

FEAR **by Stephen Volk**

In Japan, at the time of the Heisam era, there was no further point from Kyoto than the town of Orobi, in the old province of Ema. And it came to the ears of the Emperor that this town was besieged by ghosts to such an extent that the hapless residents were at the end of their tether. It is said they appealed to their monarch to come to their aid before the township was entirely wiped out by their spectral, and cunning, enemy.

The Emperor, though he believed the conventional wisdom that the spirits of the dead had an influence on the living, wondered if the rapidly diminishing population of the town was some ruse to avoid paying taxes. The Emperor was a suspicious man. He forthwith despatched to the town a samurai by the name of Hojo, who was reputed by his Generals to be the bravest in his entire and not inconsiderable army: not for nothing was he known as Hojo the Fearless.

Samurai Hojo set out on horseback alone and straight-backed in the saddle for the province of Ema, thinking nothing of the fact that, according to reports, the living population of Orobi was diminishing week by week, and likewise the number of ghosts was increasing just as steadily -- something you and I might contemplate with some degree of dread or trepidation.

But Hojo was not the superstitious type.

For many days and moonlit nights henceforth he had only wolves and bears for company, and lost not a wink of sleep, such was his iron will and stoutness of heart. This would not have been a surprise to his fellow samurai, who said even amongst themselves, a courageous breed, that Hojo did not even understand the meaning of the word fear. He always slept deeply and well.

On his long journey through desert and over mountain he saw not a single human soul and that suited him well. But by the time he rode into Orobi he was looking forward to seeing a bustling thoroughfare of peasants about their daily toil, instead of which he found every street deserted, every house with its doors bolted and its windows battened down, every resident too terrified to respond to his arrival until he identified himself.

"I am Samurai Hojo!" he cried, drawing his massive sword from his belt. "I come from the Emperor. Slothful citizens, welcome me with food and drink, as I demand for a man of my station!"

The weary denizens of Orobi duly emerged, skin the colour of candle-wax and round-shouldered from carrying the burden of their terrors for so long.

The hunched figures brought him rice and chicken-meat which he devoured quickly with his fingers, wiping grease from his cheeks with a cloth snatched from a farmer's wife.

When asked why they did not venture out of doors, the townsfolk each answered the same way, with one word and a subservient bow to the samurai before them: "Ghosts."

Stroking his beard and strutting up and down, Hojo asked what these "ghosts" looked like. Nobody knew, and looked at each other perplexed.

"When they come," he was told by a community leader, "You too will shut your eyes rather than look upon them. As it is told by the ancients, those who do look at them, sire, go mad."

Hands on hips, Hojo the Fearless snorted a laugh. "Fools! Does not even one of you know what these creatures you are so afraid of even look like?" he asked.

The poor citizens shook their heads.

"No, sire," they chorused.

"Then you are more stupid and superstitious than I thought!"

It was a long time since any of them had dared to peek outside their doors. All they knew, they said, is that when those beings crawl, as they do crawl on a nightly basis from the surrounding woods, they utter howls like nothing on earth, like neither beast nor man.

"They come to us every night, and every morning we count each head of our population in the market place, and every day the number is one less than the day before."

Hojo sheathed his sword in a sudden and brisk motion. The gesture seemed to say shrilly and unmistakably: "We shall see about that."

On the first night Hojo heard no terrible howling. On the contrary the night was calm and silent but for the movement of the branches of the trees. He sat inside the house that had been designated to him, and occasionally patrolled its windows and rooftops, which gave him a good view of the forest.

He cleaned his sword until it was gleaming and ate more rice and chicken-meat, then he patrolled yet again. He had forgotten how chilly it got in this part of the province and his armour was not very good at keeping out the draughts. The wind, when it wanted to, could become icy in an instant, and the next day he took it upon himself to purchase a fur cloak made from the pelt of a black bear.

He felt the cloak's weight on his shoulders, admired it somewhat, and said to himself: "I shall not tremble."

On his way back to the house, he saw the head-count taking place in the market square, and he quickly knew from people's expressions that another had been taken.

On the second night he began to think about his mysterious enemy. As he ate his rice and chicken-meat he wondered what it might be like to touch the skin of a ghost. It might be incredible slimy and loathsome. He didn't want that to distract from the job at hand, if they suddenly attacked him. So the next day he went to the blacksmith and demanded that the man make him metal caps he could wear on his finger tips. Hojo did not pay him: he reminded the man he was an officer of the Emperor and such work should be seen as an honour. The blacksmith bowed and did as he was told.

Hojo tried on the objects when he returned to the house that evening. "Good. This way I shall not feel their obnoxious skin if they get too close," he said.

