

Sanshirō – Chapter 12

Natsume Sōseki – 1908

The days of the performance were relatively cold. The year was approaching its end. All awaited the New Year, which was less than twenty days off. Those engaged in the trades clamored about busily. The closing of books fell to the worker bees. The theatrical performances, in the meantime, welcomed any and all who could afford the time, who weren't burdened down by end-of-year tasks.

Of these there were plenty, for the most part young men and women. Yojirō, with excitement, related to Sanshirō how greatly successful their first day had been. Sanshirō held tickets for day two. Yojirō instructed him to fetch Professor Hirota on the way. Sanshirō objected that the professor's ticket was for a different day. Yojirō acknowledged that fact. However, he explained, if left to himself there was little chance the professor would show. Sanshirō was to drag him along. Sanshirō acquiesced.

When he called that evening, the professor had a large book spread open beneath his bright lamp. "Would you like to come with?" he asked.

The professor grinned a bit and shook his head in silence. It was a child-like gesture, but it impressed Sanshirō as scholarly. In this absence of words was an air of refinement. Sanshirō, half seated, found himself at a loss. The professor felt bad for declining.

"If you're going, then I'll walk with you as far as the venue." He put on his dark cloak, and they stepped outside. It looked as though he had his hands tucked into his pockets. The sky was hanging low. It was a cold and starless night.

"Looks like it might rain."

"That'll make things difficult."

"At the doors, yes. Japanese playhouses make guests check their shoes. It's bad enough when the weather's fair. Then there's the air inside. It doesn't circulate well. Smoke fills the room, and one leaves with a headache -- It's amazing what people put up with."

"You're not suggesting it be held outdoors, are you?"

"Shinto rites, both song and dance, are always outdoors, even in the cold."

Sanshirō, seeing no point in pursuing this further, refrained from answering.

"I like the outdoors. Imagine breathing fresh air, under a clear sky, not too hot and not too cold, and watching a wonderful drama unfold. A pure and simple story, transparent like the sky."

"That dream of yours, enacted on stage, would fit the bill."

“Are you familiar with Greek theater?”

“Not very. Didn’t they perform outdoors?”

“Outdoors, and in broad daylight. It must have been spectacular. With seats of natural stone. Grandiose through and through. A fellow like Yojirō could certainly take a lesson from it.”

The professor was back on Yojirō’s case. It was interesting to think that this same Yojirō, just now, was dashing around the cramped theater in high spirits, attending on guests for all he was worth. Even more interesting would be Yojirō’s reaction when Sanshirō showed up without the professor -- “I knew he wasn’t coming. He doesn’t realize he needs to get out. A place like this would do him good. I try to tell him, but he doesn’t listen. Stubborn as an ox.”

The professor continued to expound on the workings of Greek theater. Sanshirō learned about the terms Theatron, Orchêstra, Skênê, and Proskênion. According to some German scholar, the theater of Aten was thought to have seated seventeen thousand. That was a smaller venue; the largest could accommodate fifty thousand. Admission tickets were of ivory or lead, and in either case were medallion-shaped, with patterns embossed or engraved on their surfaces. The professor even knew the prices. Admission for a single day’s minor performance was 20 sen, while admission for a three-day performance series was 35 sen. Sanshirō listened with fascination, and before he knew it they were in front of the venue.

It was brightly illuminated, and a constant stream of visitors flooded through the doors. It was even better attended than Yojirō had described.

“What do you think? Since you’re here, why not come inside?”

“No, I’m not going in.” The professor turned and retreated back into the night.

Sanshirō looked after him for some time. Then, however, seeing others arrive by rickshaw and hurry inside, as though begrudging the time it would take to check their shoes, he went in himself. He moved, or rather was propelled forward, at a rapid pace.

At the entrance, four or five men stood idle. One of them, a man dressed in hakama, took his ticket. Looking over the man’s shoulder, the interior of the venue opened immediately to a broad and brightly lit space. Sanshirō almost thought to shield his eyes as he was led to his seat. Wedging himself into the narrow spot, he surveyed his surroundings. The colors of the crowd flickered before him. It wasn’t just the sweep of his gaze that set them in motion. The colors, affixed to a sea of humanity, swirled through the large room, each moving in its own manner.

