

# *Musashi* by Eiji Yoshikawa

## Book I • EARTH

### The Little Bell

Takezō lay among the corpses. There were thousands of them. "The whole world's gone crazy," he thought dimly. "A man might as well be a dead leaf, floating in the autumn breeze."

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

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

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

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

Images of his sister and the old villagers floated before his eyes. "I'm dying," he thought without a tinge of sadness. "Is this what it's really like?" He felt drawn to the peace of death, like a child mesmerized by a flame. Suddenly one of the nearby corpses raised its head. "Takezō."

The images of his mind ceased. As if awakened from the dead, he turned his head toward the sound. The voice, he was sure, was that of his best friend.

With all his strength he raised himself slightly, squeezing out a whisper barely audible above the pelting rain. "Matahachi, is that you?" Then he collapsed, lay still and listened.

"Takezō! Are you really alive?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Matahachi lay on his stomach, eyes closed, hoping against hope they would not be trampled, but Takezō stared unblinkingly upward. The horses passed so close they could smell their sweat. Then it was over. Miraculously they were uninjured and undetected, and for several minutes both remained silent in disbelief.

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

The two friends helped each other, with great difficulty, to their feet. Slowly they made their way across the battlefield to the safety of the wooded

hills, hobbling along with arms around each other's shoulders. There they collapsed but after a rest began foraging for food. For two days they subsisted on wild chestnuts and edible leaves in the sodden hollows of Mount Ibuki. This kept them from starving, but Takezō's stomach ached and Matahachi's bowels tormented him. No food could fill him, no drink quench his thirst, but even he felt his strength returning bit by bit.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

village troublemaker.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A stream of tears cleared a white path down Matahachi's grimy face. He

heaved the sigh of a very sick man.

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

"What are you talking about?"

"I feel like I'm dying."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But gone she was, like a flash of lightning in the night. The sound of a

small bell receded eerily into the darkness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's right," said Takezō. "We were under Lord Shimmen of Iga." "Go away! If you're found around here, we'll be in trouble."

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

"Please go away!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One evening about a week later, Takezō and Matahachi sat chatting. "They must have a trade of some kind," Takezō remarked.

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

But Takezō's curiosity was aroused. "The mother's not so old," he went on.

"It's strange, the two of them living alone here in the mountains." "Umm. Don't you think the girl looks a little like Otsū?"

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

Matahachi motioned for him to be quiet.

"Shh! I hear her bell."

Akemi's light knock on the door sounded like the tapping of a woodpecker.

"Matahachi, Takezō," she called softly.

"Yes?"

"It's me."

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

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

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

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

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

"They are?"

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

"We won't make a sound," Takezō promised. "I'll even cover Matahachi's face

with a rag if he snores too loudly."

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

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

"Why not?"

"Mother'd be angry."

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

"Sixteen."

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

"Thanks for telling me."

"Where's your father?"

"I don't have one anymore."

"Sorry. Then how do you live?"

"We make moxa."

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

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

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

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

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

"Well?"

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

Akemi turned quickly and opened the door.

"What were you doing out there?"

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



## The Comb

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

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

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

Matahachi began going to the house and sitting by the hearth with Akemi and her youthful mother. After three or four days of chatting and joking with them, the convivial guest became one of the family. He stopped going back to the woodshed even at night, and the rare times he did, he had sake on his breath

and tried to entice Takezō into the house by singing the praises of the good life just a few feet away.

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

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

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

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

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

"Matahachi," he said seriously, "we're imposing on these people. They're taking a big risk having us around. I think we should start for home."

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

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

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

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

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

more than Takezō, who simply ignored the suggestion or countered it with a humorous remark.

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

"Takezō, over here! Lots of them!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She started racing down the mountainside like a pheasant, but suddenly stopped dead in her tracks, an expression of alarm clouding her face.

Approaching diagonally across the grove, halfway down the slope, was a mountain of a man; his strides were long and languorous, and his glaring eyes were trained directly on the frail young girl before him. He looked frighteningly primitive. Everything about him smacked of the struggle to survive, and he had a distinct air of bellicosity: ferocious bushy eyebrows and a thick, curling upper lip; a heavy sword, a cloak of mail, and an animal skin wrapped around him.

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

but horror.

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

"Yes," came a peep of a reply.

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

"Yes."

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

Akemi said nothing.

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

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

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

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

Akemi, her lips still trembling, answered wearily, "His name is Tsujikaze. He comes from the village of Fuwa." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "He's a freebooter, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"What's he so worked up about?"

She stood there without answering.

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

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

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

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

"Of course I remember."

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

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

"Well, I was stealing!" She looked at him closely, gauging his reaction.

"Stealing?"

"After a battle, I go to the battlefield and take things off the dead soldiers: swords, scabbard ornaments, incense bags—anything we can sell." She looked at

him again for a sign of disapproval, but his face betrayed none. "It scares me," she sighed, then, turning pragmatic, "but we need the money for food and if I say I don't want to go, Mother gets furious."

The sun was still fairly high in the sky. At Akemi's suggestion, Takezō sat down on the grass. Through the pines, they could look down on the house in the marsh.

Takezō nodded to himself, as if figuring something out. A bit later he said, "Then that story about cutting mugwort in the mountains. Making it into moxa. That was all a lie?"

"Oh, no. We do that too! But Mother has such expensive tastes. We'd never be able to make a living on moxa. When my father was alive, we lived in the biggest house in the village—in all seven villages of Ibuki, as a matter of fact. We had lots of servants, and Mother always had beautiful things."

"Was your father a merchant?"

"Oh, no. He was the leader of the local freebooters." Akemi's eyes shone with pride. It was clear she no longer feared Takezō's reaction and was giving vent to her true feelings, her jaw set, her small hands tightening into fists as she spoke. "This Tsujikaze Temma—the man we just met—killed him. At least, everyone says he did."

"You mean your father was murdered?"

Nodding silently, she began in spite of herself to weep, and Takezō felt something deep inside himself start to thaw. He hadn't felt much sympathy for the girl at first. Though smaller than most other girls of sixteen, she talked like a grown woman much of the time, and every once in a while made a quick movement that put one on guard. But when the tears began to drop from her long eyelashes, he suddenly melted with pity. He wanted to hug her in his arms, to protect her.

All the same, she was not a girl who'd had anything resembling a proper upbringing. That there was no nobler calling than that of her father seemed to be something she never questioned. Her mother had persuaded her that it was quite all right to strip corpses, not in order to eat, but in order to live nicely. Many out-and-out thieves would have shrunk from the task.

During the long years of feudal strife, it had reached the point where all the shiftless good-for-nothings in the countryside drifted into making their living this way. People had more or less come to expect it of them. When war broke out, the local military rulers even made use of their services, rewarding them generously for setting fire to enemy supplies, spreading false rumors, stealing

horses from enemy camps and the like. Most often their services were bought, but even when they were not, a war offered a host of opportunities; besides foraging among corpses for valuables, they could sometimes even wangle rewards for slaying samurai whose heads they'd merely stumbled upon and picked up. One large battle made it possible for these unscrupulous pilferers to live comfortably for six months or a year.

During the most turbulent times, even the ordinary farmer and woodcutter had learned to profit from human misery and bloodshed. The fighting on the outskirts of their village might keep these simple souls from working, but they had ingeniously adapted to the situation and discovered how to pick over the remains of human life like vultures. Partly because of these intrusions, the professional looters maintained strict surveillance over their respective territories. It was an ironclad rule that poachers—namely, brigands who trespassed on the more powerful brigands' turf—could not go unpunished. Those who dared infringe on the assumed rights of these thugs were liable to cruel retribution.

Akemi shivered and said, "What'll we do? Temma's henchmen are on their way here, I just know it."

"Don't worry," Takezō reassured her. "If they do show up, I'll greet them personally."

When they came down from the mountain, twilight had descended on the marsh, and all was still. A smoke trail from the bath fire at the house crept along the top of a row of tall rushes like an airborne undulating snake. Okō, having finished applying her nightly makeup, was standing idly at the back door. When she saw her daughter approaching side by side with Takezō, she shouted, "Akemi, what have you been doing out so late?"

There was sternness in her eye and voice. The girl, who had been walking along absentmindedly, was brought up short. She was more sensitive to her mother's moods than to anything else in the world. Her mother had both nurtured this sensitivity and learned to exploit it, to manipulate her daughter like a puppet with a mere look or gesture. Akemi quickly fled Takezō's side and, blushing noticeably, ran ahead and into the house.

The next day Akemi told her mother about Tsujikaze Temma. Okō flew into a rage

"Why didn't you tell me immediately?" she screamed, rushing around like a madwoman, tearing at her hair, taking things out of drawers and closets and piling them all together in the middle of the room.

"Matahachi! Takezō! Give me a hand! We have to hide everything."

Matahachi shifted a board pointed to by Oka and hoisted himself up above the ceiling. There wasn't much space between the ceiling and the rafters. One could barely crawl about, but it served Okō's purpose, and most likely that of her departed husband. Takezō, standing on a stool between mother and daughter, began handing things up to Matahachi one by one. If Takezō hadn't heard Akemi's story the day before, he would've been amazed at the variety of articles he now saw.

Takezō knew the two of them had been at this for a long time, but even so, it was astonishing how much they had accumulated. There was a dagger, a spear tassel, a sleeve from a suit of armor, a helmet without a crown, a miniature, portable shrine, a Buddhist rosary, a banner staff..... There was even a lacquered saddle, beautifully carved and ornately decorated with gold, silver and mother-of-pearl inlay.

From the opening in the ceiling Matahachi peered out, a perplexed look on his face. "Is that everything?"

"No, there's one thing more," said Okō, rushing off. In a moment she was back, bearing a four-foot sword of black oak. Takezō started passing it up to Matahachi's outstretched arms, but the weight, the curve, the perfect balance of the weapon impressed him so deeply that he could not let it go.

He turned to Okō, a sheepish look on his face. "Do you think I could have this?" he asked, his eyes showing a new vulnerability. He glanced at his feet, as if to say he knew he'd done nothing to deserve the sword.

"Do you really want it?" she said softly, a motherly tone in her voice. "Yes . . . Yes.....I really do!"

Although she didn't actually say he could have it, she smiled, showing a dimple, and Takezō knew the sword was his. Matahachi jumped down from the ceiling, bursting with envy. He fingered the sword covetously, making Okō laugh.

"See how the little man pouts because he didn't get a present!" She tried to placate him by giving him a handsome leather purse beaded with agate. Matahachi didn't look very happy with it. His eyes kept shifting to the black-oak sword. His feelings were hurt and the purse did little to assuage his wounded pride.

When her husband was alive, Okō had apparently acquired the habit of taking a leisurely, steaming hot bath every evening, putting on her makeup, and then drinking a bit of sake. In short, she spent the same amount of time on her

toilette as the highest-paid geisha. It was not the sort of luxury that ordinary people could afford, but she insisted on it and had even taught Akemi to follow the same routine, although the girl found it boring and the reasons for it unfathomable. Not only did Okō like to live well; she was determined to remain young forever.

That evening, as they sat around the recessed floor hearth, Okō poured Matahachi's sake and tried to persuade Takezō to have some as well. When he refused, she put the cup in his hand, seized him by the wrist and forced him to raise it to his lips.

"Men are supposed to be able to drink," she chided. "If you can't do it alone, I'll help."

From time to time, Matahachi stared uneasily at her. Okō, conscious of his gaze, became even more familiar with Takezō. Placing her hand playfully on his knee, she began humming a popular love song.

By this time, Matahachi had had enough. Suddenly turning to Takezō, he blurted out, "We ought to be moving on soon!"

This had the desired effect. "But . . . but ... where would you go?" Okō stammered.

"Back to Miyamoto. My mother's there, and so is my fiancée."

Momentarily taken by surprise, Okō swiftly regained her composure. Her eyes narrowed to slits, her smile froze, her voice turned acid. "Well, please accept my apologies for delaying you, for taking you in and giving you a home. If there's a girl waiting for you, you'd better hurry on back. Far be it from me to keep you!"

After receiving the black-oak sword, Takezō was never without it. He derived an indescribable pleasure from simply holding it. Often he'd squeeze the handle tightly or run its blunt edge along his palm, just to feel the perfect proportion of the curve to the length. When he slept, he hugged it to his body. The cool touch of the wooden surface against his cheek reminded him of the floor of the dōjō where he'd practiced sword techniques in winter. This nearly perfect instrument of both art and death reawakened in him the fighting spirit he had inherited from his father.

Takezō had loved his mother, but she had left his father and moved away when he was still small, leaving him alone with Munisai, a martinet who wouldn't have known how to spoil a child in the unlikely event that he had



wanted to. In his father's presence, the boy had always felt awkward and frightened, never really at ease. When he was nine years old, he'd so craved a kind word from his mother that he had run away from home and gone all the way to Harima Province, where she was living. Takezō never learned why his mother and father had separated, and at that age, an explanation might not have helped much. She had married another samurai, by whom she had one more child.

Once the little runaway had reached Harima, he wasted no time in locating his mother. On that occasion, she took him to a wooded area behind the local shrine, so they wouldn't be seen, and there, with tear-filled eyes, hugged him tightly and tried to explain why he had to go back to his father. Takezō never forgot the scene; every detail of it remained vividly in his mind as long as he lived.

Of course, Munisai, being the samurai he was, had sent people to retrieve his son the moment he learned of his disappearance. It was obvious where the child had gone. Takezō was returned to Miyamoto like a bundle of firewood, strapped on the back of an unsaddled horse. Munisai, by way of greeting, had called him an insolent brat, and in a state of rage verging on hysteria, caned him until he could cane no more. Takezō remembered more explicitly than anything else the venom with which his father had spat out his ultimatum: "If you go to your mother one more time, I'll disown you."

Not long after this incident, Takezō learned that his mother had fallen ill and died. Her death had the effect of transforming him from a quiet, gloomy child into the village bully. Even Munisai was intimidated eventually. When he took a truncheon to the boy, the latter countered with a wooden staff. The only one who ever stood up to him was Matahachi, also the son of a samurai; the other children all did Takezō's bidding. By the time he was twelve or thirteen, he was almost as tall as an adult.

One year, a wandering swordsman named Arima Kihei put up a gold-embazoned banner and offered to take on challengers from the village. Takezō killed him effortlessly, eliciting praise for his valor from the villagers. Their high opinion of him, however, was short-lived, since as he grew older, he became increasingly unmanageable and brutal. Many thought him sadistic, and soon, whenever he appeared on the scene, people gave him a very wide berth. His attitude toward them grew to reflect their coldness.

When his father, as harsh and unrelenting as ever, finally died, the cruel streak in Takezō widened even more. If it had not been for his older sister, Ogin,

Takezō would probably have gotten himself into something far over his head and been driven out of the village by an angry mob. Fortunately, he loved his sister and, powerless before her tears, usually did whatever she asked.

Going off to war with Matahachi was a turning point for Takezō. It indicated that somehow he wanted to take his place in society alongside other men. The defeat at Sekigahara had abruptly curtailed such hopes, and he found himself once again plunged into the dark reality from which he thought he had escaped. Still, he was a youth blessed with the sublime lightheartedness that flourishes only in an age of strife. When he slept, his face became as placid as an infant's, completely untroubled by thoughts of the morrow. He had his share of dreams, asleep or awake, but he suffered few real disappointments. Having so little to begin with, he had little to lose, and although he was in a sense uprooted, he was also unfettered by shackles.

Breathing deeply and steadily, holding on to his wooden sword tightly, Takezō at this moment may well have been dreaming, a faint smile on his lips as visions of his gentle sister and his peaceful hometown cascaded like a mountain waterfall before his closed, heavily lashed eyes. Okō, carrying a lamp, slipped into his room. "What a peaceful face," she marveled under her breath; she reached out and lightly touched his lips with her fingers.

Then she blew out the lamp and lay down beside him. Curling up catlike, she inched closer and closer to his body, her whitened face and colorful nightgown, really too youthful for her, hidden by the darkness. The only sound that could be heard was that of dewdrops dripping onto the windowsill.

"I wonder if he's still a banana," she mused as she reached out to remove his wooden sword.

The instant she touched it, Takezō was on his feet and shouting, "Thief! Thief!"

Okō was thrown over onto the lamp, which cut into her shoulder. Takezō was wrenching her arm without mercy. She screamed out in pain. Astonished, he released her. "Oh, it's you. I thought it was a thief." "Oooh," moaned Okō. "That hurt!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know it was you."

"You don't know your own strength. You almost tore my arm off." "I said I was sorry. What are you doing here, anyway?"

Ignoring his innocent query, she quickly recovered from her arm injury and tried to coil the same limb around his neck, cooing, "You don't have to apologize. Takezō . . ." She ran the back of her hand softly against his cheek.

"Hey! What are you doing? Are you crazy?" he shouted, shrinking away from her touch.

"Don't make so much noise, you idiot. You know how I feel about you." She went on trying to convince him, with him swatting at her like a man attacked by a swarm of bees.

"Yes, and I'm very grateful. Neither of us will ever forget how kind you've been, taking us in and all."

"I don't mean that, Takezō. I'm talking about my woman's feelings—the lovely, warm feeling I have for you."

"Wait a minute," he said, jumping up. "I'll light the lamp!"

"Oh, how can you be so cruel," she whimpered, moving to embrace him again.

"Don't do that!" he cried indignantly. "Stop it—I mean it!"

Something in his voice, something intense and resolute, frightened Okō into halting her attack.

Takezō felt his bones wobbling, his teeth rattling. Never had he encountered such a formidable adversary. Not even when he'd looked up at the horses galloping past him at Sekigahara had his heart palpitated so. He sat cringing in the corner of the room.

"Go away, please," he pleaded. "Go back to your own room. If you don't, I'll call Matahachi. I'll wake the whole house up!"

Okō did not budge. She sat there in the dark, breathing heavily and staring at him with narrowed eyes. She wasn't about to be rebuffed. "Takezō," she cooed again. "Don't you understand how I feel?"

He made no reply.

"Don't you?"

"Yes, but do you understand how I feel, being snuck up on in my sleep, frightened to death and mauled by a tiger in the dark?"

It was her turn to be silent. A low whisper, almost a growl, emerged from a deep part of her throat. She said each syllable with a vengeance. "How can you embarrass me so?"

"I embarrass you?"

"Yes. This is mortifying."

They were both so tense they hadn't noticed the knocking at the door, which had apparently been going on for some time. Now the pounding was punctuated by shouts. "What's going on in there? Are you deaf? Open the door!"

A light appeared in the crack between the sliding rain shutters. Akemi was

already awake. Then Matahachi's footsteps thudded toward them and his voice called, "What's going on?"

From the hallway now, Akemi cried out in alarm, "Mother! Are you in there? Please answer me!"

Blindly Okō scrambled back into her own room, just adjoining Takezō's, and answered from there. The men outside appeared to have pried open the shutters and stormed into the house. When she reached the hearth room she saw six or seven pairs of broad shoulders crowded into the adjacent, dirt-floored kitchen, which was a big step down, since it was set at a lower level than the other rooms.

One of the men shouted, "It's Tsujikaze Temma. Give us some light!"

The men barged rudely into the main part of the house. They didn't even stop to remove their sandals, a sure sign of habitual uncouthness. They began poking around everywhere—in the closets, in the drawers, under the thick straw tatami covering the floor. Temma seated himself royally by the hearth and watched as his henchmen systematically ransacked the rooms. He thoroughly enjoyed being in charge but soon seemed to tire of his own inactivity.

"This is taking too long," he growled, pounding his fist on the tatami. "You must have some of it here. Where is it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," replied Okō, folding her hands over her stomach forbearingly.

"Don't give me that, woman!" he bellowed. "Where is it? I know it's here!"

"I don't have a thing!"

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Well, then, maybe you don't. Maybe I have the wrong information. . . ."  
"He eyed her warily, tugging and scratching at his beard. "That's enough, men!" he thundered.

Okō had meanwhile sat down in the next room, with the sliding door wide open. She had her back to him, but even so she looked defiant, as though telling him he could go ahead and search wherever he had a mind to.

"Okō," he called gruffly.

"What do you want?" came the icy reply.

"How about a little something to drink?"

"Would you like some water?"

"Don't push me . . ." he warned menacingly.

"The sake's in there. Drink it if you want to."

"Aw, Okō," he said, softening, almost admiring her for her coldhearted stubbornness. "Don't be that way. I haven't been to visit for a long time. Is this any way to treat an old friend?"

"Some visit!"

"Now, take it easy. You're partly to blame, you know. I've been hearing about what the 'moxa man's widow' has been up to from too many different people to think it's all lies. I hear you've been sending your lovely daughter out to rob corpses. Now, why would she be doing a thing like that?"

"Show me your proof!" she shrieked. "Where's the proof!"

"If I'd been planning to dig it out, I wouldn't have given Akemi advance warning. You know the rules of the game. It's my territory, and I've got to go through the motions of searching your house. Otherwise, everybody'd get the idea they could get away with the same thing. Then where'd I be? I've gotta protect myself, you know!"

She stared at him in steely silence, her head half turned toward him, chin and nose proudly raised.

"Well, I'm going to let you off this time. But just remember, I'm being especially nice to you."

"Nice to me? Who, you? That's a laugh!"

"Okō," he coaxed, "come here and pour me a drink."

When she showed no sign of moving, he exploded. "You crazy banana! Can't you see that if you were nice to me, you wouldn't have to live like this?" He calmed down a bit, then advised her,

"Think it over for a while."

"I'm overcome by your kindness, sir," came the venomous reply.

"You don't like me?"

"Just answer me this: Who killed my husband? I suppose you expect me to believe that you don't know?"

"If you want to take revenge on whoever it was, I'll be happy to help. Any way I can."

"Don't play dumb!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"You seem to hear so much from people. Haven't they told you that it was you yourself who killed him? Haven't you heard that Tsujikaze Temma was the murderer? Everyone else knows it. I may be the widow of a freebooter, but I haven't sunk so low that I'd play around with my husband's killer."

"You had to go and say it, didn't you—couldn't leave well enough alone,

eh!" With a rueful laugh, he drained the sake cup in one gulp and poured another. "You know, you really shouldn't say things like that. It's not good for your health—or your pretty daughter's!"

"I'll bring Akemi up properly, and after she's married, I'll get back at you. Mark my word!"

Temma laughed until his shoulders, his whole body, shook like a cake of bean curd. After he'd downed all the sake he could find, he motioned to one of his men, who was positioned in a corner of the kitchen, his lance propped vertically against his shoulder. "You there," he boomed, "push aside some of the ceiling boards with the butt of your lance!"

The man did as he was told. As he went around the room, poking at the ceiling, Okō's treasure trove began falling to the floor like hailstones.

"Just as I suspected all along," said Temma, getting clumsily to his feet. "You see it, men. Evidence! She's broken the rules, no question about it. Take her outside and give her her punishment!"

The men converged on the hearth room, but abruptly came to a halt. Okō stood statuesquely in the doorway, as though daring them to lay a hand on her. Temma, who'd stepped down into the kitchen, called back impatiently, "What are you waiting for? Bring her out here!"

Nothing happened. Okō continued to stare the men down, and they remained as if paralyzed. Temma decided to take over. Clicking his tongue, he made for Okō, but he, too, stopped short in front of the doorway. Standing behind Okō, not visible from the kitchen, were two fierce-looking young men. Takezō was holding the wooden sword low, poised to fracture the shins of the first comer and anyone else stupid enough to follow. On the other side was Matahachi, holding a sword high in the air, ready to bring it down on the first neck that ventured through the doorway. Akemi was nowhere to be seen.

"So that's how it is," groaned Temma, suddenly remembering the scene on the mountainside. "I saw that one walking the other day with Akemi—the one with the stick. Who's the other one?"

Neither Matahachi nor Takezō said a word, making it clear that they intended to answer with their weapons. The tension mounted.

"There aren't supposed to be any men in this house," roared Temma. "You two . . . You must be from Sekigahara! You better watch your step—I'm warning you."

Neither of them moved a muscle.

"There isn't anybody in these parts who doesn't know the name of

Tsujikaze Temma! I'll show you what we do to stragglers!"

Silence. Temma waved his men out of the way. One of them backed straight into the hearth, in the middle of the floor. He let out a yelp and fell in, sending a shower of sparks from the burning kindling up to the ceiling; in seconds, the room filled completely with smoke.

"Aarrgghh!"

As Temma lunged into the room, Matahachi brought down his sword with both hands, but the older man was too fast for him and the blow glanced off the tip of Temma's scabbard. Okō had taken refuge in the nearest corner while Takezō waited, his black-oak sword horizontally poised. He aimed at Temma's legs and swung with all his strength. The staff whizzed through the darkness, but there was no thud of impact. Somehow this bull of a man had jumped up just in time and on the way down threw himself at Takezō with the force of a boulder.

Takezō felt as though he were tangling with a bear. This was the strongest man he had ever fought. Temma grabbed him by the throat and landed two or three blows that made him think his skull would crack. Then Takezō got his second wind and sent Temma flying through the air. He landed against the wall, rocking the house and everything in it. As Takezō raised the wooden sword to come down on Temma's head, the freebooter rolled over, jumped to his feet, and fled, with Takezō close on his tail.

Takezō was determined to not let Temma escape. That would be dangerous. His mind was made up; when he caught him, he was not going to do a halfway job of killing him. He would make absolutely certain that not a breath of life was left.

That was Takezō's nature; he was a creature of extremes. Even when he was a small child, there had been something primitive in his blood, something harking back to the fierce warriors of ancient Japan, something as wild as it was pure. It knew neither the light of civilization nor the tempering of knowledge. Nor did it know moderation. It was a natural trait, and the one that had always prevented his father from liking the boy. Munisai had tried, in the fashion typical of the military class, to curb his son's ferocity by punishing him severely and often, but the effect of such discipline had been to make the boy wilder, like a wild boar whose true ferocity emerges when it is deprived of food. The more the villagers despised the young roughneck, the more he lorded it over them.

As the child of nature became a man, he grew bored with swaggering about the village as though he owned it. It was too easy to intimidate the timid villagers. He began to dream of bigger things. Sekigahara had given him his first

lesson in what the world was really like. His youthful illusions were shattered—not that he'd really had many to begin with. It would never have occurred to him to brood over having failed in his first "real" venture, or to muse on the grimness of the future. He didn't yet know the meaning of self-discipline, and he'd taken the whole bloody catastrophe in stride.

And now, fortuitously, he'd stumbled onto a really big fish—Tsuji-kaze Temma, the leader of the freebooters! This was the kind of adversary he had longed to lock horns with at Sekigahara.

"Coward!" he yelled. "Stand and fight!"

