

SAFETY SECTION

## Manoling's Lanterns

By QUIRICO A. CRUZ \*

There was a rumpus at Nicanor's house. In spite of the cold December air that ought to have kept every living soul in a sound sleep, every member of the family was up. The mother was in the kitchen preparing breakfast. Nicanor was shivering with cold in the bathroom while Anita, his only sister, was busy packing up some clothes in an old rattan suitcase. Mang Nonong, the father, was under the house putting three fat hens and a rooster into a chicken coop and half a dozen eggs into a small egg-basket.

"Nonong," called Aling Dading, the mother. "Don't forget to put the oranges and the bunch of *Lakatan* in the sack. There are some ripe chicos buried in the palay in our small *bayong*. Please get them. Ate Luisa likes chicos very much.

"Yes, Dading," replied the old man.

The family ate their breakfast which consisted of hard-boiled rice, friend salted *Tigiti*, fresh carabao milk, and a few blocks of *panucha*. After breakfast, Aling Dading, Anita, and Nicanor put on their best clothes which had long been kept at the bottom of the trunk. They were invited by Aling Luisa, Nicanor's aunt on

his mother's side, to spend Christmas with her in the city. Aling Luisa and her son, Manoling, used to spend their Christmas in her sister's home in Calamba. This time she thought it would be nice to have Aling Dading and her children spend Christmas in her beautiful home in Sampaloc.

At about six thirty o'clock that fine December morning an L. T. B. truck passed by and Aling Dading and her two children got into it. Calamba is about sixty kilometers from Manila and it took the truck two long hours travel before it reached the city. The truck stopped at Azcarraga. Aling Dading hired a carretela to take her, her two children, and the baggage to Sampaloc.

When they arrived at the place where they were supposed to go, they did not see the beautiful house of Aling Luisa. Instead, they saw a small shack made of dark half-burned wood and galvanized iron. All around the shack were pieces of charcoal and heaps of ashes.

"This might not be the place!" exclaimed Nicanor.

"Let me see . . ." said Aling Dading knitting her brow as if in deep thought. "This is the place. I cannot be mistaken. Let us inquire."

Aling Dading approached the shack and said, "Tao po." An elderly woman peeped out of the dark window.

"Dading-g-g"

"Ate Luisa, what happened?"

Aling Luisa could not say anything. She wept bitterly. Aling Dading could not help crying too. Nicanor and Anita approached their aunt and kissed her hand. Then, they too cried. After a brief while of silence that was disturbed by the occasional sobs of the grief-stricken group, Aling Dading asked.

"Where is Manoling?"

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reaches you it will be near Christmas. I want to wish you and all my friends there a very merry Christmas."

"A merry, merry Christmas to Trudie!" all the children shouted clapping their hands.

Anselma continued, "Christmas here will be rather different from the way I spent Christmas in the Philippines. For one thing it will be very cold. We will have a big roaring fire to huddle around. When we go outside there will be warm coats, heavy stockings, gloves and a cap to pull down over the ears.

"Do you remember once at your Christmas party we all went swimming in the sea? This year I am planning to go skating on ice. I do not know which is the most fun—a warm Christmas or a cold Christmas. I am very happy here in Europe. but I often think of the years spent in the Philippines. Again let me wish all of you a merry Christmas."

"A merry, merry Christmas to Trudie!" the children shouted again.

When Anselma finished the letter and folded it she glanced toward the door. Her mouth came open, her eyes were wide open and she stood stone still. "Oh—it's—Good afternoon, Sir," was all she could think of to say.

In a flash all eyes were on the door.

A tall man made three solemn bows to them. He was dressed in a long red coat with the collar turned up well around his

ears, and a cap pulled down over his eyes.

"Santa Claus!" screamed little Pablo.

"Santa Claus!" repeated all the children.

"Merry Christmas, girls and boys," the red-coated person.

"This is a happy surprise, Santa Claus," said Mrs. Santos, "wont you come in?"

"Thank you, madam, I do have a few parcels to leave for the children."

"Thank you," cried the children.

"How very nice," said Mrs. Santos.

As he pulled out each package he called the name of the child to whom it belonged. Each one shook Santa's hand and thanked him for coming.

"I do wish father was here to see how happy everyone is," said Pablo.

The person who had given the gifts threw off the red cap and coat, and gathered his little boy into his arms, saying, "Well, so he is."

"Oh!" gasped all the children at once.

Little Pablo threw his arms around his father's neck and started laughing, crying and talking all at the same time. "Oh, father, I thought you were Santa Claus. You and Santa are both so good to me that sometimes I can't tell which is which."

All the children gathered around Mr. Santos. Each one

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"He is in the hospital. He was almost burned to death. However, he is now on his way to recovery.

"How did this happen?"

"Our neighbors believed the fire to have been caused by defective electric wiring, but no. The fire started from our Christmas tree. Only two days ago I bought a Christmas tree for Manoling. I decorated it nicely and bought a string of small electric bulbs of different colors. In the afternoon, Manoling brought home some Japanese lanterns with small candles in them. I did not know there were candles in them until after Manoling had lighted them at night. I was tired all day so I made our beds early and soon fell asleep. At about ten o'clock I was awakened by a glaring light. I stood up and saw the Christmas tree burning. I tried to put out the fire but I could not do anything. The curtain hanging near the tree caught fire. The fire spread so fast that I became terribly frightened. I lost my presence of mind and ran out of the house gasping for breath. I shivered . . . gradually lost my strength . . . and finally I fainted. Manoling was trapped in the house, and had not one of our neighbors had the courage to save him, he would have been burned to death." Aling Luisa finished her version of the incidents with a sigh.

shook hands with him again, thank him over and over for the gifts and wished him a very merry Christmas.