



THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF AN AGE

(A Short Story)

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Long streaks of a Friday sun streamed through the broken windows, limply draping the rows of improvised chairs and desks. The sound of spattering bakia-clad little feet soon closed the day. I thought of Baby who should be fed by now. So for a few hasty minutes, I viewed the empty desks before me, and the crude handwriting on the board done by the cleaners. Somehow, I sensed an oblique emptiness in the room so full of life a few moments before.

A week's work has passed. There seems nothing remarkable about that, really. Classes come and classes go. Lesson plans and the daily routine. Routine and the lesson plans. I wonder oftentimes if work is for man or man is for work. But I must go home now. Pidiong will be home from his teaching, too, with the evening almost gone. Baby must be struggling out of Nanang's hold by now. Indeed, I must go. Across the garden of pechay and mustard, I can see the far-off Zambales hills on a crest of which the sun lingers, like the clasp of dying hands.

It seems centuries ago when I used to carry books, too; no, not lesson plans and test papers, but books. Yes, books and lecture notes. The University quadrangle used to lose itself in focus as the white portals seemed to merge with the mass of concrete beside them as soon as I caught sight of him, waiting at the foot of the steps at the Palma Hall. Ah, lost were the words... "that they may

delve deep into the wisdom of the ages,"—in the depths of those dark heavens, his eyes. "That was some march," he said. Commonwealth anniversary. Those PMA's had taken time out to come down from the City of Pines.

Our laughter was acknowledged by the stars up above. Hand locked in hand, we felt the vastness of the sky, we breathed in the exhilaration of being in love, refusing to think of such things as coming fear. Meanwhile, too, I thought of the letters, B.S.E., which made me pore over those books, and of the little sheet of something to be put in a frame.

"...And I'll keep house for you," deep in my heart I told him.

He told me, "Two and a half years are just two and a half steps. I will have shed my gray uniform by then," he added.

"You're wonderful in your uniform," I said.

"But I can't have you while I'm yet in it," he retorted.

We walked on and on. Time had stopped for us. We held it in our hands. Like the sheer happiness from fondling the soft petals of a rose. Like listening in rapture to Schubert's Serenade, and to the bewildering whispers of the pines. Like nothing at all on this earth!

"Look at that square light from that house," he interrupted my thoughts. "I shall find comfort and you there when I come home from work." I

felt the cold buttons on his uniform---

Then came the nightmare of December 8, 1941. During that nightmare, I refused to believe that there were bombs and Japanese. I refused to believe that Roque was one of those newly commissioned cadets who had been sent to Bataan. No--- No--- He could not have gone to Bataan.

It took many months for me to shake off that unseemly reality. But all the while it was there, like the relentless fading away of lengthening shadows. Unconsciously, I felt aware of everything around me, except of the mask of stupefaction I wore on my face.

The news of the fall of Bataan and of Corregidor and the infamous O'Donnell Camp scurried along apparently without any effect on my embittered life. For what mattered more than anything else in the world was the reality of his being released from a war prisoners' camp. He had returned from Capas but was a mere ghost of the stately figure he cut way back in PMA days. But it was said of love--- "Omnia Vincet Amor?" I pinned my hope on that. Alas, for the dark, adoring pools of heaven in the look of his eyes. In their stead, sunken eyes seemed merely to stare at people with gnawing bitterness.

The hard Occupation days came to stay for what seemed to be an interminable period. I felt so keenly the tense struggle for existence. I learned the bitter lessons of pitting one's pride against want. There were times when I felt I was not strong enough to go through all the nightmare of the war—the leering Jap faces, the search for the things to appease hunger, guerrilla days and escapades. It seemed that these were too much for me.

I flicked off the tears from unbrave eyes. I held on to the last, clinging steadfast to the smithereens of hope as I received the message, as I saw the pleadings of his eyes when he took to the hills.

I shall wait, I assured myself. Even if the waiting be forever. I shall never forget him. Never!

I think now of those times when horrible stories of the war were as common as food was then uncommon.

And then the Americans had returned. But no Roque came back. Many more months. Still no Roque.

I can see the far-off blue mountains atop which the scudding clouds hover. He will come, I told myself. He will return. But the hard reality of facts could not be held off any longer. Each day was becoming an empty echo of such memories as the magazine "The Corps," as the U.P. quadrangle, as the gray uniform with the silver buttons on, as the pungent smell of the pines.

In this town of Manibato, I stumbled upon the teaching profession. Ah, I used to smirk then at the thought of it. I realized soon enough, however, upon entering the teaching profession that one is doomed, in all probability, to spinsterhood.

But I found I was mistaken, for was it not a year ago when Pidiong succeeded in persuading me I would make him a good wife? Well, yes, a wife but not a housewife.

I must hurry now. There's the square light; Baby is crying. I'll be too tired to do any housework. There's Nanang, anyway. Pidiong and I will soon be too busy making the lesson plans for the next day. Too busy even to look at each other. I become conscious of an ache somewhere inside of me. I must be getting foolish, I chide myself.