Takezō was running like lightning through the pitch-black field, shouting taunts all the while. Ten paces ahead, Temma was fleeing as if on wings. Takezō's hair was literally on end, and the wind made a groaning noise as it swept past his ears. He was happy—happier than he'd ever been in his life. The more he ran, the closer he came to sheer animal ecstasy.

He leapt at Temma's back. Blood spurted out at the end of the wooden sword, and a bloodcurdling scream pierced the silent night. The freebooter's hulking frame fell to the ground with a leaden thud and rolled over. The skull was smashed to bits, the eyes popped out of their sockets. After two or three more heavy blows to the body, broken ribs protruded from the skin.

Takezō raised his arm, wiping rivers of sweat from his brow.

"Satisfied, Captain?" he asked triumphantly.

He started nonchalantly back toward the house. An observer new on the scene might have thought him out for an evening stroll, with not a care in the world. He felt free, no remorse, knowing that if the other man had won, he himself would be lying there, dead and alone.

Out of the darkness came Matahachi's voice. "Takezō, is that you?"  
"Yeah," he replied dully. "What's up?"

Matahachi ran up to him and announced breathlessly, "I killed one! How about you?"

"I killed one too."

Matahachi held up his sword, soaked in blood right down to the braiding on the hilt. Squaring his shoulders with pride, he said, "The others ran away. These thieving bananas aren't much as fighters! No guts! Can only stand up to corpses, ha! Real even match, I'd say, ha, ha, ha."

Both of them were stained with gore and as contented as a pair of well-fed kittens. Chattering happily, they headed for the lamp visible in the distance, Takezō with his bloody stick, Matahachi with his bloody sword.



A stray horse stuck his head through the window and looked around the house. His snorting woke the two sleepers. Cursing the animal, Takezō gave him a smart slap on the nose. Matahachi stretched, yawned and remarked on how well he'd slept.

"The sun's pretty high already," said Takezō.

"You suppose it's afternoon?"

"Couldn't be!"

After a sound sleep, the events of the night before were all but forgotten. For these two, only today and tomorrow existed.

Takezō ran out behind the house and stripped to the waist. Crouching down beside the clean, cool mountain stream, he splashed water on his face, doused his hair and washed his chest and back. Looking up, he inhaled deeply several times, as though trying to drink in the sunlight and all the air in the sky. Matahachi went sleepily into the hearth room, where he bid a cheery good morning to Okō and Akemi.

"Why, what are you two charming ladies wearing sour pusses for?" "Are we?"

"Yes, most definitely. You look like you're both in mourning. What's there to be gloomy about? We killed your husband's murderer and gave his henchmen a beating they won't soon forget."

Matahachi's dismay was not hard to fathom. He thought the widow and her daughter would be overjoyed at news of Temma's death. Indeed, the night before, Akemi had clapped her hands with glee when she first heard about it. But Okō had looked uneasy from the first, and today, slouching dejectedly by the fire, she looked even worse.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked, thinking she was the most difficult woman in the world to please. "What gratitude!" he said to himself, taking the bitter tea that Akemi had poured for him and squatting down on his haunches.

Okō smiled wanly, envying the young, who know not the ways of the world. "Matahachi," she said wearily, "you don't seem to understand. Temma had hundreds of followers."

"Of course he did. Crooks like him always do. We're not afraid of the kind of people who follow the likes of him. If we could kill him, why should we be afraid of his underlings? If they try to get at us, Takezō and I will just—"

"—will just do nothing!" interrupted Okō.

Matahachi pulled back his shoulders and said, "Who says so? Bring on as many of them as you like! They're nothing but a bunch of worms. Or do you think Takezō and I are cowards, that we're just going to slither away on our bellies in retreat? What do you take us for?"

"You're not cowards, but you are childish! Even to me. Temma has a younger brother named Tsujikaze Kōhei, and if *he* comes after you, the two of you rolled into one wouldn't have a chance!"

This was not the kind of talk Matahachi especially liked to hear, but as she went on, he started thinking that maybe she had a point. Tsujikaze Kōhei apparently had a large band of followers around Yasugawa in Kiso, and not only that: he was expert in the martial arts and unusually adept at catching people off their guard. So far, no one Kōhei had publicly announced he would kill had lived out his normal life. To Matahachi's way of thinking, it was one thing if a person attacked you in the open. It was quite another thing if he snuck up on you when you were fast asleep.

"That's a weak point with me," he admitted. "I sleep like a log."

As he sat holding his jaw and thinking, Okō came to the conclusion that there was nothing to do but abandon the house and their present way of life and go somewhere far away. She asked Matahachi what he and Takezō would do.

"I'll talk it over with him," replied Matahachi. "Wonder where he's gone off to?"

He walked outside and looked around, but Takezō was nowhere in sight. After a time he shaded his eyes, looked off into the distance and spotted Takezō riding around in the foothills, bareback on the stray horse that had woken them with his neighing.

"He doesn't have a care in the world," Matahachi said to himself, gruffly envious. Cupping his hands around his mouth, he shouted, "Hey, you! Come home! We've got to talk!"

A little while later they lay in the grass together, chewing on stalks of grass, discussing what they should do next.

Matahachi said, "Then you think we should head home?"

"Yes, I do. We can't stay with these two women forever."

"No, I guess not."

"I don't like women." Takezō was sure of that at least.

"All right. Let's go, then."

Matahachi rolled over and looked up at the sky. "Now that we've made up our minds, I want to get moving. I suddenly realized how much I miss Otsū, how

much I want to see her. Look up there! There's a cloud that looks just like her profile. See! That part's just like her hair after she's washed it." Matahachi was kicking his heels into the ground and pointing to the sky.

Takezō's eyes followed the retreating form of the horse he had just set free. Like many of the vagabonds who live in the fields, stray horses seemed to him to be good-natured things. When you're through with them, they ask for nothing; they just go off quietly somewhere by themselves.

From the house Akemi summoned them to dinner. They stood up. "Race you!" cried Takezō.

"You're on!" countered Matahachi.

Akemi clapped her hands with delight as the two of them sped neck and neck through the tall grass, leaving a thick trail of dust in their wake.

After dinner, Akemi grew pensive. She had just learned that the two men had decided to go back to their homes. It had been fun having them in the house, and she wanted it to go on forever.

"You silly thing!" chided her mother. "Why are you moping so?" Okō was applying her makeup, as meticulously as ever, and as she scolded the girl, she stared into her mirror at Takezō. He caught her gaze and suddenly recalled the pungent fragrance of her hair the night she invaded his room.

Matahachi, who had taken the big sake jar down from a shelf, plopped down next to Takezō and began filling a small warming bottle, just as though he were master of the house. Since this was to be their last night all together, they planned to drink their fill. Okō seemed to be taking special care with her face.

"Let's not leave a drop undrunk!" she said. "There's no point in leaving it here for the rats."

"Or the worms!" Matahachi chimed in.

They emptied three large jars in no time. Okō leaned against Matahachi and started fondling him in a way that made Takezō turn his head in embarrassment.

"I . . . I . . . can't walk," mumbled Okō drunkenly.

Matahachi escorted her to her pallet, her head leaning heavily on his shoulder. Once there, she turned to Takezō and said spitefully, "You, Takezō, you sleep over there, by yourself. You like sleeping by yourself. Isn't that right?"

Without a murmur, he lay down where he was. He was very drunk and it was very late.

By the time he woke up, it was broad daylight. The moment he opened his eyes, he sensed it. Something told him the house was empty. The things Okō and

Akemi had piled together the day before for the trip were gone. There were no clothes, no sandals—and no Matahachi.

He called out, but there was no reply, nor did he expect one. A vacant house has an aura all its own. There was no one in the yard, no one behind the house, no one in the woodshed. The only trace of his companions was a bright red comb lying beside the open mouth of the water pipe.

"Matahachi's a pig!" he said to himself.

Sniffing the comb, he again recalled how Okō had tried to seduce him that evening not long ago. "This," he thought, "is what defeated Matahachi." The very idea made him boil with anger.

"Fool!" he cried out loud. "What about Otsū? What do you plan to do about her? Hasn't she been deserted too many times already, you pig?"

He stamped the cheap comb under his foot. He wanted to cry in rage, not for himself, but out of pity for Otsū, whom he could picture so clearly waiting back in the village.

As he sat disconsolately in the kitchen, the stray horse looked in the doorway impassively. Finding that Takezō would not pat his nose, he wandered over to the sink and began lazily to lick some grains of rice that had stuck there.

## The Flower Festival

In the seventeenth century, the Mimasaka highroad was something of a major thoroughfare. It led up from Tatsuno in Harima Province, winding through a terrain proverbially described as "one mountain after another." Like the stakes marking the Mimasaka-Harima boundary, it followed a seemingly endless series of ridges. Travelers emerging from Nakayama Pass looked down into the valley of the Aida River, where, often to their surprise, they saw a sizable village.

Actually, Miyamoto was more a scattering of hamlets than a real village. One cluster of houses lay along the riverbanks, another huddled farther up in the hills, and a third sat amid level fields that were stony and hence hard to plow. All in all, the number of houses was substantial for a rural settlement of the time.

Until about a year before, Lord Shimmen of Iga had maintained a castle not a mile up the river—a small castle as castles go, but one that nonetheless attracted a steady stream of artisans and tradespeople. Farther to the north were the Shikozaka silver mines, which were now past their prime but had once lured miners from far and wide.

Travelers going from Tottori to Himeji, or from Tajima through the mountains to Bizen, naturally used the highroad. Just as naturally, they stopped over in Miyamoto. It had the exotic air of a village often visited by the natives of several provinces and boasted of not only an inn, but a clothing store as well. It also harbored a bevy of women of the night, who, throats powdered white as was the fashion, hovered before their business establishments like white bats under the eaves. This was the town Takezō and Matahachi had left to go to war.

Looking down on the rooftops of Miyamoto, Otsū sat and daydreamed. She was a wisp of a girl, with fair complexion and shining black hair. Fine of bone, fragile of limb, she had an ascetic, almost ethereal air. Unlike the robust and ruddy farm girls working in the rice paddies below, Otsū's movements were delicate. She walked gracefully, with her long neck stretched and head held high. Now, perched on the edge of Shippōji temple porch, she was as poised as a porcelain statuette.

A foundling raised in this mountain temple, she had acquired a lovely aloofness rarely found in a girl of sixteen. Her isolation from other girls her age and from the workaday world had given her eyes a contemplative, serious cast

which tended to put off men used to frivolous females. Matahachi, her betrothed, was just a year older, and since he'd left Miyamoto with Takezō the previous summer, she'd heard nothing. Even into the first and second months of the new year, she'd yearned for word of him, but now the fourth month was at hand. She no longer dared hope.

Lazily her gaze drifted up to the clouds, and a thought slowly emerged. "Soon it will have been a whole year."

"Takezō's sister hasn't heard from him either. I'd be a fool to think either of them is still alive." Now and then she'd say this to someone, longing, almost pleading with her voice and eyes, for the other person to contradict her, to tell her not to give up. But no one heeded her sighs. To the down-to-earth villagers, who had already gotten used to the Tokugawa troops occupying the modest Shimmen castle, there was no reason in the world to assume they'd survived. Not a single member of Lord Shimmen's family had come back from Sekigahara, but that was only natural. They were samurai; they had lost. They wouldn't want to show their faces among people who knew them. But common foot soldiers? Wasn't it all right for them to come home? Wouldn't they have done so long ago if they had survived?

"Why," wondered Otsū, as she had wondered countless times before, "why do men run off to war?" She had come to enjoy in a melancholy way sitting alone on the temple porch and pondering this imponderable. Lost in wistful reverie, she could have lingered there for hours. Suddenly a male voice calling "Otsū!" invaded her island of peace.

Looking up, Otsū saw a youngish man coming toward her from the well. He was clad in only a loincloth, which barely served its purpose, and his weathered skin glowed like the dull gold of an old Buddhist statue. It was the Zen monk who, three or four years before, had wandered in from Tajima Province. He'd been staying at the temple ever since.

"At last it's spring," he was saying to himself with satisfaction. "Spring—a blessing, but a mixed one. As soon as it gets a little warm, those insidious lice overrun the country. They're trying to take it over, just like Fujiwara no Michinaga, that wily rascal of a regent." After a pause, he went on with his monologue.

"I've just washed my clothes, but where on earth am I going to dry this tattered old robe? I can't hang it on the plum tree. It'd be a sacrilege, an insult to nature to cover those flowers. Here I am, a man of taste, and I can't find a place to hang this robe! Otsū! Lend me a drying pole."

Blushing at the sight of the scantily clad monk, she cried, "Takuan! You can't just walk around half naked till your clothes dry!"

"Then I'll go to sleep. How's that?"

"Oh, you're impossible!"

Raising one arm skyward and pointing the other toward the ground, he assumed the pose of the tiny Buddha statues that worshipers anointed once a year with special tea.

"Actually, I should have just waited till tomorrow. Since it's the eighth, the Buddha's birthday, I could have just stood like this and let the people bow to me. When they ladled the sweet tea over me, I could've shocked everyone by licking my lips." Looking pious, he intoned the first words of the Buddha: "In heaven above and earth below, only I am holy."

Otsū burst out laughing at his irreverent display. "You do look just like him, you know!"

"Of course I do. I am the living incarnation of Prince Siddhartha."

"Then stand perfectly still. Don't move! I'll go and get some tea to pour over you."

At this point, a bee began a full-scale assault on the monk's head and his reincarnation pose instantly gave way to a flailing of arms. The bee, noticing a gap in his loosely hung loincloth, darted in, and Otsū doubled up with laughter. Since the arrival of Takuan Sōhō, which was the name he was given on becoming a priest, even the reticent Otsū went few days without being amused by something he'd do or say.

Suddenly, however, she stopped laughing. "I can't waste any more time like this. I have important things to do!"

As she was slipping her small white feet into her sandals, the monk asked innocently, "What things?"

"What things? Have you forgotten too? Your little pantomime just reminded me. I'm supposed to get everything ready for tomorrow. The old priest asked me to pick flowers so we can decorate the flower temple. Then I have to set everything up for the anointing ceremony. And tonight I've got to make the sweet tea."

"Where are you going flower-picking?"

"Down by the river, in the lower part of the field."

"I'll come with you."

"Without any clothes on?"

"You'll never be able to cut enough flowers by yourself. You need help."

Besides, man is born unclothed. Nakedness is his natural state."

"That may be, but I don't find it natural. Really, I'd rather go alone."

Hoping to elude him, Otsū hurried around to the rear of the temple. She strapped a basket on her back, picked up a sickle and slipped out the side gate, but only moments later turned to see him close behind her. Takuan was now swathed in a large wrapping cloth, the kind people used to carry their bedding.

"Is this more to your liking?" he called with a grin.

"Of course not. You look ridiculous. People will think you're crazy!"

"Why?"

"Never mind. Just don't walk next to me!"

"You never seemed to mind walking beside a man before."

"Takuan, you're perfectly horrible!" She ran off ahead, with him following in strides that would have befitted the Buddha descending from the Himalayas. His wrapping cloth flapped wildly in the breeze.

"Don't be angry, Otsū! You know I'm teasing. Besides, your boyfriends won't like you if you pout too much."

Eight or nine hundred yards down from the temple, spring flowers were blooming profusely along both banks of the Aida River. Otsū put her basket down and, amid a sea of fluttering butterflies, began swinging her sickle in wide circles, cutting the flowers off near their roots.

After a while, Takuan grew reflective. "How peaceful it is here," he sighed, sounding both religious and childlike. "Why, when we could live out our lives in a flower-filled paradise, do we all prefer to weep, suffer and get lost in a maelstrom of passion and fury, torturing ourselves in the flames of hell? I hope that you, at least, won't have to go through all that."

Otsū, rhythmically filling her basket with yellow rape blossoms, spring chrysanthemums, daisies, poppies and violets, replied, "Takuan, instead of preaching a sermon, you'd better watch out for the bees."

He nodded his head, sighing in despair. "I'm not talking about bees, Otsū. I simply want to pass on to you the Buddha's teaching on the fate of women." "This woman's fate is none of your business!"

"Oh, but you're wrong! It's my duty as a priest to pry into people's lives. I agree it's a meddling trade, but it's no more useless than the business of a merchant, clothier, carpenter or samurai. It exists because it is needed." Otsū softened. "I suppose you're right."

"It does happen, of course, that the priesthood has been on bad terms with womankind for some three thousand years. You see, Buddhism teaches that



women are evil. Fiends. Messengers of hell. I've spent years immersed in the scriptures, so it's no accident that you and I fight all the time."

"And why, according to your scriptures, are women evil?"

"Because they deceive men."

"Don't men deceive women too?"

"Yes, but . . . the Buddha himself was a man."

"Are you saying that if he'd been a woman, things would be the other way around?"

"Of course not! How could a demon ever become a Buddha!"

"Takuan, that doesn't make any sense."

"If religious teachings were just common sense, we wouldn't need prophets to pass them on to us."

"There you go again, twisting everything to your own advantage!" "A typical female comment. Why attack me personally?"

She stopped swinging her sickle again, a world-weary look on her face.

"Takuan, let's stop it. I'm not in the mood for this today."

"Silence, woman!"

"You're the one who's been doing all the talking."

Takuan closed his eyes as if to summon patience. "Let me try to explain. When the Buddha was young, he sat under the bo tree, where she-demons tempted him night and day. Naturally, he didn't form a high opinion of women. But even so, being all-merciful, he took some female disciples in his old age."

"Because he'd grown wise or senile?"

"Don't be blasphemous!" he warned sharply. "And don't forget the Bodhisattva Nagarjuna, who hated—I mean feared—women as much as the Buddha did. Even he went so far as to praise four female types: obedient sisters, loving companions, good mothers and submissive maidservants. He extolled their virtues again and again, and advised men to take such women as wives."

"Obedient sisters, loving companions, good mothers and submissive maidservants . . . I see you have it all worked out to men's advantage."

"Well, that's natural enough, isn't it? In ancient India, men were honored more and women less than in Japan. Anyway, I'd like you to hear the advice Nagarjuna gave women."

"What advice?"

"He said, 'Woman, marry thyself not to a man—'"

"That's ridiculous!"

"Let me finish. He said, 'Woman, marry thyself to the truth.'"

Otsū looked at him blankly.

"Don't you see?" he said, with a wave of his arm. "'Marry thyself to the truth' means that you shouldn't become infatuated with a mere mortal but should seek the eternal."

"But, Takuan," Otsū asked impatiently, "what is 'the truth'?"

Takuan let both arms fall to his sides and looked at the ground. "Come to think of it," he said thoughtfully, "I'm not really sure myself."

Otsū burst out laughing, but Takuan ignored her. "There is something I know for certain. Applied to your life, wedding honesty means that you shouldn't think of going off to the city and giving birth to weak, namby-pamby children. You should stay in the country, where you belong, and raise a fine, healthy brood instead."

Otsū raised her sickle impatiently. "Takuan," she snapped, exasperated, "did you come out here to help me pick flowers or not?"

"Of course I did. That's why I'm here."

"In that case, stop preaching and grab this sickle."

"All right; if you don't really want my spiritual guidance, I won't impose it on you," he said, pretending hurt.

"While you're busy at work, I'll run over to Ogin's house and see if she's finished the obi I'm supposed to wear tomorrow."

"Ogin? Takezō's sister? I've met her, haven't I? Didn't she come with you once to the temple?" He dropped the sickle. "I'll come with you."

"In that outfit?"

He pretended not to hear. "She'll probably offer us some tea. I'm dying of thirst."

Totally spent from arguing with the monk, Otsū gave a weak nod and together they set out along the riverbank.

Ogin was a woman of twenty-five, no longer considered in the bloom of youth but by no means bad-looking. Although suitors tended to be put off by her brother's reputation, she suffered no lack of proposals. Her poise and good breeding were immediately evident to everyone. She'd turned down all offers thus far simply on the grounds that she wanted to look after her younger brother a bit longer.

The house she lived in had been built by their father, Munisai, when he was in charge of military training for the Shimmen clan. As a reward for his excellent service, he'd been honored with the privilege of taking the Shimmen name. Overlooking the river, the house was surrounded by a high dirt wall set on

a stone foundation and was much too large for the needs of an ordinary country samurai. Although once imposing, it had become run down. Wild irises were sprouting from the roof, and the wall of the dōjō where Munisai once taught martial arts was completely plastered with white swallow droppings.

Munisai had fallen from favor, lost his status, and died a poor man, not an uncommon occurrence in an age of turmoil. Soon after his death, his servants had left, but since they were all natives of Miyamoto, many still cropped in. When they did, they would leave fresh vegetables, clean the unused rooms, fill the water jars, sweep the path, and in countless other ways help keep the old house going. They would also have a pleasant chat with Munisai's daughter.

When Ogin, who was sewing in an inner room, heard the back door open, she naturally assumed it was one of these former servants. Lost in her work, she gave a jump when Otsū greeted her.

"Oh," she said. "It's you. You gave me a fright. I'm just finishing your obi now. You need it for the ceremony tomorrow, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. Ogin, I want to thank you for going to so much trouble. I should have sewn it myself, but there was so much to do at the temple, I never would have had time."

"I'm glad to be of help. I have more time on my hands than is good for me. If I'm not busy, I start to brood."

Otsū, raising her head, caught sight of the household altar. On it, in a small dish, was a flickering candle. By its dim light, she saw two dark inscriptions, carefully brush-painted. They were pasted on boards, an offering of water and flowers before them:

*The Departed Spirit of Shimmen Takezō, Aged 17.*

*The Departed Spirit of Hon'iden Matahachi, Same Age.*

"Ogin," Otsū said with alarm. "Have you gotten word they were killed?"  
"Well, no . . . But what else can we think? I've accepted it. I'm sure they met their deaths at Sekigahara."

Otsū shook her head violently. "Don't say that! It'll bring bad luck! They aren't dead, they aren't! I know they'll show up one of these days."

Ogin looked at her sewing. "Do you dream about Matahachi?" she asked softly.

"Yes, all the time. Why?"

"That proves he's dead. I dream of nothing but my brother."

"Ogin, don't say that!" Rushing over to the altar, Otsū tore the inscriptions from their boards. "I'm getting rid of these things. They'll just invite the worst."

Tears streamed down her face as she blew out the candle. Not satisfied with that, she seized the flowers and the water bowl and rushed through the next room to the veranda, where she flung the flowers as far as she could and poured the water out over the edge. It landed right on the head of Takuan, who was squatting on the ground below.

"Aaii! That's cold!" he yelped, jumping up, frantically trying to dry his head with an end of the wrapping cloth. "What're you doing? I came here for a cup of tea, not a bath!"

Otsū laughed until fresh tears, tears of mirth, came. "I'm sorry, Takuan. I really am. I didn't see you."

By way of apology, she brought him the tea he'd been waiting for. When she went back inside, Ogin, who was staring fixedly toward the veranda, asked, "Who is that?"

"The itinerant monk who's staying at the temple. You know, the dirty one. You met him one day, with me, remember? He was lying in the sun on his stomach with his head in his hands, staring at the ground. When we asked him what he was doing, he said his lice were having a wrestling match. He said he'd trained them to entertain him."

"Oh, him!"

"Yes, him. His name's Takuan Sōhō."

"Kind of strange."

"That's putting it mildly."

"What's that thing he's wearing? It doesn't look like a priest's robe." "It isn't. It's a wrapping cloth."

"A wrapping cloth? He is eccentric. How old is he?"

"He says he's thirty-one, but sometimes I feel like his older sister, he's so silly. One of the priests told me that despite his appearance, he's an excellent monk."

"I suppose that's possible. You can't always judge people by their looks. Where's he from?"

"He was born in Tajima Province and started training for the priesthood when he was ten. Then he entered a temple of the Rinzai Zen sect about four years later. After he left, he became a follower of a scholar-priest from the

Daitokuji and traveled with him to Kyoto and Nara. Later on he studied under Gudō of the Myōshinji, Laō of Sennan and a whole string of other famous holy men. He's spent an awful lot of time studying!"

"Maybe that's why there's something different about him."

Otsū continued her story. "He was made a resident priest at the Nansōji and was appointed abbot of the Daitokuji by imperial edict. I've never learned why from anyone, and he never talks about his past, but for some reason he ran away after only three days."

Ogin shook her head.

Otsū went on. "They say famous generals like Hosokawa and noblemen like Karasumaru have tried again and again to persuade him to settle down. They even offered to build him a temple and donate money for its upkeep, but he's just not interested. He says he prefers to wander about the countryside like a beggar, with only his lice for friends, I think he's probably a little crazy."

"Maybe from his viewpoint we're the ones who are strange."

"That's exactly what he says!"

"How long will he stay here?"

"There's no way of knowing. He has a habit of showing up one day and disappearing the next."

Standing up near the veranda, Takuan called, "I can hear everything you're saying!"

"Well, it's not as though we're saying anything bad," Otsū replied cheerfully.

"I don't care if you do, if you find it amusing, but you could at least give me some sweet cakes to go with my tea."

"That's what I mean," said Otsū. "He's like this all the time."

"What do you mean, I'm 'like this'?" Takuan had a gleam in his eye. "What about you? You sit there looking as though you wouldn't hurt a fly, acting much more cruel and heartless than I ever would."

"Oh, really? And how am I being cruel and heartless?"

"By leaving me out here helpless, with nothing but tea, while you sit around moaning about your lost lover—that's how!"

The bells were ringing at the Daishōji and the Shippōji. They had started in a measured beat just after dawn and still rang forth now and then long past noon. In the morning a constant procession flowed to the temples: girls in red obis,

wives of tradesmen wearing more subdued tones, and here and there an old woman in a dark kimono leading her grandchildren by the hand. At the Shippōji, the small main hall was crowded with worshipers, but the young men among them seemed more interested in stealing a glimpse of Otsū than in taking part in the religious ceremony.

"She's here, all right," whispered one.

"Prettier than ever," added another.

Inside the hall stood a miniature temple. Its roof was thatched with lime leaves and its columns were entwined with wild flowers. Inside this "flower temple," as it was called, stood a two-foot-high black statue of the Buddha, pointing one hand to heaven and the other to earth. The image was placed in a shallow clay basin, and the worshipers, as they passed, poured sweet tea over its head with a bamboo ladle. Takuan stood by with an extra supply of the holy balm, filling bamboo tubes for the worshipers to take home with them for good luck. As he poured, he solicited offerings.

"This temple is poor, so leave as much as you can. Especially you rich folks—I know who you are; you're wearing those fine silks and embroidered obis. You have a lot of money. You must have a lot of troubles too. If you leave a hundredweight of cash for your tea, your worries will be a hundredweight lighter."

