

XI.

HOUSEHOLD CUSTOMS AND SUPERSTITIONS.

HOUSEHOLD, as distinct from religious, superstitions may be defined as beliefs having no real foundation of fact and a narrower range of influences. They act as a sort of moral police, whose rewards and punishments are confined entirely to this life. Religious superstitions affect all mankind alike; those of the household may be said to influence mainly women and children, and to have no connection with religion or the priests. Screened from criticism, humble in their sphere, they linger in the household longer than religious superstitions. Every nation has them; and according to the degree of intelligence possessed by a people will they be numerous or rare. In most cases they are harmless, while many have a real educational value for children and simple-minded people, who can not, by their own intelligence, foresee the remote good or bad results of their conduct. These persons may be influenced by the fear of punishment or the hopes of reward, embodied in a warning told with gravity, and enforced by the apparently solemn belief of him who tells it. As children outgrow them, or as they wear out, those who once observed will laugh at, and yet often continue them through the force of habit. Others will be retained on account of the pleasure connected with the belief. Others, again, become so intrenched in household customs that religion, reason, argument, fashion, assault them in vain. Thus, among many of us, the upsetting of a salt-cellar, the dropping of a needle that stands upright, the falling of a looking-glass, the accidental gathering of thirteen people around the dinner-table, will give rise to certain thoughts resulting in a course of action or flutter of fear that can not be rationally explained. I once heard of a Swedish servant-girl who would not brush away the cobwebs in her mistress's house, lest she should sweep away her beaux also. As in our own language, the fancies, poetry, or fears of our ancestors are embalmed in the names of flowers, in words and names, so the student of the picture-words of the Japanese lan-

guage finds in them fragments of poems, quaint conceits, or hideous beliefs.

So far as I could judge, in Japan, the majority of the lower classes implicitly believe the household superstitions current among them; and though, in the upper strata of society, there were many men who laughed at them, the power of custom enslaved the women and children. The greater number of those I give below are believed by the larger portion of the people, particularly in the country. In this, as in others of a more serious nature, the belief varies with the mood and circumstances of the individual or people. Many of them I have seen or heard referred to in conversation or in my reading; others I have had noted down for me by young men from various parts of Japan. I find that a few of them are peculiar, or local, to one province; but most of them form the stock of beliefs common to mankind or the Japanese people. From hundreds, I give a few. Some have an evident moral or educational purpose—to inculcate lessons of tidiness, benevolence, and to form good habits of cleanliness, nicety in house-keeping, etc. Some are weather prognostics, or warnings intended to guard against fire or other calamities.

They never sweep the rooms of a house immediately after one of the inmates has set out upon a journey, or to be absent for a time. This would sweep out all the luck with him.

At a marriage ceremony, neither bride nor bridegroom wears any clothing of a purple color, lest their marriage-tie be soon loosed, as purple is the color most liable to fade. It would be as if a couple from New Jersey would go to Indiana to spend their honey-moon.

If, while a person is very sick, the cup of medicine is upset by accident, they say it is a sure sign of his recovery. This looks as though the Japanese had faith in the dictum, "Throw physic to the dogs."

There are some curious ideas in regard to cutting the finger-nails. The nails must not be trimmed just previous to going on a journey, lest disgrace should fall upon the person at the place of his destination. Upon no account will an ordinary Japanese cut his nails at night, lest cat's nails grow out from them. Children who cast the clippings of their nails in the brazier or fire are in danger of calamity. If, while any one is cutting the nails, a piece springs into the fire, he will die soon. By burning some salt in the fire, however, the danger is avoided.

It seems that the bore is not unknown in Japan, and the Japanese are pestered with visitors who sit their welcome out, and drive their

hosts into a frenzy of eagerness to get rid of them. The following is said to be a sure recipe to secure good riddance: Go to the kitchen, turn the broom upside down, put a towel over it, and fan it lustily. The tedious visitor will soon depart. Or, burn a moxa (Japanese, *mō-gūsa*) on the back of his clogs. A Japanese, in entering a house, always leaves his clogs or sandals outside the door. The American host, bored by tedious callers, is respectfully invited to try his method of hastening departures.

Japanese papas, who find, as other fathers do, how much it costs to raise a large family, will not let an infant, or even a young child, look in a mirror (and thus see a child exactly like itself, making apparent twins); for if he does, the anxious parent supposes the child, when grown up and married, will have twins.

When small-pox prevails in a neighborhood, and parents do not wish their children attacked by it, they write a notice on the front of their houses that their children are absent. This is said to keep out the disease.

