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Lieutenant Lookeast and
other stories

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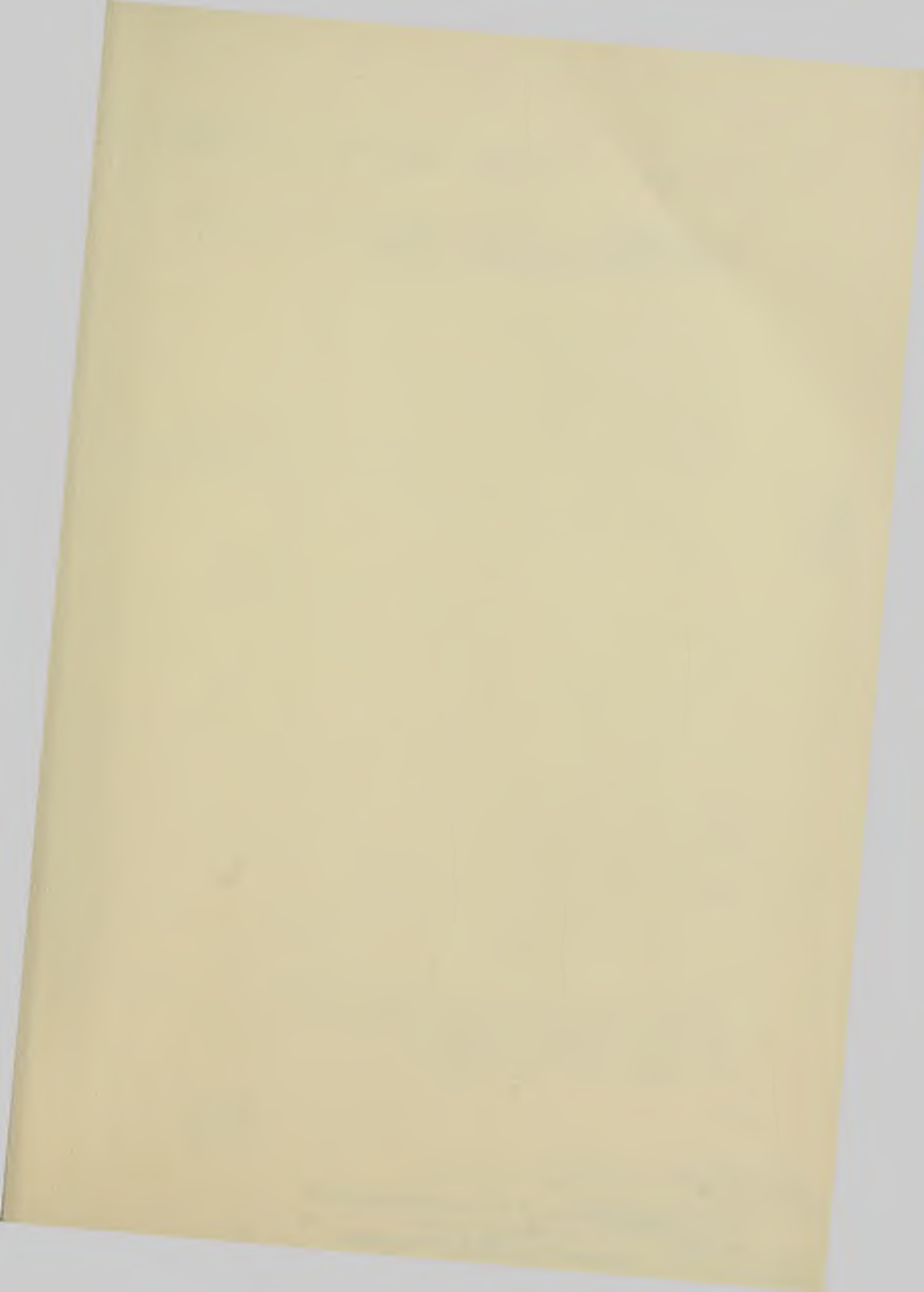
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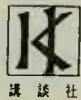
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LIEUTENANT LOOKEAST

AND OTHER STORIES

MASUJI IBUSE

TRANSLATED BY
JOHN BESTER



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Preface

The work of Masuji Ibuse is an acquired taste; not in the sense that it is difficult to enjoy on first reading, but in the sense that extensive acquaintance with it deepens one's pleasure and understanding of its art.