On the other side of the flower temple, Otsū was seated at a black-lacquered table. Her face glowed light pink, like the flowers all around her. Wearing her new obi and writing charms on pieces of five-colored paper, she wielded her brush deftly, occasionally dipping it in a gold-lacquered ink box to her right. She wrote:

*Swiftly and keenly,  
On this best of days,  
The eighth of the fourth month,  
Bring judgment to bear on those  
Insects that devour the crops.*

From time immemorial it had been thought in these parts that hanging this practical-minded poem on the wall could protect one from not only bugs, but disease and ill fortune as well. Otsū wrote the same verse scores of times—so

often, in fact, that her wrist started to throb and her calligraphy began to reflect her fatigue.

Stopping to rest for a moment, she called out to Takuan: "Stop trying to rob these people. You're taking too much."

"I'm talking to those who already have too much. It's become a burden. It's the essence of charity to relieve them of it," he replied.

"By that reasoning, common burglars are all holy men."

Takuan was too busy collecting offerings to reply. "Here, here," he said to the jostling crowd. "Don't push, take your time, just get in line. You'll have your chance to lighten your purses soon enough."

"Hey, priest!" said a young man who'd been admonished for elbowing in. "You mean me?" Takuan said, pointing to his nose.

"Yeah. You keep telling us to wait our turn, but then you serve the women first."

"I like women as much as the next man."

"You must be one of those lecherous monks we're always hearing stories about."

"That's enough, you tadpole! Do you think I don't know why *you're* here! You didn't come to honor the Buddha, or to take home a charm. You came to get a good look at Otsū! Come on now, own up— isn't that so? You won't get anywhere with women, you know, if you act like a miser."

Otsū's face turned scarlet. "Takuan, stop it! Stop right now, or I'm really going to get mad!"

To rest her eyes, Otsū again looked up from her work and out over the crowd. Suddenly she caught a glimpse of a face and dropped her brush with a clatter. She jumped to her feet, almost toppling the table, but the face had already vanished, like a fish disappearing in the sea. Oblivious of all around her, she dashed to the temple porch, shouting, "Takezō! Takezō!"

## The Dowager's Wrath

Matahachi's family, the Hon'iden, were the proud members of a group of rural gentry who belonged to the samurai class but who also worked the land. The real head of the family was his mother, an incorrigibly stubborn woman named Osugi. Though nearly sixty, she led her family and tenants out to the fields daily and worked as hard as any of them. At planting time she hoed the fields and after the harvest threshed the barley by trampling it. When dusk forced her to stop working, she always found something to sling on her bent back and haul back to the house. Often it was a load of mulberry leaves so big that her body, almost doubled over, was barely visible beneath it. In the evening, she could usually be found tending her silkworms.

On the afternoon of the flower festival, Osugi looked up from her work in the mulberry patch to see her runny-nosed grandson racing barefoot across the field.

"Where've you been, Heita?" she asked sharply. "At the temple?" "Uh-huh."

"Was Otsū there?"

"Yes," he answered excitedly, still out of breath. "And she had on a very pretty obi. She was helping with the festival."

"Did you bring back some sweet tea and a spell to keep the bugs away?"

"Unh-unh."

The old woman's eyes, usually hidden amid folds and wrinkles, opened wide in irritation. "And why not?"

"Otsū told me not to worry about them. She said I should run right home and tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"Takezō, from across the river. She said she saw him. At the festival."

Osugi's voice dropped an octave. "Really? Did she really say that, Heita?" "Yes, Granny."

Her strong body seemed to go limp all at once, and her eyes blurred with tears. Slowly she turned, as though expecting to see her son standing behind her.

Seeing no one, she spun back around. "Heita," she said abruptly, "you take over and pick these mulberry leaves."



"Where're you going?"

"Home. If Takezō's back, Matahachi must be too."

"I'll come too."

"No you won't. Don't be a nuisance, Heita."

The old woman stalked off, leaving the little boy as forlorn as an orphan. The farmhouse, surrounded by old, gnarled oaks, was a large one. Osugi ran past it, heading straight for the barn, where her daughter and some tenant farmers were working. While still a fair distance away, she began calling to them somewhat hysterically.

"Has Matahachi come home? Is he here yet?"

Startled, they stared at her as though she'd lost her wits. Finally one of the men said "no," but the old woman seemed not to hear. It was as though in her overwrought state she refused to take no for an answer. When they continued their noncommittal gaze, she began calling them all dunces and explaining what she'd heard from Heita, how if Takezō was back, then Matahachi must be too. Then, reassuming her role as commander in chief, she sent them off in all directions to find him. She herself stayed behind in the house, and every time she sensed someone approaching, ran out to ask if they had found her son yet.

At sunset, still undaunted, she placed a candle before the memorial tablets of her husband's ancestors. She sat down, seemingly lost in prayer, as immobile as a statue. Since everyone was still out searching, there was no evening meal at the house, and when night fell and there was still no news, Osugi finally moved. As if in a trance, she walked slowly out of the house to the front gate. There she stood and waited, hidden in the darkness. A watery moon shone through the oak tree branches, and the mountains looming before and behind the house were veiled in a white mist. The sweetish scent of pear blossoms floated in the air.

Time, too, floated by unnoticed. Then a figure could be discerned approaching, making its way along the outer edge of the pear orchard. Recognizing the silhouette as Otsū's, Osugi called out and the girl ran forward, her wet sandals clomping heavily on the earth.

"Otsū! They told me you saw Takezō. Is that true?"

"Yes, I'm sure it was him. I spotted him in the crowd outside the temple."  
"You didn't see Matahachi?"

"No. I rushed out to ask Takezō about him, but when I called out, Takezō jumped like a scared rabbit. I caught his eye for a second and then he was gone. He's always been strange, but I can't imagine why he ran away like that."

"Ran away?" asked Osugi with a puzzled air. She began to muse, and the

longer she did so, the more a terrible suspicion took shape in her mind. It was becoming clear to her that the Shimmen boy, that ruffian Takezō she so hated for luring her precious Matahachi off to war, was once more up to no good.

At length she said ominously, "That wretch! He's probably left poor Matahachi to die somewhere, then sneaked back home safe and sound. Coward, that's what he is!" Osugi began to shake in fury and her voice rose to a shriek. "He can't hide from me!"

Otsū remained composed. "Oh, I don't think he'd do anything like that. Even if he did have to leave Matahachi behind, surely he'd bring us word or at least some keepsake from him." Otsū sounded shocked by the old woman's hasty accusation.

Osugi, however, was by now convinced of Takezō's perfidy. She shook her head decisively and went on. "Oh, no he wouldn't! Not that young demon! He hasn't got that much heart. Matahachi should never have taken up with him."

"Granny . . ." Otsū said soothingly.

"What?" snapped Osugi, not soothed in the least.

"I think that if we go over to Ogin's house, we just might find Takezō there."

The old woman relaxed a bit. "You might be right. She is his sister, and there really isn't anyone else in this village who'd take him in."

"Then let's go and see, just the two of us."

Osugi balked. "I don't see why I should do that. She knew her brother had dragged my son off to war, but she never once came to apologize or to pay her respects. And now that he's back, she hasn't even come to tell me. I don't see why I should go to her. It's demeaning. I'll wait here for her."

"But this isn't an ordinary situation," replied Otsū. "Besides, the main thing at this point is to see Takezō as soon as we can. We've got to find out what happened. Oh, please, Granny, come. You won't have to do anything. I'll take care of all the formalities if you like."

Grudgingly, Osugi allowed herself to be persuaded. She was, of course, as eager as Otsū to find out what was going on, but she'd die before begging for anything from a Shimmen.

The house was about a mile away. Like the Hon'iden family, the Shimmen were country gentry, and both houses were descended from the Akamatsu clan many generations back. Situated across the river from one another, they had always tacitly recognized each other's right to exist, but that was the extent of their intimacy.

When they arrived at the front gate, they found it shut, and the trees were so thick that no light could be seen from the house. Otsū started to walk around to the back entrance, but Osugi stopped mulishly in her tracks.

"I don't think it's right for the head of the Hon'iden family to enter the Shimmen residence by the back door. It's degrading."

Seeing she wasn't going to budge, Otsū proceeded to the rear entrance alone. Presently a light appeared just inside the gate. Ogin herself had come out to greet the older woman, who, suddenly transformed from a crone plowing the fields into a great lady, addressed her hostess in lofty tones.

"Forgive me for disturbing you at this late hour, but my business simply could not wait. How good of you to come and let me in!" Sweeping past Ogin and on into the house, she went immediately, as though she were an envoy from the gods, to the most honored spot in the room, in front of the alcove. Sitting proudly, her figure framed by both a hanging scroll and a flower arrangement, she deigned to accept Ogin's sincerest words of welcome.

The amenities concluded, Osugi went straight to the point. Her false smile disappeared as she glared at the young woman before her. "I have been told that young demon of this house has crawled back home. Please fetch him." Although Osugi's tongue was notorious for its sharpness, this undisguised maliciousness came as something of a shock to the gentle Ogin.

"Whom do you mean by 'that young demon'?" asked Ogin, with palpable restraint.

Chameleon-like, Osugi changed her tactics. "A slip of the tongue, I assure you," she said with a laugh. "That's what the people in the village call him; I suppose I picked it up from them. The 'young demon' is Takezō. He is hiding here, isn't he?"

"Why, no," replied Ogin with genuine astonishment. Embarrassed to hear her brother referred to in this way, she bit her lip.

Otsū, taking pity on her, explained that she had spotted Takezō at the festival. Then, in an attempt to smooth over ruffled feelings, she added, "Strange, isn't it, that he didn't come straight here?"

"Well, he didn't," said Ogin. "This is the first I've heard anything about it. But if he is back, as you say, I'm sure he'll be knocking at the door any minute."

Osugi, sitting formally on the floor cushion, legs tucked neatly beneath her, folded her hands in her lap and with the expression of an outraged mother-in-law, launched into a tirade.

"What is all this? Do you expect me to believe you haven't heard from him

yet? Don't you understand that I'm the mother whose son your young ne'er-do-well dragged off to war? Don't you know that Matahachi is the heir and the most important member of the Hon'iden family? It was your brother who talked my boy into going off to get himself killed. If my son is dead, it's your brother who killed him, and if he thinks he can just sneak back alone and get away with it . . ."

The old woman stopped just long enough to catch her breath, then her eyes glared in fury once more. "And what about you? Since he's obviously had the indecency to sneak back by himself, why haven't you, his older sister, sent him immediately to me? I'm disgusted with both of you, treating an old woman with such disrespect. Who do you think I am?"

Gulping down another breath, she ranted on. "If your Takezō is back, then bring my Matahachi back to me. If you can't do that, the least you can do is set that young demon down right here and make him explain to my satisfaction what happened to my precious boy and where he is—right now!"

"How can I do that? He isn't here."

"That's a black lie!" she shrieked. "You must know where he is!"

"But I tell you I don't!" Ogin protested. Her voice quivered and her eyes filled with tears. She bent over, wishing with all her might her father were still alive.

Suddenly, from the door opening onto the veranda, came a cracking noise, followed by the sound of running feet.

Osugi's eyes flashed, and Otsū started to stand up, but the next sound was a hair-raising scream—as close to an animal's howl as the human voice is capable of producing.

A man shouted, "Catch him!"

Then came the sound of more feet, several more, running around the house, accompanied by the snapping of twigs and the rustling of bamboo.

"It's Takezō!" cried Osugi. Jumping to her feet, she glared at the kneeling Ogin and spat out her words. "I knew he was here," she said ferociously. "It was as clear to me as the nose on your face. I don't know why you've tried to hide him from me, but bear in mind, I'll never forget this."

She rushed to the door and slid it open with a bang. What she saw outside turned her already pale face even whiter. A young man wearing shin plates was lying face up on the ground, obviously dead but with fresh blood still streaming from his eyes and nose. Judging from the appearance of his shattered skull, someone had killed him with a single blow of a wooden sword.

"There's . . . there's a dead . . . a dead man out there!" she stammered.

Otsū brought the light to the veranda and stood beside Osugi, who was staring terror-stricken at the corpse. It was neither Takezō's nor Matahachi's, but that of a samurai neither of them recognized.

Osugi murmured, "Who could've done this?" Turning swiftly to Otsū, she said, "Let's go home before we get mixed up in something."

Otsū couldn't bring herself to leave. The old woman had said a lot of vicious things. It would be unfair to Ogin to leave before putting salve on the wounds. If Ogin had been lying, Otsū felt she must doubtless have had good reason. Feeling she should stay behind to comfort Ogin, she told Osugi she would be along later.

"Do as you please," snapped Osugi, as she made her departure.

Ogin graciously offered her a lantern, but Osugi was proudly defiant in her refusal. "I'll have you know that the head of the Hon'iden family is not so senile that she needs a light to walk by." She tucked up her kimono hems, left the house and walked resolutely into the thickening mist.

Not far from the house, a man called her to a halt. He had his sword drawn, and his arms and legs were protected by armor. He was obviously a professional samurai of a type not ordinarily encountered in the village.

"Didn't you just come from the Shimmen house?" he asked.

"Yes, but—"

"Are you a member of the Shimmen household?"

"Certainly not!" Osugi snapped, waving her hand in protest. "I am the head of the samurai house across the river."

"Does that mean you are the mother of Hon'iden Matahachi, who went with Shimmen Takezō to the Battle of Sekigahara?"

"Well, yes, but my son didn't go because he wanted to. He was tricked into going by that young demon."

"Demon?"

"That . . . Takezō!"

"I gather this Takezō is not too well thought of in the village."

"Well thought of? That's a laugh. You never saw such a hoodlum! You can't imagine the trouble we've had at my house since my son took up with him." "Your son seems to have died at Sekigahara. I'm—"

"Matahachi! Dead?"

"Well, actually, I'm not sure, but perhaps it'll be some comfort to you in your grief to know that I'll do everything possible to help you take revenge."

Osugi eyed him skeptically. "Just who are you?"

"I'm with the Tokugawa garrison. We came to Himeji Castle after the battle. On orders from my lord, I've set up a barrier on the Harima Province border to screen everyone who crosses.

"This Takezō, from that house back there," he continued, pointing, "broke through the barrier and fled toward Miyamoto. We chased him all the way here. He's a tough one, all right. We thought that after a few days of walking he'd collapse, but we still haven't caught up with him. He can't go on forever, though. We'll get him."

Nodding as she listened, Osugi realized now why Takezō hadn't appeared at the Shippōji, and more importantly, that he probably hadn't gone home, since that was the first place the soldiers would search. At the same time, since it seemed he was traveling alone, her fury wasn't diminished in the least. But as for Matahachi being dead, she couldn't believe that either.

"I know Takezō can be as strong and cunning as any wild beast, sir," she said coyly, "But I shouldn't think that samurai of your caliber would have any trouble capturing him."

"Well, frankly, that's what I thought at first. But there aren't many of us and he's just killed one of my men."

"Let an old woman give you a few words of advice." Leaning over, she whispered something in his ear. Her words seemed to please him immensely.

He nodded his approval and enthusiastically exclaimed, "Good idea! Splendid!"

"Be sure to do a thorough job of it," urged Osugi as she took her leave.

Not long afterward, the samurai regrouped his band of fourteen or fifteen men behind Ogin's house. After he briefed them, they piled over the wall, surrounding the house and blocking all exits. Several soldiers then stormed into the house, leaving a trail of mud, and crowded into the inner room where the two young women sat commiserating and dabbing at their tear-stained faces.

Confronted by the soldiers, Otsū gasped and turned white. Ogin, however, proud to be the daughter of Munisai, was unperturbed. With calm, steely eyes, she stared indignantly at the intruders.

"Which one of you is Takezō's sister?" asked one of them.

"I am," replied Ogin coldly, "and I demand to know why you've entered this house without permission. I will not stand for such brutish behavior in a house occupied only by women." She had turned to face them directly.

The man who had been chatting with Osugi a few minutes earlier pointed

to Ogin. "Arrest her!" he ordered.

Barely were the words out of his mouth before violence erupted, the house began to shake and the lights went out. Uttering a cry of terror, Otsū stumbled out into the garden, while at least ten of the soldiers fell upon Ogin and began tying her up with a rope. Despite her heroic resistance, it was all over in a few seconds. They then pushed her down onto the floor and began kicking her as hard as they could.

Otsū couldn't recall afterward which way she had come, but somehow she managed to escape. Barely conscious, she ran barefoot toward the Shippōji in the misty moonlight, relying completely on instinct. She had grown up in peaceful surroundings and now felt as though the world were caving in.

When she reached the foot of the hill where the temple stood, someone called to her. She saw a shape sitting on a rock among the trees. It was Takuan.

"Thank heaven it's you," he said. "I was really starting to worry. You never stay out this late. When I realized the time, I came out looking for you." He looked down toward the ground and asked, "Why are you barefoot?"

He was still gazing at Otsū's bare white feet when she rushed headlong into his arms and began wailing.

"Oh, Takuan! It was awful! What can we do?"

In a calm voice, he tried to soothe her. "There, there. What was awful? There aren't many things in this world that are all that bad. Calm down and tell me what happened."

"They tied Ogin up and took her away! Matahachi didn't come back, and now poor Ogin, who's so sweet and gentle—they were all kicking her. Oh, Takuan, we've got to do something!"

Sobbing and trembling, she clung desperately to the young monk, her head resting on his chest.

It was noon on a still, humid spring day, and a faint mist rose from the young man's sweating face. Takezō was walking alone in the mountains, whither he knew not. He was tired almost beyond endurance, but even at the sound of a bird alighting, his eyes would dart around. Despite the ordeal he'd been through, his mud-spattered body came alive with pent-up violence and the sheer instinct to survive.

"Bananas! Beasts!" he growled. In the absence of the real target of his fury, he swung his black-oak sword screeching through the air, slicing a thick

branch off a large tree. The white sap that poured from the wound reminded him of a nursing mother's milk. He stood and stared. With no mother to turn to, there was only loneliness. Instead of offering him comfort, even the running streams and rolling hills of his own home seemed to mock him.

"Why are all the villagers against me?" he wondered. "The minute they see me, they report me to the guards on the mountain. The way they run when they catch sight of me, you'd think I was a madman."

He'd been hiding in the Sanumo mountains for four days. Now, through the veil of the midday mist, he could make out the house of his father, the house where his sister lived alone. Nestled in the foothills just below him was the Shippōji, the temple's roof jutting out from the trees. He knew he could approach neither place. When he'd dared go near the temple on the Buddha's birthday, crowded though it was, he'd risked his life. When he heard his name called, he had no choice but to flee. Aside from wanting to save his own neck, he knew that being discovered there would mean trouble for Otsū.

That night, when he'd gone stealthily to his sister's house, Matahachi's mother—as luck would have it—had been there. For a while he'd just stood outside, trying to come up with an explanation of Matahachi's whereabouts, but as he was watching his sister through a crack in the door, the soldiers had spotted him. Again he had to flee without having the chance to speak to anyone. Since then, it appeared from his refuge in the mountains that the Tokugawa samurai were keeping a very sharp eye out for him. They patrolled every road he might take, while at the same time the villagers had banded together to form search parties and were scouring the mountains.

He wondered what Otsū must think of him and began to suspect that even she had turned against him. Since it appeared that everyone in his own village regarded him as an enemy, he was stymied.

He thought: "It'd be too hard to tell Otsū the real reason her fiancé didn't come back. Maybe I should tell the old woman instead..... That's it! If I explain everything to her, she can break it gently to Otsū. Then there won't be any reason for me to hang around here."

His mind made up, Takezō resumed walking, but he knew that it would not do to go near the village before dark. With a large rock he broke another into small pieces and hurled one of them at a bird in flight. After it fell to earth, he barely paused to pluck its feathers before sinking his half-starved teeth into the warm, raw flesh. As he was devouring the bird, he started walking again but suddenly heard a stifled cry. Whoever had caught sight of him was scrambling



away frantically through the woods. Angered at the idea of being hated and feared—persecuted—for no reason, he shouted, "Wait!" and began running like a panther after the fleeing form.

The man was no match for Takezō and was easily overtaken. It turned out to be one of the villagers who came to the mountains to make charcoal, and Takezō knew him by sight. Grabbing his collar, he dragged him back to a small clearing.

"Why are you running away? Don't you know me? I'm one of you, Shimmen Takezō of Miyamoto. I'm not going to eat you alive. You know, it's very rude to run away from people without even saying hello!"

"Y-y-y-yes, sir!"

"Sit down!"

Takezō released his grip on the man's arm, but the pitiful creature started to flee, forcing Takezō to kick his behind and make as if to strike him with his wooden sword. The man cringed on the ground like a simpering dog, his hands over his head.

"Don't kill me!" he screamed pathetically.

"Just answer my questions, all right?"

"I'll tell you anything—just don't kill me! I have a wife and family."

"Nobody's going to kill you. I suppose the hills are crawling with soldiers, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"Are they keeping close watch on the Shippōji?"

"Yes."

"Are the men from the village hunting for me again today?"

Silence.

"Are you one of them?"

The man jumped to his feet, shaking his head like a deaf-mute. "No, no, no!"

"That's enough," shouted Takezō. Taking a firm grip on the man's neck, he asked, "What about my sister?"

"What sister?"

"My sister, Ogin, of the House of Shimmen. Don't play dumb. You promised to answer my questions. I don't really blame the villagers for trying to capture me, because the samurai are forcing them to do it, but I'm sure they'd never do anything to hurt her. Or would they?"

The man replied, too innocently, "I don't know anything about that."

Nothing at all."

Takezō swiftly raised his sword above his head in position to strike. "Watch it! That sounded very suspicious to me. Something has happened, hasn't it? Out with it, or I'll smash your skull!"

"Wait! Don't! I'll talk! I'll tell you everything!"

Hands folded in supplication, the trembling charcoal-maker told how Ogin had been taken away a prisoner, and how an order had been circulated in the village to the effect that anyone providing Takezō with food or shelter would automatically be regarded as an accomplice. Each day, he reported, the soldiers were leading villagers into the mountains, and each family was required to furnish one young man every other day for this purpose.

The information caused Takezō to break out in goose pimples. Not fear. Rage. To make sure he'd heard right, he asked, "What crime has my sister been charged with?" His eyes were glistening with moisture.

"None of us knows anything about it. We're afraid of the district lord. We're just doing what we're told, that's all."

"Where have they taken my sister?"

"Rumor has it that they've got her in Hinagura stockade, but I don't know if that's true."

"Hinagura . . ." repeated Takezō. His eyes turned toward the ridge that marked the provincial border. The backbone of the mountains was already spotted with the shadows of gray evening clouds.

Takezō let the man go. Watching him scramble away, grateful to have his meager life spared, made Takezō's stomach turn at the thought of the cowardice of humanity, the cowardice that forced samurai to pick on a poor helpless woman. He was glad to be alone again. He had to think.

He soon reached a decision. "I have to rescue Ogin, and that's that. My poor sister. I'll kill them all if they've harmed her." Having chosen his course of action, he marched down toward the village with long manly strides.

A couple of hours later, Takezō again furtively approached the Shippōji. The evening bell had just stopped tolling. It was already dark and lights could be seen coming from the temple itself, the kitchen and the priests' quarters, where people seemed to be moving about.

"If only Otsū would come out," he thought.

He crouched motionless under the raised passageway—it was of the sort that had a roof but no walls—which connected the priests' rooms with the main temple. The smell of food being cooked floated in the air, conjuring up visions of

rice and steaming soup. For the past few days, Takezō had had nothing in his stomach but raw bird meat and grass shoots, and his stomach now rebelled. His throat burned as he vomited up bitter gastric juices, and in his misery he gasped loudly for breath.

"What was that?" said a voice.

"Probably just a cat," answered Otsū, who came out carrying a dinner tray and started crossing the passageway directly over Takezō's head. He tried to call to her, but was still too nauseated to make an intelligible sound.

This, as it happened, was a stroke of luck, because just then a male voice just behind Otsū inquired, "Which way is the bath?"

The man was wearing a kimono borrowed from the temple, tied with a narrow sash from which dangled a small washcloth. Takezō recognized him as one of the samurai from Himeji. Evidently he was of high rank, high enough to lodge at the temple and pass his evenings eating and drinking his fill while his subordinates and the villagers had to scour mountainsides day and night searching for the fugitive.

"The bath?" said Otsū. "Come, I'll show you."

She set her tray down and began leading him along the passageway.

Suddenly the samurai rushed forward and hugged her from behind.

"How about joining me in the bath?" he suggested lecherously.

"Stop that! Let go of me!" cried Otsū, but the man, turning her around, held her face in both big hands and brushed his lips against her cheek. "What's wrong!" he cajoled. "Don't you like men!"

"Stop it! You shouldn't do that!" protested the helpless Otsū. The soldier then clapped his hand over her mouth.

Takezō, oblivious of the danger, leapt up onto the passageway like a cat and thrust his fist at the man's head from behind. The blow was a hard one. Momentarily defenseless, the samurai fell backward, still clinging to Otsū. As she tried to break away from his hold, she let out a shrill scream. The fallen man began shouting, "It's him! It's Takezō! He's here! Come and take him!"

The rumble of feet and the roar of voices thundered from inside the temple. The temple bell began signaling the alarm that Takezō had been discovered, and from the woods throngs of men began converging on the temple grounds. But Takezō was already gone, and before long search parties were once again sent out to scour the hills of Sanumo. Takezō himself hardly knew how he'd slipped through the swiftly tightening net, but by the time the chase was in full swing he found himself standing far away, at the entrance to the large dirt-

floored kitchen of the Hon'iden house.

Looking into the dimly lit interior, he called out, "Granny!"

"Who's there!" came the shrill reply. Osugi ambled out from a back room. Lit from below by the paper lantern in her hand, her gnarled face paled at the sight of her visitor.

"You!" she cried.

"I have something important to tell you," Takezō said hurriedly.

"Matahachi isn't dead, he's still very much alive and healthy. He's staying with a woman. In another province. That's all I can tell you, because that's all I know. Will you please somehow break the news to Otsū for me? I couldn't do it myself."

Immensely relieved to have unburdened himself of the message, he started to leave, but the old woman called him back.

"Where do you plan to go from here?"

"I have to break into the stockade at Hinagura and rescue Ogin," he replied sadly. "After that, I'll go away somewhere. I just wanted to tell you and your family, as well as Otsū, that I didn't let Matahachi die. Other than that, I have no reason to be here."

"I see." Osugi shifted the lantern from one hand to the other, playing for time. Then she beckoned to him. "I'll bet you're hungry, aren't you?"

"I haven't had a decent meal for days."

