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## Ambassador Vargas: A Portrait

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IT was a cold new year that stole a march on the Imperial Japanese Forces advancing upon Manila a few weeks after the outbreak of the war, cold in spite of the ruddy glow of the many fires that limned the city against a grey leaden sky.

By now it had dawned on the population that the open city of Manila had been left by a hard-pressed regime to its fate.

It was not until the city was occupied that the people realized that Manila had been left not entirely to its fate but also to Jorge B. Vargas.

To a degree hard to calculate, the fear of the unknown was instantly quieted. If the masses did not know or were not sure what fate was in store for them, they at least knew Vargas: they were sure somehow he would do right by them, come what might. They had faith in him.

Thus, while no show of jubilation

greeted the first bald announcements in the press, of the negotiations which resulted in the bloodless occupation of Manila, in the cautious and wary manner of a people still strange to the ways of the victorious forces, one noted a sigh of relief and a murmur of gratitude for the man who had remained at Malacañan.

Yet, somehow, in the subdued stir of excitement, there was a feeling that, in the fall of Manila, Jorge B. Vargas was the *fall guy*. Perhaps this was a manifestation of sympathy for him in view of what was generally considered his delicate and precarious position. Perhaps it was an attempt at facetiousness. But whatever motivated it, mattered little. In the fell clutch of a crisis, it became evident that the loyalty of Vargas was not, in the final analysis, to men or parties or even to government: his loyalty was to his country and people.

And so a new chapter opened in the life of Vargas, just as a new one also opened in the history of his people. It will now be impossible to recount the events of this period without giving Vargas his rightful place or without appraising his cool courage and quick thinking in the midst of a situation in which men lost not only their heads but also their hearts—and their nerve.

\* In his "Ambassador Vargas: A Portrait," VICENTE ALVAREZ gives us a foretaste of the book-length biography of Mr. Vargas on which he has been working for some time. His close contact with the Ambassador peculiarly fits Mr. Alvarez to undertake this biographical work. He hails from Occidental Negros, Mr. Vargas' own province. Since he was 18, Mr. Alvarez has worked under Mr. Vargas, as one of the press relations officers, later as staffman on the "Official Gazette," under the Philippine Executive Commission. For more about Mr. Alvarez, see our August issue.

For Vargas kept all three: a level head, a stout heart and a steady nerve. With a prophetic sense of faith in the power that was to be, he was to succeed, at the same time, in keeping faith with the Filipino people.

## II

ALL HIS life Vargas has kept faith with the Filipino people, whom he has served long and constantly. As a public servant who rose from the ranks to positions of eminence and power, he has been true to a code of service without captious clauses or equivocal provisions. Never having been a fair-child of politics, he has not catered to the caprice of the electorate; and if he has received a vote at all in his favor, it has been only a spontaneous vote of thanks from the popular will.

As Chairman of the Philippine Executive Commission, it was not surprising that he should attempt to purify the public service by the elimination of politics from the system. In a speech to the provincial governors and city mayors in convention, he declared, "Politics must be banned; it must be banished from the field of public service, from the topmost rung of the ladder down to the humblest government post!" Those who heard him knew that he meant this, and that he knew whereof he spoke.

If anyone knows the public service system to the last pigeon-hole, that man is Vargas. In the renovation of this system to make it simpler, more economical, compact and efficient, he had only to fall back on his own knowledge and experience. Since 1917 when he became chief clerk of the Department of the Interior in the semi-autonomous government set up by the Jones Law, he had known every wrinkle and rough spot in the structure. Before that, as an ambitious young man fresh from the College of Law of the University of the Philippines, from which he was graduated with honors, he had accepted the modest position of law clerk

in the Philippine Commission. His promotion to the post of chief clerk two years later upon the reorganization of the Executive Department was probably the initial recognition of his talent and devotion to duty. After successively working as legislative secretary to Speaker Sergio Osmeña of the House of Representatives of the then Philippine Legislature, as executive secretary of the first Independence Mission to Washington, D. C., as secretary to President Manuel L. Quezon of the Philippine Senate, and again as secretary of the second independence mission to the United States, he ended up in 1920 as assistant director of Commerce and Industry. This tour of duty was to give him that intimate and index-like knowledge that would serve him infallibly as key man of the government under the Commonwealth and under the Japanese Military Administration. After serving for some time as director of posts, he was appointed chief of the Bureau of Commerce. In 1922 he became director of the Bureau of Lands, staying there long enough to consolidate his gains. In 1928 he found himself Under-Secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources, and as such was acting Secretary for extended periods. All these various positions were not elective, nor had he sought them.

