

The Peasant Ghost: A Critical Edition of “The Ghost of Sakura” as Adapted by A. B. Mitford

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This edition provides critical insight into the classic Japanese folktale commonly referred to as “The Ghost of Sakura.” Themes include the narrative of the feudal peasant, the cultural importance of the collective good, and the Western view of Japanese culture. We have also included two original essays by Mitford and an article from the *New York Times* in order to contextualize the cultural importance of this narrative on a global scale.

General Introduction

Eighteenth-century Japan was a mystery to most of the Western world since it did not engage in trade with other countries and had a governing system that purposefully distanced itself from the rest of the world. As a result, nobody outside of the country was familiar with Japan’s government practices, folktales, and supernatural stories. To the rest of the world, Japan appeared ghostly, as there were precious few that actually knew anything of Japanese culture. This edition explores one story, “The Ghost of Sakura”—part of a larger collection, *Tales of Old Japan*—which helped unveil some of these mysteries and expose outsiders to Japanese culture.

Algernon Bertram Freeman-Mitford (1837-1916) was a British diplomat and a writer who was responsible for exposing the English-speaking Western world to Japanese culture. Mitford first traveled to Japan in 1858 when he was second secretary to British diplomatic efforts during the Meiji Restoration. During his time in Japan, Mitford met fellow diplomat and Japanese expert Ernest Salow and learned much that would ultimately inform his collection of Japanese folklore, *Tales of Old Japan*, which featured “The Ghost of Sakura” among others.¹ *Tales of Old Japan* was among the first English-language collections of Japanese literature and folklore available

in the West, and thus was a great influence on how Japanese culture was viewed in Europe and North America. As such, Mitford is an important figure in giving Western culture a taste of older Japanese culture.

What is especially crucial is that Mitford managed to publish his anthology at a time when Japan was beginning to open up to the outside world. Mitford was first sent to China as a diplomat, but was transferred to Japan in 1866. At the time, Japan wasn’t viewed as a country of real consequence to Britain but more of an exotic land that offered nothing in terms of trade (Mitford, *Memories*). Initially, Mitford wasn’t even stationed in the capital of Japan, but instead had to wait for British minister Sir Harry Smith Parkes to arrive and force Mitford into the capital to properly represent England. During the time Mitford served as a diplomat, Japan was beginning to undergo the aforementioned Meiji Restoration. This change would essentially restore the Imperial structure of Japan and help thrust it into the modern world. Countries were able to trade with Japan on an unprecedented scale, and the country was hurtling towards the industrial age (Satow). As Mitford and Parkes traveled to the capital, they received an in-depth and intense look at this revolution. Mitford’s life was even put at risk as war and riots raged outside of Kyoto, where Mitford was staying. It was here that he stumbled upon *Tales of Old Japan*

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1. For more information on Mitford’s notes and time in Japan, see Mitford, *Memories*.

and, with nothing else to work on, worked to learn the language and transcribe the stories.

Japanese folklore is rooted in tradition and honor. Most stories impress the idea of karma or some sort of spiritual retribution being realized. Often, traditional Japanese folk stories would be passed around by wandering religious figures that would travel from village to village, spinning their tales. These wandering performers, called “*ukarebito*” and “*hokaibit*,” were sometimes believed to be spirits that had somehow wandered into the physical world. Nearly all of their stories would contain elements of Kami (spirits) and their interactions with the mortal world (Takanori 199). It is this belief in spirits being able to influence the physical world that formed the haunted nature of many Japanese folktales, including “The Ghost of Sakura.”

A particular focus of our edition is the role of peasants within the government structures of Japan. At the time period of “The Ghost of Sakura,” Japan operated on a feudal system that had five levels to it: Peasant, Samurai, Daimyo, Shogun and finally, the Emperor. Obviously the peasants would form the base of this system, and the other levels built upon this base. In this time period, it was common for peasants who experienced some forms of injustice from their government to contact the Shogun in order to resolve the issue. “Their [the peasants’] protests followed a ritualized pattern: the crisis was discovered, action was taken to resolve it; and equilibrium was restored” (Walthall 571). “The Ghost of Sakura” explores this theme, but, in this case, equilibrium is not initially restored. This imbalance helps bring about the spiritual themes of the story, with a ghostly presence acting in order to attempt to bring equilibrium to the situation. Mitford made stories such as “The Ghost of Sakura” a key focus of his edition more than likely due to his close interaction with the conflicts within the structure of Japan going on at the time.

It is our hope that this edition will provide both a context and understanding of “The Ghost of Sakura,” one of Japan’s most popular folk tales. This is a story that has undergone several changes throughout its existence, with some versions even dropping the ghost present in this edition, but overall it has endured as one of the most well-known stories in the Japanese canon. We have included an annotated version of the story with its original wood-cut illustrations as well as three contextual documents. The first of these is Mitford’s introduction to

“The Ghost of Sakura,” and, in that introduction, Mitford discusses the societal roles at play in the story. The second is Mitford’s introduction to his slightly more well-known translation of “47 Ronin,” a folktale about rogue samurai who band together to fight evil. This introduction goes into more detail about the mystery that was pre-modern Japan and why it was puzzling to the Western world. Finally, we have included a late-19th-century *New York Times* article discussing the Feast of Lanterns, a Buddhist tradition honoring the dead. With these documents we hope to provide a compact view of both what made Japan mysterious to the Western world and how haunting fits in to Japanese folklore.

Introduction to “The Ghost of Sakura”

The social inequality experienced by countless peasants during the times of feudal Japan gave rise to many critical narratives that tell the tale of oppression and suffering, often in unique ways. These narratives often placed the peasantry at the center of events and attempted to give credibility to the cause that they were fighting for, lending a voice to a social group that found itself in a constant struggle against the system that kept them down. Narratives of this nature often based themselves loosely upon historical fact while adding in embellishments that aided in furthering the peasants’ plea for social mobility (Walthall 572).

“The Ghost of Sakura” provides an excellent example of the peasant uprising narrative. By retelling the tale of a farmer who stood up for his rights and eventually paid the ultimate price, the story of oppression is passed on to the audience and creates a narrative in which peasants become active players in shaping their own place in society. The ghostly aspect of the story, however, does more than simply give the peasants a voice of their own. The haunting creates a scenario in which one of their own is able to transcend the rules of society, and even humanity, as he takes on a form in the afterlife that allows him to move into the most private spaces in the lives of their oppressors and affect real change.

Walthall suggests that this dissonance between fact and fiction is precisely what creates the powerful effects found in peasant narratives (572). It allows for the discussion of the morals surrounding real historical events within the realm of fiction, helping accentuate particular points that may not have been completely clear in the

true course of events. Framing the discussion within fiction also allows for a much safer discussion of social issues than may have been possible in purely factual historical narratives. The particular use of haunting in retelling the events in “The Ghost of Sakura” lends another interesting facet to the discussion of morality, as the fact that a peasant was able to return as a ghost implies that something on the other side of death is clearly favorable to their cause. This implied support of the supernatural instantly adds a sense of validity to the moral narrative found within the story. It seems to invoke a clear distinction between right and wrong and creates a sense of legitimacy for their rebellion (Scheiner 581).

It is also important to note how the contrast between collectivism and individualism plays out throughout the narrative. Collectivism, typically seen in Eastern cultures, emphasizes the importance of group needs over individual needs. Individualism, on the other hand, is typically seen in Western cultures and places a higher importance on the needs of the individual. Thus, the peasants perceive their collectivist cause as the norm while the individualist attitude of the nobility is presented as deviant. This deviance lends further validity to the cause of the peasants, as they perceive it as something that is wrong and must therefore be corrected.² This tension between ideologies results in an interesting inversion of the power structure once the haunting begins. The peasant is able to return and, as an individual, create havoc in the life of the nobility. This narrative implies that the rise of one individual over another must only take place in the name of the collective good. Furthermore, the nobleman in this narrative is granted good fortune following his atonement, and he prospers along with the villages that he rules. His previous actions against the collective good are overlooked, and society is portrayed as returning to a state of equilibrium. Much of the story concerns the economic system that was present in feudal Japan; as such, it is likely that Mitford may have intended to show his Western audience that the Japanese people were

very organized and could be a viable candidate for future trade. Additionally, the story aids in reaffirming the importance of bureaucracy—something that had become quite common in the Western world at that point.

By mixing historical fact with the embellishments of fiction, “The Ghost of Sakura” presents a compelling narrative that emphasizes equality, the collective good, and the just cause of peasant uprisings. While the original tale was passed through Japanese families as oral legend, the version that follows was written down by A. B. Mitford as a part of his *Tales of Old Japan* anthology in 1871. While a theatrical version was produced that changed the names of individuals, his version emphasizes history by including correspondence and the real names of individuals, also including the aspects of haunting that make the tale so powerful. This creates a sense of authenticity while simultaneously adding a supernatural element. Additionally, the original illustrations from Mitford’s text, adapted from Japanese woodcarvings, have been retained here in order to emphasize the authenticity of this classic folktale.

“The Ghost of Sakura”³

“How true is the principle laid down by Confucius, that the benevolence of princes is reflected in their country, while their wickedness causes sedition and confusion!”⁴

In the province of Shimôsa, and the district of Sôma,⁵ Hotta Kaga no Kami was lord of the castle of Sakura, and chief of a family which had for generations produced famous warriors. When Kaga no Kami,⁶ who had served in the Gorôjiu, the cabinet of the Shogun,⁷ died at the castle of Sakura, his eldest son Kôtsuké no Suké Masanobu inherited his estates and honours, and was appointed to a seat in the Gorôjiu; but he was a different man from the lords who had preceded him. He treated the farmers and peasants unjustly, imposing additional

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2. For a more detailed analysis of the role of collectivism in Japanese history, see Hoston.

