

# A Tall Tale from the Hill

By  
MANG BATO

(NOTE: *The reader is advised to consult a map while reading this yarn.*)

To begin with, you all know that before I got this cruising job, I was purchasing agent for the Mickey Rattan-Craft Company of San Francisco wherever that is, although I suspect it's somewhere in Quezon City, but that's beside the point. And I then considered myself unlucky when I got a bare thousand-peso monthly commission, but that's also beside the point because all I want to tell you is why I'm now here sharing this campfire with you—yes, why I terminated my services with them or, taking their point of view, why I was fired by Mr. Mickey.

It all happened this way:

Mr. Mickey received an order for rattan sofas to grace the lounging coaches of the New Bicol Express Company's luxury trains. The specifications were strict. The sofas must run the full length of the coach and must be formed from one whole length of rattan-bent, coiled, and looped to the desired shape. No joints were allowed—to minimize fungi infection, they said, altho why they chose rattan, I still haven't figured out yet. Must be to lessen the weight of the train, I guess, because I've heard it said that their locomotives were run on *bakauan charcoal*, rights from the swamps of Calauag.

Well, there came Mr. Mickey's telegram to me at Casiguran where I happened to be at that time. The telegram read: "Get me longest Palasan canes you can find stop I mean longest Repeat, longest—Mickey."

I knew that boss of mine too well, by gam. When he says longest, he means longest, or else. Of course he knows how much I valued my job, what with the pay he used to give

me, and he always said, "I give you a pay you like, so you give me what I like when I like to have it." Try giving him something short of his specifications, and, by gam, you'd better get clear before you get scalded by his steam. He'd be so mad his bellow could be heard from San Francisco clear to San Juan del Monte and the mothers there would quiet their children by saying, "sleep on, dears, that's only Mr. Mickey having one of his tantrums." Like that time he boasted about his strength and I tricked him into lugging the trunk of an *anibong* palm on his shoulder. But I'm getting off my track, so back to the telegram.

It was a special order from a special boss, so I decided to give it special attention by personally locating the specified rattan canes in the forest. So, with my camping gear securely lashed to the back of my dark, kinky-haired native guide, Sub'-sub', I pulled out of Casiguran and tracked across the mountains inland in a westerly direction. For days, we searched the forest literally up and down for what I'd got to call as "Mickey's rattan." We went up ridges and down ravines, but all we found were the ordinary 100-meter long variety so common in those parts. Of course we encountered a few of the 300-meter class, but Mr. Mickey's words, "Get me the longest," kept ringing in my ears, so we had to go on although I began to wonder how long was the longest as we went deeper into the forest.

I was about ready to give up when one afternoon, as we were about to make camp near a barrio called Maquebenga which is

about twenty kilometers from Dupax in Nueva Vizcaya, I tripped on a root and fell flat on my tummy. As my faithful Sub'-sub' was helping me up, he suddenly yelled and let me go crashing down again. He was visibly excited about the root that tripped me, for it turned out to be a ground-creeping rattan stem. Whether it was palasan or limuran, or what not, I was too tired to care, so I just said, "Sub-sub, follow up this one and find out how long it is," and I sat down to rest and wait for him. I didn't expect that one to be more than a hundred meters long, anyway.

I must have dozed off because the moon was already up when I was awakened by Sub-sub who had just returned. He was dancing and leaping and pointing at the rattan cane on the ground and excitedly repeating "Hodi! Ho-di! Hod, hod, ho-di!" Meaning to say, that we've found what we were looking for. He followed the rattan stem, northward, he said, expecting to find either its base or its growing tip not too far away. However long after dark, he still kept on walking, his face close to the ground, but neither end of the stem was in sight.

We slept but lightly that night. Long before the sun was up, we had breakfasted and were on our way northward with our eyes fixed to the rattan stem on the ground. Was it to be Mickey's rattan at last? The longest rattan I could find, he said, so here was what he would get. I smiled as I thought of the fat bonus I'd surely get in turn and what I'd do with all the money. I was beginning to long for city lights again. But that was because I had no inkling of the disastrous effects to be brought about by the discovery of Mickey's rattan. Had I known, at that time, what the consequences would be, I would have right then and there slashed that accursed cane to pieces. And I never would have filled Mr. Mickey's order though he belated till the rains fell or till the soldiers at Camp Murphy rushed to his office at San Francisco del Monte.

Sub-sub estimated our find to be about a kilometer long at most. I believed that it must be a bit shorter than that for I've long

been in the rattan business and have seen many long beauties and export grade at that but never more than half a kilometer in length. I expected that before nightfall we'd find either the base of that rattan stem, or its growing tip which I knew would be climbing up a tall timber tree.

But the day passed, and the next day and the next, with the tip of the rattan still nowhere in sight. Thus we followed it up day after day in the forest through dense underbrush, and I got so weary that I lost track of time. Sub-sub only grunted once in a while. Other than that, no word passed between us except when I cursed the *bikal* and vines that blocked our way, or when a jutting rock or a root would trip me flat on my tummy, which, by now was pretty badly bruised.