"You poor boy! Wait! I'm in the midst of cooking right now, and I can give you a nice warm dinner in no time. As a going-away present. And wouldn't you like to take a bath while I'm getting it ready?"

Takezō was speechless.

"Don't look so shocked. Takezō, your family and ours have been together since the days of the Akamatsu clan. I don't think you should leave here at all, but I certainly won't let you go without giving you a good hearty meal!"

Again Takezō was unable to reply. He raised his arm and wiped his eyes. No one had been this kind to him for a long, long time. Having come to regard everybody with suspicion and distrust, he was suddenly remembering what it was like to be treated as a human being.

"Hurry on round to the bathhouse, now," urged Osugi in grandmotherly tones. "It's too dangerous to stand here—someone might see you. I'll bring you a washcloth, and while you're washing, I'll get out Matahachi's kimono and some underwear for you. Now take your time and have a good soak."

She handed him the lantern and disappeared into the back of the house.

Almost immediately, her daughter-in-law left the house, ran through the garden and off into the night.

From the bathhouse, where the lantern swung back and forth, came the sound of splashing water.

"How is it?" Osugi called jovially. "Hot enough?"

"It's just right! I feel like a new man," Takezō called back.

"Take your time and get good and warm. The rice isn't ready yet."

"Thanks. If I'd known it'd be like this, I'd have come sooner. I was sure you'd have it in for me!" He spoke two or three more times, but his voice was drowned out by the sound of the water and Osugi didn't answer.

Before long, the daughter-in-law reappeared at the gate, all out of breath. She was followed by a band of samurai and vigilantes. Osugi came out of the house and addressed them in a whisper.

"Ah, you got him to take a bath. Very clever," said one of the men admiringly. "Yes, that's fine! We've got him for sure this time!"

Splitting into two groups, the men crouched and moved cautiously, like so many toads, toward the fire blazing brightly under the bath. Something—something indefinable—pricked Takezō's instincts, and he peeped out through a crack in the door. His hair stood on end.

"I've been trapped!" he screamed.

He was stark naked, the bathhouse was tiny, and there was no time to think. Beyond the door he'd spotted what seemed like hordes of men armed with staffs, lances and truncheons.

Still, he wasn't really afraid. Any fear he might have had was blotted out by his anger toward Osugi.

"All right, you bananas, watch this," he growled.

He was well beyond caring how many of them there were. In this situation, as in others, the only thing he knew how to do was to attack rather than be attacked. As his would-be captors made way for each other outside, he abruptly kicked open the door and jumped out and into the air, bellowing a fearsome war whoop. Still naked, his wet hair flying in every direction, he seized and wrenched loose the shaft of the first lance thrust at him, sending its owner flying into the bushes. Taking a firm grip on the weapon, he thrashed about like a whirling dervish, swinging with complete abandon and hitting anyone who came near. He'd learned at Sekigahara that this method was startlingly effective when a man was outnumbered, and that the shaft of a lance could often be used more tellingly than the blade.

The attackers, realizing too late what a blunder they'd made by not sending three or four men charging into the bathhouse in the first place, shouted encouragement to one another. It was clear, however, they'd been outmaneuvered.

About the tenth time Takezō's weapon came in contact with the ground, it broke. He then seized a large rock and threw it at the men, who were already showing signs of backing down.

"Look, he's run inside the house!" shouted one of them, as simultaneously Osugi and her daughter-in-law scrambled out into the back garden.

Making a tremendous clatter as he stormed through the house, Takezō was yelling, "Where are my clothes? Give me back my clothes!"

There were work clothes lying about, not to speak of an elaborate kimono chest, but Takezō paid them no attention. He was straining his eyes in the dim light to find his own ragged garment. Finally spotting it in the corner of the kitchen, he seized it in one hand and finding a foothold atop a large earthenware oven, crawled out of a small high window. While he made his way onto the roof, his pursuers, now totally confused, cursed and made excuses to each other for their failure to ensnare him.

Standing in the middle of the roof, Takezō unhurriedly donned his kimono. With his teeth, he tore off a strip of cloth from his sash, and gathering his damp hair behind, tied it near the roots so tightly that his eyebrows and the corners of his eyes were stretched.

The spring sky was full of stars.

## The Art of War

The daily search in the mountains continued, and farm work languished; the villagers could neither cultivate their fields nor tend to their silkworms. Large signs posted in front of the village headman's house and at every crossroads announced a substantial reward for anyone who captured or killed Takezō, as well as suitable recompense for any information leading to his arrest. The notices bore the authoritative signature of Ikeda Terumasa, lord of Himeji Castle.

At the Hon'iden residence, panic prevailed. Osugi and her family, trembling in mortal dread lest Takezō come to take his revenge, bolted the main gate and barricaded all entrances. The searchers, under the direction of troops from Himeji, laid fresh plans to trap the fugitive. Thus far all their efforts had proved fruitless.

"He's killed another one!" a villager shouted.

"Where? Who was it this time?"

"Some samurai. No one's identified him yet."

The corpse had been discovered near a path on the village outskirts, its head in a clump of tall weeds and its legs raised skyward in a bafflingly contorted position. Frightened but incurably nosy, villagers milled about, babbling among themselves. The skull had been smashed, evidently with one of the wooden reward signs, which now lay across the body soaked in blood. Those gawking at the spectacle could not avoid reading the list of promised rewards. Some laughed grimly at the blatant irony.

Otsū's face was drawn and pale as she emerged from the crowd. Wishing she hadn't looked, she hurried toward the temple, trying to somehow blot out the image of the dead man's face lingering before her eyes. At the foot of the hill, she ran into the captain who was lodging at the temple and five or six of his men. They had heard of the gruesome killing and were on their way to investigate. Upon seeing the girl, the captain grinned. "Where've you been, Otsū?" he said with ingratiating familiarity.

"Shopping," she replied curtly. Without bestowing so much as a glance upon him, she hurried up the temple's stone steps. She hadn't liked the man to begin with—he had a stringy mustache which she took particular exception to—

but since the night he'd tried to force himself on her, the sight of him filled her with loathing.

Takuan was sitting in front of the main hall, playing with a stray dog. She was hurrying by at some distance to avoid the mangy animal when the monk looked up and called, "Otsū, there's a letter for you."

"For me?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes, you were out when the runner came, so he left it with me." Taking the small scroll out of his kimono sleeve and handing it to her, he said, "You don't look too good. Is something wrong?"

"I feel sick. I saw a dead man lying in the grass. His eyes were still open, and there was blood—"

"You shouldn't look at things like that. But I guess the way things are now, you'd have to walk around with your eyes closed. I'm always tripping over corpses these days. Ha! And I'd heard this village was a little paradise!"

"But why is Takezō killing all these people?"

"To keep them from killing him, of course. They don't have any real reason to kill him, so why should he let them?"

"Takuan, I'm scared!" she said pleadingly. "What would we do if he came here?"

Dark cumulus clouds were drawing their cloak over the mountains. She took her mysterious letter and went to hide in the loom shed. On the loom was an unfinished strip of cloth for a man's kimono, part of the garment which, since the year before, she'd been spending every spare moment spinning silk yarn for. It was for Matahachi, and she was excited by the prospect of sewing all the pieces together into a full kimono. She had woven every strand meticulously, as if the weaving itself were drawing him closer to her. She wanted the garment to last forever.

Seating herself before the loom, she gazed intently at the letter. "Whoever could have sent it?" she whispered to herself, sure that the letter must have really been meant for someone else. She read the address over and over, searching for a flaw.

The letter had obviously made a long journey to reach her. The torn and crumpled wrapper was smudged all over with fingerprints and raindrops. She broke the seal, whereupon not one but two letters fell into her lap. The first was in an unfamiliar woman's hand, a somewhat older woman, she quickly guessed.



*I am writing merely to confirm what is written in the other letter, and will therefore not go into details.*

*I am marrying Matahachi and adopting him into my family. However, he still seems concerned about you. I think it would be a mistake to let matters stand as they are. Matahachi is therefore sending you an explanation, the truth of which I hereby witness.*

*Please forget Matahachi.*

*Respectfully, Okō*

The other letter was in Matahachi's scrawl and explained at tiresome length all the reasons why it was impossible for him to return home. The gist of it, of course, was that Otsū should forget about her betrothal to him and find another husband. Matahachi added that since it was "difficult" for him to write directly to his mother of these matters, he would appreciate her help. If Otsū happened to see the old woman, she was to tell her Matahachi was alive and well and living in another province.

Otsū felt the marrow of her spine turn to ice. She sat stricken, too shocked to cry or even to blink. The nails of the fingers holding the letter turned the same color as the skin of the dead man she had seen less than an hour before.

The hours passed. Everyone in the kitchen began wondering where she'd gone. The captain in charge of the search was content to let his exhausted men sleep in the woods, but when he himself returned to the temple at dusk, he demanded comforts befitting his status. The bath had to be heated just so; fresh fish from the river had to be prepared to his specifications and someone had to fetch sake of the highest quality from one of the village homes. A great deal of work was entailed in keeping the man happy, and much of it naturally fell to Otsū. Since she was nowhere to be found, the captain's dinner was late.

Takuan went out to search for her. He had no concern whatsoever for the captain, but he was beginning to worry about Otsū herself. It just wasn't like her to go off without a word. Calling her name, the monk crossed the temple grounds, passing by the loom shed several times. Since the door was shut, he didn't bother to look inside.

Several times the temple priest stepped out onto the raised passageway and shouted to Takuan, "Have you found her yet? She's got to be around here somewhere." As time went on, he grew frantic, calling out, "Hurry up and find her! Our guest says he can't drink his sake without her here to pour it for him."

The temple's manservant was dispatched down the hill to search for her, lantern in hand. At almost the same moment he took off, Takuan finally opened the loom shed door.

What he saw inside gave him a start. Otsū was drooped over the loom in a state of obvious desolation. Not wanting to pry, he remained silent, staring at the two twisted and torn letters on the ground. They had been trampled on like a couple of straw effigies.

Takuan picked them up. "Aren't these what the runner brought today?" he asked gently. "Why don't you put them away somewhere?"

Otsū shook her head feebly.

"Everyone's half-crazy with worry about you. I've been looking all over. Come, Otsū, let's go back. I know you don't want to, but you really do have work to do. You've got to serve the captain, for one thing. That old priest is nearly beside himself."

"My . . . my head hurts," she whispered. "Takuan, couldn't they let me off tonight—just this once?"

Takuan sighed. "Otsū, I personally think you shouldn't have to serve the captain's sake tonight or any night. The priest, however, is of a different mind. He is a man of this world. He's not the type who can gain the daimyō's respect or support for the temple through high-mindedness alone. He believes he has to wine and dine the captain—keep him happy every minute." He patted Otsū on the back. "And after all, he did take you in and raise you, so you do owe him something. You won't have to stay long."

She consented reluctantly. While Takuan was helping her up, she raised her tear-stained face to him and said, "I'll go, but only if you promise to stay with me."

"I have no objection to that, but old Scraggly Beard doesn't like me, and every time I see that silly mustache I have an irresistible urge to tell him how ridiculous it looks. It's childish, I know, but some people just affect me that way."

"But I don't want to go alone!"

"The priest is there, isn't he?"

"Yes, but he always leaves when I arrive."

"Hmm. That's not so good. All right, I'll go with you. Now stop thinking about it, and go wash your face."

When Otsū finally appeared at the priest's quarters, the captain, already slouching drunkenly, immediately perked up. Straightening his cap, which had

been listing noticeably, he became quite jovial and called for refill after refill. Soon his face glowed scarlet and the corners of his bulging eyes began to sag.

He was not enjoying himself to the full, however, and the reason was a singularly unwanted presence in the room. On the other side of the lamp sat Takuan, bent over like a blind beggar, absorbed in reading the book open on his knees.

Mistaking the monk for an acolyte, the captain pointed at him, bellowing, "Hey, you there!"

Takuan continued reading until Otsū gave him a nudge. He raised his eyes absently, and looking all around, said, "You mean me?"

The captain spoke gruffly. "Yes, you! I have no business with you. Leave!" "Oh, I don't mind staying," Takuan replied innocently.

"Oh, you don't, do you?"

"No, not at all," Takuan said, returning to his book.

"Well, I mind," the captain blustered. "It spoils the taste of good sake to have someone around reading."

"Oh, I'm sorry," responded Takuan with mock solicitude. "How rude of me. I'll just close the book."

"The very sight annoys me."

"All right, then. I'll have Otsū- put it away."

"Not the book, you idiot! I'm talking about you! You spoil the setting."

Takuan's expression became grave. "Now, that is a problem, isn't it? It's not as though I were the sacred Wu-k'ung and could change myself into a puff of smoke, or become an insect and perch on your tray."

The captain's red neck swelled and his eyes bulged. He looked like a blowfish. "Get out, you fool! Out of my sight!"

"Very well," said Takuan quietly, bowing. Taking Otsū's hand, he addressed her. "The guest says he prefers to be alone. To love solitude is the mark of the sage. We mustn't bother him further. Come."

"Why . . . why, you . . . you . . ."

"Is something wrong?"

"Who said anything about taking Otsū with you, you ugly moron!"

Takuan folded his arms. "I've observed over the years that not many priests or monks are particularly handsome. Not many samurai either, for that matter. Take you, for example."

The captain's eyes nearly leapt from their sockets. "What!"

"Have you considered your mustache? I mean, have you ever really taken

the time to look at it, to evaluate it objectively?"

"You crazy banana," shouted the captain as he reached for his sword, which was leaning against the wall. "Watch yourself!"

As he got to his feet, Takuan, keeping one eye on him, asked placidly, "Hmm. How do I go about watching myself?"

The captain, who was by now screaming, had his sheathed sword in hand. "I've taken all I can take. Now you're going to get what's coming to you!"

Takuan burst out laughing. "Does that mean you plan to cut off my head? If so, forget it. It would be a terrible bore."

"Huh?"

"A bore. I can't think of anything more boring than cutting off a monk's head. It would just fall to the floor and lie there laughing up at you. Not a very grand accomplishment, and what good could it possibly do you?"

"Well," growled the captain, let's just say I'd have the satisfaction of shutting you up. It'd be pretty hard for you to keep up your insolent chatter!" Filled with the courage such people derive from having a weapon in hand, he laughed a mean belly laugh and moved forward threateningly.

"But, captain!"

Takuan's offhand manner had so enraged him that the hand in which he held his scabbard was shaking violently. Otsū slipped between the two men in an effort to protect Takuan.

"What are you saying, Takuan?" she said, hoping to lighten the mood and slow the action. "People don't talk like that to warriors. Now, just say you're sorry," she entreated. "Come on, apologize to the captain."

Takuan, however, was anything but finished.

"Get out of the way, Otsū. I'm all right. Do you really think I'd let myself be beheaded by a dolt like this, who though commanding scores of able, armed men has wasted twenty days trying to locate one exhausted, half-starved fugitive? If he hasn't enough sense to find Takezō, it would indeed be amazing if he could outwit me!"

"Don't move!" commanded the captain. His bloated face turned purple as he moved to draw his sword. "Stand aside, Otsū! I'm going to cut this big-mouthed acolyte in two!"

Otsū fell at the captain's feet and pleaded, "You have every reason to be angry, but please be patient. He's not quite right in the head. He talks to everybody this way. He doesn't mean anything by it, really!" Tears began gushing from her eyes.

"What are you saying, Otsū?" objected Takuan. "There's nothing wrong with my mind, and I'm not joking. I'm only telling the truth, which no one seems to like to hear. He's a dolt, so I called him a dolt. You want me to lie?"

"You'd better not say that again," thundered the samurai.

"I'll say it as often as I wish. By the way, I don't suppose it makes any difference to you soldiers how much time you squander looking for Takezō, but it's a terrible burden on the farmers. Do you realize what you're doing to them? They won't be able to eat soon if you keep this up. It probably hasn't even occurred to you that they have to neglect their field work completely to go out on your disorganized wild-goose chases. And with no wages, I might add. It's a disgrace!"

"Hold your tongue, traitor. That's outright slander against the Tokugawa government!"

"It isn't the Tokugawa government I'm criticizing; it's bureaucratic officials like you who stand between the daimyō and the common people, and who might as well be stealing their pay for all they do to earn it. For one thing, exactly why are you lounging around here tonight? What gives you the right to relax in your nice, comfortable kimono all snug and warm, take leisurely baths and have your bedtime sake poured for you by a pretty young girl? You call that serving your lord?"

The captain was speechless.

"Is it not the duty of a samurai to serve his lord faithfully and tirelessly? Isn't it your job to exercise benevolence toward the people who slave on the daimyō's behalf? Look at yourself! You just close your eyes to the fact that you're keeping the farmers from the work which gives them daily sustenance. You don't even have any consideration for your own men. You're supposed to be on an official mission, so what do you do? Every chance you get, you literally stuff yourself with other people's hard-earned food and drink and use your position to get the most comfortable quarters available. I should say you are a classic example of corruption, cloaking yourself with the authority of your superior to do nothing more than dissipate the energies of the common people for your own selfish ends."

The captain was by now too stunned to close his gaping mouth. Takuan pressed on.

"Now just try cutting off my head and sending it to Lord Ikeda Terumasa! That, I can tell you, would surprise him. He'd probably say, 'Why, Takuan! Has only your head come to visit me today? Where in the world is the rest of you?'"

"No doubt you'd be interested to learn that Lord Terumasa and I used to partake of the tea ceremony together at the Myōshinji. We've also had several long and pleasant chats at the Daitokuji in Kyoto."

Scraggly Beard's virulence drained from him in an instant. His drunkenness had worn off a bit too, though he still appeared incapable of judging for himself whether Takuan was telling the truth or not. He seemed paralyzed, not knowing how to react.

"First, you'd better sit down," said the monk. "If you think I'm lying, I'll be happy to go with you to the castle and appear before the lord himself. As a gift, I could take him some of the delicious buckwheat flour they make here. He's particularly fond of it."

"However, there's nothing more tedious, nothing I like less, than calling on a daimyō. Moreover, if the subject of your activities in Miyamoto should happen to come up while we were chatting over tea, I couldn't very well lie. It would probably end up with your having to commit suicide for your incompetence. I told you from the beginning to stop threatening me, but you warriors are all the same. You never think about consequences. And that's your greatest failing."

"Now put your sword down and I'll tell you something else."

Deflated, the captain complied.

"Of course, you are familiar with General Sun-tzu's *Art of War*—you know, the classic Chinese work on military strategy? I assume any warrior in your position would be intimately acquainted with such an important book. Anyway, the reason I mention it is that I'd like to give you a lesson illustrating one of the book's main principles. I'd like to show you how to capture Takezō without losing any more of your own men or causing the villagers any more trouble than you have already. Now, this has to do with your official work, so you really should listen carefully." He turned to the girl. "Otsū, pour the captain another cup of sake, will you?"

The captain was a man in his forties, ten years or so older than Takuan, but it was clear from their faces at this moment that strength of character is not a matter of age. Takuan's tongue-lashing had humbled the older man and his bluster had evaporated.

Meekly he said, "No, I don't want any more sake. I hope you'll forgive me. I had no idea you were a friend of Lord Terumasa. I'm afraid I've been very rude." He was abject to the point of being comical, but Takuan refrained from rubbing it in.

"Let's just forget about that. What I want to discuss is how to capture

Takezō. That is what you have to do to carry out your orders and maintain your honor as a samurai, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Of course, I also know you don't care how long it takes to catch the man. After all, the longer it takes, the longer you can stay on at the temple, eating, drinking and ogling Otsū."

"Please, don't bring that up anymore. Particularly before his lordship." The soldier looked like a child ready to burst into tears.

"I'm prepared to consider the whole incident a secret. But if this running around in the mountains all day long keeps up, the farmers will be in serious trouble. Not only the farmers but all the rest of the people as well. Everyone in this village is too upset and frightened to settle down and get on with their normal work. Now, as I see it, your trouble is that you have not employed the proper strategy. Actually, I don't think you've employed any strategy at all. I take it that you do not know *The Art of War*?"

"I'm ashamed to admit it, but I don't."

"Well, you should be ashamed! And you shouldn't be surprised when I call you a dolt. You may be an official, but you are sadly uneducated and totally ineffectual. There's no use in my beating you over the head with the obvious, however. I'll simply make you a proposition. I personally offer to capture Takezō for you in three days."

"*You* capture him?"

"Do you think I'm joking?"

"No, but . . ."

"But what?"

"But counting the reinforcements from Himeji and all the farmers and foot soldiers, we've had more than two hundred men combing the mountains for nearly three weeks."

"I'm well aware of that fact."

"And since it's spring, Takezō has the advantage. There's plenty to eat up there this time of year."

"Are you planning on waiting till it snows, then? Another eight months or so?"

"No, uh, I don't think we can afford to do that."

"You certainly can't. That's precisely why I'm offering to catch him for you. I don't need any help; I can do it alone. On second thoughts, though, maybe I should take Otsū along with me. Yes, the two of us would be enough."

"You aren't serious, are you?"

"Would you please be quiet! Are you implying that Takuan Sōhō spends all his time making up jokes?"

"Sorry."

"As I said, you don't know *The Art of War*, and as I see it, that is the most important reason for your abominable failure. I, on the other hand, may be a simple priest, but I believe I understand Sun-tzu. There's only one stipulation, and if you won't agree to it, I'll just have to sit back and watch you bumble about until the snow falls, and maybe your head as well."

"What's the condition?" said the captain warily.

"If I bring back the fugitive, you'll let me decide his fate."

"What do you mean by that?" The captain pulled at his mustache, a string of thoughts racing through his mind. How could he be sure that this strange monk wasn't deceiving him completely? Although he spoke eloquently, it could be that he was completely insane. Could he be a friend of Takezō's, an accomplice? Might he know where the man was hiding? Even if he didn't, which was likely at this stage, there was no harm in leading him on, just to see whether he'd go through with this crazy scheme. He'd probably worm out of it at the last minute anyway. With this in mind, the captain nodded his assent. "All right, then. If you catch him, you can decide what to do with him. Now, what happens if you *don't* find him in three days?"

"I'll hang myself from the big cryptomeria tree in the garden."

Early the next day, the temple's manservant, looking extremely worried, came rushing into the kitchen, out of breath and half shouting: "Has Takuan lost his mind? I heard he promised to find Takezō himself!"

Eyes rounded.

"No!"

"Not really!"

"Just how does he plan to do it?"

Wisecracks and mocking laughter followed, but there was also an undercurrent of worried whispering.

When word reached the temple priest, he nodded sagely and remarked that the human mouth is the gateway to catastrophe.

But the person most genuinely disturbed was Otsū. Only the day before, the farewell note from Matahachi had hurt her more than news of his death could ever have. She had trusted her fiancé and had even been willing to suffer the formidable Osugi as a slave-driving mother-in-law for his sake. Who was there



to turn to now?

For Otsū, plunged into darkness and despair, Takuan was life's one bright spot, her last ray of hope. The day before, weeping alone in the loom shed, she'd seized a sharp knife and cut to shreds the kimono cloth into which she'd literally woven her soul. She'd also considered plunging the fine blade into her own throat. Though she was sorely tempted to do so, Takuan's appearance had finally driven that thought from her mind. After soothing her and getting her to agree to pour the captain's sake, he'd patted her on the back. She could still feel the warmth of his strong hand as he led her out of the loom shed.

And now he'd made this insane agreement.

Otsū wasn't nearly as concerned over her own safety as she was over the possibility that her only friend in the world might be lost to her because of his silly proposal. She felt lost and utterly depressed. Her common sense alone told her it was ridiculous to think that she and Takuan could locate Takezō in so short a time.

Takuan even had the audacity to exchange vows with Scraggly Beard before the shrine of Hachiman, the god of war. After he returned, she took him severely to task for his rashness, but he insisted there was nothing to worry about. His intention, he said, was to relieve the village of its burden, to make travel on the highways safe once more and to prevent any further waste of human life. In view of the number of lives that could be saved by quickly apprehending Takezō, his own seemed unimportant, she must see that. He also told her to get as much rest as she could before the evening of the following day, when they would depart. She was to come along without complaint, trusting in his judgment completely. Otsū was too distraught to resist, and the alternative of staying behind and worrying was even worse than the thought of going.

Late the following afternoon, Takuan was still napping with the cat in the corner of the main temple building. Otsū's face was hollow. The priest, the manservant, the acolyte—everybody had tried to persuade her not to go. "Go and hide" was their practical advice, but Otsū, for reasons she herself could hardly fathom, didn't feel the least inclined to do so.

The sun was sinking fast, and the dense shadows of evening had begun to envelop the crevices in the mountain range that marked the course of the Aida River. The cat sprang down from the temple porch, and presently Takuan himself stepped onto the veranda. Like the cat before him, he stretched his limbs, with a great yawn.

"Otsū," he called, "we'd better get going."

"I've already packed everything—straw sandals, walking sticks, leggings, medicine, paulownia-oil paper."

"You forgot something."

"What? A weapon? Should we take a sword or a lance or something?"

"Certainly not! I want to take along a supply of food."

"Oh, you mean some box lunches?"

"No, good food. I want some rice, some salty bean paste and—oh, yes—a little sake. Anything tasty will do. I also need a pot. Go to the kitchen and make up a big bundle. And get a pole to carry it with."

The nearby mountains were now blacker than the best black lacquer, those in the distance paler than mica. It was late spring, and the breeze was perfumed and warm. Striped bamboo and wisteria vines entrapped the mist, and the farther Takuan and Otsū went from the village, the more the mountains, where every leaf shone faintly in the dim light, seemed to have been bathed by an evening shower. They walked through the darkness in single file, each shouldering an end of the bamboo pole from which swung their well-packed bundle.

"It's a nice evening for a walk, isn't it, Otsū?" Takuan said, glancing over his shoulder.

"I don't think it's so wonderful," she muttered. "Where are we going, anyway?"

"I'm not quite sure yet," he replied with a slightly pensive air, "but let's go on a bit farther."

"Well, I don't mind walking."

"Aren't you tired?"

"No," replied the girl, but the pole obviously hurt her, for every once in a while she shifted it from one shoulder to the other.

"Where is everyone? We haven't seen a soul."

"The captain didn't show his face at the temple all day today. I bet he called the searchers back to the village so we can have three days all to ourselves. Takuan, just how do you propose to catch Takezō?"

"Oh, don't worry. He'll turn up sooner or later."

"Well, he hasn't turned up for anyone else. But even if he does, what are we going to do? With all those men pursuing him for so long, he must be desperate by now. He'll be fighting for his life, and he's very strong to begin with. My legs start shaking just thinking about it."

