

Desultory Notes about Japan.

Along the eastern shore of Asia, five or six thousand miles from the westernmost of the American States, are scattered multitudes of volcanic islands. They extend irregularly from Behring's Straits to Ceylon. Some four thousand of them, more or less, lying over against the Chinese sea-board, constitute the Empire of Japan, the object of an expedition about to leave the ports of our country; and in view of the interest imparted to this *terra incognita* by the anticipated opening of commercial relations, the *Times* volunteers a trifle of desultory information. It may be prudent to know a little about a people to whom we propose to teach so much. Our slight knowledge of their institutions—and all our knowledge of this insular monarchy is but slight—may not be superfluous, before we materially alter and perhaps destroy them.

The whole empire of Japan is said to contain a population of 30,000,000 inhabitants. Nippon, the largest of the island group, boasts an extent about equal to, and a population nearly double that of Ireland. The Chinese have corrupted the name into Jihpun, and the English by an easy transition, make Japan of it. Upon this Nippon, among temples and camphor groves and rice fields, and hills cultivated to the summits, stand the capital towns of Miaco and Jeddo. The latter ranks among the first class cities of the world. Its low, one-story buildings shelter a population of 1,500,000 souls, all laboring cheerfully at the mechanic or finer arts, or living in as much aristocratic elegance and ease as European nobility of measureless pedigree. At Jeddo, too, resides the civil Emperor or Siogoon of Japan; and there the princes who rule in the multitudinous islands spend half their time; thence all the reins of Government diverge; and there the imperial council holds its sessions. The commerce of the Archipelago all centres at Jeddo. At Miaco, on the other side of the island, lives the Mikado, or religious Emperor, in other times the sole ruler of the realm in all its interests, civil, naval and superstitious. Revolution, however, did its work some centuries since, and the Siogoon, an upstart from the lower orders, made himself nominal regent and actual autocrat of the Empire. Time has in turn crippled the power of the Siogoon, who is actually governed by his council; retaining, however, a sort of veto not at all similar to the veto of the American Constitution. If any act of the council fail to meet the views of the Siogoon, it is referred to three of his nearest relatives. If they sustain the objections of the chief, the council is obliged to adjourn and disembowel themselves: each member deliberately cutting himself open. On the other hand, should the act of the council be approved, the Siogoon is bound to abdicate, pretty much on the same principle that an English Cabinet Minister resigns when voted down in the Commons. The Mikado inhabits a temple at Miaco, and spends his time in receiving adoration. As he has to dress daily in new garments, and eat daily from new crockery, his fare is said to be tolerably hard. He generally resigns in favor of his son, after a few years of deification, and retires to private life.

The island of Kiusiu is next in order of dimension to Nippon. Nagasaki, the port town, is the only one to which foreigners are admitted. There the Dutch have their island-fort of Dezima, in which they remain locked up two-thirds of the year, until the pair of vessels, the only ones Japanese jealousy allows to European commerce, arrive. Then an annual pilgrimage, with presents to the Siogoon, at Jeddo, takes up three months; and six weeks of the year are left, in which to dispose of the cargoes of spices, and load up the return burdens of copper and camphor. The various tables and stands and cabinets and enamelled work, for the exquisite manufacture of which the Japanese are so famous, are never permitted to leave the islands. A few samples, enough to furnish models for European imitation, alone escape, through the connivance of sub-officials.

Japan is as insulated in manners, habits, government and religion, as in situation. Every thing strikes the stranger as anomalous, like the animal and vegetable life of Australia. The social scheme is entirely subordinate to the purposes of Government. A more perfect system of checks and balances never entered the head of the constitution maker. It is a perfect network of espionage. Each private citizen is by law a spy upon his five nearest neighbors. The commissioned and secret spies of Government reside in every village. Each magistrate is surrounded by spies. The prince, who rules a million subjects, has his two secretaries appointed at Jeddo, whose one resides, while the other, the shadow of the viceroy in his remote Government, transmits constant information to his fellow at the capital. Even these subordinates are in their turn subjected to surveillance; and for better security, the prince is obliged to spend each alternate year at the Capital, where his family remain all the while as hostages. The Council and the Siogoon are equally watched; and to be detected in error or dishonor or neglect, entails upon the unfortunate officer the duty of cutting himself open in the presence of his friends. This curious mode of self-destruction is a part of the education of every Japanese child. To accomplish it gracefully, and upon hearing the first whisper prejudicial to one's fame, is the great object of the national ethics. In a scheme so ingeniously tied and knotted up, it is impossible for any advance or improvement to be made. The people are victims of an inveterately vicious absurdity.

