

A LIVING GOD

BY LAFCADIO HEARN

I

OF whatever dimension, the temples or shrines of pure Shinto are all built in the same archaic style. The typical shrine is a windowless oblong building of unpainted timber, with a very steep overhanging roof ; the front is the gable end ; and the upper part of the perpetually closed doors is wooden lattice-work, -usually a grating of bars closely set and crossing each other at right angles. In most cases the structure is raised slightly above the ground on wooden pillars; and the queer peaked facade, with its visor-like apertures and the fantastic projections of beam-work above its gable-angle, might remind the European traveler of certain old Gothic forms of dormer. There is no artificial color.

The plain wood soon turns, under the action of rain and sun, to a natural grey, varying according to surface exposure from the silvery tone of birch bark to the sombre grey of basalt. So shaped and so tinted, the isolated country yashiro may seem less like a work of joinery than a feature of the scenery, —a rural form related to nature as closely as rocks and trees, —a something that came into existence only as a manifestation of Ohotsuchi-no-Kami, the Earth-god, the primeval divinity of the land.

Why certain architectural forms produce in the beholder a feeling of weirdness is a question about which I should like to theorize some day : at present I shall venture only to say that Shinto shrines evoke such a feeling. It grows with familiarity instead of weakening ; and a knowledge of popular beliefs is apt to intensify it. We have no English words by which these queer shapes can be sufficiently described, —much less any language able to communicate the peculiar impression which they make. Those Shinto terms which we loosely render by the words "temple" and "shrine" are really untranslatable ; —I mean that the Japanese ideas attaching to them cannot be conveyed by translation.

The so-called "august house" of the Kami is not so much a temple, in the classic meaning of the term, as it is a haunted room, a spirit-chamber, a ghost-house ; many of the lesser divinities being veritably ghosts, —ghosts of great warriors and heroes and rulers and teachers, who lived and loved and died hundreds or thousands of years ago. I fancy that to the Western mind the word "ghost-house" will convey, better than such terms as "shrine" and "temple," some vague notion of the strange character of the Shinto miya or yashiro, —containing in its perpetual dusk nothing more substantial than symbols or tokens, the latter probably of paper. Now the emptiness behind the visored front is more suggestive than anything material could possibly be ; and when you remember that millions of people during thousands of years have worshiped their great dead before such yashiro, — that a whole race

still believes those buildings tenanted by viewless conscious personalities, — you are apt also to reflect how difficult it would be to prove the faith absurd.

Nay! In spite of Occidental reluctances, — in spite of whatever you may think it expedient to say or not to say at a later time about the experience, — you may very likely find yourself for a moment forced into the attitude of respect toward possibilities. Mere cold reasoning will not help you far in the opposite direction. The evidence of the senses counts for little : you know there are ever so many realities which can neither be seen nor heard nor felt, but which exist as forces, — tremendous forces. Then again you cannot mock the conviction of forty millions of people while that conviction thrills all about you like the air, — while conscious that it is pressing upon your psychical being just as the atmosphere presses upon your physical being. As for myself, whenever I am alone in the presence of a Shinto shrine, I have the sensation of being haunted ; and I cannot help thinking about the possible apperceptions of the haunter. And this tempts me to fancy how I should feel if I myself were a god, — dwelling in some old Izumo shrine on the summit of a hill, guarded by stone lions and shadowed by a holy grove.

Elfishly small my habitation might be, but never too small, because I should have neither size nor form. I should be only a vibration, _ a motion invisible as of ether or of magnetism ; though able sometimes to shape me a shadow-body, in the likeness of my former visible self, when I should wish to make apparition.

As air to the bird, as water to the fish, so would all substance be permeable to the essence of me. I should pass at will through the walls of my dwelling to swim in the long gold bath of a sunbeam, to thrill in the heart of a flower, to ride on the neck of a dragonfly.

