

9: Kyoto

I woke soon after six o'clock this morning after a good night's sleep. At 6.40, the official waking up time, pop music was played over the loudspeaker system. Shortly afterwards there were announcements in Japanese and English: today was Thursday 27th September, and the weather would be hot, dry and sunny. For breakfast we were given horrible white bread with eggs and salad; I stuck to the salad and only reluctantly ate the bread. Everybody complained about the food.

I left at eight and walked to the nearby Kanze Kaikan hall in order to buy a ticket for a *Nō* performance (an ancient, traditional form of theatre), but at this hour of the morning, the hall was closed. I then headed towards the Heian Shrine, a bright vermilion reproduction of the first Imperial Palace, which had been built in 1895, one thousand years after the founding of Kyoto. This nineteenth-century complex was a scaled-down replica (5:8) of the original, which had been built in AD 794. There were long queues of students waiting to enter the gardens at the rather gaudy though impressive entrance. I considered joining them, but decided against it.



Heian Shrine, Kyoto

Instead, I decided to set off for the Old Imperial Palace, as there would be a tour at 10 a.m. The walk was longer than expected as the grounds were so large. However, I timed it well, arriving there by 9.30. I filled out a form, requesting permission to visit the palace and two others: the Katsura and Shugakuin villas. I then went to the souvenir shop, where I bought a set of postcards, and presented myself at the entrance at 9.45. Here we had to hand over our passports for inspection; once inside, our passports were checked again, along with our forms. While we waited for our guide, I wrote a postcard.

At last we set off, with a long line of Japanese students ahead of us. Our party consisted mostly of noisy American tourists. The one-hour guided tour was not very satisfactory, for we were never brought into any of the buildings. Apart from a few pretty corners and pleasant gardens, the place left me almost stone cold. Like most

guided tours, it was too rushed; I was trying to take photos, listen to the guide and keep up with the group. Security was strict and a guard was usually close by.

Soon we were back at the entrance and it was all over. For a place so important as this, I was quite disappointed. I sat down and rested for a few minutes; although the day had been fresh to begin with, by now it was quite warm.



Nijo Castle, Kyoto

I then walked to nearby Nijo Castle, an impressive structure surrounded by a high stone wall and a moat. The wooden buildings of the Ninomaru Palace inside were arranged in a zigzag plan; they had been considerably restored during the nineteenth century after having been damaged, and looked exceptionally lavish by Japanese standards. Gleaming in the sunshine, the façades looked really fine. All the sliding doors, walls and coffered ceilings inside were decorated with paintings done by artists of the noted Kanō school; most of these surfaces had a golden background, which gleamed in the dim light filtering through the paper *shōji* (windows). The large gilded nail covers were exceptionally impressive; although there were hundreds of them, no two were alike. What craftsmanship! Even the floors were of great interest; called ‘nightingale flooring’, they squeaked when trod upon. It was lovely to walk barefoot in these cool buildings after traipsing outside in the heat.



Nijo Castle, Kyoto

I had a look at all the rooms – some were bigger than others – then went outside to walk in the extensive grounds. Although the gardens were quite fine, I did get a little tired of them after a while. I finally left and made my way to a nearby bus stop.

After a short wait, I jumped on a number 204 bus and travelled to the small but famous Ginkakuji or Silver Pavilion. As it was about two o'clock and I had not eaten any lunch yet, I stopped at a small, smart restaurant, where I ordered a bowl of rice with seaweed, vegetables and some other titbits, including pickles. Also included was a pot of tea. What I found most unusual here was the custom of pouring some of the tea into the rice and mixing everything together – the lady in the shop showed me what to do. Actually, the mixture tasted fine!

After I had eaten and rested, I walked to the temple entrance and paid for a ticket to enter. At first I was disappointed; the famous pavilion looked small and scruffy, and the monastic complex around it was packed with tourists and more noisy students. It was only when I settled down to examining everything carefully that the beauty of the place began to impress itself on me; I had to focus my mind and block out all the exterior noise and bustle. Originally built in 1479 by the Shōgun (commander-in-chief) Ashikaga Yoshimasa as a country villa for retirement, the pavilion and adjoining buildings were converted into a Zen Buddhist temple after his death. The name 'Silver Pavilion' is merely fanciful – neither the villa nor the temple were ever silver in colour. The style of the gardens was simple: full of quiet restraint.



