The Ghost of Ofumi

OFUMI NO TAMASHII

M y uncle was born at the end of the Edo era¹ and was a
great authority on the various bizarre and gruesome leg-
ends that were so popular in those days: tales of haunted
houses with rooms no one dared enter; tales of the souls
of scorned women, still living, tormenting an unfaithful lover;
tales of ghosts unable to relinquish an attachment to their former
lives. . . . Yet he took great pains to deny there was any truth to
these legends, repeating the lesson of his samurai education that
“a true warrior does not believe in ghosts.” Even after the Meiji
Restoration,² it seems he retained the same outlook. Whenever
we children, inevitably, got onto the subject of ghosts, he would
look displeased and have nothing to do with us.

On just one such occasion, this uncle of mine uttered the fol-
lowing remark: “Some things in this world really are beyond ex-
planation. Take the case of Ofumi, for example. . . .”

No one had any clue what my uncle was talking about. As if
he regretted letting slip something that seemed to undermine his
stated convictions, he refused to divulge anything further about
these events that were “beyond explanation.” I asked my father

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¹. 1603–1868; also known as the Tokugawa period, when shoguns of the
powerful Tokugawa clan ruled Japan from their capital in Edo (present-day
Tokyo).

². The return of de facto power by shogun Tokugawa Yoshinobu to Emperor
Mutsuhito in 1868, whereupon the imperial court was moved from Kyoto to
Tokyo. Mutsuhito ruled under the reign name of Meiji, meaning “enlightened
government.”
for clarification, but he too would tell me nothing. I divined from
the tone of my uncle’s remarks, however, that somewhere lurking
in the background of this tale was the figure of another uncle,
“Uncle K.” My child’s curiosity aroused, I hastened to pay him
a visit. I was twelve years old at the time. “K” was not in fact my
real uncle, but my father had known him since before the begin-
ning of the Meiji era, and I had called him “Uncle” for as long
as I could remember.

K’s responses to my questions, however, did not satisfy me
either.

“Well, it’s nothing really. Just a silly ghost story. If I tell you,
your father and your uncle will be very angry with me.”

With the normally loquacious Uncle K choosing to be tight-
lipped about this particular matter, my investigation ran up
against a brick wall. At school, I was too busy cramming my head
with physics, mathematics, and all manner of subjects to think
of Ofumi, and gradually the name vanished from my mind like
a cloud of smoke.

Two years passed. As I remember, it was late November. Since
my return from school, a cold drizzle had been falling, and
around sunset it turned into quite a downpour. A neighbor had
invited Auntie K to go to a play at the Shintomiza with her, and
she would be out from late morning.

“I’ll be all on my own tomorrow night, so come by and see
me,” Uncle K had said the previous day. I’d promised I would, so
as soon as I’d had dinner I headed out. Uncle K’s house was only
about four blocks from ours as the crow flies, but it was located in
Banchō, an old part of town where a number of former samurai

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3. 1868 – 1912.
4. Formerly called the Moritaza, one of Edo’s three major kabuki theaters, founded in 1660. In 1872 it moved to Shintomichō in central Tokyo, and in 1875 changed its named to the Shintomiza, or Shintomi Theater. Many of Okamoto’s own plays were staged there.
houses still stood. Even on clear days, the neighborhood seemed for some reason to be cast in shadow. In the rain, as dusk fell, it was especially gloomy. Uncle K’s house lay inside the gate of an old daimyo estate, and long ago it must have been the residence of a senior retainer, steward, or some other high-ranking samurai. At any rate, it was a free-standing house with a small garden attached, surrounded by a roughly woven bamboo fence.

Since coming home from the government office where he worked, Uncle K had eaten dinner and been to the local bathhouse. For about an hour, he sat across from me in front of an oil lamp and we chatted about trivialities. Only the occasional sound of raindrops striking the broad leaves of a fatsia that brushed against the rain shutters reminded one of the darkness outside. As the clock on the pillar struck seven, Uncle K suddenly stopped in the middle of what he was saying and turned his head to listen to the rain.

“It’s really coming down, isn’t it?”

“I wonder if Auntie K will have any trouble getting home.”

“No, I sent a rickshaw to meet her.”

With this, Uncle K sipped his tea in silence for a few moments. Then, his tone suddenly rather somber, he said: “Hey, why don’t I tell you that story about Ofumi you asked me about once? This is just the kind of night for a ghost story. Or are you too much of a scaredy-cat?”

Truth be told, I was a scaredy-cat. All the same, whenever someone had a scary story to tell, I would be all ears, my small body rigid with expectation. Thus, when of his own accord Uncle K unexpectedly brought up the subject of Ofumi that had per-

5. A neighborhood in between the inner and outer moats of Edo Castle in the northwest corner of the city. After the Meiji Restoration, many of its large mansions were left abandoned, their samurai occupants having returned to their provincial domains.

6. As opposed to a rowhouse, in which the vast majority of commoners and mid- to low-ranking samurai in Edo would have lived.
plexed me over the years, my eyes immediately lit up. Sitting up straight, I looked him in the eye, as if to say that no matter how scary his ghost story might be, I was immune from fear in such a brightly lit room. My child’s attempt to put on a show of bravery evidently amused him. He sat quietly for a few moments with a big grin on his face.

