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WHEN CHRISTMAS CAME TO FUKUI

by

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Winter had come early to Fukui this year, and although it was still December, a month of comparative warmth, the little city was wrapped in a dense snow storm. To the girl at the glass window of the "foreign" house, the people seemed to blow along the street as helplessly as the snowflakes. Their shoulders hunched, ~~their~~ hands drawn up in the sleeves, they went mutely before the driving wind, one shivering word coming from between ~~the~~ ~~their~~ chattering teeth as they greeted each other: "Samui! Samui!" (Cold! Cold!)

And it was cold indeed, penetratingly, wretchedly cold! So thought the girl at the window, as she looked at her own blue hands, and turned her back suddenly upon the street, as if to shut out the frigid symbol of the implacable season.

It was cold, too, indoors, and especially in this great, empty chamber, which was all her own. They had promised her so many things, she recalled with a suffocating sense of bitterness and rebellion. Only the glittering, ice-coated panes of glass were there to remind her at least, that they had striven to redeem these promises. The Mission was poor--she had known this from the first. Those glass panes represented a concession and even sacrifice.

How desireable, how charming, the life had seemed to her but such a short time since. What had wrought then this wretched change, she asked herself, and piteously answered that it was the cruel cold. It had frozen her very soul. She moved about the room, wringing her hands unconsciously. They ~~too~~ felt like small blocks of ice.

There was no fire in the room, save that contained in a diminutive kotatsu, scarcely more than a small pan with a couple of live coals in it, whose warmth one could not adequately feel unless one crept under a quilt thrown over the fire frame.

At home there had been a mother, a father, brothers, sisters, and many other relatives and dear friends. They had made her pathway very cheery and rosy. She had left them for this!

Her mind wandered with a persistent anguish to the little circle she knew was gathered this very night about the home hearth. A sense of desolation, of unutterable loneliness swept away her last effort at self control. She threw herself down by the kotatsu, dragged the quilt wildly above her shivering little body, and there with her face buried in her hands, the sobs burst from her unchecked.

How long she wept, she could not have told. She became aware, with a sudden sense of half fright, half anger, that someone had intruded, and, no doubt, had witnessed her grief. Her orders had been emphatic that her privacy was to be respected. Now, without knocking, someone had dared to enter her room, on this night she had claimed as all her own, this Christmas Eve, which she <sup>alone</sup> ~~only~~ in all this snow wrapped city--so she told herself fiercely--- could <sup>appreciate</sup> ~~understand~~ and love!

She had the cynicism of the disillusioned younger missionary, who finds the first fruits of his labor returned to him spoiled and scorned. Of all the fifty inmates of the school, not one, ~~she was assured,~~ was there for love of her religion. This, she was sure of now, despite ~~the~~ those who the most loudly and vigorously protested their "conversion". Only that morning, one of her most hopeful pupils, a boy named Gonji, eagerly desirous of obtaining a bit of money for some obscure purpose, and unable to move her by entreaty or guile, had finally fervently offered: "For ten yen me goee to church aevly Thunday. For fifteen yen, me lubbee Jesus!"

With passionate vehemence the girl had assured her own weary heart that she alone would feel and understand the Spirit of Christmas. She had shared her all with them; but this she now wanted, demanded, hugged to herself---just to be alone, on this great day adored by her own beloved people for centuries. And now!

She put back the quilt from her head, cautiously, noiselessly. Then as silently, she sat up. A hard look crept into the girl's young face; into her eyes a curious wrathful excitement blazed. Suddenly she sprang to her feet, and in a moment had ~~seized~~ seized by the neck of her kimono the Japanese girl crouching behind her trunk.

To strike a native servant, or even a pupil, was no uncommon thing among foreigners at this time; but if any one had suggested to Miss Ellison this method of chastisement, she would have repelled the idea with indignation and horror. Now, as she held the trembling girl with one hand, she brought the other

swiftly forward in a resounding slap.

