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## Flaviano Buys a Gift

By ELLEN KALIFF COFFEY

AT LAST they were all seated; attentive, submissive, and supposedly quiet. But the room throbbed with their suppressed restlessness. Feet shuffled a little; seat hinges creaked as little bodies shifted unconsciously with soft twistings that relieved the tenseness of Teacher's command.

"Attention, children!"

But her command was kind; her voice had a soft firmness, like strong velvet. . . . For she knew it would be as futile to expect a roomful of youngsters to be silent as it would to command a mountain brook to cease its rippling. . . . Now thirty-one pairs of dark eyes, at any rate, were still, as their gaze rested adoringly on her face, awaiting her first word.

Today she looked past their untidy little heads, on, out of the window, at the forlorn scene beyond; the shabby back streets of Mexican Town, where forlorn mothers, braced against the raw December wind, hung forlorn washings on the fences, and underfed babies played in drab door-yards. . . . Only last year she could have been transferred to the new school on the Hill; no under-privileged children there; no need to mix charity with education—and often more charity than education!

Yet every morning, as these children filed past her at the doorway with a loud clatter of broken shoes, and looked up into her face with happy eagerness in their black eyes, and sometimes even touched her dress surreptitiously in passing, she repeated to herself that she would not exchange any teacher's easier lot for hers. . . . What a lesson to the more fortunate; these ragged youngsters carrying their thin shoulders high with a gay swagger that defied pity!

Now at her word, the tensity relaxed; a great scuffling for books and pencils ensued. Someone's shadow fell across

her desk; she looked up. Oh, Carlotta this time. Always they brought her gifts. What now? An ostrich feather! The old ostrich at the Zoo had flapped his wings only just a little, there by the fence, and there it was! "You like, Teacher?" she queried anxiously.

"Oh, beautiful!" sighed Teacher, with just the right shade of enthusiasm. "Thank you so much, Carlotta." And warm under Teacher's smile, the child hurried self-consciously to her seat, aware of the silent awe and envy of the others. . . .

As Teacher laid the ostrich feather carefully in the book-case, the door burst open and Flaviano shuffled in. She shook her head at him sadly. "Late again?" she murmured. . . . He occupied the very front seat, and she spoke softly, so the others could not hear. Flaviano's tears came so easily. And yet, on the playground the other teachers declared he was such a little devil, always up to something! They couldn't understand why she championed him so. "Your Flaviano!" they would scoff. "That rascal! Bundle of dirt and rags! Not even bright; and oh, his nose!" With that triumphant thrust would they most likely climax their remarks; for Flaviano's sniffly cold was perennial, and every day he came, happily unaware of discomfort, and consistently without a handkerchief.

But when he raised his eyes to her face something always happened to her heart-strings; the harsh words she felt he deserved, never came. . . . Through a fringe of non-descript, dusty-looking black hair his gaze held hers. Sometimes his eyes were brilliant, restless, dancing; sometimes they were opaque, dull, resentful; often sad, soft limpid pools, brimming with tears. . . .

Thus gazing at his teacher, he was invariably able to size her up; was she cross at him, would she tell him to go wash his hands, comb his hair, or blow his nose? Sometimes she did, sometimes she didn't. You could most always tell just by looking at her. . . .

Now, no sooner had Teacher turned to the blackboard than a familiar raucous sniffing noise came to her ears. She laid down her chalk and opened her desk drawer. "Here Flaviano; take this." With his Puckish grin he sidled up to her, took the clean rag she held out, and applied it vigorously to the offending member.

"Now remember your handkerchief tomorrow; will you?"

"Yes, ma'am"—very promptly. And so had he answered every day since the term began, but not once had he appeared with the necessary article. . . . Yes, she supposed she *was* a little foolish about such a child. . . .

Now she turned to them: "Tomorrow, as you all know, is Friday—the last day of school before the Christmas holidays. We'll have a little program tomorrow afternoon, and sing the carols you have learned. So today we must trim our tree. . . . But this year we've decided not to exchange gifts, haven't we? We talked that over, you know. I wonder if you all remember why?"

A flutter of grimy hands greeted her question.

