

CHRISTMAS IN MANILA

Cockfights And Carnival In East Asia's Sole Christian City

(Written for "The Listener" by A.M.R.)

ONLY one city in all the East keeps Christmas. In all the rest, except of course in European Clubs and indigenous Christian homes, business proceeds precisely as on the year's other three hundred and sixty odd working days. But in the one city that does celebrate, "Oh Boy (as they say on the spot), it shore is some celebration, Señor." Well, it was, that is. Manila's Christmas this year will not bear thinking about.

We landed in East Asia's sole Christian city on the Day of Days. Six hundred miles of lashing by a typhoon's tail had delayed us. So, impatiently gliding up the glassy gulf, landlocked with barren-seeming mountains and brilliant-green jungly flats, that protect the flat Philippine capital from sea breezes and sea dangers, we missed dawn's deafening carillonade from sixty-nine church towers—for Manila competes with Edinburgh and Moscow—that was as the world's best-churched city; missed, too, sight of an entire population streaming to Mass; and can tell you nothing of what a real Northern-hemisphere, mid-winter Christmas dinner is like where everyone just must siesta straight after it.

However, folk were beginning to return from dreamland to Luzon, as, having hoisted our tandem out of hot-storage in the aft-hold, we set out up-city after tiffin. The Pasig River still steamed in dead silence among its fringing parks. And the wide boulevard before the great new Parliament Hall was a concrete desert save for a single soldier on guard miraculously unstruck. But once we entered the residential streets odd twos and three seeping out gradually from their homes—little square boxes-on-stilts among the drowsy-scented trees—quickly coalesced into a wave of population pouring towards the city centre we had left.

No Footpaths

There are no footpaths in the Philippines. But along both sidewalks paraded handsome, brown-faced, sleek-haired, hatless and jacketless, slight young men in natty white trousers, with tinted or brightly-spotted cotton singlets hanging tails out (back and front) over their elegant slim waists. Senoras and señoritas looked equally neat and cool, if curiously formal by comparison, in their light but stiff traditional *fiesta* costume of delicate pale-tinted gauze with high transparent shoulders. And, had you been dropped out of an aeroplane or a trance, you must at once have known yourself for where you were. Those smooth brown locket faces—broad brows rounding into small pointed chins—could only be so completely universal in Filipino land.

The women, I should make clear, did not parade. They rode, and usually en

famille, bunched six or seven into—or, more correctly, out of—tiny match-boxes of spring carts. For, rooted sardine-tight as to the lower limbs by the traps' four straight low sides, they swayed out gracefully and colourfully like window-boxes in full bloom. Sometimes papa drove, or a professional driver perched precariously forward almost on the tail of the tiny pony. And above each party floated a cloud, following it everywhere, faithful as one's shadow—a square of canvas shade spiked on a bamboo rod tacked upright at each corner.

Into the flowery quiet of an extensive cemetery, winding toward us between the gaudy wedding-cake mausolea of the rich and the fragile wooden crosses of the poor, came a flamboyantly merry procession. A band led on, gorgeous as a Chinese funeral in appearance, but in instruments and their din reeking rather of Harlem and Hollywood. Hallelujah! Magnó Jubilo! Vim and eclat! . . . Din without music drew us towards the matshed market, where, apparently, business had resumed at top tempo.