Ginkakuji, Kyoto

For a long time I stood contemplating a tiny stone and shrub garden near the entrance, then went around to view the little 'silver' pavilion reflected in the pond. It was beautiful after all: refined taste of the highest order. The combination of the remarkable pavilion, its reflection in the water and the framing of the scene by the surrounding trees was thrilling to behold.

I then retraced my steps, climbed up a steep pathway to view the rest of the complex and the various gardens, then came down again. I now applied myself to the most bizarre features within the temple grounds: a platform of raked sand created to reflect the moonlight and a conical mountain of sand, said to represent Mount Fuji. A little building and its miniature garden nearby also looked fascinating.

I lingered for a while longer, resting and admiring everything around me, took one last look at the lovely Ginkakuji, tore myself away and left. It was a pity that so many

people were here; it seemed that almost none of them fully appreciated the quiet beauty of the place.



Ginkakuji, Sand Garden

As was a lovely sunny afternoon by now, I took a narrow mountain byway that followed the course of a stream, and, passing by picturesque houses here and there, I slowly made my way back to the youth hostel. There were many small temples along this route, some still open, others closed. As the lovely little Hōnen temple was open, I walked around its neat precincts and through its cemetery. This wonderfully quiet and restful place was nestled between trees and hills.

Also along the road were several colourful Shinto shrines; in one of them were statues of mice in front of a building. The Reikanji Buddhist temple was closed, but the Eikandō was open. It was quite impressive, though not quite up to my expectations. A monk was locking up just when I ambled in.

Finally I reached the Nanzenji, which was also closing for the evening, and suddenly I found myself back in the noisy main streets. What an unpleasant contrast! I tried the Kanze Kaikan hall again, but it was still closed.

Back in the hostel I washed, ate a good dinner – I was hungry – and got back to diary writing. A Japanese lad was fascinated by my diary and notebook. Later I went downstairs for a cup of tea. Returning, a Japanese girl called me from my dormitory and got the fellow who was interested in my diary to photograph the two of us together, arm in arm. I then finished my diary and prepared for bed.

As the chap in the bed beside me snored heavily during the night and as I was feeling alternatively hot and cold, I slept badly and dragged myself out of bed just before seven, bleary-eyed. It was an effort to stay awake during breakfast.

I left at eight; it was a cool, cloudy morning. For today I had devised a walking tour around the area, filling in the places that I had not seen already. I headed first for the Nanzenji, but stopped to peep into a little temple not marked on my map, the Konchi-in. It looked inviting; as I contemplated the buildings, a man in the ticket office popped his head out and shouted, ‘Good morning!’ then, ‘It’s very beautiful!’ When I enquired about the price, he said, ‘*sambyaku-en*’ (¥300). I paid up and went inside.

A little gem, it was unpretentious and a haven of peace. According to my explanatory leaflet, it was founded in 1400 and restored around 1600. In my

stockinged feet I padded along the wooden floors and verandas, viewing the various rooms, some of which had screens decorated in gold and painted by artists of the famous Kanō school. Here and there were tiny, intimate gardens of great beauty. I had the place to myself; only a few old men and women were attending to the plants and opening up the place. At one stage I thought that I was not going to see some of the painted doors, but just then a lady appeared and opened up a room. As I was viewing the works of art, the place suddenly came to life; a voice blared from a loudhailer and the temple was invaded by a large group of students, who left just a few minutes later.

I finally emerged from the complex, thanked the man in the ticket office and left. I now walked to the Nanzenji, which was already open and full of students. I hesitated before buying a ticket, but finally did. I was so glad that I had done so, for this was such a charming temple. The first thing to catch my eye was a little waterfall and some greenery just beyond a tea room – what a perfect setting!