Many have reference to death or criminals. A Japanese corpse is always placed with its head to the north and feet to the south. Hence, a living Japanese will never sleep in that position. I have often noticed, in the sleeping-rooms of private houses, where I was a guest, and in many of the hotels, a diagram of the cardinal points of the compass printed on paper, and pasted on the ceiling of the room, for the benefit of timid sleepers. Some Japanese, in traveling, carry a compass, to avoid this really natural and scientific position in sleep. I have often surprised people, especially students, in Japan, by telling them that to lie with the head to the north was the true position in harmony with the electric currents in the atmosphere, and that a Frenchman, noted for his longevity, ascribed his vigorous old age mainly to the fact that he slept in a line drawn from pole to pole. I used to shock them by invariably sleeping in that position myself.

The plaintive howling of a dog in the night-time portends a death in some family in the vicinity of the animal.

The wooden clogs of the Japanese are fastened on the foot by a single thong passing between the largest and next largest toe. The stocking, or sock, is a "foot-glove," with a separate compartment for the "thumb of the foot," and another mitten-like one for the "foot-fingers." This thong, divided into two, passes over the foot and is fastened at the sides. If, in walking, the string breaks in front, it is the sign of some misfortune to the person's enemies; if on the back part, the wearer himself will experience some calamity.

When, by reason of good fortune or a lucky course of events, there is great joy in a family, it is customary to make *kowaméshi*, or red rice, and give an entertainment to friends and neighbors. The rice is colored by boiling red beans with it. If, for any cause, the color is not a fine red, it is a bad omen for the family, and their joy is turned to grief.

When a person loses a tooth, either artificially at the hands of the dentist (Japanese, "tooth-carpenter"), or by forceps, or by accident, in order that another may grow in the empty socket, the tooth, if from the upper jaw, is buried under the foundation of the house; if from the lower jaw, it is thrown up on the roof of a house.

Many are founded upon puns, or word-resemblances, making the deepest impression upon the native mind. There are many instances in Japanese history in which discreet servants or wise men gave a happy turn to some word of sinister omen, and warded off harm.

At New-year's-day, *paterfamilias* does not like any one to utter the sound *shi* (death), or any word containing it. This is a difficult matter in a household, since the syllable *shi* has over a dozen different meanings, and occurs in several hundred Japanese words, some of them very common. Thus, let us suppose a family of husband, wife, child, and servant, numbering four (*shi*). A visitor calls, and happens to use the words *Shiba* (a city district in Tōkiō), *shi* (teacher, poem, four, to do, etc.). The host, at first merely angry with the visitor who so forcibly uses the sinister words, is incensed when the latter happens to remark that his host's household consists of four (*shi*), and wishes him gone. Moodily reflecting on his visitor's remark, he resolves to dismiss his servant, and so make his household three. But the shrewd servant, named Fuku, remonstrates with his master for sending away *fuku* (blessing, luck) from his house. The master is soothed, and keeps his "boy."

Many Japanese worship the god *Kampira* for no other reason than that the first syllable of his name means gold.

If a woman steps over an egg-shell, she will go mad; if over a razor, it will become dull; if over a whetstone, it will be broken. If a man should set his hair on fire, he will go mad. A girl who bites her finger-nails will, when married, bring forth children with great difficulty. Children are told that if they tell a lie, an *oni*, or an imp, called the *tengu*, will pull out their tongues. Many a Japanese urchin has spoken the truth in fear of the *oni* supposed to be standing by, ready to run away with his tongue. No such watchman seems to be set be-

fore the unruly member of the scolding wife. Of these "edge-tools that grow sharper by constant use" there is a goodly number in Japan. When husband and wife are quarreling, a devil is believed to stand between them, encouraging them to go on from bad to worse.

Salt is regarded as something so mysterious in its preservative power, that it is the subject of several household superstitions. A housewife will not, on any account, buy salt at night. When obtained in the day-time, a portion of it must first be thrown in the fire to ward off all dangers, and especially to prevent quarreling in the family. It is also used to scatter around the threshold and in the house after a funeral, for purificatory purposes.

Many are the imaginary ways of getting rich, so numerous in every land. One of the most important articles of Japanese clothing, in both male and female, is the *obi*, or girdle. If, in dressing, the *obi* gets entangled, and forms a knot or knob, the wearer never unties it himself, but proposes to some one else to do it for him, promising him a great sum, as the wearer is sure to be rich. There is usually a great deal of laughing when this "superstition" is observed.

All Japanese seem to have a desire to attain full stature. Stunted growth is a great grief to a man, and every thing of ill-omen calculated to restrain growth must be avoided. If a boy rests a gun on the top of his head, he will grow no taller. Children must not carry any kind of basket on their heads, nor must they ever measure their own height. Such a sight as men or women carrying burdens on their heads, so common in Europe, is rarely seen in Japan.

If a man, while going to fish, meets a bonze on the road, he will catch no fish, as the [strict] bonzes eat no fish.

