

Translating *Banaag at Sikat* (1906) of Lope K Santos

Reflection on Problems of Meaning

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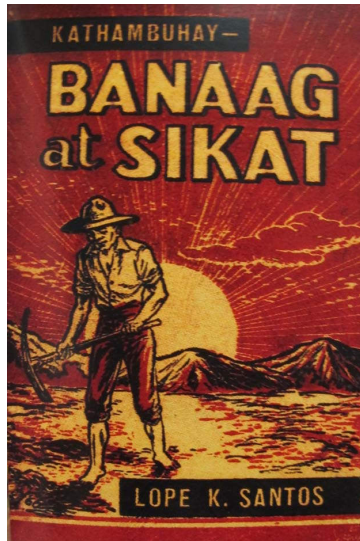
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I. The Challenges of Translating a Tagalog Classic: Issues of Literary Translation and the Socio-Political Environment

What the translator had initially thought of as mainly a job of linguistic translation, proved to be a more profound and problematic task, once the realization had sunk in that translation was not a mere shift of language code from the original tongue to the target language. Translating the first chapter of the Tagalog classic, *Banaag at Sikat* required a familiarity with the cultural context, the racial sensibility of the characters and of the author himself, the philosophical leanings of the author, his loyalties, the literary tradition to which the author belonged, and the prevailing literary standards.

Indeed, as one realizes now, the effort requires a reasonable knowledge of the original idiom, and an equal command of the target language of translation, in this case, English. The translator is perforce also an arbiter of literary sensibility who must make choices on the basis of preferred literary and linguistic theory. Such choices include: Should the work be as accurately mirrored in the formal tradition it came from, or should the work be re-fashioned or compromised according to the cultural context, idioms, and the formalist standards and conventions of the target language?

From a non-literary perspective, the translator should be well informed about politico-linguistics issues. An example is a popular anti-Islamic



Banaag at Sikat by Lope K. Santos

English idiomatic expression innocently dropped in many conversations, which should be translated without the religious slur in a prospective new translation. “If the mountains would not come to Muhammad, Muhammad would go to the mountains.” The context here is the Christian disbelief on the ability of the Prophet of Islam to prove his prophethood with miracles. A translator ignorant of or insensitive to the complex dynamics among religious groups in the present century would have to know that such an apparently innocent slur ought to be translated with political sensitivity (“correctness”). When Bacon used this quip in 1636, the Islam-Christianity polarity were continents apart, unlike today where nations and religions are digitally linked. Parenthetically, any reference to Islamic prophets like Jesus Christ (Issah) or Muhammad, or Moses (Musa) must be reverential in any translation, with the customary “Peace be upon him” honorific, in deference to the Islamic tradition.

In this light, the translator as a writer himself, cannot be impervious to the politics of his time. In the present essay, for example, the translator is

aware of the political and linguistic issues in Philippine art and culture, and should be cognizant of questions such as: Should the national language be the repository of national literature, or should the local literature, inclusive of those written or already with translations into the national language, be translated into English for world exposure? If they should be, why should the choice be, particularly or primarily, English? Should a select set of languages be prioritized: English, Spanish, Arabic, Bahasa, and Chinese?

Even the choice of which world language to translate Philippine literary and intellectual work is significant. Bahasa or Malay is a language that should be an important second language in the Philippines, and a Bahasa translation of revolutionary works of the propagandists, Rizal, Bonifacio, Mabini, and Recto among other Filipino intellectuals, would have strengthened the intellectual ties between the Philippines and Indonesia, a formidable combination of more than 250 million Austronesians.

Filipino should eventually become the language of education and communication of the Philippines, as mandated by the Constitution of 1987. The continuing tradition of re-creating the output of Philippine literature with English as the linguistic repository clearly contravenes such constitutional mandate. The effort perpetuates the Filipino Anglo-Saxonized sensibility (*la sensibilidad anglo-sajonada*) and its hold on Philippine literature and culture, a continuing cultural crisis that has been ignored by the English-educated Filipino literati. Dr. Zeus Salazar has described this national crisis as the Great Cultural Divide between two Filipino sub-nations: the *Bayan* and the *Nacion*.

The choice of English vis-à-vis Filipino or other translation language should be open to policy debates or at least, to challenge, to be resolved in a translation priority policy.

In the midst of the unquestioned hegemony of the *anglo-saxonized*, or more correctly, Americanized, Filipino literati, the question is: Should the nation be oriented to world literary traditions in English or in the language understood by a majority of the people? As a professor of literature, it has been this translator's experience that the teaching of world literature in English is a burdensome if not an impossible task for the majority of Filipino

students. This translator's research has consistently proved that Tagalog-translated works of Shakespeare are significantly better appreciated by his students than the original works in English.

