box. Both women bent over their papers at once and wrote without too much trouble.

Then, to the surprise of everyone in the room, Heiji turned to O-Ito as well. He said she had never claimed to be O-Fuji, but there was a reason he wanted her to write too. O-Ito stepped back in fear and said she knew nothing, but Heiji did not press her roughly. He only held up the black box and asked whether it seemed familiar, whether she remembered any toy she had once loved, any little thing from long ago. At last, trembling like a child called out in class, she said she remembered a large ball sewn in red, blue, purple, and yellow thread, and she also remembered a red sash being put away in the black box.

Those simple words changed the whole room. They did not sound like the talk of a scheming woman trying to gain a rich house. They sounded like pieces that had floated up from the bottom of the heart. Heiji nodded without showing too much at once. Then he opened the box before everyone and brought out the old things one by one. There, among the little clothes and toys saved from sixteen years before, were exactly the bright ball and the red sash O-Ito had spoken of.

O-Ito stared at them as if she were looking into a dream. Her face changed little by little, and tears gathered in her eyes before she seemed to know why. Isaburo too stood frozen, for the thing he had feared and hoped at the same time was now beginning to stand before him in plain form. Heiji then said quietly that the true O-Fuji had not come forward boldly with a token or a clever story. She had been in the house from the start, poor, faithful, and without any idea of her own birth. The old lullaby and the black box had called her memory back when nothing else could.

After that, Heiji no longer needed to be gentle. He turned first toward O-Gin and said that she too was false. She was not the foster child from Chofu at all, but

only a country girl from near Odawara. The silver bamboo-gentian hairpin had been arranged as false proof, and the chief clerk Kingoro had already confessed as much. O-Gin was only a made-up daughter, pushed forward by another person's greed. At those words she lost her bright color and sat with her face bent low.

Then Heiji faced O-Fune, and his voice became even harder. He said she was not O-Fuji either, but a girl acrobat from Kiten-sai's traveling show. Kiten-sai had had her fifteen years earlier, while the real O-Fuji had left the farmer Jinbei's hands only thirteen years ago. That alone broke her claim. The old brass lost-child tag meant nothing, he added, because such a thing could be made at any time and aged with sour plum vinegar until green rust rose upon it.

But Heiji did not stop with proving that O-Fune was false. He said she was also the poisoner of Shoji Izaemon. Because she had learned escape tricks in the showman's world and had a narrow, flexible body, she could slip through the transom above the shutters. While Izaemon was in the bath, she had entered the room and put rat poison into the sake bottle. The strange board mark in the garden had explained the rest: Iori Heitaro had stood on the board outside, and O-Fune had used his shoulders to reach the transom without leaving footprints in the mud.

O-Fune, cornered at last, clung to the brass tag as her final hope, but it was already useless. Heiji said that when she feared her true history would be exposed, she killed Izaemon to protect herself. Later, after she had begun dreaming of becoming the daughter of the house and the wife of Isaburo, Heitaro himself became a burden. So she killed him too. First she had tried to throw suspicion on O-Ito, and when Heitaro died, she tried to turn everyone toward Kiten-sai. But the second murder could only have been done by a woman inside the house, one whom Heitaro trusted enough to let near him without fear.

That was the end of O-Fune's false beauty. Under Heiji's words her face seemed to lose all life, and the thin grace of her body turned cold and ugly. The lovely, silent girl who had looked like a sad princess from an old tale now stood stripped of every covering but fear. No one in the room spoke for her. Even those who had pitied her before could no longer mistake what she was. She was not

only a liar, but a deadly woman who had killed twice for place and safety.

When the storm had passed, Hachigoro later begged Zenigata Heiji to explain the whole thing from beginning to end. Heiji said that O-Gin had been Kingoro's false daughter, while O-Fune had been Heitaro's lover and fellow plotter. Once O-Fune saw Isaburo and the rich future before her, she grew tired of Heitaro and closed his mouth forever. He also said that the muddy prints in Heitaro's room had been too carefully made, which was why the false break-in never fully fooled him. Hachigoro shivered and said O-Fune was a frightening woman indeed.

Then Heiji's voice softened. He said that women like O-Fune were rare in the world, and that there were also girls like O-Ito. Hachigoro asked what he meant, and Heiji only laughed. He had seen enough to know that O-Ito's quiet heart and Isaburo's loyal concern were already turning toward each other. The true daughter had been found, the innocent girl had been saved, and the house that had nearly been destroyed by lies and poison still had one honest road left before it.

So the strange case of the lullaby came to its true end. It was not loud proof or proud claims that brought out the truth, but an old song, a forgotten box, a child's bright ball, and a red sash remembered through tears. That was why Zenigata Heiji, after carrying the full weight of the case, could finally laugh again with a free heart. And in the deep quiet after so much fear, the old lullaby seemed still to remain in the air, carrying the true O-Fuji back at last to the home from which she had once been sent away.

Letters on a Comb [Kushi no Moji]

Part 1

“Boss, what a fine day it is,” Hachigoro said. Zenigata Heiji looked at him at once and answered that such sweet talk from Hachigoro could only mean one thing. Either he wanted money, a meal, or help with some woman. Hachigoro swore that it was none of those things, though he added with his usual foolish pride that he had plenty of money, had eaten well, and had so many girls following him that his life was almost in danger. Heiji told him to stop talking nonsense before he lost his patience.

But Hachigoro was not there only to joke. From inside his robe he took out a small object wrapped carefully in cloth and placed it in Heiji’s hand. It was an old-fashioned large tortoiseshell comb, smooth and amber-colored, still handsome despite its age. Hachigoro said that it had belonged to the dead mother of a young wife at a teahouse near Yosenji in Yanaka. The mother had died a year and a half earlier, and only now had the comb finally been passed on as a keepsake. Yet the young wife felt uneasy about it, because faint scratches on the surface looked almost like writing.

Zenigata Heiji turned the comb in the light and studied it from several angles. At first the marks were hard to make out, but once he had seen them he could not unsee them. They were too steady to be random scratches and too regular to be the work of chance. He said they had probably been cut with a fine metal tool rather than an ordinary sewing needle, because the lines were too clean. Hachigoro asked him at once to read the writing, but Heiji said that in its present state no one could read it clearly.

So he washed the comb carefully to remove the oil and dirt that had gathered on it over time. Then he took thick black ink and spread it over the whole surface. Hachigoro stared, half admiring and half worried that the keepsake might be ruined, but Heiji only told him to wait. When the ink had dried enough, he wiped it off with soft paper, and the black remained only in the cut lines. At once the

hidden letters stood out clear and dark before their eyes.

“There are nineteen characters,” Heiji said, reading them aloud. The string of sounds made no sense to Hachigoro, who at once joked that perhaps it was a prayer or a charm against burns. Heiji told him sharply not to be a fool. This was some kind of secret message, almost certainly cut into the comb by the dead mother because she wanted to leave her daughter a warning that could not be read openly. That thought alone made the little keepsake feel colder and heavier in the hand.

Hachigoro then began eagerly naming every kind of hidden writing he had ever heard of, hoping one of them might fit. Zenigata Heiji listened, frowned, and thought in silence. At last Hachigoro shouted that the first sounds must mean “Asakusa,” but Heiji waved that away and said the matter was not so simple. He explained that the message had to be read by following the old iroha order in a staggered pattern, moving forward and backward in turns. Then, after testing the method on paper, he wrote down the true meaning in one short line: “The letter is in Matashichi’s charm bag.”

That changed the whole affair at once. A hidden message is one thing, but a hidden letter inside a dead boy’s charm bag is another. The name Matashichi meant nothing at first, but the young wife at the teahouse was the key, so the two men went straight to Yosenji. There they found not the wife herself, but an older woman staying behind at the shop. She told them that the young wife had already rushed back to her family home because her younger brother, Matashichi, had died the night before. His home, she said, was the house of a great landowner named Naka Manzo in Sendagi.

Zenigata Heiji and Hachigoro knew the name well. Naka Manzo’s house was one of the big farming-rich homes in that part of Edo, famous for land and money. The two men went there at once, but before entering the main house, Heiji sent Hachigoro to bring out the teahouse wife, O-Haru, so he could ask her a few quiet questions away from the others. She came out young and pretty, lively in face yet firm in character, and she answered plainly when he spoke of her dead brother. Matashichi, she said, had not seemed sick at all the day before, and the family

doctor himself did not really understand why he had died. The temple was even hesitating to take the body, which made the whole thing still more troubling.

When Zenigata Heiji asked about the charm bag, O-Haru said that none had been found on the boy's body. He then told her what the comb's hidden words had said, and the color changed in her face at once. She had received the comb, she said, through the young clerk Otokichi, who claimed that her dead mother had once entrusted it to him, though for some reason he had forgotten about it for a long time. Heiji also asked about her mother's illness, her death, and the woman named O-Tora who had entered the house afterward. O-Haru answered that her mother had died rather quickly, that she had always spoken as if she were happy, and that after O-Tora came, her stepfather had slowly changed.

Those answers were enough to make the whole house smell wrong to Zenigata Heiji. He told O-Haru to return first so that people would not wonder why she was talking with a detective outside. Then he and Hachigoro entered the great house of Naka Manzo. It was rich but rough, grand in size yet somehow cold and unpleasant, with heavy wood, awkward furnishings, and a feeling of false goodness in the air. When they were taken to the room where the boy lay dead, Zenigata Heiji lifted the cloth from Matashichi's face, looked once, and knew at once that the child had not died a natural death.

Part 2

Zenigata Heiji lowered the cloth over Matashichi's face and sat back on his heels. The boy had not died from sickness, and the room itself already seemed to know that. His face had been twisted by pain, his eyes had pushed forward, and there was old blood where he had bitten his own lips. Hachigoro, staring hard, muttered that the boy must have been strangled, but Heiji shook his head. There were no clear marks on the throat. "Not strangled," he said quietly. "His breath was stopped. He may have been smothered with bedding."

The old chief clerk Wasuke answered the next questions. He said the boy had been cheerful the day before and had played outside with neighborhood children

as usual. When Heiji asked whether Matashichi slept alone, the answer was no. The boy was timid and usually shared the room with the young clerk Otokichi. That one fact mattered at once, because it meant the murderer had not entered a child's lonely room in the dark. Something had happened on the one night when the usual arrangement was broken.

So Heiji turned to Otokichi and made him tell the story carefully, with no loose words and no guessing. Otokichi said he had gone the previous night to Yanaka, to the teahouse of O-Haru, and because it had grown late and the roads were dangerous, he had stayed there for the night. His errand had two parts. First, he had been asked to bring fifteen ryo that O-Haru needed for goods for the teahouse. Second, Matashichi had asked him to tell his sister that he wished to consult her and wanted her to come the next day if possible. Otokichi's explanation was smooth, modest, and neatly ordered from beginning to end.

The more he spoke, the more useful and trustworthy he seemed. He had served in the house fifteen or sixteen years, he said, not merely as a servant but as a distant relative under special favor. His face was strong, his manner gentle, and he had the easy softness that makes people want to lean on a man. Even so, one sentence of his stayed in Heiji's mind. Before the detective himself had said anything about the hidden message, Otokichi mentioned that Matashichi's charm bag was missing and added that the boy's dead mother had always made him keep it carefully. That could be innocent. It could also mean he already knew exactly where suspicion would go.

Heiji then asked about the dead mother, O-Haru's mother and Matashichi's as well. Otokichi said she had been a fine woman and that her death, a year and a half earlier, had felt too quick even then. She had taken to bed and died in only three days. He smiled sadly when he said it, but the sadness sat on his face like something practiced. Heiji did not challenge him yet. Instead he let the words sink into the room and listened to the silence that followed.

It was then that another figure crashed into the scene. A woman's loud voice came before the woman herself, sharp and fast and too familiar with all corners of the house. She was O-Tora, twenty-eight years old, now living close to Manzo

under the name of a household helper, though everyone plainly understood that she was more than that. She had once moved through rough pleasure quarters, and all the color, wit, and danger of that life still clung to her. Her face was lively and bold, but her body had already been worn down by years of hard living, and that contrast made her somehow more unpleasant, not less.

Hachigoro disliked her on sight, and Heiji did not trouble to hide his own suspicion. He asked where she had been the previous night, and O-Tora answered at once that she had spent the whole night in the master Manzo's room and that they could ask him if there was any doubt. She tried to laugh and plead and flatter all at once, but none of it softened the air. Heiji told Hachigoro to keep watch on her and said that he himself would inspect her room. O-Tora protested immediately, saying she was untidy and would be ashamed to have anyone see the place, but that only made Heiji more willing to look.

Hachigoro pulled her back before she could follow. She gave in at last and dropped down in anger, while Heiji went with Otokichi to the room. It was a small six-mat room made to look stylish in a cheap way, with a round window and many little touches that wanted to seem fine. But the actual condition of the room was dreadful. Clothes, trinkets, costume pieces, and cosmetics lay everywhere in disorder, and the whole space smelled of grease, sweat, and powder mixed together. Heiji looked around it once and said that searching such a place properly could waste half a day.

He was already about to give up and leave when Otokichi quietly drew his attention to one thing inside the closet. In the middle of all that dirt and confusion sat a handbox that looked strangely clean. Everything else in the room had been tossed about, stained, or handled carelessly, but this one small box had been kept neat, almost with respect. Heiji stopped at once and turned back. In a room where disorder shouted from every corner, such cleanliness was louder than a cry.

That was enough for the moment. Heiji did not yet say what he expected to find or whom he truly suspected. But as he stood there with Otokichi beside him and the smell of O-Tora's room heavy in the air, the case no longer seemed scattered. The dead boy, the missing charm bag, the dead mother's hidden comb,

the too-smooth clerk, the worn-out mistress, and the rich master whose house had turned cold all belonged to one knot. And Zenigata Heiji had just put his fingers on the thread that would tighten it.

Part 3

Zenigata Heiji did not open the folded paper in front of Otokichi. He saw at once that the young clerk was trying too hard to watch without seeming to watch, and that alone was enough to make him careful. So he slipped the paper back into the little charm bag and hid the whole thing inside his robe. Then he told Otokichi to inform Hachigoro that the missing bag had been found and that he himself would look over the outside of the house. He spoke lightly, as if nothing had happened, but in truth the case had just changed shape in his hands.

He walked out into the garden and called over the old chief clerk Wasuke. The old man answered every question in the dull, respectful way of a servant who has spent long years in one house and forgotten how to think outside it. He said the master Manzo was very strict about locks and shutters and made a full round of the house every evening. He also said there was one strange thing about the dead boy's room: the rain shutters had been closed in the morning, yet the bars and the ring-latch were not set. Everyone in the house had decided that the boy must have opened them himself during the night because he felt unwell.

Heiji made Wasuke show him the exact place. The earth outside had been dry and hard for days, and there were no footprints, no dragged marks, and no sign that anyone had forced an entrance from outside. The shutters themselves bore no scratches, and the sill was sound. Then Manzo came out and repeated firmly that he had checked the whole house the night before and had certainly seen the room shut. That statement mattered even more than he knew. If the shutters had been opened after the master's round, then someone inside the house had either entered by invitation or been let in by the boy himself.

Zenigata Heiji now knew enough to stop searching and start laying a trap. He ordered that all members of the household be brought together in the room

beside Matashichi's body. Soon they were all there: Manzo the master, O-Tora the woman who had come into the house after the death of the first wife, O-Haru the married daughter, her husband Jisaburo, old Wasuke, and the young clerk Otokichi. Hachigoro joined them too, full of restless questions, but Heiji gave him only one warning glance, and the big man fell quiet. The room felt tight and airless, like a place waiting for a storm to break.

Heiji first held up the tortoiseshell comb. He explained that the hidden letters on it had at first looked like the work of a woman scratching with a needle, but that was false. The lines were too even, too steady, and too clean. They had been cut with a small metal tool, the kind used by craftsmen. He then repeated the message he had already solved: "A letter is in Matashichi's charm bag." Every person in the room changed color a little, though not all for the same reason.

Then he took out the charm bag and said that it had indeed been missing from the boy's body. He went on calmly, almost cruelly slowly, saying that after a little search he had found it inside O-Tora's neat handbox, the one single tidy thing in her wild room. O-Tora cried out at once, but her cry sounded more like fear than anger. Heiji unfolded the paper at last and said he would read it aloud so that everyone could hear. A silence heavier than grief settled over the room.

The letter said that the dead first wife had feared she would soon be murdered. She wrote that one night she had opened her eyes and found someone sitting on top of her with a dagger at her throat. She also wrote that her medicine had lately begun to taste strangely bitter and that she was growing weaker day by day. At the end came the sharpest line of all: after seeing the face of the person who meant to kill her, she had given up hope, and that person was her own husband. When the reading ended, Manzo sprang up in horror and stammered that it was impossible.

But Zenigata Heiji did not let the room fall upon the master. He raised his hand and said that everyone could calm themselves because the letter was false. The hidden writing on the comb was not made by a woman, he said, and the paper inside the charm bag was far too new to have been kept for a year and a half in the bag of an active young boy. It held no sweat smell, no body stain, no old crease of long use. The whole thing had been prepared recently by a man who wanted

the message found now, not long ago. In other words, someone had planted the charm bag in O-Tora's box and had pushed the comb through Hachigoro's hands in order to make Zenigata Heiji himself accuse Manzo.

No one moved. Even Hachigoro, who loved nothing better than to burst out with a thought, kept still. Heiji went on and said that the murder of Matashichi had been done for the same purpose. The boy had been killed so that blame would fall either on the master or on O-Tora. The false letter would strike the master, the hidden bag in the woman's box would strike O-Tora, and the dead child would help the whole lie look real. But there was one flaw in the plan. The killer was not a woman at all. He was a man, and he had come to the boy's window by night, called to him softly, and been let in because lonely children open doors for voices they know and trust.

At that, Zenigata Heiji's eyes flashed across the room and came to rest on one face. "Hachigoro," he said sharply, "be ready. The man is frightened now, and frightened men run before they think." The room seemed to stop breathing. One body leaned, one foot shifted, and one shadow drew back toward the open side of the room. In that instant, before anyone else even understood what was happening, the true shape of the trap at last stood clear in Zenigata Heiji's mind.

Part 4

The room had gone so still that even the breathing of the people inside seemed to stop. Then, before anyone else could move, one man broke from the line and ran for the garden side. He moved fast, but fear had made him careless. Hachigoro was already waiting for just that moment, and he threw himself after the fleeing figure with a roar. The two men crashed into the ground outside like fighting dogs, rolled once across the dirt, and a moment later Hachigoro had his knee on the man's back and rope biting into his wrists.

"You miserable devil," Hachigoro shouted as he pulled the knots tight. When the others reached the doorway and saw the prisoner clearly, shock ran through them like cold water. It was not O-Tora. It was not the master Manzo. It was not

some hidden outsider from the road. It was Otokichi, the smooth young clerk, the very man who had guided Zenigata Heiji through the house, offered useful hints at every turn, and tried hardest of all to shape the case with his own hands.

O-Tora gave a cry and covered her mouth with both hands. Manzo stood as if turned into wood, his broad face empty and stunned. O-Haru swayed where she sat, one hand pressed against the floor, her face white with horror and shame. Otokichi himself said nothing at first. He only stared upward with the wild eyes of a trapped animal, all his fine manners torn away in one instant.

Zenigata Heiji did not raise his voice. He stood over the bound man and said quietly that the case had been ugly from the start because it had been built out of layers of lies. The false path began with the comb. Whoever carved those hidden letters had not wanted to protect a dying woman's secret. He had wanted the comb to pass through Hachigoro's hands, reach Heiji's eyes, and force the detective himself to dig out a false "last letter" and accuse the master of the house.

That was why the comb had smelled wrong from the first moment. The writing on it was too firm and too neatly cut to be the weak scratching of a sick woman using a sewing needle in secret. It had been made with a craftsman's tool by a steady hand. And the so-called letter hidden in Matashichi's charm bag was wrong too. It was too clean, too fresh, too ready, and too perfectly placed to have slept for a year and a half against the body of an active young boy.

"A real dying message does not try so hard to be found," Zenigata Heiji said. "A real letter also does not wait for one and a half years and then choose the most useful hour to appear." The planted bag in O-Tora's handbox had been made to strike in two directions at once. The false letter pointed toward Manzo. The place where the bag was hidden pointed toward O-Tora. If Heiji had been just a little less careful, the house would have broken apart under those two accusations and the true killer would have stood behind the confusion smiling.

But the death of Matashichi destroyed the trick instead of saving it. The boy had not opened the shutter for a stranger. The ground outside showed no forced way in, the wood had no real damage, and the shutter had only been left unsecured. A lonely child who feared the dark would never rise in the middle of the night and

let in a wandering killer. He would do it only for a voice he knew well, a voice he trusted without thought, a voice that spoke to him as part of the household.

