

DAZAI OSAMU

## The Lady of Banquets

THE LADY I WORK FOR has always liked to do things for her guests, and lay out feasts for them—but no, that doesn't quite say it. In Madam's case, rather than liking her guests, she seems to be afraid of them. When the doorbell rings, first I go to answer it. Then, when I go to Madam's room to announce the name of the caller, she already has a weird tense expression, like a little bird when it hears the sound of the eagle's wings and is just about to fly up. Stroking back into place a stray lock of hair, adjusting her kimono collar, she rises up from her sitting position. Not hearing half of what I say, she stands up and goes out into the corridor. Running with little half steps, she rushes along to the entryway and immediately, in a strange, fluty voice that sounds as though she were laughing and crying, welcomes her guest. Then, changing her expression so that she looks like a crazy person, she runs back and forth between the parlor and the kitchen, overturning pots, breaking dishes, apologizing to me, the maid, saying, "forgive me, forgive me." Then, after the guest has left, she sits by herself in a daze in the parlor, her legs exhaustedly sprawled out to the side, doing nothing to tidy up. Occasionally, she even starts to cry.

The master, her husband, was a professor at the university in Hongo. His family are rich people, I hear, and Madam's people, too, are wealthy farmers in Fukushima Prefecture. Perhaps it's also because they had no children, but there used to be something carefree about both of them, even as man and wife. They were like children themselves, children who haven't known any hardship. When I came to help out at this house four years ago, the war was still at its height. About half a year later, although he was merely a reservist on account of his weak health, the master was suddenly called up. As bad luck would have it, he was sent immediately to an island in the South Pacific. Even when, not long after, the war ended, there was no word of him. From the day a simple postcard came from his ex-commanding officer, saying that perhaps Madam should resign herself to the possibility that the master would not return, her reception of guests grew more and more frantic. It was pathetic. It got so I couldn't bear to watch.

Even so, until that Professor Sasashima showed up, Madam's entertaining was limited to the master's relatives and her own friends. Even after the master left for the South Pacific, there were sufficient remittances from Madam's people in the country. Her life was comparatively easy, quiet and, so to speak, respectable. But after Professor Sasashima and his gang made their appearance, everything went badly.

Although it is a suburb of Tokyo, we're rather close in to the city here. Fortunately, we escaped the incendiary bombings. But it meant that people who had been burned out of the city came pouring into our neighborhood like a flood. As I walked along the shopping street, I had the feeling that all the people's faces were different.

Towards the end of last year it was, Madam happened to meet Professor Sasashima, the master's old friend from ten years ago, in the marketplace and brought him back to the house. That was the end of our good fortune.

Professor Sasashima, a gentleman of about forty, the same age as the master, also taught at the university in Hongo. But whereas the master was a professor of literature, Professor Sasashima was a doctor of medicine. They had been classmates in middle school. Before having this house built out here, the master had lived with Madam in an apartment house in Komagome. At that time Professor Sasashima, a bachelor, had been living in the same apartment house. So, for just a little while, they had been on friendly terms. After the master moved out here—perhaps it was also because their fields of study were different—they didn't visit each other. Their relationship had gone no further. Some ten years had passed since then. According to Professor Sasashima, he'd happened to spot Madam in the marketplace of this neighborhood and had called out to her on the spur of the moment. Although it would have been better if Madam had simply greeted him and passed on her way—really, she should have held herself back—because of that hospitable nature of hers, she said, "My house is just over there; please, won't you come in?" Even though she doesn't want any guests, because she's afraid of them, she gets hysterical and desperately detains them. Professor Sasashima, in a strange get-up of an Inverness cloak and a shopping basket, graciously accompanied her back to the house.

"Well, well, this is a very comfortable place you have here. You're certainly lucky to have been spared the bombings. All by yourself, eh? That's really *too* comfortable. Of course, it's at a house like this, where only women are living and where everything is in apple-pie order, that it's hard to ask that they share it with you. Even if they let you stay there, it's apt to be awkward. But I had no idea you lived so nearby, Madam. I'd heard you were living over in Myogadani, but people are stupid, they get things wrong. Although it's nearly a year already since I drifted into this neighborhood, I never noticed the nameplate out front. I often pass this house on my way to the market; I always come along this lane. I've had a terrible time in this war. As soon as I got married, I was drafted. Then when I finally came back, my house had been burned down to the ground. My wife and the boy who had been born while I was away had been evacuated to my wife's folks in Chiba Prefecture. Even though I want to call them back to Tokyo, there's nowhere for them to live. That's my situation. I have to live by myself in a rented three-mat room at the back of a grocery store. I do my own cooking. Tonight I thought I'd have

some roast chicken and drink a lot of sake. That's why I was wandering around the marketplace with this shopping basket. But I'm quite at my wit's end. When things get this way, you don't know whether you're dead or alive."

The Professor, seated tailor-style in the parlor, talked of nothing but himself.

"I'm so sorry."

Madam, saying this, was already in the throes of her hysterical hospitality. Looking desperate, she came running back to the kitchen in little steps.

