

CHAPTER 3
CONCERNING THE *KONJAKU*
MONOG ATARI

IN The *Konjaku Monogatari*, or *Tales, Present and Past*, you will find many stories relative to Kitsuné —and the book treats of *Kitsuné*, in literature, as a hero or heroine, for the first time in Japan. It is appropriate, therefore, to say a few words concerning the book and its author.

The *Konjaku Monogatari* is a rare book written by Minamoto-no-Takakuni, known as Uji Dainagoft (1004-1077) in the closing years of the Heian Era (781-1185). The oldest as a collection of narratives in Japanese, the book consists of 31 volumes, divided into Three Sections: Tenjiku (ancient name for India), Shintan (ancient name for China) and Japan.

A wonderful book, this. The author was evidently a man who read extensively and learned abundantly by hearsay. He possessed many friends in every walk of life. He was energetic, systematic, accurate, and wrote with a powerful pen. Nobody could hope to start such a great work, and finish with success, unless he were a man holding views above the general level of opinion.

In the book, the Section of Tenjiku comes first,

followed by Shintan and Japan. The author compiled the book in this order out of respect toward Tenjiku, the country in which Buddhism arose and where Sakyamuni was born—and Shintan, the country of culture—the two great nations to which Japan owed a debt of gratitude.

Why did Takakuni write this book of narratives, comparable only with such books as *Æsop's Fables* or *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments*? Did he finish the work just finding it an occupation to his taste? Without any meaning? Without any prime object? And did he simply endeavor to collect and record tales of a strange nature?

In Japan, in the latter part of the remote ages, Buddhism, became more and more popular, and it was at the zenith of its prosperity in the early years of the 9th century after the brilliant Nara Era (645-780). Meanwhile, with the lapse of time, the old trend of things had been superseded by the traditions of China, and those of India coming through China had a great influence on the Japanese people—in ideas and in knowledge.

The author of *The Konjaku Monogatari*, no doubt, added the two sections of Tenjiku and Shintan for the purpose of enlightening people concerning the two great countries of culture and wisdom. Takakuni told them, through his work, of things which were being preached and observed in Tenjiku and Shintan as the truth, and therefore, he thought, should be observed in Japan.

Takakuni taught in his narratives that the law of

nature was firm and stable forever, like the sun shining high up in the sky. And he preached by telling them that it was Buddhism that taught them this everlasting truth. He informed them of the importance of knowing the great truth of *samsarā*, or transmigrationism, and *karma* or inevitable retribution.

With this in mind, Takakuni gave to the Japanese people the narratives he had garnered. Therefore on many occasions, he never forgot to tell the people of *karma*, the inevitable consequences of some fault committed in a previous state of existence even when he was speaking of worldly things. However it is interesting to see that he was, on the other hand, a humorous person, a fact shown well in some of his tales.

The *Konjaku Monogatari* teaches us to be grateful, sympathetic, to keep to our sphere in life—warning us not to despise other people, not to be captivated by beautiful women, not to go anywhere without any knowledge of the place, not to confide in anybody (reflecting the conditions of life in those days) even in one's wife, and so on.

The *Genji Monogatari*, written by Murasaki Shikibu, Lady Purple, deals almost exclusively with the life of the upper classes. When we read the *Genji*, the Book of Love and Romance of the handsome Imperial prince and the beautiful ladies, we breathe the very air of the brilliant Heian Era with the Court noblemen, effeminate and superstitious—and the gay and intellectual noblewomen.

In The *Konjaku Monogatari*, however, we meet the common people as well as noblemen and noblewomen.

And the fact that Buddhism, especially the Tendai sect (a sect the fundamental doctrine of which is the Sutra of the Lotus) was prevalent at that time is clearly reflected in the writing.

Takakuni also extolls the benevolence of *Kanzéon*, or the Goddess of Mercy, and *Jizo*, the guardian deity of children. He believes in the transmigration of the soul. Many phantoms in various forms including *Kitsuné* appear in the narratives. However as in the case of later years, they are not ferocious or wicked in nature. They are, to my mind, rather good-natured, and they reveal their true character easily when cornered.

