

Shimizu Shikin's "Broken Ring" (Koware yubiwa, 1891)

Translated by Joseph Essertier¹

You are wondering what happened to the stone on my ring? Indeed, wearing a ring like this, one broken so severely, is not very pretty, and I really should replace it with a new one. Any stone would do. That is true, but the brokenness of this ring has a purpose for me—remembering the past—so replacing the lost stone with a new one is absolutely out of the question.

Ahh... the months and days have passed by so quickly. It's been almost two years since the day I broke this ring. Many people have asked, "Why wear such a thing? It really does not become you." Actually, I have some very strong reasons, and it is precisely because my reasons are so strong that I continue to wear it, just as it is. Its history I will relate to you, you who are so dear to me.

Looking at this ring feels worse than if my stomach were cut open. But never do I take it off, not even for a moment. Because it has been my great benefactor. In the sense that through so much pain and sadness, it has eventually given me the courage and determination to become an independent, mature human being. This ring always drums up my resolve, becomes the link to my courage, and is my ultimate supporter. From the perspective of another person, it may look indecent, but I would not let go of this ring even for millions of pounds of gold. It truly suits me. You might not know the details of my history, but my life really resembles this ring. I have been criticized in various ways about this ring, but when I broke it I did so intentionally with a definite purpose in mind, with the feeling, "I am ready for this." But once in a while, looking at this ring, I lapse into tears

and say to it, "You are as pitiable as I!"

But then I pull myself together with the thought that other people in the end... God knows my heart, so... Oh! This ring doth make me doubt that anyone, even one hundred years from now, will understand the true value hidden in this ring.

Somehow just as I was about to amend these words and tell you my story, I felt my heart fill to the brim with emotion. I will never forget. It was exactly five years ago to the day, in the spring of my eighteenth year, that I came to put on this ring. Since we married just that spring... The ring was given me by my husband. But it's not that it came into my possession as a "contractual" ring, the term today. It's just that he bought this for me in a cold-hearted way, so it is probably fair now to refer to it with this contemporary term.

On the whole in those days, it was a time—around the time I got married—when you could say that the seeds of girls' education were finally being planted. Even I have not acquired half today's learning, but five years ago for me is very different from five years ago for someone in Tokyo, especially since I grew up in the countryside. I never dreamed of the kind of relationship that exists between Western couples, was ignorant of proper marriage registration laws, and was only familiar with Japanese traditional rituals. And you must understand that even in the girls' school where I received my education, our training centered on Chinese-style moral instruction in those days, and the books we were made to read were all along the lines of Liu Xiang's Stories of Chaste Women.

Before I knew it I was thoroughly steeped in that sort of thinking. For example, we were taught that even if a boy to whom we were betrothed in childhood died, we should slice off our nose with a knife and cut off our ears to show that we would never be of two hearts. Or even if our mother-in-law was cruel and tried to hang her daughter-in-law by the neck, we must not leave our husband's home of our own accord. We had come to believe that never causing trouble to our husband's family was the quintessential virtue. Thus in those days we were committed to living our

lives graciously, even without any idea what sort of husband we would wind up with. It was just like drawing lots. Whether the lot we drew was lucky or unlucky, there was nothing we could do about it. We were to leave everything up to fate and always behave righteously.

Not only that. You could say my mother adhered to a literal interpretation of the Greater Learning for Women. She believed in embodying in her own life the ideals described in those pages. She rarely said anything to my father without sitting away from the threshold and having her hands on the floor while kneeling. She treated him completely as if he were a guest in her home. From the time I was a child I wondered why other fathers related to their children with such familiarity. The father-child relationships of other families were puzzling to me.

