

Botchan – Chapter 10

Natsume Sōseki – 1906

There was no school on victory day, but there was a formal ceremony at the parade grounds. Tanuki was required to march the student body onto the grounds, and as a staff member I was part of the procession. When I reached the town, it was a dazzling sea of Hinomaru flags. Our school had over eight hundred students, and the physical education instructor had organized them into marching formation. The plan was to open gaps in the formation and insert one or two teachers for supervision. The plan was clever enough, but implementation was another matter altogether. These students were impertinent imbeciles who sought the respect of their peers through breaking of rules. Of what use was teacher supervision? They sang war songs of their own choosing without instruction. When they weren't singing, they erupted in spontaneous battle cries. It was as though masterless samurai were marauding through the town. And when they weren't singing war songs or raising battle cries, they were engaged in boisterous chatter. One would think they could march without talking, but Japanese are born mouth first and feet last, so no amount of scolding could silence them. Their talk wasn't just talk, but slanderous barbs directed against the teachers. A vulgar lot. I'd forced them to apologize for the night duty incidents and thought that the end of the matter, but I was sadly mistaken. To borrow the language of my landlady, I'd indeed been dead wrong and thoroughly confused. The students hadn't apologized out of any heartfelt regret. They'd merely bowed their heads to me superficially on orders from the principal. Just as merchants bow courteously while cheating their customers, those students who apologized had no intent of curtailing their deviant behavior. It may well be that most of the world is like these students. Anyone who takes an apology at face value and pardons the perpetrator is a naïve fool. If the apology is halfhearted, then let the forgiveness be halfhearted to match. If one wants a true apology, one has to thrash the culprit till he's truly remorseful.

As I inserted myself into the formation, I was heckled with incessant calls of “tempura” and “dumplings.” In the sea of students, it was impossible to pinpoint the voices. And even if I could, they would no doubt insist that the words “tempura” and “dumplings” had nothing to do with me, that I must be suffering from some nervous disorder that affected my judgment. They'd been nurturing ignoble character traits here since feudal times, so nothing I could tell them or teach them was going to make any difference. One year in this place, and I'd likely be forced to debase myself and join them on their level. I wasn't going to be played for a fool and let them humiliate me with thinly-veiled verbal abuses. They were men, just as I'm a man. Call them students or call them youths, they were physically larger than me. I was fully justified in retaliating against them with punitive action. However, if I sought to retaliate through the usual channels, they would turn the tables on me. If I said I was punishing their misconduct, they'd refute me eloquently with their ready-made excuses. They'd present themselves as ostensibly respectable, and then they'd attack me anew. Since my actions would be retaliatory, I wouldn't be able to defend them unless the other party's misdeeds were made apparent. In the end, they'd manipulate the situation to make me look like the instigator of any discord. I was at a terrible disadvantage. They'd grow in impudence as do-nothing juveniles, of no use whatsoever to society. Then I'd be forced to retaliate underhandedly in their manner. That would be my downfall as a Tōkyō man. It might be my downfall, but no human being can tolerate endless abuse. I'd do what I had to to settle the score. My only way out was to return to Tōkyō as soon as possible and join Kiyō.

Staying here would only complete my moral corruption. Better to deliver newspapers for a living than descend into the mire.

As I followed along despondently, a great commotion suddenly arose from the front ranks. At the same time, our procession came to an abrupt halt. Thinking this odd, I stepped out of line to my right to look ahead. At the end of Ōtemachi, on the corner that turns onto Yakushimachi, our way had been blocked, and a contest of back and forth pushing and shoving had begun. The physical education instructor was making his way back toward me, yelling for order until he was hoarse. I asked what was happening, and he told me the middle school had clashed with the teachers' college at the corner.

It's said that middle school and teachers' college students, in every district in the land, are ever at each other's throats. I don't know why, but they just don't get along. It takes very little to spark a quarrel. Most likely they're all bored in the confines of the countryside, and this is how they amuse themselves. I enjoy a good quarrel myself, so when I heard they were clashing I dashed off toward the front. The middle schoolers in the fray were yelling for the "welfare students" to stand aside. Those behind were spurring the forward ranks to push harder. As I cut my way through the students and approached the front, I heard a shrill, sharp voice ring out with, "Forward!" The teachers' college students silently began to advance. Apparently the clash over precedence had been resolved, with the middle school yielding. In terms of order, it seems, the teachers' college outranks the middle school.

