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The Little Town of Cuenca in Batangas

I
From those snatches of conversation one has with his chauffeur to relieve the tedium of long drives, we had learned from Vicente something about the little town of Cuenca, in Batangas. Vicente is a widower, 35 years old; he has reached the age of discretion, picked up sufficient English to make himself understood after sufficient probing and repetition, and possesses, besides a natural faculty for observation, an abiding love of his town, Cuenca. He is also respected there, where his neighbors call him *Man*; Vicente. This Tagalog term of respect is pronounced with the *a* broad; it is not our *man*. Vicente is a religious man. When we pass funeral processions, which one does perform in these hurrying days, both our hats come off; but besides this deference, merely to human woe, his hat is doffed to every church and chapel, while his lips move in silent prayer.

He isn't a bit inrosor about his religion, he is just punctual about it, conscious of it. How he endures us is still a mystery, he being always in complete command of his temper, and our own over on the trigger; but we think the explanation is that we are foreign, possibly noncatholic—though he has never inquired—and we may be able to get by with a more vigorous vocabulary than a peasant may permit himself. We sent him back to Cuenca once, sick; a little undue exposure had provoked hemorrhages of the lungs. An herb-doctor uncle treated him, gave

him rest and diet, and he returned to Manila—to another armo. But after awhile he came back to us, wanting to work again.

"But you're driving for Dr. R You have a new, closed car, not an old open one like ours."

"Yes, sir. But you see . . . that is, I rather . . ."

Then we burst out at him.

"That's it, sir! I like your custom!"

So he drives for us again. He knows every street and alley in town, apparently; we have never given him an address he couldn't find; he threads the traffic skillfully, and in four years has never so much as scraped a fender. Out on the provincial roads, however, he is a little disconcerting at times; he is never satisfied until every car going our direction has been left behind. Cars on provincial roads, where he can really put his skill to the test, are to him what rabbits are to Kansas grayhounds—objects to swoop down upon, instinctively. He is about 4-1/2 feet tall, a Visayan from Cebu—a *Cebuano*. But Cuenca is his town by marriage, and the Tagalog people his people by adoption. In his scriptural studies he must have read "Whither thou goest, I shall go," and applied it tail end today. His Tagalog wife is buried in Cuenca. He requested, very respectfully, a vacation of several days then; the funeral cost him thirteen pesos, and was so cheap because they did not have the priest go to the grave.

The charge also included use of the grave for five years. Then there will be nothing but bones, and these might be tossed away. But Vicente isn't going to have it that way; he is poor, but not of the very poorest, and he is going to give another five pesos next year and keep the grave unmolested. It is a very leading thing in his life, this hallowed reverence for his dead.

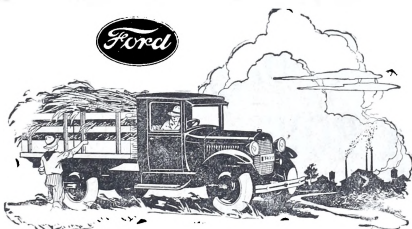
"Let us go Cuenca!" we proposed to him one Sunday morning, the day being one of those glorious Philippine winter days when the call of the road is too strong to resist.

"Cuenca?"

"Yes; let us visit your town."

He was as pleased as a chap can be. And somehow, though we were off quite early, he got there ahead of us, and lunch was ready in his modest wattle cottage at the end of the road! There was a table, knives, forks and spoons, a clean white cloth, napkins. Lunch began with soup, continued with chicken, potatoes and greens, and wound up with dulce and bananas; and then a cup of Cuenca coffee, grown right there on Cuenca's hills. And for all this liberal and instant hospitality, our hosts were apologetic, though they had even provided bread and butter. We looked about their acreage, small and poor; and but one work animal, a dun bullock, typical of the Batangas breed. It was old; soon the butcher would be called, a bargain struck, and then a new one would be tethered in the bamboo stall under the *camachili*

(Conclusion on page 39)



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The Little Town of Cuenca in Batangas

(Concluded from page 3)

tree where this old one was standing now, munching his meager fodder.

Then we looked upon the faces of our hosts once more. Bred of the soil ourselves, the penury here was apparent to us. But those faces were brave: in fact that day they were genuinely happy, and the daily anxieties were kept deep down and well hidden.

"Why, Vicente, your ox is old."

The children who had brought the fodder got it. It echoed in their merry throats: "Ano, ano?" queried the grandmother at the window. "What, what does he say?" "Ang vaca ay matunda dao!" He says the ox is old! So the little girls in calico camisolas interpreted our appraisal of the livestock.

The crone laughed too, and Vicente made great stories of our sagacity in farm matters. But if the ox was old, there was a pig in the fattening pen—a pen all bamboo, fog, shade, and all—and the pig was growing lustily and would soon weigh 200 pounds. Then it could be sold for half the price of a young ox. Cuenca folk are poor but not needy; they neither want nor thrive; they are sufficient unto themselves; there is not a Chinese in all Cuenca, and few in any of the towns of Batangas. Cuenca folk are proud, clanish and puritanical. Cuenca, because it has attracted no foreigners and yet is a very old settlement, is a first rate place for the study of Tagalog culture. This culture is essentially oriental puritanism. But its rigid forms are not in the statutes of the islands, first borrowed from Spain and later added to from America; hence it has no blue laws, but only the customs of the people.

