

Bunchō (Japanese Rice Sparrow)

Natsume Sōseki – 1908

I'd moved to Waseda in October. I was alone in my cavernous study, chin propped idly on my palm, when Miekichi dropped by and suggested I should keep a bird. I replied that maybe I would. I asked, for good measure, what kind of bird. "Bunchō," came his immediate reply.

The bunchō appeared in Miekichi's novel, so I didn't doubt it was a nice enough bird. I asked him, then, to get me one. He kept on, however, insisting that I really should have one. He was, more or less, repeating himself. Chin still resting on palm, I mumbled back my acquiescence. After a while he finally stopped. I thought, for the moment, I'd worn him down with my insolence.

Several minutes later, he started again, this time about buying a bird cage. I told him "fine," but he kept on anyway. To press the matter, he lectured at length on the ins and outs of cages. His lecture was quite involved, but I'm sorry to say I've forgotten it all. I do remember him saying that a nice cage runs twenty yen, at which point I'd objected to any such undue extravagance. Miekichi had grinned in return.

Where on earth, I'd asked him next, does one buy a bunchō. His obvious reply was from a bird dealer. Then what about the cage? The cage was, well, there was somewhere that they had them. His open-ended answer was like grasping at clouds. I scowled back with disapproving mien. If he didn't know then what could I do? Miekichi put his hand to his cheek and spoke of a craftsman in Komagome. The man was old though, and might no longer be living. Miekichi seemed at a loss.

I thought it proper to assign responsibility to the instigator, so I entrusted all to Miekichi. He asked for money up front, which I produced. Miekichi carried a silk trifold wallet he'd bought somewhere. Any money he had, whether his own or from others, went into this wallet. I watched as he tucked my five-yen note down into its depths.

Thus it was that my five yen fell to Miekichi. However, neither bird nor cage appeared in return.

Meanwhile, autumn showed its milder side. Miekichi often dropped by. He'd talk of women then take his leave. There were no further lectures on bunchō or bird cage. Sunlight streamed through the glass doors and brightened the wide veranda. If one were to keep a bunchō, this would be the ideal season. I imagined setting its cage on the warm veranda, and I imagined how happily it would sing.

According to Miekichi's novel, the bunchō sings, "chiyo, chiyo." Miekichi, seemingly fond of this sound, used it repeatedly in his writing. Or then again, perhaps he had fallen for a woman named Chiyo. He never mentioned such an affair, though, and I never had occasion to ask. At any rate, the veranda was bathed in sunlight, but no bunchō sang.

By and by the frost began to settle. I passed my days in the cavernous study, shifting my cold face from composure to consternation, sometimes propping my chin on my palm. Both sets of doors were tightly shut. I fed the brazier with charcoal. The bunchō was all but forgotten.

One day, in early evening, Miekichi burst into the room. I'd been leaning over the brazier, trying to drive the chill from my sullen face. Suddenly, the scene sprang to life. Miekichi had Hōryū with him. Hōryū is nothing but a nuisance. Each of the two was holding a cage. Miekichi, as leader of the operation, also carried a large box. On this early winter's eve, then, my five yen gained me a bunchō, two cages, and a box.

Miekichi was terribly pleased with himself. "Take a look," he said. "Hōryū, bring that lamp closer," he called. At the same time, he was not immune to the cold. The tip of his nose was a light shade of purple.

It was, indeed, a nice cage. The base had been painted with lacquer. The bamboo had been finely worked and was colored as well. He said it had run three yen. "A bargain at that, wouldn't you say, Hōryū?" Hōryū agreed it was a bargain. I myself, having no basis for judging the price, added my voice to the consensus. According to Miekichi, the best cages run twenty yen. This was the second time he'd mentioned this figure. It went without saying that three yen, compared to twenty, was a far more reasonable price.

Miekichi went on about the cage. "This lacquer, professor, will change its hue over time with exposure to light. The black pigments will fade away, exposing a fine vermilion tone. -- And the bamboo's been well steeped, so no need for concern." Concern about what, I asked in return. "Anyway, look at the bird. Isn't it handsome?"

It was a handsome bird. The cage was in the next room, so I viewed the bird from a short distance. It was perfectly still. In the dusk it shone pure white. So much so, that had it not been in a cage, one wouldn't have taken it for a bird. It seemed to be cold.

I asked Miekichi if it wasn't cold. That's what the box is for, came the answer. At night, the bird should be placed in the box. I asked next why there were two cages. The bird, I was told, should be transferred to the rough cage and given the chance to bathe itself. I was thinking how this would require some effort. Next I was told that the bird would dirty its cage with droppings. I should clean the cage from time to time. Miekichi was quite the advocate on behalf of the bunchō's well-being.

Satisfied with my agreement thus far, Miekichi next produced a bag of millet from his sleeve pocket. The bird must be fed each morning. If not changing out the bowl each time, then at least remove it from the cage and blow off the hulls. Otherwise, the bird would have to pick through one by one to find the seeds. Water, too, should be changed each morning. Late sleeper that I was, my schedule would fit the bunchō to a tee. Miekichi persisted on in championing the bird's welfare. I assured him I would take his instruction to heart. Hōryū then produced a food dish and water bowl from his own sleeve pocket and ceremoniously aligned them before me. Now, with all arrangements dutifully made, I was honor-bound to follow through and care for my bird with all due diligence. Inwardly anxious at it all, I put on a brave face and determined to give it my best. If worse came to worst, I figured, other members of the household could help me out.

Before departing, Miekichi carefully placed bird and cage in the box and carried it out to the veranda. I laid out my bedding in the middle of my cavernous study and retired onto the cold cushion. I felt the chill for a while, but once asleep, my dreams were peaceful as ever. The burden of my new responsibilities was not enough to upset them.

When I woke the next morning the sun was streaming through the glass doors. I thought to feed my bunchō immediately. Rousing myself out of bed, though, proved to be a chore. Time and again I told myself I'd best get to it, till eight o'clock had come and passed. Finally, I forced myself upright. On my way to the washroom I stepped out barefoot onto the cold veranda, opened the box, and lifted the cage into the light. The bunchō fluttered its eyelids, as if protesting the abrupt dawn. I felt bad about starting its morning so late.

The bunchō's eyes were jet black. Around its eyelids ran a thin streak of pink, almost like an embroidered silk thread. As it fluttered its eyes, the pink streak would converge to a single line and then open back to a circle. As soon as it was out of the box it tilted its head, shifted its black eyes, and, for the first time, looked at my face. Then it cried "chi, chi."

I gently placed the cage on top of the box. The bird flitted off its perch, only to reappeared a moment later. There were two perches, shaped from blackened apricot wood and aligned in parallel at just the proper distance. I looked at the bird's feet, resting lightly on the perch, and was struck by their exquisite form. Pearl-like claws, at the end of slender, light-crimson limbs, nimbly found their nearest grip. As I looked, the scene suddenly shifted. The bunchō had flipped its orientation on the perch. It tilted its head left and right. Then the head suddenly righted itself and extended forward. The white wings beat for another fleeting moment, and the bird's feet were now at rest on the middle of the opposite perch. It cried "chi, chi" and peered at my face from a distance.

I proceeded to the washroom and washed my face. I came back through the kitchen, stopping to open the cupboard and take out the bag of millet that Miekichi had brought the evening prior. Putting the feed in one bowl and filling the other with water, I made my way back to the veranda off my study.

Miekichi is a meticulous fellow. He'd given me careful instruction on what to do at feeding time. One must take care, he had said, in opening the cage. Otherwise the bird might escape. While opening the door with the right hand, the left hand should follow underneath to block the exit and preclude flight. The same procedure must be followed when removing the food bowl. He'd demonstrated the hand movements as he'd explained. I'd neglected to ask how one handles the bowl with both hands thus occupied.

There was nothing to do but grasp the bowl and slide the door up with the back of my hand. At the same time, I used my left to block the opening. Turning to face me, the bird cried "chi, chi." My left hand didn't know where to go next. The bird showed no sign, whatsoever, of scheming its escape. I felt some shame in my own behavior – Miekichi had done us both a disservice.

I slipped my large hand steadily into the cage. The bunchō responded with a sudden flurry of movement. It beat its wings so fast that bits of warm white down came floating out through the intricate bamboo lattice. I looked reproachfully at my own large hand. On placing the millet and water bowls between the perches, I

immediately withdrew my hand. The cage door dropped back lightly, closing itself. The bunchō resettled on its perch. It cocked its head to look up at me from within the cage. Then it straightened itself and gazed down at the millet and water beneath its feet. I proceeded to the hearth room for my own meal.

At the time, I was working daily to draft a novel. With the exception of mealtimes, I sat at my desk with pen in hand. In quiet times I could hear the sound of my pen as it scratched its way across the page. As a rule, I was left to myself in my cavernous study. From morning to night, the sound of my pen was also the sound of solitude. However, there were many times when the pen fell silent, when it found it could move no more. At those times, I would rest my chin on my palm, still gripping the pen, and gaze through the glass at the windswept garden. After that I would give my chin a tug or two. If pen and paper were still estranged, I'd give the chin a two-fingered shove. On one such occasion, the bunchō suddenly sang "chiyo, chiyo" from its cage on the veranda.

I set down my pen and quietly stepped out to see. The bunchō was on its perch, facing my direction. It thrust out its white breast, leaning almost too far forward, and called out "chiyo" in a high voice. It was a wonderful voice. Miekichi, had he heard it, would no doubt have been delighted. He'd assured me, before departing, that the bird would sing "chiyo" just as soon as it was comfortable in its new surroundings.

I crouched again by the side of the cage. The bunchō shifted its plump head several times from side to side. Finally, in a white blur, its body disappeared from the perch. Before I knew it, the fronts of its delicate claws were hooked on the edge of the food bowl. The food bowl, that the smallest touch of one's finger could readily upset, held steady as a massive temple bell. The bunchō, it seemed, like the essence of lightly-falling snow, weighed next to nothing.

The bunchō's beak darted into the bowl. Then it shook from side to side. Millet, that I'd carefully leveled in preparing the bowl, was strewn about the bottom of the cage. The bunchō raised its beak. A faint sound emanated from its throat. The beak dropped back to the millet. The faint sound followed again. The sound was most intriguing. I listened attentively. It was a soft harmony, at an exceedingly rapid tempo. I imagined a tiny man, no larger than a violet, striking agate Go pieces in succession with a golden mallet.

The color of the beak was crimson, but with a touch of purple. The crimson dissipated over its length, yielding to white at the tip where it pecked at the millet. The white of the tip was like translucent ivory. The motion of the beak into the millet was extremely rapid. The light grains of millet were easily scattered from side to side. The bunchō, as it thrust its sharp beak down into the yellow millet, was very nearly head over heels. On each thrust, it shook its plump head from side to side with abandon. Countless grains littered the cage floor. Through all of this, the bowl held steady like a silent observer. It was a substantial bowl, five centimeters or so in diameter.

I returned to the solitude of my study, working my pen across the page. From the bunchō on the veranda came "chi, chi." Occasionally it sang "chiyo, chiyo." Outside, a cold wind blew.

At dusk I saw the bunchō drink. Resting its delicate feet on the edge of the bowl, it caught a single droplet in its small beak. Then it carefully tilted its head up and swallowed. At this rate, I thought to myself as I returned to the study, a dishful of water should last it ten days. When night fell I placed the bunchō in its

box. Before retiring, I looked out through the glass doors. The moon was out, and a frost had settled. There was no sound from the bunchō in its box.

The following day, regrettably, I woke late again. It was after eight when I lifted the cage from its box. The bunchō, most likely, had long been awake. Even so, it didn't seem the least perturbed. As soon as the light hit the cage, it blinked its eyes, drew its neck in lightly, and looked my way.

I once knew a beautiful woman. On a certain occasion, as she leaned against her desk, lost in thought, I stole up behind. I took the purple tassel of her obi band and played it out to caress the back of her neck. She turned toward me listlessly with lightly furrowed brow, yet on her lips and in her eyes was the trace of a smile. At the same time, she'd drawn her well-formed neck reflexively down toward her shoulders. As the bunchō looked at me, I suddenly recollected this woman. She's someone's wife now. That day I teased her with the purple tassel was shortly after her marriage had been arranged.

