The Real Japan—Her Role in the Future

FRENCHMAN'S PROFOUND STUDY

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I HAVE the advantage of being able to place before New Zealand readers at the earliest possible moment the salient contents of one of the most important and enlightening books ever written about modern Japan. The author is M. Ludovic Naudeau, and the book is entitled "La Japon Moderne." In the words of a French contemporary M. Naudeau "is the man who, of the whole world, knows the most of Japan in its present development."

Sent to Manchuria—we are not told by whom—to follow the operations of the Russo-Japanese war, M. Naudeau was taken prisoner by the Japanese, and sent with a convoy of other Russian captives to Tokio, where he remained for upwards of a year. Left completely at liberty by the Japanese authorities, he profited by his enforced residence to see everything and to report everything of interest in the capital at a time when it was possible to receive vivid and valuable impressions. And so in the book before me I find a marvellously vivid account of national institutions, the Japanese army, the magistrates, the politicians and the people. And above all the author is a man of calm reason, keen insight, and profound judgment. Perhaps it is his mental adaptation to his task far more even than the quantity of his material, that has made his work so peculiarly enlightening.

Passing over the old, old question of whether Japan is in reality original or Imitative (and which, like so many others, he finds himself unable to solve), he passes to the interesting theme of "the psychology of Japanese heroism." And here is his solution:

[This heroism takes its origin in the first place in the fact that the Islands of Japan, with their volcanoes, their seismic perturbations, and the uncertainty of Nature generally, have habituated the Japanese to contemplate death as a possibility at any moment. Secondly, it springs from the circumstances that the Japanese are constantly accustomed to the idea of death by the necessarily large mortality which follows from its teeming population.]

The author, to develop his argument in detail, draws a harrowing picture of the ravages of famine in Japan. He shows us that since the era of Meiji, the consumption of rice has become increasingly general in that country. But all the rice that the islands can supply would not suffice to keep more than 25 million persons. Thus to-day, as in days gone by, the Nippons sell abroad the greater part of their rice (which is excellent, but dear) and they buy in China and Indo-China a rice of which the quality is inferior. But these means have not been sufficient to preserve the country from appalling suffering. At the close of the recent war in 1906 and during the whole of 1907, Japan underwent a terrible famine, in which many a young girl (to the certain knowledge of the author), sacrificed her honour to her need. Other scourges rage in Japan, and cause a fearful mortality—cholera, plague, dysentery and beri-beri. In 1899 one epidemic of dysentery attacked 45,000 persons, and caused the death of 9000. But meantime the birth-rate is maintained at such a figure, that while life is more precarious than in Europe, it is held more cheaply. "There is a great circulation of life among prolific peoples, as there is a great circulation of capital in nations in full commercial vigour."

"They see many die; death surrounds them always, threatens them always. They are brave because each of them counts less than we upon the continuance of his separate existence. They pass away without lamentation, because they are habituated to the idea of passing away. But do not believe that the Japanese soul is never possessed by fear. The soul of the Japanese is, as much as ours, accessible to fear. They are more afraid than we of earthquakes. At the least tremor they rush headlong from their houses. I have seen them show without shame an emotion which seemed to me incomprehensible. One day, while I was living in Tokio, some savants, or pretended savants, predicted an imminent earthquake. Immediately the public schools were emptied, and the children were seized by the panic-stricken mothers, who cried: 'If we must die let us die together!' A Japanese proverb says: 'Fear your father, fear fire, fear earthquakes!'" The Japanese Year-Book states that the mortality during earthquakes has generally been caused by the consequences of panic.

No less do the Japanese fear sickness. Since primary education has spread in the masses some notions of elementary science, they live in perpetual fear of microbes: "I remember that after the battle of Mukden we saw advancing northwards immense Japanese convoys of ambulance wagons. Now all the officers and all the men who accompanied these convoys had their nostrils and mouths covered with green gauze. . . . . Courageous when they have to submit to surgical operations, the Japanese are on the contrary, demoralised by an illness. The moment that he believes himself seriously ill, the Japanese remains prostrate, manifests no desire to struggle, to cling to life."

