

A Translation:
***The Vignettes of Red Beard the Doctor* (2)**
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CONTENTS

The Badger Tenement Houses

The Truthfulness for the First Time on the Third Time Around

Committed to an Effort that Goes for Nothing

The Badger Tenement Houses

1.

A little while before the rainy season set in, Yasumoto Noboru began, of his own will, to wear the outfit for the medical staff: the cotton robe with cylindrical sleeves dyed light gray and the hakama that came with the robe looking like tattsuke. They were well starched and felt stiff to the skin. The first time he put on them, he was fairly embarrassed as if stared at by everybody.

Niide Kyojo and Mori Handayu clammed up about the change and pretended not to notice it. Nor did other medical staff members say anything about it, but whenever they saw him donned in it, as was

furtively observed, they looked sardonic or sneered about the lips. —But there was one who neither feigned ignorance nor scorned on the sly. She explicitly took delight in his change and expressed her delight in the words straight from the shoulder. It was o-Yuki, a young woman who was working in the kitchen. On seeing Noboru rigged out in the outfit, in her surprise she clapped her hands and broke into a broad smile. In fact, her face was brimming over with her delighted smile.

“Well, well, well, you’re wearing the outfit, at long last. I’m glad of it, doctor,” o-Yuki said. “Now that you show up the way you’re dressed, I win finally though at long last.”

“You say you win?” Noboru said quizzically. “Did you make a bet with anybody?”

“Well,” she said. She was a bit flustered but covered it up with a slick smile. “Make a bet? Well, yes I did make a bet, but I’ve always prayed so you’d have the heart for it.”

“Have the heart for it? What do you mean?”

“That you’ll settle down in this infirmary, doctor.” She said boldly, “I know I’m not in the position to say a thing like this, but good doctors are needed here. If a doctor’s a doctor in the true sense of the word, I’m sure he’ll be all keyed up to work for this infirmary. Am I wrong?”

At this moment, it came home to Noboru.

—Aha, she’s copying Mori Handayu.

He’d heard from Tsugawa Genzo that o-Yuki loved Handayu. He’d heard the same thing from o-Sugi, maid attendant to madwoman o-Yumi. Handayu, they said, stood aloof from a romantic relationship, but o-Yuki was crazy about him. O-Sugi said it was praiseworthy that doctor Mori was cool-headed, but then again that it was against the grain, and that she was tempted to hate him when she thought about o-Yuki’s heartfelt devotion. On the part of Noboru, he’d sometimes seen them together, say, talking. O-Yuki would stop Handayu as he passed her and they’d stand there chatting. That was all. One time, however, Noboru happened to see her weeping by the fence of the herb garden. —Wasn’t it in the dusk of late spring twilight-time? Handayu, arms folded, stood bolt upright looking up at the sky with her next

to him. She was weeping, face covered with her kimono sleeve. The couple was at a distance from Noboru. He looked away from them and left right away. The glimpse of the couple being projected in a fuzzy silhouette against the wide swathe of the failing light after sunset when the dusk was robed in its raiment of an evening mist, arose in the bystander a heart-rending pathetic fantasy.

—No doubt she’s copying Handayu.

So thinking, Noboru said to o-Yuki nonchalantly:

“Is that what Mori cherishes in his thought?”

She nodded and smiled, for all she cared, “Yes, doctor, doctor Mori says the same thing.”

“OK. Now I’ll speak my own mind,” he said, and suddenly twisted his face into a grimace and began as if flying at her: “Mori’s stringing himself along by prevaricating. Everybody has a desire to get ahead in the world. It’s the strongest but a justifiable desire humans were born with to earn a reputation and a fortune for themselves. A desire of the sort has no place in Red Beard. He’s already renowned as a great doctor. He’s received most courteously by domain lords and rich people. It’ll only make him even greater that he possesses nothing to his name, not even a roof over his head. That through the years he’s lived and worked in an infirmary like that. But we aren’t cut out like him. We’re nothing but nameless interns. Stagnate in a cesspool like this for a long time, and we’ll end up being nameless and no choice. I have no use for the kind of life I’m talking about. Thanks, not for me.”

“You’re tired, doctor Yasumoto,” o-Yuki said as if consoling him. “You’re being mean because you’re tired, doctor. That’s the proof. Off you go and have a rest, doctor.”

Noboru shrugged in resignation and walked away.

He felt ashamed. Not only was he ashamed to talk stuff like that to someone like o-Yuki, but he sensed a contradiction between what he was practicing and what he’d just delivered. However, what he’d told o-Yuki was neither exaggeration nor pertinacity. That was what he’d always had in mind. He’d been honest when he spoke his mind. On the contrary, he was strongly attracted to the duties in this infirmary and

Kyojo, all the same. —There was a reason for his spontaneity to put on the outfit he'd hated so much. He could never have brought himself to put on it, had it not been for the change that had taken place in his mind. Reason as it may have been, very little was made of it because it simply came from one sick person's remark.

The neighborhood down the slope called Nakatomi-Zaka, a declivity from the main gate of the Denzu-In Temple, was a quarter called the "Badger Tenement Houses." The quarter was a squalid slum known for being inhabited by the extremely poor. While frequenting it, assistant to Kyojo on his round of visits to treat the residents, Noboru was given a patient called Sahachi, who made wheel spokes by trade. He was forty-five or -seven, big-boned, and thickset, but, plain as day, had tuberculosis of the lungs, suffering from intense debility and exhaustion in contrast to his ostensible stockiness.

—Could you talk him into taking it seriously and putting his all to recuperate, doctor?

Chihe'e, manager of the tenements, asked Kyojo and Noboru to tell him so for umpteen times. Kyojo himself told him sternly from time to time to have quiet and rest. Sahachi followed his counsel obediently. To be sure, when he was attacked by the fit of nasty coughing with a high running temperature, he'd rest from work and get himself laid up, as it seemed, but when he felt a thought better, he'd get out of bed and set about doing something. When he was caught working and got a telling-off, he'd shrink and, a shy smile over his big face, bend many a time in a row, scratching his head, to say as if he was really sorry:

—I'm finishing right now. I promise I'll lay in bed on finishing this. I'll lay me in bed real soon, honest.

Sahachi had once got married when young, the manager said one time, but divorced in a matter of a half year or so. He'd remained single, living alone ever since. He was well skilled in his trade and made much, but was a man of peerlessly few wants. He'd spend all he made on others. He hadn't yet furnished himself with enough household effects.

This man Sahachi had once gazed questionably on the way Noboru was clothed and asked why he didn't wear the outfit of the infirmary.

Noboru had answered it was not designated by the authority. Since it was Kyojo's own designation, not the authority's, it was all up to you whether or not you'd put on it.

2.

As he took his eyes off from Noboru, Sahachi muttered as if talking to himself:

—That outfit saves people's lives, doctor.

He said what he did.

—Get the load of a person in it, and you can tell right away he's a doctor from the infirmary. Poor people like us have little use for the infirmary and stay away from it. But when we see a doctor from it passing out here, we often want him to stop by to see us at home. I, for one, do appreciate the outfit more than anything else, doctor.

Originally, the outfit had meant differently. It made it easy to do things. It kept wearers clean. If it got soiled with patients' muck, it could be changed to a fresh one at once. They made a point of providing a fresh one every day in summer, and in winter, every other day, even though it wasn't soiled. Kyojo must have designated the outfit as the uniform on account of those merits. While listening to Sahachi, Noboru had to accept an extra meaning at the back of his mind, the importance of the uniform, which there was among the needy.

“Oh, poor me. Vanitas vanitatum.”

So he shook his head disdainfully as he made his way back to his private room after the debate with o-Yuki.

“Ha! Do you say, doctor Yasumoto, it's the strongest and a justifiable desire humans were born with?” he deprecated himself and curled his lips. “—And you'd been and gone and said it when you're rigged up in this outfit of dignity, doctor Yasumoto.”

When he got as far back as Kyojo's office, Noboru heard his voice as it groaned within the shoji doors. The sound was not a groan. Rather, it was more like a howl. Single short howl as it was, Noboru felt as if he'd

abruptly been splashed with water, and hurried past the room. When he turned the corridor, Mori Handayu slid open the shoji of his room and beckoned him to enter.

“Is there anything you want from me?”

“I have something to tell you,” Handayu said.

“I haven’t had breakfast yet.”

“Neither have I. Come on in.”

Reluctantly Noboru went in.

“Where have you been?”

“Nowhere in particular,” Noboru said with a shrug of his shoulders. “I had a little walk before breakfast. Is there anything wrong with it?”

“I, —” Handayu began to shout at him, but promptly held himself down and said quietly, “Dr. Niide is extremely high-strung. That’s why I wanted to tell you to bear it in mind.”

Noboru became silent.

“A while ago, the yoriki police sergeant called Dr. Niide to his office. Dr. Niide told me to come with him and I went with him,” Handayu said in a somewhat suppressed voice. “Mr. Matsumoto Sanza’emon got the yoriki to have Dr. Niide present. Kimoiri Ogawa was there with them. On having all present, Mr. Matsumoto issued the orders to cease treating outpatients and cut back the annual budget by one-third.”

The de facto ban had long been issued from treating outpatients, Handayu explained. It had officially been banned when, instead, the infirmary building had been extended and the capacity of inpatients increased. But in practice it was impossible. Irrespective of the capacity of inpatient being more than doubled from seventy to one hundred and fifty, outpatients numbered three hundred and fifty at the least every year and in some years the number shot up over seven hundreds. Most of the time, outpatients were too poor to get treatment from regular practitioners. For this reason, when entreated by them, the infirmary had no way of rejecting them. In this way, in spite of the official ban, one more came, then two more, until eventually they were as many as they had been before the ban was issued.

“Soon after Dr. Niide became the head doctor, it was allowed to treat

outpatients in a sort of official way. That is, the authority acquiesced in his decision,” Handayu said. “And now, out of the blue, they’ve come with their ban again. Treating outpatients has been banned again. To make matters worse, they’ll reduce expenditures by one-third.

“For that, —” Noboru asked back, “Are there any reasons for that?”

“There was a celebration in the shogun’s family. They need vast expenses for it. So I’m told.”

“Celebration?”

“They say a concubine who’s doted on by the shogun gave birth to a baby girl. The shogun was hugely delighted and planned various events to celebrate it. The yoriki was vague about it. He equivocated about the truth, whereupon Dr. Niide got mad.”

What Kyojo had to say was that if the shogun’s family was blessed with happiness, it was natural to grant amnesties to convicts and give out money and rice and grains to the needy. That was where he was infuriated, but he was not in the position to expostulate on it. Had he done, he’d have slandered the shogunal authorities.

“Dr. Niide says, ‘I understand what you say about the cutbacks in expenditures, but I can’t stop outpatients coming to us for treatment.’ ” Handayu paused briefly and parroted Kyojo in a subdued voice but in a way the incarnate Kyojo roared with rage, “—They are poor and sick. Quit treating them and you’ll straightway plunge them into the abyss of death. No, I can’t accept it. I beg you to reconsider.’ —As soon as he finished, he took off.”

In the midst of the discussion the interns were making about impending problems, the gong board was struck to announce that breakfast was ready. Hearing it, neither would get to their feet. They kept in their seats after Handayu had finished.

“What was Mr. Ogawa’s reaction, the kimoiri’s?” Shortly Noboru lifted his eyes and asked, “Which does he side with?”

“Neither, I guess. He should have negotiated with the shogunal official there and then. Isn’t he the director of the infirmary?” Handayu said. “But he was only seated with the rest and stayed silent. He was a deaf mute, —I’d say, most probably, the kimoiri sides with neither.”

Handayu rose to his feet at last and said, "Let's have breakfast." He looked at Noboru. "Watch your p's and q's, and don't make Dr. Niide offended."

Noboru remained silent, looking as if he had no confidence.

Kyojo had been bad-tempered all morning. Needless to say, he didn't betray his rage or raise his voice, but the ill-humor and ire peeped out in the way he behaved that day. Handayu and Noboru attended on him for everything from treating inpatients to writing prescriptions. Both assistants scrupulously kept on the alert. Every time something came up, they signaled to each other with their eyes to prevent disaster.

—Are we not half bad getting along?

So Noboru chewed the cud. He was now beginning to feel he was growing closer to Mori Handayu and fond of him. And this feeling was not in the least unnatural. At which he was surprised, though.

—He's at least more human than Tsugawa.

Although the memory came back to Noboru that Tsugawa Genzo had insulted as he said about Handayu, "He's a hick," Noboru, forgetting he'd looked at Handayu with Tsugawa's eyes, thought about there being something in Mori Handayu that he must learn.

When he finished the prescriptions, Kyojo turned on Noboru as he got ready to go out.

"How's Sahachi in the Badger Tenements?"

"Seems nothing's changed, sir."

"Well then, I'll have a visit before Sahachi. You'll come with me."

Handayu and Noboru went out into the corridor. At the threshold of the prescriptions dispensary, Handayu looked back and said:

"Take heed."

Noboru nodded with a smile.

3.

Kyojo visited Lord Matsudaira of Iki's residence. It was located within two cho of the Ushigome Gate, one of the shogun's castle town

gates, and a stone's throw of the Shogunal Fire Brigade Station. Kyojo spluttered to himself all the way until they got there:

“Do they have any such right? If they do, who gave it to them?” He had a way of shaking the wrist of one hand. “Unlike wartime, the world now is enjoying peace and everything's well ordered. The shogun's authority holds the world in control and its foundation is unshakably solid. People from all four classes are in fear of goofing up on the authority's orders. So, the bureaucrats of the regime can do anything. They're allowed to openly enjoin anything on plebeians under the name of the shogun, no matter how lawless they are, no matter how inhuman they are. And in actuality, they're playing them out word-perfect.

“No, I won't be cheated.” He curled out his lower lip. “I may be gone gaga though good-natured, but I firmly refuse to shut my eyes to the way the powers that be make a fool of us, doing as they are now. Nope, I'm not so much over the hill or good-natured as to stoop and nod to the sort of government which fools its people and holds them in contempt.”

For brief moments, Kyojo becomes silent. He shortens his long stride and rubs his beard with one hand. “The lawless for the lawless,” he resumes to mutter. “The inhuman for the inhuman. —We must make those lick pain and despair and taste what they are like, those who wield power on powerless common people, must we not?”

Kyojo's giving vent to his venom goes on and on in his muttering. For his heart seems to be darkly seething with anger and abhorrence. He curses the shogun's domineering bureaucrats and finally the target of his curse shifts to his own ineptness in resisting the power. But on entering the Ushigome Gate, he shakes his head weakly and makes an inscrutable gesture of wiping off something only with his right wrist.

“No, that isn't so,” Kyojo whispers tiredly. “I'm incapable of doing stuff along that line. I'm a good-natured old man. I'll trust they're humans like the next one. Their guilt is to have assumed the positions of authority for all their total lack of aptitude in the true sense of the word, and to be completely in the dark about what they ought to be fully in the know. They are,” he says, curving his lips downward, “The powers that be are the most impoverished, more senseless than the most, and

ignorant, to boost. They're to be pitied before anyone else."

Takezo, medicine basket on back, came along with Noboru, spoke up from behind in a stutter and reminded Kyojo that they were at Lord Iki's. Struck, Kyojo stopped in his tracks. He looked to his left and then glared at Takezo, who, in turn, looked at Noboru in embarrassment. Noboru left them behind and proceeded toward the janitor's box.

Kyojo and Noboru went in by the side entrance.

Tea and sweets were served in the drawing room. The elder named Kawamoto Yuki'e came out to receive them. On being greeted, Kyojo plunged into business without touching the tea, even. He said in a clipped and formal manner, "Today I'd like the payment of the fees made before I leave. I'd like to ask you to have it ready." When Yuki'e was told the sum of fifty ryo, his chin was thrown out as if his forehead had suddenly been poked.

"Of the amount, ten ryo shall be in change." Kyojo was blasé as he said so. "Well then, let me see the thing I asked you for last time."

"Wouldn't you see the lord first, doctor?"

"I'd do after I have a look at the menu."

Yuki'e hurried out of the room.

"Lord Iki's annual revenue is thirty-two thousand koku of rice, but it's only superficial. He's long served as middleman between the shogun and domain lords and the shogun's direct vassals. So, he's de facto richer," Kyojo said. It was vague whether he said it to Noboru or to himself, but there was an obvious ring of ridicule in the way he said it. "Forget it. Fifty ryo or one hundred ryo—doesn't make any difference. Not that he makes money by himself. That's not a big deal."

Then again Kyojo mumbled disgustedly, Who the hell cares? Fifty ryo or one hundred ryo, to hell with it, it's just nothing.

Presently, Iwahashi Hayato, comptroller and in charge of the general affairs of the house, showed up. He produced to Kyojo a scroll written in with something. It was a list of menus for five days, courses going on into Lord Iki's meals. Kyojo took out his yatate portable writing kit. His writing brush crossed out one item after another in the menus and added afresh several new items that would replace.

“The lord’s meals shall be exactly this way for one hundred days, please,” Kyojo said, returning the scroll to Hayato. “Chicken and eggs are to be strictly forbidden. Seafood and salt and vinegar shall not go beyond the specified intake. As for rice, you may remember what I told you last time. I hope you’re strictly keeping to it. Cleaned rice only shortens the lord’s life, let me remind you. The ratio of wheat to rice shall be religiously seven to three, and with this ratio they shall be cooked together,” Kyojo finished. And now, without waiting for Hayato’s response, he suggested he’d go and take the lord’s pulse.

Kyojo had Noboru attend on him when he examined Lord Iki. Noboru was told the lord was forty-five. He was as obese as the walrus Noboru had seen in a drawing before. He looked painful just to be sitting on his legs. He was potbellied. Noboru was tempted to doubt his eyes. In his eyes, no belly was more gigantic. Every movement he made stirred up lapping waves of his obesity over him. His chin was folded into three, which drooped, directly reaching his chest. He was all but neckless. His face was round in a circle, cheeks bloated to their fullest like a balloon about to burst at any prick. The bloating shrank his eyes into the slits cut open in the head. —Kyojo did nothing but to look up at him sitting on the dais. He wouldn’t take his pulse, even. All he did was, not a word on his lips, gaze on the lord with a pitiful look in his eyes. Then, it gradually took effect. The lord began to lose his presence of mind. He panted painfully, loosened the collar, and wiped his mouth with the folded paper he took out from inside his garment. He wheezed.

“I had a look at the menus for your Lordship’s meals just now,” Kyojo began at length. “As I said, your Lordship is not ill. Your Lordship is, I’m afraid, in by far worse condition. If your Lordship had a disorder anywhere, I’d have only to treat it. But the problem lies elsewhere, your Lordship. Your Lordship takes very substantial meals. For this reason, the fat which has accrued to your Lordship’s entire visceral system has debilitated the viscera themselves, and the balance has been completely off the beam between absorption and excretion.”

Kyojo relentlessly went on intimidating Lord Iki for about a quarter of toki. While listening to him, Noboru caught on to Kyojo’s chicanery,

that he was threatening. However, he was struck at the rigor of the diet Kyojo put the lord on. He'd heard in the drawing room that the diet be seventy percent of wheat and thirty percent of rice cooked together for his staple and include absolutely no chicken or eggs. He listened to Kyojo repeat it to the valet responsible for general affairs and accounts in the presence of the lord, and found the amount and contents of meals to be actually inferior to those of the poorest. There was barely any stir of expression on Lord Iki's face, which was fat and bloated like a white leather sack. Only, the slits of his eyes alone gleamed with a pathetic hue mixed with the horror of a scared child.

"Poor people get ill mostly because of the inferiority of their meals," Kyojo said to Noboru once back in the drawing room, "whereas domain lords and rich people get ill mostly because of dainty foods they eat to excess. There's nothing more disgraceful in the world than to have an insatiable greed for food and let it ruin you. It makes me sick to look at him as he is," he said, making a disgusted face as if he felt like spitting.

When Iwahashi Hayato, comptroller, came back with the money, Kyojo told him he'd prepare medicine and had the medicine basket fetched. When the valet took leave of them, Kyojo picked the pieces worth two ryo from the ten and wrapped them in paper and told Noboru to be off to the Badger Tenement Houses with the money.

"I'll stop by Okaku-do, then I have one more to stop by before I catch up with you," Kyojo said. "When the cutbacks in expenditures are put into effect, what we have to do first and foremost is to clinch a deal with our apothecary. Maybe, it'll be hard work to talk the proprietor of Okaku-do into answering the demands of the financial predicament we'll be driven into, —well, you forget it. Off you go ahead of me and give this to Chihe'e at the Badger Tenements."

Noboru took the money, put it into his chest fold, and took off.

4.

A short while before Noboru got to the tenement houses on Nakatomi

Slope, the entire sky became overcast and the thunder began to rumble. Hardly had he entered the manager's, a violent squall began to bucket down. —Chihe'e who was making a waraji straw sandal, threw it away at the sight of Noboru, and stood to his feet to meet him, telling him that he'd only just sent a runner to the infirmary for him.

“Sahachi coughed up blood,” Chihe'e said, taking out an umbrella, “—did you come across the runner, doctor?”

“No, I was getting around other places,” Noboru said and handed Chihe'e the money as it was wrapped. “Dr. Niide told me to take this and give it to you.”

Chihe'e put down the umbrella and wordlessly took it with both hands held above his head as though it was handed to him on a plate. He took it to the Buddhist altar to put it away in it. Then, sharing the umbrella, they went out into the alley between the tenement terraced houses. They walked to Sahachi's tenement, stomping the planks covering the ditch. The neighborhood they walked in was down the steep slope. It'd become flooded with rainwater in less than no time when there was a heavy rainfall. The ditch leading to the main sewer that emptied into the Koishikawa Waterway did not drain well, —on this day too, the poor drainage was causing the ditch planks to float up within a few minutes of the start of the rainfall, and the wives from the tenements were out braving the downpour to dig up like fury the garbage stuck in the ditch.

