

Botchan – Chapter 6

Natsume Sōseki – 1906

I hate Noda. Better for Japan if his kind were bound to large rocks and sunk in the sea. And that voice of Red Shirt's irritates me to no end. He no doubt softens it intentionally for scholarly effect. Unfortunately, his face spoils the effect. His "Madonna" must be a rarity to love such a face. On the other hand, his sophistication in speech does befit his position as head teacher. After returning home I considered his arguments, and on the surface they seemed quite sensible. He isn't direct, so I can't be sure of what he meant, but it seemed he was warning me to watch out for Yama Arashi. If that's his point, then I wish he'd act like a man and affirm it clearly. And if Yama Arashi's such a bad instructor, then why not dismiss him without further ado? Head teachers, like most elite scholars, are spineless. Any man who gossips maliciously and won't speak openly marks himself a coward. Cowards tend to be kindly, so Red Shirt probably is kind, albeit in a feminine way. Kindness is one thing, and a man's voice is another. If he's showing me kindness then no sense rebuffing it on account of that voice. It's a strange world where a revolting fellow turns out kind, and an amicable friend turns out the villain. It leaves one feeling the fool. Perhaps all things in the country run counter to things in Tōkyō. What a vexing place. At any moment fire may freeze and rock may turn to tōfu. But on second thought, Yama Arashi hardly seems the type to incite students and instigate mischief. He's rumored to be popular with the students, so he could if he wanted to. But why go to such trouble when he can save himself the effort by confronting me directly? If I'm a burden to him then he could just state the reasons and ask for my resignation. The situation could be readily resolved through dialog. If his argument held weight I'd resign the following day. This isn't the only land where rice grows. Wherever I might go, I certainly won't be dying by the roadside. Yama Arashi should understand as much.

It was Yama Arashi who treated me to ice water on my first arrival here, but favor from a two-face only serves to stain one's reputation. I only drank one cup, and he only paid one sen and five rin. However, the thought of being beholden to a cheat and a swindler, even for a trivial sum, would chafe me all the way to my grave. Tomorrow I would go to the school and return his money. I borrowed three yen from Kiyō, and in the five years since I haven't returned it. It's not that I can't return it, it's just that I haven't. Kiyō is not eager to have her money back and is in no way dependent on it for her livelihood. A stranger would feel obligated to pay her back promptly, but I don't. To worry about returning her money would be to doubt her sincerity and disparage her noble spirit. I don't keep the money to slight her, but rather to tighten the bond between us. Of course there's no comparison between Kiyō and Yama Arashi, but to receive favor, whether it be in the form of ice water or a cup of tea, is an act of goodwill and a silent offering of one's respect toward the giver. To take on a debt of gratitude, when chipping in one's own share would be simpler, is a willful bestowing of honor that money can't buy. Though I may not hold rank or title, I am my own man. When a free man bows to another, he's bestowing a priceless gift.

I felt that I'd given something priceless to Yama Arashi in exchange for a mere one sen and five rin, and it was he who should be grateful to me. He was a disgraceful rogue for orchestrating devious stunts behind my back. If he was after a quarrel, then a quarrel he was going to get.

Thinking these matters through made me drowsy, and I slept soundly. The following day I had a score to settle, so I arrived at the school early and waited for Yama Arashi. I waited, but he failed to show. Uranari arrived. The classics teacher arrived. Noda arrived. Finally even Red Shirt arrived, but Yama Arashi's desk remained deserted, save for a lone stick of chalk. Since leaving home I'd been clutching two coins in my hand like bath money, thinking to return them as soon as I entered the staff room. I have sweaty palms, and when I opened my hand the coins were shiny with moisture. It occurred to me that Yama Arashi might object to sweaty coins, so I set them on my desk and blew on them before picking them up again. At this point Red Shirt approached and apologized for keeping me so long on the previous day's outing. I told him I'd actually enjoyed myself but had arrived back with a wicked appetite. Red Shirt planted his elbows on Yama Arashi's desk and brought his big sauce-pan face up close to my nose. I wondered what he was up to. He asked me to keep private the things we'd discussed in the boat on our way back. He wanted to confirm that I hadn't told anyone. His effeminate voice made him appear anxious. I hadn't told anyone, but I intended to do some telling today, and I had my coins ready in the palm of my hand. I didn't need Red Shirt interfering. Though he hadn't singled out Yama Arashi by name, it was poor form on his part to line up insinuations and then fault me for reaching my own conclusion. A head teacher should know better. His rightful role was to let me start things with Yama Arashi and then boldly step into the fray to take my side. That would make him a worthy head teacher and justify his bold red shirt.

