SONGS OF JAPAN.

POEMS OF MADAME SAISHO ABSUKO.

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY THE LATE ARTHUR LLOYD.

[Madame Saisho was for many years a lady in attendance on the empress, being appointed to the imperial household almost immediately after the marriage of the emperor and empress. She won the esteem of all who knew her, and was often consulted about matters of importance, for her judgment was very sound. She died several years ago.]

_The Woodman's Return in the Evening._

With faggot on his back, and hook in hand,
The weary woodman leaves the upland slopes,
And seeks the cot that nestles, like a child,
Close to the mother-mountain's peaceful breast.
The gentle moon then rises from her lair
Behind the hill, to guide him on his way,
Through woods and darkling valleys, till he reach
That well-loved home where he may take his rest.

_Moon and Stars._

[The thought underlying this poem is that of the restoration. Soon after it had been accomplished, the _daimyō_ or barons of the various provinces surrendered their fiefs and territories to the central government, and thus made possible the unification of the country.]

The imperial moon with splendor fills the skies,
And earth rejoices. But the lesser lights
That ruled, each in his sphere, have hid themselves
For very shame, and modestly refuse
To match their paler fires with her bright beams.
The Cries of the Wild Geese.

[This poem also refers to the confusions of Japan in the seventies of last century, until the restored imperial power was able to make its influence effectively felt.]

What time the evening fell upon the land
With deepening shades, and wild disordered clouds,
We heard the wild geese crying in the fields;
But could not see them, till the imperial moon
Broke through the clouds and ordered all the sky.
Then o'er its face we saw them flitting by,
Or mirrored in the placid pool, and knew
How sovereign worth brings out the subjects' praise.
And servants shine in the true master's light.

A Moonlight Night.

My neighbor, poor prosaic soul, is going to bed;
I hear the shutters rattle and the bolts
Creak in their sockets. But this heavenly night,
With silver moonlight flooding all the air,
I cannot go to bed—I simply won't.

Kamenaga Shinnō.

[Kamenaga Shinnō was the son of the unfortunate Godaigo, the Charles I of Japan, who fought so valiantly to maintain the dignity of the crown. When his father's cause was almost lost, Kamenaga ("the Bamboo-Garden's Son") went to Kyushu where, in conjunction with Takemitsu Kikuchi, he raised an army and gave battle against the Daimyōs who held by the cause of the rebel Takanji. The loyalists were however defeated by Naouji Isshiki, one of Takanji's generals, and Takemitsu was slain. Kamenaga disappeared after the battle. It is supposed that he lost his life too. Tsukushi = Kyushu.]

The Bamboo-Garden's son, what time his sire
Stood long confronting adverse circumstance,
Went off to Tsugushi's isle, and lifting there
His father's standard, raised a host and fought!
Ah! had but Fortune smiled upon his arms,
The imperial court had ne'er been desolate.

Taira Munemori.

[Taira Munemori was a son of the famous Kiyomori, the prince of the Heike house. Taken prisoner by Yoritomo he received from his captor a hint...]
to save himself from disgrace by suicide. The hint was a disemboweled fish placed on a cooking-board and sent in to Munemori's prison. But Munemori was too stupid to understand the hint, or else lacked the courage to take his own life. He met his death therefore at the hands of the common executioner.

"The self-same pine that stood so high," is of course the family of the Heike or Taira, the wars between Heike and Genji being to Japanese history what the wars of the Roses are to English history, both in character and in time.

Branch of the self-same pine that stood so high
On the mount's topmost peak, he knew not how,
When all was lost, by voluntary act
To save his honor, and so fell at last
A victim of the headman's shameful axe.

Fujiwara Fujifusa.

[Just as in the English rebellion the royal cause lost a good deal owing to the light-hearted behavior of the court at Oxford, which had been intoxicated by the few successes at the commencement of the campaign, so the Emperor Godaigo, having succeeded in establishing himself at Kyoto, gave himself up to pleasure of all sorts and speedily lost all the advantages that he had gained. Fujiwara Fujifusa was Godaigo's faithful counsellor, and repeatedly warned his master of his folly. But his admonitions were unheeded, and at last one day he suddenly disappeared, having retired from a society which refused to hear him.]

A cuckoo crying in the undergrowth
Fringing the imperial lawns, and when men stop
To pick up stones to scare th'importunate bird
That vexes ears august with petulant cries,
No bird is to be seen: but still the sound
Of "cuckoo! cuckoo!" floating in the air.

Hōjō Yoshitoki.

[Hōjō Yoshitoki belonged to the family of the Kamakura regents who were mere vassals of the shogun, just as the shogun in the fourteenth century was a mere vassal of the emperor. The fact remains, however, that the Hōjō regents actually held in their hands the supreme sovereignty, both emperor and shogun being mere puppets in their hands. Hōjō Yoshitoki is credited with having designed to put an end to this anomalous state of affairs by raising himself to the imperial dignity, another instance, if one were required, of the shameless unveracity of the modern Bushidoists who maintain that such a thing as rebellion against the sovereign has never been known in Japan].