I then set off down a wooden corridor with squeaky floorboards, passing by a room that opened out on to another fascinating little garden. Here water flowed from a bamboo pipe into a bamboo tube which, when full, toppled over and went *bonk!* when it hit a stone basin, then returned to its original position.



Leaping Tiger Garden, Nanzenji, Kyoto

Around the corner, to the left, was another surprise: the lovely Zen stone and shrub garden, often called the ‘Leaping Tiger Garden’ because of the shape of its rocks. As usual, it was sheer bliss to linger here and contemplate such a wonderful exercise in simplicity. I then applied myself to the rooms of the main building, the Seiryoden, in which there were screens, once again, decorated by the Kanō painters. Those depicting tigers in the next building were by Kanō Tan’yū. There were more little gardens to be seen, but they were not as fine as the ‘Leaping Tiger’. Around the other side were verandas overlooking gardens and a little tea house. Although the place was invaded from time to time by noisy students, who seemed to show no appreciation for buildings such as these, it was fairly quiet.

Back out in the entrance hall, I noticed some men and a crowd of schoolgirls partaking of *o-cha* (honourable green tea) with a great deal of giggling and confusion. One girl grimaced when she sipped a mouthful of the bitter-tasting tea.

I then left and wandered down to the huge Sammon or Southern Gate, a mighty affair that I thought about visiting but decided to skip it because of the price of admission. At this moment a Japanese schoolgirl caught my attention, and asked me if

I would take a photo. I knew exactly what this request was supposed to mean: she wanted to take a picture of me with her companions. So, we arranged ourselves into a symmetrical group with me at the centre and my arms around two of the girls. The whole business was carried out with a great deal of laughter and good humour. Then, as politeness demanded, I handed my camera to one of the girls and asked her to photograph us.* They tried their limited English out on me and we parted on good terms.

After I had looked around, I left. Passing other temples on my way – there seemed to be a great deal of temples in the vicinity, all of them very pretty – I made my way to the Kanze Kaikan Hall, which I found was still closed. How was one supposed to reserve tickets here? The *Nō* play would be on tomorrow.



Shōren-in, Kyoto

Heading south from the youth hostel, I walked to the Shōren-in, also called the Awata Palace because at one time the head abbot of the Tendai sect of Buddhism was always an imperial prince. Although this was supposed to be quite a notable temple and its garden one of the best landscape gardens in Kyoto, the place did not impress me greatly at first; it was only after a while, when I had explored the complex more thoroughly, that its elusive beauty began to become apparent. It all seemed to depend on where one was and in which direction one looked.

Once again, I bumped into the same schoolgirls. Plucking up more courage this time, they asked me to write down my name and address. They then wrote their names for me and gave me a present of the little perfumed marker that they had used. I was quite touched by their sweetness and kindness. I then met another group of girls drinking tea, who invited me to join them for a photograph. I chatted with them too; it turned out that they were all from the same school somewhere in the Prefecture of Gunma.

Once I had gone around the temple and its gardens, I left and followed a group of girls to the next temple: the large Chion-in, headquarters of the Jōdō or Pure Land sect of Buddhism. This place was on the grand scale; it was one of the biggest temples in Japan. The Sammon or South Gate was large and imposing but very dark in colour. The place lacked the intimacy of the smaller temples, which I found more attractive.

* See front cover.

By now it was midday and it was becoming hot. I bought a ticket and entered the large, impressive Hondō or main hall, where all was dark; in the dim light I could discern the gleam of gold and smell burning incense. I then walked down the squeaky corridor to the Assembly Hall, the ‘hall of one thousand [*tatami*] mats’. Beyond, in the temple superior’s apartments, I admired the screens decorated by members of the Kanō school, and a small garden designed by Kobori Enshū.

