

AI-Generated Graded Readers

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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: Edogawa Rampo (江戸川乱歩)

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

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Edogawa Rampo, *The Fiend with Twenty Faces [Kaijin Nijū Mensō]* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified from the Japanese by ChatGPT)

Part 1

In those days, there was one name that everyone in Tokyo knew. If two people met on the street, they might begin by speaking about the weather. But before long, the conversation would almost always turn to the same subject.

“The thief with twenty faces.”

The newspapers wrote about him every day. People spoke about him in trains, in schools, and in shops. Rich men spoke his name with fear. Children spoke it with excitement. The police spoke it with anger.

No one had ever seen his real face.

People said that the mysterious thief could change his appearance whenever he wished. One day he might look like an old man with white hair and bent shoulders. The next day he might appear as a young student. Sometimes he dressed like a poor beggar in dirty clothes. Sometimes he appeared as a rich gentleman in a fine suit.

He could even pretend to be a woman.

His disguises were perfect. Even if you looked closely at him in a bright room, you would never guess that he was wearing a disguise.

Because of this strange ability, people gave him a name.

“The Fiend with Twenty Faces.”

But there was something even stranger about this famous criminal. No one knew how old he really was. No one knew where he lived. No one even knew what his real face looked like.

Perhaps, some people said, even he himself had forgotten his real face.

The police tried many times to catch him. They searched houses and questioned suspicious men. They watched trains and ships. They set traps in many places.

But every time the thief escaped.

However, the Fiend with Twenty Faces had one unusual habit.

Before he stole something valuable, he always sent a letter to the owner.

The letter would say that he planned to come and take the treasure on a certain night.

It was as if he were saying:

“Please prepare yourselves. I am coming.”

Some people believed he did this because he enjoyed showing how clever he was. Others believed he wished to make the contest fair.

Whatever the reason, the letters made people even more afraid.

Because once the letter arrived, the theft always happened.

And so the story you are about to read tells of a great contest.

It is the contest between the mysterious thief known as the Fiend with Twenty Faces and the most famous detective in Japan.

The detective’s name was Akechi Kogoro.

Akechi was known throughout the country for his intelligence and calm thinking. Many difficult crimes had been solved by his sharp mind.

He also had a young assistant.

The boy’s name was Kobayashi Yoshio.

Kobayashi was quick and brave, and he admired Akechi very much. Though he was still a student, he often helped the detective in dangerous adventures.

Now let us begin the story.

One autumn, in a quiet district of Tokyo called Azabu, there stood a very large house.

The house belonged to a wealthy businessman named Hashiba Sotaro.

His home was surrounded by a tall concrete wall nearly four meters high. From outside, people could see only the top of tall trees growing in the garden.

Inside the wall stood a large iron gate.

Beyond the gate lay a wide garden with trees, stones, and winding paths. Near the entrance stood a large cycad tree with thick leaves that spread like a fan.

Behind the tree rose the main house.

Part of the building was a traditional Japanese house with many rooms and sliding doors. Next to it stood a large Western-style building made of yellow brick.

Behind the house there was an enormous garden that looked almost like a public park.

At that time the Hashiba family was feeling two very strong emotions.

Great happiness.

And great fear.

Their happiness came from wonderful news.

Ten years earlier, the eldest son of the family, Hashiba Soichi, had disappeared.

As a young man, Soichi had loved adventure. After finishing middle school, he dreamed of traveling to the South Seas to start a new life.

His father strongly opposed the idea.

“You are still young,” his father had said. “You must continue your studies.”

But the young man would not give up his dream.

Finally he left home secretly and sailed away on a small ship.

After that, ten years passed.

During those years the family received no letters and heard no news. They did not even know whether Soichi was alive.

But three months earlier, a letter suddenly arrived.

It came from Sandakan on the island of Borneo.

In the letter Soichi wrote that he had finally become successful. He was now managing a large rubber plantation and wished to return home to apologize to his father.

Inside the envelope there were also two photographs.

One showed the rubber plantation.

The other showed Soichi himself.

He was now thirty years old. In the photograph he had a small mustache and a confident expression. He looked like a strong and successful man.

When the family saw the photographs, they were filled with joy.

Sotaro, the father, was deeply moved.

The mother cried with happiness.

The daughter Sanae clapped her hands with excitement.

And the youngest son, a boy named Soji, could hardly sleep at night because

he was so eager to meet his brother.

Soichi wrote that he would arrive by airplane at Haneda Airport.

Everyone in the house began counting the days.

But at the same time, another message arrived.

A message that filled the house with fear.

It was a letter.

And the name written at the bottom of the letter was one that every person in Tokyo already knew.

“Twenty Faces.”

The letter said that the writer had learned that Hashiba Sotaro possessed six magnificent diamonds.

These diamonds had once decorated the crown of the Russian imperial family.

After the fall of the Russian Empire, the jewels had passed through many hands before finally being purchased by Sotaro.

They were extremely valuable.

The letter declared that the thief had decided to take those diamonds.

He did not say exactly when.

But he promised to inform the family of the precise time soon.

At the end of the letter he wrote a short warning.

“Please prepare yourselves carefully.”

When Sotaro finished reading the letter, he remained calm.

But the others in the house became terribly frightened.

The house manager, an old man named Kondo, became especially anxious.

“We must inform the police immediately,” he said.

Soon police officers were stationed near the house.

Several detectives visited to examine the building.

A fierce guard dog named John was brought in to watch the garden.

Servants locked doors and windows carefully every night.

Even so, no one felt completely safe.

Because everyone knew the stories about the Fiend with Twenty Faces.

And everyone knew that he always kept his promises.

Meanwhile, the day of Soichi's arrival finally came.

Early in the morning the entire family traveled to Haneda Airport.

When the airplane landed and passengers began stepping onto the ground, the family watched nervously.

Then they saw him.

A tall young man stepped down from the plane.

He wore a brown suit and carried a light coat over his arm. His skin was dark from the sun, and he wore a small mustache just like in the photograph.

He smiled warmly as he approached them.

"Father. Mother. It has been a long time."

The family rushed forward with cries of joy.

They shook his hands again and again.

The long-lost son had finally returned home.

But none of them knew that something terrible was already waiting inside their house.

Part 2

After leaving the airport, the Hashiba family returned home together.

Two automobiles carried them through the streets of Tokyo. In the first car sat Sotaro and his wife with their long-lost son Soichi between them. They could not stop looking at him. Every few moments the mother touched his arm gently, as if she wished to confirm that he was truly there.

"You have changed so much," she said softly.

Soichi smiled.

"Ten years is a long time, Mother."

In the second automobile sat Sanae, little Soji, and the old house manager Kondo. Soji pressed his face against the rear window so that he could watch his brother in the car ahead.

"He looks like a hero from a movie," the boy whispered.

Sanae laughed.

“You will have plenty of time to talk with him tonight.”

When the automobiles passed through the iron gate of the Hashiba residence, the servants were already waiting in a line near the entrance. Everyone bowed deeply as the family stepped out of the car.

“Welcome home, Master Soichi,” they said.

Soichi bowed politely in return.

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly. The family gathered in the large living room and spoke about many things. Soichi described his life on the island of Borneo.

“At first it was very difficult,” he said. “The forests were thick and wild. But slowly we cleared land and planted rubber trees. Now the plantation is large and successful.”

The family listened with great interest.

“Did you meet many dangerous animals?” Soji asked.

“Sometimes,” Soichi replied with a smile. “But the jungle is also beautiful.”

The boy looked at him with shining eyes.

As evening approached, the house servants prepared a special dinner to celebrate the reunion.

The dining room looked more beautiful than usual that night. A clean white tablecloth covered the long table. Fresh autumn flowers stood in a vase at the center. Silver knives and forks shone in the light.

Everyone sat down together.

During the meal, Soichi told more stories about the South Seas. He also laughed as he remembered small events from his childhood.

“Soji,” he said kindly, “when I left home, you were only a little baby. Once you entered my study and knocked over my bottle of ink.”

Soji opened his eyes wide.

“Did I really?”

“Yes,” Soichi continued. “Then you rubbed the ink across your face. You looked like a little black monkey.”

The family laughed.

Even the mother, who could barely remember the story, smiled through tears of happiness.

But suddenly their joyful evening was interrupted.

A servant entered the room carrying a telegram.

“A message has arrived, sir,” he said.

Sotaro took the paper and opened it.

As he read it, the smile slowly disappeared from his face.

The room became quiet.

“Father,” Soichi said, watching him carefully, “is something wrong?”

Sotaro folded the telegram slowly.

“I did not wish to worry everyone tonight,” he said. “But we must be careful.”

“What does the message say?” Soichi asked.

Sotaro handed him the paper.

The telegram contained only a short sentence written in simple words:

“Tonight at exactly twelve o’clock I will come to take the promised treasure.
— Twenty Faces.”

The moment Soichi finished reading, his expression became serious.

“So the thief has chosen tonight,” he said quietly.

Sotaro nodded.

“He wants the diamonds that once belonged to the Russian emperor. They are locked safely in my study.”

“Then we must guard them carefully,” Soichi said. “I will stay awake with you tonight.”

“Good,” Sotaro replied. “Your strength will be useful.”

At once the entire house began preparing for the night.

Old Kondo hurried through the building giving orders to the servants.

“Lock every door!” he cried. “Close every window!”

The large iron gate was shut and locked early in the evening.

Several police officers who were already watching the house took positions around the garden. Sotaro’s three secretaries also joined the guard. The driver waited near the garage.

In addition, the fierce dog John was released to patrol the garden.

No one would be allowed to enter the house.

