

THE TASTE OF BANZO'S SWORD

By Kate Walker

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MATAJURO JAGYU had one dream: to be a famous kendo sword master—as famous as his father, who was known throughout all Japan. At an early age, Matajuro entered his father's school and began the hard, daily kendo training.

After several months, his father said, "Matajuro, come. Walk with me in the garden."

Matajuro walked proudly at his father's side.

"You have studied hard at kendo," his father said.

"Thank you!" Matajuro beamed.

"And practiced many hours each day."

It was true. Matajuro had practiced very hard.

"But in all kindness," said his father, "I must tell you that you have no skill for sword fighting. Take up poetry. Poetry is a great and gentlemanly art."

"But ..." Matajuro stopped short. "I don't want to be a poet! I want to be a sword master!"

"That can never be." His father frowned gravely and walked on.

Matajuro caught up. "I'll practice more. I promise. And try harder."

"You already try too hard," said his father. "You leap about like your kimono is on fire. That is not kendo."

"I'll take more lessons!" Matajuro said. "No," said his father.

"Harder lessons!"

"Please," said his father, "do not embarrass me further in my own school."

Matajuro bowed respectfully. He said he was sorry to have embarrassed his father, went home, packed a small parcel of belongings, and left.

He would be a kendo sword master! And if his father refused to teach him, then he'd just go and find somebody else who would!

There was only one kendo master in Japan more famous than Matajuro's father—an old man named Banzo. Old Banzo did not fight in tournaments or teach anymore. He lived on his own in a small walled house somewhere high in the mountains, and Matajuro set off in search of him.

After traveling many days, Matajuro finally knocked at the old man's door and begged him, "Please, sir, teach me kendo. My father refuses. He says I have no skill."

"Then you have no skill," said Banzo.

"But my father might be wrong," said Matajuro. "Or he might be trying to teach me a special lesson in a strange way. Some sword masters have odd ways of teaching."

"True." Old Banzo nodded and walked away, leaving the door open. So Matajuro followed.

The old man stepped into his practice hall, where he took down two bamboo swords from a rack on the wall. He gave one to the boy and said, "Strike me."

"No!" Matajuro cried. "I could not, master. You're too old."

So Banzo struck the boy instead.

Immediately Matajuro tried to hit back. He thrust at the old man, took swipe after swipe at him, puffed and panted and shuffled his feet so much that at the end of ten minutes his whole young body ran with sweat and his face was red, whereas the old man stood calm and fresh as ever. Matajuro had not laid a blow on him.

Banzo put the swords back on the rack. "Your father was right," he said. "You have no skill. Take up painting. Painting is a fine and gentlemanly art."

"With respect, sir" said Matajuro, "I want to be a sword master. And I will be a sword master, if I have to walk the length of Japan ten times over to find a teacher."

"Oh dear," Banzo sighed. "Poor old Japan, such a tramping she will get. You'd better stay here, and I will teach you."

Matajuro leaped up for joy. "Thank you, master. When do we start? I am ready now!"

"Then we will begin now," Banzo said.

"How long will it take for me to learn?" Matajuro asked.

"A boy of your age?" said Banzo. "Ten years."

“That’s too long!” Matajuro cried. “What if I practice every day, day and night—how long then?”

“Every day, day and night?” said Banzo. “In that case, twenty years.”

“I mean if I practice all day long, every day, without fail—do nothing but kendo—how long then?”

“In that case,” said Banzo, “thirty years. A fellow in a hurry never learns anything fast.”

Matajuro’s face sank.

“And your first lesson is this,” said the old man, “you will not touch a sword or speak of kendo until I say.”

“But ...”

Banzo raised a finger for silence. “If you would learn from me, you must obey.”

Matajuro nodded. Thereafter he stayed with the old man and worked as his houseboy. Matajuro cooked the meals, washed the clothes, and tended the garden—all without a word of sword fighting or swords.

Secretly, though, Matajuro practiced—with a mop. And every day, when the old man went into the practice hall, the boy crouched outside to listen to the old but sure feet shuffle through the footwork patterns. Matajuro listened for the whisper of a kendo sword blade slicing the air. One day he even offered to paint the practice hall, just to get inside.

“Good idea,” said Banzo, and he gave the boy a box of paints, two small brushes, and a sheet of rice paper. “Painting is a fine art,” he said. “Every gentleman should know how to paint.”

