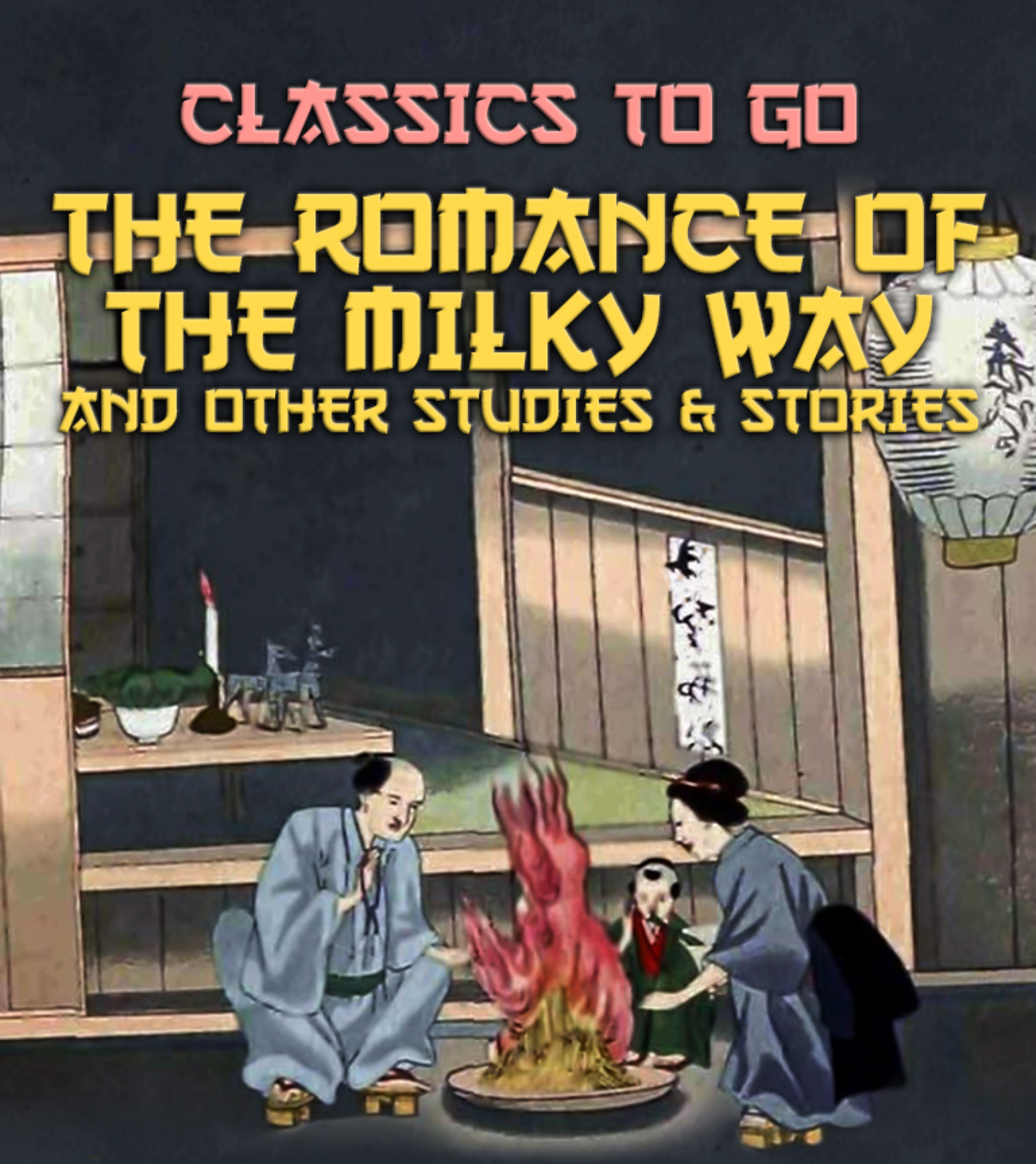
CLASSICS TO GO

THE ROMANCE OF THE MILKY WAY

AND OTHER STUDIES & STORIES



LAFCADIO HEARN

The Romance of the Milky Way

and Other Studies & Stories

Lafcadio Hearn

INTRODUCTION

Lafcadio Hearn, known to Nippon as Yakumo Koizumi, was born in Leucadia in the Ionian Islands, June 27, 1850. His father was an Irish surgeon in the British Army; his mother was a Greek. Both parents died while Hearn was still a child, and he was adopted by a great-aunt, and educated for the priesthood. To this training he owed his Latin scholarship and, doubtless, something of the subtlety of his intelligence. He soon found, however, that the prospect of an ecclesiastical career was alien from his inquiring mind and vivid temperament, and at the age of nineteen he came to America to seek his fortune. After working for a time as a proof-reader, he obtained employment as a newspaper reporter in Cincinnati. Soon he rose to be an editorial writer, and went in the course of a few years to New Orleans to join the editorial staff of the "Times-Democrat." Here he lived until 1887, writing odd fantasies and arabesques for his paper, contributing articles and sketches to the magazines, and publishing several curious little books, among them his "Stray Leaves from Strange Literature," and his translations from Gautier. In the winter of 1887 he began his pilgrimages to exotic countries, being, as he wrote to a friend, "a small literary bee in search of inspiring honey." After a couple of years, spent chiefly in the French West Indies, with periods of literary work in New York, he went in 1890 to Japan to prepare a series of articles for a magazine. Here through some deep affinity of mood with the marvelous people of that country he seems suddenly to have felt himself at last at home. He married a Japanese woman; he acquired Japanese citizenship in order to preserve the succession of his property to his family there; he became a lecturer in the Imperial University at Tōkyō; and in a series of remarkable

books he made himself the interpreter to the Western World of the very spirit of Japanese life and art. He died there of paralysis of the heart on the 26th of September, 1904.

With the exception of a body of familiar letters now in process of collection, the present volume contains all of Hearn's writing that he left uncollected in the magazines or in manuscript of a sufficient ripeness for publication. It is worth noting, however, that perfect as is the writing of "Ultimate Questions," and complete as the essay is in itself, the author regarded it as unfinished, and, had he lived, would have revised and amplified some portions of it.

But if this volume lacks the incomparably exquisite touch of its author in its arrangement and revision, it does, nevertheless, present him in all of his most characteristic veins, and it is in respect both to style and to substance perhaps the most mature and significant of his works.

