



**KWAIDAN:
STORIES AND STUDIES
OF STRANGE THINGS**

LAFCADIO HEARN

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OF STRANGE THINGS

BY
LAFCADIO HEARN

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might endanger the health of their children; and that, for insects, their longevity is exceptional,—members of the more highly evolved species living for a considerable number of years.

But it is not especially of these matters that I wish to speak. What I want to talk about is the awful propriety, the terrible morality, of the ant⁸⁰. Our most appalling ideals of conduct fall short of the ethics of the ant,—as progress is reckoned in time,—by nothing less than millions of years!... When I say "the ant," I mean the highest type of ant,—not, of course, the entire ant-family. About two thousand species of ants are already known; and these exhibit, in their social organizations, widely varying degrees of evolution. Certain social phenomena of the greatest biological importance, and of no less importance in their strange relation to the subject of ethics, can be studied to advantage only in the existence of the most highly evolved societies of ants.

After all that has been written of late years about the probable value of relative experience in the long life of the ant, I suppose that few persons would venture to deny individual character to the ant. The intelligence of the little creature in meeting and overcoming difficulties of a totally new kind, and in adapting itself to conditions entirely foreign to its experience, proves a considerable power of independent thinking. But this at least is certain: that the ant has no individuality capable of being exercised in a purely selfish direction;—I am using the word "selfish" in its ordinary acceptance. A greedy ant, a sensual ant, an ant capable of any one of the seven deadly sins, or even of a small venial sin, is unimaginable. Equally unimaginable, of course, a romantic ant, an ideological ant, a poetical ant, or an ant inclined to metaphysical speculations. No human mind could attain to the absolute matter-of-fact quality of the ant-mind;—no human being, as now constituted, could cultivate a mental habit so impeccably practical as that of the ant. But this superlatively practical mind is incapable of moral error. It would be difficult, perhaps, to prove that the ant has no religious ideas. But it is certain that such ideas could not be of any use to it. The being incapable of moral weakness is beyond the need of "spiritual guidance."

⁸⁰ An interesting fact in this connection is that the Japanese word for ant, *ari*, is represented by an ideograph formed of the character for "insect" combined with the character signifying "moral rectitude," "propriety" (*giri*). So the Chinese character actually means "The Propriety-Insect."

