

THE BURNING OF THE RICE FIELDS

ADAPTED FROM GLEANINGS IN BUDDHA-FIELDS, BY LAFADIO HEARN

Once there was a good old man who lived up on a mountain, far away in Japan. All round his little house the mountain was flat, and the ground was rich; and there were the rice fields of all the people who lived in the village at the mountain's foot. Mornings and evenings, the old man and his little grandson, who lived with him, used to look far down on the people at work in the village, and watch the blue sea which lay all round the land, so close that there was no room for fields below, only for houses. The little boy loved the rice fields, dearly, for he knew that all the good food for all the people came from them; and he often helped his grand father to watch over them.

One day, the grandfather was standing alone, before his house, looking far down at the people, and out at the sea, when, suddenly, he saw something very strange far off where the sea and sky meet. Something like a great cloud was rising there, as if the sea were lifting itself high into the sky. The old man put his hands to his eyes and looked again, hard as his old sight could. Then he turned and ran to the house. "Yone, Yone!" he cried, "bring a brand from the hearth!"

The little grandson could not imagine what his grandfather wanted with fire, but he always obeyed, so he ran quickly and brought the brand. The old man already had one, and was running



for the rice fields. Yone ran after. But what was his horror to see his grandfather thrust his burning brand into the ripe dry rice, where it stood.

"Oh, Grandfather, Grandfather!" screamed the little boy, "what are you doing?"

"Quick, set fire! Thrust your brand in!" said the grandfather.

Yone thought his dear grandfather had lost his mind, and he began to sob; but a little Japanese boy always obeys, so though he sobbed, he thrust

his torch in, and the sharp flame ran up the dry stalks, red and yellow. In an instant, the field was ablaze, and thick black smoke began to pour up, on the mountain side. It rose like a cloud, black and fierce, and in no time the people below saw that their precious rice fields were on fire. Ah, how they ran! Men, women, and children climbed the mountain, running as fast as they could to save the rice; not one soul stayed behind.

And when they came to the mountain top, and saw the beautiful rice-crop all in flames, beyond help, they cried bitterly, "Who has done this thing? How did it happen?"

"I set fire," said the old man, very solemnly; and the little grandson sobbed, "Grandfather set fire."

But when they came fiercely round the old man, with "Why? Why?" he only turned and pointed to the sea. "Look!" he said.

They all turned and looked. And there, where the blue sea had lain, so calm, a mighty wall of water, reaching from earth to sky, was rolling in. No one could scream, so terrible was the sight. The wall of water rolled in on the land, passed quite over the place where the village had been, and broke, with an awful sound, on the mountain side. One wave more, and still one more, came; and then all was water, as far as they could look, below; the village where they had been was under the sea.

But the people were all safe. And when they saw what the old man had done, they honoured him above all men for the quick wit which had saved them all from the tidal wave.