In the distance I could hear some strange-sounding music; it sounded as though some people were practising on flutes and a *hichiriki* (a double-reed wind instrument like an oboe). The shrill sound of the *hichiriki* penetrated every corner of the place. When I returned to the main square, I heard chanting and the sound of a gong coming from one of the halls. I went to investigate and found just one monk intoning a litany (I recognized the formula ‘*namu Amida Butsu*’ – ‘praise to the Amida Buddha’) and beating both a gong and a pair of clappers.

I listened for a while, climbed up steps to a sub-temple and cemetery, and, after a final look around, left. Hungry by now, I went off in search of food, but could find no decent restaurants. I passed through Maruyama Park, where the little restaurants were far too exclusive and expensive, walked around the pleasant but not extraordinary Yasaka Shrine, and proceeded southwards to the Kenninji Zen temple. I discovered that I had passed it before; it seemed to be closed up and its compound used as a children’s playground. I continued along the narrow old-world streets, searching for the Rokuharamitsuji, but stopped for a late lunch of noodles and vegetables in a tiny, inexpensive restaurant.



Kiyomizu Temple, Kyoto

I then left, gave up looking for the elusive Rokuharamitsuji and decided to press on to the famous Kiyomizu Temple. Although Dee had told me that it was currently surrounded in scaffolding, a girl in the hostel had told me that it was still worth visiting. When I saw it in the distance, at the top of a hill, enveloped in scaffolding, I began to have misgivings, but continued nonetheless. I was glad that I did, for only the main pagoda was being repaired; once past this, the rest was clear of scaffolding. For a small entrance fee I walked through these late Edo buildings, all constructed of dark, almost black wood, and stopped at the famous viewing platform. Below was a dramatic gorge and, beyond, the city of Kyoto, which now actually looked somewhat attractive in the soft, late afternoon light.

Although the place was crowded (mostly with students), it was not too bad. I lingered, admiring the view and the temple buildings, walked to a nearby tiny pagoda, and from it up a winding mountain path for a short distance. I returned and descended to the gorge, where I found students queuing to sample water from the *kiyomizu* or clear spring. I then left. It was very touristy around here.

I now footed it back to the hostel along a different route, through narrow streets, some of them with steps. Some of the streets were lined with souvenir shops and high-class restaurants. The Ryozen Kannon, a huge modern statue in a temple compound on a hillside, looked ghastly, and the Kodaiji temple, which I passed, was tiny. I passed through Maruyama Park once again and finally arrived back at the hostel, footsore and weary. Although a long bath revived me somewhat, I still felt tired.

After dinner, I chatted to a Japanese lad in my room, then I put in a request to stay one more night in the hostel. I then wrote my diary, pausing briefly to drink a cup of tea downstairs. The television had been switched on and a dreadful programme of women's wrestling was being watched. It put me on edge.

This evening I had experienced the keen observation and memory of the hostel staff. The moment I walked in, I was greeted with, 'It is open tomorrow at 11 a.m.' This morning I had casually mentioned my surprise about the Kanze Kaikan hall being closed all the time; during the day somebody had telephoned on my behalf and had received this information. When I had finished my meal this evening, one of the hostel lads had asked me, 'Well, did you eat enough?' He had obviously seen me taking a second helping of rice and that I had eaten everything on my plate!

When I was preparing to go to bed, I found a little note on my pillow. The Japanese lad in my room explained that it was from the girl who had had us both photographed last night. (I had taken a photo of her and her boyfriend this morning.) In the note, she asked me to write to her as she intended to visit Ireland sometime in the future.

Today I decided to take it easy and immerse myself in some Japanese culture. I got up after another bad night's sleep, took my time and went down for breakfast rather late. Afterwards I tried telephoning the Myokoji temple to see if they had accommodation for me, but the lady at the other end of the phone could not speak English. I asked the man at the desk to telephone for me; it turned out that as there would be a festival in the temple tomorrow, no accommodation was available. I then telephoned Mrs Tani's Tiny House and booked a room for one night.

