

RAMBLES IN JAPAN

CHAPTER I

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

IMPRESSIONS are always heightened by contrast, and the first impressions of Japan, striking and enchanting as they must be in any case, were to me intensified by the startling contrast to the lands I had just left. As we stepped ashore in the lovely land-locked harbour of Nagasaki, and set foot on the little islet of Deshima, for two centuries and a half the only spot of Japanese ground which a European might tread, and those Europeans only half a dozen Dutchmen; and when one looked around on the harbour filled with shipping of every great nation in the world, and then on the sloping sides of the encircling rocky hills, dotted with fairy-like villas, peeping out amongst a labyrinth of semi-tropical trees, which overshadowed clumps of brilliant flowering shrubs, it was difficult to realise that only thirty-six hours before we had left the monotonous mud banks and the turbid waters of the Yang-tsze-kiang. It was a veritable transformation scene.

The land of China, like its people, strikes one as essentially unromantic, everything on a large scale,

dull and prosaic, matching the inhabitants, with many good qualities, solid, stolid, plodding, unimaginative—in short, a matter-of-fact, business land, nothing if not practical, but to a stranger's eye not much beyond. At once, after spending a day in the fogs of the Yellow Sea, we seemed to have stepped into fairyland; nothing grand, nothing magnificent, but everything in perfect harmony, a land of minute prettinesses. Well might my artist friend, who landed with me soon after sunrise, exclaim as we returned from our ramble through the streets: 'I should have come for six months instead of one, and brought a dozen sketch-books instead of two. Every step provides a new picture, every child in the street has an artist's eye. The little girls arrange their bouquets and sachets as though they were students of Ruskin; even the butchers' shops are decorated with vases and flowers, as though they were Regent Street repositories. Every woman looks bewitching, and the harmony of colours in a bright dress is a perfect study. Only one thing spoils the charm, the horrid intrusion of European slop tailors. While the porters and coolies attract one by their picturesque dress, fashion seems to demand from everyone who can afford it, that he should assume European hard hat, misfitting coat and trousers, and cotton gloves with elongated fingers. If the women are charming, the men look thorough little snobs.' I must endorse my friend's criticism, even though there be plain women in Japan as elsewhere.

Seaport towns, though generally the first

specimens that the traveller sees of a new country, are not necessarily the truest or most attractive representatives of their country. No exception can be taken to Nagasaki as an illustration of Southern Japan. For the capacity of its roadstead, it may well rank among the great harbours of the world. The entrance is somewhat intricate, but when once entered under the anchorage, we seemed to be in a land-locked lake surrounded by villas. Looking across the harbour, I was at once reminded of the Bay of Naples; I could have imagined myself gazing at Sorrento on a summer morning. But our minuter inspection soon revealed a difference: the general outlines might be similar, but there was a finish, an exquisite variety, an absence of whitewash and long stone walls, an adjusting and harmonising of every detail with its surroundings, which presented as fine an illustration of art concealing art as can be seen anywhere in the world. Every tree seemed placed as if it were a necessity where it grew, and where its absence must cause a disfiguring gap; the very shape of even the largest trees was guided by art which Japanese understand so well, for trees, like children, are there trained from their youth up: whilst the houses seem to suggest that they are a natural upgrowth from the rocks on which they stand.

Various little islets dot the inlet. I have mentioned the most historically celebrated, Deshima, the prison factory of the Dutch, where, since the expulsion of the Jesuits in the beginning of the seventeenth century, two Dutch ships a year were allowed to

discharge and take in cargo, while the residents in the factory were never allowed to leave it. The islet is now united to the mainland by a causeway, and might be supposed by a stranger to be merely a continuation of the wharf. Near the farther end of the bay a lofty island cliff rises out of the water, the Tarpeian Rock of Japanese history, whence, according to the received tradition, many hundred native Christians, who refused to abjure their faith, were hurled into the depths beneath. The calm beauty of the scene to-day is indeed in strange contrast with its dark traditions.

Nagasaki, though one of the smallest cities of the first rank in Japan, yet from its situation and associations was selected as one of the treaty ports, open to Europeans, and is a most convenient trading port for the Southern Island of Kiushiu. It has not, however, increased in importance except as a mail station, the local trade being carried on at other ports. It has not a large European population, but it is the centre of the Church Missionary Society operations in the Southern Island, which has now at length a missionary bishop of its own. There is a rather handsome English church outside the city, and native churches within, as well as extensive schools.

