THE TAKASE-BUNE

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The Takase-bune were small boats that plied the Takase River in Kyoto. During the Tokugawa period, in Kyoto, when a criminal was sentenced to a term on a distant island, his relatives were summoned to the prison where they were allowed to take final leave of him. Then he was put on board a Takase-bune and sent to Osaka. The escort was a constable under the Kyoto Magistrate’s Office, and it was customary for him to allow one responsible kinsman to sail on board with them as far as Osaka. This practice, not officially permitted, was in fact winked at, allowed tacitly.

In those days, criminals sentenced to distant islands were of course those who had been found guilty of serious crimes. But this was not to say that extremely vicious characters, like those who committed murder and arson for the sake of robbery, made up the majority of the cases. Most of the criminals who sailed on the Takase-bune were those who had committed an unexpected crime as a result of a so-called ‘lapse.’ A typical example was the type of man who, attempting to commit what was then called ‘death by mutual consent’, killed the woman and only he himself survived.

With such a criminal on board, the Takase-bune set out as the evening bell was tolling, and going east past the darkened houses of Kyoto on each bank, crossed the Kamo River and sailed south. On
board, the criminal and his relative stayed up all night talking over his fate. It was always the same old story of vain regrets. The constable who guarded them, overhearing their talk, was able to learn in detail the wretched circumstances of the family which produced the criminal. They were circumstances which the officials who heard the formal oral confessions at the Magistrate's Court, and read affidavits at their office desks, could not imagine even in their dreams.

Among those employed as constables, too, were men of various temperaments. The unsympathetic ones wanted to turn a deaf ear, thinking those hours were just a nuisance; others took on themselves men's wretchedness, and though, with their official duty in mind, they did not show it outwardly, they took it to heart inwardly and in silence. At times, when a particularly lachrymose soft-hearted constable happened to be escorting a criminal and his relative who had fallen into extremely miserable circumstances, he was unable to keep back his tears.

Thus escort duty on the Takase-bune was an unpleasant task disliked by the constables of the Magistrate's Office.

It was a long time ago, probably in the Kansei Era, when Lord Matsudaira Sadanobu took control of the government in Edo. In the spring twilight, as the cherry blossoms at the Chion-in were scattered by the tolling of the evening bell, an unusual criminal, the first of his kind, was put on board the Takase-bune. His name was Kisuke, about 30 years old, with no fixed address. He was of course alone on board with the constable, having no relative to be summoned to the prison.

Haneda Shobe, the constable in charge of guarding him on board, had heard only that Kisuke had killed his brother. While taking him from the prison yard to the pier, the constable noticed that this
pale, thin Kisuke was very meek and self-effacing, and respectful to him as a government official, trying not to disobey him in anything. But his manner was not like that often seen in criminals, of cringing before authority, pretending obedience.

Shobe was puzzled. Even after getting on board, he did not just keep an eye on Kisuke for duty's sake, but constantly paid close attention to his behavior.

That day, the wind died down toward evening, and a slight overcast dimmed the contours of the moon; it was a night when the heat of approaching summer seemed to be rising as mist from the earth on the river's banks and even from the riverbed. By the time they left South Kyoto and crossed the Kamo River, everything was so quiet that they could hear only the whisper of the water cleft by the prow.

Even criminals were allowed to sleep on the boat at night, but Kisuke did not even think of lying down; he sat in silence looking up at the moon shining brightly then dimly as the clouds went by. His face was radiant and in his eyes there was a faint gleam.

Though not looking directly at Kisuke, Shobe never took his eyes off him. 'It's strange,' he thought to himself over and over, because no matter how he looked at him, Kisuke seemed to be extremely happy. He looked as if he would have started whistling or humming a tune, if he had not felt constrained by the officer's presence.

