

Traditions of the Amazons of Japan



USHIWAKA, A FAMOUS FEMALE WARRIOR, OVERCOMING THREE REDOUTABLE SAMURAI.—From an Old Colored Print.

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THE letters sent by the war correspondents from Tokio are full of praise of the Spartan courage and resolution shown by Japanese women at the present crisis of their country's fortunes. They send their husbands, sons, brothers and sweethearts to the front with a smile upon their lips; they tell them to be proud of the chance to die for the Mikado, they tell them that they must think only of their duty, and not of the girls they leave behind them.

This Spartan spirit has been cultivated in the women of Japan more than 2,000 years, until it has become second nature to them. In olden days Japan produced a fine crop of Amazon warriors, whose exploits live in history and provided subjects for those delicately beautiful color prints of Toyokuni and Hiyodoshi which are now so popular among American artists and art collectors. Nowadays Japanese women do not go to war except as Red Cross nurses, although several of them, disguised as soldiers, tried to be sent to fight against China, and, according to the Japanese newspapers, many in the country parts have applied to enlist against Russia. But although they have to stay quietly at home, it is evident that the fighting spirit inherited from generations of warlike ancestors on both sides is as keen as ever.

Japanese girls, who seem so meek and tender and loving that the foreigner would never dream of associating thought of violence and bloodshed with them, are taught from their earliest childhood to reverence the Empress Jingo, who conquered Korea, and are told all about the brave deeds of other Amazons who are distinguished in Japanese history.

Ushiwaka was one of the most famous of these female warriors. She lived in the middle ages of Japan, and no man could stand against her in single combat. She is generally represented in the color prints as vanquishing at the same moment three redoubtable samurai, Sangoku Kuro, Yanashita Kuro and Surihari Taro. Another noted amazon was the Lady Kuryo, who donned the full armor of a samurai and went out to battle in order to have revenge on the man who had killed her husband. After many exciting adventures and desperate encounters, she eventually slew him in a hand-to-hand fight.

She was captured by a party of his samurai, bound hand and foot, and taken to his palace. But one of the young men, who had fallen in love with her for her beauty and courage secretly cut the bonds at night when she was awaiting judgment. She stayed in the garden of the palace all night, armed with a sword which she had picked up when her bonds were cut.

In the morning, as she expected, her husband's murderer came out into the garden to pay his devotions to the honor-

able bamboo which imprisoned the spirits of his ancestors. Like a good Shintoist, she allowed him to perform them in peace and then walked from behind a concealing clump of bushes and offered him the alternative of committing hari-kari or engaging her in mortal combat. He chose the latter, and was slain. According to one Japanese chronicler, the woman cut his head clean off by the first strong, sweeping blow of her sword.

Ishi, the wife of Oboshi Yuranosuke, leader of the forty-seven ronins who avenged the death of their lord and then committed hari-kari at his tomb in a body, was another strong minded woman, who is held up to the admiration of all Japanese girls. When her husband departed on his fateful enterprise, she told her son, Rikuya, a lad of 15, that he must go with his father and show piety to the memory of their lord.

After they had gone she sent all the male servants away and trained her maids in the art of swordmanship, so that they could help her to defend the house while the men were away. They slew a band of robbers who attacked them and kept faithful watch and ward, hoping for the master's return. When the news came that father and son had performed the "happy dispatch," Ishi did not weep. She promptly drew the short sword of the samurai from her sash and joined them. She is regarded in Japan as a perfect type of the brave and faithful wife.

A story which Japanese artists have loved to tell for centuries past in their color prints is that of the brave peasant girl, Kowan. About 1550 A. D. she lived at Otsai, and her lord was secretly a traitor to the Shogun Toritomo, who ruled Japan at that time in the name of the Mikado. Serving in the lord's house, Kowan became acquainted with a plot to assassinate the Shogun and got possession of a letter which contained the details of it.

The Shogun was aboard his junk on Lake Biwa, some distance away. Thither the girl fled, hotly pursued by the treacherous lord and his vassals. They came up with her just as she reached the shore of the lake, but she plunged into the stormy waters and swam to the Shogun's ship, with the all-important letter firmly gripped in her teeth. Dozens of arrows cut the water all around her, but she escaped them and was picked up by a boat lowered from the junk. When the Shogun heard the story he promptly treated the treacherous lord and his fellow conspirators to "something lingering with boiling oil in it."

Unfortunately, he did not fall in love with the girl and marry her, which rather spoils the story from an Occidental standpoint. Kowan is always represented in the color prints swimming out to the junk, while the traitors on shore furiously rage together.