My mother was always inhibited around my father, I was greatly influenced by her example, and I had just concluded that a woman's fate was pitiable and fragile. Nevertheless, I already knew that there was something wrong with this state of affairs, and thought it might be possible somehow to escape becoming someone's wife, to live in a carefree fashion. And so the day came, around the age of 15 or 16, when my parents began to urge that I get married. Not just once or twice but to my surprise, over and over they suggested possible suitors to me with, "How do you like this one?" or "Perhaps that one?" I brazenly found faults in each of them, saying, "No, I don't like him," "Not him either." At the beginning my mother would speak to my father for me saying "She is not yet at the age when marriage is necessary, so let's keep our eyes out for another."

On the first month of my eighteenth year, however, their patience ran out and my mother would no longer speak on my behalf to my father. He began to get angry, saying, "She's just a selfish brat, you raised her that way," going so far as to blame my behavior on her.

Then one day my father called me into the living room. When I went there wondering what this was about, he was in such a hurry that he could not even wait for me to kneel before commanding me to accept a new offer of marriage. I can feel the cold perspiration even now as I recall that moment

of shock. I had already ruminated for some time in advance, thinking, "If he says such and such, I'll say such and such," but I had not imagined that he would order me to marry as if the whole thing had already been decided, so I was just completely taken aback. When I looked up at my father's face, he looked determined as if he was saying, "You had better not say no, or I'll..." Since my mother was sitting at my side, I put my faith in her, thinking she would say something. I waited expectantly for her to speak, but either she was afraid of my father's anger, or she had already decided in advance to give up when the time came. She said nothing, just staring at my face worriedly, and conveying to me through the look on her face, "Hurry up and say yes!" I was being stared at by both of them I did not know what to say. In particular, I was truly bewildered by my father who was not generous to me, but finally, biting my shaking lips, I said to him, "I haven't studied enough. Please let me have more time." But father did not let me finish my sentence and stared at me with his shining eyes. He fiercely shot off, "What are you saying? Haven't you studied enough? How stupid! I've given you enough education. What more could you want? What don't you like? How selfish you are!" My mother looked at me like I was saying something bad. I was trying to excuse myself by saying that I had not said anything bad. But I could hardly say it.

Finally, I said, "Please let me go to the teacher training school for girls in Tokyo." But my father cut me short and said, "What?! Teacher-training school. I see. After becoming an elementary school teacher, what will you do? It's not easy to be alone for the rest of your life. You must stop saying things like that and follow what we say. You can't change it. I've told your mother about this, so listen to her carefully." He suddenly stood up and left for somewhere.

Later, my mother told me quietly, I know your father, and if he says something like this, he will never go back on what he said. It seems that your father likes this marriage prospect. The go-between is that Mr. Matsumura, the one who has no ill intentions. The future husband has such a great background and education, so it is not easy to get such a

marriage. If girls are not properly discharged at the right time, they will lose the candidate.” In the end, she was trying to persuade me in a trembling voice.

If this happened now, I would not be persuaded, but at that time I was only an innocent girl and I was prepared for the fact that I would be married off at least once, so out of feeling for my parents, I gave them my consent. Looking back, I wonder why I did not resist a little more tenaciously. And then my mother started to talk about the meeting in which I would be formally introduced to my prospective husband as part of an arranged marriage. “If you can make it, they’d like to see you the day after tomorrow. The sooner the better. So tomorrow make up your hair and think about the combination between your kimono and its collar color.” But at this point, I did not know what to say, so I said yes and went back to my room. After I went back to my room, I tried thinking deeply about this. As the marriage was arranged almost 99% by my father, I would not be able to say no to him anyway after meeting him. I thought it would be very unpleasant feeling ashamed and being looked at by him. So I insisted to my mother that I would not meet him. Looking back on it, this was stupid. It was truly a bad decision, but when I step back and think about it, it was rare for me, from the time I was small, to meet anyone other than friends or relatives. When guests of my father came to visit, if I happened to be loitering around the entranceway to the house, my mother would say, “A guest has come. Go where you won’t be seen.” “Go in there.” I had learned to hide in the closet, so I had not become a good judge of character. Thus even when I was about to be formally introduced to my prospective future husband, I could not judge him at all. I stood before him ill-equipped, without wisdom, and on the edge of a precipice. But anyway, all I remember is that instead of feeling anxious, I actually faintly enjoyed the momentary pleasure of wondering what kind of person he would be, without worrying or concerning myself with the fact that I was not ready to get married.

