THE LANCE WINS

THE SWORD OF JAPAN

BY F. J. NORMAN

PERHAPS in no other country has the sword had so much attention and honour paid it as in Japan; for regarded as being of divine origin, it has been worshipped as such. But then on the other hand, viewed from a European standpoint, few swordsmen in other lands have so defiled their blades as those of Japan. For instance, it was quite a common occurrence, even so lately as the seventies, for a *samurai*, or gentleman soldier of old Japan, to pay a small fee to the public executioner for the privilege of being allowed to test his blade upon the carcase of a criminal, and even at times upon the living body of one. And some Japanese swordsmen, with the same object in view, went further than this, and hesitated not to resort to what they so expressively termed "cross-road cutting," the victims in such a case being generally a beggar—man, woman, or child, it mattered not which to them.

Among the many good sword stories told me by my old fencing master, the following is not only interesting but thoroughly illustrative of Japanese humour and of the weakness above mentioned with regard to the testing of sword blades. According to him, there lived in days gone by a certain great *daimyo*, or feudal lord, who was a great patron of swordsmiths and swordsmen. One day

a swordsmith in his service presented him with a beautiful blade he had but just lately finished. Desirous of seeing it tested the *daimyo* sent for the best swordsman among his retainers, and when he arrived ordered him to test it upon the body of a fish hawker who happened to be passing along a road lying within the precincts of the castle. Putting the sword in his girdle, in the place of his own which he left behind him in the charge of a friend, the famous swordsman strutted off down the road, met and passed the fish-hawker, and returned to his feudal lord by another and shorter road. Furious with him the *daimyo* asked why he had not obeyed his instructions? Begging his feudal lord to have patience, the swordsman asked him to watch the fish-hawker carefully when he came to a certain sharp turning in the road. This he did, and to his surprise saw him collapse all of a sudden, for while the upper portion of his body toppled over one way the lower fell another. The moral attached to the tale is, of course, that not only was the sword such an exceptionally fine one, but the swordsman who wielded it so dexterous, and with so true an edge had he made his cut, that it only required the twisting swing of the fish-baskets to finish his job.

Up to 1876 all *samurai* wore two swords, that being their particular mark of distinction, and the different ways of carrying the weapon indicated the rank of the wearer. Men of high birth wore theirs with the hilt pointing straight upwards; the common people, who were only allowed to wear one sword, and then, too, only when on a journey, wore theirs stuck horizontally in the *obi* or girdle-like sash of the Japanese; while ordinary *samurai* wore theirs in a position about half-way between the other two. To clash the sheath of one's sword against that belonging to another person was held to be a grave breach of etiquette; to turn the sheath in the belt, as though about to draw, was tantamount to a challenge; while to lay one's weapon on the floor of a room, and to kick the guard with the foot, in the direction of anyone else, was a deadly insult that generally resulted in a combat to the death. It was not even thought polite to draw a sword from its sheath without begging the permission of any other person present. A Japanese gentleman of the old school calling on another, even though he might be his most intimate friend, invariably left his sword with the door-keeper of the house, so little did such men, apparently, trust each other.

As I believe that I was the first Occidental to make a study of Japanese swordsmanship, it may be of interest if I here describe my experiences in the fencing schools of Tokyo; and so to begin: The summer of 1889 found me established in Tokyo, and as the sedentary

nature of my duties commenced to tell on my health, I decided to take up the study of *kenjutsu*, or Japanese fencing. Getting into touch with the authorities at the *Keishicho*, or head police station of Tokyo, I soon secured an introduction to Umezawa-san, the fencing master of the Takanawa Police Station, and then quite one of the best swordsmen in Japan. Never did a *maître d'armes* take more interest and pride in a pupil than Umezawa did in me, and this was all the more commendable on his part because the majority of the fencing masters in Tokyo looked upon his teaching me Japanese swordsmanship as a renegade act. The first dozen lessons or so were given me

ILL-TIMED POINT AND RESULT

on the little lawn in front of my house, but after a while I used to attend daily at the Takanawa police fencing room, and for a couple of months or so fenced with, or rather took instructions from, the best fencers attending there. When he thought I was sufficiently advanced, Umezawa set me to fence with some of the more indifferent and harder hitting swordsmen, but was always close at hand to give instructions and correct faults. Writing as an old cavalryman, with plenty of experience of regimental drill grounds and gymnasiums, I can safely say the Japanese system of teaching fencing is far and away superior to that in vogue in the British army, and that for

rough dismounted work the Japanese system of two-handed swordsmanship is much superior to any of the systems of Europe. A first class French or Italian duellist would, more than probably, beat a first-class Japanese swordsman, but only so if fighting on ground thoroughly suitable to his own peculiar style of sword-play. On rough ground, on a hill-side, or on ground covered with impedimenta, the Japanese swordsman would more than likely have the advantage; or in other words, in positions where a rough-and-tumble fight is going on, and where men want to kill and kill quickly without attending too much to details of form over it.

