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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

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Author: Okamoto Kidō (岡本綺堂)

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

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Okamoto Kidō, *The Casebook of Inspector Hanshichi [Hanshichi Torimonochō]* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified from the Japanese by ChatGPT)

Ofumi's Spirit [Ofumi no Tamashii]

Part 1

My uncle had been born at the end of the Edo period, so he knew many dark old stories from that age. He knew stories about haunted rooms that no one dared enter, about jealous women whose living spirits came to trouble other people, and about dead men whose hate stayed in the world after death. But he did not like such tales. He had been raised as a samurai, and he believed that a samurai should not trust ghosts or monsters. When children in the family began to talk about strange things, he always made a hard face and told us to stop.

And yet, one day, that same uncle said something I never forgot. He said, "Still, there are things in this world that cannot be explained. That case of Ofumi, for example…" Then he stopped. He would not tell us what the case of Ofumi was, and my father would not tell me either. But from a few small hints, I began to think that another man, whom we called Uncle K, knew the truth. I was only twelve then, and my curiosity pushed me to go and ask him.

Uncle K was not my real uncle, but he had known my father since long before I was born, so I had always called him that. When I asked him about Ofumi, he did not give me a clear answer. "That kind of foolish ghost story is not for children," he said. "If your father hears that I have filled your head with such talk, he will be angry with me." Uncle K usually liked to talk, but on this subject he closed his mouth tightly. After that, school work and daily life slowly pushed the name of Ofumi out of my mind.

About two years later, near the end of November, I remembered it again. A cold rain had begun to fall before sunset, and by evening it had become much stronger. Uncle K's wife had gone out earlier in the day to see a play, so Uncle K was alone and had told me, "Come and visit me tomorrow evening. I will be keeping house

by myself.” After supper, I went to his home. It stood in Bancho, in an old part of the city where many dark samurai houses from earlier days still remained. Even in daylight the streets seemed dim there, and in the rain the whole place felt lonely.

Uncle K lived inside the gate of a former daimyo house, in an old building that must once have belonged to some important retainer. It was a single house with a small garden and a rough bamboo fence. He had already returned from work, eaten, and gone out for his bath. We sat together by the lamp and spoke of small things for a long time. The rain beat softly on the large leaves in the garden, and the sound made the night outside feel deeper and darker. When the clock struck seven, Uncle K stopped speaking and listened to the rain for a moment.

“It is coming down hard now,” he said. I answered, “Your wife may have trouble getting home.” He shook his head and said, “No. I sent a man with a rickshaw to meet her.” Then he drank a little tea in silence and looked at me with a different face. “Shall I tell you the story of Ofumi tonight?” he asked. “A ghost story is best on a night like this. But you are timid, so do not cry and say you cannot go home after I finish.” I was timid, that was true, but I loved frightening stories. I sat up straight, looked at him with all the courage I could gather, and waited.

Uncle K smiled at my brave face and began. “I was twenty years old at the time,” he said. “It was the first year of Genji, the year of the fighting at Hamaguri Gate in Kyoto.” In those days, a hatamoto named Matsumura Hikotaro lived in Bancho on an income of three hundred koku. He was a learned man, good at Dutch studies, and he served in work connected with foreign matters, so people thought him able and promising. His younger sister, Omichi, had married four years earlier into the house of another hatamoto, Obata Iori, who lived in Koishikawa by the west bank of the Edo River. She had also given birth to a little daughter named Oharu, who was now three years old.

One day, Omichi suddenly came back to her brother’s house, carrying Oharu in her arms. Her face was pale, and before she had even sat down calmly, she said, “I cannot stay in the Obata house any longer. Please help me receive a divorce.” Matsumura was shocked. Any brother would have been shocked, but in a samurai

family such a thing could not be spoken lightly. He asked her at once why she wished to leave her husband's house, but she only stood there with a white face and said nothing.

Matsumura tried first to speak gently, then more strongly. "You cannot ask for such a thing and give no reason," he said. "A woman who has married into another house cannot leave it just because she feels unhappy for a moment. If you tell me the truth, and if your reason is just, I can speak for you. But if you say nothing, I can do nothing." Omichi only repeated, again and again, "I cannot stay there. Please help me leave." Her brother's patience began to break. He knew Obata Iori to be a mild and honest man. There were no cruel parents-in-law in the house, and Omichi already had a child. So what could have driven her away like this?

At last another thought entered his mind, an ugly thought that many older brothers would have in such a moment. Omichi was still young. There were young samurai in her husband's house and in the neighboring houses too. Had she perhaps made some terrible mistake? Had she fallen into some secret trouble and now wished to run away before disgrace became public? When Matsumura thought of that, his questions became sharp and hard. "If you will not speak," he said, "I will take you back myself and make you speak before your husband. Come now." He nearly pulled her to her feet by force.

That frightened Omichi so deeply that she broke down. Crying, she said, "Then I will tell you." Seven nights earlier, on the evening after the dolls of the Girls' Festival had been put away, she had gone to bed with little Oharu sleeping beside her. In the middle of the night she saw a young woman by her pillow. The woman's long hair was loose, and from her head to the hem of her robe she was wet, as if she had just come out of deep water. Her face was terribly white. She did not rush forward or speak a word. She only sat quietly on the mat, with the manner of a woman who had once served in a samurai house, and bowed with both hands on the floor. That stillness made her even more terrible.

Omichi clung to her quilt in fear, and then the vision vanished like a dream. At that same moment, little Oharu woke with a scream and cried, "Fumi has come! Fumi has come!" Omichi had never spoken that name, so the child could not have

learned it from her. The next night, the same wet woman appeared again. The night after that, she came again. Each time, Oharu cried out in the same frightened voice, “Fumi has come!” Omichi was ashamed to tell anyone such a story, so at first she kept silent, even from her husband.

But when it happened night after night, fear and loss of sleep wore her down. At last she told Obata Iori everything. He only laughed. He said that a samurai’s wife should not fill her head with foolish fancies, and after a time he even grew cold and displeased with her. Omichi began to hate his calm face. She thought, “If this goes on, that unknown spirit will kill me.” At last, with no hope left, she took her child and fled to her brother’s house. When she finished speaking, she shook so hard that Matsumura could see her fear was real, even if he could not believe the story itself.

Matsumura was troubled. He could not easily accept a tale of a wet ghost who came to one woman’s pillow, and yet his sister did not look like a liar, nor like a woman hiding some low secret. He decided that he must speak with Obata Iori before he judged the matter. Leaving Omichi and Oharu at his house, he set out at once for Koishikawa with one servant following behind. As he walked, he kept thinking how foolish it would sound for one samurai to speak to another about a ghost. Still, foolish or not, he had to go. And so the strange matter of Ofumi truly began.

Part 2

Even as he walked to the Obata house, Matsumura kept asking himself how he could speak. He was not a child, and he was not a foolish old woman. He was a samurai with two swords at his side, going to speak to another samurai. To stand before such a man and begin talking about a wet ghost would be shameful. He tried to think of a better way to open the matter, but the problem was too direct. No matter how he turned it in his mind, it still came back to the same ugly and childish story.

Obata Iori was at home and received him at once. They exchanged the usual

polite words, and then Matsumura sat there, unable to begin. At last Obata himself spoke first. “Did Omichi go to your house today?” he asked. Matsumura answered, “Yes, she did,” but even then he could not go on. Obata gave a short laugh and said that women and children were foolish creatures, and that Omichi had recently begun talking about a ghost. Since the matter had already been opened, Matsumura had no choice. He forced himself to tell the whole story, even though sweat came to his face while he spoke.

When he had finished, Obata was no longer smiling. If Omichi alone had been frightened, he could have laughed at her and the matter would have ended there. But now her brother had come to speak almost as if he were carrying the first steps of a divorce talk. That was serious. Obata sat in thought for a while and then said that they must investigate the matter properly. He himself had lived in that house for twenty-eight years, and he had never seen or heard of any ghost. His father had never spoken of such a thing. His mother had never spoken of such a thing. Why, then, should a ghost appear only to Omichi, and only now, after four years in the house?

There was only one thing to do, so they began at once. Obata called his chief retainer, Gozaemon, a man in his forties who had served the family for many years. Gozaemon said he had never heard any such story from the time of the former lord, nor from his own father before him. Then the younger servants and the men in the yard were called, but they were all newer people and knew nothing. After that the women servants were questioned. They only stared in fear, for they were hearing the tale for the first time and could say nothing useful.

Since the strange woman appeared soaked with water, Obata next ordered the pond in the garden to be examined. Perhaps, he thought, some secret from the past lay hidden in the mud. The pond was old and fairly large, and many workers were brought in the next day to drain and dig it. Obata and Matsumura stood there and watched from beginning to end. Fish were found, and mud was found, but nothing else. No bones came up from the bottom. No comb, no hairpin, not even a single hair of a woman appeared in the black mud.

After the pond, they tried the wells in the house grounds. They hoped that

something hidden there might explain the story. But the wells gave them nothing either. The only strange thing to appear was a red loach rising from the deep water, and that merely made the workers laugh in surprise. Their line of inquiry had broken. They had searched the ground, the water, the servants, and the family memory, and still they had no answer. Yet the ghost, if ghost it was, had not gone away.

Then Matsumura proposed a harder test. Omichi hated the thought of it, but he forced her to return to the Obata house with little Oharu. That night mother and child were made to sleep again in the usual room. Matsumura and Obata hid in the next room and waited with swords close at hand. It was a warm spring night, with the moon hidden now and then behind cloud. Omichi was too frightened to sleep well, but Oharu, knowing nothing, soon fell into a child's deep rest. Then, without warning, the little girl gave a terrible cry, as if someone had stuck a needle into her eye.

"Fumi has come. Fumi has come," the child moaned in a low broken voice. At once the two men threw open the sliding doors and rushed in. But the room was closed, heavy, and still. The lamp burned quietly without shaking. No wind had entered from outside. Omichi was clutching her child so tightly that her body shook against the bedding, and she had pressed her face down against the pillow. Matsumura and Obata looked at one another in silence. Even now, seeing living proof of the child's terror, they still saw no woman in the room.

That only made the matter worse. How could a girl of three know the hidden name of a dead or unknown woman? Obata tried to calm Oharu and ask her questions, but she was too young, and her words were unclear. Nothing useful came from her frightened mouth. The two men began to feel an ugly chill. They were armed, grown, and awake, yet they had been helpless before something they could neither see nor understand. On the next day the chief retainer, growing worried, went to consult a fortune-teller in Ichigaya. The man told them to dig around the roots of a large camellia tree west of the house, but when they did so, they found nothing, and only the fortune-teller's reputation suffered.

Omichi now claimed that she could not sleep at night at all, and so she began

to lie down during the day. The ghost did not appear in daylight, and that gave her a little rest, but it was no true solution. A samurai wife could not live like that forever, sleeping in the day and staying awake in fear through the night. Life in the house had become twisted and unnatural. Matsumura and Obata kept the matter secret as best they could, and Obata warned all the servants to hold their tongues. But secrets do not stay buried in a samurai neighborhood. Before long, people were whispering that a female ghost appeared in the Obata house.

Most people had the good sense not to ask directly. They talked behind backs, added details of their own, and let the story grow in shadow. But there was one man in the neighborhood who was too bold to follow that rule. This was the man I have called Uncle K. He was the second son of a hatamoto family, and like many such men, he had no official post and too much free time. When he heard the rumor, he went straight to the Obata house and asked whether it was true. Since he and Obata were already close, Obata did not hide the matter from him. He told him everything and asked whether any clever method could be used to discover the truth.

Men like Uncle K often lived in a strange way in old Edo. The eldest son inherited the house. But second and third sons, unless they had unusual talent or could marry into another family, often had no path open before them. Many spent their days as idle gentlemen, carrying swords, wearing good clothes, and waiting for some event to break the long dull hours. Some became pleasure-seekers. Some became gamblers. Some became men who ran toward trouble simply because trouble was more interesting than peace. Uncle K, by nature and by circumstance, was exactly the sort of man to welcome a case like this.

So he accepted gladly and began to think in a practical way. It would be foolish, he thought, to sit by Omichi’s pillow like a hero from an old tale and wait for a ghost to step into the room. First they had to learn who this Ofumi was. If such a woman had once served in the house, then her name and her connection to the family must still exist somewhere. Uncle K asked whether any relative or servant named Ofumi came to mind. Obata said no. No relative had that name, and among the current servants there was no such woman. But they did learn one useful thing:

one of the women servants in the house usually came from the family's country land, while the other was hired in Edo through a lodging-house that handled servant placements. That house was called Sakaiya in Otowa.

Uncle K decided that this was the first thread he should follow. The country district was too far away to begin with, but the lodging-house in Edo could be checked at once. Perhaps, long before Obata's time, a woman named Ofumi had been placed in the house through that channel. "Then I leave the matter to you," Obata said, though he warned him again to act quietly. Uncle K promised that he would. The two men parted on a clear day at the end of the third month, when the double cherry trees in the Obata garden had already begun to show fresh green leaves among the blossoms.

Part 3

On the next day, Uncle K went to the lodging-house in Otowa that supplied women servants to the Obata family. He asked to see the old records and began to turn the pages one by one. As Obata had said, the recent records showed no woman named Ofumi. Uncle K went back three years, then five, then ten, checking every name that began with the sound of fu. There was Ofuyu, Ofuku, and Ofusa, but no Ofumi.

Still, he did not stop there. He thought that perhaps the woman had come from much earlier days, from the time before Obata Iori became master of the house. But the search soon struck a wall. The lodging-house had lost its oldest books in a fire thirty years before, and nothing earlier remained. Uncle K sat there over the dark paper and faded writing until his eyes grew tired and his head began to ache.

The book was thick, and it did not concern only one family. The names of women sent to many samurai houses had all been written together into the same large volume. That meant he had to search line by line for the name Obata, and then search the names under it. Some hands were bold and hard like nails scratched into wood, while others were thin and soft like threads. The older he went, the worse the writing became, until some parts looked as if a child had

written them.

He was beginning to regret taking the matter into his hands when a voice spoke beside him. “Well, young master of the Edogawa house, what are you searching for so seriously?” Uncle K looked up and saw a thin man of about forty-three in a striped kimono and haori. He had a dark face, a high nose, and quick living eyes that gave him the look of an actor more than that of an ordinary townsman. This was Hanshichi, an officer’s helper from Kanda, whose sister taught Tokiwazu under Myojin.

Uncle K already knew him a little through that sister, and he knew something else as well. Hanshichi was famous among men of his trade, but not in the bad way that many were. He was known as a true Edo man, simple in manner, sharp in mind, and not cruel to the weak. So after a little ordinary talk, Uncle K suddenly thought, “This man may be exactly what I need.”

“I am sorry to trouble you while you are busy,” Uncle K said, looking around to make sure no one was listening, “but there is something I want you to hear.” Hanshichi agreed at once and borrowed a small room upstairs. There, in the dim little space with a storage chest pushed into the corner, Uncle K told him the entire story of the Obata house. He described Omichi’s fear, Oharu’s cries, the woman soaked with water, the search of the pond, and his own useless work in the records.

Hanshichi listened without interrupting and smoked quietly for a long time after the tale ended. Then he asked a question so unexpected that Uncle K almost laughed. “Does the Obata house read picture-books or light story-books?” he said. Uncle K stared at him and answered that the master disliked such things, but the women in the inner rooms probably read them, and a lending shop called Tajimaya came to the house. Hanshichi nodded, asked the name of the family temple, and when he heard it was Joenji in Shitaya, he smiled in a way that showed he had found a thread.

“Leave the rest to me,” he said. “I think I can open this knot in two or three days. But let it stay between you and me. On the surface, you are still the one who is looking into the matter, and that is how it should remain.” Uncle K trusted him and agreed at once. Hanshichi added that Uncle K should come with him the next

day, since the results would have to be carried back later as if Uncle K had found them himself. Uncle K accepted gladly, for now his curiosity had grown even stronger than before.

The next morning they met and first went to the lending shop. The clerk there knew Uncle K by sight, and Hanshichi began asking what books had been sent to the Obata house since the New Year. The clerk could not remember everything, because such things had not all been written down carefully, but he named a few common story-books and picture-books. Then Hanshichi asked, “Did you lend them a book called Thin Ink Story?” The clerk answered at once that he had, sometime in the second month.

Hanshichi asked to see it. The clerk brought out the book in two stitched volumes, and Hanshichi opened the lower one and turned several pages. Then, without a word, he held it out to Uncle K. There on the page was the very thing that had stood in Omichi’s room: a young serving woman rising from a pond of irises, her hair hanging loose, her clothes wet from head to foot, and her face drawn in a way that could frighten any woman or child. Uncle K felt a true shock then, not only because the picture was ugly, but because it matched so closely the ghost he had been imagining in his own mind.

The dead woman in the story was named Ofumi. In the tale, she had been killed and thrown into an old pond by a cruel master, and now her spirit rose to appear before the wife in the house. “Take it with you,” Hanshichi said softly. “It is a lively little piece.” Uncle K borrowed both volumes, and when they had stepped back out into the bright street, Hanshichi explained himself. He had read the book before. When he first heard of a wet woman servant appearing by Omichi’s pillow, the memory of that picture had come back to him at once.

“Then you think she saw the picture and dreamed the rest?” Uncle K asked. Hanshichi shook his head. “Not only that,” he said. “There is one more place we should visit.” So the two men crossed the city and went to Joenji, the Obata family temple. It was a fine day at the end of spring, with no wind at all, and the sky shone like polished blue stone. Inside the temple gate, yellow yamabuki flowers were blooming thickly, but the beauty of the place did not ease Uncle K’s mind.

The head priest was a fair-skinned man not yet forty, with the blue shadow of shaved beard still visible around his mouth. Because one visitor was a samurai and the other a man known in official work, he received them carefully. As they had arranged beforehand, Uncle K opened the matter by saying that strange things had been happening in the Obata house. He spoke of the female spirit that appeared by the young wife's pillow and asked whether there was any prayer or rite that might drive such a thing away. The priest sat silent and fingered his beads.

After a moment he asked, in a somewhat unsteady voice, "Is this request from the lord and lady of the house, or from you gentlemen yourselves?" Uncle K answered, "That need not concern you. We only ask whether you understand the matter and whether something can be done." Both he and Hanshichi looked straight at the man. At once the priest's face lost color, and though he tried to remain calm, a slight trembling came into him like a shadow passing through water.

He said that his training was shallow and he could promise no miracle, but that he would offer prayers with all sincerity. Soon after that, he insisted on serving them a full vegetarian meal, and even wine for his guests. He drank none himself. Uncle K ate and drank, but all the while he watched the priest's face and saw there not holiness, but fear. When they rose to leave, the priest tried quietly to press a wrapped gift into Hanshichi's hand, but Hanshichi pushed it back without even opening it.

Once they were outside again, Hanshichi gave a short laugh. "That is enough," he said. "The holy man was shaking. We did not need to say much. He surrendered before we asked for anything clearly." Uncle K agreed that the man's fear, his heavy hospitality, and the hidden gift all spoke loudly enough. Yet one point still troubled him. "Even if all the rest is clear," he said, "how did that little girl come to cry, 'Fumi has come'?" Hanshichi only smiled and answered, "A child does not invent such a name by herself. Someone taught it to her. That is all I will say for now."

Part 4

Hanshichi did not go back to the Obata house that same day. Instead, he and Uncle K made quiet inquiries and soon found the last hidden steps of the matter. Little Oharu had not learned the name Ofumi from a spirit at all. She had learned it from her own mother. Once that was understood, the whole ghost story changed shape at once, and what had seemed dark and deep began to look like a foolish human trick.

Some weeks earlier, Omichi had borrowed a cheap picture-book from the lending shop. She had opened it in an idle hour and found the picture that Uncle K and Hanshichi had just seen together. It showed a young serving woman with loose hair and wet clothes, sitting sadly by a room in a samurai house. The child Oharu had pointed at the picture and asked in fear, “What is that?” Without thinking, and only wishing to frighten the child into good behavior, Omichi had answered, “That is the ghost of a woman named Ofumi. If you are not good, a ghost like that will come from the pond in the garden.”

She had spoken lightly, but the picture and the words bit deeply into the child’s heart. Oharu turned pale and clung to her mother. That very night she woke in terror and cried, “Fumi has come.” The next night she cried the same thing, and on the third night she cried it again. Omichi, shocked by what she herself had done, returned the book quickly to the lending shop. But by then the child’s nerves had already been hurt, and the name had stayed in her small sleeping mind.

That alone explained Oharu’s cries, but it did not explain Omichi’s own fear. There was another part still hidden, and that part led back to the priest at Joenji. Omichi was a woman of weak nerves and strong religious feeling. She trusted the priest deeply. It seemed that he had filled her mind with dark ideas, telling her in one form or another that a terrible danger stood over her and that she must be careful, or even leave the house, if she wished to escape ruin.

A frightened heart does half the work of a ghost by itself. Once fear entered her, Omichi began to see danger in every shadow. Then the child’s cries and the memory of the picture joined together in her mind. The wet woman in the book rose before her inner eye again and again, until at last she too thought she saw

Ofumi by her pillow. In truth, there had been no spirit in the room. There had only been a tired young wife, made weak by fear, shame, and broken sleep, and slowly driven into a kind of waking dream.

