

# George Augustus Fabre

## The Ideal Forester

By

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Twice in a series of convocation in the College of Forestry, Dean Florencio Tamesis mentioned the world famous Forestry School at Nancy, France, which has produced great foresters. I recollected one those foresters from Dr. M. R. Jacob's lecture in Silviculture 2 two years ago on the forest of Mt. Aiguol, one of the largest reforestation works in the Cevennes which our beloved Dean perhaps was fortunate to see. Certainly, I cannot escape condemnation by my colleagues for directing this write-up on a foreigner instead of colleagues who are equally entitled to the same merits, but this man who was chiefly responsible for a vast reforestation work should be known by us as an ideal for those who may soon enter the Filipino Foresters' Grove of Fame.

The accomplishments of this humble forester can be summarized in his own words before his death: "I have been very happy, very happy. I have done what I could; if I had to recommence my life and career I would change nothing. If I had enemies I pardon them with all my heart."

George Augustus Fabre was born in Orleans, France, of mixed parentage. His mother was an English woman and his father was a native of the Cevennes mountains. His early education at the Lycee of Paris determined his future vocation as a forester. He obtained the rare privilege of attending the science excursions conducted by Herbert, Munier-Chalmas and other geologists from whom he listened, watched and developed the habit of observation. He pursued his studies at the Forestry School of Nancy and grad-

uated at the head of his class. After graduation in 1868 he surprised his masters and the administration when he demanded the least coveted position in the upper Cevennes as "*Garde General*". He got what he wanted and served unswervingly in this capacity until the outbreak of the war in 1870 when he enlisted and served for two years as Captain of Engineers. This was his only infidelity to the forests of the Cevennes.

He was not only a pioneer but also a persistent crusader of the belief "that in order to do any good, the forester must know the country in which he is situated and that the amount of good he can do is directly proportional to this knowledge of the country, realizing that frequent changes are bad for the forester and disastrous to the service." He knew his country so well, the labor resources of every village the capacities of his workers, and all that might be useful to the forest service. On the other hand, all the inhabitants of the mountains knew, respected and loved him. His great interest in them was manifested by his sincerity of purpose, encouragement, and even advice and help that were much solicited, without jeopardizing however his own nature of untarnished devotion to duty, unquestioned honesty, and clarity of his thoughts and words. Yet, he was not solicitous of vain popularity for he had only for the braggarts his good humored politeness or indulgent laughter "through which the more astute might see a mark of irony or pity."

Many whispered that he was married, so to speak, with the reforestation work of the

mountains of Lozere and Mende. Successively, he occupied the posts of sub-inspector in 1875, inspector in 1883 and conservator in 1900. But he was less seen in the towns of Lozere and Mende for he "disliked the life of the office where man loses fatally his personality." He went to the field as often as possible that people who came to see him at his meals or waited for him at a ceremony or a festival were surprised to know that he was gone. Into his mountains he went without escort and after a rapid inspection of the men and the work, he resumed his job always before the afternoon whistle. He travelled only on foot on the limestone plateaus and spurs of the Cevennes; his average size, "thin and lithe," had only muscles of steel to carry on a life of study and proficiency of his assignment. His modest meal was bread and cheese, but his large pockets bulged with field books, notes and scientific materials.

However, he stuck to his desk assiduously as much as was necessary making and carefully studying his reports before dawn; often times he prolonged the day deep into the night to improve himself by digging into archives in order to help landholders within the reforestation area of their rights. He became well versed and abreast with all the articles abroad which might be of assistance in his reforestation work even before they were mentioned by the journals in France. Ever watchful of new trends that were applicable to his country from Switzerland, Germany, Belgium and Austria-Hungary, he had already applied chemical fertilizers in his nurseries and plantations before others in the forest service knew it.