I turned to face Red Shirt and informed him that I hadn't told anyone yet but intended to exchange words with Yama Arashi. This seemed to trouble him greatly, and he cautioned me against doing anything rash. "I don't recall saying anything directly that concerns Hotta. If you start trouble with him here it will place me in an awkward situation. You didn't come to this school to stir up trouble, did you?" Since he posed this preposterous question, I answered with, "Of course not! What school would suffer a chronic troublemaker on its payroll?" Red Shirt then advised me to keep the previous day's discussion private for now. He was sweating, and his counsel bordered on a plea, so I reluctantly agreed to desist for his sake. "Are you sure you're okay?" he pressed again. He must be effeminate to the core. If all scholars are like this then they really are a sorry lot. He forces an unreasonable request on me, with nonchalance, and then has the gall to question my sincerity. With all due humility, I consider myself a man. A man doesn't give his word and then dash into the shadows to break it.

The occupants of the desks on either side of us had arrived, so Red Shirt hastily retreated to his own seat. He was even haughty in the way he walked. When moving about the room, he placed the soles of his shoes gently to avoid making any sound. This was my first encounter with anyone who prided himself in walking with stealth. Assuming he's not a burglar in training, there's no reason for him not to walk naturally. Finally, the bugle sounded to signal the start of classes. Yama Arashi had not arrived, so I set the coins on my desk and headed for the classroom.

I was delayed at first hour and late getting back to the staff room. The other teachers were all talking at their desks, and Yama Arashi was among them. I had thought he was absent for the day, but it turned out he was just late. As soon as he saw me he said he'd been late on my account and I owed him for it. I picked up the two coins on my desk and said, "Here, take these." I placed the coins in front of him and told him they were for the ice water I'd had in Tōrichō the other day. He gave me a questioning look and began to laugh it off,

but then saw that I was quite serious. He told me to dispense with petty foolishness and swept the coins back onto my desk. In keeping with his character, he was not about to back down from treating me.

“There’s nothing foolish about it. No bond between us warrants your treating me to ice water, so I’m paying you back. On what grounds do you not accept?”

“If a paltry one sen and five rin is bothering you then I’ll take it back, but why now, after all this time?”

“Now or whenever, I’m returning it. I’ll not have you treating me, so I’m returning it.”

Yama Arashi eyed me coolly and replied with a grunt. If not for my promise to Red Shirt I’d have called him out for his misdeeds, then and there, and laid into him. But I was sworn to silence, so my hands were tied. The nerve of the man to brush me off with a grunt, when I stood before him boiling red with anger.

“I’ll take the ice water money, but I want you to vacate your lodgings.”

“Take your money and leave it at that. Where I lodge is my choice.”

“It’s not your choice. The master came to me yesterday, and he said he wants you gone. I heard him out, and he seemed to present a solid case. Even so, I stopped by there this morning to get more details and confirm his position.”

I had no idea what Yama Arashi was talking about.

“How am I to know what the master might have told you? And who made you my judge and jury? If there’s a reason here, then let’s hear it. What’s the meaning of this, presuming my guilt and slamming the cell door?”

“Okay, in that case, here it is. You’re rude, you’re disorderly, and they’ve had it with you. The master’s wife is not your maidservant. The arrogance, sticking your feet out and telling her to wipe them.”

“When did I ever tell the master’s wife to wipe my feet?”

“I don’t know what you did or didn’t tell her, but at any rate the master’s sick and tired of you. For ten yen, or even fifteen, he doesn’t need the grief. He can make up your lodging fee, he said, on the sale of just one scroll.”

“That insolent little scoundrel! What gall! Then why on earth did he take me in?”

“I can’t say why he took you in. But he did take you in, and now you’ve offended him and he wants you out, so leave.”

“You bet I’ll leave. I wouldn’t stay if he begged me. In fact, it was reprehensible of you to set me up in that den of slanderers in the first place.”

“We’ll see who’s more reprehensible, you or me.”

Yama Arashi was my equal when it came to temper, and he bellowed at me in his indomitable voice. The rest of the staff wondered what was happening, and they all craned their necks to look in our direction. I had no reason to cower in shame, so I stood up and swept the room with my gaze. Among the surprised faces, only Noda's sported a grin. I challenged him with my meanest glare, directed right through his dried gourd of a face, and his grin quickly evaporated. It seemed I'd rattled him a bit. The bugle sounded, and Yama Arashi and I suspended our quarrel to head off to our classrooms.