At seventy-three, Ibuse can look back over a large and varied output, from the 1923 "Salamander" to *Black Rain*, the 1965 novel on Hiroshima, and beyond. Most of it, with the exception of *Black Rain*, consists of pieces of short or medium length—which is one reason, perhaps, why he has been less translated than some other Japanese writers of comparable stature.

The range of themes, as the ten stories in this book show, is wide. There are the early, more consciously literary and intellectual pieces with a strong element of fantasy such as "Salamander." There are semi-autobiographical pieces such as "Carp" (1926). Other comparatively early pieces, of which "Plum Blossom by Night" (1930) is a good example, seem to owe more, both in form and manner, to the European short story.

There is a body of stories on historical themes, represented here by "Yosaku the Settler" (1955). It is a characteristic of these that, while sometimes drawing heavily on documentary sources, they succeed by what appear to be the simplest of means in giving the characters humanity, the setting a sense of actuality, and the theme a universal relevance. The same skill was to serve Ibuse in good

stead when, in *Black Rain*, he created a work of art out of a mass of firsthand accounts of the bombing of Hiroshima.

There are many scenes of country life that show, along with a vivid appreciation of the virtues and shortcomings of the Japanese peasant, a vein of gentle humor that is found at its broadest in "Old Ushitora" (1950). Occasionally, as in the title story, "Lieutenant Lookeast" (1950), the humor gives way to biting satire; to read this work is to realize the intensity of feeling that lies behind the gentle mocking of human foibles.

In a fairly large group of medium-length stories, hardly novels in the accepted sense, a central figure—a village policeman, a doctor, an employee at an inn—serves as the connecting link for a series of loosely connected episodes. These episodes range from the briefest of portraits, intended to sketch in a single human being with a few telling strokes of dialogue or description, to more or less self-contained short stories. These works, of which "Tajinko Village" (1939) is a good example, depend less on an overall form than on the gradual building-up of a character and the portrayal of a way of life in a particular section of society. Thus a work like "Tajinko Village" can tell one more about prewar rural society in Japan—and especially its solidly human qualities—than many a sociological study.

Some works, finally, such as the remarkable "Life at Mr. Tange's" (1931), show a combination of realism and symbolism, broad humor and poetry, realism and fantasy, that display Ibuse's techniques at their most quintessential and defy classification.

Despite the variety of themes, the stories share certain characteristics of technique and manner. There is the absence of extended descriptive passages, of "fine writing" for its own sake. Characters and physical settings are sketched in with a few details that are concrete and particular. Around them, there is space. The effect is to give the characters something of the quality of caricatures, or of actors on a stage: they are simultaneously slightly larger than life and seen at a distance.

The writing is spare. Carefully molded images and fragments

of dialogue succeed each other without comment. The mood changes subtly, often abruptly. Effects are built up by setting these varied elements next to each other without unnecessary padding. The impression is of a self-effacement on the part of the author that extends to a dislike of underscoring any point too heavily. The dialogue makes its points slyly; sometimes the motives, even the action itself, are half-concealed.

This dislike of too clearly stated positions is one of the most marked features of the personality that emerges from Ibuse's work. Yet one feels that the ambiguity is not a sign of weakness, but of a conscious distaste for assertive statements, founded in a fullness of experience. Arising from the interaction of elements that are intrinsically strong, it comes to be felt as constituting, in itself, a positive statement.

The other obvious characteristics of the author's personality are humor and compassion, well-worn if fundamental virtues that are dispensed in a blend peculiar to Ibuse. The humor is often gently mocking, directed now at a particular individual (the hero of "Plum Blossom by Night"), now at intellectual pretension ("Salamander"), now at genteel prudery (the extinguishing of the lamp before the mating of Myōkendō's cow in "Old Ushitora"), now at the author's own person (the writer from Tokyo, also in "Old Ushitora"). At times, as in "Carp," it almost seems a weapon of self-defense against an excess of feeling.

The compassion is sometimes, as in "Yosaku the Settler," implicit in the theme of the story. But it is at its subtlest and most effective when it combines with humor, as in the passage in "Yosaku" where the thief imagines himself returning one day to die in the imperial tomb that he has helped to rifle, or in Mr. Tange's reminiscences and the arrival of Ei's wife in "Life at Mr. Tange's."

