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Sarah Field

Iowa State College

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At Home in Nippon

By Sarah Field

A TRILLION, trillion cherry blossoms, the patter of small brown cat, the slap-slap of sandals and coy little almond-eyed ladies flirting behind bewitching fans. What is it? Where are we? The answer is—Japan—enchanting Nippon.

As we walk down our first Japanese street, the colors of the houses seem somber. No paint decorates or protects them. Most of them are hidden by walls of mud or unpainted wood and all that can be seen of them, except a slatted door, is a gray tiled roof behind the treestopped wall.

In the city we will find the homes crowded together but here in the towns and suburbs the houses have more room and we often see picturesque straw roofs upon which lilies and mosses grow. Our guide informs us that such roofs last 30 years and compare favorably in cost with shingled ones.

He adds, however, that they increase the fire risk and so are not permitted within the city limits.

At last our curiosity is to be satisfied. We are entering our first Japanese home! We approach through a small door in the wall beside the big formal gate which we are informed is opened only for grand occasions. A few steps and we enter a low sliding latticéd door which rings a bell. We call "Beg pardon," (under orders).

We wait.

At last comes a neat smiling maid to ask us in, whereupon we sit down and take off our shoes! It is no wonder, we decide that a well kept Japanese house seems very fresh and dainty when all the dirt of the street is left outside on the shoes. "All!"? Well, all but what apparently blows in as dust. A Japanese house must take much cleaning, after all, to keep it fresh and dainty, we conclude.

To stop our soliloquizing comes our charming little hostess, elegant in a long slender kimono touched with blue and crimson. We will learn much of Japanese life if we will take "mats" for a time and listen as she talks thus of her Japanese home.

The rooms though small and low are very light and pleasant because of the papered lattice slides which open wide in the warm weather and let in plenty of light even when closed. This effect of light airiness is helped by the smooth thick matting that covers the floors. These mats are swept with a light broom, but one can guess that much dust gets through the surface into the grass inside and the grass wears into dust. Every day the latticed paper windows are cleaned —flick, flick, with a "feather" duster made of silk rags. How could one wipe each of the hundreds of tiny wooden bars? And so the dust is "flicked" off to the mats, to settle through—to rise again.

The mats are taken out twice a year and beaten in the sunshine which helps, but if bugs ever get a start in them, they might as well be burned up, says our hostess with a sigh.

The rooms are connected by narrow verandahs or corridors which are not matted but of wood and kept polished by mopping twice daily with cold water. We were informed that the water from the family bath is best for this. It is sure to give that desired soft velvety polish in not more than fifty years!

At night wooden doors outside the corridors are slid into place and all made cozy. Heating is by tiny charcoal fires burning in great jardiniers of bronze or pottery filled with ashes. There is electricity even in tiny hamlets.

In the common sitting room, small but conveniently central, there is a low table, a foot high, so that one may use it while sitting on the floor. Here the family sits at meals and the children study in the evening. There are emboinds on one wall for the bedding which is brought out at night and spread on the floor in this same room. The Japanese think "for-
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boiling ten minutes the fire is turned out and the rice left tightly covered five minutes or more longer. Then it is mixed gently with a flat scoop and is ready for the table. No salt or other seasoning is added except in special dishes.

Unseasoned rice is bread and potatoes to every meal, simple or elaborate, in Japan. Soup is almost as inevitable, even for breakfast. This is made of a soured soy bean paste reminding one of sauer kraut in taste. It is hard to get used to unusual foods at breakfast as we soon discovered, but for this soup a liking soon develops.

Meat is little used. Good cuts of beef cost 50 to 70 cents a pound in the cities. Milk is expensive, 20 to 25 cents a quart and though pasteurized is not very desirable. Besides, Japanese are just learning to like to drink it. There is, of course, very little cheese used. It is so hard for Japanese to learn to eat it. Butter is used a little as bread is coming to be used, but it too, has to be learned.

Fish is plentiful, cheap and excellent. Many kinds are more delicious than even channel cat. Certain varieties are always served raw by preference but their sale is carefully regulated and inspected. Fish is delicious raw in thin pink slices garnished with seaweed or shaved turnip.

Vegetables are plentiful. There are more than a dozen varieties being used as greens. It is a Japanese fault to throw away the water in which the vegetables are cooked, but perhaps that loss is partially made up for in the amount eaten. Greens are pickled as are turnips and other vegetable, by letting them sour in a paste of water, rice bran and a little salt—again like our sauer kraut. Many kinds of root vegetables are eaten, including our own sweet potatoes and less commonly the Irish potato. Tomatoes and sweet corn so much liked by Americans are not eaten generally by Japanese.

The sweets of the Japanese are many. They grace the end of an important meal and are served with tea to any caller. Fruits are many, cheap and delicious.

The clothing of Japan is changing too. The universal kimono is becoming skirt and midy, or dress for school girls—or coat and trousers for men and boys. A few women wear dresses but most of them are still in the picturesque but expensive and uncomfortably narrow kimonos. Many children and men, especially those in towns away from the large centers still wear kimonos too, but they are difficult to clean since they must often be ripped to wash them. If made of silk they are expensive and if properly tied on, the kimono is terribly tight around the waist and so narrow at the knees as to interfere with walking.

Underwear is not worn much for warmth except by boys and working men. With them it is very apparent—heavy knitted cotton drawers and shirts—in the winter. But the absence of underwear is just as apparent in summer; working men and boys go in a gauze-string plus a wide knitted woolen belt—said to protect one from cholera. It sometimes looks as if all masculine Japan were in shorts or track suits. So much does our kindly hostess tell us of her home and the lives of her family and of her neighbors’ families. More we can picture. The beauty and drudgery of the homes of the middle class; the strangeness and the likeness to our own, and the changes that are taking place to make Japanese homes more like our own—these things it is not hard to see.

As we make our farewells we are reminded of the story of a New England Farmer who greeted his missionary cousin, just back from Japan, with the question, “Well, ye got them heathen learned to sit on cheers yit?”

Western civilization seems to be progressing toward the sitting of the Japanese on “cheers”. But if that is all we accomplish, if we but tear down the customs and habits of the home and give no meaning to life, add no motive force to a desire for beauty in it, our contribution is far too small.

Earth’s crammed with Heaven
And every common bush’s afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes—
The rest sit round and pick blackberries.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning