

# 30,000 POEMS from the PEN of an EMPRESS



The Poetical Empress of Japan.

## Thoughts of Her Majesty of Japan Expressed in Verse

TO BE the empress of a great people is a proud distinction, but to be both empress and poetess is unusual. Her majesty the empress of Japan, besides being the beloved co-occupant of the throne, is the poetess laureate, the favorite songstress, of the land where the cherry blooms.

But two women of royal position have become famous both as generous, gracious and admired rulers, and as leaders of national literature. They are Elizabeth, queen of Roumania, known as "Carmen Sylva" throughout the world, and the charming first lady of Japan, who, singularly, is little known as a figure in literature outside her island empire.

Yet she has written more than 30,000 poems.

In the schools and homes of the Kingdom of the Rising Sun the little poems of the empress are read and admired. They are not pretentious bits of literature, to be sure, for the literature of Japan has not yet even reached the stage of English letters at the time of Chaucer.

Like the women of this strange kingdom, the poems of the country are unpretentious, modest, yet with the touch of human nature. And no one has done native poetry better than the empress.

WRITTEN in five phrases, the poems of Japan contain thirty-one words. The forms are different entirely from those of our country. The first phrase contains five characters, the second seven, the third five and the last two lines seven each.

Perhaps the "Twelve Virtues" are typical of the best of Japanese poetry. In Japan they are regarded as an index to the character of the little woman who lives secluded in her palace, and who is seen by the public usually at hospitals, where she visits the sick, or institutions of learning for women, in which she is particularly interested.

The first of the "Twelve Virtues" is "Moderation." It is customary in Japan for the people to go on picnics during the spring and fall. Out in the woods and under the trees they indulge in sweets and sake, many, indeed, drinking to excess. Generally a temperate people, the Japanese regard these as occasions when a person may become intoxicated without censure. But this is the sentiment of the empress, rendered into English verse by a Japanese translator:

When cherry trees enblossom in the spring  
And earth is gay with song of birds and flowers,  
Or when the crimson leaves of maples bring  
Red autumn and rejoicing picnic hours,  
Indulge in moderation.

皇太后十二徳詩  
第一  
清徳  
第二  
節用  
第三  
誠實  
第四  
謙遜  
第五  
忍耐  
第六  
勇毅  
第七  
寛容  
第八  
公正  
第九  
剛直  
第十  
温和  
第十一  
謙遜  
第十二  
忍耐

### Four Poems on the Twelve Virtues

Few people, perhaps, are more cleanly in their home life than the Japanese. It would be but natural that the empress, in her 30,000 poems, should praise cleanliness, but, as you will see, cleanliness of one's garments only calls to mind a purity of soul. To wit, this poem on "Cleanliness," the "Second Virtue":

From off one's garments, however white and clean,  
A man can brush the dust that falls by day,  
But when by unkind words and actions mean  
He clouds his soul, he cannot brush away  
The writhing of conscience.

The "Third Virtue" is "Diligence." However, it is not the diligence in performing only manual labor, but in duty, goodness, righteousness:

Even as an uncouth pebble, dull and gray,  
By polishing becomes a gem serene,  
The human mind, a mass of inert clay,  
Transforms into a diamond clear and clean  
By righteous persevering.

There is a whole world of philosophy in the poem on "Silence":

The ghosts of hours pass on and ne'er return,  
Into the land of silence are they fled;  
This life is short, therefore 'tis well to learn  
Even so the careless words that one has said  
Can never be recalled.

What the Japanese call a poem we would regard merely as a verse, or perhaps a couplet. Because of being so short, the task of writing 30,000 of them was not as formidable as it might appear.

Most of the verses are mere expressions—the embodiment of poetic fancies, sometimes rather misty, but, as a rule, delicate. A literal translation serves to give one an idea of the sentiments, at least, although there is not the rhyme that we are accustomed to. The poem on "Firmness" is as follows:

A human mind should be as pure and transparent  
As a precious gem;  
A pure soul cannot be destroyed even by the fire  
Of burglar's.

And this is a sentiment, which has often been expressed, on "Sincerity":

It is better to be inwardly sincere-hearted  
Than outwardly decorated with beautiful  
flowers.

