CHAPTER XI

A GEISHA DINNER

Inishi toshi
Ne-kojite uyeshi
Waga yado no
Wakaki no ume wa
Hana saki ni keri.

The young plum tree
Of my house
Which in bygone years
I dug up by the roots and transplanted
Has at last bloomed with flowers.

NEXT morning, Geoffrey rose earlier than was his wont; and arrayed in one of his many kimonos, entered his sitting-room. There he found Tanaka, wrapped in contemplation of a letter. He was scrutinising it with an attention which seemed to pierce the envelope.

'Who is it from, Tanaka?' asked Geoffrey; he had become mildly ironical in his dealings with the inquisitive guide.

'I think perhaps invitation to pleasure party from Ladyship's noble relatives,' Tanaka replied, unabashed.

Geoffrey took the note to his wife, and she read aloud,

'DEAR MR AND MRS BARRINGTON,—It is now the bright Spring weather. I hope you to enjoy good health. I have been rude thus to absent myself during your polite visit. Much pressing business has hampered me, also stomach trouble, but indeed there is no excuse. Please not to be angry. This time I hope you to attend a poor feast, Maple Club Hotel, next Tuesday, six p.m. Hoping to esteemed favour and ever friend,

'Yours obedient,

'G. FUJINAMI.'

'What exactly does he mean?'

'As Tanaka says, it is an invitation to a pleasure party, at the beginning of next week.'

'Answer it, sweetheart,' said Geoffrey; 'tell them that we are not angry, and that we shall be delighted to accept.'

Tanaka explained that the Maple Club Restaurant or Koyokwan, which more strictly should be translated Hall of the Red Leaf, is the largest and most famous of Tokyo 'tea-houses'—to use a comprehensive term which applies equally to a shack by the roadside, and to a dainty pleasure resort where entertainments run easily into four or five pounds per head. There are restaurants more secretive and more *élite*, where the æsthetic *gourmet* may feel more at ease and where the bohemian spirit can loose its wit. But for public functions of all kinds, for anything on a really big scale, the Maple Club stands alone. It is the 'Princes' of Tokyo with a flavour of the Guildhall steaming richly through its corridors. Here the great municipal dinners take place, the great political entertainments. Here famous foreigners are officially introduced to the mysteries of Japanese *cuisine* and the charms of Japanese *geisha*. Here hangs a picture of Lord Kitchener himself, scrambled over by laughing *mousmés*, who seem to be peeping out of his pockets and buttonholes, a Gulliver in Lilliput.

Both Geoffrey and Asako had treated the invitation as a joke; but at the last moment, while they were threading the mysterious streets of the still unfamiliar city, they both confessed to a certain nervousness. They were on the brink of a plunge into depths unknown. They knew nothing whatever about the customs, tastes and prejudices of the people with whom they were to mix—not even their names and their language.

'Well, we're in for it,' said Geoffrey, 'we must see it through now.'

They drove up a steep gravel drive and stopped before a broad Japanese entrance, three wide steps like altar stairs leading up to a dark cavernous hall full of bowing women and men in black clothes, similar, silent and ghostlike. The first impression was lugubrious, like a feast of mutes.

Boots off! Geoffrey knew at least this rule number one in Japanese etiquette. But who were these fluttering women, so attentive in removing their cloaks and hats? Were they relatives or waitresses? And the silent groups beyond? Were they Fujinami or waiters? The two guests had friendly smiles for all; but they gazed helplessly for a familiar face.

An apparition in evening-dress with a long frock-coat and a purple tie emerged from that grim chorus of spectators. It was Ito, the lawyer. The free and easy American manner was checked by the responsibility of those flapping coat-tails. He looked and behaved just like a shop-walker. After a stiff bow and handshake, he said,—

'Very pleased to see you, Sir and Mrs Barrington also. The Fujinami family is proud to make your entertainment.'

Geoffrey expected further introductions; but the time had not yet come. With a wave of the arm Mr Ito added,—

'Please step this way, Sir and Lady.'

The Barringtons with Ito led the procession; and the mutes closed in behind them. Down endless polished corridors they passed with noiseless steps over the spotless boards. The only sound was the rustling of silk garments. To closed eyes they might have seemed like the arrival of a company of dowagers. The women, who had at first received them, were still fluttering around them like humming-birds escorting a flight of crows. To one of them Geoffrey owed his preservation.

He would have struck his forehead against a low doorway in the darkness; but she touched the lintel with her finger and then laid her tiny hand on Barrington's tall shoulder, laughing and saying in infantile English,—

'English *danna san* very high!'

