

BROWN RIVER, WHITE ● OCEAN

*An Anthology of Twentieth-Century
Philippine Literature in English*



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Carlos Bulosan



THE ROMANCE OF MAGNO RUBIO

Magno Rubio. Filipino boy. Four-foot six inches tall. Dark as a coconut. Head small on a body like a turtle. Magno Rubio. Picking peas on a California hillside for twenty-five cents an hour. Filipino boy. In love with a girl he had never seen. A girl twice his size sideward and upward. Claro said...

I was listening to their heated discussion.

"I love her," he said.

"But how could you?" Claro asked. "She's twice your size sideward and upward."

"Has size got anything to do with love?"

"That's what I've heard from my uncle."

"Your uncle could be wrong."

"My uncle was never wrong, God bless his soul."

"Was he an educated man?"

"Not in the book sense but in the life sense."

"I don't know," he said, screwing up his fish-eyes. Then he saw me. "You went to college, Nick?"

"Yes."

"How many years?"

"Enough to understand a few things, Magno."

"Now tell me," he said. "Has size got anything to do with love? I mean real love, an honest love?"

"I don't think so."

He brightened up. He turned to Claro. "That's what I thought," he concluded.

"But," Claro protested, "he hasn't seen the girl he's supposed to be in love with?"

He looked at me hopefully.

"The object of love may be an idea, a dream, a reality," I explained. "The love is there. And it grows—depending, of course, on the ability of the lover to crystallize the beloved."

He opened his black mouth, showing rotten teeth. He jumped to his feet like a monkey. "That's it!" he cried. "I don't understand all your words, Nick. But I get it that it's possible for me to love a girl I've never seen!"

"That's exactly what I mean, Magno."

"Nick, you saved my life!"

"It's all wrong," Claro said, grabbing the long neck of his jug of red wine on the table. His throat gargled. His stomach rumbled. "Words, words, words! They don't mean a thing. My uncle couldn't be wrong: he was a gentleman!"

They were sitting directly opposite each other. They were pushing the jug of wine back and forth across the bare dining table in the smoky kitchen of our bunkhouse. It was early spring and the sun outside was glittering on the dew-laden hills, where the royal crowns of eidelweiss, the long blue petals of lupines and multicolored poppies were shaking slightly in the wind. It was morning and we had no work. Some members of our crew were sleeping in their straw beds, some playing cards in a

corner of the bunkhouse, some playing musical instruments on the porch. We were pursuing the daily routine of our lives when we had no work. But the three of us were thinking of Magno Rubio's romance with a girl in the mountains of Arkansas. A girl he had been corresponding with but never seen.

"Will you help me, Nick?" he asked me suddenly.

"Sure, Magno."

He looked at Claro with displeasure. "Please go away," he told him.

"This illiterate peasant tells me to go away," Claro said contemptuously. "This ignoramus tells a man who has gone to the second grade to go away! Listen, peon—"

"Here's a dollar," he said, disregarding the insult. "Now go away. Drink the wine in your room. I was crazy to pay for it anyway."

"Look, Igorot—"

"Here's two dollars. Be a gentleman like your uncle."

Claro looked tentatively at the money. He picked up the crisp bills on the table. He grabbed the jug of wine and went to his room.

"What is it, Magno?" I asked.

"I like you to write a letter for me, Nick."

"Where to?"

"My girl in Arkansas."

"I thought you've been writing to her."

"In a way."

"I can't express your feelings, Magno."

"Sure you can. I'll dictate in our dialect and you translate it into English." He looked in the direction of Claro's room, where a bed was squeaking like a dozen little pigs. He turned to me and frowned. "You see, he has been writing my letters. But he's very expensive. Very, Nick."

"You paid him?"

"And how!"

"How much per letter?"

"No, no, no!" he protested. "It's very complicated. At first there was only a gallon of wine. Later he thought of making some money. I don't know where he had stolen the idea, but it must have been from the movies. He demanded a flat rate of five dollars per letter."

"That's reasonable, Magno. After all he spent some money when he went to the second grade."

"But it's not that, Nick! You see, I wrote to my girl every day. I earn only two dollars fifty cents a day. Still, I had to write to her. I love her. You understand, Nick?"

"I understand. I was in love once."

"You see what I mean?"

