



A JAPANESE FESTIVE DAY.

Glimpses of Japanese Holidays.

BY HELEN H. S. THOMPSON.

THE Japanese have many festive days. Unlike most heathen nations they are exceedingly devoted to their children, sparing neither time, labour, nor expense, for their amusement. Even their system of education is made a source of pleasure; and corporal punishment is a thing unknown in the family. Masquerades, domestic comedies, picnics, and many feast-days, are enacted and observed for the benefit of the little folks, giving a very strong impression that it is a shrewd method of enjoyment for the elders also. There are five national festival days, including New Year's, which, under the old laws, was not begun with ours, but on the ninth day of February. The second is called the "Festival of the Dolls," and is a great day for the little girls; during which the various specimens of dollhood are conducted into the state chamber of the house, which is beautifully decorated with blooming peach-blossoms and evergreens. These favourite automatons are made to personify grand personages, from the ancient Mikado and his Imperial Court to the various families of the princes. For days before this greatest of great days to the daughters of the house, the shops are gay with these splendidly dressed images, and afterward are seen no more till another year brings the demand. Every respectable family has a number and variety, ranging from four inches to a foot and a half in height. In some old families the display is very large. A family banquet is served, and afterwards the girls make offerings of *saké* and rice-cakes to the effigies of emperor and empress, and then spend the day mimicking the entire round of Japanese life, as child, maiden, wife, mother, and

grandmother. Other toys, representing the table service, utensils of the kitchen, toilet set, and travelling apparatus, many of these very elaborate and costly, are in use on this day. This festival is celebrated on the third of May.

On the 5th of July occurs a corresponding feast for the boys. Previous to this day of rejoicing the shops are again gay with toys suited for the "Feast of the Banners." These consist of all the regalia and equipments of a *damio's* (prince) procession, the contents of an arsenal, flags, streamers, banners; effigies of heroes, warriors, soldiers on foot, horseman, geni of strength, valour, etc. Such toys are bought for every son born into the family, hence the display is imposing and brilliant. The streets are gaily decorated, and planted with bamboo staffs, which are ornamented and trimmed with every device of oddity. Gay banners are placed in all conspicuous points, blazoned with national designs, heroic sentences, and family titles. Troops of boys in parti-coloured clothes, wearing miniature swords and sabres, and each carrying a flag, throng the streets, while parents, priests, and police look on in pleased admiration. Outside of the door of the home, a bamboo pole is erected, and hung by a string to the top of the pole is a large paper fish, representing a carp, which the Japanese consider the type of swiftness and strength. The paper being hollow, is easily filled by the breeze, and the huge body flaps its tail and fins in a most natural manner. The carp, being able to swim swiftly against the current, is a favourite type of the young man who mounts over all difficulties.

New Year's Day we had looked forward to with eager anticipations. This is not altogether a *file* day. The

national idea of justice is shown in the law requiring all debts to be adjusted, and no one allowed to begin the year with unsettled accounts. Therefore, no one gives himself up to unrestrained enjoyment on this day until those matters are satisfactorily arranged.

Festive preparations had been going on for many days, such as thoroughly renovating and cleaning the houses, planting evergreen and bamboo branches along the streets, and either side of the vestibules or doorways. The bakeries were unusually alive, and teeming with delicacies. Professional rice pounders, with their immense mortars and pestles, were hurrying from house to house. Flowers and ornamental shrubs, of exquisite varieties, were vended on every hand, and the shops displayed their daintiest wares and toys.

Households, on this day, not only prepare an abundance of good things for feasting themselves, but provide a liberal supply for those that are poorer than they. Each home, too, must be decorated, which is not a difficult matter in this ever-blooming land. Every house and street was brilliantly illuminated for the inauguration of the new year, till the entire city, bay, and adjoining country, were lit up with a brilliancy we had never seen equalled. During the morning, a Sabbath-like stillness prevails, while accounts are being adjusted, and family life reigns supreme. Indeed, it has been said that New Year's Day is the only Sabbath of Japan. After that, all is astir, every one in festive garments and smiling faces exchanging polite greetings.