They came to a sudden opening between paper walls. In a little room behind a table stood a middle-aged Japanese couple as stiff as waxworks. For an instant Geoffrey thought they must be the cloak-room attendants. Then to his surprise Ito announced,—

'Mr and Mrs Fujinami Gentaro, the head of the Fujinami family. Please walk in and shake hands.'

Geoffrey and his wife did as they were directed. Three mutual bowings took place in absolute silence, followed by a handshake. Then Ito said,—

'Mr and Mrs Fujinami Gentaro wish to say they are very pleased you both come to-night. It is very poor food and very poor feast, they say. Japanese food is very simple sort of thing. But they ask you please excuse them, for what they have done they have done from a good heart.'

Geoffrey was mumbling incoherently, and wondering whether he was expected to reply to this oration, when Ito again exclaimed, 'Please step this way.'

They passed into a large room like a concert hall with a stage at one end. There were several men squatting on the floor round *hibachi* smoking and drinking beer. They looked like black sheep browsing.

These were joined by the mutes who followed the Barringtons. All of these people were dressed exactly alike. They wore white socks, a dark kimono almost hidden by the black cloak upon which the family crest—a wreath of wisteria (*fuji*) foliage—shone like a star on sleeves and neck, and by the fluted yellowish skirt of heavy rustling silk. This dress, though gloomy and sacerdotal, was dignified and becoming; but the similarity

was absurd. It looked like a studied effect at a fancy dress ball. It was particularly exasperating to the guests of honour who were anxious to distinguish their relatives and to know them apart; but Ito alone, with his European clothes and his purple tie, was conspicuous and unmistakable.

'He is like Mrs Jarley,' thought Geoffrey, 'he explains the waxworks.'

In the middle of the room was a little group of chairs of the weary beast of burden type, which are requisitioned for public meetings. Two of them were dignified by cushions of crimson plush. These were for Geoffrey and Asako.

Among the black sheep there was no movement beyond the steady staring of some thirty pairs of eyes. When the Barringtons had been enthroned, the host and hostess approached them with silent dragging steps and downcast faces. They might have been the bearers of evil tidings. A tall girl followed behind her parents.

Mrs Fujinami Shidzuyé and her daughter, Sadako, were the only women present. This was a compromise, and a consideration for Asako's feelings. Mr Ito had proposed that since a lady was the chief guest of honour, therefore all the Fujinami ladies ought to be invited to meet her. To Mr Fujinami's strict conservative mind such an idea was anathema. What! Wives at a banquet! In a public restaurant! With *geisha* present! Absurd—and disgusting! *O tempora! O mores!*

Then, argued the lawyer, Asako must not be invited. But Asako was the *clou* of the evening; and besides, an English gentleman would be insulted if his wife were not invited too. And—as Mr Ito went on to urge—any woman, Japanese or foreign, would be ill-at-ease in a company composed entirely of men. Besides Sadako could speak English so well; it was so convenient that she should come; and under her mother's care her morals

would not be contaminated by the propinquity of *geisha*. So Mr Fujinami gave in so far as concerned his own wife and daughter.

Shidzuyé San, as befitted a matron of sober years, wore a plain black kimono; but Sadako's dress was of pale mauve colour, with a bronze sash tied in an enormous bow. Her hair was parted on one side and caught up in a bun behind—the latest *haikara* fashion and a tribute to the foreign guests. Hers was a graceful figure; but her expression was spoiled by the blue-tinted spectacles which completely hid her features.

'Miss Sadako Fujinami, daughter of Mr Fujinami Gentaro,' said Ito. 'She has been University undergraduate, and she speaks English quite well.'

Miss Sadako bowed three times. Then she said, 'How do you do?' in a high unnatural voice.

The room was filling up with the little humming-bird women who had been present at the entrance. They were handing cigarettes and teacups to the guests. They looked bright and pleasant; and they interested Geoffrey.

'Are these ladies relatives of the Fujinami family?' he asked Ito.

'Oh no, not at all,' the lawyer gasped; 'you have made great mistake, Mr Barrington. Japanese ladies all left at home, never go to restaurant. These girls are no ladies, they're *geisha* girls. *Geisha* girls very famous to foreign persons.'

Geoffrey knew that he had made his first *faux pas*.

'Now,' said Mr Ito,' please step this way; we go upstairs to the feast room.'

The dining-room seemed larger still than the reception room. Down each side of it were arranged two rows of red lacquer tables, each about eighteen inches high and eighteen inches square. Mysterious little dishes were placed on each of these tables; the most conspicuous

was a flat reddish fish with a large eye, artistically served in a rollicking attitude, which in itself was an invitation to eat.

