

Home for Christmas.

By MAXIMO RAMOS

A LONG ABOUT THE MIDDLE of 1943 Gat mailed a letter to Maul, the capital of the province. Addressed jointly to Aquino, Valdez, and Villanea, three men who owned the homesteads adjacent to his own, the letter urged them to come and join him in Lala. For effect Gat pointed to the hunger and misery which his friends and their families were putting up with in Maul, contrasting this with the quiet abundance and the cool contentment to be had in the homestead.

The answer to this letter came in September. Gat's friends replied that they knew how necessary it was for them to leave Maul, but the lack of transportation and the perils attendant to travel over the road to Lala made it impossible for them to join him. They sounded light-hearted about it, but Gat felt that a little more prodding would make them pack up. Moreover, Christmas was nearing and he counted on a happy reunion in the homestead with his comrades in arms.

Promptly Gat went to mail a rush order with the wheelwright at Maul for an extra-large wagon, the need for which he had long felt in marketing his ever-increasing farm yield. Another letter he sent to Aquino, inclosing a money order. He asked Aquino to buy him a strong Indian bull. "Hitch the bull to the wagon," he continued, "and dump your family, the Villaneas, and the Valdezes into

it. Then hightail it to Lala, and be here for Christmas. Come to Lala and be done with the dog's life."

That letter got them. That, at any rate, added to the effect produced by the cart-load of grain, poultry, game, and other foodstuffs from the homestead which Gat had sent them earlier in the year. Now Aquino went into a huddle with the other two men. They paid the wheelwright an additional amount to finish the wagon as quickly as he could and to make it roomy enough to hold their three families and the belongings which they had to take to the jungle with them.

Aquino went to purchase the finest bull in the Pantar ranch on the following day. Their houses were rented out and their unessential gear disposed of; their wives busied themselves with buying mosquito nets, household medicines, soap, matches, thread, and such things which they felt would be hard to get in the jungle. The men also bought themselves ploughs and other tools in opening up the land.

"This is a lot of Christmas presents for the highway robbers," remarked Borja, a cynical neighbour.

"We hope part of it will go through," they replied cheerfully.

In a few weeks they were ready to leave for the homestead. The men rigged up a specially tall covering for the wagon and then loaded the vehicle with their families and their wares.

"On this day," observed Aquino's

wife as the wagon crossed the steel bridge which was going to start them on the long, uncertain road to Lala, "big things began for this part of the world."

"I hadn't realised that," replied Mrs. Valdez. "December 8—the start of the Greater East Asia War, and now—our setting out for new worlds to conquer."

"So many things have happened since," said Aquino.

"Things like eternally rising prices and eternally falling avoirdupois," said Villanea, exhibiting his loose waistband.

"What are temporary difficulties like those to freedom and dignity and honour?" said Mrs. Valdez.

The late-risen moon was a silver ship spilling cool silver over the dawn world. The silver wagon followed the silver road which wound in and out of the silver hills. The mountain wind flowed like a thin, cool liquid, and on silver wings a nightbird flitted over silver fields of fern and broomgrass.

As day broke they passed Pantat. The Indian bull lowed cavernously to its haunts that it was leaving forever. From a high-topped Moro house among the banana trees a rooster sent out spurt after spurt of belligerency. The morning breeze swept over the river, breathing health and trailing the scent of unmowed grass.

The wagon stopped at a spring by the road, and soon a fire was roaring under a large kettle. Breakfast consisted of rice gruel—the kind of preparation which had been their breakfast, lunch, and supper in Maul for months and months. Valdez and Aquino disappeared in a clearing by the road, and shortly returned with a handful of string beans and some eggplants; hurriedly boiled with salt, these formed a welcome addition to the meal. Breakfast was over in a little while, and soon the bull was trotting down the pebbled road again.

Lunch consisted of the unfailing

rice gruel, plus some paddy snails which the menfolk had picked up in the rice-fields. Travel was resumed promptly after the noon meal, so that by nightfall the group pulled up in the barrio of Momungan. They parked by a house which was Aquino's favourite stopping-place before the war. They found it locked up, but learned from the neighbours that the owner had evacuated months before to his homestead in Dalipuga; so they moved on to an empty nipa shack.

