

Heart Matters* : Short Stories**
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A Translation

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The Wicket in the Back Is Open

1

The road was narrow. On both sides lined the houses of samurai warriors. Count the houses one by one as you go down west until you get to the next block, for something like one hundred and twenty yards from the cross of Kura-machi, and you will find the road ran parallel to the earthen walls on either side because the houses on both sides exposed their backs to the road. There was one exception in the middle of the

* The title was newly given by the translator; the author himself did not bring out a collection of any of his short stories under any such title pregnant of a number of interpretations. The translator leaves it to the reader how it is to be interpreted.

** Translated from : 「裏の木戸はあいている」 (“Ura no Kido wa Aite-iru”), 「将監さまの細みち」 (“Shōgen-sama no Hosomichi”), and 「雨あがる」 (“Ame Agaru”), in Shinchō Bunko, Shinchō Publishing Co. Tokyo. 2012 and (first story) 2007 (first ed. 1972 (first story) and 1971), respectively. These stories first appeared in the magazines: *Kōdan Club*, Extra Issue. November 1955; *Shōsetsu Shinchō*, June 1956; and *Sunday Mainichi*. July 1951, respectively.

houses on the north side. The house had a wooden black fence with a planked roof on the top instead of an earthen wall enclosing the house. The fence was installed with a wicket in one corner. —Scarcely did a soul walk along the road during the daytime, even. By night it was pitch dark except when the moon was out, not to mention. Albeit, as often as not, somebody dissolved into this darkness (as though dreading to be seen) and come to open the wicket of the fence belonging to this house. The wicket was not locked. Sliding the bolt opened the door easily only with a light *click*, toward the inside of the household. . . . Men came, women came, so did the old. They all sneaked their way to the door, opened it, got into the yard, and then again, doing something a while, sneaked out, closing the door behind. They would go away exactly the same way as they came, carefully lest their foot sound be heard.

2

O-Matsu halted and looked back over her shoulder.

It was an evening of early October (of lunar calendar). It was already after ten. A thread of a crescent moon was hanging in the mid air. Winds a bit warm for early winter were blowing. It was a back street o-Matsu turned into from the cross of Kura-machi. There was not a soul to be seen around. She went along the road. She was a commuting maid who served at an inn called “Tomoe-ya” in Oke-machi. She made a detour to come here on her way home.

O-Matsu had walked about a half block along the earthen walls, when she stopped again, turned back, and called across the pitch darkness: “Who’s that? —”

“Who’s that?” o-Matsu said. “What the heck are you coming after for?”

At her query, there was one who wandered out from the darkness. Robed casually, straw-sandaled, he had his sword dangling loosely from his waist.

“You’re quick to pick up,” said the man, coming up to her. “You’ve

got such a bad nose to sniff out my following.”

“It’s Mr. Fujii, isn’t it?” o-Matsu said. “What do you want from me?”

“That is my question. What ill wind has blown you here to a place like this?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“I can guess, tell you,” said Fujii Jushiro. “You’re hard up for money and you mean to raise it at somebody’s. Isn’t that what you mean?”

“What of it then? You’ve got nothing to do with it.”

“Who do you warm to?” Jushiro said. “In spite of the reputation you have at the inn that men are no use for you, you had a beau as I suspected. Who? Kawamoto, is it?”

“Oh unjust conjecture. But it’s very like you. Really, you are the way you are. You’re a nasty piece of work. So you are,” o-Matsu said. “Like you say, I am pinched for money. Mom’s been laid out sick for ages, and my brother’s a rapsallion, and I’ve got loads of unpaid bills, . . . however, I haven’t as yet gone under as to reduce myself to prostitution, let me tell you, sir.”

“Oh, don’t be in dead earnest like that,” Jushiro tittered. “Of course I wouldn’t say you’ve gone under so much. But what I’m asking is, who you are going to visit on the sly at this late hour and try to get money out of?”

“Does it have to do with you, Mr. Fujii?”

“You’ve ever asked me for money, haven’t you, eh?”

“You said you’d lend me money. But you didn’t, instead you only attempted to do me dirty things.”

“I am the third son of the house and it means I’m not always rolling in money, tell you. But if I intended to, I’d raise small sums such as five and ten ryo. And so will I—,” Jushiro said. “Only, in transactions, you must get for what it’s worth if you pay money. This is the way the world goes, right?”

“You sound exactly like the son of a father in top management.”

“I mean things are not as easy as you think in the world.”

“Not only things but humans are as well, let me remind you,” o-Matsu retorted. “I may be foolish but I know about you inside out now, sir.”

“What about me?”

“I heard almost from A to Z. Order me to repeat, and I can repeat, sir.”

“Pack of lies. Hun, there’s a lot of baloney in what the world fusses about, tell you,” Jushiro said. “Do you possibly believe what the world says?”

“Neither yes nor no. I don’t have a bit to do with it,” o-Matsu said. “So, pray don’t follow me in any way any longer. I’d never ever be at your disposal, should I ever be killed.”

“Why not go now?” Jushiro said. “He will also be expecting you, won’t he, eh?”

“I’m begging you pray not to follow me, sir.”

“You want to leave me out about who you’re going to meet, don’t you?”

“Do as you like, sir,” said o-Matsu and began walking. “I don’t know him, either. If you don’t think you’re ashamed of your status, I don’t mind you coming after me, why not, sir?”

“You are not familiar with him, eh?”

Without answering, o-Matsu proceeded. As Jushiro came after her, he said indecisively, “Are you going to deceive me?” ; “Shall we talk it over?” ; and so forth.

“Oy, that’s Takabayashi’s residence,” he said as he saw o-Matsu come to a halt. “That’s where Takabayashi Kihe’e lives, you know?”

Without bothering with him, she fumbled for the end of the wooden fence with a planked roof. On finding the bolt of the wicket, she slid it to the right. Jushiro came up to her and held her shoulders down and whispered: “Your beau Kihe’e?” o-Matsu didn’t answer. She shook his hands off her shoulders and gingerly pushed the wicket toward the inside of the household. When the door was open, they saw a high window beyond and the light inside the house feebly reflecting on the paper-mounted lattice window. —O-Matsu entered by the wicket. Jushiro craned his neck and only put it inside to peep. Right away o-Matsu made for the box placed to the right upon entering and on this side of the fence. She lifted the lid. The box was something like six inches long and a foot wide, and its top board was hinged so as to open toward her as the

lid of the box. Opening the lid, she groped for what was inside the box.

“Ah-ha, that was here!” Jushiro throatied low. “Now I see that rumor was true.”

A little sound was heard in the box. Then she grabbed out something, and counted it on her palm by the dim light that was coming from the window. There were small pieces of silver and Nanryo (rectangular pieces of silver) and pennies (one-mon-sen coins) as well. Surprise, surprise, surprise. Was the rumor true? Jushiro muttered. I thought it a sheer lie, the rumor was. I only thought no such ludicrous thing should be practiced in this hard world. Well, well, well, it was—, he shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. Well, it seemed most probably true, he said. What surprised him more was, it was Takabayashi Kihe’e who was the benefactor. O-Matsu picked out some from among what were on her palm. She returned what were left of them to the box. She was about to close the lid, when Jushiro scuttled up to her nimbly, took hold of her hand that held the lid, and said, Wait.

“Wait a mo. I’ll take this opportunity and borrow some, too.”

“Let go of my hand,” o-Matsu said. “You must not kid.”

“Anyone who’s hard up is allowed to borrow, aren’t they? So I learned insomuch as the rumor got around to me.”

“Pray, stop kidding, sir,” o-Matsu said. “This is a precious little treasure poor people who can’t scrape today’s life can enjoy. The privilege to borrow money here is limited to these poor people. There’s no money here for drinking at inns and gambling.”

“That’s up to Takabayashi Kihe’e.”

“I will shout.”

“I’ll be pleased to hear your shout. You may trill.”

All of a sudden, o-Matsu screeched, “Somebody come, please!” Taken aback, Jushiro said: “Oh, knock it off.” He waved his hands as he said so and leaped almost sideways and got out of the wooden fence. — The lattice window slid open and one samurai got to his feet and looked down at her through the darkness.

“Who’s that?” the samurai said. “What’s the matter?”

“I’m someone who’s here to borrow your money,” o-Matsu said. “I’m

sorry to disturb you and thank you very much.”

O-Matsu bent down low in thanks. The samurai at the window remained standing without a response.

3

Fujii Jushiro sat on ceremony. He planted his hands on the lap of the hakama loose-legged pleated formal trousers, and shrugged his shoulders, which buried down his head in the dent made by the shrug between the shoulders. Kosuke was fortyish, of a small build, and looked like an artless man, but now the look of his eyes was inexorable due to the distrust he had toward Jushiro. He was an assistant of Hamada-ya. Since it was a purveyor of the domain government, Takabayashi Kihe'e was familiar with him. Kihe'e was the comptroller cum chief controller of the government jurisdiction. His father had long been the commissioner of finance and had been closer to Kosuke than Kihe'e was.

“I'm afraid I can't go in more detail because the story includes personal names,” Jushiro said, head bent down. “I didn't indulge in drinking or whoring on that money. I did need as much as that, and my prospect was that I ought to have been able to return by the deadline.”

Kosuke coughed. Jushiro paused, filched a quick side glance, and went on, “I ought to have been able to pay back by the deadline. Honest.” Kihe'e was listening and nodding at word by word with meek eyes. It was not so much understanding Jushiro as placating him by lending his ears. So it looked.

“That's why I asked him to wait another month, but he said he couldn't,” Jushiro said. “He said if I didn't pay him back right away he'd meet with my elder brother at home to ask him to return for me.”

“Oh yes, I will,” Kosuke said, “because I can't trust you any more. How many times have I had to be deceived by you?”

Kihe'e raised his hand and said, “Please don't raise your voice.”

“Excuse me, sir, but you do not know what Mr. Fujii is like,” Kosuke said. “He is not the sort of a person who will be intimidated by this

shout of voice, sir.”

“You may be right,” Kihe’e said as he looked to the screen doors. “It’ll be a little inconvenient if the house hears us, you know. So please.”

“If it comes to pass, —” Jushiro continued. “If he comes and talks to my brother, it’s obvious that I’ll be disowned this time because I’ve made a blunder before and his temper is as you see it to be.”

Kosuke made another cough.

“You, Kosuke,” said Kihe’e as he looked at him, “must you have it paid now?”

“Yes, sir,” Kosuke nodded, “however, if you guarantee, I can manage to wait a couple of days longer. But that’s all I can give. I can’t wait any more.”

Kihe’e rose to his feet and made for the living room. Presently he came back and produced to Kosuke money placed on paper. Jushiro’s head remained hanging low. But by that time a look of relief surfaced on his face. After all there was a smile about his mouth, even.

“There you go. Here’s half,” Kihe’e said to Kosuke. “The rest of the half I will bring to the shop tomorrow or, it depends though, the day after.”

“It’ll inconvenience me at the shop, sir,” Kosuke shook his head. “I raised him the money confidentially to the shop. The shop is not allowed to lend a penny to Mr. Jushiro at his brother’s request. I was told such a pathetic story I got careless enough to get my guard down and let myself be deceived, though.”

“Wait, wait,” Kihe’e interrupted. “When you have your money back, it means you haven’t been deceived, right? —Well then, where do you want me to bring the rest?”

Kosuke responded, “I’ll come to you.” Kihe’e insisted on coming to bring himself, at which Kosuke said, “Then, I would like you to come by my place, sir.” As he commuted to the shop and he lived off Second Street, Kawabata-cho, said Kosuke as he explained in detail how to get there and added, if it’d be convenient he preferred early morning or evening. He counted the money and wrapped it with the paper as it came on and took out a big time-worn leather wallet from the chest pocket, putting the wrap into it. The wallet was attached to a string, which slung

from his neck.

“May I be excused when I say this, sir?” Kosuke said. “Although the money has come back, it remains true that I’ve been deceived. He was fraudulent for sure. When I was told his story, I shed my share of tears. But when I looked into it, it all turned out to be a pack of sheer lies. He irresponsibly came out with whatever came into his head, all tarradiddles, sir.”

“You say such a preposterous thing,” Jushiro shouted. “You, bastard, say stuff like that, but how about you? Think back on yourself. You, yourself, are privately abusing the shop’s money and making profits on it. I know it, tell you.”

“Quit it, I’ve had enough,” Kihe’e restrained.

“What?” Kosuke turned defiant. “What on earth do you say I did with the shop’s money?”

“Thanks, but not for me any more. Stop,” said Kihe’e, waving his hand. “Ju-san, will you stop? Please don’t let Kayo hear it, or it will only make her too much worried.”

Kosuke stared at Jushiro with angry eyes, then he bid goodbye to Kihe’e and took off.

“He’s a rogue,” Jushiro said as he motioned with his chin in the direction in which Kosuke had just left. “He lent me money for greed. It is the official money of the shop. Official as it is, he collects the interests and makes them his.”

“Let’s not hear about a thing like that any more.”

“I’m telling you the truth. He lends to others and yet the interests are due to him. It’s common knowledge.”

“Let’s not hear about it,” Kihe’e said meekly. “Other than that, what do you intend to do with the marriage into the Asanuma family?”

“I’m not enthusiastic,” Jushiro said in an affected tone. “The daughter is too old, and, well, I met her once and I found her looks were not to my liking. I am reluctant.”

Kihe’e smiled sorrowfully and said, “Well, think on it hard.”

On the following day, —Kihe’e visited Nigyū Hisanosuke at the next-door house. The Nigyū inherited the position of the government execu-

tive over generations. Hisanosuke himself was the manager of *yoriai* direct retainers of the shogun. He was, thirty-two, two years Kihe'e's senior, and was good friends, closer to Kihe'e (and *vice versa*) than anybody else.

"No problem," Hisanosuke nodded pleasantly after he'd listened to Kihe'e. "—Recently, I've been stuck in work and unable to come by. How has Matsu-san been doing?"

"Oh him, he seems all right now," said Kihe'e as he nodded with his meek eyes. "He's keen to get out of bed, but, as you know, Kayo is neurotic about him."

Hisanosuke gave a nod and, standing to his feet, went. Immediately, he returned with something wrapped in paper. "There you go," he said and was about give the wrap to Kihe'e, when suddenly his eyes turned dubious.

"I just have a question for you. Aren't you going to lend this to the third son of the Fujiis?"

The look of Kihe'e's eyes turned like they were looking at something blinding.

"Just as I expected, it's Jushiro."

"I'd like you not to ask that question."

"If it's Jushiro, I will withdraw."

"Come on," Kihe'e said pathetically, "because this is nothing to do with you."

"Yes, I will. I will decline if it is Jushiro."

In spite of it, Kihe'e looked at Hisanosuke calmly.

4

"I borrow the money," Kihe'e said leisurely. "I think it's all up to me how I'll spend it."

"Things have limits," Hisanosuke said. "So far, you've had bitter experiences with him time and time again. It can't be helped to have to do something for him to some extent because he's your wife's big brother.

You'll be bound to this relationship endlessly and because of this he will be hurt all the more. You'd do better to let it go at that."

"I can't leave him as he is."

"His brothers have *de facto* given up on him, you know," Hisanosuke said. "He does ornery things. Rumors reach my ears about him being samurai that doesn't live up to what the world expects. You might as well not let him cross your threshold, otherwise, what trouble you don't know you may have to land in."

"But, if I should leave him, I wonder if he'd get any better."

"He has big brothers, Saburobe'e is, for one, his eldest brother and, for another, the second eldest who married into the Okajima family. His father is dead but his mother should be alive and well."

"You said just now all of them have given up on him, didn't you?" Kihe'e said with a smile on his face. "And besides, among us retainers of the province, there seems none on friendly terms with him any more, and if I should keep my distance from him, what'd become of him? This you can imagine, can't you?"

"When a tree gets to be rotten, it's best to fell it down from its root. Aren't I right?"

"He's not a tree. He's human."

"That's why it's all the worse," Hisanosuke said as he frowned. "A rotten tree won't annoy others, but if a human is rotten, he or she will poison those around him or her."

"Fujii Jushiro is a human being. Like others, he has his own sorrow and pain and bitterness, or I think he does. He has made blunders and misdeeds. But every time he's made one, he must have had pain and trouble for it. Fortunately I've outlived those blunders and misdeeds, but I've been able to enter into his feelings, such as when the wound hurt him and how he was feeling."

Hisanosuke sighed, "Augh," and limply hit his knee with one hand. It was a gesture he wanted to convey. It was as though he were saying, "Unbearably too much, I've had more than enough."

"I always think," Hisanosuke said, "that the way you think doesn't so much encourage others as make a good-for-nothing of them. It's highly

susceptible. This especially applies to the type of person like Jushiro. As long as he has someone who sympathizes and consoles, and who patches up his failures, he won't kick his habit of behavior, and will only get bogged down into the depth of it."

Kihe'e nodded and mumbled, "Maybe so." He thought it might be so for sure. So mumbling, he looked at Hisanosuke.

"But why, oh why?" he said plaintively (as though appealing). "What he needs now are sympathy, consolation, and help. Inevitably he must have them. And not only them, but also giving them all may, on the contrary, help him get degenerated. Why is it so? Tell me, Nigyū, why it is so."

"It's all the matter depending on Jushiro himself. He is just the kind of person that gets degenerated."

"Oh, it beats me. It doesn't seem to me that it's everything that matters," Kihe'e said as he lowered his head. "The business of one getting unhappy, I think, depends not only on what one is, but on the incongruity of various conditions, such as one's environment, talent, and fortune, and this is one possibility—why, he's hurt whereas I am not. Being unhurt as I am, I can't forsake a person who's hurt. It's what I just can't do."

Handing the paper wrap, Hisanosuke said, "Now I understand. Shall we stop here?" Then, he looked up at Kihe'e and began something with: By the by, —, but shook his head right away, and denying, "No, it's nothing," withdrew what was on his mind as he coughed. Kihe'e put away the wrap and talked about his official responsibilities for a while, shortly taking leave of Nigyū.

After sunset, Kihe'e went to pay off in Kawabata-cho. When he got home, his wife was waiting and said, "Matsunosuke is running a temperature again."

"Dr. Chogen has just left," Kayo said, "and I'm going to have someone run to get the medicine."

Then, she turned on her husband. Kihe'e returned a look at her wife as though to say, "What's wrong?"

"The bills are left unpaid," Kayo said. "It's been three months, and

unless we leave the runner with the money, I can't send him on the errand."

"All the same," Kihe'e said inquisitively, "we ought to have still enough left to pay medicine bills with."

"If there were any left, I wouldn't say a thing like this."

The way his wife spoke was too abrasive, and for a brief moment Kihe'e was at a loss what to say in reply. Without responding he was off to the room where his son was laid out. Matsunosuke was sleeping. The air smelled like it had gone sour, which was particular to sick (feverish) children. —His boy was five years old. He was born weak. When he caught a slight cold, he would have to stay in bed for a good half month because he didn't easily get over it. That was the way with him. This summer, he contracted a cold caught in sleep and the diarrhea and the running fever had been persistent. He had taken to his bed since mid-September.

—Children ought to be left to run a bit freer. You take too much care of your son in a neurotic way.

