A Japanese Boy

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CHAPTER I.

I was born in a small seaport town called Imabari, which is situated on the western coast of the island of Shikoku, the eastern of the two islands lying south of Hondo. The Imabari harbor is a miserable ditch; at low tide the mouth shows its shallow bottom, and one can wade across. People go there for clam-digging. Two or three little streams empty their waters into the harbor. A few junks and a number of boats are always seen standing in this pool of salt-water. In the houses surrounding it, mostly very old and ramshackle, are sold eatables and provisions, fishes are bought from the boats, or shelter is given to sailors. When a junk comes in laden with rice, commission merchants get on board and strike for bargains. The capacity of the vessel is measured by the amount of rice it can carry. The grain merchant carries about him a good-sized bamboo a few inches long, one end of which is sharpened and the other closed, being cut just at a joint. He thrusts the pointed end into bags of the rice. The bags are rice-straw, knitted together roughly into the shape of barrels. Having taken out samples in the hollow inside of the bamboo stick, the merchant first examines critically the physical qualities of the grains on the palm of his hand, and then proceeds to chew them in order to see how they taste. Years of practice enable him to state, after such simple tests, precisely what section of the country the article in question came from, although the captain of the vessel may claim to have shipped it from a famous rice-producing province.

About the harbor are coolies waiting for work. They are strong, muscular men, thinly clad, with easy straw sandals on. Putting a little cushion on the left shoulder, a coolie rests the rice-bag upon it and walks away from the ship to a

store-house; his left hand passed around the burden and his right holding a short, stout, beak-like, iron hook fastened in the bag. In idle moments the coolies get together and indulge in tests of strength, lifting heavy weights, etc.

At a short distance to the right from the entrance of the harbor is a sanitarium. It is a huge, artificial cave, built of stone and mortar and heated by burning wood-fires in the inside. After it is sufficiently warmed the fire is extinguished, the smoke-escape shut, and the oven is ready for use. Invalids flock in with wet mats, which they use in sitting on the scalding rocky floor of the oven. Lifting the mat that hangs like a curtain at the entrance, they plunge into the suffocating hot air and remain there some time and emerge again into daylight, fairly roasted and smothered. Then they speedily make for the sea and bathe in it. This process of alternate heating and cooling is repeated several times a day. It is to cook out, as it were, diseases from the body. For some constitutions the first breath of the oven immediately after the warming is considered best, for others the mild warmth of later hours is thought more commendable. I, for myself, who have accompanied my mother and gone through the torture, do not like either very much. The health-seekers rent rooms in a few large cottages standing near by. In fact, they live out of town, free from business and domestic cares, pass time at games, or saunter and breathe pure air under pine-trees in the neighborhood. The establishment is opened only during summer time. A person ought to get well in whiling away in free air those glorious summer days without the aid of the roasting scheme.

To the left of the harbor along the shore stands the main body of Imabari. Mt. Myozin heaves in sight long before anything of the town can be seen. It is not remarkable as a mountain, but being so near my town, whenever I have espied it on my return I have felt at home. I can remember its precise outline. As we draw nearer, white-plastered

warehouses, the sea-god's shrine jutting out into the water, and the castle stone walls come in our view. You observe no church-steeple, that pointed object so characteristically indicative of a city at a distance in the Christian community. To be sure, the pagoda towers toward the sky in the community of Buddhists; but it is more elaborate and costly a thing than the steeple, and Imabari is too poor to have one.

Facing the town, in the sea, rises a mountainous island; it encloses with the neighboring islets the Imabari sound. A report goes that on this island lies a gigantic stone, apparently immovable by human agency, so situated that a child can rock it with one hand. Also that a monster of a tortoise, centuries old, floats up occasionally from an immeasurable abyss near the island to sun itself; and those who had seen it thought it was an island.

Very picturesque if viewed from the sea but painfully poverty-stricken to the sight when near, is a quarter closely adjoining Imabari on the north. It is on the shore and entirely made up of fisher-men's homes. The picturesque, straw-thatched cottages stand under tall, knotty pine-trees and send up thin curls of smoke. Their occupants are, however, untidy, careless, ignorant, dirty; the squalid children let loose everywhere in ragged dress, bareheaded and barefooted. The men, naked all summer and copper-colored, go fishing for days at a time in their boats; the women sell the fishes in the streets of Imabari. A fisher-woman carries her fishes in a large, shallow, wooden tub that rests on her head; she also carries on her breast a babe that cannot be left at home.