Momungan, a mere eighteen kilometers from Maul, was not overabundant with cereals. But already here, rice cost one-third less than what it did in the capital. They procured six gantas of rice and six more of corn, and they bought chickens and pork, which the women dressed and salted to keep against hard days ahead.

After they had been, in Momungan two days the women and children had sufficiently recovered from the sore muscles and aching joints which the jolting in the wagon had given them. Early at dawn on the following day the group took to the road again.

The going was easier now, though the road went deeper and deeper into tiger-grass and cogon. The travelers made Buro-on before dusk on the same day. Buro-on was but thirty-eight kilometers below Maul; yet what a difference that made! Here they could have fine fresh sea-fish for the ridiculously low price of P10 a kilo, as against P200 in Maul. One never realised till then what a little matter of transportation could mean.

They purchased a goodly store of fish, which they dried at the beach and stored away. They spent the whole of three days in this delightful fishing village, feasting on boiled barracuda and bonito, roasted pampango and mullet, oysters, and crabs with meat as firm as copra. The men climbed the coconut palms that stood on the shore drooping with unpicked

fruit; before they resumed their journey, they loaded the wagon with a hundred young nuts which they felt would be needed farther down the way where safe drinking water would be hard to get.

From Buro-on the road went parallel to the shore, undulating southwestward in the direction of Pangil Bay and Zamboanga. To their right was the blue sweep of the inland sea; on the left the shaggy mountains were like gigantic cattle coming down to water. A hot day's travel brought the party to Kausuagan, now a village of charred ruins where the once cultivated land had been taken over by weeds. Gallinules and watercocks, coots and moorhens now nested in the marshy paddies where rice and corn used to be grown; miserable shacks were scattered about.

"When we wake up tomorrow," said Villanea, "I'm afraid we shall be minus some of our things."

"I don't like the looks of the place, myself, but it's more risky to keep to the road at night," said Aquino.

"And my poor old bones must have rest from the endless rattling in the wagon," said Villanea's wife.

Valdez went to hide the bull and the wagon behind a thick screen of bushes and piled fresh fodder before the animal. Then he took out a trusty chain which he had brought along for the purpose. Passing one end of the chain around the neck of the bull, he secured it with a stout padlock. The other end he fastened to the axle of the wagon with another lock. "If that can't save our transport," he said, "only God or a battleship can."

After sunset the men made a strategic dispersal of their gear and provisions, hiding these under bushes and camouflaging them with mallows, capers, and ferns. A filling dinner of boiled rice from Momungan and boiled crabs from Buro-on was then had by all, and after that they promptly retired into a small deserted hut.

"Now," Aquino held an erect finger

before the children, "the robbers must not know there are descent folks here. The boy or girl who makes a noise tonight will walk tomorrow with his Pa, instead of riding in the wagon."

"And during the rest of the journey he will drink canal water instead of refreshing coconut water," added Mrs. Valdez.

Not a single sound came from the hut that night. But when day broke and the men went to retrieve the things they had hidden, they found that every single item had been spirited away. Seeing the smoke of culinary activity in the evening, the thieves must have sneaked down and observed the proceedings from well concealed vantage points, then made off with their loot during the night. However, the wagon, the bull, and the cooking utensils were safe. Without wasting tears over their loss, they picked camote leaves growing wild in the deserted patches, boiled it and called this breakfast, then resumed their journey in haste.

They made Kolambugan, twenty-five kilometers farther on, before five in the afternoon. This once-prosperous town which had grown around a British lumber yard had been burned down in the early days of the war, and it, too, was now a ghost town. At this point the group paused to do some figuring. They had gone seventy kilometers in nine days, stopovers included. It was a hundred and ten kilometers from Maul to Lala. Take seventy kilometers from one hundred and ten, and it left them only forty more.

"At the rate we've been going, we should be in Lala in five or six days," said Valdez.

"Today is December—say, what's today?" asked Mrs. Aquino.

No one knew, and a recapitulation of the journey had to be made. After summing up the days during which they had traveled from one point to another, and adding to that the days they had spent at each stopping-place,

they figured that today was December 16.

"December 16. Six days from today will be December 22," concluded Mrs. Aquino with a bright glint in her eye.

