THE FIRST BOOKS OF A JAPANESE CHILD

BY ETSU INAGAKI SUGIMOTO

One of my pleasantest first recollections connected with books is of a day when my father returned from a journey to Tokyo with gifts for all the family. I can see my mother's face now, and hear her gentle voice as she said:

"Daughters, are you all ready to greet the honorable father? It was well, Suiko, to put on the stork hairpin of congratulation for the welcome. Oh, careless Tachiko, the white on your face is too thin. Only tea-house girls powder to look natural. And your pale lips are ill luck. Hasten to your nurse and tell her to dress your face properly. Haruko, it is not graceful to laugh unsuppressed. You will have to learn more repose of manner. And little Etsu—oh, my daughter, again you must have Ishi fasten back those ugly, curly strands of hair."

And when at last we were together again, all sitting in a prim row on the matting, she gravely admonished us to cultivate the proper spirit of dignity and subdued joy for the honorable welcome. Of course we were only too glad to obey carefully every instruction, for oh, how important those homecomings were to us children!

My father was one of the conservative type of *Samurai* who buried all political ambition with the fall of feudalism. Retiring to an estate which he turned into a very *un*paying farm, tilled mostly by his old, faithful and wholly inexperienced retainers, he devoted his life to reading, to memories and to introducing unwelcome ideas of progressive reform to his neighbors.

Although my father prided himself on having leveled his rank to the class of farmer, he retained one extravagance which was unlike ordinary farmers. The formal, every-two-year journey to the Capital, which before the Restoration, law had required of men of his position, was now merged into an informal annual trip which he laughingly called "the Window toward Growing Days". The name was most appropriate, for these trips of my father gave his whole household a distant view of progressing Japan. Besides the wonderful word pictures, he also brought us gifts of strange, unknown things—trinkets for the servants, toys for the children, useful home articles for mother, and often rare imported things for the much honored grandmother.

I being the youngest, and the favorite of my father, generally fared the best of all. Perhaps it was because of this that I was always the most impatient one of the waiting group. I vividly remember even now —though three decades have passed since then—how on this particular day I watched the slow-lengthening shadows of the garden trees. I had placed my high, wooden clogs on a stepping-stone just at the edge of the longest shadow, and as the sun crept farther I moved them from stone to stone, following the sunshine. I think I must have had a vague feeling that I could thus hasten the slanting shadow into the long straight

line which would mean sunset—and my mother had said that father would arrive at "the close of day".

At last—at last—and before the shadow had quite straightened, I hurriedly snatched up the clogs and clattered across the stones, for I had heard the jinrikisha man's cry of "Okaeri!" just outside the gate. I could scarcely bear my joy, and I have a bit of guilt in my heart yet when I recall how crookedly I pushed those clogs into the neat box of shelves in the "shoe-off" alcove of the vestibule.

The next moment the men, perspiring and laughing, came trotting up to the door where we, servants and all, were gathered, our heads bowed to the floor, all in a quiver of excitement and delight, but of course everybody gravely saying the proper words of greeting. Then, my duty done, I was caught up in my father's arms and we went to honorable grandmother, who was the only one of the household who might wait in her room for the coming of the master of the house.

That day was one of the "memory stones" of my life, for among all the wonderful and beautiful things which were taken from the willow-wood boxes straddled over the shoulders of the servants was a set of books for me. I can see them now. Ten small volumes of tough Japanese paper, tied together with silk cord, and marked, "Tales of the Western Seas". They were translations, compiled from various sources, and only recently published by one of the progressive book houses of Tokyo. There were extracts from "Peter Parley's World History", "National Reader", "Wilson's Readers" and probably other books that would be familiar to me now if I could remember.

The charm of delight that rare things give came to me during days and weeks—even months and years—from those books. I can recite whole pages of them now. There was a most interesting story of Christopher Columbus. It was not translated literally, but adapted so the Japanese mind would readily grasp the thought without being buried in a puzzling mass of strange customs. All facts of the wonderful discovery were stated truthfully, but Columbus was pictured as a fisher lad, and somewhere in the story there figured a lacquered bowl and a pair of chopsticks.

One musical little poem I committed to memory, all unknowing that years after I would teach it, clothed in strange, foreign words, to my own little girl. It was,—

Ware ima inentosu.
Waga Kami waga tamashii wo mamoritamae.
Moshi ware mesamezushite shinaba,
Shu yo! waga tamashii wo sukuetamae.
Kore, ware Shu no nani yorite negotokoro nari.

Now I lay me down to sleep.
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.
This I ask for Jesus's sake.

These books were not only the first shaft of light which opened to my eager eyes the wonders of the western world, but they drew still closer the loving bond that had always existed between my father and myself. The contents were new to him also, and he took much interest in reading them to me. It was a wonderful thing in those days for a little girl to read books with her father and talk of them to him, for books were considered almost sacred, and were never spoken of carelessly. I even yet do not know why the "Tales of the Western Seas" seemed so different to us, but it was certainly true that no feeling of formality was associated with those

books. My father and I enjoyed them as if they and we were companions of the same age.

