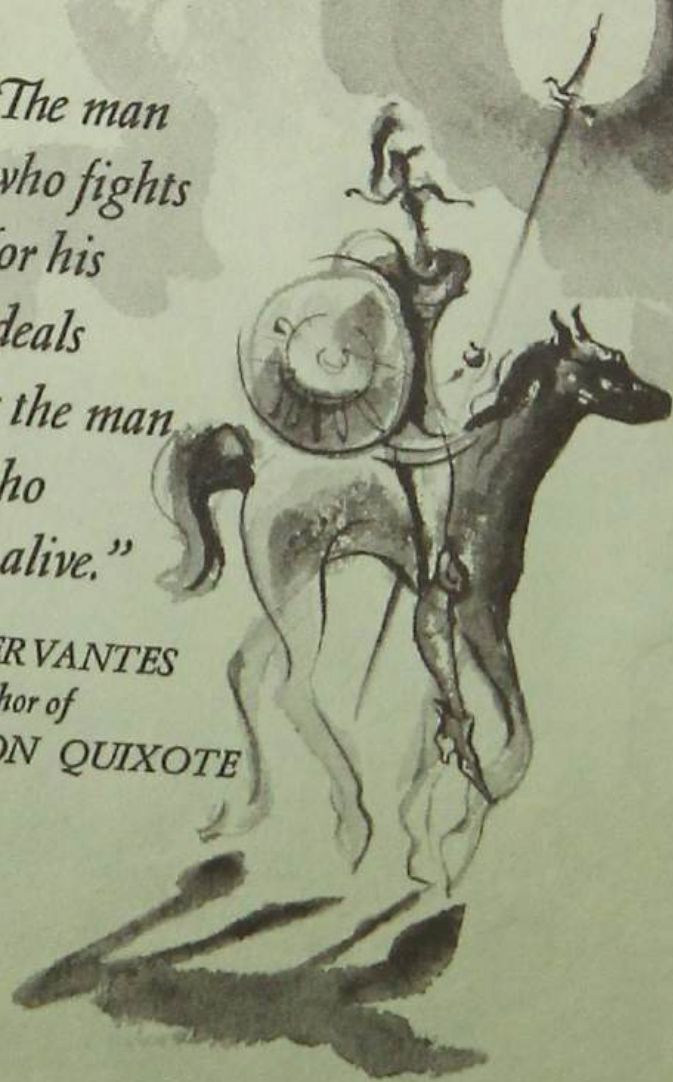




*"The man
who fights
for his
ideals
is the man
who
is alive."*

CERVANTES
author of
DON QUIXOTE



Leoníd S. Polevoy





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THE SERENE REALM BEYOND THE PASSION

BY

HIROSHI KIKUCHI

TRASLATED

BY

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ДАР
Л.С.ПОЛЕВОГО

TOKYO

KENKYUSHA

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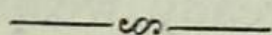
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THE SERENE REALM BEYOND THE PASSIONS



CHAPTER I

ICHIKURO failed to parry a thrust of his master's sword, sustaining a wound, though a mere scratch, on the face, from the left cheek to the jaw. He had intrigued with his master's favorite mistress, who was to blame for getting the better of his scruples. To his guilty conscience the impending danger appeared in the light of an inevitable punishment for his fatal misconduct. True, he strove to avert the vindictive blade, but had not the shadow of an intention of presenting a bold front. His only wish was to make good his escape as best he could,

being loath to throw down his life for what he thought an idiotic delusion. Hence, when his master accused him of disloyalty, and attacked him without more ado, he had only to ward off the vigorous thrusts of the former, making a ready weapon of a candlestick which stood near by. But stroke after stroke from a sturdy and steady arm, even though of nearly fifty winters, was more than could be withstood for long by a man defending himself at a distinct disadvantage. Thus it was that the first wound was inflicted on the side of his head. The sight of blood, however, wrought a sudden change in Ichikuro's psychology. All his discretion gone, he was now left no better than a furious bull pricked by a picador's dart. Before the approaching death, he saw no world, no relation between master and servant. He only saw in his assailant, whom he had served as his master up to that moment, a brute,—a

blood-thirsty brute threatening his life. Driven to desperation he instantly made up his mind to assume the offensive, hurling with a cry of defiance, the candle-stick he had in his hand at the other's face. In an unguarded moment, Saburobei failed to stop the missile so suddenly thrown, an edge of the socket hitting him severely in the right eye; he had felt confident in the unopposing defence which his servant had adopted. Ere his adversary could recover from his confusion, Ichikuro swiftly unsheathed his short sword, and dashed at him.

"How do you dare to make a stand before me?" angrily cried his injured master. Ichikuro's only answer was to press forward in grim silence. Thrice the master's long weapon, nearly three feet in length, and the man's short one pressed furiously together, then each disengaged.

With a hissing and a clattering of the

thirsty blades, the frenzied combat continued. More than once the longer brand grazed the low ceiling, each time hampering the free sweep of the weapon. Ichikuro did not fail to see how this advantaged him, and pressed the more eagerly on his quondam master, who, on his side, had remarked the danger, and sought to escape it by getting into the freedom of open space. To achieve his purpose he began to move backward to the veranda, and as Ichikuro attacked him fast and furious on his retreat, Saburobei, with a yell of intermingled rage and disgust, lashed fiercely at his following foe. In the heat of the moment, however, his descending sword missed its aim, lodging itself deep into the lintel of the doorway leading into the veranda from the room.

"God in Heaven!" the betrayed master groaned, trying to disengage his weapon. But he was too late, for Ichikuro, seizing the

opportunity, rushed up, and, with a back-handed blow savagely dealt, inflicted a mortal wound in the side.

The moment his antagonist fell, Ichikuro came to himself. With the recovery of his senses, which had been carried away in the turmoil of excitement, he was painfully conscious of his serious crime, for in attacking his benefactor he was guilty of parricide, and he sank down overwhelmed with remorse and fear.

The evening was well advanced. The lackeys' lodge stood far apart from the main residence. None was apparently aware of the deadly fight between master and servant, save the handmaids who were in attendance. But the timid creatures remained huddled together in one room trembling all over, struck by the horror of the affair.

A sense of gnawing self-reproach now seized Ichikuro. A libertine, an abandoned

young samurai, he had hitherto done nothing approaching a criminal act. Never in his life had he dreamed of finding himself a perpetrator of a parricide, the worst of the eight felonies. He again grasped the blood-stained sword. To murder his master, he reflected, on the eve of punishment for his illicit intimacy with the latter's mistress! Everything was against him. Looking askance at the fallen body, still showing a slight indication of life, he calmly resolved to offer his own life then and there in payment for his fearful crime. It was at this juncture that a voice came from the next chamber, a voice sounding as if relieved of the pressure of an unseen hand which had seemed to gag it.

"Ye gods! but I was frightened. You see, I was not sure of the issue. Had you been hewn asunder, why should I not have met the same fate? All the while, in breathless suspense, I had been watching the fight from

behind a screen. Luckily, all's gone well, so far. But now that things have come to this pass, we have not a moment to lose. What we must do is to make off with all the ready-money we can lay hands on, and that before the retainers get wind of the incident. The nurse and the maids seem to be out of their wits with terror in the kitchen. I'll just go and tell 'em not to kick up a silly row. In the meanwhile, do you hunt after cash!" The voice had a positive tremor, which its owner was evidently subduing with the strong will of a desperate woman, in an attempt at composure.

Ichikuro, who had entirely lost his head, visibly revived at the sound of the female voice. Rising like a puppet moving at the will of the woman, rather than by his own volition, he laid his hand on a paulownia cabinet set in the room. Drawer after drawer he closely searched, ruthlessly soil-

ing its creamy grain with his bloodsmeared hand. All her could find in her absence, however, was a small packet of merely five *ryo* in silver. When Oyumi, for that was the name of his master's mistress, rejoined him, and saw the scanty booty, she was but little pleased.

"What's the use of such a pitiful pittance?" So muttering, she proceeded to ransack with a vengeance every single one of the drawers herself, and finally an armour case, but not a piece of gold rewarded her pains.

"Being a notorious man for thrift, the fellow may have his money securely concealed underground in a jar or the like," snarled the woman. The next moment she was busy packing up rich garments, *inro* and other articles of virtu and value.

It was early in autumn, in the third year of Ansei, that the parricide and his paramour

thus eloped from the residence of Nakagawa Saburobei, a *hatamoto*, at Tawara-machi in Asakusa. Saburobei's only son, Jitsunosuke, an infant barely three years of age, was then sleeping peacefully in his nurse's arms, and alas! in blissful ignorance of his father's tragic end.

CHAPTER II

Once out of Yedo, Ichikuro and Oyumi sought to make their way stealthily to Kyoto over the Tosan-do, which course they preferred to the Tokai-do for reasons best known to themselves. The man's conscience was haunted by the ever-pricking memory of his crime. Not so, however, with the degraded woman with a past, dead to all the virtues of her sex. At sight of the merest indications of his despondency, she would

spur her lover to evil, suggesting :

“We are castaways branded with crime, any way. Your moping and worrying won't help us. What's the good of it, then? The best thing is put on a bold front and lead a merry life.”

But by the time the couple came to Yabuhara in Kiso by way of Shinshu, they were not over-merry, for the fund at their disposal had been exhausted to the last coin. Want drove them to evil courses. First, they practised the easiest form of blackmail incidental to the combination of such a man and woman, squeezing money out of way-faring merchants and farmers at stages ranging between Shinano and Owari. Ichikuro, who had been dragged into the evil path by his importunate seductress, gradually learned to follow it with zest. The unwary merchants and farmers, thus entrapped and robbed, were a picture of submission and

humility before the two-sworded blackmailer in the guise of a *ronin*.

As he slipped deeper into villainy, Ichikuro came to prefer less elaborate means of extortion, until at last murderous robbery was, in his eye, his regular occupation. In the meantime, he settled at Torii-toge, a mountain pass leading from Shinano to Kiso. There he kept a wayside resting-booth by day, committing robbery by night.

His conscience was so far gone by this time that he felt neither scruple nor uneasiness in the wicked life he led. He would watch for a traveller apparently with a heavy purse, kill him, and dispose of his body in some horrible but masterly fashion. Three or four murders a year brought him sufficient finds to keep them going through the four seasons.

It was in the springtide, three years after the couple had fled from Yedo. One daimyo procession after another from the North, on

its way to Yedo, where the feudal lords had to take their turn of attendance at the Shogun's Court, provided every stage along the Kiso Highway a scene of life and stir for some days. Then there was a succession of pilgrims so the Great Shrine of Ise, from Echigo and Etchu, not to mention Shinshu, many of them, bent on pleasure, contemplated an extension of their trip to Kyoto, and farther on to Osaka. Ichikuro's greedy eyes gleamed in anticipation of fine hauls ensuring him the means of living at ease for a year or more, from two or three peripatetics victimized.

It was towards the close of day, when the wild cherry blossoms, which had beautifully dotted the sombre avenue of cedar-trees running along the highway of Kiso, began to scatter before the evening breeze, that two travellers, a man and a woman, sought rest at Ichikuro's booth. It needed no second glance

to show that they were man and wife, the former somewhat over thirty years of age, the other probably twenty-two or three. They were apparently members of some wealth family belonging to the farming community in Shinshu, out on a free and easy trip, dispensing with the annoyance of obsequious and inquisitive attendants.

The sight of their personal appearance prompted Ichikuro to conceive the idea of making them his victims of the year.

"Say, goodman, Yabuhara is not far off, is it?" said the man, stooping on the doorsill to readjust his *waraji*-strings. Even before a response sprang to Ichikuro's lips, Oyumi came flying from the kitchen, with a ready answer:

"Yes, sir, scarcely a half *ri* below this pass. So you would do well to take your time for a thorough rest here."

Ichikuro was not slow in interpreting these

words as a sure suggestion of the diabolical scheme his consort had already conceived. To throw an unfortunate traveller off his guard by lying about the distance to Yabuhara, which was in reality more than two *ri* distant; to take a by-path to the highway just at the entrance to the stage, waylay, and assault the belated victim—this was Ichikuro's *modus operandi*.

"Wel, then, you might give us some tea," said the reassured traveller, little thinking that he had been beguiled into a fatal trap. His wife sat down close to him, undoing the red strings of her hat of plaited sedge.

After resting for not less than half an hour after the fatigue induced by the stiff uphill journey, the young couple offered a liberal *chadai* and proceeded to descend the pass for the valley of Kogiso now being enveloped in the purple evening haze.

Hardly had they gone out of sight, when

Oyumi motioned Ichikuro to make an instant move. The latter hurriedly girded on a sword and gave mad chase, like a huntsman after his game. He struck off the route to the left, and raced down a steep path running along the River Kiso.

By the time Ichikuro emerged into the avenue of trees leading to Yabuhara, the long spring day was over, and night was fast falling. The mountains of Kiso appeared as though floating in the dim, creamy light heralding the ten-day-old moon ascending from behind a lofty peak.

Ichikuro hid himself in a grove of willow-trees by the roadside, patiently waiting for the approach of the doomed couple. Villain as he was, he was yet human enough to listen to his inner voice. He mused on the sheer brutality of outrageously slaughtering the happy pair on a pleasant trip. But he was now fairly in for the game, he reflected, and

the idea of giving it up and returning empty-handed seemed forbidding to him who knew the temper of Oyumi.

He was not over-anxious to shed their blood ; at heart he hoped the young couple would be absolutely submissive, if possible, to his words of menace ; he certainly thought of letting them go unscathed, in case they delivered up their money and clothes.

It was when this final resolution was made, that the benighted couple was seen hurrying up from the road. They looked sorely exhausted and weary, for the journey from the pass had proved more than they had bargained for. They came trudging along speechless, helping each other as best they could. As they drew near his hiding place, Ichikuro suddenly leapt out and faced them right in the middle of the road, giving free utterance to the intimidating language, of which he was master by frequent use. The

man, in evident desperation, drew his trusty steel, and pulled himself up for defence, sheltering his consort behind him. Baffled in the start as he was, Ichikuro raised his voice in an imperative tone, demanding :

“Look here, traveller ! You had best cease your futile attempt at resistance, if you set any value on your life. It is not your life, but your cash and clothing that I am after. Give them up to me, without further ado !”

The other, who had been intently gazing into his face, cried out : “Ah, now I see you ! You are the owner of the tea-booth on the summit, where we rested a while ago !”

The next moment found him dashing at his man with all the courage of despair. All was over now, thought Ichikuro to himself. He could ill afford to spare the lives of the man and woman, now that his identity had been detected.

Dodging with alacrity the furious cuts and

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thrusts dealt by the now utterly reckless traveller, Ichikuro gave him a merciless stroke on the neck, and at once ended the man's life and the fight. The man's fair companion was cowering by the roadside, ready to faint, trembling like an aspen. Ichikuro hardly found it in his heart to take her life. But then he had to consider his own personal safety, which was of more concern to him. He must go on with it, thought he, while he was yet hot with lust of murder. Lifting up his bloody sword, he paced up to the poor woman, who entreated him, on her knees, to spare her life. Stared at straight in the face by her imploring eyes, the red-handed scoundrel could not very well strike the fatal blow. There was, however, no way out, he said to himself, save despatching the eye-witness of his crime. Even then greediness came to him with a whisper that it would be silly to spoil her garments by

employing any sanguinary mode of destruction. Thereupon, he wrenched off a towel he had carried at his side, and strangled her to death.

Upon the death of the two, the footpad felt a sudden fear of homicide creeping all over him. And he could not bear the idea of remaining on the spot a minute longer. Snatching up their purses and clothes, he took to flight, helter-skelter, from the scene of his crime. True, his hand was red with the blood of a dozen travellers he had slain. But they were, all of them, either grey-haired old men or elderly itinerant peddlers. Not once had he shed the blood of a married couple in the prime of life.

The miserable wretch returned home, completely crushed by his torturing conscience. Once indoors, he flung towards Oyumi the money and raiment, as if to get rid of something devilish. The woman, on the

other hand, proceeded, with perfect serenity, to count the cash, the sum of which fell short of her expectation, being barely over twenty *ryo*. Next she came to the examination of the murdered young woman's clothes.

"Ah, all of splendid stuff, the outer garment of yellow *hachijo*, the underwear, spotted silk crape. Good, so far. But," she continued in an imperious tone, "what of her hair ornaments, young man?"

"Hair ornaments?" echoed Ichikuro blankly.

"Yes, what else? Her rich attire leads me to surmise that hers are no imitation combs and *kogai*. No, it's more than surmise, for my unerring eyes were set on them the moment she doffed her sedge-hat a while ago. I'm ready to turn nun if they were not tortoise-shell," pursued the relentless woman.

Ichikuro was at a loss for a reply; never had it entered into his head to rob the poor

victim of the adornments of her coiffure.

“Look here, man, Surely you are not going to say you forgot what you were about?” she snarled, perking herself up. “If of tortoise-shell, the things would mean a certain haul worth seven or eight *ryo*, I’ll be bound. What on earth is the good of setting off on a deadly scent, if you’re going to sacrifice your legitimate loot,—you, an old hound at that? The idea of killing a woman dressed as she was, without so much as troubling yourself with her upper ornaments! How long have you been at this business, I’d like to know? Well, I do declare you are the most idiotic bungler that ever lived on relieving others of their goods and chattels! Speak, man! Out with it, I say!”

