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Ernest Satow

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

APPOINTMENT AS STUDENT INTERPRETER AT YEDO (1861)

MY thoughts were first drawn to Japan by a mere accident. In my eighteenth year an elder brother brought home from Mudie's Library the interesting account of Lord Elgin's Mission to China and Japan by Lawrence Oliphant, and the book having fallen to me in turn, inflamed my imagination with pictures verbal and coloured of a country where the sky was always blue, where the sun shone perpetually, and where the whole duty of man seemed to consist in lying on a matted floor with the windows open to the ground towards a miniature rockwork garden, in the company of rosy-lipped black-eyed and attentive damsels—in short, a realised fairyland. But that I should ever have a chance of seeing these Isles of the Blest was beyond my wildest dreams. An account of Commodore Perry's expedition, which had preceded Lord Elgin's Mission, came in my way shortly afterwards, and though much more sober in its outward appearance and literary style, only served to confirm the previous impression. I thought of nothing else from that time onwards. One day, on entering the library of University College, London, where I was then studying, I found lying on the table a notice that three nominations to student-interpreterships in China and Japan had been placed at the disposition of the Dean. Here was the chance for which I had been longing. Permission to enter myself for the competition was obtained, not without difficulty, from my parents, and having gained the first place in the public examination, I chose Japan. To China I never wished or intended to go. My age was sufficient by a few hours to enable me to compete. I was formally appointed in August 1861, and quitted England full of joyful anticipation in November of that year.

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Owing to the prevalence of a belief among those who then had the direction of our affairs in Japan that a knowledge of Chinese was a necessary preliminary to the study of Japanese, my fellow-student, R. A. Jamieson, and myself were at first stationed for a few months at Peking, where we were joined early in 1862 by Russell Robertson, who also belonged to the Japan establishment. I pass over our sojourn there, which, though not without its own interest, was not long enough for me to gain any useful knowledge of China. But I learnt a few hundred Chinese characters which were of great help to me afterwards, and I even began the study of Manchu.

Our stay at the Chinese capital was suddenly cut short by the arrival of a despatch from Yedo, containing the original text of a Note from the Japanese Ministers, which it was found no Chinaman could decipher, much less understand. This was decisive of the question whether the short cut to Japanese lay through the Chinese language. I thought then, and still think, that though an acquaintance with Chinese characters may be found useful by the student of Japanese, it is no more indispensable than that of Latin is to a person who wishes to acquire Italian or Spanish. We were consequently bundled off to Japan with the least possible delay.

Of the eight students belonging to the China establishment then at Peking, three only are still (1885) in the service—H. J. Allen, C. T. Gardner, and W. G. Stronach, each of whom attained the rank of consul in 1877. They had all passed the examination at the same time as myself. The man who came out second was “allowed to resign” in 1867, three are dead, and one, the best man of the whole set, and who oddly enough was last or last but one in the examination list, passed in 1872 into the Chinese Customs Service, in which he now holds one of the highest appointments. So unequal are the results obtained by even limited competitive examination. When the competition was afterwards thrown open to the public, the results became even more uncertain, as later experience has shown, at least in Japan, and perhaps elsewhere.

The great fault of the system is that it takes no account of moral qualities. Whether a candidate has the manners or feelings of a gentleman cannot be ascertained from the way in which he will reproduce a proposition of Euclid or translate a passage from a Greek author. It does not test the intellec-

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tual powers, for a stupid young man who has been properly coached will almost always beat the real student who has not got the right "tips." Nowadays, every candidate for a public examination goes to a crammer, who trains him in a few months for the contest, and enables him to bring forth forced fruit for a moment. Show me a successful examinee, and I will show you a well-coached candidate. In the majority of cases the process disgusts the man who has undergone it, and takes away any inclination he may previously have had for study. And without serious study it is not possible to acquire such languages as Chinese, Siamese or Japanese. The scheme of examination is no test of the linguistic capabilities of the men, and sometimes sends into the service those who can no more learn to speak a foreign language than they can fly. My own success in the examination was due to my having left school more recently than any of the other competitors.

While I was at Peking the whole body of students was invited to dine one evening with the Bishop of Victoria, who was stopping at the Legation in the absence of Mr Bruce, the Minister. The conversation fell upon the effects of Chinese studies on the intellectual powers, and the Bishop inquired of us whether we did not find that the mind was weakened by close application to such a dry, unproductive form of learning. At least, his own experience had been to that effect. This was a curious admission to make, but the matter of his conversation certainly corroborated it. I do not think any of us was candid enough to confess to a similar result in his own case.

