Tetsuya Ayukawa

THE RED LOCKED ROOM

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Translated by Ho-Ling Wong

The Red Locked Room

This book is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogue are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

First published in Japanese in *Hōseki and Tantei Kurabu*, between 1954 and 1961.
THE RED LOCKED ROOM

Cover picture: one of the "Eight Hells of Beppu" hot springs, Japan

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Introduction

Taku Ashibe

Anthony Boucher famously wrote “Ellery Queen is the American detective story,” and if one were to borrow his saying, one could also claim that Tetsuya Ayukawa is the Japanese *honkaku* mystery story.

The Japanese word *honkaku* on its own translates to ‘orthodox’ or ‘standard.’ The term ‘*honkaku* mystery fiction’ on the other hand corresponds to ‘classic fair-play mystery’ in the English-language world. In the past, mysteries were grouped together with tales of horror, fantasy and adventure under the common term *tantei shōsetsu* (detective story), but the classic mystery novel was eventually differentiated from the other genres through the introduction of the word *honkaku*. It was mystery author Saburō Kōga who first coined the phrase in 1926.

It was also around that period that the S.S. Van Dine boom in the United States reached Japanese shores. Van Dine’s writing style, which focused solely on a core mystery plot and eliminated all other redundant story elements—save for snobbery and pedantry---was considered both surprising and refreshing.

Translations of the works of the writers responsible for the Golden Age of Detective Fiction in the west followed. Stories by Ellery Queen, Agatha Christie, F. W. Crofts, E. D. Biggers, E. C. Bentley, A. A. Milne and others helped solidify the shared idea of what a *honkaku* mystery story entailed. However, the time was not yet ripe for Japanese authors to follow.

Neither Edogawa Rampo, the father of the Japanese detective story who had quickly grasped the charm of *honkaku* mystery and realised it would become the mainstream style of the genre, nor Saburō Kōga, who had created the term *honkaku mystery*, were able to switch over to this new style. They had been influenced strongly by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Maurice Leblanc and had already obtained a certain reputation as mystery writers, so this new change would have made it necessary for them to alter their writing style.

The first to embrace this new trend was the new generation, which included writers like Yū Aoi and most notably Keikichi Ōsaka, a collection

of whose short stories is already available via Locked Room International. Despite their efforts, *honkaku* did not become the mainstream style because the upcoming World War nipped the movement in the bud. Ōsaka died in the war, while his mentor Kōga died of a sudden illness while travelling, due to scarcity of medicine.

Ironically, losing the devastating war in 1945 actually liberated the Japanese literary scene. During the war it had been forbidden to write detective stories, as they were considered subversive literature, but once the war was over writers could start publishing their stories again, including *honkaku* mystery fiction.

Seishi Yokomizo, who had been an editor before the war, as well as a writer of fantasy and thrillers, brought much foreign mystery fiction into Japan. He had read John Dickson Carr's works during the war, which now inspired him to write *The Honjin Murders*, quickly followed by other masterpieces such as *The Butterfly Murder Case* (*Chōchō Satsujin Jiken*) and *Gokumon Island* (*Gokumontō*). Together, they made Yokomizo one of the pioneers of the *honkaku* mystery novel. Many of the genre's major works were written in the early post-war period. Kikuo Tsunoda, who had previously written romantic and mysterious period stories, published *The Tragedy of the Takagi Clan* (*Takagike no Sangeki*) featuring Superintendent Keisuke Kagami, and Ango Sakaguchi, a pure literature author belonging to the *Buraiha* Decadent School, wrote *The Non-Serial Murders* (*Furenzoku Satsujin Jiken*).

Much was expected from the younger generation. Edogawa Rampo, who by that time was mostly focusing on genre research and criticism, was so impressed by a manuscript sent to him that he convinced a major publisher to print it. This was Akimitsu Takagi's *The Tattoo Murder Case*. The mystery, which involved the discovery of a female corpse minus the torso in a bathroom locked from the inside, could not have been written before the war, or by anyone of the older generation.

The unique circumstances in Japan at the time were an important factor in the growth of the genre's popularity. Due to the long war and the controlling society that had facilitated it, people had been starved of books, whether about philosophy, art or plain entertainment. Period novels were popular among the wider audience, but publishers were hesitant because they were thought to promote feudalist and anti-democratic ideas. On the other hand, mystery stories, which embraced the novelties of the new era,

were welcome. (Parenthetically, the Allied occupation forces had established clear regulations for films. Actors who had once starred as heroic samurai warriors were thus forced to play police detectives, coast guards or private detectives.)

Although Tetsuya Ayukawa did not stand out at first, he slowly made his way to the forefront of the new era and remained loyal to the *honkaku* mystery story to the end. Even when the genre was abandoned and even dismissed, he kept on writing stories of mystery and logical deduction, and with time he became a peerless figure, respected by readers and younger writers alike.

Tetsuya Ayukawa (real name: Tōru Nakagawa) was born in 1919 in Tōkyō. When he was in elementary school he was forced to move to mainland China, because of his father's job as an engineer for the South Manchuria Railway Company. Most of his life between boyhood and adolescence was spent in Dalian, a city in Northeast China, although he did return several times to Japan to go to school in Tōkyō. Dalian was a unique metropolis, where Chinese, Japanese and Russians lived together, a melting pot between East and West, the past and the present. The exotic scenery of that city, which would disappear with the end of the war, indubitably made a tremendous impression on young Ayukawa.

When he was in middle school, a senior student told him about the stories of Sherlock Holmes. He was captivated by them and soon thereafter he went on to read R. Austin Freeman's Dr. Thorndyke stories. After that he could not find anything more in local libraries and was obliged to travel to neighbouring towns or even faraway cities to read the translated tales of Poe, Chesterton and Van Dine.

In the beginning he liked stories where a brilliant detective would solve a tricky case, but after reading Croft's *The Ponson Case*, he realised that having a normal detective patiently solving a case through simple trial and error also had its charm. After coming across the timetable of the South Manchurian Railways and noticing the interesting manner in which certain trains connected, he decided to write a mystery story himself.

Ayukawa's family had returned to Japan before the end of the war, so he did not experience the tragic fall of Manchuria, but he did lose the manuscript of his story in the chaos following Japan's defeat. He also found himself suffering from a lung disease and had to spend time in recuperation,

only working sporadically. With his creative urge growing, he started submitting stories to magazines. He made his debut in 1948 with an exotic fantasy short story titled *Tsukishiro*. In the same year, he published his first mystery story *The Snake and The Wild Boar* (*Hebi to Inoshishi*.)

Soon afterwards, the post-war detective story boom offered him the opportunity of a lifetime. He had entered an important novel competition organised by the magazine *Hōseki*. His novel *The Petrov Affair* (*Petrov Jiken*), which he had submitted under his real name Tōru Nakagawa, won first place. The novel was a rewrite of the manuscript he had lost in the war and it would become the first novel starring Chief Inspector Onitsura, a Japanese police detective who at the time was in the police force of Dalian.

The alluring story brimmed with nostalgia and exoticism and was set in an international metropolis long gone. The skilled manner in which the complex, perfect alibi was broken down in the tale was a bellwether of the arrival of a new generation of *honkaku* mystery writers.

Unfortunately, the publisher of *Hōseki* could not pay him the prize money due to financial problems. When he protested, he was sent packing and his book was not published.

Ayukawa turned his hand to writing short stories for the several second-rate magazines in existence at the time and he also tried to strengthen his ties with societies of mystery aficionados.

Meanwhile, he continued to work on his second full-length novel. Back then it was rare for a no-name newcomer to have a full-length novel published, but his never-ending efforts would pay off. In 1955, publisher Kōdansha was publishing a series of newly written detective novels. The final volume *The Thirteenth Seat* was open for submissions from newcomers, and his submission, *The Black Trunk* (*Kuroi Toranku*), won. It was the first time he had used the pen name Tetsuya Ayukawa, and his second debut had been a rousing success.

