

A blurred night photograph of a Japanese street scene. In the center, a traffic light is visible, with a green light illuminated. To the right, there are several vertical neon signs, some of which are brightly lit. The background is dark, with various lights and structures creating a bokeh effect. The overall atmosphere is that of a busy urban area at night.

***LAFCADIO
HEARN***

***KOTTO: BEING
JAPANESE
CURIOS, WITH
SUNDRY
COBWEBS***

Lafcadio Hearn

Kotto: Being Japanese Curios, with Sundry Cobwebs

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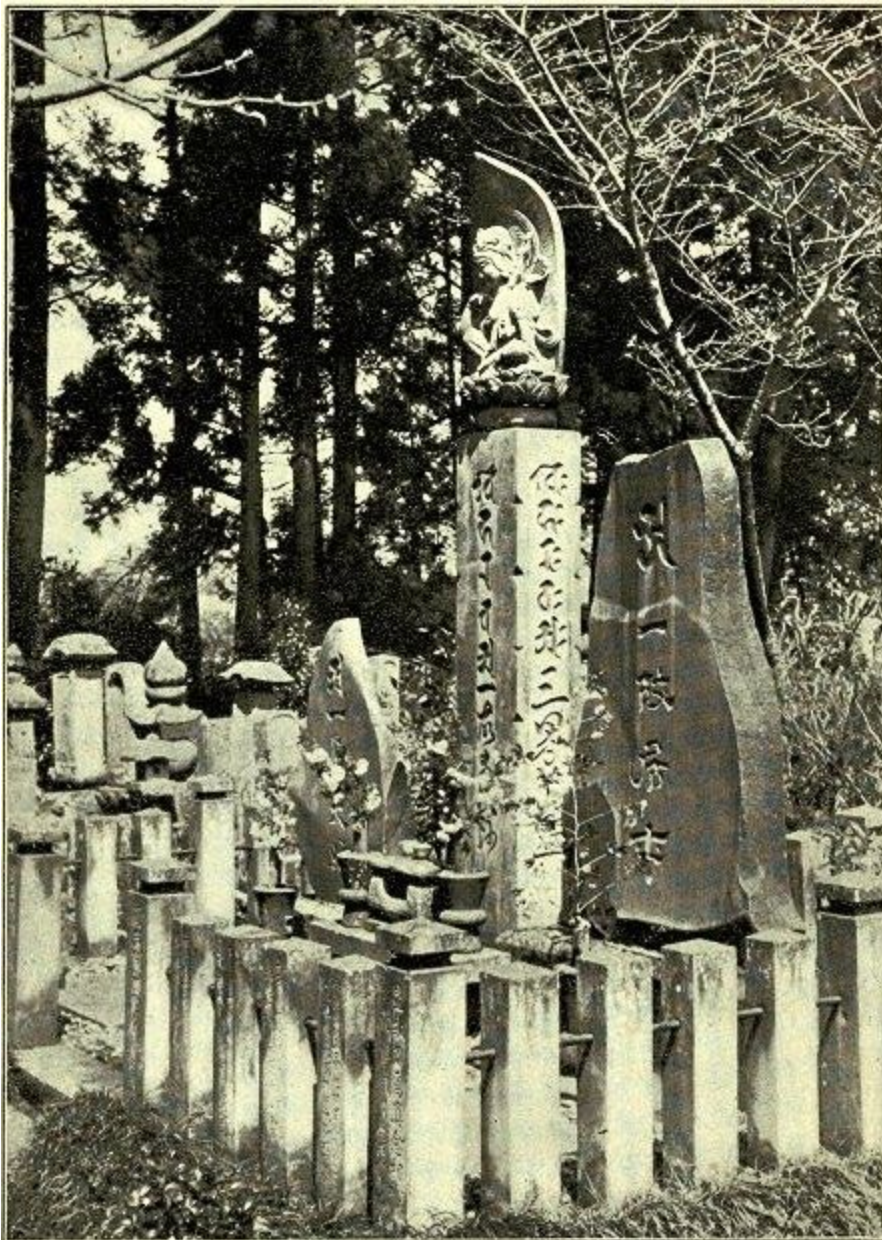
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TO
SIR EDWIN ARNOLD
IN
GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE

OF
KIND WORDS

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Old Stories

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The following nine tales have been selected from the "Shin-Chomon-Shū" "Hyaku Monogatari," "Uji-Jūi-Monogatari-Shō," and other old Japanese books, to illustrate some strange beliefs. They are only Curios.

The Legend of Yurei-Daki

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Near the village of Kurosaka, in the province of Hōki, there is a waterfall called Yurei-Daki, or The Cascade of Ghosts. Why it is so called I do not know. Near the foot of the fall there is a small Shintō shrine of the god of the locality, whom the people name Taki-Daimyōjin; and in front of the shrine is a little wooden money-box—*saisen-bako*—to receive the offerings of believers. And there is a story about that money-box.