Murata Kendo, government doctor, warned time and time again. Kihe'e's wife, Kayo, did not like it and changed to Ujji'e Chogen, a town doctor, and depended on him. Chogen was close on to sixty. He had won a good renown as a pediatrician but then he had also earned a reputation as one whose charges were very high.

Kihe'e came to sit quietly at the child's bedside and looked into him by the andon light which was turned down. The boy looked high-strung like his mother, with conspicuously thick eyebrows, and a pointed nose. Because of the repeated diarrhea he was suffering malnutrition, reduced to skin and bones. His face looked exactly like an old man's (in spite of the flush caused by the running fever). . . . Kayo came after her husband and, sitting by him, whispered, "My lord."

"He's fast in sleep," said Kihe'e.

"What should we do about the medicine?"

"Medicine?" he turned back on her. "You haven't sent a runner yet, have you?"

"I'd have very much liked to, so I asked you for the money."

"I can't comply with a sudden request."

“Aren’t we paying?”

Kihe’e looked toward his wife and said, “I can’t,” and, getting up, left for his apartment. He sat at his desk, turned up the andon light, and was adding charcoal in the brazier, when Kayo came in. He didn’t lift his eyes but he thought he could see her face which had turned pale and stiffened, and her mouth gone awry.

Family budgets, in any households, were unmanageable against the initial plans, Kayo said. Above all, Matsunosuke was in delicate health, having been unable to leave a doctor’s care for a half year. She continued, that was why she depended on her husband for his understanding that there would be extra expenditure on their son’s health. The payment of the bills had been so delayed that they couldn’t send a runner for medicine, which was deplorable. Kihe’e heaved a deep sigh and spread out his copying so he could begin to copy a book. By copying old books he had made some extra money for over two years, but it was, too, a complaining stock to Kayo, who mouthed a platitude: “It’s discreditable.”

“As you say, our family budget is unmanageable against the plans,” Kihe’e said quietly. “But since we have to think of Matsunosuke’s health condition, I’ve always told you to put aside for emergencies. I gave extra for sundry expenses the other day, you know it, right?”

“I bought a sash with it. This I told you.”

“Sash? You bought a sash—?”

“I’m sure I told it to you, or you must have forgotten,” Kayo said. “In November, I am supposed to attend the third anniversary memorial service of my deceased father at his home. All relatives will come together. At least I have to make a new sash made, or else I’ll be too ashamed to attend.”

Kihe’e lifted the lid of the inkstone box.

5

Kihe'e rubbed down the ink stick, feeling as though he had been spent. He did not get told about the sash. It did not matter whether or not she had bought a sash. What mattered was, well actually, her way of thinking—such as “I can't send a runner for medicine without the money for it,” and “(I'm so ashamed) I can't attend the memorial service in the old clothes” —did not seem to have changed, no matter how repeatedly he told her that his annual stipend was different from that which the Fujiis, his wife's home, received. This feeling annoyed Kihe'e and had become a burden. Kayo, he found, was still haranguing him about her complaints. He put down the ink stick he was rubbing and said, “I understand,” and got to his feet and said, Very well, he would go.

“Where will you be off to?”

“Why not, to the doctor.”

“We have a manservant.”

“In that case, he must go with the money but without it he can't, right?” Kihe'e said. “Then, who but me can you ask to go get the medicine? There's no choice.”

“You go,” Kayo said in a trembling voice, “and try to make innuendos on me.”

“You know if I'm the type of person to do a thing like that, or do you not?” he said calmly. “It's a general practice that doctors are paid twice a year. You say Ujii'e is a town doctor and that it doesn't apply. But when you become a regular client, it's the same. Of course not to mention it's better to pay through the nose if we had money on us. This I know very well. But when we don't, we don't need to have our way and pay. It's time we chucked the vanity thing which puts us in a fix.”

“While what I do is out of vanity, is what you do not out of vanity, my lord?”

“What I do—,” he looked at his wife.

“You don't think I know it, do you, my lord?” Kayo said. “The box

at the wicket in the back, for one, is so, but I say the family budget, on which you cut down to the last penny while you raise any money when it comes to others. When we are hard put to it to pay medical charges for our only son, asked, you go and raise a fund for others. Isn't this vanity, my lord?" Kihe'e shook his head ruefully, knelt down there and took his wife's hand. Then, caressing it, he said, "Let us hear about it next time."

"You're tired and uptight now," Kihe'e said as though to appease his wife. "Tonight, get Iné to keep the vigil and go to sleep yourself. When I come home with the medicine, I'll prepare it for Matsunosuke."

"Not a mite do you," Kayo said in a teary voice, "not a mite do you take seriously what I say, my lord."

"We've had enough tonight. Go to bed," he quietly caressed her hand. "I'll fetch the medicine and you'd do better to go to bed."

"I'll get Yohei to run to the doctor."

"No, I'll go. It's quicker," he said and stood up. "I'm sorry for what I said about what you do as vanity. I apologize."

Kayo smiled as she dabbed her eyes and Kihe'e smiled back. Then he went out of the room.

Matsunosuke's fever stopped in the morning.

Several days later, it was past nine in the evening that something strange took place at the wicket. It was the first frozen night that year. When Kihe'e, copying a book as usual, was adding charcoal in his brazier, he heard a slight noise of the wicket opening. He stopped the copying hand and strained his ears for it.

—Come to pay back or to borrow. . . ?

In the case of borrowers, they would simply give a bend in deep bow in a silent manner, but in the case of those who would pay back, they would thank in a low voice without fail. They face the (light-reflecting) window of Kihe'e's room and usually thank in a whisper but sometimes thanking was heard fairly clearly.

—Ah-ha, come to borrow.

He frowned. He was wishing: "I pray there is enough money to meet the demand," when suddenly there arose quarreling voices. He heard people wrestling in a violent fight near the wicket and a hand slapping

in a high pitch and the voice saying, “You, shame on you.” Surprised, Kihe’e was on his feet and slid open the lattice door.

“Who’s that?” he called to someone. “What’s gone wrong? What’s happened?” There was no reply. He heard the footsteps of someone running away and someone else immediately after close the wicket and the bolt slide shut with a click.

“What’s gone wrong?” Kihe’e muttered. “What’s happened?”

He stayed where he was to watch a while longer for what would follow next, but since he heard only the prevailing silence and there was not a hint of a soul there, he slid the lattice door shut and was back to his desk.

Soon after the days had progressed into November, when Kihe’e was attending to his duties in his castle office, the messenger came in to inform him: “Mr. Hosojima wants to see you, sir.” Hosojima Sanai was a *yoriai* which doubled as the manager of the mounted guards. Usually, he was in his *yoriai*’s office. Kihe’e immediately headed for his office. In the office were not only Hosojima Sanai but also others from top management: Wakiya Gozaemon, Fujii Saburobe’e, and Nigyū Hisanosuke.

“Well, this is not official, but we have some things we’d like to inquire into—,” Sanai began. “Everybody’s on duty now, so let me make it brief. There were letters of appeal cast into the complaints boxes, which read that you have been lending money secretly. There were more than a dozen letters, so we’d like to make sure with you if it is true.”

Kihe’e answered, “That’s simply groundless.” Sanai turned to Fujii Saburobe’e, who in turn looked inexpressively at Kihe’e as he said, “That doesn’t answer if it is true.” Kihe’e looked at Saburobe’e embarrassedly. This man, Saburobe’e, Kihe’s wife’s eldest brother, was reputed among relatives for his scrupulousness and obstinacy.

“I am related to you by your marriage with my younger sister. And that’s why I want this odious problem made clear,” said Saburobe’e. “The letters of appeal are well over a dozen, and just saying that it’s groundless does not make us convinced. Do you have anything you can guess out?”

Kihe’e closed his eyes.

—Is it about the wicket-in-the-back thing?

That may be so, he brooded if it means ‘something like money lending,’ though they are two different realities. I can guess out nothing else. Albeit, should it be so, I can’t bring it out here, absolutely I mustn’t.

“No, sir,” Kihe’e shook his head. “I have nothing that I can guess out.”

“Are you sure?” Saburobe’e said

“I may be shoving my oar in, but,” said Nigyu Hisanosuke, “you have one thing that would cook up a slander like that, am I not right, Takabayashi?”

Kihe’e turned to look at Hisanosuke. So did the rest of the three of them. They waited for what would follow. Hisanosuke was quietly gazing at Kihe’e in an unconcerned manner.

“Shall *I* explain?” Hisanosuke suggested. “I mean the wicket in the back.”

Kihe’e uttered “Ack.” He lifted his hand to restrain Hisanosuke as though to say, “Wait,” but the hand stopped when it was only lifted about two inches up from his knee. He heard Hisanosuke already begin to talk.

6

“I’ll take care of it,” Hisanosuke began to explain to the three. “Inside the wicket in the back of the Takabayashi residence there hangs a box which contains money. The sum is not known, but it’s not a sum to speak of, I suspect. The wicket is always left unlocked. Anyone in dire need can go in by the wicket and take as much money as they want from the box. And when they pay back, there’s the same procedure. They can go in by the wicket without asking and have only to leave the repayment inside the box. —Apparently, this has been practiced over time. It seems the letters refer to this practice.”

“Is that true?” Saburobe’e scowled at Kihe’e sharply. “Does what Mr. Hisanosuke has just told hold true?”

Kihe’e looked at his brother-in-law to vindicate himself. Then

Saburobe'e turned red in the face, advanced forward on one knee, and relentlessly fired off, "If it proves true, it is not like lending money, but it is lending money, isn't it?"

"You are in the wrong," Hisanosuke interrupted. "Mr. Fujii, I'm afraid you are mistaken."

"But you said what you did just now."

"Gentlemen, now listen," Hisanosuke said unhurriedly. "Money lenders as we know them, lend money and take interests on it. Takabayashi takes no interests. Anyone in need takes away as much as they need, and when the time comes they can afford to pay back, it will do to pay back then. It's all up to the borrowers whether or not to borrow and whether or not to return. If they can't afford to repay, then they don't necessarily need to repay. It's not known how much who borrowed, nor who paid back, nor who didn't—all Takabayashi does is to check the box. When enough money is in it, he leaves it as it is. When the sum falls short, he simply supplies. If all this is lending money any wee bit, I'll take care of your opinions."

Hosojima Sanai looked at Wakiya Gozaemon, who in turn looked at Fujii Saburobe'e, and, turning on Kihe'e, made sure: "Is that the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth?" Lowering his eyes, Kihe'e replied embarrassedly, "Correct, sir."

"What for?" Gozaemon asked. "Under what circumstances did you institute a system like that?"

"It's—," Kihe'e said in a low voice. "It's so that those who are so hard up as to lack the day's meals can scrape a hand-to-mouth life at least for the time being."

"That's one-who's-worth-nothing's way of thinking," said Saburobe'e. "It looks benefitting one, but then it makes one lazy. If they, in their destitution, can find a temporary easy way out, those plebeians, who would otherwise laze off, will inevitably lose the spirit of working by the sweat of their brow. I wouldn't say every one of them gets to be so, but one or two out of ten, as plain as day, will apply."

"And besides," said Gozaemon, "when it comes to the rule, either is fine: whether one can pay back or one doesn't need to. One is most

likely to just let it go at that when indebted. It's likely to brew slyness on the debt."

"What do you say to it?" Saburobe'e said to Kihe'e. "Have you ever thought easy benefits will turn into evils against your expectations?"

Kihe'e remained silent for a few moments. Shortly, he replied, "I haven't." Saburobe'e looked at Sanai, who coughed and clapped his fan shut on his knee, and nodded toward Saburobe'e as though to say, "Please go ahead with our decision."

"Now here we go. This is our *yoriai*'s decision."

Saburobe'e spoke in a formal tone: "Until you shall be instructed at a later date, it shall be that the wicket be locked instantly and the box removed."

Kihe'e said calmly, "No, sir," and lifted his eyes onto Saburobe'e.

"I am afraid I cannot accept it, sir."

"What? —You will not accept?"

"No, I shall not, sir," Kihe'e said clemently. "As long as there is one who depends on small change in the box, I shall hang the box and leave the wicket unlocked."

"Even at the instruction of the *yoriai*?"

"That—," Kihe'e stammered, but his head bent low, muttered, "No, I cannot, accept it, never, sir."

Anger flared up in Saburobe'e's eyes and he was about to shout something, when Hisanosuke said quietly, "Wait, gentlemen."

"This is not a problem to be simply solved," Hisanosuke continued. "If there are any people in penury, then naturally the domain government has to take a measure of relieving them. Takabayashi has so far done it on his own. Therefore, before ordering him to abolish his good will, the government has to investigate into what are the realities of people suffering poverty and who posted the letters of appeal into the complaints boxes. How does it sound, gentlemen?"

The other three looked at one another. Since Hisanosuke was the manager of *yoriai*, Saburobe'e (, looking discontented,) did not dare to oppose him.

"Then, there shall be instructions at a later date," Hisanosuke said as

he winked at Kihe'e. "You can leave now. We are sorry to disturb you when you must attend to your office."

Kihe'e looked at Hisanosuke with a look of gratitude in his eyes and took leave of them.

On the same day, —Hisanosuke came by Kihe'e's office after the drum was beaten to signal the end of the day, for you to leave the castle. He waited for the others to leave, and said with a smile, "You did a good job." Nobody but him could have been able to reject twice. "However," Hisanosuke asked, "why didn't you explain more distinctly there are people who depend on that box?"

"What could it possibly have done to say it?" Kihe'e said with a smile mixed with sorrow. "They would have failed to understand. Unless they had the firsthand experience of being starved, they would have difficulty understanding how painful it would be."

"But you understand, don't you?"

"They went and said," Kihe'e said as though to lament, "that if they can have such easy access to outliving the detriment for the time being, the spirit of working by the sweat of their brow will go away. It only fosters slyness to neglect to pay back the debt. —They don't know, nor do they try to learn. They have a firm belief that those plebeians are disposed to laze off. Augh!" he shook his head sorrowfully. "I say, they don't have the least idea how poor people live, what they think, or what poverty is like."

"But you do."

"It's been close on to fifteen years," Kihe'e went on to say, "—why, you don't know this naturally, Nigyu, don't you? There was a barrel man, called Kichibe'e, who had been in and out of my home on business. There was this happening. He was in such dire need he killed his wife and two children and then killed himself."

"I remember the story," Hisanosuke said. "Barrel man Kichibe'e also had been in and out of my home. As far as I can remember, he had a pretty daughter."

"Nao was her name."

"I didn't know her name, but she was thirteen or fifteen and a good-

looking girl, —yep, she was,” he nodded. “She said her father had some trouble with his leg and came to take our buckets and to bring them back, so I remember.”

Kihe’e nodded, “Yes,” and gazed across to a point in the screen door like he was wistfully looking afar. An expression came to Hisanosuke of ‘I get it’—and asked himself if Kihe’e had fallen for her.

7

“I went to see the place Kichibe’e had lived in,” Kihe’e resumed in time. “Hiding from my father, I was told by my mother to make a funeral money offering to the deceased family. There I heard about what had been up. Since Kichibe’e had sprained his ankle, misfortunes had come one on the heels of another. They had been in debt up to the neck and neglected their social obligations, until they were completely stuck. They had no choice but to finish them off by committing family suicide. This is what I was told.”

It was an old man, manager of the tenements, that told the story to Kihe’e. The old man said reminiscing, “Kichibe’e was a weak-minded, but good-natured honest man, he truly was.” He’d been a very loving father and couldn’t have thought about “putting her daughter into live-in service at an inn.” The old man went on, “Had he talked a bit of it to me, I would have raised some money.”

“On the same night or the next,” Kihe’e continued, “there was a guest for my father. The topic was brought up. The guest was, as I remember very clearly, Mr. Fujii Zusho, the father of the Fujii brothers. Mr. Fujii and my father reviewed the suicide, saying—if they had had one ryo or two of silver, they wouldn’t have had to do away with themselves. Had they asked anybody to raise that much, then it would have been raised. Surprise they should have committed a foolish thing. . . . the two of them said. It’s not an exaggeration. I almost copied.

“I thought there and then,” Kihe’e put in a little pause and went on to say, “that the old manager of the tenements had said so, and that Mr.

Fujii Zusho and my father had said the same thing, but, in reality, could it have possibly been so? They said quite easily it was the matter of one ryo or two of silver, but they said so only after the family had been dead. Suppose Kichibe'e had asked while alive, would there have been anyone who would willingly have complied with his request? —No need of an answer. I know it. They never would. At least the kind of people who said a thing like that would never ever have lent money.”

Hisanosuke gave a nod of consent.

The idea of “the wicket in the back” struck Kihe'e at that time, Kihe'e went on. His idea was that, to his chagrin, the poorer they were the more scrupulous they became regarding money; that nobody but them hated handouts and benefits more; and that, however, if they could get by for the time being with a little finance without being looked at and without deeds or interests, then they would come for it.

“Only after my father had demised and I had succeeded to his estate did I hang the box,” he continued. “—In the first place, I talked to the old man, manager of Kichibe'e's tenement, and decided that only tenants in Kogané-cho and Yamabuki-cho could use the system and only when they were really hard put to it. The tenants were informed. Nobody came something like a half year and only then did they begin to come severally. . . . The old man who was the manager said no one would pay back. And that, like Mr. Fujii and Mr. Wakiya said, even though they might come to raise some, none of them would come back to repay it. —To be sure, for the first two years or so, the box became empty more often, and painstakingly I supplied it.”

“You never thought of quitting, did you?”

“Well—,” Kihe'e nodded his head, “yes, I did. There were long spells when I was thoroughly hard up. But when I did, I always remembered Kichibe'e's girl, the girl named Nao. . . . remembered what she felt like when she died, you know.”

It came home to Hisanosuke who thought to himself as he averted his eye from Kihe'e: “He was that much in love with that girl.” Kihe'e said, “The thought of her braced him all the time.” To think of the dead girl, he always thought to himself, his trouble wouldn't amount as much.

“I’ll hang in there as long as I can.

“In time, there were among others a few who paid back,” Kihe’e said. “There was money in the box more often than when there was none. And what’s more, there were even times when there was more money than I had initially left in it.”

“Those were the moments when you won, Takabayashi,” Hisanosuke said, his eye averted. “—You won. Your trust that poorer people were more scrupulous about money matters was stronger.”

All of a sudden, Kihe’e bated his breath and gazed at Hisanosuke. He gazed and gazed at the profile of Hisanosuke who was looking elsewhere and then uttered, “Ah-ha.”

“Comes home to me,” Kihe’e said. “Nigyu, you’ve been filling, haven’t you?”

“Come on, quit it.”

“No, no no, no. Those who know about the wicket in the back are only tenants in Kogané-cho and Yamabuki-cho. Albeit, you made mention of it in the last meeting, —oh yes, yes, I remember,” said Kihe’e. “One night in the middle of last month, I heard someone slap someone else’s face at the wicket in the back and a voice say, Shame on you! At that time, I had no idea who it was, but now I can remember it. It was your voice, Nigyu.”

“That fellow, Jushiro, came,” Hisanosuke said as though abashed. “Jushiro came and tried to grasp a handful from the box.”

“You were there to add money in the box, weren’t you, Nigyu?”

