

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: San'yūtei Enchō (三遊亭円朝)

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

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San'yūtei Enchō, *Tales of the Peony Lantern* [*Kaidan Botan Dōrō*] (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified from the Japanese by ChatGPT)

Part 1

On the eleventh day of the fourth month in the third year of Kanpo, the city was still called Edo. At Yushima Tenjin Shrine, there was a great festival for Prince Shotoku, and the streets were full from morning to evening. People came from every side. The air was warm, the road was dry, and dust rose under many feet. Voices, sandals, carts, and laughter mixed together until the whole town seemed to move like a living thing.

In Hongo Sancho-me there was a sword shop called Fujimura-ya Shinbei. Fine swords were set out at the front, where men passing by could stop and look at them. That day a young samurai came there and sat down before the shop. He was about twenty-two years old, with very white skin and sharp eyes. His face was handsome, but there was a hard, quick anger in it. Behind him stood his servant, Fujisuke, in a work coat, with a wooden sword at his side.

The young samurai looked over the swords with care. Then he pointed to one and said, "Shopkeeper, show me that sword with the dark handle and the iron guard. It looks like a very good one." The shopkeeper bowed at once and brought it out with both hands. "Please have some tea first," he said. "The roads are crowded today, and the dust must have troubled you." As he wiped the sword clean, he added, "The outside is a little worn, but the blade itself is strong."

The samurai took the sword and studied it like a man who truly knew weapons. He did not only look at its shape. He checked the curve, the temper line, the front and back of the blade, and the point. At last he said, "This seems to be Bizen work." The shopkeeper looked impressed and answered, "You have a fine eye. Many in our trade say the same. It may be Sukesada, though sadly it has no name." Then the samurai asked the price, and the shopkeeper said, "Ten ryo."

"Ten is high," the young man said. "Will you take seven and a half?" The shopkeeper smiled in the tired way of a man used to bargaining and answered that

such a price would bring him loss. So the two of them went on speaking back and forth over the sword. The young samurai stayed calm. He held the blade, looked at it again, and seemed ready to keep talking until they reached a fair price.

Just then trouble came from behind him. A drunken man staggered past, bumped into Fujisuke, and fell hard onto the street. When he got up, his face was red with drink and anger. At once he began to strike Fujisuke again and again. Fujisuke did not fight back. He put his hands to the ground, lowered his head, and begged forgiveness, knowing the man was drunk.

The young samurai turned at once when he saw that it was his own servant. He stepped toward the drunk man and bowed. "Whatever foolish thing my servant has done, I beg you to forgive him," he said. "I apologize in his place." But the drunk man would not listen. He shouted, "Your servant stood in the road and made me fall. See how my clothes are covered in mud. If you wish to apologize, then kneel to the ground properly. Do not stand there with your hand near your sword. Are you trying to threaten me?"

The young samurai answered with great patience, "No. I was only looking at this sword when the noise began, so I came out at once." But the drunk man only grew louder. By now a crowd had formed in the street, and people began to whisper many foolish things. Some said the men were fighting over the sword. Some said it was about a dog. Some said the drunk was an uncle asking his nephew for money. No one knew the truth, yet everyone spoke.

Among the crowd, one man knew the drunk and said in a low voice that he was Kurokawa Kozo, a violent samurai from the Maruyama Hongyoji residence. He was known for drink, bad living, and wild acts in the city. Those words reached the ears of the young samurai. He had already controlled himself a long time, and now shame and anger rose together in his chest. Even then he asked once more, "I have apologized this far. Will you still not forgive us?" Kurokawa laughed, cursed him, and suddenly spat full in the young samurai's face.

That was the end of patience. The young samurai's whole face changed. "I showed you respect," he said, "but you only climb higher with your insults. To spit on the face of a samurai is too much." In the next moment his hand moved to

the sword he had just been examining. The blade flashed out so fast that the crowd cried out and broke apart in fear. Shops closed, side streets were shut, and in a moment the busy road became strangely empty.

Kurokawa, though drunk, understood danger when he saw it. He turned and ran about twenty steps, but the young samurai chased him in his sandals without slowing. "Coward!" he shouted. "A samurai does not show his back." Kurokawa stopped, put his hand on his own sword, and turned half around. That was enough. The young man stepped in and cut deep into his shoulder. Kurokawa cried out and fell to one knee, and the second cut came at once, from shoulder toward chest. He fell dead in the road.

The young samurai stood straight, shook the blood from the blade, and walked back to the sword shop as if nothing uncertain had happened. Fujisuke was shaking with fear. "This is terrible," he said. "What will happen if my lord's name is drawn into this? It began with me." But the samurai said, "Do not fear. He was a violent man who troubled the city. Cutting him down will bring no shame." Then he turned to the shopkeeper and said, with calm surprise, "This sword cuts even better than I expected. It is very fine. Will you take seven ryo and two bu?"

The shopkeeper was so afraid that he agreed at once. The young samurai said, "I will not bring trouble to your shop. Still, this must be reported at once. Lend me an inkstone." The shopkeeper was so stunned that he did not even see the inkstone box beside him until the samurai pointed it out. Then, with a steady hand, the young man wrote his name: Iijima Heitaro. After that he sent notice to the local guard and returned to his house in Ushigome. When he told the whole matter to his father, Iijima Heizaemon, his father said only, "You did well." The case was reported through proper channels, and in the end there was no punishment at all.

Part 2

Iijima Heitaro had shown great courage when he killed that violent man. He had been only twenty-two then, but he had not shaken even a little. As the years passed, he grew older, wiser, and more important. After his father died, he took

the family name and place and became Iijima Heizaemon. He married the daughter of a hatamoto family from Suidobata, and before long a daughter was born to them.

That girl was called Otsuyu. She was very beautiful, and because she was their only child, her father and mother loved her more and more each year. No other children were born after her, so they cared for her like a treasure in their hands. Time passed quickly, and Otsuyu grew into a lovely young girl. By the spring of her sixteenth year, the Iijima house was rich and peaceful, and everything seemed to go well. But good fortune does not stay still forever.

Otsuyu's mother became ill after a small trouble and soon died. In the house there was a maid named O-Kuni who had served the late lady closely. She was not as beautiful as Otsuyu, but she had a clever face and quick hands, and she knew how to move and speak in the right way. Lord Heizaemon, now lonely in his empty room, soon began to favor her. Before long she became his mistress, and because there was no lady of the house to stand above her, her place grew stronger every day.

Otsuyu hated O-Kuni. She did not call her kindly, and O-Kuni also disliked the proud young girl. When Otsuyu spoke sharply, O-Kuni went at once to Heizaemon and spoke badly of her. So the house became uneasy. No open war began, but there was no peace between them. At last Heizaemon decided to avoid daily trouble, and he bought a small villa near Yanagishima and sent Otsuyu there to live with only one maid, a loyal girl named Oyone.

This seemed easy at first, but it was the beginning of the family's ruin. The year ended, and when the new year came Otsuyu was seventeen. The little villa stood quiet and apart, and in it Otsuyu had no joy except the company of Oyone. About this time there was a doctor named Yamamoto Shijo who often came and went from the Iijima house. He was called a doctor, but in truth he was more of a talker and joker than a man of deep medicine.

Other doctors might carry pills or powders in their cases, but Shijo was the sort of man who might carry tricks for his hands and strange toys instead. He liked jokes, easy talk, and the company of women. Among his friends was a young

masterless samurai named Hagiwara Shinzaburo. Shinzaburo lived in Nezu near Shimizudani, where he had some fields and row houses, and he lived quietly on that income. He was twenty-one, very handsome, and still unmarried, but he was shy, stayed indoors, and spent his days reading books in silence.

One fine day Shijo came to see him and said, “The weather is good. Let us go out to Kameido and look at the famous plum trees. After that, we can stop at Iijima Heizaemon’s villa. You care nothing for women because you are too shy, but for a young man there is no better joy than women. In that villa there are only two of them, the young lady and her maid, and both are worth seeing. The plum flowers are pretty, but they do not move or speak. Women both move and speak, and for me that is better. Come with me.”

Shinzaburo was quiet, but he allowed himself to be led away. The two men went first to see the flowering plums, and after that they stopped at the villa. Shijo called out at the gate, and soon Oyone came. She welcomed him warmly and said she had wondered why he had stayed away so long. Shijo answered with easy lies and smiles. “We went to see plum blossoms,” he said, “but I was still not satisfied, so I came here to see the blossoms in your garden too.”

Oyone opened the gate and brought them in. She gave them tea and thanked them for coming, saying that the house was lonely with only herself and Otsuyu in it. Shijo talked without rest, praised the place, pulled out the drink he had brought, and joked like a man on a stage. Then he turned toward his friend and began to praise him in a loud voice, as if he wanted someone else to hear. “My friend here is a fine man,” he said. “He makes poems, reads books, and pretends to be calm. But he should come out into the world more.”

In the next room Otsuyu heard the voices and looked through a small crack in the sliding door. The moment she saw Shinzaburo, she felt as if something had struck her whole body. He was the very image of the kind of young man a girl might dream of: gentle face, bright eyes, and a quiet, noble air. Her cheeks burned red at once. She closed the door, then opened it again and pretended to look at the plum blossoms in the garden, but really she was only stealing quick looks at him. She stepped back, then came forward again, too shy to stay and too eager to leave.

Shijo saw everything. He laughed and said, "Shinzaburo, the young lady has been looking at you for some time now. She pretends to look at the flowers, but her eyes are here. There, she is gone again. Now she is back. In and out, in and out, like a bird at water." Just then Oyone came with food and warm sake. She said, with a smile, that the young lady wished to offer them a small meal and hoped they would stay and enjoy themselves. Shijo answered at once, thanked her, and begged that the young lady herself might come too.

Oyone went back, and after a short time she returned with Otsuyu. The girl came in behind her maid, sat down shyly, and spoke only a few soft words of greeting to Shijo. She moved where Oyone moved and stayed close behind her like a frightened child. But though her face was lowered, she looked sideways at Shinzaburo again and again. And Shinzaburo, for his part, was so taken by her beauty that he could hardly think. The room, the food, the voices, even the light of the late day seemed far away to him.

Time passed until evening. Lamps began to shine here and there, but Shinzaburo still did not say he wished to leave. At last Shijo said, "We have stayed long enough. Let us go now." Oyone smiled and answered, "Why hurry? You may stay the night." Shinzaburo spoke at once. "I do not mind staying," he said. Shijo laughed and said that perhaps he alone would become the hated one if he took his friend away, but sometimes the hated man was the kind man. Even so, he rose to leave.

Then Shinzaburo said he wished to use the toilet before going. Oyone led him down the hall and, as they passed Otsuyu's room, she said in a low voice, "Please step in there for a moment and rest after." Then she went ahead and quietly placed a clean towel in Otsuyu's hands. "When he comes out," she whispered, "pour water for him and give him this." Oyone meant no evil. She only thought that her lonely young mistress might feel a little joy from such a harmless meeting.

When Shinzaburo came out, Otsuyu stood there with the water bucket in both hands, but she was so full of shame that she could not speak. "Thank you," he said gently, holding out his hands. She tried to pour the water, but she was trembling and her eyes were confused, so the water went to the wrong place and his hands

moved here and there before they were finally washed. Then she held out the towel, but did not let it go. Shinzaburo reached for it, and because she still held it, his hand closed over hers. Her face turned bright red, yet instead of pulling away, she softly held his hand in return.

In the other room Shijo began to wonder what had delayed his friend so long. He called, "Shinzaburo, where are you? It is time to go." Oyono tried to cover the matter and laughed as she spoke to him. "Do not worry," she said. "You know how shy the young lady is. Nothing is wrong." A little later Shinzaburo returned, and the two men prepared to leave. As he went, Otsuyu looked at him with deep feeling and said in a low voice, "If you do not come again, I shall die." Those words stayed in Shinzaburo's ears, and from that moment he could not forget them.

Part 3

While these things were happening at the villa, life at the Iijima house had its own trouble. O-Kuni, now strong in the house, did as she pleased and pushed her will as far as she could. Among the servants there was a new sandal-bearer named Kosuke. He was about twenty-one or twenty-two, white-skinned, neat in face, and very good-looking. On the twenty-second day of the third month, Lord Heizaemon was off duty and stood in the garden looking here and there when he noticed this new young man.

"You there," Heizaemon said, "are you the one called Kosuke?" The young servant bowed low and answered, "Yes, my lord. I am Kosuke, a new man in your service." Heizaemon looked at him with interest. "I have heard a good report of you already. They say you work hard in light and dark, never hiding from labor, and everyone seems to like you. You are too fine in face and manner to remain only a sandal-bearer."

Kosuke thanked him and then, with honest concern, asked after his lord's health. He had heard that Heizaemon had not felt well and said he had worried about it. Heizaemon answered kindly that it was nothing serious, then asked where Kosuke had served before. Kosuke began to tell his story in a plain, direct way. He said

that he had worked in many places, first at a metal shop in Yotsuya for about a year, then at a smith's place in Shinbashi for three months, and after that at a picture-book shop, where he had stayed only ten days before leaving.

Heizaemon laughed a little and said, "If you tire of work so quickly, you will never stay long in service anywhere." But Kosuke shook his head and answered that it was not because he was easily bored. His uncle, he said, kept sending him to town houses and merchant places, while he himself wanted only one thing. "I wished from the start to enter a warrior house," he said. "When my uncle sent me to those other places, I ran away on purpose. I wanted a samurai house and nothing else."

"A samurai house?" Heizaemon asked. "That is harder, more strict, and less easy than merchant work. Why would you choose that?" Kosuke lifted his face at once and spoke with real fire. "Because I want to learn swordsmanship, my lord. I heard that your honored house is famous in the Shinkage school, and I wished with all my heart to enter either your house or the Kurihashi house. When at last I was taken in here, I felt my wish had been answered. I hoped that, when you had time, I might beg a little teaching from you."

Then, because he was a simple young man and spoke too freely, he said more than he should. If there had been a young master in the house, he said, he might have served close by and learned while watching the lessons. But there was only a daughter at the Yanagishima villa, and that did him no good at all. "If that daughter had been a son, it would have been far better for me," he said. "In a warrior house, daughters are of no use." The words were rough, and he knew it at once.

He bowed low in shame and hurried to ask pardon. Heizaemon, however, laughed loudly. "You are a bold fellow," he said. "But there is truth in what you say. In a warrior house, a daughter cannot take a son's place." Kosuke, glad that no anger had come, begged again that he might be taught some sword work when his lord had leisure. Heizaemon told him that matters of office had kept him busy and that the old practice hall was no longer used as before, yet when time allowed, he would teach him something.

After that, Heizaemon asked about Kosuke's family. The young man said that the uncle he had spoken of was not a true blood uncle at all, but only a man who had taken over his father's shop after things had fallen apart. When asked about his mother, Kosuke answered that she had left him when he was four years old and gone away to Echigo. Heizaemon said that this sounded cold and cruel, but Kosuke still defended her. He said she had not gone from heartlessness, but because his father had lived badly and had driven her to despair.

"And your father?" Heizaemon asked. "Is he still alive?" At this Kosuke grew quiet. His face fell, and after a little silence he said, "No, my lord. He died long ago." He added that he had no brothers and no close kin, and that after his father's death no one had been there to raise him. So the man who took over the family business had taken him in from the time he was four. "He brought me up," Kosuke said. "That is why I call him uncle now. And now I have come to your house. Please look on me kindly for a long time."

As he said this, tears suddenly fell from his eyes. Heizaemon was moved in spite of himself. "You are a good son," he said. "Many boys your age do not even remember the day of a parent's death, yet when someone asks about your father, you weep at once. Was it only lately that he died?" Kosuke answered, still wiping his eyes, that his father had died when he himself was only four years old. "Then you can hardly remember your parents' faces at all," said Heizaemon. Kosuke said that was true, yet when he had reached eleven years of age, his uncle had at last told him the story.

"How did your father die?" Heizaemon asked. Kosuke lowered his head and spoke the words with pain. "He was cut down." Then he broke into deeper tears and had to force the rest out little by little. It had happened eighteen years before, he said, in front of a sword shop called Fujimura-ya Shinbei in Hongo Sanchome. Heizaemon's face changed, though only a little. He asked the date. "The eleventh day of the fourth month," Kosuke answered.

"And what was your father's name?" Heizaemon asked. Kosuke replied, "He had once served the Koide house as a horse guard. His stipend had been one hundred and fifty koku. His name was Kurokawa Kozo." At those words

Heizaemon felt as if someone had struck him in the chest. He counted the years in his mind. There was no mistake. The violent drunkard he had killed in front of the sword shop long ago had been this boy's father.

