



Left: Yari-ga-take (Spear Peak) rises 10,176ft. and is the highest mountain in the range

## INTO THE JAPANESE ALPS

I WAS on leave from Tokio and travelling for four days with an American railroad inspection officer who was making a tour of the stations within his area. He had his own carriage, specially fitted for sleeping and with a kitchen, and he travelled by hitching this carriage to the local trains and stopping off wherever it was necessary. For the two days since leaving Tokio we had passed inland through plains, valleys, and river gorges: it was early autumn, with the days brilliantly clear, and the harvest-yellow of the ripening rice crops contrasted perfectly with the browns and greens of the forests and bushlands. Orchards of brick-red kaki (persimmons) and tangerines splashed further colour through a most beautiful countryside. It was cooling a little after the insufferable heat of summer.

On the morning of the third day we stopped, 156 miles from Tokio, at Matsumoto, before the war a prosperous commercial city, a centre for the raw silk industry in the near-by districts. There, too, is the largest stadium in Japan, covering 25 acres and with seating for several tens of thousands.

Matsumoto is the setting off point for the many routes into the Northern Japanese Alps and as soon as we stepped from the carriage we felt the chill in the air. The American went about his business and later the stationmaster came to our office. Would we, he asked through our interpreter, like to accompany him on a trip he had planned to Kamikochi, a famous mountain resort about 35 miles away—we would stay there the night and return early the next morning. There was no hesitation in our acceptance.

This account of a journey into Japan's Northern Alps was written for "The Listener" by the Official New Zealand Correspondent with J Force.

The Northern Japanese Alps are one of the three volcanic ranges extending through the whole of Honshu, the main island of Japan. The ridge, consisting of more than 100 peaks (40 of which are more than 8,000 feet) extends for 100 miles with a breadth of about 40 miles and is dotted with both active and extinct volcanoes. Nearly the whole of this great area has been set aside as a national park and before the war was visited each year by thousands of overseas and Japanese tourists. Not the least of the attractions are the geysers and hot springs, and for these Kamikochi, the resort we were to visit, was the best-known centre.

### Chicken on the Road

We left soon after lunch, after one of those maddening endless discussions you always seem to have when anything has to be decided through an interpreter—this time the question was whether we should wait for a chicken which was being brought by a policeman on a bicycle from a farm 10 miles away, or make do with some pork which we had offered in the hope of solving this all-important problem. After detailed calculations as to how long the policeman would take to get there (up-hill), how long for him to return (downhill), how long it would take to catch the bird, the time of sunset at that time of year, and whether one chicken would be enough—after 20 minutes of rapid-fire conversation from about six Japanese accompanied by

groans from us, we decided to compromise by taking the pork and accepting the chicken as a present when we left the next morning. We hoped this wretched chicken would not be as tough as the decision as to the time of its eating had been.

From Matsumoto to Kamikochi was 35 miles: we were surprised to hear that the journey would take nearly four hours. After the first hour surprise was replaced by understanding; before long we felt the only thing that would surprise us was if we arrived at all. In that 35 miles we had to climb nearly 5,000 feet. The road, which had obviously had no maintenance since before the war, was so narrow that most of the time we were looking straight down into a gorge on one side, while steep cliffs rose abruptly on the other. The car, a pre-war Ford V8, looked and felt as though it had been a troop-carrier through the whole of the Burma campaign. It rattled and shook; the rear door fell out rather than opened; when the water boiled the driver filled up from an ice-cold mountain stream, causing a minor explosion; and my companion reckoned that every time the driver blew the horn he had to change gear to stop the engine from stalling.

### Forest, Lake, and Mountains

But the shortcomings of our vehicle and the narrowness of the road were more than made up for by the magnificence of the scenery. From the cliffs and valley slopes above tumbled mountain streams with water sparkling clear and only less cold than the ice it had melted from. Surrounding us were mountain peaks, pushing high into the sky; some of them were snow-tipped and all of them were thick at first with forest and then with bush that reached almost to their summits. There were innumerable lakes set (as they say) like jewels. Waterfalls poured down hundreds of feet; two of the most beautiful—almost side by side,

with one larger than the other—were named "Young mother and child."

Soon we left the paddy fields and fruit crops behind, but we continued to pass small villages that seemed screwed into the cliff faces. The roofs of all the small houses were heavily weighted with stones, their foundations seemed more sturdy than the usual—and although the day was still it was not hard to imagine the strength of a winter wind raking down that valley. The inhabitants apparently worked either in the many power-houses we passed or at milling the timber that Japan to-day is so much in need of. Every now and again we saw an oxen cart or an old motor truck loaded high with lumber; but however appropriately they fitted into that mountain scene we cursed them because the difficulty of passing them delayed our progress, which was already so slow.

Up we crawled. As we climbed the forests thinned a little. Once, when we stopped for the driver to fill the water-tank, we walked up a side track to where a truck had run over a log which was lying lengthwise and which had become jammed under the wheelbase. A notice in English said "prison labour" and it explained the prisoners' uniforms and dejection, which were similarly drab. One of them scrambled for a cigarette butt which we dropped.

### Misshapen Mountain

The higher we climbed the clouds of steam puffing up from off the road became thicker and more frequent. We were approaching Mount Yake-dake, an active volcano, which explained the thermal activity. Some of these hot springs were bubbling and only the absence of the smell of sulphur made them different from those of the thermal regions in New Zealand.

Yake-dake is the most famous of the volcanoes in the Northern Japanese Alps. Almost 8,000 feet high, it rises with the peaks about it as the only one without forest and bush to soften its gaunt grandeur, reminding us of a toad looking from a bunch of flowers. With one side ripped away by a former eruption it is misshapen, and somehow ugly and repulsive. Its last major eruption was in 1915 when the slide of lava jammed the river and formed Lake Taisyo. This lake, we saw as we skirted its edge, is great in area but shallow in depth and breaking its surface are thousands of tree stumps which have not yet rotted after being swallowed in water after the eruption more than 30 years ago. The outlet has been dammed and the water flowing from it is controlled so as to drive the power-house generators.

We had now reached a huge plateau which is 5,000 feet high and which extends from east to west for ten miles, surrounded by high peaks. Highest of them is Yari-ga-take (Spear Peak), 10,176 feet, which soared immediately above us. It is the highest mountain in the range. It was now late afternoon and cold. Across the river from us was the Imperial Hotel and further on from it, our guide explained, the Japanese inn where we were to stay the night.

After leaving the car, we crossed what a sign explained, alliteratively if not accurately, was the "Klappa-blashi Blidge";

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