

■ This story written by Minamoto no Jun is from the "Taketori-Monogatari," the great classic of the 10th Century, the product of the second literary period of ancient Japan.

THE MOON MAIDEN

Throughout Japan there was talk of the beauty of Nayotake Kaguyahime. Wisely, indeed, had the old priest Akita named her Nayotake, which means "Slender Bamboo." Samurai and Princes wooed her; but none could win her. The verses that were offered to her were returned, sometimes without word, sometimes, if the wooer were particularly troublesome, with a verse that mocked him and stopped his courtship if not his love.

At last, however, the Mikado himself fell in love with her. Then Nayotake was haughty and cruel no longer. She became mournful and gentle, and once, when the ruler held her silken sleeve, and entreated her to marry him, she hid her face and sighed: "I would if I could. But I may not. I am not of this earth."

The Mikado knew from her expression and her voice

that she had pronounced some fateful decree that he could not hope to change. He went home sorrowfully, and his only pleasure after that was to write verses and tie them to blossoming trees where she could find them. She, in turn, answered with similar verses, and thus, for three years, the lovers kept their love alive though they never saw each other.

When the fourth Spring arrived and the cherry trees were blossoming again, Nayotake became more and more mournful. Through all the months that followed she wept till the new moon rose in the middle of the eighth month.

Then she went to her foster-parents (who had found her in a bamboo grove) and said to them: "I must tell you now what I have kept secret all these years, from love for you. I am not a daughter of the earth, but

was born in the moon, and I descended to earth for only a period, according to an ancient law of my race. My time on earth ends when the present moon is full. Then my parents and kin, who dwell in a great moon-city, will arrive to take me back.

Her foster-parents lamented. Sanuki, her foster-father, sorrowed so that his beard whitened, his back became bent and his eyelids were continuously red. At last he sent word to the Mikado and asked him to help keep Nayotake on earth.

Immediately the Mikado ordered his chief commander, Takomo Okuni, to guard her with his best warriors. Takomo picked out 2000 of the most accurate archers and the most desperate swordsmen in the land, and marched with them to Nayotake's home to beat back the attack from the moon-people.

He ordered Nayotake's foster-mother to retire with her into an underground place that was heavily walled with stone. "Put your arms around her," said Takomo Okuni, "and do not let her out of your grasp till the moon has passed its fullness."

Then he locked the place and surrounded it with his grim men.

The girl smiled sadly while they were doing all this. "I loved you so, and your grief hurt me, so that I prayed to have my time on earth lengthened by a year," she said to the old woman. "I should like to stay with you, though the moon-city is most glorious and we live there without sorrow or pain in eternal youth. But my wish was not fulfilled. At the appointed time I must go."

The night of the full moon arrived. The old woman pressed the girl to her with all her strength. At the "mouse's hour" — midnight — all the country around the house suddenly became as bright as if sun and moon both were shining at once.

Shimmering clouds appeared high, high in the sky. Slowly they sank until the warriors could see beings standing on them. Most wonderful and beautiful were they, lovely beyond all loveliness that the earth ever had seen. Still the brave archers laid their arrows in rest and pulled their bow strings taut

with all their might. The terrible swordsmen set their faces into the most fearful creases and wrinkles and lifted their eyebrows in their most murderous manner, as they brought up their swords, ready to smite and slay.

One of the cloud people held up both hands. Instantly the arms of the archers were powerless. Their right hands yielded helplessly to the pull of the deadly bow strings, and the arrows sank to the ground. The swordsmen could not hold their swords and had to let them slip from nerveless hands.

The door of the underground vault sprang open of itself, and Nayotake appeared. The moon people approached her with two shining caskets. One of these contained the aerial garments and the other contained the herb of immortality.

Nayotake nibbled a bit of the herb. Then she wrote verses of farewell to the Mikado, thanking him for his great love. Weeping, she gave the verses and the herb of immortality to Takomo Okuni, put on the aerial garments and stepped on one of

the clouds. Swiftly the clouds rose, and in a few moments were lost in the sky.

When the Mikado heard of her departure from earth and read her loving, gentle verses he became immersed in a melancholy that never lifted from his soul throughout all the rest of his life. He lived only to think of her.

He would not touch the herb of immortality. He sent it by trusted servants to the summit of the great Mountain Fujiyama with strict orders to destroy it by fire.

This was done. The servants made a vast pile of faggots and laid the tiny herb on it. The flame licked high toward Heaven and they stirred it until all the masses of firewood were utterly consumed and nothing remained except the very finest ash. Yet the fire in the heart of it would not stop.

It has not stopped yet, and people say, it never will. It is the herb of immortality burning forever. That is why there always is smoke on the peak of beautiful, chaste Fujiyama. — *As interrupted by Julius W. Muller.*