

# The Ghost in the Tokaido Inn (The Samurai Mysteries)

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While attempting to solve the mystery of a stolen jewel, Seikei, a merchant's son who longs to be a samurai, joins a group of kabuki actors in eighteenth-century Japan.

Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler are historians and authors of over sixty books, both fiction and nonfiction, mostly for young readers. They are the authors of the well-loved American Family Album series, including The Japanese American Family Album, which was named a Carter G. Woodson Honor Book in 1997.

The Society for School Librarians International chose their book *Showa: The Era of Hirohito* for a best book award in 1991, and they have been cited for excellence by the Library of Congress, the Parents' Choice Foundation, Bank Street College, the International Reading Association, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and the New York Public Library. The Hooblers make their home in New York City. They have one daughter and are active in community affairs.

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Chapter three: A Ghost Story  
Father was not as disappointed as Seikei thought he would be. "What can you expect?" he said, shrugging. "This is not so bad. At least he paid you, and we didn't give him our best tea. Now let's go to bed."

"Father, I cannot sleep," said Seikei. "I am too excited."

"We have another long day of travel tomorrow," Father said.

"I can sleep in the Kago."

"Well, I cannot," Father said. "I must get my rest."

"There is a terrace at the back of the inn," said Seikei. "Could I go there to look at the view until I feel tired?"

Father shrugged. "If you wish," he said. "But do not leave the inn. The streets of this town are dangerous at night."

Seikei left, promising that he would not stay long.

When he reached the terrace, he found that rain had started to fall softly. Though the stone floor was covered with mats, it felt cool through his cotton tabi, or socks.

He walked to the railing that overlooked a small pond. The rain clouds had covered the moon and only a soft glow fell onto the water. He didn't mind the rain falling on his head. He felt feverish from his experience in the daimyo's quarters. I was afraid, he admitted to himself, just to be in his presence.

He jumped at the sound of a footstep just behind him. He whirled and saw the girl.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Did I startle you?"

"No," he said hastily. "I mean, I didn't expect to find someone here."

"Should I leave?" she said

It was hard for Seikei to speak. The girl seemed even more beautiful than she had before.

"No, please," he said. "Stay."

"Was your master pleased with the paper?" she asked.

Seikei was confused. "Who?"

"The daimyo. I saw you in his room."

Now he understood. "No, no. I was there for the same reason you were. My father is a tea merchant. Excuse me. My name is Konoike Seikei."

She bowed. "I am called Michiko. My family name is Ogawa."

"Is it true that your family knew the poet Basho?"

She smiled, and he realized that it was rude to question her honesty.

"I ask," he said, "only because I greatly admire Basho's poetry."

Michiko put her hand over her mouth to hide her smile. Seikei knew why she was amused. Because he was a merchant's son, and merchants care for nothing except money.

He looked away from her, feeling ashamed. Then his eyes fell upon the pond, and he remembered one of Basho's poems. Seikei took a deep breath, and began to recite:

Clouds come from time to time-

and bring to men a chance to rest

from looking at the moon. The girl clapped her hands. "That was the same poem I was thinking of before you appeared."

Seikei turned back to see her smile. He realized that she was not mocking him. Without thinking, he blurted out his secret wish: "I would so much like to be a samurai like Basho, and devote my life to poetry."

Michiko nodded. "But you do not have to be a samurai for that," she said. "Anyone can write poetry, if they wish."

"My father says it is not something a merchant should do. Only a samurai, and I can never be a samurai."

"I do not believe that," Michiko said. "Did you hear the poem that the daimyo wrote?"

"Yes."

"And didn't you see his brush-writing?"

Seikei nodded.

"So you know," Michiko said, "that although he is a samurai, he does not have a noble spirit."

Seikei was surprised by the girl's boldness. "He was rude to you," he said. "I admired your courage."

"You thought I was courageous?" She shrugged. "I only reminded myself that my family needed to sell the paper."

Seikei nodded.

"It is true that Basho was a samurai," Michiko said. "But he discarded his swords. Isn't it Basho's spirit that we admire in his poetry? Though you are a merchant's son, you can still develop a noble spirit-brave, honest, and faithful to your family. And if you do, who can stop you from writing poetry?"

Seikei had no answer. He wondered how his father would reply. They stared across the

pond for a while. The sound of laughter came across the water from the other side.

