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The Sewing Machine

By KATHERINE POWERS GALLEGOS

Over the hot road rolled the little wagon that carried the children from the out-lying ranches to school in the town. The passengers called it the "Covered Wagon." It had carried them for many years, guided by the present driver's father. Since Cecilio had fallen heir to both wagon and occupation, he had painted the rickety wooden top a violent blue, and had cut an oblong window in each side, so that it lent a sprightly air to the calm New Mexico landscape.

Cecilio cracked his long whip threateningly over the back of the rusty and aged white horse that pulled the wagon. He didn't actually hit him, for the horse was rather dearer to him than most of his own brothers and sisters, and besides he knew as well as anyone that his present speed was as much as the old horse was capable of. Even the children realized that something unusual was on foot, and speculated shrilly as to the reason for the unnatural hurry. Loud and bitter were their complaints when Cecilio set them all down at a cross-road, instead of taking each one to his individual ranch as he did on other days. Their voluble Spanish protests and derisive hoots filled the quiet afternoon sunshine.

"What do they pay you for, anyway, making us wear out our shoes with walking?"

"My father pays a tax; he will go to the School Board, and have you fired, old thin monkey."

"I guess your old mother told you to hurry home, and you are too afraid to be out late."

To taunts and profanity Cecilio answered not a word, but he hurried the last brown boy in tattered overalls out of the wagon, closed the two swinging doors which secured the back, mounted the seat and drove off stiff and calm.
vouchsafing no reply of any kind to the rain of clods that bade him goodby.

A quarter of a mile farther on, he turned into a bare, wind-blown, clean-swept yard, white with the alkali that was in the soil. Before him was his home, a low, little, oblong, adobe house, with one white-washed door and no windows in front, and with round timber vigas protruding at the top. From these were hung to dry four brilliant scarlet strings of chile pods. Behind the house stretched a barren waste of a field, which might produce a little chile and a patch of beans and corn in summer, although it looked as if it would hardly pay for the cultivation.

Cecilio unhitched the horse, gave him an armful of hay and a bucket of water, and carefully placed the wagon in a little shed made of brush and branches laid over rough boards, where its brilliant paint would be protected from any sudden showers. He did his work daintily, so as not to soil his clothes, which were new, and were of a style and color that might have startled a less placid beast than his own. They had caused no little unpleasant comment from the school children the first time he had worn them.

His trousers were a peculiar purplish hue; his shirt was pink China silk, and had short sleeves, from which his bony, almost black arms protruded; his shoes were bright tan and very shiny. His hair was long and shiny with oil; it was cut in exaggerated side-burns that further shadowed his gaunt cheeks. In Cecilio himself a close observer might have detected an artistic something to account for his eccentricities; his features were rather delicate, and there was a certain grace in his long, bony fingers.

His old mother came to meet him at the door. She had been watching for him for the last half-hour as she did every day. Cecilio was twenty-six, but he was her baby. Her face was dark and wrinkled and soft; she was so thin and bent that she appeared deformed, but it was only with her years and years of unceasing work. Her eyes were sunk,
but they were not dim. They had a sparkle that made them seem to snap. She had a black shawl over her head, a faded gray calico skirt, and a ragged black sweater buttoned over her thin old chest.

“What’s the matter?” She had not missed the significance of the unwonted speed of the old horse.

“Nothing. Why?” The school children’s taunts had left Cecilio slightly huffy on the subject of his speedy return, and seeing this, his mother questioned him no more.

She started breaking up a single splintered stick to make a tiny fire in the low little iron stove.

Cecilio washed his hands with a piece of strong yellow soap, in a chipped blue granite basin, and passed a broken black comb through his hair.

Just as he finished, an automobile stopped in front of the house, and he rushed to open the door, his face flushed with excitement. His mother looked on impassively from the stove, as Cecilio helped a stout, perspiring, big-nosed man carry in a beautiful new sewing-machine, and set it in the middle of the mosaic of gunnysacks that covered the dirt floor.

“Yes, sir,” continued the man, puffing, and wiping his red face with a bandanna handkerchief, “that’s the best sewing machine for the money in the United States. Well, for that matter, I better say in the world, because you know they don’t make none better than in the United States.”

Cecilio nodded encouragingly, though he understood little of what the man said, and was, in fact, gazing dreamily into the shiny varnished depths of the machine.

“Yes, sir, you may think a hundred and five dollars is a lot of money, but after you see how good that machine runs, and start making your own clothes and doing your mending on it—. And like you say, you’re making this thirty dollars a month driving this school bus, and you say you got paid today, well, you can just give me the thirty dollars down, and then ten dollars a month, and it will be paid
for before school's over, and you'll have the use of it all the time too. This old lady your grandma?"