In 1873 Fabre finished his Bachelor of Science and according to his professors he would make a brilliant teacher and scientist. It was then that to do honor to the Forest Service he acceded in 1876 to work with the Geological Survey of France aside from his already tough reforestation work. He collaborated extensively that up to 1909 he published more than 60 papers devoted chiefly to geology, botany and silviculture. For the

Geographical Dictionary of France he wrote hundreds of articles on the Cevennes and the south of France. Besides his paper on the geology of the Cevennes, he further explained in four days (actually in the field) before the Geological Society the whole subject which he knew after 25 years of patient study. As field demonstrator and chief excursionist he had no equal. His technique was unsurpassed and marvellously clear so much so that in June, 1907, on top of the observatory of Mt. Aiguol, he explained lucidly the geography of the Cevennes to the members of the Second Inter-University Geographical Excursion.

Forester Fabre was admired most for his modesty. Proudly, he talked about his predecessors, like Surell and Demontzey, of their experiences and insurmountable difficulties that were soon conquered. From this slow and painful lesson, he had to show the results of 22,000 acres of young forests in Mt. Aiguol where the past generation had seen desert and angry rivers, desolate villages left by tremendous floods. Yet, he was modest about having restored this mountain vegetation aside from his foresight that this vegetation could serve as living walls to support the roads, tracks, and footpaths at the critical points of erosion. These roads and tracks already marked on his maps were envisioned by him as the goal for the completion of his work.

Unfortunately, Forester Fabre did not see his work completed for he was relieved of his assignment; but he knew that victory was certain and the Cevenne population nodded their heads in utmost appreciation although they were sorry about his relief. Before the workmen of the mountain dispersed and sought their fortune elsewhere, they accorded him honor by engraving his memorable service upon a slab of marble in order that it might not be forgotten by the mountain people of the future. The memoir was erected on the side of a road in the heart of the Aiguol mountain, signifying the homage of a peo-

ple who for nearly forty years shared with him his vigilant and discreet protection. For he looked after their welfare, persuaded them not to abandon their properties altogether but to change their methods of cultivation on unproductive soils by concentrating their efforts on those of better quality and reducing their extensive work on 400 acres to intensive work on 30 acres only.

Significantly, Mt. Aiguéal is the treasure-house of Fabre's dynamic initiative. In deserting the country because of the necessities of life, the proprietors of the Cevennes wanted to sell their lands to the State. Foreseeing the future shortage of labor, Fabre prevented them from deserting the mountains by acquiring not only their land and homes but he saw to it that the homesteads were not empty. Often times, when he could not make the buildings into foresters' quarters he made them available to workmen and their families. For "to allow a hearth to go cold, to allow a mountain cottage to crumble, is to dry up the springs from which the country draws its power." "We must find," he insisted, "the men who will come and live here in the mountains and give them concession to enable them to do so; at least we would gain by having workmen on the spot without counting the advantages of a higher order of civilization."

Faithful to his convictions Fabre crusaded to convince his colleagues and subordinates that "nature only acts slowly and that it is only in the beginning of things that she takes harm." "*Patiens quia oeternus*," he loved to repeat, "We pass quickly! it is only a small thing that 30 to 40 years of activity should be consecrated faithfully to the improvement of a corner of the country; for her it is imperishable. We pass along, others will continue what we have commenced provided that we have done our work well." Besides this he emphasized openly the importance of plant succession in the reestablishment of a forest because in reestablishing the natural order of things it is imperative not to force and demand from nature the forest to deve-

lop before the soil is ameliorated.

He was the master of the forest species of his country particularly regarding their natural distribution, their reciprocal limits, the sites suitable for their growth, and their significance as site indicators. On the other hand, he developed an interest on exotic species which at that time was a "childish whim or a deliberate joke." A sagacious observer, curious of all that he could learn, little disposed to content himself with the dictates of circulars or regulation, he tried to implement this interest in his work. Having no funds to back him up he appealed to the generosity of tree lovers, nurserymen and botanists locally and abroad and was able to introduce in the Aiguéal mountain exotic species which formed the kernel of arbore-tums in France.

