

THE SAKURADA AFFAIR IN YEDO.

BY ERNEST W. CLEMENT.

DOUBTLESS, most, if not all, of the foreign residents of Tokyo are inclined to pass along the streets of the metropolis without thinking of the historic associations of places. There are, it is true, some spots which have a well-known and definite historic interest, such as the temple called Sengakuji, with the tombs of the famous Forty-Seven Ronin. But there are many other places, the historic memories of which have been obscured or even obliterated by the lapse of time and the march of modern civilization. We think of Ueno now in connection with cherry blossoms, of the conservatory of music, or the museum, or an ephemeral exposition; and we are not likely to recall the facts that, on July 4, 1868, it was the site of a battle between the forces of the last Shogun and the Imperial Army; and that it was the Abbot of Kwan eiji (a Buddhist temple at Ueno) whom the Tokugawas put up as a rival of the late Emperor Meiji Tenno. Here and there throughout the city of Tokyo, we may find Buddhist temples, like Tozenji and Zempukuji, which once sheltered the ambassadors of Western countries and were the scenes of fierce attacks by the anti-foreign *ronin*. The present arsenal at Suidobashi was the site of one of the three Mito Yashiki¹ in Yedo: the First Higher School is the site of another Mito Yashiki and now marks its historic character with a monument in honor of a Chinese Ming scholar who took refuge with the famous Mito Prince, Mitsukuni (or Giko), in the seventeenth century. The Imperial University is located on the grounds of the old Kaga Yashiki of the mighty Maeda family. Sakurada Mon (Gate) is one of the old gates of the former Shogun's castle (now the Imperial Palace), and is now known as a tram-car transfer point; but it was the scene, sixty years ago, of a very important event in the development of New Japan. That event is known as the "Sakurada Affair."

¹ "Yashiki" = mansion, of a noble Family.

It occurred on the third day of the third month according to the old lunar calendar, the date of the famous Girls' Festival or Dolls Festival which fell that year (1860) on March 24. That festival is one of the Five Festivals (Go-Sekku) which come on the first day of the first month, the third day of the third month, the fifth day of the fifth month, the seventh day of the seventh month, and the ninth day of the ninth month (all according to the old calendar). It was the custom of the Tokugawa Shogunate to hold a kind of levee in the castle of Yedo on each of those festivals. As March 24 was so near the spring equinox, it is not strange that a storm of sleet and snow was raging even in Japan. From that circumstance, as well as from the fact that the principal participants in the affair did not survive to write up the story with all the modern newspaper embellishments, it is a little difficult to establish with certainty the details of what did happen. The best that can be done is to piece together several versions of the tragedy.

The chief victim of this tragic affair was Ii Kamon-no-Kami, Lord of Hikone, *Tairo* (literally "Chief Elder"), that is, Prime Minister of the Shogun (who was a minor), and thus (since the Emperor was then a figure-head) practically the regent of Japan. He had dared to negotiate a treaty of amity and commerce with the American Consul-General Townsend Harris and to have it signed July 29, 1858, without waiting for the imperial approval; and he had followed this up by making similar treaties with Holland, Russia, Great Britain and France. This had brought down upon him the wrath of the ultra-Imperialists under the lead of Mito, who, on account of Ii's autocratic manners and methods, had dubbed him the "swaggering Prime Minister." He knew very well that he was marked for death whenever a favorable opportunity should present itself. Only a few days before this affair he had been advised by a friend to resign and thus avoid danger. He replied: "My own safety is nothing, when I see a great danger threatening my country." Even that very morning he had been warned again; but, like Julius Cæsar, he paid no attention to the prophesied dangers of his "Ides of March."

Ii's mansion was situated on the hill about where the War Department and the General Staff Office are now located. It was, therefore, only a little way that he had to go in his palanquin to the Shogun's castle. Even for that short distance he was escorted by a retinue of retainers both for display and for protection. And, as the retinues escorting other lords, coming from other directions, all had to converge upon the same spot, it produced more or less

confusion, which, added to the storm then raging, made a stage setting eminently suited to carrying out the conspiracy to a successful issue.

The other chief actors were eighteen samurai, seventeen of Mito and one of Satsuma.

It seems quite clear, from the various available reports of the "Sakurada Affair" (reports naturally conflicting, and even colored or doctored, and hence obscure in many points), that, when Lord Ii, in his palanquin, had reached a certain (prearranged?) spot, a few persons, who had apparently been idly hanging around there for the mere purpose, a common one, of watching the various feudal trains go by, rushed out in front of the Ii retinue. It was, of course, a very rude performance to break into the progress of a daimyo, as the Englishman Richardson learned two years later to his sorrow at Namamugi, near Kanagawa. It would seem that the rush of Ii's retainers to avenge this affront left his palanquin comparatively unprotected, so that others of the assaulting party were able to reach the palanquin without much difficulty. The attacking party had easily divested themselves of the straw rain-coats or other means with which they had been disguised to look like innocent bystanders. But Ii's retainers, taken so completely by surprise, were, some of them, slain before they could divert themselves of the coverings with which they had protected their armor and weapons from the weather. Consequently, the unarmed Lord of Hikone fell an easy victim to his assailants.