The victory ceremony was a simple affair. The brigadier commander read his prepared remarks. The governor read his prepared remarks. Those in attendance cried "Banzai!" That was it. Additional festivities were scheduled, but not until the afternoon, so I returned to my lodgings in the interim to work on my overdue letter to Kiyō. She had asked for more detail this time, so I would have to articulate my thoughts as thoroughly as possible. There was much I wanted to tell her, but when I picked up the paper to write, I didn't know where to begin. I thought of this and that, but this was uninteresting and that was unwieldy in words. I tried to think of something that would flow smoothly off my brush, without too much effort, and also be of interest to Kiyō. Nothing came to mind. I ground my ink, moistened my brush, and stared at the paper. I stared at the paper, moistened my brush, and ground my ink. After repeating this same routine numerous times in the same manner, I came to the conclusion that I'm no writer. I gave up and placed the lid over my ink stone. Letter writing was too much work. It would be simpler to set out for Tōkyō and tell Kiyō everything in person. I could imagine she must be worried, but I could sooner fast for three weeks straight than compose the kind of letter she'd asked for.

I pushed aside my brush and paper and lay down, resting my head on my bent arms. I gazed out at the garden, but Kiyō still weighed on my mind. Then I reasoned as follows. If I had come such a distance and still held Kiyō in my thoughts, then she surely must sense my devotion. And if she sensed my devotion, then there was no need for a letter. If I didn't write her, she could assume all was well. Correspondence, I decided, was best left for times of death, times of sickness, or news of life-changing events.

The garden was a flat plot of roughly thirty square meters, and its flowers and shrubs were nothing special. However, there was a single mandarin orange tree, sufficiently tall that it served as a landmark from outside the fence. Whenever I returned home, I would pause for a moment to look at this tree. To one who has never

ventured outside of Tōkyō, seeing oranges ripen on the branch is a novel experience. I imagined it must be a splendid sight when the green fruit ripens and slowly turns to yellow. Already there were several starting to change. According to the old woman, the tree produced sweet, succulent oranges. She invited me to eat my fill when they ripened, so I planned to help myself to a few each day. In another three weeks they'd be ready for eating. I had no reason to expect that I'd be gone within three weeks' time.

As I was thinking about the oranges, Yama Arashi dropped by unexpectedly to talk. Pulling a bamboo-wrapped package from his sleeve pocket and tossing it into the middle of the room, he told me he'd bought beef for us to enjoy together on victory day. I'd been effectively barred from frequenting soba and dumpling shops, and they fed me nothing but potatoes and tōfu at my lodgings, so I gladly accepted. We borrowed a pan and some sugar from the old woman and immediately began to cook.

As he stuffed an excessive quantity of beef into his mouth, Yama Arashi asked if I knew that Red Shirt was on familiar terms with a certain geisha. I told him I'd sensed something going on with one of the geisha at Uranari's farewell party. He complimented me on my astuteness, noting that he'd just recently become wise to the situation himself.

“That guy lectures the rest of us about moral character and intellectual pursuits, and then he cavorts shamelessly with geisha when no one is watching. It would be one thing if he tolerated the rest of us having some fun too, but didn't he call out your soba and dumpling outings as a breach of discipline and use the principal to admonish you?”

“He did. The scoundrel sees cavorting with geisha as an intellectual pursuit, while tempura and dumplings are material indulgences. If that's his intellectual pursuit, then let him pursue it openly. I saw how he hightailed it out of the room when his geisha appeared. Disgusting lout. Imagines he has us all fooled. When confronted with censure, he spins a façade of denials, throws in an allusion to Russian literature, and sidesteps by expounding on haiku vs. new-style poetry. That coward's a lousy excuse for a man. He must be the reincarnation of someone's chamber maid. Could be his father was a Yushima man-pleaser.”

“What's a Yushima man-pleaser?”

“Suffice it to say it's nothing very masculine. ... That part's not cooked. You'll get tapeworms eating it that rare.”

“Really? I think it's okay. Anyway, they say that Red Shirt makes clandestine visits to Kadoya, in the hot springs town, to rendezvous with his geisha.”

“Kadoya? You mean the inn?”

“Inn and restaurant. The best way to put him in his place is to catch him in there with his geisha and confront him on the spot.”

“How? Are you planning to stake the place out?”

“Exactly. There’s an inn called Masuya opposite Kadoya. I’ll rent a second floor room on the street side, open a hole in the shōji, and watch from there.”

“You think he’ll show while you’re watching?”

