

YAKUMO KOIZUMI: THE INTERPRETER OF JAPAN.

BY K. K. KAWAKAMI.

*“Yakumo tatsu;
Izumo yaye-gaki;
Tsuma gome ni
Yaye-gaki tsukuru:
Sono yaye-gaki wo.”*
“Many clouds appear:
Eightfold clouds a barrier raise
Round the wedded pair,
Manifold the clouds stand guard;
Oh, that eightfold barrier-ward.”

IN Izumo, the Land of the Issuing of Clouds, Susa-no-wo-no-mi-koto, in the ages of the gods, built a bridal palace. Clouds rose up thence, and the god-bridegroom sang the august song of “Eightfold Clouds.” Here it was that Japanese history first gleamed through the mist of mythology. Attracted by its enchantment, an imaginative soul started on a pilgrimage from the far West—from the shores of the Atlantic, unto this Land of the Issuing of Clouds, a land of awesome ghost-stories, of marvelous traditions, of grotesque yet charming folklore. Short in stature, the pilgrim had but one eye, carrying about him a weird and unearthly air. His poetic temperament was so captivated by the unspeakable charm of the land that he renounced his Christian name, adopting the Japanese name “Yakumo,” the very first word of the sacred song, “Eightfold Clouds.” Touched with the rare picturesqueness and graceful simplicity of Japanese life, he married a daughter of a samurai, whose family name, Koizumi, he then assumed.

Ere long, Yakumo Koizumi converted himself into a subject of the Mikado, determined to devote his maturer years to those intimate delineations and charming pictures of Oriental life that were destined to give the Western nations a new conception of the Eastern spirit, revealing noble qualities, and inspiring ideals either unde-

veloped by Occidental civilization or overshadowed by its commercialism.

It was in the fifth month of the twenty-third year of Meiji (1890) that this strange pilgrim, whose original name was Lafcadio Hearn, first set his foot in Japan. His first day in Tokyo was one of those Japanese spring-days of divine beauty, converting the landscape into a bland expanse of soft lucidity under the wide canopy of a speckless azure sky. Thither he arrived as correspondent of some American newspaper syndicate, but it was not long before he severed his connections with the syndicate, deciding to remain indefinitely in this fascinating land.

Soon he wended his way to the Land of the Issuing of Clouds, and in the autumn of the same year we find Hearn teaching a high-



MATSUYUE IN THE LAND OF THE ISSUING OF CLOUDS.

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school in Matsuyue, the metropolitan city of this historic province. Here he made a little Japanese home with his Japanese bride, winning and dainty, yet with all the noble qualities fostered by a Spartan training of old. The view from this home was superb. Before his tiny paper windows glimmer the broad, placid waters of the grand Shinji Lake, framed in a dreamy dim gray of hills and peaks, while, skirting his garden, the grand Ohashi River glides slowly and majestically toward the lake, tremulously mirroring the trees and houses upon its further side. It was here that Hearn wrote the most of the chapters in *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*—his first book written in Japan.

In the Matsuyue high-school Hearn was required to teach Eng-

lish composition, conversation, and pronunciation. The work would have been a tiresome routine, were it not for the fact that, through the medium of compositions and conversations in the class-room he strove to unearth the hidden treasures of legends and traditions, to coax out the psychological peculiarities of his strange pupils, to enter into the emotional life of a race much read of, yet all unknown. Thus, he took a profound interest in the naive, often unintelligible, writings of his youthful students which he scanned with the eyes of a keen critic.

Hearn's stay in Matsuye did not last longer than a year. The harshness of the elements and the winter blast sweeping the northern coast, told upon his constitution so harshly that before a second winter had set in he was forced to leave this historic town, with all its endearing surroundings. Accompanied by his dutiful Japanese spouse, Hearn journeyed thence to the city of Kumamoto to accept a position in a higher middle school, a counterpart of the German *gymnasium*. The metropolis of an island stretching in a southerly direction from the outlet of the world-famous Inland Sea, Kumamoto enjoys the mild climate which was essential to the health of the *litterateur* long accustomed to semi-tropical climes. Here his work was of more advanced nature than in Matsuye, and included English rhetoric, conversation, history of English literature, and Latin.

