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KUNIKIDA DOPPO

By F. YAMAZAKI

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AMONG the many who have won a literary reputation in modern Japan none is more deserving of mention than Kunikida Doppo; for few have given themselves to their art with more consummate skill and more wholehearted devotion. Not least among his merits is the fact that he has always tried to keep a step in advance of the reading public, though at times the public has not appreciated it; but with the rapid advance of knowledge and general intelligence Kunikida Doppo has come more and more to be understood and welcomed. Like many a literary genius, his welcome has been rather late, not appearing, unfortunately, until he was suffering from an incurable decline, an experience that is always a tragedy.

This master of the pen was born in 1871 at Choshi, a place noted for its soy breweries. His father was of samurai class, serving the lord of the Tatsuno clan at Harima. He had moved to Tokyo, but circumstances obliged his removal to Iwakuni in the province or Suwo, where he lived as a Justice of the Peace. His son, the future poet, still a youth, at that time entered the Yamaguchi Middle School; but in 1887 he, entered Waseda University, where at first, he took up the study of Political Science. In 1889 the young man underwent remarkable mental change. First he became a Christian and was baptized in that faith, by the famous preacher and religious publicist, Masahisa Uyemura.

Young Kunikida had in him the spirit and devotion of a martyr; and his Christian principles were very evident in his novels. In the year 1890 he suddenly left Waseda and returned to his father's house at Suwo. This move may have been due to his active opposition to the late head of Waseda, Dr. Hatoyama, whose political principles were objectionable to large number of students. Failing to have the principal of the college removed, Kunikida himself left and returned to the paternal roof.

This period he put in reading such writers as Carlyle and the poet Wordsworth, from whom lie learned the love of nature in a spiritual way. During the next few years his life was indifferent and regarded as for the most part a failure. To eke out a living he

opened an English school and started a magazine and wrote for the newspapers. Everything seemed to go wrong, however, and he gave one up thing after another. In 1894 Kunikida begin to write for the famous Tokyo daily, *kokumin*. It was the year of the war with China and the young man went to the front as a war correspondent, being assigned to the battleship *Chiyoda*. His letters from the scene of action brought him sudden fame. They were written in the form of epistles from an older to a younger brother, and were the first thing of the kind ever seen in Japanese journalism. The letters made a great hit; newspaper readers were completely captivated by them, Kuni-

kida now soared to the heights of fame.

It was indeed a memorable year to the young writer. That year he made the acquaintance of his future wife, the daughter of a physician named Sasaki. Her name was Nobu; and it was a case of mutual love at first sight. At first he wanted to go to a solitary place apart and enjoy his young wife in peace and quietness, and so he planned to remove to Hokkaido; but later he decided upon Kamakura, as being nearer his work. The youthful lady, however, was not quite prepared for the hand-to-mouth way of living to which Kunikida had accustomed himself, and poverty drove her from his house: she fled back to her parents, and could not be induced to return. He now tried to migrate to America, but he could not collect enough to buy a ticket, and the project was abandoned.

One day Kunikida traveled to Nikko with the noted novelist Tayama Kwatai, who greatly influenced him; and soon after this he published some poems entitled Doppogin, which name had the merit of being part of his own name and at the same time meant "unique." The volume won him many friends, especially those who loved a nature-poet, but for the most part the book was ignored. One of his masterpieces which then could not find a publisher and had to be sold to an Osaka magazine proprietor for a mere pittance, is now prized as a great literary work of the nation.

By the year 1907 the disease that had taken him, tuberculosis, began to make increasing headway and his system gave out. He was now in Chigasaki in Sagami, where he had to take to bed. To assist him financially 28 famous literary friends in

Tokyo each wrote a chapter for book to be sold in his aid; and the proceeds were presented to him. On the 23rd of June in the same year he passed away at the age of thirty-eight.

Since then his novels have been collected in three large volumes, under such names as Doppo (Unique); Tosei (Billow-voice); Ummei (Fate). His journalistic writings make a separate volume called Honest Records. There is another volume named, Musashi-no, Impressions of Tokyo. Musashi is the plain on which Tokyo is built; and the tales narrated in the volume have the old plain for their background. Kunikidaâ€™s novels are quite original, being based on his own observation of life and nature, viewed from his own peculiar point of view, and are in a large measure biographical. The story entitled Master Tomioka, recently appearing in the JAPAN MAGAZINE, is quite typical of Kunikida. In the stories entitled "The Third One," and "Lady Kamakura," the novelist depicts his own disappointment in love. It is easy to see that his story Bettenchi, or Seclusion, was taken from his experiences while on board a battleship. Another story of his called the Spring Bird, a translation of which we give herewith, shows Kunikida's radical breaking away from the old literary conventions where characters were mere puppets; it is an attempt to take characters from real life. His position in national literature was really unique, as his name implies. Here follows the translation of Kunikida's story, Haru-notori, or Spring Bird:

Some six or seven years ago I was acting as teacher of English and mathematics in the school of a provincial town. In that place there was a high hill known as Shiroyama, or Castle Mountain, cover-

ed with luxuriant trees, which threw a dark and gloomy shade; and though not so lofty they were yet quite picturesque.

