

Japanese Tea Houses and the Geisha Girls

(Copyright, 1902, by Douglas Sladen.)

TEA houses and geisha girls make up that mournful ceremony of a Japanese banquet; the food is of no consequence—to a European.

Taken separately they are not bad; your own dinners at the foreign hotel would be much enlivened by performances of geishas—they would do as well as a yeomanry band. And tea houses are not so bad if you don't take their tea, though their teas are less awful than the dinners unless you do the correct thing and eat salted cherry blossoms with them.

Japanese dinners are a refined kind of torture; you are expected to sit on your heels and eat off the floor. Lovely little mousmees, with scarlet petticoats, come and kneel before you. But what is the use of it, when you are kneeling yourself, because, not being a Jap, you can't sit on your knees? Besides your mousmee spends all her time in playing hide-and-seek with your sake bottle. No good restaurant will let you drink sake that isn't hot enough, and as you don't drink it at all, it soon gets below the proper point and your mousmee goes for more. You are behaving very badly. The Japanese never keeps his sake waiting.

The food is a worse trial. Live fish might do if you could persuade yourself to treat it like an oyster, but seaweed soup and lard sweetmeats and custard made with pickle and fish juice are novelties too striking for the male European stomach. When you are drowning you reach at straws and when you are having Japanese banquet you catch at anything you know by sight, like a plum or a potato, but it is only a subtler form of torture, for the plum is sure to be salted and the potato cooked in syrup.

Even if the things were good to eat, you couldn't help yourself with chopsticks; it's no use like eating soup with a fork. Un-eterred by your not eating, the dinner goes on for hours, while you wonder which will happen first—your knee joints give way or your selves go flat. If you have been to a Japanese banquet before, you prop yourself against the wall. That is the only way you can sit on the floor for hours. The mousmees are so pretty and so nice that if you do get up to leave they always persuade you to sit down again.

And when it is all over comes the unkindest cut of all. Politeness demands that you should make a separate excuse for each dish you cannot eat; it's no use, for you are getting into your 'riksha your mousmee hands you a pile of white wooden boxes in which she has carefully packed everything you could not eat, for you to take to your honorable family, and etiquette demands that you should take them, though you give them to your 'riksha boy as soon as you are out of sight. Etiquette is the thief of Japan.

There is no good looking at the geisha while you are going through these tortures; you are not in a state of health to make allowances for their voices or their music, and their wit is lost upon you, which is, perhaps, just as well. The geisha, except in the kind of ballets you get at the Maple Club, does not suit Europeans. She dances without her feet and sings without a voice. She does not, as the unen' guild assert, belong to the oldest profession in the world—not necessarily. Her real function is to console the dissipated Japanese for the absence of actresses in his country. Mme. Ida Yacco is a Japanese woman, but a western idea.

Japanese ladies have actors to fall in love with, but the Japanese man has to fall back on the geisha. The ancient Greeks did not have actresses either.

Perhaps their plays were as dull (on the stage) as Japanese plays, which run their banquets close. The ancient Greek was as wise as the modern Jap; he did not want to be separated by the footlights and the cat-gut tortures of the orchestra from his goddess. The wisest of the ancients, like the Japanese, did not hang about stage doors, or send jewelry on the off chance to actresses whom they did not know.

If you ask a man to dinner and take him to the Gaiety afterward, you spoil his dinner or lose half the performance. Instead of going to the Gaiety, the Japs made the Gaiety come to them. Japanese wives are not taught accomplishments, but virtues, which are their only reward. The Japanese man wants something more than an actress. The geisha is expected to be excellent in that way, and to be at his beck and call; when he is too idle to attend any more to her dancing and singing, he beckons her to come closer and entertain him with her blandishments.

Geishas are not always beautiful; they are always elegant and clever; they are the best dressed women in Japan—the Japanese do not think it ladylike for their wives to dress well. Wives wear a sort of half-mourning and no wonder. The geisha begins training for her future honors early. Girls are chosen for cleverness at 7 or 8 years old—beauty is only considered skin deep for a geisha. They are trained in dancing and singing and the art of conversation.

The latter is most important; a geisha has constantly to be bandying wit with sake-fuddled admirers and to switch lovers on or off. She is expected to sing and dance and play. Any music hall artist in London would promise to shoot herself if she could not do better with a week's practice. But the training of these geishas extends over four years, and is perfect of its kind. The popular geisha, like the popular actress, is much courted; she often makes a brilliant marriage.

No Japanese could understand "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray." Women with pasta get married every day there; their pasta are no objection, but they have to be pasta when they marry; in that divorce-mongering land Caesar's wife ceases to be a wife if she is not above suspicion.

It is hard for Europeans to take the geishas seriously, for all their accomplishments. They look like children, and are children—when they are not cats. It is easy to recognize the geisha; she looks like an angel with wings of rich brocade, a chalk face, geranium lips and flowers in her glossy hair. The geishas may often be seen in 'rikshas with their duennas. The houses in the Yoshiwara are glorified tea houses, and may be used as such. They remind one of the Arabian Nights.

