

The Chrysanthemum Show

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Japanese

Advanced
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Yoshi-san and his Grandmother go to visit the great temple at Shiba. They walk up its steep stairs, and arrive at the lacquered threshold. Here they place aside their wooden clogs, throw a few coins into a huge box standing on the floor. It is covered with a wooden grating so constructed as to prevent pilfering hands afterward removing the coin. Then they pull a thick rope attached to a big brass bell like an exaggerated sheep-bell, hanging from the ceiling, but which gives forth but a feeble, tinkling sound. To insure the god's attention, this is supplemented with three distinct claps of the hands, which are afterward clasped in prayer for a short interval; two more claps mark the conclusion. Then, resuming their clogs, they clatter down the steep, copper-bound temple steps into the grounds. Here are stalls innumerable of toys, fruit, fish-cakes, birds, tobacco-pipes, ironmongery, and rice, and scattered amidst the stalls are tea-houses, peep-shows, and other places of amusement. Of these the greatest attraction is a newly-opened chrysanthemum show.

The chrysanthemums are trained to represent figures. Here is a celebrated warrior, Kato Kiyomasa by name, who lived about the year 1600, when the eminent Hashiba (Hidéyoshi) ruled Japan. Near the end of his reign Hashiba, wishing to invade China, but being himself unable to command the expedition, intrusted the leadership of the fleet and army to Kiyomasa. They embarked, reached Korea, where a fierce battle was fought and victory gained by Kiyomasa. When, however, he returned to Japan, he found Hidéyoshi had died, and the expedition was therefore recalled. Tales of the liberality and generosity of the Chief, and how he, single-handed, had slain a large and wild tiger with the spear that he is represented as holding, led to his being at length addressed as a god. His face is modelled in plaster and painted, and the yellow chrysanthemum

blossoms may be supposed to be gold bosses on the verdant armor.

Next they looked at eccentric varieties of this autumn flower, such as those having the petals longer and more curly than usual. To show off the flowers every branch was tied to a stick, which caused Yoshi-san to think the bushes looked a little stiff and ugly. Near the warrior was a chrysanthemum-robed lady, Benten, standing in a flowery sailing-boat that is supposed to contain a cargo of jewels. Three rabbits farther on appeared to be chatting together. Perhaps the best group of all was old Fukurokujin, with white beard and bald head. He was conversing with two of the graceful waterfowl so constantly seen in Japanese decorations. He is the god of luck, and has a reputation for liking good cheer. This is suggested by a gourd, a usual form of wine-bottle, that is suspended to his cane, whilst another gourd contains homilies. He was said to be so tender-hearted that even timid wild fowl were not afraid of him.

Not the least amusing part of the show was the figure before which Yoshi's Grandmother exclaimed, "Why, truly, that is clever! Behold, I pray thee, a barbarian lady, and even her child!" In truth it was an unconscious caricature of Europeans, although the lady's face had not escaped being made to look slightly Japanese. The child held a toy, and had a regular shock head of hair. The frizzed hair of many foreign children appeared very odd to Yoshi-san. He thought their mothers must be very unkind not to take the little "western men" more often to the barber's. He complacently compared the neatness of his own shaven crown and tidily-clipped and gummed side-locks.

Being tired of standing, the old Grandmother told her grandson they would go and listen to a recital at the story-teller's. Leaving their wooden shoes in a pigeon-hole for that purpose, they joined an attentive throng of some twenty listeners seated on mats in a dimly-lighted room. Yoshi could not make out all the tale-teller said, but he liked to watch him toy with his fan as he introduced his listeners to the characters of his story. Then the story-teller would hold his fan like a rod of command, whilst he kept his audience in rapt attention, then sometimes, amidst the laughter of those present, he would raise his voice to a shrill whine, and would emphasize a joke by a sharp tap on the table with his fan. After they had listened to one tale Yoshi-san was sleepy. So they went and bargained with a man outside who had a carriage like a small gig with shafts called a "jin-riki-sha." He ran after them to say he consented to wheel them home the two and a half miles for five cents.

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