Power above life and power over death would be mine, _ and the power of self-extension, and the power of self-multiplication, and the power of being in all places at one and the same moment. Simultaneously in a hundred homes I should hear myself worshiped, I should inhale the vapor of a hundred offerings: each evening, from my place within a hundred household shrines, I should see the holy lights lighted for me in lamplets of red clay, in lamplets of brass, _ the lights of the Kami, kindled with purest fire and fed with purest oil.

But in my yashiro upon the hill I should have greatest honor : there betimes I should gather the multitude of my selves together ; there should I unify my powers to answer supplication.

From the dusk of my ghost-house I should look for the coming of sandaled feet, and watch brown supple fingers weaving to my bars the knotted papers which are records of vows, and observe the motion of the lips of my worshipers making prayer :

—" Harai-tamai kiyom_-tama_ ! . . . We have beaten drums, we have lighted fires ; yet the land thirsts and the rice fails. Deign out of thy divine pity to give us rain, O Daimy_jinn ! "

—" Harai-tamai kiyom_-tama_ ! . . . I am dark, too dark, because I have toiled in the field, because the sun hath looked upon me. Deign thou augustly to make me white, very white, --- white like the women of the city, O Daimy_jin ! "

—" Harai-tamai kiyom_-tama_ ! . . . For Tsukamoto Motokichi our son, a soldier of twenty-nine : that he may conquer and come back quickly to us, — soon, very soon, --- we humbly supplicate, O Daimy_jin ! "

Sometimes a girl would whisper all her heart to me : " Maiden of eighteen years, I am loved by a youth of twenty. He is good ; he is true ; but poverty is with us, and the path of our love is dark. Aid us with thy great divine pity ! — help us that we may become united, O Daimyojin ! " Then to the bars of my shrine she would hang a thick soft tress of hair, — her own hair, glossy and black as the wing of the crow, and bound with a cord of mulberry-paper. And in the fragrance of that offering, — the simple fragrance of her peasant youth, — I, the ghost and god, should find again the feelings of the years when I was man and lover.

Mothers would bring their children to my threshold, and teach them to revere me, saying, " Bow down before the great bright God ; make homage to the Daimyojin. " Then I should hear the fresh soft clapping of little hands, and remember that I, the ghost and god, had been a father.

Daily I should hear the splash of pure cool water poured out for me, and the tinkle of thrown coin, and the pattering of dry rice into my wooden box, like a pattering of rain ; and I should be refreshed by the spirit of the water, and strengthened by the spirit of the rice.

Festivals would be held to honor me. Priests, black-coiffed and linen-vestured, would bring me offerings of fruits and fish and seaweed and rice-cakes and rice-wine, — masking their faces with sheets of white paper, so as not to breathe upon my food. And the miko their daughters, fair girls in crimson hakama and robes of snowy white, would come to dance with tinkling of little bells, with waving of silken fans, that I might be gladdened by the bloom of their youth, that I might delight in the charm of their grace. And there would be music of many thousand years ago, — weird music of drums and flutes, — and songs in a tongue no longer spoken ; while the miko, the darlings of the gods, would poise and pose before me : —

. . . " Whose virgins are these, — the virgins who stand like flowers before the Deity ? They are the virgins of the august Deity.

" The august music, the dancing of the virgins, — the Deity will be pleased to hear, the Deity will rejoice to see.

" Before the great bright God the virgins dance, — the virgins all like flowers newly opened. " . . .

Votive gifts of many kinds I should be given : painted paper lanterns bearing my sacred name, and towels of divers colors printed with the number of the years of the giver, and pictures commemorating the fulfillment of prayers for the healing of sickness, the saving of ships, the quenching of fire, the birth of sons.

Also my Karashishi, my guardian lions, would be honored. I should see my pilgrims tying sandals of straw to their necks and to their paws, with prayer to the Karashishi-Sama for strength of foot.

I should see fine moss, like emerald fur, growing slowly, slowly, upon the backs of those lions ;

— I should see the sprouting of lichens upon their flanks and upon their shoulders, in specklings of dead-silver, in patches of dead-gold ; — I should watch, through years of generations, the gradual sideward sinking of their pedestals undermined by frost and rain, until at last my lions would lose their balance, and fall, and break their mossy heads off. After which the people would give me new lions of another form, — lions of granite or of bronze, with gilded teeth and gilded eyes, and tails like a torment of fire.

