

### Chapter 29.

A that time there was a band called Shinchogumi, or New Levies, organized of bravoos to keep anti-Shogunate politicians of various clans in check. Their duty was first of all to arrest politicians and undesirables who entered Yedo; assassinate them if necessary.

At Yanagiwara, Kanda, a dozen levy-men were from morning assembled in the house of one Kaneko, a levy-man. They held counsel in whisper. In ones and twos they went out and then came back. They seemed to be planning something in secret.

It was towards the end of the eleventh month. The day was cold. The sky had been dull from morning. Powdery snow began to fall in the evening as expected.

From the belfry of the Kan-eiji Temple boomed forth the sunset bell. Then one of the levy-men who left the place last came back to report:—

"Captain, all's well."

"That's good."

The man who was called captain was one Kamo Serizawa of Mito.

"Two palanquins have left Sakyo Sugiyama's residence; the second palanquin contains Hachiro Kiyokawa for certain."

"Sure?"

"Yes, sure. I commissioned Buhei to see to things meanwhile, so you had better get ready, sir."

"Very well."

A dozen or so levy-men sprang to their feet anxious for the fray, and put on the black-mask dress.

There was, however, one who sat in a corner and held a huge goblet, full of strong drink, in hand. He now yelled out "Halt, the one behind is our man Kiyokawa, but who goes before?"

It was Isami Kondō, the dare-devil, second in command of the levies, who spoke.

"That was," the scout turned towards Kondō, "For certain Isenokami Takahashi."

"What, Takahashi!" they all stared at one another, for Takahashi was a man none could equal should he take up a spear.

In those days there was one Sakyo Sugiyama, a retainer to the Shogun, who lived in Maru-no-Uchi. Two or three times in a month rare birds of the time used to assemble there for a chat. Those who used to meet were Isenokami Takahashi; Tetsutaro Yamaoka, tutor to the Mikado in latter days; Shuzo Ishizaka; Gorō Asaka; Hachiro Kiyokawa; Yosaburo Kaneko and Toranosuke Shimada. The number was not big, but the members were men above the average; some were Shogun's retainers, some were royalists—they were alike kept under surveillance of the levy-men.

Especially Hachiro Kiyokawa was unpardonable — the levy-men thought. He was an officer of the levy-men once, and now was in league with the royalists in secret—abominable traitor! 'Kill Kiyokawa first,' was their slogan and now their plan was going to be put into execution. From daytime Sugiyama's mansion had been watched and the scout reported a unique chance.

"Takahashi?! what is he! kill him, too," yelled Serizawa, the leader, much excited.

"But Takahashi holds an important place among the Shogunate retainers," objected Toshizo Hijikata from Ishidamura, County of Tama, Musashi Province, the same village as Kondō, the dare-devil.

"He is a Shogun's retainer and he traffics with the contemptible politicians. Scoundrel Takahashi! He, too—together with Kiyokawa, for this is a good chance. Or are you afraid of his spear?" said Serizawa, the leader, and looked round insinuating at Kondō, the dare-devil, and Hijikata. Kondō was hurt. He took *Kotetsu* his favourite sword famed for killing whenever it leaves its sheath, and staring back at Serizawa in high spirits said, "Kondō's *Kotetsu* is here, even if Takahashi becomes superhuman when he takes up a spear, I do not hesitate to give him battle."

"Hold on," said Hijikata to cool down excited leaders. "Our objective of the night is Kiyokawa, it's not wise that we waste our energy upon anybody else. We had better wait until the two palanquins part, and then set upon

Kiyokawa when he is alone. In that way we can behead him with the least fight. Isn't that the plan?"

"Um!" all nodded slightly, including Serizawa as well as Kondō, and they further listened to Hijikata.

"Let us now start to shadow the palanquins to put Kiyokawa to blood-offering when the palanquin containing Takahashi is parted from the one containing Kiyokawa. But if no such opportunity should present itself, we deal both with Kiyokawa as well as Takahashi."

"A good idea, will you take command of this enterprise?" Serizawa said.

"Very well, you and Mr. Kondō will stay here, I'll bring here the head of Kiyokawa," responded Hijikata promptly.