3. This text is found in A.B. Mitford’s *Tales of Old Japan*, pages 164-188.

4. This introductory quote was inserted by Mitford during the translation process. The Neo-Confucianism movement popular in Japan was based on the idea that the universe could be understood by human reason. This stood in contrast to the Zen Buddhists of the time, one of Japan’s other popular spiritual beliefs. The Neo-Confucius movement also helped form hierarchy in Japanese society, which would explain why this quote would introduce “The Ghost of Sakura,” which deals with social hierarchy (Craig 552-53).

5. Sôma is in the modern-day Chiba prefecture and just to the west of Tokyo.

6. Family names in Japanese and many other Eastern cultures are placed at the beginning of the name. As such, Hotta Kaga no Kami is from the Hotta clan and his given name is Kaga no Kami. This convention is used frequently throughout the text.

7. The Shogunate were military governors responsible for a given district of Japan. The title was typically passed down within families; the Gorôjiu would be his high council.

8. Peasant farmers in Japan were expected to pay a portion of their crop earnings each year to the nobility that oversaw their particular group of villages.

and grievous taxes, so that the tenants on his estates were driven to the last extremity of poverty; and although year after year, and month after month, they prayed for mercy, and remonstrated against this injustice, no heed was paid to them, and the people throughout the villages were reduced to the utmost distress.⁸ Accordingly, the chiefs of the one hundred and thirty-six villages, producing a total revenue of 40,000 kokus⁹ of rice, assembled together in council and determined unanimously to present a petition to the Government, sealed with their seals, stating that their repeated remonstrances had been taken no notice of by their local authorities. Then they assembled in numbers before the house of one of the councillors of their lord, named Ikéura Kazuyé, in order to show the petition to him first, but even then no notice was taken of them; so they returned home, and resolved, after consulting together, to proceed to their lord's yashiki, or palace, at Yedo,¹⁰ on the seventh day of the tenth month. It was determined, with one accord, that one hundred and forty-three village chiefs should go to Yedo; and the chief of the village of Iwashashi, one Sôgorô, a man forty-eight years of age, distinguished for his ability and judgment, ruling a district which produced a thousand kokus,¹¹ stepped forward, and said—

“This is by no means an easy matter, my masters. It certainly is of great importance that we should forward our complaint to our lord's palace at Yedo; but what are your plans? Have you any fixed intentions?”

“It is, indeed, a most important matter,” rejoined the others; but they had nothing further to say. Then Sôgorô went on to say—

“We have appealed to the public office of our province, but without avail; we have petitioned the Prince's councillors, also in vain. I know that all that remains for us is to lay our case before our lord's palace at Yedo; and if we go there, it is equally certain that we shall not be listened to—on the contrary, we shall be cast into prison. If we are not attended to here, in our own province, how much less will the officials at Yedo care for us. We might hand our petition into the litter of one of the Gorôjiu, in the public streets; but, even in that case, as our lord is a member of the Gorôjiu, none of his peers would care

to examine into the rights and wrongs of our complaint, for fear of offending him, and the man who presented the petition in so desperate a manner would lose his life on a bootless errand. If you have made up your minds to this, and are determined, at all hazards, to start, then go to Yedo by all means, and bid a long farewell to parents, children, wives, and relations. This is my opinion.”



The others all agreeing with what Sôgorô said, they determined that, come what might, they would go to Yedo; and they settled to assemble at the village of Funabashi on the thirteenth day of the eleventh month.

On the appointed day all the village officers met at the place agreed upon,—Sôgorô, the chief of the village of Iwashashi, alone being missing; and as on the following day Sôgorô had not yet arrived, they deputed one of their number, named Rokurobei, to inquire the reason. Rokurobei arrived at Sôgorô's house towards four in the afternoon, and found him warming himself quietly over his charcoal brazier, as if nothing were the matter. The messenger, seeing this, said rather testily—

“The chiefs of the villages are all assembled at Funabashi according to covenant, and as you, Master Sôgorô, have not arrived, I have come to inquire whether it is sickness or some other cause that prevents you.”

“Indeed,” replied Sôgorô, “I am sorry that you should have had so much trouble. My intention was to have set out yesterday; but I was taken with a cholic,¹² with which I am often troubled, and, as you may see, I am taking care of myself; so for a day or two I shall not be able to

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- 8. Peasant farmers in Japan were expected to pay a portion of their crop earnings each year to the nobility that oversaw their particular group of villages.
- 9. A *koku* is a unit of volume equal to approximately 278.3 liters. It is used throughout the text to measure rice and describe the wealth of the various villages and districts. In this case, the villages had a combined rice yield of 11.1 million liters.
- 10. Yedo, also known as Edo, is the modern-day city of Tokyo.
- 11. This is approximately 278,300 liters.
- 12. This is also called colic, a kind of digestive pain that comes and goes due to muscular contraction (Bhat 363).

start. Pray be so good as to let the others know this.”

Rokurobei, seeing that there was no help for it, went back to the village of Funabashi and communicated to the others what had occurred. They were all indignant at what they looked upon as the cowardly defection of a man who had spoken so fairly, but resolved that the conduct of one man should not influence the rest, and talked themselves into the belief that the affair which they had in hand would be easily put through; so they agreed with one accord to start and present the petition, and, having arrived at Yedo, put up in the street called Bakurochô. But although they tried to forward their complaint to the various officers of their lord, no one would listen to them; the doors were all shut in their faces, and they had to go back to their inn, crestfallen and without success.

On the following day, being the 18th of the month, they all met together at a tea-house in an avenue, in front of a shrine of Kwannon Sama; and having held a consultation, they determined that, as they could hit upon no good expedient, they would again send for Sôgorô to see whether he could devise no plan. Accordingly, on the 19th, Rokurobei and one Jiuyémon started for the village of Iwahashi at noon, and arrived the same evening.

Now the village chief Sôgorô, who had made up his mind that the presentation of this memorial was not a matter to be lightly treated, summoned his wife and children and his relations, and said to them—

“I am about to undertake a journey to Yedo, for the following reasons:—Our present lord of the soil has increased the land-tax, in rice and the other imposts, more than tenfold, so that pen and paper would fail to convey an idea of the poverty to which the people are reduced, and the peasants are undergoing the tortures of hell upon earth. Seeing this, the chiefs of the various villages have presented petitions, but with what result is doubtful. My earnest desire, therefore, is to devise some means of escape from this cruel persecution. If my ambitious scheme does not succeed, then shall I return home no more; and even should I gain my end, it is hard to say how I may be treated by those in power. Let us drink a cup of wine together, for it may be that you shall see my face no more. I give my life to allay the misery of the people of this estate. If I die, mourn not over my fate; weep not for me.”

Having spoken thus, he addressed his wife and his four children, instructing them carefully as to what he desired to be done after his death, and minutely stating every wish

of his heart. Then, having drunk a parting cup with them, he cheerfully took leave of all present, and went to a tea-house in the neighbouring village of Funabashi, where the two messengers, Rokurobei and Jiuyémon, were anxiously awaiting his arrival, in order that they might recount to him all that had taken place at Yedo.

“In short,” said they, “it appears to us that we have failed completely; and we have come to meet you in order to hear what you propose. If you have any plan to suggest, we would fain be made acquainted with it.”

“We have tried the officers of the district,” replied Sôgorô, “and we have tried my lord’s palace at Yedo. However often we might assemble before my lord’s gate, no heed would be given to us. There is nothing left for us but to appeal to the Shogun.”

So they sat talking over their plans until the night was far advanced, and then they went to rest. The winter night was long; but when the cawing of the crows was about to announce the morning, the three friends started on their journey for the tea-house at Asakusa, at which, upon their arrival, they found the other village elders already assembled.

“Welcome, Master Sôgorô,” said they. “How is it that you have come so late? We have petitioned all the officers to no purpose, and we have broken our bones in vain. We are at our wits’ end, and can think of no other scheme. If there is any plan which seems good to you, we pray you to act upon it.”

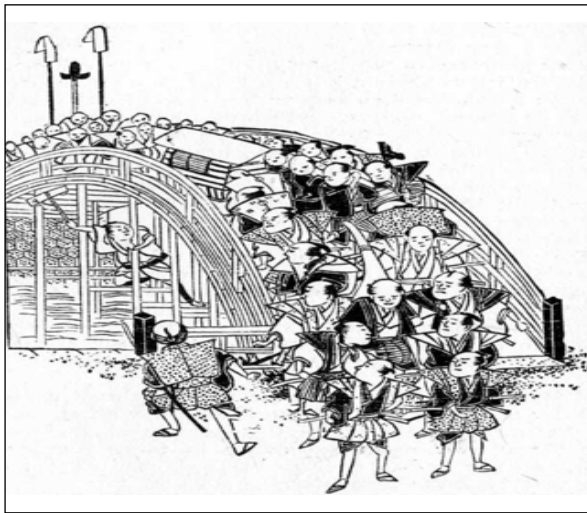
“Sirs,” replied Sôgorô, speaking very quietly, “although we have met with no better success here than in our own place, there is no use in grieving. In a day or two the Gorôjiu will be going to the castle; we must wait for this opportunity, and following one of the litters, thrust in our memorial. This is my opinion: what think you of it, my masters?”

