

A Ball in Edo

by Pierre Loti¹

(trans. David Rosenfeld, ©2001)

For Madame Alphonse Daudet

The Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Countess Sodeska have the honor of asking you to pass the evening at the Rokumeikan to celebrate the birth of H.M. the Emperor. There will be dancing.

This was engraved, in French, on an elegant card with gilded corners that reached me by post one day in November at Yokohama Bay. On the reverse, the following was added in a fine hand: *A special return train will leave Shibachi station at one o'clock in the morning.*

Having been in this cosmopolitan Yokohama for only two days, I turned the small card over in my hands with a certain astonishment. I had to admit that it confounded all the notions of Japanese-ness with which my stay in Nagasaki had left me. I did not expect much from this European-style ball, with the high society of Edo in black tie and Parisian dress. From the first, this “countess” (as well as a “marchioness” that I had seen

¹Text: Pierre Loti, ‘Un bal à Yeddo’ (A ball in Edo), *Japoneries d’Automne* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 34th ed., 1910), 77-106. – Trans.

mentioned the day before in a high-class local newspaper) made me smile. But why, after all? These women were descended from noble families; all they had done was change their Japanese titles into equivalent French ones. Their education and aristocratic refinement were no less real or hereditary. It was even possible that it would be necessary to go back farther than our crusades to find the origins of these nobles, lost in the annals of a people so ancient.

On the evening of the ball, there was a crowd at Yokohama station for the eight-thirty departure. All the Europeans of the colony were on foot, in full dress, in response to the invitation of the “countess.” The men were in opera hats, the women cowed in lace, with long trains and fur stoles. The guests, in the waiting rooms just like ours, conversed in French, English and German – this 8:30 departure was anything but Japanese.

After an hour, the ball train stopped at Edo.

Here was another surprise. Had we arrived at London, or Melbourne, or New York? Around the station stood tall houses of brick, of an American ugliness. Lines of gaslights allowed one to see far down long, straight streets. The cold air was criss-crossed with telegraph wires and, in various directions, with trams leaving amid familiar sounds of stamps and whistles.

Meanwhile, a swarm of foreign characters, all clad in black, who seemed to be lying in wait, rushed to meet us. These were the *jinriki-san*, the human horses, the running men. They pounced on us like a flight of crows – the square was darkened with them – each pulling behind him his little carriage. They capered, cried, jostled, and barred our passage like an army of cavorting imps. They wore close-fitting short pants that outlined the thighs like tights, with close-fitting blouses, short, with pagoda sleeves, and shoes made of cloth, with the

separated big toe sticking out like that of a monkey. In the middle of their backs an inscription in large white Chinese letters stood out on their black costumes like a funerary device on a catafalque. With apish gestures, they slapped their thighs to make us admire the strength of their muscles; pulling us by the arms, by the shoulders, by the legs, they argued furiously over us.

There were quite a few horse-drawn carriages there as well, waiting for the official ladies of the legations. But the crowd cautiously kept its distance, finding this new system of locomotion a bit risky; the drivers held onto their horses with two hands, as if they were dangerous beasts.

Presently most of us jumped into the small carriages that the runners offered us. No need to tell them where we were going; to the Rokumeikan, this went without saying, and they took off like madmen, without waiting for a word from us. Each elegant female guest, as soon as she was seated on her narrow chair, with her ball gown pulled up to her knees, was pulled separately, with all his might, by her hired runner. The husband or gentleman protector who accompanied her, mounted on a separate little cart, was pulled next to her, at a different pace. The fact that we were all going in the same direction was the only thing that reassured the women whom these devils bore; it resembled a sort of wild stampede, where there were neither families nor groups anymore.

We followed on one after the other, at different speeds and in uneven bursts. Our runners would let out a cry and bolt off. We were numerous, forming a long, panic-stricken parade; many people had been invited to the ball, and our numbers seemed to be growing, even though we knew that the Mikado and, even less likely, his invisible spouse, weren't meant to appear. But all of Japanese society would be there, and I was

very curious about these "countesses" and "marchionesses" that I would see there for the first time, and in formal attire.