Shortly thereafter, *Hōseki* also had a restart, and this time it had Edogawa Rampo aboard as well. He invested his own funds, devised a renewal plan and even sought new talent to write for the magazine. One of the new stars of *honkaku* mystery he had his eye on was Ayukawa.

The mystery genre in Japan had seen tremendous growth, thanks to authors like Seichō Matsumoto and Etsuko Niki, but in their hands the emphasis changed to the motive for the crime and the psychology of the criminal. The former openly disapproved of stories about brilliant

detectives solving fantastic crimes by pure logical deduction, and as a result, readers' interest shifted to realism and contemporary issues.

Despite this change in readers' tastes, Ayukawa remained focused on *honkaku* mystery and kept on writing impressive, high-quality works. His earnest work attitude earned him the trust of his readers and would also influence later generations of writers. It can be confidently stated that there is not one writer belonging to the *shin honkaku* movement who does not hold Tetsuya Ayukawa in the utmost regard. The fact that all the titles on the following list of Ayukawa's novels are true *honkaku* mystery stories is absolutely stunning.

The Petrov Affair (*Petrov Jiken*, 1950)
The Black Trunk (*Kuroi Toranku*, 1956)
The Villa Lilac Case (*Rira-sō Jiken*, 1958)*
A Fossil of Hate (*Zō'o no Kaseki*, 1959)
White Fear (*Shiro no Kyōfu*, 1959)*
The Black Swan (*Kuro no Hakuchō*, 1960)
What People Call Love Suicide (*Hito Sore wo Jōshi to Yobu*, 1961)
Gravestone in the Shadows (*Kage Aru Bohyō*, 1962)*
Castle of Sand (*Suna no Shiro*, 1963)
The Fake Grave (*Itsuwari no Funbo*, 1963)
Whipping the Dead (*Shisha wo Muchi Ute*, 1964)*
A Deadly Scenery (*Shi no Aru Fūkei*, 1965)
Destination Unknown (*Atesaki Fumei*, 1965)
The Semi Express Nagara (*Junkyū Nagara*, 1966)
A Tower of Blocks (*Tsumiki no Tō*, 1966)
A Door Without a Keyhole (Kagiana no Nai Tobira, 1969)
Testimony of Wind (*Kaze no Shōgen*, 1971)
What Did the Inugami See? (*Inugami wa Nani wo Mita Ka*, 1976)
A Box of Silence (*Chinmoku no Hako*, 1979)
The Last Writing in Blood-Red (*Shu no Zeppitsu*, 1979)*
Find the King (*Ō wo Sagase*, 1979)
Seat of the Dead (*Shibito no Za*, 1983)

The titles feature Chief Inspector Onitsura, except those marked *, which either feature the amateur detective Ryūzō Hoshikage, or don't belong to any series. Ayukawa also wrote a series starring the bartender of the bar

Number 3. He had been working on the Number 3 series' first novel, entitled *The White Birch House Affair* (*Shirakabasō Jiken*), when he died without finishing the novel.

If one were to point out the characteristics of Ayukawa's two main series, one can say that the Ryūzō Hoshikage series feature a classic, whodunit/howdunit puzzle style, while the more prolific Onitsura is mostly occupied with breaking down alibis. Due to the latter's larger output, Ayukawa's novels are often categorised as realistic police procedurals, but these stories are actually brimming with original tricks and impressive lines of logic. Onitsura is perhaps best described as "Ellery Queen wearing the face of Inspector French."

But why is Onitsura always busy cracking alibis? As stated previously, in the period post 1960, detective novels in Japan focused on the motive for the crime and the psychology of the criminal and eschewed the brilliant detective, the murder in the country house and fantastic murder schemes. Ayukawa therefore decided to focus on the web of railways that covered the islands of Japan, and the diverse trains that ran along the rails with impeccable timing. Such trains would provide the stage for his tales of mystery and logic. It was far more realistic to portray a clever criminal who, in order to evade the hands of justice, would come up with an iron-clad alibi for themselves, rather than create some kind of locked room. Railway mysteries were thus able to offer a unique experience, by portraying Japanese locales in the second half of the twentieth century and the people who lived there, while at the same time also presenting daring murder schemes.

From 1975 on, Ayukawa started taking up new interests besides his career as a novelist, first by compiling dozens of mystery anthologies. He also started locating forgotten writers through interviews and research. Finally, he gave new writers a hand, helping them make their professional debut. All these achievements can probably be traced back to his own experiences starting out as a writer and to the fact that he had seen how many writers and their work had been forgotten by time.

In 1990, the annual Tetsuya Ayukawa Award was established. Ayukawa passed away in 2002, but even now, this award is still the gateway to success for writers of *honkaku* mystery in Japan and it will be awarded for the thirtieth time this year. The award has indeed become a synonym for

honkaku mystery. The book you are holding now comprises a selection of short stories featuring the master's two best-known detectives and is the first time they have appeared in the English-speaking world.

To introduce the amateur detective Ryūzō Hoshikage first: this obnoxious merchant with a snobbish moustache and a love for pipes was originally conceived as a caricature of the classic great detective. When Ayukawa was deprived of the opportunity to publish his first novel, he submitted a story to the club magazine of the most famous mystery aficionado society in Japan, SR no Kai (SR stands for 'Sealed Room.') In that story, Hoshikage appeared as a rival to Onitsura. Hoshikage lost the battle horribly then, but Ayukawa decided to use the character when he wanted to write fantastical impossible crime stories which wouldn't fit the character of Onitsura. It is funny how, despite his origins, Hoshikage managed to grow into one of Japan's greatest fictional detectives, to whom Chief Inspector Tadokoro turns in much the same way Inspector Lestrade turned to Sherlock Holmes.

His best novel-length exploit is *The Villa Lilac Case* (*Rira-sō Jiken)*. There are few novels, both in and outside Japan, which can come close to this masterpiece about a series of murders in a mountain villa.

As the title *The White Locked Room* (1958) suggests, this story has the problem of 'no footsteps in the snow' as its theme. One victim and one witness are found in a house surrounded by snow. If the witness is innocent, the murder becomes an impossible crime. Both the solution and the true meaning hidden within the eccentric and almost prophetic questions asked by Hoshikage are sure to shock readers. Perhaps they might also think that Ryūzō Hoshikage reminds them of Sir Henry Merrivale or Dr. Gideon Fell after a successful diet.

The Blue Locked Room (1961) may not have some grand-scale idea, but the twisty solution is highly enjoyable. The culprits in the *Red* and *White* locked rooms go through a great deal of trouble to create their locked rooms, but that is not the case here. But what is the meaning behind that? The way the mystery is presented and the skill with which the author plays with logic is impressive.

The Clown in the Tunnel (1958) is about an impossible disappearance. A clown suddenly appears in a house where musicians live and, after attacking people there and killing one person, he disappears equally

quickly. He escapes through a narrow passage, basically a tunnel, but nobody sees him leave from the other side. In order to solve the apparent miracle, perhaps one might even be tempted to turn to the author's other detective for help.

The Red Locked Room (1954) is the best-known short story featuring Hoshikage and is undoubtedly one of the greatest impossible crime stories ever written in any language. How could a dismembered body have been introduced into an autopsy room completely locked from the inside save for a small air vent? The crime appears to be utterly impossible, but Hoshikage's deductions slowly unravel the mystery. While the brilliant solution will surely surprise, many a reader will wonder how they missed the many clues dangled in front of them.

