

Mr. Bamboo
and the
Honorable Little God



A Christmas Story

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MR. BAMBOO AND THE HONORABLE LITTLE GOD

During sundry long and lonely evenings in a Japanese mission school, a young native teacher sought to while away the hours for a homesick exile. She was girlish and fair, with the soft voice and gentle, indescribable charm characteristic of the women of her race. Her tales were of the kindergarten, happenings in her life and the lives of others, and I have sought to set them down as she told them to me in her quaint, broken English. But they miss the earnest eyes and dramatic gestures of the little story-teller as she sat in the glow of the hibachi fire, with a background of paper doors, with shadow pictures of pine-trees and bamboo etched by the moonlight, the far-off song of a nightingale, and the air sweet with incense from nearby shrines.

He wear name of Tāke Nishimura, which in English say' Mr. Bamboo of the West Village. He most funny little boy in my kindergarten class. But he have such sweet heart. It all time speaking out nice thoughtfuls through his big round eyes, which no seem like Japanese eyes of long and narrow.

His so much slim of body make him look like baby. But his mama say' he been here four years. She nice lady and loving mother. One more thing

why that child's most funny small enfant. He have papa who is great general of war, with big spirit. Tāke Chan fixed idea in his head he's just same kind big warrior man. He use same walk and the same command of speak.

This time I relate you about was most Christmas-time. I tell story to children of long time ago, when big star say to all worlds Christ baby lay in manger, and I say soon we celebrate joyful day in kindergarten. That little Tāke Chan never hear 'bout it before, and he get look in his face same as John boy in picture what always have crooked stick in his hand, and he speak this word: "A new God? Will He be our guest on feast-day?"

We learn song 'bout star and cradle and 'gain he speak his thought. He say: "What is cradle, Sensei? I know 'bout star. Every night at my honorable home I open shoji to see old priest strike bell and make him sing. Then I see big star hang out light over topmost of mountain." One more time he say, like thinking to himself: "Cradle. Maybe him shrine for new God of foreign country."

I know English for long time, but Japanese childs never know cradle. It have not come to this land.

Christmas-story was telled many times, for children like to hear about it. When I say this time, on that day we get pine-tree and dress him up with many gifts, Tāke Chan clap his hands and say: "Banzai! We make offering of tree to new God."

Sometimes many troubles press my mind how I make child know much difference of real God, which he never see, and those wooden-stones we see all time with burning of lights before them and leaves of bamboo and pine.

We work very hard all days before morning of Christmas-tree, but not one child in whole class could make things such fast as Tāke Chan. His hands so small they look 'most like bird-feet hopping round quick in flower garden when he construct ornaments of bright color. Sometimes he have look of tired in his face, and bad coughs take his throat. For which, if I did not know 'bout Christmas-story and all other many things like that, I would have a thought that fox spirit was industrious to enter his body.

Then I mention, "Go play in garden", for I know well how he have like of play in lovely garden of his home, where, with body of bare, he race big dragon-flies what paint the summer air all gold and blue. But Tāke Chan makes the laughs for me when looks so firmly and say: "No. I have the busy to make ready for honorable guest coming on feast-day of Christman." All times he not singing he talk 'bout what big welcome we give to new God.

Ah, that little boy! I can no' make him have the right understand'; but he walk right into my heart, and give me the joyful of love and much sad.

No, I never forget that Christmas day. It makes of my mind a canvas and paints pictures on it what will never wash away nor burn.

In morning, sun 'most so slow climbing over mountain as snail creeping up Fuji. He get big surprise when his eye come into kindergarten window and find me very busy for a long time.

All teachers have many works, and very soon they turn their playroom into lovely feast-place. Paper flowers and ornaments which childrens build with hands, and red berries they bring from forest, have expression same as growing from walls and windows. Same thought as all teachers to give the happy to glad Christmas-day. Many Japanese child is just getting news of this birthday.

Quick we put piano where it can sing best, chairs all in circle. Big spot in middle for tree, which comes at very last from that other room.

While I work postman bring long box from foreign country, which one teacher open. It had gift for kindergarten. It was such beautiful thing. Many childrens never see same as this before. All teachers give quick decide to make secret of present, and put on Christmas-tree as big surprise.

In very middle of most happy time by opening box, idea arrive in my mind. Wonder if those coughs permission Tāke Chan to come kindergarten that day? One desire knock very loud at my heart for that little Bamboo boy to know rightly 'bout Christ-child. I know for surely. Once I

go to foreign country, and my life have experience of seventeen. But Japanese child of now must see God and everything.

Then glad thought come. If Tāke Chan do not make absence this day, his own eye will tell him trulier than stiff speech of tongue that cradle is not shrine, and Christ child not blazon image of wooden stone, but great spirit of invisible which have much love for childrens. I learn those words out of book, but meaning come out my own heart, which I have the difficult to give child.

Beginning time for morning march grow very near. Him not come, and the anxious so restless my body I run to big gate and view round and up.

Narrow street which walk by kindergarten house most lovely picture than all other countries of universe. It have many trimmings of flags and banners for greeting soon coming of New-Year. Even old plum-trees have happy to break pink flowers out full, and lay on gray roof to look at bright sun. The big love of my heart for this Japanese country make me so delightful I have little forget 'bout late of Tāke Chan till I hear spank of many feet on hard earth. I look, and see one of those pictures which never melt off my mind. That sound of feet belong' to soldiers company, and so quick they stop in long line and hold all hands to hat for salute, I think maybe Oyama San coming. I give piercing look, and my eyes see marching straight by those big mens a speck of blue all trimmed with gold

braid. It was Tāke Chan. Same war clothes as his papa, even same number stripes on his sleeve, and twelve inch' of sword on his side, which make song on heel of shoe when they walk. Father's two soldiers servants walk close behind Tāke Chan, and in smiles. Everybody know that little boy, and everybody love his earnest. I have several feelings when he walk up to me and say: "New guest have he come? I make ready to welcome with new clothes."

Ah, me! I have the yearn to convey the right understand'; but he look so glad to give the welcome, and his war clothes so grand, the feeble fell on my heart. I not give correction.

One servant say: "Last night Tāke Chan very sick with evil spirit cough. Mama say rest at home, but he say this great feast-day for new God. He must for certain come and offer pine-tree and have song and march." I hurry away with Tāke Chan, and take seat on circle of kindergarten room. A feel of anxious press' hard. First we have grand parade, and that little soldier boy in blue in front of all children have atmosphere same he was marching before emperor. My keen of eye see all time he have fight with swallow in his throat. After march come song 'bout cradle and star, but big cough catch Tāke Chan in middle, and when the strangle had left and tears of hot had wipe way, he heard childrens saying amen to prayer. His red lip have little shake, for he have great pride to

say that prayer faster than any child. He has a hospitable soul, too. But Tāke Chan son of great general of war, and he never cry, even though much disappointment come to his mind. I was hunting speech to give him the comfort of heart when children give sound with mouth like storm breeze hurrying through leaves. I look. Where door of other room always lived was most beautiful Christmas-tree of any world, all light with flaming candles and gold and silver balls. On very tip-most top the lovely big surprise from foreign country. It wore dress of spangly stars and white. Big brown eyes and hair like rice-straw when sun shines through it. It held out welcome arms. Every move of tree give sway to body. I know trulier, but surely, it have look of real life. Teacher rolled tree to middle of room in bare spot, which made glad to have it. Children laughed and clapped hands happy of that day, and call many funny sayings. I forget the anxious in my happy of that day, and turn with glad eye on Tāke Chan. Bamboo boy. Never I see such wonderful thing as the glory. First he see only it, and give low tight whisper, "The Offering." His eye fly to tip of top. He lean way over like his body break with eager. Joyful speech come with long sigh, "Ah—the guest he is come!" For one minute room very still, and just same as fairy give him enchantment Tāke Chan rose from floor till he come right under tree. Other childrens make such merries.

They have thought it play. But all sounds and peoples passes away from my vision. Nothing left but picture of one small blue soldier looking up through blazon flames of Christmas-tree to shining thing above. His cheeks so full of red with fighting cough, eyes so bright with wet of tears, he fold his hands for prayer, and soft like pigeon talking with mate he speak: "O most Honorable Little God! How splendid! You are real; come live with me. In my garden I am a sodier; I'll show you the dragon-flies and the river. Please will you come?" My heart have pause of beat. I think fever give Tãke Chan's mind delirious. Quick I uncement my feet from floor to go to him. "Tahke Chan," I say with lovely voice, "that is not a God nor even image. Listen: it's only a big foreign doll which postman bring this morning as great surprise from America. Teacher put it up high so all child's could see it. Look what kindergarten give you—most beautiful kite, like dragon-fly you love more better. Come rest in your chair. We sing."

Ah, that little play soldier! Door of his ear all shut to my every speak of love. He just stand with eyes uplift' and plead: "Please come play with me. I know your song 'bout cradle and star. And I can march. See." But his body rock from each side to other. Then I press my arms round and whisper with much tender: "I bring doll home with you." He look 'way up high on Christmas-tree, then he leave his conscious in kindergarten room.

Me and two soldier servants convey Tāke Chan and foreign doll to his home. I stay in honorable house with them. One day go by, and 'nother night come. Sick boy's mama have look of ivory lady as she rest her tired, and maid girl make tea. I watch by side of bed on floor. Big ache in heart clutch' me when I look round room and see blue soldier's suit hang' near. It have look of empty and lonely, dragon-fly kite in corner have broken wing. But when I bring gaze back Tāke Chan, loveliest sight of all visit me. That little child reach out and find hand of foreign doll. He hold very tight, and give it look of love. Such heaven light come on his face! I suspend my breath and listen to his low speech which come in broken pieces: "You are my Tomidachi. Do not go; I soon be well I come play in your garden. Dragon-flies—cradle—star—Ah, Little God—you grow so big!"

Something made me open shoji quick. Old priest make bell sing. Lovely star hangs its light over mountain. All things have great stillness. Not even leaf tremble in white moonlight. Strange feel hold me. Then I know Tāke Chan have gone to play in Christ-child's garden.

Ah, me! Tears of my heart are many for that little Bamboo. But I have the joyful too; Now he have the right understand'.