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Chop Sticks and Geisha . . .

By Mitchell V. Charnley

HOW would you like,” says your Japanese host, at the end of a viciously hot summer day of sightseeing in Kyto, “to take dinner in true Japanese fashion tonight?”

Likely you are inclined to demur. Though you want to see everything Japanese you can during your tour, any extra effort when you’re willing in perspiration and fatigue seems too much. You’d prefer a “European style” dinner tonight, from a menu printed in English. But your host, with native tact and thoughtfulness, has read your mind.

“You think it too hot,” he pronounces. “But it will be cooler and more comfortable than in the hotel.” And so that is decided.

You are, incidentally, a man—only men go to the old-style Japanese restaurants. Westernization of Japan is rushing forward, and with it is coming the death of the ancient tradition that women are little better than servants; but in some places the tradition holds, and the restau-rant to which your host is to take you is one of them.

So, in company with your host and two or three other Japanese men, you set out for the restaurant. You could take a ricksha if you choose, or a taxi; it’s only a short way, so you walk. The entrance fronts directly on the street, and looks exactly like dozens of shops on each side; just inside the doorway, however, you see a row of shoes (both shoes like yours and wooden “geta?”), and you know that you must take yours off. Off they come, and you slide your feet into soft heelless “bedroom slippers.”

YOU shuffle in the slippers down a long corridor, its floor of highly polished hardwood and its walls of sliding paper or woven straw mats. Some of the panels are pushed back, showing you square rooms with floors of “tatami,” thick, soft straw matting; you don’t see a stick of furniture in any of them, but you’ve been in Japan long enough to know that Japanese furniture is brought out from big closets behind wall panels as it’s needed.

At the end of the corridor the little brown-skinned women servants, in kimono of soft colors, bow you into a somewhat larger room than the rest; at its far end it opens onto an uncovered balcony overlooking the wide, placid Kamakura River. As you step from the corridor to the tatami you remove the slippers—anything firmer than your stockinged feet might harm the soft matting. And then, to your surprise, you find your party removing its clothing, while the servants bring freshly-humdered cotton kimonos.

“First,” says your host, “we will bathe.”

Now you know why he had said it would be more comfortable here than at the modern hotel.

So you go to an adjoining bathroom, its square wooden tub set with its top only 6 inches above the floor. It is full of hot water, but you don’t step into it. Instead you take a big wooden dipper, scoop up water from the tub and give yourself a kind of shower bath. Then you soap yourself, and finally get into the tub for rinsing. Servants hover around to offer you towels. Finally you are once more in your kimono—and the heat and fatigue of a hard day are forgotten.

YOU return to the balcony, cool and pleasant in the twilight; servants have preceded you with big cushions on which you are to sit, and little semicircular arm-rests, heavily padded, on which you may lean. The proprietress of the restaurant, a small smiling woman in dark brown kimono, comes to greet you and to ask solicitously whether you need anything to make you more comfortable.

And you are at last ready for a leisurely Japanese dinner of so many courses that you lose count, and you are to find that you’ll spend 4 hours at it!

First the little servant girls—one for each member of your party—bring a clear, pleasantly-scented liquid which your host warns you hurriedly not to drink. “It’s only a mouth wash,” he says. So you wash your mouth with it! Then a steaming hot towel, wrung into a tight coil, appears—this to give your face and hands a final cooling “sponge bath.” And finally the first dish of the meal itself is brought—a small ice-cold glass of a drink made by boiling roasted wheat in water.

Soon the glasses are whisked away, and for the first time tables make their appearance—low little black lacquered tables, one for each diner. On each is a covered black bowl, also of lacquer; beside the bowl rests a pair of chop sticks (brand new chop sticks, wrapped in paper as sanitarily as the straws you are

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given with your ice cream sodas). You remove the cover, and find steaming soup in the bowl. And there isn’t a sign of a spoon to eat it with!

But you watch the other guests, and find that they do the obvious thing—they drink the soup, and with loud and expressive inhalations at that. So you do likewise. And, seizing the chop sticks in your right hand and struggling to make them behave docilely as do the Japanese, you hold the bowl close to your mouth when the soup is gone and lift, or shovel, or push—whichever technique you prefer—the vegetables and bits of meat from its bottom between your lips.