“He’ll show, but one night won’t do. It’s going to be a two-week operation.”

“You’ll be exhausted. I had the night shift tending to my father before he passed away. I did it for a week, and I was light-headed and thoroughly fatigued.”

“I don’t mind a little physical fatigue. Such scoundrels, if left unchecked, are a stain on our national honor. On behalf of heaven, I’ll give him his due.”

“I love it! If you’re intent on this, then count me in. Does the stakeout begin tonight?”

“I haven’t arranged for the room at Masuya yet, so not tonight.”

“Then what’s the plan?”

“It’ll be soon. I’ll let you know when the time comes, and then I’d like your help.”

“I’m ready whenever. I’m not much of a planner, but confrontation’s my forte.”

As Yama Arashi and I continued to plot our subjugation of Red Shirt, the old woman appeared and announced a student who had come in search of Hotta-sensei. She kneeled at the threshold and explained that the student had been to his residence, learned that he was away, and guessed that he might be over here. Yama Arashi rose and proceeded to the entry hall. After a while he returned and said that the student had exhorted him to come and watch the victory day festivities. There was a large troupe from Kōchi that was here to perform some sort of dance. It was a rare opportunity that mustn’t be missed. Yama Arashi seemed greatly intrigued and insisted that I should accompany him. I’d already seen my share of dances in Tōkyō. Every year they set up a dancing stage in town for the festival at Hachiman-sama, so I was familiar with shiokumi and other such dances. I didn’t really care to go and watch some idiotic dance by bumpkins from Tosa. However, since Yama Arashi insisted that I should accompany him, I agreed to go along, and we left through the front gate. The student who had come calling was none other than Red Shirt’s younger brother, an odd choice for a messenger.

The festival grounds were decorated with numerous banners planted in various locations, like a sumō tournament at Ekōin or the Oeshiki festival at Honmonji. In addition, they had borrowed a flag from every country and strung them between cords and ropes, filling the whole sky with vivid color. A stage had been hastily erected in the east corner, and this is where the renowned Kōchi troupe was to perform its dance. To the left and half a block down, surrounded by a reed screen enclosure, was an exhibition of flower arrangements. Everyone seemed impressed with the arrangements, but to me they were utter trash. If they take such delight in contorting grasses and bamboo, then I can only imagine how proud they would be with a hunchbacked beau or a hobbled husband.

Opposite the stage they were launching rockets one after another. One released a balloon, on which was written “Long Live the Empire.” It floated gently over the pines around the castle tower and descended among the barracks. Another launch sounded, and this time a black dumpling shot up through the autumn sky. Over my head it split open into trails of blue smoke, drawing a set of umbrella ribs that drifted lazily down the sky. Another balloon went up. This one had “Long Live the Armed Forces” in white against a red-dyed background. It swayed on the breeze and floated over the hot springs town toward Aioi Village. It may have landed within the Kannon Temple grounds.

There hadn’t been so many people at the ceremony, but by now a tremendous crowd had gathered. I was surprised that the countryside could produce such a multitude. There weren’t many intelligent faces among them, but they were formidable in their numbers. At this point the renowned Kōchi troupe began its such-and-such dance. When they’d said dance, I’d hastily assumed it was the sort of dance performed by the Fujima school. I couldn’t have been more mistaken.

On the stage were three rows of ten men each, dressed in warrior-style hakama and with imposing headbands, knotted in the back. I was astonished to see that every one of the thirty was holding a drawn sword. The spacing between the rows was about half a meter, and the clearance left and right was no greater. A solitary man stood apart from the formation at the edge of the stage. This lone figure wore the same hakama but had dispensed with the headband. Instead of a sword, he carried a drum attached to his chest, similar to that of a street performer. This man began singing out “iyaa, haaa” in a leisurely voice, punctuating his curious song with drum beats. It was a wondrous song, with a unique rhythm that I couldn’t place. It might be described as a fusion of the Mikawa Manzai and the chanting at a Buddhist initiation rite.