*

One icy winter's evening, thirty-five years ago, the women and girls employed at a certain *asa-toriba*, or hemp-factory, in Kurosaka, gathered around the big brazier in the spinning-room after their day's work had been done. Then they amused themselves by telling ghost-stories. By the time that a dozen stories had been told, most of the gathering felt uncomfortable; and a girl cried out, just to heighten the pleasure of fear, "Only think of going this night, all by one's self, to the Yurei-Daki!" The suggestion provoked a general scream, followed by nervous bursts of laughter.... "I'll give all the hemp I spun to-day," mockingly said one of the party, "to the person who goes!" "So will I," exclaimed another. "And I," said a third. "All of us," affirmed a fourth.... Then from among the spinners stood up one Yasumoto O-Katsu, the wife of a carpenter;—she had her only son, a boy of two years old, snugly wrapped up and asleep upon her back. "Listen," said O-Katsu; "if you will all really agree to make over to me all the hemp spun to-day, I will go to the Yurei-Daki." Her proposal was received with cries of astonishment and of defiance. But after having been

several times repeated, it was seriously taken. Each of the spinners in turn agreed to give up her share of the day's work to O-Katsu, providing that O-Katsu should go to the Yurei-Daki. "But how are we to know if she really goes there?" a sharp voice asked. "Why, let her bring back the money-box of the god," answered an old woman whom the spinners called Obaa-San, the Grandmother; "that will be proof enough." "I'll bring it," cried O-Katsu. And out she darted into the street, with her sleeping boy upon her back.

*

The night, was frosty, but clear. Down the empty street O-Katsu hurried; and she saw that all the house fronts were tightly closed, because of the piercing cold. Out of the village, and along the high road she ran—*pichà-pichà*—with the great silence of frozen rice-fields on either hand, and only the stars to light her. Half an hour she followed the open road; then she turned down a narrower way, winding under cliffs. Darker and rougher the path became as she proceeded; but she knew it well, and she soon heard the dull roar of the water. A few minutes more, and the way widened into a glen,—and the dull roar suddenly became a loud clamor,—and before her she saw, looming against a mass of blackness, the long glimmering of the fall. Dimly she perceived the shrine,—the money-box. She rushed forward,—put out her hand....

"*Oi!* O-Katsu-San!"[\[1\]](#) suddenly called a warning voice above the crash of the water.

O-Katsu stood motionless,—stupefied by terror.

"*Oi!* O-Katsu-San!" again pealed the voice,—this time with more of menace in its tone.

But O-Katsu was really a bold woman. At once recovering from her stupefaction, she snatched up the money-box and ran. She neither heard nor saw anything more to alarm her until she reached the highroad, where she stopped a moment to take breath. Then she ran on steadily,—*pichà-pichà*,—till she got to Kurosaka, and thumped at the door of the *asa-toriba*.

*

How the women and the girls cried out as she entered, panting, with the money-box of the god in her hand! Breathlessly they heard her story; sympathetically they screeched when she told them of the Voice that had called her name, twice, out of the haunted water.... What a woman! Brave O-Katsu!—well had she earned the hemp!... "But your boy must be cold, O-Katsu!" cried the Obaa-San, "let us have him here by the fire!"

"He ought to be hungry," exclaimed the mother; "I must give him his milk presently."... "Poor O-Katsu!" said the Obaa-San, helping to remove the wraps in which the boy had been carried,—*"why, you are all wet behind!"* Then, with a husky scream, the helper vociferated, "*Arà! it is blood!*"

And out of the wrappings unfastened there fell to the floor a blood-soaked bundle of baby clothes that left exposed two very small brown feet, and two very small brown hands—nothing more. The child's head had been torn off!...



[1] The exclamation *Oi!* is used to call the attention of a person: it is the Japanese equivalent for such English exclamations as "Halloa!" "Ho, there!" etc.

In a Cup of Tea

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Have you ever attempted to mount some old tower stairway, spiring up through darkness, and in the heart of that darkness found yourself at the cobwebbed edge of nothing? Or have you followed some coast path, cut along the face of a cliff, only to discover yourself, at a turn, on the jagged verge of a break? The emotional worth of such experience—from a literary point of view—is proved by the force of the sensations aroused, and by the vividness with which they are remembered.

Now there have been curiously preserved, in old Japanese story-books, certain fragments of fiction that produce an almost similar emotional experience.... Perhaps the writer was lazy; perhaps he had a quarrel with the publisher; perhaps he was suddenly called away from his little table, and never came back; perhaps death stopped the writing-brush in the very middle of a sentence. But no mortal man can ever tell us exactly why these things were left unfinished.... I select a typical example.