Now let me introduce Chief Inspector Onitsura. The rational and cool-headed police detective decided to go to Northeast China due to a broken heart. As an officer of the Japanese police force, he was first posted in Harbin and later Dalian, where he solved several cases. Upon his return to Japan, he was assigned to the Metropolitan Police Department. He had spent much of his younger days abroad, so his intelligent, gentlemanly attitude is more reminiscent of an inspector of Scotland Yard when compared to his Japanese colleagues.

Onitsura has a partner in his subordinate, Detective Tanna. Interestingly, Chief Inspector Tadokoro, who brings Ryūzō Hoshikage most of his cases, is a direct colleague of Onitsura, so perhaps Onitsura has met Hoshikage.

Whose Body? (1957) gives one a miraculous taste of how the impossible becomes possible. One could say this story does not feature any locked rooms or fabricated alibis, but one could also claim that's not exactly correct. The story features a Grand Guignol-worthy tragedy and a relentless stream of mysteries offered by the suspects. With what prop is Tetsuya Ayukawa deceiving the reader? Time? Space? Characters? In any case, this is a story that makes you realise how far an author specialising in illusions and surprise can go.

Death in Early Spring (1958) involves a perfect alibi. A crime which seemed utterly impossible time-wise, suddenly becomes possible simply by changing the viewpoint ever so slightly. In the eyes of Tetsuya Ayukawa, an alibi is basically a "locked room in time." A locked room on the other hand

is an “alibi in space.” It is therefore only natural he was such a master of both the alibi trick and the locked room mystery.

The Five Clocks (1957) is a masterpiece written at the request of Edogawa Rampo. The manner in which Ayukawa managed to include such an intricate fabricated alibi and the solution to the problem within the restraints of so few pages makes one think of precision machinery. In order to save a person framed for a murder he did not commit, Onitsura has to break down the alibi of the real culprit. An alibi protected completely by five separate clocks. Each step in the solving process is imposing, but the wit of the whole deal when everything is revealed also invites a smile.

I hope you too can now agree with the statement that Tetsuya Ayukawa is the Japanese *honkaku* mystery story. This collection only offers a glimpse of his oeuvre. He has also written for television, radio and YA audiences, and naturally basically all of this output too belongs to the mystery genre. I can only hope that the publication of this short story collection will lead to more of his work being published in English.

Tōkyō, 2020.

Addendum.

The initial selection of stories for this collection was conducted by Alice Arisugawa and Taku Ashibe. Five stories each were chosen from the Onitsura and Hoshikage series, as well as one non-series story. It was decided to not pick stories from the Number 3 series until the final page count of the collection was decided upon. Ashibe wrote summaries for the eleven selected stories, which were translated by Ho-Ling Wong. The final selection of the stories to be included was made by Ashibe and Wong.

The Five Clocks

1

After Tokiko had expressed her gratitude and left the room, Sarumaru gently closed the door behind her and relaxed in his chair.

‘She came here at the advice of my professor when I was in college, so I could hardly refuse her.’

After explaining himself, Sarumaru opened his cigarette case, lit up a Peace cigarette and took a puff. After a moment, he stubbed his cigarette out in the ash tray and his demeanour became more serious.

‘It’s only natural that she believes her fiancé to be innocent. But I am well aware how busy you are, so I wouldn’t be bothering you if trust were all she had besides a fancy introduction letter. I couldn’t say this out loud in front of her, but I am actually of the same opinion.’

‘So you, too, think Nikaidō is not our man?’ Chief Inspector Onitsura looked surprised and upset by the statement. ‘There’s motive and evidence. And he has no alibi either.’

‘That’s exactly what I mean. Don’t you think it’s all a little too pat, served up on a silver platter like that? Doesn’t it feel as though someone’s been pulling strings?’

‘What good comes from suspecting everything like that? It would be different if you had something concrete for me, but you can’t expect me to rule out Nikaidō as the murderer just because it seems too neatly wrapped up,’ retorted Onitsura. It was too late to go over the case again, the expression on his face said.

The details of the case the two men were discussing were as follows.

Exactly one week earlier, at noon on the first of May, the body of Mansaku Sasamoto was discovered in a room in his fancy apartment in Takagichō in Aoyama. Sasamoto had been found by a visitor, who had turned pale at the sight and almost tripped as he made his way to the

concierge’s office on the ground floor. The concierge had immediately gone up to the room, and found Sasamoto lying stone cold, strangled by the dirty towel around his neck. His eyes were bulging, and the tongue sticking out of his mouth had turned dark.

The usual examinations were conducted and it was discovered that the victim’s savings passbook had been stolen from his closet. That was seen as the first clue tying Ryūkichi Nikaidō to the horrible crime, for he was known to be having trouble financing his upcoming wedding. He, however, claimed that although he had indeed been fretting over money, he had accepted Tokiko’s suggestion to hold a simple ceremony, with no reception and only an overnight honeymoon. So the problem had already been solved, according to Nikaidō.

Glasses of whisky soda had been sitting on the table at the crime scene, suggesting that the murderer was not a passing thief, but an acquaintance of Sasamoto. That was the second clue. But Ryūkichi claimed he was not particularly close to Sasamoto, and that they only ever talked about work. He had never visited Sasamoto’s apartment. It was suspected that the killer had deliberately not touched his own drink, and had attacked Sasamoto when his guard was down.

The new criminal laws placed emphasis on physical evidence, so the police did everything to trace the owner of the murder weapon—the towel which had been left at the crime scene. When it was discovered that the towel belonged to Ryūkichi, who worked in the same accounting division as Sasamoto, suspicion of the former became insurmountable. That was the third clue. When confronted, Ryūkichi turned pale. While admitting it was the towel he used in his office, he claimed he had misplaced it a few days earlier.

Ryūkichi’s office desk was searched, and Sasamoto’s passbook was found there, hidden at the bottom of the lowest drawer on the right side of the desk. That was clue number four. Ryūkichi only gave vague answers, saying he had no idea where the passbook had come from, but that made a bad impression on the detectives, who seemed to think he was brazenly challenging them.

Lastly, Ryūkichi had no alibi. That was clue number five. The time of the murder had been determined to be between nine and eleven of the night prior to the discovery of the body. Ryūkichi usually spent his evenings

reading in his shabby apartment, but on that particular night he had gone out. And his testimony about it sounded like a pack of lies.

‘It was just before nine. A woman called me saying Ms. Hario had asked her to pass on a message. I was told to go to a café called Marronier at once. So I got dressed and went out.’

The young man looked very serious as he anxiously explained his movements that night. But the more serious he became, the more he gave the impression he had carefully prepared his answers beforehand. His whole story sounded fake. The Hario he mentioned was Tokiko’s surname.

‘What’s this Marronier place?’

“I was told it was a café near the crossing in Jinbōchō and that it was easy to find, but I didn’t see it anywhere. I went by all the streets around the crossing and even checked the back alleys, but there was no such a place. I searched for an hour and half, but eventually gave up and went home exhausted. The following day, I met with Ms. Hario and asked her about the phone call, but she said she hadn’t asked anyone to pass on a message to me. It was only then that I realised I had been tricked.’

‘Did you meet anyone you knew while you were out?’

‘No, nobody.’

And so it was that Ryūkichi Nikaidō was sent to the prosecutor’s office while still protesting his innocence.

‘So you claim there’s actually someone else behind it all?’

Onitsura’s question to Sarumaru was answered by a slow, almost theatrically slow, nod back. There was an intellectual air about him, but he was a hard worker.

‘Do you remember how disappointed we were when we learnt Sasamoto had been murdered?’

By “we,” Sarumaru meant the detectives of Investigative Division II.

‘This is between you and me, but early this year, we learned something interesting from an international merchant I know. A young employee at the accounting division of a certain government office was supposed to be living a rather luxurious life: driving a Cadillac, maintaining two mistresses, investing in trading firms and even buying a villa in Atami. That was suspicious, and when we started to follow the lead, it eventually led to Mansaku Sasamoto, the man who was killed.’

