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A TASTE OF THE WORLD

Wingate Froscher

ON A WEDNESDAY many years ago there was an earthquake, and half the town of Cabo Bajo was destroyed.

Word of this spread from the stricken coast town high into the hills of Puerto Rico where, in the coffee country, the *jibaros* gave thanks to God and the Saints and knew they would always remember their luck of that Wednesday. For in the hills, the tremor had caused only a slight rumbling somewhere deep in the earth under the big stone doorsteps, while the rest of the palm-thatched shacks had not even trembled. The people of the hills had been good and God was not punishing them.

Of that, Manolo was certain. What molested him was whether or not he should nevertheless make his regular Saturday trip to Cabo Bajo for his weekly supplies. Most of his neighbors had always thought, and were now more certain than ever about it, that the little town of Somoza right there in a pocket of the mountains was far enough to go for one's *compra*. But Manolo, when he had put the saddle bags on his little mare and had dressed himself in his pongee shirt and khaki trousers, always felt the need of really going some place—of making the journey past Somoza, three hours, down hill all the way, to the plaza of Cabo Bajo. There, one could see something of the world. The ocean was not more than five miles from the town, and beyond that were Spain, France, and New York—the places where the coffee he picked was sold, so it was said.

At first, thinking of the calamity of Wednesday, he would not go. "Imagine to thyself," he said to his wife Rufina, "half of the town destroyed. That shows what great sinners those people of the town

are. . . . And even when they have the great church of La Milagrosa right there."

"God take me if it isn't the truth," said Rufina. "The earthquake was the punishment of God. Hail Mary, I would not go to that town if they paid me a dollar."

Yet Manolo could not keep from thinking of that great plaza at the end of which towered the beautiful red and yellow dome of La Milagrosa. That holy church had naturally not been destroyed by the shuddering of the earth; nor, so it was said, had the store of Agustín been damaged. In that *colmado* Manolo always bargained for his rice, olive oil, smoked codfish, salt pork, and other necessities. These things one could buy in Somoza as well; but only Agustín had on display the latest luxuries such as the olives and the *turrón* candy from Barcelona and the foreign fruits in cans from New York. And if he had earned any part of a dollar extra during the week, Manolo could also bargain with the vendors who had their kiosks on the plaza for colored pieces of cloth and other such trinkets to take home to Rufina. Or under the shady laurel trees in front of La Milagrosa he could talk with men from all over that end of the island and perhaps bet with them on the afternoon cockfights. And the plaza would be filled with market women from all parts, selling eggs, pole-beans, plantains, yams, chickens, suckling pigs . . . anything one might care to buy. . . . There would be shaved ice with pink sweetening to refresh one after the journey down. . . .

He wanted to see how it had all changed.

"What foolishness to have fear!" he exclaimed as he tightened the girth strap around his little mare and she trembled from side to side with the pressure. "Do not molest thyself," he said to Rufina. "I shall go immediately to the plaza. The surroundings of La Milagrosa are the safest place in the world. Even if there is another shock, as all have predicted, I shall be safe there."

Thus, as on all Saturdays, Manolo, perched high on the white saddle rug, rode down the hills. Now and then, he tipped his hard straw hat to acquaintances in their fields and doorways, while under him, his little mare picked her accustomed way down the smooth, stony slopes, between the thorny *maya* plants.

But, as Manolo said many times during the rest of his life, "Even before I arrived in Cabo Bajo I wished to be on the way home. All

the world knew that the people of that town had deserved the punishment of God. In going among them, I invited the curse upon myself."

When the road turned the last hill and crossed the river, he dismounted at the entrance of the town to marvel at the destruction. "Mother of God," he said aloud, "even the strongest buildings are in ruins."

Some of the wooden buildings like the old schoolhouse and the older part of the tobacco factory were still upright, but the new cement walls of the latter, covered by a roof of zinc, were only half standing. Some of the sheets of zinc had been so battered in falling that the red paint had peeled off. The long tobacco leaves which had been hanging from the rafters to dry were now blackened and made worthless by the recent rains. Even some of the old houses of the Spaniards were left with their thick yellow and blue walls crumbled into piles of dust and broken roof tiles. Everywhere there were soldiers with guns. It appeared that all the people were now living out in the surrounding fields in the big, round tents. The street Manolo stood before was so heaped with wreckage that it had been barricaded and the soldier there would not let him pass. He led his mare across the field to another street. "Oh, Saints, this is horrible," he said to himself.