For a moment his heart turned dark within him. This young man had come into his house to serve him, not knowing that the very lord before whom he bowed was his father's killer. Yet Heizaemon showed nothing on his face. He only said, "That must be a bitter sorrow." Kosuke lifted his head and answered with great force, "Yes, my lord. I wish to avenge my father. But the man who killed him was a fine samurai, and unless I learn swordsmanship, how can I ever face such an enemy? Since I was eleven, I have longed to learn. Now at last I am in your house, and I am truly happy. Teach me, and when I have learned enough, I will risk my life to strike down my father's enemy."

Heizaemon looked at him closely and asked, "But you do not know the face of that enemy. Suppose he appeared before you now, right at the end of your nose. Suppose someone said to you, 'There is the man.' What would you do then?" Kosuke answered at once, with fierce feeling. "What could I do? Even if he were a great swordsman, even if he were a high samurai, I would throw myself on him. If I could do nothing else, I would tear out his throat with my teeth." Heizaemon could not help admiring such wild, faithful feeling.

"You are a man of spirit," he said. "Do not worry. If the day comes when your enemy is known, this Iijima will stand beside you and help you take revenge. Keep yourself safe. Serve well. Grow strong." Kosuke's whole face shone with joy. "My lord, will you truly help me?" he cried. "If you stand with me, then even ten enemies would not frighten me. I thank you. I thank you from my heart." Heizaemon watched him and felt both pity and pain. From that day on, he kept a secret thought in his heart: when the proper time came, he himself would tell Kosuke the truth and let the boy strike him down.

Part 4

After that first meeting, Hagiwara Shinzaburo could think of nothing except

Otsuyu. In truth, very little had happened between them. They had not spoken long, and they had not shared a bed or made any open promise. They had only touched hands over the towel, and yet that small touch had gone deeper into his heart than many long nights of love might have done. Men and women of that time were often more reserved, and because they were reserved, a single touch could become a whole life in the mind.

Shinzaburo was not a bold man. He could not simply go alone to the villa and ask to see her. The thought of being found there by Iijima's servants filled him with shame and fear. So he waited for Doctor Shijo, thinking that if the doctor came again, he could go with him and offer thanks as an excuse. But Shijo did not come. He had noticed enough that day to understand danger, and he was not the sort of man to place his neck under a sword if he could avoid it.

So the months went by. The second month passed, then the third, then the fourth, and still Shijo stayed away. During all that time Shinzaburo grew thinner with longing. He sat with books before him, but he did not read them. Food was set before him, but he ate almost nothing. The rooms of his house seemed dark, and each day felt longer than the one before.

One day a man named Tomozo came to speak with him. Tomozo lived in one of the small row houses on Shinzaburo's land with his wife, and he often looked after little matters in the house. He saw at once how weak and pale his master had become. "Sir," he said, "what has happened to you these days? You hardly touch your meals. Even your noon food sits untouched. At your age, this is no good."

Shinzaburo only answered, "I do not want to eat." But Tomozo kept talking in his easy way. He said that a young man should go out more and take pleasure in life, and he reminded him of that day in the second month when he had gone with Doctor Shijo to see the plum blossoms. Those words touched the very place Shinzaburo wished to hide. After a little silence, Shinzaburo suddenly asked, "Tomozo, do you still like fishing?"

Tomozo brightened at once. "Like it? I love it better than rice," he said. Then Shinzaburo replied, "In that case, let us go fishing together." Tomozo was surprised, because he knew his master cared nothing for fishing. Still, he was

pleased and asked where they should go. Shinzaburo answered with forced calm, "To Yokokawa near Yanagishima. I hear the fish are good there."

Tomozo laughed and said that no great fish would be waiting there, but he quickly made ready all the same. He prepared food, filled a bamboo tube with sake, and hired a boat from a riverside house near Shohei Bridge. The two men got into the boat and set out, but Shinzaburo had no real interest in lines, hooks, or fish. His heart had only one purpose. He wished to go near the Iijima villa and, if fortune allowed, catch even the smallest sign of Otsuyu.

As the boat moved on, he drank too much sake and soon lay down inside it as if he had fallen asleep. Tomozo fished by himself for a long time and let his master rest. The day moved slowly toward evening. From time to time Tomozo looked at him and called softly, fearing that the river wind might chill him. At last Shinzaburo opened his eyes and looked around in confusion.

"Where are we?" he asked. Tomozo answered, "At Yokokawa." The moment he heard that name, Shinzaburo raised himself and looked toward the bank. There he saw a gate and a double fence of bamboo, and at once he knew the place. It was the Iijima villa. His whole body trembled, but he said only, "Bring the boat to the side for a moment. There is somewhere I must go."

Tomozo at once said that he would go too, but Shinzaburo stopped him. "Wait in the boat," he said. "Do not follow me." Tomozo laughed and teased him, saying that a companion only troubled a man in matters of love, but he obeyed and stayed behind. Shinzaburo stepped onto the bank, walked toward the gate, and stood there shaking as if with fever. Then, seeing that the gate was not fully closed, he pushed it gently and slipped inside.

Because he had been there once before, he still remembered the way. He went along the garden, passed the pond, and moved beside the hedge until he came near the four-and-a-half-mat room that had been Otsuyu's. At that same time Otsuyu herself had been thinking of him with all her strength. Since the day of their meeting she had grown sick with longing, and every face she saw seemed for a moment to become his. So when the real Shinzaburo suddenly appeared outside, she stared at him as if she had seen a spirit and whispered, "Is it truly you,

Shinzaburo?"

He answered in a low voice, "Please be quiet. I wished to come much sooner and thank you, but Doctor Shijo never came again, and I felt ashamed to appear alone." Otsuyu forgot all shame at once. Joy carried her beyond it. She reached out, took him by the hand, and drew him inside as if she feared he might vanish if she let him stand there another moment. Then, once he was with her, she could not even speak. She knelt by him, placed both hands upon his knees, and tears of pure happiness fell softly down.

Shinzaburo, seeing those tears, felt that nothing else in the world mattered. In that moment he stopped caring whether they were discovered or punished. They spoke together with deep feeling, and at last Otsuyu took out a precious incense box that had once belonged to her mother. It was a beautiful thing, with autumn fields and little insects worked into its surface. "Please keep this," she said. "Think of it as something from me." She gave him the lid, while she herself kept the lower part.

Just then the sliding door of the next room opened sharply, and Iijima Heizaemon appeared with a lantern in his hand. The light fell hard upon them both. Shinzaburo and Otsuyu were struck with terror, and for a moment neither could move. Heizaemon's voice was full of anger as he called his daughter out and demanded to know what man had entered his house. Shinzaburo bowed and gave his name, saying that he alone was to blame.

Then the father turned his wrath upon Otsuyu and accused her of asking to live in a quiet place only so that she could hide such shameful conduct from the world. Otsuyu cried that she was the guilty one and begged him to spare Shinzaburo. Shinzaburo, in the same breath, begged that Otsuyu be forgiven and that only he should die. In his rage Heizaemon drew his sword and said that those who shared such guilt must share one punishment. At that instant the blade came down, and Shinzaburo saw Otsuyu's head fall before him. Then the sword flashed toward his own face, and in horror he felt himself cut and thrown into darkness.

"Sir, sir, you are crying out in your sleep," Tomozo said. Shinzaburo opened his eyes with a gasp. He was still in the boat. Sweat covered his body, and the

evening air felt cold against his skin. "Tomozo," he said, still half lost in fear, "is my head still on my shoulders? Am I cut anywhere?" Tomozo stared at him and answered that there was not the smallest wound. Shinzaburo then understood that he had only dreamed the whole terrible scene, yet the dream had felt more real than waking life.

He wanted to leave that place at once. The dream was too dark, and he felt that some bad sign had shown itself. So he ordered Tomozo to return without delay. The boat went back, and when at last they reached home and stepped out, Tomozo happened to notice a small object lying near where they landed. "Sir," he said, "something has fallen here." Shinzaburo took it in his hand and looked closely. It was the lid of the incense box, the very same beautiful lid with autumn fields and insects, the one Otsuyu had given him in the dream. At that sight he stood frozen, unable to understand how a thing from a dream could be resting in his own hand.

Part 5

Iijima Heizaemon was a strong and able man, famous for good judgment and many skills. Above all, he was known for swordsmanship. In the Shinkage school he was spoken of as a master, and men respected both his courage and his clear mind. He was now about forty years old, still handsome and full of force. Yet for all his wisdom, there was one grave mistake in his house: the woman O-Kuni.

O-Kuni had become his mistress, but she was not faithful to him. In secret she had drawn close to Genjiro, the second son of the neighboring family. She feared eyes and gossip, so she prepared her meetings with care. At the garden side there was a small door in the fence, and when Heizaemon was away on night duty, she left that door open so Genjiro could come in quietly. Because all inner matters of the house were under her control, no one clearly knew what she was doing.

On the twenty-first night of the seventh month, Heizaemon was again away from home. Before dark O-Kuni gave orders in her usual easy voice and said that the night was too hot to sleep without air. She told the servants to leave a rain shutter slightly open, and by the side of the little garden door she placed wooden

clogs in a neat pair. Then she waited. Late in the night Genjiro came barefoot across the stepping stones and climbed in through the opening exactly as she had planned.

“You are late,” O-Kuni said when he entered her room. “I wondered what had happened to you.” Genjiro sat down beside her and answered that he had wished to come sooner, but people in his own house had stayed awake in the heat, waving fans and talking, and he had not been able to slip away. Even now he was uneasy. “Your lord is a sharp man,” he said. “If he noticed anything strange between us, we would be lost.”

O-Kuni smiled and said he worried too much. She reminded him that Heizaemon trusted him and liked him well enough already. Then she moved closer and spoke of the future. Since Otsuyu was gone from the house and there was no son, she said, the Iijima house would need an heir. She had already spoken in small ways for Genjiro. Heizaemon had said the young man was still too wild and unsteady, but O-Kuni did not stop there. Her mind had gone much farther.

At last she said the thing in her heart. “If you truly care for me,” she whispered, “then kill him.” Genjiro stared at her. Heizaemon was not only his neighbor. He was also an older man who had once helped him after his own bad conduct had led to disgrace. So he protested that he could not kill such a man, and in any case he was no swordsman great enough to face him. O-Kuni laughed at that and said she was not asking for a duel.

She had already worked out the whole plan. The next month, she said, Heizaemon and Genjiro were to go fishing together on the river. During that trip Genjiro could push him from the boat into the water. Heizaemon could not swim. As for the boatman, O-Kuni said he could be cut down afterward. Then Genjiro could report that the boatman had caused the lord’s death, kill him in anger, frighten the boat inn into silence, and return home. The death could be hidden for a time under the name of illness until the adoption was settled and Genjiro entered the Iijima house.

Greed and lust worked together in Genjiro’s mind, and little by little fear gave way. O-Kuni spoke of rich clothes, fine swords, and the wealth of the Iijima house,

which was greater than his own family's. She spoke of herself as well, saying that once he entered the house, she would stay by his side always. At last he nodded and said her plan was clever. She answered with pride that she had thought about it for three days and nights. The two of them bent close and went on whispering together.

But another man in the house had not fallen asleep. This was Kosuke, the young sandal-bearer who served with full loyalty and a brave heart. The heat had kept him awake, and he had gone out with a fan to cool himself in the garden. There he noticed that a small side door in the fence was moving in the wind though he believed it had been shut. Then he saw a pair of garden clogs placed there. At once suspicion rose in him, for he had already thought O-Kuni and the neighbor's son looked strange together.

He came softly across the ground and listened near the room. There he heard enough to understand that they were speaking of murder. The man he most wished to protect in all the world, Lord Heizaemon, was being discussed like prey. Rage burst up in him so strongly that he made a sound without meaning to. Genjiro heard it at once and whispered that someone was there. O-Kuni called out sharply, and when Kosuke answered, she stepped forward in anger and demanded to know why a mere gate servant had come creeping about the women's side of the house in the middle of the night.

Kosuke answered boldly that heat had brought him into the garden, but once there he had seen the open door and the clogs and had every right to ask questions. He said that a guard must watch more than only the front gate. If a thief entered the rear while the gatekeeper stared only ahead, what kind of service would that be? O-Kuni tried to drive him off, but he would not retreat. He said the neighbor's son had no proper business entering the house at such an hour while the master was away, and if his errand was not for the lord, then it must be some secret matter with O-Kuni herself.

Genjiro could not bear such words from a low servant. Yet he was careful enough not to appear guilty too soon. He stepped out and demanded what proof Kosuke had. Then he threw down a written note. It was indeed a message in

Heizaemon's own hand, asking Genjiro to come, even at night if necessary, to mend fishing tools for their planned outing. Kosuke read it and knew at once that he had been trapped. The paper was real, and against it he had only what he had heard with his own ears.

Even so, he did not bend. He said that if the letter were absent, he would have won the quarrel at once, but with the letter in hand he had lost in outward form only. "Ask your own heart who is wrong," he said. "I serve this house. I do not speak without cause." Those words only angered Genjiro more. O-Kuni handed him part of a heavy bow, and with it Genjiro struck Kosuke again and again. Kosuke cried out and rolled on the floor, but even while he begged him to stop, he kept saying that the truth still lived in Genjiro's breast.

Genjiro beat him without mercy. Blow followed blow until dark blood ran from the edge of Kosuke's shaved forehead. At last Genjiro said he would spare the servant's life this once but would never forgive such talk again. Then, shaken and angry, he declared he would not come to the house anymore and hurried away across the stones. O-Kuni, instead of pitying the wounded man, cursed him for bringing trouble, shoved him hard out into the garden, and shut the house against him.

Kosuke lay there in pain, shaking with anger and helpless shame. He thought of reporting everything to Heizaemon at once, but he knew how weak his position was. The other side had a written note. He had only secret words heard in the dark. Genjiro was a gentleman's son, while he himself was only a sandal-bearer. If the matter were brought forward, he might lose his place, and if he were driven out, no one would remain near the lord to protect him.

So as he bled in the night, another thought grew in him. If warning could not save his master, then perhaps only killing the guilty pair could do so. He told himself that he should take a spear, strike down both O-Kuni and Genjiro, and then open his own belly afterward. The decision rose like iron inside him. Young as he was, Kosuke had the heart of a man who would throw away his life for duty, and by the end of that terrible night he had almost fixed himself upon that path.

Part 6

While Kosuke was suffering in the Iijima house, Shinzaburo was sinking deeper into love and grief. He stayed alone and thought only of Otsuyu. On the twenty-third day of the sixth month, Doctor Shijo finally came to visit him after a long silence. The doctor smiled as usual when he entered, but he stopped when he saw Shinzaburo's face. The young man had grown pale, thin, and weak, and it was plain that his body had been worn down by longing.

"You look very unwell," Shijo said. "What has happened to you?" Shinzaburo answered with pain in his voice. He said that since the middle of the fourth month he had been lying in bed much of the time and could hardly eat at all. Then he complained that Shijo had been cruel to stay away so long. He said he had wished to take a box of sweets to the Iijima villa and offer thanks, but without Shijo he had not dared to go.

Shijo heard this and at once decided to cut the bond. He was afraid that if Heizaemon learned the truth, the blame would fall on him for bringing the two young people together. So he chose a hard lie. "You need not think of going there now," he said. "The young lady is dead." Shinzaburo stared at him in shock and could hardly breathe.

Shijo went on in a careless voice, though the words were cruel. He said that Otsuyu had fallen deeply in love at that first meeting and that this had somehow come to her father's knowledge. Because of that danger, Shijo himself had stayed away in fear. Then, he said, when he later visited the Iijima house, he had heard that Otsuyu had died and that her maid Oyone had died soon after her. He even added, half joking, that to be too handsome was a kind of sin, since a woman had now died for love of Shinzaburo.

Before Shinzaburo could ask where she had been buried, Shijo took his leave and went out. Shinzaburo sat still in silence after the doctor had gone. Then grief rose over him like a dark wave. He began to think that Otsuyu had truly loved him, had longed for him, and had died because she could not see him again. Because he was a soft-hearted man, this thought struck him with terrible force, and from

that day his sickness grew much worse.

He wrote Otsuyu's common name on a tablet and placed it before his household shrine. Every day he offered prayers for her soul. He passed the time in chanting and deep sadness, and the world around him lost all taste. At last the season of Bon came, and on the thirteenth night of the seventh month he arranged the spirit shelf and made ready for the dead. Then, when evening grew cool, he sat on the veranda in a white summer robe, holding a fan and looking up at the bright moon.

As he sat there, he heard the rare sound of wooden sandals outside the hedge. He looked up at once. First he saw a woman of about thirty carrying a lantern decorated with peonies and other flowers made in bright cloth. Behind her walked a girl of seventeen or eighteen in a long-sleeved robe of soft autumn color, with red under-clothes showing at the neck and a painted fan in her hand. In the moonlight that second figure looked exactly like Otsuyu.

Shinzaburo rose in wonder and leaned forward to see more clearly. At that same moment the woman in front stopped and said, "Why, Lord Hagiwara, how strange this is." It was Oyone. Shinzaburo cried out in surprise and asked how she had come there. But Oyone answered with equal surprise and said that she had heard that he was the one who had died. Shinzaburo replied that he had heard the same false thing about her and Otsuyu.

