

IT was Christmas eve.

In a certain town, the houses, particularly those of the wealthy and well-to-do families, were well decorated. Paper lanterns, both native and Japanese, were hanging from the eaves over the windows. Electric light bulbs of high candle power lighted these homes. In other houses, the Aladdin, Continental, and Petromax lamps burned brightly. In each of these houses, a Christmas tree, beautifully decorated and heavily laden with toys, occupied the center of the sala. The small nipa houses were also lighted but only the ordinary petroleum lamps were used. The Christmas trees in these homes of the poor were simple and practically without decoration. Hardly a toy could be seen in any of them.

Here and there Christmas carols were sung. On the streets in front of the wealthy homes, Christmas sketches and operettas were being performed. On the tennis court behind the municipal building and just a few meters away from the Catholic Church, a dance was going on which was to last until midnight when everybody would go to the church to hear the Midnight Mass. A group of spectators gathered around the tennis court outside of the wire fence. They, too, were waiting for the ringing of the bells that would announce the birth of the Christ Child.

It was Christmas eve and everybody was happy.

At about ten o'clock, a little boy got away from the group of spectators. When he came in front of the first house, he stopped to gaze at the Christmas tree in the center of the sala and which he could see through the opening below the window. Father, mother, and children gathered around the decorated tree.

"How beautiful!" was all that the boy could say as he left the place. He went on, stopping now and then, to amuse himself with the different Christmas trees in the homes on the way. He did not know that he had gone too far until he met an old man who was bending under a heavy load on his back.

"Good evening, sir, and a merry Christmas to you," he greeted the old man.

"Oh, good evening, good evening," returned the old man, "and a merry Christmas to you, too."

"May I help you carry your pack, sir?" said the

Uncle Juan's

A Story

By Antonio C. Muñoz



boy. "I see you are overloaded."

"Thank you," the old man replied. "Come along but you need not help me. I'm used to this kind of work."

As they walked along, the boy's attention was always on the Christmas trees in the homes on the way.

"You are interested in those Christmas trees," said the old man. "Don't you have one at home?"

"Oh, yes," the boy replied, "but it's bare. There is no decoration. There are no toys."

"Don't you envy those children?" the old man asked him.

"Oh, no," answered the boy. "I'm glad that not all children are like me. I mean they are not so poor as I. Sir, we are very poor and my parents

Christmas Gift



cannot afford to buy toys for my Christmas tree. Those children are happy because they can have whatever they want. To see them happy is enough to fill my heart with happiness. No, sir, I don't envy them."

"Good boy!" exclaimed the old man. "You have made Uncle Juan happy, tonight. Old Santa will be happy, too, when I tell him about you. Now let's go to your home. I should like to see that bare Christmas tree you have told me about."

The boy nodded and led the way. Soon they came to an old nipa house. A small petroleum lamp hung from the roof giving insufficient lights to the space below. A small Christmas tree decorated with vines stood in the center. A man and a woman sat on a bamboo bench near by.

"A merry Christmas to you, good people!" the old man greeted the boy's parents as he entered the humble dwelling.

Without waiting for an answer, the old man put his heavy pack on the floor. Then he opened it. He put his hand inside and drew out a drum. He placed it on the bare tree. Then came out a bugle, a toy gun, a toy revolver, toy automobiles and aeroplanes, and many other toys. When they were all placed on the Christmas tree, the tree was just as beautiful as those in the homes of the rich.

"How old are you?" the old man asked the boy.

"I am ten years old," the boy replied.

The old man went over the packages he had in the sack and when he had found the one he was looking for, he gave it to the boy.

"That will fit you well," he said.

To each of the parents, the old man gave a package.

"Who are you?" asked the father when he had recovered from his surprise.

"I am known as Uncle Juan. You may address me by that name," the old man answered.

"Thank you very much, Uncle Juan!" the three exclaimed together.

"Don't mention it," said the old man. "I'm just doing my duty. Old Santa who lives far away across the ocean cannot come this year. In the past years, I always helped him distribute gifts to good people during Christmas. I received a letter from him last month asking me to do the work alone. He said that I have had enough training and experience and it's time I did this work without him. Now excuse me for I have plenty of work to do."

With a bow and "A MERRY CHRISTMAS TO YOU," the old man ran toward the road and soon disappeared among the trees near by.

The three astonished people picked up their packages and opened them. The father had a pair of shoes, a hat, and a half dozen undershirts. The mother's package contained a pair of slippers, a veil, and a silk pañuelo. In the boy's package was a boy scout uniform and with it were a hat and a pair of shoes.

Three happy people went to bed that night but the happiest among them was the little boy for besides the package, he had the toys on the Christmas tree.