Action had started on the stage. Players appeared, all in courtier’s cap and sporting footgear. They shouldered a long palanquin. Another figure blocked them in the middle of the stage. As the palanquin was lowered, a single figure emerged from within. This new figure drew his sword and engaged the other, who’d hindered his passage, in combat. -- Sanshirō had no idea what was going on. Yojirō had, in fact, briefed him on the story, but he’d merely nodded politely while half listening. He’d assumed that the story, once he saw

it enacted, would prove self-explanatory. Now, though, he found himself totally lost. The one thing he remembered was the title. It was “Nobleman Iruka.” He wondered which figure was Iruka. There was no way to know. All he could do was regard the entirety as Iruka. With that, the courtier’s caps, the footgear, the tight-sleeved clothing, even the words of the players, all invoked Iruka. In truth, Sanshirō had no clear notion of Iruka. His history studies were far behind him, with Iruka a forgotten shadow from some ancient past. Had he lived in the times of Empress Suiko? It could well have been the reign of Emperor Kinmei too. Certainly not Emperor Ōjin or Emperor Shōmu. Sanshirō was content to simply drink in the flavor of Iruka. He admired the Chinese-style costumes and surveyed the backdrop. The storyline eluded him completely. By and by, the curtain fell.

Shortly before the curtain fell, the man next to Sanshirō had turned to his neighbor to critique the players. They were thoroughly unpracticed, with weak voices. Like family members conversing in close quarters. The other man, in turn, had complained how fidgety they looked, tottering about. Both men had thorough knowledge of the players’ true identities. No doubt they were gentlemen of some renown. Sanshirō had imagined how vehemently Yojirō, had he heard them, would have objected. Just then, someone in back had yelled, “Bravo! Bravo! Wonderful!” The two gentlemen had turned to look and spoken no further. At this point, the curtain had fallen.

Here and there folks rose from their seats. The main isle, from stage to exit, was soon awash in human motion. Sanshirō, half rising, looked around. A certain person, who should be present, was nowhere in sight. In truth, he’d kept his eyes peeled throughout the performance. Failing that, he’d awaited the curtain fall with eager anticipation. A bit disappointed now, he gave up the search and directed his gaze back toward the front.

The gentlemen next to him, it seemed, knew everyone who was anyone. Looking to both sides, they named renowned guests in succession. Over there was so-and-so. On that side was such-and-such. In several cases, they exchanged salutations with the other party across a distance. Sanshirō, thanks to these gentlemen, learned to recognize a number of distinguished men’s wives. Among these men was one who was newly wed. One of the gentlemen wiped his glasses for a better look, all the while expressing great interest.

At this point, from the far end of the curtain-covered stage, Yojirō started forward at a half run. Traversing the apron, he covered two thirds of its length and drew to a stop. Leaning forward, he peered across the parterre boxes, calling to someone within. Sanshirō took this cue to redirect his gaze. -- Several meters from Yojirō, in a straight line from the edge of the stage, Mineko’s profile caught his eye.

The man next to her had his back to Sanshirō. Sanshirō hoped inwardly that this man, by some chance, might turn in his direction. Fortuitously, the man rose. Apparently in need of a stretch, he leaned against the box railing and surveyed the theater. In that moment, Sanshirō clearly discerned the broad forehead and large eyes of Nonomiya. As Nonomiya had risen, the figure of Yoshiko, seated behind Mineko, had come into view. Sanshirō tried to determine who else might belong to their party. What he saw from the distance, however, was nothing but a tightly packed throng. For all he could tell, the entire box could as well be together. Mineko and Yojirō conversed intermittently. Nonomiya threw in an occasional word as well.

Haraguchi suddenly appeared from behind the curtain. He came to Yojirō's side and fixed his gaze on the parterre boxes. Most certainly he was calling to someone. Nonomiya gave an affirmative nod in response. Haraguchi then slapped Yojirō's back with the flat of his hand. Yojirō did an about face and disappeared under the edge of the curtain. Haraguchi climbed down from the stage and made his way through the crowd to Nonomiya. Nonomiya straightened up to let him pass. He plunged into the masses and dropped from sight, about where Mineko and Yoshiko were seated.