I nodded my head. I said, "Five dollars per letter. That's more than I earn a day as a bookkeeper for our crew."

"That's not the end of it, Nick." He leaned toward me, his fish-eyes shining like mud. "Realizing that I truly love the girl, that I can't live in the world without her, he demanded one cent per word!"

"One cent per word? It's robbery!"

"Yes! And do you know what, Nick! He wrote long letters that I couldn't understand. And he used big words. How would I know if he wasn't writing for himself?"

"It's hard to say."

"However, I'm not worried about that part of the deal," he said, showing his protruding rotten teeth. He bit at a twisted chunk of chewing tobacco, rolled it from cheek to cheek and said: "I've confidence in myself. But some men use their education to enslave others. I thought education is meant to guide the uneducated. Did some educated man lie about this thing called education, Nick?"

"I don't think so, Magno. Education is what you said: for the educated to guide the uneducated. And it's more than that. Education is a periscope through which a common ground of understanding should be found among men."

He coughed up the slimy wad of tobacco in his mouth, licked the brown shreds of saliva dripping down his thick lips with the tip of his serrated tongue. He banged the splintery table with a fist and said, "The thief! He acts like an exploiter, always squeezing the last drop of my blood! You know what he did to enslave me for a lifetime if you didn't come along, Nick?"

I looked at his coconut head. I looked at his turtle neck. "No," I said.

"Later he charged me ten cents per word!"

"What?"

"You heard me right, Nick! I paid him twenty dollars per letter! Sometimes more! There!"

I studied his monkey face. I said, "It's unbelievable, Magno!"

He bit another chunk of tobacco, swallowed his saliva and bared his ugly teeth. He said, "I didn't mind paying him that much money. But the words were too long and deep for me. And again I say: how would I know if he hadn't been writing for himself? Do you think he's that low, Nick?"

"Some men are capable of anything, Magno. Some men could crawl on their bellies on human filth to earn a dollar."

"I didn't know that, Nick." He was disappointed. "I thought we were all born honest."

"We were all born honest, Magno. But along the way some of us lost our honesty."

"I didn't lose my honesty."

"Keep it, Magno. Honesty is the best policy."

"That's what I've heard. Still . . ."

"You heard right, Magno."

"I will, Nick." He brushed off a scab on his flat nose. "But I'm free now because I've you. Will you write for me from now on, Nick?"

"Sure, Magno."

"What would you like to have? You don't drink like Claro. You don't go after girls like our foreman. You don't gamble like the hoodlums in the poolroom in town. You don't smoke like the whores at the Elite Hotel. You don't chew tobacco like—"

I stopped him. I said, "Don't start anything, Magno. I'll do it because I like to help you. Maybe I'll need your help some day."

"That's what I like about you, Nick. You use your college education in the right direction."

"By the way, Magno," I said. "How do you know your girl in Arkansas is tall and big on the beam?"

"She wrote to me about the matter."

"You mean Claro told you that's what she wrote?"

"Exactly."

"Did she send you a picture of herself?"

He fumbled in his pockets and produced an old wallet. He extracted a snapshot from a bunch of bills and magazine clippings.

"This is it, Nick."

I looked at the snapshot. It was faded due to too much handling. It was impossible to determine the girl's age and shape and height.

"How tall is she according to Claro?"

"Five-foot eleven inches," he said. "But I don't mind. I really don't. I like tall girls."

"Everybody does, Magno," I told him. Who is short like you, I almost added. Instead I asked him, "And how heavy is she, according to Claro?"

"One hundred ninety-five pounds on bare feet," he said. "But I don't care about that either. I like heavy girls. I really do."

"Everybody does, Magno," I said. Who is a featherweight like you, I almost added. Instead I told him, "It doesn't really matter how tall she is and how much she weighs if you love her."

His flat nose flared up. "I love her, Nick," he said.

"I know you do."

"Will you write a letter now?"

"Sure, Magno."

He ran to his room. He came back with a pencil and a pad of notepaper. Plus a big dictionary, I didn't know why. He put his hands behind his back, walked around the table a few times, stopped in front of me and screwed up his monkey face. Then he began to dictate in our dialect.

Magno Rubio. Four-foot six inches tall. Dark as a coconut. Head small on a body like a turtle. Filipino boy. In love with a girl five-foot eleven inches tall. One hundred ninety-five pounds of flesh and bones on bare feet. A girl twice his size sideward and upward, Claro said . . .

