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Our Little Japanese Cousin



Mary Wade

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Lotus Blossom is the dearest little girl in the world. I beg your pardon – I mean in the Eastern world, for she lives far away across the Pacific, on one of the beautiful islands of Japan.

Lotus Blossom is very pretty. She has a round face, with a clear, yellow skin, and her teeth are like little pearls. Her black hair is cut square across the forehead and braided behind. It is never done up in curl-papers or twisted over a hot iron; the little girl's mamma would think that very untidy.

Lotus Blossom does not smile very often, yet she is always happy. She does not remember crying once in her life. Why should she cry? Papa and mamma are always kind and ready to play with her. She is never sent to bed alone in the dark, for she goes to sleep, and gets up in the morning when her parents do. She does not play so hard as to get tired out and cross with everybody. She takes everything quietly, just as the big folks do, and is never in a hurry. Her playmates do not say unkind words to make her sad, for the children of Japan are taught to be polite above everything else. Why, I have heard that once upon a time one little yellow boy so far forgot himself as to call a lady bad names. His parents were terribly shocked. They felt that they had been disgraced, and at once sent for a policeman to go to the lady's house and ask for their child's pardon. As for him! well, he was severely punished in a way you will hear about later on in my story.

Besides all these things which help to make Lotus Blossom happy, she is dressed comfortably. Tight, stiff shoes could never be thought of for a minute. She wears white stockings made of cloth, with a separate place in each one for the big toe. In fact, they resemble long mittens. That is all Lotus Blossom wears on her feet in the house; but when she goes out-doors she has pretty sandals, if the walking is good. These sandals have straps, which are fastened on the foot between the big toe and around the ankle. If the ground is muddy or covered with snow, Lotus Blossom puts on her clogs. They are queer things, raised high on strips of wood. Of course one can't walk very fast on such clumsy affairs, but the Japanese dislike getting their feet wet as much as kittens do, and would wear anything to prevent such a mishap. But if Lotus Blossom stops at a house or store while she is out walking, she is polite enough to take off her clogs or sandals before going inside. That is one reason why every building can be kept so clean.

The little Japanese girl's clothes are pretty as well as comfortable. It is not possible for pins to prick her tender flesh, because they are never used about her dress. In summer she wears a silk or linen garment made very much like your papa's dressing-gown, except that it has immense sleeves. Beautiful scarlet flowers are embroidered all over it, and a wide sash is wound around her waist and tied in a big, flat bow behind. She is very fond of red, so she has a bow of red crape in her hair, and a small red bag is fastened to her belt in front. What do you suppose she carries in the bag? Paper handkerchiefs! Not linen ones like yours, which are washed when they get soiled, but rather of soft, pretty paper. As soon as each one is used it is thrown away. Don't you think that is a very nice and cleanly custom? Indeed, there are many things about the Japanese which we might copy with profit, for they are the cleanest people in the world. Perhaps another reason why our little cousin is so happy is because she is always clean.

Lotus Blossom carries another bag at her belt, filled with amulets. These are charms to keep away any evil spirits that might do her harm. In the bag with the charms, there is a brass plate, which tells her name and where she lives. So if she should get lost, her mother need not worry, for she will be brought safely home without loss of time. But what can be the use of such big sleeves? When her mamma cut them, she made them long enough to nearly reach the floor. Then they were doubled up

inside and fastened in front so that they could serve as pockets. How you would laugh to see Lotus Blossom and her brother tuck away their playthings in their big sleeves when their mother calls them away to do something for her! It is enough to make an American boy's heart fill with envy. He may boast of six pockets, but what of that? They could all be filled and stowed away in one of Lotus Blossom's sleeves, and room would be still left.

The little girl's life is like a long playtime. In the first place, she lives in a sort of play-house. There is nothing to get out of order; no chairs in the way, no table-scarfs to pull down, no ink-wells to tip over. There is only one big room in the house, but there are many beautiful paper screens, so her mamma can divide the house just as she pleases by moving the screens about. If company should arrive suddenly, there need be no question whether there is a guest-room or not. One can be made with screens in a moment. Even the front of the house is made of screens, which can be closed at night, and folded away in the morning to open up the whole house to the fresh air and sunshine. There are no carpets on the floors, but instead of these there are pretty mats made of rushes. They are exactly alike in size, and are shaken every morning. There are no chairs, for Lotus Blossom's family sit on the mats or on cushions on the floor. They cannot lean against the walls either, for remember, there are no walls! And if they should lean against the screens they would tumble over.

The only tables are six inches high. They are pretty and delicate, and are highly lacquered. When Lotus Blossom has nothing else to do, she likes to look at the pictures on these little stands. But where are the stoves? How do the people keep warm in the cold winter days? And where is all the cooking done? In the picture do you see a little box with smoke rising from it? It is lined with metal, and charcoal is burned in it. All the food is prepared over these little fire-boxes. If any one is cold, he has only to get a fire-box, light some charcoal, and sit down beside it. And when Lotus Blossom goes to breakfast, she has a fire-box beside the lacquered table, so that water for her tea can be kept hot.