"Careful! Watch your step!" Takuan shouted suddenly.

"Oh!" Otsū cried in terror, stopping dead in her tracks. "What's the matter?"

Why did you scare me like that?"

"Don't worry, it's not Takezō. I just want you to watch where you walk. There are wisteria-vine and bramble traps all along the side of the road here."

"The searchers set them there to catch Takezō?"

"Uh-huh. But if we're not careful, we'll fall into one ourselves." "Takuan, if you keep saying things like that I'll be so nervous I won't be able to put one foot in front of the other!"

"What are you worried about? If we do walk into one, I'll fall in first. No need for you to follow me." He grinned back at her. "I must say, they went to an awful lot of trouble for nothing." After a moment's silence, he added, "Otsū, doesn't the ravine seem to be getting narrower?"

"I don't know, but we passed the back side of Sanumo some time ago. This should be Tsujinohara."

"If that's the case, we may have to walk all night."

"Well, I don't even know where we're going. Why talk to me about it?"

"Let's put this down for a minute." After they'd lowered the bundle to the ground, Takuan started toward a nearby cliff.

"Where are you going?"

"To relieve myself."

A hundred feet below him, the waters that joined to form the Aida River were crashing thunderously from boulder to boulder. The sound roared up to him, filling his ears and penetrating his whole being. As he urinated, he gazed at the sky as if counting the stars. "Oh, this feels good!" he exulted. "Am I one with the universe, or is the universe one with me?"

"Takuan," called Otsū, "aren't you finished yet? You certainly do take your time!"

Finally he reappeared and explained himself. "While I was about it, I consulted the Book of Changes, and now I know exactly what course of action we have to take. It's all clear to me now."

"*The Book of Changes*? You aren't carrying a book."

"Not the written one, silly, the one inside me. My very own original Book of Changes. It's in my heart or belly or somewhere. While I was standing there, I was considering the lay of the land, the look of the water and the condition of the sky. Then I shut my eyes, and when I opened them, something said, 'Go to that mountain over there.'" He pointed to a nearby peak.

"Are you talking about Takateru Mountain?"

"I have no idea what it's called. It's that one, with the level clearing about

halfway up."

"People call that Itadori Pasture."

"Oh, it has a name, does it?"

When they reached it, the pasture proved to be a small plain, sloping to the southeast and affording a splendid view of the surroundings. Farmers usually turned horses and cows loose here to graze, but that night not an animal could be seen or heard. The stillness was broken only by the warm spring breeze caressing the grass.

"We'll camp here," announced Takuan. "The enemy, Takezō, will fall into my hands just as General Ts'ao Ts'ao of Wei fell into the hands of Ch'u-ko K'ung-ming."

As they laid down their load, Otsū inquired, "What are we going to do here?"

"We are going to sit," replied Takuan firmly.

"How can we catch Takezō by just sitting here?"

"If you set up nets, you can catch birds on the wing without having to fly around yourself."

"We haven't set up any nets. Are you sure you haven't become possessed by a fox or something?"

"Let's build a fire, then. Foxes are afraid of fire, so if I am I'll soon be exorcised."

They gathered some dry wood, and Takuan built a fire. It seemed to lift Otsū's spirits.

"A good fire cheers a person up, doesn't it?"

"It warms a person up, that's for sure. Anyway, were you unhappy?"

"Oh, Takuan, you can see the mood I've been in! And I don't think anyone really likes to spend a night in the mountains like this. What would we do if it rained right now?"

"On the way up I saw a cave near the road. We could take shelter there till it stopped."

"That's what Takezō probably does at night and in bad weather, don't you think? There must be places like that all over the mountain. That's probably where he hides most of the time, too."

"Probably. He doesn't really have much sense, but he must have enough to get in out of the rain."

She grew pensive. "Takuan, why do the people in the village hate him so much?"

"The authorities make them hate him. Otsū, these people are simple. They're afraid of the government, so afraid that if it so decrees, they'll drive away their fellow villagers, even their own kin."

"You mean they only worry about protecting their own skins."

"Well, it's not really their fault. They're completely powerless. You have to forgive them for putting their own interests first, since it's a case of self-defense. What they really want is just to be left alone."

"But what about the samurai? Why are they making such a fuss about an insignificant person like Takezō?"

"Because he's a symbol of chaos, an outlaw. They have to preserve the peace. After Sekigahara, Takezō was obsessed with the idea that the enemy was chasing him. He made his first big mistake by breaking through the barrier at the border. He should've used his wits somehow, snuck through at night or gone through in disguise. Anything. But not Takezō! He had to go and kill a guard and then kill other people later on. After that it just snowballed. He thinks he has to keep on killing to protect his own life. But he's the one who started it. The whole unfortunate situation was brought about by one thing: Takezō's complete lack of common sense."

"Do you hate him too?"

"I loathe him! I abhor his stupidity! If I were lord of the province, I'd have him suffer the worst punishment I could devise. In fact, as an object lesson to the people, I'd have him torn limb from limb. After all, he's no better than a wild beast, is he? A provincial lord cannot afford to be generous with the likes of Takezō, even if he does seem to some to be no more than a young ruffian. It would be detrimental to law and order, and that's not good, particularly in these unsettled times."

"I always thought you were kind,. Takuan, but deep down you're quite hard, aren't you? I didn't think you cared about the daimyō's laws."

"Well, I do. I think that good should be rewarded and evil punished, and I came here with the authority to do just that."

"Oh, what was that?" cried Otsū, jumping up from her place by the fire. "Didn't you hear it? It was a rustling sound, like footsteps, in those trees over there!"

"Footsteps?" Takuan, too, became alert, but after listening closely for a few moments he burst into laughter. "Ha, ha. It's only some monkeys. Look!" They could see the silhouettes of a big monkey and a little one, swinging through the trees.

Otsū, visibly relieved, sat down again. "Whew, that scared me half to death!"

For the next couple of hours, the two sat silently, staring at the fire. Whenever it would dwindle, Takuan would break some dry branches and throw them on.

"Otsū, what are you thinking about?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Although I do it all the time, I really hate holding conversations with myself."

Otsū's eyes were puffy from the smoke. Looking up at the starry sky, she spoke softly. "I was thinking of how strange the world is. All those stars way up there in the empty blackness— No, I don't mean that.

"The night is full. It seems to embrace everything. If you stare at the stars a long time, you can see them moving. Slowly, slowly moving. I can't help thinking the whole world is moving. I feel it. And I'm just a little speck in it all—a speck controlled by some awesome power I can't even see. Even while I sit here thinking, my fate is changing bit by bit. My thoughts seem to go round and round in circles."

"You're not telling the truth!" said Takuan sternly. "Of course those ideas entered your head, but you really had something much more specific on your mind."

Otsū was silent.

"I apologize if I violated your privacy, Otsū, but I read those letters you received."

"You did? But the seal wasn't broken!"

"I read them after finding you in the loom shed. When you said you didn't want them, I stuck them in my sleeve. I guess it was wrong of me, but later, when I was in the privy, I took them out and read them just to pass the time."

"You're awful! How could you do such a thing! And just to pass the time!"

"Well, for whatever reason. Anyway, now I understand what started that flood of tears. Why you looked half dead when I found you. But listen, Otsū, I think you were lucky. In the long run, I think it's better that things turned out the way they did. You think I'm awful? Look at him!"

"What do you mean?"

"Matahachi was and still is irresponsible. If you married him, and then one day he surprised you with a letter like that, what would you do then? Don't tell me, I know you. You'd dive into the sea from a rocky cliff. I'm glad it's all over

before it could come to that."

"Women don't think that way."

"Oh, really? How do they think?"

"I'm so angry I could scream!" She tugged angrily at the sleeve of her kimono with her teeth. "Someday I'll find him! I swear I will! I won't rest until I've told him, to his face, exactly what I think of him. And the same goes for that Okō woman."

She broke into tears of rage. As Takuan stared at her, he mumbled cryptically, "It's started, hasn't it?"

She looked at him dumbfounded. "What?"

He stared at the ground, seemingly composing his thoughts. Then he began. "Otsū, I'd really hoped that you, of all people, would be spared the evils and duplicities of this world. That your sweet, innocent self would go through all the stages of life unsullied and unharmed. But it looks like the rough winds of fate have begun to buffet you, as they buffet everyone else."

"Oh, Takuan! What should I do! I'm so . . . so . . . angry!" Her shoulders shook with her sobbing as she buried her face in her lap.

By dawn, she'd cried herself out, and the two of them hid in the cave to sleep. That night they kept watch by the fire and slept through the next day in the cave again. They had plenty of food, but Otsū was baffled. She kept saying she couldn't see how they'd ever capture Takezō at this rate. Takuan, on the other hand, remained sublimely unperturbed. Otsū hadn't a clue to what he was thinking. He made no move to search anywhere, nor was he the slightest bit disconcerted by Takezō's failure to appear.

On the evening of the third day, as on the previous nights, they kept vigil by the fireside.

"Takuan," Otsū finally blurted, "this is our last night, you know. Our time is up tomorrow."

"Hmm. That's true, isn't it?"

"Well, what do you plan to do?"

"Do about what?"

"Oh, don't be so difficult! You do remember, don't you, the promise you made to the captain?"

"Why, yes, of course!"

"Well, if we don't bring Takezō back—"

He interrupted her. "I know, I know. I'll have to hang myself from the old cryptomeria tree. But don't worry. I'm not ready to die just yet."

"Then why don't you go and look for him?"

"If I did, do you really think I'd find him? In these mountains?"

"Oh, I don't understand you at all! And yet somehow, just sitting here, I feel like I'm getting braver, mustering up the nerve to let things turn out whatever

way they will." She laughed. "Or maybe I'm just going crazy, like you."

"I'm not crazy. I just have nerve. That's what it takes."

"Tell me, Takuan, was it nerve and nothing else that made you take this on?"

"Yes."

"Nothing but nerve! That's not very encouraging. I thought you must have some foolproof scheme up your sleeve."

Otsū had been on her way toward sharing her companion's confidence, but his disclosure that he was operating on sheer audacity sent her into a fit of despondency. Was he totally insane? Sometimes people who are not quite right in the mind are taken by others to be geniuses. Takuan might be one of those. Otsū was beginning to think this was a distinct possibility.

The monk, serene as ever, continued to gaze absently into the fire.

Presently he mumbled, as though he'd just noticed, "It's very late, isn't it?"

"It certainly is! It'll be dawn soon, " snapped Otsū with deliberate tartness. Why had she trusted this suicidal lunatic?

Paying no attention to the sharpness of her response, he muttered, "Funny, isn't it?"

"What *are* you muttering about, Takuan?"

"It just occurred to me that Takezō has to show up pretty soon."

"Yes, but maybe he doesn't realize you two have an appointment." Looking at the monk's unsmiling face, she softened. "Do you really think he will?"

"Of course I do!"

"But why would he just walk right into a trap?"

"It's not exactly that. It has to do with human nature, that's all. People aren't strong at heart, they're weak. And solitude is not their natural state, particularly when it involves being surrounded by enemies and chased with swords. You may think it's natural, but I'd be very much surprised if Takezō manages to resist the temptation to pay us a call and warm himself by the fire."

"Isn't that just wishful thinking? He may be nowhere near here."

Takuan shook his head and said, "No, it is not just wishful thinking. It isn't even my own theory, it's that of a master of strategy." He spoke so confidently



that Otsū found herself relieved that his disagreement was so definite.

"I suspect that Shimmen Takezō is somewhere very close by, but hasn't yet decided whether we're friends or enemies. He's probably plagued, poor boy, by a multitude of doubts, struggling with them, unable to advance or retreat. It'd be my guess he's hiding in the shadows right now, looking out at us furtively, wondering desperately what to do. Ah, I know. Let me have the flute you carry in your obi!"

"My bamboo flute?"

"Yes, let me play it for a while."

"No. Impossible. I never let anyone touch it."

"Why?" Takuan insisted.

"Never mind why!" she cried with a shake of her head.

"What harm would it do to let me use it? Flutes improve the more they're played. I won't hurt it."

"But . . ." Otsū clasped her right hand firmly on the flute in her obi.

She always carried it next to her body, and Takuan knew how much she treasured the instrument. He had never imagined, however, she would refuse to let him play it.

"I really won't break it, Otsū. I've handled dozens of flutes. Oh, come now, at least let me hold it."

"No."

"Whatever happens?"

"Whatever happens."

"You're stubborn!"

"Okay, I'm stubborn."

Takuan gave up. "Well, I'd just as soon listen to you play it. Will you play me just one little piece?"

"I don't want to do that either."

"Why not?"

"Because I'd start to cry, and I can't play the flute when I'm crying."

"Hmm," mused Takuan. While he felt pity for this obstinate tenacity, so characteristic of orphans, he was aware of a void deep within their stubborn hearts. They seemed to him doomed to yearn desperately for that which they could not have, for the parental love with which they were never blessed.

Otsū was constantly calling out to the parents she'd never known, and they to her, but she had no firsthand knowledge of parental love. The flute was the only thing her parents had left her, the only image of them she'd ever had. When,

barely old enough to see the light of day, she'd been left like an abandoned kitten on the porch of the Shippōji, the flute had been tucked in her tiny obi. It was the one and only link that might in the future enable her to seek out people of her own blood. Not only was it the image, it was the voice of the mother and father she'd never seen.

"So she cries when she plays it!" thought Takuan. "No wonder she's so reluctant to let anyone handle it, or even to play it herself." He felt sorry for her.

On this third night, for the first time, a pearly moon shimmered in the sky, now and then dissolving behind misty clouds. The wild geese that always migrate to Japan in fall and go home in spring were apparently on their way back north; occasionally their quacking reached them from among the clouds.

Rousing himself from his reverie, Takuan said, "The fire's gone down, Otsū. Would you put some more wood on it? . . . Why, what's the matter? Is something wrong?"

Otsū didn't answer.

"Are you crying?"

Still she said nothing.

"I'm sorry I reminded you of the past. I didn't mean to upset you."

"It's nothing," she whispered. "I shouldn't have been so stubborn. Please take the flute and play it." She brought the instrument out from her obi and offered it to him across the fire. It was in a wrapper of old, faded brocade; the cloth was worn, the cords tattered, but there still remained a certain antique elegance.

"May I look at it?" asked Takuan.

"Yes, please do. It doesn't matter anymore."

"But why don't you play it instead of me? I think I really would rather listen. I'll just sit here like this." He turned sideways and clasped his arms around his knees.

"All right. I'm not very good," she said modestly, "but I'll try."

She knelt in formal fashion on the grass, straightened her kimono collar and bowed to the flute laying before her. Takuan said no more. He seemed no longer to even be there; there was only the great lonely universe enveloped in night. The monk's shadowy form might well have been a rock that had rolled down from the hillside and settled on the plain.

Otsū, her white face turned slightly to one side, put the cherished heirloom to her lips. As she wetted the mouthpiece and prepared herself inwardly to play, she seemed a different Otsū altogether, an Otsū embodying the strength and

dignity of art. Turning to Takuan, she once again, in proper fashion, disavowed any claim to skill. He nodded perfunctorily.

The liquid sound of the flute began. As the girl's thin fingers moved over the seven holes of the instrument, her knuckles looked like tiny gnomes absorbed in a slow dance. It was a low sound, like the gurgling of a brook. Takuan felt that he himself had turned into flowing water, splashing through a ravine, playing in the shallows. When the high notes sounded, he felt his spirit wafted into the sky to gambol with the clouds. The sound of earth and the reverberations of heaven mingled and were transformed into the wistful sighs of the breeze blowing through the pines, lamenting the impermanence of this world.

As he listened raptly, his eyes closed, Takuan could not help but recall the legend of Prince Hiromasa, who, while strolling on a moonlit night at Suzaku Gate in Kyoto and playing his flute as he walked, heard another flute harmonizing with his. The prince searched out the player and found him in the upper story of the gate. Having exchanged flutes, the two played music together throughout the night. Only later did the prince discover that his companion had been a devil in human form.

"Even a devil," thought Takuan, "is moved by music. How much more deeply must a human being, subject to the five passions, be affected by the sound of the flute in the hands of this beautiful girl!" He wanted to weep but shed no tears. His face sank deeper between his knees, which he unconsciously hugged more tightly.

As the light from the fire gradually faded, Otsū's cheeks turned a deeper red. She was so absorbed in her music that it was difficult to distinguish her from the instrument she was playing.

Was she calling to her mother and father? Were these sounds ascending into the sky really asking, "Where are you?" And was there not mingled with this plea the bitter resentment of a maiden who'd been deserted and betrayed by a faithless man?

She seemed intoxicated by the music, overwhelmed by her own emotions. Her breathing began to show signs of fatigue; tiny beads of sweat appeared around the edges of her hair. Tears flowed down her face. Though the melody was broken by stifled sobs, it seemed to go on and on forever.

And then suddenly there was a movement in the grass. It was no more than fifteen or twenty feet from the fire and sounded like a creeping animal. Takuan's head shot up. Looking straight at the black object, he quietly raised his hand and

waved a greeting.

"You over there! It must be chilly in the dew. Come over here by the fire and warm yourself. Come and talk with us, please."

Startled, Otsū stopped playing and said, "Takuan, are you talking to yourself again?"

"Didn't you notice?" he asked, pointing. "Takezō has been over there for some time, listening to you play the flute."

She turned to look, and then, with a shriek, threw her flute at the black form. It was indeed Takezō. He jumped like a startled deer and started to flee.

Takuan, as astonished as Takezō by Otsū's scream, felt as though the net he was so carefully hauling in had broken and the fish escaped. Jumping to his feet, he called out at the top of his lungs, "Takezō! Stop!"

There was overpowering strength in his voice, a commanding force that could not easily be ignored. The fugitive stopped as though nailed to the ground and looked back, a little stupefied. He stared at Takuan with suspicious eyes.

The monk said no more. Slowly crossing his arms on his chest, he stared back at Takezō as steadily as Takezō was staring at him. The two seemed even to be breathing in unison.

Gradually there appeared at the corners of Takuan's eyes the wrinkles that mark the beginning of a friendly smile. Unfolding his arms, he beckoned to Takezō and said, "Now, come here."

At the sound of the words, Takezō blinked; a strange expression came over his dark face.

"Come on over here," Takuan urged, "and we can all talk to each other."

There followed a puzzled silence.

"There's lots to eat and we even have some sake. We're not your enemies, you know. Come over by the fire. Let's talk."

More silence.

"Takezō, aren't you making a big mistake? There's a world outside where there are fires and food and drink and even human sympathy. You persist in driving yourself about in your own private hell. You're taking a pretty warped view of the world, you know.

"But I'll stop trying to argue with you. In your condition, you could hardly have much of an ear for reason. Just come over here by the fire. Otsū, warm up the potato stew you made a while ago. I'm hungry too."

Otsū put the pot on the fire, and Takuan placed a jar of sake near the flames to heat it. This peaceful scene allayed Takezō's fears, and he inched

nearer. When he was almost on top of them, he stopped and stood still, apparently held back by some inner embarrassment.

Takuan rolled a rock up near the fire and patted Takezō on the back. "You sit here," he said.

Abruptly, Takezō sat down. Otsū, for her part, couldn't even look her ex-fiancé's friend in the face. She felt as though she were in the presence of an unchained beast.

Takuan, lifting the lid of the pot, said, "It seems to be ready." He stuck the tips of his chopsticks into a potato, drew it out, and popped it into his mouth. Chewing heartily, he proclaimed, "Very nice and tender. Won't you have some, Takezō?"

Takezō nodded and for the first time grinned, showing a set of perfect white teeth. Otsū filled a bowl and gave it to him, whereupon he began alternately to blow on the hot stew and slurp it up in big mouthfuls. His hands trembled and his teeth clattered against the edge of the bowl. Pitifully hungry as he was, the trembling was uncontrollable. Frighteningly so.

"Good, isn't it?" asked the monk, putting down his chopsticks. "How about some sake?"

"I don't want any sake."

"Don't you like it?"

"I don't want any now." After all that time in the mountains, he was afraid it might make him sick.

Presently he said, politely enough, "Thank you for the food. I'm warmed up now."

"Have you had enough?"

"Plenty, thank you." As he handed his bowl back to Otsū, he asked, "Why did you come up here? I saw your fire last night too."

The question startled Otsū and she had no answer ready, but Takuan came to the rescue by saying forthrightly, "To tell the truth, we came here to capture you."

Takezō showed no particular surprise, though he seemed hesitant to take what Takuan had said at face value. He hung his head in silence, then looked from one to the other of them.

Takuan saw that the time had come to act. Turning to face Takezō directly, he said, "How about it? If you're going to be captured anyway, wouldn't it be better to be tied up with the bonds of the Buddha's Law? The daimyō's regulations are law, and the Buddha's Law is law, but of the two, the bonds of the

Buddha are the more gentle and humane."

"No, no!" said Takezō, shaking his head angrily.

Takuan continued mildly. "Just listen for a minute. I understand that you are determined to hold out to the death, but in the long run, can you really win?"

"What do you mean, can I win?"

"I mean, can you successfully hold out against the people who hate you, against the laws of the province and against your own worst enemy, yourself?"

"Oh, I know I've already lost," groaned Takezō. His face was sadly contorted and his eyes brimmed with tears. "I'll be cut down in the end, but before I am I'll kill the old Hon'iden woman and the soldiers from Himeji and all the other people I hate! I'll kill as many as I can!"

"What will you do about your sister?"

"Huh?"

"Ogin. What are you going to do about her? She's locked up in the stockade at Hinagura, you know!"

Despite his earlier resolve to rescue her, Takezō could not answer.

"Don't you think you should start considering the well-being of that good woman? She's done so much for you. And what about your duty to carry on the name of your father, Shimmen Munisai? Have you forgotten that it goes back through the Hirata family to the famous Akamatsu clan of Harima?"

Takezō covered his face with his blackened, now nearly clawed hands, his sharp shoulders piercing upward as they shook in his haggard, trembling body. He broke into bitter sobs. "I . . . I . . . don't know. What . . . what difference does it make now?"

At that, Takuan suddenly clenched his fist and let go with a solid punch to Takezō's jaw.

"Fool!" the monk's voice thundered.

Taken by surprise, Takezō reeled from the blow and before he could recover took another punch on the other side.

"You irresponsible oaf! You stupid ingrate! Since your father and mother and ancestors are not here to punish you, I'll do it for them. Take that!" The monk struck him again, this time knocking him all the way to the ground. "Does it hurt yet?" he asked belligerently.

"Yes, it hurts," the fugitive whined.

"Good. If it hurts, you may still have a little human blood coursing through your veins. Otsū, hand me that rope, please . . . Well, what are you waiting for? Bring me the rope! Takezō already knows I'm going to tie him up. He's prepared

for it. It's not the rope of authority, it's the rope of compassion. There's no reason for you to either fear or pity him. Quick, girl, the rope!"

Takezō lay still on his stomach, making no effort to move. Takuan easily straddled his back. If Takezō had wanted to resist, he could have kicked Takuan in the air like a little paper ball. They both knew that. Yet he lay passively, arms and legs outstretched, as though he'd finally surrendered to some invisible law of nature.

# The Old Cryptomeria Tree

Although it was not the time of the morning when the temple bell was usually rung, its heavy, regular gonging resounded through the village and echoed far into the mountains. This was the day of reckoning, when Takuan's time limit was up, and the villagers raced up the hill to find out whether he'd done the impossible. The news that he had spread like wildfire.

"Takezō's been captured!"

"Really! Who got him?"

"Takuan!"

"I can't believe it! Without a weapon?"

"It can't be true!"

The crowd surged up to the Shippōji to gawk at the collared outlaw, who was tied like an animal to the stair railing in front of the main sanctuary. Some gulped and gasped at the sight, as though they were beholding the countenance of the dreaded demon of Mount Ōe. As if to deflate their exaggerated reaction, Takuan sat a bit farther up the stairs, leaning back on his elbows and grinning amiably.

"People of Miyamoto," he shouted, "now you can go back to your fields in peace. The soldiers will be gone soon!"

To the intimidated villagers, Takuan had become a hero overnight, their savior and protector from evil. Some bowed deeply to him, their heads nearly touching the ground of the temple courtyard; others pushed their way forward to touch his hand or robe. Others knelt at his feet. Takuan, appalled at this display of idolatry, pulled away from the mob and held up his hand for silence.

"Listen, men and women of Miyamoto. I have something to say, something important." The hue and cry died down. "It is not I who deserve the credit for capturing Takezō. It was not I who accomplished it, but the law of nature. Those who break it always lose in the end. It is the law that you should respect."

"Don't be ridiculous! You caught him, not nature!"

"Don't be so modest, monk!"

"We give credit where it's due!"

"Forget the law. We have you to thank!"



"Well, then thank me," continued Takuan. "I don't mind that. But you should pay homage to the law. Anyway, what's done is done, and right now there's something very important I'd like to ask you about. I need your help." "What is it?" came the question from the curious crowd.

"Just this: what shall we do with Takezō now that we've got him? My agreement with the House of Ikeda's representative, who I'm sure you all know by sight, was that if I didn't bring the fugitive back in three days' time, I'd hang myself from that big cryptomeria. If I did succeed, I was promised, I could decide his fate."

People started to murmur.

"We heard about that!"

He assumed a judicial pose. "Well, then, what shall we do with him? As you see, the dreaded monster is here in the flesh. Not very fearsome, really, is he? In fact, he came along without a fight, the weakling. Shall we kill him, or let him go?"

There was a rumble of objections at the idea of setting Takezō free. One man shouted, "We've got to kill him! He's no good, he's a criminal! If we let him live, he'll be the curse of the village."

While Takuan paused, seeming to consider the possibilities, angry, impatient voices from the rear shouted, "Kill him! Kill him!"

At that point, an old woman pushed her way to the front, shoving aside men twice her size with sharp jabs of her elbows. It was, of course, the irate Osugi. When she reached the steps, she glared at Takezō for a moment, then turned and faced the villagers. Waving a mulberry branch in the air, she cried, "I won't be satisfied with just killing him! Make him suffer first! Just look at that hideous face!" Turning back to the prisoner, she raised her switch, screaming, "You degenerate, loathsome creature!" and brought it down on him several times, until she ran out of breath and her arm dropped to her side. Takezō cringed in pain as Osugi turned to Takuan with a menacing look.

"What do you want from me?" the monk asked.

"It was because of this murderer that my son's life has been ruined." Shaking violently, she screeched, "And without Matahachi there is no one to carry on our family name."

"Well," countered Takuan, "Matahachi, if you don't mind my saying so, never amounted to much anyway. Won't you be better off in the long run taking your son-in-law as heir? Giving him the honored Hon'iden name?"