Sahachi's stood alone from the rest of the tenements, the manager said to Noboru. They used to be in one piece. But seven years before, there'd been a landslide, which gobbled down the whole terraced house, ruining it in the mud, and left one tenement on one end. It left such a mass of mud where the house had been that the landlord gave up restoring it. Sahachi worked on the remaining part to remodel it into an inhabitable, independent tenement. —In the course of seven years, the manager went on, the mass of mud the landslide had left was washed away and the land was now as good as flat and open. Thus, the landlord was inclined to fill in the open space with a new house. Used lumber was being carried into the space and the space was being leveled off.

At Sahachi's tenement the manager's wife o-Koto was tending him. "He's sleeping tight," she whispered to her husband after she had greeted Noboru. "He says funny things by fits and starts. Maybe he's speaking in delirium. He's got a high fever. Pain's gone, it seems."

"Doctor Yasumoto's been out. He's been getting around elsewhere," said Chihe'e as he sat down. "When the runner gets back, tell him the doctor's here. You take that umbrella and bring another right away."

No sooner had o-Koto left than the thunder clapped right overhead, sending right down a deafening ring of explosion. It felt as though the whole house had shuddered. They heard o-Koto scream. Chihe'e flung to the door and looked across the alley. There seemed nothing wrong. He came back muttering, "Gosh, shame she's like a girl," and sat down. Noboru was gazing at the patient.

"About a toki ago," Chihe'e began, "when I got my old woman to take porridge, yes, 's right, he'd been in bed since yesterday afternoon, got her to make the porridge and bring it here, she found he was lying over there in his workroom."

Next to the living space of two rooms with six tatami-mats and two was a wooden floored workroom with an area of about three tsubo. Perhaps, Sahachi built on it by himself. It was like a shack. It was without a ceiling and wooden-walled. It was cluttered with tools and materials to make spokes on the usuberi rush matting. —When o-Koto came, Sahachi lay groaning in his workroom, whose floor left a puddle of his coughed blood. Upon o-Koto's reporting, Chihe'e rushed here and put him to bed. Then again he coughed up blood.

"He coughed up as much blood as half of this metal washbowl," Chihe'e said in a lowered voice. "I held him in my arms as he vomited blood. It made me feel like vomiting, too. I thought he'd be gone once and for all and no doubt about it, doctor."

Suddenly, Sahachi opened his eyes.

"O-Naka," he called and looked around. "O-Naka, what've you come here for?"

He was placid as he distinctly said so.

"It's his divorced wife, doctor," Chihe'e whispered to Noboru. "He

got divorced seventeen or eighteen years ago. Yep, her name was o-Naka.”

Sahachi’s eye stopped at a point when it came to it.

“Stop there. That’s enough,” he said clearly this time again. “Soon I’ll be joining you there. I won’t be long. ’s right, promise I won’t keep you waiting too long.”

Smile on face, Sahachi nodded gently as if he had someone next to him. Then he closed his eyes. Chihe’e looked Noboru in the face.

“Speaking in delirium, that’s all,” Noboru said.

“Most of the time, doctor, a sick person, when dying, speaks like that in delirium,” Chihe’e whispered. “But I just don’t want to let him go now. I wanna make him come alive again no matter what I got to do. Doctor, this man, Sahachi is the reincarnation of a perfect being, either the Buddha or a Shinto god.”

Well, I only learned this several days ago, Chihe’e lowered his voice and began, his arms folded on his chest.

The fact was that Sahachi had been giving up without stint what he made to his fellow tenants, about which Chihe’e had heard before. He had almost nothing to put on on his back, didn’t smoke, let alone drinking, and spared what little to eat was his due. He’d been giving away to needy families in his neighborhood all he could leave by lessening his wants and needs to the minimum. —This had remained unknown for years. For, in a place like the Badger Tenements where only the extremely poor came together, the tenants invariably changed. Barely did anyone settle down for a long time. In three years’ time, they were one and all strangers. The reasons for what Sahachi had done having remained unknown were, maybe, that he strictly sealed the beneficiaries’ lips; and maybe that one beneficiary left after another. Five years ago when Sahachi first fell down with the sickness, his bread upon the waters came into Chihe’e’s ears for the first time.

“I says at that time, ‘Stop and think, Sahachi, and do what you can,’” Chihe’e said. “I rants at him, ‘Is there anyone in the world as foolish as you who gives and gives and gives to others until they get sick and fall? You ought to know better. Think there’s a limit.’”

Sahachi said he was sorry. What got him down was tuberculosis of the lungs. But he wouldn't see a doctor. He was laid up for some ten days and got up to work. He promised Chihe'e to be careful not to trouble him because he'd think about taking care of himself. However, in reality, he didn't keep a word of his promise. —Seeing him in poor shape, Chihe'e forced him to see Dr. Niide, who, on the spot, gave him strict orders that he keep absolute quiet.

“But as it was, please listen, doctor.” Chihe'e unfolded his arms and, planting them on his lap, said, “This very fact was found out only several days ago. He was, as ever, giving away to other people. Dr. Niide gave money to buy this and that with, so he could take nutrition. I got my old woman to take them to him regularly with his medicine. Provided all things were given at a time, I'd be worried if he'd give all away. So, I got her to take only the day's portion every day. I thought that'd work, —as it turned out, through the grapevine, the daily intake he should have had also went to others. Rice to begin with, each and every item such as fish, chicken, eggs, and so on and so forth. And his medicine too. Can you believe it, doctor? He was giving his medicine, even.” The subdued voice he spoke in quivered with infuriation. He went on, “—What could I have said? Anger boiled in me. I was carried away, and I stormed into here straightway to rant and rave at him.”

Noboru was gazing at the patient.

—What on earth for?

So Noboru thought to himself as he looked at the hollow cheeks in Sahachi's haggard face, on which only the cheekbones were prominent. It was, to be sure, unusual what Sahachi did. Natural compassion alone would fail to come up to the service he was rendering. Although Chihe'e said of him as “the reincarnation of a perfect being, either the Buddha or a Shinto god,” Noboru couldn't think the same as he did. He had the presentiment that there had to be reasons more down-to-earth, or rather relevant to the vivid realities of human affairs.

Sahachi heaved a deep sigh and opened his eyes again. A wan smile came on his pallid lips drained of color. He nodded at someone. “Out of this world, yes, you are,” he said clearly this time again. “You're out of

this world. Those dimples defy words. O-Naka, come over here.”

And in a fragment of a second, fear replaced the smile on his face. His hollow cheeks hardened and his eyes dilated. His dry pallid lips trembled and, trembling, parted. Through the aperture his teeth emerged.

“That baby, —” Sakichi rasped. “Don’t. That baby’s not for me. Don’t show it to me. Get it out of my sight. Out of my way!”

Sakichi gasped. His eyes were firmly shut.

Just then, in the direction of the open space in the back, ear-splitting screams and the fierce barking of a dog were heard. In the meantime, the thunder had gone and the rain had let up. “Skeleton!” was distinctly heard above the screams coming from the back.

Quietly, Chihe’e got to his feet.

5.

Noboru stayed with Sahachi until dusk.

Manager Chihe’e, who had heard the boisterous confusion in the back, had been away for nearly a toki to see what was up. The patient seemed to have quite calmed down. He was sleeping like a top, mouth half open. Noboru himself was beginning to feel starved and quietly standing up to go, when Chihe’e returned.

“I’m awfully sorry I’m late, doctor,” said Chihe’e as he stepped up into the sickroom, mopping his forehead with a hand towel, “because there in the back where they’re leveling off the land, the workmen dug up an abominable thing.”

“I’m going,” Noboru said in a lowered voice. “The patient’s sleeping well. There won’t be a sudden turn for the worse. When he wakes up, give the medicine and feed him with rice gruel. Make it thick.”

“How about dinner here, doctor?” Chihe’e said. “There’ll be nothing good, but my old woman’s preparing it now. Won’t you have it if you will, doctor?”

Noboru thanked him and declined his offer. He left the tenement.

When he returned to the infirmary, the dinner service was over just now in the dining room. Handayu was alone eating. Noboru sat beside him. The dining room whose floor and walls were boarded was deserted after everything had been cleared away. All andon oil lamps were out except for the two that were lit for late comers. The light of the andon took away the life from the rest of the place, which was left dark and quiet. The waitress on the shift was a middle-aged woman called o-Hatsu. She kindly warmed Noboru's soup but served the rest cold, the broiled fish and the boiled vegetables, as they'd been cooked.

Finishing his tea, Handayu said as he rose from his seat:

“Will you come over to my room later? Or I can come to yours, —well, I'd like a word with you.”

“It's been a long day today. Are you in a rush?”

“A young lady called Miss Amano visited you during your absence.”

Disconcertedness emerging on his expression stirred Noboru as if he had been tripped by something. He stopped his chopsticks and looked at his colleague.

“This young lady's name is Miss Amano Masawo,” Handayu said and went out of the dining room.

“Look what he's done again, he's left it unfinished,” o-Hatsu said when she came to clear away Handayu's tray. “Doesn't it please doctor Mori unless o-Yuki serves him? When I do, not once has he finished what are on the tray, not once, I'll tell you, doctor.”

Noboru went on eating without responding to her.

Noboru knew it wasn't because of the waitress. Handayu's appetite had waned since early spring. When o-Yuki was there to serve, he seemed to give in to her. Because she looked to be entreating him to eat, he had to force the meal down willy-nilly. But other times when other waitresses served him or the dishes were not his favorites, he seemed more often than not to loathe taking up his chopsticks, even.

He was sick. That was why he had a lean appetite.

Noboru had long diagnosed his sickness as tuberculosis of the lungs. He was split whether the sick colleague was unaware of it or, like many sick people, in spite of being aware of it, he avoided facing the fact.

Kyojo loved Handayu. He always had him attend him when he did the treating. He left everything in the infirmary to him while away on his round of visits. He evidently had in mind to get him to succeed to his position. But he didn't so much as refer to his health condition. It was unconceivable for Kyojo to be blind to Handayu's deteriorating health. It could be just as a proverbial saying goes: "Physician, heal thyself," or it could be that people, unaware, let their attention fall far short of someone close to them. Neither, however, could ever be applicable to a doctor as great as Kyojo.

—Most probably, he knew it.

Then, it came home to Noboru, "That's it." Once Kyojo, Noboru reminisced, had told him something about the relation between the vital force individuals had in them and the art of medicine. Some individuals would conquer their disease; but others would surrender to it and fall. Doctors would be able to identify the symptoms and the progress of their patients' disease; and they would be of some help to them; but they were unable do anything beyond that. He'd also said: things would change if medicine advanced further, but it wouldn't surpass the vital force an individual possessed.

"There's nothing more hopeless than the art of medicine, so he said," Noboru muttered to himself, sipping the tea after dinner. "—The longer you're a doctor, the better you get to know how hopeless the art of medicine is. He said so or in a way like that."

So muttering, he abruptly lifted his eyes. The realization had come to him that he was thinking about several things at a time. About Sahachi, about Handayu, and about Masawo who visited him during his absence. Suddenly, this Masawo surfaced clearly on his consciousness. He was beset by a depressive gloom.

Noboru left the dining room, went straight back to his room, and shut himself in. Presently, Handayu came and asked him from outside the shoji. Reluctantly, Noboru said to come in.

"It's a bit muggy, isn't it?" Handayu said. "Let's open this."

He slid open the small shoji fitted in the window and sat down.

"I'm completely drained."

“It’s a waste to get around it,” Handayu said. “Wouldn’t it better to face it out, wash it clean out of your hair, and feel better off?”

“It’s all too crystal-clear about Chigusa to hear.”

“Then, how come you don’t see Masawo?”

“Don’t see her? Me?”

“She came here once and waited for you more than one toki,” Handayu said. “She said she’d known you were in, but you’d never see her,” he went on. “—I met with her today. On meeting me, she asked if I’d listen to what she had to say and pass it along to you. She seemed very serious, looked kinda obsessed. So, I showed her into my room.”

“No thanks. Let’s not hear about Chigusa.” Noboru shook his head and said, “I have no desire to hear about her. It makes me sick.”

“All the more reason to come clean out with everything. Let me tell you, there’s something else to consider, too.”

Noboru looked at Handayu quizzically.

“Mr. Amano is making arrangements so that you may leave here and become a shogun’s doctor.”

Noboru set his lips firmly into a stern straight line.

Handayu began.

Readers, let me remind you here of the concerned facts. Amano Gempaku held the high Buddhist rank of a Dharma Vddhana. He also held the position of a doctor at the official quarter of the shogun’s residence. Gempaku and Yasumoto Ryo’an, Noboru’s father, were close friends through the years, and the both families frequently visited each other. Amano had a boy, named Yujiro, and two girls. Noboru was the only son of the Yasumotos. And this boy was Amano’s favorite for reasons they didn’t know. Amano loved him more than his own son, Yujiro. Anytime he saw Noboru, he was all a smile and told him time and time again that he’d be something when he grew up.

—Regrettably, Yujiro is no good. He’s evidently hoping to be an entertainer. He’s helpless.

At that, Amano himself clicked his tongue and said that the blame lay on him, too, though and that his son had been made when he always used to drink heavily. Things had gone the way they had, and when

Noboru was nineteen and Chigusa fourteen, they were engaged. In the course of time, Noboru was to study abroad in Nagasaki. Chigusa had turned eighteen. She was blooming in plenty, face and body. She spoke idyllically and leisurely, chunking her say word by word with intervening pauses which made you wonder if her tongue was heavy, but then this manner sometimes made you an impression that she was a young girl and other times that she was a woman at her best femininity.

“According to Masawo, the lady called Chigusa told you she wanted to marry you before you left for Nagasaki,” Handayu said. “So did Mr. Amano, but you declined.”

“How can you marry before you hit the road to studying abroad? We’d been engaged a good four years and it was only for three years I’d be away studying.”

“Mind you, your fiancée was at a marriageable age of eighteen,” Handayu interrupted softly. “She must have had a rationale, in her own right, for wanting to marry you at the time you could wait. For you the top priority was studying abroad, whereas for a woman as old as eighteen . . .”

Noboru shook his head vehemently and protested agitatedly, “Knock it off! My ears take umbrage at the words about the woman who committed adultery with a houseboy and got away with him.”

“Does that mean,” retorted Handayu a little ironically. “Does that mean your heart still remains in her?”

Noboru’s lips were compressed again into a stern straight line.

“Don’t get ticked off, but listen,” said Handayu. “It ought to be time you forgave her if you’ve left her heart. The couple has been abandoned and disinherited by the Amano family. She’s going to have a baby soon. It’s going to be the first grandchild to Mr. Amano, and its mother is seeking help from her own mother. If you resolve your anger and mediate the disownment, then they’ll be back to the same old father and daughter. You’re the only person for the job. What do you think? You can’t bring yourself to do so?”

“Did Masawo come to ask me for it?”

“The other subject is about getting you out of here,” Handayu said.

“It wasn’t Mr. Amano but your father who made every effort he could to put you in here. He feared lest you should run wild because of the Chigusa breach. He asked this institute to take him on, as it was agreed upon, until you calm down.”

Handayu went on. From the start, Amano had been against what Noboru’s father had intended, asserting that it’d do Noboru no good if he was kept long in a place like an infirmary. He was having talks to secure a position of the shogun’s doctor as he’d promised before and for this Noboru had to be displaced from the infirmary as soon as possible.

“And if you feel like it, Masawo said, she wants to see you in person. She has something to talk over with you.” Handayu stopped there and gave a benign smile. “—She said she was seventeen. I say, Masawo is a pretty and clever young lady and thinks painstakingly about a whole lot of other things. She seemed so worried about you, her mind wasn’t all there with me but with you, I’ll tell you, Yasumoto.”

6.

That night, Noboru didn’t fall to sleep easily.

It wasn’t because of his excited brain, but more likely because of his sedate heart-searching and penitence. In his head, Chigusa’s image came back for the first time in years, an image from her childhood which he’d been well familiar with for years. It seemed to be begging a pardon of him. —Even when she looked like a mature woman that she was, she could not, by nature, bring out what she had in mind onto her lips. She could neither speak her mind nor express it in her demeanor. She used to be like that. This, carelessly enough, Noboru had overlooked. He’d had the staunch conviction that she was a late-developer and besides had been born to be carefree, and that she hadn’t developed woman’s feelings as yet, so that marriage should be still way off.

“My eyes were all the more blind because I’d been too familiar with her since we’d been little children,” he muttered in bed. “—Had I been aware of it, I’d have married her before leaving for Nagasaki, and it

must have been completely different now, the whole shebang.”

The blow Noboru sustained from the betrayal was all the more bitter because he had confidence in his belief that she was a late-developer, hence idyllic, and lacked a longing for romance.

“Obviously, I’ve been obsessed with myself alone.” A silence. Then he muttered again, “I decided my father had put me here because Mr. Amano soft-soaped him. He’d had nothing from scratch that’d get the better of his friend. This included his son’s, my, future. He’d totally relied on Mr. Amano, —I’ve hated Chigusa. I’ve hated my father and Mr. Amano, and, what’s more, I’ve gone and hated this infirmary, too.”

Noboru grimaced and shook his head to and fro on his pillow.

“Chigusa was hurt by the wrong she herself had done. Mr. Amano and my father got also hurt in their own way. Above all, I got stuck-up and obstinately persisted in thinking I alone got seriously hurt. Oh, I’ve fretted like a baby.” He made an even more despicable grimace.

“You’re such a puffed-up fool, —think about what you’ve said and done since you arrived here. Hey, don’t you get ashamed?”

So muttering, Noboru cringed in bed.

The next morning, Noboru overslept a bit and had a late breakfast. Shortly after he’d finished his breakfast, a runner came for him from the Badger Tenements. Sahachi’s condition had turned worse. Kyojo told him to go right away. He gave a dose of powder medicine wrapped in paper and said to give him, should he suffer terribly.

“If it’s unneeded in the end, bring and give it back to me,” reminded Kyojo. “Be sure to bring back because it’s a medicine only used in case of emergency.”

Noboru got ready and took off.

When he got as far as the Denzu-In Temple corner, a middle-aged woman scuttled out of the alley, stopped him on catching sight of him. She asked, panting and gasping, if he was a doctor from the infirmary. When he said he was, she asked if he could see her child. The child was in most serious condition. It’d been sick a half year or so, but the doctor had stopped coming because the mother couldn’t pay the bills which had piled up, left unpaid in a long time. She grieved hugely over her

dear little one who, she said, by the look of it, might die any minute.

—Aha! Thanks to this outfit.

The outfit he's in does show that he's a medical staff member of the infirmary. There's a woman whose child is seriously ill, but she can't get the doctor to come because she can't afford to pay. She runs out of her house, and, on identifying the outfit, she calls him to a halt. Red Beard, yep, he's a good old man, which Noboru thought was hilarious.

"Go on to the infirmary," Noboru said to the woman. "I have a most serious case to see right now, too. I'm on the way. Go to the infirmary and ask. They'll do something for you. Run, it's just around the corner."

The woman thanked him and trotted up the slope.

At Sahachi's tenement, Chihe'e and two women probably from the same tenements were attending the patient. One of them, the younger, a wife, was boiling water on the charcoal heat of the brazier, and the other, an old woman, was busily scrubbing the tatami. They said that Sahachi had coughed up a little blood at dawn and again had only just vomited and copiously. The vomiting was too sudden for a metal washbowl. He splattered the first half and soiled the mats. The old woman was wringing the cloth after rinsing it with the hot water, then scrubbing the mats elaborately along the grain of the plaiting.

"I hear Sahachi had a little thin rice gruel and half of an egg yolk yesterday evening," Chihe'e said in a soft voice. "The old woman brought her bedding. She intended to stay with Sahachi for the night, but he wouldn't let her. This morning when it was still dark, she came to him and found him wiping away the smudges of blood by himself.

Noboru slid on his knees up to the head of the patient's bed.

Apparently, Sahachi was sleeping, but his eyes were open a slit, his mouth agape, languidly hanging as if the lower jaws had been dislocated at the joints. His face was livid. His cheeks were all skin and bones as if all the flesh had been scraped off. The skin slid, in creases of folds, down to the jaws.

"He won't last any longer, will he, doctor?"

"No, he doesn't seem to." Noboru left the bedside. "He's gone out of our league. He's at Death's mercy."

“Been such a good person,” said Chihe’e, sighing deeply. “We see useless whippersnappers milling around our good citizens’ streets and hamper our way as we live like honest people we are. And yet we should have to have such a good person taken away. Don’t we feel like blaming almighty beings, gods and the Buddha, doctor?”

The young wife served tea to Noboru.

“It’s quiet in the back today, isn’t it?” Without touching the tea, he asked, “Is the leveling off of the land over?”

“No, doctor. The constable and his men will be investigating the site. Nothing can be done before it’s done.”

“Has there been anything criminal in there?”

Chihe’e frowned, then lowered his voice and recounted.

In clearing away the landslide ruins off the land, they found a body wrapped in the futon. It was completely rotten and what were left of it were all but bones. Maybe because the cotton in the futon was solid, the entire skeleton built up when the bones were put together from skull to limbs. It was easily found that the corpse was a young woman’s, by the fragments of the kimono which were still sound and the existing abundant hair. —Seven years ago, new soil came in with the landslide and it couldn’t be clearly identified where the body had been buried. By inference, it’d have been some spot above the tenement house ruined in the mud flush. Judging from the condition of the body when it was found, the woman had been murdered and then buried and no mistake about it. Today, the constable and his men were to come to investigate.

“The body was found in bones. It must be years old.”