Kondo spoke firmly to the servants.

“Even if someone claims to be an important visitor, do not open the gate tonight.”

Meanwhile Sotaro led his son to the study in the Western building.

The room stood on the second floor and overlooked the garden. Inside stood a large desk, several chairs, and a strong safe in the corner.

The diamonds were locked inside that safe.

A small round table stood near the center of the room. On it the servants placed sandwiches and a bottle of wine so that the two men could remain awake all night.

Sotaro checked the doors and windows carefully.

Each window had a heavy lock.

Each door had a strong bolt.

When he finished his inspection, he returned to the table and sat down.

“Perhaps we have been too careful,” he said with a faint smile.

Soichi shook his head.

“I have read many reports about this criminal,” he said. “The more I study them, the more dangerous he appears.”

Sotaro laughed.

“You speak almost as if you admire him.”

“Not admire,” Soichi replied calmly. “But he is extremely clever.”

Sotaro leaned back in his chair.

“Even a clever thief cannot pass through all these defenses,” he said. “First he must climb the high wall. Then he must avoid the police and the servants. After that he must break into this room. And finally he must open the safe.”

He tapped the metal door of the safe proudly.

“Without the correct combination of numbers, this safe cannot be opened.”

He laughed loudly.

“Even the famous Twenty Faces cannot perform magic.”

But Soichi did not laugh.

“Sometimes clever men appear to perform magic,” he said quietly.
Outside the wind began to blow through the garden trees.
The glass windows made soft sounds as the wind touched them.
Time passed slowly.
Finally Sotaro stood and walked toward the safe.
“Perhaps I should check the diamonds once more,” he said.
He turned the dial of the safe carefully.
Click.
The heavy door opened.
From inside he removed a small bronze box and carried it back to the table.
“You have never seen them before,” he said.
Soichi leaned forward with interest.
Sotaro opened the box.
Instantly brilliant light flashed inside.
Six large diamonds rested on black velvet.
They shone with rainbow colors like tiny stars.
After a moment Sotaro closed the lid again.
“We will keep the box here on the table,” he said. “It will be safer under our eyes.”
Soichi nodded.
Neither man spoke after that.
They simply watched the small bronze box between them.
Outside, the night grew darker.
The wind continued to move through the garden.
Somewhere far away a dog barked.
At last Sotaro asked quietly,
“What time is it?”
Soichi looked at his watch.
“Eleven forty-three.”
The minutes moved slowly toward midnight.
The hour promised by the mysterious thief.

Part 3

The study was completely silent.

The two men sat facing each other across the small round table. Between them stood the bronze box that contained the six famous diamonds.

Outside the window the autumn wind moved through the trees. Sometimes it pushed lightly against the glass.

Tok... tok...

The sound seemed unusually loud in the quiet room.

Sotaro wiped his forehead.

“What time is it now?” he asked again.

Soichi raised his wrist and looked at his watch.

“Eleven fifty,” he answered.

Ten minutes remained.

Neither man spoke after that.

The ticking of the watch seemed to grow louder and louder. Every second passed slowly, as if time itself had become heavy.

Sotaro tried to appear calm, but his face was pale. A thin line of sweat appeared along his forehead.

Soichi also looked tense. His hands rested on his knees, and his fingers were tightly closed.

“What time now?” Sotaro asked again after a moment.

“Eleven fifty-seven,” Soichi replied.

Three minutes.

Sotaro cleared his throat.

“I still believe this is foolish,” he said, forcing a laugh. “How could a thief enter this room without our noticing?”

Soichi did not answer.

The seconds continued to pass.

Eleven fifty-eight.

Eleven fifty-nine.

The room seemed to grow colder.

Sotaro stared at the closed door. He imagined that the thief might already be standing on the other side of it, listening silently.

Perhaps the man was preparing to break down the door at any moment.

Sotaro's heart began beating faster.

"How many seconds remain?" he asked in a whisper.

Soichi looked again at his watch.

"Ten seconds."

Both men stared at the door.

Nine.

Eight.

Seven.

Six.

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

Midnight.

They waited.

Nothing happened.

The door did not move.

The windows remained closed.

No footsteps were heard.

A full minute passed.

Finally Sotaro laughed loudly.

"Ha! It is already twelve o'clock," he said. "Where is the famous thief now?"

He leaned back in his chair and laughed again.

"It seems that even Twenty Faces cannot always keep his promises."

But Soichi did not laugh.

He continued staring at the bronze box.

“Father,” he said quietly, “are you certain that the diamonds are still inside?”

Sotaro frowned.

“Of course they are. We have been watching them all this time.”

“Still,” Soichi said calmly, “perhaps we should check.”

Sotaro suddenly stood up.

“Very well,” he said. “I will open the box again.”

He placed both hands on the lid.

But before he opened it, he noticed something strange.

Soichi had also risen from his chair.

The two men stood facing each other across the table.

For several seconds neither of them moved.

Their eyes met.

There was something unusual in Soichi’s expression.

Something that Sotaro had never seen before.

A strange smile slowly appeared on the young man’s face.

“Why are you smiling?” Sotaro demanded.

“I am thinking about the cleverness of the thief,” Soichi replied.

“This is not a time for jokes,” Sotaro said sharply.

“But it is interesting,” Soichi continued calmly. “The thief promised to come at midnight. And now it is after midnight.”

Sotaro’s voice grew angry.

“Yes! And nothing has happened!”

“Are you sure?” Soichi asked softly.

Sotaro’s hands tightened around the bronze box.

“What do you mean?”

“Please open it,” Soichi said.

Sotaro suddenly felt uneasy.

But he forced himself to act confidently.

“Very well,” he said.

He lifted the lid.

The moment the box opened, a cry escaped from his throat.

“Ah!”

The black velvet inside the box was empty.

The six diamonds had disappeared.

For several seconds Sotaro could not move.

His mind refused to accept what he was seeing.

“Impossible...” he whispered.

Soichi remained silent.

“This cannot be possible,” Sotaro said again. “No one entered this room.”

Soichi nodded slowly.

“That is true.”

Sotaro looked around the study.

The door was still locked.

The windows were still closed.

No one could have entered.

His eyes slowly returned to his son’s face.

“There are only two people in this room,” he said slowly.

“Yes,” Soichi replied.

“You and me.”

“Exactly.”

A strange silence filled the room.

Sotaro stared at the young man standing across the table.

The smile on Soichi’s lips grew wider.

“Why are you smiling?” Sotaro shouted.

“Because the thief kept his promise,” Soichi answered.

“What nonsense are you talking about?”

“The thief said he would take the diamonds at midnight.”

Sotaro felt a sudden chill.

“What are you saying?”

Soichi’s voice became calm and clear.

“He did exactly what he said he would do.”

Sotaro took a step backward.

“Soichi...?”

The young man reached slowly into his pocket.

For one terrible moment Sotaro believed his son might be reaching for the missing diamonds.

Instead, Soichi removed a small pistol.

He raised it quietly.

The weapon pointed directly at Sotaro.

“Please do not move,” he said.

Sotaro stared at him in horror.

“Who are you?”

The young man laughed softly.

“Surely you understand by now.”

“You... you are not my son!”

The man with the pistol bowed slightly.

“Correct,” he said.

His smile widened.

“I am the man people call the Fiend with Twenty Faces.”

Part 4

For a moment Sotaro could not speak.

The words he had just heard seemed impossible.

The man standing before him had the same face as the son he had welcomed only a few hours earlier. The same voice. The same clothes.

And yet that man was calmly holding a pistol.

“You... you are lying,” Sotaro whispered.

The young man laughed softly.

“No, Mr. Hashiba,” he said. “I am telling the truth.”

Sotaro felt the room spinning around him.

“If you are the thief,” he said slowly, “then where is my son?”

“That,” the man replied, “is a question I cannot answer.”

His smile remained relaxed and confident.

“Perhaps your son is somewhere in the world living happily. Or perhaps he is still wandering across distant seas.”

He shrugged lightly.

“I have never met him.”

Sotaro stared at him in disbelief.

“But the letters... the photographs...”

“Ah,” the man said with satisfaction. “Those were my preparations.”

He touched his cheek lightly.

“First I learned that your son had disappeared many years ago. Then I found one of his old photographs from his school days.”

Sotaro’s hands trembled.

“And then?”

“Then I imagined what he might look like ten years later,” the thief said calmly. “After that I created this face.”

He tapped his cheeks again.

“A little hair here. A mustache. A darker skin tone from the sun. Small changes make a great difference.”

Sotaro felt a cold anger rising inside him.

“You deceived my entire family!”

“Yes,” the thief replied pleasantly.

“The photograph you received from Borneo was taken by me. The letter was written by me. I even asked a friend to mail it from overseas so that it would appear authentic.”

He laughed quietly.

“It was a small performance.”

Sotaro gripped the edge of the table.

“You monster.”

“Please do not be upset,” the thief said lightly. “Without this disguise I could never have entered your house.”

He looked down at the bronze box on the table.

“But now I have what I came for.”

Sotaro suddenly shouted.

“You will not escape!”

The thief’s pistol moved slightly.

“Please remain where you are,” he said calmly.

“If you shout for help, I will have to fire.”

Sotaro froze.

The young man’s smile returned.

“Do not worry,” he continued. “I dislike violence. I have never harmed anyone if I could avoid it.”

He slipped his free hand into his pocket and removed six small shining stones.

Even in the dim light they flashed brilliantly.

The diamonds.

“Beautiful, are they not?” the thief said.

Sotaro clenched his teeth.

“How did you take them?”

“Ah,” the thief replied, “that was very simple.”

