

Candle in the Dark

by Captain Mel R. Jones, United States Army

Children all over the world wait by firesides for a glimpse of a man with a snow-white beard dressed in red and white, but Santa Claus doesn't always look like that. If you don't believe me, as Kim Chi, a little one-armed peanut girl who met Santa Clause face to face. That was two years ago--but she will never forget. Nor will any of us who know the story.

Of course, the little Vietnamese girl didn't realize that the tall, thin man with the wide grin who purchased a small bag of peanuts from her (paying three times the normal amount) was really Santa Claus. At first she thought he was just another American soldier looking for something to do on the narrow streets of Quang Ngai. But there was something different about the way he looked into her dark brown eyes. It was as if they weren't eyes at all but bright candles on a Christmas tree.

There was no "ho, ho, ho" in his voice as he inquired about the pain in her arm. Only soft sounds came from his lips--like snow falling in the woods.

When he gently raised her sleeve, exposing the raw bone left there after a portion of her arm had been shot away, she didn't cry the way she usually did when the village children teased her. His touch was as soft as the feathers of a swan, his fingers soothing.

"Yes, we can do something about that," he said in a language she had heard the Americans use, "but first we'll have to consult your parents." Then in perfect Vietnamese he explained he wanted to talk to her mother.

"Impossible," she told him. "Mother is with the angels."

"Your father?" he asked.

"Him gone, too. Viet Cong shoot. Same time shoot me. Do this," she told Santa Claus pointing to the empty place below her elbow but smiling proudly because she had spoken his language.

When he took her good hand in his, she followed him to the jeep parked by the curb side (not the least bit surprised that it wasn't a sleigh pulled by eight tiny reindeer). Besides, she had heard the other children in the village say that sometimes Santa used a helicopter to get around on Christmas Eve.

Later in the hospital, Santa Claus was dressed in a white cap and gown as he gave instructions to his helpers--some Vietnamese, some American but all dressed in white and paying more attention to her than anyone else in the world ever had.

When she awoke the next evening, he was gone. Gone, too was the pain in her left arm. There was no horrible bone sticking out of her sleeve like a turkey leg. In its place was a clean, white bandage. And on the table along side her bed was a small Christmas tree with a note pinned to it.

She knew it was from Santa Claus even before the nurse started reading:

Dear Kim Chi,

You certainly slept a long time for an eight-year-old girl--right through Christmas when all the other children here in the hospital were receiving their presents. It's a wonder their happy laughter didn't awake you.

I wanted to give you your present personally, but there are some wounded soldiers up at Be Tat that need my help. I'm sure you understand.

Before next Christmas, Kim Chi, you will have a new arm. We've ordered one from America especially for you. You'll be able to comb your long, dark hair by yourself. You'll even be able to wear a pony tail when walking in the woods so that the branches will not catch your hair.

With your new arm, you'll be a normal little girl with two arms like all the other children so we've made arrangements for you to attend school in Quang Ngai. Never again will you have to sell peanuts on the corner in the rain.

The nurse has a beautiful new ao-dai for you to wear. It has a high collar and is as stylish as any you could find in Saigon. Oh, yes, it has long sleeves with pretty flowers painted on them.

You'll be a beautiful girl; and when I get back, I want to be the first to promenade with you down the boulevard. 'Til then, Merry Christmas to you, Kim Chi.

Love,

Nick

But why was the Vietnamese nurse crying, Kim Chi wondered? Surely, Santa's letter was filled with joy not sorrow. Soon she realized that Santa's letter made everyone cry at the hospital so she put it under her pillow where they couldn't see it.

One night she overheard two Vietnamese orderlies talking about the doctor who had died of burns in a helicopter crash at Be Tat on Christmas day. They said the doctor was brave; he wouldn't accept any water for himself until all the other burn casualties had been treated. But by then it was too late for the doctor.

"Was it Santa Claus?" she cried.

"No, silly little girl," said one of the orderlies. "It was an American doctor. Santa Claus will be back next year. Don't you worry."

Happily, Kim Chi fell asleep clutching the letter under her pillow.

As I said, that was two years ago. She's still in Quang Ngai waiting for Santa Claus to come back and see her new arm.