

XIV.

JAPANESE PROVERBS.

THE proverbs of a nation are mirrors of its character. Not only the genius and wit, but the prejudices, the loves, the hates, the standards of actions and morals, are all faithfully reflected in the condensed wisdom of their pithy phrases. Most proverbs are of anonymous authorship. "The wisdom of many and the wit of one," a proverb is saved from death because clothed in brevity, rhythm, or alliteration. Every man hails it as his own, because he recognizes his own heart in it. Proverbs are often tell-tale truths, for a nation sometimes outgrows its prejudices and becomes ashamed of its own familiar beliefs. Proverbs thus become the labels of antiquities in the museum of speech. They are fossils which show how opinions which had life and force long ago are now defunct and forgotten. Unexplainable to latter generations, they, as the fossils of geology once were, are thought to be *lusus natura*.

The delver among the treasures of Japanese lore finds proverbs both new and old, and in them sees ancient landmarks and modern finger-posts.

The proverbs of a nation so long isolated from the world must needs have peculiar interest to the rest of that world. We shall see in most of them, however, the clear reflection of that human heart which beats responsive beneath the toga, the camel's-hair raiment, the broadcloth, and the silk *haori*.

It has often been a delightful feeling, when stumbling upon some untranslatable but tickling morsel of wisdom, to reach its heart by quoting one of our own homely and pretty proverbs. Many of our old friends may be recognized in Japanese costume. Nothing so touches the Japanese heart and nature as the unexpected quotation of one of their old proverbs. Especially in the lecture-room does it give point and clinching force to a statement or explanation. When before his class, the teacher sees no response or sympathy in the earnest

but stolid faces of his Japanese pupils, and when every chosen arrow flies the mark, let a shaft feathered with one of their own proverbs be sent: instantly a gleam of intelligence, like a sunburst, or an assuring peal of merry laughter, proclaims the centre struck and success won.

I shall arrange together a few of the most familiar of Japanese proverbs. Lest some might think the Japanese plagiarize from us, or lest some "resemblance"-monger should catch a few to put in his "Index Rerum," or "familiar quotations," I would remark that, apparently, many of these proverbs were current in Japan before Cæsar was born or America discovered.

The following are expressions for what is impossible: To build a bridge to the clouds. To throw a stone at the sun. To scatter a fog with a fan. To dip up the ocean with the hand.

Like our "No rose without a thorn," is their "There's a thorn on the rose."

Good doctrine needs no miracles, is the Japanese rationalist's arrow against the Buddhist bonzes.

The fly seeks out the diseased spot, as people do in their neighbors' character.

As different as the moon is from a tortoise. (Cheese, green or otherwise, is not made or eaten by the Japanese.)

The natives of the Islands in the Four Seas are better boatmen than cooks, too many of whom spoil the broth, but, With too many boatmen, the boat runs up a hill.

The universal reverence of youth for age is enjoined in this: Regard an old man as thy father.

The fortune-teller can not tell his own fortune.

The doctor does not keep himself well.

Some men can do more than Goldsmith's school-master: They can argue until a crow's head becomes white.

A narrow-minded man or bigot looks at the heavens through a reed, or a needle's eye.

Our "cat in a strange garret" is metamorphosed into the more dignified figure of A hermit in the market-place.

The dilatory man seeing the lion, begins to whet his arrows. The beaten soldier fears even the tops of the tall grass. Fighting sparrows fear not man.

Only a tidbit to a ravenous mouth. (Said when the little tidbit Denmark flies down the huge gullet of Prussia; or when Saghalin falls into Russia's maw.)

By losing, gain.

Give opportunity to genius.

To give an iron club to a devil is to give riches to a bad man.

While the hunter looks afar after birds, they fly up and escape at his feet.

The ignorant man is gentle.

Don't give a *ko-ban* to a cat.

Akin to "The heart knoweth its own bitterness" are The sage sickens; The beautiful woman is unhappy.

Every one suffers either from his pride or sinfulness.

Even a calamity, left alone for three years, may turn into a fortune.

No danger of a stone being burned.

Even a running horse needs the whip.

An old man's cold water—*i. e.*, out of place, unreasonable. The Japanese nearly always wash their hands and faces with hot water, and old men invariably do so. For an old man, then, to wash with cold water, or for one to bring him cold water, is decidedly *mal à propos*.

Birds flock on the thick branches.

The fox borrowed the tiger's power.

Giving wings to a tiger.

Dark as the lantern's base, while the light streams far abroad. (People must go to a distance to learn the news about things at home. This is emphatically true about residents in Japan who read home newspapers.)

Heaven does not kill a man. (No one is utterly crushed by calamity.)

A curse comes not from a god with whom one has no concern. (Men are not to be punished by a god of whom they have never heard.)

Like jumping into the fire with a bundle of wood. (Especially used of a small nation going to war against a large one, only to be "gobbled up.")

Having inquired seven times, believe the common report.

Even the worm that eats smart-weed, to his taste. ("Every one to his liking." "No accounting for taste.")