These six years in Kumamoto were the most fruitful period of his literary career. His crowning works *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (1894), *Out of the East* (1895), *Kokoro* (1896), and *Gleanings in Buddha Fields* (1897), all appeared in this period.

The pervading subtlety and exquisite delicacy of his style and workmanship are perhaps yet further enhanced in his later writings, but by far the most serious of his thoughts,—his exposition of the Japanese spirit,—his critical study of Japanese estheticism,—his philosophical examination of Buddhist philosophy and Shinto cult,—his attempt, in short, to interpret Oriental life and ideals in the light of modern theory of evolution as expounded by Spencer, Huxley, and others, are all clearly set forth in these four books. The first, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, though essentially descriptive, is yet replete with those thought-provoking observations, which bespeak a man of rare imaginative reach and extraordinary insight. In those early years, devoted to the production of this book, Hearn was no doubt bewildered with the maze of this strange world which must have appeared to him a marvelous fairy-land full of baffling enigmas. But after a sojourn of four years our pilgrim sees Japan

without its glamor. Thus, in the three books, following *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, we find the most admirable expositions of the inner springs of Japanese life, which have so far issued from the pen of foreign writers. In *Kokoro*, in *Out of the East*, in *Gleanings in Buddha Fields*, he has infused a unique spirit into English literature in his delicately chiseled style reflecting what his critic, Mr. Paul E. More, aptly terms "the meeting of three ways,"—a fusion into one compound of Hindu philosophy, the esthetic sense of Japan and the Western theory of evolution. In soft reverberating eloquence, the true significance of Karma and Nirvana is unfolded in the light of empiric philosophy, and in terms of evolutionary psychology we are apprised that the tiny mortuary tablet in the household sanctuary and the miniature lamplet nightly kindled before it are the emblem, indeed the fountain of the strong national spirit inherent in the Japanese. Even his later *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation*, regarded by many as his monumental work, possesses perhaps no greater merit than these early works, save that it systematizes what was there set forth, linking them together into one thread of historical discourses.

But to come back to Kumamoto. Here Hearn continued his Japanese life, declining the offer of an official residence built after the Western fashion. His paper-screened home, his dainty *futon*, his picturesque *kimono*, his tiny smoking-pipes, his artistic landscape garden—these and many other things touched with the simple serene taste of his Japanese wife, were adapted to realize a genuine Japanese home. As Hearn deeply loved everything Japanese, so intensely did he dislike those ugly foreign things so common in new Japan. His antipathy towards the Christian missionaries and churches was truly invulnerable. In fact, he had vowed never to permit a church to appear in his sight, and avoided all intercourse with his missionary colleague in the Kumamoto school. His conviction was that in the practice of virtue, in purity of life and outward devotion, the Japanese quite outdo the Christians and have nothing whatever to gain by conversion to Christianity, morally or otherwise. "Old Japan came nearer," says Hearn, "to the achievement of the highest moral ideal than our far more evolved societies can hope to do for many a hundred years." To him, those simple, happy beliefs of the natives were far preferable to the Western fancies of "an unforgiving God and an everlasting hell." Even the commonest superstitions of the simple-minded people were, to him, of rarest value as fragments of the unwritten literature of their primitive efforts to find solutions for the riddle of the Unseen—

some of which are even comparable for beauty of fancy to those Greek myths which still furnish an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the noblest of our Western poets. He was not blind to the darker side of Japanese life, but believed it compared very favorably with the reversed side of Western civilization. To be brief, his attitude towards Japanese life is summed up in this single sentence, "It has its foibles, its follies, its vices, its cruelties; yet the more one sees of it, the more one marvels at its extraordinary goodness, its miraculous patience, its never-failing courtesy, its simplicity of heart, its intuitive charity."