These venomous words stung Ichikuro to the quick, whose absorbing sense of guilt had been painfully weighing on his heart. He felt not a shadow of regret over his blunder

or lack of ability as a robber in letting slip his rightful plunder. His mind had been all in a whirl with the deed, which he knew was dastardly and wicked, and his confusion prevented his paying any attention to the murdered woman's hair ornaments, valued at close-on ten *ryo*. And he had not for a moment regretted his heedlessness. Sunk, as he was, to the desperate level of a footpad, slaying harmless souls out of sheer wanton lust after gain, he would not, like a fiend from the pit, gnaw the very bones of his victims. And his mind felt a shade lighter over the thought. Oyumi, on the contrary, showed no pity for the fate of one of her own sex, whose very underclothes now lay spread out before her eyes, at once a beautiful tribute to the murderer's skill, and a silent witness of his crime. Nor did she stop at this, her insatiable avarice ravening for what even her villainous but better-hearted

spouse had failed to notice. This reflection went to make Ichikuro so much disgusted with her that he felt he could not breathe the same air with her.

Oyumi had not the faintest idea of the revulsion of feeling that was shaking his mind. Her eyes shone with triumph, as if convinced of her thoroughly reasonable claim, as she persisted :

“Up with you, my man and have a look round for the stuff. What is the sense of standing on ceremony and forgoing what has fallen into our hand ? ”

But Ichikuro only shook his head in grim silence.

“Ah, I see you are cut up because I picked a hole in your jacket,” pursued Oyumi with vehemence. “And so you mean to stay here like a consummate fool and let a windfall slip your fingers,—a windfall, mind, netting some ten *ryo*.”

It had been Ichikuro's wont to move at her beck and call. But at the moment his brains were in an awful turmoil of distracted thoughts, and his inward struggle was too violent for him to heed her words.

"You sit there mumchance and useless, and me jawing away like this!" she went on. "Very well, I won't waste any more breath. I'll do the job myself. Tell me the spot! The same old haunt, eh?"

Ichikuro, who felt an unspeakable hatred for her creeping into his heart, almost jumped at his chance of being relieved, be it even for a moment, of her detestable presence.

"No need of asking! It's the usual pine avenue leading to Yabuhara," was the impatient reply.

"Then I'll just go and fetch 'em. Luckily, there's a moon, and it's bright outside. Fancy the idea of making a botch of it!" Thus muttering, Oyumi tucked up her skirt,

slid on *zori*, and dashed out of the house.

The man's heart swelled with wretchedness as he followed her departing figure with his eyes. Here was a woman, maddened and unsexed, flying on a gruesome errand to rob a dead woman of her hair ornaments. This idea combined with the recollection of his old attachment to her, sank him all the more into the depths of misery. He had, indeed, gone to the length of robbery, and even murder, with comparative freedom from such remorseful feelings, the consciousness of his doing them himself, coming infallibly as a strange plea. But once placed in the position of a calm looker-on of another's crime, all its horror and ugliness would come to him in appalling vividness. The woman he had won at the hazard of his life, was now dashing, forgetting all feminine gentleness, to the scene of a murder, to the side of the corpse of one of her own sex, with the ferocity of

a hungry wolf after a carcase,—all for some tortoise-shell worth five or ten *ryo*! The idea sent a thrill of horror through his veins, making him loth to dwell even for a second in that abode of crimes with the Jezebel.

This reflection revived, with the pangs of remorse, in his mind, the memory of the series of foul deeds he had perpetrated. The death glare of a strangled woman, the last groan of a dealer in cocoons weltering in blood, the heart-rending shriek of a grey-haired old man under the first stroke, all these conspired against him. He wished he could have effected an instant escape from his past, from his very self, and above all from the woman who had been the motive force of all his lawless acts. He started up with a will, hurriedly wrapped up two or three changes of clothes, pocketed the purse plundered a while before to meet expenses for some days, and sallied forth, without so

much as fitting himself out for a journey. Hardly had he taken a dozen steps, however, before he recalled that the money and clothes he carried, had all been illegally obtained. The next second he was back at his door, as if hurled by a spring, and there with all his might he cast from him inside the house the guilty things which were the price of his peace of mind.

For fear of meeting Oyumi, he ran for all he was worth along the trackless banks of the River Kiso. He had no definite destination in view. All he wanted was to get away, were it merely a single rod, from the scene of his crimes.

CHAPTER III

Ichikuro, at one stretch, traversed a score of *ri* over the wilderness of hill and dale.

The following afternoon found him seeking refuge in the Jogan-Temple, which stood outside Ogaki in Mino. Not that he had premeditated it as his objective. He simply chanced to pass by the temple in the course of his flight, when his bewildered heart, in its abysmal gloom of penitence, throbbed with yearning for the benign light of religion.

The Jogan-Temple was the head temple of the Shingon Sect for the whole Province of Mino. Ichikuro gained access to Myohen, the Abbot, to whom he confessed on his knees all his dark deeds in the past. The large-hearted priest did not fail to extend his benignant hand of mercy even to this villain of deepest dye and steeped in iniquity. He gently dissuaded the latter from his intention of surrendering himself to justice.

"You have indeed heaped guilt upon guilt," the good Abbot counselled, "It is, therefore, one way to take the mundane conse-

quences at law, by exposing your body on a scaffold. But then, my friend, you lie eternally under the divine condemnation, for your doom is to incur the torture of everlasting Hell-fire. Far better and more important would be for you to devote yourself to Buddhism, and aspire after complete and eternal salvation at the sacrifice of your earthly life, that you may thereby save your brethren as well as yourself."

At these words, Ichikuro felt his heart the more sore by the all-consuming flames of penitence. He resolved then and there to enter the priesthood. Converted by the Abbot himself, he was given a Buddhist name "Ryokai." His subsequent life was a life of strenuous efforts in pursuit of the Buddhist teaching. Nor did his unflinching faith fail to stand him in good stead. His ascetic morality, pure and taintless as snow, reached the degree of sublimity. At morn, he rigidly

practised the rite of the Three Secrets, attending at eve an esoteric service, in which he sat for hours together in silent communion with the divine. These two forms of austerity, blending in perfect harmony, were not slow in diffusing a dawn of wisdom in his soul. And ere two seasons were passed, the quondam rascal found himself transformed into no mean priest. When he learned to trust in his own firm, unshakable morality, there arose in his mind a fervent desire to carry salvation to the world, and for the achievement of this desire he started, with the permission of the Abbot, on an itinerant tour.

Leaving the Province of Mino, he directed his course toward Kyoto. Ever keenly sensitive to his sanguinary memories, the idea of living on even in sackcloth and ashes proved to him a source of constant pain. The only longing left him was to toil and moil for

humanity, that he might atone for a hundredth part of his past. Still at times he left the relentless burden of a guilty soul almost past redemption, as he reflected on the outrageous acts he had committed in the Kiso mountains.

Not a day passed but he devoted himself to minister to human aid. The sick and afflicted whom he met on the road were, regardless of age, objects of his unfailing compassion. Some he helped on by hand or by pushing from behind. Others he even carried on his back for many a weary mile. Nor did he pass unnoticed a damaged village bridge off the highway, which he went to the trouble of repairing, with the timber and stone he personally brought from the neighbouring mountain. A collapsed spot on the road was likewise put in good repair at the cost of his personal labour.

He thus traversed the Five Provinces

around Kyoto and the best part of the Midland, never sparing pains in performing one virtuous deed after another, which was, however, a mere mole hill, in his eye, beside the guilt he had accumulated sky-high. The depressing reflection would bring home to him the depth of his wickedness in days gone-by, until he was thrown into despair unutterable, arguing that his was an abandoned case. Often, when he lay awake at a wayside inn, a thought would recur to his mind that it was mean and unmanly to cling to the mode of life he led. It was at such a time that he came near making away with himself. But everytime he would brace himself up by his indomitable courage, and offer a silent prayer for an opportunity to accomplish something great for his fellow-men.

It was in the autumn of the ninth year of Kyoho that he was ferried over to Kokura from Akamagaseki. Thence he repaired to

the Province of Buzen to pay homage to the Hachiman Shrine at Usa. This done, he proceeded southward from Yokkaichi across a stretch of waste land presenting a reddish hue, into the valley along the River Yamaguni. His intention was to worship at the Rakan Temple at an upper reach of the river.

The autumn down in Kyushu wore on as the pilgrim shifted his night's lodging from one stage to another. In the thickets were seen berries of *haji* mellowed deep-red. The fields were yellow with rice in its maturity. Near the eaves of farm-houses grew in clusters, like loads of enormous crimson gems, persimmons, for which the locality was famed.

It was one day early in August, when Ichikuro was trudging through the mountain path of Hotokezaka from Mikuchi. On his right flowed the limpid stream of the Yamaguni,

reflecting in the morning beams of the autumn sun. About noon, he arrived at Hida, a sequestered mountain hamlet where he was treated to lunch by way of alms. Thence he continued down south through the Vale of the Yamaguni. At the end of the village, the path again ran along the River Yamaguni, winding with it over volcanic rocks.

As he toiled on over the rugged, stony road with the help of a stick, his eyes happened to rest on a group of excited men by the roadside, evidently farmers of the country-side. One of them, who quickly observed the approaching priest, said :

"None is more welcome, reverend Sir. Here's a poor soul that has met an untimely end. Sure, there's Providence in your presence here. Be good enough to pray for the repose of his soul."

The words "untimely end" led Ichikuro to surmise, with a thrill of horror, that the

case might be that of foul play—a victim of murderous robbery. The sinister scenes of his past floated before his eyes, and the awakened sense of remorse almost nailed him to the spot.

“He was apparently drowned. But why those ruptures of the skin and flesh?” queried Ichikuro in manifest fear.

“Your reverence is a stranger here, and may know nothing about the place,” answered another farmer. “But some sixty yards up the river, there’s a perilous spot known as ‘the Chain Passage.’ It’s the most dangerous ledge in the Vale of the Yamaguni, where passing men and horses run such risks. He whom you now see at rest was a pack-horse driver who lived at Kaki-zaka up the stream. Well, this morning he came half-way along the ledge, when his horse took fright, hurling him headlong down sixty feet. The mangled body tells

its own tale."

"Of 'the Chain Passage' I have verily heard as a hazardous place. But does such fate often fall on many?" inquired Ichikuro in a sad tone, fixing his gaze on the mutilated body.

"Yes, three or four a year on an average, but sometimes no less than ten are sent to their premature graves. The worst is that unforeseen dangers make it almost impossible for us to repair the hanging bridge, though it be weather-worn."

Thus replying, the farmers set about disposing of the body. Ichikuro, after offering up a prayer for the dead, hastened to the scene of disaster.

Some fifty paces brought him to the spot, where a mountain towering on the left as though rough-hewn by the hand of Nature, abruptly cut itself into a precipice, a hundred feet high above the River Yamaguni,

exposing its rugged, wrinkled body of light-grey. The waters of the river went bounding and splashing towards the cliff, seemingly attracted by some mysterious power, lapping its bottom in a swashing whirlpool presenting a deep-green hue.

"This, then, is 'the Chain Passage,' referred to by the villagers," said Ichikuro to himself. The road he pursued came to an end right before the frowning rocks, the sole access to which was a hazardous bridge of pine and cedar logs chained together, stretching half-way up. Indeed, it would by no means be timid female travellers alone, who might feel their hearts failing them on the perilous height, with a gaping abyss below, and a colossal wall overhanging them.

Ichikuro gave great heed as he slowly moved on the bridge, clinging to the rocks and steadying his quaking limbs. It was at

the very moment he accomplished the dangerous passage, and cast a backward glance at the menacing precipice, that an ardent vow found its way into his heart.

Dissatisfied with the meagre amends he had made, he had always prayed for some extraordinary undertaking, calculated to test his devotion and fortitude. No wonder, then, that, at sight of this source of dread and danger, carrying off ten lives a year, he was seized with the preternatural ambition to bore a tunnel through the precipitous rock, extending over two hundred *ken*.

Ichikuro felt he had found the very thing he had long been searching for. The rescue of ten men a year, he thought, would mean the rescue of a hundred in ten years, and tens of thousands as the years passed by. Thus resolved, he set to work at once. Taking up his quarters at Rakan-Temple on that very day, he went about

preaching along the River Yamaguni for contributions toward the enterprise of tunnelling the dreaded obstacle, only to find that no sympathetic ears rewarded the pains of an apparently itinerant priest.

"There raves a maniac haranguing that he would attempt to pierce a solid rock of more than three *cho* in length!" laughed some of the unseeing villagers.

"Why, he's a big fraud trying to swindle us, and that under pretence of monstrous absurdity. A downright impostor, for that's what he is!" would decry others of a tougher type, offering strong opposition.

For ten consecutive days the zealous propagandist laboured to no purpose, until the firm resolution arose within him to tackle the tremendous undertaking all by himself. Procuring a stone-cutters' hammer and chisel, he stood at an edge of the massive wall, the very acme of human impotence!

And yet he meant in dead earnest to penetrate it single-handed,—a range of natural Lulwarks, which, though composed of volcanic rocks easy to break, stood frowning over the river.

“See what the poor wretch has come to. He’s out of his mind!” scoffed passers-by, pointing at Ichikuro. Nothing daunted, he washed himself in the clear stream of the Yamaguni, and, offering prayers to Kwanon, struck the first blow with his hammer for all he was worth. Barely two or three splinters flew out under the impact. Then he struck the second with as much strength, crumbling two or three other atomic fragments out of the vast, infinite mass of rock. Thus went the third stroke followed by another, and still another, all with undiminished force. When hungry, he was wont to go to a neighbouring village begging for alms; satisfied, he would face the rock,

resuming his work. When he felt his zeal slacken, he would seek in the Shingon invocation a revival of vigour and courage. A strenuous day was followed by a second and a third. Contempt and derision were constantly showered on him by the wayfarers who passed by. Never for a second, however, was his single-hearted exertions relaxed for that, the very manifestation of discouragement imparting fresh impetus to the hand which wielded the hammer.

In the meantime, Ichikuro erected near the rock a rude shelter from rain and dew. From early morn when the twinkling stars were mirrored in the dark stream of the Yamaguni, till an hour when the noise of the rushing waters alone broke the stillness of night, his hammer was seen swinging, while the remarks of mockery from the passing villagers went on as mercilessly as ever.

"The old fool is still at it, as if he were Benkei!" they would jeer, never giving him credit for his dogged determination.

None the less, the unflagging priest ever strove on in his mighty purpose. So long as his hammer was in action, his adamant mind was secure from all worldly sentiments. There was no remorse for murder, nor aspiration after the blessings of an invisible world at such moments—the placid sense of devotion standing supreme. He felt day after day the abatement of the painful memory of his past, which had nightly haunted him in bed, ever since he became a priest. This encouraged him to concentrate his energy all the more for the due accomplishment of his scheme.

A new year came followed by spring and summer, until one year sped by. Ichikuro had not toiled in vain, for it bore fruit in a cave ten feet deep at one end of the

prodigious precipice. It was indeed a small, insignificant cave, still the initiative mark of his iron will was plainly to be seen in evidence.

But Ichikuro still remained an object of ridicule among the country folk around, who would sarcastically remark: "Look at what that maniac has done! He has struggled full one year, and the result is a bare rat's hole."

And yet the sight of that cave was so dear to the digger that he well-nigh wept for joy, for, with all its meagre dimensions, it was the manifestation, the revelation of his devout perseverance. With the renewal of the year, Ichikuro braced his nerve for further effort. Day found him seated upright in the twilight, and night, in the pitchy gloom, of the cave, working his right arm like one mad, until its constant motion became the whole of his religious life.

Without the cave, the sun blazed, the

moon waxed and waned, the rain fell, and the strife of the elements took place, but within, the incessant sound of the pounding hammer filled all space.

The sentiment and attitude of the villagers towards Ichikuro underwent no change for the better at the end of the second year, except that they had learned to stifle their laughter. They only winked at one another, and made grimaces out of his sight. Another year elapsed, and the sound of his hammer was still going on with the steadfastness of the roar of the Yamaguni. The village swains were struck dumb by now; their expression of derision had imperceptibly given place to that of wonder. Ichikuro's uncombed hair grew to cover the upper part of his body, which, from sheer lack of proper attention for years, looked anything but human. What was of more concern to him was the cave he was boring,

in which he wriggled like a wild beast, his hammer beating, beating, beating, with all the strength of a monomaniac.

The wonder of the rustic people gradually changed into sympathy. As Ichikuro was about to start, snatching odd moments, on a tour of mendicancy, he not infrequently found at the mouth of his cave unexpected alms in a bowl or rice. This meant so much addition to the hours he devoted to his undertaking.

Four years slid away, at the end of which he had dug some fifty feet into the cave. This, however, was pathetically suggestive of human lack of power compared with the stupendous cliff stretching hundreds of yards farther and the deadly resistance of its inertia. Amazed as they were at this instance of a prodigious enthusiasm, none of the villagers volunteered to help in an enterprise of such palpable futility, leaving

Ichikuro to continue his own exertions. But to his mind, which had found samadhi in its occupation, the idea of swinging the hammer was paramount to all others. Indeed, his sole concern was to go on digging mole-wise to the last. Thus all alone he dug and dug away with an untiring assiduity all his own. One season after another came and went in the outside world with its shifting scenes and features, while the eternal cling, clang from the striking hammer went on inside the cave.

