

## **COURTSHIP and MARRIAGE** (How I Met and Married My Wife)

When World War II broke out in the Pacific on December 7, 1941, schools were closed. My mother Valentina (Belen), my younger sister Francisca (Ansing) and me, evacuated to our barrio Abian, Bambang, Nueva Vizcaya. We lived in our former house which we left in 1935 for Bayombong to pursue my elementary education. It was located on our lot near the bridge at the bank of the river, opposite the place (Macate) where I was born a score of years before. After a week my mother bought a small hut, as the house was already dilapidated and rain poured in that made us sleepless and miserable.

My father Fabian went to seek his fortune in Hawaii in 1928 when I was about four or five years of age, leaving alone my mother to fend for herself and us, her four children. We lived in a village cradled by verdant forests at the foothills of the Palale mountain, northern appendage of the Sierra Madre range. My two older sisters, Martha and Leonora, with their respective husbands and children, also lived nearby.

I spent my time helping my mother earn our livelihood by harvesting rice, corn and vegetables for farmers who gave a fourth of what we harvested as our share. My mother also did odd jobs, laundered clothes for people, helped plant others' rice fields, or as middle-woman, bought and sold vegetables and other crops in the public markets of Bambang and Bayombong, which she carried in a basket delicately balanced on her head. My younger sister Ansing did household chores, while I tended to my backyard garden and my little poultry and swine projects.

That was the kind of life we lived from the outbreak of WWII until 1943 was ushered in. In 1943 I was a twenty-year old bachelor, who knew how to type and play the violin. The steel Batu Bridge (that became a concrete superstructure in 2000) played significant role in the life of a couple of kindred spirits, for it was both a landmark and a lasting monument of love "built upon a rock." But more of this later.

The repair and reconstruction of the Batu bridge was then in full swing, which was bombed by Japanese zeros and dynamited by the Engineering Corps of the USAFEE to prevent or delay the onslaught of the Japanese Imperial Army. I applied as a clerk-typist and was accepted on March 1, 1943. I stayed in a little room adjoining the Engineers' Office and went home to Abian on weekends.

On week nights, there was nothing to do but sleep early because, although I wanted to read (my habit), there was no light as the flickering flames on the earthen stove was long extinguished after supper to conserve firewood. I was just emerging from the chrysalis of teenage youth and most often, my friend Francisco (Paquito) Tiam, who was a good singer and guitarist, and I, went serenading the damsels around the village.

One of the ladies we often serenaded was a petite, pretty girl, in her midteens, oval-faced, with aquiline nose and shoulder-length ebony tresses. Her angelic countenance captivated my heart, which ran wild like an unbroken bronco, the very first time I came to set my eyes upon her. It was love at first sight, I suppose. My mind was catapulted into the celestial realm where love reigns supreme, and... *"Cupid shot an arrow in the dark/ It struck dead centre at my heart;/ Instantly I loved her at first sight,/ I swooned when'er hers met my eyes."*

How I came to meet this lovely creation of God that set my heart aflame, causing

an inexplicable phenomenon that bestirred the tranquility of my mind and created an unusual throbbing in my previously unperturbed heart, was a very unique and exhilarating experience that I can never forget in all my life.

It was one of those late Saturday afternoons, when the timekeeper, Rosal Pescador, told Paquito and me that there were young girls wanting to cross over the river. I suggested for us to go meet them, so we repaired to the bridge site but the ferry boat was at the opposite bank and the operators were off-duty. The overflow wooden bridge was then being inundated by the swollen river due to the continuous downpour during the past few days.

The timekeeper sent laborers to help the ladies come across, who at first hesitated to cross because of their fear of the rolling waves of the river, but after the men assured them of their safety, they consented to cross, suppressing their fear of walking on the shaking pontoon bridge, their feet were oftentimes submerged in the lapping waves but they clung to their guides for dear life and at last they were brought safely to where we were waiting to welcome them.

My friend Paquito was already introducing himself to the girls. Their names, barely audible to my ringing ears, were Alice, Maria and Puring. Not wanting to be outdone, I blurted out my name Pedring (euphonious to Puring) through chattering teeth and trembling lips. I extended my shaking hand and nervously introduced myself to them.

I was dumbfounded and could hardly talk because my mind was deep in reverie, thinking that somewhere in the deep recesses of my mind, kaleidoscopic recollection rung a bell, that sometime in the past few months these three teenage girls with faces and names were somewhat familiar to me, have previously crossed the path of my life.

