JAPAN'S UNIQUE NEW YEAR

BY TOASHI KATO

READY FOR THE FEAST

THE SHINTO TEMPLE

A DECORATED WELL

WE deeply pity the superstition of the Japanese. Yet there is something very beautiful in the archaic simplicity of their faith. Lafcadio Hearn found in Shintoism Greek religion transplanted in the midst of this material century. What he read and imagined in ancient literature he really found in this Land of the Rising Sun. For all the modernization of Japan there is one spot where the hand of the dissecting science has done but little damage.

Visitors from civilized and enlightened lands can go deep into the real life of the archaic society in Japan, and in the twinkling of an eye they can come back to the luxury of the twentieth century, and this archaic society is a living one and not an artificial miniature. Sympathy is aroused, as the faith is the only surviving remnant of the time-honored old religion. Political sentiment is touched, as Shintoism peoples woods, mountains, trees, rocks, rivers and seashores with gods and goddesses. Compassion is kindled as it is by a beautiful dawn slowly dissolving before the onslaught of the fierce daylight. No wonder, then, that Shintoism finds many lovers among westerners.

I would like to introduce the reader not indeed to the stately mausoleum and ceremony of Shintoism, but to the humble household of the common folk of Japan.

January in Japan is a month of rest and festival; rest after hard work and harvest; festival as an auspicious beginning of the year.

Before the end of the old year pine branches are set up by the gateways, shrines of gods, hearth, well and other places. These pine branches, signifying constancy, are hung with a straw ring made to imitate a jewel, with rays of light radiating from it, and stuck with a dried sardine, a leaf of evergreen, pieces of paper and a bit of edible seaweed. These rings are also put on almost all representative articles of furniture and kitchen implements, and this is said "to let them take one year." (This suggests that these articles were believed once to have had life and so have felt the advance of age.

The festival of "going over the year," or "Toshikoshi," is sometimes called "Toshitori," or "taking the year," and is a busy time for the housewife. She has to cook many different dishes, all of which have prosperous significance, besides her regular rice and bean soup.

Let me enumerate some. Soup of clam, which opens when cooked, signifies the opening out of the good fortune. Roe of herring, which is called "kazu-noko," or numerous children, forms a dish whose meaning is obvious. Health in Japanese is "mame," so beans must be eaten, as these happen to have the same sounding word for their name. Salt salmon, fish cake, pickled radish and many others must be prepared on this eventful eve, for we are going to add one whole year during the night. The kitchen is full of life, with kettles whistling and pots steaming, plates and trays all spread out. Children and even cats are very apt to be mischievous at such times, but they receive no scolding as the great festival should not be marred by discord and irritation.

When food is ready gods are served first with all these dishes, but only in miniature. Lights are put before them; sake liquor is offered in a pair of small vases, which, by the way, I have often seen used for flowers in America. Before the gods on the shelf they hang highly colored leaflets, each with a lucky meaning. One is the god of fortune under an auspicious gem, with a bagful of gold coins, coral and other precious things. Another has a bundle of edible seaweed, which is called "kobu." The phrase "to rejoice" in Japanese is "yorokobu;" so seaweed (kobu) means rejoicing. The last has under it a lobster. A person doubled up with age reminds one of a lobster with its doubled up waist. So the lobster quite often is picturesquely representative of "the aged of the sea."

When the family have bowed down before the gods they eat the great meal and a few rounds of sake were ceremoniously served in former days. Once you have eaten this feast you have added one year; and a child born in December is said to be two years old right after this meal. I used to be reminded by older people that I should be a better boy from the first of January, as I had added one year during that one night. They say that one night of the 31st of December is worth 50 days of usual days, and those who go to bed early this night will grow old that much in one night.

Polytheists are not troubled by a surplus of gods. The Japanese have already many gods at home and yet on New Year's day they buy printed gods. This paper is hung above the stone stove on which one cooks rice. One represents "year god," with thank offerings of rice, sake liquor, kneaded rice and regular New Year decorations of evergreen trees. The figure is Buddhist; the original Shinto god has long been replaced by a boddisatwa, showing the result of usurpation of Shintoism by Buddhism, effected by a Buddhist priest Kobo, as a means of Buddhist propagation. These offerings were once real ones, but the Japanese learned how to economize labor and expense by printing, and the goddess herself came into the picture.