Tea! you say. That little girl, nine years old, drinking tea? Yes, we have to admit that the Japanese child drinks tea at a very early age; and with no milk or sugar, either. But then the cups are so tiny they do not hold much. They are no bigger than those in a doll's china set. How quickly the little tea-table is set at meal times. Each member of the family has one all to himself. There is no table-cloth, no knife, or fork, or spoon; instead of these one sees a pair of chop-sticks, a small cup and saucer, and a plate from which he eats the steaming rice and the minced fish. But suppose that the tea or rice should be spilled on the beautiful table? Please don't imagine such a thing. Japanese children are too carefully trained by their kind mammas to be so careless. They handle their chop-sticks so daintily that no grain of rice nor bit of fish falls as they lift the food to their pretty mouths.

Where does our little Japanese cousin sleep in this funny house? There are no bedsteads, or mattresses, or blankets, or sheets. When bedtime comes, her papa and mamma move the screens around so as to shut themselves off from the rest of the house. Then they go to a cupboard and take down some wadded quilts and queer wooden blocks, whose tops are slightly curved. A quilt is spread on the floor, and a wooden block serves as a pillow. Some paper is laid on it so that it may be kept clean. And now, you think, Lotus Blossom may get into her bed after she has undressed and put on her night-dress. Not so, however. She must bathe in a tub of such hot water that it would turn your body very red, if you were only to hop in and out again. The whole family bathe in the same tub of water, one after the other, and it is kept hot by a tube which runs to a fire-box. The little girl puts on her day-dress after her bath is finished, and, lying down on the quilt, she rests her head on the hard pillow. Mamma covers her with another quilt, and she is soon sound asleep.

When Lotus Blossom was two years old her brother Toyo was born. How the family rejoiced at having a little son! When he was only seven days old a very important ceremony was performed. He had to receive a name. His papa, who believes in the religion of Shintoism, fully wrote out five of his favourite names on pieces of paper. Then he took his baby in his arms, and, carrying the papers, he went to the temple where he worshipped. The papers were handed to the priest, who placed them in a bowl. After some ceremony, the priest began to fish in the bowl with a sacred wand. The first paper

he lifted out bore the name of Toyo. This was the way that Lotus Blossom's little brother received his name. When he was about four weeks old he was again carried to the temple by his father and nurse. The Japanese believe in one great power, or god, but under him there are many others; as, a god of flowers, a god of art, and so forth. This time he was put under the care of his special god, who was then expected to protect him for the rest of his life.

All this time Toyo's head was kept perfectly smooth. In fact, his first visit to the barber was very important, for all his hair was shaved off then except a little fringe at the back and sides. When he was four months old another important ceremony was held. Toyo left off baby clothes and was given his first solid food. That was rice, of course, which he would continue to eat at every meal for the rest of his life.

Toyo and Lotus Blossom are always happy together. His sister was the first one to help Toyo squat on his little heels. Japanese babies never creep. The little brother had no baby-carriage or cradle, but he never missed them. He was always such a happy little fellow; never perched up in a high-chair with his body fastened in by a wooden tray, but always moving around, sometimes on the floor, sometimes fastened on mamma's or nurse's back, again on the older children's backs, when Lotus Blossom was out playing in the garden with them. When he got tired he would simply go to sleep, while the children would keep on with their play. But when he woke up, he would look about with a dear little smile, as much as to say: "I'm all right, thank you, don't fret about me."

It was a most important time when he cut the first tooth, and not only that, but the second and the third, – in fact, every tooth in turn had its arrival celebrated. A poem about each one was written by his loving papa, and a little festival was held in the home. Such happy, childlike people are the Japanese! They are ready to enjoy everything. Even the funerals are cheerful, and have nothing sad and dreary about them. Why should they, when the people believe that they always will live, and that they will come back to earth again to enjoy the beautiful fields and flowers and sunshine in new bodies?

Almost the first words that Toyo learned to speak were, "Thank you," and "If you please." Don't think for a moment that he ever did such a rude thing in his life as to answer "no" or "yes" without some very polite expression with it. For instance, if his mamma asked him a question, he would answer with his baby lips, "No, thank you, most admirable mother," or, "If you please, my adorable, honoured parent," at the same time bowing his little body over till his head reached the ground. Why! he and Lotus Blossom are taught to speak respectfully even of the potatoes or the dishes or the table. For example, they say, "the highly respected cup," etc. Isn't it funny? But, after all, isn't it nice, too, to act kindly toward every one and everything in the world?

If her little brother should step on Lotus Blossom's doll and break its arm, what would she do? Give him a slap and say, "Oh, you bad, bad boy?" By no means. A slap is unknown in her land. The little woman would not even let herself look cross or unhappy, while Toyo would spend five minutes in telling her how unutterably sad and broken-hearted he was made by his cruel, ungentlemanly carelessness. And then, to make them forget all about it, mamma would bring a new doll from the cupboard.

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