After a few moments of retrospection, my memory brought to the screen of my mind, the fact that one night these same girls attended a social dance in Abian, under the auspices of the exchange program of Barrio Captains of various villages of Bayombong and Bambang, to raise funds for their respective projects, supervised and guarded by Japanese Kempei Tais (military policemen).

Our little house was just across the bridge and they rested there for sometime before going to the dance in the Primary School a kilometer farther inside the barrio. During the dance, there were social boxes assigned to selected girls and I bade for the box of Puring.

After the dance, the Barrio Captain of Abian told the girls to spend the night in his big house nearby which they accepted. However, Puring forgot her bag containing her sleeping dress in our house. I offered to fetch it but she disagreed, fearing that I might be in harm's way in the dark night.

(As narrated to me when we were already married, my offer to fetch the bag of Puring from our house in the middle of the night endeared her feelings toward me, thinking that my proposition would prove that I could provide security and care for her.

*"Beauty is on the eyes of the beholder,"* a poet once said, and so it was a pleasure for me to behold three shivering pretty teenage girls, but one was exceptionally beautiful in my eyes' point of view, that caused my heart to throb like a locomotive gone wild!

But my retrospection was cut short when I realized that Paquito was already leading the girls away from where I was petrified like the biblical pillar of salt. I hurried after them and we conducted the girls to the house of Mrs. Pacing Francisco, a distant relative of Puring, where they lodged for the night.

In the brief conversation that ensued among us, I mentioned my recollection to the girls and they, too, remembered that particular night when we danced together in Abian. We didn't stay long and bade them goodbye, as we agreed to pick them up shortly to conduct them to the dance.

It was a starry night and the dance went on peacefully, safeguarded by many Japanese soldiers. As it was customary in every social dance, social boxes were allotted to chosen ladies. I outbade all bidders for Puring's box and I was catapulted to the realm of extreme happiness when I danced with the girl of my dreams.

After the dance, Paquito and I escorted our newfound friends back to their lodging and we returned to our own dwelling place. However, sleep eluded us for we were reminiscing the exciting and delightful acquaintanceship we had with those pretty girls. In silent consensus, Paquito and I, his guitar in hand, and my violin in mine, went to serenade the girls.

The introductory aria of the pleasant and melodious strains of the Tagalog kundiman "*Pakiusap*" wafted by the lilting sound of the violin, accompanied by the resonant and reverberating rhythm of the guitar, was the key that opened the door of the house and the hearts of our friends, who gladly welcomed and invited us inside.

Songs and music such as "*No Other Love*," "*La Golondrina*," "*Schubert's Serenade*," "*Estrellita*," and others were alternately sung and played by hostesses and guests alike, until the break of dawn signaled the singing of "*Paalamna, sinta ko*," and we departed into the semidarkness as the **aurora borealis** broke through the early dawn. In the morning the girls returned to their hometown Bayombong and we didn't know whether or not we'll ever see them again, particularly Puring, who left a void in my heart.

However, fate led our paths to cross again some months later, when one early morning I was walking under the bridge on my way to check the laborers, I saw a little yellow chick which I gently scooped in my hands and playfully caressed it while I continued walking. Then I saw a girl cooking on the ground below the house of Mrs. Pacing Francisco.

Although it was often said that curiosity kills the cat, I threw precaution in the air and politely approached the damsel. To my surprise it turned out to be no other than Puring, who was also taken by surprise and so dumbfounded that when I greeted her she only smiled that Mona Lisa smile that I remembered always painted on her lips.

I didn't know what to do momentarily other than to offer her the little chick, which after an inquisitive and doubtful look on her face, she gladly accepted. That little bird was my ambassador of good will and my pretext to visit her every morning. My daily contact with that paragon of beauty created a mutual feeling of camaraderie and special friendship between both of us.

Analogous to the theorem in magnetism that "*unlike poles attract each other*," this petite bud that was beginning to blossom, attracted the birds and the bees and was swarmed with admirers, who vied for her sweet smiles and bought all her peanuts and pancakes as their pretext just to be near her. My bridge to reach her heart was different and unique, however.

Many men were more intrepid in manifesting their affection and admiration to her but her heart responded only to this unworthy suitor who, in the deep quietude of the night, serenaded her with his violin and the lilting, melodious sound plucked the strings of her up-to-that-time quiet heart.

