

Ushiwaka and his retailer Benkei

In the 12th century, the late Heian period in Japan, the Taira family was at the height of its prosperity while their opponent the Minamoto family had almost perished. You can see what was happening on one of the bridges in Kyoto, the capital at that time.



Nobody but a big monk is on the Gojyo Bridge with a Naginata, or Japanese halberd (one of Japanese arms which has a wide sword on top of the long shaft), under his arm, standing firm with his feet a little apart. The moon is very beautiful, and it is shining on the bridge of Gojyo. Look, someone is coming toward the monk playing the flute. How beautiful the sounds are! But you can't see the player's face clearly because he wears a sheer silk kimono over his head. He has a sword on his waist, which looks precious. The monk notices the player's beautiful sword. He yells out at the person playing the flute.

"I'm determined to get one thousand swords. I already gathered 999 of them in my inventory. One more sword and my collection will be perfect." But the man is still playing the flute calmly and just about passing by the monk.

"Hey, wait a minute. As I said I'm gathering one thousand swords. One more sword and my collection will be perfect. You have a good sword on your waist. If you give it to me immediately, I won't hurt you. You can go away as you like." The person stops playing the flute, and takes off the kimono from his head. Look! What a noble and clear-cut features he has! With a calm, composed voice, he says, "You've gathered nine hundred ninety-nine swords, right? But what you are doing is nothing but mugging."

The monk shouts loudly,

"Shut up! If you don't want to give it to me, I'll take it from you by force. It's going to be mine any minute."

The young man who doesn't appear to be afraid of the monk, says,

"Take it, if you can."

Then the monk raises his halberd over his head to threaten the young man. In most cases, his victims are scared of him, leave their swords, and run away. But the young man isn't. He dodges the attack nimbly. The monk's halberd slices nothing but air. He looks a little bit upset, and tries to do one more attack, but---he loses sight of the young man.

"Where on earth is the boy hiding?" he shouts.

"Here I am, Monk." The voice is from behind.

"None of your impudence!" The monk's face turns red with anger. He tries again. This time the young man jumps lightly like a bird and stands on the railing of the bridge. When he jumps, he knocks the monk's halberd down with his flute. The monk is panicked and tries to pick it up, but before he does, the young man jumps down on the halberd.

"Now you know you can't get my sword easily," the young man says to his opponent.

"You win, I give up. Now I understand you must be famous in this field. Please tell me your name. I ought to have said first that I am a warrior monk called Benkei," he accepts his defeat gracefully, "I'll be your loyal retainer from now on."

The young man says,

"My name is Ushiwaka. My father Minamoto-no-Yoshitomo was the head of the Minamoto family, but he was killed by the Taira family during the Heiji disturbance. Some day I should beat the Taira family completely. So I do need some loyal retainers. You can be the first of my own."

This is an episode showing how Ushiwaka met his loyal retainer Benkei for the first time. Later Ushiwaka was called Minamoto-no-Kuro-Hangan-Yoshitsune (1159-1189). He reunited with his brother Yoritomo soon after the battle of Fujigawa against Taira. They swore to avenge their father's death on the Taira family. Benkei was said to be a man of extraordinary cunning, strength and martial skill. He accompanied Yoshitsune through all the campaigns of the Taira-Minamoto war (1180-1185).

Yoshitsune devoted himself to defeat the Taira family. When his duty was completed to wipe out their rival family at Dan-no-Ura, he expected to have his brother Yoritomo thank him for his long and hard service. But the suspicious brother Yoritomo wasn't pleased to meet his younger brother returning in triumphant. Yoritomo, who opened Japan's first warrior government, Kamakura Shogunate, refused his own brother entry to Kamakura. The younger brother was very aggrieved and wrote a letter to his brother asking for his forgiveness. But finally he felt his brother's deep hostility. He sought the protection of Oshu Fujiwara family in Hiraizumi, as the head of the Fujiwara family had once sheltered Yoshitsune when he was young. But after the head's death, under pressure from Yoritomo, his son forced Yoshitsune to commit suicide.

You'll be surprised that Yoshitsune is still one of the popular historical heroes among Japanese people. He has been immortalized as a tragic hero. Even after he was said to have died, stories that he was alive in Ezo (now in Hokkaido) or Mongolia circulated, and some legends said that Genghis Khan and a tragic hero Yoshitsune were the same person.

