

Botchan – Chapter 8

Natsume Sōseki – 1906

Since the return boat ride from fishing with Red Shirt, I'd begun to distrust Yama Arashi. When he'd told me to vacate my lodgings on sham pretexts, I'd finally decided he really was a reprehensible rogue. But then, contrary to expectation, he'd argued eloquently at the staff meeting for severe punishment for the students. This had struck me as highly peculiar. I'd learned from the old Hagino woman that Yama Arashi had tried to intervene with Red Shirt on Uranari's behalf. That was admirable, and I applauded his initiative. I was starting to think that, in light of all this, maybe Red Shirt was the devious one, and maybe he'd been corrupting my thoughts with contrived insinuations and circumlocutious accusations. When I'd caught Red Shirt out strolling the Nozeri River embankment with Madonna, I'd become convinced that he was the true scoundrel. Or whatever he was, he was certainly no gentleman. He's a deceitful two-face. Unless a man is straight like bamboo, he's not to be trusted. If a man is straight and true, then even a good quarrel can be satisfying. Those like Red Shirt, who proudly shows off his amber pipe with a gentle, kind, and noble air, are the ones to watch out for. They can't be confronted. And if they are confronted, it never ends like the Ekōin sumō matches with a clear-cut outcome. Yama Arashi, with whom I'd argued over a trivial ice water tab, stirring up the entire staff room in the process, was far preferable as a human being. I'd thought him despicable when he'd scowled at me in the meeting, showing his meanest glare. But when I'd thought on it later, better that than Red Shirt's syrupy, coaxing voice. In fact, I'd thought to reconcile with Yama Arashi after the meeting, but when I'd tried to address him he'd brushed me off with a hostile look. This had made me angry all over again, so I'd left it at that.

Yama Arashi hadn't spoken to me since. The ice water money that I'd deposited onto his desk was still there. The two coins were gathering dust. Of course, I wasn't about to touch them, and Yama Arashi was absolutely not going to pick them up and take them home. These coins precluded any rapprochement. I couldn't talk to him even if I wanted to, and he, for his part, held his stubborn silence. Each day, when I arrived at the school, the sight of these coins dismayed me.

In contrast to my standoff with Yama Arashi, Red Shirt and I maintained our relationship as before and continued to socialize. The day after our encounter by the Nozeri River, he approached me immediately upon his arrival at the school. He asked me how my new lodgings were, suggested we go fishing again for 'Russian literature,' and made various other small talk. I was feeling a bit spiteful toward him, so I mentioned how we'd run into each other twice the previous evening. "Yes, at the station. Do you always set out at that time? Isn't it rather late?" I reminded him point blank that I'd also seen him on the embankment of the Nozeri River, and he proceeded to deny it. He told me he had no business in that direction. He'd bathed and then immediately returned home. He needn't have bothered to hide it. It's a fact that I saw him there. The man was a shameless deceiver. If this is middle school head teacher material then I should be a university chancellor. At this point, he had lost all credibility in my eyes. So here I was conversing with Red Shirt, whom I didn't trust, and speaking not a word to Yama Arashi, whom I held in esteem. The world is a strange place.

One day, Red Shirt told me he had a matter of some importance and invited me to visit him at his home. I was disappointed at having to forego my outing to the onsen, but I set out around four o'clock to pay my call. Befitting his status as head teacher, Red Shirt had vacated his lodgings long ago and moved into a splendid house. I'd heard that his rent was nine and a half yen. It was such a nice house that it got me to thinking. If one could come to the country and take a house like this for nine and a half yen, then maybe I too could indulge myself in similar fashion. Kiyo would be extremely pleased if I called her to come join me in such a place. I announced myself, and Red Shirt's younger brother came out to greet me. I taught this brother algebra and other mathematics at the school, and he was an extremely poor student. Being something of a vagabond, he was even worse than the born-and-bred country folk.

When I was face to face with Red Shirt, I asked what he had wanted to discuss. He started in with a pompous air as he puffed foul smoke from his signature amber pipe. "Since coming to us here, you've performed very well in comparison to your predecessor. The principal is thrilled that we've acquired a talented colleague. The school has placed its confidence in you, and we expect in return your utmost effort."

