

THE KNACK OF MAKING A JAPANESE LAUGH

By ADACHI KINOSUKE

Illustration From a TOKIO COMIC SUPPLEMENT



The American conception of a Japanese comic artist

IN SPITE of our critics there must be something human about us heathens in Japan. For we have laughed for nearly twenty-six centuries and do still laugh at the miseries and predicaments of others. And that is perhaps the broadest foundation stone underneath the old and scantily furnished structure which might be called Japanese Humor. In all our long, weary history our august ancestors have never achieved a lemon meringue pie. Therefore that refined masterpiece of humor so familiar to the fans of this enlightened land—Charlie Chaplin with his noble features solidly and squarely opposing the flight of a piece of the aforementioned pie—had never delighted our people over there before the invasion of American films.

Even with this painfully glaring handicap Japan may be able to hold her own against the United States or any other country in the variety and extravagance of her slapstick comedy. There is a humorous impression in America that the Japanese are a race suffering from super-refinement and that they are as stiff as the starch in their ceremonial costumes of ancient days. Evidently our American friends got the idea of our people from the fans, lacquer wares and Satsuma vases and from the solemn stupidities of our official class.

Refinement may have in some things, but not so abundantly in the realm of humor. Some years ago there lived in Tokio a scholar named Professor Basil H. Chamberlain. He knew us much better than we did ourselves, because it was his erudite delight to read us in the light of what the other peoples beyond the four seas thought and did. He wrote a small book which, in the judgment of many of us natives, has remained for generations and will remain for many more generations one of the biggest books on Japan. In his "Things Japanese" he defines Japanese humor as the mixture of "the broad jest, the outrageous pun, the practical joke, the loud guffaw. Quips, cranks and wanton wiles, snatches of half-meaningless song buffoonery, tomfoolery, high jinks of every sort—the very carnival of uproarious merriment."

There is a book which has enjoyed for centuries the reputation of being the one big fun book of the people of Japan. "Hizakurige" is its name, which cannot be Englished either correctly or gracefully (for it is not a correct or a graceful word in any language), but which might be rendered as "Shanks' Mare-ing It." It is the record of two heroic souls, Yajirobei and Kidabachi by name, the Japanese Mut and Jeff (absolutely penniless—that is, without funds of their own, but rather rich in the money in other men's pockets), shaking it from the storied Yedo of the Shogun down that historic highway, Tokaido, to the ancient flower capital of the Mikado, the present Kyoto.

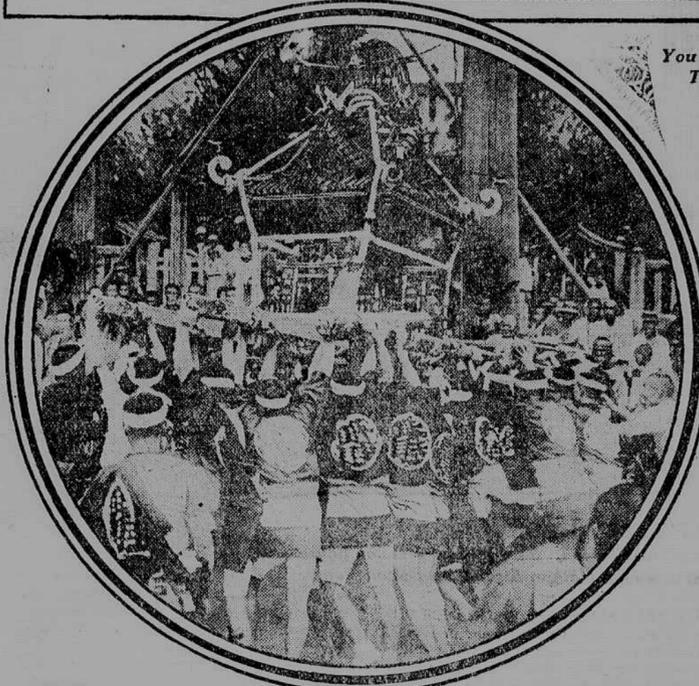
The classic was written by the Japanese Rabelais, who wrote under the pen name of Jippensha Ikkyu. Poor in worldly wealth, his two heroes were rich in that superb gift of the gods we sometimes call wit. And the featuring of these two things, the utter absence of money and the persistent presence of sharpest sort of wit, naturally mothered many a laugh. But from beginning to end and at all times it is that brand of fun so luminously severed by the definition of Professor Chamberlain quoted above. Here is a sample:

"One day, long, long after the sun had gone behind the western hills in his night robe of crimson and gold, our travelers two, Yaji and Kida (for short), found themselves at the entrance of a village inn. They were pale with hunger and gray with the dust of travel. Above all the wealth of the world they longed for the steaming hot consolations of a regular Japanese bath. When the maid announced that the bath was ready neither Yaji nor Kida cared very much for the first prize in politeness. Yaji just naturally beat Kida to it, simply because he happened to be the nimble

of the two. He stripped himself with a dispatch worthy of a better cause and faced the bathtub. It was then all his hilarity vanished. He had never seen a bathtub like that before in all his life—and no wonder. It was one of those in fashion in the districts near Kyoto; an entirely strange creation to the children of Yedo of those days. The huge wooden barrel was built in squarely over the stove. It was bottomed with copper plate, and the fire was built directly under it, so that it took very little time to heat the water. The bath barrel was fitted with a perforated wooden bottom, which was so made to float on top of the water when no one was in the bath. In that manner it served also as the lid while the water was being heated. The bather was expected to step on it as he entered the bath and sink it with his weight till it rested against the copper bottom. Now Yaji had been used to the Yedo style of a tub fitted with a wooden lid, which the bather takes off as he enters the bath. Naturally enough, Yaji put his fingers through some of the holes made in the wooden bottom floating atop of the water and lifted it out of the tub, and with the impatience of a weary traveler about to enjoy an earthly paradise of unspeakable bliss leaped into it. He went in like a flash, but he came out much quicker. His stay in the tub was not long, but quite long enough to blister a goodly section of the soles of his feet, for he had landed intimately upon the red hot copper bottom of the bath without the merciful intervention of the wooden floor. He turned his wide-open mouth and wider-open eyes on the offending tub with unutterable resentment and disgust. He was about to call for the servant of the hotel to demand some sort of explanation. But at that precise moment it dawned on him that there might be some mystic rite about this new fangled tub of which he was utterly ignorant. A child of Yedo would rather die than show himself as an ignorant in the eyes of a village inn people. His bloodshot eyes roamed over the battlefield, where everything, including his honor, was completely lost. But where there is a god who throws you down there will be another who picks you up' is an ancient



You do not have to understand Japanese to grasp the main points of this "strip" from the Tokio "Jiji." Remember, however, that Japanese comics read from right to left



Nippon is perhaps the only country where the people make playmates of their gods. Here they are taking one of their deities for an airing

proverb of the East. And the gloomy eyes of Yaji fell upon a pair of clean wooden clogs in the corner of the bath room.

"A gift of the gods!" exclaimed Yaji as he put them on and leaped into the tub with them protecting his rather sensitive feet. He took his time; he broke out in a series of crippled and disjointed songs—snatches of all the popular airs he had ever heard in his life. He enjoyed his hot bath. He was enjoying infinitely more the laugh he expected to have over the predicament of his partner in no remote future. In fact, Kida was snarling his impatience from the adjoining room. As soon as Yaji got out of the hot water he took the clogs off and hid them away. This time there was an excess load of politeness about Yaji as he emerged from the bathroom and urged his friend to enter the heaven on earth.

"Kida took his turn at the earthly paradise with as much velocity as his friend Yaji—with pretty much the same sort of blistering result. He, too, looked about the room carefully in search of salvation. Yaji evidently

did not conceal the clogs very successfully, for his friend found them without too much loss of time. He was mortally certain that nothing was the matter either with him or with this strange type of bath, only his friend the enemy played a nasty, cowardly trick on him once more—that was all. That explained everything to his entire satisfaction. He was boiling with rage and with the expectation of what a dire catastrophe he would hurl at the miserable head of the faithless Yaji. In a fit of rage he stamped on the copper floor of the tub with more emphasis than wisdom. The most natural thing on earth came to pass. He stamped through the thin copper bottom. There was a tremendous hiss of water as it drowned the fire beneath, and there was a yell of pain which entirely drowned the sound of rushing water. Yaji, who had been watching this farce through a hole in the paper screen, rushed madly out to save his friend and got himself all messed up about as badly as the hapless Kida, so proving to his entire satisfaction that in this life gods, when they

dispense favors and fun, do so with unspeakable impartiality."