牛若と弁慶

12世紀、平安末期の日本では、平家は栄華を極め、源氏は滅亡寸前でありました。そんな中、京の都の橋の上で、ある出会いがありました。

五条の橋の上、小脇になぎなた（にほんのやり）を抱えた、一際大きな僧が、仁王のごとく、立っていました。明るい月が、五条の橋を照らし出していました。※なぎなた（幅広で反りの強い刀身に長い柄をつけた武器）



おや、大男の方へ、笛を吹き近づいて来る者がいます。何と美しい笛の音でしょう。薄での絹の着物を被いて（かざいて）いるのでその顔ははっきりわかりません。腰に差している太刀は由緒あるものに見えます。大男は、その立派な太刀に目をつけました。男は、笛吹きに向かって大音声を上げました。

「拙僧の宿願は千本の太刀を得ること。すでに999本の太刀を得た。あと一本で満願成就。」しかし笛吹きは、一向に動じることなく笛を吹きながら、大男の脇を通り過ぎようとしてきました。「おい、ちょっと待て。今も話したように、拙僧の宿願は千本の太刀。あと一本で満願成就だ。そちは見事な太刀を差しておる。それを拙僧に即座によこすなら、命は助けてやる。どこへなりと立ち去れ。」

その人は笛を吹くのを止め、被きものを取ります。何と気高い、きりりとした顔立ちの若者でしょう。

若者は、穏やかに、落ち着いた声で話します。

「そちが999本の太刀を集めたのは真実（まこと）か。しかし、そちがやっていることは盗みに他ならぬ。」

男は大声で叫びます。

「だまれ！お前が、太刀をよこさぬと言うなら、力づくでも頂くまでだ。もうわしのものも同然だ。」

若者はおどしに動ずることなく、

「取れるものなら取ってみよ。」

男は、なぎなたを頭の上に振りかざし、若者を威嚇します。いつもなら、ここで大方の者は恐れをなし、太刀を捨てて逃げ出します。しかし、若者にその気配は全くなく、大男の攻撃をすばやくかわします。男のなぎなたが空を切ると、男はちょっと取り乱し、もう一度切りかかります。しかし若者を見失ってしまいます。

「一体どこに行った。」と怒鳴ります。

「ここぞ。御坊。」後ろから声がしました。

「何をこしゃくな！」

男は怒りで顔が真っ赤になり、再び切りかかります。若者は、今度は鳥のように軽やかに飛び上がり、笛で男のなぎなたを叩き落とし、橋の欄干に立ちます。男は、慌てて、なぎなたを拾おうとしますが、その前に、若者はなぎなたの上に飛び降ります。

「容易にわが太刀は奪えぬと知ったか。」若者は男に言います。

「参った。降参だ。貴殿は、この道では、名の通るお方とお見受けした。お名前をお明かし下され。拙僧は弁慶と申す僧兵だ。」弁慶は、自らの負けを潔く認めて、「これからは、そこもとの郎党になりましょう。」と言う。

「私は牛若と申す。父、源義朝は源氏の棟領であったが、平治の乱で平家に滅ぼされた。いつの日か平家一族を倒したいと思っておる。それには私に仕える郎党が是非とも必要だ。そちにはわが郎党のかわきりになってもらおう。」

これは、「牛若」がその郎党となる「弁慶」に初めて出会った場面であります。後の源九郎判官義経（1159-1189）とは、この「牛若丸」でありました。「義経」が、兄「頼朝」と合流したのは、兄の平家討伐の富士川の戦いの直後でありました。兄弟は、平家一門を打ち、亡き父の無念を晴らすことを誓います。「弁慶」は人並はずれた老練、大力に加え、武術に秀でた人物と言われ、「義経」に従い源平合戦（1180-1185）に加わりました。

「義経」は平家滅亡に身をささげ、壇ノ浦の戦いで宿敵平家を壊滅し、悲願達成を果たした時、当然、兄「頼朝」からは長きにわたる辛い功労に対し労い（ねぎらい）の言葉があると思っていました。しかし、疑い深い「頼朝」は勝ち誇った「義経」が戻ってくるのを望みませんでした。日本で最初の武家政権「鎌倉幕府」を開いた「頼朝」ではありましたが、「義経」の鎌倉入りを許しませんでした。失意のどん底の「義経」は、「頼朝」に許しを請う書状（腰越状（こしごえじょう））を送りますが、結局は兄の敵意を強くさせるのみでした。「義経」は救いを、かつて若かりし時、一時身を寄せた奥州、藤原家に求めました。しかし当主「藤原秀衡」の死後、「頼朝」の圧力に屈した息子「泰衡」により自害を余儀なくされました。

驚くなかれ、今でも「義経」は日本人の中で人気のある歴史的英雄の一人であります。悲劇の英雄の象徴とされ、その死後でさえ、蝦夷（北海道）にいる、とかモンゴルに渡った、とか言ううわさ話が流れました。挙句の果てには、ジンギスカンと悲劇の英雄「義経」は同一人物である、という伝説まで生まれました。