“All right, then,” he said, “I’ll tell you the story — but don’t go asking me afterward if you can sleep over tonight because you’re too scared to walk home!”

With this stern warning, K launched into his account of the case of Ofumi.

“I was exactly twenty years old at the time, so it must have been 1864 — the year of the battle of the Hamaguri Gate in Kyoto,” he said by way of introduction.7

In those days, a *hatamoto* — a direct vassal of the shogun — by the name of Matsumura Hikotarō maintained a big mansion in this neighborhood on an income of 300 *koku*.8 Matsumura was highly educated and, being especially well-versed in Western learning,9 he had risen to become quite a bigwig in the Bureau of Foreign Affairs. Four years earlier, his younger sister, Omichi, had married another *hatamoto* by the name of Obata Iori who

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7. A battle that took place outside the Hamaguri Gate of Kyoto’s imperial palace on August 20, 1864, between pro-shogunal forces and anti-Western, pro-imperial armies from Chōshū Province in southern Japan.
8. A *koku* was a measure of rice weighing approximately 330 pounds (150 kilograms). In 1862 prices, one *koku* was worth 145 *monme* in silver, or about 1.8 *ryō* in gold. It has been estimated that one *ryō* is equivalent to about 41,500 yen in 1999 prices. One *koku* of rice, then, would have cost nearly 75,000 yen in today’s terms. Matsumura’s income of 300 *koku* (540 *ryō*) today would be worth 22.5 million yen (approximately US$200,000). Though a samurai’s income was measured in *koku*, by the nineteenth century, most samurai no longer received their income in rice, but the equivalent in coin.
9. *Rangaku*, or literally “Dutch Learning,” that is, the study of Western science and medicine.
lived in Koishikawa on the west bank of the Edo River, and the couple had a daughter named Oharu who was nearly two years old.

Then, one day a strange thing happened. Omichi showed up at her brother’s house with Oharu in tow and announced: “I can’t remain in my husband’s house any longer. Please help me to get a divorce.” Matsumura was dumbfounded by this sudden turn of events and tried to question her as to the details, but Omichi just sat there, white as a sheet, and would not say another word.

“You can’t just keep quiet! Tell me exactly what happened. Once a woman has married into another family, she doesn’t just cut her ties and run off without good reason. How can you come strolling in here suddenly and tell me you need my help getting a divorce without telling me what’s happened? If you can convince me that you have just cause, then I’ll go speak to your husband. You must talk to me!”

In such a situation, there was really nothing else for Matsumura or anyone else to say, but Omichi stubbornly refused to go into any of the details. Twenty-one years old and the wife of a samurai, she simply kept repeating over and over, like a spoilt child, that she refused to spend another day in that house and wanted a divorce. In the end, even her patient brother lost his temper.

“Don’t be stupid. How can I go and ask for a divorce if you won’t tell me what’s happened? Do you imagine Obata would agree? You didn’t just get married yesterday, you know. It’s been four years already, and you have a daughter. I mean, you don’t have to worry about looking after in-laws, and your husband’s a kind and honest man. Though of humble status he holds a position of great importance in the government. What grounds could you possibly have for wanting a divorce?”

Scold and reason with her as he might, he got nowhere. But then something occurred to him — seemingly incredible, perhaps, but such things were not unheard of in this world. After all, there were several young samurai in service at Obata’s house. And the nearby residences were full of second and third sons
who led idle, dissolute lives. Wasn’t it possible that his sister, who
was still very young, had gotten herself into some sort of mess
from which she was trying to extricate herself to avoid sullying
her good name? As he imagined such a scenario, his interroga-
tion became more intense. “I’ve an idea,” he said, “why it is you
won’t tell me the whole story. I’ve a mind to drag you back to
Obata’s house right now, make you look him in the eye, and then
we’ll see if you’ll talk. Come, let’s go!” He grabbed her by the col-
lar and pulled her to her feet.

The look of anger on her brother’s face terrified Omichi almost
out of her wits. “All right,” she cried, tears of remorse streaming
down her face. “I’ll tell you everything.”

As Matsumura listened to her pleading her case, sobbing as
she did so, his surprise turned to astonishment.

The incident had taken place seven days earlier. Omichi had
just put her daughter Oharu’s dolls away after the third-month
festival.10 That night, a pale-faced young woman with tousled
hair appeared at Omichi’s bedside. The woman was soaking wet
from head to toe, as though she’d been drenched in water. She
made a deep bow, placing her hands squarely on the tatami floor,
hers demeanor suggesting a servant in a samurai house. Without
a word, or any hint of menace, she simply sat there, kneeling in
demure silence — but that alone was unimaginably terrifying.
Omichi lay there trembling, unconsciously clutching the edge of
the quilt, until suddenly she awoke from her nightmare.

Meanwhile, Oharu, who lay sleeping beside her, seemed to be
having a similar nightmare, for suddenly she burst into a storm
of tears and shouted, “Ofumi’s here! Ofumi’s here!” It seemed
that the woman with wet clothes was haunting her daughter’s
dreams as well. “Ofumi,” Omichi surmised, must be the wom-
an’s name.

Omichi lay awake the rest of the night, too terrified to sleep.

