



Chapter Thirteen

CHRISTMAS AT THE MANSION

CHRISTMAS was a full week off when preparation for its celebration was started at the Del Valle mansion. Carpenters were hired to build a wide bamboo trellis to shelter a spacious enclosure that could accommodate scores of children. A miniature "Belen" was built on one end of the enclosure and an enormous Christmas tree was planted at the middle. Star-shaped lanterns of different colors hung all around.

Mrs. Del Vale made several trips to the city. Each time she brought home packages of all sizes wrapped in gay Christmas colors and designs.

Tonio made himself useful in every way. He and his friends made the lanterns and built benches of halved bamboos. The boys told Tonio how they had been entertained and given gifts every Christmas Day of the past years.

"Last year, I got a monogrammed sweater," one boy said.

"I received a pair of undershirts," said another.

"All the neighbors, young and old, were given something useful and lasting," a third added.

"Mr. and Mrs. Del Valle are very generous, aren't they, Tonio?" the first boy asked.

"I used to envy children with parents,"

THE ADVENTURES OF A BEGGAR BOY

•
by Julio Cesar Peña
•

answered Tonio. "Now I feel as if I were no longer an orphan."

"Were you not with them the other day?" asked one.

"Yes, they ordered some suits for me. They are very kind. I do not know how we could ever repay them," Tonio explained.

"The old cook, who has lived with the Del Valles for many years, says they find joy in giving and being kind specially to children," one of the boys said. Lowering



his tone, he continued, "He says they are doing it in memory of their own boy."

"Did they ever have a child?" Tonio asked in surprise.

"Yes", according to the old man.

"Did he die?"

"Perhaps. If not, he should be with them."

On Christmas Eve, all the neighbors were invited to the mansion for the midnight lunch. The country people were treated to something different. Instead of the customary lunch consisting of *suman* and choco-

late, sandwiches, cakes and ice cream were served. Chopped nuts crowned the ice cream cone.

One of the smallest guests gazed long at his cone. Seeing his elders lick theirs, he started to do the same, but his tongue had hardly touched the ice cream when he drew the cone from his mouth. After staring at the cone again, he finally blew at it before he bit off the top. A bigger boy laughingly asked, "Is it hot, Totoy?"

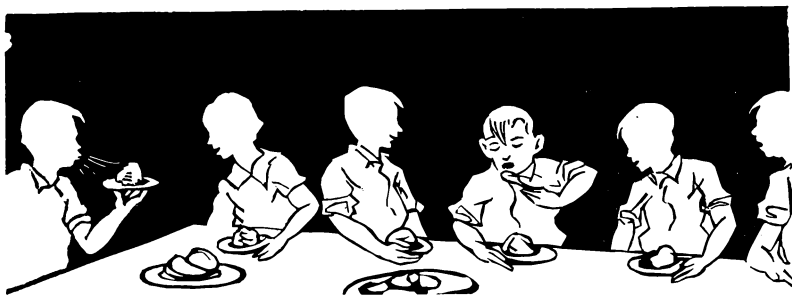
"Yes", was the answer, "very hot, but it makes me feel very cold."

told me that Mr. and Mrs. Del Valle once had a child."

"Yes, the old cook said something about their holding children's parties in memory of a child. Poor dears! Mrs. Del Valle is so motherly."

Very early on Christmas morning, Mr. and Mrs. Del Valle sent for all the servants. Each received some money and clothing. To Tonio and his Lolo, they gave a savings account book with an initial deposit of a hundred pesos.

"That is for you to spend on anything



Another boy enjoyed his ice cream so much that he bit off half of his cone to finish it quickly. When his tongue could not stand the cold, he swallowed the big mass at one gulp. His attempt was followed by a fit of coughing which threw off the ice cream into the air. An old woman had an attack of chills after eating her share.

Before the crowd dispersed, the children were reminded about coming back in the morning. They shouted their thanks while the old people murmured prayers for blessings upon the generous couple.

Tonio's Lolo was very happy. Although he could not see, he enjoyed the party as much as the rest.

"You must never fail to mention them in your prayers, my boy," he reminded Tonio when they went to bed.

"Lolo," Tonio whispered, "one of the boys

you like," Mr. Del Valle said. "Mrs. Del Valle has consulted an eye specialist about your case, Lolo. She will take you to him one of these days," he continued.

The old man was dumbfounded with joy. Tonio cried over the unexpected happiness.

"If Lolo could see again, I would not mind even if I could not study."

"No, my boy, you must not talk that way."

"If God wills, you shall both have your wishes," Mrs. Del Valle assured them.

When they went to the grounds afterwards, the place was already crowded with children. Tonio's Lolo distributed the gifts until a big sack was emptied and the Christmas tree shorn of all the packages that had hung from its branches.

(To be continued)