The most important national establishment here is a medical college, the only one in the island, which bears very high reputation, and the professors in which are chiefly Europeans of scientific distinction. In fact, in nothing has Japan advanced more rapidly than in medical education, in which she is already in

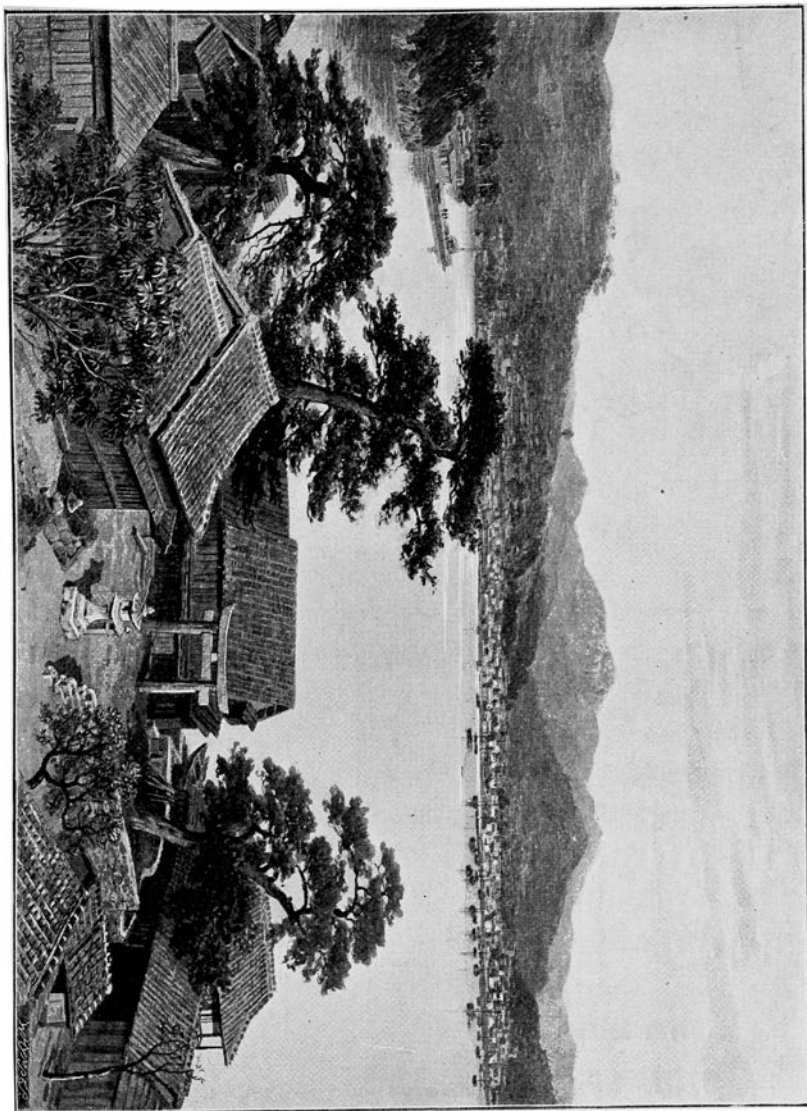
Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-04585-8 - Rambles in Japan: The Land of the Rising Sun

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Excerpt

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Cambridge University Press

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advance of some European countries. About thirty of the students at the time of my visit were Christians connected with the Church Missionary Society. They held a devotional meeting once a week in a native church for students alone, and had also one night for open discussion on Buddhism and Christianity, at which I happened to be present, and which was largely attended. The discussion was earnest and animated, though of course I could not understand a word.

It must be remembered that the island of Kiushiu presents many points of contrast to the other islands, both in climate, products, and character of the inhabitants. We are rather apt to forget the great variety there is in Japan on these points. With an area one-tenth larger than the British Isles, and the population larger in exactly the same proportion—forty-four millions to forty—the four main islands of Japan stretch slantways through sixteen degrees of latitude and twenty degrees of longitude. But, owing to its formation and number of islands, it possesses a coast-line more than double the extent of that of the British Isles. Like them, it enjoys the advantages of the warm equatorial current representing in the Pacific our own Gulf Stream.

