

XII.

THE MYTHICAL ZOOLOGY OF JAPAN.

As if to make amends for the poverty of the actual fauna in Japan, the number and variety of imaginary creatures in animal form are remarkably great. Man is not satisfied with what the heavens above and the waters under the earth show him. Seeing that every effect must have a cause, and ignorant of the revelations of modern science, the natural man sees in cloud, tempest, lightning, thunder, earthquake, and biting wind the moving spirits of the air. According to the primal mold of the particular human mind will the bodying of these things unseen be lovely or hideous, sublime or trivial. Only one born among the triumphs of modern discovery, who lives a few years in an Asiatic country, can realize in its most perfect vividness the definition of science given by the master seer—"the art of seeing the invisible."

The aspects of nature in Japan are such as to influence the minds of its mainly agricultural inhabitants to an extent but faintly realized by one born in the United States. In the first place, the foundations of the land are shaky. There can be no *real* estate in Japan, for one knows not but the whole country may be engulfed in the waters out of which it once emerged. Earthquakes average over two a month, and a hundred in one revolution of the moon have been known. The national annals tell of many a town and village engulfed, and of cities and proud castles leveled. Floods of rain, causing dreadful land-slides and inundations, are by no means rare. Even the ocean has, to the coast-dweller, an added terror. Not only do the wind and tempest arise to wreck and drown, but the tidal wave is ever a possible visitor. Once or twice a year the typhoons, sometimes the most dreadful in the dreadful catalogue of destructive agencies, must be looked for. Two-thirds of the entire surface of the empire is covered with mountains—not always superb models of form like Fuji, but often jagged peaks and cloven crests, among which are grim precipices, frightful gulches, and gloomy defiles. With no religion but that of paganism and fetichism, armed without by no weapons of science, strengthened

within by no knowledge of the Creator-father, the Japanese peasant is appalled at his own insignificance in the midst of the sublime mysteries and immensities of nature. The creatures of his own imagination, by which he explains the phenomena of nature and soothes his terrors, though seeming frightful to us, are necessities to him, since the awful suspense of uncertainty and ignorance is to him more terrible than the creatures whose existence he imagines. Though modern science will confer an ineffable good upon Japan by enlightening the darkened intellect of its inhabitants, yet the continual liability to the recurrence of destructive natural phenomena will long retard the march of mind, and keep alive superstitions that now block like bowlders the path of civilization.

Chief among ideal creatures in Japan is the dragon. The word dragon stands for a genus of which there are several species and varieties. To describe them in full, and to recount minutely the ideas held by the Japanese rustics concerning them, would be to compile an octavo work on dragonology. The merest tyro in Japanese art—indeed, any one who has seen the cheap curios of the country—must have been impressed with the great number of these colossal wrigglers on every thing Japanese. In the country itself, the monster is well-nigh omnipresent. In the carvings on tombs, temples, dwellings, and shops—on the Government documents—printed on the old and the new paper money, and stamped on the new coins—in pictures and books, on musical instruments, in high-relief on bronzes, and cut in stone, metal, and wood—the dragon (*tatsu*) everywhere “swinges the scaly horror of his folded tail,” whisks his long mustaches, or glares with his terrible eyes. The dragon is the only animal in modern Japan that wears hairy ornaments on the upper lip.

I shall attempt no detailed description of the Japanese dragon, presuming that most foreign readers are already familiar with its appearance on works of art. The creature looks like a winged crocodile, except as to the snout, which is tufted with hair, and the claws, which are very sharp. The celebrated Japanese author, Bakin, in his masterpiece of *Hakkenden* (“The Eight Dog Children”), describes the monster with dogmatic accuracy. He says: “The dragon is a creature of a very superior order of being. It has a deer’s horns, a horse’s head, eyes like those of a devil, a neck like that of a snake, a belly like that of a red worm, scales like those of a fish, claws like a hawk’s, paws like a tiger’s, and ears like a cow’s. In the spring, the dragon lives in heaven; in the autumn, in the water; in the summer, it travels in the

clouds and takes its pleasure; in winter, it lives in the earth dormant. It always dwells alone, and never in herds. There are many kinds of dragons, such as the violet, the yellow, the green, the red, the white, the black, and the flying dragon. Some are scaly, some horned, some without horns. When the white dragon breathes, the breath of its lungs goes into the earth and turns to gold. When the violet dragon spits, the spittle becomes balls of pure crystal, of which gems and caskets are made. One kind of dragon has nine colors on its body, and another can see every thing within a hundred ri; another has immense treasures of every sort; another delights to kill human beings. The water dragon causes floods of rain; when it is sick, the rain has a