"Poor priest! He is bereft of reason, for aught I know," would observe the passing villagers to one another, touched by the sight of his apparently vain effort. "No sane man would go on digging that impenetrable mass of rock. Goodness only knows if he can live to see even one-tenth of his purpose attained."

Years rolled on, and the end of the ninth

year saw the excavation wrought so far as to measure twenty-two *ken* from entrance to wall.

The inhabitants of Hida Village awoke for the first time to the possibility of success attending Ichikuro's undertaking. If the nine years' labour of one emaciated mendicant priest could bring about this result, surely the penetration of the immense cliff would not altogether be an impracticable project before the united strength of many enduring without remission for years. This was the argument that carried the day. Thus it was that the people of the seven villages along the River Yamaguni, who, nine years before, had rejected Ichikuro's appeal for contributions, now offered spontaneous donations towards the funds of the identical scheme. Ichikuro was no longer solitary, for he had a number of professional stone-cutters employed to assist

his work. The sound of many hammers striking the rock proceeded from within the cave with life and animation.

In the following year, however, when the villagers examined how far the work had progressed, they found that it had not covered even one-fourth of the cliff. The discovery sank them again into dismay and misgivings.

"Why, this is a tough job defying any increase of hands. The Rev. Ryokai is to blame for deceiving us into unnecessary expenses," they grumbled, giving themselves up to lassitude at the inevitably slow progress of the cutting.

Ichikuro noticed that his helpers decreased day after day, until at last he found himself left all alone again in the cave. Nor did he seek to detain the deserting hands. Mute and persistent he went on, hammering out his own destiny.

The interest and attention of the simple country folk entirely forsook Ichikuro, and not without reason. The deeper he dug, the farther he carried himself away from their vision. Indeed, some of the more curious would ever and anon peer into the cave enveloped in gloom, observing dubiously, "I wonder if the Rev. Ryokai is still at it!" But even this remnant of occasional curiosity disappeared from the rustic minds, in which the very existence of Ichikuro was all but effaced. What cared he, though, for this neglect, since to him the villagers and their existence were as of little moment as he and his existence had now become to them? To him the stubborn, confronting wall of rock yet to be overcome was the one great fact of his life.

The troglodytic life which had now buried him for over ten years in the gloom and cold of the cave, did not fail to leave its

grim traces on him. His countenance grew pallid and haggard, his lustreless eyes peering from the sunken sockets. This combined with his gaunt, reduced frame with bones prominent, gave him the general appearance of a spectre from the shades. Yet in his bosom burned the constant fire of an indomitable spirit, ever pushing him straight on to the furtherance of his life object. And he gave a cry of exultation at every fragment, be it ever so small, which was detached from the mass of the rocks.

Three years more elapsed since Ichikuro had been abandoned to his task, when the attention of the villagers was turned to him again. Upon surveying the attained depth of the cave, which they did out of mere curiosity, they discovered that it measured sixty-five *ken*, besides a window made in the rocks facing the river, to let

in light, and that one-third of the cliff had been excavated mainly by the individual effort of the forlorn priest. They stood with a blank stare before this revelation. They realized with a sense of shame the absence of wisdom in them, and reverence for the devoted priest was revived in their breasts. In this way a dozen skilled arms which were put at his disposal pounded their hammers in unison with his again.

Another year passed, in the course of which his fickle patrons again began rueing the moment when they had been tempted into a bad bargain. The contributed labour gradually diminished, leaving the solitary digger in the cave to shake its sombre air with the echoes of his ever-striking hammer. But the strength with which he drove his implement remained intact, company or no company. He was simply a machine when he raised it to the height necessary for the

blow he would strike, and then brought it down with every atom of skill and force in his body. His very existence was merged in the operation, obliterating from his memory the evil deeds of the past day,—parricide, robbery, and murder.

The lapse of one year more followed by another found Ichikuro still at his post. His thin, wiry arm animated by the intensity of his ardour retained the hardness of steel. Just towards the close of the eighteenth year it was discovered that he had narrowed the vast precipice by one half of its length. Before this awe-inspiring miracle the distrust of the country folk vanished completely. Heartily ashamed of their repeated hebetude in the past, the people of the seven villages cooperated with utmost sincerity in assisting Ichikuro. The same year the functionary of the Nakatsu Clan in charge of the local admin-

istration came round on a tour of inspection, giving him words of approval for his good service. Some thirty professional stone-masons, were brought together from the surrounding country, and the work of excavation accelerated with the rapidity of a fire consuming dry leaves.

Ichikuro, worn out with age and toil, was an object of general compassion. The suggestion was often repeated to him to refrain from personal labour, contenting himself with superintending the men. But every-time he would decline it with a determined shake of his head; to him the prospect of dying in harness was seemingly far more acceptable. As if incognizant of the presence of thirty hammers at work, he held to his wonted assiduous life of self-denial.

Nor was it without reason that the people exhorted him to rest. His sedentary occupation for nearly twenty years in the

recesses of the cave, shut out of the sunlight began to tell on his legs, until they partially lost their elasticity. The consequence was that he had to rely on a stick even for a short walk.

His eyes, too, were in no better condition. Either affected by the prolonged absence of daylight, or injured by the small splinters of stone incessantly flying back at and around him, they become dim and lacklustre, depriving him of their distinguishing power.

Indefatigable as he was, Ichikuro was painfully conscious of age encroaching on his vigour. Not that he set undue store by his life, but that the harassing idea beset his mind of sinking with his work unfinished.

"I have only to stand it out for another couple of years," he would encourage himself, endeavouring to forget his age in the

lively play of his hammer.

The natural barrier which had first confronted him in its insurmountable majesty was found well-high overcome by the single arm of the miserable wreck of his former self. And the cave cut into the heart of the rock was apparently ready to march with irresistible force against its inmost core.

CHAPTER IV

Years of overwork had indeed sadly affected Ichikuro's health. But he was more in danger from a formidable foe who, unknown to him, was seeking his life.

Nakagawa Shirobei, who had met his fate at the hand of Ichikuro, was found guilty of mismanaging his household in being murdered by his own retainer. In consequence, his property was confiscated, and

Jitsunosuke, his only son, then three years old, was taken over by one of his relations to be brought up.

When thirteen years of age, the unhappy child learned for the first time how his father had died. His boyish heart burnt with just indignation when he was further informed that the assailant was not a samurai of equal status, but merely a domestic in the service of his house. He took a solemn oath on the spot to avenge his father. He lost no time in entering the fencing school set up by Yagyu, the celebrated fencing-master, being initiated into the mysteries of the art at nineteen. Next we find the young avenger of blood start on a wandering tour to fulfil his mission, with the unanimous words of encouragement from his kinsmen ringing in his ears that they would act on his behalf for the restoration of his family prestige and pro-

perty on his triumphal return.

The inexperienced young traveller moved about from one province to another in search of Ichikuro, going through a multitude of hardships and adventures. For him who had never once set his eyes on his enemy, the difficulty of finding him was as great impossibility as that of grasping a vision. Year in, year out, Jitsunosuke roamed, traversing the greater portion of the realm in the course of his restless rambles, which he continued futilely until he was twenty-seven years of age. From time to time, he felt the resentment and grudge he entertained against his mortal enemy lose its vitality amidst the various privations incidental to his protracted wanderings. But every time an inexorable thought would come to his rescue, that of the unredressed wrongs of his ill-fated father and his own heavy responsibility of reviving the extinct

house of Nakagawa.

The spring of the ninth year since he had quitted Yedo was greeted in the Castle town of Fukuoka. His intention was to explore the outlying Kyushu, exhaustive search after his man in the Mainland having borne him no fruit. It was one day in February after he had moved down to Nakatsu from Fukuoka, when he visited the Hachiman Shrine at Usa to supplicate divine help that his heart's desire might be accomplished without further delay. Prayer offered, he rested his weary frame at a tea-booth in the precincts. It was then that his ear caught the casual remarks of a stranger, a farmer to all appearance, in chat with a pilgrim who happened to sit there.

"Well, as I said, the priest hails from Yedo. While young, he killed a man, so goes the story, penitence for which has led

him to aspire after the salvation of his fellow-creatures. The tunnel at Hida I mentioned is the outcome of his unaided labour for years."

This careless remark thrilled Jitsunosuke through and through, such a thrill of intensest interest as he had never before experienced in all his nine years' wanderings. There was a dash of excitement in his voice when he asked:

"Kindly excuse my venturing a question or two, but how old is that priest you refer to, I pray?"

"Well, sir," returned the other, as if he deemed it a mark of distinction that his remarks should have attracted the attention of a samurai. "Well, sir, I haven't had the honour of personally seeing him. But I know by hearsay that he is somewhere about sixty."

"What of his height? Is he tall or

short?" pursued Jitsunosuke with vigour.

"That's more than I know. Why, sir, he's seldom seen abroad, spending the best part of his time in the depths of the cave."

"And don't you happen to know his secular name?"

"Again, I must answer in the negative. But I can enlighten you this far. He was a native of Kashiwazaki in Echigo, whence he went up to Yedo while young."

This piece of information was calculated to make him almost forget his dignity and caper about for joy. On the eve of his departure from the capital, one of his relatives had reminded him of the fact that his enemy was from that identical town, and that he should, therefore, be all eyes in the province, where the latter might possibly have sought refuge.

Jitsunosuke was in high spirits, for he interpreted the gladsome news as the very

oracle of the God of Hachiman. The moment he secured the knowledge of the name of the old priest and the location of the Vale of the Yamaguni, he made straight for his enemy's abode, though it was past two in the afternoon, his limbs sweeping along with a fresh vigour born of expectant vengeance. At dusk of the same day he attained the village of Hida. His first impulse was to direct his steps at once to the cave. His better judgment told him that self-possession was what he required. Thereupon, he sought shelter in a village inn, where he passed a feverish night of impatience. At peep of day, he was up, and lightly attired, sallied forth towards the tunnel of Hida. Upon reaching the entrance, he met a stone-cutter, conveying from within a load of broken stones, of whom he inquired:

"A priest, Ryokai by name, I understand,

lives in this cave. Am I rightly informed?"

"Ay, ay, sir, what else do you expect? The Rev. Ryokai is, as it were, the patron spirit of the cave, ha, ha, ha!" answered the man with an easy laugh.

Jitsunosuke's blood was up at the immediate prospect of realizing his life object. But he was on his guard not to suffer himself to be carried away by his feelings.

"And is this the only means of going in and out?" This was asked out of apprehension lest his man should make good his escape at the supreme moment.

"That goes without saying, sir. It is for the main purpose of cutting an opening on the other side that the Rev. Ryokai is working under untold afflictions."

The thought that the mortal enemy he had so long sought after was within a stone's throw, like a rat in a trap, could not fail to plunge him into raptures. As

for the workmen under him, he said to himself with confidence, he knew how to put them to the sword, let there be dozens of them.

"Look here, friend, will you do me a favour? Just go in and tell the Rev. Ryokai that a man has come from afar on purpose to look him up," requested Jitsunosuke.

When he saw the stone-cutter vanish into the gloom of the cave, he got his trusty steel ready, and pictured to himself the general appearance of that mortal foe for whom he was about to encounter for the first time in life. As to the man of the stupendous work, he could scarcely be less than an individual of stout physique, though over fifty years of age, he argued. This conclusion combined with his knowledge that he was no mean strategist in his younger days had the effect of making

Jitsunosuke the more alert and vigilant.

A few minutes later, however, there stepped or rather crawled toadwise, out of the cave to where he stood, a poor mendicant priest, who looked no more than the sheer wreck of what had once been a stalwart man. His feeble frame reduced to a skeleton, with sores sadly noticeable in the lower limbs, was altogether a painful and pitiful sight. The tattered priest's robe he wore suggested the only semblance of one in the sacred profession, for his hair had been allowed to grow so long as to enshroud half his much-wrinkled face.

"Well, sir, I am so weak-sighted with age that I can hardly recognize my old friends," faltered the old priest, blinking his bleared eyes in an attempt to take a distinct view of the stranger.

Jitsunosuke's nerves, which had been strained to the breaking point, relaxed the

moment he clapped eyes on the old man. What he would encounter had been, in his mind's eye, a callous, villainous priest, such as he might feel hatred for from the bottom of his heart. Crouched before his very eyes, however, he saw a helpless, timeworn, decrepit creature, more corpse than living person. He had to lash his sinking heart when he demanded impetuously :

"And you are called Ryokai, the priest Ryokai?"

"Ay, none else, sir, and you?" returned the other, looking up in bewilderment.

"To Ryokai, then, I speak. You are now in the guise of a priest, but you cannot very well deny the knowledge of an incident in your younger days when you were named Ichikuro. I refer to none other than your murder in cold blood of Nakagawa Shirobei, your master, after

which you made good your escape. I am his only son, Jitsunosuke. Your time has come. The Avenger of Blood is here, and payment must be made by you. Are you ready?" Jitsunosuke's address was marked by an austere self-possession as impressive and calmly implacable as Death.

"And so you are Jitsunosuke-sama, my old master's son, are you?" questioningly remarked the other, showing no sign of perturbation. "Ay, it is verily this Ryo-kai that laid a violent hand upon your father, and afterward saved his head by his heels." The friendly feelings with which he spoke were more for the orphan of his quondam master than for the enemy thirsting for his blood.

"What lengths have I not gone to during these ten long years?" said Jitsunosuke excitedly, for he had to look sharp lest he should be cajoled by the priest's

sympathetic tone. "All to hunt you out and avenge my father! Now I have run you to earth, there's slipping off. Come, then, let us have it out fair and square."

Ichikuro remained calm and composed. His only source of regret was to die without witnessing the accomplishment of his life-purpose now brought within a year's compass. But putting it down to Providence that called him to reap what he had sown, he soon made ready for his end.

"My life, Jitsunosuke-sama, is at your disposal. This very cave was originated, as you may have heard, in the idea of making amends for my past. The digging has cost me nineteen years' harassing labour, and it is all but finished. Even if I pass on, the work will come to final completion before the year closes. Nothing will give me more peace of mind and greater ease of spirit, therefore, than to

fall by your hand, consecrating the mouth of the cave with my blood." Saying which, the resigned old priest blinked his purblind eyes.

In the presence of the old man in the last stage of decrepitude, Jitsunosuke felt the grudge he had long borne against his father's murderer vanish in an instant. That enemy had consumed the whole man in strenuous years of exemplary penitence for his crime, and was, moreover, only too willing to receive his deserts the moment the new arrival disclosed his identity. To put to death such an aged priest, with already one foot in the grave, Jitsunosuke pondered, was in no sense the rightful accomplishment of a vendetta. But so long as he had not achieved his purpose, there would be no course open to him to put an end to his life of wandering, and return to Yedo, not to mention the restoration of his

family prestige. He thought of shortening his foe's life out of calculation rather than out of a spirit of revenge, which utterly failed him at the supreme moment, the idea of killing a man for such a motive giving his conscience a sensation of unease. It was all he could do to inflame his hatred, which would not easily burn in his breast, and it was only by thinking of his vow that he could rouse in himself such a rage that he decided then and there that his duty to his murdered father must ride paramount over any feeling of pity he might feel for this wreck of humanity.

It was at this moment that half a dozen stone-cutters, who came running out of the cave, saw the danger to which Ichikuro was exposed, and rushed forward to screen him.

"Whatever are you about, sir? Bethink yourself, young sir, that this man is a priest, the highly reputed Rev. Mr. Ryokai,"

they shouted accusingly. It needed no second glance at their strained faces to tell that they were equal to any occasion.

"For certain reasons, I have been hunting after this old priest as my enemy," Jitsunosuke declared with vigour and spirit. "It was my good fortune to happen on him to-day and I expect to realize my heart's desire. Let anyone of you dare to interfere, and he shall pay dearly for it."

In the meantime, however, there arrived more and more stone-cutters, who, reinforced by passers-by gathering upon the scene, began to close round the young samurai, each uttering menaces, so as to prevent him from even touching the old man.

"Such a thing as wreaking vengeance is something to be carried out while the other party remains in the world," rebuffed a man among the excited crowd, as if regarding Jitsunosuke's intention as an

unrealizable ambition. "The Rev. Mr. Ryokai, as you see, is not merely in the holy profession now, but is an individual in whom all the inhabitants of the seven villages along the Yamakuni Valley behold a Buddha elect."

Thus finding himself checked by the challenging throng, the young man's subsided fury towards his enemy was speedily rekindled. The situation also aroused the samurai in him, and the idea of withdrawing like a coward was the very last in his mind.