"How did you know Clarabelle?" I asked him.

"I found her in a magazine," he said.

"How?"

"You know, one of those magazines that advertised the names and addresses of girls for one dollar."

"A Lonely Hearts magazine."

"I guess so."

"But you can't read, Magno?"

"Claro read it for me."

"And he found the name for you?"

"He did."

"And of course you gave him the dollar."

He nodded his turtle head. He inserted a finger in his hairy nostril to extricate a slab of dried mucus. He made a face when he pulled it out, looked at a minute, flung it aside and wiped his hand on his trousers.

"How long have you been writing to her?" I asked him.

"Three months. Do you remember the time when we were picking tomatoes and I didn't want to work? That was the time when I found Clarabelle."

"I remember, Magno."

"For a long time I had nobody to work for, Nick," he explained. "But when I found Clarabelle..." He grunted because he had swallowed the wad of tobacco in his cheek, bringing tears to his dull eyes. "You know what I mean, Nick."

"I do."

"Well, that's why I've been working every day ever since. And I don't regret it, either."

"That's the spirit, Magno."

He put his chin between his hands. I looked at him and wondered what was transpiring in his bird brain. But I recalled, about three months before, he used to stay in the bunkhouse all day. I saw him looking with dreamy eyes at the pages of dime magazines. I knew he couldn't read, but the magazines were illustrated with the photographs of nude and semi-nude girls. I was tempted to teach him the alphabet, which I did for a few days, but he lacked concentration. And his memory was bad because his mind was taken up by the enticing photographs. So he made excuses that he was either ill or too busy to study.

But he was not ill. Of course, he was ill with love. The foreman scolded him once for staying out of the work, but he complained that he was suffering from arthritis. The foreman left it at that because, if Magno Rubio

had the illness that he claimed, it would be dangerous for him to work in the cold weather. It was winter then, and the tomatoes were almost frozen. But the crop was saved by our industry and endurance.

And he was not busy, either. He had nothing to do in the bunkhouse, because we had a cook who cooked our food and cleaned the place. Magno Rubio seldom washed his clothes, if he ever did. He had the same rags on him all the time, even when he was in bed. It was insufferable to sit beside him at the dining table. He smelled of mud, sweat and filth, and more, he smelled like a skunk. He was not lazy of course, but he just didn't know how to be clean. He had forgotten that some human beings had a sensitive sense of smell, and unlike him, he who had been a peon and a companion of pigs and goats all his life.

But now he had Clarabelle. He was in love for the first time in his life. And also for the first time in his life the filthy rags clinging on his back were discarded. I recalled that when he burned them in the back yard, I dashed out of the house to the foothill for fresh air. But even then my stomach betrayed me, and made me curse the ugliness of some human beings. However, it was all over. Magno Rubio was a human being again. And he was in love.

It was in the middle of spring and we were picking peas on the hillsides near our bunkhouse. Magno Rubio and I were working side by side, astride neighboring rows that began from the slope of the hills and ended atop a stony plateau, where goats and sheep were let loose by farmers to eat the destructive loco weeds. We worked up and down the hills, crawling on our knees like brown beetles.

I threw a handful of pea pods into my can and looked at him. "What are your plans for Clarabelle?" I asked.

"I want to marry her, Nick," he said.

"Would you like to say that in your next letter?"

"That's what I've been planning to tell you."

"Well, you should propose to her. How much money have you already spent on her?"

He counted it on his fingers, his thick lips moving the while. "A little over two hundred dollars, Nick. There was the engagement ring. Seventy-five dollars. The wrist-watch. Eighty dollars. A pair of suede shoes, some clothes, a diamond bracelet. One hundred twenty-nine. It's over three hundred dollars, Nick!"

"That's plenty of money, Magno."

"It's worth it."

"If you think so."

"I spent every cent I earned for her. I also borrowed some money from the foreman with interest."

I studied his flaring flat nose. It was caked with dirt and mucus.

"But it's worth it, Nick."

"Of course, Magno. Would you like me to write a letter of proposal of marriage tonight?"

"Yes, Nick. The sooner the better."

"Suppose she'll change her mind when she arrives in California?"