The Rain Dragon. (From a Japanese drawing, by Kano.)

fishy smell. The fire dragon is only seven feet long, but its body is of flame. The dragons are all very lustful, and approach beasts of every sort. The fruit of a union of one of these monsters with a cow is the *kirin*; with a swine, an elephant; and with a mare, a steed of the finest breed. The female dragon produces at every parturition nine young. The first young dragon sings, and likes all harmonious sounds, hence the tops of Japanese bells are cast in the form of this

dragon; the second delights in the sounds of musical instruments, hence the *koto*, or horizontal harp, and *suzumi*, a girl's drum, struck by the fingers, are ornamented with the figure of this dragon; the third is fond of drinking, and likes all stimulating liquors, therefore goblets and drinking-cups are adorned with representations of this creature; the fourth likes steep and dangerous places, hence gables, towers, and projecting beams of temples and pagodas have carved images of this dragon upon them; the fifth is a great destroyer of living things, fond of killing and bloodshed, therefore swords are decorated with golden figures of this dragon; the sixth loves learning and delights in literature, hence on the covers and title-pages of books and literary works are pictures of this creature; the seventh is renowned for its power of hearing; the eighth enjoys sitting, hence the easy-chairs are carved in its images; the ninth loves to bear weight, therefore the feet of tables and of hibachi are shaped like this creature's feet. As the dragon is the most powerful animal in existence, so the garments of the emperor or mikado are called the 'dragon robes,' his face the 'dragon countenance,' his body the 'dragon body,' the ruffling of the 'dragon scales' his displeasure, and his anger the 'dragon wrath.'"

Whence arose the idea of the dragon? Was the pterodactyl known to the early peoples of the East? Did the geologic fish-lizard wander at night, with teeth unpicked and uncleansed of phosphorescent fragments of his fish-diet, and thus really breathe out fire, as the artists picture him?

The kirin, referred to above, is an animal having the head of a dragon, the body of a deer, and the legs and feet of a horse, with tail and streaming hair or wings peculiar to itself, though native poets never bestride it, nor is it any relative of Pegasus. On its forehead is a single horn. It is found carved on the wood-work of the tombs of the shōguns and other defunct worthies in Japan. It is said that the kirin appears on the earth once in a thousand years, or only when some transcendently great man or sage, like Confucius, is born. It never treads on a live insect, nor eats growing grass. The kirin is of less importance in Japan than in China, whence its origin, like that of so much of the mythology and strange notions current in Japan.

There is another creature whose visits are rarer than those of angels, since it appears on the earth only at millennial intervals, or at the birth of some very great man. This fabulous bird, also of Chinese origin, is called the *howo*, or phenix. The tombs of the shōguns at Shiba and Nikkō have most elaborate representations of the howo, and

the new and old paper currency of the country likewise bears its image. It seems to be a combination of the pheasant and peacock. A Chinese dictionary thus describes the fowl: "The phenix is of the essence of water; it was born in the vermilion cave; it roosts not but upon the most beautiful tree (Wu-tung, *Elaeococcus oleifera*); it eats not but of the seeds of the bamboo; it drinks not but of the sweetest spring; its body is adorned with the Five Colors; its song contains the Five Notes; as it walks, it looks around; as it flies, the hosts of birds follow it." It has the head of a fowl, the crest of a swallow, the neck of a snake, the tail of a fish. Virtue, obedience, justice, fidelity, and benevolence are symbolized in the decorations on its head, wings, body, and breast.

