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Gabriel & the New School

THE SMILE OF THE SANTO

by

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THE SMILE OF THE SANTO

Gabriel walked along the narrow, dusty road on the high plateau, with his blanket thrown over his shoulder and covering his chin, for it was early morning and the air was cold. Now and then he met an Indian on his way to market in the next village, shivering in his thin white cotton suit in spite of the heavy load he carried, with his wife and his children walking beside him, and sometimes a donkey so loaded that only its head and feet showed.

"Good day," Gabriel said as he passed on.

"Go with God," they answered and they stared curiously at this boy who chose to be walking away from the village on market day.

Gabriel went on, kicking the dry dust with his bare feet and he watched the little ants, dry as the earth itself, scurry away at his approach. All about him ^{there} were tall maguey plants with large spikes stretching out like broad green swords, and a lone, twisted mesquite ~~tree~~ stood far out on the horizon where the dry, white earth met the sky. But ~~strange, when he came to the mesquite tree, the horizon was as far away as ever. Some day he'd walk and walk until he reached it, just to see what it was like on the line out there. But now there was not time. There was the new government school, not far from the mesquite tree, and Gabriel stopped there.~~ Beyond the mesquite, where the earth dipped down, stood the new government school.

Every morning now for many weeks he had been coming here, from the very first day when strange men came in an automobile over the rough road and pointed out the spot where it was to be. And day after day he had watched it go up, this queer building made of stone and tile and wood, looking out of place on the barren Mexican plateau, where no trees but the scraggly mesquite could grow, and where the only houses were little huts made of leaves of the maguey plant, with bare, dirt floors.

Now the building was finished and a teacher had come from the city to teach in it. Gabriel hid behind a tall maguey and looked on, for he was afraid to go closer. Three ragged children stood outside, too shy just yet to play. Two were the grandchildren of old Pedro, the witch-doctor, who, it was said, could turn himself into a bear or a snake or a panther when the night was dark, and he was afraid of nothing, not even ^{of} the new government school. And one, a little girl, was the daughter of the widow Rosito who worked in her cornfield alone during the mild, damp days of summer, and who was so poor she had scarcely enough to feed herself and her child.

"Come on, Gabriel," the oldest grandson of old Pedro cried, but Gabriel did not answer back.

"They've got bread and milk for us if we go inside," the child of the widow Rosita said, ^{shyly}.

Just then the teacher came out and rang a bell. He was a small man, dressed in dark town clothes of the correct ones, ^{and} there was a kind look about his eyes that did not seem to belong to a wicked man at all. He saw the broad straw hat and the wide eyes of Gabriel peeping from behind the ~~tall~~ maguey, and he smiled in

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a friendly way. But Gabriel did not smile back. He stayed where he was and would not go nearer the school until the children had marched solemnly in. Then quietly ~~the~~ crept to the window and looked at the room inside.

There were desks and benches of new shiny wood and a blackboard at the end of the room where the teacher sat. But Gabriel had seen this before, when the school was being built. It was the bread and the milk on the teacher's desk that he stared at now - big loaves of wheat bread and milk in cans which the teacher poured into earthen mugs and mixed with water, and gave to the pupils. And as the children drank the milk and ate the slices of bread, their shyness left them. The child of the poor widow Rosita drank with such a noise and smacked her lips so, as she chewed the bread, that one could almost see her thin little body become rounder.

When they were through eating and drinking, they sat ~~down~~ on the benches and the teacher drew letters on the blackboard, naming them aloud as he wrote. The shadows moved and the sun beat down on Gabriel as he watched at the window. He took off his blanket and ~~folded it~~ and threw it across his left shoulder. Two black crows flew above him and perched on the mesquite tree, cawing in loud, hoarse voices, and the children looked out the window. The little girl giggled when she saw Gabriel standing there. He moved away then, before the teacher had time to look up, and slowly he walked back toward his home.

"Aye," he sighed, "if only it were not wrong to go to the new government school, what fun it would be playing with the children each morning before the teacher comes out to ring the bell, then

marching in and eating wheat bread and drinking milk, and learning ~~how~~ to make the queer things called letters and to read them from books."

