By Lilia F. Mendoza

THE MEN in our neighborhood had already erected in our front yard the **abong,** roofed with fresh green coconut leaves. White, red, blue and green crepe were tied from the middle of the abong to the corners. Our old embroidered curtains, which were taken out only for baptismal parties and other special family gatherings and which smelled like burnished wood because they had been long kept at the bottom

of our century-old narra trunk, were hung around the abong by the ladies in the neighborhood. The Life Orchestra, the best in our town during the occupation, would furnish the music on the eve of the wedding.

I was leaning on the sill of our veranda watching the young men and women putting the final decorations of the abong. The strips of crepe wafted by the wind were like waves on a turbulent sea.

The young people were joking and teasing each other.

"When I marry . . . we will elope so that there will be no trouble," Mang Ilo remarked as he lifted two heavy benches, the hard muscles of his arm bulging, and placed them in one corner of the abong.

"And who would want to elope with you?" snapped Mang Iniong, who was pounding the loose earth near the poles of the abong. "You with bowlegs and crossed eyes? Pare, it would take a girl out of her mind to give you a second look."

"Be careful, Iniong," warned Mang Doming, "someone is already blushing." And they looked toward Manang Julia whose shaking hands were tying the strip of crepe blown by the wind. Then everybody teased her and she almost cried. But the noise stopped when Auntie Feling, for whom all these grand preparations were made, appeared in the veranda like a queen before her eager subjects.

"Thank you very much for coming over to help." She stopped a moment as if a lump of food was in her mouth. "Why, what happened to Julia?" Sensing perhaps the unusual air in the group she remarked, "You silly young people!" Then taking my hand, she said, "Come, Dedet. Accompany me to confession . . ."

I FOLLOWED her inside the house. Her graceful light steps and her pleasantly proportioned body made her look youthful and I gasped with pride.

But, really, Auntie Feling was getting married quite late, so our neighbors said. At first I thought she would not get married anymore since, according to Nanang Metiang, my childless aunt with whom I had spent my childhood, Auntie Feling, was past her thirty-third year. But to me she did not appear that old. I still remember how she, when going to church, combed her dark, wavy, long hair, and made a round knot at the back of her head. She had clear, deep-set eyes and no wrinkles were to be found around them. Her skin, which I dreamed of possessing someday, was still smooth and glossy.

Tata Maning, the bridegroom, was four years her ju-

nior; yet no one recognized their difference in age. He was a hard-working man, and being the only child, he had to be the family's breadwinner. Only his ways of dressing and his fondness for my cousins and me showed that he was younger than Auntie Feling.

Tatang Lacay, the eldest of my aunts and my father, approved the marriage because, according to him, he was very eager to see Auntie Feling get settled before he died, since she was the only one left single.

"Three pigs, two dozen chickens, two hundred eggs, and some fish will be enough," said Tatang Lacay, whose popular name among the barrio folks was Belong. But my cousins and I called him Tatang Lacay because he was the oldest and besides he always acted like an old chief whose word was law and whose acts drew obedience and respect. I still remember the time when his son Noling and I had a quarrel. We jeered and shouted at each other. He was awakened from his afternoon nap by our shouts and the mere sight of him made Noling and me stop. We didn't run for that would have been worse. Each of us just said, "I am sorry."

"Do you think that will be enough, Manong?" Nanang Metiang asked Tatang Lacay. "You told me yesterday the mayor and his friends would be coming together with the other high people in the poblacion," she continued, and the words "high people" made her smile with pride.

"Yes, these will be enough," he repeated.

ON THE eve of the wedding, a tall, thin man, dressed in dirty, patched khaki pants approached Tatang Lacay who was with my father giving last-minute orders to the helpers. The man's shirt clung to his body for it was wet with sweat, and a loose patch at his hips revealed unwashed underwear. His worn-out cap almost covered his eyes. I got near them when, without uttering a word, the stranger delivered a letter in a sealed envelope. With trembling hands Tatang Lacay took the letter. Grains of perspiration began to form on his forehead although it was very windy. But the man, upon hearing the sound of engines at a distance, ran as if a mad dog were chasing him.

"Jose, read the letter for me." He handed the envelope with hands still shaking. My father, too, was nervous, and the letter dropped as he was opening it.

The guerrilla officials wanted Tatang Lacay to be under the Secret Service to report on the Japanese activities in town, the letter said. Tatang Lacay wiped the sweat from his forehead

and smiled as if a thousand burdens had been lifted from him.

During the wedding, Tatang Lacay was nowhere to be found. The mayor and the other guests inquired for him as he was supposed to lead the toast with basi for the newlyweds. The tension caused by his disappearance couldn't be hidden. Nanang Metiang tried to joke with everyone but I noticed that she was very much worried. A friend of hers said, "May I have a glass of water?" She gave instead a plate of rice. My father, too, kept looking around distractedly.

"Where is Belong?" a friend asked in a suspicious voice. My father only shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

At another corner of the abong, the old men and women were dancing to the tune of "Dungdunguencanto." The onlookers threw coins to the dancers; the money was for the married couple. The dance became a riot, for the dancers were drunk. There was loud laughter when Apo Intang's saya slipped to the ground because her partner Apo Julio stepped on its tail.

