

Botchan – Chapter 9

Natsume Sōseki – 1906

On the morning of the day of Uranari's farewell party, Yama Arashi approached me immediately on my arrival at the school and offered a lengthy apology. "When Ikagin complained to me the other day of your unruly conduct and asked me to tell you to move out, I took him at his word. I've since come to learn he's a scoundrel. The man peddles forgeries impressed with fake seals. I've no doubt now his complaints against you were nothing but rubbish. He'd hoped to earn extra money from selling you paintings and curios. You fended him off, and he realized there was no profit to be had, so he trumped up false pretexts to remove you. I was unaware of his true character, and I ask your pardon for the great discourtesy I've done you."

Without answering, I picked up the ice water money that was still there on Yama Arashi's desk and put it into my coin purse. He asked doubtfully if I were really taking it back. I explained that I'd resolved not to let him treat me and had intended absolutely to return his money, but after thinking further, I'd decided that I should, after all, accept his hospitality. So, yes, I was taking it back. Yama Arashi laughed his hearty laugh and asked why I hadn't taken it back sooner. I'd really wanted to take those coins back, but the situation was awkward, so I'd left them. I confessed how in recent days I'd found it more and more stressful to arrive at school each day and see those coins. He noted that I was not a man who backed down, and I replied that he too was a man of extreme obstinance. The two of us then proceeded to have the following exchange.

"Where was it you're from?"

"I'm a native of Tōkyō."

"A native of Tōkyō, huh? That explains why you never back down."

"How about you?"

"I'm from Aizu."

"A native of Aizu, huh? No wonder you're headstrong. Will you be attending tonight's farewell party?"

"Absolutely. You?"

"I'm definitely going. I also intend to see Koga off at the shore when he departs."

"Farewell parties are great fun. Come and see. I'm planning to drink heavily."

"Drink if you like. I'm going home after the fish. Fellows who drink are dolts."

"You do love a quarrel, don't you? Typical Tōkyō man, you're never in want of indiscretion."

"Be that as it may, can you stop by my place before the party? There's a matter I'd like to discuss."

Yama Arashi stopped by my lodgings as agreed. I'd been feeling quite sorry in recent days about Uranari's plight. Now that the day for formal goodbyes had arrived, he seemed so pitiable that, if I could, I'd gladly go in his place. On the occasion of his farewell party, I wanted to give him a hearty send-off with eloquent words. However, my poor speaking ability made doing so out of the question. I thought to use Yama Arashi, with his powerful voice, as my proxy to strike some fear into Red Shirt, and that's why I'd invited him over.

I began by starting to explain the Madonna affair, but of course Yama Arashi knew even more about this than I did. I told him about my encounter on the Nozeri River embankment, and how Red Shirt was a blasted idiot. He objected to my labeling of anyone and everyone as an idiot. "Didn't you call me an idiot at the school today? If I'm an idiot, then Red Shirt can't be. I'll not be cast as one of his same type." I suggested that in that case we call Red Shirt a spoony jackass, and he readily agreed. Yama Arashi is a powerful man, but when it comes to insults I beat him hands down. I wonder if this isn't the case with Aizu men in general.

I proceeded to tell him about the pay raise and Red Shirt's hint that I would take on greater responsibility. Yama Arashi took this to mean Red Shirt was after his dismissal. I asked if he had any intention of letting himself be dismissed. He answered defiantly that if he were to be dismissed then Red Shirt was going out with him. When I pushed back by asking how he intended to make that happen, he said he didn't know yet. Yama Arashi may be powerful, but he doesn't seem all too judicious. The old fellow was greatly pleased to hear how I'd turned down Red Shirt's pay raise, and he complimented me on my virtues as a Tōkyō man.

I asked why, if Uranari was so loathe to transfer, there hadn't been greater effort made to keep him here. By the time Yama Arashi had heard the story from Uranari it was all a done deal. Yama Arashi had met with the principal twice and with Red Shirt once to discuss the matter, but to no avail. And Koga's too-good nature had complicated things. He should have refused flat out, or at least left himself an out by saying he'd need to think it over. He'd been taken in by eloquent talk and immediately acquiesced, so his mother's later pleading and Yama Arashi's arguments were, to their great chagrin, all for naught.

I noted that this whole situation must certainly be Red Shirt's scheme to push Uranari out of the picture so he could make his move on Madonna. No doubt that was true. Red Shirt comes across as well-mannered while perpetrating villainy. When someone calls him out for it, he's ready with a cleverly concocted escape, and this makes him a slippery rascal. Yama Arashi bared his burly arm and declared that the only way to thwart Red Shirt was with an iron fist. I mentioned that he looked strong and asked if he practiced martial arts. At this he flexed his bicep and told me to try grabbing it. I tested it with my fingertips. It was solid as a bathhouse pumice stone.

