

## Beauty and the Beast

by Virginia R. Moreno

WHEN MY HOUSEMOTHER ushered me and my motley baggage to Hopkins Hall in Kansas, Millie's "Hi, Honey Brown" and ear-to-ear grin were the first to greet me. Millie's deft hands toted—my *buri* bag, fat to its reedy seams with my Ang Tibay slippers, my huge pillow, my sweets-coconut honey in a bamboo shoot, my pickle-salted red eggs, my paper, the Philippines Free Press, my music-from *tinikling* to the nipa hut song, my Gogo shampoo, my rice powder and, for evening prayers, a brown Holy Family by Manansala. In brief, Millie carried my own games, comforts, pantry and ikons, a Philippine paper flag flying over them all, to my first home in

America. Millie's foot it was that kicked the door to our sitting room to let our startled roommates know that I had come—with her bang. I am sure that Barbara, Rita, Jo, Ann did things for me that first day but again it was Millie's so-willing arms that cradled my tar-black pine box chalked on all sides with "Fragile China Handle with Care" while I followed her gingerly up the stairs.

"Where to, Honey?" she asked me from the stairwell.

"Please, right next to my study desk," I said, running ahead to open the door for her and her frail cargo.

"Not this coffin!" She exclaimed, grinning, "no junk in the study room, house rules you know. We get the folks and

boys up here some days."

"It's Noritake china!" I announced and caught myself boasting pathetically. Names of Oriental makers would impress my islander friends, surely not a girl from the richest nation in the world? More, she had positive ideas on how our room should look. Here, everything must be jumping alive, Dutch-clean and neater than the U.S. Navy. I shivered, longing that instant for my Manila room, ay, lizards in the ceiling, typhoon rain on my bed and all. Barbara, Jo, Rita and Ann rushed out of our room just then, all eyes and hands suddenly on Noritake.

"Git!" screamed Millie, and realizing perhaps the new importance of the mysterious crate or her role in its safe arrival, she raised the black box above our heads like a sacred urn while chanting abracadabra until right next to my study desk she carefully stopped to ease Noritake down.

In the thrill of showing around my portable Philippines out of a buri bag, I forgot Millie's parting word: "Anytime you want Noritake hauled down, you call me, Honey." I never did call. You see, Noritake was a set of egg-shell-thin cups and saucers with a matching teapot, so small one could hold it in the palm of one hand, and with a delicate lip from

which can flow out but only the most fragrantly brewed tea. All these pieces were exquisitely handpainted with mere breaths of carnationhood. On my last day in Kobe, I saw this, first and last love in Japan, begging to be removed from its glass cage, singing only to me.

ALL THE GIRLS in the house except Millie knew soon enough of Noritake's odyssey and my secret fears that my family might not forget so easily the beast for the beauty. Millie had no time to listen to such idle tales. Minute-Silly, the girls called Millie, aways a demon for small work, routing dust and bugs and spiderwebs from the cloak-room, washing the telephones with alcohol, always moving our study-tables a fraction of an inch nearer the light so we could read better although Millie herself had no time to read. We were all grateful but terribly awed by Millie.

Every clean-up day, Millie espied one by one my out-of turn things, as indeed all the Philippine things I hugged in caprice across the sea to my American home would seem "crummy" to any Midwestern girl. First, the salted red eggs must go, not to our dinner table (I had hoped to share the delicacy with people who eat only plain boiled eggs) but "To the incinerator, Honey, they smell!" she said. I

wrote my best friend at home who can whip egg-foo-yung any old time that the Americans were no gourmet, my way of vengeance. Then the bamboo shoot that held the coco-honey attracted the ants, so off to the trash can it went, not without a secret scream from me. Thereafter I hid my *Free Press* copies lest she use them to start our picnic fires and I quaked to let my rice-powder spill on the floor, she'd think it was too white. But always with variations on the old theme of Noritake like:

"Honey, why don't we push Noritake a little under your bed, huh?"

"No, Millie, everybody keeps horse-playing on the double decker beds and I don't want Noritake as the late *Thousand-Pieces Art*."

"Why, I can cover the coffin with a handsome pillow and we can all use it sometimes for a divan right here in the sitting room."

"What if Fattie Sue sits on it and forgets it's Noritake under?" And so on.

By then, Noritake was notorious. In the house, in Lawrence and parts of Kansas where the girls go home and tell their folks of the war between Minute-Silly and Noritake, I was offered fabulous sums by Kansas housewives to part with Noritake. That would end gracious-

ly the house war but who sells his first love in a strange country?

Spring came. We were cleaning for the open house with Millie as our director, of course.

"Folks with lots of kids and the girls with their dates will be tumbling around here." Millie said oracle-like, "we must put Noritake away safely in the basement! She even held out a cotton pad for Noritake, like the one we had for the house-cat in winter.

I walked away in aggrieved silence. I could hear my family's voice scolding across the sea: "Be nice, give way, the bamboo sways with the typhoon so it never breaks, be nice."

Well, I didn't want to be nice. Noritake stays. In my eyes Noritake was the eccentricity for which there should be tolerance in the same way the Bill of Rights grants the right to work, to worship and, also, I thought, the right to be foolish. After all, what monsters of stuffed teddy-bears lay at the foot of the beds when the girls slept. One of them even had a real skull for a shampoo dish! And I washed my long hair from it gladly when asked to.

The first families came and Millie as official hostess received them in the parlor below. I was assigned our sitting-room upstairs as my gracious domain and there I received my first

guest for tea, a nice boy from my art class.

"What's that Pandora box?" he joked.

"It's Noritake," I said gravely, handing him his cup of tea, "It was my first love in Japan and Millie here..." All my sorrows and travails about the Japanese beauty flowed down my cheeks as foolish tears. He listened to me. Yes, I had a right to keep Noritake with me, Millie was a "square" all right and the black box was a cubist's dream in a proper midwestern girl's room. I was assuaged. I flew about to give him more team, more cookies and happier tales. Once or twice he bent over Noritake, feeling the sunken nails all around on the black pine box.

"Get me a claw hammer," he ordered.

"No!" I exclaimed.

"Yes!" he insisted, "everyone has a right to be foolish but it is a privilege to share a beautiful foolishness."

And Noritake emerged from its mattresses of straw, was rinsed, cup by cup, saucer by saucer, was filled with the amber liquid gold of my best Hongkong tea. Mr. and Mrs. Gordon, Millie's folks, got their

first taste of Oriental tea from Noritake, declared it splendid and Millie was not above putting her lips to it. Noritake was safely cached with me all year afterwards except when our house entertained at tea and my beautiful foolishness was passed around and after tea, was rinsed by Millie, as a museum piece caretaker would.

The year over, I went home to Manila with Noritake. I opened Noritake tremblingly before my family. When I held the first cup and saucer in all its exquisite carnationhood in my hand, my family hissed in a chorus: "Impractical!" and never used Noritake.

"Impractical!" hissed my shipmates in a chorus behind me.

I released the beautiful prisoners with a fistful of yen and carried them in the black box, luxuriously padded in straw and castings of ricepaper. Buying a Japanese beauty was to me forgetting Japan's beast.

No one would take home Noritake for me, neither the Kobe post-office, nor the ship agency in San Francisco. Manila had not yet forgiven. So I had Noritake shipped to Kansas with me, my heart in my throat each time a porter laid his rough hands on the black box.

\* \* \*