The hot sun and the dust he kicked up as he walked, made him thirsty, and thoughts came to him of gentle rains in the summer, and water trickling down the hilly slopes through plowed furrows, and he thought of the big, cool schoolhouse and the milk in earthen mugs. He saw a maguey plant with the spikes bent down toward the center and held there by a rock, and he knew that the juice of the plant was gathering there. He walked to it and with his hands he dipped out the warm, milky-white juice and drank of it.

Far down the road he could see his father, walking with quick, short steps, from the market, with a load on his back of wares he had not sold, big straw hats which the whole family had made. Behind him came Gabriel's mother, her long red skirt swishing over her bare feet. Her hands, never idle, even when she walked, turned a small hand spindle, spinning a coarse thread of cactus fiber. Michel, the baby, rode on her back, securely tied in her long blue shawl, his brown legs dangling with each step she took. They were talking about the market in the village that day, of the crowds that were there, and the friends they had met.

"And you, little foolish one, did you go again to see the new school?" the father asked.

"Yes, and the teacher was there today," Gabriel replied.
"And he gave bread and milk to those that went inside."

They turned off the road, through the dusty cactus field to their own little hut made of dried corn stalks standing upright, fastened to four corner saplings, and roofed with flattened maguey leaves.

"Well, naturally, if your heart is set on going to the school, my son, I won't forbid it," the father said, as he sat on the ground outside the house and shook the cactus thorns from his leather sandals.

"But ~~I don't think~~ the Santo would ^{not} like it," the mother said, and she spoke as if she were half afraid. She put the little one down on the ground and set about to build a fire, to cook their supper. ~~Gabriel played with his brother and forgot for a time about the new school and the teacher.~~

"I'm a frog," he said, and he hopped about, leaping over the low-growing thorny cactus, and making a deep noise in his throat.

"Now I'm a snake," and he glided over the ground on his stomach and stuck out his tongue each time he raised his head.

"Burro," the little one said, and Gabriel got on his all fours with the child on his back, wobbling from side to side, and he made the noise of donkeys and he tried to wiggle his ears but they would not move unless he moved his whole head.

The mother fanned the fire she built on the stone stove outside the house and the flames flared up red and hot with each wave of her straw fan. Soon there came the pleasant smell of beans cooking in a earthen bowl, and the sound of tortillas patted into their smooth, round shape.

They ate their supper of beans rolled up in tortillas, sitting on the ground out of doors beside the fire, and they watched the sun go down like a red ball below the horizon.

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Darkness came suddenly and with it there came the breezes from the north, and again it was so cold that they went shivering inside the hut for the protection the walls gave them, just as during the day the glaring sun sent them inside in search of the cool shade. Gabriel rolled himself up in his blanket, with all his clothes on, and lay down on his straw mat on the dirt floor, beside the mats of his parents.

One by one the stars came out, like lanterns hung in a velvety black sky, and slowly the moon came up, lighting the magueys and the mesquite trees, and throwing their shadows on the white earth. Far away a rooster crowed, thinking it was morning, and a dog barked as if in answer. ~~And~~ Gabriel thought of many things as he lay there. He closed his eyes and could see again the new stone government school with the children marching inside while he stayed behind the maguey and watched them. And when he opened his eyes he could see, in the moonlight coming through the open door, the dim outline of the carved wooden statue of the Santo on the table, with the artificial flowers around it.

If only there was some way of knowing what was the right thing to do. Never had he wanted anything so much as to go to the school, but he couldn't bring himself to displease the Santo.

The little one had stoppped rolling and tossing on his mat and was fast asleep, and soon Gabriel heard the low, steady breathing of his parents, who slept also. And he thought of the Santo in the church, alone on the hillside. He'd go there. Maybe there was some way the Santo could let him know. Quietly he got up and tiptoed out the open door of the hut.

On he went toward the rising hill in the distance, and as far as he could see in the weird moonlight, there was not another living creature out but himself. Even the rooster had stopped crowing and the dog had stopped barking, and the world was so still that his footsteps in the soft earth sounded loud and heavy.