Another picture is also hung before the shelf. The central figure is Prince Shotoku, the famous patron of Buddhism in its early days in Japan. A Japanese spade, stalks of rice on a tray, thresher, sake liquor and cooked rice are the offerings. A pair of foxes need a little explanation. Originally they belonged to a very popular Shinto god whose place has been usurped through the strategy of Kobo, and this Buddhist prince has been substituted. But religious degeneration has gone on further and these foxes came to be mistaken for the god itself. And Inari worship (for Inari is the name of the god) is seen nowadays in its most degraded form of fox worship.

Others are a pair of salesman's gods. Who they originally were has very little to do with the present worship. Anyhow, as gods of good luck and prosperity they are worshiped in New Year's season, and almost every shop has these idols in stock.

Early on the first of January New Year's callers begin to pour in. What do they say? With heads bowed down and hands on the sill, they mumble: "Congratulations for the opening of the new year, and pray that it will be continued in future." This phrase is so common that both sides speak at the same time, and yet both are well understood. One says: "Won't you come in?" "No," answers the other; "I have more houses to call." "Then come when you are through," and the caller goes. If the caller should come in he is sumptuously feasted with food and drink, and you see more open drunkenness on New Year's day than at other times.

Superstitious people find omens and meanings in dreams, and the Japanese must have good dreams to begin the year. For this purpose they put a piece of paper under the bed. On this paper a Japanese junk is printed, loaded with precious goods, her sails outspread, on her decks men busy with rigging and oars. A Japanese poem is also printed on it:

Na ka ki yo no,
To no ne fu ri no,
Mi na me sa me
Na mi no ri fu ne no,
O to no yo ki ka na.

Translated roughly, this means:

After a sound sleep of long night,
Resting awake in bed,
I hear a cheerful sound
Of a sailing vessel
Gliding over the billows.

The poem in translation loses its power of calling up associations. But one can imagine himself living near an inland sea, with its nooks, bays, and offings, pine groves and plum blossoms hanging over from the hilly shores, the sun as yet below the horizon, and in the mist he can discern a vessel gliding smoothly, leaving merry songs of sailors behind to be carried away by the spring breeze. This is considered an appropriate scenery to think over in the calm of the spring night. But this aesthetic association is little appreciated by the masses. They rather wonder at the clever construction of this poem, that reads just alike from either end. Read from the end and go back to the beginning, syllable by syllable; you have just the same result as if you read from the beginning.

Now, what kind of dreams are the best? First, Fugi mountain; second, eagle; third, eggplant; fourth, funeral; fifth, snakes—these are the five best ones. To dream of the horse is also auspicious. If a Japanese should happen to dream he is quite blue over the matter. These people, however, are not without the means of getting out of this misfortune. They say when they had a bad dream: "To the baku; to the baku." Now they did not know what "baku" was; they only knew that this mysterious animal living in a dreamy land lived on the dreams of man, and bad dreams were cast to the baku. It was a shock to these old fashioned people when their children told them that the teacher of zoology told the children that the baku is a hippopotamus and lived on substantial green leaves, and not on dreams. Such a revelation, though, cannot change the superstition, and people still say: "To the baku," to relieve their minds after a bad dream.

There is a record in history which shows that there was a custom once of selling and buying dreams. Once upon a time there was a prince in a famous house. He was thinking to court a maiden, and she had a strange dream, which she could not make out. She called in the help of her eldest sister. The latter, seeing the good omen of the dream, offered to buy the dream. An old mirror was the price and the bargain was made. Meanwhile the prince changed his mind quite suddenly, as if by magic, and paid his court to the eldest and won her hand. This prince is the famous Yaritomo, who founded the Shogunate, or military regency, in Japan.

Such is the story told and retold when the family get together by the fire box and spend the "long spring night" in merriment. I hope these humble doings of the common folk of Japan may find a warm reception among the readers of America.

Christmas Frolics.

A very effective and practical decoration for the table on Christmas morning is a pyramid of oranges with sprays of holly for a doily, with a scarlet ribbon running to the corners of the table fastened by a big orange at each corner. All the housekeeper's best efforts are usually expended on the dinner table, but it will only take a moment to arrange this. Place holly around the finger bowls. By the way, a dainty way to serve oranges for breakfast is to have the juice squeezed in the kitchen and served in a little glass which stands on a plate.