But tea houses are apt to be lovely; it is their business, except those which go in for the dull respectability of being inns. A tea house isn't tea-total. It is generally not a house at all, but a garden full of summer houses and quite often consists of nothing but a roof and a view. You can never get to a view in Japan without passing through a tea house, and your way is blocked by gay little mousmees, who rub their knees together and bow and kiss their respects and give you tea.

They don't sell it, but you give them a Chal-dal tea present—three half-pence

(worth only three farthings) for five cups of tea, and you needn't drink it. One often wonders what they do with the tea that isn't drunk in Japan; it doesn't seem to go back in the pot for the next person, who won't drink it either. Perhaps tea plants are kept in a good humor by having the tea put back in the soil. As the tea shed is built across the path, this pretty performance is a toll.

Some tea houses are as beautiful as dreams of coming into fortunes. They may be in the Chinese style with masonry ornaments like that described below; they have exquisite old wooden terraces overhanging a lake with the sacred fountain of Fujiyama staring at them like a house to let; or they may be themselves overhung with fragrant lavender wistaria blossoms four feet long, which sweep the waters of a river in the midst of a gay capital; they may be dear little dolls' houses, built of porous unpainted pine wood, and planted in a retired corner of paradise like the point of Tomi Oka.

The dolls are always there, pretty little mousmees, who take off your boots to prevent your spoiling the deep, soft, primrose-colored matting or kicking the house down when you grow impatient. Time is a snail in Japan. There is a tea house in every temple, run by the priests. If Europeans go there, they sell other things stronger than tea. 'Rikshaboy's tea houses you always have with you on the great high roads. Almost any house may turn tea house or shop among the lower class Japanese.

Delightful as those thatched belvederes are, where you pay your tea money and look at the view, there is nothing a foreigner enjoys so much as the city tea house with Chinese gardens

About inns I shall say nothing. They are respectable places enough for a land which has no arbitrary rules about decency. It is the restaurant tea house at which the Japanese defies our conventions. Even a banker asking his family lawyer to dinner does not include wives; he asks him to dinner at a restaurant and engages geishas, famous for their beauty and their wit, but not necessarily for their morals, to make themselves agreeable to him. Both wives regard this as a natural feature of hospitality. As you drive through Shiba at night you will know where the Japanese gentleman is enjoying himself in his primitive way, by large wooden lanterns with paper glasses and projecting eaves and by the 'rikshaboy's smoking, and, doubtless, scandal-mongering, at the gates.

You will hear the tinkle of the samisen and the poor little geishas' voices. Sometimes, if the night is hot and the banqueters have reached the drunken stage, the shutters will be taken down and you will see the party enjoying itself. The Japanese take their pleasures badly; the host and his guests sit in a semi-circle more or less drugged with gorging and sake and the geishas are ranged in semi-circle opposite if they still have a soul for music; or come closer and enchant them with prettiness and wittiness. The Japanese do not laugh for pleasure or kiss for love; they have a derisive laugh to show anger and they giggle at wit, but the hearty English laugh of enjoyment is unknown to them.

We went to such a tea house at Kobe. I wanted to stay in the garden, the size of a back yard, which contained a river and a waterfall and a lake, and ever so many little islands, connected with hog back bridges, garnished with pagodas and the

mushroom-topped lanterns, which are never lit, and shrines and lighthouses, all of mossy old masonry. The lake didn't seem to contain any water, though I was assured that this was the case. Its top was paved with broad lotus leaves, from which sprang like crowns standing on scepters, huge rose-colored blossoms, and all round the lake were freaks in maples.

The tour de force, a fir tree taught to grow in the shape of a junk, looked like a ship as any other junk. The whole scene looked like a willow pattern plate, converted by the moon into a garden for a toy nation. It made me feel quite like a poet, but our host had not taken us there for poetry, but for a spree. We were sad dogs. Our little summer houses were only lit by two rush lights on tall candlesticks of wrought iron. Then some little mousmees came and brought in geisha, who could not sing, and Japanese dishes, which we could not eat, and sake, which we could not drink, or we might have warmed to our work.