One and all, the assembled elders were agreed as to the excellence of this advice; and having decided to act upon it, they returned to their inn.

Then Sôgorô held a secret consultation with Jiuyémon, Hanzô, Rokurobei, Chinzô, and Kinshirô, five of the elders, and, with their assistance, drew up the memorial; and having heard that on the 26th of the month, when the Gorôjiu should go to the castle, Kuzé Yamato no Kami would proceed to a palace under the western enclosure of the castle, they kept watch in a place hard by. As soon as they saw the litter of the Gorôjiu approach, they drew near to it, and, having humbly stated their grievances, handed

in the petition; and as it was accepted, the six elders were greatly elated, and doubted not that their hearts' desire would be attained; so they went off to a tea-house at Riyôgoku, and Jiuyémon said—

“We may congratulate ourselves on our success. We have handed in our petition to the Gorôjiu, and now we may set our minds at rest; before many days have passed, we shall hear good news from the rulers. To Master Sôgorô is due great praise for his exertions.”



Sôgorô, stepping forward, answered, “Although we have presented our memorial to the Gorôjiu, the matter will not be so quickly decided; it is therefore useless that so many of us should remain here: let eleven men stay with me, and let the rest return home to their several villages. If we who remain are accused of conspiracy and beheaded, let the others agree to reclaim and bury our corpses. As for the expenses which we shall incur until our suit is concluded, let that be according to our original covenant. For the sake of the hundred and thirty-six villages we will lay down our lives, if needs must, and submit to the disgrace of having our heads exposed as those of common malefactors.”¹³

Then they had a parting feast together, and, after a sad leave-taking, the main body of the elders went home to their own country; while the others, wending their way to their quarters waited patiently to be summoned to the Supreme Court. On the 2d day of the 12th month, Sôgorô, having received a summons from the residence

of the Gorôjiu Kuzé Yamato no Kami, proceeded to obey it, and was ushered to the porch of the house, where two councillors, named Aijima Gidaiyu and Yamaji Yôri, met him, and said—

“Some days since you had the audacity to thrust a memorial into the litter of our lord Yamato no Kami. By an extraordinary exercise of clemency,¹⁴ he is willing to pardon this heinous offence; but should you ever again endeavour to force your petitions upon him, you will be held guilty of riotous conduct;” and with this they gave back the memorial.

“I humbly admit the justice of his lordship’s censure. But oh! my lords, this is no hasty nor ill-considered action. Year after year, affliction upon affliction has been heaped upon us, until at last the people are without even the necessaries of life; and we, seeing no end to the evil, have humbly presented this petition. I pray your lordships of your great mercy to consider our case and deign to receive our memorial. Vouchsafe to take some measures that the people may live, and our gratitude for your great kindness will know no bounds.”

“Your request is a just one,” replied the two councillors after hearing what he said; “but your memorial cannot be received: so you must even take it back.”

With this they gave back the document, and wrote down the names of Sôgorô and six of the elders who had accompanied him. There was no help for it: they must take back their petition, and return to their inn. The seven men, dispirited and sorrowful, sat with folded arms considering what was best to be done, what plan should be devised, until at last, when they were at their wits’ end, Sôgorô said, in a whisper—

“So our petition, which we gave in after so much pains, has been returned after all! With what face can we return to our villages after such a disgrace? I, for one, do not propose to waste my labour for nothing; accordingly, I shall bide my time until some day, when the Shogun shall go forth from the castle, and, lying in wait by the roadside, I shall make known our grievances to him, who is lord over our lord. This is our last chance.”

The others all applauded this speech, and, having with one accord hardened their hearts, waited for their opportunity.

Now it so happened that, on the 20th day of the 12th month, the then Shogun, Prince Iyémitsu, was pleased

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13. Having your head exposed on a pike was considered an ultimate form of disgrace.

14. Mercy.

to worship at the tombs of his ancestors at Uyéno; and Sôgorô and the other elders, hearing this, looked upon it as a special favour from the gods, and felt certain that this time they would not fail. So they drew up a fresh memorial, and at the appointed time Sôgorô hid himself under the Sammayé Bridge, in front of the black gate at Uyéno. When Prince Iyémitu passed in his litter, Sôgorô clambered up from under the bridge, to the great surprise of the Shogun’s attendants, who called out, “Push the fellow on one side”; but, profiting by the confusion, Sôgorô, raising his voice and crying, “I wish to humbly present a petition to his Highness in person,” thrust forward his memorial, which he had tied on to the end of a bamboo stick six feet long, and tried to put it into the litter; and although there were cries to arrest him, and he was buffeted by the escort, he crawled up to the side of the litter, and the Shogun accepted the document. But Sôgorô was arrested by the escort, and thrown into prison. As for the memorial, his Highness ordered that it should be handed in to the Gorôjiu Hotta Kôtsuké no Suké, the lord of the petitioners.

When Hotta Kôtsuké no Suké had returned home and read the memorial, he summoned his councillor, Kojima Shikibu, and said—

“The officials of my estate are mere bunglers. When the peasants assembled and presented a petition, they refused to receive it, and have thus brought this trouble upon me. Their folly has been beyond belief; however, it cannot be helped. We must remit all the new taxes, and you must inquire how much was paid to the former lord of the castle. As for this Sôgorô, he is not the only one who is at the bottom of the conspiracy; however, as this heinous offence of his in going out to lie in wait for the Shogun’s procession is unpardonable, we must manage to get him given up to us by the Government, and, as an example for the rest of my people, he shall be crucified—he and his wife and his children; and, after his death, all that he possesses shall be confiscated. The other six men shall be banished; and that will suffice.”

“My lord,” replied Shikibu, prostrating himself, “your lordship’s intentions are just. Sôgorô, indeed, deserves any punishment for his outrageous crime. But I humbly venture to submit that his wife and children cannot be said to be guilty in the same degree: I implore your lordship mercifully to be pleased to absolve them from

so severe a punishment.”

“Where the sin of the father is great, the wife and children cannot be spared,” replied Kôtsuké no Suké; and his councillor, seeing that his heart was hardened, was forced to obey his orders without further remonstrance.

So Kôtsuké no Suké, having obtained that Sôgorô should be given up to him by the Government, caused him to be brought to his estate of Sakura as a criminal, in a litter covered with nets, and confined him in prison. When his case had been inquired into, a decree was issued by the Lord Kôtsuké no Suké that he should be punished for a heinous crime; and on the 9th day of the 2d month of the second year of the period styled Shôhō (A.D. 1644) he was condemned to be crucified.¹⁵ Accordingly Sôgorô, his wife and children, and the elders of the hundred and thirty-six villages were brought before the Court-house of Sakura, in which were assembled forty-five chief officers. The elders were then told that, yielding to their petition, their lord was graciously pleased to order that the oppressive taxes should be remitted, and that the dues levied should not exceed those of the olden time. As for Sôgorô and his wife, the following sentence was passed upon them:—

“Whereas you have set yourself up as the head of the villagers; whereas, secondly, you have dared to make light of the Government by petitioning his Highness the Shogun directly, thereby offering an insult to your lord; and whereas, thirdly, you have presented a memorial to the Gorôjiu; and, whereas, fourthly, you were privy to a conspiracy: for these four heinous crimes you are sentenced to death by crucifixion. Your wife is sentenced to die in like manner; and your children will be decapitated.

“This sentence is passed upon the following persons:—

“Sôgorô, chief of the village of Iwahashi, aged 48.

“His wife, Man, aged 38.

“His son, Gennosuké, aged 13.

“His son, Sôhei, aged 10.

“His son, Kihachi, aged 7.”

The eldest daughter of Sôgorô, named Hatsu, nineteen years of age, was married to a man named Jiuyémon, in the village of Hakamura, in Shitachi, beyond the river, in the territory of Matsudaira Matsu no Kami (the Prince of Sendai). His second daughter, whose name was Saki, sixteen years of age, was married to one Tôjiurô, chief

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15. It is believed that this practice was introduced to Japan following the introduction of Christianity into the region. It was a common form of capital punishment, as were burning, sawing, and beheading (Okamura 49).

of a village on the property of my lord Naitô Geki. No punishment was decreed against these two women.

The six elders who had accompanied Sôgorô were told that although by good rights they had merited death, yet by the special clemency of their lord their lives would be spared, but that they were condemned to banishment. Their wives and children would not be attainted, and their property would be spared. The six men were banished to Oshima, in the province of Idzu.

Sôgorô heard his sentence with pure courage.

The six men were banished; but three of them lived to be pardoned on the occasion of the death of the Shogun, Prince Genyuin, and returned to their country.

According to the above decision, the taxes were remitted; and men and women, young and old, rejoiced over the advantage that had been gained for them by Sôgorô and by the six elders, and there was not one that did not mourn for their fate.

When the officers of the several villages left the Court-house, one Zembei, the chief of the village of Sakato, told the others that he had some important subjects to speak to them upon, and begged them to meet him in the temple called Fukushôin. Every man having consented, and the hundred and thirty-six men having assembled at the temple, Zembei addressed them as follows:—

“The success of our petition, in obtaining the reduction of our taxes to the same amount as was levied by our former lord, is owing to Master Sôgorô, who has thus thrown away his life for us. He and his wife and children are now to suffer as criminals for the sake of the one hundred and thirty-six villages. That such a thing should take place before our very eyes seems to me not to be borne. What say you, my masters?”