Our supplies had long run out and Sub-sub had to provide for us both by catching fish in streams with his bare teeth. At least that's how I thought he caught them because he'd swim underwater in a shallow stream and come up with a fish clamped between his teeth and one in each hand. This we'd eat after roasting, lightly sprinkled with ashes, for we'd run out of salt. Not till then did I learn to crave for salt. I even imagined that if, someday, I'd like to torture somebody, I wouldn't starve him but instead would feed him on a saltless diet. If you'd like to find out how it tastes, try it yourself for a whole week in the forest and call me a liar if, after a few days, you don't learn to lick the ashes of your campfire. They say that's what the deer do, but I'm not sure, really, for I haven't yet seen one do it. All I know about the contact between deer and salt is when Sub-sub sometimes gave me salted deer meat, and it tastes fine indeed.

It must have been on the twentieth day that we found ourselves in the foothills of the Sierra Madre east of Echaque, Isabela, for the rattan stem, still creeping on the ground, had gradually veered in a curve towards the northeast. Still we walked on, our eyes to the ground, but we made quicker time for the terrain there was no longer very rugged.

One day, as we were at a point between

Ilagan and Palanan where the ground was fairly level, we entered a dense grove of catmon trees. It was like entering a cathedral because it was very quiet and dark under those trees. The moist ground was practically free of underbrush and in the dim light, Sub-sub discerned another rattan stem coming from the west and curving northward to run parallel with the one we were following up. The two stems were but one meter apart, laid on the forest floor like a railroad and I was overjoyed at this other discovery for it meant that we now had two longest rattans for Mr. Mickey and could mean also, a double bonus from my boss. But as I said I did not know yet at that time the awful consequences of that discovery.

Sub-sub and I trudged on between the two parallel rattan stems, heads bowed, for the forest was dark although it was about noon time and far ahead, as from a tunnel, a faint glimmer of light showed where the catmon grove ended and where an open talahib area stretched out northward.

I was plodding on ahead of Sub-sub, my eyes on the barely discernible rattan stems, when suddenly there came a loud grunt and a squeal from a mound of leaves I stepped on. Something ponderous and dark heaved and crashed against my thighs. The thing sent me sprawling on my back. Sub-sub laughed at me as he pointed at a large wild pig that scampered away for I must have frightened it in its sleep. For a moment I lay there on the ground and then my eyes went wild as, in the dim light, I perceived clumps of beautiful blue, white and blood-purple flowers hanging above, which can only belong to orchids. Sub-sub gasped as he too, looked up, for there clinging to the branches of the trees, were the rarest most beautiful orchids to stagger any orchid fancier. There were *Dendrobium victoriae reginae* and *sanderiae*; *Vandas sanderiana* and *merrillii*, and hosts of other species I couldn't momentarily identify, all blooming at the same time.

We realized then, why that catmon grove was so darkened. For as far as our eyes could see, the whole catmon grove which cov-

ered about fifty hectares, was a vast natural orchid nursery, with each of the trees laden with orchids thicker than the leaves of the catmon trees themselves. The orchids clinging to the branches of the trees were so plentiful and so thick that they cut off the sunlight. Sub-sub was for stopping right there, to make our fortunes with those orchids, he said, but I reminded him that we still had to get a permit from the Bureau of Forestry, I being a law-abiding man, and Mr. Mickey's words "Get me the longest rattan!" kept ringing in my ears, so I persuaded Sub-sub to go on with me and come back to collect the orchids later. So we plodded on northward along the western foothills of the Sierra Madre.

The two parallel rattan stems went on up a little unknown volcano which must have been Mt. Cagua near Gonzaga, Cagayan and on and on, ever northward up the Sierra Madre till we sighted the sea and far off Cape Engaño. Farther off we sighted Camiguin Island across the Babuyan Channel.

At this point, the two parallel stems began to separate, so I told Sub-sub to follow up the one to the left while I kept on tracking the other one which we discovered first at Dupax, Nueva Vizcaya. Sub-sub and I were never more than five meters from each other, separated only by thick underbrush. Then, just as the rattan stem curved to the left behind a large apitong, imagine my surprise when I bumped into Sub-sub. He was as astonished as I was because it turned out that the two parallel stems were one and the same but a continuation of each other, having grown northward, curved around that large apitong tree and grown on back southward through the whole length of Cagayan province and half of Isabela. I deduced that the stem at the western side must be the growing point because it was softer and greener than the other one and the tip must have been somewhere in the Mountain Province across the Cagayan River since it curved westward just above the vicinity of Ilagan, Isabela.

Sub-sub and I placed markers near the rat-  
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tan stem so we would know where to come back for it later. Then we worked our way down to the town of San Vicente, Cagayan, where I wired Mr. Mickey: "Longest rattan found Stop Covers whole length of three provinces from Nueva Vizcaya to Cagayan and back Stop End still undetermined Stop Send derricks, cranes, and spools to Casiguran to haul in rattan." Mr. Mickey did just that. Sub-sub and I took a bus to Aparri from where we took another bus for Manila.

