



Chapter Fifteen

A STRANGE BIRTHDAY PARTY

DURING vacation when Tonio and Mrs. Del Valle were often together, Tonio noticed a great change in her. She was visibly happy. There was a lightness in her steps. Her eyes which had been sad began to smile with her lips. She was not just being kind to the boy. She was affectionate. And Tonio felt his heart dance with a new joy. Having known no relative other than his Lolo, he experienced no variety of feeling which one usually gave to people of different degrees of relationship. The object of his first passion was not a person but a school building. For the second time he was developing another passion. It was not a turbulent one but a deep

THE ADVENTURES OF A BEGGAR BOY

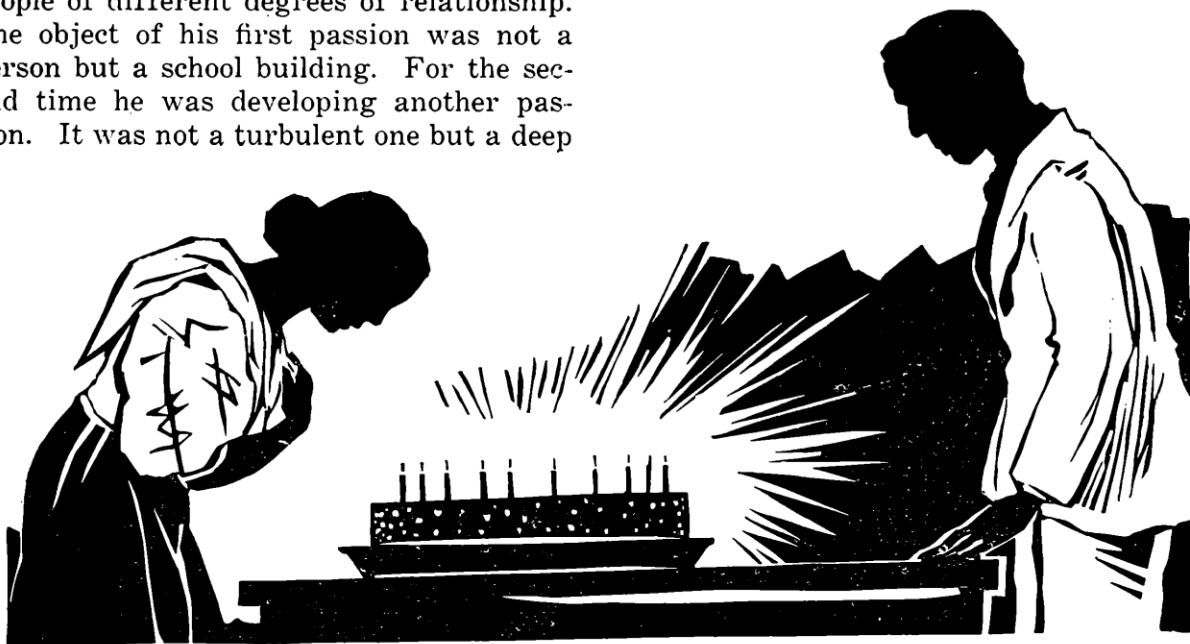
•
by Julio Cesar Peña
•

and sweet attachment that gave him a rich and delicious kind of happiness.

School opened in January and Tonio and Mrs. Del Valle could take their long walks only on Saturdays. Tonio noticed that she began to talk less. Her smiles, too, became rare. The light in her eyes seemed to be hidden beneath a heavy shadow. Tonio's heart ached for her, but there was nothing he could do.

"Lolo," Tonio whispered as he was going to bed one night, "Mrs. Del Valle seems to be in trouble. Do rich people ever get worried?"

"Why, yes, my boy. And I think they



Mrs. Del Valle murmured a wish, and, as she stooped to blow out the candles, a tear dropped down her pale cheek.

have had some big trouble."

"It might be the death of their child," ventured Tonio.

"Very likely," the old man answered. "If they could have another child, they would be happy once more."

One Saturday at about the end of January, the old cook came out bustling from the kitchen. Meeting Tonio's Lolo, he remarked, "This is a busy day for me. Baking cakes and making cookies and all kinds of candy."

"A fiesta I suppose," the blind man offered a guess.

"Yes, a birthday party tomorrow. The whole neighborhood will be invited again. The occasion is a great day for all the children."

"Whose birthday is it?"

"Their baby's," the cook whispered and left the blind man wondering which baby was meant.

Very early on Sunday morning Mr. and Mrs. Del Valle went to church in the city. The servants opened the spacious parlor. Small chairs were arranged around a dozen small tables.

Unlike the Christmas Eve party, the birthday party had an air of formality. The guests, Tonio included, were dressed in their party suits and dresses. Strangely enough the children behaved well even at the tables which were richly laden with tempting cakes, cookies, and sandwiches of various shapes. There was a big birthday cake all by itself on a round table placed at the middle of the parlor. Ten tiny candles—white, pink, and blue—stood on the top of the cake. Traced on its white icing was the name *Tony*.

Mr. and Mrs. Del Valle came forward. Mr. Del Valle lighted the candles. Both looked very serious as if they were performing a religious ceremony. Mrs. Del Valle murmured a wish, and, as she stooped to blow out the candles, a tear rolled down her pale cheek.

As soon as the party was over, Tonio

sought his Lolo.

"They must love their dead child very dearly," Tonio remarked.

"He must have been their only child," the old man said.

"Mrs. Del Valle cried over the birthday cake." Tonio's tone was sad.

When Lolo asked the old cook about the success of the birthday party, the latter had much to tell.

"It has always been thus every year," the cook concluded. "She prays for the return of the child. She believes firmly that he will be found."

"Found?" the blind man asked in great surprise. "I thought the child died."

"No, he was lost," the cook whispered.

"Lost? How? When?"

"About ten years ago. The child was barely a year old. They suspected the amah that had been dismissed."



"What a coincidence!" the blind man murmured.

"Coincidence. What do you mean?"

"My boy was left on my *batalan* about that time."

"Do you mean to say that Tonio is a foundling?" the cook demanded excitedly.

"Yes."

"The *Señora* must know about this," the old cook declared and immediately went out.

(To be continued)