‘So that’s why he was living in such a fancy apartment in Takagichō.’

‘That wasn’t all. He had two other apartments for his two mistresses. He managed to lure a woman called Tonkoma from Kaguyazaka’s geisha district and installed her in Akasaka, and he bought a home in Yoyogi Hatsudai for a dancer who had once been Miss Nippon. We were surprised to find that he lived even more glamorously than the rumours had said. But it was clear the income of a simple accountant in his thirties could never have covered his extravagant life style.’

It was obvious he had been getting his money elsewhere, so we investigated his dossiers. We found out that over the last three years, he had embezzled 56 million yen. We wouldn’t have been able to earn that much in two hundred years.’

‘But he wasn’t the only one who had been helping himself to the till, surely? He had to have a partner in crime.’

‘Precisely,’ said Sarumaru, nodding in agreement.

‘It was the assistant division chief. Sasamoto would cook the books, and the assistant division chief would work his ways on the division chief, making him rubber stamp everything. But with age comes wisdom, and he is much craftier than Sasamoto. He lives in a normal home like other office workers and his daily commute is by train in rush hour. He even dresses very simply. He occasionally splurges on food, but as his wife runs a small handicraft shop in Shinjuku, and when you add in that income, there was nothing suspicious about his expenditures at all. He had been very careful, so we were completely fooled by him.’

Sarumaru leaned forward as he told Onitsura how they had asked Mansaku Sasamoto to appear voluntarily for questioning.

‘At first he maintained he knew nothing about anything and at times even tried to threaten us, but we had gathered our evidence in advance, so he couldn’t maintain that aggressive attitude for long. At the fifth interrogation, he broke down. He asked for a week in order to write a detailed memo about their crime. We were waiting eagerly to get our hands on it, but he was killed on the fourth day.’

‘So the mastermind behind it all was the assistant division chief?’

‘Yes, Hirondo Sugita.’

Onitsura had met Sugita when the police went to search Nikaidō’s desk. A plump man in his forties, with downward slanting eyes, he had given the stereotypical apology about how sorry he was that his lack of supervision had led to his subordinate becoming a murderer. He hadn’t left a

particularly bad impression on Onitsura at the time, but now he had heard Sarumaru's side of the story, the chief inspector couldn't help feeling that the man had been laughing at him behind his serious expression.

'The corruption seems to run deep. We might even be talking about political payoffs here. Sugita would be the one in the most danger if Sasamoto had presented his memo. In my view, he had a much stronger motive to commit the crime than Nikaidō.'

'Suppose you are right. Why did he choose Nikaidō as his scapegoat?'

'That, I don't know,' said Sarumaru, shaking his head. 'Perhaps Nikaidō's personal circumstances made him perfect for the role, as everybody knew about them. Or it might be that Sugita had another reason for wanting to kick Nikaidō off the cliff. If Nikaidō is indeed an honest young man with a strong sense of justice, as his fiancée claims, then maybe a man like Sugita simply couldn't stand someone like that around. But digging into that is your speciality. What I'm concerned about is Sugita's alibi. If he was astute enough to frame Nikaidō for Sasamoto's murder, he's bound to have prepared a cleverly constructed alibi for himself. Be careful not to fall for his tricks,' said Sarumaru with a warning look.

2

It wasn't done for a detective to have doubts about his suspect, so Onitsura immediately went to his superior to tell him about Sarumaru's warning.

Next, he paid Sugita a visit. The latter's face was already flushed from too much drinking, but when he realised he was a suspect himself, his ruddy face turned purple with anger. Struggling to control his outrage, he told the chief inspector that on the thirtieth of April he had been out drinking with a junior classmate from his college days, and that the police should ask him about his alibi. There was no hint of the friendly face resembling Ebisu, one of the Seven Gods of Fortune, which he had presented when Onitsura and he first met.

Onitsura ignored Sugita's mood and simply asked him about his movements on the night of the murder. He then paid a visit to Sugita's friend, a man called Jōji Kobayakawa, who worked at an Indian trading firm located in Nihonbashi.

Kobayakawa, whose office was on the fourth floor of a small building, had just returned from the Ministry of International Trade and Industry. The skinny young man was obviously nervous and kept blinking his eyes behind thick glasses. His testimony about the night of the murder corresponded to what Hirondo Sugita had told Onitsura earlier.

Early in April, Kobayakawa had received a call from Sugita, who had lost money on off-course betting. He asked Kobayakawa to lend him 20,000 yen, so he could keep it a secret from his wife. He promised he would pay Kobayakawa back by the end of the month. Sugita had often helped Kobayakawa out in the past, so he didn't hesitate to withdraw the amount from his savings.

The next call came on the twenty-eighth. Sugita said he wanted to return the money he'd borrowed. His wife had found out anyway, but he'd managed to smooth things out, so he hoped that Kobayakawa could come over so Sugita could treat him, and perhaps sleep over. It had been a long time since Kobayakawa had last visited Sugita in his home in Shinjuku, so he was glad to take up the offer.

They had met at Tōkyō Station on the early evening of the thirtieth and taken the train to Shinjuku, where Sugita took Kobayakawa to a beer hall near the station. The place was packed, as it was the night before May Day, but they managed to get a corner table.

'Are you familiar with Shinjuku by night?' asked Sugita.

'I guess it depends. I don't really know the darker side of Shinjuku.'

'Perfect. Tonight, I will be your guide.'

After the beer hall, they visited an oden restaurant, a music café, another bar and a cinema. By the time they finally arrived at Sugita's home, the hands on Kobayakawa's wristwatch showed ten minutes to nine. Sugita's home was located in Banshūchō, only a ten-minute walk away from the entertainment district of Shinjuku. It was not particularly large, but the location was very convenient, and it actually became surprisingly quiet at night. Kobayakawa's daily commute to the city was from Hachiōji, so he would have loved to live there.

'Hey, we're starving. Is there anything to eat?' shouted Sugita as he dropped into an armchair in his study. A splendid bookcase with heavy books flanked the right side of the window, and on top of it stood a marble timepiece. "I'd love to have a gorgeous clock like that too, once I have my

own house and family," thought Kobayakawa. Sugita's thirty-five year old wife Yaeko looked younger than her age, perhaps because they had no children, but she also seemed to have more beauty than brains.

'How about cheese?'

'How is cheese going to fill us up! Kobayakawa here is starving as well. Let's order some soba noodles with tempura.'

While his wife was on the phone placing the order, Sugita suddenly got up.

'Let me return your money before the soba arrives. Thank you for helping me out.'

He took out a fountain pen and his stamp and opened the chequebook on his desk. Sugita often used cheques, perhaps because his wife ran a store separately on her own.

After Yaeko had finished her call, she sat next to Kobayakawa.

'My husband lost money on off-course betting and foolishly tried to hide it from me. I'm sorry he caused you so much trouble.'

She shot an angry glance at her husband, who pretended not to notice.

'It was no trouble at all,' said Kobayakawa, suddenly noticing the amount on the cheque. It was two thousand yen more than he had lent Sugita.

'Hey, this isn't right.'

'It's interest.'

'This much? I'm not a loan shark.'

'A senior should never be borrowing from his junior, only the other way around. Please accept that interest, or else I'll feel ashamed for the rest of my life,' Sugita insisted. Yaeko stood firm with her husband as well, so Kobayakawa had no choice but to accept.

Just then the soba noodle delivery man called and Yaeko hurried out, to return quickly with a tray with two bowls. As Kobayakawa picked up his chopsticks, he noticed the name printed on the bowl covers.

'Issa-an? That's an unusual name.'