That voice could only have been Otokichi's. He had slept in the boy's room on most nights. He carried messages between the main house and O-Haru's teahouse. He stood close to everyone and seemed useful to everyone, which made him the most dangerous kind of man in such a case. Matashichi had surely opened the shutter gladly, thinking the familiar young clerk had come to tell him something in secret, and that trust had led him straight into death.

Hachigoro, still breathing hard from the struggle, asked how Heiji had known so early that Otokichi smelled bad. Zenigata Heiji answered that the man had spoken too well from the beginning. He had mentioned the missing charm bag before anyone else had reason to think much of it. He had guided the search toward O-Tora's room. He had even helped draw attention to the one clean handbox in that wild place, as if he could not bear to leave discovery to chance. A truly innocent man does not usually prepare the detective's path with such care.

As for what Otokichi hoped to gain in the end, Zenigata Heiji said he did not need every dark thought in the man's heart to solve the crime. It was enough to know that he meant to ruin the master, drag O-Tora down with him, and stand safely above the wreck he himself had made. Perhaps he believed confusion would open the house and its money to him. Perhaps he thought some old grudge or hidden desire would finally be satisfied. But whatever dream he had been feeding, it had ended now with rope on his wrists and mud on his face.

After Otokichi was taken away to the watch house, Zenigata Heiji and Hachigoro walked slowly back toward Kanda. The early summer air was clear, and the young leaves on the rise toward Hongo looked bright enough to drip. Hachigoro kept shaking his head and saying that he still could not get over it. Zenigata Heiji answered with a tired smile that from the moment he first saw that comb, he had felt the stink of human trickery on it. Too much labor had gone into that hidden writing, and too much timing had gone into its arrival. That was never the smell of truth.

So the case of the letters on the comb came to its true end. The dead mother's

name had been used for a lie, the lonely boy had been murdered to support that lie, and the false clues had been set with cruel care. Yet in the end the very neatness of the scheme betrayed its maker. The comb had tried to point one way, but Zenigata Heiji followed the hand that carved it instead.

Death of a Mermaid [Ningyo no Shi]

Part 1

“Garappachi, where are you taking me?” Zenigata Heiji asked as he followed Hachigoro through the late afternoon streets. Hachigoro only grinned and said that the boss should come quietly and trust him for once. He promised that Heiji would not regret it. Heiji answered that Hachigoro’s ideas of pleasure were often dangerous and that he did not wish to be dragged to see some monstrous beast caught in the mountains. Even while joking, however, he let himself be led along.

The two men had been on some ordinary errand in Kameido and were returning by way of East Ryogoku. It was around four in the afternoon, when the first shadow of evening had only just begun to soften the early summer light. Hachigoro finally brought him to a crude show tent in the entertainment district. It was one of those temporary places made quickly with straw mat walls and noisy signs, the sort that looked cheap from a distance and yet could swallow whole crowds of curious people. In front hung a painted board showing a beautiful woman fighting a dragon under the sea.

At the entrance stood two people calling in customers. One was a loud, older woman who shouted with easy skill and quick charm. The other was a strong young man, silent by nature or perhaps merely dull, who did nothing but ring the wooden entrance board and repeat, “Come in, come in, now is the very best part.” The strange mix of shrill selling cries and that flat repeated call already made the place feel wrong. Heiji stopped there and frowned. He said the whole thing smelled unpleasant before one even stepped inside.

Hachigoro, however, was delighted with himself. He took hold of Heiji’s arm and urged him on, saying that the show was truly worth seeing and that the boss should at least look once before speaking badly of it. So Heiji let himself be pulled inside. The tent was larger than it had looked from outside, perhaps fifty or sixty tsubo, and at its center stood a large square tank filled with slightly cloudy water. Though the show tent itself was rough and temporary, the tank had been made

strong and solid, as if the whole business depended on that one thing.

Above the tank was a small stage. There sat the two stars of the show, two young women called O-Matsu and O-Mura. Both were dressed in matching purple robes with red sashes, and one played the shamisen while the other played a bamboo flute. They were said to be ama from Shido in Sanuki, but nothing in their appearance suggested rough fisherwomen hardened by wind and salt. They looked instead like carefully raised beauties, eighteen or nineteen, perhaps twenty at most, with smooth white skin, shining black hair, and healthy charm that seemed to rise from their whole bodies.

One of the two, O-Matsu, was a little more slender and elegant in face. The other, O-Mura, had a fuller and more sensual beauty, rich with youth and strong life. Heiji could see at once why the whole city had fallen for them. Their beauty was too open, too direct, and too physical to ignore. Around them the crowd leaned forward with hungry eyes, while Hachigoro rubbed his hands as if he himself had organized the performance and was proud of its success. He told Heiji that even in hard times people gladly paid twelve mon to enter, and that alone proved how popular the thing had become.

Besides the two women there was a man in formal costume serving as announcer, a quick and lively fellow with an actor's ease in his movements. His eyebrows were painted in a comic shape, and blue paint darkened his shaved head and upper lip, but even under that foolish appearance his face was intelligent. He moved across the stage with light, professional skill, speaking in a clear, practiced voice. There were perhaps two or three hundred people filling the seats built around the tank, and everyone's eyes were fixed on the stage. The whole place pulsed with cheap excitement.

The performance began with songs. The two women played and sang several popular Edo tunes, though nothing about them smelled of Sanuki at all. The audience listened gladly enough, but everyone knew this was only preparation. At last the announcer stepped forward and raised his voice. He spoke of a legend from old times, of ama diving to the bottom of the sea to seize a precious jewel from the Dragon King, and he said that while in the old story there had been only

one ama, in this tent there would be two, both equally beautiful, both diving into the water to seek the shining jewel.

While he joked that the bottom of the tank went all the way down to the Dragon Palace and invited unbelievers to jump in and test it, the two women stood up. Then, before the whole crowd, they untied their red sashes and removed their robes. There was no trick to it, and no attempt to hide them with any false modesty. Their only covering was a strip of red cloth at the waist. They stood on the edge of the tank with one hand holding the chest and the other managing the fluttering cloth, their long black hair sliding over white shoulders as the crowd stirred in excitement.

Even Heiji, who was not easily led by such things, felt the force of the scene. It was not simply that the women were beautiful. It was the deliberate way the performance used beauty, danger, water, and shame together. The announcer then brought out two daggers and handed one to each woman. The blades looked sharp enough to cut flesh easily, and because the women had to free a hand to receive them, the crowd gave a broken, uneven burst of applause that sounded more excited than joyful. Hachigoro, beside himself, whispered again that the show was remarkable.

At the signal, the women leaped into the water. Music crashed from behind the curtain, and the old man beating the gong peered anxiously at the tank while striking it. Later Heiji would learn that this uneasy old man was Fujiroku, the master of the troupe and husband of the loud woman at the entrance. Beneath the surface the two women swam like living fish, their black hair and white limbs crossing in the greenish water. One rose while the other sank, one moved toward the carved wooden dragon at the far side while the other blocked the way, and the red cloth at their waists flashed through the dim water like drifting fire.

The tank, Heiji noticed, had been divided into two sections. At the far side, beyond a rough grating, stood a carved red dragon with a gold-colored jewel in its mouth. The water had been left slightly muddy, perhaps to make the tank seem deeper than it was, and near the bottom of the grating there was only a small opening through which a person could slip. The audience could not clearly see

that lower part from above, and that fact stayed in Heiji's mind. This was not merely a show of swimming and beauty. It was a carefully arranged machine for making the audience see one thing and miss another.

After circling and struggling for a while in the water, O-Mura won the contest. She forced O-Matsu upward, slipped through the lower opening in the grating, approached the dragon, and rose holding the glittering jewel high above the water in one hand and the dagger in the other. The crowd roared in delight, and the announcer danced foolishly across the stage in celebration. Then came the final sight of the act: the two young women climbing out of the tank, soaked and shining, with wet black hair hanging like seaweed and the red cloth at their waists clinging to every curve of their bodies. There was no need for words. The whole house seemed drunk on the sight.

But Heiji had already gone cold. He said nothing for a moment, then told Hachigoro that he had seen enough. When they stepped back outside into the air, Hachigoro protested and begged to stay longer, but Heiji told him sharply that there was something deeply unpleasant about that tent. He did not yet know what it was, only that the place had the wrong feel. It was too well made in the important parts, too cunning in the use of the half-clouded water, and too eager to drag the crowd into a kind of dirty excitement. "This is not something for decent Edo men to enjoy," he said, and the two of them made their way back toward Kanda, one still thrilled, the other already uneasy.

Part 2

The very next day, a little after noon, Hachigoro came rolling into Zenigata Heiji's house in such a state that he could hardly speak. Heiji at first scolded him for making noise as usual, but one look at the man's face told him this was not the old foolish panic. Hachigoro blurted out that one of the sea women from the Ryogoku show had been killed in the tank itself. The words struck Heiji at once, because the ugly feeling he had taken away from the tent the day before now rose before him again with sharp meaning.

Hachigoro then forced himself to tell the story properly. The show had opened as always in the late morning and quickly filled with paying customers. Near noon, when the act reached the same point as on the previous day, O-Matsu and O-Mura had taken their daggers, leaped into the tank, and begun the underwater contest for the jewel in the dragon's mouth. Then, just as O-Matsu slipped through the lower opening in the grating to move toward the dragon, the water suddenly turned red around her. Frightening bubbles rose, her body twisted in the water, and for a moment she seemed caught in the opening itself like a fish trapped in a net.

Hachigoro said the sight had been terrible beyond words. O-Matsu's black hair moved in the water like seaweed, and her white body, wrapped only in the red cloth at the waist, seemed to burn inside the clouding water. Several times her face turned upward in a horrible shape, staring at something as if she hated it even while dying. Somehow she pulled free, rose once near the dragon, and then sank again, while the whole tank went redder and redder. Even Hachigoro, who loved noise and excitement, could not laugh through such a memory.

O-Mura, meanwhile, had floated blankly on the near side of the grating with her dagger still in her hand. The moment she saw O-Matsu writhing in the blood-dark water, she scrambled out of the tank like an animal chased by fire and collapsed on the stage in a faint. For an instant the onlookers thought she too had been cut, because red drops seemed to cling to her, but she had no wound. Then the announcer, Seiji, jumped into the tank without stopping to undress, and Fujiroku, the gong-beating master of the troupe, leaned down from above to help pull O-Matsu out. By then she was already almost gone. Her body had been split in a straight line from chest to belly, she had swallowed water, and after moving her lips only once or twice, she died without a clear word.

The crowd, Hachigoro said, had become like a little hell. Women and children screamed, spectators pushed and fled, and the whole tent turned into one mad confusion. He had shown his jitte, ordered the master to close the entrance, and kept the members of the troupe from scattering before running to fetch Heiji. But instead of praise, he received a hard blast of anger. Zenigata Heiji told him

that a man who had just been given a jitte was no child to run from a murder scene in fright, and that if the killer escaped while he was absent, the shame would fall not only on Hachigoro but on Heiji as well.

Stung to the bone, Hachigoro ran back at once and began doing what he could in the closed tent. Fujiroku, the master, was drooping with grief and fear, partly because O-Matsu was dead and partly because a rich and popular show had suddenly become cursed. The local officer had not yet arrived, and Ishihara no Risuke, who worked that district, was still away on other business. So Hachigoro, standing as straight as he could and trying to look equal to his new post, questioned everyone connected with the performance.

What he learned seemed simple enough at first. Fujiroku and his wife were from Sagami, and with the clever advice of their young manager Seiji they had hired two water-skilled beauties and built the show around them. Seiji, the announcer, had once been a fisherman in Misaki, could read a little, and was far sharper than his painted comic face suggested. O-Matsu and O-Mura were also Sagami women, equally beautiful and equally loose in their affections, and lately there had even been talk that both were hot for a local pleasure-seeker called Saizo of Haraniwa. Besides them there were only temporary musicians and the quiet doorkeeper Hyakumatsu, who was from the same area as O-Matsu and clearly adored her, though he was too ugly and too shy to speak to young women freely.

The bare facts of the killing seemed to point only one way. When O-Matsu was cut, the only person in the water with her was O-Mura. More than that, O-Mura had been close beside her in the deep part of the tank near the entrance toward the dragon section, and she had still been holding a dagger when she came up. Hachigoro therefore felt that no one else had even the chance to strike the blow. When Ishihara no Risuke finally arrived and heard the whole story, he agreed almost at once and said there was no point in overthinking it. O-Mura, he said, should be tied at once and handed over to higher officers for beating and questioning.

So O-Mura was bound and taken, and for a short while the case appeared solved. Yet before three days had passed, that easy answer began to rot away in

everyone's hands. O-Mura denied the crime no matter how hard she was pressed, and the physical facts also fought against the charge. The dagger she had carried looked sharp, but in truth it had no cutting edge, and no woman could have used such a blunted stage weapon to carve open a body from chest to belly in one straight terrible line.

There was another problem too, and it was even worse. The fight in the water had not been a real struggle but part of the fixed routine of the show, and all the witnesses agreed that O-Matsu had been cut at the moment when O-Mura was above and away from her, too far to reach her belly properly. Hundreds of eyes had watched that part, so the point could not easily be waved aside. One might imagine that O-Mura had hidden a second real knife and thrown it away, but that too failed, because she had come out of the water almost naked and fainted on the stage at once, while the tank had later been drained and washed clean. No second weapon had appeared anywhere.

In the end even Sasano Shinzaburo could not allow O-Mura to be sent formally to judgment as the killer. Risuke and Hachigoro were sharply rebuked, and after three days the woman had to be released. That was when Hachigoro, bruised in pride and sick with shame, returned to Zenigata Heiji and begged for help at last. He admitted that his own disgrace did not matter very much, but Sasano was deeply worried now, and even Risuke was waiting in Fujiroku's house with his neck stretched long, hoping Heiji would finally come. Zenigata Heiji answered that the case sounded truly difficult and that he doubted he could do much, but he rose all the same. Sometimes a man says he is only going to show his face, yet everyone around him knows the real work is just beginning.

Part 3

Three days after O-Matsu's death, Hachigoro came before Zenigata Heiji at last with his pride completely broken. He said plainly that he had made a fool of himself, that Ishihara no Risuke had also been shamed, and that even Sasano Shinzaburo was worried because the case would not move. O-Mura had been

released, yet the murder still stood there like a wall no one could climb. Heiji said the matter sounded difficult enough that even he might do no better, but he rose all the same. Then the two men went together to the lodging house in Midori-cho where Fujiroku's little troupe was staying.

Fujiroku received them with obvious relief, and Risuke too looked as if a weight had lifted from his shoulders. Zenigata Heiji said he already knew the rough shape of the case from rumor and from Hachigoro's clumsy telling, but he wanted everything once more from the beginning. So Fujiroku, his wife, and the painted announcer Seiji gave the names, relations, and habits of the little troupe one by one. Heiji especially asked about Hyakumatsu, the ugly doorkeeper, and whether it was true that he had long been in love with O-Matsu. Fujiroku's wife answered that Hyakumatsu and O-Matsu came from the same village in Misaki and had known each other since childhood, and that Hyakumatsu had worshiped her in his own hopeless way, though O-Matsu herself had thought very little of him.

Then Heiji moved to the center of the trick itself. He asked whether the taking of the jewel in the tank was decided in advance or whether whichever woman passed through the lower opening first would seize it. Fujiroku answered at once that it was always arranged beforehand. Otherwise, he said, the women might hesitate or make mistakes underwater, and a show built on timing could not risk such confusion. On the day of the murder, the first jewel of the day had been assigned to O-Matsu, just as on every other day in the fixed order. That answer made Heiji's face grow still.

It meant the victim had been known before the women ever entered the water. The hidden knife under the grating had not been set for whichever diver happened to pass first. It had been planted for O-Matsu in particular. Whoever arranged that death had known the routine in detail and had known it early enough to prepare the trap before the show began. That line of thought narrowed the field at once, though not enough yet to name the guilty hand aloud.

After that, Heiji asked a question that seemed to change the direction of the talk. He looked around the room and said it was strange that neither Hyakumatsu

nor O-Mura could be seen that evening. Seiji answered first that Hyakumatsu usually slept in the show tent itself, to keep watch against fire and thieves, since there was not much there but what little existed still needed guarding. Fujiroku then added, with some surprise, that O-Mura had been resting in the back because she was exhausted after her release from the officials, but since evening he had not seen her either. The room had only just begun to feel that odd absence when a talkative little serving girl from the kitchen put her head in and said that O-Mura had gone off with Hyakumatsu not long before.

Everyone turned toward her at once. She said O-Mura had resisted and told him to wait until tomorrow, but Hyakumatsu had worn a frightening face and had dragged her strongly toward Ryogoku all the same. Zenigata Heiji sprang to his feet before anyone else had fully understood what that meant. He said only that O-Mura's life was in danger and told the others to come after him without delay. Then he vanished into the evening dark so quickly that the room seemed to empty around the place where he had been sitting.

In the show tent by the river, Hyakumatsu had already begun his terrible private judgment. He stood on the stage with a candle in his hand, facing O-Mura, who had been tied behind her back and gagged so she could not answer him. His ugly face, made uglier still by grief and obsession, leaned close into the candlelight as he told her that the authorities might have released her, but he knew she must have killed O-Matsu. He said the shogun's men might be fooled, but he would not be. To him, the matter was simple: O-Matsu had been cut open in the water, and only the woman swimming with her could have done it.

Then his speech turned from accusation to confession. He told O-Mura that he and O-Matsu had been born in the same village and had played together as children. He said that when they were small they had promised to stay together when they were grown, though later O-Matsu had fled from his face and from the life he offered. Even so, he had searched for her for two long years through all of Edo until he found her in this shameful tent. He knew he was ugly, he said. He knew a beauty like O-Matsu could never truly love him. But if only she had let him remain near her, like a dog lying by the door, he would have accepted even

her faithlessness in silence.

O-Mura, though gagged, could not hide her terror as he spoke. Hyakumatsu's tears fell onto the stage boards while he said he had spent three days thinking of how to avenge O-Matsu. At last he chose the same cruel stage that had swallowed her. He untied O-Mura only enough to strip away her outer clothes, then bound her again tight over the red waist cloth used in the performance. After that he fastened a stone weight to her body so she could not fight the water for long. The whole thing was not merely murder in anger. It was a punishment arranged like a show for one spectator alone.

Then he threw her into the tank. The water had been freshly changed that day and was clear as green glass under the candlelight, so every movement could be seen from top to bottom. O-Mura's body sank slowly under the pull of the stone while her black hair spread and twisted through the water like seaweed. Her face, white and distorted with terror, turned again and again toward the surface, and her two eyes shone in the candlelight like stars in a deep well. Hyakumatsu stood over the tank laughing in a dry, cracked voice, saying that even a sea woman could not endure such treatment for long.

That was the moment Zenigata Heiji burst into the tent. He did not waste a breath on questions. He threw himself at Hyakumatsu like a storm, knocked the half-mad man aside, and jumped straight into the water without even stopping to remove his clothes. The stone and the ropes made O-Mura hard to handle, and before Heiji could bring her fully up, Hyakumatsu, wild with ruined revenge, began hurling whatever lay near him—sticks, boxes, stage tools—down toward the tank. It would have gone badly even for Heiji if the others had not come pounding in just then.

Hachigoro, Risuke, Fujiroku, and Seiji rushed in together and overpowered Hyakumatsu before he could do more harm. They then pulled Heiji and O-Mura from the tank. Heiji was safe enough, and O-Mura, being accustomed to water from long practice, had not yet lost her life. Once the worst of that chaos had passed, everyone gathered in a ring of candlelight on the stage and asked the question that now felt heavier than before. If Hyakumatsu had meant only to kill

O-Mura in revenge, then he was not the person who had set the hidden blade for O-Matsu. So who had truly murdered the mermaid? Heiji answered, to the shock of them all, that he still did not know for certain—but that if the water were drained from the tank, the tank itself might finally speak.

Part 4

The water had been let out until the tank lay open like a stripped secret. Zenigata Heiji stepped down with a candle in his hand and went first to the dragon. He had already said that if no weapon were found, then people would have to believe O-Matsu had been cut by some ghostly wind in the water. But he did not believe in such things. He pushed his arm into the dragon's mouth and into the hollow body behind it, feeling carefully in the dark wood. Then at last he gave a short cry of success and drew out a small dagger blade with no handle and no sheath, still dimmed by the old cloud of blood.

