

OR A FULL HOUR Mario's thoughts strayed into nowhere as he wandered down Avenida Rizal. The specks of light that ringed off the engulfing darkness served only to heighten his predicament.

It was three months now since he had been fired from his job as a clerk in a downtown business office. It was not really his fault that he had been absent during office hours; he could not have been expected to give all the attention required of him because domestic problems beset his mind.

He had asked Mr. Cruz' permission to go out for a few minutes and see how Grace was faring out at the maternity house. They were going to have their first child. The complexity of Grace's labor made him stay a while longer, until dusk came without his noticing it.

The baby was born late that evening. It was a boy and it made him happy. Yet, the blaze of excitement which glowed in his heart in becoming a father petered out when he learned from a fellow employee that he was fired.

Things were not so bad for a while. He had been able to save a little amount in the bank; it could tide him over for a month or two. Months went by. He was still unemployed. His savings dwindled away until he was forced to borrow some funds from his Tia Tanciang. But even that was exhausted. Bill collectors hounded him. The hope of landing a job drove

him to conduct an office-to-office job-hunting campaign. It all ended with the same result: NO VACANCY.

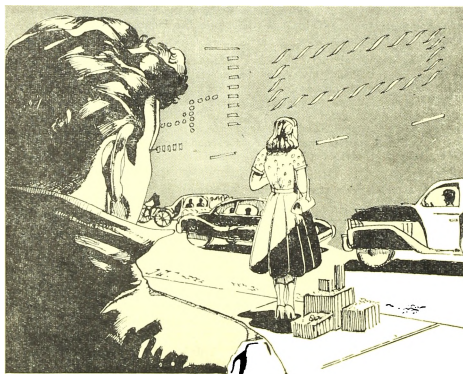
Grace's health broke down and the baby had to be bottle-fed. That meant a lot of milk had to be bought. And, what's more, Grace needed medicine, too. The key to his problems was money. He had none. He tried borrowing again from his aunt but this time Tia Tanciang could not help him. She needed money herself. He tried to secure a bank loan but failed because he had no collateral to offer. To top it all, it was the day before Christmas. He simply had to have some money. A wall clock in a sari-sari store told him it was eleven-thirty. Thirty minutes more and it would be Christmas Eve. Some Christmas gift a guy can give to his wife and kid, he secretly mocked himself. No job. No gifts. He had no money. Nothing.

Heck, he thought, there are only a few drops of milk left in that lost can for the baby. Tomorrow, they would all go hungry.

It began to drizzle. The street was now covered by a thin film of raindrops which mirrored a shimmering light set atop a gawky lamp post. It was strange how the dark street could hold something beautiful. Most of the department stores were closed. A handful were open to accommodate the frantic last-minute shoppers. Only the sari-saris, the restaurants and a few grocery stores displayed the determination to stick it out in anticipation of the dawn shoppers. It was time to go home. Grace would be worried. Home, Mario thought out loud. What could he bring home? Nothing. Tomorrow he would wake up and there would be nothing. He didn't feel like going home yet. But he had to. Mario heaved a sigh. A grocery store stood ahead. It was half-opened. A patch of light beamed out of the doorway. A woman emerged from the store. She carried several bundles of

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grocery goods. She lumbered toward the end of the pavement and stood on the brink. The storeowner appeared and started to stretch the contracted accordion-like iron gate into its full spread. It gave a grating noise. From the holes of the curtain-like gate Mario saw milk. Dozens and dozens of cans. His tongue felt dry. The woman was obviously waiting for a ride. Several jeepsneys passed. She hailed none of them. It must be a taxi she is waiting for, Mario deduced. A purse was snuggled beneath her right armpit. She must be rich. Her dress was of expensive material and she wore nylon stockings. The fat purse stirred Mario's imagination. It must contain quite an amount. Enough to buy food, medicine and milk. Stroking his chin with his forefinger and thumb, Mario weighed the possibilities. Should he...? Two headlights glowered way down the street. It was coming towards them swiftly like a hungry hound toward a bowl of food. If she took that taxi.... all the money



would be gone. He would have nothing. Nothing. NOTHING. The word nagged him. He shut his eyes. A flurry of thoughts crossed his mind.

With a start he swooped down on her and yanked out the leather purse. Her bundles clattered to the pavement. She screamed. Mario dashed towards a dark alley in Raon Street. He threw a parting backward glance and saw the car screech into an abrupt stop. It was a police patrol car. Soon the night air was filled with the shrill tones of police whistles. Mario's heart

shoulder. The jig was up.