'There's no better place. I heard the name comes from Issa Kobayashi. You know, from the poem "There's the moon, there are Buddhas, but for me, there's soba." The soba there is really good.'

Sugita had stopped his chopsticks in mid-air to boast about the place, when Yaeko suddenly remembered something.

'Did you repay Mr. Narahara?'

‘Oh no! It slipped my mind,’ cried her husband as he put down his bowl and chopsticks. His wife looked furious.

‘Today’s the last day of the month. I reminded you this morning.’

‘Sorry.’

‘It’s no good saying sorry. If you don’t pay it back today, nobody will ever trust us anymore. You have to go now.’

‘But it’s already past nine. Let’s give up on tonight.’

Sugita looked sour as he looked up at the clock on the bookcase.

‘Nine isn’t that late. You can make it back here in thirty minutes.’

‘Twenty even, but can’t this wait until tomorrow?’

‘No, a delay of even one day will still mean their trust in you becomes zero. It’s simple to lose trust, but not easy to regain it. Especially from a precise person like Mr. Narahara.’

‘Okay, I’ll go,’ said Sugita. He quickly finished his meal and asked Kobayakawa to wait for him. It was just out on the main street, so it wouldn’t take too long and once he was back, they could get started on the whisky. He got up and picked up his chequebook.

‘Dear, don’t forget your stamp.’

‘I know, you don’t have to tell me!’ he barked at her.

‘I always have to keep an eye on him all the time. He’s like a big baby. And yet he acts like he’s a big man.’

Kobayakawa didn’t quite know how to react. Yaeko sighed as she sat down in the armchair her husband had vacated.

‘The amount he borrowed from you wasn’t enough, so he had to borrow another 50,000 yen from the owner of a clothes store we know,’ she explained with a frown. She seemed to realise she was making her guest uncomfortable, so she tried to put on a smile.

‘Do you like music? I believe there’s a concert at nine.’

Kobayakawa checked the radio schedule in the evening newspaper lying on the desk and indeed, Radio Kantō was airing a Mozart piano concerto.

‘Feel free to listen. You can turn on the radio.’

A medium-sized radio was standing next to the clock on the bookcase. Kobayakawa stood up, switched it on and turned the dial until he finally found the concerto in C minor. The first movement had just begun, and the pianist’s light touch promised an enjoyable performance.

After thirty minutes sitting all alone with someone else’s wife, Kobayakawa was feeling quite nervous. Only Mozart’s angelic music saved

him from the awkward situation. By the time the front door opened again, the performance had ended and the announcer was reading a commercial message. Yaeko switched the radio off, and they could hear Sugita calling out.

He looked quite pleased and there was no sign of the ill temper in which he had left the house.

‘How did it go?’

‘He was there. He offered me a seat, but I said I had an important guest waiting at home, as well as some good whisky and my lovely wife, so I was only there for about ten minutes. By the way, Kobayakawa, did I write the date on that cheque of yours?’

‘The date? Well…,’ Kobayakawa mumbled as he took the cheque out of his pocket. The date column was indeed empty.

‘It happened over there too. Mr. Narahara had to draw my attention to it. Must be a bad night.’

‘You’ve drunk too much, dear.’

‘Nonsense. If anything, it’s because I haven’t had enough. Bring the cheese and smoked herring.’

As his wife left the room, Sugita took out his fountain pen, wrote the date on the cheque, then took out a bottle of whisky from the bookcase.

‘Look at this. Old Parr.’

‘Wo—wow!’

As someone who had grown up in the post-war period, Kobayakawa had never tasted the famous brand, and couldn’t help salivating at the sight of the amber liquid.

‘So you had a few drinks and stayed the night there. And Mr. Sugita only left you once, when he went out just after nine, is that correct?’

‘Exactly. After he returned, we drank together for a long time. His wife was with us as well.’

Kobayakawa was devoted to Sugita, and didn’t seem to like how the chief inspector was asking all the questions about what they had done that night. He started to blink more frequently the longer the conversation continued. Onitsura pretended not to notice and pressed on regardless. He learned that Sugita had left to visit the tailor around five past nine.

‘When did he return?’

‘Just after the Mozart ended, so slightly before half past, I’d say.’

So Sugita had been absent for about twenty-three minutes. If he were indeed the murderer, that period was the only time he could have committed the crime. Twenty-three minutes would have been enough to go to the crime scene in Aoyama and return. The investigation needed therefore to concentrate on that time interval, starting with whether Sugita had indeed visited the tailor. Onitsura also had to think of ways to fabricate an alibi, such as moving the hands on the clock to the wrong time. He also had to determine whether the clock on the bookcase had been indicating the correct time.

‘Of course the time was correct. My wristwatch and their clock were both set to the correct time,’ said young Kobayakawa vehemently. ‘And if you don’t believe me, you can check with the soba restaurant. Their delivery came exactly at nine,’ he said.

3

Tokiko’s mother had been busy when her daughter returned home, so she waited until they sat down for dinner to ask her: ‘So, were there any leads in the investigation?’

Tokiko had used her lunch break to visit Onitsura for an update on his investigation. She had gone to work full of hope, but now she looked gloomy and didn’t even touch her chopsticks. Her small, innocent face suddenly looked many years older.

Her mother repeated her question.

‘Your tea is getting cold. What did the chief inspector say?’

‘It’s hopeless….’

Tokiko looked very depressed.

‘Mr. Sarumaru said he suspected that Hirondo Sugita, the assistant division chief, might be the culprit. But he has a perfect alibi. Mr. Sarumaru said it was a miracle it was so perfect.’

Seeing her mother looking anxious, Tokiko elaborated.

‘Mr. Sugita claimed to have been having a drink with a friend in his own home in Shinjuku at the time of the murder. The police suspected the clock in the house may have been tampered with, but on checking the clock at the soba restaurant which made a delivery at the Sugitas, they corresponded.’

‘How confusing.’

‘Mr. Sugita did leave his home for a while to pay back some borrowed money to a person called Narahara, the owner of a clothes shop. But that was true too. Mr. Narahara confirmed Mr. Sugita’s story.’

‘Tokiko, what if this Sugita had a brother? He could have asked him to act as a double. The tailor could have been easily fooled.’

Tokiko shook her head.

‘The police didn’t overlook that possibility, either. But Mr. Sugita wrote a cheque for both his friend and the tailor, so his handwriting was on both cheques. They were checked by the handwriting experts at the Metropolitan Police Department, who determined that it was 95% certain that they were signed by Mr. Sugita himself. So the person drinking with his friend at home, and the person who visited Mr. Narahara was definitely the real Mr. Sugita, which means it would have been impossible for him to make a return trip to Aoyama Takagichō to commit the murder.’

‘But don’t you think it’s suspicious that he went out just then to return the money to the tailor? He may have really visited the man, but he could also have gone over to Aoyama in a taxi while he was out.’

Tokiko’s mother was desperately looking for some way to break the deadlock. If it could be proved that Sugita was the murderer, Ryūkichi could safely return to her Tokiko.

‘That’s impossible as well. The shop is just a six- or seven-minute walk from the Sugita residence. The time it would have taken for a round trip, plus the time the two chatted, adds up exactly. He couldn’t have gone to Aoyama.’

Sugita had left his house at five past nine, and arrived seven minutes later at the tailor at twelve minutes past. They had talked for about ten minutes. After Sugita wrote Narahara the cheque, he had been invited to stay a bit longer, but Sugita had explained he had a guest waiting and left. He had returned home at twenty-eight minutes past nine. So there was no time for Sugita to have found a taxi and made a round trip to Aoyama to commit the crime. Tokiko felt that listing all those times would only confuse her mother, however, so she spared her the details.

‘And what if that tailor is lying? Is he trustworthy?’