*

On the fourth day of the first month of the third Tenwa,—that is to say, about two hundred and twenty years ago,—the lord Nakagawa Sado, while on his way to make a New Year's visit, halted with his train at a tea-house in Hakusan, in the Hongō district of Yedo. While the party were resting there, one of the lord's attendants,—a *wakatō*[\[1\]](#) named Sekinai,—feeling very thirsty, filled for himself a large water-cup with tea. He was raising the cup to his lips when he suddenly perceived, in the transparent yellow infusion, the

image or reflection of a face that was not his own. Startled, he looked around, but could see no one near him. The face in the tea appeared, from the coiffure, to be the face of a young samurai: it was strangely distinct, and very handsome,—delicate as the face of a girl. And it seemed the reflection of a living face; for the eyes and the lips were moving. Bewildered by this mysterious apparition, Sekinai threw away the tea, and carefully examined the cup. It proved to be a very cheap water-cup, with no artistic devices of any sort. He found and filled another cup; and again the face appeared in the tea. He then ordered fresh tea, and refilled the cup; and once more the strange face appeared,—this time with a mocking smile. But Sekinai did not allow himself to be frightened. "Whoever you are," he muttered, "you shall delude me no further!"—then he swallowed the tea, face and all, and went his way, wondering whether he had swallowed a ghost.

*

Late in the evening of the same day, while on watch in the palace of the lord Nakagawa, Sekinai was surprised by the soundless coming of a stranger into the apartment. This stranger, a richly dressed young samurai, seated himself directly in front of Sekinai, and, saluting the *wakatō* with a slight bow, observed:—

"I am Shikibu Heinai—met you to-day for the first time.... You do not seem to recognize me."

He spoke in a very low, but penetrating voice. And Sekinai was astonished to find before him the same sinister, handsome face of which he had seen, and swallowed, the

apparition in a cup of tea. It was smiling now, as the phantom had smiled; but the steady gaze of the eyes, above the smiling lips, was at once a challenge and an insult.

"No, I do not recognize you," returned Sekinai, angry but cool;—"and perhaps you will now be good enough to inform me how you obtained admission to this house?"

[In feudal times the residence of a lord was strictly guarded at all hours; and no one could enter unannounced, except through some unpardonable negligence on the part of the armed watch.]

"Ah, you do not recognize me!" exclaimed the visitor, in a tone of irony, drawing a little nearer as he spoke. "No, you do not recognize me! Yet you took upon yourself this morning to do me a deadly injury!..."

Sekinai instantly seized the *tantō*[\[2\]](#) at his girdle, and made a fierce thrust at the throat of the man. But the blade seemed to touch no substance. Simultaneously and soundlessly the intruder leaped sideward to the chamber-wall, *and through it!* ... The wall showed no trace of his exit. He had traversed it only as the light of a candle passes through lantern-paper.

*

When Sekinai made report of the incident, his recital astonished and puzzled the retainers. No stranger had been seen either to enter or to leave the palace at the hour of the occurrence; and no one in the service of the lord Nakagawa had ever heard of the name "Shikibu Heinai."

*

On the following night Sekinai was off duty, and remained at home with his parents. At a rather late hour he was informed that some strangers had called at the house, and desired to speak with him for a moment. Taking his sword, he went to the entrance, and there found three armed men,—apparently retainers,—waiting in front of the doorstep. The three bowed respectfully to Sekinai; and one of them said:—

"Our names are Matsuoka Bungō, Tsuchibashi Bungō, and Okamura Heiroku. We are retainers of the noble Shikibu Heinai. When our master last night deigned to pay you a visit, you struck him with a sword. He was much will hurt, and has been obliged to go to the hot springs, where his wound is now being treated. But on the sixteenth day of the coming month he will return; and he will then fitly repay you for the injury done him...."

Without waiting to hear more, Sekinai leaped out, sword in hand, and slashed right and left, at the strangers. But the three men sprang to the wall of the adjoining building, and flitted up the wall like shadows, and....



Here the old narrative breaks off; the rest of the story existed only in some brain that has been dust for a century.

I am able to imagine several possible endings; but none of them would satisfy an Occidental imagination. I prefer to let the reader attempt to decide for himself the probable consequence of swallowing a Soul.

[1] The armed attendant of a *samurai* was thus called. The relation of the *wakatō* to the *samurai* was that of squire to knight.

[2] The shorter of the two swords carried by samurai. The longer sword was called *katana*.

Common Sense

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Once there lived upon the mountain called Atagoyama, near Kyoto, a certain learned priest who devoted all his time to meditation and the study of the sacred books. The little temple in which he dwelt was far from any village; and he could not, in such a solitude, have obtained without help the common necessities of life. But several devout country people regularly contributed to his maintenance, bringing him each month supplies of vegetables and of rice.

Among these good folk there was a certain hunter, who sometimes visited the mountain in search of game. One day, when this hunter had brought a bag of rice to the temple, the priest said to him:—

"Friend, I must tell you that wonderful things have happened here since the last time I saw you. I do not certainly know why such things should have happened in my unworthy presence. But you are aware that I have been meditating, and reciting the sūtras daily, for many years; and it is possible that what has been vouchsafed me is due to the merit obtained through these religious exercises. I am not sure of this. But I am sure that Fugen Bosatsu^[1] comes nightly to this temple, riding upon his elephant.... Stay here with me this night, friend; then you will be able to see and to worship the Buddha."

"To witness so holy a vision," the hunter replied, "were a privilege indeed! Most gladly I shall stay, and worship with you."

So the hunter remained at the temple. But while the priest was engaged in his religious exercises, the hunter began to think about the promised miracle, and to doubt whether such a thing could be. And the more he thought,