Heiji held the blade up before them all and said that even after three days in water, a true murder weapon does not shine like a harmless stage knife. Then he climbed down farther and searched the floor under the grating where the divers passed through. There, exactly where he had expected it, was a fresh narrow hole cut into the bottom. When he set the hidden blade into it, the steel stood upright, point upward, like a planted fang waiting in the dark. The people looking down from above cried out in horror. O-Matsu had not been stabbed by a hand in the water at all. She had been cut open when she dived through the lower opening exactly as the killer had planned.

The whole trick now stood clear. The order of the performance had been fixed in advance, and on the morning of the murder O-Matsu had been the one chosen to go first for the jewel. That meant the victim had been decided before the act even began. Someone who knew the routine had planted the hiltless blade under the grating, waited for O-Matsu to pass through, and then, after her body was dragged up from the water, removed the blade from the hole and hid it in the dragon's mouth. The killer therefore had to be one of the men who handled the

body at once after the attack.

Ishihara no Risuke demanded to know who among them could have done such a thing. Heiji answered without haste that there were only two possible men. One was Fujiroku, the old master of the troupe, who had helped pull the dying woman up from above. The other was Seiji, the clever announcer who had jumped into the tank and lifted O-Matsu from below. For one breath the room held both names in equal fear. Then Heiji cut one of them away. "Fujiroku would not kill his own rice chest," he said in effect. O-Matsu had been one of the two great beauties on whom the whole show and its earnings depended.

That left only Seiji. Before anyone else had fully taken in the words, the young man acted for himself. Quick as a fish slipping from a net, he leaped from the stage and tried to break away into the evening dark. But a fleeing man confesses faster than a speaking one. The mere fact of his sudden flight was answer enough to everyone present, and the ring around him broke at once into pursuit and shouting. In that instant all doubt ended. It was Seiji, not O-Mura, not Hyakumatsu, and not some impossible hand from outside, who had built death into the performance itself.

Zenigata Heiji did not need to say much more. The case had already said enough. Seiji was the cleverest man in the troupe, the one who knew the timing, the underwater route, the fixed order of the jewel-taking, and the exact second when confusion would hide the truth. He had also been the man in the water who could remove the planted blade after O-Matsu was cut and before the tank was drained. That was why the murder had looked impossible for so long. It had not been done by a hand seen striking. It had been done by a trap, and then hidden by the same man who helped "rescue" the victim.

Hyakumatsu, hearing all this, seemed to lose the last wild fire in him. The poor ugly doorkeeper had nearly become a murderer himself because he believed O-Mura guilty. O-Mura, who had already suffered rope, questioning, and almost death in the tank, could only stare in silence. Fujiroku and the others too were struck dumb, for the thing was more terrible than simple jealousy with a knife in the hand. Their whole show, with its music, beauty, water, and false wonder, had

been turned into a machine for murder by the man who understood it best.

Zenigata Heiji had felt from the first day that there was something dirty beneath the beauty of the tent. Now that feeling at last had taken a clear form. The slightly cloudy water, the hidden opening under the grating, the hollow dragon, the fixed order of the act, and the man who moved most skillfully among all those devices had come together into one answer. The audience had thought they were watching two sea women play at danger beneath the water. In truth they had been watching a death arranged in advance with cold thought.

So the case of the dead mermaid came to its true end. O-Matsu had been killed not by the woman swimming beside her, but by a hidden blade planted beneath the water for the path she was certain to take. O-Mura's name was cleared, Hyakumatsu's blind revenge was stopped, and the clever hand behind the impossible murder was exposed at last. That was enough for Zenigata Heiji. He had dragged the truth up from the bottom of the tank itself and forced it to stand in the light.

Furisode Genta

Part 1

Furisode Genta had become one of the wonders of Edo. In a show tent at Ryogoku he performed daring acrobatic acts that people said had never been seen before since the city was founded. He was young, strikingly handsome, and so light and sure in his movements that even people who came only out of curiosity soon found themselves staring with open mouths. Zenigata Heiji, who was not the sort of man to chase every new pleasure, had still gone to see the show that day and had spent half the afternoon in the charged air of the tent. By evening he had taken a drink at a small place nearby and was crossing Ryogoku Bridge under the pale light of the sixteenth-night moon.

He was humming a little tune to himself and walking without hurry when he happened to look ahead. About ten ken away, a man had one foot on the railing and was leaning toward the dark water below. Heiji saw the danger at once, but the man was too far away to reach in time, and if he shouted, the fellow would almost certainly throw himself in out of shock. So his right hand slipped into his sleeve by instinct. From the change he had just taken at the tavern he caught one small coin between thumb and finger and sent it flying.

The coin struck the man sharply at the temple. He cried out, jerked back from the railing, and spun around in anger just as Heiji came near. "What are you doing?" the old man snapped, rubbing the swelling place and glaring as if he might bite. Heiji answered lightly that if the fellow had jumped, Heiji would have had to stand there and watch him drown, because he was no river goblin and had no talent for diving after old men in the dark. Even while joking, he kept a steady hand on the man's sleeve.

Looking more closely, Heiji saw that this was no mad drunk and no ruined gambler. The man was around fifty-six or fifty-seven, solidly built, plainly dressed, and of the sort who looked more likely to count coins carefully than to throw away his life. The old fellow, still angry, complained that Heiji had used shocking force

and that his head was swelling. Heiji only told him that a hole in the temple was cheaper than death. Little by little the edge went out of the old man's voice, and once that happened, Heiji led him back to a nearby eating place and sat him down with sake and food until he was ready to speak.

"Tell me plainly," Heiji said at last. "Men do not die over a joke. I am not rich, and I do not carry a storehouse of wisdom in my sleeve, but I do official work. If the matter is within a poor man's reach, I may still be able to help." At those words the old man started and stared. When he heard that this was Zenigata Heiji himself, he bowed deeply and said that he would now speak even if he was ordered not to. His tale, when it came out, was so strange that even Heiji stopped smiling.

In Nihonbashi Fourth Street stood the great draper's house of Fukuya Zenbei. It was no ordinary merchant home, but a vast establishment with more than eighty apprentices and servants, a house rich enough once to compete with Echigoya itself. Yet in the past few weeks, three of Zenbei's five children had vanished one after another. The eldest son, twenty-four years old, disappeared from the Nihonbashi shop in broad daylight on the twenty-fifth of the previous month. Then, on the fifth of the present month, the second son, aged twenty-one, vanished from the family house during the night.

Even that might have been blamed on strange chance if the pattern had stopped there. But on the fifteenth, only the day before, the third child, an eighteen-year-old daughter, had disappeared after going to stay with relatives. The dates fell ten days apart, and the missing children were being taken in order from eldest downward. That was no accident. Zenbei had spent money freely and searched in every direction, but the tracks of the three vanished children had simply broken off into nothing. The old man sitting before Heiji had been the escort of the third daughter, and after losing her, he had wandered a whole day and night trying to find some trace before drifting at last toward the river in despair.

He began to cry as he finished, and the rough old face collapsed into helpless shame. Heiji let him cry a little, then told him that throwing himself into the river would not bring a daughter back to her father. "All right," he said. "I will take the

matter in hand.” He added that a crime done with such skill could not be the work of an ordinary fool, and for that very reason it was worth his trouble. He told the old man to go back quietly, pretend nothing had happened on the bridge, and bring him every bit of news he could from inside the house. The old fellow bowed again and again, as if his life had been given back to him for a second time.

Zenigata Heiji soon went to Fukuya himself. What he found there was noise, fear, and helpless confusion. Because it was still that age, no one had gone running to any regular police office with proper reports and procedures. The family, the clerks, the servants, and the shop hands were only rushing about, arguing, searching, and wearing themselves out in circles. Zenbei, half broken by grief, clung to Heiji as soon as he appeared and said that if half the Fukuya fortune must be thrown away to recover the three missing children, so be it.

In the house there now remained only two children: a beautiful daughter of sixteen named O-Ito, and a little boy of six named Eizaburo. There was also Zenbei’s second wife, O-Taki, whom he had married only about a year earlier. By the common way of thinking, she was the easiest person to suspect, and she clearly knew it herself, for she trembled whenever Heiji looked at her. Yet Heiji was not satisfied by easy suspicion. O-Taki was around thirty-two or thirty-three, younger than her husband but not by so much as to look absurd, and she had both beauty and the good bearing expected in the wife of a great house. Even the servants did not speak badly of her.

There were more than eighty servants in all, far too many to pull apart one by one without stronger cause, and the head clerk insisted there was not one man among them of doubtful background. Heiji therefore left the house for the moment and quietly told Sasano Shinzaburo the outline of the affair. Sasano listened with interest and said the pattern was too odd to ignore. He advised Heiji to keep watching, because if the case were opened far enough, something truly large might be hiding inside it. Those words only deepened the weight already sitting on Heiji’s shoulders.

Then one day passed, and another, and a new fear closed over Fukuya like nightfall. If the pattern continued, the next date would be the twenty-fifth, and the

next victim would be O-Ito. She and the missing elder sister had been known in Nihonbashi as the two beauties of the house, but now O-Ito moved about like a girl who felt danger on her skin. Worse still was Zenbei. If he did not see her for even a little while, he called wildly through the house, "Where is O-Ito? Where is O-Ito?" until the whole family trembled with him. In the end he begged Heiji to guard the girl personally for one day, saying that even a hundred other men would not make him feel as safe.

Heiji did not promise success. He said only that the enemy was plainly no easy hand and that even if he himself watched, there might be no certain way to prevent the attack. But if Zenbei understood that risk, Heiji would come. Thus, because he had stopped one desperate old man on a moonlit bridge and listened when others might have walked away, Zenigata Heiji found himself stepping straight into the center of the Fukuya affair. The next move would be made at Mukojima, where O-Ito was to be hidden away under guard, and where the unseen hand behind the disappearances would very likely strike again.

Part 2

On the twenty-fifth, the guard at the Mukojima villa became so heavy that it almost looked foolish. Fifteen or sixteen strong clerks came from the Nihonbashi shop, and five or six of Zenigata Heiji's own men joined them. Then there were the villa's keeper and his wife, maids, attendants sent from the main house to serve O-Ito, and even a few helping hands from nearby. In all, more than thirty people surrounded the beautiful girl from noon onward, as if sheer numbers could close every hole in the world.

During the day nothing at all happened. Yet because the precautions were so extreme, everyone grew tired before night had even begun. Heiji forced them to keep their places and set each group where he thought it most useful. At every entrance he placed two watchers, and at every weak point he put a man by each rain shutter, until it seemed that not even an ant could slip through unseen.

O-Ito withdrew early to her own room with her favorite maid, O-Chiyo. Heiji, however, could not bring himself to sit inside the sleeping room of a sixteen-year-old beauty and watch her face through the night. The room fortunately stood at the end of a passage with only two sides open, so he posted two trusted men in the corridor and placed himself in the next room with the head clerk Kashichi and the villa keeper's couple. He meant to stay awake until dawn and talk the night through.

At one point the keeper's wife quietly opened the sliding door just enough for Heiji to see inside. In the dim light of a paper lamp, O-Ito's head could be seen under bright night clothes, so clearly that even from outside the room she seemed safely there. Heiji nodded, and the door was closed again. After that the sounds from the neighboring room stopped completely, and the long stillness of the riverside night began to gather around the house.

For three full watches of the night, no one in or around the villa slept. The tension only rose, pressing on everyone harder with each hour, until at last the pale first light of dawn crept in at the windows. The villa keeper's wife breathed out loudly and said they were saved, and the others, without even trying to hide it, struck their own foreheads or laughed in relief. When the shutters were opened and the whole house filled with spring sunlight, it felt for one moment as though danger itself had left.

Then the scream came. "The young lady is gone!" a maid cried from the inner room. Heiji threw the door wide and rushed in. O-Ito's bedding lay empty, and beside it O-Chiyo had fallen backward in such shock that she could hardly speak. Heiji thrust his hand at once into the bed and found the warmth of a living body still there, which meant the abductor could not have gone far.

He sprang to the veranda and shouted for no one to leave the house, telling each man to hold his position and sound the whistle if anyone tried to run. After that the villa turned into a boiling pot. Floors were lifted, doors removed, the ceiling space searched, and every dark corner inspected as if even a mouse might hide the truth. But they found no trace of the intruder and no sign at all of the shining girl whom they all thought could never be hidden in so small a place.

By noon, Zenbei's grief and O-Taki's terror were past words, but the wound to Heiji's own pride bit hardest of all. He had come speaking boldly enough, and in spite of all that show of care the fourth child had vanished under his very eyes. So he left the villa and walked back along the embankment toward Honjo with his head bent low. It was there that another detective, Ishihara no Risuke, touched his shoulder from behind and spoke with ugly satisfaction.

Risuke said Heiji should leave the Fukuya case alone, because he himself had all but made the arrest already. He hinted that he did not wish to shame a fellow officer by exposing him publicly after such a failure, and then he went off toward Mukojima without even waiting for a full answer. The words stung badly, and when the story spread through Edo in broadsheets that same day, the whole city laughed over the tale of Zenigata Heiji standing guard all night only to be cleanly fooled. Even Sasano Shinzaburo had to call him in and show him a bitter face for form's sake.

Heiji answered Sasano plainly that he had made one great mistake. He had guessed too cheaply that the disappearances might be the stepmother's work or at least some common household plot, when in fact the hand behind them was far too skillful for that. He added that O-Taki, whatever her place in the house, did not look to him like a woman capable of such brilliant and repeated crimes. Sasano then told him that Risuke had already arrested O-Taki, and Heiji flared up at once, not because he had proof of her innocence, but because he knew that such an arrest had been made only to steal the case and humble him.

Yet even after that, Heiji still had no clear answer. No ransom demand came. No blood was shed. No message asked for money. Five children were being taken in order, and the purpose of it all was as dark to him as ever. As he went out into the late spring evening after that hard meeting, he thought that if only the criminals had wanted gold or revenge in some ordinary form, he could at least have found their road. But this cold pattern, so neat and so cruel, seemed to aim at something he still could not name.

Then, on the morning of the next fifth day, when the last remaining child, little Eizaburo, was clearly the next target, Heiji moved at last in a new way. He

met again the old retainer whose life he had once saved on Ryogoku Bridge and quietly gave him a secret task, warning that if anyone noticed, the effort would mean nothing. After that he entered the Mukojima villa once more and made an even stranger arrangement than before. This time he withdrew all outside guards and packed all thirty-odd watchers inside the house itself, certain now that the criminal never came through doors or shutters at all.

Eizaburo was seated in the middle of two opened rooms, with two circles of men around him, great candles burning, maids and neighbors on guard, and Heiji himself facing Zenbei across the room from evening onward. The atmosphere was worse than a wake, because at least in a wake the dead are already past fear. Here every living face strained toward the next invisible blow. And as Heiji sat there giving the same answer again and again to Zenbei's anxious questions, he knew very well that the night now beginning would either restore his name or break it completely.

Part 3

The strain in the Mukojima villa that night was worse than on the first watch. This time Zenigata Heiji had pulled every guard inside, because he had already decided that the enemy did not come by gate or rain shutter like an ordinary thief. Little Eizaburo sat in the middle of two joined rooms, with two rings of people around him, big candles burning at the four corners, and the maid O-Chiyo close at hand to tend him. Heiji sat facing the broken old father Zenbei, who kept asking the same question over and over again: whether the boy would be safe. Heiji could only give the same answer each time—that he would do everything he could.

As the night went on, the pressure became almost unbearable. More than thirty people were packed into those rooms, all trying to stay still, all trying not to imagine what hidden method the criminal might use this time. It did not feel like a vigil around a dead body, where grief at least has already reached its end. It felt worse, because here the victim was alive in the very center of the room, and everyone waited for the invisible blow that might come at any moment. Even the

warm coals in the braziers and the tea laid out in readiness did nothing to soften that fear.

It was a little past midnight when the first move came. O-Chiyo, the pretty maid attending the child, rose quietly and took up a pair of brass scissors, saying she meant only to trim the candle wicks. She stepped lightly toward the nearest stand, and for one instant no one thought anything of it. Then, as if by accident, her sleeve touched one tall candlestick and sent it over. When she jumped back in surprise, her body struck the second one, and at the very same moment the two candles at the doorway also crashed down. The room went black in one breath.

Women screamed. Men stumbled into one another. Someone shouted for help, and someone else cursed. In the middle of that confusion only one voice remained cool. Zenigata Heiji cried out for lights to be brought from the kitchen and shouted that he had hold of the boy. But panic is faster than thought. The servants in the kitchen were too frightened to move at once, and inside the darkened room the crowd lurched and writhed like a heap of living things thrown together in a pit.

When lamps and hand lights were finally brought in, the sight was like the inside of a storm. People had fallen, cushions and trays lay scattered, and the whole floor was in disorder. Worst of all, Heiji was indeed lying on the floor gripping a piece of cloth with both hands—but it was not the hem of little Eizaburo's robe. It was the red, soft hem of O-Chiyo's garment. The child himself had vanished from the very center of the double guard as completely as if the earth had swallowed him. All around the empty cushion, full-grown men stood staring with the helpless faces of fools.

To everyone else it looked like another total defeat. To Heiji, however, the darkness had yielded one thing at last. He had not caught the child, but he had caught the hand inside the room. O-Chiyo had clearly been part of the trick. He let the others rush about in wild confusion for a time, turning rooms over and searching every corner as though a six-year-old boy could melt into wood. Then, while the house still boiled, Heiji slipped away and went down toward the embankment where he had quietly placed one extra watcher that very morning.

The watcher was the same honest old retainer whose life Heiji had once saved on Ryogoku Bridge. Heiji had chosen him because the old man belonged naturally to the villa, no one would think twice about his presence, and, after looking once into death, he could be trusted not to lose his head. Hidden by the shadow of an old cherry tree, the man now whispered what he had seen. During the confusion inside, a figure had appeared on the roof, moving with the light balance of an acrobat. The man had come down the slope of the embankment like a cat, where a small lighter had already been prepared below. He had jumped in, and the boat had been rowed away downriver before anyone in the villa knew what had happened.

Heiji did not curse, and he did not pound the ground in anger. He had hoped for exactly this much. If he had spread his hands too wide, he might have caught nothing at all. Instead he had chosen to let the outer thief reveal his road while he watched for the helper within. The old man, ashamed that the fugitive had still escaped, began apologizing, but Heiji silenced him. There was no sense in trying to catch a shadow once it had already taken to the river. The better path now was to hold the piece left behind on land.

Even as the old man spoke, Heiji raised a hand sharply for silence. From the rear of the villa a shape was slipping out, moving low and careful in the dawn dimness. It was not one of the panicked servants, and it was not a searcher hurrying on some honest errand. It was someone trying to leave the scene without being seen. Heiji waited until the figure drew near the cherry tree and then sprang out with both hands. His grip closed at the back of the neck, and the person gave only a short cry before being dragged into the light. It was O-Chiyo.

Heiji pulled her straight back into the villa. The old father Zenbei had by then recovered enough to look at her, though his grief had hollowed him out like an old man ten years older than he had been the day before. The chief clerk and the others crowded near, but no one could yet speak. O-Chiyo stood between them with her beautiful face unnaturally calm, almost coldly amused, as though she had no intention of begging or denying anything. That expression told Heiji nearly as much as the darkness had done. She was not a frightened servant girl caught by

chance. She was the willing partner of the man who had taken the children.

Heiji then began laying out the truth as far as he already saw it. The first four disappearances had all used different outward tricks, which was why the whole affair had seemed impossible. But behind that changing surface there had always been at least two working hands—one inside the house or houses involved, and one outside skilled enough to move where ordinary men could not. The rooftop flight proved the second hand clearly, and the overturned candles proved the first. O-Chiyo had created the darkness at the exact instant needed, and in that darkness the acrobat had snatched the child from the center of the room.

Yet there was more in the thing than common kidnapping for money. No ransom had been asked, and not one drop of the children's blood had been shed. That meant the children themselves were not the true enemy. They were being taken as part of some larger revenge against the house of Fukuya. When Heiji said this, Zenbei seemed to break a little further inside. He looked at O-Chiyo as if seeing her for the first time and asked in a dry, cracked voice why anyone would hate him so much. O-Chiyo did not answer. Her lips tightened, and the cold smile on her face only sharpened.

That silence was answer enough for the moment. Heiji told the others to bind O-Chiyo hard and keep her where she could not bite off her tongue or otherwise destroy herself. Then he stepped outside again and looked toward the river. He now knew that the fugitive was no ordinary abductor but a man of the show world, someone who could fly over roofs, vanish down a slope, and trust a prepared boat to meet him at the exact spot below. There was only one man in all this affair who fit that shape too perfectly: Furisode Genta, the beautiful acrobat whose body moved as lightly as air and whose face had already burned itself into Heiji's mind.

