

YAM GRUEL

THIS STORY MIGHT have taken place about eleven hundred years ago. The exact time does not matter. All that the reader has to know is that the remote past of the Heian period forms its background. In those days there lived in Kyoto a certain samurai in the service of Regent Fujiwara Mototsune. I would specify his name, but unfortunately it is not recorded in the ancient chronicles. Probably he was so ordinary a man as to be unworthy of recording in a chronicle. The writers of these works evidently took very little interest in the lives or stories of common people. In this respect they differ greatly from the present-day writers of the naturalist school. However, the novelists of the Heian period were not as leisurely as might be expected. Anyway, among the samurai in the service of Fujiwara Mototsune there was an official of fifth class court rank. He is the hero of this story. In those days an official of fifth class court rank was a low official. The Japanese word for that rank is "goi." So in this story he will be called "Goi."

Goi was a very plain-looking man. His hollow cheeks made his chin seem unusually long. His lips...if we mentioned his every striking feature, there would be no end. He was extremely homely and sloppy in appearance.

No one knows how he came to serve the Regent. Still it is certain that he had gone about his daily chores for a long time, in his discolored silk robe and soft head-gear. From his mannerisms and his unkempt dress, it was hard to believe he had ever been a young man. He was well past forty. His face gave the impression that ever since birth he had had his cold-looking red nose and unshapely mustache exposed to the wind blowing down the Sujaku Avenue. Everyone from the Regent to the herdsman believed so and had no doubt about it.

You can easily imagine the kind of treatment Goi received from those around him. His fellow samurai did not care a straw for him. His subordinates, with or without court rank, nearly twenty altogether, were also amazingly indifferent to him. When he was supposed to give them instructions, they disregarded him and carried on with their idle chatter and gossip. His existence no more entered their vision than the air itself. His appearance caused no more ripple of unrest than a drop of water in the Japan Sea. The backwash of this man's helplessness was felt in the samurai's hall, where the Steward, the Chief and all his superiors would have nothing to do with him. They gave him all their commands by visual signs.

It is not by accident that man has a voice. Human speech was not made by a simple process. So sometimes they failed to make themselves understood by him. Then they seemed to attribute their failure to defects in his own understanding. Whenever they could not make themselves understood, they would glare at him as if it were his fault. Then, after eyeing him from the top of his head-gear, which was bent out of shape, to the tip of his worn-out straw sandals, they would suddenly turn their backs on him. For all that, Goi never took offence. He was such a timid and unspirited man that he was impervious to all injustice.

His fellow samurai thought it great sport to make him the butt of their jokes. The older men constantly made off-color remarks about his personal appearance; this prompted the younger men to practise all their wit on the helpless Goi. In his presence they would never tire of making critical comments about his nose, mustache, headgear, and silk robe. Moreover, they would often

talk of his hare-lipped wife from whom he had separated five or six years ago, and of a drunken Buddhist priest who was said to have been intimate with his wife. And not only that. Now and again without reason. But one day he happened to hear Goi's question, "Why did you do that?" and the words stuck in his mind. From that time on he saw Goi in a different light, because he saw a blubberer, persecuted by a hard life, peeping from the pale and stupid face of the undernourished Goi. This samurai could never think of Goi without being impressed by his accusing protest against the hard and heartless realities of life. At the same time Goi's frost-bitten red nose and mustache, the hairs of which might be counted on one's fingers, somehow seemed to give him a touch of consolation.

But this young samurai was an exception. Aside from a few such people, Goi had to continue his dog's life amid the contempt of everyone around him. First of all, he had no clothes worthy of the name. He had only a dark blue coat and a pleated gown of the same color. But these clothes had faded into what could be called neither indigo nor blue. As for his gown, it was exceedingly worn. His thin legs under this gown, without even drawers, were no more presentable than the plodding legs of a lean ox pulling the cart of a poor court-noble. His sword was nondescript, with doubtful metal fittings and with the lacquer on its hilt beginning to wear off. The red-nosed Goi used to walk about with short steps, his round shoulders all the more stooped under a cold sky, and cast covetous looks right and left. So he was naturally made a fool of even by passing peddlers. The following instance may be mentioned.