He opened the small side door and asked them to come in at once. When they entered, he told Oyone that Doctor Shijo had come and said that both she and Otsuyu were dead. Oyone was angry at once and said that the doctor had told her the same lie in the other direction. Then she explained the truth. Otsuyu had spoken too often of Shinzaburo, her father had grown suspicious, and because Okuni was always ready to make trouble, the house had used Shijo's lie to separate them and force them to forget.

Oyone said that the plan had failed. Otsuyu had even spoken of shaving her head and becoming a nun, and when Heizaemon later pressed her to accept a husband, she had refused with all her strength. Because of that, great trouble had broken out in the house. In the end, she and Otsuyu had both been put out and had gone to live in a poor little place at Yanaka Misaki. Oyone said she now did small

handwork to support them, while Otsuyu spent her days in prayer and sorrow.

Shinzaburo listened with deep feeling and showed them the memorial tablet he had made, proving that he too had prayed for Otsuyu every day. Oyone thanked him warmly and said that Otsuyu would be moved beyond words to know such constancy. Then she spoke more directly. She said that Otsuyu had told her many times that she cared nothing for disgrace, poverty, or even death, so long as she might receive Shinzaburo's love. At last she asked, in a quiet but clear voice, whether Otsuyu might remain in the house that very night.

Shinzaburo answered that he himself would gladly receive her, but there was one difficulty. In one of his row houses lived a man called Hakuodo Yusai, a reader of faces and fortunes, who often concerned himself with his affairs and made a great fuss over everything. So, he said, if they wished to come, they should use the back way and enter quietly without being seen. Oyone agreed, and that night both women stayed. Before dawn they slipped away, and from then on they came again each night, in rain and in wind alike, always leaving before morning.

From the thirteenth night to the nineteenth, seven nights passed in this way. During those nights Shinzaburo and Otsuyu became closer than ever. All shame disappeared between them. They sat together like husband and wife, spoke softly through the long dark hours, and seemed to forget the whole outer world. Shinzaburo was completely lost in love and cared nothing for danger.

But Tomozo, who lived in one of the row houses and watched over small matters for Shinzaburo, began to grow suspicious. Night after night he heard women's voices from his master's room, though no women had ever openly entered the house. Thinking that some bad woman might be deceiving his gentle master, he slipped out in secret and went near the side of the house to look in. Inside, under the hanging mosquito net, he saw Shinzaburo and Otsuyu sitting close together on bedding like a true married pair. Otsuyu was leaning against Shinzaburo's knee, asking whether he would take her in if her father cast her out, and he was answering with loving care when Tomozo bent farther to see her face. In that instant he turned white with terror, cried, "A ghost, a ghost!" and ran wildly off toward the house of Hakuodo Yusai.

Part 7

In the Iijima house, Kosuke spent that night in deep pain after hearing O-Kuni and Genjiro's secret plan. He went back to his room and thought that matters had now gone too far to leave untouched. In his loyal heart, only one road seemed open. If he could not save his lord by warning him, then he must kill the guilty man and woman with his own hands. He told himself that even if he died after, even if he had to cut his own belly on the spot, it would still be better than letting disaster fall upon Lord Heizaemon.

The next morning Heizaemon returned home from duty. The weather was still hot, and O-Kuni stood by him with a fan as if she were the most faithful woman in the world. She spoke softly, asked after his health, and said she worried every day that the summer heat might trouble him. Then, when he asked whether anyone had called in his absence, she told him that Aikawa Shingobei had come and was waiting to see him. Heizaemon guessed that the old man must have come again about some family matter and said he should be shown in.

Aikawa came in with all his usual noise and ceremony. He bowed, greeted Heizaemon at length, complained of the heat, and thanked O-Kuni for some earlier kindness before turning at last to the true matter. He said he had a serious request and begged that the people nearby might be sent away first. When the room had been cleared, he still hesitated. He kept saying that the matter was hard to speak and begged again and again that Heizaemon would not laugh at him or look down on him.

At last he explained. His only daughter O-Toku had long been ill, and no doctor had been able to say clearly what troubled her. He had worried over her, prayed for her, and tried one thing after another, until finally, the night before, she had confessed the truth. She was in love. Aikawa, even while speaking, blushed and fanned himself harder, saying that he felt shame as a father but could no longer ignore the matter.

The man she loved, he said, was none other than Kosuke, the young servant in

the Iijima house. He had heard Heizaemon praise the young man's loyalty so often that all the women in his own house had begun to praise him too. The maidservants said Kosuke was good-looking and gentle. The old nurse praised him as a man of honest heart. In time O-Toku herself had begun to admire him deeply, not only for his face, Aikawa said, but because she believed that a man loyal to his lord would also be kind to his parents and true to his wife.

Aikawa then gave his daughter's own reasoning. Their house was small, he said, and if he took in some stranger from another family as an adopted son, there was no promise that such a man would treat him well in old age. O-Toku feared that if a cold or greedy husband entered the house, both she and her father would suffer. Therefore she wished, if possible, to marry a man of tested character even if he was poor. For that reason she had set her heart on Kosuke and now lay sick with love.

When Aikawa finished, Heizaemon was pleased. He said it was a good and honorable request and that he wished to help. Aikawa was overjoyed and cried out in thanks at once, but Heizaemon said that one thing still remained. He must speak to Kosuke himself and hear the young man's answer. Aikawa, eager and restless, begged that this not become complicated. He said that Kosuke was such a loyal fellow that if Heizaemon ordered him to go, he would surely go. He even asked that the formal gifts be exchanged the very next day and that Kosuke be brought to his house soon, so O-Toku might see him and recover her strength.

After Aikawa left in high spirits, Heizaemon at once asked for Kosuke to be called. O-Kuni answered that he was unwell and had shut himself up, but Heizaemon said that did not matter and ordered him brought anyway. Kosuke had been beaten badly the night before, and the wound on his forehead made him ashamed to appear. Yet when he heard that his lord had called, he forgot his pain and came at once. That was the sort of man he was.

Heizaemon told everyone else to go away and had Kosuke come close. Then he looked up and suddenly noticed the wound. "What is this on your forehead?" he asked. "Have you been fighting?" Kosuke answered quickly that he had not fought with anyone. He said that while passing beneath the long row house of the

Miyabe family on an errand, a roof tile had fallen and struck him. Heizaemon did not fully believe that story, but he did not press further at once.

Instead he began to advise him in a serious tone. A man in service, he said, must never let himself be drawn into quarrels. Kosuke was a straight and honest fellow, but when crooked men came at him, he must learn to step aside instead of crashing into them head-on. Patience was the heart of duty. One must endure even when the heart felt as if it were being cut by a blade. Since a servant's body had already been offered to his lord, he must guard it carefully and use it only in loyalty.

Those words entered Kosuke's heart one by one. As he listened, tears came into his eyes. Then Heizaemon told him the matter openly. Aikawa's daughter O-Toku, now eighteen, had fallen in love with him and wished to take him as an adopted son and husband. It was an excellent chance, he said, and a clear rise in life. Kosuke should be glad. But Kosuke, hearing this, stood in confusion for a moment and then said plainly, "I do not want it."

Heizaemon was astonished. He said that such a thing was beyond foolishness. What better fortune could a poor young man hope for than to enter a proper house and live as a samurai? But Kosuke only begged more strongly to remain where he was. He said that he wanted to stay by Heizaemon's side all his life, clinging there if need be, and that even for a moment he did not wish to be sent away. His voice shook, but his feeling was true.

Heizaemon answered that this could not be. He had already given his word and even struck the gold pledge. If Kosuke refused now, Heizaemon himself would be shamed before Aikawa. Kosuke, still desperate, said that even a pledge should not decide such a thing. Then Heizaemon grew stern and said that if Kosuke meant to defy his lord's command, he would be dismissed from service altogether. At that, Kosuke lost all color. To leave the house was the one thing he could not bear, because he believed death waited for his lord the moment he himself was gone.

At last Heizaemon softened and admitted that perhaps he should have spoken to him sooner before giving the promise. He even put his hands to the floor in apology and asked him to go. Kosuke, seeing his lord humble himself in that way, could no longer resist openly. He said that if such was the command, then he

would obey in form. Yet inside he thought that once he left, O-Kuni and Genjiro would surely kill Heizaemon. Therefore another resolve became fixed in him. Before he could be sent away, he must strike them down that very night and then die himself.

Because of that dark thought, his face turned pale, and tears ran down again as he looked at his master. Heizaemon, not understanding the cause, said that Aikawa's house was only at Suidobata, almost at their very noses, and that Kosuke could come and go every day if he wished. There was no need to act as though he were being sent to a distant province. Still Kosuke could not calm himself. He bowed low and then, with deep feeling, began to speak of other matters that had long troubled him.

He reminded Heizaemon that a fishing trip to Nakagawa had been planned for the fourth day of the next month. Because the lady Otsuyu had died only recently, he begged that the outing be stopped. He said he could not explain why, but he feared some injury might come if the trip were carried through. Then he added another plea. Since Heizaemon often drank until he slept heavily, Kosuke begged him to be careful and never let his guard fall. He even reminded him to keep taking the medicine that had come from Fujita and asked that it be used every other day.

Heizaemon listened with a half-smile and said that Kosuke was talking as though he were going on a long journey. There was no need for such anxious words, he said, and no danger to speak of. If the fishing seemed unlucky, it could be given up. He told him not to worry so much and to think instead of the good fortune now opening before him. But Kosuke, hearing those calm words, only felt more strongly that his lord knew nothing at all of the black net closing around him.

Part 8

Tomozo ran out in terror after seeing the woman in Shinzaburo's room. At first he thought he would go straight to Hakuodo Yusai, but fear seized his whole body so strongly that he could not bring himself to knock at anyone's door in the middle of the night. He hurried back to his own house instead, crept inside like a hunted

animal, and lay down without speaking a word to his wife. Even under his blanket he shook from head to foot. He did not truly sleep. He only waited in misery for the sky to grow pale.

As soon as morning came, he rushed to Yusai's house and called out in a voice that still trembled. "Master, master, please open the door." From inside came the old man's sleepy reply, asking who was making such noise so early. "It is Tomozo," he answered. "Please open quickly." Yusai undid the fastening and said that such early rising did not suit a man like Tomozo. But when he saw the servant's white face and frightened eyes, he understood that something serious had happened.

Tomozo begged him to speak softly and then blurted out the whole matter in broken words. He said that Lord Hagiwara was in dreadful danger. He reminded Yusai that both of them lived on Shinzaburo's land and owed him a debt of gratitude. Tomozo himself, he said, worked his fields, cleaned the grounds, and ran errands, while his wife washed clothes and helped in many small ways. Because of that kindness, he could not keep silent now. Every night, he said, a woman had been staying with Shinzaburo.

Yusai was not greatly shocked at first. He said that a young and handsome bachelor might well have women come to him. But Tomozo shook his head violently and said this was no ordinary matter. He had gone out late on business, returned after midnight, and heard women's voices from inside the house. When he looked in, he saw his master under the mosquito net with a beautiful woman beside him. She spoke in a tender voice, begging him not to cast her aside, and Shinzaburo answered that even if his parents turned against him, he would still take her as his wife.

"That itself was enough to surprise me," Tomozo said, "but what I saw next froze my blood." He then described the woman as she had truly appeared to him. Her face was blue-white. Her body was thin like a dead branch. The lower part of her form seemed lost in darkness, and her hands, all bone and skin, clung around Shinzaburo's neck. Beside her stood another woman with the round hair of a maid, and she too was little more than skin over bone. When that second figure rose and moved toward the window, Tomozo saw that her shape was wrong as well, and he

fled before she could reach him.

Yusai listened and asked more than once whether this tale could be trusted. Tomozo became almost angry at the doubt. He said there was no reason in the world for him to invent such a thing, and if Yusai still thought it false, he should go and see with his own eyes that very night. Then he asked the question that mattered most. "If a living man sleeps night after night with a ghost," he said, "will he die?" Yusai's face grew grave at once. He answered that he surely would. The dead are full of dark and unclean force, he said, and if a living man joins himself to such a being, even a long life will be cut short.

Tomozo then urged him to look at Shinzaburo's face and see whether the sign of death was already there. Yusai nodded. He said Shinzaburo had been entrusted to the care of old friends ever since his father's time, so he could not ignore the matter. Still, he warned Tomozo very strictly not to spread the story to anyone. Tomozo promised that he had not even told his wife and would keep silent. By then the sky had become fully light, so the two men set out together and went to Shinzaburo's house.

When they called at the door, Shinzaburo welcomed them and asked what business had brought them so early. Yusai answered that he wished to examine his face properly in the fresh light of dawn. Shinzaburo laughed a little and said that since they lived on the same ground, such a thing could be done at any time. But Yusai replied that some signs showed themselves best when the sun was just rising. Then he took out his glass, looked long and carefully, and at last said in a heavy voice, "Lord Hagiwara, before twenty days pass, you will surely die."

Shinzaburo was deeply shaken by these words. He knew well that people often spoke of a death sign appearing before the end, and Yusai had a strong name as a reader of faces. So he asked, with real fear, whether there was any way at all to escape such a fate. Yusai answered that there was only one road. The woman who came to him every night must be driven away. Shinzaburo at once denied that any woman came, but Yusai replied that someone had seen the truth. Then Shinzaburo, seeing concealment was useless, admitted everything.

He said that the woman was Otsuyu, daughter of Iijima of Ushigome, and that

because of family trouble she was now living with her maid O-Yone in Yanaka Misaki. He explained that he had once believed her dead, then had met her again by chance, and since that time the two had met in secret night after night. He even confessed that he meant to make her his wife in the future. Yusai struck the floor with anger and said this was madness. If Shinzaburo had once heard that she was dead, then all the more reason existed to suspect that what visited him now was no living woman. He asked whether Shinzaburo had ever gone to Misaki and actually seen the house where she lived. Shinzaburo had not.

That answer troubled him at once. His face changed, and he said he would go there immediately and make certain of the truth. So he left the house and searched through Misaki, asking from place to place whether two women lived there alone, one a young lady and the other her maid. No one knew of such a pair. He kept asking until he could do no more, and on his way back he passed through the grounds of Shinbansui-in Temple. There, behind a hall, he noticed new graves. Before one of them stood a bright lantern decorated with peony flowers, left out in the weather. The instant he saw it, he knew it was the same lantern O-Yone had carried each night.

With his heart beating fast, he went around to the temple kitchen and asked the monks whose grave it was. They answered that it was the grave of the daughter of Iijima Heizaemon of Ushigome, who had died not long before. Then he pointed to the grave beside it and asked about that one too. They told him it belonged to the maid who had served the girl and had died soon after from the strain of nursing her. At those words his last hope vanished. He left the place in horror, ran back home, and told Yusai what he had found.

Yusai was greatly troubled and said that no stranger fate could be imagined. To be loved by a ghost was a terrible thing, and yet Shinzaburo had promised that ghost another meeting the next night. He begged Yusai to stay in the house and help him, but the old man refused at once. He said no price on earth would make him sleep under the same roof with such visitors. Still, he did not abandon him. Instead he wrote a letter to Ryoseki, the priest of Shinbansui-in, a holy man known for deep practice and spiritual power, and told Shinzaburo to go to him without

delay.

Shinzaburo went at once and was brought before the priest. Ryoseki was a man of about fifty-one, calm and severe, dressed in white and brown robes, and the sight of him alone made Shinzaburo bow his head. After reading Yusai's letter, the priest looked at him and said plainly that the sign of death was indeed upon him. Yet he also said that the spirit troubling him was not moved by hatred, but by deep love from a bond far older than this life. Because of that heavy tie, escape would be hard. Even so, he lent Shinzaburo a precious image of Kannon hidden in its little shrine, gave him a sacred text to read, and supplied many holy papers to place around the house. With Yusai's help, Shinzaburo pasted the papers in every direction and then sat alone inside his mosquito net, trying to read the strange holy words. Late that night he heard the familiar sound of high wooden clogs from the road, and when the sound stopped by the hedge, he looked through a hole in the shutter and saw O-Yone with the peony lantern and Otsuyu beside her exactly as before. But this time they could not enter. The holy papers blocked them, and though O-Yone tried the front and back, both ways were closed. Otsuyu wept outside in a voice full of sorrow, saying that after so many promises Shinzaburo had changed his heart, and while he listened in silent pain from within, the two women were forced at last to turn away.

Part 9

In one of the small row houses on Shinzaburo's land lived Tomozo and his wife, O-Mine. They were poor people and had long depended on Shinzaburo's kindness. He let them stay there without taking rent, and from time to time he even gave them small gifts, old clothes, or a little money. For that reason Tomozo did work around the place like a servant, though he was not a true servant in name. O-Mine also worked late into the night at sewing and other small tasks to help them live.