“Ay! ay! what you say is just from top to bottom,” replied the others. Then Hanzayémon, the elder of the village of Katsuta, stepped forward and said—

“As Master Zembei has just said, Sôgorô is condemned to die for a matter in which all the village elders are concerned to a man. We cannot look on unconcerned. Full well I know that it is useless our pleading for Sôgorô; but we may, at least, petition that the lives of his wife and children may be spared.”

The assembled elders having all applauded this speech, they determined to draw up a memorial; and they resolved, should their petition not be accepted by the local authorities, to present it at their lord’s palace in Yedo, and should that fail, to appeal to the Government. Accord-

ingly, before noon on the following day, they all affixed their seals to the memorial, which four of them, including Zembei and Hanzayémon, composed, as follows:—

“With deep fear we humbly venture to present the following petition, which the elders of the one hundred and thirty-six villages of this estate have sealed with their seals. In consequence of the humble petition which we lately offered up, the taxes have graciously been reduced to the rates levied by the former lord of the estate, and new laws have been vouchsafed to us. With reverence and joy the peasants, great and small, have gratefully acknowledged these favours. With regard to Sôgorô, the elder of the village of Iwahashi, who ventured to petition his highness the Shogun in person, thus being guilty of a heinous crime, he has been sentenced to death in the castle-town. With fear and trembling we recognize the justice of his sentence. But in the matter of his wife and children, she is but a woman, and they are so young and innocent that they cannot distinguish the east from the west: we pray that in your great clemency you will remit their sin, and give them up to the representatives of the one hundred and thirty-six villages, for which we shall be ever grateful. We, the elders of the villages, know not to what extent we may be transgressing in presenting this memorial. We were all guilty of affixing our seals to the former petition; but Sôgorô, who was chief of a large district, producing a thousand kokus of revenue, and was therefore a man of experience, acted for the others; and we grieve that he alone should suffer for all. Yet in his case we reverently admit that there can be no reprieve. For his wife and children, however, we humbly implore your gracious mercy and consideration.

“Signed by the elders of the villages of the estate, the 2d year of Shôhô, and the 2d month.”

Having drawn up this memorial, the hundred and thirty-six elders, with Zembei at their head, proceeded to the Court-house to present the petition, and found the various officers seated in solemn conclave. Then the clerk took the petition, and, having opened it, read it aloud; and the councillor, Ikéura Kazuyé, said—

“The petition which you have addressed to us is worthy of all praise. But you must know that this is a matter which is no longer within our control. The affair has been reported to the Government; and although the priests of my lord’s ancestral temple have interceded for Sôgorô, my lord is so angry that he will not listen even to them, saying that, had he not been one of the Gorôjii,

he would have been in danger of being ruined by this man: his high station alone saved him. My lord spoke so severely that the priests themselves dare not recur to the subject. You see, therefore, that it will be no use your attempting to take any steps in the matter, for most certainly your petition will not be received. You had better, then, think no more about it.” And with these words he gave back the memorial.¹⁶

Zembei and the elders, seeing, to their infinite sorrow, that their mission was fruitless, left the Court-house, and most sorrowfully took counsel together, grinding their teeth in their disappointment when they thought over what the councillor had said as to the futility of their attempt. Out of grief for this, Zembei, with Hanzayémon and Heijiurô, on the 11th day of the 2d month (the day on which Sôgorô and his wife and children suffered), left Ewaradai, the place of execution, and went to the temple Zenkôji, in the province of Shinshiu, and from thence they ascended Mount Kôya in Kishiu, and, on the 1st day of the 8th month, shaved their heads and became priests; Zembei changed his name to Kakushin, and Hanzayémon changed his to Zenshô: as for Heijiurô, he fell sick at the end of the 7th month, and on the 11th day of the 8th month died, being forty-seven years old that year. These three men, who had loved Sôgorô as the fishes love water, were true to him to the last. Heijiurô was buried on Mount Kôya. Kakushin wandered through the country as a priest, praying for the entry of Sôgorô and his children into the perfection of paradise; and, after visiting all the shrines and temples, came back at last to his own province of Shimôsa, and took up his abode at the temple Riukakuji, in the village of Kano, and in the district of Imban, praying and making offerings on behalf of the souls of Sôgorô, his wife and children. Hanzayémon, now known as the priest Zenshô, remained at Shinagawa, a suburb of Yedo, and, by the charity of good people, collected enough money to erect six bronze Buddhas, which remain standing to this day. He fell sick and died, at the age of seventy, on the 10th day of the 2d month of the 13th year of the period styled Kam-bun. Zembei, who, as a priest, had changed his name to Kakushin, died, at the age of seventy-six, on the 17th day of the 10th month of the 2d year of the period styled

Empô. Thus did those men, for the sake of Sôgorô and his family, give themselves up to works of devotion; and the other villagers also brought food to soothe the spirits of the dead, and prayed for their entry into paradise; and as litanies were repeated without intermission, there can be no doubt that Sôgorô attained salvation.

“In paradise, where the blessings of God are distributed without favour, the soul learns its faults by the measure of the rewards given. The lusts of the flesh are abandoned; and the soul, purified, attains to the glory of Buddha.”

On the 11th day of the 2d month of the 2d year of Shôhô, Sôgorô having been convicted of a heinous crime, a scaffold was erected at Ewaradai, and the councillor who resided at Yedo and the councillor who resided on the estate, with the other officers, proceeded to the place in all solemnity. Then the priests of Tôkôji, in the village of Sakénaga, followed by coffin-bearers, took their places in front of the councillors, and said—

“We humbly beg leave to present a petition.”

“What have your reverences to say?”

“We are men who have forsaken the world and entered the priesthood,” answered the monks, respectfully; “and we would fain, if it be possible, receive the bodies of those who are to die, that we may bury them decently. It will be a great joy to us if our humble petition be graciously heard and granted.”

“Your request shall be granted; but as the crime of Sôgorô was great, his body must be exposed for three days and three nights, after which the corpse shall be given to you.”

At the hour of the snake (10 A.M.),¹⁷ the hour appointed for the execution, the people from the neighbouring villages and the castle-town, old and young, men and women, flocked to see the sight: numbers there were, too, who came to bid a last farewell to Sôgorô, his wife and children, and to put up a prayer for them. When the hour had arrived, the condemned were dragged forth bound, and made to sit upon coarse mats. Sôgorô and his wife closed their eyes, for the sight was more than they could bear; and the spectators, with heaving breasts and streaming eyes, cried “Cruel!” and “Pitiless!”¹⁸ and taking sweetmeats and cakes from the bosoms of their dresses threw them to the children. At noon precisely

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16. This is an interesting word choice, as it implies that the fate of Sôgorô’s family has already been sealed and that there is now only a “memorial” of their efforts to save them.

17. Time in 17th-19th century Japan was broken up into the 12 symbols of the Zodiac of the Japanese lunar calendar. The snake represents 9-11 p.m., when snakes leave their underground homes (For more on the Chinese Zodiac see Lau.) Mitford has likely inserted this information for his Western readers.

18. Note that, as in many other parts of the narrative, there is no violent resistance and only an exchange of words.

Sôgorô and his wife were bound to the crosses, which were then set upright and fixed in the ground. When this had been done, their eldest son Gennosuké was led forward to the scaffold, in front of the two parents. Then Sôgorô cried out—

“Oh! cruel, cruel! what crime has this poor child committed that he is treated thus? As for me, it matters not what becomes of me.” And the tears trickled down his face.

The spectators prayed aloud, and shut their eyes; and the executioner himself, standing behind the boy, and saying that it was a pitiless thing that the child should suffer for the father’s fault, prayed silently. Then Gennosuké, who had remained with his eyes closed, said to his parents—

“Oh! my father and mother, I am going before you to paradise, that happy country, to wait for you. My little brothers and I will be on the banks of the river Sandzu, and stretch out our hands and help you across. Farewell, all you who have come to see us die; and now please cut off my head at once.”

With this he stretched out his neck, murmuring a last prayer; and not only Sôgorô and his wife, but even the executioner and the spectators could not repress their tears; but the headsman, unnerved as he was, and touched to the very heart, was forced, on account of his office, to cut off the child’s head, and a piteous wail arose from the parents and the spectators.

Then the younger child Sôhei said to the headsman, “Sir, I have a sore on my right shoulder: please, cut my head off from the left shoulder, lest you should hurt me. Alas! I know not how to die, nor what I should do.”

When the headsman and the officers present heard the child’s artless speech, they wept again for very pity; but there was no help for it, and the head fell off more swiftly than water is drunk up by sand. Then little Kihachi, the third son, who, on account of his tender years, should have been spared, was butchered as he was in his simplicity eating the sweetmeats which had been thrown to him by the spectators.

When the execution of the children was over, the priests of Tôkôji took their corpses, and, having placed them in their coffins, carried them away, amidst the lamentations of the bystanders, and buried them with great solemnity.

Then Shigayémon, one of the servants of Dan-

zayémon, the chief of the Etas, who had been engaged for the purpose, was just about to thrust his spear, when O Man, Sôgorô’s wife, raising her voice, said—

“Remember, my husband, that from the first you had made up your mind to this fate. What though our bodies be disgracefully exposed on these crosses?—we have the promises of the gods before us; therefore, mourn not. Let us fix our minds upon death: we are drawing near to paradise, and shall soon be with the saints. Be calm, my husband. Let us cheerfully lay down our single lives for the good of many. Man lives but for one generation; his name, for many. A good name is more to be prized than life.”

