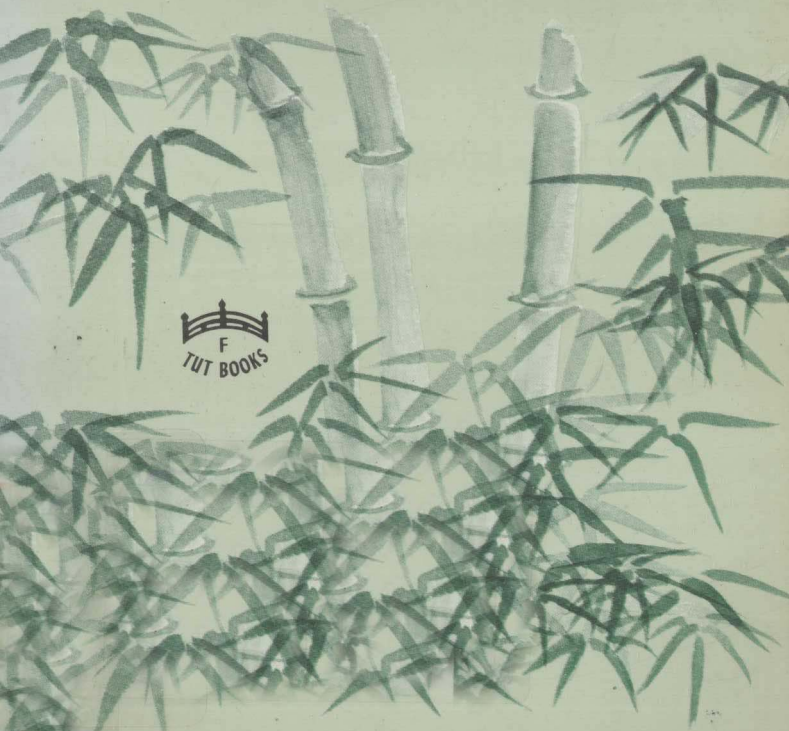
THE THREE BAMBOOS

Robert Standish

author of "Elephant Walk"



A NOVEL OF THE RISE OF MODERN JAPAN

The Three Bamboos

By the Same Author

THE THREE BAMBOOS
BONIN
THE SMALL GENERAL
MR. ON LOONG
THE GULF OF TIME
ELEPHANT WALK

The Three Bamboos

A NOVEL

BY

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PROLOGUE

IN the long ago the oak tree was heard to jeer at the bamboo, or so the story runs, as it is told still in Kyushu.

"You, O Bamboo," the sturdy oak was heard to say, "acknowledge yourself the servant of the least breeze which blows. Do you not bow your head before it and humble yourself? Look at me! through rain and sunshine and before all the winds which blow I remain proud and erect."

"I do not acknowledge the wind as my master," said the largest of three tall and tapering bamboos, which grew gracefully from the swampy ground beside the lake. "I am gay and supple. I love to dance to the music of the wind through my foliage. It is in the nature of the bamboo to be supple, as it is in the nature of the oak to be rigid. Since we are talking of pride, do I not tower above you? Could I not with equal justice taunt you with your stunted growth? If I were to imitate your stiffness my roots would be torn from the ground, while if you were to try to learn my suppleness the gods would laugh at you and the gust of their laughter would uproot you, too. Each of us to his nature. . . ."

Then came the Great Typhoon, which swept up the China Sea to Kyushu. Most of the people who lived in the village beside the lake lashed themselves to the stoutest oaks in the grove, believing that there lay safety. Tomo Fureno led his family to the bamboos which grew in the swamp, lopping off all their foliage at the point where they began to taper finely. With strong ropes Tomo Fureno lashed his family and himself to the bases of the bamboos.

The wind howled and screamed. Houses tore past in the gathering darkness, which was rent with cries of fear and pain. No one expected to see the morning's sun, while his children reproached Tomo Fureno for not having taken them to the oak grove.

When dawn broke the Fureno family, though battered and bruised and in the last stages of exhaustion, was safe. During the night the wind had bent the bamboos almost horizontal until they thrummed like the strings of a harp. Of the rest of

the people who had sheltered in the oak grove only five survived the night. There were gaping holes in the ground where the oak trees had stood.