When one is in love, real romantic love, it seems that one is endowed with superhuman power which enables one to accomplish extraordinary things. That was the frame of my mind when Cupid's arrow pierced and controlled my heart. I was always thinking of ways and means to attract the attention of, bring pleasure to, and captivate the heart of the girl I love at first sight.

For the little things I mustered to offer her, though insignificant they were, she heartily accepted and out of innocent coyness and modesty, she simply whispered "Thank you." I discerned, though, that deep in her heart a spring of inexpressible affection gushed forth inside her, which spread throughout her lovely countenance, as manifested by her blushing cheeks, quivering lips, and twinkling eyes that briefly met mine. In that split second of eye contact, two souls were fused into one kindred spirit, bound by love. And.... *"In love, a woman is like a lyre,/ That surrenders its chords' desire/ Only to the man from pleasure springs,/ And touch softly her heart strings."*

The passion that laid dormant in my young heart grew in intensity until I could no longer suppress my pent-up emotions and, after whispering much ado about sweet nothings, I finally declared, in a quivering and passionate voice, my unrequited feelings and undying devotion to my loved one.

My seeming urgency was doubly goaded by the loathsome circumstance that made life miserable and uncertain during those troublous wartime days, when women were raped and unceremoniously and forcibly taken, under pain of death, as mistresses of Japanese Kempei Tais.

Fearing that my sweetheart would fall prey to such abominable fate, as she was then being eyed by one such officer with a crush on her, and, although I was then a very young man, unknowledgeable with the uncharted course of a married life, and she, I surmised, was barely fifteen years young, decided to spend whatever time was left for me to found a family to perpetuate my posterity.

I, therefore, proposed marriage to her as my life partner and she, too, was willing to surrender the sweetness of her love and share with this humble and ever grateful Ilocano swain whatever life was in store for us both, if there was any during those uncertain days, *"... for better or for worse, till death do us part."*

However, her mother stepped in between us, reminding her daughter, that she was still under sixteen (yeah, never been kissed), and she (as mother) had maternal authority to grant or not her consent to my proposal of marriage to her lovely daughter.

Moreover, unbeknown to me at that point in time, but which my love one narrated to me after our marriage, that the first the reason she and her family transferred their residence to Batu was, that she was being forced by her sister-in-law to marry a very much older man than she was, which she and her mother didn't like.

The second was, that a widow, friend of her mother, was cajoling the latter to consent to the marriage of her son to her daughter (Puring), but to which her mother disagreed. This disagreement led the widow to utter the threatening insinuation that she will have me arrested as a guerrilla (not true) by the Japanese Kempei Tais to prevent my marriage to Puring.

The third was, as I already mentioned above, before she will be forcibly taken as a mistress of the Kempei Tai Captain eyeing her, she pleaded to her mother for our marriage to which her mother at last consented. But there was a condition attached to her consent.

Since time immemorial it was customary for a suitor to serve in the household of the girl he wanted to marry. This traditional form of servitude is called “*Mangatugangan*” in Ilocano, “*Manilbihan*” in Tagalog, “*Pangagad*” in Leytenio, or “*Pamalaye*” in Cebuano.

My sweetheart’s mother imposed that task upon me, saying, “*To test your mettle,*” and warned me that she will “straighten” my curly hair, if I proved unruly, or infringed any of the etiquettes of a true gentlemen. (This reminded me of a similar threat my aunt Aniceta had on me several years before the war).

I obeyed without hesitation as both mother and daughter were the source of my inspiration and determination and, although the burden I voluntarily yoked myself into was tough, I performed it with all my strength and ability, notwithstanding my small size.

I had never seriously involved myself doing manual labor in my adolescent years, but at that period in time, just to gain the approval of the mother of my sweetheart, I was performing household chores that required herculean efforts to accomplish for a neophyte like me, it seemed at first.

But when I really applied a combination of physical strength, mental fortitude and spiritual resoluteness, coupled with the determination to marry the girl I love, the job wasn’t so formidable after all, and this petite man was able to move mountains, crushed them into molehills and easily vanquished the problems for and in the name of love.

After a few weeks of patient servitude, like gathering firewood from the nearby forest, chopped wood until my palms blistered, fetched water from the river with a long bamboo tube I carried on my shoulder that ached to the bone, or any other errands required of me, I proved myself equal to the task to the satisfaction of my hostess.