But even then Omichi might still have recovered quietly, if she had not come to a desperate decision. She had begun to believe what the priest had suggested, that some terrible fate was waiting for her in the Obata house. She thought that if she stayed, both she and her child would be destroyed by the evil hanging over the place. So she made up her mind to leave. Since she could not openly say that she wished to flee only because of a dark warning and her own fear, she used Oharu's cries as the base of a full ghost story and turned herself, all at once, into the author of that false tale.

When Hanshichi had gathered all this, he and Uncle K went back to Obata Iori. Hanshichi, as he had promised, remained in the background, and Uncle K spoke first. Then Omichi was called and questioned more closely. At the beginning she wept and tried to hide her face, but the truth had already been caught on all sides, and she had no road left. At last she threw herself down before her husband and confessed everything.

Obata was angry, and no wonder. He called her a foolish woman and scolded her for bringing shame and confusion into the house. Yet even while Uncle K listened to that unhappy scene, he could not wholly despise her. Beneath the poor trick, beneath the weak falsehood and the empty ghost story, there was still the heart of a mother. She had been thinking of her child as much as of herself. She had believed, wrongly and blindly, that if she stayed where she was, some unknown harm would fall upon little Oharu.

So Uncle K spoke on her behalf and calmed Obata as best he could. Omichi was finally forgiven. But another problem remained. Matsumura had already been drawn into the matter, and the servants in both houses had heard enough to whisper. Some explanation had to be given to the outside world, or the family would lose face. After discussing it together, they decided on a careful public ending. Through a priest connected with Uncle K's own family temple, they arranged a memorial service for the unknown spirit of Ofumi, as if a wandering soul had truly

been troubling the house and now needed prayers.

After that, a doctor treated Oharu, and the child stopped her night cries. Since the memorial service had been held, people naturally said that the power of prayer had driven away the ghost. The wet woman never appeared again, because of course she had never existed outside the fear in Omichi's heart. Matsumura Hikotaro, who did not know the secret truth, went away still wondering whether there might indeed be strange things in the world that no reason could fully explain. He told the story quietly to two or three close friends. My own uncle was one of those listeners, and that is how the tale first reached my ears.

Uncle K, however, knew exactly what had happened, and he admired Hanshichi more than ever. To pull a ghost out of a cheap picture-book, to see a hidden fear in a woman's mind, and to catch the weak place in a priest's behavior from a few words and a trembling face—this seemed to Uncle K the work of a truly sharp man. As for the priest of Joenji, Hanshichi did not care to explain too clearly why that holy man had filled Omichi with such fearful thoughts. He seemed to feel that some things were too dirty to speak aloud.

But about half a year later, the priest was arrested by the temple authorities for a crime involving women, and when Omichi heard it, she shuddered again. Then she understood how close she had stood to a dangerous edge and how easily her weakness might have led her into ruin. Hanshichi had saved her without noise, without cruelty, and almost without taking credit for it. "Remember," Uncle K said to me at the end of his story, "this secret is known only to Obata and his wife and to me. Obata is still alive, and after the Restoration he has risen to a good post in government. So do not go repeating what I have told you tonight."

By the time he finished, the rain had grown lighter, and even the broad leaves in the garden sounded sleepy and still. I was young, and the story burned itself deeply into my mind. Later, when I looked back on it, I understood that this was only one small example of Hanshichi's skill, not the greatest of his cases. Still later, after Uncle K had gone from this world, I came to know old Hanshichi himself. From then on, I no longer had to hear such old Edo stories through Uncle K, because I could sit with Hanshichi and hear them directly from the man who

had lived them.

The Stone Lantern [Ishidōrō]

Part 1

One day old Hanshichi told me in some detail about his own early life and about the kind of work he did when he was young. Since many readers now enjoy stories of old Edo detectives, I think I should repeat a little of what he explained to me. In those days, a case was first heard by low officers and helpers, and then a short report was carried to the town office. Such reports were written down in a rough book, and that kind of record was called a hanshichō, or case book. Hanshichi laughed and said that people used many names for men like him, but the plain truth was simple: he had been one of the small men who ran, listened, searched, and caught.

He also told me that such men were often looked down on. Their pay was poor, and many of them had to live by doing other work as well, or by depending on a stronger leader above them. Some were bad men, and some were kind men, and the world mixed them all together. Hanshichi said this with a calm face, as if he had long ago stopped caring what people thought. But when he spoke of his own youth, I could still hear a little pride under his easy voice. He had not been born into that life, yet once he entered it, he found that he had a sharp eye and a mind that did not let go easily.

He was not the son of a detective. He had been born in Nihonbashi, the son of a clerk in a cotton shop. His father died when Hanshichi was thirteen and his younger sister was still very small. His mother hoped that he would grow into a steady shop man and follow the same road his father had taken. But Hanshichi was restless, and common shop work did not suit him. He admitted, with a smile that held some regret, that he had caused his mother many tears in those years.

At last he left home and became a helper under a man named Kichigorō in Kanda. Kichigorō was not perfect, and he had some bad habits, but he treated his men kindly and taught them the trade. Hanshichi had worked under him for only about a year when the chance came for his first real success. “I remember it well,”

the old man said. “It was the end of the Year of the Ox, and I was nineteen.” Then he leaned back, half closed his eyes, and began the story of the Stone Lantern.

It was early in the twelfth month, on a cold dark day near the end of the year. Hanshichi was walking along the main street of Nihonbashi with no special purpose when he saw a young man come slowly out of a side lane. The man’s face was pale, and his steps were weak, as if trouble had been pulling at him all night. Hanshichi knew him at once. He was Seijirō, a chief clerk from an old shop in that lane called Kikumura. Since Hanshichi had grown up nearby, he had known Seijirō since childhood.

“Where are you going, Seisan?” Hanshichi called. Seijirō stopped, bowed, and tried to answer as if nothing were wrong. But his face was darker than the winter sky above them, and Hanshichi saw at once that this was no ordinary bad mood. When he asked whether Seijirō had caught cold, the young man shook his head and came a step closer. Then, in a low voice, he said, “The young lady O-Kiku has disappeared.” The words were so sudden that even Hanshichi stared at him in surprise.

O-Kiku was the daughter of the widow who now ran the Kikumura shop. She was eighteen, pretty, and well known in the neighborhood. Seijirō explained that on the day before, after noon, she had gone out with a woman helper named Otake to pray at Asakusa. But on the way, or perhaps after they arrived, the two had somehow become separated. Otake had come home alone in confusion, and O-Kiku had not returned that night. The shop had searched all evening and through the next morning, asking at every place they could think of, but they had found no sign of her at all.

Hanshichi looked at Seijirō closely as he spoke. The young clerk’s eyes were red with loss of sleep, and his tired face had a sharp pain in it. Half in jest, and half to test him, Hanshichi slapped his shoulder and said, “Are you sure you did not hide her somewhere yourself?” Seijirō turned even redder and denied it at once. Hanshichi had long suspected that Seijirō and O-Kiku felt more than the proper feeling between clerk and master’s daughter. Still, he could not believe that this honest, serious young man had tricked her into running away.

Seijirō said that he was now going to ask at the house of a distant relation in Hongō, though he did not really expect any help there. Hanshichi told him to go and to keep watch, while he himself would visit Kikumura at once. The shop stood in a narrow lane, with a deep old house, a side entrance, and a small garden at the back. Its former master had died some years earlier, and now the widow O-Tora held the family together. Besides Seijirō, there was an older clerk named Jūzō, another young clerk, a few boys in service, Otake, and two kitchen maids. Hanshichi remembered the whole house and its people well.

He spoke with O-Tora, with Jūzō, and with Otake, but no one could give him any useful clue. All of them had the same bent faces and the same lost air, as if they had been walking around in a dark room since the day before. O-Tora sighed, Jūzō frowned, and Otake looked near tears. When Hanshichi turned to leave, he quietly called Otake out to the lattice door and warned her to keep her eyes open. “You were the one with O-Kiku yesterday,” he said. “So this matter touches you too. If anything at all comes to mind, you must tell me. Hiding it will only make things worse.”

The young woman turned white when he said this. She looked like someone who had already been carrying a great fear inside her and had now been struck right on the sore place. Hanshichi noticed that and said nothing more. He went away, but he was sure that Otake knew more than she had dared say in front of the others. That feeling kept him uneasy all evening and into the next morning. So as soon as he could, he went back again to Kikumura.

This time Otake was sweeping in front of the lattice door, and the moment she saw him she ran toward him as if she had been waiting. Her face was frightened, but there was excitement in it too. “Hanshichi-san,” she whispered, “O-Kiku came home last night.” Hanshichi began to say that this was good news, but she shook her head quickly and caught her breath. “No,” she said. “It is stranger than before. She came home, and then she vanished again.”

Part 2

Hanshichi looked at Otake's frightened face and saw that she was not inventing the story. In fact, she looked even more confused than he was. "Then tell me exactly what happened," he said. "Do not leave out one word, and do not try to make the matter prettier than it was." Otake nodded quickly and glanced over her shoulder toward the dark inside of the house, as if she feared that someone else might hear. Then, lowering her voice until it was almost a whisper, she began to tell him about the evening before.

It had been near six in the evening, she said, when the lattice door at the front of the house suddenly opened. She had been standing there alone, with the other women busy in the kitchen, preparing the evening meal. O-Kiku came silently in. Otake, shocked and overjoyed, cried, "O-Kiku!" But the girl only turned her head a little, gave her one quick look, and walked straight toward the back rooms without answering a word.

A moment later, from the inner room, O-Tora had called out, "Why, O-Kiku, is that you?" Her voice held both surprise and relief. Then she came hurrying out and asked Otake, "Is O-Kiku there?" When Otake answered that she had just gone in, the mistress looked puzzled. Together they searched the house at once, but no trace of the girl could be found. The clerks were all in the shop, the maids were in the kitchen, the back gate was still shut from the inside, and no one had seen her leave.

Stranger still, the wooden clogs O-Kiku had worn when she entered were left behind inside the lattice. They were muddy from the road and plainly real. That meant she had come in as a living person, not as a spirit. Yet if she had come in with clogs on her feet and no one had seen her leave, where had she gone, and how had she done it? When Hanshichi asked what she had been wearing, Otake answered at once that it was the same dress she had worn when she went to Asakusa: a yellow striped robe and a light purple hood. The image rose before Hanshichi's eyes so clearly that he could almost see the girl pass before him.

He then asked Otake a question he had been holding back from the first. "Did O-Kiku meet Seijirō in Asakusa that day?" At once the young woman's face changed, and he knew he had struck the true place. He told her not to hide anything

now, because the matter had already gone far beyond a simple lovers' meeting. Otake began to cry softly and confessed that O-Kiku and Seijirō had indeed been meeting in secret for some time. The visit to the temple had only been an excuse. She herself had helped them.

According to her confession, they had met at a tea house in the Okuyama area behind the temple grounds. Otake had then withdrawn and wandered about by herself for a short time to give them privacy. When she returned, Seijirō had already gone, and O-Kiku too had disappeared. The woman at the tea house had said that the young man left first, and that the girl went out shortly afterward and even paid the bill. After that, Otake searched all around but found nothing. Seijirō later swore that he knew nothing more, and because they dared not reveal the secret meeting, the household had agreed to say only that the two women had been separated on the way.

Hanshichi listened without speaking until she had finished. The story explained part of the matter, but not the heart of it. If O-Kiku had truly vanished after leaving the tea house, then something had happened between that point and her strange return home. If she had returned in secret and then disappeared again, she must either have had help or possessed more skill and boldness than any young merchant's daughter should have had. He told Otake to keep quiet and try not to lose her head, then went back to Kanda to report everything to Kichigorō.

His chief only grunted and said that the young clerk still looked suspicious. "A man may seem honest and still do wild things for a woman," Kichigorō said. "When you go again tomorrow, strike a little fear into that Seijirō and see what drops out." But Hanshichi did not feel satisfied with that easy answer. He could not clear Seijirō in his mind, yet neither could he picture him leading a girl away and then sending her back in silence like an actor in some cheap play. There was something else hidden in the case, and until he found it, all guesses would be cheap guesses.

The next morning, around ten, he went again to Kikumura. This time there was a crowd in front of the shop, whispering and staring inside. Their faces held that sharp, hungry look people wear when fear and curiosity come together. Even the

dogs of the neighborhood wandered among their feet, restless, as if they too felt that something dreadful had happened. Hanshichi pushed his way through, went around to the side entrance, and there found the narrow space filled with sandals and clogs.

Otake came running out with a tear-stained face. At first she could hardly speak. Then, shaking all over, she cried, “The mistress has been killed.” For a moment even Hanshichi stood silent. He asked who had done it, and after more tears and broken words, she told him the terrible story. On the previous evening, again around dusk, O-Kiku had appeared once more. O-Tora had cried out in surprise, then screamed, and when the women servants rushed in, they saw a figure in yellow running away toward the veranda.

O-Tora had already fallen, stabbed below the left breast with a sharp blade. Blood had spread across the mats, and before the household could gather itself, she was dead. In her last weak breath, she seemed to have said, “O-Kiku… O-Kiku…” That was enough for panic to break out in the house. Officials had been called. Since O-Kiku was missing and her secret relation with Seijirō soon came to light, Seijirō had been seized at once and taken away. Otake herself now feared she too would be punished as an accomplice.

Hanshichi did not waste time on her fear. He asked to be shown the room and the garden. The back veranda looked out on a neat winter garden, small but carefully kept. The shutters had been closed, except for one panel near the stone basin that was usually left slightly open in the evening. He looked at the fence, the pine tree, the bamboo with its pointed tops, and the high wall. There were no marks showing that anyone had climbed in that way, and no ladder had been used.

Then he stepped down into the garden itself and slowly searched every corner. In the eastern part of the yard stood an old stone lantern, heavy with blue-green moss. It had clearly stood there for many years, untouched and half wrapped in damp age. Hanshichi asked about it casually, and the old clerk who guided him answered that no one was allowed to disturb it, because the mistress had always loved the rich moss on its surface. Hearing that, Hanshichi bent closer, and there he found the first real sign in the case: on the top of the mossy stone were the faint

marks of small toes.

The marks were too small for an adult man. They looked like the front of a woman’s foot. Hanshichi straightened himself and stared at the high wall beyond the lantern. A nimble body might step on that stone and reach the top, but not many town girls could do such a thing in secret and in the dark. His thoughts moved at once away from merchant houses and toward people trained to climb, leap, and balance. Without explaining himself, he left Kikumura, crossed the city, and made for the busy open ground at Ryōgoku, where show tents and cheap performances gathered. There, after stepping into a tea house beside a performing booth, he asked the serving girl one direct question: “That woman acrobat, Koyanagi—what is the name of the man who stays close to her?”

Part 3

The girl in the tea house had laughed when she answered, but Hanshichi did not laugh. He thanked her, stepped out again into the crowded winter street, and stood for a moment in thought. Around him the booths were waking into life. Drums sounded from one side, pipes from another, and men shouted to draw people in. The smell of dust, cold river wind, cheap food, and wet straw seemed to rise all at once. But through all that noise Hanshichi’s mind held only two things: the small marks on the moss of the stone lantern, and the name of the acrobat Koyanagi.

He went at once into the performance tent. Inside, the air was warmer and thick with the breath of many people. Men, women, and children sat pressed close together, all staring upward at the narrow rope and the slim figure moving upon it. Koyanagi, painted heavily and dressed to catch the eye, smiled at the crowd while she balanced, climbed, bent, and swung through the air. Even as she performed dangerous tricks, she kept turning her face toward the watchers with a cheap sweet look that did not suit true courage. Hanshichi stood still and watched her closely. She was no young girl, yet her body was light and quick, and he thought at once, “Yes. A woman like this could do it.”

When the show ended, he did not try to speak to her there. That would only warn her too early. Instead he crossed toward the far side of Ryōgoku and made for the lane where Kinji lived. The way there grew quieter with every turn. The sound of the show booths fell behind him, and the houses became poorer and more close-set. At last he found the place near Komadome Bridge, in a narrow lane not far from a shop that sold meat from wild animals.

He called from outside the lattice, but no one answered. So he asked next door and learned that Kinji had gone out to the bath, leaving the house open. Hanshichi bowed lightly and said that he had come from far away and would wait inside the entrance. The neighbor saw nothing strange in that. Once he had stepped within, he sat on the wooden floor and smoked, looking like an ordinary visitor with no urgent business. But after a little while, a thought struck him, and he slid open the inner paper door just enough to see.

The house had only two rooms. In the front room stood a brazier. In the back room, half hidden by the closing door, he saw bedding and a wall rack. On that rack hung a woman’s yellow striped robe. Hanshichi took off his sandals, moved in softly, and looked more carefully through the narrow gap. The robe was indeed yellow, and the sleeves still looked damp, as if someone had washed them in haste. He did not need to touch them to guess why. The blood on O-Tora’s killer must have stained the cloth, and someone had tried to wash the marks away.

He had only just returned to the entrance when he heard steps on the boards outside and a young man’s voice greeting the neighbor. A moment later the lattice opened, and Kinji came in carrying a wet towel from the bath. He was about Hanshichi’s own age, neatly dressed, and not unpleasant to look at. That only made the matter sadder. Many weak young men have faces that make old women trust them and stronger men pity them, and Kinji seemed to be one of those.

“Why, Hanshichi-brother,” he said with forced cheer, “this is unusual. Please come in.” Hanshichi went in and sat by the brazier. They exchanged common words about the season and the cold weather, but even while Kinji tried to behave easily, his hands and eyes betrayed him. He moved too quickly, then too slowly. He looked at Hanshichi and away again. The fear in him was like a bad smell in

a closed room. Hanshichi let it grow for a little while, and then he said, very calmly, “Before anything else, I must ask your pardon.”

Kinji stared and tried to smile. “Pardon? For what?” Hanshichi answered, “Even if I work in official matters, it was wrong of me to enter a man’s house in his absence and look into the back room. So you must forgive me for that.” At once Kinji’s face changed. It seemed to lose all color under the skin. The iron chopsticks in his hand shook against the brazier so hard that they made a dry clicking sound. Hanshichi watched him a moment longer and then began to press, lightly at first, like a man testing rotten wood with his foot.

“That yellow robe hanging there,” he said, “belongs to Koyanagi, does it? She has loud taste for a woman of the stage. Still, if a woman keeps a young fellow like you, perhaps she feels she must dress young too.” He even laughed a little when he said it. But Kinji did not laugh. So Hanshichi went on, his voice still easy, but his eyes hard. He spoke of men who are kept by older women and dragged into trouble by them, of how pity might still be found for a foolish young man who told the truth, and of how silence would only make the rope tighter around his own neck. At last he said, “Come now. Tell me everything. It will be better for you.”

Kinji collapsed like a man whose legs had already been cut away beneath him. He put both hands on the mat and bowed low. “Brother,” he said, “I will tell it all.” Then the whole ugly business came out. He and Koyanagi had gone to Asakusa two days before. She had been drinking and wandering half wildly in Okuyama when she saw Seijirō leave a tea house, and then saw O-Kiku come out after him. Koyanagi knew O-Kiku by sight from visits to Kikumura’s shop, and she laughed at the chance. Here, she thought, was a respectable merchant’s daughter doing a secret and shameful thing. She could be used.

Kinji said that Koyanagi had him fetch two palanquins. Somehow, by lies or by fear, she drew O-Kiku away toward Umamichi. The girl was taken to their house. She cried, and Kinji pitied her, but Koyanagi ordered him to gag her and shut her into a deep closet, since neighbors must hear nothing. That very night Koyanagi arranged to sell the girl through a broker to the Itako district for forty ryō through

the end of the year. The price was low, but debts were pressing, winter was hard, and she wanted money at once. Before sending O-Kiku away the next morning, they stripped off her yellow robe and purple hood and dressed her in Koyanagi's clothes instead. That, Kinji said, was why O-Kiku's own things remained in the house.

Hanshichi interrupted only once. "So Koyanagi later put on the girl's robe and hood and went into Kikumura's house in her place." Kinji nodded miserably. They had frightened O-Kiku into telling them where the money box was kept in her mother's room. On the first night, Koyanagi went in but failed to get the money. On the second, she tried again. But O-Tora cried out when she saw her, and in sudden anger Koyanagi stabbed her under the breast. When she returned, she had blood on her sleeve and said, almost calmly, that now everyone would surely believe the daughter had done it. She washed the robe, hung it to dry, and went out to perform again as if nothing had happened.

When the confession ended, Hanshichi sat silent for a few breaths. Then he said, "You have been ruined by a bad woman, and you are a weak fool. But because you have told the truth, your neck may yet remain on your shoulders." Kinji began to cry and thanked him again and again, not like a bold criminal, but like a child. That moved Hanshichi in spite of himself. They were both young men, after all. Yet pity could not change duty. Hanshichi told him to prepare to come at once to Kichigorō's place. Because it was still broad day and the neighbors would be watching, he spared him a rope. But in his own mind he was already thinking ahead. Koyanagi was still free, still dangerous, and before the winter night fully closed over Edo, she too would have to be taken.

