

## OUR FOREIGN LETTER.

## LITTLE PAPERS FROM JAPAN.

Overhead the sun is blazing, and beats back pitilessly off the verandah roofs below, filling the upper rooms with throbbing waves of heat. Reflected from the river beyond, its fierce rays pierce upwards through the screen of trees and trailing Madeira vine, but a light bamboo blind softens the light, and a fine grass mat spread under me, over mattress and pillow, make the heat bearable. Beside my bed sits a quaint little figure in white, patiently fanning me with a large paper "uchiwa," painted with anything but a cool design—the most gruesome of dragons in flame-colour and black.

Presently I ask my little nurse what is the matter with me, and she replies with a Japanese medical word, which I have never heard before, adding that it is very common, and that there are many cases of it in the hospital just now. Shyness or weakness, or a little of both, keep me from asking for an explanation, but I make up my mind that as soon as I am left alone I will jump out of bed and peep out. If I am infectious, I know there will be a fragile-looking straw-rope stretched across the entrance and a little policeman in white uniform sitting by it, to see that no one goes out or comes in. It will be so easy to run across the room to the window overlooking the front garden, when nurse goes downstairs, but for the present I am content to lie quite still and silent, while she manipulates the fiery dragon. She looks absurdly like a doll as she sits there with impassive face and unnatural figure, for the Japanese think it unseemly to show any sign of a waist, and the nurses disguise theirs by wearing a thick sash under the straight white bodice. The skirt, too, is in straight kilts, and the cap is about the most stiff and unbecoming form of headgear that can possibly be conceived. Below the skirt appear the usual white calico socks with separate division for the big toe, but for dirty work, such as mopping the floors, they slip these off and work barefooted.

Presently nurse leaves me for a few minutes, and I try to get out of bed, but no! Curiosity pulls hard, but in vain. I conclude that I must be infectious, as nurse wipes the straw-matted floors over every day with carbolic solution, and puts all my soiled things to soak in baths of it with disastrous results, as I afterwards find!

When night comes, she takes a couple of thickly wadded quilts out of the big cupboard in the wall of the next room, and spreads them on the floor. A green mosquito-net is hung up over them, and there she sleeps quite happily.

In the morning she will slip down to the back yard; draw water out of the well, and wash herself in the open-air, possibly using the back-door as a partial screen if there are men about! In Japan, washing is not, as a rule, done inside the houses, but in the hotels there are recesses provided with brass basins and a supply of water, in full view of

the public corridors. All the better houses have a bath-house adjoining, but the water has to be carried from the well, so that people who cannot afford servants, go every day to the public baths, where all can bathe in the one large bath of hot water for the small sum of, perhaps, one halfpenny, or even less. It is often stated that in Japan men and women bathe together, but this is not strictly true. In some places, I believe, the only division between men and women is an open railing, but that sort of thing is becoming less and less common. All the same, it is not rare for the bath of a private house to be placed in the garden, no doubt as a precaution against fire, as the water is heated by a small stove inside the big wooden bath-tub. To the Japanese mind, there is no harm in anything that is demanded by common-sense. The evil is in the mind of him who thinks it. I have seen a gentleman gardening on a wet day attired in nothing but a cape, but the same gentleman would be shocked and disgusted at the sight of an Englishwoman in evening dress, for the display of neck and arms and figure seem to him quite unnecessary and unreasonable. Who shall say that the Japanese standard of modesty is inferior to our own?

The following day I ask nurse if I may be washed, and am greatly surprised, not to say annoyed, when she declares she cannot possibly "wash" me in bed, but she will "wipe" me. I wonder, impatiently, what "wiping may mean," but it proves to be just the ordinary hospital expression for a wash in bed, for to the fastidious Japanese mind such ablutions do not deserve to be called "washing."

When I was well enough to get up, I found myself luxuriously installed in a huge arm-chair with innumerable pillows round me. I asked nurse if she would "honourably condescend" to brush my hair. She had never seen a hair-brush before, as the Japanese only use combs; however, she said she would try and do it as well as she could, but how was she to reach it? The chair is big and she is very small; so she climbs upon another chair behind me, and brushes my hair straight up into the air. I let her twist it up in a single knot, and lie back contentedly until my friend appears with the doctor—a kindly, fatherly man, who has studied medicine in Germany, one of the few comfortable, restful men one saw in Japan, for most of them shine rather by their strenuous alertness.

When he has gone, my friend looks askance at my hair, and suggests that I am now quite able to do it myself. I say nothing, but feel very hurt, and think: "How could she expect me to do it when I am so dreadfully weak?" By-and-by, however, I see myself in the glass, and understand. To-morrow I will do my own hair, *however bad I feel*.

The time passes swiftly, and now no little dainty woman in white waits upon me with glasses of iced milk and cups of broth, for I am well enough to do without a nurse. It is pleasant enough to

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)