The bowl of millet was still about eight tenths full. There were, however, a good many hulls mixed in. The water bowl, too, was terribly sullied with hulls floating over its surface. Both had to be changed. Once again, I inserted my large hand into the cage. Though I exercised great caution, the bunchō reacted and beat its wings frantically. The loss of even the smallest feather, I decided, would weigh on my conscience. I carefully blew off the hulls, and the cold winter wind carried them away. I changed the water. The water from the tap was ice cold.

I spent the entire day with the solitary sound of my pen. Throughout the day I also heard, on occasion, "chiyo, chiyo." I wondered if the bunchō sang because it, too, was lonely. However, when I went to the veranda, I found it hopping playfully from perch to perch, showing no indication at all of ennui.

At night I put the bunchō back in its box. When I woke the next morning, the ground outside was white with frost. The bunchō, I thought, must also be awake, but I couldn't pry myself out of bed. Even reaching for the paper by my pillow was a chore. Still, I did manage a cigarette. Just one, I thought, and then I'd get up and pull the cage out first thing. I gazed at the smoke as it left my mouth and meandered away. In the smoke was a hint of that woman from long ago. I pictured her with neck drawn in, eyes narrowed, and brow lightly furrowed. I sat up on the bedding, pulled on my haori, and proceeded to the veranda. I removed the lid from the box and drew out the cage. The bunchō, before even out of the box, sang out in succession "chiyo, chiyo."

According to Miekichi, the bunchō, once familiar with its keeper, would sing to him on sight. Miekichi's bunchō, in fact, was said to sing "chiyo, chiyo" all the while he remained nearby. His bird was also said to take food off the tip of his finger. I wanted to try this myself sometime.

The next morning, too, I dawdled idly in bed. Even the woman from long ago did not intrude on my thoughts. Only after washing my face and eating did it occur to me to check the veranda. To my surprise, the cage was out on top of the box. The bunchō was happily hopping about on its perch. From time to time it extended its neck and glanced up at the outside world. Its gesture was simple and innocent. That woman of long ago, whom I'd teased with the purple tassel, had been svelte and graceful. She would often tilt her neck when engaging another.

There was millet, and there was water. The bunchō seemed well provisioned. I withdrew to my study without tending to either.

After noon I went back out. For some exercise after eating, I intended to read while pacing the long, wrap-around veranda. I found, however, that the millet was mostly gone, and the water was thoroughly sullied. I tossed aside my book and hurriedly changed out both.

The following day I slept in again. Further, I didn't check the veranda until after I'd washed my face and eaten. On returning to my study, I wondered if, like the day before, another member of the household might not have taken the cage out. I went and found that, indeed, it had been taken out. Not only was it out, but millet and water had both been replenished. Fully assured, I started back into the study. As I did so, the bunchō sang "chiyo, chiyo." I stopped and retraced my steps. The bunchō, however, sang but once. I watched as it gazed through the glass, with an air of apprehension, at the frost-covered garden outside. Finally, I returned to my desk.

In the study my pen, as always, scratched its way across the page. The work on the novel was coming along. My fingertips grew cold. The coals I'd covered in the morning were fully turned to ash, and the kettle on its stand had grown cold. The charcoal bucket was empty. I clapped my hands, but the sound, it seems, did not carry to the kitchen. I stood up and opened the door, and I saw that the bunchō was uncharacteristically still on its perch. On closer inspection, only one leg was visible. I set the charcoal bucket down on the veranda, bent closer, and peered into the cage. As close as I looked, I could see only one leg. The bird reposed in its cage, perfectly still, with its full weight bearing on a single slender leg.

I was intrigued. Miekichi, who'd explained all else in the greatest of detail, had apparently neglected to mention this. When I returned with a bucketful of charcoal, there was still just a single leg. I observed for a time on the cold veranda, but the bunchō showed no sign of stirring. As I watched in silence, it slowly narrowed its round eyes. Thinking it must be drowsy, I stepped softly toward the study. On my first step, though, the bunchō re-opened its eyes. At the same time, it produced a second leg from beneath its pure white breast. I closed the door and fed the brazier with charcoal.