Here is a pretty conceit which gives the lady's idea of "Gentleness":

When in trouble be gentle as a pine tree,  
Behave not like cherry blossoms in spring.

High as is her position, the empress utters a charming expression on "Modesty":

As the shadows of a high peak are reflected in the  
bottom of a stream,  
So try to bring your exalted self to the level of  
your inferior.

Of "Orderliness" she writes:

If you start carefully and continue so till the end,  
You can reach your goal, no matter how far.

Of "Frugality":

Although a bamboo tree grows straight with measured  
lengths,  
Even tiny dewdrops that find their dwelling place  
on the leaves retain their usefulness.

Many of her poems express maxims for daily living, as, for instance, "Calmness":

When overwhelmed with difficulty  
Do not be discouraged, but be calm.

"Duty to the Nation" is practically the Christian's "Golden Rule":

To give succor to a multitude, begin with your immediate neighbor;  
It will eventually reach the remotest.

are interesting. That her heart was often grieved is shown by this little verse:

When the news of great victory reaches me, when  
the people rejoice in the winning of battles,  
Then I think of the intrepid soldiers who are exposed  
to the gravest dangers.

And how succinctly she sums up "The Japanese Spirit":

It is the indispensable spirit in winning victory  
Which does not stop or falter until the victory is  
assured.

And this surely touched the hearts of the men who were fighting:

How sad I feel thinking of the poor soldiers lying  
frostbitten on the battlefield;  
We of the royal family pass cold nights by the  
warm fireside thinking of them.

A touching bit this:

Before me lie visions of soldiers asleep,  
Ready to battle at morn despite dangers and fears,  
When I think of the hardships endured for the  
country's sake,  
I cannot control the abundant flowing of tears.

These poems of the empress, printed in the official journals, are copied in all parts of the empire.

Her skill in verse is to some extent attributable to the excellent training she received when a girl from Seiki Tsugina, one of the cleverest scholars of the country, who taught her both the Chinese and Japanese classics.

Two of the more recent poems of the empress were sent to the School of Princes and Nobles, of which General Nogi is the principal. These are "The Diamond" and "Water in a Vessel," which are written in a new meter, considerably longer than the thirty-one-word poem.

"Water in a Vessel" is as follows:

Water poured into a vessel conforms to the shape  
of it;  
One led into good or evil by the friends one selects,  
So you should choose a friend superior to yourself,  
And hand in hand with him you can diligently  
strive onward on the road of learning.

As the needle of a clock constantly glides onward minute after minute,  
So if a man studies without wasting precious time,  
There is nothing which he cannot accomplish.

Perhaps few occasions so stir the empress as the New Year celebration, which is accompanied by impressive and picturesque ceremonies.

On the 1st of January a religious ceremony, performed by his majesty the emperor, begins at 5 o'clock in the morning by torchlight in the palace gardens. On a small table are placed incense, an antique lamp, oil and sake, the native wine.

Costumed in ancient fashion, the emperor, followed by chamberlains, leaves the palace and enters a four-sided screen, which incloses the table. The screen is closed. Alone he turns to the north, the east, the south and the west, and implores his ancestors to grant his nation during the coming year happiness, prosperity and peace.

There is great rejoicing and merrymaking. Of the New Year the empress has written:

We who live in the city,  
We who live in the country,  
All greet the new year pleasantly,  
And we sing the song of praise cheerfully.

About spring the empress sings:

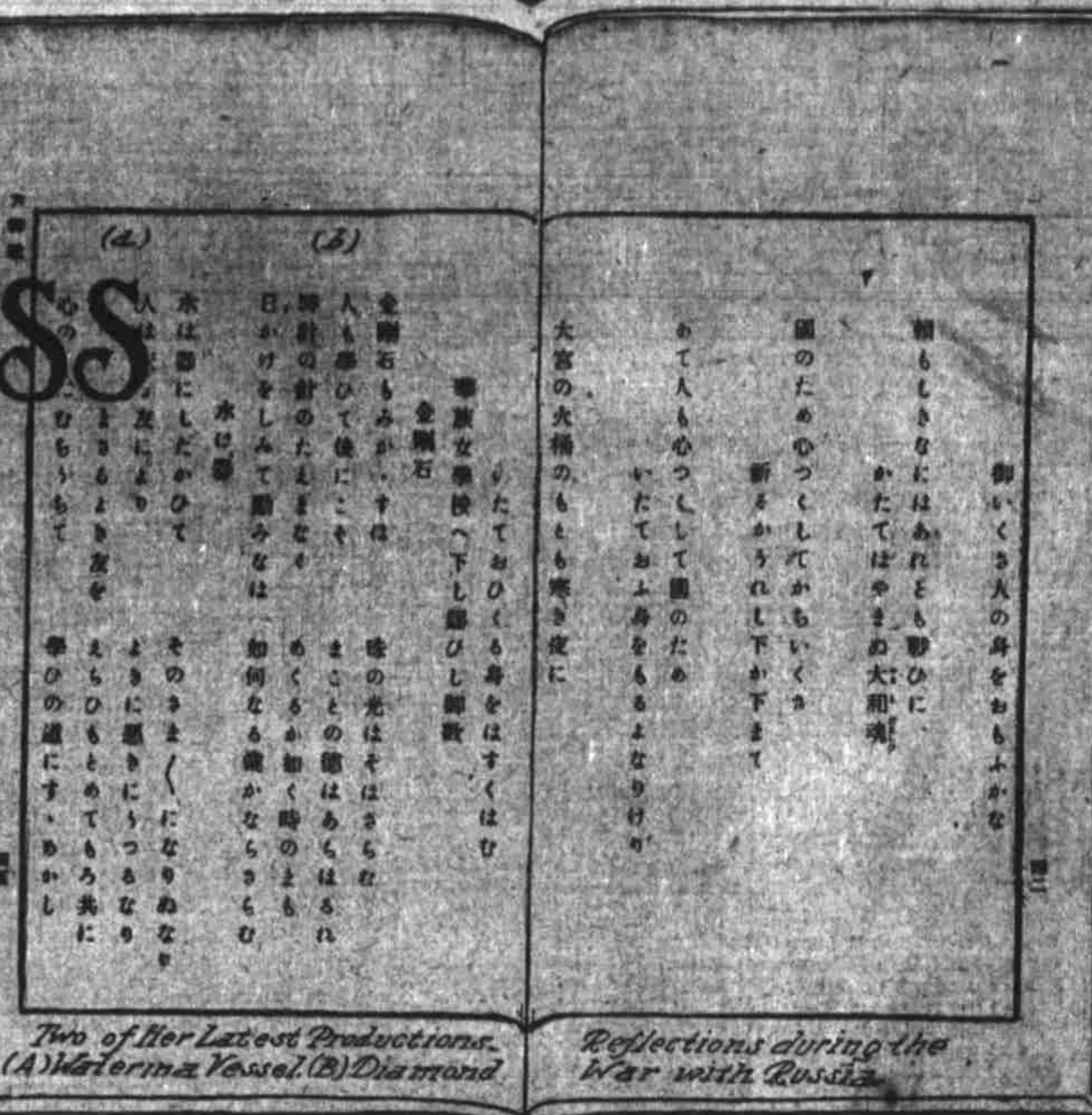
Under the shadow of the radiant sun I feel the  
fragrance of the soil;  
Balmly spring approaches! Both the high and low  
welcome spring!  
It matters not whether we are from the Nine  
Circles (the palace) or from the humble inn,  
We all greet spring.

Women in Japan are little counseled by the men. The empress is an exception. Among the people it is known that the emperor finds pleasure nowhere so much as in the company of his consort.

The people of Japan are certain that in her majesty the ruler has a wise counselor. Her verse on "Public Opinion" is a national axiom on the lips of the people—

The public opinion of a nation is like the stream of a river;  
If dammed up, it is bound to overflow the banks of a river to play destruction.

A wise observation of a wise monarch!



Two of Her Latest Productions. (A) Water in a Vessel, (B) Diamond

Reflections during the War with Russia