A voice jolted him back to reality. The hand was that of an old man. He was clad in rags and leaned over a crooked cane.

"What is the matter, *hijo*? Don't you feel well?" the old man queried.

"No, I'm all right," he replied. "Just a little sleepy."

"Go home, my boy," the old man advised. "It is Christmas, you know. Your folks must be waiting for you."

"Thanks," Mario acknowledged. The old man staggered. A wall

A DARK ALLEY

throbbed wildly. Figures were racing after him. He had to escape. He darted into another alley. The purse proved to be cumbersome. Snapping the lock open, he emptied the purse of its contents and discarded it. He thrust the money inside his trouser's pockets. The sharp wail of a police siren echoed from the opposite end of the alley. They were trying to corner him. Apparently they were using the two-way radio. A pair of automobile headlights swung into view. A prowl car. Mario turned back. Footsteps pounded the pavement ahead with menacing proximity.

An inconspicuous nook for trash cans caught his eyes. Run for it, his mind commanded. Using his left hand as a lever, he vaulted over the trash cans and covered behind them. His left hand had touched something slimy. The stench was nauseating. How he detested rank odors! The searching beams of the prowl car flashed by overhead. He crouched some more. The smell was overpowering. He felt like vomiting. Voices pierced the curtain of silence that hung over the alley. They were arguing which way he got away. The prowl car retraced its route and vanished. The voices faded away. Slowly and cautiously he strained his ears for some warning noise. A heavy silence prevailed. He vaulted over the trash cans once more. Warily he trudged forward. Everything seemed all right. Suddenly a hand clutched his left

clock which clung to a wall in a window display revealed it was quarter to twelve. Christmas Eve was just fifteen minutes away. Time to hurry home, Mario told himself. He broke into a run. The sight of home with a paper lantern suspended over the doorway warmed his heart and brought a smile to his lips. Gently, he rapped on the door. Must be twelve o'clock now, he guessed.

"Mario?" Grace called out in a drowsy voice.

"Yes, Darling," he answered. The door latch snapped free and the door swung open. The rising crescendo of sirens wailing, church bells ringing, and automobile horns tooting crept into the room. It was Christmas Eve. He caught Grace in a tender embrace and kissed her forehead.

"Merry Christmas, Darling!" Mario greeted.

"Merry Christmas," Grace whispered softly. He reached for the light switch and snapped it on. The light drove away the gloomy darkness. They approached the crib and saw the baby was fast asleep. The sight lightened the heart of Mario. It was good to be back.

"A penny for your thoughts, Mar," Grace remarked. He knew she was happy to see him smiling.

"The strangest thought came to me a moment ago," Mario explained. "A while ago, when I was out there in the street walking, I felt

sorry for you, for the baby, and for myself. I was despondent over the fact that I had nothing to give you two. Yet, now, the whole world seems bright and easy."

"I'm glad you feel that way," Grace sighed.

"So do I," Mario confirmed. "When I thought of how a Family of Three endured the same tribulations we are going through now, how inconvenient it must have been for them in that stable, how all the world frolicked without being aware of His coming to be with us, all the things that bothered me, that agitated my very soul did not matter anymore."

"Yes, darling," Grace agreed. "Sometimes, by not having anything, we have everything."

"Let's get some sleep now. We must hear Mass early," Mario advised. He switched off the light and the darkness did not affect him. Somehow, he was glad that the dark alley existed only in his mind. Sleep came heavily on his eyes. †

THE GREATNESS OF . . . (Continued from page 24)

for a nation is a group of people bound together by a common sentiment of unity by reason of common aspirations and a common history and heritage, and it is these people alone who can best chart their own future and determine their own destiny.

To the Filipinos, that was his message; to the world, he gave the same message.

The Filipinos learned the message well. When, on July 4, 1946, some fifty years after Rizal fell on the Luneta, the Filipino flag was raised for the first time alone on the flagstaffs of the nation, every Filipino knew that it was there, sustained on the wings of the idea and the thought that was Rizal.

That thought, moving upon the face of the Philippines to ultimately dissipate the clouds of colonialism and reveal the full splendor of freedom, continues to move towards other benighted colonial areas of the earth. In Indonesia and other countries, that thought has become a bible in their struggle for political emancipation. Rizal indeed now belongs not only to the Philippines; he belongs also to the hearts and history of peoples desiring to be free.

The greatness of Rizal was only the measure of the greatness of the thought that it was his singular fortune to give expression to, with all his mind, his heart, even with his life. And that thought has made him truly great because it is in accord with the essence of the greatness of justice, of humanity, of God. ‡