And yet the Japanese hunger and thirst for fragments of European learning. They pick up with the utmost avidity any scrap of knowledge their Dutch or Chinese visitors may let drop. Many of the leading French and German scientific authors, have been rendered into the vernacular, and are esteemed standard authorities. They have their astronomical instruments, calculate their almanacs and eclipses, and know more about every other planet in the solar system than they do of their own. They have none of the Chinese supercilious contempt for barbarian accomplishments. Their motto is "to get all they can, and keep all they get."

But the oddest of the national idiosyncrasies is the rooted aversion to outsiders. A glance at history, perhaps, with the conservative scheme of checks and balances we have referred to, borne in mind, will serve partially to elucidate this peculiarity.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans who found and landed in Japan. This they did in 1542, meeting with a cordial and hospitable welcome. Commerce at once sprung up with great animation, the Portuguese naturally endeavoring to obtain an entire monopoly of it. The early zeal of the Jesuits, then an uncorrupted order of holy men, carried a large body of missionaries to the new land, where the attractive dogmas of Roman Catholicism were remarkably successful in displacing Sintoism and Buddhism, the prevalent religions of the people. The converts numbered nearly a hundred thousand souls, embracing members of the Imperial family, and the Mikado himself is said to have been a believer. In the course of a hundred years the trade with Europe had waxed exceedingly. The commercial importance of the discoverers, had declined, however, and the Dutch, always ready to extend their traffic, were soon located at every Japanese port of any moment. To drive out their Portuguese rivals entirely was a great object with the thrifty Hollanders. Stories were accordingly circulated, that the Catholic Missionaries, as true believers in the Papal supremacy, designed to bring the Islands under the rule of the Roman pontiff. The fears thus excited were soon in ungovernable flame. A revolution took place. The Siogoon of the day was deposed; a war of extermination waged against the Jesuits, and hosts of faithful converts, faithful even in death, put to the sword. History records that the Dutch had over-shot the mark. They had stirred up so thorough a dread of European treachery, that they themselves

came very near suffering the consequences, and only saved the narrow footing they still retain at Nagasaki, by aiding in the slaughter and torture of their Christian brethren. Even now their two vessels per annum are always deprived of their armature and rudders, the moment they come to anchor: and whatever cash capital they bring along is kindly taken care of by the Japanese authorities. There is no reason to believe that the captain and sailors have to open commercial relations every year by trampling on the crucifix; though during the first heat of animosity against the Catholics that formulary was undoubtedly exacted and obligingly complied with.

From the era of this anti-Christian warfare, 1637, the whole policy of the Japanese Government has been directed to the prohibition of foreign intercourse. The Dutch and Chinese alone trade at Nagasaki. That port is the only one open as an anchorage ground to foreigners; the condition of that favor being the deposit of all their arms with the authorities of the city. Under no circumstances is any one permitted to land or engage in traffic. To anchor in any other harbor of the Empire, instantly exposes a vessel to destruction. Natives of other countries, shipwrecked or coming voluntarily upon the shores, are consigned to prison. Natives of the islands shipwrecked abroad, are not permitted to return, save upon a Dutch or Chinese vessel. A decree to that effect was transmitted to the European powers in 1813.

We may review briefly the various attempts of civilization to break down the selfish barrier of the Japanese.

The English, as long ago as the reign of Charles I., sent an embassy thither, to obtain the privilege of trade for the East India Company. As the war upon foreigners had not yet been declared, the advantages asked for were promptly granted. All the ports of the empire were opened to the Company's vessels; remaining so, however, for only a dozen or fifteen years, when the exclusive system was re-instated. In 1811, England made another effort to get in. Having conquered the various Dutch possessions in the East Indies, they notified the Siogoon of their intention to take possession of the Dutch Factory at Dezima, but the Japanese refused to accede to any such arrangement. In spite of every artifice on the part of the English, the Factory was for several years carefully protected, and eventually guaranteed to its Dutch possessors. The British have never since repeated the attempt. Certainly they would stand a poorer chance than any others, so inflexibly have the Japanese been prejudiced by their doings in 1811, and their more recent subjugation of China.