10. The Dolls’ Festival (Hinamatsuri) held on the third day of the third
month.
Having been born and raised in a samurai household, and what was more having married into one, she was too embarrassed to mention her ghostly nightmare to anyone. She kept the events of that night secret from her husband, but the woman with wet clothes and a pale face reappeared at her pillow the following night, and again the night after that. Each time, the young Oharu cried out, “Ofumi’s here!” just as before. At last, the timid Omichi could stand it no longer, but neither did she have the courage to tell her husband.

After this had gone on for four nights in a row, Omichi was exhausted from worry and lack of sleep. At last, throwing shame and decorum to the winds, she gave in and told her husband, but Obata merely laughed it off and refused to take her seriously.

The ghostly apparition continued to appear at her bedside. No matter what Omichi said, her husband brushed it aside. Finally, he got angry and said something to the effect of “Are you the wife of samurai, or aren’t you?”

“Samurai or not, how can you look on and laugh while your wife is in distress?”

Omichi began to resent her husband’s callous attitude. If her suffering continued indefinitely, she was sure that sooner or later she would be hounded to death by the mysterious ghost. No, she told herself, there’s nothing left for me now but to take my daughter and flee from this haunted house as soon as possible. The time had passed when she could afford to spare a second thought either for herself or for her husband.

“That’s why I can no longer remain in that house. Please understand.”

Several times, as Omichi recounted her story to her brother, she had paused, catching her breath and shuddering as though the mere recollection of what had happened still sent shivers down her spine. The look of sheer terror in her eyes suggested that every word she’d spoken was true.

It gave her brother pause. Could such a thing be possible? No matter how he looked at it, the whole story seemed highly
improbable; it was no wonder that Obata had not taken his wife seriously. Matsumura himself was tempted to shout “What nonsense!” at the top of his voice. Yet his sister was clearly so tormented that to fly into a rage and dismiss her concerns out of hand seemed altogether too cruel. Besides, despite what his sister had said, there was a distinct possibility that there was more to the situation than met the eye. In any case, he resolved to visit Obata and confirm the particulars with him.

“I’ll have to get more than just your side of the story. I’ll go see Obata and hear what he has to say. Leave everything to me.”

Leaving his sister at his own house, Matsumura set out immediately for Koishikawa with one servant in tow.

[2]

On the way to Obata’s home, Matsumura mulled things over in his mind. His sister was childlike and had never responded well to reason. However, he himself was a man of considerable standing and a samurai to boot. How could he look another samurai in the eye and launch, with a straight face, into a discussion about ghosts? It would be most regrettable if Obata should feel that Matsumura Hikotarō, for all his mature years, revealed himself as a fool. He racked his brain for a good way of broaching the subject, but it seemed so straightforward that, whichever way he looked at it, no solution presented itself.

When he reached Koishikawa, the master of the house happened to be at home, and Matsumura was immediately shown through to a reception room. Once they had exchanged the obligatory pleasantries about the weather, Matsumura struggled to find an opportunity to bring up his business. But even though he’d resigned himself to inevitable ridicule, now that he sat there looking his companion in the eye, he simply could not bring himself to say anything about a ghost. He was still wavering when Obata himself broached the subject.

“Omichi hasn’t been to see you today, I suppose?”
“Yes, as a matter of fact, she has,” Matsumura replied, but was unable to add anything further.

“Well, I don’t know how much she’s told you, but you know how foolish women are. Lately she’s been saying there’s a ghost in the house. Can you believe it?” Obata said, breaking into raucous laughter.

Matsumura had no choice but to laugh along with him. But knowing that he couldn’t let the matter rest there, he seized the opportunity and began to talk about Ofumi. When he was through with the story, he wiped the sweat from his brow. By this point, Obata was no longer laughing. He frowned as though deeply troubled and fell silent. If this had been a simple question of a ghost, he could have derided his companion as a coward and a fool, and laughed the whole thing off. But his brother-in-law had been sent over to discuss a divorce, so he had a real problem on his hands. Obata had no choice but to take the haunting seriously.

“All right, let’s consider this carefully for a moment,” Obata said.

If there really were a ghost in his house — if it were a “haunted mansion,” as people say — then surely, he reasoned, some other member of the household would have seen something strange by now. He himself had lived in the house for twenty-eight years and, of course, had never seen anything. Nor had he heard any rumors to that effect. Neither his grandparents, who died when he was a boy, nor his father, who had passed away eight years earlier, nor his mother, who had departed this world six years before, had ever said anything to him about a ghost. The oddest aspect of the situation was the fact that Omichi, an outsider who had married into the family four years earlier, was the only person to have seen the spirit. Even assuming that, for some reason, only she was capable of seeing the ghost, wasn’t it odd that it had waited four years to make its first appearance?

Either way, the only other means of resolving the matter was to gather everyone in the household together and question them.
Matsumura readily agreed. “I leave the matter to your discretion,” he said.

First, Obata called his steward, Gozaemon. He was a hereditary vassal who had served the family for forty-one years.

“I never heard any rumors to that effect during your father’s tenure, milord,” he said emphatically. “Nor did my father ever mention any such story to me.”

Next, several young junior retainers were questioned. They were mere hired help, however, and newcomers as well, so of course they knew nothing. After that, the maidservants were called in. They said it was the first they’d heard of it, and sat there trembling in fear. The investigation was leading nowhere.