Part 4

When Hanshichi brought Kinji to Kichigorō and gave his report, the older man was shocked almost beyond belief. He slapped his knee, stared hard at Hanshichi, and said that the young helper had stumbled into a far greater case than anyone had expected. But after the surprise came quick action. Kichigorō said that Kinji

must be secured at once, and that Koyanagi must be taken before she could guess how much was already known. Since she was a dangerous woman and quick in both body and mind, he sent two experienced men to go with Hanshichi at once.

By the time they set out for Ryōgoku again, the short winter day was almost over. The show tents were beginning to close, and the air along the river had turned sharp enough to bite the ears. Hanshichi left the two men outside and went alone into the tent, because a frightened bird is easiest to catch before it sees the net. Inside the narrow back room, Koyanagi was changing her clothes after the performance, wiping away paint and powder from her face. She looked up when she saw him, and though she smiled, a dark shadow passed over her eyes at once.

“I have come from Kichigorō in Kanda,” Hanshichi said in an easy voice. “The chief wants a word with you, so you had better come with me for a little while.” Koyanagi gave a small laugh and asked what such a man could possibly want with a performer like her. Hanshichi answered that he was only a messenger and knew nothing himself. That was a lie, of course, and she knew it. Still, she did not refuse.

Leaning one hand on the big clothes chest beside her, she watched him with a long, snake-like look. “You know more than you say,” she told him quietly. “Men like you always do.” Hanshichi only shrugged and said again that it was no great matter, and that if she came quietly, no one would trouble her more than needed. Around them, the other performers had stopped talking. In the dark corners of the room they listened without moving, like people who smell smoke and are waiting for flame.

Koyanagi sat down for one last moment, took out her tobacco pouch, and smoked a small pipe with steady fingers. The calmness of her hands was stranger than any shaking would have been. Hanshichi watched her closely and thought that a person who could act like this after murder was not an ordinary sinner. When she rose at last, she put on her outer robe neatly and said, “Very well. I will go.” Then she stepped out into the cold evening beside him.

The moment she came outside and saw the two other men waiting in the shadows, she turned her head and gave Hanshichi a sharp look full of hate. But she still kept her voice soft. “How cold it has become,” she said. “When the sun

goes down, winter comes all at once.” Hanshichi told her to walk faster, but after a few steps she asked whether she might first stop by her own house, since she was only a woman and might need to prepare for being away. Hanshichi answered, “There is no use. Kinji is not there.”

She stopped walking then, and for one moment closed her eyes. When she opened them again, there was wet light on her long lashes. “Kin-san is not there?” she asked in a much smaller voice. Hanshichi said nothing more. So the four of them went on together over Ryōgoku Bridge while the evening deepened around them. House lights were beginning to shine along the riverbanks, yellow and thin in the cold air.

As they reached the middle of the bridge, Koyanagi began to cry in a broken, choking way. The sound seemed almost real, yet Hanshichi did not trust it. He asked her whether she truly cared so much for Kinji. “Yes,” she said. “Please understand me.” Then she asked what would happen to him if something bad had indeed been done. Hanshichi answered that it would depend on what Kinji had said and how far he himself was guilty.

She wiped her eyes again, and for a few steps there was only the sound of sandals on the boards and dark water below. Then everything changed in a single breath. With a cry of “Kin-san, forgive me,” she shoved Hanshichi aside with sudden force and moved like a swallow. Before any of the men could seize her sleeves, she had reached the railing. In the next instant her body had gone over and fallen straight down into the black river.

Hanshichi cursed and rushed forward, but there was nothing to catch. The water struck once and closed. The bridge guard came out of his hut, and a boat was called from nearby at once under the name of official business. They searched the water in the dark cold evening, but Koyanagi did not rise again. She had escaped the rope, the court, and the shame of standing alive before those she had deceived.

On the next morning her body was found at last, tangled near the far bank among the riverside piles, her black hair caught there like seaweed. When they pulled her out, she was stiff with cold, and the winter frost along the river seemed to have touched even her dead face. So ended the woman acrobat who had climbed

ropes and crossed the air as if she feared nothing. Edo talked of the case everywhere, and with that talk Hanshichi's own name rose higher too. He had not meant to make a name for himself, but the city decided otherwise.

At once the people of Kikumura sent men out to bring O-Kiku back safely from Itako before she could be fully handed over there. When she later gave her statement, she said that after Seijirō left the tea house, she had waited for Otake and then stepped outside without care. Under a large tree she saw Koyanagi, whom she already knew by sight because the woman had come before to buy powder and color from the shop. Koyanagi told her in a hurried voice that Seijirō had suddenly fallen ill nearby and had already been carried by palanquin to a doctor. In fear and confusion, O-Kiku went with her at once.

Soon she too was forced into a palanquin and taken to a dim house she did not know. There Koyanagi's manner changed at once, and with Kinji's help she was shut away and treated cruelly. Later she was sent far off, half dead with fear, hardly knowing what road she had traveled or what would become of her. By the time help reached her, she had almost lost the power to think clearly. She said it had all felt like a bad dream that began in daylight and never ended.

Seijirō, after close examination, was found not to have planned the crime and was let off with a hard warning. Koyanagi, because she had killed herself, escaped formal punishment while alive, though even then the law did not treat her gently in death. Kinji, who might have faced the same end, received mercy because he confessed fully and because he had not struck the fatal blow with his own hand. He was sent away to Izu Island instead, and thus the case was closed in the eyes of the law. For the people involved, of course, it did not close so easily.

Kikumura made Seijirō the daughter's husband after all, and the shop went on with its trade. Yet old Hanshichi said that once trouble stains a house, even a long-established business may never again stand quite the same way. Years later the shop was said to have moved away from its old place, and he did not know what became of it after that. Then he smiled and added that this case had been the beginning of his rise. A few years later Kichigorō died, left his place and people in Hanshichi's hands, and from then on he was no longer only a helper, but a full

leader in his own right.

“You ask why I fixed my eye on Koyanagi so quickly,” the old man told me. “It was those marks on the stone lantern.” The prints were too small for a grown man, yet too skillful for an ordinary town girl. Once he thought of a woman who lived by climbing, balancing, and leaping, the rest of the road opened before him much faster than he had expected. Then his face grew a little serious. “Still, one thing remains bitter,” he said. “Koyanagi was not the kind of person who would have been saved in the end. But letting her jump into the river was our own carelessness. Men become excited before a capture, and then, when the capture seems already done, their minds may grow loose for one fatal instant.”

The Death of Kanpei [Kanpei no Shi]

Part 1

One day, after visiting an old writer in Akasaka and hearing many stories about old Edo, I felt that I wanted to see Hanshichi again. It was about three in the afternoon when I left the writer's house. The streets were already full of the busy feeling of the last days of the year. Workmen were setting pine decorations before the gates of houses, shop boys were shouting, and red paper signs and cheap music made the whole city look bright and tired at the same time.

I said to myself, "The year will end in only a few days." Then I thought it was not right for a useless man like me to go on visiting people at such a busy time. So I decided to go straight home. But as I walked toward the tram stop, I met old Hanshichi in the street by chance.

"What has happened to you?" he asked with his usual cheerful face. "I have not seen you for some time." I said, "I was just thinking of visiting you, but I felt bad about troubling you at the end of the year." He laughed and answered, "What trouble is there? I am a retired man. For people like me, there is no real difference between summer, year's end, and New Year. Come with me if you have no other business." That was exactly what I wanted, so I followed him at once.

He opened his lattice door and called inside, "Old nurse, we have a guest." I was shown into the familiar six-mat room, and before long the usual good tea and good sweets were set before me. Outside, the city rushed toward the year's end, but inside Hanshichi's house time moved slowly, as if clocks meant nothing there. We talked in peace until evening shadows began to gather. Then Hanshichi suddenly said, as if remembering something, "It was about this season too, when there was that amateur play at Izumiya in Kyōbashi."

"What happened at the play?" I asked. Hanshichi smiled. "Ah, that matter gave me some trouble," he said. "It was the twelfth month of the Year of the Horse, and for the season the nights were strangely warm. Izumiya was a large ironware shop in Gusokuchō. Everyone in the house loved the theater, and in the end that love

brought a very bad result. If you want to hear it, I will tell you the story. It will sound like one more tale in which I praise my own cleverness, but never mind that."

A few days in a row had been mild that winter, and on that morning Hanshichi had just finished breakfast and was thinking of making his year-end visits to the officials at Hatchōbori. At that moment his younger sister, Okume, came in from the kitchen in a hurry. She lived with their mother in Myōjinshita and taught Tokiwazu there. Behind her stood another woman, quiet and ashamed, as if she did not know whether she should enter or go back out into the street.

Hanshichi's wife, Osen, turned and said kindly, "Oh, Okume, you are early. What is the matter?" Okume looked behind her and said, "I have brought someone who wants to ask my brother for help." Then she led the other woman in. The visitor was about thirty-seven or thirty-eight, well dressed in the way of a woman of the arts, but her face was pale and sharp with pain. She bowed and said, "My name is Mojikiyo. I live in Shitaya, and I am also a Tokiwazu teacher. I have long been in your sister's care."

She sat before Hanshichi, and he saw at once that she was in a dangerous state of mind. A pain plaster was stuck at her temple, and her eyes were red, as if she had not slept. Okume said, "Brother, Mojikiyo has something serious to ask of you." Hanshichi answered, "Very well. I do not know whether I can help, but tell me what troubles you." The woman pressed both hands against the mat and began in a shaking voice.

"You may have heard," she said, "that on the nineteenth night of this month there was a year-end amateur play at the house of Izumiya in Gusokuchō." Hanshichi nodded. He had already heard that a terrible mistake had happened there. Every year the people of Izumiya gathered neighbors, friends, and servants for a private play. This time they had prepared a very large performance. They had opened wide three rooms at the back of the house and built a proper stage. They had spent money on costumes and stage things, and even the music and chanting were provided by people who loved such entertainments.

The play was made of five parts from Chūshingura, and the eldest son of the

house, Kakutarō, was to play Hayano Kanpei. He was nineteen that year, a thin handsome young man whom the girls of the neighborhood already spoke of as if he were a real actor. Many people had come especially to see him in that role. When the earlier acts ended and the sixth act began, the audience had grown very crowded. Lamps, braziers, powder, oil, and tobacco smoke filled the room with heat and smell, and laughter poured out into the street.

Then joy turned to terror in one moment. Onstage, Kanpei was to kill himself with a stage sword, and at first the audience thought Kakutarō was acting with wonderful skill. But the blood pouring over his costume was real blood, not stage color. Before he could finish his lines, he fell heavily on the stage, and everyone cried out at once. The sword that should have been harmless had a real blade hidden in its scabbard. When he drove it into his side with full force, it truly cut deep into him.

The play ended in confusion. Kakutarō was carried at once into the dressing room, still wearing his stage face. The doctor came and sewed the wound, but the injury was too serious. For two days and two nights he suffered terribly, and on the night of the twenty-first he died in torment. His funeral left Izumiya on the following day, and the whole neighborhood talked of nothing else. So when Mojikiyo came and spoke with such pain, Hanshichi still did not understand what connection she could have with that house.

Okume said softly from beside her, “She is grieving bitterly over it.” Then Mojikiyo lifted her wet face and cried, “Please take revenge for me, master.” Hanshichi frowned and said, “Revenge? For whom?” She answered, “For my son.” For a moment Hanshichi simply stared at her. The face before him was no longer only the face of a woman in pain. It had become the face of a mother, wild and dangerous.

“Do you mean that the young master of Izumiya was your child?” he asked. “Yes,” she said. “I know this sounds strange, but it is the truth.” Then she told him the hidden history. Twenty years earlier, when she had been teaching Tokiwazu near Nakabashi, the master of Izumiya had often visited her. In time she had borne him a son. That child was Kakutarō. At that time the wife of Izumiya had no child

of her own, so the baby was taken into the house and raised as the heir.

Mojikiyo said that giving him up had broken her heart, but everyone told her it would be best for the boy. In Izumiya he would grow up in a fine large shop and become a proper young master. She had received money and promised to cut ties with him for life, so that no shame would fall on him later. She moved away to Shitaya and went on with her work, but she never forgot him for even one day. She had heard, little by little, that he was growing into a fine young man, and she had been happy in secret. Now, with this death, she felt her mind breaking.

At first Hanshichi said what any sensible man would say. “It sounds like a terrible accident,” he told her. “If the wrong sword was given to him by mistake, who can be called his enemy?” But Mojikiyo only gave a bitter smile through her tears. She said that five years after Kakutarō entered the house, the wife of Izumiya had given birth to a daughter named Oteru. Now that girl was fifteen. “Tell me,” Mojikiyo said, leaning forward, “which child would such a woman truly love? The son of her husband and another woman? Or her own daughter? Would she want Kakutarō to inherit the shop? Or Oteru?”

She went on in a hard, trembling voice. However kind the wife looked on the outside, she said, the heart of a human being could hide hate. Kakutarō was in the way. He was not only a stepson, but the living proof of her husband’s past with another woman. Was it not possible that she had long wished to remove him? Was it not possible that in the confusion backstage, she herself, or someone acting for her, had changed the harmless sword for a real one? “Is that only my wild jealousy?” Mojikiyo asked. “Or is it exactly what happened?”

She had become more and more excited as she spoke, until she seemed close to madness. “I am so angry,” she cried, “that I want to seize a kitchen knife, run into Izumiya, and cut that woman to pieces.” Hanshichi saw at once that he must not feed such fury. If he spoke carelessly, this woman might truly go and do it. So he stayed calm, smoked a little, and then said in a quiet voice, “I understand what you are saying. Leave the matter to me for now. I will look into it as far as I can. But until then, speak of this to no one.”

“If she killed him,” Mojikiyo said, still shaking, “the law will take vengeance,

will it not?" Hanshichi answered, "If there is guilt, the law will not ignore it. So be patient and let me work." At last she went away, though only after many tears. Okume stayed behind and, when Hanshichi was preparing to leave, whispered, "Brother, do you think the mistress of Izumiya truly did it?" Hanshichi answered, "I do not know yet. I must put my hand on the thread before I can say anything."

Without delay he went straight toward Kyōbashi. But even a man in his position could not simply burst into a great merchant's house and accuse people without cause. So he first passed by the front of Izumiya and went instead to the house of the local fire-chief, hoping to hear something useful from the neighborhood. The chief was out. While Hanshichi stood in the street thinking where to turn next, a well-dressed man of over fifty came after him and bowed politely. "Are you perhaps the detective from Kanda?" he asked. "My name is Yamatoya Jūemon. I am in the iron trade in Shiba, and I am the elder brother of the wife at Izumiya. I have something I wish to discuss with you, if you would kindly come with me."

Part 2

Hanshichi followed Jūemon into a nearby eel shop, and they were shown to a small upstairs room facing south. The winter sun came in softly through the shōji, and the shadows of potted plum branches lay on the paper like black ink. The room was quiet, warm, and almost peaceful, but the man before him was not peaceful at all. Jūemon sat with his back a little bent, as if a heavy weight had been tied to his shoulders.

He began speaking before the food arrived. He said that he was the elder brother of the wife of Izumiya and had come out that day because the family was in great fear. Kakutarō was dead, and nothing could change that now, but the talk after his death had become more and more dangerous. Some people whispered that the sword could not have changed by chance. Some people had begun to turn their eyes toward his sister.

Jūemon said that his sister was a quiet and honest woman, not the kind to raise her voice even at servants. She had cared for Kakutarō, he said, as if he were truly

her own son. But gossip in Edo was worse than smoke, because it slipped into every room and clung to everything. If the house allowed those whispers to grow, his sister might lose her mind under the weight of them.

Hanshichi listened without interrupting. In the morning, Mojikiyo had said almost the exact opposite thing. She had looked at the same woman and seen a cruel stepmother hiding hate in her heart. Jūemon looked at the same woman and saw only kindness and fear. Hanshichi thought that both stories might hold some truth, or neither might.

He began with simple questions. Jūemon had attended the play that night, so Hanshichi asked how the dressing rooms had been arranged. Jūemon explained that the backstage space had been very crowded. There was one eight-mat room where many of the players dressed, and a small detached room of four and a half mats where Kakutarō had stayed with three shop men. There were costumes, wigs, and stage things everywhere, and helpers were moving in and out all evening.

“Then there were no samurai swords lying about?” Hanshichi asked. Jūemon shook his head at once. Everyone there had been a townsman, he said, and no one brought long or short swords into such a place. The stage weapon had been handed to Kakutarō with the other props, and he had even looked at it when he received it. So if the harmless blade had been changed, it must have happened just before he went onstage, in the last confusion before the curtain rose.

Hanshichi asked next whether Kakutarō had any bad habits. Perhaps he gambled, perhaps he chased women, perhaps he had enemies among young men. But Jūemon denied all of this. Kakutarō liked the theater and was handsome enough to be noticed, yet he had no bad name for drink, cards, or women. Then, after a moment of discomfort, Jūemon admitted that there was one private matter in the house.

Kakutarō, he said, had become close to a young woman servant named O-Fuyu. She was seventeen and from Shinagawa. She was pretty, gentle, and well liked, and the family had been quietly thinking that it might be better to settle the matter properly before outside talk began. They had discussed finding a formal guardian and letting her marry Kakutarō openly. Then the terrible death had fallen between

them, and both young lives had been broken at once.

That caught Hanshichi's full attention. A house may hide money troubles, family troubles, and business troubles, but love troubles are often the ones that suddenly turn to blood. He asked O-Fuyu's age again, where she slept, and whether he might see her at once. Jūemon answered that she had become weak and half senseless since the event, so she would not be able to greet him properly, but if Hanshichi wished it, they could go immediately after the meal. Hanshichi agreed at once.

When the eel and rice finally came, Jūemon began to eat in haste, but Hanshichi hardly touched his food. Instead, he asked for another bottle of hot sake. Jūemon looked at him with some surprise. Hanshichi laughed and said that he was not really a strong drinker, but today he wanted a little color in his face. Then he began to pour cup after cup for himself.

The warm room, the hot drink, and the noon sun quickly turned his cheeks and hands bright red. Jūemon smiled because he felt he ought to smile, but his eyes showed doubt. To take a red-faced detective into a troubled shop at such a moment did not seem wise. Yet he had already asked for help, and now he could not pull back. So when the bill was paid, he took Hanshichi outside and led him toward Izumiya with growing unease.

Hanshichi staggered a little in the street, and once he nearly walked into a boy carrying a fish. Jūemon caught his arm and asked whether he was truly all right. Hanshichi answered that he was fine and only requested one thing: he did not want to go through the front of the shop like an ordinary guest. "Please let me in by the back," he said. "It will be better if I slip in quietly."

Jūemon hesitated, but Hanshichi had already turned into the side lane and was making his way toward the rear entrance. There his steps no longer looked quite so uncertain. They passed through the broad kitchen and glanced into the room where the maids sat, but O-Fuyu was not there. One of the women said that O-Fuyu had fallen ill from grief on the night before and, by the mistress's order, had been laid in the small detached room at the back.

That room, Jūemon added in a low voice, was the very room that had been used

as Kakutarō's dressing room on the night of the play. They crossed a narrow corridor and came to a small garden. Red berries hung thick on a large nandina bush, and the winter sun lay pale on the wooden veranda. Jūemon called softly, and the sliding door opened from within.

The person who opened it was a young shop man sitting beside O-Fuyu's pillow. O-Fuyu herself lay deep under the quilt, so that even the sides of her hair were almost hidden. The young man was small, dark-faced, and narrow-foreheaded, with thick brows and sharp eyes. He bowed to Jūemon and quickly slipped away. Jūemon then told Hanshichi that this was Wakichi, the same man who had played Senzaki Yagorō in the amateur play.

O-Fuyu pushed back the quilt and sat up a little. Her face was even whiter and more worn than Mojikiyo's had been that morning. She looked like someone who had been walking in a bad dream and had still not fully awakened. When Hanshichi spoke to her, she answered only in broken little pieces, and sometimes not at all. Most often she only lowered her head and cried.

Still, Hanshichi did not hurry her. He asked no direct question about love at first. He asked how the master and mistress treated her now, and she said they were kind beyond measure and pitied her deeply. He asked whether anyone from the shop came often to see her. She answered that Wakichi had been the kindest of all and had already come twice that morning when he found time away from work.

"And what did he say to you just now?" Hanshichi asked. O-Fuyu wiped her face and answered with difficulty that she had told Wakichi she could no longer bear to stay in the shop after what had happened. Then Wakichi had urged her not to speak so quickly, and had begged her to remain at least until the spring change of service. Hanshichi nodded and thanked her gently. By then he had learned enough to feel the first real movement of the case. He still had no proof, but he now believed that behind the accident on the stage there stood not only a false blade, but also jealousy, fear, and a man whose heart had become twisted in silence.

Part 3

On the way back from O-Fuyu's room, Hanshichi's face still looked red from drink, but inside his mind had become very clear. He had not yet caught the crime in his hand, yet he could already feel its shape. Kakutarō, O-Fuyu, and Wakichi stood too close together for peace. The dead young master had loved the girl. The girl had been kind to Wakichi without knowing what fire she had fed in him. And Wakichi, who kept coming to her side even now, had the face of a man who could not stay away from his own wound.

