



AND SUDDENLY he was a winged butterfly out of a cocoon, flitting around a bud slowly spreading its wet petals into the sun; and into the sun his mind stopped wondering for he understood—the tears in his eyes to weep a boy's last Christmas and the smile on his lips to hail a man's first Christmas.

● Ramonito sat by the window gazing into the lantern-lighted night, as he listened to the boys' jolly chanting, shrill and piercing, as it cut across the cool December night. He knew all those songs, he thought, and he could sing them well; but he was just having a cold and a bad one, though he knew well that he did not feel sick or tired or restless. He tried his voice, but still it cracked; and again he felt the pain inside—the pain which was anger—the pain the night before. The old choir of boys had been formed once more, with added younger members, and they had been practicing the songs when his turn to make the solo came (the great Casuso, they used to call him); and his voice cracked. They laughed and derided him, and he felt ashamed and angry. And he felt them all.

Already, he was planning how to shame them all. He was hurt. His voice would come back, clear and vibrant as before, making him again the envied singer of the choir. Just a cold, he muttered. He bit his lips hard though from outside his mother was already furiously calling, "Ramonito. . . Ramonito!" in her characteristic nervous voice.

"What's the matter with you. . . Moming?" she stated. "The padre has been waiting for you."

ces and of long, long masses. He thought he was happy, but he was not sure he was; he wondered why. Maybe it was because he could not skip and jump and yell anymore like the Christmas when he was eight or nine or ten—the Christmas when he was eight or nine or ten, in San Juanico.

Christmas was more than Christmas in San Juanico. To a boy, it was a great day of sizzling *lechons* and popping *bibingkas*, and of dripping *putos*, red and white; a day of funny ringing bells and of shouting and cheerings above the din of clattering dishes inspired by endless dinners: a day of yelling godchildren and fleeing godfathers while bands played, and pigs squeaked, and hens cackled, and men laughed.

He reached the church.

All his friends and classmates were in the church busy decorating the walls and altar. He joined with the boys who were making lanterns, and all at once he could not think because they were all noisy and jubilant. Manolo, his partner, was painfully chiding Juanito about his spendthrift godfather—about the humiliating candy gift Nito had received the year before—while everybody laughed and roared and giggled with him. Nito almost cried.

him—how to be more than a boy.

He knew a boy's life well enough—a life of ceaseless fighting, bantering, teasing, tearing and smashing with other boys. He had learned how to be with boys—how to expect incidents in a group—how to fight and tease and tear when occasion demanded. And in a group like this, he was expecting something to happen.

It came when the *padre* summoned him to help the girls put up the flowers. For a moment, he hesitated as he looked around at the silent smiling faces and mischievous eyes before him; but he thought he was Junior, so he stood trying to smile at them all. Inside, he felt different and successful. He had never acted like this before. He remembered the day long ago he had almost cried because the boys' taunted him when he had been paired with Tita in a dance; the day he had fought Berto for teasing him with Lucy; and all the other days he had been leading a perfect boy's life. He wondered why he did not feel angry now or feel sore or shy as he used to.

The girls teased him too, but he did not feel hurt. They told him the story about Princess Nenita and King Ramonito (a most infuriating subject to him); but he only tried to smile it off, and they were all surprised why he did not get sore as he used to. Maybe, it was because it was Christmas. But they would not stop kidding Ramonito. They had always been successful in teasing him. So they asked him, expecting success this time, why he returned the pretty embroidered handkerchief as an exchanged gift from Nita. He remembered the ex-

## A Boy's Last Christmas

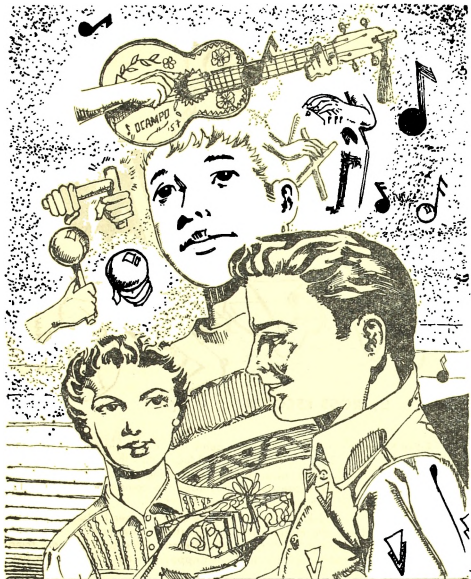
"What. . . Inay!" he answered instinctively, pretending not to hear, though he knew very well what she meant. His mind was empty and blank.