"Some traveling kabuki are giving a play at the monastery," Michiko said. "I wanted to see it, but my father has been feeling ill all day. I used some of the gold the daimyo gave me to buy herbal tea for his stomach."

"I have never seen a kabuki play," Seikei said. "Father says they are improper."

"I think they are exciting," Michiko said. "Some are very scary, with goblins and ghosts."

"I like ghost stories," said Seikei.

"Do you? I know one that Basho told to my grandmother when she was a child. Would you like to hear it?"

"Very much," he replied.

"I will see if I can frighten you," she teased. "Let us go under the roof, so that the rain won't fall on us."

Seikei had forgotten about the rain. He would gladly have stood there all night to listen to this girl.

They sat down where the overhanging roof gave shelter. It was darker here, and the girl's face disappeared in the shadows. Seikei could hear only her voice.

"Well, then," she began. "Long ago, a Buddhist priest named Kokushi was traveling alone through the mountains. It was getting dark, and he had lost his way. He came upon a little hut, like the ones hermits sometimes live in to meditate on the Buddhist teachings.

"An old man opened the door when Kokushi knocked. He wore the orange robe of a Buddhist monk, but it was faded and worn. The monk refused to let Kokushi stay with him, but said there was a village on the other side of the hill. There, Kokushi could find food and lodging.

"Kokushi found this to be true. But in the village, no one answered his knock. All the houses seemed to be empty. Finally, he found the people gathered in one house, weeping and praying.

"The head of the village had died that day. His body lay in this house, and everyone had brought offerings of food to see him into the next life.

"The village had no priest, and Kokushi offered to perform the Buddhist rites for the man's soul. But the dead man's son said that no one could remain in the village on the night after a death. 'Strange things happen on that night,' he said, 'and it would be better if you came with us to the next village.'

"Kokushi replied that he had no fear. He would be glad to keep watch over the old man's body. The others tried to persuade him to leave, but he would not.

"At last, they departed, leaving him alone with the body. Kokushi said the Buddhist prayers and blew out all the lamps except one next to the body. He sat quietly meditating, but he was curious about what strange things might happen.

"Hours passed, and Kokushi began to doze. Suddenly, he realized that something else had entered the house. A mist gathered around the dead body. Kokushi saw the face of a horrible demon emerge from the mist. It was a horned beast, with ferocious teeth flashing in the mist. The demon lifted the body with its claw and began to devour it.

"As quickly as a cat swallows a mouse, the demon ate everything—hair, bones, even the shroud. And this monstrous creature, after consuming the body, turned to the food offerings and ate them also. Then it went away as silently as it had come.

"In the morning, the villagers returned. They did not seem surprised to find that the body had disappeared. The dead man's son told Kokushi, 'Now you know why it is a law in our

village that everyone must leave on the night after a death. But you are unharmed, and so must be a holy man.'

"Kokushi asked, 'Why do you not have the monk on the hill perform the funeral service for your dead?'

"The villagers did not understand him. 'There is no monk living near our village,' they said. 'For many years now, we have had no priest, for all fled when they saw what you have seen.'

"Kokushi took his leave, and walked back the way he had come. He found the little hut, and again knocked on the door. When it opened, the monk covered his eyes and said, 'Ah! I am so ashamed.'

"You need not be ashamed for refusing me shelter,' Kokushi said. 'I was very kindly treated in the village.'

"The monk replied, 'I am ashamed because you saw me in my true form. It was I who devoured the corpse and the offerings last night before your eyes. For I am a jikininki-an eater of human flesh.'

"The monk explained that he once had been a priest, the only one for miles around. 'The people would bring me their dead so that I might pray over them. But I greedily ate the offerings that they had brought for the dead to enjoy. And when I died, as punishment I was sent back to earth as a jikininki.' He hung his head. 'Now all men must flee from the sight of me, or they will die.'

" 'Yet I saw you,' said Kokushi, 'and I did not die.'

" 'You must be a holy man,' the jikininki said. 'I beg you, pray for me so that I may be released from this hideous state of existence.'

"Kokushi began to say the proper Buddhist prayers, and when he looked up, the monk had vanished, along with the little hut in which he lived.

Kokushi found himself alone in the grass, next to a tombstone covered with moss. It was a go-rin-ishi, the stone that marks the grave of a priest.