“In that case, we’ll dredge the pond,” Obata ordered. The fact that the woman who’d appeared to Omichi had been soaking wet suggested that some clue to the mystery might lie at the bottom of the old pond on the grounds of Obata’s estate, which measured some sixty feet across.

The next day a large group of laborers was brought in and the dredging began. Obata and Matsumura were both on hand to supervise, but apart from catching a few carp, their search was fruitless. The mud yielded not a single strand of hair, not even an object such as a comb or a hairpin upon which a spurned lover’s curse might have been cast. At Obata’s suggestion, they also cleaned the bottom of the well, but its depths produced nothing except, to everyone’s great astonishment, a single weatherfish.11 All their efforts had been in vain.

The investigation had reached an impasse.

This time, it was Matsumura who hit upon the idea of summoning Omichi, over her protestations, back to the mansion in Koishikawa and having her sleep in her usual room with Oharu. Matsumura and Obata hid in the adjoining room and waited late into the night.

11. Dojō, a freshwater fish considered a delicacy in Edo times. Also known in English as a loach.
It was a warm night and the moon was hidden behind clouds. Omichi’s nerves were on edge, and it seemed unlikely that she would be able to sleep soundly. But her young daughter, who had no inkling of what was happening, was soon fast asleep. No sooner had she drifted off, however, than she let out a piercing shriek as though someone had stuck a needle in her eye. Then she began moaning, “Ofumi’s here . . . Ofumi’s here . . .”

“There, it’s the ghost!”

The two samurai who had been lying in wait grabbed their swords and hurriedly threw open the door to the next room. The warm air of a spring night hung heavily about the tightly closed room. By the side of the bed, a paper lantern shed a dim, unwavering light. There was no hint, even, of the telltale draft that signaled the presence of ghosts. Clutching her child tightly to her breast, Omichi lay with her face pressed against the pillow.

Confronted by this irrefutable evidence, Matsumura and Obata turned and looked at one another. How could it be, they wondered, that the young Oharu knew the name of an intruder whom they were unable even to see? That was what troubled them the most. Obata tried questioning Oharu, but no matter how much he coaxed and cajoled the child, who was not old enough to speak properly, he got nowhere. It seemed that Oharu’s tiny soul had become possessed by the dead woman’s ghost, which was using the girl to bring her name to the attention of the living. The two sword-bearing samurai began to feel distinctly ill at ease.

Obata’s chief retainer, Gozaemon, was also troubled. The next day, he paid a visit to a famous fortune-teller in Ichigaya. The fortune-teller told him to go and dig around the roots of the large camellia tree on the west side of the house. They hurriedly set about digging under the tree until it fell over, but the entire exercise produced no result other than to destroy the fortune-teller’s credibility.

Saying she was unable to sleep at night, Omichi took to spending the daytime in bed. As one would have expected, Ofumi’s
ghost did not come to molest her while the sun was up. Everyone was relieved by this, but the idea of a samurai’s wife leading such an unorthodox lifestyle — staying up at night and sleeping during the day like some sort of prostitute — was extremely annoying, not to say downright inconvenient. Unless somehow he was able to exorcise this ghost for good, it seemed doubtful whether the peace of Obata’s household could be preserved. If news of what was happening leaked out, it would cause a scandal. With Matsumura, of course, the secret was safe. And Obata saw to it that his retainers kept their mouths shut. Still, it appeared that someone had let the cat out of the bag, for outrageous rumors began to reach the ears of people who frequented the house.

“Obata’s mansion is haunted. They say a woman’s ghost appears at night. . . .”

While other samurai might spread wild rumors about Obata behind his back, when they were in each other’s company no one would dare ask him about the ghost to his face. Among his associates, there was only one man sufficiently lacking in the proper sense of decorum — Uncle K, the second son of a hatamoto who lived in the same neighborhood as Obata. The minute he heard the rumor, he raced over to Obata’s mansion in order to verify it. Obata was on very good terms with K, so he confided everything to him. He even asked K whether he couldn’t come up with a plan to find out the truth behind the haunting.

Now during the Edo period the second and third sons of samurai — even samurai of the highest rank who served the shogun — were, generally speaking, idle loafers with no responsibilities. An eldest son, of course, had the duty of succeeding his father as head of the family, but younger sons had virtually no prospects in the world, save for two: either to receive a special appointment from the shogun in recognition of some extraordinary talent or to be adopted into another family. Most simply lived under their elder brothers’ roofs, passing the time without any work worthy of a full-fledged samurai. From one perspec-
tive, theirs was an extremely enviable lot. From another, it was pitiable.

The inevitable consequence was the creation of an entire class that excelled at idleness and license. Most younger sons were mere playboys. The whole lot of them simply sat around and waited for something to come along to alleviate their boredom. Uncle K, having been born into this unfortunate class, was a prime candidate for a task like the one Obata had consulted him about. Naturally, he accepted it eagerly.

Then he got down to thinking. These were no longer the days of old when a legendary figure such as Kintoki would keep a solemn vigil at the bedside of his lord, Yorimitsu. The first thing he would have to figure out, he realized, was who this woman Ofumi really was, and what connection she had with Obata’s family.

