

THE BAMBOO SWORD
AND OTHER SAMURAI TALES

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著 者 藤沢周平
訳 者 ギャビン・フルー
発行者 富田 充
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Shuhei Fujisawa

Translated by
Gavin Frew

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The Bamboo Sword



The young guard had been keeping an eye on the family ever since it first appeared in the square beyond the castle's outer gate. The family consisted of a samurai, his wife, and two young children holding their mother's hands. They were dressed in thread-bare clothes.

As they drew nearer the gate, the guard saw that his first impression of poverty had been correct. However, he was struck as much by the beauty of the wife as by the sorry state of their clothing. Few women in the town could rival her in looks. He stood watching them fixedly until he realized they were heading straight for the gate.

"And where might you be going?" he demanded officiously. His tone was severe, but he used the polite form of address because although the family looked extremely poor, the man wore two swords revealing his samurai status.

A river ran past the main gate of Unasaka Castle, creating an impressive moat sixty feet across. When the castle was built, the

river had been deepened and both banks strengthened with stone walls. A wooden bridge across the moat provided access from the town to the castle. On the town side of the moat was a small wooden gateway manned by a few guards, while the main gate on the other side was an imposing two-story building, with huge doors and a heavy, tiled roof.

Besides this main gate, there were eleven other entrances into the castle's outer bailey, within which lay an inner bailey. Inside that was a central donjon that dominated the skyline. The castle had armories, powder magazines, storehouses for food in case of a siege, stables, and the domain's administrative offices. In the outer bailey there were also a number of houses belonging to senior retainers, providing an extra line of defense for the donjon.

The fact that people lived within the castle meant that they—as well as merchants, farmers, and others with business at the domain's offices—had to be allowed entry, and it was the duty of the guards at the outer gate to check the comings and goings of these people. The gate was open from five o'clock in the morning until five o'clock in the evening, but even during this period farmers had to receive permission each time they entered, while others had to present passes issued by the residence or the domain office they wished to visit. In order for the guards to confirm that the passes were genuine, all twelve gates of the castle had ledgers with samples of the various seals of authorization.

In this case, the suspicious attitude of the young guard was not merely a result of customary caution but also due to the family's evident poverty.

The man looked to be about thirty-five years old. He was wear-

ing a samurai's black kimono bearing his family crest and had two swords thrust through the sash at his waist. His feet in their straw sandals were covered with dust, while the straw hat he held in one hand was old and had several holes. His wife and children also looked as if they had been on the road with him and had just arrived at the castle after a long journey. This was not unusual in itself, but closer inspection of their clothes revealed a mass of darns. The man's kimono had been washed so often that the family crest was faded almost to the point of being indiscernible.

Furthermore, all four family members looked exhausted. The man was in the worst condition of them all, and his sunken cheeks were covered with unkempt beard, making him appear all the more disreputable. It was difficult to imagine what business he might have in the castle.

"My name is Oguro Tanjuro," the man said, approaching the guard at the gate. His voice sounded unexpectedly cheerful. "I was once a retainer of Lord Matsudaira in Echizen. I wonder if you could help me."

"What is it you want?"

"I'm looking for a man by the name of Tsugé Hachirozaemon. I believe he holds a position here."

"Tsugé?" The young guard gazed at the sky in thought for a moment, but then remembered. "Yes, he resides here."

"He says he resides here," repeated Tanjuro, turning around to his family. They had been looking on with anxious expressions, but relief flooded into their faces when they heard this. They seemed overjoyed, and the children even skipped a few steps, all the time holding their mother's hands.

"Tsugé Hachirozaemon is the chamberlain of the domain."

"Did you hear that? He's the chamberlain," Tanjuro repeated, and his young family again capered with glee.

"Could you be so kind as to tell me where his house is located?" said Tanjuro, turning to the guard.

"He lives over there, in the outer bailey." The guard still regarded Tanjuro and his family dubiously. "But what is the nature of your business with him? Are you an acquaintance?"

"No, I've never had the honor of meeting him. However . . ." Tanjuro hurriedly reached inside his kimono and extracted four or five letters tied together with string. He licked his thumb and finger and sorted through them, selecting one with "Tsugé Hachirozaemon" written on it in bold black characters. He removed the letter and held it out for the guard to read.

"As you see, it's a letter of recommendation."

The guard scanned the contents quickly.

"So you are looking for a position?"

"Yes, that is so."

The guard scrutinized Tanjuro and his family once more. Now that he thought about it, he remembered that the domain had hired several samurai a month or so earlier, and there had been many men in much the same condition as Tanjuro coming and going. He had no idea where they had heard about the vacancies, but they all carried similar letters of recommendation and had been desperate to find work. However, that had been during the heat of July, so those positions had long been filled. Seeing the quiet expectancy on the faces of the pitiful little group before him, though, the guard did not want to be the one to disappoint them.

"I've been without a post for a long time now. We were staying with an acquaintance in the Aizu region when we heard about the vacancies here. Luckily, our acquaintance is a good friend of Tsugé Hachirozaemon, so we rushed here as fast as we could. It's a great relief to know that Tsugé is the chamberlain. Even our friend did not know that."

"You may pass," the guard said. Seeing that Tanjuro was about to put the recommendation letter back inside his kimono, he added, "You'd better keep that letter out to show the guards at the main gate."

He guessed that the guards there would also find Tanjuro's shabby state sufficient grounds to stop him. He watched as the family, now walking with a lighter step, made its way over the bridge.

"What was all that about, Hashimoto?" the guard's superior asked, unable to conceal the mirth in his voice as he came out of the guardroom. "Fool! Doesn't he know there's no more hiring? I hear they already took on five extra men."

