

Yuuki & the Tsunami

(Japan)

For as long as people can remember, the shores of Japan have been swept from time to time by enormous tsunamis. These awful sudden risings of the sea are caused by earthquakes or by underwater volcanic action. The story of the boy Yuuki is the story of such a calamity.

Yuuki lived with his family in the village. His grandfather, who had passed away several years before, had taught Yuuki much about raising rice crops, solving disputes, and a great deal about the ways of the world. His grandfather had been the most respected and wealthiest resident of the village - its headman. Now Yuuki's family cultivated the enormous fields of rice that his grandfather had passed on to them. Yuuki's village was nestled by the shore below a small mountain. One day, Yuuki was playing on top of the small mountain, watching the preparations below for a festival that was going to take place very night to celebrate an wonderful rice crop.

All of a sudden, Yuuki felt an earthquake beneath his feet. It was not strong enough to frighten anybody, but Yuuki, who had already felt dozens of shocks, thought it was odd - a long, slow, spongy motion. The houses below, by the sea, rocked gently several times, then all became still again.

Soon after, Yuuki noticed something even more strange. The sea darkened all of a sudden and it seemed to be rushing backward, toward the horizon. The sea was actually running away from the shore very fast, leaving behind wide stretches of beach that had never been exposed before.

With a gasp, Yuuki suddenly remembered the words of his grandfather. His grandfather had told the boy how his own father's father had told him that just before a terrible tsunami, the sea suddenly and quickly rolls backward. Yuuki, his breath heavy, ran down the mountainside to warn the people of the impending danger. Already many had run to the beach to witness the spectacular new stretch of ribbed sand.

"Get back, get back!" shouted the boy. "There is terrible danger!"

"What are you talking about, Yuuki?" laughed one person. "Look at all the great new shells on the beach!"

"No, no! You don't understand!" cried Yuuki. "You must run away! Up to the mountain! Everybody!"

But no one would listen to him. They all laughed in his face and carried on romping in the new sand and watching the sea roll backward even more.

Desperate, Yuuki could think of only thing to do. He lit a pine torch and hurried with it to the fields. There hundreds of rice-stacks stood golden and dried in the sun. He touched the torch to the edge of each one - hurrying from one to the other as quickly as his legs could carry him. The sun-dried stalks instantly caught fire; the strengthening sea breeze blew the blaze forward. Soon the stacks burst into flame. Yuuki, terrified, ran after his friends and family calling, "Fire! Fire! Everyone run to the mountain! Quick!"

The people hurried from over the beach, like a swarming of ants, though to Yuuki's anxious eyes the moments seemed terribly long to him. All the while, the sea was fleeing even more quickly toward the horizon.

The whole village was moving up the mountain now. The growing multitude, still knowing nothing, looked horrified at the flaming fields and at the destruction of their homes and their livelihood.

"Yuuki is mad!" cried one of the boys when they had all reached the top. "He set fire to the rice on purpose: I saw him do it!"

"Yuuki, is this true?" said Yuuki's mother and father, frowning deeply.

Yuuki hung his head.

Just then, someone cried, "Look!"

At the edge of the horizon a long dim line like the shadowing of a coast where no coast had even been - a line that thickened as they gazed, that broadened in the way a coast-line broadens when one approaches it, yet much more quickly. For that long thin line of darkness was the returning sea, towering like a cliff, and raging swiftly toward them.

"A tsunami!" shrieked the people. Then all shrieks and all sounds and all power to hear sounds were annihilated by a nameless shock heavier than any thunder, as the colossal swell struck the shore with a weight that sent a shudder through the hills, and with a burst of foam like a blaze of sheet lightning. Then for an instant nothing could be seen but a storm of spray rushing up the slope like a cloud, and the people scattered back in panic from the mere menace of it. When they looked again, they saw a white horror of sea roaring over the place of their homes. It drew back, tearing out the land as it went. Twice, three times, five times the sea struck the land and ebbed, but each time with surges less strong. Then finally, the sea returned to its normal place and stayed there, though still raging, as the sea will do after a hurricane.

On the mountain for a long time no word was spoken. All stared speechlessly at the desolation below, at the wreckage and debris that was scattered over what was left of their village.

"I'm sorry I burned the fields," said Yuuki, his voice trembling.

"Yuuki," said his father softly. "You saved us all."

And the villagers swept up Yuuki and raised him into the air. "We were going to celebrate our rice harvest tonight," said one, "but now we'll celebrate that we're all still alive!"

And they cheered with relief and admiration at the brave Yuuki, who that day had saved over four hundred lives.