Three quarters of an hour or thereabouts passed on this hard road, in poorly lit and solitary suburban areas. Around us, it no longer resembled the area near the station; this was the true Japan that was passing now, very quickly, on both sides of these streets and alleys amid the black night: houses of paper, somber pagodas, odd stalls, preposterous lanterns showing their tiny, colored flames far away in the darkness.

At last, we arrived. One after another, our chairs passed under an ancient portico, the roof of which turned up at the edges in the Chinese manner. Then we were in full light, in the middle of a sort of Venetian fete, in the middle of a pretentious garden where innumerable candles burned within paper balloons before girandoles and, in front of us, stood the Rokumeikan, well illuminated, with strands of gas lanterns at each cornice, casting light from each of its windows, sparkling like a glass house.

But it was not very handsome, this Rokumeikan. Built in the European style, all fresh, white, and new, it resembled – my God – a casino in one of our second-rate resort towns; one could believe oneself to be anywhere at all, except in Edo. . . Large banners with the Mikado's coat of arms floated lightly, suspended from invisible cords, clearly lit against the dark ground of the sky by the thousands of lamps below, they were of violet crepe (the imperial color) embroidered with the large heraldic chrysanthemums which in Japan are equivalent to our fleur-de-lis. Then there was a strange note, given by the furious arrival of the puffing runners, depositing every minute at the entry stairs another single male or female guest. What a strange ball, in which each guest, rather than getting out of a carriage, is brought in a wheelbarrow by a black imp. From the vestibules, where the gaslights burned, hastened valets in black

coats; their neckties were quite proper, but they had curious little yellow faces, nearly without eyes.

The salons were on the first floor, to which one ascended by a large staircase bordered by a triple row of Japanese chrysanthemums, such as our autumn flowerbeds give no hint of: a row of white, a row of yellow, a row of pink. In the pink row, which covered the rampart, the chrysanthemums were as big as trees, and their flowers were as large as suns. The yellow row, placed before it, was lower, flowered with large tufts, bouquets of a glittering buttercup yellow. And at last, the white row, the last and lowest, extended along the whole length of the steps, like a line of handsome snowy tassels.

At the top of this staircase, four persons – the hosts of this event – awaited, smiling, the entry of their guests into the salons. I paid little attention to a gentleman in a white tie, decorated with several medals, who must certainly have been the minister; whereas I curiously regarded the three women who stood about him, the first of whom was apparently the “countess.”

In the train, someone had told me the story of this woman: a former geisha (a hired dancer for Japanese feasts) who had turned the head of a diplomat who then became the minister, married him, and was now charged with doing the honors in Edo in the official world of foreign legations.

I expected therefore some strange creature dressed up like a performing dog. I stopped in surprise before a person of distinguished and fine visage, gloved to the shoulder, coiffed irreproachably; age indefinable, face thickly covered with rice powder, long satin train in a very pale lilac, discreetly ornamented with garlands of small woodland flowers, with a deliciously assorted nuance; her slender body was sheathed in a rigid embroidery of shimmering pearls; an outfit, in sum,

which would be acceptable in Paris and was truly worn well by this astonishing parvenue. I took her seriously, and addressed her with a formal salutation. She, correct also, and extremely gracious, offered me her hand in the American style, with a well-bred ease that completely conquered me.

I quickly inspected the two other women in the hallway. First was a charming young woman all in faded pink, with a train covered in camellias. Then was the last of the group, on whom my eyes would have gladly lingered: this was the Marchioness Arimasen, a young woman of ancient nobility, the wife of “the grand master of ceremonies of His Majesty the Emperor”: jet-black hair bound up in a chignon, in the style of that winter; pretty velvet eyes, with the air of an adorable little kitten, dressed in the Louis XV style in ivory satin. This was an unexpected effect, this combination of Japan and eighteenth-century France, with this pretty young face of the Far East wearing a hoop skirt and a plunging neckline as if she were at the Trianon.

Oh, well done, my ladies; my sincere compliments to all three of you! Your attitudes so amusing, your disguises so successful.