Sanshirō, who observed every movement of this group with greater interest than he'd watched the performance, felt a sudden tinge of envy. Never had he imagined that a certain someone could be approached with such ease. He wondered if he should dare to follow Haraguchi's lead. The thought of actually doing so, however, immediately sapped him of the courage to act. Then there was the worry that, however much they squeezed, there wouldn't be room for him. Sanshirō refrained, his haunches rooted squarely to their present spot.

By and by the curtain rose, and Hamlet took the stage. At Professor Hirota's house, Sanshirō had seen a photograph in which some-such famous Western actor portrayed Hamlet. The Hamlet before him now was dressed identically. The resemblance didn't end with attire. The facial expression was also the same - both showing knitted brows.

The movements of this Hamlet were light and refreshing. He swept grandly about the stage, animating the entire scene. His style was utterly counter to the noh-inspired Iruka. In particular, at a certain point in a certain scene, when he spread his arms at center stage and cursed the heavens, the audience was fully caught in the moment, oblivious to all else.

At the same time, the script was in Japanese. Japanese that had been translated from Western texts. Expressions were imbued with rhythm and intonation. Some lines were so fluent they reeked of excess eloquence. The words were well crafted, yet even still, they didn't hit home. Sanshirō wished for Hamlet to be a little more Japanese. Just when he expected, "But Mother, so doing most surely dishonors Father," Hamlet instead would shirk his duty, producing Apollo or some-such to bear on the matter. All the while, both mother and son appeared on the verge of tears. These inconsistencies, however, registered only vaguely with Sanshirō, and he lacked the certitude to level any serious criticism.

When Sanshirō lost interest in Hamlet, he would direct his gaze toward Mineko. When Mineko was blocked from view, he would look back toward Hamlet.

When Hamlet turned to Ophelia and pronounced, "Get thee to a nunnery!" Sanshirō suddenly recalled Professor Hirota. The professor had raised the question. -- Could one like Hamlet ever marry? -- On reading the play, one wondered thus. On stage, however, Hamlet appeared quite marriageable. On further reflection, the line "Get thee to a nunnery!" seemed ineffective. Ophelia, after all, evoked no sympathy in receiving this dictate.

The curtain fell again. Mineko and Yoshiko rose from their seats. Sanshirō rose too. Out in the corridor, halfway down, the two ladies were conversing with a gentleman. The gentleman stood in a doorway that

opened from the corridor to the left-side seats. Sanshirō saw his face in profile and turned back. Without returning to his seat, he retrieved his shoes and departed.

It was a dark night. Outside the sphere of man-made light, he sensed an impending rain. A wind rattled the branches. Sanshirō hurried back to his lodgings.

Later that night the rain began. Sanshirō, tucked into his bedding, listened to its sound. His thoughts revolved around the line “Get thee to a nunnery!” Professor Hirota was likely still awake. Sanshirō wondered where the professor’s thoughts might be. Yojirō, no doubt, was lost in the depths of his Great Dark Void. ...

The next day, Sanshirō woke with a bit of a fever. His head felt heavy, so he stayed in bed. At noon, he sat up just long enough to eat his lunch. He rested again, and then broke into a sweat. His thoughts were cloudy. All of a sudden, Yojirō rushed in. He hadn’t seen Sanshirō the night before, nor at morning lectures. Concerned, he’d decided to search him out.

Sanshirō thanked him. “I went last night. I was there. I saw you on the stage. I saw you talking to Mineko across the way.”

Sanshirō was feeling a little woozy. Once he started talking, the words just flowed. Yojirō pressed a hand to his brow.

“You feel hot. You’d better take some medicine. You must have caught cold.”

“That theater was too hot and too bright. Then stepping outside, it was suddenly cold and dark. That’s a bad combination.”

“It may be bad, but what can we do?”

“Nothing, I suppose, but it’s bad nonetheless.”

Sanshirō’s speech gradually grew fragmented. Yojirō stuck with him for conversation’s sake until he finally dozed off. An hour later he opened his eyes and looked at Yojirō. “You’re here?”

Sanshirō seemed to have regained his senses. Asked how he was feeling, he simply replied that his head felt heavy.

“Must be a cold.”

“Must be a cold.”

Each said the same thing. After a bit, Sanshirō posed a question. “You asked me the other day if I’d heard about Mineko, didn’t you?”

“About Mineko? Where?”

“At school.”

“At school? When?”