"You thief!" she cried breathlessly. "Oh-h! You wicked thief!"

Words failed her further. She could only stare at the Japanese girl with wide, blazing eyes, trembling and quivering from head to foot. But she was conscious too of another sense, ~~odd~~ enough one of strange relief, as if the explosion of her hand against the yielding cheek of the Japanese girl had acted as a veritable tonic upon her overcharged nerves.

She began to search her, dipping down into the long sleeves, which were quite empty. Her hands, since the shock of that single slap, felt weak as a child's or a sick woman's, and her effort to drag the silk stocking which Yone still desperately clung to from her was futile. Miss Ellison abandoned the effort, and ~~shoveled~~ pushed the Japanese girl toward the doors.

"Dr. Masters shall know of this!" she cried shrilly. "Oh, you may be very sure of that. Go---go-- out of my room, quickly! And never let me see your face again!"

Alone, she looked about her. The excitement had put new energy and warmth into her, but it had added more fire to her bitterness, her anger, her resentment. She put both her weak little hands over her heart, as if to stop its passionate beating.

Yone! His precious discovery--the sole redeeming hope of the mission. Yone! Whose soft, prayerful, sweet voice, with its pleading entreaty for more blessed light, whose wistful eyes and quivering lips had betrayed to him---so he had averred with such kindling eyes--- a rare and sensitive soul. Yone--- a thief! What would he say to that?

Miss Ellison felt a ~~strange~~ sense of wild elation at the

proof of Yone's defection. She could have cried from sheer joy, from pure relief. Never again would he sound the praises of this small white sepulchre! Never again need she chide herself for her seeming coldness to this girl.

Following this savage sense of elation, the reaction was a pitiful one. A pinched, tragic look crept slowly across the girl's face, giving it a peculiarly frightened, suffering expression. ~~It dawned on~~ She knew very well why she was glad of the wickedness of Yone. She loved Dr. Masters. It was like a mad illness--this love that had taken possession of her heart, here in this "heathen" land, where she and he had seemed to her sometimes like shipwrecked sailors upon a strange coast. Their very isolation had drawn them the closer together. Their interests had been of a mutual kind, their ideals the same; they were struggling toward the same goal. She knew that she ~~had~~ loved him that very first moment when she ~~had~~ looked into his eager face, as he smiled across at her in the midst of that motley crowd of little Japanese people in the mission house. For love knows not Time. It wells up in the human breast like the titanic waves of the mighty ocean, which may not be beaten down. It had raised this girl to abnormal heights, only to drop her, as she feared ~~deep~~ into abysmal depths.

Life had been desirable, so absolutely a thing of sun and glory while he was there in Fukui, working shoulder to shoulder beside her, teaching, leading, helping her---she, who was to take his place. Then he had gone, ---gone to another field of labor---and everything had turned black and hateful. This land of unending interest, of scenes of surpassing beauty was nothing but the home of the heathen, the savage, ~~king to the~~

~~beasts~~, whose impulses were no purer, no higher than animals, and whom it were vain and futile to dream of uplifting. She had missed her vocation. She was adrift here, a martyr to a girl's first emotional impulses. Miss Ellison was very very young.

She wrote to Dr. Masters. He had been transferred to Tokyo, and was in charge of a large church there. How glad she had been of this wonderful advancement for him, and how her heart had throbbed under the silent parting clasp of his hand, a pressure which seemed to reassure her that soon they would be together again. That was more than a month since, and he had not replied to her letter! He had written to Yone!

Miss Ellison's half closed eyes recalled with a poignant sense of agony the girl's confusion and alarm, when she had come upon her with the letter. Yone had thrust it into the bosom of her kimona, without reading or showing one word of it to her, whom she professed to love! Very well, then. Her turn had come. She would write another letter to ~~Brook~~ Yone's friend.