One night, after the holy papers had been placed around Shinzaburo's house, O-Mine was still at her work when she noticed something strange. Tomozo was inside the mosquito net, not sleeping, but whispering softly as if someone were

with him. At first she thought he was speaking in his sleep. Then she looked more carefully and felt a sharp rise of anger in her chest. A woman seemed to be there outside the net, speaking in a low voice.

O-Mine did not burst out at once. She was no longer a very young wife, and she held her jealousy in for a time. But the same thing happened again the next night, and then again the night after that. At last she could bear it no longer. When she entered the net beside him, she demanded to know who the woman was. Tomozo tried to put her off, saying only, "It is nothing," but that answer made her more angry than before.

"Nothing?" she said. "I work until late every night for this poor house, and while I do that, some woman comes creeping to you in the dark. If there is a reason, then speak clearly." Tomozo groaned and said he had wished to hide the matter only because she would be frightened. O-Mine answered that she was not a child and told him to speak. Then, seeing that he could not escape her questions, Tomozo told the truth.

He said that the visitors were no living women at all. They were the young lady who loved Shinzaburo and the maid who served her. For several nights they had come with the peony lantern and begged him to remove the holy papers from Shinzaburo's house. Tomozo said that only later had he understood what they truly were. Once he had gone around to the back and seen the little window covered with sacred writing, and then he knew that these women were the dead ones who could not enter because of that protection.

O-Mine turned pale and cried out in fear, but Tomozo went on. He described the fine young lady in her long-sleeved robe, the quiet maid, and the soft but sorrowful way they spoke. He said they bowed to him politely and begged for help like women in deep trouble, but that only made the thing more terrible. "Beautiful as they are," he said, "they are still ghosts. And if I remove those papers, Lord Hagiwara will surely die." O-Mine trembled, crossed her arms tightly over her chest, and said she wished never to see such visitors at all.

Yet after fear came another thought. O-Mine was poor, and poverty makes quick roads in the mind. She told Tomozo that if he could not refuse the ghosts

forever and could not safely help them for free, then he should ask for a heavy price. "Tell them this," she said. "We live only because of Lord Hagiwara's kindness. If harm comes to him, our own lives will be ruined too. So unless they bring enough money to support us after his death, the papers cannot be touched." Tomozo stared at her. "What ghost carries money?" he asked.

But O-Mine said that was exactly the clever part. If they could not bring money, then they would go away, and there would be no danger. If they somehow could bring it, then perhaps fortune itself had come to their poor house. At first Tomozo hesitated, but greed rose slowly in him. The thought of a hundred ryo, more money than people like them could ever hope to see, began to shine in his mind brighter than caution. By the end of their talk he was no longer thinking of right and wrong. He was thinking only of how rich they might become.

So the next day they waited for night with uneasy hearts. O-Mine said she would not show herself when the time came, but would hide in a closet and listen. Tomozo drank bowl after bowl of cheap sake so that he might speak without shaking too much. Still, when the hour grew late and the bell sounded across the quiet night, his courage fell away again. Then from the direction of the spring came the clear sound of high wooden clogs, and the peony lantern appeared just as before.

The maid came first and called his name in a soft voice. Tomozo answered through dry lips and invited them closer. The maid bowed and said that they had come again in deepest apology, for the young lady could not bear the pain of separation and begged once more that the holy papers be removed. Tomozo's whole body was cold, but he forced himself to speak the words O-Mine had prepared. He said that he and his wife lived only through Shinzaburo's favor, and if Shinzaburo died after the papers were removed, then they too would be ruined.

"So I cannot help for nothing," he said. "Bring me one hundred ryo, and then I will take the papers away." The maid and the young lady looked at each other in silence. For a time neither spoke. Then the maid turned gently toward Otsuyu and said that it was cruel to trouble a man who had done them no wrong. She even begged Otsuyu to give up Shinzaburo, saying that a love which brought such

misery to others should now be cut off. But Otsuyu only pressed her sleeve to her face and wept.

“I cannot give him up,” she said. “No matter what is asked, I must go to him.” The sight of her crying in that still, dark place was so sad that even Tomozo felt a moment’s pity. Yet greed had already entered his heart. The maid then said that she had no such sum ready at hand, but because her young lady wished it so strongly, she would somehow find it and bring it the next night. After that, she added, there was one more thing: Shinzaburo carried a sacred charm of Kannon, and as long as that remained on his body, the young lady still could not go near him. Tomozo must steal it in the daytime and throw it away.

Tomozo swallowed hard and said he would do it if the money truly came. The maid accepted his promise. Otsuyu, still crying, asked whether she must return again without seeing Shinzaburo, and the maid gently led her away. The peony lantern moved off into the dark, and the sound of the clogs slowly faded. Tomozo sat alone afterward, covered in cold sweat, knowing that he had just sold more than his honesty. He had sold his fear, his gratitude, and perhaps Shinzaburo’s life as well.

Part 10

After the ghosts had gone, Tomozo sat still for some time with his hands on his knees. The room felt close and wet, and he could hear O-Mine breathing inside the cupboard like a person hiding from fire. At last he struck the door softly and said, “They are gone now. Come out.” O-Mine opened the door only a little at first and peered into the room. Even after she saw that no one remained, she still came out slowly, as though the dead women might return the moment she stood up straight.

“What happened?” she asked. “I could hear your voices, but not every word.” Tomozo wiped the sweat from his face and told her the whole talk again from the beginning. He said the young lady had wept and begged not to be separated from Shinzaburo, and the maid had promised somehow to bring the one hundred ryo

on the next night. Then he added the new and more dangerous part. “The maid said there is still one thing in the way,” he said. “Lord Hagiwara keeps a sacred image of Kannon on his body, and as long as he wears it, she cannot go near him. She told me to steal it and throw it away.”

O-Mine listened with wide eyes. Fear came over her again, but greed came with it and stood beside it. “That may be even better than the money,” she said at last. “A golden image from a holy man must be worth a great deal.” Tomozo nodded and said he had once heard something about that image when it was shown in public. It was not a little toy, he said, but a truly valuable thing. Then the two of them began to talk like poor people who had suddenly seen a road to wealth opening in the dark.

“Could it be sold in Edo?” O-Mine asked. Tomozo shook his head at once. “Not here,” he said. “It would be too dangerous. But in some distant place, where no one knows it, it might bring a hundred or even two hundred ryo. And if it cannot be sold whole, it can still be melted down.” O-Mine’s face changed at those words. “Two hundred ryo,” she said softly. “With that, you and I could live in ease all our days.” Tomozo, hearing her say it aloud, felt his heart go fully over to evil.

Yet one difficulty remained. Shinzaburo kept the charm on his body always. He no longer went out, no longer bathed, and hardly even changed his clothes except in haste. So they had to find a way to make him remove it. O-Mine thought for a while and then smiled in a thin, clever way. “Tell him the heat is bad for his body,” she said. “Say that he must use water at once. If he fears going outside, then we will clear the three-mat room and let him wash there. While I scrub his back and make him bend forward, you can take the charm.”

Tomozo said it was a good plan, but he worried what he might put in the box after taking the image. If the box became too light, Shinzaburo might notice it. So he prepared beforehand. He found a little clay figure of Fudo of almost the same weight and kept it ready in his sleeve. The next day they heated water from early afternoon and waited for their chance. Tomozo then went to Shinzaburo and said, in the cheerful voice of a helpful servant, “Sir, the day is terribly hot. We have heated water. Please wash yourself.”

Shinzaburo refused at once. He said he had reasons and could not do such a thing. O-Mine came too and urged him with the worried face of a faithful old servant. She said his sleeping robe was wet with sweat and that if weather changed suddenly, he might fall ill. Tomozo added, "Master Yusai himself says that dirt invites sickness and evil things. If a man keeps himself clean, ghosts and demons cannot come near so easily." These words struck Shinzaburo where his fear lived. "Is that so?" he said. "Then perhaps I should wash, but only inside."

They quickly removed the mats in the little three-mat room and brought in a tub and buckets. Shinzaburo took off his robe and then removed the charm from his neck with great care. "This is a precious holy thing," he said. "Put it on the god shelf while I wash." Tomozo bowed, took the little shrine in both hands, and did exactly as he was told in outward form. Meanwhile O-Mine busied herself with the water and then stood behind Shinzaburo, telling him again and again to bend lower and face away. She rubbed at his shoulders and neck so carefully that he looked only forward and did not once turn back.

That was the moment Tomozo had been waiting for. He squeezed the cord and drew the contents partway out. Inside the dark little shrine, wrapped in black silk, lay the golden Kannon image. Even his greedy hands shook when he saw it. Still, he worked quickly. He slipped the real image into his robe, placed the clay Fudo in its place, closed the doors, and set the shrine up on the shelf again. Then he called to O-Mine not to wash the master too long or the hot water would make him dizzy. Shinzaburo soon rose, dried himself, and put on a fresh summer robe, feeling much better. He took back the charm without the least suspicion and sat down that evening inside the mosquito net, reading the sacred text as before.

Tomozo and O-Mine ran back to their own house full of joy. They opened the little shrine once more and looked at the stolen image again and again. "This is no common thing," O-Mine said. "Our luck has truly changed." But Tomozo, though pleased, began at once to see another danger. "As long as this stays in the house, the ghosts may not even be able to come near us tonight with the money," he said. "And if Lord Hagiwara dies after the papers are gone, people will search for the missing charm. They will first suspect Yusai or me. If they search this house and

find it, we are finished.”

O-Mine saw that he was right. After a little more talk they decided to bury it outside until all trouble had cooled. Tomozo found an old sweet-box, put the golden image carefully inside, and carried it to the field. There he dug deep into the earth, buried the box, and placed a bamboo marker above the spot so he could find it again later. Then he returned feeling lighter in one way and more wicked in another. He and O-Mine even drank a little together in celebration, and she hid again in the cupboard before the hour came, while he sat alone waiting for the dead.

The night grew still, and then the bell sounded from far away. Soon after that came the familiar clatter of high wooden clogs from the direction of the spring. Tomozo felt all the sake leave his body at once. The maid and Otsuyu appeared as before, pale and quiet, carrying the peony lantern through the dark. The maid bowed and said that they had troubled him many nights in a row and begged him once more to show pity. Tomozo managed to ask, with a shaking voice, whether they had brought the money and whether the holy charm no longer blocked their path.

“The charm has been dealt with,” the maid said. “And here is the money.” She held out a packet, and when Tomozo took it, the weight told him it was real gold. Fear did not leave him, but greed became stronger than fear. He climbed up by ladder to the back window and reached for the sacred papers with trembling hands. They did not come off easily. He pulled harder, the ladder shook beneath him, and suddenly he lost his footing and fell backward into the field, still clutching the torn paper in his hand. For a moment he could do nothing but whisper prayers through chattering teeth.

But the dead women were no longer stopped. Otsuyu looked at the open way with joy so deep that it almost seemed like life. “Now, my lady,” the maid said softly, taking her hand, “go in and tell Lord Hagiwara all the sorrow in your heart.” Together they moved to the window. Tomozo, still lying where he had fallen, watched through half-shut eyes as they slipped inside. The peony lantern swayed once in the dark, and then both women vanished into Shinzaburo’s room.

Part 11

On the twenty-fourth day, Lord Heizaemon was again away on night duty, and O-Kuni lay awake thinking of nothing but her own desire. She wanted only one thing in the world: to become one with Genjiro and cast off every barrier between them. The plan for the fourth day of the next month was already fixed in her mind. Heizaemon and Genjiro were to go fishing together on the Nakagawa River, and there Genjiro would push him into the water and let him drown. But now another danger stood in the way. Kosuke had heard their secret talk, and so O-Kuni's mind turned again and again to the same hard question: how could she drive him from the house, or better still, cause him to die by his lord's own hand?

She thought until her mind grew dull with heat and weariness. At last she dozed for a little while, but then her eyes opened suddenly in the dark. A sliding door two rooms away was moving. In those days even in summer the house was shut by paper doors and sliding screens, so every sound carried clearly in the still night. O-Kuni lay without moving and listened. The door opened softly, then another, and then she heard the faint sound of feet moving with great care.

She thought at first that perhaps some servant was still awake, but the steps were too light and too strange. A moment later she heard a small cupboard door shake, then the hard sound of metal. It was the sound of a lock being forced. O-Kuni's heart jumped, yet she did not cry out. After that came the soft closing of doors again, and then the whisper of cloth as someone slipped away toward the kitchen side of the house.

O-Kuni was a bold woman. She rose at once, lit a lamp, and went to see. No one was there. But the cupboard in the sitting room stood open, and from it an indigo silk money-belt had been pulled halfway out as if by hurried hands. When she examined the place more closely, she found that the lock on Heizaemon's writing chest had been twisted open and that the gold inside the belt was gone. A hundred me had vanished. For a moment even she was shaken, for the house felt empty and cold after such a thing.

But fear in O-Kuni never stayed fear for long. It quickly became cunning. She saw at once that this theft might save her. If she could use the missing gold as proof against Kosuke, then he could be cast as the thief. Once accused, he might be driven out, or, if fortune favored her, Heizaemon might cut him down in anger with his own sword. Holding that thought, she took the money-belt into her sleeve, went back to bed, and slept as calmly as if no crime had touched the house at all.

The next morning she spoke as though nothing had happened. She sent Kosuke away with a lunch box to meet his returning master, so he would be out of the house. After that a young retainer named Gensuke came out with a broom to sweep the garden. O-Kuni called him over in a friendly voice, gave him tea, and began talking of ordinary things. She asked how long he had served, praised his honesty, and then slowly turned the talk toward Kosuke.

“Kosuke has been here only since the fifth day of the third month,” she said, “and already he has grown proud because the lord favors him.” But Gensuke at once defended his companion. He said there was no better young man in the house. Kosuke worked in light and dark, he said, never held back from labor, and cared for the lord almost like a madman. When Gensuke himself had been ill, Kosuke had stayed awake through the night to nurse him and then had risen at dawn to serve as usual. Such a man, he said, was rare.

O-Kuni smiled, but her words grew sharper. She told Gensuke that he had been fooled. She said Kosuke had complained about him behind his back, saying that Gensuke was mean, jealous, and unwilling to teach a new servant anything. According to O-Kuni, Kosuke had even said that Gensuke ate all the good things himself and never shared them. The poor fellow was stunned by this lie. He protested that whenever tasty food came his way, he usually gave the larger share to Kosuke because he was younger and hungrier.

O-Kuni then dropped the last poison into his mind. “That is not all,” she said. “Kosuke steals from the lord. If you stay too close to him, you will be caught with him.” Gensuke, honest and simple, grew frightened at once and asked what had been stolen. O-Kuni answered that she knew for certain something from the lord’s room had been taken. Then she told him quietly to bring Kosuke’s writing box to

her without letting anyone know. Gensuke, never guessing that he was being used in a wicked trap, obeyed.

When he brought the box, O-Kuni opened it as if only to inspect it. Then, while speaking, she slipped the indigo money-belt from her sleeve and pushed it deep inside among Kosuke's things. After that she looked up and said, "This is terrible. The lord's precious article is here." She told Gensuke that the matter must stay secret for the moment and that the box should be returned exactly where it had been. Gensuke, now fully deceived, took it back with a troubled face.

Around the eighth hour, a little after three in the afternoon, Heizaemon returned home. Usually O-Kuni would stand beside him at once, fan him, and speak to him sweetly from the first moment. But now she sat with a dark face and heavy sighs. Heizaemon noticed it at once and asked whether she felt ill. O-Kuni then made her report. She said that during his absence a thief had entered, the money-belt had disappeared with the gold, the writing chest had been broken, and because the kitchen-side shutter alone seemed to have been open, she feared the thief might be someone within the house itself.

Heizaemon said there was no need for wild suspicion. None of the household, he thought, had the nerve or skill to steal such a sum. But O-Kuni pressed the matter. She said she had already prayed, consulted an omen, and heard that the thief must indeed be one of their own people. So servants and maids were called one by one. Their boxes and baskets were brought out to the veranda and opened under the lord's eyes. Heizaemon still showed no true anger. He looked through their things with the half-amused patience of a man who expected to find nothing.

At last O-Kuni said that the men's side should also be searched and called for Gensuke and Kosuke. Gensuke came in alarm, and Kosuke with him. Both bowed and expressed concern at the news that so much gold had vanished. O-Kuni said coldly that they too must bring their boxes. Gensuke offered his at once, and nothing of note was found. Then Kosuke's box was opened. O-Kuni searched inside, moved one thing after another, and finally lifted the indigo money-belt on the handle of her fan and held it up for all to see.

"Kosuke," she said, "how did this come to be in your box?" Kosuke stared at it

in open shock. He said again and again that he knew nothing of it and had never seen it there before. But O-Kuni would not stop. She said that this very belt had vanished with the hundred me of gold and that she had worried day and night because she could not answer to the lord for its loss. Then she turned on Gensuke as well, saying that perhaps the two of them had worked together. Gensuke, terrified for himself, began pressing Kosuke to confess, and the room filled with harsh voices and shame.

