

The Face

By N. V. M GÓNZALEZ

EARLY IN THE MORNING, Paulino Abad got out of bed, dressed up without so much as washing his face, and bade his wife good-bye

"I'll be back in the afternoon," he told her. For he knew it would take him only two hours by train to get to San Ildefonso and he could, to be sure, return to the city that same day.

But that he could never make the trip seemed foreordained. About three o'clock a.m., he had been awakened by a dream and afterwards he had stayed awake for some time. A cricket had begun chirping somewhere. "A premonition of some sort?" The thought crossed his mind. In the end, of course, he dismissed the cricket, and forthwith slept a little more.

Now, in the chill morning air, he hurried to the street car stop, which was about a kilometer away from the apartment where he lived. His program for the day was set: he would go to the railroad station and try to get a ticket for San Ildefonso, where his brother-in-law lived. Free entry of the cereal had been allowed by the authorities, and he could well bring in a sack, Abad thought.

He was thirty and a Ph. D. He had earned it on the basis of a thesis entitled "The Monetary System in

the Philippines Prior to the Spanish Regime." And there was something of the poet in him, too. His journey, therefore, was bound to mean a great deal. His scholarly mind might not have approved of it at all, but his heart anticipated the experience about to unfold. In any case, he could feel his spirit agitating as it were, and eagerly looking forward to the prospect of seeing the countryside. It seemed as though the native heath, like a powerful magnet, was drawing him with a certain inviolate spell. Now the sack of rice he hoped to procure from an accommodating brother-in-law in San Ildefonso might well have been a mere pretext.

Although it was only five in the morning, the North bound street car was already full. And the conductor, a good-natured young chap, was making jokes at the expense of the women passengers:

"Ah, I see, you're all homeward bound! High time you are! 'Tis high time, lady-folks!"

And through the street car windows the chilly air of December flooded in, making people turn up their shirt collars.

At length the street car stopped and Abad alighted, as did the majority of his fellow passengers, for this was the North Station at last:

The driveway towards the station building proper was scarcely lighted and already a multitude had gathered at this early hour. All were waiting for the station gates to open.

"So it's true!" Abad said to himself. "It's true—what they use to say in the office! Some people actually sleep here at the station in order to be able to buy tickets for the train journey in the morning!"

And his naive, ivory-towerish mind was excited over the scene. The crowd not only waited for the station gates to open but also minded for other things. To begin with, trading of some sort was going on hereabouts. While the long lines extending from the station gates to the street had been formed, hundreds sat on the grass under the acacia trees, hugging their goods.

A babel emanated from the assemblage. The station grounds had acquired the living atmosphere of a market place, with the difference that the smell of fish and chicken dung was nowhere in the air. One could swear, on the contrary, that there hung about a curious mixture, if there be such, compounded of human bodies and the crisp December breeze.

All these affected Paulino Abad in no incurious way. A tall, though slouchy fellow, with a tendency to stand like a question mark, he could well see over the heads of the multitude; and he felt a strong, puzzling affinity with the crowd. It seemed he had missed this scene for so long. He now put down the collar of his jacket the better to feel the invigorating breeze brushing against his cheek and titillating the nape of his neck. Warmth pervaded his entire being; his cheeks flushed with a curious joy. He unbuttoned his shirt, so that the wind would cool his

breast with its soothing, blissful touch.

"Come on," some one was saying, obviously addressing a companion. And Abad turned, just about in time to be confronted by a man. The latter then asked him:

"Can you tell me, please, whether the Cabanatuan train has left?"

"I can't say. I'm taking that train myself," Abad replied.

"Since yesterday the traffic has been exceedingly heavy. There's been an unholy rush for tickets," the man said. "There! Look!"

Like floats of a fishing net being dropped upon a choppy sea, heads bobbed up and down. The crowd rolled in a wave, this way and that, at first uncertainly, and then with the decided intention to push forward as close as possible to one of the station entrances. The men had seen an opening made and several people had slipped in, causing no little envy on the part of the others. To the annoyance, however, of the peace officer posted at the entrance, the crowd drove forward harder than ever. The officer, thoroughly flabbergasted by now, blew his whistle and motioned the people to stop. He tried to bar their approach with his outspread arms.

Meanwhile, Paulino Abad had joined the crowd. Prudence would have dictated sternly against it, but all the same he had stepped down as it were from the pedestal his old self had occupied. He had become one with the common *tao*, and he liked the feeling. It thrilled him. Only one thought predominated in his mind; and that was to keep from falling upon the next fellow's back lest he should pick a quarrel. Three peace officers, instead of one as before, now stood there endeavouring to keep order.

"Sit down, all of you!" one of them commanded.

The group, slightly puzzled, vacillated.