Imabari has about a dozen streets. They are narrow, dirty, and have no sidewalks; man and beast walk the same path. As no carriages and wagons rush by, it is perfectly safe for one to saunter along the streets half asleep. The first thing I noticed upon my landing in New York was, that in America a man had to look out every minute for his

personal safety. From time to time I was collared by the captain who had charge of me with, "Here, boy!" and I frequently found great truck horses or an express wagon almost upon me. In crossing the streets, horse-cars surprised me more than once in a way I did not like, and the thundering engine on the Manhattan road caused me to crouch involuntarily. Imabari is quite a different place; all is peace and quiet there. In one section of the town blacksmiths reside exclusively, making the street black with coal dust. In another granite workers predominate, rendering the street white with fine stone chips. On Temple street, you remark temples of different Buddhist denominations, standing side by side in good fellowship; and in Fishmongers' alley all the houses have fish-stalls, and are filled with the odor of fish. The Japanese do not keep house in one place and store in another; they live in their stores. Neither do we have that singular system of boarding houses. Our people have homes of their own, however poor.

My family lived on the main street, which is divided into four subdivisions or "blocks." The second block is the commercial centre, so to speak, of the town, and there my father kept a store. My grandfather, I understood, resided in another street before he moved with his son-in-law, my father, to the main street. He lived to the great age of eighty: I shall always remember him with honor and respect. Of my grandmother I know absolutely nothing, she having passed away before I was born.

It is customary in Japan that a man too old for business and whose head is white with the effect of many weary winters, should retire and hibernate in a quiet chamber, or in a cottage called inkyo (hiding place), and be waited upon by his eldest son or son-in-law who succeeds him in business. My good grandfather—his kindly face and pleasant words come back to me this moment—lived in a nice little house in the rear of my father's. Although strong in mind he was

bent with age and went about with the help of a bamboo cane. He lived alone, had little to do, but read a great deal, and thought much, and when tired did some light manual work. It was a great pleasure for me to visit him often. In cold winter days he would be found sitting by kotatsu, a native heating apparatus. It is constructed on the following plan: a hole a foot square is cut in the centre of the matted floor, wherein a stone vessel is fitted, and a frame of wood about a foot high laid on it so as to protect the quilt that is to be spread over it, from burning. The vessel is filled with ashes, and a charcoal fire is burned in it. I used to take my position near my grandfather, with my hands and feet beneath the quilt, and ask him to tell stories. My feet were either bare or in a pair of socks, for before getting on the floor we leave our shoes in the yard. Our shoes, by the way, are more like the ancient Jewish sandals than the modern leather shoes.

In this little house of my grandfather's I erected my own private shrine of Tenjinsan, the god of penmanship. The Japanese and the Chinese value highly a skilful hand at writing; a famous scroll-writer gets a large sum of money with a few strokes of his brush; he is looked up to like a celebrated painter. We school-boys occasionally proposed penmanship contests. On the same sheet of paper each of us wrote, one beside another, his favorite character, or did his best at one character we had mutually agreed upon, and took it to our teacher to decide upon the finest hand. The best specimens of a school are sometimes framed and hung on the walls of a public temple of Tenjin. He is worshiped by all school-boys, and I also followed the fashion. My image of him was made of clay; I laid it on a shelf and offered saké (rice-wine) in two tiny earthen bottles, lighted a little lamp every night and put up prayers in childish zeal. The family rejoiced at my devotion; they finally bought me, one holiday, a miniature toy temple. It was painted in gay colors; I was delighted with it beyond

expression, and my devotion increased tenfold.

CHAPTER II.

The earliest recollection I have of my school life is my entrance with a number of playmates into a private gentleman's school. At that time the common school system which now exists in Japan had not been adopted; some gentlemen of the town kept private schools, in which exercises consisted mainly of penmanship; for arithmetic we had to go somewhere else. In Imabari there lived a keen-eyed little man who was wonderfully quick at figures, and to him we repaired for instruction in mathematics. We worked, not with slate and pencil, but with a rectangular wooden frame set with beads, resembling an abacus. It is called soroban; you find it in every store in Japan. I like it better than slate and pencil, for the fundamental operations of arithmetic, but cannot use it in higher mathematics. I remember seeing a young man of my acquaintance perform algebraic calculations, of which we had some knowledge before the influx of Western learning, with a number of little black and white blocks called the "mathematical blocks." A knowledge of penmanship and arithmetic is all that is required of a man of business, but a learned man is expected to read Chinese.

My schoolmaster was a kind of priest, not of Buddhism nor of Shintoism, but one of those who go by the name of Yamabushi; he let his hair grow instead of shaving it off as the Buddhist priest does, wore high clogs and the peculiar robe of his religion. He simply followed his father in the vocation; he was a young man of high promise and manifested more ardor in letters than at the prayers for the sick or for the prosperity of the people. His house was on the fourth block of the main street, set back a little from the street and with an open yard between the tall, elaborate gate and the mansion. The front of the residence