He remounted and the mare trotted quickly down this street.

Two high sections of cement wall were all that remained of the new American school. They leaned slightly toward one another with rusty iron bars sticking out of their broken corners. "That will fall with a little wind," he said. He saw scarcely anyone but the soldiers, and many of them were Americans. "Mother of God, all the world must be dead."

Further on, toward the center of the town, he found it true that the houses had not suffered so much. On both sides of the church, many of the stores and the apartments with balconies above them stood as always. But there was no life in them. Every shutter was closed. There were no longer any flower boxes on the balconies.

"The church is the house of God," he said. "The bad people lived too far from La Milagrosa to be saved."

He looked down one street and saw that the remaining parts of the buildings had been burned and that the gutters were cluttered with charred bits of wood and blackened lumps of concrete. "Fire . . . horrible . . . another shock will be the end of the world . . . most Holy

Mother, save us!" He saw all becoming like these broken pillars, these splintered, twisted balconies hanging down into the streets.

At one intersection, his mare had to cross a large wooden plank over a crevasse in the street. There were a few soldiers standing guard while some blacks of the Coast filled this long hole with debris. For that reason, Manolo could not tell if it was possible to see the bottom.

At last he turned the corner and came to the store of Agustín, on the north side of the plaza, halfway down from the church. The doors were padlocked, but Agustín was there, appearing thinner than ever and with many extra wrinkles of worry in his brown face. He was arguing, partly in English, with a red-faced soldier.

Manolo dismounted to wait. Through the trees, he saw the house of the mayor, a building recently constructed at the opposite end of the plaza from the church. The *alcaldía* was now a pile of rusty iron bars and chunks of broken mortar, all covered with gray dust. "Where is the big clock they had in the top?" he asked himself. Along that entire end of the plaza only a doorway and a few discolored sections of crumbling wall remained standing. One of the walls had an open window in it. . . .

When the soldier had left, Agustín remained the only person in sight. "Hóla," he said, waving his glasses in the air and squinting.

"Good, how goes it, Don Agustín?" Manolo grinned by custom, although he felt he should not, with so much tragedy around them. "All the world says you had luck. You did not lose the store."

"As always, they exaggerate. Thanks only to God that my family is safe. I am completely ruined." He mopped his dirty shirt sleeve across his gray, unshaved chin. "Completely ruined."

"You still have the store."

"But, Don Manolo, you can see. . . ." Agustín shrugged his hands as well as his shoulders. "My store is locked. All my stock is gone — confiscated for the benefit of the sufferers."

"In truth, bad. I shall have to obtain my compra in Somoza, or my family will starve in the hills. We have only yams. Perhaps we shall have to kill a pig."

"You have a pig to kill! Man, what are you doing here?" Agustín again waved his glasses. "Run, man, run back to the coffee country before someone hears of that pig. *Cristo*, that is more than any of us have here. They have taken everything to feed the dying — even the

turrón of Spain and all the things in cans I have just finished getting from New York."

"Mother of God, what will pass?"

There was not even a sign in the plaza that the sellers of shaved ice had ever been there, or the sellers of broiled pig-skin, or of cloth.

"Most bad, most bad," lamented Agustín. "All that is left to me is the clothing on my body. Out there in a tent are my wife and little ones. Man, if you had been here. Only three days ago, but already it is like many years ago. . . . And in the full light of day too. And how the women screamed." He spoke in a lower voice, more tensed and moving closer to Manolo. "I saw the sister of my wife crushed by a telephone pole near the railroad station and her two babies burned black in her arms by the falling wires. My house, which used to be seen down the street, was completely burned."

"For God, what a tremendous thing!" Manolo muttered, gazing about him in fear.

"Son of God! You see — we running, trying to escape the town. . . . All I wish now is that I had left that bunch of bananas in the store the day before instead of taking it home. And Manolo, never was seen such a bunch! They were as big as plantains—from Santo Domingo, of that kind that is sweet like the small mango. If we had them now. . . ."

While Agustín spoke, Manolo found that his own eyes were regarding only the cross on top of the brilliantly colored dome of the church. He removed his hat. The cross was the highest thing to be seen, standing out against the mountain above the town. His eyes then came to rest on the high black door in the deep portal of the church. It was closed. Suddenly, among the trees, he saw — "*Ay de mí*, Agustín, those cracks in the plaza, in the concrete. Look how they run almost to the steps of the church. A man would have to jump far."