Kosuke was shoved, accused, and called a thief, yet he did not bend. He said only that he had no memory of taking anything and that a thing appearing in his box did not make it his deed. At last Heizaemon himself thundered at him. He asked how the belt could be there if Kosuke was innocent, and when Kosuke still answered that he did not know, the lord's anger broke loose. He declared that such ingratitude could not be forgiven, that a favored servant who repaid kindness with theft was beyond pardon, and that if no proper answer came, he would have Kosuke executed. Kosuke, tears in his eyes but courage still firm, said that death by his lord's hand would be no wrong to a servant, but that he would not confess to what he had not done. Then Heizaemon ordered him confined until evening, when the matter would be settled in blood, and as the light began to fade and lamps were lit, the command finally came: "Kosuke, go out to the garden."

Part 12

Kosuke obeyed the order and went out into the garden, but his heart was no longer in the world of ordinary men. He believed that this was the last evening of his life. Since Heizaemon would not hear his warning and the fishing trip was still set for the next day, he saw only one road left. He would kill O-Kuni and Genjiro before dawn and then die by his own hand. As he crossed the veranda, he turned once more to look back at his lord's face, and tears fell without his wishing it. Heizaemon saw that strange look and, for a moment, wondered what storm was moving inside the young man.

At the entrance hung a spear. Kosuke took it down and drew out the blade. It

was red with rust, so he went into the garden, brought a whetstone, and began to sharpen it with quick, hard strokes. The sound of stone against iron carried through the still evening. Heizaemon called out and asked what he was doing. Kosuke answered that in a peaceful age a rusty spear might seem enough, but if villains entered the house, such a weapon might fail when it was most needed.

Heizaemon replied in a calm voice that a true weapon did not depend on bright metal alone. He said that if a man's arm was steady, even a rusty spear could pass through a board of iron. In fact, he added with grim force, when one wished to kill a hated enemy, a rusty point was better, because it gave greater pain. Kosuke stopped at once and said that this too was true. He hung the spear back where it had been, but in his heart the decision remained fixed like a nail. Heizaemon, hearing the answer and remembering the look in Kosuke's eyes, understood more clearly than before what the young man intended.

That night Genjiro came to the house, and wine was brought out. O-Kuni played the shamisen and sang to entertain the guest, acting as though nothing dark had ever touched the place. The feast went on until late, and at last Genjiro was shown to a guest room under a mosquito net. O-Kuni then withdrew to the little upper room where she usually slept when guests stayed, for such an arrangement was useful whenever Genjiro came. When the house had grown quiet, Kosuke wrapped a towel low over his forehead, tied up his clothes, took the spear under his arm, and slipped into the garden by the side way. He opened two shutters a little, hid himself among the plants, and pushed the spear beneath the floor while he waited.

The hour-bell sounded through the night. Soon after that, a sliding door opened softly, and someone began to move down the corridor on silent feet. The shape was dressed for sleep, and in the dim light Kosuke believed it could only be Genjiro going up to O-Kuni's room. He held his breath, leaned close, and waited until the figure passed the opening. Then, without a word, he thrust with all the strength in his body. The spear went in deep through the side.

The man gave a cry, pulled the spear free, and struck back at once. Kosuke stumbled, fell hard among the stones, and looked up in confusion. The wounded

man came down from the veranda in a staggering line, sat heavily on the shoe-removing stone, and called out, "Kosuke, come out into the open." At that voice the world turned black. The man he had struck was not Genjiro. It was Heizaemon himself.

Kosuke crawled toward him in horror, unable even to weep at first. Blood was running through Heizaemon's fingers as he pressed both hands hard against the wound. Still, the lord's spirit did not break. He ordered Kosuke to take off his upper sash and bind the wound quickly. Kosuke's hands shook so badly that he could scarcely tie it, so Heizaemon tightened it with his own strength and sat down upon the stones, holding the cloth in place. Only then did Kosuke begin to cry openly and beg forgiveness for the terrible mistake.

Heizaemon, though pale from pain, told him to be quiet and not let the others hear. Then he asked whether Kosuke had aimed at Genjiro and struck his master by accident. Kosuke confessed everything at once. He told of hearing O-Kuni and Genjiro on the twenty-first night, of their plan to drown Heizaemon during the fishing trip, of the beating he had received when he spoke against them, and of his fear that if he reported the plot without proof he would only be dismissed from service and leave his lord unprotected. So, he said, he had decided to kill both guilty lovers that night and then cut his own belly. Instead of saving his master, he had driven a spear into him. As he spoke, he rolled upon the stones in grief and called himself cursed by heaven.

Heizaemon listened and then said with deep feeling that such loyalty was beyond price. He told Kosuke that it was no wonder he had acted so far for his lord's sake. Then, after a painful pause, he spoke the hidden truth at last. When Kosuke had first entered service and told the story of his father Kurokawa Kozo, Heizaemon had been struck with shock, because he himself was the samurai who had killed that man long ago in front of the sword shop. He had kept silent only because he loved the young servant's loyal and filial heart and could not bear to destroy him. His plan, he said, had been to send Kosuke out as an adopted heir and only then tell him the truth, so that he might be avenged without falling into the crime of killing his own lord while still in service.

Kosuke sat frozen, staring at him. At last he cried that such kindness was too cruel and that Heizaemon should have told him sooner. But Heizaemon answered that he had understood Kosuke's heart even more clearly when he saw him polishing the rusty spear. So, knowing what was coming, he had dressed and moved in Genjiro's manner on purpose, letting Kosuke mistake him and strike the blow. In this way, he said, the son had at last repaid the father's death, and the debt of blood was closed. Yet Kosuke must not now take his head, for that would be open lord-killing and would destroy both him and the Iijima house. Instead, Heizaemon ordered him to cut off only the topknot, take it as proof of revenge, and leave at once.

Then Heizaemon gave him more. He handed over the very sword with which Kurokawa Kozo had been cut down years before, saying that the blade was a good Bizen sword and should remain with Kosuke as a keepsake. He also gave him a wrapped packet containing money and a written statement explaining the whole matter and the future of the house. With these, he said, Kosuke must go secretly to Aikawa Shingobei at Suidobata and consult him in all things. If the truth came out too soon, the Iijima house would surely be ruined, and Kosuke himself would be taken as a criminal. "Go now," Heizaemon said. "Take revenge as revenge, remember kindness as kindness, and after your vengeance is complete, think of us still as master and servant through all lives."

Kosuke could no longer control his tears. He said that if his spear-work had been poorer, the wound would have been lighter, and that his very skill had now become his sin. Heizaemon ordered him once more to stop weeping and obey. So at last Kosuke rose, drew his short sword, and cut off his lord's topknot as commanded. Then he bowed down upon the earth and said farewell through choking sobs. With the sword at his side and the packet in his hand, he slipped out through the gate and hurried through the night to Aikawa's house.

The old man was still awake when the knocking came. His foolish servant stumbled to the door half asleep, struck his head on a post, and muttered complaints before finally opening the gate. When he heard that it was Kosuke, he led him in at once. Aikawa himself came forward warmly, saying that now they

were nearly family, no ceremony was needed between them. But when he saw Kosuke's face in the lamplight, swollen with grief and fear, he stopped talking and asked what urgent matter had brought him there at such an hour. Kosuke knelt down, struggled to speak, and said only that a deep reason had arisen, one so grave that the marriage plan must be broken and that he must go away at once.

Part 13

After the two ghostly women slipped in through the opened back window, Tomozo lay in the field for some time, too afraid even to stand. The torn holy paper was still in his hand, and the packet of gold felt heavy inside his robe. At last he dragged himself up and hurried back to his own house, stumbling through the dirt like a man chased by fire. When he came in, O-Mine saw at once from his face that the dead had passed the barrier. She asked what had happened, but her own voice shook before he could answer.

Tomozo told her that the women had gone in by the back window and that there was no longer any stopping them. O-Mine, strange as it may seem, was less frightened than he was. She said that Otsuyu had not come out of anger or revenge, but out of love, and that such a spirit would more likely cling than strike. "If she were a living woman," O-Mine said, "she would cry, complain, and speak bitter words. Since she is only longing for him, she may do no more than lie beside him." Tomozo did not like to hear such talk, but even in his fear he wanted to know what was happening in the house.

So, after much pushing from O-Mine, he crept around to the back again and tried to listen. He heard low voices for a while, then the voices stopped. The silence that followed was worse than the speaking had been. He could not tell whether peace or death had come upon the room. At last he went back and said that perhaps the two had become quiet together under the net, as lovers do after tears and pleading. O-Mine scolded him for speaking so stupidly at such a time, but neither of them slept.

The night moved slowly, and both husband and wife sat in fear until the

darkness began to thin. Then Tomozo said that daylight had come and they should go see their master together. O-Mine wanted no part of it. She said she would sooner face a tax man than walk into that room after a night like this. But Tomozo was too afraid to go alone, so in the end he pulled her with him, and the two of them crossed the yard like people going to look upon an execution ground.

When they reached Shinzaburo's house, they still did not dare go in at once. They stood by the door and listened, but heard nothing. Tomozo whispered that perhaps Shinzaburo was still asleep, and O-Mine whispered back that silence itself was the worst sign. Even then they argued in small, foolish ways, each trying to force the other to open the fastening first. Such is often the way with frightened people. Their fear makes them childlike.

At last Tomozo put his hand through the gap, lifted the bar, and slid the door open. He called out in the cheerful voice he used every morning, saying that dawn had come and that it was time to rise. No answer came. O-Mine, trembling behind him, said that she had warned him from the start that this would end badly. Tomozo answered that if she knew so much, she could go in first, but of course she would not. So once more he had to step ahead, though every hair on his body seemed to stand up.

The outer room was dark, because the shutters were still closed. Tomozo told himself that if Shinzaburo were truly dead, the place would feel different, but in truth the whole room already felt strange and heavy, as if the air had thickened during the night. O-Mine called from behind and asked whether their master was still alive. Tomozo said that he could not yet tell. Then, trying to sound brave, he moved closer to the sleeping place and reached toward the inner part of the room.

He pulled aside the hanging cloth and looked into the bed space. In that same instant a cry broke out from him so sharply that O-Mine screamed in answer without even seeing what he had seen. Tomozo fell backward and could do no more than point with one shaking hand. His lips moved, but no words came at first. At last he gasped that he had never in his life seen anything so dreadful. The money he had taken, the stolen charm, the ghosts, and the torn paper all came back upon him in one blow.

O-Mine cried out again and asked what was there, but Tomozo could not make himself describe it clearly. He only said that the thing must be seen by another person at once, or else no one would believe them later. He feared that if he and his wife alone gave the story, people might accuse them of murder or say they had invented some wild lie to hide a crime. So he said they must fetch Hakuodo Yusai and make him stand witness. O-Mine, though weak in the knees, agreed at once, because she too saw the danger.

Tomozo then ran to Yusai's house and hammered at the door with both fists. Yusai, already awake, complained that such pounding would break the boards, but when he heard Tomozo's voice and saw his face, he knew that something terrible had happened. Tomozo begged him to come at once to Shinzaburo's place and see with his own eyes. He said there was no use asking questions on the road, because his tongue could not tell it properly. So Yusai took up his stick and followed, though he was plainly uneasy.

When the three of them returned, Yusai told Tomozo to go in first, but Tomozo refused. Then he told O-Mine to go first, and she refused as well. At last Yusai muttered in anger that cowards were useless in a crisis and stepped in himself. Still, even he did not go boldly. The room was so dark that he first ordered O-Mine to open a small window and let in some morning light. Only after that did he lean forward and look toward the bed.

The sight before him was enough to drive the blood from his face. There lay Shinzaburo, dead beyond all question. His body was held tightly in the arms of Otsuyu, but Otsuyu was no longer the soft, lovely girl who had come beneath the peony lantern. She was now a dry white skeleton, with skinless arms locked around him and bare teeth showing from the dead face pressed near his own. Beside them, still near the bed, was the other one, the maid O-Yone, also reduced to a thin and terrible form of bone and old death.

Shinzaburo himself looked as if life had been slowly drawn out of him through the night. His face was pale and sunken, and yet there remained upon it a strange quietness, almost like the peace of a man who had at last reached the thing he most desired. That calm only made the horror deeper. He had not died by violence.

He had died by surrender. He had given himself wholly to the dead woman he loved, and she had taken him with her into her own dark world.

Yusai stepped back trembling, and for a little while none of the three could speak. Tomozo and O-Mine clung to each other as if the skeletons might rise at any moment and turn toward them. Yusai at last said in a low voice that the priest had spoken true: a man who joins himself to a ghost cannot remain among the living for long. Then he added, with bitter weight, that greed had finished what love had begun. Tomozo heard those words and felt his whole body turn cold, for he knew better than anyone how the barrier had been broken.

Part 14

Aikawa Shingobei put on his glasses and read Heizaemon's written message without stopping. In it, Heizaemon explained everything clearly. He wrote that Kosuke had become both servant and enemy by fate, that he had let himself be struck on purpose so Kosuke could avenge his father without falling at once into open disgrace, and that the house could still be saved only if Kosuke obeyed the next command. He wrote that O-Kuni and Genjiro would surely flee, most likely toward O-Kuni's family in Murakami in Echigo, and that Kosuke must chase them, kill them as the enemies of his lord, and return with their heads.

The letter went further. Heizaemon begged Aikawa to support the restoration of the Iijima house once that revenge had been done. He also wrote that since Kosuke had already been promised as Aikawa's heir, he should live in harmony with O-Toku, and any child born from that union, boy or girl, should one day carry on the blood and name that would restore the fallen Iijima line. It was the writing of a man thinking not of himself, but of others, even while dying. As Aikawa read it aloud, Kosuke knelt beside him and let large tears fall one after another onto his own knees.

But the moment the reading ended, Kosuke suddenly changed. He rose with wild force and rushed toward the front as if he would run straight back into the night. Aikawa called after him and asked where he meant to go in such a state.

Kosuke turned with a shaking voice and said that his master must even now be facing Genjiro while badly wounded. He said that to sit still and let such a man die under the sword of a traitor was unbearable, and that he must return at once and die beside him if he could not save him.

Aikawa stopped him with the weight of an older man's judgment. He said that if Kosuke ran back now, Heizaemon's whole purpose would be ruined. The dying lord had written so carefully because he knew the house would be destroyed if things were handled foolishly. If Kosuke truly wished to honor him, then he must obey, even when obedience felt harder than death. These words struck Kosuke like blows, and though rage and grief still shook him, he could not answer them.

So he fell down where he was and wept in helpless pain. Meanwhile, back at the Iijima house, Heizaemon had sent him away and then dragged himself onward with the blood-wet spear as a staff. He climbed up to the veranda with terrible effort, like a crab crawling sideways over rock, and then moved down the corridor one shaking step at a time. At last he reached the guest room, slid the door open, and went inside. There Genjiro was sleeping heavily under the great mosquito net, snoring without care.

Heizaemon cut down the hanging lines of the net and threw it aside. Then he touched Genjiro's cheek with the bloody tip of the spear and ordered him to wake. Genjiro opened his eyes and at once saw the truth of danger. Before him stood Heizaemon with loose hair, eyes full of blood, face gray with pain, and a spear still wet from the wound in his own side. Genjiro had never been brave in the true way, and the sight nearly turned him to water.

He still pulled his sword toward him and put a hand near the guard, but his courage failed him. He asked in a trembling voice what his uncle meant to do. Heizaemon answered that there was no need for such false innocence. He said he knew all about the long affair with O-Kuni and the plot to push him into the river the next day and take both his life and his house. Then he declared that such betrayal could end only one way, and that Genjiro would die there on the spot.

Even in his pain, Heizaemon still thought beyond the present moment. He knew his own wound was grave and that he might well die under Genjiro's blade before

finishing him. So he aimed not first for the chest, but for a place that would weaken the younger man and help Kosuke later. When he thrust, Genjiro tried to turn aside, but the spear struck deep into his thigh. Driven mad by fear and pain, Genjiro drew his sword and leaped in like a trapped animal.

Heizaemon tried to strike again, but the wound Kosuke had given him was too deep. His strength failed for one fatal instant. Genjiro cut him once, then again more deeply, and the older man fell. After that Genjiro hacked at him with savage panic, not with skill, but with the ugly strength of a frightened man killing what he fears. By the time he stopped, Heizaemon had been cut down completely.

O-Kuni had been sleeping in the raised room above, but the noise brought her down in haste. She came in her sleeping clothes, looked in, and saw the ruined scene. For a moment she ran up and down in confusion, but when she saw that Genjiro still stood and that Heizaemon was truly dead, her mind returned at once to escape. She asked whether Genjiro was hurt, and he answered that the leg wound was bad but not enough to stop him. Then he told her they must flee at once to whatever place would take them.