The pen point broke against the paper. She tore the sheet across. No! She would not, could not write. It did not matter. Nothing -- nothing in the whole wide world mattered now. She hated him no longer, just as she loved him no longer, she told herself calmly. Nor was Yone still odious to her. Indeed she regretted her impetuous brutality. Nothing, nothing mattered, save that this was Christmas Eve, and at home, in her faraway beloved, homely, beautiful Michigan, they were thinking of her tonight, and praying for her, and sending out upon the silent air myriad beautiful thoughts and hopes to bless and elevate her. They had asked her to keep the Christmas with them over the distance of land and water between them. So she

would--Ah, she would! she would transport her yearning heart back to the dear homeland, and they must feel that she was indeed a among them once again--she, whose heart had been so very sore, and who had let the cold of this cheerless place wither her heart.

Her tired head drooped downward to her arms, and fell like a crushed flower upon them.

The sliding walls of her chamber disappeared noiselessly into grooves. There was the soft, sliding patter of stockinged feet passing across the padded floor. A girl with a face strangely like the thief's -- Yone-- softly enfolded her in a silken quilt that was very warm and fragrant, and the Japanese girl put her sweet brown cheek against that of the sleeping teacher, and left upon the white woman's face something moist as a tear.

They were moving about the chamber. She was too blissfully weary to open her eyes and beg them to desist. Of course, it was all part of a dream, she murmured sighingly to herself; and she fancied even that she heard the tingle of sleigh bells---sleigh bells in Japan! Even in her sleep she smiled. It was the glass windbells on the eaves jangling musically against each other in the breeze. She solved the anomaly thus, while she slept; but she sighed, for it made her think of the sleigh bells of her home.

What a noise of hammering and banging those brazen little jack-daws who made their home in the go-down, were making! Why, they were actually poking at her glass window panes--those wonderful sheets of glass, which were the awe and delight of the whole



countryside, ~~and the pride of the school.~~ She did hope the jack-daws would not break them. They were part of the charm that allured the heathen to her school.

How very warm. how deliciously, irresistibly warm, it had suddenly become. What was that? She started bolt upright, her eyes wide, her lips parted, her ears strained. It was his voice--his beautiful, blessed voice, murmuring in her very ear his name!

~~But~~

~~But the room~~

But she saw, as her startled, anguished giance glance swept the room, that it was empty; there was no sound now of moving feet, of tapping jackdaws, or the murmuring soothing tones of her own lover. She moaned, sighed, sobbed, like a child in her sleep, and unconsciously crept closer under the silken quilt that was indeed about her.

After a snow storm the sun seems to smile with a certain wide benevolence, as if it personally were responsible for and approved this magical white work of nature. Gilding all the land with a golden touch, making every littlest twig on the trees glisten and bristle with its light, it found its way into the great chamber of the girl missionary, finding an easy and bold pathway through the shining glass panes. It shed long searchlights about the room, and came to rest in a beam upon the head of the girl who lay asleep. She stirred under the insistent light, moving vaguely from side to side. Suddenly she raised herself to a sitting posture.

She made no sound, and beyond the widening of her eyes, one could not have seen a change in her. But her bosom went up and down like a little wave upon a small restless sea, and presently her hand stole slowly to her throat. Then she closed her eyes, as one may do when he prays.

Presently there trickled something from between the little sheltering fingers about her face.

From behind a folded screen, the small, no longer sad or wistful face of Yone, showed. Her dimples glimmered like stars in her cheeks. Never had she appeared so pretty and charming, as demurely she pronounced the Japanese formal first words of greeting.

"I pray thee to excuse my rudeness the last time we met!"

"Yone, dear!"

Miss Ellison was holding out her arms; but Yone was unused to embraces. After a very deep and profound courtesy, a forehead barely escaping bumping on the mats, she said shyly:

"No doubt your graciousness desires to know who are the honorable humble gift givers?"

