

"We never miss the sunshine, until  
the shadows fall,  
We ne'er regret the bitter words, till  
past beyond recall." (Rome)

## Sunshine and Shadows

by Marie Aurora B. Agustines



When Bert alighted from the bus, it was raining. He drew his rain-coat closer to himself and headed towards the gate across the street. Overhead, the trees that bordered the side-walks fluttered wildly in the wind. He pushed the little gate and scurried up the garden path to the porch. Except for a light from one of the upper windows, the house was dark. Bert wondered grimly if Nina had decided to let matters go this far. He fumbled in his pocket for the door-key. The street lamp shimmering through the slanting rain cast gloomy streaks on the porch wall. He slid the key into the hole; it refused to turn. He turned the door-knob. To his surprise, it yielded.

The hall was dark. No light come from the kitchen. So Nina had decided to go home to her mother, taking the children with her and forgetting to lock the door. Well, okay, Nina. It's my fault anyway Bert thought wearily.

It was his fault—mostly his fault—that they had plunged into a

most bitter quarrel. And it would not have started had he been more careful and Nina had held her tongue. But they were both angry. For almost a week now, they had been discussing Lulu's going to school. The matter had almost been settled.

"Mother said we should wait for another year," Bert had remarked last night after Nina had come down from the children's bedroom.

"But Bert, Lulu is already six. And she's such a bright child."

"She said 'twould not be good for her to start for school so young."

"Did you tell her I began when I was five?"

Bert nodded. "Do you know what she said? 'Of course, Adelina was a clever child at her age. But I think Lulu took after her father who is a long way from his wife when it comes to cleverness.'" Bert had repeated his mother's words even to a biting tone.

Nina had flushed. A deadly silence had fallen on the room. When

she spoke, her voice cut coldly. "Will you tell your mother that I can get along very well without her nice little dictations? Both of us will be much happier if she keeps that tongue of hers where it belongs. . ."

"Nina!"

After that had rumbled a barrage of bitter words. They flung at each other one cutting remark after another. When they went to bed, Bert knew they would spend a sleepless night. He was miserable. Of course Nina was to blame too. Her language stung. But it was mostly his fault. He knew only too well that his mother never liked Nina.

Nina and he had been married for eight years now. Yet his mother had always looked with acidness at Nina. Perhaps because she was afraid Nina might be the kind who would boss him. Nina's father was formerly governor of Zambales. Bert had tried to convince his mother that she was wrong. But she would not listen to him.

Bert switched on the lamp. Warm light flooded the room. He tiptoed up the stairs. A faint glimmer of light came from the bedroom.

"Nina. . ." he called uncertainly. She might not be in there after all. She might have left the light on purpose. "Nina." He repeated softly. He wanted to add, I'm sorry, Nina, sorry for being a fool". . . Outside, the rain pattered and the trees rustled in the wind.

For a moment Bert stood before the closed door. Slowly he turned

the knob. A muffled voice trailed out. "Bert. . .?" Nina was in bed. Her face even in the shadows looked pale. Instantly Bert was sorry, sorry for his own thoughts. He wanted to kick himself for mentally accusing her of running home to her mother.

Bert turned on the lamp nearest the bed. The soft light fell directly on Nina's face. The blue veins shone out dangerously on one side of her white brow. "Bert." There was an ominous gasp in her voice. Then Bert realized. Her old illness.

Bert dashed downstairs. Frantically he dialed first for Dr. Gonzalez who lived on the next street, then for Nina's mother. He wanted to call his own mother. But on second thought, he decided to wait. A number of questions raced through his mind: Where are the children? What has happened to everybody? Why did nobody call me up at the office?

When Nina's mother arrived, he felt relieved at least about the children. Nina's mother had gone to the house earlier in the afternoon. She had taken Lulu and four year-old Carmencita and little Bertie, Jr. with her home.

Bert wearily trudged up the garden path leading to the back of the house. He had been at the hospital. He was worried about everything. He was worried about Nina. She seemed to be going down. And he was worried about the children. For the past week, they had been with Bert's mother. Nina had wanted it that

way. When he had brought her to the hospital, she had asked that the children be sent to his mother. Bert was worried especially of little Bertie who was barely ten months. And Lulu and Carmencita might be crying at night. Nina had been at the hospital eight days now. She had had two other attacks since that day she had been first brought there. The last one had been more damaging. It had weakened her considerably.

