



### **The Geisha Who Bewitched the West**

by Lesley Downer

She came from a well-to-do samurai family and might have been expected to make a good marriage and lead an uneventful life as the wife of a respectable businessman. But life in Japan at the time was changing at an extraordinary rate. This had a cataclysmic effect on her life.

Her grandfather was an assistant magistrate in Edokko. He lived a prosperous life. Her mother Otaka was a notable beauty who had worked in the mansion of a provincial lord. There she acquired airs and graces and an aristocratic style. Her father, Hisajiro Koyama, was such a placid, saintly man that he was nicknamed "Buddha." When he married Otaka, he moved into the family house and eventually inherited the business.

The rigid class system then put the military at the top, followed by peasants and merchants, who produced nothing, and were regarded as parasites. They were at the bottom of the social pecking order, though many like her dad, had become hugely wealthy. Isolated from the rest of the world, Japan developed a hothouse culture of courtesans and geishas. However, in 1868, the shogunate was overthrown in a coup d'état. The 15-year-old Emperor came down in a grand procession from Kyoto and was established as the figurehead of a new government, dominated by those same samurai. Edo was renamed Tokyo (Eastern Capital) and became the official capital of the country. Japan's new rulers set about creating a country that could deal with the West on equal terms and things changed.

In 1871 her mother Otaka discovered she was pregnant again with her twelfth child. It was the worst possible time as the new banking system had put her husband out of business. The couple were middle aged and already had eleven mouths to feed. Little Sada was born on July 18, 1871. For a few years her father managed to keep the family together by setting up a pawnbroking business to provide cash to impoverished aristocrats. He borrowed a sizable amount of money from The Hamada House in exchange for his daughter when she was five or six. He may have expected to redeem her but he died when she was seven. By then the family had fallen deep into poverty.

*"My adopted mother, Kame Hamada, used to serve as a maid in a nobleman's mansion, so she had very high standards. I was brought up very strictly, as if I were her own child. I was an uncontrollable*

*tomboy--wild and willful.*" In the winter of 1883, at the age of 12, she made her debut as an o-shaku, literally "*asake pourer*" an apprentice geisha. She had a certain refinement which came from her samurai parents and an innocence that was rare in the geisha world. Kamekichi sent her off to a local Shinto priest to be taught to read and write beautifully with a brush. The geisha of those days was like rock stars. They were showgirls who danced, sang, and entertained the privileged and wealthy – *gei-sha* literally means "art person." In those days Tokyo was a city of waterways, a Venice of the east with canals, rivers and streams. Teahouses had their own boathouses.

Kamekichi was a perceptive woman who realized that Sada was an exceptional child. With proper training she could be a star. She was given a lot of love and attention. She wore Western clothes with her hair bunched into a bun on top of her head and framing the face in a flattering way. At the age of fourteen she began riding. Until the coming of the Western barbarians, horses had been only for samurai. While riding she met a handsome young student by the name of **Momosuke Iwasaki**. He knew he could never marry her. She was a geisha and belonged to another world.

At 12 Sada was growing into a striking beautiful young woman. Long legged and coltish, like a dancer. She had a fiery temperament. Her virginity was a priceless commodity. As she reached puberty, Kamekichi pondered the all-important question: *Who should perform the deflowering?* This was how the proprietress of a geisha house recouped her investment. It generated an enormous amount of money. The fee was equivalent to the cost of a small house.

**Prince Uto** When he entered her life the prince was in his forties and approaching the pinnacle of his career. He was a short, Napoleonic figure, a strutting bewhiskered playing and notorious libertine. Forceful and charismatic he later become prime minister. At eighteen he had been a swashbuckling young warrior who had tasted blood in the struggle against the shogunate. He was a charismatic young thinker and revolutionary. While the Americans were playing out their Civil War, Japan launched into its own full-fledged civil war. He was one of the rebellion's natural leaders. By 1880 he was senior councilor and the most powerful man in the realm. He was fascinated by young Yakko and signed a document with two friends stating his intentions.

Then one day in 1886 when Yakko was fifteen, Ito finally claimed his rights. For Yakko the fact that her deflowerer was prime minister was a matter of immense pride. Contemporary geisha, old enough to have been through *mizuage* themselves say that being deflowered by someone for whom they did not feel the slightest attraction was horrible. But completely unavoidable. The week before he spent every evening with the young girl, massaging her thighs with egg white. In those days no one in Japan imagined for a moment that they would marry for love. Love was a shameful emotion.

Meanwhile Momosuke had a duty to family. He would marry the woman his parents chose. They selected Fusa, the extremely well-educated daughter of the founder of Japan's first university, Keio. She spoke with the refined tones of a samurai and could speak English well. Momosuke signed the marriage agreement but insisted that he spend three years abroad before the marriage.