● In the street, everybody seemed happy, and he tried to be happy too. Christmas Eve. Many happy thoughts fluttered into his mind: thoughts of showering gifts, and of programs and gluttonous dinner; thoughts of exciting contests, of funny games and caroling; and thoughts of noisy bands and of dan-

But soon it was Nardo who was telling the story. Junior, he said, punched a fellow in the face for teasing Nena while they were together. (For boys, a boy and a girl together is a good and wholesome joke). There was a glint in everybody's eyes and a derisive humming tone was rising. But Junior stood up nonchalantly, and said, "So what!"; and everybody laughed. He liked Junior because he thought he was more than a boy. He was wondering how to be like

changing gift in school, remembered how he returned the gift from Nita when his classmates started to tease him about priests and tinging bells. Nita had always been pleasant to him, but she had been really hurt that time, probably embarrassed too; and she had started not talking to him anymore, not anymore, but he had not cared. The girls fidgeted and giggled when he did not answer and they laughed; and he tried to laugh with them too.

## • Short Story •



● It was Christmas in San Juanico. As the village *sacristán*, he tried his best in distributing the Padre's gift enthusiastically though he spent his night waking and wondering. Something was changing in him, but he was wondering what and where. He could not understand. Anyway he went to everybody's house and got the fun he was not sure he wanted.

The last box he was to handle was marked Mrs. Rellon, Nenita's mother. He did not know what to do with it because he dreaded going to Nenita's house; because he was not sure he would not be ashamed; because he would not know what to say; and because he was awkward and clumsy and shy and afraid. But he did go because he thought himself brave as Junior.

And when he arrived, Mr. and Mrs. Rellon were leaving for a party. They received the gift with their sophisticated, "Thank you,

thank you... Moning," and turning, "Nita, a young man is here... Ramonito!"

A violent panic ceased him. A moment he dreaded most had come, and he was unprepared. He turned to go, to flee unnoticed; but on second thought he felt ashamed of himself. Why should he, he told himself. He must be brave.

When Nita came out of her room, he could not say anything. He bit his lips.

"Merry Christmas," said she, smiling.

He forced a smile, and he thought it was a half-smile because his throat was very dry.

"Nenita..." it was Mr. Rellon, "didn't you tell me..."

"Yes, Papa... I have something for Ramonito," and turning to him: "please excuse me, Moning."

She went back into her room. The couple bade him Merry Christmas when they left; but he was not

listening to them because he felt angry with himself for failing to say a word or anything or even something that was not a word. For a moment, he sat alone thinking what was the matter with him. But Nenita was on his mind; so he could not think. So, he just looked at her in his thoughts, and he decided that she had grown taller; and that she had a tighter belt; and that she had learned to walk like Miss Rella, his teacher; and that... She was out with a gift box. He stood not knowing what to say and met her at the center table.

"It's for you," she said smiling. "Thank you." His voice cracked.

He looked around. He thought there was a man in the room.

"Aren't you angry with me anymore?" he could hardly finish. His mouth was dry.

"No... not anymore," she answered looking straight at him and looking down with eyes smiling. She looked up and she caught him gazing at her. A pain stirred within him, and he thought it was the pain that was anger; but it was not, and he knew it was not.

He looked down for he thought he was not breathing. He fumbled with the gift box listlessly. A surge of anger burst within him for being a coward. Why did he look down?

He bit his lips. With a determined but hesitating effort, he raised his eyes again. Their eyes met. She was smiling at him, and she was trying not to. He felt funny and excited. He managed to smile too, and suddenly she was red and was not looking at him anymore. He felt triumphant.

by Gerardo Leopardo, Jr.

A strayed December breeze rustled the lanterns by the window, and the old faded calendar cut across the room, its only page dangling in the breeze.

She turned slowly to pick it up, but he held her by the hand. He searched his voice; and "Let me do it," said he, and again he thought he heard a man's voice. But there was a smile on his lips for he knew well and very well it was his own voice. ♯