For all those reservations, the author of *Banaag at Sikat*, Lope K. Santos himself, had wished for an English translation of his novel. His friend Carlos P. Romulo, then President of the University of the Philippines, had expressed interest in the translation, but was perhaps discouraged by the enormity of the translation work. In 1960, a graduate student at the UP Los Baños, Mariano Javier, used the novel as thesis for his master's degree, under the supervision of his thesis adviser Leopoldo Yabes, a staunch anti-Tagalog regionalist. Unfortunately, the student failed to give Santos, the author, a copy of his English translation. In retrospect, the translation did not seem up to par with the grand Tagalog style of the original, which the translator Javier himself has extolled for its "vernacular accuracy."

II.

The first chapter, "Sa Batis ng Antipulo" (In the Spring Rivulets of Antipolo), foreshadows the challenges to be faced in translating the entire novel into English, particularly, the twin challenges of capturing the vernacular accuracy and the deciphering of the novel's symphonic sensibilities. The first challenge involves diction or vocabulary, and the second involves capturing the philosophical, psychological, social and cultural surface or the literal, merged with the subterranean meanings, in lines after lines of the first chapter.

This translator who is 62 years old was humbled by the fact that Lope K. Santos, the novelist, was only 22 years old when he wrote the novel in 1906. That alone was intimidating, as there were passages in the novel in which one had to closely read through the author's complex intentions, as the translator realized that at a similar age of 22 he could not have been anywhere this level of Lope K. Santos' precocious intellectual and stylistic sophistication.

The novelist, in his simplest language in 1959, dedicated his 1906 *oeuvre* to teachers and the youth who were learning the National Language, when this novel was reprinted. To quote:

.... Isang babasahin itong napapanahon. Tigib ng palaisipang mabibigat sa pamuhay, malulubhang sigalot ng puhunan at paggawa, at saka ng likaw-likaw na suliranin ng pag-ibig ng dukha at masalapi.

[This is a relevant reading for our time. Redolent with significant riddles and thoughts on existence and living, the grave conflicts of capital and labor, not to miss the intricate complexities and problems of love among and between the poor and the moneyed.]

And the author was definitive on which tradition he proclaimed his writing should be classified, and by reasonable assertion, how the work should thereby be appraised:

Naalinsunod ang pagsasalaysay sa mga simulain ng wagas na panitikang Tagalog at naayon sa pangulong tuntunin ng palatuldikan at palabigkasa sa Balarila ng Wikang Pambansa; anupa't ang Aklat na ito ay magagamit sa patakaran at sanggunian sa wastong pagsulat at matatas na pagbibigkas ng Wika ni Balagtas.

[The narrative conforms with the primordial rules and principles of Tagalog literature, and the work adheres to the main rules of orthographic accentuation and fluent speech in the Language of Balagtas.]

The great Filipino writer-essayist in Spanish, Macario Adriatico saw *Banaag at Sikat* as the intellectual and literary product of a young author from the masses, impressed by the emergent thoughts in his time. Writing the first reaction to the novel, by invitation of the author, Adriatico's impressionistic critical essay is itself a showcase of turn of the century Tagalog grand style. He wrote:

Sinabi ko na. Ang ipinagkaganito ni G. Lope K. Santos ay sa pagkahilig ng loob sa mga bagong munukala.....muni-muni o panagimpan ng isang anak-bayang uhaw sa kalayaan at katwiran, na babahagyang ganapin sa sinupil ng yaman at puhunan.

[I said it. Lope K. Santos' leanings traced its roots in his attractions to new thoughts. moorings or vision of a son of the people longing for freedom and reason, which rarely happens to those who have been corrupted by wealth and capital.]

In this light, it would be imperative to consider the author's intentions when he wrote the novel. Obviously the present effort to translate the work into English, and Lope K. Santos' desire to have his work translated into English in the late 50s, might seem like an ironic reversal of his intent, as the author had clearly meant his work to be a contribution to the body of literature and the literary tradition of his choice. On the other hand, a translation into English would have made his thoughts known to Filipinos whose preferred language of literary reading was (is) English.

The translator's foray into translation of this Tagalog classic into English would seem like an affront to the ideological position that the national literature should be translated into Filipino rather than into the English language. Why should it be an affront? Because, to reiterate, the repository of local literature, including those in English written by Filipinos, and those works of non-Filipinos of world repute, should be in their national language.

An important possible benefit in this paradoxical conflicted effort is that such translation could be a modest contribution in helping elevate awareness of Tagalog writing at the turn of the century, outside of the national community, and into the reach of other people, which may also encourage translator-scholars to pursue translations of *Banaag at Sikat* into Spanish and other world languages like German and Russian, particularly the latter two languages, with which Tagalog shares a philosophical affinity that the scholar Epifanio San Juan, Jr. has elucidated in his critical essay, *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature*. The translator is of the firm opinion that *Banaag at Sikat* is a hallmark of Filipino grand tradition of writing in the league of Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, Balagtas' *Florante at Laura*, and Amado V. Hernandez's works, as San Juan had previously theorized. A translation into English or other languages would help in placing

the Santos *kathambuhay*, or masterpiece, as one of the great novels of our country.