One day on his way from Sanjo-mon to Shinsen-en, he saw several children gathered at the roadside. Thinking they might be spinning tops, he watched them, from behind, and found them thrashing a stray, shaggy dog, held by a rope fastened round his neck. The shy Goi had almost always been too timid to translate into action whatever he might have really felt. But on this occasion, since they were children, he could muster up some courage.

"Please spare him," he said, smiling as broadly as possible and patting the shoulder of the boy who seemed the oldest of the group. "If you hit the dog, you'll hurt him."

The boy looked back, and turning up his eyes, stared at him contemptuously. "Mind your own business," he retorted. And, taking a step backward, he pouted his proud lips and shouted, "What? You, red-nosed wretch!"

Goi felt as if these words had struck his face. It was not that he had taken the least offence at the boy's abusive language, but that he felt miserable for having disgraced himself by an unnecessary remark. Concealing his shame with a bitter smile, he silently went on toward Shinsen-en. The children behind made faces and thrust out their tongues at him. Of course he did not see them. Even if he had, it would have made no difference to the spiritless Goi.

Was the hero of this story a man who was born only to be despised, and had he no particular aim in life? No, not so. For the past five or six years he had had an extraordinary craving for yam gruel. Yam gruel is a gruel made by boiling slices of yam in a soup of sweet arrow-root. In those days it was regarded as the supreme delicacy, even at the dining table of the sovereign of the realm. Accordingly, such lower officials as Goi could taste it only once a year when they were invited as extraordinary guests to the Regent's Palace. On such an occasion they could eat no

more of it than barely enough to moisten their lips. So it had been his long-cherished desire to satiate himself with yam gruel. Of course he did not confide his desire to anyone. He himself might not have been clearly aware that it had been his life-long wish. But as a matter of fact, it would hardly be too much to say that he lived for this purpose. A man sometimes devotes his life to a desire which he is not sure will ever be fulfilled. Those who laugh at this folly are, after all, no more than mere spectators of life.

On January 2nd of a certain year, extraordinary guests were invited to a banquet held in the palace of Fujiwara Mototsune. (This was the banquet held by the Prime Minister Regent inviting State Ministers and other court-nobles, and was much the same as the grand banquet held at the Ninomiya Court on the same day.) Goi and other samurai joined in the dinner; for at that time there was not yet the custom of dividing the guests according to their court ranks, and so all the retainers used to assemble in one hall and enjoy the same feast. At banquets in those old days they served a large assortment of dishes and sweets, few of which would be specially appetizing to moderns: glutinous rice cake, fried and sweetened rice cake, steamed ear-shells, dried fowl, the sweet fish of the Uji River, the crucian of Omi, porgy powdered and seasoned, boiled salmon, broiled octopus, large lobsters, large and small tangerines, mandarins, persimmons dried on skewers, and many others. Among these was the yam gruel in question. Every year Goi looked forward to this yam gruel. But this year, since there were a great many guests, his share of yam gruel was proportionately small. And, though it may have been only his fancy, it seemed that the yam gruel tasted more delicious than usual. After he had finished it, his eyes were still riveted on the empty bowl. Wiping the drops off his thin mustache, he remarked to someone near by, "I wonder if I shall ever eat my fill of yam gruel."

"He says he hasn't had enough yam gruel," someone laughed. It was a sonorous and dignified warrior-like voice. Goi, raising his head, looked timidly toward the speaker. The voice came from Fujiwara Toshihito, the son of Tokinaga, who was Finance Minister under the regency of Mototsune. He was a towering and sinewy broadshouldered giant, and appeared to be well on his way to intoxication, thanks to the many cups of dark-colored rice-wine he had consumed during the meal.

"I'm sorry for you," Toshihito continued, in a voice mingling contempt and compassion, as he saw Goi raise his head. "You shall fill yourself with yam gruel, if you like."

A dog, constantly teased, will not readily jump at a piece of meat thrown to him once in a while. With his usual expression that made you wonder whether he was smiling or crying, Goi looked from Toshihito's face to his empty bowl, contemplating each in turn.