The English guests were escorted to two seats at the extreme end of the room, where two tables were laid in isolated glory. They were to sit there like king and queen, with two rows of their subjects in long aisles to the right and to the left of them.

The seats were cushions merely; but those placed for Geoffrey and Asako were raised on low hassocks. After them, the files of the Fujinami streamed in and took up their appointed positions along the sides of the room. They were followed by the *geisha*, each girl carrying a little white china bottle shaped like a vegetable marrow, and a tiny cup like the bath which hygienic old maids provide for their canary birds.

'Japanese *saké*,' said Sadako to her cousin, 'you do not like?'

'Oh yes, I do,' replied Asako who was intent on enjoying everything. But on this occasion she had chosen the wrong answer; for real ladies in Japan are not supposed to drink the warm rice wine.

The *geisha* certainly looked most charming as they slowly advanced in a kind of ritualistic procession. Their feet like little white mice, the dragging skirts of their spotless kimonos, their exaggerated care and precision, and their stiff conventional attitudes presented a picture from a Satsuma vase. Their dresses were of all shades, black, blue, purple, grey and mauve. The corner of the skirt folded back above the instep revealed a glimpse of gaudy underwear provoking to men's eyes, and displayed the intricate stencilled flower patterns, which in the case of the younger women seemed to be catching hold of the long sleeves and straying upwards. Little dancing-girls, thirteen and fourteen years old—the so-called *hangyoku* or half jewels—accompanied their

elder sisters of the profession. They wore very bright dresses just like the dolls; and their massive *coiffure* was bedizened with silver spangles and elaborately artificial flowers.

'Oh!' gasped the admiring Asako, 'I must get one of those *geisha* girls to show me how to wear my kimonos properly; they do look smart.'

'I do not think,' answered Sadako. 'These are vulgar women, bad style; I will teach you the noble way.'

But all the *geisha* had a grave and dignified look, quite different from the sprightly butterflies of musical comedy from whom Geoffrey had accepted his knowledge of Japan.

They knelt down before the guests and poured a little of the *saké* into the shallow saucer held out for their ministrations. Then they folded their hands in their laps and appeared to slumber.

A sucking sound ran round the room as the first cup was drained. Then a complete silence fell, broken only by the shuffle of the girls' feet on the matting as they went to fetch more bottles.

Mr Fujinami Gentaro spoke to the guests assembled, bidding them commence their meal, and not to stand upon ceremony.

'It is like the one—two—three—go! at a race,' thought Geoffrey.

All the guests were manipulating their chopsticks. Geoffrey raised his own pair. The two slender rods of wood were unparted at one end to show that they had never been used. It was therefore necessary to pull them in two. As he did so, a tiny splinter of wood like a match fell from between them.

Asako laughed.

'That is the tooth-pick,' cousin Sadako explained. We call such chopsticks *komochi-hashi*, chopstick with

baby, because the tooth-pick inside the chopstick like the baby inside the mother. Very funny, I think.'

There were two kinds of soup—excellent: there was cooked fish and raw fish in red and white slices, chastely served with ice: there were vegetables known and unknown, such as sweet potatoes, French beans, lotus stems and bamboo shoots. These had to be eaten with the aid of the chopsticks—a difficult task when it came to cutting up the wing of a chicken or balancing a soft poached egg.

The guests did not eat with gusto. They toyed with the food, sipping wine all the time, smoking cigarettes and picking their teeth.

Geoffrey, according to his own description, was just getting his eye in, when Mr Fujinami Gentaro rose from his humble place at the far end of the room. In a speech full of poetical quotations, which must have cost his tame students considerable trouble in the composition, he welcomed Asako Barrington who, he said, had been restored to Japan like a family jewel which has been lost and is found. He compared her visit to the sudden flowering of an ancient tree. This did not seem very complimentary; however, it referred not to the lady's age but to the elder branch of the family which she represented. After many apologies for the tastelessness of the food and the stupidity of the entertainment, he proposed the health of Mr and Mrs Barrington, which was drunk by the whole company standing.

Ito produced from his pocket a translation of this oration.

'Now please say a few words in reply,' he directed.

Geoffrey, feeling acutely ridiculous scrambled to his feet and thanked everybody for giving his wife and himself such a jolly good time. Ito translated.

'Now please command to drink health of the Fujinami family,' said the lawyer, consulting his *agenda*. So the

health of Mr and Mrs Fujinami Gentaro was drunk with relish by everybody, including the lady and gentleman honoured.

