

JAPANESE SONGS AND FOLK-LORE.

BY JAMES IRVING CRABBE.

THE songs of a nation afford a fair idea of the standard of culture and æsthetic taste as well as of the social peculiarities of the singers. The more insular or isolated the nationality or race the greater will be the poetic peculiarities. And of no race is this more noticeable than of the Japanese. They are poetic by reason perhaps of the scenic beauties of their island home and because they are endowed with an instinctive love of the beautiful in nature. No other people in the world have a keener appreciation of the æsthetic or so greatly love the land of their birth. It is not an affectation for the peasant or coolie to pause on the ledge of a romantic ravine and draw the attention of the American or European traveler to the beauty of the scene. From the prince to the beggar there is a sincere love of the shapely Fuji San, one of the most graceful mountains in the world (if one may be allowed the use of the adjective), a love and affection developed in earliest youth which endures till death.

“What is my last wish?” said a Japanese poet, “It is that my last sight, ere I change my world, may rest on Fuji’s beauteous cone!”

This intense love of nature finds abundant expression in the artist as well. It is noteworthy, then, that the popular songs are filled with references to the beauty of rock, mountain, stream, or tree, and these are always found combined with protestations of love and friendship.

One of the most popular song-books is that of Teika Kio, a songs and folk-lore of Japan, and more it is the brand motive of the nobleman who flourished about seven hundred years ago. He collected and compiled odes that had been sung for at least two centuries prior to his time. His book, called *Steps to the Summit of the Hundred Odes of a Hundred Poets*, (or, in Japanese, *Hyak Nin*

Is'-shiu Mine No Kake-hashii) can be found in every home in the Island Empire. Some of these have been translated into English, but not very successfully, for one reason because classic Japanese is so replete with double meanings, similes, and references to flowers and scenery as to allow a variety of renderings.

Naturally this redundancy of meaning has made punning a fine art, so to speak, in Japan. Even in the affairs of everyday life the student of the Japonesque will note this tendency. For instance, the lover who changes his mind sends to the former object of his devotions a maple leaf which tells the story of his change of heart, for "momiji" (maple) also means change, probably because the maple is the first tree to feel and show the effects of the approach of winter. This method of "getting the mitten" is certainly more poetical than the Western plan, though perhaps not more satisfactory to the fair recipient.

An example of translation of one of the most familiar odes may be of interest. It is called "The Cherry Blossom" and was written by Ki No Tsurayuki, who was a court poet in Japan when King Alfred of England was a child.

"The comrades of my early days
 Their former friend indifferent view,
 Who with a wond'ring eye doth gaze
 On th' village that of old he knew
 So well. O flower! thy fragrancancy
 Alone familiar seems to me."

The poet after a long absence from home returns to find himself a stranger and the only familiar object is the fragrant wild cherry.

In the following ode, written by Fujiwara (A. D. 910-974), the genuine love-song is given:

*"Kimi ga tame
 Oshika razarishi
 Inochi sahe
 Nagaku mo gana to
 Omoikera kana."*

"Ere I, dear maid, had worshipped thee,
 A sad, uncared-for life was mine:
 O may long years be granted me
 Now that my heart, O maid, is thine."

These odes will afford a fair idea of the culture attained by this interesting nation at a period of the world's history when the Anglo-Saxon race was emerging from savagery.

The poetic instinct has not died out among the Japanese, although since the feudal system passed away and the mercantile and commercial spirit has been introduced, much of the poetry and the inspiration of nature-love has evanesced. It is too often so in the workaday world that utilitarianism and the beautiful whether in art or in song are found to be incompatible.

A striking instance of the lyric tendencies of the Japanese was given to the writer. One summer's day he was acting as cicerone to a young Japanese gentleman in Jackson Park, Chicago. The floral wealth of the parterres filled the young man's heart to the brim; "O, if I had but enough English to write a poem of those flowers!" he exclaimed, when we went from one beautiful display to another.

No other nation has so rich a treasury of folk-lore as the Japanese, or has such a wealth of myth and romance. With them the national religions, Shintoism and Buddhism, have been so intertwined that it is impossible to separate myth, romance, and history. (As an example of this we find that His Imperial Majesty, the Mikado, is descended in an unbroken line from the sun.*) These religions although differing in nearly every other respect the one from the other are alike in encouraging the belief that the lower animals are psychologically associated with mankind. The Shintoist believes that the fox, the tiger, and other animals occasionally assume human form sometimes for good, sometimes for evil purposes. A Totemism has thus been evolved which finds abundant expression in the realm of legend, song, and art. The Buddhist, likewise, has a great regard for our dumb friends. Transincorporation (sometimes spoken of as transmigration) of souls is reason sufficient for his friendliness for the animals and for the keen interest taken in them by the authors and artists of Japan. The strict Buddhist deems the killing of one of the lower animals, unless in self-defense, a crime equal to homicide, because the soul of a relative, perhaps, at all events a human soul, may be in the animal slain. With this vast realm of bird, beast, and fish to draw upon, it is little wonder that the folk-lore is rich and imaginative.

The Japanese variant of the story of Rip Van Winkle, a version of which may be found in the folk-lore of many nations, illustrates the Totemistic idea alluded to:

"Once upon a time there was a man who was so very pious that he spent most of his time between meals in praying. He

* There is in England a very intelligent class of people which believes that the present king is the lineal descendant of King David, the psalmist.

spent all his leisure, that is when he wasn't eating or sleeping, upon his knees. His wife was a practical sort of woman and drew her lord's attention to the fact that while he was praying she and the children were starving. The saintly man paid no attention to her remonstrances except to remind her that salvation was more important than food and so continued his devotions.

"At last, patience ceased to be a virtue and the 'Katrina' of the Orient, disgusted with her prayerful spouse, drove him from the home and bade him continue his prayers in the mountains. Thus evicted, the pious man wandered into an upland glade in a range of hills near his native village and was soon engaged in his favorite occupation of praying. Suddenly his attention was diverted from spiritual to temporal things.

"In a sheltered nook near where he knelt, two ladies attired in the rich garb of members of the Imperial Court sat in front of a small table playing a game of 'Go,' the Japanese equivalent for checkers. So ravishingly beautiful, so graceful and so skilful in their play were the fair ladies that the village saint forgot his prayers, his home, everything, and was soon absorbedly watching the game and the players. And as he watched, the sun set and the moon rose and then disappeared, and the seasons came and went and still he watched.

"At last came a crisis in the game. One of the ladies made a bad move which our pious friend noticed. 'Fair lady,' he exclaimed, 'you have made a mistake!' At the sound of his voice the players started in alarm, the 'Go' table went and the ladies became foxes and scurried away in a twinkling.

"Rising from his knees the saintly man returned to his native village. Not aware that he had been gone very long he finds that his family has passed into oblivion, and that he has been absent one hundred years!"

The story exists in several versions and different morals are deduced from it—one of which is characteristic of the Japanese love of ceremonious propriety, pointing out the bad taste of criticising another person's play.

* * * *

The *Mono-gatari* are the standard editions of Japanese romance, one of the most reliable being the *Taketori Mono-gatari*. This work was first issued about 1,000 years ago.

The heroine was discovered by a venerable man when she was but three inches in height and had her habitat in a joint of a bamboo. The old gentleman adopted the fairy as his daughter and had

her finely educated. When she eventually made her debut in the upper circles of society her celestial beauty and rare accomplishments turned the heads of all the marriageable noblemen of the day, even the reigning Mikado being among her suitors. To the astonishment and grief of her father she refuses all offers. Pressed for the reason for this singularity she explained that she was an exile from the moon whence she was banished for an act of disobedience. When the period of her banishment had expired her moonly father sent a flying chariot and a fairy army to conduct her home in formal procession. This was accomplished in spite of two thousand soldiers who at the command of the Mikado guarded the house. As a parting gift she left to her Imperial lover a poem explaining the reason why she could not marry him and the elixir of immortality. However, the love-sick monarch did not care to prolong his life. He ascended the Fuji-Yama, the loveliest spot of all Japan, where he read once more the maiden's farewell message which he burned, and wearied of life poured the elixir into the flames. Thus, the fire of Fuji-Yama acquired the immortality which the Mikado refused to possess.