There was a flicker of momentary doubt in his monkey face. "I don't think Clarabelle will do that. She's a good girl."

"I hope you are right."

"I've confidence in her."

So I wrote the letter of proposal. She answered immediately saying that she was accepting his proposal, but, unfortunately, she had to stay home for a while because of her sick mother. However she urged him to send her the ticket money and some extra for expenses, in abeyance, since she expected the old woman to get well.

The money was sent. Several days passed. Two weeks passed. Three weeks, and a letter arrived from Clarabelle. I read it and gave the translation to Magno Rubio. Clarabelle said, in resume, that her mother died from a lingering disease and she had to spend the money on her funeral. And not only that, she wrote sobbingly: now she had to take care of her little brothers and sisters, all under ten. But, she added, her heart was with him: she was looking forward to the day when she would be free from her family obligations.

"Poor girl," Magno Rubio commented sadly. And that was all he said, nothing more. So

we kept on writing to her. Sometimes we sent her money when she asked for it, sometimes we sent clothes for her brothers and sisters. Magno Rubio never complained. Not one word of protest. The plight of the girl in Arkansas made him more industrious and frugal. He even cut down his expenses on chewing tobacco, which made him look like a Moro juramentado about to go desert among Christians so he could go to heaven and honored heathen. And of course he was back to his rags.

He worked and worked. He worked like a carabao but lived like a dog. Then the pea season was over. We had a rest for a week, before we started planting celery and carrots. Then the lettuce season came. We thinned and irrigated the seedlings. So the months passed, the seasons came and went. And a year passed by uneventfully, sadly, for Magno Rubio.

A stream of letters flowed from Arkansas to California. Clarabelle was still supporting her little brothers and sisters. And poor Magno Rubio, he didn't suspect anything wrong. He was still looking forward to her coming to California.

"Will you wait?" This was her constant plea in every letter.

"I'll wait," Magno Rubio said to himself. And he waited. It was now two years and a half since he first contacted her through Claro. Then the third year passed, and he still waited. What sustains a man to have such patience? What quality of soul does he possess to have so much faith in something he has never seen?

I don't know. But Magno Rubio had the patience and the faith. Where most men would have given up long ago, he kept on beyond belief and all reason.

"I'll wait," he said every day.

Magno Rubio. Filipino boy. Four-foot six inches tall. Dark as a coconut. Head small on a body like a turtle. Picking tomatoes on a California hillside for twenty-five cents an hour. In love with a girl he had never seen. A girl five-foot eleven inches tall. One hundred

ninety-five pounds of flesh and bones on bare feet. Filipino boy. In love with a girl twice his size sideward and upward, Claro said...

"What are you giving Clarabelle for Christmas, Magno?" I asked him.

He grinned like a goat. He was carrying a big bundle under one arm. "I'm giving her a radio," he said. "A combination radio-phonograph. It costs me nearly two hundred dollars."

"That's good, Magno."

"Let's send it right away, Nick."

We did. And we waited in vain for her letter. Then Christmas day came.

We were all in the bunkhouse. The foreman and two others were playing poker in a corner of the kitchen. Claro was drinking wine at the dining table. Magno Rubio was oiling his hair near a window, where he had propped up a broken mirror. He was grinning like a monkey. He was in love.

"So Clarabelle will know I'm clean tonight," he explained.

"It doesn't make any difference to her," I said. "She's too far away to appreciate your cleanliness."

He stopped combing his oily black hair and turned to me. "We'll tell her about it in the next letter, Nick."

"Sure, Magno."

"You see, Nick. I'm clean in my soul, thinking of her."

I stopped playing solitaire. I studied his monkey face, and somehow felt that a pure soul was hidden by his flat nose and fish-eyes. I glanced over at Claro. He was getting drunk. Saliva was dripping down the corners of his twisted mouth. His eyes were popping red, like frozen tomatoes.

"Don't you have a girl, Nick?" Magno Rubio suddenly asked me.

I turned my face away from Claro and looked at Magno. "No," I said.

"You should have. You are a college man."

"Education has nothing to do with love."

"You really don't have a girl anywhere in the wide world?" I shook my head vigorously.

"If I were you I would write to all the pretty

girls. There must be a girl somewhere for you, Nick."

"I don't think so, Magno."

"How come pretty girls fall for an uneducated guy like me, huh?"