Six summers had passed before Hearn resigned his position in the Kumamoto higher middle school to assume the chair of English literature at the Imperial University of Tokyo. In the University,



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KAZUWO.

Hearn's oldest son.



SUZU.

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Hearn's fourth child and only daughter.

he was an inspiring teacher, sparing no effort to encourage his students. He had come to understand that to be a teacher in the full Oriental sense it was not enough to lecture skilfully,—not enough, indeed, to impart his knowledge or his art as a trader sells his merchandise for a certain price. No, he must do something more, something nobler than that. In days of old the Japanese teacher was expected to take a parental interest in his students, to look after their welfare with fond sympathy even at the sacrifice of his own happiness and comfort. To his pupils, he was an instructor, a guardian, a confidant, a wise and affectionate adviser. A precious bequest of a vanishing world, this beautiful relation between the teacher and his students has not yet wholly disappeared before the

devastating onslaught of Western commercialism. This the foreign teacher must understand first of all, or else he will surely toil in vain, and this in spite of his utmost endeavors to come into touch with the emotional life of his students, or to evoke that interest in certain studies which renders possible an intellectual tie. In fact, many a foreign professor, long resident in Japan, often wonders why he is so utterly unable to come into close contact with his students, why they so persistently maintain an attitude of apparent indifference towards his efforts, finding himself, as our author observes, "in the state of Antarctic explorers, seeking, month after month, to no purpose, some inlet through endless cliffs of everlasting tie." In Lafcadio Hearn we find a gratifying exception. His students, both in Kumamoto and Tokyo, looked upon him with fond



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IWAWO.
Hearn's second son.



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KIYOSHI.
Hearn's third son.

esteem, referring to him with the touching honorific *sensei*, expressive of profound Oriental reverence toward the teacher. When the Imperial University decided to discontinue Hearn's chair, all his students rose in strong protest against this decision of the Government. Their protest proved unavailing, and Hearn's connection with the university was severed in the spring of 1904, never to be resumed. Upon his death, a literary magazine under the auspices of the university published a memorial number devoting its entire pages to the life and reminiscences of the deceased scholar.

During his seven years in the Imperial University, Hearn published six works, *Shadowings* (1900), *A Japanese Miscellany* (1901), *Kotto* (1902), *Exotics and Retrospectives* (1898), *Ghostly Japan* (1899), and *Kwaidan* (1904). The greater portion of his last book

Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation (1904), was also written in this period. All these books, excepting the last one, are largely made up of short stories, legends, folk-lore, and popular songs common in Japan, which the author interprets with his imaginative sense of the weird and picturesque coupled with the Spencerian philosophy. Entertaining, and at the same time instructive, and with all the delicacy of mellowed workmanship, they can hardly be compared in depth of thought to his earlier works already noted. *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation* contains doubtless many suggestive ideas, but only after making great concessions could we call it an authoritative work. It is easy to point out many a sweeping conclusion which is scarcely warrantable from a sound Japanese point of view. Nevertheless, it constitutes an invaluable contribution to the critical study of Japanese history still deplorably neglected by native scholars. In this book, as in others, Hearn looks back with reluctant eyes towards a disappearing world governed by the simple code of *Samurai* whose moral precepts were welded together by the Shinto cult and the teachings of Buddha and Confucius. "Where Japan has remained," says he, "true to her old moral ideals, she has done nobly and well; where she has needlessly departed from them, sorrow and trouble have been the natural consequences." But was it possible for Japan to plunge into the whirl of economic competition—and she was bound so to do if the basis of her new departure was to remain solid—without at the same time radically changing her moral conceptions? Is it not unreasonable to expect the nation to retain the graceful simplicity, the amiability of manners, the daintiness of habits, the delicate tact displayed in pleasure-giving, the bright smile and courteous bow at once so artless and so faultless—to retain all these and other charming old customs and ideas, when her green valleys are murked by the sooty breath of countless factory chimneys and her sunny towns and picturesque villages are startled by the busy tumult of the spinning jenny, the power-loom weaving, the steam-hammer, and the locomotive engine? Does not the introduction of the factory system, the advent of a constitutional government inevitably spell the dissolution of those ideas, however winsome, which are the fruitage of a paternalistic conception of society? And is not the knell of the old régime an invocation withal for a new spirit, on the whole more salutary than the old? Verily, in the same breath lamenting the passing away of the old Japan, Hearn unmistakably admits that without individualism no modern nation can grow prosperous, that the future Japan must rely upon the efficacy of this new principle for

success in the universal struggle for predominance, political and economic.