Humor, compassion, a plebeian quality, an absence of sentimentality, a detached, almost satirical view of humanity, abruptness, a subtle poetry, a strong feeling for the Japanese countryside in its unprettified actuality—it is no wonder that some Japanese

critics have pointed out a similarity between Ibuse and Hokusai, especially the Hokusai of the "Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji." And once the resemblance is noted, it is tempting to recall also Hokusai's contemporary, Hiroshige, with his romanticism, sentimentality, lyrical feeling for color, and his greater urbanity, and to see the two artists as representing two opposing aspects of the Japanese character that can be detected in literature as well as in art. Yet whether that parallel can be validly drawn or not, it is certain at least that Ibuse's work has a strength and deep-lying humanity that deserves attention in the West both for its own sake and for the light it throws on the Japanese character.

John Bester

Plum Blossom by Night

Late one night—more precisely, at around two in the morning on February 20 last year—I was driven by an extremely empty stomach and a feeling of boredom to walk the main thoroughfare of the Ushigome Benten district of Tokyo in search of an *oden* restaurant or some other cheap eating place. Within the high wall of a large private house, white plum blossom was in bloom, a pleasing sight as, stopping to turn up the collar of my cloak, I glanced up briefly towards the sky. But just then, quite without warning, the figure of a man came staggering towards me out of the gloom around the foot of a telegraph pole.

“Hey, you!” he shouted, planting himself in my path and sticking his chin out for me to see. “Is there blood on my face?”

The man’s words alarmed me greatly. Examining him in the light of a street lamp, I found that he was right. Someone, it seemed, had dealt his right cheek a blow of some force, and the flesh was broken in two places, at the corner of his mouth and below his ear. The blood was spurting rhythmically from the gashes, soaking his collar, and he wiped at it incessantly with the palm of his hand. Like myself, he wore a cloak over his kimono, with a soft hat on his head. He exuded a pronounced odor of drink.

“You’re hurt pretty badly, aren’t you? Did you get the worst of a quarrel?” I asked, retreating a few paces before putting the question. Something about his bearing towards me suggested

a still smoldering excitement that possibly stemmed from a drunken quarrel.

But he grabbed at the flap of my cloak and refused to let go, tugging at it till he threatened to tear it.

"Here, let me go!" I demanded.

"No, I won't!" he said. "I'm thinking of lodging a complaint. I've been beaten up by four or five men from the fire station. I'm going to the police. Be my witness, will you?"

"How can I? I didn't see what happened. I wonder, though, if you didn't do or say something yourself that upset the firemen in the first place?"

"D'you know, I just don't remember anything at all. I was too drunk. Anyway, it's outrageous when you get beaten up by members of the fire brigade, of all people. So you must be my witness!"

"Sorry, it's impossible. What I will testify, though, is that you were badly hurt. There's a police box over there."

The lamp over the police box at Enoki-cho was clearly visible. But he changed his mind.

"The truth is, you know, I live right near here, so I don't want to kick up too much fuss about it. That would make trouble where I work. It hurts, but perhaps I'd better let them off after all."

For a drunk, and a drunk with a grievance at that, he seemed to be showing a considerable fund of good sense. I was moving off, therefore, thinking to leave him to his own devices, when again he took an uncompromising hold of the flap of my cloak.

"You wouldn't go off in such a hurry, would you? Tell me, now—what d'you think I should say to the boss when I get back to the shop? You see, with a face like this he's bound to realize I've had a scrap."

"I suppose so. Show me your face again, then. We may be able to cook up some story."

"Well?" he inquired. "It's pretty bad, I expect?"

He brought his face close to mine, and in the dim light I inspected his wounds with all the assumed composure of a doctor's assistant.

"This is terrible!" With my left hand in the pocket of my cloak, I moved his chin up and down and from side to side with my right.

"I see. . . ." I said. "Now put your chin up a little bit more. I call this a bit much, really! You've been poked in the cheek with a stick or something, haven't you?"

"I've no idea, I was drunk."

"The wound on your mouth, too—it looks as though it's been torn open at the corner. No teeth loose?"

He ran his tongue round his teeth.

"My teeth are all right."