Yojirō still seemed unable to remember. Sanshirō, having no other recourse, explained the details of before and after the moment.

“That does sound familiar now,” Yojirō conceded.

Sanshirō thought Yojirō highly irresponsible. Yojirō, feeling bad for Sanshirō, struggled to remember. Finally, he spoke. “Ah, that must have been it then. It must have been about Mineko being married off.”

“It’s decided?”

“So I heard, but I’m not entirely sure.”

“To Nonomiya?”

“No, not to Nonomiya.”

“Then ...” Sanshirō stopped short.

“You know who it is.”

“I don’t know,” he asserted.

At this point, Yojirō leaned forward a bit. “I don’t really understand it all. It’s a curious set of circumstances. It may be some time yet till everything sorts itself out.”

Sanshirō was eager to hear of the “curious circumstances,” but Yojirō took his time, mulling things over in private. After a while, Sanshirō’s patience reached its end, and he insisted that Yojirō reveal, in entirety, all that he knew about Mineko. Yojirō laughed. Then, thinking perhaps to offer Sanshirō solace, he steered the conversation in a different direction.

“It’s foolish to fall for her. You must know nothing can come of it. First of all, aren’t you both about the same age? No woman wants a man her own age anymore. Such romance belongs to the past, to Oshichi’s era.”

Sanshirō remained silent. He wasn’t sure yet where Yojirō was going.

“Let me explain. Consider a man and a woman, both about twenty. In all things, the woman is more capable. She can’t help but view him as incompetent, and she feels no desire to marry into the house of a man she can’t respect. The woman who regards herself above all else is an exception. She either goes to a man she disdains or lives out her days alone. There are daughters like this from well-to-do families. They willingly go as brides, but they never respect their husbands. Mineko’s much better than that. Accordingly, she won’t

even think of marrying a man whom she can't respect as her husband. Anyone vying for her hand should know that. Fellows like you and me are disqualified from the get-go."

Sanshirō finally found himself lumped in with Yojirō. However, he continued to listen in silence.

"You and I, even at that, are far more exceptional than she is. It'll be five or six years, though, till she's able to see it. In the meantime, there's little chance of her waiting around. When it comes to marriage, beasts in heat couldn't spring the gulf between you and her."

Yojirō enjoyed a laugh at his odd choice of expression.

"Just let five or six years pass. Far better options are bound to appear. Japan is awash in women. No use falling ill for one now. -- It's a wide world - don't worry. I've had some experience myself. I had to tell one, who was pestering me, that I was shipping off to Nagasaki."

"What's that?"

"What that was, was a girl I was involved with."

Sanshirō was surprised.

"This girl was unlike anything you've ever seen. So anyway, to break things off, I told her I had a research assignment to study bacteria in Nagasaki. Then she said she'd come to the station to see me off. Said she'd bring me apples. I was trapped."

Sanshirō was even more surprised. "What happened then?" he asked with a look of astonishment.

"How would I know? I suppose she stood at the station with her apples."

"That's terrible. How could you treat her so badly?"

"I know I treated her badly, and I was sorry for it, but I had no choice. Fate nudged us along, bit by bit, and that's just the way it played out. Way back, from the start of it all, she knew me as a medical student."

"Why complicate things by lying?"

"Let's just say I had my reasons. Anyway, there was a close call once, when she fell ill and asked me to examine her."

Sanshirō, by now, was finding the whole thing comical.

"I went through the motions, looking at her tongue and tapping her chest, but next she asked if I would take her to the hospital for further checks. I didn't know what to do."

Sanshirō finally laughed out loud.

“Such things happen. You mustn’t be too serious,” Yojirō added.

Sanshirō didn’t know what “such things” were, but he did feel better.

After that, Yojirō finally returned to Mineko and her curious situation. As he related it, Yoshiko had also had a suitor. Then Mineko’s suitor had appeared. That in itself was fine. However, Yoshiko’s suitor and Mineko’s suitor were one and the same. That’s what was curious.

Sanshirō found this a bit hard to swallow. He did know that Yoshiko had a suitor. He’d been there himself when the subject was broached. It was possible that Yojirō, in hearing the news, had confused her for Mineko. The rumor of Mineko marrying, however, did not seem entirely unfounded. Sanshirō was anxious to sort things out. He asked Yojirō to investigate for him. Yojirō readily agreed. He would tell Yoshiko of Sanshirō’s illness and have her look in on him. Then Sanshirō could ask her directly. It was really quite clever.

