

S A T O

ERNEST L. MEYERS

(Reprinted from La Follette's magazine, "The Progressive")

Sato, if you are still alive, and wherever you may be, I address this to you. Perhaps I do wrong in writing for you are a Japanese, and at the moment we must hate the Japanese, just as we must hate the Germans and the Italians and the Vichy French and the Finns and the Fascists of Norway and Rumania and many scattered precincts of the globe. Ah, there are millions of people we must hate, but, especially, must we hold contempt for the Japanese, for "remember Pearl Harbor."

I do remember Pearl Harbor, and the memory hurts, for the act was evil. And it was precisely because your countrymen, Sato, at the behest of lunatic war-lords who control them, committed this evil act that I feel an obligation to write you, lest you and men like you, and I feel that there are many, be lumped with the villains. I do remember Pearl Harbor but I also remember Seattle and you, Sato.

Let me recall. The story is personal, perhaps unimportant, but true. There was a season in Seattle when I was desperately down in my luck. Penniless, workless, and without a friend in a strange city. In the frantic quest for jobs, it was the habit of me and a hundred others like me to crowd into an alleyway behind the press room of the Post-Intelligencer long before daybreak. We waited for the first city edition of the morning newspaper to roll off the presses, and when the news boys emerged with their bundles, we scrambled for their wares. Under the arc light we flipped open the paper to the want-ad section and scanned the columns with practiced eyes. We sought some nugget of hope in the mass of the fake-ads and blind-ads, and when we found that nugget we ran like demons in the dawn to be the first in line when shop or office opened in the morning.

Many a race I lost, Sato, but in the end I won both a job and your friendship. One dawn under the arc light I read "wanted, Short order cook: must be experienced; apply Night Manager, Palace Restaurant." The address was a mile distant but my legs were long and I won the race, leading a dozen of others of the hungry horde by a full block.

Breathless, disheveled, I burst into the Palace Restaurant. Fortunately the Night Manager was still there, behind the Cashier's counter. I still held the crumpled newspaper in my hand, and I indicated the want-ad.

"Experienced?", asked the Manager.

I had never cooked in all my life, but I blurted desperately, "Two years. Spokane, Walla-walla, Portland."

"Well, I'll try you out. Eight dollars a week, plus meals, of course, Hours 6 P.M. to 6 A.M.; half day off Sundays. Go back to the Kitchen, and Sato, the head cook, will tell you what to do."

I went into the kitchen, relieved but scared. You were there, Sato, in clean cap and coat and apron, fussing over the pots on the huge range, and when you looked up at me I said simply:

"I'm the new short-order cook. I lied to the Manager. I said I had experience but I've never even boiled an egg. I lied because I was hungry and I need a job."

I remember, Sato, that you stopped stirring something in a big copper kettle and you looked at me for what seemed a long, long time. Then you said in your excellent and precise English,

"I, too, have known hunger. Take off your coat, put on the white jacket and apron there in the closet. And then come and I will show you."

Sato showed me. Sato corrected my awkward fumbblings, taught me short cuts and tricks of the trade. Sato covered up for me. When the Night Manager looked in, later, Sato said in the pidgin he affected for some people:

"Plenty good cook, this young feller."

I knew he lied, for he had done much more than half my work for me and when the Night Manager, smiling, had left, and I blurted out some poor words of gratitude, Sato said:

"Say no more on this matter. I could see at once when you came in that you did not hate Japanese. This gives me much happiness."

At that time, so green was I on the coast, I did not get the full meaning of his remark. I did not know that it was the part of all good race-conscious whites to despise the yellow man. And though I might never have shared the common contempt, my blessed ignorance eased the way towards a friendship between me and Sato which became real and enduring.

On our precious half-Sundays off, and on many an early afternoon, Sato and I would meet at an agreed spot and set out on long walking trips. We explored the water-front, remote inlets of the sound and the thickly wooded shores of Lake Washington. Sato always carried a camera. Ah, the spy! But if investigators had studied his negatives as I did, they would have felt thwarted. For on them there was naught but the silhouette of a pine branch against the sky, his favorite theme, or a pattern of tangled spars of some battered coast-wise freighter or the strange traceries that bilge and oil leave on still water, or the span of a gull's wings when it settles, stiff-legged, on the crest of a wave. Nothing suspicious there, unless groping toward fugitive beauty comes under the ban.

Sato was young, though I never knew his exact age, but his talk was always considered and thoughtful. I remember once, when he broached a subject that weighed heavily on him, racial intolerance, he observed;

"It is not true, most certainly, that all men are brothers under the skin. But that is only because the leaders, the strong ones, do not wish it so. The strong ones thrive on dissension, for without dissension there would be no need for a great military machine, and without a great military machine the strong ones would lack something which is both their passion and their crutch."

"I regret that in my own country the strong ones are making a great noise, but the day will surely come when they and their guns will cease to talk and then we will hear the little voices, the small voices, but lifted in a great chorus. Listen, do you hear?"

I listened. I am still listening, still hoping. And because I still hope, I address this to you, Sato, a little voice but one of deep understanding. "I, too, have known hunger. Come, I will show you." Ah, what a theme for the little voices. Wait, Sato, we are coming.