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EDITORIAL COMMENTS

Not His Talent But His Character

FOR THE LAST EIGHT AND FORTY YEARS, WE HAVE REMEMBERED Rizal, in June and December. On these occasions, we have extolled his many-sided talent and virtues. Every community had orators, poets, and songsters eager to pay tribute to "the Greatest Man the Malay Race ever produced." Thousands of beauties have been crowned to honour this exceptional genius, who was physician, oculist, linguist, philosopher, poet, novelist, playwright, painter and wood-carver, musician, fencer, scientific agriculturist, naturalist, mentor, crusader, nationalist, patriot and martyr. Periodicals from time to time managed to unearth an interesting anecdote or a piece of writing or thought by or about him to reveal his exceptional ability in this endeavour or that, and why he surpassed many men by nature and by training, and why because of his many-sided genius he is a worthy example to young and old alike. Which, without doubt, he is.

But somehow, so much attention has been directed towards his personal abilities and the admirable facility with which he cultivated new interests and branched out into almost any activity in which, with little effort, he invariably excelled. His private life and his secret loves were ventilated and wondered at. Who is the admiring young or the credulous old who has not marvelled at the fantastic versions of the manner in which he fell, his heart pierced by the alien dominator's bullets?

Perhaps through no fault of well-meaning hero-worshippers, Rizal's life has become a rarity regarded with unreasoning admiration and curiosity, its true meaning all but lost to the generations most called upon to translate into living reality the ideals he lived and died for. In his people's fuller realization of his consuming passion for national dignity and self-respect, engendered in the firm character and national solidarity of the Filipinos, is Rizal's greatness measured. True, we were not wanting in correlating some aspects of his moral and patriotic fervour to an occasional excitement or an attempt to stir up a lukewarm Filipinism;

but, since the shallow interests and exotic alien distractions of the past called for nothing more substantial than lip-service and even this was gradually lost in elaborate programmes of little civic value, we had to wait for a global war to bring us the blessings of his restoration to the level of his true worth and stature.

We missed Rizal's meaning, not so much by a dullness of wit or deliberate intent, as by our insistence to measure his greatness not in terms of human character but in terms of the natural gifts considered and appreciated as private assets necessary to individual success. Taken individually, and given the opportunity, the Filipino is the equal if not the better of other individuals elsewhere in the world.

And therein lies our strength and our weakness as a nation: that the individual Filipino can be superior but as a national unit weakened by the dearth of individual talents ready to bury personal glory and convenience to the necessary self-effacement that national unity demands. In our eagerness to demonstrate individual aptitudes and to glory in their cultivation, we think not in terms of the honour or the disgrace which we cast upon that sum-total of the combined human volition and character we call the Filipino nation, but rather of our narrow individual self. We quite miss the point that had we been born in some Polynesian atoll, we would not have been afforded the opportunities and the natural talent in which our nation and race have been favoured to excel, that we owe it all to the country that gave us birth and, of course, to a just God who has seen it in His infinite wisdom to give us this land.

Thus is Rizal's true worth lost in the individualistic buy-and-sell man who believes that the country had been made for him to do as he pleased and that the fellows who are compelled by their principles to stay away from the fortunes of the black market are unfortunate dullards. He has forgotten that Rizal could have been a very rich man had he chosen to utilise his abundant talent to satiate his capacity for personal wellbeing and the good life, that the fact that Rizal's character firmly attached the patriot to an uncompromising principle which led to his martyrdom, far from qualifying Rizal as an unfortunate dullard, confirmed his greatness and hold up this nation to the just admiration and respect of the whole world. Rizal dies in those of us who are lost in our ego, who think more of what we can get in terms of personal wellbeing—abundant cash, lot, rice, privileges, bonuses, possessions and comforts procured in a manner which we hide even from ourselves, personal security, freedom from inconvenience, or the solicitude to live at any cost and under any circumstance.

Rizal is worlds apart from us in that Rizal had character, which alone makes a man; and he had principles by which a true man always abides with all the strength of his character, no matter to what personal misfortune his attachment to those principles may lead him. When his friends offered him a fake passport with the wherewithal and the opportunity to escape the injustice of an impending martyrdom, like Socrates of an earlier day, our hero chided his well-meaning friends for inducing him to run away like a guilty criminal, away from the only country and people he had learned to cherish and whom he must never abandon to their hapless fate. He accepted an unjust verdict and faced death with the joy of one who is assured in his heart that death would at last release him from the narrow prison cell of individual self and take him away to the infinite and eternal felicity of an ever-fulfilling deathlessness, and to crown with it his people and those of other climes and ages that might derive great rewards therefrom.