

During the Sanctus Veus, Sanctus Fortis, Capitana Barang nudged the fat woman next to her, the one lying on the floor, leading the prayers.

"Mana Sebia... Mana Sebia!" Capitana Barang exclaimed, interrupting Sebia's prayers.

"Santus talis..." murmured Mana Sebia "...serere nobis!" rubbing her eyes and making the sign of the cross across her chest.

"Mana Sebia... Mana Sebia did you see it?" Capitana Barang asked with alarm.

"See what?" Mana Sebia replied, half-awake.

"Our parish priest, Padre Agaton! Ay! he pushed the missal."

"Look!"

Mana Sebia yawned, her mouth wide open, revealing teeth blackened by buyo. She raised her head and got up, jolting herself awake. Now wide awake, Mana Sebia knelt to see the proceedings better. She saw nothing. Being short, she could not see anything, except the flickering candles set on two ciriales in front of the Nuestra Señora — serious, morena and symmetrical in her gilded silver vestments in the center niche of the retablo.

There must have been something unusual happening that day, because all the women cast knowing glances at each other and made small hand gestures, asking silent yet expressive questions.

"Que paso, Capitano Barang?" Mana Sebia asked, staring blankly into the Capitana's face.

"What's happening?" she repeated, again trying to glean an answer from Barang's face.

"Ay! It. seems..."

A few measures of music still remained to be sung by the choir when the swinging censer, together with the pealing of the tiny bells from the sacristy, gave everyone a vigorous signal indicating the end of the Mass,

The Mass was over, and everyone could now go home. Those who had fallen asleep because of the interminable and uncomfortable heat began to rise; stretching their limbs to awaken their still-sleepy bodies.

The heavy suffocating atmosphere was aggravated by a tempest of sounds, The air seemed filled with a mixture of evaporated sweat, exhaled air, candle smoke, human stench, and the scent of incense. With each whiff of incense, Mana Sebia gazed at the curtains closing on the altar.

"What happened? What's the matter?" she asked, striking her chest each time the bell sounded.

But then Capitana Barang did not reply. She simply made a couple of signs of the cross, each time striking her chest so hard she was unable to hear herself.

The strings of the bass fiddle, the sound of the wind Instruments and the pistons of the brass instruments resounded like war trumpets. The clarinets blared, the flutes whistled, and the saxophone sounded like the hoarse voice of a drunken person. The whole flock was in a frenzy in the midst of these sounds, with small bells tinkling furiously at the end of the Mass producing a commotion akin to that of hells around mules on the loose.

The bells in the tower began to chime. The small bells shrieked like giddy college girls away from their studies and on a field trip, while in the center of the tower the huge bell called Sta. Cecilia tolled solemnly, her sound majestic like an old Mother Superior trying to contain the uproar. Her voice seemed to follow the pealing of the small bells, seemingly saying:

"Calm down... calm... calm..."

Padre Agaton, however, did not wait for the curtains to drop and cover the altar completely when he handed the censer to the sacristan and left in a huff, disappearing into the sacristy, preceded by the huge candlesticks held by bearers, followed by magnificently dressed acolytes. The Mass had ended.

The chiming of the church bells became weaker and then slowed,, down, as if trying to impose silence on the furious sounds which had followed the end of the Mass. Way up in the belfry, the bells were vigorously pealing, one after the others while the huge bell called St. Cecilia carried away by rapture kept ringing as if it were animating the small bells instead of calming them.

"Sing, sing, sing," its metal tongue repeatedly intoned.

The people who filled the church to the rafters began to move out as soon as they had made the sign of the Cross. Suddenly there was a great commotion among the people inside the church. The men stood up and shook off the dust and grime from their knees with their handkerchiefs, producing a tumultuous noise, while the women gathered up the hems of their sayas and tapis, then shook the dust off their clothes by slapping the undersides with their palms. Then, turning about as if they were dancing to the tune of the music, the children started crying loudly while the tapestries, draperies, and curtains agitated by so much commotion kept swaying; the tiny flames seemed to be dancing over the candlesticks because of the whirling wind. Everyone inside the church seemed to be in a desperate mood: The sacristans moved to and fro; the evangelists on the altar with unbelted waists and one foot advancing seemed disposed to follow the crowd by imitating the poses of the images of the saints on the side altars.

San Sebastian had the air of a dancer with castanets in his hands; San Miguel the Archangel executed a difficult pass over the head of the devil. Only the image of the Jesus Nazareno had a serious mien, as it knelt on its ugly, unadorned carriage. The Nazarene seemed to be gazing strangely toward the choir, scandalized by such profanity. In this surprised posture he seemed to be unmindful of the heavy Cross he bore, which had been donated by Mana Sebia, and recently varnished and gilded. The Mater Doloroso, our Lords faithful companion in His Lenten sufferings, could be seen beside him with her head slightly bowed, shedding crystal tears. Beneath her hands, folded devoutly to express her sorrows, was her heart. It was engraved in her bosom and shaped like a kasuy. Her statue was covered with a black mourning veil through out Passion Sunday.

A loud drumbeat signalled the end of the religious affair, and the people responded with great rejoicing. They hastily got up, pushed the doors open then rushed out, jostling one another toward the exit.

The women murmured, shrieked, and became irritated when their feet were trampled upon and their arms pinched by unseen hands in the crowd. All of a sudden, a man would leap, pinched by an old woman whose long skirt he had inadvertently stepped on, while in another corner one could hear the sound of a loud slap on the face of someone followed by curses. Aba! Salvaje! was the angry shout directed to a waggish old man. Some women alleged that there were really men who take advantage of such a tight and packed situation in order to abuse them.

Here and there one could hear the nasal mumbling of an old woman praying her novena together with a lay brother leading an association of beatas, while over there you could see a young maiden brushing. The children kept crying loudly. A confused muttering multitude momentarily stayed inside the church.

Meanwhile Capitan Panchong a mar of medium build, stout and around 38 to 40 years old came by, pushing, trampling upon everyone else's feet, clearing the crowd with his cane, while his followers, their shirts soaked in perspiration, elbowed each other in a race to the door, raising their hats and salakot above their heads to keep them from being crushed and to defend themselves from being mobbed by the crowd. Then Capitan Panchong, as if to stop a tempest, stepped toward the holy-water font, dipped in his finger, made the sign of the Cross, genuflected, and later disappeared.

Once more the crowd resumed their struggle for the exit. Capitana Barang and Mana Sebia both got up, anxious to exchange impressions and observations about the rites. Mana Sebia, above all, could not satisfy her curiosity:

"Bendito y alabado sea... What happened to our parish priest?"

"To our curate? Ave Maria Purisima!"

"Sin pecado concebida ", she answered looking intently at Menang.

"Ave Maria purisima!"

"He pushed the Missal, Mana Sebia!"

"He pushed it? Ave Maria!"

"He refused to bless Anday's daughter. Aba! And think of it, Mana Sebia, the stipend for the candles and blessing had been paid in advance, but then the money has not been returned to them. A peso and half a real, Mana Sebia!"

"A peso and half a real, Capitana Barang!"

"Yes, a peso and half a real. A peso for the blessing and half a candles. I know because I lent her the money."

"So you were the one, Barang? And you said that Anday owed such an amount?"

"Ay! seventy-three pesos plus another peso and a half this morning. But how could she use it for such holy things?"

"How can you ask him to bless the baby when she was crying while her mother was praying the rosary? You know, I think that girl has been possessed by the devil since the age of one. Ay! she will become wicked like her mother."

"But why is the mother wicked?"

"Aba, Mana Sebia! She did not want her child to be blessed by the priest because she owed me much money, so I threatened to throw her out of our house at once because, Mana Sebia, I don't like wicked people staying with me. They beget misfortune."

"Ah, so that's the reason why she presented herself at our home and begged me to hire her as our maid. Jesus! Who would want to employ a maid with a child? Servants should not have children."

"They are all rotten! Ave Maria purisima!"

"Sin pecado concebida," answered Mana Sebia.

At that moment, the people rushed toward the holy-water font. They dipped their forefingers into the font, and with a grimace made the sign of the Cross on their foreheads, faces, and chests, mumbling prayers and then left the church.

Outside, in the patio, all the men were noisily discussing and commenting on what had happened during the Mass. Fura, a barrio fixture, was relating to his neighbor a story about Clodio, a rustic old man, a heathen, a notorious heretic, who used to beat the images of the saints when he was in a foul mood. Old Clodio attended church but once a year and that only out of curiosity. He always left the church immediately before the final blessing; thus, it was widely believed that he contracted skin disease and lost the powers of his anting-anting due to his profane and unbelieving behavior.