In this particular brand of humor the Japanese carry the laugh much further than American comedians. For we do not stop where a decent Christian people does. Just poking fun at our fellow mortals squirming in tight corners is not enough. We insist on carrying the laugh into the domain of the august gods of our ancestors. Not with all the gods we worship, to be sure—for with us the gods are like humans. There are deities and deities. Some are so sacred that such an idea as making a target of mirth of them would never enter into the heads of the people in a thousand years. But then again we have with us in Nippon a perfect colony of humorous deities, and with those the people of Japan have no end of fun. Sometimes they laugh with them—the gods—and at times they even laugh at them, their follies, their foibles, their predicaments. If you were to walk down Ginza Street in Tokio, which is our Broadway, you would not be able to find a single cartoon or caricature of our Emperor or of any of the members of the imperial family of Japan. But you would have no trouble in meeting a few hundred cartoons of all sorts of gods.

Professor Chamberlain's definition of Japanese humor does not cover every department and variety of it. For at times wit flashed in Japan with as much grace and lightness of touch as French esprit. Take this for example:

There lived a wit who answered to the name of Sorori Shinzaemon. Now Sorori was perhaps the wisest man of the court of a great Shogun, therefore and naturally he went under the official title of a fool or a court jester—as is the time-honored custom in the Orient as well as in the Occident. The mighty Shogun—the sovereign do fact of the time—wished to get the first hand knowledge of the conditions of his people. He wished to go and mix and mingle with them and see how they were faring. There was no other way of doing this save through the ancient trick of disguising himself and going about the country from place to place. There was one serious objection to that programme at the time: the country was torn into hundreds of factions, and in many sections of the land life was by no means safe. The elder counselors of the Shogun were entirely and unanimously opposed to any such dangerous adventure. The issue of practical statesmanship was to find the effective how—how to stop the Shogun from carrying out his dangerous design. The Shogun happened to be Toyotomi Taiko, who had risen from the son of a "water-drinking"

farmer to the highest position in the empire and, naturally, had a rather high opinion of his ability in doing things in the face of all sorts of storms. Solemn conclaves after still more solemn conclaves of the elder statesmen of the day yielded just one small harvest—in the shape of a slender hope. There was that court fool, Sorori. He was absolutely the only man who could do anything with the Shogun. And this simple and all-apparent fact made the stiff knee joints of the elders to bend—and bend before a man of jests. Sorori accepted the commission with as much cheer as a sales agent accepts the commission for a Rolls-Royce carload.

Very early the following morning there was a rush and commotion where noise and disturbance meant the decapitation of a dozen heads any day—namely, in the bed chamber of the Shogun. The retainers on duty were pale and ashen with amazement.

"August master," breathed Sorori, facing squarely the stormy features of the Shogun with equally portentous frowns on his face. "I've just met with a liver-squashing sight, the like of which the eyes of man never before beheld. And I have rushed in here to tell you of it before I die—for I shall die in a minute or two."

The death of a favorite jester was no laughing matter to the Shogun. Instantly he was all ears and round eyes.

"The humble one climbed the hills back of the castle as of wont that I might be numbered among the first to greet the Lord of Day. The sacred silences among the pines beyond the shrine were as profound as the thoughts of the gods. And I stood there lost in wonder as the dawn whitened on the treetops. Suddenly there was a tremendous flapping of wings and behold, there towered in front of me a tengu as tall as heaven." (A tengu is a red-faced, winged demi-god with the longest nose imaginable and who, like the storied little girl, was very, very good when he was good and very, very wicked when he wished to be bad.)

"Well!"—said the Shogun, in the voice of one who had never seen a tengu in all his eventful life.

"The august tengu said to me: 'I'm going to eat you up. Half a minute for you to talk to your gods.' Strange, august master, how quickly the wit of a lazy soul works when it has to," said the jester, his tangled features melting into the first faint smile at the interview. "With the first breath that came back to me I said: 'Oh, sovereign tengu—how great you are! Heaven is just high enough to roof you. And after beholding your noble proportions I am ready to die, regretting only I cannot offer you a nobler meal. But—but I have one wish before I die.' The tengu wished to know what that was. 'Now that I have seen how great you can be, deign to show me how really small you can be also, for I have heard that you can shelter your noble stature within an ant.' The tengu agreed to satisfy my dying wish and bade me to stretch forth my right hand, palm up. There was another flapping of wings and then in a twinkling the huge tengu vanished. Presently I felt an itch on my outstretched palm, and looking intently upon it I found on it something like the smallest ant I had ever seen."

