



Chapter four

TONIO'S FIRST FIGHT

WINDING in and out of the irregular rows of shacks and sheds that had been built without pattern or form on the water-edge of the Tondo beach, Tonio made his way slowly to the sea. His mind occupied with the image of the woman of his previous night's dreams, he did not notice the group of beach urchins that had formed a circle on his very path.

"Hoy, Ambó, see how stuck-up that beggar boy is? He would not even glance in our direction," one of the boys said.

"Yes, Ikong, I see. He shall pay for high-hatting us. Come boys, we shall lay out our plans."

Tonio waded into the water and walked on until he reached a small island which appeared at low tide. With both hands and feet, he shoveled the sand in search of *paros*. In less than half an hour his basket was half-full of the small mussels.

"Hey, Tonio, how would you like to have a refreshing drink of coconut water? If you go with us, I shall let you have as many nuts as you can pick." This offer came from Ambó. The boys had planned to take Tonio to a private lot and to set dogs upon him.

"Thank you," Tonio answered meekly. "My *Lolo* is expecting me now." And he

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got up and started homeward.

Suddenly his way was blocked by two of the boys, Ikong and Ambó, who had started fighting for no apparent cause. Tonio turned his steps toward another direction, but his way was blocked again by the fighting boys and the spectators. Ikong was holding a stick but was not using it against his adversary. He turned to Tonio holding out the stick, and said in a pleading tone,

"Tonio, please hold this for me. I will teach Ambó a lesson."

Baffled and not knowing what else to do, Tonio took hold of the end of the stick proffered to him. No sooner had he held it than he had to drop it. The end of the stick was smeared with carabao manure. A volley of laughter and howls broke from the gang who danced and leaped with cruel mirth.

"Lick your fingers," shouted Ambó.

"Smell them. What is the scent, *kanan-ga?*" jeered another.

Poor Tonio rubbed his hands with sand and rinsed them thoroughly with sea water. He was choking with rage, but he was helpless. If he were big enough to fight, he would show them!

"Come and box me," challenged Ikong.

"Or, I will match you with one of your size," another shouted.

Tonio swallowed the lump in his throat. He gritted his teeth and held back the tears that threatened to flow from his brimming

eyes. He consoled himself by recalling his *Lolo's* admonition that he must not get into a scrape. With lips set and head held high, Tonio started toward the shore.

"Hey yellow-billed, running home to mother? Stay longer. There is plenty of fish in the fishermen's bancas for a *bakaw*," yelled Ambó.

"Why do you have to dig up for mussels? You always have two fresh oysters in your *Lolo's* eye-sockets."

Beastly shouts of glee from the gang hailed the last taunt hurled by Ikong.

Tonio, who had made up his mind to maintain his self-control, suddenly flew into a rage and threw himself against Ikong, who was much bigger. Taken unawares, Ikong was scratched on the breast. But Tonio was severely punished for the scratch. He emerged from the *melée* badly bruised. He walked home aching all over but proud for having fought for a cause. For to him, no greater cause there was than to defend the honor of his *Lolo*. No one could insult his *Lolo* or refer to him slightly and get away with it.

When Tonio reached the shore, he was accosted by two young men. They expressed their sympathy for him for the licking he had received from the hands of the young beachcombers. One of them offered to give him boxing lessons.

"Only an hour every afternoon," he coaxed.

"Yes," joined the other, "and we shall also train you in a gainful but easy occupation. You will not have to beg nor to dig up for *paros*."

"Thank you, Sirs, but my *Lolo* will not

permit me. He does not want me to fight."

"You don't have to tell him now. Later when you are able to support him with your own earnings and defend him with your own fists, you may tell him all. How proud he would be of you, then," the other persuaded.

He introduced himself to Tonio as Mr. Borja.

"Think it over, my friend. Every boy has to learn to fight. I'll be here tomorrow afternoon. I am sure you will find it to your advantage to accept my offer," Mr. Borja finished, tapping Tonio on the shoulder.

Tonio could not explain why the men were repellent to him. In spite of their apparent interest in his welfare, the thought of his some day being able to sup-



port his *Lolo* tempted him to accept the proffered help. Then, too, he would be able to go to school! He forgot the pains from the beating.

"I will think it over," he decided, and left the men.

(Who are these men? Will they prove to be true friends? Read the next chapter of "The Adventures of a Beggar Boy" in the next issue of "The Young Citizen".)