

Botchan – Chapter 3

Natsume Sōseki – 1906

It was finally time for my teaching debut. Entering a classroom and for the first time stepping up onto the platform, I felt out of place. Even while lecturing, I wondered if I were really cut out for this. The students were a noisy bunch, and sometimes one would call out to me in a loud voice. I had often called out to the teachers in my physics school, but there was a world of difference between addressing a teacher and being addressed as a teacher. The bottoms of my feet began to feel itchy. I'm not a cowardly or timid man, but my nerves unfortunately are not so steady. Each time a student called out to me, I was reminded how one feels on an empty stomach when the noon gun suddenly sounds at Marunouchi. The students didn't hit me with any particularly difficult questions, and I somehow managed to fumble my way through that first hour. When I returned to the staff room Yama Arashi asked how it went. I responded simply that it went okay, and this seemed to put him at ease.

Setting off for second hour with chalk in hand, I felt as though I were marching into enemy territory. On entering the room, I saw that the students in this class were all bigger than those in the first hour. I'm a Tōkyō man of small and slender build. Even stepping onto the high platform, I couldn't cut a figure of authority. I'll grapple with anyone in a quarrel, but there were forty big students in the rows before me, and I didn't know how to inspire their admiration with just the tongue in my mouth. However, I did know that showing weakness in front of these country folk would set a poor precedent, so I rolled my tongue a little and laid into them with my loudest voice. For a while the students seemed caught off guard and fully bewildered. Feeling more and more triumphant, I continued lecturing until a big fellow in the middle of the front row stood up. Thinking "here it comes," I called on him. He spoke timidly in the local dialect. "You're lecturing so fast that I can't follow, could you please slow down a bit?" I told him that if it was too fast for him then I didn't mind slowing down, but that I was a Tōkyō man and couldn't lecture in the local dialect. If he couldn't understand my words he would just have to listen patiently until he did understand. Employing these tactics, second hour was easier than I'd expected. Then, as I was heading back, a student approached and asked me for help with a geometry problem. I had no idea how to work the problem, and I felt myself break into a cold sweat. I had to admit I needed time to think about it. I promised to explain it next time, and then I beat a hasty retreat. The students hooted and reveled in my failure, and I heard gleeful voices saying, "he can't do it, he can't do it." Idiots! Of course there are problems a teacher can't solve on the spot. Is it so strange to admit one can't solve something? Would a highly gifted mathematics teacher trudge all the way out to these sticks for forty yen a month? When I returned to the staff room, Yama Arashi asked again how it went. I said "okay" again, but then added that the students at this school were a bunch of boneheads. He gave me quizzical look.

Third and fourth hour, and the hour following lunch, were generally the same, each with minor blunders. I realized that teaching is not as easy as it looks. Having made it through the teaching day, I still wasn't done. I had to idle my time until three o'clock. At three the classes under one's charge would report that they'd finished cleaning their rooms, and the teacher was to perform an inspection. After that, and after one final check of the attendance sheets, we were free to leave. Even though we were on salary, there didn't seem much sense in holding us there just to stare at our desks. But since the rest of the staff adhered to this policy,

and I didn't think it proper as a newcomer to make waves, I went along. On the way home I mentioned to Yama Arashi that it was foolish for us to be held at the school till after three. He laughed in agreement at first, but then became serious and told me not to complain too openly about the school. If I had something to say, I should tell only him, and he added in a cautionary tone that there were certain people one must watch out for. We parted ways at the next corner, so I had no opportunity to question him further.

After I returned home, my landlord came and offered to make me tea. I thought he was treating me, but instead he brewed my tea and joined me in drinking it. Maybe he would like to "make me tea" while I was away too and enjoy it by himself. He explained to me that he loved paintings, calligraphy, and antiques, so he had finally decided to go into the business of buying and selling. Judging by my looks, he said, I must surely be a fellow connoisseur. He then put forth the absurd suggestion that I begin collecting as a pastime. Several years ago I'd gone on an errand to the Imperial Hotel and been mistaken for a locksmith. And a rickshaw driver once addressed me as "sir" as I was viewing the great Buddha at Kamakura wrapped in a blanket. I've been mistaken many times for many things, but no one has ever accosted me as a connoisseur. The fact that I'm not one is clear from my dress and appearance. A connoisseur, as one knows from paintings, wears a hood or carries strips of poetry parchment. This man must be a first-rate scoundrel to make such a statement with a straight face. I told him I had absolutely no interest in a pastime pursued by retired old men. He laughed this off as he deftly helped himself to more of my tea, and he added that of course collecting takes a while to grow on one, but once you start you'll find yourself hooked. I had asked him the evening before to buy me tea, but this stuff was horribly strong and bitter. One cup was enough to turn my stomach. I told him next time I wanted something less bitter, and he nodded his assent while pressing out yet another cup for himself. He seemed determined to drink as much of another man's tea as he could. After he left I prepared for the next day's lessons and went straight to bed.