A person who, when eating, bites his tongue, believes that somebody begrudges him his food.

It often happens that boys and girls like to eat the charred portions of rice that sometimes remain in the pot when the rice has been burned. Young unmarried people who persist in this are warned that they will marry persons whose faces are pock-marked.

Many people, especially epicures, have an idea that by eating the first fruits, fish, grain, or vegetables of the season, they will live seventy-five days longer than they otherwise would.

It is an exceedingly evil omen to break the chopsticks while eating. Children are told that if they strike any thing with their chopsticks while at their meals, they will be struck dumb.

People who drink tea or water out of the spout of the vessel, in-

stead of out of a cup, are told that they will have a child with a mouth shaped like the spout of the vessel. This terror is kept fresh before the mind by masks and pictures of human beings with spout-shaped mouths.

In Japan the dwellings are universally built of wood, and conflagrations very frequently destroy whole towns or villages in a single day or night, leaving nothing but ashes. Hence it is of the greatest importance to provide against the ever-ready enemy, and every "sign" is carefully heeded. The following prognostics are deemed unailing: When the cocks crow loudly in the evening; when a dog climbs up on the roof of a house or building of any kind. If a weasel cries out once, fire will break out: to avert it, a person must pour out three dipperfuls of water, holding the dipper in the left hand. A peculiar kind of grass, called *kinodé* (sunrise), grows on many Japanese houses: this must not be pulled up, otherwise the house will take fire.

In regard to visitors, they believe the following: In pouring tea from the tea-pot, it sometimes happens that the stem of a leaf comes out with the tea, and stands momentarily upright. From whatever direction the stem finally falls, they expect a visitor. If a bird, in flying, casts its shadow on the partition or window (which is of paper, and translucent), a visitor will surely call soon. A person, when abstracted or in trouble, while eating, will often pour out his tea from the back of the tea-pot, instead of through the spout. In such case it is a sure sign of the near visit of a priest to the house.

Many are intended to teach the youth to imitate great, good, or wise men.

If the rim (*fuchi*, also meaning "salary") of a cup is broken (*hana-réru*, also meaning is "lost") in presence of an official while he is eating, he will be unhappy, for he will understand it to mean that he will lose his office or salary.

Even among the educated samurai, with whom the maintaining of the family name and dignity is all-important, there are many dangerous seasons for travelers, and the number of lucky and unlucky days is too numerous to be fully noted here.

Many people of the lower classes would not wash their head or hair on "the day of the horse," so named after one of the signs of the zodiac, lest their hair become red. Any other capillary color than a deep black is an abomination to a Japanese.

During an eclipse of the sun or moon, people carefully cover the wells, as they suppose that poison falls from the sky during the period

of the obscuration. Seeds will not germinate if planted on certain days. Many people will not build a house fronting to the north-east, else it will soon be destroyed: this is the quarter in which especial evil lurks; it is called the "Devil's Gate." Young men must not light their pipes at a lamp: it should be done at the coals in the brazier. If they persist in violating this precaution, they will not get good wives. Many people even now, in the rural districts, think it wrong to eat beef, and believe that a butcher will have a cripple among his descendants.

When a maimed or deformed child is born, people say that its parents or ancestors committed some great sin. After 5 P.M. many people will not put on new clothes or sandals. There are several years of life called the *yaku-doshi* (evil years), in which a person must be very careful of himself and all he does. These critical years are the seventh, twenty-fifth, forty-second, and sixty-first in a man's, and the seventh, eighth, thirty-third, forty-second, and sixty-first in a woman's life.

In Japan, as with us, each baby is the most remarkable child ever seen, and wondrous are the legends rehearsed concerning each one; but it is a great day in a Japanese home when the baby, of his own accord, walks before his first birthday, and mochi (rice pastry) must be made to celebrate the auspicious event.

Young girls do not like to pour tea or hot water into a cup of *kawaméshi* (red rice), lest their wedding-night should be rainy.

The common belief in Japan is that the dream is the act of the soul. As soon as a person falls asleep, the soul, leaving the body, goes out to play. If we wake any one suddenly and violently, he will die, because his soul, being at a distance, can not return to the body before he is awakened. The soul is supposed to have form and color, and to be a small, round, black body; and the adventures of the disembodied soul, *i. e.*, the black ball apart from its owner, form a standard subject in Japanese novels and imaginative literature.

In general, dreams go by contraries. Thus, if one dreams that he was killed or stabbed by some one with a sword, the dream is considered a very lucky one. If a person dreams of finding money, he will soon lose some. If he dreams of loss, he will gain. If one dreams of Fuji no yama, he will receive promotion to high rank, or will win great prosperity. If on the night of the second day of the First month one dreams of the *takara-buné* (treasure-ship), he shall become a rich man. In order to dream this happy dream, people often put beneath their pillows a picture of it, which operates like bridal-cake.

