

**THE ROMANCE OF THE  
MILKY WAY AND OTHER  
STUDIES & STORIES**

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The romance of the Milky Way and other studies & stories by Lafcadio Hearn

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HOUGHTON  
MIFFLIN AND  
COMPANY ◎  
BOSTON AND  
NEW YORK 1907



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AMONG the many charming festivals celebrated by Old Japan, the most romantic was the festival of Tanabata-Sama, the Weaving-Lady of the Milky Way. In the chief cities her holiday is now little observed; and in Tōkyō it is almost forgotten. But in many country districts, and even in villages near the capital, it is still celebrated in a small way. If you happen to visit an old-fashioned country town or village, on the seventh day of the seventh month (by the ancient calendar), you will probably notice many freshly-cut bamboos fixed upon the roofs of the houses, or planted in the ground beside them, every bamboo having attached to it a number of strips of colored



paper. In some very poor villages you might find that these papers are white, or of one color only ; but the general rule is that the papers should be of five or seven different colors. Blue, green, red, yellow, and white are the tints commonly displayed. All these papers are inscribed with short poems written in praise of Tanabata and her husband Hikoboshi. After the festival the bamboos are taken down and thrown into the nearest stream, together with the poems attached to them.

To understand the romance of this old festival, you must know the legend of those astral divinities to whom offerings used to be made, even by the Imperial Household, on the seventh day of the seventh month. The legend is Chinese. This is the Japanese popular version of it :—

The great god of the firmament had a lovely daughter, Tanabata-tsumé, who passed her days in weaving garments for her august parent. She rejoiced in her work, and thought that there was no greater pleasure than the

pleasure of weaving. But one day, as she sat before her loom at the door of her heavenly dwelling, she saw a handsome peasant lad pass by, leading an ox, and she fell in love with him. Her august father, divining her secret wish, gave her the youth for a husband. But the wedded lovers became too fond of each other, and neglected their duty to the god of the firmament; the sound of the shuttle was no longer heard, and the ox wandered, unheeded, over the plains of heaven. Therefore the great god was displeased, and he separated the pair. They were sentenced to live thereafter apart, with the Celestial River between them; but it was permitted them to see each other once a year, on the seventh night of the seventh moon. On that night — providing the skies be clear — the birds of heaven make, with their bodies and wings, a bridge over the stream; and by means of that bridge the lovers can meet. But if there be rain, the River of Heaven rises, and becomes so wide that the bridge cannot be formed. So the husband and wife cannot always meet, even on the seventh night of the seventh