Between the trunks of the cedars and pines, between the jointed columns of the bamboos, I should observe, season after season, the changes of the colors of the valley : the falling of the snow of winter and the falling of the snow of cherry-flowers ; the lilac spread of the miyakobana ; the blazing yellow of the natane ; the sky - blue mirrored in flooded levels, - - - levels dotted with the moon-shaped hats of the toiling people who would love me ; and at last the pure and tender green of the growing rice.

The muku-birds and the uguisu would fill the shadows of my grove with rippings and purlings of melody ; - - - the bell-insects, the crickets, and the seven marvelous cicad[♂] of summer would make all the wood of my ghost-house thrill to their musical storms. Betimes I should enter, like an ecstasy, into the tiny lives of them, to quicken the joy of their clamor, to magnify the sonority of their song.

But I never can become a god, - - - for this is the nineteenth century ; and nobody can be really aware of the nature of the sensations of a god - - - unless there be gods in the flesh. Are there ? Perhaps - - - in very remote districts - - - one or two. There used to be living gods.

Anciently any man who did something extraordinarily great of good or wise or brave might be declared a god after his death, no matter how humble his condition in life. Also good people who had suffered great cruelty and injustice might be apotheosized ; and there still survives the popular inclination to pay posthumous honor and to make prayer to the spirits of those who die voluntary deaths under particular circumstances, - - - to souls of unhappy lovers, for example. (Probably the old customs which made this tendency had their origin in the wish to appease the vexed spirit, although to-day the experience of great suffering seems to be thought of as qualifying its possessor for divine conditions of being ; - - - and there would be no foolishness whatever in such a thought.) But there were even more remarkable delifications. Certain persons, while still alive, were honored by having temples built for their spirits, and were treated as gods ; not, indeed, as national gods, but as lesser divinities, - - - tutelary deities, perhaps, or village-gods. There was, for instance, Hamaguchi Gohei, a farmer of the district of Arita in the province of Kishu, who was made a god before he died. And I think he deserved it.

II

Before telling the story of Hamaguchi Gohei, I must say a few words about certain laws - - by which many village communities were ruled in pre-Meiji times. These customs were based upon the social experience of ages; and though they differed in minor details according to province or district, their main signification was everywhere about the same.

Some were ethical, some industrial, some religious ; and all matters were regulated by them, - - - even individual behavior.

They preserved peace, and they compelled mutual help and mutual kindness.

Sometimes there might be serious fighting. Between different villages, - - - little peasant ward about questions of water supply or boundaries ; but quarreling between men of the same community could not be tolerated in an age of vendetta, and the whole village would resent any needless disturbance of the internal peace. To some degree this state of things still exists in the more old-fashioned provinces: the people know how to live without quarreling, not to say fighting.

Anywhere, as a general rule,. Japanese fight only to kill ; and when a sober man goes so far as to strike a blow, he virtually rejects communal protection, and takes his life into his own hands with every probability of losing it.

The private conduct of the other sex was regulated by some remarkable obligations entirely outside of written codes. A peasant girl, before marriage, enjoyed far more liberty than was permitted to city girls. She might be known to have a lover ; and unless her parents objected very strongly, no blame would be given to her : it was regarded as an honest union, - - - honest, at least, as to intention. But having once made a choice, the girl was held bound by that choice. If it were discovered that she met another admirer secretly, the people would strip her naked, allowing her only a shuro-leaf for apron, and drive her in mockery through every street and alley of the village.

During this public disgrace of their daughter, the parents of the girl dared not show their faces abroad ; they were expected to share her shame, and they had to remain in their house, with all the shutters fastened up. Afterward the girl was sentenced to banishment for five years.

But at the end of that period she was considered to have expiated her fault, and she could return home with the certainty of being spared further reproaches.