Fura related and even imitated with gestures how the parish priest pushed the missal away, as well as the manner in which Padre Agaton jerked the censor.

"Clodio," Fura said, "be now convinced that you have missed a great thing in life! You may never see anything like it again."

Clodio laughed mockingly. "Hey," he answered, "I have said it, for me; I really don't care to wait for the final blessing."

Fura replied, "Do you know why you have scabies? Because you refuse to be blessed by the parish priest."

They could see the groups of curious people loitering around the main entrance of the church all commenting on the same topic, well as the line of women passing, who were also talking about the same subject. They added details, some exaggerated in retelling things, while others invented conjectures. For the people of Pili nothing was more important than the movements of their parish priest.

The whole of Europe could be at war, science could come with the most useful discoveries, the most humanitarian principles in matters of law and sociology could be enunciated — all this to the people of Pili was mere rice chaff as long as Fray Agaton continued to be Fr. Agaton, and his handsome forehead did not darken with his terrible frown. The people of Pili had good reason to think this way.

Wars did not directly affect Fr. Agaton's life. He considered modern principles a dismal disturbance for the great majority of people, like light for dull and dormant minds. More than the existence of God, more than the sun, science or even their destiny — nothing was more important for the people of Pili than Fr. Agaton their famous parish priest, feared by the whole province — from the miserable rural folk to their presumptuous governor.

Fray Agaton despite his age still looked young. He maintained fame for being extraordinarily brave and energetic. Ever since he had arrived in town, he tried to dominate the people completely by requiring total obedience from them. In the seventeen years that he had exercised his ministry, Fr. Agaton's fame was not only confirmed, it also increased tremendously.

He was apparently a good young bachelor with an arrogant bearing and a manly physiognomy. His head was always erect, as if puffed up with pride, which perhaps could not inspire respect, except for some kind of consideration because of his ministry. He was endowed with a taurine force and an unlimited audacity, and was confident in the support of the religious order to which he belonged.

He dared to challenge all his enemies and take their lands. He relied mostly on the strength of his fists, the garrote, the law, the decisions of the tribunals and judges in whom he inspired mysterious terror. All the alcaldes and government employees who crossed him were dismissed from the service. The lieutenants and even commandants of the Guardia Civil who dared disobey him openly were either relieved of or reshuffled in their positions. Some of the residents were exiled. Indeed, no project or activity in the province could be done without consulting the parish priest, for nothing could be accomplished without his approval.

On the other hand, he who was fortunate enough to fall into his good graces could live peacefully and securely, as if all the saints in the celestial court had come down to protect him,

Furthermore, Fr. Agaton was a model parish priest. He was always clean, neat, elegant in his manners; refined, dignified in front of high authorities; imposing and majestic to his peers. He maintained his prestige in the religious order to which he belonged and upheld all principles that would keep the priesthood in the people's high esteem.

The town of Pili is located near the crater of an inactive volcano. It has hot springs and waterfalls frequently visited by many people. All travelers and foreigners who visited Pili mentioned Padre Agaton in their writings. This priest was always cited as a paragon of virtues, gentlemanliness and courtesy.

As a token of his singular virtues, his enthusiastic brothers had exalted him further by recommending him to a bishopric several times, but he declined. For this act of seeming self-abnegation his order praised him to the stars. Why refuse a mitre during those times when everybody seemed to be dancing and prancing for such a noble and lofty position?

His close supporters nodded their heads in admiration, while his rivals, as well as some bishops, bit their lips and smiled wanly "Modesty, it's true modesty!" a newly-consecrated bishop exclaimed

A bishop commented further that "as a simple priest it is easier to administer and shine spiritually in a town, rather than govern with decorum as a prelate in a place where force is needed in order to be successful. Bear in mind that only a screen hides apparent modesty from pride."

Even the devil, not wanting him made a bishop, wished that this kind of reaction from the people would be known to Fr. Agaton, so he himself could appraise them and give the corresponding response. It would be foolish pride for him to aspire to become a bishop. "It's really pride! He is right then." People thought: "He can't degrade himself too much."

Fr. Agaton used to say Mass with much grace and dexterity. He had a beautiful baritone voice and according to his protégés and admirers, his studied manners, gestures and movements seemed rehearsed in front of a mirror.

As a parish priest, he nobly performed his avowed duties, that is, he would never degrade his profession with trivial matters. He confided delicate things only to persons of unblemished reputation select and trustworthy clients and those of high social standing, who would surely not commit ignoble and mean actions. His delicate sense of hearing seemed to choose only elegant and delightful sins.

You would never see him officiating at the funerals poor people anymore, of those unworthy of his dignified position. [But for the wealthy] there would be a solemn and pompous ceremony for the dead, with all the bells tolling funeral dirges, a tomb or catafalque covered with black cloth, and the air enveloped in the fragrance of incense. There, you could see him majestic and imposing between two assistant indio priests or co-adjutors, singing the psalms and lamentations soulfully in his beautiful baritone, sprinkling the cadaver with some drops of holy water. It was enough to see Fr. Agaton officiate at solemn rites to be convinced that God could not condemn even the most hardened sinner.

He would not preach for less than 300 pesos, nor administer the saving sacrament of baptism for less than twelve pesos. He used to perform ordinary baptisms for this amount. Twelve pesos was required to hire the musicians, for the display of fireworks, for the ringing of the bells, and to get Fr. Agaton to personally administer the sacrament of baptism.

The indios could die without confession if that was their wish but Fr. Agaton would not abolish such a salutary institution. He requested that he be taken even to the miserable cabañas with cogon roofs in the distant barrios. His primary concern was the prestigious position of the priesthood and the eternal care of souls, without which religion would be easily taken away from the people by mere malicious advice or information from others.

Hence, this priest, Fr. Agaton, was honored and respected by everyone and his fame as a refined and gentle friar became quite proverbial. The town fiesta which was not attended by Fr. Agaton was looked upon with a grimace of scorn or disdain, like the reunion which was not sanctified by his presence. All kinds of sacrifices were made; the last peso kept in their chests was taken out in order to be baptized, to be married or to be buried by the parish priest. These rituals were considered a luxury by the rich, and became the subjects of conversation, talked about and remembered for weeks and weeks.

It was considered an honor to kiss the friar's hand or greet him, Perhaps even his kicks, like those delivered to his sacristan mayor, could be considered a blazon of nobility. It was not strange therefore, that his somewhat abnormal actions would cause such a sensation. Even the ignorant and obscure townspeople, more so those who were anticlerical, were very much preoccupied with the missal that had been pushed and the censer that had been brusquely thrown away.

Most prominent among these anticlerical townspeople was Dr. Lopez, a physician who had lived in Europe and had become a free-thinker and anti-friar. Although he always claimed to desire the progress and prosperity of the town, in reality his ulterior motive was to immediately land a job in the government and gain some more fur for his moustache.

Dr. Lopez was discoursing in a loud voice, undoubtedly to call the attention of the people. He made many gestures at Attorney Don Paquito, the current Justice of the Peace, who was more concerned about the causes of the parish priest's ill-humor. Dr. Lopez blamed all this on the wine offered during Mass. He observed that Fr. Agaton used to drink too much blood of Christ. It was a bad habit the priest had acquired, and it was becoming worse.

A Catholic, Don Paquito shortened his talk, but with the same number of gestures and mimicking, saying, he could not afford to acquire a bad reputation, which usually happened once he entered into a

discussion. To each his own, unmindful of the valid reasons of the other. He always insisted on his own reasoning and tried to have the final word. Suddenly both disputants kept quiet and each one assumed a relaxed posture. At that juncture, Cecilia passed by, mute, silent, respectable and admirable.

Cecilia, the daughter of Capitan Panchong, was fondly called the Star, the Pearl of Pili. The young girl gracefully walked erect along the line of curious people who were hurrying to greet her and lead her on the way. She was dressed in black, with a tulle veil covering her head, her face partly hidden. She seldom wore jewelry, except for some jet-black and brilliant ornaments, like the rosary which was coiled around her hands,

"I don't know how the parish priest could be in a bad mood!" She overheard the loud voice of Don Fermin, the warehouse keeper of the town, who was winking at the others with a certain malice. But the young girl passed by without any sign that she had understood the words uttered by Don Fermin; not a muscle of her face contracted and she continued walking majestically like a goddess, the cola or train of her skirt held in one hand until she disappeared behind the improvised bamboo altazuelo partly hidden between gumamela shrubs and plants from the Moluccas (coles de Molucas).