He carried this distinction unobtrusively when he was given a seat in the cabinet of the Commonwealth President as member without portfolio by virtue of his position as Secretary to the President. Every other member of the cabinet was, or had been, a politician, and Vargas, the uninitiate in politics, the hard-working product of a bureaucracy, imparted a technical and business-like air to the body.

## III

WHETHER his lack of first-hand experience in politics worked to his advantage or disadvantage, cannot be easily determined. A fling into the

political arena might have given him that battle-seasoned look, that flair for the dramatic and histrionic, that uncanny perception to spot in events not of his making the elements that he could use to heighten his stature in the public eye. It might have given him color and dash, things which are usually identified with, although not indispensable to, what is conceived as dynamic leadership.

And yet it might have placed him under ineludible obligations restricting his freedom of action. It might have weighted the scales of his judgment. It might have given him a partisan bias or a personality complex. Worst of all, it might have forced a violation of his code of service.

It was probably due to the fact that he is not a dramatic figure that the appointment of Vargas as Chairman of the Executive Commission was received matter-of-factly, with neither great enthusiasm nor pessimism. The tragedy of constancy was beginning to take its toll: Vargas had been taken for granted. His proverbial reliability had become a truism that provoked practically no second thought. He had been ranking cabinet member before the year 1941 closed, and Mayor of Greater Manila when the city was occupied. It seemed natural enough that he should be Chairman.

Self-effacing as usual, he spoke only of the duty of the people of a territory in the event of occupation, preparing them to face the inevitable but making no promises to invite greater faith in him. After the terms for the occupation had been arranged and pactcd, there was no tone of proclamation in his reports of the completion of the negotiations which resulted not only in reasonable but also in generous terms for the people. Making little of his share in the affair, he justly gave the credit for its success to the high sense of justice and the noble motives of the Imperial Japanese Forces, whom he described

later as coming "not as a conquering horde but as an army of liberation," on the one hand; on the other, to the people of Manila for their good conduct.

Fortunately, this job was not of a nature new to him. To be sure, it was the most difficult, the most crucial, that he had yet to tackle. His career up to then, however, had given him a rich background for such a delicate assignment. Until recently, he had been the resilient buffer for the President of the Commonwealth, cushioning the latter against the unceasing, and often importunate, knocks of the axe-grinding throng at the gates of Malacañan. The volume of work he saved the President by using his own judgment and discretion was staggering. A man with less driving energy and gift for quick resolution and action would have been sorely confounded. He was the safety lock that prevented the trigger-temper of the President from firing away explosively at every man who provoked his displeasure. Vargas was the insulating medium, the cooling shaft for the presidential heat.

Little did he dream, in his fleeting moments of respite from this taxing job, that the tact, delicacy of sentiment and official nicety that he had, continuously been called upon to display, further polished by dealings with foreign representatives and personages in the course of his work here and abroad, were to be his greatest asset in the fall of Manila and were to be recognized and rewarded, later on, with the unprecedented honor of being the first Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Philippine Republic to the great Empire of Japan.

#### IV

TO THIS long association of his with the Commonwealth President is ascribed by many his habit of self-effacement. Whether it is a habit to be regretted or a quality to be praised, however, the fact remains that this trait of his asserted itself strongly

in his actuations as Chairman of the Executive Commission. Far from personalizing his leadership, he chose to make it representative of his colleagues in the Commission. It might be that he is much too disciplined to step out of the ranks and claim the place that was his out in front. It might be that it was again the absence of the politician from his person, of that ability for a grand gesture, a fiery exhortation, a solemn pause. When opportunities were rich for personal glory, he seemed content in busying himself with affairs of administration and his collection of Filipino paintings for his art gallery.

