

## If I Had a Million

By BERNARDINO RONQUILLO

**T**HERE IS A PLACE IN Manila to which we can repair conveniently whenever we are famished, physically as well as spiritually. It is not a place of worship, mind you, with a canteen somewhere for communicants. It is a café—a café filled invariably with a milling crowd, tobacco smoke, and the stimulating smell of coffee. The coffee is good, with or without cream; and the girls are pretty. Beggars tug at your sleeves and ask for the crumbs and the dregs in your cup. Once you take your first sip, however, you begin reflecting on contemporary life, especially that phase of it that has something to do with the survival of people like you and me. There is something in the price of the humble bill of fare and the no-tipping service that sets the mind of homespun thinkers like us to dreaming.

At the FFRM canteen there is a record crowd daily waiting to be served their coffee and coco pudding or casava cookies. Many of these people subsist on just this diet. They take their breakfast and lunch, with a thankful look in their eyes. The daily crowd is more than three times the full seating capacity of the canteen. But everybody, if he has enough patience, can be served because all customers simply stand around the tables. This is a new innovation in restaurant operation, a brilliant idea which dawned on Federation officials after more than two years of public service; it was adopted by the FFRM canteen with the purpose of accommodating more customers and at the same time eliminating the "standby"

or what are professionally known in today's business circles as "buy-and-sell" people dealing in anything from jewelry or refrigerators to somebody else's furniture or pair of pants. There are still quite a number trying to sell other people's watches or houses, or some automobile or truck they have not yet seen; but now they have to talk business hurriedly while sipping their cup of coffee as slowly as possible.

On one of those occasions when the coffee was particularly good my companion reflected aloud:

"If I had a million...well, if I had about \$20,000,000 now, I could bring prices and living costs down." This in an inspired tone that waxed eloquent with each sip from the steaming cup.

"Aw, heck," I observed, "If you had a million you won't be standing with me here in this joint. Imagine, you and me would have to wait for coffee for half an hour."

"Only a quarter of an hour," he corrected. "Oh, well, you have got to be patient. Look at the crowd. Anyway...where were we?"

"If you had a million...20 million."

"Yes, 20 million. And don't interrupt until I outline to you my whole idea in a nutshell." I smiled skeptically, but sympathetically. After all, he practically paid me to listen to him. He continued:

If I had 20 million I could do something decisive enough to bring down prices and minimise the unwieldy burden of rising living costs. I could help mitigate the hardships caused by the seemingly visible short-

ages in foodstuffs and the consequent jacking up of prices that play havoc with the pocketbook of the highest-paid mental, intellectual or manual worker. By the way, do you notice that there is actually no food shortage to speak of? Well, anyway, not if we have in mind such countries in Europe, China or other places ravaged by war for some time now. Look at our sidewalks—they are cluttered up with food vendors selling anything from peanut to hot dogs (they are “genuine” dogs, too). The only question which is really very serious is the price tagged by man to man’s prime requirement—too excessive, indeed, and rather out of proportion to the actual status of available supply.

In going into this venture I might not be able to live comfortably enough as some people with 20 million or more could, because of my idea is to practically throw away this money—but very slowly and sensibly, to my own way of thinking. In other words, I’d like to be a philanthropist in a unique way. I have an idea which may sound stupid, but it has some business points and sense quite different from the ideas that most financiers and businessmen have. That’s why you would probably call me a fool.

Well, the general idea is I’d be willing to lose this 20 million in business, if by so doing I could help decisively in bringing down general living costs to the level of the purchasing capacity of the masses. I’d invest this 20 million in prime commodities and foodstuffs and make these prime articles available to the people at least at cost, or at a loss if need be.

Let’s go down to figures, broadly and roundly. There are about 200,000 families in Manila representing some 1,000,000 people. If I sold prime commodities to these families at cost or at a slight loss, I would be in a position to feed the city of Manila with my 20 million, basing an average family’s food budget at P100 a

day. A family in actual practice would need about P200 daily to do some marketing now, but if a big corporation like mine, which could afford to break even or operate at a loss, would do the marketing for them, the daily budget of that family could be cut down to half.