He glanced at the floor.

“Do you remember the little white ball that rolled across the carpet a few minutes ago?”

Sotaro blinked.

“The ping-pong ball?”

“Exactly.”

The thief chuckled.

“I dropped it from my pocket. When it rolled across the floor, you looked away for just a moment.”

Sotaro remembered.

He had indeed bent down to look under the desk.

“During that moment,” the thief continued calmly, “I opened the box and removed the diamonds.”

Sotaro felt sick.

“And we noticed nothing.”

“That is the art of misdirection,” the thief replied proudly. “A magician uses the same trick.”

He placed the diamonds carefully back into his pocket.

“Now I must leave.”

Slowly he stepped backward toward the door.

“Do not try to stop me,” he said.

With his left hand he reached behind him and turned the key in the lock.

The door opened quietly.

He stepped into the hallway.

Sotaro suddenly shouted,

“Help! Thief!”

But the thief moved quickly.

He crossed the hallway in two steps and ran to a window that faced the garden.

The window opened easily.

He climbed onto the frame.

Then he looked back at Sotaro one last time.

“Please return this to young Soji,” he said.

With a small laugh he tossed the pistol into the room.

It landed on the carpet with a light sound.

Sotaro stared at it in confusion.

The thief’s voice floated through the window.

“It is only a toy.”

And with that he jumped.

Sotaro rushed to the window.

Below, in the dim light of the garden lamps, he saw a dark figure fall onto the ground.

The man rolled once and then sprang to his feet.

He began running across the garden.

“Thief! Catch him!” Sotaro shouted loudly.

His voice echoed across the quiet night.
Doors opened.
Footsteps sounded through the house.
Police officers and servants rushed into the garden from all directions.
The chase had begun.
The fleeing thief ran straight across the lawn.
And directly toward the flower bed beneath the study window.
But hidden in that flower bed was something the thief did not know about.
A large iron trap.
It had been placed there early that morning by the young boy Soji.
As the dark figure ran across the garden, his foot landed in the center of the flower bed.
Suddenly—
CLANG!
A sharp metallic sound split the night.
The thief cried out and fell violently to the ground.
The trap had closed around his leg.

Part 5

The loud metallic sound echoed across the garden.
CLANG!
The dark figure fell forward and rolled across the flower bed.
For a moment he did not move.
Then he struggled to rise.
The iron trap had closed tightly around his ankle.
From the window above, Sotaro shouted again.
“There he is! The thief is caught!”
At once the men guarding the house rushed toward the flower bed.
Three police officers ran from the front gate. The secretaries hurried across the lawn. The driver and several servants followed behind them.

Their flashlights moved wildly through the darkness.

But the thief was fast.

Even with the trap clamped to his leg, he worked quickly. With both hands he forced the heavy jaws apart.

The metal snapped open.

He pulled his injured foot free and jumped up.

By the time the pursuers reached the flower bed, the thief was already running again.

He ran like a shadow through the garden.

“After him!” one of the police officers shouted.

The chase began.

The garden of the Hashiba house was enormous. There were winding paths, large trees, stone lanterns, and a small hill covered with bushes.

In the dim electric lights, the fleeing man could be seen only in brief flashes.

A dark figure passing between trees.

A shadow leaping over a stone.

The police ran as fast as they could.

“Stop!” one officer shouted.

But the thief did not stop.

He ran toward the small hill in the center of the garden and climbed it quickly. At the top he disappeared briefly among the bushes.

The police split into two groups.

Some ran up the hill after him.

Others circled around the far side to block his escape.

Flashlights moved through the branches like small wandering stars.

“There he goes!” someone shouted.

The thief leaped down the other side of the hill and dashed into a thick cluster of trees.

The officers followed closely behind.

The sound of running footsteps filled the garden.

But the thief moved like a wild animal. He slipped between tree trunks, turned

suddenly, and vanished behind bushes.

Even when the police saw him clearly, they could not catch him.

Meanwhile more officers arrived from the nearby police station.

They surrounded the outside of the wall so that the thief could not escape into the streets.

The tall concrete wall around the property was nearly four meters high.

Without a ladder it would be impossible to climb it quickly.

“He cannot escape!” one officer said confidently.

“Search every corner of the garden!”

The chase continued for many minutes.

Sometimes the police saw the thief’s back as he ran ahead of them. Sometimes he disappeared completely among the trees.

Finally the officers entered the darkest part of the garden, a place filled with tall trees and thick bushes.

Their flashlights moved carefully from trunk to trunk.

“Where did he go?” someone whispered.

A moment earlier the thief had been running directly ahead of them.

But now he was gone.

The officers searched quickly.

They shone their lights into the branches.

They looked behind rocks and bushes.

They checked the base of every tree.

But there was no sign of him.

It was as if the thief had vanished into the air.

The police officers gathered together.

“This is impossible,” one of them said.

“He was right in front of us.”

Another officer shook his head.

“He cannot have left the garden,” he said. “The gates are guarded, and the walls are too high.”

The men continued searching.

They walked slowly through the trees, shining their lights everywhere.

But still they found nothing.

At last one officer spoke.

“Perhaps we should wait until morning,” he said. “In daylight we will be able to search more carefully.”

The others agreed.

The garden was simply too large and too dark to search completely during the night.

Guards remained at the gates and around the outside wall. If the thief attempted to escape, he would certainly be seen.

Slowly the men began leaving the garden.

One by one their flashlights disappeared.

Soon the trees stood quiet again.

Only one man remained behind.

It was the driver, Matsuno.

He had fallen slightly behind the others during the search.

As he walked slowly through the dark garden, he came near a large pond surrounded by trees.

He paused there for a moment.

The surface of the water was covered with fallen autumn leaves.

His flashlight moved across the quiet water.

Then he noticed something strange.

Among the floating leaves, a small piece of bamboo was sticking up from the water.

It was only about thirty centimeters long.

The bamboo tube moved slightly.

It rocked gently back and forth.

Matsuno frowned.

There was no wind strong enough to move it.

And the water of the pond was calm.

Yet the bamboo continued to move.

Slowly an idea began forming in his mind.
It was a strange idea.
Almost impossible.
But he could not ignore it.
Matsuno crouched beside the pond.
Carefully he reached into his pocket and removed a handkerchief.
He tore a small strip from the cloth.
Then he held the thin piece of fabric just above the opening of the bamboo tube.
Something remarkable happened.
The cloth began moving.
It rose and fell slightly, as if air were flowing from the bamboo.
Matsuno's eyes widened.
"Breathing..." he whispered.
If air was moving through the bamboo, then someone must be using it to breathe.
Someone hiding beneath the water.
Matsuno quickly set his flashlight on the ground.
Then he grabbed the bamboo tube with both hands.
With all his strength he pulled upward.
The bamboo slid easily through the water.
But it was not alone.
At the end of the tube, a human hand suddenly appeared from the dark pond.
Muddy fingers clung tightly to the bamboo.
A moment later a black head rose from the water.
Then shoulders.
Then an entire dripping figure climbed out of the pond like a dark sea creature.
It was the thief.

Part 6

For a moment Matsuno froze.
The dripping figure rising from the pond looked almost like a monster from a

nightmare. Mud covered the man's clothes and face. Water ran down his body and dropped onto the ground.

But there was no mistake.

It was the thief.

The Fiend with Twenty Faces.

Matsuno reacted at once.

He threw himself forward and grabbed the man's arm.

"I've caught you!" he shouted.

But the thief was strong and fast.

The two men struggled beside the pond in the darkness. Their wet shoes slipped on the ground, and the fallen leaves scattered around them.

Matsuno tried to hold the man's shoulders.

The thief twisted suddenly.

In one quick movement he knocked Matsuno's hands aside and pushed him backward.

Matsuno stumbled but did not fall.

He lunged again.

This time he managed to grab the thief's coat.

"You're not escaping!" he cried.

The thief's eyes flashed.

"You are brave," he said quietly.

Then he moved.

His hands shot forward like lightning.

In seconds the situation changed completely.

The thief twisted Matsuno's arm behind his back. Matsuno felt a sharp pain and lost his balance.

He fell to his knees.

Before he could shout for help, a thin cord slipped around his wrists.

The thief worked quickly.

The cord tightened.

Matsuno struggled, but the knot held firmly.

Another cord appeared.
In less than a minute his arms and legs were bound tightly.
The thief pushed him onto the ground.
Then he removed a handkerchief from his pocket.
Matsuno tried to shout.
But the handkerchief was already in his mouth.
Another cloth was tied firmly around his head to keep the gag in place.
The entire struggle had lasted less than a minute.
The thief stood over the helpless driver.
“Please forgive me,” he said calmly. “But I cannot allow you to stop me.”
Then he began removing Matsuno’s coat.
Matsuno’s eyes widened.
The thief smiled.
“I believe your uniform will be very useful.”
Soon the two men had exchanged clothes.
The thief now wore the driver’s jacket and cap.
Matsuno lay on the ground wearing the thief’s dark clothing.
The thief lifted the bound man easily onto his shoulder.
He carried him to a nearby tree.
It was a large oak tree with thick branches.
Quickly the thief climbed onto a low branch and pulled the helpless driver upward.
Then he tied the cords more tightly around the branch so that Matsuno’s body hung securely among the leaves.
The driver could not move.
Only his eyes followed the thief’s movements.
The thief jumped lightly back to the ground.
“You will be safe here,” he said.
Then he looked down at the bamboo tube lying beside the pond.
He picked it up and threw it back into the water.
After that he adjusted the driver’s cap on his head.