I was so impressed that I asked him if he couldn't take out five or six Red Shirts at once with an arm like that. He replied that of course he could, and he rolled the muscles beneath his skin by extending and contracting his bent arm. This was immensely entertaining. Yama Arashi boasted that he could burst a double-stranded paper tie string by flexing his bicep. I told him I thought I could probably do the same. He doubted this and challenged me to try it. Failure would be humiliating, so I begged off the attempt.

I suggested half-jokingly that we give Red Shirt and Noda a solid drubbing after drinking ourselves drunk at the party. Yama Arashi gave it some thought but suggested we hold off for a while. When I asked why,

he explained that doing it at the party could make things harder for Koga. If we were going to drub them, then we should catch them up to no good and pummel them right then and there. Otherwise we'd take blame for it. This approach showed good discretion. Even Yama Arashi seemed to think things through more thoroughly than I did.

“Then build Koga up grandly in your speech. If I try it in my glib Tōkyō style it'll only lack gravity. And anyway, I'm always hit with sour stomach at the critical moment. A lump rises in my throat, and my voice fails me, so I'll leave the speaking to you.” Yama Arashi remarked that mine was a strange affliction and asked if it wasn't terribly inconvenient to not have a public voice. I told him that no, it was really no great loss.

We talked further, and when the time came, we set out together for the party hall. It was a place called Kashintei, reputed to be one of the region's top restaurants. I had never set foot inside. It was said that they'd procured the former residence of a chief retainer and were using it as is. It did indeed seem an imposing structure, but turning such a residence into a restaurant was akin to re-tailoring a battle coat into an undergarment.

When we arrived, our party was for the most part assembled, with several groups formed in a large hall of some eighty square meters. The alcove was impressively sized to match the hall. It was beyond comparison to the alcove in the room I'd occupied at the Yamashiroya Inn. I reckoned its width at three to four meters. On the right side was a Seto vase with red glazing, into which a large pine branch had been placed. I didn't understand what significance the pine branch might be meant to convey, but it seemed like a good choice, as it would keep its needles for a number of months and no replacement cost would be incurred. I asked the natural history teacher where the Seto piece was from, and he told me it was not a Seto piece, but rather an Imari. I asked if an Imari wasn't still a Seto piece, and he laughed. I later learned that only ceramics actually made in Seto are called Seto pieces. Coming from Tōkyō, I'd thought all ceramics or pottery were referred to as Seto. In the middle of the alcove was a scroll with twenty-eight large characters, each the size of my face. It was poorly done. It was so ugly, in fact, that I asked the classics teacher how they could display such lousy work so prominently. He informed me that the scroll was by Kaioku, a renowned calligrapher. Kaioku or whomever, lousy is lousy.

After a while Kawamura, the secretary, asked us to be seated. I chose a spot where I could conveniently lean my back against a pillar. Tanuki, dressed formally in haori and hakama, took his seat in front of the Kaioku scroll. Red Shirt, outfitted similarly, was stationed to his left. The place on Tanuki's right was reserved for the guest of honor, Uranari, who had also dressed himself in the Japanese style. I was wearing Western clothes, making it uncomfortable to sit formally on my heels, so I soon broke rank and crossed my legs. The physical education instructor seated next to me wore black trousers but sat up properly. As a physical education instructor he was clearly well-practiced in such matters. The dinner trays were brought out and saké bottles arrayed in preparation. The master of ceremonies rose and offered his opening remarks. He was followed by Tanuki, who was followed by Red Shirt. All three offered words of farewell, and as if by prior agreement they all touched on the same themes. Uranari was a good instructor and a wonderful human being, and it was truly a disappointment to lose him, but one had to respect that his personal circumstances compelled him to leave us. They seemed not the least bit ashamed at sponsoring an event to

propagate blatant lies. Among the three of them, it was Red Shirt who praised Uranari most profusely, lamenting the loss of a close friend. And he spoke quite convincingly, making his soft voice even softer still. Anyone hearing him for the first time would surely be taken in. No doubt he'd used the same technique to win over Madonna. As Red Shirt was speaking, Yama Arashi shot me a meaningful glance from the other side of the table. I pulled down my lower eyelid as a signal back to echo my contempt for the speaker.