“So there is no woman by the name of Ofumi in your family, nor among your servants?”

Obata gave a firm negative to K’s question. In his family there certainly was no one of that name. As for his servants, they changed frequently, so of course he could not remember them all, but no one of that name had worked there in recent times. Further questioning revealed that, for as long as anyone could remember, Obata’s family had employed two types of women: those sent from villages in Obata’s provincial domain, and those hired independently from a referral agency in Edo. The agency was located in Otowa and had done business with Obata’s family for generations.

From Omichi’s story, it seemed likely that the ghost had been a servant in a samurai family. Uncle K decided that before he

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12. Sakata no Kintoki, a legendary warrior famed for his fierce loyalty to his master, Minamoto no Yorimitsu (948–1021), a.k.a. Minamoto Raikō, who was known for immortal feats such as slaying the ogre Shutendōji and the monstrous earth-spider.
went trekking off to Obata’s feudal domain, he would first make inquiries at the nearby referral agency. It was not at all impossible that, unbeknownst to Obata, there had been a woman named Ofumi who served his family many generations ago.

“Well, do your best,” Obata said. “And please, be discreet about it,”

“I understand.”

With this promise, the two parted. That was at the end of the third month. It was a clear day, and the cherry trees in Obata’s garden were already covered with fresh green leaves.

[3]

Uncle K headed for Otowa and studied the records of servants who had passed through the referral agency. Since Obata’s family had been using the agency for generations, it followed that all the names of servants who had come from there would be entered in their books.

Just as Obata had said, there was no record of any Ofumi in recent times. K gradually went further and further back, checking first the past three years, then the past five, and finally the past ten, but found not a single name beginning with “Ofu” — not even an Ofuyu, Ofuku, or Ofusa, much less an Ofumi.

“So maybe she was a woman from the provinces,” K thought to himself, still stubbornly gripping the edges of the ledger and poring over it. The agency had lost its old books in a fire thirty years before, so they had no records beyond that. Even if he examined all the old ledgers available, he would run into a dead end when he got to that point. Nonetheless, Uncle K pored patiently over the smudged pages and the faded writing, intent on examining every ledger for those thirty years.

Naturally, the ledgers had not been made especially for the Obata family; each thick, horizontal tome contained records for a number of samurai houses that patronized the agency. Just
going through and picking out Obata’s name from among all the others was no easy task. Moreover, since the handwriting covered such a long period of time, it was not consistent throughout. Clumsy masculine calligraphy was interspersed with wispy feminine script. In some places, the entries were in a childish hand and written almost entirely in phonetic lettering rather than Chinese characters. Trying to decipher this hodgepodge was enough to make K’s head spin and his eyes glaze over.

Uncle K soon began to grow bored and to feel pangs of regret at having impulsively taken on so formidable a task.

“Well, if it isn’t the young master from Koishikawa!” came a voice. “What’s he up to, I wonder?”

The man with a big grin on his face who had just sat down at the front of the shop looked to be about forty-two or -three. He was lanky and, in a striped kimono with a striped jacket over it, looked the very picture of a respectable merchant. He was somewhat swarthy, and his long, thin face was extremely distinctive, with a prominent nose and expressive eyes that gave him the air of a kabuki actor. His name was Hanshichi of Kanda,13 and he was a detective. He had a younger sister who was a teacher of Tokiwazu14 ballads and also lived in Kanda, just below the Myōjin Shrine. Since Uncle K occasionally paid her visits, he was on friendly terms with her brother Hanshichi as well.

Hanshichi was an imposing figure in the world of law enforcement. He was a rarity in his profession, an honest and unpretentious child of Edo about whom no one had ever whispered an unkind word. He never abused his authority to torment the weak under the guise of official business, and he treated everyone with the utmost civility.

“You’re as busy as ever, I take it?” Uncle K asked.

13. In Edo times, commoners were not permitted to take surnames.
14. A style of narrative music (vocal and instrumental) accompanying dance pieces in the kabuki and puppet theaters.
“Yeah. Just popped in on a bit of official business.”

They were exchanging small talk about what was going on in the world when Uncle K had a sudden idea. Surely there couldn’t be any harm in revealing Obata’s secret to this detective — telling him the whole story and taking advantage of his wisdom and experience?

“I’m sorry to trouble you while you’re on a case, but there’s a small matter I’d like to consult you about . . . ,” he began, glancing left and right over his shoulders. Hanshichi nodded pleasantly.

“Well, I can’t imagine what it’s about, but why don’t we talk it over? Hey, ma’am. We need to use your room upstairs. That’s okay, isn’t it?”

He led the way up the narrow staircase to the second floor. Upstairs consisted of one six-mat room, in a dark corner of which sat a wicker clothes trunk and a few other things. Uncle K followed Hanshichi inside, sat down, and told him the whole story of the bizarre events at Obata’s mansion.

“Well, what do you think? Do you know how we could get to the bottom of this? The way I see it, if we can figure out the ghost’s identity, then we could hold a service to pray for her soul, and maybe then everything will be all right.”

“Hmm, perhaps . . . ,” Hanshichi replied, shaking his head. He thought for a few moments. “Look here, sir. Do you suppose there really is a ghost?”

“Well . . .” Uncle K was at a loss for a reply. “I mean, I haven’t actually seen it . . .”

