

THE night was young, but the town of San Antonio, forever sandwiched between the sea and the mountains, lay lifeless under the August stars. In this secluded, coastal town its rugged inhabitants worked in the fields under a burning sun and fished along the shore of a turbulent sea in the days and they were glad to crawl into their tiny homes by nightfall. Except for a few young men with the warm blood of youth coursing in their veins promenading in the silent, dark streets, the town of San Antonio had settled for the night. But inside the church of *Padre* Silvio, situated on a knoll overlooking the town, four people knelt in solemn prayer while the candles burned.

The big heart of *Padre* Silvio, who had been parish priest in this peaceful hamlet since the turn of the century and beloved by everyone, was gladdened at the sight that met his dimming eyes when he entered the church direct from the convent to say his evening prayers. It had been many years since he had seen these four persons together in church. As he knelt beside the poorly lighted altar, his mind groped for the reason that brought them to this sanctuary.

The youngest among them was Marta, her head bowed in prayer. *Padre* Silvio knew her well; he had officiated at her baptism; he had seen her grow into a pretty girl, with a flock of swains following her even to church. Like the other girls in San Antonio, Marta was a regular attendant at the Mass he performed day after day. But two years ago something happened to this lovely girl that turned her into a bitter, wretched being.

Marta's parents, like most well-meaning parents, had meticulously planned to marry her off to a man with a substantial income. The parents' choice was a widower with three children and who was old enough to be her father. Although another girl might not have objected strenuously against the match, Marta's young heart was decidedly won over to the side of a stalwart man by the name of Lino. One night, underneath one of the coconut trees which grew abundantly in San Antonio and with the stars looking down upon them and the night wind whispering above their heads, Marta and Lino found happiness in each other's young arms. The night was far gone when they parted, decided to elope to fulfill their young hearts' desire.

Somehow, however, her parents got wind of the affair between Marta and Lino. Acting swiftly, they set the date of the marriage of Marta to Ciano, the widower. Elaborate plans were laid out and the wedding became the talk of the town.



A Short Story

By ADRIANO P. LAUDICO

On the eve of the marriage, young Lino, frustrated in his hopeless love, his young mind bewildered at the unhappy turn of events, rowed out to sea in his tiny *banca*. Early the next day his lifeless body was found on the sandy beach, even while the bells of the old church on the knoll were ringing, announcing to the town the wedding of Marta and Ciano.

Pigs were being roasted and a cow was being butchered in the home of the prospective bridegroom when the sad news of Lino's unexpected death broke into the expectant town like a typhoon. When it reached the ears of Marta, who was then being dressed in her bridal gown by a bevy of excited women, she fell into a swoon.

Like a bombshell the news spread to the town that the wedding would never take place. The district health

officer, who was one of the guests invited by Marta's parents, rushed to the side of the stricken girl and he learned the secret which the unhappy girl had been trying to keep to herself. Indignant and terrifyingly humiliated, Ciano walked out of his would-be wife, while *Padre* Silvio waited in vain for the coming of the pair.

The wrath of Marta's parents knew no bounds. They drove her out of their house. In the house of a friend Marta found refuge. There, months later, her child, hers and Lino's, was born—dead.

Something seemed to have snapped in the mind of Marta after the little one was buried in the town's lonely cemetery. She would walk the streets of the town, her eyes lowered as if counting the stones, unseeing, unkempt. Marta had com-

pletely lost her wits, the people of San Antonio believed.

Tonight Marta, in her aimless walking, had stopped at the foot of the hill and her eyes had looked up to the silent church silhouetted against the clear sky. Light filtered out of the main portal of the church and this, like some powerful beacon, had drawn her to the sanctuary.

A few feet away from where she knelt, her eyes caught a figure sprawled on the aisle, an improvised crutch lying beside him. The prostrate figure was Berto, the town's paralytic. Like Marta, Berto had found no use for the church in a good many months. But tonight he was there mumbling the rosary all over again, a pitiful, tragic sight.