"That's what I thought, but I didn't have the heart to tell them."

"No matter. They'll find out soon enough when they get to Tsugé's mansion."



It just so happened that the chamberlain, Tsugé Hachirozaemon, was away on official business that day, so Tanjuro did not manage to see him after all. On their arrival at Tsugé's residence the family

was met by a young man who stared in disbelief at their tattered clothing and paid scant attention to Tanjuro's formal greetings before disappearing back into the house. His place was taken by a polite, rather plump woman in her mid-forties, who turned out to be the chamberlain's wife.

A look of puzzlement passed across her face when she first saw them, but her smile was warm. She listened to Tanjuro's speech of introduction and read the letter of recommendation he presented.

"I see," she said, "but I am afraid I have to disappoint you."

"Oh?"

"Unfortunately, my husband is away at the moment and will not be back for four or five days."

"Four or five days?" Tanjuro repeated with a sigh. His face crumpled, and for a moment she thought he was going to break down and weep, but he soon brought himself under control.

She realized that the family must have pinned all their hopes on her husband, and the sight of their threadbare clothes moved her to pity. She had never heard of Katayanagi Zusho, the man in Aizu who had recommended Tanjuro to her husband, and she had no idea whether there was a post available, but her heart went out to the family before her, proud in their bearing despite their evident poverty. The letter said that Tanjuro had been employed by the daimyo of Inuyama, Lord Hiraiwa, until he died without leaving an heir, which resulted in the disbandment of the clan. Tanjuro had then found a position with the Matsudaira clan of Echizen province. However, it was not the man's background but the sight of his wife and young children that touched the chamberlain's wife. Tanjuro's wife was slight in build and seemed no more

than twenty years of age. She looked almost like a child herself, while her daughters, one aged five or six and the other about three, stood staring up at her with intelligent eyes. They were dressed in rags, but they still retained their pride as befitted their samurai status.

"My husband has gone to Konuma but will definitely return in four or five days. Can you wait until then?"

The town of Konuma, located by the sea some twenty miles from Unasaka, was the site of Kaionji Castle, one of the clan's subsidiary castles under the charge of a steward.

"Yes, we can wait. I will come again after he has returned."

"Do you know where you will stay?"

"No, we have no plans yet. We will look for a suitable inn."

"Why don't you stay here? If you have no objections, I'd be happy to see to your needs."

"No, we could not impose on you like that," Tanjuro said, shaking his head. "We came to ask a favor, and we couldn't possibly take advantage of your hospitality that way."

"In that case you must promise to come again after my husband has returned. I will put in a word on your behalf."

"We are most obliged." Tanjuro made a deep bow, and his wife and children did the same. As he was about to leave, he stopped and asked awkwardly, "May I trouble you to return my letter of recommendation?"

"Here you are," the chamberlain's wife replied, handing him the letter that had been lying open on her knees. She looked at him curiously. "But surely you will be giving it to my husband anyway?"

"That is true," Tanjuro said, putting his hand to his head in a

gesture of embarrassment. "But it is very important to me."

She understood then just how vital the letter must be for the four of them, and she warmed to them even more. "Just a moment," she said as they turned to leave. "If you can't find a suitable inn, try the Tokiwaya in Yayoi. My husband goes there a lot so I'm sure you will be treated well there."

"You are most kind."

"Oh, I almost forgot something important."

Beckoning them back inside the entrance hall, she went to the rear of the house, reappearing a little later with a cloth-wrapped bundle and a letter.

"Please don't think me presumptuous, but I have packed some old clothes for you and also written a letter for you to show the guards at the gate the next time you come." She had guessed that Tanjuro might have trouble entering the castle given his present appearance, so she had written a few lines and affixed the household seal at the bottom of the letter to facilitate his passage.

Tanjuro thanked her once more and the family left, walking out through the main castle gate and over the bridge in silence. When they came to the square beyond the small outer gate, Tanjuro looked back and saw the guard there, stave in hand, watching them suspiciously.

"What shall we do now?" he asked, turning to his wife. His children were looking at him uneasily. "I thought that once we presented our case to Tsugé all our problems would be solved. I did not allow for the fact that he might not be home."

"At least we know he exists and that he is the chamberlain. So our worries are over," his wife said encouragingly, holding the

package Tsugé's wife had given her. "We just have to wait four or five days."

"But how are we going to manage?" Tanjuro asked anxiously. Realizing their predicament, his wife lowered her eyes. They had entered the Unasaka domain the previous night and had spent the last of their money at an inn in Eguchi village. Earlier that day she had also exchanged her last item of value, a hair ornament, for some rice balls for lunch.

"Are there any rice balls left?" Tanjuro asked. As long as they had some food they could sleep under the eaves of a shrine that night.

This was the second time Tanjuro had been a ronin, as samurai who had no lord to serve were called. The first time was when Hiraiwa Shinkichi, the daimyo his family had served since his father's time, died on New Year's Eve in 1611 without a successor and the clan was disbanded. Ironically, the daimyo did have a son, but as his wife's father had fought on the wrong side in the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, in which the great general Tokugawa Ieyasu won control of the entire country, Hiraiwa was wary of arousing the hostility of the new government and had refrained from registering him as his heir. As a reward for this gesture of loyalty, the shogun had given Hiraiwa his own seventh son, Matsuchiyo, as an heir, but the boy had died at the age of six and no other heir had been chosen.

Tanjuro was twenty years old when Hiraiwa died and he became a ronin. His father had already passed away, and he had his elderly mother and a young girl of ten to support. This girl, Tami,