

## Sunrise and an Eruption: An Adventure in Japan

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After all, it is not inappropriate that I should have enjoyed my first mountain sunrise in this Land of the Rising Sun. Not unreasonable either. For in England where *caelum crebris imbribus ac nebulis foedum*<sup>1</sup> our little mountains can rarely be relied on to rise to the heights of a clear sunrise; and, in consequence, those few lucky people who have happened to find themselves and occasion in happy conjunction, say, on the summit of Helvellyn or Scafell make life so intolerable for other sun and mountain lovers that they are forced to emigrate. Fortunately I decided to emigrate to Japan, where there are many mountains high enough to lift us above the thick clouds of earth and the empty vaunts of men.

Yet even here the sunrise is not absolutely assured. As in England, there are many things to intervene between the bold, sleep-annihilating resolve and its accomplishment. But these are only mortal weaknesses. There is, however, one intervention against which no sunrise aspirant in England has yet been called to match his courage and resolution, and that is a volcanic eruption. So be it accounted to the greater glory of our sunrise that we achieved it despite the sulphurous antagonisms of the mountain itself.

It was during our summer holiday at Karuizawa. This place, owing to its height of 3,270 feet and comparative coolness, is the most popular summer resort among the foreign residents in Japan and also among the wealthier Japanese. It has many fine natural beauties, not least of which is the lofty volcanic mountain Asama-yama. There it stands, a few miles distant from Karuizawa as the crow flies, but almost three times the distance by which wingless bipeds are compelled to crawl, a comely mountain indeed, nearly 8,200 feet high. On the evening of our arrival we saw it against a bright sunset sky, glowing like a giant ruby amongst the tempered radiance of the lesser hills, and the black smoke waving from its summit like a majestic plume. For it is in a state of constant activity: but precisely because of the relentless regularity of its laborious days it is esteemed the less capable of any dangerous assertion. Even two or three violent eruptions, one of which, the other year, proved fatal to a foreign climber, have failed to terrify us; but so familiar and friendly is the vast cloud of smoke usually veiling its summit that the climbing of Mount Asama to see the sunrise is counted by the more energetic the pièce de resistance of a Karuizawa holiday.

Now it should be beyond all argument that to gain the fullest sense of glory from your mountainous enterprise you must eschew all such artful aids as horse-back or motor-car. Yet here in Japan, where almost everybody, including Americans who expect a car to take them anywhere, and even Englishmen who ought to know better, the tendency is to ask the minimum of activity from the legs God gave us to use. The only exceptions are the Japanese students, who have so little money that if they hadn't any legs they would be compelled to do it on their heads, and foreigners, like myself and my young son, who, true to the

traditions of English Lakeland, wear boots without spurs and prefer blistered heels to punctured tyres.

### Red-Hot Stones

And so we had our reward. For on the night of our enterprise Asama-yama suddenly broke out in one of the most violent eruptions of recent years. It happened just about an hour before the earliest non-pedestrian starters had dreamed of setting out, and consequently they did not go at all. But we two Englishmen, whose delight is in the legs of a man, had actually reached the lonely hut whence the actual ascent begins when a deafening noise like the battle-charge of the Titans struck our ears, and red-hot stones the size of walnuts began to assail the corrugated iron roof.

But this is the story of a sunrise, not a volcanic eruption. Therefore, even as the eruption failed to divert us from our enterprise, so it shall also fail to divert us from the recording thereof. Suffice it to say that, strengthened by one stray but loyal policeman, we twain took on the character of a search party for a company of Japanese students, who were half an hour ahead of us with the same objective and consequently that much nearer to danger.

We had flung down all our impedimenta of blankets, food, drink, and even our trusty staves, on the floor of the hut, and in the excitement of the moment forgot to retrieve them. But apart from the staves, without which the last stage of the ascent up the steep slopes of soft (and, on this occasion, burning hot) cinders was fraught with the acutest misery, we had no occasion to regret our forgetfulness. The students (whom we discovered quite safe under the cover of cloaks and ground-sheets, with a few stray scorchings like cigarette burns on hats and clothes) furnished us with refreshment, whilst the nearer we approached the smouldering summit of the volcano the less need there was for any aids to warmth.

Like Japanese lanterns, the stones still red-hot, glowed here and there on the mountain-side, whilst many small temporary volcanoes sent up pillars of smoke from holes where masses of lava had fallen. So hot were the highest reaches of the cone, and so sulphurous the air, that we could not quite approach the edge.

It was then almost 3 a.m. We descended the mountain until the slope could afford us a cool enough place on which to sit, and then, well over 7,000 feet above sea-level, waited for the sun to rise.

### A Beautiful Spectacle

With the first faint tinge of blue in the sky we found that we were sitting on the shores of a limitless sea of cloud that rolled and surged in an energy of stately silence. It was 'such a tide as moving seems asleep, too full for sound',<sup>2</sup> and the more to marvel at because of the great, changing waves of swelling foam. For a full hour my eyes feasted on the most beautiful sight they had ever seen. When at last the sun appeared it was as a crystal bow more radiant than any shining ruby, the glowing emergence of the life-blood of the universe, all crimson, and brimming to its diurnal overflow.

Soon the universal changed to the national, and we saw the round, red Rising Sun of the Japanese flag. Then a veil of cloudy foam arose to transform the actual sun into the silvery mirror that is the symbol of Amaterasu, the Sun-Goddess founder of Japan.

As though we ourselves had achieved the triumph of that new-created day we thought pityingly of those 'gentlemen in England [and Japan] now a-bed', who, when they heard our stammering lips unfold their tale of beauty, would 'think themselves accurst they were not here'.<sup>3</sup> Yet when we returned to earth and later arrived at our hotel we were surprised to find nobody the least bit interested in our sunrise. Instead, we received an almost a public reception, and figured in the newspapers, just because we had happened to get caught in the eruption and escape unharmed.

Not until twelve days later did we fully realise at what great risk we had attained our sunrise on Mount Asama. But then six unfortunate Japanese were overtaken in the neighbourhood of the crater by another eruption very like the one that surprised us in the hut; and all were killed.

This has tinged our sunrise with a cloud of melancholy. Yet it may be the last sunrise that man's eyes will see from Mount Asama for many a day, for it is said that the ascent will henceforth be officially prohibited. So we must treasure it the more.

#### NOTES

- 1, i.e. 'the sky is obscured by constant rain and cold' (Tacitus).
2. Lines from Tennyson's poem 'Crossing the bar'.
3. Lines from Shakespeare's *Henry V*.