'In this country,' thought Geoffrey, 'one gets the speechmaking over before the dinner. Not a bad idea. It saves that nervous feeling which spoils the appetite.'

An old gentlemen, with a restless jaw, tottered to his feet and approached Geoffrey's table. He bowed twice before him, and held out a claw-like hand.

'Mr Fujinami Gennosuké, the father of Mr Fujinami Gentaro,' announced Ito. 'He has retired from life. He wishes to drink wine with you. Please wash your cup and give it to him.'

There was a kind of finger-bowl standing in front of Geoffrey, which he had imagined might be a spittoon. He was directed to rinse his cup in this vessel, and to hand it to the old gentleman. Mr Fujinami Gennosuké received it in both hands as if it had been a sacrament. The attendant *geisha* poured out a little of the greenish liquid, which was drunk with much hissing and sucking. Then followed another obeisance; the cup was returned, and the old gentleman retired.

He was succeeded by Mr Fujinami Gentaro himself, with whom the same ceremony of the *saké* drinking was repeated; and then all the family passed by, one after another, each taking the cup and drinking. It was like a visiting figure in the Lancers' quadrille.

As each relative bent and bowed, Ito announced his name and quality. These names seemed all alike, alike as their faces and as their garments were. Geoffrey could only remember vaguely that he had been introduced to a Member of Parliament, a gross man with a terrible wen like an apple under his ear, and to two army officers, tall clean-looking men, who pleased him more than the others. There were several Government functionaries; but the majority were business men.

Geoffrey could only distinguish for certain his host and his host's father.

'They look just like two old vultures,' he thought.

Then there was Mr Fujinami Takeshi, the son of the host and the hope of the family, a livid youth with a thin moustache and unhealthy marks on his face like raspberries under the skin.

Still the *geisha* kept bringing more and more food in a desultory way quite unlike our system of fixed and regular courses. Still Ito kept pressing Geoffrey to eat, while at the same time apologising for the quality of the food with exasperating repetition. Geoffrey had fallen into the error of thinking that the fish and its accompanying dishes which had been laid before him at first comprised the whole of the repast. He had polished them off with gusto; and had then discovered to his alarm that they were merely *hors d'œuvres*. Nor did he observe until too late how little the other guests were eating. There was no discourtesy apparently in leaving the whole of a dish untasted, or in merely picking at it from time to time. Rudeness consisted in refusing any dish.

Plates of broiled meat and sandwiches arrived, bowls of soup, grilled eels on skewers—that most famous of Tokyo delicacies; finally, the inevitable rice with whose adhesive substance the Japanese epicure fills up the final crannies in his well-lined stomach. It made its appearance in a round drum-like tub of clean white wood, as big as a bandbox, and bound round with shining brass. The girls served the sticky grains into the china rice-bowl with a flat wooden ladle.

'Japanese people always take two bowls of rice at least,' observed Ito. 'One bowl very unlucky; at the funeral we only eat one bowl.'

This to Geoffrey was the *coup de grâce*. He had only managed to stuff down his bowl through a desperate sense of duty.

'If I do have a second,' he gasped, 'it will be my own funeral.'

But this joke did not run in the well-worn lines of Japanese humour. Mr Ito merely thought that the big Englishman, having drunk much *saké*, was talking nonsense.

All the guests were beginning to circulate now; the quadrille was becoming more and more elaborate. They were each calling on each other and taking wine. The talk was becoming more animated. A few bold spirits began to laugh and joke with the *geisha*. Some had laid aside their cloaks; and some even had loosened their kimonos at the neck, displaying hairy chests. The stiff symmetry of the dinner party was quite broken up. The guests were scattered like rooks, bobbing, scratching and pecking about on the yellow mats. The bright plumage of the *geisha* stood out against their sombre monotony.

Presently the *geisha* began to dance at the far end of the room. Ten of the little girls did their steps, a slow dance full of posturing with coloured handkerchiefs. Three of the elder *geisha* in plain grey kimonos squatted behind the dancers strumming on their *samisens*. But there was very little music either in the instrument or in the melody. The sound of the string's twang and the rattle of the bone plectrum drowned the sweetness of the note. The result was a kind of dry clatter or cackle which is ingenious, but not pleasing.

Reggie Forsyth used to say that there is no melody in Japanese music; but that the rhythm is marvellous. It is a kind of elaborate ragtime without any tune to it.

The guests did not pay any attention to the performance, nor did they applaud when it was over.