"Mama," murmured Cecilio.

"Yeah? Well, now, I guess she's the one you're getting it for—. You ain't married?"

"No."

"Better off. Well, you want me to show her those attachments I spoke of,—tucking, gathering, and so on? You can kinda tell her what I say——"

"No, sir."

"Well, all right. They're right here in this drawer, and here's that book of directions, and everything, so I guess you'll get along fine. Anyway, of course I'll be back this time next month and get my payment, and I can tell you anything you want to know then. You seemed to catch on to it pretty good when I showed it to you there where you were waiting at the school. Gosh, I never thought I was going to make a sale there! Well, you sign this agreement, and give me that thirty dollar check you say they give you, and it's yours."

When the salesman had gone, Cecilio opened the machine, inspected wheels and needles and gadgets, sewed an experimental seam in his own handkerchief. The old woman approached and felt the smooth grain of the wood with her hard little hand. She and her son understood each other with few words.

"I'm going to get cloth," Cecilio told her, "for a few cents a yard. I've been looking at those dresses the girls order from those big books. I can make them just as good, and sell them to everybody. Baby clothes, too... I'll make enough to pay for the machine, maybe so much that I can just stay at home and sew and not take the children to school every day."

He worked over the machine lovingly while his mother put the supper on the table. There were two tin saucers and two cups. They had black coffee, boiled and reboiled
until it retained no semblance of its original flavor, without sugar or milk. In their saucers they had warmed-over beans, and these they ate with pieces broken from a tortilla, made of kneaded dough rolled flat to the size of a dinner plate, and baked deliciously on top of the stove, which was always kept wiped clean for this purpose.

After they had eaten, the woman washed the dishes in a saucepan, in a cupful of tepid water, and set them on a little shelf. Cecilio puttered over the machine until it was time for him to go to bed in the corner of the kitchen, on a pile of ancient folded blankets and home-made quilts.

Their home had two low rooms. This room was kitchen, living-room, and bedroom. The other was the “cuarto de recibo” into which important guests were ushered. It had a wide window filled with flowers and vines growing in lard buckets. There was an old four-poster bed for the mother, and two straight chairs against the wall. The whitewashed, mud-plastered walls had been decorated with an intricate pattern of concentric red rings, designed by Cecilio in his spare time. Besides several enormous, brightly colored pictures of saints, there were many large pictures drawn on pieces of brown wrapping paper ironed smooth. These were of angular houses surrounded by vari-colored flowers, and surmounted by gigantic birds and airplanes in full flight. These were drawn with crayons, and were displayed in prominent positions, some enclosed in cardboard frames with scalloped edges.

The next day was Saturday, and Cecilio walked to town and came home with bolts of pink, green, and yellow gingham, bought on credit. Day after day he labored, fashioning garments that sometimes surprised even himself. His mother cut them out, for her ideas of size were more accurate than his. Her old hands trembled as they guided the rusty scissors. Cecilio stitched them on the machine, and then embellished the more elaborate dresses with a spidery kind of embroidery which was his own invention.
At night, when the little oil lamp gave insufficient light for sewing, he oiled and cleaned the machine, not because it needed it, but merely for the sensual pleasure it gave him to be near its shiny bulk.

He found no difficulty in selling his creations, regardless of his price, but collecting for them was a different matter. Most of his neighbors were the poorest of farmers, and saw little cash from one year’s end to another. Sometimes he would hear that one of his debtors had sold a pig, or a goat, and he would hurry over to collect, but it always seemed that he arrived too late, and he would be given a little sack of last year’s beans or an old rooster for his trouble. Yet he couldn’t stop sewing; it had got to be a habit with him. Every cent he could scrape together went for more cloth, and he often gave away dresses, where he knew they would arouse the loudest gratitude and admiration.

Very soon, of course, he found it impossible to keep up his payments. The first month his ardor was still burning brightly, and he had the ten dollars ready for the salesman the day he called. The second month he put him off for a week, and finally gave him six dollars. By the third month, the six had shrunk to three, and the fourth month he found that there was no possible way in which he could raise any money at all. The general store had garnished his check that month, because he owed them for a new overcoat, cloth and thread, and a sack of flour.