There was a time when Berto was strong-limbed like the rest of the men of San Antonio. There was a time when Berto was insolent with his strength and daring in his heart. Many were the stories of his escapades circulated in the town.

Berto was strong, stronger than the average young man of San Antonio. He gloried in his strength, this child of the fields. He fought those who questioned his self-imposed supremacy over the youth of San Antonio. And a time came when no one dared show his teeth in the presence of the bully of San Antonio.

Berto was quick with his fists as he was with his tongue in the presence of the town's lasses. There were many tales told of his nightly excursions in the homes of girls whose beauty attracted him. These tales were told and retold by the young men of the town over glasses of *tuba* in San Antonio's only *cantina*. They were stories of girls whose virtues were despoiled by the town's bully at the point of a poniard. So fearful were the parents of these outraged girls of the threat that lurked in the brawny muscles of Berto that they never quite managed to denounce him to the authorities.

Then one night, while Berto was returning home from one of his much talked of visitations, rain overtook him. The sky seemed to have opened up and let go off its load, drenching the whole countryside. Berto was caught in the midst of the torrent.

When Berto woke up the following morning, he was feverish and unable to move his limbs. Like the bully that he was, he tried to laugh off the ailment that had suddenly descended upon him. But when the day wore on and his condition had turned for the worse, fear, which he had never known before, gripped him.

His parents summoned the town's *albarios* but they all shook their

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Four People Took Refuge In The Little Church And Met Their Death In It Just At The Time When They Found God Again

"DON'T grin — smile." So says Emily Post in her code of behavior for women. But then she hadn't read "Gentlemen Prefer..." in a local magazine last month in which various obsequious gentlemen commented sagaciously on women in general.

My, how my funnybone tingled upon reading their fatuously flippant observations! Of course they spoke with their tongues in their cheeks as in the accepted custom among young men, particularly adolescents, when the subject is "Women." Why do men seem to have an unconscious dread that people mistake their interest in the opposite sex as serious? Why not admit it? Why not admit it? Why hide behind a protective screen of wisecracks and rib-tickling remarks?

I remember a young fellow who professed disinterest in girls in general. He took extreme pains by actions and words to proclaim his aloofness... his disregard. Yet he sprouted an elegant moustache.

"Why the moustache?" I asked him. "To strain soup?" We admire broad-minded

The Contrariness of the Male Species

By HELEN MELIA

men. But not men with wide-open spaces between the ears. To judge from what gentlemen say nowadays about their preference in women, they seem to be magnanimous beyond belief. They speak, with convincing gestures and shining eyes. The liars! They admire modernity in a Miss. They offer her cigarettes and glasses brimming with gin. They tell her there's a drugstore in every corner and whisper, insinuatingly, "why not? You won't be a chicken all your life." They profess eternal love until the poor girl's head is giddy from their ardent avowals and promises. Oh no! She mustn't be old-fashioned! Men don't like it! Yet they'd wallop their own sister if they caught her trying hard not to be old-fashioned. When

it's the girl next door who goes wrong, they go right after her—until church bells chime in the distance when they beat a hasty retreat.

The most popular and preferred girls in town are those that "gentlemen" won't be seen out with — in public. That is, if we are to believe what they say they prefer in women.

Some gentlemen generously allow us ladies to study their masculine souls, "if it does us any good." But we tried that long ago when we wore ribbons in our hair and skirts that came above our dimpled knees. We've outgrown gentlemen of that type whose ego expands alarmingly under adolescent admiration. Then there's the virile male who "chases anything that wears a skirt." A start-

ling statement but disarmingly frank. There's a rooster in my back-yard that chases anything that clucks and then crows magnificently and flaps his wings on his chest. Mr. Skirt-chaser, like the rooster, deems it necessary to prove his virility at repeated intervals. Why? Who doubts his masculinity?