So she spoke; and Sôgorô on the cross, laughing gaily, answered—

“Well said, wife! What though we are punished for the many? Our petition was successful, and there is nothing left to wish for. Now I am happy, for I have attained my heart’s desire. The changes and chances of life are manifold. But if I had five hundred lives, and could five hundred times assume this shape of mine, I would die five hundred times to avenge this iniquity. For myself I care not; but that my wife and children should be punished also is too much. Pitiless and cruel! Let my lord fence himself in with iron walls, yet shall my spirit burst through them and crush his bones, as a return for this deed.”

And as he spoke, his eyes became vermilion red, and flashed like the sun or the moon, and he looked like the demon Razetsu.¹⁹

“Come,” shouted he, “make haste and pierce me with the spear.”

“Your wishes shall be obeyed,” said the Eta, Shigayémon, and thrust in a spear at his right side until it came out at his left shoulder, and the blood streamed out like a fountain. Then he pierced the wife from the left side; and she, opening her eyes, said in a dying voice—

“Farewell, all you who are present. May harm keep far from you. Farewell! farewell!” and as her voice waxed faint, the second spear was thrust in from her right side, and she breathed out her spirit. Sôgorô, the colour of his face not even changing, showed no sign of fear, but opening his eyes wide, said—

“Listen, my masters! all you who have come to see this sight. Recollect that I shall pay my thanks to my lord Kôtsuké no Suké for this day’s work. You shall see it for

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19. There is little documentation available to decipher the significance of the reference to this particular demon. It appears to be an obscure reference (or perhaps spelling) by Mitford in his retelling.

20. Ritualized form of suicide that involves disembowelment using a ceremonial knife.

yourselves, so that it shall be talked of for generations to come. As a sign, when I am dead, my head shall turn and face towards the castle. When you see this, doubt not that my words shall come true.”

When he had spoken thus, the officer directing the execution gave a sign to the Eta, Shigayémon, and ordered him to finish the execution, so that Sôgorô should speak no more. So Shigayémon pierced him twelve or thirteen times,



until he died. And when he was dead, his head turned and faced the castle. When the two councillors beheld this miracle, they came down from their raised platform, and knelt down before Sôgorô's dead body and said—

“Although you were but a peasant on this estate, you conceived a noble plan to succour the other farmers in their distress. You bruised your bones, and crushed your heart, for their sakes. Still, in that you appealed to the Shogun in person, you committed a grievous crime, and made light of your superiors; and for this it was impossible not to punish you. Still we admit that to include your wife and children in your crime, and kill them before your eyes, was a cruel deed. What is done, is done, and regret is of no avail. However, honours shall be paid to your spirit: you shall be canonized as the Saint Daimiyô, and you shall be placed among the tutelar deities of my lord's family.”

With these words the two councillors made repeated reverences before the corpse; and in this they showed their faithfulness to their lord. But he, when the matter was reported to him, only laughed scornfully at the idea that the hatred of a peasant could affect his feudal lord;

and said that a vassal who had dared to hatch a plot which, had it not been for his high office, would have been sufficient to ruin him, had only met with his deserts. As for causing him to be canonized, let him be as he was. Seeing their lord's anger, his councillors could only obey. But it was not long before he had cause to know that, though Sôgorô was dead, his vengeance was yet alive.

The relations of Sôgorô and the elders of the villages having been summoned to the Court-house, the following document was issued:—

“Although the property of Sôgorô, the elder of the village of Iwashashi, is confiscated, his household furniture shall be made over to his two married daughters; and the village officials will look to it that these few poor things be not stolen by lawless and unprincipled men.

“His rice-fields and corn-fields, his mountain land and forest land, will be sold by auction. His house and grounds will be given over to the elder of the village. The price fetched by his property will be paid over to the lord of the estate.

“The above decree will be published, in full, to the peasants of the village; and it is strictly forbidden to find fault with this decision.

“The 12th day of the 2d month, of the 2d year of the period Shôhō.”

The peasants, having heard this decree with all humility, left the Court-house. Then the following punishments were awarded to the officers of the castle, who, by rejecting the petition of the peasants in the first instance, had brought trouble upon their lord:—

“Dismissed from their office, the resident councillors at Yedo and at the castle-town.

“Banished from the province, four district governors, and three bailiffs, and nineteen petty officers.

“Dismissed from office, three metsukés, or censors, and seven magistrates.

“Condemned to hara-kiri,²⁰ one district governor and one Yedo bailiff.

“The severity of this sentence is owing to the injustice of the officials in raising new and unprecedented taxes, and bringing affliction upon the people, and in refusing to receive the petitions of the peasants, without consulting their lord, thus driving them to appeal to the Shogun in person. In their avarice they looked not to the future, but laid too heavy a burden on the peasants, so that they made an appeal to a higher power, endangering the

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20. Ritualized form of suicide that involves disembowelment using a ceremonial knife.

honour of their lord’s house. For this bad government the various officials are to be punished as above.”

In this wise was justice carried out at the palace at Yedo and at the Court-house at home. But in the history of the world, from the dark ages down to the present time, there are few instances of one man laying down his life for the many, as Sôgorô did: noble and peasant praise him alike.

As month after month passed away, towards the fourth year of the period Shôhō, the wife of my lord Kôtsuké no Suké, being with child, was seized with violent pains; and retainers were sent to all the different temples and shrines to pray by proxy, but all to no purpose: she continued to suffer as before. Towards the end of the seventh month of the year, there appeared, every night, a preternatural light above the lady’s chamber; this was accompanied by hideous sounds as of many people laughing fiendishly, and sometimes by piteous wailings, as though myriads of persons were lamenting. The profound distress caused by this added to her sufferings; so her own privy councillor, an old man, took his place in the adjoining chamber, and kept watch. All of a sudden, he heard a noise as if a number of people were walking on the boards of the roof of my lady’s room; then there was a sound of men and women weeping; and when, thunderstruck, the councillor was wondering what it could all be, there came a wild burst of laughter, and all was silent. Early the following morning, the old women who had charge of my lady’s household presented themselves before my lord Kôtsuké no Suké, and said—

“Since the middle of last month, the waiting-women have been complaining to us of the ghostly noises by which my lady is nightly disturbed, and they say that they cannot continue to serve her. We have tried to soothe them, by saying that the devils should be exorcised at once, and that there was nothing to be afraid of. Still we feel that their fears are not without reason, and that they really cannot do their work; so we beg that your lordship will take the matter into your consideration.”

“This is a passing strange story of yours; however, I will go myself to-night to my lady’s apartments and keep watch. You can come with me.”

Accordingly, that night my lord Kôtsuké no Suké sat up in person. At the hour of the rat (midnight) a fearful noise of voices was heard, and Sôgorô and his wife, bound to the fatal crosses, suddenly appeared; and the ghosts, seizing the lady by the hand, said—

“We have come to meet you. The pains you are suffering are terrible, but they are nothing in comparison with those of the hell to which we are about to lead you.”

At these words, Kôtsuké no Suké, seizing his sword, tried to sweep the ghosts away with a terrific cut; but a loud peal of laughter was heard, and the visions faded away. Kôtsuké no Suké, terrified, sent his retainers to the temples and shrines to pray that the demons might be cast out; but the noises were heard nightly, as before. When the eleventh month of the year came round, the apparitions of human forms in my lady’s apartments became more and more frequent and terrible, all the spirits railing at her, and howling out that they had come to fetch her. The women would all scream and faint; and then the ghosts would disappear amid yells of laughter. Night after night this happened, and even in the daytime the visions would manifest themselves; and my lady’s sickness grew worse daily, until in the last month of the year she died, of grief and terror. Then the ghost of Sôgorô and his wife crucified would appear day and night in the chamber of Kôtsuké no Suké, floating round the room, and glaring at him with red and flaming eyes. The hair of the attendants would stand on end with terror; and if they tried to cut at the spirits, their limbs would be cramped, and their feet and hands would not obey their bidding. Kôtsuké no Suké would draw the sword that lay by his bedside; but, as often as he did so, the ghosts faded away, only to appear again in a more hideous shape than before, until at last, having exhausted his strength and spirits, even he became terror-stricken. The whole household was thrown into confusion, and day after day mystic rites and incantations were performed by the priests over braziers of charcoal, while prayers were recited without ceasing; but the visions only became more frequent, and there was no sign of their ceasing. After the 5th year of Shôhō, the style of the years was changed to Keian; and during the 1st year of Keian the spirits continued to haunt the palace; and now they appeared in the chamber of Kôtsuké no Suké’s eldest son, surrounding themselves with even more terrors than before; and when Kôtsuké no Suké was about to go to the Shogun’s castle, they were seen howling out their cries of vengeance in the porch of the house. At last the relations of the family and the members of the household took counsel together, and told Kôtsuké no Suké that without doubt no ordinary means would suffice to lay the ghosts; a shrine must be erected to Sôgorô, and

divine honours paid to him, after which the apparitions would assuredly cease. Kôtsuké no Suké having carefully considered the matter and given his consent, Sôgorô was canonized under the name of Sôgo Daimiyô, and a shrine was erected in his honour. After divine honours had been paid to him, the awful visions were no more seen, and the ghost of Sôgorô was laid for ever.