"I did not know that priesthood redeemed from the felony of parricide. Be off, men, or you shall see the fury of an avenger of blood!" He had no sooner said than he proceeded to suit the action to the word by unsheathing his sword, while the mob surrounding him made ready as quickly for a vigorous resistance. Then

it was that Ichikuro raised his husky voice :—

“ Hold your hands, friends ! I have the best of reasons for meeting my fate. The boring of this very tunnel was undertaken from no other motive than as an atonement for the past. To end my earthly career, which is in any event fast drawing to its close, at the hand of the filial son is indeed all that I could wish for in life. Therefore, kind friends, though I thank you most heartily for your well-meant interference, yet I beseech you to leave me to my doom ; mark you, my just doom ! ”

With these words, Ichikuro struggled to crawl on to where Jitsunosuke stood. The village folk, who had been well aware of his determined character, now found little hope of dissuading him from the step he had resolved to take. Thus his life was in imminent peril, when the master-mason came forward, and turning to Jitsu-

nosuke said:—

“I have no doubt you have heard that this tunnel took its origin in the Rev. Mr. Ryokai's devout vow, for the execution of which he has gone through a multitude of undreamt-of hardships these twenty long years. Admitting it as the consequences of his own evil deeds, the Karma self-created, how regrettable it must be for him to depart out of this world with the completion of his great undertaking still not wholly realized. Our joint entreaty, therefore, is that you will most generously leave his life with us, not for any length of time, but until the boring is done. Upon its completion, you may do what you like with him.” The sincerity of the man's words was more than could be doubted.

“Yes, yes, that is only too reasonable!” cried the by-standers, unanimously endorsing this suggestion. As things stood, Jitsunosuke

could not but yield to this appeal. If he persisted in having his own way then and there, he thought, there would be fear of spoiling the game through the hostile manœuvres of the mob. Far wiser would it be to wait time given and thus easily attain his end and aim. In that case, he concluded with conviction, Ichikuro, who was even now willing to fulfil his destiny, would certainly relinquish his life out of a thankful heart for the generosity shown to him. Apart from this calculative consideration, the idea of letting the poor old priest, though his enemy, accomplish his great scheme was by no means distasteful to Jitsunosuke.

"I will grant you the request out of consideration for the sacred calling of the priest Ryokai. Beware of betraying my confidence," said Jitsunosuke, glancing at Ichikuro and the crowd in turn.

"You may rely upon us, Sir," assured the master-mason in a calm tone. "The moment the tunnel is cut through by ever so small an aperture measuring a foot or an inch, that is the time you are straight-way at liberty to deal, not the priest Ryokai, but with your father's slayer. Meanwhile you would do well to take up your quarters about here, and leisurely await the day."

Upon the amicable settlement of the dispute, Ichikuro made haste to creep into the cave on all fours, visibly regretful for the waste of time thus engendered.

Baulked at the last moment by an unforeseen interruption, Jitsunosuke's heart was full of indignation. Keeping his futile passion under control, he suffered himself to be shown into a shanty by one of the stone-cutters. Left all alone, his recurring sense of self-disgust at helplessly letting go,

with a whole skin, the mortal enemy within his reach, knew no bounds. Presently, an impatient rage took entire possession of his heart, leaving in him no such grace as reprieving his man until the tunnel was completed. His final resolve was to steal into the cave that very night, put Ichikuro to death, and take his departure from the place. But he had to remember that as he closely watched for the old priest, so he in turn was a marked man by the workmen.

A day of inactivity was followed by another much against the young samurai's will, until the fifth evening came, when the men about him fell into slumber near the midnight hour, in every conceivable posture, probably through the relaxed tension of their nightly vigil. Now or never was his chance, he said to himself. In a moment, he was up on his feet, snatching up his

trusty steel by his bedside. A second later, he slid out of the hut unnoticed. It was an early spring night, with a bright moon up, the pale waters of the Yamakuni flowing in whirls bathed in her light. Jitsunosuke never once paused to take note of the surrounding landscape, but moved straight on, with a stealthy pace, to the mouth of the cave, where the scattered splinters of rock impeded his progress, cutting and bruising his naked feet.

With the moonbeam shining in at its entrance and apertures cut in the rock at several places, the inside of the cavern was only faintly discernible where such light fell. Jitsunosuke groped his way into its depths along the right wall of the cave.

He had advanced some two *cho*, when his ears caught a strange, sepulchral sound, which emanated from the bottom of the

cave, at regular intervals. At first, he could not make out what it was. With each step he took, however, the sound grew in resonance, until the circumambient still air of night shook with the echoes of its very vibrations. It was, without doubt, that of a descending hammer coming in violent contact with the rock. He felt every fibre of his being receive a severe shock from the pathetic sound with its uncanny note. As he drew near the bottom, the sharp clank as of a huge crystal being smashed, echoed and re-echoed against the rocky walls, assailing his ears with ruthless ferocity. Nor did he hesitate a moment to struggle on, finding in the sound a trustworthy guide to direct his course, for he felt certain that it came from the hammer wielded by his enemy. On and on he crept with bated breath, his sword ever ready to his hand for instant use. It was

at that moment that he heard in the intervals of the striking hammer, the old priest's voice chanting a sutra, in a semi-murmurous and semi-groaning rhythm.

That thin, hoarse voice full of pathos, sent a cold thrill through the nocturnal intruder. Despite the inky darkness he was in, there floated before his mental eyes in appalling vividness, the solitary figure of the devout hammerman all in his solemn loneliness at work in the dark and death-like silence of the night. It was verily no mortal mind, but a mind divine, with its inspired devotion and fortitude, surpassing all human thoughts, that explained the marvel of his vision. His hand gripping the hilt of his sword had been unconsciously relaxed in its hold, when, in a flash, he came to his senses. Here was one spiritually awakened striving, at his own personal sacrifice, for the good of his fellow-men.

That holy individual stood in danger of an attack from an armed samurai, who, like a footpad or a wild beast after its prey, was sneaking up to him, under cover of night, with murder gleaming in his eyes. This reflection frightened Jitsunosuke, and a violent shudder took possession of him.

Thus it was that the mighty sound of the smiting hammer, which shook the very cave, and the singularly touching voice of invocation, utterly shattered the nerves of steel possessed by the avenger of blood. His only alternative in the circumstances, was to bide his time with good grace, and then have the pledge carried out. He turned, and wormed his way toward the moonlight out of the cave.

Not long after the above-recorded incident, the knightly figure of Jitsunosuke was seen mingling with the workmen engaged in the tunnelling work. Sinister designs,

such as playing foul with the worthy soul of the enterprise, and taking to his heels, had clean gone out of his mind. As the conviction grew on him that the latter was the last man to give him the slip, he thought he was bound to do him a good turn by abiding by his promise and leaving him to achieve his great end.

But then, he thought, it would not do simply to remain idle, and spin out his time. If he would volunteer his assistance in the enterprise, the prospective time of vengeance would be by so much shortened. This consideration induced him to share the labour in common with the other hammerers.

The old priest and the young samurai thus sat side by side at work. Jitsunosuke employed his hammer with all his might, that he might greet, at the earliest possible date, the day when his long-cherished desire might be realized. As to the priest

Ryokai, he was the more dogged and unflinching in pursuing his devoted task, since the other had made his appearance, attacking the massive rock like one mad, and that with the obvious intention of carrying out his scheme without a day's delay for the benefit of the filial son.

Two or three months sped by, in the course of which Jitsunosuke was so much moved by this example of the tremendous moral courage revealed by the old man, that he would fain have forgotten his vengeful sentiment in the vast work on hand. Even in the small hours when other hands were at rest from the fatigue of the day's work, the two men were found toiling abreast mute and silent.

It was the night of the 10th of September, in the third year of Enkyo, just twenty-one years after the first blow had been struck by our hero at the monstrous rock

at Hida, and one year and a half after Jitsunosuke fell in with him. The stone-cutters had all gone to their hut for rest, while the two devotees remained as ever hard at work despite their arduous application in the daytime. Towards midnight the hammer brought down with force by Ryokai received little resistance, as if driven into rotten timber, so that his hand grasping the implement impelled by its own momentum came in contact with the rock. In spite of himself, he uttered a cry of surprise. The exclamation had hardly died on his lips, when what met his dim, old eye, through the very fissure he had split, but a lucid view of the Yamakuni sparkling in the moonlight! Ryokai burst into a strange, indescribable yell, as is given by one who is all of a tremble with excitement. Next he burst out weeping in a sudden access of frenzied joy, until the cavern dimly

rang again.

"Look, Jitsunosuke-sama, my life vow for which I have toiled and moiled these twenty-one years, has at last been fulfilled to-night," he said, leading the other by the hand to the narrow rift where the stream of the Yamakuni could be seen. The darkish soil, which was visible right below the aperture, was in all probability the road running along the banks. The next moment found them, priest and samurai, in each other's arms, sobbing in an ecstasy of joy. Presently Ryokai slid back, and addressed the young man:—

"Now, Jitsunosuke-sama, your time has come. Put me to the sword, I beg you. My departure from this world amidst such perfect bliss would, without a doubt, secure my soul a place in the abode of the blessed. Now is the very moment for the fulfilment of your duty to your father. To-morrow

will bring the village masons with their interference. Now is your chance, sir."

His husky but forcible voice rang through the night air of the cave. But the man addressed only sat with folded arms, sobbing like a child, for the sight of the withered, doubled-up old priest with tears of rapture gushing out of his inmost heart, completely disarmed him of his murderous intent. His heart had been simply filled with unbounded admiration at the achievement wrought by a pair of frail and aged human arms, an achievement before which such a despicable mortal sentiment as vengeance utterly vanished. He dragged himself up to the wonder-worker, and eagerly clasped him again by the hand. And there the two ex-enemies stood bursting into tears afresh out of profound emotion, in utter oblivion to all earthly thoughts.

THE END

will bring the village mission with their
instruments. Now, your chance is
the best for the work, and through
the night air the cry of the
distressed only and with that cry
lingers a call for the help of the
world of devoted people, with their
of course, through one of the most
capacities, through him of the most
nature. The heart had been completely
very, undoubtedly, submission at the moment
some strength by a gift of itself and a
human mind, a mind of a man, whose
and a thought, a thought, a thought, a
vigilance, a vigilance, a vigilance, a
itself, and in the most perfect, and
comely, and in the most perfect, and
and that the two are connected, and
in the most perfect, and in the most perfect,
and in the most perfect, and in the most perfect,

THE END

NOTES

—•—

此の註解は、拙譯が「英語青年」に掲載の折同誌記者が初學者の爲に附せられたるもの。茲に轉載を快諾せられたる同記者の好意を深謝す

(K. A.)

CHAPTER I

- P. 1. getting the better of his scruples 「彼の小心翼翼たるのに打勝つこそ」「彼に罪を犯さしめたこそ」
1. had not the shadow of 「少しもなかつた」
1. present a bold front 「大膽に構へる」「齒向ふ」
2. without more ado 「いきなり」
2. ward off 「防ぐ」
4. God in Heaven! は苦痛、悲恨を表はす exclamation である。
4. betrayed 「裏切られたる」
4. savagely dealt の前に that を略して居る。blow を形容するのである。
5. came to himself 「正氣附いた」「我に歸つた」
5. parricide 「主殺し」
5. lackeys' lodge 「仲間部屋」
5. the timid creatures 「女中」

- P. 5. huddled together 「ごちやごちや集まつて」
 5. gnawing ['nɔ:ɪŋ] 「喰ひ込む」
 5. libertine 「放蕩者」
 5. abandoned 「放埒な」「無頼な」
 6. on the eve of 「の間際に」
 6. illicit intimacy 「不義」
 6. All was against him 「彼にいゝところはなかつた」
 6. askance 「尻目に」
 6. offer his own life 「自殺する」
 6. Ye Gods! 「まあ!」
 6. the issue 「どうなることかさ」
 6. Had you.....asunder 「真二つに切られたら」
 7. so far 「これまでの所」
 7. now that.....pass 「かうなつては」
 7. make off 「逃げる」
 7. and that before.....incident 「してそれも仲間の者の氣付かぬ内に(やるがよい)」
 7. kick up a silly row 「つまらない騒動を起す」
 7. lost his head 「周章して居た」
 7. ruthlessly 「無慈悲に」
 8. grain 「木目」
 8. in her absence 「妾が女中の所へ行つて居る間に」

CHAPTER II

9. woman with a past 「曰く附きの女」「泥水を飲んだ女」
 10. put on a bold front 「何喰はぬ顔をする」
 10. learned to follow it 「それをやるやうになつた」

- P. 10. a picture of 「の標本」
11. wayside 「路傍の」
11. resting-booth 「茶店」
12. peripatetics 「巡回者」
13. farming community 「百姓」
13. Say, good man 「ねい、君」
14. To throw.....off his guard 「油断させる」
14. lying 「虚言を言ふ」
14. modus operandi = way a person goes to work 「遣り方」
15. struck off 「曲がつて進んだ」
15. doomed couple 運の盡きた夫婦
15. was in for 「のつびきならぬことになった」
16. benighted 「行き暮れた」
16. bargained for 「豫期した」
17. could ill.....lives 「命を助けることは出来ない」
18. fair companion 「連れの女」 fair は女性を表はす語、
fair readers (女流讀者)の如し。
19. sanguinary mode of destruction 「血を流すやうな殺し方」
19. footpad 「剽盜」
19. took to flight 「逃げ出した」
19. raiment 「衣服」
20. fell short of her expectation 「豫期した程なかつた」
20. Good, so far 「之までのところはよい」
20. turn nun 「尼になる」
20. rob.....coiffure 「殺した女の頭の物を盗む」 of は(か
ら)の意、日本の語法と全く反對。
21. perking herself up 「氣取つて頭を上げる」

- P. 21. haul 「獲物」
21. I'll be bound 「きつさ」
21. setting off on 「に出発する」
21. sacrifice.....loot 「正當な分捕品を捨て、顧みない」
21. an old hound at that 「昨日や今日の泥棒じゃない」
21. troubling yourself with 「を取る」
21. lived on.....chattels 「人の物を盗むを稼業とした」
21. Out with it! 「愚圖々々しないで早く言へ」
21. a shadow of 「ちさこも」
22. letting.....plunder 「分捕品を取らぬこと」
22. His mind.....whirl 「心は色々の思ひに亂れて居た」
22. close-on 「約」
23. failed to notice 「注意を引かなかつた」
23. Up with you=Get up 「起きよ」
23. standing on ceremony 「遠慮する」
23. forgoing 「捨てる」
23. are cut up 「怒つて居る」
23. picked.....jacket 「人に難辭をつけた」
23. a windfall 「思ひがけぬ獲物」
23. mind 「注意せよ」
23. netting 「の利益になる」
24. move at.....call 「お弓の言ふ通りになる」
24. mumchance=silent 「無言で」
24. useless 「徒らに」
24. me jawing.....this 「私に此様に小言ばかり言はせて」
24. waste.....breath=talk vainly.
24. her detestable presence 「妻が自分の前に居るのが嫌でたまらぬこと」

- P. 24. leading to 「に通じて居る」
24. making a botch of it 「へまをやる」
25. followed.....with his eye 「出て行く姿を見送る」
25. unsexed 「女たるの性を失つて」
25. rob.....ornaments 「女から髪のを物を剥る」
25. gone to the length of robbery = gone so far as to rob 「盗みする程の極端な事をする」
25. infallibly 「相違なく」
25. looker-on 「傍観者」
26. loth 「好まぬ」 形容詞で、普通 infinitive を伴ふ。
26. Jezebel 舊約全書列王紀略中にある王妃で、毒婦のことである。
26. perpetrated 「犯した」
26. glare 「ねめること」
26. weltering 「まみれる」
26. conspired 「共謀した」
26. with a will 「本氣になつて」
26. changes 「着替」
26. meet 「充てる」
27. the price.....mind 「心の平和を破る物」
27. for all he was worth = with all his might 「精一杯」

CHAPTER III

27. at one stretch 「一気に」
28. found himself seeking refuge 「隠れ家を求めて居た」
28. abysmal 「底知れぬ」
28. benign = gracious.