A staff meeting had been called for the afternoon to discuss the punishment of those boarding students who had disrespected me some nights ago. This was my first meeting of any kind ever, so I had no idea as to the protocol, but I expected that the staff would assemble, each would say his piece, and the principal would in some manner craft a consensus. The term "consensus" really only applies when the black and white of a situation is unclear. In a case like this, where it was obvious to anyone who the wrongdoers were, gathering the staff was a waste of time. However one might construe the facts, there could be no room for dissenting opinion. The principal should dispense with ceremony, handle the situation promptly, and be done with it. If perpetual indecision is the hallmark of a principal, then count me unimpressed. "Principal" is merely a euphemism for vacillating dullard.

The meeting place was a narrow room next to the principal's office that normally served as our lunch room. Twenty chairs, upholstered in black leather, were arranged around a long table, reminding one of those Western-style restaurants in Kanda. The principal sat at the head of the table with Red Shirt at his side. The rest of the seats were unassigned, but it was said that the physical education teacher always took the end seat as a show of modesty. I had no experience with meeting protocol, so I seated myself between the natural history and classics teachers. Yama Arashi and Noda were seated across the table from me. Noda really did sport a third-rate face. Yama Arashi's face, even after a quarrel, was far more noble. During my father's funeral at the Yōgenji temple in Kobinata, I'd noticed a painting in the parlor with a similar face. I'd learned from the priest that it depicted a mythical monster called Idate. Yama Arashi was angry today, so he was rolling his eyes and occasionally aiming a glare in my direction. Determined not to be intimidated, I returned fire with an equally menacing stare. My eyes aren't well formed, but they're superior in size to the average person's. Kiyō had even once told me that I'd make a good actor on account of my large eyes.

The principal asked if all were present, and the secretary, a man named Kawamura, tallied up the heads. One was missing. I could have told him as much, as Uranari had not yet arrived. Uranari and I must be connected somehow, perhaps through some sort of karma. Since the moment of our first meeting, his face remained etched in my mind. Whenever I entered the staff room, he immediately drew my notice. When walking on the street, I would conjure him up in my mind. Sometimes at the onsen I would see his pale and swollen face floating in the bath. When I greeted him, he would lower his head with deference, so much so as to evoke pity. At the school there was no one more mild-mannered. He seldom smiled, and he only ever spoke when necessary. I knew the word "gentleman" from texts, but I'd considered it merely a conceptual term, not something one encounters in the real world. After meeting Uranari, it struck me for the first time that this term could have a corresponding embodiment.

Due to this deep connection, I'd noticed immediately on entering that Uranari was not in the room. To be honest, I'd intended to seat myself next to this man and had secretly sought him out. The principal remarked

that Uranari should arrive shortly. He then proceeded to loosen a purple, silk-wrapped package and peruse what looked like a hectograph copy. Red Shirt began polishing his amber pipe with a silk handkerchief. This was his pastime and seemed appropriately suited to his mien. Others of the group conversed privately with their neighbors. Those trapped in awkward idleness traced out lines on the table with the eraser ends of their pencils. Noda tried several times, to no avail, to engage Yama Arashi in conversation. Yama Arashi only muttered curtly in response. Sometimes he would put a fierce look in his eyes and cast it in my direction. I would stare back in defiance.

Uranari, our awaited colleague, entered the room with a somewhat dejected look, explained to Tanuki that he'd been delayed on an errand, and apologized for arriving late. Tanuki opened the meeting and began by having the secretary, Kawamura, pass out hectograph copies. The first item listed was the matter of punishment, the second item was the matter of student oversight, and there followed several additional items. Tanuki put on his usual airs, as though he fancied himself higher education incarnate, and addressed us as follows. "Any fault of the staff or students of this school ultimately reflects my personal dearth of moral influence. Each time discord assails us, I'm tormented by shame and inwardly question my ability to serve as your principal. Unfortunately, I must face you all again at this time and apologize deeply for a disturbance that's taken place. That said though, what has happened has happened, and it must be dealt with. You're all familiar with the facts of the case. I ask you now to openly and candidly share your thoughts on the appropriate remedial measures."