"Sit down, I say! Sit down!" And the peace officer got out a stick and swung it in the air.

The men stooped, bent their knees, and finally sat down. That is, they assumed a half-squatting position, which was under the circumstances the most convenient thing to do. They were careful to reform the lines they had made willynilly, extending from the center of the station grounds as far as the cement pavement about two meters from the entrance.

"What sort of men are you?" the officer shouted. "Here you wait all night for the station to sell your tickets, and how well you behave!"

There was silence. The men sat and dropped their heads. Then, suddenly, voices of women were heard. It was only then that Paulino Abad became aware that women were around. Towards his left the women had gathered. They were exchanging catcalls and profuse and colourful banter.

"Silence!" one of the peace officers said, blowing his whistle.

"She's been crushed!" some one shouted, hearing a woman's scream.

"Silence! Let's have some order here!"

Whistle and cries now mingled in the air. And, just then, in order to take advantage of the confusion, the men from the right drove forward to gain the entrance door. They pushed forward this time with greater determination than before. There was a scramble as they approached the cement pavement.

"Order! Order!" cried one of the peace officers. "And here's something for you if you don't watch out!"

He forthwith struck right and left with the metal chain that had held his whistle to his shirt. He flayed at the crowd, even chasing away those that appeared to fight back.

There was no telling whom he hit, for he struck blindly, partly to gratify his access of madness and partly to impress upon the crowd the discipline it sorely needed. Nevertheless, the men pushed forward in a fierce, mad rush.

Daylight had not yet come. In the half dark of the station grounds, the commotion increased. The maddened peace officer rushed forth from time to time to castigate his tormentors. As though a giant scythe were being swung over their heads, the men cowered and pushed, and shrieks rent the air.

Paulino Abad had long since lost hope of getting into the station and buying his ticket. He had become one of the mob, and a sense of pride warmed his heart. He felt that the blood that coursed in his veins was no humbler than that in those of the others. He felt curiously vain and pleased.

But he had been hurt. He had got his taste of that metal whistle chain converted into a whip. He could feel the welt which the blow had laid upon his cheek. He touched the welt once more. Yes, it was there. It smarted under the touch of his forefinger. Were it light enough, he would have raised his finger to his eyes to ascertain whether the cut bled or no. He wished that it would bleed. Strangely enough, he felt that this would be the affirmation he needed somehow to make the ex-

perience a piece of truth which nothing could ever falsify.

Things had happened as they should, he felt. And yet, all of a sudden, anger and hate seethed within him. And for want of something to identify as the cause of the emotion, he thought of the metal whistle chain, then of the man who had used it.

"I must remember that man! I must remember his face as long as I live!" he vowed to himself.

Up to this moment he had not left the mob. All the better then. The peace officer with the metal whistle chain stood there near the entrance door. Abad had the opportunity he wanted. He looked long at the face and did not lift his stare until he was sure that each and every feature of the man's face had been imprinted in his mind.

It was scarcely seven o'clock. And it occurred to Abad that he was, of all things, exceedingly hungry. It was only then that he remembered he had intended to breakfast at his brother-in-law's house in San Ildefonso. He laughed at how things had turned. Now reminded once more of his breakfast, he was fascinated by the idea of forgoing with the thing altogether. But no, he had still time to spare. A decent breakfast at a downtown restaurant, following which he'd report to office for work... No sense losing a day's work... And no sooner thought than done. Some fifteen minutes later, he alighted from his street car at the Rizal Avenue and Carriedo corner. From here he walked down

as far as R. Hidalgo. For some reason, the place had a peculiar attraction for him. Now, since he had become one of the people, he should breakfast where his brothers did. And so thinking, he stepped into an eating shop.

In the shop were three people besides the owner and waiter, both of whom were Chiuamen. Paulino Abad ordered a cup of coffee and, by way of celebrating himself, added a piece of bread with a bit of muscovado jelly to his belated meal. The coffee soon warmed his stomach, and he dunked his bread into his cup. He ate leisurely, as though all was well with him and the world.

Then, as he was about to leave the café, he became aware of the presence of another person in the place. He could see the face in the mirror near the counter; for most Chinese eating places are profusely decorated with mirrors, as though to give testimony on how a meal had improved one's well-being. And Paulino Abad suddenly recognised the face he saw.

He looked at it intently. It was the very same face: the low-bridged nose, the thick lips, the high cheek bones and the eyebrows quite set far apart, thick and unshapely—the features were all there. He took a second look, and was certain that this was the face he had cursed in his heart, the face he would hate all the years of his life.

And except for one detail—the cut which the metal whistle chain had made—he could have sworn it was not his face. The realisation came to him in a flash. He ran away from the shop, like one possessed.