Again the vases from which soared up gigantic chrysanthemums, and then, after these women, between Japanese pavilions, the main room opened out vastly, almost empty – encircled with benches, on which the occasional guest was seated, with the strained air of one used to squatting on the ground. To the right and to the left, between open colonnades, appeared other rooms, slightly more peopled, with occupants fumbling nervously with their outfits and uniforms, and two complete orchestras, one French, the other German, hidden in the corners, performing irresistible contradances taken from our best-known operettas.

They were vast, these rooms, but mediocre, one is forced to say, decorated like second-rate casinos. The lights were festooned with garlands of foliage and paper lanterns, while the walls were draped with the imperial purple crepe with large white heraldic chrysanthemums, or yellow and green Chinese banners with horrible dragons. These hangings contrasted with the banality of venetian lanterns and all sorts of gewgaws hanging from the ceiling, giving the feeling of a China or a Japan on a spree, like yokels at a village fair.

A bit too gilded, too bedizened, these innumerable Japanese gentlemen, ministers, admirals, officers or officials in evening dress. They faintly reminded me of a certain General Boom, who had his hour of celebrity some time ago. And their tailcoats, already so unfashionable to us – how remarkably they wore them! Their shoulders were, clearly, simply not made for this sort of attire; it is impossible to say exactly how, but I found in all of them, always, strong resemblance to monkeys.

Oh – and the women! Eligible young women on the benches, or mothers ranged like tapestries along the walls, all more or less amazing to examine in detail. What was it in them that just didn't work? I examined them carefully, but I could not define it: too many hoops in their skirts, perhaps, or too few, or placed too high or too low, and their corsets of an unfamiliar shape. Their figures were not common or coarse, their hands were small, and their dresses were straight from Paris; but in spite of all this, they were somehow strange, they were improbable to the last degree, with the smiles in their narrow eyes, their feet turned inward, and their flat noses. Obviously those who had already arrived at the door were the best of their kind, the most elegant women of the capital, the only ones who already knew how to follow our European manners.

At ten o'clock, the party of the Chinese Ambassador arrived. From among the swarms of dwarfish Japanese, the heads of this haughty band of a dozen protruded with disdainful looks on their faces; these Chinese, men from a superior race of the north, possessed, in the way they walked, and in their fine silks, a noble grace. They displayed as well a splendid dignity and taste, by adhering strictly to their traditional robes, their finely embroidered jackets, their coarse, pendulous beards and their queues. With reserved smiles, all the while playing with their fans, they made their tour of the rooms and of this masquerade; then they went, disdainfully, by themselves out in the fresh air, to sit on a terrace overlooking the illuminated garden and the Venetian fete.

Ten-thirty: the entrance of princesses of the blood, and the ladies of the court. This was a remarkable entrance, like an apparition of persons from another world, or of people fallen from the moon, or some era long past.

It was during a quadrille, to an air from "Girofle-Girofla;" suddenly there appeared two groups of tiny women, pale and of an exhausted lineage, advancing with the air of lilliputian fairies, with wonderful clothing and hairstyles that made their heads look as enormous as sphinxes. These costumes that they wore were such as one has never seen – not in the streets of any Japanese town, nor on a screen or in a painting; they seemed to be part of some timeless tradition of the court that appeared nowhere else.

Cinderella slippers of a marvelous crimson; trousers of scarlet silk, large and flowing, immoderately widened at the bottom in a way that made each leg like a crinoline skirt, hindering their walks with its rustling. Above, a sort of priest's hood, white or pearly gray, scattered with black blossoms. The material was magnificent, heavy and as rigid as brocade. All the clothes descended in a single stiff fold from the narrow