"How dare you say such a thing!" Suddenly the proud dowager burst into

sobs. "I don't care about what you think. Nobody understood him. He wasn't really bad; he was my baby." Her fury rose again and she pointed at Takezō. "He led him astray, he made him a good-for-nothing like himself. I have the right to take my revenge." Addressing the crowd, she beseeched them, "Let me decide. Leave it to me. I know what to do with him!"

Just then a loud and angry shout from the back cut the old woman off. The crowd parted like rent cloth, and the latecomer marched quickly to the front. It was Scraggly Beard himself, in a towering rage.

"What's going on here? This isn't a sideshow! All of you, get out of here. Go back to work. Go home. Immediately!" There was shuffling, but no one turned to go. "You heard what I said! Get a move on! What are you waiting for?" He stepped threateningly toward them, his hand poised above his sword. Those in the front shrank back wide-eyed.

"No!" interrupted Takuan. "There's no reason for these good people to go. I called them here for the express purpose of discussing what's to be done with Takezō."

"You be quiet!" commanded the captain. "You have nothing to say in this matter." Drawing himself up and glaring first at Takuan, then at Osugi, and finally at the crowd, he boomed, "This Shimmen Takezō has not only committed grave and serious crimes against the laws of this province; he is also a fugitive from Sekigahara. His punishment cannot be decided by the people. He must be turned over to the government!"

Takuan shook his head. "Nonsense!" Seeing that Scraggly Beard was ready to respond, he raised a silencing finger. "That's not what you agreed to!"

The captain, his dignity seriously threatened, started to argue. "Takuan, you will no doubt receive the money the government has offered as a reward. But as an official representative of Lord Terumasa, it is my duty to take charge of the prisoner at this point. His fate need no longer be of any concern to you. Don't trouble yourself even thinking about it."

Takuan, making no effort to answer, broke into peals of laughter. Every time it seemed to subside, it would come rolling up again.

"Watch your manners, monk!" warned the captain. He started to spit and sputter. "What's so funny? Huh? You think this is all a joke?"

"My manners?" repeated Takuan, cracking up in laughter again. "My manners? Look, Scraggly Beard, are you thinking of breaking our agreement, going back on your sacred word? If you are, I warn you, I'll turn Takezō loose here and now!"

With a unanimous gasp, the villagers began edging away.

"Ready?" asked Takuan, reaching toward the rope that bound Takezō. The captain was speechless.

"And when I unleash him, I'm going to sic him on you first. You can fight it out between yourselves. Then arrest him, if you can!"

"Now hold on—just a minute!"

"I kept my part of the bargain." Takuan continued to make as if he were about to remove the prisoner's fetters.

"Stop, I say." The samurai's forehead beaded with sweat.

"Why?"

"Well, because—because—" He was almost stuttering. "Now that he's tied up, there's no point in letting him go, just to cause more trouble—now, is there? I'll tell you what! You can kill Takezō yourself. Here—here's my sword. Just let me have his head to take back with me. That's fair, isn't it?"

"Give you his head! Not on your life! It's the business of the clergy to conduct funerals, but giving away the corpses, or parts of them . . . Well, that'd give us priests a bad name, wouldn't it? No one would trust us with their dead, and anyway, if we started to just give them away, the temples would go broke in no time." Even with the samurai's hand resting on his sword handle, Takuan couldn't resist baiting him.

Turning to the mob, the monk became serious again. "I ask you to talk it over among yourselves and give me an answer. What shall we do? The old woman says it's not enough to kill him outright, we should torture him first. What do you think of lashing him to a branch of the cryptomeria tree for a few days? We could bind him hand and foot, and he would be exposed to the elements day and night. The crows will probably gouge out his eyeballs. How does that sound?"

His proposal struck his listeners as so inhumanly cruel that at first no one could answer.

Except Osugi, who said, "Takuan, this idea of yours shows what a wise man you really are, but I think we should string him up for a week—no, more! Let him hang there ten or twenty days. Then I myself will come and strike the fatal blow."

Without further ado, Takuan nodded. "All right. So be it!"

He took hold of the rope after freeing it from the railing and dragged Takezō, like a dog on a leash, to the tree. The prisoner went meekly, head bowed, uttering not a sound. He seemed so repentant that some of the softer-

hearted members of the crowd felt a bit sorry for him. The excitement of capturing the "wild beast" had hardly worn off, however, and with great gusto everyone joined in the fun. Having tied several lengths of rope together, they hoisted him up to a branch about thirty feet from the ground and lashed him tightly. So bound, he looked less like a living man than a big straw doll.

After Otsū came back to the temple from the mountains, she began feeling a strange and intense melancholy whenever she was alone in her room. She wondered why, since being alone was nothing new to her. And there were always some people around the temple. She had all the comforts of home, yet felt lonelier now than she had at any time during those three long days on the desolate hillside with only Takuan as a companion. Sitting at the low table by her window, her chin resting on her palms, she reflected on her feelings for half a day before coming to a conclusion.

She felt that this experience had given her an insight into her own heart. Loneliness, she mused, is like hunger; it isn't outside but inside oneself. To be lonely, she thought, is to sense that one lacks something, something vitally necessary, but what she knew not.

Neither the people around her nor the amenities of life at the temple could assuage the feeling of isolation she now felt. In the mountains there had only been the silence, the trees and the mist, but there had also been Takuan. It came to her like a revelation that he was not entirely outside herself. His words had gone straight to her heart, had warmed and lighted it as no fire or lamp could. She then came to the innocent realization that she was lonely because Takuan was not around.

Having made this discovery, she stood up, but her mind still grappled with the problem at hand. After deciding Takezō's punishment, Takuan had been closeted in the guest room with the samurai from Himeji a good deal of the time. What with having to go back and forth to the village on this errand and that, he'd had no time to sit down and talk with her as he had in the mountains. Otsū sat down again.

If only she had a friend! She didn't need many; just one who knew her well, someone she could lean on, someone strong and completely trustworthy. That was what she longed for, craved so badly that she was nearly at her wit's end.

There was always, of course, her flute, but by the time a girl is sixteen,

there are questions and uncertainties inside her that can't be answered by a piece of bamboo. She needed intimacy and a sense of partaking in, not just observing, real life.

"It's all so disgusting!" she said out loud, but voicing her feeling in no way mitigated her hatred for Matahachi. Tears spilled onto the little lacquered table; the angry blood coursing through her veins turned her temples blue. Her head throbbed.

Silently the door behind her slid open. In the temple kitchen, the fire for the evening meal burned brightly.

"Ah ha! So this is where you've been hiding! Sitting here letting the whole day slip through your fingers!"

The figure of Osugi appeared at the door. Startled out of her abstraction, Otsū hesitated a moment before welcoming the old woman and putting a cushion down for her to sit on. Without so much as a by-your-leave, Osugi seated herself.

"My good daughter-in-law . . ." she began in grandiose tones.

"Yes, ma'am," answered Otsū, cowed into bowing deeply before the old harridan.

"Now that you have acknowledged the relationship, there's a little something I want to talk to you about. But first bring me some tea. I've been talking till now with Takuan and the samurai from Himeji, and the acolyte here didn't even serve us refreshments. I'm parched!"

Otsū obeyed and brought her some tea.

"I want to talk about Matahachi," the old woman said without prelude. "Of course, I'd be a fool to believe anything that lying Takezō says, but it seems Matahachi is alive and staying in a different province."

"Is that so?" said Otsū coldly.

"I can't be sure, but the fact remains that the priest here, acting as your guardian, agreed to your marriage to my son, and the Hon'iden family has already accepted you as his bride. Whatever happens in the future, I trust you don't have any ideas about going back on your word."

"Well . . ."

"You'd never do such a thing, would you?"

Otsū let out a soft sigh.

"All right then, I'm glad of that!" She spoke as though adjourning a meeting. "You know how people talk, and there's no telling when Matahachi will be back, so I want you to leave this temple and come live with me. I've more work than I can handle, and since my daughter-in-law's got so much on her

hands with her own family, I can't drive her too hard. So I need your help."

"But I—"

"Who else but Matahachi's bride could come into the Hon'iden house?" "I don't know, but—"

"Are you trying to say you don't want to come? Don't you like the idea of living under my roof? Most girls would jump at the chance!"

"No, it's not that. It's—"

"Well, then, stop dawdling! Get your things together!"

"Right now? Wouldn't it be better to wait?"

"Wait for what?"

"Until . . . until Matahachi comes back."

"Absolutely not!" Her tone was final. "You just might start getting ideas in your head about other men before that. It's my duty to see that you don't misbehave. In the meantime, I'll also see that you learn how to do field work, care for the silkworms, sew a straight seam and act like a lady."

"Oh. I . . . see." Otsū had no strength to protest. Her head still pounded and with all this talk of Matahachi, her chest tightened. She feared saying another word lest she release a torrent of tears.

"And there's one other thing," said Osugi. Heedless of the girl's distress, she raised her head imperiously. "I'm still not quite sure what that unpredictable monk plans to do with Takezō. It worries me. I want you to keep a sharp eye on the two of them until we're sure Takezō is dead. At night as well as in the daytime. If you don't take special care at night, there's no telling what Takuan might do. They may be in cahoots!"

"So you don't mind if I stay here?"

"For the time being, no, since you can't be in two places at once, can you? You will come with your belongings to the Hon'iden house the day that Takezō's head is separated from his body. Understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Make sure you don't forget!" Osugi barked as she whooshed out of the room.

Thereupon, as though waiting for the chance, a shadow appeared on the paper-covered window and a male voice called softly, "Otsū! Otsū!"

Hoping it was Takuan, she hardly looked at the shape of the shadow before rushing to open the window. When she did, she jerked back in surprise, for the eyes meeting hers were the captain's. He reached through, grabbing her hand and squeezing it hard.

"You've been kind to me," he said, "but I've just received orders from Himeji to go back."

"Why, that's too bad." She tried to pull her hand from his, but the grip was too firm.

"They seem to be conducting an investigation into the incident here," he explained. "If only I had Takezō's head, I could say I had discharged my duty with honor. I'd be vindicated. That crazy, stubborn Takuan won't let me take it. He won't listen to anything I say. But I think you're on my side; that's why I've come here. Take this letter, will you, and read it later, somewhere where no one will see you?"

He pressed the letter into her hand and was off in a shot. She could hear him hurriedly walking down the steps to the road.

It was more than a letter, for a large gold piece was enclosed. But the message itself was straightforward enough: it asked Otsū to cut off Takezō's head within the next few days and bring it to Himeji, where the writer would make her his wife, and she would live amid wealth and glory for the rest of her days. The missive was signed "Aoki Tanzaemon," a name that, according to the writer's own testimony, belonged to one of the most celebrated warriors of the region. She wanted to burst out laughing, but was too indignant.

As she finished reading, Takuan called, "Otsū, have you eaten yet?"

Slipping her feet into her sandals, she went out to talk with him.

"I don't feel like eating. I have a headache."

"What's that in your hand?"

"A letter."

"Another one?"

"Yes."

"From whom?"

"Takuan, you're so nosy!"

"Curious, my girl, inquisitive. Not nosy!"

"Would you like to have a look at it?"

"If you don't mind."

"Just to pass the time?"

"That's as good a reason as any."

"Here. I don't mind at all."

Otsū handed him the letter, and after reading it, Takuan laughed heartily. She couldn't help but let the corners of her mouth turn up too.

"That poor man! He's so desperate he's trying to bribe you with both love

and money. This letter is hilarious! I must say, our world is fortunate indeed to be blessed with such outstanding, upright samurai! He's so brave he asks a mere girl to do his beheading for him. And so stupid as to put it in writing."

"The letter doesn't bother me," said Otsū, "but what am I going to do with the money?" She handed Takuan the gold piece.

"This is worth quite a lot," he said, weighing it in his hand.

"That's what bothers me."

"Don't worry. I never have any trouble disposing of money."

Takuan walked around to the front of the temple, where there was an alms box. Preparing to toss the coin in, he touched it to his forehead in deference to the Buddha. Then he changed his mind. "On second thought, you keep it. I daresay it won't be in the way."

"I don't want it. It'll just cause trouble. I might be questioned about it later. I'd rather just pretend I never saw it."

"This gold, Otsū, no longer belongs to Aoki Tanzaemon. It has become an offering to the Buddha, and the Buddha has bestowed it on you. Keep it for good luck."

Without further protest, Otsū tucked the coin into her obi; then, looking up at the sky, she remarked, "Windy, isn't it? I wonder if it'll rain tonight. It hasn't rained for ages."

"Spring's almost over, so we're due for a good downpour. We need it to wash away all the dead flowers, not to mention relieving the people's boredom."

"But if it's a heavy rain, what'll happen to Takezō?"

"Hmm. Takezō . . ." the monk mused.

Just as the two of them turned toward the cryptomeria, a call came from its upper branches.

"Takuan! Takuan!"

"What? Is that you, Takezō?"

As Takuan squinted to look up into the tree, Takezō hurled down a stream of imprecations. "You swine of a monk! You filthy impostor! Come and stand under here! I have something to say to you!"

The wind was beating at the tree's branches violently, and the voice came through broken and disjointed. Leaves swirled around the tree and onto Takuan's upturned face.

The monk laughed. "I see you're still full of life. That's okay; that suits me fine. I hope it's not just the false vitality that comes from the knowledge that you're soon going to die."



"Shut up!" cried Takezō, who was not so much full of life as full of anger. "If I were afraid to die, why would I have just kept still while you tied me up?"

"You did that because I am strong and you are weak!"

"That's a lie, and you know it!"

"Then I'll put it another way. I'm clever, and you are unspeakably stupid!"

"You might be right. It was certainly stupid of me to let you catch me." "Don't squirm so much, monkey in the tree! It won't do you any good, it'll make you bleed if you've any blood left, and frankly, it's quite unbecoming." "Listen, Takuan!"

"I'm listening."

"If I had wanted to fight you on the mountain, I could've easily squashed you under one foot like a cucumber."

"That's not a very flattering analogy. In any case you didn't, so you'd be better off leaving that line of thought. Forget about what happened. It's too late for regrets."

"You tricked me with your high-sounding priest talk. That was pretty mean, you banana. You got me to trust you and you betrayed me. I let you capture me, yes, but only because I thought you were different from the others. I never thought I'd be humiliated like this."

"Get to the point, Takezō," Takuan said impatiently.

"Why are you doing this to me?" the straw bundle shrieked. "Why don't you just cut off my head and get it over with! I thought that if I had to die, it'd be better to let you choose how to execute me than let that bloodthirsty mob do it. Although you are a monk, you also claim to understand the Way of the Samurai."

"Oh, I do, you poor misguided boy. Much better than you!"

"I would've been better off letting the villagers catch up with me. At least they're human."

"Was that your only mistake, Takezō? Hasn't just about everything you've ever done been some kind of mistake? While you're resting up there, why don't you try thinking about the past a little."

"Oh, shut up, you hypocrite! I'm not ashamed! Matahachi's mother can call me anything she wants, but he is my friend, my best friend. I considered it my responsibility to come and tell the old hag what happened to him and what does she do? She tries to incite that mob to torture me! Bringing her news of her precious son was the only reason I broke through the barrier and came here. Is that a violation of the warrior's code?"

"That's not the point, you imbecile! The trouble with you is that you don't even know how to think. You seem to be under the misconception that if you perform one brave deed, that alone makes you a samurai. Well, it doesn't! You let that one act of loyalty convince you of your righteousness. The more convinced you became, the more harm you caused yourself and everyone else. And now where are you? Caught in a trap you set for yourself, that's where!" He paused. "By the way, how's the view from up there, Takezō?"

"You pig! I won't forget this!"

"You'll forget everything soon. Before you turn into dried meat, Takezō, take a good look at the wide world around you. Gaze out onto the world of human beings, and change your selfish way of thinking. And then, when you arrive in that other world beyond and are reunited with your ancestors, tell them that just before you died a man named Takuan Sōhō told you this. They'll be overjoyed to learn you had such excellent guidance, even if you did learn what life was all about too late to bring anything but shame to your family name."

Otsū, who had been standing transfixed some distance away, came running forward and attacked Takuan in shrill tones.

"You're carrying this too far, Takuan! I've been listening. I heard everything. How can you be so cruel to someone who can't even defend himself? You're a religious man, or you're supposed to be! Takezō's telling the truth when he says he trusted you and let you take him without a struggle."

"Now what's all this? Is my comrade in arms turning against me?"

"Have a heart, Takuan! When I hear you talk like that, I hate you, I really do. If you intend to kill him, then kill him and be done with it! Takezō is resigned to dying. Let him die in peace!" She was so outraged she grabbed frantically at Takuan's chest.

"Be quiet!" he said with uncharacteristic brutality. "Women know nothing of these matters. Hold your tongue, or I'll hang you up there with him."

"No, I won't, I won't!" she screamed. "I should have a chance to speak too. Didn't I go to the mountains with you and stay there three days and three nights?"

"That has nothing to do with it. Takuan Sōhō will punish Takezō as he sees fit."

"So punish him! Kill him! Now. It's not right for you to ridicule his misery while he's lying up there half dead."

"That happens to be my only weakness, ridiculing fools like him." "It's inhuman!"

"Get out of here, now! Go away, Otsū; leave me alone."

"I will not!"

"Stop being so stubborn," Takuan shouted, giving Otsū a hard shove with his elbow.

When she recovered, she was slumped against the tree. She pressed her face and chest to its trunk and began wailing. She had never dreamed Takuan could be so cruel. The people in the village believed that even if the monk had Takezō tied up for a while, eventually he'd soften and lighten the punishment. Now Takuan had admitted that it was his "weakness" to enjoy seeing Takezō suffer! Otsū shuddered at the savagery of men.

If even Takuan, whom she'd trusted so deeply, could become heartless, then the whole world must indeed be evil beyond comprehension. And if there was no one at all whom she could trust . . .

She felt a curious warmth in this tree, felt somehow that through its great, ancient trunk, so thick that ten men with arms outstretched could not encompass it, there coursed the blood of Takezō, flowing down into it from his precarious prison in the upper branches.

How like a samurai's son he was! How courageous! When Takuan had first tied him up, and again just now, she had seen Takezō's weaker side. He, too, was able to weep. Until now, she'd gone along with the opinion of the crowd, been swayed by it, without having any real idea of the man himself. What was there about him that made people hate him like a demon and hunt him down like a beast?

Her back and shoulders heaved with her sobs. Clinging tightly to the tree trunk, she rubbed her tear-stained cheeks against the bark. The wind whistled loudly through the upper branches, which were waving broadly to and fro. Large raindrops fell on her kimono neck and flowed down her back, chilling her spine.

"Come on, Otsū," Takuan shouted, covering his head with his hands.  
"We'll get soaked."

She didn't even answer.

"It's all your fault, Otsū! You're a crybaby! You start weeping, the heavens weep too." Then, the teasing tone gone from his voice: "The wind's getting stronger, and it looks like we're in for a big storm, so let's get inside. Don't waste your tears on a man who's going to die anyway! Come on!" Takuan, sweeping the skirt of his kimono up over his head, ran toward the shelter of the temple.

Within seconds it was pouring, the raindrops making little white spots as they pummeled the ground. Though the water was streaming down her back,

Otsū didn't budge. She couldn't tear herself away, even after her drenched kimono was clinging to her skin and she was chilled to the marrow. When her thoughts turned to Takezō, the rain ceased to matter. It didn't occur to her to wonder why she should suffer simply because he was suffering; her mind was consumed by a newly formed image of what a man should be. She silently prayed his life would be spared.

She wandered in circles round the foot of the tree, looking up to Takezō often, but unable to see him because of the storm. Without thinking, she called his name, but there was no answer. A suspicion arose in her mind that he might regard her as a member of the Hon'iden family, or as just another hostile villager.

"If he stays out in this rain," she thought in despair, "he's sure to die before morning. Oh, isn't there anyone in the world who can save him?"

She started running at full speed, partially propelled by the raging wind. Behind the main temple, the kitchen building and the priests' quarters were tightly shuttered. Water overflowing from the roof gutters slashed deep gullies in the ground as it rushed downhill.

"Takuan!" she screamed. She'd reached the door of his room, and began banging on it with all her strength.

"Who is it?" came his voice from within.

"It's me—Otsū!"

"What are you doing still out there?" He quickly opened the door and looked at her in astonishment. Despite the building's long eaves, rain showered in on him. "Come inside quick!" he exclaimed, making a grab for her arm, but she pulled back.

"No. I came to ask a favor, not to dry off. I beg you, Takuan, take him down from that tree!"

"What? I'll do no such thing!" he said adamantly.

"Oh, please, Takuan, you must. I'd be grateful to you forever." She fell on her knees in the mud and lifted her hands in supplication. "It doesn't matter about me, but you must help him! Please! You can't just let him die—you can't!"

The sound of the torrent nearly blotted out her tearful voice. With her hands still raised before her, she looked like a Buddhist practicing austerities by standing under a freezing waterfall.

"I bow before you, Takuan. I beg you. I'll do anything you ask, but please save him!"

Takuan was silent. His eyes were tightly closed, like the doors to the shrine where a secret Buddha is kept. Heaving a deep sigh, he opened them and

breathed fire.

"Go to bed! This minute! You're weak to begin with, and being out in this weather is suicidal."

"Oh, please, please," she pleaded, reaching for the door.

"I'm going to bed. I advise you to do the same." His voice was like ice. The door slammed shut.

Still, she would not give up. She crawled under the house till she reached the spot she guessed was beneath where he slept. She called up to him:

"Please! Takuan, it's the most important thing in the world to me! Takuan, can you hear me? Answer me, please! You're a monster! A heartless, cold-blooded fiend!"

For a while, the monk listened patiently without replying, but she was making it impossible for him to sleep. Finally, in a fit of temper, he jumped out of bed, shouting, "Help! Thief! There's a thief under my floor. Catch him!"

Otsū scrambled out into the storm again and retired in defeat. But she was not finished yet.

## The Rock and the Tree

By early morning, wind and rain had washed spring away without a trace. A throbbing sun beat down furiously and few villagers walked around without a wide-brimmed hat for protection.

Osugi made her way uphill to the temple, arriving at Takuan's door thirsty and breathless. Beads of sweat emerged from her hairline, converged in rivulets and coursed straight down her righteous nose. She took no notice of this, for she was brimming over with curiosity about her victim's fate.

"Takuan," she called, "did Takezō survive the storm?"

The monk appeared on his veranda. "Oh, it's you. Terrific downpour, wasn't it?"

"Yes." She smiled crookedly. "It was murderous."

"I'm sure you know, however, that it isn't very difficult to live through a night or two of even the heaviest rain. The human body can take a lot of buffeting. It's the sun that's really deadly."

"You don't mean he's still alive?" said Osugi in disbelief, at once turning her wrinkled face toward the old cryptomeria. Her needlelike eyes squinted in the glare. She raised a hand to shield them and in a moment relaxed a bit. "He's just drooping up there like a wet rag," she said with renewed hope. "He can't have any life left in him, he can't."

"I don't see any crows picking at his face yet." Takuan smiled. "I think that means he's still breathing."

"Thank you for telling me. A man of learning like you must surely know more than I do about such matters." She craned her neck and peered around him into the building. "I don't see my daughter-in-law anywhere. Would you please call her for me?"

"Your daughter-in-law? I don't believe I've ever met her. In any case, I don't know her name. How can I call her?"

"Call her, I say!" Osugi repeated impatiently.

"Who on earth are you talking about?"

"Why, Otsū, of course!"

"Otsū! Why do you call her your daughter-in-law? She hasn't entered the Hon'iden family, has she?"

"No, not yet, but I plan to take her in very soon as Matahachi's bride."  
"That's hard to imagine. How can she marry someone when he's not around?"

Osugi became more indignant. "Look, you vagabond! This has nothing to do with you! Just tell me where Otsū is!"

"I imagine she's still in bed."

"Oh, yes, I should've thought of that," the old woman muttered, half to herself. "I did tell her to watch Takezō nights, so she must become pretty tired by daybreak. Incidentally," she said accusingly, "aren't you supposed to be watching him during the day?"

Without waiting for an answer, she did an about-face and marched under the tree. There she stared upward for a long time, as if in a trance. When it finally broke, she plodded off toward the village, mulberry stick in hand.

Takuan returned to his room, where he stayed until evening.

Otsū's room was not far from his, in the same building. Her door was also closed all day except when opened by the acolyte, who several times brought her medicine or an earthenware pot full of thick rice gruel. When they had found her half dead in the rain the night before, they'd had to drag her in kicking and screaming and force her to swallow some tea. The priest had then given her a severe scolding while she sat mutely propped against a wall. By morning she had a high fever and was hardly able to lift her head to drink the gruel.

Night fell, and in sharp contrast to the previous evening, a bright moon shone like a clearly cut hole in the sky. When everyone else was sound asleep, Takuan put down the book he was reading, slipped into his wooden clogs and went out into the yard.

"Takezō!" he called.

High above him a branch shook and glistening dewdrops fell.

"Poor boy, I guess he doesn't have the strength to reply," Takuan said to himself. "Takezō! Takezō!"

"What do you want, you banana of a monk?" came the ferocious response.

Takuan was seldom taken off guard, but he could not conceal his surprise. "You certainly howl loudly for a man at death's door. Sure you're not really a fish or some kind of sea monster? At this rate you ought to last another five or six days. By the way, how's your stomach? Empty enough for you?"

"Forget the small talk, Takuan. Just cut my head off and get it over with."

"Oh, no! Not so fast! One has to be careful about things like that. If I cut your head off right now, it'd probably fly down and try to bite me." Takuan's voice trailed off and he stared at the sky. "What a beautiful moon! You're lucky

to be able to view it from such an excellent vantage point."

"Okay, just watch me, you filthy mongrel of a monk! I'll show you what I can do if I put my mind to it!" With every ounce of strength in him, Takezō then began to shake himself violently, flinging his weight up and down and nearly breaking off the branch he was bound to. Bark and leaves rained down on the man below, who remained unruffled but perhaps a bit affectedly nonchalant.

The monk calmly brushed his shoulders clean, and when he was finished he looked up again. "That's the spirit, Takezō! It's good to get as angry as you are now. Go ahead! Feel your strength to the fullest, show you're a real man, show us what you're made of! People these days think it's a sign of wisdom and character to be able to control their anger, but I say they're foolish. I hate seeing the young being so restrained, so proper. They have more spirit than their elders and they should show it. Don't hold back, Takezō! The madder you get, the better!"

"Just wait, Takuan, just wait! If I have to chew through this rope with my bare teeth, I will, just to get my hands on you and tear you limb from limb!"