I then left the hostel, walked up the hillside towards the Nanzenji and found a tiny little temple where I sat on a bench by the garden, writing a letter to my parents. The letter began:

Kyoto, 29th September

Dear Mum and Dad,

I'm sitting in a little garden – one of these lovely creations of sand, rocks, shrubs, trees and a stream – of a quiet, obscure temple up in the hills of East Kyoto. Kyoto is a strange city; I both hate and love it. I hate its busy, noisy streets and its general ugliness, but I adore these smaller temples away from it all. The bigger and more important temples are fine of course, but lack the intimacy of the little ones. What a marvellous feeling to walk in stockinged feet along wooden corridors and verandas, passing the paper sliding screens and peeping out at the miniature gardens! In one such small Buddhist temple, I paid for and was served *o-cha* (honourable green tea) by a young English-speaking monk in an intimate and beautiful old tea house. Back out in the streets again, this peaceful world is quickly shattered: buses roar, bells clang at railway crossings and pedestrian crossings go ‘*cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo!*’

I continued writing in this beautiful spot, which I had all to myself. When I had finished the letter, I scribbled a couple of post cards, then returned to the city and walked to the Kanze Kaikan hall, where I bought a ticket for today's performance of three *Nō* plays. Thinking that I would have to pay ¥3,000 (£12), I was delighted to discover that I was able to avail of the students' rate, which was half that amount.

The hall turned out to be very modern, clean and smart. The small stage, which was constructed almost like a shrine with wooden posts and a roof, looked quite imposing. Expecting the place to be crowded, I was quite surprised to discover that there were so few people. I chose a good seat and sat down. At that moment a girl from the youth hostel appeared and so I invited her to join me; it turned out that she was Finnish. Although she had not been studying English for very long, she spoke it excellently. Like me, she had decided to treat herself to some Japanese culture today. As she knew nothing about *Nō*, I explained it to her as best as I could. I told her that *Nō* (also spelt ‘Noh’) means ‘skill’ or ‘talent’, and that it is a major form of classical Japanese dance-drama that has been performed since the fourteenth century. As it is the oldest major theatre art that is still regularly performed today, *Nō* opens a window to the past, for it is still presented in exactly the same way as it was some six hundred years ago. The plays, which are generally short, are often based on tales from traditional literature, which often feature a supernatural being, transformed into human form, as a hero narrating a story. William Butler Yeats and Samuel Beckett are just two of many poets, writers, composers and theatre producers who have been influenced by *Nō*.

Soon it was eleven o'clock and time for the first of today's three plays, *Maki-guni* (‘The Rolls of Silk’). According to the little résumé in English that we had been given, this was about a Court official who announces ‘that he has been charged with the task of collecting a thousand rolls of silk to be sent from the various provinces to the Kumano Shrines, in accordance with a dream the Emperor has had. The man bringing the silk from the capital, however, has stopped on the way to offer up a poem at the shrine of the god Otonashi no Tenjin, and arrives late. The official therefore orders him to be bound and punished, but the god takes possession of a priestess to save the man in gratitude for his offering. Speaking through the mouth of the priestess, the god then recites some prayers at the request of the official and finally dances.’

It was quite an extraordinary experience to watch the slow, measured movements of the main actors, all attired in fantastic, voluminous costumes, and hear the strange, slow delivery of their lines. The music sounded decidedly unearthly: a flautist played shapeless melodies, the percussionists whooped and shouted as they whacked their drums in erratic rhythms, and the chorus sang and chanted in strained, throaty voices. Although the action was so slow and at times almost static, there was a great deal of tension both in the gestures and the emotions. Although the performance tended to become a little tedious at times, I nonetheless remained fascinated.

When the main masked actor[†] appeared as the priestess possessed by the god, the atmosphere became electric: it was as though a being from another world had appeared. The slow dance that followed was equally other-worldly. I certainly felt transported back in time – and almost to another planet.

With this dance, the play ended; suddenly we were back in the real world and it was 12.20 p.m. – time to grab some lunch. I went off in search of a shop or restaurant for something cheap, but ended up having something filling and expensive: a dish called *yakitori-nabe* (grilled skewered chicken), which was nothing special.

