JAPANESE NEW-YEAR DECORATIONS.

My brother, Mr. J. Cole Hartland, who is resident at Yokohama, has forwarded me the appended statement. In the letter enclosing it he writes:

"I enclose a short account of the Japanese New-Year Decorations, which was written out for me by Suguki, our compradore. I hope it may interest you. The first part is, I think, a translation from some Japanese book; but the second part is Suguki's own. Dr. Hepburn, in his Dictionary (the best published), gives a rather different account of the 'Shime.' He says it is 'the straw rope which Futodama-no-mikoto stretched behind the Sun-goddess to prevent her returning to the cave after Tajikarao-no-mikoto had pulled her out.' I have questioned Suguki as to this, but he sticks to it that the shime was merely a straw decoration hung about the rocks to excite the curiosity of the Sun-god and so tempt him out. I don't know which tale is the correct one. I don't think any interest is to be attached to the dates on which the decorations are taken down, because until very recently the Japanese kept the same New Year as the Chinese, and that is in February. Mikoto in the proper names is simply a title of honour equivalent to Lord."

I have left the paragraph added by Suguki to tell its own tale. The sense is perfectly clear, and the composition is not more rugged than might have been expected from a foreigner writing in an idiom as widely different from his own as English is from Japanese. There may be readers of the Journal who can throw further light upon the shime, and account for the variation between the two versions of the tradition. The paragraph which precedes Suguki's observations bears traces, hardly to be mistaken, of European origin; but I am unable to say whence it is derived.

E. Sidney Hartland.
PLANTS USED IN NEW-YEAR CELEBRATIONS BY THE JAPANESE.

The most striking feature of New-Year’s Day in Japan is the decoration placed with more or less completeness before every portal. Every object of which the decoration is composed has, as might be supposed, a symbolic meaning. Suppose a spectator to face the green arch—on his right will be a Me Matsu (Pinus densiflora) with its reddish stem, and on his left will be the black trunk of the Omatsu (Pinus Thunbergii, or Massoniana). Immediately behind the pines rises on each side the graceful stem of the bamboo, of which any kind that is convenient is selected. Its erect growth and succession of knots, marking its increase during succeeding seasons, render it symbol of hale life and a fulness of years. The distance of usually about six feet between the bamboos is spanned by a grass rope (Nawa). Although convenience obliges this rope to be sufficiently high to allow of passage beneath, it should, to accord with its symbolic meaning, debar all bad and unclean things from crossing the threshold. In the centre of arch thus formed of pines, bamboos, and rope is a group of several objects. The most conspicuous is the scarlet yebe, or lobster, whose crooked body betokens the back of the aged bent with the weight of years. The lobster is embowered amongst Yusuri branches. In this Yusuri (Melia Japonica), when the young leaves have budded, the old leaves yet remain unshed. So may the parents continue to flourish while children and grandchildren spring forth. In the centre also are the graceful fronds, the Urajiro (Polypodium dichotomum). This fern symbolises conjugal life, because the fronds spring in pairs from the stem. These uniform graceful leaves might suggest dangerous ideas of the equality of the sexes, but the simile has not in Japan been pushed to so desperate a length. Between the paired leaves nestles, as offspring, the little leaf-bud. Here and there are quaintly-cut scraps of white paper, the gohei, or offering to the gods; the form of the paper is said by some to be a conventionalised representation of a human form—that of the offerer—devoting himself thus in effigy to the deities. Almost as conspicuous as the lobster is the orange-coloured daidai, a fruit of the Citrus Bigaradia. The juice of the daidai is much prized as a remedy against vomiting. This is
interesting, because the juice of lemon, also an aurantiaceous plant, is often considered by Europeans a palliative for sea-sickness. The New Year arches are cut down in Tokyo on January 7th, and in some other places on January 3rd.

The explanation of "Shime," a rope which the writer calls "Nawa," lacks in the symbolic meaning—that is more important part of the arch than any other else; for the decoration, when abbreviated, is made only of a shime, to which Yuduri and Urajiro sometimes attached, that symbolises the protection of the house from devils. This shime seems in existence of custom from the time almost unknown, and the other plants are added a long after its existence. The tradition tells us the shime is first made with rice-straws to decorate the eaves of the rock in which Sun God concealed himself, to tempt him out with the dancing and music from the cave, so that he will throw the almighty light over the world again. Thus the shime is derived from the old tradition, as you see every temple of Shinto sect has a shime in the front or around the temple eaves all the year round.

NOTES AND QUERIES.

Mysterious Serenades, or Music and Invisible Musicians.—Mr. G——, a respectable Holderness farmer, resides in a mansion situated at a considerable distance from any other. He has been accustomed for several years, at intervals, to hear during the night the sounds of different musical instruments, which together produced a most delectable and harmonious concert. Two or three friends were taking their Christmas supper with him, when a domestic came to inform them that the musicians were at work in the garden. The party immediately sallied out, and, although they could perceive
nothing save trees loaded with snow, their ears were ravished with notes of music. The night was more than usually serene, the moon nearly at full, and yet, notwithstanding a minute search, not the slightest vestige of a human being could be discovered. The music was all this time continued, and, as far as they could judge, within a few paces of the place they occupied. The farmer and his friends are convinced that they are indebted to "fairies" for the entertainment they received; and as that part of the country was formerly, according to oral tradition, the theatre often selected by Queen Mab and her tiny followers to perform their mystic evolutions, and "Dance the Hay," they are induced to hope it is again fixed upon for the same purpose, and that times like those in which of yore the "Elgin train" con-descended to visit mortals are on the eve of returning.—Hull Packet.

**Early Witch Trials.**—The late Rev. James Raine, the learned historian of North Durham, published a little before his own death "A Memoir of the Rev. John Hodgson . . . . . author of the History of Northumberland," 2 vols. 8vo. 1857-1858. This work was a labour of love to its author. There is not so far as I know a more excellent life of a man of letters in our language. Hodgson was not only a local historian who holds a high place in the first rank, but also a man of very wide culture. The memoir therefore, as was to be expected, contains much valuable and curious information on subjects which the ordinary reader would not think of looking for in its pages. The geological information given is useful and as accurate as it could be, when we allow for the fact that the existence of "the great ice-sheet" was unthought of when Hodgson made his observations. There are also many facts about the safety-lamp which will be new to most readers. We have good reason to believe (and we say this sorrowfully) that the "Memoir" has been but little read, except by natives of Northumberland and the few students who take interest in local history. As this is the case, it may be well to transfer the following passages therefrom to the Folk-Lore Journal.

On the 4th of March, 1821, Hodgson, who was in London, writes to his wife telling her that her aunt Mrs. Burke had repeated to him the following stories: