

## Miguel's Christmas Gift



MIGUEL'S highest ambition was to be wealthy. He had long been surrounded by an atmosphere in which to be rich and affluent was regarded as the summum bonum of human existence. The rich bankers, brokers and merchants of San Jose with whom he came into daily contact at the Exchange; the American, English, French, and German adventurers whom he often met on the Plaza; the Senoras with whom he sometimes conversed in the Gran Salon; all seemed to have one topic of conversation, to uplift one ideal, to kneel to one god—the almighty colon! His employer de la Guardia even had posted over his desk this motto, "Get and keep all you can." Small wonder then, that every fibre of Miguel's being was permeated with the desire to be rich. In pursuance of this desire he often found himself compelled to do things which sharply pricked his conscience. More than once he had been engaged in very questionable transactions for la Guardia; and in collecting the rents from the tenants of la Guardia though he knew that it was often exorbitant, and the people poor, yet he would set his face like a flint against their entreaties and obtain the entire amount of rent due or order the baliff to possess the home. By such means his soul was becoming sordid and selfish. He no longer cared for the spiritual discussions of friends in the Lyceum, nor for a long time had he attended church or visited the Padre at his home as once he loved to. He took more pride now in the increasing growth of the columns of his bank-book, and gloated over the idea that now he was the owner of nineteen hundred colones, which he hoped to increase to two thousand colones when he received his salary on the twenty-fourth of December.

Two thousand colones! How he longed to realize this sum? How often he had promised himself to embark into business on his own account as soon as he had that amount, and now, only three days more and the long desired sum would be his!

Now among the many tenants of la Guardia, there was one Senora Melano who with her daughter Carmelita lived in one of the little cottages on the Avenida del Sur. This little cottage was conspicuous from all the others by its remarkable neatness of appearance. The white adobe walls covered with roof of red tiling; the well kept little flower garden in front never failed to attract the notice of the casual passerby who instinctively perceived that the inmates of that cottage were somewhat above the ordinary dwellers of the "Sur." Should he enter the cottage, he would be still more surprised at the air of refinement which reigned within. The dainty bits of antique furniture tastefully arranged in the little parlatorio, the clean but threadworn Turkish rug which plainly though inaudibly spoke of a better day, the

little vases of flowers on the mantel; all bore evidences of the culture and refinement of the inmates.

Senora Melano was once the proud wife of Don Jose Melano, Prefect of Limon; but Don Melano was not wealthy and so when he was struck down by the fever, Senora Melano, left alone with her little Carmelita removed to the more genial climate of Cartago and supported herself and daughter by giving lessons on the banduria and organ both of which instruments she played with the skill of a virtuoso.

At the time of our story, Carmeltia was just seventeen, slightly taller than the Senoritas of her age. Perfect in form like a Phidian statue was Senorita Carmeltia, her long hair falling in graceful curls down her back, her black eyes and ruby lips half laughing, half sad, eyes and lips, each influencing the other, so harmoniously combined to make her features most expressive betraying every ripple which passed over her crystal soul within, and lured the hapless admirer at once to madness and despair.

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It is the twenty-third of December. Tomorrow Senora Melano's rent is due. The twenty-third of December,—two days more and Christmas will be here. But Senora Melano is very ill. Doctor Garcia to whom she has just given her last colon has said to her in parting, "Senora, you must go to Augua Calliente, or you will die." But it costs twenty colones to take her to Augua Calliente, the rent due is twenty colones. "What will become of Carmelita?" Thus Senora meditates.

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"Miguel," it was the voice of la Guardia, "tomorrow is the twenty-fourth of the month when all the rents of the "Sur" are due. The total amount is five-hundred colones. Collect and bring me four hundred colones as early as you can, and then collect the remainder for your salary."

"Yes Senor," replied Miguel; "trust me. The tenants of the Sur knows me and will pay or suffer the consequences."

La Guardia chuckled to himself. He knew Miguel would bring the money, but never stopped to think that Christmas was so near, and that if many of the tenants paid their rent then, their Christmas tables would be poor indeed.