Hanshichi knew he could not question such a man in an ordinary way. A careful liar can hide his words. A frightened man can keep his mouth shut. But a guilty man whose heart is already shaking may betray himself if he is struck in the right place. So Hanshichi decided to act like a drunken brute. If his guess was wrong, the house would only think him rough and foolish. If his guess was right, someone's face would change.

He let Jūemon lead him into the shop front again. There the great house looked as rich and strong as ever, with clerks at the accounts, boys opening bundles of iron nails, and the cold daylight lying bright across the floor near the street. But Hanshichi sat down in the middle of that ordered place like a stone thrown into still water. He looked around at each face slowly, letting his red cheeks and loose manner do their work before he spoke.

Then he began. He said that Izumiya was famous in all Edo, almost as famous as a temple, and yet what kind of house was it really, if it fed and paid a servant who had killed his own master. At once every face turned toward him. Jūemon tried to stop him, whispering that the street was near and others might hear. Hanshichi only laughed harder and said that such a house deserved to be talked about in the street.

He pointed at the men one by one and called them cowards for working beside a killer and pretending not to know it. He said that he already knew there was a murderer among them, and that the murder had come from a petty quarrel over one small serving girl. Then he mocked the master of the house, saying that any man who had raised such a snake under his own roof must be blind. His words

were cruel on purpose, and the shame in them stung even the innocent men who heard them.

The workers stood frozen. No one wanted to answer, because no one knew where the next blow would fall. Wakichi, however, changed more than the others. The color left his face so quickly that it seemed to run down his neck and vanish. He tried to keep his eyes steady, but they moved again and again like the eyes of a cornered rat. Hanshichi saw that and pressed harder.

In a loud hard voice, he began to describe the punishment for a servant who killed his master. He spoke of the ride through the city, the shame before the crowd, the binding to the post, the spears shown before the prisoner's eyes, and then the true stabbing from both sides. The details were ugly, but he chose them because he wanted terror, not only in the room, but inside one particular heart. Jūemon turned pale. Several of the younger workers lowered their heads. Wakichi looked as if he might fall.

When Jūemon could bear no more, he asked Hanshichi to rest in the back room until the wine went down. Wakichi stepped forward, trembling, and tried to take Hanshichi by the arm. Hanshichi struck his hand away so roughly that the blow twisted the young man's face. "Keep back," he shouted. "I need no help from a man fit for the execution ground." After that there was a long silence, and even the boys in the shop did not move.

At last Hanshichi let his body sag and gave them what they wanted. He sprawled down on the floor as if the drink had finally beaten him. The people of the shop could do little with him. They did not dare drag him out, and they did not dare anger him further. So they let him lie there while Jūemon went into the inner rooms to speak with the master and his wife, and the others slowly returned to their work with stiff uneasy hands.

Hanshichi waited. He listened to the quiet sounds of the house, the street beyond, the boys at work, the clink of tools, the whisper of someone crossing the passage. Time moved slowly, but he did not hurry. Then, after what felt like half an hour, he rose all at once. "Ah, I am thirsty," he muttered. "I will get some water from the kitchen." No one stopped him. They thought the strong drink still led his

steps.

But instead of going toward the kitchen, he turned straight toward the back. He slipped through the passage, crossed the veranda, and dropped lightly into the small inner garden. A large nandina bush stood there, heavy with red berries, and beneath its leaves there was enough shadow to hide a crouching man. Hanshichi pressed himself flat beside it and waited. From there he could see the edge of the veranda, the corner of O-Fuyu's room, and the paper door.

Soon another figure came. It was Wakichi. He moved on bare careful feet, looking behind him once before he came near the door. Then he bent close, as though listening to the breathing inside. Hanshichi watched him with the stillness of a cat. There was no doubt now. An innocent man would fear a detective's rough words, but he would not steal away at once to the girl at the center of the matter.

Wakichi slid the door open a little and entered. Hanshichi heard a man's low voice from within, wet and unsteady, as if the speaker had already begun to cry. At first the words were too soft to catch. Hanshichi stayed where he was, but his impatience slowly grew. He had come this far, and now the truth was only one room away. So, inch by inch, he crept out from the bush, climbed the veranda like a house thief, and brought his ear closer to the half-opened gap.

Then the voice became clear. Wakichi was speaking to O-Fuyu. He told her that he had killed the young master because he loved her. He said he had never dared speak that love aloud, but had wanted for a long time to make her his wife. When he learned that she and Kakutarō were close, and that she would soon become the young master's wife in public, his heart had turned black with pain. He said he did not hate her, not even now, but he had come to hate Kakutarō so fiercely that his mind had broken.

Piece by piece the whole crime came out. Taking advantage of the year-end play, Wakichi had gone to buy a ready-made real sword. Then, just before the curtain rose on the scene of Kanpei's death, he had quietly changed the harmless stage blade for the true one. He said that when Kakutarō came back from the stage covered in real blood, he himself had nearly frozen with horror. For two days and two nights he had lived in fear while the wounded young man still breathed, and

every time he stood near the pillow, his body had shaken.

Yet even that fear had been mixed with another feeling. If Kakutarō died, Wakichi had thought, then perhaps one day O-Fuyu might become his. That hope had made his suffering even worse, because joy and terror had lived together inside him. Now, after Hanshichi's scene in the shop, he said there was no road left. The detective had seen through him. He would soon be bound, jailed, dragged through the city, and put to death in shame. Before that happened, he wanted only one thing from O-Fuyu.

He begged her not to think only of Kakutarō's death, but also a little of the heart that had driven him to it. He asked her, after he was gone, to offer one stick of incense for him. He said he had saved two ryō and one bu from his wages and wanted to leave it all to her. His voice fell lower and lower after that. Hanshichi could no longer catch every word. But now he did not need more. The heart of the matter was already in his hand.

Inside the room he heard another sound at last: O-Fuyu's quiet sobbing. Then the bell of Kokuchō struck two in the afternoon, and the clear sound cut through the air like a knife. Wakichi seemed to start at it. There was a small movement inside, the sound of feet, and Hanshichi slipped back at once into the shadow of the nandina. A moment later Wakichi came out again, walking along the veranda like a man already half dead. Hanshichi let him pass and waited until the sound of those weak steps had faded into the house.

Part 4

Hanshichi waited in the shadow of the nandina bush until Wakichi's weak steps had fully faded away. Then he climbed back onto the veranda, brushed the dirt from his hands, and returned to the front of the shop. He did not rush. A man who rushes too soon shows what he knows, and Hanshichi still wanted the last piece to fall by itself. So he stood near the account desk and spoke idly with one of the older clerks, as if nothing more serious than the weather and the year's end mattered to him.

But Wakichi did not come back. Hanshichi let a little more time pass and then asked, in a careless tone, “That man Wakichi is not here now, is he?” The chief clerk looked around and said he had not noticed when Wakichi left. A boy was sent to check the back rooms, the kitchen, and the small rooms off the passage. He came back quickly and said that Wakichi was nowhere to be found.

“And is Master Jūemon still in the inner room?” Hanshichi asked. When he was told yes, he said that he wanted a word with him at once. So he was taken into the dim sitting room at the back, where the master of Izumiya, his wife, and Jūemon sat around a long brazier, speaking in low troubled voices. Even in that half-dark room the wife’s face showed deep strain. She looked like a person who had been bearing a weight on her heart every hour since the night of the play.

Hanshichi sat down and lowered his voice. “I know now who killed the young master,” he said. At once the three faces before him changed. Their eyes sharpened, and even their breathing seemed to stop. “It was one of the men in your own house,” Hanshichi continued. “It was Wakichi.”

Jūemon stared hard at him. “Then all those wild words you shouted in the shop were not drunken nonsense?” he asked. Hanshichi gave a dry little smile. “I had drink on my face,” he said, “but not in my head. I wanted only to shake the guilty man harder than he could bear.” Before he could say more, the door flew open and a maid came in almost falling over herself with fear. She cried that Wakichi had been found hanging in the storeroom at the back.

For a moment no one in the room moved. Then the mistress gave a low broken cry and covered her mouth with both hands. Hanshichi only let out a long breath and said, “I thought it would be the rope or the river. A man in that state was never going to wait quietly for arrest.” He did not say this with cruelty. In truth, there was more weariness than triumph in his voice.

Once the first shock had passed, he explained everything carefully. At first, he said, he had heard only two dangerous things: first, that Kakutarō had loved O-Fuyu, and second, that Wakichi had shared the same room with Kakutarō on the night of the play. When he learned that O-Fuyu was young, pretty, and already closely tied to the dead young master, he had begun to suspect that jealousy might

be hiding under the surface of the case. Then he met O-Fuyu and learned that Wakichi had been visiting her again and again, more often and more eagerly than simple kindness required. After that, the line of the crime began to show itself.

He told them that he had deliberately gone into the shop like a rough drunken fool because he wanted the guilty man to believe he had already been seen through. If Wakichi had been innocent, he would have hated the shame of those words but stayed quiet like the others. But if he had guilt in his heart, he would not be able to remain still. “That was my wager,” Hanshichi said. “I had no full proof in my hand at that moment, only a path of suspicion. So I pressed his fear and waited for him to move.”

The wager had succeeded. Hidden by the garden bush, Hanshichi had heard Wakichi confess to O-Fuyu that he had bought a real sword and exchanged it for the false one just before the scene began. He had heard the whole dark truth of the matter: that Wakichi had loved O-Fuyu in silence for a long time, that he could not bear to see her become the wife of his master, and that his jealousy had turned into madness. He had also heard that Wakichi planned to die rather than be taken, questioned, and led through the streets to execution. “So,” Hanshichi finished, “before I could bind him, he judged himself and passed sentence on himself.”

Jūemon bowed his head deeply. “You have done more for this house than I can say,” he said. “It is your duty to tie a criminal and take him in, yet you chose a road that would spare the name of the shop. I do not know how to thank you. And now I must ask one more favor. Please let this remain private, and let Wakichi be spoken of only as a man who lost his mind.” The master of Izumiya bowed too, and the mistress, still pale and shaken, bent her head in silence.

Hanshichi agreed at once. He said that no punishment, however terrible, could bring Kakutarō back to life, and that if the family wished to end the matter quietly, he would not stand in their way. He added, however, that there was one person in Edo to whom he would have to speak plainly. Jūemon looked up in surprise, and Hanshichi said, “The Tokiwazu teacher Mojikiyo in Shitaya. She has badly misunderstood this case, and if no one tells her the truth, her bitterness may drive her into some real crime.”

At those words the husband and wife of Izumiya looked at each other. Then Hanshichi, speaking more gently than before, said another thing that was not strictly part of an investigation but mattered just as much. As long as Kakutarō had lived, many arrangements in the house had been difficult, and there may have been reasons to keep distance from Mojikiyo. But now the situation had changed. She was a lonely woman, growing older without husband or child beside her, and she had lost the son she had secretly carried in her heart for twenty years. “Please allow her to come and go,” Hanshichi said. “Please show her some care. It is too cruel to leave her outside forever.”

That finally broke the mistress. Tears came into her eyes, and she said that the fault was hers, that she had not thought deeply enough, and that on the very next day she would go to Mojikiyo herself. She promised that from then on she would treat the woman not as a shameful shadow from the past, but almost like a sister. Hanshichi believed her. He had listened all day to false suspicion and painful truth from many mouths, and he knew by then that this woman was no secret murderess. She was only a weak human being who had been crushed by suspicion and grief.

After that, the matter was settled as quietly as possible. O-Fuyu remained for a time in the house of Izumiya, and later, through the good offices of Jūemon of Yamatoya, she was married into a decent home in Asakusa as if she were a young woman under the protection of Izumiya itself. Mojikiyo too began to visit Izumiya openly, and after two or three years she gave up teaching and married in Shiba with help from the same kind-hearted Jūemon. The man truly had a gift for looking after other people’s lives.

The Izumiya house itself did not fall. Their daughter O-Teru later took a husband, and that man proved active and clever in business. When Edo became Tokyo, he changed trades at the right moment and made the family prosper as clock sellers. “Even now they are doing well in the Yamanote area,” Hanshichi told me. “Because of old ties, I still go to see them now and then.” He said this in his easy quiet way, but I could hear that the memory of the case still remained with him.

Then evening had fully gathered around us. Hanshichi rose, reached up, and

turned on the lamp above his head. The room brightened, and the old man smiled faintly. He said that in Edo there had once been a great fashion for amateur room plays and comic performances, and that the fifth and sixth acts of Chūshingura had been favorites because they were not hard to stage. He himself had often been forced by duty or friendship to sit through such things. “But after the trouble at Izumiya,” he said, “I noticed something strange. People stopped choosing the sixth act so often. I suppose, after all, it left too bitter a feeling in the heart.”

Upstairs in the Bathhouse [Yuya no Nikai]

Part 1

One New Year season, I went again to visit old Hanshichi. I greeted him in the proper way for the holiday, and he answered in the same formal manner, which somehow made me smile. Soon the ceremonial sake was brought out. Hanshichi did not drink much, and I drank even less, but even that little warmed our faces and made the talk move more easily.

“Do you have a story for the New Year?” I asked. “Something bright, perhaps, to suit the season?” Hanshichi rubbed his forehead and laughed. “That is a hard order,” he said. “In our line of work, most stories concern killing, theft, or some other dark business. Bright stories are rare. Still, we did not always succeed. We were not gods. Sometimes we guessed wrong, and sometimes we failed to catch what was before our eyes. So today I will tell you one of my foolish failures. When I think of it now, it seems almost like a joke.”

He said that this happened in the first month of Bunkyū 3, after the New Year gate pines had already been taken down. Toward evening on the day people called “the sixth-day New Year,” one of his helpers came to his house in Kanda Mikawa-chō. The man’s name was Kumazō, but because he ran a bathhouse below Atago, people called him Bathhouse Kuma. He was known for being careless and for bringing strange reports, so he had another nickname too, something close to Boastful Kuma.

“What is it, Kuma?” Hanshichi asked him. “Have you brought me some cheerful spring news?” Kumazō sat before the brazier, shook his knees with seriousness, and said, “No, boss. This is exactly why I came. I have something important for you to hear.” Hanshichi laughed and asked whether it was just another wild story. Kumazō swore that it was not. Then he leaned forward and began.

Since about the middle of the eleventh month, he said, two young samurai had been coming to the upstairs room of his bathhouse almost every day. That in itself

was not strange. In old Edo, bathhouses often had upstairs rooms where people rested, drank tea, played games, and wasted time. Young women worked there too, serving tea and sweets. Kumazō's bathhouse had such a room, and a neat young woman named Okichi worked there.

"But these fellows are samurai," Kumazō said. "And they come every day. That is the strange part." Hanshichi first laughed it off. Samurai had to go upstairs, after all, because they had to leave their swords there before going into the bath. The upstairs room had sword racks for exactly that reason. Maybe, Hanshichi suggested, one of the men had taken a liking to Okichi. But Kumazō shook his head hard and said it went far beyond that.

"It has gone on for nearly fifty days," he said. "Even on New Year's Eve. Even on the first day of the year. Even on the second. What sort of samurai leaves his residence and spends New Year's Day lying around upstairs in a bathhouse? And they are not alone most of the time. Usually the two of them come together. Sometimes one leaves and comes back. In the evening they always go away together. However you look at it, they are not ordinary samurai."

Hanshichi became more serious then. The times were already troubled, and there were bad men everywhere. Since the coming of the black ships, the city had grown more dangerous. Men dressed as samurai sometimes threatened rich merchants and demanded "military funds," pretending to act for a noble cause while really doing little more than robbery. Some were true masterless men, but many were only bad retainers, spoiled sons, or common rogues in borrowed dress. Hanshichi began to think that Kumazō's two visitors might belong to such a group.

"What do they look like?" he asked. Kumazō answered that both were young. One was perhaps twenty-two or twenty-three, rather fair, and handsome enough to please women. The other was of about the same age, taller, and also not cheap in appearance. They spent money freely, spoke well, and did not seem like rough country fools. In fact, Kumazō added with some annoyance, Okichi seemed to have become a little too interested in the fairer one.

That was bad enough, but Kumazō had heard something worse. Earlier that day he had quietly climbed partway up the stairs and listened. One of the men had said

in a low voice, “Do not cut them down without reason. If they listen obediently, that is fine. If they argue, then it cannot be helped. Frighten them and seize them.” Kumazō said that hearing those words had chilled him. Hanshichi agreed that it did not sound like harmless talk.

So Hanshichi promised to go the next day and see for himself. The following morning he first stopped at the house of his superior in Hatchōbori, where he received a warning that, because the times were dangerous, the watch against fire, theft, and disorder was being strengthened. That only sharpened his attention. Then he went straight to the bathhouse below Atago. It was near eleven in the morning. Even then, some people were still making late New Year calls in the streets, and the music of lion dancers could be heard here and there.

Kumazō had been waiting. He told Hanshichi that one of the men was already there and was probably in the bath. Hanshichi therefore went in openly by the front, like an ordinary customer, paid the bath fee, and entered. The bathhouse was quiet at that hour. A cheerful song echoed inside the steamy room, but there were only four or five customers. Hanshichi warmed himself quickly, then came out, threw his clothes loosely over his body, and went upstairs, with Kumazō following behind him a little later.

Sitting there with tea before him, Hanshichi asked which bather had been the man in question. Kumazō pointed him out. Hanshichi had watched the young man closely while bathing and now gave a surprising answer. “He is no false samurai,” he said. “He is the real thing.” Kumazō stared. Hanshichi explained that a man who always wore the long and short swords of a samurai developed his body in a certain way. The left leg, especially, tended to grow a little stronger and thicker. Hanshichi had seen enough to judge that the man truly belonged to a warrior class.

Kumazō then said he had seen the man bring in a heavy wrapped bundle and leave it with Okichi. Since Okichi was away outside, watching the lion dance in the street, Kumazō suggested that they quickly inspect it. Hanshichi agreed. Kumazō searched among the storage shelves and brought out a dark blue cloth bundle. Inside that was another cloth of dull yellow-green, and inside that were two old boxes, the kind used for Noh masks, each tied shut tightly with flat dark

cords.

Kumazō hurriedly untied one of the cords and lifted the lid. Even then they could not at once see what was inside. The object had been wrapped yet again in a thin yellowish material, something between fish skin and oiled paper. “They are careful enough,” Hanshichi muttered. Kumazō pulled the wrapping away, gave a short cry, and nearly dropped the thing on the floor.

Before them lay a human head. It was so old and dried that it no longer looked fully human. The skin had turned dark yellow, like dead leaves left too long in the wet, and both men had difficulty telling whether it had once belonged to a man or a woman. For some moments neither of them spoke. They only stared, breathing as little as possible, as if the head itself might somehow awaken if they moved too roughly near it.

At last Hanshichi told Kumazō to open the second box as well. With even greater fear, Kumazō did so. This time the thing that rolled out was not a human head, but the head of some strange beast. It had short horns, a wide mouth, and fangs. It might have been called a dragon, or a serpent, or something between the two. It too was blackened, dried, and hard as wood or stone.

Kumazō whispered that the man must be some kind of showman who carried strange things to use in entertainments. Hanshichi could not accept that easily. The young man was a real samurai, or something close enough to one. Why would such a person carry around a dried human head and the head of some unknown beast? And why would he leave such things so carelessly in the keeping of a bathhouse girl? The questions piled up faster than answers.

Then they heard a cough from below. The signal had come from the front desk. The man had finished bathing and was on his way up. At once the two men hurried to wrap the heads again, shut the boxes, tie the cords, and push everything back into place. A moment later Okichi returned from outside, and then the young samurai came upstairs with his wet towel in hand. Hanshichi sat quietly with his tea and showed nothing on his face, but inside his mind the case had already become stranger than before.

Part 2

Hanshichi left the bathhouse that day without any clear answer, and that troubled him more than an ordinary mystery would have done. A hidden knife, a false name, or even a stolen purse could usually be brought back to some plain human purpose. But these things in the old boxes did not fit easily into any common crime. As he walked through the bright streets of early spring, with holiday callers still passing and music from lion dancers sounding now and then, he turned the matter over again and again in his mind.

He wondered first whether the men might be some kind of magicians or men of religion using strange objects in prayer. Then he wondered whether they belonged to the forbidden Christian faith, whose followers were still watched with special care. Yet none of these ideas pleased him. The young samurai had the look not of a holy man, but of a pleasure-seeking warrior. And if he had truly been engaged in dark religious work, why should he leave such objects in the care of a bathhouse girl who was half in love with him?

Hanshichi went home, slept without trouble, and hoped that by morning his thoughts might have settled. Instead, before the light had fully spread, Kumazō came rushing in again, out of breath and full of anger. “Boss, it has happened,” he cried. “Those fellows finally did it. We were too late.” Then he reported that during the night two men dressed like masterless samurai had forced their way into a pawnshop called Isseya in the same district and demanded money in the name of military funds.

When the people inside did not yield at once, the intruders had drawn their long swords and wounded the master and the head clerk. After that they had seized about eighty ryō in ready money and escaped. Their faces had been covered, so no certain identification could be made, but their age and build, Kumazō insisted, matched the two young warriors from the bathhouse upstairs room. He was almost shaking with anger as he spoke. “They are using my place as a resting ground,” he said. “If someone else catches them first, both your face and mine will be blackened.”