“I flared up,” said Hisanosuke. “I had no idea how he learned about the wicket. I didn’t want to let a fellow like him touch a penny. And, before I knew it, I caught him and slapped in the face.

Kihe’e hung down his head and said as though whispering, “Many thanks.”

“We’ve talked such a long time,” Hisanosuke stood up. “If you don’t mind, shall we go home together?”

As he was putting away the things on his desk, Kihei asked, “What will be the *yoriai*’s decision?” Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it, Hisanosuke said. I think I can pretty much guess who posted the letters into the

complaints box. You can guess it? “Yes,” Hisanosuke nodded. It was the job of money lenders who get repayments by the day from those in Kogané-cho. They suck blood from poor living humans and get fat, so the wicket in the back is a worst enemy, I’ll tell you. Is it really?! Kihe’e opened his eyes wide. You know far and wide, Nigyū. Not really. To be candid, I asked the town magistrate for his opinion, said Hisanosuke, who smiled wryly.

“Things are hard,” Kihe’e sighed. He said, “—A simple practice like this can’t help influencing some quarters.”

Hisanosuke said, “Shall we hit the road home?”

Several days later, a memorial service was given at Fujii’s. It was the third year anniversary of the demised Zusho. Kayo took her son Matsunosuke to the temple to attend the ceremony; and Kihe’e visited the Fujii house and burned the incense for the dead after he came back from the castle. There, Saburobe’e said to Kihe’e, “Regarding the case of the wicket, no further action will be taken,” but did not look good-humored. —Kayo left her home before sundown because she did not “want to expose Matsunosuke to the night air.” And Kihe’e remained with some twenty relatives, with whom he was treated to the dinner which abstained from fish and flesh, so the diners would stay purified for the sake of the dead. Finishing the dinner, he took leave.

The night was still young, but it was so cold he felt like the night was frosty with a little strong north wind blowing. Treading in the wake of the lantern light, he had almost got to the cross of Kura-machi, when without warning Fujii Jushiro flung out from aside and stopped Kihe’e.

“Sorry, but,” Jushiro said as he waved Kihe’e’s attendant off, “leave us. We just need to talk in secret.”

“Shall we go to my home?”

“No,” he shook his head. “I’m in a hurry. Very urgent. Please.”

Kihe’e took the lantern from his attendant and ordered: “Go home ahead of me.”

8

Left alone with Kihe'e, Jushiro impetuously asked to raise him the amount of five ryo or so.

"I was led down the garden path and taken to the gambling den," Jushiro said trembling. "As is always the case, it was a fraudulent dice game. In it I made the debt of honor of as much as fifty ryo. —I've asked to put off the repayment for a half month, but they came and said they can't wait any more as of tonight. They're waiting in the precinct of the Shimmei Shrine in Takumi-cho. They say, if I fail to keep time, then they'll go to my home and make high demands of my elder brother."

"Then," Kihe'e asked, "what will you do with five ryo?"

"I'll take flight," Jushiro said, his harsh breath freezing white due to the cold. "I can't possibly raise such a big sum when they intimidate me out of it for the debt of honor at the cost of my life, so I have no means but to take flight."

"Are the dun's assistants waiting in the precinct of the Shimmei Shrine?"

"I ask you, this is for the very last time."

"Wait, I'll go and talk with them," Kihe'e said. "I have no idea what formalities they have at a gambling den, but as we talk about our circumstances, we'll find a way out."

"No, it won't work. It just won't work any more," Jushiro said as though crying. "The dun is called Mirutoku, a gambler with a criminal record. He's mad because I've deceived him though he had the kindness to put off the repayment."

"At any rate, we'll talk as much as we can." Kihe'e began to walk. "The dun is the kind of person who, wherever you get away, will find you out. When driven to bay, you chance it, so people say, don't they?"

Kihe'e turned back along the street and crossed the main street. Although still noisily repeating, "It won't work, they have no ears to lend you," Jushiro came after him.

—Most probably, this man is lying.

Kihe'e thought, this man had made up a story like that in order to borrow five ryo. But when they put a step in Takumi-cho, Jushiro suddenly hushed up and walked like he was trying to hide himself behind Kihe'e. —The Shimmei Shrine was located near the edge of the samurai residence streets. The precinct was not very large but had an ancient cedar clump. Immediately inside the stone fence around the shrine was a large pond. Kihe'e made sure with Jushiro at the torii archway to the shrine, "Here we are, aren't we?" He made sure with Jushiro, who nodded. His trembling was so obvious, it was communicated to Kihe'e.

Kihe'e went through the torii.

"Anybody from Mirutoku?" he called. "I'd like to talk to you about Fujii Jushiro."

With the call of "Disptach'em," four, five men flung out of the shadows of cedar trees to the right, and suddenly one of them, with his entire body, dashed into Kihe'e, who felt like he was touched with fire in his side and uttered, "Ugh." His lantern was sent flying, which landed in the ground and burned in flames. Kihe'e limply collapsed to his knees, covering his side with his hand.

"Wait," he throated, "wait. I need a word with you."

Just then, "That's done it. Big mistake," a voice said, "It's the lord of Takabayashi. I made a big mistake. Someone go and fetch the doctor?" Hearing the shrill voice, Kihe'e passed out.

Only when the doctor came and was treating him, did Kihe'e come to because of pain. He perceived Jushiro and two young strangers there. One of them (, who looked seventeen or nineteen,) was whispering to the other man, trembling, "I made a hell of a mistake. Shucks! I been an' gone an' made a big mistake." Thanks to this lord, my big sister was saved. And thanks to this lord again, mom recovered from her sickness. It was too dark to know who it was. Never ever did I dream the lord would come, never a teensy-weensy bit. "That's over. Stop it once and for all," the other man said.

—Who's the big sister of this young'un?

So Kihe'e vaguely thought in the pain from being treated by the doc-

tor. With a stiffened pale face, Jushiro was watching the doctor's hands, but soon turned to Kihe'e and said in a low voice, "I beg your pardon."

"I am very sorry, Takabayashi. Please pardon me."

Kihe'e nodded with his eyes.

—Albeit, Jushiro did not get away.

He just wasn't so cowardly as to get away, leaving me here as I am, Kihe'e thought.

"I know it," Kihe'e said with his throat. "It was on the spur of the moment. You don't need to worry. Probably because of this, the paying back thing will go well. —I'm all right and you'd better go home."

Jushiro began to sob. Kihe'e saw tears roll down from Jushiro's eyes. Shortly, —the strange young 'uns came running with a shutter (to carry Kihe'e on it).

"Now, will you go?" Kihe'e said to Jushiro. "I'll deftly cover up tonight's incident, so please do not repeat to anyone, never, I ask you."

9

Around ten o'clock, one snowing night—An old man in his fifties by the look of him walks up the back street of Kura-machi, wearing his torn raincoat from his head. He mumbles incessantly. He says such a thing as: "Can't I? Probably I can't." There is no wind and snow is falling straight down except that it swirls around the old man. The old man shivers and mumbles, "They say the lord was wounded." He keeps on, "And that he's been in bed for a good half month." He shakes his head quietly, but goes on walking, mumbling, "Most probably I can't. I'm afraid I've come to no avail."

The old man stops at the wooden fence with a planked roof on the top, and groped to find out the wooden wicket (in the snow light). He hesitated there. The lord of the house was wounded some half month ago. While he was taking care of his sword, he made a mistake and hurt himself somewhere in his body. So the rumor went around. . . . The old man drew a sigh and looked around as though he were asking for help.

Then, indecisively he stepped up to the wicket and apprehensively put his hand on the bolt. The hand was visibly trembling with fear, but the bolt slid *click* and the wicket faintly creaked open.

The wicket was open as ever. When it opened, the lying snow fell off and beyond was seen a lighted window fitted with lattice sliding doors. The old man bent himself low in greeting for three times toward the window.

“Lord. . . ,” the old man whispered, “I’ve come here again to borrow. Thank you very much, my lord.”

Honorable *Shogen's* Little Lane

1

A little after nine o'clock in the evening— While o-Hiro was getting ready to go home, customers of a group of four came in the palanquins and stopped by. Drunk as the four of them, they were well dressed and good-natured. By the look of them, they were split in small groups, twos and threes, after some meeting. They said, "We're here in this part of town for the first time."

It was a cloudy night in mid April. The air was also dump. It had looked like rain at any minute since the early evening. O-Hiro was not a live-in maid. When she was about to go despite the new comers, o-Masa, manager of this place, came to her and said, "Stay on, will you?"

"I'll take one, and Ikuyo and Mon'ya say they'll take two. The guests say the women can take turns but that, if the number did not meet them, they'll go. —Sorry, but we seldom have an occasion like this, so I do ask you to stay tonight."

O-Hiro was reluctant to say yes. Then, o-Masa's eyes turned glowering right away.

"You don't want to?" o-Masa said. "If you don't, I'll ask Kohanaya for someone in your place. I just don't want to make no one do what they don't want, you know."

"Yes," o-Hiro nodded. "I'll stay."

O-Masa said, "Be clear, won't you?" and o-Hiro said again, "I'll stay." If she will, o-Masa said, run to Mikawa-ya for saké, anyhow. Then, change her clothes and go back to work, will she? She can close the place. So saying, o-Masa went into the inner part of the place.

—I'm sure I'll get catty things told to me again.

O-Hiro put down her cloth wrapping and got out by the back door.

The unlicensed prostitution quarter in Akasaka-Tamachi was com-

monly called “Cooked Rice & Wheat.” In the back area across Hitotsugi Street were residences of samurai in low rank. This side of the street went along the moat leading to the reservoir, and right beyond the moat was the forest of Sanno. The forest was so overtowering it embraced a huge mass of darkness. The overtowering darkness was such that it looked like trees would assault you unawares at any minute. O-Hiro came out on the road by the moat, went to Mikawa-ya in Third Street, made the order of saké, and was on the way back.

—You know, I’ll get catty things told to me, again.

Walking through the darkened streets, o-Hiro sighed time and again. The pictures emerged in her eyes of the pointed chin of her husband, Risuke, and the sneering, malicious face of o-Masa. The both of them were, as it were, hurting her on either side in collusion with each other.

“Fifty years ago, —” o-Hiro whispered to herself, swaying her head, “Fifty years after, —”

And then, regardless of what she whispered to herself, she said in her mind:

—You know well.

Yes, it was as plain as day. Should she stay overnight away from home, her husband would give her snide remarks. But were she to decline to stay overnight, o-Masa would get a replacement from Kohana-ya. When o-Masa really did so, she wouldn’t be able to make money at Somei-ya any more. Which was plain as the nose on your face.

—See? I’m on the horns of a dilemma.

No women “commuted” to unlicensed prostitution quarters. Or you could say there was almost none. Extenuating circumstances allowed o-Hiro to commute. Until the previous July, she had been a maid at a restaurant called “Masuda-ya” in Gorobe’e-cho, Kyobashi, where she had met Gempei. He was a customer there. Her circumstances at the time had been that she had (of necessity) needed to earn more to make a living for her family and to pay for the medication of her husband who was sick in bed. She had a four-year-old son Masaji. The need to increase her earnings had been a must, no matter what situation she’d been in. This obligation she had to fulfill was pat there under her nose. There

was only one way out for an unskilled woman with a sick husband and a little child to support. She talked to Gempei about it. He dealt in palanquin transportation service in Second Street, Shibakuchi. He had a side business, a proprietor of a brothel called Somei-ya in the unlicensed red light district of Akasaka-Tamachi—he had assumed the business from a friend, of which the management he left to a woman called o-Masa.

O-Hiro had heard about it and talked to Gempei. He accepted her solicitation.

O-Hiro didn't borrow money. Money borrowed in this way would bind her and the interests would accrue to it and eventually it would make it impossible to quit the business. She'd been in the know, but she would *have* to commute from home in order to look after the needs of her sick husband and her little child. Gempei had accepted it too. He had taken her to the place in Tamachi and explained her circumstances to o-Masa. Thus, she had begun to make money unlike other women, going back and forth between the workplace and her home. She had told her husband and neighbors that she had "changed to a restaurant in Shimmei-ma'e, Shiba." She would leave for work in the afternoon and return around nine or ten at night. She had maintained this lifestyle nearly one year.

There were three other women in Somei-ya. O-Masa, manager of the place, was twenty-two years old, Mon'ya twenty-one, and Ikuyo nineteen. O-Hiro was twenty-three, the oldest of all. The other three of them didn't warm to o-Hiro. Not only were they cold, but they were offensive. Although it was not to the extent of hostility, obviously they harbored ill feelings. One of the reasons was that she "commuted," and another, that she had a family, apparently. —Each of the three women, for sure, had their own unhappiness and burdens that oppressed them. If so, they might have shown sympathy to o-Hiro who was as unhappy. They didn't. All three women treated her coldly. They did and said spiteful things even in front of customers. —Naturally, o-Hiro looked to them less unhappy and loaded with lighter burdens. All the sick feel jealous of others having a less serious disease. O-Hiro simply would remain quiet and take their jealousy and hostility lightly.

—What can I do? I see nothing that can be done about it.

So she would always tell herself. Since she had taken this job at Somei-ya, the habit had come to her of convincing herself by saying, “What can I do with it?” and she had no choice. She said it, say, when she was confronted with something that went beyond her best ability.

“Fifty years ago, —” o-Hiro mumbled unawares, “and, fifty years after, —”

When she arose from her reverie, it had begun raining. She had been walking in a dream. She came to only when the raindrops pelted her on the cheeks. She took out a hand cloth and was about to cover her head with it, when she was called from behind, “Isn’t that o-Sono-san?” O-Sono was o-Hiro’s business name at Somei-ya. Turning back, she saw Heikichi, an assistant of liquor shop Mikawa-ya, hanging a two-handle keg from his right hand.

“I’m on the way to delivering your order,” Heikichi said, “but you’re still here dawdling. You surprise me. Anythin’ wrong with you?”

O-Hiro shook her head, meaning neither yes nor no.

“Oy, this here’s right by the moat. Don’t go nuts. Stay yourself. You’re alright?”

O-Hiro returned she was alright and, smirking, said, “You take care.”

“Indeed, I gotta take care,” Heikichi said, “no other place operates as late. Heh! Greedy man the owner. This is too much. I’ll take flight.”

So saying, he trotted his way, leaving her behind him.

2

Forced to drink, O-Hiro was blind drunk.

It was the customers who made her drink, but it was because o-Masa said, “This woman drinks like a fish.” The more o-Hiro refused, saying, “Oh, please pardon, I’m not a drinker,” the more amused they became. The four of them took turns, without a pause, proffering to her a cup full of saké. Customers who came to a place like this would barely drink. If they did, one or two tokkuri bottles would usually be the most. But the

four kept on drinking well after midnight. —In the beginning, o-Hiro was cautious not to get drunk. She was trying to empty half the cup into the basin, but in time, as usual, o-Masa said out of malice, “This woman has a family.” Then, apparently suspecting it was out of malice, one of the customers took advantage of the malice to the contrary and said, “That’s grateful indeed.”

“If so, I’d like to be her john,” the same customer said. “Cuckold her husband, and if I were to be caught, it’d be either both she and I’d get the capital sentence to layering our bodies and lacerating them in the middle into four, or I’d pay seven ryo and two bu for a fine. I’ll make o-Sono-san mine, y’all get it?”

“Nope, it won’t work,” another said. “That woman’s been supposed to be mine from the start. If you must have her, pay me seven ryo and two bu.”

The rest of the two caught up and came out with something the same. Obviously, they were making innuendos to o-Masa. O-Hiro was touched by their warm-heartedness, which, in turn, set her drinking in earnest.

Mon’ya and Ikuyo had overnight johns to cope with. They excused themselves, leaving o-Masa and o-Hiro behind, who were to serve the four. Since o-Masa was no drinker, the customers began to make much of o-Hiro alone. O-Masa must have thought about making money on it. She took advantage of this situation and volunteered to occupy herself going back and forth to bring saké nonstop. —In time, o-Hiro became dead drunk and stupefied. Upon entry into the bedroom with her john, she threw up. He didn’t clench his brow but opened the window to help her throw up more. He rubbed her back to ease her. He busied himself apologizing: “So sorry to make you drink when you can’t,” and bringing water to her.

O-Hiro must have fallen fast asleep as she was. When she woke up, the guest lay on his belly smoking. Turning toward him, she extended her hand. He said, “Don’t bother,” and pushed back her hand. He looked at her caringly and said, “How are you feeling?” She replied with a smile on her face, “I’m freshened up.”

“I’m sorry I troubled you.”

“No, it was our fault,” he said, “We were drunk, too, and we mistook you for a drinker.”

O-Hiro gave an abashed smile and said, “The most I’d ever drunk was just about three sak’é cupfuls.” The client put down his long pipe and drank the water at the bedside. He said, “Will you have some?” and poured into a teacup, too. O-Hiro was touched again and, averting her eyes, drank. The guest lay down and said, “By the way, won’t you sing that song again?”

“That song?” she asked back. “Did I go and sing a song?”

“Oh, you did. You don’t remember?”

“You’re lying, aren’t you?” she said, “I don’t know any songs at all.”

“It’s nothing to speak of, just a children’s song. —Was it, er, *Just across the street*. . . ? No, it wasn’t. *Where are you crows off to*. . . ? This isn’t it, either.”

“*Tell me how this little lane is called?* isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes. That is it.”

“Come on,” o-Hiro gave a wry smile, “did I sing that song? Stupid!”

“Would you please sing that song again?”

She shook her head, “No way, it’s a shame.” He kept at it. He seemed to have a reason for it. He was persistent and begged: “Once again, please.” She sang and no choice. Then, he said, “The words are a bit different.” Were they? A bit different, try the first part. No, it was a shame, she said. But she gave in and sang it for a third time.

“*Tell me how this little lane is called. Tell you it’s Honorable Shogen’s little lane.*”

“That’s where!” the client said. “In my place we sing *the Shrine of God Tenjin’s little lane.*”

O-Hiro flashed a glimpse of grimace. It came back to her that her husband Risuke would sing the song even now when he put his child to sleep.

“Yes,” she said nodding her head, “you’re right about it.”

“Did you make a mistake?”

“No,” said she. “A playmate from my childhood began to sing so and since then we’ve had a way of singing that way. It came from Lord

Matsudaira the *Shogen* (court judge), who lived in a mansion next to our neighborhood. And she suggested we sing after *Shogen* instead of *Tenjin*.”

“Does she still live there?”

“It beats me, —” she stammered. “I moved out six years ago and since then I haven’t been back there to my girlhood neighborhood.”

The client seemed to be interested in going further into it, but giving it up on second thought, he said, “Shall we go to sleep?” and turned on his back, and said, “I see. Honorable *Shogen*’s little lane. Well, thanks much.” O-Hiro redid the quilt over them lest cold air should creep in between their shoulder blades as she said, “Have a good rest.”

O-Hiro wondered that this man was about as old as Tsuné-san. Tsunekichi-san, yes, Tsuné-san. I heard he’d also got married. Something like two years after I had moved out, I heard he’d got married. Well, I was so tied up what with the childcare of the newly-born Masaji and the constant hand-to-mouth living, I had absolutely no time to care about others. I missed him when I heard he’d got married, but had no time at all to think what his wife was like.