According to one report, the men who succeeded in reaching Ii first demanded of him an explanation of his conduct and engaged in a discussion with him on the right and wrong of his policy, and then assassinated him. But, while such a procedure was quite in accord with the conventionalities with which a vendetta was performed in those feudal days; yet, in this case it seems unlikely that there was time enough for such a formality. A counter-attack by some friendly Tokugawa retainers, or by those of the Shogun himself, was altogether too imminent to allow such a diversion, however interesting.

There are also contradictory reports concerning the disposition made of Ii's head. One statement is that the man who started off with it was unable to effect his escape and was brought to bay in the moat, where he was permitted unmolested to commit *harakiri* in the orthodox manner. It seems much more likely that he had only a decoy head, while, by a prearranged plan, the man with the real head of the high victim effected an escape. It is stated that Ii's head was carried to Mito and exhibited to his old rival, Prince Nariaki, who

is said to have gloated over it and spat upon it. It is needless to add that the Mito adherents deny the truth of that report. It is also affirmed, with more plausibility, that the head was taken to Kyoto, there publicly exposed as the head of a traitor, then carried back to Yedo and cast one night into the Hikone Yashiki grounds.

One of the most interesting features of this affair illustrates one of the curious old customs of feudal Japan. It was an unwritten law that the estate of a daimio who suffered death violently or away from home should be either confiscated or reduced. It was, therefore, necessary to avoid such disgrace by officially concealing the exact truth. Hence, the principal gentlemen in the late regent's service is reported to have written as follows: "This morning, while my master was on his way to the castle to pay his respects to the Shogun, an attack was made upon his train. In the scuffle one man was killed, and the servants of Ii brought the body to the house here." That is certainly a remarkable example of the skilful way in which the truth can be told and yet concealed! And this fiction was maintained by the Shogun's officials, who reported to the foreign ambassadors for several days, that Ii "was not worse"!

Even more interesting is the statement made in Dickson's "Japan," that Ii himself wrote to the Shogun as follows: "I proposed going to the levee at the palace and was on my way there, when, near the Sakurada Gate, about twenty men were collected. They began to fire pistols, and afterward with swords attacked me in my *norimono*. My servants thereupon resisted and killed one of the men—the others ran off and escaped. Having received several wounds, I could not pay my intended visit to the Shogun, and was obliged to return to my house. Now I send the names of such of my servants as were wounded."

According to another old feudal custom the assailants issued a formal statement giving their reasons for the deed. This is summed up in the following words: "They accused him, first of possessing himself of the person of the young Shogun, and of dismissing and appointing officials as his own selfish objects suggested; secondly, of receiving enormous bribes and granting private favors; thirdly, of having driven away the princes of Owari, Mito, and Echizen, thereby depriving the Shogun of the support of those who were most nearly allied to him by blood; fourthly, of having deluded His Highness Kujō, besides confining many Court nobles, and putting numbers of the *samurai* and common people to death; and fifthly, of being frightened by the empty threats of the foreign bar-

barians into concluding treaties with them, without the sanction of the Mikado, and under the pretext of political necessity."

At this point let me only add that while the Mito Ronin thus wreaked vengeance upon the man who had heaped indignities upon their prince, the latter enjoyed his triumph for only a few months, and died in October of the same year (1860). The deaths of these two leaders may have diminished a little the bitterness of party feeling, but also "left Japan without any master mind to control a difficult situation."

It remains now to consider briefly the effects of the assassination of Ii. A Japanese writer (Iyenaga) has said that the "family was called the *dodai* or foundation-stone of the power of the Tokugawa dynasty [of Shoguns]"; but the same writer has characterized Ii as "bold, ambitious, able and unscrupulous," "the Richelieu of Japan." From this point of view it was probably a good thing that he was removed from the scene of action. Gubbins, in "The Progress of Japan," gives Ii due credit for what he had done: "There can be little doubt that the regent's direction of affairs greatly assisted the work of reopening Japan to foreign intercourse." It may not be unfair to say that his removal might naturally have retarded that same process, which indeed moved very slowly after his death. Anyhow, the death of Ii hastened the downfall of the Tokugawa Shogunate, the overthrow of which was essential to the national unification of Japan. Ii's lifework and his death cooperated to the same end, the development of a New Japan.