The obligation of mutual help in time of calamity or danger was the most imperative of all communal obligations. In case of fire, especially, everybody was required to give immediate aid to the best of his or her ability. Even children were not exempted from this duty. In towns and cities, of course, things were differently ordered ; but in any little country village the universal duty was very plain and simple, and its neglect would have been considered unpardonable.

A curious fact is that this obligation of mutual help extended to religious matters: Everybody was expected to invoke the help of the gods for the sick or the unfortunate, whenever asked to do so. For example, the village might be ordered to make a sendo-mairi on behalf of some one seriously ill. On such occasions the Kumi-cho (each Kumi-cho was responsible for the conduct of five or more families) would run from house to house crying, "Such and such a one is very sick: kindly hasten all to make a sendo-mairi!" Thereupon, however occupied at the moment, every soul in the settlement was expected to hurry to the temple, - - taking care not to trip or stumble on the way, as a single misstep during the performance of a sendo-mairi was believed to mean misfortune for the sick. . . .

III

Now concerning Hamaguchi.

From immemorial time the shores of Japan have been swept, at irregular intervals of centuries, by enormous tidal waves, — tidal waves caused by earthquakes or by submarine volcanic action. These awful sudden risings of the sea are called by the Japanese tsunami. The last one occurred on the evening of June 17, 1896, when a wave nearly two hundred miles long struck the northeastern provinces of Miyagi, Iwate, and Aomori, wrecking scores of towns and villages, ruining whole districts, and destroying nearly thirty thousand human lives. The story of Hamaguchi Gohei is the story of a like calamity which happened long before the era of Meiji, on another part of the Japanese coast.

He was an old man at the time of the occurrence that made him famous. He was the most influential resident of the village to which he belonged: he had been for many years its muraosa, or headman; and he was not less liked than respected. The people usually called him Ojiisan, which means Grandfather; but, being the richest member of the community, he was sometimes officially referred to as the Choja. He used to advise the smaller farmers about their interests, to arbitrate their disputes, to advance them money at need, and to dispose of their rice for them on the best terms possible.

Hamaguchi's big thatched farmhouse stood at the verge of a small plateau overlooking a bay. The plateau, mostly devoted to rice culture, was hemmed in on three sides by thickly wooded summits. From its outer verge the land sloped down in a huge green concavity, as if scooped out, to the edge of the water; and the whole of this slope, some three quarters of a mile long, was so terraced as to look, when viewed from the open sea, like an enormous flight of green steps, divided in the centre by a narrow white zigzag, — a streak of mountain road. Ninety thatched dwellings and a Shinto temple, composing the village proper, stood along the curve of the bay; and other houses climbed straggling up the slope for some distance on either

side of the narrow road leading to the Choja's home.

One autumn evening Hamaguchi Gohei was looking down from the balcony of his house at some preparations for a merry-making in the village below. There had been a very fine rice-crop, and the peasants were going to celebrate their harvest by a dance in the court of the Ujigami. The old man could see the festival banners (nobori) fluttering above the roofs of the solitary street, the strings of paper lanterns festooned between bamboo poles, the decorations of the shrine, and the brightly colored gathering of the young people. He had nobody with him that evening but his little grandson, a lad of ten; the rest of the household having gone early to the village. He would have accompanied them had he not been feeling less strong than usual.

The day had been oppressive; and in spite of a rising breeze there was still in the air that sort of heavy heat which, according to the experience of the Japanese peasant, at certain seasons precedes an earthquake. And presently an earthquake came. It was not strong enough to frighten anybody; but Hamaguchi, who had felt hundreds of shocks in his time, thought it was queer, —a long, slow, spongy motion. Probably it was but the after-tremor of some immense seismic action very far away. The house crackled and rocked gently several times; then all became still again.

As the quaking ceased Hamaguchi's keen old eyes were anxiously turned toward the village. It often happens that the attention of a person gazing fixedly at a particular spot or object is suddenly diverted by the sense of something not knowingly seen at all, —by a mere vague feeling of the unfamiliar in that dim outer circle of unconscious perception which lies beyond the field of clear vision. Thus it chanced that Hamaguchi became aware of something unusual in the offing. He rose to his feet, and looked at the sea. It had darkened quite suddenly, and it was acting strangely. It seemed to be moving against the wind. It was running away from the land.