Some of the ultra-conservatives, who cherish the old superstitions, and who look with distrust and contempt on the present *régime* in Japan, await the coming of the kirin and the howo with eagerness, as the annunciation of the birth of the great leader, who is, by his pre-eminent abilities, to dwarf into insignificance all the pigmy politicians of the present day. This superstition in Japan takes the place of those long in vogue in Europe, where it was supposed that such leaders as Charlemagne, Alfred, and Barbarossa were sleeping, but would come forth again at the propitious moment, to lead, conquer, and reign.

The *kappa* is a creature with the body and head of a monkey and the claws of a tortoise. There are various representations of it, gravely figured in native works on reptilology. In some of these, the monkey type seems to prevail; in others, the tortoise. There is a peculiar species of tortoise in the waters of Japan, called by the natives *sūppon*. Its shell is cartilaginous, its head triangular, and its proboscis elongated and tapering. Imagine this greenish creature rising up, shedding its shell, and evolving into a monkey-like animal, about the size of a big boy, but retaining its web-footed claws, and you have the *kappa*. It is supposed to live in the water, and to seize people, especially boys, who invade its dominions. It delights in catching well-favored urchins, and feasting upon choice tidbits torn out of certain parts of their bodies.

The *kappa*, fortunately, is very fond of cucumbers, and parents having promising sons throw the first cucumbers of the season into the water it is supposed to haunt, to propitiate it and save their children. In Fukui, I was warned not to bathe in a certain part of the river, as the *kappa* would infallibly catch me by the feet and devour

me; and more than one head was shaken when it became known that I had defied their warnings.

A woman was riding in a jin-riki-sha, and the coolie was coursing at full speed on the road at the side of the castle-moat, where the water is four feet deep. Suddenly, and, to the coolie, unaccountably, he and his vehicle were upset, and the precious freight was thrown into the moat. She was fished out in a condition that might have helped even a passing foreigner to believe in the existence of the mermaid. The coolie was puzzled to account for the capsizing of his machine, and immediately attributed it to the agency of the kappa. By venturing insultingly near the domain of this local Neptune, he had been punished by his muddy majesty. Though the woman had no mark of claw or teeth, she doubtless congratulated herself on her lucky escape from the claws of the monster.

I have heard, on several occasions, of people in Tōkiō seeing a kappa in the Sumida-gawa, the river that flows by the capital. Numerous instances of harm done by it are known to the orthodox believers, to whom these creations of diseased imagination are embodied verities. The native newspapers occasionally announce reported cases of kappa mischief, using the incidents as texts to ridicule the superstition, hoping to uproot it from the minds of the people.

Among the many ideal creatures with which the native imagination has populated earth and air is the *kama-itachi*, believed to be a kind of weasel, that, in the most wanton sport, or out of mere delight in malignity, cuts or tears the faces of people with the sickle which it is supposed to carry. This creature is not known to trouble any animal except man. Every one knows that at times, in moments of excitement, cuts or scratches are received which are discovered only by the appearance of blood. In Japan, where the people universally wear clogs—often high, heavy blocks of wood, the thong of which is liable to break—and the ground is covered with loose pebbles or sharp stones, falls and cuts are very frequent. The one thought, to the exclusion of every other, in an instance of this kind, is about the failing thong or the outslipping support. The pedestrian, picking himself up, with probably a malediction on the thong or the clog-maker, finds, on cooling off, that his face is cut. Presto! "*Kama-itachi ni kirareta*" ("cut by the sickle-weasel"). The invisible brute has passed and cut his victim on the cheek with his blade. I have myself known cases where no cut appeared and no blood flowed, yet the stumbler who broke his clog-string fell to cursing the *kama-itachi* for tripping

him. This creature is also said to be present in whirlwinds. It is a most convenient scape-goat for people who go out at night when they ought to stay at home, and who get cuts and scratches which they do not care to account for truly. A case recently occurred in the port of Niigata, which illustrates both the mythical and scape-goat phases of this belief. A European doctor was called to see a native woman, who was said to be suffering from the kama-itachi. The patient was found lying down, with a severe clean cut, such as might have been caused by falling on some sharp substance; but to all questions as to how she got the wound, the only answer was, "Kama-itachi." By



Futen, the Wind-imp. (From a Japanese drawing.)

dint of questioning the servants, it appeared that there was more in the facts than had met the doctor's ears. It seemed that, during the night, she had risen and passed out of the house, and had been absent for a considerable time. Whether there was a "love-lorn swain in lady's bower" awaiting her coming was not developed during the pumping process she was subjected to by the student of imaginary zoology, who was the catechist of the occasion. Japanese gardens are nearly always paved with smooth stones, which often have sharp edges. These might easily have inflicted just such a wound in case of a fall on

their slippery surfaces, especially if the fall occurred in the darkness. For reasons of her own, most probably, the blame was laid on the *kama-itachi*.

