

BOYS AND GIRLS



New Year's Day With Chinese Boys and Girls.

(The Rev. Frederic Poole, in the 'Sunday School Times.')

The Chinese boys and girls—especially the boys—get lots of fun out of their yearly festivals, and the little urchins look forward to their holiday times with as much glee and happiness as we do on Christmas and New Year's Day.

There is the Lantern Festival, when all turn out to witness the brilliant display, for the whole country is ablaze with the light of thousands of paper lanterns made in all sorts of fancy shapes.

But perhaps the chief reason why the little folks in China look forward to the Moon Festival is because they get all they want of those little moon-shaped cakes which are made only for this occasion. They are very prettily decorated, but oh! so awfully indigestible that the next day the little fellows who are suffering from stomach ache are apt to think that there was a dead toad in the cake instead of the moon.

But the great day of all days for the children is New Year's Day. I think, if you were to ask a little Chinese boy what he meant by 'New Year's,' he would say, 'Noise, and plenty of it.' For weeks the Chinese are preparing for this great event. Houses are cleaned, and the shopkeeper looks forward to it with great satisfaction, because he knows that his customers, if they have any self-respect, will be sure to pay their debts before the new year; for it is considered a great disgrace to start the new year in debt.

The Chinese know nothing about Christmas, because, you know, that beautiful holiday belongs only to Christian countries.

By the way, boys, ask your father which comes first, Christmas or New Year's. He is sure to say 'Christmas,' and then you can laugh, and tell him that he is wrong.

Well, New Year's ever comes first in China, just as it does here, and, dear me, what a time of frolic and nervous expectancy it is for the little slant-eyed boys and girls. Lots of firecrackers are laid by in readiness, but none must be let off before the proper time.

Nobody goes to bed that night, but all sit up waiting for the first hour of the new day, when the father, and his wife and little ones, all worship before the spirit tables of their ancestors, and then at the shrine of the household gods.

Then the door is opened, and the whole family and servants go outside and bow down to a certain part in the

heavens which has been indicated in the Chinese calendar, and so worship heaven and earth, and receive the spirit of gladness and good fortune which, they say, comes from that quarter of the heavens.

Then the noise begins, and when I was in China I often used to think that it was a good thing that the country was so big, for every one of the four hundred millions are setting off firecrackers at the same time. This is to frighten away evil spirits, and I have thought many a time that those spirits must have a bad time of it during the dawn of the Chinese New Year.

Then, too, we Americans could walk along the streets for once in the year feeling sure that nobody would curse us, or call us 'foreign devils,' for it is unlucky to use that bad word at such a happy time. Dear me, how I wish that New Year's would last twelve months!

But the first day has come, and the little Chinese children get ready to enjoy it for all it is worth. They are dressed in their best and gaudiest clothes, which are only worn on this occasion. The father has got from the pawn-shop his finest silk gowns, which that obliging 'relative' has taken good care of during the past twelve months, and, thus splendidly attired, the proud father and his little boys start out on a little visiting trip to his relatives and friends, to 'Kung Hi, Fah Tsai,'—wish them a happy new year and many riches.

'What,' you say, 'don't the little girls go too?'

No; they must stay at home, because the little girl is not so important as her brother, besides, she would have difficulty in walking far in her tiny 'golden lily' shoes, which do not measure more than three inches in length.

But what a day it is for the little boy! He has already got his first present when Santa Claus, that is to say, the boy's father (same thing, you see, as in this country), gave him a little string of copper cash tied on a red cord; for it is unlucky to start the new year without any money in your pocket, and that is something both you and I agree with,—isn't it?

But our little Chinese boy could never carry home all the money that is given to him, for it is the custom for every one whom he visits to give him presents of money, as well as candy and cakes. Of course, the father takes charge of this,—I mean the money,—and I have often wondered if his little son ever sees his money presents again. I really think that a little Chinese boy must be a good investment for his father on New Year's Day in China.

But the visiting is soon over, and then the little Chinaman is off, sometimes with his sister, to see the sights in the streets. They look at the peep-shows and the Punch-and-Judy shows, which, by the way, is a Chinese invention. They spin their tops and fly their kites, until the sound of gongs and drums tells them that there is a theatre or a juggling-show somewhere near, and off they go, and soon are to be found in the front row, clapping their hands in childish glee at the funny antics of the performers, until the man comes round with the hat, and then there is a patter of small feet as the youngsters scurry away, for the Chinese boys have no use for the hat,—like some other boys I know.

But twilight finds the tired little lads at home, for they are afraid to be out at dark; and little John Chinaman closes the day in eating sweetmeats, or in taking his turn at beating the unmusical gong, or in diving among the mass of red paper in the courtyard, where the fireworks were let off by his father and big brothers, in the search for unexploded single crackers, which he at once puts to their proper use, until, tired out with his day's exertions, he is put to bed, and is soon sound asleep, dreaming of cakes and candy, copper cash, and Punch-and-Judy shows, and 'Cr-cr-crack—bing—bang—boom!'