Within a very little time the whole village had noticed the phenomenon. Apparently no one had felt the previous motion of the ground, but all were evidently astounded by the movement of the water. They were running to the beach, and even beyond the beach, to watch it. No such ebb had been witnessed on that coast within the memory of living men. Things never seen before were making apparition; unfamiliar spaces of ribbed sand and reaches of weed-hung rock were left bare even as Hamaguchi gazed. And none of the people below appeared to guess what that monstrous ebb signified.

Hamaguchi Gohei himself had never seen such a thing before; but he remembered things told him in his childhood by his father's father, and he knew all the traditions of the coast. He understood what the sea was going to do. Perhaps he thought of the time needed to send a message to the village, or to get the priests of the Buddhist temple on the hill to sound their big bell . . . But it would take very much longer to tell what he might have thought than it took him to think. He simply called to his grandson: —

"Tada! — quick, —very quick! . . .Light me a torch."

Taimatsu, or pine-torches, are kept in many coast dwellings for use on stormy nights, and also for use at certain Shinto festivals. The child kindled a torch at once; and the old man hurried with it to the fields, where hundreds of rice-stacks, representing most of his invested capital, stood awaiting transportation. Approaching those nearest the verge of the slope, he began to apply the torch to them, — hurrying from one to another as quickly as his aged limbs could carry him. The sun-dried stalks caught like tinder; the strengthening seabreeze blew the blaze landward; and presently, rank behind rank, the stacks burst into flame, sending skyward columns of smoke that met and mingled into one enormous cloudy whirl. Tada, astonished and terrified, ran after his grandfather, crying, —

"Ojiisan ! why ? Ojiisan ! why ? —why?"

But Hamaguchi did not answer : he had no time to explain ; he was thinking only of the four hundred lives in peril. For a while the child stared wildly at the blazing rice ; then burst into tears, and ran back to the house, feeling sure that his grandfather had gone mad. Hamaguchi went on firing stack after stack, till he had reached the limit of his field ; then he threw down his torch, and waited.

The acolyte of the hill-temple, observing the blaze, set the big bell booming; and the people responded to the double appeal. Hamaguchi watched them hurrying in from the sands and over the beach and up from the village, like a swarming of ants. and to his anxious eyes, scarcely faster; for the moments seemed terribly long to him. The sun was going down; the wrinkled bed of the bay, and vast sallow speckled expanse beyond it, lay naked to the last orange glow; and still the sea was fleeing toward the horizon.

Really, however, Hamaguchi did not have very long to wait before the first party of succor arrived, — a score of agile young peasants, who wanted to attack the fire at once. But the Choja, holding out both arms, stopped them.

" Let it burn, lads! " he commanded, —" let it be! I want the whole mura here. There is a great danger, —taihen da! "

The whole village was coming; and Hamaguchi counted. All the young men and boys were soon on the spot, and not a few of the more active women and girls; then came most of the older folk, and mothers with babies at their backs, and even children, -- for children could help to pass water; and the elders too feeble to keep up with the first rush could be seen well on their way up the steep ascent.

The growing multitude, still knowing nothing, looked alternately, in sorrowful wonder, at the flaming fields and at the impassive face of their Choja. And the sun went down.

" Grandfather is mad, -- I am afraid of him!" sobbed Tada, in answer to a number of questions. "He is mad. He set fire to the rice on purpose: I saw him do it!"

"As for the rice," cried Hamaguchi, "the child tells the truth. I set fire to the rice. . . . Are all the people here?"

The Kumi-cho and the heads of families looked about them, and down the hill, and made reply: "All are here, or very soon will be. . . . We cannot understand this thing."

"Kita!" shouted the old man at the top of his voice, pointing to the open. "Say now if I be mad!"