"Oh, what a fragrance!" exclaimed Don Fermin, inhaling the air sensuously.

Four or five young girls all admired by the warehouseman also passed by noisily, and he repeatedly exclaimed: "Oh, how fragrant, yes, what fragrance!"

The warehouseman, encouraged by the cheers and applause, permitted himself to tease one of the young bystanders who stood speechless at the sight of such beautiful creatures. "Señor Ysagani, are you dumb?" Don Fermin asked "You are good for nothing. eh!"

"What is it?" Ysagani replied coldly.

"What? Hombre!" he exclaimed in surprise. "Don't play dumb! We know everything. Somebody should really pick the first fruit easily, Sr. Ysagani; somebody should taste the first fruit at once." And Don Fermin murmured some words audible enough to be heard by the young girl. He smiled maliciously afterward. Ysagani bit his lips and his face reddened momentarily.

"Yes, that is true, Don Fermin, you ought to keep quiet ...with more reason" replied Ysagani.

"There's nothing wrong with it," said the warehouseman, somewhat irritated. "You ought to be grateful to me for this inside information. You should relay that tip to your father yourself."

"Yes, I know how to take care of things that pertain to me," Ysagani answered.

Don Fermin threw a glance at the young girl, but upon seeing her bearing and her figure, he repressed his ire, telling her that Ysagani, the nephew of a mere assistant priest, was so pretentious. And he directed his comments to another group—that of principales. Capitan Panchong was in the center of this group of prominent people, about to leave, with a tasseled cane held up high in the air. He was a small but obese fellow dressed in a swallow-tailed coat, the bosom of his white shirt soaked with his perspiration. Capitan Panchong was painstakingly wiping his forehead with the hand that held the cane, which looked odd, since his other hand held an exquisitely embroidered silken handkerchief.

Every Sunday, the faithful townspeople assembled after Mass to kiss the friar's hand; the besamanos was a custom which was observed in Pili with much pomp and solemnity. This ritual was accompanied by the band, which moved around the patio and proceeded to the convent in an orderly line, headed by the current gobernadorcillo. When they reached the convento, the parish priest would be waiting to extend his clean, well-perfumed hand for the veneration of the faithful. Of course this was also ostentatious act of displaying his well-polished fingernails, which had been prepared for this ritual.

In other towns, cognizant of the poverty and weakness of his parishioners, the besamanos was done in a more diplomatic way. Fray Agaton extended his perfumed hand near the window of the convento while a multitude of curiosity-seekers would lie in wait in the patio to watch the ceremony and comment on each and every movement. By extending his hand to certain people, he glorified the most favored persons in town, who could then boast before the multitude.

On that day, all the windows of the convent were opened and as usual a huge crowd of curious people gathered in the patio to witness the ceremonies, all of them making side comments on his movements. The friar would extend his hand and would add some slight blows (golpecitos) or tender pats (cogotazos) on the backs of their heads, saying: "Muy bien, well done!" After such an act the favored ones could even insult the gods, like the impudent Ajax.

If on the contrary, the friar distractedly extended his hand blankly, as if he were staring far into the distance, this was a bad sign. Later, he would extend his hand upward — bad, a very bad gesture, since it was an omen of great misfortune.

But when the parish priest refused to give his hand — Ah! this was a different story altogether. But then this had only happened once, when he unexpectedly found out that the son of an unfortunate parishioner who had just arrived from Europe had delivered a speech about the present conditions in the country. That event made everyone tremble each time they were reminded of it. The unfortunate persons who were thus castigated went home weak and stupefied. Many got sick, and they only got well when the priest said Mass with greater solemnity, prolonged tolling of the bells and numerous lighted votive candles. In this context we can understand that Capitan Panchong had sufficient reason to wipe the perspiration off his brow with his cane instead of his handkerchief. He was made absent-minded by his preoccupation with the priest's bad mood. Thousands of dreadful suppositions welled in his mind, thousands of conjectures.

On this day the cura, a figure terrible beyond words, did not receive any of the principalia. There was no besamanos that Sunday. Everyone had to return home full of anxiety, uneasiness, and consternation. Never before had there been any event like it in Pili. Most friars were really wont to have the besamanos even if they were already lying on their death beds.

The inquietude of the townspeople worsened when the curate's servant secretly told Panchong that the Among had shouted at Menang and splashed his chocolate at the cook when he found it too hot. With this news, Panchong and all the principalia were seen running from the convent, as if fleeing from a garrotazo. Everyone looked crestfallen and melancholy as they proceeded to the tribunal to deliberate on the event, a process akin to that done in Rome in times of public calamity. The musicians went home and were about to play a funeral march at the slightest provocation.

Despite his great discomfort, Panchong proceeded to the tribunal instead of going home, in order to preside over a meeting. He had to take up several matters at this meeting concerning Holy Week. But nothing was discussed in the tribunal. The question of Maligay and plans for the Holy Week activities were entirely set aside.

Someone who had been detained for two days complained of hunger. Nobody knew why he had been imprisoned. The teniente mayor said the teniente del barrio was responsible, while the latter laid the responsibility on the Justice of the Peace or the gobernadorcillo. This detainee, not knowing why and by whose order he had been jailed, complained of hunger. But he shut his mouth suddenly upon hearing that another fellow had been threatened with flogging the previous night — twelve lashes for claiming he had been forcefully abducted by thieves in uniforms very much like those of the Guardia Civil.

A teniente mayor who complained that his cattle had died because of the raging pestilence in his barrio was bitterly blamed by everyone for his gross negligence. He had failed to have his animals blessed by the parish priest! The herd died by the dozen and there were no people to bury them. Licentiate Lopez suggested that they should be burned, but Panchong left, knowing the curate was indignant because he had not been asked to bless the animals. This led to the pestilence. But somebody noted that the dead animals the very ones which had been blessed by the priest, who charged five pesos per head.

The teniente observed that the dead people had all been blessed. Panchong, who was in a bad humor, replied: "The dead are already dead, so, no one can ever revive them. What is important now is to know how to pacify the curate with gifts."

"Sir, the bridge in our barrio is already destroyed," reported a teniente del barrio and its residents.

Panchong became furious. "Stupid fools! Don't you we are concerned here with more urgent and important matters? You come to talk about bridges? If your bridge is destroyed, let it be destroyed; and if you don't know how to swim, then let all of you drown! Anyway, there is already an excess of people in your town."

Panchong did not bother with any other matter, except the nagging question: Why was the curate so angry? What was urgent now Panchong stressed repeatedly was to find out the real cause of the parish priest's wrath, so that they could at pacify him.

Nobody dared give his opinion. However, a *teniente del barrio* tried to recall reasons for the curate's actions, suggesting that it might be because of the bundles of firewood which had not been delivered to the convent, since the bridge connecting their *barrio* to the town had collapsed.

"I used to cross the river," replied the poor *teniente*. "Now I get wet up to the armpits, but since you talk of gifts, the firewood for the parish priest would get wet."

"Very well, carry them over your heads!" Panchong retorted. It did not matter if all the bridges in the world collapsed—provided his election would not be endangered. Would he be able to get the support of the peasants if they got wet? Would they vote for him? Yes, all of them were wicked. The *cabezas de barangay* would surely vote for *Capitan Tanukang* who had promised to pay them 200 pesos each. If his opponent won, the peasants' would stop public office again. If the curate got angry, surely that would endanger his reelection. That was his problem now; He might not be reelected, *Don Tanukang* would surely win, and then would call him *Kiao Kiao* in front of everyone. This idea would surely drive him crazy. The meeting adjourned without any agreement, and Panchong went home restless.

Capitan Panchong had sufficient reason to be restless. He was stupefied thinking of the bad humor of the curate, so much so that he wiped his forehead with his cane instead of his handkerchief. What orders, or what dispositions of the curate, had not been complied with? There had been a public proclamation ordering the people to have their cattle, poultry and fishponds blessed by the priest to protect them from an epidemic of influenza. What was the sin committed, if not all would comply with the order? During that week, there were two solemn burials and the heirs of the deceased certainly had to sell part of their land to defray the expenses. In fact, another rich and powerful person had died, but the heirs did not have a pompous funeral although they could afford it.

Padre Agaton's parishioners were all egoists who simply buried their dead as they wished, unmindful of the exigencies which they ought to follow as baptized persons. After a pompous and solemn funeral, many persons certainly asked what happened to the fattened capons given as gifts to the curate.