"Yes, but the church still stands."

"Clearly. The house of God is the strongest."

"Naturally. And do you know that it is crowded with people at this very moment? They have lost their homes and for three days they have been sleeping and eating and praying in there."

"How many people?"

"What do I know? A multitude. . . . And the soldiers have been trying to get them out. They say the church will go in the next shock. They want all the world to live in the tents in the fields. But the priest

says no, all the bad people were destroyed in the first shock. For that reason, it will not pass again."

"The priest knows," Manolo said, arranging the mane of his little mare so that it all fell on one side of her neck.

"Yes, the church is the oldest building — older than any of these American buildings. Look at the *alcaldía*."

"Why not? And also on the way, I saw the remains of the new school. It was not even a year old, true?"

"True. The priest has reason. . . ."

A small section of the door of the church had opened. Through the laurel trees three people could be seen coming out. The door closed again on the dark interior. The three came from the shadow into the sunlight. It was a soldier leading two girls. They walked out of sight down a street on the other side of the plaza and Manolo lost sight of the bright dresses of the girls.

He glanced again at the cross and at the silent bells hanging in their small arches below the dome. "Do these Americans know when the next shock is to come?"

"I don't believe so; but they say it must come because it always passes thus. The priest says no — the Americans are too lazy to clean the streets and for that reason they await another shock. That's the way it goes. . . . Only yesterday, they were still digging for the bodies."

"God knows," Manolo shrugged. As they talked, they had moved part-way across the narrow street, nearer the three steps leading up to the plaza. One of the crevasses ran diagonally from the top of the steps almost to the portal of the church. "It must go down into the underworld," Manolo said, "it is so dark."

"It is said that at night smokes comes out of there," said Agustín.

"Imagine."

"I have not been here at night. I would not come. But thus it is said."

They saw the door of the church open again. An old, little woman wrapped all in black crept out along the wall into the sunlight. She stood there quietly, regarding all about her.

"Poor little one," said Manolo.

She had knelt now and was praying.

A dull crash of something startled them. Manolo grabbed the reins of his little mare, trembling. They must leave.

"Saints . . . ," muttered Agustín.

They saw then what had caused the noise. One of the lone sections of wall near the alcaldía had toppled, and now there was a cloud of dust to show for it.

"There is the priest," said Agustín.

A tall man in a black cassock stood over the little woman. In a moment, the priest had led her back into the darkness again. Before the door closed, Manolo thought he could hear the many voices from the interior.

Unexpectedly, he found himself regarding the end of the biggest crack in the plaza. The opening of the earth had begun to widen. The dry cement was splitting rapidly, being cut by an invisible knife down the steps toward him.

He let fall the reins and jumped aside. "Demons!" was all he heard from Agustín. Behind him somewhere there erupted a terrible sound of crumbling and falling, a low rumbling from somewhere. . . . The mare tumbled to the side and was down, two hoofs hanging over the darkness. He heard a cry from Agustín, then saw him stumble, disappear into the pit.

The bells of the church clanged. He felt the street rising sideways under him. The mare was far away, kicking on her side, somewhere below. . . .

He was on a hill. A cloud of white dust rose over the church. The bells clanged wildly, jarringly. . . .

Then came a rushing, tearing rumble as the whole church collapsed beyond the trees . . . in a dull, subsiding crash. A bell, half as big as a man, rolled loose, down over the wreckage, the clapper banging and scraping. It rammed into a tree where the sidewalk stood on end and the tree grew out of the side of it; then rolled still in some ashes.

The sun made new shadows in a dead place. Manolo saw the dome but not the cross, far off near the ground. Transparent flames shot upward around it. The mountain appeared to stand higher against the white clouds than before. He was alone.

He crossed himself.

Suddenly, he found he had feet and ran. Where the next corner had been, he leaped a new crevasse, scrambled over a new wall. He

picked his way through twisted doorways, past a bed on fire, and many things he could not notice.

When he had left the town, he did not stop until he was walking breathlessly among the shiny green coffee trees of the hills.

Manolo never again cared to taste of the advanced life of the Coast. On that Saturday he had seen that not even the house of God could save those sinful people. Thus, he remained a jíbaro and always obtained his compra in Somoza, never having occasion to return to Cabo Bajo until many years later. At that time, he was carried down from the hills in a coffin to be buried in the reconstructed cemetery of La Milagrosa.