From that day onwards the family of Fureno took for its mark the Sign of the Three Bamboos.

. . . .

On a day in early February of the year 1853, a fierce-eyed man with greying hair strode swiftly along the mountain path which led from the maple groves of Hakone down to the sea. He was the lineal descendant of this Tomo Fureno who had pinned his faith in the bamboos rather than the oaks. Since that day the Furenos had risen to greatness and fallen again from their high place into obscurity.

Even had the Elder Fureno not carried the twin swords of the Samurai, his manner and bearing marked him as an aristocrat, although he remembered with bitter rage that a few weeks previously he had been compelled to avert his eyes humbly as a palanquin, bearing one of the hated Tokugawa, who ruled Japan, was carried through the streets of Yedo.

The Furenos had been Lords of Kyushu when the Tokugawa were little feudal chieftains. Now by a turn in the wheel of fortune the Furenos lived in simplicity upon their small lands and the pension, their due as Samurai, which was thrown to them by the Tokugawa clan as a bone is tossed carelessly to a dog. For more than 250 years the Furenos had been in exile from their native Kyushu. Although poor, they still held their heads high, living for the day when the name of Fureno would command respect throughout the land. It was the memory of the Three Bamboos which had helped them to walk softly, to endure the storms which had broken over their heads.

The Elder Fureno quickened his pace in tune with his quickened pulses as he remembered these things.

The previous night a messenger had come to him in the mountains with great news:

"The ship has returned. Your son is well."

It was enough. So many possibilities hung on the return of this beloved son. Under a Tokugawa edict it was death to leave Japan, but the Elder Fureno had believed the risk worth taking. Japan's only intercourse with the rest of the world was the yearly ship which came to the Dutch factors, isolated upon a tiny island off Nagasaki.

The road to the sea became steeper and the vegetation became richer, and as though the transition from winter to summer occupied a mere two hours, the biting winds of the mountains gave place to light and balmy airs, on which was borne the sweet perfume of flowers.

Vulcan once honeycombed the Izu Peninsula with hot springs. The eternal fires were still very near the earth's surface, so that the plum and cherry trees, the jonquils and the narcissi, forgot that it was winter.

At the last turn of the road the Elder Fureno looked back across the mountains, which a few weeks ago had been blood-red with the autumn foliage of the maples. Beyond them was the peerless cone of Fuji-yama, to which he bowed. Then quickening his pace once more, the Elder Fureno sighed for sheer joy at the lush panorama which lay before him. The grim mountains were behind and a softer, gentler world lay spread at his feet, while in the foreground was a small ship lying at anchor.

"It will not be long now," he said through clenched teeth. "We have remembered the lesson of the bamboos. The gods will witness that we have bowed before the storm and now—I feel it in my bones—we Furenos will once more take our proper place in the land."

Although schooled through long years to hide all emotion, there were tears in his eyes as he went to greet his son.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

THE first Fureno to make a home on the headland at Atami had chosen the site well. Immediately behind the house a hot sulphur spring bubbled up from the fires beneath the earth, whence it flowed through shallow stone conduits to a spot immediately above the bath-house. From here it flowed into the bath-house itself, while a minor stream was diverted to the kitchens.

There were disadvantages in the site to be offset against the winter warmth, the superb view and the almost tropical vegetation which flourished in the vicinity. Periodically, and as might have been expected in such an actively volcanic region, the whole Izu Peninsula, and the mountains which ran up from the sea to Hakone and beyond, were shaken by awe-inspiring earthquakes. For this reason the Furenos had always been content with a house of the flimsiest construction which had been almost entirely rebuilt by each successive generation. It would have suited their sense of dignity and the fitness of things to live in a massively constructed stone house. But it is more than probable that the very simplicity of their lives had been in large measure responsible for their immunity from persecution by the minions of the Tokugawa Shoguns, who had always been ruthless in eliminating any element which could conceivably threaten their dominance of the island empire.