MEANTIME you’ve found your party enlarged by the appearance of a number of Japanese women who kneel on the tatami beside the diners, chat with them—and gleefully try to teach you how to use your chop sticks! Like the servants, they are dressed in kimonos; but their kimonos are more elaborate, their stiff wide obi more colorful. And the younger among them have elaborate coiffures, with heavy high coils of black hair and sparkling ornaments.

They are the geisha girls (only English-speaking persons add the word “girls”—the Japanese call them simply geisha, pronounced gaysha), and their function is to entertain the restaurant’s guests. They are selected because they are pretty, or clever, or both; Kyoto’s best-known geisha is Takoka, a woman of 45, a comedienne of no mean ability. You can’t understand a word she says, but very soon your sides are aching at her drollness.

The soup finished, more dishes are brought on, one at a time. There is a stiff brownish-red bean jelly, heavily sweet, which you eat with a single slim bamboo sliver (you wondered at first whether it could be a tooth-pick!). There is a dish of “hors d’oeuvres”—radishes, pickled vegetables that are strange to you. There’s a bowl of iced raw fish cut in small white hunks, served with soy sauce into which you dip the chunks. There’s a plate of sizzling fried eel, deliciously toothsome.

The pièce de résistance is brook trout. Golden brown, two small trout are brought to you on a square black lacquer tray; they are crossed diagonally in the middle of the tray, and their tails curl up in surprisingly lifelike manner. On one corner of the tray is what looks like a small green lime, crisp small leaves on its stem; you lift off the top and find a bitey sauce inside. Altogether it’s one of the most attractive dishes you’ve ever laid eyes on, and you hate to disturb it.

Before you get a chance a geisha beside you takes your chop sticks and, with quick, deft jabs, loosens the bones from the flesh; then she siezes the head and neatly pulls the bones completely out of the trout, all without breaking the browned skin!

Of course there’s rice—a fresh hot bowl of it is kept on your table constantly, and you eat it along with the other dishes, much as you eat bread at home. There is cup after cup of hot green tea. And there’s steaming hot “sake”—Japanese wine—served in tiny cups not much bigger than a thimble, and kept filled by the geisha. As the meal progresses, your host takes his “sake” cup, washes it in a bowl of water provided for the purpose, and fills it from the little china “sake” flask; then he passes it to you as a gesture of hospitality and friendship.

And there are many other dishes—sea food, meat, vegetables, “sushi” or rice cakes, sweets. It seems that the meal will never end. Meanwhile you are entertained by troops of wandering minstrels—tiny children, mostly—on the river bank below you; you toss small coins to them (if you’re remembered to put your purse in the conspicuous sleeve of your kimono). And the geisha entertain too—they sing sad, plaintive songs to the accompaniment of the “samisen,” an instrument something like a mandolin, or they dance slow, graceful dances.

At length the evening is ended. You get back into your commonplace clothes, go to the door and slip your shoes on. The proprietress, the geisha and all the servants stand in the doorway, bowing low as they say “sayonara”—goodbye. You call “sayonara” back to them, and if you’re a linguist you add “irigato” thank you.

And you leave with a fervent certainty that no elaborate “European” meal, in the finest modern hotel in Japan, would ever taste so good or be so pleasant.

Girls Like Hygiene
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have is the only one they’ll ever have seems to be an apparently new idea to some, who have a big desire to make their record more shining by burning the candle’s two ends. If they do awaken with a bang” when they find out just how they’ve been treating themselves, they’re glad to be told.

Many girls find practical application for their training in the home. It’s something to be able to do such an ordinary thing as fill a hot water bottle and do it right. Little aches and pains can often be relieved if a handy girl around the house uses a couple of capable hands and does a bit of massaging. And the instruction in child care not only proves valuable around the home, but a number of girls have been able to strengthen the summer finances with this knowledge.

The Physical Education Department cooperates with Miss Goulding; and its head, Miss Whinfred Tilden, gives the girls the fine points in posture and the bony and muscular structures of the body. Miss Louise L’Engle of the Foods and Nutrition Department straightens out the vitamin difficulties and sees just how much each girl is eating. This is measured by a calorie scale. If it isn’t enough, she is told about it, and if they ‘still call her skinny!’ it’s her own fault. The same applies to the girl whose appetite just can’t be controlled.

Hygiene is “fun.” Just ask anyone who has taken it. And besides knowing all of the nice things to do and when to do them, there’s always a chance that you may meet up with the big emergency some day, make a headline and do something important, just because you learned how to do it back in a lab at Iowa State.

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