"Then the party will be thirteen in all."

"Very well."

At this juncture Kondō looking into one corner of the room called out "Mr. Yoshida, Mr. Yoshida," to a man who had been lying down and asleep intoxicated a little. He shook the man to wake him. The man got up abruptly and blinked, it was Ryunosuke Tsukue.

Ryunosuke had joined the Band of New Levies in order to obscure his trace, and because he came from the same locality as Kondō and Hijikata.

"Overslept, sir," Ryunosuke said and taking his sword up he came forward.

"We are all ready, Mr. Yoshida, as you see," Hijikata said.

"Very well, I'll get ready, too," Ryunosuke answered and girdled his clothes and put on leggings ready for action. Putting on the black mask he asked:—

"Is it Kiyokawa alone?"

"As we all understand it, there's a nasty companion."

"A nasty companion?!"

"Yes, Isenokami Takahashi, the expert spearman, is with him."

"Both?"

"No, our objective is Kiyokawa only, but if necessary both."

"I see."

Ryunosuke looked at Hijikata and Okada in the face and asked:—

"What is your plan if Takahashi must be tackled?"

"We set upon Kiyokawa. If Takahashi interferes you and Mr. Okada will tackle him."

"All right."

Here Hijikata's plan, was that he would, with his men, attack Kiyokawa, and if Takahashi proved to be troublesome Ryunosuke Tsukue and Yaichi Okada would see to him.

The Shinchogumi, or the Band of New Levies was composed of free lance Samurai who were itching for action. The Shogunate charged them with the duty that needed what they liked most—fight. The policy may be called to counteract poison with poison.

Isami Kondō was a man leonine, excitable, and emotional, therefore quick to make friends even with the enemy once he saw reason to do so. His manner of fence was rough to the extreme. Of course he was a highly skillful fencer, but he usually won by virtue of his unique dash.

Toshizo Hijikata by comparison was a man of patience. Quiet but can become rougher even than Kondō when he is roused. He never forgave an enemy. The government circle was of opinion that Kondō was easy to manage but Hijikata was not, and he was dreaded by the officials.

Serizawa, the captain of the band, was worse still, later he was killed by Kondo. After the death of Serizawa the name of the band was changed from Shincho to Shinsen, or from New Levy to New Chosen, and Kondo was made captain. The reader will find that later.

The snow kept on falling. The night was after that of the fourth hour (ten o'clock). The wind had fallen and it was not so very cold but there was no traffic in the street.

A few notes of the pipe of a blind shampooer were heard in the direction of Neribei Kōji. Bow-w-o-w came from Surugadai Hill. Except, it was all still. Then appeared two palanquins one after the other proceeding on Shoheibashi Bridge. By the side of front palanquin walked an attendant shouldering a spear. The badge on the

lantern that went by the rear palanquin was 'herb-gingers face-to-face.'

When the two palanquins passed the snow covered Shoheibashi the leading palanquin headed towards Kōbusho. Then something said in a loud voice by the one within the palanquin was heard. The one in the rear palanquin answered in a lower tone, and then the two palanquins parted their way.

The front palanquin, attended by the spear, headed towards the temple for Confucious. The rear palanquin accompanied by a lantern marked with 'herb-gingers' headed straight to Uyeno by way of Outer Kanda.

By Shoheibashi Bridge was a mass of objects which looked like so many 'sea-goblins.' They had been watching breathless the palanquins. Upon seeing them parted, they, grasping the hilt of their sword, crossed the bridge that was high and concave. Needless to say they were the party of levy-men under Hijikata.

The palanquin accompanied by the spear undoubtedly carried Isenokami Takahashi, and he was going home to his residence at Kagurazaka, Ushigome, in the compound of which was a giant camphor tree. For that reason people called his residence Camphor-tree Mansion. Evidently he was returning there.

The levy-men, as they had hoped, now had Kiyokawa by himself. They, the desperadoes of New Levy, were about to rush to the palanquin, hand on hilt and their swords loosend in the sheath ready to be drawn.