Was it a wife comparing the attentions of her husband before and after marriage who coined this proverb, or heaved it as a sigh? It tells a sad tale of a woman who has borne mother-pain and marriage cares only to be rewarded by coldness. In Japan, the unmarried girls only wear the red petticoat, which peeps out so prettily at times, or

glistens through the summer dress of silken crape. After marriage, they doff this virginal garment; and as it was with Whittier's, so with the Japanese Maud Muller, "care and sorrow and childbirth-pain" leave their trace on the once blooming face and willowy form, in which her partner no longer delights. Alas! what a tale does this proverb tell: Love leaves with the red petticoat!

When people say "as ugly as sin," meaning thereby as ugly as Milton's hag, and suppose that the blind bard's conception of ugliness eclipses every other, they have, most evidently, never looked upon the face of the Japanese lord of Jigoku, or the hells, of which the Buddhists count one hundred and twenty-eight. To say that his face is hideous or describe it in adjectives, is to damn with faint praise the native imagination that could conceive such a terror. What I mean by reference to this demon, who is called Ema, is to give point to the Japanese version of our homely reference to the man who will have his fun, but "must pay the fiddler." The proverb by which every steady-going Japanese exults at the end of the fast and, perhaps fine-looking young man who sports on credit, is, When the time comes to settle up, you'll see Ema's face.

Which does the following recall—the ostrich, which, hiding its head, thinks itself safe, or the youth who reads ghost-stories till his blood curdles, but who, by covering up in the bedclothes, feels safe? The proverb, The head is concealed, but the back is exposed, is applied by the Japanese to all who, to flee from spooks, and to guard against lightning, hide in the dark or under their coverlets.

Here is an exquisite bit of philosophy, which shows that "travels at one's fireside," or what Emerson has taught of seeing at home all that travelers behold abroad, are not strange ideas in Japan: The poet, though he does not go abroad, sees all the renowned places.

Some one has said of the sage: "He keeps his child's heart." All know Wordsworth's line, which is approximated in this: The child of three years keeps his heart till he is sixty.

The idea contained in the saying, "Talk of an angel, and you will hear the rustling of his wings," or "Speak of the Devil," etc., is confined only to the genus *Homo* in the Japanese proverb: Talk of a person, and his shadow appears.

Sydney Smith condensed a volume of dietetic hygiene in his exact statement that "Some men dig their graves with their teeth." The complement of that is found in this: Disease enters by the mouth; or, The mouth is the door of disease.

The following are all in the form of a simile: Like walking on thin ice (like a politician before election-day); To give a thief a key. Like scratching the foot with the shoe on (can not reach the seat of trouble). Like placing a child near a well. One hair of nine oxen (small fraction). Like the crow that imitated the cormorant (he tried to dive in the water, and was drowned). Like spitting against the wind (said of a wicked slander against a good man). The decree of the mikado is like perspiration; it can never go back ("Firm as the laws of the Medes and Persians").

Proverbs, like certain kinds of money, vary in the amount and rapidity of their circulation. A class of Japanese proverbs, such as "The frog in the well knows not the great ocean," which lay almost forgotten in the national memory for centuries, has come forth, and is now the circulating medium of those who bandy the retorts applicable to old fogies and old foggism. The conservatives who impede or oppose reform in Japan, claiming that Japan is all-sufficient in herself, are usually styled "frogs" by the young blades who have been abroad and seen the world beyond Japan, who also refer to the past as the time when that country was "in a well."

There are several other proverbs like that of the "well-frog;" but they depend for their interest upon references to things not easily explained by mere translation. The "great ocean," however, mirrors itself in the Japanese mind ever as the symbol of immensity. Thus: A drop of the ocean is our "drop in the bucket." To dam up the great ocean with the hand. The ocean does not mind the dust (a great man lives down slander). The ocean, being wide, can not be all seen at once (a great subject can not be treated fairly by a bigot). To dip out the water of the ocean with a small shell.

The Japanese have a lively sense of the iniquity of ingratitude: Better nourish a dog than an unfaithful servant. To have one's hand bitten by the dog it feeds.

That paternal solicitude is not unknown in the land of Great Peace, is evinced by these: Childbirth is less painful than anxiety about children. It is easier to beget children than to care for them. Catching a thief to find him your own son.

Don't trust a pigeon to carry grain. (Don't send one man to bring back another from a place of pleasure, lest he also be tempted.)

If in a hurry, go round. ("The longest way round is the shortest way home." "The more hurry, the less speed.")

The spawn of frogs will become but frogs.

By saving one cash (one one-hundredth of a cent) lose a hundred (one tempō). Cash wise, tempō foolish.

Only a tailor's (dyer's) promise.

The walls have ears. Pitchers have spouts.

Deaf men speak loudly.

There is no medicine for a fool.

You can not rivet a nail in potato custard.

He wishes to do both—to eat the poisoned delicacy and live.

By searching the old, learn the new.