"Don't you care to?" Toshihito asked.

Goi remained silent.

"What would you say?" Toshihito urged.

Goi felt that the eyes of all the company were focussed on him. Whether he would be the butt of their ridicule depended on how he would answer. Whatever he answered, he would be

made a fool of, he thought. So he hesitated. Had the other not just then thundered impatiently, "If you don't care to, I won't repeat my invitation," he would have only gone on comparing Toshihito and his bowl. "I would be much obliged, sir," Goi answered at last, when he heard Toshihito's resounding question.

The company listening to this by-play between Toshihito and Goi roared with laughter. "I would be much obliged, sir," someone mimicked. Uproarious laughter swept over the group, and the soft and stiff head-gear of the guests bobbed like waves over the yellow, blue, crimson, and varicolored dishes set before them. Above all, it was Toshihito who laughed the heartiest.

"Then I'll invite you before long," he choked out. Apparently the wine had stuck in his throat. "Are you sure?" he asked emphatically. "Yes, I would be much obliged, sir" Goi stammered once more, blushing. Of course all the company laughed again. Toshihito himself, who had asked the question emphatically to make Goi repeat these very words, laughed still more loudly and heartily, and his broad shoulders shook as if he were all the more amused. The rustic court noble from the north knows only two ways of getting along in life: drinking and laughing.

Finally the center of conversation turned elsewhere — presumably because the others disliked having their attention concentrated on red-nosed Goi, for all the amusement of ridiculing him. At any rate, the topic shifted from one thing to another, and by the time there was little left to eat and drink, the company's interest was drawn to the story of a fledgling samurai who tried to get on a horse while he had both his legs in one side of a pair of riding breeches. All but Goi listened. He remained aloof, offering no comment one way or the other. Yam gruel occupied all his thoughts. He would not even put a cup of rice-wine to his mouth. Both hands on his lap, as shy as a girl at an interview with a prospective husband, and blushing even to the roots of his graying hair, he gazed into his empty black-lacquered cup and smiled stupidly.

One morning, a few days later, Toshihito invited Goi to accompany him on a ride to a hot spring near Higashiyama. Goi, taking him at his word, was only too glad to accept the offer. Since he had not bathed for a long time, he had been itching from head to foot. It would be a godsend if, in addition to being treated to yam gruel, he could take a bath. So he got astride the roan that Toshihito had brought.

Soon both Toshihito and Goi were riding toward Awataguchi down a road along the bank of the Kamo River. Toshihito, with his black mustache and handsome side-locks, dressed in a dark azure hunting outfit and armed with a long sword, made a fine picture of a warrior. Goi, in a shabby, pale silk robe and two thinly wadded undergarments, his sash tied slovenly around his waist, and the mucus from his nose covering his upper lip, seemed a poor counterpart to the dashing Toshihito. The only comparison was in the horses. Both rode such gallant young steeds — Toshihito on a sorrel and Goi on a roan — that all peddlers and samurai turned to stare at them. Keeping pace with the horses, two servants trotted behind, a valet and a footman.

Although it was winter, it was one of those exceptionally clear mornings. The air was so calm there was not a breath of wind to sway the dead lotus leaves on the slow waters of the river, winding their way through the stones on the white river bed. The leafless branches of low willow

trees facing the river were bathed in satin-smooth sunlight, and even the motion of a kingfisher perched on a tree-top cast its distinct shadow on the road. Mt Hiei showed its whole velvety frost-bitten shoulder over the dark green of Higashiyama. Both Toshihito and Goi made their way leisurely toward Awataguchi, the mother-of-pearl work of their saddles glittering brilliantly in the golden sunlight.

“Where is it that you're pleased to take me, sir?” asked Goi, pulling up the reins.

“Just over there. It's not as far as you might think,” Toshihito answered.

“Then is it near Awataguchi?”

“Yes, that will be about it.”

When they had ridden abreast as far as Awataguchi, Goi found that this did not appear to be Toshihito's destination. In the course of time they rode past Awataguchi.

“Are we going to stop at Awataguchi?”