The wind and the thunder, to a Japanese child or peasant, are something more than moving air and sound. Before many of the temples are figures, often colossal, of the gods of the wind and of thunder. The former is represented as a monstrous semi-feline creature, holding an enormous bag of compressed air over his shoulders. When he loosens his hold on one of the closed ends, the breezes blow; when he partly opens it, a gale arises; when he removes his hand, the tornado devastates the earth. At times, this imp, as the fancy seizes him, sal-



Raiden, the Thunder-drummer. (From a native drawing.)

lies forth from his lair away in the mountains, and chases terrified travelers or grass-cutters; often scratching their faces dreadfully with his claws. Sometimes, invisibly passing, he bites or tears the countenance of the traveler, who, bearing the brunt of the blast, feels the wound, but sees not the assailant. There are not wanting pictures and images representing the deliverance of pious men, who, trusting in the goddess *Kuanon*, have, by dint of nimbleness and prayer, escaped, as by a hair-breadth, the steel-like claws of *Futen*, the wind-imp.

The "thunder-god" is represented as a creature that looks like a

human dwarf changed into a species of erect cat. His name is Raiden. He carries over his head a semicircle of five drums joined together. By striking or rattling these drums, he makes thunder. With us it is not the thunder that strikes; but in Japanese popular language, the thunder not only strikes, but kills. According to Russian superstition, thunder kills with a stone arrow. Among the Japanese, when the lightning strikes, it is the thunder-cat that leaps upon, or is hurled at, the victim. Often it escapes out of the cloud to the ground. A young student from Hiuga told me that in his native district the paw of a thunder-imp that fell out of the clouds several centuries ago is still kept, and triumphantly exhibited, as a silencing proof to all skeptics of the actual occurrence of the event asserted to have taken place. Tradition relates that a sudden storm once arose in the district, and that, during a terrific peal of thunder, this monster leaped, in a flash of lightning, down a well. Instead, however, of falling directly into the water, its hind paw happened to get caught in a crack of the split timber of the wooden well-curb, and was torn off by the momentum of the descent. This paw was found after the storm, fresh and bloody, and was immediately taken to be preserved for the edification of future generations. It is not known whether any of the neighbors missed a cat at that time; but any suggestions of such an irreverent theory of explanation would doubtless be met by the keepers of the relic with lofty scorn and pitying contempt.

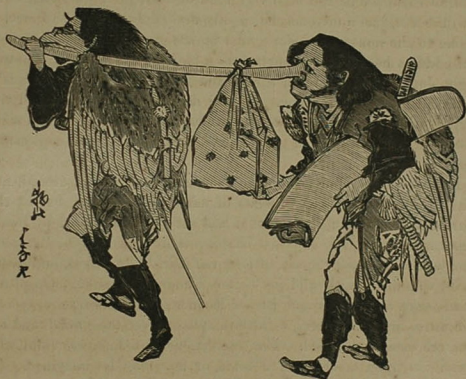
One of the miracle figures at Asakūsa, in Tōkiō, until 1874 represents a noble of the mikado's court, with his hand on the throat, and his knee planted on the back of the thunder-imp that lies sprawling, and apparently howling, on the ground, with his drums broken and scattered about him. One hairy paw is stretched out impotently before him, and with the other he vainly tries to make his conqueror release his hold. The expression of the starting eyes of the beast shows that the vise-like grip of the man is choking him; his nostrils gape, and from his mouth extrude sharp teeth. His short ears are cocked, and his body is hairy, like a cat. On each of his paws are several triangular bayonet-shaped claws. The human figure is life-size; the thunder-cat is about three feet from crown to claws. The creature does not appear to have any tail. This, however, is no curtailment of his feline dignity, since most of the Japanese pussies have caudal appendages of but one or two inches in length, and many are as tailless as the Darwinian descendants of the monkey. This tableau is explained as follows by the guide-book to the exhibition:

"In the province of Yamato, in the reign of Yuriyaku Tennō, when he was leaving his palace, a sudden thunder-storm of terrific violence arose. The mikado ordered Sugaru, his courtier, to catch the thunder-imp. Sugaru spurred his horse forward and drove the thunder-god to the side of Mount Abé, where the creature, leaping high into the air, defied the attempts of his pursuer. Sugaru, gazing at the sky, cried out to the imp, 'Obey the emperor!' But the roll of the thunder ceased not for a moment. Then Sugaru, turning his face to the temple, prayed earnestly to Kuanon, and cried out, 'Dost thou not hear and protect thy faithful ones when they cry unto thee?' Immediately, as the prayer ended, a splendor of radiant light shot out from the temple, and the thunder-imp fell to the earth. Sugaru seized him in a trice, bound him securely, and took him to the emperor's palace. Then all men called him the 'god-catcher.'"

Decidedly, the animal of greatest dimensions in the mythical menagerie or aquarium of Japan is the *jishin uwo*, or "earthquake fish." Concerning the whereabouts and haunts of this monster, there are two separate opinions or theories, held respectively by the dwellers on the coast and those inland. The former believe that the *jishin-uwo* is a submarine monster, whose body is from half a ri to one ri in length. This fish strikes the shore or ocean-bottom in its gambols or in its wrath, and makes the ground rock and tremble. In times of great anger it not only causes the solid earth to quiver and crack, leveling houses in ruin, and engulfing mountains, but, arching its back, piles the waters of the ocean into that sum of terror and calamity—a tidal wave. Among the people in the interior, however, the theory obtains that there exists a subterranean fish of prodigious length. According to some, its head is in the northern part of the main island, the place of fewest and lightest earthquakes, and its tail beneath the ground that lies between Tōkiō and Kiōto. Others assert that the true position is the reverse of this. The motions of the monster are known by the tremors of the earth. A gentle thrill means that it is merely bristling its spines. When shocks of extraordinary violence are felt, the brute is on a rampage, and is flapping its flukes like a wounded whale.

The limits of this chapter forbid any long description of the less important members of that ideal menagerie to which I have played the showman. Not a few instances have fallen under my own immediate notice of the pranks of two varieties of the genus *tengu*, which to the learned are symbolical of the male and female essences in

Chinese philosophy. These are in the one case long-nosed, and in the other long-billed goblins, that haunt mountain places and kidnap wicked children. Their faces are found in street shows, in picture-books, on works of art, and even in temples, all over the country. The native caricaturists are not afraid of them, and the funny artist has given us a sketch of a pair who are putting the nasal elongation to a novel use, in carrying the lunches. One is being "led by the nose," in a sense even stronger than the English idiom. The scrap of text, "*hanami*" ("to see the flowers"), is their term for junketing in