A SIDE SLIP AND WHAT WOULD HAPPEN

As a weapon of offence and defence a *katana* is an infinitely superior one to the absurd thirty-six inches bladed, single-handed sword with which British infantry officers are armed, and with slight modifications in its make and use it could be rendered still more effective. In the first place its blade is considerably shorter—from ten to fifteen inches—thus allowing for the majority of men greater freedom of movement; for nobody can deny that to a dismounted man a long scabbard is a horrible nuisance, and that to a shortishly-inclined man it is an absolute incumbrance. But though

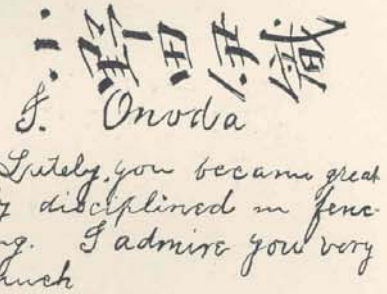
shorter in the blade the *katana* has a longer grip, and when one has learnt to use it aright it is truly wonderful what little length of reach is lost. This great length of grip permits of the use of both hands for the purpose of delivering a crushing blow or cut; and, moreover, after practising the Japanese style of fencing a swordsman becomes quite ambidextrous. How very disconcerting this last is to an opponent all swordsmen are fully aware, and when to this is added the fact that *katana* play is a closer play than that of the cut-and-thrust sword of the Occident, it must be admitted it is an infinitely

JAPANESE WRESTLING

superior one to it for the one and great purpose of a fight to the death. It certainly is not so taking to the eye as—let us say—a French or Italian swordsman's play; but while there is less ostentatious art and ceremony about it, there certainly is just as much science, and it may also be added as much, if not more, deadly intent.

Among the many swordsmen who used to put in their daily attendance at the Takanawa fencing-room was one who very early attracted my attention. He was an elderly man, and in some

respects a finer swordsman than Umezawa, who introduced him to me one day as his *sensei* or teacher. Onoda was his name, and though he was exceedingly tall for a Japanese he was quite the best built one I have come across. For a long time I could gather nothing more about him than that he did not like foreigners, and that it would be just as well if I did not thrust my acquaintanceship upon him. Later on I learnt he was, or had been, the hereditary fencing master to the late Shogun or "generalissimo" of Japan. All this of course helped to arouse my curiosity, but a grimmer or more forbidding old man never lived than Onoda-sensei, and so what was my surprise when some six months after I had begun learning *kenjutsu*, he came up to me one afternoon and presenting his card, as here shown, offered to take me on for a bout. Delighted at



the thought, I was soon ready, but no sooner did the other fencers in the room see what was going to happen than they stopped fencing; and, making quite a ring round us, stood looking on with what I could not but help thinking were quite troubled faces. They knew well that Onoda-san had highly disapproved of my being admitted to the fencing-room, and I am not sure but that some of them did not think my days were about to be numbered. They were quite wrong, and Onoda-san and myself got on so well after this that instead of keeping aloof from me any longer he rather sought than otherwise my company. In his way he was a most peculiar old fellow, a sort of Buddhist puritan, and when he found out I had spent some years in India he was for ever asking me questions about it, its people and their religions, etc. He did a thing one day I never knew another Japanese man to do, and that was to reprove a fellow-countryman of his for being rude to me and calling out after me in the streets. Being an old *samurai*, with an exceptionally fine presence and manner, he did this in a way that sent the erring indi-

vidual literally grovelling in the dust of the road. With such a man as my friend and instructor I soon was more than able to hold my own with the average good swordsmen of Tokyo, and remarkably useful I found the being able to do so, for it brought me into contact with a class of Japanese few, if any, other foreigners have ever had the chance of becoming acquainted with. However, to revert to the *kenjutsu*.

The *kabuto*, or helmet, though it is undoubtedly superior as a

THE AUTHOR AND UMEZAWA-SAN

fencer's mask to that used by the sabre players of Europe, yet on the other hand it has certain defects about it. For while giving ample protection to the face, neck, and throat, it does not sufficiently protect the sides of the head, nor yet its top or crown. It sits firmer, however, than do any of our fencing helmets or masks, being tied, or rather lashed, on to the head. Under it is invariably worn a *tenagui*, or small native towel, wrapped round the head in turban-like fashion as shown in the photograph in which I

am seen standing by the side of Umezawa-san. The reason for this is of a purely cleanly or sanitary nature, and the result is that no Japanese helmets ever have an unpleasant odour.