**Otojiro Kawahami - The Liberty Kid** was a member of a troupe who performed. His trademark was a catchy satirical song that he had composed. It was a huge hit. He was no pretty boy; he had a cheeky round face, thick eyebrows and a defiant set to his mouth. He looked like an overgrown street urchin who was spoiling for a fight. His cocky self-confidence, combined with a certain self-deprecating comical style, was irresistible to everyone.

Otojiro was 27 years old when he met Yakko, who was then 19. From a Merchant family, Oto was the second son of a second son. At the time he liked a Geisha by the name of Oteru. She waited for him after a party and when he did not appear she started searching for him and found him in Yakko's bed. Like the up-and-coming pop stars of today Oto was a celebrity. However as to social status he was the lowest of the low. Lower even than a riverbed beggar and not even good looking.

Yakko liked him because he was different from the big-spending, flashy kind of danna she usually spent time with. He was a real man. Years later she explained in an interview: *"When I got together with Otojiro, it was 1890. At the time I was a geisha. Some might think it was a typical geisha-actor affair that we just hitched up on our own accord, for convenience; but it absolutely wasn't like that. My adoptive mother wanted me to have a proper husband, no matter how scrawny or withered he was. I decided I'd like to marry a real maverick. If Kawahami was kind enough to want to marry me, I said I would accept. So, it was settled."*

With the popular Geisha behind him Otojiro's star was soaring. He became famous for his thrilling dramas. He had a genius for giving the public what they wanted. He had a string of hits with some spine-tingling melodramas. But he could never break free of money problems. Right in the middle of a successful run his debtors would appear or bailiffs would arrive to seize some of his property.

Yakko, was always a devoted and supportive wife. She had given up her geisha status at the pinnacle of her career to devote herself to him. However, Oto was always beset by temptations. Wherever he went there were geisha, dancers, prostitutes and women of every sort. *"He had a very merry temperament. He was always telling the most enormous lies. He was as slippery as a fox on a horse's back. He had a sort of magic for women. He was a real lady-killer."*

One wintry day when Yakko was sitting at home beside the charcoal brazier smoking a long pipe two women slid open the front gate. One, who was strikingly lovely and had an elegant grace. Behind her was a woman in the baggy trousers and hempen kimono, a servant. She had a baby wrapped in quilts tied to her back. Yakko carelessly said, *"New domestics, are you? My husband's out. If you want to talk to him, come back later."*

The pretty woman spoke: *You must be that Miss Yakko that everyone talks about, Well, I happen to be Oshizo of the Iroha House and this is Mr. Oto's baby. Mr. Oto told me that he would take me and my baby in anytime. So, I'm moving in. I've come to be his wife. I've got no dowry, but I've got a baby. That's worth much more. I just want Otojiro to recognize this child.* After a fierce argument and many tears Yakko kicked Oto out. They eventually reconciled when she accepted his child.

Yakko and Oshizo traveled to American and Europe performing his plays with great success. *She was beautiful, she was exotic, she breathed life into the woodblock prints that they adored and collected. She had a mesmerizing stage presence, and a beauty so vibrant that even in a huge theater it never diminished. She had a fascinating soft smile and a natural allure; but she also had a sweet vulnerability. She had the frail, yielding beauty of a willow tree; that's her secret, and no one else can compete.*

Of all this adulation Yakko responded, *"The great fame and fortune that our troupe has met with today is by no means due to our own abilities but because, as the Japanese empire won the recent war [against China], many countries have focused their attention on Japan. Our present success is partly due to the*

*fact that foreigners are interested in dramas performed by victorious nations; people tend to like the unusual,"* she explained.

For all her brave words Yakko must have wondered what fate had in store when she returned to Japan. There, she was not a diva, a superstar, or the idol of the theatergoing public but an ex-geisha, spurned by decent society. Otojiro was a riverbed beggar who lacked even the dubious honor of being a member of a Kubuki family. But in Japan, where actors were initiated as children into the secrets of an exclusive and closed profession, Yakko could not possibly go on stage. In Japan it would never do for a woman to be more famous than her husband. Yakko's superstar status had been galling enough for Otojiro while they were traveling. Back in Japan she doubted their relationship could withstand the strain. She needed to step quickly back into the role of "little woman behind her man."

A month after they returned Yakko bought a large tract of land in Chigasaki, an exclusive seaside resort between Tokyo and Oiso. [Probably funded by Prince Ito who was assassinated ten years later.] Presumably the intention was for the couple to live there together, although the deeds were in her name. They acquired a beautiful wooded estate full of pine trees in a very desirable location, on the main road between the railway station and the sea. After three years moving from hotel to hotel it was time to settle down and have a home, Yakko was 31, Otojiro nearly 40. Prince Ito named their new house Bansho'en, "the Garden of Evening Pines." Otojiro, dogged by ill health, was perpetually in and out of bed. Never-the-less he quickly set to work on his grand project to reform Japanese theater.