Bert slid the key into the hole. The door yielded easily. He turned on the light in the kitchen. Slowly he filled the water-pot halfway and set it over the range. He had not taken one square meal these past days. He had been too worried to realize that.

He settled down on the kitchen table and waited. The silence of the empty house almost frightened him. He looked about him. The kitchen was very orderly although dusty. Of course it must be dusty. No one had run a wet rag across the cupboard or the kitchen table or the window sills this past week. But everything was in its right place.

Pitiful that he had never noted these things before. And the other little things that Nina did. The tidy, the orderly, the marvelous way in which she had managed this house, their home. Bert shook his head regretfully.

When Nina was well, each morning his clothes were hanging by the bed, neatly pressed, ready to be put on. Each afternoon, he'd come

home to find Nina standing by the front door and the two little girls sitting on the porch-steps, waiting for him. In the evening, he'd sit down to a carefully prepared supper where the soup was just warm enough to soothe a tired man, where the slices of meat were just as tender as he would have wanted them to be. At night, he'd rest his tired body on a bed that seemed to be made up of nothing but warm sheets and soft pillows.

Yet he never let Nina know that he cared for the little, thoughtful things that she did. They were here. That was all. He never gave them a second thought. And now, when Nina was away, he remembered. He missed her. He missed the children. Now, when it was almost too late...

Bert rose when the water-pot began to hiss. Gingerly, he lifted the cover. It went down again with a clatter as he let go. It scorched the tender skin of his inexperienced hand.

The phone rang. Its persistent clamor resounded eerily through the quiet house. Bert dashed to the little room near the stair. When he heard the clear, feminine voice at the other end of the line, his heart sank.

"Mr. Alberto Perez?"

"Yes...?"

"This is the hospital. Will you come immediately?"

Bert knew. Another attack. In a quarter of an hour, he was at the hospital. When he saw Nina's thin, pale face, he was frozen. He was scarcely aware of the white-

garbed figures moving noiselessly about.

An hour later, Nina was resting. She was very weak. "Bert," she whispered almost inaudibly. "the children..."

"They are with Mother. Don't talk now, Nina. You must rest."

She seemed to obey. She was very tired. But after a while, she turned again towards Bert. "Let the children stay with her."

Again she fell silent. For a long time, she gazed at the crucifix hanging on the blue wall opposite the bed. "One more, and I might have to go..."

"Don't say that."

"I want the children to love her. That's why I want them to stay with her."

Bert could not speak. He was bewildered. It was the first time Nina ever talked that way.

"I'm sorry, Bert, that she does not like me. I'm sorry for what I said that night..." She could not go on. Two tears trickled down her white cheeks.

Bert took Nina's hand. He wanted to cry too. He wanted to bury his face into the white sheets and cry. He knew Nina was referring to that quarrel of many nights before. Somehow, wordlessly, silently, they had forgiven each other for that unfortunate affair. He knew that that quarrel accounted a great deal for Nina's illness.

She loved Bert and it hurt her terribly to think that his own mother should ultimately be the cause of

their quarrel. She wanted to love Bert's mother but the older woman was making it very difficult for her to do so. And that was very painful for her.

During the following weeks, Bert found it almost impossible to stay in the house. He was filled with a terrible loneliness that tried to press him down. Standing on the hall, he'd remember the sound of tiny footsteps, the gurgle of baby laughter, Nina's voice calling from the kitchen.

But no, they were not there. Instead, the hollowness and the grim silence of the empty house stunned him like a sharp blow. And yet, before he had never given these little things a second thought. Now, when the children were gone and Nina was sick almost to death, he'd remember... **It is pitiful when a man has reached that stage where he takes everything for granted, when he becomes carelessly, almost cruelly indifferent. Then, when it is almost too late...** The tiny footsteps, the baby laughter, the soft voice... they might never be here again if... if...

But Bert checked his thoughts. Instead he prayed as he had never prayed before, "Let her live. Let Nina live. Give her back to us..."