That struck Hanshichi too. It is one thing to follow a doubtful clue carefully. It is another to let men escape after blood has already been drawn. Still, he had no proof strong enough to seize a samurai at once, and a rash move against the wrong man could easily end badly. So he sent Kumazō back to watch the bathhouse while he dressed and ate quickly. On the way there he turned aside through Hikage-chō for another small errand, and by chance that side road gave him the next curious thread.

In front of a sword dealer's shop called Aizuya sat the same fair young samurai he had seen the day before at the bathhouse. The man appeared to be bargaining with the clerk over some object wrapped in rough paper. Hanshichi stopped and watched from a short distance until the samurai received some money and hurried off. Instead of following him at once, Hanshichi entered the shop and began speaking with the clerk, who knew him by sight.

The clerk laughed uneasily and showed him the object just purchased. Inside the wrapper lay an ugly piece of unfinished sharkskin, dark with mud and not at all like the clean white skin used to wrap sword hilts and scabbards. The clerk explained that such skins often came in filthy condition from distant islands and had to be washed and prepared before their quality could truly be judged. The trouble, he said, was that some of them bore dark blood marks which did not show clearly until the work was far along, and those damaged the value badly. Hanshichi listened with real interest, turning the harsh skin over in his hand.

The samurai, the clerk said, had claimed to have bought it in Nagasaki and had tried to sell it for a fair price. But because it was only one muddy piece and came from a stranger, the clerk had forced him down to a low sum. Hanshichi left the shop with his mind even more troubled than before. First there had been the dried human head and the beast's head. Now there was this unfinished sharkskin. The objects did not belong together in any natural way, and yet the same man had handled them all.

When he reached the bathhouse again, Kumazō ran out to meet him. The fair young samurai, he said, had come only a short while earlier and had already gone out again. He had been carrying a long narrow wrapped parcel. The taller

companion had still not appeared. Hanshichi at once sent Kumazō to the robbed pawnshop to learn not only how much money had been taken, but what goods had been stolen along with it. Then he went upstairs and found Okichi sitting by the brazier, trying to look calm.

She greeted him with a smile, though her eyes showed fear. Hanshichi did not attack her openly at first. He spoke kindly, asked after her mother and her older brother, and even gave her a little wrapped silver, saying that he had troubled the house so much lately that he ought to pay something for the tea and sweets. Then he gently turned the talk toward filial duty. A mother, he said, does not live forever, and a daughter should not waste her youth in foolish ways.

The words made Okichi lower her head and blush, but the blush was not only that of modesty. It carried shame, fear, and the guilty warmth of a secret romance. So Hanshichi pressed a little harder, still pretending to smile. “People say,” he told her, “that you have grown rather close to one of those two visiting samurai. Is that true?” She tried to answer with playful surprise, but her face reddened more deeply.

Then Hanshichi stopped pretending. He asked who the men were, what residence they belonged to, and what business they truly had. When she tried to slip away with vague answers, he told her that she might be called to the local guardhouse and questioned there if she did not speak plainly now. That frightened her badly. He could see her body grow stiff. But even then she would not reveal much.

At last, after he had frightened and coaxed her by turns, she gave him only one strange piece of information. “They are out on a vendetta,” she whispered. Hanshichi laughed at once, because the answer sounded like the line of a stage play. Two young samurai, spending every day in the upstairs room of a bathhouse in the middle of Edo, did not look much like grim avengers. Yet she insisted on that story and would not say where they lodged, except that it was somewhere in the Azabu area.

Just then Kumazō came back from the pawnshop and pulled Hanshichi downstairs in haste. The thieves, he reported, had stolen not only money, but also some cheap metal goods and five pieces of prepared white sharkskin that had been

taken in pawn from a sword-hilt craftsman. That disappointed Hanshichi in a curious way. He had been hoping that the robbery and the muddy sharkskin might connect directly, but the skins stolen from the pawnshop had already been finished and polished white. The line of thought he had begun to build collapsed at once.

Since it was nearly noon, the two men went out for a quick meal nearby. Kumazō wanted to frighten Okichi more severely when they returned, but Hanshichi refused. Too much pressure, he said, often spoiled a case. A frightened person may speak too soon to the wrong friend and drive everything deeper underground. So they came back at an easy pace, chewing toothpicks and watching the street ahead.

Then they saw the fair young samurai stepping out from the bathhouse. He carried what looked like a box wrapped in the light yellow-green cloth they had already seen. Kumazō sprang up at once, and Hanshichi ordered him to follow. While his helper hurried off, Hanshichi turned back inside and climbed to the upstairs room. It was empty. Okichi had vanished, and when he searched the shelves, the two strange boxes were gone as well.

At once he understood. While he and Kumazō had gone out to eat, the young samurai must have returned. Okichi, already warned and frightened, had arranged matters with him. Each had taken one box, and the two had slipped away separately, one through the front and one through the rear, so that any watcher might miss the trick. Hanshichi bit his tongue in anger at his own carelessness. He had been half a step too slow, and in his work half a step could be as bad as ten.

He hurried first to Okichi’s home, a poor little place behind Myōjin. Her older brother was away at work. Her mother, an honest-faced woman past fifty, sat inside mending old clothes and said that Okichi had gone out as usual that morning and had not yet returned. The small house held no possible hiding place, and Hanshichi saw no lie in the old woman’s face. So he went back to the bathhouse in growing frustration, only to find Kumazō returning as well with an equally miserable look.

The fool had lost the man. On the way he had met an acquaintance, stopped for a few useless words, and when he looked again, the samurai had disappeared.

Hanshichi cursed him sharply, but anger could not repair the mistake now. He ordered Kumazō to watch the bathhouse carefully through the rest of the day and to follow the taller samurai without fail if that man appeared again. Then he returned home in a bitter mood, slept badly, and rose the next morning while the streets were still iron-hard with cold.

He hurried back to Atago. There Kumazō whispered to him at once that Okichi had not gone home the night before and that her mother had already come in fear to ask about her. So she had run away, very likely with the fair young samurai. There was nothing to do now except wait for the other man. Hanshichi went upstairs, where no fire had yet been lit, and sat in the chill room with tea and tobacco while the broken paper of the window let the spring cold creep against his neck.

He sat there thinking of the dried heads, the muddy sharkskin, the supposed vendetta, the robbery, and the vanished girl, but none of the pieces would fit. Then at last, around ten in the morning, a signal cough rose from below. Kumazō peered over the stair opening and whispered that someone had come. Up the steps climbed the taller samurai, sword at his side, asking at once whether Okichi was ill. Hanshichi felt for the jitte hidden in his robe and told Kumazō to hide the man's swords as soon as he could. Then both of them waited in silence for the stranger to come back upstairs from his bath.

Part 3

Hanshichi and Kumazō sat in silence after the tall samurai went down to the bath. Neither man wished to speak too soon. The room felt colder than before, and the weak morning fire in the brazier did little against the chill that came through the torn paper of the window. At last they heard the sound of water below stop, then the sound of wooden steps on the stairs. The tall samurai came back up, dried his body, and sat where Okichi usually served tea, but even before he spoke, Hanshichi saw that the man's face had changed a little at the news of her absence.

Kumazō did his best to talk lightly. He said the girl had a fever, and then he

turned the talk toward ordinary things, asking whether the gentleman's friend had also fallen ill, whether both men came from the same residence, and whether they had business nearby. The samurai answered, but not clearly. He seemed careful with every word, and his answers all had small weak places in them. He said one thing and then seemed to draw half of it back. He smiled, yet the smile never stayed on his face long.

Hanshichi listened from the side and added a few questions of his own. He asked where the man's house stood, and the answer was only "in the Azabu direction." He asked how long the two companions planned to remain in this part of the city, and the samurai said only that their business was not yet finished. He asked whether the fair young man had gone on ahead that morning, and again the reply was cloudy and incomplete. The more the samurai tried to hide, the more his hiding showed.

That only made Hanshichi more impatient. He had already chased this matter through many false shapes. First it had looked like black magic. Then it had looked like hidden religion. Then it had seemed to touch robbery. After that came a runaway girl and the vanishing boxes. He now felt that the answer stood almost within reach, yet still would not show its face. Once a man begins to feel that kind of strain, he becomes more likely to act too fast.

At last Hanshichi could bear no more. He thrust his hand inside his robe, drew out the jitte, and held it before the samurai with a sharp movement. Kumazō gave a little cry, and even the tall samurai started back. "Enough," Hanshichi said. "You have hidden things from us from the start. Speak the truth now. Who are you, who is your companion, and what are those strange things you left with the girl?" His voice was low, but it was no longer friendly.

The samurai went pale. He looked first at the iron jitte, then at Kumazō, then back at Hanshichi. For a few moments he still tried to stand firm. But a man who has already been carrying trouble on his shoulders may break quickly when one more weight is laid upon him. At last he lowered his head and said that there was no use hiding further. "The girl told you the truth," he said. "We are on a vendetta."

Hanshichi almost laughed then, because the answer was exactly the one he had

been most unwilling to believe. Yet the samurai's face was too serious for mockery. So Hanshichi put the jitte a little lower and told him to speak plainly from the beginning. The man said his name was Kajii Gengorō. He was a samurai from a western domain and had been in Edo since the spring on attendance duty. His close companion was Takashima Yashichi, another man of the same domain and of similar age. The two had spent too much time together in pleasure places and had become careless men.

In the eleventh month of the year before, Kajii and Takashima had gone out to Shinagawa with two others from the same domain, Kanzaki Gōsuke and Mobara Ichirōemon. They had visited a pleasure house there and drunk too much. During the drinking, Kanzaki and Mobara had begun a quarrel. Kajii and Takashima somehow calmed the men and ended the dispute for the moment. But Kanzaki still burned inside. Though the others urged him to stay the night, since the domain gate would already be closed, he insisted on returning.

Since they could not let one companion go back alone in that state, the four left together. When they reached the shore at Takanawa, it was past eight on a cold dark night. A few fishing fires floated far off on the black sea, and the north wind cut through the last of their drunkenness. Then, without warning, Kanzaki fell a step behind and drew his sword. In the darkness there was only a sudden flash. Mobara cried out once and fell. By the time Kajii and Takashima understood what had happened, Kanzaki had already run toward Shiba and disappeared into the night.

Mobara had been cut down with a single terrible stroke from the right shoulder across the back. He died at once. Kajii and Takashima could do nothing for him. In fear and confusion they placed the body in a roadside palanquin and carried it secretly back to the domain house in Azabu. The matter was grave, for it was bad enough that samurai of the same house had gone drinking in a pleasure quarter, and far worse that one had killed another after a drunken quarrel. The domain searched for Kanzaki at once, but even after many days no trace of him could be found.

Mobara had a younger brother named Ichijirō. He asked for permission to

avenge his brother, and this was granted. But the domain did not allow a public departure for vendetta. Instead, he was allowed to leave Edo under the name of carrying his brother's bones home and stopping at temples or relatives on the way. That was the formal shape. The true purpose, of course, was to search for Kanzaki wherever he might be found. So the younger brother left with the bones and the duty of revenge.

Kajii and Takashima were punished as well. Because they had gone into bad places and because they had failed to seize Kanzaki when the killing took place, they were ordered to assist in the vendetta as payment for their fault. But there was a cruel limit to the order. They were not allowed to leave Edo. They had to search within the city and its near surroundings and discover Kanzaki's hiding place within one hundred days. If they failed, disgrace would certainly follow.

At first they searched honestly enough. Every morning they left the domain house before dawn and wandered through Edo until evening. But no one even knew whether Kanzaki still remained in the city. Day after day passed, and the task became more hopeless. Soon the two young men began to grow tired. Then they became lazy. Then, little by little, they began to cheat. They would leave the gate at the proper hour, but instead of truly searching, they spent their days in tea stalls, storytelling halls, and bathhouse upper rooms, later returning with false reports about where they had looked.

Since they were trying to waste time without spending too much money, they chose cheap places. In the end this bathhouse upstairs room became their main hiding place. They slept there, talked there, and now and then walked out only far enough to make their reports sound true. In time Takashima grew too close to Okichi. She worried over him, told him that vendettas were dangerous, and begged him to stop. But he had two fears working in him at once. One was the fear of failing the domain and being sent back in shame. The other was the fear of being separated forever from Okichi.

"I may as well become a masterless man," Takashima finally said. Kajii did not have the courage for that. He was afraid of punishment too, but he still had a mother, a brother, and a sister in the home country, and he could not cut himself

away from all of them. Takashima, however, was more alone and more reckless. As spring came on, he slowly began carrying small personal things out from the domain house and hiding them with Okichi. When the bathhouse master began to watch too closely, and when Okichi warned him that Kumazō had ties to the police, he lost the last of his calm. So, it seemed, he fled with her the night before and did not return.

By then the reason for the vendetta and the reason for the elopement were both clear. But Hanshichi still wanted to know about the two dreadful objects in the boxes. Kajii, now that he had started to speak, answered that too. Those were not magical tools for present use. They were old treasures handed down in Takashima's family. In the time of Toyotomi Hideyoshi's Korean war, an ancestor of Takashima had crossed the sea with his lord and brought back two strange objects as spoils: a dried human head and the head of some unknown beast, perhaps a dragon or serpent. They had once been used, Kajii said, by a Korean shaman woman in charms and prayers and had been honored almost like sacred things. No one in the domain truly knew what they were, but everyone knew the story.

The muddy sharkskin was different. Kajii said he did not fully know its history. Takashima's grandfather had spent many years in Nagasaki, so the skin had likely come from some foreign source in those days. Because it could be sold for money, Takashima had sold that piece off. But the other two objects had no buyer and, more than that, they belonged to his house as heirlooms. So he must have taken them with him when he ran away with Okichi. A young man and a young woman going off into the world with a dried human head and a beast's head under their arms—Hanshichi later said there had never been a stranger elopement in all Edo.

Hanshichi finally lowered his jitte and let out a long breath. He admitted later that he had made a fool of himself that day by waving official authority too early. But Kajii turned out to be a more open-hearted man than he had feared. Once the truth was out, he even gave a bitter smile and seemed almost ready to laugh with Hanshichi over the absurd shape the matter had taken. The robbery at the pawnshop, it became clear, had nothing to do with them. Those robbers were

entirely different men. The strange boxes, the runaway girl, the muddy sharkskin, and the samurai's hidden business had all belonged to one foolish side road, not to a gang of violent thieves at all.

"So in the end," old Hanshichi said to me, rubbing his forehead as he often did when remembering some old mistake, "we somehow patched it up. Takashima never came back to the domain house after that, and Okichi vanished too. People said the pair had hidden themselves somewhere around Kanagawa, but I never learned what became of them. Kajii was not sent home in disgrace, and after that he sometimes still came to idle away an hour in the upstairs room of that bathhouse. As for those odd treasures, I later heard in the Meiji years from a certain learned man that the human head may have been some kind of mummy. Whether that is true or not, I cannot say. But I can tell you this much: they were certainly strange enough."

The Ghostly Teacher [Obake Shishō]

Part 1

Since the second month, I had been so busy with my own work that I had not visited old Hanshichi for almost half a year. At last I began to feel uneasy about that long silence. Near the end of the fifth month, I sent him a letter with an apology. A reply came back at once, inviting me to visit him during the Hikawa festival in the next month, when he said they would cook festival rice. I too had begun to miss him badly, so on the festival day I went out to Akasaka. On the way, a thin mist-like rain began to fall.

“This is bad luck,” I said. “It has started to rain.” Hanshichi looked up at the sky with a troubled face and answered, “It is just before the rainy season. It may pass, but I do not like the look of it.” As he had promised, a good meal was prepared, with festival rice, stewed dishes, and even sake. I ate and drank freely, and we talked about the decorated dance carts in the neighborhood. But the rain only grew stronger, and the old nurse in the house began hurrying about to take in the lanterns and flowers that had been set outside.

Soon the sounds of festival music in the street became dull and far away under the rain. Hanshichi looked toward the door and said, “Well, that ends any hope of going out to watch the dancing carts. So tonight you must stay and listen to an old story instead.” That pleased me more than any festival sight. I at once begged him to tell me one of his old cases, just as I always did. He smiled in his teasing way and said, “Another of my proud little stories? Very well, then. But first let me ask—are you especially afraid of snakes?”

I answered that no one could like snakes, though some people feared them more than others. He nodded and said, “That is true. Then, if you are not the sort to turn white at the very word, let us have a snake story tonight. It happened, I think, in the year before the great Ansei earthquake.” With that he began. It was the tenth day of the seventh month, the day of the great fair at Asakusa Kannon. Hanshichi had gone there in the gray light before dawn.

The five-storied pagoda stood half hidden in damp morning mist. Even the pigeons had not yet come down to pick up beans from the ground. There were few worshippers at that early hour, so he prayed at leisure and then started home. On his way back, when he reached the Onari Road in Shitaya, he saw seven or eight men standing together in a side lane beside a sword shop. Because trouble was his trade, he stopped at once and looked in.

Then a small man in a striped summer robe broke away from the group and came running toward him. “Boss, where have you been?” the man asked. “To pray at Kannon,” Hanshichi answered. “And what has happened here?” The little man lowered his voice and said, “You have come at the right time. Something very strange has happened.” This man was one of Hanshichi’s lower helpers, a barrel-maker named Genji, who lived in that neighborhood and had sharp eyes for trouble.

Hanshichi explained to me at this point that such men stood below the better-known street detectives. On the surface they looked like ordinary tradesmen, but in their free hours they watched, listened, and brought in bits of information. Without them, he said, many criminals would never have been caught. Genji was one of the best among them, and he was not a man to grow pale for nothing. So when Hanshichi saw that Genji’s face had truly changed, he asked again, “What is it? What has happened?” Genji swallowed and answered, “Someone has died. The Ghostly Teacher is dead.”

“The Ghostly Teacher” was the strange nickname people had given a dancing teacher named Mizuki Kameju. The name had not belonged to her for long. It had begun only after the death of a younger woman named Kadayo, who was both her niece and her adopted daughter. Kameju had taken the girl in when she was very small, taught her dancing with severe care, and hoped one day to leave the school in her hands. But Kadayo had died the previous autumn at the age of eighteen. After that, people in the neighborhood began to speak of Kameju with fear and dislike, and the ugly name spread.

Kameju was said to be forty-eight, though she looked younger than that. She was still fresh and well dressed, and in her younger days she had had many lovers

and much talk around her name. But in the last ten years, people said, she had become hard and greedy. She had not taken in her niece out of kindness. She had done it because she saw in the child a future source of money. She trained the girl so sharply, people said, that even those watching from outside felt sorry for her.

Because of that harsh training, Kadayo grew into an excellent dancer. She was also beautiful, and that beauty brought many male pupils into the house once she was old enough to teach in her mother's place. As the pupils increased, so did the money. Yet Kameju was not satisfied with the usual monthly fees and small charges for charcoal or mats. She wanted something larger. Hanshichi said she was like an angler who already has many small fish in her basket but still dreams only of one great fish.

At last that great fish seemed to swim near. In the spring of the year before, a senior retainer from a daimyo residence in the Chūgoku region became eager to make Kadayo his own kept woman. Kameju at first pretended to refuse, saying that the girl was heir to the school and could not simply be given away. That only made the man press harder. In the end, he offered regular support every month and, once the matter was settled, a payment of one hundred ryō. In those days that was a huge sum, and Kameju at once began dreaming of a much easier life.

But Kadayo fell at her mother's feet and begged her to refuse. "Please forgive me in this one matter," she said. "My body is weak. I can barely bear the work I already do. If you force me into such a life, I will not endure it." She promised that she would go on working until she dropped, and that she would never let Kameju suffer want. But she begged not to be sold in that way. Kameju, however, was not a woman who listened easily. And when even the gentle Kadayo held firm and would not give in, Kameju's anger only grew.

While the argument dragged on, the hot wet months of the rainy season came, and Kadayo's health began to fail more clearly. She could no longer continue the daily lessons without long spells in bed. At last the retainer seems to have grown tired of waiting, and the plan slowly died away. The great fish escaped from the hook. Kameju ground her teeth over that loss and blamed it all on Kadayo's stubbornness. From then on she treated the girl with even greater cruelty.

She reminded Kadayo of her own words and forced her to work until she almost fell. Even when the girl lay white-faced and weak, Kameju dragged her up again and made her go on teaching from morning till night. She would not even call a doctor. A young player named Onaka felt pity for Kadayo and secretly bought medicine for her, but it did little good. Under the heavy summer heat, the girl became so thin that she looked almost like a living skeleton.

Even then Kameju gave her no rest. Only two or three days before the Bon holiday, in the middle of the afternoon, Kadayo was dancing the part of the mountain witch when her strength finally ended. She fell on the practice stage and could not rise again. Thus the young and beautiful teacher died in the first autumn of her eighteenth year, after being driven without mercy by the woman who should have protected her. Hanshichi said that even now, when he remembered that part, he felt anger more than sadness.

Then the stories began. On the first Bon of the dead girl, long white lantern tails moved in the faint cold air, and Onaka later whispered in terror that she had seen the young teacher standing there sadly in the dim light. From one mouth to another, the tale spread. People added things as such people always do. Some said that, late at night, faint dancing steps could be heard on the dark practice floor, though no one was there. Soon the whole neighborhood had decided that Kameju's house was haunted, and pupils began to stay away. The nickname "the Ghostly Teacher" was born from those whispers.

