ONE night in spring, Ryo was strolling along a street in Keijo, looking into the gay night-stalls where vendors were hawking specialities. At one place he saw a display of lanterns of attractive colors and shapes which reminded him of the old costumes of the Shiragi princes. He remembered that it was the eve of April 8 of the lunar calendar. Needless to say, April 8 is the Buddha Festival. These colorful lanterns were reminiscent of the old lanterns which used to be hung on the door of every house in the town of Choan in the days when the country was a Buddhist kingdom.

Stopping on his path, Ryo became absorbed in looking at them for a while and muttered to himself, "Yes, I will go to the Shakuo Temple." From Keijo he could get there in four or five hours. As the Lantern Festival is still observed there in all its old gaiety, he thought he might be able to recapture the old dreamy atmosphere for which he had lately been longing.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. Looking round, he saw Sokun with a grin on his face and a pipe clenched between his teeth. Sokun was a young poet whom Ryo knew well.

Pulling Ryo by the sleeve, Sokun pushed his way through a crowd and led him into a back street where jazz music could be heard all around. Sokun was a gifted poet, but recently he had been living in a dream of the future, like a madman. When he came across someone, he took hold of him for two or three days and debated on the future. When he met his friend on this particular night, he must have been especially happy. Inside a small restaurant, Sokun said:

"In the words of the poet, 'There can be no new Muse in such things as the light of Spain, the mist of Scotland, and the sword of Italy.' Now let's drink to the beautiful dream of the future!" Shouting these words, the poet raised his cup. Then:

"Now to beer!"
"To sake!"
"To medicinal wine!"
"Shakuo Temple? Good. To Shakuo Temple!"
"To Buddha!"

Things went on like this for some time, and at last, in the middle of the night, they both reeled into Sokun's untidy boardinghouse room. So Ryo could not visit the Lantern Festival. Of course, he insisted repeatedly on leaving for Shakuo Temple with the poet. But each time the poet argued with him, saying that there were many temples near Keijo and that it was ridiculous to insist on Shakuo Temple in particular. Ryo, feeling chaotic as he did whenever he was drunk, could not think of a good
reason for the trip, in spite of his utmost efforts to find one. He gave some incoherent explanation, not knowing exactly what he said.

The poet laughed pityingly. Then he suddenly sat up and said:

"The Lantern Festival at Shakuo Temple will last for about three days. Yes, it really lasts three days. You might as well go on the last day. So, for the time being, let's drink to Shakuo Temple and Buddha."

In this way, he clung to Ryo all through the next day and the day after, and they shed tears for the future or cried with senseless joy.

It was not until the morning of April 10 that Ryo got away. He arrived at the Shakuo Temple at about six o'clock in the evening, with the sun still shining over the western mountain range. When he stepped out into the square in front of the station, he recognized the reason why he had wanted so much to come here. Approaching the precincts of the temple, which is surrounded by the pine woods of the West Mountain, he saw the reason more and more clearly: it was an apple orchard stretching over a gentle slope. The white flowers, faintly pink at their bases, and the rosy buds smiled innocently up into the clear blue sky.

He vividly remembered having strolled here exactly seven years before. At that time, the apple trees had just been planted, and the flowers were not so beautifully in bloom as they were now. That time, Ryo had not been alone on his stroll. He had been with his sick friend Kokun, and Kokun's little sister Ippunyi. It had been in the spring vacation when he had come to call on his fellow student, who had been recuperating from his chest disease.

Among his many friends, Ryo was especially intimate with Sokun and Kokun. Moreover, Ryo and Kokun were bound together by their opposite characters. Ryo was whimsical and sometimes fanatical, while Kokun was steady and a thinker.

However, Kokun had fallen ill and had left the university to recuperate in this Shakuo Temple, which was near his native town. When Ryo had called on him seven years before, his rest did not seem to have had any good effects; his arms and the nape of his neck were conspicuously thin. However, he did not refrain from absorbing himself in thought, which was bad for his health; and, what was worse, he spent much time reading medical books. Ryo could not help but feel pity for him. He was getting weaker and weaker in spite of his strenuous efforts to regain his former health by the powers of spirit and science. It had been their custom at that time to take a walk down to this orchard together with Ippunyi, and to chat with the villagers or watch the old men in the neighborhood shooting arrows.

Letters had ceased to come from Kokun some three years ago. Sometimes he had delighted Ryo, and sometimes he had made him sad by sending cutting remarks or severe criticism on Ryo's writings. But in his last few letters his attitude had changed into a dreamy one, a painful, rather touching challenge which seemed almost religious.

In the end, Ryo's many letters went off like arrows shot into the sky, bringing not a single reply. Ryo thought that Kokun was merely being cranky, and he had been thinking of calling on him again to inquire after his health and exchange opinions with him. It was probably because of this subconscious intention that, while he was standing in front of that night-stall in Keijo, it had occurred to him to visit Shakuo Temple.

In the old days, when they had walked along the path through the orchard, he and Kokun, with Ippunyi, had looked down at the pale little twigs on which pink buds were puffing out. Unlike her elder brother, Ippunyi was sturdy and as fresh as an apple. She still went to primary school and was very fond of her brother. She insisted on coming to see him on every holiday and, instead of nursing him, she made him smile, al-
though he felt anxious and surprised at her running about in the mountains and woods. She looked very much like a mountain girl and did not want to return to school.

In these seven years, the apple trees had already grown thick trunks. Had Kokun become so healthy that one could hardly recognize him, like these trees? Had Ippunyi also grown up into a beautiful flower, like the apple blossom? Absorbed in his fond memories and tender emotions, Ryo walked along through the orchard.

Just then he heard the cheerful shouting of men and women in the direction of the pine grove at the entrance to the temple. As he walked towards the sound of laughter and cheering, he met an old woman weeding under the apple trees.

"Is the Lantern Festival still on today?" he asked her.

"No," she replied, without even raising her head.

"But that noise, that shouting over there—"

"The Lantern Festival is on April 8. There is wrestling and a swing contest in the square today." So saying, she stood up. Ryo stared at her with surprise. Though she looked pitifully old after seven years, she was none other than the caretaker of the orchard. Her expression became suspicious.

"Why, old lady, have you already forgotten me? I am the friend of Kokun who has been here for his health for the last seven years. Didn’t we often come here together? Once you were very angry because his sister Ippunyi broke an apple tree or something like that."

"My goodness, is it really you? Ippunyi is taking part in today’s swing contest. She always comes here and carries off the first prize—" she murmured, and a sad look passed over her face.

"That Ippunyi—?" Ryo asked, suddenly feeling his heart beating and at the same time becoming uneasy for no reason.

"Are brother and sister still together?"

"What do you mean? He died three years ago at the temple inn. It was on the night of April 8 that he died, alone, while the priests, pilgrims, and villagers were all making merry at the Lantern Festival. When Ippunyi returned home after the night’s frolic, she found him sleeping with an unusual smile on his still face. When she tried to shake him awake, saying ‘Big brother, are you having a happy dream?’ she found his body stiff."

She wiped away a tear.

"The wrestling and the women’s swing contest always attract a big crowd on the two days following the Lantern Festival. Since Mr. Kokun’s death, Ippunyi has made it her custom to join in the swing contest whenever it is held. She is such a skillful swinger."

Ryo could not utter a word for indescribable sorrow and emotion. Even the stouthearted Kokun could not hold out! In what ecstasy did he pass away in a lonely room of the mountain temple on the night when the outside world was filled with joy and cheerful shouting?

Once again he heard the crowd bursting into cheers. Bidding the old woman farewell, he took a short cut through the pine wood and hurried towards the temple. He wanted to see the room where Kokun died and hear more about his death from the master of the inn.

In the midst of the deep pine wood, some two kilometers up the mountain, the large temple buildings stood in desolate rows. Near the entrance to the temple, he crossed a ravine over a little bridge and found the old inn. In the garden, plum trees were in full bloom, and the flowery shrubs of mountain azalea looked like red clouds. He glanced at the last room which Kokun had occupied. Through the bamboo blind, a young woman could be seen lying on her side, reading a book. The other rooms looked deserted; there was not a soul to be seen. He called for the master of the inn. A caretaker replied that there was a new master since last year and that he was out to see the sumo matches. So
there was no means of finding out more about Kokun’s death.

It began to darken, and the pine wood rustled quietly under the evening sky. Leaving his suitcase behind, Ryo entered the precincts of the temple and went up to the Moon View Tower. It was still too early to admire the moon. He sat still, leaning over the balustrade. Tranquility prevailed all around. Every now and then, the twittering of birds roosting up in the twigs could be heard from the forest.

Looking around inside the dim hall, he saw various wooden tablets, inscribed with the names of visitors, fixed on the walls and ceiling. Seven years ago, he and Kokun had once sat here looking at these unsightly tablets. There were several hundred of them. Did they indicate the vain hope of worldly men for riches and fame or longevity? Once Kokun had said with feeling that, far from despising them, he wished to respect those tablets. Did he have so great an aversion for death? Thinking such thoughts, Ryo got up and strolled towards the tower. He imagined Kokun engraving his name somewhere in this hall before he died. It seemed somehow very sad.

At that moment, the merry shouting of the crowd again came faintly from the foot of the mountain. Ryo came to himself: Yes, let’s go down quickly and see Ippunyi. If I see her, I shall be able to learn the mood in which Kokun died. I shall also be able to find out the feeling with which Ippunyi comes here every year and soars up to the sky where the soul of her beloved brother is flying. She must be about twenty years old already . . . .

The swing contest had already reached its climax. When Ryo arrived there, it was eight o’clock, and the sky was dark. The square was jammed with an enormous crowd. The sumo matches were already finished, and the champions were riding home on the backs of big and small cows, accompanied by an old military band. A group of men were surging in the wake of this procession. He heard that the swing contest had now entered its final stage, with three finalists competing.

Right in the center of the square, two posts, some fifty to sixty feet high, stood piercing the dark sky. From the bar over the top, two thick ropes hung down. Three lighted red lanterns hung high up in front of this swing, dancing and tossing about in the wind. The prize was to go to the swinger who could kick these lanterns.

When Ryo joined the crowd, one of the girl-swingers was flying down, sitting on the foot-bar as if too weak to continue. The crowd sighed with disappointment. Only when her beautiful skirt suddenly flew wide open did some men burst into vulgar laughter. At this moment, a man called out: “Come, Ippunyi! Quick!”

Then another yelled: “Yes! No one can drop them but Ippunyi!”

Trying to get a glimpse of Ippunyi, Ryo moved close to the judges’ stand, elbowing his way through the crowd. Arriving there, he was surprised to find Sokun the poet standing beside the place where the champions were sitting. At Ryo’s touch, Sokun turned around and smiled in recognition.

“I have come too, after all. By the train following yours.”

Suddenly shouting filled the air.

“Ippunyi!”

“It’s Ippunyi!”

“See, the next is Ippunyi,” the poet said. “It’s she who is now getting ready to fly, pushing back with the ropes in her hands! Isn’t she beautiful? Though we can’t see her clearly in the dark, her jacket is crimson and her skirt is indigo. Look, she is up. Her body is marvellous. I hardly recognize her. Oh! Wonderful, that elan!”

Ryo, too, was so deeply moved that he could not help crying out. Ippunyi flew up, light as a swallow. At the top of the arc, she twisted her body around and then swung back, keeping the ropes pulled back tightly and drawing her body up a little.
Then once again she twisted her body and, adding strength, she swung forward, drawing a beautiful arc in the air. Suddenly she kicked out her leg high up in the air with all her might. At this moment her skirt opened wide like a flower, and she rose three or four feet higher than before.

Ryo and the poet were speechless, bewitched by her wonderful swinging. Each time she flew higher and higher, men and women cheered or swallowed quickly. Some were clapping.

“It's a feast of beauty. I have never seen anything as beautiful,” Sokun murmured.

... Ippunyi had said that Kokun died on a night which was loud with just such cheerful shouting. He was a stouthearted fellow, after all. In his last moments, he was filled with joy. It may have been that he was so choked with joy that his breathing stopped. I know that Ippunyi comes here to play with the soul of her brother every time the swing contest is held . . . . Now! She is getting near the lantern. Come on! She is going to kick! Getting close to it—! Oh, what a pity! One more swing!

The throng began to cheer, but then suddenly suppressed their shouting. Ryo watched breathlessly, anticipating her success in the next swing.

“In his last moments, Kokun must have been in the mood of an ecstatic poet,” Ryo said.

“No, he must have been more like a god calling to an angel,” the poet replied.

“In that case, Ippunyi is the angel . . . .”

The tense ropes now cut across the night sky, carrying up the lovely angel. She flew through the air, closer and closer to the lanterns. No sooner had she approached within three or four feet of them than she kicked out her foot. Her flaring skirt made her body look as round as a toy balloon.

Look! Two lanterns were marvellously kicked. They burst into flames. Shouting and cheers broke forth, and the crowd swayed like waves. In the dark night sky, the lanterns were still flaming brightly. Then one of the blazing lanterns began to fall.

“Look! That is Kokun coming down from Heaven.” Ryo suddenly embraced Sokun.

“Called by the angel, called by the angel . . . .” the poet choked.