Thus speaking, Sorori looked upon the Shogun in a dramatic pause. The Shogun wished to know what he had done.

"This," said Sorori, opening his mouth wide and slapping his open palm onto it, "and the tengu is inside of me now; and I am sure I am going to die."

The Shogun never went abroad in the guise of a mendicant that he might study the conditions of his people first hand.

The father of Japanese caricature was a Buddhist priest called Kakuyu, who is better known among his friends as the Abbot of Toba. His genius dominated this particular field of pictorial art to such an extent that even to this day all the caricatures and funny pictures are called "Toba pictures" by the people of Nippon. The worthy abbot was born in 1053. A. D. and frivole away the early years of the twelfth century in amusing himself by poking fun at men and beasts of his time with his gifted brush. The abbot was the model of the famous Hokusai, who came about seven centuries later and rendered the same sort of service to society of his time as the Abbot of Toba.

WHEN GRASSHOPPERS PULLED TRAINS

THE electric locomotive slid softly into the terminal and came to a gentle stop. Two of the outgoing passengers turned to notice the crew, who were stepping from their cab. The fireman—if such he may be called on an electric—was an immaculate young chap, not even deigning to wear overalls. The engineer was a scholarly person, who might have been a college professor. He wore a white collar.

One of the two observers was Eugene Beggs, of Paterson, N. J. Mr. Beggs chuckled. There were reasons.

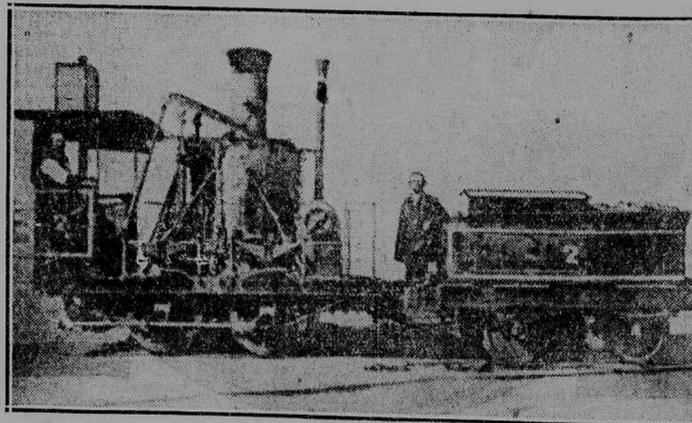
"Seventy-five years ago," he declared, "when it was my boyish ambition to be a locomotive engineer, that wasn't quite what I had in mind. Engineers got only \$2 a day then, and time and a half and double time were ideas which never had occurred to us."

Those were the days of the old "grasshopper" locomotives. Mr. Beggs remembered two of them on the Paterson & Hudson River Railroad. Their boilers and cylinders were upright and they had a fan blast, for that was necessary in the use of "stone" coal, which was what they used to call anthracite in those days. They couldn't pronounce the other word.

"In those days," said Mr. Beggs, "the town was never mixed up with a lot of new fangled time changes. Down in the railroad yard at

Paterson a large bell was suspended, and three times a day, just fifteen minutes before train time, Rody Claxton would ring it loud enough to be heard all over the place. Railroading

was a rougher game than it is now. They didn't wear white collars then. I recall old Tom Blakely, who was one of the first engineers. The Patterson & Ramapo road was



Andrew Jackson, the original of the grasshopper type of locomotive. It was built in 1836 and was one of the earliest to use coal for fuel

built to connect with the Erie at Suffern and to the P. & H. R. R. at the junction, one-half mile from the town. One day the Ramapo train was on the way to Jersey City and Tom Blakely was coming to Paterson with his train. The road was single track. A curve at Lake View happened to be in an unfortunate place, considering the schedule the two trains were running on.

"Blakely and York, the engineer of the other train, didn't see each other coming on account of that curve and consequently they met rather suddenly. The Blakely train was a mixed one, passenger and freight, and judging from the flour that was scattered over the countryside the Blakely train had the worst of the concussion.

"They still had the old flat rails in those days, and I can remember when they first started to tear them up and lay the T-rails. The flat rails were dangerous. One of them once turned up over a wheel into the car in which my mother was riding from New York. It tore her dress.

"Railroads have improved since those days," added the old engineer, "but I don't believe they are as saving and economical as they used to be. The saving of coal and oil used to be drilled into us engineers, so that once when an engineer was asked what he would do in case of a collision, he said: 'I would grab an oil can and a lump of coal and jump!'"