The Elder Fureno, almost exhausted from his tremendous walk down from the mountains, was beginning to feel his years. So that he should not appear to his son as a tired old man, he made for the bath-house immediately on arrival. Here the healing waters took the stiffness out of old bones and the ache from tired muscles, so that an hour later, when he sent a maidservant to tell his son that he was ready to receive him, he had shaken off much of the fatigue which during the last few miles had hung on him like a leaden weight. He could not bear the thought of appearing a weakling before his son.

Tenjo Fureno loved his father greatly, but in the Samurai code filial respect comes before love. Entering the bath-house,

therefore, he bowed in ceremonial fashion. Nor did he shake off anything of his formality until his father's arm was about his shoulder in affectionate greeting.

A maidservant brought them food and a lamp, and it was long after midnight before Tenjo had told to his father's satisfaction the tale of his long journey.

"They are strong, these red-headed foreign barbarians?" asked the Elder Fureno.

"They are so strong, my father, that we should be powerless to resist them. With their armed ships alone they could defeat us. They have cannon which would carry to the island yonder. China is already helpless in their hands and it is our turn next."

"But what is the secret of their strength, my son?"

"They have learned how to use steel. Great factories manufacture goods in thousands where we make dozens by hand. Their ships encompass the world. They buy and sell in all lands except Japan."

"But that seems no reason to me why we should fear them," said the Elder Fureno. "We are armed and we have no lack of brave men. Do you suggest that a Samurai of Japan is of less worth than these flesh-eating barbarians?"

"It would seem, my father, that bravery is of small account against the weapons they wield. China has not been defeated by force of arms. It is her great men who have been corrupted. The heart of China is dying. I was in Foochow where lie the great ships waiting for the tea harvest. There I saw and heard things you will hardly believe. The Chinese are no longer masters in their own house. The officials grow fat on foreign bribes; the merchants vie with one another to buy and sell among the foreigners; while the common people are no more than slaves to the foreigners, who walk proudly about the streets and make their own laws. Peking protests, but the foreigners laugh. While I was there I heard that because a foreigner had been killed up the Great River a foreign warship destroyed a village, killing three hundred people. It was all done within the hour."

"I hear these things, my son, but they do not touch me. I have seen the Dutch at Nagasaki. They are at best poor creatures. True, they bring us goods that we cannot make ourselves. But I saw nothing in them to fear. What can they want of us?"

"They are not all like the Dutch traders at Nagasaki, my father. They come peaceably enough at first, seeking only to

trade, but in the wake of the traders come their warships and soldiers. It is the same everywhere. The kings of Siam and the Spice Islands are no longer kings, but the slaves of the foreigners. None can resist them."

"Then you tell me that it is a wise policy, that of the Tokugawa, to keep our empire closed to the barbarians?"

"No, father, I do not. I say that we should and we must open the door a little to them. If we do not they will batter down the door and will dictate terms to us. All the red-headed barbarians are not of one race. There are great jealousies among them. The greatest of them, if report be true, are the English, who come from small islands on the other side of the world and are a great seafaring people. The Americans, who speak the same language, are also great upon the sea. There are the Russians, who some say are kin to the Chinese, and there are many others. In Foochow I learned a little English from a priest of the new faith. He believes that I am a Christian and the knowledge pleased him. They have not much guile, these barbarians, and their thoughts are upon their faces for all the world to read."

"And you are sure that if they come here our arms cannot prevail against them?"

"I am sure."

"You are sure also that there is much we have to learn from them?"

"I am sure."

"Then our duty is plain, my son," said the Elder Fureno, his eyes glinting with the intensity of the thoughts behind them. "You and your brothers, Shoji and Akira, must go among hese barbarians, learn their ways, their methods of fashioning new things and their skill in all matters. When they are old enough I will send your young cousins to join you. Before you go you must marry so that, come what may, the name of Fureno will go on. Through my brother at Nagasaki you will find a way to send letters to me and receive them from me. If we cannot yet overcome these barbarians we will use them and in the new empire which will arise the name of Fureno will be the proudest in the land. It has been a long time . . ."

This last was said with a sigh that was almost a gasp.