"You tell me, Magno."

"Now take Clarabelle. Why didn't she fall for you, Nick?"

"You found her first."

"If you found her first and I horned in, would she still fall for me?"

"I guess so, Magno."

He laughed like a horse. Claro banged on the table with both fists and leaped to his feet.

"Listen, you peon!" He pointed a finger at Magno. "What are you laughing about?"

"He's happy, Claro," I said. "He has a girl, that's why he's happy."

"I got Clarabelle," Magno said.

"Clarabelle, my eye!" Claro screamed.

"What do you mean by that foolishness?" Magno asked. He put the comb in his shirt pocket and advanced toward Claro. "Will you clarify your statement?"

"You mean to tell me that a girl like Clarabelle loves a donkey like you?"

"What's wrong with me?"

"What's wrong with me?" Claro imitated him. "Don't you know, peasant?"

Magno advanced closer to his adversary. I stopped playing solitaire.

"Don't you know that you look like a monkey?" Claro continued his tirade. His voice was becoming hysterical, his eyes redder, and his mouth was foaming. "Don't you know that besides being a peasant you are also illiterate! Girls like Clarabelle don't fall for your kind, illiterate peasant!"

"You are also a peasant."

"An educated peasant! There, monkey-faced dog peasant!"

"What's the difference?"

"What's the difference?" Claro imitated him again.

"I don't care what you say. Clarabelle loves me."

"Prove it, dog eater!"

Calmly Magno produced his old wallet. He threw a lock of hair on the table.

"Here's the absolute proof. She sent it to me. It's from her own head."

"You think you are the only man with a lock of hair from Clarabelle?" Claro also produced a lock of hair and flung it upon the table. "There, monkey! That's the real proof. And it's not from her head, either!"

Magno Rubio was astonished. He leaned over the two locks of hair, examining one and then the other. Then the two of them were leaning over the table, examining the two locks of hair in all their minutiae, as though they were looking down the magnificent lens of a microscope. And they were growing suspicious of each other, their heads bent close together, their eyes popping like over-ripe guavas. But, finally, Magno Rubio calmed down. He didn't want any violence. His soul was clean and beautiful.

"Your lock of hair doesn't prove anything," he told Claro. Carefully he put Clarabelle's faded snapshot on the table. "But this proves something definite," he added.

Claro sneered. He flung a snapshot beside Magno's face down and said, "Proof, my ass! This is the irrefutable proof! Look for yourself, pig!"

Magno Rubio reached for the snapshot. Claro snatched it away. I had a quick glance of it. I hoped Magno wouldn't see it, because it was the picture of a pretty girl, quite young and proportionately shaped. But he was aroused.

"Let me see!" he demanded.

"Go to hell!" Claro shouted.

The coconut head sunk into the turtle body. The fish-eyes shone. The flat black nose flared. The ugly mouth snarled. Then the gorilla legs leaped. Then they were rolling on the floor. Then Magno Rubio was on top of Claro, beating his face into pulp with his whirlwind fists.

I jumped to my feet. I grabbed Magno Rubio's hands. But he was strong. He was like a mad dog. I looked toward the poker players.

"You guys!" I called. "Help me!"

They looked in our direction for a minute, then continued their game. I changed my tactics on the mad dog. I squeezed his neck and kept on squeezing until he released Claro. He gasped for air, while Claro scrambled to his feet and dashed outside. I went back to my game of solitaire.

Magno Rubio walked straight to a wall. He began beating it with his fists, weeping at the same time. He kept beating the wall until his fists began to bleed. Then he sank exhausted in a corner of the kitchen, while Claro shouted obscenities from the porch.

Magno Rubio. Filipino boy. Four-foot six inches tall. Dark as a coconut. Head small like a turtle. Magno Rubio. Cutting celery for twenty-five cents an hour. In love with a girl in the mountains of Arkansas. Filipino boy. In love with a girl he had never seen. A girl twice his size sideward and upward, Claro said. . .

"Have you heard from Clarabelle, Magno?" I asked him one day.

"No."

"We should write to her."

He looked at me. His serrated tongue darted out of the black pit of his mouth. Then he yawned, and the orifice at the root of his tongue revealed its yellowish membrane.

"It's no use, Nick," he said finally. "Claro fouled up everything."