“So take some medicine and stay in bed.”

“Even if I’m better, I won’t leave my bed.”

The two of them laughed as Yojirō took his leave. On his way home, Yojirō arranged for a local doctor to call on Sanshirō.

That evening, the doctor arrived. Sanshirō, who had never received a doctor on his own, was somewhat flustered at first. As the doctor measured his pulse, he gradually relaxed. The doctor was a young man with courteous demeanor. Sanshirō supposed he was still an assistant. Within five minutes, the diagnosis had settled on influenza. Sanshirō was instructed to take a single dose of medicine that evening, and he was advised to avoid drafts.

When he woke the next morning, his head felt much lighter. Lying in bed, he almost felt normal. However, when his head left the pillow dizziness set in. The maidservant entered and remarked that the room felt stuffy. Sanshirō remained in bed, skipping his meals and staring at the ceiling. He dozed off from time to time. Fever and fatigue had clearly gotten the better of him. Yielding to his condition, he alternately slept and woke. He found a certain comfort in letting nature run its course - a luxury afforded by mild symptoms.

Four or five hours passed, and he began to feel restless. He started to toss and turn. The weather outside was fair, and he watched as the sunlight traced a path across the shōji. A sparrow sang. It would be good, he thought, if Yojirō came by again.

At this point, the maidservant opened the shōji and announced a female visitor. He hadn’t anticipated Yoshiko coming so soon. Yojirō, true to form, had acted without delay. From his bed, Sanshirō directed his gaze through the open doorway. Shortly, a tall figure appeared over the threshold. She wore a purple skirt and stood in the hallway, seemingly a bit hesitant. Sanshirō lifted his shoulders from the bedding.

“Welcome,” he said.

Yoshiko slid the shōji shut and seated herself at his pillow-side. The small room was in disarray. Not having been cleaned that morning, it felt even more confined than usual.

“Please rest,” Yoshiko offered.

Sanshirō let his head sink back to the pillow, indulging himself despite his guest.

“Does it smell like a sick room?” he asked.

“Yes, a little,” she replied, though it didn’t seem to bother her. “Are you running a fever? What do you have? Has the doctor been by?”

“The doctor came last night. He says it’s influenza.”

“Early this morning Sasaki came over. He said you were ill and suggested I should stop by. He didn’t know what it was, but he said it was serious. Mineko and I were both alarmed.”

Yojirō had stretched the truth again. One could even argue that he’d tricked Yoshiko into coming. Sanshirō, honest by nature, felt bad for her. “Thank you for coming,” he said, his head still on his pillow.

Yoshiko unwrapped her bundle and produced a basket of mandarin oranges. “Mineko told me to buy these,” she stated with candor.

Sanshirō wasn’t sure whom they were from. He expressed his thanks to Yoshiko.

“Mineko would’ve come too, but she’s a bit busy these days -- she sends her regards ...”

“Has something come up that requires her time?”

“Yes, something has,” she replied. Her large black eyes fell on Sanshirō’s face as he lay on his pillow. From below, Sanshirō looked up at her pale brow. He thought back to that day, long past, when he’d first seen her in the hospital. Even now, she still showed traces of fatigue. At the same time, her presence brightened the room. Sanshirō found comfort in entrusting himself to her care.

“Can I peel an orange for you?” She produced the fruit from a jumble of green leaves.

Sanshirō let the fragrant nectar soothe his parched throat.

“Good, aren’t they. They’re really from Mineko.”

“Satisfying.”

Yoshiko drew a handkerchief from her sleeve pocket and wiped her hands.

“Tell me, what became of your talk of marriage?”

“Nothing further.”

“I hear that Mineko received a proposal too.”

“Yes, it’s settled already.”

“Who’s the other party?”

“The same party who proposed to me. Funny how things turn out. It’s a friend of Mineko’s older brother. I’ll be moving again soon, back to live with my brother. I can’t impose after Mineko’s gone.”

“You won’t marry?”

“I will, when the opportunity presents itself.” She left it at that and smiled amicably. It was clear there was no current suitor.