I should like to dwell longer on our life in Peking—the rides in the early morning over the plain on the north of the city, excursions to the ruins of the Summer Palace, beautiful still in its desolation, the monasteries among the blue mountains west of the city, the magnificent temples inside and outside the walls, the dirt and dust of the streets in wet or fine weather, the pink lotus blossoms on the lake of the marble bridge, the beggars with their cry of *K'olien, k'olien, shang i-ko ta*, the bazaar outside the Ch'ien Men Gate, with its attractive shops, the Temple of Heaven, the view of yellow, brown and green-tiled roofs embosomed in trees as one saw them from the city wall, the carts bumping over the stone pavements worn into deep ruts, the strange Eastern life that surrounded a band of boys fresh from school or

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college or their mothers' apron-strings, and the splendour of the newly restored buildings of the Liang Kung Fu, occupied by the British Legation—which will never be effaced from my memory: but there is no time. Mr, afterwards Sir Frederick, Bruce was then our Minister there, a tall man of about fifty, with a noble forehead and brown eyes, grey beard, whiskers and moustache; altogether a beautiful appearance. The Chinese Secretary was Mr, afterwards Sir Thomas, Wade, a great Chinese scholar, to whom we looked up with awe, and who was said to be of an irascible temper. A story was told of his visiting the Chinese Ministers with the chief, and waxing very warm in argument. The president of the Ts'ung-li Ya-mên remarked: "But, Mr Wade, I do not observe that Mr Bruce is so angry." "D'ye hear that, Mr Bruce, they say you're not angry." Whereupon Mr Bruce, with a benevolent smile and with the most good-tempered expression in the world, replied: "Oh, tell them I'm in a deuce of a rage."

We, that is to say Jamieson, Robertson and myself, got away early on the morning of August 6, arriving that evening at Ho-si-wu, a town on the way, and reached Tientsin next day. Thence we took boat to Taku, where we passed some days under the hospitable roof of the Vice-Consul Gibson. He was later on transferred to a post in Formosa, where he got into difficulties with the Chinese officials and called on the commander of a gunboat to bombard the Custom House, for which he was smartly reprimanded by the Foreign Office. Shortly afterwards he died, it was said, of a broken heart. This happened in the days when the so-called "gun-boat" policy was no longer in favour, and poor Gibson fell a victim to his excess of zeal.

At Shanghai Jamieson left us, to start a newspaper on terms which promised him a better future than the Consular service could offer. Robertson and I embarked in the steamer *Lancefield*, and started for Japan on September 2. The first land we sighted after leaving the coast of China was Iwô Shima, a volcanic island to the south of Kiû-shiû, and on the 7th we found ourselves close to Cape Idzu in a fog. Luckily it lifted for a moment, and the captain, who was new to the coast, ordered the ship to be put about, and we ran down among the islands. Next morning early we were steaming over the blue waves east of Vries Island, passed the serrated wooded range of Nokogiri yama on our right and the

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tiny inlet of Uruga to our left, and stood across the broad bay towards Yokohama. It was one of those brilliant days that are so characteristic of Japan, and as we made our way up the bay of Yedo, I thought no scenery in the world could surpass it. Irregular-shaped hills, covered with dark-green trees, lined the whole southern coast, and above them rose into the air for 12,000 feet and more the magnificent cone of Fuji, with scarcely a patch of snow visible. The noble ranges of Oyama and others bounded the plain on its western side, while by way of contrast, a low-lying sandy coast trended rapidly away on our right, and speedily sank below the horizon in the direction of the capital.

Curious duck-shaped boats of pure unpainted wood, carrying a large four-square sail formed of narrow strips of canvas loosely tacked together, crowded the surface of the sparkling waters. Now and then we passed near enough to note the sunburnt, copper-coloured skins of the fishermen, naked, with the exception of a white cloth round the loins, and sometimes a blue rag tied across the nose, so that you could just see his eyes and chin. At last the white cliffs of Mississippi Bay became closer and more distinct: we rounded Treaty Point and dropped anchor on the outer edge of the shipping. After the lapse of more than a year I had at last attained my cherished object.