Apart from the concerns discussed above, in particular, the following are some of the challenges the translator encountered in this preliminary effort of translation:

1. The socio-cultural context: Santos, in 1906, expressed the belief that true heroism only happens or exists, in the noblest sentiments of the poor. The novel was meant to benefit the poor, but by 1959, as Lope K. Santos saw the failure to liberate the poor from poverty, it remained as a dream unrealized. The translator must therefore understand the specific illustrations of poverty as well as the exploitative practices of the rich, details of which are highlighted in the novel.
2. The Filipino sensibility. The translator must understand the locale and the qualities and sensibilities of characters, and the author's intentions in each character, their strengths, follies, and comic or tragic qualities. In this effort, the translator ought to discern the "equivalent" sensibilities recognizable to the contemporary audience. Although a translation is assumed mainly for contemporary English-reading Filipinos, the translator must consider the possibility of a "universalized" translation.
3. Linguistic sensibilities and codes. Where there are approximate cases of equivalence, the equivalent expressive code is used. Where the expression is untranslatable the original is used. Example: The interjection, *Aba!* used in the original code, was used in the translation.
4. Conflict of literary traditions. Western authors and critics of recent contemporary leanings are against long essayistic remarks of characters that tend to reflect the position of the author with the arguments presented and represented by the characters. The translator is faced with the choice of adhering to the original text and intent of the author, or resorting to the simplification or corruption of the

text, with the expurgation of long dialogues. The English tradition now commonly frowns on essayistic dialogues as those found in Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*. In a similar vein, western-oriented readers may find cloying the prolonged lovers' spat and courting between Meni and Delfin in Chapter 1 of the Santos novel, for example. The translator stood by the author in his intent to depict the elegant courting and lovers' spat, which readers of western contemporary literature may find rather excessively sentimental or romantic.

5. Vernacular accuracy. The exquisite and elegant language of the first decade of the 1900s is captured by the novel. Many of the words used are no longer understood by Filipinos of the current generation. It was extremely a taxing effort of linguistic approximation that sometimes had to give way to simplified translations where the limit of translator's vocabulary has been reached.
6. Customary traditions. The novel is a documentation of the mores, cultural norms, fashion, and traditions of the turn of the century and presumably for centuries before. For example, the translator has to understand what difference in social status a *buntal* hat confers on the wearer. This demands sociological historical research.
7. Flora and fauna. The novel is so precise even in the description of the flora of Antipolo. The equivalent terms in English are themselves obscurely known, except to experts. The translator would benefit from the rich vocabulary of a bilingual botanist.
8. The idiom of translation. The classical Tagalog used should keep a modicum of its respectability in contemporary English. The translator of a novelist in the caliber of Lope K. Santos must be a writer of the caliber of language masters like Nick Joaquin or a Carmen Guerrero Nakpil, or a Ninotchka Rosca, which is a tall order for the current translator. The Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino could find this a worthy undertaking.

Conclusion

With the myriad of challenges met by the author in translating a chapter of *Banaag at Sikat*, he has come to the conclusion that the work of translating this masterpiece would require an inter-disciplinary group of translators. For example: Language experts could help in providing a glossary of now archaic terms; and sociologists would be useful in the historical analysis of social mores and attitudes of the turn of the century. Moreover, an acknowledged master of the target language of translation serving as overall editor-translator, with a staff of competent editorial assistants trained in Stylistics, would be useful in preserving the elegance and cadence of the author's language; and bilingual specialists, e. g. botanists, would be very helpful in providing the correct translation of specific details in the novel such as the botanical wealth of the locality of Antipolo at the turn of the century. The author sought courage in proposing a translation of the first chapter of Lope K. Santos' *Banaag at Sikat* only after the self-assurance that it was a translator's modest *interpretation* of the chapter. He realized the limits of his vocabulary, but had to find courage in the fulfillment of an academic commitment for a preliminary translation. Translators need not be traitors, and could be modest interpreters of great works.

BANAAG AT SIKAT

Chapter One

In the Rivulet Springs of Antipolo

"People have been flocking here for years, but this year, there were even more visitors," an Antipolo resident was tactfully boasting to his house guests from Manila. "It could be that other than the recent conflagration which razed and devastated the town, the resistance our people fought against the Spaniards, and then against the more powerful Americans could have also impoverished our people. But by the grace of Our Miraculous Lady of Peace and Good Voyage, this year's festivities were truly joyous! Only this time, the most populated attractions are the spring waters where visitors come to bathe..."

The Antipolo resident told of it more or less accurately, as recent visitors who were here from the first days of May to the last days of June 1904 would have similarly described it, having seen for themselves the many people who came.

Were it faith or the attractions of leisure that could entice almost the whole of Manila and those from the provinces to go up the hills of Antipolo, what could not be denied is that the town seemed to possess such a magnetic power so as to pull people up to the ridge, even those who were cold-hearted and those who scrimped on any cost.