P. 28. on his knees 「跪いて」

28. the deepest dye 「最悪」 the blackest dye 最も言ふ。

28. iniquity 「罪惡」

28. mundane 「現世の」

29. then and there 「即座に」

29. stand him in good stead 「彼に大に役立つ」

30. diffusing 「擴める」

30. quondam 「昔の」

30. itinerant 「遍歴の」

30. sensitive.....memories 「人を殺した事を思ひ出して」

30. in sackcloth and ashes 「悔悟して、僧となつて」 猶太ではツックの粗服を着、頭に灰を掛けて懺悔する習慣があつたのでかく言ふ。

31. past redemption 「償ひ切れない」

31. minister to 「貢獻する」

32. best part 「大部分」

32. beside the guilts 「罪惡の傍に持て行けは」

32. bring home to 「深く覺らせる」

32. making away with himself 「身を殺す」

32. brace himself up 「奮起する」

33. pay homage [ˈhɒmɪdʒ] 「參拜する」

33. stretch 「擴がり」

33. upper reach 「上流」

33. wore on 「そろそろ経つた」

33. limpid 「澄み切つた」

34. sequestered 「世を離れた」「閑靜な」

34. by way of alms 「施して貰つて」

34. tolled on 「さぼさぼ進んだ」

- P. 35. your reverence 僧に對して言ふ you の意。
35. pack-horse 「駄馬」
35. took fright 「驚いた」
35. The mangled body 「無殘な死骸」
36. weather-worn 「風雨にひどく打たれて」
37. swashing 「洗ふ所の」「バシヤバシヤいふ」
37. their hearts failing them = they losing their hearts 「心戦く」
38. Taking up his quarters 「宿つて」
39. itinerant 「巡歴の」
42. Benkei (or Hercules) (希臘神話に在る強力の人。)
42. unflagging 「強情な」
42. adamantite 「鐵石の」
42. standing supreme 「ちやんさある」
42. it bore fruit in a cave 「其の結果は洞窟となつた」
43. was.....in evidence 「現はれた」
43. full one year 「まる一年」
43. braced his nerve 「奮起した」
44. waxed and waned 「満ちては虧けた」
44. strife of the elements 「暴風雨」
44. learned..... 「になつた」
44. imperceptibly 「少し宛」
45. wriggled 「うごめき廻つた」
45. snatching odd moments 「僅かの時間を利用して」
45. Amazed as they were = though they were amazed.
45. samadhi 梵語で三昧のこと。
45. all his own = peculiar himself 「獨特の」
45. Goodness only knows 「か判りやしない」

- P. 49. ever and anon 「時々」
 49. all but = almost.
 49. of little moment = unimportant.
 49. troglodytic life 「洞窟に住むこそ」
 49. did not fail to leave = left.
 50. gaunt [ɡɔːnt] 「肉の落ちた」
 50. spectre from the shades 「あの世の人」
 50. life object 「生涯の目的」
 52. wiry [ˈwaɪəri] 「針金のやうな」
 52. hebetude 「遲鈍」
 52. functionary = official.
 53. in harness 「常務を執りて」
 53. held to 「固執してゐた」
 54. tell on his legs 「兩脚にこたへる」
 54. lack-lustre = dull 「さんよりさせる」
 54. set store by 「重んじた」

CHAPTER IV

56. brought up 「養育される」
 56. on the spot 「すぐに其場で」
 56. family prestige 「家名」
 57. year in, year out 「年々」
 57. incidental to 「有りがちの」
 61. made straight for 「其足で直ぐ……で指して行つた」
 62. blood was up 「激昂した」
 62. make good his escape 「逃亡する」 「(目前に)」
 62. within (a) stone's throw 「石を投げてさざくさころに」

- P. 63. look him up 「彼を訪ねる」
65. clapped eyes = set eyes 「見た」
65. decrepit 「老衰した」
66. Avenger of Blood 「親などの仇を打つ者」
66. payment 「賠償」
66. saved his head by his heels 「逃亡した」
66. quondam 「以前の」
66. What lengths have I not gone to? そんな極端なことで
もしなかつたか、實際そんなことをもして来た、随分苦勞し
て来た」
67. run to earth 「穴まで追ひつめる」
67. there's no slipping off 「逃げ去ることは出来ぬ」
67. have it out 「勝負する」
68. decrepitude 「老衰」
68. the whole man 「心身全部」
68. deserts 「相當の罰」
69. the supreme moment 「いよいよさいふ時」
69. ride daramont over 「屈服せしめる」
70. equal to any occasion 「如何なる事が起ることも驚かな
い」「如何なる事にも當る」
70. happen on 「偶然出會ふ」
70. pay dearly 「ひざい報ひを受ける」
71. the samurai 「武士の意地」
71. avenger of blood 「親の仇を打つ者」
71. had no sooner said than 「言ふや否や」
71. suit the action to the word 「言ひながら實行する」
75. on all fours 「四つん這で」
75. engendered 「醸したる」 (waste of time にかゝる)。

- P. 75. **Baulked** [bɔ:kt] 「妨けられて」
75. **futile** = vain, ineffectual.
75. **be shown into** 「案内される」
75. **recurring** 「時々發する」
76. **with a whole skin** 「傷たも負はさずに」
76. **reprieving** = suspending or delaying execution of.
76. **take his departure** = depart.
76. **in turn** 「又」
79. **marked man** = one whose conduct is watched with suspicion or hostility 「注意人物」
76. **in every conceivable posture** 「ありとあらゆる姿勢をして」
76. **Now or never was his chance** 「此機を逸すべからず」
77. **trusty steel** 「刀」
77. **with a stealthy pace** 「こつそり歩んで」
77. **Impeded** 「妨けた」
77. **apertures** = openings, gaps.
77. **groped his way** = proceeded tentatively 「手探りで進んだ」
77. **depths** 「奥」
78. **make out** = see, recognize,
78. **resonance** = resounding.
78. **circumambient** = surrounding.
78. **his being** 「五體」
78. **uncaanny** = mysterious.
78. **struggle on** 「進んで行く」
78. **with bated breath** 「氣息をひそめて」
79. **nocturnal** 「夜の」

- P. 79. appalling = terrifying; shocking.
79. in a flash 「一刹那に」
80. footpad 「剽盗」
80. after its prey 「餌をあさる」
80. sneaking up 「こつそり忍び寄る」
80. under cover of night 「夜に乗じて」
80. took possession of 「を占有した」
80. smiting = striking.
80. invocation 「念佛」
80. of steel 「鐵石の如き」
80. avenger of blood 「近親復讐者」
80. alternative 「外の方法」
80. bide his time 「時機を待つ」
80. with a good grace 「潔く」
80. wormed his way 「這つた」
81. playing foul with 「闇打ちにすること」
81. the worthy soul of the enterprise 「了海の事をいふ」
81. taking to his heels 「逃げる」
81. clean 「すつかり」
81. the latter 「實之助のこそ」
81. to do him a good turn 「手助けをする」
81. spin out his time 「時を過してしまふ」
82. dogged 「我慢強い」
82. unflinching 「不屈な」
82. abreast 「胸を並べてで」 相並んでの意となる。
83. fell in with = happened to meet.
83. momentum 「はすみ」
83. in spite of himself 「思はず」「我を忘れて」

- P. 83. burst into a yell 「叫び出した」
83. all of a tremble=trembling all over 「全身ぶるぶるもの」
83. burst out weeping 「俄かに泣き出した」
84. rift=cleft.
84. running 「通じて居る」
84. abode of the blessed 「極楽」
84. Put.....the sword=get rid of=kill.
85. doubled-up 「體の曲つた」
85. disarmed of 「を解いた」
85. wonder-worker 「奇蹟を行ふ人」「驚くべき事業を爲す人」

JOSEPH CONRAD
BECAUSE OF THE DOLLARS

(あははのアンナ)

東京高等師範學校教授 岡倉由三郎先生譯註

海の文人コンラッドが得意の短篇の一つ。南洋の島々をさまよひ歩く化粧の女の憐れなる生活と、其數寄にからまつて自らの運命を損ふ一船長の情誼、是等を廻る船員の社會、無頼の徒の群なさを描いて哀切胸をつく如き作品である。

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◆ 恩 讐 の 彼 方 に ◆

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メレデイス、ハーデーの如き老大家よりボロー、ギッシングの如き隠れたる文人に至るまで、最近英文壇に於て最も傑出したる諸作家を捉へて一々その閱歷、作風を紹介し、自傳、隨筆、小説、戯曲各その得意の作物より代表的文例を抄出し、これに對照するに忠實なる譯文を以てし、更に懇切なる脚註を添へて學者が精緻の研究に資す。文學より文學に入らんとする初學者の人々に取っては、好手引草なるべく、英文學專攻の士に取りては、久しく缺けたるステイヴンソン以後の文學界の趨勢を窺ふべき參考書として最も適切なる補ひなるべく、附録「現代十家」は更にその消息の知り難き英文壇刻下の小鳥瞰圖と見るべく、著者がたまた「語學界の人にして同時に文壇の人たるは最も本書の特包たるべし」と信ず。

廣島高等師範學校教授 小日向定次郎先生著 (訂正第二版出來)

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を見て居るこ、彼を敵として殺す事なごは、思ひ及ばぬ事であつた。敵を打つなご
こ云ふ心よりも、此の羸弱^{かよわ}い人間の双の腕に依つて成し遂けられた偉業に對する驚
異と感激の心で、胸が一杯であつた。彼はるざり寄りながら、再び老僧の手を執
つた。二人は其處に凡てを忘れて、感激の涙に咽び合つたのであつた。

一九一七年十二月——

ある。了海は「おう！」と、全身を顫はせるやうな名狀しがたき叫聲を挙げたかと思ふに、夫につゞいて狂したかと思はれるやうな歡喜の泣笑が、洞窟を物凄く動搖めかしたのである。

「實之助ごの、御覽なされい。二十一年の大誓願端なくも今宵成就いたした。」

かう云ひながら、了海は實之助の手を取つて、小さい穴から山國川の流れを見せた。その穴の眞下に黒ずんだ土の見えるのは、岸に添ふ街道に紛れもなかつた。敵ご敵ごは、そこに手を執り合つて、大歡喜の涙に咽んだのである。が、暫くするに了海は身を退つて、

「いざ、實之助殿、約束の日ぢや。お斬りなされい、かゝる法悦の眞中に往生致すなれば、極樂淨土に生るゝここ、必定疑ひなしぢや。いざお斬りなされい。明日こもなれば、石工共が、妨けを致さう、いざお斬りなされい。」と、彼のしはがれた聲が洞窟の夜の空氣に響いた。が、實之助は、了海の前に手を拱ねいて坐つたまゝ、涙に咽んで居るばかりであつた。心の底から湧き出づる歡喜に泣く凋びた老僧の顔

子の願を叶へてやりたいと思つたのであらう。彼は、又更に精進の勇を振つて、狂人のやうに岩壁を打ち碎いて居た。

その裡に、月が去り月が來た。實之助の心は、了海の大勇猛心に、動かされて、彼自ら、剗貫の大業に讐敵の恨みを、忘れようとし勝であつた。

石工共が、晝の疲れを休めて居る眞夜中にも、敵に敵は相並んで、黙々として槌を振つて居た。

夫は了海が、樋田の剗貫に第一の槌を下してから、二十一年目、實之助が、了海に廻り合つてから、一年六ヶ月を経た延享三年九月十日の夜であつた。此の夜も石工どもは、悉く小屋に退いて、了海と實之助のみ終日の疲勞にめけず、懸命に槌を振つて居た。その夜九つに近き頃了海が、力を籠めて振り下した槌が、朽木を打つが如く何の手答もなく力餘つて、槌を持つた右の掌が岩に當つたので、彼は「アツ」と思はず聲を上げた。その時であつた。了海の朦朧たる老眼にも、紛れなくその槌に破られたる小さき穴から、月の光に照されたる山國川の姿が、歷々映つたので

り外はないと思つた。

實之助は、深い感激を懷きながら、洞外の月光を指し、洞窟の外に這ひ出たのである。

其の事があつてから間もなく、剋貫の工事に従ふ石工の裡に、武家姿の實之助の姿が見られた。彼はもう、老僧を闇打にして、立退かう云ふやうな險しい心は、少しも持つて居なかつた。了海が逃隠れもせぬことを知るこゝ、彼は好意を以て了海が、その一生の大願を成就する日を、待つてやらうと思つて居た。

が、それにしても茫然と待つて居るよりも、自分も此の大業に一臂の力を盡す事に依つて、幾何かでも復讐の期日が短縮せられる筈である事を悟るこゝ、實之助は自ら石工に伍して、槌を振ひ始めたのである。

敵と敵とが、相並んで槌を下した。實之助は、本懷を達する日の一日も早かれこゝ、懸命に槌を振つた。了海は實之助が出現してからは、一日も早く大願を成就して孝

に一刀の鯉口を濕しながら、息を潜めて寄り添うた。その時、ふと彼は槌の音の間に囁くが如く、うめくが如く、了海が、經文を誦する聲を聞いたのである。

そのしはがれた悲壯な聲が、水を浴びせるやうに實之助の心に徹して來た。深夜人去り、草木眠つて居る中に、たゞ暗中に端坐して鐵槌を振つて居る了海の姿が、墨の如き闇にあつて尙、實之助の心眼に、歷々として映つて來た。夫は、もはや人間の心ではなかつた。喜怒哀樂の情の上にあつて、たゞ鐵槌を振つて居る勇猛精進の菩薩心であつた。實之助は、握りしめた太刀の柄が、何時の間にか緩んで居るのを覺えた。彼はふと、我に歸つた。既に佛心を得て、衆生の爲に、碎身の苦を嘗めて居る高德の聖に對し、深夜の闇に乗じて、ひはぎの如く、獸けものの如く、瞋恚の劍を抜きそばめて居る自分を顧るに、彼は、強い戰慄が身體を傳うて流れるのを感じた。

洞窟を揺がせるその力強い槌の音に、悲壯な念佛の聲は、實之助の心を散々に打ち碎いてしまつた。彼は、潔く竣功の日を待ち、その約束の果さるゝのを待つよ

眼も呉れず、實之助は、足を忍ばせて潜かに洞門に近づいた。削り取つた石塊が、所々に散らばつて、歩を運ぶ度毎に足を痛めた。

洞窟の中は、入口から来る月光を、所々に剝り明けられた窓から射し入る月光で、所々ほの白く光つて居るばかりであつた。彼は右方の岩壁を手探りく奥へ奥へ進んだ。

入口から、二町ばかりも進んだ頃、ふと彼は洞窟の底から、クワツ／＼と間を置いて響いて来る音を耳にした。彼は最初夫が何であるか判らなかつた。が、一步進むに従つて、その音は擴大して行つて、おしまひには洞窟の中の夜の寂靜の裡に、こだまする迄になつた。夫は、明かに岩壁に向つて鐵槌を下す音に相違なかつた。實之助は、その悲壯な、凄みを帯びた音に依つて、自分の胸が烈しく打たれるのを感じた。奥に近づくに従つて、玉を打ち碎くやうな鋭い音は、洞窟の周圍にこだまして、實之助の聴覺を、猛然と襲つて来るのであつた。彼は、此の音をたよりに這ひながら、近づいて行つた。此槌の音の主こそ、敵了海に相違あるまいと思つた。私

實之助は、大切の場合に思はぬ邪魔が入つて、目的が達し得なかつたことを憤つた。彼は如何にもし難い鬱憤を抑へながら、石工の一人に案内せられて、木小屋の裡へ入つた。自分一人になつて考へるこゝ、仇を目前に置きながら、討ち得なかつた自分の腑甲斐なさを、無念と思はずには居られなかつた。一彼の心は何時の間にか焦ら立たしい憤りで一杯になつて居た。彼は、もう剝貫の竣成を待つと云つたやうな、敵に對する緩かな心を全く失つてしまつた。彼は今宵にも洞窟の中へ忍び入つて、市九郎を討つて立ち退かうと云ふ決心の臍を固めた。が、實之助が市九郎の張り番をして居るやうに、石工達は實之助を見張つて居た。

最初の二、三日を、心にもなく無爲に過したが、丁度五日目の晩であつた。毎夜の事なので、石工達も警戒の眼を緩めたと見え、丑に近い頃には何人もいぎたない眠に入つて居た。實之助は、今宵こそと思ひ立つた。彼は、瓦破と起き上るこゝ、枕元の一刀を引き寄せて、靜に木小家の外に出た。夫は早春の夜の月が冴えた晩であつた。山國川の水は月光の下に蒼く渦卷きながら流れて居た。が、周圍の風物には

實之助も、さう云はれて見るに、その哀願を聽かぬ譯には、行かなかつた。今此處で、仇を討たうとして、群衆の妨害を叙けて不覺を取るよりも、剗貫の竣功を待つたならば、今でさへ自ら進んで討たれよう云ふ市九郎が、義理に感じて首を授けるのは、必定であると思つた。又さうした打算から離れても、仇は云ひながら此の老僧の大誓願を遂げさせてやるのも、決して不快なこゝではなかつた。實之助は、市九郎と群衆とを等分に見ながら、

「了海の僧形にめで、その願ひ許して取らさう。束へた言葉を忘れまいぞ」云つた。

「念もないこゝで御座る。一分の穴でも、一寸の穴でも、此の剗貫が向う側へ通じた節は、その場を去らず了海様を討たさせ申さう。夫迄はゆる／＼に、此の邊りに御滞在なされませ」云、石工の棟梁は、穩かな口調で云つた。

市九郎は、此の紛擾が無事に解決が付くに、夫に依つて徒費した時間が如何に惜しまれるやうににじりながら洞窟の中へ這入つて行つた。

「皆の衆、お控へなされい。了海、打たるべき覺え十分御座る。此の洞門を穿つことも、たゞその罪滅しの爲ぢや。今かゝる孝子のお手にかゝり、半死の身を終る事、了海が一期の願ぢや。皆の衆妨け無用ぢや」。かう云ひながら市九郎は、身を挺して實之助の傍に、ゐざり寄らうとした。兼々、市九郎の強剛なる意志を、知りぬいて居る周圍の人々は、彼の決心を翻すべき由もないのを知つた。市九郎の命、茲に了るかと思はれた。その時に、石工の統領が、實之助の前に進み出でながら、

「御武家様も、御聞き及びでもムらうが、此の刳貫は了海様、一生の大誓願にて、

二十年に近き御辛苦に身心を碎かれたのぢや。いかに、御自身の惡業は云へ、大願成就を目前に置きながら、お果てなさるゝここ、如何ばかり無念であらう。我等の舉つての御願ひは、長くは申さぬ、此の刳貫の通じ申す間、了海様の、お命を我等に預けては下さらぬか。刳貫さへ通じた節は、即座に了海様を存分になさりませ」