"Sh!" however said Hijikata stopping the men. Without his leave the men could not act. They grew blood-thirsty, the swords seemed wanting to leave the scabbard by themselves. Gokencho and Suehirocho streets were past, now it was Hiro Kōji, yet Hijikata gave no signal.

Kiyokawa's palanquin, oblivious to the danger, proceeded skirting Uyeno Hill.

The men thought that Hijikata's plan was to avoid the town for the fray, and allow the man to get into the hills and there to make a thorough job of him. And they followed the palanquin into the hill. But the likely wood patches of the hill had been all passed, they now descended to the foot of Shinsaka approaching Uguisudani. What was the meaning of this? Now the hill was nearly past!



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From Shinsaka to Uguisudani the road was lonely. Looking back the gloomy Uyeno woods blocked the view. Looking ahead towards Asakusa, taking in Negishi, only a few temple roofs and samurai residences were seen scattered here and there.

When Hachiro Kiyokawa's palanquin at last reached the open tract descending Shinsaka, the snow decreased. The night by now ought to have had the moon if the sky were clear, so it was not dark.



"Halt!" shouted Hijikata who had been singularly patient, and flash he drew his long sword. His men leaped forward like so many locusts, drawing their swords and surrounding the palanquin.

The bearers were taken aback.

"Who are you? No pranks," they said, still being under the influence of the drinks they were given while waiting at the mansion, but needless to say they were soon cowered. When the lantern was cut down the bearers fell prostrate on the ground upon their faces begging for life:—

"Sir, please spare us, sir."

"Go!"

None of the men liked to take such mean lives as these palanquin bearers, so they were allowed to depart. Helter skelter they ran back towards Uyeno Hill. Now fifteen cold blades were ready for the palanquin.

From within the palanquin however came nothing, not even so much as some one moving. If the man had been sleeping he must have now awake, if had been awake he must have now sprung to feet.

"Come out," Hijikata shouted, but no response from within—the palanquin stood there as still as death. Then the black hooded head of Hijikata was seen nodding to one of the men, who were all alike attired. He nodded in return, and got round to the right side of the palanquin and raised his sword to assist Hijikata who had got to the left side changing the hold of his sword to get ready for his fresh move.

The remaining ten odd men took a few paces back and surrounded the palanquin. Then Hijikata lunged his heavy long sword through the palanquin—it was empty.

Just then "Ah" uttered one of the blacks and fell face down on the snow his sword falling after him like a leaf.

Astonished were Hijikata and his men, but they were too late. Taking the fence of a temple as protection to the rear a man stood on the guard of 'to the eye, lower,' his sword-strap being used to tuck up the sleeves.

"Presumptuous, gentlemen! I am Toranosuke Shimada of Okachi-Machi. If you desire a bout, challenge properly. If it is for enmity state reason."

"By Jove!" escaped the lips of Hijikata.

Snakes poking the bush, goes the saying; the levy-men got a tiger by poking a palanquin.

This mistake was due to Shimada returning home in Kiyokawa's palanquin for the latter by mistake travelled home in the palanquin of the former.

A man who has thoroughly acquired an art seems to have keen intuition. Intuitively Shimada felt on the way that danger lurked about him. He never dreamt that levy-men in such a big number would come, but sat in the palanquin with his back close to the wall of the palanquin ready to foil a thrust so long as it was not from the rear. And by the time Hijikata shouted halt, the sword-strap had already been put over the shoulders and passed under the arm-pits to tuck up the sleeves, and the hilt-pin of his favourite sword, forged by Saburo Shizu, wetted. At the

same time as Hijikata's sword pierced the palanquin in vain, Shimada drew upon his sword as he sat his back still close to the wall, and cut the leg of the man who stood by the palanquin holding the sword above his head ready for Shimada, and then leapt out.

The reason that Hijikata exclaimed astonishment was not only because they had made a mistake in the man but because Hijikata surely knew that Shimada was the first class swordsman of the time.

But the men of New Levy were not such people as would cower for a name, nor there were any who would say 'oh, it was a mistake and so let us withdraw' when they found themselves in this predicament. They were all expert fencers of this school or that school; they had joined the band in order to find scope for their sword and bloodthirsty inclinations. Therefore a mistake in the man gave them not much concern. Some might have thought it was a piece of good luck that they could urge such a famous fencer as Shimada to fight.