In the 2d year of the period Keian, on the 11th day of the 10th month, on the occasion of the festival of first lighting the fire on the hearth, the various Daimios and Hatamotos of distinction went to the castle of the Shogun, at Yedo, to offer their congratulations on this occasion. During the ceremonies, my lord Hotta Kôtsuké no Suké and Sakai Iwami no Kami, lord of the castle of Matsumoto, in the province of Shinshiu, had a quarrel, the origin of which was not made public; and Sakai Iwami no Kami, although he came of a brave and noble family, received so severe a wound that he died on the following day, at the age of forty-three; and in consequence of this, his family was ruined and disgraced. My lord Kôtsuké no Suké, by great good fortune, contrived to escape from the castle, and took refuge in his own house, whence, mounting a famous horse called Hira-Abumi, he fled to his castle of Sakura, in Shimôsa, accomplishing the distance, which is about sixty miles, in six hours. When he arrived in front of the castle, he called out in a loud voice to the guard within to open the gate, answering, in reply to their challenge, that he was Kôtsuké no Suké, the lord of the castle. The guard, not believing their ears, sent word to the councillor in charge of the castle, who rushed out to see if the person demanding admittance were really their lord. When he saw Kôtsuké no Suké, he caused the gates to be opened, and, thinking it more than strange, said—

“Is this indeed you, my lord? What strange chance brings your lordship hither thus late at night, on horseback and alone, without a single follower?”

With these words he ushered in Kôtsuké no Suké, who, in reply to the anxious inquiries of his people as to the cause of his sudden appearance, said—

“You may well be astonished. I had a quarrel to-day in the castle at Yedo, with Sakai Iwami no Kami, the lord of the castle of Matsumoto, and I cut him down. I shall soon be pursued; so we must strengthen the fortress, and prepare for an attack.”

The household, hearing this, were greatly alarmed, and the whole castle was thrown into confusion. In the

meanwhile the people of Kôtsuké no Suké’s palace at Yedo, not knowing whether their lord had fled, were in the greatest anxiety, until a messenger came from Sakura, and reported his arrival there.

When the quarrel inside the castle of Yedo and Kôtsuké no Suké’s flight had been taken cognizance of, he was attainted of treason, and soldiers were sent to seize him, dead or alive. Midzuno Setsu no Kami and Gotô Yamato no Kami were charged with the execution of the order, and sallied forth, on the 13th day of the 10th month, to carry it out. When they arrived at the town of Sasai, they sent a herald with the following message—

“Whereas Kôtsuké no Suké killed Sakai Iwami no Kami inside the castle of Yedo, and has fled to his own castle without leave, he is attainted of treason; and we, being connected with him by ties of blood and of friendship, have been charged to seize him.”

The herald delivered this message to the councillor of Kôtsuké no Suké, who, pleading as an excuse that his lord was mad, begged the two nobles to intercede for him. Gotô Yamato no Kami upon this called the councillor to him, and spoke privately to him, after which the latter took his leave and returned to the castle of Sakura.

In the meanwhile, after consultation at Yedo, it was decided that, as Gotô Yamato no Kami and Midzuno Setsu no Kami were related to Kôtsuké no Suké, and might meet with difficulties for that very reason, two other nobles, Ogasawara Iki no Kami and Nagai Hida no Kami, should be sent to assist them, with orders that should any trouble arise they should send a report immediately to Yedo. In consequence of this order, the two nobles, with five thousand men, were about to march for Sakura, on the 15th of the month, when a messenger arrived from that place bearing the following despatch for the Gorô-jiu, from the two nobles who had preceded them—

“In obedience to the orders of His Highness the Shogun, we proceeded, on the 13th day of this month, to the castle of Sakura, and conducted a thorough investigation of the affair. It is true that Kôtsuké no Suké has been guilty of treason, but he is out of his mind; his retainers have called in physicians, and he is undergoing treatment by which his senses are being gradually restored, and his mind is being awakened from its sleep. At the time when he slew Sakai Iwami no Kami he was not accountable for his actions, and will be sincerely penitent when he is aware of his crime. We have taken him prisoner, and have the honour to await your instructions; in the mean-

while, we beg by these present to let you know what we have done.

“(Signed)

GOTÔ YAMATO NO KAMI.

MIDZUNO SETSU NO KAMI.

To the Gorôjiu, 2d year of Keian, 2d month, 14th day.”

This despatch reached Yedo on the 16th of the month, and was read by the Gorôjiu after they had left the castle; and in consequence of the report of Kôtsuké no Suké’s madness, the second expedition was put a stop to, and the following instructions were sent to Gotô Yamato no Kami and Midzuno Setsu no Kami—

“With reference to the affair of Hotta Kôtsuké no Suké, lord of the castle of Sakura, in Shimôsa, whose quarrel with Sakai Iwami no Kami within the castle of Yedo ended in bloodshed. For this heinous crime and disregard of the sanctity of the castle, it is ordered that Kôtsuké no Suké be brought as a prisoner to Yedo, in a litter covered with nets, that his case may be judged.

“2d year of Keian, 2d month.

(Signed by the Gorôjiu)

INABA MINO NO KAMI.

INOUE KAWACHI NO KAMI.

KATÔ ECCHIU NO KAMI.”

Upon the receipt of this despatch, Hotta Kôtsuké nô Suké was immediately placed in a litter covered with a net of green silk, and conveyed to Yedo, strictly guarded by the retainers of the two nobles; and, having arrived at the capital, was handed over to the charge of Akimoto Tajima no Kami. All his retainers were quietly dispersed; and his empty castle was ordered to be thrown open, and given in charge to Midzuno Iki no Kami.

At last Kôtsuké no Suké began to feel that the death of his wife and his own present misfortunes were a just retribution for the death of Sôgorô and his wife and children, and he was as one awakened from a dream. Then night and morning, in his repentance, he offered up prayers to the sainted spirit of the dead farmer, and acknowledged and bewailed his crime, vowing that, if his family were spared from ruin and re-established, intercession should be made at the court of the Mikado, at Kiyôto, on behalf of the spirit of Sôgorô, so that, being worshipped with even greater honours than before, his name should be handed down to all generations.

In consequence of this it happened that the spirit of Sôgorô having relaxed in its vindictiveness, and having ceased to persecute the house of Hotta, in the 1st month of the 4th year of Keian, Kôtsuké no Suké received a summons from the Shogun, and, having been forgiven, was made lord of the castle of Matsuyama, in the province of Déwa, with a revenue of twenty thousand kokus. In the same year, on the 20th day of the 4th month, the Shogun, Prince Iyémitsu, was pleased to depart this life, at the age of forty-eight; and whether by the forgiving spirit of the prince, or by the divine interposition of the sainted Sôgorô, Kôtsuké no Suké was promoted to the castle of Utsu no Miya, in the province of Shimotsuké, with a revenue of eighty thousand kokus; and his name was changed to Hotta Hida no Kami. He also received again his original castle of Sakura, with a revenue of twenty thousand kokus: so that there can be no doubt that the saint was befriending him. In return for these favours, the shrine of Sôgorô was made as beautiful as a gem. It is needless to say how many of the peasants of the estate flocked to the shrine: any good luck that might befall the people was ascribed to it, and night and day the devout worshipped at it.

Here follows a copy of the petition which Sôgorô presented to the Shogun—

“We, the elders of the hundred and thirty-six villages of the district of Chiba, in the province of Shimôsa, and of the district of Buji, in the province of Kadzusa, most reverently offer up this our humble petition.

“When our former lord, Doi Shosho, was transferred to another castle, in the 9th year of the period Kanyé, Hotta Kaga no Kami became lord of the castle of Sakura; and in the 17th year of the same period, my lord Kôtsuké no Suké succeeded him. Since that time the taxes laid upon us have been raised in the proportion of one tô and two sho to each koku.

“Item.—At the present time, taxes are raised on nineteen of our articles of produce; whereas our former lord only required that we should furnish him with pulse and sesamum, for which he paid in rice.

“Item.—Not only are we not paid now for our produce, but, if it is not given in to the day, we are driven and goaded by the officials; and if there be any further delay, we are manacled and severely reprimanded; so that if our own crops fail, we have to buy produce from other districts, and are pushed to the utmost extremity of affliction.

“Item.—We have over and over again prayed to be

relieved from these burthens, but our petitions are not received. The people are reduced to poverty, so that it is hard for them to live under such grievous taxation. Often they have tried to sell the land which they till, but none can be found to buy; so they have sometimes given over their land to the village authorities, and fled with their wives to other provinces, and seven hundred and thirty men or more have been reduced to begging, one hundred and eighty-five houses have fallen into ruins; land producing seven thousand kokus has been given up, and remains untilled, and eleven temples have fallen into decay in consequence of the ruin of those upon whom they depended.

“Besides this, the poverty-stricken farmers and women, having been obliged to take refuge in other provinces, and having no abiding-place, have been driven to evil courses and bring men to speak ill of their lord; and the village officials, being unable to keep order, are blamed and reproved. No attention has been paid to our repeated representations upon this point; so we were driven to petition the Gorôjiu Kuzé Yamato no Kami as he was on his way to the castle, but our petition was returned to us. And now, as a last resource, we tremblingly venture to approach his Highness the Shogun in person.

“The 1st year of the period Shôhō, 12th month, 20th day.

“The seals of the elders of the 136 villages.”