More and more, I became absorbed in my writing. Mornings, as always, I slept late. Once members of the household engaged in care of the bunchō, I felt my own responsibility lightened. If others failed to, I would change the food and water myself. I would also take the cage out and put it away. Or I would call for help and have it done. My sole duty, now, was to appreciate the bunchō's song.

Even so, I never failed to stop by the cage and check on the bunchō when strolling the veranda. Usually, I would find it hopping contentedly from perch to perch in the confines of its cage. On fair days, it would bask in the faint light that streamed through the glass and sing effusively. It didn't seem, however, to sing at my presence as Miekichi had described.

Needless to say, it also didn't eat from my fingertip. From time to time, when the mood felt right, I would place a breadcrumb on my fingertip and offer it through the bamboo. The bunchō did not come near. When I was overzealous, sticking my fat finger too far in, the bunchō reacted with alarm. It beat its white wings in panic and fluttered about the cage. I felt bad for the bird, and after several such occasions I decided to

desist from further attempt. I doubted greatly that any man of the modern age could pull this off. Such feats belonged with the saints of antiquity. I questioned the credibility of Miekichi's claims.

One day, as I sat in the study, my pen scratching out its usual succession of dreary lines, a curious sound reached my ears. It was a persistent rustling, coming from the veranda. It could be a woman, arranging the long silk hems of her kimono, but it was too strong to come from a single such woman. One could also imagine the chafing of hakama pleats as hina dolls strolled across their tiered stand. I set aside my manuscript and walked to the veranda, with pen still in hand. The bunchō was bathing itself.

The water had just been changed. With its slender feet in the middle of the bowl, the bunchō immersed itself to the down of its breast. From time to time it would spread out its wings, bend its legs to lower its belly further into the water, and shake itself side to side. Then it would hop back lightly onto the lip of the bowl. After a while it would plunge back in. The water bowl was small, no more than five centimeters in diameter. When the bird plunged in, its tail, its head, and, of course, its backside, were high and dry. The water only touched its legs and its underbelly. Even at that, it bathed with great satisfaction.

I hurried off, brought back the spare cage, and transferred the bunchō over. Then I took the watering pot to the washroom, filled it from the spigot, and drained it over the cage from above. By the time the pot was empty, beads of water were rolling off the white feathers. The bunchō blinked its eyes repeatedly.

Once, long ago, when the woman I'd teased with the purple tassel was working in the parlor, I'd amused myself by catching spring sunlight with my pocket mirror and directing it her way from my room at the back side of the second floor. She'd lifted her lightly-crimsoned cheeks and shielded her brow with her delicate hand, blinking in bewilderment. The feeling of the woman then, and the feeling of the bunchō now, were no doubt similar.

Days passed, and the bunchō poured forth its song. It received in return, however, less and less notice. On one occasion, its food bowl was reduced to only hulls. Another time, the floor of the cage became covered in droppings. One evening, I returned home late from a banquet. The winter moon shone through the glass, faintly illuminating the wide veranda. The birdcage, still as the night, was resting on top of its box. Tucked inside, barely discernible in the faint light, was the pale white figure of the bunchō on its perch. I threw off my coat and immediately placed the cage in its box.

The next day, the bunchō was back to its usual self, singing heartily. There followed some cold nights where I forgot to place it back in its box. One evening, as I toiled away in the study, absorbed in the sound of my pen, a sudden crash echoed from the veranda. I didn't get up, but kept on as I was, pouring forth words. If I broke my thoughts to go see, and it was nothing, I'd be quite put out. While not without some misgiving, I pretended ignorance, keeping my ears tuned for anything further. I didn't stop until after midnight. Returning from the toilet, I detoured onto the veranda for a final check to put any fears to rest. --

The cage had fallen from its box and lay toppled on the floor. Water bowl and food dish had both been upset. Millet was strewn across the veranda. The perch sticks had been knocked loose. The bunchō itself covered in the cage, clinging to a crosspiece. I swore to myself, from the morrow, to secure the veranda from the cat.