These capons had been for sale, but they were confiscated from a certain *barrio* resident who, unfortunately, had failed to produce his *cedula*. Oh! Therefore, if that was the reason for the priest's foul mood, *Capitan Panchong* thought, then poor *barrio* folk should be paid at least 25 pesos and taught later how to raise better capons!

Perhaps it was mere intrigue from the wicked *Don Tanukang*, who had vowed to disobey his orders in the coming elections? *Capitan Tanukang* was capable of anything; he was a very wicked person. He did not yet understand the consequences of the priest's actions, since he had never been exiled.

Capitan Panchong continued to reflect on his political rival's tricks. Two hundred pesos had been promised to each voter if he won the elections for *gobernadorcilo*. All this money not counting *Capitan Tanukang's* continuous gifts to the curate! Two hundred pesos! That was immoral; *Capitan Panchong* had only given 50 pesos to each voter. Where did *Capitan Tanukang* get such a large amount of money? Why, *Tanukang* had even offered him work one day in the street and even called *Capitan Panchong* out in front of everyone. Oh, *Capitan Panchong* had sound principles in him, not all could call him well...really now, there must be ungrateful people in this world! Now, since *Capitan Tanukang* offered 200 pesos, all voters would naturally vote for him.

Oh well, the parish priest had not yet gotten angry. He might have fixed his attention on the silken cloth *Capitana Barang* had bought for him to decorate the altars, *Capitan Panchong* had already said that it

was ordinary, but his wife was a very mean woman. In this life nobody, not even his own wife, could think of the compromises which might beset him.

Meditating further on the reasons behind the priest's unusual behavior, Capitan Panchong thought, it might be because his daughter, Cecilia, did not appreciate the carpet which the curate had ordered for her. Another stupid girl! How scrupulous could she be! How egoistic! The parish priest was simply being a fine and gallant gentleman. What more could it mean? Nobody would definitely think any evil about that. Oh, Capitan Tanukang would be appointed and he would be called... Capitan Panchong's thoughts trailed off as he wiped his forehead again with the tassled cane and looked around him.

The principalia were glad about those afflictions and showed their contentment to each other by meaningful glances. Times were not really propitious, but they would willingly give a peso each, provided they could provoke the curate to quarrel with Capitan Panchong. He had an insufferable character, and he had been elected only by his own will. Certainly, not as ordered by the parish priest. Yes, Panchong would give at least a peso and a half provided the curate would not quarrel with him, and thereby get him reelected.

Capitan Panchong was roused from his stupor by the arrival of the sacristan informing him that the parish priest was really getting impatient.

"Tell him that it is not my fault, it is the fault of the others," he said. "Where are the others?" he asked anxiously "Don't you see that the parish priest is waiting for us?"

"It's already a most opportune time, a pretty good time. This is what we have been expecting from you," responded an elderly man.

"It's already a pretty good time," murmured Capitan Panchong.. "What about the music?"

"They are waiting for your orders, sir."

Then ten or twelve musicians lifted their instruments and started to make short, brief sounds.

"But all that I have to do, all that I have to display," Capitan Panchong exclaimed furiously. "You have already seen it, Selmo" he said, facing the sacristan. "When the Among gets angry, you tell him everything you have seen. He expects you to enumerate them all."

"Let us go to the convent!" Capitan Panchong said with a commanding voice, and began to walk away with a gait that betrayed an affected grace and solemnity.

They proceeded to the convent accompanied by the tune of a beautiful waltz. The sun was shining brightly and its brilliant rays were like golden thread. The air was saturated with perfume, and the patio was covered profusely with flowers and beautiful ornamental plants. everything in the warm embrace of the sun. The almond trees were swaying. The palm trees were shaking their green fronds; the bamboo murmured mysterious songs like repressed laughter, and down below, the ground was covered with a verdant green carpet. At the ramp, one could gather white flowers to be scattered into the air like a divine perfume. It was springtime in the country of an eternal spring!

Capitana Barang heaped on poor Anday all the blame for Fr. Agaton's bad mood, which began when the curate had refused to bless her daughter. According to Capitana Barang, Anday should have knelt near the altar before the priest read the last gospel, then he would surely have blessed her daughter even if he was in a bad mood.

"Do you think the curate would wait just for you? Ay! You? A miserable maid? If we your masters have to be on the alert much more so should you!"

Anday was a young girl of 18 or 19 years, yet her beauty seemed to have faded; she was pale and weak. She humbly replied to Capitana Barang that she could not do as she was told since the sacristans would not even allow her to get near the altar; they likewise refused to give her a candle on the pretext that the curate was really furious. But Capitana Barang did not listen to Anday's explanations, and continued reprimanding her:

"If we who have already paid the cedula were not able to receive Holy Communion. Ay!" Capitana Barang exclaimed, "much less this maid, who had only paid a media real! Surely, I have to confess once more. Oh, Jesus! I am surrounded by many temptations. If you were only able to have your daughter blessed by the priest, you would have less occasions for sin. That's why I lent you a peso and a half in spite of my tight finances right now. I hoped that some drops of holy water would fall upon you, so that everyone would at least have gained something from God."

Anday bowed her head and continued to work. She folded clothes, washed dishes, brushed and arranged the clothes of both mother and daughter. It was indeed very humiliating to be accused of being a temptress and seductress in front of many people, but what could she do? Maybe her master had other motives for scolding her? Maybe there was a reason for doing so, for accusing her bitterly?

She had borne that daughter out of wedlock by the son of her former master, which was why she was dismissed. Now her new master was Capitan Panchong, who demanded all kind of services -- domestic and otherwise. Anday could not complain; she either performed all these chores or Capitan Panchong would surely maltreat her for many days.

Being an unwed mother, she was considered despicable. Yes, she really was a sinner, but what could she do? She owed her masters much money because she loved her daughter. She had to support the little girl. She could still remember her first experience with her former master or rather lover, but what else could she have done? She willingly accepted all accusations and vituperations against her. But if these were against her daughter? Santo Dios, oh no! Her daughter was young, just a year and a half, charming, gentle and innocent. The girl still cried when darkness fell during her prayers.

Capitana Barang continued scolding Anday. "These are the bitter consequences of being hardheaded, hence it is like condemning your own daughter! Ay! There are children blessed by their parents for Satan. You will bring your daughter to Hell yourself."

"Naku! señora," Anday answered very much alarmed. "God knows that I would offer my own blood for the sake of my daughter!"

"Shut up! Don't you dare answer back because it was your fault, You did not insist that your daughter be blessed by the priest. You always like doing things your way. You are really stubborn and hardheaded!"

"Señora, if the sacristans would not permit me to..."

"The sacristans, the sacristans, always the sacristans! Not, another word! You are such a nagger. You can't bear to be scolded you always answer back. Ay! anyone who can't suffer scoffs and reprimands should stay at home and never borrow money."

"I don't want to work as a maid, but there was no choice. Who knows? I could have been a lazy flirt."

Capitana Barang's suspicions were right, "How could she be serving day and night while committing sin at the same time, thus causing scandal to everyone?" Anday merely bowed her head and tears welled in her eyes.

Capitana Barang could still recall the causes of the girl's misfortune. Her father was once a cabeza de barangay who embezzled money and eventually became bankrupt. He lost his fortune in the cockpit. He had to make trips to the capital several times, and was later sent to prison. Thus, his family had to sell everything and borrow money at an exorbitant interest.

Consequently, Anday had to serve as a domestic with a family who had a son studying for the priesthood. This son was handsome and amiable, so Anday, the maid, fell in love with him and finally allowed herself to be seduced by him. This happened when she was barely sixteen years old. When the boy's parents discovered this, they immediately sent their son to Manila and dismissed Anday after beating her up. The father of the boy threatened her, saying she would be pardoned provided she would forget the young man and deny that this future priest had seduced her.

She acceded to everything as long as she was not dismissed. But later she admitted that she had been seduced by Titoy and suffered much, but later became resigned to her fate. She sought refuge and was

cared for by an old woman who gave her food, treated her well and made her pray so much. There, she gave birth to a baby girl called Felicidad, but the old, woman died a few months later, forcing Anday to seek new employment.

She went to the house of Capitan Panchong, who treated her badly, subjected her to hard work and oftentimes whipped and tormented her little daughter. His wife Capitana Barang also used to pinch and scold her daughter. Anday could have changed masters, but it was not so easy to do so. She could not leave because she could not find another employer, and she owed her masters much money. She owed them 60 pesos, yet she received not more than four pesos a year.

She calculated that she had to work for 18 years before she could fully pay her debts. That meant having to endure more years of suffering in the future. All of Anday's computations excluded money required for annual tribute, as well as clothing expenses, and payment for all the plates and utensils she might break. She also needed money for her daughter's medicine when she fell ill.

Capitana Barang, as an act of charity, used to give Anday seven-and-a-half pesos since her father, the discredited gobernadorcillo, had once saved the life of Capitana Barang's husband. Anday had already served as their maid for eight years by then, so she had to endure some ten more years of suffering.

During her first year in the house, Anday experienced all kinds of hardships from Capitan Panchong in order to remain faithful to her first love. She endured all these partly for chastity and partly for fear that Capitana Barang would send her away. However, because of her initial resistance to his advances, Capitan Panchong threatened to send her away because of her faults as well as her daughter.

Fearing dismissal, the maid first pleaded, cried and implored her master's mercy. What else could she do? Is God really just?. The young man who had seduced her had not yet returned to town and it was said that, sooner or later, he would be ordained a priest. She then confided everything to Capitana Barang, and was resigned to her fate. She said that she really deserved all kinds of insults from her master for she had, truly, committed some faults. She had deceived them before, but all her hidden faults were eventually revealed. The young girl was trembling with fear because she was very much afraid that Capitana Barang, even by chance, would discover her relationship with Capitan Panchong.

Capitana Barang's sermons were endless. The good lady believed it was a virtue to preach to that unfortunate being and save both mother and daughter from the fires of hell. It was evident that they were indeed possessed by the devil, because Felicidad, the little girl, cried bitterly precisely when her mother was praying. Surely, the devil took advantage of that occasion to distract her from her prayers and condemn both of them to hell! The devil's wiles and deceit could be understood easily. The devil had vowed to impede the young man's vocation; therefore, the little girl was the devil's daughter. This fact was undoubtedly true! Similar examples were reflected in the novenas and other religious books which could be read every day.

A teardrop fell, on Capitana Barang's skirt, which she hastily shook off. That skirt had cost her more than six pesos! "But look at. this maldita!" she exclaimed indignantly, pausing from her sermon. "Don't you see what you've done? You have tarnished my-ten-peso saya. What would you do if I told you that I will add this to your debts? Where would you get money to pay me?"

Anday momentarily forgot all her sufferings and sorrows because of these threats. As she stood motionless Capitana Barang pinched her hard and slapped her on the nape.

"The skirt was not tarnished, señora. No, it was not stained either," replied the maid pointing to the skirt with a reproachful look in her eyes.

"Yes, it is not soiled, it is not even stained," retorted Capitana Barang. "You are really clever! Your apparent sorrow meant nothing. I don't know what more I can say to you. You would have done the same thing to my mother. All I can say for the moment is that I will pardon you now."

Anday did not reply; she just remained patient but kept crying and sighing. She tried to be cheerful just to please her master. She raised her head and was about to fold her dress when Capitana Barang came in and tried to stop her little daughter from crying.

"You see? Don't you see?" Capitana Barang shouted, pointing at the little girl. "Look, she seemed to be very intelligent or shall I say the devil's ...oh, let her play alone. Don't waste your time just to make, her shut up. I have not even whipped you," she added furiously.

Anday, trying to pacify her daughter, also wept, hard put to show the girl that nothing whatsoever had happened to her.

"Do you think I would pay you seven-and-a-half pesos if you just wasted your time playing with your daughter? Ay! when I was young I would never spend my time occupied with my children nor tell them to keep quiet. If they cried I would just hit them and they would hush up by themselves. Thus, the devil could never enter their bodies. But you? You willfully tolerate your daughter's playing and shouting

Anday left her daughter alone with a heel of a shoe to play with. But the girl stuck her "toy" into her mouth.

"If you continue to behave like that, or refuse to be corrected," Capitana Barang said, "it would be much better for you to look for another master. I don't want to be responsible before God for anyone. I don't want to be accused of neglecting and abandoning both you and your daughter in order to be condemned to Hell."

"Señora. my little daughter is very good by nature. You don't know her well enough; she is good and obedient. If my daughter behaves contrary to this, as you claim she does, I assure you I will follow whatever you want." Anday could not contain her grief and anxiety any longer, so she burst into tears again.

Capitana Barang was about to scold her again, but she saw her husband coming. together with two cabezas de barangay. The little girl started to make noise again. Capitan Panchong was very irritated. He heaved a deep sigh and called out "Barang... Barang!..."

Panchitong's Cure

Panchitong had just arrived home from the Tribunal and he was in a miserable state. His coat was slovenly, his pants were crumpled and his blue necktie was misplaced atop the collar of his shirt, like a girdle worn by some sultan. He came in dazed, howling and moaning, "Barang! Barang!"

Pale and trembling because of the cold, Panchong closed the windows quickly. Cecilia came, Capitana Barang forgot her usual sermons to Anday and amidst questions, shouts and lamentations he removed his frac and lay in bed.

Everyone remarked that he might have been exposed to some kind of bad wind, thus Capitana Barang tried all means to revive his spirits. She stretched certain parts of his body, pinched him, applied several kinds of spices like garlic, onion, mustard, etc.; on his body, as if she would cook the poor Panchong like adobo. Barang was panic-stricken yet she refused to send for a doctor, and attempted thrice to keep back their servant from doing so.

All the neighbors came to his aid; Cecilia wanted to call the doctor but Capitana Barang repeatedly stopped her from doing so. There were many visitors, as if Panchitong would only live till nightfall. Well, the doctor could still visit, Cecilia suggested again.

Panchitong kept complaining about his ailments and the good neighbors tried all imaginable remedies. Mana Sebia suggested an infallible cure for scabies and rheumatism — strong faith through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin! Another remedy suggested was the relic of a certain saint for the pain of his pot belly. Then Capitana Barang remembered a bottle of holy water which she had carefully kept following the advice of the cura. This miraculous water, according to the parish priest and Mana Sebia, could cure all kinds of ailments. Since he was apparently in danger of death, they forced Panchitong to drink all the holy water!

The unfortunate patient drank all its contents, although he abhorred its taste, and after a few minutes began to throw up the rest of his breakfast consisting of puto, tapa and fried rice. It was an unusual meal, which made one believe that his illness was grave.

At eleven o'clock he asked for confession. Meanwhile, Mana Sebia went to the convent to summon their parish priest. Cecilia was left beside the bed, silent and in a pensive mood, with her arms folded over her bosom; she was motionless and seemed to contemplate his eternal damnation; she also tried to divine the causes of his illness.

Looking out from their balcony, Cecilia saw the figure of Ysagani, the nephew of the new assistant parish priest. The young man was passing by fixing his gaze on the window. Their eyes met and she managed a gracious smile at him and the young man took off his hat and greeted her.

The modest Ysagani served as a clerk at the tribunal. She had met him when her father asked her to get a copy of some documents pertaining to her aunt Doña Orang. One of these happened to be the will she had left after her death. Even at this time, she was attracted at once to Ysagani's serious taciturn and likeable appearance. Once they had exchanged meaningful glances.

Cecilia felt a sudden flush in her cheeks. She wanted to withdraw, but her feet didn't want to move. She tried to turn back but it would be impossible. On the surface she seemed serious, apparently indifferent, but in reality she directed her eyes to the garden in order to see better. She kept looking as the young man drew away from her gaze. Cecilia felt a kind of childlike reproach for that strange feeling. What? Was she in love with the nephew of the new coadjutor who used to criticize his new friends haughtily?

Cecilia was the daughter of Capitan Panchong and Cepitana Barang who could not support her education as she had an elder brother who was still at school. So Cecilia had been reared in her aunt's home in Manila. She spent her childhood with Doña Orang till her adolescent years, returning to Pili for two or three days a year during the town fiesta. Capitana Barang had sacrificed her maternal love for Cecilia to her love of money, and little by little was able to assuage and pacify the loving tenderness she had nurtured in her heart knowing full well the quality of life her daughter would enjoy with her rich aunt.

The young girl was very much interested in this man, Ysagani. She had already heard about him even while she was in Manila living with her aunt, sister of her mother, the noted lawyer Doña Orang who had financed her education and upon her death left behind an immense fortune — huge bank deposits and vast landed estates. Cecilia would soon be the sole heir, upon reaching legal age.

This extraordinary woman, Doña Orang, used to revolve in high society. It was she who had molded Cecilia's imagination and character from adolescence, developing her into a strong and wholesome woman adorned with sterling virtues. Doña Orang had nurtured in her mind the type of man she would love — an ideal which her young mind had conceived even in her fantasies.