I was back a little late for the second play, which had begun at 1 p.m., but it did not really matter. People seemed to come and go quite freely here; I noticed that the Japanese do not pay the same rapt attention to a performance as we do at home. Members of the audience here chatted and rustled paper bags, and a photographer was busy at work. I found this both annoying and amusing.

Today's second play was *Hajitomi* ('The Wicket Gate') by Naitō Tōzaemon. As it featured an elderly priest and an old, tottering lady (played by a man), it progressed at an even slower pace and was in the more usual two-act form, with an interlude in the middle. When the old lady reappeared in the second half in supernatural guise as the Lady Yūgao, a few things went wrong: the lower part of the costume began to fall down, the mask slipped and the actor could not see where he was going. There were some anxious moments as the dance went askew; at this point, stage assistants came out to pull up the costume and steer the actor around. Eventually things got back on course and the play finished to lukewarm applause.

During the break I went outside for some air and returned for the final play. This was *Dai-e* ('The Great Service') by Zenchiku. This one was more dramatic, more colourful and faster moving. In it was a priest, a goblin disguised as a priest, and other goblins of the woods. In the second act, the goblin who had been disguised as a priest appeared as a grotesque image of the Buddha. This act was electric and charged with great tension – it was so strange that it was almost frightening. An unearthly vision had certainly appeared before us.

The Finnish girl and I left the theatre slightly mystified, for we could not really decide whether we had enjoyed this experience or not. I had, though in an unusual way; I suppose that, having been curious to see a *Nō* performance, I was now delighted to have witnessed three of them. As we both had decided to go to a concert this evening between six and eight o'clock, we walked back to the hostel, where we managed to have our dinner at five. We finished half an hour later and set off – I led the way. We walked a good distance down the busy street to a bus stop, hopped on a bus that went to the theatre and arrived just in the nick of time, at 6 o'clock exactly.

We were now in the Furitsu Bunka Geijutsu Kaikan Hall. When we bought tickets at ¥2,000 each (no student rates here!), we discovered that this evening's concert of

[†] The *shite* (pronounced 'sh'tay').

Japanese music did not start until 6.45 p.m. We therefore had time to relax and chat. Together we discussed our experiences and impressions of Japan so far.

Finally, when we were allowed in, we chose good seats. It was just as well that we had come early, for the place filled up quickly until there were people standing at the back of the hall.

The concert began when the curtain rose and revealed a dramatically-lit stage with just three people standing in the middle. A spotlight picked out the man in the middle, who played some music on a *shakuhachi*, an end-blown flute; held vertically, the sound is produced on this instrument in the same manner as one would play a note by blowing across the top of a bottle. The lone instrument with its plaintive sound filled the small theatre. The man on the right then did a slow-moving *Nō*-like dance, and then the lady on the left performed an elegant dance with a fan.

When this was over, a man came out with a microphone and made a very long, tiresome speech in Japanese – not one word of which we could understand. At last he stopped talking and the curtain rose to reveal a large ensemble of *shakuhachi* players. This ensemble was a little ridiculous, for the *shakuhachi*, being a solo instrument, did not lend itself to ensemble playing. As they had no conductor, they were not always together. It was like listening to class of beginner recorder players. Occasionally one of the players performed solo; this was a lot more pleasant to listen to. However, I was glad when this item eventually finished.

Next we were treated to a Japanese dance, performed by a young lady in an elaborate costume, with an umbrella and a sprig of lavender. This item was very pretty and pleasant .

The final item was another *Nō* play! We recognised most of the actors, as we had seen them earlier in the Kanze Kaikan hall. Fortunately they did a different play, a short one, in which a strange being with a huge mop of bright red hair danced in a lively fashion. Although the ‘concert’ had been a little gimmicky, it had been enjoyable enough.

As we had been sitting down all day, we walked back to the hostel at a brisk pace, completing the journey in half an hour. There we had a cup of tea, then a glass of whiskey up in the girl’s male companions’ room, and went to bed at ten. It had been an enjoyable day, during which I had experienced something new. It had also been a welcome change from sightseeing.