“It was shown to the gravedigger from the Zenno-Ji Temple. He said it’d be fifteen years old.”

“How did they find that she’d been killed and buried?”

“There remains nothing suggestive of a coffin, and if she’d died of an illness, how could she have been buried wrapped in the futon?” Chihe’e said. “Notwithstanding, if the murder took place fifteen years ago like the gravedigger said, I doubt there’ll be a clue to finding out the truth.”

There was a sound of voice at the entrance, and a man of about fifty lurched in. He was thickset, uncouthly wearing a long hanten wadded-

cotton robe in indigo with one front coming down lower than the other. The robe was tied with a shabby blind-stitched narrow sash. Hoary stubble was growing from his cheeks down to his chin. His glossy bald pate was glaring ruddy as if greased all over. He must be dead drunk. He was staggering, so unstable in the legs that he couldn't stand still. His bloodshot eyes looked into where the patient was.

"Don't come in." Chihe'e waved him off. "The patient's in most serious condition. You can't come in. Go back."

"I done come to tell ya the constable an' his men are here," the man said. "They want ya, manager o' them tenements. I reckon ain't ya been axed from bein' manager yet?"

7.

"Don't shove in your oar and talk stuff and nonsense," Chihe'e snapped. Turning on Noboru, he said, "You heard it, doctor? May I be excused for a sec?"

Noboru nodded.

When Chihe'e left with the man, the old woman looking after the sick man's needs left by the back door to see how things were at home. Then, before long, the man who had left with Chihe'e staggered back by himself and, an obsequious smile on his face, thudded down on the wooden stepping-board to the tatami-mat floor at the entrance.

"Don't, Hei," said the young wife, coming out of the kitchen. "You got hell from the manager just now. You'll disturb the sick person. Will you go."

"Yer a doctor from the infirmary, right?" the old man said toward Noboru. "Heikichi's the name. I done knowed Doc Niide fer years. Yep, in this here Badger Tenements, ya know, Sahachi an' me, two of us alone, been tenants the longest. My fella tenant Sahachi, he's sick but they don't lemme see him, —this here woman o-Matsu, she's still a stranger, only come from someplace else. Shamelessly enough, she says I'll disturb him an' tells me to vamoose."

“If you weren’t drunk, I wouldn’t say that,” she said. “When you’re drunk, you can’t tell good from bad. Didn’t the manager also say so?”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up, woman,” the old man stopped her in the middle, shaking his head. “Hey, listen, I been drinkin’ since I was nine, nearly forty years now. Not fer a moment in forty years, ain’t I run outa my saké. I dunno when I ain’t drunk, but when I’m drunk, I never failed to tell good from bad, tell ya. If ya think I’m lyin’, ask Doc Red Beard.”

There Heikichi smirked. “—Now look. One time Doc Red Beard, he said to me when I got desperate an’ drank real hard. I got dead drunk. I throwed up somepin’ odd an’ dropped down. He made a frightenin’ face, look, like this. Says he, ‘If you can afford to drink and get ill, think about your wife and kids, too.’ Who the hell was he talkin’ to? Was he kiddin’? Right. I said, ‘Doc, yer lookin’ at me from the outside, an’ ya can talk like that, like a good an’ honest man.’ I says, ‘Doc, common inside me, inside the heart of a man like me, will ya? I mean it, . . . If yer rich or educated, then ya’ll know ya ought’na do this, and ya know ya oughta do it that way, ’cos ya’d, otherwise, lose money. Ya’ll know them things that’ll do ya good from them things that’ll do ya harm. Ya can tell good from bad, ’cos ya got money, or time, or learnin’. We ain’t all that clever. We can’t do none of them such clever things. Well, ain’t it plain as the nose on yer face, doc? Folks like us, they gotta work their fingers to the bone night an’ day, but they can’t make a bare livin’, not even a from-hand-to-mouth livin’. Each passin’ day we gotta find a way to scrape the day’s bare livin’. We can get by today, just narraly, but who knows ’bout tomorra? That’s why we gotta think over from scratch. Tomorra’s a sealed book. An’ besides, there’s my wife’s in childbed, a kid’s comin’ on. There’s we’re gettin’ goaded into movin’ out them tenements, ’cos we ain’t paid the rent fer months. Where ’n’ how could we raise the money fer it all? —Ever’ day in our born days, yeah, from mornin’ till night fer years ’n’ years that come ’n’ go, we been livin’ like this, doc. Yer right. From the outside, in yer eyes, I’m a simple drunkard, but what’s inside me’s somepin’ I just told ya ’bout, like. No kiddin’, I’m as serious as any, doc. The moment I think ’bout my wife an’ kids, I can’t help but drink, ya know what I mean?”

Sahachi groaned and said something. When Noboru slid over to peep at him, he croaked, he had something to talk to him about.

“Will you get o-Matsu and Hei to leave us, doctor?”

Noboru nodded yes and told them to.

Heikichi didn't budge. O-Matsu left promptly. It was timely for her, for she had things to attend to at home, but Heikichi grumbled about this and that until eventually he rolled down onto the floor.

“You can leave him, doctor,” Sahachi said. “He'll fall asleep as he is. —Excuse me, doctor, could I have a drink of water?”

Noboru first eased Heikichi to a better sleeping position, then took up the patient's teacup at his head. When he was about to pour hot water from the iron kettle on the brazier heat, Sahachi said he wanted cold water.

“Now, can't I drink everything, doctor?” Sakichi smiled feebly. “Cold water, please.”

Noboru went to scoop cold water in the kitchen and came back.

“I'm pleased you got to wear that outfit, doctor,” Sahachi said after a sip of the water. “Thanks to that, tens of more poor people'll be saved.”

As he remembered what had happened on the way here, Noboru inly said in response that it was exactly what he'd told him.

“Please don't laugh it off simply as a drunkard's minor quibbles. I mean what Heikichi has just said. Poor people tend to think more or less the same, doctor,” Sahachi reiterated what Heikichi had just said, “When they must slog away at hard work day after day, working their fingers to the bone, for all the livelong day, just to make a bare living, all that makes them forget the pain of hard labor is get drunk, otherwise, they can't keep going.”

“Not that I can't understand, but among them is someone like you.”

“Me?”

So Sahachi asked back, sounding as if he might be somewhere else. He took up his teacup and adroitly downed another mouthful as he lay.

“Doctor, I know what names I'll be called by my fellow tenants,” said Sahachi after he'd put down his teacup. “I was listening to what manager Chihe'e had to tell you and Dr. Niide about. I heard it all,

—all was ridiculously too good for me. Among the tenants, not one has the foggiest about anything. That’s why they go all the lengths to speak well of me. But when they learn the truth, how inhuman I am, they’ll be too sick even to spit at me, doctor.”

“Is that what you want to talk to me about?”

“Exactly, doctor,” Sahachi nodded. “So far, I’ve kept quiet about it and told it to no one at all. I’ve been on tenterhooks all the time if anyone should perceive it. And now, my time is ending soon, inside of today or tomorrow at the longest, I guess. No, don’t say anything. You may think I say a ridiculous thing, but I’ve been seeing my own last, Death’s messenger’s been here, since yesterday.”

Noboru stayed silent. Sahachi was talking as if nothing mattered, but it was so real to Noboru, a cold shiver ran through him. He felt a kind of pressure, a feeling of being pressed down.

“What I’d like you to hear about is my wife,” Sahachi began quietly. “Her name is o-Naka. She was three years younger than me. We got married in the first year we’d met.”

He made an excuse if he mightn’t sound like he’d be talking fondly how he’d loved her. If he wouldn’t talk of this feeling toward his wife, he’d fail to make himself understood. It’d sound unpleasant to Noboru but he’d like him to put up with it. So he excused and began:

He was living in Kanasugi, Shitaya, before coming to settle here. He was a craftsman by trade. He made wheel spokes, a live-in craftsman at his master’s. He was only told about his parents that they’d been from someplace in the Oshu district in the northern part of the country, and that he’d become an orphan at the age of fifteen. Since then he’d depended on his master and his wife as his both parents and blood-kin while he grew. O-Naka was a maid servant at “Echitoku” in the neighboring block. The shop dealt in kimono. She was twenty-one when he first met her. He spoke to her for the first time one early morning in April when he was on the way from Naka, a red light district. —Just for the sake of socializing with a colleague, he’d gone out for gregariousness at a brothel in Kyo-Machi with him late at night. The companion chose to stay on, but due to the sense of reserve toward

his master, he left the brothel alone earlier. It was at the crack of dawn, getting light. When he came as far as the Daion-Ji Temple, a sprinkling rain started to come down. He tucked up the bottom of his kimono and, breaking into a trot, hurried his way.

8.

Sahachi first belittled it as a simple spring shower, a fine rain, but when he was out on the main street in Kanasugi, it turned into a downpour. He let it rain on him as it did. He was drenched to the skin. Covering his head with a thin coarse hand towel, he was walking unhurriedly in the rain, when he was stopped by a young maid servant. She lent him a bangasa umbrella which bore a trademark.

—In any way, I'm a drowned rat.

—But it's not good for your health.

Something like that went between the two. And he borrowed the umbrella from her. The woman was o-Naka.

Since he saw o-Naka again to return the umbrella, he'd been unable to forget her. At first glance, Sahachi had been attracted to her eyes, face, and voice, the way she scurried away in the downpour to him, said to him, "But it's not good for your health," and lent him an umbrella. After that, he called her out, regardless of her convenience, and they met a number of times in the rice paddies in Iriya. It was very difficult for o-Naka but she didn't decline. In time, a holiday came to her. The two of them met at the Tenno-Ji Temple in Yanaka, where Sahachi wooed her.

—I'm so glad.

So o-Naka said but was pale in the face. The simple expression "I'm so glad" gave Sahachi a marvel which was as fresh as it were if he might be seeing a morning glory unfurl its flower bright and early.

—I'm so glad but it's impossible.

O-Naka gently shook her head, her face remaining as pale. She gave him the reasons. She was remitting money home which provided

sustenance to her seven younger brothers and sisters and her father who had a delicate constitution. Not only that, but the advance payment of her wages for the next ten years was in the contract. That is to say, she'd be supposed to stay on the job for so many years when she became a maid servant. She had to send home much more than other servants did. The reason for it, or rather the connection involved in it, was that her father was, for years, a kimono peddler who bought his stock at wholesaler Echitoku for whom he'd worked before. After he'd quit his job there, he'd become a peddler. At any rate, she was bound to the contract and the moral obligation derived from the favor his father had long gained, both of which rendered it even harder to unbind her from them.

—How many more years do you have to serve?

—One more year. But I'll have to pay back what I've owed to send home, so even when the serving term comes to an end, I can't quit.

—Does that mean you have only to pay back what you've owed?

—What'll be left after all is my sense of obligation.

—There's no such obligation as will bind you all the rest of your life. Will you leave it to me?

O-Naka shook her head. She asserted he'd only shoulder a burden if they got married. He'd have to look after a large family charged with a father with a delicate constitution. He said it'd be none too difficult as he didn't have parents or siblings. He assured her that he'd be only too ready to give to her family and sickly father what he'd earn because her parents were his parents and her siblings his siblings.

From then on Sahachi strove to make money for all he was worth. Once a month he met o-Naka in the usual rice paddies in Iriya. Her home was in San'ya, Asakusa, beyond Iriya. She was given leave of absence once every month to see her sickly father at home. On her day off, he'd plan to meet and walk her along the farm roads as far as the neighborhood of San'ya. Sahachi was a natural drinker but stopped drinking. He also stopped going out for entertainment with his cronies. He quit practicing the Shinnai chanting. There was a craze for it among his cronies at the time, with whom he'd been practicing it around a half

year. This again he chucked away once and for all and was entirely devoted to making money, kicking everything else out of his way.

Probably, this wholehearted devotion was successfully appreciated by o-Naka, who was eventually determined and promised him to marry him upon the expiry of her serving term. Sahachi expressed his desire to meet her family, but that was something she balked at and wouldn't say yes to. She cussedly persisted in refusing to have him even in the neighborhood of her home.

—Sorry, I just don't want it now. Please understand and wait until we get married.

It was because everything at her home was wretched, for crying out loud, and she'd be humiliated. Sahachi understandably refrained from pressing her any more. Nevertheless, it was known later that there was a reason elsewhere. It was more serious and of the sort that would have put her on the horns of a dilemma.

One year after, they became a married couple. Prior to it, Sahachi had told his master everything about what had developed between them. His master took the trouble of being the go-between and met with the proprietor of Echitoku on behalf of the two. At Echitoku they were reluctant, but Sahachi's master said he'd pay the debt clean off and be the surrogate father for the couple. He was eventually successful in getting the unwilling proprietor of Echitoku to consent to the marriage. The couple settled in Yamasaki-Cho, Shitaya, from where Sahachi commuted to his master's workshop. One year elapsed, during which time happy and quiet days went by. —Sahachi was head over heels in love with o-Naka. He was by far more in love after they'd got married. His feeling that she was dear to him defied words.

“And then came the conflagration in the year of the Fiery Horse,” Sahachi continued sedately. “—It was a daytime fire toward the end of February. The sheet of flames ravaged the entire Shitaya, spreading as far as the Asakusa Bridge. When I rushed myself from my workshop in Kanasugi, my neighborhood was a sea of fire. It was absolutely impossible just to get near.”

There again Sahachi took a sip of the water.

Sahachi combed the streets, frantically searching for o-Naka, he went on to say, in such a frenzy that he didn't even know that his master's workshop in Kanasugi had caught the fire and been burned down. He was steadfast in his belief that, ten to one, she hadn't been burned to death and that she'd fled where it was safe, as the fire was a daytime disaster and she was young and carefree. She was on her own with nobody as yet to be anxious about. He tore around from place to place where those who were burned out of their homes were milling about. The next day, he visited o-Naka's home to inquire about her, as San'ya stayed untouched by the flames. They only said, "O-Naka? She didn't come." That was the second time that he'd visited her family because o-Naka had hated his visits. Only, they were remitting the monthly stipend. All he found about her family folks was that they were icily cold.

"Their attitude toward me, doctor, was as though I had kidnapped one of the daughters."

So he said and sighed deeply.

Sahachi's master's workshop, he found only later, went up in smoke in the fire, too. His master and his wife retired to the country in Ebara. Sahachi stayed with a friend for nightly accommodation at his home, and walked around ruins and salvation shelters, leaving no stones unturned, to inquire about o-Naka. Only at the end of about a half month of his frantic search, could he bring himself to give up on her as dead. Thereupon, he was driven into the valley of despondency and fell down at the friend's, too despondent to get up.

"It was in the July of the same year, doctor, that I moved here into the Badger Tenements," said Sahachi with a look in his eyes which might be running after something in the distance. "It was again my co-workers who kindly helped me build on a workroom to my tenement, at the end of the tenement house. After that I was on my own feet. I took orders and delivered the finished jobs on my own. I ate out most of the time. All this daily routine, it seemed, finally began to settle me down to a slow, carefree life."

He was egged on, or, as a matter of fact, annoyed with good people's

kindness to egg him on, to get married. But he equivocated about and got around all the marriage offers and stuck to being single. Two years later, in the summer of the year when he turned twenty-eight, he ran into o-Naka in the precinct of the Senso-Ji Temple. It was the temple's festival day. People called it Forty-Six Thousand Days, a good day on which, the ninth of June, you visited the temple and offered prayer, one day's prayer-offering was worth offering it for forty-six thousand days. The precinct was swarmed with visitors who came to pray. In the multitude of people by the Prayer Chanting Hall, the two ran into each other, face to face, and, upon recognizing each other, were arrested in their tracks.

O-Naka was carrying a baby on her back. She appeared to have put on a little weight and did her hair differently than when he used to know. That made her look like a stranger, but Sahachi knew her as o-Naka at first blush and o-Naka knew him as Sahachi straightway.

—Long time no see, dear, Sahachi said.

—Long time no see indeed, o-Naka responded.

Jostled by the crowd, the two made for Okuyama in the back of the temple.

9.

Sahachi and o-Naka went around the temple and left it by the Zuishin-Mon Gate. Once out there, he found a buckwheat noodle place and took o-Naka into it. They took a table in the upstairs room. They were alone their own company, so o-Naka unloaded her baby from her back and began to breast-feed it.

—Is that your baby?

—Yes. His name is Takichi.

—Near his first birthday?

—He's in his ninth month.

Sahachi was agonized that his heart might have been chiseled out as they talked.

“My heart felt like a chisel was thrust in and applied to it to chip it off piece by bloody piece.” His brows puckered a little in a grimace as he went on, “—Not that I hated her or resented her, but it was nothing but pitiable and heart-rending, . . . it’s funny, isn’t it, doctor? My wife had a baby by another man and she was feeding it right in front of me. Normally, you’d have talked her down to your heart’s fill and beaten her half dead. But as it was, I was distressed that she was simply such a poor thing. In my distress, I could have held her tight and cried together for her.”

Noboru took out paper from the chest pocket of his robe and with it softly wiped the beads of perspiration standing on Sahachi’s forehead.

Sahachi continued. At that time, they parted from each other as they met. Sahachi asked nothing of o-Naka, who, in turn, told nothing to him. The buckwheat noodles were served. But the two left them untouched and rose to their feet. Sahachi helped her pack the baby on her back.

—You say you’re happy, don’t you? Sahachi asked.

—Yes, o-Naka answered in a whisper.

—We won’t be seeing again, will we?

Not answering him, o-Naka swayed the baby on her back. On exiting the shop, they parted. Sahachi stood seeing her go away, her back to him, she looked back over her shoulder as she turned the corner and, looking across to him, bent herself in salutation.

“For five, six days thereafter, I definitely couldn’t concentrate on my work. I went back to drinking after I’d long been a teetotaler. I drank and drank and drank. Got drunk and slept, got drunk and slept. That was all I did, doctor.” Sahachi softly shook his head. “I felt, how can I say, half of myself might have gone with o-Naka, poor thing, and that it might be ailing with her. For no reasons, no hard feelings, such as hate and resentment, would raise their heads to besiege my drunken self who ought to be boiling with rage in anguish and exasperation. My heart broke at the series of pictures which surfaced before my eyes. They were those when she left me, back turned against me, bending in salutation as she looked over to me when she was about to disappear round the corner. Pity on her pierced my heart through and through.

Pain excruciated me until it might stifle me to death, doctor.”

And then, one evening, o-Naka came by this tenement.

Sahachi was lying on the floor, drunk. O-Naka didn't bring her baby with her. With the same hand that slid open the door to let her in, she slid shut the shutters of the entrance. She took off her footwear, came up to Sahachi, and sat by him. Sahachi noticed right away that it was o-Naka. He'd known her as o-Naka by the noise she'd made as the shutters slid. Rather, it took him by surprise that he was aware there was nothing unusual about what happened just now in front of his eyes.

—I asked Risuke at Kuruma Slope about you before I came here, o-Naka whispered.

—I owe him a lot in many ways after the great fire.

—I heard about it from him. I'm very sorry. Please forgive me.

Sahachi wrenched out all the strength in him to suppress a groan which would have escaped him. He sat up quietly and drew the andon lamp closer to them. Because it'd come lighting time and because the shutters had been closed, the tenement room was shut off from the rest of the world. It was as dark as if night had fallen.

—Please don't light the andon.

On saying so, o-Naka burst into tears.

—Do you not forgive me?

—I just don't know, said Sahachi as if groaning. That's what beats me. But I'm at least pleased that you're alive, that you survived the fire.

—Will you listen to me? I'll explain why.

—Not if you're unhappy.

O-Naka became silent, maybe in order to hold down her sobs. Some time passed. She blew her nose soundlessly and began to talk flatly as if she'd killed her emotions.

She'd had a fiancé before she met Sahachi. He was a son of a friend of her father in San'ya. He had left his parents, come to live in her neighborhood, and made a living by doing home building piecework. He was as old as o-Naka. Since seventeen or so, he'd been giving away all he earned to o-Naka's family. He'd say, "I'll be a member of this family." When he turned twenty, he made it clear that he had a wish to

have o-Naka for his wife. Her parents willingly agreed to his proposal.

—It was only a little before you proposed to me when I myself learned about the proposal.

Her mind hadn't been quite made up. She didn't dislike the man and was grateful for what he'd been doing for her family. But it was quite another story to be his wife. She didn't have any sense of reality, like it was someone else's business. In the middle of her uncertainty Sahachi turned up. She was strongly attracted to him. She knew she'd have to tell him the grim facts and decline his marriage proposal. But she lost the control of herself. Half in trance she allowed herself to be drawn into Sahachi's world.

—As it was, I couldn't help it.

Recounting, o-Naka began to sob again. She withheld the voice stinging her throat and went on sobbing for a long time.

In time, o-Naka went on to say, she'd made up her mind that she would get married to Sahachi. An obligation was an obligation. There'd surely be a time when she'd be able to pay back what she'd owed the man one way or the other. So determined, she talked to her employer at Echitoku and to her parents in San'ya. She'd become a daredevil. She feared nothing. Because she feared nothing, she feared her own self. She persisted without shedding tears When Sahachi's master visited Echitoku for matchmaking, the proprietor wasn't positive about the two getting married. When Sahachi visited her parents in San'ya for their daughter as his wife, the family members couldn't be colder to him. Now Sahachi understood the reason why they'd all been opposed to them getting married. At any rate, they got married. It was so happy and so full for o-Naka living together with Sahachi about a year. This one year was filled with happiness and satisfaction. In her sheer bliss, she could only gladly have traded her whole life with that one year.

—I thought it was rewarding that I'd been born into this world just to stay one year with you. I'd often think to myself when alone, It's too good to be all this happy, it can't be. And I can't go without impunity, that's for sure, just wait and see.

