

but it was a lot hotter, and the currents not quite so predictable. All the same, he knew he must not stop. One moment of rest and his 45-year-old muscles would seize up, the cramps would tie knots in his arms and legs and the pain would be even more excruciating than the splashes of salt water on his harshly sunburned face.

He was thirsty. Heavens he was thirty. But there would be a well just to the north of the municipal hall at Matigan and there the water would run free, clear and cold. He kept the image in his mind, a focus, a mantra. Cool water. Cool, cool water.

Of course, if he'd had time to think about it, he should have asked Maria to prepare a jug or two of water, and perhaps a roast chicken, some of that fine bread she'd learned to bake, possibly some cheese. Sweet Maria. Catbalogan girl. Fifteen. Soft as silk and hard as nails.

Cheese would be nice. Stilton would be splendid, too, although it was a bit early in the morning. He found himself imagining fresh oysters on shaved ice with a sprinkling of cayenne pepper and lemon juice. And the ice dripping. Cool water.

A disturbed ribbonfish erupted from the sapphire water and juggled its way across the low wave tops towards the shore.

Already the sun had risen high enough to transform the rolling hills of Samar and paint the vast expanse of trees a dozen shades of emerald against a bright pale blue sky. Underneath that green brilliance was a terrain of undulating razor sharp rock, swamp and an occasional piece of flat land enough to grow a little rice. In general it was not good food country and most of the rice came through traders like Hoggitt in return for the hemp he sent to Manila and then on to America.

For a moment, Hoggitt had a vision of great ships, impossibly large, and he thought to himself "God Bless America", for America had done him very well until '97 when the great typhoon roared its way across the island, tearing the coconut groves apart, ripping the abaca hemp trees to shreds, destroying the fragile economy of its people.

Now, three years on, and the first new harvests of coconut and hemp promised revival. If only the war...

Then he thought again about the American garrison at Basey and Camp Erencote. "Noxious bastards". But he still felt sorry for Company M.

Cooking smoke rose from huts among the coconut groves ashore as their day began. Until the war, their morning had started well before sunrise. A few nighttime bombardments from nervous gunships, the *Vicksburg*, the *Frolic* or the *Julia* – the latter under charter from Smith, Bell - put an end to early rising. Even a year later it wasn't unusual to hear the clatter of a Colt gun.

His morning began just after four when Maria ran up the rattling steps from the stock room where she slept, probably with one of the clerks, and hammered on his door.

"Muerte... Soldado Amerikano... muy... maraming soldado, patay... Matigan..." she spoke poor Spanish at the best of times and almost none at all when flustered, veering between the language of Castile and the *Binisaya* language of Samar. She appeared to have a total resistance to English, even its American dialect, all the same, one did not have to be too much of a polyglot to get the general drift – lots of American soldiers dead at Matigan.

It really didn't make much sense. True, the remains of the Filipino government forces were putting up a spirited resistance from the hills under their commander, Vicente Lukban, but these days Lukban could hardly afford to take on an entire garrison by himself. Lukban told him so only last week. Most of his men worked in units of under a couple of dozen.

The company yacht *Charisma* was fast but it would have taken a good two hours to round up her five-man crew and get up a head of steam. Then there would be the issue of getting a pass to allow her out of the harbour, and Hoggitt was not inclined to give the Americans the benefit of knowing he was heading to Matigan ahead of them. Doubtless Colonel Stillig, commander at Camp Erencote, would order up the *Vicksburg* from Tanauan on Leyte to get a company of men into Matigan as quickly as possible but, even with the *Vicksburg*'s speed over Hoggitt's modest

rowboat, he still estimated he'd have a good thirty minutes to himself at least in Matigan. Even fifteen minutes would suffice for what he had to do.

Tuna leapt in a bay, splashes glittering in the mid-morning sun. Could be barracuda, or sailfish. There's fine sailfin in these waters.

Lukban was not the only player in this war; there was also the *Dios-Dios*. Matigan was a long way from the hills, the home of the *Dios-Dios*. The Spanish, in a sense, created the *Dios-Dios*. In the aftermath of the 1884 smallpox epidemic Samarenos on the west coast set out on pilgrimages a thousand or more strong to visit the island's various religious shrines. The Spanish somehow got it into their heads that a revolt was afoot and started firing. The *Dios-Dios* fought back and, for a brief period, there was a small revolt. A peaceful religious pilgrimage became something darker, more ominous, and occasionally deadly.

Whether it was Lukban or the *Dios-Dios* didn't matter to Hoggitt at this moment. His mission sought its resolution elsewhere.

A narrow plume of black smoke from the other side of a headland announced the approach to Matigan. Cooking smoke is white. The smoke of a burning town is black. This smoke was black.

It took another thirty minutes to round the headland into Dulab Bay. Hoggitt had often made this approach aboard the company yacht *Charisma* and expected, although he knew better, to hear the church bells ringing, the rattle of bamboo gongs and the sound of conch horns. There was only silence beneath the splash of his rhythmic oars.

The headland fell away to reveal the corrugated iron roof of the centuries-old church of gray-black coral rock above the *nipa* roofs of the fishermen's huts along the shoreline. Coco lumber log ramps dotted the sand and stone beach but no gaily-painted fishing *barroto* outriggers rested on them. No fishermen mended nets, tended boats or lay the day's catch to dry on the bamboo slats laid out for the sun.