Though without doubt the sheer faith in the miraculous healing waters of Antipolo used to be the reason of the sick who sought cure by bathing in the spring, now people would come for the cool and clear waters and the endless attractions of pleasure rather than for the waters “that were made miraculous by the Virgin Mother”. Those were bygone days when the rivulets were venerable, the balm for souls guilty with sins... Most often, the rivulets became flowing witnesses to the secrets of the heart of a young woman, the obscene temerity of a young man’s eyes, and the opportunities for admiring the embellishments of the body and for exchanging affection between lovers.

“To bathe in the rivulets” would no longer be said as before as a wish for a cure of a sickness but would now mean “to enjoy the stars from heaven.” Indeed, it would be like the use of “going to church” which would now mean, “to see people in their Sunday best.”

Pity the soul of him who had “discovered” and “made” those waters “miraculous”, for his failure to foresee any glimmer of what would happen to his “discovery”. Just as sure as the sun would set in the west, his merchandise of faith in these miraculous springs would face a night of overflowing flood of profanity: a hive of rentals and lodging businesses, an abode for lovers, a paradise for the daughters of Eve picking the forbidden fruit, a haven for the lustful, and a theater for the sinful eyes of men--wide open and moist with desire.

“Someone has stolen my dream!” He who had discovered these waters would certainly be fretting these days were he still alive, with eyes looking

up to the heavens, staring in disbelief at the irreverent behavior of pilgrims frolicking in his miraculous waters.



Antipolo has been known not for one but for a few more rivulets, though many of these streams branched into two, four, even eight cycles downstream; but among the many, one rivulet stood distinctive for the sparse presence of people and for its pristine and unspoiled condition.

Upon reaching the top of the stairs carved from the hillside, a pathway snaked towards the entry door of a large landscaped property bounded by a written signage, BATIS, made from improvised bamboo slits. The ends of each letter were nailed on two native cotton trees looking as if these were planted together to become intimately intertwined, a suggestive and lusty invitation to tourist bathers.

Upon first approaching the entrance, it is most likely that the imaginative but fearful lowlander would think that he is standing on the hollowed grounds of a private cemetery. The hanging branches and twigs of *tampoy* or rose apple trees, the prolific fruits of cashew, healthy *zapote*, banana, *mabolo* or velvet apple, native blackberries called *duhat*, *macopa*, and the native cotton trees; some native fence shrubs said to be “the natural cure of rats that have survived snake attacks”... all these plants in their placements, healthy growth, splendor and freshness could be thought of as having been fertilized by the dead underneath. The hilly terrain, the wild grass, and the touch-sensitive mimosa or *makahiya* growing everywhere; would seem to suggest that the place indeed is a burial site. In the distance, a small hut locally known as *kamalig* or *sagubang*, usually found in a field under cultivation, appeared to be the cemetery chapel. On either side and at the back of the hut stood two other huts taller than the normal height of people. The fearful would contemplate interred beneath the ground on which stood these huts the bones of some parish priest, a barrio captain, or other personage of public distinction and repute.

Ghostly memories would visit the fearful newcomer, as his eyes searched the top or front of the “chapel”, for even one small cross atop the hut as would be commonly found in cemeteries. One morning, however, a visible clothesline of colorful women’s wear could be seen inside the huts, with women gracefully moving and swaying around even as the men kept standing up and sitting down restlessly. Some wore white, others pale red, some others fiery red, and still others fresh-leaf green.

Is there an interment? If so, mourners should be in black. A child perhaps is to be interred? But rather than a gloomy sight, the horrified intruder entering timorously might instead hear the echoes of conversations devoid of grief, and conversations that roared with fun and laughter. And in the space separating familiar faces, the imagined thoughts of a cemetery would dissipate fast into thin air upon seeing five or six pretty women, running out and away from inside the “*chapel*” as if in a race to be the first to reach one of the huts that looked only moments before like a repository of skeletal remains.

Certainly not a cemetery. In the town of the dead, noise and fun would not reign. The fearful eyes of an entrant would be completely dashed with the sight and sound of fun. The aroma of *tampoy* and the prolific growth of cashew trees, the lush foliage and fresh growth of varied plants, the grassy heaps on the mounds of the earth, then and before the color and smell of gloom now would transform into a scene of fun and joy, evoking neither tears nor prayers for the dead but an invitation for sharing life and happiness with the living.

This one stream. One of the sources of pride for the Antipolo lady of the house.



Thin droplets from an intermittent drizzle needled through the pale sunlight of the morning. It was Sunday, on the second week of the nine-week feast. Indeed, the May feast was nearing its final day.

