The Boy From Standard III

Father Rebello sat in his study, his vast bulk filling the roomy revolving chair. 'Swish, swish', went his pen as he wrote. Tick-tock went the clock on top of the bookshelf. Otherwise, the room was very quiet. The windows were shut against the chill mountain air. The curtains were drawn. On the carpet below lay Father's dog, Raja. In the daytime, Raja acted bone-lazy. Even his meals had to be pushed right under his nose or he wouldn't eat. But at night a change came over him. If the wind so much as stirred Father's latch, Raja let out a deep growl.

The clock had just struck ten when Father signed the last of the papers. As he put down his pen, he heard a low rumble. "Grrr, grr. . . . ."

"Quiet," said Father and Raja put his head between his paws. Silence.

And then Father heard a soft footfall. Some more. . . Slowly they came up the staircase and on to the landing where they stopped. Raja was barking furiously as Father walked to the door and threw it open. "Who is there?" he called. In the dark he could just make out a small form.

"Come in," he said aloud and presently the light shone on the face of Norbu, the new Tibetan boy from Standard III.

Norbu shivered slightly as Father Rebello led him into the study. He sat huddled in one corner of a chair, his frightened eyes darting about the room. Father Rebello waited so that the thudding of the boy's heart had time to ease. At last he spoke, "What is it, Norbu? Tell me,"

Norbu tried, but the words wouldn't come. He passed his tongue over his lips once, twice, three times, before he found his small voice.

"Father," he said, "I can light some joss-sticks in chapel every evening? Yes? You not mind?"

Father was taken aback. "Of course, Norbu," he replied. "But why?"

"Because to tell God I am here."

Norbu spoke without bitterness, but on Father's ears the words fell harshly. He put an arm round the boys' shoulders. "Why son, what makes you think God has forgotten you?"

But Norbu would not say anything more, and Father did not want to press him, for already the boy's face had gone very white. They had a cup of hot milk together. Later, Father took a torch, and saw Norbu to his dormitory, half-way down the hill.

Norbu came every day, directly after evening study, while the rest of the boys went tearing

down to the dining-hall. He stole past Father's room and entered the chapel. And five minutes later, Father Rebello could smell the joss-sticks. Norbu seemed content, but Father knew that this was not the end.

The rains had come and gone early that year. Autumn twilight trailed over the land, pink and dotted with stray white clouds. Father Rebello loved the evenings—a time when he could take his mind off the day-to-day problems of running the school. He never missed his evening walk, starting from the school on top of the hill, down into the valley and up again to the little knoll that overlooked a running stream. Here Father would sit and watch the sun sink to rest among the pines.

One day Father Rebello came later than usual. As he zig-zagged up the path to the top of the knoll, something caught his eye. A blue-clad arm, jutting out from behind a bush. Someone from the school. In uniform. Father Rebello quickened his pace, for he knew the knoll was out of bounds at that hour. "Who's there?" he said sharply, drawing level with the figure behind the bush. And then he saw the startled face of Norbu. In one hand the boy clutched a pencil, in the other, a sheaf of papers. He had been drawing the face of a girl, a Tibetan girl, and her likeness to Norbu was so remarkable that Father


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caught his breath.

"I never knew you could draw so well," he said. "And who is this girl? Your sister?"

Norbu nodded. Father sat down on the grass beside him, grateful for the tears that shone in the boy's eyes, for they meant that his defences were down and he would be ready to talk. Father Rebello waited. Soon, the boy wiped his face and plunged into his story.

"I seven years old when Chinese come to Tibet. Even then I have no father, no mother. My grandmother she take me and my sister and run to India. We leave our all behind, house and clothes and goats. My sister and I small. Can't walk much. Grandmother old. Can't carry. Somehow we drag along with the rest. Hundreds of Tibetans, all coming to India."

Norbu took a deep breath. "Some time later, one night Grandmother go to sleep and never get up. . . . .My sister and I go on with the crowd. Many moons after, we find us in a large house. Lots of other Tibetans there too and some people we don't know. They give us small white bowls to eat porridge.

"One day they tell us we go to school. Next morning two buses come. I put in one with boys. My sister put in the other with girls. They—they take her away. I not seen her again."

There was a long silence. Then Father spoke

gently, 'Norbu, you want to look for your sister, don't you?"

Norbu's eyes met his and he said, "Yes."

"In that case, do you mind if we do it together? I could make enquiries through our mission. Perhaps your sister is in one of our schools. If not, other missions will help. Of course, it will take time

But Father Rebello never quite finished what he was saying. For, rising like a little whirlwind, Norbu had flung two small arms round his neck. And Father held him tight, while over the mop of brown hair he watched the last little bit of the sun sink peacefully to rest.