"That's good. Now, when you get home, tell your boss this: you were going home drunk on a streetcar, standing on the step enjoying the breeze, with your hands tucked into your kimono sleeves, when the streetcar suddenly rounded a curve and you were shaken off head first. And you were unlucky enough to strike your cheek on an upturned paving stone."

"I see. Yes—that's what I'll tell him!"

"I must say, your face is a bit too damaged even for that, which is awkward. But still, he may swallow it if you lay it on thick enough."

I took my hand away from his chin.

"Two things you'll have to keep reminding him of," I added. "First, that you fell with your chin down, and second that you were, after all, drunk."

"Right you are! Thanks! You're a great fellow." He puffed out his cheeks, expelled the air, staggered, and spat.

"Well, I'm off," I said, making to take my leave.

"So soon? Now, I call that unfriendly!"

He lunged after me, and I thought he was going to insist on our taking a walk together. But he thrust out his right hand instead.

Assuming that, as always with drunks, he wanted to shake hands, I stretched out my own hand, to receive not a handshake but something remarkably like a coin that he seemed to be trying to press into my palm. As I drew my hand back in a reflex move-

ment, there came the unmistakable sound of a coin falling to the ground. Holding on to my cloak with one hand, with the other he picked up the object that had fallen onto the ground in the dark and held it up in the light of the lamp.

“Damn!” he said. “A *copper* coin.” Hastily, he tucked the coin away in the pocket of his cloak and fetched out something else.

Conscious of the smile spreading over my face, I brushed aside his arm in an attempt to make my escape, whereupon he suddenly thrust whatever he was holding into my cloak pocket. Taking it out, I found it was a five-yen note.

“You were trying to give me this, weren’t you?” I said. “Well, you’re not going to. Here. . . .”

I placed it on the brim of the soft hat he was wearing and tried to flee. But he had a firm grasp on the flap of my cloak. Abruptly, he started to prod me in the chest.

“Hey, that’s enough!” I cried. “What d’you think you’re . . .?”

“It’s because you won’t take it. You’re too big for your boots. If you don’t take it, I’ll tell people *you* did this to my face.”

He set about throttling me, with every sign of confidence in his own skill.

“Wait!” Somehow, I had to calm him down. “Wait! I’ll take it.”

“Take it, then! If you think you’re going to make a fool of me. . . .”

“I’ll come and get it tomorrow morning.”

“Oh no you won’t! Here we go again, then!”

“Cut out the rough stuff! Let me go and I’ll take it.”

He picked up the note, which had fallen to the ground, and, putting it in my pocket, leaped away from me and assumed a posture that warned he would hit out if I came any nearer.

“All right, then,” I said. “Let’s do it like this: tomorrow morning, I’ll drop by with a box of cakes or something and inquire how you’re doing. That way I shall see your boss, and I can say to him, this is nothing special but here you are, this is for your injured employee. And while I’m about it, I can tell him the story about the streetcar too.”

"Now, there's a good idea!" He relaxed his aggressive posture in favor of his former drunken stance.

"You'd better give me your name and address, then," I said.

He replied in an unsteady voice, still keeping a wary distance.

"Jūkichi Murayama, care of Ishikawa, 37 Tsurumaki-cho."

I committed what he said to memory, my fingers all the while busily folding and refolding the note inside my pocket.

"Care of Ishikawa, Jūkichi Murayama, right? Number thirty-seven. Care of Ishikawa, Jūkichi Murayama. . . ."

"Right. . . . Right. Don't forget the box of cakes, now. Tell him to give them to the head clerk."

"Don't you worry. Care of Ishikawa, right?"

He walked unsteadily away, apparently satisfied. The five-yen note was beginning to bother me even more than if I had, say, found it on the street and pocketed it. It worried me so much, in fact, that I gave up my search for an *oden* shop.

Early the next morning, while I was still asleep, I received a visit from a friend of my university days, a man called Yasuo Tawa who worked in the broker's section of the Yamagano Trading Company. He had had a windfall a few days before, he said, and was going to take me out for a meal. So eager was he to get me out with him, in fact, that he could barely restrain his impatience while I washed. So we went to the Beniya, in the Kagurazaka quarter, where he plied me with one thing after another.

Two or three times a month, Tawa would come to see me and talk a great deal, mostly about fluctuations in the market. He disapproved heartily of the way I went from printing house to printing house, doing proofreading on a piecework basis.