"Hurrah!" shouted all five children together. "Christmas in the home-
stead!"

"If God permits," cautioned Villanea and his wife.

"If God doesn't permit, we'll still have an allowance of three days," came the defiant answer from Romeo, Valdez' son.

"Junior!" warned the boy's mother.

An inquiry at Kolambugan revealed that Mr. Echiverri, ex-supervising teacher of Kolambugan, had retired to his farm a kilometer behind the town. Thither they were led, and before long they were knocking at the gate of a comfortable farmhouse. Mr. Echiverri was some sort of a village grandee hereabouts. He was well respected even by the lawless elements and lived in this seclusion without molestation from anyone. He now met the weary travelers with a cordial welcome.

"Rest at least two days with us," said he. "You deserve a month's rest after traveling so hard."

"Plenty of time to get to Lala for Christmas," said his wife.

When the two days with the Echiverris were over, travel was resumed. Not, however, before their host had restocked the wagon with enough provisions to last them till the end of the year. There was rice, corn, cassava, taro, and squash, besides sugar, salt, venison, and dried fish. But perhaps even more important than these, Mr. Echiverri gave them a note, meant for the bad eggs on the road, requesting that the bearers be spared from annoyance on their way to Lala. The note was written in the Moro and Visayan tongues, and both in Arabic and Roman characters.

"That should give you safe conduct as far as Tubod, at least," he said.

The letter worked like magic. Along the stretch of wild, rarely travelled road beyond Kolambugan, armed ruffians fell upon the travelers no less than half-a-dozen times, only to spare them after reading Mr. Echiverri's note. The trip to Tubod took them the better part of three days, however; the rains in the preceding monsoon season had wrought havoc on the newly constructed dirt road, making travel over it extremely difficult. Many a time the human cargo had to alight to allow the men to lift the wagon over obstructions. It was December 21 when they finally got to Tubod. They had four days in which to make Lala, eighteen kilometers farther on, over the most uncertain part of the way, and where Echiverri's magic note had no more potency.

At ten in the morning, before they had gone two kilometers beyond Tubod, a score of heavily-armed toughs with long, ragged beards and evil looks stopped the wagon. For all the men's unkempt appearance, their tight coats were of rayon fabrics of expensive weave, though badly in want of soap. They had diamond rings on their fingers, and their wolen trousers tapered down to an anticlimax of bare feet and spread toes. Their chieftain was a small mean-looking man with agile movements. He was heavily convoyed by *buyo*-chewing men with rifles on their shoulders and revolvers and *kampilans* on their waists. With a rasping voice he ordered the men, women, and children out of the wagon. The three citified men had no chance. - They each had a dull bolo, to be sure, but it would have been stupid to make these against the armory of the seasoned highway pirates seven times their own number.

On being shown Echiverri's letter, the bandit leader tore it up. There was no choice but to leave everything and proceed to Lala on foot. Valdez, however, would not let go of the bull and the wagon. "These do not belong to us," he said in broken Moro. "Take

everything that is ours, but please leave us the wagon and the bull."

Without a word the chieftain hit him across the face. Cut to the quick, Valdez would have retaliated with a vicious hay-maker at the pint-sized rascal, but Aquino and Villanea had the quickness of getting hold of him before he could further complicate matters.

"Eighteen kilometers to walk to Lala, without provisions and with these five kids on our hands!" said Mrs. Villanea dolefully.

"And it's December 19, a mere six days before Christmas," added Mrs. Valdez.

"That's a lot of time," said Romeo. "Eighteen over six are three. Even if we go only three kilometers a day we shall be in the homestead on time for Christmas."

"If God permits," snapped Mrs. Villanea.

But it was eighteen kilometers of miserable roads walled in on both sides by thick jungle. It was just as well that the bull was spared the agony of pulling the loaded wagon over that path. And when they began to look for food, food for nine hungry mouths in this desolate wilderness, and when they found any edibles, to prepare it for their meals—then even Romeo became disheartened.