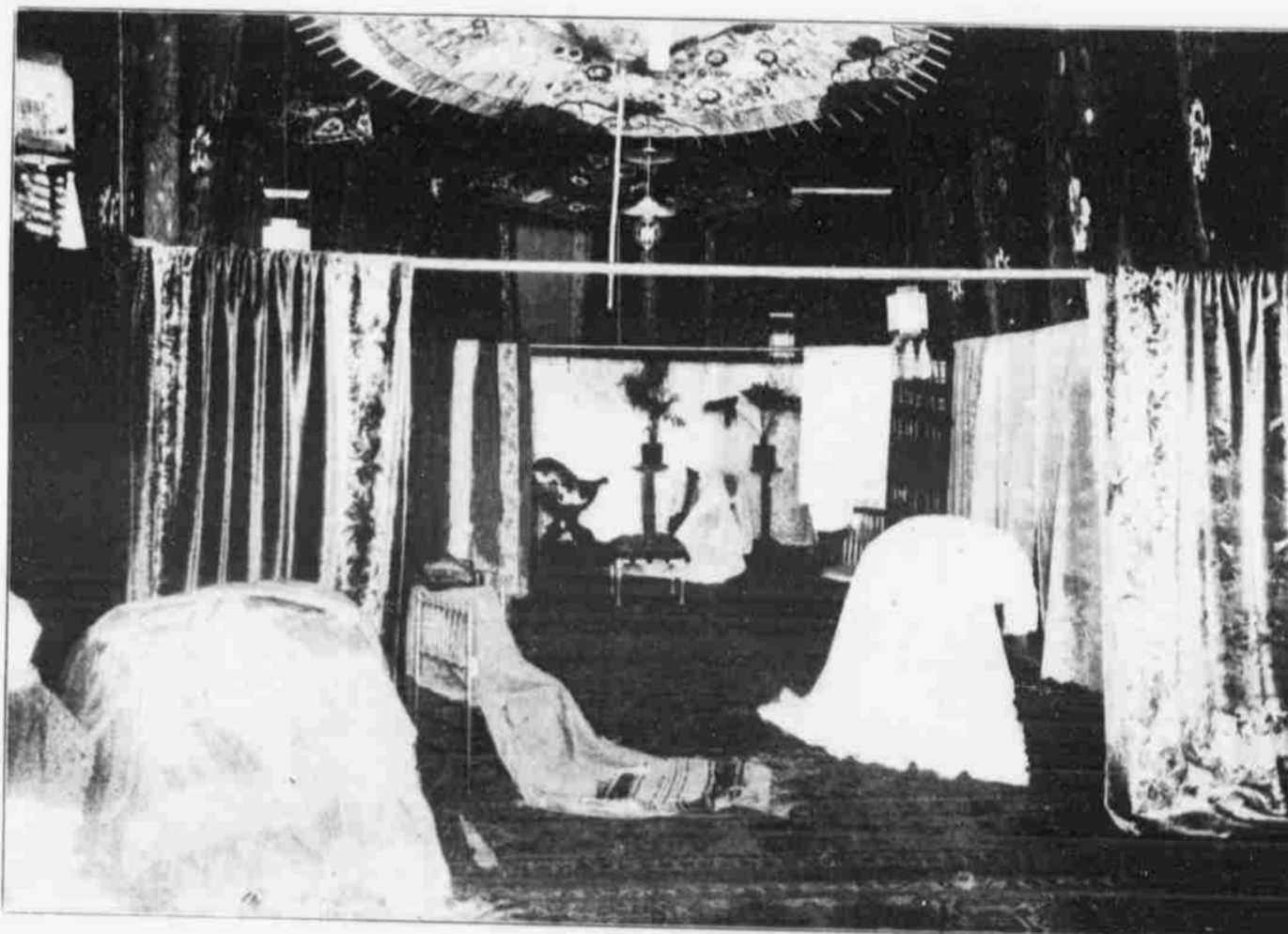
Public Improvement

Washington Star: "You say that the taxes are light in Crimson Gulch?" said the stranger.

"Practically nothin' at all," answered Three-Finger Sam.

"But what do you do for public improvements?"

"Faro Bill tends to 'em. He did hint that the boys ought to chip in and buy a new roulette wheel, but they stood firm on the proposition that if Bill wanted any public improvements he'd have to make 'em himself."



PARTIAL VIEW OF THE CURTAIN AND DRAPERY DEPARTMENT OF THE SHIVERICK FURNITURE CO. THIS IS ONE OF THE HANDSOMEST AND MOST LUXURIOUS DISPLAYS OF COSTLY FABRICS EVER SHOWN IN THE WEST.



ART ROOMS OF THE SHIVERICK FURNITURE CO., SHOWING ARTISTIC AND EXCLUSIVE DESIGNS IN FURNITURE, DRAPERIES AND RUGS. THESE ROOMS WERE ADMIRER BY HUNDREDS OF VISITORS DURING CARNIVAL WEEK.

SECURITY LIFE AND SAVINGS INSURANCE CO.
OF IOWA
LOBECK & DEMING STATE MANAGERS

SECURITY LIFE AND SAVINGS INSURANCE CO.
OF IOWA
LOBECK & DEMING STATE MANAGERS

While The Bee artist was strolling and the carnival grounds looking for something good for The Illustrated Bee he was attracted by the booth occupied by Lobeck & Deming, the progressive, up-to-date managers of the Security Life Savings Insurance company, Des Moines, Ia.

This company has grown to be one of the giant old-line companies and the Nebraska managers are pushing it in the front ranks of life insurance in this state. They are hustlers after business and can give first-class contracts to good, energetic men. Messrs. Lobeck & Deming have a suite of offices at 622-23-24, New York Life building.