". . . and you, my son, and your two brothers, are the Three Bamboos. When great storms assail you, bend your heads to them. When you come to rivers too broad to swim, follow the stream upwards until it narrows. When you come to mountains

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too steep to scale, find a pass through them or a way round. Declare yourselves and your purpose to nobody. I shall be an old man before you return. I shall keep daily watch for your homecoming. But hurry, son, hurry! Time will not stand still for either of us. You are a man now, twenty years of age, and there is much to be done. Your brothers will be here to-morrow. I have called them from their studies in Yedo. As you are a son to me, so you must be a father to them. I will instruct them to accept your authority as though it were mine, and until they are of an age of discretion I will hold you answerable for them."

The Elder Fureno lay down wearily upon the sleeping mat which had been prepared for him. Tenjo stood dutifully beside his father until his regular breathing proclaimed that he was asleep. Then he went softly out into the still night, heavy with the scent of blossom and occasionally the faint reek of sulphur.

Outside the bath-house, huddled against the water conduit for warmth, lay a slender figure which during his absence of nearly two years had almost never been from his thoughts. Stooping, Tenjo lifted the figure gently, one hand over the sleeper's mouth to prevent an outcry of fright when she awoke.

"It is I, Tenjo," he whispered as she stirred.

For answer a pair of soft warm arms were twined round his neck. A great sob convulsed the slender body and hot tears ran down the cheek that was pressed tightly to his.

Between the son of a Samurai and the daughter of a small farmer there is a great gulf, so great indeed that despair might well fill the hearts of those who sought to bridge it. It was one of life's ironies that Mori, the father of Kimi-san, although a humble tenant of Fureno land, had by his thrift and industry become a great deal more prosperous than his landlords the Furenos. Before Mori four generations of his line had farmed the same land, paying a trifling rent. It would have been within the power of the Elder Fureno to increase the rent, but to have penalised a tenant for being a better farmer than his forebears would have been unworthy of the tradition of the Fureno line. Equally, it would have been beneath the dignity of a Fureno to become a farmer and take the profits of the soil.

The Elder Fureno and Mori seldom came in contact with each other, and when they did the latter gave the former the deference law and custom demanded. As a Samurai it was the right of the Elder Fureno to decapitate Mori with his sword as a reward for the smallest piece of insolence. It was only by recognising in full the privileges of the Samurai class, creating

between themselves and the common people a strong buffer, that the Tokugawa Shoguns had been able to maintain the power which they had unsurped from the imperial line. Anomalous though it may have been, there were thousands of the Samurai who hated the Tokugawa clan, who would, nevertheless, have cheerfully fought for them against the common people had the latter attempted to overstep the line which centuries of absolutism had drawn for them.

In common with most of his race, the Elder Fureno loved children. That in the past Tenjo and his brothers should have been the playmates of little Kimi-san, daughter of Mori the tenant farmer, had not seemed incongruous. The children found joy in each other. That was enough. If he had ever thought of the matter, which is doubtful, the Elder Fureno would have assumed that upon reaching manhood his sons would have remembered the class distinctions which in childhood are not important.

Kimi-san did not remember a world in which there was no Tenjo. In her cradle he had brought her butterflies to tear to pieces with little fingers which were all thumbs. When she had learned to walk it had seemed the most natural thing in the world to toddle beside Tenjo and share his toys. Five years divided them, but despite her tender years, Kimi-san was a woman. She had heard much of the conversation between father and son. Most of it had been beyond her ken, but when she heard the Elder Fureno instruct Tenjo to marry before he left Atami her heart sank. In the middle nineteenth century Japanese sons did not disobey their fathers, and an order to marry was an order to marry within his own class. Lately her own father had been talking of marriage for her, but she had never dared to tell him what was in her heart. Japanese daughters, far more than sons, were wont to accept with humility the destinies their fathers planned for them. Few dared the consequences of disobedience, the least of which would have been ostracism.

So Kimi-san sobbed, for there seemed nothing else to do.