"It's no good carrying on like an odd-job man at everyone's beck and call," he said. "The actual work you do doesn't matter, of course, but you mustn't let yourself get stale. You must project yourself more into the future. Be more positive, that's what I say!"

On one occasion, he even produced a woman's silk jacket with a red lining, which he hung inside out on the hat rack in my room, insisting that it would make me feel, at least, a bit more positive.

"It's easy for you to talk, telling me to be more positive," I said, "but one just can't do it all in a rush."

"You let the world bully you, that's the trouble," he said. "I'm going to put some new life into you. You've got to be more positive, now."

But he never did succeed in effecting the change.

On leaving the Beniya, we went back to my place and talked until late at night. As a result, I failed to call on Jūkichi Murayama as I had promised. Instead, I took the opportunity while Tawa was reading the evening paper to send a letter by special delivery.

"Dear Mr. Murayama," I wrote, "I fully intended to come to see you this morning, as I was worried about your injuries, but urgent business arose due to an unexpected call from a friend, so I am writing to inquire after you instead. The market these days fluctuates dreadfully, you see. In fact, I am still discussing various things with my friend at the moment. I hope you will forgive me. Where last night's business is concerned, I can't help feeling it was the conductor's fault. In the first place, since you were obviously drunk, he should have kept a more careful eye on you. He should, at the very least, have given you a word of warning before the streetcar went round the curve. As it was, there you were with your hands tucked in your sleeves, taking the air on the steps, when the car suddenly went round a corner. Naturally enough, you fell head first—and there, to add to your bad luck, were the paving stones all up, with the result that you hurt your cheek and mouth badly. Leaping from the streetcar in alarm, I took you up in my arms and inquired your name and address. But the conductor—I wonder how anyone could be so heartless? You might well have killed yourself on that stone, but he made no move at all to stop the car. I myself would take such inhuman conduct to the courts. However, what disturbs me most of all at the moment is the danger that your wounds will become infected. Please take every care, so that you are restored to health just as soon as possible. I ought to come and see you tomorrow, I feel, but, as I al-

ready said, the need to see my friend about the market and various other things will keep me busy for some while to come. I hope you will not think badly of me. As soon as I have a moment to spare, I will call without fail to inquire after you. Whatever happens, though, I sincerely hope that you will be completely recovered in the very near future."

I omitted my own name and address. If the truth be told, cigarettes, envelopes, repairs to a wooden clog, and that evening's dinner had made considerable inroads into the five yen of the previous night, and I was not entirely my own master. The idea of that five-yen note and the box of cakes troubled me even more than if I had committed theft. As a child, I once stole an offering from in front of a Buddhist altar in order to buy fishhooks, but even that had not bothered me quite so much as this.

Five or six months passed.

The twenty-sixth of every month was payday and I found myself with a little money in hand. On the twenty-sixth, therefore, I would promptly insert the cleanest five-yen note I could find into the writing-brush stand on my desk, ready to return it to Murayama at any time. This had the effect of preventing any muddle in my finances on account of the five yen; an added advantage was that I did not actually need to return the money, or to call on him, in order to preserve my peace of mind.

Unfortunately, I failed to keep the money by me constantly. On the tenth of every month, I was obliged to pay my board for the last month but one. This meant that during the sixteen days remaining until the afternoon of the twenty-sixth, I could not even board a streetcar without fretting lest I should not have the fare. And so, finally, I would find myself forced to lay hands on the five yen in the brush stand that I had set aside for paying back Murayama.

For a whole year or so, I was forever putting a note in the brush stand or taking it out and spending it. While it was in there I felt no pangs of guilt at all, but at times when I had taken the liberty

of borrowing it, I went in terror of meeting Murayama. Who could tell when he might come up from behind and seize me by the scruff of the neck?

Why, then, if I was so worried, did I not pay this Murayama his five yen and have done with it? The answer is that for people living my kind of life there are two sorts of debt. The amounts involved may be the same, but there is a sort that can be paid back and a sort that cannot. And the debt I owed Murayama quite obviously belonged to the second category. At the same time, though, it was the kind of debt that was a constant worry until one did in fact pay it back.

Worst of all, Jūkichi Murayama appeared to be the kind of man with a violent disposition who must never be allowed to find one off one's guard. Who knew when he might dart out from the shadows without warning and plant himself in my path with a "Hey, you! Is there blood on my face?"