When the fire broke out, Sahachi went on, what flashed across

o-Naka's mind was the thought she'd long harbored: "I can't go without impunity, that's for sure." While running chased by the flames of the fire, she thought, how could the thought be true? but denied it as a silly idea. The more she denied the idea, the stronger it grew, at that.

OK, I've spent a happy life, o-Naka decided. It's been worth an average person's whole life. This is the end of it. This fire is showing it.

That fire was the evidence that it'd come time to put an end to that life. She might have clearly heard it in her mind as if someone were whispering it into her ears. She thought her husband would think she'd perished in the flames. It all would put an end. It was time she'd hailed the end. While getting determined so, she found herself standing at the entrance of her home in San'ya.

—From then on, I was not me, not my true self. I felt like I'd become a different person.

She was determined that she, her true self, was with Sahachi elsewhere, and that that she was 'here and now' was a falsity, in which she was another person. In fact, she might have been living death. She got married to the other man as she was told by her parents, like a good girl. The newly-wed couple, the man and the false 'she', started their married life in a new place in Honjo.

10.

It had been two years since then. O-Naka had a boy named Takichi. Eventually it was beginning to seem that she'd settled down to the married life with the man, when she ran into Sahachi at the Senso-ji Temple.

She said she'd woken from sleep. She'd been sleeping for a long time and all of a sudden she was wakened from the sleep by running into Sahachi fortuitously. In her feeling, she might have been spirited away no one knew where, and without warning popped back home. Ever since that chance meeting, she'd begun to feel that nothing that had taken place after the conflagration was real to her.

—I'm here and now, well aware I'm the same old me. I can tell this same old me is talking. But it's absolutely unthinkable there's 'another me' somewhere else who has, other than you, a husband and a child. That can't be. No way.

So saying, she writhed.

—That's why I've come back to you. You'll understand, will you, darling? Here I am, I am back to you now.

—Are you serious?

—Hold me, please.

—Won't you want to go back there?

—Please, please hold me.

Sahachi gently drew her into his embrace. O-Naka readjusted something with one hand and, hanging from him with both hands, flung herself into his embrace with all her might. And at the same time, she let out a sharp shrill *EEK*.

—Stay!

O-Naka said so and stayed clinging to him.

—Don't let me go!

And then she stopped breathing for good.

"A dagger stabbed her to death below the left breast," said Sahachi. "No doctor was needed. One single stab dispatched her in less than no time Now, you're in the know, doctor? She begged me not to let her go. Nor did I want to. I took the dagger that killed her, and pointed it toward me. But I gave up burying it into myself too, because she looked to be saying I must not die. And now, yes, doctor."

Sahachi was seized by a fit of coughing. He was thoroughly consumed. He bent his body and gripped his pillow with both hands as he coughed. The coughing rent him to pieces. It looked as if he'd cough his last and expire at any minute. Noboru sidled on his knees up to him and rubbed his back on which only bones were prominent. He waited for his coughing to calm down and, when it did, gave him a gentle drink of water. "Yes, doctor." After a few moments' silence, Sahachi said in a hoarse, feeble voice, "It was o-Naka who was dug out in the open space in the back of my place yesterday. Before the landslide, my workroom

had been there. I'd buried o-Naka right under where I worked and had been together with her ever since."

Volunteering his services to his neighbors was for him giving memorial services to poor o-Naka. That was why there was no reason for him to be thanked or praised for his services. He had no idea about what became of o-Naka's new husband and her boy, but he made them unhappy and, therefore, as good as killed o-Naka. He thought that the day would come when the truth would be revealed. He decided, until the day, to do something he could be of what little help to other people, so that he hoped o-Naka's soul would rest in peace and that he could be shed of the sense of guilt that crucified him.

"For the reasons I gave you just now, doctor, I said, 'Now o-Naka's come to take me with her,' " said Sahachi. "— Yesterday when I heard people make a noise in the back, it came home to me, That's it, o-Naka's come to meet me and take me with her. Now, we really will be one. I'm unfettered from the tenterhooks. I'd been on them through the years. And I can rest."

Heikichi, who was sleeping on the edge of the floor next to the entranceway, suddenly groaned and shouted ridiculously at the top of his lungs, Brin' me water.

"Manager, you hardhearted over-the-hill dodo, an' o-Ume, you stingy old harridan." Heikichi shouted curses. "Sahachi, you blockheaded son-of-a-bitch, Red Beard, you stomped-face sawbones! Y'all funny-faced super-duper nitwits! Crap! This world's, after all's said an' done, stuffed with crap, don't fill up a quarter of a bottle. You, baubles, make yerselves look sober as a judge, but yer bottoms just there, y'all can hit it straightaway. There's no serious shit in the world. All ya can do's drink an' get drunk, what else? —Hey, can'tcha hear me, eh? Brin' me water."

"Doctor Yasumoto," Sahachi said. "I beg you from my heart, please go to the manager and tell him. Those bones are o-Naka, my dear wife, and I buried her, —they can spare extra work, right, doctor?"

The Truthfulness for the First Time on the Third Time Around

1.

A half month or so after the spell of May rains had decamped, madwoman o-Yumi attempted to commit suicide. As I wrote before, she was living with her maid servant o-Sugi in the ward house detached from the main ward buildings. This house was newly built at the expense of o-Yumi's father. It had thick bars in the windows and the one and only door had a lock. Its entire structure was, as it were, a house of confinement. Every time o-Sugi, her servant, went in and out, she had to lock and unlock it. On the day, while o-Sugi was out doing supper in the infirmary kitchen, o-Yumi tied her shigoki sash to the bars and attempted at suicide by hanging herself from it.

Yasumoto Noboru was not in the infirmary at the time. He was, as always, attending Niide Kyojo on his round of visits. He was seeing a man named Wino at Tokichi's home in Sakuma-Cho, Kanda. Tokichi was a builder by trade. So was Wino, who was Tokichi's junior apprentice, or in the mores of apprenticeship, his 'younger brother.' He was twenty-five. It was his big brother Tokichi who had first visited the infirmary to ask for the examination of his younger brother.

—The other doctors who saw him all said he'd gone mad. But I don't think so. Wino and I've been together since we were boys. We were trained together in carpentry and brought up together in the master's home on apprenticeship. When we left his house, we shared a place together until I got married. We've got along like real brothers over a decade. I know him inside out, his ways and temperament.

For those reasons Tokichi couldn't believe his brother had gone insane. He must have a disease of some other kind. Tokichi believed

there'd be a cure for him. He asked in earnest if Kyojo could come see him once. Kyojo complied with his request, but promise as he did, he said he wouldn't be able to see him right away but in a matter of a couple of days because he'd been stuck in quite a number of emergency cases. He had put off his promise from a couple of days to seven days. On the seventh day Kyojo accompanying Noboru went to see a retired merchant, the former proprietor of Omi-Ya at the Gofuku Bridge. On the way back, he went around to Sakuma-Cho where Tokichi lived.

Wino was a smallish young man, with a sharply cut face, making you a strong impression that he was a well-skilled craftsman. But probably because he was in poor fettle with lackluster, languid eyes and loose lips, he wasn't quite aware he was being examined by Kyojo, being examined as he was. Whatever he was asked, he only answered absently with a slovenly simper on his face. When the examination was over, he laid himself and in a lazy tone of voice begged tea of Tokichi's wife.

"Sis," Wino said sluggishly. "Sorry to trouble ya, but, sis, won'tcha gimme tea?"

Tokichi was not back yet. His wife, o-Chiyo, alone was dealing with the lodger and the visitors. When bespoken, she got to her feet amiably and with her efficiency worked to brew tea afresh for the three of them. Wino, recumbent on his side, resting his head on his elbow, was blankly watching over o-Chiyo. He rolled his eyes and, winking at Kyojo, whispered with a disdainful scowl on his face:

"Heh, a tribe called womankind is, —now, ya see, doc?"

The expression worn on Wino's face was woven with contempt and repugnance. Without responding, Kyojo was alternately gazing at Wino and o-Chiyo, making a furtive comparison of them. When the visitors stepped out of Tokichi's house into the street, it was dusk in the twilight, the rows of the houses on the Yushima Heights floating high in purple silhouettes against the sky lit by the sunset afterglow.

"What's your diagnosis, Yasumoto?"

Kyojo posed the question to Noboru as, with his head set straight ahead, he made toward Hijiri Slope along the Kanda River with his attendants. Takezo, the medicine basket carrier, responded "Yessir?"

behind Noboru. Obviously he was mistaken and thought he was asked something. Noboru waved him off, then answered the question himself:

“In my opinion, it’s depression, sir.”

“It’s convenient jargon,” said Kyojo. “A high fever goes on and it’s ague. You have a cough and it’s tuberculosis of the lungs. You idle without any trouble in your viscera and it’s depression, —Yasumoto, you can become a practitioner any minute, mark my words.”

Noboru didn’t mind it and asked back, “What is your diagnosis, sir?”

“Depression,” Kyojo replied offhand.

Noboru didn’t dare to say anything further.

“Tomorrow, you go alone to see him,” Kyojo said when they began to ascend the slope. “Ask in detail about the relationship he and Tokichi have had over the years. But as you see, the patient himself won’t impart anything informative. You have no choice but to ask Tokichi.”

“What about, sir?”

“From A to Z,” Kyojo said. “Something may hit the mark as you keep on listening in more detail. This something may suggest what gave rise to Wino’s depression. You’ll go on inquiring and put piece by piece together, those pieces that will flake off from around that ‘something,’ until they form themselves into a clearer reason for you.”

Did it need doing that much? Noboru felt like protesting. As he got more used to the life of the infirmary, he became aware what held the doctor’s first priority. And now, in his understanding, there was a long line of sick people impatiently waiting to be examined by Kyojo, not to mention within, without, too, the infirmary. It seemed to Noboru that Wino was, by comparison, not exactly a sick person or all that serious. Should a busy doctor need to spare his precious little time for him? No.

—Why not make do just to leave him alone?

Noboru was tempted to say so, but then he dropped putting in his oar. For, on second thought he decided that it was as plain as a pikestaff what little entered Noboru’s head had already entered Kyojo’s head and that Kyojo must have had a sufficient reason for that particular case inasmuch as he gave him orders.

They got back to the infirmary in the nick of time for dinner.

On washing his face and changing his clothes, he stopped at Mori Handayu's room to suggest they eat together. He got no response from inside. When he went to the dining room, he found he'd already begun.

Handayu waited for Noboru to sit at his tray and began to recount what'd happened to o-Yumi. But then something must have told him. Awkwardly flurried, he hemmed and hawed to beat around the bush. The imbroglia that had disgraced o-Yumi and Noboru apparently still stayed with Handayu. Surely a deep scar was left in Noboru's heart, but it was all the more a load on his mind that others stopped like that and refrain from bringing it out.

"Go on," Noboru steered back to the topic. "Wasn't she saved?"

"Yes, she narrowly escaped death. But," said Handayu, "the mark left by the sash when she tried to strangle herself with it, is awful to look at. Her voice is now nearly destroyed. Her face is still bloated. All's in evidence. But what I just don't understand is, it isn't her insanity, rather her sanity that made an attempt on her life."

Noboru stopped eating and looked at Handayu.

"I'll get Dr. Niide to examine her later, though," Handayu continued gloomily. "Judging from my examination, she stays sane longer and longer these days, and she's beginning to know she's insane and that she's confined because of it. For this reason, in my diagnosis, she grew despaired and tried to do away with her."

Noboru paused before he said, "It isn't due to the insanity but the predisposition that she's confined, let me remind you." Giggling, Noboru added, "I, too, saw a funny patient, today. He ought to be confined there, were that woman to die, —and, not only that, but I was given orders to be his doctor from tomorrow on."

2.

The next morning, Noboru left the infirmary when it was still dark.

Walking accompanied by Kyojo had made him strong and agile in the legs. When he got to Tokichi's place in Sakuma-Cho, he was in good

time to catch Tokichi who was still at home, eating breakfast. He asked o-Chiyo to get Tokichi at the entrance and, when he came out, told him that he'd come at the behest of Kyojo.

"I'm afraid Wino's still in bed," Tokichi said and scratched his head. "However, if the purpose is, I'm supposed to talk about him, impart information about him in detail, this here isn't appropriate, doctor."

"Your workplace is fine with me."

"I can get somebody else to take my place." Tokichi said like he was feeling bad for Noboru, "I'll get a replacement if my master permits me to. So, could you follow me as far as his place in Hori'e, doctor?"

"You don't need to take a day off."

"I wanna take time enough to talk if I do at all. There's no prob, doctor. Somebody will take the responsibilities I have currently at the work site. Right, that's settled. I'll go finish my breakfast in a minute."

Noboru went outside.

His location was now in Fourth Street, Sakuma-Cho, with the Kanda River in the back. Tokichi's home was a semi-detached house. It's a neat small house with latticework sliding-doors. In the neighborhood were similar houses. All those houses made a quiet residential block though they were in the middle of a shopping area. —Tokichi, when he came out, he was casually dressed in a plain kimono with a narrow sash tied around and in the zori sandals whose backs were of plaited hemp. Obviously he was going to take the day off. He said 'Sorry, kept you waitin', doctor,' and began to walk. But suddenly he stopped at the thought of something that entered his mind. He said he had something he wanted Noboru to see. Going along the side of the house, they got around to the back, where there was another row of semi-detached houses facing the Kanda River. Between the rows was an open space about nine feet wide. There, the backdoors of the houses in either row faced one another. There was a drawing well for the common utility. There were home-made shelves lined with bonsai pots and bamboo fences encircling the flowers and plants the inhabitants were growing.

"Look at these, doctor."

Tokichi stood at his backdoor and pointed to the line of pots at the

door. Noboru saw seven unglazed cheap pots, in each of which was planted a small sapling, but he couldn't make out what they were.

"Wino planted them," Tokichi said, minding the direction of his backdoor. "Look at 'em careful, doctor, they're all upside down."

"Upside down?"

"The tops and branches are buried under, whereas the roots are out."

Noboru said, 's that so? It was true. Studying them closely revealed that the roots were sticking out of the soil. All the plants were buried so the roots were out. That was why Noboru couldn't tell what they were.

"How come Wino planted them like this?"

"I'll tell you later, doctor," Tokichi said and began to walk. "Now, shall we get a move on?"

As they crossed the Atarashi Bridge (Pont Neuf), walking in the direction of Nihonbashi, Tokichi began to talk.

Wino was two years Tokichi's junior. At twelve he arrived as an apprentice to the carpenter owning a shop named "Daimasa" in Hori'e, Nihonbashi. Tokichi had been at Daimasa three years at the time. He'd arrived last, the youngest of the six apprentices. He was the closest to Wino in age. Naturally, he got closer to Wino than anyone else.

"Wino's smart. He's nimble, conscientiously clever of his hands and mouth, so he'd become popular at Daimasa in less than half a year. Everybody showed love for him any time something came up, Wino for this and Wino for that."

Wino was popular among not only the folks at Daimasa but neighbors as well. Above all, girls became his avid fans. The master carpenter of Daimasa had two daughters called o-Shidzu and o-Sayo, the elder was ten and the younger seven at the time. Not to mention these sisters, all their playmates were Wino's fans.

—When I grow up, I'll be Wino's wife, I'll tell you.

—Oh, come on! Do you think Wino'll marry a funny-looking girl like you? I'll tell you, it's me who'll be his wife, not you!

When a bunch of four, five girls were at play, they'd often have tiffs like that over Wino. When taunted about it, blushing he got infuriated.

—Heh, Wino spat. Heh, goddammit, women! Who'll have a wife?

Girls, they ain't worth a damn, none of 'em, tell ya.

And then, he repeated his contemptuous "Heh!" and wouldn't get close to the girls for a while. He was cool at everything, none too hard for him, beanbag-tossing, marble-flicking, ball-bouncing, and you name it. He had such a frank personality and such good looks that it was only natural that he was liked by girls, but he himself carried no special favor with any girl. The daughters were no exceptions. Any girl who made herself look particularly close to him was relentlessly rejected.

"He was like that until he turned twenty," Tokichi said. "What I'll tell you from now is somthin' nobody'll give a damn about. But it'll begin to bear meaning as we go, so I must have your attention, doctor."

Noboru nodded wordlessly.

"Craftsmen are craftsmen. When they come of age, they go out with girls in their neighborhood, or big brothers tempt us juniors to go out for women," Tokichi went on. "To be frank, I was one among them. But Wino was different. There were loads of girls in the neighborhood who cast sheep's eyes at him. Nevertheless, he paid them not a wee bit of attention. He and I are close to each other like real brothers. And even though I tried to tempt him to go whoring, he'd flatly refuse it, always. The big brothers often used to say if he wasn't a faggot."

The two, when Tokichi was twenty-three and Wino twenty-one, left Daimasa and lived together, sharing a place between them. For one reason, the shop got too noisily crowded for them to be well rested. O-Shidzu had her gloom married into Daimasa and had a baby, three more apprentices arrived, and a girl was hired for babysitting.

Their new place was in the tenement house on a backstreet in Tadokoro-Cho. It was near to Daimasa, their master's shop, where, as always, they had breakfast and dinner and had their laundry and other little chores taken care of. They had only to pay the rent. Other than that, they both lived an easygoing life for nearly one year, except that Wino kept off women. The two of them living together, Tokichi went out whoring, whereas Wino stayed at home. He seemed a natural drinker and would drink quite a bit by then. When drunk, he'd grow merry, a pleasant drinker. But no matter how mellow he got from drinking, he

flatly refused it when Tokichi suggested: “For dames, shall we?”

—Big Bro, you go. Thanks, but not for me.

That was his fixed phrase. He’d say it and nothing more. But then in the February he turned twenty-two, Wino came to Tokichi and said, eagerness itself:

—I got a woman I wanna marry. Big Bro, I beg you, and go arrange an engagement for me?

Please, Big Bro. He bent himself deep down to Tokichi.

“Here we are. We’re at my master’s shop.” He stopped recounting the story and stood there. “Will you wait a sec, doctor? I’ll ask for permission and come back. I won’t be long.”

3.

The master’s shop was a large establishment, two-storied with an entranceway some thirty feet wide, and on each of the two shoji which were slid open to the right and to the left for entrance and exit was the name of the shop: “Daimasa.” Tokichi went in and soon came out. He began to walk with Noboru in the south along the road on the moat.

“I know an inn that accommodates guests who use its services of water transport and pleasure rowboats. Shall we talk there over a drink of saké, doctor?”

“Do you mean, will we drink at this time of day?”

“Morning drinking over the view of the waters,” Tokichi stopped in the middle and gave a wry smile, “this is too trite to inspire anything, right, doctor?”

The inn was located on the moat on Third Street, Kobuna (Rowboat)-Cho. It was a time-worn small establishment but it had two guest rooms on the second floor. Opening the shoji of the six-tatami-mat front room they were ushered into presented them with a view of the other side of the river, on which was Lord Makino of Kawachi’s mansion with the smoky foliage of a lusty thick tree-stand in the premises.

“Anyway, shall we act out ordinary guests, doctor?”

So saying, Tokichi ordered saké.

“The woman Wino wanted to marry was the daughter of a tavern proprietor in the same neighborhood as ours in Tadokoro-Cho,” Tokichi resumed the accounts of Wino. “She was seventeen years of age, named o-Taka, a round-faced and round-bodied fat woman with an awfully crude but merry demeanor.”

He continued. I says, Stop joking. Of all women under the heaven, you should choose a woman like that for your wife. Have you turned a moron? Wino fumes at me and says, Piss it off, I’m serious. Such as she may be to yer eyes, Big Bro, but she’s the very woman I do wanna marry. Wino begs me to please go and arrange an engagement. Seriousness showed in the way he said it. He even looked enthused.

—Are you sure you’re serious?

Tokichi made doubly sure and took the proposal to the girl’s parents. Her father’s name was Daikichi, who, at first, also thought it was a joke. O-Taka, the daughter first said, “Don’t be tongue-in-cheekish, brother.” But her mother, o-Raku, trusted Tokichi and talked her husband and daughter into consenting to the marriage with Wino. Only then did Daikichi compromise, but he’d accept the proposal on condition that Wino would marry into her family because o-Taka was the only child.

It took Tokichi five days to clinch this much of a deal. Enthused though he was, Wino fell thinking when he learned he’d have to marry into the family. But all the same, he got determined promptly. He said decisively it was fine by him to marry into the woman’s family.

—Think on it carefully, Wino. You gotta future yet to build. If you wanna be whole, wanna be a whole craftsman, from now on’s important, from now on you gotta be well-trained. You’re yet to be trained in yer skills. Look, if you, here and now, must shoulder the burden of the responsibilities for the woman and her parents, you’ll never get anywhere at all for the rest of your life.

—You mean me? Heh!

So Wino spat and shrugged his shoulders. Tokichi consummated the engagement.

—When are you planning to have a wedding? Tokichi said now that

the engagement was concluded.

Don't put me in a hurry, says Wino. The thing's been fixed, an' there's no need of hurry, Big Bro. I says, But they may have their convenience and it's my responsibility to let 'em know around when it'll be. What's your idea? Wino says as he falls thinking, Well, Big Bro, if you insist, let's see, well, let's set it fer the fall fer now. I says, Fall, is it? Wino says, Yep, Big Bro, I do have my own convenience, too.

"Will ya keep quiet 'bout it fer the time bein'?" Wino repeated again and again till I got annoyed," Tokichi said and sipped the tea that had got tepid. "Then, in about a half month . . ."

The wife of the inn's proprietor brought saké. On each tray were placed a tokkuri containing warmed saké, and three courses of appetizer. Tokichi told her that they'd help themselves and that she could leave them. The woman left them right away.

"Won't you have just one drink, doctor?"

"Thank you, but not for me."

"Well then, will you excuse me, doctor?"

