

THE OLD WOMAN'S GIFT

(A Story)

by Antonio Muñoz

A FISHERMAN and his wife lived in a small hut near the sea. Tito was their only child. He was ten years old. Whenever his parents were away, Tito would do all the work in the house. He would gather fuel and fetch water. He would cook the rice and fish.

Tito was a very obedient boy. There was never a time when he disobeyed his parents. No matter how hard the work was, he did it cheerfully. This made the parents happy and as much as they could they did the work that should have been done by Tito.

One day the fisherman did not feel well. He could not go out that day to catch fish. Tito got his hook and line and went to the sea. Soon he caught a fish. That was enough for dinner so he went home. When he reached the shore, he got his bolo and split the belly of the fish. Just as he started to remove the intestines, he felt something hard inside. He took it out. It was a gold ring. How did it get into the stomach of the fish? Tito was puzzled.

"Well, I'll take it home to mother," he said to himself. "She can sell it if she does not want to wear it."

He stooped down to pick up the fish he had caught. It was not there any more. He looked around to see if somebody was there who might have taken the fish. An

old woman was standing near him but there was no sign of the fish.

"You are looking for the fish, little boy," said the old woman, "but you will not see it again. That ring which you found in the stomach of the fish is very powerful. It is mine and I give it to you for you are



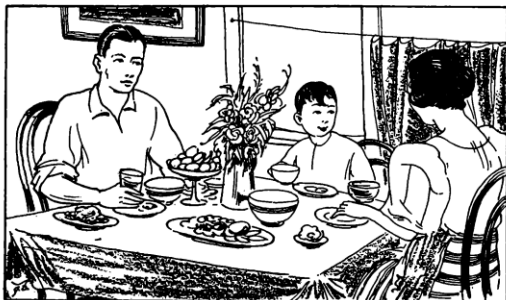
a good boy. You are obedient and you never do anything to displease your parents. A boy with such love and respect for his parents deserve the honor to receive the gift of Manda, the Queen of this Sea. If you put that ring on your middle finger, you will get anything you want. Don't take it off once it is placed on your finger for if you do something very bad will happen to you."

Tito looked down as he put the ring on his finger. Then he looked up to thank the old woman but she was not there any more so he went home.

"Mother," he asked, "do we have something to eat?"

"Nothing," replied the mother.

"My precious ring," said Tito, "please give us something to eat."



Immediately a table set with good things to eat appeared in the middle of the room.

"Come, mother," said Tito, "let us help father to the table."

But the father was already on his way to the table for as soon as the odor of the food entered his nostrils, he felt better and stronger. The effect was much better than the medicine he took that morning.

After their meal, Tito said, "Ring, dear, please give us a better house to live in and decent clothes to wear."

As soon as Tito had finished speaking, they found themselves in a well-furnished house. There were wardrobes full of clothes. The kitchen was well supplied with utensils. The sala looked grand with its fine furniture. The beds in the bedrooms were covered with thick mattresses and linen sheets.

"Where did you get that ring, Tito?" asked the mother.

Tito told her the story but he forgot to mention the warning of the old woman.

"Give it to me, Tito," said the mother. "I can take better care of it."

Tito did not know what to do. The old woman's warning rang in his ears at that

moment but he did not want to disobey or displease his mother. What should he do?

At last he took it off and gave it to his mother. As soon as it touched her hand, the room became dark. The house shook. The utensils in the kitchen fell to the floor with a loud crash.

Then all was quiet again, but it was still very dark. Tito thought that the end of the world was coming. He seemed rooted to the spot. He wanted to shout but the voice choked in his throat.

Suddenly the room was flooded with light. Everything was in its proper place. In the middle of the room, stood the old woman.

"Tito," she said to the boy, "when you got that ring, I told you not to give it to someone else. A few minutes ago you disregarded that warning by giving the ring to your mother. Am I angry with you? No, I am not. I am very happy. You are a good son, Tito for you decided to lose everything in order that you would not disobey or displease your mother. Let your mother keep the ring if she wants it. Whenever you need anything, just touch it, Tito, and ask for the thing you want and you will get it at once."

Thereupon the old woman disappeared and was never seen again. Tito and his parents lived happily for many years. The ring always gave them what they wanted.