The wall of that large house in Benten-cho, with the white plum blossom spilling over it, rose before my eyes. He grabbed hold of me and refused to let me go. I was supposed to have the money ready for paying back at any time; but that day I did not have five yen to my name. . . . Time and again, as I was walking through the dark streets at night, the imagined scene would send shivers running down my spine.

The plum had bloomed once more this year; already the flowers were beginning to fall. The old tree that stretched its branches over the high wall of the house in Benten-cho had made a fine showing.

One day—not payday, but a day when I had not a penny left save the five-yen note in the brush stand—I determined that I would call on Murayama. Even the plum blossom, you see, seemed to be proclaiming my five-yen fraud. I felt certain that Murayama would be there, staggering beneath that plum tree, and with hands all bloody would stroke my cheek or even, perhaps, try to strangle me. One night, in a public latrine at Iidabashi, I actually thought I felt him doing it. I even came to feel that I

had seen an account of the affair, in excessively small print, reported in a recent newspaper.

I located Jūkichi Murayama's home, care of Ishikawa, 37 Tsurumaki-cho, without difficulty. It was the Ishikawa Pawnshop. It was this pawnshop, it seemed, of which he had said he was "head clerk."

Just as I was ducking beneath the short curtain that hung over the doorway—a dark blue curtain, with the legend "Pawnshop" picked out in white—a very convenient way of handling my visit occurred to me. All I needed to do was pretend that I had come to pawn my cloak, give a brief, fictional explanation of my delay on the lines of last year's letter, and return him the five yen. And if he should have sufficiently bad taste to be impressed by the way I took off my cloak, he might well let me pawn it for around ten yen. I was still wearing the same cloak as the previous year.

"Good morning!" I said, undoing the buttons of my cloak. "I'd like to pawn this."

But Jūkichi Murayama was not at the counter; it was a fat, middle-aged man. He was in the act of photographing a camellia in a vase on the shelf, using an old-fashioned camera that someone had doubtless pawned.

Taking my cloak from me with a supercilious air, he turned it inside out, measured the length, and finally made a face as though bothered by the worn places at the back of the neck and the hem.

"Would this be your first time here?" he asked.

"Yes, indeed." I took out my personal seal ready to stamp the necessary form.

"How much would you . . .?"

"Ten yen."

"Ten yen? I'm afraid I can't give you that much."

"Don't worry—I'll redeem it all right."

"But I mean, look how worn the hem and collar are! Imitation melton just doesn't wear well, does it?"

He had both ears stuffed with cotton. It disposed me to feel a mild contempt for him.

"It's *my* cloak until I decide to pawn it, so I'll trouble you to stop insulting it."

"But ten yen, I ask you!"

"And besides, I'm on good terms with your clerk, Jūkichi Murayama, so it's ten yen or nothing!"

"Him? He left here ages ago."

"Gone? Where is he, then?"

"How should I know? Knowing him, I'm quite sure he's up to all kinds of tricks."

Jūkichi Murayama, he told me, had not come home that night last year when he had met me. He had vanished, along with the money kept in hand for buying pawned articles.

In the end I got ten yen for my cloak, with my watch thrown in as well.

Whatever happened now, I felt, I had nothing to fear from Jūkichi Murayama. Why, he was even more clearly a criminal than myself! It was I, in fact, who had had a windfall. I went to the Beniya in Kagurazaka and rang Tawa at the Yamagano Trading Company. He was out. My scheme, if he had been in, had been to summon him, tell him—as he was always so fond of boasting to me—that I had had a windfall in the past two or three days, and propose to stand him drinks and a meal. After all, I must be more positive!

To get things going, I went upstairs to have a coffee and a bowl of sweetened red beans. Resting my feet, shod in the restaurant's slippers, on the gas fire in the corner, I forgot all about Jūkichi Murayama and set about watching the comings and goings of the patrons and waitresses. The waitresses there have smartened up remarkably in recent years.

Leaving there, I went to a Western-style restaurant near Edogawa Bridge. By now the lights were on, and though it was still early the waitresses, their faces heavily coated with white powder, were already drunk. As they went about refilling people's glasses with drink, each of them puffed at a cigarette filched from one or the other of the customers. One of them, with yellow-stained

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