Tokichi helped himself to it and, drinking as if licking, continued:

One day, in about a half month, Wino pleaded with Tokichi to cancel the engagement for him. Tokichi looked as if he'd sustained a hard blow that was dealt all of a heap. His eyes fixed on Wino, he was speechless for a while.

—I'm sorry fer ya, Big Bro, but she ain't no good, absolutely not worth a damn.

Wait, wait a sec, I interrupts. What in the heaven's name happened? What's wrong with it? What's no good about her, Wino?

—Last evening I went there to drink.

—You don't need to repeat it. I went with you.

—You, Big Bro, went home ahead of me, Wino said. I also left on the heels of ya. But that woman, o-Taka, came after and stopped me. When I asked what she was up to, that woman, she stepped up to me and clasped my hand. I said to 'er, What the fuck's up? That woman, o-Taka, ugh, eery enough, put on airs and sighed. Then she put all 'er might in 'er clasping hand and whimpered, Darling, don't you chuck

me away fer the rest of my life—so she said, that cow!

Wino rubbed his right palm on his kimono. He did it in a way his palm was grimed with something slimy. He rubbed it for the second time and the third, and frowned.

—Is that what you mean, she’s no good?

—I felt like throwin’ up. Ya dunno, but a chubby hand grasped mine. It was, ugh, gruesomely warm with greasy sweats. And, Darling, don’tcha chuck me away fer the rest of my life! Think of it, Big Bro. It was such a cloying eery voice that I felt like I got my backbone pulled out without a word of warnin’. I felt damn sick an’ ran away from her.

—Tell ya, Wino, it’s only natural. The woman who’s goin’ to be yer wife should tell ya not to chuck her away the rest of her life.

—You ever got told that, Big Bro?

—I’m just talking what women are like generally.

—Get told, just once, Big Bro, and you’ll understand this feeling. Like you got kicked pat into a pitch-black hole.

—You must say this and you must say that.

I says, you feel like throwing up. You feel like your backbone pulled out with no warning. And you feel like you got kicked into a hole. This and that. Hey, tell me, Wino, yer backbone should be pulled out after ya get warned? That’s why, Big Bro, Wino says, I mean to scratch the engagement before I get it pulled out, don’tcha get it?

“I said to him, Do as you like. I’m finished,” Tokichi said. “I went to all the trouble to make the deal. If you really mean to scratch it, do it on your own. Nothing doing on the part of me.”

It seemed Wino had broken off his engagement by himself. So he must have, for the other party didn’t come to claim anything. The mixed feelings resulting from the breach made them avoid the place. They had to change to the one that was not located in their next-door neighborhood, no less than six cho away in Sumiyoshi-Cho.

“That incident must have pulled the trigger. From then on, Wino began to make a pass at one woman after another.” Tokichi made a hand sign of thanks and took Noboru’s tokkuri from his tray. “And besides, look at his way with women, doctor. He must have his own way with

them. He doesn't give a damn about those women who try to get close to him. Like I said, he's always been popular among women. But he's never made a pass at them. The kind of woman he gets crazy about is, say, stand-offish and cold-shoulders him."

4.

In the winter of the same year, Wino again came out with, "I got a woman I wanna marry," and begged Tokichi to do the matchmaking for him. Just at the same time, the talks of Tokichi's own marriage were taking place. The bride to be was the daughter of a builder who had been trained at "Daimasa." The master builder of the shop brought the marriage to Tokichi and proposed that he'd be the go-between for them if he'd take to her. This woman was now his wife o-Chiyo. Despite his acceptance of the marriage proposal, when he met her she was a mere girl, very childish. She was sixteen. But she hadn't outgrown her childhood physique, far from the roundness of a woman at her age, or had the mentality of a marriageable woman. In his feeling, she was painfully too young to be married.

—Master, could you give me some time to think?

Tokichi had thus responded to his master. It was then that Wino brought out his own marriage to him.

The woman was again a maid of a tavern in Sumiyoshi-Cho. It was a fashionable place named "Umemoto." The woman's name was o-Yono, who looked like she was something like twenty years of age. She'd been working for the tavern less than two months but was already popular among customers because she could hold her saké well and measured up well in handling her customers, too.

—No, it won't work. Withdraw from her.

So saying, I shakes my head, I can't be too positive, but I reckons she isn't a respectable woman, not fit for a married life. At least she knows men, that's for sure. And your married life will get ruined if she drinks that much. You'd do best to wash her clean out of your hair. Thus, I

strongly opposed Wino's marrying that woman.

— I'll tell ya, Big Bro, I'm serious.

Wino straightens up, sitting squarely. Sure she does drink 'cos she gotta cope with guests. They come to 'er to drink. That's 'er job, he says. But Big Bro, when she settles down to a married life, she'll stop drinkin'. Look at Shigehei's wife in Yokka'ichi. Shigehei was a builder by trade, also come from "Daimasa," now living in Yokka'ichi-Cho. His wife o-Tsuna had been a maid at a place of the sort which offered gregariousness as well. The rumor had it that she used to drink like a fish as a maid. But once she got married to Shigehei, she quit drinking once and for all. And what was better, she thriftily handled the household budget. She had a good reputation for it among fellow builders.

—And, Big Bro, ya say she obviously knows men, Wino went on, ya know a lotta 'bout marrymakin' with entertainers, but yer too naïve 'bout the world.

—Hey, tell me, what do you say I don't know?

—Women, Big Bro, Wino said. I don't know 'bout olden times, but ya know, nowadays, there ain't one woman outa one thousand, nay, five thousand, who gets married virgin.

—You know it yerself, Wino?

Defiantly, I whirls around on him and protests, I gonna get married soon, too. Who I'll marry you know. It's o-Chiyo, daughter of a big brother in Kakigara-Cho. You dare to say she ain't virgin like the next one? No kiddin', piss it off! Wino is flushed. You piss it off, Big Bro, I don't mean such a joke, Wino says, I ain't sayin', this woman's virgin and that woman's not. Right, here Wino flings his head backward.

—Right, I'm talkin' 'bout what're women like generally.

—Don't you ever talk like you know everything, Wino!

—That's somethin' you, Big Bro, said to me the other day.

—There's no need of ya copyin' it.

Tokichi went to "Umemoto" for a marriage talk. It was maybe because he himself had his own engagement coming, and Wino seemed so serious, on the spur of the moment he brought himself to perform the mission. O-Yono consented. She'd say she was eighteen but it turned

out that she was as old as twenty, as expected. She had a younger sister serving somewhere. Other than this, she had no one to look after.

—I'll make him a good wife.

O-Yono said so and demurely cast her eyes down. Tokichi talked to the proprietor of "Umemoto" and his wife and concluded the betrothal. When he told Wino that the deal had been clinched, Wino simpered whimperingly, and said he was obliged.

—Hey, what's up?

You're engaged, and ain't you happy, eh? says I.

—So, I'm saying I'm obliged, ain't I, Big Bro? I thank you from the bottom of my heart, honest.

—Awright, awright, I got you.

Gazing fondly on Wino, Tokichi felt something run down his spine for no reason.

"The wedding was set for a day when it turned into a new year, but then," Tokichi went on, "it was decided I'd temporarily transfer to Mito. I had a project to launch in Mito as soon as the New Year week was over. I was supposed to build a retreat for a retired merchant. His shop was called Sagami-Ya dealing in seafood wholesale and located in Mito. I was appointed foreman of the task force of some twenty craftsmen: builders, plasterers, and joiners. All was set for the Mito project, and it was three days before I was to leave Edo that Wino suddenly threw in a tantrum and pestered me to take him with me."

It was impossible because the staff members had been selected. The master wouldn't allow. As he said so, Tokichi studied Wino to find there was something unusual about him. He asked if there was anything wrong. Wino said yes and remained hesitant for a while. Then determination on his face, he came out.

—I got a woman I wanna marry. I'm wonderin' if you couldn't be the go-between fer me.

Tokichi took time to calm down before he asked back.

—Wasn't that all settled?

—No. I'm asking ya fer the first time 'bout this woman.

—You mean it's not o-Yono at Umemoto, no?

—Of course not, Big Bro.

It took some time before Tokichi held down his boiling anger.

—Whatcha gonna do with o-Yono at Umemoto?

—Cinch. Scratch it clear, that's all. That bitch. Wino curled his lips. Come to think of it, I dunno why I fell in love with such a woman. To be honest with ya, Big Bro, I doubt my own self.

—Look, Wino, listen to me carefully.

—I know whatcha mean, Big Bro. I know ya'll get mad, Wino said in a great hurry, but I couldn't ask nobody but ya, Big Bro, for crap like this. I know I'll get hell from ya. But I got no one else I can ask. This is the truthfulness for the first time on the third time 'round. So this time, I'll never ever fail ya 'bout this woman, I promise.

Tokichi stared Wino in the eyes.

—You got a woman all that dear. Yet you wanna go to Mito. Why?

—Well, that's . . . from Umemoto fer a while.

—What will ya do fer a while?

Wino said, scratching his head, that he'd wait and let the storm pass over by staying away from Umemoto.

“I shouted at him, doctor. I came down on him like a ton of bricks.” Tokichi noticed he'd finished his tokkuri, which he shook to show Noboru it was empty. “I'm in the mood for more. Would you mind if I had more, doctor?”

“I'm fine. Go ahead,” Noboru nodded.

Tokichi clapped his hands. The voice responding to the call came upstairs. Soon the woman came with two tokkuri. Was she measuring the time for another order?

“Nevertheless, you're on the losing side after all once you come down on someone like that,” Tokichi went on as he poured himself the fresh saké. “I did everything to prostrate him on the carpet, but in the end I found I was doing exactly what Wino'd wished me to. Shame on me, I'd gone and played the foolish role of a go-between.”

The latest woman was named o-Matsu, eighteen, a maid of Omi-Ya dealing wholesale in tabi socks and momohiki long johns.

5.

Omi-Ya was located in Fukui-Cho outside the Asakusa Imperial Gate. In the early previous winter, at the request of Omi-Ya, “Daimasa” had put in builders for a month or so to remodel the retreat annexed to the main building. O-Matsu had been in many respects kind to Wino who’d grown very fond of her but never thought about marrying her. Things would sometimes take a funny turn. Scarcely had the engagement been consummated with o-Yono of “Umemoto,” dear memories of o-Matsu flooded back and made Wino change his mind. He was determined to have no one else but her for his wife, if he would at all.

“Fortunately, doctor, o-Matsu herself secretly held Wino dear to her. And it was expected that the talk would be concluded in an instant. But this particular time, I was wary,” said Tokichi. “So, both parties agreed that the final talk be held after I was finished with the Mito project and that until then we keep it in privacy. And I made Wino agree, too.”

Tokichi traveled to Mito and set about building the retreat of Sagami-Ya. His recounting skipped the Mito project because it didn’t concern the subject. However, the retired old merchant was a typical rare specimen who would go overboard about his project. A good number of times, he modified the original plan under contract. He perpetually stuck around to the working men on the construction site and beefed about what they were doing and got the finished parts done over. Tokichi was spent to the marrow, caught in catch-22 between placating the raging builders and persuading the client to understand their work. What with this and that, the building progressed at a snail’s pace, especially the frequent rainfalls conjoined to hamper the progress. It was a peculiar climate that year. It took nearly forty days to finish the framing. Thus the days progressed into March, when the joiner brought his hands from Edo. As if at the heels of the joiners, Wino popped out of thin air.

—I’ve come ’cos the master told me to go.

That was his excuse. Tokichi thought it funny because there were by that time more builders than needed. He was about to send half of the task force back to Edo. He thought there must be some reason for Wino's arrival and pressed him for an answer.

—Fact is, I ast the master to lemme go, Wino said embarrassedly. Without ya nearby, Big Bro, I mighta been an over-the-hill widower.

—Hey, Wino, do be honest. How come you took flight from Edo?

—You're real leery, Big Bro.

—Out with it. Oh, oh, 'bout Umemoto?

—No kiddin'. Right after that, I gave that woman a flat no, clean scratched the engagement, Big Bro.

—Well then, what's it?

I gives no leeway, keeping a tight rein on questioning, and presses Wino for an answer. In time Wino is cornered and begins, OK, Big Bro, I'll tell ya the truth and the whole truth. You won't get mad, won'tcha? he says looking meek. I says, Who knows? You tell the truth first and it'll decide whether I may get mad or not. So tell it to me first, Wino. Wino says, Ya'll be the death of me, Big Bro.

—That real gets me in a fix, Wino mumbled but loudly enough for Tokichi to hear it. Dammit, it's just like I been brought out to the scaffold to be beheaded.

Tokichi was silent. At his wits' end, Wino had to say something. Eventually he confessed the truth as he stuttered. In a nutshell, he'd grown fed up with o-Matsu at Omi-Ya, so he wanted Tokichi to cancel the engagement for him. Tokichi closed his eyes for what seemed to be ages and waited for his anger to dissolve.

—Wino, you said it was the truthfulness for the first time on the third time 'round, Tokichi said patiently. Didn'tcha tell me you didn't put a foot wrong that very time, that she was the right woman fer ya?

—Don'tcha get mad an' listen to me, will ya, Big Bro?

Wino waved his hands to stop Tokichi. He said that, truly, he'd thought she was the right woman. But the other day, o-Matsu got a day off, and they met and went to the Senso-Ji Temple. On the way back they ate at an eel place in Komagata. While waiting for the eel to be

done, they drank and talked. Wino proffered a saké-cup to o-Matsu so she'd drink, too. She declined it first but yielded to his insistence and downed three, four cupfuls. Her face grown faintly red, her demeanor and expression grew enticing. That was fine by then, so far so good. But a while later, o-Matsu, pouring saké into Wino's cup, glared askance at him and told him to be true to her.

—By all means, be true to me, my darling, 'cause I'm yours and you're mine. Be sure of it, will you?

Wino says, I felt a chill run all the way down my spine, Big Bro.

—Why not, buster! said Tokichi. Didn'tcha feel like you got something done to yer backbone again?

—You don't feel nothin', Big Bro?

—There's nothing odd about the woman who's gonna be yer wife, even though she said stuff like that, Wino?

—You are mine, ugh!

Wino recoiled from it and shuddered. As if you had a woolly bear thrown into the scruff of your garment. You hate the worm. It gives you the creeps and makes you goose-fleshed at the thought of it.

“It couldn't be helped, doctor. I thought it was ruthless of me to send him back to Edo, so I got him to stay put in Mito,” Tokichi said. “I said to him, ‘Only,’ I prefixed *only* to make doubly sure, doctor, ‘don't ever fall in love with a woman again. I'll never be involved in your sappy love farces again. Hammer it into that head of yours, Wino.’”

Wino, relieved, giggled and said:

—I'll never again make ya no trouble, Big Bro.

Instead, shrewdly taking advantage of this situation, Wino asked Tokichi to settle the matter with Omi-Ya. Very well, Tokichi accepted his plea. He was in the prospect that it wouldn't be a hard nut to crack to nullify the betrothal because it hadn't been formally concluded yet, for he'd half feared if a thing of this sort should pop up.

The construction at Sagami-Ya was protracted. The master builder of “Daimasa” took trouble to travel from Edo twice to see how it was coming along. Albeit, fortunately it was completed before the spell of May rains. Meanwhile, Wino had been and gone and found a woman

for his wife again. He didn't impart the topic himself, but it unfolded of itself when he'd been in Mito about a half month. There was something unusual about him again. The builders on the project ate and slept in the makeshift cabins built on the job site. Tokichi, acting master builder, was accommodated in an outhouse on the Sagami-Ya premises and provided with meals and other services.

"I let Wino stay with me. Otherwise he'd feel like an old widower if he wasn't by my side." Tokichi was now feeling tipsy. "Him! Simperin' an' whimperin' wishy-washy son-of-a-gun, doctor," he said and chuckled. "Dinner came with saké at Sagami-Ya. Wino wouldn't touch it. At first he'd say he didn't want it and I simply took his word for it."

In time, I notices there's something unusual about him.

After taking a bath we sit at dinner. Wino thuds down into his seat, looks over the dinner on the tray without taking up his saké-cup. I asks, Hey, what's up? Why not drink? No, Wino only replies as if he wasn't there and goes on gazing down over the dinner for keeps.

—What's ailin' ya, my boy. Don'tcha drink it?

—No, I don't feel like drinkin'.

—You got diarrhea or somethin'?

—No, I don't. I'm fine. Don'tcha worry 'bout me, Big Bro, an' go ahead as ya like. Ferget 'bout me.

Something like that was repeated several days in a row. One evening, during the usual question-and-answer session, Tokichi was suddenly beset by the same old sensation of a chill running down his spine. It was exactly the same as it had been. It was about to be repeated now. Thereafter, he tried as much as possible not to look toward Wino.

6.

In time, however, Tokichi was beginning to run out of his patience. Meanwhile, Wino artfully drew Tokichi's attention and encroached bit by bit on his territory. Like a termite that eats its way into the core of a wood pillar, he inched his way into Tokichi's heart and infested it.

—Whew, Wino sighs. Gazing over the dinner on the tray, he talks to himself in a suppressed voice, which, though, travels as far as Tokichi. No way. I just can't do a thing like that, 'cos I gave my words. Once a man makes a promise, he just can't do such a thing. That's that, man.

A silence. He gives another big sigh, staring on the dinner vacantly. Such was the way he was at the time. One evening, fully aware he'd be caught in Wino's trap, Tokichi spoke to him. It was the end of the line:

—Which woman?

Wino pretended to be innocent, looking at him quizzically, "What?"

—Don't pretend to know nothing. Woman, again, right?

Wino hung down his head.

"He's on the crafty side, and I'm on the daft side. Doctor, look at the logic of it and you'll see it's me that started out in on his business. Isn't this his line, but it all makes me copy it, *Shucks, it ain't no good, it won't get nowhere.*"

Pressed for an answer, Wino responded reluctantly. The woman was a maid of a tavern, in a part of town called Sentaku-Cho. She was twenty, named o-Sei. Tokichi was also familiar with her. He'd often go and drink there. I says, "Inaba" is a tavern doing sound and honest business though it's located in Sentaku-Cho known for prostitution like an oka-basho in Edo. Thanks to the nature of its location, you don't need to take it too seriously. I tells Wino to handle the matter by himself. He says in resignation, "Yeah," but that's all. All he does is sigh and sigh, looking dejected. What's the matter? You can't do it on yer own? —No, I can't. When I come in face to face with 'er, I can't say nothin' to 'er, I can't even call 'er name.

—Take it from me, said Tokichi. Don't depend on me, no, not any more, Wino. No thanks, I've had more than enough.

—I know, Big Bro. I'm fine. Don'tcha worry 'bout me.

At the end of it, Wino mumbles, "This is the very truthfulness fer the first time on the third time 'round and the last resort." I catches it and reproves him, Whaddya mean, the truthfulness fer the first time on the third time 'round? Oh, it's nothin', Wino replies softly. There's been women I've fallen for. Among 'em I've loved three the most and

I've wanted 'em fer my wife from my heart. This is the third one. And besides, I've found this very one's the real one fer me.

—Hey Wino, think on it serious, said Tokichi. Whaddya mean, the third time 'round? Mind ya, this is the fourth.

—No, it isn't. Listen, Big Bro. O-Yono and o-Matsu make two.

—What did ya do with the first one, o-Taka?

—O-Taka? Heh, Wino gave a scornful shrug. You must know, Big Bro, she ain't worth a damn. Tick 'er off.

—Why, Wino, when ya fell fer o-Matsu, you told me that was the truthfulness fer the first time on the third time 'round.

—My blood must'a've rushed up to my head, and it must'a've made me feel like it was truthful. Big Bro, I mustn't fail this time. Let it be, once an' fer all, the truthfulness for the first time on the third time.

I mean it, Big Bro, Wino emphasizes.

“I tried as much as I could to keep my back against him.” Tokichi took a whole swig of his cupful. “But after all, doctor, I lost to him. I'm definitely no match for that son-of-a-gun in perseverance. I went to 'Inaba' to ask for o-Sei for his wife.”

It was a couple of days before the transference of the completed job, the newly built retreat, to the client. O-Sei accepted the offer and expressed her desire to talk to Wino in person.

O-Sei had taken to Wino in her own way. She'd be keen to live through this hard world with a man if he'd be Wino. She proudly confessed to Tokichi, “I've been thinking of him one-sidedly.”

—The nerves! said Tokichi after he'd told Wino letter-perfect what the woman had. I might've been a small boy who'd only run a stupid cupid errand, a serious runner for the fatuous twitters of a lovesick couple on both ends. I've been so softhearted, I'm fed up with myself.

—I'm sorry, Big Bro, Wino bent down his head in apology.

—What a fine way! Is that all you got to say to me?

—I am very sorry, Big Bro.

When Tokichi turned on Wino, he only saw the look of disinterest on Wino's face and not the least enthusiasm. I says, Go and talk to her. In a couple of days we'll all be off to Edo. Hurry, or you'll be left alone.

Yeah, I will, Wino says and repeats, Yeah, I will. I'll go talk to 'er.

"Wino went out, but, doctor," Takichi said, "in about half a toki he came back and said he'd be off to Edo right away ahead of me."

Tokichi was nonplussed.

—That woman says she'll come alon' with me to Edo. No kiddin', Wino said fidgeting about. This ain't cats matin'. Can you get loaded with all marriage responsibilities just at a moment's notice? No kiddin'. No way! For me, no thanks!

—Wake up, Wino. Calm down and tell me what it's all about?

Sorry, I got no time fer it, Big Bro, Wino replies. I'll tell ya what's it all about when we're back to Edo. O-Sei was mad an' she may come bargin' in on me 'ere. If she does, drive 'er away, Big Bro. At any rate, beg'er par'n an' I'll hit the road ahead of ya. With it, he got all set in no time and fled out without properly putting on his waraji straw sandals. In this topsy-turvy, Tokichi had only to miss getting angry if he would, and just remained in his seat growling, when Wino, turning back, peeped in through the door, gave him an affable smile in tears and said:

—Big Bro, beat me until you feel you're right again when we're back in Edo.