As soon as Red Shirt sat down, Yama Arashi abruptly rose to his feet. I was so enthused that I applauded in anticipation. This drew the attention of Tanuki and all the others, and I became a bit self-conscious under their gazes. As I was pondering what Yama Arashi might say, he started in. "Just now our principal, followed by our head teacher, expressed their deep regret in losing our colleague Koga through his impending transfer. However, I myself am of the opposite opinion. I wish to see Koga transferred away from this place as soon as possible. Nobeoka is a remote region and may lack some of the material comforts we enjoy here, but they say it's a place of great moral integrity, where both staff and students nurture a keen respect for time-honored values. I'm confident that Koga will not be beset by ostentatious rogues in Nobeoka, the kind who resort to insincere flattery, or the kind who sport a façade of charm, all the while scheming to bring down a virtuous man. I believe that a gentle man of virtue like Koga will be received throughout the region with open arms. For Koga's sake, I fully welcome and celebrate this transfer. In conclusion, it's my hope that Koga will choose from the lady-folk there a proper wife and establish a harmonious household without delay, leaving a certain hussy behind to wallow in her own shame." Clearing his throat loudly two times, Yama Arashi returned to his seat. I wanted to applaud again, but I didn't wish to draw attention, so I held back.

When Yama Arashi was seated, Uranari rose. He politely moved from his own seat to the end of the row and bowed to all respectfully. "On this occasion, as personal circumstances compel me to depart for Kyūshū, I can't but feel overwhelmed by this magnificent farewell that all of you have so kindly arranged on my behalf. I'm especially thankful for the parting words with which the principal, the head teacher, and my other friends have honored me. Even as I set off for a distant land, it's my humble hope that I might retain a presence in your thoughts as heretofore." He made a deep bow and returned to his seat. There seemed no limit to Uranari's gentle nature. He had respectfully thanked the principal and head teacher, both of whom were playing him for a fool. I could understand if he'd done so from sheer sense of duty, but judging from his mannerisms, choice of words, and facial expression, he was thoroughly earnest. Both Tanuki and Red Shirt, who should have shown some semblance of pity, and who should have blushed with shame on receiving such words from a saint, simply sat at attention and listened with straight faces.

After the formalities were ended, sipping sounds broke out on all sides. I followed suit and tasted my soup. It was awful. Kamaboko had been served as a side dish, but it was dark in color, looking rather like a failed attempt at chikuwa. We had sashimi too, but it was thick, like eating a raw bluefin fillet cut. Even so, those around me were indulging voraciously. Most likely they'd never experienced authentic Edo-style cuisine.

Bottles of warm saké began flowing back and forth, and the party came to life. Noda was in front of the principal, reverently toasting his health. What a jerk. Uranari was making the rounds, intent on exchanging a drink with each member in attendance. A formidable task. He came to my spot, straightened the pleats of his hakama, and proposed that we drink. Though uncomfortable in my trousers, I sat formally on my heels and poured him a cup. I said it was a shame to be saying farewell so soon after my arrival, and I asked him

for his departure date so I could see him off at the shore. He replied that I mustn't bother when I was so busy. Regardless of his objection, it was my firm intention to see him off, even if it meant a break from my duties at the school.

Over the next hour the gathering grew livelier still. "One more." "Have a drink." ... one or two began slurring their words. I grew weary of it, so I went to the toilet and then stopped to gaze at the old-style garden, bathed in soft starlight. Yama Arashi approached and asked me, with a great deal of self-satisfaction, if his speech hadn't been impressive. I told him it had been indeed, but there was one point I took exception to. He asked where it was I found fault.

"You said that in Nobeoka there aren't any ostentatious rogues, the kind who sport a façade of charm while cutting another man down."

"I did."

"Well 'ostentatious rogues' is putting it far too mildly."

"Then what should I have said?"

"You should have said ostentatious rogues, who are swindlers, who are frauds, who are hypocrites, who are lechers, who are snitches, who would be bona fide dogs if they only said woof."

"I can't rattle off that many words. You're quite articulate. For one thing, when it comes to pejorative terms, you pack an impressive arsenal. It's an odd thing that you can't deliver a speech."

"These are words I hold in reserve for a quarrel. I couldn't produce them in a speech."

"Is that so? They seem to roll out effortlessly. Let's hear it again."

"As many times as you like. Ostentatious rogues, who are swindlers, who are frauds, ..." At this point we were interrupted by a pair who staggered onto the veranda with great commotion.

"You two, what's the idea? -- Trying to get away -- I won't let you go - come drink -- a fraud? -- what fun -- fun fraud -- come and drink."

And they pulled Yama Arashi and me back to the party. They'd actually come out to use the toilet, but in their stupor it seems they'd forgotten the toilet and were pulling on us instead. An inebriated fellow busies himself with whatever catches his eye, quickly forgetting what he was up to the moment before.

"Gentlemen, we've seized a couple of frauds. Give them a drink. Drink them into submission. Don't let them get away."

They pressed me, who had made no effort to get away, into a spot against the wall. Looking around, I couldn't find a satisfactory scrap of fish on any tray in any direction. Some of the fellows had cleanly

devoured their own and gone foraging five or six trays down the line. I hadn't seen him leave, but there was no sign of the principal.