The cogon grass hut with a trellis in the left front had an elevated space under the hut roof which served as dwelling of the housemaster or caretaker, reachable by an inclined bamboo ladder at one edge of the hut. Under the improvised dwelling was a center table where there were bottles of varied colors and sizes, and three or four flavors; a glass container with hardened bread, caramel, and other sweets; some canned sardines, neatly atop each one piled up over a can of margarine; an improvised native plate or *bilao* of bread (If one were not favored with luck, the bread would have been as tough as the heads of the coughing and tubercular man from whom it was bought); a native and finely chiseled water dipper or wood *tabo*, two boxes with one for unconsumed tobacco and the other for the money from sales. The surface of an elevated bamboo floor also served as the bed of a native hag, whose head already shone like a silver fan, with corsets of hemp hair on her crown like chicken waste pellets. Under a trellised corner was a woman coddling and nursing a baby as she stood before the native stove where she was also frying native cakes known as *butche* and fried floured bananas known as *maruya*. All of these would have been the picnic food of the crowds of bathers had not Don Ramon Miranda rented all the baths that morning. No one could use the baths while Don Ramon and his guests were around. Everything had been reserved for Don Ramon: the seats, the merchandise sold by the vendors, the utilities, all the streams, and also apparently the tubercular coughing man and the old hag of a caretaker, judging by the impeccable courtesy rendered by these two to whatever the Master would ask about or require from them.



Three automobiles and a horse-drawn carreta brought the flock of Don Ramon to Antipolo, Saturday of the previous afternoon. He and two unmarried women, his daughters Talia and Meni, comprised the expected core group with Don Filemon Borja, who could never be out of such family occasions, and Lady Loleng and her only daughter the unmarried Isiang; brothers Honorio and Turing Madlang-layon, and some other associates who were always with the core group during out-of-town and longer travels such as

this. All were from the richer business district of Sta Cruz, except for the lawyer brothers Madlang-layon of Tondo, a district mainly of workers and professionals.

When in Antipolo, they stayed in that country house, which yearly would be reserved for Don Ramon on the town's feast days. A spacious residence of unpainted wood and grass, the house may have seen better days but it enjoyed some local prestige for being located on one of the roads fronting the shrine.

After having attended mass in the early morning, they were seen by several of their Manila acquaintances and friends. Don Ramon and Don Filemon were both men of means; Honorio was a lawyer; and all of them were escorting the younger ladies who were with them. The members of the group were all affable and happy; at any time as they left the church, they welcomed and joined friends who arrived from another town. The world has yet to find a place like Antipolo where Manila's eligible bachelors would not be like birds pecking excitedly at a trail of grains. All the way to the house they who followed behind were pleased to see and felt assured that the ladies were safely escorted. From there, after having changed clothes right after breakfast and after barely a few minutes of rest, they were quickly up and about ready to rush to the stream baths. Four of the bachelors who were following the group became inseparable as they made their way to the stream. Two of them were friends of Isiang: Bentus and Pepito, both men of elegance and scions of moneyed residents of Sta. Cruz and of Troso, another man wasn't just a mere friend but was the distinguished pharmacist, Martin Robles, the man who kept Isiang's thoughts preoccupied. The fourth bachelor was an acquaintance of Turing's, or perhaps not a mere acquaintance, judging by their frequent stolen glances at each other.

Indeed, the flock has grown.

Don Ramon had decided to use the right wing pools, and somewhere on the left wing the bachelors would take turns. He then ordered the servants that the roasted pig, the chicken and broth, and the rest of the dishes be cooked in the house, and the food when ready for serving was to be brought to the side pool. Indeed, everyone was to enjoy the stream to the fullest.

Don Ramon and Don Filemon got into the pools first. While they were about done with the bath, the ladies on the other side of the pools were only starting to get the soaked native bark shampoo—*gugo*—to bubble. But only two so far have emerged out of the pool: Meni and Isiang.

“While the *gugo* husk is yet to bubble up and turn sudsy, we shall be looking around for lemon grass or *katmon* juice,” the two told the rest of the ladies.

“And where will you look around?—asked Lady Loleng—“why not ask Petra instead to do that so you, too, can change into your bathing clothes, ready for the pool?”

Petra was the maidservant of Lady Loleng. But the two pretended not to have heard her. Whispering to each other, they proceeded straight to a *duhat* tree heavy with the black fruit, craning their necks to look up and pointing out the ripe fruits in wishful delight. With necks stiffened from looking up at the berries for too long and their mouths almost dried up from salivating for the dark fruits, the ladies knew there was little chance of success at getting even one berry. Isiang found an excuse to call the attention of the bachelors for their help, not even sparing the widowed lawyer, Madlang-layon, from climbing the *duhat* tree.

“Get a *sungkit*, a fruit pole sickle,” Meni said.

“I will just climb up,” Morales offered as a chivalric gesture.

“No,” Isiang protested sweetly. “You are in your shoes. The *duhat* tree is slippery and frail!”

“Yes, madame. But it wasn’t just a *duhat* tree we climbed up to during the war when we watched enemies under cover from the crowns of trees.”

“But you were without shoes then.”

“I had, and those trees had lesser branches than this tree.”

“It’s up to you! - Isiang conceded - “When you reach the top, make sure you shake the tree vigorously Please?”