—Ah, those were the days.

So she mused to herself.

In the evening, the last hour until she was called back by her mother: “Dinner, come home,” was so dear to her. She would try to make the most of it to enjoy herself. She would sing “*The o-Inari Fox God in the side street from here across*” while bouncing her ball. She would sing, “*Where are you crows off to? To the Satsuma Mountains*” when she juggled her bean-balls. Juggling bean-balls was girls’ play, and Tsuné-san was good at it, boy as he was. She would envy him for it. We were o-Nuki-chan, o-Ito-san, Kiku-chan, my husband, and then Tsuné-san. Tsuné-san’s father was a grocer. His shop was called “Yaoso” located on the main street. He was the grocer’s only son. Beside the shop with a frontage nearly forty feet wide was a large storehouse, in which vegetables, fruits, and pickle barrels lined. Upon entering a stifling smell stung her nose. Tsuné-san would take her into the storehouse and stuffed her chest and sleeve pockets with loquats, mandarins, pears, and so forth

until nothing more could go into them.

Ah, o-Hiro sighed.

—I can't ever go back to those days any more for the rest of my life.

O-Hiro shook her head and closed her eyes. Closing her eyes, her heart rent and tears welled up in her eyes. Instead of going back to those days, look what she'd gone and done. She had come down this low. When could she wash her hands of this business? Oh, what would become of her? She softly thought to herself and quietly wiped tears with her hand.

The soft breathing of the client in sleep began to reach her.

3

O-Hiro lived in Seventh Street, Kobiki-cho. Entering an alleyway from the side of Sanjikken-Bori or the Sixty-Yard Moat led to her home, the third tenement with a drawing well in front and a pear tree to the side of it. It was a tall pear tree. When the season came around, it put forth white blossoms along with tender leaves, a view indeed. Once the blossoms started to be shed of petals, it would get snow-white with the petals on the ground around the well. —This year, the blossoms had already gone, petals and all. The tender foliage was wet with the previous night's rain. It was out of this world. It struck viewers' eyes.

When they saw o-Hiro back, the wives gathering at the well cried, calling to her son: "Ma-chan, your mommy's back." O-Hiro turned to see him standing alone under the pear tree. Seeing her, he ran up to her. She thanked the women and took his hand to go into her tenement home. He complained of no one having come to him to be his playmates and asked for something she brought home. She produced the cakes she bought on her way home. She took one and gave it to him, saying, "Just this. Lunch will be ready soon." She stashed away the rest into the meat safe.

Her husband was out, his bed laid out as had been slept in. Masaji (who seemed to be banned by his father from repeating to her) said in a soft

voice, “Shogi chess game, —” Maybe he was at the shogi club in Fifth Street. He was such a happy-go-lucky man, o-Hiro thought, though, on the other, she was relieved she could escape from being given nasty words on returning home. —Masaji took out a broken toy and began playing with it, eating the cake in the two-tatami-mat room next to the entrance, while o-Hiro changed her clothes and stepped down to the kitchen.

Doing lunch, she thought about the client last night.

She took in how the client looked in the morning, but what his name was, where he lived, and what he did by trade were left unknown. Among the group they called each other by town and street names, places where they worked, such as “Matsuba-cho”, “Second Street”, and so forth. From their ages, the way they were dressed, and what they were talking about, they were all proprietors of shops. The client who chose o-Hiro was the youngest, aged twenty-six or -seven, but somewhere about him there was the air that intimated that he was a bighearted established person, who made different impressions from craftsmen and shop assistants.

“I’m sure he’s as old as Tsuné-san,” she said under her breath as she rinsed greens. “—Yet, he’s not the kind of person who will visit us again.”

And she chuckled.

Tsunekichi’s father’s shop was called “Yao-so” (Grocery), but people in the neighborhood would call it “O-Yaoya” (Big Grocery). As a child O-Hiro’s husband Risuke would often fight with Tunekichi, and it was always Risuke that lost. Risuke was strongly built whereas Tsunekichi looked skinny and fragile. Be that as it may, Tsunekichi was always the winner of fights. When he lost, Risuke would flit away and from a distance hoop, “O-ya, oya-oya-oya!” a pun meaning nearly *Oh boy, look how he looks, big groggy boy!* instead of *grocery*.

“—Come here, big groggy boy, if you could. Heh! What of it? O-ya, oya-oya-oya!”

Tsunekichi hated it most.

O-Hiro remembered that and whispered, chuckling, “Oh, that’s it.”

When she heard Risuke yell so at a safe distance after he had fled away, she would find it at once pitiable and laughable. She would, if anything, have a liking for Tsunekichi rather than Risuke. There had been a big gap between children from main streets and those from back streets. When it came to a fight for instance, birds of a feather would flock together here, too.

“That’s it!” o-Hiro murmured, “No doubt my husband has been a chicken since those days. He used to talk big and bluff. But at crucial moments he cowered and turned sissy.”

O-Hiro would side with Risuke and shelter him because she pitied him for his cowardice and sissyness.

“Nothing’s changed,” she strained the water from the greens and whispered as she cut them with her knife, “Nothing’s changed. He was born with sissyness. Nothing can be done about it.”

There was cooked rice left over from last night. She boiled the greens with seasoning and made a soup, too. As she did so she said to Masaji, “Fetch your daddy.”

Risuke looked sullen when he came back. An unlined robe with a padded garment on top of it made him look like a real sick man. However, despite the fact that he was in the third year of his sickness, he was putting on weight and sleek of the skin.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come home last night,” o-Hiro said in a light tone, “because there were two groups of customers. Both of them were late and one group stayed until it was almost dawn. This one kept me there and I couldn’t anyhow come home.”

“You ain’t eating?” Risuke said.

“Customers made me drink a little. They enjoyed making me drink. And I feel sick, today. I’ll eat later.”

“You got a hangover, ain’t you?” Risuke said. “What a good life!”

O-Hiro stared at her husband.

—How dare you say?

Which was at the tip of o-Hiro’s tongue. She withstood. Risuke, his eyes lowered, did not look enjoying what he was eating. His thick eyebrows, thick lips, and hardhearted-looking face were, she realized from

the way he was now, abject, which made him look pretty mean. Rather than getting angry, she felt like her spirits were rapidly drained. She heaved a sigh to herself: "Oh, it's helpless through and through."

—In any way, fifty years ago and fifty years after, it's all the same.

Risuke mumbled on: It was bitter for a man to keep to his bed while making his wife work. She'd say it didn't matter because she was making money, but he lay writhing bitterly. He'd even think, once in a while, he wouldn't care at all no matter how deteriorated he would get if only he had work to go out to, and if he had none he'd dispatch himself once and for all. "You're in shape and wouldn't know how one like me feels." In truth, he'd be much better off if he died, and so on.

She had thus got him to vent his complaints in the face of her for tens of times. The difference was, after all, that in the time he had been repeating them, he had grown accustomed to delivering them. The delivery had now assumed something like reality.

—Oh, *I*'d be better off if *I* died, not you.

So thinking, o-Hiro cared not to have her husband suspect that she felt fed up with it. She said, "You're just around the corner, wait a little while," as she began to clean away the table.

"Wait a little while," said o-Hiro, "You're that much better now. When you get well again we'll have to depend on the living you'll make. Please don't mope like that," was about to be on her lips, when she turned around to find herself responding automatically, "Yes." She heard someone call to her at the door. Risuke who was sipping tea said, "Is it Kitsan?"

"Is this joiner Risuke-san's place?"

The voice was asking at the door. It was an unwonted voice. O-Hiro replied, "Yes," looked at her husband, and, taking off her apron, went out into the two-mat room. —A man was standing at the door, in an unlined cotton robe which was tied with a stiff sash and whose back end was tucked up in the sash, a navy-blue long john, and a hemp-sole straw sandals, with a hand in his chest pocket.

O-Hiro's heart missed a beat. The man looked thirty-two or-three. Her intuition told her, judging from the look of his eyes, that he was an

“okappiki” privately-hired police assistant. She thought her husband had done something bad. As expected, he introduced himself by: “I’m sent from Fujikawa-ya in Kinroku-cho,” and gave a glimpse of a jitte short metal truncheon in his chest pocket.

The strength drained from her knees, which in turn felt wobbly.

4

Coming into the dirt entryway, the okappiki said, “Are you the housewife? O-Hiro sat on the tatami to receive him and nodded “Yes,” and looked back over her shoulder.

“I’m afraid my husband is sick in bed now.”

“That’s not the name of the game,” the man shook his head. “I’m here to ask somethin’ of you. O-Hiro-san’s your name, isn’t it?”

“s right, sir. I’m o-Hiro.”

“Excuse me, let me sit here.”

The man sat on the lumber frame of the two-mat room.

—Not for my man.

Relieved to know the okappiki was not here for her husband, o-Hiro said, “Excuse me, sir,” and was about to rise to her feet. At this, the man waved his hand.

“No, no tea for me, thanks,” the man said. “I’ll go in a moment, so will you be seated there?”

O-Hiro sat down. It was quiet back there in the six-mat room. She perceived well that Risuke and Masaji were there with their breath held.

“Your husband’s sick, isn’t he?”

“Yes, sir, —” o-Hiro nodded. “He’s been sick three years.”

“How have you been making a living in the while?”

“I have been making a living, sir.”

“You’re a maid at an inn, aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” she looked at the man’s profile as she nodded. She heard children frolicking around the common well. The man seemed to be looking toward it.

“Maid at an inn,” he said and looked at her quietly, “Tell me, where’s the inn?”

“In the neighborhood of the Shimmei Shrine, sir.”

“In the neighborhood of the Shimmei in Shiba, right?” he said. “What’s the name of the place?”

“Why do you ask such stuff, sir?” o-Hiro retorted. “Is there anything wrong with me, sir?”

“Don’t let it get on your nerves. I’m simply asking the name of the place,” he said, “or does it bother you if I ask?”

O-Hiro stared at the man. He looked too calm to read anything from him, and it was quiet in the back room. No noise was heard.

“An inn,” o-Hiro replied, “—called Kishihachi in the neighborhood of the Shimmei Shrine, sir.”

“No, not that place,” the man shook his head. “I went to Kishihachi to make sure. No one knew you there, as it proved.”

“That’s, er, well why, I use a different name at the place.”

“Isn’t it o-Sono, —?” he said.

Her body gave a twitch. She glared at him with astonished eyes as if they would pop out.

“You’re makin’ money in the unlicensed prostitution district in Akasaka-Tamachi,” the man said, “whorin’ at a brothel called Somei-ya, under the name of o-Sono, ain’t it right, eh?”

O-Hiro opened her mouth.

Just then, the sound (*crash!*) of plaits and trays turning over leapt into her ears from the six-mat room and Risuke stormed out of the room. The man stood up; and Risuke ranted, “I heard it!” Ranting, he hit her in the face, and grabbed her by the locks of hair to pull her down. She drew in her legs, Risuke mounted her to slap her again. He slapped her on the head, cheeks, and shoulders. Slapping, he ranted:

“I heard it, you slut, I did hear,” he ranted and raved, “you slut cheated your husband. You been a whore, eh? This slut, this slut,” he slapped. “You made a cuckold of me. What a fine wife!”

O-Hiro would neither raise a voice nor ward herself off. Face covered with both hands, legs remaining drawn in, body stiff, she endured being

slapped. Masaji began to cry in the six-mat room and out at the entrance neighbors of the tenements came gathering. The man shouted, "Party's over, boys and girls. You're neighbors to each other, ain't you? Can't you make believe you don't see what they're doin'?" He waved them off. When the crowd dispersed, he turned back and said, "Stop. Time's up."

"Quit hitting her," the man said to Risuke as he restrained him. "What if she gets hurt? That's enough."

Risuke quit hitting and gasped: "But you know, sir, —"

"No reason for fuming," the man said. "She's making money for you, sick man, and your kid, isn't she, eh? Not because she stole or murdered, you don't need to be that worked up."

"Nonetheless, this slut under me, —"

Risuke alighted from o-Hiro, ranting fudge and mudge between gasps. She would not budge as she remained lying. She was whispering in her mind, "Fifty years ago, —fifty years after, . . ." Masaji was still crying in the six-mat room. The man spoke to her:

"I never intended to get no one to kick up a fuss like this. There's one who grassed on you and my duty brought me here to make sure whether it's true or false. And that's that."

"Then," Risuke asked, "you don't mean to arrest her, do you, sir?"

"It's not a big deal, not that big, never," the man said. "I am simply here to make sure whether or not it was true. I'm sorry, ma'am."

O-Hiro didn't respond.

"I s'ppose you been havin' a hard time with a sick husband and a little kid, but I really hope for you to wash your hands of a business like that as soon as you can. But then, you know it in the first place, and much earlier," the man said, "—you were called o-Hiro-san, weren't you? I got a tip for you. You'd do better not to have words in a place like a bathhouse. There are those in the world who like makin' a big fuss over a piffling matter. Now I must go. Good day."

And the man went out.

Risuke went back to the six-mat room to the crying boy and began to humor him. O-Hiro quietly sat up, redid her robe and sash, reaching her hand for her hair. The paper cord that bound all her hair was not snapped

but the root was undone. When her hands felt, the chignon came loose. —Wordlessly, she went past father and son into the six-mat room, where her dressing table was. The dressing table was torn and the mirror had gone. She opened a drawer and took out a comb. She began redoing her hair.

“Chicken, —” o-Hiro spat with a dried voice in a quiet low tone without looking at her husband, “you’ve known.”

Risuke clammed up at her words, then he began to baby the boy. Either he hadn’t heard what his wife had said or he had failed to make it out. Her hands trembled. She thought she could see the clear expression that appeared on her husband’s face at the moment when he clammed up.

—He’s known it. He did sense what business I’m in. Yes, he *did* sense it.

So she bemused herself.

—I knew it by the way he hit me. It wasn’t the way when he was really mad. He hit me just to show off. Chicken!

Risuke was talking to his son, suggesting like, “Shall we go out to see boats?” O-Hiro swept her hair together into her hand and did it. And she stood up.

5

“What’re you doing?” said Risuke. “Where are you going?”

Without responding, o-Hiro picked her wooden clogs and put them on. Risuke got up to his feet and called to her, “Will we talk between the two of us? We’ll talk it out.” She went out without responding or looking to her husband.

You got out of the alleyway to be on the river and you saw on the other side of the river was a shop called “Tsuchisho” which dealt in sand, earth for wall mud, gravel, and so forth. The proprietor was named Shobe’e, a good-natured man, aged fifty-two or -three. O-Sachi, his wife, was twenty-one or -two. They were a couple of disparate ages like

father and daughter. Shobe'e had had tough luck with his marriages. O-Sachi was his third wife. They'd only been married one year or so.

—It was o-Sachi who grassed on me.

So o-Hiro thought. The man from Fujikawa-ya said, "You'd do better not to have words in a place like a bathhouse." An incident of the kind had taken place at the Matsuba Bathhouse in Fifth Street about a half month before. The water that was rinsing o-Hiro's body off splashed against o-Sachi, who said it did and began yelling like a bolt from the blue. She raved so harshly o-Hiro retorted. O-Hiro found it imprudent of her to continue and had the discretion to put an end to it. She had completely forgotten as she had left it. But when she was told, "in a place like a bathhouse," something told her right away it was about o-Sachi.

Shop "Tsuchisho" was side by side with the residence. The residence had a lattice façade. O-Hiro slid the lattice door open and called. She called three times and on the third time she heard a response. Munching (a meal or something), o-Sachi came to answer. Looking to where o-Hiro was, she stopped and downed, *gloop*, something in her mouth.

"O-Sachi, you—" o-Hiro said and there stumbled over the words of what she had to say. She was at a loss what to say in what way. She felt that the words thronged up and were checked at the throat. "You," she stammered and felt as if the blood had rushed up to the head in an instant. "What does it have to do with that I'm working in an unlicensed prostitution district?"

O-Sachi's face turned stiffened.

"You're ensconced in a comfortable place like this, where, I tell you, you can wear what you want, eat what you want. You have variety show houses to go to, plays to watch, and whatnot. You can grab hold of anything you like. And that's how you live, isn't it," said o-Hiro. "—Whereas, as you know, I'm working at a brothel, prostituting myself. Unless I do so, we three of us, husband, kid and me, can't pull through. Do you know what it's like to be in want, eh?"

"You have such a big voice," o-Sachi said, "Are you here to brag it or something?"

"What's it to do with you? Living a good life as you do, wallowing

through extravagance, what do you have to grass on me for? That I'm working at a brothel bothers you, does it, eh?"

"That's not my business. That's none of my business," o-Sachi said scornfully. "I did nothing that makes you put something over me. Get it? Go away, will you?"

Just at that time, Risuke rushed to where they were, riling, "O-Hiro!"

"O-Hiro," he riled. "Quit making a fool of yourself."

"You shut your mouth."

"Beat it," he grabbed her shoulders. "Are you interested in making me ashamed furthermore?"

O-Hiro trembled. She bit her lip. While o-Sachi was watching coldly, Risuke apologized: "I'm awfully sorry." He was sorry o-Hiro disturbed her. She was high-strung, so "will you please pardon her?" He bent himself in bow on word by word.

"The weather's been peculiar these days," said o-Sachi. "Take her back before she does something wrong, will you?"

Risuke apologized again, bending in bow. O-Hiro was trembling the while. O-Sachi straightened out her robe's neckband disdainfully and left for the depths, feeling her hair with her hand. He apologized repeatedly after her, "Would you please pardon her?" Turning to o-Hiro, he said, "Now off we go." O-Hiro thought as she went out:

—This man's, I'm sure, failed to perform his obligations on them in some way.

She was sure he had a debt of money or something from them. This must be it. Otherwise he wouldn't apologize the way he did. He oughtn't to apologize like that as if kowtowing. Ah, what can I do? Whatever can I do? she thought to herself.

"What're you doing?" Risuke said, "You're going home, won't you?"

She didn't reply but began to make for the Shiodomé Bridge. Risuke said, "Hey," and attempted to take her by the hand. O-Hiro swept his hand off.

"I ask you, 'cause I'm to blame," he said, clinging after her. "I got a thought. I wanna talk to you about it. So, I ask you to go home before anything else. I entreat you."

“Hey look. Passers-by will watch us,” o-Hiro said. “I’ll do some shopping first, then go home. You go ahead and go home, will you?”

You can do your shopping later. Anyway, do come home once, said Risuke. Don’t pester me, o-Hiro said in a stern voice. We’re making a fool of ourselves on the street, don’t you see? I’ll be back soon, so go ahead home and take care of Masaji. Very well, I’ll be home ahead of you and wait, said Risuke anxiously looking at his wife.

“O-Hiro, you, —you’re alright, ain’t you?”

She understood what her husband meant.

“Yes,” she nodded, “I’m alright.”

She got across the Shiodomé Bridge and turned right. She only had the vague memory where her husband had left her to go home. She passed by a horse cart, was overtaken by a palanquin, and went through the crowd of people on the crossroads.

“Fifty years ago, —” o-Hiro mumbled, “and fifty years after, . . . nothing changes for crying out loud.”

She could not bring herself to go home.