"And now that Ghostly Teacher herself is dead," Genji said in a frightened voice. Hanshichi gave a cold little smile and muttered, "A woman like that might die from eating something bad." But Genji shook his head hard. "No," he whispered. "It is nothing like that." Hanshichi looked at him more sharply. "Then how did she die?" he asked. Genji leaned closer still and said, "The maid named Omura found her this morning. She was lying dead inside her mosquito net, and a black snake was wrapped around her throat."

Even Hanshichi was startled by that. Genji, with fear in his eyes, went on to say that all the neighbors were shivering and talking of vengeance from beyond the grave. People were saying that Kadayo's bitter spirit had entered the snake and

strangled the cruel woman who had destroyed her. Hanshichi told me that he himself felt a chill when he heard it. However sharp a man may be, the words “killed by a snake” on such an anniversary are enough to strike cold through the bones. And so, with rain beating on the roof in Akasaka, he reached the point where the real story began.

Part 2

“Well, we had better go and see it,” Hanshichi said at last. He went first into the side lane, and Genji followed close behind him with the uneasy face of a man walking toward something he did not want to see. More and more people were gathering in front of Kameju’s house. Since this was the first anniversary of Kadayo’s death, everyone seemed ready to believe that some fearful revenge had now fallen from the world of the dead. Their eyes shone with excitement and fear, and they whispered to one another as if they were standing outside a haunted place rather than an ordinary house.

Hanshichi and Genji went in through the back entrance. The shutters had not yet all been opened, so the house still held the half-darkness of early morning. The mosquito net was hanging just as it had been found, and in the four-and-a-half-mat room nearby sat the landlord and the maid Omura, both silent and stiff, as if even breathing had become difficult for them. Hanshichi knew the landlord by sight, so he greeted him at once and asked what had been done.

The landlord answered that word had already been sent to the authorities, but the inspection had not yet taken place, and so no one had dared touch the body. He looked troubled in a practical way, like a man whose property had suddenly become the center of a neighborhood horror. At the same time, however, Hanshichi could see that even this sensible man had been infected by the strange talk outside. The words “killed by a snake” had bitten into his mind too deeply for him to laugh them off.

Hanshichi asked whether snakes often appeared in that area. The landlord answered no at once. The houses stood close together there, and even the tiny

garden behind Kameju's place was no more than four tsubo of ground. It was not the sort of place where a snake should live, and there was no clear way for such a creature to slip in from outside. "That is why the neighbors say all kinds of things," he added in a lower voice, and Hanshichi knew exactly what kind of things he meant.

He then asked permission to look inside the net. The landlord agreed at once, and Hanshichi went into the next room. It was a six-mat room, and in one corner stood a small decorative alcove with an old hanging picture of Taishaku. The net filled almost the whole room. Since the summer heat still lingered though it was already past Bon, Kameju had spread a sleeping mat over the quilt and pushed the thin coverlet down toward her feet.

She lay on her back facing south, her head turned a little aside and the pillow half slipped away. The disorder of her hair showed that she had struggled hard before dying. Her brows were twisted, her lips bent, and her pale tongue hung slightly out, leaving on the face a terrible mark of final pain. Her sleeping robe had been pulled open at the chest, as though she had fought desperately to breathe, and in the blue-gray half-light her body looked pitifully small and weak for a woman who had been so feared in life.

"Where is the snake?" Genji whispered from the side. Hanshichi lifted one edge of the net and stepped in. It was too dark to see clearly, so he told Genji to open one shutter toward the garden. The moment Genji did so, the strong morning light poured in across the room, turning the pale net blue and making the dead woman's face look still colder and more dreadful. Then, beneath the chin, something black and smooth began to show.

Genji drew back at once, but Hanshichi bent closer. The snake was not large. It was perhaps only a foot long, and its tail lay loosely around the dead woman's neck, while its flat head rested as if lifeless on the bedding. For a moment Hanshichi wondered whether it too might be dead. Then he touched its head lightly with a fingertip. At once the creature slowly raised its neck. Thinking for a moment, Hanshichi took a folded piece of paper from his robe and gently pressed the head back down. The snake seemed to shrink from the touch and lay

quiet again on the quilt.

Hanshichi came out from the net, went to the stone basin at the veranda, and washed his hands. When he returned to the four-and-a-half-mat room, the landlord immediately asked whether he had understood anything. Hanshichi only answered that he could say nothing yet and that the officials would soon have their own view of the matter. The landlord looked disappointed, but Hanshichi did not care. He had already seen enough to know one thing clearly: the snake had not killed the woman.

Once outside, Genji pulled close and asked in a low voice what Hanshichi thought. Instead of answering at once, Hanshichi asked a sudden question. “That maid Omura is young, is she not?” Genji said that she was seventeen. Then he added quickly that she could not possibly have done such a thing. Hanshichi gave only a short sound in his throat and walked a few more steps before speaking.

“I will tell you because you are one of us,” he said at last. “The teacher was not killed by the snake. She was strangled by human hands, and then the snake was wound around her neck afterward.” Genji stared in disbelief and asked again whether the dead girl’s spirit was not involved after all. Hanshichi answered, “Perhaps the dead may still have some claim in this, but the strong hate of a living person is there too. Keep your eyes not only on the maid, but on everyone who comes and goes.” Then he asked another practical question. “Did Kameju have money saved?” Genji answered that such a greedy woman must certainly have put aside a small fortune.

Hanshichi next asked whether she had a lover. Genji said that in recent years she seemed to care only for money. Just then Hanshichi glanced back and saw, a little apart from the crowd in front of the house, a young man standing and listening too closely to their words. He was trying not to be noticed, but his eyes kept coming back to them with restless caution. Hanshichi asked who he was, and Genji answered that he was Yasaburō, the son of a local paper-hanger and mounter.

Genji also said that Yasaburō had once attended lessons there every evening, but after young Kadayo died he had stopped coming. “Not only he,” Genji added, “most of the young male pupils disappeared after she was gone. They were quick

enough to scatter." Hanshichi then asked where the family temple was, and Genji answered that it was Myōshinji near Kōtokuji-mae. He himself knew the place because he had gone there for Kadayo's funeral the year before. Hanshichi gave another short sound and said no more.

He walked first toward the main road, then suddenly turned back and made for the temple district. The late summer sun flashed on the broad ditch water, and a large dragonfly crossed before his face and flew over the low clay wall of a temple. That was Myōshinji. Inside the gate, on the left, stood a flower seller's little shop, already busy because many people still came to the graves around Bon. Hanshichi bought a branch of shikimi that he did not need and asked where Kadayo's grave stood.

He then asked whether anyone came there often to visit her. The old flower seller said that in the first months many pupils had come, but lately there were fewer. Only one person never failed, she said: the young son of the paper-hanger, that same Yasaburō. He had come only the day before as well. With water and flowers in hand, Hanshichi went to the grave. It was a small family stone, shaded by a broad maple branch, and in the flower holder stood fresh bellflowers and maiden flowers, still wet as if tears had been shaken over them.

Hanshichi placed his own flowers there and bowed. As he prayed, he heard a rustling sound behind him and turned. A small snake slipped through the late summer grasses as if it were chasing something. For a moment he watched it with a strange expression and thought, "Was it one of these?" But he shook the idea away almost at once. When he returned to the flower shop and asked whether Kadayo had come often to pray there while alive, the old woman said yes, and sometimes she had come with that same young man, Yasaburō.

That was enough. A sad thread had clearly run between the dead young teacher and the paper-hanger's son. Hanshichi left the temple and, on the way back toward Ueno, met one of his own men, a tall narrow fellow called Thin Matsukichi. He told him sharply about Kameju's death and then gave him a sudden order. Matsukichi was to search at once for wandering sellers of the talismans of Chiryū Daimyōjin and to find out where any of them were staying, likely somewhere

around Mannenchō. The order seemed strange, but Matsukichi asked no questions and hurried off to do it.

Hanshichi returned home for the time being. That evening Genji came secretly and reported that the official inspection had taken place, but nothing had been settled clearly. Because Kameju had been so disliked and because the snake story had spread so fast, people were already inclined to close the matter as one of strange punishment from beyond the grave. Hanshichi only smiled when he heard that. He asked when the funeral would be held, and when Genji answered that it would leave at half past six the next morning, Hanshichi said he would go to watch.

So on the following morning he made his way quietly to Myōshinji again. Kameju's body arrived in a palanquin, followed by thirty or forty people from the neighborhood and from among the pupils. Genji was there, watching with sharp eyes. Yasaburō was there too, with a pale face. Even the maid Omura came, looking small and frightened among the others. Hanshichi sat apart and behaved as if he were no more than one more respectful mourner. But all the while he was watching and waiting, because he felt that the truth now stood very close, just on the far side of grief.

Part 3

After the funeral chanting ended, Kameju's body was sent on toward the burning ground. The people who had come to mourn began to leave in small groups, speaking in low voices as they went. Some looked frightened, some excited, and some only curious. Hanshichi remained seated longer than the others on purpose, as if he were no more than one more respectful visitor who did not wish to hurry away. Then, when most of the people had gone, he rose quietly and slipped around toward the graves.

There he saw one man kneeling before Kadayo's grave. It was Yasaburō, the paper-hanger's son. He bowed so deeply and so still that he seemed to have forgotten the world around him. Hanshichi walked softly over the wet grass and hid behind a large stone marker close by. He listened, but Yasaburō said nothing

aloud. He only prayed with all his heart, and the silence around him felt heavier than words.

At last Yasaburō rose and turned to go. Then he suddenly found Hanshichi standing there. The young man gave a start and looked as if he might run, but Hanshichi called to him in a low calm voice and told him to come back. The two crouched down together on the grass in front of Kadayo's grave. The morning remained cloudy, and the wet cold of the ground came up through the straw sandals into their feet.

Hanshichi began gently. He said he had heard that Yasaburō came faithfully to this grave every month. Yasaburō answered with care that he had once taken lessons from the young teacher and therefore felt he should pray for her. Hanshichi watched his face closely and then stopped circling around the truth. He said, very directly, that the young man and Kadayo had loved one another. At once Yasaburō's face changed, and he lowered his eyes to the grass.

Then Hanshichi struck the next point. He said that people were already whispering that, to avenge Kadayo, Yasaburō might have killed Kameju on the very first anniversary of the girl's death. Yasaburō shook all over and denied it in broken words. But Hanshichi did not let him go yet. He told him plainly that he himself did not believe Yasaburō had done it. That was why he wanted the whole truth, and he wanted it here, before the grave of the girl whom neither of them wished to shame with lies.

That broke the young man at last. Tears came into his eyes, and the whole sad story fell out of him. For more than a year, he said, he had gone to Kameju's house every evening for lessons, and during that time he and Kadayo had grown close. They had never done anything shameless. Kadayo was sickly, and Yasaburō was timid by nature. Mostly they had only spoken softly together when Kameju was not watching. Yet there had been one day in the spring when Kadayo, in deep misery, had begged him to take her away somewhere, anywhere, because she could no longer bear to live in that house.

Yasaburō had not done it. He had parents, younger brothers and sisters, and the duty to inherit the family trade. He had persuaded Kadayo to return quietly home.

Soon after that she fell more seriously ill, and before he could gather courage for anything, she died. Since then he had lived with the tormenting thought that he had let her perish when he might have saved her. That was why he came every month to pray at her grave. Hanshichi believed him. The tears of such a weak young man did not look false.

Then Hanshichi asked another question. After Kadayo's death, had Yasaburō truly stopped visiting Kameju's house? At first the young man hesitated. Then, after more urging, he admitted something far stranger. About a month after Kadayo died, Kameju herself had come to his family's shop and called him outside. She said she wished to consult him about memorial gifts for the thirty-fifth day service. But when he visited that night, the talk quickly changed. To his horror, she asked whether he would become her adopted son and heir, and then, in a way that grew uglier over time, whether he would become something closer still.

Yasaburō said he refused at once and went home shaking. Yet Kameju would not give him up. She found excuses to send for him again. Once she forced him into a tea house in Yushima and made him drink, speaking in a sweet, shameless way that terrified him. Then, only at the end of the previous month, he had met her by chance again after bathing in the neighborhood. She insisted that he come home with her because she had something important to discuss. Unable to refuse, he went. But when they entered the house, a strange man of about forty was already there, sitting by the long brazier. Kameju had looked startled to see him.

Hanshichi smiled inwardly when he heard that. The new man, clearly, had not expected Yasaburō, and Yasaburō had not expected the new man. That crossing of paths told him much. He now saw two separate lines of desire leading toward the dead woman. One line was the pure sad love of Yasaburō and Kadayo. The other was the ugly line of Kameju and some older man from her past. He told Yasaburō to keep quiet about all this for the time being, and then he went back toward the temple gate, where another thread came flying in from a different direction.

There he met his man Matsukichi at last. Matsukichi had searched through Mannenchō and other rough quarters, as ordered, and at first had found nothing.

But that morning he had finally learned of a man selling snake-charm talismans who was staying at a cheap inn in Honjo. One of the men was young and out working in the hills. The other, however, was about forty and had also been going out to sell. When Hanshichi heard the age of the older man, he struck his hands together softly. This now sounded much closer to the stranger Yasaburō had seen in Kameju's house.

Still, age alone was not enough. So Hanshichi made for the river crossing and waited. The sky was clearing by then, and the summer heat had begun to press down again. At the ferry landing he soon saw a dark-faced man of about forty wearing a sedge hat, leggings, and straw sandals. Around his neck hung a small box, exactly the sort a charm seller would carry. Hanshichi watched him carefully while pretending not to watch at all. The man, sensing something, seemed to avoid his eyes.

They both boarded the ferry. Several ordinary passengers crowded in after them, women with children, a small boy carrying sugar, and an old woman on some temple errand. Then, as the boat moved out over the broad river, the charm seller suddenly saw another man among the passengers and leaped toward him in fury. He seized the fellow by the breast and shouted that this thief had stolen one of his precious black snakes. The accused man protested loudly, and the little boat rocked so hard that women cried out and the boatman shouted for peace.

The moment the boat reached the Honjo side, Hanshichi sprang ashore first. The accused man tried to run, but Hanshichi caught his arm and stopped him with the voice of authority. Then he turned to the charm seller and asked whether the thing stolen from him had indeed been a black snake. When the man answered yes, Hanshichi knew he had reached the heart of the matter. He pulled both men off to the nearest guardhouse and began the rough kind of questioning common in those days.

He looked hard at the accused man and said, without any softening, that he must be Kameju's lover, or husband, or old kept man from the past. He said that after returning to Edo and visiting her again, he had found her treating him coldly while pulling some young fellow into the house. Maddened by jealousy and humiliation,

he had decided to kill her. Then, learning that people already called her the Ghostly Teacher and feared Kadayo's spirit, he had stolen a snake from the talisman seller and used it to turn a murder into a ghost story. Hanshichi spoke fiercely and fast, leaving the man no room to gather himself. At last the fellow collapsed and confessed.

He had once been a monk from the Ueno temple grounds, he said, though younger than Kameju. She had led him astray years before, and he had left religious life and gone away into Kōshū. But old Edo drew him back. When he returned and sought her out after many years, she treated him badly and paid more attention to younger men, including Yasaburō. Bitter and humiliated, he watched her for nearly two months from cheap lodgings. During that time he heard of Kadayo's death and the strange rumors growing around Kameju's house. Being a former monk, he was quick to think in terms of curses and restless spirits. So he slipped in at night through the water entrance, strangled her, and wound the stolen snake around her neck.

When Hanshichi told me this, he smiled and said the fellow had planned the thing rather cleverly. The season, the death anniversary, the dead daughter, the neighborhood fear, and the snake were all ready to hand. If Hanshichi had accepted the dead woman's reputation and the town's frightened talk, the whole matter might well have ended as a case of divine punishment. But the snake itself betrayed the trick. It was weak, unnaturally quiet, and when he tested it with a sheet of paper, it shrank its neck at once in the manner of snakes trained by false talisman sellers. That small movement had opened the whole path before him.

The former monk was sentenced to death, Hanshichi said. As for the charm seller, he had indeed been trading under the holy name of Chiryū with trained snakes and worthless tricks, though that alone did not trouble the old law very much. "In those days," Hanshichi said to me with a laugh, "people often said that the one who was fooled was the one at fault." Then he added that old Edo had been full of such fake wonders, fake prayers, fake medicines, and fake holy things. The rain outside had stopped by then, and the street beyond his house was growing lively again with festival sounds. So, after finishing the story, Hanshichi rose and

said we had better go out and see the lanterns lit, because a festival, however fine by day, truly belongs to the night.

The Mystery of the Fire Bell [Hanshō no Kai]

Part 1

It was on a drizzling day at the beginning of the eleventh month that I visited old Hanshichi again after a long absence. He had just come back from the first Cock Fair in Yotsuya and still held in his hand a tiny bamboo rake no bigger than a hairpin. He carefully placed it up on the household altar, almost as if it were something holy, and then he led me into the usual six-mat room. We first talked about the fair itself, how it had changed from old times, and what kind of people used to crowd there in the Edo days.

Since it was the season when the air had already turned thin and cold, our talk naturally moved to fires. Hanshichi always knew a great deal about fires in old Edo, perhaps because so much of his work had once touched the lives of frightened townspeople after such disasters. He told me that arson had been one of the gravest crimes, and that even a man who only stole at a fire scene might lose his life for it. Then, smiling a little, he said, “Still, the world often gives us things stranger than real fire. There was one affair, not very far from the neighborhood of that Ghostly Teacher I once told you about, where a whole town nearly lost its wits.”

He would not tell me the exact name of the district, because he said there were still people who might dislike hearing it repeated. But he told me to imagine one of those lower-town merchant quarters where the houses stood close together, where the danger of fire always lived in the minds of the people, and where the sound of one bell in the night could send hundreds running into the street. It was after the Kanda festival, when the mornings and evenings had already grown cold enough for lined robes. Hanshichi said that as soon as the baked-sweet-potato sellers began hanging out their lanterns with “Eight and a Half Ri” painted in thick black strokes, the whole city seemed to remember that winter was coming.

Around the end of the ninth month and into the first days of the tenth, the fire bell of that district began to ring without warning. People would hear it in the

black middle of the night and jump up at once crying, “Fire! Fire!” Men rushed out half dressed. Neighbors called to neighbors. Some even began carrying out boxes and bedding before they had fully opened their eyes. Yet when they looked around, there was no smoke anywhere, no glow in the sky, no smell of burning wood, no flying sparks. Sometimes the bell rang once or twice in a night. Sometimes it rang three or four times.

The worst part was that one fire bell did not trouble only one street. Its alarm was caught by the next district, and then by the next. Bells answered bells, men ran from all directions, and the fire fighters came together with no fire to fight. In the end they went home angry and ashamed, not knowing what had fooled them. After enough nights of this, people stopped thinking of mistake and began to think of mischief. Someone, they decided, must be playing a wicked trick. But to ring a fire bell without cause and disturb the city under the shogun’s rule was not a light offense.

The men most troubled by it were those responsible for the neighborhood guardhouse. Hanshichi explained to me that such a place was something like a larger old form of a local police post. In a warrior district it was called a roadside guard post, but in merchant streets it was called a jishinban, a town guardhouse. In former times, landholders themselves had taken turns there, and from that old custom came the name. By the time of this case, however, a head man usually kept the place and hired one or more underlings to stay there. The fire watch ladder stood on the roof, and when fire broke out, it was one of these men, or a town watchman, who struck the bell.

In this particular district, the head of the guardhouse was a man named Sahei. He was around fifty, unmarried, and always suffered in winter from painful stomach attacks. His two underlings were Den shichi and Chōsaku, both past forty and also unmarried. Since the false alarms had become such a serious matter, the town officers scolded them hard and ordered them to keep guard strictly every night. And strangely enough, while they truly watched, nothing happened. But the moment they grew lazy, or sat carelessly warming themselves, the bell would begin again, as if mocking them for their weakness.

The town officers even came in person and examined the bell. Nothing was wrong with it. It did not swing by itself in any natural way. It rang only at night, and only when watchfulness slackened. No one in that age was foolish enough to believe that a fire bell had become alive. Everyone understood that some hidden hand must be at work. Yet because no one could catch that hand, the fear only deepened. Some said that even if the thing was done by a person, such repeated evil play might be the sign of a real great fire yet to come. Nervous families tied up their belongings in readiness. Some sent old parents away to relatives in safer districts.

In the end, the alarm grew so serious that not only the men of the guardhouse, but also the craftsmen and young men of the whole district began taking turns to watch the fire ladder every night. That heavy watch frightened the trickster for a while. For five or six days, not a sound came from the bell. Then cold rain began to fall around the season of the Oeshiki festival, and since rain lowered people's fear of fire, the watch slowly relaxed again. It was just then, as if waiting for that very chance, that the first direct blow fell upon a living person.

The victim was a young woman named O-Kita who lived in a little lane in the district. She had once worked as an entertainer at Yanagibashi, but now she was kept by a chief clerk from a large shop in Nihonbashi and lived quietly in a small separate house. On the evening in question, her patron came in the daytime and left around eight. After he went, O-Kita went out to the public bath. She stayed rather long there and started home after half past eight, when most houses had their large front doors half closed against the rainy wind.