What gentlemen seem to prefer these days makes for a rather confusing picture. We must be sophisticated yet basically simple and unaffected. We must be intelligent but not more so than our escorts — the hardest requisite of all! I could make a gag here about us girls going out in relays with intelligent escorts but what girl wants to step out only once a month! Never mind; let that pass. I don't want to leave an opening for gentlemen pugilists of the pen.

To boil it all down, if you wish to be preferred by the modern Manila male, you must be born charming, if not actually devastatingly beautiful. If you're intelligent as well... that's a handicap you'll have to struggle along with as well as you can.

DEATH IN THE ...

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seemingly sapient heads in utter bafflement. They had never seen a case like this: of a strong-limbed youth suddenly stricken by an unknown malady. It was the district health officer, summoned by Berto's grief-stricken father, who put an end to the speculation of the townspeople on Berto's sickness. A vicious form of paralysis had gotten its relentless grip on the town's bully.

"He's being punished by God," was the townspeople's verdict.

Poor as they were, Berto's unhappy parents did everything within their limited means to bring life to the dead limbs of Berto. But he remained partly dead for months and months. While he could move his arms with great effort, his legs were stiff and unmoving. Berto would be half dead all his life.

But tonight, inside the church of Padre Silvio, Berto, as he lay sprawled on the aisle, seemed to be suffused with a force that seemed to bring life to his useless legs. He had heard of miracles, of men and women whom the world gave up as dead but who were given new life because they had faith. He would go to the church of Padre

Silvio and pray as he had never prayed before.

With reluctance, his aged father fashioned a crude crutch and with this Berto started on his pilgrimage to the church on the hill. Still the bully at heart, he refused assistance from his father and relatives. He would go to the church alone, even if he had to crawl in going there. And crawl he did, dragging the crutch with him.

As he lay quivering on the cold aisle, a slight noise came from one of the corners of the church. It was a series of soft, dry coughs that came from the pain-wracked body of a thin, prematurely old woman around whose drooping shoulders was wrapped a tattered shawl. It was Antonia, who was vainly trying to stop the paroxysm that gripped her and filled the entire church with an eerie noise.

In her heart Antonia knew that

it would not be long before her diseased, wretched body would cease disturbing people. Way back in far Manila, in a hospital where ghosts of people move about with the white plague dogging their heels, the solemn-faced doctors had given her up as a hopeless case. Antonia had returned to San Antonio—to die.

The forlorn figure kneeling in a darkened corner of the church that night was a far cry from the vivacious woman of ten years ago who left San Antonio to find her "rightful place" in the city, the hunting ground of modern Cinderellas. She was not like the rest of San Antonio's female inhabitants who were born only to be married to ignorant, calloused men and raise armies of half-naked children. She was different.

Indeed, Manila has a place for women like Antonia. It welcomes with open hands women like her

who want to get somewhere and are not scrupulous about the weapons they use in attaining this end. Soon, Antonia became a familiar figure in Manila's high spots, a typical lady of the evening.

A few so-called fortunate residents of San Antonio who had stayed away and landed in Manila, brought glowing tales of the activities of Antonia when they returned. They told of her costly clothes, of her sparkling jewels, of the people she ran around with. To the girls of San Antonio the name of Antonia was always spoken of with awe, almost reverence. But to the men, the stories about her brought a familiar leer in their eyes and huskiness in their voices.

Ten years is not a long, long time, but to Antonia she had lived to the full every day of this dizzy decade. So full that when the blow struck her, she was the only one who found it unbelievable. She could not reconcile herself to the fact that she had lost her youth and her strength. A terrible disease was the price of those ten mad years.

Her money, clothes, jewels and friends gone, Antonia found her-

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DEATH IN THE . . .
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self in the city's haven of lost souls. For months the hospital's physicians fought to piece together what the years had destroyed, but in the end they gave up the struggle. Already reconciled to the end that awaited her, Antonia had begged one of the doctors to send her home, which was sandwiched between the sea and the mountains. And thus, ten years later, Antonia came home to die.