“No, a little farther on.”

Toshihito rode quietly with a smile, intentionally avoiding Goi's face. The houses on both sides gradually became few and far between, till nothing was visible in the broad paddy fields but crows seeking prey, and in the distance the lingering snow on the northern side of the mountain dimmed into a pale blue. The thorny tops of the unclad trees piercing sharp into the clear sky added to the chill of the air.

“Then, is it about Yamashina, sir?”

“No, this is Yamashina. Our destination is a little farther.”

As they jogged on, they rode past Yamashina and much further. They went even beyond Sekiyama, and a little after noon they found themselves in front of the Mie Temple. In this temple lived a priest who was on close terms with Toshihito. They paid a call on the priest, and he served them dinner. After dinner, they rode on hastily.

The road farther on was much more lonely than the road they had already covered. In those days the whole country swarmed with robbers, and was unsafe everywhere.

“It's still farther off, isn't it, sir?” Goi asked, looking up into Toshihito's face and hunching his round shoulders all the more.

Toshihito smiled. It was the sort of smile that a child who has done mischief gives his parent when he has nearly been found out. It seemed as if the wrinkles at the tip of his nose and the slack muscles at the corners of his eyes were deciding whether or not to burst into laughter.

“As a matter of fact, I plan to take you as far as Tsuruga,” Toshihito said cheerfully at last, and, raising his whip, he pointed to the distant sky. Under his whip the limpid waters of Lake Biwa shone in the light of the afternoon sun.

“Oh, Tsuruga?” Goi asked in consternation. “The Tsuruga in the Province of Echizen?”

He had often heard that Toshihito had lived in Tsuruga for the most part, since he married the heiress to Fujiwara Arihito, but till that moment he had not had the least idea that Toshihito was going to take him so far. First of all he wondered how, with only two servants, he could ever get safely to distant Echizen across the many mountains and rivers. And then he thought of the frequent rumors that travelers had been killed by robbers. He raised an imploring face to Toshihito.

“Lord bless me!” Goi blubbered out. “First I thought our destination was Higashiyama, but it turned out to be the Mie Temple. Finally you tell me you're going to take me to Tsuruga in Echizen. Whatever do you mean? If you'd told me so at first, I'd have brought my servant with me at least.... Tsuruga, Lord bless me!”

If his craving for yam gruel had not encouraged him, he would probably have left Toshihito and returned to Kyoto alone.

“Consider one Toshihito a thousand men strong. You needn't worry about our trip.” Toshihito scoffed, frowning slightly as he saw Goi's consternation. Calling his valet, he slung on the quiver which the valet had carried on his back and, fastening on his saddle the black lacquered bow which the valet had carried in his hand, he rode on at the head of the party. Now there was no course left for the dispirited Goi but blind obedience to Toshihito's will. So, helplessly looking at the desolate wilderness all around, he made his weary way. The footsteps of his horse were unsteady; and his own red nose was bent toward the saddle-bow as he chanted the sutra of the Merciful Goddess, which he remembered faintly.

The bleak wild fields echoing the rattle of their horses' hoofs were covered with a vast expanse of yellow pampas grass, and the cold puddles lying here and there seemed as if they would freeze that winter afternoon, with the blue sky mirrored in them. Far on the horizon, a range of mountains, out of the sun, lacked even the glitter of the lingering snow, and painted the horizon with a long streak of dark violet. But, in places, dreary clumps of dead pampas grass cut them off from the view of the servants trudging along.

“Look!” Toshihito called out to Goi suddenly, turning. “There comes a good messenger. I'll have him send word to Tsuruga.”

Unable to understand what had been said, Goi timidly looked in the direction to which Toshihito had pointed with his bow. Of course there was not another soul in the whole extent of the plain. But in a clump of bushes entangled by a wild vine, a fox could be seen walking slowly, his fur exposed to the declining sunlight. Instantly the fox sprang up hastily and began to run away at full speed. For suddenly Toshihito had whipped up his horse and galloped toward him. Goi also ran for his life, as if in delirium, after Toshihito. Nor could the servants afford to lag

behind them. For some time the clatter of their horses' hoofs striking against stones broke the silence of the wilderness. But it was not long until Toshihito stopped his horse, and dangled the fox, which he had caught before the others knew it, head downwards by the side of the saddle. He must have run him down under his horse and caught him alive. Wiping off the drops of perspiration which were clinging to his sidelocks, Goi rode pantingly up to Toshihito.