Once I asked some of our students whether there was any Japanese proverb which answered to the old English one, "Happy is the man whose father has gone to the devil." Several of them answered with this familiar one: *Jigoku no sata mo, kané shidai*—the tortures of hell are graded according to the amount of money one has; or, briefly and literally, even hell's judgments are according to money.

The Buddhists, like the mediæval priests in Europe, sell their masses at a high price. Happy the dying rich man, but woe betide the poor! In most Japanese Buddhist temples, as in Roman churches in Europe, a box hangs up to receive cash for the mutual benefit of the damned and the priests—especially the latter.

The rat-catching cat hides her claws.

If you keep a tiger, you will have nothing but trouble.

An ugly woman shuns the looking-glass.

Poverty leads to theft.

To aim a gun in the darkness. In vain.

The more words, the less sense.

Like the peeping of a blind man through a hedge.

A charred stick is easily kindled.

Who steals money, is killed; who steals a country, is a king.

If you do not enter the tiger's den, you can not get her cub.

In mending the horn, he killed the ox.

The best thing in traveling is a companion; in the world, kindness.

To draw off water to his own field. (Most of the fields in Japan are irrigated rice-fields. Water is always a desideratum. This proverb is like our "Feather his own nest.")

Famous swords are made of iron scrapers.

Like learning to swim in a field.

Though the magnet attracts iron, it can not attract stone.

Here is something almost Shakspearian: The gods have their seat on the brow of a just man.

If you say to him "gently," he will say "slam."

A sixth-day camellia. (A great flower festival comes on the fifth of a certain month. To bring your flower on the sixth day is to bring it a day after the fair.)

Now sinking, now floating. ("Such is life.")

Poke a canebrake, and a snake will crawl out.

Like carrying a cup brimful.

To feed with honey; *i. e.*, to flatter.

Proof is better than discussion.

Use the cane before you fall down.

Like casting a stone at an egg.

A roving dog runs against a stick. (A man willing to work will surely find employment.)

To avoid the appearance of evil three proverbs are given: Don't wipe your shoes in a melon-patch. Don't adjust your cap while passing under a pear-tree. Don't stay long when the husband is not at home.

A bad report runs one thousand ri (two thousand three hundred and thirty-three miles).

Lust has no bottom.

The world is just as a person's heart makes it.

Send the child you love most on a journey. (To save him from being spoiled by indulgence.)

Cast the lion's cub into the valley. Let the pet son travel abroad.

Give sails to dexterity.

He conceals a sword under a laugh.

To make two enemies injure each other.

I have never heard of any Japanese "Samivel" receiving monitory advice concerning "vidders;" but Japanese fathers often throw out this caveat to their sons when contemplating marriage: Beware of a beautiful woman; she is like red pepper.

The good bonzes sometimes preach rather long sermons. Their shaven-pated hearers do not snap their hunting-case watches under the pulpit. Nevertheless, this is what they say and think. They often test a speaker's merit, and measure the soul of his wit, by his brevity. The unskillful speaker is long-winded; or, It takes a clever man to preach a short sermon.

The following is said by an educated idolater, who worships the deity beyond the image, the pious sculptor, or the sneerer at all idolatry. Making an idol, does not give it a soul.

If you hate any one, let him live.

As there are plenty of hypocrites in Japan, but no crocodiles, our zoological metaphor is altered. Lachrymal shams are called "a devil's tears."

A clumsy fellow commits *hara-kiri* with a pestle.

Live under your own hat, is the Japanese expression for "Be content," or "Let well-enough alone."

They extinguish meddling busybodies, or those who talk too much, by saying, "Make a lid for that fool; cover him up."

The women of Japan have tongues. I knew several old shrews who used their husbands as grindstones to sharpen a certain edge-tool which they kept in their mouth. Either a Japanese carpenter or one having an eye for metronomics first noticed this brilliant fact, that The tongue three inches long can kill a man six feet high.

Give victuals to your enemy. (The word translated "victuals" means food for animals, such as beasts, birds, fishes, etc., or *bait*; and some Japanese say it should read, "Give bait to your enemy"—*i. e.*, revenge yourself on him skillfully, by stratagem.)

A cur that bravely barks before its own gate. (So that it may run inside, in case it catches a Tartar.)

Even a monkey sometimes falls from a tree.

To rub salt on a sore. ("Adding insult to injury.")

Excess of politeness becomes impoliteness.

A blind man does not fear a snake. ("Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.")

Poverty can not overtake diligence.

The heron can rise from the stream without stirring up the mud. (Delicacy, tact.)

Adapt the preaching to the hearer.

If you call down a curse on any one, look out for two graves. ("Curses, like young chickens, always come home to roost.")

As string for our bouquet, here is something which, whether proverb or not, has a meaning: When life is ruined for sake of money's preciousness, the ruined life cares naught for the money.

There is no teacher of Japanese poetry. ("The poet is born, not made.")

Hearing is paradise; seeing is hell. (Description *v.* reality.)

When men become too old, they must obey the young. (Said especially of the old nations, such as Japan and China; they must, and ought to, accept the civilization of the younger Western nations.)