The old crumbling church stood alone, neglected and deserted, on the rising knoll of the plateau. Gabriel walked through the gate into the garden where once flowers and trees had grown, but now it was overrun with cactus plants growing threateningly out of the dry earth, choking the flowers and sending out spikes and thorns as if trying to prevent anyone entering there. Gabriel thought he heard a noise and he stopped where he was to listen, but it was only his own loud breathing.

Few people came to the church now, since the priest was no longer there, and there was a damp, musty odor about the place as he opened the door. The moonlight coming through the door shone on the Santo in his niche. His purple velvet robe was covered with dust, and no longer were there copper coins at his feet, only a few candles, long ago burnt down to their ends.

Gabriel looked long at the Santo.

"If only you could talk," he said. "If only you'd tell me what to do."

But the Santo did not change his expression. He stared ahead with his black bead eyes and took no notice of anything around him at all. Gabriel turned and went slowly back to his hut and lay down to sleep.

The days passed, and every morning Gabriel walked the long, dusty road to the schoolhouse, not daring to go closer than the maguey plant until the children were inside, then he looked in at them through the window. There were more pupils now. Each day new ones came, timid at first, then losing their fear as the days went by. Manuel, the boy who lived nearest him, was there now, and Gabriel longed to join him. I

They were taught many things. They read from books and wrote on the blackboard, and counted numbers. ~~and~~ Besides, the girls learned to sew, white cotton suits for the boys, and long, full skirts and blouses of gay colors for themselves. And the boys made tables and chairs and wove blankets of wool to wear on chilly mornings. And twice every day they had their bread and milk.

Many times Gabriel started from the maguey plant, when he saw the pupils marching in, wanting with all his heart to march with them. But always the thought of displeasing the Santo held him back, until it seemed that he alone of all the countryside was left out of the school.

Then the rains came, and the hard, dry earth drank in greedily every drop that fell. The dusty leaves of the mesquite trees uncurled and the ground became covered with green. Oxen were hitched to wooden plows and the men prepared the land to receive the corn and chili and bean seeds to supply them with food.

Gabriel felt the soft mud under his bare feet, and the rain dropping on his head, and over his face, and in his heart as in the hearts of all who lived on the dry plateau, there was happiness.

As if by magic, the desert was abloom with cactus flowers everywhere, bright red and yellow and white. Every year it happened, and every year it was a new miracle. Gabriel went about here and there and gathered the stemless flowers, taking care not to ~~pinch~~^{prick} his fingers with the thorns, and when he had a large bouquet, he walked in the rain to the crumbled old church and put them at the Santo's feet.

Did he imagine it? Or did the Santo really look down at him and smile when he asked again if he might go to the school. Gabriel never knew, but he walked out of the church feeling strangely free from the weight that had been on his conscience. The next morning at the school, he came from behind the maguey plant when the teacher rang the bell, and without fear he marched in with the other pupils, and he drank the milk and ate the bread the teacher gave him, and sat down at his desk to learn the new things the teacher taught.

Gabriel stopped

on his way to the school, Gabriel stopped at the crumbling old church, ~~the~~ ^{that} neglected & deserted on the way half to ruin. A light dim through the arch into the old altar & in his mind. His simple velvet robe was worn with dust & mud - you were the opposite of his feet, only a few calls by accident down the stairs.

as if he would take, Gabriel said, I don't just tell me it's all right to go to the school. Did he say in it or did the saints think this? Gabriel mumbled but when he reached the school he saw flowers in bloom.

So on the floor of the desert in your colors all of the desert, all about him, flowers in all the colors, bluing as if by him as anywhere else, at once a rainbow of softer shades, but due to the good, mainly, it seemed, the one to the school. Gabriel, standing from the very first in his corner, would be with the people & not in the school but I set out to look to be the next thing to the light. The weight that had been on his conscience. The next morning at the school he never knew, but he walked out of the school feeling strangely free from and white when he asked again if he might go to the school. Gabriel did not imagine that of old the school really took down at him Gabriel's feet. He walked in the rain to the crumbling old school and but there at the his fingers with the stones, and when he had a large potter, he there and gathered the stemless flowers, taking care not to touch any and easily knew it was a new miracle. Gabriel went about here and everywhere, bright red and yellow and white. Every year it happened, as if by magic, the desert was ablaze with scarlet flowers.