In the variety of its natural products it vastly surpasses our own island group. In Yezo, the Northern Island, the hill-tops are the resort of the ptarmigan, identical with the bird of the Scottish Highlands; and the pine forests below are the home of the hazel hen, so familiar in the Swedish dahls. The great Central Island of Nippon (a name strangely

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corrupted into *Japan* by some of the earlier navigators) presents us with the varied produce of Northern and Central Europe, until in Kiushiu we have all the semi-tropical luxuriance of Andalusia and Southern Italy, and of even still more tropical climes. The traveller amongst the Ainos of the north may gather his bouquets of the lily of the valley and various Alpine acquaintances; whilst the wanderer amongst the villages of Satsuma in the south rests in the orange groves under the shade of the palm, lulled by the swish of the never-resting banana-leaves.¹ But as the British home possessions extend to the Shetlands northwards, and to the Channel Islands in the south, so the empire of Japan in the Kurile Islands possesses a continuation of insular territory to almost Arctic limits; while in the south the archipelago of the Loochoos, connected as they are with Kiushiu by an unbroken chain of islets, and beyond these again the Majico Sima group, close to Formosa, bring the island empire to the edge of the tropics, while the acquisition of the latter has brought it well within them.

The Japanese writers therefore may fairly claim that their empire stretches across the Temperate zone. Young Japan delights to talk of 'the Britain of the Pacific,' and considering the very good opinion these charming people had of themselves, even before the war of 1894, we ought to take this as a great compliment. And no doubt, with their vast seaboard, countless harbours, and inexhaustible sea fisheries,

¹ The banana lives, but does not bear fruit in Kiushiu.

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they are a nation of born sailors, unapproached by any other Eastern nation. A Chinaman behaves well on the water so long as he has not to fight; a Japanese fisherman—and that is half the nation—is at home there. The fishing industry is perhaps quite as important to Japan as the raising of cereals; for, until recently, fish was the only animal food ever tasted by the people, and still is exclusively so except in European settlements. But I shall have much to say on this subject hereafter.

Long before the war with China, popular writers in Japan had set their heart upon the acquisition of Formosa, which can be easily understood on studying the map, and bearing in mind their maritime aspirations. In a book in my possession, written and printed in the English language at Tokio, the writer urges the importance of England securing Formosa at the earliest opportunity, as being the only security against the designs of Russia, who, the writer assumed, was prepared to absorb that island as well as Corea unless forestalled by England.

But it is not only in fisheries, it is also in mineral wealth, that Japan holds a position of pre-eminence which may be compared to that of Spain in Europe. The coal-fields, both in the south and north, are inexhaustible, and have scarcely been tapped. Even though very slightly developed, the yield of her copper-mines, after being worked for ages, far exceeds the demand, and there is reason to believe that the mineral deposits are equally rich in every department. Silver, it is said, used to be comparatively the scarcest

of the metals, while gold was abundant, and stories are rife of the enormous fortunes made by American speculators at the first opening of Japan, between 1854 and 1868, who bought gold in the interior for twice its weight in silver. It would require, however, a very cute speculator to-day to make a profit out of a Japanese bullion dealer.

But enough of this preliminary digression. The detention of the steamer for coaling gave me the opportunity, which I did not miss, of visiting the outskirts of Nagasaki, as well as examining the beautiful manufacture of tortoiseshell articles, one of the staples of the place, and which in delicacy and minuteness of workmanship far surpasses the skill of Naples.

The coaling was carried on in very primitive fashion. The indigenous product (for the coal-mines are on an island at the other end of the bay, where they are worked by drifts run into the sides of the cliff) is passed from the barges in small baskets, head over head, by long lines of women and lads, chiefly the former, up the sides of the ship, and into the bunkers, while the empty mat baskets are passed back with equal rapidity by a parallel line of workers.

I was told that bunker coal at that time could be put on board for little more than a dollar a ton. Now, I believe, the price is very much higher, owing to the increased demand caused by the repeated strikes in England, and which have already led, throughout the whole of the Pacific ports, to the