

Hime-daruma

This is a story about the origin of the dolls produced in the city of Taketa, which are called "Hime-daruma."

Long ago, there lived a samurai called Zoga Kanzaemon who served the feudal lord Nakagawa. However, being of the lowest rank, he received only a meagre allowance and could barely support himself and his mother. In time he was married to a girl called Aya, but now that he had both mother and wife to support, his life became a struggle to make ends meet.

Poor Aya had constantly to worry about rice and miso to feed the family. But worse than that, her mother-in-law was mean and ill-tempered and kept complaining of Aya to her neighbors: "My daughter-in-law doesn't know how to cook. Everything she cooks tastes awful! She cannot even do needlework. She sleeps till late in the morning, and eats a lot."

Aya heard these complaints but did not let them upset her. Instead she served her mother-in-law patiently and gladly. For the neighbors knew that Aya got up very early in the morning and worked very hard. They said: "We should learn from Aya's example."

That the neighbors should praise Aya offended her mother-in-law. She began therefore to scold Aya directly. This was too much for Kanzaemon who tried to defend Aya, pleading: "Mother, please! Aya works as hard as she can. She has done everything possible." But his mother merely retorted: "So you two just think I'm a nuisance, do you?"

Kanzaemon was deeply disturbed by his mother's behavior and felt more and more depressed whenever he came home from work at the castle. He wanted the two to live happily together but could do nothing to help. Caught between them, he could merely say sadly to Aya: "I'm sorry I have brought you so much unhappiness."

The months passed but things got no better. The end of the year was fast approaching, when they would have to settle their debts for rice and miso. But where was the money to come from? The mother-in-law angrily blamed Aya for all their woes: "All this you have brought on us because of your incompetence!"

Kanzaemon stood helplessly by, wanting to defend his wife but fearing his mother's anger. Aya began to weep. Her mother-in-law, seeing this, yelled: "You useless woman, get out of here this instant!" Aya appealed to Kanzaemon, but in vain. He could not find the courage to stop his mother, and Aya had to leave the house.

Poor Aya had nowhere to go. Having married, she could not return to her family home. She could only plod miserable along the streets. Soon it began to snow and her hands and feet grew numb with cold. At last she could walk no further and had no choice but to return to Kanzaemon. She reached his gate and, falling to her knees, begged her mother-in-law to forgive her: "I was wrong. I will do whatever you tell me. Please, please let me in." Poor Aya pleaded again and again but to no avail. The gate remained closed. She spent a sleepless night under the eaves of their barn.

The next morning was New Year's Day. Again Aya knelt before the gate and begged forgiveness. Again her mother-in-law refused to let her in. Helplessly Aya returned to the barn and crouched under the eaves.

At dawn the next morning she was discovered by her neighbor, lying faint and stiff with cold and hunger. She was taken into the house where her mother-in-law, suddenly fearing Aya would die, turned pale with alarm and remorse. At length however Aya opened her eyes. Her mother-in-law, realizing Aya's faithfulness for the first time, changed into a different person and confessed: "Aya, please forgive me. I have done you much wrong."

Kanzaemon and his mother took good care of Aya and soon she became well again. Kanzaemon started to work harder and his lord, recognizing his work, gave him a promotion with the result that his allowance was increased. "This is all thanks to Aya," thought Kanzaemon, gratefully.

The three lived happily thereafter in peace and harmony.

Hime-daruma doll (the picture below) depicts a princess (hime) in the form of a tumble doll which has no arms or legs (daruma). It is a beautiful reminder of Aya who persevered despite hardship and at last found happiness. She wears the "juni-hitoe", the many-layered kimono worn at court in the ancient Heian period (794-1185), and patterned with designs of pine, bamboo and plum.