

The Storyteller

ESTABAN.

(Conclusion).

'Well, we went out from Manila on a little steam-launch, a patrol boat, merely to carry on a few explorations. We went up the Pasig River and turned into one of the side streams, supposing all the time that we were in a peaceful district. Suddenly the narrow banks were thronged with natives; they fired, we did the same; a few of our boys fell and a good few niggers fell. Well, we fired our last cartridge and then asked for the honors of war. What else could we do? No go; they swarmed around us, put shackles on our ankles and took us along. That was three days ago. We've been trudging across swamps ever since until we reached this place. Why should we be treated like mere criminals?'

'I don't know. We Spanish prisoners have been treated very decently. We do not complain, but then we Spaniards always carried on war in a way that the Filipinos understood. We never broke into their homes; we never carried off their daughters; we never pillaged their churches of all that they hold religious and sacred; we never set up our national flag to be the trademark of the wine-den and the vice-den; we never burned the villages of the poor, nor destroyed their year's harvests, nor shot their babies and their defenceless ones in murderous cold blood.'

'But, my dear sergeant; have we done such things?'

'I cannot say. Terrible stories are told of American modes of warfare however. They tell us that your soldiers trample upon every shred of decency, respecting neither religion nor age nor sex: outrage and looting and assassination and sacrilege are the things asserted everywhere. Who is this wretched Funston of your army? Have you heard of no atrocities connected with his name?'

'A brave man much maligned.'

'Bravery becomes every soldier, but worthier still is that strength of character which gives recognition to natural rights and bows to the majesty of moral law.'

'Captain,' said one of the American prisoners, stepping up, 'those stories are not all untrue. I have seen with my own eyes such very doings as the officer speaks of—barricade burnings and pillage and cold blooded killing. As for the desecration of churches, is it not a fact that the pawn-shops of San Francisco are overflowing with sacred vessels and vestments which have been stolen from Filipino altars? If we only treated the Filipinos with common fairness, we would not be subjected to harshness ourselves, shut up in this rat-trap, and kept under triple guard.'

'I wonder,' said the captain, 'if the guards know anything about the length of time it is intended to keep us here.'

'I will go and question one of them if you wish.'

'Do.'

When Estaban returned, his countenance wore a serious mien. 'It is too bad,' he said, 'but your case has a hard look to it.'

'How is that?'

'Well, just the day before you were taken, a peaceful village was put to the torch, and during the night the local church was robbed of all its treasures. Your capture took place in the immediate vicinity of that rifled church, and so they have set you down as among the perpetrators. In view of Aguinaldo's recent proclamation to the effect that the extreme rigor of the law shall be meted out to those who are caught while engaged in the acts of pil-

lage or wanton desecration, your fate is apt to—'

'Great God! you do not mean—'

'That you are to be shot as malefactors to-morrow morning in the public square; yes.'

'No, sergeant, you cannot mean what you say; there is some mistake; some terrible mistake; they cannot mean to shoot honorable soldiers down like dogs.'

'There is no mistake, sir; I saw the warrants; the commander of the district has signed them.'

'Then you must speak to him for us; explain our situation; intercede with him for a stay of sentence until our identity be ascertained.'

'What weight would there be in my intercession? A prisoner like yourself, with merely a few more privileges. Besides if you have committed these wanton deeds, why—'

'But we have not; we are innocent men.'

'The church was certainly despoiled of all it contained.'

'Not by us. We despoil a church? Why four of us here are of your own religion; the same altar, the same creed, the same holy Mass.'

'What, do you mean to tell me that there are Catholics in the United States?'

'Yes indeed; twelve millions of them between New York and Oregon. Why it was your own Catholic prayer-book lying there on that shelf that first attracted our notice when we came into this prison-room. We made bold enough to turn over its pages, we discovered that it was in the English language, and found your name, O'Donoghue, written on the blank leaf. Don't you believe yet that we are Catholics, at least some of us? Maloney show him your rosary beads; Mulligan, you wear a scapular round your neck; show it to the sergeant. And look-a-here, sir; here's a prayer-book of my own, just like yours, only mine is more used up, and yours was published in Dublin, while mine was printed in New York. The name is the same, "Key of Heaven" in both. Now, do you think we could be men base enough to break into a sanctuary sacred to our own faith? Tell the commander these things and ask him if he is going to punish innocent men for crimes of absent rascals.'

Estaban, although a prisoner himself, had somehow won the esteem and affections of his jailers, his own humane character, long evident in the days before political troubles arose in the island, was, perhaps, responsible for this generous feeling toward him. At any rate when he made known his desire of interviewing the commander, that request was forthwith granted. The result was a night gallop of twelve miles toward the mountains to the camp of Aguinaldo, Estaban being blindfolded and conducted under guard all the way. Early on the morrow the troop returned with the message from the commander-in-chief.

'The Filipinos,' Aguinaldo stated, 'are not savages, but are a people gifted with all the instincts of an enlightened and religious civilisation. We have no wish to wreak vengeance upon men not guilty. The American prisoners under detention at Casayquia will be, therefore, treated with all respect and consideration until such time as proper measures are effected for their release.'

Six weeks later negotiations were entered into between the American authorities at Manila and the military representatives of the Filipino force. An exchange of prisoners was to be made, and the men in dur-

at Casayquia were to be given their freedom and safe conduct to an American camp.

'The terms of the exchange are incomplete,' exclaimed Captain Maguire, when he heard them read. 'They make no provision for the release of the Spanish prisoners detained along with us. We owe you our lives in a way,' he added, turning to Estaban, and the only worthy thing for us to do is to help you to your own deliverance.'

'Nay,' answered Estaban. 'Do not bother about me. Our turn will come some day when the troubles which disturb this island have quieted down. Take your freedom now, while it comes; let not our misfortunes stand in any manner between you and your liberation.'

Captain Maguire, however, was obdurate. He sent his ultimatum stating that he felt that he and his men owed their lives to the intercession of the young Spanish sergeant and that unless the Spanish prisoners were liberated with him he would refuse the proffered boon. Within two days his message received a favorable answer, and so together the incarcerated men of both nations were conducted under safe escort to the American lines.

'I am glad to meet you,' said the American general at Manila to Estaban.

'I have heard about you, and I feel that you deserve the thanks of the great Republic which I have the honor to represent. I am going to ask you, now, to become a citizen of that Republic and to take service under her flag. I've got a good position for a good man like you. Your military training, your standing in the engineer department, your knowledge of the roads and country hereabouts, your versatility in the several languages you speak, your acquaintance with the native population, together with the great esteem in which they seem to hold you; all these factors combine to make you an invaluable man to the Government in control here, that is to say the American Government. We are bound to subdue these people it may take long or it may take short, but it has got to come, even if we have to continue to resort to fire and bloodshed. Now we prefer peaceful methods. That's why I say you are in a position to do great service for us. Your capabilities and temperament seem to just cut you out and fit you for the noble work. I ask you, therefore, to remain with us right here in the Philippines. I have a position ready for you in the island which guarantees a yearly salary of 18,000 dollars. Will you take it?'

'There's only one hindrance,' answered Estaban.

'What's that?'

'My obligation as a Spanish soldier to my own country.'

'If that is the only matter to stop you, you're all right; for I have forestalled that objection by going myself to the Spanish Consulate here and fixing up things provisionally in your name. I thought that it would be best to have you easy on that score; so I went and had a talk with the Consul. He is a good friend of mine ever since the war ended and our two countries resumed their former friendly relations.'

'Then I accept the offer you make me.'

'Good! And may you ever be as faithful with us as you were under the banner of your own unfortunate Spain.'

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