‘He’s not lying. An office worker who lives in the neighbourhood happened to be in the store to buy some shirts and saw Mr. Sugita. With all those details uncovered by the investigation, even I am inclined to believe his alibi….’

‘Then someone else must be the culprit.’

‘But Mr. Sarumaru said that Mr. Sugita was without a doubt the murderer. He said that Mr. Onitsura must have fallen for a fake alibi. A perfect alibi….’

Her daughter seemed to be sighing to herself, but her mother knew of no way to comfort poor Tokiko. Those peaceful times when Tokiko was counting down the days to her wedding seemed like ancient history now.

‘Don’t give up now. Hope will surely shine its light upon us sooner or later. Now pick up your bowl. Today’s your favourite, fried shrimp,’ she said in a forcefully spirited manner, in the hopes of cheering up her daughter. She could not think of anything better to say at that moment.

At the same time, Onitsura was having dinner at his home in Kokubunji. He lived alone, without even a pet, so his meals were always very simple.

He thought back to that afternoon, and the terribly disappointed expression on Tokiko Hario’s face as he explained the results of his investigation to her in a café in Toranomon. He grimaced at the unpleasant message he’d had for her. There were no doubts left about Sugita’s alibi, due to the testimonies of both the tailor and the soba chef. And, as long as Sugita had an alibi, Ryūkichi Nikaidō’s guilt appeared to be indisputable.

Nevertheless, there was still something bothering him, but he couldn’t put a finger on what it was. Only after sitting in his armchair for almost an hour did Onitsura finally realise that it had been Sugita’s cheques that had concerned him.

According to Kobayakawa, Sugita had forgotten to write down the date on his cheque and had added the date after he had returned from the tailor. While the chief inspector had not given it any particular attention at first, subconsciously he had found it unnatural that a person accustomed to writing cheques would make such a careless mistake, and he couldn’t help thinking that Sugita had done it on purpose. He tried to put himself in Sugita’s shoes, imagining what reason he could have had not to write the date on the cheque the first time.

Sugita had obviously anticipated that the authorities would check his alibi, and had probably anticipated that the police would be suspicious whether the man who ate soba in the study and drank with his friend was indeed Sugita himself, or a substitute. Sugita had two brothers, Masando and Takendo, so perhaps he had foreseen that the police, in their desperation, would not think it out of the question that one of them had

taken his place and acted a role, together with Yaeko, in order to fool Kobayakawa. It was for that reason that it was necessary to prove that it was indeed he himself who had kept Kobayakawa company, and the way to do that was through his handwriting. Which is why he wrote a cheque to Kobayakawa.

If Sugita had written the amount, his signature and the date all at once, he could prove he had been in his home before he left, but there would be no way to prove that the man who returned from the tailor was also Sugita himself. To avoid even the slightest suspicion, and to fill in all the holes in his alibi, he needed to leave evidence to prove that it was indeed he himself who had returned from the tailor. And he could only do that by leaving his handwriting both before he left and after he returned. It didn't need to be a cheque, of course. He could have just written a short note as well, but as it needed to be presented as evidence later, Sugita had to make sure it was something Kobayakawa wouldn't lose carelessly. A cheque would be handled with care by its bearer and also be filed away by the bank once it had been handed in, so it would be available to the police as evidence at any time.

Onitsura was stunned when he realised that such a small action on Sugita's part could hold such significant meaning. At the same time, the fact Sugita had acted with such attention to detail convinced the policeman that his perfect alibi was nothing more than a meticulously constructed fake.

4

Late the following afternoon, just as she was about to finish work, Tokiko got an unexpected call from Onitsura. He wanted her to meet him, as he had something to tell her.

She got off the metro at Jingū Gaien, but spent some time trying to find the designated spot. Eventually, she found him sitting on a park bench.

'Hello, I'm happy you're here. After what I told you yesterday, you must have been feeling rather desperate.'

Onitsura was like a different person from the day before, radiating energy from every pore. Tokiko looked at him with a mixture of hope and trepidation.

‘Did you manage to get any sleep last night? No? That’s a shame. I have to apologise for that. But today, I bear good news. We might be overheard in a café, which is why I decided to meet you here.’

The chief inspector paused as a young man passed by, walking his dog.

‘Last night, I re-examined Mr. Sugita’s alibi and concluded that I needed to correct what I conveyed to you earlier. I’ve found decisive evidence that proves his alibi was falsified.’

‘But what could that be?’

‘I’ll explain later. It had been in front of my nose, but due to carelessness, I had completely missed it until last night.’

Tokiko gasped. How had Onitsura managed to break an alibi that he had deemed to be impenetrable?

‘What Sugita did was very simple, actually. The hands of the clock were moved back one hour, that was all. But the real problem was how he managed to fool his witness. As you know, the murder was committed between nine and eleven, and what was supporting Sugita’s alibi in that two-hour interval were the hands of the clock. Actually, there were several clocks involved, either directly or indirectly. Let’s count them.’

Tokiko started counting on her slim fingers.

‘First there’s the clock in the study. And then there’s the wristwatch of the witness, Mr. Kobayakawa. And I should also count the clock of the radio station which broadcast the Mozart performance at nine. Then there’s the clock at Narahara Tailors and finally, the clock on the wall at the soba restaurant. That makes five clocks in total. By setting the time on all those five clocks back one hour, he created his false alibi. So how did he manage to tinker with all those clocks? It took me all day, but I finally solved the mystery.’

Onitsura’s eye fell on the watch around his listener’s slender wrist.

‘What a lovely watch. Could I have a look at it?’

Tokiko hesitated for a second, as it was hardly a watch worthy of praise, then took it off.

‘It’s just a cheap watch, made here in Japan.’

‘No, it’s wonderful. Those illegal imports, the ones they call bed bugs, make the wearer look so cheap,’ said Onitsura as he held the watch in his hands and admired it. It didn’t sound as though he was merely flattering her.

‘Anyway, Mr. Kobayakawa testified that when they entered Sugita’s study, the clock there was indicating 8:50 p.m. But, as I told you just now,

in reality the time was already 9:50 p.m. Naturally, someone had already set the clock back one hour.'

'Mr. Sugita's wife?'

'Almost certainly. She only needed to turn the hands back before her husband and Mr. Kobayakawa came home, which was a very simple task. By the way, it was probably she who made the fake phone call to young Nikaidō.

'The next problem we face is how Mr. Kobayakawa's wristwatch was set back one hour. You obviously can't tinker with a watch still on someone's wrist, so you would need to find a way to separate the watch from the person. What would you have done?'

'Errr, visit the public bath?'

'That's right. It might not be original, but there's really no other way. So when I questioned Mr. Kobayakawa he said he had indeed been taken to a Turkish bath that night. After their bath, Sugita had probably dressed quickly and picked up both wristwatches, turning Mr. Kobayakawa's back one hour, which the owner put back on without checking. Oh, I've been so busy talking, I've kept your own watch. Here, better put it back on before you forget.'

Tokiko felt somewhat disappointed by Onitsura's explanation, as he seemed to make everything seem so easy. She wasn't familiar with the inside of a Turkish bath, but she assumed there were clocks on the walls there, too. Wasn't it likely that Kobayakawa would have checked his watch with the clocks in the baths?

She looked up to see the chief inspector grinning at her. He seemed to have guessed her thoughts.

'You might think it odd that Mr. Kobayakawa didn't see through Sugita's simple trick, but if he had done, Sugita would just have put off his murder plans. But, since the murder did occur, it means that Mr. Kobayakawa didn't notice the change.'

Despite Onitsura's assurances, Tokiko couldn't help still doubting that the trick would have really worked. The chief inspector smiled again.

'Let me demonstrate in practice. I moved the hands on your watch slightly before I returned it to you, but you haven't noticed. Isn't that enough proof?'

'Oh!' Tokiko immediately looked at her watch, which was indicating five forty-five.