As she was walking in the direction of Akasaka (from her long-practiced habit), she suddenly made a wry face, shuddering shrugged her shoulders. It was disgraceful of her to tiff with o-Sachi. It was such a shame that she bemoaned to herself: “I’d rather kill her.” And she reproached herself harshly for storming in in such a rage.

—Oy, this here’s by the moat.

She heard a voice say so somewhere in her head.

—Hey, don’t go nuts. Stay yourself. You’re alright?

Oh yes, she nodded and muttered, “It was a young assistant of Mikawa-ya.”

“I can’t afford to get myself drowned to death here. No, I shall not,” she said as she walked by the moat. “If I will, I can’t die as I am. No, I just can’t die if I will.”

When she found she got as far as Tamachi, o-Hiro stopped in her tracks and wondered, “What will I do?” and kept looking at the surface of the reservoir there. Then she decided and whispered, “I’ll drop a word to say that I’ll be off today,” and turned the corner of Second

Street, making her way.

6

It was too early and “Somei-ya” did not have the entrance really open yet. When o-Hiro went in, she saw Mon’ya putting on make-up in the first three-tatami-mat room upon entry. “Oh, you came in in the nick of time,” she said, “You have a john.”

“I’ve come to say that I’ll be off today,” o-Hiro said. “I’m out of shape and I’m going to ask for tonight off.”

Mon’ya, turning back to the mirror, said, “That so?” She continued to make herself up.

“Then, I’ll tell him so.” She said, “However, you’re asked for by name.”

O-Hiro looked at Mon’ya dubiously.

“He came just now and asked for you by name. He said he’d wait and so I’ve left him to wait.”

“Ask for me? —Who the heck is he?”

“If you take tonight off, you’ve got to decline or I could take him in place of you if you will.”

“Didn’t he come here last night?”

Mon’ya just shook her head. She said she wasn’t quite familiar with him because she had plural clients last night. That she didn’t see him off this morning because she was deep in sleep, “and because I don’t quite remember his face, even,” she didn’t know. While o-Hiro was listening something told her that it was the client from the last night.

“Don’t bother,” said o-Hiro, taking off her wooden clogs, “I’ll go and decline myself.”

Mon’ya (in the mirror) threw a sharp glance at her and said, “You’ll go as you are? If you decline, I can take him.”

In spite of her offer, o-Hiro just gave a vague answer and went into the four-and-a-half-mat room she usually used. When she slid open the screen door, she found the client seated by the andon light. The win-

dows had their shutters closed and despite the light from the andon, it was too dark for the eyes that moved in from outside to see the inside of the room well immediately.

“Welcome, sir,” o-Hiro looked at the client as she greeted. “You’re such an early guest.”

And then she got speechless. It wasn’t the same client she had taken in the night before. He was almost as old but she knew in the fragment of a second that he wasn’t the same she had seen off in the morning. He looked over his shoulder and gazed steadily on her and called her real name in a hoarse voice.

“That’s it,” the client said. “You don’t know still, Hiro-chan? It’s me.”

O-Hiro’s heart thumped as if it were surging up and down and her breath stopped. As she slowly exhaled the breath that had been inhaled and arrested in its tracks, she saw something like a rainbow flitting across her eye.

“Hiro-chan,” the client called her.

O-Hiro whirled back to get away from him. The guest jumped up and grabbed her by the arm. When she tried to sweep it away, he held her by the shoulders with both hands and said, “Wait please. I got to talk to you.”

“For goodness’s sake, Tsuné-san,” she said gasping painfully, her face averted. “Let me go. Don’t make me ashamed.”

“No, I won’t let you go, I’ve been looking for you. For a long two years I’ve been looking for you.”

“For goodness’s sake,” o-Hiro said, “I’ll kill myself.”

The guest took her in his arms firmly and said, “Do sit down. I ask you,” he said as he made her sit down where she was. She covered her face with the sleeve of her robe and sat down stiffened.

“A friend told me. The friend who came here last night told me,” he said. He seemed also nervous and what he said was incoherent. “For two years I’ve kept asking friends. Last night there was a meeting of the same trade. I went straight home, but other four rode into this place on the spur of the moment. The guy you took last night is called Grocer Katsu. He stopped by my place on the way from here and brought the

news.”

O-Hiro didn't stir an inch. Hearing the guest, she was repeating to her heart, “I'm being punished, I'm being punished, —” But she was not aware what she was being punished for. Only, words like that came to her naturally. —In her head, a kaleidoscope of this and that memory began to rotate. She was convinced, “This gentleman's Tsuné-san.” Yes, Tsuné-san of Big Grocery. How come? o-Hiro wondered. How come Tsuné-san's here, in a place like this? How come?

The old friend was speaking. He was married once, but his wife was always sick and three years ago she died. He'd since been single because if circumstances allowed, he had a wish to marry o-Hiro after he found her out. He'd been fond of her from the start and had intended to have her for his wife. Risuke had been cleverer and quicker, a chicken though, to get ahead and had married o-Hiro away. Risuke had learned that Tsunekichi had wanted her and cunningly he'd got ahead of him. He'd found what Risuke was like and doubted if he could make her happy. And now “There you are!” The guest was choked and, *gulp*, he made a sound of something being goggled down the throat.

“Son of a bitch, that Risuke is,” the guest cursed. “He's got you, Hiro-chan, bogged down in this plight. I, I, er. . .”

Then, o-Hiro began to weep.

She dropped her sleeved arm which was covering her face and began to sob secretly like a child, *ough, ough*, offhandedly, sitting with her face toward the wall. The guest sidled up to her and called, “Hiro-chan.”

“That's enough. Get a divorce,” the guest continued. “You've endured enough till now. More than enough, actually. I'll give money, so give it to Risuke and get a divorce.”

O-Hiro was weeping, a deluge of teardrops rolled down her cheeks and farther onto her lap.

The guest said, Risuke's parents were in Kisaradzu, Boshu Province, weren't they? Risuke must have relatives who were fishermen there. I heard he was sick and he could go home. He'd need ten ryo. Give him ten ryo, and he'd agree to divorce you. He's a man of the sort. Your child can go with him, or if you want, I'll take him on. I have no chil-

dren and we could both raise him. "I'll be more than happy to raise him because he's your son, Hiro-chan," the old friend said.

O-Hiro just wept and wept and listened to the guest almost none. However, she understood. Although she didn't believe she was listening, she understood from start to end. Absentmindedly and offhandedly she wept while nodding to him inwardly and shaking her head.

"It's too late for you," she said in a crushed voice. "I'm no more for you. I'm not me that was."

"Yes, you are. You are the same old Hiro-chan to me."

"When I took the job here, I thought," she said, "—I was not born yet fifty years ago, and fifty years after I'll be dead and gone and not be in this world. . . that is to say, I am, was, and will be all but nowhere in this world. No matter what bitterness and pain, they last that long only. It's nothing, is it? So I thought."

7

The guest's face went awry and the voice that said "Hiro-chan" quivered. O-Hiro smiled at him between sobs.

"Funny, isn't it?" o-Hiro said. "It's like something you hear in Buddhist sermons. It's funny, right? —But it is true. Ever since then, every time I've had trouble and pain, I've told it to me."

The guest cursed under his breath, "Son of a bitch! Son of a bitch, that Risuke is." As he said so, he clasped o-Hiro's hands as if impulsively. She did not refuse. Clasped, o-Hiro's hands began to slowly melt as the strength drained.

"You've had enough. You've had enough trouble and pain, Hiro-chan. Let us put an end to it, it's time," the guest said. "Should the trouble and pain be rewarding, you could go on with it no matter how. But if you must have it for the sake of Risuke, it's like you're sprinkling water over sand. Like you say, given that we'll be dead and gone in fifty years, we must live the life we're living now. Let us think about living a happy life while living."

“It’ll work no more,” o-Hiro said. “My body has been this much stained and I have a child, too.”

“Like I say, I’ll take it on. It’ll be our child and bring up, I’ll tell you,” he said as he clenched her hands firmly. “I’ve been looking for you for a long two years. I’m serious—, Hiro-chan. Please divorce him for me. You say your body is stained, but a-hundred-day peace and quiet will make it clean through and through. You don’t need to bother such stuff and nonsense, dear.”

“As long as two years—?” o-Hiro asked in a reverie, “You say you’ve looked for me as long as two years?”

“I asked friends, acquaintances, and all the other.”

“How come you’ve found out?”

“Honorable *Shogen’s* Little Lane, I say,” the guest said. “Remember? In no words like that, they sing the song elsewhere. Feckless though the clue was, I had no other means, dear.”

O-Hiro looked at the guest’s face, daydreaming, then, quietly, pressed her face with her hands.

He went on to say, “Please divorce Risuke.” Risuke could go back to Kisaradzu. It’d do good to his failed health. Should there be fishermen’s securities or something, ten ryo would be enough for him to make a living. Money would be ready any minute, so “when you’re back, clinch this deal pronto.” He himself could go and talk to Risuke if she would, said the guest.

—Oh yes. He has a place where he belongs in Kisaradzu.

She thought to herself. Oh yes, she’d had enough. She was thoroughly down and out. Then she went over all those memories that the man from Fujikawa-ya gave a glimpse of a jitte truncheon (in the chest pocket of his robe) that o-Sachi at “Tsuchisho” had smirked and had put on airs as she went back into the inner part of her house, feeling her hair to smooth it with her fingers; that his husband had kowtowed obsequiously in apology, and so on and so forth. She trembled to think back on them and shook her head.

—I remember, folks came a number of times from Kisaradzu where he belongs.

He could go back to Kisaradzu where he belonged, o-Hiro thought. Yes, that was it, she thought to herself. He'd receive as much as ten ryo. She was, on her part, completely spent. At the sight of ten ryo he'd receive he'd gladly divorce her. She could see his face, she thought to herself.

"You get it, dear?" the guest was saying when she came to from her reverie, "When you're back, be sure to make the deal."

"Yes," o-Hiro nodded, "I get it."

"You can do that, can you, dear? If you can't, I could go and talk to him myself."

"I'm alright. I will do it myself," said o-Hiro, "I, such as I am, can do stuff like that myself."

"You're a good girl. When the deal is only clinched, I'll take care of all the rest," the guest said boastfully. "Leave everything to me. You'll just do as I do. I will never make you feel humiliated or disgraced, never. You get it?"

"Yes," o-Hiro said.

Color came into the thin face of the guest and the eyes assumed sparkles of sprightliness. O-Hiro gazed at the guest as if looking at him for the first time. His face was thin and oval, with a long nose and the obduracy that appeared in the look of his eyes and his mouth. The complexion was rather fair with a fresh shaving trace. His hair was so jet-black that it would make you envy. He was dressed in a striped lined robe of pongee in sober color which was fastened with a stiff sash. But change into children's gear, he was the Tunekichi himself from those days. O-Hiro cast down her eyes as she said "Yes." Which was followed by a soft voice that said, "I'll do as you tell."

"Now, everything's been settled. I'll be waiting for you at home," the guest said. "Regarding your child, I'll do as you like. I'll have the money ready and be waiting at home."

The client went ahead. As he parted, he looked into o-Hiro's eyes and whispered, "I'll be waiting." O-Hiro smiled on the lips and nodded back to him.

O-Hiro left the shop shortly, too. O-Masa and Ikuyo had been back from the bathhouse and gazed on her searchingly. Most probably, Mon'ya

had eavesdropped their talk and repeated to them. O-Hiro, feeling the searching eye in her back, left wordlessly.

—I'll be determined in that way. I'll do as Tsuné-san told me.

While walking on the brink of the reservoir, o-Hiro repeatedly thought: Tsuné-san said he was serious. He'd kept looking for me as long as two years. I would just be positive. I'd think later. At the moment, I would do as he told me to. I oughtn't be unfeeling even if I'd do so, "yes, I'm sure there will be no one calling me unfeeling," o-Hiro muttered.

While walking, o-Hiro became more definite and her mind was made up. She stopped by the palanquin shop in Second Street, Shibakuchi and met with Gempei the proprietor, telling him that she'd "quit the job." She didn't tell him the reasons. Nor would Gempei ask her anything but only nodded, saying, "That's good. That'll be much better if you can."

She did the shopping for dinner at the fishmonger's and the grocery. When back to the precincts of the tenements, she found Masaji playing in the corner of the alleyway. When she asked what his daddy was up to, he only said, "Sleeping," and was back to the play. —O-Hiro went in and proceeded to the kitchen, and spread her buy there.

"Is that you-?" Risuke said in the six-mat room. "You back?"

O-Hiro replied, "Yes."

"You're late, eh? Where have you been to do the shopping?"

She didn't answer. She heard him coughing. She attended to her duty. She began to use water to cook. She had known that her husband's coughing was (half) faked up. She'd known it over time.

"Can't you hear what I'm saying?" Risuke said as he coughed. "Where the heck have you been, forgetting to decoct my medicine? You aren't supposed to make a decoction, eh?"

O-Hiro complied by saying, "I'll do that right off."

8

That night, o-Hiro hadn't waited for the night to come more impatiently. She took Masaji to the bathhouse, bought him a toy, and took more time than needed to prepare dinner, too. Risuke must have perceived something from the way she behaved. He never spoke but seemed to be studying what she was up to.

When they sat at the dinner trays, Risuke said as if talking to himself, "I had a little visit to the master in Oga-cho, today." "That so?" o-Hiro just said refusing to strike up a conversation. Nor would he continue with what he had to say. Only when the meal was over and she was washing dishes, did he come behind her as if appearing out of thin air and say, "I went to see the master while you were away." Then he added, "I'd like a word with you later."

O-Hiro went on washing dishes wordlessly, then said, "I'd like a word with you, too." She said clearly and calmly in such an uncompromisingly flat tone, she was surprised at herself. Without responding, Risuke returned to the six-mat room.

—That's it. This'll work. No, I won't be a loser. I just won't be a loser.

She almost smiled as she thought.

Done with clearing away in the kitchen, she made the andon lighter and spread her mending. She was going to start first when the child went to sleep.

Notwithstanding, Risuke was the quicker. As soon as he tucked his son into his bed, he began: "The master says he'll give me a job." Plying her needle, o-Hiro said, "Let it come after our son gets to sleep." When it came to talks, she had something she wanted him to hear about ahead of him. Uh-huh, he nodded, saying, "I know just about what you got to say." Because he knew, he wanted to speak first all the more. Once he got her to talk first, he'd do have nothing left to say. That, he knew, for this reason he wanted to let him come first, said Risuke.

Without responding, o-Hiro kept on sewing and Risuke began to talk in a low voice.

“This afternoon, you said I’d known, didn’t you?” he said. “After the man from Fujikawa-ya went, you vented it while redoing your hair. When you vented it, in a low voice though, I did hear crystal-clear.”

When you had it out, Risuke said, I felt I had a chisel thrust into my chest all of a sudden. I’m not exaggerating. I had a piercing sensation this here in my chest. Even now the painful sensation remains here. I’ll be honest with you. Although you may not trust me, I’ll have all out tonight. I didn’t know. I didn’t have the faintest idea ’til the man from Fujikawa-ya unfolded it. Honest.

O-Hiro was unresponsive, only plying her needle. She heard three, four people drinking beyond the thin wall on one side. She heard plates clink and the people talking and laughing. They seemed to be enjoying the best of the merrymaking. On the other side was a “quibbler,” single, who may have gone out seeking for some pleasure or hit the sack. It was already quiet and nothing came at all.

—Now you can say all you have to say. No matter how you simper and whimper, I won’t let it get me.

She wouldn’t give in no matter what, o-Hiro was determined.

“But when I heard the man from Fujikawa-ya say that, and when I set on you to hit, I got aware that I’d had a vague idea about it.”

He’d had a vague idea, Risuke continued. But of course he didn’t clearly sense that it was an unlicensed prostitution district. He should be unable to sense it, and he was afraid to know. It wasn’t a normal job she had at an inn, from the way she behaved and what she made on it. There must have been something she was hiding from him. Although suspecting so, he was afraid to find out the truth. He had dilly-dallied over the time and this had pulled out the brace from him, both mentally and physically. He was an honest man now. He was afraid to hit the bull’s eye in finding out. Really “I was afraid,” he said and paused a while.

“I thought that I was hitting myself while I was hitting you,” Risuke went on, “I was hitting myself. Hitting, I was telling myself to die. You must die, you must die, I was repeating it to myself.”

There he stopped. He inspected to see how fast his boy was sleeping, then he sat up quietly. And he wrapped the son's shoulders with the quilt. He sat himself on his knees beside the sleeping boy. He hung his head down.

“This is the sixth year that we've been married. Half of the years I've been sick and obliged you alone to shoulder trouble and pain, and the greatest part of it has been the job you had to take in a place like an unlicensed prostitution district where you landed to make money, . . . I came to the realization for the first time in my life of what sort of person I am. Once in the know, I really wanted to die, I'll tell you.”

Risuke was choked. Head hanging down, with both hands he clasped both knees of his night robe with all his might. He continued while o-Hiro felt her strength drain (from her body). It was not because her husband's words moved her but totally apart from it. It was because the distance between her and Tsunekichi felt growing longer, and she was feeling small and forlorn.

—Tsuné-san, don't ever leave me, keep clutching. I'm fine. I won't give in. So keep clutching me.

I'll be honest and tell the truth. The doctor allowed me to get out of my sick bed, o-Hiro found Risuke was saying. He also allowed me to do casual, easy work that comes my way, to begin with. I've procrastinated one day after another. I've lied to myself because I know what it's like to be lazy and that you're working to make a living.

“However, today's incident made me think,” said Risuke. “I want to say goodbye to my life once and for all but dying means anything but making good for what's gone. I'll change it all in me. —Whether I'll be able to change, I'll give it a try. . . . I thought this way and I went to Oga-cho while you were away.”

O-Hiro's needle stopped in its tracks, and her eyes dimmed, losing focus.

“Don't ask me anything,” she muttered. “I'm utterly fed up. I'm way down and out. Pray you, don't ask me anything any more.”

Please hear me out, at any rate, Risuke said. The master didn't welcome me at first. I thought, this is all or nothing in my life. I persisted.

And it worked. The master gave me a job. Well, it's not quite a job. It's keeping his customer's lumberyard. There's a shop that needs a live-in couple. What I'll make will only be for a hand-to-mouth living. The master said, if I have the eagerness to be a keeper until I can do labor work, then he'd be the mouthpiece for me.

"That's nice," o-Hiro gasped, "if there's a house to live in and money to live on." Then she said between gasps as though getting drowned, "If you have food to eat and a place to sleep, then it's nice to be a keeper or whatever it is."

"O-Hiro, you, you mean it?"

Ah, o-Hiro groaned. She threw out what was on her lap and shaking her head violently, groaned, "Ah."

—Tsuné-san, clutch me.

As she cried so in her heart, she fell down on her face where she was.

9

Risuke dithered. He got to his feet and came along to where his wife was and put his hand on her back and said in a quivering voice, "Is it true what you said just now?" O-Hiro avoided his hand (with her back) and was choked, *ugh*.

"I'll give it a shot, I'll promise," Risuke said quivering, "If I wait being a keeper three months or six, then I'll get stronger, I'll be full of life, my body and all. I can make my chisels and planes come back to me in the meanwhile. I'm sure I'll give my all this time, you have my word."