He looked exactly like Matsuno now.
The thief walked calmly across the garden.
When he reached the front gate, two secretaries were standing guard.
Each held a wooden stick.
They recognized him immediately.
“Ah, Matsuno,” one of them said. “Have you seen the thief?”
The disguised thief wiped his forehead and spoke in a tired voice.
“I feel terrible,” he said. “I think I may have a fever.”
The secretaries looked concerned.
“Then you should rest,” one of them said kindly.
“Yes,” the thief replied weakly. “I will lie down for a while.”
He bowed slightly and walked toward the garage.
Behind the garage was the driver’s small room.
The secretaries watched him disappear inside.
Neither of them suspected anything.
The night passed quietly after that.
Guards remained at the gates and along the walls.
The police believed the thief was still hiding somewhere in the garden.
But they could not find him.
At dawn the sky slowly grew brighter.
Birds began singing in the trees.
Soon several detectives from the Tokyo Metropolitan Police arrived to investigate the crime.
The leader of the group was Inspector Nakamura.
He first met with Sotaro in the study where the diamonds had disappeared.
Sotaro explained everything that had happened during the night.
When the story was finished, Nakamura nodded thoughtfully.
“The thief must still be inside the property,” he said.
A local police officer agreed.
“No one has passed through the gates,” he said. “And no one has climbed the wall.”

Nakamura looked out the window toward the garden.
“Then we must search the grounds carefully,” he said.
The officers began examining every part of the large garden.
Meanwhile the house was also placed under strict watch.
No one was allowed to leave the property.
But there was one exception.
The children still had to go to school.
Sanae, who was in the third year of middle school, and young Soji, who was in the fifth year of elementary school, prepared to leave as usual.
The driver brought the car to the front entrance.
He seemed quiet and tired that morning.
“You don’t look well,” Sanae said.
The driver nodded slightly.
“Just a little cold,” he said.
The children climbed into the back seat.
The car passed slowly through the gate.
None of the guards suspected anything.
They did not realize that the man driving the car was not Matsuno at all.
It was the Fiend with Twenty Faces.
And he was taking the boy Soji with him.

Part 7

After the automobile passed through the iron gate, it turned onto the quiet morning road.

The air was fresh, and the streets were beginning to fill with people going to work and school. The city looked peaceful, but inside the car something very dangerous was happening.

In the back seat sat Sanae and her younger brother Soji.

Sanae looked out the window calmly.

But Soji was thinking about the exciting events of the night before.

“Driver,” the boy said suddenly, leaning forward, “did you see the thief?”

The man in the driver’s seat did not turn his head.

“Yes,” he replied quietly.

His voice sounded a little strange.

Soji frowned slightly.

“Did he escape?”

“Perhaps,” the driver said.

The car continued moving through the streets.

Soon it reached the neighborhood where Sanae’s school stood.

The automobile stopped near the gate of the middle school.

Sanae gathered her books and opened the door.

“Thank you,” she said politely.

She stepped out and waved to her brother.

“Good luck at school today, Soji.”

“See you this afternoon!” the boy replied.

The car started moving again.

Sanae walked through the school gate and disappeared into the crowd of students.

Inside the automobile, Soji sat quietly for a moment.

Then he noticed something unusual.

The car was not heading toward his elementary school.

It was turning into a different street.

“Driver,” he said, “my school is the other way.”

The man at the wheel did not answer.

The car continued moving.

Soji felt uneasy.

“Driver?”

Slowly the man turned his head.

A strange smile appeared on his face.

“You are very clever, young master,” he said softly.

Soji suddenly understood.

His eyes widened.

“You’re not Matsuno!” he cried.

The man laughed quietly.

“No,” he said.

He removed the driver’s cap.

Beneath it was the face of the mysterious criminal.

“I am the man you have been hearing about,” he said.

“The Fiend with Twenty Faces.”

For a moment Soji could not speak.

Then he shouted,

“Help! Help!”

But the thief spoke calmly.

“Please do not shout,” he said. “No one will hear you inside this moving car.”

Soji clenched his fists.

“What do you want with me?”

The thief smiled again.

“Nothing terrible,” he said. “You are a brave boy. After all, it was your trap that caught me last night.”

Soji remembered the iron trap in the flower bed.

“Are you taking revenge?” he asked.

The thief shook his head.

“No,” he said. “I admire clever people.”

He drove carefully through the morning traffic.

“In fact,” he continued, “I need a young assistant for a short time.”

Soji stared at him.

“I will never help a thief!”

The man laughed again.

“Do not worry,” he said. “You will not be helping me steal anything.”

The car turned into a quiet street lined with old warehouses.

Few people walked there in the morning.

Finally the automobile stopped in front of a large wooden building.

The thief stepped out and opened the rear door.
“Please come with me,” he said politely.
Soji did not move.
The thief’s eyes remained calm.
“I would prefer not to force you,” he said.
Soji slowly climbed out of the car.
The building looked abandoned. Its wooden walls were dark and weathered.
The windows were covered with dust.
The thief led the boy inside.
The interior smelled of old wood and dust.
Sunlight entered through cracks in the roof.
“You may sit here,” the thief said, pointing to a wooden chair.
Soji sat down but kept watching the man carefully.
The thief removed the driver’s coat and hung it on a nail.
“You must be wondering why I brought you here,” he said.
Soji nodded.
“Your father has many friends,” the thief continued. “Among them is a famous detective.”
“You mean Mr. Akechi,” Soji said quickly.
The thief smiled.
“Exactly.”
He walked slowly across the room.
“I believe Mr. Akechi will soon become interested in this case.”
The thief turned and looked directly at the boy.
“And when he begins searching for me,” he said calmly, “the real game will begin.”
Soji’s eyes flashed.
“Mr. Akechi will catch you!”
The thief laughed softly.
“Perhaps.”
Then he added,

“But that will make the contest much more interesting.”

Part 8

While Soji sat inside the dusty warehouse, many people at the Hashiba house were beginning to worry.

After the police finished questioning Sotaro, they continued searching the garden.

Officers walked through the trees and examined every corner carefully. They even checked the pond again.

At the same time other detectives questioned the servants.

Inspector Nakamura wrote notes as he listened to their answers.

“No one passed through the gate during the night?” he asked.

“No one,” replied the police officer who had been guarding the entrance.

“And no one climbed the wall?”

“Impossible. We watched it all night.”

Nakamura nodded slowly.

“Then the thief must still be somewhere inside the property,” he said.

Just then another officer approached.

“Inspector,” he said, “we found something strange.”

“What is it?”

“The guard dog.”

Nakamura followed him into the garden.

Beneath a tree they found the body of the large dog, John.

The animal lay quietly on the grass.

“Poison,” the officer said.

Nakamura examined the body carefully.

“This was done yesterday evening,” he said.

A servant standing nearby nodded nervously.

“Yes,” the servant said. “The young master Soichi was playing with the dog yesterday afternoon.”

Nakamura looked up.

“Soichi?”

“Yes. He gave the dog something to eat.”

Nakamura sighed.

“Then the thief planned this long before the robbery.”

The inspector stood up and brushed dust from his coat.

“He is extremely careful,” he said.

At that moment a shout echoed across the garden.

“Over here!”

Everyone turned toward the sound.

A secretary was standing near a large oak tree in the wooded part of the garden.

He was pointing upward.

“We found him!” the man cried. “The thief is here!”

The officers rushed toward the tree.

Inspector Nakamura arrived a moment later.

“Where?” he asked.

The secretary pointed into the branches.

High above them, partly hidden among the leaves, lay a human figure.

The man was stretched across a large branch.

“There!” the secretary said. “I recognize the clothes. That is the thief!”

Several officers aimed their flashlights into the tree.

The beams of light revealed a strange sight.

The man in the branches was tied tightly with thin cords.

His mouth was covered with cloth.

“Bring a ladder,” Nakamura ordered.

A ladder was quickly carried over and placed against the trunk.

One officer climbed up carefully.

A few minutes later the bound man was lowered to the ground.

As soon as the cloth was removed from his mouth, the man shouted angrily.

“That villain! That scoundrel!”

The secretary stared at him in confusion.

“Matsuno!” he cried.
It was indeed the driver.
But something was terribly wrong.
His clothes were soaked with water.
Mud covered his hands and face.
Inspector Nakamura stepped forward.
“Explain everything,” he said calmly.
Matsuno struggled to stand.
“He tricked me,” he said angrily.
“The thief was hiding in the pond.”
The officers looked at one another in surprise.
Matsuno continued.
“He used a bamboo tube to breathe underwater,” he said. “When I pulled him out, we fought.”
“And then?”
“He tied me up and took my clothes.”
The officers suddenly understood.
One of them gasped.
“Then the man who drove the children to school this morning...”
Matsuno nodded miserably.
“Was the thief.”
A terrible silence followed.
Sotaro, who had just arrived, turned pale.
“My children,” he whispered.
The inspector spoke quickly.
“Call the schools at once.”
A telephone was brought.
First they called Sanae’s middle school.
After a few moments the answer came.
Sanae had arrived safely and was attending her classes.
Everyone breathed with relief.

But the inspector was not satisfied.
“Now call the elementary school,” he said.
The telephone rang again.
Sotaro waited anxiously.
Finally the voice on the other end answered.
“Is Soji there?” the servant asked.
The reply came after a short pause.
“No. He has not arrived today.”
The room grew silent.
Sotaro’s face turned white.
“He has taken my son,” he whispered.
The terrible truth had become clear.
The Fiend with Twenty Faces had escaped.
And he had taken young Soji with him.