Cecilia could visualize this type of man by following the ideals instilled in her by her deceased aunt, who used to tell her that if a woman would behave well she would be admired not only for her beauty but also for her strength of character, firm decision, nobility, intelligence and courage. Now she could feel that this ideal being really existed, or at least ought to exist, such that sooner or later she would meet and fall in love with him. They would surely complement each other and then be happy. This would explain her apparent aversion toward all those who had courted her. The young man in question was well off, he was the son of a very affluent family. He was irresistible to her eyes.

Most outstanding of all were his rarest qualities: valor, youth, generosity, heroism and disinterest, which were his natural attributes. Hence upon waking up from the reality of her gilded dreams, upon hearing his pastoral words, upon seeing him make a crude gesture, she closed her eyes, and smiled sadly. She closed her eyes again, as if she would want to go to sleep and recall those nocturnal dreams of an ideal man, dreams improper to a young maiden like her. That young man coming from an affluent family was the real man she desired, the man to whom she could confide her future and to whom she could unburden all kinds of self-deceptions.

In her imagination she watched him dragging his feet on a huge mountain amidst gloomy shadows, then dancing and smiling but still full of apprehension, with a very powerful impulse. Later she stopped

gazing at this disagreeable scene to encounter the taciturn figure of Ysagani, enigmatic, silent and incomprehensible. With her eyes she saw much more. There on the summit seated like a sovereign was the imposing figure of the cura kicking everyone crawling on the floor before him. He looked disdainful and arrogant like a victorious lord.

"Here is a real man!" an interior voice murmured. Cecilia closed her eyes.

"What beautiful flowers you have, did you make these?" With those words Cecilia was roused from this dream. The curate was approaching her together with her mother. Cecilia retreated, to no avail since the cura had access not only to all houses but also the private rooms of these houses in Pili.

The cura brought with him a bottle full of water which he claimed was water taken from the river Jordan. He had been informed that Capitan Panchong was sick, so he had come bringing with him an infallible cure for his ailment. He had himself been cured by this water.

"I was informed that your father is sick," Fr. Agaton blurted out while he was approaching Cecilia. He paused for a while to survey the flowers in the garden. "I myself have brought this bottle of water from the Jordan which is a sure cure against any kind of ailment."

Fr. Agaton stayed for a while in the house. He told Capitana Barang that the water had also cured him instantly that morning.

"Ah!" exclaimed Cecilia, breaking the silence, sensing that the friar was staring at her intently.

"What beautiful flowers you have," he said as he moved even closer to her, at the same time looking around him. "How abundant are those roses; those dahlias and azucenas are beautiful! Is that one a camelia? How were you able to make them grow and bloom in such a luxuriant way?"

"I take care of them as best I can," Cecilia replied, to regain her composure.

"Were you the one who made them bloom? Why, even the thorns in your hands would produce roses!" Fr. Agaton gazed at her lovingly, as he drew closer and closer toward her, beaming the smile of a conqueror.

At that moment, voices and exclamations were heard. The door burst open and Panchong came out, smiling and crying. He genuflected, and extended his hand to grasp and kiss the friar's hand in gratitude. Behind him followed Capitana Barang together with several beatas and curiosity-seekers in tow.

"Gracias, Among. Muchas gracias Among!" Panchong greeted him. "I am well."

"Eh, what shall I say," retorted the friar, turning solemnly with a victorious air. "Well, all this results from the water from the Jordan."

"Well then among, it is really due to the water from the Jordan. Holy water is undoubtedly good, but water from the Jordan... too bad I received not more than a few bottles."

All the beatas insisted on being given even a few drops of the Jordan water. Fr. Agaton said, "A small bottle cost me ten pesos." But the devotees, undaunted, replied that it did not matter even if it cost twenty pesos per bottle because with this water, they could economize on medicine and doctor's consultations.

In spite of all this commotion, Cecilia did not utter a word. Her eyes merely moved alternately between her father and the curate. Panchong was really well.

"I have also come precisely to settle a problem." the cura added.

"Cecilia said that she could not make the decorated palm fronds for the Domingo de Ramos procession because she doesn't know how to fashion artificial flowers. Well, the garden is full of flowers, so I will pay you thirty pesos for the decorated palaspas you will prepare for me plus an additional five pesos for those you will make for my two assistant priests. Well? Is this all right with you?"

All the women in the room were astounded at the curate's generosity and benevolence. Capitana Barang accepted the offer on behalf of her daughter. She had never heard such a generous offer in her life.

As Cecilia was contemplating this matter deeply, she was able to divine the cause of her father's illness. She became restless and pensive, and looked out of the balcony of her room to distract herself. She could surmise the real cause of the cura's bad humor that morning but she did not dare to confess it to him, for fear he would be offended and embarrassed.

She proceeded to the balcony facing a miniature garden full of flowering plants on huge antique earthen pots of different sizes and shapes. She tried to erase the cura's obsession about her preparing the decorated palaspas from her mind.

Domingo de Ramos

During the Palm Sunday procession each year, the young people who had not yet paid their cedula personal nevertheless had to give ten cuartos for the cedula de confesion, a slip of paper they would then present to the parish priest before confession. With the money from this cedula de confesion they subsidized the decorated palm fronds for the cura, who used to collect around fifty pesos annually. But this year the cura had entrusted the confection of this to Cecilia, who had just arrived from Manila. Cecilia felt a certain repugnance for the chore, and wanted to excuse herself, claiming she did not know how to fashion artificial flowers from cloth. But Fr. Agaton suggested that if this was inconvenient then he preferred natural flowers which bloomed abundantly in Cecilia's garden.

The town plaza offered much animation that afternoon. The young men and other pious persons who joined the prayers during the Stations of the Cross were all talking about the miracle as they gathered around the stalls selling food and drinks. The curate and Panchong had been miraculously cured, the former from an extreme headache and the latter from his recurrent gas pains, which could not be cured by any medicine or doctor. A certain vendor had testified that the cura really looked gravely ill that morning after mass, and this explained why he did not receive his prominent visitors for the besamanos that day. Another, an empanada vendor, confirmed that she had seen Capitan Panchong almost dying, staring blankly while Capitana Barang stretched all parts of his body in order to revive him. Fortunately, he suddenly was cured at about 11:30 in the morning, simply by drinking some drops of water from the Jordan mixed with ordinary water and praying one Our Father and one Hall Mary! Panchong was on his feet again.

"Ow?" one of them asked doubtfully.

"Yes, he's back to normal. As a matter of fact the best proof is that he has whipped Anday's daughter with his slippers twice since. I was there when it all happened, the little girl is still there crying."

"What kind of water was it?" asked a pancit vendor.

"Aba! It is the water from the river Jordan."

"It is just like ordinary water, any kind of water which you use for washing your plates," answered the empanada vendor, "but it was really water from the Jordan river. Do you know its healing effects?"

"Ah, if indeed water taken from the Jordan river," a young man as he looked at the two women, nodding his head with compassion, "Yes, it is the miraculous water from the Jordan. Everyone can be cured instantly by applying it like balsamo do Fierabras, the healing balm for wounds, or simply by drinking it."

"How strange."

"You see, that's why it was so costly!"

"How much?"

"Aba! four pesos for a small bottle like this de grande chiquita! Ay! one could hardly buy a bottle of this water due to the miracles it is supposed to perform."

"Oh, how fortunate I would be if I could live along the banks of the Jordan river!" said the pancit vendor calculating the amount the cura could expect to earn at four pesos per bottle

"Listen," the young man asked pensively, "is the Jordan river the same place where John the Baptist baptized Jesus Christ?"

"That's right! That's why one can get much profit from it."

"But that place is very far away!"

"Just imagine, it is a very distant place and the baptism of Christ happened a long, long time ago."

"Didn't they say that the water came from nearby mount San Cristobal?"

"That's true! I heard that the head of the Hermanos de San Francisco would travel to Jordan every year. They would leave here on Good Friday after the procession, reach there on Palm Sunday and return home before Easter!"

"Departing viernes santo and reaching there by domingo de ramos?" the gullible pancit vendor asked.

"Ah, I also heard that said about many hermanos; how curious eh?"

"Isn't that strange?" repeated the pancit vendor.

Church bells began ringing interrupting this amusing conversation, and calling the faithful to take part in the Stations of the Cross. The church patio was soon filled with children, some running around, playing and jesting while the others preferred to stay tranquil and were content to visit the bamboo altarcitos in the patio or those situated in the corners of the plaza. Each altarcito contained a frame with a scene from the Passion of Christ between two flower vases, all resting on a table covered with a mantle.