"Is that a promise or a threat? If you really think you can do it, I'll stay down here and wait. Are you sure you can keep it up without killing yourself before the rope breaks?"

"Shut up!" Takezō screamed hoarsely.

"Say, Takezō, you really are strong! The whole tree is swaying. But I don't notice the earth shaking, sorry to say. You know, the trouble with you is that, in reality, you're weak. Your kind of anger is nothing more than personal malice. A real man's anger is an expression of moral indignation. Anger over petty emotional trifles is for women, not men."

"It won't be long now," he threatened. "I'll go straight for the neck!"

Takezō struggled on, but the thick rope showed no sign of weakening. Takuan looked on for a time, then offered some friendly advice. "Why don't you cut that out, Takezō—you're getting nowhere. You'll just wear yourself out, and what good is that going to do you? Squirm and wriggle all you like, you couldn't break a single branch of this tree, much less make a dent in the universe."

Takezō gave out a mighty groan. His tantrum was over. He realized the monk was right.

"I daresay all that strength would be put to better use working for the good of the country. You really should try doing something for others, Takezō, although it is a little late to start now. If you'd just tried, you'd have had a chance at moving the gods or even the universe, not to mention plain, everyday people."



Takuan's voice took on a slightly pontifical tone. "It's a pity, a great pity! Though you were born human, you're more like an animal, no better than a boar or wolf. How sad it is that a handsome young man like you has to meet his end here, without ever having become truly human! What a waste!"

"You call yourself human?" Takezō spat.

"Listen, you barbarian! All along you've had too much confidence in your own brute strength, thinking you didn't have a match in the world. But look where you are now!"

"I've got nothing to be ashamed of. It wasn't a fair fight."

"In the long run, Takezō, it doesn't make any difference. You were outwitted and outtalked instead of being out-pummeled. When you've lost, you've lost. And whether you like it or not, I'm sitting on this rock and you're lying up there helpless. Can't you see the difference between you and me!"

"Yeah. You fight dirty. You're a liar and a coward!"

"It would have been crazy of me to try to take you by force. You're too strong physically. A human being doesn't have much chance wrestling a tiger. Luckily, he rarely has to, being the more intelligent of the two. Not many people would argue with the fact that tigers are inferior to humans."

Takezō gave no indication that he was still listening.

"It's the same with your so-called courage. Your conduct up till now gives no evidence that it's anything more than animal courage, the kind that has no respect for human values and life. That's not the kind of courage that makes a samurai. True courage knows fear. It knows how to fear that which should be feared. Honest people value life passionately, they hang on to it like a precious jewel. And they pick the right time and place to surrender it, to die with dignity."

Still no answer.

"That's what I meant when I said it's a pity about you. You were born with physical strength and fortitude, but you lack both knowledge and wisdom. While you managed to master a few of the more unfortunate features of the Way of the Samurai, you made no effort to acquire learning or virtue. People talk about combining the Way of Learning with the Way of the Samurai, but when properly combined, they aren't two—they're one. Only one Way, Takezō."

The tree was as silent as the rock on which Takuan sat. The darkness, too, was still. After several moments, Takuan rose slowly and deliberately. "Think about it one more night, Takezō. After you do, I'll cut off your head for you." He started walking away, taking long, thoughtful strides, his head bowed. He hadn't gone more than twenty paces when Takezō's voice rang out urgently.

"Wait!"

Takuan turned and called back, "What do you want now?"

"Come back."

"Mm. Don't tell me you want to hear more? Could it be that at last you're beginning to think?"

"Takuan! Save me!" Takezō's cry for help was loud and plaintive. The branch began to tremble, as though it, as though the whole tree, were weeping.

"I want to be a better man. I realize now how important it is, what a privilege it is to be born human. I'm almost dead, but I understand what it means to be alive. And now that I know, my whole life will consist of being tied to this tree! I can't undo what I've done."

"You're finally coming to your senses. For the first time in your life, you're talking like a human being."

"I don't want to die," Takezō cried. "I want to live. I want to go out, try again, do everything right this time." His body convulsed with his sobbing. "Takuan . . . please! Help me . . . help me!"

The monk shook his head. "Sorry, Takezō. It's out of my hands. It's the law of nature. You can't do things over again. That's life. Everything in it is for keeps. Everything! You can't put your head back on after the enemy's cut it off. That's the way it is. Of course, I feel sorry for you, but I can't undo that rope, because it wasn't me who tied it. It was you. All I can do is give you some advice. Face death bravely and quietly. Say a prayer and hope someone bothers to listen. And for the sake of your ancestors, Takezō, have the decency to die with a peaceful look on your face!"

The clatter of Takuan's sandals faded into the distance. He was gone, and Takezō cried out no more. Following the spirit of the monk's advice, he shut the eyes that had just experienced a great awakening and forgot everything. He forgot about living and about dying, and under the myriad tiny stars lay perfectly still as the night breeze sighed through the tree. He was cold, very cold.

After a while, he sensed that someone was at the base of the tree. Whoever it was was clutching the broad trunk and trying frantically but not very adroitly to climb up to the lowest branch. Takezō could hear the climber slipping downward after almost every upward advance. He could also hear chips of bark falling to the ground and was sure that the hands were being skinned much worse than the tree was. But the climber kept at it doggedly, digging into the tree again and again until finally the first branch was within reach. Then the form rose with relative ease to where Takezō, barely distinguishable from the branch

he was stretched on, lay depleted of every ounce of strength. A panting voice whispered his name.

With great difficulty he opened his eyes and found himself face to face with a veritable skeleton; only the eyes were alive and vibrant. The face spoke. "It's me!" it said with childlike simplicity.

"Otsū?"

"Yes, me. Oh, Takezō, let's run away! I heard you scream out that you wanted with all your heart to live."

"Run away? You'll untie me, set me free?"

"Yes. I can't stand this village anymore either. If I stay here—oh, I don't even want to think about it. I have my reasons. I just want to get out of this stupid, cruel place. I'll help you, Takezō! We can help each other." Otsū was already wearing traveling clothes, and all her worldly possessions hung from her shoulder in a small fabric bag.

"Quick, cut the rope! What are you waiting for? Cut it!"

"It won't take a minute."

She unsheathed a small dagger and in no time severed the captive's bonds. Several minutes passed before the tingling in his limbs eased and he could flex his muscles. She tried to support his entire weight, with the result that when he slipped, she went down with him. The two bodies clung to each other, bounced off a limb, twisted in the air and crashed to the ground.

Takezō stood up. Dazed from the thirty-foot fall and numbingly weak, he nevertheless planted his feet firmly on the earth. Otsū writhed in pain on her hands and knees.

"O-o-h-h," she moaned.

Putting his arms around her, he helped her up.

"Do you think you broke something?"

"I have no idea, but I think I can walk."

"We had all those branches to break the fall, so you're probably not too badly hurt."

"What about you? You okay?"

"Yes . . . I'm . . . I'm okay. I'm . . ." He paused a second or two, then blurted out, "I'm alive! I'm really alive!"

"Of course you are!"

"It's not 'of course.'"

"Let's get out of here fast. If anybody finds us here, we'll be in real trouble." Otsū started limping away and Takezō followed . . . slowly, silently,

like two frail wounded insects walking on the autumn frost.

They proceeded as best they could, hobbling along in silence, a silence broken only much later, when Otsū cried, "Look! It's getting light over toward Harima."

"Where are we?"

"At the top of Nakayama Pass."

"Have we really come that far?"

"Yes." Otsū smiled weakly. "Surprising what you can do when you're determined. But, Takezō ." Otsū looked alarmed. "You must be famished. You haven't eaten anything for days."

At the mention of food, Takezō suddenly realized his shrunken stomach was cramped with pain. Now that he was aware of it, it was excruciating, and it seemed like hours before Otsū managed to undo her bag and take out the food. Her gift of life took the form of rice cakes, stuffed generously with sweet bean paste. As their sweetness slid smoothly down his throat, Takezō grew giddy. The fingers holding the cake shook. "I'm alive," he thought over and over, vowing that from that moment on he'd live a very different sort of life.

The reddish clouds of morning turned their cheeks rosy. As he began to see Otsū's face more clearly and hunger gave way to a sated calm, it seemed like a dream that he was sitting here safe and sound with her.

"When it gets light, we'll have to be very careful. We're almost at the provincial border," said Otsū.

Takezō's eyes widened. "The border! That's right, I forgot. I have to go to Hinagura."

"Hinagura? Why?"

"That's where they've got my sister locked up. I have to get her out of there. Guess I'll have to say good-bye."

Otsū peered into his face in stunned silence. "If that's the way you feel about it, go! But if I'd thought you were going to desert me, I wouldn't have left Miyamoto."

"What else can I do? Just leave her there in the stockade?"

With a look that pressed in on him, she took his hand in hers. Her face, her whole body, was aflame with passion. "Takezō," she pleaded, "I'll tell you how I feel about this later, when there's time, but please, don't leave me alone here! Take me with you, wherever you go!"

"But I can't!"

"Remember"—she gripped his hand tight—"whether you like it or not, I'm

staying with you. If you think I'll be in the way when you're trying to rescue Ogin, then I'll go to Himeji and wait."

"All right, do that," he agreed instantly.

"You'll definitely come, won't you?"

"Of course."

"I'll be waiting at Hanada Bridge, just outside Himeji. I'll wait for you there, whether it takes a hundred days or a thousand."

Answering with a slight nod, Takezō was off without further ado, racing along the ridge leading from the pass into the far-distant mountains. Otsū raised her head to watch him till his body melted into the scenery.

Back in the village, Osugi's grandson came charging up to the Hon'iden manor house, shouting, "Grandma! Grandma!"

Wiping his nose with the back of his hand, he peered into the kitchen and said excitedly, "Grandma, have you heard? Something awful's happened!"

Osugi, who was standing before the stove, coaxing a fire with a bamboo fan, barely looked his way. "What's all the fuss about?",

"Grandma, don't you know? Takezō's escaped!"

"Escaped!" She dropped the fan in the flames. "What are you talking about?"

"This morning he wasn't in the tree. The rope was cut."

"Heita, you know what I said about telling tales!"

"It's the truth, Grandma, honest. Everybody's talking about it." "Are you absolutely sure?"

"Yes, ma'am. And up at the temple, they're searching for Otsū. She's gone too. Everybody's running around shouting."

The visible effect of the news was colorful. Osugi's face whitened shade by shade as the flames of her burning fan turned from red to blue to violet. Her face soon seemed drained of all blood, so much so that Heita shrank in fear.

"Heita!"

"Yes?"

"Run as fast as your legs can carry you. Fetch your daddy right away. Then go down to the riverbank and get Uncle Gon! And hurry!" Osugi's voice quivered.

Before Heita even reached the gate, a crowd of muttering villagers had arrived. Among them were Osugi's son-in-law, Uncle Gon, other relatives and a

number of tenants.

"That girl Otsū's run away too, hasn't she?"

"And Takuan's not around either!"

"Looks pretty funny if you ask me!"

"They were in it together, that's for sure."

"Wonder what the old woman'll do? Her family honor's at stake!"

The son-in-law and Uncle Gon, carrying lances passed down to them from their ancestors, stared blankly toward the house. Before they could do anything, they needed guidance, so they stood there restlessly waiting for Osugi to appear and issue orders.

"Granny," someone finally shouted, "haven't you heard the news?"

"I'll be there in a minute," came the reply. "All of you, just be quiet and wait."

Osugi quickly rose to the occasion. When she'd realized the awful news had to be true, her blood boiled, but she managed to control herself enough to kneel before the family altar. After silently saying a prayer of supplication, she raised her head, opened her eyes and turned around. Calmly she opened the doors of the sword chest, pulled out a drawer and withdrew a treasured weapon. Having already donned attire suitable for a manhunt, she slipped the short sword in her obi and went to the entranceway, where she tied her sandal thongs securely round her ankles.

The awed hush that greeted her as she approached the gate made clear they knew what she was dressed for. The stubborn old woman meant business and was more than ready to avenge the insult to her house.

"Everything's going to be all right," she announced in clipped tones. "I'm going to chase down that shameless hussy myself and see to it she receives her proper punishment." Her jaw clamped shut.

She was already walking briskly down the road before someone in the crowd spoke up. "If the old woman is going, we should go too." All the relatives and tenants stood up, and fell in behind their doughty matriarch. Arming themselves as they went with sticks, fashioning bamboo lances hastily as they walked, they marched directly to Nakayama Pass, not even pausing to rest on the way. They reached it just before noon, only to find that they were too late.

"We've let them get away!" one man shouted. The crowd seethed with anger. To add to their frustration, a border official approached to inform them such a large group could not pass through.

Uncle Gon came forward and pleaded earnestly with the official,

describing Takezō as a "criminal," Otsū as "evil" and Takuan as "crazy." "If we drop this matter now," he explained, "it will sully the name of our ancestors. We'll never be able to hold up our heads. We'll be the laughingstock of the village. The Hon'iden family might even have to abandon its land."

The official said he understood their predicament but could do nothing to help. The law's the law. He could perhaps send an inquiry on to Himeji and get them special permission to cross the border, but that would take time.

Osugi, after conferring with her relatives and tenants, stepped in front of the official and asked, "In that case, is there any reason why two of us, myself and Uncle Gon, can't go through?"

"Up to five people are permitted."

Osugi nodded her acquiescence. Then, although it looked as if she was about to deliver a moving farewell, she instead called her followers together in a very matter-of-fact way. They lined up before her, staring attentively at her thin-lipped mouth and large protruding teeth.

When they were all quiet, she said, "There's no reason for you to be upset. I anticipated something like this happening before we even set out. When I put on this short sword, one of the most prized Hon'iden heirlooms, I knelt before our ancestors' memorial tablets and bade them a formal farewell. I also made two vows.

"One was that I would overtake and punish the brazen female who has smeared our name with mud. The other was that I'd find out for sure, even if I died trying, whether my son Matahachi is alive. And if he is, I'll bring him home to carry on the family name. I swore to do this, and I will do it, even if it means tying a rope around his neck and dragging him all the way back. He has an obligation not only to me and to those departed, but to you as well. He will then find a wife a hundred times better than Otsū and blot out this disgrace for all time, so that the villagers will once again recognize our house as a noble and honorable one."

As they were applauding and cheering, one man uttered something sounding like a groan. Osugi stared fixedly at her son-in-law.

"Now Uncle Gon and I," she went on, "are both old enough to retire. We are both in agreement on everything I've vowed to do, and he, too, is resolved to accomplish them, even if it means spending two or three years doing nothing else, even if it means walking the length and breadth of the country. While I'm gone, my son-in-law will take my place as head of the house. During that time, you must promise to work as hard as ever. I don't want to hear of any of you

neglecting the silkworms or letting weeds grow wild in the fields. Do you understand?"

Uncle Gon was nearly fifty, Osugi ten years older. The crowd seemed hesitant to let them go it alone, since they were obviously no match for Takezō in the event that they should ever find him. They all imagined him to be a madman who would attack and kill for the smell of blood alone.

"Wouldn't it be better," someone suggested, "if you took three young men along with you? The man said that five can pass through."

The old woman shook her head with vehemence. "I don't need any help. I never have, and never will. Ha! Everyone thinks Takezō is so strong, but he doesn't scare me! He's only a brat, with not much more hair on him than when I knew him as a baby. I'm not his equal in physical strength, of course, but I haven't lost my wits. I can still outsmart an enemy or two. Uncle Gon's not senile yet either.

"Now I've told you what I'm going to do," she said, pointing her index finger at her nose. "And I'm going to do it. There's nothing left for you to do but go home, so go and take care of everything till we return."

She shooed them away and walked up to the barrier. No one tried to stop her again. They called their good-byes and watched as the old couple started their journey eastward down the mountainside.

"The old lady really has guts, doesn't she?" someone remarked.

Another man cupped his hands and shouted, "If you get sick, send a messenger back to the village."

A third called solicitously, "Take care of yourselves!"

When she could no longer hear their voices, Osugi turned to Uncle Gon. "We don't have a thing to worry about," she assured him. "We're going to die before those young people anyway."

"You're absolutely right," he replied with conviction. Uncle Gon made his living hunting, but in his younger days he had been a samurai involved, to hear him tell it, in many a gory battle. Even now his skin was healthily ruddy and his hair as black as ever. His surname was Fuchikawa; Gon stood for Gonroku, his given name. As Matahachi's uncle, he was naturally quite concerned and upset about the recent goings-on.

"Granny," he said.

"What?"

"You had the foresight to dress for the road, but I'm just wearing my everyday clothes. I'll have to stop somewhere for sandals and a hat."



"There's a teahouse about halfway down this hill."

"So there is! Yes, I remember. It's called the Mikazuki Teahouse, isn't it? I'm sure they'll have what I need."

By the time they reached the teahouse they were surprised to see that the sun was beginning to set. They had thought they had more daylight hours ahead of them, since the days were growing longer with the approach of summer—more time to search on this, their first day in pursuit of their lost family honor.

They had some tea and rested for a while. Then, as Osugi laid down the money for the bill, she said, "Takano's too far to reach by nightfall. We'll have to make do with sleeping on those smelly mats at the packhorse driver's inn in Shingū, although not sleeping at all might be better than that."

"We need our sleep now more than ever. Let's get going," said Gonroku, rising to his feet and clutching the new straw hat he had just bought. "But wait just a minute."

"Why? "I want to fill this bamboo tube with drinking water."

Going around behind the building, he submerged his tube in a clear running brook till the bubbles stopped rising to the surface. Walking back toward the road in front, he glanced through a side window into the dim interior of the teahouse. Suddenly he came to a halt, surprised to see a figure lying on the floor, covered with straw matting. The smell of medicine permeated the air. Gonroku couldn't see the face, but he could discern long black hair strewn every which way on the pillow.

"Uncle Gon, hurry up!" Osugi cried impatiently.

"Coming."

"What kept you?"

"There seems to be a sick person inside," he said, walking behind her like a chastened dog.

"What's so unusual about that? You're as easy to distract as a child."

"Sorry, sorry," he apologized hastily. He was as intimidated by Osugi as anyone else but knew better than most how to manage her.

They set off down the fairly steep hill leading to the Harima road. The road, used daily by packhorses from the silver mines, was pitted with potholes.

"Don't fall down, Granny," Gon advised.

"How dare you patronize me! I can walk on this road with my eyes closed. Be careful yourself, you old fool."

Just then a voice greeted them from behind. "You two are pretty spry, aren't you?"

They turned to see the owner of the teahouse on horseback.

"Oh, yes; we just had a rest at your place, thank you. And where are you off to?"

"Tatsuno."

"At this hour?"

"There's no doctor between here and there. Even on horseback, it'll take me at least till midnight."

"Is it your wife who's sick?"

"Oh, no." His brows knitted. "If it were my wife, or one of the children, I wouldn't mind. But it's a lot of trouble to go to for a stranger, someone who just stopped in to take a rest."

"Oh," said Uncle Gon, "is it the girl in your back room? I happened to glance in and see her."

Osugi's brows now knitted as well.

"Yes," the shopkeeper said. "While she was resting, she started shivering, so I offered her the back room to lie down in. I felt I had to do something. Well, she didn't get any better. In fact, she seems much worse. She's burning up with fever. Looks pretty bad."

Osugi stopped in her tracks. "Is the girl about sixteen and very slender?"

"Yes, about sixteen, I'd say. Says she comes from Miyamoto."

Osugi, winking at Gonroku, began poking around in her obi. A look of distress came over her face as she exclaimed, "Oh, I've left them back at the teahouse!"

"Left what?"

"My prayer beads. I remember now—I put them down on a stool."

"Oh, that's too bad," said the shopkeeper, turning his horse around. "I'll go back for them."

"Oh, no! You've got to fetch the doctor. That sick girl's more important than my beads. We'll just go back and pick them up ourselves."

Uncle Gon was already on his way, striding rapidly back up the hill. As soon as Osugi disposed of the solicitous teahouse owner, she hurried to catch up. Before long they were both puffing and panting. Neither spoke.

It had to be Otsū!

Otsū had never really shaken off the fever she caught the night they dragged her in out of the storm. Somehow she forgot about feeling sick during the few hours she was with Takezō, but after he left her she'd walked only a short way before beginning to give in to pain and fatigue. By the time she got to

the teahouse, she felt miserable.

She did not know how long she had been lying in the back room, deliriously begging for water time and time again. Before leaving, the shopkeeper had looked in on her and urged her to try to stick it out. Moments later she had forgotten he'd ever spoken to her.

Her mouth was parched. She felt as if she had a mouthful of thorns. "Master, water, please," she called out feebly. Hearing no reply, she raised herself on her elbows and craned her neck toward the water basin just outside the door. Slowly she managed to crawl to it, but as she put her hand on the bamboo dipper at the side, she heard a rain shutter fall to the ground somewhere behind her. The teahouse was little more than a mountain hut to begin with, and there was nothing to prevent anyone from simply lifting out any or all of the loosely fitted shutters.

Osugi and Uncle Gon stumbled in through the opening.

"I can't see a thing," complained the old woman in what she thought was a whisper.

"Wait a minute," Gon replied, heading toward the hearth room, where he stirred up the embers and threw on some wood to get a bit of light.

"She's not in here, Granny!"

"She must be! She can't have gotten away!" Almost immediately, Osugi noticed that the door in the back room was ajar.

"Look, out there!" she shouted.

Otsū, who was standing just outside, threw the dipperful of water through the narrow opening into the old woman's face and sped downhill like a bird in the wind, sleeves and skirt trailing behind her.

Osugi ran outside and spat out an imprecation.

"Gon, Gon. Do something, do something!"

"Did she get away?"

"Of course she did! We certainly gave her enough warning, making all that noise. You would have to drop the shutter!" The old woman's face contorted with rage. "Can't you do something?"

Uncle Gon directed his attention to the deer-like form flying in the distance. He raised his arm and pointed. "That's her, right? Don't worry, she doesn't have much of a head start. She's sick and anyway she only has the legs of a girl. I'll catch up with her in no time." He tucked his chin in and broke into a run. Osugi followed close behind.

"Uncle Gon," she cried, "you can use your sword on her, but don't cut off

her head until after I've had a chance to give her a piece of my mind."

Uncle Gon suddenly let out a scream of dismay and fell to his hands and knees.

"What's the matter?" cried Osugi, coming up behind him.

"Look down." Osugi did. Directly in front of them was a steep drop into a bamboo-covered ravine.

"She dived into that?"

"Yes. I don't think it's very deep, but it's too dark to tell. I'll have to go back to the teahouse and get a torch."

As he knelt staring into the ravine, Osugi cried, "What are you waiting for, you dolt?" and gave him a violent shove. There was the sound of feet trying to gain a footing, scrambling desperately before coming to a stop at the bottom of the ravine.

"You old witch!" shouted Uncle Gon angrily. "Now just get on down here yourself! See how you like it!"

Takezō, arms folded, sat atop a large boulder and stared across the valley at the Hinagura stockade. Under one of those roofs, he reflected, his sister was imprisoned. But he'd sat there from dawn to dusk the previous day and all day today, unable to devise a plan to get her out. He intended to sit until he did.

His thinking had progressed to the point where he was confident he could outmaneuver the fifty or a hundred soldiers guarding the stockade, but he continued to ponder the lay of the land. He had to get not only in but out. It was not encouraging: behind the stockade was a deep gorge, and at the front the road into the stockade was well protected by a double gate. To make matters worse, the two of them would be forced to flee across a flat plateau, which offered not a single tree to hide behind; on a cloudless day such as this, a better target would be hard to find.

The situation thus called for a night assault, but he'd observed that the gates were closed and locked before sunset. Any attempt to jimmy them open would doubtless set off a cacophonous alarm of wooden clappers. There seemed no foolproof way to approach the fortress.

"There's no way," Takezō thought sadly. "Even if I just took a long shot, risked my life and hers, it wouldn't work." He felt humiliated and helpless. "How," he asked himself, "did I get to be such a coward? A week ago I wouldn't have even thought about the chances of getting out alive."

For another half day his arms remained folded over his breast as if locked. He feared something he couldn't define and hesitated getting any closer to the stockade. Time and time again he upbraided himself. "I've lost my nerve. I never used to be this way. Maybe staring death in the face makes cowards out of everyone."

He shook his head. No, it wasn't that, not cowardice.

He had simply learned his lesson, the one Takuan had taken so much trouble to teach, and could now see things more clearly. He felt a new calm, a sense of peace. It seemed to flow in his breast like a gentle river. Being brave was very different from being ferocious; he saw that now. He didn't feel like an animal, he felt like a man, a courageous man who's outgrown his adolescent recklessness. The life that had been given to him was something to be treasured and cherished, polished and perfected.

He stared at the lovely clear sky, whose color alone seemed a miracle. Still, he could not leave his sister stranded, even if it meant violating, one last time, the precious self-knowledge he'd so recently and painfully acquired.

A plan began to take shape. "After nightfall, I'll cross the valley and climb the cliff on the other side. The natural barrier may be a blessing in disguise; there's no gate at the back, and it doesn't seem heavily guarded."

He had hardly arrived at this decision when an arrow whizzed toward him and thudded into the ground inches from his toes. Across the valley, he saw a crowd of people milling about just inside the stockade. Obviously they'd spotted him. Almost immediately they dispersed. He surmised it had been a test shot, to see how he'd react, and deliberately remained motionless upon his perch.

Before long, the light of the evening sun began to fade behind the peaks of the western mountains. Just before darkness dropped, he arose and picked up a rock. He had spotted his dinner flying in the air over his head. He downed the bird on the first try, tore it apart and sank his teeth into the warm flesh.

While he ate, twenty-odd soldiers moved noisily into position and surrounded him. Once in place, they let out a battle cry, one man shouting, "It's Takezō! Takezō from Miyamoto!"

"He's dangerous! Don't underestimate him!" someone else warned.

Looking up from his feast of raw fowl, Takezō trained a murderous eye on his would-be captors. It was the same look animals flash when disturbed in the midst of a meal.

"Y-a-a-h-h!" he yelled, seizing a huge rock and hurling it at the perimeter of this human wall. The rock turned red with blood, and in no time he was over

it and away, running straight toward the stockade gate.

The men were agape.

"What's he doing?"

"Where's the fool going?"

"He's out of his mind!"

He flew like a crazed dragonfly, with the war-whooping soldiers in full chase. By the time they reached the outer gate, however, he'd already leapt over it. But now he was between the gates, in what was in fact a cage. Takezō's eyes took in none of this. He could see neither the pursuing soldiers nor the fence, nor the guards inside the second gate. He wasn't even conscious of knocking out, with a single blow, the sentinel who tried to jump him. With almost superhuman strength, he wrenched at a post of the inner gate, shaking it furiously till he was able to pull it out of the ground. Then he turned on his pursuers. He didn't know their number; all he knew was that something big and black was attacking him. Taking aim as best he could, he struck at the amorphous mass with the gatepost. A good number of lances and swords broke, flew into the air and fell useless to the ground.