O-Hiro remained on her face on the tatami floor and let her head wobble. Risuke, on his part, said, "Look, I'm sure I'll do it." He burst into tears. The teary voice pinioned her unmovable.

—I'm a happy woman, Tsuné-san. You've looked for me a long two years. I'm happy.

I won't forget, never, o-Hiro thought. Her head wobbled. That's enough for me. You came to see me at a place like that and said you'd make me your wife. I'm only gratified that you've thought of me that

much.

—I'm only gratified. I couldn't hope for more. I oughtn't to hope for more by getting a divorce then married with you. If I would, I'd be punished.

's right, o-Hiro thought. It was because I knew "I can't" that I accepted your proposal, Tsuné-san. How can I? The facts will never go away that I got married with this man and bore a child and that I'd made a living out of being a prostitute. Suppose I got married with you, Tsuné-san, the facts would cling to me for the rest of my life, they'd never go away. Because of them, you and me would have a bitter time for the rest of our lives, what do you say, Tsuné-san? o-Hiro thought to herself.

—This man has been sissy from the old times. You remember, don't you? He always used to lose to you, Tsuné-san. Every time he had a fight with you, he used to go away from you in sobs and from a safe distance yell, O-yaoya (Oh boy, grocer)! Do you remember?

O-Hiro was choked. The vivid picture surged up of Risuke's face smeared with tears and voice taunting from a distance. Remembering it, she suppressed, for her life, the titter that came up stinging her throat.

"Out with it, o-Hiro," Risuke said in a teary voice. "This is all I have to say. Now let us hear about what you have to say."

O-Hiro shook her head and said in a dry voice, "I'm fine now."

"Let us hear your story. I'll be your audience."

"I'm fine now," o-Hiro said. "Now that you're pondering about working like a good husband, I have nothing to say. —Last of all, I want to move as soon as possible. That's all."

"You really don't have anything to say?"

The child began to fret. O-Hiro rose to her feet and went toward him and slipped into his bed to lie next to him so she'd lull him back into sleep.

"I only want to move to a new place as soon as possible," said o-Hiro. "When will we be able to move to the lumberyard?"

"It should be any minute if I ask the master for the position," Risuke said. "O-Hiro, . . . you, you're going to get a divorce from me, aren't you?"

She was quiet for a while. Then she said, “What a preposterous idea!”
“You thought it over again and gave up on it for me,” said Risuke. “At any rate, you don’t mean to divorce me right now, do you?”

“Don’t talk loud. Masa is about to fall asleep again, don’t you see?”

“I’m obliged. I’ll give it a shot,” he said, his voice killed. “You stay right by my side and I’ll give it a big shot for crying out loud. I’ll promise.”

O-Hiro, tapping Masaji on the back (with her fingertips), began to sing low. Tsuné-san, she called in her heart, I’ll never ever sing this song for the rest of my life. This is the last time tonight, she cried out in her heart. She began to sing as if murmuring:

—Tell me how this little lane is called?

Honorable *Shogen*’s little lane.

Please let us through, I entreat you. . . .

The Rain's Let Up

1

Once again, the woman let out a screaming voice. Then she began to squawk. All this came to where he was.

—It's that woman again.

Misawa Ihe'e gazed at his wife anxiously as he lay on the floor, eyes open a slit. O-Tayo kept plying her needle. A lined kimono which had long been exposed to time was unsewn and unraveled by being starched and dried under the sun. She was sewing it over to recycle it into an unlined summer robe. She looked painfully weak like a haggard old woman. Her haggardness was known by her pinched cheeks which were conspicuously lean, her bony shoulders whose ridges looked like a razor, and her fingers that held needles. All this was thrown into relief by the light filtering through the foxed paper mounted on the shoji sliding doors. Other than this, however, her abundant hair done in a neat manner and her vividly red lips retained the youthfulness of a maid. A well-to-do life she had lived until she got married outdid the seven-year privation. This and maybe the fact that she had not had a baby dwelt in her hair and lips alone as the remnant of her youthfulness, as it were.

It was raining outside. The May rains ought to have decamped by now, but it had kept on raining each passing day for no less than fifteen days and there was no hint of it letting up today, either. It was drizzling and no sound of rain came, but the drip-drop of raindrops night and day was nothing but depressing.

“There's a thief here, I'll tell you, a thief,” the woman screeched bluntly, the screech gaining its volume, “stole the rice I was cooking in the few moments I was away to do a little washing, you know. I did give a mark to my pot alright.”

Ihe'e closed his eyes tightly.

—That's not rare.

Kicking up a fuss like this was not unusual in flophouses at the edge of town along highways. Guests of flophouses were people in great need, most of them being toffee vendors, fair-ground stall keepers, cheap traveling troupers. Being haltered by rain for a while longer would mean that they'd instantly fail to scrape up the day's life, not to mention feeding themselves alone, and snatch co-guests' effects in spite of themselves. This wasn't unusual.

—But calling someone a thief goes too far, yes, too far.

In his embarrassment and regret, the e's heart began to flutter as if he himself had been called a thief.

The woman's scream grew louder and louder while no one would dare to raise a voice. The scene was not to be seen from here in the three-tatami-mat room. But in the guestroom with a fireplace which had to be holding some ten guests, even a baby seemed to be bating its breath now. Among the guests were two couples who were traveling with their family. The baby was the offspring of the younger couple who left it to cry and fret all day long. But now it was holding its breath.

The woman was on the wrong side of thirty, engaged in shady business. She did not get along with other guests. No one took her seriously. They shunned her. Not that they did from disrespect. Those who were busy making a hand-to-mouth living had neither a way nor time to debase others because of their trade. The reason was that her manners were intolerably rude and thorny and that she talked relentlessly in a barrage of acrimonious language. That is to say, they took off their hat to her. And yet, apparently she didn't think so but constantly showed them overt hostility.

Everyone had been held up by the rain for as long as a half month. They were half starved. But this woman, unlike the others, cooked a meal today too (though as much in need), maybe because she was in the line of sorts. That she cooked every day satisfied her everyday animosity and pride to a large extent.

“That goes too far. Who does she think she is?” the e muttered. He sat up. The woman's scream was growing ever more hysterical and with it she became more acrimonious. He couldn't stand it any more.

“That’s awful. Even if it really proves the way she claims, I don’t think it clever to say things that will eat others.”

He was kind of whispering to himself, he stole a glance to see how his wife was feeling. He had a nice body. He was tall in height, broad and thick in the shoulders and chest, and firm in the muscles. His puffy round face had as mild looks as any. His drooping eyes and small mouth suggested the cleanness of a well-bred boy.

“Yes, that’s so, but,” o-Tayo said without looking toward him, as she smoothed out where her needle had gone through with her thumb nail. “I’ll suggest they try a little more tenderness. She thinks she’s treated like an odd man out. She’s so lonely. I’m sure she gets that high-strung before she knows it.”

“Yes, that could explain it, my lady. But she has to manage herself a bit.”

Ihe’e’s heart missed a beat. The woman at last brought out a particular name on her lips.

“Hey, say something. That’s you, narrative reciter geezer.”

Her voice was piercing.

“—No chance, faking ignorance. I’m not blind. I know from the start you did it. The other day, too, . . .”

Ihe’e leapt up to his feet.

“Don’t, my lord.” O-Tayo tried to stop him, but he slid open the screen door and went out.

He came out into a guestroom looking like a farmer’s fireplace. A large fireplace was cut next to the board floor to which you stepped up from the dirt floor used for passage from entrance in front to exit in the back. Tatami mats were laid out in a six-mat pattern and an eight-mat, which were put together in the shape of a hook. The room differed from a farmer’s where it was low-ceilinged; where most of the guests took no separate guestrooms of their own, huddling together to sleep; and where cooking utensils lined because they cooked their meals at the fireplace, borrowing pots and pans.

The woman was by the fireside. Hand thrust into chest pocket, one knee drawn up, unhealthily lean pale face twitching, she scowled around

with her glaring eyes and screeched with an ear-splitting voice. —The rest of the guests kept a distance from her and endured it with bated breath, holding their knees and bending over them, lying on their belly, and holding their children tightly. They made the impression of the dog of a house in mourning, the dog patiently waiting for the storm to pass.

“Excuse me, ma’am, but would you mind stopping that?” Ihe’e said, coming up to her, as if gently soothing her. “I don’t think there’s any such bad person. Everyone here’s good-natured and you yourself know it well, don’t you, ma’am?”

“Leave me, please,” she said and looked away. “—It hasn’t got to do with a samurai, sir. I’m in the line of a base trade for a living, but I am no butts that are so weak I got to keep mum when I get a property of mine stolen.”

“You’re quite right, ma’am. Yes, that’s so. However, I’ll pay the price, so, pray will you pardon whoever it is?”

“That isn’t something a samurai should mind. Don’t let it worry you, sir. I’m not saying all this ’cause I grudge the loss.”

“Of course not. You’re quite right, ma’am. But human beings do err, and we’re now being under the same roof. So, at any rate, will you consider pardoning? I’ll go out and handle your problem right now. Please, ma’am?”

This much saying, Ihe’e was up and left busily for some reason.

“An oath is an oath, and this is quite another.”

When he was out with an umbrella with the name of the inn in large letters, hanging over his head, he said so and wore a smile as if tickled.

“Insomuch as a course of an event took place right under my nose, I can’t make do by keeping my conscience alone, can I? ’s right. It’s conduct that goes against conscience, let me tell you. Well, no,” he suddenly turned serious and said, “—no, I’m not going to do anything and it won’t be called conduct, will it? Non-conduct, let’s see, no this isn’t successful, is it?”

Babbling mumbo-jumbo, he sprightly strode his way with all enthusiasm toward the castle town.

2

It was some four hours after that he came back to the flophouse.

Maybe he had drunk. His face was scarlet. But more surprising was that he was followed after by a line of several young assistants and apprentice boys who were laden with various victuals. An assistant from the rice dealer bore a bale of rice, another from the grocer a large basket full of vegetables, another from the fishmonger fish in two fishmongers' tubs, yet another from the liquor store an eighteen-pint barrel full of saké and miso (fermented soy paste) and soy sauce. Candies and cakes from the confectioner. And on the heels of them were huge loads of kindling and charcoal, and so forth.

"How did you come by all this?"

The mistress of the flophouse wondered with her eyes wide open as she came out. The young men and young boys arrayed the loads they were each laden here with from left to right on the dirt floor and the running stepping board between the dirt floor and the rooms.

"I thought we need a little life back into our life, ma'am."

He'd smiled, his eyes narrowed to slits. And turning to the co-lodgers who were all flabbergasted, he said:

"Everyone, excuse me, but could you lend me your hands? Shall we get a mouthful and make merry? We'll have a little bit of life back from this long spell of rain. I'm ashamed it's just going to be a humbly small get-together. Shall we be our own cooks by sharing responsibilities among us? I can cook rice."

There arose among the co-lodgers ripples of groans one couldn't tell as joy or pain. No one would stir right away. But no sooner did he take out a cake so everyone would be able to see it than Gen-san's (fixer of hooped tubs and barrels) child leapt up from its mother's lap. And with the child, as if automatically, four, five comrades got up to their feet and came to him.

The flophouse suddenly became alive with the waves of liveliness.

On the waves the house swayed. Something might have burst out in an instant. The proprietor of the house, his wife, and the middle-aged maid joined them. The fish and vegetables were spread. A fire was built in the fireplace and the kitchen stove. Sprightly shouts and roars of laughter arouse incessantly. Of no necessity, women cackled and slapped one another's back.

"You sit down and wait, please sir," everyone said to Ihe'e. "—We can take care of 'em all. We got 'em from you, sir, and we feel bad if we get you to cook like us, sir."

They said imploringly they'd call him when it was ready, but Ihe'e didn't take it and made himself busy awkwardly working together, as he sneaked casual glances over to the small guestroom where his wife was.

The old Buddhist narrative reciter man, a little palsied, enthusiastically made himself busier than anybody else because he felt guilty of the scene that had developed before.

By the time the dinner was almost ready, the darkening common room was lighted up (by the proprietor's favor) with a large flat light hanging from the ceiling and, furthermore, with andon lights in three spots.

"Now, gentlemen, be seated with the lord. We've only to carry the foods and nothing more to do," the women said and hurried the men to their seats.

"—Don't let my hubby take the responsibility of warming saké. He'll drink up before it is warm. Mind you, please."

And then, the woman sitting beside her said in jest, Well then, your saké-bottle warming pot can never find time to get warm itself, never for a moment, can it? And they pecked and cackled to each other.

Ihe'e sat side by side with the proprietor and his wife. The other men severally took their seat. There were seven or eight tokkuri bottles warming saké in the huge pot on the fire of the hearth. When courses were brought, the maid of the house distributed the bottles to the diners' trays.

Now a bubbly party began.

"Look and imagine. Courses to go with saké are lining from end to end, and my figure is stately sitting with a saké cup. The picture of this

draws me going extravagant, doesn't it? It feels like I was a shogun. Honest."

"Don't be too proud. Don't let your majesty throw back your majesty's pate too much and topple over on your majesty's back. That's dangerous."

Ihe'e was drinking in such a delighted swig, looking over the merrymaking with his drooping eyes. All the people there had been dry of drinks in such a long time, they all got drunk in a few moments. They took out a ramshackle shamisen and began singing to it. Some of them began to dance to the music.

"It's all like a dream." Takehei, a man who burnished mirrors by trade, felt in his bones and said, "—If I knew there'd be one merrymaking like this once a year, no, let it suffice there'd be one every three years, then I could put up with almost any hardships that'd come my way."

And so saying he gave a sigh, which was solitarily communicated through the hurly-burly to Ihe'e. Ihe'e closed his eyes awhile and, as if stabbed somewhere, made a hard grimace and tossed off his cup of saké.

Into the middle of noise, the woman came back. She usually came back after midnight but she may have failed to trawl johns tonight. She proceeded into the dirt floor with a drawn face. Appalled, she was arrested in her tracks and stood bolt upright, her hands about to wipe the rain off her hair. It was the wife of Gen-san who noticed her first. Her child would often get candies from her. That was why she was one of the few who got along with the woman. However, this evening she was so inebriated like the next one, apparently she had just forgotten about the happening in the afternoon and said, "Ah, there you are, o-Roku-san. We're invited by Lord Misawa. He gave us this merrymaking opportunity at his expenses. Quick, o-Roku-san, get up and join us."

The last few words were on the tip of her tongue. She was interrupted by the old Buddhist narrative reciter man, who leapt up to his feet and shouted:

"Now you're back, nightwalker bitch. Come up here and I'll return you the meal you say I stole. So, come up and sit here."

A bit palsied, he was kind of thick-tongued. But his voice was su-

premely high-pitched, his eyes glaring. His body trembled all over. Everyone fell silent. The song and the accompanying instrument stopped. All the eye was directed toward the woman.

“How dare you call me a thief!” the old man went on, gasping for life, “Who do you think you are? You dare. . . , this old man? Now come on here. I’ve waited for you to come back in order to feed you with this much. I’ve kept it without eating it. Serves you right, you’ll take back your loss. Now take it!”

“Wait, wait please. Don’t be mean to her. Wait, anyway,” Ihe’e stood up and soothed the old man. “People can make a mistake. She’s sad, too, in her way. People are all sad in their own way. We share the sadness, so let’s forgive her and be friends again.”

He spoke incoherently. Speaking, he called to the woman standing in the dirt floor.

“—Will you join us? We’re just having fun, no more or no less. So, will you come over here and sit down? There’s nothing to speak of, but please be happy and share the joy. Join us in a drink, please. We’re in the same boat, you know.”

“Do come over here,” the wife of the proprietor egged her on. “—Take it from him this here lord, and come over here to have foods and drinks.”

Everyone there followed her. They were so made that they could not do without inviting anyone to everything that was to be shared among them, not only the high spirits derived from being mellow but also delight and joy. The wife of hoop-fixer Gen-san rose and fetched the woman. She was seated looking hoity-toity. As if she would drink out of obligation, she wordlessly took a saké cup, her head thrown back.

“Now everybody, let’s make merry again,” Ihe’e said at the top of his lungs, “—so that Heaven will be overwhelmed and fold up those sheets of rain. Now every one of you, let’s all in one. . . .”

And when the liveliness came back and the merriment went in full swing, Ihe’e seemed to summon up pluck. He stood up with the tray in front and made for the three-mat room where his wife was waiting.

Entering the room, Ihe’e found o-Tayo sitting on her knees at a

lopsided small desk. She was writing in in a handmade notebook, the diary she kept. It was the diary she had been keeping during long journeys from place to place. It may well have been her sole fun, as it were, to put in every day in it. He saw her bending over the desk with the andon pulled close to her. He put down the tray and sat down squarely where he was and bent down low in apology to her.

“I am sorry. Will you please forgive me?”

O-Tayo turned back quietly. Her lips formed a smile but the look of her eyes was that of anger.

“You had a betted swordsmanship bout, didn’t you, my lord?”

“To be honest, my lady, I had a betted swordsmanship bout.”

Again he bent down.

“You know, I couldn’t stand any more. I was sad to hear good people bickering at each other like that. My nature just couldn’t overlook it. I had to do something. Anyway, everyone was in a plight, the rain didn’t stop. Thinking how they were feeling made me feel I couldn’t stay still, my lady.”

“Let me remind you, my lord. You promised me not to have a betted bout.”

“That is correct, my lady. I did promise. But this is not for the sake of my drinking and eating, my lady. Well yes, I drank a little. I’d say it might be somewhat more than a little. Everyone is in seventh heaven, like that, my lady.”

Then, he made still another bend.

“—Please understand and forgive me. There won’t be absolutely another betted bout any more. So, please, my lady, will you please. . . take a mouthful of this on the tray for the evidence that you’ll forgive me. Just a mouthful will do, my lady.”

O-Tayo put down her writing brush and got to her feet as she made a sad smile.

3

The next morning when it was still dark, Ihe'e borrowed a tattered sedge headgear and went out of his accommodations with fishing tackle and a creel. There was a river called the Hazama, some quarter of a mile away toward the castle town. The river was known as a good place for sweetfish fishing in this neighborhood.

Like other lodgers, he'd been shown by the proprietor of the accommodations and fished in the river a couple of times. He'd so far hooked several of the small size. But that morning, he went out for a different purpose. It was not for fishing, it seemed, but for the purpose of getting away from the accommodations.

He was prostrated. Dejection on face, he shook his head as if he couldn't bear any more and sighed. Crossing the bridge, turning left, and walking no more than two hundred and fifty yards on the riverbank would bring you where you saw the lush thickets that grew on the shore. He'd been there before. He stopped for a while and faltered his way down the bank into the pine tree grove.

"Right, it's already been seven years. Right."

The smell of young pine needles was adrift in the grove. Big raindrops came down pelting his sedge hat.

"I don't care, but the problem is how o-Tayo is feeling. I ignored her feelings, to get around which I spoke hocus-pocus, and broke the swear and had a betted bout, . . . Right, after all, I wanted to drink. Maybe so. I licked my lips as I went out, didn't I, eh? Eagerly and with pleasure. Oops!"

Ihe'e shrank his head and shut his eyes tight.

