

GOODWIN'S WEEKLY

FOURTEENTH YEAR

PUBLISHED EVERY SATURDAY.

SUBSCRIPTION PRICE:

Including postage in the United States, Canada, and Mexico, \$2.00 per year, \$1.25 for six months. Subscriptions to all foreign countries, within the Postal Union, \$3.50 per year.

Single copies, 5 cents. Payment should be made by Check, Money Order or Registered Letter, payable to Goodwin's Weekly.

Address all communications to Goodwin's Weekly.

Entered at the Postoffice at Salt Lake City, Utah, U. S. A., as second-class matter. Telephone, Wasatch 301. Boston Building, Salt Lake City, Utah.

THE BREAD LINE

By I

A MILIO TOVAR worked at the smelter. From ten-thirty at night until eight-thirty in the morning he sweated over a furnace laden with molten lead, tapping the furnace and running the metal into bars. It was therefore necessary for him to eat to sustain life so that he might earn four pesos daily.

He came home one morning and found no food in the house. "Madre de Dios," he cried, "and why is there not wherewith to eat?"

"Because, Hijo mio, it is not to be had in the markets. We are now in a land of famine, and tortillas or beans are things impossible of securing. I fain would give my man-child wherewith to eat, but it is impossible to purchase it."

"Buena, I, myself will see that there is food in the house," and he went in search thereof.

Three hours later he returned, hot, dusty and hungry. "I found no tortillas in the city, mother mine, yet am I told that at the bread shop named the Ray of Golden Light they bake bread of wheat every night and in the mornings they give it to the people for one peso for each small loaf. Go thou there—thou and thy daughter—at six of the clock and wait in the door until they open the shop. Then buy bread—I, thy son, would eat that we may live."

He went to bed—on a goat-skin thrown on the floor—and slept soundly.

The women bathed, dressed and sat in front of the house, their hair loose and stringy from the water. After their hair had dried in the sun they prepared to go to the breadshop of the Ray of Golden Light. At six they were in the door and were informed by those already waiting there that to get bread meant an all night vigil. They had eaten nothing during the day and had nothing to eat now, so they prepared for the vigil.

"Mamma," complained the daughter, a child of twelve, "I have thirst."

"Very well, daughter mine; endure it. It is necessary to remain in line that we may get two small loaves of the bread of the wheat, for they weigh little more than a gram and one is insufficient for our needs. Wait thou here until we secure wherewith to eat; then slake the thirst thou hast. Patience, my soul, and the time until the dawn will be short."

Many were ahead of them and a long line formed on the sidewalk as people came after them. Darkness fell out of the sky and a few of the wiser ones lighted small fires on the sidewalk and cooked their scanty supper. The provost guard came along and straightened up the wavering, snake-like line. The cold crept down from the hills and searched through the few ragged garments of the child and sought the marrow of her bones. The mother gave the child her waist and sat on the walk in her short-sleeved camisa, revealing a bony, rib-marked chest and scrawny, pendulous breasts, at which the cold wind bit spitefully. The sleepers on the hard walk stirred uneasily as the mountain wind from the thinnest

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places in their ragged clothing. The moon, cold and forbidding, came up over the hills and tinged the smelter smoke to a pure, cold silver.

From afar came the sound of shooting, for the breadshop was near to the district wherein the prostitutes resided and the drunken wastrels fought and killed continually. The child whimpered in her sleep and complained of thirst. The mother soothed her with soft words and petted her back to sleep. The sounds of shooting died away and in its stead there floated to the watchers the dulcet tones of a flute, playing a ribald air.

A drunken reveler came toward the breadline. From the other direction came an officer—drunk and armed. The reveler muttered an imprecation as he passed the officer, who turned and demanded the reason of the remark. The reveler mumbled that it were better that the officer get back to the farm, that the people might not be compelled to starve.

"Buena, it is all for la libertad," scolded the officer. "Like ye not the cause?" he demanded and nervously clutched the pistol in its holster.

"There is no other remedy, senior, one is compelled to abide these things."

"He is an enemy of the liberty," shrieked the officer hysterically, and he shot three times.

The reveler crumpled and sagged, jerked once or twice convulsively, and flopped off the walk—exactly like a chicken with its head cut off. Then he lay very still.

The officer put away his pistol and resumed his walk to the red lights.

The watchers in the bread line stirred uneasily. No one rose to their feet. No one spoke. The body lay in the muddy gutter, while a thin trickle of red, visible by the light on the corner, slowly dyed the dirty shirt to a deep crimson, and the wind flopped the baggy trousers and a protruding shirt-tail into a grotesque semblance of motion—as if some huge insect were making ineffectual efforts to crawl away. A meteor shot across the sky, lighting the world for an instant. The old women crossed themselves, fearfully.

"It is the passing of a soul," they whispered affrightedly.

The guard rode down upon the bread line and demanded the cause of the murder. The old women, with many gestures, declared their ignorance of the affair. "Pues, a senior officer and this senior passed us. They began shooting just there and the one in the street has ceased to be alive. No, we know nothing of it. We had never seen either before. The senior officer went his way. We know not whither." Could the major, the commandante of the guard, tell when the doors of the bakery would open? They had been shivering here the night through and were cold, hungry and anxious for the pittance of bread they could purchase with their small money. Then the guard went away.

Two old women, quarrelling over a place in the line, shrieked curses at each other and, these proving ineffectual, screamingly pulled each other's scanty locks. The bread line laughed and encouraged them to greater efforts. The termagants turned upon the seated women of the line and cursed them fearfully, then one drew from some inner place of concealment in her clothing—it was not a dress—a bundle of rags held on her person by strings—a bottle, and they who had rought, amicably drank off the hot, biting zotol. "It will serve for food as well as to frighten away the wind, life of mine," mumbled one, and the other drank—copiously—whereupon the one shrieked again and the quarrel was resumed. They sat down at the end of the line and quarreled all the rest of the night.

The sun shot up over the hills and changed the smelter smoke to molten gold. The earth grew hot, after the cold night, and the doors of the shop were thrown open. A shelf had been placed across the door and on it were piled pieces

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