Shobe thought to himself: 'I don't know how many times I've been in charge of this Takase-bune. The criminals we put on board always look so miserable I can't bear to look at them. But what is there about this man? He looks as if he's on a sightseeing boat. They say his crime was that he killed his brother. If he's at all
human, he shouldn't be feeling so happy about killing his brother, however bad he might have been, or whatever the circumstances were. Was this pale, thin fellow one of those uncommon wretches completely devoid of human feelings? I don't think so. Could he be out of his mind? No. No. Not a word or action is inconsistent. So what is there about this man?' The more Shobe thought about Kisuke's attitude, the less he was able to understand it.

After a while, unable to contain himself any longer, Shobe called out to him, "You, Kisuke, what are you thinking?"

"Sir?" Kisuke, looking around, seemed to be worried that he was being reprimanded by the officer about something. He sat up straight and studied the constable's face.

Shobe felt that he had to explain why he had suddenly asked the question and excuse himself for asking something which had nothing to do with his official duty. So he said, "Well, I didn't have any particular reason for asking. To tell you the truth, I've been wanting to ask you for a while now how you feel about being sent to the islands. In my time I've escorted a lot of people on this boat. There've been all different sorts, but every one of them was overcome with grief at going to the islands, and spent the whole night weeping with their relatives who were on board with them to see them off. But you don't look as if you are worried at all about going to the islands. What on earth are you thinking about?"

Kisuke broke into a smile. "I'm much obliged to you for asking, sir. It's probably true that going to the islands is a sad thing for others. I think I can understand their feelings myself. But they were sad because they'd been living comfortably. Kyoto is a fine place, that's for sure, but I don't think I'll suffer the way I had to in that fine place, wherever I go. The judge was kind enough to
spare my life and send me to the islands. No matter how hard a place the islands are, there're probably no devils living there. I've never had a good place to live. The judge told me to live on an island. I'm just very grateful that I'll be able to settle down at the place he's sending me to. Besides, though I'm not strong, I've never been sick. So even after I get to the islands I don't think my health will suffer, however hard the work may be. Also, when I was sentenced to the islands, I was given two hundred mon in coppers which I have here on me.” So saying, Kisuke put his hand on his chest. It was the law at that time that those sentenced to hard labor on distant islands be given two hundred mon in coppers.

Kisuke went on. “I feel ashamed to say that up to now I've never had as much as two hundred mon cash like this to carry in my pocket. Hoping to find work somewhere I went about looking for a job. The moment I got a job, I'd break my bones working but I always had to give away the money I got right and left. I thought I was well off those times when I could buy food with cash; usually, I paid back a loan and then had to borrow again. But since I went to jail, I've been fed without having to work. For that reason alone, I'm really obliged to the government. Then, when I left jail, I was given this two hundred mon. While I'm eating at government expense like this I can keep this 200 mon without spending it. This is the first time for me to have cash all my own. Until I get to the islands I can't tell what kind of work I can do there, but I'm looking forward to using this two hundred mon as a stake for work on the islands.” With this, Kisuke fell silent.

Shobe said, “Is that so?”, but he was so dumbfounded at everything he had heard that he too was speechless for a while, thinking it over.
Shobe was close to forty years old, and already had four children. Since his old mother was still living, there were seven people in his household. Their life was generally so frugal that others called them stingy. Besides the clothes he wore on duty, he hardly had any clothes made but sleeping robes. To his misfortune, his wife was from a wealthy merchant family. With the best of intentions she tried to manage on her husband's stipend, but she had been spoiled by her upbringing in a prosperous family, and so she was not able to tighten her purse-strings enough to satisfy her husband. All too often by the end of the month she was short of money. Then she made both ends meet by getting money from her parents on the sly, since her husband hated borrowing as he hated vermin. However, he could hardly be unaware of this. Since it pained Shobe even to get anything from his wife's parents at the seasonal festivals or to have his children get clothes for their festival ceremonies, he was not pleased to find that they were being helped out of financial difficulties. It was this that was the cause of storms occasionally breaking out in the usually peaceful Haneda household.