Forester Fabre was one of those men whose strong classic educational background was a source of superior technique. His perspective was broad enabling him to discover immediately the multiple bearings of the questions brought to him particularly the diverse phases. During the grand period of afforestation in the Cevennes from 1864 to 1870, certain species showed signs of weakness and poor growth. He left without special authority for the Balkans and the Caucasus and returned with many observations and additional knowledge which contributed to the solution of his problems. His departure was unceremonious that one only learnt he had gone abroad three days afterwards. Quietly as his exit he would be found back at work in the morning to the surprise of his subordinates and workers.

He was exceptionally a dynamic worker. Early in the morning or even before dawn, he started his daily grind. In his work he appeared tireless and simple, wearing his uniform only to conform with the requirements of regulations. He seldom attended clubs unless very necessary. When he was invited at the insistence of his people, he did not  
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## GEORGE AUGUSTUS . . .

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know how to refuse them; he generally disappeared at the last moment because he always gave priority to his work. But if he accepted any invitation, he was jovial and a good mixer, conveying unselfishly to his people the things which he saw and observed locally and abroad. His social duty fulfilled, he slipped quietly from the occasion to resume his work.

Forester Fabre judged men by their work and not by their titles or distinctions. He preferred a hard working man rendering satisfactory service than all the "gilded fools" put together. To him a task successfully accomplished was the best method of effective demonstration.

Although he was religious in his work he was fond of his family. He spent his evenings to relax his body and mind with his four children and Madame Fabre (daughter of a forester) who was very understanding and concerned about him and his work. At home he had a frank, open and attractive face, always eager to extend his two hands to

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## SEED MUSEUM . . .

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The museum should be enlarged and the only means of doing so is for the alumni in the field to contribute samples to the collection. What is needed is a representative of the species (whether or not the seed is viable) provided all the essential features are present. The information to be submitted are: local name, official common name, scientific name, family date of collection, site elevation of mother tree, and to help build our seed museum, the only one of its kind in the Philippines. We need species particularly of the Dipterocarp family. This appeal is directed to the alumni in the field because we need samples from the different parts of the Philippines. It will give you a feeling of pride to know that you had a hand in building up our seed museum.

welcome anyone. Profoundly christian, he sought God as a necessity in the search for truth. He was religiously tolerant. It was surprising to note that although he was a Calvinist and in spite of the difficult circumstances imposed by the law concerning christians in France, he persuaded a priest over the hesitations of His Worship and the Bishop of Nimes, not to abandon the Catholic religion in a parish without resources. When that solemn hour came into the highest village of the Aiguoual mountain, it was this same priest who announced his death and recommended him to the prayers of his faithful. "He died in full possession of his fine faculties, with the serenity of a christian who has the certainty of finding a God of peace, of justice and mercy."

It may be difficult to emulate the life of George Augustus Fabre—the man, the forester and the scientist. But as an ideal for all foresters of the world there is no question about his greatness. It is in this light that we can count upon our foresters that the Philippines is not wanting. How many of our foresters are as great as Forester Fabre? There may be a number of them now but let us do them justice by writing their biographies for posterity.

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## BARRIO IMPROVEMENT WEEK

By presidential proclamation, October 4-10 of this year and every week beginning on the first Sunday of October hereafter, is Barrio Improvement Week, as sponsored by the PRUCIS. Committee chairmen for this year are the following: Mauro Baradi, legal and legislation; Agapito Burgos, labor problems; Zoilo Castrillo, public lands; Anastacio de Castro, finance and rural cooperatives; Jose Crisol, rural security; Jose Dorado, public relations; Isaia Fernando, public works; Jaime Ferrer, community organization; Felix Franco, forestry and parks; Jesus Mamisao, soil conservation; Regino Padua, health; Domingo Paguirigan, agricultural extension; Bonifacio Quiaoit, commerce and industry; Dominador Rosell, pumps and irrigation; Enrique Ruiz, education; Juan Ruiz, town beautification; Alfredo Sese, rural welfare; Manuel Sumulong, animal industry; Toribio Teodoro, membership and Deogracias Villadolid, fisheries.