"Well, Josefitita?"

Josefitita tucked her big wad of bubble gum in her cheek so "Teasher" wouldn't know, though the bulge was quite evident; but Teacher determined not to notice, for once. . . . Then taking a deep breath, the child began:

"'Cause there so *too many* poor shildren, and some of them got papas and mamas who no have work for long, long time! It would be hard for those papas and mamas to buy presents." She recited this glibly and almost gaily, bristling with importance; while Teacher observed that her little toes were sticking out of tattered scraps of shoes.

Then Orlando's piping voice—"And those who their papas are working must give the five cents to charitee bu-bu-bureau instead, so they can buy shoes and things for the shildren who their papas and mamas have no work."

"Good!" applauded Teacher. "I'm glad you all understand so well just why we will not draw names for gifts

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from each other this year. But now I have news for you. Your teacher *does* have a job, and she has no little boys and girls to get things for. And she is so glad she has work that she is going to put presents on the tree for all of you." A squeal of delight ran over the room.

Teacher knew, of course, that Miss Parker, fifth grade teacher, would be furious. Among themselves, the other teachers in the building referred to her as "the old veteran." The years she had given to her profession had only hardened the lines about her mouth; she bitterly criticized the younger teachers, declaring they were ruining school discipline by being too soft and relenting toward their young charges, "Rule them or they rule you," was her motto. And now she had imposed an unwritten law; the teachers should not establish a precedent by giving gifts to the children. "Puts ideas in their heads," she said. . . .

Teacher drew a long breath. She would do it anyway. Let Parker fume. She was so tight she squeezed a nickel till it gasped. Let her fume! Scarcely a family represented at Fourth Ward had more than enough this winter for beans and fire-wood. . . . Teacher tossed her head and cast off all worries about Parker's "law."

It was with a holiday spirit that the youngsters had taken their places this morning; they were fairly thrilling with joy now. It was hard to keep one's eyes on multiplication combinations when the Christmas tree, bristling with importance, stood in the corner, awaiting the afternoon trimming. But Teacher, smiling but resolute, spoke firmly: "Think if some of you would have to do your number work this afternoon, while the rest of us were having a good time! No, of course you wouldn't like that! So get busy, Porfiria; don't dream. No, Felix, the last one isn't finished. Put your name on your paper, Carlos."

At last it was noon. As they filed out, the insistent fragrance of the Christmas pine followed them. They rushed off excitedly in all directions, to take home the good

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news. "Teasher, he going to bring present for all the shildren!"

In the afternoon they finished the Christmas art lesson; the Three Wise Men, cut out of grey paper, pasted on a white ground; a gold star in the heavens—palm trees outlined against the sky. . . .

And then came recess, which interested no one today. An eager group surrounded Teacher's desk. "Let's start to trim the tree right now, Teacher!" Smiling, she agreed, and they set to work.

Sometime after the last recess bell rang, Flaviano strode importantly into the room, pulling from a grimy pocket of overalls much too large, a seemingly endless string of popcorn.

"Oh, darling, it is for our tree, isn't it? Oh, children, see what Flaviano has brought us for our tree," boasted Teacher, hugging the thrilled youngster impulsively. . . . Then, just as she realized, gazing at her hands, that the popcorn seemed buttery, Johnny Ortega spoke up. "Teacher, I saw where Flaviano got that. Maybe he *did* string it, but I know where he got it before he stringed it. He went over to the popcorn stand at recess, and pretended he was going to buy some. Then he ran without giving the man any money. I saw him."

This smacked too much of the lilac story last spring. Flaviano had brought her the loveliest bunch of lilacs; and how she had praised him—only to find out that he had snatched them from a yard on the way to school! Remembering the lilacs, Teacher felt a cold chill of foreboding. She hurriedly changed the subject. Poor little fellow! He sat forlorn, gazing at her, then lowered his gaze so guiltily, the heavy fringe of his lashes sweeping his dark little cheeks. Presently she saw tears forming. . . .