The *dō*, or corselet, is a lighter, cooler, and in every way a far superior chest and body protector to the leather jerkins of European sabre-players. It is made of slips of the very best and soundest of bamboos, strung perpendicularly together in the required shape, and trimmed and strengthened with fastenings of leather, silk, or hemp. The best *dō* are lacquered with the *mon* or crest of the owner, and remarkably handsome some of them are. They are

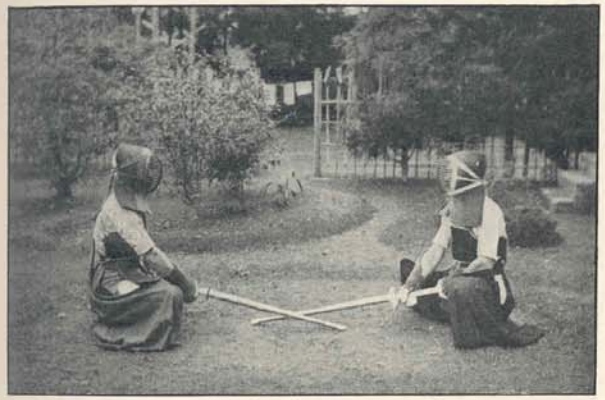
MEMBERS OF THE TAKANAWA FENCING SCHOOL

worn hanging somewhat loosely, being suspended from the shoulders by soft cords of cotton or silk, but never so loosely as to prove a nuisance to the swordsman.

The *kusadzuri*, or taces, is a light and efficient enough protector for the lower part of the body, but hardly as good as those in use in British gymnasiums. These are generally made of a tough cotton or hempen canvas, cut in five strips of about nine inches in length and four in width, two strips lying under, and three outside, as shown in sketch, and each strip is well quilted. Though

hanging loose the strips are fastened to a band that encircles the waist of the fencer, but in a way that does not impede his movements in the slightest degree.

The *kote*, or gauntlet, is a hand, wrist, and forearm guard much superior to anything to be seen in our gymnasiums. A *kote* is made of strong cotton or hempen canvas, lined with bamboo shavings or horse-hair, and trimmed and strengthened with a soft kid-like leather. One great advantage the Japanese *kote* has over our gauntlets is that its size can be regulated up to quite an appreciable degree by the loosening or tightening of the lacing running along and inside its forearm portion.



PRIOR TO THE SALUTE

The *shinai*, or practice sword, is made from four strips of bamboo, and though it undoubtedly looks clumsy enough at first it is not so by any means. The length and weight of *shinai* vary according to the taste of fencers, there being no rules laid down about this—surely a fairer method than ours, which forces all men to use the same-sized practice sword irrespective of their stature and strength. The four strips of bamboo being cut to fit each other are then brought together, and over the grip or handle end of the *shinai* is drawn a strong leather covering. The grip may be of any length, say from eight to fourteen inches. From the guard end of this covering runs a leather or gut strand to the point of the *shinai*, and is there fastened to a leather cup-like covering that keeps together

the ends of the four bamboos and forms a button over their points. The line along which the gut runs is considered the back of the sword, and as the *shinai* is strengthened and kept together by a fastening of leather at its cutting point, advantage is taken of this to run the gut through it and so help to keep it all the tauter in its place. The *tsuba* or guard is a circular piece of stout leather with a hole in its centre to permit of its being passed up and over the grip until it reaches the hilt, where it forms a circular guard standing out from the *shinai* an inch or a little more. Sometimes, but not often, a fencer will use a secondary *tsuba*, made of thin leather and padded like a cushion. This will lie between his hand and the ordinary *tsuba*. The measurements of my favourite *shinai* are—blade, twenty-six inches, and grip, eleven inches. But it must be pointed out here that I stand but a trifle over five feet six inches and have somewhat small hands.

The *hakama*, or divided skirt of the *samurai*, is a most comfortable article of clothing, which, while it affords a certain amount of protection to the legs and lower parts of the body, does not in the least impede a fencer's movements. It is light, airy, and cool, and might with very great advantage be introduced into England.

Japanese fencing-rooms are all built on more or less the same plan, and the Takanawa fencing-room was no exception to this. It was about thirty feet in length and about half that in width. Two of its sides were opened to the air, and along its other two sides ran a raised platform, a couple of feet or so above the floor of the fencing arena. The platform was furnished with mats, and on cold days with fire-boxes, and was used indiscriminately as galleries for spectators or dressing and resting-rooms for the fencers. Such men as liked to keep their fencing gear there could do so, hanging the same up on pegs along the side of the gallery. Here it must be pointed out that all Japanese fencers have their own special kit, the fencing-room supplying nothing.