こ、彼は誠を表して哀願した。群衆は、口々に
「いこわりぢや〜」こ、賛成した。

ぢや。妨け致すこ、餘人なりこも容赦は致さぬぞ」こ、實之助は凜然と云つた。

が、その裡に、石工の數は増え、行路の人々が、幾人もなく立ち止つて、彼等は實之助を取巻きながら、市九郎の身體に、指の一本も、觸れさせまいこ、銘々に敦圍き始めた。

「敵を打つ打たぬなごは、夫はまだ世に在る裡の事ぢや。見らるゝ通、了海ごのは、染衣薙髮の身である上に、此山國谿七郷の者に取つては、持地菩薩の再來こも仰がれる方ぢや」こ、その中のある者は、實之助の敵打を、叶はぬ非望であるかのやうに云ひ張つた。

が、かう周圍の者から、妨けられるこ、實之助の敵に對する怒は何時の間にか、蘇つて居た。彼は、武士の意地として、手を拱ねいて立ち去るべきではなかつた。

「譬ひ沙門の身なりこも、主殺しの大罪は免れぬぞ。親の敵を打つ者を妨け致す者は、一人も容赦はない」こ、實之助は一刀の鞘を拂つた。實之助を圍ふ群衆も、皆悉く身構へた。するこ、その時に、市九郎は、しはがれた聲を張り上げた。

まして、命を捨てようとして居るのである。かゝる半死の老僧の命を取るここが、何の復讐であるか、實之助は考へたのである。が、然し此の敵を打たざる限りは、多年の放浪を切り上げて、江戸へ歸るべきよすがは、なかつた。まして家名の再興なごは、思ひも及ばぬ事であつたのである。實之助は、憎惡よりも、むしろ打算の心から、此の老僧の命を縮めようかと思つた。が、烈しい燃ゆるが如き憎惡を感じずして、打算から人間を殺すことは、實之助に取つて忍びがたい事であつた。彼は、消えかゝらうとする憎惡の心を、勵ましなが、打ち甲斐なき敵を打たうとしたのである。

その時であつた。洞窟の中から、走り出て來た五六人の石工は、市九郎の危急を見るに、挺身して彼を庇ひながら、

「了海様を何とするのぢや」こ、實之助を咎めた。彼等の面には仕宜に依つては、許すまじき色が歴々こ見えた。

「仔細あつて、その老僧を敵に狙ひ、端なくも今月廻り合つて、本懷を達するもの

「主を打つて立ち退いた非道の汝を打つ爲に、十年に近い年月を艱難の裡に過し、
わ。茲で會ふからは、もはや逃れぬ所を尋常に勝負せよ」云、云つた。

市九郎道は、少しも怯びれなかつた。もはや、期年の裡に成就すべき大願を見果
てずして、死ぬことが稍悲しまれたが、夫もおのれが惡業の報であると思ふこ、彼
は死すべき心を定めた。

「實之助様、いざお斬りなされい。お聞き及びもなされたらうが、之は了海奴が、
罪亡しに、掘り穿たうに存じた洞門でゐるが、十九年の歳月を費して、九分迄は竣
工致した。了海身を果つるこも、もはや年を重ねずして成り申さう。御身の手にか
かり、此の洞門の入口に血を流して人柱となり申さば、はや思ひ残すこもゝりま
せぬ」云、云ひながら、彼は見えぬ眼をしばた、いたのである。

實之助は、此の半死の老僧に接して居るこ、親の敵に對して懷いて居た憎し
みが、何時の間にか、消え失せて居るのを覺えた。敵は、父を殺した罪の懺悔に、身
心を粉に碎いて、半生を苦しみ抜いて居る。而も自分が一度名乗りかけるこ、唯々

る。實之助は、失望し始めた自分の心を勵まして、

「そのもこが、了海云はるゝか」こ、息込んで訊いた。

「如何にも、左様でゐります。して其許は」こ、老僧は訝しげに實之助を見上げた。

「了海こやら、如何に僧形に身を窶すこも、よも忘れは致すまい。汝、市九郎と呼ばれし若年の砌、主人中川四郎兵衛を打つて立退いた覺があらう。某は、四郎兵衛の一子實之助こ、申すものぢや。もはや、逃れぬ所こ、覺悟せよ」

こ、實之助の言葉は、飽く迄落着いて居たが、其處に一步も、許すまじき嚴正さがあつた。

が、市九郎は實之助の言葉を聽いて、少しも駭かなかつた。

「如何さま、中川様の御子息、實之助様か。いやお父上を、打つて立退いた者、此の了海に相違ゐりませぬ。」こ、彼は自分を敵こ狙ふ者に逢つたこ云ふよりも、舊主の遺兒に逢つた親しさを以て答へた。が、實之助は、市九郎の聲音に欺かれてはならぬと思つた。

門の開鑿を、統領して居るこ云へば、五十は過ぎて居るこは云へ、筋骨たくまじき男であらう。殊に、若年の頃には、兵法に疎からざりしこ云ふのであるから、ゆめ油断はならぬと思つて居た。

が、暫くして實之助の面前へこ、洞門から出て來た一人の乞食僧があつた。夫は、出て來るこ云ふよりも、藁の如く這ひ出て來たこ云ふ方が、適當であつた。夫は、人間こ云ふよりも、むしろ人間の殘骸こ云ふべきであつた。肉悉く落ちて骨露はれ、脚の關節以下は處々爛れて、永く正視するに堪へなかつた。破れた法衣に依つて、僧形こは知れるものゝ、頭髮は永く延びて皺だらけの額を掩うて居た。老僧は、灰色を爲した眼をしばたゝきながら、實之助を見上げて、

「老眼衰へはてまして、孰れの方こも辨へ兼ねまする」こ、云つた。

實之助の、極度に迄、張り詰めて來た心は、此の老僧を一目見た刹那タヂ／＼こなつてしまつて居た。彼は、心の底から憎惡を感じ得るやうな惡僧を、欲して居た。然るに彼の前には、人間こも死骸こも付かぬ、半死の老僧が蹲まつて居るのであ

工は心なけに笑つた

實之助は、本懷を達する事、はや眼前に在りこ、欣び勇んだ。が、彼は周章て、は、ならぬと思つた。

「して、出入の口は茲一個所か」こ、訊いた。敵に、逃げられてはならぬと思つたからである。

「夫は知れた事ぢや。向ふへ口を開ける爲に、了海様は塗炭の苦しみを爲さつて居るのぢや」こ、石工が答へた。

實之助は、多年の怨敵が、囊中の鼠の如く、目前に置かれてあるのを欣んだ。譬ひ、その下に使はるゝ石工が、幾人居ようこも、斬り殺すに何の難作もあるべきこ、勇み立つた。

「其方に少し頼みがある。了海ごのに、御意得たい爲、遙々こ尋ねて参つたものぢやこ、傳へて呉れ」こ、云つた。石工が、洞窟の中へはいつた後で、實之助は一刀の目くぎを濕した。彼は、心の裡で、生來初めて廻り逢ふ敵の容貌を想像した。洞

たさうでゐります」こ、百姓は答へた。

茲迄聽いた實之助は、躍り上つて欣んだ。彼が、江戸を立つ時に、親類の一人は、敵は越後柏崎の生れ故、故郷へ立ち廻るかも計りがたい、越後は一入心を入れて探索せよこ云ふ、注意を受けて居たのであつた。

實之助は、之ぞ正しく、宇佐八幡宮の神託なりこ勇み立つた。彼はその老僧の名こ、山國谿に向ふ道を訊くこ、もはや八つ刻を過ぎて居たにも拘はらず、必死の力を双脚に籠めて、敵の所在へこ急いだ。その日の初更近く、樋田村に着いた實之助は、直ちに洞窟へ立ち向はうかこ思つたが、焦つてはならぬこ思ひ返して、その夜は樋田驛の宿に、焦慮の一夜を明すこ、翌日は早く起き出で、輕装して樋田の剗貫へこ向つた。

剗貫の入口に着いた時、彼はそこに石の碎片を、運び出して居る石工に訊ねた。

「此の洞窟の中に、了海こ云はる、御出家が、おはすさうぢやが、夫に相違ないか」
「おはさないで何こせう。了海様は、此の洞の主も同様な方ぢやハ、」こ、石

人の力で出来たものぢや」こ、語るのを耳にした。

此の話を聞いた實之助は、九年此方未だ感じなかつたやうな興味を覺えた。彼は、や、焦き込みながら、

「卒爾ながら、少々物を訊ぬるが、その出家を申すは、年の頃は、何程位ぢや」こ、訊いた。その男は、自分の談話が、武士の注意を惹いた事を、光榮であると思つたらしく、

「左様でムいますな、私はその御出家を拜んだ事は、ムいませぬが、人の噂では、もう六十に近いと申します」

「丈は高いか、低い」こ、實之助は疊みかけて訊いた。

「夫もしかこは、判りませぬ。何様、洞窟の奥深く居られる故、しかこは判りませぬ」

「その者の俗名は、何と申したか存ぜぬか」

「夫も、そんな判りませんが、お生れは、越後の柏崎で、若い時に、江戸へ出られ

市九郎の所在を求めた。市九郎を、たゞ一度さへ、見た事もない實之助に取つては、夫は雲を掴むが如き覺束なき搜索であつた。五畿内東海東山山陰山陽北陸南海と、彼は漂泊の旅路に、年を送り年を迎へ、二十七の年迄空虚な遍歴の旅を續けた。敵に對する怨も憤も、旅路の艱難に消磨せんとするこゝ度々であつた。が、非業に殞れた父の無念を思ひ、中川家再興の重任を考へるこゝ、奮然と志を振ひ興すのであつた。

江戸を立つてから、丁度九年目の春を、彼は福岡の城下に迎へた。本土を空しく尋ね歩いた後に、邊陲の九州をも探つて見る氣になつたのである。

福岡の城下から、中津の城下に移つた彼は、二月に入つた一日宇佐八幡宮に賽して、本懐の一日も早く達せられんことを祈念した。實之助は、參拜を終へてから境内の茶店に憩うた。其時に、ふと彼は傍の百姓體の男が、居合せた參詣客に、

「その御出家は、元は江戸から來たお人ぢやけな、若い時に、人を殺したのを懺悔して、諸人濟度の大願を起したさうぢやが、今云ふた樋田の剝貫は、此の御出家一

夫よりもつゝ恐ろしい敵が、彼の生命を狙つて居るのであつた。

市九郎の爲に、非業の横死を遂げた中川四郎兵衛は、家臣の爲に殺害された爲、家事不取締ゝあつて、家は取潰され、その時三歳であつた一子實之助は、縁者の爲に養ひ育てられる事になつた。

實之助は、十三になつた時、初めて自分の父が、非業の死を遂げたことを聞いた。殊に、相手が、對等の士人でなくして、自分の家に養はれた奴僕であることを知るゝ、少年の心は、無念の憤に燃えた。彼は、即座に復讐の一義を、肝深く銘じた。彼は、走せて柳生の道場に入つた。十九の年に、免許皆傳を許されるゝ、彼は直ちに報復の旅に上つたのである。若し、首尾よく本懷を達して歸れば、一家再興の肝煎もしようゝ云ふ、親類一同の激勵の言葉に送られながら。

實之助は、馴れぬ旅路に、多くの艱難を苦しみながら、諸國を遍歴して、只管敵

の身邊に飛び散る碎けた石の碎片が、その眼を傷けた爲でもあらう。彼の兩眼は、朦朧として光を失ひ、物のあいりも辨へかねるやうになつて居た。

道がに、不退轉の市九郎も、身に迫る老衰を痛む心はあつた。身命に對する執着はなかつたけれど、中道にして殞れることを、何よりも無念と思つたからであつた。「もう二年の辛抱ぢや」こ、彼は心の裡に叫んで、身の老衰を忘れようこ、懸命に槌を振ふのであつた。

冒し難き大自然の威嚴を示して、市九郎の前に、立ち塞がつて居た岩壁は、何時の間にか衰殘の乞食僧一人の腕に貫かれて、その中腹を穿つ洞窟は、命ある者の如く、一路その核心を貫かんとして居るのであつた。

四

市九郎の健康は、過度の勞働に依つて、痛ましく傷けられて居たが、彼に取つて、

九郎を援け始めた。その歳、中津藩の郡奉行が、巡視して、市九郎に對して、奇特の言葉を下した。近郷近在から、三十人に近い石工が、蒐められた。工事は、枯葉を焼く火のやうに進んだ。

人々は、衰殘の姿いたくしい市九郎に、

「もはや、そなたは石工共の統領たはねを、なさりませ。自ら槌を振ふには及びませぬ」
と、勧めた。が、市九郎は頑として應じなかつた。彼は、殫るれば槌を握つたまゝ、思つて居るらしかつた。彼は、三十の石工が、傍に働くのも知らぬやうに、寢食を忘れ、懸命の力を盡すこと、少しも前と變らなかつた。

が、人々が市九郎に、休息を勧めたのも、無理ではなつた。二十年にも近い間、日の光も射さぬ岩壁の奥深く、坐り續けた爲であらう。彼の兩脚は、永い端坐に傷み、何時の間にか屈伸の自在を缺いで居た。彼は、僅かの歩行にも杖に縋らねばならなかつた。

その上、長い間、闇に坐して、日光を見なかつた爲でもあらう、また不斷に、彼

音が、再び市九郎の夫に和した。

又一年経つた。一年の月日が経つ裡に、里人達は、何時かしら目先の遠い出費を、悔い始めて居た。寄進の人夫は、何時の間にか、一人減り二人減つて、おしまひには、市九郎の槌の音のみが、洞窟の闇を、打ち顫はして居た。が、傍に人が居ても、居なくても、市九郎の槌の力は變らなかつた。彼は、たゞ機械の如く渾身の力を入れて、槌を挙げ、渾身の力を以つて、之を振り降ろした。彼は、自分の一身をさへ忘れて居た。主を殺した事も、剽賊を働いたことも、人を殺したことも、凡ては彼の記憶の外に、薄れてしまつて居た。

一年経ち、二年経つた。一念の動くところ、彼の瘠せた腕は、鐵の如く屈しなかつた。丁度、十八年目の終であつた。彼は、何時の間にか、岩壁の二分の一を穿つて居た。

里人は、此の恐ろしき奇蹟を見るに、もはや市九郎の仕事を、少しも疑はなかつた。彼等は、前二回の懈怠を、心から恥ぢ、七郷の人々合力の誠を盡くし舉つて市

た。

然し、市九郎は、洞窟の中に端坐してから、もはや十年にも餘る間、暗澹たる冷めたい石の上に、坐り續けて居た爲に、顔は色蒼ざめ双の眼は窪んで、肉は落ち骨露はれ、此の世に生ける人とも見えなかつた。が、市九郎の心には、不退轉の勇猛心頻りに燃え旺つて、たゞ一念に穿ち進む外は、何物もなかつた。一分でも、一寸でも岩壁の削り取られる毎に、彼は歡喜の聲を揚げた。

市九郎は、たゞ一人取残されたまゝに、又三年を経た。するこ、里人達の注意は、再び市九郎の上に歸りかけて居た。彼等が、ホンの好奇心から、洞窟の深さを測つて見るこ、全長六十五間、川に面する岩壁には、採光の窓が一つ穿たれ、もはや、此の大岩石の三分の一は、主として市九郎の瘠腕に依つて、貫かれて居る事が判つた。

彼等は、再び驚異の眼を刮いた。彼等は、過去の無智を恥ぢた。市九郎に對する尊崇の心は、再び彼等の心に復活した。やがて、寄進された十人に近い石工の槌の

一にも達して居ないのを、發見するこゝ、里人達は再び落膽疑惑の聲を洩した。

「人を増しても、こゝても成就是せぬ事ぢや。あたう、了海ごのたふらに騙たぶらかされて入らぬ物入をした」こゝ、彼等は撈たぎらぬ工事に、何時の間にか倦き切つて居つた。市九郎は、又獨り取残されねばならなかつた。彼は、自分の傍に槌を振る者が、一人減り二人減り、遂には一人も居なくなつたのに氣が付いた。が、彼は決して去る者を追はなかつた。黙々として、自分一人その槌を振ひ續けたのみである。

里人の注意は、全く市九郎の身邊から離れてしまつた。殊に洞窟が、深く穿たれれば、穿たれるほど、その奥深く槌を振ふ市九郎の姿は、行人の眼から遠ざかつて行つた。人々は、闇の裡に閉された洞窟の中を透し見ながら、

「了海さんは、まだやつて居るのかなあ」こゝ、疑つた。が、さうした注意も、しまひには、段々薄れてしまつて、市九郎の存在は、里人の念頭から、屢々消失せんこゝした。が、市九郎の存在が、里人に對して没交渉であるが如く、里人の存在も亦市九郎に没交渉であつた。彼にはたゞ、眼前の大岩壁のみが、存在するばかりであつ

風物が移り變つたが、洞窟の中には不斷の槌の音のみが響いた。

「可哀さうな坊様ぢや。物に狂つたこ見え、あの大盤石を穿つて行くわ。十の一も穿ち得ないで、おのれが命を終らうものを」こ、行路の人々は、市九郎の空しい努力を、悲しみ始めた。が、一年経ち二年経ち、丁度九年目の終りに、穴の入口より奥迄、二十二間を計る迄に、掘り穿つた。

樋田郷の里人は始めて市九郎の事業の可能性に氣が付いた。一人の瘠せた乞食僧が九年の力で、之迄掘り穿ち得るものならば、人を増し歳月を重ねたならば、此の大絶壁を穿ち貫く事も、必ずしも不思議な事ではないこ云ふ考が、里人等の胸の中に銘せられて來た。九年前、市九郎の勸進を擧つて斥けた山國川に添ふ七郷の里人は、今度は自發的に開鑿の寄進に付いた、數人の石工が市九郎の事業を、援ける爲に雇はれた。もう、市九郎は孤獨ではなかつた。岩壁に下す多數の槌の音は、勇ましく賑やかに、洞窟の中から、洩れ始めた。