‘Can you tell me by how many minutes I moved the hands?’

‘No….’

She looked at the face of her wristwatch again, but she had no idea how many minutes it had been moved.

‘Once the hands on a clock have been moved, it’s nearly impossible to guess the real time. So it was quite normal for Mr. Kobayakawa to be wearing a watch which was running an hour behind, without noticing it.’

Tokiko had to admit that, now she had been shown the trick in person. She looked absolutely perplexed at how Onitsura had fooled her. He stared at her again for a moment, then laughed out loud.

‘Hahaha, I fooled you again. I lied to you when I said I’d moved the hands of your watch. Here, look at my watch,’ he said as he showed her his Elgin wristwatch. It showed five forty-five.

‘Oh, I really believed you. You looked so serious.’

But then the chief inspector laughed again.

‘Haha, you are being deceived again. The correct time now is actually five past six. I had already set my own watch back twenty minutes, then set yours back twenty minutes as well, to match mine. Just because both our watches indicate the same time, doesn’t mean they are running correctly.’

‘Oh!’

‘Now do you understand? If two clocks are both running twenty minutes late, it’s unlikely you’d ever notice. If I hadn’t said anything, you’d have believed that it was now five forty-five. That’s the same trick Sugita used. Mr. Kobayakawa didn’t notice the clock in the study was an hour late, because his own wristwatch had been set one hour back as well.’

A wry smile appeared on Tokiko’s face as she moved the hand on her watch back to the correct time.

‘Please don’t do that, it’s not good for a watch if you keep moving the hands. I was actually lying when I said both our watches were running twenty minutes behind. I never moved the hands on your watch. The same with my own watch. I only wanted to perform a little experiment with you, to show that it’s not difficult to move the hands of someone else’s watch, that it’s not easy to notice if one’s own watch has been tinkered with, and that it’s very simple to deceive someone with nothing more than the power of suggestion. I am of the opinion that it was a lot easier for Sugita to deceive Mr. Kobayakawa than you and I were initially inclined to believe.’

Tokiko nodded while hesitating about whether she should or should not move the hand on her watch.

‘Hahaha, you’ve lost all trust in me now. Well, let’s forget about that and move on to the next clock. According to that night’s newspaper, Radio Kantō had a Mozart program starting at nine. But in reality Mr. Kobayakawa started listening to that performance at ten. Needless to say, it’s not possible that the clocks at the radio station were all running behind. So that leads us to the conclusion that he had not in fact been listening to the radio waves from Radio Kantō. It’s common knowledge that commercial radio stations copy their programs on tape to be distributed to local stations, which can then fit them into their own programming. So I rang Radio Kantō and I learned that the only stations broadcasting that Mozart concerto at ten o’clock on the evening of the thirtieth of April were Radio Akita and Kinki Broadcasting. I don’t know which of these stations Mr. Kobayakawa had been listening to, but with a DX Radio which can receive long distance, you can definitely have a clean reception of either station even from Tōkyō.’

Here Onitsura paused. Tokiko looked around at the shrubbery. It had grown dark by now, and there was nobody else in the park.

5

‘And at this point, the problem of the fourth clock, the clock at the tailor’s, basically solves itself. Mr. Kobayakawa testified that after their soba meal, Sugita had taken his chequebook and stamp with him to visit Mr. Narahara. But we now know their clocks were running one hour late, so Sugita did not leave his house at five past nine, but five past ten. So Sugita had not visited the clothes shop at that moment, he had actually done so an hour earlier, at the real twelve minutes past nine. Which means that Sugita did not leave his home at the false five past nine to visit Mr. Narahara, he went out to commit the murder in Aoyama. But now a new problem arises: what was Mr. Kobayakawa doing when Sugita was visiting Mr. Narahara at the real twelve minutes past nine? Do you have any ideas?’

‘Well, perhaps he had passed out in some bar, after too many drinks.’

‘It’s a good guess. But having him pass out would actually be bad for Sugita, who needed his witness to be able to recall clearly where they had been between nine and nine-thirty. So he couldn’t afford to have him drunk

before that. When Mr. Kobayakawa went through all their movements that night, he told me that after the baths Sugita took him to a newsreel cinema. A theatre in the entertainment district is, of course, always packed. Sugita had suggested that, because the theatre was so crowded, they would never find two seats together, so they should just sit down wherever there was an empty seat and, once the newsreel had ended, they could meet up again outside. There was no reason to say no, so Kobayakawa found a seat in the front of the cinema and watched the news from there. The reels were short, so it was over in an hour and he found Sugita already waiting for him outside. Afterwards, they headed for Sugita's home in Banshūchō.'

'So Sugita had slipped out of the theatre to make his round trip to the tailor then?'

'Exactly. And to Mr. Narahara he made it sound as if he had a guest waiting at home. So now do you understand what he did?'

'Yes, your explanation makes it clear, but it's still hard to grasp the whole picture,' she admitted honestly.

'That's only natural. I'll show you my notes later. But first we have to discuss the problem of the fifth clock. How did Sugita manage to affect the clock of the soba restaurant? I questioned the cook at Issa-an, the madam at the counter, and the delivery boy, and they all swore that the soba had been delivered to the Sugitas at nine. Orders by phone are immediately written down in the notebook on the counter and Sugita's order had indeed been recorded there. The clock at the restaurant was also running correctly, down to the minute. As I told you, I had worked on the presumption that the clock in Sugita's study had been running behind and from there I'd managed to break his alibi apart. But unless I could prove the testimonies at Issa-an wrong, I would have had no choice but to accept that the clock in the study and Mr. Kobayakawa's wristwatch were in fact running correctly. It would mean my whole line of reasoning had been faulty. I was in a pinch.'

Tokiko had been entranced by Onitsura's story and couldn't suppress a gasp.

'Unlike the other simple tricks, the mystery of the fifth clock really turned out to be the major obstacle in unravelling the false alibi. I really had to rack my brains to come up with a solution. But it's already time for dinner. What if I treat you to a bowl of soba?'

Tokiko had expected to be taken to a soba restaurant nearby, but they took the bus to Shinjuku instead. They got off at the Isetan Department Store and

walked past the newsreel cinema Sugita and Kobayakawa had visited. The programming had already changed, but knowing Sugita had used this place for his alibi, Tokiko couldn't help staring at the building with interest.

'This neighbourhood is called Sankōchō, and it's next door to Banshūchō,' explained the chief inspector.

At the far corner of the next crossing, Tokiko spotted a soba restaurant. The words "O-Soba Restaurant – Sunaba" appeared on a glass sign lit by traditional lamps.

'Lately there have been more and more restaurants using the fancy-sounding O-Soba, by putting the honorific 'O' before the word. But I say that plain "soba" is much more like the old days and sounds much more delicious. It's a shame to see how Tōkyō has changed,' muttered Onitsura as they crossed the street. They entered the restaurant and ordered two bowls. Then the chief inspector asked the waitress an odd question.

'Would you happen to know the home of the Sugitas?'

'Yes, it's in a street three blocks behind us.'

'Do they like soba?'

'Not particularly. But Issa-an is closer to their home, so they probably eat there.'

Onitsura whispered something in her ear, which made the waitress suddenly look serious.

'Nevertheless, did you get any orders from the Sugitas recently?'

'Let me think,' replied the waitress, cocking her head and stealing a glance at Tokiko. She seemed confused, but Tokiko was starting to have a vague idea of what the policeman was trying to find out.

'Yes, there was that one evening a while back,' the girl finally recalled. The restaurant was quite small, so their conversation was also overheard in the kitchen. A young man stuck his head out and added: 'Mister, that was late on the night of the thirtieth. I think it was around ten.'

Onitsura went over to the man and had a brief discussion. Returning to his seat, it was clear from the tone of his voice that he was satisfied with the conversation.