At the height of the celebration, about ten Japanese soldiers arrived. Their muddy, black boots seemed to trample on everybody. Their bayonets, fixed at the tip of their rifles, seemed about to kill every person in the wedding.

The guests withdrew to the corners of the abong. Some of them attempted to run, the old women made the sign of the cross and muttered unintelligible prayers. The dancers stood immobile. One of the soldiers approached my Auntie Feling who sat at the far end of the abong still clad in her snow-white mestiza dress. I threw my eyes to where Tata Maning stood. Did he escape? Then I looked at my aunt again. All the while I thought the brute would carry her away. I was relieved when he only touched her chin. The other soldiers gathered the left-over food and they laughed mockingly as they made their way among the throng.

But the inaction of Tata Maning bothered me. Could it be that he would never raise a hand in defense of his bride?

I COULDN'T sleep well that night of the incident. The sight of deadly weapons haunted me in my sleep. Even the darkness made me restless in bed. When at last I had dropped into an uneasy sleep, I was suddenly awakened by my father.

"Dedet, Dedet," my father shook me. "Light the lamparilla." When the light spread around the room, I saw Tatang Lacay sitting before my father's writing table. His jaws were set

and he stared at the dark corners of the room which were not reached by the faint light of the lamparilla.

"Jose," he began, "I am going to dictate to you my report and translate it in English."

And save for the rhythmic creaking of the typewriter and Tatang Lacay's low voice not a sound could be heard. Sometimes I could hear the rustling of the leaves of the caimito trees in our backyard which would make Tatang Lacay suspicious lest someone would be around. He dictated that he climbed the big mango tree not far from our house and saw the Nippons run away with the left-over food.

Tatang Lacay did well in his patriotic duty. Sometimes I would find myself praising his excellent services for the guerrilla cause. Some Japanese on patrol would often pass by him and stop to fondle his favorite rooster.

"Kumbawa," he would say, and add an exaggerated bow, his head nearly touching the ground. The atabrine-faced Japanese would only smile showing their big unbrushed teeth.

Tatang Lacay's wife died at a time when she needed him most. His child and his duty to the Secret Service conflicted.

"I will bring the children over here, Metiang. Anyway, Maning and Feling are here to help you around the house." Thus he devoted much time to his reports and observations.

Tatang Lacay rarely came home. He was always busy observing every step and plan of

the Japanese soldiers in the town garrison. Sometimes he would arrive hungry and tired but he always managed to give a smile of assurance to everybody in the family.

"Take care of your health, Manong," my father said as he typed his reports. "You've become pale and thinner during these days."

"Don't worry, Jose," he patted my father's shoulders. "My work really needs a lot of sacrifice; I might even give my life for the sake of our country." As he was about to get his buri hat from the deer's horn that was nailed against a post, he turned to Nanang Metiang who was darning his worn-out pants.

"Metiang, I noticed that Feling is already with child. Tell ier not to work so hard. Tell Maning to gather vegetables every day. Apo Julio's field has plenty of fresh camote tops and saluyot. I want the baby to come healthy," and he put on his hat that smelled acrid due to too much sweat.

THE FOLLOWING week several battalions of foul-smelling, dirty-looking fierce Nippons passed. According to Tatang Lacay's report, they came from Vigan, the capital. There were so many of them that, afraid, we abandoned our homes and went to a wide field across a river. We built a calapaw, an improvised shelter the roof of which was only two layers of cogon. Its bamboo floor, that creaked when we moved around, was matted together by lanuti. We did not make a ladder anymore since the floor was only about one-half yard from the ground. Also, there was no partition inside. It was too small to divide into rooms. The smell of dry cogon was enough to make us all feel at home.

Every morning I would see the bright rays of the sun glittering on the clear waters of the river that rippled by. I would see the rolling plains around h a l t e d by the saw-toothed Cordillera mountains. There were scattered calapaws far from us.

For several days we would watch smoke and flames coming from the burning houses near the road. Some bolomen, their sunburnt faces half-hidden by their long, unruly hair, would pass by our calapaw. Sometimes they would drop by and ask for a drink of water.

"Have all the houses on both sides of the road been eaten by fire?" Nanang Metiang asked them.

"Everything is ash. And do you know the lame, old woman beggar who lives alone in a leaning h o u s e near the big mango tree?" asked one.

"Yes, Why?"

The boloman wiped his sweat and pushed the hair that cov-

ered his face. "She was tied like a pig and thrown into the flames."

When another batch passed by again, this time with some bundles of clothes, probably saved from the fire, my father intercepted them.

"Have you seen a man of about fifty, his hair all white, dressed in khaki with a black band around his left arm?"

"No," answered one lowering his bundle. "But there were many who were massacred in the poblacion last night."