I went to the school each day and performed my duties, and each day when I came home my landlord would appear to "serve" me my own tea. After a week I had a general grasp of how things worked at the school, and I'd become reasonably well acquainted with my landlord and his wife. Other instructors told me how the first weeks after receiving one's letter of appointment were anxious times, as one worried over establishing one's reputation. This didn't seem to apply in my case. I would cringe each time I blundered in the classroom, but thirty minutes later it would be cleanly out of my mind. I'm the type of man who couldn't worry over anything for very long even if he tried. I was indifferent to the effect of my blunders on the students, or even to how the principal or head instructor might react. As I've said before, I'm not a man with steel nerves, but I am a man of unwavering resolve. If things didn't work out at this school then I was ready enough to pack up and go elsewhere, so I was not about to show excessive deference to Tanuki or Red Shirt. I also felt no inclination to court the students' approval through coddling or flattery.

While I was getting along fine at the school, my lodgings were another matter. I could tolerate my landlord coming in and drinking my tea, but he also brought along his wares. The first he brought were artists' seals, of all things. He laid out ten or so in a row and suggested I buy the lot for three yen, a bargain price. I'm not a hack painter touring the countryside, so I told him I had no need for such things. The next time, he came in with a hanging scroll of the flower-and-bird genre. It was by an artist named Kazan, or something like that. He hung it in the alcove and remarked on its craftsmanship, so I responded halfheartedly that, yes, it was a nice work. He then proceeded to bore me with a lecture about there being two artists named Kazan, a

Kazan something or other and a Kazan something or other, and this scroll was by the Kazan something or other. For me, he could let it go for a mere fifteen yen - how about it? I refused at first by saying I didn't have that kind of money, but he stubbornly proposed a sale on credit. I managed to fend him off by stating more bluntly that even if I had the money I wouldn't buy his scroll. On his next visit, he lugged in a large inkstone, about the size of a corner roofing tile. He mentioned several times that it was a Tankei, so to humor him I asked what a Tankei was. He explained that Tankei stones could be classified according to upper stratum, middle stratum, or lower stratum. Most recent works were of upper stratum stone, but this was certainly from the middle stratum. He directed my attention to the grain markings and noted how unusual it was to find three such marks on one stone. It felt superb in rendering ink. He pushed it toward me and suggested I try it out. I asked how much it was worth, and he told me that its owner had brought it back from China and was intent on selling it, so he could give it to me for only thirty yen. This man was no doubt a bona fide idiot. I felt could I could manage my way through the work at the school, but I wasn't sure how long I could put up with this guy pushing antiques on me.

Then things took a turn for the worse at school. One evening while strolling through an area called Ōmachi I noticed a shop sign next to the post office with "Soba" written on it and "Tōkyō" added below. I love soba. In Tōkyō, whenever I'd passed in front of a soba shop and caught the aroma, I couldn't resist ducking in through the shop curtain for a quick bowl. Preoccupied with mathematics and antiques, I hadn't thought about soba since my arrival. But now that it was here in front of me I couldn't pass it by. Since it was on my way, I thought I might as well step inside. On first glance it didn't live up to its billing. If they were going to advertise it as "Tōkyō" then they ought to fix the place up a little. Maybe they didn't know anything about Tōkyō, or maybe they didn't have the money, but the place was filthy. The tatami floor mats were discolored and gritty with sand. The walls were dark from soot. The ceiling was low and blackened by lamp smoke, making one reflexively lower one's head. A menu listing the soba varieties was posted on the wall and stood out for its newness. Likely they had purchased an old house and opened their business here just within the past few days. Tempura soba was first on the menu, so I called out, "One tempura!" in a loud voice. As I called out my order, a group of three clustered in the corner slurping noodles turned and looked my way. I hadn't noticed before in the dark room, but when they looked my way I saw that they were students from the school. They greeted me, and I returned their salutation. That evening was my first chance in a long while to enjoy soba, and it was good soba, so I downed four bowls with tempura.