One of the most popular amusements of the day is masquerades, in which children, parents, and servants delight in mystifying each other by personifying various families of rank. Here and there fathers, with their big and little boys, were intent upon the use of the top, in which they were very expert, while bevy of pretty girls and young women merrily played with battledore and shuttlecock.

At one time, we were mystified by sweet musical sounds in the air, resembling those proceeding from an Æolian harp, and discovered that these came from a great number of *kites* flying over the city. Our Japanese teacher explained this mystery to us by showing us a strip of fine bamboo stretched across the frame of the kite. This creates the strange, sweet music. But the toys—could I venture to enumerate them? Nay, not even to name them, or designate a use. Some, however, were familiar. It has been well said that in the toy-shops of Japan one may see the microcosm of Japanese life; for in the children's life one may see enacted the miniature drama of the serious life of the parents.

Among the toys are bows and arrows, artificial birds, and hen and chickens, true to nature with marvellous fidelity, exquisite dolls parading the streets with automatical regularity, families of mice, rabbits, and monkeys, eggs and fruits, in brilliant coloured crapes. Here are cranes, parrots, dragons, and wild beasts, all in mimic—that is, toys in mortal combat; feats of jugglery, impressive as impossible, and all entered into with the heartiest earnestness, hilarity, and mirth. But one is told with sudden gravity, "It is all for the children!" Blessed childhood! And it is plain to see that these people revel at will within its sacred precincts to drown the cares and sorrows of their ripper years.

Here the man with the magic swimming-birds tips his tiny water-fowl with camphor, and floats them in a long, narrow trough of water. The dissolving gum propels the fowl from side to side, and imbues them with life, to the widening eyes of the uninitiated. The bug-man harnesses paper-carts to the backs of beetles, and a half dozen will drag a load of rice up an inclined plane. The fire-eater rolls balls of camphorated paste, glowing with lambent fire, over his arms and face, and then extinguishes them in his mouth. Raree shows, in which one sees some famous bit of natural scenery, or the inside splendours of a *damio's* palace, dancers, flute-players, posturers, conjurers, acting charades, throng the streets. Here are a bevy of pretty girls, dressed in their gayest robes and girdles, with painted lips and cheeks, till they resemble beetles' wings, their beautiful hair still more beautifully dressed, playing battledore and shuttlecock. There is a knot of boys laughing uproariously over a huge image of Daruma, the snow-man of the northern and western coasts. In America the boy's snow-man is a Paddy with a caved hat, clay pipe and shillalah in hand; but in Japan the snow image is Daruma, one of the followers of Buddha, who by long prayers in kneeling posture lost his legs from paralysis.

Banquets are spread in the streets for the police, and the benefit of those who prefer this repast to the more private dinner at home. Buckets, barrels, and porcelain jars, are everywhere flowing with new *saké* (rice beer), which everybody drinks, and yet, to the credit of these people be it said, there is little drunkenness; and although we are ashamed, yet are we glad to know that the temperance laws of Japan are far stricter than in America.

The Japanese are determined to enjoy life as they go. Probably much of the habit of devoting so much time to recreation and amusement is due to the sad tenets of Buddhism and the steady growth of infidelity. We live in the faith of a joyous immortality, but annihilation and transmigration can hold up but little to brighten the cares and toils of the present. Therefore we see all classes of this people leaving their labours to go on short journeys into the country, where, under the rustic shade of blossoming fruit-trees, or in one of the endless tea-houses, they may rest, refresh, and enjoy themselves.

These tea-houses are a character—if I may be allowed the expression, idyllic certainly. Charming retreats with flowers, arbors, and climbing plants; flowers growing even upon the thatched roof. Ah! lover of the *the-nectar*, would you have it in perfection? Come, then, and sip from dainty cups, ambrosia fit for the gods! and with it, on some of these fair hills, drink inspiration not only for your poet or artist's brain and eye, but enthusiasm and high resolve to enter in and possess this land for the King of kings and Lord of lords! The harvest is ripe, but the reapers are few. Pray ye, therefore, the Lord of the harvest to send forth labourers into His harvest.

MR. JOHN HOLMES, of Boston, was recently asked by a stranger who was presented to him: "What! Are you a brother of Oliver Wendell Holmes?" "No," said Mr. Holmes, "he is a brother of me."