When he heard Kisuke's story, Shobe compared Kisuke's circumstances to his own. 'Kisuke said that although he got paid for his work, it all went to others right and left. It was indeed a pitiable lot. But then if I look at my own circumstances, how much difference is there between him and me? Don't I live just by handing over the stipend I get from the government to others right and left? The difference between us is just a matter of scale. I haven't saved the equivalent of the two hundred mon Kisuke is so grateful for.' If you think of this difference in scale, Kisuke's joy at seeing even this two hundred mon as his savings is not unreasonable. I can understand this feeling myself. But however much you change the
scale, the strange thing is that Kisuke has no avarice, feels satisfied.

‘Kisuke had a hard time finding work anywhere. And when he did find a job, he worked without sparing himself and was satisfied if he could just eke out a hand-to-mouth existence. So he was surprised to find that in prison, he received the food that up to now he had found so difficult to get, without working, as if it fell from heaven, and he felt a satisfaction he had not known his whole life.’

Shobe thought, ‘But however much you change the scale, I know there’s a big difference between me and Kisuke here. Though my stipend isn’t always enough to get along on, usually I can manage to make both ends meet. So I’m just getting along.’ But he was never content with that. He went along without feeling either happy or unhappy. Vague fears lay hidden deep in his heart: ‘Living like this, what’ll I do if I’m relieved from duty; what’ll I do if I get seriously ill?’—when he found that his wife was borrowing money from her parents to help them out, these vague fears would rise to the threshold of his consciousness.

‘How did this difference between us come about? On the surface, we might say it’s because I have a family to support but Kisuke doesn’t, and that would be that. But that’s not all there is to it. Even if I were a bachelor, I don’t think that I’d feel the way Kisuke does at all. The root of the matter seems to lie much deeper.’

Shobe thought vaguely, ‘What is a man’s life? When you get sick, you wish you weren’t. When you have nothing to eat day after day, you just wish you had something. If you have nothing put by for a rainy day, you wish that you’d put by at least something. And even if you had put something by, now you wish you had more. So you go on like this, further and further. And you can’t tell where you’ll be able to stop.’ Shobe then realized that now, before his eyes,
someone had shown him that he was able to stop and that someone was Kisuke.

As if seeing him now for the first time, Shobe looked at Kisuke in wonder. Then he felt as if a halo had enveloped Kisuke's head as he gazed up at the sky.

Still staring at Kisuke, Shobe again called out to him, but more respectfully, although Shobe himself was not fully aware that he had changed the way he spoke. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he realized how inappropriate this mode of address was, but it was too late for him to take them back.

For his part, puzzled at being addressed so respectfully, Kisuke answered, "Yes, sir?" as he looked at Shobe apprehensively.

Shobe, hiding his embarrassment a little, said to Kisuke, "I may sound inquisitive, but they say you're being sent to the islands because you caused someone's death. Now, would you mind telling me why?"

Kisuke, appearing greatly ashamed, said, "Very well, sir, I will." He started to speak in a low voice. "It was a terrible lapse on my part to do such an awful thing. I just had no excuse. When I think about it, I myself can't understand how I could've done such a thing. I was completely out of my mind. When I was small, my parents died in a plague leaving just me and my kid brother. At first, people in the neighborhood took pity on us the same way they took care of puppies born on their doorstep, and had us run errands and so on for them in the neighborhood, so we grew up without freezing or starving to death. Even when we grew up and looked for work we tried our best to work together helping each other so we wouldn't be separated.

