

## A Son for a Gift

(From Rizal's "Social Cancer")

FORTUNATO ASUNCION \*

High up on the slope of the mountain, near a roaring stream was a hut hidden among the trees. In the shade of a tree an old man was making brooms from the fibers of palm leaves, while a young woman was placing eggs, lime fruit, and some vegetables in a wide basket. Two children,—a boy and a girl, were playing by the side of another who was pale and sad.

"When your foot gets well," the little girl was saying to him, "we'll play hide-and-seek. I'll be the leader."

"You'll go up to the top of the mountain with us," added the little boy, "and drink deer-blood with lime-juice and you'll get fat, and then I'll teach you how to jump from rock to rock above the torrent."

The pale sickly child smiled sadly, stared at the sore on his foot, and then turned his gaze toward the setting sun.

"Sell these brooms," said the grandfather to the young woman, "and buy something for the children, for tomorrow is Christmas."

"Firecrackers! I want firecrackers!" exclaimed the boy.

"I want a head for my doll," cried the little girl, catching hold of her sister's *tapis*.

"And you, what do you want?" the old man asked the sickly, child.

The sick boy tried hard to rise. He went near the old man.

"Sir," he said, "I've been sick more than a month now, haven't I?"

"Since we found you lifeless and covered with wounds, two weeks have passed. We thought you were going to die then."

"May God reward you, for we are very poor," replied the sick child. "But now, that tomorrow is Christmas I want to go to town to see my mother and my little brother. They will be seeking for me."

"But, my son, you're not yet well, and your town is far away. You won't get there by midnight."

"That doesn't matter, sir. My mother and my little brother must be very sad. Every year we spend this holiday together. Last year the three of us had a whole fish to eat. My mother will be grieving and looking for me."

"You won't get to town alive, boy! Down there are soldiers and robbers. Don't you want to see the firecrackers and play hide-and-seek? Tonight we're going to have chickens and wild boar's meat. My sons will be asking for you when they come from the fields."

"You, sir, have many sons, while my mother has only us two. Perhaps she already believes that I'm dead! Tonight I want to give her a pleasant surprise, a Christmas gift."

"What will you give her?"

"... Her long lost son is the gift I'll give her. Won't she be surprised?" answered the boy with childish delight.

The old man felt the tears rolling down his cheeks, so placing his hands on the boy's head, he said with emotion:

"You are like an old man! Go, look for your mother, give her the Christmas gift—from God, as you say. If I had known the name of your town I would have gone there when you were sick. Go, my son, and may God and the Lord Jesus go with you."

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