O-Kuni hurried away, gathered money and fine things, and came back with whatever could be carried. She helped Genjiro put on extra robes, tied swords onto him, and loaded him with cases and belts in a wild, foolish way that showed both fear and greed. Just then a working maid named O-Take came to see what all the noise was about. The moment she saw the blood and cried out that there had been murder, Genjiro rushed at her and struck her down before the cry could spread farther. Other women in the house hid where they could, some by the water place, some among boxes, while the guilty pair slipped out into the dark and fled.

After they were gone, Gensuke ran from his room, pounded on the neighbor's wall with his fists, and shouted that robbers had broken in. In the next house, Genjiro's older brother Gennoshin heard the alarm, but because Heizaemon was a famous swordsman, he guessed that many attackers must be involved. So instead of running at once, he wasted time calling people up, preparing armor, and making a great fuss. By the time he finally came, dawn had already begun to break, and the robbers, if robbers they were, were long gone.

Then the truth began to rise. One maid came trembling out from hiding and said plainly that the so-called robbers were no strangers at all. She said that Genjiro and O-Kuni had been lovers for a long time, had killed Heizaemon in the night, stolen money and clothes, and escaped together. Gennoshin was shocked and at once sent word to the authorities that his own younger brother had fled. When officials later examined Heizaemon's body, they judged that the spear wound must have come first and that the sword cuts had come after. Since Genjiro was known to be no great fighter, they decided he must have attacked Heizaemon by trick and surprise.

So Genjiro became a wanted man, the Iijima house was broken, and Heizaemon's body was quietly taken to Shinbansui-in in Yanaka and buried there. As for Kosuke, he sat in Aikawa's house with a heart even heavier than before, for now he knew his lord had indeed thrown away his life for him and for the future of the house. Aikawa returned after hearing the first reports and said that matters were moving exactly as the letter had foretold. Then he told Kosuke that from this moment on, his father's revenge was done, and his next duty was to avenge his lord, restore the Iijima name, and go out into the world as no mere servant, but as a true samurai.

Part 15

Aikawa then asked the question that had to be asked. "When will you set out?" he said. Kosuke answered without a moment's delay. "At daybreak tomorrow." He could not bear to remain even one extra day while the enemies of his lord were still alive somewhere on the road. But Aikawa, though he did not oppose the journey itself, said that before the departure there was one request he begged Kosuke to hear. He said it was not a light wish, nor a selfish one, but something that touched the peace of his house and the heart of his daughter.

Kosuke answered at once that whatever could rightly be done, he would do. Then Aikawa said the thing plainly. Before leaving, Kosuke must exchange the marriage cups with O-Toku. Nothing more was asked. No feast for the town, no

display, no delay of days. Only the simple rite inside the house, so that his daughter might have some peace in her heart and know that the promise was true. Kosuke was troubled. He said that Lord Heizaemon himself had set the formal marriage for the following year, in the second month, and now, when his master had only just died, to think of marriage seemed painful and wrong.

Aikawa answered that such feelings were natural, but this was no time for outward form. If the enemies were found quickly, Kosuke might return soon. But if they disappeared, the road of revenge could take years. A man might be gone five years, ten years, or never return at all. He himself, Aikawa said, was already old. He did not know whether he would still be alive when Kosuke came back. If he died without seeing his daughter safely joined to the man she had chosen, that sorrow would remain on his mind even in the next world.

He added another reason. Until now Kosuke had gone about as a servant, wearing the rough signs of low service. But if he went out as Aikawa's adopted son, properly entered and dressed as a samurai, he would travel with greater dignity and less risk of insult. That too would help him in the work ahead. Kosuke listened and saw that the old man's words were not foolish. At last he bowed and said that if the matter remained within the house and no public display was made, then he would obey. Aikawa's face brightened at once with deep relief.

"You have saved an old man's heart," he said. Then he brought out money he had long kept aside for wedding expenses and offered it as traveling funds instead. Kosuke refused at first, saying that Lord Heizaemon had already given him a hundred ryo. But Aikawa laughed sadly and said that money on a long road was never too much. He said he would have smaller pieces sewn into Kosuke's underclothes so thieves could not easily take them, and he warned him again and again that the roads were full of tricks, dust, false friends, and sudden danger.

He then called for his people and set the house in motion at once. Fish were ordered, wine was brought, paper, tobacco, straw sandals, and many small things for a journey were sent for in haste. He also brought out a fine sword that he had promised before, a blade by Fujishiro Yoshimitsu, and told Kosuke to wear it on the road together with Lord Heizaemon's Bizen sword. "Then," he said, "your

lord and your father by marriage will both be with you at your side.” Kosuke accepted it with deep thanks.

The household became busy in a quiet, hurried way. O-Toku was prepared by the women, and though the house was poor, they did what they could to make the night feel like a true wedding. At last the dishes were set out and the cups arranged. Aikawa himself acted as parent, go-between, and master of the feast all at once. He chanted a few lines in a joyful voice, lifted the cups, and guided the rite of three-times-three. The forms were simple, but the feeling behind them was not small. When it was done, he sighed from the depth of his chest and said again and again how lucky and grateful he felt.

The old nurse cried openly, saying she had served O-Toku from childhood and had long wished to see this day. Aikawa, who had tears in his own eyes, tried to laugh and speak like a cheerful host, but his voice shook. He told the old woman to prepare things well, because Kosuke would leave before dawn and must be fed hot rice with fish before he went. He spoke too much, repeated himself, and fussed over every detail, like a father whose joy and sorrow had both become too large for silence.

At last he said the gathering was over and tried, in his awkward old man’s way, to send the couple to their room. He whispered foolish advice to the nurse about placing a screen and not letting the girl feel ashamed, and the nurse scolded him for speaking as though O-Toku were still a child. Even then he kept worrying aloud. Such talk might have been laughable on another night, but because departure and danger stood just beyond dawn, it only made the house feel more tender and sad.

Yet Kosuke was in no state for a bridegroom’s ease. Once alone, he sat on the bedding with folded arms, sunk deep in thought about roads, swords, and the faces of the enemies. O-Toku, seeing this, could not simply lie down and sleep. She sat too, quiet and uncertain. The old nurse came in more than once because O-Toku called her in confusion, unable to manage the silence. Each time she urged Kosuke to rest, and each time he answered that he had much on his mind. O-Toku spoke gently and asked him at least to lie down for a while. In the end, out of pity for

her, he stretched himself beside the pillow.

Then at last some small peace entered the room. There was no loud talk, no foolish laughter, no careless joy such as often belongs to a wedding night. Instead there was only the quiet nearness of two people joined under strange and painful stars. O-Toku had loved him long before he knew it. Kosuke had accepted her under the shadow of duty. Yet because both were honest by nature, a true bond began there in silence. It was a brief and tender hour, set between death behind and blood ahead.

Before dawn Kosuke rose and made ready. His clothes were arranged, the small money carefully hidden on his body, and the two swords set at his side. Aikawa, already up, called for hot food and made sure it was brought steaming to the room. He said a man should never leave on a great road with an empty stomach. Kosuke bowed deeply and said that what worried him most was not himself, but the health of the old man left behind. He prayed that Aikawa would live in strength until the day he returned with the heads of the enemies and laid them down in proof.

Aikawa answered that Kosuke must think first of his own body and not throw away his life through rashness. O-Toku, standing near, could not hold back her tears and asked the question no one could answer. "When will you come home?" Aikawa snapped at her at first and said that a man going out to avenge his lord was not setting off on a pleasure journey. How could anyone know whether he would return in a year, in five, or in ten? But the girl only wept more softly at that. She was young, and time in such numbers was too large for her heart.

Then the old nurse wept too, and even Aikawa had to wipe his eyes while pretending to scold them both. He said that this was a proud departure and they must not send such a man off with nothing but tears. Still, tears were what filled the entrance hall. When Kosuke stepped down to put on his straw sandals, O-Toku came close, caught at his sleeve, and could say only, "Please go safely." He put a gentle word on her grief, told her to care for her father, and then turned away before feeling could weaken his purpose.

With that he went out from the house, escorted by a servant for the first part of the road. Behind him stood the old man, the old nurse, and the young bride he had

hardly had time to know, all watching until he was lost from sight. The morning air was cold, but his heart was hotter than fire. His father's revenge was already done. Now only one thought filled him from head to foot: he must find O-Kuni and Genjiro, kill them as the enemies of Lord Heizaemon, and return only after the Iijima house had begun its rise again.

Part 16

Hakuodo Yusai stood by the bed and forced himself to look again. The sight was enough to chill even an old man who had seen much in life. Shinzaburo lay there with his hands pulled upward as if he had tried to seize empty air in his last pain. His teeth were tightly set, and his face had turned the dull color of earth. Beside him, and partly against him, lay a skull and scattered bones. One bony hand still seemed to cling to his neck, while other bones were spread across the bedding and floor in a wild, broken way.

“Tomozo,” Yusai said at last, his voice low and shaking, “I am sixty-nine years old, and I have never seen such a terrible thing.” He said that strange stories of fox wives and ghost lovers could be found in old books, but this was not a tale on paper. This was real, and it stood before them in the cold light of morning. Then he remembered the sacred charm that Ryoseki had lent for Shinzaburo's protection. “The charm is still on him,” he said. “Take it off at once.” But Tomozo stepped back and said he could not bring himself to touch the body, and O-Mine also refused in fear.

So Yusai opened the shutters with his own hands and let more light into the room. Then he went to the dead man, untied the white cloth belt from Shinzaburo's body, and drew out the little dark shrine that hung at his neck. He opened it at once, expecting to see the golden image of Kannon within. But the moment the doors were spread, his face changed. The true image was gone. In its place sat a cheap clay Fudo with a thin red metal cover, a false thing set there in great haste. For a long moment Yusai could not speak at all.

“Who took it?” he said at last. “Who dared steal such a holy image?” Tomozo

answered in a weak voice that he knew nothing, but the words rang badly in the room. Yusai said that the real image was the sacred Kannon of Kai-on, a figure of great power, feared even by beings from the dark world. Ryoseki had lent it only out of pity for Shinzaburo, and Shinzaburo had worn it at all times. “How could it be changed for this?” he asked. Tomozo tried to act simple and confused, but the more he spoke, the less natural he sounded.

Yusai did not openly accuse him, yet suspicion rose strongly in his mind. He said that men who take what is not theirs often carry the sign of it somewhere in face or manner, and he asked Tomozo to step forward and let his features be examined. That frightened Tomozo more than almost anything else. He laughed foolishly and said that a poor man’s face was not worth looking at, and that nothing in it could show wealth or success. Yusai understood from that answer alone that all was not clean. Still, he said no more then, because he feared that if he pressed too soon, the guilty man might run.

Instead he told both husband and wife to remain quiet and let no rumor spread for the moment. Then he set out at once for Shinbansui-in Temple to speak with Ryoseki. When he arrived, the priest was sitting in calm silence, dressed in plain robes, as though he had already been expecting the visit. Yusai bowed and spoke of the great disaster. Ryoseki answered before he had finished. “Yes,” he said, “Hagiwara is dead. A wicked man was near him, and Hagiwara could not escape the tie that held him.” Yusai was amazed that the priest already knew the heart of the matter.

Then Yusai confessed another trouble. He said that the holy image had been stolen from the little shrine and replaced with a false one, and that this had happened while Shinzaburo still wore it. Ryoseki showed little surprise. He said that the image had already been hidden in the earth and that it would come to light in the following year, in the eighth month. So there was no need for restless worry. Yusai, who made his living reading fate and giving answers, could only bow more deeply before such strange knowledge. He admitted that he himself had not seen through the deceit. Ryoseki told him to let that shame go and listen instead to what must now be done.

The priest then said that, though Shinzaburo had his own family temple, he should be buried near Otsuyu. The tie between them was too deep to be denied, even by death. Otsuyu and Shinzaburo, he said, were joined by old causes far beyond the sight of ordinary men, and it was only right that their graves stand side by side. Yusai was to act as chief supporter in the burial, since he too had received kindness from Shinzaburo in life. Yusai agreed at once. As he walked back from the temple, he could not stop thinking of the priest's words and wondering how a man could know hidden things so early and so fully.

When he returned, he told Tomozo that Shinzaburo's body would be sent to Shinbansui-in and buried there by Otsuyu's grave. He ordered him to help with the funeral work, since Shinzaburo had shown him much favor while alive. The body was then prepared, carried away in quiet sadness, and laid to rest as Ryoseki had commanded. In this way the unhappy young man was placed at last beside the woman he had loved beyond reason and beyond life. After the burial, the house stood empty and heavy, and those who had once moved freely there now felt that the place itself had turned dark.

Tomozo, however, had another fear besides ghosts. He feared that his own crime would soon come to light. If anyone looked too closely into the stolen image, the torn papers, or the broken protection, his name might rise first. So he began to spread a story before any other story could spread. He told neighbors that he had seen the ghost women clearly, one young and one older, the younger in a Shimada hairstyle, the other carrying a lantern with peony flowers upon it. He said they passed by with a strange dull sound, and that any person who saw them would die within three days. People listened, shivered, and repeated the tale with more fear added each time.

Soon the story grew larger than Tomozo himself had planned. Some said one hundred ghosts came to Shinzaburo's house each night. Some said a woman's crying voice could be heard by the spring at Nezu after dark. Some said white shapes moved behind the shutters long after the place had been emptied. The rumors made the whole area uneasy. Families began to move away rather than stay near such a haunted ground. Even Yusai, though a man of learning and age,

felt a chill in his heart and decided that he too had no wish to remain there any longer. He left and moved to Kanda Hatagocho.

Tomozo and O-Mine used the same fear as their excuse. They said again and again that after what they had seen, they could no longer live on that land. In truth, fear was only part of it. They also wanted distance between themselves and the place where the holy image had vanished and Shinzaburo had died. Since Kurihashi on the Nakasendo road was Tomozo's native district, they chose that town and made ready to leave. Thus, under cover of ghost stories and public fear, the guilty pair slipped away from the shadow of the dead house and began a new life elsewhere, carrying with them not only money and stolen sin, but the dark weight of what they had done.

Part 17

Tomozo feared from the first that one day his wicked bargain would come to light. So he left the haunted place with O-Mine and moved to Kurihashi, where fewer people knew his past. With the hundred ryo gained from the dead, he quickly found help from a carter named Kyuzo, a man known to them, and bought a fine house for twenty ryo. Then he used fifty more as business money and opened a wholesale and retail shop for rough household goods. Under the name Sekiguchi-ya Tomozo, he and O-Mine worked with all their strength, bought cheaply, sold cheaply, and before long drew customers from every side.

Their success came fast. People said that the goods at Sekiguchi-ya were both good and low in price, and the shop grew busy from morning to night. But money that comes from evil rarely stays quiet. After about a year Tomozo began to change. He forgot the fear that had once ruled him and started to dream of finer clothes, better belts, handsome sandals, and the sort of small luxuries a poor man admires most when he first becomes rich.

One day he went into a local eating house called Sasaya and drank there at ease. A serving woman came to pour sake for him, and the moment he saw her, his heart moved. She seemed about twenty-seven, yet looked much younger, and her beauty

was the kind that even a tired middle-aged man could mistake for good fortune itself. Tomozo asked the innkeeper about her, and he was told that she was the wife of a sick traveler who had once come through with her husband, a former samurai whose wounded leg had grown so bad that he could no longer stand properly. Their journey money had run out, so the inn had helped them rent a poor place below the levee, and the wife now worked there to keep them alive.

Tomozo at once gave her money in pity, or what he called pity, and from that day he began going there often. One gift led to another. He cut gold from his store of ghost money and used it to draw her closer. Soon he and the woman became secret lovers. This woman, of course, was O-Kuni, the same O-Kuni who had betrayed Heizaemon, fled with Genjiro, and wandered from province to province until sickness and poverty left her stranded in Kurihashi. Evil recognized evil quickly, and she saw at once that Tomozo was a man with sudden wealth and a weak heart.

Tomozo, now past forty, was almost beside himself with foolish joy at being welcomed by so young and beautiful a woman. He began sleeping there night after night. O-Mine knew what was happening, but at first she swallowed her anger for the sake of the business and the servants. Yet jealousy rose higher and higher in her chest. At last one day she saw Kyuzo passing with a horse and called him in, pretending only kindness and family feeling. She gave him a little money and, by slow and clever talk, drew the whole truth out of him.

Kyuzo, simple and loose in speech, told her everything. He said that the woman's name was O-Kuni, that her husband was called Genjiro, that Tomozo had been going there since the second day of the fourth month, and that he had given her money again and again, first a little, then two ryo, then three, then five, and even once as much as twenty. O-Mine smiled and spoke gently while hearing all this, but inside she shook with anger. When Kyuzo had gone, she waited for night, sat over her work, and prepared herself to force the matter out into the open.