O-Sei didn't come. She didn't come barging in. But when other builders from Edo went to the tavern, she got dead drunk and reviled them with all the venom in the world. That bastard's not a man, she began. Then, they heard her call all Edo names. With all her vehemence she dragged Edo through the mud and pulverized it to a coarse powder. The builders depicted her in a nutshell, "Oh, that was like trampling our reputation under her muddy shod feet."

"This is all I have to tell you, doctor." Tokichi took up the second tokkuri and, pouring himself, said, "Soon after I got back, my marriage arrangements were quickened. Toward the end of May, I married o-Chiyo, and we moved to Sakuma-Cho where we're now living."

"Well," Noboru said. "What went between Wino and o-Sei in Mito?"

"Nothing, doctor," said Tokichi. "When Wino went to talk to her, o-Sei showed him into a room. Yes, there's a small room in the depths of the tavern. And without warning, she flung herself to Wino to hug

him. She said she heard he'd be going back to Edo in a few days. She asked him to take her along with him when he went back. She added that if he'd be unfaithful to her, she'd never forgive him."

"That again made his heart leave the woman, right?"

"There's a lot of baloney. No rhyme or reason in it, doctor," Tokichi said. "It's Wino falls in love first and asserts he must marry. But when the woman tells him something, just a word, —well, it's affection that makes her say it and it's only natural, but that one word put him off. In a jiffy, his mind changes dramatically. He starts hating her as if he'd been given the creeps. Oh, I don't get the hang of it. What feelings are there in it, doctor?"

7.

That same evening, Noboru recounted to Niide Kyojo what he had heard from Tokichi. Despite his doubt that Kyojo would be interested, his accounts seemed to arouse a keen interest in Kyojo. He urged Noboru to continue, repeating, So what?

After Tokichi and his wife had moved to Sakuma-Cho, Wino temporarily returned to Hori'e to stay with his master, until about six months later he moved out to live in a tenement in Kyu'emon-Cho. Maybe he found it inconvenient to come by Tokichi's home if he lodged at the master's in Hori'e. Seldom did Wino stay away from the newlyweds for three days in a row, or rather he came almost every day, so frequently that o-Chiyo, a new wife, was bewildered. Since he'd moved to Kyu'emon-Cho, he'd come to pick up Tokichi bright and early and did chores such as drawing water and sweeping around the house until his big brother was ready. Then they'd go to work together. Not only that, but after sunset, too, he'd turn up and stay on unless Tokichi said he'd hit the sack. Things went like that.

Since Tokichi had married, Wino hadn't got into trouble with women. He wouldn't go out for dames, either, as always. Nor did he pay any attention to women. He just ignored them though different women more

often than not approached him at places such as job sites and taverns. —It was toward the end of last year that a change came on him. He wouldn't do a stroke of work at the job. All day long, his mind was elsewhere, arms folded on chest. Asked what was up, he'd only say, Nothing. And yet his hands were left idle. Only once in a while would he take up a plane or a chisel, and do an outrageously fine job with them. He'd bore a hole in a pillar of the finished framework and plane a half-inch board until it was reduced paper-thin.

—That's weird.

So Tokichi found about Wino. He talked to his master about him and got him to take some rest off work. Thereupon, the manager of his tenement came to complain to Tokichi. Wino was not a rough tenant but there was something odd about him. It made the fellow tenants feel ill at ease. That was a problem. Could Tokichi do anything about it? Wino was the third of a fisherman in Shinagawa. Back home he had a father, a big brother, and two younger sisters. The sense of family ties was hardly present in him. He had contacted no one of his family members in years. They were father and son, at that. Tokichi suggested to the manager that his father take him home. When o-Chiyo heard him saying so, she opposed, "Isn't it merciless? Oh, poor Wino."

—He shall go back to his dad? They've got very little sense of family ties. Will his family take loving care of him? Oh, I doubt it.

Furthermore, o-Chiyo says, Wino's that dependent on you and feels very close to you, much closer to you than to his real dad, brother and sisters. Fortunately, we don't have a child yet. I suggest we have him with us here and he'll be better off, o-Chiyo persists in earnest. In mid-January the couple took Wino into their home in Sakuma-Cho.

In the half year's time since then, they'd taken Wino to see doctors, given him various kinds of medicines, taken him to faith healers, and had charms used on him. But none of them made him any better. Nor did he get worse because of them. He wore his kimono the wrong side out, walked around in the neighborhood with his three-foot-long sash knotted in front. He slept tight during the day, but at night stayed up and talked to himself and hummed songs, until he got yelled at by Tokichi.

This was just about all that was out of the way about him. Only, among other things, Tokichi was wondering if Wino's sickness didn't come from his flat refusal to work.

"He buried the plants upside down in the pots, didn't he?" Kyojo asked back. "Did you see them with your eyes?"

"I did, sir. They all had their roots sticking out of the soil."

He looked at Noboru. "What do you think? You see it as insanity?"

"I'm not quite sure, sir, but the troubles with woman after woman caused him a mental problem. This is how I see it."

"You're wrong. Not women, it's Tokichi."

Noboru returned a puzzled look to Kyojo.

"Wino has been idolized by girls and women since a young boy. When he grew up, it's women first that have been attracted to him. While examining him, I studied him carefully and found him to have lost his head over Tokichi," Kyojo said. "He's been so adored by women, the affection he'd have directed toward them has veered off and been instead directed to Tokichi. This isn't of course sexual perversion. It's the kind of affection men feel for men. In Wino's case, this affection is more dominant and has thus become entangled."

"It follows then that his condition ought to improve because he's living with Tokichi, doesn't it, sir?"

"No, quite the opposite. He must be detached from Tokichi," said Kyojo. "Wino's done various things so far. He's done them all in order to trouble Tokichi. Surely, Wino himself won't agree because he only believes everything he's done has taken their natural course and ended in giving Tokichi hassles. But deeper in him, he unconsciously meant Tokichi to spoil him by putting him in a fix. In this way, he's tried to keep himself and Tokichi close-knit to each other."

Noboru cast his eyes down silently but soon gave a soft though ambiguous nod.

"Tomorrow, we'll put him in the infirmary." Kyojo turned back to his desk, took up his writing brush, and said, "Detach him from Tokichi and leave him alone for the time being, and he'll be all right again. —There's nothing like the workings of human brain that gives rise to

such esoteric, abstruse conundrums, don't you think?"

The next day, Wino was hospitalized into the infirmary.

Noboru informed Tokichi of Kyojo's diagnosis and made doubly sure never to come to see him. Noboru didn't altogether trust Kyojo's diagnosis. In his feeling, it was too theory-bound and conveniently reasoned, so he decided he'd have his way to find a clue to treating Wino. —Wino was placed alone in a separate sickroom. He insistently claimed, for he hated being others' company, especially women's, sick or old. Kyojo admitted it and allowed him to do as he liked.

Until the summer went, Noboru tried to find time and dropped by Wino's sickroom, where, offering cakes with tea, he talked to Wino casually. He attempted to induce him to speak.

"No one's come to see you here," Noboru hinted to Wino one day. "Do you have anyone you want to come see you?"

Wino got to thinking with a grave expression on his face.

"The folks in Sakuma-Cho?" Noboru went one step deeper into him and said, "Shall I send someone to fetch them?"

"No, let's not, doctor," Wino shook his head decisively. "Big Bro's tied up at work. Nothin' will change if I get 'im to come see me."

Noboru stopped there.

There'd been no change in Wino yet by the time they saw the summer off. He was cooped up in his room most of the time, spending time doing nothing better. He just let it pass vacantly, except that in the evenings he'd step out into the garden for a short while.

He didn't do odd things any more. This was surely a change, but otherwise there was no hint of his getting better.

"Why do you hate women?" Noboru asked. "Being a man that you are, you hate women, isn't it funny?"

"Not that I hate 'em, doctor," Wino replied. "I don't say I hate 'em."

"But you said you hated a ward where there were women, even though they are sick or old. Do you remember?"

Wino thought for a few seconds and nodded. "Ah, that must be it. I understand that's where it's funny, ain't it, doctor?"

"By funny you mean you're referring to yourself, Wino?"

“I got a reason fer it, doctor,” said Wino. “This must be somethin’ I should’na tell to no one. But there’d be no prob if I did to you. Yer a doctor, right?”

“Of course not,” Noboru said.

8.

“Back when I was eighteen,” Wino said. “My master had two daughters. Girls in the neighborhood would often come by.”

Listening, Noboru remembered what Tokichi had told him, but pretended as if he was hearing it for the first time. As he listened to Wino, he tried hard not to show any interest, not a mite.

“Amon’ the girls, there was one called o-Tama, nine years old. She was the daughter of dyer Tamagawa-Ya. She was plump, round-faced, an’ round-bodied, an’ mild an’ obedient, —oh, I hate it,” Wino said and blushed, “now, here’s the toughest part fer me.”

“Remember you’re talking to a doctor.”

“Don’t take it bad, doctor,” Wino said, chagrined, rubbing the nape of his neck. “That girl, o-Tama, grew very close to me. Well, that ain’t a big deal, you can ferget it. I thought ’er a cute girl. And there was a lot between us. One time she came an’ hugged me. I snatched a kiss on ’er lips. No, don’t ya take it wrong, doctor. I didn’t do it out a dirty feelin’, never. I always liked ’er and when she hugged me, I just kissed ’er, just a snap kiss, no ax to grind, an’ that was that, doctor.”

“That’s not a once-in-a-blue-moon case, I’ll tell you, Wino,” Noboru said. “Everybody has more or less the same experience, don’t they?”

“Well, what followed after was horrible,” Wino continued, speaking in all rapidity, as if trying to get away from it as soon as possible. “The instant I sucked ’er lips, o-Tama thrust ’er tongue into my mouth. A nine-year-old thrust ’er tongue, doctor.” He swept across his lips with his hand to wipe them and made to spit out the saliva with a grimace on his face. “—I was eighteen, but I didn’t know no such thin’ ’bout kissin’. And if you can believe me, she was only nine. I’d known ’er

to be an ordinary, mild, obedient, an' cute nine-year-old. So, when a soft, hot tongue slithered its way into my mouth, in my astonishment I shoved 'er out my way right 'way an' ran from 'er fer the life of me."

Noboru smiled quietly and said, "That's nothing peculiar, Wino."

"Do you say it's not nothin' peculiar, doctor?"

"I have a similar experience," Noboru said. "I experienced almost the same thing as you did."

Wino looked as if he'd only just woken up from sleep and turned on Noboru, saying, Really?

"An', doctor," he asked, "didn'tcha feel no nothin' even though you went through such an odious thin'?"

"I got a wee bit embarrassed, most probably."

"I couldn'tna been more frightened," Wino said. "A girl of only nine should know that much. It was appallin'. I was terrified to find women were a scary, horrible tribe. This finding curdled my blood, doctor."

"You grew up and became a craftsman in the middle of the jumbled mishmash of a downtown teeming with plebeians from every walk of life and things from everywhere," Noboru said, chuckling again. "In spite of it, you sound like a real late-developer."

"Oh, do I?" Puzzled, he shrugged. "Things're like that, doctor?"

"Seem like that," Noboru said.

Noboru thought that would be where he could start treating him.

Surely, Kyojo's diagnosis stood to reason, but it was not all, Noboru thought. There was the o-Tama shock. This must have affected Wino's infatuation with a long line of women. The shock always stayed with him where it was deep in his mind.

Noboru's prognosis was that if only Wino'd get rid of his o-Tama trauma he'd begin to get better. —Did it prove true or did it not? Soon after it had turned into fall, his eyes fell on something in the yard you wouldn't easily have been able to see. Wino made a point of going out for a walk in the evening. When Noboru clapped eyes on Wino, he was walking with a woman, a hand basket hanging from his hand.

"Well?" Noboru had opened his eyes wide before he knew it.

The woman was o-Sugi. Probably she was on the way back from the

kitchen where she'd got supper for her employer o-Yumi. The basket Wino was hanging was used for carrying a meal in it. Noboru was familiar with it.

Wino went past toward o-Yumi's ward house with o-Sugi, talking to her about nothing Noboru could make out from where he was standing. He just watched the scene and went straight into his room.

Noboru asked Mori Handayu to watch Wino's behavior. He himself was more out attending Kyojo on his round. Handayu also had very little time but tried to be of help. He seemed to keep carefully watching him. He was kind enough to report every day to Noboru in detail what he saw and heard on the day. —Obviously, Wino was beginning to change. He'd coop himself in his sickroom less often. He'd go out and do this and that. He'd go to the herb garden to borrow out saws and planes and do repair work, such as fixing the fence in the herb garden and nailing planks in the wainscot of the kitchen.

Mornings and evenings, Wino helped o-Sugi with her hand basket. Often dropping by the kitchen, he honed the cutlery, planed the surface of the cooking boards, and sometimes even helped rinse vegetables. Thus went Handayu's report.

—If so, he needs no worrying any more.

Wino would get well again soon, Noboru decided. Once Noboru's mind was made up, Wino went out of his mind by and by as a matter of course. One evening in mid-September, after coming back from the round of visits and changing his clothes, Noboru was going into the dining room for late supper, when Wino came after and stopped him.

"I have some saké in my room, doctor," he whispered to Noboru. "Would you mind coming to join me in a drink?"

"What, saké? —How did you come by it?"

"I asked Kitzan to go buy it," his lips formed a smile. "You often used to get 'im to go buy saké, too. I heard it from 'im, doctor."

Noboru looked away and said, "I'm starved."

"I got sushi, too," Wino said. "Anyway, could ya come over fer a few moments? As a matter of fact, I got somethin' to talk over to you."

Noboru went to his room.

Noboru had been away from it for days. He found the room ship-shape. It was cleaned spic and span. He felt comfortable in there.

On the tray were his regular dinner of the infirmary and sushi packed in a thin-wood box with a five-go, or two-pint, tokkuri standing beside it. The sickrooms had of course no heat to warm the saké. Wino seemed to have begun drinking it as it had come, and now, upon sitting down, he drank up what was left in the teacup, which he produced to Noboru. No, he wasn't allowed, he waved his hand and said he'd instead like to listen to what Wino had to say.

"Well then, lemme have a little more," Wino said. "Unless I get a bit more drunk, I can't come out with what I got to tell you, it's a little bit too embarrassing, ya know, doctor."

Noboru said quietly, "Is it about o-Sugi?"

"Oops," Wino uttered and gazed at Noboru. "D'you know, doctor?"

"I don't know very well, but I can guess."

"Well, well, well, it's surprisin'. 's that so? Then, I don't hafta stand on ceremony no more, doctor. It's easier. I'll be out with it straightway," Wino poured more saké into his cup and, holding it in both hands, faced Noboru squarely. "First of all, won'tcha let me stay this 'ere place fer the time bein'? What d'ya say, doctor?"

"I can't decide by myself."

"I'll be useful 'ere. I shall gladly do anythin' I can, an' as ya see, this 'ere place needs a lotta carpenterin'. You need to have a carpenter workin' 'ere."

"Seems so," said Noboru. "Then what's next?"

"Not that I mean right now," said Wino, whose face blushed in a split second. In one gulp he downed the saké from the cup. "I haven't told o-Sugi nothin', no, not yet, —won'tcha try a piece of sushi, doctor?"

Noboru burst out involuntarily, "You mean, you're getting to be married to o-Sugi?"

"It's pitiable, doctor," said Wino, "she should be servin' a mad mistress like that. From attendin' to 'er meals to lookin' after 'er bath-room needs. Doin' such stuff with perseverance 'til no one knows when, but 'til when it comes to an end. My heart pains sharply, just as I watch

'er do all that stuff.”

“May I understand,” Noboru asked, “that you’ll marry her because she’s pitiful?”

“Oh no, nothin’ o’ the sort, I’m serious!” Wino protested passionately. “Sure thin’ she’s pitiful. But the reason I wanna marry ’er is ’cos I love ’er. I’ve met various women so far, doctor, but I haven’t met a woman like o-Sugi before. She’s the very first thin’ that ever happened to me. I’m positive I’ll be able to get alon’ with ’er till the end of my life, no matter how poor we’ll remain, doctor.”

Noboru was silent.

“You can say that again, doctor.” Wino’s eyes got wet and he stiffened as he spoke. “—While lookin’ at o-Sugi the way she was, I thought to myself that I’d need to learn to be responsible and independent. I gave myself hell, Hey, Wino, milksop, stand. Stand on yer own feet. You, easygoing sissy mollycoddle, stay the way you been to this day or you can’t get by in the world. . . . This is fer the first time in my life. In my born days, I’ve never felt like this, doctor. I have a strong desire to make o-Sugi happy, and I know I can do it, doctor.”

“You can declare it? And are you sure?”

“Ask Big Bro. He never knew me declare the way I do. If only o-Sugi stays with me, this feelin’ I got now toward ’er will never change for keeps, I swear, doctor.”

He must be telling the truth, Noboru thought.

—Yes, for the first time in his life, he stands in the position to love somebody.

To this day, Wino had always been protected by Tokichi and approached by women. He’d all the time been safely ensconced in the cradle of being passive. But he turned the tables. He took the active end. He took pity on o-Sugi and began to think about his responsibility to make this poor woman happy in his own right. This was the evidence that he, as a man, was striving to be independent. So Noboru thought, but he reminded him with an intention to make sure:

“Is it your truthfulness for the first time on the third time around?”

Wino returned a quizzical stare and said, “What’s that, doctor? My

truthfulness for the first time on the third time around, so I heard.”

“Forget it,” Noboru said and got to his feet. “It’s nothing, never mind my hocus-pocus. —I’ll talk to Dr. Niide about the possibility regarding what you’ve told me now.”

“I’m obliged, doctor.” Wino bent his head in thanks and then announced with his head high, “Lemme warn you and Dr. Niide. Should ya doctors not ever accept my serious intentions, I’d take flight from ’ere. I’d take o-Sugi with me, too. This is not threat. This is my truthfulness, mind you, Dr. Yasumoto. So, could you please tell Dr. Niide that I’m as serious as any?”

Noboru nodded to Wino’s eyes, and out walked into the corridor.

Committed to an Effort that Goes for Nothing

1.

“I know inpatients are discontented and chewing the fat,” said Niide Kyojo as he walked, “about the wooden-floored sickrooms, the bedding they have to lay out immediately on the rush matting, which is to be spread again immediately on the wooden floor, the uniform outfit that’s fastened not by a sash but the strings fixed to the robe, and so on and so forth, —all this is equally practiced in the wards and the medical staff offices. I hear they’re saying it’s as though they were put in prison. The rumor has it that not only the inpatients but also many of the staff members have the same complaints. What about you, Yasumonto? What do you say to it?”

“I don’t care, sir,” said Noboru and added in a hurry, “I think it’s all the better because it’s much cleaner.”

“That’s flattery. I have no use for flattery.”

Noboru clammed up.

“Among things we use every day, the tatami-mat is the worst. In olden times they were wise enough to use no such thing. Take as an example of Lord Tokugawa Mitsukuni in Mito, from one of the three shogunal successor houses, throughout his life he never allowed tatami-mats to be laid out in his residence. It is said he highly esteemed the simplicity-and-fortitude loving ethos of ancient samurai warriors. This is not true, of course, though as a lord, he may have had to assume such a specious attitude. At any rate, his way was extremely reasonable. In fact, tatami-mats only came into everybody’s daily life in the Genroku era (1688-1704). It’s only recent. Till that time, for over two thousand years, people had lived on the wooden floor. This length of time is good proof.”

“Was there always what we call the matting, sir?”

“It was among the soft furnishings noble people used. It was only used on such occasions as rites and rests. Still, the wooden flooring was the basic style,” Kyojo said. “Hadn’t the wooden flooring been reasonable, the tatami-mat, all in all, would have come into general use much earlier, because they already had it for the drawing room.”

The road came to where it led to a slope. At three in the afternoon of mid-July when it was already in fall on lunar calendar, the heat was more intense than in the summer at its height. On that particular day, there was not a breeze, the air standing still, the sky ferociously clear in hard blue as if showing off its malicious will. The blistering sun beating down on the pedestrians’ backs might have been as palpably solid as if a hand could touch it. This solidity felt like a cubic weight pressing them down. Not to mention Noboru, Takezo whose back was loaded with the medicine basket, was soaked with sweat through and through. Their robes which were soaked with the sweat clung to their back and biceps. Both of them were busy wiping incessantly the sweat running in torrents from the forehead down the face to the scruff of the robe collar. How was Kyojo? He wasn’t sweating at all. —Noboru had noticed it for some time, since the summer was about to set in. Kyojo had a thickset build in a not fat but stout way. The muscles on both arms and broad shoulders formed lumps. His hands were large and his fingers stubby like a farmer’s. Stocky in build as he was, his waist alone was muscular and narrow like a young man’s. But a quick glance at him gave you the impression that he was an ox full of years. —Accordingly, Noboru thought that this heat had to be twice as brutal to him as to the rest of them. Notwithstanding, Kyojo walked on no matter how beastly the sun was. He couldn’t have cared less and, to top it off, never perspired unlike others. Noboru wouldn’t be surprised that Kyojo didn’t say it was hot when it was hot as Hades to the rest of the world, but he saw no reason whatsoever why not a bead of sweat stood on him in this inhuman heat of the summer sun.

—Are you not hot, sir?

At one time Noboru asked so. Kyojo quickly responded, Yes, I am.

The response sounded as if he was retorting what was wrong with it. Noboru was put off from asking further about Kyojo's perspiring.