I listened to the principal's speech, and whether I refer to him as Tanuki or principal, I must say that I was impressed by the gravity of his pronouncements. It seemed to me that if the principal were assigning all responsibility to his own faults and moral failings, then he should resign his post and we could dispense with punishment of the students. Then we wouldn't have to suffer through this meeting. But the situation should first and foremost be viewed through the lens of common sense: I was peaceably serving my turn as night duty attendant. The students went on a rampage. The fault was not with the principal, nor with me, but solely with the students. If Yama Arashi was behind it, then banish him along with the students and be done with the matter. What kind of fellow shoulders another's faults and claims them as his own? Only Tanuki would pull such a stunt. After presenting this argument that defied all logic, he surveyed the group with an air of self-satisfaction. No one said a word. The natural history teacher was preoccupied with a crow that had landed on the roof of the classrooms. The classics teacher was folding and straightening his hectograph copy. Yama Arashi was scowling at me. If meetings are such foolish affairs as this, then better to excuse oneself and go catch a nap.

I was annoyed and had a mind to speak first, but as I started to rise Red Shirt spoke, so I stopped myself. He had put away his pipe and was wiping his face with a striped handkerchief. No doubt he'd filched that handkerchief from Madonna. Men's handkerchiefs are white linen. "I too, upon hearing of the misconduct of our boarding students, felt myself deficient in my role as head teacher, and I'm deeply ashamed that my moral influence failed to affect these young men. Problems arise in the presence of deficiency. Looking at the case in question, it would appear that the students are solely at fault, but if we investigate thoroughly we may find that the responsibility, in fact, lies with the school. If we judge superficially and mete out severe punishment, it could, in the end, prove detrimental to our future. Furthermore, we can't rule out the possibility that these hot-blooded young men, intoxicated with the vigor of youth, were unable to discern

right from wrong and performed this mischief half unwittingly. Of course, the method of punishment is up to the principal, and it's not my place to interfere, but I would request that all extenuating circumstances be considered, and that the situation be resolved with as much leniency as possible."

Tanuki and Red Shirt were two of a kind. Both asserted brazenly that when students run amok it's the staff, not the students, who bear the blame. So if a lunatic bashes a man on the head, there must be some fault with the man whose head was bashed. Pleasure doing business with you. If the students need to expend excess energy, then take them to the athletic grounds for wrestling, but don't try to tell me they "half unwittingly" stuffed grasshoppers into my bed. At this rate, they could murder me in my sleep and be duly acquitted on grounds of "half unwittingly."

These were my thoughts as I was formulating my response. If I was going to speak, I wanted to state my case with impressive elegance. When I'm angry and try to express myself, I always end up tongue tied after two or three words. I'm of nobler character than Tanuki and Red Shirt, but they're more skilled as speakers, and I didn't want to let them trip me up on my own words. I began crafting phrases in my mind in preparation. As I was doing so, Noda, who was seated across from me, surprised me by suddenly rising. It was just like Noda to butt in with an unwelcome opinion. He spoke in his usual flippant tone. "This grasshopper incident and war cry incident are in fact singular events that should instill misgivings in all concerned staff about the future of our school. All of us must take personal initiative to reflect on what's happened and enforce strict discipline across the board. The views just expressed by our principal and head teacher are most appropriate, given the case in question, and I find myself in thorough agreement. I would submit that the punishment be as lenient as possible." Noda's speech was words without meaning. He decorated his sentences with fancy phrases, but there was no coherent message. The only part I understood was "thorough agreement."

I didn't understand what Noda had said, but all the same it somehow set me off. Prepared or not, I jumped to my feet. I started in with "I thoroughly disagree ..." but suddenly the words stopped coming. Then I added "... such topsy-turvy, settlement is unpalatable," and the entire staff broke into laughter. "The fault does indeed lie entirely with the students. If they're not made to apologize, then there won't be an end to it. Even if we have to expel them all. ... what insolence, think just because it's a new teacher ..." And with that I sat down. The natural history teacher to my right voiced a weak opinion. "The students are clearly in the wrong, but too severe a punishment might cause a backlash. I agree with the head teacher that leniency is the prudent approach." The classics teacher to my left added his endorsement for a gentle hand. The history teacher also followed suit. The cursed lot were all in Red Shirt's camp. With this sort of crew the school was a lost cause. I had resolved that I'd either have my apology from the students or offer my resignation. If Red Shirt prevailed I would immediately return to my room and start packing. At any rate, I didn't have the verbal skills to win their support. Even if I could win them over, I had no wish to endure any long-term association with such fellows. If I were on my way out, then what did I care of the outcome. If I spoke further they'd no doubt just laugh again. I assumed a position of detachment and kept quiet.