I would invest 10 million in the restaurant business. I’d run a chain of restaurants or have canteens like that of the FFRM all over Manila. If each restaurant or canteen would require only about P100,000 daily as operating capital. I could have around 100 of these eating places in Manila, enough to cater to at least half of the city’s population a day, or enough to drive other operators out of business unless they come down close to the rates I charge. At the rates I would charge, I would probably just break even or lose a little; the other operators at present could actually make some 40 per cent or more profit. If they just cut down their profits by half, they might still remain in business and I would have won my point and gone far enough where all control measures to date have not.

Perhaps you could appreciate the point better if I told you that the FFRM, the rates of whose canteen and store are lower than anywhere outside, continues to make money. The Federation, I heard, declared another dividend for the past quarter and reported some profit last month. You go to a Chinese or Filipino restaurant outside and for a cup of coffee and cake you will have to spend some P30 or more; for coffee and two cookies or pudding here you pay no more than P15. You get hot waffles here for P10; outside, they charge you P12 and up. And yet the FFRM is still raking in reasonable profits.

Can you imagine how far I could go if I refused to make a profit or actually lost money with my 100 canteens all over Manila?

You’d probably say the FFRM gets its supplies cheaper than the other

restaurants. Generally, there is not much difference here; the FFRM also buys from the black market part of its requirements. On the other hand, some of the Chinese restaurant operators probably do their blackmarketing at a better bargain. They have been in the business for some time and have better connexions and wider facilities in the procurement of their requirements in foodstuffs and other prime commodities.

Now, the other 10 million I would put in the chain store business, selling prime commodities to the public—something like the FFRM store. If I had 100 of these stores, I could even probably run the FFRM itself and its member retailers out of business, for I heard they, too, have been making good profits. I'll make it unprofitable for market retailers and sidewalk vendors to do business.

Should there be an air-raid, and all other dealers raised their prices by 100 per cent or more, I'd cut down mine instead and make my competitors look ridiculous. My competitors would probably accuse me of cut-throat tactics for all I care. I would rather be with the masses than have the goodwill of a few profiteers.

With my capital I could practically corner the market in a perfectly legal way. I'd see to it that no one should run me out of business. I'd do the retailing myself through the chain stores and sales should be on a ration basis. There should be enough to take care of the 200,000 families if each family had to be given P50 worth of prime commodities daily to start with.

What about the many retailers and store owners whom I'd drive out of business. They could probably shift their energy to more productive efforts, to the creative instead of the speculative. They could undoubtedly do more good by producing and creating rather than by wasting the nation's wealth and the nation's energy and very life through destructive speculation.

Now, you'd say I'm crazy by investing my 20 million wastefully. I know it somebody else had that 20 million he would want to double it, or hold on to it and do nothing for himself and his starving fellow men. But I won't exactly waste my 20 million. I would be losing it sensibly and usefully by bringing down living costs of the heavily burdened consuming public. In other words, I'd be succeeding where the government with all its expensive control machinery has failed so far because the government itself has not been willing to do what I would do if I had the 20 million. Instead of giving away 20 million in pointless philanthropy or more than that in relief from time to time, I would be losing it gradually in business—unprofitable in terms of monetary returns but very profitable in terms of sufferings saved and goodwill gained.

Thus my 20 millions are invested in our nation's welfare, in our nation's destiny. My 20 million monetary loss would be nothing compared to what is actually being lost in terms of the people's energy and well-being, and the nation's health and very life which is now at stake due to the vicious and destructive speculation and profiteering.

If I lost only P10,000 a day, it would take about 6 years for me to go broke. If I lost P100,000 a day, I would not be penniless until after 6 months. By then I would have served my purpose and succeeded where all others have failed.

"Sounds like big talk," I commented when I saw that he had about finished, smiling whimsically but thoughtfully. There may not have been enough food in my system, but there certainly was plenty of food for thought in what he said, I reflected.

If my friend had 20 million? A hypothetical and very improbable matter, you would say. Nonetheless, it contains a challenging suggestion that our numerous *nouveaux riches* may pick up and help realised.