“Now listen, fox!” Toshihito said in a purposely dignified voice, holding the fox high up before his eyes. “Run to Toshihito's mansion in Tsuruga tonight, and tell them '*Toshihito's coming down just now, along with a special guest. Send some men to meet him as far as Takashima about ten o'clock tomorrow morning, and bring two saddled horses.*' Be sure, will you?”

When he finished talking, Toshihito gave the fox a swing and threw him away toward a clump of grass.

“Oh, how he runs! How he runs!” The two servants, who had barely caught up to Toshihito, cheered and clapped their hands as the fox scampered away. The autumn-leaf colored animal was seen running full tilt to the end of the world across stones and over the roots of trees in the evening light. They could see him clearly from the little height where they were standing. For while they had been running after the fox, they had come to the top of an easy slope of the wild fields which merged into the dry river bed.

“He's a messenger of the gods, isn't he, sir?” Giving vent to his naïve wonder and admiration, Goi looked up, all the more respectfully, into the face of the fierce knight who commanded the willing service of even a fox. He did not think of what a gulf lay between him and Toshihito. He merely felt with greater assurance that, since he had now fallen more and more under the sway of Toshihito, his own will had become all the freer in the broad embrace of this hero's will. Probably flattery has its natural birth on such an occasion. Therefore, even if the reader should hereafter find the red-nosed Goi something of a sycophant, he should not indiscriminately doubt his character.

The fox, which had been thrown away, rushed down the sloping field as if rolling along, jumped nimbly over the stones in the dry river bed, and ran obliquely up the opposite slope with vigor and agility. Dashing up the incline, the fox looked back and saw the party of samurai that had caught him still abreast on horseback on the far-off top of the easy slope. They all looked as small as fingers standing together. Especially the sorrel and the roan, bathed in the splendor of the setting sun, were in sharp relief against the frosty air.

Turning his head forward, the fox started running again like the wind through the dead pampas grass.

The party arrived at the outskirts of Takashima about ten o'clock the next day, as had been expected. It was a little hamlet facing Lake Biwa, with only a few straw-thatched houses scattered haphazardly in the fields. Threatening clouds filled the sky, unlike the summery sky of yesterday. The rippling surface of the lake mirrored the dappled picture of pine trees growing on

its bank. Presently the travelers stopped. Toshihito turned to Goi and said, "Look! Over there some men are coming to meet us."

Of the twenty or thirty men who were bringing two saddled horses, some were on horseback and others were on foot. Their silk robes fluttering in the cold wind, they all came rapidly toward them along the bank of the lake and through the pinetrees. As soon as they neared Toshihito, the mounted men hurriedly jumped down out of their saddles, while those on foot kneeled down on the ground, and they all waited respectfully for Toshihito.

"Indeed, the fox seems to have done a messenger's service," said Goi.

"Yes," Toshihito replied, "the fox is an animal that has a natural ability to disguise itself. So it's quite easy for it to perform such a service."

While Goi and Toshihito were talking in this vein, they and their party came to where Toshihito's vassals were waiting.

"Thank you for coming," Toshihito called out to them. The vassals, who had all been kneeling on the ground, stood up at once and bridled the horses of Toshihito and Goi.

The two had scarcely got off and sat down on fur cushions when a gray-haired vassal in a brown silk robe came before Toshihito and said, "Last evening a mysterious thing took place."

"Well, what was it?" Toshihito asked in a lordly manner, offering Goi the food and drink which his vassals had brought.

"Please, my lord. Last evening about eight o'clock Her Ladyship fell unconscious and said, *'I am the fox of Sakamoto. I will give you a message my lord has sent today. So step up to me and listen.'* All of us got together before her. Then she said, *'My husband is coming just now with a special guest. Around ten o'clock tomorrow morning send men as far as the outskirts of Takashima and take two saddled horses.'* That was the message she gave us."

