Correspondence

COREAN PROVERBS AND PITHY SAYINGS.

By William Elliot Griffis.

Shut off as they are from the rest of the world, like fish in a well, the Coreans nevertheless have coined a fair share of homely wisdom, which finds ready circulation in their daily speech. Their proverbs not only bear the mint mark of their origin, but reflect truly the image and superscription of those who send them forth. Many indeed of their current proverbs and pithy expressions are of Japanese or Chinese origin, but those we have selected are mainly of peninsular birth and have the flavor of the soil.

Do the Coreans place the seat of wisdom, as they do the point of vaccination, in the nose? "Who has a nose three feet long?" (If one is embarrassed how can he put others at ease?) Evidently they have a wholesome regard for that member. "A nose of iron" describes an opinionated man, and suggests unlimited "cheek." A common expression of the native Roman Catholic Christians, meaning to go to church and pray, is "to see the long nose of the father," that member being looked upon with awe as the seat of wisdom.

Between Japan and China, Corea probably sees herself in this proverb of the unhappy cur that wanders boneless between two kitchens, the cook in each supposing he has been fed by the other. "The dog which between two [Buddhist] mónasteries gets nothing."

Corea's isolation is like a fish in a well. "He knows nothing beyond the place which he inhabits." They apply this to secluded villagers. So also "Like the hermit in the market-place." Both these proverbs describe the national life of this peninsula people.

"A poor horse has always a thick tail." "One stick to ten blind men"—something very precious.

"The cock of the village in a splendid city mansion"—the bumpkin in the capital.

"To have a cake in each hand"—knowing not which to eat first, to be in a quandary.

"A volcano under the snow"—a man of amiable manners conceals a violent temper.

"The treasure which always circulates without an obstacle"—"cash," or in Corean, *sapeks*.

"An apricot blossom in the snow"—something rare and marvellous.

"To blow away the hair to see if there is a scar"—to look for a mote in another man's eye; to hunt for defects.

"As difficult as the roads of Thibet." This is evidently a reminiscence derived from the ancient Buddhist missionaries who entered Corea from that country.

"To put on a silk dress to travel at night"—to do a good action and not have it known.

Some pithy sayings show the local gauge of sense. "A dull fellow does not know silver from lead." "He has round eyes." "He can't tell cheese from wheat." He is an idiot if he "doesn't know lu from yu." These refer to the Corean letters, the jot and tittle of the alphabet.

"As opposed as fire and water."

"A buckskin man" is a man of no will or backbone.

"To have a high hand" means to be liberal.

"A great blue sea" refers to something very difficult with no end to it, and no way out of it.

"A man who is "not known in all the eight coasts" is an utter stranger.

A very sick person is "a man who holds disease in his arms."

"A bag of disease" is a chronic patient.

"Who can tell in seeing a crow flying whether it be male or female?" is a question referring to the impossible.

The numeral 10,000 (*man*) plays a great part in proverbial sayings, as "10,000 times certain." Corea is "a land of 10,000 peaks." Certain success is "10,000 chances against one."

"To die 10,000 times and not to be regretted" is to be "worthy of 10,000 deaths," and "10,000 sorrows" means great grief.

A mountain is "10,000 heights of a man" high, and "10,000 strings of cash" is a fabulous sum to the ordinary villager, and "10,000 times 10,000 people" means all the people in the universe.

"To lose one's hands" is to make a flasco.

"A comet is an arrow-star."

"A hundred battles make a veteran."

Almost as poetical as "anarithma gelasma" (unnumbered laughings) of the Greek poet is this Corean description of the sea—"Ten thousand flashings of blue waves."

"To lose them both at a time" is a proverb founded on a native love story.

"When a raven flies from a pear tree, a pear falls." Appearances are deceitful; don't hazard a guess. Perhaps the raven caused it, perhaps he did not.

"If one lifts a stone the face reddens." The Coreans are fond of rival feats of lifting. Heavy stones are kept for that purpose. "Results are proportionate to effort put forth."

Mosquitoes are lively and jubilantly hungry in Corea, yet it does not do to fight them with heavy weapons, or "seize a sabre to kill a mosquito."

Of a very poor man they say "He eats only nine times in a month," or "He eats only three times in ten days." To say he is in the depths of poverty is to mention the pathetic fact that "he has extinguished his fire," for "he looks to the four winds, and finds no friend."

"The right and left are different," is said of a hypocrite who does not speak as he thinks.

When a man is not very bright he "has mist before his eyes," or "carries his wits under his arms," or has "hidden his soul under his armpits," or he "goes to the East and goes to the West" when he is bothered.

Like Beaconsfield's dictum "Critics are men who have failed in literature and art," is this Corean echo "Good critic, bad worker." "On entering a village to know its usages"—when in Rome, do as the Romans do.

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"To destroy jade and gravel together" refers to indiscriminate destruction.

"Without wind and without cloud" describes a severe life.