Through the twilight eastward all looked, and saw at the edge of the dusky horizon a long, lean, dim line like the shadowing of a coast where no coast ever was, -- a line that thickened as they gazed, that broadened as a coast-line broadens to the eyes of one approaching it, yet incomparably more quickly.

For that long darkness was the returning sea, towering like a cliff, and coursing more swiftly than the kite flies.

"Tsunami!" shrieked the people; and then all shrieks and all sounds and all power to hear sounds were annihilated by a nameless shock heavier than any thunder, as the colossal swell smote the shore with a weight that sent a shudder through the hills, and with a foam-burst like a blaze of sheet-lightning. Then for an instant nothing was visible but a storm of spray rushing up the slope like a cloud; and the people scattered back in panic from the mere menace of it. When they looked again, they saw a white horror of sea raving over the place of their homes. It drew back roaring, and tearing out the bowels of the land as it went. Twice, thrice, five times the sea struck and ebbed, but each time with lesser surges: then it returned to its ancient bed and stayed, -- still raging, as after a typhoon.

On the plateau for a time there was no word spoken. All stared speechlessly at the desolation beneath, -- the ghastliness of hurled rock and naked riven cliff, the bewilderment of scooped-up deep-sea wrack and shingle shot over the empty site of dwelling and temple. The village was not; the greater part of the fields were not; even the terraces had ceased to exist; and of all the homes that had been about the bay there remained nothing recognizable except two straw roofs tossing madly in the offing.

The after-terror of the death escaped and the stupefaction of the general loss kept all lips dumb, until the voice of Hamaguchi was heard again, observing gently,-

"That was why I set fire to the rice."

He, their Choja, now stood among them almost as poor as the poorest; for his wealth was gone—but he had saved four hundred lives by the sacrifice. Little Tada ran to him, and caught his hand, and asked forgiveness for having said naughty things. Whereupon the people woke up to the knowledge of why they were alive, and began to wonder at the simple, unselfish foresight that had saved them; and the headmen prostrated themselves in the dust before Hamaguchi Gohei, and the people after them.

Then the old man wept a little, partly because he was happy, and partly because he was aged and weak and had been sorely tried.

"My house remains," he said, as soon as he could find words, automatically caressing Tada's brown cheeks; "and there is room for many. Also the temple on the hill stands; and

there is shelter there for the others."

Then he led the way to his house; and the people cried and shouted.

The period of distress was long, because in those days there were no means of quick communication between district and district, and the help needed had to be sent from far away. But when better times came, the people did not forget their debt to Hamaguchi Gohei. They could not make him rich; nor would he have suffered them to do so, even had it been possible. Moreover, gifts could never have sufficed as an expression of their reverential feeling towards him; for they believed that the ghost within him was divine. So they declared him a god, and thereafter called him Hamaguchi DAIMYOJIN, thinking they could give him no greater honor; -- and truly no greater honor in any country could be given to mortal man. And when they rebuilt the village, they built a temple to the spirit of him, and fixed above the front of it a tablet bearing his name in Chinese text of gold; and they worshiped him there, with prayer and with offerings. How he felt about it I cannot say; ---I know only that he continued to live in his old thatched home upon the hill, with his children and his children's children, just as humanly and simply as before, while his soul was being worshiped in the shrine below. A hundred years and more he has been dead; but his temple, they tell me, still stands, and the people still pray to the ghost of the good old farmer to help them in time of fear or trouble.

I asked a Japanese philosopher and friend to explain to me how the peasants could rationally imagine the spirit of Hamaguchi in one place while his living body was in another. Also I inquired whether it was only one of his souls which they had worshiped during his life, and whether they imagined that particular soul to have detached itself from the rest to receive homage.

"The peasants," my friend answered,

"think of the mind or spirit of a person as something which, even during life, can be in many places at the same instant. . . . Such an idea is, of course, quite different from Western ideas about the soul."

"Any more rational?" I mischievously asked.

"Well," he responded, with a Buddhist smile, "if we accept the doctrine of the unity of all mind, the idea of the Japanese peasant would appear to contain at least some adumbration of truth. I could not say so much for your Western notions about the soul."