Mr. Mickey was all smiles when he met us at his office although at first I suspected that he could not distinguish between us two, which was Sub-sub and which was I, for we pretty looked much alike, I having had no change of clothes and no shave since he sent me on that confounded search. He handed us a few thousand pesos apiece and said, "I wouldn't be needing your services again, boys. The rattan you found for me will last till the next world war. Come around in 1980."

But it is not losing my job that hurts. I guess you all know what happened next. Mickey's almost perpetual, easy to get supply of rattan had disastrous effects on the rattan trade. He held prices down till all other exports were forced out of business, for all Mr. Mickey did whenever he received an order for rattan canes was to roll in a few spools of it with his crane, and it was not long before he had a monopoly of the rattan trade in the Philippines. He is still in the business at present, but I expect to get my job back with him thirty years from now. By then, I hope that rattan would be all used up. And if I do get my job back, I'll never, never again send him any canes more than half a kilometer long.

Oh, yes about the orchids. Did we go back for them? Well, Sub-sub and I made preparations to collect those rare beauties but upon going back to the place and after feasting our eyes on the wondrous magnificence of those flowers, I had a change of heart and after talking to Sub-sub for a full hour, we

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## Alumni and Friends!

*The forestry campus is a beautiful place to see. The thousands that flock to this place on Sundays and holidays attest to that fact. You who were here will no doubt agree that the forestry campus is a display of nature at her best.*

*But you who were here will also agree that when the dark veil of night enshrouds the campus into an indistinct mass, black and forbidding, you never felt as lonely and homesick in your life. Every forestry student experiences this feeling night after night with telling effects on his studies and his mental frame of mind.*

*The situation fortunately can be remedied. And you are called upon to help us. The FORESTRY LEAVES is sponsoring a drive to raise funds for a movie projector. This projector will be the answer to the students' need for diversion. Weekly movies will be shown them to relieve the tension of intensive studies and refresh their tired minds. When you come for the alumni homecoming or for forestry conferences, the student body will be better equipped to entertain you. Do not hesitate to give your share however small it may seem. The ball was started rolling when an American guest during the smokers rally gave her share when the appeal was made. Let us keep that ball on the go. Send your contributions to the Forester-in-Charge College of Forestry, College, Laguna.*

*The FORESTRY LEAVES wishes to thank*

*Miss ANNE B. COOKE of the USIS*

*For her generous response to the appeal made for a movie projector*

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out as a challenge. I can think of few other fields where the exercise of professional skill and high personal qualities will be more rewarding in national betterment.

We of the F.O.A. recognize quite well the importance to continued well being of the Philippines, of the wise use of the forest resources. We are cooperating to the extent permitted by our policy and our means in measures designed by the Bureau of Forestry to facilitate some of the approaches to solving the immediate problems and to assist in the longer range aspects. Some of these measures, such as the important matter of land classification, are already being applied. Others, including additions of your College facilities, expanded silvicultural and forest products research, and assistance in vital protection and reforestation are close to actuality. You probably are quite well aware of the details of this matter. Indeed, I recall a certain recent article in "Forestry Leaves" which indicates that you are extremely well aware of what is going on. I hope you will maintain an equally questioning attitude in all of your work.

Such cooperation as we may be able to extend, however, merely helps you to acquire some of the tools you will need in accomplishing the task ahead of you. And this applies to technical advice even more than to material things. That is why we have given research a prominent place in our planned cooperation. The practice of forestry is an art based on several sciences. It can not be formed into a stencil for application in different places in the same way. A new pattern must be developed for each new set of conditions. The early foresters in the United States were inclined to attempt applying European stencils to American conditions with unfortunate results. When we threw away the stencils but retained the principles to develop techniques suitable to American conditions, we began to make progress. That is why I expressed the

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both made torches and set fire to the whole grove. And as those exquisite flowers were eaten by the flames, a heavy load seemed to be lifted from my heart and my conscience was eased, for I knew that we had done the right thing for the lesson of the rattan was still fresh in my mind.

Well, after all, who would value orchids if they were as common as weeds? Like Mickey's rattan these orchids would have flooded the market, disturbing the balance between supply and demand and resulting in disastrous consequences to the orchid business. Don't you agree with me?

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### FORESTRY IN THE . . .

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"This achievement speaks highly of your ability not only to rehabilitate an industry that was all wiped out by the war but also to rise to the occasion and meet our urgent national requirements for wood and other forest products," he added.

Secretary Mapa called the attention of the lumbermen to the tendency among some lumber companies to produce more logs and less sawn lumber in view of the high prices for logs offered by Japan.

*Manila Times, August 12, 1953*

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Be unselfish. That is the first and final commandment for those who would be useful and happy over their usefulness. If you think of yourself only, you cannot develop because you are choking the source of development which is spiritual expansion through thoughts of others.

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hope that you will maintain a continually searching and questioning attitude as you relate advice or knowledge from all sources to your own specific problems.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that although the problems confronting you foresters are great, the opportunity to make important contributions to the good of the Philippines is even greater. It represents a real challenge, and one which will require the best in professional skill and personal qualities to meet successfully.