The Shogun at that time was Prince Iyémitu, the grandson of Iyéyasu. He received the name of Dai-yu-In after his death.

The Gorôjiu at that time were Hotta Kôtsuké no Suké, Sakai Iwami no Kami, Inaba Mino no Kami, Katô Echiu no Kami, Inouyé Kawachi no Kami.

The Wakadoshiyôri (or 2d council) were Torii Wakasa no Kami, Tsuchiya Dewa no Kami, and Itakura Naizen no Sho.

Contextual Documents

*Author's Original Introduction*²¹

The following is Mitford's original introduction to “The Ghost of Sakura,” published as part of his *Tales of Old Japan*. In it, he emphasizes the historical importance of the story itself, and provides some background on the economic structures that governed the lives of peasants.

His description shows the inequality that was often experienced as a part of feudalism through the enforcement of rents, land-tax, and local government. It tells the tale of a system that was set up to keep its subjects at the bottom while allowing those who developed it to prosper and live lives of luxury.

All of this information came from Mitford's first-hand experiences witnessing something very similar to these revolutions during his time in Japan. With his introduction, Mitford wanted to give the readers as much context to Japan's political and social structures as possible, given how little was known about them at the time. However, Mitford also wished to incite interest in Japanese culture, as that was lacking before his translation of *Tales of Old Japan*.

The misfortunes and death of the farmer Sôgorô, which, although the preternatural appearances by which they are said to have been followed may raise a smile, are matters of historic notoriety with which every Japanese is familiar, furnish a forcible illustration of the relations which exist between the tenant and the lord of the soil, and of the boundless power for good or for evil exercised by the latter. It is rather remarkable that in a country where the peasant—placed as he is next to the soldier, and before the artisan and merchant, in the four classes into which the people are divided—enjoys no small consideration, and where agriculture is protected by law from the inroads of wild vegetation, even to the lopping of overshadowing branches and the cutting down of hedgerow timber, the lord of the manor should be left practically without control in his dealings with his people.

The land-tax, or rather the yearly rent paid by the tenant, is usually assessed at forty per cent. of the produce; but there is no principle clearly defining it, and frequently the landowner and the cultivator divide the proceeds of the harvest in equal shares. Rice land is divided into three classes; and, according to these classes, it is computed that one tan (1,800 square feet) of the best land should yield to the owner a revenue of five bags of rice per annum; each of these bags holds four tô (a tô is rather less than half an imperial bushel), and is worth at present (1868) three riyos, or about sixteen shillings; land of the middle class should yield a revenue of three or four

Notes

21. This introduction is found in A.B. Mitford's *Tales of Old Japan*, pages 160-164.

bags. The rent is paid either in rice or in money, according to the actual price of the grain, which varies considerably. It is due in the eleventh month of the year, when the crops have all been gathered, and their market value fixed.

The rent of land bearing crops other than rice, such as cotton, beans, roots, and so forth, is payable in money during the twelfth month. The choice of the nature of the crops to be grown appears to be left to the tenant.

The Japanese landlord, when pressed by poverty, does not confine himself to the raising of his legitimate rents: he can always enforce from his needy tenantry the advancement of a year's rent, or the loan of so much money as may be required to meet his immediate necessities. Should the lord be just, the peasant is repaid by instalments [sic], with interest, extending over ten or twenty years. But it too often happens that unjust and merciless lords do not repay such loans, but, on the contrary, press for further advances. Then it is that the farmers, dressed in their grass rain-coats, and carrying sickles and bamboo poles in their hands, assemble before the gate of their lord's palace at the capital, and represent their grievances, imploring the intercession of the retainers, and even of the womankind who may chance to go forth. Sometimes they pay for their temerity by their lives; but, at any rate, they have the satisfaction of bringing shame upon their persecutor, in the eyes of his neighbours and of the populace.

The official reports of recent travels in the interior of Japan have fully proved the hard lot with which the peasantry had to put up during the government of the Tycoons, and especially under the Hatamotos, the created nobility of the dynasty. In one province, where the village mayors appear to have seconded the extortions of their lord, they have had to flee before an exasperated population, who, taking advantage of the revolution, laid waste and pillaged their houses, loudly praying for a new and just assessment of the land; while, throughout the country, the farmers have hailed with acclamations the resumption of the sovereign power by the Mikado, and the abolition of the petty nobility who exalted themselves upon the misery of their dependants. Warming themselves in the sunshine of the court at Yedo, the Hatamotos waxed fat and held high revel, and little cared they who groaned or who starved. Money must be found, and it was found.

It is necessary here to add a word respecting the position of the village mayors, who play so important a part

in the tale.

The peasants of Japan are ruled by three classes of officials: the Nanushi, or mayor; the Kumigashira, or chiefs of companies; and the Hiyakushôdai, or farmers' representatives. The village, which is governed by the Nanushi, or mayor, is divided into companies, which, consisting of five families each, are directed by a Kumigashira; these companies, again, are subdivided into groups of five men each, who choose one of their number to represent them in case of their having any petition to present, or any affairs to settle with their superiors. This functionary is the Hiyakushôdai. The mayor, the chief of the company, and the representative keep registers of the families and people under their control, and are responsible for their good and orderly behaviour. They pay taxes like the other farmers, but receive a salary, the amount of which depends upon the size and wealth of the village. Five per cent. of the yearly land tax forms the salary of the mayor, and the other officials each receive five per cent. of the tax paid by the little bodies over which they respectively rule.

The average amount of land for one family to cultivate is about one chô, or 9,000 square yards; but there are farmers who have inherited as much as five or even six chô from their ancestors. There is also a class of farmers called, from their poverty, “water-drinking farmers,” who have no land of their own, but hire that of those who have more than they can keep in their own hands. The rent so paid varies; but good rice land will bring in as high a rent as from £1 18s. to £2 6s. per tan (1,800 square feet).

Farm labourers are paid from six or seven riyos a year to as much as thirty riyos (the ryo being worth about 5s. 4d.); besides this, they are clothed and fed, not daintily indeed, but amply. The rice which they cultivate is to them an almost unknown luxury: millet is their staple food, and on high days and holidays they receive messes of barley or buckwheat. Where the mulberry-tree is grown, and the silkworm is “educated,” there the labourer receives the highest wage.

The rice crop on good land should yield twelve and a half fold, and on ordinary land from six to seven fold only. Ordinary arable land is only half as valuable as rice land, which cannot be purchased for less than forty riyos per tan of 1,800 square feet. Common hill or wood land is cheaper, again, than arable land; but orchards and groves of the Pawlonia are worth from fifty to sixty riyos per tan.

With regard to the punishment of crucifixion, by which Sôgorô was put to death, it is inflicted for the following offences:—parricide (including the murder or striking of parents, uncles, aunts, elder brothers, masters, or teachers) coining counterfeit money, and passing the barriers of the Tycoon’s territory without a permit. The criminal is attached to an upright post with two cross bars, to which his arms and feet are fastened by ropes. He is then transfixed with spears by men belonging to the Eta or Pariah class. I once passed the execution-ground near Yedo, when a body was attached to the cross. The dead man had murdered his employer, and, having been condemned to death by crucifixion, had died in prison before the sentence could be carried out. He was accordingly packed, in a squatting position, in a huge red earthenware jar, which, having been tightly filled up with salt, was hermetically sealed. On the anniversary of the commission of the crime, the jar was carried down to the execution-ground and broken, and the body was taken out and tied to the cross, the joints of the knees and arms having been cut, to allow of the extension of the stiffened and shrunken limbs; it was then transfixed with spears, and allowed to remain exposed for three days. An open grave, the upturned soil of which seemed almost entirely composed of dead men’s remains, waited to receive the dishonoured corpse, over which three or four Etas, squalid and degraded beings, were mounting guard, smoking their pipes by a scanty charcoal fire, and bandying obscene jests. It was a hideous and ghastly warning, had any cared to read the lesson; but the passers-by on the high road took little or no notice of the sight, and a group of chubby and happy children were playing not ten yards from the dead body, as if no strange or uncanny thing were near them.

*Introduction to “47 Ronin”*²²

Here is the author’s original introduction to his translation of “47 Ronin,” possibly Japan’s most notable folktale about 47 master-less samurai who embark to save the land from corruption. Similar to “Sakura,” this story also comments on themes of social structure, class and how justice is distributed in Japan as these samurai are the heroes despite the fact that they lie outside the structure of the samurai. Mitford establishes here the true

purpose of his anthology, giving the audience plenty of information about why Japan was mysterious for so long and why it is now important to read these folktales in order to understand the culture of Japan at the time. As noted above, England at the time didn’t view Japan as a very significant country, so Mitford saw it as his responsibility to bring Japan’s rich culture to the attention of a Western audience.

“47 Ronin” provides a look into how Japan valued samurai as symbols of justice and honor in their social structure. This introduction establishes that Mitford wanted not only to inform the West of these values, but also to explore these values through the allegorical story itself. “47 Ronin” also continues the theme of conflict within the structure of Japan’s governing structures, perhaps because Mitford was able to see the social unrest of Japan up close and thus felt obligated to report upon it. Mitford even goes into some detail about how he was received as a diplomat to Japan, which was critical in his ability to translate and provide this work. This piece is a good companion to “The Ghost of Sakura” because it highlights Mitford’s vision of Japanese culture. It’s important to remember that Mitford initially approached Japan and its culture from a point of total ignorance. As a diplomat he represented Britain, which at the time did not view Japan as a country worthy of much attention. It was only by being a diplomat that Mitford was exposed to Japanese culture and became convinced that it was important to translate all of these stories and present them to a Western audience.