Hearn was essentially an ascetic soul, restricting his acquaintances into a very narrow circle. Many a foreigner, attracted by his literary fame, wended his way to the suburban home at Tokyo only to meet with a blunt rebuff at his portal. At the Imperial University he seldom participated in the conversation in the private chamber where the professors retired between hours, but alone would direct his steps to the campus, strolling among the trees or poring upon the face of the pond. In later years he completely withdrew from society, even denying himself the comradeship of old and tried friends, even of those to whom he had in an earlier period dedicated his works. It is not perhaps altogether just to liken Hearn, as does an American critic, to a sensitive plant which can not bear a breath of rudeness. His asceticism was the asceticism of many original thinkers whose preoccupation permitted no leisure for relaxation of society. When some of his former students undertook to organize a society for the study of English literature, Hearn addressed to them a touching letter, earnestly opposing their undertaking. "The study of literature or art," wrote he, "is never accomplished by societies of this kind. The study of literature and art requires and depends upon individual effort, and original thinking. The great Japanese who wrote famous books and painted famous pictures did not need societies to help them. They worked in solitude and silence. No good literary work can come out of a society—no original work, at least. Social organization is essentially opposed to original effort, to individual effort, to original thinking, to original feeling. A society for the study of literature means a society organized so as to render the study of literature, or the production of literature absolutely impossible."

Not only did Hearn object to the organization of a literary society, but he did not encourage the students to choose literature or philosophy as a special study, believing that Japan for at least fifty years to come must bend all her energies to practical matters. Writing to one of his students in Matsuye high school, he once expressed the same opinion as follows:

"I think you ought not to study what would not be of practical use to you in after-life. I am always glad to hear of a student studying engineering, architecture, medicine—or any branch of applied sciences. I do not like to see all the fine boys turning to the study of law instead of to the study of science or technology. Hundreds of students leave the University without any practical ability

to make themselves useful—their whole education has been of no use to them, because it has not been practical. Men can succeed in life only by their ability to do something, and three-fourths of the university students can do nothing.”

Hearn was probably led to this belief by the disappointing career in after life of most of the Japanese students of literature or metaphysics or psychology, in marked contrast to the conspicuous success of the scholars of applied science. In a comparatively brief period, Japan has achieved signal progress in the field of medical and military, and engineering and physical, sciences, and even practical law and administration. In the case of literature and philosophy it has been otherwise. That the Japanese mind lacks idealism, taking but little interest in philosophical problems, Hearn does not believe, as does many a cursory observer of Japan; but he points out that the young Japan, like the United States of some forty years ago, is impelled and ought to absorbingly engage herself in practical undertakings.

Hearn died at the age of fifty-six but a few months after his withdrawal from the Imperial University, leaving four children with his Japanese wife. His funeral ceremony was conducted in strict observance of the Buddhist rites at the Buddhist monastery, Jishoin, Tokyo. In the register of the monastery, you search in vain for the name of “Lafcadio Hearn,” but an acolyte apprises you that a foreigner by the quaint name of “Yakumo Koizumi” lies interred here, leading you presently into the inner sanctuary where stands a tiny lacquered tablet bearing in gold the “spirit-name” of the deceased parishioner in artistic Chinese ideographs. The acolyte then curiously remarks, “I wonder what his original nationality is; he seems to have come from everywhere—some say he was a Greek, some a Frenchman, some an Englishman, but many believe he was an American.” Verily, Yakumo Koizumi was a citizen of the world—this devout herald of Japanese culture to the Occidental nations.