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The Mayor's Punctilio

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SAN RAFAEL lies in a fertile valley of the Sierra Madres and feels itself as remote from world affairs as a constellation. Thrice yearly the town is visited by expeditions from Chihuahua, the state capital: one expedition collects the state's revenues and taxes; another collects the tithes of the church, and the third hauls out the silver for which San Rafael's mines are justly famous.

Imagine, therefore, what prestige attached to the office of Don Miguel Tierrablanca, who had been the mayor for more than fifteen years. He used stern measures as a magistrate perhaps, but they were necessary in a community where any ruffian with a pistol might take the law into his own hands. Don Miguel often said, in passing sentence, that the honor, the dignity, and good name of San Rafael must be preserved before all.

Such words stirred admiration for him among the proud people, whose temper was peaceful and whose honesty was irreproachable. They approved Don Miguel's crusade against the bawdy carousels of the bachelor miners, young bucks who had the physique of gladiators and the souls of heathens. Every Sunday Don Miguel had them herded into the Cathedral where he made them listen to a sermon handed down on the lips of El Padre, who certainly preached vehemently on the subject of sin.

But nothing moved Don Miguel to such rage as the bandits who habitually swooped upon some isolated hacienda or unprotected home and ordered the inhabitants to give up their valuables at the point of the gun. Don Miguel had organized a company of vigilantes to assist his regular force of uniformed police, and under his leadership all had sworn to end the terror of the bandits. They set traps and pitfalls,
they burned the desperadoes in effigy, and Don Miguel made eloquent speeches before the outraged citizenry.

"Upon my word," he would say, "I promise to end this assault on public safety. If not by peace, I intend to end it by the sword. I swear an oath to protect your property. You, who have been robbed, have my deepest sympathy. But fear not! Their heads will roll from their bodies!"

But on the very night following that outburst the bandits returned and made off with booty valued at many thousands of pesetas. The owners wept and raged. They came to Don Miguel's house, shouting across the garden.

"We've been robbed," cried one, José Posadosa. "They've robbed all our precious belongings. We have been left miserably poor. We who have paid our taxes and supported your vigilantes. We are like defenseless sheep at the mercy of wolves. All our savings gone! Our work of years . . ."

Don Miguel's estate was the finest in San Rafael. The gardens were expansive and the house outfitted like a palacio. It was of white oolitic limestone and furnished with fine carvings, china, and tapestries, all from overseas. He had acquired wealth both as a mine owner and as Mayor.

His children were playing with their pet dogs when the suffering people appeared. The Mayor's wife begged them to call later, as Don Miguel had just retired for a siesta. But they insisted on seeing him, "For," said José, "we have something of the utmost importance to tell him."

There was a stir in the rear of the garden, and to the surprise of everyone, Don Miguel himself appeared. He seemed vexed as he approached, but he said "Buenas tardes," to the villagers who immediately removed their hats and bowed. Notwithstanding, Don Miguel did not return the expected and traditional courtesy of doffing his own hat. He merely went on to answer their complaint.

"I know why you are here, my friends. The bandits have robbed you. I have heard."

"You have heard all?" they cried in unison.
"Yes, and I have dispatched my vigilantes in pursuit. We may have a report this evening."

"We fought them," said José. "They did not get off so easily this time. Pedro and I emptied our pistols after them. We must have wounded one, for later we found drops of blood."

"Good!" exclaimed Don Miguel. "But you should have killed the scoundrel."

"Ah! with the help of St. Francis I might have done it," answered José.

Taking leave, the Mayor assured them again that he was losing no time in giving pursuit. He urged them, however, to hide their most valuable possessions and to be prepared for further assaults. The townsfolk thanked him for his advice, and again they removed their hats and bowed. But the Mayor merely nodded his head, and did not remove his hat. Taking the arm of his wife, he said good-bye and walked away.

Confounded by this breach of punctilio, José and his companions felt distressed and piqued. In San Rafael, crimes of all sorts are excusable, but lack of politeness! None but a pig could be excused for that.

Word got round that Don Miguel had refrained from tipping his hat according to the established tradition. The oily-tongued gossips of the town flavored and peddled this bit of news until it threatened to upset business. Arguments, discussions, and symposiums were held in every shop and on every street corner. Why? why was the Mayor discourteous? they said.

By this time Don Miguel had gotten wind of the public disturbance, but he offered no explanation nor took any counter-move. He merely stayed home.

But from idle gossip San Rafael turned to speculation, from speculation to prediction, thence to resentment, and finally to provocation and criticism.
"Our Mayor," said a citizen, addressing a meeting, "has retired into his home where he receives us like outcasts and ruffians. Now, my friends, may I ask whether his conduct is worthy of his office?"

"No!" from a thousand throats.

A cry arose from among the miners, especially those whom the Mayor had forced to attend Sunday mass against their will. "Let us demand an apology!" The crowd carried this out into the street, where scores of recruits joined the malcontents. Singing, dancing, and shouting, they marched on Don Miguel's house.

The uproar brought the Mayor to the balcony. On sight of him they all removed their hats. The Mayor wore a large white handkerchief tightly bound around his head. When the miners shouted, "Courtesy!" he blanched and stood stockstill. His wife appeared, and after a resentful stare at the mob, she drew him inside.

In a thrice half a dozen miners had scaled the balcony. They entered the house and reappeared with the Mayor. "Fools!" cried the Mayor, suddenly impatient and angered with their tactics. "Remove your hands and get off or I'll . . ."

"Shall we ask our Mayor to unhat himself?" cried the leader, a daring youth.

"Aye!" roared the mob, as in a single voice.

The Mayor struggled. With a flourish, the youth seized the handkerchief and tore it from Don Miguel's head saying, miraculously, "I unmask you!"

There was a fresh wound at the top of Don Miguel's forehead, and the sight of it brought gasps and mutterings from the crowd.

Who had shot Don Miguel?

"It was an accident," declared the Mayor sheepishly, "... a slight accident I had the other day. But you see it is not . . ."
"Liar!" came from the audience. "I shot him. I-I! Let him disprove it." José Posadosa came forward. "Señor Mayor," he said sneeringly, "on the night of June the twelfth you were lurking near the corral of my hacienda, and I shot you..."

"I?" cried the Mayor in a sudden heat. "What would I be doing...?"

"Dog! You were the bandit leader who directed those cut-throats to rob me!"

Something snapped and gave way. The crowd surged, bellowed, and snorted. A torrent of uneasy tension broke loose. Then pandemonium. Nobody could save the Mayor against such wrath.

They buried him the following day in a plot that has since been plowed for corn.