Tomozo came home late and, not yet suspecting anything, asked for drink and some small food. O-Mine answered coldly that nothing was ready and that if he wanted pleasant company and fine pouring, he should go back to Sasaya and let

O-Kuni serve him there. At once he tried to deny everything, but O-Mine pressed him harder and harder. She praised O-Kuni's beauty with bitter laughter, named the sums he had given, and said that if he loved that woman so much, he should take her openly and let O-Mine leave. Tomozo understood at once that Kyuzo had talked.

At first he tried soft words. He said he had done wrong, that he had meant to tell her someday, and that it was only a passing mistake. But O-Mine would not stop. She reminded him of their old poverty, of the nights she had stayed awake doing work to earn a little money, of the cheap sake and dried salmon she had once bought so he could drink with a smile, and of how they had climbed together from nothing. "Now you swagger like a great shop master," she said, "but have you forgotten what you were only the year before?" Tomozo grew red with shame and anger, for servants were nearby and her words cut too close to the bone.

Then O-Mine struck where he was weakest. She cried that the money which had built the shop was ghost money in the first place. She said aloud that they had received a hundred ryo from the dead woman, that Shinzaburo had been destroyed, and that the golden Kannon of Kai-on had been stolen and hidden. Tomozo begged her in terror to lower her voice. But once such words are spoken, they come more easily. O-Mine said that if he cast her aside, she would not keep silent. She demanded the hundred ryo or a fair share of the property and said she was ready even to be bound and beheaded if only he did not escape with everything.

At that point Tomozo changed his tone again. He said he did not truly wish to leave her, that O-Kuni was only a dangerous passing pleasure, and that perhaps they should sell the whole place, go far away together, maybe even to Niigata, and make a still greater fortune. O-Mine's anger softened for a moment. She said she had never truly wished to separate and that if he would treat her properly, she would still go with him anywhere. So they drank together and seemed to make peace. On the next day he even took her to Sakaite to buy cloth, and they ate and drank there together like a reconciled husband and wife.

But Tomozo had already made up his mind. On the way back they came near the levee, where the roads divided and the air had grown dark with coming rain.

He told O-Mine to keep watch toward the road while he stepped down below, saying he wished to dig up the buried golden image, which he had hidden there earlier and now meant to sell at Koga the next day. O-Mine, excited and unsuspecting, looked away exactly as he wished. In that instant he drew his short sword without a sound and struck her from behind with all his force.

O-Mine cried out and fell, yet still caught hold of his clothing. "So this is it," she gasped. "You mean to kill me and take O-Kuni as your wife." Tomozo answered with cold truth that he meant exactly that. Then he reversed the blade and drove it into her under the breast, hard and deep. Even while dying she clung to him, twisting in pain and refusing to release her hold. Tomozo threw himself upon her and finished the work. When her hands still gripped his clothes after death, he cut off finger after finger to free himself, wiped the blade, and ran home as fast as his legs would carry him.

At the house he began his lie at once. He beat on the door, cried that robbers had attacked them on the levee, and said that O-Mine had gone down below and perhaps been hurt. The servants rushed out with poles and sticks, and Tomozo led them to the place. There O-Mine lay cut and terrible to see. Tomozo wept false tears, saying that if only he had been one step faster, such a cruel death would never have happened. The officials were told, the inspection was made, and the body was taken home and later sent out for burial. No one guessed that the murderer stood among the mourners.

Seven days passed. Then one evening, after Tomozo had returned from a temple visit, a servant woman named O-Masu suddenly began to shake, groan, and speak wildly. When Tomozo came near and asked what troubled her, she stared straight at him and said, "It hurt when you drove the blade from the shell-bone under the breast." The others thought she had gone mad with fever, but Tomozo felt the blood leave his face. O-Masu threw off the bedding, sat up, and went on in a voice that was no longer her own. She spoke of eight years of shared poverty, of being killed so he could take O-Kuni, and of the unbearable pain of the wound. Tomozo tried to quiet her, but she kept fixing him with her eyes and repeating the truth. At last, shaken to the center of his being, he sent people in haste to bring a famous

doctor who was then staying in Sakaite.

Part 18

The doctor who was brought in from Sate was none other than Yamamoto Shijo. The moment he sat down in the place of honor and looked at Tomozo, he broke into loud surprise. It had been a long time, he said, but he knew that face at once. Then he began praising Tomozo in his usual easy, half-mocking way, saying that he had always thought this clever husband and wife would rise above ordinary people someday. Tomozo forced a smile, but his heart was uneasy, because Shijo was the last man he had wished to see in such a house and at such an hour.

Shijo then asked after O-Mine, as if speaking only out of old friendship. Tomozo had to answer that she had been killed on the levee eight days before. Shijo gave proper words of sorrow and said that such a faithful woman had not deserved so cruel an end. After that he asked to be shown the sick servant. Tomozo led him in and warned him that the woman said wild and senseless things when the heat rose to her head, but the warning did no good at all.

O-Masu suddenly sat up on the bedding and looked straight into Shijo's face. She greeted him by name, which startled him at once, and then began speaking in a voice that was not truly her own. She spoke of the pain of being stabbed beneath the breast, of years of shared poverty, and of being killed because Tomozo wished to take another woman. Tomozo kept trying to cut in, saying that fever made people say anything, but Shijo only raised a hand and told him to be still. The more he listened, the more lively and curious he became.

Then the possessed woman went on to the older crimes. She said that Tomozo had taken one hundred ryo from the ghost, had torn away the holy paper, had stolen the golden image of Kai-on Kannon from Shinzaburo's body, and had hidden it in the flower bed by the Nezu spring. She even said that Shinzaburo had not simply died in the arms of the dead, but had been kicked to death and then laid out in a false and terrible manner so that others might believe he had perished only by ghostly love. Tomozo turned cold from head to foot. But Shijo, instead of

shrinking back, leaned nearer like a man listening to a fine story over sake.

“This is remarkable,” he said at last. “Do not worry. I have seen such things before.” Then he gave advice in a calm voice that suited Tomozo perfectly. The servant girl should be sent back to her home at once, he said, because spirits often spoke only while they remained under the same roof as the guilty cause. If she were removed, the talking would stop. Tomozo seized on those words with relief. O-Masu was sent away at once, and when she passed through the front, she already seemed more nearly herself.

But that was not the end. Soon the head clerk began to shake and mutter. He too started talking of ghost money, the stolen charm, and Shinzaburo’s death. He was quickly sent away to his home. Then a shop boy began the same thing, and after him another servant. One after another they had to be dismissed until no one remained in the house except Tomozo and Shijo. Each new outbreak made Tomozo feel more certain that O-Mine’s hatred was spreading through the whole place like smoke.

Once they were alone, Shijo dropped his playful doctor’s face and spoke more directly. He said there was now no use hiding anything. Long ago there had been rumors of Shinzaburo’s strange death and of the sacred image being exchanged, and even old Hakuodo Yusai and the priest Ryoseki had guessed that some human hand was involved. But now, after what he had heard with his own ears, Shijo said that in his judgment Tomozo himself was the man behind everything. If matters had gone this far, then the only wise course was to tell the truth and think together about what should be done next.

Tomozo saw that concealment was finished. So he confessed all of it. He admitted that he had made the whole ghost story appear worse than it was, that he had kicked Shinzaburo to death, that he had crept by night to the graveyard of Shinbansui-in, dug up bones from a fresh grave, and laid them beside the body to fool others. He admitted too that he had stolen the Kai-on Kannon image, hidden it in the flower bed by the spring, frightened the neighborhood with false tales, moved away at the right moment, and built his present fortune on the hundred ryo given by the dead. At last he confessed that he had killed O-Mine as well, luring

her to the levee and stabbing her there because she had become a burden.

Shijo listened with bright eyes and said, half laughing, that only a true villain could confess so quickly and so fully. Yet he also promised, in his loose and cheerful way, that he would not spread the story. Tomozo, eager to hold him quiet, took out twenty-five ryo and placed it before him as a “cut rice cake,” as he called it, a little token to seal the doctor’s lips. Shijo accepted it easily enough and said that now, since they had become one in both good and evil, they should drink somewhere more pleasant than that gloomy house. So the two men went out together to Sasaya and sat facing one another over cups of sake.

There Tomozo called for O-Kuni. She came at once, happy to see him, and spoke of how Genjiro’s wound had finally improved enough that they could soon leave for Echigo again. But the moment she saw Shijo, her face changed. He knew her past too well. She drew Tomozo aside and whispered that nothing said by this doctor should be believed, because he was a liar who loved to push himself between men and women. Yet once she had gone, Shijo told Tomozo plainly that O-Kuni had not given herself to him out of true love at all. She was the mistress of Genjiro, he said, and both of them were wanted people who had killed Heizaemon and fled with money and swords.

Shijo then gave a sharp warning. O-Kuni, he said, had likely told Genjiro everything already. If Tomozo stayed there alone that night, the lame man might still come in secret, threaten him, and try to squeeze two hundred ryo or more from him as the price of silence. The safest road was to vanish for the night and let husband and wife find an empty place instead of a victim waiting in bed. Tomozo saw the sense of this at once. So he and Shijo left Sasaya, went off together, and spent the night elsewhere, leaving O-Kuni and Genjiro to gain nothing from their plan.

On the next morning Tomozo brought Shijo home with him. They had scarcely sat down and begun laughing over the trick before a voice called from the front, asking politely to be let in. Shijo at once guessed who it must be and slipped away to hide inside a cupboard, telling Tomozo to call him only if the matter became truly dangerous. Tomozo then opened up. Genjiro came in with a sword in his

hand and seated himself high, like a man who meant to overawe a shopkeeper with rank and temper. He began with soft words, asking for travel money, saying he and his wife were poor and wished to leave for Echigo.

Tomozo at first answered politely and even set down a small packet before him. But when Genjiro opened it and found only two ryo and two bu, his tone changed at once. He said such a sum was a joke and demanded one hundred ryo instead. Tomozo answered that travel depended more on manner than on money and that a gift was something given from the giver's heart, not something fixed by the receiver's greed. Then Genjiro threw off all cover and said openly that he had come not as a beggar, but as the husband of O-Kuni, and that Tomozo must pay a proper hand-separation fee for sleeping with another man's wife.

Tomozo had already prepared himself for this very turn. He said coolly that O-Kuni was no pure wife wronged by chance, but a woman who had once been Heizaemon's mistress and had then gone with Genjiro to kill him and steal his wealth. If O-Kuni had come to Tomozo, it was not because she loved him, but because she hoped to squeeze money for Genjiro's sake. He added that he himself was no innocent townsman to be frightened by a half-drawn sword. He had been wicked since boyhood, had seen the roughest gaming dens and roads, and had no fear of a thin-necked fugitive samurai.

More than that, he gave Genjiro something worse than defiance. He warned him that the avenger Kosuke was still alive and still searching. If Genjiro kept lingering so near Edo, his head would likely be cut off before long. Those words struck home. Genjiro lost color at once. The sword stayed in its place. He changed his tone completely, apologized for his rudeness, accepted the smaller sum, and said that he had mistaken Tomozo for an ordinary honest merchant. Then he took his leave and went out with far less pride than he had brought in.

The moment the door closed, Shijo climbed out from his hiding place full of delight. He praised Tomozo's bold tongue, laughed over the whole meeting, and said that villains of real quality were rare in this world. Then the two of them decided on the next step. Since so much had now been spoken aloud, there was no use delaying. They would go together into Edo, dig up the hidden Kai-on

Kannon image from the flower bed by the Nezu spring, and make ready for whatever must come after.

Part 19

Kosuke went on searching through many roads and provinces, following one rumor after another about O-Kuni and Genjiro. He heard that the two had fled toward Murakami in Echigo, so he followed that trail first and questioned people in many places. But each trace broke off before it became firm. No one could tell him with certainty where they had gone next, and every answer seemed to open only into more dust and more road. At the same time another thought never left his heart. His mother, Orie, from whom he had been separated eighteen years before, might still be alive somewhere. He longed to see her even once before fate cut off that chance forever.

So his journey became two journeys in one. He hunted his lord's enemies, and he searched as well for the woman who had given him life. He made careful inquiries about the Sawada family, because he knew that his mother had once been the sister of Sawada Uemon, a retainer of Lord Naito of Kii. But when he dug more deeply, he learned only that Sawada Uemon and his wife were already dead and that an adopted heir now stood in their place. No one could tell him where Orie had gone after those older troubles. He stayed ten days here, five days there, then moved on again, asking quietly, listening sharply, and following every weak sign he could find. Yet nothing came fully to light.

Thus the year passed in emptiness. Then another year began, and still he had no true result. He went out from Echigo into Shinano, then passed toward Mino, searching all the while, but again the road gave him nothing. At last he remembered that the first memorial year for Lord Heizaemon had come. Since he had not yet found the enemies, he thought it right to return once to Edo, offer proper prayers for his dead master, and then go back to the road again with new resolve and another line of search.

On the third day of the eighth month he reached Edo. He did not first go to the

Aikawa house, nor did he rest his feet or wash the dust from his travel clothes. Instead he went straight to Shinbansui-in in Yanaka, where Lord Heizaemon lay buried. He brought flowers and incense, poured water at the grave, and knelt down before the stone. There, with both hands placed respectfully on the ground, he spoke as if his lord were still living and listening before him.

“My lord,” he said, “I am ashamed. I have still not found O-Kuni and Genjiro, and I have not yet fulfilled my duty. But because this is the first year of your memorial, I have returned to Edo to pray for you and perform the proper rites. After that I will go out again at once. This time I will change my direction and continue until I surely find them. Please protect me from the world beyond the grass and help me learn where those enemies hide.” He bowed long and deeply, and when he rose, his face showed both loyalty and pain.

After that he went to the temple entrance and asked to see the abbot. The attendants asked who he was, and he answered that he had once been a retainer of Iijima Heizaemon and had returned for his master’s memorial year. Soon he was led within. There Ryoseki sat in deep stillness, a man of about fifty-five, firm in religious discipline and full of quiet power. The moment Kosuke saw him, his own head seemed to lower by itself, for there was something in the priest’s presence that made ordinary speech and movement feel small.

Kosuke bowed and presented five ryo for the memorial service. Ryoseki received him kindly and praised the feeling that had brought him back from such a long journey. He then ordered tea and said that since Kosuke was surely not a man rich in supporters, the temple would do the work with as little expense as possible. The younger monks, he said, could prepare what was needed, and Kosuke should return the next day after noon. Then, as if speaking of something plainly visible before him, he added, “You will be going to Suidobata now. There are many there waiting for you, and some happy thing has come about. Go and show them your face.”

Kosuke was startled and asked how the priest could know where he meant to go. Ryoseki only answered in his calm way and said nothing further. Kosuke left the temple deeply puzzled. He thought to himself that the priest seemed less like

a common holy man than like an ancient diviner who could see through walls and distance. Still carrying that strange feeling in his heart, he made his way at last to the Aikawa house at Suidobata. Because he had been away almost a year and felt some modesty after so long an absence, he entered not from the main front, but by the kitchen side and called softly for Zenzō.

The servant answered carelessly at first, thinking some common worker had come, but when he recognized Kosuke, he cried out in joy and ran to tell his master. Old Aikawa came hurrying out at once, full of noise, tears, and delight. He scolded the servants for letting Kosuke enter by the kitchen, then praised heaven for bringing him safely home. He said that not a day had passed without thoughts of him. When snow fell, he had wondered what mountain Kosuke was crossing. When wind blew, he had wondered through what lonely field he was walking. His heart, he said, had followed him through every kind of weather.

The old nurse came too and welcomed him warmly, saying that everyone in the house had spoken of him every day. Kosuke bowed and gave thanks, saying that though he had often wished to send letters from the road, travel did not always allow it. He said he had worried constantly for the health of the old man and all the people there. Aikawa answered that O-Toku had thought of him more than anyone and had wept bitterly after his departure. Then Kosuke said that he had come back because the next day would be Lord Heizaemon's first memorial service and he wished to attend it properly before beginning the search again.

While they were talking, the old nurse hesitated over some matter in the inner room. Aikawa told her to bring "that one" out, then changed his mind and said perhaps the child should wake naturally first, since it would be better to show a smiling face than a crying one. Kosuke, hearing this talk, did not understand it at all. A moment later O-Toku herself came from the next room, her face bright with joy and wet with tears. She greeted him gently and said that she had spoken of him every day. Kosuke answered with equal feeling and said there was no greater happiness than to see once more the safe faces of those he loved and respected.

Then the old nurse came carrying a baby. Aikawa laughed with delight and held the child up for Kosuke to see. "A fine boy, is he not?" he said. Kosuke looked at

the child and asked whose son he was. "Why, yours," said Aikawa. Kosuke was so surprised that for a moment he could only stare. He protested at once that he had left on his journey the year before and had no child. Aikawa replied in his cheerful, foolish way that once was enough when two people were deeply tied by fate. He said that O-Toku had conceived after that one night before Kosuke's departure, and that when the child was born, he himself had given him the name Kotaro, taking the first character from Kosuke's own name.

