



ILLUSTRATION BY JENNELL JAQUAYS

DEMONS OF THE DEPTHS

From the Tales of Shintaro Oba

By C. L. WERNER

THE sun beat down with fiery intensity upon the *Eiko-maru*. Sweat glistened upon the bare bodies of sailors as they worked the iron-capped paddles, guiding the flat-bottomed ship across the shallow coastline. The crisp breeze that wafted across the decks did little to counter the heat bearing down upon the men. As they strove at their labours, more than one of them whispered an appeal for relief to Dogon, the god of day, or muttered a curse upon Goj, the dragon of summer.

Seated in such shade as the side of the ship's cabin presented, Shintaro Oba stared out across the sandy beaches and rich fields that reached down to the shore. Here and there the roofs of villages dotted the landscape, sometimes a cluster of fishing boats would be drawn up onto the sand. Faintly he could hear the songs of farmers working their lands, a contented melody that drifted out towards the sea. The Nokoshima Province was a prosperous domain, governed by the even-handed Lord Torogawa of Clan Hoshin. Though Torogawa was a devoted vassal of the Shogun, Oba had to concede that he was a principled and just daimyo. Certainly, among the provinces of Mu-Thulan, there were far worse lords, even among those who held fealty to the Emperor above their obligations to the Shogun.

Lord Yoshinaga, Shogun of Mu-Thulan, had been responsible for wiping out the Sekigahara Clan. Oba was the last of the clan, tasked by his dying master with a terrible and onerous duty. It was the samurai's burden to seek out the demon that laid claim upon his dead master's soul and to free his lord's spirit from that infernal bondage. It was a mission that had seen him wandering the provinces, confronting the monsters that haunted the land. To the difficulty of his quest could be added the ire of the Shogun. It rankled Yoshinaga that the destruction of Clan Sekigahara had been left incomplete. He'd stopped short of an official proclamation, unwilling to dignify Oba with such distinction, but the vassal who made a gift of the samurai's head would certainly earn favour with the Shogun.

Oba lowered his gaze to the sword resting across his lap. Koumakiri, the sacred blade of Sekigahara, a weapon that had endured for centuries and survived countless battles. He'd never had cause to doubt the resilience of the uchigatana. The sword had vanquished many demons in its time, prevailed against foes beyond the imaginings of madmen. It was a test of his own quality to see if his endurance was equal to that of Koumakiri. Tradition held that the weakness of a swordsman flowed back into his blade, but so too did the strength of the sword embolden the man who wielded it.

A slight cough from beside him caused Oba to look upwards. His grip upon Koumakiri relaxed when he saw that it was only a small boy. The child struggled to maintain his hold upon a bamboo bucket with one hand while he extended the other towards the samurai. When Oba was in the cabin below with the other passengers, he'd noted the boy selling water to the travellers. The samurai rolled his shoulders, feeling his kimono cling to his back, plastered to his body with sweat. The hot day had made the crowded cabin stifling, but it wasn't much better in the open – trading fresh air for the unfettered intensity of the sun.

Oba drew the small silk bag out from beneath his kimono. Removing a coin, he started to set it in the boy's hand. The child drew back quickly, shaking his head. He held up two fingers.

'You only charged one mon for a drink before,' Oba scowled.

The boy smiled back at him. 'That was down there,' he said, nodding at the steps leading to the cabin.

Oba thumbed another coin from the pouch. 'So carrying water up to the deck is an added expense?' He grinned at the shrewdness of the boy. When the child came towards him again, he drew the ladle out of the bucket, noting with no little annoyance how empty the pail was. The child was more than shrewd, he was cunning. A few more years and he'd wind up a yakuza with such a calculating mind.

The boy started to go back down into the cabin, but stopped and gave Oba a puzzled look. 'Why are you staying up here? And why aren't you hiding your sword like the other samurai?'

Oba quickly swallowed the water in his mouth. Suspicion flared inside him. The travellers he'd seen had all been merchants, tradesmen and farmers. He hadn't noticed any fighting men among them. 'What do you mean about other samurai?'

The boy perked up at the question, he held out his hand, waiting until Oba gave him another iron coin before answering. 'There are five who I noticed,' he said, pointing at his eye. 'Samurai walk different than other people, I can spot them right away.' He frowned and added, 'Maybe there are more, better at pretending than the others are.'

'Any idea who they are and why they're hiding?' Oba pressed. Though he had Koumakiri and the jewelled short sword that served as its companion, he'd left his armour below in the cabin. The possibility that the samurai were Yoshinaga's agents wasn't a comfortable one.

The boy shook his head, surprised by Oba's question. 'They're men of Clan Hoshin,' he said. 'Every ship travelling the coast has a deputation of samurai on it these days.' It was the boy's turn for suspicion to gleam in his eyes. 'Didn't you know the wako have been preying on Lord Torogawa's ships?'

Oba leaned back against the wall of the cabin. 'I am only newly come to Nokoshima. I didn't know that pirates have been hunting in these waters.'