Minamoto-no-Takakuni came of a noble family. His grandfather was an Imperial prince of the Emperor Daigo (385-930); and Fujiwara-no-Michinaga, the most influential Prime Minister in the age, was his uncle. Still, according to the records, he was democratic enough to invite travelers passing in front of his mansion at Uji, near Kyoto, the capital; and he wrote The *Konjaku Monogatari* by listening to what they told him.

Reading the book, we learn the manners and customs, the thoughts, morality and superstitions of the people of the Heian Era as well.

Now before we proceed with such tales as those found in The *Konjaku Monogatari*, containing a great number of the foxes resorting to their subtle art of bewitchery, we deem it necessary to tell you concerning the matter of metamorphosis in general.

It is true that the folklore relative to such a thing as bewitchery, or metamorphosis, is now regarded as concerning things of the past. However in Japan, the idea of the mysterious power of *Kitsuné* is deep-rooted among the populace; and a superstition such as *Inu-gami*¹ or *Hébi-gami*² is still prevalent in some rural districts in the country, and the case of *Kitsuné-mochi*³ or *Izuchi-mochi*⁴ is also prevalent in some part of Japan.

Such things as these, no doubt, are a superstition fermented by tradition. However it cannot be denied that there is—in each of them—a fixed form. Why there is such a fixed form?

Now let us study the metamorphosis tradition of such an animal as *Kitsuné*. In the form of metamorphosis, there is a difference between the case of a human being turning himself into an animal; and the case when an animal changes its shape into a human being. An interesting contrast will be observed between these cases.

And there is also a form—a fixed one—in the conjugal relation between human beings and animals in tradition. For instance, there exists in legend some hindrance in the marriage of human being and serpents

¹ Literally, Dog-god. A sort of possession by evil spirits. The natural shape of it, however, is not a dog. Supposed to be an animal about the size of a rat with a supernatural power.

² Literally, Snake-god. A sort of possession by the evil spirit of a small snake.

³ A specific family supposed to have a supernatural power through the influence of *Kitsuné*.

⁴ Same as *Kitsuné-mochi*.

(as seen in the case of a man marrying a serpent in the guise of a charming girl, in *The Ugétsu Monogatari* by Akinari), or otters or badgers, animals supposed to have the power of turning themselves into human forms. *In the case of the union of human beings and foxes, they do not have any such drawback.*

In the tradition of a human being changing his form into that of an animal, there is no record of matrimony between the person changing his form and other human beings. However, in the case of an animal changing its shape into that of a human being and the real human being, you will find many tales of matrimony.

The case of the human being changing his form into such an animal as a fox—or the case of the human being joining the fox family by marrying a fox—will be found in the legends of China. However in the case of the latter, the form of the human being is not changed: He will just become a fox-man without changing his form, though perhaps, a slight change may be seen in his appearance or voice.

In this connection, it may be added that there are many stories of foxes turning themselves into women, *but no stories of women assuming the shape of foxes in any Japanese fox-tradition.*

There are various ways in the art of bewitching men on the part of *Kitsuné*. The method of metamorphosis differs according to the districts. *Kitsuné* is supposed to emit fire, *Kitsuné-bi*, by stroking its busy tail. And it is also believed that it will put a skull on its head and bow in veneration to the Dipper before turning itself into a human shape. When the skull does not

fall off, it will be able to turn itself into a human form successfully, it is said.

As the method of assuming a human form, especially a beautiful girl, *Kitsuné* adopts the process of covering its head with duckweed or reeds. Japan's fox is an expert in changing itself into any form, and its specialty is assuming the shape of a charming and seductive woman, to captivate a young man and an old gentleman susceptible to female charms.

According to the fox-marriage legend, the fox in the guise of a pretty woman will lead men into temptation to satisfy its desire. All the foxes will turn themselves into the shape of fascinating women and exhaust the energy of their victims. The men victimized, it is believed, are to die, sooner or later.

Kitsuné, as you will read in such a book as *The Konjaku Monogatari*, is an animal wanton by nature. It is supposed to satisfy its desire by having relations with men through the art of bewitchery. Apart from the question of the possibility of this, you will notice, in the fox tradition, that *Kitsuné* is making use of its superior brains in various ways in bewitching men. This is the time-honored tradition of Japan in regard to the bewitchery of *Kitsuné*.