Inside the church, Antonia found a peace that she had not known for years. In her heart she knew that it would not be so hard to die, feeling this way. But if there was peace in the heart of this dying woman, there was only turmoil inside the man praying close to her, the fourth devotee in the church that night. Dressed in expensive clothes, Don Basilio, the town's *tesorero*, knew only the despair of the damned.

He had gone to church that night, seeking solution to the dilemma that confronted him. Once a powerful political figure, who had served two terms as the town's *presidente* and who was considered a bulwark of wealth and prestige, Don Basilio had thrown away his fortune in pleasures of the flesh. His wife, unfortunate woman that she was, died a broken creature.

Don Basilio turned to gambling with the collapse of his fortune, hoping that he could win back what he had thoughtlessly squandered. With his children, all grown-ups, studying in exclusive colleges in Manila, he contracted huge debts in his last desperate stand against poverty. Himself a vicious usurer once upon a time, he turned to the town's money lenders in his despair, hoping that he could recover his losses and pay back the money vultures.

But the cards were all stacked against him. He had reached the crossroads and he was completely bewildered. Only that morning the tax collections had come in from the *barrios* and the old iron safe in his office at the municipal building was filled with money that could save him from the threats of the loan sharks. Should he disregard the threats of these persons who once borrowed from him, the scandal that would ensue would certainly bring disgrace to him and his children. But should he lay his hands on the money in his safe, this duplicity would unquestionably leak out and it would bring dishonor to him and his children. There did not seem to be a way out.

Like a blind man groping in utter darkness, Don Basilio stumbled into the church on the hill that night. God would show him the way, he thought. But even while his mouth mouthed prayers, his fevered mind was trying to seek the easiest way

out. His mind clung to the money in the safe in his office. A three-day *pintakasi* was going to start on the morrow and he might yet win enough to pay off all his debts. Then everything would turn out all right.

Outside the church the town of San Antonio lay in a stupor. The streets were practically deserted and lay ghostly white under the starlight. The church bells had just tolled the hour of eight.

Inside the church Padre Silvio had finished his evening prayers from where he knelt at the altar. He stood up slowly, his dimming eyes taking up the four forms engrossed in prayer. The good father's heart was ringing with joy. These stray members of the flock had come back.

But the happiness of Padre Silvio was short-lived. Even while he stood there at the altar, an inspir-

ing figure, he heard an ominous, rumbling sound that seemed to fill the entire church. Underneath his sandaled feet, he could feel the ground moving. Before him the startled devotees, except the paralytic, had stood up, with fear written in their faces and trembling as if stricken with palsy.

Padre Silvio fell down on his knees. The chandelier above was swinging to and fro, as if some strong, hidden hand was viciously toying with it. The age-old stone pillars, which supported the roof of the church, groaned under their weight. In his heart Padre Silvio knew that there was an earthquake going on, the intensity of which he had not felt before in all his years.

"Father, Father, save us!" wailed the terror-stricken devotees, who had run to the foot of the altar, with the paralytic behind them.

"My children, be brave!" coun-

seled the good priest. "Pray, pray!"

But the trembling of the earth continued, the swinging of the chandelier persisted, the groaning of the pillars intensified the deafening roar that was welling inside the House of God and outside. Suddenly, there came a terrific noise as the pillars gave way and the roof came tumbling down.

When the violent tremor had subsided and the startled inhabitants of San Antonio had mustered enough courage to venture near the church on the hill, they found Padre Silvio standing over the ruins with the altar behind him intact. In the hands of the priest, his black robes whitened by the dust of centuries, was tightly grasped the crucifix. Over these ruins, where lay the bodies of the four devotees, would rise a new church built by the hands of men with renewed faith.

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