Hanshichi fell quiet again, smoking his pipe for a while. Then he said: “So the ghost appears to have been a servant in a samurai house, and she’s soaking wet, you say? In other words, it sounds a lot like that old ghost story about Okiku who was thrown down a well for breaking one of her master’s plates, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“Do they read popular storybooks at Obata’s house?” Hanshichi asked suddenly, taking K by surprise.

“The master can’t abide them, but it seems they read them in
the women’s quarters. I hear that someone from the Tajimaya, a local book-lender, has been coming to the house often lately.”

“What’s the name of the Obatas’ family temple?”

“Jōenji, in Shitaya.”

“Jōenji. Hmm . . . really?”

“Are you on to something?”

“Is Obata’s wife a beautiful woman?”

“She’s more attractive than most, I guess. And she’s just twenty-one years old.”

“I see. Now, sir, what do you think of this idea?” Hanshichi said, smiling. “It won’t do if I go sticking my nose into a private matter like this, so just leave everything up to me. I’ll have the matter solved for you within two or three days. Of course, this is just between you and me—I won’t breathe a word about it to anyone.”

Uncle K expressed his confidence in Hanshichi and asked him to take care of everything. Hanshichi gave him his word.

“But there’s just one condition,” he said. “I’ll only be working behind the scenes on this case in an unofficial capacity—it’s got to look as though you’re the one in charge of the investigation, and you who report to Obata. So if it’s not too much trouble, I want you to come with me when I make my inquiries tomorrow.”

Uncle K readily agreed; he always had a lot of time on his hands, anyway. Even among Edo’s merchant community, Hanshichi had a reputation for being a man who could get things done, and Uncle K was eager to see how he’d handle the case. Looking forward to the following day, K left Hanshichi and headed off for Fukagawa, where a haiku party was being held that evening.

It was late when K returned home. Getting up early the next morning was a trial for him, but somehow he managed to meet Hanshichi at the appointed time and place.

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15. Kashihon’ya, a business that lent out books for a small fee.
“Where are we going first?”
“I thought we’d start with the book-lender.”

The two headed for the Tajimaya in Otowa. The head clerk was a frequent visitor at Uncle K’s house, too, and they were already well acquainted. Hanshichi questioned the man about the books he’d taken to Obata’s house since New Year’s. Such information wasn’t recorded in detail in the shop ledger, so at first the clerk was at a loss. However, after racking his brain for a moment, he managed to recall the titles of two or three books.

“You didn’t by any chance lend them one called Tales of the Macabre,16 did you?” Hanshichi asked.

“Why, yes, I did. It was around the second month, as I recollect.”

“Could you show it to us?”

The clerk went and checked his shelves. He soon reappeared with a two-volume set. Hanshichi took it, opened the second volume and began turning the pages. When he came to the fifteenth or sixteenth page, he spread it open and showed it to K. The illustration depicted a woman, apparently the wife of a samurai, seated in a room. Nearby, close to the veranda, stood a young woman, presumably her maidservant, staring down despondently at the ground. There was no mistaking that she was a ghost. By the side of a pond in the garden, irises were in bloom. The servant seemed to have emerged from the pond, for her hair and her clothes were sodden. Her face, depicted in a highly grotesque manner, was obviously intended to strike terror into the hearts of women and children.

A chill went down Uncle K’s spine. It was not so much the gruesomeness of the scene that startled him, as the fact that the servant in the picture looked exactly as he’d imagined Ofumi’s ghost. Taking the book from Hanshichi, he saw that the cover bore the full title, Tales of the Macabre: Revised Edition, and the name of the author, one Tamenaga Hyōchō.

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16. Usuzumi-zōshi. Date of publication unknown.
“Go ahead and borrow it, sir. It’s a good read,” Hanshichi said, giving him a knowing look. K slipped the two volumes inside his breast pocket and left the shop.

“I’ve read that book, you know,” Hanshichi said once they were out in the street. “As I was listening to your story yesterday, I thought of it immediately.”

“So you think the pictures in this book frightened the girl and her mother, giving them nightmares?”

“I don’t think that’s all there is to it. In any case, I’d like next to pay a visit to the Obatas’ temple in Shitaya.”

Hanshichi led the way. The two headed up Ando Hill, and, after passing through Hongō, reached Ikenohata in Shitaya, at the edge of Shinobazu Pond. There’d been no wind at all since morning, and the clear sky on that late spring day was like a polished blue jewel. A kite sat perched atop the local fire watchtower as though asleep. Sunshine suggesting the approach of summer glistened off the helmet of a young samurai, apparently on a long journey, hardening his sweaty steed along the road.

Jōenji, the Obatas’ family temple, was quite an imposing edifice. The first thing that struck them on passing through its gate was a great profusion of globe flowers in bloom. They asked to see the head priest.

The priest seemed to be around forty, with a pale face showing a dark shadow where he’d shaved. He greeted his two distinguished guests, samurai and government official, with extreme courtesy.

The two men had discussed their plan on the way there, so Uncle K spoke first and told the priest about the recent bizarre events at Obata’s residence, recounting how Obata’s wife had seen a ghost at her bedside. Then he asked the priest whether there was not some sort of incantation he could recite to exorcise the evil spirit.