They spent most of each day looking for bamboo shoots, tops of edible fern, wild beans, plantains, and snails. When they had secured enough grub, they cooked it in pots improvised from green bamboo joints, over fire which they kindled by rubbing two sticks together. They had also to boil water to drink, carrying it along with them in jars made of bamboo tubes. On the day they were despoiled of their means of transportation and their remaining belongings, they made less than two kilometers. The second day they did three kilometers, thanks to a cloudy sky and to their good luck in obtaining food easily. But on the third

day the women and children were too exhausted to walk, and they were unable to gain a meter of ground. The men, however, made use of the enforced delay by gathering enough bamboo shoots and plantains to last the party three days.

"Almost fourteen kilometers more to Lala, the land of boiled corn and fragrant rice and roast duck," said Aquino that night.

"Tomorrow is December 22," added his wife "We've averaged but a kilometer a day."

"A kilometer a day keeps the duck sure away," quipped Valdez.

But the others were too sleepy to laugh, and soon they were snoring at each other under the tree which served as their roof.

By four o'clock the following morning breakfast was over. They began walking at a brisk pace, determined to make up for lost time. The men helped the youngsters by occasionally carrying them on their shoulders. By lunchtime they had passed four kilometer posts. A short rest followed their noon meal, then they walked on again. Before the party encamped for the night, three kilometers more had been done.

"Not a bad day's work," said Aquino. "Seven kilometers today. It leaves us less than that many more to do in two days."

"Fat chance we have to make it. I'm run ragged," said Mrs. Villanea.

"And look at my blisters and bruises!" Mrs. Valdez broke down.

"And the thorns in my soles!" joined Rose, her ten-year-old daughter.

"That Gat! I'd like to claw him for luring us into this miserable trap of a trail," said Mrs. Aquino.

"Keep a stiff upper lip now," said her husband. "Gat doesn't know the road is this bad. He has not seen it for at least a year, for he markets his products at the post-office town northwest of Lala, from where mail is sent by boat through Iligan to Maul."

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The next day was December 23. It

rained almost all morning, and they could not start till after lunch. They walked in the mud for two kilometers, then retired to a deserted grass hovel by the road, rain-soaked and travel-worn.

"We can still get there by tomorrow evening, can't we, Pa?" inquired Romeo appealingly. "If God permits?"

"And if Rose thinks about the thorns less and shakes her legs more," replied the lad's father.

But the weather took a turn for the worse on the morning before Christmas. The wind tore off the branches of the trees, lightning zigzagged over the jungle, while the roaring thunder shook the world. But on they walked in the raging storm. It was the final lap of a very trying journey, and even Mrs. Villanea was determined to get the trip done that day. Lunchtime found them passing Kilometer Post 106. They paused to eat their remaining stock of bamboo shoots boiled with camote leaves, then off they went again.

Finally came what the three men had agreed to keep as a pleasant surprise for the women and kids. At Kilometer Post 108 they walked onto a first-class asphalt road, wide and even and glossy-black in the rain.

"Don't tell me we're about to reach Manila," said Mrs. Valdez.

"It's only the road from Gat's door to Baroy," said her husband.

"Baroy?"

"The market town where Gat and

Tuazon sell their farm produce. This road goes past the homestead.

Before twilight the children were excitedly making guesses whether the next clearing would not be *the* homestead at last.

"I hear Moro gongs!" Rose soon announced. "I bet that's a folk dance in some Christmas celebration."

"I can smell roast duck and venison already," seconded Romeo.

"And the fragrance of boiled young corn," said little Nita, her imagination getting the better of her.

"Ah," sighed Villanea at last. "It has been a difficult journey, this!"

"We've been on the road seventeen long days since December 8," put in his wife. "What difficulties we have met!"

"Don't let's be a kill-joy now. We have arrived," said Aquino.

"There go children's voices singing 'Silent Night,'" said Rose.

"Say, men," said Valdez, "I propose that we enter the scene singing *We three kings of Orient are*. I alone present unto Gat and his wife three gifts; namely —" and here he pointed to his shivering, mud-splattered daughter Rose and to Romeo—"cold, and dirt, and Frankenstein."

But neither of his two children heard his kidding. Both had joined the others in a full-throated chorus, singing "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing!" Their voices had lost all trace of weariness and carried clear through the storm and the jungle shadows to the cheerful warmth of the hearth in the homestead.