throat to the wide basis of these women-goddesses; of their delicate little bodies and their tiny receding shoulders, which presumably lay below, one could see not the slightest hint; and their little arms, their fragile little hands, were lost in the long pagoda sleeves that descended on right and left, all in one piece, like inverted horns. (Seen from up close, these black blooms, scattered over the shining cowls, represented monsters, birds, and foliage arranged in a circle; each was different; they were the family crest, the coat of arms of each noble woman.) What was certainly most unbelievable about these women was their hairstyles. Their beautiful black hair, glossy, lacquered, displayed on I know not what hidden framework, spread around each small, yellow, lifeless face, like a peacock's tail or a great fan. Then all this silky mass suddenly broke like an Egyptian headdress, lying flat on the nape of the neck, narrowing into a knot at the back. The result was that their heads appeared as large as their bodies; this accentuated the flattening of their profiles, even as the stiff clothing exaggerated the lack of breadth of their hips and their busts. One could imagine them as people escaped from between the pages of some old book where they had been preserved for centuries, pressed like rare flowers in a collection. Ugly, perhaps – I am no longer sure – ugly, but superlatively distinguished, and nevertheless with a certain charm. An air of scorn for this affair emanated from them, appearing as an enigmatic smile in their barely open eyes, as they went to sit apart, in a side room, forming in the middle of this ball, a group of mysterious aspect.

The very polite Japanese officers did us the honor of their nation in introducing us to several young women, their relatives or friends: “Allow me to introduce to you Mademoiselle Arimaska – or Kounitchiwa, or Karakamoko –

the daughter of one of our most valiant artillery officers – or the sister of one of our most distinguished engineers [sic].”² These Misses Arimaska, or Kounitchiwa, or Karakamoko, were in robes of white gauze, or pink, or blue, but all had the same face: a funny little cat's face, round, flat, with almond-shaped eyes, which they rolled right and left under their chastely lowered lashes. Instead of all this bad dressing and good manners, they would have been so charming bursting out with peals of laughter in their own Japanese costumes!

They held in their hands elegant dance cards of pearl or ivory, on which I gravely signed up for a waltz, a polka, a mazurka, a lancers. But how would I recognize them, tell the Misses Arimaska from the Misses Karakamoko, and the Karakamokos from the Kounitchiwas, when it was time to come to them, at the first measures of the promised dance? This worried me greatly, that they all resembled each other so; certainly I would shortly be very embarrassed among this uniformity of appearance. . .

They danced very correctly, my Japanese women in Parisian robes. But one felt that this was a *learned* thing, that they acted as automatons, without the least bit of personal initiative. If by chance the rhythm was lost, it was necessary to stop and begin again; of themselves, they could never catch up, and would continue to dance out of time. This is explained well enough, moreover, by the fundamental difference between our music, between our rhythms and theirs.

Their little hands were adorable in their long pale gloves. They were not at all savages in disguise; on the contrary, these women belonged to a civilization more ancient than our own, and of an excessive refinement. Their feet, for example, were

²*This “[sic]” is Loti's, apparently intended to mock the idea of a “distinguished” Japanese engineer. – Trans.

less successful. They tended to turn inward, in the old elegant style of Japan; and they retained a certain clumsiness, by the hereditary habit of dragging their high wooden shoes.

They danced with an appearance of liveliness, and the floor of the great building trembled with the beat in a disconcerting manner; one could not help imagining the quite possible and terrible collapse onto the heads of the gentlemen smoking cigars or playing whist on the ground floor in an attempt to give themselves a European air.

One of my unexpected impressions was of hearing Japanese words leaving the mouths of these modernized dancers. Up until now, I had used the language only in Nagasaki, with townspeople and merchants, who wore the long robes of a Chinese statue. With these women in their ball gowns, I could no longer find my words.

In order to bring myself to the proper standard, I tried to use the elegant forms and honorific conjugations of *degosarimas*. (For persons of good manners, it is the practice, among other affectations, to intersperse *degosarimas* in the middle of each verb, after the root and before the inflection; this results in an effect far more pompous than our miserable subjunctive imperfect in French.) And here, naturally, one heard this *degosarimas* everywhere; it was the dominant feature of these extraordinarily polite conversations that droned on through the ball, with slight laughter.