"I don't think so," I consoled him. "Besides he's gone."

"He's a louse."

"How do you know?"

"He's been writing to her."

"Well, the best man wins, Magno. And you are the best man."

"Do you think so?"

"Don't you?"

He sighed. "We'll write to her tonight."

"Are you sure you didn't get a letter from her since—?"

He did not let me finish. "I have, Nick," he confessed. "Ten letters in all. I didn't want to show them to you. The letters are in my room."

"Why didn't you let me know?"

"I thought Clarabelle—"

"Of course you were wrong, Magno," I finished it for him.

"Will you read them tonight, Nick? And write a letter for me?"

"Sure, Magno."

We were packing lettuce in the shade. It was May again and the crop was good. It was now three years and four months since he had first written to her. I read all of Clarabelle's letters in translation to him. They were arranged chronologically; he had stacked them in an empty cigar box as they arrived. Clarabelle's plea of love became more fervent in every letter, for it seemed that her responsibilities were diminishing. Magno Rubio nodded his head. A genuine smile decorated his black face. When we came to the last letter, I couldn't believe its message. But it was true. Clarabelle was coming to California. She was already on the way.

"When did you get this letter?" I asked him.

"This morning."

"Clarabelle is on the way."

His dull fish-eyes shone for the first time.

"Did she say she's coming to marry me?"

"That's what she says, Magno. Did you save enough money for this emergency?"

"I've fifty dollars."

"That's not enough."

"But I thought—"

"You'll have to get out of the state to get married, you know."

"Can't we get married in town?"

"You can't marry here, Magno," I explained.

"You can't marry in the whole state of California. You must go to New Mexico or Washington. These are the nearest states where you can get married. And you'll need at least two hundred dollars for the whole affair."

"I didn't know it would cost that much to get married."

"It's only the beginning, Magno."

"You mean there are other expenses?"

"Well, later."

Dreams of glory misted his eyes. "I know what you mean, Nick."

"I know you."

"I'll borrow some more from the foreman."

"You are mortgaging your whole future," I told him.

"It's worth it, Nick." Dreams of glory crossed his face again. "When is she arriving?"

"Saturday around noon, the letter says. Today is Thursday. You've barely two days to prepare. You are supposed to meet her at the bus station."

"Will you come with me, Nick?"

"Sure, Magno."

He licked his thick lips and turned away from me. "Will you lend me a hundred, Nick?"

"I'm very sorry, Magno."

"I understand. I'll go to the foreman . . ."

"I'm sure he'll help you."

"Do you think she wrote to Claro?"

"I don't know."

"I will kill him."

We were loading the crates of lettuce in the waiting trucks when a telegram came for Magno Rubio. It was from Clarabelle. She was arriving in town sooner than she had expected; at five o'clock Friday afternoon. And it was already Friday noon. He had only four hours to prepare, and we had five more trucks to load. He was stunned for a moment. Then he started throwing the loaded crates into the trucks, working like two men. I followed him, hoping we would finish the job before the momentous hour arrived.

We did. We rushed to the bunkhouse and took a quick shower, changed our clothes, borrowed the pickup from the foreman and drove into town.

Clarabelle was waiting in the bus station. I knew her right away. I had seen the snapshot in Claro's wallet. He didn't recognize her. He was expecting a girl five-foot eleven inches tall, one hundred ninety-five pounds of flesh and bones on bare feet. I pulled his arm. I propelled him toward her.

"Clarabelle?" I greeted her.

"Yes," she said. "Are you Claro?"

Magno Rubio winced.

"No," I said.

"I wonder why he didn't meet me. Are you his brother?"

"Claro is gone," I told her. "Claro has no brother. My name is Nick."

"Glad to meet you, Nick. Where did he go?"

"Alaska."

"Why did he go there of all places?"

"He's working in the fish canneries."

"He didn't tell me about it. Will he be gone long?"

"He left suddenly, Clarabelle. He'll probably be gone for several months. Maybe longer. I can't tell."

She looked like a prospector who had reached the promised hill in vain. The hill was there all right, but the gold—

"What a way to treat a lady," she complained.

I grabbed Magno's arm. "This is Magno Rubio, Clarabelle."

Her blue eyes flickered. The promised hill of gold reappeared. The rose mouth unfolded sweetly. The dying prospector murmured a prayer: the vein of gold was not a mirage after all.

