

THE BETROTHAL OF OTOYO

By Ooto Watanna

O TOYO-SAN'S eyes shone brightly, and in each round cheek was a bright red spot. The small pink hands were clasped one in the other, and she sat very quietly as her maid dressed her hair. She would not for worlds have betrayed before even the maid the intense excitement under which she was laboring. But her affected air of repose and indifference did not deceive the astute attendant, who brushed the long black locks viciously and as if in protest that she was not taken fully into her mistress's confidence.

An auspicious time had arrived in the life of Ootoyo-san. Her father had chosen a husband for her. And now she was being dressed for the "look-at meeting," which was to occur that evening.

It was hardly a year since her father, returning from one of his trips to Tokyo, had announced to his wife his intention of marrying Ootoyo within the next year to the son of one of the wealthiest merchants of the big city. The Mizutany family of Tokyo, although of extreme wealth, was not of the nobility. On the other hand, Nobanaga, the father of Ootoyo, could trace his ancestry back in one long unbroken line of nobles and warriors eminent for their strength, fearlessness and pride. The Mizutany family, anxious to be allied with the nobility, had approached Oto Nobanaga, and he, glad of the opportunity of repairing his fallen fortunes, had gracefully consented to the union. One year of probation was given to the young couple, and during that period the boy was kept at school, and Ootoyo

made the most of her few precious months of liberty.

Her family lived in one of the old pretentious mansions affected by the nobles, in the beautiful town of Hakata, but her home was separated by several rice fields from any neighbors, and Ootoyo had been kept in great seclusion. However, since his acquaintance with the Mizutany family, Nobanaga had started some business in Tokyo, and was absent from his home quite often, so that the girl during these absences roamed at will through the surrounding forests and meadows and rice fields. She had no playmates or companions, and as for a lover, although she was at the romantic age of fifteen years, such a thing was unheard of among girls of her rank. She had been brought up always to understand that at the proper time a husband would be chosen for her, and this husband she would be commanded to accept, obey and even love.

Thus far her life had been uneventful, with a never-ending sameness each day that sometimes wearied the girl. It had been with feelings almost akin to pleasure that she looked forward to the day when she should be given to her bridegroom. She had vague dreams of what he should be like, and she gratified her imagination with pictures of a hero after her own fancy.

Ootoyo had been educated at home. Her own mother, up to the time of the great illness that had made her a chronic invalid, had been her instructor and constant companion, guarding her and directing her education in such a way that the result was

that rarest and sweetest of all types of Japanese womanhood—a daughter of a noble, carefully nurtured under a domestic home training and education. The gentler and sweeter qualities of womanhood were cultivated, and less attention paid to the girl's intellectual achievements. Submission, meekness, generosity and the repression of the emotions—these were the very important matters that the girl had to study. And Otoyō was in every respect a success, and in her sweetness of disposition, her gentleness of demeanor and tenderness of heart reflected credit on the old-fashioned method of training she had received. Still, underlying all this outward meekness, there was a great deal of impulse and fire in the girl's nature, which was why a queer little germ of question and protest against the narrowness of her lot began to come to life in her half-wakened soul of dreams.

One day, wandering aimlessly with her maid through the neighboring forest, Otoyō had met a young man, and this was an event in her life, for Otoyō had never seen any young men save her own relatives, and the coolies and servants or the peasantry. And, moreover, this young man seemed to her excited fancy unlike anyone she had ever seen. He had a pale, attractive face, melancholy eyes, a high, noble brow and a fine, slender form. He was dressed in the garb of a student.

Otoyō found herself standing still in front of him, and she was conscious of the fact that when the youth looked at her she could not remove her eyes from his, and so for a long moment the two faced each other in fascinated silence. Then the intrusion of the maid's hand through Otoyō's arm broke the spell and woke her with a queer shock of pain and pleasure commingled.

Otoyō shivered and hung her head, but the next moment she was blushing all rosy red, even to the tips of her little ears, and was returning the low and graceful obeisance of the anger. The youth was blushing

also, and with their eyes greedily fixed on each other something strange and new welled up in both of them, and involuntarily they sighed. No word was spoken, and in less than a minute Otoyō had turned and resumed her walk silently with her maid.

But that night the strange little image she had fashioned in her mind of the man who would some day be her husband crumbled to pieces and vanished into mist-land, and the girl dreamed instead of a face that was as tender as Kwannon's own. And after that day she was wont to bend her steps toward the spot where she had first met the youth.

One day a huge bunch of cherry blossoms, exquisitely arranged, lay at her feet. The girl knew the message of the flowers. She had not been forgotten, then! She caught her breath with a little gasp that was almost a sob, and then, stooping, picked up the flowers, and kneeling, buried her sweet face among them.

Suddenly she was conscious that someone was close to her, regarding her. She felt, before she saw, the presence and she knew who it was, and the knowledge sent a delicious thrill quivering through her veins. She looked up, and again her shy eyes encountered the compelling gaze of the young man. They were both very pale now, perhaps because they were both innocent and each had a premonition of disaster.

"Ah! I must ask excuse," said Otoyō, stammering. "The flowers—they are yours?" for she perceived he held a few in his own hands, and those in her arms she held out toward him. But he pushed them back to her, and in doing so their hands touched. The girl retreated.

"They are yours," the young man said, "and this also." He handed her a small scroll, and then, turning quickly, left her standing alone.

Otoyō did not do as many girls in her place would have done—that is, examine the scroll immediately upon the disappearance of the young man. Her dilated eyes followed him till she

could no longer see him, and then she folded the scroll with little hands that trembled and reverentially placed it in the bosom of her kimono.

"How so many honorable flowers at once?" both her mother and maid had asked her, in surprise, on her return to the house.

Otoyo smiled faintly.

"They were so honorably sweet to-day," she said, softly.

Not even the maid or her mother must see that precious scroll. Otoyo lay awake through many hours after the household had retired, waiting for all to sleep. Then she rose, and stealthily, by the andon light, she untied the scroll and read the writing thereon. It was a poem, and to her. Her face, her hands, her eyes, her grace, purity, sweetness, goodness were its theme.

O lovely maiden, my moon thou art!
Otoyo-San, thou hast my heart!

ended each verse.

She became so dizzy with ecstasy that she almost slipped against the lighted andon. And the quiet moon looked in on her and smiled, and lingered and kissed the girl's sweet, dreamy face.

That was the beginning of their courtship, if such their communion can be called. They met in secret, as lovers before them have done, and the meetings were short, pitifully short, a mingling of great joy and agony. For it must be remembered that Otoyo was daughter of a noble and betrothed to one of her own rank, for thus had her father described the Mizutany family to her. And the young man, who was inferior in rank to Otoyo, was also betrothed. Still, neither of the lovers had found the courage to confess to the other the truth. It was because of this mutually hidden secret that a certain restraint ever remained between them. It was a timid, sweet and inexpressibly sad feeling, with such a small moment's joy to compensate for the tragedy each realized they were weaving around themselves. And the shadow dark-

ened, the storm was threatening; soon it would descend and overtake them.

Now they were dressing Otoyo for this odious look-at meeting with the man her father and his father had chosen for her husband. She could hear her father's voice down stairs. He was directing the servants, who were preparing for the little banquet that was to be given in her honor that evening.

All the weary night before Otoyo had lain with wide-open eyes, which were dry of tears but bespoke the hopeless heartache within. It had been over a week since she had seen her lover, for since her father's return she was forced, from fear, to remain indoors. Once, indeed, she had ventured out alone, and that time her father, stalking heavily behind her, had overtaken and accompanied her.

Despite the bright eyes and flushed cheeks, Otoyo was really quite ill. The maid, watching her closely and suspiciously, saw the eyelids flicker at times, the lips tremble. She knew Otoyo's teeth were tightly clenched together to prevent them from chattering, and she knew also that her supreme effort to contain herself was even worse for her than if she could have found some outlet for her feelings in tears. And so, with sympathetic understanding, she put off to the last the care of the girl's face, busying herself with other parts of her toilet, and feeling sure that the girl would weep and break down ere long.

As she knelt before Otoyo, perfuming and manicuring the small, exquisite hands, she began talking to her.

"They say thy honorable lord is augustly handsome?"

She put it as a question, though she knew Otoyo had never seen him. There was no answer from the mute little figure, sitting now rigid and upright. Her face was turned toward the window, through which she could see far beyond the fields and valleys to where she had wandered with her lover. Only the pitiful semi-profile was visible to the maid.

"Also they do say he is honorably noble and good?"

Still no answer.

"And also he hath much wealth?"

She waited a trifle longer this time, but still Otoyō did not stir.

"*Moshi, moshi*" (please, please), said the maid softly, and stopped her work.

Otoyō moved her head, and looked down.

"It—it is all true—they say," she answered, her voice quivering and sounding strained and far away.

But Otoyō did not weep. The maid was mistaken in her and was not capable of understanding this endurance—something that, besides being cultivated, was an hereditary trait in Otoyō's character. And so with reluctance the maid finally powdered and prepared the girl's face.

When she passed from her maid's hands Otoyō looked very beautiful. Flowers were in her hair and on her breast—big poppies, that matched her lips and cheeks in their vivid redness. But the fire had died out from the girl's eyes, leaving them dim and lustreless, as she paused in the doorway before descending. Then she seemed to gather her scattered senses, and suddenly the maid saw, with a feeling of compassion and horror, that Otoyō was smiling.

And so it was that when she entered the *zashishi* (guest-room), bowing gracefully to her father, no one would have guessed from looking at her that Otoyō had ever known a tear.

It was not a warm day, but it seemed to Otoyō as if the incense-laden room was so hot that it was the cause of her dizziness. When the party had arrived she scarce noted to whom she made the prostrations. It was through a mist that she saw them one and all, and it seemed to her poor, bewildered vision that they melted somewhere into space, as she mechanically went through the long, low bows; and then soon she found herself seated on her mat, one of a large semicircle, and the little tea-drinking ceremony had perfunctorily begun.

Otoyō had forgotten herself, where she was, what it all meant. She picked up her little cup mechanically, and mechanically she drank its contents, and then, suddenly, memory, invincible, cruel and accusing, came back to her, and she knew that thus she had sealed her own betrothal, and a terrible pain tugged at her heart-strings.

Someone was speaking her name. It was her father's voice. He was addressing the company, and she saw as in a dream the smiling good-will reflected on the faces of all turned toward her, and then—someone from out the circle came quickly forward and took the seat by her, and she knew they two were removed, even though infinitesimally, from the others. But it seemed to her excited imagination they were sitting far off from the rest of the company, and she knew that he who was so close to her was the one to whom they had given her, the one who stood in the light of the man she loved—yes, the one whom she had prayed passionately, if guiltily, to the gods to remove.

She gasped and staggered to her feet, and stood trembling and swaying. Her companion had risen quickly also, and the guests, puzzled and even shocked at this strange interruption of the feast, were holding their cups from their lips and regarding the pair in spellbound silence.

And then, all of a sudden, Otoyō's hands were taken in a warm, close clasp, a clasp that was so familiar and sweet and dear that it was agonizing to her aching heart and senses. And then came a voice—a low, tender, wooing voice—so sweet and caressing, that instinctively she subsided closer to him:

"*Anata!*" (thou) was all he said.

Otoyō looked up fearfully. Did her eyes deceive her? She was clinging passionately to her own lover's hands, and at last the floodgates of her heart opened, and there, before the assembled guests and relatives, she wept on his breast.