Yakko's adoptive mother died suddenly on August 19, 1903 at age 59 and Otojiro's health continued to cause him trouble. Finally, he was forced to retire from acting. Asajiro took his place as lead. Yakko continued to act. Otojiro was determined to build Japan's first truly modern Western-style theater. Prince Ito, Viscount Kaneko, and other leading national figures promised financial support.

The inflammation of the appendix area that had troubled Otojiro for many years continued. When he thought death was near he advised Yakko: *"The Imperials Theater has been born, as an exemplar for theaters to come, but we still need to train actors capable of performing on its stage. This has been my ideal. If I die, carry on my work. I've done nothing for personal profit. Do not distort my ideals and turn them toward money making."* When the inflammation spread to his diaphragm he became feverish and delirious. All night long Yakko was kneeling silently beside his futon, tending to his every need, gently pressing cups of luke-warm green tea to his dry lips. She became pale and haggard. At dawn a relative or one of the actors would take her place for a few hours so that she could sleep. In the evening she was still performing. She was so exhausted that she had begun to forget her lines. He seemed to recover but quite suddenly slipped into a coma and died. Inflammation reached his brain. He died at 47.

One day in 1913 Yakko received news that her older sister Hanako, had thrown herself in a well and died. She had been the mistress of a wealthy man. She had finally found it unbearable to go on living a life hidden from the world, unacknowledged by her lover. She had barely recovered from that blow when there was another far worse. Her adopted son Kaikichi disappeared. The story that Yakko passed on many years later was that he had had tuberculosis. Perhaps he was desperately ill and thought his case was hopeless. One day he took the train to the desolate Japan Sea coast, where the waves lash savagely on the foot of precipitously high, rocky cliffs. There he threw himself in the sea and drowned. We do not know who saw him or how the story reached Yakko. Perhaps this is not the real story. The towering cliffs of the bleak Japan Sea coast are the traditional place where star-crossed lovers used to go to commit love suicide. In the days of forced marriages, it was common last resort. At least they could

be together in death. Raikichi was only seventeen, full of the torments and passions of youth. Maybe he could not bear the stigma of being the illegitimate son of a “riverbed beggar.” To this day we do not know what really happened. They are not even sure that he died. They only know that he disappeared and was never seen or heard of again.

For some reason Yakko never had children of her own. Japanese say that being deflowered in their early teens damaged many young geisha so badly that it made them infertile. Perhaps this happened to Yakko. Then news came that something dreadful had happened to Asajiro who had taken Otojiro’s place in the company. He had started mumbling, had nonsense on stage, straying from the script. The lead in the white makeup he had used to paint his face for so many years had finally gone to his brain. He retired and died soon afterward, on March 3, 1914.

In the terrible days and months following Otojiro’s death, Yakko was desperately in need of support and love. As for Momosuke, his marriage was a disaster. He had been consoling himself for years in the company of geisha. Yet neither had ever forgotten the intensity of their first meeting as children. As adults their friendship was touched with the magic of love which never soured. Perhaps Yakko had turned to him for financial help when Otojiro was still alive. By 1914 the pair had thrown caution to the wind. When her troupe toured the Nakasendo region of central Japan, Momosuke was with her. He was the most loving and supportive of partners and began to gently suggest that she should consider retiring from the stage.

Japan’s participation in World War 1 was a huge and unexpected bonanza for his business. Momosuke owned 75 companies and business was booming as never before. In 1927 he had a slight stroke and retired the next year at the age of sixty. He was still married to but not living with Fusa and their two sons. In those days people in Japan seldom divorced. Wives knew that their feckless husband would eventually return when they were old. In 1933 when Momosuke was sixty-five and Sada sixty-two, the pair decided it was time for him to move back to his home. By then they had been together more than 20 years. She had never hoped for or expected so much happiness in the second half of her life. The two parted formally with no more than bows and polite expressions of good wishes. She and Momosuke had put *giri*, their duty to society, before *ninjo*, their personal feelings and suffered as a result. But they had done the right thing as they saw it.

Yakko died December 7, 1946 at the age of 75. She made full provisions for her adopted daughter Tomiji and grand-daughter Hatsu in her will and they survived to take care for her grave, a custom so important in Japan. Geisha, actress, mistress: Sadayakko’s was a life lived passionately. She managed to tread a narrow path, to follow her heart while trying to play the role expected of women in those days. Few Japanese women before or after have created such ripples in the East and West.

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This book was in the Diamond Princess’ library. I read it while we were on a cruise to Japan. Then I focused on “remarkable women” while reviewing it for Book Club Oct. 2nd. I also adopted Jason Mow’s theme: “The Warrior Ethos – God, Family, Country.” We are warriors! We’ve come to earth at this time for a reason. Despite status, circumstances or economic conditions or other circumstance everyone can make a difference.