And so finally in March of that year, when the cherry blossoms were going to bloom, we were married. But I could not get used to being with my husband. For the first few months I could not believe I would be in this house for the rest of my life. Did my husband love me? From time to time he took me to museums or some such, and he sometimes he asked me, "What shall I get you? How about this?"

I did not feel like being given anything by him. The reason is that I was not completely confident that I was a member of the household and walking together with him was not fun. I was remembering the days I was at home and wherever we went, I wished I go there with my mother or sister. One day a maid around 15 or 16 years of age came to our house with a letter. Our chambermaid received the letter beside me without thinking. My husband grabbed the letter away and glared at the chambermaid, saying, "Why didn't you bring it to me?"

I could not understand at all what was going on, and I thought he was such a frightful character, getting angry at something so trivial. In a while he finished reading the letter, rolled it up, and to my surprise, put it in his kimono sleeve. He told the chambermaid that he would answer the letter and took the maid who had brought the letter to her house. That evening he left the house telling me that he would go for a walk in the neighborhood, but he did not return 10 o'clock, nor did he return at 12 o'clock. As I was waiting for him to come back, I did not ask the chambermaid to lay out the futons for us, and took the opportunity to write some letters to my school friends. Meanwhile, since the night had deepened, I wanted to allow the chambermaids to go to bed, but one of the chambermaids stayed beside me saying that I would be lonely. She was looking at me writing letters and told me that I have very nice hands, and carelessly said that the previous lady of the house did not. The words "the previous lady of the house" reached my ears and, automatically staring into her face, I asked her, "Was there someone before me in this house?" This chambermaid had been hired long before I came to live there and knew everything, so she had no other choice but to answer me. "Oh, what I have done, to carelessly blurt

out... The lord will scold me for telling you this, but it is too late, so I will tell you. There was a woman living here just 5 or 6 days before you came. I reckon she was the daughter of the house where the master was living when he was an apprentice.”

She told me the whole story. Now I could understand the nature of the errand the maid was on, but as I did not want my chambermaid to realize I was worried, I cool-headedly said to her, “Oh, I see.” But later, I started to feel bad. I felt that he was an unfair person. If there had been a woman such as that, he should not have married me. If he was going to marry me, he should have stopped seeing her. But I decided not to tell this to anybody and kept it secret for a long time. After that, as time went by, he went out more and more, and finally he would be gone for 3 or 4 days at a time. At first I was waiting for him for three nights without sleeping, but as time passed I could no longer stay awake, so I dozed off. That’s just the way it is. Such a night he came home at midnight. Hearing the banging on the gate, I opened it, and found my husband totally drunk. He said, staring at me, “What are you doing? I almost broke the door banging on it. Why didn’t you open it? It’s not good if our neighbors hear this. You make your husband stand outside while you rest in deep slumber. What a happy-go-lucky lady you are.” How painful, to be grumbled at in this way. I was able to endure this, but it was really disgraceful that his angry voice at night awoke the chambermaids and made them think that I was complaining about him coming late, but if I had told him this he would have complained more, so I carefully apologized to him, telling him that he is unquestionably right and one way or another asked him to go to bed. Every time such things happened, I remembered my school days. When I heard that my best friend was still single or that some other girl was working at school, I could not help crying, thinking that I was too weak such that I had to marry and have a hard time.

My father went far away for his work and it was only my mother who stayed at my birthplace home. And she, being the female parent, could instantly understand what was going on. Whenever I went for a visit

home, she said "your complexion does not look good these days, and must have lost weight. You must be worried about something. If your father were here, he could talk with your husband, but I am the female parent, so I cannot do anything. Anyway, look after yourself and do not worry too much." How sad I was when she said that to me.

