

The Mirror Maiden

By Lafcadio Hearn

In the period of the Ashikaga Shôgunate the shrine of Ogawachi-Myôjin, at Minami-Isé, fell into decay; and the daimyô of the district, the Lord Kitahataké, found himself unable, by reason of war and other circumstances, to provide for the reparation of the building. Then the Shinto priest in charge, Matsumura Hyôgo, sought help at Kyoto from the great daimyô Hosokawa, who was known to have influence with the Shôgun. The Lord Hosokawa received the priest kindly, and promised to speak to the Shôgun about the condition of Ogawachi-Myôjin. But he said that, in any event, a grant for the restoration of the temple could not be made without due investigation and considerable delay; and he advised Matsumura to remain in the capital while the matter was being arranged. Matsumura therefore brought his family to Kyôto, and rented a house in the old Kyôgoku quarter.

This house, although handsome and spacious, had been long unoccupied. It was said to be an unlucky house. On the northeast side of it there was a well; and several former tenants had drowned themselves in that well, without any known cause. But Matsumura, being a Shinto priest, had no fear of evil spirits; and he soon made himself very comfortable in his new home.

In the summer of that year there was a great drought. For months no rain had fallen in the Five Home-Provinces; the river-beds dried up, the wells failed; and even in the capital there was a dearth of water. But the well in Matsumura's garden remained nearly full; and the water—which was very cold and clear, with a faint bluish tinge—seemed to be supplied by a spring. During the hot season many people came from all parts of the city to beg for water; and Matsumura allowed them to draw as much as they pleased. Nevertheless the supply did not appear to be diminished.

But one morning the dead body of a young servant, who had been sent from a neighboring residence to fetch water, was found floating in the well. No cause for a suicide could be imagined; and Matsumura, remembering many unpleasant stories about the well, began to suspect some invisible malevolence. He went to examine the well, with the intention of having a fence built around it; and while standing there alone he was startled by a sudden motion in the water, as of something alive. The motion soon ceased; and then he perceived, clearly reflected in the still surface, the figure of a young woman, apparently about nineteen or twenty years of age. She seemed to be occupied with her toilette: he distinctly saw her touching her lips with *béni*.¹ At first her face was visible in profile only; but presently she turned towards him and smiled. Immediately he felt a strange shock at his heart, and a dizziness came upon him like the dizziness of wine, and everything became dark, except that smiling face—white and beautiful as moonlight, and always seeming to grow more beautiful, and to be drawing him down—down—down into the darkness. But with a desperate effort he recovered his will and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the face was gone, and the light had returned; and he found himself leaning down over the curb of the well. A moment more of that dizziness—a moment more of that dazzling lure—and he would never again have looked upon the sun. . .

Returning to the house, he gave orders to his people not to approach the well under any circumstances, or allow any person to draw water from it. And the next day he had a strong fence built round the well.

¹ A kind of rouge, now used only to color the lips.

About a week after the fence had been built, the long drought was broken by a great rain-storm, accompanied by wind and lightning and thunder—thunder so tremendous that the whole city shook to the rolling of it, as if shaken by an earthquake. For three days and three nights the downpour and the lightnings and the thunder continued; and the Kamogawa rose as it had never risen before, carrying away many bridges. During the third night of the storm, at the Hour of the Ox, there was heard knocking at the door of the priest's dwelling, and the voice of a woman pleading for admittance. But Matsumura, warned by his experience at the well, forbade his servants to answer the appeal. He went himself to the entrance, and asked:

“Who calls?”

A feminine voice responded:

“Pardon! it is I,—Yayoi! I have something to say to Matsumura Sama—something of great moment. Please open!” . . .

Matsumura half opened the door, very cautiously; and he saw the same beautiful face that had smiled upon him from the well. But it was not smiling now: it had a very sad look.

“Into my house you shall not come,” the priest exclaimed: “You are not a human being, but a Well-Person. . . . Why do you thus wickedly try to delude and destroy people?”

The Well-Person made answer in a voice musical as a tinkling of jewels (*tama-wokorogasu-koë*):

“It is of that very matter that I want to speak. . . . I have never wished to injure human beings. But from ancient time a Poison-Dragon dwelt in that well. He was the Master of the Well; and because of him the well was always full. Long ago I fell into the water there, and so became subject to him; and he had power to make me lure people to death, in order that he might drink their blood. But now the Heavenly Ruler has commanded the Dragon to dwell hereafter in the lake called Torii-no-Ike, in the Province of Shinshû; and the gods have decided that he shall never be allowed to return to this city. So to-night, after he had gone away, I was able to come out, to beg for your kindly help. There is now very little water in the well, because of the Dragon's departure; and if you will order search to be made, my body will be found there. I pray you to save my body from the well without delay; and I shall certainly return your benevolence.