The head priest listened attentively.

“Are you here at the behest of his lord- and ladyship?” the priest asked, fingering his rosary nervously. “Or have you gentlemen taken this consultation upon yourselves?”
“That is unimportant. What matters is, are you able to comply with our request?”

Under the piercing gazes that both Hanshichi and Uncle K were directing at him, the priest turned pale and trembled slightly.

“I am a man of humble training, so I cannot guarantee that it will have any efficacy. Nonetheless, I will undertake to pray for the repose of the woman’s soul as best I can.”

“We would be most grateful.”

After a while, the priest announced that it was time to eat, and a meticulously prepared vegetarian meal was promptly brought out. Saké came as well, and though the priest did not touch a drop, the other two men had all they could drink and eat. When it came time to leave, the priest said, “Let me have a palanquin take you home . . .” and surreptitiously handed Hanshichi something wrapped in a piece of paper. Hanshichi thrust it back at him and left.

“Sir, I think we found what we came for. That damn priest was shaking like a leaf,” Hanshichi said with a smile. The way the priest had gone white as a sheet, and the lavishness of the feast, were a more eloquent admission of guilt than words could ever be. But there was something that was still bothering Uncle K.

“Even so, I don’t understand why the little girl should be calling out Ofumi’s name.”

“I don’t know the answer to that either,” Hanshichi replied, still smiling. “But we can dismiss the possibility that the child came out with it unprompted. She must have learned it from somewhere or someone. But, mark my words, that priest is a bad sort. . . . I’ve heard occasional rumors that he’s up to no good, much like that monk long ago at Enmei Temple. That’s why he

17. Undoubtedly some coins intended as a bribe to buy Hanshichi’s silence.
18. A temple where, in 1803, a monk was found to have been carrying on an affair with a maidservant in Edo Castle under the guise of visiting her to recite prayers.
acted as though he was hiding something as soon as we barged in, even before we opened our mouths. I think we’ve nipped his plans in the bud. He won’t go trying anything stupid now. My job is finished here. I’ll leave it up to you how best to explain everything to Lord Obata. Well, you’ll have to excuse me.”

The two parted at Ikenohata.

[ 4 ]

On his way home, K dropped in on a friend of his who lived in Hongō. The friend told him that a dance teacher of his acquaintance in Yanagibashi was holding a performance featuring her students, and he was obliged to show his face. “Why don’t you join me?” he asked K, who readily accepted. The place was full of attractive young ladies and the festivities lasted until the lanterns were lit for the night. Uncle K returned home in high spirits. As a result, he was unable to make it to Obata’s house that day to report on the results of the investigation.

The next day, he went to Obata’s residence and found the master at home. Omitting all references to Hanshichi, he spoke as though he had investigated the matter entirely on his own, proudly announcing his findings concerning the storybook and the priest. He saw Obata’s expression cloud over as he listened.

Omichi was immediately summoned before her husband. He thrust a copy of Tales of the Macabre at her and interrogated her closely. “Isn’t this the ghost that you saw in your dream?” he demanded. Omichi paled and was unable to utter a word.

“I know all about that Jōenji priest’s corrupt and depraved ways. Are you sure he didn’t trick you into doing something reprehensible? Tell me the truth!”

But however forcefully her husband accused her, Omichi tearfully denied that she had behaved improperly in any way. But she was guilty of one thing, she said. Begging her husband’s forgiveness, she confessed her secret to the two men.
When she went to pay her respects at the temple on New Year’s Day, the priest had shown her to a private room. They’d chatted for a while, then he gazed intently at her face for several moments and let out a deep sigh. Finally he muttered, as though to himself, “Alas, what a cruel fate awaits her.” With that, he’d bid her farewell. Then, in the second month, she’d been to the temple again. Once more the priest looked at her face, uttered the same words, and sighed deeply. This bothered her quite a bit, so she’d asked him timidly what he meant.

“Your physiognomy is not at all good,” he’d warned her in a pitying tone. “As long as you have a husband, a life-threatening calamity lies in store for you. If at all possible, you should renounce married life. Otherwise, a terrible fate awaits not only you, but your daughter too.”

A chill went down her spine. “I don’t care about myself,” she said, “but isn’t there some way that I can help my daughter escape such a misfortune?”

“I’m afraid that mother and daughter are inseparable,” the priest replied. “If you do not take steps to head off this disaster, then not even your daughter will be safe.”

“You can imagine . . .” Omichi said, choking back sobs, “how I felt . . . at that moment.”

[“Hearing this story today,” Uncle K interjected at this point, “you young people would no doubt dismiss it as a load of rubbish and silly superstition, but in those days everyone—especially women—believed such things.”]

The priest’s words plunged Omichi into a despair that she could not dispel. Whatever calamity might befall her, she was resigned to renouncing the things of this world. But the mere thought of her darling daughter having to share in her misfortune was terrifying. It tortured her unbearably; without doubt, she had a great affection for her husband, but she loved her daughter even more. Oharu’s life was dearer to her than her own. If she was to save her daughter’s life, not to mention her own,
what choice did she have but to leave the house to which she had grown so accustomed?