In this manner, Lent, like the other years before it, had bamboo altarcitos covered with sawali built purposely to mark the path of the Lord on the Via Crucis. In olden times this used to be held inside the church in front of the twelve chromolithographs depicting the Passion from Pilate's Judgement up to Christ's burial. That was until Cecilia had arrived in town. Since then the cura ordered the gobernadorcillo to construct small altars for the Stations of the Cross around the church patio. This design had the added advantage of being conducive to prayer because it was less hot and humid than it was inside church. Besides, the parish priest could see everyone from his convent window, watch over them and guide them in the right direction — meaning, to any place convenient for him

The procession started with great solemnity, headed by the Cofradia president, who was devoutly following the carriage of the Nazareno, whose stereotyped face was beaming with surprise. It seemed as if the Divine Image could not comprehend how on earth these people could abuse his infinite patience. Below the carriage were four miserable-looking persons wearing gaudy vestments; two of them were sacristans and the other two looked as if they were criminals condemned to be hanged. These devotees were commonly called the reputados.

The image of the Virgen Dolorosa followed that of the Nazareno. She was weeping as usual, and looked as if she were admonishing the people to repent for their sins, but no one paid any attention to her sorrowful gaze, specially those who were bored and irritated with this Lenten obligation.

Then a crowd followed, composed of the different members of the various groups: cofradias, beatas, hermanos, and young people -- happy and smiling — who joined the procession just for fun and out of curiosity. The children merely simulated the elders, kneeling and kissing the ground; they stood up each time the cofradia leader rose alternately with the music from the choir noted for their loud cheating, particularly the hymns accompanied by the shrieking of a clarinet.

It was Holy Week; they were going to crucify the Son of God who became man. He who had been suffering since the beginning of Lent in order to make even the stones cry, as Fr. Agaton used to say to

his faithful parishioners. Only God knows if both Mother and Son had really suffered. Since the first Sunday of Lent, the devotees had to endure the ordeal and discomfort at each of the twelve stations, hearing the snuffling voice of the mischievous person who was leading the prayers during the procession. Step by step they followed the Stations of the Cross like miserable mendicants who used to beg for alms in the midst of vast throngs of people: troubadours, various members of religious fraternities and associations, people both old and idle twisting their bodies, like their souls and consciences. They went to church just to evade boredom at home, or maybe the men did not have money to bet in the cockfights?

Finally, the little bell was rung at the end of each station. On one side of the town plaza one could see numerous groups of men seated in front of the tiendas and food stalls run by the women, in heated discussion on the issues of the day. On the other side the young men carried chicken eggs and busied themselves with their favorite pastime called tuktukan, played only during Lent, while their fathers and elders were in the cockpit playing with their fortunes.

Boys usually played tuktukan until they become adults. The only difference between this game and cockfighting was money. In cockfighting, one lost large sums but in tuktukan, the winner just took the cracked egg. Before playing tuktukan, they first carefully examined the eggs to determine whether one was more resistant than the other by testing them slightly against each other. Firmly holding the eggs, they gave each a slight stroke on the elongated portion of the egg. This slight blow on the lower part of the egg usually produced a tiny crack while the top remained intact.

In the plaza, one could see Silvino, son of Tanukang, among the group of youngsters. He was well-dressed, and carried a small pouch with half a dozen eggs that he had previously won, wrapped in a silk handkerchief. He was thus challenging everyone to the eggshell-cracking contest.

"Tuktukan!" he shouted triumphantly. "Come on, are you afraid? Come on! I have already received several blows." The other young men, upon seeing his basket full of eggs, shied away and refused to join the contest. Silvino was notorious among the boys for being clever, arrogant and very demanding because his father was in power. Besides all this, everyone murmured that Silvino was a cheat, who filled his eggs with very fine brick or metal pellets.

"Tuktukan!" he shouted more arrogantly each time, and many responded by shaking their heads and keeping silent. Seeing that nobody would dare challenge him, he approached the son of Copitan Panchong, who was also in the crowd, and provoked him.

"Let's go, the two of us." he said with a provocative air.

Cecilio, the son of Capitan Panchong, who was timid and bashful responded: "I don't want to play with you. I'm not feeling well."

"Oh! Are, you afraid?" Silvino sneered.

"What? Me? Afraid of what?" Cecilio replied, somewhat irked. "Let us examine the eggs first. Oh, I guess you don't want to show your egg because it is filled with tiny brick pellets."

Silvino was irritated by these comments. "What brick pellets are you talking about? You're a coward! The truth is you're just afraid of your father, that's why you don't want to play!"

"Say that again?" the once timid Cecilio answered. "When was I ever afraid of my father?"

"Tuktukan!!" Silvino shouted triumphantly and maliciously. "Tuktukan! Who would dare challenge me?" he repeatedly cried aloud.

Still everyone refused to take the challenge, especially when somebody whispered that Silvino's winning egg might be a fake. In fact, young boys could devise many ways of faking an egg. Some would meticulously prick a small hole into the eggshell, then fill it up with tiny brick or metal pellets to reinforce the elongated part of the egg.

"Very well, then, tuktukan! I accept your challenge," Cecilio retorted helplessly, yet looking quite impassioned. "Who will hold the egg below my hand?"

"You will," replied Silvino.

"No, you will be the one above," he said while trying to test the strength of his eggshell by gently hitting it against his front teeth to assure himself of its resistance. He likewise made slight and delicate blows or golpecitos on the elongated portion of the egg.

"Well, your suggestion is well taken," replied Silvino quite generously. "I'll hold my egg below your fist."

He grasped the elongated part of the egg firmly in the palm of his hand, leaving only a very tiny portion of it exposed between his thumb and forefinger. These boys knew by experience that between two eggs of equal resistance the egg placed below the hand usually loses strength since it receives the hardest blow.

But the young boy suggested that they follow the rules of the game strictly, and first examine the eggs to be used. The young boy was glad, so that he could first test the strength of the eggshell by pounding it slightly against his teeth.

Silvino also brought out his winning egg and tested it against his teeth. He opened his eyes wide to attract more attention from the onlookers. Upon testing, the egg gave a sharp and resistant sound; he was exceedingly glad that it was really an extraordinary egg for the contest.

"Well, now my friend, allow me to examine your winning egg," Cecilio said, as he extended his hand to Silvino.

You have already examined mine!"

"I'm giving you your option, whether I am to be below yours." replied the young boy.

"I can even get somebody to confirm that my egg is unbreakable, I'll pay him a real for it. If you wish, I'll strike it again against my teeth. Listen carefully and you can hear its sharp tinkling sound,"

Silvino struck the egg once more against his teeth and it really produced a strong tinkling sound. The young boy, who had not had so much tuktukan experience was readily convinced and nodded his approval for the contest to begin. Silvino firmly grasped his winning egg in the right position and then smiled maliciously. Cecilio grasped the elongated portion of his egg with his right hand, when suddenly Silvino struck a strong blow against his opponent's egg, producing a cracking sound. Cecilio suddenly turned pale, while Silvino laughed sarcastically.

"Give me that egg!" Silvino said as he suddenly seized it from Cecilio, who gave it to his opponent willingly without uttering a word. Tears welled in his eyes. Meanwhile, Silvino victoriously kept on shooting loudly:

"Tuktukan, tuktukan! who wants to challenge me?"

Another fellow who was supposed to contest his winning egg sneaked out while the bystanders stood amazed at Silvino's tricks.

"This is just between us, Cecilio," Silvino told the loser, who merely smiled wryly.

Cecilio then replied arrogantly: "I don't like to challenge anyone in tuktukan without betting a big amount."

"All right then, let us play the game this time with big bets," Silvino blurted out. "How much do you want to bet?"

"One peso and the cracked egg to the winner."

"Two pesos!"

"Well then, I agree."

Hearing of the stipulated amount, the other boys gathered round the combatants, encircling them in a tight cordon. These two boys were considered the best in town, the unbeatable champions of tuktukan.

"First, we will entrust the money agreed upon to this fellow here," Cecilio said, pointing to another boy nearby.

"Naku! the parish priest and your father might see us. Watch out!" Silvino shouted. Sensing that he would surely emerge the winner, he took two pesos from his pocket and took the winning egg from inside his handkerchief. Cecilio did the same thing. Silence reigned momentarily even if all seemed to be at the height of their excitement. Silvino bit his lips and gazed intently at the four pesos he was about to win, but Cecilio stood silent and motionless. "Shall we test the eggs again?" he asked.