So saying, she vanished into the night.

Before dawn the tempest had passed; and when the sun arose there was no trace of cloud in the pure blue sky. Matsumura sent at an early hour for well-cleaners to search the well. Then, to everybody's surprise, the well proved to be almost dry. It was easily cleaned; and at the bottom of it were found some hair-ornaments of a very ancient fashion, and a metal mirror of curious form—but no trace of any body, animal or human.

Matsumura imagined, however, that the mirror might yield some explanation of the mystery; for every such mirror is a weird thing, having a soul of its own—and the soul of a mirror is feminine. This mirror, which seemed to be very old, was deeply crusted with scurf. But when it had been carefully cleaned, by the priest's order, it proved to be of rare and costly workmanship; and there were wonderful designs upon the back of it—also several characters. Some of the characters had become indistinguishable; but there could still be discerned part of a date, and ideographs signifying, “third month, the third day.” Now the third month used to be termed Yayoi (meaning, the Month of Increase); and the third day of the third month, which is a festival day, is still called Yayoi-no-sekku. Remembering that the Well-Person called herself “Yayoi,”

Matsumura felt almost sure that his ghostly visitant had been none other than the Soul of the Mirror.

He therefore resolved to treat the mirror with all the consideration due to a Spirit. After having caused it to be carefully repolished and resilvered, he had a case of precious wood made for it, and a particular room in the house prepared to receive it. On the evening of the same day that it had been respectfully deposited in that room, Yayoi herself unexpectedly appeared before the priest as he sat alone in his study. She looked even more lovely than before; but the light of her beauty was now soft as the light of a summer moon shining through pure white clouds. After having humbly saluted Matsumura, she said in her sweetly tinkling voice:

“Now that you have saved me from solitude and sorrow, I have come to thank you. . . . I am indeed, as you supposed, the Spirit of the Mirror. It was in the time of the Emperor Saimei that I was first brought here from Kudara; and I dwelt in the august residence until the time of the Emperor Saga, when I was augustly bestowed upon the Lady Kamo, Naishinnô of the Imperial Court.² Thereafter I became an heirloom in the House of Fujiwara, and so remained until the period of Hôgen when I was dropped into the well. There I was left and forgotten during the years of the great war.³ The Master of the Well⁴ was a venomous Dragon, who used to live in a lake that once covered a great pan of this district. After the lake had been filled in, by government order in order that houses might be built upon the place of it, the Dragon took possession of the well; and when I fell into the well I became subject to him; and he compelled me to lure many people to their deaths. But the gods have banished him forever. . . . Now I have one more favor to beseech: I entreat that you will cause me to be offered up to the Shogun, the Lord Yoshimasa, who by descent is related to my former possessors. Do me but this last great kindness, and it will bring you good-fortune. . . . But I have also to warn you of a danger. In this house, after to-morrow, you must not stay, because it will be destroyed.” . . . And with these words of warning Yayoi disappeared.

Matsumura was able to profit by this premonition. He removed his people and his belongings to another district the next day; and almost immediately afterwards another storm arose, even more violent than the first, causing a flood which swept away the house in which he had been residing.

Some time later, by favor of the Lord Hosokawa, Matsumura was enabled to obtain an audience of the Shogun Yoshimasa, to whom he presented the mirror, together with a written account of its wonderful history. Then the prediction of the Spirit of the Mirror was fulfilled; for the Shogun, greatly pleased with this strange gift, not only bestowed costly presents upon Matsumura, but also made an ample grant of money for the rebuilding of the Temple of Ogawachi-Myôjin.

² The Emperor Saimei reigned from 655 to 662 (A.D.); the Emperor Saga from 810 to 842. Kudara was an ancient kingdom in southwestern Korea, frequently mentioned in early Japanese history. A Naishinnô was of Imperial blood. In the ancient court-hierarchy there were twenty-five ranks or grades of noble ladies;—that of Naishinnô was seventh in order of precedence.

³ For centuries the wives of the emperors and the ladies of the Imperial Court were chosen from the Fujiwara clan. The period called Hôgen lasted from 1156 to 1159: the war referred to is the famous war between the Taira and Minamoto clans.

⁴ In old-time belief every lake or spring had its invisible guardian, supposed to sometimes take the form of a serpent or dragon. The spirit of a lake or pond was commonly spoken of as *Iké-no-Mushi*, the Master of the Lake. Here we find the title “Master” given to a dragon living in a well; but the guardian of wells is really the god Suÿin.