

Botchan – Chapter 2

Natsume Sōseki – 1906

Our steamboat sounded its whistle and slowed to a stop, and a baggage lighter set out rowing from the shore to meet us. The ferryman was stark naked, except for a red loincloth. We must have put the civilized world behind us. But then again, who could wear clothing in this kind of heat? The water glistened so brightly under the intense sun that gazing too long could blind one. The ship's officer informed me that this was my destination. From the looks of the place, it was a fishing village no bigger than Ōmori. I thought this must be someone's idea of a joke, but this was indeed the place, and I had no choice but to disembark. I jumped quickly down into the lighter, and five or six others followed. Four large boxes were also loaded, and our naked man in the red loincloth rowed us back to shore. I was first again to jump out when we landed, and I immediately grabbed an urchin boy who was standing on the beach and asked where the middle school was. He looked at me blankly and told me he didn't know. Obviously a dull-witted bumpkin. How could anyone not know where the middle school was when the whole town was no bigger than a postage stamp? At this point a man wearing an odd style of kimono approached and told me come with him. I followed, and he led me to an inn called Minatoya. A group of dubious-looking maids called out for me to enter, so I stopped where I was and demanded directions to the middle school. They told me it was five miles off by train. After learning this I decided I should keep moving. I snatched my bags back from the man in the odd kimono and resolutely walked away. The folks in the inn watched me go, regarding me like some kind of rare bird.

I easily located the station and purchased my ticket. The train I boarded was like a match box on wheels. After rattling along for what seemed but a handful of minutes, it was already time to get off. No wonder the ticket only cost me three sen. I hired a rickshaw and rode to the school, but it was after hours and no one was there. The janitor informed me that the fellow on night duty had gone out on errands. Seems they had a rather loose interpretation of "duty." I thought of calling on the principal, but I was exhausted by that point, so I asked my driver to take me to an inn. He quickly pulled me to a place called Yamashiroya. Interestingly, this was the same name as the next door pawn shop in my old neighborhood where Kantarō lived.

I was shown to a dark room beneath the staircase. This room was unbearably hot. I asked for a better room but was told that, unfortunately, all of the other rooms were occupied. Then they tossed my bags down and left. There was nothing to do but stay and sweat it out. When they finally called me to the bath, I jumped in with a splash and finished quickly. On the way back to my room I looked in on a number of empty rooms that were cooler than mine. These folks were disrespectful and dishonest. After a while the maid brought my dinner tray. The room was stifling, but the food was much better than at my former lodgings. While serving, the maid asked where I was from, so I told her I was from Tōkyō. When she replied that Tōkyō must be a nice place, I told her of course it was. After she took the finished tray away and returned to the kitchen, I heard loud laughter. I'd had enough of their nonsense by now and turned in early, but I couldn't sleep. It wasn't just the heat, but the noise too. This place was five times louder than my former lodgings. When I did drift off, I dreamt of Kiyō. She was munching on her leaf-wrapped sweets from Echigo, bamboo leaf and all. I told her she should stop because bamboo leaves are poisonous, but she replied that these leaves were medicine and continued eating. I was greatly amazed at this and laughed out loud. My laugh woke me, and I saw that the maid was opening the shutters. The weather was unchanged, just an endlessly clear sky.

I had heard that one tips when traveling. I had also heard that one who didn't tip could be treated brusquely. That's probably why I ended up stuck in this dark and cramped room. Also probably due to my shabby dress, jute travel bags, and drab black umbrella. These country folk are quick to disparage a person. I decided to hit them with a tip they'd remember. I'd left Tōkyō with thirty yen in my pocket, the remainder from my education fund. After train and boat fares and miscellaneous expenses, I had about fourteen yen left. I could spend it all if I wanted, since I'd soon be receiving my monthly pay. But these country folk were a stingy lot, so five yen should suffice to knock them off their feet. I settled on this course of action, finished washing my face, and returned to my room. The same maid from the prior evening came in with my breakfast tray. She served me with a mischievous smirk. There was nothing about my face that should have amused her. It was, in fact, far superior to that mug of hers. I had planned to spring the tip on her after the meal, but I was too annoyed to wait. I pulled out my five yen note and instructed her to hand it over to the front desk. She responded with a curious look on her face. I finished my breakfast and immediately left for the school. My shoes had not been polished.

I had ridden to the school the day before, so I knew more or less where it was. I turned several corners and arrived at the gate. The way from the gate to the entrance was paved with granite. I'd felt somewhat self-conscious the day before when my rickshaw had made such a racket passing over these stones. Today, I met many uniformed students on my way, and they all entered through this gate. Some of them were taller than me and looked to be stronger. I was uncomfortable at the thought of having to instruct such fellows.