Tenjo mused bitterly on what his grim unrelenting father would say when he broached the idea of making the daughter of his tenant farmer a daughter of the house of Fureno. His father, Tenjo knew, wished him to marry a daughter of the Lord of Shidzuoka, for the linking of the two houses would further great ambitions. Indeed, the marriage would have taken place before Tenjo went to China on his father's mission, had the Lord of Shidzuoka rated Fureno blood as highly as those

through whose veins it coursed. A past and almost forgotten glory did not impress him, for he was a practical man, concerned more with the present and the future. He shared but one thing in common with the Elder Fureno: a hatred of the Tokugawa tyranny.

Already there were uplifted eyebrows at Tenjo's single state. It was whispered throughout Izu that the Elder Fureno could not afford the expenses attendant on a marriage into a family of standing and would rather see the line extinct than perpetuated by an unworthy mother of his grandsons. Being careful to do so behind his back, there were those who found food for mirth in the Fureno pride. Although it was traditional for those of true Samurai blood to scorn wealth and those who made it the mainspring of their lives, poverty and pride are notoriously bad bedfellows.

. . . . .

Shortly after daybreak on the morning following Tenjo's return the Elder Fureno took the road for Shidzuoka. A decision once made, he was not the one to dally, nor did it cross his mind that his son could be of another way of thinking. Tenjo remained behind to greet his brothers.

An hour's walk from Atami, further down the peninsula, was a hot spring which bubbled into a natural rock basin. Beside it was the Shrine of Disappointed Lovers, where lovers forcibly kept apart on earth, swore fidelity to each other in the hereafter. Kimi-san's heart leapt when Tenjo suggested this as a meeting place. Tenjo wanted her: that was enough. In the Western sense he had never declared love for her, for in the Japanese language, spoken and written, there is no word or ideograph for love as an expression of a pure and noble passion. As in most Asiatic languages, marriage, lust and pleasure are almost synonymous. A man takes a woman because he wishes to do so. A woman submits because her body was created for man's pleasure. If she derives pleasure from this union she is very much more fortunate than the vast majority of her sisters. All through the ages in Japan there have doubtless been many men and women who loved each other in the Western sense of the word, but they have been so out of tune with the general trend of Japanese life, so pitifully unable to arouse an echo of sympathy in other hearts, that suicide has more often than not been the chosen way out of their impasse.

In Kimi-san's mind the thought of suicide was uppermost as

she took the narrow road to the Shrine of Disappointed Lovers. She would spend a few hours in Tenjo's arms, give him all that she had longed to give him since she had been old enough to know what surrender meant. Then, clutching to her heart the brief memory of ecstasy, she would throw herself over the cliff beside the shrine. Her tears would mingle with the salt sea and she would have accomplished her short destiny. Despite these thoughts her step was light and almost gay, while on her lips was a happy smile as she went to the trysting place from which, there was no doubt in her mind, she would never return.

Tenjo was already splashing in the pool when she arrived. Casting off her kimono she joined him. At high noon they ate the simple meal of rice and fish which she had lovingly prepared for him. A stranger seeing them thus, hearing their joyous laughter and envying the bloom of health on their sun-warmed bodies, would not have guessed at the numb and uncomprehending ache in the heart of the lissom girl who gazed in adoration into Tenjo's eyes. A thousand ancestresses who had learned the bitter lesson that the heart of a woman is of small account beside the whim of a man, helped her to conceal the agony.

"Do you remember what you used to call me when I was a baby?" asked Kimi-san. "When you used to stroke me as you are doing now?"

"To me then you were Soft-as-silk. . . ."

"Has my skin grown so harsh that I am no longer worthy of the name?"

"Your skin is still as soft as the finest silk, but you were a baby then and now you are a woman. I thought you would laugh at me if I called you by your baby name. . . ."

"Say it again, my baby name!"

"Soft-as-silk! You will always be that to me."

And then, where all had been brightness before, the sun seemed to go behind a cloud. Tenjo told Soft-as-silk of the purpose of his father's journey.

"Do not grieve," said Tenjo, seeing the hurt expression which crossed her face. "It is likely that the Lord of Shidzuoka will find me too poor for the husband of his daughter."

"If not her, then another," said Soft-as-silk sadly.

"Let us say no more of it until my father's return," commanded Tenjo.