"Is that so? I don't believe I can work any harder than I'm already working."

"Your present effort is sufficient. And as to our talk of the other day, you'd do well to bear it in mind."

"You mean that I should watch out for the likes of the man who helped me secure my lodgings?"

"When stated so bluntly, the nuance is lost. But okay, I think you catch my drift. Now, if you'll continue with your current industry then the school, for its part, will not let it go unnoticed. In a short while, when conditions present themselves, I expect some small improvement may be made to your remuneration."

"You mean my salary? Not that I care so much about my salary, but I suppose more is always better."

"We have a fortunate circumstance arising from a transfer of personnel. While I can't promise anything without first consulting the principal, there will be a little surplus in the budget due to the transferees' remuneration arrangements. I plan to talk with the principal and see what we can do for you."

"I appreciate that. Who's being transferred?"

"The announcement is imminent, so there's no harm in my telling you. It's Koga."

"Koga? I thought he was a native of this town."

"He does have roots here, but there are other factors at play - this in part reflects his own wishes."

"Where is he going?"

"To Nobeoka in Hyūga. It's a remote region, so he's being promoted to a higher pay grade in the process."

"Is someone coming to replace him?"

“Arrangements for his replacement are nearly final. Based on those arrangements, we can consider bettering your salary.”

“I see. That’s fine, but you needn’t go to any great pains over my salary.”

“At any rate, I intend to talk with the principal, and I believe that he thinks as I do. As a result, please be aware that we may have to call on you to perform additional duties.”

“You mean longer hours?”

“No, most likely fewer hours.”

“Additional duties, yet fewer hours? That seems odd.”

“It may sound a little odd, and I can’t provide details at present, but it entails an increase in your level of responsibility.”

I had no idea what Red Shirt meant. More responsibility would mean assuming the role of head mathematics teacher. Yama Arashi was the head mathematics teacher, and there was little chance of his resigning from his post. And he was well-liked by the students, so it wouldn’t be in the school’s interest to transfer or dismiss him. I could never quite make complete sense of Red Shirt’s words. But sensible or not, that was the conclusion of his business with me. We chatted further, with Red Shirt touching on various topics. There would be a farewell party for Uranari. Did I drink? Uranari was a man of virtue whom we certainly all cherished. Finally, he changed the subject and asked if I had an interest in haiku. I took this as my cue to exit, telling him I had no interest and beating a hasty retreat. Poetry is for Bashō, or for barber shop proprietors. What concern does a mathematics teacher have for morning glories entwined round rustic buckets?

I returned home and thought things over. There are men in this world whose motivation escapes me. Why would a man turn his back on his home town to seek out hardship in unknown lands, especially when he owns an estate and has gainful employment at a respectable school? I could understand the allure of a modern city with electric street cars, but Nobeoka in Hyūga? This country I’d come to at least boasted a respectable harbor, yet I yearned for home after less than a month. Nobeoka was in the middle of the middle of the mountains. According to Red Shirt, after disembarking from the boat, it was first a day’s travel by wagon to Miyazaki, and then it was a further day’s travel by rickshaw from Miyazaki. Even the name of the place had a backcountry ring to it. There must be, I supposed, as many monkeys there as humans. However much an ascetic Uranari might be, it was beyond me why he would choose to go off and commune with monkeys. To each his own, I figured.

At this point the old woman appeared, as usual, with my dinner. I asked if we were having potatoes again today, and she told me that, no, today it was tōfu. More or less the same thing.

“I hear that Koga will be leaving us for Hyūga.”

“Yes. A pity it is. The poor man.”

“It may be a pity, but if that’s his choice then who’s to stop him?”

“Whose choice?”

“Koga’s choice. Is he not just heeding his own eccentric volition?”

“I should say not. You’re dead wrong and thoroughly confused on that point.”

“Dead wrong, am I? I just now heard it from Red Shirt. If I’m dead wrong then Red Shirt’s an outright liar.”