For a week before the collection day, he had been spending most of his time sitting on the bed with his head in his hands, trying to think of some way in which he could satisfy the fat little demon. If the collection day had been on a Saturday, Cecilio would have packed his mother into the covered wagon on Friday evening, and they could have gone to visit a cousin in Tomé until late Sunday night. Nothing so simple as this would answer, however, for the collector was to come on Thursday, and might even arrive before Cecilio got home from school. One of his passengers

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who was in the fifth grade had read and explained to him his copy of the contract, and so far as Cecilio could understand its intricacies, it seemed to mean that his failure to meet the last payments in full was enough to cause him to lose the machine, as well as any equity he might own in it.

So Cecilio sighed, and tossed in his sleep, and ate only a little dry tortilla and coffee, in a way that caused his mother the deepest anxiety, especially after she found him poring over an old Sunday newspaper someone had given him, which contained lurid pictures illustrating different spectacular ways of ending one’s life.

She cooked dishes which were usually reserved for Feast days, trying to tempt him out of his melancholy mood. She served big bowls of dark brown, fragrant beans, cooked to a tender succulence with bits of bacon rind. She made dishes of the pulp of the brilliant red chile pods, savory with garlic and “orégano,” an herb she raised with her flowers in the window. She even made the sacred “chiles rellenos,” a mixture of ground cooked pork, raisins, and green chile made into croquettes, dipped in egg and fried, and served with a hot sauce made of brown sugar and more raisins.

Cecilio barely tasted these delicacies, and made no comment on their surprising appearance. On Thursday morning he left with the wagon before his mother was up, and without eating breakfast.

All day the blackest dread hung over her mind. If the man came and took the machine away, what might not Cecilio do?

At three o’clock, the familiar rickety automobile drove into the yard, and the old woman’s heart seemed to stop as she saw the horrible scowl on the face of the fat man.

“Is HE here?”

A shrug gave him the answer that he already knew.

“Has he got the money?—dinero? Tenny el dinero?”

Another shrug of denial.
“I knew it.” The man’s voice became almost a wail, and the deep creases in his pudgy face made him look as if he were about to burst into tears. “I told everybody he had no business buying it! I’d of told him so, only he don’t hear a word I say. Sittin’ out here sewin’ dresses! He’s crazy, that’s what he is; poco loco, lady, poco loco.”

He tapped his head with a grimy finger, and puffed into the house, where he looked closely at the machine, and prepared to pull it out and put it in the back of the car.

“Don’t think I blame you, lady. I don’t. I bet you wished he’d spend that money on food or something instead of this foolishness. The money I’ve spent, coming down here to collect! And the worry I’ve had, day and night, wondering what he’d do to that machine, because I’m responsible for it to the company till it’s every cent paid for. I tell you, I bet I’ve lost five pounds since he got it. You better send him to Las Vegas or somewhere lady, You never know what they’ll do next when they get like him.”

And he chugged off, still muttering. “Poco loco.”

The dull dread in her heart would not let her sit still. She moved all the furniture around in the little kitchen, trying to conceal somewhat the empty space left by the removal of the sewing machine. Then she made “burritos” for Cecilio’s supper. A neighbor had killed a pig, and had sent her a saucierful of crisp brown cracklings. She cooked dried corn with lye, washed it, shelled it, and ground it into a paste, and with her knotted hands made the dough-like mass into flat cakes slightly smaller and thicker than her usual tortillas. She baked them on the stove, then placed four or five of the hot cracklings in the middle of the corn cake, and molded the warm tortilla into a ball around them.

At the usual time, the covered wagon turned into the yard, and a few minutes later Cecilio walked in. His face had lost the somber melancholy it had worn for a week. He made no comment on the changed furniture or the disappearance of the sewing machine, but sat down at the table at once, and ate heartily of the “burritos” and coffee.
His mother watched him slyly out of the corner of her eye.

When supper was over, and while she was washing the dishes, he took out of his pocket several folders, cards, and booklets, spread them out on the table, and pored intently over them, an excited color glowing in his dark face.

When the woman finished her task, she came to the table, and looked over his shoulder. He turned sparkling eyes to hers.

"You see this? It's a 'camera'—one of those boxes to make pictures. I can send for it right now without paying anything, and then just send them five dollars in two weeks, when I get the check. You have to buy 'fillums,' too,—little papers that make the pictures. I can buy six of them for forty-five cents; then I can take pictures of weddings, and babies, and everyone. I send them back to the company, and they make them big, for, maybe, fifty cents for the six. Then I can sell each picture for ten cents, and make,—Oh, ever so much money. Everyone wants pictures of himself. They will ask me to all the weddings to take the pictures of the 'novios.' Then there are picture frames here ..."

His voice lapsed into an indistinct murmur as he bent over the folder.

His old mother sighed contentedly, and lit a tiny brown cigarette.