From generation to generation the Misawa family had served the Lord Matsudaira of Iki and earned an annual stipend of 1,250 bushels of rice. Ihe'e's father was called Hyogonosuké, whose only son was Ihe'e. He had had such a weak physique as a young boy, he had been farmed out to a Zen temple called Soka-ji. He was so loved by priest Genna that

even when he had grown up, he had been in frequent touch.

He was weak both temperamentally and physically. He had the disposition that he would retire from things and was prone to sobbing. Thanks to the masterly education the priest had given, he had grown to be physically healthy and temperamentally cheerful and active by the time he had turned fourteen or sixteen.

—The flint holdeth fire inside; unless it be struck, it bringeth it out not.

This priest Genna always said so. And Ihe'e himself cherished the axiom like his guardian deity. Whether it be learning or military arts, whenever he was stuck in a fix he would ponder over the words. A flint holds fire inside it; unless it be struck, it does not bring fire out. How he should strike it, now, how he should strike to ignite fire that would be brought from inside the flint. Now. . . this was how he would figure out a way to handle a situation. And then, in most cases (not in all) he would find a way out to the solution.

His learning ranged far and wide from the doctrines of Zhu Xi and Yang Ming to those of Taoism. His mastery in military arts included sword, spear, partisan, archery, Jujitsu, pike, horseback riding, and swimming. His achievements in all this were such that there were no peers for him.

If so, did Ihe'e ascend the ladder of samurai-warriordom rapidly?

Far from it. It was quite the other way around. It was because of his mastery in learning and military arts that he had to leave home, ending up being without a master.

There seemed to be two reasons: reason one, his military feats had grown to be phenomenal; and reason two, his temperament. In a nutshell, he was peerlessly strong in everything, such as swordplay and Jujitsu. He did nothing in particular but he was extremely spontaneous as he applied them. At twenty-one or -two, even masters in their individual quest of the art were no match whatsoever for him. Not that he wielded any special, bizarre feats. But he was simple and straight. Effortlessly, the bout was clinched. Unexpectedly so easily and so soon.

—The point where he would strike out the fire in the flint.

The moment he spotted “the point” in question, the win-and-lose was spelled out. But all the same, it was too spontaneous, plain and simple, for the opponent to find it hard to end the bout and for the bystanders to find it exciting, and for himself to be proud of winning, to top it off.

Ihe’e’s father Hyogonosuké had demised and he succeeded to his father’s estate at the age of twenty-four. At the same time, he got married. The bride was from the Kurematsu family in the same lord’s domain. She was o-Tayo. Shortly after his mother followed his father, he was immediately driven by the feeling he was hard put to stay at home. . . . Thanks to old priest Genna, he had grown to be active, but apparently his nature had not changed. He had grown temperamentally softer, while he had grown physically stronger, till he had become suave and modest.

It may have been virtuous not to be proud of winning. But Ihe’e became embarrassed and felt bad every time he won. He felt so bad and was so embarrassed in the true sense of the words, the opponent was made to feel it difficult to end the bout all the more for it. Nor did the bystanders have the feeling that it had clean ended. And there again he had the sensation that he had done a bad thing. As this discomfiture had accumulated, something had begun to go wrong in the air among the people concerned and, in the end, Ihe’e had asked for leave of his lord and resigned from his office (in direct, there had been a *de facto* plot planned by the military art masters of the domain).

—I’ve acquired this much learning and the mastery of various military arts. It’ll be peaceful for both parties that I’ll be once and for all off for a strange domain, where there’ll be a new master for me.

He talked to o-Tayo about it, too, and got her consent to go on the road. They hit the road. But it didn’t work. Despite the opportunities that came his way, oddly enough something would go wrong when it came to the bout for the testing purpose of his feats. As usual, he would beat local or domain military art masters or one well-reputed as peerlessly strong with such ease that bystanders would lose interest because the bout would come to an end so simply and so soon. The feelings would be crossed somehow. His feats were praised but eventually no topic of a post would ever pop up.

—It isn't the way it should. I'm this much skilled, but what's wrong with me?

He reflected back, pondered, and even was anguished. A couple of cases went well. But in those cases there arose problems of different sorts, such as one that he was sorry about the opponent who lost to him and had to lose the job, and another that he had the opponent grudge his success (in fact, he was implored: "Would you please decline the offer of service that is extended to you? Should I lose my job now, I'd get my wife and children to be driven out in the cold.>"). Then it followed that he became terribly sorry and was at the end of the rope. Which meant that he, on his part, apologized and withdrew himself from the offer, and that was that.

When they left home, they had more than plenty of finance for journeys. But in the third year it had all gone. He couldn't help but start occasional betted bouts in exercise halls in town. This went definitely well. When the opponent accepted the challenge, inevitably he would be the winner. And sometimes he came in big money. But when this was known to his wife, she admonished him in tears, making him swear never to do it again.

Needless to say, they became hard up right away.

—I'll do piecework, at least this much I can do. So, please be patient and bide your time.

So began to say o-Tayo. She had been born to the family of acting principal retainer, the annual stipend being some 4,500 bushels of rice. She had been brought up and had grown as a rich family's daughter as naturally as any and with no hardships. But the trouble and pain of unwonted wanderings had now debilitated her health and wasted her away. He's heart would break at a glimpse at her. He took such a pity on her he'd be convulsed with pain. He was shook up at the word "piecework" and flatly refused her suggestion. He implored: Oh no, pray you don't. Instead he thought of commencing a nickel-and-dime business he could do on his own.

The business referred to here was not steady one but one that traded in simple and plain small toys he made himself, such as balancing toys

called “yajirobe’e”, jumping hares, T-shaped bamboo flying toys called “bamboo dragons”, popguns with paper wads, and bamboo flutes; sometimes, according to seasons and places, small fresh water creatures, such as small carp, crabs, and frogs, which he hooked and caught to sell to little children. The inns they lodged gradually went down the line from decent through humble to base. And now before they knew it, they were wont to lodge in flophouses. By nature, Ihe’e was fond of children, so it was not unpleasant to conduct a business like that. Nothing, in fact, would bother him when he got along with other flophouse guests who were simple and honest and compassionate like him (yes, there were exceptions), and who had each other’s sympathy since they were commonly down and out.

“Eventually all that has come to me. Despicable. Don’t you yourself think it’s simply despicable, you, Mister Misawa Ihe’e?”

On the verge of tears, he sighed. He came out of the reverie and found himself standing in the middle of the pine grove, where the raindrops were incessantly beating his sedge headgear.

“Now is about the time when I did do something material in earnest. At any rate, o-Tayo is wretched. Isn’t she? When you come to thinking how she feels, isn’t that so? Isn’t that so, you, Misawa Ihe’e?”

He suddenly turned aside to see beyond. He heard someone’s voice in the direction. He looked and saw a gang of several samurai warriors talking on the grass next to the pine grove. He’d be ashamed if he’d be found standing daydreaming in a place like that, in a sedge headgear, fishing tackle in hand. He tried to walk away in a hurry but there and then stopped again in his tracks. He heard hostile voices from behind and the next moment saw, glare after glare, the samurai unsheathe their swords.

—Oh no.

Ihe’e was taken aback. Then, learning that five men were surrounding a young man, he, unawares, threw away his fishing tackle and dashed out of the pine grove to where they were.

“Stop it, please stop it.”

He shouted as he waved his hands.

4

Soggy in the drizzle, they were all furious, horribly worked up, and almost frenzied.

“Please stop it. Wait, please.”

Ihe’e said as, coming up to them, he tried to hold both parties down with his hands.

“It’ll be dangerous. You’ll get hurt. Stop wagging your swords like this. It’s dangerous. Please everyone.”

“Beat it, you thug. Shut that mouth,” hollered one of those who were surrounding, “Get that stinking carcass right out of here or I’ll get you first.”

“I think you may well say so, but anyhow.”

“Do you still hang on, you thug? Now!”

“Oops! That is unsafe. That is too rough. Oops!”

One in frenzy came for Ihe’e, sword held up above (though it was just a threat). Who knew how Ihe’e shunned it? Ihe’e took the opponent by the dexterous arm and, breaking into the ring of the samurai, said, “I have no idea why but may I ask you please to stop? It will go for nothing, so please.”

The one who had his dexterous hand held by Ihe’e kicked and struggled but could not possibly let himself go of Ihe’e’s hand. Seeing this, the rest of the four associates were agitated and said:

“Let’s get that thug first.”

So shouting, they came for Ihe’e, letting the blades of their swords glint. Ihe’e was at a loss. He shunned aside and said, “Would you stop? No. It’s dangerous. Wouldn’t you give that to me? Anyway, please let me, oops!”

There was a razzle-dazzle which engaged Ihe’e from moment to moment. Waving his hands, bowing, imploring, moving to right then to left, leaping, avoiding, and turning around behind, hurry-scurry, he bewilderingly moved back and forth, and in less than no time flat he

snatched the swords from all five, and bunched them up high above his head. "Would you forgive me? Let me be excused for my rudeness. I'm saying to forgive, so please forgive me at the moment," he said as he ran around to get away from them.

A few moments before this, three samurai warriors had ridden horseback to the roadside on that side of the pine grove and had been watching the scene. Only when they watched the five chase hollering after the 'e who was trying to run away: "Give back our swords"; "You rude thug"; and "Wait, you scum," did they alight from their horses and two of them came up to the fighting men.

"Stop and calm down. Shame on you, guys."

A stout samurai who looked to be forty-five, -six controlled the scene with a penetrating grave voice.

"A duel is banned. Stay back."

"Here's our principal," the other shouted.

"—Calm down, you all. You have your principal out here."

It seemed he was the power that be, for everyone there came to themselves at the word and obediently stopped the fight. The middle-aged man called principal glowered at young 'uns and immediately came toward the 'e. "I'm afraid I have no idea who you are, sir, but I do appreciate your kindness to stop them. I am Aoyama Shuzen, of this domain, sir. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"Oh no, please don't mention it, sir."

Although the 'e had of course put down the bunch of swords he had hoisted above his head, he got embarrassed as usual and blushed.

"—It is I that was rude enough to meddle in and made all these gentlemen thoroughly angered."

"These young 'uns are bloody loggerheads. They must have been a simple laughing stock in your eyes. Excuse me, sir, but may I ask you are. . ."

"Oh yes, I am Misawa the 'e, masterless samurai, sir. I came to fish in that river over there. But I found it was getting dangerous here, and so, before I knew it, I let this happen the way you've seen it, sir."

"Are you staying here, sir?"

“Yes, I’m staying at Matsuba-ya at the fork of the thoroughfare. Oh no, no, no, that is. . . Please don’t. Would you please, sir, never mind me? I simply did what I can. And that is all.”

Ihe’e put down the swords and, bending in a bow, stepped back.

“—Oh leave me alone, sir. I have my wife waiting for me. And I have to pick up my fishing tackle I left behind. So, may I be excused, sir?”

And he left there hurriedly.

The fishing tackle and the creel were there as they had been left. He was in no mood for fishing any more, and picking them up, took his way back, feeling disappointed.

“Duel, how do they dare to do such a dangerous thing?” he mumbled as he walked. “Maybe they have parents and brothers and sisters, and some of them have a wife and children. It was only, say, pride that counts as nothing, samurai’s face to save. Maybe, they fight for these causes. . . . However, it turned out a fiasco, wasn’t it, Mister Misawa Ihe’e? What a shame! I was chased around, begging to be forgiven, with five swords held up above head with both hands. It’s a shame to think back. And I was seen when I was the way I was. Ugh.”

Ihe’e shrank his neck and groaned.

He went back to his accommodations. He had nothing to do. He had a stock of more than enough toys for his business. Were he to make more, he would have to worry about the money he would have to pay for materials (because he had to pay for the accommodations). He was the morning after, which strongly tempted him to have a dog’s hair to quench it. But there was nothing to be done about it. He had a brunch and went to sleep.

In his sleep he had a splendid dream. Some domain lord came attended by a regiment of retainers and claimed him in earnest for his service.

—We shall land in an awkward situation, sir.

So he said and declined the offer. The lord hankered after him even more strongly and never conceded. He offered a stipend of 5,000 bushels of rice. Ihe’e could think of 5,000 bushels. He felt his heart palpitating, expecting that the time had come at long last. He was filled with happiness as if in a dream, when he was awoken by his wife.

“You have a guest, my lord.”

Ihe'e woke up at a third call. But, it was just a dream. He was not a little disappointed. But he was told the guest was a samurai from this domain, which awoke him wide awake.

“You say it's a samurai, my lady? That's OK, I'll answer right away. Let me wash my face before I meet with him.”

Ihe'e rushed out into the back.

The guest was the same samurai that had, among other two, come horseback to the grassy river shore and commanded: “You have your principal out here.” He was in his mid-thirties and called Ushio Dairoku. Apparently sickened of this flophouse, he told Ihe'e what he was here for as he remained standing in the dirt floor. To sum it up, his master Aoyama Shuzen would like him to come by his residence because he wanted to thank him with a drink of saké for what he had done this morning, and would like a word with him. Ihe'e was excited.

—The dream I had in the nap might come true.

That it could be a sign could not be belittled. Ihe'e replied if the messenger didn't mind he'd accompany him. Ushio said that he had a palanquin waiting. Ihe'e got it to wait and made ready.

“What business do you have, my lord. Where did you meet him?”

O-Tayo asked anxiously. He didn't want to disappoint her and said he'd tell her in more detail after he got back. He put on his crested garment, which was worn-down, and bore two swords long and short on his waist. Co-lodgers seeing him off with a query and an envy, off he went with Ushio Dairoku.

5

At the Aoyama House, Ihe'e was treated to a feast.

There was no other guest. He and Shuzen alone feasted, attended by a young retainer called Hayashi. The height of the rank of principal retainer was known by the hugeness of the house and the figures and the disposition, which were more refined than the commonplace, of the

trees and the stones in the middle garden seen from the drawing room.

Shuzen did not touch the incident that morning. On thanking Ihe'e, he began to praise Ihe'e's feats of martial arts.

"To be candid, I watched you from the roadside while you were treating them like children, though they are really good at their swords. It was a surprise to me. Excuse me, may I ask of what school you are?"

"Well, sir, the Ono school and I practiced some *batto* (art of slashing upon drawing a sword). But I am still a beginner."

"Let us put aside your modesty, which is of no use. In spite of all those feats you have, you are without a master. There must be reasons. If you don't mind, could you tell me?"

"Why certainly, sir. There are no reasons to speak of. All there is is just like a lot of baloney, sir."

Ihe'e told all that had happened to him. According to customs, nobody would make mention of their former masters. They were only hinted at and the listener would be all right. The reserve characterized in the way he spoke must have made good the uncertainty of the contents. Shuzen seemed to understand why he had had to leave his master and also why he had been unsuccessful in getting a new one.

"That *could* happen, it seems. Well, your nature that is obviously modest turn out bothersome in other cases. Let's say, the wheel of fate, good luck and ill luck, or destiny," Shuzen mumbled the rest and nodded, "—then besides swordsmanship, you are good at the art of archery, equestrian skills, the art of spear, of jujitsu and so on and so forth, are you not?"

"Oh, way far from it. As I told you, I am a beginner, only a blunderer, sir."

"Very well. I'll tell you the truth of why I had you here to this humble lodging. The truth is, I have a favor to ask you."

By which Shuzen meant, he was asking Ihe'e to show his feats here again, and that, to be frank, he had waiting three retainers who would be his opponents. By that time, Ihe'e had drunk fairly enough. Shuzen consciously got him to drink, as it were, but, if anything, Ihe'e would himself be better off swayed by a little inebriation. He sprightly accepted

the offer right off.

“If it is fine, it is fine by me right now.”

“Well then, I am giving you trouble, though.”

Shuzen uttered a voice and Ushio Dairoku came in. He was waiting in the next room. He was told to go and see if they were ready. Off he went and came back soon to report that they were ready.

Ihe'e was shown into a practice hall. It was built on. Turning twice along the corridors of the main building led them there. Small as it was, it was a formal structure and apparently had an anteroom. . . . When Ihe'e followed in after Shuzen, he saw three coming out of that anteroom in time with him. Just then, what was it? One of the three got startled at the sight of Ihe'e and, speaking something to his companions, retreated into the anteroom.

Ihe'e didn't care a hair. He went to the corner of the hall, pulled up his hakama pants, and took one of the wooden swords which were brought in by Dairoku, without carefully studying as he made a choice. No band around head. No strip for tucking up the sleeves of his robe. One opponent got ready, too. With rather a long wooden sword in hand, he was whispering to Shuzen. He was a small young man, twenty-seven or -eight, had a dark and sharp complexion against which his white teeth stood out.

Soon, at Shuzen's introduction, the two stood face to face. The young man was named Harada Jyube'e, who, looking at Ihe'e's posture, tittered. Seemingly the titter was induced by the stupid-looking lax posture of his waist which remained straight, not ready yet. Ihe'e, not knowing what made the young man titter, narrowing his eyes to pay back the smile, and furthermore bobbing his head instead of bowing, drove young Harada to the verge of sniggering in spite of himself. Harada was narrowly successful in stifling his snigger, which greatly took off his nervousness. He raised an active voice and eagerly demonstrated fight in him.

Ihe'e's posture was lousy by the look of it and not strenuous. There was no vantage point whatsoever for the opponent to attack. Thick and stout shoulders leaning a little forward, wooden sword thrust forward

again, he was looking at young Harada with his drooping, genial eyes. If you got your guard down before you knew it, you might have forgotten it and begun an outstaring game.

The young Harada shrieked at the top of his lungs and dashed toward Ihe'e with his entire self to bring his sword down. A pebble of his small body might have flown away, whereas Ihe'e was simply standing on tip-toe; only he swung up his sword above his head. The youth shot through the air, hit his head against the wainscot of the hall, and rebounded automatically against it and fell down. But soon he sat up, thought for a few moments, and shouted, "You win."

"Oh, I'm very sorry," Ihe'e said as he bent deeply down in apology. "— May I please be excused?"

The next challenger was Nabeyama Matagoro, in his mid-thirties, who was apparently master here. His serene eyes held the light that could not pass unnoticed. He was self-possessed and had the calmness which would not give anyone the slightest chance.

"Maybe it is going to be a bit rough," Nabeyama said placidly. "— Please be prepared for it."

"Yes sir. Hoping it will prove a good bout."

Ihe'e nodded in greeting and posed the same posture and looked at the opponent genially in the same way as he had done. Nabeyama retreated his left foot to position himself to the side of his opponent, his wooden sword brought down as if the tip would touch the ground, and posed fiercely (which would be called ground-trailing aiming or something), eyes slowly landing on Ihe'e's to aim at him.

This time it was kind of long before either one moved. Both of them were quiet, refusing to budge an inch. Whereas Ihe'e maintained his posture in a lousy but not strenuous way, vigor filled up in Nabeyama moment by moment and his eyes began to assume, as it were, murder. In this way, plenty of time elapsed, in which his sword pointed as slowly as invisibly with leisure, sliding up one-umpteenth notch by notch to a little lower aiming posture, before anyone could perceive it.

Evidently, the time had ripened. The tension between them had reached the acme, when sparks might have flashed.