'Every fourth ship falls prey to them,' the boy said. Oba could see him shudder, slopping water from the bucket. 'When they strike, they leave no survivors. Even the samurai Lord Torogawa has sent to protect the ships haven't been able to stop them.' The boy forced a smile to his face. 'I've been lucky,' he boasted. 'The wako haven't targeted any of the ships I've been on. With luck like that, I'll make a good yakuza when I get older.'

It was on Oba's tongue to scold the boy about the cruel ways of gamblers, but the reprimand was silenced by a howl of alarm from one of the sailors. Oba spun around to see the man pointing wildly away from the shore. Just visible, coming out from behind a rocky outcropping was an immense atakebune, a wooden warship with twenty oars to a side and a tall tower rising from the foredeck. White flags snapped from poles fastened to the sides of the hull, each banner marked with taunting symbols painted in crimson and black, each promising a more despicable and violent death than the last. A bustling mob of humanity could be seen scrambling about the decks, the shine of steel gleaming among them.

'A lesson for you,' Oba told the boy. 'Eventually the well-spring of luck goes dry. Hurry below and tell the Hoshin samurai that the pirates are here.'

The pirate ship drew steadily nearer. The jeers and threats of the wako rolled across the waves, a litany of the most obscene profanities. A few of the pirates produced bows and loosed arrows at the barge, their comrades mocking them when their shots fell short. A wiry rogue, wearing nothing except a steel hat and a loin clout, scurried out to the very end of the forecastle. He hooked his legs about the railing, his arms filled with the heavy length of a tanegashima. Smoke rose from the matchlock as the marksman aimed the firearm. A moment later there was a loud cracking sound and a flash of flame from the muzzle of the gun. The sailors onboard the barge cried out in terror, ducking down behind the bulwarks and abandoning their paddles.

Contemptuous laughter rose from the pirates. Oba could guess the trick they'd played. The marksman's shot had never been intended to hit anyone – perhaps there hadn't even been a ball loaded into it when it was fired – but simply to scare the sailors and make them forsake their efforts to paddle the barge closer to shore. If the boy's story bore out, then it was clear these pirates took care about allowing any survivors to slip from their clutches. Oba could see it would serve no purpose to explain this to the sailors. Even if he could rally them, the wako would catch them before they could reach the beach.

A sudden rush came from below. The Hoshin samurai emerged from the cabin, each warrior sporting two swords tucked under the belt of whatever disguise he wore. They also carried bows and quivers of arrows, and it was to these weapons that the samurai turned as the pirates came closer. At least five of them did. A sixth, one the boy had missed, stood over Oba with his sword bared.

'Well, ronin dog, are you with those outlaws?' the samurai demanded.

Oba scowled back at his interrogator. 'You have enemies enough. Don't be eager to create more.' He nodded towards the pirate vessel. 'Even were I ronin, I would open my belly before hiring myself to such scum.'

'You serve Lord Torogawa?' the samurai asked, taken aback by the cold authority in Oba's voice. There was a sense of wounded pride on the man's face, a mixture of shame and frustration. His expression hardened, a touch of uncertainty in his eyes. 'My lord entrusted me with this duty. He wouldn't send someone to watch me.'

Oba looked past the young samurai, observing the pirate ship. 'What you need to watch are the people you already know are enemies.' Again he nodded at the warship. 'Ask yourself why they are keeping back.'

The pirates had indeed arrested their speedy approach. Oars had been raised and the big atakebune sat atop the waves several hundred yards from where the barge was. The samurai raised their bows and loosed a volley at the warship. Their effort was answered by ribald jeers, every arrow splashing down just inches from the hull.

The situation seemed to be a stand-off. The pirates keeping out of range, the crew of the barge keeping to cover out of fear of the matchlock. The barge couldn't escape and the wako couldn't close in to board her. At least so things appeared. Oba couldn't shake the impression that the atakebune was waiting for something, like a tiger hidden in the long grass ready to pounce when its prey is most vulnerable.

'Cowards!' the young samurai shouted. 'You have no stomach for your outrages when the victim fights back! Come along you jackals, it is Kawajiri Ujio who will take your heads to Lord Torogawa!'

The taunts rising from the pirates only intensified as Kawajiri threatened them. Some of the villains drew their own swords, mockingly waving at the samurai and inviting him to make good on his bold words. The matchlock was fired once more, the ball this time cracking into the side of the barge.

Oba raised his gaze from the antics of the wako to the wooden tower that rose amidships. On the platform at the top of the structure he could see a corpulent man dressed in yellow robes sitting in a lotus position. How long he'd been there, Oba wasn't certain, neither could he explain the intense sense of unease that gripped him as he watched those fat fingers cutting apart a large fish. The robed man tossed each fragment into the sea, casting them always towards the west. When there was only one piece of flesh remaining, he removed a string of glistening jewels from his neck. Even from such a distance, Oba could see the crimson shine of the stones. The man separated one of the stones from the string and began stroking it with the last bit of fish.

The waters around the pirate ship were now alive with sharks. Thrashing about to snap up the morsels thrown overboard by the robed man, they churned the sea into a white froth. The waves turned red as the feeding frenzy drove the creatures to turn against one another, ripping away at their fellows in the crazed hunger. When this frenzy was at its height, the man on the tower calmly rose and stepped to the edge. Deliberately he dropped the jewel straight down into the midst of the ravenous sharks.