Turning bashfully toward the long silken stocking, which she had taken from Miss Ellison's trunk, and which now hung in a prominent place in the room, she said:

"This, respectable teacher, is full of nize gifts from insignificant schhol. See! They are of Americazan make. Those degraded boy, Gonji, buy same in Tokyo".

Miss Ellison remembered Gonji's fervent appeals for ~~money, and his ingenious offers to "Iubhae X Jesus" X~~

money; his ingenuous bribe to "lubbee Jesus" if she would but lend a few yen to him. She thought of ~~his~~ severe scolding and lecture with which she had answered his request. She had accused him of desiring the money for gambling purposes.

"This" continued Yone, with sparkling eyes, "is a box of honorable choco-lut Americazan candy. It is my gift to your graciousness. Mees Ellison, me--I have ask that Dr. Master buy that same candy for me at you magnificent country".

Still Miss Ellison's tongue failed her. She knew that Yone must have skimped and saved for months out of her small earnings in order to buy this Christmas gift. The lump in her throat could not be controlled. It threatened to choke her. Tears splashed in a shower down her face, but she did not attempt to hide them.

"This" went on the soft voiced Yone, and now she turned joyfully to the proud little fir tree which literally dripped with ornaments never before probably hung upon a Christmas tree: "This be the gift of Nishimura Taro sama". A faint blush dyed the Japanese' girl's cheeks, but her eyes smiled straight into the American girl's. "With his honorable hands he have cut down those tree at those mountain and on those unworthy back he have carry him to the honorable house of your graciousness".

"Taro! He---why, he is in Tokyo--Dr. Master's assistant!"

Yone laughed, her pretty dimples all abroad again, and then childishly she clapped her hands. As if ashamed of this display of feelings, she then very humbly prostrated herself, and when she had bumped her forehead several times on the mat, she looked up, still smiling, and said:

"Taro got obey those order from hees boss----" using a forbidden word, and being unchided for it--

"You mean Dr. Masters' told him to---come---here?"

~~As very sweet look~~

Yone looked at Miss Ellison, and <sup>a</sup> very sweet expression was in her shy eyes as she answered:

"Mees Ellison, he bring him here!"

"Please a-don't----" began Miss Ellison, but Yone was still smiling in that soft caressing way, just like a little kitten waiting to be stroked. Up and down she nodded her ~~black~~ shining black head.

"Those Dr. Master bring also hees gift to you, Mees Ellison". With a motion of triumph and pride, Yone jumped to her feet, swept aside a sheltering screen, and exposed to the view of the bedazzled teacher a great black stove, through whose open bars a ruddy fire blazed and crackled. It was the secret of the magical warmth of the room. The Japanese girl looked at it reverently, and then she said: "Dr Master say thaa Americazan stove jos lig' jewel ad Japan, and' thas hees <sup>gift</sup> unto you!"

Miss Ellison stretched out her hands toward it. She was crying, in spite of the smile that had been for some time trying to force its way through her tears.

"If you only knew what that meant!" she said.

"It take many long day and moach work carry thaa iron over those mountain" said Yone gently, "bud Dr . Master, he say -- thaa thas no madder, account thas grade labor --of love!

Something rustled in the bosom of Yone's kimona, as she laid her hand upon it. She drew out a little crumpled sheet of pap

paper and <sup>it</sup> put into the hands of her teacher.

"Thas hees ledder" she said. "Pray you read 'bout thad grade secret for you".

Their heads were together, the gold one nestling to the black, and ~~as they read they~~ they drew apart only at the sound of voices in the adjoining room.

Said Yone:

"Thas hees voice---my Taro-sama's"

"And his !" said the other girl with a happy sob.

"We vaery loggy" said Yone. "We got lots nise presents at those school, an' we got something more bes' still. You know whas those?"

There was a deep note of solemnity in the voice of the missionary as she answered: "Its what christ gave us as our imortal birthright, Yone---Love divine!"