Sanshirō remained in bed for four more days. On the fifth day, he cautiously went to the bath. Looking in the mirror, he saw there the face of the dead. He set out resolutely for the barber. The following day was a Sunday.

After breakfast, Sanshirō dressed warmly in his winter shirt and overcoat and set out for Mineko’s house. Yoshiko was standing in the entry hall, about to step down and put on her shoes. She explained that she was off to visit her brother. Mineko wasn’t home. Sanshirō accompanied Yoshiko out front.

“Are you better now?”

“Yes, I’m pretty well recovered. Thanks. Can you tell me where Satomi-san went?”

“The older brother?”

“Mineko, actually.”

“Mineko’s at church.”

Sanshirō hadn’t known that Mineko attended church. Yoshiko told him where it was, and he took his leave of her. Traversing several side streets, he found himself before the church. Sanshirō knew nothing of Christianity. He’d never even looked inside a church. Standing out front, he gazed at the construction. He read the notice for the sermon. He paced the iron fence, leaning against it from time to time. However long it might take, he was resolved to wait for Mineko.

After a time, the sound of voices in song arose. Sanshirō assumed it must be a hymn - something sung behind tall sealed windows. Judging by the way it carried, there were a great many voices engaged. Mineko’s voice was among them. Sanshirō listened attentively. The song ended. The wind gusted. Sanshirō turned up the collar of his coat. A cloud appeared in the sky - a cloud of the kind Mineko fancied.

Sanshirō had once gazed on the autumn sky with Mineko. From the second floor at Professor Hirota's. They'd also sat by the edge of a stream in Tabata. In those times, he'd found a companion. Stray sheep. Stray sheep. The cloud had the form of a sheep.

The church doors suddenly opened. People poured forth from within, returning from the Kingdom of Heaven to the transient world. Mineko was one of the last to appear. She wore a ladies coat of striped fabric. Her eyes were cast downward as she descended the main steps. Appearing cold, she drew in her shoulders and pressed her hands together in front of her, minimizing exposure to the outside chill. She maintained this guarded posture until she approached the gate. Once at the gate, she lifted her gaze, suddenly conscious of the bustle around her. Sanshirō's cap, which he held in his hands, caught her eye. They approached each other near the sermon notice board.

"Is something wrong?"

"I called at your house."

"I see. Let's head back then."

She started to redirect her steps. As usual, she was wearing low clogs. Rather than follow, Sanshirō leaned on the fence.

"I just need a moment here. I was waiting for the service to end."

"You should have come in. It must have been cold."

"It was cold."

"Is your flu gone? Take care of yourself, or you'll have it back. You don't look fully well yet."

Without answering, Sanshirō produced a paper-wrapped packet from his pocket. "The money I borrowed. Thank you so much. I meant to return it sooner."

Mineko glanced at Sanshirō for a moment, then received the packet without objection. However, as soon as she held it she paused and looked on it. Sanshirō looked on it too. For a moment, no words were spoken. Finally, Mineko broke the silence.

"You won't be inconvenienced?"

"No. I wrote home, and they've covered it for me. Please."

"In that case, I suppose I should take it back."

Mineko put the packet into her pocket. As her hand re-emerged from her coat, she was clutching a white handkerchief. She held it to her nose and looked at Sanshirō. She seemed to be taking in its aroma. Then,

suddenly, she extended her hand, bringing the handkerchief close to Sanshirō's face. He was hit by a powerful scent.

“Heliotrope,” she said quietly.

Sanshirō reflexively drew back his nose. That “Heliotrope” bottle. That evening in Yonchōme. Stray sheep. Stray sheep. The sun, high overhead, shone brightly in the sky.

“They say you're to be wed.”

Mineko dropped the white handkerchief into her sleeve pocket.

“You know, then,” she said, narrowing her contoured eyes as she looked up at him. She seemed to place him at a distance, while at the same time fearing he was too far away. Her eyebrows, on the other hand, were unmistakably at ease. Sanshirō's tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth.

After she'd gazed at him for a moment, a sigh, barely audible, escaped her lips. Then she placed her slender hand over her thick eyebrows. “For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.”

Her voice was barely discernible, but Sanshirō heard each word clearly. With this, Sanshirō and Mineko parted.

When Sanshirō returned to his lodgings, a telegram from his mother awaited him. When, it asked, was he coming.