

# *Tokgabi and His Pranks*

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Korean

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*Intermediate*

*7 min read*

Tokgabi is the most mischievous sprite in all Korean fairy-land. He does not like the sunshine, or outdoors, and no one ever saw him on the streets. He lives in the sooty flues that run under the floors along the whole length of the house, from the kitchen at one end of it to the chimney hole in the ground at the other end. He delights in the smoke and smut, and does not mind fire or flame, for he likes to be where it is warm. He has no lungs, and his skin and eyes are both fire-proof. He is as black as night and loves nothing that has white in it. He is always afraid of a bit of silver, even if it be only a hairpin.

Tokgabi likes most to play at night in the little loft over the fireplace. To run along the rafters and knock down the dust and cobwebs is his delight. His favorite game is to make the iron rice-pot lid dance up and down, so that it tumbles inside the rice kettle and cannot easily be got out again. Oh, how many times the cook burns, scalds, or steams her fingers in attempting to fish out that pot lid when Tokgabi has pushed it in! How she does bless the sooty imp!

But Tokgabi is not always mischievous, and most of his capers hurt nobody. He is such a merry fellow that he keeps continually busy, whether people cry or laugh. He does not mean to give any one trouble, but he must have fun every minute, especially at night. When the fire is out, how he does chase the mice up and down the fines under the floor, and up in the garret over the rafters. When the mousies lie dead on their backs, with their toes turned upward, the street boys take them out- doors and throw them up in the air. Before the mice fall to the ground, the hawks swoop down and eat them up. Many a bird of prey gets his breakfast in this way.

Although Tokgabi plays so many pranks, he is kind to the kitchen maids. When, after a hard day's work, one is so tired out that she falls asleep, he helps her to do her hard tasks. Tokgabi washes their dishes and cleans their tables for good servants. So when they wake up, the girls find their work done for them. Many a fairy tale is told about this jolly sprite's doings — how he gives good things to the really nice people and makes the bad ones mad by spitefully using them. They do say that the king of all the Tokgabis has a museum of curiosities and a storehouse full of gold and gems and fine clothes, and everything sweet to eat for good boys and girls and for old people that are kind to the birds and dumb animals.

For bad folks, he has all sorts of things that are ugly and troublesome. He punishes stingy people by making them poor and miserable. The Tokgabi king has also a menagerie of animals. These he sends to do his errands rewarding the good and punishing naughty folks. Every year the little almanac with red and green covers tells in what quarter of the skies the Tokgabi king lives for that year, so that the farmers and country people will keep out of his way and not provoke him. In his menagerie the kind creatures that help human beings are the dragon, bear, tortoise, frog, dog and rabbit. These are all man's friends. The cruel and treacherous creatures in Tokgabi's menagerie are the tiger, wild boar, leopard, serpent, toad and cat. These are the messengers of the Tokgabi king to do his bidding when he punishes naughty folks.

The common every-day Tokgabi plays fewer tricks on the men and boys and enjoys himself more in bothering the girls and women. This, I suppose, is because they spend more time in the house than their fathers or brothers. In the Land of Rat-tat-tat, where the sound of beating the washed clothes never ceases, Tokgabi loves to get hold of the women's laundry sticks which are used for pounding and polishing the starched clothes. He hides them so that they cannot be found. Then Daddy makes a fuss, because his long white coat has to go without its usual gloss, but it is all Tokgabi's fault.

Tokgabi does not like starch, because it is white. He loves to dance on Daddy's big black hat case that hangs on

the wall. Sometimes he wiggles the fetich, or household idol, that is suspended from the rafters. But, most of all, he enjoys dancing a jig among the dishes in the closet over the fireplace, making them rattle and often tumble down with a crash.

Tokgabi likes to bother men sometimes too. If Daddy should get his topknot caught in a rat hole, or his head should slip off his wooden pillow at night and he bump his nose, it is all Tokgabi's fault. When anything happens to a boy's long braid of hair, that hangs down his back and makes him look so much like a girl, Tokgabi is blamed for it. It is even said that naughty men make compacts with Tokgabi to do bad things, but the imp only helps the man for the fun of it. Tokgabi cares nothing about what mortal men call right or wrong. He is only after fun and is up to mischief all the time, so one must watch out for him.

The kitchen maids and the men think they know how to circumvent Tokgabi and spoil his tricks. Knowing that the imp does not like red, a young man when betrothed wears clothes of this bright color. Tokgabi is afraid of shining silver, too, so the men fasten their topknots together, and the girls keep their chignons in shape, with silver hairpins. The magistrates and government officers have little storks made of solid silver in their hats, or else these birds are embroidered with silver thread on their dresses. Every one who can uses white metal dishes and dresses in snowy garments. Tokgabi likes nothing white and that is the reason why every Korean who can puts on clothes that are as dazzling as hoar frost. Tons and mountains of starch are consumed in blanching and stiffening coats and skirts, sleeves and stockings. On festival days the people look as if they were dipped in starch and their garments encrusted in rock candy.

Before we tell of Tokgabi's Museum and Curiosity Shop and of his Aviary of birds liked and disliked, and his menagerie of popular and despised animals, we must let you know how and why Tokgabi used to be most busy between the hours of nine o'clock at night and midnight. In old days, the Great Bell, in the centre of the city of Seoul, was struck at nine o'clock at night. Then, every man and boy must be in the house and off the streets, while every woman and grown girl, carrying a little paper lantern, was free to walk out in the darkness or moonlight. Woe be to any one of the masculine gender caught outdoors! If grabbed by the magistrate, he was severely spanked. Great wooden paddles were kept in the police office to be used on boys and men seen abroad.

The women folk, dressed in white, in their tumbled-up shoes, and with their funny little green jackets over their heads, wended their way to call on their female friends for chat and gossip. Yet they must every one of them be home by midnight and then — if Tokgabi had not hidden their beaters away — they began again on the pile of starched clothes. Laying each garment over a little round log, they kept up a steady "rat-tat-tat" until near

morning, making the real Korean chorus, which Tokgabi loves to hear.

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