Even then, Omichi hesitated time and again. Soon, the second month had slipped away, and the time came for Oharu to celebrate the Dolls’ Festival. At Obata’s house, the family dolls were taken out and displayed on a set of shelves. When night fell, two paper lanterns atop the display were lit, causing the red and white peach blossoms set on a lower shelf to cast flickering shadows in the night. Omichi stared dismally at the lanterns. Would they be celebrating this way next year, she wondered, and the year after that? Would her daughter be safe forever? Which of the ill-fated pair would meet with misfortune first, the girl or her cursed mother? Sad and terrifying thoughts rose up in poor Omichi’s mind, leaving her in no mood that year to get tipsy on the customary “sweet saké” drunk during the festival.

In Obata’s house the tradition was to put the dolls away on the fifth day of the month. Omichi was loath to see them go, fearing it might be for the last time. That afternoon, she sat down to read a book she had borrowed from the Tajimaya. Clinging to her mother’s knee, Oharu innocently peered at the pictures. The book was the aforementioned *Tales of the Macabre*, containing the story of a servant named Ofumi who is killed by her cruel master. He throws her body into an old pond, beside which some irises are in bloom. The illustration to the scene that Omichi happened to be reading depicted Ofumi’s ghost in an especially gruesome manner, as she told her former mistress of the injustice she had suffered. Terrified, little Oharu had pointed at the picture and asked timidly, “Mommy, what’s that?”

“That’s the ghost of a woman named Ofumi. If you’re not a good girl, her ghost will come out of the pond in our garden,” Omichi had lightheartedly replied, not meaning to scare the girl. But Oharu had seemed to have received a tremendous shock. She turned white as a sheet, almost as if she were having a seizure, and clung to her mother’s knee with all her might.
That night, Oharu cried out in her sleep as though being attacked.

"Ofumi’s here!"

This was repeated the following night.

Regretting the terrible thing she’d done, Omichi made haste to return the book immediately. But Oharu cried out Ofumi’s name three nights in a row. Sick with worry and guilt, Omichi, too, was unable to sleep properly. Then she became fearful lest this might be a harbinger of the terrible misfortune that was to befall them. She herself began to have visions of Ofumi too.

Omichi at last came to a decision: there was no choice but to follow the advice of her trusted priest and abandon her husband’s house. She used her innocent child’s calling out of Ofumi’s name as a basis for concocting her own ghost story, which she made a pretext for her attempt to return home to her family.

"Stupid woman!” shouted Obata, appalled, as his wife lay prostrate before him, sobbing. Uncle K, however, could not help but recognize the strong maternal instinct that lay beneath this silly’s woman’s deceit. And thanks to his good offices, Omichi finally received her husband’s forgiveness.

“I’d prefer that her older brother, Matsumura, not hear of this,” Obata said to K. “Is there some way we can resolve the matter so that nobody in this house or at Matsumura’s will suspect the truth?”

Uncle K pondered Obata’s dilemma. In the end, they decided, for the sake of appearances, to ask the priest from K’s family temple to perform a memorial service for the repose of the mysterious Ofumi’s soul. A doctor was called in to treat Oharu, who soon stopped screaming in the middle of the night, and thanks to the power of the Buddha — or so it was plausibly rumored — Ofumi’s ghost was never seen again.

Meanwhile, Matsumura Hikotarō, not knowing the truth of the matter, would shake his head in amazement every time he quietly related, to two or three chosen friends, the story of Ofumi, which he always concluded by saying, “Strange things happen
in this world that cannot be explained by reason.” My father’s brother was one of those to whom Matsumura told this tale.

K gained a newfound appreciation for the keen insight that had enabled Hanshichi to discover the truth about Ofumi’s ghost in the pages of a storybook. As for the motivation behind the Jōenji priest’s terrifying prophecy about Omichi’s fate, Hanshichi always refrained from giving a precise explanation. But six months after the events described in this story, Omichi was shocked to hear that the same priest had been hauled before the Office of Temples and Shrines on charges of lascivious conduct with women. So, she had been teetering on the edge of a precipice, and had only been saved thanks to Hanshichi!

“As I’ve said,” K concluded, “no one is privy to this secret save Lord and Lady Obata, who are still living, and myself. After the Restoration of 1868, Obata became a government official and has since risen high in the world. You’d best not let anyone else get wind of what I’ve told you tonight.”

By the time he had finished talking, the night rain had eased to a light drizzle, and the fatsia that had earlier stirred against the shutters had subsided into repose.

Uncle K’s story made a huge impression on my young mind. But in retrospect, I realize that this piece of detective work was mere child’s play for Hanshichi. There are many more adventures of his that would astound and amaze people, for he was an unsung Sherlock Holmes of the Edo era.

It was ten years later, just around the time when the Sino-Japanese War came to an end, that I began seeing Hanshichi frequently. Uncle K had already passed on. Hanshichi purported to be “well over seventy,” but he was an astonishingly youthful and vigorous man. He had helped his son-in-law open an import business and was enjoying the leisure of his golden years. By chance, I was able to make his acquaintance and began visiting him at his home in Akasaka. The old man was fond of luxuries
and always served me the choicest tea and most delicious cakes. Over tea, he would tell me about his younger days.

I have managed to fill an entire notebook with these detective stories of Hanshichi’s. I have chosen those I find most compelling, and I hereby put them before my readers, though not necessarily in chronological order.