

Nippon's New Year Means Fifteen Days Off

By ADACHI KINOSUKE



A Tokio street all dressed for the holidays

THE calendar has not been crowned as the super-masterpiece of emotional literature of the world by great dramatic critics and famous motion picture directors. It is, though,

Unlike other dramatic masterpieces, the calendar puts its climax right at the first line of the first chapter—January the first. In Japan there is no such thing as New Year's Day. With the children of Nippon it's New Year's DAYS. The most godly and least ceremonious among them knock off their daily work for the first three days at the very least. Self-respecting folk take fifteen to twenty days. The very idea of canning the essence of one whole year's sublimation of bliss into one day and one night is one of those Occidental stupidities which passes all the patience of the Nipponese. Then, too, the thing can't be done, that's all! Why, the very respects which they are bound to pay to the eight million gods (no less; consult any standard work in the original on the piety of the Japanese people) and to the sainted and some of them enshrined spirits of their august ancestors (and they are bound to be quite a majority in a country of 60,000,000 souls and in a nation whose people kept on dying for the last 2,582 years, since the first Emperor of the Yamato race ascended the throne), all this, naturally, requires some little time.

At the palace in Tokio the Emperor sets the example for the whole people. His Majesty rises ahead of dawn on the first day of the year and worships the gods of heaven and of earth and the spirits of the august ancestors, according to the ancient rites of the Shinto cult.

And everywhere throughout the empire, for once in a year, the people try to get ahead of the dawn. This is about the first and only day in the year when the sleepiest schoolboy finds himself leaping from the bed without literally kicking himself out of it. And, one and all, they rush out into the open court back of their homes to wash their faces in the "water of youth." To the chemist it is the same old H₂O, this "water of youth," and to the benighted foreigner it is just plain water from any old wells in the backyards. "There is no medicine to paste on to a fool," is an old, old Japanese proverb, and there is nothing on this good old footstool to light the eyes of stone with the magic light of Fancy. But to all the happy people of Japan the "water of youth" in which they bathe their faces is drawn right out of the fountain in search of which Ponce de Leon is reported to have made a happy fool of himself. It is the first bucketful of water drawn from their ancestral family well in the year just born.



Drawing the year's first bucket of water, from a well decorated with rice festoons and other New Year symbols

With the face and hands shining from the first scrubbing of the year, the people turn their faces and thoughts to the gods. Of course, it is rather difficult for them to clap their hands and bow in worship 8,000,000 times to 8,000,000 gods in 8,000,000 directions—rather laborious even for the leisurely Nipponese. In matters of

piety the Japanese are astoundingly practical. They group all the gods into four, put them at the four points of the compass and clap their hands, facing the four points in turn, to let the gods know that they are there to pay their devotion, and bow in silence. They do not pray aloud, for in that spiritually enlightened kind

(although a bit backward in auto races and in airplane construction) even a coolie knows that the gods do not talk in the tin-can Babel of human noises.

In some sections of Nippon people go up to hilltops just ahead of the first dawn of the year and clap their hands and bow to the east as the sun rises out of his golden couch.

After performing the sacred rites of worship at the palace shrine, called Kashiko-dokoro, on the first morning of the new year, His Majesty the Emperor receives the princes and princesses of the blood, court nobles, ambassadors of the friendly powers and the Cabinet officers and other high ranking people of the realm in a great function. While this is going on the special envoy of the Emperor performs the New Year's rites at the great shrine of Ise.

In the homes of his people, after greeting the gods, every member of a family gathers in the largest room in the house. There one and all exchange the New Year's felicitations and address themselves to the first meal of the year. They eat the traditional soup with rice dumpling and certain vegetables in it, called zoni. And they begin the celebration of the greatest of all the festal days in Japan by partaking of toso (a native liquor brewed from rice, and which it is a crime against both scholarship and sense to translate "rice wine," as most of the writers, both foreign and native, persistently do for some reason). The toso is sake, sweetened and spiced for the auspicious occasion. It is drunk in three cups, slightly varying in size. It is a ceremonious drink. People drink only a few drops in each of the three cups. This drink is offered to the callers. Not to all of them, to be sure, for the Japanese in their descent to the pell-mell rush of modern imported civilization have fallen into the time-saving habit of just dropping their printed cards on trays at the entrance halls of their friends' houses and going no further.

Put to the more intimate friends who delight in being taken into the bosom of the family the toso is invariably offered. If such visitors are really fond of saké, then they are given good, old, unsweetened, unspiced drink, in addition to the few formal sips of toso. They are also invited to partake of the condiments in four boxes of china or lacquer fitted, one atop of another, in a tier. There is nothing expensive or weird about the contents of the tier—herrings, dried small smelts, black beans cooked in sugar, edible seaweeds, etc. And so begins the formidable battle of the exchange of New Year's felicitations and presents—just begins, for it continues for ~~ten~~, fourteen, twenty