Until then, all the books I had read had been a few old-fashioned novels and the books on Confucian Ethics, which I had learned to recite without knowing their meaning. I must explain that my education from babyhood had been different from that of my sisters. I was supposed to be destined for a priestess, as I had been born with the navel cord looped around the neck like a priest's rosary. It was a common superstition in those days that this was a direct command from Buddha, and it was sincerely believed by my mother and grandmother. In a Japanese home the ruling of the house and children is generally left to the women members, so my father, who I now know was a very broad-minded man, quietly bowed to the earnest wish of my grandmother to have me educated as a priestess. He, however, selected for my tutor a priest whom he knew—a very scholarly man, who spent very little time in teaching me the forms of temple worship, but who most conscientiously instructed me in the doctrines of Confucius. This was considered the foundation of all literary culture and was believed by my father to be the highest moral teaching of the time.

So my mental education was much more like that of a boy than a girl, but of course I also learned all the domestic accomplishments taught my sisters—sewing, weaving, embroidery, cooking, flower arranging and the complicated etiquette of ceremonial tea.

My teacher always came on the days of threes and sevens—that is, the 3rd, 7th, 13th, 17th, 23rd and 27th. This was in accordance with our Moon calendar custom of dividing days into groups of tens instead of sevens, as is done by the Sun calendar. I enjoyed my lessons very much. The stateliness of my teacher's appearance, the ceremony of his manner, and the rigid obedience and submission required of me appealed to my dramatic instinct. Then the surroundings were most impressive to my childish mind. The room was always prepared with especial care the day of my lessons, and when I entered I invariably saw the same sight. I close my eyes now and all is as clear as if it were an hour ago.

The room was wide and light, separated from the garden porch by a row of sliding paper doors crossed with slender bars of wood. The black-bordered straw mats were cream-colored with time, but immaculate in their dustlessness. Books and desk were there, and in the sacred alcove hung a roll-picture of Confucius. Before this was a little teakwood stand from which rose a curling mist of incense. On one side sat my teacher, his flowing grey robes lying in straight, dignified lines about his folded knees, a band of gold brocade across his shoulder and a crystal rosary around his left wrist. His face was always pale, and his deep, earnest eyes beneath the priestly cap looked like wells of soft velvet. He was the gentlest and saintliest man I ever saw. Years after he proved that a holy heart and a progressive mind can climb together, for he was excommunicated from the Orthodox Temple for advocating a reform doctrine that combined the beliefs of Buddhism and Christianity. Whether through accident or design, this broad-minded priest was the teacher chosen for me by my broad-minded, though conservative father.

As it may be interesting to know the first books studied by a Japanese child

of six years, I will give a list—but it must be remembered that these were the books for boys. It was very unusual for a girl to study Chinese classics. My first lessons were from the "Four Books of Confucius". These are: Daigaku—"Great Learning", which teaches that the wise use of knowledge leads to virtue; Chuyo—"The Unchanging Center", which treats of the unalterableness of universal law; Rongo and Moshi—which consist of the autobiography, anecdotes and sayings of Confucius, gathered by his disciples.

Of course I got not one idea from this heavy reading. My mind was filled with many words in which were hidden grand thoughts, but they meant nothing to me then. Sometimes I would feel curious at some half-caught idea and ask my teacher the meaning. His reply invariably was:

"Meditation will untangle thoughts from words", or "A hundred times reading reveals the meaning"; once he said to me, "You are too young to comprehend the profoundly deep books of Confucius".

This was undoubtedly true, but there was a certain rhythmic cadence in the meaningless words that was like music and I learned readily page after page, until I knew perfectly every word of the four books, and could recite them as a child rattles off the senseless jingle of a counting-out game. In the years since, the splendid thoughts of the grand old philosopher have dawned upon me gradually, sometimes flashing like a sudden ray of sunshine, when some well-remembered passage has come into my mind.

My priest-teacher taught these books with the same reverence that he taught his religion—that is, with absence of bodily comfort and with all thought of the world put away. During my lesson he was obliged, despite his own wish, to sit on the thick, silk cushion the servant brought to him, for cushions were our chairs, and the position of instructor was too greatly revered to allow him to sit on a level with his pupil; but, during the two-hour lesson, he never moved the slightest fraction of an inch except with his hands and his lips. And I sat before him on the matting in an equally correct and unchanging position.

Once I moved. I remember with deep humiliation that careless act. It was in the midst of a lesson. For some reason I was restless and swayed my body slightly, allowing my folded knee to stray a trifle from the proper angle. The faintest shade of surprise crossed my instructor's face, then very quietly he closed his book, saying gently, but with a stern air:

"Little Miss, it is evident that your mental attitude today is not suited for study. You should retire to your own room and meditate."