Matajuro had to sit and paint the picture from outside.

Later that afternoon when Banzo saw it, he sighed, “Again, your father was right. A poem would have been better. You have no skill for painting.”

Matajuro went back to his chores of cooking and scrubbing. And thus the first year with the master passed quietly by.

During his second year with the old man, Matajuro grew tired of listening at the practice room door and simply went about his chores—but all the while dreaming of kendo. He daydreamed so much that, pruning the peach tree one day, he cut his finger. While mending the roof, he accidentally slipped off and bumped his head. And

while tending the garden, he often pulled out the carrots and left the weeds to grow—all the time off in the clouds dreaming of kendo. Old Banzo said nothing, and so the second year passed quietly by.

Matajuro began to wonder if the old man would ever teach him anything! Perhaps he should leave and seek another master? As he sauntered about with his watering can, thinking these thoughts, he suddenly came across a young peach tree he'd planted the year before. Overnight it had burst into bloom. White flowers like snowflakes dotted its limbs.

“Master!” Matajuro called. “Master, come quick! Come and see!” He fetched the old man into the garden. “Look! Look at my tree. I planted it myself. Do you remember? From just an old cutting you said would never take. You said it was just a stick, but look at it now.”

The small tree was a mass of flowers, and every flower would become a ripe peach before the summer was done.

“To get such a stick to grow into a tree,” said old Banzo, “you must have watered it every day. And held it in your thoughts every night.”

“No,” said Matajuro. “Mostly I forgot about it. It grew on its own.”

“Then plant more sticks and forget about them,” said Banzo. “You have learned a great secret.”

Matajuro laughed, picked up his watering can, and went on with his chores. And Banzo returned to the practice hall and took down a bamboo sword from the rack on the wall. With it hidden behind his back, he crept up on the boy still mooning over his tree outside.

Matajuro did not hear the old man until—whack! The bamboo sword blade whistled through the air and struck him on the seat. “Whaaaah!” He leaped up yelping. “Master! Master! Why did you do that?”

The old man raised his finger. This was a matter of swords and kendo. It was not to be spoken of. He had not given the word.

That night, while Matajuro was warming the rice for the evening meal, Banzo sprang again and rapped him across the knuckles with the bamboo blade.

“Master, what have I done?” Matajuro cried, sucking his fingers. “Why do you beat me? Haven’t I been a good servant? Don’t I do everything you say?”

But the old man raised a hand for silence again.

The following day, as Matajuro laid out the washing, the old man appeared from nowhere and struck once more, paddling him sharply.

“Please, master!” Matajuro said. “Why do you treat me this way?”

Banzo would not answer.

It became a ritual. Any time of the day or night, the old man might appear from nowhere and strike. Not a moment passed in which Matajuro did not have to think about swords or listen for the old man’s footsteps, which were impossible to hear. He moved like a cat.

But one day, while tending the lettuce in the garden, Matajuro sensed the old man behind him. He heard the soft swish of the blade descend through the air. There was no time to leap away. He leaned to one side. Whoosh! The bamboo blade hissed narrowly past him and hit the lettuce, squashing it flat.

Matajuro looked at it, clutched his sides, and began to roll on the ground, cowering and laughing. “Missed! You missed me! Ha, ha, ha!” It was not a very dignified thing to do, but the greatest living sword master in Japan had taken a swipe at him and missed! “You missed me!” he chortled, unable to believe it himself.

“Come,” said the old man, “it is time to speak of kendo.”

“Kendo?” Matajuro said. “*Kendo*?” Getting up from the ground he asked the lettuce, “Kendo—what is that?”

Under the old man’s guidance, Matajuro learned very quickly and in just a few years, returned to his father’s school and challenged the students there.

Having watched him, his father said, “Come, Matajuro. Walk with me in the garden.”

Matajuro walked proudly at his father’s side.

“You have studied hard,” his father said. “I have,” said Matajuro.

“And practiced many hours.”

It was true.

“Again you have embarrassed me,” his father said.

Matajuro frowned. He had hoped to please his father, not disappoint him again. “Might I know,” he asked, “embarrassed you in what way?”

“That you had such skill and I failed to see it,” his father said.

In time Matajuro Jagyu became a greater sword master than his famous father and one of the most renowned in all the history of Japan.