Needless to say, another victim had been taken by hours of darkness.

During the third night he heard a rattling at the window and could not work out what was causing it. The wind was becoming shriller now and he reminded himself that some people sometimes imagined the sound of the wind was a howling in the night.

He ate his rice contentedly, humming a lullaby to himself which reminded him of his mother.

Whilst he was patrolling, he wondered if the ghosts uttered screams that turned men mad -- an old wives' tale often repeated in the barrack room. If so, he had better be in preparation for that.

The next day he bought cloth pockets to tie over his ears, the better to keep out the sound of the ghosts' hideous cries when they came.

Then he slept, for he had to sleep in the daytime now, and thus be wide awake to face his demons. Or at least, those of Orobi.

Pointless to repeat -- that day, another soul was found to have been taken. Another widow wept.

At dusk, one of the village elders commented to Hojo while he bathed in the river that he was looking jittery. Hojo laughed. He said what they perceived as his nervousness was only extreme irritation. He was a samurai, he liked to feel blood on his hands, and he was getting impatient to face his foes -- cowards that they were. Why didn't they show their faces?

"You are lucky that they do not," said the elder, shuffling away on his wooden shoes with a pail of water.

On the fourth night, Hojo did not feel like eating his rice. He began to think that the chicken-meat was off. He said to himself that it was more important than ever to keep alert. He wrapped his black fur cloak around him. He put on his metal finger tips and tied tightly about his skull the cloth ear plugs. He tried to stop his mind from wandering by going through elaborate thrusts and swipes with his sword -- as if at invisible combatants, though he was alone in the room. He tried to stop thinking that the ghosts might wait until you fell asleep before attacking and eating you, the way wild beasts do.

He shook his head and listened to the night.

Still, they did not howl.

Hours passed, and he stood fighting sleep with his eyes wide open till he felt they would bleed.

He stood in agony, sword clenched tightly in his fist.

There were no shapes in the woods. Much as he squinted, he could see nothing.

His heart beat louder and louder in his chest.

Still, still they would not come.

The next day he bought needle and thread.

As he did so, he heard one farmer say to another that another bed had been found empty.

"Let him look at me," thought Hojo. "But he will not see fear in my eyes. For I am a Samurai. I am Hojo."

On the fifth night he prayed to hear the howling begin. He wanted to return to the Emperor a hero. It was typical of his cowardly enemies to toy with him like this. It was because they were afraid of him, obviously. The fear was theirs -- not his. That was the truth of the matter. It should be plain to everyone.

He did not drink from the bowl of water left for him.

The ghosts may have infected it.

There was no telling the methods they might use to get to him.

Did they not know they were dealing with Hojo the Fearless?

He took the needle and thread and sewed his eyelids back, the upper ones to his forehead and the lower ones to his cheeks, so that it was impossible for him to close them. That way, he would not be able to sleep even if he wanted to.

He waved his sword and screamed from the rooftops: "Come! Come and face me, beasts, monsters! I will slaughter you and all your kind! Mothers, babies, all!"

His voice seemed to echo off the full moon, but the trees did not even quiver.

He lit a candle.

He said a prayer to his gods and hoped that they were listening. He blessed them and hoped they blessed him in return.

He sat on the floor, staring at his knees tucked as they were below his chin.

He had a thought. "Aha! If you run away from them and they catch you, they will no doubt grab onto your legs, and eat them inch by inch beginning with the toes." He clapped his hands, pleased at his sudden insight.

They would not get him. He would ensure once and for all that the ghosts would not get him. Fear would not win.

He stopped waiting and listening for the sounds to come from the forest. He took action.

He lifted his sword and with two swift slices -- One! Two! -- cut off his feet at the ankles.

Writhing on the floor in a pool of blood, he screamed at the top of his voice, but the sound seemed dragged from some deep place within him that had never been exposed before. It was a cry such as no man or beast of the earth had made before or since.

It was a howl, and as soon as it was uttered he heard it taken up by many more of the same from outside the confines of his house.

From the forest, in fact.

Sobbing, Hojo twisted onto his belly, propped himself up on his elbows and dragged himself to the window.

His sobs became a long drawn-out wail.

For now he saw them all too clearly, lit by the knowing and gibbous moon.

They moved out of the shadows of the forest on their bellies, with the same awkward squirming motion he had used to get to the window, for they had no feet. Their fur was like that of a black bear on their shoulders, from their ears hung flaps like cloth pockets, they had no fingertips but pointed iron claws, and their round bloodshot eyes stared from sockets with the lids held unnaturally open.

Hojo the Fearless prepared with his laughter to greet a million howling creatures the mirror of himself.