Are the Japanese a religious people? M. Naudean replies with a question: "Of which Japan do you speak? If you speak of the mass of the nation I reply that it is profoundly imbued with all the superstitions of Bhuddism, and that it has a profound veneration for the innumerable deities of Shintoism. Not only is this peop'e religious, but it is the most religious of all peoples." He gives instances, on the other hand, of the growing free-thought of the ruling classes. Half the men who at present direct the political affairs of Japan have been formed by the celebrated Fukuzawa, who, from 1860 to 1900, exercised an incessant tutelage over the mind of the young Samurai (nobles). Fukuzawa was by turns diplomat, reformer, moralist, pedagogue and sociologist. His publications, which treated with clearness and courage the political questions and the organisations of European countries, had a success without precedent in the intellectual classes. Fukuzawa was a populariser, a sort of encyclopaedist, a utilitarian philosopher, like Benjamin Franklin. His private school had more vogue than the Imperial university. His energetic mind profoundly impressed a whole generation of the ruling class. Above all, he parted absolutely, and with disdain, from all the religious systems existing. "For him religion could only have one utility—to conserve peace in society in keeping the ignorant under its yoke."

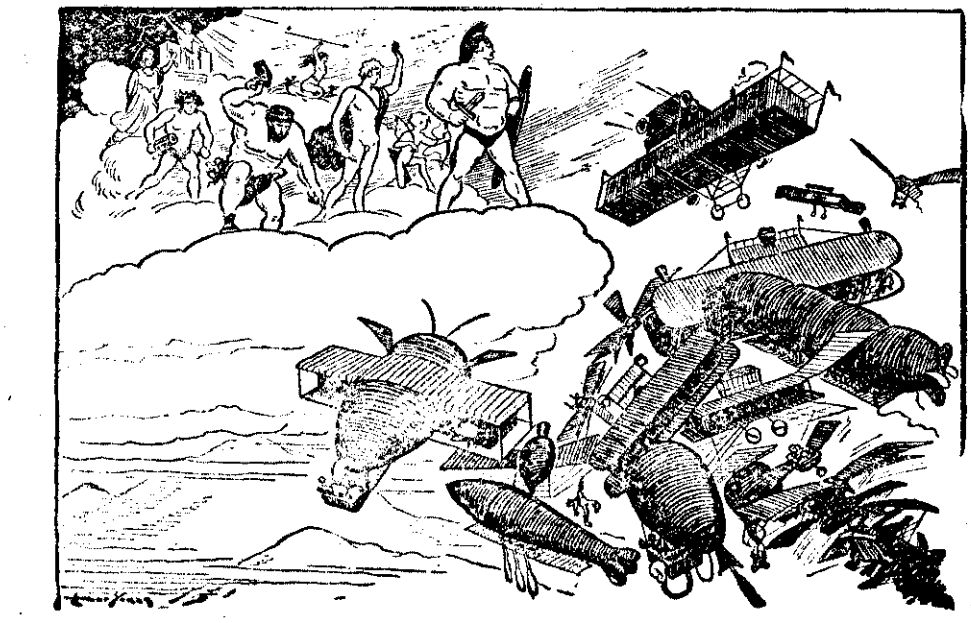
The author compares the Japanese army of 1904 to an army of French "Chouans," but of disciplined Chouans who were willing to obey officers who were themselves instructed and less credulous. "But what is particularly admirable in the history of Nippon is that the warrior aristocracy of the country has found it possible to be also an intellectual aristocracy, an element of progress, of social renovation. At the beginning of the war between Russia and Japan, it was constantly repeated in Europe that the triumph of the islanders was the triumph of science, of democracy, of knowledge over obscurantism and superstition. In point of fact, the soldiers engaged in Manchuria, whether yellow or white, differed little enough, if we consider their intellectual development. The Japanese rankers had received more primary instruction than the Russian, but this rudimentary knowledge had left intact their deep-rooted superstitions. Icons for the Russians, amulets preserving their bearers from death for the Japanese." The author, in the following pages, gives many examples of Japanese superstition, including individual beliefs in a special dispensation. "Russian peasant, Japanese peasant; equal superstition. It is the Japanese aristocracy which is, if not superior to the Russian aristocracy, at least better intentioned, more patriotic and more disinterested." He instances the profound self-abnegation of the Japanese aristocracy on the eve of, and during the war, in staking the whole of their fortunes on the successful issue of the conflict.