"Ogin!" cried Takezō, running toward the rear of the stockade. "Ogin, it's me—Takezō!"

He glared at the buildings with fiery eyes, calling out repeatedly to his sister. "Has it all been a trick?" he wondered in panic. One by one he began battering down doors with the gatepost. The guards' chickens, squawking for dear life, flew in every direction.

"Ogin!"

When he failed to locate her, his hoarse cries became nearly unintelligible. In the shadows of one of the small, dirty cells he saw a man trying to sneak away.

"Halt!" he shouted, throwing the bloodstained gatepost at the weasel-like creature's feet. When Takezō leaped at him, he began to cry shamelessly. Takezō slapped him sharply on the cheek. "Where's my sister?" he roared. "What have they done to her? Tell me where she is or I'll beat you to death!"

"She . . . she's not here. Day before yesterday they took her away. Orders from the castle."

"Where, you stupid banana, where?"

"Himeji."

"Himeji?"

"Y-y-yes."

"If you're lying, I'll . . ." Takezō grabbed the sniveling man by his hair. "It's true—true. I swear!"

"It better be, or I'll come back just for you!"

The soldiers were closing in again, and Takezō lifted the man and hurled him at them. Then he disappeared into the shadows of the dingy cells. Half a dozen arrows flew by him, one sticking like a giant sewing needle in the skirt of his kimono. Takezō bit his thumbnail and watched the arrows speed by, then suddenly dashed for the fence and was over it in a flash.

Behind him there was a loud explosion. The echo of the gunshot roared across the valley.

Takezō sped down the gorge, and as he ran, fragments of Takuan's teachings were racing through his head: "Learn to fear that which is fearsome. . . . Brute strength is child's play, the mindless strength of beasts..... Have the strength of the true warrior . . . real courage.....Life is precious."

## The Birth of Musashi

Takezō waited on the outskirts of the castle town of Himeji, sometimes keeping out of sight under Hanada Bridge but more often standing on the bridge unobtrusively surveying the passersby. When not in the immediate vicinity of the bridge, he would make short excursions around town, careful to keep his hat low and his face concealed, like a beggar's, behind a piece of straw matting.

It baffled him that Otsū had not yet appeared; only a week had gone by since she swore to wait there—not a hundred but a thousand days. Once Takezō had made a promise, he was loath to break it. But with every passing moment he grew more and more tempted to be on the move, though his promise to Otsū was not the only reason he made his way to Himeji. He also had to find out where they were keeping Ogin.

He was near the center of town one day when he heard a voice shouting his name. Footsteps came running after him. He looked up sharply, to see Takuan approaching, calling, "Takezō! Wait!"

Takezō was startled, and as usual in the presence of this monk, felt slightly humiliated. He had thought his disguise was foolproof and had been sure that no one, not even Takuan, would recognize him.

The monk grabbed him by the wrist. "Come with me," he commanded. The urgency in his voice was impossible to ignore. "And don't make any trouble. I've spent a lot of time looking for you."

Takezō followed meekly. He had no idea where they were going, but he once again found himself powerless to resist this particular man. He wondered why. He was free now, and for all he knew they were headed straight back to the dreaded tree in Miyamoto. Or perhaps into a castle dungeon. He had suspected they had his sister locked up somewhere in the castle's confines, but he hadn't a shred of evidence to back this up. He hoped he was right: if he, too, was taken there, at least they could die together. If they had to die, he could think of no one else he loved enough to share the final moments of precious life with.

Himeji Castle loomed before his eyes. He could see now why it was called the "White Crane Castle": the stately edifice stood upon huge stone ramparts, like a great and proud bird descended from the heavens. Takuan preceded him across the wide arcing bridge spanning the outer moat. A row of guards stood at



attention before the riveted iron gate. The sunlight glancing off their drawn lances made Takezō, for a split second, hesitant to pass. Takuan, without even turning, sensed this and with a slightly impatient gesture urged him to keep moving. Passing under the gate turret, they approached the second gate, where the soldiers looked even more tense and alert, ready to fight at a moment's notice. This was the castle of a daimyō. It would take its inhabitants a while to relax and accept the fact that the country was successfully unified. Like many other castles of the time, it was far from accustomed to the luxury of peace.

Takuan summoned the captain of the guard. "I've brought him," he announced. Handing Takezō over, the monk advised the man to take good care of him as previously instructed, but added, "Be careful. He's a lion cub with fangs. He's far from tamed. If you tease him, he bites."

Takuan went through the second gate to the central compound, where the daimyō's mansion was located. Apparently he knew the way well; he needed neither a guide nor directions. He barely raised his head as he walked and not a soul interrupted his progress.

Heeding Takuan's instructions, the captain didn't lay a finger on his charge. He simply asked Takezō to follow him. Takezō silently obeyed. They soon arrived at a bathhouse, and the captain instructed him to go in and get cleaned up. At this point Takezō's spine stiffened, for he remembered all too well his last bath, at Osugi's house, and the trap from which he had narrowly escaped. He folded his arms and tried to think, stalling for time and inspecting the surroundings. It was all so peaceful—an island of tranquility where a daimyō could, when not plotting strategies, enjoy the luxuries of life. Soon a servant bearing a black cotton kimono and *hakama* arrived, bowing and saying politely, "I'll lay these here. You can put them on when you come out."

Takezō nearly wept. The outfit included not only a folding fan and some tissue paper, but a pair of long and short samurai swords. Everything was simple and inexpensive, but nothing was lacking. He was being treated like a human being again and wanted to lift the clean cotton to his face, rub it to his cheek and inhale its freshness. He turned and entered the bathhouse.

Ikeda Terumasa, lord of the castle, leaned on an armrest and gazed out into the garden. He was a short man, with a cleanly shaven head and dark pockmarks lining his face. Although not dressed in formal attire, his countenance was stern and dignified.

"Is that him?" he asked Takuan, pointing his folding fan.

"Yes, that's him," answered the monk with a deferential bow.

"He has a good face. You did well to save him."

"He owes his life to you, your lordship. Not me."

"That's not so, Takuan, and you know it. If I just had a handful of men like you under my command, no doubt a lot of useful people would be saved, and the world would be the better for it." The daimyō sighed. "My trouble is that all my men think their sole duty is to tie people up or behead them."

An hour later, Takezō was seated in the garden beyond the veranda, his head bowed and his hands resting flat on his knees in an attitude of respectful attentiveness.

"Your name is Shimmen Takezō, isn't it?" Lord Ikeda asked.

Takezō glanced up quickly to see the face of the famous man, then respectfully cast his eyes downward again.

"Yes, sir," he answered clearly.

"The House of Shimmen is a branch of the Akamatsu family, and Akamatsu Masanori, as you well know, was once lord of this castle."

Takezō's throat went dry. He was, for once, at a loss for words. Having always thought of himself as the black sheep of the Shimmen family, with no particular feelings of respect or awe for the daimyō, he was nonetheless filled with shame at having brought such complete dishonor on his ancestors and his family name. His face burned.

"What you have done is inexcusable," continued Terumasa in a sterner tone. "Yes, sir."

"And I am going to have to punish you for it." Turning to Takuan, he asked, "Is it true that my retainer, Aoki Tanzaemon, without my leave, promised you that if you captured this man, you could decide and mete out his punishment?"

"I think you can best find that out by asking Tanzaemon directly." "I've already questioned him."

"Then did you think I would lie to you?"

"Of course not. Tanzaemon has confessed, but I wanted your confirmation. Since he is my direct vassal, his oath to you constitutes one from me. Therefore, even though I am lord of this fief, I have lost my right to penalize Takezō as I see fit. Of course, I will not permit him to go unpunished, but it is up to you what form the punishment is to take."

"Good. That is exactly what I had in mind."

"Then I assume you have given it some thought. Well, what shall we do with him?"

"I think it would be best to place the prisoner in—what shall we say?—'straitened circumstances' for a while."

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"I believe you have somewhere in this castle a closed room, one long rumored to be haunted?"

"Yes, I do. The servants refused to enter it, and my retainers avoided it consistently, so it went unused. I now leave it as it is, since there is no reason to open it again."

"But don't you think it's beneath the dignity of one of the strongest warriors in the Tokugawa realm, you, Ikeda Terumasa, to have a room in your castle where a light never shines?"

"I never thought of it that way."

"Well, people think of things like that. It's a reflection on your authority and prestige. I say we should put a light there."

"Hmm."

"If you'll let me make use of that chamber, I'll keep Takezō there until I'm ready to pardon him. He's had enough of living in total darkness. You hear that, don't you, Takezō?"

There was not a peep from Takezō, but Terumasa began laughing and said, "Fine!"

It was obvious from their excellent rapport that Takuan had been telling Aoki Tanzaemon the truth that night at the temple. He and Terumasa, both followers of Zen, seemed to be on friendly, almost brotherly, terms.

"After you've taken him to his new quarters, why don't you join me in the teahouse?" Terumasa asked the monk as he rose to leave.

"Oh, are you planning to demonstrate once again how inept you are at the tea ceremony?"

"That's not even fair, Takuan. These days I've really started to get the knack of it. Come along later and I'll prove to you I'm no longer simply an uncouth soldier. I'll be waiting." With that, Terumasa retired to the inner part of the mansion. Despite his short stature—he was barely five feet tall—his presence seemed to fill the many-storied castle.

It was always pitch dark high in the donjon, where the haunted room was located. There was no calendar here: no spring, no fall, no sounds of everyday life. There was only one small lamp, lighting a pale and sallow-cheeked Takezō.

The topography section of Sun-tzu's *Art of War* lay open on the low table before him.

Sun-tzu said:

*"Among topographical features,  
There are those that are passable.  
There are those that suspend.  
There are those that confine.  
There are those that are steep.  
There are those that are distant."*

Whenever he came to a passage that particularly appealed to him, like this one, he would read it aloud over and over, like a chant.

*He who knows the art of the warrior is not confused in his movements. He acts and is not confined.*

*Therefore Sun-tzu said, "He who knows himself and knows his enemy wins without danger. He who knows the heavens and the earth wins out over all."*

When his eyes blurred from fatigue, he rinsed them with cool water from a small bowl he kept beside him. If the oil ran low and the lamp wick sputtered, he simply put it out. Around the table was a mountain of books, some in Japanese, some in Chinese. Books on Zen, volumes on the history of Japan. Takezō was virtually buried in these scholarly tomes. They had all been borrowed from Lord Ikeda's collection.

When Takuan had sentenced him to confinement, he had said, "You may read as much as you want. A famous priest of ancient times once said, 'I become immersed in the sacred scriptures and read thousands of volumes. When I come away, I find that my heart sees more than before.'

"Think of this room as your mother's womb and prepare to be born anew. If you look at it only with your eyes, you will see nothing more than an unlit, closed cell. But look again, more closely. Look with your mind and think. This room can be the wellspring of enlightenment, the same fountain of knowledge found and enriched by sages in the past. It is up to you to decide whether this is to be a chamber of darkness or one of light."

Takezō had long since stopped counting the days. When it was cold, it was

winter; when hot, summer. He knew little more than that. The air remained the same, dank and musty, and the seasons had no bearing on his life. He was almost positive, however, that the next time the swallows came to nest in the donjon's boarded-over gun slots, it would be the spring of his third year in the womb.

"I'll be twenty-one years old," he said to himself. Seized by remorse, he groaned as if in mourning. "And what have I done in those twenty-one years?" Sometimes the memory of his early years pressed in on him unrelentingly, engulfing him in grief. He would wail and moan, flail and kick, and sometimes sob like a baby. Whole days were swallowed up in agony, which, once it subsided, left him spent and lifeless, hair disheveled and heart torn apart.

Finally, one day, he heard the swallows returning to the donjon eaves. Once again, spring had flown from across the seas.

Not long after its arrival, a voice, now sounding strange, almost painful to the ears, inquired, "Takezō, are you well?"

The familiar head of Takuan appeared at the top of the stairs. Startled and much too deeply moved to utter a sound, Takezō grabbed hold of the monk's kimono sleeve and pulled him into the room. The servants who brought his food had never once spoken a word. He was overjoyed to hear another human voice, especially this one.

"I've just returned from a journey," said Takuan. "You're in your third year here now, and I've decided that after gestating this long, you must be pretty well formed."

"I am grateful for your goodness, Takuan. I understand now what you've done. How can I ever thank you?"

"Thank me?" Takuan said incredulously. Then he laughed. "Even though you've had no one to converse with but yourself, you've actually learned to speak like a human being! Good! Today you will leave this place. And as you do so, hug your hard-earned enlightenment to your bosom. You're going to need it when you go forth into the world to join your fellow men."

Takuan took Takezō just as he was to see Lord Ikeda. Although he had been relegated to the garden in the previous audience, a place was now made for him on the veranda. After the salutations and some perfunctory small talk, Terumasa lost no time in asking Takezō to serve as his vassal.

Takezō declined. He was greatly honored, he explained, but he did not feel the time was yet right to go into a daimyō's service. "And if I did so in this castle," he said, "ghosts would probably start appearing in the closed room every night, just as everyone says they do."

"Why do you say that? Did they come to keep you company?"

"If you take a lamp and inspect the room closely, you'll see black spots spattering the doors and beams. It looks like lacquer, but it's not. It's human blood, most likely blood spilled by the Akamatsus, my forebears, when they went down to defeat in this castle."

"Hmm. You may very well be right."

"Seeing those stains infuriated me. My blood boiled to think that my ancestors, who once ruled over this whole region, ended up being annihilated, their souls just blown about in the autumn winds. They died violently, but it was a powerful clan and they can be roused."

"That same blood flows in my veins," he went on, an intense look in his eyes. "Unworthy though I am, I am a member of the same clan, and if I stay in this castle, the ghosts may rouse themselves and try to reach me. In a sense, they already have, by making it clear to me in that room just who I am. But they could cause chaos, perhaps rebel and even set off another bloodbath. We are not in an era of peace. I owe it to the people of this whole region not to tempt the vengeance of my ancestors."

Terumasa nodded. "I see what you mean. It's better if you leave this castle, but where will you go? Do you plan to return to Miyamoto? Live out your life there?"

Takezō smiled silently. "I want to wander about on my own for a while." "I see," the lord replied, turning to Takuan. "See that he receives money and suitable clothing," he commanded.

Takuan bowed. "Let me thank you for your kindness to the boy." "Takuan!" Ikeda laughed. "This is the first time you've ever thanked me twice for anything!"

"I suppose that's true." Takuan grinned. "It won't happen again."

"It's all right for him to roam about while he's still young," said Terumasa. "But now that he's going out on his own—reborn, as you put it—he should have a new name. Let it be Miyamoto, so that he never forgets his birthplace. From now on, Takezō, call yourself Miyamoto."

Takezō's hands went automatically to the floor. Palms down, he bowed deep and long. "Yes, sir, I will do that."

"You should change your first name too," Takuan interjected. "Why not read the Chinese characters of your name as 'Musashi' instead of 'Takezō'? You can keep writing your name the same as before. It's only fitting that everything should begin anew on this day of your rebirth."

Terumasa, who was by this time in a very good mood, nodded his approval enthusiastically. "Miyamoto Musashi! It's a good name, a very good name. We should drink to it."

They moved into another room, sake was served, and Takezō and Takuan kept his lordship company far into the night. They were joined by several of Terumasa's retainers, and eventually Takuan got to his feet and performed an ancient dance. He was expert, his vivid movements creating an imaginary world of delight. Takezō, now Musashi, watched with admiration, respect and enjoyment as the drinking went on and on.

The following day they both left the castle. Musashi was taking his first steps into a new life, a life of discipline and training in the martial arts. During his three-year incarceration, he had resolved to master the Art of War.

Takuan had his own plans. He had decided to travel about the countryside, and the time had come, he said, to part again.

When they reached the town outside the castle walls, Musashi made as if to take his leave, but the monk grabbed his sleeve and said, "Isn't there someone you'd like to see?"

"Who?"

"Ogin?"

"Is she still alive?" he asked in bewilderment. Even in his sleep, he'd never forgotten the gentle sister who'd been a mother to him so long.

Takuan told him that when he'd attacked the stockade at Hinagura three years earlier, Ogin had indeed already been taken away. Although no charges were pressed against her, she had been reluctant to return home and so went instead to stay with a relative in a village in the Sayo district. She was now living comfortably there.

"Wouldn't you like to see her?" asked Takuan. "She's very eager to see you. I told her three years ago that she should consider you dead, since in one sense, you were. I also told her, however, that after three years I'd bring her a new brother, different from the old Takezō."

Musashi pressed his palms together and raised them in front of his head, as he would have done in prayer before a statue of the Buddha. "Not only have you taken care of me," he said with deep emotion, "but you've seen to Ogin's well-being too. Takuan, you are truly a compassionate man. I don't think I'll ever be able to thank you for what you've done."

"One way to thank me would be to let me take you to your sister."

"No . . . No, I don't think I should go. Hearing about her from you has been

as good as meeting her."

"Surely you want to see her yourself, if only for a few minutes."

"No, I don't think so. I did die, Takuan, and I do feel reborn. I don't think that now is the time to return to the past. What I have to do is take a resolute step forward, into the future. I've barely found the way along which I'll have to travel. When I've made some progress toward the knowledge and self-perfection I'm seeking, perhaps I'll take the time to relax and look back. Not now."

"I see."

"I find it hard to put into words, but I hope you'll understand anyway."

"I do. I'm glad to see you're as serious about your goal as you are. Keep following your own judgment."

"I'll say good-bye now, but someday, if I don't get myself killed along the way, we'll meet again."

"Yes, yes. If we have a chance to meet, let's by all means do so." Takuan turned, took a step, and then halted. "Oh, yes. I suppose I should warn you that Osugi and Uncle Gon left Miyamoto in search of you and Otsū three years ago. They resolved never to return until they've taken their revenge, and old as they are, they're still trying to track you down. They may cause you some inconvenience, but I don't think they can make any real trouble. Don't take them too seriously.

"Oh, yes, and then there's Aoki Tanzaemon. I don't suppose you ever knew his name, but he was in charge of the search for you. Perhaps it had nothing to do with anything you or I said or did, but that splendid samurai managed to disgrace himself, with the result that he's been dismissed permanently from Lord Ikeda's service. He's no doubt wandering about too." Takuan grew grave.

"Musashi, your path won't be an easy one. Be careful as you make your way along it."

"I'll do my best." Musashi smiled.

"Well, I guess that's everything. I'll be on my way." Takuan turned and walked westward. He didn't look back.

"Keep well," Musashi called after him. He stood at the crossroads watching the monk's form recede until it was out of sight. Then, once again alone, he started to walk toward the east.

"Now there's only this sword," he thought. "The only thing in the world I have to rely on." He rested his hand on the weapon's handle and vowed to himself, "I will live by its rule. I will regard it as my soul, and by learning to master it, strive to improve myself, to become a better and wiser human being.



Takuan follows the Way of Zen, I will follow the Way of the Sword. I must make of myself an even better man than he is."

After all, he reflected, he was still young. It was not too late.

His footsteps were steady and strong, his eyes full of youth and hope. From time to time he raised the brim of his basket hat, and stared down the long road into the future, the unknown path all humans must tread.

He hadn't gone far—in fact, he was just on the outskirts of Himeji—when a woman came running toward him from the other side of Hanada Bridge. He squinted into the sunlight.

"It's you!" Otsū cried, clutching his sleeve.

Musashi gasped in surprise.

Otsū's tone was reproachful. "Takezō, surely you haven't forgotten? Don't you remember the name of this bridge? Did it slip your mind that I promised to wait here for you, no matter how long it took?"

"You've been waiting here for the last three years?" He was astounded. "Yes.

Osugi and Uncle Gon caught up with me right after I left you. I was sick and had to take a rest. And I almost got myself killed. But I got away. I've been waiting here since about twenty days after we said good-bye at Nakayama Pass."

Pointing to a basket-weaving shop at the end of the bridge, a typical little highroad stall selling souvenirs to travelers, she continued: "I told the people there my story, and they were kind enough to take me on as a sort of helper. So I could stay and wait for you. Today is the nine hundred and seventieth day, and I've kept my promise faithfully." She peered into his face, trying to fathom his thoughts. "You will take me with you, won't you?"

The truth, of course, was that Musashi had no intention of taking her or anyone else with him. At this very moment, he was hurrying away to avoid thinking about his sister, whom he wanted to see so badly and felt so strongly drawn toward.

The questions raced through his agitated mind: "What can I do? How can I embark on my quest for truth and knowledge with a woman, with anyone, interfering all the time? And this particular girl is, after all, still betrothed to Matahachi." Musashi couldn't keep his thoughts from showing on his face.

"Take you with me? Take you where?" he demanded bluntly.

"Wherever you go."

"I'm setting out on a long, hard journey, not a sightseeing trip!"

"I won't get in your way. And I'm prepared to endure some hardships."

"Some? Only some?"

"As many as I have to."

"That's not the point. Otsū, how can a man master the Way of the Samurai with a woman tagging along? Wouldn't that be funny. People'd say, 'Look at Musashi, he needs a wet nurse to take care of him.'" She pulled harder at his kimono, clinging like a child. "Let go of my sleeve," he ordered.

"No, I won't! You lied to me, didn't you?"

"When did I lie to you?"

"At the pass. You promised to take me with you."

"That was ages ago. I wasn't really thinking then either, and I didn't have time to explain. What's more, it wasn't my idea, it was yours. I was in a hurry to get moving, and you wouldn't let me go until I promised. I went along with what you said because I had no choice."

"No, no, no! You can't mean what you're saying, you can't," she cried, pinning him against the bridge railing.

"Let go of me! People are watching."

"Let them! When you were tied up in the tree, I asked you if you wanted my help. You were so happy you told me twice to cut the rope. You don't deny that, do you?"

She was trying to be logical in her argument, but her tears betrayed her. First abandoned as an infant, then jilted by her betrothed and now this. Musashi, knowing how alone she was in the world and caring for her deeply, was tongue-tied, though outwardly more composed.

"Let go!" he said with finality. "It's broad daylight and people are staring at us. Do you want us to be a sideshow for these busybodies?"

She released his sleeve and fell sobbing against the railing, her shiny hair falling over her face.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled. "I shouldn't have said all that. Please forget it. You don't owe me anything."

Leaning over and pushing her hair from her face with both hands, he looked into her eyes. "Otsū," he said tenderly. "During all that time you were waiting, until this very day, I've been shut up in the castle donjon. For three years I haven't even seen the sun."

"Yes, I heard."

"You knew?"

"Takuan told me."

"Takuan? He told you everything?"

"I guess so. I fainted at the bottom of a ravine near the Mikazuki Teahouse. I was running away from Osugi and Uncle Gon. Takuan rescued me. He also helped me make arrangements to work here, at the souvenir shop. That was three years ago. And he's stopped in several times. Only yesterday, he came and had some tea. I wasn't sure what he meant, but he said, 'It's got to do with a man and a woman, so who can say how it'll turn out?'"

Musashi dropped his hands and looked down the road leading west. He wondered if he'd ever again meet the man who'd saved his life. And again he was struck by Takuan's concern for his fellow man, which seemed all-encompassing and completely devoid of selfishness. Musashi realized how narrow-minded he himself had been, how petty, to suppose that the monk felt a special compassion for him alone; his generosity encompassed Ogin, Otsū, anyone in need whom he thought he could help.

"It has to do with a man and a woman ....." Takuan's words to Otsū sat heavily on Musashi's mind. It was a burden for which he was ill prepared, since in all the mountains of books he'd pored over those three years, there wasn't one word about the situation he was in now. Even Takuan had shrunk from becoming involved in this matter between him and Otsū. Had Takuan meant that relationships between men and women had to be worked out alone by the people involved? Did he mean that no rules applied, as they did in the Art of War? That there was no foolproof strategy, no way to win? Or was this meant as a test for Musashi, a problem only Musashi would be able to solve for himself?

Lost in thought, he stared down at the water flowing under the bridge.

Otsū gazed up into his face, now distant and calm. "I can come, can't I?" she pleaded. "The shopkeeper's promised to let me quit whenever I wish. I'll just go and explain everything and then pack my things. I'll be back in a minute."

Musashi covered her small white hand, which was resting on the railing, with his own. "Listen," he said plaintively. "I beg of you, just stop and think."

"What's there to think about?"

"I told you. I've just become a new man. I stayed in that musty hole for three years. I read books. I thought. I screamed and cried. Then suddenly the light dawned. I understood what it means to be human. I have a new name, Miyamoto Musashi. I want to dedicate myself to training and discipline. I want to spend every moment of every day working to improve myself. I know now how far I have to go. If you chose to bind your life to mine, you'd never be happy. There will be nothing but hardship, and it won't get easier as it goes along. It'll get more and more difficult."

"When you talk like that, I feel closer to you than ever. Now I'm convinced I was right. I've found the best man I could ever find, even if I searched for the rest of my life."

He saw he was just making things worse. "I'm sorry, I can't take you with me."

"Well, then, I'll just follow along. As long as I don't interfere with your training, what harm would it do? You won't even know I'm around." Musashi could find no answer.

"I won't bother you. I promise." He remained silent.

"It's all right then, isn't it? Just wait here; I'll be back in a second. And I'll be furious if you try to sneak away." Otsū ran off toward the basket-weaving shop.

Musashi thought of ignoring everything and running too, in the opposite direction. Though the will was there, his feet wouldn't move.

Otsū looked back and called, "Remember, don't try to sneak off!" She smiled, showing her dimples, and Musashi inadvertently nodded. Satisfied by this gesture, she disappeared into the shop.

If he was going to escape, this was the time. His heart told him so, but his body was still shackled by Otsū's pretty dimples and pleading eyes. How sweet she was! It was certain no one in the world save his sister loved him so much. And it wasn't as though he disliked her.

He looked at the sky, he looked into the water, desperately gripped the railing, troubled and confused. Soon tiny bits of wood began floating from the bridge into the flowing stream.

Otsū reappeared on the bridge in new straw sandals, light yellow leggings and a large traveling hat tied under the chin with a crimson ribbon. She'd never looked more beautiful.

But Musashi was nowhere to be seen.

With a cry of shock, she burst into tears. Then her eyes fell upon the spot on the railing from which the chips of wood had fallen. There, carved with the point of a dagger, was the clearly inscribed message. "Forgive me. Forgive me."