My little heart was almost killed with shame. There was nothing I could do. I humbly bowed to the picture of Confucius, then to my teacher, and backing respectfully to the door, I went slowly to my father to report, as I always did, at the close of my lesson. Father was surprised, as the time was not yet up, and his unconscious remark, "How quickly you have done your work this day!" was like a death knell. The memory of that moment hurts like a bruise to this very day.

As absence of bodily comfort was the custom for priests and teachers while studying, of course all lesser people grew to feel that hardship of body meant inspiration of mind. For this reason, although my home was in a province where the winters were very severe, no one ever dreamed of having a charcoal blaze for warmth

where I studied. Also my studies were purposely arranged so that the hardest lessons and longest hours came during the thirty days of midwinter, which the calendar calls the coldest of the year. The ninth day is considered the most severe. I well remember one "ninth day" morning when my nurse wakened me with the first gleam of sunrise. It was a bitter day and my kind Ishi helped me in every way she could, without actually doing the work for me. The snow was deep everywhere. I remember how the bamboo grove looked with its feathery tops so snow-laden that they were like widespread umbrellas. Once or twice a sharp crack and a great, soft fluff of spurting snow against the grey sky told that a trunk had snapped under its too heavy burden. Ishi took me on her back, and in straw snow-boots slowly waded to where I could reach the low branch of a tree, from which I gathered perfectly pure, untouched snow, just from the sky. This I melted to mix ink for my penmanship study. The reverence for learning is so strong in Japan that not only books, but even the tools we use in writing are kept as free from contamination as possible. Japanese penmanship is more than mere writing. The shading energy of pen-brush strokes so accurately expresses the writer's condition of mind that nothing can be better training in mental control. Practising Japanese penmanship has the intense fascination of painting pictures, but it is careful and slow work, and of course I wrote in a room without fire. As Japanese houses are tropical in their architecture, the absence of the little charcoal firebox brought the temperature about equal to that outside. I froze my fingers that morning without knowing it, until I looked back and saw my good nurse softly crying as she watched my purple hand.

Of course the absolute necessity of this rigid discipline was never questioned by anyone, but because I was a delicate child, I think it sometimes caused uneasiness to the family. I do not remember ever feeling especially cold, but I well recall how promptly Ishi always appeared at the close of my lessons with a big, padded kimono all warmed, ready to wrap around me, and how I was hurried into grandmother's room where, beside her glowing firebox, there was always something hot for me to drink. Even my trusting mother, who felt that the priest studies were essential in carrying out the plan of the holy Buddha, once said to my father:

"Honorable husband, I am sometimes so bold as to wonder if the studies are too hard for our little girl."

My father, gently stroking my head, replied:

"The lioness pushes her young over the rock to the valley hundreds of feet below. Her heart is breaking, but she sternly watches while the little creature is climbing back to her. So only can it gain strength for its life-work."

But my brain life was not all work. Like all children, I often slipped away into the realm of fairyland. All the servants had a wonderful fund of folk-tales, but Ishi had the best memory and the readiest tongue of them all, and I don't remember ever going to sleep without stories. They were mostly simple old legends and priest-tales or the odd jingles that every country has in store for its children, and had all come down by word of mouth from past generations. At that time there were no books written in the language the people used in conversation. Only the stilted, ceremonious style of the classics was considered proper for literature. I could

read when quite young, and found a good deal of pleasure in the long, tedious recitals of the weeping ladies who are invariably the heroines of old Japanese novels, but I enjoyed still more having my grandmother tell the stories to me in conversational language. She was a great reader, and during the shut-in evenings of the long, snowy winters, we children gathered around the firebox and listened to grandmother talk. In this way I became familiar, when very young, with our mythology, with the lives of Japan's greatest historical personages, and with the outline stories of many of our best novels. Also, I learned much of the old classic dramas from the lips of my grandmother. These were always of intense interest to me, and I spent many happy hours sitting on the mat before my grandmother's cushion—but Ishi's tales were different! Those I listened to, all warm and comfortable, snuggled up crookedly in the soft cushions of my bed, giggling and interrupting, and then begging for "just one more" before I said good night and stretched myself into the "kinoji", which was the necessary position for a *Samurai* girl's sleep.

The "Tales of the Western Seas" I enjoyed in the same informal way that I did Ishi's fairy stories. Japanese books I always treated with great respect, handling them carefully and sitting properly when I read them, but there was no known rule regarding foreign books, and reading these with my father had given me a feeling of close friendliness for them. I would even sit on a cushion when reading one, or let it lie on the mat beside me, or carry it about folded in my sleeve, just for the pleasure of having it close to me.

I do not know whose idea it was to translate and publish those ten little paper volumes, but whoever it was holds my lasting gratitude, for through them I was introduced to countless other friends and companions who, in the years since that "memory stone" day, have brought to me such a wealth of knowledge and happiness that I cannot think what life would have been without them.