AN AMAZON PUTTING TO ROUT A SMALL ARMY OF POLICEMEN, SENT TO SEIZE HER FOR THE SHOGUN.—From an Old Colored Print.

The Empress Jingo, greatest of all the Amazons of Japan, belongs to the legendary era of that country before the introduction of Buddhism in the fifth century, and many stories are told of her which certainly cannot be regarded as authentic history. For example, she is said to have been exiled before she left Japan to invade Korea and to have given birth to her son, Ojin, afterwards deified as the Japanese god of war, upon her return. Inasmuch as three years elapsed, that could hardly have been possible; but when this fact is pointed out to the Japanese jinrikisha man who tells the foreigner the legend, he smiles pleasantly and says that it is only another proof of the miraculous powers of Jingo Kogo. Did she not make the fishes and the waves do her bidding? Would she be likely to be troubled by a little thing like that?

After this story, the traveler in Japan hears without a gasp that Jingo overcame a hundred Koreans single-handed, and slew the great Korean champion whom none of her warriors could tackle. He had killed a dozen of them, one after the other, in single combat; but Jingo cut off his head at the first onslaught with her mighty two-handed sword.

In the feudal days of Japan, up to the restoration era, the wives and daughters of the samurai were regularly trained in the aristocratic science of arms, and fought as readily and bravely as the men. But they were not, as a rule, allowed to fight unless it was absolutely necessary for the protection of life and honor. The samurai were not chivalrous according to the ideas of Occidental knight-hood; they did not deem it disgraceful to their manhood to allow women to fight; but, to their minds, fighting was such an honorable luxury, such an august privilege, that they wanted all of it for themselves, and thought it altogether too good for an inferior creature like woman. Thus it was that the Amazons of Japan generally performed their achievements when their lord was away from home at the wars, and his enemies or a band of robbers attacked the house in his absence.

They did not fight with the famous sword of the samurai, except on the rare occasions when they masqueraded as one in order to fight by the side of a lover or a husband. The long, double-bladed sword and the short sword for the "happy dispatch" were the sacred property of the male warrior, and it was a crime for anyone except a samurai to carry them. Women, when acting as the "home guard," were supposed to be content with a medium-length sword, betwixt the two, and a frightful looking halberd, much like a short scythe, lashed to the end of a long pole. The Japanese artists of past generations were fond of depicting them doing wonderful feats with this awkward weapon.

Only the samurai class were allowed to carry arms in old Japan, and this rule applied to the women as well as to the men.

Nevertheless, many stories are told of the heroism of women of the peasant and "heiwin" (trading) classes, who resisted at the sword's point the dishonorable advances of their "daimio" (feudal lord) or even of the Shogun himself.

An old Toyokuni color print shows a woman named Bentenkozo Kaneosuke putting to rout a small army of policemen sent by the Shogun to seize her for one of his concubines. She was doubly famous as being the prettiest girl in Japan in her day and the most virtuous.

She lived in Kioto and was the idol of the town. The greatest of the daimios wooed her in vain, and when one of them threatened her with violence she challenged him to fight and easily overcame him, although he was one of the most noted swordsmen of the day in Japan.

At last the Shogun saw her one day when riding through the streets of Kioto. He straightway fell in love, but she repelled his advances in spite of his despotic power and great prestige. Knowing little of her prowess in arms, the Shogun did not trouble to send soldiers to seize her. He sent instead a squad of policemen—or the functionaries who answered to policemen in that day. They were armed with short iron clubs, which were of little use against the heroine's sword. The chroniclers record with horrible glee the manner in which she carved those poor policemen, putting at least a dozen of them off the strength of the force. The Shogun admired her bravery, and did not trouble her further.—Bassett Staines.

Pointed Paragraphs

Other people's troubles bore a man more than his own.

Women would rather look at dresses than listen to addresses.

If a man has a stiff income he can afford to have a stiff backbone.

Every man gets a lot of free advice which isn't worth much.

It makes a man feel cheap to be caught looking at a picture of himself.

Some girls would rather flirt than eat, and some do both simultaneously.

The judge charges the jury, but not as much as the lawyer charges his client.

Many a man who knows there is room at the top sits down and waits for the elevator.

With the exception of the girl's father and the dog all the world tolerates a lover.

If a married man has degrading ties it is ten to one his wife bought them at a bargain sale.

Many a man who meanders around the free lunch route daily likes to be seen entering a first-class hotel.

When a young man begins to inquire about a girl's abilities as a cook it is up to her to ascertain if he can provide the necessary material.—Chicago News.