"Oh, Flaviano! Come help me with this very highest branch. You aren't afraid to get on the very top of the ladder, are you, dear?" Tears and sin forgotten, all smiles

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now, he jumped gaily forward. Teacher sighed. *Another crisis passed!*

That evening after school she had a gorgeous time. She shopped until almost dark, and then walked home, laden with parcels, with two messenger boys, similarly laden, trailing behind her. She smiled to herself, imagining the picture they made. Mrs. Murphy, her landlady, opened the door to let them in, ejaculating delightedly in her rich brogue. . . .

The next morning Mrs. Murphy helped her carry the gifts to the schoolhouse. She hid them away in the book closet, cautiously locking the door. To her own children that door was sacred; they would never try to enter. But there were others not quite so reverent. . . .

All morning the room teemed with suppressed excitement. Teacher did not go home for lunch. She ate hastily from a paper bag Mrs. Murphy sent over at noon, and then set to work arranging the gifts around the tree. "I am more excited than they," she thought. . . .

Miss Parker, returning early from lunch, stood in the door-way sniffing her displeasure. There was little that went on around Fourth Ward that she did not find out. "You know it is our custom in this school—" she began.

"Custom be hanged," retorted Teacher in a most unlady-like tone, turning her back on her visitor.

"H-m-m-m, well-l-l." Miss Parker turned on her heel and marched down the hall. Teacher gave a hysterical little laugh.

But when the line marched in at noon, Teacher was a little worried. Flaviano was missing. He always sidled past her with a brisk army salute, which invariably drew smiles from the other teachers on hall duty. But this afternoon there was no Flaviano at all.

"Well, perhaps he is only late again," thought Teacher. Sometimes, she remembered, he had to deliver laundry for his mother at noon. "There are fourteen of them," she

reminded herself, "And if they are to have any Christmas at all, there must be lots of washing for Mrs. Chavez."

As final preparations for the program were under way, Teacher became definitely uneasy. At last she called in Flaviano's brother, a big boy from the fifth grade room upstairs. She sent him home to see what had happened to Flaviano. He returned, breathless, in a few minutes with the disconcerting news that Flaviano had started to school, so his failure to appear meant that he had played hookey; "and when he comes home my father will whEEP him," he added.

The afternoon dragged on. Teacher went mechanically through the process of carrying out the program, until she found herself carried away by the spirit of the occasion in spite of herself. After all, there were thirty-one others to be made happy; if only she did not feel an intuitive sense of disaster in the absence of Flaviano! But she must not spoil the big day for the rest of them.

Each youngster was dressed up in his or her poor best; some shivered in white summer dresses, while their heavy misshapen shoes gave an effect of grotesqueness. The sight of their shoes brought a lump to Teacher's throat. She tried to keep her eyes above them, as the children stood in rows before her, singing their Christmas carols.

And now came the joyous distribution of the gifts that she had selected with such meticulous care. Sadly she picked up the last one—Flaviano's—and put it away in her desk. . . . As last they had all gone whooping home, their "Merry Christmas" calls coming back through the dusky halls to her.

She turned back to the littered room, deciding to straighten it a bit before it met the horrified glance of old Mr. Brown, the janitor. As she "picked up" here and there, her mind dwelt on poor, erring little Flaviano. She supposed he was in trouble again. Brought up in a family so large and so poor, his ideas of honesty were somewhat warped by the stronger claims of hunger and want. To him



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there was nothing so wrong about taking the popcorn or the lilacs, when he was doing it for someone else, especially. . . .

Teacher was startled from her ponderings by an excited voice behind her. It came from Flaviano's brother, who was almost too breathless to speak:

"Do you know what happened to Flaviano? He's in the hospital. Yes, they took him to a hospital after they ran over him."

After untangling the threads of his rambling tale, Teacher found back of Flaviano's truancy the following story:

For weeks, Flaviano had sought the possession of a dime to buy Teacher a Christmas present. He'd been selling papers once in a while, but always there was some tempting bit of food or candy that drove him to spend his few pennies. If he only had a dime all at once, it would be easier; for then he would go and buy the gift right away. But it was hard to have a few pennies lying around, waiting for the others to accumulate that would make up the necessary amount. He daren't steal anything to sell, for if Teacher found it out she would be so sad! He knew what sort of a "muchacho" she thought him whenever he was found in some petty theft. After the unfortunate incident about the popcorn, he felt sure she must have some uncanny power by which she knew all his sins. She always seemed to know, whether some one "tattled" on him or not.