All day Miguel collected the rent. Many of the tenants were ready with their money, and many by means of threats and persuasions were compelled to borrow the money from the pawnshops at a high rate of interest in order to pay him; but what cared Miguel how the money was obtained so long as he received it? By four o'clock, he had already collected and turned over to la Guardia the four hundred colones, and was now about to collect the remainder for himself.

One of the houses remaining to be collected from was that of Senora Melano from which Miguel expected to receive twenty colones and joyfully he bent his footsteps thither. As he stepped up the little gravel walk, he could not help noticing the wonderful neatness of the place. When he rang the bell, and Carmeltia came to the door, he was amazed at the extreme loneliness of the young lady that

stood before him, for though Miguel had heard of Senorita Melano, he had not seen her before and as he regarded her he was seized with a certain hesitancy. Then for the first time in his life he felt loath to mention his errand. He did not pause long, however, for just then he thought of the two thousand colones and quietly doffing his hat he explained to the young lady his mission.

Carmelita was perplexed. There was no alternative but to inform him of her mother's illness, that they had paid out all to the doctor and so was unable to pay the rent.

Miguel, though accustomed to many excuses and subterfuges from his tenants, could not but believe that the pure creature before him spoke the truth. Nevertheless, he was not going to be cheated so easily out of his expectations; therefore he told her that he was expected to receive the money that morning. The maiden told him that there was no way in which the rent could be paid just then but assured him that as soon as her mother recovered it would be paid.

Still Miguel was obdurate. He looked up at the face of the young lady and as he did so a strange sensation came over him. Some subtle power in those sad, dark eyes seemed to hold him enthralled. A mountain loomed up before his vision completely blotting out every other consideration from his breast; then with a scowl on his features, he said firmly, "Senorita, you know that de la Guardia brooks no delay. We must have the rent by tomorrow or be compelled to send the bailiff."

A deep pallor overspread the maiden's features. She had often heard of the unyielding nature of la Guardia and she feared to think what would become of her sick mother if the rent was not paid. Bewildered she replied "Senor, it is impossible! We cannot pay today. Besides, the doctor has told mother if she is not removed to Agua Calliente by Saturday, she will die. Today is Thursday. It will cost us twenty colones to take mother to Agua Calliente, and except we can borrow that amount, mother must die!"

Miguel did not answer. Chagrin, disappointment and a vague and undefinable sensation stopped further utterance, and bowing to the young lady he hurried from the house.

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Miguel thirsted for wealth. And yet it was not always so with him. Even now he would sometimes think of his boyhood home in old Valencia, and of the loving, tender, unselfish heart of his mother, Donna Castillo. Well, he remembered how she thought of those who worshipped wealth and employed questionable means to obtain riches.

His father, Don Juan Castillo, was the scion of a renowned house in Valencia. In the distant past when Spain ruled the Western world, the manors of the Duke de Castillo were large and rich and grand; but times had changed since then, and although Juan Castillo inherited a very small portion of the wealth of his ancestors, yet he inherited all their ancient nobility of character and chivalrous manners. Not being wealthy, he was nevertheless contented and happy; and when Fortune gave to him as wife the Senorita Constancia de la Vega of Seville, whose loveliness of face and form and still greater loveliness of soul, caused her to be known for many a league around as "La Angela del Seville," his cup of happiness was full.

Their union was blessed with a son—the Miguel of our acquaintance—the idol of his father and mother, whose especial care it was to instil in his young mind the virtues characteristic of a Castillo. When he was five years old, he was sent every day to the convent of Santa Clara to be educated, and every morning, Donna Constancia herself would teach him about God and the Blessed Virgin. At night she would kneel with him beside his little crib and teach him to pray; and more than once when he awoke in the night he would hear her praying that her son might grow up true to the church, and gentle, kind and brave.