By the time the sun was fully up, Zenigata Heiji had the next road before him. The child was alive, of that he was almost certain. O-Chiyo's face, the careful handling of the earlier victims, and the lack of ransom all said the same thing. This was a revenge that wanted witnesses, not corpses. Somewhere nearby, hidden among tents, sheds, or river places, the five children had been gathered together. And if the hand outside truly belonged to Furisode Genta, then the road from the

Mukojima villa would lead straight back toward Ryogoku and the dangerous world of the acrobat's tent.

Part 4

The next morning, just as the ticket gate of the Ryogoku acrobat tent was about to open, Zenigata Heiji's men surrounded it from every side. There was no formal written proof yet, so no officer from above had come out. This was one of those rough arrests made on judgment, speed, and nerve. Hachigoro and the others were not many in number, but they were all strong hands. The moment the gate opened, they rushed in with the first customers and pushed straight toward the backstage area.

"Furisode Genta, in the name of the law," they shouted. But Genta had already dressed for the stage in his splendid red-sleeved costume and green silk hakama. The instant he heard the cry, he snatched up a prop sword and fled upward instead of outward. Like a monkey flying through branches, he climbed into the hanging ropes, swings, and beams above the stage before the others could even reach him. Below, the half-entered customers burst into panic, running for the door, tumbling over one another, screaming and crying as if the whole tent had suddenly caught fire.

Zenigata Heiji stood his ground in the middle of the dirt floor and looked up. "Genta," he called, "it is known now that you took all five children of Fukuya. Do not make your 罪 heavier by foolish resistance. Give yourself up and tell us where the children are." The words rang through the tent, and even the panicked crowd quieted a little. High above them, framed by hanging ropes and rough beams, Genta leaned down and answered that if the speaker were truly Zenigata Heiji, then perhaps he would listen for a moment. His face was as beautiful as ever, but now it burned with something much harder than stage charm.

Then, before anyone could stop him, Genta began to tell the truth of his hatred. He said that he was the son of the main Fukuya house, ruined long ago by the greed and scheming of the present Fukuya line. Because of them, his father

had fallen into misery and had been sent away, and his mother had died afterward. He said his hatred for that family was deeper than anything he could repay in a single lifetime. The tent listened in stillness. Whatever the full old money quarrel had been, the wound inside him was plainly real.

But he was not speaking only to explain himself. He had prepared the next move as well. Genta cried out that, in case this day ever came, he had gathered all five stolen children together the previous night and locked them inside an old cage once used to hold a bear. Above that cage, he had hung a stone weighing more than a hundred kan. One cut to the supporting rope, he said, and there would be no time even to pray. As he spoke, he raised the sword and looked toward a thick rope stretched down from one of the main beams. The beauty of his face under the red sleeves made the threat only more terrible.

The whole tent froze. Genta's revenge had not been ordinary kidnapping after all. He had preserved the children alive only so that he could destroy them at the end in one blow before the father's eyes. Hachigoro and the others could do nothing. Even a small movement might push him into cutting the line. The entire tent, full of cheap painted wood and show ropes, had suddenly become a place where six young lives hung from one man's hand.

Then Heiji struck back with the one opening he had left for himself. "Wait, Genta," he cried. "If you cut that rope and kill those children, your wife O-Chiyo will die the death of one who helped murder her master's house." At that signal, men brought in O-Chiyo already bound hard with rope. For the first time since her arrest, her face changed. She looked up at the red figure on the beam and cried, "You!" Genta answered with her name, and the hardness in his face shook for one instant. The trap had at last reached the place where revenge and love met.

Yet O-Chiyo was no weak woman. Even tied and facing ruin, she told him not to mind her and to cut the rope and finish it. She said she wanted to watch from the execution post itself while grass grew over the roof of Fukuya. It was a fierce thing to say, and many in the tent shuddered to hear it. But Heiji had already chosen his final card and did not let their courage carry the day.

He called upward that Fukuya Zenbei had died that very morning from grief

after the loss of his last son. “Your revenge is already enough,” he said. “The five children have no guilt. I will not deal unfairly with you. Do not take the hatred farther than it must go.” Those words struck Genta harder than threats had done. His father’s enemy, the man he had planned to break completely, was already dead. The revenge that had fed him could go no further without turning into nothing but slaughter.

“A revenge can go too far,” Heiji said again. “Choose. I will trade your wife’s life for the lives of the five children. I will untie her. You come down.” And then, to the shock of every man present, he did exactly what he had said. He bent and began loosening O-Chiyo’s ropes with his own hands. The bound woman stood free again, and she and Genta looked at one another from earth and beam in a silence deeper than speech. In that instant the whole case turned, not on force, but on whether two desperate people still loved life more than revenge.

The children were saved. What happened in the next few moments was too quick and too full of confusion for everyone in the tent to follow cleanly, but the result was plain enough. Genta did not cut the rope. The cage was reached, the five brothers and sisters were recovered alive, and in the end both Genta and O-Chiyo slipped away instead of going in bonds to the law. It was only afterward, when Sasano Shinzaburo spoke to Heiji with a bitter smile, that the full shape of the “failure” became public.

Sasano told him that letting O-Chiyo’s ropes be undone and allowing her to escape together with Genta had gone too far, even for a man with Zenigata Heiji’s taste for dangerous mercy. Heiji could only bow his head and admit it. Sasano, however, forgave him for the sake of the five children whose lives had been spared, and even laughed in the end. As for Genta and O-Chiyo, they vanished completely. Ishihara no Risuke, who had proudly arrested the stepmother too early and then watched the real case slip elsewhere, withdrew for a while in embarrassment.

One last detail remained in people’s mouths afterward. The children had been taken on the fifths and fifteenths because Genta’s father had been sent away on a fifth day, and his mother had died on a fifteenth. Even in revenge he had followed the calendar of his own wounds. That was why this strange crime had felt so

orderly and so cold. Behind the brilliant acrobatics, the rooftop escapes, the river boat, and the beauty of the tent performer, there had been a son counting pain by dates and repaying it child by child.

So the case of Furisode Genta came to its true end. The five stolen children were restored alive, the hand inside the house and the hand outside it were both revealed, and the long pattern of disappearances was finally understood as revenge, not greed. Yet once again Zenigata Heiji did not finish with a clean arrest and easy praise. He saved lives and lost his prisoner, and because of that his strange fame only grew stronger: the detective who solved everything and still let the great prize slip through his fingers.

Heiji in New Year Cheer [Heiji Toso Kigen]

Part 1

It was the afternoon of New Year's Day, and Zenigata Heiji had just finished making his formal visits with Hachigoro to the officers' residences in Hatchobori. The sky had been clear since morning, the sort of bright winter blue that made even the cold look cheerful, and the city still wore all the neat green decorations of the season. As the two men crossed Kaizoku Bridge and turned toward Aomono-cho, Heiji suddenly stopped. He looked ahead, then sideways, and said in a voice full of lazy good humor, "Hachi, this is a happy day, isn't it?" Hachigoro blinked, because there was no special reason to say so. But before he could ask, Heiji added that the sake they had politely sipped at official houses had not settled properly in his body, and that a man should drink one real cup on New Year's Day if he wished to feel alive.

Hachigoro was delighted. He knew very well that his boss was not the sort of man who often said such things of his own accord. He asked if Heiji really meant it, and Heiji answered that he had no intention of asking for a share of the bill afterward, so Hachigoro should stop staring like a fool and walk straight in. The place Heiji had noticed stood near the live sea-bream estate, a newly opened cooking house with fine gate pines and a fresh, polished look. Its signboard read Sazanami, and even from outside it had the stylish air of a shop made to attract rich town customers during the New Year season.

Yet before he went in, Heiji saw something that made him pause. Above the entrance hung the great New Year ring decoration, but it had been put up backward, showing its wrong side to the street. It was not something a child might have done by playing a joke, because the thing hung too high and could only be reached by standing on a barrel or stool. Hachigoro, who noticed nothing at first, only saw his boss grin and say that this was a clever house indeed, since if one turned New Year's decorations around, the year might flip over and become the Bon season instead. Laughing as if already well drunk, Heiji dragged over an empty cask,

climbed up, and turned the wreath the proper way round with his own hands.

The servants welcomed them with exaggerated cheer. A clerk at the front and a younger serving man both bowed and gave polished greetings, saying that the gentlemen looked wonderfully merry already. Heiji answered in the voice of a man half carried away by drink, saying that no man could become truly happy on free official sake alone. He swayed, stumbled a little, and let his words blur at the edges just enough to make the act convincing. Hachigoro, who at first did not know whether this was true drunkenness or comedy, could only follow him with a long-nosed look of wonder.

A serving girl tried to guide them to a seat downstairs, saying the upstairs rooms were crowded. Heiji refused at once. He said that crowded rooms were the very soul of New Year's Day and that he had not been raised to be shy of other people's faces. He even pointed back at Hachigoro and said the fellow might bite when drunk, so perhaps it was better to keep them where there were more witnesses. The little maid did not smile, though such a joke should have drawn at least a polite laugh. That too Heiji quietly noticed.

Upstairs the place was indeed full, yet the feeling of it was strange. The rooms held a good number of customers in proper holiday dress, and from a distance it looked like a lively first day of the year. But once Heiji sat down, he began to feel that the people there were much too still. Men who had been drinking since morning should have been louder, redder in face, freer with words, and more careless in their movements. Instead, these customers spoke little, watched little, and sat with the unnatural quiet of people trying too hard not to be noticed. Even Hachigoro, who was not a deep thinker, began after a while to feel that something did not fit.

Heiji, however, went on with his drunken play. He demanded food, called for sake again, laughed too loudly at his own poor jokes, and let himself lurch against the fittings as though he had lost all sense of balance. At one point he crashed against one of the sliding paper screens and knocked it partly out of place. The maids rushed to set it back, but in the confusion Heiji himself helped, talking all the while like a man too merry to stand straight. While doing so, he quietly

turned the panel around and noticed something at once. If the screen was fitted carelessly, the wooden ribs could face outward toward the street.

He sat down again without changing expression, but now his mind had sharpened completely. A backward New Year wreath could perhaps be dismissed as a foolish mistake. A single screen fitted backward on the second floor might also be explained away if it happened once and by accident. But a careful house on the first day of the year does not make such mistakes in both places unless there is a reason. Heiji continued his noisy performance, pretending to drink more than he did, and from time to time he let his eyes travel lightly across the room, the screens, the beams, and the faces of the silent customers. The house had begun to smell to him not of sake and fish, but of hiding.

At last he paid, stumbled downstairs with Hachigoro beside him, and stepped out into the New Year street. The city outside had already grown unexpectedly quiet. A few samurai in formal hemp robes and servants carrying green-wrapped gifts still passed by here and there, but most shops were closed, and only the pine decorations and wreaths gave the street its holiday color. Heiji walked on in silence until they were far enough away. Then he stopped, folded his arms, and looked back once more toward Sazanami.

Hachigoro asked at last what was wrong. Heiji said that the very first thing had been the wreath at the entrance. No decent house would hang such a lucky New Year thing backward, and certainly not one that needed a barrel to reach it. Then he reminded Hachigoro about the screen upstairs. If the panel he had knocked loose were put back in the wrong way, its ribs showed outward. That alone would not prove much, but when he looked back after leaving, he saw that the wreath was once again backward and the middle upstairs screen again showed its ribs outside. In other words, someone inside had deliberately returned both things to their unnatural positions after Heiji had corrected them.

Hachigoro wondered if the backward things might be some sort of charm or unlucky spell against sickness for the new year. Heiji told him not to talk like an old woman. There was no such simple answer, and what troubled him more than the decorations was the air of the whole house. Even on New Year's Day, with

that many customers inside, the place had been too quiet. It did not feel like a cooking house full of men eating and drinking. It felt like a place where people were waiting under orders. Hachigoro shivered a little at that, though he could not yet have said why.

So the two men stood in the middle of the holiday street and looked at one another as the cold light faded. Heiji admitted that he still did not know what the backward wreath and backward screen truly meant. But he also said that once he had seen such things with his own eyes, he could not walk past the house and forget it. There was some hidden purpose inside Sazanami, and his drunken play had not been wasted. The trouble was only beginning, and before the New Year sake settled in his blood, Zenigata Heiji had already stepped onto the true road of the case.

Part 2

Hachigoro asked whether they should turn back at once and look again at the cooking house. Zenigata Heiji snapped that only a fool would warn the other side after seeing a strange sign for the first time. He said he had already felt uneasy enough inside Sazanami, because even with so many customers on New Year's Day the place had been unnaturally quiet. Men who drink in holiday groups do not sit like stones and speak in whispers. The backward wreath and the backward screen might perhaps be explained separately, but together with that silence they formed a shape he could not ignore.

As they walked back toward Kanda, Hachigoro suddenly asked about the towel the clerk had given them at the counter. Heiji answered at once that this too had mattered to him. That was why he had made such a noisy scene over wanting not the white towel but one of the cheaper light-blue ones. While he quarreled with the clerk, Hachigoro had cleverly slipped one blue towel into his sleeve, and Heiji had allowed the quarrel to end only after he saw that the theft was safely done. Hachigoro, now understanding how he had been used, grinned with pride.

Once they were back at the house, Heiji spread the blue towel open on the

mat. It was covered with a crowded printed design divided into twelve little sections. In those squares were animals of the zodiac, towers, bridges, gates, figures, and other bits that looked at first like ordinary playful decoration. Yet even at a glance the pattern felt wrong. There were things among the supposed famous sights of Edo that did not belong there at all, such as a pot-hook and a die, mixed in with bridges and birds.

Hachigoro tried to guess at once. He thought one square showed the five-storied pagoda of Asakusa seen from Ryogoku Bridge and pointed to the bird flying over it. Heiji said it could not possibly be a proper kite or hawk, because its waist was too thin and its legs too long, so that it looked more like an insect than a bird. The two men stared together at the towel, but the meaning still would not open itself to them. Even so, Heiji did not think it was random decoration. If Sazanami had printed special New Year towels, then the odd design on them must connect somehow to the backward wreath and the backward screen.

Since the design itself would not yet speak, Heiji chose the simpler path. He told Hachigoro to take the towel to a dyer and find out who had ordered it. There would almost certainly be a maker's mark on the edge, and trade people could read such things quickly. At the same time, he ordered him to set watchers on Sazanami for as long as necessary, even if that meant calling in every low man they could spare. Hachigoro asked whether the matter was truly so large, and Heiji answered that it might be a gambling den, it might be some high-born trick, or it might be something stranger still, but in any case it did not belong under the very nose of the authorities.

After that, Heiji did something that made the whole matter look almost comic. He slept through the rest of the holiday like a man doing nothing at all. Yet on the morning of the third day, Hachigoro came hurrying in with bright eyes and said that the towel's origin had been learned. At first his answer sounded useless: the person who had ordered the towels was none other than the clerk from Sazanami. Heiji cursed him for a fool and said that such a fact explained nothing. Then Hachigoro added the part that mattered. Sazanami had already closed up and disappeared.

The speed of it was astonishing. The place had opened at the turn of the year, done business on New Year's Day, and by the second day had shut its doors and vanished as if it had never meant to stay. Heiji leaped up at once, barely letting Oshizu protest that he had not even finished breakfast, and he and Hachigoro flew to Kaizoku Bridge. There they found the shop closed tight. The neighbors knew nothing useful, only that the people from Sazanami had gone away and left no clear word of where they were heading.

Behind Sazanami stood a pawnshop called Kuragaya, and its master, Sohichi, turned out to be the landlord. From him they learned the strange truth of the tenancy. A certain smooth-tongued clerk had rented the place on the twenty-fifth day of the twelfth month, paying one ryo and two bu for a month and placing six months' deposit besides. He had said they wished to open quickly for the New Year because they had newly come to Edo and knew no one yet. The master of the house had never shown his face, and only the clerk had dealt with the landlord.

The rest only deepened the mystery. After opening the shop and trading for a single day, they suddenly declared that business was poor and that they would return to their home in Fuchu. The landlord had already returned the deposit the night before. There were no reliable papers, no real references, and almost no names that could be used to find them again. The household had included a doorkeeper, two cooks, two serving women, and three maids for the upstairs rooms, exactly enough to create the appearance of an ordinary prosperous cooking house and nothing more.

Yet one point struck Heiji harder than the rest. If the shop had only come into the place on the twenty-fifth, then it could not have had a special order of New Year towels prepared in time unless that order had been arranged well before the move. That meant the whole business had been planned in advance, not improvised at the last moment. This was no failed little restaurant run by fools. It was a temporary front, set up for one specific purpose during the holiday and taken down the moment that purpose had been served.

Then Heiji made the move that left even the landlord staring. He asked to rent the empty shop himself for a single day. At first the man said this was

impossible, because a new tenant, an auction dealer in old goods, had already put down earnest money and would arrive on the fifth. Heiji calmly answered that the fourth day still stood open and that he would take only that one day, clearing out again before the next morning. The landlord hesitated, but the request came from Zenigata Heiji, and refusal was not easy. At last Heiji pressed one ryo and two bu into the man's hands and demanded a written receipt as if he were making the most ordinary business bargain in Edo.

When they came away, Hachigoro could no longer hold his tongue. He asked what in the world his boss meant to do. Heiji answered that it was plain enough: he had rented Sazanami's old house, and since food shops were said to be the quickest way to make money, they would become food sellers themselves. Hachigoro thought this was madness. He had no skill with knives except perhaps the jitte and short sword. Heiji told him not to be stupid, because the thing would last only one day, and for one day even fools could play at trade if the game was set properly. So, with that, the next step of the case began. Instead of chasing the vanished Sazanami through the whole city, Zenigata Heiji chose to step into its place and wait for the meaning of the backward signs to come back to him.

Part 3

On the way back from the landlord's shop, Zenigata Heiji suddenly said that it was time for a change of trade. Hachigoro gave another dull answer, so Heiji told him sharply to put more spirit into his voice. Since they had rented the old Sazanami place for the fourth day of the year, they would open it again themselves. Heiji would sit at the front like the master of the house, Hachigoro would become a cook whether he liked it or not, Oshizu would help as a servant, and O-Shina from next door would act as one of the upstairs maids. Hachigoro stared as if the world had tipped sideways, but Heiji had already begun arranging the whole thing in his head.

By the next morning the plan was in motion. Hachigoro, being useless with knives except the short blade and the jitte, could not truly serve as a cook, so Heiji

borrowed as many hands as he could from a friendly restaurant and filled the place with real workers for the day. Cushions, braziers, trays, bowls, and all the other small things needed for a food shop were carried in at speed. At daybreak on the fourth day of the year, the old Sazanami reopened as if nothing strange had ever happened there at all. Hachigoro, seeing it alive again, muttered that it now looked frighteningly real.

Heiji told him to go outside and look at the front once more. When Hachigoro did so, he cried out in surprise. The great New Year wreath over the entrance had again been hung backward, and upstairs the middle screen again showed its wooden ribs outward toward the street. No one from their side had set them so. That meant the sign had been restored during the night by some hidden hand that expected certain eyes to read it. Heiji answered only, "That is how it should be," and then sent Hachigoro off on more errands before questions could begin.

First he had Hachigoro borrow a few extra braziers, a money box for the front, and even a hanging scroll from the landlord behind the shop, saying that anything would do, whether it showed mountains, birds, or even a Buddha. Since the landlord was a pawnbroker, he was bound to have such things in store. Then Heiji quietly learned how many local watchers were already near at hand. Hachigoro answered that six of their low men were in the neighborhood, all ready for use. Heiji said that would be enough if they were placed cleverly.

He ordered one man each to the notice boards at Edobashi and Nihonbashi, one to Yorozu-cho, one to Aomono-cho, and one to the river's edge at Second Street. If anyone in the street stopped to chat too long, made a sign to passersby, or behaved as though waiting for a signal, the watchers were to interrupt at once. If need came, they were even to seize such a man and drag him off. Heiji also gave one quieter instruction. If the little errand boy from the landlord's shop came out for any reason, someone was to follow him every step. This, he said, was not to be shouted aloud.

After Hachigoro left to place the men, Heiji settled himself once more at the front. Yet the new shop, though properly run and better staffed than the false Sazanami had been, saw almost no customers at all. That too mattered. The old

Sazanami had been crowded beyond reason on New Year's Day, while this very same place now sat half empty even though it looked just as ready for trade. This proved that the earlier customers had not come for food and drink in any honest way. They had come because they had been summoned.

Around noon the landlord himself dropped in to see how the borrowed shop was doing. Heiji smiled pleasantly and told him business was so good that perhaps he would change trades for real and take root there. The landlord, who had no idea whether this was a joke or madness, could only stare and then withdraw. Soon after that Hachigoro returned quietly to say the watchers had been placed and were doing as ordered. Everything was ready. All they lacked was the fish that would finally touch the hook.

