



On Local Color

By Alfredo E. Litiatco.

(AUTHOR'S NOTE—Those whose memories are merciless, may remember that of the nine narratives the writer has had published in the GREEN AND WHITE, only two had a Philippine setting. Of the remaining seven, one purported to transpire during the days of the Crusades; another in the course of the American Revolution; a third when Cardinal Richelieu was the power in France; a fourth in Chicago; and the rest in an imaginary city I chose to call Erewon.

It is thus quite evident that I was myself partial to the writing of "foreign" stories while a student; and yet, what I propose to do forthwith, is to criticize and preach to those students of La Salle who are partial to the use of alien settings. Hence am I a perfect example of people who, though living in glass houses, recklessly throw stones. May I mention, though, that my two GREEN AND WHITE stories that *did* have local color—or some vestiges of same, at any rate—were both written when I had become what I am now: i. e., no longer an under-graduate. And the alumni are mature persons who, some time or other, go through (with immense profit) that school which is alleged to be for fools only.

Thus, while most people profit by their mistakes, I am affording you the rare privilege of learning from *mine*. That is how generous I am!—A. E. L.)

ONE may reasonably indulge in the encouraging supposition that, even outside readers of more than ordinary taste, find the articles and verses of the GREEN AND WHITE of interest; but, with possibly greater certainty, and more reason, one likewise cannot but arrive at the depressing conclusion that, they probably totally ignore the majority of the efforts at fiction-writing.

This may be attributed to at least four major causes, namely: first, lack of vitality; second, faulty technique (if there is at all a semblance of form); third, immaturity; and lastly, the absence of local color.

With the first three flaws, we shall not concern ourselves: they are natural and almost inevitable. One cannot expect people young in age, education, experience, and observation to be discriminating in selecting material for a story, and skillful in fashioning that material; nor can one expect their viewpoint to be anything but adolescent. But surely, inasmuch as this magazine's story-writers are Filipinos, or at least residents of the Philippines, presumably writing for readers who are Filipinos, or residents of the Philippines, one may look forward to finding the GREEN AND WHITE narratives colored with native tints. But one does not so find them.

One of the rules of fiction-writing requires that authors never utilize settings with which they are not completely familiar; and once decided on a particular setting for a story, another rule dictates that the characters and descriptions be in accordance with that setting. Of course, the latter rule is automatically broken, once the former is disregarded—which is precisely, if in all probability, inadvertently, what practically all GREEN AND WHITE story-writers do. (In any case, should the first rule, as in a few instances, be followed, the second is usually not—and again, unknowingly, maybe.)

This, it goes without saying, has not been observed by the writer alone. Outside readers and exchanges have also remarked it. "Why is it," an outsider who is himself an author once inquired of me, "That your writers are so fond of running around the streets of New York, London, Paris, Berlin, when they have not even attempted to tread on the Escolta?"

Let us see: what does the average La Salle student read in the way of fiction? That is, those students who write for our school publication?

As a rule, these are they who are in one of the classes from the first year high school up. The Freshmen are fresh from, and mayhap, still enjoying, the Alger books and the Rover Boys series. The Sophomores are reveling in the Merriwell stories, the Juniors live Sherlock Homes, while the Seniors and the other upper-classmen probably think that the novels of Rafael Sabatini constitute the acme of adult fiction. If they read any other stories or novels, they are those which they are compelled to read in connection with their classes in English Literature. At all events, whatever they read is "foreign." They seldom, possibly never, read local works of fiction—which is probably just as well.

Thus, when they write for the college periodical, they turn out would-be detective stories, would-be historical romances, would-be sports narratives, would-be rags-to-riches epics, and so forth, in an attempt to create another *Craig Kennedy*, another *Ivanhoe*, another *Jack Lightfoot*, or another *Herbert Carter*. And of course, they use an alien background. Granted, they have never traveled or even read extensively. But they have a fair knowledge of the countries concerned, anyway. Haven't they gone to all sorts of places with the heroes of Henty and Stratemeyer? Haven't they sailed to Treasure Island or served under *Captain Blood*? Haven't they fought with *Richard the Lion Heart*, or gone sleuthing with *Nick Carter*? Haven't they been "adrift in New York," and "risen from the ranks" with *Julius the Street Boy*? Haven't they—oh, what period have they not lived in, what class of people have they not known, what nation have they not gone to? None, none—except the different eras of Philippine history, the race of people known as Filipinos, that country which is called the Philippines!

Yes: we can, in a measure, account for the absence of local color in the bulk of the stories in the GREEN AND WHITE. We know the "reason." But it is a reason that is not truly a reason, because it is not excusable. We can understand why the characters, and even the plots may be essentially exotic. But we cannot comprehend why the settings, as well, should deliberately be made foreign—why La Salle story-tellers, as a whole do not at least *begin* or *attempt* to write *Filipino* short-stories. *Paucity* of native touches may be unavoidable under the circumstances; but surely, not *total absence*.