"Did you ever hear this story before?" Michiko asked Seikei.

"No," Seikei said. "It was a good one, but I was not afraid."

"I must return to my father now," said Michiko. "Perhaps we will meet again, and then you can read me a poem you have written."

"I promise," said Seikei. He watched as she rose and went into the inn. How graceful she is, he thought.

After she left, a cool wind blew across the terrace, sending a chill through Seikei. The play across the lake was over, and now all was silent. He began to think of the jikininki, and stood up. It was too quiet and too dark. He had the odd feeling that something might be hiding in the darkness beyond the terrace. He didn't want to stay out here any longer.

#### Chapter 4: The Hour of the Rat

Seikei hurried back to the room where his father was sleeping. He took off his kimono and lay down on the other mat.

But he didn't fall asleep. The inn was still noisy. Only rice-paper screens separated one room from another, and Seikei could hear Lord Hakuseki's men talking loudly in other rooms along the corridor. They were drinking rice wine, and showed no concern for the slumbers of other guests.

Seikei heard his father snoring. All the noise did not disturb his sleep. Seikei knew that

tomorrow would bring another long, uncomfortable trip in the kago. He sighed, and tried to shut the sound out of his ears.

Then loud shouts made him sit up and listen. He could hear very clearly, though the voice was farther down the hallway. It was Lord Hakuseki himself. He was scolding one of the inn's servants for not bringing the wine quickly enough. The sound of a blow was followed by a muffled cry. Then heavy footsteps and a loud thud. The servant had been thrown out on the wooden floor of the hallway. Much laughter followed from the other samurai.

Truly, as the girl Michiko had said, this daimyo did not have a noble spirit. I would not be that way if I were a samurai, Seikei thought. He reminded himself of the three qualities of a samurai—loyalty, right conduct, and bravery. Right conduct meant setting an example for others to follow. Lord Hakuseki, powerful though he was, did not know the difference between right and wrong.

The noise of the partying continued for some time. Gradually, it began to die down. Seikei heard the slow footsteps of a samurai going down the hall to the privy in the courtyard, and then returning. Finally, the inn became quiet.

Seikei tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable. He regretted telling the girl he liked ghost stories. Now he could not get the image of the jikininki out of his mind. The dim light from the corridor shone through the rice-paper walls of the room. The walls were decorated with a pattern of whorls and curlicues. Every time Seikei looked in their direction, he seemed to see large eyes staring at him.

Far off, a temple bell rang once, a hollow sound that meant the first hour after midnight had begun—the Hour of the Rat. Seikei closed his eyes, but he could hear the sounds of heavy breathing all around him. He knew it was only the occupants of the rooms on either side. But it sounded like a gang of jikininkis waiting to gobble him up as soon as he fell asleep.

Then his body tensed. He heard another sound. Something was sliding across the floor outside the doorway. Seikei's eyes popped open, and he saw the bamboo-screen door begin to slide open, very, very, slowly.

Seikei felt his hair stand on end. As he watched in horror, the door opened wide. Something was standing behind it—something larger than a man. The light in the hallway was too dim for Seikei to see anything more than a shadow. But he could see that it had a huge head, with horns sticking out of it.

Seikei sat up as quickly as if he had been a marionette on strings. He waved his arms wildly, and tried to say, "I'm not dead!" But his throat was paralyzed with fear, and only a squeak came out.

The shadow turned in his direction. Seikei saw its eyes flash in the light from the hallway. The creature's white face looked down on Seikei. It stared at him for a second and then raised one arm. Seikei saw a small object in its hand, red and glowing like a fiery eye. The ghostly form waved the red object toward him. To Seikei, it seemed like the spirit was trying to cast a spell on him.

The shadow moved backward, and the door slid closed again. Seikei felt as if he were made of stone. He could not move a muscle, but his heart was pounding so fast that he thought his chest would break open.

His ears were so keen now that he thought he could hear insects crawling in the corners of the room. As he listened, he heard a door sliding back. The ghost must be going...

Other Books

Bowker's Guide to Characters in Fiction.

King Read Along - The Brightest Star ... 18.95 ( 0-9641861-1 - X ) Redhawk Publishing  
Osborne , Mary Pope . Lions at Lunchtime . 1998 . ( Magic Tree House ..."