The books which have been written of late years about Japan have either been compiled from official records, or have contained the sketchy impressions of passing travellers. Of the inner life of the Japanese the world at large knows but little: their religion, their superstitions, their ways of thought, the hidden springs by which they move—all these are as yet mysteries. Nor is this to be wondered at. The first Western men who came in contact with Japan—I am speaking not of the old Dutch and Portuguese traders and priests, but of the diplomatists and merchants of eleven years ago—met with a cold reception. Above all things, the native Government threw obstacles in the way of any inquiry into

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22. This introduction is found in A.B. Mitford’s *Tales of Old Japan*, pages 1-3.

their language, literature, and history. The fact was that the Tycoon’s Government—with whom alone, so long as the Mikado remained in seclusion in his sacred capital at Kiôto, any relations were maintained—knew that the Imperial purple with which they sought to invest their chief must quickly fade before the strong sunlight which would be brought upon it so soon as there should be European linguists capable of examining their books and records. No opportunity was lost of throwing dust in the eyes of the new-comers, whom, even in the most trifling details, it was the official policy to lead astray. Now, however, there is no cause for concealment; the Roi Fainéant has shaken off his sloth, and his Maire du Palais, together, and an intelligible Government, which need not fear scrutiny from abroad, is the result: the records of the country being but so many proofs of the Mikado’s title to power, there is no reason for keeping up any show of mystery. The path of inquiry is open to all; and although there is yet much to be learnt, some knowledge has been attained, in which it may interest those who stay at home to share.

The recent revolution in Japan has wrought changes social as well as political; and it may be that when, in addition to the advance which has already been made, railways and telegraphs shall have connected the principal points of the Land of Sunrise, the old Japanese, such as he was and had been for centuries when we found him eleven short years ago, will have become extinct. It has appeared to me that no better means could be chosen of preserving a record of a curious and fast disappearing civilization than the translation of some of the most interesting national legends and histories, together with other specimens of literature bearing upon the same subject. Thus the Japanese may tell their own tale, their translator only adding here and there a few words of heading or tag to a chapter, where an explanation or amplification may seem necessary. I fear that the long and hard names will often make my tales tedious reading, but I believe that those who will bear with the difficulty will learn more of the character of the Japanese people than by skimming over descriptions of travel and adventure, however brilliant. The lord and his retainer, the warrior and the priest, the humble artisan and the despised Eta or pariah, each in his turn will become a leading character in my budget of stories; and it is out of the mouths of these personages that I hope to show forth a tolerably complete picture of Japanese society.

Having said so much by way of preface, I beg my

readers to fancy themselves wafted away to the shores of the Bay of Yedo—a fair, smiling landscape: gentle slopes, crested by a dark fringe of pines and firs, lead down to the sea; the quaint eaves of many a temple and holy shrine peep out here and there from the groves; the bay itself is studded with picturesque fisher-craft, the torches of which shine by night like glow-worms among the outlying forts; far away to the west loom the goblin-haunted heights of Oyama, and beyond the twin hills of the Hakoné Pass—Fuji-Yama, the Peerless Mountain, solitary and grand, stands in the centre of the plain, from which it sprang vomiting flames twenty-one centuries ago. For a hundred and sixty years the huge mountain has been at peace, but the frequent earthquakes still tell of hidden fires, and none can say when the red-hot stones and ashes may once more fall like rain over five provinces.

In the midst of a nest of venerable trees in Takanawa, a suburb of Yedo, is hidden Sengakuji, or the Spring-hill Temple, renowned throughout the length and breadth of the land for its cemetery, which contains the graves of the Forty-seven Rônins, famous in Japanese history, heroes of Japanese drama, the tale of whose deeds I am about to transcribe.

On the left-hand side of the main court of the temple is a chapel, in which, surmounted by a gilt figure of Kwanyin, the goddess of mercy, are enshrined the images of the forty-seven men, and of the master whom they loved so well. The statues are carved in wood, the faces coloured, and the dresses richly lacquered; as works of art they have great merit—the action of the heroes, each armed with his favourite weapon, being wonderfully life-like and spirited. Some are venerable men, with thin, grey hair (one is seventy-seven years old); others are mere boys of sixteen. Close by the chapel, at the side of a path leading up the hill, is a little well of pure water, fenced in and adorned with a tiny fernery, over which is an inscription, setting forth that “This is the well in which the head was washed; you must not wash your hands or your feet here.” A little further on is a stall, at which a poor old man earns a pittance by selling books, pictures, and medals, commemorating the loyalty of the Forty-seven; and higher up yet, shaded by a grove of stately trees, is a neat inclosure, kept up, as a signboard announces, by voluntary contributions, round which are ranged forty-eight little tombstones, each decked with evergreens, each with its tribute of water and incense for the comfort of the departed spirit. There were forty-seven

Rônins; there are forty-eight tombstones, and the story of the forty-eighth is truly characteristic of Japanese ideas of honour. Almost touching the rail of the graveyard is a more imposing monument under which lies buried the lord, whose death his followers piously avenged.

*Feast of Lanterns*²³

Understanding the ways in which a culture treats their deceased is perhaps one of the most important ways of comprehending how haunting fits into that particular culture. The article that follows, first appearing in the *New York Times* in 1883, documents the respect shown for the dead as part of Japan’s Feast of Lanterns. This feast is held every year and typically honors the first, third, and seventh anniversary of a person’s passing.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the Feast of Lanterns is that it appears to be a festival celebrated much more widely among the working class. This builds upon the themes of collectivism by emphasizing the community bonds that are held even beyond death. As such, these types of collectivist beliefs are much more important to those in the lower and middle classes of Japanese culture than it is to those in the individualist upper classes. Friendship and family extend beyond the grave as those who have passed return to greet their loved ones. It is also notable that all of the deceased experiencing their first, third, or seventh anniversary are allowed to return to the living. This implies that ghostliness, like the ideal collectivistic society, is equal opportunity as each person is given the same amount of time to spend with their friends and family. In a sense, it is an ancient Japanese way of saying that we are all equal in death.

This article also offers an excellent opportunity to see the ways in which the Western world viewed such Japanese traditions. The use of words such as *peculiar* and *weird* to describe the Feast of Lanterns provides perhaps the most obvious insight into this viewpoint. The Japanese were viewed as an exotic race of people with a strange culture that was often beyond Western comprehension. While much of Mitford’s retelling of “The Ghost of Sakura” may not use such obviously subjective terms to describe the culture, it is still important to keep in mind that such views may have influenced his writing.

The annual festival called the feast of lanterns is one of the most peculiar of the Buddhist ceremonials among the Japanese, belonging more particularly among the working than among the official classes. Buddhism in Japan is remarkable for the extraordinary veneration of the memory of the dead which it inculcates. Graves are habitually kept clean and decked with flowers, and nearly every grave in that faith has a cup of rice and a jar of tea or water standing by for the use of the departed spirit on its supposed frequent return visits to this world. These graves, among groves of ornamental trees and flowering plants, beautify the hillsides about Nagasaki. Besides this ordinary care, Buddhism also inculcates the celebration by the relatives of deceased persons of distinct commemorative services upon the first, third, and seventh anniversaries. In the case of distinguished personages or the heads of families these are kept up to the fiftieth or even the hundred and fiftieth anniversaries, but as to the vast majority of ordinary deaths all obligations of propitiatory ceremonies are discharged after the seventh anniversary by one common and general feast of lanterns. This is held as a three days’ holiday by all classes about the 1st day of September annually, and the people of the outlying country flock into the city to attend it and enjoy its accompanying visiting dressed in their best attire. On the first of the three days the ghosts particularly honored are believed to leave the spirit-land on a return visit. Accordingly all the house doors are set wide open, and the head of each family in his best clothes sits in his reception-room, bowing at intervals and uttering words of welcome to his invisible guests as they come in, conscientious persons who have a large ghostly acquaintance continuing this ceremony well into the night. By the next day all the spirits are supposed to have arrived, and a small cabinet apartment found in every Buddhist dwelling (called the household temple and set apart for the use of the dead) is decorated with flowers and set out with rice, fruits, wines, and so on. Sitting in the adjoining room, the living members hold their own accompanying feast, which is kept up through the second day and most of the third. In the night of the third day the ghosts have to go back, and at nightfall all the population that can move betake themselves to the

Notes

23. This text is from an untitled article that was published in the *New York Times* on 10 Jan. 1883. There is no listed author.

graves, which they deck with bright paper banners and many-colored lanterns, lighting up the latter as the day fades, so that the departing visitors may have their last hours as pleasant as possible. As midnight approaches the males form into processions, every member carrying aloft a lighted lantern on a bamboo pole about ten feet long, and thus they carry down the hillsides to the sea the boats in which the spirits are to depart. These boats, varying from two to ten and even thirty feet in length, are decorated with flags and streamers, provided with a

stock of provisions and with money to pay for ferriage over the Styx, not omitting a lantern or two to show the way, are then launched and thrust forth together, carrying the spirits to the far West, where good Buddhists are believed to pass their time in happy oblivion. This act, blended with outcries, beating of gongs, chanting by priests, and nearly naked figures rushing to and fro in their excitement, concludes the weird but touching ceremonials.

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