A voice asked, "Is this the room?" and a small group of geisha entered. I was a bit surprised, but trapped as I was against the wall, I just kept still and watched. I saw Red Shirt, who had been leaning on an alcove post proudly smoking his signature amber pipe, suddenly straighten up and prepare to take his leave. One of the geisha, who had entered from the opposite side of the room, smiled and greeted him in passing. She was the youngest and prettiest of the lot. I couldn't hear for the distance, but it appeared that she said "good evening." He ignored her and made his exit, and that was the last we saw of him. Most likely he followed after the principal and made his way home.

The arrival of the geisha brought sudden energy to the room. A great noise erupted, as if the entire party were greeting them with a victory cry. Some of the fellows took up nanko. Their shouts were every bit as forceful as those of a master swordsman. On this side they were playing morra. The players were thoroughly engrossed in the game, shaking their hands with a dexterity that rivaled the D'Arc marionette troupe. From the far corner they shouted for saké service. Then they shook the empty bottle and shouted instead for a replenishment. The racket became intolerable. In the midst of all this, Uranari brooded idly and gazed at the floor. They hadn't arranged this party to lament his departure, but rather to drink and carouse. He'd ended up alone, suffering in his own ennui. Such a farewell party he could have done better without.

After a while, a raucous voice broke out in song. The geisha in front of me had a shamisen and asked if I wouldn't like to sing something too. I declined but asked her to sing for me. She sang, "Bells and drums, wandering wandering Santarō, don doko don, chanchikirin. If banging bells and drums draw folks together, then I'll bang bells and drums till I meet to one I want, don doko don, chanchikirin." She sang this all in two breaths. She said this had taxed her and stopped to rest. If it's that hard to sing, she could have chosen an easier tune.

Then Noda, who had suddenly seated himself at her side, said, "How unfortunate, Suzu-chan, that you met the one you want, only to see him leave so soon." Noda spoke, as always, in his storyteller-like manner. The geisha brushed him off with a pout, but Noda persisted. "While chancing to meet the one I want ..." he chanted in a poor imitation of Gidayū. The geisha slapped his thigh with an open hand and told him to cut it out. This started Noda laughing with delight. This was the same geisha who had greeted Red Shirt. Noda was a half-wit to take such pleasure from a geisha's slap. "Suzu-chan, play for me while I dance the Ki no Kuni." Now he had to dance too.

Across the room, the old classics teacher contorted his toothless mouth and sang, "I can't hear you Denbei, this fling between you and I ..." After making it thus far he had to ask his geisha for the next line. Memory fails old men. One of the geisha grabbed the natural history teacher and offered to play him a modern song. She told him to listen closely. "Her hair is done up stylishly, tied with a white ribbon. She rides a bicycle, she plays a violin, and she says in her best English, 'I am glad to see you' ..." The natural history teacher found this amusing and was impressed with the line of English.

Yama Arashi called for the geisha in his booming voice. He ordered a shamisen accompaniment for the sword dance. The geisha, taken aback by his unruly manner, failed to respond. Yama Arashi, not to be thwarted by a minor technicality, grabbed a cane and proceeded alone into the center of the room to begin his performance. In the meantime, Noda had finished dancing Ki no Kuni, finished dancing the Kappore, and finished dancing Dharma on the Shelf. Now he had stripped down to his loincloth, placed a hemp broom under his arm, and was marching around the room saying, “Sino-Japanese talks are in disarray ...” The scene was utter insanity.

I’d been feeling terribly sorry for poor Uranari, who was still in full formal dress and was looking miserable. There was no reason he should have to sit there in haori and hakama and put up with loincloth dancers at his own farewell party. I approached him and suggested that we head home. He replied that I was welcome to go, but it would be a breach of etiquette for the guest of honor to leave early, and he remained anchored to his seat. Who cares for etiquette? Look at this place. This was no farewell party, it was a congregation of lunatics. “Come, let’s leave.” I forced him out of his hesitation and we started on our way. At that point, Noda advanced on us brandishing his broom. “The guest of honor leaving early? Unacceptable! The Sino-Japanese talks are in process. You can’t go.” He held his broom sideways to block our way. He’d already been trying my nerves. “If it’s the Sino-Japanese talks,” I replied, “then you’re the Chinaman,” and I thwacked him on the head with my bare knuckles. He was stunned for several seconds and looked at me blankly. Then, “Oh, how could you? It’s so coldhearted to hit a man. I can’t believe you would beat your dear Yoshikawa. At long last, the Sino-Japanese talks.” As he spoke nonsensically, Yama Arashi, who’d perceived trouble brewing, had dispensed with his sword dance and come running over. After sizing up the situation, he promptly grabbed Noda by the scruff of his neck and yanked him backward. “Sino-Japanese ... Ouch! Ouch! This is an outrage!” As he struggled, Yama Arashi twisted him sideways and sent him to the floor with a thud. I don’t know what happened next. I walked part way home with Uranari. When I finally arrived at my place, it was past eleven.