Then, toward midday, two komuso came straight into the shop. Their basket hats hid their faces completely, and their movements were calm enough to suggest long habit in this strange business. "We have arrived late," one of them said. "The agreement was for New Year's Day, but we were delayed at the barrier at Hakone and only entered Edo today." The words made no sense to Hachigoro, but Heiji bowed them upstairs with all the courtesy of a proper house and accepted from one of them a small folded slip, which the man called a pass. Heiji placed it respectfully into his robe as if this were the most ordinary thing in the world.

Once the two men had gone up, he opened the slip in secret. Written on it were nothing but dates, kana in brackets, and numbers: "Second month, eighteenth day, (U), three five eight," and so on through several months of the year. At first glance it looked like a merchant's mad account book or the notes of a lunatic. Yet Heiji understood at once that this was no random paper. It was the very thing for which the backward wreath, the reversed screen, and the towel signals had existed. He folded it up again and waited.

The two komuso ate lightly, paid neatly, and then came down from upstairs. Just when Heiji thought the danger had passed, the younger one stretched out a hand and asked for the New Year gift. For one instant even Zenigata Heiji lost color. He had rebuilt the whole shop in a day, but he had not had time to prepare both kinds of gift towels, the white and the light-blue. Then he answered with a

humble apology, saying that all the towels had gone out on the first day of the year and only one wrinkled piece remained. From inside his robe he produced the very light-blue towel Hachigoro had stolen from the original Sazanami and offered it on folded paper with both hands. The komuso accepted it and left without looking back. Only then did Heiji wipe the cold sweat from his neck.

The moment they were gone, he called for Hachigoro, who had been hiding nearby, and ordered him to follow the two men. Hachigoro flew off like a dog after game. Two hours later, after the shop had been closed, the borrowed things returned, and the hired workers paid off, Hachigoro came stumbling back like a drowned rat. The younger komuso, he said, was no common holy beggar at all. Hachigoro had followed the pair through Kameido, then to Fukagawa, then back across the river again. They had entered no house, spoken to no known contact, and only visited shrines, read graffiti, wrote something themselves, and made some small secret movement under the railing of Eitai Bridge. When Hachigoro dared look more closely after they had gone, the younger man came back like lightning, accused him of dogging their steps, and with one movement threw him over the bridge into the freezing water below.

Heiji did not laugh. He stripped off Hachigoro's wet clothes, borrowed bedding from the landlord, forced hot sake into him, and settled him under blankets in the little six-mat room below the stairs. Then, leaving all others dismissed and the place quiet at last, he took the coded paper and hurried to Sasano Shinzaburo. The young officer looked only a short time before his expression changed completely. He asked where Heiji had got it, and when he heard that komuso had left it by mistake, he said at once that this was a very serious thing indeed. He did not yet explain the whole meaning, but he told Heiji to come with him at once to the magistrate's office at Sukiyabashi and consult one of the writing clerks. As they set off together into the winter night, both men knew the case had grown far beyond a strange New Year restaurant by Kaizoku Bridge.

Part 4

At the magistrate's office the meaning of the strange slip slowly came out. The dates and numbers matched great robberies committed on highways and passes across the country during the previous year. On the eighteenth day of the second month a government money courier had been killed at Utsunoya Pass and a large sum taken. On the sixth day of the fourth month a merchant had been robbed at Satta Pass, and later that same month another attack had taken place at Kambara. There were more such cases in the seventh, ninth, and tenth months as well, each one marked on the paper the two komuso had left behind as if it were nothing more than an account book.

Zenigata Heiji at once understood the true nature of Sazanami. It had not been an ordinary cooking house at all. It had been a meeting place where thieves from different roads and districts could recognize one another without using names, exchange passes, compare their successes, and perhaps settle shares afterward. The backward New Year wreath and the reversed screen had not been charms or jokes. They were signs visible from the street, marks that told the right eyes, "This is the place." The blue towel, with its strange divided pattern, had served as another form of silent sign among the same people.

Sasano Shinzaburo did not waste a moment once the matter became clear. He told Heiji that if this nest were truly broken open, it might become one of the largest captures in recent years. Orders moved quietly through the right hands. Watchers were sent toward the shrines, bridges, and posts where the younger komuso had gone, because his odd acts there now looked like a chain of signs or hidden notices for others of his kind. Every small clue that had seemed foolish during the holiday suddenly became serious enough to cost men their heads.

Yet for all the size of the affair, the final shape of the case was not a loud raid in the middle of the street. It was a quiet tightening of nets. The paper, the signs, the rented shop, the false customers on New Year's Day, and the wandering komuso all pointed to one moving road rather than one fixed house. The gang had used holiday confusion, temporary lodgings, and signs that common people would ignore. They had tried to pass through Edo like winter birds, leaving almost no perch behind them.

Hachigoro, when he woke warmer and drier the next morning, was furious that his fall from Eitai Bridge had become part of such a large matter. He said bitterly that if he had known he was following men tied to great highway murders, he would at least have tried to fall into the river with more dignity. Heiji told him not to brag after the fact and said that the younger komuso's skill had already shown what kind of enemy they were dealing with. A man who could throw Hachigoro over a bridge as if tossing away a bundle was no temple beggar. He belonged to the dangerous moving world that lived between roads, shrines, ferries, and the edges of the law.

In the days that followed, the signs were gathered in one by one, and the hidden meeting place at Kaizoku Bridge was broken beyond use. The false restaurant vanished for good, its landlord wiser and far more frightened than before. The strange towel, the slip of dates, and the holiday signals all proved to be links in a larger underworld method, one built on passing signs in plain sight and on quick meetings under borrowed roofs. What had looked at first like drunken comedy on New Year's Day turned out to be a door opening onto a countrywide robber network.

Ishihara no Risuke, who had at first sat waiting in Fujiroku's house in another case and stretched his neck for Heiji's help there, would no doubt have liked a share in so large a success here too, but the heart of this business had been touched first by Zenigata Heiji alone. Heiji himself did not boast of that. He had entered Sazanami acting half drunk, nearly lost the game over a single New Year's towel, and sent Hachigoro into freezing river water besides. If the younger komuso had suspected him a little sooner, the whole line might have gone dark forever. That thought kept even victory from feeling easy.

What pleased him more than praise was something else. He had been right to trust the uneasiness that came from small crooked things. A backward wreath, a reversed screen, a room too quiet on a holiday, a towel printed too carefully, and customers who were not really customers at all—none of these alone would have proved anything. But taken together they formed the kind of false naturalness that Zenigata Heiji hated most. Once he had seen that, he could not leave the matter

alone, no matter how foolish he might look for following it.

Hachigoro later asked one last time why the thieves had used such strange open signs instead of a secret word whispered from mouth to mouth. Heiji answered that open things are often safer than hidden ones. If a man whispers to the wrong ear, he dies. But a backward wreath on New Year's Day is only a mistake to ordinary people, and a reversed screen is only carelessness. The best hiding place, he said, is often the thing everyone sees and no one truly notices. Hachigoro scratched his head and said that was exactly the kind of wisdom that made him tired.

So the case of Heiji in New Year cheer came to its true end. The drunkenness had been an act, the quiet shop had been a thieves' meeting place, and the backward decorations had been road signs for criminals crossing into Edo. What began with a single strange meal near Kaizoku Bridge led to the outline of a whole chain of robberies stretching far beyond the city. And once again Zenigata Heiji, pretending to be a fool with holiday sake on his breath, had seen farther than anyone else in the room.

Heiji and His Trouble with Women [Heiji Jonan]

Part 1

“Hachi, the moon is fine tonight,” Zenigata Heiji said as he stepped onto Ryogoku Bridge with Hachigoro beside him. Hachigoro, who never let even a good moon pass without some foolish idea, asked at once whether they should do something lively under it. Heiji told him to stop, saying that if Hachigoro raised that salty voice too loudly, even the moon would hide its face. The night was cold and clear, and because it was the thirteenth night of the ninth month, the moon stood high and bright over the river. Most of the people who had come out to enjoy it were already gone, and from the bridge one could see all the way toward Hamacho without anything blocking the pale, empty beauty of the scene.

Then Hachigoro tugged at his sleeve and said there was a strange woman ahead. At first Heiji answered lightly that she might only be waiting for a lover, but Hachigoro said no woman waiting for a lover climbed onto the railing. Before either of them could do more, the woman noticed that she had been seen. In the next instant she threw herself over the side and dropped into the cold black water with a hard splash. Heiji shouted for Hachigoro to jump, but Hachigoro cried out that he floated like a sake bottle and would only make things worse. So Heiji flung off his clothes without another word and dove in himself.

The woman went under once and came up again. By good luck a moon-viewing boat had already drifted under the bridge, and its people, together with Heiji in the water, managed to pull her safely to the side. She had swallowed little water, and after her wet clothing was stripped away and she was wrapped in the boatman’s coat and the passengers’ outer robes, she slowly came back to herself. In the blue moonlight she looked about twenty-two or twenty-three, perhaps a little worn already, but very beautiful. Even after such a violent rescue, her face still held a kind of dangerous charm.

Heiji, still naked and dripping, looked at her more closely and felt that he had seen her before. So he asked whether her name was O-Raku. At that, the

woman lifted her face in shock and then lowered it in shame. Yes, she was O-Raku, and seeing Zenigata Heiji in such a moment seemed almost too much for her to bear. She threw herself down upon the boat's rug as if she wished to disappear into it. At that point another man stepped forward from behind her and introduced himself politely. He said he was Sasaya Gensuke, a small pawnbroker from Hasegawa-cho, and though the moment was ridiculous, he could not help speaking like a man used to shaping neat phrases.

There was something refined and easy in Gensuke's manner. He looked more like a man who might compose light verses by moonlight than a small-town pawnbroker, and once he learned that the rescuer was Zenigata Heiji, he quickly recovered his calm. He even remarked that though saving a life was surely a good deed, men like himself were useless at such a moment. Heiji paid him little attention and spoke instead to O-Raku. He asked why a woman like her had tried to die. The answer that came back surprised even him.

O-Raku said she hated Heiji for what had happened to her brother. Her brother, Kasaburo, had been caught by Heiji and sent to the prison at Denma-cho. Ever since then, the people around her had treated her like plague. They called her the sister of a great thief, shut their doors to her, and drove her from one lodging to another until, in only three months, she had moved five times and spent the last of her savings. She said that if she did not die, there was nothing left for her but begging in the street. The bitterness in her voice was real enough, and Heiji, hearing it, felt a wound open in his own thoughts. He had taken pride in that great arrest, but he had never once asked what fell on the innocent sister afterward.

He told her then that a man who carried the jitte was not an ogre or a snake. If she had come to him sooner and spoken plainly, he might have found some way to help her live honestly. O-Raku answered that it was kind of him to say so now, but a thief's sister remains a thief's sister in the eyes of the world. Even while saying that, however, she wept. Heiji told her not to speak of death again and promised, as far as a poor detective could promise anything, that he would try to find some way for her to stand again. At that very moment Hachigoro came rowing up in a hired boat, having rushed to the bridge guard station to get help

after seeing his boss dive into the river. His first foolish question—whether the drowned body had been recovered—was rewarded with a sharp scolding, and that nonsense lightened the boat’s air a little.

Hachigoro suggested handing the woman over to the bridge guard and hurrying home, but Heiji said no. He told him to fetch a palanquin because O-Raku would be coming with them. Hachigoro grumbled at the oddness of carrying home a woman he still jokingly called a “drowned body,” yet Heiji ignored him and turned to Gensuke with proper thanks. So that strange rescue under the moon ended with O-Raku being brought into Zenigata Heiji’s own house. It was an unusual thing to do, yet Heiji, once moved by pity and conscience together, was the sort of man who would go through with even an awkward kindness.

What made the whole thing still more delicate was Oshizu. Yet when O-Raku was brought in, Oshizu did not show an ugly face or a narrow heart. On the contrary, she welcomed the woman almost as if an older sister had returned from far away. Oshizu was still young, beautiful, and soft in nature, and she treated O-Raku with painful humility, as though the guest’s sorrow alone gave her the higher place. O-Raku was older, stronger in presence, and far more practiced in the ways of men and the world, but Oshizu gave her room freely, not knowing what kind of shadow she had opened the door to.

The next day Gensuke came to call. He said he had happened to be in the neighborhood on business and could not let such kindness pass without bringing his thanks in person. He brought a small gift and spoke with easy grace. Heiji welcomed him politely, and once the talk began the two men found that they went on well enough together. Gensuke was older, worldly, and unusually well read for a pawnbroker. He could speak of trade, poetry, and common affairs with equal ease, and even Hachigoro, though he later complained that such men made his skin itch, could not deny that the visitor had a kind of smooth charm. That day the talk lasted until evening, with O-Raku listening and Oshizu serving them all.

After that Gensuke began coming often. If Heiji was home, they talked. If he was away, Gensuke still sat awhile with O-Raku, Oshizu, and even Hachigoro, making jokes and easy conversation before going off again. Hachigoro disliked

him the moment he was out of earshot and said that no one could tell whether the man was really a pawnbroker, a comic hanger-on, or some kind of verse-maker. Yet when face to face with such knowledge and polish, Hachigoro himself became weak and silent, because clever, well-spoken men were among the few creatures in the world that truly frightened him.

There was one more person who hated both O-Raku and Gensuke. Two houses away lived O-Machi, the daughter of a cheap sweets shop. She and Oshizu had once worked together at a waterside teahouse, and long ago she had held feelings for Heiji. She had lost that game cleanly to Oshizu, yet she had never become an honest loser in spirit. She still drank too much, moved too freely among men, and lived in a loose half-angry way. When Hachigoro stopped by her shop, she demanded to know what sort of female creature O-Raku was and why such a woman had begun ordering Oshizu about in her own home. Hachigoro gave slippery answers, but O-Machi only pressed harder. If, she said, that glossy stray cat of a woman tried to steal Heiji away from Oshizu, she would not leave her alive.

Hachigoro laughed uneasily at that and called her dangerous, but O-Machi meant every word in her own fashion. She had accepted losing Heiji to Oshizu only because Oshizu was good, gentle, and truly worthy. A woman from outside, however, who crossed into the neighborhood and laid a hand on that balance, awakened something fierce in her. So now, while O-Raku settled into Heiji's house, while Gensuke came and went with smiling ease, and while Oshizu continued to serve everyone without complaint, another pair of eyes had already begun watching from the side. Zenigata Heiji, who had brought pity home under the moon, did not yet know how much trouble had entered with it.

Part 2

Four or five days passed without any open trouble. On the surface, the house remained peaceful. Oshizu still worked as hard as ever and showed no shadow on her face when others looked at her. O-Raku too behaved well enough in outward

form. As Hachigoro had said, there was something thick and clinging about her, but she worked like a servant and did not openly quarrel with anyone. If a stranger had stepped into the house, that stranger might almost have thought O-Raku was the true wife and Oshizu only a younger sister living under the same roof.

But Zenigata Heiji began to notice small changes in Oshizu. Sometimes he caught her standing still without reason, breathing out in a long quiet sigh as though some dark thought had entered and remained there. One day, when O-Raku was out, Oshizu quietly called him into the shadow beside the house and said she had a private matter to tell him. Heiji, already burdened with too many things in his head, told her to speak plainly where she stood. Oshizu said she had tried not to say anything, but now the fear had become too strong. She begged him to give O-Raku some money and send her elsewhere.

Heiji, surprised, asked if she meant jealousy. Oshizu denied it at once. She said this was not about jealousy at all. She said that lately she had begun to feel that if she stayed in the house as things were, someone would kill her. Then, very quietly, she told him why. The previous night, while drawing water at the back well, something had suddenly swept her feet away. She had only saved herself by catching the well frame, and when she looked more closely, she found that a rope trap had been fixed where she stood, led over a beam, and arranged so that someone hidden at a distance could yank it hard at the right moment.

That was not all. The same morning, while she was inside the storeroom, someone had locked the door from outside, fastened it tight, and set fire to a charcoal sack nearby. She had smelled the danger in time, forced the door open, and rushed out just before the fire could spread to the eaves. She put it out herself with water from the cistern, but once again the meaning was plain. These were not accidents. Someone wanted her dead. Oshizu then added one more thing. O-Machi had told her that O-Raku had gone specially to a drug shop in Ryogoku and bought rat poison. O-Machi had warned her that the thing being hunted might not be a rat.

Any husband hearing such words should have grown grave. Instead, Zenigata Heiji did something shocking. He looked at Oshizu and asked again

whether she was merely jealous. She cried out that she was not. He then answered with a hard face that she had married him knowing he was a man of the jitte and that such a man could not keep a wife who made jealous complaints every time a difficult case touched the house. He said if she disliked the woman he had saved, then perhaps he must think again about the marriage itself. Oshizu could hardly believe the words she was hearing. Until then he had never spoken to her in such a cruel tone.

He did not stop there. He ordered her to return at once to her mother's house and wait there five or ten days until he had decided what to do. He even spoke of a possible letter of separation if need came. Oshizu threw herself at his knees in tears and said she had meant no such selfish thing. She clung to him like a frightened child and begged forgiveness again and again, but Heiji remained stubborn. Even Hachigoro, who had been listening from the veranda and wiping his eyes with his fist, could bear it no longer. When Heiji called for him and ordered him to escort Oshizu away, Hachigoro flatly refused. He said he wanted no part in driving out such a faithful wife and shouted that a man who cast out a good woman for the sake of a sly she-cat was no boss of his.

The quarrel became so fierce that Oshizu herself had to step between them and beg Hachigoro to fall back. In the end she went, weeping as she left, while Hachigoro, half mad with pity and anger, tried to comfort her in the street and only made matters worse with the strange things he said. That was how the house stood when evening came. O-Raku, now free of the one person who stood in her way, sat with a sake bottle in her hand and said with soft excitement that it was sad for Oshizu, but perhaps this was simply the price of being the wife of a detective. She sat close, dressed in Oshizu's clothes, yet making even plain cotton seem graceful and warm with her body. Her hair was loose, her lips bright, and the way she smiled over the little wine cup made her look less like a guest and more like a woman already claiming the place.

Zenigata Heiji, however, did not yield to that softness. Instead he turned the talk where he had wanted it all along. He asked O-Raku about the great three-man robbery band that had shaken Edo half a year before. One man had been her

brother Kasaburo and was now locked in Denma-cho prison. Another, Mamushi Sanpei, was thought dead. The third, and worst, was the murderer Fusakichi, the head of the group, who had escaped the law and was still committing crimes in Edo while laughing at Zenigata Heiji. Heiji said plainly that he wanted Fusakichi caught and would hear anything O-Raku knew. O-Raku answered that she understood and that if he truly meant to grant her one wish in return, she would tell everything.

Then she said the most important thing yet. Fusakichi, she told him, was alive under another name and living right in the heart of Edo, still committing crimes together with Sanpei, whom Heiji had wrongly believed dead. As she spoke, she moved closer and wound her arm around his, her flushed face turned up toward him in a manner that was less honest confession than temptation. Heiji pressed her to give the man's hiding place at once. O-Raku said she would, but first he must promise again to hear her wish. The very moment the answer was about to come, the whole scene was broken apart.

From the kitchen side came the voice of O-Shina, the beautiful and intelligent daughter of Ishihara no Risuke. She stepped quietly in and said she had come because Oshizu had written to her, asking her to keep watch over Heiji for one night while she was away. Before that shock could settle, O-Machi came in from the front as bold as ever, declaring that if Heiji could spend the night with a sticky creature like O-Raku, then she too had a right to sit there and make sure nothing went too far. Heiji, who had nearly wrung Fusakichi's name from O-Raku in that very instant, could only stare in helpless disbelief. O-Raku at once withdrew and said the matter could wait until tomorrow.

What followed was misery of a very special kind. O-Raku, oily and slow with false tenderness, sat on one side. O-Machi, sharp-tongued and half-wild like a woman ready to bite, took the other. O-Shina, wise, beautiful, and too calm to be sent away by force, remained within call. The three women kept him in the middle as if he were the candle at a wake. O-Machi drank and mocked. O-Raku smiled and watched. O-Shina said less, but the very fact that she stayed made escape impossible. Zenigata Heiji, who had faced murderers without fear, found

that one night between those three women was harder to endure than most battles of the law.

At last dawn came. Heiji fled first to the bath, then swallowed the breakfast O-Shina had kindly prepared, and after that ran from the house with the desperate speed of a man escaping a fire. He left the women behind and trusted, or perhaps only hoped, that O-Shina would somehow keep the peace. But the case was no longer waiting politely for the next conversation. Before that same day ended, the whole affair would leap forward into blood, and the woman he had dragged home from the moonlit river would lie dead in a dark lane not far from his own door.