'I already suspected what happened that night. The soba and tempura Mr. Kobayakawa ate actually came from this restaurant.'

'Oh,' cried Tokiko in surprise, even though she hadn't yet fully grasped the significance of the chief inspector's statement. He would only explain after they had finished their meal and left Sunaba.

‘As the people at Issa-an testified, they made a delivery at nine. But at that time, Mr. Kobayakawa was actually watching news reels, while Sugita had sneaked out of the cinema. So when Issa-an delivered their soba and tempura to the Sugita residence, only Yaeko Sugita was present.

‘Approximately one hour later, Sugita returned home together with Mr. Kobayakawa. And, exactly according to the scenario, Sugita said he wanted something to eat and ordered soba and tempura. His wife pretended to be calling Issa-an, but in fact was calling Sunaba.

‘After Sunaba arrived with their delivery, she quickly transferred the soba and tempura into the bowls from Issa-an and brought them to her husband and their guest. The tray and disposable chopsticks were of course also those of Issa-an. It was only natural that Mr. Kobayakawa would believe he was eating soba from Issa-an.’

‘Now I finally understand,’ said Tokiko in an emotionless tone. She had prayed to the heavens for proof that would save her Ryūkichi, but that had left her emotionally drained. Suddenly presented with the solution, she simply didn’t know how to express her utter joy.

After the soba, Onitsura took her to a fruit parlour for dessert. The melody coming out of the audio system had a sweet romantic tune, wholly unsuitable for the serious conversation the two were having.

‘To be honest, I had quite some trouble with the mystery of the fifth clock, only solving it just before I called you. Because I’d had no time to test my theory, I decided to do my final inquiries in your presence. If I’d failed to get results from that soba restaurant, I was planning to visit another three or four soba outside Banshūchō. I was already afraid you’d get a stomach-ache from eating all that soba, hahaha!’

He laughed loudly as he held a spoon in his hand. His sense of humour was hardly refined, but seeing the smile on his face made Tokiko realise he was quite a pleasant man, and she could laugh with him.

After they finished their fruit dessert, Onitsura took a notebook from his pocket, opened it at a certain page and showed Tokiko. It looked like a timetable.

Correct Time	False Time	Movements
08:40 p.m.		S & K visit cinema.
08:53		Y orders soba

		from Issa-an.
09:00		Issa-an delivers soba.
09:05		S exits cinema.
09:12		S visits tailor.
09:22		S leaves tailor.
09:30		S returns to cinema.
09:40		K exits cinema, meets up with S.
09:50	08:50	Arrival at S's house.
09:53	08:53	Y orders soba from Sunaba.
10:00	09:00	Sunaba delivers soba.
10:05	09:05	S says he is going to tailor. Goes out to commit murder.
10:28	09:28	S returns after murder. Says he visited tailor.

Tokiko read each line carefully.

'Of course nothing was quite as precise as what I wrote, but setting it down like this makes it easier to understand.'

'Yes, it's perfectly clear now,' said Tokiko as she looked up at the policeman. 'But there is still one mystery I don't understand.'

6

'Another mystery?'

‘You said earlier you had decisive evidence that Sugita’s alibi was fake. What was that evidence?’

Onitsura placed his bag on his lap and took out two slips of paper. They were the cheques Hirondo Sugita had written out for Kobayakawa and Narahara. He had borrowed them from the bank to confirm the handwriting.

‘Here, have a look at these.’

Tokiko held them in her hands, but they looked to her like perfectly ordinary used cheques. One of them was written out for the amount of 22,000 yen, the other for 52,500 yen. Both were dated April 30, Shōwa Year 32 (1957), and both were signed and stamped by Hirondo Sugita.

She turned them over, and on the back of the one with the smaller amount she noticed some unclear writing in ink. The name, address and stamp of Jōji Kobayakawa were also signed on the back. Narahara Tailors’ address and stamp were also on the back of the other cheque, but that cheque didn’t have the vague ink markings.

Tokiko looked at both sides of the two cheques several times, but she couldn’t work out what Onitsura had discovered.

‘Is there something wrong with them?’

‘Yes,’ answered the chief inspector with an enigmatic grin. ‘But first I have to ask you a question. When you write a letter to your friends, how do you use your stationery?’

‘How? I start with the page on top and use them in order.’

Tokiko was surprised by the question and had no idea why he had asked it.

He continued without explanation.

‘If you look at the back of Mr. Kobayakawa’s cheque, you’ll see some blurry ink marks left on the paper, some sort of writing. Look very carefully and see if you can make out what it says.’

‘…Hmm, this is a money amount starting with “52” and this is Hirondo Sugita’s signature. And I think it says “April 30, Shōwa Year 32” here.’

‘Exactly. That’s more than enough already. You should already know what it says.’

‘Oh, this is the writing on the cheque for Narahara Tailors.’

Onitsura said nothing, but nodded vigorously. He then placed one of the cheques on top of the other.

‘Look, the writing and the ink marks correspond exactly. That means that before the ink on this cheque had dried completely, the other cheque was

placed on top of it, leaving ink marks on the back. That's not unusual. Sugita's chequebook contained fifty cheques in all. Mr. Kobayakawa's was number 14 and Narahara Tailors' was number 15. Since they followed each other, it's quite normal that the ink of one left marks on the other.'

Tokiko listened carefully. She understood that the writing on the front of the Narahara cheque could have left marks on the back of the Kobayakawa cheque, but what did it mean?

'According to Mr. Kobayakawa's testimony, Sugita wrote and signed the cheque right before his eyes and handed it over, before taking his chequebook and stamp and leaving the house. We now know he didn't go to the tailor, but to Aoyama to commit the murder. But even if we pretend that he did really visit Narahara Tailors, as he testified, it's immediately obvious that the cheque he wrote and signed in front of Mr. Narahara could never have left ink marks on the back of Mr. Kobayakawa's cheque, because that cheque was already safely in his pocket, as he was sitting in a chair in the study, listening to Mozart!'

'Oh, you're right.'

Now it had been pointed out to her, Tokiko finally understood what was wrong and almost felt ashamed for being so slow to follow.

'The only explanation is that, for some reason, Sugita wrote the cheque for Narahara Tailors first, skipping number 14 and going straight to number 15. Then, before the ink had dried, the chequebook must somehow have fallen to the floor and left ink marks on the back of number 14. The obvious question is why did he sign the cheques out of order? That's what first put me on the trail.'

Finally, Tokiko grasped what the chief inspector was saying. With hindsight it all sounded so simple, like the Egg of Columbus.

'When you tear a cheque out of a chequebook, there's a stub left inside, so it's easy to confirm to whom the cheque was written. Sugita's trick revolved around making it appear he had written a cheque out for Narahara Tailors *after* he had written one out for Mr. Kobayakawa, so it was imperative for him to write no. 14 out to Kobayakawa, and no. 15 to Narahara Tailors. It was not a particularly difficult trick, so he must have conducted it without giving it too much thought. If he had not made that one mistake….'

If he had not made that one minuscule mistake, Sugita's plan would have gone perfectly. Even Onitsura had accepted Sugita's false alibi until he

finally uncovered the truth. Ryūkichi would have been protesting his innocence all the way to the gallows. Tokiko could feel a chill run down her spine as she imagined what would have happened had Sugita not made that one slip.

‘This morning I went to the tailor and surreptitiously asked him about how the ink had been transferred to the other cheque,’ continued Onitsura. ‘Apparently, a sudden gust of wind through the window made the pages of the chequebook flutter. For Sugita it was a fatal wind, but for Mr. Nikaidō it was the wind of fortune.’

The chief inspector, too, had realised how that brief moment had made the difference between life and death. He solemnly closed his notebook and put it back in his pocket.