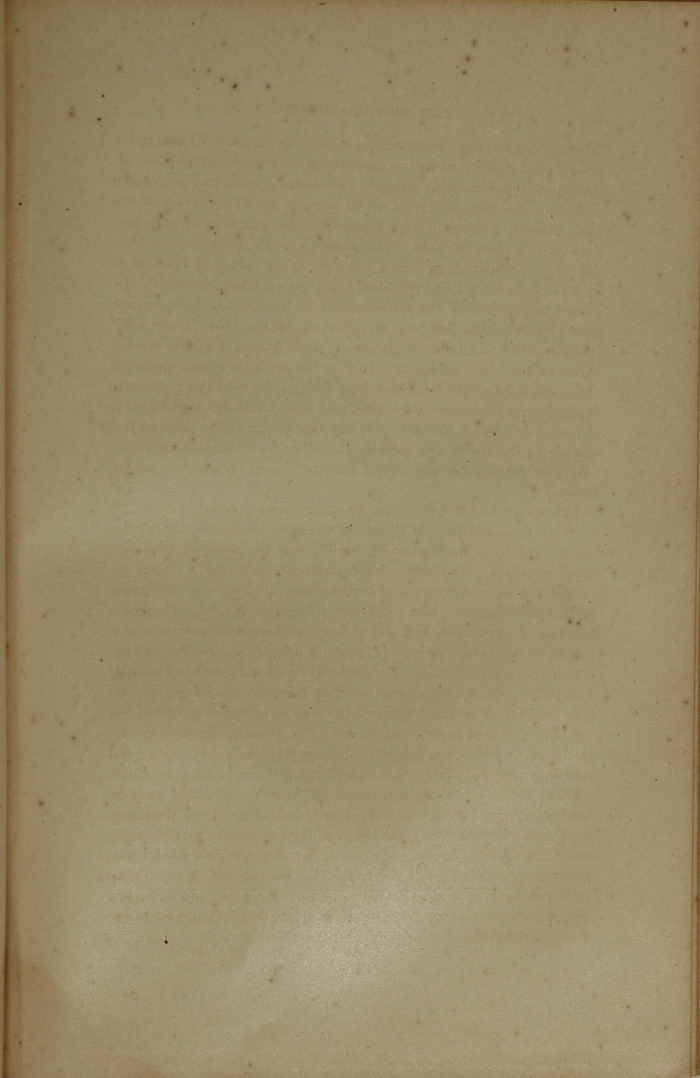
Tengu going on a Picnic. (Hokusai.)

the woods; but the hindmost tengu is carrying pleasure to the verge of pain, since he has to hold up his lunch-box with his right, while he carries his mat to sit on and table-cloth in his left hand. He of the beak evidently best enjoys the fun of the matter. I might tell of cats which do not exist in the world of actual observation, which have nine tails, and torment people, and of those other double-tailed felines which appear in the form of old women. A tortoise with a wide-fringed tail, which lives ten thousand years, is found portrayed on miscellaneous works of art, in bronze, lacquer-ware, carved work, and in silver, and especially represented as the emblem of longevity at

marriage ceremonies. The mermaid is not only an article of manufacture by nimble-fingered native taxidermists, but exists in the belief of the Japanese fishermen as certainly as it does not exist in the ocean.

Among the miracle-figures or tableaux at Asakūsa, to which we have already referred, is one representing a merman begging the prayers of a pious devotee. The Japanese guide-book says: "One day when a certain Jogu Taishi was passing the village of Ishidéra, a creature with a head like a human being and a body like a fish appeared to him out of the rushes, and told him that in his previous state of existence he had been very fond of fishing. Now, being born into the world as a merman, he eagerly desired Jogu Taishi to erect a shrine to the honor of Kuanon, that by the great favor and mercy of the goddess he might be reborn into a higher form of life. Accordingly, Jogu Taishi erected a shrine, and carved with his own hands a thousand images of Kuanon. On the day on which he finished the carving of the last image, a *ten-jin* (angel) appeared to him and said, 'By your benevolence and piety I have been born into the regions of heaven.'"

Little boys, tempted to devour too much candy, are frightened, not with prophecies of pain or threats of nauseous medicines, but by the fear of a hideous huge worm that will surely be produced by indulgence in sweets. The Japanese bacchanals are called *shōjō*. They are people who live near the sea, of long red hair, bleared eyes, and gaunt faces, who dance with wild joy before a huge jar of saké. On picnic boxes, saké cups, vases and jars of lacquered work, bronze, or porcelain, these mythical toppers, with the implements of their mirth and excess, are seen represented. The associations of a Japanese child who first looks upon a man of red beard or hair may be imagined. So goes through all ages and ranks of life a more or less deep-rooted terror of non-existent monstrosities; and although many Japanese people in the cities and towns laugh at these superstitions, yet among the *inaka*, or country people, they are living realities, not to be trifled with or defied. In company, round the hearth, one fellow may be bold enough to challenge their existence; but at night, on the lonely road, or in the mountain solitudes, or in the presence of nature's more awful phenomena, the boor, the child, and even the grown men who reason, are awed into belief and fear. That they are fading away, however, year by year, is most evident. Science, the press, education, and Christianity are making these mythical animals extinct species in the geology of belief.





Grandmother telling Stories to the Children round the Brazier. (Drawn by Nankoku Ōzawa.)