Part 3

Zenigata Heiji had never spent a worse night in his life. O-Raku, heavy with dangerous beauty and soft false warmth, sat on one side of him. O-Machi, sharp-tongued, half drunk, and ready to fight like a wild dog, held the other. O-Shina, young, wise, and too proper to be driven out by force, remained close at hand, saying she had come because Oshizu had written begging her to watch over Heiji for one night while she was away. By dawn he had endured more torment from those three women than from many hardened criminals.

The moment morning came, he escaped. He went first to the bath, then swallowed the breakfast O-Shina kindly prepared, and fled the house with the speed of a man escaping a fire. He trusted, or perhaps only hoped, that O-Shina would keep matters from breaking apart behind him. Yet before that same day had ended, the whole case leaped forward into blood. By evening, the woman he had dragged home from the moonlit river was dead.

O-Raku had gone out to the neighborhood bath and did not return at the usual time. At first O-Shina, left in charge of the house, only waited and wondered, because O-Machi had already gone home and the street was quiet. Then a terrible cry rose from a narrow lane near Heiji's house. People rushed out from every side, carrying hand lights and shouting for one another. O-Shina ran there too, and in the dead end of the lane she found a terrible sight.

The lane was a narrow pocket between a board fence and a closed rental house, ending near a hedge and a shared well, so that after dark almost no one passed through it. When someone brought a light near, the people drew back all at once. A young woman lay on her back in a pool of blood, still in her bath clothes, the loosened look of the public bath still upon her. There was no mistake. It was O-Raku.

Because Zenigata Heiji had been out since morning, he was nowhere to be found. A patrol officer came, and with him, as if guided by the smell of scandal, came Miwa no Manshichi and Kagura no Seikichi. Manshichi at once began moving busily through the scene, questioning people, staring at the body, and speaking with the pleasure of a man who believes the case will wound a rival. He said openly that the dead woman had been living in Heiji's house and that because of her, Heiji had driven his own wife away only the previous night. Such a matter, he suggested, could easily end in a blade.

The wound seemed to support his line. O-Raku had been stabbed from behind with a narrow dagger, and that made Manshichi declare that the killer was surely a woman. Then he found something in the blood near the body and held it up with triumph. It was a rich tortoiseshell comb with silver decoration, the sort of fine thing people would remember. He asked around at once and returned with the news he wanted: the comb was known to belong to Oshizu, Zenigata Heiji's wife.

That was enough to poison the whole air. Manshichi said smoothly that he did not mean to accuse Oshizu outright, yet if she had been driven from the house because of this very woman, and if her comb had then been found beside the corpse, she must at least be called and questioned. He added, with even more poison, that Oshizu had been seen wandering near Heiji's house twice that day, once in the morning and once again around noon. If she had come twice in daylight, then why should she not have come again after dark? The patrol officer did not like his tone, but he could not ignore the points completely.

O-Shina, standing in the crowd, could do nothing openly against it. She knew better than anyone that the whole thing smelled wrong, but she had no clear proof

in hand. The officer examined the lane, questioned the bathhouse people, and even checked the house where O-Shina had been keeping watch, but for the moment no other suspect stood in clearer light than Oshizu. At last he asked where Oshizu's mother lived and prepared to send for her. Just then another voice cut in and stopped him.

It was Hachigoro. He stepped in before the officer could send anyone and said that calling Oshizu was unnecessary because there was not the slightest stain on her. Manshichi mocked him at once and waved the comb again, saying that the thing had been found in blood beside the body. Hachigoro answered that if the comb truly belonged to Oshizu, that would be serious, but what if another woman owned a comb exactly like it? With that, he ran off and returned dragging in a drunken O-Machi, who was half carried and half stumbling.

O-Machi, soaked in drink and in rage, cried out that if O-Raku had lived until the next day, she herself had meant to kill her. She said the night before had been enough to make her sick, and that was why she had shut her shop and drunk since morning. But when Hachigoro thrust the comb before her face, she recognized it at once and claimed it as her own. She said Oshizu had one just like it, because they had been made as a pair a year before. The two combs had no mark to tell them apart.

Manshichi tried to break that answer by asking when it had been stolen, but O-Machi, even drunk, did not withdraw. She said it had gone missing two months earlier and that if she had failed to report it to the magistrate, then they might blame her for that and nothing more. Hachigoro pressed the point further and added that Oshizu had spent the day with him and with her mother until just before now, laughing and crying in turns, but never leaving their sight. Manshichi still refused to let go, saying that suspicion could not yet be cleared so easily, but now the ground under him had softened badly.

The argument grew until it almost turned into a fight. Seikichi joked and shoved, Hachigoro swore that no one would drag Oshizu through such filth, and for a moment the lane was in danger of becoming more disorderly than the murder itself. O-Shina, seeing the case slipping into vulgar noise, quietly sent a messenger

to Sasano Shinzaburo. It was a wise move. Before long the young officer arrived and the whole scene suddenly changed.

Under Sasano's eye, the matter was pulled back into order. The examinations began again from the start. O-Raku's death, the wound, the lane, the bathhouse, the comb, the movements of Oshizu and O-Machi, and the statements of those in Heiji's house were all reviewed carefully. The result was uncomfortable for everyone. The only women who clearly had motives against O-Raku were Oshizu and O-Machi, yet the comb could not decide between them, and neither line stood cleanly enough to hold. Even so, both women remained under a shadow while the real killer walked free.

Then, in the middle of that uneasy questioning, Zenigata Heiji came back at last. Hachigoro sprang to him at once and said that a terrible thing had happened. Heiji heard the news, looked once toward the blood-dark lane and once toward the gathered faces, and for a moment showed nothing at all. But those who knew him best could see that he was not surprised in the way an innocent man should have been. His eyes had already gone past the dead woman and begun measuring the living.

That was how the case reached its darkest turn. O-Raku lay dead, Oshizu had been nearly dragged into suspicion, O-Machi stood there reeking of drink and fury, and even Hachigoro was close to blows with the other detectives. Yet beneath all that confusion, one truth was already moving toward the surface. Zenigata Heiji had never truly driven Oshizu away in anger, and he had never truly trusted O-Raku. The cruel play of the night before, the false letter sent to O-Shina, the comb in the blood, and the dead woman in the lane all belonged to one design. Heiji had been hunting a man, and that man had just shown his hand.

Part 4

When Zenigata Heiji finally stood before the gathered people, the lane was already full of suspicion, gossip, and ugly satisfaction. O-Raku lay dead in the blood-dark passage, Oshizu had nearly been dragged into disgrace, and even O-

Machi, drunk and furious, had been made to stand there like a possible killer. Hachigoro was ready to fight, and Sasano Shinzaburo had come to force order back into the scene. Yet Heiji himself looked far calmer than a man should have looked if he had truly been swept away by the disaster. That calmness was the first thing that made people stop talking.

Then he began to speak. He said that from the first night on Ryogoku Bridge he had already felt something wrong about O-Raku's suicide attempt. Later, after checking her background, he learned that she was born in Awa and handled water like a river creature. A woman like that does not easily drown herself by panic. So he came to see the leap from the bridge for what it had really been: a staged drowning meant to draw him in. O-Raku had hoped either to kill him in the water or, failing that, to enter his house and destroy him from within.

O-Raku, he said, had first meant to help her brother's comrades and avenge the arrest of her brother Kasaburo. Once inside Heiji's house, however, her heart began to change. She had not fallen into honest goodness, but she had grown drawn toward Heiji himself, and because of that she lost the will to kill him directly. Instead she began trying to kill Oshizu and take the place nearest to him. The rope at the well, the fire at the storehouse, and even the rat poison were all parts of that shift. That was why Oshizu's fear had been so real.

Heiji then said that his own cruelty to Oshizu had been an act from beginning to end. The harsh words, the false anger, the order sending her back to her mother's house, even the threat of a letter of separation, had all been done because he saw that Oshizu was in real danger and because he wanted O-Raku to believe she had succeeded. By driving Oshizu out in appearance, he saved her life and also loosened O-Raku's guard. Hachigoro had hated him for it, and Oshizu had wept as if her heart would break, but Heiji had endured that because the trap needed one more night to close.

That same night, when he questioned O-Raku over sake, she finally opened the true road of the case. She admitted that the last of the three great thieves, the murderer Fusakichi, was alive under another name, and that the man everyone believed to be dead, Mamushi Sanpei, was alive as well. At that moment she was

about to reveal where they could be found. Then O-Shina arrived carrying the false letter, and O-Machi burst in after her, ruining the chance to hear the hiding place spoken aloud. But even that interruption proved useful, because Heiji later compared the handwriting of the letter sent to O-Shina with writing taken from Sasaya Gensuke and found them to be exactly the same hand.

That was the point at which the smiling pawnbroker's mask came off. Sasaya Gensuke, the smooth, learned visitor who had spoken with such ease in Heiji's house, was no harmless tradesman. He was O-Raku's husband, and under that false name he was none other than Fusakichi, the murderous head of the three-man robber band. Once he knew that O-Raku was wavering and might betray him and Sanpei, he could no longer leave her alive. He had sent the false letter to bring O-Shina into the house as a watcher, because he feared O-Raku's changed heart and did not want her alone with Heiji that night. O-Machi's wild arrival had not been part of his plan, but it did not stop the danger that followed.

The killing itself was then easy to understand. After O-Raku left for the bath, Gensuke followed her, drew her into the narrow blind lane near Heiji's house, and tried one last time to turn her back to him. He argued, threatened, and urged her to keep faith with the old criminal life. But O-Raku had fully changed by then. Whether out of love for Heiji, disgust at her old life, or both together, she would no longer obey her husband or hide his crimes. So, holding her close from the front as if in private talk, he stabbed her with the hidden dagger and left the body where it would bring the greatest scandal upon Zenigata Heiji's house.

The comb in the blood had been planted for the same purpose. Gensuke had often come and gone from Heiji's house, and during those visits he had taken O-Machi's matching comb, perhaps noticing it the day before when Oshizu rushed out in tears and small things were left in confusion. By dropping it beside O-Raku's body, he meant to throw suspicion first on Oshizu and, if that failed, on O-Machi, while he himself watched the neighborhood tear itself apart. It was a clever move, but not clever enough for a man like Heiji once the larger shape had already become visible.

Sasano Shinzaburo then asked the question that mattered most. If Gensuke

was truly Fusakichi, where was he now? Zenigata Heiji answered that there was no need for a wide search. He had expected the man to come back and watch the confusion with his own eyes, because men of that kind cannot resist seeing whether their trick has worked. Then Heiji pointed quietly into the very crowd gathered around the lane. There, among the onlookers, a man was already turning to flee.

In the next instant Zenigata Heiji's throwing coins flashed through the air. One struck the man at the nape of the neck, another in the back, and he stumbled hard before he could run three full steps. Hachigoro, whose mind always moved fastest when his boss's hand was already in flight, dove straight into the opening and seized him from behind. The crowd broke apart with a cry. When the struggling man was dragged back into the light, there was no longer any room for doubt. It was Sasaya Gensuke.

Sasano looked down at the captured man and asked softly whether this was truly the same Fusakichi who had mocked the law for so long. Zenigata Heiji answered yes. Gensuke had worn the face of a cultivated pawnbroker, but beneath it he was still the head of the old three-man robbery band and a killer of many people. One by one the layers of the case now fell into place: O-Raku's false drowning, Oshizu's danger, the forged letter, the lane murder, and the planted comb. What had seemed like a household scandal was nothing less than the last struggle of a gang being pulled apart by fear, betrayal, and changing hearts.

When it was all over, Zenigata Heiji turned once toward Oshizu with a look too gentle for words, as if saying only, "Forgive me." Oshizu by then was already crying with relief and shame and joy together, not even trying to hide her tears. O-Machi swore loudly that she had known from the first that some outside snake was behind it, though no one believed that part. Hachigoro, who had cursed his boss as a brute only the day before, stood there red-faced and said nothing at all. In that way the case ended: with O-Raku dead by the hand of the husband she had begun to betray, with Fusakichi finally taken, and with Zenigata Heiji saving not only the law's honor but also the good wife he had seemed so cruelly to cast away.

The Broken Spear [Yari no Ore]

Part 1

“Hachi, where are you coming from so early in the morning? You look as if you have run half across the city,” Zenigata Heiji said when Hachigoro came in. Hachigoro answered in his usual foolish way, asking whether his boss could tell that he had not merely come back from his aunt’s house beyond Mukoyanagihara. Heiji said that even without fortune-telling he could see enough. It was still before ten, Hachigoro’s hair knot was dusty, and the man’s whole face showed the wild excitement of someone who had seen something far bigger than a family breakfast.

Hachigoro, enjoying his own importance even in fear, tried to build the tale slowly, but the thing itself was too large to hold back for long. He said that a man who had died two years earlier had returned and killed someone. More than that, the dead man had promised in writing to kill four or five more before he was done. Heiji, who had heard every kind of foolish rumor in Edo, still paused at that. Hachigoro then named the dead man: the great thief Bat Kambee, a robber once famous through the city both for his daring break-ins and for the false holy name he made by throwing a few coins to the poor after stealing a hundred times more for himself.

Heiji remembered him well enough. Bat Kambee had once made the whole city uneasy because no lock seemed able to stop him. Then he had made the mistake of entering the house of Naruseya Soemon in Rokushaku-machi, down the slope beyond Andozaka in Koishikawa. Naruseya was one of the largest landowners in the district, rich enough to fill half the neighborhood with talk of his storehouses and lands. Knowing the thief might come, the family had prepared every kind of trap, alarm, and barrier and had taken him alive instead of losing treasure to him. Afterward Bat Kambee had been handed over to the officials, and before long his head had been set up at Suzugamori.

Hachigoro said that all of Edo had forgotten the man after that, but the house of Naruseya had not been allowed to forget. About a month earlier, strange letters

had begun arriving there in the dead robber's name. In them Bat Kambée declared that he would wipe out the whole Naruseya family in revenge. One letter might have been called a joke. Two might have been blamed on some malicious fool. But now there had been three, each darker than the last, and this very morning the threat had at last turned into blood. Naruseya's head clerk and guard, a fierce and strong man named Denroku, had been found dead with a spear point driven straight into his chest.

"Was he really killed in his sleep?" Zenigata Heiji asked. Hachigoro nodded and said that the thing was more terrible than that. Denroku had been the sort of man who trusted his own strength more than locked doors, a powerful fellow proud of both his arms and his temper. Yet even such a man had not cried out. It looked as though he had been stabbed through the heart before he could utter a sound. Hachigoro, who had already gone to see the place, said the whole thing looked less like murder than like a visitation from the dead.

Zenigata Heiji gave him a dry look and said that he had no taste for ghost stories at breakfast, but he rose all the same. He added that tying up a ghost might at least be good sport for the morning. Hachigoro, now relieved that his boss was moving, begged first for food because he had flown out so quickly that he had not even eaten. Oshizu brought the meal for him while Heiji watched with a half-amused face, and soon after that the two men set out together for Koishikawa. Even before they reached the place, however, Heiji had already decided one thing clearly in his own mind. Dead thieves do not climb stairs, lift weapons, and choose targets. If there was blood in the Naruseya house, then living hands had made it.

Naruseya turned out to be exactly the sort of house Hachigoro had described. It was not merely prosperous, but one of those great Edo merchant homes that seemed to spread outward until half the neighboring land looked somehow attached to them. The local detective, Kanatomi no Tomekichi, looked almost happy with relief when he saw Zenigata Heiji appear. He said that once Zenigata Heiji had come, even a wandering spirit might think twice before showing itself again. Yet at the same time he muttered that the case was beyond him, because the house was locked up tighter than the great prison at Denma-cho, and if there had

been any opening at all, it was no more than a kitchen window through which only smoke and wind should pass.

The master of the house, Naruseya Soemon, received them with polished courtesy. He was about fifty-seven or fifty-eight, a typical great merchant of the old sort, with graying hair at the temples, a practiced warmth in his manner, and the easy dignity of a man used to command without raising his voice. He said with proper sorrow that after helping the authorities capture a famous thief, he now found himself haunted by that thief's revenge and hardly knew how to face decent people any longer. He asked Heiji to do whatever was needed and spoke neither like a coward nor like a man trying to hide. The smoothness of the reception itself made the whole case feel still stranger, because under such calm words the house was full of uneasiness.

Zenigata Heiji and Hachigoro were first shown the room where Denroku had died. It was a room through which many household movements naturally passed, so in one sense it was open from several sides. Yet that only deepened the difficulty. A strong, sharp-eyed fighter like Denroku should not have let anyone approach him with a weapon in hand, much less allowed a spear point to be brought down on his heart without a struggle. The lamp had still been burning when the body was found, and the broken spear point used in the attack had been taken from the second floor of the house. That meant the killer had not only approached the victim but had first gone up, taken the weapon, and come down again without being seen or heard.

While Heiji was examining the lower room, Soemon's younger brother Toyojiro came in and patiently showed them the state of the doors, shutters, and windows. He was a humble, soft-spoken man of forty-five or forty-six and seemed willing to explain anything. The second floor, he said, was kept more tightly closed than ever. It was opened only when cleaning had to be done, and even then a very strong lattice stood there, so that entering from outside was nearly unthinkable. Heiji listened, looked, and said little. Each answer made the crime seem more impossible, but impossible crimes only excite the wrong kind of mind. They do not truly exist.

Then Heiji began to hear about the people in the household itself. Besides Soemon and his wife O-Haya, there were their twenty-year-old son Shimasaburo and their daughter O-Yoshi, eighteen and richly attractive. There was also a young woman named O-Machi, a relation of the family who had been taken in years earlier and now lay ill after suffering for three years. O-Haya, Heiji was told, was a plain, honest-looking woman from a farming family in Itabashi, though she seemed somewhat greedy and not especially quick of mind. Shimasaburo looked weak in spirit and unlikely to kill anyone. O-Yoshi, on the other hand, was strikingly full and womanly in appearance, the kind of beauty that can become dangerous simply by existing.

O-Machi interested Heiji in a different way. He went to see her by her pillow and found a pale, worn young woman who answered in a flat, almost detached voice. She said she was of the blood of the former Naruseya line, and that when the old house had nearly collapsed, the present master, a distant relation, had stepped in and rebuilt it. After she had been left an orphan, she had served in another household and was later taken back into Naruseya and raised there. When Heiji asked whether the family treated her well, she said they did—almost too well. She spoke with gratitude toward Soemon, kindness toward O-Yoshi, and no open bitterness at all, even though illness had tied her to the bedding for three full years.

The more Zenigata Heiji looked and listened, the less willing he became to accept the easy story of a dead thief's curse. Bat Kambee's threatening letters were certainly part of the case, but whether they were the cause of the murder or only a screen thrown over it remained to be seen. Denroku's strength, the locked second floor, the weapon carried from above, the burning lamp, and the grateful but ghost-like O-Machi all pressed on his thoughts at once. By the time he rose from her bedside, he had not yet solved the murder, but he knew exactly where the true road began. If the dead robber's hand was visible anywhere in this house, then it was only because some living person had chosen to wear it.

Part 2

The lower room where Denroku had died lay at the very center of the house's movements. A person could come there from the shop, from the inner rooms, or from the kitchen side, and above it ran the second-floor space from which the broken spear had been taken. Yet that did not make the case easier. It made it worse. A bold and sharp man like Denroku should have noticed anyone bringing down a weapon from above or stepping close with murder in mind. Still, there he had lain, struck once through the heart, the lamp burning quietly beside him as if death had entered without making even the floor speak.

Zenigata Heiji asked where the lamp had stood, where Denroku usually laid his bedding, and how much of the room could be seen from the second floor. Toyojiro, the master's younger brother, answered everything in his low, careful way. Denroku had slept near the foot of the ladder, but a little off from the busiest path so that no one walking through the room would kick his bedding in the dark. The lamp had been left burning until dawn, and in that soft light a moving shadow should have shown itself at once. That was why the manner of the killing felt wrong. The murderer had not simply stepped near like an ordinary house thief and struck in haste. Something quieter and stranger had taken place.

Heiji then turned again to the kitchen side. The hatch window stood open in a way that almost demanded belief, as though the killer had wanted everyone to say at once, "He came in there." The ladder left by the wall after roof repairs only strengthened that easy answer. Yet Heiji hated explanations that offered themselves too willingly. He asked the serving woman O-Dai once more whether she had truly checked the locks twice before sleeping, and she answered with such force and fear that he believed she had at least looked. That did not prove the window had been shut. It only proved that if it had been opened later, the opening had been part of the plan.

So he made a trial on the spot. He had Hachigoro pull the hatch fully closed and tie the cord as hard as he could to the bent nail above the kitchen stove. Then Heiji went outside, climbed the ladder to the roof, and from there worked something into the crack little by little until a gap opened. Through that gap he

slipped down a hooked tool, caught the cord, and loosened it from outside. In a moment the hatch flew open, and he himself came sliding lightly down into the kitchen. Everyone stared, because what had looked impossible had suddenly become possible before their eyes.