In his first days as a writer Hearn had conceived an ideal of his art as specific as it was ambitious. Early in the eighties he wrote from New Orleans in an unpublished letter to the Rev. Wayland D. Ball of Washington: "The lovers of antique loveliness are proving to me the future possibilities of a long cherished dream,—the English realization of a Latin style, modeled upon foreign masters, and rendered even more forcible by that element of *strength* which is the characteristic of Northern tongues. This no man can hope to accomplish, but even a translator may carry his stones to the master-masons of a new architecture of language." In the realization of his ideal Hearn took unremitting pains. He gave a minute and analytical study to the writings of such masters of style as Flaubert and Gautier, and he chose his miscellaneous reading with a peculiar care. He wrote again to the same friend: "I never read a book which does not powerfully impress the imagination; but whatever contains

novel, curious, potent imagery I always read, no matter what the subject. When the soil of fancy is really well enriched with innumerable fallen leaves, the flowers of language grow spontaneously." Finally, to the hard study of technique, to vast but judicious reading, he added a long, creative brooding time. To a Japanese friend, Nobushige Amenomori, he wrote in a passage which contains by implication a deep theory not only of literary composition, but of all art:—

"Now with regard to your own sketch or story. If you are quite dissatisfied with it, I think this is probably due *not* to what you suppose,—imperfection of expression,—but rather to the fact that some *latent* thought or emotion has not yet defined itself in your mind with sufficient sharpness. You feel something and have not been able to express the feeling—only because you do not yet quite know what it is. We feel without understanding feeling; and our most powerful emotions are the most undefinable. This must be so, because they are inherited accumulations of feeling, and the multiplicity of them—superimposed one over another—blurs them, and makes them dim, even though enormously increasing their strength.... *Unconscious* brain work is the best to develop such latent feeling or thought. By quietly writing the thing over and over again, I find that the emotion or idea often *develops itself* in the process,—unconsciously. Again, it is often worth while to *try* to analyze the feeling that remains dim. The effort of trying to understand exactly what it is that moves us sometimes proves successful.... If you have any feeling—no matter what—strongly latent in the mind (even only a haunting sadness or a mysterious joy), you may be sure that it is expressible. Some feelings are, of course, very difficult to develop. I shall show you one of these days, when we see each other, a page that I worked at for *months* before the

idea came clearly.... When the best result comes, it ought to surprise you, for our best work is out of the Unconscious."