The Russians have endeavored to find ingress ever since the days of Catharine I. The proximity of their Kamschatkan Territories, and the return of straggling Japanese sailors, at various times, before the decree of 1813 was promulgated, have been ineffectually relied upon. In 1801 a Russian envoy visited Nagasaki in great state, and through the intervention of the Dutch, obtained an audience, but that was all. The court of Jeddo wanted nothing to do with that of St. Petersburg. The Emperor Alexander declared war, and captured a few inconsiderable islands at the north. The Japanese retaliated by seizing a Russian frigate, with its crew, and notified their enemies, that every one of the captives should be put to death, unless hostilities were suspended. The war was therefore terminated.

The Dutch have managed to maintain their post at Dezima, with the slender advantages it yields, by dint of uncomplaining submission to the authorities. King William, in 1844, thought to obtain a modification of the prohibitive policy. To that end he sent a letter to the Siogoon, detailing the result of the Chinese war, and begging that there should be some let up of the wretched embargo, in favor of the European commercial powers. After maturely deliberating upon the proposition for two years, the Siogoon replied that he had carefully watched the progress of events in China, involving the overthrow of the fundamental law of that empire. Those events, upon which his majesty of the Netherlands based his arguments, were, in his eyes, the very strongest reasons for re-affirming the standing policy of the Japanese. It was clear that there could be no peace without the entire exclusion of strangers. Had the Chinese never allowed the English to gain a foothold at Canton, their domestic institutions would have remained undisturbed.

"From the moment," said the Siogoon, "that we yield one point, we become vulnerable at all. This was the reasoning of my ancestor when he debated the propriety of granting you the liberty of commerce with Japan, and, but for the evidences of sincere friendship for our country which you have often given, rest assured that you would be as rigidly excluded as the other nations of the West. Now that you possess this privilege I desire that you may continue to enjoy it; but I shall be very careful never to extend it to any other people whatever; for it is easier to maintain an embankment in a good state of preservation, than to prevent the widening of a breach, when it has once been opened. I have given my officers orders accordingly; the future will prove that our policy is wiser than that of the Chinese Empire."

The Japanese, it will be remarked, are not without a fair share of shrewdness. The Siogoon argues ingeniously.

The Government of the United States has repeatedly tried to effect a lodgment on the islands, but with no better prosperity than its European competitors. In 1846, Com. Biddle made the mistake of violating the laws of the Empire, in bringing his frigate to anchor in the harbor of Jeddo. His object was the opening of commercial relations, and his object he made known to the Siogoon by letter. Offended by the unfortunate blunder with which the Commodore opened his negotiation, the Siogoon replied curtly:

"According to the laws of Japan, the Japanese can only trade with Hollanders and Chinamen. America cannot be permitted to have a treaty with Japan or commerce with the Empire, while such permission is granted to no other nation. Besides, whatever relates to foreign countries is attended to at Nagasaki, and not in this bay: you will therefore depart as soon as possible, and never return."

Shortly after, a sloop-of-war was dispatched to Japan to demand the restoration of a few American sailors, who had been shipwrecked on one of the islands. They were promptly and courteously surrendered, notwithstanding the national law upon the point; and we are unaware of any ground for hostilities now existing between the two Governments. The proposers of the measure, of course, know more than we do about it, and in good time will doubtless be at pains to enlighten us. In the meantime we must be content with the light we have; and here it is collected in a focus. Japan is a semi-barbarous empire, exhibiting the curious spectacle to mankind of a nation which, in its whole history, has neither retrograded or advanced, and we of the United States being convinced that a manifest destiny bids us "conquer its prejudices," propose to knock open a passage-way with ball, bullet, and bomb, to let in revelation, and a few annual cargoes of cotton cloth. Its laws, manners, social and domestic habits, have proved unalterable since the earliest remembered periods. These are the results of entire isolation from humanity. We have, then, this lesson, worth all the traffic we shall probably ever have, that it is impossible for any people to shut itself out from intercourse with its fellows; or decline to conform with the common sense of the world; or refuse to bear its part in international obligations, without becoming, what Japan is, a galvanized mummy, rather than a sentient, vital existence. The text has already been enunciated by Kossuth.