Another picture awaits us in the dreadful revelations of Japanese pauperism—in which the author proclaims his complete divergence from English and other writers, who have painted the social conditions of Japan in "couleur de rose." Let me quote M. Nandeau in his own words: "We, who arrived in Japan in 1904, we have seen in this country a terrible pauperism which other Europeans have ascertained, studied and depicted at the same time as ourselves. What we have to realise is that militarism is undermining Japan. The victories of 1894, gained over the Chinese, and the victories of 1904, gained over Russia, have brought with them a harvest of glory and a recrudescence of misery." The increasing cost of her armaments is literally ruining Japan.

An evolution of profound importance, as seen by M. Nandeau, is the gradual self-emancipation of women. But he adds that the triumph of feminism is not imminent. The resistance is obstinate, and for a long time to come will be invincible. And from this point the author derives another series of conclusions, which I hastily pass over in order to reach the supreme question, in dealing with which, I shall quote M. Nandeau verbatim: "The Japanese, who will make this war against their own customs, traditions and superstitions, will perhaps be those who through travel or reading have clearly informed themselves upon the real conditions of European and American society. They know into what a pitch of moral dilequescence, into what effeminacy may fall nations which have no religion, but the apotheosis of woman, apotheosis of luxury and of ostentation. They know that these nations are without prolific families, and that in consequence they could not pretend to any preponderating role in the universal conflicts of the future. . . In the true Japan—in the Japan of the Japanese—there are organised neither balls nor receptions, nor banquets, few formal visits are paid, and people ignore those diversions which absorb the days and nights of so many Europeans, and render their existence so onerous and so complicated. And it is this that explains in part why the Japanese family is so much more fecund than the French. The resources of Japanese housekeeping are not exhausted by the imperious necessity of keeping up appearances. Japan is a country in which . . . . anyone who chose to adopt an ostentatious appearance would be accounted grotesque."

But the apparent pessimism of the author is relieved a little in his last pages, where he assumes that the Japanese will be obliged, in the necessary process of making money, to adopt more and more the habits, the tastes and the appetites of Europeans. He thinks that the worship of the golden calf and of the ancient Japanese deities can hardly coexist. "The divinity of the Mikado is a myth which the death of the present Sovereign will obliterate. The gods of the Shinto Olympia are fading away; already they are less visible, hidden by the smoke of the factories. All the framework of society is falling out of joint. For how long will ancestor-worship maintain its force and maintain its discipline over the individual? The thinkers of Japan ask this capital question with profound anxiety. If the Japanese were to lose these beliefs which have bound and associated them together in spite of everything, for centuries, what would remain to them? Where would they find the new bases of a moral system?"

The crux of this most fascinating book lies, I think, in these last pages, which constitute a mild intellectual rebuke to those who, while rightly seeing that the unlimited development of Japan on present lines would present a grave menace to Western civilisation, fail to see that those lines cannot be permanent. In short, by the time Japan has grown to full stature as a world-Power, she will be hampered by the same internal problems of economics as her western rivals. She will have lost that inestimable advantage of the power of underselling—dependent on the simplicity of her social institutions—which is her chief danger at present. She will have been Europeanised to her loss as, until now, she has been Europeanised to her gain. Whether after being pessimistic enough to satisfy the most ardent preacher of the "Yellow peril," M. Nandeau has passed to an excessive optimism, it is not for me to say. His book is, at least, stimulating in the highest degree, and I only hope that it will find a translator to do fuller justice to it than I have been able to give it in this hurried summary of its most salient contents. But at least you have an inkling of the contents of a book, of which the first French reviews predict a great vogue—and that before its fame has reached London.



YE GODS! The Invasion of Olympus