Even so, Heiji shook his head and said this was only one possible trick, not necessarily the true one. A man might indeed enter that way, but if the murderer truly belonged to the household, he would have chosen a simpler false sign than so awkward a method. On the other hand, if an outsider had done it, he still had to approach Denroku unseen and strike him down without waking the whole house. The hatch might explain entry, but it explained nothing about the silent murder itself. So the question remained where it had been from the first: how had the killer carried a weapon near Denroku, and how had Denroku failed to notice?

After that, Heiji asked to see the threatening letters said to have come in the name of Bat Kambee. Local detective Tomekichi told him that the letters had been examined during the official inspection and then returned to the master for safekeeping. Soemon himself led them to his room and reached up to a handbox on a shelf with the careless confidence of a man who feared nothing inside his own walls. The next instant his face changed. The box held only a small handful of gray ash. The three letters were gone.

The shock of it ran through the room at once. Soemon insisted that he had placed the papers there with his own hands. Hachigoro and the others leaned in as if the letters might somehow still be hiding under the ash, but there was nothing. Heiji did not join the excitement. He listened to the rising voices for only a breath and then slipped quietly out into the corridor. The back part of the house was strangely still, and beyond the little planting outside stood the high wall with its iron spikes like something built not for peace but for fear.

The next room he entered belonged to O-Yoshi. She sprang up in alarm the moment he opened the sliding paper door. She was only seventeen or eighteen, yet already full-bodied and richly alive, the kind of girl who might seem merely pretty to one man and dangerous to another. Heiji looked through the room quickly, moved the partition that joined it to her father's side, and glanced at the dressing

stand, brazier, and sewing box. O-Yoshi seemed as if she wanted badly to say something, but whenever he turned his eyes on her, the words died in her throat. That too he remembered.

Beyond her room, past a storeroom and a dark little chamber, lay the room of O-Machi, the sick young woman tied to her bedding for years. Heiji entered more gently there, perhaps because the smell of medicine itself forced gentleness. O-Machi looked up with strangely living eyes from a face made thin and pale by long illness. She said she was of the blood of the former Naruseya line, that the present master had rebuilt the house after its fall, and that she herself had later been taken back and raised there out of duty to the old family. She spoke without bitterness. If anything, she spoke with too much gratitude.

Heiji asked whether the household treated her well. She said they treated her so well it almost felt beyond her worth. He asked about Soemon, and she praised him as a deeply kind and thoughtful man known throughout the neighborhood for his good deeds. He asked about the son and daughter, and she praised them too, saying Shimasaburo worked hard and O-Yoshi was truly good-hearted. He even asked about the wife O-Haya, and though the answer there was more plain than warm, nothing in O-Machi's voice held complaint. A woman might lie in words, but the quiet worship in her manner was harder to fake.

Then, in a move that made Hachigoro stare, Heiji asked to take her pulse. He said a detective needed some learning in medicine and fortune-telling if he meant to stay alive in his work. While Hachigoro stood by in foolish wonder, Heiji carefully examined both of O-Machi's hands. He was not really reading her pulse. He was looking for traces that might betray the burning of paper or some secret labor. Yet when he finished, he found her palms smooth and clean, almost painfully so, with no ash, no stain, and no sign that she had handled the vanished letters. The result disappointed him, though he hid that disappointment behind a little joke.

When he left her room and rejoined Hachigoro outside, the big man whispered at once that the sick woman must be the strange one. Heiji answered that if ash had truly clung to her hands, the whole matter would already be finished.

But it had not. Then Hachigoro asked about O-Yoshi, and Heiji said her hands had also been clean, though perhaps too clean, as if they had been washed not long before. That did not amount to proof. A person with time enough to wash might also have time enough to hide three small letters. So he forbade Hachigoro from frightening the young woman with a rough search and instead told him only to watch her closely.

The contents of the letters had to be rebuilt from memory, since the papers themselves had vanished. Soemon and Tomekichi together recalled enough. All three had been folded common half-sheets thrown into the shop from outside in the early morning or at dusk. The writing was firm and old-fashioned, not the easy hand of a shop clerk or a woman, and the tone was filled with long, bitter vengeance. Bat Kambee, or the person using his name, claimed that after being trapped, tormented, and handed to the authorities, he would now kill every member of the Naruseya house one by one. The style was almost too proper for a thief, which made it feel either false or very carefully prepared.

Heiji asked whether Soemon had any enemies in money matters, lawsuits, or marriage talk. The master answered calmly that he lent money but never pressed cruelly, that he rented houses and land but had no serious quarrels, and that no marriage had yet been settled for his children. He also explained that Toyojiro was not his true younger brother but the brother of his first wife. The present wife's children, however, were all his own. In every answer Soemon showed the same open face. It was the face either of a very good man or of a man so skilled in goodness that he wore it like a second skin.

By the time the afternoon light began to bend across the garden, the case had only grown darker. The hatch window could be opened from outside, yet that solved nothing. The letters threatened from beyond the grave, yet someone within the house had made them disappear. The sick woman seemed grateful, the daughter seemed frightened, the master seemed kind, and the dead guard had been strong enough to fear no one. Zenigata Heiji stood with Hachigoro and Tomekichi looking out over the Koishikawa lowland, but the view meant nothing to him. What filled his mind was simpler and harder. If Bat Kambee's ghost truly walked

in this house, then the ghost was living in someone's body.

Part 3

Zenigata Heiji did not leave Naruseya empty-handed, even though no arrest had yet been made. When he returned to Kanda that evening, several of his low men were already waiting with scraps of neighborhood knowledge gathered from every side. One said that Toyojiro, the master's younger brother, lived like a great fool outside the house, keeping a mistress and burning through his elder brother's money while wearing a meek face indoors. Another said that Denroku, the dead guard, had once slipped into the old Naruseya house as something between a servant and a hanger-on, had cheated the good-natured former master into ruin, and after that had helped bring the present Soemon into the house while seizing real power for himself.

A third report mattered even more. The sick young woman O-Machi, said the informer, had until four or five years ago served in a daimyo household. There she had learned far more than ordinary women learned. She could read and write well, understood refined manners, and, most striking of all, was famous even among the women there for her skill with the bow. If that was true, then the impossible spear thrust into Denroku's chest no longer needed to be imagined as a hand-thrust from close range. It could have been fired downward from above with a bow after all.

Yet even that did not settle the case completely. A woman bedridden for years might once have been able to shoot, but what mattered was whether she could do so now. Just then Hachigoro came in with one last bit of news from the neighborhood doctor. The doctor said O-Machi's illness had never been as grave as people believed. Her disease was real enough, but not the sort that must keep her pinned hopelessly to bedding if her spirit were strong. Worse still, the doctor now feared she might not live through the night—not because of the old sickness itself, but because something had sharply changed in her condition since morning.

Zenigata Heiji listened to all this without speaking for some time. Then he

said only that the thing was becoming uglier than before. If O-Machi had truly written the letters in Bat Kambée's name, hidden them, and found a way to kill Denroku from above, then she had done it in full knowledge of her father's ruin and of the part Denroku and Soemon had played in it. That would make the dead thief's ghost nothing but a borrowed mask. Still, Heiji did not want to leap too early. He had already seen too many neat explanations go bad in his hands.

So he waited, but not peacefully. For two or three days he remained in a state of restless expectation, almost as if he himself were standing inside Naruseya listening for the next footstep. He knew too well that the threatening letters had promised not one death, but the wiping out of the whole house. If Denroku had been only the first blow, then more blood—or something worse than blood—must soon follow. Hachigoro later said that during those days his boss looked as though he were waiting to be struck from behind at any moment.

The blow came on the third morning. Hachigoro burst in again so violently that there was no mistaking this for one of his usual alarms. "It is the slaughter of Naruseya," he cried. "The master, his wife, the son, the daughter—everyone in the inner house is down. O-Machi too is between life and death." Zenigata Heiji did not waste a breath. He and Hachigoro flew at once toward Dentsuin and the great house beyond, already knowing before they arrived that the killer had changed methods but not purpose.

Naruseya had collapsed into a horror worse than the first murder. The shop was closed, the servants crept around in silence, and in the inner rooms the five stricken members of the family lay groaning side by side. The gravest case was O-Machi, who seemed very near death. The lightest was Soemon himself, and because he could still speak, Heiji began with him. What he learned was simple on the surface. Only the five who had eaten in the inner house had been poisoned. None of the servants were ill, and the one person who should have been at table with them but was not, Toyojiro, had escaped the poison entirely because he happened that morning to be delayed by shop business and had not begun his meal when the others started to suffer.

The doctors, three of them together, had already agreed on the poison. It was

made from the root of the aconite blooming in the rear garden, the same dangerous plant that people called torikabuto. The poison had been ground and mixed into the miso soup. That part could not be doubted. Yet identifying the hand that placed it there was far harder. The kitchen maid O-Dai had been in charge and admitted that, while the soup was on the fire, she had once gone away because something or someone had come in at the back. But in that brief absence anyone might have slipped to the pot and added the poison.

Heiji went into the rear garden himself. There the aconite was indeed growing thickly and beautifully, but among the many plants only one showed signs that its root had been disturbed and cut. Even that did not point clearly to any one person. The servants knew the flower only as a handsome thing of the garden, not as a hidden poison. Whoever had used it must have known more than common house people knew. That thought deepened rather than eased the mystery, because knowledge of herbs might belong to someone educated, not merely to someone cruel.

Local detective Tomekichi, faced now with a whole house half poisoned, was ready to seize Toyojiro at once. The man's bad private life, his dependence on his brother's money, and his fortunate delay at breakfast all made him look convenient. But Zenigata Heiji stopped the arrest with only a glance. "Not yet," that glance meant, and Tomekichi, though unwilling, understood. A weak man who wastes money on women may well be dirty, but dirt alone does not make a pattern like this: three threatening letters, a silent killing with a broken spear, and then aconite in the morning soup. Someone colder and more patient had laid this road.

By evening the poisoned house was still full of low groans, whispered orders, and the stale smell of medicine. Heiji at last withdrew, not because he had given up, but because the shape of the thing had at last become visible. The murderer hated Denroku, yes, but the murderer also hated the whole Naruseya line and had chosen Bat Kambee's name only as a cloak. A person who could write a hard old-style hand, shoot or arrange the spear from above, hide letters as ash, and then turn to aconite in the soup was not striking wildly. That person was moving with

a private history and a terrible patience. And of all the people in the house, only one had both the deepest old wound and the strongest reason to die before she spoke.

Part 4

That night Zenigata Heiji slept little. The poisoned members of the Naruseya house did not die at once, and because they did not die at once, the whole place seemed to groan through the darkness like a ship full of wounded men. Toward dawn he called Hachigoro close and said the end must now be near. The threatening letters had promised that Bat Kambee's son Koukichi had no guilt, and the poisoning had struck the whole family at the very time Koukichi had already been seized. That meant the true enemy was not Koukichi at all, but someone trying to save him while still finishing an older revenge.

Just as the sky began to pale, that thought took shape. A small boy came running with a folded half-sheet and thrust it into Hachigoro's hands before anyone could catch him. Hachigoro shouted and flew after him, but the little messenger was too quick and vanished into the morning lanes. When he came back, furious and empty-handed, Zenigata Heiji had already opened the paper. It said, in the name of Bat Kambee's ghost, that his son Koukichi had no crime, that only Naruseya was hated, and that as proof the whole family would soon be destroyed, so they should guard themselves well. That final warning made the whole matter clearer, not darker.

"Do you understand now?" Heiji asked quietly. Hachigoro nodded only halfway, so Heiji told him the truth more plainly. If Koukichi were truly the criminal, there would be no reason to send such a letter after he had already been arrested. The only reason to write so boldly now was to separate Koukichi from the crime and shift all attention away from him. The writer wanted to save the son of Bat Kambee, yet still punish Naruseya. That meant the writer's hatred did not come from the dead thief at all. It came from another old wound, one buried inside the house itself.

So Zenigata Heiji went straight to O-Machi's room. Dawn light had only just begun to enter, and the room smelled more sharply of medicine than before. O-Machi lay pale and still, but her eyes were open, and when Heiji entered she understood at once that there was no use pretending any longer. Hachigoro and a few of the others remained near the doorway, but no one spoke. It was Heiji alone who sat down by the pillow and began laying out the road of the crime step by step.

He said first that O-Machi's father had been destroyed through a tangled lawsuit and dishonest scheming by Denroku and Soemon together. The present master now covered himself with charity and good deeds, but in earlier years, when Naruseya's old line was collapsing, greed and hard calculation had ruled the house. O-Machi had known this. She had entered the rebuilt Naruseya not simply as a grateful dependent, but as a daughter of the ruined line returning quietly to the house that had swallowed her father. She had accepted kindness, yes, but under that kindness she had kept another purpose alive. She meant to take revenge when the hour was right.

Then Heiji turned to the first murder. O-Machi had made herself look weaker than she truly was. She had chosen a night when the ladder still stood by the kitchen wall, opened the hatch as a false sign, and before that had slipped into the second floor and hidden there in darkness. When midnight deepened and Denroku lay below with the lamp still burning, she had taken the broken spear from the long beam and used the bow kept among the old weapons to drive it down into his chest from above. That was why even such a keen and violent man died without struggling. No killer had stood over him with a raised weapon. Death had flown at him like a shot.

O-Machi did not deny it. Her eyes only blinked once or twice, and the pain in them grew clearer. So Heiji went on. The letters in Bat Kambee's name had also been hers. She had chosen that dead robber's ghost as a cover because Bat Kambee had in truth been captured in this very house and had left behind a son, Koukichi, whose life now drifted in the same low waters where ruined children and thieves often meet. By using the dead thief's name, she could frighten

Naruseya, promise slaughter, and later create a road by which Koukichi might be saved. The little messenger boy who carried the papers had worked under her orders, though whether from pity, fear, or kinship, she had not yet said.

Heiji then said that the vanished letters had not burned themselves. O-Machi could not easily leave her bed by day and risk carrying them off under so many eyes. So she had used O-Yoshi. The girl had been frightened, pressured, and made to steal the three false threats from Soemon's handbox and put ash in their place. "That foolish girl is not as clever as she looks," Heiji said. "You threatened her, and she obeyed." At that, even from the doorway one could feel a tremor pass through the house, because the bright, healthy daughter had become part of the revenge without fully understanding it.

Still O-Machi said nothing, and so Heiji came to the poison. "When you heard that Koukichi had been arrested," he said, "you understood that delay would destroy him. If Naruseya's family died while he was already in bonds, then no one could say he had done it. So you prepared the aconite root in advance, dug from the garden with your own hands. When O-Dai opened the kitchen and turned away, you dropped it into the pot. And because you had decided to finish both revenge and your own life together, you drank two bowls yourself before the others had even taken one." The words fell one by one into the room like small stones into deep water.

O-Machi's face changed then. Until that moment she had seemed only pale and exhausted, but now a true death-color spread over it all at once, cold and swift as ink in clear water. Zenigata Heiji leaned nearer and said there was still one thing he wished to know. "That boy," he asked softly. "Who is that little messenger? Who is he to you?" It was the one point left dark: whether the child was merely a tool, Bat Kambee's son, or something bound to O-Machi by blood or pity more closely than anyone knew. But the answer did not come.

The poison had already gone too far. As Heiji spoke, O-Machi's eyes began losing their strength. Her lips moved once, perhaps trying to form a name, perhaps only trying to breathe. The people outside, hearing the change in Heiji's voice, rushed in at last, but there was nothing any of them could do. Zenigata Heiji drew

back a little, pressed his palms together, and began quietly chanting the prayer for the dying. No accusation now remained in his face. Only pity did.

The first light of autumn dawn entered through the window and touched O-Machi's face. In that light she looked no longer like a schemer, nor like a sick dependent kept alive by another family's kindness, but like something both more beautiful and more tragic than either. She had avenged her father, struck at the men she held guilty, tried to free the son of a dead thief, and chosen death for herself as part of the same design. Yet because revenge does not move in a straight line, she had also dragged innocent people into terror and guilt before her own life burned out. By the time the prayer ended, she was gone.

That was the true end of the matter. Denroku's death had not come by ghost or by a hand thrust from beside the bedding, but by O-Machi's deadly skill and patience. The threatening letters had been her false mask, O-Yoshi her frightened helper, the little boy her unseen messenger, and the aconite in the soup her last desperate stroke to save Koukichi and finish Naruseya at once. The dead thief Bat Kambee had never returned. Only the living hatred of a ruined daughter had walked through the house wearing his name.

The Virtuous Woman of the Shoben-gumi [Shōbengumi Teijo]

Part 1

“Boss, do you know what a Shoben-gumi is?” Hachigoro asked as he came shambling into Zenigata Heiji’s house, stroking his long jaw as if he were about to offer a great piece of wisdom. Heiji at once told him not to start the day with dirty talk, because breakfast had only just ended and there was no good reason to spoil a man’s stomach so early. Hachigoro, however, only grinned and said that the story was not dirty at all. On the contrary, he said, the woman at the center of it was so beautiful that even the ugly name could not keep people from talking about her.

Zenigata Heiji did not smile much, but he let Hachigoro go on. In those days, Hachigoro said, many men with money kept mistresses quite openly, and the world acted as if that were only natural. Great lords, rich merchants, and even scholars and priests sometimes did so without shame. Because of that custom, there were also many beautiful women who lived by becoming kept women for a price. Some of them were honest enough in their strange trade, but others were not. Now and then a woman of great beauty would take a huge preparation fee, enter a rich man’s house, and then, by a foul trick in the bed itself, make him throw her out in disgust. Since the money could not easily be taken back, such women moved from man to man and lived on the ruin they caused.

Edo people, cruel and lively as ever, had given a mocking name to such women. They called them the Shoben-gumi. The name was ugly, but the laughter around it was even uglier. Comic verse and street gossip kept the word alive, and before long a woman could be judged by the rumor alone whether or not it was true. Hachigoro said that the present case had begun because one of those famous women had done the strange thing of not behaving as expected. Instead of bringing shame and trouble by her own foolishness, she had entered a house and turned out to be almost unbelievably good.

The man at the center of the affair was Keizaburo of Wakamatsuya in

Asakusa Sangen-cho, a timber merchant of good name. He had lost his wife two years earlier and was now forty-one, old enough to remarry easily if he chose, yet he had delayed because he pitied the two small children left by his first marriage and did not want to place them under a stepmother's hand too quickly. Still, a large house with many servants cannot run only on pity. At last, three months earlier, people around him urged him to take in a woman as a mistress, and he agreed. The woman they brought was called O-Sen, twenty-one years old, slender, white-skinned, soft in manner, and so beautiful that Hachigoro nearly knocked over his tea while trying to describe her.

Heiji mocked him for that, but Hachigoro insisted the point mattered. By all common expectation, such a woman should have brought trouble. Instead, from the moment she entered Wakamatsuya, O-Sen behaved like a model wife. She was gentle with Keizaburo, kind to the servants, warm with the two children, and careful in every small duty of the house. Far from wasting money on herself, she kept herself plain and neat. The longer she stayed, the more the whole house began to love her. Keizaburo's happiness grew day by day, and if nothing had disturbed that peace, Wakamatsuya might have become the very place where O-Sen left her old bad name behind forever.

But peace did not last. Before even one full month had passed, stones began flying over the black board fence and striking near Keizaburo's sleeping room. The thrower had a skillful hand, because the stones came from the street side and still landed close to the same place again and again. When the servants tried to watch for the culprit, the attacks shifted in time. Sometimes they came early in the evening, sometimes before dawn, always slipping through the smallest gap in the house's guard. After that came even nastier tricks. Horse dung was thrown at the front of the house, and the body of a dead cat was dropped into the rear well.

Even then Keizaburo tried to hold the house quiet. He was broad-hearted and did not wish to stir public talk. But the attacks soon took a sharper and more personal shape. Rumors spread through the neighborhood that O-Sen was one of the notorious Shoben-gumi after all, and boys from the street, bribed with sweets, came singing before the shop in cruel chorus. They shouted that O-Sen should wet

the bed, sweep the master away, and wash away his pillow with him. No decent house could bear such a thing for long. Yet it was hard to catch children and useless to punish them if some older, dirtier hand was driving them from behind.

At last the matter rose into blood. That very morning, said Hachigoro, a local rogue called Fujiro had been found dead in the lane behind Wakamatsuya, his belly ripped open by a strong thrust. Fujiro was the kind of swaggering brute who had once worked on a red-seal ship and made that old adventure the one proud story of his life. In truth he was only a violent gambler and drifting criminal. Worse still, people said he was the man standing behind O-Sen's old life and the one now stirring up trouble around the house. He even boasted in public that O-Sen was really his woman and that he could drag her back whenever he wished.