"Ume-chan. Please forgive me."

Apologizing, she told me to start making supper with the chicken and to serve the sake. Then, whirling around, she ran back to the parlor, only to come running back to the kitchen again. Although she was giving out completely everyday orders, such as "make a fire in the brazier" or "put out the tea things," her keyed-up agitation and consternation went beyond the pathetic and even had a feeling of bitterness about them.

In a loud, audacious voice, Professor Sasashima continued:

"Well now, about that roast chicken. It's very rude of me, Madam, but I always have it with devil's tongue noodles. May I ask you to add some. Also, with a little broiled bean curd, it'll be perfect. If you have it with just scallions, it's sort of lonely."

Without staying to hear it all, Madam came running back and tumbled through the kitchen door.

"Ume-chan. Please forgive me."

As she implored me, she looked like a baby ashamed of the fact that it's crying.

Professor Sasashima, saying it was too much trouble to drink the sake out of one of those little cups, gulped down glasses full and got drunk.

"Is that so? You've had no news of your husband? That's bad. Eight or nine out of ten cases like that, they're dead. There's nothing to be done about it. Madam. You're not the only unfortunate one." After this extremely concise summation, he switched to a more congenial subject.

"Me, for instance, Madam . . ."

Talking about himself again, he went on:

"I don't have anyplace to live; I'm separated from my beloved wife and child; all my household furnishings were burned; my clothes were burned; my bedding was burned; my mosquito netting was burned; I don't have a thing left. Before I found that three-mat room at the back of the grocery store, Madam, I was sleeping in the corridors of the university hospital. We doctors are much worse off than the patients. It would be better to be a patient. Ah, it's really hard. It's miserable, Madam. You're lucky."

"Yes. I am," Madam hurriedly chimed in. "That's what I think. Really and truly. Compared to everybody else, I've been too fortunate."

"That's so, that's so. I'll bring some friends the next time I come. They've all had a hard time, so I have to ask you to treat them nicely."

Giving a smile that seemed happy rather than otherwise, Madam said, "Yes, certainly." Then, she added quietly, "It'll be an honor."

From that day on, our household became a sort of hell.

It was no drunken joke or anything like it. Four or five days later, Professor Sasashima brazenly brought three friends along with him.

"Today we had a forget-the-old-year party at the hospital. Now we'll have a follow-up party here at your house, Madam. We're going to stay up the whole night drinking. These days, it's hard to find a suitable house to have a party in. Hey, everybody. This is a house where you can feel right at home. Come in, come in. The parlor's in here. You can keep your overcoats on. This damn cold is too much." Bawling out various instructions, he behaved exactly as if he were in his own house. What's more, one of his friends was a woman. She seemed to be a nurse. Not minding the others, he clowned around with her. And he ordered around the mistress, who kept a timid, strained smile on her face, exactly as if she were a servant.

"Madam, Excuse me for asking, but please put more coals in the *kotatsu*. After that, I'd appreciate your coming up with some liquor like before. If you don't have any sake, *shochu*\* or whiskey will do, eh? And then after that, as for food . . . Ah, that's right, I've brought you a splendid gift tonight, Madam. You must have some. Broiled eels! In cold weather, nothing's better than this. One skewer for Madam, one skewer for us. After that . . . Hey, who brought the apple? Come on now; don't be stir gy; give it to Madam. It's the kind called Indian. Absolutely top qualit /, very fragrant aroma."

When I entered the parlor with the tea, one little apple rolled out of somebody's pocket and stopped at my feet. I felt like kicking it out of the way. Just one apple. What nerve, speaking of it as if it were a magnificent present. Even the eel, when I looked at it later, was skimpy and half dried out, a pitiful item, more like kippered eel.

That evening, they drank and carried on almost until daybreak. Madam was forced to drink along with them. Then, when dawn broke chill and grey, they all sacked out like a pile of fish around the sunken hearth. They made Madam lie down with them. She must not have got a single wink of sleep, but the others snored away in drunken slumber until afternoon. When they woke up, they slurped up green tea over rice. By then, they must have sobered up, because they did look a little crestfallen and ashamed of themselves. Especially since I was openly furious at them, they all turned their faces away from me. After a while, looking like dead fish that had gone bad, they slunk out of the house.

"Madam, why did you lie down with people like them? I hate that kind of slovenly thing."

"Please forgive me. I couldn't say I didn't want to."

\*A coarse, inferior drink, as strong as vodka (translator's note).

When I heard Madam, her face dead pale, sleepless, exhausted, say this with tears welling up in her eyes, I didn't have the heart to scold her any more.

Before long the invasions of these human wolves became an everyday occurrence. The house became a sort of hostelry for the friends and acquaintances of Professor Sasashima. When the Professor himself did not come, his friends did. They stayed overnight. Every time, they made Madam sleep with them, all piled up together like so many dead fish. Only Madam got no sleep, and since her health wasn't robust to begin with, when the guests had gone, she spent all her time catching up on her lost rest.