"That's very mysterious," Goi chimed in importantly, with a remark pleasing to everyone.

"Her Ladyship told us in no ordinary way," the vassal went on. "Trembling with terror, she said, *'Don't be late. If you are late, I will be punished by my husband.'* While talking, she wept incessantly.

"What did she do after that?"

"After that she fell asleep. When we left, she seemed to be still asleep."

"What do you say?" Toshihito asked, turning his proud look to Goi when his vassal had finished talking. "Even animals serve Toshihito."

Bobbing his head and scratching his big red nose, Goi answered theatrically, "I'm filled with admiration beyond words." He then rolled his tongue over his upper lip to lap up the drops of the rice wine left on his mustache.

It was the same evening. Goi was passing a long sleepless night in a room in Toshihito's mansion, his eyes casually fixed on a rush light.

Then the picture of the pine-grown hills, the brooks, withered fields, grass, leaves, stones, and the smell of the smoke of field fires — all these things, one after another, passed through his mind. The pleasant relief he had felt on seeing the red glow of the charcoal in the long brazier when they had arrived earlier that evening — it, too, could only be considered an event of the distant past.

Stretching his legs out under the luxurious yellow ceremonial robe, which Toshihito had lent him, Goi tried to patch together the events of the evening. His liquor-filled brain made it almost impossible. Beneath the ceremonial robe, he was wearing two thickly wadded garments of a russet color, which Toshihito had also lent him. Under this comfortable warmth Goi realized that now he lay in the lap of wealth. The night was bitter cold, he imagined. The meager events of his life compared to the ones he had experienced tonight seemed like those of a coolie compared to a prince. But for all that, there was a curious uneasiness in his mind. Above all, he was impatient for time to pass. Yet, on the other hand, somehow he felt that dawn, that is, the eating of yam gruel, must not come too soon. Nervousness from this sudden change in circumstance lurked at the back of his mind, chilling his heart and keeping him awake.

By and by he heard someone shouting in the large yard outside. To judge from the voice, it was the gray-haired vassal who had come part of the way to meet Toshihito. It sounded as if he were making some kind of special announcement.

"Listen, all you servants. His Lordship wants each of you, young and old, to bring a yam three inches wide and five feet long, by six o'clock in the morning. Remember, by six o'clock." The old man's dry voice resounded through the frosty air, and his very words seemed to penetrate to the marrow of Goi's bones. Unconsciously, he drew his ceremonial robe tight around him.

The command was repeated. Then human noises ended, and all was again hushed into the dead silence of the winter night. The servants had gone to obey the order — probably in fear of their lives, Goi imagined. Alone with his thoughts once more, he tossed and turned. Finally he lay still. An oppressive silence filled the room, broken only by the sizzling oil in the rush lamp. The red light of the wick was wavering.

So after all he was to have yam gruel. When he thought of this, the old uneasiness which had left him because of the distraction of what was happening outside, came back again. His perverse reluctance to being treated to yam gruel too soon grew stronger than ever, and it continued to dominate his thoughts. Such an early realization of his heart's desire seemed to turn years of patient waiting into a vain endeavor. If possible, he wished that something unexpected would happen to keep him from eating yam gruel for a while. Such ideas spun round and round in his mind like a top. At last, overcome by fatigue from his long journey, he fell fast asleep.

The next morning when he wakened, the thought of yam gruel was on his mind. He must have overslept. It was past six o'clock. He jumped out of bed, crossed the floor, and opened the window. Outside he saw stacked roof high what at first glance appeared to be huge piles of corded logs. Rubbing his sleepy eyes, he looked a second time, and with a sharp gasp he realized what they were. Yams! Yams! Yams! Tremendously large yams three inches wide and five feet long, enough to feed the whole town of Tsuruga. Set out in the broad yard, five or six caldrons were placed side by side on new spikes driven into the ground, and dozens of young maids in white-lined garments worked as busily as bees around them. Some of the servant girls were lighting fires, some were raking ashes, and others were pouring sweet arrow-root juice into the caldrons from wooden pails. Volumes of smoke rose from under the caldrons, and bursts of white vapor shot up from them to mix with the still lingering haze of dawn and form a gray pall which hung all over the large yard, obscuring everything but the red flames of the blazing fires. The wide yard was in such a state of confused excitement as is witnessed only on a battlefield or at the scene of a fire. These huge caldrons boiling yams into gruel filled Goi with blank amazement and dismay. They made him remember only too clearly that he had made the long journey to Tsuruga all the way from Kyoto for the express purpose of eating yam gruel. The more he thought, the more miserable he felt about everything. By this time he had already lost half of the appetite which had hitherto commanded our sympathy for him.