“I’m sure whatever the head teacher said is correct, but it’s also correct that Koga does not wish to go.”

“Okay, then both are correct. I admire your impartiality, but what’s the real story here?”

“Koga’s mother came by this morning, and bit by bit she divulged to me how this all came about.”

“What did she tell you?”

“Just as we surmised, things have not gone well for the family since the father passed away. The mother went to the school principal and asked if her son’s salary couldn’t be increased just a little, given his four years of service.”

“I see.”

“The principal told her he would think it over. This reassured her, and she was anticipating positive news, expecting it would come either this month or next. The principal asked Koga to his office, but when he went he was told that, unfortunately, school finances were such that a pay raise was not possible. However, there was an opening in Nobeoka that offered five yen more per month. This would meet his needs perfectly, and arrangements had already been made, so he should prepare to depart.”

“It was an order then, rather than an offer?”

“Exactly. Koga would rather stay put at his current salary than transfer elsewhere for a small increase. He made the case that his family home and his mother were here, but the principal told him it was already a done deal, and his replacement was on the way.”

“They’re playing the man for a fool. Despicable. Then Koga has no desire to leave. I thought the whole thing odd. Only an oaf would move himself deep into the mountains, to commune with monkeys, for a five-yen pay raise.”

“Tell me, what is an oaf?”

“Never mind. This is Red Shirt’s scheme. Unethical, and foul through and through. And raising my pay as part of his dealings - what could be more unjust? Let’s just see him try and raise it.”

“You’re receiving a pay raise?”

“I was told I’d be given a raise, but I think I’ll refuse it.”

“Why would you refuse it?”

“I have my reasons. Listen, that Red Shirt’s a dolt, and a coward too.”

“He may be a coward, but if he offers you a raise, then you’d best accept it. These things may bother you while you’re young, but when you look back later you’ll wish you’d been a little more obliging. We always end up regretting things we lost on account of our passions. Listen to an old woman, and if Red Shirt offers you a raise, then accept it with gratitude.”

“You can keep your ‘wisdom of age’ out of my business. My salary is my salary, and that’s that.”

The old woman quietly withdrew. The old man was chanting his Noh lines in a slow and measured tone. Noh is the art of taking words that make sense on paper and purposely rendering them incomprehensible through convoluted phrasing. It’s amazing he never tires of groaning these things out night after night. But now was not the time to fuss over Noh chants. Red shirt had said he would raise my pay, and figuring if the school had money to spare then why not, I’d accepted, even though I wasn’t really after more money. But how could I, in good conscience, profit from a man being forced out against his will? And what’s the idea in sending a man down to Nobeoka when he’d prefer to stay where he is? Even Dazai Gonnosotsu was only exiled as far as Hakata. And Kawai Matagorō went no further than Sagara. At any rate, I had to go back to Red Shirt and decline his offer.

I put on my duck cloth pants and set out again. As I stood in Red Shirt’s grand entryway and announced myself, the aforementioned younger brother came to the door. He looked at me with a ‘you again?’ expression. If I have business to settle, then I’ll come back twice, or even thrice, till it’s settled. I’ll wake them up in the middle of the night if need be. Does he imagine I’m one who calls at the head teacher’s place to flatter him with niceties? On the contrary, I was there to turn down a pay raise. The younger brother informed me that Red Shirt had company. I said I needed to see him for a moment, even if just in the entryway, and he withdrew into the house. Down by my feet, I noticed a pair of low clogs, cobbled from flimsy, matted material and of a forward-sloping design. A celebratory voice rose from the inner room. I realized the ‘company’ was Noda. No one but Noda would squeal so in a sissy voice, and no one but Noda would wear such garish clogs.

After a while, Red Shirt appeared in the entryway with a lamp. He invited me in, saying his guest was no stranger, but Noda. I told him I was fine where I was, that I just needed to speak to him briefly. His face was flushed red. It seemed he and Noda had been drinking.

“You mentioned earlier that I might receive a pay raise. I’ve had second thoughts about it and come back to decline.”