"In this country, the climate is too humid. The tatami-mat is the cesspool moisture in the air, dust, and dirt accrue to," Kyojo went on, "Take any one house for example. Try and thrash a tatami-mat of the house which has just done the spring-cleaning, and you'll still see smoke of dust and dirt beaten out of it. The matting padded with straw and covered by plaited rush is most conveniently made so it can absorb moisture, dust, and dirt and hold them well. Of course the wealthy can alleviate this uncleanness to some extent. They get their tatami-mats changed often enough and cleaned thoroughly. But the poor can never afford such things. You've seen enough of atrocious conditions they are living in in backstreet tenement houses, and you should know it by now, Yasumoto. They leave their tatami-mats as they were initially laid out and use them over ten years. They can't afford to change them to new ones or sweep and clean them well enough. That's why the straw padding gets corroded from the moisture that's been absorbed and held in it over time. The corrosion is such that the corrupt padding bulges out of the holes of the worn-out rush covering like the insides of an animal. That's exactly where lice and fleas hatch and the inhabitants inhale specks of straw and dust and dirt as they breathe. The floor is low to the ground. The earth underneath is always dank. There's no chance of it getting dry. Just imagine, Yasumoto, if you sleep and eat in a place like this, it's a wonder you don't get sick.

Kyojo continued. Remodel them so they'll be floored with wood like it is in the infirmary, and the absorption of dampness coming up from under the floor can be prevented. Rush matting is easily exposed to sun and winds. Compare this alone and it's obvious which floor is more reasonable, wooden or tatami-matted, or else am I wrong, Yasumoto? They'd just plodded up the slope and were turning right at the crossroads from First Street of Hongo. As he listened to Kyojo explaining, Noboru marveled at his passion and pluck to put into practice right away what he believed right, rather than dallying on whether the theory of it was right or wrong. And he wouldn't care a hair

how others would oppose or what they'd grumble about.

—Someone like Kyojo would best suit a specific institute like an infirmary.

So thinking, Noboru wiped off the sweat with his hand towel. Just then, he caught a glimpse of a young man coming in the opposite direction. He was wearing an unlined summer kimono whose color was washed off and which was fastened by a three-foot-long sash. In straw sandals, one front bottom of his kimono tucked up in his hand, he came wobbling, and the moment he passed Kyojo, he bumped into him. He did it intentionally, and so it was evidently seen by Noboru who was coming after Kyojo. Caught off his guard, Kyojo faltered a moment. The young 'un took the moment's advantage and yelled:

“Hey, you moth-eaten dotard, what d’ya mean?”

Kyojo looked at the speaker and immediately nodded to him and said, “Oh, beg your pardon, please.”

“Beg ’er par’n, eh?”

The young 'un tucked up one of the sleeves with the hand that had held the bottom of his robe and said, “Hey you wake up, you dotard, d’ya say beg ’er par’n? Ya carelessly bumped into someone on this broad road. Yer thinkin’ ya’ll be par’ned?”

Noboru was stepping out in front before he knew it, but Kyojo held him back and he bent his head down politely and said, “As you see, I’m an old man. I was so absorbed in thinking I’ve been uncivil to you. I’m terribly sorry, but I’d like you to pardon me.”

“Blast it!” The young 'un looked daggers and glared up then glared down at Kyojo, but since it seemed he could find nothing more to take out on him, he spat aside and said, “Dammit! No good luck, it ain’t my day. You bruise my feelings. Watch careful, ya moth-eaten dotard.”

When they’d walked about a half block, Noboru said disgustedly:

“He’s a desperado, sir. He’s outrageous. I witnessed his intentional bump into you, sir.”

“I guess he wanted to do so,” Kyojo said nonchalantly. “People sometimes feel like doing a thing like that, above all while they’re young, —I remember doing the same thing when young.”

Noboru had been tempted to deal a blow on the young man. This temptation he brought on the tip of his tongue. But he withheld it. Instead, he went on walking silently, hands firmly fisted.

2.

In Okumi-Cho where the villa was located of the Nikko-Monzeki, the head priest of the shogun's temple in Nikko, there was a quarter clustered with small brothels. It was called "oka-basho," lined with rows of tenement terraced houses. The regulation allowed one tenement or brothel to have two prostitutes. Of course, this was superficial. The numbers of brothels and prostitutes were inconstant because the regulation alternated between sternness and lenience, some brothels sometimes banned from operating and closed, and in time, approved of and back in service.

Kyojo visited women in this quarter every ten days or so to see them. He made it compulsory for the prostitutes to see him and get his treatment if needed. He'd been doing it for two years. According to Mori Handayu, in the fall of the year before last, three prostitutes had run away for refuge to the infirmary. The three of them had a venereal disease and were skin and bones like pretas or hungry ghosts, denizens of the Buddhist hell of starvation, due to extreme undernourishment. Kyojo gave them first aid and summoned their employers, but they insisted they knew of no such women and wouldn't move a muscle. Thereupon Kyojo asked the constable to accompany him and went to see how things were in Mikumi-Cho.

—There's absolutely no ill-natured person in this world. There's in this world no person who's villainous.

So he was muttering to himself again and again when he returned to the infirmary. It didn't sound to mean he acknowledged "that there were absolutely no villains," but that he was telling himself that there ought to be no villains. So Mori Handayu recounted. Of the three who had come away for refuge, one died, and the two waited for recuperation

from the disease. In, say, a half year, they were almost put right again. One went home in Mito and the last one ran away.

—Because she had no kith or kin, Dr. Niide told her to stay in the infirmary and help with kitchen chores.

But she vanished into thin air, her whereabouts still unknown.

Noboru heard it all from Handayu. In fact, there were two prostitutes in the infirmary now. Kyojo had them in here and they were waiting to recuperate. When they were treated, Noboru was assistant to Kyojo, but never before had he been out to Mikumi-Cho on Kyojo's round of visits. —And on that day, on the usual round, when they turned the street of Hongo toward the Yushima-Tenjin Shrine, it came home to Noboru where Kyojo was heading for.

“Have you, well, —” when they came where the Monzeki villa came in view, Kyojo said Noboru, slowing down, “been to a brothel, licensed or unlicensed, Yasumoto?”

Noboru faltered a little as he said, “Well yes, sir. Three times or so when I was in Nagasaki.”

“As a doctor or a john?”

Noboru mopped his brow. “I went with a classmate who suggested going for some entertainment. But of course,” he emphasized, “I didn't touch a woman.”

“You didn't?” said Kyojo.

“I had a fiancée in Edo,” said Noboru, deadly in earnest. “She, while I was away, with another man, er—no, she breached the engagement. I had the belief that she'd wait for me, so even though I joined cronies for dames in brothels, I didn't feel like touching another woman.”

After having walked a while, Kyojo responded, “Sorry, I asked what I shouldn't. I'll cancel it. Expunge it from your memory, will you?”

Noboru wiped the sweat again.

In Mikumi-Cho, the quarter in question was encircled by the low charcoaled-surface board fences. Next to the entrance gate was the shed for fire watchmen. The black board fences were thoroughly time-worn, sagging all the way around, and in some spots the boards had flaked off. In the shed, the oilpapered shoji was left open. Through it were seen

some three men inside. Two were shed of their kimono from the waist above, half naked, and the other stark naked except for his loincloth. Recognizing Kyojo as he passed by, one whispered something and all three in one goggled Kyojo with sharp eyes, then glared at Noboru.

“At this time of year,” Noboru asked, “are fire watchers posted from the daytime here?”

“That’s an ostensible gesture,” said Kyojo. “Like other places, good-for-nothing men do the fire-watching. They’re bodyguards.”

Noboru didn’t quite get what Kyojo meant.

“Johns here are mostly samurai’s handymen and lackeys,” Kyojo explained. “Among them there are those who do mean things in the plumes borrowed from their masters. That’s when those men are needed. They come out to settle the troubles. They’re also supposed to keep the women from running away. Eventually, they’re hired by the brothels in this quarter. —But the relations are too entangled to unravel and explain in a moment. Wait and see and you’ll know in the course of time. —At the moment, you might as well remember this. You must never respond to whatever they may say to you.”

“Is there anything they may say about anything, sir?”

“Not that I know of here at the entrance,” answered Kyojo. “Probably, there won’t be anything of the sort, but I warn you just in case.”

“I got you, sir,” said Noboru.

Kyojo visited seventeen brothels and examined eight women. Among them was a thirteen-years-old who they said was a house maid. The proprietress said, “This is a relative’s girl. This house looks after her as a house maid.” The girl herself said she was fifteen, yet she didn’t look fifteen if a day. She only had a child’s physique, undeveloped breasts and waist, thin as a girl’s, and a childishly featured, lean face. Kyojo seemed to have been keeping tab on this girl for some time. He nabbed her and by use of compulsion examined her. Finishing, he strictly remonstrated with the proprietress. He said, “Who are you to make this girl trawl for johns? She’s still a child. Were I to report to the authorities, you’d land in jail and be detained behind the bars.”

“What’re you getting at, doctor? How could that happen?” The

proprietriss denied with mounting excitement. “This is a relative’s girl. I’ll admit I run despicable business like this, but I’m not the sort of woman who’ll offer a relative’s girl to johns. She’s the girl I’m looking after in place of her parents, doctor.”

“This shows she has syphilis.” Kyojo pointed at the boil in the corner of her mouth. “I’ve kept watching her. She has the same boils in other parts of her body. It’s a disease she couldn’t have contracted unless she’d come in contact with the john who had the disease.”

“Oh, that’s news to me, doctor,” she said and looked across at the girl. “Or else, —Toyo-chan, tell me, haven’t you been doing a bad thing where my eye can’t reach?”

The girl kept silent, no expression on her face.

“I say, Toyo-chan, you have no reply to make?”

“Stop it,” Kyojo said to the proprietriss. “Thanks. I’ve had enough of a poor travesty. Rather, you’d do better to send this girl back to her parents. Where are they?”

“It’s hard to know.”

Kyojo remained silent.

“They’d been in Narihira, Honjo until the year before last,” said the proprietriss. “They used to paddle to peddle vegies, doctor. They were a big family. They were hard put to live together. When they had to break up, they left me with this girl. After they left her, where did they go? It’s still unknown.”

Kyojo said, “Be honest, o-Toyo, and tell me where your home is.”

“I don’t know,” she shook her head. “Like my madam,” she began but promptly reworted, “Like my aunt says, I used to live with my family in Narihira.”

“You mustn’t lie,” Kyojo interrupted. “Don’t worry, I’ll be of help to you. So be honest and tell me the truth.”

Kyojo reassured o-Toyo that she didn’t need to worry or have anybody at all to stay back from. He’d be by her side. But she only parroted what the proprietriss had said and insisted that she was fifteen. At the end of his rope, Kyojo said that, under the circumstances, he’d take her to the infirmary. The proprietriss said to go ahead, that she’d only be

grateful for the riddance if he'd do so. She was saying to please take her with him and that she'd be obliged, when suddenly o-Toyo broke into tears. She said she wouldn't go. She expressed her refusal by shaking her shoulders back and forth.

"I wanna stay here," o-Toyo cried petulantly at the top of her lungs, "I won't go nowhere. I'll stay in this here house. Don't take me away."

She seemed to be telling the truth and the whole truth. Her voice and the look of her eyes from which tears were rolling down, well reflected her candid feeling that she wanted to stay there not because she was scared of the proprietress.

"Listen to me, dear," Kyojo said soothingly. "You have a bad disease. If you stay here and do nothing about it, you'll go either lame or mad because of it, I'll tell you, dear."

"No, no, no, no," o-Toyo screamed in tears. "I W-I-L-L stay here. You mustn't take me away, no you mustn't!"

3.

The proprietress was smoking on her long-stemmed blasé pipe the while. In the next room were two prostitutes, who, apparently holding their breath, made no noise at all, not so much as a rustle. The girl's crying and screaming, amplified all the more for it, seemed to have traveled far, and voices spoke outside the entrance. "What's up, what happened?" Two men violently strode into the earth entranceway.

"There you are, big sis," one of the men said. "What's up? Is there anything wrong, big sis?"

The both men were young, probably twenty-one or -two, hair done fashionably with the tied tail-end curved sideways up on the crown, in a stylish yukata robe fastened with an unpadded narrow sash and a new pair of leather-sole sandals.

"Oh, it's nothing. Don't kick up a fuss," the proprietress said putting down her pipe. "The doctor from the infirmary says this girl's sick and he'll take her to the infirmary to cure her of the disease. But she refuses

it and is crying her eyes out. That's all, bro."

"You mean he'll take her when she says no in frantic tears?" said one of them. "Cure her disease? It doesn't have to be in the infirmary, right? We have our own local doctors, don't we, Tetsu?"

"Seriously," croaked his companion. "The doctors in the infirmary ain't all we got in the world. Not that they can cure any incurable disease 'cos they're from the infirmary. What d'ya say, eh? If it holds true, then there ain't a soul in the whole world who dies. Diseases are diseases. Doctors are doctors. People slated to die are slated to die. That's that. There's no need of strangers putting their nose in another's business, tell ya, big shots."

"I don't wanna go. I'll stay here," o-Toyo screamed in tears writhing in intense loathing. "I don't wanna go nowhere. I will stay here."

"Takezo," Kyojo called. "Fetch the medicine basket."

Takezo was scowling at the two young men as he sat waiting on the wooden stepping-board to the floor. Hands fisted, he could have jumped at them at any minute. Called by Kyojo, he came back to himself and pushed the basket toward Noboru.

"Stop worryin', o-Toyo," the first young man was appeasing her, "You got us here. We won't let no one touch you, not a teeny-weeny bit. We could die for it."

"Seriously," the other agreed. "We've laid down our lives and selves fer this territory. We ain't livin' in this territory fer nothin', tell ya."

Meantime, Kyojo was handing the medicines to the proprietress. They were a decoction and a shell full of salve. He elaborately showed her how to take them. On the spot he spread the salve on the plaster and applied it to o-Toyo. She stopped crying instantly. The change was as phenomenal as if she wasn't crying or screaming like hell. She skipped sobs even, leaving no traces of having cried her eyes out up until now.

"I'll make it clear," Kyojo said to the proprietress. "Make her pick up no johns from now on. If you do, I'll report to the authorities. Get it?"

"I'm fine, doctor," the proprietress said, taking up her pipe, "but I can't keep tabs on her around the clock, all twelve toki a day. She knows too much of it for her age. You can do it while you're standing behind

the shield of shoji. Isn't that right, doctor?"

"Are you thinking any such logic will be accepted?"

"This girl, such as she is, is a human. Is it humane, by any means, to chain her all day, doctor?" Turning to the young men, she said, "Alright, you can go. Thanks for taking the trouble, Tetsu and Kané."

The young men went out. Once they were out, their voices were heard to say, Chicken-hearted doctor; Tell ya, he was *tremblin'*. They'd gone several yards away before they burst into silly laughter. At the cacophony of the laughter, Noboru saw Takezo's face turn dark-red with boiling anger. Kyojo couldn't have cared less. He said he'd get back in about ten days. Then they left the brothel.

They took the route from Mikumi-Cho to Shitaya. In Negishi Kyojo saw a retired grain wholesaler who was laid up in his retreat. Next they proceeded to Kanda to see a merchant, then to the lord of Matsudaira Oki inside the Kajibashi Shogunal Gate, getting around eight places one after another. In between, Kyojo, walking, talked to Noboru without a moment's pause.

"There's nothing as noble, as beautiful, as pure, and as reliable as human beings," said Kyojo. "But then, there's nothing as despicable, as impure, as stupid, as evil, as greedy, and as mean as human beings."

Kyojo goes on. The proprietresses of those brothels make a living by getting their women to earn money. Whether it's good or bad, they're making a living on them. They might at least be obliged to compensate them for what they get from them. But the fact is quite contrary in most cases. They force their women to earn as much as they can. But they scarcely give them time for peace and quiet even when they get sick. They ally themselves with local practitioners, and taking advantage of the alliance, they go on making them pick up johns until the moment they fall down. Until they get totally wasted useless and take to their bed, they give nothing enough to eat, let alone medication, waiting, as it were, for their early demise. They treat them inhumanly without the sense of guilt. Examples may be few, but the three women who came away for refuge to the infirmary were the cases in question. In Mikumi-Cho, some brothels currently have similar cases.

“I don’t deny prostitution. As long as human beings are slave to lust, it’s natural that circumstances should come about to satisfy human lust,” said Kyojo. “If prostitution is an evil institution, then restaurants are unnecessary, nay, more fundamentally, cooking and cuisine per se must be denied, because it’s against natural law which stipulates that foods be taken in a natural way. Artificial flavors added by cooking unnecessarily whet appetite.”

Kyojo continued. Naturally, restaurants will flourish more and prostitution must expand. Other than these, undesirable circumstances in favor of human desires that must be satisfied will come along manifold. Therefore, even though they’re all for evil purposes, it’s useless to criticize, remonstrate with those who enjoy them, and demolish them. Rather, you have to be brave enough to approve of their existence and to make an effort to better them in a wholesome way.

“The reason I say this is, I experienced them myself,” said Kyojo. “I don’t think I need to explain. I know theft, wallowed in whoring, betrayed my teacher, and sold a friend. I’m a man soiled with mud and bruised all over. Therefore, I know inside out the way they feel, such as thieves, harlots, and cowards.”

And all of a sudden, he clicked his tongue.

“Stupid!” he stomped angrily. “What’s made me worked up? There’s something wrong with me today.”

All in all, Noboru was dismayed.

—Theft, betrayal, selling a friend?

What was it all about? Had Kyojo really experienced them all? Or was it the parable of his reasoning? Either way, how come he came out with stuff like that and out of the blue? Noboru’s thinking oscillated as he went along wordlessly accompanied by Kyojo.

4.

That same evening, —after he’d had late supper as usual, Noboru was called by Kyojo and went to his room. Kyojo took up a package

standing next to his desk and produced it toward Noboru. He apologized to him for keeping it for a long time.

“What’s this, sir?” Noboru asked.

“Your notebooks and pictorial records. I borrowed them ages ago.”

Noboru nodded. Those were the things he’d made while studying in Nagasaki. They were his achievements. They were the records of all medical branches including pathology, anatomy, treatment, and dispensing pharmacy, which Noboru had presented at the behest of Kyojo when he first became an intern in this infirmary.

“I’ve copied what I thought was necessary, with the help of your good grace,” said Kyojo. “I’ll make good use of it, not for me but for my patients. You may want to disapprove of it but please understand.”

Noboru felt sweat ooze out in his armpits. He’d stubbornly refused, insisting, “They’re exclusively mine,” when he was ordered to turn in those notebooks and pictorial records. In particular, when it came to internal medicine, the notes included his originally developed methods of diagnosing and treating, which he’d striven to contrive. He was strongly convinced they’d help him emerge into the world of medicine with a good reputation. He’d gone and said: “There’s a great doctor well-reputed only for his method of treating cataract, isn’t there?”

“Today, I said I’d ever stolen, too,” said Kyojo giving a wry smile. “I think this is also one way of stealing, to be sure.”

“Please forgive me, sir,” Noboru bent his head deep down. “At that time, I lacked sensibility. When I think back on it, I get more than ashamed. I ask you, sir, please say nothing about it any more.”

“Like you, I’m ashamed of the way I was today,” said Kyojo, rubbing his beard hard. “I blabbered on and on about nothing that mattered, just stuff and nonsense. I tried to make myself look aloof and dignified. I was carried away by the rage and became fiercely assertive. It was disparaging of me.”

“You were indignant, sir,” said Noboru. “At the brothel where that girl called o-Toyo was, the two goons offended you with their abrasive language and you put up with them, sir. I think the pent-up anger began to erupt while we were heading for Shitaya, sir.”

“No, that’s not quite right. I did sympathize with them, but never did I feel angry with them.”

“—sympathize with them?”

“The number of seedy young men like that has been continuously on the increase for the past several years,” said Kyojo and heaved a deep sigh. “One reason for it lies in the Thrift and Frugality Ordinance. It’s good to forbid useless amusements and extravagances. But the control has been too tight on commercial transactions. They’ve stagnated. Consequently, the world is chock-full of merchants who have gone out of business and people who have lost jobs. Civil engineering projects like large-scale land reclamation, river-dike construction, and moat-digging have been suspended, and quite a few people have been laid off, —well, notwithstanding, those old family men or those tactful men may strive to find a way out and earn a living. But those young men who don’t know yet what they hope to be are easy to fall prey to social deviance. Apart from those who are seedy by nature, ordinary young people may wish to live like a good and honest man. There’s absolutely none who steps out to be called a hobbledehoy or outlaw so they’ll get ousted from the world at large.”

Kyojo added that not only the young men at the brothel today but those hanging around in the streets had his poignant sympathy.

“It’s the same with the proprietresses of brothels. When I see them treat their women ruthlessly and mercilessly, I feel like catching them and punishing them by hanging them heads down. At first I felt so, and even now the same anger often gets me. But then again when I look at them carefully, I find they aren’t always doing their business just out of greed. In view of poverty they’re mostly no better off than their employees.” Kyojo stopped there for brief moments and resumed in a way which blamed him. “—Those who deviate from society, those who are slighted, disliked, hated, and despised by the society they live in are, if anything, honest, timorous, and good-natured, but lacking in tact in most cases. When they’re driven into a cul-de-sac, they’ll either destroy themselves or run amok, losing their judgment. Usually, they’re pursued by the circumstances that’ll drive them into a deadlock.

Most of them end in self-destruction. But those who get desperate and commit bestial atrocities are tactless and that's all the more reason to tend to do things outrageously out of scale. I bet you've seen a plethora of them."

Kyojo goes on. It might be impossible to rid the immorality and vice of the world as it is, but if most evils come from poverty and ignorance, then an effort ought to at least be made to conquer them.