"What for?" Silvino replied and tried to divert attention by asking "Now what do you want? Who will hold the egg below and who will hold it above?"

"You should."

"No, you should be the one!"

"Cara o Cruz! Let us toss a coin," suggested a third party.

"You're right." the combatants agreed.

"Cara, o Cruz?" asked Silvino.

They tossed a coin and settled it this way. Cecilio held his egg below his opponent's hand thus like the first try it would receive the hardest blow. A diabolical smile brightened Silvino's face as Cecilio protected his egg, holding it carefully with both hands and showing only a very tiny portion of the elongated part of the egg such that Silvino could hardly touch the tip. Silvino became angry, since he could not even hear the slightest ticking sound of his blow.

"Both eggs are winners," he decided quite hastily. "Both?" Cecilio asked, quite surprised.. There was a momentary silence, then Silvino tried to test his egg by striking it against his teeth once more. He stood up and made heavy blows on his opponent's egg repeatedly. Neither of the eggs cracked. However, they heard a faint cracking sound with the last blow.

"It's already broken," Silvino shouted triumphantly while looking at Cecilio's cracked egg with disdain "Yes, it's already broken. You have lost! Your eggshell was already cracked." Silvino glanced once more at the egg in his hand and noticed that the tip of the egg had indeed cracked.

"Lintik!" he exclaimed angrily. He suddenly turned pale and looked at his opponent scornfully.

"Now give me those eggs," Cecilio said, as he was trying to retrieve the little basket for them.

Silvino allowed him to take the eggs, staring at him with knitted eyebrows. He did not know who was to be blamed, so when Cecilio insisted on getting Silvino's cracked egg he flatly refused.

"No, don't get take this egg. No. no!"

"Yes, that egg," replied Cecilio "This was our prior agreement, remember?"

"Let me see your egg first!"

"No, I don't want to, because you won't show me yours either." Then a sudden flash, like lightning, struck Silvino's eyes. "Ah! perhaps your egg, is made of stone. Maybe this is why you dare not show it to me. Maybe your egg is filled with tiny brick pellets —that's why you won't show it to me."

The two boys exchanged insults and exhausting this, later came to blows. The eggs in the basket were thrown away. Silvino received a strong blow, this time not on his egg but on his face, causing a black eye. Cecilio likewise had the same on his eye. They stopped for a while, perhaps to rest, and resumed the heaving boxing "Filipino style".

All food vendors nearby shouted so much that those attending the procession stopped their prayers because of the uproar. When Tanukang saw his son, he hurriedly rushed toward the scene, followed the rest of the faithful in the procession. Capitan Panchong. father of Cecilio, got there first and tried all

means to pacify the boys. His efforts were in vain, and seeing Tanukang hit Cecilio, his paternal love was offended and he rushed like a wild bull to defend his son.

Even the women rushed to the scene and there was so much panic and commotion that even the plates filled with pancit were thrown about in every direction. All you could hear were shouts, vituperations, interjections and maledictions. While the women shrieked at the top of their voices, later following this with deep sighs. The choir, psalmists, and even the men carrying the images of the Nazareno and the Virgen Dolorosa dropped the carrozas and joined the riot.

The Nazareno seemed both shocked and amazed at the mob, staring at them in utter disgust, while the Dolorosa behind him seemed startled, her wounded heart radiating with seven silver daggers piercing it and shaped in the form of a fan.

Grave consequences for both parties undoubtedly followed this rumble. The cord strung around Tanukang's waist was untied during the scuffle of the fathers. Capitan Panchong's belt loosened and his pants slipped down! Upon seeing this Capitana Barang suddenly rushed to his aid covering the exposed part of her husband's body with her tapis and pañuelo. This riot reflected both barbarism as well as sacrilege, which led to great dishonor for everyone.

"Let us go to the tribunal!" Tanukang shouted, panting while trying to fix his underwear. "Let us go to the tribunal," he kept shouting.

"But look at yourself." Capitan Panchong replied scornfully "You should go home first and get properly dressed. Put on your best shirt and pants."

"I don't know why you had to meddle in the affairs of these young scoundrels," Capitana Barang shouted at her husband while crying angrily.

Capitan Panchong was berating his son: "I have already told you that you are too small, Cecilio. I have forbidden you several times not to mix with these rabble rousers."

Everyone was talking, five or six people all talking at the same time, when Tanukang shouted at the top of his voice, calling for the cuadrilleros and other local officials to intervene, but each word he uttered was ignored. Capitana Barang with disheveled hair, raised her large arms and gesticulated; however, Silvino and Cecilio continued their brawl, insulting, threatening, and lunging at each other. At this moment, the parish priest looked out of the convent window and saw the head of a lady from a nearby house who also watched the incident anxiously, trying to guess what was really happening.

"We will see," Tanukang shouted.

"Yes, vamos a ver," Capitan Panchong added mockingly as he thought to himself. So what if Tanukang might be a gobernadorcillo, well, he worked in his calzoncillos, in his underwear! Besides, everyone called him kiti-kiti.

Tanukang resumed the squabble. but Capitan Panchong withdrew and left the scene with his son. At this point, one could notice that the Nazareno seemed to stare in shock at the crowd, while the Dolorosa simply stood, behind his carroza, in sorrow — her eyes filled with crystal tears.

The Aftermath of the Fight

That night the cura visited Capitan Panchong's house and after the prayers the doctor, the lawyer and telegrapher likewise gathered there. This time they arrived earlier to air their protests against Tanukang. The warehouseman who saw them enter Panchong's house closed shop at once and followed them, for fear that anyone in that group would complain first.

As expected, they commented on the current issues of that afternoon. They condemned their enemies, Cecilio was really sure that Silvino's egg was made of wood. Although in the shape of an egg, it was a fake. Since everyone had agreed against Silvino the lawyer said:

"Tuktukan is a kind of pastime, a game, and so nothing can be said against it. Now, as to the egg; whether fresh, empty, cooked, refilled, or any way you want it, it is enough provided that it is an egg. As the contest is only centered on the eggshell, if it has a shell, it fulfills the requirement for the contest. An egg made of wood, despite its shape and general appearance does not have a shell and cannot be considered in the contest."

The doctor, on the other hand, had to examine Cecilio very carefully as he might have sustained internal injuries which could later prove fatal. It would therefore be convenient to make it known. Who knows? Silvino was a barbarian.

"If I had not intervened," interrupted the gobernadorcillo, "a catastrophe might have befallen us."

"This is a question of honor and defamation," the telegrapher said. "If you wish me to do so, I'll send a vexing, mischievous note to the governor right now!"

"But everyone knows that Tanukang is in the good graces of the parish priest." This thought occurred to Panchong at once, because of his recent fears and anxieties about Fr. Agaton's displeasure at mass and the besamanos earlier on. "Then this means we can do nothing at all — out of respect to the cura. I'm sure the cura will support and protect Tanukang."

"Yes, he will protect him," added Capitana Barang. "Just this morning I saw him going out of the convent. He had surely reported the incident to the cura as you will see later."

"He is a subservient yet very mean fellow. He would do everything provided he could become gobernadorcillo to replace me."

"I have not seen anyone with such a passionate hunger for power, butt."

"We will see!"

Criticism flowed freely and the people in the house kept talking about the gifts Tanukang used to take to the convent, not to mention, of course, the day he had given several kinds of fruit and sweets.

Cecilia did not utter a word nor take part in their conversation. She just smiled affably at the people around her and in turn, they nodded their heads toward her. Capitana Barang began to talk about mutual understanding between Capitan Panchong and his peers. They would probably have to settle their dispute simply, by offering some gifts to the authority concerned — Fr. Agaton.

At this point, the sound of footsteps on the porch alarmed them. They pretended to talk indirectly about the matters at hand, so that the parties concerned would not suspect their rather shaky relationship with the parish priest.

"Yes, on the contrary," the doctor said, deviating from the topic of their conversation. "I think the parish priest should be married, because in the first place it is a call of nature. It is a natural necessity of every man. To be celibate is against nature; hence he might be incapable of properly administering the parish assigned him. If the cura is always irritable because of his celibacy, there would be no peace in our town. That would be dissatrous for all of us."

Then the doctor looked at Cecilia meaningfully and continued:

"This is, indeed, a natural need of our cura. When the parish priest hears confession from a woman, the latter confides everything. to him, even her innermost secrets. Therefore, it is much better to confide such matters at home rather than in the confessional."

[The unfinished draft can only be reconstructed up to this point.]