Ryunosuke Tsukue, who was charged with the duty of standing by to the fray ready to give help if necessary, together with Yaichi Okada, was particularly much excited on hearing that the man was Toranosuke Shimada, as if he had met an age-long enemy whom he must kill. Ryunosuke felt the muscles of his arm quiver from excitement. He, however, sought a shade a little way off to watch how Shimada would act.

Hijikata now had to decide for the man had given his name to make it clear who he was.

"At him" Hijikata shouted, for now there was no other course open, he thought.

"Yei" came from Shimada rentng the air,—a yell that sounded as if something terrible was torn asunder. With the yell Shimada, who had been as still as night, leapt forward with lightning speed and with only one cut sent the soul of a levy-man Mizushima to the Better Land giving it at the shoulder as he took a step forward, his blood dyeing the snow red.

Shimada went towards a tree that stood beyond Mizushima to cover his rear and stood on the guard of 'to the eye, lower,' again.

Really it was like a ferocious tiger roar at the moon in the dead of night in the heart of high and wild mountains to hear Shimada yell. It made the levy men, rough and fearless as they were, shudder.

Presently one Otsuka fell doubled up on the snow with his one arm cut off; and Shimada was back to his original position before the fence, and again at 'to the eye, lower.' In a very short space of time two of the desperadoes were put to death.

Toranosuke Shimada thoroughly mastered the sense of fear by means of the Zen sect meditation in addition to the mastery of swordsmanship. He was from Nakatsu of Buzen. When young he was not at all gentle in temperament; he used to abuse people and quarrel with them, and

seemed rash and light-headed. But as for swordsmanship he was a genius, at twenty he was past master.

Resigning from the service of his lord he travelled all over Japan to gain experience and broaden his views—calling not only on every fencing master and masters of other military arts but also on scholars and persons celebrated for art or lore, and thus improved himself. His original style of fencing was Jikishinkage. Later he found that there was uncanny something relating to swordsmanship that was to be acquired only by meditation on nature of things. So every day for five years he attended the meditation practice at a certain Zen sect Buddhist temple at Shinagawa. There he underwent a thorough respiration and mental training, and made a through swordsman of himself.

Since his taking to the meditation sect, it was said that his disposition underwent a change, the former rash and light-headedness completely disappeared and began to show the mellow and tranquil thoroughness of a finished man.

When he fenced he used to take the guard of 'to the eye, lower' and watching the eye of the opponent would advance into an opening scarcely raising his foot. Something was there in his silent advance, for even the most ferocious fencer would find his hair stand on edge to see him advance into him in that manner. Masterfully yet gently, step by step Toranosuke Shimada would fence. But if the opponent were inclined to be rude and haughty, the gentleness fell off all at once and ferocity, that even

gods would shirk to face, would manifest itself. Then those who watched the bout would clench their fists and hold their breath for anxiety. Perhaps this fencer was not only the best one of his time, but is also one of the few leading swordsmen throughout history.

Leap in, cut and leap out or leap in, be cut and fall down, are the only possible courses open for a fencer when a superior number surrounded him.

When Shimada shouted 'yei,' he was found on the opposite side breaking through the cordon, and one or two of the levy-men were cut down.

Those who surrounded Shimada were no mere figures, they were young desperadoes in addition to being well trained how to use the sword in this school or that. Yet none of them could parry Shimada's cut or thrust even once; the contest was too one-sided.

Toranosuke Shimada who had death out dealt to already five of the levy-men was back again to the fence and stood calmly again on the guard of 'to the eye, lower.'

For the credit of the levy-men, it must be stated that none of them flinched though man after man of their comrades were down before their very eyes. If Shimada were a tiger, the levy-men were blood thirsty wolves eager for a dead body.

But Ryunosuke Tsukue alone did not take part in the fray. He stood a little way off in a shade and watched this scene absent-mindedly.

The report that Shimada was waylaid reached Isenokami Takahashi as he sat talking with Kiyokawa having returned to his own mansion at Kagurazaka.