"Yes, yes!" She grabbed his hand. "How are you, Magno?"

He blushed. He muttered something. She turned to me for help.

"May I speak to him for a minute?" she asked me.

I nodded my head. They went to a corner. I walked to the restaurant and ordered a cup of coffee. Then I saw him motioning to me. I left my cup and went to him.

"She's trying to tell me something, Nick," he said. "But I can't understand her. Will you help me?"

I followed him in silence. "What is it, Clarabelle?" I asked her.

"It's difficult for me to make him understand," she explained. "This is what I like to tell him: I must check in a hotel before we talk things over. He understands the marriage part of our conversation. But I need some rest. Explain it to him, Nick."

I explained it to him in our dialect.

"Tell him," Clarabelle added, "that I need some expense money."

I told him.

"And tell him that I sold our engagement ring. Tell him that I need another ring."

"He can't do it today, Clarabelle," I said.

"The banks are closed now."

She looked at the big clock on the wall.

"Tomorrow will be okay."

I told him. He gave her fifty dollars.

"Now that everything is arranged properly," Clarabelle said, "let's look for a hotel."

He carried her small suitcase. We walked a block and found a hotel. I followed her to the desk, while he sat in a chair near the door. She signed her name on the registry and turned to me.

"Too bad you are not interested," she said in a low tone of voice. "I like you, Nick."

I shook my head.

"I suppose not," she said. "Will you come with him tomorrow?"

"I will, Clarabelle."

She threw a kiss at Magno and walked to the waiting elevator. We went out the lobby. He was the happiest man on earth. He hopped and jumped like a little boy. He was in love.

The next day he borrowed two hundred fifty dollars from the foreman. Then we went to town again. He bought a diamond ring for one hundred dollars. I phoned Clarabelle, and she met us at the door of her hotel. He gave her the ring, and she put it on her finger. Then she kissed him. On the tip of his small flat nose.

"We'll get married tomorrow, Magno," she said.

He understood. He nodded his head.

"Have you got a car, Magno?" Her voice was like a song.

He shook his head.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "How about my expense money, Magno?"

He opened his wallet and gave her two hundred dollars. Clarabelle kissed him again. On the tip of his small flat black nose. She looked at me for a moment trying to say something with her blue eyes. One gesture—and a life was broken forever. One word—and it could have been mended.

"You understand, Nick," she told me at last.

"Yes."

"Thanks."

"You should at least be alone with him."

"But I can't do that, Nick."

"I know."

"I'll see you both tomorrow," she said.

We left her. We rode back to our bunkhouse. Magno Rubio couldn't sleep even when midnight came. I heard him prowling restlessly in his room. He knocked at my door when daylight struck the windows.

"This is the day, Nick!" he greeted me. He was carrying a small suitcase.

"Where are you going to get married?" I asked him.

"New Mexico. It's the nearest place."

"You have enough money?"

"I borrowed some more from the foreman. I'm the luckiest man in the world!"

I followed him to the pickup. We drove into town. We parked outside Clarabelle's hotel and both went into the lobby. We went to the clerk, and I asked for Clarabelle.

"She just checked out," the clerk informed me. "Her husband came for her."

"Her husband?"

The clerk looked at me with eyes that said more than the whole words in the dictionary.

Magno Rubio was beginning to understand. He pulled at my arm. We went outside in silence.

We were walking down the street when we saw Clarabelle in a car pulling out from the curb. She was sitting beside a man with brown hair and thin mustache. She was laughing. He was laughing, too.

Magno Rubio watched the car pull away. He was speechless for a moment. Then he understood everything. He brushed his eyes with a finger and took my arm.

"I guess we'll start picking the tomatoes next week, Nick," he said.

"Yeah," I said.

"Well, what are we waiting for? Let's hurry back to the bunkhouse. Those guys will eat all the chicken!"

Why does everybody make it difficult for an honest man like Magno Rubio to live in the world?

Magno Rubio. Filipino boy. Four-foot six inches tall. Dark as a coconut. Head small on a body like a turtle. Magno Rubio. Picking tomatoes on a California hillside for twenty-five cents an hour. Filipino boy. In love with a girl one hundred ninety-five pounds of flesh and bones on bare feet. A girl twice his size sideward and upward, Claro said...