Cuenca! Off the main road; nestled in the mountains, a tedious trail leading to the roaring sea: Cuenca—hardly known! It is tucked away in its jealous isolation on the slopes of Mount Makulot, which means Curly Mountain, very similarly to a highland village of a clan of Scots. Alejandro Laha is its mayor, an independent; he will be succeeded this month by Manuel Cuevas, an independent. The town treasurer, though appointed, is a Cuenca man. The justice of the peace is a Cuenca man; and there are two lawyers, both native Cuenca men; and there is one doctor, *Misio* Chaves, a Cuenca man born and bred. There is a drugstore. Dr. Chaves is the *sanitario*, the town health officer; he is rich, as wealth goes in Cuenca,

and Vicente gives him a good character—he is a very nice man, born in Cuenca!

The election this year took almost as long a vacation as the funeral had taken. It was necessary to give a few days to prelection work, and insure the triumph of the independent ticket.

Who might be governor, who might go to the legislature—this was comparatively of little importance. The real question was, who was to have the honor of governing Cuenca: in whom would the people put their trust? "How about the old *presidente* (mayor)?" "Oh, he is a very good man." "And how about the new one?" "Oh, he's a very good man, too; they are both good Cuenca men."

No doubt they are, the people are attentive to their own interests, ready to speak out boldly, ready to make their wishes known.

Let us go to Cuenca, there is more to see than just the old ox and the fat shoat in the pen, important as they are to Cuenca's domestic economy. And first of all the road: down the bay to Las Piñas, off through the narrow plain and over the hills of Alabang; Muntinglupa, San Pedro Tunasan, Sta. Rosa, Cabuyao, Biñang, Calamba—all nesting placidly in the irrigated rice fields; and then the sverve to the right and into the rolling country of Batangas: Tanauan, Sto. Tomas, Malvar, Lipa, Rosario, Tumbal, Ibaan, Batangas, Bauan, Paho (and a turn to the right), Alitagtag, and Cuenca. Keeping on along the main road far Paho would take one into Taal.

Taal is visible from the summit of Makulot, not a hard climb, and one affording an inspiring view. Cuenca men go to Taal lake to fish. They also fish in the sea, a half-hour's walk through the fields. From lake and sea and their rugged acres, they wrest their abstemious livelihood. Those who are richest have cattle, for there is good pasturage. Nevertheless, there is but one butchering day, Sunday, which is general market day, when one may buy fresh beef and pork. Lumber being available, most Cuenca houses are built of it, and roofed with cocon, bamboo is little utilized in building. One of the long line of very good men Cuenca seems to have had as mayors went up on Mount Makulot and impounded the waters, and piped them down the slopes and around the town. During the rainy season, there is enough for all day; but during the dry season the hours when patrons

may use the water are to 7 to 9 a. m. and 4 to 6 p. m. There is a frugal rule in force, and no one thinks of violating it. In Cuenca there is no public opinion, about matters pertaining to Cuenca.

The water is cool and sweet. Two things Cuenca folk value very highly, the waterworks and the road. The first insures their health, the second affords egress to the outland—even to Manila. And this is good, because Cuenca, little as her products are, still has something to market. Besides, the road makes it easy to leave Cuenca and find work, and then to get back to Cuenca again.

The young men of Cuenca must do this very thing this year. The rice crop failed in Cuenca, there is famine there; but not really, either, because the men are going off to work, and they are buying rice with their wages and sending it home on the trucks that ply regularly on the road. Cuenca is very poor, but will get along without outside help. As soon as the harvest comes in Sta. Rosa, Biñang, and all the towns in the lowlands where there is irrigation, Cuenca men will go there to help in gathering the grain and threshing it. This going away to help in the harvest is called *lalawigi*; and the men will have their pay in rice, and this pay is called the *kabahagi*. The harvesters are *magaani*.

Cuenca rice is upland rice. By ancient Tagalog custom, it is grown on the shares. If the tenant has his own ox, his share is half the crop after the *kabahagi* is deducted; if the landlord must furnish the ox, then the tenant's share is only 1/3 of the crop after the *kabahagi* is deducted. It is so with all Cuenca crops, and custom is the law that governs.

The rice is sown on the plowed fields, not germinated in a seedbed and transplanted as lowland rice is. When a field is ripe, the neighbors, men and women, are called upon to gather it. They go into the field and pluck the heads (using a little knife to cut the stems) and put them into *rakuyans*, baskets slung at the waist. These basketsful of heads are dumped into *rayuds*, coarse mats will, and taken to the threshing yard at the house of the landlord or the tenant. There the *manga magaani*, in the evening, spread out the mats and trample out the grain, singing the sagas of Cuenca and religious hymns as they work; but sometimes they don't sing, but listen to the old men's stories. The grain all free from the heads, it is pushed into a pile in the middle of the mat and divided into the equal parts. Then the *manga magaani* with many a *salamat po*—that is, many a *thank-you, kind sirs!*—put two parts of the new grain into the bamboo bins under the house, and roll the other part, which is their *kabahagi*, up in the *rayud* and are off to their homes.

When the grain is all gathered and threshed in this way, and the *kabahagi* taken out, the tenant who grew the crop takes half of what is left, the landlord the other half, and the business of making rice crop is over. But God must be thanked for His bounty. All Souls and All Saints days remembered. Be sure that all this will be punctiliously done, for the hearts of the people are stirred with gratitude. What a fine and wonderful thing it is, they feel, that one may plow a hillside, sow some little yellow seeds, and reap a crop of rice: because God changes the direction of the wind, and brings the rains, and then shifts them away again for the sun to shine and ripen the mature grain.

There is more to say about Cuenca next month.

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TABLES NEXT MONTH

Owing to the absence from Manila of the employee making up the statistical tables, they are omitted this month. But they will appear next month as usual, and quite up to date with the latest port data.