With such efficient efforts in serving, I gained the family’s approval of my proposal of marriage and she entrusted her daughter to her would-be son-in-law, who was free to visit or take his sweetheart for a walk any time he felt appropriate to do so.

When my mother came to know what was happening to her one and only son, she surmised that she was losing maternal control over me due to the intrusion of a stranger into our family life. When I asked, nay, implored her to accompany me to ask for the hand of the girl I love, she vehemently refused as she resented the whole affair.

Therefore, I had no recourse but to go alone to talk candidly with the whole family, banking on the previous acceptance of me by their mother, the intimate friendship I hopefully still existed with her oldest brother Rafael (the man of the house), and my faith in God.

Her uncle, Mr. Domingo Cerezo, a pre-war Provincial Warden and erstwhile Chief of Police of Bayombong, knew me before the war as the small guy with a weird, sibilant voice, (caused by laryngitis) but when he heard me talk with a normal, manly voice, and observed my gentlemanly decorum, his subtle sarcasm disappeared.

He was considered the patriarch of the family clan, being the older brother of my sweetheart’s mother, herself a widow, who depended upon him for help and advice. He set the tone and pace of the conversation and when everything was said and done, he led the family into accepting me as a would-be member of their family, with the condition for me to bring my mother with whom they’ll discuss the date and material necessities for the wedding.

I went home on a buggy (*calesa*) but to me it was a “flying carpet” that soared in the celestial realm of intense happiness. I at once hugged, kissed, and again implored my

mother to approve my marriage, with a promise not to be separated from or to abandon her as long as she or I live. That promise was easier said than fulfilled, however, and, as it was often uttered, *"Promise is made to be broken,"* mine came to naught, not entirely of my own undoing but by circumstances beyond my control.

In order to be fair and give merit where it is due, I've to state here my profound gratitude to my brother-in-law Narding, who convinced and urged my mother to grant her consent, saying that it was a very rare chance that she could have a daughter-in-law as pretty and young as the girl her only son had chosen to be his wife.

At last, my mother swallowed her pride and always motivated by her love to her children, especially to her only son, we repaired to the house of Mrs. Maria Cerezo, mother of Puring, at San Nicolas, Bayombong, where both our families discussed and agreed upon the date and provisions of the wedding.

A brief whirlwind courtship and romance – known and expressed only by those who already experienced them, which young and innocent neophytes, like us, did experimentally – ensued between my loved one and myself. The taboo that shackled youngsters, even sweethearts, during those days - to hold hands in public - was unchained from us, but kissing before marriage was strictly forbidden. Doing so would earn the ire of society and resulted to being shunned and despised by everyone, especially the women.

My sweetheart and me sang love songs, like *"Here Is My Heart,/ With all my love..."* and others while we strolled hand in hand under the rain. We sat together beneath the steel bridge, dreamily looking into each other's eyes, or just simply whispering sweet nothings into each other's ears under the moonlight.

Barely half-a-year since we first met at Batu, such happiness that overflowed in our hearts brought us to the altar with ecstatic bliss on June 19, 1944, in the Roman Catholic Church of Bayombong (now a big cathedral), solemnized by Rev. Godfrey Lambrecht, parish priest and my boyhood mentor.

Our wedding sponsors were M/Sgt. Ambrosio Birco of Bayombong and Mrs. Eufronia Paquing of San Esteban, Ilocos Sur, aunt of the late Atty. Rosito M. Europa.

While I was being dressed up by my mother, assisted by my sisters Martha, Leonor and Ansing, I was inwardly singing.... *"A man that all his time,/ Hath founded his good fortune on her love;/ it fell not, for it was founded on a rock."*

If there was a poorer couple than us, that was married during those prohibitive and chaotic days of the war, it hasn't come to my knowledge up to now. The bridal ensemble of my fiancée was rented from her mother's friend (off-white due to long storage), and my suit was borrowed from my brother-in-law Narding, hurriedly altered to fit my small size.

However, our poverty was somewhat camouflaged because when we marched together to the altar in cadence to the organ wedding music, the aisle was bedecked with bouquets of fragrant flowers, especially **cana** lilies from Baguio City, not ours, but for the couple, Mr. & Mrs. Daniel Panganiban (nee beautiful Aurora Simon – all brides are beautiful, ain't they?). They were married on Sunday previous to ours on Monday and because they immediately left for their honeymoon, they didn't clear the church of their decorations, so we used them – *gratis et amore*.

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