Part 9

The news spread quickly through the Hashiba house.
Young Soji had disappeared.
The boy had left home in the morning automobile, but he had never arrived at school. Now everyone understood the truth.
The man driving the car had been the Fiend with Twenty Faces.
Sotaro sat heavily in a chair, his face pale.
“My son...” he whispered.
His wife stood beside him, trembling.
“We must find him,” she said. “Please save our boy.”
Inspector Nakamura nodded gravely.
“We will do everything possible,” he said.
The telephone began ringing again and again as the police contacted nearby stations. Officers were sent to search the streets around the schools.
But Tokyo was a large city.

Finding one boy and one criminal in its crowded streets would not be easy.

After giving several orders, Nakamura turned to Sotaro.

"There is one man who may be able to help us," he said.

Sotaro looked up.

"Who?"

"A detective."

"You mean...?"

Nakamura nodded.

"Akechi Kogoro."

The name brought a small spark of hope to the worried father.

Akechi Kogoro was famous throughout Japan for solving extremely difficult crimes. If anyone could outwit the mysterious thief, it might be him.

"Please call him at once," Sotaro said.

Nakamura lifted the telephone again.

A few minutes later he placed the receiver down.

"He will come immediately," the inspector said.

Meanwhile, in the quiet warehouse far across the city, Soji sat in the wooden chair watching the thief.

The Fiend with Twenty Faces seemed completely calm.

He moved around the room slowly, examining several objects that lay on an old table.

Finally he turned toward the boy.

"You must be hungry," he said.

From a small box he removed bread and fruit.

"Please eat."

Soji did not touch the food.

"I don't want anything from you," he said stubbornly.

The thief smiled.

"Very well," he said. "But I assure you that I have no intention of harming you."

Soji crossed his arms.

"Then why did you bring me here?"

The thief walked to a dusty window and looked outside.

“Because,” he said quietly, “I wanted to send a message.”

“To my father?”

“Not exactly.”

The man turned back toward the boy.

“To Akechi Kogoro.”

Soji’s eyes widened.

“You mean Mr. Akechi?”

“Yes,” the thief said.

“You see, your father will soon ask the detective for help. When that happens, I want him to know that the game has already begun.”

“Game?” Soji said angrily.

“This is not a game!”

The thief nodded slowly.

“Perhaps not for you.”

He picked up a small piece of paper and began writing.

“But for me and Mr. Akechi, it is a contest.”

When he finished writing, he folded the paper neatly.

“This letter will reach him very soon,” he said.

Soji leaned forward.

“What does it say?”

The thief smiled.

“It invites him to chase me.”

A short time later footsteps sounded outside the warehouse.

Soji looked toward the door.

“Who is that?” he asked.

The thief listened carefully.

Then he smiled again.

“One of my friends,” he said.

The door opened slowly.

A tall man entered the building carrying a small bag.

He looked at the thief with surprise.

“You already finished your work?” the man asked.

“Yes,” the thief replied calmly.

“And the boy?”

The newcomer glanced at Soji.

The thief waved his hand lightly.

“Do not worry,” he said. “He is our guest.”

The tall man nodded.

“What should we do now?”

The thief folded the letter and placed it inside an envelope.

“First,” he said, “we send this message.”

Then he looked at Soji once more.

“And after that,” he added softly, “we begin the real contest.”

Far across the city, a black automobile stopped in front of the Hashiba residence.

A tall man stepped out of the car.

His eyes were sharp and calm.

This was the famous detective.

Akechi Kogoro had arrived.

Part 10

The tall man stepped through the iron gate of the Hashiba residence.

Inspector Nakamura hurried forward to greet him.

“Mr. Akechi,” he said, bowing slightly.

The detective nodded politely.

Akechi Kogoro was a slender man with calm eyes and a thoughtful expression.

He wore a dark suit and carried himself with quiet confidence.

Nothing about him looked dramatic or heroic. Yet people who knew his reputation understood that he possessed an extraordinary mind.

“Inspector Nakamura,” he said quietly. “I came as quickly as possible.”

Sotaro hurried forward.

“Mr. Akechi,” he said anxiously, “please save my son.”

Akechi listened carefully as Sotaro explained the events of the previous night. He did not interrupt.

When the story ended, the detective walked slowly to the study window and looked out toward the garden.

“So,” he said softly, “the thief disguised himself as your missing son.”

Sotaro nodded.

“Yes. We believed him completely.”

“And the diamonds were taken by a simple distraction.”

“Yes.”

Akechi’s eyes moved toward the small bronze box resting on the table.

“A clever trick,” he murmured.

Inspector Nakamura stepped closer.

“The thief then escaped through the garden,” he said. “He hid in the pond using a bamboo tube to breathe.”

Akechi nodded again.

“Very imaginative.”

“Later he attacked the driver and stole his clothes,” Nakamura continued. “He then drove the children to school.”

Akechi turned.

“But only the girl arrived.”

Sotaro’s voice trembled.

“My son Soji is missing.”

Akechi was silent for a moment.

Then he said calmly,

“The thief wants attention.”

“Attention?” Sotaro repeated.

“Yes,” Akechi said.

“The Fiend with Twenty Faces always enjoys challenging others. He is not satisfied with simple theft.”

The detective walked slowly across the room.

“He wants a contest.”

Nakamura nodded.

“That seems likely.”

At that moment a servant hurried into the study.

“A letter has arrived,” he said.

The envelope was addressed simply:

“To Detective Akechi Kogoro.”

Akechi opened it calmly.

Inside was a short note.

The detective read it silently.

Nakamura leaned forward.

“What does it say?”

Akechi handed him the paper.

The message read:

“Dear Mr. Akechi,

I have heard that you are the greatest detective in Japan.

I have therefore prepared a small challenge for you.

The boy Soji is safe for now.

If you wish to see him again, you must find me.

Let us see whose intelligence is greater.

— The Fiend with Twenty Faces.”

Sotaro clenched his fists.

“That villain!”

Akechi folded the letter slowly.

His expression did not change.

“Interesting,” he said.

Nakamura looked puzzled.

“Interesting?”

“Yes,” Akechi replied.

“The thief wishes to compete with me.”

The detective looked out the window again.

“Very well,” he said quietly.

“I accept his challenge.”

Sotaro stepped closer.

“Can you really find him?”

Akechi nodded.

“Perhaps.”

Then he turned toward Inspector Nakamura.

“First,” he said, “we must learn everything about the boy Soji.”

“Everything?”

“Yes,” Akechi said.

“Children often leave small clues that adults overlook.”

At that moment another person entered the room.

He was a boy about the same age as Soji.

His bright eyes were full of curiosity.

“Mr. Akechi,” he said eagerly.

Akechi smiled slightly.

“Ah, Kobayashi,” he said.

“You arrived quickly.”

The boy bowed.

“I came as soon as I heard the news.”

This was Kobayashi Yoshio.

The detective’s young assistant.

Kobayashi looked around the room excitedly.

“So the Fiend with Twenty Faces has appeared again?”

Akechi nodded.

“Yes.”

Kobayashi’s eyes shone.

“Then we must catch him!”

Akechi placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“We will try,” he said calmly.

Then he looked once more at the letter from the mysterious thief.

“The game has begun.”

Part 11

The study became quiet again after the letter was read.

Akechi Kogoro stood near the window, thinking carefully.

Kobayashi Yoshio waited beside him with bright, eager eyes.

Inspector Nakamura spoke first.

“Mr. Akechi,” he said, “do you have any idea where the thief might be hiding?”

Akechi shook his head slowly.

“Not yet,” he replied.

“But the letter tells us something important.”

“What is that?” Nakamura asked.

“The thief wants us to search for him,” Akechi said.

“He is inviting us.”

Sotaro frowned.

“But that makes no sense. Why would a criminal do such a thing?”

Akechi turned toward him.

“Because he enjoys the contest,” he said calmly.

Kobayashi nodded eagerly.

“Yes,” he said. “I have read about him. The Fiend with Twenty Faces likes to challenge people.”

Akechi smiled slightly.

“Exactly.”

He held the letter again.

“This message is not a threat. It is a declaration.”

Nakamura crossed his arms.

“Then he must believe he is smarter than us.”

“Perhaps,” Akechi replied.

Kobayashi stepped closer to the table.

“Mr. Akechi, where should we begin?”

The detective thought for a moment.

“First,” he said, “we must understand the thief.”

“Understand him?”

“Yes,” Akechi said.

He began walking slowly around the room.

“He is careful. He plans every step. He enjoys clever tricks.”

Akechi pointed toward the bronze box on the table.

“The ping-pong ball.”

Kobayashi nodded.

“A distraction.”

“Exactly,” Akechi said.

He then pointed toward the window.

“The iron trap in the flower bed.”

Nakamura added,

“The boy Soji placed that trap himself.”

“Yes,” Akechi said.

“Which means the thief did not expect it.”

Kobayashi leaned forward.

“And yet he still escaped.”

Akechi nodded.

“Because he always prepares another plan.”

The detective stopped walking.

“Now let us think about the boy.”

Sotaro looked worried.

“Soji?”

“Yes,” Akechi said.

“The thief took him deliberately.”

“For revenge?” Nakamura asked.

“Possibly,” Akechi said.

“But I believe there is another reason.”

Kobayashi looked curious.

“What reason?”

Akechi folded the letter again.

“The boy is a message.”

The others stared at him.

“A message?”

“Yes,” Akechi continued.

“The thief wishes to show that he can act freely even while the police search for him.”

Nakamura nodded slowly.

“That does sound like him.”

Akechi walked to the desk.

“Inspector,” he said, “please tell me something.”

“Of course.”

“After the thief escaped from the garden, did anyone see a suspicious vehicle leaving the area?”