That crooked pine that grew upon the slopes
Of Kamakura's heights, what mind was his
To be transplanted to the cloud-girt throne,
And there to flourish?

*Tomoe.*

[Tomoe was the concubine of the brave warrior Yoshinaka, daimyo of Kiso, whose broken fortunes she followed to the very end. When Yoshinaka saw that no hope was left for him he persuaded Tomoe to leave him, which she did, demonstrating her faithfulness by retiring into a nunnery and refusing to form any fresh connections. For love of Yoshinaka, she was contented to be thrown aside and neglected like a worthless faggot.]

"Leave me," he said, "my faithful follower, Comrade in arms, sharer in all my woes, My day is done. I will not have it said That in the hour of black calamity, My thoughts were of my pleasures and of thee: Leave me." They parted: he to meet his death, She, widowed yet no widow, to a life Of cloistered solitude and chaste desire, A half-charred faggot, made of worthless twigs From that great pine that grew on Kiso's heights.

*A Chinese Tale.*

"The king will wed, let maids who fain would win His favor send their pictures, that the king May look upon them, and so make his choice." Then all the painters in the land were set To making flattering portraits for the king, Of ladies beautiful in form and face, In hair, in dress, and with enchanting smiles. But one alone declined the painter's arts, "Paint me," she said, "to life." And when the king Beheld the daub, hers was the foulest face. Then from the northern marches, from a chief Of savage hill-men came a message rude: "Send me," it said, "one of thy courtly dames To be my wife, or else"—No need was there To read the rest: the king and all his court (Effeminate, unnerved, unskilled in arms) Turned pale to think of that most fearful threat. And then the king, "That woman, foul of face, That pleased us not, we'll send her," and they laughed. And forthwith bade her pack her things and go.
Yet ere she went, the king, in kindlier mood,
Seeing she went to save the king from harm,
Resolved to see her, and so sent for her
To come into his presence, when, behold,
Her face was found the loveliest of them all,
As lovely as her deeds; and so she passed
Into the north. And ever and anon,
A sound, as of a ghostly four-stringed lute,
Sweeps through the palace chambers, and a voice,
“Fair in my face, and fairer in my deeds,
I go to save my Lord—speak well of me.”

Fulfilment of Desire is Not Always Happiness.
All day the sky lowered with leaden clouds,
And some said, “Good! the snow will come and change
Our world to silver.”

So it came, and lo!
They looked not at it, but round the fire
Sat shivering, till the sun should melt the snow.

The Mist on Lake Hakone.

[Madame Saisho was an attendant on the empress during the early days of the present reign, when the restoration of the imperial power had not yet been fully effected; and when there reigned in the country a confusion of which very few foreigners had any conception. This poem (or rather these poems, for I have here put together two songlets) shows that at headquarters there was always a feeling of confidence in the ultimate restoration of tranquility and peace.]

Thick lies the mist upon the mountain lake,
And all the lower heights are shut from sight
Behind me and before: perplexed in mind,
I stay my foot and ponder. Lo! I see
Kingship in Fuji raise his royal head
Far over all the mists, and on the lake
A boat with bellying sail is scudding fast
Before the wind. Soon this life-giving breeze
Will clear the mists, and show the mountain’s base.

Human Happiness.
Ah! deem not human happiness to lie
In Fortune’s singling thee above thy mates
To special privilege.
Yon grasshopper,
Whom Fate elected to his high estate,
And placed to sing in yonder gilded cage,
Think’st thou he’s happy? Nay, although thou bid
Him sing his native song in that strange place,
He can’t forget his freedom, and be sure
He’s yearning all the time for those lost fields
Wherein, a humble citizen, he took the air,
And chirruped as he leaped for want of thought.

*Life’s Oases.*

Ever and anon,
Life’s wint’ry path o’er snow and ice is cheered
By fair oases in the wilderness,
Like kindly Uji with its sheltering screen
Of kindly mountains where the flowers bloom
In cold midwinter and defy the blasts
Of all the jealous crew of winter winds.

*A Japanese Lucretia.*

He told his wicked love, and she, who knew
His brutal nature, feigned to give consent.
“But first,” said she, “my husband must be slain;
This night he lies alone.” In the dark hours,
His cruel blade in hand, the ruffian crept
To where a single sleeper lay outstretched,
Struck one swift blow, and gazed upon the dead—
Not him, but her. And he, the wicked earl,
Moved by the sight of one that gave her life
To save her lord from death, herself from shame,
Fled from the world, assumed monastic garb,
And sought by penances austere to gain
Heaven’s grudging pardon for a deed of shame.