In the dining room that has to have a screen to conceal the kitchen, there may be a very simple and effective addition made to the Christmas decorations by pinning holly to it, covering the original surface completely. Lace curtains may be treated in this way to make lovely bits of color in the room or form a background for a tree.

LID IS ON.

"Aren't you almost ready for church?"

"I'm sorry, but something dreadful has happened. I can't go to church to-day."

"For heaven's sake, what has happened?"

"The cook is wearing one just like mine!"

Not Fair.

"Look here, Abraham," said the judge, "it's been proved right here in court that instead of doing something to help support your wife and children you spend your whole time hunting 'possum!"

The old negro hung his head.

"Now, Abe, you love your wife, don't you?"

"Ah suttinly does!"

"And your children?"

"Yas, suh!"

"And you love them both better—"

"Better ev'ry day, jedge!" Abe broke in.

"—better than a thousand 'possums?"

"Look hyah, jedge," exclaimed Abe, with widening eyes, "dat's takin' a coon at a pow'ful disadvantage!"—Bohemian Magazine.

The Symmetrical Figure.

Speaking of that rare gift, symmetry of person, it is more desirable than beauty of feature, because it outlasts youth. The symmetrical figure is perfectly proportioned and articulated anatomy, and nothing is more rare. Be thankful, fair ones, when you have "points" which cause us to to overlook any little discrepancy in form.—Exchange.

Not for Him.

The Poet—I understand you have furnished rooms for rent?

The Landlady—The only thing I have at present is a handsomely furnished suite on the first floor.

The Poet—I'm afraid that would be a little too sweet for me.

Every man should be a hero at least once during his career for the sake of his prospective grandchildren, if for no other reason.

There are nearly 88,000,000 sheep in Australia and New Zealand, 10,000,000 cattle and 1,871,000 horses.

The proportion of left-handed people is one in six.

HE IS AN ARTIST IN SUGAR

St. Louis Wedding Cake Nothing Less Than Work of Art.

A wedding cake over three feet high was a special feature at a recent fashionable wedding in the West end, but the cake itself was not the feature, for, aside from its decorations, it would have been a very modest affair.

But the bride and her family were not half as proud of that cake as the confectioner who furnished it, and his self-satisfaction was a mere trifle compared with that of the "artist" who did the decorating. He is a foreigner, said to be a Swiss-Frenchman, and a perfect genius in the manipulation of "icing" or "frosting." He uses a sort of bellows, filled with prepared frosting, and after sketching his design on an artist's board he takes his bellows and goes over the cake, squeezing out the frosting on the prepared background and tracing with his line of sugar any figure desired. A bunch of roses, a forest scene, a party of dancing girls, a bouquet of half a dozen different kinds of flowers, a landscape covered with snow, a group of statuary, a garden scene, Cupids, butterflies—anything that is wanted he traces in sugar, with a speed and elegance that would make the lightning artist of the side show green with envy. He knows his work is only for a few hours, that his dreams of art will not be hung on cathedral walls or salons, but he makes better wages than most of the old masters did, and, for that matter, than a good many of the young masters, and by and by he is going back to Switzerland to live in comfort, and that is enough for him. —St. Louis Globe-Democrat.

Spendthrift's Purchases.

A spendthrift—in one sense he has his money's worth by the purchase of large lots of repentance and other dolorous commodities. — Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Falling Off in Insurance.

Everybody is interested in the remarkable showing of the life insurance business as reported by Supt. Kelsey of New York. The falling off has been enormous between the years 1906 and December 30, 1907. The point of Mr. Kelsey's report is the great decrease in the amount of insurance last year, $241,496,308. Of the 370,000 policies which terminated, only 53,167 were by death and 14,247 by maturity, while 99,554 amounting to $211,008,495 were surrendered, and 210,565, amounting to $307,639,953, lapsed. Five times as many policies were dropped as were paid in full and the diminution in insurance through lack of confidence or through inability to meet premiums was more than three times the amounts paid.

Aerial Fishing.

"When aeroplanes come into everyday use it will be easy to hunt wild ducks."

"How is that?"

"Why, a fellow can take along a net, dip into a flock and sein for 'em.