At this juncture, it may be illuminating to point out just what is, or what constitutes, local color. (1) The writer will endeavor to do this negatively and indirectly—in the main.

(1) I suggest the interested reader procure a copy of the very first number of the *Literary Apprentice*, issued late in 1928, and read Casiano T. Calalang's "On Local Color," which is an almost perfect exposition of the subject.

It is not having local color to simply name your characters Juan and Maria instead of John and Mary, to merely state that they live in Manila instead of in Los Angeles, that they ride in *carrromatas* instead of in taxis, that their house is a wooden one instead of a "palatial mansion."

It is not having local color to fill a story with descriptions of nipa shacks and *taos*, carabaos and rice fields, *kundimans* sung and *cariñosa* danced. Nor is it having local color to intersperse your English words with native terms conspicuously italicized.

No, it is not sufficient to state the bald fact that your character, either implied or definitely designated—that he is a Filipino.

It is all very well to say that fundamentally all men are equal, that hearts are hearts the world over, that art knows neither national boundaries nor race distinctions, that Caucasian, Malayan, Mongolian, or what-not, we all feel the same emotions: love, hate, sorrow, joy, etc. But superficially, the manner in which we react to those emotions, and give them expression differs with each race. And there are conditions which exist only in certain countries, conditions typical of them, just as there are individual traits characteristic of those living in them. Be it ever so subtle or slight, there is a difference between the way a Filipino acts, thinks, talks, and all in all lives, and the way of an American, a Frenchman, or a Turk.

"There are," writes Walter Robb (2), "humble servants in Philippine villages, types as thoroughly grandiose and picturesque as those the world smiles at, with French writers, and those who will be smiled at with American authors when American literature is somewhat farther along than it now is; the policeman, the policeman's family, the town-council member, the *teniente del barrio*, the councilman's lieutenant, usually quite puffed up by his little portion of authority.

"The little woman in village life is all-important to the student, and it must, in literature, be shown by incident and not by preachment. Just what is it? Many a *tao* is driven by apron strings, yet, craven though an aggressive spouse has made him, to his children his word is law. Here is humor, pathos, drama of the richest sort. Man squirms like a brow-beaten child under woman's discipline, and without doubt the Philippine peasant squirms adroitly. But just how? The answer lies in specific incident Some day, somebody with a learned mind and a comprehending soul will spring from our peasantry, or go out into the country and live among them; and then Philippine literature will be born. Once born, it will wax vigorous. Here is a story of the centuries, which has never been told; the loves and hates, the hopes and disappointments of a simple people, and how they manage the enigma of life from the bamboo cradle, swung on a bamboo pole, to a sodden grave in the *campo santo*. If they did this grudgingly, if they were a morose and morbid folk, the golden secret would be gilded dross. That they do it joyously, stoically, obediently—that is the unsullied treasure-trove hidden in their humble careers."

There are those who hold that all things Philippine are in the country. With this radical view, I cannot wholly concur. I contend that the Filipino of the city, changing though he may be (indeed, this very fact lends him importance, rendering him the potentiality of what may, in the distant future be an inevitable actuality), and adulterated with Occidental views and traits. I believe he, too, merits portrayal, is worthy of study. Less and less is he becoming the exception, it must be admitted, for in this country, in truth, East and West have met and are swiftly blending.

(2) In the fourth of a series of articles under the heading of "Haphazard Studies in the English Language," published in the September, 1928, number of the *American Chamber of Commerce Journal*.

Coming again to the task of coloring our short-stories and other works of fiction with native tints, there are many things to avoid, among them:

(a) *Superfluous description.* This will retard the movement of the story, make it lag, and so render it uninteresting and spoil its technique. A choice bit of description here and there is more effective than several useless paragraphs. Make the description really an integral part of the narrative. For instance, in "Soft Clay" by Casiano T. Calalang (3), in the part where father and son are traveling in a *banca*, you will find this sentence: "They were nearing a bend, and the old man held the paddle horizontally, midway, and struck it many times against the side of the *banca* to warn other boatmen who happened to be on the way of their approach." This incident is at once a part of the story and typically Filipino.

(b) *Excessive use of native terms.* If you are writing in English, never forget it in your desire to have local color. Do not use vernacular words unless you cannot find English equivalents for them—such as *naman*, *ano*, *po*, etc.—or else, when translated literally, will not convey the correct and precise impression you desire.

Sometimes, conversations are a great help, and are more effective than descriptions. For instance, in "Dead Stars" by Paz Marquez-Benitez (4), the second paragraph runs thus: "Papa, and when will the long table be set?" Which means, as we Filipinos know, "When will the wedding be?" Then again, one may resort to the usage of such characteristic expressions as "Suppose I vomit blood!" as in "Dahong-Palay" by A. B. Rotor (5). Finally, there are the common methods hinted at previously in this article.