"Madam, you've gotten awfully thin. Please stop having these people."

"Forgive me. I can't. Aren't they all unfortunate people? Coming to my house is probably their one pleasure in life."

It's all such foolishness. Madam's money is running out. At this rate, she's going to have to sell the house in a half a year. But she never lets on to the guests by so much as a word. And although her health is surely deteriorating, when a guest calls, she jumps out of bed, hurriedly gets dressed, runs out to the entryway in little steps and immediately, in a strange voice that's like laughing and crying, welcomes the guest.

There was one evening in early spring. "There's the usual gang of guests tonight. They'll probably be drinking until daybreak. Before long we'll be constantly on the run. Why don't we fortify ourselves with a little food?" I'd been telling Madam. Standing up in the kitchen, we were eating some of the steamed bread that was a substitute for rice then. Although Madam always served the most delicious food to the guests, she made do herself with the substitute food rations.

Just then, from the parlor, there was a burst of vulgar, drunken laughter. It continued.

"No, no, it's nothing like that. I've got my eye on you, though. I suspect you and that old lady in there . . ." And then he used a medical term for something that was so dirty, so disrespectful, that I couldn't bear to hear it. Then, what seemed to be the voice of that young Dr. Imai answered:

"What the hell are you talking about? I don't come here for sex. This place is nothing but a dormitory."

Angrily, I looked up at Madam.

Under the dim light bulb, in Madam's lowered eyes as she silently ate the steamed bread, tears shone. I felt so sorry for her, I couldn't speak. And then, quietly, her eyes still lowered, Madam said:

"Ume-chan. I'm sorry to ask, but please heat the bath water tomorrow morning. Dr. Imai likes a morning bath."

But that was the only time I saw Madam look as if she regretted anything. Afterwards, as if nothing had happened, she made small talk with the guests, with her lovely, polite laugh, or frantically hurried back and forth between the parlor and the kitchen.

I could see as clear as anything that she was getting weaker and weaker, but while she was with her guests Madam never betrayed a trace of weariness. So that even though her guests were all such fine doctors, none of them seemed to notice that she was ill.

One quiet spring morning—happily, that morning, there was no one who had stayed overnight—with a carefree heart, I was doing the laundry by the wellside when Madam stepped down into the garden. She was barefoot and seemed to stagger a little. Then when she knelt by the hedge where the mountain roses were in bloom, she had a coughing fit. She brought up a good deal of blood. With a scream, I ran from the well to her side. Holding her up from behind, almost carrying her, I took her inside the house and made her lie down in her room. After that, crying, I said to her:

“That’s why. That’s why I dislike those people so much. Now that this has happened, those people are doctors and unless they make you well again, I refuse to have them in the house.”

“I can’t do that. I can’t say that kind of thing to them—they’re my guests. If they felt responsible, they wouldn’t be able to enjoy themselves.”

“But if you’re this ill, what are you going to do, Madam? Are you going to get out of bed and wait on them again? If you cough up blood when you’re all sleeping together, it’ll be a fine sight.”

Madam, with her eyes closed, thought for a while.

“I’ll go back to the country. You look after the house, Ume-chan, and take care of the guests. Because they have no place else where they can rest and be at ease. So please don’t tell them about my illness.”

Saying this, she gave me a gentle smile.

Thinking to myself, before the guests come, I started packing that same day. Then it occurred to me that it would be better if I accompanied Madam back to her home town in Fukushima. So I bought two train tickets. The third day after that, Madam was in very lively spirits. Taking advantage of that and the fact that no guests had come, hurrying Madam up as if we were making our escape, I’d slid shut the rain doors, closed all the other doors, gotten her as far as the entryway, when—

Who should appear, but Professor Sasashima! Drunk in broad daylight, he had two young women, apparently nurses, in tow.

“Hey, what is this? Where are you going?”

“It’s all right. It doesn’t matter. Ume-chan, please open the rain shutters in the parlor. Please come in, Professor. You haven’t inconvenienced me.”

In that strange, half laughing, half crying voice of hers, she greeted the young women as well. And the frenzied hospitality, the scampering back and forth between the kitchen and parlor, like a dancing mouse, began all over again. I was sent out to buy some food. At the market, when I opened the traveller’s handbag, which in her distraction Madam had handed me instead of her purse, to take out some money, I was astonished to find Madam’s ticket torn in half. When I thought that

Madam must have secretly torn it up the instant she met Professor Sasashima in the entryway, I was stupefied by her gentleness that knew no limits. I also felt as if I had been made to know for the first time in my life that human beings possess something precious that truly distinguishes them from other animals. Taking out my own ticket from between my sash and kimono, I furtively tore it in two. Thinking I'd go back with something even more delicious than usual, I went about the market, carefully making my choices.

Translated from the Japanese  
by Lane Dunlop

"The Lady of Banquets" belongs to a group of *onnamonogatari* (called "women-stories," because the narrator is in a female voice), all twelve of which comprise a book called *The Schoolgirl*. Most have appeared previously in Lane Dunlop's versions, in British and American literary journals.

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