

*When the Indians reached the church, they formed a half circle in front of the missionary. How would they react when he had nothing to offer them on Christmas Eve?*

proudly told how Christians came to the aid of their needy brethren at Christmas. This would happen in Curachos, he promised the Indians. There could be none more needy than they.

Peter saw Diego on the porch of his store, which was also the local post office. Diego was not a native of the valley. He was Spanish, not Indian, he had announced the first time they met. Diego had been educated on the coast and even spoke a little English as proof. He had not been encouraging when the young minister arrived a few months earlier.

"You think you bring the word of God to these heathen, but you will find they listen to you only when you have something to give," Diego warned. "In their hearts, these people keep the old ways. Up in the mountains, sacrifices to the gods still go on. They will turn on you when your purse is empty."

THESE WORDS echoed through Peter's memory as he approached the store. If no money came today, what would the people do? It was too late to think about that now. His sermon last week made it clear they could expect help—help that had not yet arrived.

"Hola, Señor Morgan," Diego shouted as Peter reached the store. "A big day, eh? Christmas Eve."

"Yes, a big day," Peter agreed. "I hope to see you at our services tomorrow." Diego did not attend church. He spent his free time drinking a concoction he distilled in back of the store.

ton family. Carefully opening the envelope to avoid tearing a check, Peter removed two written pages. A five-dollar bill was attached with a paper clip.

The scrawled message from Mrs. Bradley contained conventional Christmas greetings, and a few remarks about the many financial obligations one faced at this time of year.

"I notice your raincoat is in very unhappy condition, mi amigo," said Diego, eyeing the bill. "It is not proper that a man in your position go about in crummy coat. Your fine boots should have a good companion. As it happens, I have a fine raincoat special on sale for you, only 12 dollar."

"I haven't got 12 dollars," murmured Peter, thinking of the futility of dividing five dollars among so many.

"A five-dollar down payment, rest when-I-catch-you deal would be O.K.," Diego said through a toothy grin. "After all, who can I trust more?"

"Sorry," Peter replied, shoving the mail into his pocket. "I must have good boots, but I can do without a new coat."

As he was about to leave, Diego put a hand on his arm. The little storekeeper no longer smiled. "There is something strange going on in this valley, something very strange."

Peter studied the man, who was more serious than he had ever seen him. Perhaps even afraid, Peter thought.

"I am not one of them," Diego emphasized, "so I do not know their secrets. But the Indians are planning something. I can feel it in the air. Re-

in and fell to his knees. He prayed not that God send money, but that He send a worthy man to take his place. His letter of resignation would be on the way to the bishop in the morning.

It was dark when he saw the torches approaching. He went to the door and watched them coming single file up the path from the valley. Ancient pagan processions came to mind as they approached. For an instant, Peter wanted to flee, but he prayed for courage.

As they came closer, Peter could see that each family had a torch carried by the head of the household. When they reached the church, they formed a half circle at the entrance. No one spoke.

Finally, old Manuel stepped forward. The torch he held sent strange shadows racing across the ancient crevices of his face. Manuel would remember the old ways and the old gods.

"We have listened to your words," the old man rasped in careful Spanish. "You have told us that at this time it is proper for Christians to give of themselves to help brothers in need. We have come to see that what you have told us is carried out."

PETER wanted to help these people more than he had ever wanted anything. What would happen to him when they found out he could not keep his promise no longer mattered. The effect it would have on their faith was all-important.

"As you know, we are not rich," continued Manuel. "But we want to be true Christians. Our gifts for our brothers are not of great worth, but they come from the heart."

Manuel bent slowly and placed a copper bracelet on the step of the church. Peter watched the head of each family come, torch in hand, to add his gift to the pile. There were rugs and baskets and woven hats and an occasional piece of jewelry. Not until many had come did Peter realize that the people of Curachos were actually giving to help others.

"But how will you live?" Peter asked when the last torch had passed.

"You are not long in the valley, my son," replied Manuel softly. "We have had great problems in the past, but we have survived. Never, back to the time of my father's father, has one of us perished for want of food. Your book tells us the Lord will provide. He sends trials to strengthen our bodies and cleanse our souls. The sun will shine again and there will be laughter."

After the last torch had disappeared down the trail, Peter added the five-dollar bill to the Christmas offerings from the people of Curachos. Then he added a pair of muddy boots, only four months old but already well worn.

## FICTION

by James C. Miller

"I will try," he lied. "I may have . . . how you say . . . other plans? Good news for you, though. Three letters from the States."

He handed the minister the letters. With hands trembling, Peter opened the first. A clothing firm in Chicago announced a "Post-Christmas Sale" on clerical suits and coats. The second was a Christmas card from a classmate. Peter had no family to write to him.

The feminine handwriting on the third letter was unfamiliar, but the return address filled Peter with hope. The Bradleys were a wealthy old Bos-

ton member, I warned you before that these people are savages, and now that you have no money. . ."

"I have complete faith in my congregation," broke in Peter, as he turned and left.

ON THE WAY back to the mission, Peter doubted for the first time his calling as a missionary. He had done nothing for his people, he told himself. He had failed to keep his promise to them. They had every reason to desert him and his message.

When he came to the church, he went

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