The song was slow and deliberate, flowing formlessly like syrup in the summertime. Drum beats were inserted periodically, imposing a rhythm over the song’s continuity. In response to this rhythm, the blades of the thirty flashed in rapid movements of great dexterity, sending chills through the onlookers. There was a live human within a half meter in any direction, and that human in turn was swinging his own deadly blade in a likewise manner. Only the precise coordination of their movements prevented them from striking and maiming each other. It wouldn’t have been so risky if they’d swung their swords in place, but the entire company stepped and turned in unison. They also spun in circles and bent their knees. If the next man over were a second quick or a second slow, it could cost one his nose, or worse yet, heaven forbid, his head. The blades whirred freely, but within the confines of a squared pillar half a meter on a side. Each blade had to swing in the same direction and at the same speed as those around it. I was spellbound. The shiokumi or sekinoto dances were nothing compared to this. I was told that it took extensive training. It was no easy task to stay together. The most difficult role was that of the droning drum master. The footwork, hand movements, and hip motions of the entire troupe all followed the lead of his beats. From where I sat, this old fellow looked to have the easiest role, singing away in secure comfort. In truth, he bore a heavy responsibility and was exerting himself tremendously.

Yama Arashi and I were greatly impressed and riveted our attention to the dance. Then suddenly, from half a block away, a battle cry erupted. A segment of the gathering, who until now had been peaceably viewing the various sights, suddenly swelled wavelike into left and right halves that began to push and shove. Someone yelled that a fight had started. At the same time, Red Shirt’s younger brother pushed his way

through the crowd and informed us that the middle schoolers were retaliating against the teachers' college students, looking to settle the score from the morning's skirmish. Imploring us to come quickly, he dived back into the crowd and disappeared.

As he weaved his way through the fleeing masses at a fast clip, Yama Arashi cursed the students for not leaving well enough alone and rekindling trouble. Not one to stand idly by, he intended to quell the disturbance. Of course I had no intention of running the other way, so I followed closely on his heels. When we arrived at the scene, the fight was in full fury. There were about sixty teachers' college students, and maybe eighty middle schoolers. The teachers' college students were still in uniform, while most of the middle schoolers had changed back into Japanese dress after the ceremony, making it easy to discern friend and foe. However, they were all in a jumble and grappling so wildly that it was unclear how to pull them apart. Yama Arashi observed the chaos for a moment with a worried look, not knowing what to do. There would be difficulties if the police arrived. He turned to me and suggested we jump in and begin breaking it up. Without answering, I quickly threw myself into the fiercest part of the battle. "Stop! Enough! Show some respect for your school! Cease!" I yelled at the top of my voice and tried to force my way to the front line, with little success. About three meters in I became mired, unable to advance or retreat. Directly in front of me, one of the larger teachers' college students was grappling with a fifteen or sixteen-year-old middle schooler. I ordered him to stop, but as I grabbed his shoulder to force them apart, someone tripped me from behind. Caught off guard, I lost my grip on the student's shoulder and went down sideways. Someone stepped onto my back with hard shoes. Pushing off with both my hands and my knees, I picked myself up, sending the guy on my back rolling off to my right. Standing up and looking around, I saw Yama Arashi's large figure about five meters away, yelling for order while being pushed around in a tight pack of student bodies. I called to him to give it up, but he didn't respond. I doubt that he heard me.

A rock came sailing through the air and landed square on my cheekbone. At the same time, someone clubbed me in the back from behind with a stick. "Teachers are fighting too! Attack!" "Two teachers, a big one and a small one. Stone them!" Outraged at the impertinence of these bumpkins, I whacked the head of the teachers' college student nearest me. Another rock came flying. This time it grazed my close-cropped head and flew on past. I'd lost sight of Yama Arashi, and now there was no turning back. I'd jumped in to break things up, but been stoned and clubbed for my efforts. I was not about to retreat in shame like some sap. I may be small in stature, but I've been trained by fire in the school of hard knocks. I engaged pell-mell, sending opponents reeling while receiving a drubbing in return. Finally someone shouted, "Police! Police!" and, "Run for it!" I'd been constrained from all sides, like swimming in arrowroot paste, but I was suddenly freed as friend and foe alike dispersed. These country folk were masters of strategic withdrawal, even better than Kuropatkin.

I found Yama Arashi a short distance away. His crested, single-layered haori was in tatters, and he was mopping his face. He told me he'd been hit in the bridge of the nose and bled profusely. His nose was indeed an appalling sight, bright red and swollen. I was wearing a padded kimono with a splashed pattern. It was covered in dirt but had fared better than Yama Arashi's haori. However, my cheek was stinging terribly. Yama Arashi informed me that it was bleeding.

About fifteen policemen had arrived, and the students had fled in the opposite direction, so Yama Arashi and I were the only ones detained. We gave our full names and a complete account of events. They told us to come along to the station, so we went and delivered a detailed statement before the chief. Afterward, I returned home to my lodgings.