"It happened last fall. My brother and I were working on the
loom at a weaver's in Nishijin. Then my brother got sick and couldn't work any more. At that time, we were living in Kitayama, in just a kind of shack, and we walked to the weaver's by way of the bridge over the Kamiya River. After dark, I'd come home from work bringing groceries and things and he'd be waiting for me, saying over and over how sorry he was for making me do all the work. One day, I came home as usual, without suspecting anything, and found him lying on the bedding with his face down, and there was blood spattered all around. I was so shocked that I dropped the things wrapped in bamboo sheath or whatever I was carrying and rushed over to him. 'What's the matter?', I cried. Then he raised his face, deadly pale, stained with blood from both cheeks to his chin, and looked at me, but he couldn't say anything. But every time he breathed, I could hear a whistling sound from the wound. I had no idea what was happening, so I asked him, 'What's the matter? Did you cough up blood?' As I started to go closer to him, he propped himself up from the bed a little on his right arm. His left hand was pressing hard on his neck under his jaw but clots of black blood oozed out between his fingers. With his eyes he tried to keep me away, and his lips started to open. Finally he was able to talk. 'Sorry. Forgive me. Since it looked like I was never going to get well, I wanted to die soon to make your life easier. I thought if I cut my windpipe, I'd die right away, but my breath's just leaking out and I can't die. Just thinking "deeper, deeper", I pushed it in with all my strength but it slipped to the side. I don't think the blade's broken. If you can pull it out right, I know I'll be able to die. It hurts so much I can hardly speak. Please give me a hand and pull it out.' When he relaxed his left hand, his breath started coming through the wound again. I tried to speak but the words wouldn't come out, so I peered
silently at the wound in his throat. It looked like he had probably held the razor in his right hand and cut the windpipe across, but that didn’t kill him, so he then twisted it in deeply. Hardly two inches of the handle were left sticking out of the wound. Seeing all this, I just looked at him without any idea what to do. He was staring straight at me. I finally managed to say to him, ‘Hold on. I’ll go get the doctor.’ He looked at me resentfully, and again pressing his throat hard with his left hand, he said, ‘What good’s a doctor? Oh, how it hurts! Pull it out, please, I beg you.’ I just looked at him without knowing what to do. It seems strange, but in such cases, eyes can speak. My brother’s eyes kept reproaching, me, saying, ‘Do it quickly. Do it quickly.’ I felt as if there was something like a cart-wheel spinning in my head, and his eyes never stopped their terrible demand. What’s more his resentful look slowly became angrier, and finally he looked at me with hatred as if he were facing an enemy. Seeing that, I felt at last that I had to do as he said. So I said to him, ‘All right. All right. I’ll pull it out.’ Immediately the expression of his eyes changed completely; it became radiant, really happy. Thinking I had to get it over with, I got down on my knees and leaned forward. He lay down, relaxing his right arm on which he had been propped up from the bedding, and dropped onto the bed the elbow of the arm he had been pressing against his throat. I grabbed hold of the razor’s handle tightly and pulled it all the way out.

“Just then an old woman of the neighborhood opened the front door which I had closed from inside, and came in. I had asked her to give my brother his medicine and take care of him while I was away. Since it had gotten pretty dark inside, I didn’t know how much she had seen, but she gave a cry and ran outside leaving the
door open. As I was pulling out the razor, I just wanted to pull it quick and straight, but from the way it felt, I'm afraid I must've cut a part that hadn't been cut before. Since the blade was facing out, I probably cut the outside. Still holding the razor, I looked blankly at the old woman as she came in and ran out. After she'd left, I snapped out of it and looked at my brother; he'd already breathed his last. A huge amount of blood was pouring out of the wound. I set the razor beside me and stared at my brother's face with his eyes still half open in death, until the town elders came and took me to their office."

Bent over slightly, Kisuke had been speaking while looking up at Shobe's face from below; as he finished, he lowered his eyes to his knees.

Kisuke's story was consistent, so much so that it was almost too consistent. This was the result of his recalling it again and again during the past half year, and having been made to review it with the utmost care every time he was questioned at the elders' office and every time he was interrogated at the City Magistrate's compound.

Shobe, as he listened, felt as if he was seeing it happen right before his own eyes. But was it really fratricide? Was it really murder? This doubt occurred to him when he had heard only half the story, and even after he had heard it all, he could not yet dispel that doubt. His brother begged Kisuke to pull the razor out, because he thought he would die if Kisuke did so. It could be said that by pulling it out Kisuke had caused him to die—had murdered him. But it seems that his brother would have had to die anyway even if Kisuke hadn't done anything. He couldn't bear the pain, so he wanted to die quickly. Kisuke couldn't bear to see him suffer so. He put an end to his brother's life to save him from suffering. Was that a
crime? There is no doubt that killing him was a crime, but a doubt arises, considering that it was done to save him from suffering. The constable couldn't dispel that doubt at all.