Through this study, reading, and brooding Lafcadio Hearn's prose ripened and mellowed consistently to the end. In mere workmanship the present volume is one of his most admirable, while in its heightened passages, like the final paragraph of "The Romance of the Milky Way," the rich, melancholy music, the profound suggestion, are not easily matched from any but the very greatest English prose.

In substance the volume is equally significant. In 1884 he wrote to one of the closest of his friends that he had at last found his feet intellectually through the reading of Herbert Spencer which had dispelled all "isms" from his mind and left him "the vague but omnipotent consolation of the Great Doubt." And in "Ultimate Questions," which strikes, so to say, the dominant chord of this volume, we have an almost lyrical expression of the meaning for him of the Spencerian philosophy and psychology. In it is his characteristic mingling of Buddhist and Shinto thought with English and French psychology, strains which in his work "do not simply mix well," as he says in one of his letters, but "absolutely unite, like chemical elements—rush together with a shock;"—and in it he strikes his deepest note. In his steady envisagement of the horror that envelops the stupendous universe of science, in his power to evoke and revive old myths and superstitions, and by their glamour to cast a ghostly light of vanished suns over the darkness of the abyss, he was the most Lucretian of modern writers.

In outward appearance Hearn, the man, was in no way prepossessing. In the sharply lined picture of him drawn by one of his Japanese comrades in the "Atlantic" for October, 1905, he appears, "slightly corpulent in later years, short in stature, hardly five feet high, of somewhat stooping gait. A

little brownish in complexion, and of rather hairy skin. A thin, sharp, aquiline nose, large protruding eyes, of which the left was blind and the right very near-sighted."

The same writer, Nobushige Amenomori, has set down a reminiscence, not of Hearn the man, but of Hearn the genius, wherewith this introduction to the last of his writings may fitly conclude: "I shall ever retain the vivid remembrance of the sight I had when I stayed over night at his house for the first time. Being used myself also to sit up late, I read in bed that night. The clock struck one in the morning, but there was a light in Hearn's study. I heard some low, hoarse coughing. I was afraid my friend might be ill; so I stepped out of my room and went to his study. Not wanting, however, to disturb him, if he was at work, I cautiously opened the door just a little, and peeped in. I saw my friend intent in writing at his high desk, with his nose almost touching the paper. Leaf after leaf he wrote on. In a while he held up his head, and what did I see! It was not the Hearn I was familiar with; it was another Hearn. His face was mysteriously white; his large eye gleamed. He appeared like one in touch with some unearthly presence.

"Within that homely looking man there burned something pure as the vestal fire, and in that flame dwelt a mind that called forth life and poetry out of dust, and grasped the highest themes of human thought."

F.G.

September, 1905.

THE ROMANCE, OF THE MILKY WAY

> Of old it was said: 'The River of Heaven is the Ghost of Waters.' We behold it shifting its bed in the course of the year as an earthly river sometimes does.
>
> *Ancient Scholar*

Among the many charming festivals celebrated by Old Japan, the most romantic was the festival of Tanabata-Sama, the Weaving-Lady of the Milky Way. In the chief cities her holiday is now little observed; and in Tōkyō it is almost forgotten. But in many country districts, and even in villages, near the capital, it is still celebrated in a small way. If you happen to visit an old-fashioned country town or village, on the seventh day of the seventh month (by the ancient calendar), you will probably notice many freshly-cut bamboos fixed upon the roofs of the houses, or planted in the ground beside them, every bamboo having attached to it a number of strips of colored paper. In some very poor villages you might find that these papers are white, or of one color only; but the general rule is that the papers should be of five or seven different colors. Blue, green, red, yellow, and white are the tints commonly displayed. All these papers are inscribed with short poems written in praise of Tanabata and her husband Hikoboshi. After the festival the bamboos are taken down and thrown into the nearest stream, together with the poems attached to them.