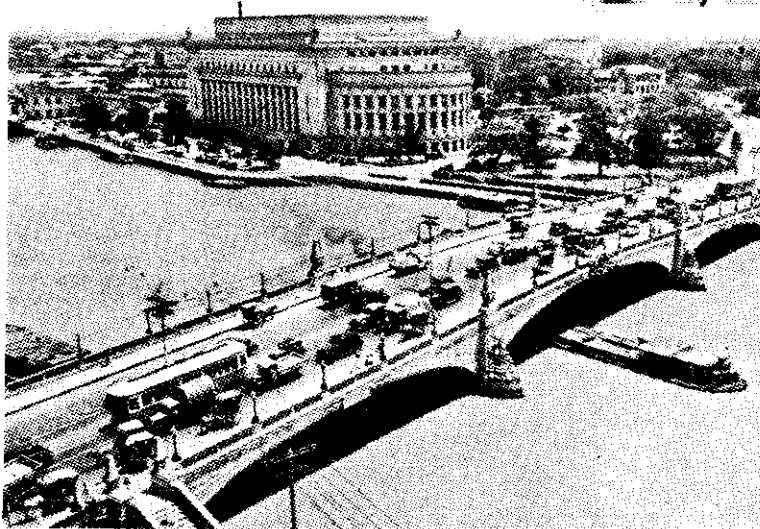
Stumbling among joists cross-lashed with giant bamboos, our heads suddenly emerged among the ringside ranks of a steep bowl of tense contorted faces and sweating, nearly-naked brown bodies. Immediately a hush like death broke out. But no one had noticed us. All eyes were on the crouching owners gingerly drawing the sheaths of their too-eager birds' spurs. The tiny cocks catapulted together. And one lay palpitatingly, bloodily dead . . . In the seconds it takes to read this it had happened, and triumph and despair had broken loose again all about us. Shouters of odds on the next bout and retrievers of winnings on this last one were literally swaying the galleries. We escaped. Christmas Day was evidently the typical Filipino Sunday intensified tenfold.

The languorous tropic night brought little lifting of the heat and atmospheric burden of the day. But such languor as remained in Manila had evaporated with the daylight. Family parties entertained in a blaze of upper story lights. With impassioned sobs in their voices guitars serenaded from the dark lanes below. The great "Buzzaars"—semi-sky-scraper and open-air department stores owned and run by Japanese—had switched on their strings of coloured bulbs strung criss-cross over the streets, and spread out their bright wares.

Under the full moon and a fluctuating neon glow mushroom zoetropes and roundabouts and walls of death and painted canvas arenas and "parks" had sprung up along the river. In and about them whirlpooled a living sea. Having struggled as pedestrians through a battery of elbows and an hydraulic press of buttocks and chests just for the experience, we skimmed round the outlying shallows. Then, as we had sought, and found, silence that afternoon in the deserted green flying-fields out beyond



Above: Strange Christmas this. Filipino evacuees are checked by a Red Cross nurse



Left: The slow-moving Pasig River in the heart of modern Manila

bloody memories of violence, compassion, struggle, cruelty, courage, vile treachery, and quixotic loyalty. Between this one wall in the pirate sea and this other

the last box-on-stilts (ironic thought this Christmas!)—so now we fled for contrast to where, far along the park-like waterfront, the patch of American offices, flats, clubs and hotels lay coldly, concretely dead. Their inhabitants, doubtless, were yawning the dance away up in the mountains at Bagio.

Back to Old Spain

So there were two Manilas in the one city—Manila Philippina, languid in worktime, riotous in festa; and Manila Americana, busy in business hours, escaped from on holidays. But he who would really understand Christmas in Luzon or any aspect of Filipino life for that matter, must visit yet a third city—Intra Muros, the original pre-American Manila, now deserted except for ghosts and memories behind its great stone walls. Inside the tunnel-doorway into one of its eight churches we had found, even in tropical daylight, darkness, quiet, coolness amounting to chill, and the authentic presence of Old Spain. Indeed this whole fortress-city is a transplantation to the isles Magellan found of the Spain of his day. Its arched passages and secret wells hold three-and-a-half centuries of

facing the heathen jungle the Spaniards-of-the-Great-Age established, as everywhere they went, the complete Castilian culture. Himalayan impossibilities they took in their stride. Two centuries before the material for one could possibly have been transported from Spain the Church of Las Pinas had, for example, its own Grand Organ. And there, three hundred years later, the only bamboo organ in the world is still playing (please God) this Christmas.

Chinese pirate, Spanish conquistador priest and planter, American merchant and administrator, Time sees in turn come and go. The first comes for plunder and leaves only a trail of blood—blood spilt and blood infused. The second's Spanish-Christian culture deeply dyes the simple-minded, irresponsible Filipino fabric of life. The third deposits a veneer of modern knowledge and efficiency—or shall it be more? And now what more is History about to teach these flibbertigibbet Malay-Chinese-Polynesian sons of the mountains and the sea in their long journey to adult nationality?