And here it was, the last day of school before Christmas, and he had no gift. What to do? Then he thought of the dump. There was an idea! He and his brother had gone dump-hunting lots of times. And there was an old Mexican woman who would look over what you brought in your gunny-sack, and give you a few pennies for it, if she found anything she could use or sell.

Teacher had a mental picture of it all. Often she had seen the little Mexican boys returning from the city dump, gunny sacks—filled with the best of the debris dumped out by the more fortunate—slung over their thin little shoul-

ders. . . . A tightness clutched her throat as she pictured Flaviano, valiant little fellow, gathering rubbish to sell so that he might buy her a present. . . .

She was walking with his brother through the dusk now, on her way to the hospital. It was time for dinner, but what matter? She must see this boy; she had no appetite for dinner.

Upon reaching the hospital, she learned that Flaviano had suffered a broken leg and minor cuts and bruises. She was thankful that it was no worse. She had pictured him dying! The leg would mend quickly, she was told. Just a simple break. Laughing, the nurse added: "And very likely he has had his first bath in years. I hope it does not slow up his recovery!"

Finding him in his bed in the long ward, Teacher had mixed emotions. Think what an event in his life this had turned out to be—and think how she had been at the bottom of it!

Pale, almost angelic he looked, there in the white bed; his great dark eyes staring out of the window; quiet for once—not the little imp of Fourth Ward, dirty, and in constant need of a handkerchief. . . .

He turned to see who had come in. Then an impish grin spread over his face. He reached under the covers. "Here's a present for you, teasher. I had just bought it, and was crossin' the street, when I got runned over by a car. It was a Packard, too!" he added proudly. "I had this in my pocket, so it's all right—not a bit dirty." Proudly he unwrapped it. Teacher's eyes filled. It was a cheap handkerchief, coarsely made, with a gorgeous embroidered design in one corner.

"Pretty, ain't it?" he said, caressing it fondly. "After I got here in bed I asked fur a pencil, and put my mono-mono-monogram on it." Sure enough, in one corner, printed in pencil—"F.C."

Teacher could scarcely trust her voice. Just then the nurse came in with his tray. Flaviano's eyes glistened.

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"Oh, say, I forgot I'd get to eat. I'm glad I got hurt." Then he had eyes only for his food.

While he ate, Teacher went down to the main office to see what arrangements had been made for Flaviano's stay in the hospital. She learned that the owner of the car that struck him was taking care of all hospital and doctor's bills. Then she returned to Flaviano's room to bid him goodnight, promising to be back next day and every day during the holidays. Then home to a warmed-over dinner and a worried Mrs. Murphy, who wiped away many a tear as she listened to the story.

On Christmas morning Flaviano had a tree in the ward, and a big heap of gifts. His mother was there—a bent, worn little Mexican woman with work-gnarled hands, who could scarcely speak English. Superstitious, and suspicious of his surroundings, she had first insisted that he be brought home at once, but was finally persuaded that he would not die even though he had had a bath. She was dubious about the efficacy of baths. "They catch cold, cough," she explained. "Water bad in winter."

On the day Flaviano was to be taken home, Teacher visited him for the last time. He seemed uneasy and uncomfortable. He sat clean and combed, dressed in the clothes she had bought for him. But he seemed ill at ease. Presently he said:

"Teasher, I got to tell you somepin'. I sold my bag of trash from the dump to old Mrs. Garcia for seven cents. But when I went to buy your present, I picked out one that cost ten cents. I didn't have that much, you see, so I gave the girl my seven pennies and then ran out before she got 'em counted. I was still a-runnin' for fear I'd get caught, when I got runned over." And with appeal in his enormous eyes, he watched his teacher's face.

Just then Teacher was saved again. "Time for visitors to leave," said a nurse cheerfully as she looked in at the door. Teacher kissed Flaviano quickly on the forehead and hurried out.