These words struck Kosuke with wonder. At once he remembered Lord Heizaemon's dying command that any child born to him, whether boy or girl, should one day restore the Iijima house. Looking at the child, he said softly that perhaps this was no ordinary boy at all, but some return of his lord's spirit into the world. Aikawa, delighted by the thought, said that O-Toku herself had often found comfort in the child because he looked so much like his father. When she missed Kosuke too strongly, she said, holding the baby in her arms helped her feel that husband and wife were not fully separated.

Aikawa then called for Zenzō and ordered many good things to be brought at once. He wanted fish, sweets, sushi, soba, mirin, and every tasty thing a traveler might miss on the road. His words came out in a rush, and his joy made him almost foolish, but no one in the house wished to stop him. The evening became a happy one. They talked far into the night, and the hours passed quickly. At last dawn came, and the next day Kosuke and Aikawa set out together for the memorial service at Shinbansui-in.

When they reached the temple, the monks were already waiting, for Ryoseki had prepared everything beforehand. The service was performed with great care and solemnity, and many monks gathered in the main hall. After the rites were finished and the guests had been fed and sent away, only Kosuke, Aikawa, and Ryoseki remained together in the priest's room. There they were served a separate meal. Ryoseki asked a few quiet questions, praised Kosuke's character once more, and then told him that before he resumed his journey, he should go the next day to Hatagocho in Kanda and see an old face-reader named Hakuodo Yusai.

He said that Yusai, though nearly seventy, still had great skill and might help

him learn what he wished to know. Then the priest gave Kosuke five ryo as a travel gift and even a box of incense for the household altar. Aikawa was embarrassed to receive such things from a priest, but Ryoseki insisted. At last his voice grew graver. He said that Kosuke stood upon dangerous ground and that sword trouble was waiting for him before long. It could not be avoided. There was no use stepping back in fear. A man in such a position, he said, must go forward as though cutting through iron, with his whole spirit fixed in one line. Hearing this, Aikawa grew frightened and asked whether there was no road by which the danger might be escaped. Ryoseki answered only that there was none. Kosuke must go forward. To retreat would profit nothing.

Part 20

After the memorial service at Shinbansui-in, Kosuke and Aikawa started for home together. Yet the words of Priest Ryoseki still stayed in both their hearts. The priest had said that a sword danger could not be escaped, only faced, and this made Aikawa especially uneasy. Kosuke, however, did not let fear enter him in a weak way. He thought that a man who stepped back even once from such a warning would never finish a great duty. So he checked both his swords carefully, made sure the hilt pegs were firm, loosened the scabbards a little for quick drawing, and kept his mind spread in every direction as he walked.

Aikawa came beside him carrying a food box and talking in his anxious old way. Again and again he said, "Kosuke, be careful. Do not forget what the priest said." The road was quiet, but Kosuke looked ahead, behind, and to both sides without resting his eyes anywhere too long. Then, all at once, the tall grass by the roadside shook. A man burst out from the reeds with a bloody sword in his hand and ran straight at Kosuke without even a word of warning.

The attacker was Tomozo. After selling his Kurihashi house and store with all the goods inside, he had come back to Edo with Yamamoto Shijo. They had hidden for a few days in the house of a doctor known to Shijo in Kanda Sakumacho. Then, on the night of the third day of the eighth month, the two of them had gone secretly

to Nezu and dug up the golden image of Kai-on Kannon that Tomozo had buried near the spring. Tomozo put it quickly into his robe, but once the treasure was back in his hands, another thought rose in him. As long as Shijo lived, there remained one man who knew too much.

So Tomozo turned upon his companion without warning. He drew his sword and struck Shijo down before the doctor could defend himself. Then he threw himself on him and drove the blade into his ribs, twisting it cruelly until the life went out of him. Thus Shijo, who had joined himself to evil deeds, met an evil end of his own. But Tomozo had no time to hide the body or flee calmly. Officers were already waiting nearby, and voices rose on all sides as men closed in on him.

Tomozo fought like a trapped beast. He swung his sword wildly at the officers, broke through one side of the ring, and leaped into the grasses in blind panic. At last he burst out onto the wide road, half crazed and unable to see clearly. The next person he saw was Kosuke, and because his eyes were dark with fear, he took him for another officer sent to seize him. So he rushed in and cut straight for him.

An ordinary man would have been split in two by such a blow. But Kosuke had been warned, and he had been trained by Heizaemon himself in the Shinkage school. There was no time to draw fully, so he took the blow near the guard of his sword, turned it aside with a sharp snap, and stepped back in the same movement. Tomozo's body pitched forward from the force of his failed strike. In that instant Kosuke seized his arm, twisted it hard behind him, and threw him down.

"Villain," Kosuke said, "what do you mean by this?" Tomozo, now flat on the ground, saw at once that force would not save him. So he changed to begging. He said it had all been a mistake, that he had quarreled with a friend ahead on the road, and that a crowd now meant to beat him to death. He claimed he had fled in panic and, half blind with fear, had mistaken Kosuke for one of those men. If only he were released, he said, he would run away and never trouble them again.

Kosuke asked sternly whether that story was true. Tomozo swore that it was. Aikawa, who had been shaken badly by the sudden attack, kept muttering over the lost food box and saying how strange and exact Ryoseki's warning had been. Then, before anything more could be done, two officers' assistants came running

up. They bowed politely and said that the man Kosuke had pinned down was a wanted criminal with many old crimes on his head and that they had nearly lost him only moments before.

Aikawa cried out, "So he is a thief after all." Kosuke's face hardened. Tomozo had not merely attacked by mistake, but had lied as well. Even so, Kosuke felt some reluctance. "He is certainly wicked," he said, "but we are returning from my lord's memorial. To hand a man over in ropes on such a day sits badly in the heart." Aikawa answered that pity could not erase duty. The officers bound Tomozo and took him away, and only later would the full judgment upon him be known.

That night father and son-by-marriage returned home safely and gave thanks for their escape. On the next morning Kosuke went out again, this time to buy things needed for a fresh journey. As he passed through Kanda Hatagocho, he noticed a white sign outside a poor house. On it were written the words, "Physiognomy, Ink Reading, Hakuodo Yusai." At once he remembered Ryoseki's words from the day before. The priest had told him to visit the old face-reader. Perhaps, Kosuke thought, some clue about the enemies might now be revealed.

The place looked anything but grand. The front was dirty, the paper screens were blackened with smoke, and the yard did not seem to have been swept in many days. Still, Kosuke stepped carefully inside and called for the master. Yusai answered from within and told him to come in, adding that he should carry his sandals with him or they might be stolen. When Kosuke entered, he saw a narrow room, a black brazier, a broken kettle, some old divination books, a few counting sticks, and the old man himself sitting with no sign of greatness about him at all.

Kosuke greeted him respectfully and said that he had come by order of Priest Ryoseki of Shinbansui-in. At once Yusai showed more interest. He asked Kosuke's age and then examined his face through a glass. After a time he said that Kosuke was surely of good birth, though he had suffered much and had lived without strong support from those above him. Kosuke admitted that this was true. Then Yusai went on to say that Kosuke's whole life had been like walking on thin ice or crossing over the edge of a sword, full of hardship and danger.

Kosuke said that this also was true and then asked whether the great wish in his

heart would be fulfilled. Yusai answered that it would be fulfilled soon, but not without danger. He said that when the moment came, Kosuke must go straight through water or fire without retreating even one step. If he advanced boldly, his path would open wide. If he hesitated, he might be killed. Then, in his abrupt way, he said that was all and tried to send him out.

But Kosuke had one more question. He asked whether he would ever meet the person he had long been searching for, someone from above him in age and place. Yusai looked again and said at once, "You have already met that person." Kosuke denied it. He said he had been separated from that person nineteen years before and would not know the face even if they passed in the street. Yusai only repeated, more sharply than before, that they had certainly met already.

At that very moment a woman entered with a servant. She too asked Yusai whether she would meet the person she had long sought, a little son from whom she had been parted when he was only four years old. Yusai again answered, "You have already met him." The woman denied it just as Kosuke had done. Then a wild thought struck Kosuke. He moved nearer and asked whether she had once lived near Hongo Maruyama, whether her name was Orie, and whether she had been married to Kurokawa Kozo. The woman stared, astonished, and said that all of this was true.

Then Kosuke fell close beside her and cried, "Mother, I am your son Kosuke, the child from whom you were parted nineteen years ago." Orie burst into tears of joy and wonder. Yusai, almost annoyed by being proved right so fully, muttered that he had said from the start that the two had already met. After some hurried words, Orie told Kosuke that she was staying at an inn in Bakurocho called Shimotsukeya. He should follow her without seeming to do so, she said, and come up later after she had sent her servant away.

Kosuke did exactly that. At the inn, once they were alone, he told her everything: his father's death, his service in the Iijima house, Heizaemon's kindness, the plot of O-Kuni and Genjiro, the terrible night of the spear, and the dying command to restore the Iijima line. Orie listened in shock. Then she answered with a truth no less shocking. O-Kuni and Genjiro were at that very time

hiding in her own house in Utsunomiya. O-Kuni was the daughter of the man Orié had later married, and she had come there with false tears and lying words, never telling that she and Genjiro had killed Heizaemon.

Kosuke said that this was bitter beyond belief. He had searched all through Echigo and farther, while the enemies stood almost under his nose. Orié then promised to help him. She said she would leave at once for Utsunomiya with her servant and would travel as if nothing were wrong. Kosuke should follow at a distance and act like a stranger. Once they reached Utsunomiya and the servant could be sent away, mother and son could speak openly and arrange the revenge. Kosuke thanked her deeply and said that after he had finished his duty, he would bring her to see her grandchild.

Then he hurried back to the Aikawa house and told the whole matter. Aikawa was first amazed, then delighted. The words of Ryoseki and Yusai had all come true, and heaven itself seemed now to be pushing the road open before them. He told Kosuke not to lose a moment. At dawn the next day he must set out once more. Thus, with his mother found, the enemies finally traced, and his purpose burning hotter than ever, Kosuke prepared to leave again for the road to Utsunomiya.

Part 21

By strange fate, Kosuke met his true mother Orié again after nineteen years. He followed her to the inn in Bakurocho, and there the two of them told the stories of their lives. From her he learned the most surprising thing of all: O-Kuni and Genjiro were being hidden in the very house where she now lived. At first she had promised to lead him to them and let him take revenge. Yet on the road back from Edo, another thought grew stronger in her heart. She had become the wife of another house, and O-Kuni was now tied to that house by duty and name.

Even so, she did not refuse Kosuke at once. On the sixth day, before dawn, Kosuke left Suidobata and went again to the inn in Bakurocho. Orié came out with a servant and made her way slowly north, while Kosuke followed at a distance so

as not to be seen with her. Because she was a woman and no longer young, the road went slowly. They passed through place after place and did not reach Utsunomiya until evening on the ninth day. Near Sugiharamachi, Orié sent the servant ahead and quietly called Kosuke close.

She pointed out the house where she lived, with its dark blue curtain and the mark upon it, and then she explained the back way in careful detail. He was to pass the board fence, turn into a narrow side street, and enter by a small gate that opened into the garden. O-Kuni and Genjiro, she said, were hiding in a four-and-a-half-mat room on the right. She promised to leave the little gate unfastened. "Come when the bell of nine sounds," she whispered. "Then they will be like mice in a bag." Kosuke thanked her with tears in his eyes and said that once he had taken revenge and restored the Iijima house, he would bring her to Edo and care for her as a son should.

But when Orié returned home, duty pulled her heart apart. She gave small gifts to the servants, spoke kindly to her stepson Gorosaburo, and then asked quietly whether O-Kuni and Genjiro were still in the little room. Soon she went in to see them and began, little by little, to ask how they had fled from Edo. At last she spoke the truth straight to their faces. She said that Kosuke was her real son, that she had learned everything from him, and that if she let him kill them, she would fail in duty to the dead man whose house she had entered by marriage. Therefore she had changed her mind.

Then she did the thing that broke Kosuke's hope. She gave O-Kuni and Genjiro money for the road, told them to escape at once, and even taught them the hidden way out toward Hachimanyama and the road beyond. The two of them, ashamed and frightened, thanked her with tears and hurried to make ready. Just then O-Kuni's brother Gorosaburo came in. He had heard enough to understand the truth. He cursed his sister for her evil, said she deserved death, and declared that if their stepmother were not such a dutiful woman, the pair would already be dead. Even so, he could not stop what Orié had chosen to do.

Meanwhile Kosuke waited at the inn called Sumiya for the bell of nine. When the time came, he tied up his sleeves, checked the pegs of his swords, and slipped

toward the house by the back fence. The little gate stood open just as Orie had said. He crept to the room and listened. But inside he heard not the voices of O-Kuni and Genjiro, but the low sound of a woman praying. When he opened the shutter a little, he saw his mother alone with prayer beads in her hand. In that moment he understood that the enemies had been sent away.

Kosuke was struck as if by a hammer. He asked how she could have done such a thing after bringing him so far. Orie answered with terrible calm. She said that though the bond with her son had never died, she also had a duty to the house into which she had married. She could not, with her own hand, lead death into that house. Kosuke pleaded with her and said that blood could not be cut away by divorce and years. He cried that if she had meant to choose duty over him, she should have told him in Edo and spared him this bitter hope.

Orie listened, then suddenly drew a short blade from beneath her knee and drove it into her own throat. Kosuke sprang forward too late. Blood poured down, and she struggled for breath, yet she still forced herself to speak. She said that this was the only way left. By dying, she would no longer stand between one duty and another. Then she called Gorosaburo in and, before life left her, made him tell the road the fugitives had taken. She begged the two young men to think of each other as true brothers from that day on and asked them to pray for her soul. Even while dying, she urged only one thing: "Go quickly."

Kosuke could hardly tear himself away. He bowed with tears, took the bloody dagger from her hand, and at last ran out into the night. But someone else had heard enough to profit from it. Kamezo, hiding nearby, rushed ahead to warn Genjiro. By the time Kosuke reached the dark way near Jurogamine, the trap had already been set. Genjiro hid under a stone bridge with drawn sword, while Kamezo and Asuke waited ahead in the woods, pretending to hold guns. O-Kuni too stood ready among them.

When Kosuke came to the bridge, the voices called out and ordered him to stop. He saw the dark shapes before him and heard old names from the past. They cried that he would die there. For one sharp moment he was caught between two dangers. If he went forward, they would fire. If he stepped back, Genjiro would

strike from behind. Then he remembered the words he had heard before: there is no gain in retreat, only in going through.

So he rushed straight in. In one flash of steel he cut off Kamezo's arm and sent the false gun to the ground. Only then did he understand that the weapon had been no true gun at all, but only a trick used to frighten him. Asuke tried to run, but Kosuke cut him down from behind. O-Kuni screamed and fled into the trees, where her belt caught on a branch. Kosuke reached her and struck her down there in the dark.

Genjiro then leaped from his hiding place to kill him, but branches and shadows ruined his chance. Kosuke turned in time and cut him across the ribs. He did not kill him at once. First he cut the topknots from both O-Kuni and Genjiro and drove them against a chestnut stump. He made them hear their own crimes named aloud: the betrayal of Heizaemon, the murder of a master, the fall of a house, and the death of his mother. They begged for mercy, but he showed none. He slashed their faces in rage, then used his mother's dagger to finish them both and cut off their heads.

For a little while he could only sit there and breathe. At last he gave thanks to the god he had long prayed to and rose with the heads. But before he could leave, Kamezo and Asuke, half blind with panic, came stumbling back toward him crying that there had been murder. Kosuke cut them both down as well, taking them for part of the same evil knot. Then, carrying the heads, he made his way back toward Utsunomiya. People on the road stared in horror, and some even ran to tell the authorities.

Kosuke went first to Gorosaburo's house and asked only one thing: whether his mother still lived to see the revenge done. But she had already died. Gorosaburo, seeing his sister's head, could hardly speak from grief and shame. The matter was then reported properly, and because it was a true revenge for a murdered lord, the authorities allowed the case to stand. Kosuke returned to Aikawa, told the full story, and the report passed through the proper hands. In the end, by Heizaemon's dying wish, Kosuke's son Kotaro became the one through whom the Iijima house was restored, while Kosuke stood as guardian.

The day after that, Tomozo was punished, and when people read the notice, all his old crimes came fully into the light. Then it became clear how the love of Otsuyu and Shinzaburo had led to the wicked work of others around them. For the sake of his lord, for the sake of Otsuyu, and for the sake of Shinzaburo, Kosuke later had a Wet Buddha statue established. That, they said, was the origin of the Wet Buddha of Shinbansui-in. And so this long tale came at last to its end, with evil punished, duty fulfilled, and the fallen house raised again.