Nakamura shook his head.

“No.”

“Then he must have remained nearby for some time,” Akechi said.

Kobayashi suddenly spoke.

“Mr. Akechi!”

“Yes?”

“If the thief stole the driver’s clothes, he would have needed a place to change.”

Akechi looked at the boy.

“Very good.”

Kobayashi smiled proudly.

“That means he probably stayed somewhere close to the house.”

Nakamura rubbed his chin.

“Perhaps an empty building.”

“Or a warehouse,” Kobayashi added.

Akechi nodded.

“Exactly.”

Sotaro stepped forward anxiously.
“Then we must search every building nearby.”
Akechi raised a hand gently.
“Please remain calm.”
“But my son—”
“Your son is alive,” Akechi said quietly.
Sotaro stopped speaking.
“The thief clearly stated that the boy is safe for now.”
Nakamura looked thoughtful.
“So the boy is valuable to him.”
“Yes,” Akechi replied.
“Which means he will not harm him.”
Kobayashi clenched his fists.
“Then we must rescue him quickly!”
Akechi smiled faintly.
“We will.”
He turned toward the window again.
The morning sunlight filled the garden outside.
“But first,” he said calmly,
“we must make the thief believe that we are following his rules.”
Nakamura raised an eyebrow.
“His rules?”
Akechi nodded.
“He wants a contest.”
The detective’s eyes grew sharper.
“Then we shall give him one.”

Part 12

While Akechi and the police were discussing their plans, young Soji was still inside the old warehouse.

The large wooden building remained quiet.
Dust floated slowly in the air, and sunlight entered through the broken roof.
Outside, distant sounds of the city could be heard.
The thief sat calmly at a small table.
Across from him sat Soji.
The boy watched the man carefully.
“Why are you smiling?” Soji asked suddenly.
The Fiend with Twenty Faces looked up.
“Am I smiling?”
“Yes,” Soji said.
The thief laughed softly.
“Perhaps I am enjoying the situation.”
Soji frowned.
“You kidnapped me.”
“That is true,” the thief replied calmly.
“Then why are you enjoying it?”
The thief leaned back in his chair.
“Because somewhere in Tokyo, Akechi Kogoro is thinking about me.”
Soji crossed his arms.
“He will catch you.”
The thief did not seem offended.
“Perhaps,” he said.
He looked toward the dusty window.
“But first he must find me.”
The man’s friend, the tall man who had entered earlier, walked across the room carrying a small bag.
“Everything is ready,” he said.
The thief nodded.
“Good.”
The tall man glanced at Soji.
“Are you sure this is wise?” he asked quietly.

The thief smiled.

“Very.”

“The police will search the entire city.”

“Exactly,” the thief said.

He stood up slowly.

“Which means they will be looking everywhere except the right place.”

The tall man looked puzzled.

“What do you mean?”

The thief pointed toward the city outside the window.

“When people search for something important, they usually imagine complicated hiding places.”

“Yes?”

“But sometimes,” the thief said, “the safest place is the simplest one.”

Soji listened carefully.

“You talk too much,” he said.

The thief laughed again.

“Perhaps.”

The tall man placed the bag on the table.

“Are we leaving now?” he asked.

“Soon,” the thief replied.

He turned toward Soji.

“Would you like to take a short walk?”

Soji shook his head immediately.

“No.”

The thief shrugged.

“Very well.”

Then he opened the bag.

Inside were several strange objects.

Pieces of clothing.

A small box of paints.

False hair.

A pair of glasses.

Soji stared at them.

“What are those?”

The thief held up the glasses.

“These,” he said calmly, “will change my face again.”

The boy understood.

“Another disguise.”

“Exactly.”

The thief began working carefully.

First he combed his hair in a different style.

Then he attached a small beard.

Finally he placed the glasses on his nose.

When he finished, his appearance had changed completely.

The man who had looked like a driver now resembled an ordinary office worker.

The tall man laughed.

“Even I almost cannot recognize you.”

The thief bowed slightly.

“Thank you.”

Then he looked at Soji again.

“You see,” he said, “faces are easy to change.”

The boy remained silent.

“But minds are more difficult.”

The thief picked up his coat.

“Now,” he said, “it is time for the next move.”

Meanwhile, across the city, Akechi Kogoro and Kobayashi Yoshio had left the Hashiba house.

Their automobile moved slowly through the busy streets of Tokyo.

Kobayashi looked at the detective with curiosity.

“Mr. Akechi,” he said, “where are we going?”

Akechi looked out the window.

“To find a warehouse,” he replied.

Kobayashi blinked.

“A warehouse?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know the thief is hiding there?”

Akechi smiled slightly.

“I do not know.”

Kobayashi looked surprised.

“Then why are we going?”

The detective’s eyes were calm.

“Because,” he said quietly,

“that is exactly where I would hide.”

Part 13

The automobile carrying Akechi and Kobayashi moved slowly through the city streets.

Outside the window stood rows of warehouses near the harbor district. Many of the buildings were old and quiet during the morning hours.

Kobayashi looked carefully at each one.

“There are so many,” he said.

Akechi nodded.

“Yes. Which makes this a convenient hiding place.”

The car finally stopped near a narrow street.

Several large wooden warehouses stood nearby. Some looked abandoned.

Akechi stepped out of the car.

Kobayashi followed him quickly.

“Do you think he is inside one of these?” the boy asked.

Akechi looked around the street.

“Perhaps,” he said.

“But we must be careful.”

Kobayashi lowered his voice.

“Should we call the police?”

Akechi shook his head.

“Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“Because if the thief notices many officers, he will escape immediately.”

Kobayashi nodded.

The two walked slowly down the quiet street.

Suddenly Akechi stopped.

“Look,” he said softly.

Kobayashi followed his gaze.

In front of one warehouse stood a black automobile.

Kobayashi’s eyes widened.

“That looks like the Hashiba car!”

Akechi walked closer.

He examined the license plate.

Kobayashi whispered excitedly.

“It is the same car!”

The detective nodded.

“Yes.”

Kobayashi clenched his fists.

“Then Soji must be inside!”

Akechi raised a hand.

“Quiet.”

The large warehouse door stood partly open.

Akechi moved silently toward it.

Kobayashi followed carefully behind him.

Inside the building, the air smelled of dust and wood.

Sunlight entered through broken boards in the roof.

The room was almost empty.

But someone was there.

A man stood near a table.

He wore glasses and had a small beard.
At first he looked like an ordinary office worker.
But Akechi stopped walking.
“Good morning,” he said calmly.
The man turned slowly.
A faint smile appeared on his face.
“Ah,” he said.
“Detective Akechi.”
Kobayashi stared in shock.
“It’s him!”
The thief bowed politely.
“I expected you to arrive sooner or later,” he said.
Akechi stepped into the room.
“Where is the boy?”
The thief nodded toward a chair behind him.
Soji was sitting there.
When he saw Akechi, his eyes lit up.
“Mr. Akechi!”
The detective spoke gently.
“Do not worry, Soji. I will take you home.”
The thief laughed softly.
“You are confident.”
Akechi’s eyes remained calm.
“You wanted a contest,” he said.
“Yes,” the thief replied.
“Then it has begun.”
Kobayashi stepped forward angrily.
“You have nowhere to run!”
The thief raised one finger.
“Please do not be so certain.”
He reached slowly into his pocket.

Kobayashi tensed.

“Are you taking out a weapon?”

The thief shook his head.

“No.”

From his pocket he removed a small round object.

It looked like a metal ball.

“What is that?” Kobayashi asked.

The thief smiled.

“Another little trick.”

Before anyone could react, he threw the object onto the floor.

A loud pop echoed through the warehouse.

Instantly a thick cloud of white smoke filled the room.

Kobayashi coughed.

“I can’t see!”

Akechi covered his mouth with his handkerchief.

“Stay calm,” he said.

But the smoke grew thicker.

Footsteps echoed through the room.

Then there was silence.

Slowly the smoke began to clear.

Akechi and Kobayashi looked around.

The warehouse was empty.

The thief had disappeared again.

But one thing had changed.

The chair where Soji had been sitting was now empty too.

Part 14

For a moment Kobayashi could not believe what he was seeing.

The chair where Soji had been sitting was empty.

“The boy!” he shouted.

Akechi moved quickly through the smoke that still hung in the air.

“Soji!” he called.

But there was no answer.

The warehouse was silent again.

Kobayashi ran to the chair.

A short piece of rope lay on the floor.

“He must have taken him!” the boy cried.

Akechi bent down and examined the rope carefully.

“Yes,” he said quietly.

Kobayashi looked toward the door.

“We have to chase him!”

Akechi walked calmly toward the open entrance.

Outside the street was empty.

The black automobile still stood where they had left it.

Kobayashi looked around anxiously.

“He cannot be far!”

Akechi stepped into the sunlight.

Then he spoke quietly.

“He is not far at all.”

Kobayashi blinked.

“What do you mean?”

Akechi walked slowly around the automobile.

He examined the ground.

“Look carefully,” he said.

Kobayashi bent down beside him.

On the dusty road they could see several footprints.

One set led toward the door of the warehouse.

Another set led away from it.

Kobayashi frowned.

“Two people walked out.”

Akechi nodded.

“Yes.”

“The thief and Soji.”

“Exactly.”

Kobayashi looked up.

“Then they went that way!”

The footprints continued down the narrow street.

Akechi began walking after them.

Kobayashi followed quickly.

The tracks were easy to see in the dust.

They led toward a crowded marketplace nearby.

As they approached the market, the sound of many voices filled the air.

Vendors were selling vegetables and fish.

People walked in every direction.