Hachigoro leaned forward then and admitted the real reason he had brought the story. The local detective Miwa no Manshichi had already thrown himself into the case and was searching fiercely for O-Sen, who had disappeared from Wakamatsuya the night before. That alone made her look guilty. Yet another person had come quietly to Hachigoro after he visited the house. It was O-Shino, O-Sen's younger sister, a girl of eighteen working at a tea stand near Kaminarimon. She was so pretty, Hachigoro said, that no man with eyes could look away from her. Heiji told him not to behave like a fool, but he already understood enough. Hachigoro had not come because the story was amusing. He had come because someone wanted help for O-Sen before Manshichi tied the whole case up with the easy answer.

So Zenigata Heiji agreed to go. The two men made their way through the chilly noon streets of early winter, with Hachigoro talking too much and Heiji listening just enough. At Wakamatsuya they found a well-kept corner shop dealing mainly in fine timber and imported woods, with a strict black fence and even spiked tops on parts of it. It was easy to see why a man like Fujiro could not simply wander in by boldness alone. Keizaburo himself came out to meet them, a large, open-faced merchant of the best old Edo kind, more the image of pure-hearted goodness than sharp beauty. The worry in his face was real. He said at once that Manshichi was searching everywhere for O-Sen, but he begged Zenigata Heiji to

believe one thing first: O-Sen was not the kind of woman who could kill.

He spoke of her with a feeling so deep that it would have sounded foolish from a smaller man. He said that once she came into his house and understood its goodness, she changed completely. Whatever dark road had brought her there, she had spent the last hundred days trying to live honestly. She had cared for the children, worked harder than any servant, and wanted only to remain in the house in peace. Yet the harassment outside had made her say again and again that she should leave, because she did not want the house to suffer on her account. She had still been there at dusk the previous evening, but by nightfall she was gone, and no one had any certain idea where she had fled.

Zenigata Heiji did not answer that speech with easy comfort. Instead he began looking and listening. He met the people of the household one by one. There was Genkichi, Keizaburo's younger brother, a good-looking man in his late thirties who managed the business by day. There was the old head clerk Yahei, who seemed interested in nothing but trade. There was the maid O-Natsu, the two children from the first wife, and one older male servant named Moju, a loyal man who had returned to serve the house after his own son had settled as a farmer in Kawagoe. All of them spoke well of O-Sen. Indeed, they spoke so warmly that Heiji began to feel the case had a stranger depth than a common neighborhood murder. Somewhere between the vanished mistress, the dead rogue, and the house that praised her so highly, the true trouble had only just begun.

Part 2

Zenigata Heiji did not answer Keizaburo's plea with easy comfort. Instead he began by looking carefully at the house itself, because a place often tells more truth than the people living inside it. Wakamatsuya, though only a corner shop, was solidly built, with black board fences drawn tight around the residence, spikes along the top, and a broad yard for timber beyond. No man like Fujiro should have been able to walk in and out there as if it were his own road. That alone made the dead rogue's bold harassment feel strange. If he had truly stood outside nightly

throwing stones, fouling the front, and troubling the well, then either he had help, or someone within the house had been slower to stop him than they claimed.

Heiji next listened again to the stories of the household. Keizaburo repeated that O-Sen had become almost unbelievably good once she entered the house. The younger brother Genkichi, handsome and capable, said much the same. The old clerk Yahei cared for little beyond trade, yet even he admitted that the woman had caused no trouble within doors. The servant woman O-Natsu, a plain middle-aged creature, spoke warmly of O-Sen's kindness to the children. And Moju, the fifty-two- or fifty-three-year-old manservant who had returned to serve the house after his own son became a farmer in Kawagoe, praised her most of all. He said she rose early, slept late, spent almost nothing on herself, and worked with such care that no one in the house could speak ill of her. The more Heiji heard, the less he believed the lazy public story that she was only a dangerous kept woman hiding her true nature.

Then he went out with Moju to inspect the grounds. They passed through the garden, across the timber yard, and finally to the place outside the fence where Fujiro's body had been found. That part of the lane lay beside the wall near the master's sleeping room, and the blood still stained the withered weeds there. Heiji asked who had first seen the body, and Moju answered neatly that some passerby on an early temple visit had cried out in the half-light and then hurried away without staying to be involved. That explanation sounded possible enough, but Moju gave it too smoothly, as if he had already repeated it many times and polished it with each telling.

Heiji crouched under the fence and looked around with unusual care. At the front side, near the master's room, there was a little drain beneath the wall and a knot-hole at about eye height. It was easy to imagine someone peeping through there. But the ground at the foot of the fence was muddy and foul. If a man had stood close to that wall, been stabbed there, and fallen, his clothes should have shown ditch mud and wet stains. Hachigoro, when ordered to inspect the dead man's garments again in memory, said there had been no such marks at all. That small absence mattered more to Heiji than any loud accusation. It meant Fujiro

had almost certainly not been killed where his body was found.

After that Heiji went around the other side of the property into the narrow lane beside the yard. There the fence was older and weaker, and in one place a large break about four feet high had been neatly covered with a fresh cedar board far newer than the surrounding wood. Below it Heiji found a single sulfur match and a pinch of tinder, still damp. When he remarked that the fence seemed wet, Moju answered at once that children had scribbled dirty things about O-Sen on the boards and that, by the master's order, he had washed them off the previous evening, though the marks had not fully disappeared. Heiji said nothing. Fresh boards, washed planks, and a dead man moved after death were things that belonged together more naturally than knot-holes and ghost stories.

From there he went straight to the neighborhood guard post, where Miwa no Manshichi was already sitting in high good humor with his silver-mounted pipe. Behind him stood his follower Seikichi, holding a young woman in place with rough pride. Manshichi greeted Heiji with false warmth and said the case was already solved. The prisoner was O-Shino, the younger sister of O-Sen and a servant at a waterside tea stand near Kaminari-mon. She was indeed strikingly pretty, round-faced and soft in feature, though her hair was disordered and there were scratches and bruises on her hands, feet, and cheek. Manshichi pointed at those marks with triumph and said they were proof of a struggle with Fujiro the previous night.

The rest of the case against her looked strong if one wished it to. Manshichi said that from about ten until eleven the previous night she had been absent from her lodging at the tea stand. He also displayed a fine tortoiseshell comb found near the body, one of a paired set known to have been made for the sisters. At first, he said, O-Shino had stubbornly denied that it was hers. Then, when pressed, she had suddenly claimed it as her own, which only made her look guiltier. According to her account, she had heard that Fujiro was nightly tormenting Wakamatsuya and trying to drag her sister back into the old filth, so she went secretly from Asakusa to confront him. They argued, wrestled, and scratched each other, but she swore she had not killed him. Manshichi, pleased with himself, said that after such a

quarrel, murder lay only one step farther on.

Heiji did not quarrel with him at once. He first spoke softly to O-Shino, who could barely keep back her tears. She said only that her sister was to be pitied and begged him to save O-Sen if possible. The words themselves were not proof of innocence, but they struck Heiji because the girl's first fear was still for her sister, not for herself. Then he looked at the corpse of Fujiro behind the folding screens. The man was about thirty, small but attractive in the flashy way that turns weak women's heads. A dagger still lay in its sheath in his clothing, which meant he had not even drawn it. The fatal wound had entered from behind the left side and driven deep enough to pierce the heart in a single thrust. Heiji silently asked himself whether a frightened young woman, after a scuffle in the road, could truly have struck so hard and so cleanly. The answer did not come easily.

While Hachigoro examined the dead man's clothes and belongings, Heiji pressed a little farther. There was money still on Fujiro, together with tobacco things and his fire-making tools. So robbery had nothing to do with it. Nor did the position of the wound suit Manshichi's easy story. If O-Shino and Fujiro had been grappling face to face, then she should have stabbed him from the front or side in panic. Instead the killer had struck him from behind with enough force to carry the blade far inward. That looked more like the work of a strong man or of someone who attacked by surprise when Fujiro's attention was elsewhere. Heiji said nothing of that aloud, but Manshichi's neat case had already begun to crack in his mind.

Then a sudden wind seemed to blow into the guard room itself. A woman came rushing in, beautiful enough to startle even in confusion, and cried out that they must bind her instead. It was O-Sen. Manshichi and Seikichi both sprang up, half in triumph and half in annoyance that the missing woman had chosen her own moment to appear. O-Sen said she had been hiding at the house of an old friend and had meant to go far away forever, but once she heard that her younger sister had been arrested for Fujiro's murder, she could not stay away. She declared that she herself had killed him and that O-Shino knew nothing about it.

She was not dressed richly, yet even in her plain robe she carried an

unexpected grace and quiet nobility. It was hard to see in her the vulgar creature people mocked as one of the Shoben-gumi. Manshichi at once demanded proof, and O-Sen said the comb was hers, not her sister's, because O-Shino was only trying to protect her. Then, leaning weakly against a pillar, she began telling the whole story of her life. She and her sister, she said, had been born to a large merchant house in Nihonbashi, lost both parents young, and then been stripped of everything by wicked relatives. After passing through many hands, they had fallen at last under the control of Fujiro's father Denroku, a boatman and brute who discovered that forcing beautiful girls into kept service brought him easier profit than selling them once and for all. Before he died, that man and later his son had earned hundreds of ryo by beating and threatening O-Sen into one degrading arrangement after another. Only O-Shino had been saved from the same road, and that only because O-Sen fought like a madwoman to keep the younger sister in humbler but safer work.

The room listened in silence. Even Manshichi's hard face lost some of its color as the tale went on. O-Sen said that after she came to Wakamatsuya three months earlier, she saw for the first time that a man like Keizaburo truly existed. She told him everything, was forgiven, and resolved to become an honest woman at last. Fujiro, however, would not let her go. When he learned that she meant to remain under Keizaburo's protection, he began all the harassment against the house and swore that if she would not return to him, he would burn Wakamatsuya and kill Keizaburo himself. O-Sen said that the previous night she slipped out to face him because she could no longer bear to let the house suffer on her account. There, in the lane, she first found him grappling with O-Shino. After the younger sister fled, O-Sen quarreled with him herself, and in rage and despair she stabbed him. Whether that last part was fully true, Zenigata Heiji could not yet say. But he now knew one thing clearly. Neither the dead rogue nor the two sisters could be judged by common rumor alone, and the case had just opened into something far deeper than Manshichi had imagined.

Part 3

Zenigata Heiji listened to O-Sen's confession without moving, but he did not accept it at once. A woman may confess out of fear, love, shame, or pity, and each of those things can be stronger than truth. So he began again from the body of Fujiro and from the place where it had been found. He had Hachigoro repeat every detail of the dead man's clothing and wound. There was still no ditch mud on the clothes, no wet stain from the shallow drain under the fence, and the thrust from behind the left side had gone in too deeply and too cleanly to look like the desperate blow of a frightened young woman in a roadside struggle.

Then he spoke of the lane itself. If Fujiro had truly been stabbed while peeping through the knot-hole in the fence by the master's room, the body should have fallen in the muddy strip below, and the clothing should have shown it. But the corpse had lain too cleanly, and the blood on the boards and in the lane told a different story. The body had almost certainly been moved after death. That one fact was enough to break Miwa no Manshichi's neat case against O-Shino, because a frightened tea-shop girl who struck in panic and then fled would not pause to shift a full-grown man's corpse into a more useful place.

Manshichi did not like hearing that, but he could not answer it cleanly. He said only that women have strange strength when cornered and that O-Sen herself had now admitted the killing. Heiji replied that if admissions were enough, the law would need no eyes. He added that O-Sen's story of stepping in after her sister's quarrel with Fujiro might contain truth, but it still left too many things unexplained. Why had Fujiro not drawn the dagger still in his sash? Why had the body been placed where suspicion would fall most heavily on the sisters and on Wakamatsuya? Why had the blood on the fence side been washed so carefully on one side of the property and not on the other? A true killer escaping in shock does not usually clean planks in the dark.

O-Sen stood through all this with her head lowered, her face white and tired but not broken. When Heiji asked whether she had truly meant to leave the district forever, she answered yes. She said she had hidden at a friend's place and intended to vanish so that Wakamatsuya would no longer suffer because of her. Yet when

she heard that O-Shino had been taken in bonds, she could not endure it and returned. That answer had the ring of truth. A selfish woman trying only to save herself would not have come back at such a moment. The more Heiji watched her, the harder it became to fit her to the easy name of criminal mistress and knife-woman.

So he made her tell the rest of her past in full. O-Sen said she and O-Shino had once belonged to a prosperous merchant house in Nihonbashi. After both parents died, bad relatives stripped them of their place and money and cast them out into the world. In the end they fell under the power of Fujiro's father Denroku, a brutal boatman who found that selling a beautiful girl again and again into kept service brought him easier profit than any honest labor. After the old man died, Fujiro took over the same trade and forced O-Sen into one degrading arrangement after another. Only O-Shino had been spared that road, and even that had been by O-Sen's stubborn struggle.

When she came at last to Wakamatsuya three months before, she said, she found for the first time a man who did not treat her like merchandise. Keizaburo listened when she told him everything, forgave the past, and let her live under his roof not as a beast for hire, but as a woman with work, children, and ordinary daily duties. That was why she changed. The kindness of the house, the open heart of the master, and the innocent trust of the children gave her a life she had not believed possible. And that, more than anything, was what Fujiro could not bear. He had not lost only a profitable woman. He had lost his hold on her soul.

O-Sen then said that Fujiro had begun the harassment because he meant either to drag her back or ruin Wakamatsuya for keeping her. He threw stones, spread the mocking songs, used street boys, dirtied the front, and poisoned the neighborhood talk with the old name of the Shoben-gumi. At last he threatened openly that if she would not return, he would burn the house and kill Keizaburo. So, on the previous night, she left secretly because she could no longer bear to see that good household suffer on her account. She intended to face him alone, even if that meant returning to the mud she hated.

That was where O-Shino entered the matter. The younger sister had also

learned that Fujiro was haunting Wakamatsuya and had gone out on her own to warn him off. She and Fujiro struggled, and the scratches and bruises on her hands, feet, and cheek came from that fight. Then she broke free and ran. O-Sen said she reached the place only after that. Fujiro then turned his threats and foul talk on her instead, demanding that she abandon Wakamatsuya and submit to him again. The sisters' stories joined neatly at that point, yet something still remained wrong. Neither woman's account naturally explained the moved body, the careful washing, or the strength of the fatal thrust.

Zenigata Heiji therefore let the questioning rest and went back once more to Wakamatsuya. This time he looked less at O-Sen and O-Shino and more at the men inside the house. The younger brother Genkichi was handsome, active, and useful in business, but his eyes moved too quickly whenever O-Sen's name arose. Moju, the old servant, remained outwardly loyal and steady, yet he answered with a readiness that felt almost too well arranged. Even Yahei, the old head clerk who seemed to care for nothing but trade, looked oddly strained under the weight of this "simple" matter. A house where everyone praises the same woman too warmly can be as dangerous as a house where everyone hates her.

By the time evening drew in, Heiji had not yet named the killer aloud, but the road before him had narrowed sharply. Fujiro had been a parasite and a brute, yet someone stronger than either sister had struck him, moved him, and shaped the scene to crush the women under scandal. That someone also understood how deeply Keizaburo cared for O-Sen and how easily the old filthy rumor of the Shoben-gumi could be used as a weapon. In other words, the killer was not standing outside the house throwing stones. The killer had been much nearer to the warm center of Wakamatsuya than anyone wished to believe.

Part 4

Zenigata Heiji returned to Wakamatsuya without noise and asked first to see Keizaburo alone. The others felt at once that the road of the case had turned somewhere they could not follow. O-Sen stood pale and silent. O-Shino, though

freed for the moment from Miwa no Manshichi's easy accusation, still looked as if one wrong word might send her back under rope. Hachigoro alone understood enough to stay quiet. When Heiji and the master of the house withdrew to the inner room, the air itself seemed to tighten behind them.

At first Heiji said nothing about love, jealousy, or the old filth of the Shoben-gumi. He spoke only of the dead body and of the lane where it had been found. Fujiro, he said, had not been killed where the corpse lay. There was no ditch mud on the clothing, no wet stain from the drain below the fence, and the thrust had gone in from behind the left side with too much depth and force for either sister to have given it in panic. Then there was the fence itself. On the side lane, the blood had been carefully washed from the boards, but not carefully enough. However much water had been thrown in the dark, blood had still sunk into the grain.

Keizaburo tried to hold his face steady, but the color had already begun to drain from it. So Heiji went on. The body had later been carried and placed near the front-side wall by the knot-hole under the master's room, because that position was convenient. It made it seem that Fujiro had been prowling there, that one of the sisters had come upon him, and that the shame of the whole affair naturally belonged to them. The comb lying near the corpse had served the same purpose. It pointed the law toward O-Shino first and then toward O-Sen. But only someone strong enough to handle a full-grown man and clever enough to understand the value of such false signs could have arranged all that after the killing.

Then Heiji touched the last point. The murder weapon itself had not been found. He said that if it was not in the well and not buried under the floor, then the likeliest place was among the timber, hidden in some hollow knot or crack of the sort that only a timber dealer or his old servant would think of using. He added that the work had probably been too heavy for one man alone in the dark, and that Moju, loyal to the house and full of pity for O-Sen, might well have lent his hands after the fact. At that, Keizaburo's whole body gave a single small shudder, as if a final support had been kicked away from under him.

Heiji still did not force a full spoken confession from him. He did not need

one. The truth had already risen plain enough between them. Keizaburo had loved O-Sen more deeply than even his own open face had shown. He had listened to her whole shameful past, taken her under his roof, watched her change into a true and faithful woman, and then seen Fujiro return again and again like poison that would not leave the body. On that last night, whether he followed O-Sen from fear or came upon the scene by chance after hearing movement outside, he had found the rogue still threatening ruin, fire, and death upon the house. Then, in one hard moment, the merchant had stopped being only a good man and become a killing man for the sake of the woman he meant to save.

For a while neither of them spoke. Keizaburo's broad, honest face tightened as if pain were drawing lines into it from within. At last he gave a broken movement, half like a bow and half like a collapse, and said only, "Boss—" That was enough. Heiji raised one hand sharply and stopped him before the word could become a confession. "Wait," he said. "If you carelessly go on from there, I shall have no choice, with this jitte at my waist, but to bind you." The sentence struck harder than any shout. It was mercy, but it was mercy with the full edge of the law still showing.

Then Zenigata Heiji made his decision. He said that Fujiro had fed on the two sisters for years, had stirred up the whole neighborhood with filth and mockery, and had lived by making decent people miserable. Better for everyone, he said, to leave the matter where it now stood and let the world believe that Fujiro had died in some quarrel among his own low companions. That answer would save the innocent women, protect the children of Wakamatsuya, and keep one good house from being dragged forever through the mud of public talk. Keizaburo listened with his head bent lower and lower, unable even to thank him properly.

After that, Heiji's voice softened for the first time. He told Keizaburo that O-Sen was a rare woman, rare not because she had never fallen, but because once shown one true road she had held to it with all her strength. He said that such a woman was not to be treated forever as a temporary kept woman bought for a hundred ryo and left under an ugly name. The past, he added, should be buried cleanly. Keizaburo should forget the old gossip, forget the mockery of the Shoben-

gumi, and make O-Sen his proper wife. If any man dared speak against it, Zenigata Heiji himself would answer for the house.

When they came out again, Heiji gave none of this away openly. To the others he spoke only enough to settle the matter. O-Shino was released from suspicion. O-Sen's own confession was set aside as the desperate lie of a woman trying to save her sister. Miwa no Manshichi was left with little to hold and less to boast about, though he was not the sort of man to admit defeat gracefully. Hachigoro, seeing the look on Keizaburo's face and the quiet tears in O-Sen's eyes, understood almost everything without having it said plainly.

The winter light was already slanting low by the time Zenigata Heiji and Hachigoro turned for home. Behind them, in the doorway of Wakamatsuya, Keizaburo stood with tears on his broad face and pressed his palms together in a gesture too full for speech. O-Sen stood a little behind him, no longer with the broken beauty of a hunted woman, but with the deep stillness of someone who had at last been believed. The old shameful name that had clung to her still lived in the mouths of the city, but inside that doorway it had already begun to die.

So the case of the virtuous woman of the Shoben-gumi came to its true end. The dead rogue Fujiro had not been killed by the two sisters, though both were ready to throw their own lives away for each other. He had been struck down by the strong hand of a man who could no longer endure seeing a rare good woman dragged back into filth. Zenigata Heiji saw the whole truth, held back the law, and chose peace for the living over easy glory for himself. And in that fading winter light, the woman whom the world mocked under the ugliest of names stood revealed for what she truly was—a rare and faithful woman worth saving.