"Strange! Could there be any dare-devil in this present-day world who would venture to assault such a fencer as Shimada?" Kiyokawa said.

"The Levy-men had no cause to waylay Shimada; possibly they had made a mistake," responded Takahashi.

"You see, through my mistake Mr. Shimada had to return in my palanquin. The levy-men regard me their enemy, so I am certain that they assaulted Mr. Shimada taking him for me," Kiyokawa said and rose to go to render assistance to Shimada.

"Shimada is not the sort that needs help, but....." rose Takahashi, too.

Soon the gate of the Camphor-tree Mansion opened wide to allow Isenokami on horse-back in a light helmet and riding coat, accompanied by Hachiro Kiyokawa on foot pass out. After them followed the spear carrier who held the famous spear of Isenokami Takahashi that bore the rank of the fifth junior court grade. The party hurried on dashing the snow.



**Chapter 31.**

When Isenokami Takahashi and Hachiro Kiyokawa arrived poste haste at Shinsakashita, they found the place turned into a battle-field. The yells echoed from the woods like the beasts of prey barking over a carcass. The snow was trodden muddy and five or six bodies were seen at a glance lying right and left on the snow, and the smell of blood filled the air of Uguisudani or Warblers' Dale.

When the figure of Shimada in the guard of 'to the eye, lower' with a wall behind came into sight, Hachiro Kiyokawa drew upon his sword to cut into the levy-men. But Takahashi who had now dismounted and taken the spear in hand stopped him saying "Shimada is a man unassailable. Remain here looking on. We must not disturb him. Sensuke, hold up the lantern."

Sensuke held up the lantern; it made its neighbourhood as light as a spring night moon would illumine.

"Yei" yelled Shimada—two of the levy-men were seen falling thud on the snow.

"Yei-yah!" yells in response were heard from the levy-men who rallied again to close on Shimada once more. As many as six levy-men were counted in the dimness of the night.

By now Shimada cut down seven of the levy-men. No matter how well a man might be trained in swordsmanship, if he had dealt with as many as seven, he ought to



show some sign of fatigue. Likewise, no matter how well a sword might be forged it must, by using so often in quick succession, be damaged now. But strange to note Toranosuke Shimada never differed his guard, nor carriage nor respiration because he had dealt with several opponents one after another in succession. If it were daylight one would have seen Shimada's face perfectly normal and it must have looked as if he were tackling children.

The levy-men on their part deserves a praise, too. If they were men of less courage they ought to have taken to flight before so many of them were cut down. Shimada would not chase one who ran. A half of the number down, yet none flinched! Possibly they would fight to the last. The reason of their brave tenacity was that all were well trained swordsmen and they were all anxious to win the laurel of putting the famed Shimada to sword.

Watching the scene from a little way off it was now seen that the contestants were for a while quiet in watchful silence, and the stillness of night reigned again.

"Yei!" The contestants must have been roused to action again. Figures leaped forwards and backwards and some side-ways. Clashing blades sent forth flashes and sparks. After a while it was all quiet again to watchful silence, and the number that confronting Shimada dwindled down to only three.

Shimada again was seen on the guard of 'to the eye, lower.' The bodies that lay on the snow now numbered

eleven. The remaining levy-men now numbered only four, but were all first-rate swordsmen.

Yaichi Okada who was, with Ryunosuke Tsukue, detailed to keep Isenokami Takahashi in check was a famed fencer of Onoha Itto Ryu School. Chikara Katō was of Mizoguchiha School, famous for 'school-breaking' in the city of Yedo, being a powerful and daring fencer. He must have now thought that it devolved upon him to oust Shimada, he leapt in with the sword forged by Shinkai Inoue ready for a blow. Shimada's sword by Saburo Shizu stopped it lightly and the two fencers pressed each other by the sword that crossed a few inches above the sword-guard.

Chikara Kato breathing fire and yelling like a demon pressed on. Shimada turned gradually to the right yielding to the pressure. Kato was the only man who could close in with Shimada as close as 'sword-guard pushing.' Seeing that Kato had closed in and Shimada's rear open, Yaichi Okada got behind the latter lifting his sword ready to deliver a cut. Isenokami Takahashi seeing this felt a thrill of fear for the safety of Shimada for the first time.

