

"Very well, you know where the keys are. Open the office. I'll be there in a moment."

Paulino hesitated: "Is everything all right, Señor? There was some *tsimis* in the market..."

Who needs telegraphs or telephones when *tsimis* moves so much faster?

"There was an unfortunate incident this morning. An intruder. When Mr. Vergara arrives ask him to check the safe, the stock books and the monies. Jose and Francisco can help."

Paulino nodded and disappeared towards the office. A moment later Hoggitt heard the rattle of keys and he returned with relief to his task.

Some people believe God reveals himself through love, beauty or fortune. Hoggitt believed that He revealed himself through a sense of ironic humor. Where the head of the dead intruder had lain was a complex, carved motif of branches, the leaves and banana-type fruit of the *abaca* plant, and a small pineapple carved to a different scale. Hoggitt unscrewed the wooden pineapple and tugged. A section of the paneling slid out to reveal a steel box, its lid secured by thumbscrews. The box was lined with a layer of hardwood, then a packing of hemp, and a second lining of wood. The insulation made it virtually fireproof. Within inches of the slain intruder's head was the object of his search.

Inside the box was the oilskin packet Hoggitt had retrieved from the *convento* at Matigan. He stuffed it inside his shirt, sealed the box again and secured everything back in place.

The two junior clerks, Jose and Francisco arrived at 7.30am and caught up on paperwork as they waited for the arrival of Vergara until 10am, when they took their *merienda* of boiled plantain and rice cake.

At eleven, Hoggitt asked Francisco to go to Vergara's house. Thirty minutes later the junior clerk arrived with the news that the Senior Clerk had gone to Tacloban the previous day and not been seen since. When Maria arrived at twelve she delivered the gossip, the *tsimis*, that the Senior Clerk had been detained by American soldiers on his return from Tacloban.

Hector Vergara's arrest was merely one of the thousands of personal tragedies, large and small, that occupied the daily lives of the island's people in these troubled times. Since the

massacre at Matigan the number of such tragedies was increasing daily. The Senior Clerk's absence was annoying but if Glendoort wanted to fish, let him fish. Vergara knew nothing and the Captain's would catch neither sprat nor mackerel. Certainly not Hoggitt.

On his way down the stairs Hoggitt found Paulino hovering with some inconsequential piece of paper that didn't really need the trader's attention but it served its purpose. Hoggitt put his hand on the worried man's shoulder: "Everything will be fine. Hector is quite safe. As you and I know, Americans have their noxious qualities, but Captain Glendoort *is* a white man. He'll treat Hector in the proper way. He will not be harmed."

Paulino gave a weak smile and nodded. Hector was his cousin, something or other removed, and therefore family to be fussed over. "They'll probably release him tomorrow"

Hoggitt stepped out into the packed earth street of Basey beneath the wooden business sign "Wilson & Dawes, est. 1854". Apart from the Wilson & Dawes trading house, the cathedral on the hill overlooking the town and San Pedro Bay, and the Municipal hall, most of the buildings were quite new, the children, in a way, of the big blow of '97 that cost a thousand lives. Locusts added their contribution, too, to the almost annual famine, as did the two-year blockade to stop food reaching Samar. Hard Times.

He looked up and down the street. Some instinct sent a tingle through his spine. There was a vague sense of a presence. It wasn't one of Glendoort's people, He was certain of that; the Americans were easy to spot and the Filipinos...

"*Buenas Dias, Señor 'Oggitt*" said a diminutive, nut-brown, bright eyed little man, his tailcoat several sizes too large. He doffed his top hat and waved his glossy black, silver-topped can with a Latin flourish and a bow. Hoggitt nodded.

"*Buenas Dias, teniente Mong. Como U esta?*"

Like all cities and towns in the Philippines, Basey was made up of what were, in effect, villages, *barrios*. Each barrio had its own elected official, the *teniente del barrio*, responsible for law enforcement, sanitation and the day-to-day running of the *barrio*. The *teniente* was a sort of

cut-down mayor. At a little under 5 feet, Raymundo 'Mong' Olives was a very cut-down mayor and the cane was his symbol of office.

"Everything is good and fine. Honky dory," said Mong.

"Your English is coming along just fine, Mong."

"*Gracias, Señor.*" Mong screwed his face up in a frown and, in case there should be any doubt that he was thinking deeply about some thorny problem, a personal *Via Doloroso*, he gave a heavy sigh. "The *Capitan Amerikano* is very strange. I do not know why he asks me to keep an eye on you. I tell him you are a good man. I tell him you go here, you go there. He gives me three dollars Mexicano and says be sure to keep it a secret thing."

Teniente Mong sighed again, his keen, greedy eyes scanning Hoggitt's face closely.

Hoggitt lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper: "I am secretly going to Tanauan to make sure *Señor Vergara's* family is safe. I am worried also about the man who came into my house this morning so I have to leave my men to guard the stockrooms and the godown and will take my boat alone." Three Mexican silver dollars were discretely transferred from his own pocket to Mong's.

Mong's face split into a toothy grin. "*Señora Vergara* is very pretty and she will be very grateful for your kindness"

With a wink, Hoggitt tapped the side of his nose: "Between you and me."

"I will keep it a secret thing," promised Mong then took a step closer. "They say one of the Macabebe scouts has deserted. This morning he is disappeared."

"Good Heavens, how dreadful!" said Hoggitt.

Mong strode off along the road, the picture of authority, but the prickle of presence remained. A few yards away, on stick-thin haunches, an elderly man the colour of mahogany, his loins wrapped in a loose cloth *bahag*, chewed betel with red-stained teeth as he waited for someone to buy the bee-encrusted forest honeycombs beside him.