Shobe turned it over in his mind, and finally he decided that the only thing to do was to leave it to the judgement of his superiors, to bow to Authority. Shobe thought that he would accept the Magistrate's decision as his own. Even so, there was still something somewhere which bothered him; he wished he could somehow ask the Magistrate about it.

As the cloudy night wore on, the Takase-bune with its two silent passengers slipped through the dark water.

The Origin of the Story 'Takase-bune'

The Takase River in Kyoto is said to have been excavated by Suminokura Ryoi from Gojo Street to South Kyoto in 1587 and then from Nijo Street to Gojo Street in 1612. The Takase-bune that plied the river were barges pulled by ropes from the shore. Since "Takase" was originally the name of a boat, a river plied by such boats was called "Takase River"; rivers of that name are found throughout the country. But such boats were not necessarily barges, so that in the Wamyosho under "kyo", defined as "a small boat with a deep draught", the character "kyo" is read "Takase". And in the Wakan Senyo-shu (Collection of Japanese-Chinese Nautical Terms) in the Chikuhaku-en Library, the Takase-bune is described as "a low flat boat with a high bow and a low beam and stern", and an illustration shows the boat moved by use of a pole.

During the Tokugawa Era, criminals in Kyoto were sent to Osaka by Takase-bune when they were sentenced to hard labor on distant
islands. Constables of the Kyoto Magistrate’s Office who escorted them had to listen to many sad stories. However, once there was a man put on board who had committed fratricide but was not sad at all. When asked why, he replied that up until now he had been having a hard time getting food, but when he was sentenced to the islands he was given 200 mon in coppers; it was the first time that he had ever had cash without having to spend it. When asked why he committed murder, he answered that while he and his brother were hired by a weaver in Nishijin to work on the loom, their wages were not enough to make a living. Then the prisoner’s brother attempted suicide but didn’t succeed, so begged the prisoner to kill him, saying that he couldn’t be helped anyway, and so the prisoner killed his brother.

This story appears in the “Okinagusa”, occupying only a little over one page of the printed edition edited by Ikebe Yoshikata. When I read it, I felt that there were two main themes in the story. One is the conception of wealth. The happiness of having money felt by a man who never had money before, has nothing to do with the amount of the money. Since one’s desire knows no limits, one cannot find the point at which one will be satisfied, however much one gets. So I found it interesting that a man was delighted with 200 mon in coppers. The other main theme is causing the death of another person who was on the verge of death but yet not dying and in pain. To cause him to die is to commit murder. One must not commit murder under any circumstances. I recall that even in the “Okinagusa”, there was criticism to the effect that he committed murder even though he had no evil intentions, because he was an uneducated peasant. But this is not something to be dealt with simply by hard-and-fast rules. Here we have an invalid on the verge
of death and in pain. There is no way to save him. What would
be the thoughts of one near him who sees that suffering? Even an
educated man is sure to feel that, since the invalid will die any­
way, he would like to cause him to die quickly without letting him
suffer any longer. Here a doubt occurs as to whether or not to
administer an anesthetic. If these drugs are administered, even if
the dosage is not fatal, they may bring about death more or less
quickly. If we do not do anything for the patient, we must cause
him to suffer. The present morality orders us to make him suffer.
In the medical world, however, some are of opinion that this is
wrong; that, if a patient is on the verge of death and suffering, it
would be better to save him from suffering by putting an end to his
life painlessly. This is what is called 'euthanasia' which means
caus­ing death painlessly. It seems that the criminal on the Takase-
bune was in the same position. I find this very interesting.

So I wrote the story called "Takase-bune" and published it in
the Chuo Koron.

[Mori Ogai’s “Takase-bune” was first published in the Chuo Koron
XXXI, 1 (January 1916) and has been republished in many editions,
We have consulted some previous translations, listed in A Bibli­
ography: Modern Japanese Literature in Western Translations (Inter­
national House, Tokyo, 1972).]