

NEW YEAR The New Year is approaching. Here in Japan, a day or two before, we shall go to the market and buy from the heaped-up carts of the peasant women of O Miya-dori braided and fringed ropes of straw, the large oranges called *dai-dai*--a word which can also mean "long life"--branches of pine, bamboo and earliest blooming plum--symbols of good fortune and congratulation--and with them decorate the gateway to our house. In the *tokonoma* we shall have an arrangement of the fruits of forest, field and sea--a spray of fern and of laurel, a white pounded-rice cake, a branch of dried persimmons, a large *dai-dai*, bands of grey seaweed and a lobster--on a stand of fragrant white *hinoki* wood.

The day before the New Year everything will be put in perfect order. We shall make certain that all the end of the year bills are paid. We shall prepare innumerable things to be eaten cold or warmed up, for we shall not cook during the first three days of the year, yet must have the delicacies of the season to give to our visitors. We shall clean the house from top to bottom, shall take our baths, have our hair freshly done at the beauty-shop, and shall lay out our best clothing for the next day. Then, late in the evening, we shall take all the charcoal embers from the braziers and cover them with ashes in the garden. Thus all that has accumulated of dust and dirt during the year which is passing will have been destroyed.

For me, these New Year customs in Japan sum up what the end of the old year and the beginning of the new should mean. But the custom I love best is that of procuring fresh fire at the Yasaka Jinja in Gion. When all other preparations have been completed, we start on our pilgrimage. Every one goes--old men, old women, husbands, wives, lovers, students, serving maids, children, babies. At the booths lining the approaches to the shrine we buy hemp ropes, then slowly follow in the crowd to the great iron braziers of flaming pine faggots presided over by white-robed Shinto priests wearing high black-lacquered hats. With a quick twist of the arm the priest seizes a blazing faggot and lights the end of our rope, and then the next, and the next. In a constant stream more than a half-million people will present their hemp ropes to be lighted, and dawn will be approaching when the fires finally die down.

Carrying their fresh fire, men, women and children will go one by one before the main edifice of the shrine, its darkness and mystery made darker and more mysterious still by the two or three lighted candles of the inmost sanctuary. They will pull the twisted rope and clang the great gong to let the Kami Sama know of their presence, then clap their hands three times and bow deeply and respectfully. Who the Kami Sama is, what the Kami Sama means, why they bow so respectfully to the Kami Sama perhaps none clearly knows, only vaguely senses. But all undoubtedly feel some inner need satisfied, some cleansing of the spirit through their simple act.