"You may say it ends in the effort that'll come to nothing. In my own case too, when I look back on the things I've ever put an effort into, I find most of them to have ended in nothing. My efforts came to nothing," Kyojo said. "The world is constantly on the move. Say, agriculture, industry, commerce, and learning, all go on advancing without a stop. No one can afford to pay attention to those who fall out of the ongoing advances, —but the grim fact is, there are also-rans, and that they're human. I feel the veracity and reality of human nature more in those who are inflicted by poverty and ignorance than in those who are prosperous and well off. It's in those suffering from social evils that I think I can have hope for the future."

He still continues. There are various aspects in what humans do. You might do something that'll appear leisurely going and it'll eventually prove effective when it's done. You might also do something that'll seem to come to nothing in the end, but only by carrying it on and steadily putting together piece by piece, will you find the effect produced in evidence when you're done. What I've thought and done might come to nothing, but I have a strong belief that it's worthwhile to commit all the rest of my life to an effort that might go for nothing. When he came as far as that, Kyojo shook his head violently.

"What am I trying to say? Whatever preposterous idea has got into my head!" He rubbed his beard forcefully. "I am not me, something terribly wrong with me, today. What did I ask you to come here for? Aw shucks, not for the kind of crap I've just been blabbering on about. I had something else to talk to you about."

Noboru looked at Kyojo.

"It's about Amano's daughter," Kyojo said, turning his eyes aside.

“You know it, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” said Noboru.

“I didn’t know what it was about in detail. Gempaku tried to explain to me but I declined. Not that I have the whole idea about it but I can guess,” said Kyojo. He put in a pause before he continued, “The gist of it is, Amano is asking you to marry his younger daughter. She’s eighteen. Her name is, what was she called?”

“If I’m not mistaken, she’s called Masawo.”

“You’re familiar with her?”

“I only vaguely remember her face.”

“The elder is still disowned by the family. If you marry the younger one, everything’ll be rounded off. Your parents want it this way. If you agree, have the intention, I advise you to go home in Koji-Machi once.”

“No. I’m still in training,” said Noboru. “I don’t want to think about getting married, sir.”

Kyojo turned on him, “Are you still bothered with the elder one?”

“If I say no, I’m lying, sir,” said Noboru, “but the training is much more important to me at the moment. I find it more worthwhile to live for. I don’t want to think about stuff like that for the time being, sir.”

“Then, how about, at least, getting engaged?”

Noboru got sharply wry in the face.

“Thank you, sir,” Noboru said looking away, “but I can’t make a promise like that.”

Kyojo continued staring Noboru in the face, but, after a few blank moments, turned around back to his desk and, clearing his throat, said:

“That’s all there is.”

Noboru bowed, took up the package, and rose to his feet.

5.

After he’d got back to his private room and put away the package of his records into the cabinet, Noboru dropped by Mori Handayu’s room. He was filling in the chronicle he kept, the andon lamp pulled next to

his desk. Keeping the daily records of the inpatients was Handayu's clerical routine responsibility.

"I'm finishing soon," he said. "There's a round cushion over there. Use it and wait a little."

Noboru took the cushion nearby and applied it under him as he sat.

What he came to see Handayu for was his interest in the information Handayu may have possessed about Kyojo. In his feeling there had to be something behind what he'd heard from Kyojo today, such as his having ever stolen, betrayed his teacher, and sold a friend. There again had to be something to be told about behind the fact that, despite the extremely high reputation for his medical knowledge and skills which made feudal lords and rich merchants treat him with their utmost reverence, he was still single and leading an inconvenient single man's life. Handayu was Noboru's big senior in their internship and much closer to Kyojo. Noboru expected Handayu would provide Kyojo's personal biographical facts, but he found he knew almost nothing.

"Dr. Niide never talks about himself," Handayu said. "From what I heard about him, he's a pupil of Baba Kokuri, and Udagawa Yo'an in Kajibashi is his junior from the Baba school."

"Speaking of Baba, he's from the school of Western learning?—" Noboru questioned with a ring of surprise in his voice, "And do you say Dr. Niide is a senior of Udagawa Yo'an in the same school?"

"I didn't hear it directly from him, so I have no idea how much of it is true. But as far as I know, among others Dr. Niide was the pupil Master Baba trusted and loved most," said Handayu. "Therefore, he'd intended to have him designated successor to his school. But Dr. Niide loathed it and left the school. He went to Nagasaki where he studied Dutch medicine and that's that."

At the mention of Dutch medicine, Noboru's heart missed a beat. Once when a patient had died of the cancerous tumor of the pancreas, Noboru recalled, Kyojo had used fluent Dutch to explain the conditions. At the time, Noboru presumed Kyojo had picked up the language from his notes. That Kyojo had studied in Nagasaki, Noboru brooded, meant that he might be better versed in the state-of-the-art medicine than

Noboru himself. Supposing he'd been very good at foreign languages, he ought to have nothing to learn from his notes because medical books in Dutch were available here in Edo, too, and because, having practiced medicine through the years, he had plenty of firsthand experiences in treating patients.

—Then, why did he copy my notes and pictures?

Most probably, Noboru concluded, Kyojo had the humbleness to learn from anything that came his way. When Noboru thus came to this conclusion, he rankled at his indiscretion, lashing himself viciously in the depths of his heart.

“What makes you ask things like that?” said Handayu. “Was there anything wrong with Dr. Niide?”

Noboru told him about what had happened today.

“Well, I don't know,” said Handayu. “That he betrayed his teacher might mean that he left his teacher's school. That is probably to say, he turned his back against his teacher's intention to make him successor to his language school. But coming to stealing and selling a friend, they're just figments of his imagination. I don't think they refer to Dr. Niide's biographical facts. This is my wild guess, though.”

“I thought so, too,” Noboru said, nodding, “but he sounded like he was making a confession and he was as serious as any as he said that. However, I mustn't take his word for it. I agree with you.”

“He's strictly self-contained, you know.”

Soon Noboru stood to his feet to leave.

They next went to Mikumi-Cho on the seventh day counting from the day of their last visit. It looked like rain. It was a stifling muggy afternoon as if the spell of May rains might have returned. Among the six visits they were supposed to make on their round on the day, the third one turned out to be most unpleasant. It was to Tokubei of Izumi-Ya, a pawn broker and money exchanger in Shirogane-Cho, Nihonbashi. His wife who was forty-one years old had been suffering palsy about a half year. Kyojo had been seeing her. Like the next rich merchant, Tokubei had been charged by Kyojo exorbitantly for his wife's treatment and medication, which, it seemed, Tokubei had been

thinking unjust. When Kyojo finished treating her and dispensed newly prepared medicine, Tokubei who was attending them close by began, offering tea, with a sardonic expression on his face:

“May I be excused for asking abruptly, doctor? But I hear there’s this saying: Medicine isn’t bound up with life and death.”

“Yes, so I do,” said Kyojo.

“Well then, how can I say,” said Tokubei, feigning ignorance. “That is to say, doctor, if I’m not mistaken, those who are doomed to recover recover, those who are doomed to die die. Doctors don’t have to do with this matter of life and death. Is it right, doctor?”

“Could mean that.”

“It follows then that there’s no difference between good doctors and bad doctors. Nor is there any difference between medicines expensively prepared by a doctor and medicines you can come by cheaply at an apothecary’s, aren’t I right?” Thus concluding, he added affectedly, “Surely this is apart from a well-reputed doctor like Dr. Niide.”

“You don’t have to set me aside,” Kyojo responded. “Like you say, there’s no big difference between doctors or between medicines. That’s true. But people, influenced by the reputation that such-and-such a doctor is very good, pay a fortune for his treatment. Or else they hunt high and low for and come by medicines though their effects are totally unknown. All this is more ridiculous than throwing good money after bad. —Do you have anything more to ask me?”

“Well, I’m awfully sorry, doctor. It seems I’ve offended you.”

“Oh no, if this much,” said Kyojo, getting up to his feet, and laughed, “should offend me, I can’t live up to you as a beat-the-drum-for-a-rich-merchant doctor. No need of worrying about it, thank you.”

Once out, Kyojo spat on the street, swearing “Miser!” After that, he went around to see three more patients. But his truculence didn’t seem to leave him. Noboru, who had attended Kyojo on his round of visits to rich people, hadn’t heard anyone give vent to such an insult in the face of Kyojo before. No domain lords even, let alone merchants, would ever fail to show their utmost courtesy toward Kyojo when they received him. That was the red tape of formalities.

—Is there anyone that could be that saucy!

When he called back Tokubei's pretense of ignorance, sardonic tone of voice, and mean expression lingering on his wan face, Noboru was also assailed by disgust and unable to stomach him.

When they were finished with the sixth, last visit on their round, Kyojo looked up at the sky and whispered, "Well then," and for a while loitered, standing still where he was. Takezo swayed up his medicine basket to where it sat comfortably on his back. As he did it, he looked into Noboru inquiringly. Noboru signed back to him to stay quiet.

"Seems too early to go back," said Kyojo as if waking from a reverie. "Right, we'll stop by Mikumi-Cho to see them there."

And he began to walk in high spirits.

As if stomping out his bad humor, he crossed the shogunal avenue of honor in a powerful long stride, walking from Matsushita-Cho through the samurai residential quarter to the narrow steep slope. He stalked his way straight up the slope in one breath with a jovial gait to Mikumi-Cho. Takezo, weighed down by the medicine basket, was soaked in perspiration. He caviled under his breath to Noboru:

"It's like he's avenging that miser on us. Why must we be losers? Isn't it ridiculous, doc?"

Without replying, Noboru looked back over his shoulder. Takezo mopped his forehead with his ruffled hand towel and wrung the sweat off it so Noboru could see it. It came off as if the towel had just been taken out of the water in a basin, in an incredibly large quantity. Noboru smiled lopsidedly and was about to say, "Knock it off," when, in spite of himself, he looked across at the man who was just passing him. He came away in the direction of the prostitution quarter. In passing Noboru, he glanced at him with an odd look in his eyes. The look glinted with an unnamed sharpness which was so displeasing that Noboru looked back and saw him looking back over his shoulder at him, too. But the man turned away from him right away and trotted his way into an alley.

"He's the young 'un we ran into the other day," Takezo stuttered.

6.

“The young ’un we ran into the other day?”

“It’s the fella the other day bumped into Dr. Niide on purpose on the street in Hongo.”

“That so? I didn’t notice.”

“I knew him by his face,” Takezo said. “That rascal, put off ’cos he failed to make nothing happen, scurried away, you remember, doc?”

“Seems so,” Noboru said.

On the day, Kyojo got around all of the seventeen brothels. Some of them refused to have him in but he lent no ears to them. Despite their refusal he pushed his way into the houses and called out the women. Should he have the least suspicion of anyone having a disease, he went out of his way and saw them. When he found them afflicted by a disease, he medicated them and warned the employers of the disease according to the degree of their condition.

Kyojo gave orders, such as “Give this woman ten days of rest,” “Don’t let her pick up johns till next time I come,” and with very serious cases, “Send her home.” Most of the time, the proprietresses didn’t in the least take his orders reluctantly, perfunctory obedience though it might have been. They were given free treatment and medication and naturally appreciation ought to be expressed, but some only showed recalcitrance:

“This woman alone makes money here in this house,” protested a proprietress. “This other one, johns only pass her. She picks up none. Doesn’t get none in three days in a row. Should we have the hen that lays golden eggs take fifteen days of rest, we’d go out of business. Or, doctor, are you saying you’re giving us fifteen-day sustenance instead?”

“Give her fifteen days,” said Kyojo. “Otherwise, you’ll land in much more trouble than going out of business, mind you.”

With a taut expression on her face, the proprietress glowered at Kyojo as she went gimlet-eyed, the look of which might put him to

death with a pointed hard glare.

At o-Toyo's house, the proprietress said, "She's here no more." The girl had been all worry if she wouldn't be taken to the infirmary. She'd run away on the early morning of three days before, without anyone knowing it. Because she'd had nowhere to go, there was no way of finding her. Was the proprietress telling the truth? The truth was, Noboru suspected, that she'd sold the girl to another brothel. Last time, o-Toyo unawares let "madam" slip out as she called the proprietress, but she corrected it to "aunt" helter-skelter. It was obviously no truer that she had been looked after as a girl of a relative of the proprietress than what the proprietress was telling now. This in mind, Noboru turned to Kyojo, who didn't specially go further into it but only kept listening to her. After a while he rose to leave.

On getting out of the seventeenth house in the quarter, Kyojo was heard to mutter, "I wish that poor girl would see a doctor somewhere." It was nearing twilight. There were a couple of johns to be who looked already mellow, talking under the eaves of this brothel and that to the women displaying themselves to trawl johns and laughing in a frolicking way. Kyojo and his attendants made their way through them, and were almost at the gate of the quarter, when suddenly two men appeared and stood in the middle of the road as if to block Kyojo's passage. Both were young. One was half naked from the waist above and the other stark naked except for his loincloth and stomach band of bleached white cotton. This naked man spoke to Kyojo. He said something which meant they'd better not to put their feet into this quarter. He said it in an oddly humble and affable tone. Only, his eyes were glowering daggers.

Kyojo was gazing at that young 'un the while, then placidly asked, "How come I must not be around?"

"They say their quarter will lose this razzmatazz," he answered. "At first you brought the constable with you. You did it once only. That's that. But your infirmary is backed by the government and you're a doctor there. Naturally, a person of your sort being in and out will scare away guests to the houses."

Kyojo interrupted and said, “Don’t you beat about the bush. Straight to the point. You’re hired and you’re here, aren’t you? Who hired you?”

“The entire quarter.”

“Talk like an honest man,” said Kyojo, pressing him harder to the point. “I’ve been coming here something like two years. Should I stand in their business, they ought to have staked a claim against my coming a long time back. Who hired you? Be honest. Out with it. Who?”

“A dodo full of guts, ain’t you, eh?” said the young ’un, turning on his companion. “All this kindness of ours is meant fer the sake of ya, but it doesn’t seem we can come to no amicable settlement.”

“Oh-ho, he regards us as cheap and easy,” the half naked man said. He raised his hand and shouted, “Hey guys, y’all come out over here.”

Noboru looked back over his shoulder and saw three more in the back, who had rushed here. Two of them were the ones who had argued with Kyojo about o-Toyo the other day, and the other one was the one who had passed them on the way here on that same day, or according to Takezo, he was the man who “had bumped into Kyojo on First Street of Hongo.” So Noboru recognized. “Yasumoto, —” said Kyojo. “Stay back with Takezo. Stay still with him. Nothing doing, get it?”

“That’s not fair, sir.”

“Don’t stand in my way,” Kyojo said and held Noboru back. “I’m fine. I can take care of myself, so stay back. No-ooo, you hear me? I’m telling you to stay behind.”

Noboru backed aside with Takezo. Fear seized him so hard his knees shook, and his mouth was dry with no water to gulp down. He looked at Takezo and saw his face puffed up in red, maybe, from anger, but saw no sign of trepidation as intense.

“Listen, old dodo,” the naked man was saying, “lemme give ya a tip, think of yer age an’ withdraw from us, won’tcha? Follow my tip and we’ll let ya go this minute. But should ya stick to obstinacy in spite of yer age, ya’d be crippled for the rest of yer life, mind ya.”

“Guys, do you know this play on words about doctors?” said Kyojo. “Remember, this is what a fella getting’ away spits out after he had a scuffle with a doctor: Get treated by the same doctor and you’ll risk

your life. —You guys, give it second thought, I warn you. I won't take your lives. But be careful. I may go to some length, so a couple of your arms and legs will snap broken. Get it?"

Was the naked man the leader of those young 'uns? He went up to Kyojo, mocking him with a derisive giggle as if he could easily twist him around his little finger.

"Hey, dodo," he challenged, "d'ya really mean to get us?"

"I warn you, you'd better stop it right here," said Kyojo. "I really mean it. Before nothing serious happens, you'd better stop."

The man, without a moment's pause, jumped at Kyojo.

Noboru was absolutely appalled, standing there, mouth agape in a stupor. He distinctly saw the naked man jump at Kyojo, but in no time they plunged into a fracas and he couldn't tell what was happening to the six men who were entangled and flew across one another. In the middle of this jumble, he heard bones breaking with a gruesome crack, flesh thudding against flesh, and fists thumping and hitting, along with the men's shouts and screams. It was within what seemed a very short time in which Noboru counted his breath for fourteen or sixteen times, that he found four of the men were prostrated on the ground and that the last one was pinioned down to the ground by Kyojo who was sitting astride him. The prostrated men were all emitting groans of pain and one among them was writhing, crying, and clutching his right leg.

"Now, out with it," said Kyojo, strangling with his hands the naked man, the apparent leader of the gang. "Who hired you to attack us? Out with it, who? Don't you come out with it or I'll strangle you to death."

The man wheezed and said, shaking his head from side to side, "Dr. Go'an."

"Who do you say? Say it clear."

"The young," said the man, gasping, "—Dr. Ida in Okachi-Machi."

7.

Ida Go'an? Such nonsense he talks! thought Noboru. Go'an was

a medical staff member of the infirmary. He was a practitioner in Okachi-Machi with his father Gentan. Father and son commuted to the infirmary to carry out their responsibilities. Stupid of him to fabricate such a quibble, Noboru thought to himself. But Kyojo let his hand go of the man and stood up.

“You’re sure of it, aren’t you?”

“There are others, too.” The man, sitting up, sat squarely, applying his hand to this throat to assuage the pain as he responded. “We’ve long been hired by Mr. Aramaki in here Yushima and the doctor at the foot of the Tenjin Shrine.”

“Do they practice medicine?”

The man nodded and coughed. “They do. This time we got urged by Dr. Ida and attacked you. Setting aside Dr. Ida, Mr. Aramaki and Mr. Seki’an at the foot of the Tenjin Shrine are, as it were, making a living exclusively off this red light district.”

“I got you. Quit it,” Kyojo said. “You, get on your feet and go find a couple of scrap boards.”

Kyojo showed him the boards be this wide and this long. The man wobbled up to his feet.

Kyojo saw around the four prostrated men one after another. All of them were wounded. Two had their arm fractured, one passed out, and the other one had his shinbone fractured. They all had black eyes and bruises on the cheekbones, blood dripping from the cut lips, on top of the bumps here and there on their bodies. Kyojo began treating. He began with the man who had passed out. He applied resuscitation and restored him to life. Kyojo had Takezo open the medicine basket and treated them all on the double. —In spite of that boisterous hurly-burly, all the brothels had their doors shut tight, and there was not a soul to be seen around. Naturally, they may all have been afraid of getting involved. Kyojo treated them quickly. When the naked man brought boards, he had Noboru tear bleached cotton cloth so he could apply them as splints to the broken arms of the two men.

“It seems that I’ve overdone it. Right,” Kyojo mumbled to himself off and on. “I should have softened it. ’s right. This is horrible. Violence

like this shouldn't be used. I ought to have known better. Doctors shouldn't do a thing like this."

Noboru looked at Takezo.

"This isn't the first time," Takezo stuttered in a whisper. "Surprise, those rascals don't know him. The same thing happened a number of times in the past, doc."

Noboru shook his befuddled head, giving a deep sigh.

"Now, all set. Take them." Kyojo stood to his feet and said to the naked man, "I've only given first aid. Take them to Ida and get him to do it over."

"But," the man hesitated, "now that things've turned out as they have, I find it hard to take 'em to Dr. Ida. No way, sir."

"If it's hard, then take them to my infirmary," said Kyojo. "It'll provide you all not just treatment on the injuries but advice for finding a job as well, if you want one."

"Thanks much, sir," said the man and scratched his head.

"It seems I've overdone it," Kyojo said again. "Forgive me."

And he turned back at Noboru and resumed walking his way.

"It's a sad thing," Kyojo said to Noboru as he made his way along the dusking streets, "that those doctors ally themselves with brothel owners and exploit their women unjustly, without giving them appropriate medication or treatment. They cheat out of the women exorbitant payments for treatment and medication. I've been aware of it over time. They are inhuman, worse than robbers and murderers, to exploit those pitiful women to their last penny without giving appropriate services. Today, I hit the roof, my anger erupted, —but a thing like this is a hard nut to crack."

"What's the hard nut to crack, sir?" Noboru retorted angrily as if defying him. "The Ida father and son are the medical staff members of the infirmary. They abuse the title of the infirmary doctor to go on being local practitioners. They take all that trouble to employ goons."

Kyojo raised his hand and stopped it. He said, "Let us set aside the Ida father and son. I'll sort out their problem. I'm pondering on the other men called an Aramaki and a Seki'an."

“They’re both in the same boat, they’re inhuman, aren’t they, sir?”

“But they are also humans,” Kyojo said in a tone that betrayed he was spent out. “It is a sad thing that we must acknowledge them as humans too. In all probability, they have a family. They themselves are well aware that they weren’t cut out to be doctors, but what else could they do if they had no other means to make a living? —In order to support their family, wife and children, and live for the day, they cling to what little skill they’ve acquired for their living and no choice, even though they know it inside out to be inhuman.”

“But, sir, it’s irrational.”

“Oh, it beats me, it really beats me,” Kyojo said and shook his head. “Reason? I have no use for it. This person is a human and so is that person. This person must live and that person has the right to live, too. Only, the thing is, there’s something wrong somewhere. What’s wrong and where? —Ha! My brains are muddled. I seem to have gone completely gaga.”

Noboru snickered in the throat. Kyojo’s expression ‘gone completely gaga’ (though different in its meaning) reminded him of the spectacular scene in which Kyojo only just now twisted five vigorous young rascallions around his little finger and flung them away. In retrospect, the scene tickled him to a snicker. Kyojo gazed at him with an inquisitive look in his eyes.

“No, no, it’s nothing, sir,” Noboru said shaking his head. “It’s nothing.”