Mr Ito was consulting his *agenda* paper and his gold watch.

'You will now drink with these gentlemen,' he said. Geoffrey must have demurred.

'It is Japanese custom,' he continued; 'please step this way; I will guide you.'

Poor Geoffrey! it was his turn now to do the visiting figure, but his head was buzzing with some thirty cups of *saké* which he had swallowed out of politeness, and with the unreality of the whole scene.

'Can't do it,' he protested, 'drunk too much already.'

'In Japan we say, "When friends meet, the *saké* sellers laugh!"' quoted the lawyer. 'It is Japanese custom to drink together, and to be happy. To be drunk in good company, it is no shame. Many of these gentlemen will presently be drunk. But if you do not wish to drink more, then just pretend to drink. You take the cup, see; you lift it to your mouth, but you throw away the *saké* into the basin when you wash the cup. That is *geisha's* trick when the boys try to make her drunk, but she is too wise!'

Armed with this advice Geoffrey started on his round of visits, first to his host, and then to his host's father. The face of old Mr Fujinami Gennosuké was as red as beetroot, and his jaw was chewing more vigorously than ever. Nothing however, could have been more perfect than his deportment in exchanging the cup with his guest. But no sooner had Geoffrey turned away to pay another visit than he became aware of a slight commotion. He glanced round and saw Mr Fujinami, senior, in a state of absolute collapse, being conducted out of the room by two members of the family and a cluster of *geisha*.

'What has happened?' he asked, in some alarm.

'It is nothing,' said Ito, 'old gentleman tipsy very quick.'

Everybody now seemed to be smiling and happy. Geoffrey felt the curse of his speechlessness. He was

brimming over with good humour, and was most anxious to please. The Japanese no longer appeared so grotesque as they had on his arrival. He was sure that he would have much in common with many of these men, who talked so good-naturedly among themselves, until the chill of his approach fell upon them

Besides Ito and Sadako Fujinami, the only person present who could talk English at all fluently was that blotchy-faced individual, Mr Fujinami Takeshi. The young man was in a very hilarious state, and had gathered around him a bevy of *geisha* with whom he was cracking jokes. From the nature of his gestures they must have been far from decorous.

'Please to sit down, my dear friend,' he said to Geoffrey. 'Do you like *geisha* girl?'

'I don't think they like me,' said Geoffrey. 'I'm too big.'

'Oh no,' said the Japanese, 'very big, very good. Japanese man too small, no good at all. Why do all *geisha* love *sumotori* (professional wrestlers)? Because *sumotori* very big; but this English gentleman bigger than *sumotori*. So this girl love you, and this girl, and this girl, and this very pretty girl, I don't know?'

He added a question in Japanese. The *geisha* giggled, and hid her face behind her sleeve.

'She say, she wish to try first. To try the cake, you eat some? Is that right?'

He repeated his joke in Japanese. The girl wriggled with embarrassment, and finally scuttled away across the room while the others laughed.

Mr Fujinami, junior, then said to Geoffrey in a very confidential manner,—

'That *geisha* girl love you very strong. She go to find one little room, just four mats, just room for two people.'

Again he translated into Japanese. One of the *geisha* answered him; he laughed and said,—

'This *geisha* girl say there is no place for tall Englishman in so small room. You must leave the head and the feet outside. I tell her, that is no matter.'

All the *geisha* now hid their faces among much tittering.

Geoffrey was becoming harassed by this *badinage*; but he hated to appear a prude, and said,—

'I have got a wife, you know, Mr Fujinami; she is keeping an eye on me.'

'No matter, no matter,' the young man answered, waving his hand to and fro; 'we all have wife; wife no matter in Japan.'

At last Geoffrey got back to his throne at Asako's side. He was wondering what would be the next move in the game, when, to his relief and surprise, Ito, after a glance at his watch, said suddenly,—

'It is now time to go home. Please say good-bye to Mr and Mrs Fujinami.'

A sudden dismissal, but none the less welcome.

The inner circle of the Fujinami had gathered round. They and the *geisha* escorted their guests to the rickshaws and helped them on with their cloaks and boots. There was no pressing to remain; and as Geoffrey passed the clock in the entrance hall, he noticed that it was just ten o'clock. Evidently the entertainment was run with strict adherence to the time-table.

Some of the guests were too deep in *saké* and flirtation to be aware of the break-up; and the last vision granted to Geoffrey of the M.P.—the fat man with the wen—was of a kind of Turkey Trot going on in a corner of the room, and the thick arms of the legislator disappearing up the lady's kimono sleeve.