

Chapter 1

KOOSUMO, LITTLE FLOWER OF INDIA

THE warm rays of the summer sun were beating down on the grass-thatched roof of a rude mud-brick hut in India. Inside the hut, on a blanket on the hard mud floor, lay a brown baby girl, fast asleep. There was no need for a covering blanket, for it was a warm day. An inquisitive fly was buzzing around the little brown face and decided to walk around the soft brown cheek. The baby awoke, opened her brown eyes, and looked up into the face of her mother, who was looking lovingly at her.

“Did that naughty fly wake up my precious baby?” mother said softly. “But it is time now to awaken, little Koosumo, my little flower, for soon your father will come from the rice field. He will be tired from working all day. We will go to the spring for water, and then we will eat supper together.” Little Koosumo did not understand her mother’s words, but she smiled because the voice was soft and sweet.

After bringing fresh water from the spring, mother stirred the curry and rice in the black kettle in the corner of the room. The smoke from the fire beneath the kettle curled up between the blackened stones until it found its way out the open door.

While the rice was cooking, mother played with Koosumo; then she placed her on her mat on the floor, for she heard father coming: down the lane. She could hear him chanting a weird song that he had learned from the charm doctor. This song was supposed to keep the evil spirits from coming to the home. Now that a tiny baby had come to the home, the parents must guard it faithfully, or the spirits might want the baby and take her from them.

When father came in, mother hastened to serve the supper on large leaves on the bare floor. Father was a big, strong man. His voice was loud and harsh; not low and sweet like mother’s. Sometimes Koosumo would cry because she was afraid. Then father would say, “Why couldn’t you have been a boy? A son

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would not cry nor be afraid; he would grow big and strong like his father.”

But Koosumo could not answer that question; she would only cry. Then mother, sweet and gentle, would take her in her arms to soothe and comfort her.

During the long hours of darkness, mother lay awake holding little Koosumo close. Many shudders of fear clutched her heart as she listened to the strange night sounds. Everything seemed so dark - a darkness made even deeper by superstition.

In the stillness of the night mother heard the hunting cry of an animal out on the hills. She reached over and touched the sleeping child beside her. The charm doctor had said that trouble would come to their home because the baby was a girl. She knew that father was displeased because she had not given him a son that would grow to be big and strong like his father.

With the dawn she would see the trees, the blue sky with the white clouds; she would not be afraid. Somehow when she could look up into the sky she did not fear the evil spirits that lurked in the dark corners at night. In the daytime the ghosts and spirits kept out of sight; then she and little Koosumo went to the spring for water.

Months passed, and as Koosumo grew older, she liked to watch mother cook the rice in the kettle on the little stone fireplace in the corner. Sometimes she, too, would have a handful of warm, cooked rice to eat. Sometimes it was too hot, and Koosumo would cry.

Koosumo grew and grew. Soon she was able to crawl off her little blanket and investigate the house. Mother was always watching, ever alert. There were many dangers. There was the hot kettle of rice and the fire between the three blackened stones. There might also be snakes, or even scorpions lurking in the dark corners of the room. There were many dangers in the outside world, too; but Koosumo need have no fear, for mother would protect her.

One day as Koosumo was looking out the doorway she saw something that held her attention. She did not know what it

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was, but it had two bright eyes, two little pointed ears, four feet, and a tail.

“Ah, ah -” said little Koosumo, creeping out the doorway. The little animal seemed to be attracted to her. It came nearer, timidly, slowly.

“Ah, ah -” said little Koosumo again, but before she could reach the little animal, mother came running out of the house with a stick and chased the creature away.

“Go away, cat!” said mother in a cross tone. Koosumo could not understand why mother chased it away.

“Cats!” said mother, as she carried Koosumo into the house. “They are not clean; they bring bad luck. Sometimes the spirits use cats to bring curses to the people. No, my little Koosumo, do not play with the kitty; it is good only to catch the rats and mice that steal our food.”

Koosumo would like to have a kitten for a pet, but the Indians in their village did not make pets of them; they were only kept to catch the rats and mice. So every day mother would drive away the skinny, frightened cats with dirty, mangy fur and ratlike tails.

Wrapped in a garment fastened to mother’s back, Koosumo went to the spring for water. Mother carried the earthen water jar on her head or shoulder, and Koosumo watched the changing scenes as they went down the path. She saw the trees overhead, the blue sky, the fleecy white clouds. It was a wonderful world!

On washday, mother went to the pond to wash the blankets and wrap-around garments that were their clothing. Koosumo rode on mother’s back, and then she lay on a blanket in a shady place while mother dipped the garments in the pond and rubbed them on stones to get them clean.

There were not many garments to wash, for father wore only a wrap-around strip of tan cloth with a red fringe that hung down in back and in front. Mother wore a simple sari of white cotton, which she fastened around her waist and draped over her shoulders. It was in this garment that she carried

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Koosumo when they went walking to the field, to the woods, or to the pond.

Then mother sat beside Koosumo while the garments dried on the bushes. She looked up at the sky. Who put the fleecy white clouds and the bright sun in the sky? Who made the moon and the stars at night? Who made my precious Koosumo, my little flower? These and many other questions puzzled the young mother as she watched her daughter sleeping on the mat beside her.

Perhaps the charm doctor knew the answers. But, no, he was only concerned with driving out evil spirits and taking gifts when there was a wedding or when a new baby was born in the village. He would not be interested in who made the lovely trees, the sparkling water, or the beautiful flowers that grew in the lotus pools.

She looked up at the trees. The leaves quivered as a light breeze passed through. It touched the hot brown cheeks of the sleeping baby beside her. Koosumo stirred, and a sweet smile crossed her face as though some pleasant dream had come to her.

“Ah, Little Flower,” sighed the mother, gazing fondly at her precious treasure. “Someday perhaps we will know - someday!”

When the clothes were dry, and Koosumo was awake, mother took up her little burden and wended her way back home. Soon it would be suppertime. Soon father would come from the fields, and the cow would be milked, and another day would end. Night would come, and they would sleep on their mats on the floor. The moon and stars would float by, and morning would come again. Soon another day's work would begin. Maybe tomorrow little Koosumo would go with mother to the rice fields to help father.