The following day I entered the classroom as usual and saw "Tempura Sensei" written in characters so large they filled the entire blackboard. Seeing my reaction, everyone burst into laughter. The whole thing seemed ridiculous, so I asked if there was something funny about eating tempura. One of the students replied, "But four bowls is too much." I'm eating on my own dime, so whether it's four bowls or five bowls, it's none of their business. I finished my lecture promptly and returned to the staff room. Ten minutes later I entered the next classroom and saw "Four bowls of tempura, but don't laugh" written across the blackboard. I hadn't been so angry the first time, but this one set me off. A joke carried too far is blatant disrespect. No one's impressed by a toasted rice cake burnt black. These country folk have no sense of tact and think it's okay to push a matter without limit. They live in a backward little town where everything can be seen in an hour, so they get excited about a "tempura incident" and spread word as though the Russo-Japanese war had erupted anew. A pathetic bunch. They're brought up poorly, gnarled like maple trees confined to flower pots, and

end up as small-minded people. I can laugh along at a good-natured joke, but this was something else. This was the malicious side of youth. I erased the blackboard and asked if they found such cowardly misconduct amusing. I asked further if they understood the meaning of “cowardly.” One of them asked me back whether, when one’s own actions were cause for laughter, getting angry over the matter wasn’t cowardly. What a smart aleck. It was a wretched thought that I’d come all the way from Tōkyō to teach such fellows. I told them to cease with the idle argument and pay attention, and I proceeded to lecture. When I entered the next classroom the board read “Indulging in tempura invites idle argument.” Things were getting out of hand. I was so fed up that I told them I couldn’t teach such disrespectful rogues and immediately left for home. I heard later that the students were quite pleased to have a break from lecture. On this day, antiques were preferable to school.

After a night’s sleep at home, the tempura soba affair didn’t bother me so much. I made my appearance at the school, and the students were there too. I wasn’t sure what to make of things. Three days passed without further incident, but on the evening of the fourth day I went to a place called Sumita and ate dumplings. Sumita was known for its onsen and was about ten minutes from the center of town by steam train or thirty minutes on foot. There were restaurants, an inn, a park, and even a red-light district. The dumpling shop I ate in was on the edge of the red-light district. I’d heard they made the best dumplings there, so I stopped on my way home after bathing at the onsen. This time I met no students, so no one would even know I was there. The next day at school, when I stepped into the first hour classroom I saw “Two plates of dumplings for seven sen.” I had indeed eaten two plates and paid seven sen. What an annoying lot. I expected something more in second hour, and I was greeted with “Red-light dumplings tasty, tasty.” Incurable delinquents. That was the end of the dumpling story, but next they set their sights on my red towel. There was nothing of substance behind this, except that since my arrival I’d decided to bathe at Sumita each day. Nothing else here could compare with the sights of Tōkyō, but the onsen was truly spectacular. Since I was here, I made the most of it by going each day. I set out each evening before dinner, getting my exercise in the process. When I went, I always took a large, Western-made towel that I dangled at my side. After being steeped in the hot bath waters, the red stripes on this towel had bled together, so that the whole thing appeared deep red. Whether coming or going, on the train or by foot, I trailed this towel. For this reason, it seems, the students had started referring to me as “Red Towel.” Pesky small-town folks. And there was more. The onsen was of new, three-story construction and offered a premium service with cotton robe rental and back scrub for eight sen. And the maid would bring out tea on an elegant stand. People began to comment on my extravagance in paying for premium service each day from a forty-yen salary. None of their business! And there was more. The bathing area was tiled with granite and about twenty five square meters in area. There were usually thirteen or fourteen people soaking at any time, but once in a while I had the place to myself. When standing, the water was chest deep, so swimming through the bath was a pleasant form of exercise. After checking carefully that no one else was present, I would allow myself a pleasurable swim round the basin. Then one day, when I descended from the third floor in high spirits and looked in to see if the coast was clear for a swim, I found they had posted in big black letters “No Swimming in the Bath.” There were not likely many guests who actually swam in the bath, so it’s possible they’d had this sign made especially for me. From that day on I no longer swam. I was done with swimming, but back at school I was surprised to find “No Swimming in the Bath” written across the blackboard in the usual manner. It seemed the entire student body was stalking me and observing my every move. What a miserable feeling. I wasn’t one to let

the whispering of students dictate my actions, but I couldn't help feeling self-pity at what an oppressive and stifling place I'd landed in. And each day when I arrived home, I was pressured to buy antiques.