が、翌年になつて、里人達が工事の進み方を測つた時、夫れがまだ絶壁の四分の

浴せざれば垢づきて、人間とも見えなかつた。が、彼は自分が掘り穿つた洞窟の裡に、獸の如く蠢めきながら、狂氣の如くその槌を振ひつゞけて居たのである。

里人の驚異は何時の間にか、同情に變つて居た。市九郎が暫しの暇を窃んで、托鉢の行脚に出かけようとするこゝ、洞窟の出口に思ひがけなく、一椀の齋を見出すこゝが、多くなつた。市九郎はその爲めに、托鉢に費すべき時間を、更に絶壁に向ふ事が出来た。

四年目の終が來た。市九郎の掘り穿つた洞窟は、もはや五丈の深さに達して居た。が、その三町を超ゆる絶壁に比ぶれば、其處に尙、亡羊の嘆があつた。里人は市九郎の熱心に驚いたものゝ、未だ、かくばかり見えすいた徒勞に合力するものは、一人もなかつた。市九郎は、たゞ獨りその努力を續けねばならなかつた。が、もう掘り穿つ仕事に於て、三昧に入つて居た市九郎は、たゞ槌を振ふ外は何の存念もなかつた。たゞ土鼠のやうに、命のある限り、掘り穿つて行く外には、何の他念もなかつた。彼は、只一人拮々として掘り進んだ。洞窟の外には春去つて秋來り、四時の

「あれ見られい！ 狂人坊主が、あれ丈掘り居つた。一年の間、もがいて、たつたあれ丈ぢや……」と、嗤つた。が、市九郎は自分の掘り穿つた穴を見るに涙の出るほご嬉しかつた。夫は如何に淺くとも、自分が精進の力の、如實に現はれて居るものに、相違なかつた。市九郎は年を重ねて、又更に振ひ立つた。夜は如法の闇に、晝も向薄暗い洞窟の裡に端坐して、たゞ右の腕のみを、狂氣の如くに振つて居た。市九郎に取つて、右の腕を振る事のみが、彼の宗教的生活の凡てになつてしまつた。洞窟の外には、日が輝き月が照り、雨が降り嵐が荒んだ。が、洞窟の中には、間斷なき槌の音のみがあつた。

二年の終にも里人は猶嗤笑を止めなかつた。が、夫はもう、聲に迄は出て來なかつた。たゞ、市九郎の姿を見た後、顔を見合せて、互に嗤ひ合ふ丈であつた。が、更に一年経つた。市九郎の槌の音は、山國川の水聲と同じく、不斷に響いて居た。村の人達は、もう何とも云はなかつた。彼等が、嗤笑の表情は何時の間にか、驚異の夫に變つて居た。市九郎は、梳らざれば頭髮は何時の間にか、伸びて双肩を掩ひ、

やがて、市九郎は、雨露を凌ぐ爲に、絶壁に近く木小屋を立てた。朝は、山國川の流れが、星の光を寫す頃から起き出で、夕は瀬鳴の音が寂靜の天地に澄みかへる頃迄も、止めなかつた。が、行路の人々は、尙嗤笑の言葉を止めなかつた。

「身の程も知らぬたわけぢや。」と、市九郎の努力を眼中に置かなかつた。

が、市九郎は一心不亂に槌を振つた。槌を振つて居さへすれば、彼の心には何の雜念も起らなかつた。人を殺した悔恨も、其處に無かつた。極樂に生れよう云ふ、欣求もなかつた。たゞそこに、晴々した精進の心があるばかりであつた。彼は出家して以來、夜毎の寢覺めに、身を苦しめた自分の惡業の記憶が、日に薄らいで行くのを感じた。彼は益々勇猛の心を振ひ起して、一向專急に槌を振つた。

新らしい年が來た。春が來て夏が來て早くも一年が經つた。市九郎の努力は、空しくはなかつた。大絶壁の一端に、深さ一丈に近い洞窟が穿たれて居た。夫は、ホンの小さい洞窟ではあつたが、市九郎の強い意志は最初の爪痕を明かに止めて居た。が、近郷の人々は又市九郎を嗤つた。

し易い火山岩であることは云へ、川を壓して聳え立つ巉々たる大絶壁を、市九郎は、己一人の力で、刳貫かうこするのであつた。

「到頭氣が狂つた！」と、行人は、市九郎の姿を指しながら、嗤つた。

が、市九郎は屈しなかつた。山國川の清流に沐浴して觀世音菩薩を祈りながら、渾身の力を籠めて、第一の槌を下した。

夫に應じて、たゞ二三片の碎片が、飛び散つたばかりであつた。が、再び力を籠めて第二の槌を下した。更に二三片の小塊が、巨大なる無限大の大塊から、分離したばかりであつた。第三、第四、第五と市九郎は懸命に槌を下した。空腹を感ずれば、近郷を托鉢し、腹滿つれば絶壁に向つて槌を下した。懈怠の心を生ずれば、只眞言を唱へて、勇猛の心を振ひ起した。一日、二日、三日、市九郎の努力は間斷なく續いた。旅人は、その傍を通る度に、嘲笑の聲を送つた。が、市九郎の心は、その爲に須臾も撓むことはなかつた。嗤笑の聲を聞けば、彼は更に槌を持つ手に力を籠めた。

市九郎は、自分が求め歩いたものが、漸く茲で見附かつたと思つた。一年に十人を救へば、十年には百人、百年、千年を経つ内には、千萬の人の命を救ふここが出ると思つたのである。

かう決心するに、彼は、一途に實行に着手した。その日から、羅漢寺の宿坊に宿りながら、山國川に添うた村々を勸化して、隧道開鑿の大業の寄進を求めた。

が、何人も此の風來僧の言葉に、耳を傾ける者はなかつた。

「三町をも超える大盤石を、剝貫かう云ふ瘋狂人ぢや、ハ、ハ、ハ、嗤ふものは、まだよかつた。

「大騙りぢや、針のみそから天をのぞくやうな事を云ひ前にして、金を集めよう云ふ、大騙りぢや」云、中には市九郎の勸説に、迫害を加ふる者さへあつた。

市九郎は、十日の間、徒らな勸進に努めたが、何人も耳を傾けぬのを知るに、奮然として、獨力此の大業に當ることを決心した。彼は、石工の持つ槌を、鑿を手に入れて、此の大絶壁の一端に立つた。夫は、一個のカリカチュアであつた。削落

たやうに、其處に慕ひ寄つて、絶壁の裾を洗ひながら、濃緑の色を湛へて、渦巻いて居る。

里人等が、鎖渡ししと云つたのは之だらうと、彼は思つた。道は、その絶壁の中腹を、松、杉などの丸太を、鎖で聯ねた棧道が、危けに傳つて居る。かよかい婦女子でなくとも、俯して五丈に餘る水面を見、仰いで頭を壓する十丈に近い絶壁を見る時は、魂消え、心戦くも理りであつた。

市九郎は、岩壁に縋りながら、戦く足を踏み締めて、漸く渡り終つて其絶壁を振向いた刹那、彼の心には咄嗟に大誓願が、勃然として萌した。

積むべき贖罪の餘りに小さかつた彼は、自分が精進勇猛の氣を試すべき難業に逢ふここを祈つて居た。今目前に行人が艱難し、一年に十に近い人の命を奪ふ難所を見た時、彼は、自分の身命を捨て、此の難所を除かうと云ふ思付が旺然として起つたのも無理ではなかつた。二百餘間に餘る絶壁を刳貫いて道を通じよう云ふ、不敵な誓願が、彼の心に浮んで來たのである。

が、此の男は此の川上柿坂郷に住んで居る馬士ぢやが、今朝鎖渡の途中で、馬が狂うた爲、五丈に近い所を眞逆様に落ちて、見られる通の無残の最後ぢや」こ、その中の一人が云つた。

「鎖渡しに申せば、兼々難所とは聞いて居たが、か様なあはれを見ることは、度々あるかの」こ、市九郎は、死骸を見守りながら、打ちしめつて聞いた。

「一年に三四人、多ければ十人も、思はぬ憂目を見るこがある。無双の難所故に、風雨に棧かけはしが朽ちても、修繕も思ふに委せぬのぢや」こ、答へながら、百姓達は死骸の始末にかゝつて居た。

市九郎は、此の不幸な遭難者に、一遍の經を読むこ、足を早めてその鎖渡しへこ急いだ。

其處迄は、もう一町もなかつた。見るこ、川の左に聳える荒削りされたやうな山が、山國川に臨む所で、十丈に近い絶壁に斫り截たたれて、其處に灰白色のギザ／＼した壁の多い肌を露出して居るのであつた。山國川の水は、其絶壁に吸ひ寄せられ

驛から出外れるこ、道は又山國川に添うて、火山岩の河岸を傳うて走つて居た。

歩み難い石高道を、市九郎は、杖を頼りに辿つて居た時、ふと道の傍に、此の邊の農夫であらう、四五の人々が罵り騒いで居るのを見た。

市九郎が近づくこ、その中の一人は、早くも市九郎の姿を見付けて、

「之は、よい所へ來られた。非業の死を遂げた、哀れな亡者ぢや。通るか、られた縁に、一遍の回向をして下され」こ、云つた。

非業の死だこ聞いた時、剽賊の爲にあやめられた、旅人の死骸ではあるまいかこ思つて、市九郎は、過去の惡業を想起して、刹那に湧く悔恨の心に、兩脚の竦むのを覺えた。

「見れば水死人のやうぢやが、所々皮肉の破れて居るのは、如何した仔細ぢや」こ、市九郎は、恐るゝ訊いた。

「御出家は、旅の人こ見えて、御存じあるまいが、此川を半町も上れば、鎖渡しこ云ふ難所がある。山國谿第一の切所で、南北往來の人馬が、悉く難儀する所ぢや

低きを思ふこ、彼は今更に、半世の惡業の深きを悲しんだ。市九郎は、些細な善根によつて、自分の極惡が償ひ切れぬことを知つて、心を暗うした。逆旅の宿の寢覺にはかゝる頼母しからぬ報償をしながら尙ほ生を貪つて居るこゝが、甚だ腑甲斐ないやうに思はれて、自ら殺したいと思つたこゝさへあつた。が、その度毎に、不退轉の勇を翻し、諸人救済の大業を爲すべき機縁の臻らんことを祈念した。

享保九年の秋であつた。彼は、赤間ヶ關から小倉に渡り、豊前の國字佐八幡宮を拜し、山國川を溯つて耆闍屈山羅漢寺に詣でんものこ、四日市から南に赤土の茫々たる野原を過ぎ、道を山國川の溪谷に添うて辿つた。

筑紫の秋は、驛路の宿り毎に更けて、雜木の森には櫨赤く爛れ、野には稻黄色く稔り、農家の軒には、此の邊の名物の柿が、眞紅の珠を聯ねて居た。

夫は八月に入つて間のないある日であつた。彼は、秋の朝の光に輝く、山國川の清冽な流れを右に見ながら、三口から佛坂の山道を超えて、午近き頃樋田の驛に着いた。淋しい驛で晝食の齋に有り付いた後、再び山國谿に添うて南を指した。樋田

の知識となり濟した。彼は自分の道心が定まつて、もう動かないのを自覺するこゝ、師の坊の許しを得て、諸人救濟の大願を起し、諸國雲水の旅に出たのであつた。

美濃の國を後にして、先づ京洛の地を志した。彼は、幾人もの人を殺しながら、縱令僧形の姿なりとも、自分が生き永らへて居るのが心苦しかつた。諸人の爲、身を粉々に碎いて、自分の罪障の萬分一をも償ひたいと思つて居た。殊に自分が、木曾山中にあつて、行人をなやませたことを思ふこゝ、道中の人々に對して、償ひ切れぬ負擔を持つて居るやうに思はれた。

行住座臥にも人の爲を思はぬこゝはなかつた。道路に難澁の人を見るこゝ、彼は、手を引き、腰を押して、その道中を助けた。病に苦しむ老幼を負うて、數里に餘る道を遠ししなかつたこゝもあつた。本街道を離れた村道の橋でも、破壊されて居る時は、彼は自ら山に入つて、樹を切り、石を運んで修繕した。路の崩れたのを見れば、土砂を運び來つて繕うた。かくして、畿内から、中國を通して、只管善根を積むこゝに腐心したが、身に重なれる罪は、空よりも高く、積む善根は土堆よりも

のではない。彼の遁走の中途、偶然此の寺の前に出た時、彼の惑亂した懺悔の心は、ふと宗教的な光明に縋つて見度い云ふ、氣になつたのである。

淨願寺は、美濃一圓眞言宗の總録であつた。市九郎は、現往明遍大德衲の袖に縋つて、懺悔の眞を致した。上人は道に、此の極重惡人をも捨てなかつた。市九郎が有司の下に、自首しようか云ふのを止めて、

「重ね／＼惡業を重ねた汝ぢやから、有司の手に依つて身を梟木に晒され、現在の報いを自ら受くるのも一法ぢやが、それでは未來永劫焦熱地獄の苦艱を受けて居らねばならぬぞよ。夫れよりも、佛道に歸依し、衆生濟度の爲に、身命を捨て、人を救ふと共に、汝自身を救ふのが肝心ぢや」と、教化した。市九郎は、上人の言葉を聽いて、又更に懺悔の火に心を爛らせて當座に出家の志を定めた。彼は、上人の手に依つて得道して、了海法名を呼ばれ、只管佛道修業に肝膽を砕いたが、道心勇猛の爲か、僅か半年に足らぬ修行に、行業は氷霜よりも鋭く、朝には三密の行法を凝し、夕には祕密念佛の安座を離れず、二行彬々として豁然智度の心萌し、天晴れ

らさへも、逃れたかつた。まして自分の凡ての罪惡の、萌芽であつた女から、極力逃れたかつた。彼は、決然として立ち上つた。彼は、二三枚の衣類を風呂敷に包んだ。先刻の男から盗つた胴巻を、當座の路用として懷ろに入れたまゝに、支度も整へずに、戸外に飛び出した。が、十間ばかり走り出した時、ふと自分の持つて居る金も、衣類も、悉く盗んだものであるのに氣が付くこ、跳ね返されたやうに立ち戻つて、自分の家の上り框へ、衣類と金とを力一杯投げ付けた。

彼は、お弓に逢はないやうに、道でない道を木曾川に添うて、一散に走つた。何處へ行くこ云ふ當もなかつた。たゞ自分の罪惡の根據地から、一寸でも、一分でも遠い處へ逃れたかつた。

三

二十里に餘る道を、市九郎は、山野の別なく唯一息に走せて、翌くる日の午下り、美濃國の大垣在の、淨願寺に駆け込んだ。彼は、最初から此の寺を志して來た

人の髪のを剥ぐ爲に、血眼になつて駆け出して行く女の姿を見るこゝ、市九郎はその女に、曾つて愛情を持つて居た丈けに、心の底から淺ましく思はずには居られなかつた。その上、自分が悪事をして居る時、縱令無残にも人を殺して居る時でも、金を盗んで居る時でも、自分がして居るこゝ云ふ事が、常に不思議な分疏になつて、その淺ましさを感ずるこゝが少なかつたが、一旦人が悪事を爲して居るのを、靜かに傍觀するこゝなるこゝ、その恐ろしさ、淺ましさが、飽くまで明かに、市九郎の目に映らずには居なかつた。自分が、命を賭して迄得た女が、僅か五兩か十兩の瑠璃の爲に、女性の優しさの凡てを捨て、死骸に付く狼のやうに、殺された女の死骸を慕うて駆けて行くのを見るこゝ、市九郎は、もう此の罪惡の棲家に、此の女と一緒に一刻も居た堪まなくなつた。さう考へ出すこゝ、自分の今迄に犯した悪事が、一々蘇つて自分の心を喰ひ割いた。絞め殺した女の眸や、血みごろになつた蘭商人の呻き聲や、一太刀浴びせかけた白髪老人の悲鳴などが、一團になつて市九郎の良心を襲うて來た。彼は、一刻も早く自分の過去から逃れたかつた。彼は、自分自身か

何時もは、お弓の云ふ事を、唯々こして聴く市九郎ではあつたが、今彼の心は烈しい動亂の中にあつて、お弓の言葉などは、耳に入らない程、考へ込んで居たのである。

「いくら云つても、行かないのだね。それぢや、私が一走り行つて来ようよ。場所は何處なの。矢ッ張り何時もの處なのかい」こ、お弓が云つた。

お弓に對して、抑へ難い嫌惡を感じ始めて居た市九郎は、お弓が一刻でも自分の傍に居なくなるこゝを、むしろ欣んだ。

「知れたこゝよ。何時もの通、藪原の宿の手前の松並樹さ」こ、市九郎は吐き出すやうに云つた。

「ぢや、一走り行つて来るから。幸ひ月の夜で戸外は明るいし……。ほんこゝに、へまな仕事をするつたら、ありやしない」こ、云ひながら、お弓は裾をはしをつて、草履をつつかけるこ駈け出した。

