

My Most Unforgettable Teacher

By PURA SANTILLAN-CASTRENCE

I have two most unforgettable teachers, my professor in Italian in college, now the President of the Boston University, and a newspaperman with whom I used to work, who is now in a Washington government office, after a successful war-career as a major. Both of them have given me part of themselves, and every decision I make now, every worthwhile thought that flashes in my mind would not be quite that decision or that thought had I never known Professor Camillo P. Merlino or Nat C. Floyd.

Curiously enough, or perhaps it is to be expected, in the most fundamental values, the two men have the same principles. For that matter these self-same principles had been inculcated in their children by my father, whom I adored, and my mother, who is still very much of a dreamer. There is only, after all, one absolute value for honesty and goodness be the evaluator Italian, American or Filipino.

But more than honesty, more than goodness even for many people are still honest and good in this war calloused world, Professor Merlino taught me the importance of kindness in a teacher, of infinite patience, strict self-discipline.

I was the only Filipino in the class. In a land of prejudices such as America, for all her excellent qualities, still is, Professor Merlino would single me out for what he insisted was my excellent pronunciation in Italian, or for this and that about my interpretation of Dante or Cellini or Petrarch. I know now, in all humility, that the encomiums were little deserved and that these were intentionally given to put me at ease—the only brown creature among so many pink—and—white ones. How many times, in my classes now, I would be tempted to poke fun at a maverick of a student, the only one in the group, for instance, too

thick-headed to understand my simple explanations, and there would flash in my mind the picture of the dear figure of Professor Merlino, kind, gray eyes, strong, squat form, big, powerful hands, but mostly the eyes, coaxing me out of my timidity, making me feel important, showing me that I was just as good as any white boy or girl.

You would say that my reason there for idealizing this great teacher was strictly personal. That is because you do not know Professor Merlino. I was only one individual student. But for him each of us was an individual student to be dealt with differently from the rest, to be shown special attention, to be encouraged according to his own particular need, personality and temperament. I sincerely believe that a number of my classmates in that Italian class would write of Professor Merlino were the editor of the *Philippine Educator* to ask them, as he asked me, to tell his readers who was their Most Unforgettable Teacher.

For this beloved teacher had the "it" in teaching technique. He drew the best out of you, because, God bless the man, he expected only the best. Why would you not be extra-careful in preparing your lesson in Renaissance Italy literature if the professor told you every so often how glad he was that he had you in his class, or if he took time to drink tea with you so that he could talk Italian to you and tell you of the lovely country from which his ancestors came? The next tea-hour you would see him at your classmate's table and you felt sure that she too would come out of his talk with her glowing like you when he was your guest.

I would have been more homesick had Professor Merlino not been my teacher in Italian. Strange cause—and—effect sequence, isn't it, but nonetheless

true. For did I not have Professor Merlino's subjects to make me forget to miss home and family all the time, I might have had a worse time of my studies abroad than I did.

My other teacher did not even know that he was teaching me. Yet I do not believe anyone could associate with him for any length of time which placed integrity above everything else and truth to self as the guiding star of existence. Never did it occur to him that there might be a compromise with expediency, as many "integrity-mouthing" people have shown by their acts, for to him there was only one way to be honest—and that was to be honest. Always he was himself, humble yet arrogant, humble for he knew all the time his limitations, arrogant, because he never allowed any sully of his personal self-respect, the respect he felt he owed to his dignity as a human being.

I have named one child in honor of Professor Merlino, hoping with all my mother's heart that something of the greatness of his namesake would be his, sheer force or another suggestion. I have made Nat Floyd the godfather of my little girl, praying that his spirit of self-reliance, the essential goodness of all his actions, be it taking his houseboy to the hospital or writing only what he believed was right, not what others thought, should somehow be his spiritual gift to her.

I can see Professor Merlino now befriending a lonely Filipino girl in a country with its mind-your-own-business philosophy; I can see Nat dancing little Lina around, telling me how he admired Goethe, idolized Emerson. I can see them together hand in hand, and when my spirit is troubled by the vicissitudes of living they still teach me what to do to conquer myself, yet not admit defeat.

LETTERS FROM... (Continued from inside back cover)

Gentlemen:

I have the honor to ask information regarding your subscription rates for the benefit of the twenty teachers of Guimba District, Nueva Ecija, who signified their intentions of subscribing to the Philippine Educator.

Very respectfully,

CAMILO JACOBA
Elementary Principal
Guimba, Nueva Ecija

I have sent out copies of your letter of July 30, 1947, to the field and have asked several district supervisors to solicit subscriptions among their teachers. The subscriptions will probably be sent direct to you

Yours truly,

TIBURCIO BORJA
President
Misamis Occidental
Teachers' Association

Dear Mr. Laya:

I owe you apologies for having remained quiet about the copies of the Philippine Educator which you mailed sometime ago. They were distributed among the teachers' associations in the eleven districts but, in view of the absence of any instruction to dispose of them by sale, I did not collect the money to cover the cost of the first issue. It is too late to exact the payment of the magazine as late as this time.

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