"Go to sea" is a provincial malediction, heavier than a tinker's, and worse than our "Go to grass."

The large number of morals pointed, and tales adorned by the tiger—that royal beast of Corea, and the scourge of her northern provinces—would require an article by itself.

It is a remarkable fact that the progressive Coreans who are now trying to persuade their government and fellow countrymen to open the gates of Corea to foreign residence and trade, make free and effectual use of the national proverbs in their arguments. The people are beginning to see themselves as others see them. Like the Japanese, they find that they are "frogs in a well" that "know not of the great ocean" or world. They are learning that it *is* "possible for the sun to shine on so many countries at once," and that these can "exist under the same sky," which they once doubted. Within six months the printed New Testament in Corean, for which the types have been cut, will circulate in Corea, bringing to the last of the hermit nations the wisdom of God.

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much the older faith, and had become very corrupt when Gautama appeared, some six hundred years before Christ. Brahminism is aristocratic; it has a hereditary priesthood, and it gridirons society into castes whose lines are like iron. Buddhism is democratic. It rebelled against caste. It destroyed the old priesthood. It gave every man an equal right and chance. According to Mr. Davids, the two systems must be studied together in order to understand the latter, which is the popular religion of the East, and includes from one-quarter to one-third of the human race in its pale. Its founder was a sort of Asiatic Luther, reforming the abuses of the system under which the people groaned and were oppressed. One point at which the contrast is brought out with great force is that of salvation. Brahminism taught endless transmigration. Man dies only to become an animal, a bird, a fish, or a reptile. If he rises to a higher form of life, it is not to stay. He is bound to an endless chain, like a captive to a wheel, and he can do nothing to improve his lot in the next state of existence save through the hereditary priesthood; and the priests exacted heavy pay for any office they might render. This degrading superstition sat like an incubus on the millions of India, when Gautama taught that it was possible for any and every man to improve his condition in the next state of existence by his own acts. He swept away from the field of human vision the whole of the great soul-theory which had hitherto so completely filled and dominated the minds of the superstitious and the thoughtful alike. For the first time in the history of the world, he proclaimed a salvation which each man could gain for himself, and by himself, in this world, during this life, without the least reference to God, or to gods either great or small. The key to this salvation was knowledge, not only of God, but of the real nature of men and things; purity, courtesy, uprightness, peace, and a universal love "far-reaching, grown great and beyond measure." The effect of this new doctrine, which spread rapidly through Southeastern Asia, was very great. It was much more moral and elevating than its predecessor, though it cannot be compared for a moment with Christianity. Doubtless many of the corrupt practices and excesses of the East are not the consequences of the religion, but of circumstances over which it has at most only a limited control. It would be unfair to hold Christianity responsible for the dazzling voluptuousness of Parisian society and the excesses of the Catholic Church in Italy and Spain.

One of the most interesting of these lectures relates to the doctrine of Kanna, which Mr. Davids represents as equivalent to the transmigration of character. According to Brahminism, the soul is a substantial, indestructible entity, which lives on and on by its own inherent force, and survives innumerable transmigrations. But Gautama rebelled against the despotic necessity involved in this doctrine. He taught that it is not the soul as such, but the character given to it that survives. The individual inherits something of a Kanna from his ancestors in his instincts and predilections; he adds to or modifies it by his own thoughts, feelings, and acts; and when he dies this Kanna survives. This doctrine seems to be the original of the theory set forth by Spencer and Tyndall and the evolutionists. It will be remembered with what tedious particularity of detail Spencer shows how the beginnings of conscience are introduced into animal life, and how by slow accretions the infinitesimal germs of a moral nature are increased, the dog showing more conscience than the fish, and man more than either; and how the moral acts of one generation become moral instincts and impulses in the next; so that the race as it exists to-day holds in its tastes and sentiments and instinctive habits the results of all past life on this planet. It seems queer to find this same doctrine taught in other terms by a Hindu reformer twenty-four hundred years ago—only with him it was a protest against a more degrading doctrine, a step in advance, while with our evolutionists it is a retreat to a lower plane of thought. Brahminism intensified thought and interest in the future; Buddhism fastened them on the present. It says "Try to get as near wisdom and goodness as you can in this life. Trouble not yourselves about the gods. Disturb yourselves not by curiosities or desires about any future existence; seek only after the fruit of the noble path of self-culture and of self-control." The Buddhist books say "It is by a man's consideration of those things which ought not to be considered, and by his non-consideration of those things which ought to be considered, that wrong leanings of the mind arise and are aggravated within him." Gautama says it is folly to speculate as to whence we came and whither we are to go, and what form we are to take on in the future—for these questions cannot be answered by mortals; and to consider these questions, he calls "the walking in delusion, the jungle, the wilderness, the puppet-show, the writhing, the filter of delusion." These teachings are so exactly like those of a school of modern scientists that the latter almost seem to be a revival or importation of the former. Verily, ... thing new under the sun? The

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