Yama Arashi, who to this point had been listening quietly, energetically rose to his feet. Since we'd been quarreling, I was resigned to hearing the rascal hand Red Shirt another endorsement. He could do as he pleased for all I cared. He began speaking in a thunderous voice that rattled the windows. "I am in complete disagreement with the opinion of the head teacher and other esteemed colleagues. However one views this

affair, it must be acknowledged that fifty boarding students disrespected a certain new teacher and played him for a fool. The head teacher seems to suggest a root cause in the failings of our staff, but with all due respect, I believe he is mistaken. The teacher in question was assigned to night duty shortly after his arrival, after fewer than twenty days of interaction with the students. Twenty days is sufficient to gauge neither a man's scholarly potential nor his character. If there were legitimate reasons for the disrespect that occurred, then these reasons should be taken into consideration, but tolerance of insincere students who mock a new teacher without provocation compromises the dignity of this school. The essence of education encompasses more than scholarship. While instilling noble, honest, and chivalrous vigor, one must also guard against vulgar, rash, and arrogant vices. The day we take half-hearted action for fear of backlash or escalation is the day that corruption takes root. To drive out corruption is the solemn duty of all who hold positions at this school. If we turn a blind eye then we have no business calling ourselves teachers. For these reasons, I believe the appropriate measures are strict punishment for all boarding students and a public expression of apology before the teacher in question." With that, he dropped back into his seat with a heavy thud. The room was quiet. Red Shirt began polishing his pipe again. I somehow felt revitalized. Everything I'd wanted to say had been said for me by Yama Arashi. Being a simple person, I completely forgot about our quarrel and turned to him with an expression of thanks. He took no notice of me.

After a while Yama Arashi rose again. "Allow me to add something that I neglected to mention earlier. On the night in question, the night duty attendant left his post to bathe at the onsen. I consider this inexcusable. Having accepted caretaking responsibility for the school, to take advantage of the lack of oversight and slip out to bathe at the onsen, of all places, is utterly disgraceful. Setting the students aside, I suggest that the principal reprimand the person in question for this action."

An odd fellow. Just when I'm feeling exonerated, he immediately proceeds to divulge my own misdoing. Thinking nothing of it, and knowing firsthand of a precedent, I'd assumed such behavior was customary when I set out for the onsen. It was clear enough now that my action was inappropriate. There was no choice but to accept their censure. I stood up again. "It's true that I went to the onsen while on night duty. This was wrong. I apologize." As I sat back down, the room filled with laughter yet again. Every time I opened my mouth they found it amusing. What a vile lot. They would never attest to their own faults publicly, as I had, so all they masked their infirmity with laughter.

The principal announced that since there seemed to be no further opinions he would think the matter through and make his decision. The final result was a week of confinement for the boarding students and an apology to me in my presence. I'd been prepared to resign my post and return home had my demands not been met. My remaining, though, only served to delay the inevitable, but more on that later. The principal announced the resumption of the meeting and continued as follows. The morals of the students must be corrected through the influence of the teachers. As a first step, he would ask the teachers to refrain from frequenting outside eating and drinking establishments. Special occasions such as farewell gatherings were of course exempted, but solitary outings to places of dubious repute were to be avoided. For example, soba and dumpling shops. This started another round of laughter. Noda turned to Yama Arashi and whispered "Tempura" with a wink. Yama Arashi duly ignored him.

I don't have a sharp mind, and I didn't understand Tanuki's discourse in full, but if middle school teachers are not allowed to frequent soba or dumpling shops then how, I wondered, was a gorging such as myself to manage. If that's the way it has to be, then fine, but from the start they should have recruited someone less fond of soba and dumplings. To be handed a letter of appointment without condition, only to be hit later with a punitive prohibition on soba and dumplings, was a severe blow to one like me who partook in few other pleasures. Red Shirt seemed to have something to add. "Fundamentally speaking, a middle school teacher belongs to the upper rung of society. As such, he should not simply pursue creature comforts. Giving oneself over to such vices only degrades the quality of one's character. However, as a human being one does require some form of diversion to break the monotony of country life. A teacher should seek out noble activities of the intellect, such as fishing, perusing of literary journals, or composition of new-style poetry and haiku. ..."

As I listened, he continued on with self-serving rubbish. If fishing up fertilizer from the open sea, equating goruki fish to the Russian literati, standing his favorite geisha under a pine tree, and composing "a frog jumps into an old pond" are activities of the intellect, then so too are devouring tempura and wolfing down dumplings. In lieu of his worthless avocations, he should go off and launder his red shirts. I couldn't take any more, so I called out, "Is meeting up with Madonna an activity of the intellect?" This time no one laughed. They looked at each other with curious expressions. Red Shirt himself averted his eyes in discomfort. Take that! Gotcha! But most pitiable of all was Uranari. After I'd spoken, his pale face had grown even paler.