Red Shirt pushed his lamp forward and gazed at my face from the hallway. He seemed momentarily stupefied, at a loss for words. Maybe he thought it curious to have encountered, miraculously, the only person in this world who would turn down a pay raise. Or maybe he was shocked that I'd returned so soon when this could certainly wait till later. Or maybe it was a some combination of both. At any rate, he stood there silently, mouth agape.

“When I consented earlier, I was under the impression that Koga’s transfer was in accordance with his wishes.”

“It is absolutely aligned, at least in part, with his wishes.”

“It’s not. He’d prefer to stay where he is. He’d rather stay with his current salary than leave his family home.”

“Did Koga tell you this himself?”

“No, not directly.”

“Then may I ask from whom you heard it?”

“The old woman at my lodgings heard it from Koga’s mother and told me this evening.”

“So you heard it from the old woman at your lodgings?”

“That’s right.”

“If you’ll pardon my saying so, I believe you’re in the wrong here. From what you’ve said, it sounds as though you trust this old woman’s word over that of your head teacher. Is that how I’m to understand things?”

I found myself in a bit of a bind. A degreed scholar is a formidable foe. He’ll latch onto any peculiarity in one’s argument and bear down relentlessly. My father used to tell me I was reckless and would come to no good, and it seemed indeed that I’d been hasty in reacting to the old woman’s story and running over here. I hadn’t ascertained the details from Uranari or his mother, and now I was defenseless against Red Shirt’s practiced rhetoric.

I couldn’t refute Red Shirt then and there, but there was no doubt in my heart as to who was credible and who wasn’t. The old woman was without doubt a stingy grabber, but she was no liar, and she wasn’t two-faced like Red Shirt. Having no other recourse, I answered as best I could.

“What you say may well be the truth. But at any rate, I respectfully decline any pay raise.”

“That’s even stranger yet. You came all the way back here because you’d uncovered a reason why you couldn’t, in good conscience, accept a raise. Having explained away your objection, I struggle to understand why you would still decline my generosity.”

“You may struggle to understand, but I decline nevertheless.”

“If it’s that disagreeable to you, then I won’t force the matter. However, by completely reversing your position in a span of hours, with no clear justification, I’m afraid you’re jeopardizing your future credibility.”

“Then let it be jeopardized.”

“You can’t really mean that. Nothing is more important than a man’s credibility. Even if we suppose that what the master at your lodgings ...”

“Not the master, the old woman.”

“In either case. Even supposing that what the old woman said were true, your increase is not ill-gotten at Koga’s expense. Koga is going to Nobeoka, and his replacement is on the way. His replacement is coming in at a lower salary. The plan is to provide for you from the surplus, so you’ve no need to feel bad for anyone else. Koga will be promoted in his transfer to Nobeoka, and the new hire has already agreed to his starting pay. It’s hard imagine more fortuitous circumstances in regard to your compensation. You can decline if you wish, but I suggest you go home and think it over once more before doing so.”

I’m no intellectual, so when assailed with an eloquent argument I normally find myself overwhelmed, lose confidence, and back down. But not this time. I’d felt a dislike for Red Shirt since my first arrival here. Over time, it had occurred to me that maybe he was really a kind man who just happened to have an effeminate manner. Now I knew that there was nothing kind about him, and I disliked him more than ever. It didn’t matter how strong his logic was, and it didn’t matter that he’d argued me into a corner with his grandiose head-teacher discourse. A skilled debater does not a good man make. And defeat in argument does not diminish one’s character. On the surface, Red Shirt’s arguments were all more valid than mine, but that polished exterior did not compel me to support him. If men’s hearts could be bought with wealth, authority, or reason, then usurers, policemen, and professors would all be loved among men. Should I surrender my heart to the skillfully-crafted arguments of a middle school head teacher? Humans act on gut instinct, not on logic.

“What you’ve said makes perfect sense, but I don’t care for a raise, so I decline your offer. Further consideration is not necessary. Goodbye.” With that, I left through the gate. Far above my head, the stars painted a streak across the heavens.