



## JAPANESE WAR NEWS BY WORD O' MOUTH

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**I**N Japan, story-telling is an old and popular calling. The professional story-tellers have their particular halls where at the present moment hundreds congregate to listen to war news. True, the Japanese story-teller does not attract the more refined or highly educated people, but so popular is he with the masses (who can seldom afford to attend the theatre), that he may be classed among the most interesting of those who live to please and instruct.

In a sense the Japanese news-teller is an educator. While he embellishes and changes and adds to the facts of his narrative, he still faithfully presents historical and patriotic stories, of which his audience might otherwise never have heard, having neither time nor means to attain information about their country's status. Compulsory education has existed in Japan only within late years and, of course, there are a great many illiterate people. They may, by attending the story-teller's hall, keep posted on current topics of the day, and just now the Japanese-Russian war is the sole subject of their discourses. No sensational occurrence ever escapes the public story-teller. Thus it happens that the people drop into a story-teller's hall to "hear the news," just as they would read it had they a newspaper, with this difference, that the story-teller by his imagery and genius, amuses and entertains them far more than would the perusal of the same news in a printed sheet.

The charge for admission to a story-teller's hall is very small—five sen (five cents). Cushions and fire-boxes for tobacco are had for a trifling extra charge.

The evening performance opens at 6.30 p. m. and ends at 10. First, a novice takes his seat on the dais and tells a story. He, however, more by his antics and buffoonery than the quality of his story, will raise the amused interest of the audience. After he has had his turn, five or six skilled story-tellers follow. Then comes the "star" performer of the evening, who occupies the dais until his narrative falls to a close. The first thing a story-teller does after sitting on his cushion is to snuff the candle in front of him and take a long drink of hot water. The object of this manoeuvre is to prolong the suspense of his audience. Most of the story-tellers have comical habits of sneezing, rubbing their noses, making grimaces before they begin to speak which generally has the effect of putting their auditors on good terms with themselves.

The better class of narrators usually presents to his auditors a single continuous story, adding much matter to enliven it and delighting to break off at the most exciting point. The present war narrations take on the nature of a serial story and in every case the audience becomes so intensely interested that none fail to attend night after night.

In front of each story-teller's hall is

a square framed lantern, the largest of any hung from the various stores or places of amusement in the streets. The lantern hangs at right angles to the street, and its flat faces are covered with the names of the elocutionary entertainers, which may be read from either end of the road.

On entering a story-teller's hall, one finds himself in a small court, on the walls of which are rows of pegs for hanging sandals, shoes or clogs. From this court the spectator passes into the big, matted hall, at the extreme end of which is the platform or dais, elevated about five feet.

The tradespeople, artisans and common citizens who make up the audience and find a relaxation and source of amusement after their hard day's work, delight in the blood-curdling character of stories of the present Japanese battles, victories and defeats. In fact, it is as much in the telling of a story as for its own merit upon which the interest of the audience hangs. When a story is in progress, the wicks of the hundreds of candles throughout the hall are gradually extinguished, and as the story is concluded, the last one flickers out, whereupon the room is left in total darkness. Naturally the most popular of these tales are Japanese versions of recent Russian defeats.

The history of Japan is full of intestine wars, and when other subjects are wanting these furnish plenty of effective material for the story-teller. The long feud between the rival clans of Taira and Minamoto, which ended in the establishment of the Shogunate by the latter in 1868, is a favorite. It is recounted in the *Taiheiki*, a work of small value as a history, but written in fascinating style by one who lived in those times. It teems with adventure, romance and poetry, and is favored alike by scholar, soldier and common citizen. The fortunes, pride, prosperity and arrogance of the great Taira clan and its final fall and utter extermination make touchingly pathetic and truly romantic plots and situations. This style of story usually

draws an audience of young men, and inspires them to emulate the heroes of the valorous deeds narrated.

Seizaemon, of the Castle-gate, was the earliest known of story-tellers in Japan. He was a highly cultured man whose fortunes had fallen. He took up his position on a little knoll near one of the castle gates where he read *Taiheiki* and explained the difficult passages. He always drew "crowded houses," and imitators fast sprang up. Other and less known works were also taken up, the reader, however, depending largely on his own imagination and invention, so that fiction overshadowed and almost usurped history.

However, this class of story-tellers, who only read from the *Taiheiki*, did not seem to appeal with equal force to the masses as a later class of story-tellers called the *Rakugoka*, or narrators of stories ending with a word play. While the *Rakugoka* is in one sense a jester, he is not altogether a quibbler, for his tales teem with pathos, though their chief quality is humor.

In the seventeenth century "A Cure for Drowsiness" was written for a nobleman by one Anrakuan Sakuden, a noted *raconteur* of his time, and it is from this remarkable book that the class of story-tellers called the *Rakugoka* draw upon for their material, though, of course, it is changed to suit the times.

Fukai Shikoden was the first to give this style of story-telling popularity. He was an itinerant priest having been driven from the temple through the jealousy of his brother acolytes. He took to story-telling as a profession and introduced this new method with peculiar success. His tales were disfigured with immoralities, but, nevertheless, they drew immense crowds. He was the most erudite story-teller of his time and established the *Rakugoku's* position among the story-tellers. He died at the age of eighty-three, in the year 1764.

The first story-teller's hall was erected about a century ago. In 1815, there were seventy-five of them in Yedo, and

in ten years there were fifty more. There came a royal edict at one period, but this prohibition was strongly combatted and the story-tellers in defiance of the law blocked the streets and carried on their profession in the open. The government perceiving the futility of suppressing public curiosity repealed the law in 1851, and the halls prospered once more.

High-grade story-tellers are comparatively few, and the really good talkers make an excellent living. A good story-teller employs his own assistants and disciples. The proprietor of the hall receives half the profits, and the story-teller pays his own assistants out of his own pockets. These supernumeraries receive such a very small consideration for their services that they seldom depend entirely on it as a means of livelihood, but, following some vocation in the day time, take to story-telling at night as much as a means of relaxation and a desire to hear their own voices in public, as for profit. Most story-tellers speak at two halls in a single evening. A popular favorite will make a great deal of money apart from what he gets out of these performances. He will derive a fair income from his patrons who call him to their houses or to tea-houses where he

entertains them. He also receives *douceurs* from third or fourth rate men anxious to join his company and gain prestige.

The story-tellers are invariably men, and while women are to be seen performing at theatres and as *Gidayu* singers, they have not as yet appeared in the story-teller's hall.

Story-telling as a profession is of comparatively recent origin, though the art itself has been appreciated and cultivated from the oldest times. The Emperor Toba (twelfth century), used to order his courtiers to tell him stories of love, war and adventure, and there is every evidence to show that these men occupied positions in the court similar to that of the jester of the courts of mediæval Europe.

The Japanese news narrators of the present time are among the most popular men of the cities in which they ply their strange vocation. These verbal war bulletins and vocal dispensers of information upon the great conflict now waging between Japan and Russia serve the masses after the fashion of the American newspaper "extras," and the smaller the community where they hold forth the greater is the importance of the professional purveyor of war intelligence and picturesque narrative.