Just as she reached the mouth of her lane, she suddenly felt her umbrella grow terribly heavy, almost as if a stone had dropped onto it from above. When she tried to tilt it and look, the paper of the umbrella ripped apart with a harsh tearing sound. At that same instant, some unseen thing seized the knot of her hair and pulled hard. She gave a sharp cry, lost her footing, and fell awkwardly, missing the plank over the drain and striking herself badly. The neighbors came running at once, but by then she had fainted from shock.

When she recovered, she remembered only part of what had happened. She said

the umbrella had suddenly become heavy, then torn, and then some invisible hand had grabbed her hair. Because of the fall, the raised drain board had struck her in the side. Once that story spread, the whole district began to murmur in a different tone. The talk was no longer only of a prankster or a hidden boy. Women and children began to whisper, “There is a monster in the town.” Evening bells from Ueno and Asakusa, sounds they had heard all their lives, now frightened them like signs that the hour of spirits had begun.

Five days after the attack on O-Kita, another strange thing happened. The long rain had finally lifted, and women all through the district were busy hanging out washed clothes under the sharp clear sky of early winter. White sleeves, pale underrobes, and bright skirts fluttered from pole after pole. By sunset most had been taken in, but at one stamp seller’s house, two little red children’s robes still hung outside. The mistress had likely meant to leave them there overnight. Then, before the eyes of passersby, one of those little red robes began to move by itself.

At first people only stared and cried out. Then more came running from nearby shops. The red robe slipped free from the pole and floated away through the dusk as if it had life inside it. It did not simply blow like cloth in the wind. It passed from one roof to another with a strange purpose, almost as if little feet were carrying it. Men shouted. Some threw stones. Startled by the noise, the red shape fled faster, trailing its hem behind it, and then vanished behind the high storehouse of a pawnshop. Later the robe was found hanging from a high branch in the back garden of that same pawnshop.

This second incident divided opinion sharply. Some said it proved that some invisible spirit was haunting the district, because of the way the robe had seemed to move by itself. Others said it proved exactly the opposite, because a robe does not leap from roof to roof unless some living creature carries it. Then a new fact appeared. A boy named Gontarō, an apprentice at the local smithy and well known for bad tricks, had been seen that same evening climbing the fence beside the pawnshop. “It must be Gon,” people cried at once. “Who else would do such a thing?”

Gontarō was fourteen, quick-eyed, square-faced, and blackened with soot from

the forge. He certainly looked like the sort of boy who would trouble a whole neighborhood and laugh over it later. His master and the older apprentices beat him soundly, cursing him for shaming the whole street. After that he was dragged to the guardhouse and made to bow and apologize until he could hardly stand. But Gontarō would not confess. He stubbornly swore that he had climbed the fence only because he wanted to steal some good-looking persimmons from the garden next door. He denied ringing the bell, denied stealing the robe, and denied all the rest. The more he protested, the more people hated him, and finally they tied his hands and threw him into a six-mat room in the guardhouse.

“There,” the neighbors thought. “Now the matter is ended.” But old Hanshichi smiled when he told me that part and tapped his pipe lightly on the brazier edge. A neighborhood is always eager to catch the wrong person when fear has sharpened it for too many nights. Gontarō, he said, was a bad boy, but being bad is not the same as being guilty. And in this case, the town had not yet reached the true face of the thing at all.

Part 2

But the town had judged too quickly. That very night, while Gontarō lay tied inside the guardhouse room, the fire bell rang again. It rang clear and sharp, almost as if it wished to laugh at the people who had blamed the wrong boy. The striking beam had even been removed, and yet somehow the bell still sounded in the dark. When the people heard it, many of them felt a colder fear than before.

Now the matter no longer seemed like a simple trick by a bad child. Even those who still wanted to believe in an ordinary culprit began to lose courage. The whole neighborhood once more gathered to watch the fire ladder, but the same old pattern returned. While the watch was strict, nothing happened. The moment people relaxed, the bell would speak again in the night.

After nearly a month of this, everyone was tired. Men could not keep losing sleep forever. Women and children were already living in fear, and the older people of the district had begun to look worn and sick from worry. At last word

of the trouble reached Hanshichi more clearly, and on a cold drizzling day in early November he came to the neighborhood to see the matter for himself.

He first stopped at the guardhouse and sat beside the brazier with the local house owner who was serving there that day. The man welcomed him eagerly, because by then the whole district was almost desperate. “You must already have heard the story,” the man said. “What do you think of it?” Hanshichi answered honestly that he still had no clear answer, but he asked first about Gontarō. When he learned that the boy had been released, he nodded slightly, as if one knot in the rope had at least been untied.

He asked next to see the fire bell itself. So he climbed the ladder, examined the bell, and came down again without much speech. After that he slowly walked through the neighborhood and studied the ground around the fire tower. Not far away there was a narrow lane. In the middle of it stood the small house where O-Kita had once lived, and beyond the lane there was an open lot with an old Inari shrine in one corner. A few boys were spinning tops there, but the place still felt empty and unfriendly.

Hanshichi noticed too that O-Kita’s former house now had a notice on it saying it was for rent. The frightened woman had left only three days after the attack under the umbrella. From there Hanshichi went to the smithy and looked in quietly from the front. Inside, the master stood giving orders while the workers struck hot iron and sent bright sparks into the air. Among them, blowing the bellows with a dark, stubborn face, was Gontarō.

The boy’s square face and large eyes still made him look like a born troublemaker, Hanshichi thought. But being made for mischief and being guilty of this affair were not the same thing. Hanshichi did not question him then. He only watched, thanked the house owner for his help, and said he would return in two or three days. Unfortunately, other urgent work held him back, and those two or three days became four or five.

During that short delay, the neighborhood suffered still more strange attacks. The first new victim was a tobacco seller’s daughter named O-Saki, a girl of seventeen. One evening she returned from visiting relatives in Honjo after dark.

A cold north wind blew dust along the road, and as she came closer to her own troubled neighborhood, fear began to beat in her chest.

She lowered her head, pulled her sleeves tightly around herself, and hurried on. Then she heard, just behind her, a light quick sound, like another set of feet matching her own steps. She was too frightened to turn around. She only walked faster, and at the very moment she reached the corner of her street, a whirl of pale dust rose from the ground and rushed up around her legs and chest. She lifted her sleeves to cover her face, and in that instant something from behind struck her hard and threw her down.

Her scream brought people running, and they found her lying senseless. Her hair had been torn badly, and one knee was scraped, but the worst injury was the fright itself. She burned with fever for three days afterward. Some people again wanted to blame Gontarō, since O-Saki had been the one who told everyone that she had seen him climbing near the pawnshop on the day of the red robe. But this time that idea failed at once, because his master and others could prove that he had been working at the smithy at the exact hour of the attack.

So once again the shadow moved away from the boy and spread back over the whole neighborhood. People warned women and children not to go outside after sunset. Then the trouble reached a man. The next victim was Sahei, the head of the guardhouse himself, who was already suffering from his old stomach pain and trying to work through it because the district was in such disorder.

One night his pain grew too strong to bear, and at last he let one of the other watchmen, Denshichi, help him to a doctor in the next street. The doctor gave medicine and told him to keep warm and rest. By the time they came out again, it was near ten o’clock, with no moon, no wind, and frost so sharp that the night itself seemed to ring. They were walking home slowly, Sahei bent over with pain, when something black suddenly appeared from the shadow of a pawnshop water tub.

Before they even knew what it was, the dark thing rushed low across the ground and swept Sahei’s legs from under him. He fell hard at once. Denshichi, who was a coward even on ordinary days, cried out and ran. Later he came back with help,

and they found Sahei on the ground with an injured knee and a cut on his left forehead, as though he had been struck by a stone or by some hard object.

This attack made people think more strongly than ever that some living thing was at work. Food had also begun to disappear from houses here and there. The attack on O-Saki, the trip and blow given to Sahei, and the stolen food all suggested something more bodily and active than a ghost. Yet no one could say what kind of person or creature moved through the district. Once again the whole neighborhood tightened its watch.

From that time the bell itself became quiet. It hung high against the winter sky as if it knew nothing of the fear below. But the strange events on the ground continued. A family moved into O-Kita's old house and fled after a single night, saying that their lamp had suddenly gone out and that the wife had been dragged by the hair from her bedding. The house was searched carefully, but nothing and no one was found there.

Then the wife of a local watchman, a strong woman named O-Kura, was attacked while hurrying through a dark stretch of road to fetch a midwife for a woman in labor. She fought back bravely and later swore that the thing which seized her felt human, and perhaps young, perhaps only sixteen or seventeen. Yet soon afterward another woman peering through a kitchen skylight saw two shining eyes on her roof and ran back screaming that no human face could have looked like that. The district swung once more between human fear and ghost fear, unable to settle.

At last Hanshichi finished his other business and returned on the afternoon of the eighth day of the eleventh month. The neighborhood felt dark and heavy even by day, and crows crossed the low sky as if hurrying away from the place. When he reached the smithy, he found them celebrating the Bellows Festival. The master was throwing oranges into the street for children, and even Gontarō wore cleaner clothes than usual. Hanshichi sat in the guardhouse with the house owner, made small talk, and waited until the throwing was done.

Then he asked quietly that Gontarō be brought to him, but without frightening him. When the boy came, Hanshichi did not accuse him at once. He asked simple

questions about the smithy, about the oranges, and then about his family. In the end Gontarō confessed that he had an older brother, seventeen years old, working at a clog shop some distance away. He said too, with tears, that after the guardhouse men beat and tied him, his brother had burned with anger and said such treatment was too cruel for a boy who had not done those things.

Hearing that, Hanshichi's mind moved quickly. He pressed harder, and the boy, crying, admitted that his brother had indeed tried to take revenge for him. The brother had frightened O-Saki, attacked Sahei, and troubled the watchman's wife, not because he loved wickedness, but because he was furious that Gontarō had been beaten and tied for crimes he had not done. Then Gontarō threw himself against Hanshichi and begged him not to arrest his brother, saying he himself would gladly be tied in the brother's place.

That plea moved Hanshichi more than the boy knew. He promised to spare the brother if Gontarō obeyed him exactly. Then he bent close and whispered instructions into the boy's ear. A little later, with sleet beginning to fall from the dark sky, he took Gontarō out toward the empty lot and the old houses behind it. "Come quickly," he said. "There is one more thing we must find before this ends."

Part 3

Gontarō followed Hanshichi without resistance. They went into the narrow lane and stopped in the empty lot before the little Inari shrine. The place felt colder there than in the street, and the sleet that had begun to fall made the gray day look even lower and darker. Hanshichi turned to the boy and asked again, very plainly, "Tell me the truth. Did you ever ring that fire bell yourself?" Gontarō answered at once, "No, I never did."

Hanshichi then asked whether he had stolen the red robe from the stamp seller's line. Gontarō shook his head again and said he had not. Hanshichi asked next whether he had frightened the woman who once lived in the lane. Once more the boy denied it. Then Hanshichi changed direction and asked, "Do you have brothers, or some close friend who would stand by you?" Gontarō said that he had

no special friend, but he did have an older brother.

Just then the sleet came down harder, and Hanshichi pulled the boy toward the empty house where O-Kita had once lived. The front door was not locked. He slid it open and took shelter in the entrance, wiping the wooden step with his towel before he sat down. Gontarō crouched near him in the cold dim space. Hanshichi asked about the brother, and the boy explained that he was seventeen and worked at a clog shop five or six blocks away.

When he spoke of his home, his voice changed. Their father had died, he said, and soon after that their mother had gone off somewhere, leaving the two boys almost like orphans. Hanshichi, hearing this, felt some pity for the boy in spite of his bad reputation. He asked whether the brother was kind to him. Gontarō answered proudly that whenever the brother had a day off, he took him out, fed him good things, and treated him better than anyone else in the world.

“That is a fine brother,” Hanshichi said. Then his tone suddenly grew sharp. He fixed his eyes on the boy and asked, “What would you do if I tied that brother up and dragged him away?” At once Gontarō burst into tears. He clung to Hanshichi and cried, “Please do not. Have mercy.” Hanshichi answered sternly that a man who did bad things had to be punished.

Between sobs, Gontarō said that he himself had been tied up even though he had done nothing, and that his brother had grown wild with anger over it. Hanshichi pressed him harder and said, “Do not hide it. Your brother did something for your sake, did he not?” At last the whole truth came pouring out. Gontarō said he had not openly asked for revenge, but his brother had spoken bitterly about the men who beat and tied him, and then had begun to strike back at them one by one.

It had been the brother, then, who had frightened O-Saki, who had tripped old Sahei, and who had attacked the watchman’s wife. He had done it because those people had helped spread the blame against Gontarō or had taken part in punishing him. Gontarō cried and begged Hanshichi not to arrest him. “My brother is not bad,” he kept saying. “He only helped me. Tie me up instead.” The child’s tears were real, and Hanshichi felt his own eyes soften a little.

So he made a decision on the spot. “Very well,” he said more gently. “I will spare your brother. No one but I shall know this. But in return, you must do exactly as I say.” The boy agreed at once, almost before Hanshichi finished speaking. Then Hanshichi bent down, whispered instructions into his ear, and sent him off. Gontarō slipped out of the empty house like a small shadow and went toward the shrine.

The low clouds sank still farther, and a heavy cold seemed to settle over the ground. The whole neighborhood had gone quiet, as if everyone were listening for something. No dogs came to dig in the rubbish heaps, and no one crossed the empty lot. Gontarō crawled close to the Inari shrine, pulled five or six oranges from his sleeve, and rolled them one by one through the lattice opening. Then he lay flat on the dirt like a spider and held his breath.

Hanshichi waited inside the empty house, but for some time no sign came. At last he stepped out softly and asked the boy in a whisper whether he had heard anything. Gontarō only lifted his head and shook it. Another burst of sleet rattled down, and Hanshichi, seeing the boy lying there in the cold, felt too sorry for him to leave him longer in that place. He beckoned him back under the roof and asked whether there had been even the smallest sound from inside the shrine. Gontarō whispered back that he had heard nothing at all.

But Hanshichi was not yet beaten. He asked whether the boy still had any oranges left, and Gontarō drew out three more from his sleeve. Hanshichi took them, slipped through the inner rooms of the empty house, and opened the damaged shōji at the back without sound. Beyond lay a small maid’s room and, farther in, a six-mat room with broken paper screens facing the veranda. The paper there had been torn in many places, and the wooden frames were cracked and bent, as though something had often come and gone through them. Hanshichi rolled two oranges into the middle of the six-mat room and threw one into the smaller room as well, then came back to the entrance and shut everything as it had been.

“Now keep still,” he told the boy. So the two of them waited, hardly daring to breathe. Outside, the sleet stopped again, and for a long moment there was no sound at all. Gontarō had begun to look disappointed when at last a faint rustle

came from the back of the house. Both of them looked at each other at once. Something was moving in through the torn paper screens with the light soft step of a cat.

They listened harder. There came a dry scratching sound, like claws brushing over the mats, and then a quiet tearing and chewing. Whatever had entered the room was eating the oranges. Hanshichi gave Gontarō a quick look and rose at once. The two of them grabbed their sandals as weapons, slid open the doors in one rush, and jumped into the six-mat room together.

In the dimness a beast crouched there. Startled by the sudden attack, it gave a horrible cry and ran for the veranda, tearing the paper screens as it went. Hanshichi leaped after it and struck it from behind on the head with his sandal. Gontarō rushed in too and struck it again. The creature bared its white teeth and sprang at the boy, but all Gontarō's rough climbing and street fighting now served him well. He did not lose courage. He threw himself at the beast and grappled with it while it screamed and twisted under him.

"Hold fast, Gontarō," Hanshichi shouted. As he spoke, he tore the towel from his own head and wound it tightly around the animal's throat from behind. Choked and confused, the creature lost strength. Gontarō, thinking fast, pulled off his own belt and tied the thing round and round. Then Hanshichi forced open the storm shutters at the veranda, and gray daylight flowed into the room. In that light the truth at last stood plain before them.

It was a large monkey. Its eyes still burned with fear and anger, and Gontarō himself had received scratches on his cheek and hands as the price of the struggle. But he only looked proud and breathed hard through a grin. Hanshichi dragged the bound beast to the guardhouse, where the whole neighborhood came running to stare. He told me later that he first guessed the truth when he climbed the fire tower and found many claw marks on the ladder. They were not the marks of a cat. Once he thought of a monkey, all the other strange events began to make sense.

A monkey, after all, could leap onto O-Kita's umbrella, steal the red robe from the line, climb roofs, snatch at women's hair, and even strike the fire bell for the joy of noise and movement. The shrine had likely served as its first hiding place,

where it lived on offerings, but later, when the empty house became open, it moved there and made an even worse nest. Poor Gontarō's usual bad behavior had only made him an easy target for everyone's anger. As for his brother, no one learned of his revenge except Hanshichi. Once the monkey was caught, all the rest of the fear was swallowed by that one answer.

And where had the monkey come from? That was the funniest part of all, Hanshichi said. It belonged to a monkey show in Ryōgoku and had escaped somehow, running over roofs and through yards until it found its way into that unlucky district. It had even been a female monkey that played the part of Yaoya Oshichi in the little street show. Since it was used to climbing towers and beating the little stage drum in play, it had likely gone up the fire ladder and struck the bell out of habit and mischief. The owner was fined a small sum, and the monkey itself was sent away. Hanshichi laughed when he finished and said that in all his long years of work, there had been few stranger captures than putting a rope on a monkey and ending a whole neighborhood's ghost story that way.

The Lady-in-Waiting [Okujochū]

Part 1

It was still very hot in August when I returned to Tokyo after a short trip to escape the summer heat. I brought a small gift and went to visit old Hanshichi. He had just come back from the bath and was sitting on the veranda on a rush mat, fanning himself with wide easy strokes. A cool evening wind slipped into the narrow garden, and from the next house came the sharp sad cry of crickets.

"Of all insects, the cricket feels the most like old Edo," Hanshichi said. He praised the cheap little creature as if it were nobler than the fine insects that rich people liked to buy. We spoke first of crickets, then of wind bells, and then of the moon, because that night was the fifteenth night of the eighth month by the new calendar. "In the old calendar, the air would already be colder," Hanshichi said. "The old moon-viewing nights had a different feeling." From that talk he moved, as he so often did, into one of his old cases.

"It was the evening of the fourteenth day of the eighth month in the second year of Bunkyū," he said. He had come home earlier than usual and was thinking of eating quickly and then going out to a neighborhood gathering. Just then a woman of about forty appeared at his door. Her hair was dressed in a small round style, and her tired face showed deep worry even before she spoke.

Hanshichi knew her at once. Her name was Okame. She kept a small tea stall near Eitai Bridge, and she had a daughter named Ocho, seventeen years old that year. Ocho was quiet, beautiful, and modest, the kind of girl who drew men's eyes without trying to do so, and Okame was proud of her. So when Okame said, in a trembling voice, that she had come because of trouble concerning Ocho, Hanshichi first thought it must be some ordinary problem between a pretty young girl and a man.

He even smiled and tried to calm her. He told her not to be too strict if her daughter had formed an attachment somewhere. "A young girl must have some small pleasure in life," he said. "And mothers were young once too." But Okame

did not smile at all. She looked at him with frightened eyes and said that this was not that sort of trouble.

“My daughter disappears,” she said. Hanshichi still did not understand at first, and his face showed it. So Okame began again and told the story carefully from the beginning. Some time before the river-opening festival in the fifth month, a fine-looking samurai with one servant had passed the tea stall, stopped suddenly when he saw Ocho, and come in for tea. Three days later, the same man came again, this time with an elegant woman of about thirty-five or thirty-six, dressed like a lady from a great house. That woman asked Ocho’s name and age, and then they left.

Three days after that, Ocho vanished. She had started home before her mother at dusk, and near the stone yard by the river several men came out from the shadows, seized her, gagged her, tied her hands, covered her eyes, and forced her into a palanquin. She was carried somewhere she could not identify and finally brought into what seemed to be a large mansion. There several women removed the gag and blindfold, untied her hands, and treated her with strange kindness.

They told her not to be afraid, brought her tea and sweets, and sent her to the bath. After that they led her to a beautiful room with a thick cushion, flowers in the alcove, and musical instruments standing along the wall. They dressed her in rich clothes, arranged her hair, and seated her before a small desk. A fine incense burner gave off sweet smoke, and a silk lamp cast a dreamlike light over everything. Ocho, nearly out of her senses with fear, felt as if she had been lifted out of the real world.

The women opened a book before her and told her to sit quietly and read with her face lowered. One of them stood beside her and fanned her gently. Then they warned her in a whisper that, no matter what happened, she must not look up and must not speak. Soon Ocho heard soft footsteps along the veranda, as if several people had come secretly to watch her through the sliding doors. But the women again warned her not to raise her eyes, so she could only stare at the desk and tremble.

After some time the unseen watchers went away. The lamp was made brighter,

and a beautiful supper was brought in. Though the trays held fine food, Ocho could hardly swallow a mouthful. When the meal was over, she was left alone in that room for the first time. Then her fear grew even worse, because now she had time to think.