It was a town asleep, where time was stopped. Dogs should be yapping, cocks should be crowing – cocks always crowed – and children should be running down the water's edge to welcome him.

There was nothing but the tall pillar of black smoke from somewhere within the silent town and Hoggitt's own burning thirst.

It was not complete silence. There was a curious sound, faint and insistent: "Ah...da... Ah... da... Ah... da..."

Immediately west of the church the waters of the Malajigang River swirled around a zigzag sandbar to the sea. Normally there would be a couple of *barrottos* weaving their way around the obstacle on their way to look for tuna and hunt by hand line for the great sailfish. Today there were none.

But there was a man swimming.

He was at the river's mouth; turning slowly with the eddy created by the sandbar, face down, dressed in a blue shirt and khaki pants. He wasn't swimming well. Uselessly, his loose-limbed arms and his legs moved back and forth and once in a while his whole body shivered, getting nowhere.

Hoggitt could not shout to the man, his mouth was too dry, his exhaustion too complete.

Suddenly the man stood up out of the water. His waste and upper body rose above the rippling waves and rushed at Hoggitt, trailing a white wake. He had no face, just a red, roughness that glistened in the sunlight above white, exposed teeth in a sardonic smile. Then he toppled backwards and vanished beneath the surface.

A dark triangular dorsal fin broke the surface briefly and was gone. The shark feasted somewhere in its hidden coral kingdom.

Hoggitt's heart pounded but fatigue dampened any sense of shock or horror.

"Ah... da... huh... Ah... da... huh ... Ah... da... Huh..." came the chant from somewhere near the church.

Tired though he was, Hoggitt kept his wits about him. There was no point in making matters too obvious to the *Vicksburg*. He guided the rowboat past an outcrop of rock, scrunched her prow onto the stone-littered beach and jammed the boat's painter into a narrow crack between two chunks of dead coral.

Something nudged his foot. He chose not to look at the soldier who lay there, sprawled, the tendons of his neck waving with the movement of the water teasing the crabs that nipped at the flesh where his head has once been.

"Keep moving... one step in front of the other... that's right" he muttered, cajoling himself into motion, knowing that sooner or later he would suffer. For now he had to be firm. Everything depended on that. Be firm.

He stumbled into the west side of the plaza, past the dark brown tatters of a mess tent and the shattered remains of its long table and bench, past the smoldering ruins of the two storey *tribunal* smelling of coal-oil and roasting meat.

All the nipa huts along the north side of the plaza and the woven *sawali* walls of the girl's school were cinders among the tall, blackened trunks of Lawa-an that once supported them. A few more charred boards still showed where Eustacio Bajo's house had stood on a street corner overlooking the ground in front of the church.

Good man, Eustacio. Reliable. Never cheated an ounce. There was no sign of him.

In the shadow of a tree on the other side of the plaza lay a group of men, a lot of men, sleeping, it seemed, undisturbed by the loud buzzing of the flies around them. Any other time Hoggitt might have sauntered over, tipped his hat and jauntily asked "Good morning gentlemen. How's the Army treating you?" There would be no reply this morning. Anyway, he knew too much of the damage a native bolo could do to a human body to let temptation overcome him. He would leave them where their escaping comrades left them, asleep beneath the tree.

Water. Cool water. Every cell in his body screamed for it. Half conscious, stumbling, he found the well beside the *tribunal*, the raised stones worn smooth and dotted with the white

roughness of decades of washing clothes. Gripping the handle of the bucket winch he gritted his teeth against the pain, shut his eyes tight against the blade of hurt and turned. Once, twice, three times the handle went around, bringing the heavy wooden bucket up the shaft, the hollow, echoing water drops promising the touch of coolness.

Eyes still closed, he felt for the edge of the bucket, felt for the handle of twisted hemp, lifted it above its head and tipped. It was cold, sharp, stinging cold, a heaven of coldness. Yes, he'd be wet, but the sun would soon dry him. He lifted the bucket to his mouth with shaking hands and drank deeply. It tasted somehow metallic but he didn't mind. Matigan water was safe, unlike city water. Its source was pure.

Not too much, he reminded himself. Take just a little at a time. He took one more deep draught and opened his eyes and immediately wondered why his shirt was stained pink.

The water in the bucket, too, was pinkly transparent. Frowning, he turned to look down the well. Far below he could see the bright circular reflection of the sky, the black roundness of his own head, and another face, bobbing pale in the dimness as its sightless eyes gazed up at him. The body of a black and white dog bumped weakly against it.

Hoggitt vomited. How long for, he didn't know, but when the retching stopped a shaft of pain seared across his stomach, bending him double.

He forced himself upright and staggered past the tall wooden cross in the middle of the plaza to the church over baked earth painted with the brown stains of dried blood, disturbing swirls of flies as he walked. Where were the Filipinos? Just behind the five metre high belfry he found some sort of answer. There was a freshly dug trench 20 metres long. A nosey, carnivorous pig was snuffling at the earth, digging for some ghastly delicacy beneath.

Weakly, Hoggitt waved his arms and tried to shout but stifled his voice as his gorge began to rise again. The pig looked at him, gave a grunt and trotted away a couple of yards and watched him with jealous eyes.