And when the advent of independence and the establishment of the Republic decided the matter of Filipino leadership, he took the decision in a spirit many could not understand. Only those close to him bear witness that Vargas had known and felt all along that the Philippine Executive Commission that he had headed was an expedient and nothing more, and that when the time came for our emancipation, it would be the voice of the people that should be heard and respected. By gladly accepting his appointment as Ambassador to Japan with the statement that every Filipino should be willing to serve his country in any capacity and despite personal considerations, he revealed the qualities of true statesmanship.

As Ambassador to Japan he is expected to go a long way yet in the service of his country. He has already gone a long way since that day in 1890 in Bago, Occidental Negros, when by right of birth he became a citizen of his native land.

## V

THE TOWN of Bago lies on the western coast of the island of Negros, in the midst of vast sugar lands. Here Angel Vargas y Tiongco, whose parents had emigrated from Molo, Iloilo, got himself a bride in 1890, after many ventures in self-taught en-

gineering and in agriculture. And it was on the outskirts of this town that Angel Vargas and his bride, Filomena Celis, had their first-born on August 24, 1890, a son who was baptized Jorge Bartolome.

From his father young Jorge was to learn his first lessons in nationalism and patriotism. When the tide of revolution against Spain surged in Negros, Angel Vargas was among the first to join the cause under General Juan Araneta, who was to establish a republic of his own in that island. After utilizing his skill in the manufacture of weapons like bolos, which were all they could brandish for lack of firearms, Angel Vargas was placed, together with another revolutionary leader, in command of 300 men in the march on Bacolod, which capitulated to General Araneta without a single shot of resistance.

After the establishment of the system of popular education under the American regime, while Jorge was pursuing his studies, his father was building up an industrial organization conceived and managed by himself. With his inventive mind, Angel Vargas had fashioned an iron plow to replace the wooden native implement and had embarked on its manufacture. As a young man with a pronounced engineering bent he had constructed hydraulic and farm machinery for many plantations in Negros, erected sugar mills, and constructed many mechanical devices.

So it came to pass that while Jorge Bartolome was only beginning to make a name for himself, his father had already made of the family name something of a household word in the Visayas and Mindanao, where his products had improved farming methods considerably.

After the death of Mrs. Vargas, who had been his helpmate for fifty years, Angel Vargas was left with his other love—his factory—and was actually putting up a game fight against imported motor-driven con-

traptions that had been gradually replacing his products on the farms, when the war broke out.

A few months later, while in the mountains of Iloilo, where he had evacuated, he learned that Iloilo City had been razed to the ground and that nothing but ashes remained of his factory. As if to compensate for the loss, however, he was informed by the party of Japanese who went to rescue him that his son Jorge had been appointed Chairman of the Philippine Executive Commission. Matters seemed too good to be true, until he was brought to Manila. Here he found that he still had a home he could call his own in his son's estate in Kawilihan.

## VI

KAWILIHAN, astride a rolling hillock in Mandaluyong, Rizal, is the little acre that Vargas has converted from a scraggly subdivision lot into a model home site. Under his quick roving eye and with his tireless designing hands, it has taken on a color and shape hard to define. It has never ceased growing and changing from year to year—almost from day to day, indeed. A room, a door, a window or a stair might appear one day and as suddenly disappear the next. The progressive mind of the owner, always at work—conceiving, planning, trying out one idea after another—is imprinted upon the whole place, from the tower that dominates

the scene to the neat potted plants and the cemented breaks in the gardens where gouramis and goldfish gambol in clear green waters. Of a mid-afternoon, the former Commission Chairman may be seen pottering about his plants, his chicken houses, his piggery.

One who has not followed the changes undergone by the Vargas residence since it was built is likely to be bewildered by the presence of so many influences. But throughout all, a native simplicity and sturdiness pervade, assimilating the diverse influences into a fascinating whole. The cosmopolitanism of the master is controlled by his pervasive nationalism.

Here he and Mrs. Vargas have given their eight children—five boys and three girls—a home environment of which they can justly be proud. Here in Kawilihan—where one can “while away the hours happily and forget the time,” as its name suggests—he has given Marina Yulo, of the prominent Yulos of Binalbagan, Occidental Negros, the home she dreamed of when she married him in 1919—a home that she deserves.

It seems clear that wherever Jorge B. Vargas may go with his family, he may be expected to give them a home where Filipino traditions will reign. But wherever he may go, the Philippines will always be his only home.