Kobayashi looked worried.

“Once he enters the crowd, we may lose him.”

Akechi stopped walking.

“Yes,” he said calmly.

Kobayashi stared at the busy market.

“What should we do?”

Akechi looked at the footprints one more time.

Then he smiled slightly.

“We are already too late.”

Kobayashi turned in surprise.

“Too late?”

Akechi pointed toward the market.

“He planned this carefully.”

Kobayashi followed his gaze.

“You mean he wanted us to follow him here?”

“Yes,” Akechi said.

Kobayashi suddenly understood.

“Because once he reaches the crowd, we cannot identify him.”

Akechi nodded.

“Exactly.”

Kobayashi clenched his fists.

“That thief!”

But Akechi did not look angry.

Instead he looked thoughtful.

“He is testing us.”

Kobayashi glanced at him.

“Testing us?”

“Yes,” Akechi said.

“He allowed us to find the warehouse.”

“Why?”

“Because he wanted to show that he can escape even when we find him.”

Kobayashi sighed.

“He is very confident.”

Akechi looked toward the crowd again.

“Yes.”

Kobayashi suddenly remembered something.

“But what about Soji?”

Akechi’s expression became serious.

“The boy is still part of the contest.”

Kobayashi’s voice became urgent.

“Then we must rescue him soon.”

Akechi nodded.

“We will.”

The detective turned back toward the automobile.

“For now,” he said calmly, “we return to the Hashiba house.”

Kobayashi looked puzzled.

“Return?”

“Yes.”

“But the thief escaped!”

Akechi opened the car door.

“He wanted us to follow him.”

Kobayashi slowly understood.

“So we should not do what he expects.”

Akechi smiled.

“Exactly.”

The two entered the automobile.

As the car drove away from the marketplace, Kobayashi looked at the detective.

“Mr. Akechi,” he said.

“Yes?”

“Do you really believe we can catch him?”

Akechi looked out at the passing streets of Tokyo.

After a moment he replied quietly.

“Yes.”

Kobayashi’s eyes brightened.

“How?”

Akechi’s voice remained calm.

“Because,” he said,

“even the Fiend with Twenty Faces must eventually make a mistake.”

Part 15

When Akechi and Kobayashi returned to the Hashiba residence, Inspector Nakamura was waiting for them.

“Did you find the boy?” Nakamura asked immediately.

Kobayashi shook his head.

“We found the warehouse,” he said. “But the thief escaped again.”

Sotaro, who had been standing nearby, looked exhausted.

“My son is still with that criminal,” he said quietly.

Akechi spoke calmly.

“Yes. But the situation has changed.”

Nakamura frowned.

“Changed?”

“The thief has now shown us two of his methods,” Akechi said.

Kobayashi nodded eagerly.

“Disguises and tricks.”

“Exactly,” Akechi replied.

He walked slowly across the room.

“First he disguised himself as your missing son. Then he disguised himself as the driver. And today he appeared as an ordinary office worker.”

Nakamura crossed his arms.

“He changes his face constantly.”

“Yes,” Akechi said.

“That is why people call him the Fiend with Twenty Faces.”

Sotaro looked troubled.

“Then how can anyone recognize him?”

Akechi smiled faintly.

“That is the wrong question.”

Nakamura looked curious.

“What do you mean?”

“Instead of trying to recognize his face,” Akechi said, “we must recognize his mind.”

Kobayashi nodded.

“His habits.”

“Exactly.”

The detective turned toward the window.

“He enjoys clever performances.”

Nakamura sighed.

“Yes. That is clear.”

Akechi continued speaking calmly.

“He also enjoys challenging me.”

Kobayashi laughed softly.

“That is very clear too.”

Akechi took the thief’s letter from his pocket.

“He invited me to a contest.”

Nakamura looked thoughtful.

“Then he will continue sending messages.”

“Most likely,” Akechi said.

Just then a servant entered the room.

“Another letter has arrived,” he said nervously.

The envelope was placed on the table.

Once again the address read:

“To Detective Akechi Kogoro.”

Kobayashi leaned forward excitedly.

“Another challenge!”

Akechi opened the envelope carefully.

Inside was a larger sheet of paper.

The detective read it silently.

After a moment he handed it to Nakamura.

The inspector read the message aloud.

“Dear Mr. Akechi,

You followed me very quickly to the warehouse. I congratulate you.

But the contest is not finished.

Tonight at eight o’clock I will appear in the center of Ginza.

If you can catch me there, the boy Soji will be returned safely.

If you fail, the game will continue.

I look forward to seeing you.

— The Fiend with Twenty Faces.”

The room fell silent.

Nakamura lowered the letter slowly.

“He plans to appear in public?”

Kobayashi looked excited.

“That will be our chance!”

Sotaro stepped forward anxiously.
“Please capture him tonight.”
Akechi folded the letter.
“We will certainly try.”
Nakamura walked to the window.
“Ginza will be crowded at that hour,” he said.
“Thousands of people.”
Kobayashi smiled.
“Then it will be difficult for the thief to escape.”
Akechi shook his head slightly.
“Or very easy.”
Kobayashi looked puzzled.
“How can it be both?”
Akechi spoke quietly.
“Because crowds are perfect hiding places.”
Nakamura nodded.
“Still, we must try.”
The inspector turned to the telephone.
“I will send officers to Ginza immediately.”
Akechi raised his hand.
“Not too many.”
Nakamura stopped.
“Why?”
“If the thief sees hundreds of police officers,” Akechi said, “he will never appear.”
Kobayashi looked thoughtful.
“Then we must hide the officers.”
Akechi smiled.
“Exactly.”
The detective looked again at the letter.
“Tonight at eight,” he said.

Kobayashi's eyes shone with excitement.

"The real contest begins."

Part 16

Evening slowly approached.

By seven o'clock the bright streets of Ginza were already crowded with people. Shops were open, electric lights shone from every window, and cars moved slowly through the busy roads.

No one in the crowd realized that a strange contest was about to begin.

Among the people walking along the street were several plain-clothes police officers.

They did not wear uniforms.

To everyone else they appeared to be ordinary men enjoying the evening.

But each one was watching the crowd carefully.

Inspector Nakamura stood near the entrance of a large department store. He pretended to examine the display window, but his eyes constantly moved across the street.

A few meters away stood Kobayashi Yoshio.

The boy looked like a student who had come to see the lights of Ginza, yet he was watching every passerby with great attention.

Akechi Kogoro stood quietly beside a newspaper stand.

His calm eyes studied the crowd.

The detective looked completely relaxed, but his mind was working quickly.

Kobayashi stepped closer to him.

"Mr. Akechi," he whispered, "there are so many people."

Akechi nodded.

"Yes."

"How can we possibly find the thief here?"

Akechi spoke quietly.

"We do not need to find him."

Kobayashi blinked.

“What do you mean?”

“He will come to us.”

Kobayashi looked confused.

“Why?”

Akechi held up the letter from the thief.

“Because he promised.”

The boy nodded slowly.

“That is true.”

The large clock above the department store showed seven fifty-five.

Only five minutes remained.

The police officers in the crowd became more alert.

Nakamura walked slowly across the street, pretending to look into shop windows.

Several other detectives positioned themselves near the entrance of a movie theater.

Akechi remained near the newspaper stand.

His eyes moved calmly from one face to another.

The clock hands continued moving.

Seven fifty-seven.

Seven fifty-eight.

Kobayashi’s heart began beating faster.

Seven fifty-nine.

The noise of the crowd seemed louder than before.

Then the clock struck eight.

The deep sound of the bell echoed across the street.

Everyone continued walking as usual.

Nothing happened.

Kobayashi whispered anxiously.

“Where is he?”

Akechi remained silent.

A minute passed.
Then two minutes.
Still nothing unusual appeared.
Kobayashi frowned.
“Did he trick us again?”
Akechi was about to reply when a strange sound came from above.
It was not loud.
But it was unusual enough to make several people look upward.
Kobayashi followed their gaze.
On the roof of the department store stood a tall figure dressed in black.
The man stood clearly against the evening sky.
Gasps rose from the crowd below.
Someone shouted,
“Look! Who is that?”
The figure raised one arm.
His black cloak moved slightly in the wind.
Kobayashi recognized the posture immediately.
“Mr. Akechi!” he cried.
“It’s him!”
The Fiend with Twenty Faces stood proudly on the rooftop.
Even from the street below, his confident stance was unmistakable.
The crowd began whispering and pointing.
“A thief!”
“Someone call the police!”
Inspector Nakamura shouted orders.
“Surround the building!”
Police officers rushed toward the department store entrance.
But the thief simply stood there calmly.
Slowly he raised a white cloth into the air.
The cloth fluttered like a flag.
Kobayashi stared.

“What is that?”

Akechi’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“A signal.”

Suddenly the thief stepped backward.

For a moment it looked as if he might fall from the roof.

The crowd gasped.

But the black figure did not fall.

Instead he leaped outward into the night.

The people below cried out in shock.

But a moment later something opened above the falling figure.

A large white shape spread through the air.

It was a parachute.

The Fiend with Twenty Faces drifted slowly down toward the crowded street.

The entire crowd stared upward in amazement.

Part 17

The white parachute floated slowly through the evening air.

Thousands of people on the streets of Ginza stared upward in amazement. Some pointed. Others shouted.

“Look!”

“A parachute!”

“Someone is falling from the roof!”

The black figure beneath the parachute drifted gently toward the center of the street.

Inspector Nakamura reacted immediately.

“Surround him!” he shouted.

Police officers rushed forward through the crowd.

But the crowd itself became a problem.