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CHAPTER II

YOKOHAMA SOCIETY, OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL (1862)

THREE years had now elapsed since the opening of the country to foreign trade in consequence of the Treaties of 1858, and a considerable number of merchants had settled at the ports of Nagasaki and Yokohama. Hakodaté, however, offered then, as now, few attractions to mercantile enterprise, and being far removed from the political centre, shared very slightly in the uneasy feeling which prevailed elsewhere. At Nagasaki most of the territorial nobles of Western Japan had establishments whither they sent for sale the rice and other produce received in payment of tribute from the peasants, and their retainers came into frequent contact with foreigners, whose houses they visited for the purchase of arms, gunpowder and steamers. Some sort of friendly feeling thus sprang up, which was increased by the American missionaries who gave instruction in English to younger members of this class, and imparted to them liberal ideas which had no small influence on the subsequent course of events. At Yokohama, however, the foreign merchants had chiefly to do with a class of adventurers, destitute of capital and ignorant of commerce. Broken contracts and fraud were by no means uncommon. Foreigners made large advances to men of straw for the purchase of merchandise which was never delivered, or ordered manufactures from home on the account of men who, if the market fell, refused to accept the goods that would now bring them in only a loss. Raw silk was adulterated with sand or fastened with heavy paper ties, and every separate skein had to be carefully inspected before payment, while the tea could not be trusted to be as good as the sample. Now and then a Japanese dealer would get paid out in kind, but the balance of wrong-doing was greatly against the native, and the conviction that Japanese was a synonym for dishonest trader became so firmly seated in

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the minds of foreigners that it was impossible for any friendly feeling to exist.

The Custom House officials were in the highest degree corrupt, and demanded ever-increasing bribes from the foreigners who sought to elude the import duties. One of the worst abuses was the importation of large quantities of wines, beer, spirits and stores, for which exemption from the payment of duty was claimed as goods intended for "personal use."

The local administration was carried on by a large staff of officials established at the Custom House. There were two Bugiô, or Governors; two Kumi-gashira, or Vice-Governors; two Metsuké, whose function was that of keeping an eye on the doings of the others; a number of Shirabé-yaku, or Directors; and Jô-yaku, or chief clerks, besides a host of scribes, interpreters, tidewaiters and policemen, in black or green robes. Dutch was the common medium of communication both orally and in writing, for English was as yet scarcely studied by the natives, and the foreigners who could speak Japanese might be counted on the fingers of one hand. Yet all knew a little. A sort of bastard language had been invented for the uses of trade, in which the Malay words *peggi* and *sarampan* played a great part, and with the addition of *anata* and *arimasu* every one fancied himself competent to settle the terms of a complicated transaction. In this new tongue all the rich variety of Japanese speech, by which the relative social position of the speakers is indicated, and the intricate inflexion of the verbs, were conspicuous by their absence. Outside the settlements it was of course not understood, and its use by Europeans must have contributed not a little to the contempt for the "barbarian" which was characteristic of the native attitude towards foreigners.

By virtue of the treaties Kanagawa had been at first fixed upon for the residence of Europeans, but, lying on the Tôkaidô, or principal highway between Yedo and Kiôto, it was only too well calculated to afford occasion for collision between the armed followers of the Japanese nobles and the foreign settlers. Early in the day the Tycoon's government sought to avoid this difficulty by erecting a Custom House and rows of wooden bungalows at the fishing village of Yokohama, across the shallow bay to the south. Some of the foreign representatives, more intent upon enforcing Treaty

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provisions than desirous of meeting the convenience of the native officials and the European merchants, strongly opposed this arrangement, but the practical advantages of proximity to the anchorage and personal security won the favour of the merchants, and Yokohama became recognised as the port. Long after, and perhaps to this day, the foreign consuls continued to date their official reports from Kanagawa, though they were safely ensconced at the rival site, where a town of 100,000 inhabitants now exists, and curious stories are told of the difference in freight that used to be earned on goods shipped from Europe to Yokohama or Kanagawa as the case might be.

The foreign settlement, for greater security, was surrounded on the land side by wide canals, across which bridges were thrown, while ingress and egress were controlled by strong guards of soldiers placed there with the double object of excluding dangerous characters and levying a tax on the supplies introduced from the surrounding country. At first land was given away freely to all applicants, some of whom were employés of the different consulates. These latter afterwards sold their lots to new arrivals bent upon commercial pursuits, and thus pocketed gains to which they had no shadow of a right. When further additions were afterwards made to the "settlement," precautions were taken which effectually prevented any one, whether merchant or official, from obtaining land without paying an adequate price. Later on, title-deeds were made out, by which the ground was conveyed to the holders, their heirs, administrators, executors and assigns, thus creating a form of property new to English experience, which purported to be at once real and personal. Streets were laid out with but little thought of the general convenience, and slight provision for the future. The day of wheeled carriages had not dawned upon Japan. It was sufficient if space were left for handcarts, and the most important Japanese commercial town of the future was thus condemned in perpetuity to inconveniences of traffic, the like of which can be best appreciated by those who knew the central parts of business London fifty years ago, or the successive capitals of the Italian kingdom when they were raised to that rank. Architectural ambition at first was contented with simple wooden bungalows, and in the latter part of 1862 there were not more than half a dozen two-storied buildings in the foreign portion of the town.