To understand the romance of this old festival, you must know the legend of those astral divinities to whom offerings used to be made, even by, the Imperial Household, on the

seventh day of the seventh month. The legend is Chinese. This is the Japanese popular version of it:—

The great god of the firmament had a lovely daughter, Tanabata-tsumé, who passed her days in weaving garments for her august parent. She rejoiced in her work, and thought that there was no greater pleasure than the pleasure of weaving. But one day, as she sat before her loom at the door of her heavenly dwelling, she saw a handsome peasant lad pass by, leading an ox, and she fell in love with him. Her august father, divining her secret wish, gave her the youth for a husband. But the wedded lovers became too fond of each other, and neglected their duty to the god of the firmament; the sound of the shuttle was no longer heard, and the ox wandered, unheeded, over the plains of heaven. Therefore the great god was displeased, and he separated the pair. They were sentenced to live thereafter apart, with the Celestial River between them; but it was permitted them to see each other once a year, on the seventh night of the seventh moon. On that night—providing the skies be clear—the birds of heaven make, with their bodies and wings, a bridge over the stream; and by means of that bridge the lovers can meet. But if there be rain, the River of Heaven rises, and becomes so wide that the bridge cannot be formed. So the husband and wife cannot always meet, even on the seventh night of the seventh month; it may happen, by reason of bad weather, that they cannot meet for three or four years at a time. But their love remains immortally young and eternally patient; and they continue to fulfill their respective duties each day without fault,—happy in their hope of being able to meet on the seventh night of the next seventh month.

To ancient Chinese fancy, the Milky Way was a luminous river,—the River of Heaven,—the Silver Stream. It has been stated by Western writers that Tanabata, the Weaving-Lady,

is a star in Lyra; and the Herdsman, her beloved, a star in Aquila, on the opposite side of the galaxy. But it were more correct to say that both are represented, to Far-Eastern imagination, by groups of stars. An old Japanese book puts the matter thus plainly: "Kengyū (the Ox-Leader) is on the west side of the Heavenly River, and is represented by three stars in a row, and looks like a man leading an ox. Shokujo (the Weaving-Lady) is on the east side of the Heavenly River: three stars so placed as to appear like the figure of a woman seated at her loom.... The former presides over all things relating to agriculture; the latter, over all that relates to women's work."

In an old book called Zatsuwa-Shin, it is said that these deities were of earthly origin. Once in this world they were man and wife, and lived in China; and the husband was called Ishi, and the wife Hakuyō. They especially and most devoutly reverenced the Moon. Every clear evening, after sundown, they waited with eagerness to see her rise. And when she began to sink towards the horizon, they would climb to the top of a hill near their house, so that they might be able to gaze upon her face as long as possible. Then, when she at last disappeared from view, they would mourn together. At the age of ninety and nine, the wife died; and her spirit rode up to heaven on a magpie, and there became a star. The husband, who was then one hundred and three years old, sought consolation for his bereavement in looking at the Moon and when he welcomed her rising and mourned her setting, it seemed to him as if his wife were still beside him.

One summer night, Hakuyō—now immortally beautiful and young—descended from heaven upon her magpie, to visit her husband; and he was made very happy by that visit. But from that time he could think of nothing but the bliss of becoming a star, and joining Hakuyō beyond the River of

Heaven. At last he also ascended to the sky, riding upon a crow; and there he became a star-god. But he could not join Hakuyō at once, as he had hoped;—for between his allotted place and hers flowed the River of Heaven; and it was not permitted for either star to cross the stream, because the Master of Heaven (*Ten-Tei*) daily bathed in its waters. Moreover, there was no bridge. But on one day every year—the seventh day of the seventh month—they were allowed to see each other. The Master of Heaven goes always on that day to the Zenhōdo, to hear the preaching of the law of Buddha; and then the magpies and the crows make, with their hovering bodies and outspread wings, a bridge over the Celestial Stream; and Hakuyō crosses that bridge to meet her husband.