*The Long Nights of Autumn.*

How long I thought the evenings when, at home,
My mother made me spend my leisure hours
In darning, mending, or embroidery!
And yet not half so long, methinks, as these
Dull autumn nights which never seem to end.
Yet why complain that the long autumn nights
Drag slowly through th' appointed tale of hours,
When cruel Fate stands ready with her shears
To cut, with one sharp snip, my thread of life?

*Autumn Nights in a Fishing Village.*

[The home-made cotton cloth, which is manufactured all over Japan, has to be beaten with wooden mallets to give it smoothness and gloss.]

The autumn days draw in, the nights are long,
And early gathering darkness drives men in
To fireside and hearth. Industrious hands
Bring out the mallet, and prepare the cloth
With much monotonous thumping for the mart.
A weary sound, yet one I love to hear:
It tells of honest work, that seeks to add
A well-earned penny to the household stock;
It tells of patient watching, when the wife
Waits for her lord's return from storm-tossed seas,
And scorns to wait with idly folded hands.
And, when the nights are cold, and reed-built huts
Let in the frosts, it tells of glowing cheeks,
And bodies warmed with healthful exercise
That gives contented minds and peaceful sleep.

*Autumn.*

'Tis not yet winter by the almanac:
But when old folks get full of aches and pains,
They don their winter clothes in autumn time,
And scorn appearances.

*The Autumn Moon.*

The white chrysanthemum is gemmed with dew;
Yet who would know it, if the imperial moon
Shone not to put the sparkles in the drops?

*Quail in Autumn.*

[This and the previous poem both refer to the common Japanese conception of the emperor as the motive power of all that is good in the nation.]

The quail are stirring in the grass; the breeze
Which wafts the sounds is fragrant: can it be
That, as when some great man, by nature shaped
For honored place, but forcibly constrained
By envious Fate, graces a lower sphere,
Ennobling all he touches, so there lurks
'Midst humbler weeds, some tall chrysanthemum,
Filling the waste with its august perfume?

*Autumn.*

What time the summer sun upon the plains
Scorched all the lower lands, and parched our throats
With burning thirst, how oft we climbed the hill,
And dipped our vessels in the ice-cold spring
That bubbles from the mountain, fresh and cool.
It bubbles still, but men forget its use:
Only the moon, constant in heat and cold,
Mirrors herself on its unbroken face.

*The Palace Moats in Winter.*

[The wildfowl on the palace moats are protected against the hunter.]

The palace moat is full of fowls to-day.
Perhaps the rising tide has swamped the ice
That fringed the beach, and the poor worried birds
Have fled from Nature's persecuting hand
To try the vaunted clemency of man.

*Hawking.*

*a.* In rain and snow, in wet or shine, I go
Hawking with my good lord; and habit makes
A second nature, so without a thought
I don my rain-coat now, and sally forth,
Because he wills to have me go with him.

*b.* I hear them singing over on the moor:
Presumably they've killed, and now my lord
Has given the men the wherewithal to drink
Success to huntsman, horse, and keen-eyed hawk.

¹This may refer to Madame Saisho's husband, but more probably to the Emperor. Hawking is a sport still practised in aristocratic circles, and Madame Saisho was all her life attached to the court.
c. They've had a good day's hunting on the moor:
The huntsmen are not weary, nor the steeds;
And e'en the hawks are fresh. 'Tis not success
That wearies, but the disappointed heart.

A Flutter Among the Birds.
The water fowl along the river's bank
Rise with excited cries and flutterings,
And much confusion, long drawn out,—and ere
They settle back again, the raft which caused
The hubbub, gently gliding on, has passed
Far down the river, out of sight and mind
Like some forgotten cause that, passing, leaves
Nought but a hollow party-cry behind.

The Cricket.
a. The farmer in his barn, these short cold days,
Threshes his rice, the while the cricket's song
Chirrups around. He knows, the artful knave,
On which side of his bread the butter lies.

b. The storm-cloud burst, and every other sound
Was silenced by the voice of wind and rain:
The storm hath ceased, and everywhere around
The dauntless cricket 'gins his song again.

The Cry of the Stags.
a. 'Tis sad to hear, upon the montain-side,
The stag call to his mate, and with that cry
To start from sleep; but lonelier far, to lie
Tossing at anchor in a little boat,
And hear the stag's cry o'er the darkling wave.

b. Just hear that stag that's calling to his mate
Upon the mountain side, now here now there:
I fear his wife is gadding—poor old boy!

[I believe these to refer to times when the husbands ("stags") were away on military service, e.g., the war with China or the Saigo Rebellion.]
Flowers in December.

Behold! 'Tis yet December, but the stalls
That line the streets at fair-time teem with plants
Already half in bloom, as though for them
Winter were past and gladsome spring had come.
Thus happy Hope grasps at the coming good,
As though 'twere hers already.

Preparing for the New Year.

Just now, in every house throughout the land,
The housewives ply relentless brooms and mops
To clear the soot and rust that, through the year,
Have clung to walls and rafters. Would they could
Sweep off my load of tiresome years as well.