Thus Miguel grew up surrounded with loving influences and daily suggestions of genuine nobility until he was sixteen years old, when misfortune overshadowed his happy home, and compelled him to seek a new home far away from former associations and early environments. Don Castillo was unjustly accused of participating in a Carlist plot, but having influential friends at the Spanish Court, he was eventually acquitted. The disgrace, however, notwithstanding his acquittal, laid heavily on his sensitive heart and in less than a year he died, shortly followed by his beloved wife.

Their property was sold to meet the various obligations with which it was encumbered, and with just sufficient to take him to Costa Rica, Miguel left Spain for the New World. Arriving in Costa Rica he finally settled in the old city of Cartago, where we find him now the trusted secretary and collecting agent of de la Guardia, one of the richest brokers of Cartago.

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After leaving Carmelita, Miguel hurried home. He was not in a very pleasant frame of mind. Here was an entirely new situation confronting him. He hated the thought that the Christmas holidays should pass by and would not have the two thousand colones. Oh, no! he must get the money! Tomorrow he would send the bailiff and sell the furniture of the home. But what if Senora Melano should die? Carmelita had said that twenty colones could save her, and Carmelita's eyes! Why was it that when he thought of them, such a strange sensation shook him? He would help her, he would save Senora Melano! But would he not in doing so further deplete his existing bank account. If he should withdraw twenty colones, when would he be able to make up the two thousand colones? If he lent the money when would he receive it again? But would he keep the money and permit Senora Melano to die? These were some of the questions which racked Miguel's mind and kept him awake long after he went to bed. There was the struggle of his life; the struggle of selfishness against unselfishness; here was his Gethsemane! Would he drink the cup?

Late in the night Miguel slept and dreamed; and in that dream he saw two angels, one his mother, the other Carmelita. Both were beckoning to him with outstretched hands, and in the eyes of his mother was the look he knew so well, but infinitely more tender, more sad, more loving! That look pierced his very soul and caused him to start with a cry from his couch.

The next day Miguel's heart was lighter. He had not yet decided what he would do, but the dream was ever in his mind and flooded his heart with a warmth and tenderness he never experienced before. The

day was a very busy one. He was kept at work until almost evening time. Immediately after leaving the office, he rushed to the bank, drew out thirty colones, and lest he should change his mind, he actually ran all the way from the bank to the little cottage on the Sur. Nervously he rang the bell and as Carmelita came to the door, he hastily thrust the thirty colones into her hands, bidding her take her mother to Agua Calliente, to pay him when she could and not to worry about the rent for that month; then quickly bidding her good night he turned and left the girl standing there amazed and scarcely conscious of what it all meant.

But Miguel stepped from the cottage out in the darkness and under the stars a new man, his breast throbbing with emotions he never felt before, a rapturous delight bounding in his bosom. He looked up at the heavens. The hanging lamps of God seemed to dance with joy, and to look down upon him with glances full of sympathy. Suddenly the sound of music struck his ear, and he paused for he remembered that the lofty edifice beside which he stood was the Church of Our Lady of the Angels, and the Choristers were now rehearsing the Christmas Carol for the morning's mass. Moved with a strange impulse Miguel listened to the soft sweet strains as they issued from the chancel upon the cool night air:

"Gloria en las alturas, A el Padre Dios,  
Y en la tierra paz, Y a los todos hombres.  
Buena Voluntad!"

"Glory in the highest. To our Father God,  
Peace on earth and good will evermore to men."

Miguel thought of the dream. He was sure he heard the angels singing. He looked up the lofty summit of Orazer, the hoary guardian of Cartago, whose watch-fires kindled in the distant ages of the past by the Eternal hand, have always looked down upon the city and its inhabitants, not in anger, but in Love. White clouds were floating around the crater and anon as they neared the light of the mountain they seemed to soar upward with feathery wings of burnished gold. To Miguel they were the angels of Christmas singing the song of love. Long he watched them and listened to the music; then clasping his hand over his heart, he murmured, "Father, I thank thee. Good-will toward men!"

—S. J. WILLIAMSON.