She could not understand why she had been taken there, dressed in splendid clothes, fed like a guest, and treated with such care. She wondered whether she was being prepared as a substitute for someone, as in a play or a puppet story, and whether she might finally be killed for another person's sake. The thought turned her cold. At last she decided that if she could find any road at all, she must escape.

Gathering all the courage she had, she tried to slip toward the garden. But the moment her hand touched the sliding door, one of the women appeared as if she had risen from the floor itself. The woman asked calmly whether Ocho wished to go to the toilet and then led her outside. In the moonless garden there were trees, fireflies drifting in the dark, and the lonely cry of an owl. That brief glimpse of the night world only made the whole mansion feel larger and stranger.

When she came back to the room, bedding had already been laid out, and a white mosquito net hung over it. The same woman who seemed to direct everything appeared once more and told her to go to bed. Then she added one more warning in a low serious voice: whatever might happen in the night, Ocho must never lift her face. Before Ocho could ask anything, she was guided into the net and left there alone.

Somewhere in the distance the late evening bell sounded ten o'clock. The women vanished without a sound, and Ocho lay wrapped in white bedding that felt far too soft and fine for her. She could not understand the place, its purpose, or the people in it. And above all, she could not forget those words: whatever happened in the night, do not raise your face. That night was terrible.

Part 2

That night, after the distant bell had struck ten, Ocho lay inside the white mosquito net and tried not to breathe. The warning she had heard before sleeping

would not leave her mind. “Whatever happens in the night, do not raise your face.” Those words echoed again and again in her head until even the soft cloth of the bedding seemed cold and threatening. She pulled the quilt up close and pressed her cheek against the pillow, listening to the silence of the great house.

Then terror came. All at once she felt as if the blood in her whole body had turned to ice. It seemed to her that one of the large sliding doors with black-lacquer edges had opened with a soft dry sound, and then, almost as softly, she heard the faint dragging whisper of long robes across the floor. Ocho lay face down upon the pillow and clutched the sleeve of the quilt with both hands, hardly daring to move a finger.

Whatever had entered the room stopped near the lamp. Through the white gauze of the mosquito net, Ocho felt rather than saw that something was standing there, looking down upon her sleeping face. It might have been a living person, or it might have been a ghost. In that moment she could not tell. All she knew was that the thing seemed to carry a chill deeper than the night air. She thought, in her blind panic, that perhaps it had come to drink her blood or strip her bones. She felt already half dead.

After a long time the faint sound of cloth moved away again and seemed to pass into the next room. Ocho remained with her face pressed down for some moments more. Then, like a person slowly waking from a nightmare, she wiped the sweat from her forehead with the sleeve of her night robe and carefully opened her eyes. The sliding doors were shut just as before. Outside the net there was nothing. Not even the thin singing of a mosquito could be heard.

Near dawn, when the air became a little cooler, exhaustion at last overcame terror, and she fell into a short uneasy sleep. When she opened her eyes again, the same women were kneeling properly at her pillow as if nothing unusual had happened in the night. They helped her change clothes, brought a fine lacquer wash basin, and treated her with the same soft care as before. After breakfast, the woman who seemed to direct the others came again and said, “You must feel very confined. Please endure a little longer. You must be bored. Would you like to walk in the garden for a short while? We will guide you.”

The women walked on both sides of her and led her into the large garden. Morning light lay over the trees and stones, but even in daylight Ocho could not tell where she was. The garden was spacious, with thick trees and a pond crossed by a stone bridge. Yet every path was watched. The women never let her fall behind or walk ahead. Even while inviting her to enjoy the air, they guarded her like a prisoner.

So the days passed. At night she was again placed before the desk. Again she was dressed beautifully, told to lower her face, and left to wait while soft footsteps came and went beyond the sliding doors. Again she was warned not to raise her head. And each night, after she entered the mosquito net, the ghost-like presence seemed to return and stand at her pillow. No hand touched her, no voice spoke to her, yet the burden of that fear was harder to bear than any blow.

In the daytime too she had no freedom. The women treated her kindly, but never left her alone long enough for escape. She was fed well, dressed well, and spoken to gently, yet the very gentleness became another form of pressure. It was the kindness of people handling something dangerous and delicate that must not break or get away. After seven or eight days of this life, fear and confinement wore her down so badly that she herself began to feel like a ghost, growing thinner and paler day by day.

At last she came to a desperate conclusion. “If I must suffer like this,” she thought, “death would be easier.” With that wild resolve in her heart, she begged the leading woman to let her go home just once. The woman looked deeply troubled. It seemed to Ocho that even this woman was not entirely cruel, and that she feared what might happen if Ocho remained much longer in such a state. Perhaps she even believed that the girl might throw herself into the old pond or otherwise destroy herself.

So, on the evening of the tenth day, permission was finally given. “But you must never speak of this to anyone,” the woman said. “And we may come for you again. If that time comes, you must agree to come with us. I ask this of you now.” Since there was no other way to win her release, Ocho promised with her lips, though her heart had no wish to return. The woman then said she was sorry for

the trouble and fear that had been caused, and she handed Ocho a paper-wrapped packet containing gifts and money.

When evening had fully darkened, they blindfolded Ocho once more. A gag was placed in her mouth, and she was set into a palanquin just as she had been before. The bearers carried her for some time, choosing roads where few people were walking. At last they stopped near the riverbank at Hamachō, before the stone yard. There they lifted her down. Then, carrying away the empty palanquin, the men vanished so quickly that it seemed almost as if they had melted into the dark.

Ocho stood there in a daze, like a person just released from a fox's spell. Then all at once fear seized her again. She began to run wildly through the streets, and not until she rushed into her own house and saw her mother's face did the world fully become real again. Even then, for some moments, she still felt as if half of her body remained in a dream.

Okame listened to her daughter's whole story in terror. She also saw with her own eyes how thin and shaken Ocho had become in only ten days. Yet because no clear enemy could be named and because the whole tale sounded like a nightmare, there was little they could do. Ocho had been blindfolded when taken and when brought back. She did not know the road. She could not name the mansion. She could only speak of the garden, the women, the strange rich room, the unseen visitors, and the ghost-like thing that came each night to her pillow.

Still, mother and daughter hoped the matter had ended there. But hope lasted only ten days. Then the same horror returned. Again Ocho disappeared. Again men seized her in the street, gagged her, blindfolded her, and carried her away. And again she found herself in that same mysterious mansion, in the same rich room, before the same low desk, under the same warning not to raise her face.

This time the fear was even worse because she knew what awaited her. She knew the long empty days, the guarded walks, the fearful meals, and the thing that came at night. She knew too that no one outside could understand what was happening. So when she was at last released again, she returned home in a condition even more miserable than before. Okame said that, after the second

return, her daughter had begun to look like someone whose soul had already been half stolen away.

Hanshichi listened without interrupting. The summer evening outside had grown darker while Okame spoke, and the cries of the crickets seemed sharper in the pauses between her words. When she had finished, he asked several careful questions. Had Ocho ever been harmed openly? No. Had any man spoken to her face to face? No. Had she heard any name, any family crest, any place-name at all? No. The whole thing had been done with such secrecy that only fear itself had been left behind.

At last Hanshichi asked the one practical thing that still remained. “Has anyone come to fetch her openly from your house since the second time?” Okame answered yes. On the previous day, a woman had come saying she was from a respectable samurai mansion and wished to speak privately about taking Ocho into service. But the woman’s manner had been so strange, and the whole matter so suspicious, that Okame had grown afraid and refused to answer clearly. It was after that visit, she said, that she could bear it no longer and came to Hanshichi for help.

Part 3

Hanshichi listened to Okame’s new report in silence. It was certainly a good sign that they had sent Ocho home openly to talk with her mother. That did not sound like the work of men driven only by lust or cruelty. Still, the whole matter remained dark. The house was unknown, the purpose was unknown, and the girl herself had once again returned with fear in her heart.

Ocho was sleeping lightly in the little back room when Hanshichi came, and Okame woke her to speak with him. The girl sat up with tired eyes and answered his questions as best she could, but her answers gave him nothing firm. The women in that mansion had always treated her carefully. The rooms were rich, the food was fine, and the garden was so large that it seemed more like the garden of a great lord than that of an ordinary town house. Yet because she had been

blindfolded each time she was taken and returned, she could not even guess in what part of Edo the place stood.

“It sounds like the lower residence of some daimyo,” Hanshichi said at last. “But a guess is not enough. We need something solid.” Then he added that since the lady from the house had already come once to speak with Okame, she would likely return soon. So there was nothing to do but wait. He settled himself in the little house as if he had all the time in the world.

The day slowly darkened toward evening. It was the fifteenth night of the eighth month, and from early morning men had been crying in the streets, selling pampas grass for moon-viewing. The heat of day faded, and a clear autumn wind began to move through the narrow lane behind the river. Okame set out sake, dumplings, and a little vase of grass at the veranda edge, and the thin leaves trembled in the cool air. Hanshichi, wearing only a light summer robe, began to feel the chill settle into his sleeves.

Since it was already the hour of supper, he told Okame to order eel from nearby. He did not like eating while the mother and daughter sat watching him, so he made them eat with him. The three of them finished in that cramped little house under a strange kind of strain, as if all were listening for the same footstep. When the meal was done, Hanshichi stood at the edge of the veranda and looked up between the crowded eaves. The moon had not yet risen, but the eastern sky had begun to grow pale yellow at the edges of the clouds.

“Come out and see the moon when it rises,” he called in an easy voice, as if nothing at all were wrong. At that very moment someone stepped across the drain board outside, and a man in samurai dress stopped before the lattice. Okame went at once, and the man asked only one thing: were mother and daughter both at home? When she said yes, he gave a short message that a lady servant would soon come to speak with them and then went away.

“Now do not say I am here,” Hanshichi whispered quickly. He snatched up his sandals and slipped with Ocho into the little three-mat room in the back. From there he watched through the crack of the sliding door. Before long a woman of about thirty entered. She was dressed in the style of a lady servant from a great

house, and she carried herself with confidence, but there was something a little too sharp and forward in the way she moved.

She bowed politely to Okame and then came straight to the point. Another lady servant had already visited yesterday, she said, and had explained everything in detail. Since the mother now understood the situation, the daughter should be ready to go from this very night. She herself had come to receive Ocho and take her back at once. Her voice was calm, but it held no softness.

Okame tried to excuse herself. Ocho, she said, had only returned the night before and had felt unwell all day. They had not yet had time to talk the matter through properly. But the woman refused to bend. She said that the household had already shown its sincerity by returning Ocho so that mother and daughter could discuss the matter, and to delay further now would be to insult that sincerity. Then she demanded in a hard clear voice that Ocho be brought out at once so that the three of them could settle the matter together.

When Okame still trembled and hesitated, the woman placed two wrapped bundles on the floor before the lamp. They were said to contain the promised two hundred ryō, still sealed. Then, as if money were not enough, she drew from her sash a small dagger case and declared that if she failed in her duty, she could not return alive. Her eyes flashed as she spoke, and poor Okame turned pale with fear. From the little back room Hanshichi whispered to Ocho, asking whether she knew this woman. Ocho only shook her head.

Hanshichi thought for a moment. Then he crawled quietly through the kitchen, slipped out by the water entrance, and went around to the lane. The moonlight had now begun to spread across the street. A little way off, before the storehouse of a pawnshop, stood a hired palanquin. Beside it waited two carriers and the same samurai messenger who had come first to the lattice. Hanshichi took one good look and then went back inside by the front.

He entered the room calmly and sat down in front of the woman as if he belonged there. She had a long narrow face with a pointed chin, thin paint on her cheeks, and sharp handsome eyes. Her nose was high, and her whole manner had a bold masculine edge that did not quite fit the quiet discipline of a lady from the

inner rooms of a daimyo house. Hanshichi greeted her politely, and she returned his bow with cold dignity.

He then said, in a mild voice, that he was a relative of Okame's and that, if the girl was truly wanted for service, it might not be impossible to agree. Ocho was an only daughter and would one day have to marry, but if such a fine house desired her, the family could at least listen. Okame stared at him in amazement, but Hanshichi went on without looking at her. He said that even if there must be secrecy, surely the mother could at least be told the name of the house where her daughter would serve. That, he said, was only natural human feeling.

The woman answered that the name of the house could not be spoken there. She would say only that it belonged to a daimyo from the western provinces. Hanshichi asked what office she herself held, and she replied that she served as a messenger in the outer service. "I see," Hanshichi said with a faint smile. "Then I am sorry, but I must refuse this arrangement." The woman's eyes flashed at once, and she asked why.

"Because I do not like the manners of your house," Hanshichi answered. The woman sat straighter and demanded to know how he could judge the manners of a house he did not know. Hanshichi looked at her hand and said lightly, "When a lady servant of the inner rooms has a plectrum callus on the little finger of her right hand, I fear the women's quarters may not be very orderly." At once her face changed color.

Just then another woman's voice came from outside, asking to be shown in. Okame rose in confusion and went to the lattice. The new visitor hesitated when she heard there was already company within. "Then I shall come again," she seemed ready to say. But Hanshichi called out from inside, asking her to wait and step in, because there was already a false version of her present and he wished her to witness the matter herself.

The first woman laughed then, though her face had grown even paler. She said Hanshichi had seen through her, and there was no use pretending further. He must be the famous Hanshichi of Mikawa-chō, she said. Hanshichi laughed too and told her that a real lady servant from a great house would not arrive in an ordinary

hired palanquin from the street, nor bring such rough theater to a poor tea-stall woman's home. "You are a good-looking actress," he said, "but your stage is poor."

So she confessed everything. Her name was Otoshi. She had been born in Fukagawa, the daughter of a nagauta teacher, but had gone bad very young and run off into a wandering entertainer's life. After years in the provinces she had come back to Edo and set herself up as a music teacher, though she still lived by trickery whenever money ran short. She had heard, through a fish seller who knew Okame well, the whole strange story of Ocho's disappearances. Knowing already that Ocho was beautiful, she decided to use the confusion and steal the girl for herself.

She had set her helper Anzō to watch the house for several days and learned that the true people from the mansion had been asking to take Ocho into lifelong service. She learned too that Ocho had returned the previous night. So she dressed Anzō as a samurai attendant, dressed herself as a lady servant, prepared false money, and rushed there to seize the girl before the real people could come. "I had no time to prepare a proper palanquin or a proper show," she said with a bitter smile. "So here I am, caught in a poor little play before the curtain even rose."

Hanshichi told her that, now he had seen through her, he could not simply bow and let her go. He would have to take her to the guardhouse. Otoshi accepted that with bad grace and even asked for a change of clothes first, saying she did not want to be dragged away in such a costume. But before Hanshichi could act, the second woman had already entered and bowed deeply. She begged him not to make a public scandal of the matter, because the name of her lord's house would suffer though no one had actually been harmed by this false attempt. Hanshichi looked at her face and at the trouble in her eyes and saw at once that she was the real one.

Because of that, and because Otoshi's plot had failed before any fresh damage was done, he finally let the false messenger go with only a sharp warning. Otoshi bowed again and again, her beauty spoiled now by shame, and slipped away into the moonlit lane. When she had gone, the room became quiet. The real woman then turned toward Okame and Hanshichi, and with a grave face she said that

there was no longer any use in hiding the truth. So, at last, the dark secret of the daimyo house began to come out.

Part 4

The second woman, the one who had entered quietly at the end, now sat down with proper composure and bowed once more. She said her name was Yukino, and she was indeed a senior lady-in-waiting in the Edo residence of a certain daimyo house. Since Hanshichi had already uncovered the false messenger and since the matter had now become too tangled to hide, she said there was no longer any use in speaking with half-truths. “Please forgive us,” she said. “What we have done has been cruel and shameful. But there was sorrow behind it, not wicked pleasure.”

Then she told the whole story. The lord of that house had already returned to his northern domain, but his wife had remained, as many daimyo wives still did in those years. That lady had one beloved daughter, a young princess of rare beauty and gentle nature. In the spring of that very year, when the girl had been only a little past sixteen and soon to turn seventeen, she had died of smallpox. The blow had broken the mother’s heart so completely that she had begun to lose her mind.

Prayers had been offered, and doctors had been called, but none of it helped. From morning until night the lady called her daughter’s name, wept, and begged to see her one more time. The people of the house soon reached the point where they did not know how to keep her safe, much less how to calm her. At last the chief steward and the older women of the house formed a desperate plan. They decided that if they could find some young girl of the same age and appearance, dress her like the dead daughter, and let the grieving mother see her from a little distance, perhaps the mother’s heart would quiet for a time.

But to do such a thing openly would have brought shame on the whole house, so the search was carried out in secret. Several men were sent quietly through the city to look for a suitable girl. By pure chance, one of them passed Okame’s tea stall at Eitai Bridge and saw Ocho there. Her age, her face, and even the quiet

sadness in her expression seemed almost exactly right. After that, Yukino herself was brought to look more carefully, and she too agreed that the match was close enough to deceive an eye clouded by grief.

Once they had found the girl, however, a new question rose. Some argued that they should go honestly to the mother and daughter, explain everything in secret, and ask their help. But others said that poor town women could not be trusted to keep such a matter buried forever, especially if later they began asking for more money or favor. In the end, fear for the family name overcame pity. So the house servants and retainers did the most shameful thing possible. They seized Ocho secretly, carried her to the mansion by force, and repeated that wrong whenever the grieving lady's madness rose again.

Now the strange details of Ocho's suffering could be explained. She had been dressed beautifully and seated before books because the dead princess had been fond of reading and elegant accomplishments. The unseen watchers behind the sliding doors had been the mother and attendants of the house, secretly looking in to see whether the resemblance would work. The ghostly white thing that came at night and stood by Ocho's pillow had not been a spirit at all. It had been the broken-hearted mother herself, moving silently in her white robe to gaze at the sleeping girl she believed was her daughter returned from the grave.

"Whenever Lady Ocho was there," Yukino said, speaking with tears in her eyes, "our mistress became quiet. She no longer screamed, she no longer struck her attendants, and sometimes she would sit silently for hours as if her spirit had softened. But when Ocho was taken away again, the madness returned. She demanded to see her daughter and grew violent with grief." For that reason the house had never been able to leave Ocho in peace for long. They knew they were wrong, yet they kept returning to the same desperate act because it was the only thing that seemed to save their mistress from complete ruin.

Then, just as this misery continued, a new order from the government changed everything. From the seventh month onward, daimyo wives too were allowed to return freely to their home domains. All over Edo, such families hurried to leave the city like prisoners suddenly set free. In this house as well, plans were made to

send the lady back to the north. But the household then faced a terrible question. What would happen if the half-mad mother cried out for her daughter during the long journey, or if she reached the distant province and found no peace there either? In the end, after much discussion, the retainers concluded that they had no choice. Ocho must be taken with them to the domain.

This time, however, the matter could no longer be settled by force alone. If the girl was to be carried to a distant province and kept there for life, the mother and daughter had to be told something. Yukino had therefore been sent as the true messenger to begin arranging a lifelong service agreement. But because she had feared scandal more than anything else, she had tried to speak only in hidden hints and incomplete requests. That had naturally deepened suspicion on this side. Then the false messenger Otoshi had appeared in the middle of it all, and the whole affair had nearly broken into open confusion.

Hearing all this, Hanshichi could not easily speak in anger. What the people of that house had done was wrong, and he knew it well. Yet he could also see the terrible grief that had driven them into such acts. It was the grief of a mother mad with love for a dead child, and the helpless trouble of servants trying to hold together a noble house with a broken heart at its center. While he still sat thinking, Ocho slowly came out from the little three-mat room where she had been hiding. Her eyes were wet from listening.

“Now I understand everything,” she said softly. “Mother, if even a girl like me can be of use, then please let me go with them to that far country.” Yukino looked at her as if she had been offered life itself and caught both her hands at once. Okame, however, began to cry openly, because now that the truth was known, the danger looked both less evil and more hopeless. Hanshichi said nothing for a little while. The moon had already turned southward, and its light reached from the garden into the room, making every face look pale and clear.

In the end, Okame too accepted what could not be avoided. Later, Hanshichi said, the matter developed still further, and someone in the daimyo house suggested that the mother should go along too. Okame had no close kin in Edo, and as she grew older, it seemed better that she live near her daughter than be left

behind in the city alone. So she closed the tea stall, gathered up her poor belongings, and went away with Ocho to that distant castle town. The family of the house gave them a small residence there, and Okame, who had feared losing her daughter to darkness, ended her life instead in a kind of peaceful retirement.

As for Ocho, she remained in service beside the grieving lady for many years. When the new age came and, not long afterward, the daimyo’s wife herself finally died, Ocho at last received formal leave from the house. She was given proper clothing and support and was married respectably into a suitable family. “That is what people told me,” Hanshichi said with a quiet smile. “If she still lives, she must be an old woman now.” He also added, with much less kindness in his voice, that the false messenger Otoshi later sank lower and lower, drifted to Sunpu after losing her way in Edo, and at last met punishment there.

When Hanshichi finished, the insects outside were crying more sharply than before, and the moonlight seemed almost white on the narrow garden stones. The story had begun in fear, but it did not end like a common tale of crime. There had been deceit in it, and cruelty too, but underneath all of that had been grief, helplessness, and a mother’s broken heart. Hanshichi only waved his fan once more and said, “In this world, not every dark thing begins in evil. Some begin in love that has gone too far.”