All of us began to be worried since Tatang Lacay didn't appear for days. However, our fears were lessened when he arrived in the calapaw with three wounded men. Where he picked them up, he didn't say. Since there was no other place to house them, the other calapaws being far from us, we accommodated them. I shook at the sight of blood oozing from their wounds. Nanang Metiang, my father and Tata Maning helped in bandaging the wounds of the men. Some medicinal herbs gathered by Tatang Lacay along the river bank were applied to stop hemorrhage.

Every morning I heated water to wash the wounds. Nanang Metiang would do the dressing since Auntie Feling was too heavy with child to help. Not only that. Tatang Lacay and Tata Maning were afraid she might faint at the sight of blood.

At night I would be awakened by the sighs and cries of the wounded men. Sometimes I would cover my face tightly with my blanket and press my ears close to my pillows in order not to see or hear what was happening around. But I would feel the shaking of the floor of the calapaw as the men tossed.

ONE MORNING I woke up earlier than usual. It was unusually cold and I could hear the slow drip-dripping of dew from the cogon roof on the tiny stones below. I wound my blanket around me and tried to linger longer in bed. But when I saw streams of light entering the calapaw, I got up reluctantly. I wiped my eyes with the lower part of my skirt.

Lowering my skirt I saw Nanang Metiang and the rest, except Auntie Feling, giving a sponge bath to one of the soldiers. He was as stiff as a log. Then I felt I was shaking; I didn't know if it was due to the cold morning or to the sight of death in front of me. They dressed him with one of Tatang Lacay's old white trousers.

Nanang Metiang motioned everyone to kneel. Auntie Feling led the prayers. We said one Our Father and three Hail Mary's.

Tatang Lacay left immediate-

ly after the burial. Nanang Metiang and I went down to the river to wash the blanket used by the dead man. On the path to the river, a black cat crossed our path.

"Isn't that a bad omen?" I asked Nanang Metiang who, I had learned, was very superstitious.

"Yes. But I hope God will take care of everything. Come on, let's hurry up," she said after giving a last look at the black cat that limped into the bushes that lined the path.

I noticed that the river that wound along the evacuation area had decreased in width since our arrival. The trees around became withered. The dead leaves were piled rotting along the bank.

When we arrived home, we saw Tata Maning kneeling in a corner and my father beside Auntie Feling. "I think it's time for the baby now Manang," my father said in a worried voice. Nanang Metiang put down the batya and went towards the three. She knew how to deliver babies. She ran her fingers on Auntie Feling's stomach and shook her head.

"Not yet."

Dusk began to envelop the area. It was unusually silent. I couldn't even hear the chirping of crickets in the dry fields around. Sometimes I would peep through the door of the calapaw and see the people inside. Tata Maning kept walking to and fro. The two soldiers were at one end of the calapaw, and Auntie Feling at another. Her moaning stopped for a while.

As I was stirring the hot linugaw for the other two men, I saw a blackbird fly across the fields of withered corn. When I stood up to get a bowl I saw a man slowly crossing the sluggish river. His head was bowed and his shoulders were drooping. As he neared, I knew that it was Tatang Lacay from the black and white shirt he wore. He stumbled at the door of the calapaw. Nanang Metiang and my father and Tata Maning helped him up. The wooden ladle with which I was stirring the linugaw dropped to my side when I saw the blood gushing from his breast and left thigh.

DURING that night we kept vigil. Blood continued to drip in spite of the preventives

Nanang Metiang applied. Several sheets were already soaked with blood. I tried to close my eyes but the picture of the suffering old man horrified me. The oil of the lamparilla was already too little to give enough light. I threw a glance at him.

Meanwhile, Auntie Feling's labor pains came again. The intervals were short this time. It was a good thing that the other two soldiers were getting better. Nanang Metiang ordered Tata Maning to heat water. "The baby might come anytime now." She exchanged places with my father. He would attend to Tatang Lacay while she prepared rags and oils for Auntie Feling.

I squatted at one corner of the calapaw. My eyes travelled from the two soldiers to Tatang Lacay and then to Auntie Feling. At past midnight, Tatang Lacay's moaning subsided a little. But afterwards, with the aid of the dying lamparilla I noticed that he was already very pale. He set his jaws as if to gather enough courage to fight death. After a few moments he passed.

I didn't know what happened afterwards. But it seemed as if I could hear voices and music similar to that played by the Life Orchestra days ago. Suddenly I was awakened from my reverie by the loud cry of a baby. I wiped my eyes with the back of my hands. And by the bright rays of the sun penetrating through the recesses of the calapaw, I beheld Auntie Feling's boy, healthy and robust.

* * *

An Exception

DO YOU think all motorcycle cops are heartless monsters? They tell of one up New England way who bagged two speeding cars at the same time, ordered the drivers to pull up at the side of the road. The lead car had a dazzlingly pretty girl at the wheel, and the appreciative young man in the second car whispered, "Go easy on her bud," as the cop strode by, summons book in hand. A few moments later the girl drove off, and the cop approached the young man. He handed him a slip of paper. It contained the girl's telephone number. "Get going," he ordered, "and no more of that 70-miles-an-hour stuff, or you'll never live to use this."