Morales was not the only one to climb. Bentus followed him. Firmly gripping the slender trunk, they seemed like they were climbing up the thin columns of a telegraph post. They felt too embarrassed to have noticed that

their knees were terribly shaking. Who cared about their soiled clothes anyway? When else would they soil their clothes?

The first time the tree was shaken, the shrieks of those on the ground followed. Isiang was first to quench her thirst, as the ripened and unripe berries rained on her.

Meni, who was being interrogated by the lawyer about her sister, Talia, also excitedly joined the jeering. All who were on the ground rushed to have their share of the fruits that had fallen on the ground.

“While we are picking the berries, do not shake the tree!” Pepito appealed, as he was worried that his white trousers and greyish woolen suit, his panama gentleman’s hat “of the folded front and the smartest cut,” might be kissed by the black raindrops from the tree.

The disturbance set those inside the pool baths in excited curiosity. Peeping, they saw that the rain of berries was causing the commotion. Dark berries, those sweet *duhat!* But they could not join the fun. Talia and Turing were already in their bath clothes and the still wet Lady Loleng was still being shampooed by Petra. The salivating ladies could not help pleading enviously and screaming:

“Hey, you gluttons. Share the berries! ...”

Meanwhile at the gates of the compound, two men were in a rush as they came in. Both in suits and in white trousers, one was in a *buntal* hat and the other in a *sabutan* hat. Almost of equal height and tall for locals, somehow the man in *sabutan* hat was slightly of better build than the other. He was fair as the latter was darker. From afar their faces seemed like they were somewhat six years older than their actual age. In their fashionable cut and style, devoid of pretense or arrogance, obvious was the strained effort to dress up worthy and considerate of the group. They stood out in their build-- neither lean nor obese. The darker man was more distinctive in appearance: with a well-formed muscular physique, and with some added muscles, he could have been a Filipino Napoleon during the Revolution, detailed among the soldiers sent to the front line. As they walked arms on each other’s shoulders, the two men looked like twin brothers except that the skin and the shape of their faces, the distinctly differing eyes—the fair one deep-set and tender

eyes, the other wide and vivid—would betray at once they were not twins but were just the closest of friends.

The two had a clear line of sight at the commotion of the crowd grabbing their pick of the berries, noticeable even from a distance. Smiling as they rushed towards the crowd, their faces could not be ascertained from afar, but from where she stood, Meni's heart thumped as she saw who were coming.

"These are Felipe and..." she hesitated. Felipe was the darker man in *buntal* hat.

"And who is that other man?" Madlang-layon intently asked, sensing that Meni was taken aback. Meni missed replying.

"Isn't Delfin the man approaching?" whispered Isiang to her friend. Delfin was the fair man in *sabutan* hat.

"Indeed, yes!" Meni replied as she slowly distanced herself from the two men with whom she was scrambling for berries, subtly stood up and made it appear that she was not among those scrambling for the berries.

"Now you're done!" exclaimed Isiang to frighten her. "Is he the jealous type?"

"I do not know—" Meni denied. "But what do I care if he becomes jealous?"

"Oh really?"

"So? *Aba!* He has no right to be jealous."

"Ummmmm."

"You don't believe me?"

As the two were teasing each other in a hush, the subjects of their talk were themselves talking about the people from whom they were only a few steps away.

"So what are you doing there?" Felipe asked.

"Picking *duhat* berries" said Madlang-layon.

"Is it sweet, Madame Isiang?" Delfin asked mockingly.

"For me, sweet enough, Sir. What about you, Meni, were the berries sweet?"

"Bitter"!

“Bitter berries!” Felipe rescued, which was followed by the suppressed laughter of everyone, save for Meni.

“She seems riled,” Delfin whispered to his friend.

Felipe came closer to Meni, and whispered: “Are you mad at us?”

A smile was the reply, and in a moment she was already speaking cheerfully, as she had been earlier.

“But why just now? What time did you leave Manila?”

“Still dark when we left,” Felipe replied. “Where are they?”

“Father? They are in the baths.”

“What about you, Madame Isiang? Are you not going to bathe?” Delfin asked after a brief glance at Meni.

“I am going there now, Sir.” As she answered back at the teaser Delfin, she also threw a quick glance at Meni, as if she was telling her:

“This man’s question was for you.”

The exchange of teasing was broken by the sudden rain of *duhat*. Looking up, Delfin recognized that the man up the tree was the pharmacist Morales, and Bentus, the smart bachelor he met at a secondary school in Sampaloc.

“So it’s the two of you.”

“Yes, it’s the two of us. When you came your eyes were fixed on the people down there so you didn’t see us,” Morales teased.

“Not really. All right, start shaking the tree again, so I can also have a taste of the fruits.”

For every branch they held, the two mercilessly shook the branches with more of the unripe fruits raining down. The farmers who saw what was happening were shaking their heads in quiet disgust. “These people from Manila are like wild locusts in the way they consume plants,” they thought aloud.