Nina stayed at the hospital for four weeks. Bert spent all his free hours with her. He had wanted to get a leave from the office but Nina did not want him to. The children went regularly to the hospital. Be-

cause he could no longer bear staying in the house, he finally decided to lock it up. It had become a dark and dusty and silent place. He stayed most of the time at the hospital.

The day Nina left the hospital, the house became alive again. At first, although Bert wanted very much to take the children back home, he was reluctant to do it. Nina might have a relapse with three lively little people around. But Nina would not listen to him. She was really well, she told Bert.

The first afternoon Nina was home, they gathered in the living room. Bert realized—not without a strange feeling he could not very well name—that indeed they made an ideal picture. Bert and Nina on their chairs. Lulu perched on the piano stool, trying to dish out stumbling, uncertain notes from the piano. Her tiny fingers could barely cover six keys at a time. Carmencita, trying vainly and with all her baby ingenuity to follow Lulu from one end of the piano. Little Bertie, Jr. was lying on a mat laid out temporarily on the linoleum. He was vigorously shaking a rattler in his chubby little hands, all the while exhibiting his two precious teeth. They made a nice family picture.

"Mother, Grandma loves you." Lulu suddenly turned from the piano and fixed her dark, round eyes at Nina.

Nina tried to conceal the puzzlement slowly appearing in her face. For her, that was a startling piece

of revelation, the most startling she had ever received. Lulu was so unpredictable sometimes. Bert smiled at Nina.

The doorbell rang. Bert rose and headed towards the door. "Wait here, Nina. I'll go and see." Faint sounds of voices trailed from the porch. After a while, Bert came back into the room. He was carrying something wrapped in paper and cellophane. "For you." He handed the mysterious gift to Nina with a boyish wink in his eye.

Flowers! Nina was more puzzled—although she tried to hide it—as she took off the white paper and beheld an assortment of colors.

"But Bert, who...?"

"Go on, you'll find out."

As Nina tilted the bouquet, a small envelope wedged between the flower stems fell out. It was a get-well-very-soon card.

"Oh Bert, from your mother." Bert nodded. "But I thought you told me she'll leave for the province this afternoon." Bert nodded again Nina fumbled for the piece of paper inserted in the card. A letter from his mother...! Her eyes moved swiftly.

My dear Nina,

Will you forgive an old woman who is your mother and yet has never been like one to you? When the children were with me, I learned many things I had never known before. I found out that the Nina Bert married is not after all the snobbish and arrogant person I thought her to be. She is will-

ing to entrust her children to her mother-in-law who had never been friendly towards her. And the children, too. Such little angels. I told myself they cannot possibly be the children of a selfish and domineering woman. I don't know why I should know this only now. It's eight years now, isn't it? Perhaps it's because from the very start I refused to know you then. I realize now I was doing you a terrible wrong, Nina. Will you forgive me?

The letter was signed 'Mother'. It was brief and direct.

Nina's eyes filled. It was the very first time that Bert's mother called her 'Nina'. As though trying to show her that she must not expect love or friendliness from her, his mother had always persisted in calling her 'Adelina'.

Now she understood what Lulu was trying to tell her a few minutes before. Her simple and seemingly insignificant act of letting the children stay with Bert's mother had melted the iciness in the older woman's heart. She finally let down the barrier of unfriendliness she had set up between herself and Nina.

After all, Nina's illness was not all nightmare. She would never want to be ill again. She would avoid being ill. But her twenty-seven days at the hospital were not, after all, all agony. Her illness somehow helped to open a pair of eyes which had been closed during these past eight or nine years.

In fact, it helped open two pairs of eyes. But of course, Nina could not know that yet, because the other pair belonged to Bert.



"You smoke how many cigars a day?"

"About ten."

"What do they cost you?"

"Twenty cents a piece."

"My, that's two dollars a day. How long have you been smoking?"

"Thirty years."

"Two dollars a day for thirty years is a lot of money."

"Yes, indeed, it is."

"Do you see that office building?"

"Yes."

"If you had never smoked in your life you might own that fine big building."

"Do you smoke?"

"No, never did."

"Do you own that building?"

"No."

"Well, I do. . . Smoke?"