At that moment, Ihe'e's wooden sword moved and hit the opponent's lightly, as if, in a light jest, his sword had tapped the other's as lightly as a feather. But look what it was. The tapped sword precipitated with the point downward, which had stabbed the hall floor with a snap. The sword stood bolt upright.

"Oops. Oh, I am very," Ihe'e said, bringing his embarrassed hand to his head, "—I am very sorry. What have I gone and done! I've given a damage to the practice hall you treasure. What a blunder! How can I say I am sorry?"

And then, he pulled out the wooden sword which was standing upside down with its point pinning the floor. He caressed the floorboard with a hole, feeling bad about it.

Nabeyama Matagoro remained standing in a daze.

6

Ihe'e got back to the flophouse after dark.

He was hugely in high spirits. Face all a smile, red from drinking, he handed a big cake box to his wife, saying that he had received it as a souvenir.

"I thought you'd be waiting to have dinner with me, but I was so egged on to eat and drink there, I let myself be this late. Yes, that's so."

He kept talking hilariously while changing clothes.

"—I was expecting that I could leave earlier in a couple of hours, but I was treated to a great feast and there were topics to talk about, my lady."

When folding the habiliments he had been in, o-Tayo found a paper wrap in the sleeve. She looked at her husband inquisitively because the weight and touch told her it was money.

"Oh yes, I have completely forgotten, my lady. I got it from Mr. Aoyama. He told me to prepare things needed in order to appear in front of the lord."

"What do you mean by in front of the lord, my lord?" o-Tayo asked

back in quandary, “—And you say Mr. So-and-So, my lord. I don’t get at all what it all means.”

“Oh you’re quite right, my lady. I’m a little drunk. Yes, I am. I’m sorry, but could you get me a drink of water?”

Ihe’e began as he drank the water.

The tone in which he spoke became shed of flippancy and now he assumed placidity. Talks of “getting a position under a domain lord” had long been prohibited between husband and wife. After all that number of failures, they had formed the habit of fighting shy of having hopes for a position and as much talk of it as possible. But today, the exhilaration and inebriation had joined to gather so much steam in the beginning, he’d been on the loose. Now that his wife’s countenance made him calm down, he told the story, putting it in a nutshell so it would not sound like a big deal:

“Then you had bouts with the three gentlemen?”

“No, two, my lady. I was told something had suddenly gone wrong with one gentleman. He came to the practice hall but. . . well, the truth is, he was made to wait for next time, most probably. It’s been decided that bouts will be done over formally in the lord’s castle, my lady.”

O-Tayo only nodded. She bewareed of his words with the expression of resignation on her face. Her nod meant, it seemed, that she wanted to warn: “Don’t expect too much, my lord.” Ihe’e, too, said, with the connotation to affirm his wife, “Either way will be fine by me, but, they kindly say they’ll offer me an opportunity, my lady. And, the money I received from them will buy some things and they’ll be our gains. Oh no. What a preposterous idea! It’s just a joke, my lady.”

So saying, he went on with a little enthusiasm, “—At any rate, Mr. Aoyama is something for all I know. I told him the whole story to date, my lady. And his way of showing understanding is completely different. His understanding is magnitudinously different from the others. To cap it all, is it a good fortune or isn’t it? they’re looking for a lord’s mentor, who ought to be first-class in archery, spear, horse riding and so on. The lord is so very enthusiastic in marshal arts, as they say. Of course I’m not on cloud nine because of it. Right, for all that, this time probably, well

this time somehow, it'll go well, in my feeling, my lady.”

“Well then, you'll have no more dinner, will you, my lord?”

O-Tayo eluded the topic nonchalantly. That she would keep her distance from her husband's feelings and that she would not deem words alone worth trusting was a painstaking effort she was making to hold herself down. This exertion appealed to him as something to be pitied on in his eyes.

It was raining as ever the next day. Despite the rain, he went into the castle town and did some shopping. He bought ready-made *kamishimo* (a pair of ceremonial dresses), a tissue pouch, a fan, a pair of tabi socks, and a pair of footgear. The expenses of all those paraphernalia having left plenty of money, he bought an ornamental hairpin for his wife.

—Oh it's been ages since I bought o-Tayo something as a gift.

Although he became a bit complacent, once out on the road, he constricted his face with a stern grimace as if stabbed somewhere in the usual spot.

—Come on. No kidding.

It had not been for ages but it was for the first time in his life that he had ever bought something for his wife. In the time of eight years and a half since he married her, they had sold out the items she had brought from her home at the time of her marriage. They had still had small chattels when he resigned from Lord Matsudaira, but they had sold them all off while wandering. And meanwhile he had bought her nothing at all. Dejected, he sighed. Then, all of a sudden, he lifted his head and, as if to pick up a fight, whispered to himself, “This sure will come true.” Looking daggers at heaven, he added, “—Immediately after there had been a sign, the messenger came. All the elements are in order. And it ought to be high time, whatever it is, it ought to be high time an opportunity came my way.”

Thus determined, he began to strut his way in the rain.

Five days after, without warning the rain let up. Until the previous night, there had been no hint of it whatsoever and it was drizzling like infinity. But when the dawn came, it was as clear as clear could be and

the sun was out shining brightly in the bottomless blue heaven.

“It’s up, the rain’s up. It’s all clear!” one of the lodgers cried out as he looked up at the sky.

It was a simple and honest voice bubbling with the elation of those who had only just retrieved their life. And a messenger came to Ihe’e, too, from Shuzen who told him that he come to the castle.

“I couldn’t wish for a better omen,” Ihe’e was just about to say when he looked at his wife whose face wore an expression of resignation, he said in higgledy-piggledy, “It’s, well, another story on my part, but everybody has been cooped up for as long as twenty days due to the rain. Now that the rain’s let up, everybody can live on. Right. Look how delighted they are! It makes us hilarious, doesn’t it, my lady?”

“I’ll get ready to be on the road, my lord.”

“Oh yes, yes, my lady.” He stole a glance at his wife and went on, “—However, my lady, I wouldn’t say it will be today for us. I may be late coming back, my lady.”

“Put on your tabi socks first, my lord.”

O-Tayo subtly eluded the topic.

7

Ihe’e came back late afternoon when the sun was slanting down.

Apparently, everything had gone well. He suppressed as hard as he could the happiness that spontaneously surfaced onto his face. Try as he did, the impulse was stronger. He looked at a loss what to do with this bubbling happiness, and consequently wore a bitter though unmanageable expression on his face.

“On the way back I dropped by Mr. Aoyama’s place and this is why.”

He said so and put down a large package where he stood.

“—Mr. Aoyama said he must give me a cup of celebration. Of course I declined first today. But it was impolite not to, my lady. This is a souvenir from the lord.”

In the package were two wraps, of which the wrapping paper was

pressed with the lord's family crest. It gave a start to o-Tayo, it seemed, but she was calm again. She held them humbly with reverence and put them away in the corner.

"May I, my lady, have a drink of saké this evening?" He'e said as he took off his kamishimo formal rigging.

"Certainly, my lord."

Among other responses, that alone was bright.

There were no bath facilities in the kind of cheap accommodations like this one at large. He traveled west to the other inn about two-third mile away to take a bath. Having taken a bath, he sat at a humble tray to drink from. Serving saké, o-Tayo was talkative, which was once in a blue moon, but then she talked quietly from her heart. She told him that so-and-so had set out on the road and that so-and-so would be leaving tomorrow. She told him the words they left to him, that they had wept to each other as they had left.

"I got closer to a number of those people who lodge somewhere like this flophouse. I've found they have all been kindhearted and good-willed. Although they are living from hand to mouth, they are thinking about other people all the time. They shed tears about other people's unhappiness. They share unsparingly what little they have among their fellows. . . , they are quite different than those in other worlds. They are all so considerate and warmhearted as to make me feel poignant."

"Poor people can only depend on one another. Have a greed and you can hardly get by. Maybe that's the way for them to go."

"The old narrative reciter man said as he left, 'I won't be able to see you again, but wherever I am I pray for your prosperity.'" O-Tayo quietly cast down her eye. "—Then he wiped his tears and went on, 'I will never ever forget the carousal we had the other day until my dying day. It was the first time in my born days that I had had such an event full of thanks and pleasure. Only at this age did I learn for the first time that the world is a wonderful place.' . . . I was choked with emotion."

"Don't let us hear a story like that any more, my lady. I feel more pity for you when you tell such poignant stories. It's bitter indeed, my lady."

He'e's face became shrunken. And then he suddenly said elatedly:

“But all the same, this is the end of it all, so I may well be allowed to say. Candidly, my lady, it has been tentatively decided what stipend I’ll get.”

“—I think you. . . once before.”

“No, it’s different, today. I had not only swordsmanship bouts. In archery, the target six inches across was removed as far back as fifty-five yards. In horse riding, well, it was a bluish black horse born and bred in the Kiso Mountains. Nobody rode it yet. Unbroken. I broke it, my lady. Well, that’s that. It’s a different story in its own right, though.”

The lord was from the Nagai clan. He was called Atsuaki, the Lord of Shinano, succeeded to the throne only recently, as youthful an age as a little over twenty. He was intent on military arts, but not only that but also he was very enthusiastic about the innovation of his domain government, an up-and-coming young lord. Seeing how skilled in military arts he was, the lord suggested strongly that he serve the domain. That didn’t mean he’d ax the current master and hire a new one, but that he’d add one up.

“Not that it’s definite because the lord said so, so I think. But at any rate, unlike other times, this time, I wonder if it’ll do to doubt that much. What do you say, my lady?”

“That’ll be exactly what you say, my lord.” O-Tayo nodded elusively. “—Shall I warm another or will you have dinner?”

“Well, yes, I will have dinner.”

He’d had tried his hand in his skills for the first time in a long time. His whole body was filled with invigorating fatigue and satisfaction. And ten to one, the promise of the position would come to pass. From the negative experiences they had had, his wife did not seem to trust what was offered that day or touch the topic as much as possible. On the part of he’d, what she did arouse pity in him, and he couldn’t help but want to do all he could to assure her (without asserting).

The next day, three of the co-lodgers took to the road. The wife of Gen-san, the hoop-fixer said, swaying up her baby on her back, “We won’t see again, ma’am. Please do take care of yourselves, you two together. I’m praying so your husband will get promotions. I’m grateful

for the kindnesses you did for us. We do appreciate them.”

So saying, she wiped the tears with her sleeve edge.

“Everyone says they’ll never see again, without fail,” o-Tayo said later. “—So far, everyone said the same thing, without fail. Why not say they would like to see again some other time?”

Ihe’e said: Oh, it beats me. As if flustered, he averted his eye.

—Those people have only today. They have not the least idea what the future will bring to them tomorrow. They can trust in being together today, but can’t have the hope of seeing again.

That doesn’t apply only to those living on the road. It also applies to all human beings. . . , so came up wet reflections in him. This was why he averted his eyes.

Another five came to the flophouse as new guests. Among them was a monkey-man, who had his monkey perform before the co-lodgers after dinner and sang himself local folksongs other lodgers hardly knew of. They were hugely delighted. But when the monkey-man picked his moment and suggested, “If you would add up a few more pennies, I’ll get this monkey to dance the way man and woman act at it,” and they left their seats without regret and retired to where they belonged.

The next morning, o-Tayo began to pack a while after she had finished breakfast.

“It’s a good day, my lord,” she said as if to herself, packing something. “—On a day with the faintest fleece of cloud, I hear it often rains in that mountain pass area. It would be a perfect day today, they say, if we intend to pass over it.”

8

“That’s right, my lady. It’s as clear as can be today.”

Ihe’e looked at the sky over the low awnings, so he’d turn away the topic. Fidgeting, he looked up at the sky again and got to his feet.

“Will you be going out, my lord?”

“No, I won’t, but something, well.”

He went out and looked in the direction of the castle town with a restive look in his eyes. Obviously, he was considerably jittery. All of a sudden, he was about to walk in that direction but turned around on second thought, giving a brief sigh. Just then, out of the blue, he heard a *tom-tom, tom-tom* of a drum sound. It was so sudden he was startled and stepped aside.

“Goo’ mornin’, sir. Today is a happy day with the best of luck, sir.”

It was the monkey-man. He had a build which was warped and wilted somewhere, but was unnaturally cheerful. He passed the time of day like that and hurriedly made for the castle town, beating his drums, with the monkey on his back.

“I checked and the weather is perfect, but,” Ihe’e said after he had been back a while to his small guestroom, “anyway, it’s only the second day and they’ll send a word or something. I don’t think we can leave without letting them know. What do you think?”

“You are right, my lord. However, at least I’ll pack and be ready to go.”

“That’s it, my lady. Whichever it may be, we’ll be leaving here. It’s as plain as the nose is on your face. . .”

Ihe’e exaggerated with a start. He lifted his head like a praying mantis because he heard the sound of a horse’s hoofs stop in front of the lodging. O-Tayo must have caught the sound. She looked startled but came to herself right away. She went on packing. Ihe’e stood up and straightened his garment, said as calmly as he could, “There they are, it seems,” and went out of the room.

Ihe’e was out just when Ushio Dairoku was coming in. Suppressing hard heartbeats and trying to be calm, Ihe’e came out as far as the stepping-board to meet the messenger with a gentle smile.

“Well, excuse me. It’s fine here.”

Ushio Dairoku looked around the grungy interior of the flophouse a bit detestably. He began to speak more formally than the last time.

“I shall be the spokesman of Shuzen. You are an excellent man of military arts that happens once in a blue moon. Due to your peerless skills and high-flown principles, no matter what stipend, we would like to ask

you for your service. And the lord of his majesty's domain, too, seems to be keenly anxious to take you on."

"Oh no. That is too much for me. I'm no such. . ."

"For these reasons, we were about to decide to take you on, when something went wrong."

Ihe'e gulped his breath, and, feeling as if the ground under his feet had begun to shake, he gripped his knees tightly.

"That something went wrong, it's not our fault, but it proceeded from you," Dairoku continued coldly. "—It is that you had a betted bout. At a certain hall of swordsmanship, you bet money and had a bout. You won and took the money away. . . , you do remember, don't you?"

Ihe'e was narrowly able to nod. And then he remembered one of the three opponents getting away at the sight of him in the exercise hall of the Aoyama House.

"Yes, I do for sure. Though I do remember," Ihe'e was shaken up, "—What I did was for one I felt sorry about, a guest staying at this lodging, . . ."

"For whatever reason, it is the most disgracing for a samurai warrior to have a betted bout, and insomuch as you have someone who appealed you to the authorities, we have no choice but to withdraw our proposal. It's regretted to ask you to forget our offer."

Ushio Dairoku placed a paper wrap on his white fan and said, producing it to Ihe'e, "Shuzen intends this to be part of your traveling expenses, such as it is."

"Oh no, this," Ihe'e shook his hands, face half crying. "—Please forget a kind consideration like this. I have received this and that already and on top of it all. Please. This is. . ."

"Yes, I would appreciate it."

So o-Tayo said and came up and sat beside her husband. Ihe'e was bewildered and so was Dairoku, who, bending his head for nothing, began to say something. But o-Tayo was quicker. She was a little excited, but with a steady tone she said clearly word by word as follows:

"It was my husband's fault to have a betted bout. I had always been imploring him never again to try his hand at it, if that is the only thing

I could implore him to. But now, I have only just learned that it was wrong. My husband ought to have known, at least, that it was the most disgracing to have a betted bout. However, knowing it, there are times when you cannot help doing it. Nothing could possibly prevent him from it. I learned it just now. By my husband winning bouts, how many people were pleased, how relieved from that depressive dampness.”

“Quit it, Tayo. You know no manners.”

“Yes, I will, my lord. And let me continue to you alone.” O-Tayo turned on him and said with her voice trembling—, “From now on, if you feel you need it, go and have a betted bout, and make happy those people around us who are unhappy, stricken with poverty, with nobody to depend on, my lord.”

Sobs overrode her words. Ushio Dairoku was stumped. He embarrassedly retreated and there made a perfunctory bow, then flitted out and was gone.

The time was for them neither to go nor to stay. But with the intention to draw a line, the couple shortly left the flophouse and hit the road. When they left, they halved the money they received from Shuzen and confided the proprietor with one half, besides the rice which had been left over since that night, asking him to provide lodgers with some fun when they had nothing better to do but stay at the lodging, hard put to it, secluded from the rest of the world. . . , and they were putting on their footgear when that woman o-Roku came up to them. Wretchedly stiffening her sickly gaunt face with a pointed chin (it was said she was smiling politely by doing so), she said, “Ma’am, will you take this with you?” and produced three foxed bags of medicine. “—When you have blisters from walking in straw sandals, you paste it and it’s good for the blisters. To be honest, it’s just tobacco ash. When you mix it with your saliva and paste it on the affected parts, it becomes a very good medicine, . . . I wish I could give you a much better parting gift, I only do the wishing, . . . it’s absolutely nothing to speak of.”

“Oh no, I am glad. Thank you very much.”

O-Tayo thanked her in a friendly tone, and really appreciatingly put it into her chest pocket.

They were seen off by people of the lodging off the fork where the flophouse was standing, at which they took a right turn, heading for the mountain pass. Carried away by the disappointment, Ihe'e seemed to have difficulty coming back to himself. O-Tayo wouldn't bring herself to comfort him.

—Although you're blessed in excellent skills this much, the skills are incapable of enabling you to go up in the world. What a funny turn of Fortune's wheel! What a funny world!

Thinking so, she would otherwise be tempted to smile unexpectedly.

—But all the same, I am fine even though Fortune never smiles on us. Not jostling others to make your way or taking a seat that can sit another, poor as you must stay, you mix with truthful people. You'll give pleasure and hopes whenever an opportunity comes around. You are perfect for my husband, staying as you are.

Wanting to bring it on her lips though arresting it at the tip of her tongue, o-Tayo pilfered casual glances at her husband and trod her way with a light step.

Apparently, Ihe'e was beginning to collect himself. He was wont to disappointment and was now good at changing moods (by habit). Only, when he pondered on his wife's feelings, he had to have enough reserve to delay in changing his moods.

Notwithstanding, that reserve at last left him and disappeared into thin air. Coming out on the top of the mountain pass, the sweeping view of the mountains and fields of the neighboring province underneath his feet, all of a sudden, spread out in his eye as if the curtain had suddenly been lifted up. When a cool breeze blew up into his face, his eyes glinting, he cried out, "Well, well, well."

"Oh, look! That's splendid! Look at that, what a gorgeous view!"

"Really! It really is amazing."

"Now, what do you think? The entire body gets freshened up at this view and fills up with new vim. It does indeed, my lady."

His round face broke into a smile from ear to ear. Sprightly and lively like a boy, his eyes overbrimmed with light. He was already fancying a new life and new hopes in the panorama of the landscape that extended

under his feet.

“Hey my lady, be strong and glowing. Shall we be full of life again?”

He was enthusiastic as he said so.

“—What you see there beneath is a castle town with its annual revenue of 525,000 bushels of rice. The town is prospering and well-known for it. At any rate, it’s a domain of 525,000 bushels. Can you believe it? Now this time, yes, this time, I may well be allowed to say. We shall be up and going, shan’t we, my lady?”

“I *am* up and going, my lord.”

O-Tayo smiled brightly, looked up caringly at her husband, and mimicked adroitly:

“I may well be allowed to say.”