Felipe proceeded to the pool where his godfather in confirmation Don Ramon was bathing. Isiang, Madlang-layon, and Pepito slowly made themselves scarce as if they were requested to leave. Delfin knew all three of them but at this time was not in speaking terms with Pepito. And so it was that Delfin and Meni were left standing alone by themselves and talking to each other while the other three were pretending to pick berries.

“Was the show at the “Zorilla” exciting last night?” Meni smilingly asked.

“I don’t know what was showing,” answered Delfin.

“Hmph. You don’t know?”

“Aba. How would I know when I have not even touched the door of any theater last night?”

“Of course, indeed. So you came here only this morning, and those red swollen eyes show that you didn’t lose any sleep.”

“Are my eyes red?”

“No ... sharp black. Hmph. Those people who commit to come, but who cannot even miss one night... Theater first before anything.”

“Oh, my dear Meni. You don’t believe a word of what I say.”

“And why not? Felipe said the minute you received your pay from the Press yesterday afternoon, you would follow without delay. Ah, perhaps you were not at the theater, you were in a movie house! Is there a new film?”

“Not even in a movie house, Meni!”

“So you went to the final day of the Feast of the Cross at Timbugan. Before we left yesterday, I heard that the *Santa Elena* and *Reina Sentenciada* were fabulous.”

“We don’t go there, anymore.”

“What virtuous men.”

“There’s a taunt here.”

Two pairs of eyes met and talked for a brief time.

“Ah, so when Felipe and you slept, it was still Angelus and you were not able to watch anything.”

“Oh, how far from what happened to me are your wild suppositions. Not one hit the truth. Last night we attended a meeting.”

“Meeting!....?”

“When will you ever believe me, Meni?”

“Aba. Who will not believe you? Isn’t it very true indeed that you had a meeting..... in *their* house?”

The question hit the bachelor like lightning. “In their house? “ Whose house? He never expected to ever hear Meni suggest any kind of blame or wrongdoing. In a flash or two he remembered the houses he had visited

in Manila. There were many of those houses, but not quite like the house where Meni lived. It flashed in his mind that the house in her mind was that of the family of Ines, a teacher of English. He was uncertain if it was the first or second time he had escorted Meni after the Night School, when Meni had prodded him to escort home the teacher, too, and not merely herself, 'the humble student of the teacher'. "You are both intelligent," he remembered now what she had then added to her request.

Meni smiled, making her face lovelier to him, as she pondered on the drift of their talk. The eyes looking straight at him seemed exultant. ("So what would this man tell me next?")

"Whose house?" the bachelor at last was able to ask.

"You know too well that I belong to many organizations and that almost daily I have meetings."

"So what does it matter to me that you have many and daily meetings... Did I get goose pimples?"

Aba!

Delfin could only utter that expression of bewilderment. Then he was hearing words of jealousy and hope; now he was hearing insults and barbed remarks. What did Meni really mean? The two were shocked at the twist. Their tongues stiffened. For a few seconds, neither one dared to utter a word. Each one thought of the mystery of their minds. In those moments they had forgotten they were not alone in the shade where they stood. Their friends on the tree branches and the scrambling fellows on the ground had already moved over from the dark palm tree, to the taller cashew trees, but the two stood together as if they were alone. Meni barely heard Isiang's yell: "Hit that branch hard!" and immediately after, barely glanced at Morales cutting off a cashew tree branch prolific with fruits. Pepito and Isiang raced to catch hold of the severed branch. That and no more. The two shut off their minds, preventing themselves from making the first move to voice out anything. But Meni finally blinked.

"I will now go to the bath. Father ought to be done by now."

"Wait!" Delfin cried out. "Do not allow me to waste these considered moments of much importance to me. The minute I saw you at the gate, and

as I face you now, my heart had been filled with joy. I was immersed with joy, at this great opportunity of having come here. I lost each yoke of fatigue and hardship, upon seeing you. Not a shade of sadness had trailed me as I was coming here, until I finally got close to you here, only to find you unspeaking; Well I know anyway that this isn't your character. When only the two of us were left here, what else but joy would engulf my heart? Meni, I see the face of triumph in my mind. The dream I longed for. What my heart seeks from you which until now you have kept in doubt. I thought your lips would now give it to me here. When else would you? Would there be a happier place than Antipolo, the heart of this place, the streams, that *duhat* tree, these plants, those grass, this morning with neither drizzle nor dimness, as a witness to the triumph of the reciprocity you deny me? In your words, in your letters to me, I have not won a reply that would secure my fate. Instead what you give me are taunts and bits of care giving me some hints of hope. I can't fathom nor rely on it. Tell me Meni, please, come, what else do I need to do to win a promising hope from you? What more?

"Nothing more."

"You are saying nothing more? Then, how can you bear not giving me a clear answer?"

"Look, Delfin. Are we not students yet?"

"So what if we are still students?"

"We are both young. We can wait till you finish your studies. Moreover you know my father. Will he be happy if he discovers we have a commitment to each other? It will end up with me not finishing my Night School, and you becoming unwelcome in the house. So that will plunge your dream into nothing. Aside from that, you know that my older sister will get married to Yoyong, so I shall be left alone as my father's daughter."