I presented my card and was shown to the principal's office. The principal was a man with thin whiskers, dark skin, and large eyes who looked like a tanuki [raccoon dog]. He reeked of arrogance. He told me to work hard and do my best, and then ceremoniously presented me with an official letter of appointment to which a large seal was affixed. On my later return to Tōkyō I would crumple this letter into a ball and hurl it into the sea. The principal told me I would soon be introduced to the staff, and I was to show this letter to each of them in turn. What a bother. Instead of such laborious pomp, why not just post it on the staff room wall for three days?

The instructors would not be in the staff room until the first hour bugle sounded. The principal took out his watch to confirm that we had plenty of time. He told me everything would be explained gradually in due course, but that first we should cover the fundamentals. He then proceeded with a lengthy lecture on the essence of education. I listened politely, of course, but half way through it struck me that I'd gotten myself into a preposterous situation. I could not possibly live up to the expectations he was laying out. Requiring a reckless scourge like me to serve as a role model for the students, to exemplify the virtues of the school, and to exert moral influence in addition to instruction was utterly unreasonable. Did he really imagine that such an outstanding gentleman would come this far into the sticks for a forty-yen-per-month salary? I believe people are all pretty much the same, and anyone is entitled to an occasional quarrel when provoked. Under these edicts I'd have to never open my mouth and never go out for a walk. They should have warned me beforehand that it was such a demanding post. I hate dishonesty, so I resolved to concede that I'd been lured here under false pretenses. I would turn down the post and head back home. After that five yen tip at the inn, I had nine yen or so left in my pocket. Nine yen would not cover a return trip to Tōkyō, and I now regretted the tip. But returning on nine yen was not out of the question, and I'd rather run out of money on the way home than lie to an employer. When I stated that I could not possibly meet his requirements and

would therefore return his letter of appointment, the principal gazed at me with his tanuki eyes and the lids began to flutter. Then he smiled and said, “My speech just now describes an ideal, and I know that you can’t match that ideal to perfection, so there’s no need to worry.” If he knew I couldn’t match his ideal, then I wish he would have spared me all that discomfort and stress in the first place.

As the principal was continuing on, the bugle sounded, and a sudden commotion arose from the classrooms. He told me the instructors should be assembled by now, so I followed him into the staff room. It was a large rectangular room, and the staff were seated at their desks around the perimeter. When I entered, they all turned to look at me as if on cue, like some curiosity paraded out for their amusement. As instructed, I made the rounds and presented my letter of appointment as I greeted each instructor. Most of them simply stood up and bowed in return, but a few went so far as to receive the letter from me, give it a perfunctory inspection, and reverently hand it back. It was like something out of a minstrel show. By the time I reached the physical education instructor, the last of fifteen, I was feeling miffed at having to repeat this routine. Each of them greeted me just once, but I had to replicate my performance fifteen times. I wished they’d consider this from my point of view.

Among those I met was the head instructor, who held a university degree. Having graduated from a university, he was most certainly an accomplished scholar. His voice was strangely soft and effeminate, but what surprised me most was that despite the heat he wore a flannel shirt. However thin the fabric may have been, it had to be hot. Perhaps he was going to great lengths to dress the part of a scholar. On top of that, the shirt was red; maybe he was somehow mocking the rest of us. I learned later that he wears a red shirt year round. He has some unusual illness, and as he explained it to me, the color red serves to soothe his condition. He custom orders these shirts to improve his health, but it seems to me he’s wasting his money. If red were really so beneficial, then why weren’t his coat and pants red too.

Then there was an English instructor named Koga who had a terribly pale complexion. People with pale complexions tend to be gaunt as well, but this man was pale and corpulent. Back in my primary school days I had a classmate named Tami Asai whose father had such a complexion. Mr. Asai was a farmer, so I asked Kiyō if all farmers had similar faces. She said no, and explained that Mr. Asai was pale and plump because he ate too much *uranari* squash. Since then, I’ve assumed that any plump person with a pale face must be that way for the same reason. There was no doubt in my mind that this English teacher also gorged himself on *uranari* squash. But to be honest, I still to this day don’t know the difference between regular squash and *uranari* squash. When I once asked Kiyō, she just smiled and didn’t answer. Most likely Kiyō didn’t know the difference either.

Then there was a man named Hotta who was to be my colleague in mathematics instruction. He was a brawny man with a close-cropped head whose demeanor suggested the Renegade Monk of Eizan. As I politely held out my letter of appointment, he disregarded it completely and bellowed out, “So you’re the new fellow? Drop by for a visit sometime. A ha ha ha!” I’ve no idea what he found so funny. And who would visit a guy like him with no sense of common courtesy? From this point on I assigned him the nickname of Yama Arashi [porcupine or frightful mountain deity]. The classics instructor, as one might expect, was proper and formal. He was an engaging older gentleman who spoke fluidly. “You arrived yesterday? You must be worn out. And you’re going to start teaching already? I’m impressed by your

diligence. ...” The art instructor was clearly the artistic type. He wore a flimsy silk coat and wielded a folding fan in one hand. “Where do you hail from? Huh? Tōkyō? Lovely - that makes us comrades. I’m a Tōkyō man myself.” If this was a Tōkyō man then I wished I’d been born elsewhere. I could go on with similar descriptions of each of the others, but there’d be no end to it, so I’ll leave off here.