Even though I tried not to cry, I lived a nervous life—being next to a husband I did not usually understand and being nervous in front of the chambermaids who could say anything about me. I felt the charity of my mother through her words, so I told her that, no, you do not have to worry about me, but the tears pouring down my face like a waterfall told her honestly what was happening to me. I tried to hide the tears, and in order to do that, I wiped them with my handkerchief. I looked at my mother as if nothing had happened, but my mother had tears in her eyes already. Such things happened many times and finally my mother became totally ill, not only because of me but also because of her poor health. In the meantime, in the autumn of my nineteenth year, she passed away like dew evaporating. It was stupid of me, conveying to her what was on my mind. At first, my mother had wanted to feel relieved to see me married. As she had worried about me so much, I reluctantly did it in order to give her some relief. But that marriage became the cause of her ruin and shortened her life. The sadness could have pierced my breast. But still, I prepared myself for the worst, because this, too, everything, had been a result of my character flaws. Under such hopeless circumstances, I went through another unfortunate and miserable two years.

The way that I reacted is incredible. Within two or three years of having married, without even realizing it, I became the kind of person who, for the sake of women, deplored the bad conditions and injustices of society. Just at that time in Japan theories about women's rights were on the rise, and the idea that it was not the fate of women to be unhappy and miserable had finally become current in Japanese society. I, too, was attracted to these theories. As a part of my ordinary life, besides all the housework, I kept reading new, topical books and magazines on women.

As time passed by, I learned all about Western ideas concerning female rights and came to believe that Japanese women, too, should enjoy a little more the natural happiness they have been given. Therefore, in order to comfort my own depression, and with the hope that I could come to the aid of women in society and lessen their unhappiness, I have come to talk about difficult matters sometimes. In that sense, what I am prepared to do is totally different from before. Up until that point, I had been passive in the way of the Chinese, convinced that I should endure anything and should sacrifice my own happiness. But from that point on, I was not content with this passiveness and came to hold a more advanced idea, feeling that regardless of my unhappiness, I would like to correct my husband's behavior and make him into a proper gentleman.

This is why I often sincerely criticized him, but as my husband is much older than I am and has more experience than I do, he hardly listened to me, and later, whenever I started to put forward a suggestion, he, with just a few words, would reject all that I had said, with, "And look at you. That even a woman could act so clever and show off her learning so proudly." This was caused by my lack of sincerity, and because I am not worthy. If only I had enough value, to earn just a little of my husband's respect, even while I may lack the talents of a Monica. However, torn cloth is not easily mended and it is difficult to present a stone as it once was. And there were other various circumstances, all of it seeming beyond my abilities. I thought that being at my husband's side would bring about a bad reaction in him, too, so finally, for his sake as well, I reluctantly made up my mind to leave him.

This is why I have committed myself to working single-mindedly for the improvement of society. I have taken the stone out of this ring as a reminder of my past, not unaware that by doing so I have rendered it worthless. Looking at the broken ring every night and day, I think about how I have a heavy responsibility, now that I have removed the stone from it. I have come to hope that I will always endure whatever hardships I may face, do the best I can to achieve my goals and dearest dreams; that I

will work for the sake of this ring without fail; that I will look after the future of many pretty, little young ladies; and that I will advise beautiful young ladies in order that they may not err as I have.

Nevertheless, the marriage laws have changed little by little and there are some splendid couples in society, so looking at them, I wonder why my husband did not love me and why I myself could not love him, and I have deep emotion toward this ring. Fortunately, my father is still fit and he pities me for my many years of suffering. The unnecessary interference by an old man broke a young branch, he says, and he writes to me in order to comfort me. Now he praises my hope and encourages me all the time, which gives me pleasure. I am looking forward to his letters more than anything else and to passing my days happily in spite of the sadness. The only wish I have now is for the owner of the ring to return it to its original condition, but as one would expect, this has not been done yet.

¹ For this translation I received valuable assistance from Kobayashi Kaori and Tsuchiya Yuriko of Nagoya City University. Any errors, however, are my own responsibility.