An hour later he sat at breakfast with Toshihito and his father-in-law, Arihito. In front of him was a huge vat filled to the brim with a tremendous sea of yam gruel. Earlier he had seen dozens of spirited young men deftly wield kitchen knives to slice up that pile of yams which reached high up to the eaves of the house. He had seen the maids run here and there past one another, scooping all the yam slices into the caldrons. When all the yams piled up on the large mats were gone, he had seen clouds of steam, reeking with the smell of yams and arrow-root, rise from the caldrons into the clear morning air. Naturally enough, when Goi, who had watched these things, was served yam gruel in a huge pitcher, he felt satiated even before tasting the delicacy. Sitting in front of the pitcher, he wiped his perspiring brow in embarrassment.

"I hear you haven't had your fill of yam gruel," said Arihito's father-in-law, "please help yourself without reserve." And he ordered the servant boys to bring several more large pitchers of yam gruel. Goi put about half of the yam gruel from the pitcher into a big earthen vessel, and closing his eyes, he reluctantly drank it off, his red nose becoming all the redder.

"As my father said, you needn't be hesitant." Grinning maliciously, Toshihito also pressed Goi to have another pitcherful of yam gruel. Goi was in a terrible plight. Frankly, he had not wanted to eat even one bowlful of yam gruel even at the beginning. With great endurance he managed to do justice to half a pitcherful of it. If he took any more, he thought he would throw it up before swallowing it. But to refuse to eat any more would be to spurn the kindness of Toshihito and Arihito. So closing his eyes again, he drained off a third of the remaining half. He could not take another mouthful.

"I'm more than obliged to you," Goi mumbled incoherent thanks. He was in such pitiful embarrassment that drops of perspiration formed on his mustache and the tip of his nose, as if it were midsummer instead of winter.

“How sparingly you eat!” said Arihito. “Our guest seems to be reserved. Boys, don't be idle.” At his words, the servants tried to pour more yam gruel from the new pitchers into the earthen vessel. Waving both his hands, as if to drive off flies, Goi expressed his earnest desire to be excused.

If at this time Toshihito had not unexpectedly said, “Look over there,” pointing to the eaves of the house opposite, Arihito would still have continued to press the yam gruel on Goi. But fortunately Toshihito's voice drew everyone's attention toward the eaves. The morning sun was shedding its light on the cypress-shingle roof. An animal sat quietly on the eaves, its sleek fur bathed in the bright sunshine. It was the fox of Sakamoto which Toshihito had caught with his hands in the withered fields two days before.

“The fox has also come from a desire for yam gruel. Men, give him his feed.” Toshihito's orders were promptly executed. The fox jumped down from the eaves and immediately began to feast on yam gruel.

Watching the fox eat its meal, Goi looked back with fond longing on his past life before the time he had come to Tsuruga. What he remembered was that he had been made a fool of by many warriors, and reviled even by Kyoto boys with “What? You Red Nose!” and that he was a pitiful, lonely being, with faded silk robe and nondescript sword, who wandered about Sujaku Avenue like a homeless mongrel. But at the same time he had been happy, treasuring up his desire to gorge himself on yam gruel. With the reassurance that he need not eat any more of it, he felt the perspiration all over his face dry up gradually, beginning at the tip of his nose. The early morning in Tsuruga was fine but cold, and a biting wind was blowing. Hastily grasping his nose, Goi emitted a loud sneeze toward the silver pitcher.