When formal introductions were concluded, the principal told me that that would be all for the day. I was to discuss lesson plans with the head mathematics instructor and begin my teaching duties two days hence. And of course the head mathematics teacher was none other than Yama Arashi. I did not at all look forward to serving under this guy. As he picked up some chalk and headed toward the classroom, he spoke to me briefly. “Hey, where are you staying? Yamashiroya? I’ll come by later to talk.” It seemed lacking in dignity for a head instructor to visit his new charge. However, I appreciated not being summoned to his place.

After that I left again out the main gate. My first thought was to return to the inn, but since there was nothing to do at the inn, I decided instead to stroll around and take in the town. I saw the prefectural office. It was an old building constructed in the style of the former century. I saw the army barracks. They didn’t measure up to those of the Azabu regiment. I saw the main street. It was half the width of Kagurazaka, and lined with inferior residences and shops. A castle town boasting a quarter million inhabitants was nothing spectacular. While walking on and thinking how anyone who took pride in such a place was pathetic, I found myself back in front of Yamashiroya. The town had seemed bigger but turned out to be quite limited, and I’d apparently seen the most of it. It was time to eat, so I passed through the inn’s gateway. The hostess seated at the front desk jumped up at the sight of me and greeted me with a deep bow. As I took off my shoes and stepped inside, the maid informed me that a better room had become available. She led me to the second floor. It was a spacious fifteen-mat room on the front side with a large alcove. I’d never in my life set foot in such a splendid room, and I didn’t know that I ever would again, so I changed into a cool summer robe and spread myself out in the middle of the floor. It was a wonderful feeling.

Immediately after lunch I wrote a letter to Kiyō. I hate writing letters. My composition skills are poor, and I can never remember my kanji [Chinese characters]. I’ve never had anyone to write to anyway. However, I knew that Kiyō would be worrying about me. I didn’t want her to imagine I might have been shipwrecked and drowned, so I made my best effort and wrote her a long letter as follows.

“Arrived yesterday. Dull place. I’m staying in a splendid fifteen-mat room. I gave the inn a five-yen tip. The hostess bowed her head to the floor in gratitude. Couldn’t sleep last night. Dreamt that you were eating leaf-wrapped sweets, bamboo leaf and all. Will return next summer. Went to the school today and assigned nicknames to those I met. The principal is ‘Tanuki,’ the head teacher is ‘Red Shirt,’ the English teacher is ‘Uranari,’ the head mathematics teacher is ‘Yama Arashi,’ and the art instructor is ‘Nodaiko’ [a third-rate clown]. Will write more soon. Take care.”

After writing my letter I felt satisfied and a little drowsy, so I spread myself out again in the middle of the large room and dozed off. I had no dreams this time and slept like a rock. I was woken by a booming voice asking, “This room here?” and Yama Arashi entered. He started in with, “Good to see you again. About your responsibilities ...” before I even had a chance to sit up, leaving me flustered. The job as he described

it didn't seem particularly difficult, so I accepted without further discussion. If this was all it entailed then there was no need to wait two days. I'd have been perfectly willing to start the next morning.

Having concluded our discussion on school and teaching duties, he said to me, "Since you can't stay in this inn forever, I'll help you settle into good lodgings. It's not easy finding a place to stay here, but I can get you into a room right away. Sooner is better, so let's look at the room today, you can move in tomorrow, and then you'll be all set to begin teaching the day after." He seemed to have decided everything for me. However, he was right that I couldn't stay where I was. Even if I handed my entire salary to the innkeeper, it might not cover a room like this. It was a shame to leave so soon after splurging on a five-yen tip, but if I had to move then better to be done with it and get settled, so I took him up on his offer. He told me I should come first and see the room, so I went out with him. The house was half way up a hill on the edge of town, in a quiet area. The master of the house was an antiques dealer named Ikagin. His wife was four years his elder. In middle school I'd learned the English word "witch," and this woman fit the word to a tee. Not that it really concerned me if a man's wife was a witch. We agreed that I would move in the next day. On the way back, Yama Arashi treated me to a cup of ice water in Tōrichō. He had impressed me as arrogant and rude when I first met him at the school, but after all his help I decided he really wasn't such a bad guy. He was just quick-tempered and hot-headed like myself. I later learned that among the students he was the best-liked instructor.