

The Criminal

During the Tokugawa wars, of which there were many in Japan before the reign of the Tokugawa Shogunate, great samurai heroes burned brightly like meteors in the autumn sky.

And yet...after the wars...the schools of swordsmanship they founded withered on the vine or disappeared.

It was a thing the old master had pondered many times as he worked to discover perfection in the way of the sword. Despite his age he challenged the masters of other schools...and each time he won.

In his heart he knew, though, that his victories were over what the schools had become, not over the great masters who had founded them. If, the old master thought, he could defeat the systems evolved by the victors of hundreds of duels and battles, then the difference must be in the men.

And yet most of these men rose to fame in battle.

The old master had meditated long and hard on this problem. If great swordsmen could be discovered only in battle, then it was clearly the master's duty to disperse his students and close his school.

It so happened at this time that government officers has captured a famous thief who was renowned for his courage. Among common people, in fact, this thief was spoken of as the samurai of criminals.

For his offenses, the thief had been sentenced to be boiled alive and as was the custom, his small son would be boiled alive with him.

Thinking of these things, the old master realized it was true: the great samurai were remembered for their courage as well as their swordsmanship.

And yet, what was the meaning?

Summoning his retainers, the old master ordered that the thief be brought to him.

The sun was chasing the cold gray out of the morning sky when the thief was brought before the master in the courtyard. He was a burly man with big, strong hands. His hair was untied and curled wildly around his face.

"I cannot save you," the old master said. "Whatever happens here, you will still die."

And then the old master explained what he wanted. He would fight the thief to the death...no quarter given.

The thief sneered. "Take me back to the pot," he demanded. "Why should I provide entertainment for you, old man? You're a master swordsman and I am only a thief."

"The sword is more merciful than the pot," the old master said gently. Only he was staring at the thief's young son, for he realized the thief was indeed a man of great courage and not to be swayed by threat or promise.

The thief, too, looked to his precious son and his heart softened. Only his vanity would condemn the child to such a cruel death...and vanity was not courage.

Reluctantly he agreed to the old master's conditions.

The retainers cut the thief's hands free and with a roar the thief plucked the sword offered to him from the scabbard and attacked the old swordsman with a barrage of sharp, cutting slashes that drove the old man back, and back again.

The master could strike back, but not without being cut himself. Minute by minute as the thief slashed at him the master was losing ground. And all of his skill could not help him.

The thief would die, but so would the master.

Driven to the wall and only moments away from his own death, the master threw away his hope of life and struck through the fatal wall of steel woven by the thief.

Though mortally wounded, the thief lunged again and it was only good fortune that his blade drew only a trickle of blood from the old master's face.

And then there was stillness as the master pondered. An unskilled man had nearly killed him...a brave man to whom death meant nothing. If the thief had been trained in the use of the sword the old master knew he himself would be lying dead in the dirt of his courtyard. He found the secret of the great heroes.

Calling his students to him, the master announced that he was closing his school and adopting the son of the thief.

"How can you do this?" his bewildered students asked. And then, one by one, each swore to be his disciple, though it meant ruin and suffering and forsaking family and friends. Once they had all done this they knelt around the master and waited for his words.

"To live by the sword," the old master said as he started his new school, "the first thing to learn is to die..."

Originally published in the "The Bujin." Reprinted in "Fighting Spirit" magazine, third quarter 1988, with the kind permission of Mr. Fredrick J. Lovret.