My Japanese astonished them; they had no experience of foreign officers trying to speak their language, and they made the greatest efforts to understand me. The most charming of my dancers was a tiny person in tinted rose carrying a fashionable bouquet – fifteen years old at most – “the daughter of one of our most brilliant engineering officers” – (a Miss Miogonitchi or Karakamoko, I don’t remember which). Still very young, jumping up and down with excitement, distinguished by her

childishness, she would be truly pretty if she were better presented, if she were not missing some indefinable something. She understood very well what I said, and with a charming smile rising to her lips, would correct me every time I made some terrible error in my *degosarimas*. When the “Beautiful Blue Danube” waltz we had danced together had ended, I wrote my name on her dance card for the next two waltzes – this may be done in Japan.

On the ground floor, in addition to the smoking rooms, the gaming rooms, and the vestibules decorated with dwarf trees and gigantic chrysanthemums, there were three large refreshment tables, very well served; one got there by the staircase bordered with the triple row of white, yellow and pink flowers. On the tables covered with silver were pies, stuffed game, pâtés, salmon, sandwiches, and ice cream in abundance, as at a well ordered Parisian ball. Fruits from America and Japan were arranged in pyramids in elegant baskets, and the champagne was of the finest label. The Japanese affectation of these buffets reminded me of a grove of dolls, with gilded trellises of artificial vines, where fine grapes hung. One took off oneself the grapes that one wished to offer to one's dancing partner, and these little vineyard scenes, like something out of a painting by Watteau, were of the highest charm.

Well aware that it was against all etiquette, absolutely inadmissible, after having danced with so many Japanese women in French robes, I went downstairs to the highborn group whose strangeness drew me so, to invite a mysterious beautiful woman in the old costume of the court to dance with me.

In the face of the rather mocking air with which the woman watched me approach, distrusting my horrible Japanese, I made my request in pure French. She did not understand, of course –

could not even have guessed what I asked, it was so unexpected. With her eyes, she beckoned another, seated behind her, who had already arisen, seeing the beginning of this conversation with no introduction. This one, now standing, her woman's body lost in her rigid clothes emblazoned with great blossoms, fixed on me her pretty, intelligent eyes, suddenly enlarged as if she had come out of a sort of sleep, now very sharp and very black.

"Monsieur," she said in French, with a rather strange accent, "Monsieur? What do you ask of her?"

"The honor of dancing with her, madame."

Instantly, her eyebrows rose very high; in a second, all the nuances of surprise passed over her face, and then she inclined toward the other the large black screen of her head and translated for her the astonishing thing I had asked. Smiles – and their two pairs of foreign eyes raised toward me. Very gracious, very kind despite my audacity, the one who spoke French thanked me, explaining that her companion did not know, any more than herself, our modern dances. This was probably true; but this was not the only reason. I knew that decorum forbade it completely. Moreover, I could imagine what it would be like, for the thought had suddenly come to me of that priest's cowl, that enormous head, that knot of hair, engaged in a contradance to a lively air of Offenbach, and this brief vision made me laugh to myself for its extreme incoherence. . .

It remained for me only to bow deeply in the salute of the court. The two large screens of black hair inclined toward me as well, with benevolent smiles and rustles of silk, and I retired at this defeat, regretting that I could not continue conversation with the interpreter, the sound of whose voice and the expression of whose eyes had enchanted me.

The dances followed one after another, French quadrilles alternating with German waltzes. The hours of the ball passed quickly; the end approached, if one was to get home at a reasonable hour.

Here and there, in the corners, comical things were happening. Here two officers, opera hats under their arms and trousers with stripes of gold, forgot themselves saluting in the Japanese style, with hands on knees, the body bent double, with the particular hissing from the lips that was the common practice on such occasions. Or two elegant women, dressed rather in the style of Louis XV, engaged in their *degosarimas* without end, paying their respects more and more markedly after each polite phrase, until they are bowing deeply in the old style.

Astonished, distracted, prowling among the salons with the carriage of startled linnets, but laughing just the same, were two or three young Japanese women, true "*musumes* [young ladies]", still in national costume; not the stiff costume of the court, but ordinary garb, which one has seen everywhere pictured on vases and fans: open tunic with pagoda sleeves, hair in a great shell, sandals of straw and split-toed socks. Very charming, these, casting a charming exotic drollness in the middle of this immense official farce.