The following day, the bunchō didn't sing. I heaped its bowl with millet and filled its water to the brim. For a long while, it remained still on its perch, resting on just one leg. After lunch, I decided to write Miekichi. Several lines in, I heard the bunchō cry "chi, chi." I put down my pen. The bunchō cried again. I checked and found the millet and water largely depleted. I quit with the letter, tearing up and discarding my draft.

The next day the bunchō was silent. It had dropped from its perch and propped its belly against the cage floor. Its fine down was ruffled in disarray, and its breast was slightly swollen. In early morning, a letter arrived from Miekichi, beckoning me to meet in a certain place to discuss a certain matter. He requested my presence by ten, so I left the bunchō to itself and departed. Miekichi's business was long and involved. We had lunch together, followed by dinner. We agreed to continue the following day. It was after nine when I returned home, and the bunchō was furthest from my mind. Worn out, I went straight to bed and dozed soundly.

When I woke the following morning, the matter at hand still occupied my thoughts. However willing the party in question might be, marriage into any such household was bound to end badly. She was still just a child, and all too ready to jump at a proffered match. Once it was done, though, there'd be no going back. Many in this world rush happily to their own misfortune. These were my thoughts as I finished breakfast, picked my teeth, and set off to bring the matter to a close.

It was after three when I returned home. I hung my coat in the entry hall and followed the corridor to the study, making my usual excursion to check the veranda. Once there, I found the cage on top of its box. The bunchō, however, lay flat on the cage bottom. Its legs, gathered together, extended stiffly from its body. I stood there transfixed, regarding the bird. Its black eyes were shut, and its lids were a pale blue.

The food dish was full of hulls. Not a single edible grain was among them. The bottom of the water bowl glistened bone dry. The western sun seeped through the glass doors, falling obliquely cross the cage. The black-lacquered base, just as Miekichi had said, was in fact fading from black to vermilion.

I stared at that vermilion base that the winter sun had worn. I stared at the empty food bowl. I stared at the perches, thoughtfully placed but now of no use. Finally, I stared at the rigid bunchō lying below.

I bent down, scooped up the cage in my arms, and carried it into the study. I set it down in the center of the ten-mat room and seated myself solemnly in front. I opened the door, reached my large hand inside, and took hold of the bunchō. Its soft feathers were cold to the touch.

I withdrew my hand from the cage and opened it. The bunchō lay still in my palm. I gazed for a while at the dead bird in my open hand. Then I placed it gently on my seating cushion. After that, I clapped loudly to summon the help. A young maid appeared in response, kneeling deferentially at the entrance. Impulsively, I grabbed the bunchō from the cushion and tossed it before her. She fixed her eyes on the tatami and remained silent. "You didn't feed it, and now it's dead." As I spoke, I glared at her face. She offered no response.

I turned back to my desk and penned a note to Miekichi. "My household help failed to feed the bunchō, and now it has died. To cage such a docile creature, then neglect its care, is unforgivably cruel."

I told the maidservant to post my note and dispose of the bird. She asked where she should take it, and I yelled back at her to do as she pleased. Alarmed, she picked it up and retreated to the kitchen.

While later, from the back garden, I heard the children clamoring about, preparing to bury the bunchō. The hired gardener consulted with the eldest daughter on an appropriate spot. I took up my pen, but little was produced.

The next morning my head felt heavy, and it was nearly ten when I finally rose. While washing my face, I peered out on the back garden. In the area from which the gardener's voice had sounded the day prior, standing among a thicket of green horsetail, was a small sign. Its height was much less than that of the surrounding horsetail. I slipped on my garden sandals and stepped through the shadows, trampling frosted grass underfoot. Drawing close, I read the words on the front of the sign. "Do not step on this mound." The writing was Fudeko's.

After noon, a reply came from Miekichi. "I'm sorry for the bunchō's unfortunate plight," was all he wrote. As to my household help, there was neither mention of blame nor indignation at the cruel outcome.