Genuine local color stories are not at all easy to write. Such are not produced regularly by even some of our best fiction-writers, not excepting such authors as José Garcia Villa and Loreto Paras. Only a few have a reputation for writing truly native stories more or less consistently: Casiano T. Calalang, Alvaro L. Martinez, Isidro L. Retizos, Mariano C. Pascual It is quite well known that the majority of our short-story writers (who number about a thousand, conservatively estimated), turn out stories which, strictly considered, have very little or no claim to being Filipino. Conditions, of course, are constantly improving, but as yet, they are far from ideal.

And why?

"The Filipino writer in English labors under a great handicap," Mrs. Benitez (6) once said. "He is smothered by an atmosphere of clever American magazine fiction. His horizon is so full of it that, he cannot see anything else. He thinks and writes in American fiction terms One comes across Juana at a railway station with a poodle on her arm, elegantly consuming bonbons while waiting for her lover to arrive, or across Juan, addressing the 'Gentlemen of the Jury' in defense of his clients. . . ."

"Our new writers are blazing the way, and like all pioneers, their progress is difficult, slow, and blundering. There are no traditions to guide the hand of the Filipino writer in English. American traditions will not serve him.

"That is the great advantage the Filipino writer in Spanish has over the new writers. The first can look on writing in Spanish by Filipinos. That is why their writings are maturer, more finished than those of Filipino writers in English of the same age and ability."

(3) First published in the *Philippines Herald*. Reprinted in the booklet "Filipino Love Stories", edited by Paz Marquez-Benitez, and published by the *Philippine Journal of Education*.

(4) First published by the *Philippines Herald*. Reprinted in "Philippine Prose and Poetry," a textbook for First Year Students in the public schools, published by the Bureau of Printing.

(5) First published in *The Tribune*. Reprinted in the anthology "Philippine Short Stories," containing the best Filipino short-stories of 1928, as selected by José Garcia Villa, and published by the *Philippines Free Press*.

And Dr. G. P. Shannon (6), formerly head of the English Department of our state university and now dean in the University of New Mexico: "It is fatal to think that a second-rate American story becomes a first-rate Filipino story by adding a few Juans and Marias, and saying that it happened in Laguna. Few writers seem to realize the wealth of legendary and historical material available for the romancer; or the dramatic, often tragic, clash of creeds, races classes and cultures that are crying for treatment by a realist. But our writers are young: in no country of the world would they at their ages be expected to be great authors. Time will improve them; and if they can learn to write history without bombast, and describe native life without sentimentality, they may do something."

La Salle story-tellers, therefore, may take heart: they are not the disgraceful exceptions. More experienced writers have made mistakes similar to theirs; not so grossly, perhaps, but still reprehensibly.

And let us learn from, and profit by our errors—and *show*, eventually, that we have. Let our future slogan be that of the patriotic tourist, suitably altered: Write about the Philippines first! We may not be thoroughly proficient at present, but at least we can make a beginning, and try earnestly—and the future, once that is done, is assured.

As for material, we have that in abundance, as already pointed out in foregoing quotations. Apropos of which, let me conclude with another one, this time from former Governor-General Francis Burton Harrison (7):

"Here in the Philippines, I would, if I could, arouse you to more earnest devotion to a literary career. You have natural advantages second to no country in the world. Your history is replete with incidents and romance. Last winter, when I returned to New York for my first vacation home, I remember one particularly dark and gloomy day when the people on the streets, which are nothing more than cañons between high buildings of stone and glass, were jostling one another without a spark of human sympathy or appreciation, conscious competitors in the struggle for the survival of the fittest; and my mind went back to those scenes of everyday life in the Philippines, to this land of sunsets across Mariveles Mountain, the dawn over Mount Arayat, the blue haze upon the rice field in the evening, all the familiar scenes and sounds of a life made animate by the sun, and made happy by the richness of nature. As I remembered the deep and tender lights of the coconut groves, and the busy industry of your daily life, I said to myself: 'There is a country which could inspire any man to literary efforts with all its wealth of romance' . . . When I recall the history of the Philippine Islands, the coming of the Christians with the sword and flaming cross, the coming of the Mohammedans, with the crescent and the crooked kris, and their cry in many a hard-fought battle, the enterprise of the Spaniard in spiritual teachings, as well as in material investments, the shouts of Legaspi's sailors across Manila Bay, the guns of Dewey so many generations later, the efforts of our country to establish here our principles of democracy, it seems to me that any young man or woman, born upon this soil, and inspired by these ideas, has an opportunity to take a place in the very foremost ranks of literature and history, and to show to the world not only what has been done here in education, but what the world may expect of the Filipino people when they take their rank as an independent member of the brotherhood of nations."

(6) In the symposium entitled "The Future of Filipino Literature," compiled by Vicente L. del Fierro and published in the *Philippines Herald* for July 15th, 1928.

(7) From "Rizal as a Patriotic Author and Scientist" published in the *Rizal Day Review*, Dec. 30th, 1925.