

Concerning Certain Superstitions

By A. B. Mitford (Lord Redesdale)

Cats, foxes, and badgers are regarded with superstitious awe by the Japanese, who attribute to them the power of assuming the human shape in order to bewitch mankind. Like the fairies of our Western tales, however, they work for good as well as for evil ends. To do them a good turn is to secure powerful allies; but woe betide him who injures them!—he and his will assuredly suffer for it. Cats and foxes seem to have been looked upon as uncanny beasts all the world over; but it is new to me that badgers should have a place in fairy-land. The island of Shikoku, the southernmost of the great Japanese islands, appears to be the part of the country in which the badger is regarded with the greatest veneration. Among the many tricks which he plays upon the human race is one, of which I have a clever representation carved in ivory. Lying in wait in lonely places after dusk, the badger watches for benighted wayfarers: should one appear, the beast, drawing a long breath, distends his belly and drums delicately upon it with his clenched fist, producing such entrancing tones, that the traveller cannot resist turning aside to follow the sound, which, Will-o'-the-wisp-like, recedes as he advances, until it lures him on to his destruction. Love is, however, the most powerful engine which the cat, the fox, and the badger alike put forth for the ruin of man. No German poet ever imagined a more captivating water-nymph than the fair virgins by whom the knight of Japanese romance is assailed: the true hero recognizes and slays the beast; the weaker mortal yields and perishes.

The Japanese story-books abound with tales about the pranks of these creatures, which, like ghosts, even play a part in the histories of ancient and noble families. I have collected a few of these, and now beg a hearing for a distinguished and two-tailed¹ connection of Puss in Boots and the Chatte Blanche.

¹ Cats are found in Japan, as in the Isle of Man, with stumps, where they should have tails. Sometimes this is the result of art, sometimes of a natural shortcoming. The cats of Yedo are of bad repute as mousers, their energies being relaxed by much petting at the hands of ladies. The Cat of Nabéshima, so says tradition, was a monster with two tails.