Two men agreeing to have a bout will, after donning their kit, step into the arena, and squatting down in front of each other, at about six feet apart, will then proceed to salute one another by a bow. Rising slowly, they will put themselves into position with *shinai*, crossing at engage, as shown in the illustration.

To go into details over all the cuts, guards, and points of a Japanese fencer's *répertoire* is not the object of this article, but it is well to point out here that during a fifteen years' experience of *kenjutsu* I remember seeing only one man make use of a back-handed stroke, and he was one of the best swordsmen in Japan. Another remarkable point about the Japanese system of swordsmanship is that its native votaries never deliver a point except at the

throat; but this is, perhaps, explainable by the fact that until the seventies armour was largely used by them. This point even is more of a job than a lunging thrust, and is delivered from below upwards, with the very evident object of getting it in between the gorget and the upper part of the breast-plate. Though highly scientific, *kenjutsu* is a very rough-and-tumble sort of sword-play, absolutely free from parade and all theatrical touches, but wonderfully practical withal. As Japanese chivalry is most uncompromisingly based upon the idea that all is fair in war, so Japanese swordsmen resort to certain methods which are highly reprehensible from our point of view. Such a thing as giving another man a chance never appears

THE ENGAGE

to enter their heads; and so, should a fencer lose his *shinai*, or fail in any way, his adversary immediately takes advantage of this to push home his attack with all the greater vigour.

The cuts most in favour with Japanese swordsmen are mainly of the chopping order, and mostly delivered at the head and right wrist. Some few, however, pay considerable attention to their adversary's stomach, and, if skilful swordsmen, these are the most difficult to tackle. The cuts at the head and wrist can be delivered from the engage position, and in the case of the former this is done by slightly raising the *shinai*, stepping sharply forward, and as sharply bringing the *shinai* down upon the adversary's head with a

chop that carries on. The wrist cut is made by a disengaging cut-over, with, if necessary, a sharp side tap against the adversary's *shinai* to throw it out of line. Both these cuts can be parried by a slight raising of the *shinai*, and an outward twist of the wrist, and from both parries return cuts can be made at either head or wrist. Ordinarily Japanese fencers stand much closer to each other than do those of Europe, and it is truly remarkable what little space a couple of good native swordsmen require for a fight to the death. Some on the contrary are very fond of keeping well away, and, if not followed up and brought to close quarters, resort to a totally different

CORPS À CORPS À LA JAPONAISE

mode of attack, consisting mainly of slashing cuts, first with one hand and then with the other, the changes being carried out with wonderful rapidity. The principal swinging cut can be delivered for either side of an opponent's head, but if he is a good swordsman it is a somewhat risky one to resort to, for he can reply to it by either a stop thrust or a stop cut at the head. The guard for it is a mere raising of the sword to a sufficient height and in the right line. There is only one form of hanging guard known to Japanese swordsmen, and it is seldom resorted to, for it makes a smart return a matter of great difficulty.

A good swordsman is held in high repute among the Japanese, but curiously enough a good swordsmith is perhaps more so; and the names of such men as Amakuni, Kamigé, Shinsoku, and Amaza of the very olden days, and Munéchika, Yasutsuna, Sanémori, Yukihira, and Yoshimitsu of the Middle Ages, are known to all educated subjects of the Mikado; and then as for Masamune, Yoshihiro, and Muramasa, their names are household words in every homestead of the land. The two best swordsmen I have met in Japan were Sakikibara and Henmi. The first was a tall, rather slightly-built man; but though a grand swordsman, somewhat inclined to play to the gallery. Henmi-san, on the other hand, was a most unobtrusive individual, standing about five feet one, and quite the most graceful man that I have ever seen; but though Sakakibara had a greater

A FIGHT TO THE DEATH

following among the general public of Tokyo, there is little doubt Henmi was the better swordsman of the two. I have seen him, while fencing with a first-class swordsman, stop all of a sudden, drop his *shinai*, and then invite the other to attack him. But try as this other might, he could seldom get a cut into him, for where Henmi was the fraction of a second before the spot would be vacant.

The Japanese have always been very fond of giving names to their swords, such names being usually derived from some circumstance connected with their career. The "Grass-mowing sword,"

for instance, was so called because when a brushwood fire threatened to destroy his army Yamato Také mowed down the intervening brushwood with it, and so stopped the flames and saved his troops. The "Higékiri" and "Hizamaru" were two famous swords belonging to the Minamoto family, and owe their names to the fact that when they were tested on a couple of criminals sentenced to decapitation, one cut through the *higé* or beard of the victim, after severing the head from the body, while the second cut through the *hiza* or knee of the other luckless wretch as he sat or squatted to receive his death blow.