Twelve-thirty. It was my third and final waltz with my little dancing partner with her spray of flowers, the "daughter of one of our most brilliant engineering officers." Really, she was dressed just like a marriageable young woman of our country (at least, to be honest, a rather countrified one from a region such as Carpentras or Landerneau), and could skillfully eat ice cream with a spoon, holding it firmly with the tips of her gloved fingers. Yet shortly she would return to the paper walls of her own home, and like all the other women, take off her

tapered corset, put on her kimono embroidered with a stork or some other such common bird, and kneeling, intone her prayers to the Shinto or Buddhist gods, and then using her chopsticks, eat her rice from a bowl. . . We had become very close, this sweet little miss and myself. And since as the waltz was long – a waltz of Marcailhou – and since it was hot; we decided to open one of the French doors and go out for some air on the terrace. We had forgotten the Chinese legation, who had taken up residence there since the beginning of the ball, and we found ourselves in the middle of an imposing circle formed of their long robes and their moustaches in the Mongolian style.

All these Chinese eyes, made a bit insolent perhaps by the recent affairs in Tonkin, looked at us, astonished at our arrival. We looked at them too, and there we were, looking at each other with the cold and profound curiosity of people from absolutely different worlds, incapable ever of mixing with or understanding the other.

Below this array of heads, coiffed in mandarin caps and queues, appeared the garden, the rest of the Venetian fete, half extinguished; and far below, a great expanse of black night, the suburbs of Edo, scattered with red lanterns. In the air the coat of arms of the Mikado still fluttered, the violet crepe strewn with the white heraldic chrysanthemums. Behind us were the ballrooms, decorated with natural and very unrealistic chrysanthemums, in which many uniforms and fine gowns were aligned, immobilized in place, between two steps of a quadrille.

The little provincial miss from Carpentras or Landerneau, leaning on my arm, told me very polite things, in *degosarimas*, about the freshness of the evening, about the weather that would come the next day. And all of a sudden, to complete the discordance, the German orchestra inside, exhilarated by American pale ale, attacked with all their might the rallying cry

from “The Mascot”: “Ah! Don't run like that, we'll catch them, we'll catch them!” At which, below, from the garden, behind a fountain of water, a firework went off: a strange bouquet, lighting up a Japanese crowd that had massed around the Rokumeikan, which one never would have noticed in the darkness, and which, in its admiration, sent up a bizarre clamor.

The orchestra wildly reprised “We'll catch them, we'll catch them, we'll catch them!” Amid this universal and unprecedented jumble, my ideas about things were clouded over by a light fog. I pressed my hand in a friendly manner to that of my Miss Miogonitchi (or Karakamoko); a crowd of things came into my head, comic yet innocent, to say to her in all sorts of languages at once; the entire world, at that instant, appeared to me to be compressed, condensed, unified, and absolutely laughable. . .

The groups began to leave, and the ballrooms to empty. Several women left in carriages. Several cowed dancers, several gentlemen in upturned collars abandoned themselves to the mercies of the blackimps who lay in wait at the door and carried them off as fast as their legs could go, in their wheelbarrows, into the black night.

Myself, I surrendered myself to one of the “*jin*” runners, so as not to miss the special return train to Yokohama that, according to my invitation, would leave at one in the morning from Shibachi station.

All in all, a gay and charming evening, that the Japanese offered us with much good grace. If I have smiled from time to time, it was without malice. When I think that those costumes, those manners, the ceremony, the dances, were things learned, learned very quickly, learned by imperial order and perhaps against their will, I say to myself that these people are truly

marvelous imitators, and such an affair seems to me one of the most interesting achievements of this people, who are unrivalled in feats of dexterity.

It has amused me to note, without any ill intention, all these details, which I guarantee are as faithful as a photograph before retouching. In this country, which is transforming itself so remarkably quickly, it will perhaps also amuse the Japanese themselves, when several years have passed, to find described here this stage of their evolution, to read what occurred at this ball decorated with chrysanthemums, given at the Rokumeikan on the anniversary of the birth of his Majesty the Emperor Muts-hito,³ in the year of our Lord 1886.

³So as not to offend anyone, I have changed all names, except that of the Emperor Muts-Hito.