The Children of Japan

IN MY last letter I spoke of the sense of duty which gave to the Japanese people a great self-constraint, but no joyful and free expansion. I must make an exception to this rule and this exception is in favour of the children.

We could quite well call Japan the paradise of children — in no other country have I seen them so free and so happy. After months of residence in Japan I have yet never seen a child beaten by a grown-up person. They are treated as if all the parents were conscious that the children are the promise and the glory of the future. And a wonderful thing is that, environed by so much attention, so much care,—indeed, such a devotion, they are the most reasonable, good and serious children I have ever met. When they are babies, tied up in an amusing fashion on their mothers’ backs, with their wide open black eyes they seem to consider life with gravity and to have already opinions on the things they look at. You scarcely hear a child cry. When, for instance, he has hurt himself and the tears burst out of his eyes, the mother or the father has but to say a few words in a low voice, and the sorrow seems to be swept away. What are those magic words which enable children to be so reasonable? Very simple indeed: “Are you not a Samurai?” And this question is sufficient for the child to call to him all his energy and to overcome his weakness.

In the streets you see hundreds of children, in their charming bright “kimono”, playing freely, in spite of the “kuruma” and the bicycles, at the most inventive and picturesque games, pleased with little, singing and laughing.

When older, but still very young, you may see them in the

1 “Impressions of Japan”.
2 Traditional wide-sleeved gown.
3 A word applied to many vehicles, here probably a carriage or a rickshaw.
tram cars, dressed with foreign clothes, the student cap on the head, the knapsack on the back, proud of their importance, still prouder at the idea of all they are learning and will learn. For they love their studies and are the most earnest students. They never miss an opportunity of adding something to their growing knowledge; and when the work for the school leaves them some liberty they occupy it in reading books. The young Japanese seem to have a real passion for books. In Tokyo one of the main streets is nearly entirely occupied by secondhand book-sellers. From the beginning to the end of the year these shops are full of students, and it is not often novels they are seeking for!

They are, as a rule, very anxious to learn foreign languages and when they come to meet foreigners, though they are in general very timid, they make use of that acquaintance as much as they can to...4

A country where such are the children and so they are treated is a country still ascending the steps of progress and of mastery.

4 This sentence was left incomplete.