All these beliefs and hundreds of others that I noted in Japan are

comparatively harmless. The Japanese fancy does not seem to have reached that depth of disease, to have suffered with that *delirium tremens* of superstition, such as inthralls and paralyzes the Chinese, and prevents all modern progress. *Feng Shuey* is not a national curse in Japan, as it is in China; and whereas, in the latter country, telegraph poles and wires are torn down because they cast a shadow over the ancestral tombs, and railroads can not be built because they traverse or approach grave-yards, in Japan both these civilizers are popular.

In a few years many of the household superstitions I have enumerated will be, in the cities of Japan, as curious to the Japanese as they are to us. Among these are the following, with which this long chapter may be closed:

All over the country, in town or city, are trees specially dedicated to the kami, or gods. Those around shrines also are deemed sacred. They are often marked by a circlet of twisted rice-straw. Several times in the recent history of the country have serious insurrections broken out among the peasantry, because the local authorities decided to cut down certain trees held in worshipful reverence by the people, and believed to be the abode of the tutelary deities. Nature, in all her forms, is as animate and populous to the Japanese imagination as were the mountain stream and sea to the child and peasant of ancient Greece. Many a tale is told of trees shedding blood when hewed down, and of sacrilegious axe-men smitten in death for their temerity. In popular fiction—the mirror as well as nurse of popular fancy—a whole grove of trees sometimes appears to the belated or guilty traveler as a whispering council of bearded and long-armed old men.

In Fukui and Tōkiō, and in my numerous journeyings, many trees were pointed out to me as having good or evil reputation. Some were the abodes of good spirits, some of ghosts that troubled travelers and the neighborhood; while some had the strange power of attracting men to hang themselves on their branches. This power of fascinating men to suicide is developed in the tree after the first victim has done so voluntarily. One of these, standing in a lonely part of the road skirting the widest of the castle moats in Fukui, was famous for being the elect gallows for all the suicides by rope in the city. Another tree, near the Imperial College in Tōkiō, within half a mile of my house, bore a similar sinister reputation; and another, on the south side of Shiba grove, excelled, in number of victims, any in that great city.

A singular superstition, founded upon the belief that the kami will

visit vengeance upon those who desecrate the sacred trees, or for whom they are desecrated, is called the "*Ushi toki mairi*"—literally, "to go to the shrine at the hour of the ox." Let us suppose that a man has made love to a woman, won her affections, and then deserted her. In some cases, sorrow culminates in suicide; usually, it is endured and finally overborne; in rare cases, the injured woman becomes a jealous avenger, who invokes the gods to curse and annihilate the destroyer of her peace. To do this, she makes a rude image of straw, which is to represent her victim. At the hour of two o'clock in the morning, *ushi toki* (the hour of the ox), she proceeds (*mairi*) to the shrine of her patron god, usually the *Uji-gami* (family or local deity). Her feet are shod with high clogs, her limbs are lightly robed in loose night-dress of white, her hair is disheveled, and her eyes sparkle with the passion within her. Sometimes she wears a crown, made of an iron tripod reversed, on which burn three candles. In her left hand she carries the straw effigy; in her right she grasps a hammer. On her bosom is suspended a mirror. She carries nails in her girdle or in her mouth. Reaching the sacred tree, which is encircled with a garland of rice-straw, before the shrine, and near the torii, she impales upon the tree with nails, after the manner of a Roman crucifier, the straw effigy of her recreant lover. While so engaged, she adjures the gods to save their tree, impute the guilt of desecration to the traitor, and visit him with their deadly vengeance. The visit is repeated nightly, several times in succession, until the object of her incantations sickens and dies. At Sabaë, which I visited, a town twenty-five miles from Fukui, before a shrine of Kampira stood a pine-tree about a foot thick, plentifully studded with nails, the imperishable parts of these emblems of vicarious vengeance. Another, and a smaller, tree hard by, wounded unto death by repeated stabs of the iron nails driven home by arms nerved to masculine strength, had long since withered away. It stood there, all scarred and stained by rust, and guttered into rotteness, a grim memorial of passions long since cooled in death, perchance of retribution long since accomplished. What tales of love and desertion, anguish, jealousy, and vengeance could each rusty cross of iron points tell, were each a tongue! It seemed but another of many proofs that the passions which thrill or torment the human soul are as strong in Japan as in those lands whose children boast that to them it is given to reach the heights of highest human joy, and to sound the depths of deepest human woe. In Japan, also, "Love is as strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave."



The Jealous Avenger. (Drawn by Nankoku Ozawa.)