

WHY AMBO TURNED OVER A NEW LEAF

(Short Story)

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Mr. Reyes, the principal teacher of the school was busy in his office that afternoon. The children were out, having their recess. Cries and shouts could faintly be heard, for the playground was big and the children were playing in small groups.

Suddenly cries were heard followed by scampering of little feet. The door of the office was opened, and a teacher leading a boy with a big lump near his eyes came in, followed by inquisitive, peering children. It was clear to see that there had been a fight.

"Where is the other one?" he asked the teacher, for one boy could not fight all by himself. The teacher motioned to another boy standing behind her to come forward.

"You can leave them," the principal told the teacher. "I will attend to them." And the two boys were left behind. Mr. Reyes, the principal, looked at the boys in front of him. He knew the one crying, with a big lump in his eyes, to be Pablo, the son of Ambo, the village tough.

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Ambo has no job, one can see, but he could manage to dress well and support the family. His wife always has new dresses and goes to the show regularly. His children in school are well dressed and looked well fed.

Whenever a carabao is lost or a load of vegetables going to Manila is held up, the people know that Ambo is behind all that. But they can not do anything. They have no evidence to pin on him. Recently, a big pile of wood for sale in Manila the following day disappeared in the night. Several hens and roosters, a big pig and six ducks

already tied for the market disappeared with them.

Everyone in the barrio knew that Ambo was behind all these. But what could they do? Ambo is elusive as well as tricky.

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"Why did you fight?" Mr. Reyes asked the two boys.

"Because, sir," Pablo answered at once, "he called me a son of a thief and a gangster."

"That is what his father is, sir," the boy answered.

"But you should not call him that," the principal told the boy. "Those are ugly words to use."

"It is true, sir. His father is that way."

"Did you hear that Pablo?" Mr. Reyes asked.

"Yes, sir, my father is really a gangster and a thief and I'm ashamed of him," answered Pablo. "Children talk behind my back. They laugh and whisper, too, and nobody cares to be friends with me," and Pablo began to cry again.

"Well, you two boys should be friends," Mr. Reyes answered. "Pablo has not done a thing to you," he told the other boy. "So you must not call his names. You must shake hands and be friends."

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Mr. Reyes had quite forgotten the incident, when the next morning, Ambo the father of Pablo unceremoniously opened the office door, sat on the chair in front of Mr. Reyes' table, and regarded him, in not too friendly a way.

"I came here to tell you," he began, "that my son Pablo was hurt by a boy yesterday. And it seems to me that you did not lift a finger to punish the culprit. I want the boy to be punished in front of me," he continued, fingering the forty five dangling in his left belt. "It is your duty as principal of the school to punish him, or else it would be better if there would not be a principal at all."

Mr. Reyes could not say a word. He had heard of Ambo's exploits. Ambo could kill a man as one would a chicken. What if suddenly he whipped out his forty five and shot him?

"Your boy had a fight with another boy," he finally managed to say. "The boy told your boy that he was a son of a thief and a gangster. There was a fight and your boy sustained a black eye. I should have punished the other boy for telling such ugly words had not your son told me the words are true. I'll get him and let us talk with him."

Mr. Reyes stood up and went out of the office. When he came back, the boy was with him.

"Now, Pablo, tell your father what happened," he urged the boy.

"He called me a son of a thief and gangster," he said softly.

"What did you do?" his father asked.

"I hit him, father, but he too hit me in the eye and so I cried."

"You should knock him harder," Ambo said, glaring at his son.

"But they are true, father," the boy answered. "You are that, I know, and the boys and girls at school hate me for it. They talk and laugh behind my back. They whisper and giggle when I pass. Nobody would like to be friends with me. I have nobody to play with. They say that when I grow big, I would also be like you."

Ambo's defiant attitude suddenly crumbled. His shoulders sagged and his face lost its color.

"So my own son is ashamed of me... ashamed of me... they would not even play with him..."

Ambo suddenly stood up, and without a word left the office,

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A week later, Mr. Reyes was standing in a corner in Blumentritt waiting for the bus to carry him to school. A man hailed him. It was Ambo. He was carrying two baskets, balanced on his shoulders by a stout bamboo. One basket contained milk bottles and the other was filled to overflowing with ripe "atis."

"Hello, Maestro," he said, "See, I am now a businessman," he shouted pointing at his two baskets.

It was clear to Mr. Reyes that Ambo had turned a new leaf.

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