Shimada now had a powerful contestant both in front as well as in rear.

Katō who was in front pushed with a yell. The crossing swords seemed to break at the guards.

"Yei!" Shimada yelled disentangling himself — flash his blade worked.

"U-u-u-m," Katō fell cut at the shoulder, his sword by Shinkai Inoue breaking at the guard and the blade flying off. At the same time Okada delivered a cut from behind Shimada, but a trifle quicker Shimada's sword cut him through at the waist. Shimada cut side-way to the rear not recovering from the cut for Katō. It was one clean continuous motion and Okada lay cut into two.

To cut two persons who pressed upon one from front and rear in one sweep of the sword! If this were not called an act rather belonging to gods than man, what would? Isenokami Takahashi was now thoroughly struck with the achievement of Shimada. It is said that Takahashi used to say that the feat was beyond the skill of swordsmanship; it was due to the cool serene mind of Shimada who acquired it by means of Zen Sect meditation and respiration exercises. Takahashi, it is said, was never tired of praising Shimada since.

What was Ryunosuke doing all this while? Had fear mastered him? Had he ran? No, he was still standing where he first stood.

Ryunosuke not taking action, the only one left now was Toshizo Hijikata, the leader. Hijikata had been informed of Shimada's skill, but he had never thought he could be so highly skilled as this. But the temperament of Hijikata was such that he would not flinch even with all the examples of his men before him. He leaped in, sword in hand, giving no respite to Shimada who was much struck with his courage.

"He's Toshizo Hijikata, I take," said Takahashi turning to Kiyokawa.

"Yes; what a pity!" Kiyokawa answered. He knew the personality of Hijikata well and respected him as one qualified for leadership. Therefore though it was his own fault, but Kiyokawa thought it was pity that Hijikata must now die. While the two onlookers were talking about Hijikata, he exclaimed "Oh" despairingly. That was because his sword was struck off his hands. While he hesitated for a next move, Shimada twisted him down on the snow and before he could get up Shimada's knee was on his back like a heavy rock.

"Who are you?" Shimada asked.

Hijikata held peace.

"Name!" said Shimada.

"Kill!" replied Hijikata.

"You must be the leader. What excuse have you for causing so many able swordsmen die like dogs, and compelling me to kill for no better cause than self-defence. All is out of rash thoughtless stupidity common to young blood," said Shimada.

"I have erred, I deserve death," Hijikata said in bitter tears, "I regret, as one sought the mastery of swordsmanship from childhood, that I've been ignorant of the existence of such an accomplished fencer as you, sir."

"It is mental training that gives you what you want; not fencing itself. The correct minded alone can attain perfection, bear that in mind if you seek swordsmanship."

So saying he took hold of Hijikata by the collar and gave him a hard push. Hijikata staggered a few paces and fell thud.



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Looking in the wake of Takahashi, Shimada and Kiyokawa who strolled away in pleasant chat Ryunosuke Tsukue stood, still in the original position. He had been enthralled heart and soul by the swordsmanship of Shimada. He had never seen such fine fencing before, possibly he would never see the like in the future. First he thought what could Shimada do; next well, he fenced better than expected; then marvellous, and in the end what could he be, a god or man?

The ever increasing admiration of Shimada in the mind of Ryunosuke found no words, no thought to express when he saw Shimada cut two fencers one in front and the other in rear in one sweep of the sword. The conclusion that Ryunosuke arrived at was that he could not attain the same level as Shimada had. The finding was as bitter as gall to him, he felt like an ignominious death coming over him, but he could not think otherwise.

Hijikata now got up shedding bitter tears over the blunder. He picked up the sword that was struck off his hands, and sat erect amongst the thirteen corpses of his

men. He now took hold of the sword a few inches from the point, point inward to dig it into his abdomen.

Ryunosuke now woke up from his reverie and ran to Hijikata to stop his sword.

—[Book I. End]—

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Translated by  
C.S. Bavier.