It was not hard for Tenjo to dismiss the matter from his mind, for upon his return to Atami his brothers, Shoji and Akira, were waiting in the house. They were great friends,

these three. The two youngest were happy to be released from their arduous studies in Yedo and agog to know what was afoot to call them home without notice.

"It is better that our father should tell you with his own lips," said Tenjo firmly in reply to all questions. "Tell me instead about the lovely geisha in Yedo and the things they have whispered to you behind the screens."

"The last did not whisper," said Shoji ruefully. "'Get back to the rice fields where you belong, you penniless bumpkin,' she screamed at the top of her voice. And here I am! Two swords do not make a Samurai these days in Yedo. A fat purse is better."

While these three ran races on the sand, swam out to the island in the bay or sunned themselves outside the bath-house, Soft-as-silk watched from a distance. It would not have been seemly for her to presume upon childhood friendship by intruding herself. At dusk she would creep near to the Fureno house and take up her vigil at some spot from which she could hear the voice of her beloved. Sometimes he strolled out to take the air alone and then, trembling with fright, she would declare herself. The joyous moments of ecstasy repaid her amply for the long hours of waiting. It was when at home with a father and mother who understood nothing of her longings, or understanding heeded them not, that black icy despair entered her soul. Behind the screen she would hear her father discussing with her mother the progress of negotiations with a fat rice merchant of the town who wanted her. He already had a wife and several children, but times had been prosperous and he wanted variety in his bed.

When she passed the rice merchant's shop Soft-as-silk shivered before his leering appraisal and she vowed that she would kill herself before she submitted to him.

Then the Elder Fureno returned. As though accidentally, Soft-as-silk was on the pathway from the mountains just before he arrived in the village. He greeted her kindly, remembering her as the sweet-faced child who had played with his sons.

"There will be a feast soon in the Fureno house," said the Elder Fureno triumphantly. "My son, Tenjo, will marry the daughter of the Lord of Shidzuoka."

"May they have long life and many children," said Soft-as-silk, biting her lip until the blood ran. When the Elder Fureno had passed she sank down into the undergrowth, sobbing as though her heart would break. She returned home to

find her mother sick in bed and her father's evening rice not prepared.

"This is nothing to the beating you would get from Kengo, the rice merchant, if you are lazy in his house," said her father, thrashing her with a supple stick he had cut carefully from a bush on learning that she was not yet returned home.

In some strange fashion the sharp pain of the beating was balm to the soul of Soft-as-silk. The physical hurt helped her to forget the pain in her heart. Although her father struck her several dozen times she did not once flinch or scream. She scarcely heard the abuse he flung at her head.

It would have been easier if Tenjo had seen her or sent her a message during the awful days of waiting, but no word came from him. Everyone talked of the forthcoming wedding, nor did anyone connect it with the drawn red-eyed appearance of Soft-as-silk and her reluctance to join in local gossip regarding the beauty of the bride, the wealth and importance of her father and the prestige the wedding would bring to Atami. If only she had been able to talk to Tenjo it would have been easier to bear. She saw him sometimes in the distance and on these occasions there was nothing in his bearing to indicate that he, too, was unhappy. It would have been enough for her to hear Tenjo whisper that only because of the need for obedience to his father would he go through with the wedding.

On the evening before the marriage ceremonies were to begin Soft-as-silk could bear it no longer. Wherever she went the talk was of nothing but the wedding and the feasting, the wealth of the bride's father and the handsome bearing of the bridegroom.

When her father and mother were asleep Soft-as-silk crept out of the house towards the Fureno bath-house, where a light still burned. No matter what the risks, she must see Tenjo, if only to tell him that she was with child by him. Not with the purpose of using this as a means of embarrassing Tenjo—for she knew only too well that it would not—but with the desire once more to be held in his arms, to hear him whisper hotly, even if the avowals he whispered were lies. It would ease the loneliness, even if the ache were worse afterwards.

Tenjo by good fortune was alone, sleeping in the bath-house.

"I am glad you have come," he said when she had nestled beside him, "although I could not bring myself to send you word. I spoke of you to my father, who said that he would kill me with his own hand rather than allow me to marry you.

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