市九郎は、お弓の後姿を見て居るこ、淺さましさに、心が一杯になつて來た。死

相手の骨迄は、しやぶらなかつた事を考へるこゝ、市九郎は悪い氣持はしなかつた。

夫にも拘はらず、お弓は、自分の同性が無残にも殺されて、其の身に付けた下衣迄が、殺戮者に對する貢物として、自分の目の前に洒されて居るのを見ながら、尙その飽き足らない慾心は、流石惡人の市九郎の眼をこぼれた頭の物に迄及んで居る、さう考へるこゝ、市九郎はお弓に對して、居た堪らないやうな淺ましさを感じた。

お弓は、市九郎の心にかうした激變が、起つて居るのを全く知らないで、

「さあ！ お前さん！ 一走り行つてお呉れ。折角、此方の手に入つて居るものを遠慮するには、當らないぢやないか」こゝ、自分の云ひ分に十分な條理がある事を信するやうに、勝誇つた表情をした。

が、市九郎は黙々として應じなかつた。

「おや！ お前さんの仕事のアラを拾つたので、お氣に觸つたこ見えるね。本當に、お前さんは行く氣はないのかい。十兩に近いまうけ物を、みす／＼ふいにしてしまふ積かい。」こゝ、お弓は幾度も市九郎に迫つた。

た。殺した女の頭の物の事などは、夢にも思つて居なかつた市九郎は、何とも答へるすべがなかつた。

「お前さん！ まさか、取るのを忘れたのぢやあるまいね。瑋瑋だこすれば、七兩や八兩は確だよ。駈け出しの泥棒ぢやあるまいし、何の爲に殺生をするのだよ。あれ丈の衣裳を着た女を、殺して置きながら、頭の物に氣が付かないとは、お前は、何時から泥棒稼業にお成りなのだえ。何こ云ふぢぢをやる泥棒だらう。何こか、云つて御覽！」こ、お弓は、威丈高になつて、市九郎に喰つてかゝつて來た。

二人の若い男女を殺してしまつた悔に、心の底迄冒されかけて居た市九郎は女の言葉から、深く傷けられた。彼は、頭の物を取る事を、忘れたこ云ふ盜賊としての失策を、或は無能を、悔ゆる心は少しもなかつた。自分は、二人を殺した事を、悪い事と思へばこそ、殺す事に氣も轉動して、女がその頭に十兩にも近い裝飾を付けて居る事を全く忘れて居た。市九郎は、今でも忘れて居たこを後悔する心は起らなかつた。強盜に身を落して、利慾の爲に人を殺しては居るものゝ、惡鬼のやうに

さか、商人さか、さうした階級の者ばかりで、若々しい夫婦連を二人迄自分の手にかけたことはなかつた。

彼は、深い良心の苛責に囚はれながら、歸つて來た。そして家に這入るこ、直ぐ様、男女の衣裳こ、金をを、汚らはしいものゝやうに、お弓の方へ投げやつた。女は、悠然として先づ金の方を調べて見た。金は思つたより少く、二十兩を僅に越して居るばかりであつた。

お弓は殺された女の着物を手に取るこ、「まあ、黄八丈の着物に紋縮緬の襦袢だね。だが、お前さん！ 此女の頭の物は、何うおしだい」こ、彼女は詰問するやうに、市九郎を顧みた。

「頭の物！」こ、市九郎は半返事をした。

「さうだよ。頭の物だよ。黄八丈に紋縮緬の着付ぢや、頭の物だつて、擬物の櫛や笄ぢやあるまいぢやないか。わたしは、先刻あの女が菅笠を取つた時に、ちらと睨んで置いたのさ。瑠璃の揃に相違なかつたよ」こ、お弓はのしかゝるやうに云つ

の安全の爲、もう此の男女を生かすことは出来ないと思つた。

相手が必死に斬り込むのを、巧みに引はづしながら、一刀を相手の首筋に浴せた。見るゝ連の女は氣を失つたやうに道の傍に蹲まりながら、ブル／＼と顫へて居た。

市九郎は、女を殺すに忍びなかつた。が、彼は自分の危急には代へられぬと思つた。男の方を殺して、殺氣立つて居る間にと思つて血刀を振り翳しながら、彼は女に近づいた。女は、兩手を合はして、市九郎に命を乞うた。市九郎は、その睜に見つめられるゝ、何うしても刀を下ろせなかつた。が、彼は殺さねばならぬと思つた。此の時市九郎の慾心は此の女を斬つて、女の衣裳を臺なしにしてはつまらないと思つた。さう思ふゝ、彼は腰に下けて居た手拭を外して女の首を絞つた。

市九郎は、二人を殺してしまふゝ、急に人を殺した恐怖を感じて、一刻も居た堪まらないやうに思つた。彼は、二人の胴巻ゝ、衣類ゝを奪ふゝ、あたふたとしてその場から一散に逃れた。彼は、今迄十人に餘る人殺をしたものゝ、夫は半白の老人

すならば決して殺生はしまいと思つて居た。

彼の決心が漸く固まつた頃に、街道の彼方から、急ぎ足に近づいて来る男女の姿が見えた。

二人は、峠からの道が、覺悟の外に遠かつた爲、疲れ切つたと思へ、お互に助け合ひながら、無言の儘に急いで來た。

二人が、丸葉柳の茂みに近づくこ、市九郎は、不意に街道の真中に突立つた。そして、今迄に幾度も口にし馴れて居る脅迫の言葉を浴せかけた。するこ、男は必死になつたらしく、道中差を抜くこ、妻を後に庇ひながら身構へした。市九郎は、一寸出鼻を折られた。が彼は聲を勵まして、「いやさ、旅の人、手向ひしてあたら命を落すまいぞ。命迄は取らうこ云はぬのぢや。在金こ衣類こを大人しく出して行け」こ、叫んだ。その顔を、相手の男は、ぢつこ見て居たが、

「やあ！ 先程の峠の茶屋の主人ではないか」こ、その男は、必死になつて飛びかかつて來た。市九郎は、もう之迄こ思つた。自分の顔を見覺えられた以上、自分達

二人の姿が見えなくなるこ、お弓は、それこばかり合圖をした。市九郎は、獲物を追ふ獵師のやうに、脇差を腰にするこ、一散に二人の後を追うた。本街道を右に折れて、木曾河の流に添うて、峻しい間道を急いだ。

市九郎が、藪原の宿手前の並樹道に來た時は、春の長い日が全く暮れて、十日ばかりの月が木曾の山の彼方に登らうこして、ほの白い月しろのみが、木曾山々を微かに浮せて居た。

市九郎は、街道に添うて生えて居る、一叢の丸葉柳の下に、身を隠しながら、夫婦の近づくのを、徐ろに待つて居た。彼も心の底では、幸福な旅をして居る二人の男女の生命を、不當に奪ふこいふここが、どんなに罪深いかこ云ふここを、考へずには居なかつた。が、一旦爲しか、つた仕事を、中止して歸るここは、お弓の手前彼の心に委せぬ事であつた。

彼は、此の夫婦の血を流したくはなかつた。成るべく相手が、自分の脅迫に二言もなく服従して呉れ、ばい、こ、思つて居た。若し彼等が路用の金こ、衣裳こを出

の前に、草鞋の紐を結び直さうとした。市九郎が、返事をしようとする前に、お弓が、臺所から出て來ながら、

「左様でゐいます、もう此の峠を降りますれば半道もゐいけません。まあ、ゆつくり休んでからになさいませ」こ、云つた。市九郎は、お弓の、この言葉を聞くこ、お弓が既に恐ろしい計畫を、自分に勧めようとして居るのを覺えた。藪原の宿迄には、まだ二里に餘る道を、もう何程もないやうに云ひくるめて、旅人に氣をゆるさせ、彼等の行程が、夜に入るのに乗じて間道を走つて、宿の入口で襲ふのが、市九郎の常套の手段であつた。その男は、お弓の言葉を聽くこ、

「それならば、茶なこ一杯所望しようか」こ、云ひながら、もう彼等の第一の筈に陥つてしまつた。女は赤い紐の付いた旅の菅笠を取り外しながら、夫の傍に寄り添うて、腰かをけた。

彼等は、此處で小半刻も、峠を登り切つた疲れを休めるこ、鳥目を置いて、紫に暮れかゝつて居る小木曾の谷に向つて、鳥居峠を降りて行つた。

金のありさうな旅人を狙つて、殺すこ巧みにその死體を片附けた。一年に三四度、さうした罪を犯すこ、彼は優に一年の生活を支へることが出來た。

夫は、彼等が江戸を出てから、三年目になる春の頃であつた。參勤交替の北國大名の行列が、二つばかり續いて通つた爲、木曾街道の宿々は、近頃になく賑つた。殊に此の頃は、信州を始め越後や、越中からの、伊勢參宮の客が街道に續いた。その中には、京から大阪へこ、遊山の旅を延すのが多かつた。市九郎は、彼等の三人を燈して、その年の生活費を得たいと思つて居た。木曾街道にも、杉や檜に交つて咲いた山櫻が散り始める夕暮のここであつた。市九郎の店に男女二人の旅人が立ち寄つた。夫は明かに夫婦であつた。男は三十を越して居た。女は二十三四であつた。伴を連れな氣樂な旅に出た信州の豪農の若夫婦らしかつた。

市九郎は、二人の身装を見るこ、彼は此の二人を今年の犠牲者にしようかこ、思つて居た。

「もう敷原の宿迄は、何程もあるまいな。」かう云ひながら、男の方は、市九郎の店

か。度胸を据ゑて、世の中を面白く暮すのが上分別さ。こゝ、市九郎の心に、明暮惡の拍車を加へた。が、信州から木曾の蘆原の宿迄來た時には、二人の路用の金は、百も残つて居なかつた。二人は、窮するに連れて、惡事を働かねばならなかつた。最初はおかうした男女の組合せとしては、最も爲し易い美人局を稼業とした。そうして、信州から尾州へかけての宿々で、往來の町人百姓の路用の金を奪つて居た。初の程は、女からの烈しい教唆で、つい惡事を犯し始めて居た市九郎も、遂には惡事の面白さを味ひ始めた。浪人姿をした市九郎に對して、被害者の町人や百姓は、金を取られながら、頗る柔順であつた。

惡事が段々進歩して行つた市九郎は、美人局からもつゝ單純な、手數のいらぬ強請をやり、最後には、切取強盜を正當な稼業とさへ心得るやうになつた。

彼は、何時こなしに信濃から木曾へかゝる鳥居峠に土着した。そして晝は茶店を開き、夜は強盜を働いた。

彼はもうそうした生活に、何の躊躇をも、不安をも感じないやうになつて居た。

「名うての始末屋だから、瓶にでも入れて、土の中へでも埋めてあるのかも知れない」さう忌々しさうに云ひ切るこ、金目のありそうな衣類や、印籠を、手早く風呂敷包にした。

かうして、この姦夫姦婦が、浅草田原町の旗本中川三郎兵衛の家を出たのは、安永三年の秋の初であつた。後には、當年三歳になる三郎兵衛の一子實之助が、父の非業の死も知らず、乳母の懷ろにスヤ／＼眠つて居るばかりであつた。

二

市九郎とお弓とは、江戸を逐電してから、東海道は態^{わざ}こ避けて、人目を忍びながら、東山道を上方へ志した。市九郎は、主殺しの罪から、絶えず良心の苛責を受けて居た。が、けんべき茶屋の女中上りの、莫連者のお弓は、市九郎が少しでも沈んだ様子を見せるこ、

「何うせ兇狀持ちになつたからには、いくらく／＼しても仕様がなないぢやない

が行つて、じたばた騒がないやうに云つて來ようよ。さあ！お前は在金を探して下さいよ」こ、云ふその聲は、確に顫へを帶びて居た。が、さうした顫へを、女性としての強い意地で抑制して、努めて平氣を装つて居るらしかつた。

市九郎は——自分特有の動機を、スツカリ失くして居た市九郎は、女の聲を聴くこ、蘇つたやうに活氣づいた。彼は、自分の意志で働くこ云ふよりも、女の意志に依つて動く傀儡のやうに立ち上るこ、座敷に置いてある桐の茶簞笥に手をかけた。そして、その眞白い木目に、血に汚れた手形を付けながら、抽斗をあちらこちらこ探し始めた。が、女——主人の妾のお弓が歸つて來る迄に、市九郎は、二朱銀の五兩包を、たゞ一つ見付けたばかりであつた。お弓は、臺所から引返して來て、その金を見るこ、

「そんな端^はした金が、何うなるものかね」こ、云ひながら、今度は自分で、自暴^{ヤケ}に抽斗を引掻き廻した。しまひには、鎧櫃の中迄探したが、小判は一枚も出て來はしなかつた。

市九郎は、深い悔恨に囚はれて居た。一個の蕩兒であり、無頼の若武者ではあつたけれども、まだ惡事名なの付くことは、何もして居なかつた。まして八逆の第一なる主殺しの大罪を犯さうとは、彼の思ひも付かぬ事だつた。彼は、血の付いた脇差を取り直した。主人の妾めかけ懇懃を通じて、その爲に成敗を受けようとした時、却つてその主人を殺す云ふことは、何う考へても、彼に、所はなかつた。彼は、まだビク／＼動いて居る、主人の屍體を尻眼にかけながら、靜に自殺の覺悟を堅めて居た。するに、その時、次の間から、今迄の大きい壓迫から、逃れ出たやうな聲がした。

「ほんごにまあ、何うなる事かと思つて心配したわ。お前が眞二つにやられた後は、私の番ちやあるまいか、先刻から、屏風の後で息を凝して見て居たのさ。が、ほんごうにい、按配だつたね。かうなつちや、一刻も猶豫はして居られないから、在金をさらつて逃るさしよう。まだ仲間達は氣が付いて居ないやうだから、逃けるなら今の裡うちさ。乳母や、女中などは、臺所の方でガタ／＼顫へて居るらしいから、私

主人は、その不利に氣が付くこ自由な戶外へ出ようとして、二三步後退りして縁の外へ出た。その隙に市九郎が、尙も付け入らうとするのを、主人は「えい」と焦だつて切下した。が、焦だつた餘りその太刀は、縁側と、座敷との間に垂れ下つて居る鴨居に、不覺にも二三寸切り込まれた。

「しまつた」こ、三郎兵衛が、太刀を引かうとする隙に、市九郎は踏み込んで、主人の脇腹を思ふ様横に薙いたのであつた。

敵手が倒れてしまつた瞬間に、市九郎は我に復つた。今迄昂奮して朦朧として居た意識が、漸く落着くこ、彼は、自分が主殺しの大罪を犯したこに、氣が付いて、後悔こ、恐怖この爲めに、其處に平臥^{へたは}つてしまつた。

夜は初更を過ぎて居た。母屋こ、仲間部屋こは、遠く隔つて居るので、主従の恐ろしい格闘は、母屋に住んで居る女中以外、まだ何人にも知られなかつたらしい。その女中達は、此の烈しい格闘に氣を失ひ、一間の内に集まつて、たゞ身を顫はせて居る丈であつた。

が、一旦血を見るに、市九郎の心は、忽ちに變つて居た。彼の分別のあつた心は、闘牛者の槍を受けた牡牛のやうに荒んでしまつた。何うせ死ぬのだと思ふに、其處に世間もなければ、主従もなかつた。今迄は、主人だと思つて居た相手の男が、ただ自分の生命を、脅さうとして居る一個の動物——夫も兇惡な動物さしか、見えなかつた。彼は奮然として、攻撃に轉じた。彼は「おう」^{おあ}と叫きながら、持つて居た燭臺を、相手の面上を目掛けて投げ打つた。市九郎が、防禦の爲の防禦をして居るのを見て、氣を許してか、つて居た、主人の三郎兵衛は、不意に投げ付けられた燭臺を受けかねて、その燭臺の一角が、した、かに彼の右眼を打つた。市九郎は、相手のたじろぐ隙に、脇差を抜くより早く飛びかゝつた。

「おのれ、手向ひするか！」と、三郎兵衛は激怒した。市九郎は無言で付け入つた。主人の三尺に近い太刀と、市九郎の短い脇差とが、二三度烈しく打ち合うた。主従が必死になつて、十数合太刀を合はす間に、主人の太刀先が、二三度低い天井をかすつて、屢々大刀を操る自由を失はうとした。市九郎は其處へ付け入つた。

市九郎は、主人の切り込んで来る太刀を受け損じて、左の頬から顎へかけて、微傷ではあるが、一太刀受けた。自分の罪を——縦令向うから挑まれたとは云へ、主人の寵妾に非道な戀をしたと云ふ、自分の致命的な罪を、意識して居る市九郎は、主人の振り上げた太刀を、必至な刑罰として、譬へその切先を避くるに努むる迄も、夫に反抗する心持は、少しも持つては居なかつた。彼は、たゞかうした自分の迷から、命を捨てるここが、如何にも惜しまれたので、出来る丈は逃れて見たいと思つて居た。それで、主人から不義を云ひ立てられて斬り付けられた時、有合せた燭臺を、早速の獲物として、主人の鋭い太刀先を避けて居た。が、五十に近いとは云へ、まだ筋骨のたくましい主人が疊みかけて切り込む太刀を、攻撃に出られない悲しさには、何時もなく受け損じて、最初の一太刀を、左の頬に受けたのである。

思 得 の 考 究

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