"There goes Meni again. She thinks that if she makes clear I can hope, that means she will love her father less. You mentioned my studies. Have you no trust in me because I have no lawyer's degree yet? Aren't those visitors with professional degrees in your house already too numerous enough to allow a space for a man without a degree?"

"Look at where this man is bringing this conversation."

The bachelor forced a happy demeanor, and smiled to comfort the lady who could have been affronted at what he had just said.

“What I was saying was—she paused, and continued—You may have problems of studying. What do I care about my own studies. But you.... I was not replying to your letters because I may distract you from your studies.”

“So that is the reason. You felt it was okay not to answer my letters. You really are a woman. You will never know that we men, until you have not replied to our letters, have nothing but dreams, have nothing in our minds but days of waiting and hope, see and hope that each piece of paper would turn out to be a letter from you.”

“Pretender!”

“Nothing but the truth.”

“If we don’t write you back, you will stop writing. So you will be able to study well.”

“A lie. It’s rather that...”

“Rather what? If we, women won’t write letters, you men have nothing to read. The time you spend reading our letters, would be better spent for reading your lessons.”

“Far from it Meni. The more you are making my studies difficult with that attitude. Do you think Delfin would study so hard without a Meni, the daughter of Don Ramon Miranda, for whom he feels the greatest of shame for failure?”

“What! *Naku!*”

Saying ‘*Naku!*’ was enough to express Meni’s reaction at the moment. It expressed the mix of her certainties, and misgivings and doubts, her own mix of conviction and disbelief, the amazement at contradictions in what she had been mouthing, and what she was hearing from Delfin. She suppressed a smile; she knew there were bits of lies in what she just heard. She remembered that when she met Delfin, it was well known to all that he was a very studious man; but neither could she believe that those words of Delfin were outright falsehoods, let alone consider those words of his as a prideful boast. In her deepest of hearts, there reigned a certain feeling of affection when she

talked with Delfin. Even the most bitter words from Delfin, had sweetness in them; anything he uttered, even if untruths, came as reality and truths.

When Delfin saw the fixed gaze of those tender eyes of the lady he was talking with, he gained strength in proving his point.

“If there should come a chance, he said, that your mouth will render, the death or end of hope, rather than joy of hoping, you will in that moment, get the ashes of all the books I am studying.”

“What? Is it the case that you men only study because you are ashamed to fail and your ladies will find out if you fail?”

“Only those men who know how to love, like myself.”

“*Sus!* There you are!”

Aba! We men can live among ourselves on earth. But because of you women, love prevails. It is because of such love that we are forced to seek a better fate to offer at your feet. Are you women not the same?”

“No, we women study for our own sake and not because of you men.”

“A lie! The way you women speak, you make it appear that we men alone know how to lie. If you women were the only creatures on earth, it would not be studies that would keep you occupied but...”

“What? Making ourselves more attractive?”

“No, what will you care for beauty when there is no one to make yourself beautiful for?”

“So what, indeed?”

“...Nothing.”

“What again?”

“I said, nothing!”

“Ah! All right, I will leave you then if you’re not going to tell me ...”

As she motioned to leave, Delfin held the sleeves of her dress and spoke out in his tenderest voice.

“Wait ... All right, I will say it now. But let us be seated for a talk.”

She allowed him to stop her. She forgot that noon would catch her unfinished with the bath. As she sat herself on the grass lawn, Delfin leaned and sat low, both arms rested on his knees. But he chose not to sit on the grass after he touched the grass that was dewy, he moved backward, where

a guava tree branch lay hanging, upon which lightly sat Meni precariously trying to keep balance on the erratically tensed branch. Delfin stood facing her, trying to hold tight on a palm-sized branch of the same guava tree that hung near him and putting his left hand inside his suit. He appeared ready to speak with sincerity and affection.

“Let it be made clear to you, Meni, that not all students think the same way. There are those who lose their studies in courting girls, and there are those whose studies improve as they gain the confidence of their sweet-hearts. I belong to the latter.... So fear not; your “Yes” will make me study harder. Would you rather deny me this?”

“Why, Delfin, is that what I wanted you to say?”

The young man was about to reply when he was stopped by a loud voice that echoed from a gate to the bath pools.

“Hey, you overgrown kids!... Enough of whatever you are up to. You are late for the baths.”

The admonition came from Lady Loleng. The guilty listeners scrambled about towards the huts about like pigeons aroused from sleep, flying away from their coops. The enchanted and hesitant lovers were not to be left behind. Ever regretful for the perfection of such a setting as a guava branch, they flew as well towards the pool. Meanwhile, Don Ramon and Don Filemon have just emerged from the baths, done with the ritual. None of the bachelors were interested in bathing. The two lawyers Yoyong and Felipe took over from where the elders had emerged. Even Delfin had lost interest.

And so those who had bathed and those who did not finally faced each other inside the hut-store.