People pushed closer, trying to see what was happening. Some laughed with excitement, believing it was part of a show.

The parachute continued descending.
Kobayashi ran forward.
“Mr. Akechi!” he shouted.
“He’s landing!”
Akechi followed calmly behind him.
The thief’s feet finally touched the ground.
The parachute collapsed softly around him like a white cloud.
For a moment the man stood perfectly still.
Then he began laughing.
It was a light, confident laugh.
The crowd moved closer.
“Who is he?”
“Is this a performance?”
Inspector Nakamura pushed through the people.
“Stand back!” he shouted.
“Police!”
Several officers reached the black figure at the same time.
They grabbed his arms.
“You are under arrest!” Nakamura declared.
The man stopped laughing.
Slowly he raised both hands.
“Very well,” he said calmly.
Kobayashi stared at him.
“We caught him!”
The crowd began cheering.
Some people clapped their hands.
“The thief has been captured!”
Nakamura pulled away the black hood covering the man’s head.
His face appeared in the bright electric lights.
Kobayashi blinked in confusion.
“That’s strange...”

The man looked terrified.

“Please!” he cried. “I’m innocent!”

Nakamura frowned.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Sato,” the man said desperately.

“I’m an office worker!”

Kobayashi’s eyes widened.

“Then... where is the thief?”

At that moment a voice spoke quietly behind them.

“Right here.”

Everyone turned.

A tall gentleman in a neat gray suit stood calmly beside the crowd.

His hat covered his hair.

A pair of glasses rested on his nose.

No one had noticed him before.

But Akechi’s eyes sharpened immediately.

“Ah,” the detective said softly.

The gentleman removed his hat politely.

Beneath the hat appeared a familiar smile.

The Fiend with Twenty Faces.

The crowd gasped.

The man in the gray suit bowed slightly.

“Good evening, Mr. Akechi,” he said pleasantly.

Kobayashi shouted,

“It’s him!”

The thief laughed lightly.

“Did you enjoy my little performance?”

Inspector Nakamura tried to push through the crowd toward him.

But people were standing everywhere.

The thief spoke calmly.

“The man with the parachute was only a volunteer.”

He gestured toward the frightened office worker.
“I asked him to wear the costume.”
Kobayashi clenched his fists.
“You tricked us again!”
The thief smiled.
“Naturally.”
Then he looked directly at Akechi.
“Did you enjoy the show?”
Akechi remained perfectly calm.
“Yes,” he said.
The thief seemed pleased.
“I am glad.”
Suddenly a loud whistle sounded.
Several police officers rushed toward the thief from different directions.
But in that same moment something strange happened.
The lights along the street suddenly went dark.
The entire block fell into darkness.
People screamed in surprise.
In the confusion, the crowd began pushing and shouting.
When the lights came back on a few seconds later, the gentleman in the gray suit was gone.
The Fiend with Twenty Faces had vanished again.
Only one thing remained.
A small envelope lying on the ground.
Akechi picked it up quietly.
On the front were written three words.
“For Detective Akechi.”

Part 18

The crowd in Ginza slowly calmed down after the sudden confusion.

Police officers pushed people back and tried to restore order. Many spectators were still excitedly talking about what they had just seen.

“Did you see him disappear?”

“That thief is like a magician!”

Inspector Nakamura looked extremely frustrated.

“We had him right in front of us,” he said angrily.

Kobayashi clenched his fists.

“He escaped again!”

Akechi, however, remained perfectly calm.

The detective was looking quietly at the envelope he had picked up from the street.

Kobayashi stepped closer.

“Is it another letter?”

Akechi nodded.

“Yes.”

Nakamura walked toward him.

“What does it say this time?”

Akechi opened the envelope carefully.

Inside was a small folded card.

He read the message silently.

Then he showed it to the others.

The card contained only a short sentence:

“If you wish to see the boy again, come alone to the old clock tower at nine o’clock tonight.

— The Fiend with Twenty Faces.”

Kobayashi looked worried.

“Alone?”

Nakamura shook his head.

“It’s a trap.”

Akechi folded the card calmly.

“Of course it is.”

“Then you cannot go alone,” Nakamura said.

Kobayashi nodded quickly.

“Yes. We should surround the place with police.”

But Akechi shook his head.

“That would be exactly what the thief expects.”

Nakamura frowned.

“Then what do you suggest?”

Akechi looked at the clock on the department store wall.

It showed eight fifteen.

“We still have forty-five minutes,” he said.

Kobayashi looked at him anxiously.

“Mr. Akechi... are you really going?”

“Yes.”

“But it could be dangerous.”

Akechi smiled slightly.

“Danger is part of the contest.”

Nakamura sighed.

“At least allow us to stay nearby.”

Akechi considered for a moment.

Then he nodded.

“Very well.”

The detective placed the card back into the envelope.

“But you must remain hidden.”

Kobayashi looked relieved.

“Of course.”

Meanwhile, across the city, the Fiend with Twenty Faces was standing on the roof of another building.

From there he could see the bright lights of Ginza in the distance.

The tall man who had helped him earlier stood nearby.

“Everything went exactly as you planned,” the man said.

The thief smiled.

“Yes.”

He adjusted his glasses.

“Mr. Akechi followed the performance perfectly.”

The tall man looked curious.

“Do you think he will come to the clock tower?”

The thief nodded confidently.

“Certainly.”

“Even if it is a trap?”

“Especially because it is a trap,” the thief replied.

The tall man laughed softly.

“You understand each other well.”

The thief looked toward the dark skyline of the city.

“Mr. Akechi is a very interesting opponent.”

The man folded his arms.

“And the boy?”

The thief shrugged lightly.

“He is safe.”

The tall man nodded.

“Then the final act is ready.”

The thief smiled.

“Yes.”

He looked at his watch.

The hands were slowly approaching nine o’clock.

“Now,” he said quietly,

“let us see how the contest ends.”

Part 19

The old clock tower stood at the edge of a quiet park.

At night the place was almost empty. A few dim lamps lit the path, and the tall tower rose like a dark shadow against the sky.

Akechi Kogoro arrived a few minutes before nine.

He walked slowly across the park, his calm eyes observing everything around him.

The detective appeared to be alone.

But hidden among the trees at the edge of the park were several police officers.

Inspector Nakamura watched carefully from the shadows.

Kobayashi crouched beside him.

“Do you see anyone?” the boy whispered.

Nakamura shook his head.

“Not yet.”

Meanwhile Akechi continued walking toward the tower.

The large clock above him struck nine.

The deep sound echoed across the quiet park.

For several seconds nothing happened.

Then a voice spoke from the darkness.

“Good evening, Mr. Akechi.”

A tall figure stepped out from behind the tower.

The man wore a dark cloak.

Even in the dim light, his confident posture was unmistakable.

The Fiend with Twenty Faces.

Akechi stopped a few meters away.

“Good evening,” he replied calmly.

The thief bowed politely.

“You came exactly as requested.”

Akechi nodded.

“And the boy?”

The thief pointed toward the base of the tower.

A rope hung down from a small window high above.

“He is inside the tower,” the thief said.

Akechi’s eyes moved upward.

“Is he safe?”

“Perfectly safe,” the thief replied.

“As long as the contest continues.”

Akechi folded his arms.

“You enjoy these games.”

The thief smiled.

“Very much.”

The wind moved lightly through the trees.

For a moment both men were silent.

Finally the thief spoke again.

“Mr. Akechi,” he said, “do you know why I admire you?”

Akechi waited.

“Because you are the only person who truly understands this contest.”

Akechi replied quietly.

“A contest between intelligence.”

“Exactly,” the thief said.

He stepped closer.

“Most people chase criminals with force.”

“But you use your mind.”

Akechi’s voice remained calm.

“And you use tricks.”

The thief laughed softly.

“Yes.”

Then he added,

“But tonight the contest ends.”

Akechi looked at him carefully.

“Does it?”

The thief nodded.

“Yes.”

Suddenly Akechi spoke.

“Before you continue,” he said quietly, “please look behind you.”

The thief turned his head slightly.

At that moment bright lights suddenly flooded the park.
Police officers stepped out from behind the trees.
Inspector Nakamura shouted,
“You are surrounded!”
The thief did not appear surprised.
Instead he laughed.
“I expected that.”
Kobayashi ran forward excitedly.
“You cannot escape this time!”
The thief looked calmly at Akechi.
“Did you arrange this?”
Akechi nodded.
“Yes.”
The thief smiled again.
“Then perhaps the contest truly is ending.”
Slowly he raised his hands.
Police officers moved closer.
Nakamura stepped forward with handcuffs.
“This time it’s finished,” the inspector said firmly.
The thief looked at Akechi one last time.
“You are worthy of respect,” he said quietly.
Then he allowed the officers to place the handcuffs on his wrists.
The Fiend with Twenty Faces had finally been captured.
Akechi walked toward the tower.
He climbed the rope and entered through the window.
A few minutes later he returned with young Soji.
The boy ran toward Kobayashi.
“Mr. Akechi caught him!” he said proudly.
Inspector Nakamura nodded with satisfaction.
“The contest is over.”
But Akechi remained silent for a moment.

Then he looked toward the thief.
“Is it?” he said quietly.
The thief smiled faintly.
And in that moment something strange happened.
The prisoner suddenly collapsed.
The police officers rushed forward in surprise.
Nakamura bent down and pulled away the man’s cloak.
Everyone stared in shock.
The face beneath the cloak was not the Fiend with Twenty Faces.
It was another man.
A stranger.
The real thief had escaped once again.
The Fiend with Twenty Faces had been playing one final trick.
And somewhere in the darkness of the city, he was already gone.