There can be little doubt that the Japanese festival called Tanabata was originally identical with the festival of the Chinese Weaving-Goddess, Tchi-Niu; the Japanese holiday seems to have been especially a woman's holiday, from the earliest times; and the characters with which the word Tanabata is written signify a weaving-girl. But as both of the star-deities were worshiped on the seventh of the seventh month, some Japanese scholars have not been satisfied with the common explanation of the name, and have stated that it was originally composed with the word *tané* (seed, or grain), and the word *hata* (loom). Those who accept this etymology make the appellation, Tanabata-Sama, plural instead of singular, and render it as "the deities of grain and of the loom,"—that is to say, those presiding over agriculture and weaving. In old Japanese pictures the star-gods are represented according to this conception of their respective attributes;—Hikoboshi being figured as a peasant lad leading an ox to drink of the Heavenly River, on the farther side of which Orihimé (Tanabata) appears, weaving at her loom. The garb of both is Chinese; and the first

Japanese pictures of these divinities were probably copied from some Chinese original.

In the oldest collection of Japanese poetry extant,—the Manyōshū, dating from 760 A.D.,—the male divinity is usually called Hikoboshi, and the female Tanabata-tsumé; but in later times both have been called Tanabata. In Izumo the male deity is popularly termed O-Tanabata Sama, and the female Mé-Tanabata Sama. Both are still known by many names. The male is called Kaiboshi as well as Hikoboshi and Kengyū; while the female is called Asagao-himé ("Morning Glory Princess")[1], Ito-ori-himé ("Thread-Weaving Princess"), Momoko-himé ("Peach-Child Princess"), Takimono-himé ("Incense Princess"), and Sasagani-himé ("Spider Princess"). Some of these names are difficult to explain,—especially the last, which reminds us of the Greek legend of Arachne. Probably the Greek myth and the Chinese story have nothing whatever in common; but in old Chinese books there is recorded a curious fact which might well suggest a relationship. In the time of the Chinese Emperor Ming Hwang (whom the Japanese call Gensō), it was customary for the ladies of the court, on the seventh day of the seventh month, to catch spiders and put them into an incense-box for purposes of divination. On the morning of the eighth day the box was opened; and if the spiders had spun thick webs during the night the omen was good. But if they had remained idle the omen was bad.

There is a story that, many ages ago, a beautiful woman visited the dwelling of a farmer in the mountains of Izumo, and taught to the only daughter of the household an art of weaving never before known. One evening the beautiful stranger vanished away; and the people knew that they had seen the Weaving-Lady of Heaven. The daughter of the farmer became renowned for her skill in weaving. But she

would never marry,—because she had been the companion of Tanabata-Sama.

Then there is a Chinese story—delightfully vague—about a man who once made a visit, unawares, to the Heavenly Land. He had observed that every year, during the eighth month, a raft of precious wood came floating to the shore on which he lived; and he wanted to know where that wood grew. So he loaded a boat with provisions for a two years' voyage, and sailed away in the direction from which the rafts used to drift. For months and months he sailed on, over an always placid sea; and at last he arrived at a pleasant shore, where wonderful trees were growing. He moored his boat, and proceeded alone into the unknown land, until he came to the bank of a river whose waters were bright as silver. On the opposite shore he saw a pavilion; and in the pavilion a beautiful woman sat weaving; she was white like moonshine, and made a radiance all about her. Presently he saw a handsome young peasant approaching, leading an ox to the water; and he asked the young peasant to tell him the name of the place and the country. But the youth seemed to be displeased by the question, and answered in a severe tone: "If you want to know the name of this place, go back to where you came from, and ask Gen-Kum-Pei."[2] So the voyager, feeling afraid, hastened to his boat, and returned to China. There he sought out the sage Gen-Kum-Pei, to whom he related the adventure. Gen-Kum-Pei clapped his hands for wonder, and exclaimed, "So it was you!... On the seventh day of the seventh month I was gazing at the heavens, and I saw that the Herdsman and the Weaver were about to meet;—but between them was a new Star, which I took to be a Guest-Star. Fortunate man! you have been to the River of Heaven, and have looked upon the face of the Weaving-Lady!..."