A little way beyond, a young woman adjusted a conical hat atop her flowing, gleaming black hair. For a moment, her pierced and filigreed *camisa* top just failed to meet the gloriously colored *saya* and its accompanying dark rectangular red *tapis* and there was an erogenous glimpse of her pale navel. She smiled as naturally as a sunrise and walked on with an elegant yet athletic poise, her bare feet flicking from beneath her skirts.

The door to the rice store should not have been ajar. It was half way along the sidewall of the Wilson & Dawes property and should have been shut tight and locked. It was not, and through the narrow crack came a very small child's chuckle.

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**M**arku looked dangerous. He was taller and bulkier than most lowlanders, with the typical athletic build of the highland Samareno and smiled rarely. A *bahag* was wrapped loosely from just above his knees to his waist and groin. At his waist hung a 24inch rounded-ended work bolo in its wooden scabbard. Years in the mountains had burned his skin as dark as the tattoos that covered his legs. Today he was ashamed. He was hungry, desperately hungry, and his dark brown shame-filled eyes avoided Hoggitt's.

Beside Marku was Flor, his wife. Early 30s, she was a *Bicolana* from Albay, on the southern peninsula of the island of Luzon. She and Marku shared a common Bisayan heritage, the culture that spread from Sorsogon down to the northern portion of Mindanao known in ancient times as *Carigara*. Her eyes were of a lighter brown than the Tagalogs of the central plains of the Luzon mainland and her hair was noticeably dark brown rather than black. A bright blue patterned *lambong*, a tube skirt of *sinamay* cloth, came above her flattened, empty breasts. She was angry.

The child was a girl, one year and three months old and lay naked in an attitude of submissive incomprehension in Maria's arms. Sometimes the child chuckled, sometimes it was silent. There was a yellowish tinge to its skin. Flor was angry because her child would be dead before she could pronounce her name. She was angry for all the reasons a mother has to be angry when she must watch her child die.

Flor spoke in a mixture of Spanish and *Binisaya*: "They came. They took our abaca. What they could not carry they burned..."

Marku mumbled, "Four years we waited for the abaca so our children could eat again."

"They took all our abaca. We have no food. We have five children. The *Amerikanos* took our abaca," said Flor in a rapid flood of words. It all seemed so matter of fact. "We have no food for our children because our abaca has been stolen..."

"Four years, again." Mumbled Marku. Then, for the first time he lifted his eyes from the ground and fixed them on Hoggitt. "What have we ever done to them, to the *Amerikanos*?"

"They are trying to catch General Lukban," said Hoggitt, weakly as the child gurgled. Weakening, undoubtedly dying, the child could still gurgle. A hardy people, the Samareno. "What about your cousin, Chikoy?"

"Chikoy is dead. His wife is dead," said Marku flatly.

"How?"

"He is told his farm is being burned. He is going there with his brothers and they see the *soldados Amerikanos* burning their farm, so they go with bolos. They are all killed."

"The *Amerikanos*? The Americans are killed?" asked Hoggitt urgently.

"Chikoy and his brothers. Then they went to the village."

"Kansingguian?"

"*O-oh*," nodded Marco, "Kansingguian...."

Marku continued to talk, haltingly, but Hoggitt hardly listened. When Marku finished he asked again: "Why do they do this to us? What have we done to them?"

Hoggitt shrugged because he knew the answer. These tall young white boys who'd traveled no farther from home than clapboard, one-room local schoolhouses, often from a village much like Marku's own, were scared. They'd joined the army for adventure, maybe for three square meals a day, because there wasn't much else for a farmboy to do in a country rapidly turning to the machine and the production line, because their country called them, because they read too

many books and thought war was a glorious adventure. They joined, full of vigor and innocence, they were given a gun, poor training, and sent 8,000 miles around the world to a place as alien to them as the moon, a place of heat, bugs and leeches, or leeches bugs and heat. So they were young and scared and hot and bug-bitten and cranky.

Then they were marched off the *USS New York* and lined up on the wharf at Basey. Their commanding officer, Lieutenant Walford, gave them an inspiring speech: "The *insurrectos* are fierce, cruel, courageous and fearless. They will give no quarter. We are here to make war upon men, not women and children. We are here to take revenge upon our slaughtered comrades at Matigan. You know what to do." That was all. His did not want to confuse them with the thought that most of the people of the island were peaceful farmers because they may take it into their heads to think before they pulled the triggers. Hesitation cost American lives.

Then they were marched to their barracks knowing only that they were very scared and that they had guns in their hands and that their minds were filled with the scuttlebutt of the horrors of Matigan.

On patrol they were to find insurgents and capture or destroy their hemp and their food. So the brown men who raised their bolos in protest, and shouted, were insurgents. Therefore the nearest pathetic gathering of huts was an insurgent stronghold to be set fire to and destroyed. Should any civilians be unfortunately mistaken for insurgents, then it was their own dumb fault for being in an insurgent stronghold in the first place.

And so it went, week after week: scared young men with powerful guns in their hands and enraged farmers who only wanted to survive and feed their families.

"Marku, don't join the *insurrectos*. It won't help you, Flora or your children," said Hoggitt, pleading.

Marku gazed at Hoggitt, his thoughts impenetrable.

Suddenly Flora took the ailing child from Maria and thrust it into Hoggitt's arms. "You buy." Flora did not beg or plead. "You buy. *Sarong caban sana'*."