On the summit of the hill stood the ruins of the old castle, the ancient stones all overrun with vines, their red leaves adding colour to the cold, grey walls. There I often threw myself on my back in the long grass and gazed upward, or over the outskirts of the town, across the deep foliage of the trees. Once I lay there alone, reading a book, when three little girls came singing that way, and picking up twigs as

they went along. Suddenly they grew alarmed and ran away frightened, to where I do not know. I arose to see what had alarmed them so; when I perceived near by a lad of about twelve years of age, who no doubt was the cause of their fear. The boy approached me and said: "Teacher, what are you doing up here?" To which I made reply and said: "I have been reading. But who are you, my lad?"

"My name is Roku," he answered simply. When I asked his age he proceeded to reckon it on his fingers, murmuring, "One, two, three," and so on, and then all at once jumped to 11, saying finally that he was eleven, talking just like a five-year old child.

"You go to school?" I inquired, to which he said "No." I wanted to know why; and the boy, after reflecting a little, turned as if he saw something beyond. Thereupon he began to cry out like an idiot and ran pell-mell down the hill, exclaiming "Crow! Crow!"

My lodging house in the village was the home of a man named Taguchi who had been High Steward to the lord of the fief. When I moved into this home, the first thing I saw on approaching the house was this same boy, Roku, sweeping up the garden. I at once accosted him saying: "Hello, Roku. Good morning!" He looked at me with a queer smile, but said nothing.

As time went on I grew to know more and more about the nature of that boy. He turned out to be the nephew of my landlord. The boy's father had been a great drunkard, who ruined his family and lost house and home, obliging the boy and his mother to seek refuge in the home of Mr. Taguchi. The boy's mother had been driven to idiocy by her matrimonial experiences, and the poor lad had evidently taken after his mother who bore him.

My landlord expressed the desire that at my leisure I would teach the poor boy what I could; and out of sympathy for his misfortune I did so. Every night I tried to get something into his head; but he was quite void of understanding, especially in the faculty of numbers. My efforts were almost fruitless.

The boy was for the most part quite mischievous: a regular urchin. After eating he used to go up Castle Mountain to play and often did not return until the evening. It was the only lesson he liked. One day when I strolled up the mountain alone, I heard someone singing near the castle keep; and there I saw Roku humming away to himself some old ballad, seated on the ruined wall. Such a boy, on such ruins: the whole thing was a picture never to be forgotten! He looked so much like an angel that I could not believe he was an idiot.

Roku was very fond of birds, to obtain which he would pursue them to any distance; and he called all birds "Crow." When the mozu, or butcher-bird, shrieked from some high tree, the boy was imply fascinated and would standing gaping

and gazing at it until the bird flew away. His gawky look as he stared at birds singing or crying out, was in itself a picture. He was simply enthralled by the flight of birds: it seemed to him the wonder of wonders.

Spring was now fast approaching. The last days of March saw a lamentable thing happen to poor Roku.

One of those days he had gone out and did not return. I took one of the household servants and a lantern and went to search for the lost boy. We went up Castle Hill, as one of his natural resorts. There we found his lifeless body lying peacefully below one of the ruined walls. He had no doubt attempted to fly like one of the birds he so loved, and so fell to his death. His faith was greater than his performance.

Two days after we buried him, I again ascended Castle Hill and spent some time contemplating the sad event. It was a time of deep reflection to me. My brain was tormented as to the relation between man and the lower animals, between man and nature, between man and death. I became profoundly saddened. I thought of Wordsworth's poem on "A Child," the lonely boy uttering in lonely voice his call to the owl by the lakeside, and the owl beyond the water making sad response. That boy, too, was delighted with the call of birds; but at last he too died and was buried there

among the birds. But the death of poor Roku was more significant to me still.

Some time afterwards I went to the lad's grave; and there I found his mother weeping, and talking to him as if he were still alive. When she saw me she said:

"Ah, Roku was so fond of the birds. When he was a bird flying he always imitated it, no matter where he was, stretching out his arms and running along; and he could caw just like any crow."

The woman stretched out her arms to show me how he used to do, her eyes shining just like those of her boy. My eyes closed involuntarily. A crow came flying from the wood beyond. The demented mother suddenly stopped conversing with me, and became absorbed in the crow, gazing at it intently!