

IN DEFIANCE OF THE GODS

BY GEORGE BALLARD BOWERS

MY FIRST sight of Samar was a bare, gray peak, piercing a dense cloud bank like a huge horn. "That's Hurao," volunteered the captain of the Masbate. Immediately I assumed an attitude of attention to encourage him to go on. I sensed an interesting story and, moreover, I was enroute for field duty with troops operating on the island we were approaching.

"That peak has never been conquered," he began. "Hurao is an abode of the gods. The Filipinos have surrounded it with a glamor of mystery and superstitious fear." Here the captain's story was cut short, he had been called to the bridge, and an hour later I was ashore.

Samar was seething in revolt; thus it happened that within a month I was at the foot of Mount Hurao. I thought of the captain's story and the hundred finished versions from the natives in the streets of Catbalogan. They had told of legendary guardians, half human and half fish, but now none were to be found. My guide assured me the monsters had once lived in a village in the center of a great hemp jungle where we found charred remains of hovels.

When I suggested that we scale the peak, my guide protested wildly, warning me that no American or Spaniard or Filipino had ever been able to reach the top, winds of a dangerous velocity had always compelled the climbers to give up. Only a few months before, he explained, a doubting Filipino official essayed an ascent only to be forced to abandon his attempt, the winds had been too strong.

Here was my chance to disprove the fiction of the gods and become a hero of the simple mountaineers. Later I was to learn that they considered men fools who defy the gods.

Twenty soldiers volunteered to accompany me. The ascent was easy. We ate our noon-day meal on the summit, eight thousand feet above sea level.

We encountered the mythical wind about half way up and, at the summit, as may be expected in the tropics, it was a steady gale, although not of such force as to endanger our climb. The extreme top was a bare rock, three sides perpendicular, fifty feet high, the fourth was a slope of soft earth covered with a mat of vines over which we ascended.

The view from that mountain height was wonderful to behold. Northward in the distance, a ribbon of white smoke curled heavenward from the eternal fires of Bulasan; in the east was the vast, sighing Pacific; south, the mysterious mountains of Mindanao and in the west, the blue of the China Sea. A lively crackle of rifle-fire below me brought me back to my narrow world, forgetting the rare rock orchids I had gathered, I slid off the summit to hurry down to camp to find my men none the worse for the insurgent attack in my absence.

A year later chance brought me back to Hurao. This time I found the legendary guardians in their squalid cluster of grass huts. Half man, half fish? No, but everyone had ichthyosis, fish-scale disease, loathesome and incurable, that turns the human skin into a mass of glistening white scales, making clothing an irritating impossibility. Filipinos afflicted with fish-scale live like lepers, outcasts of clean society. I told the chief of the clan that I intended to ascend Hurao again.

"Again? No man has yet been able to reach the home of the ancestral gods!" He laughed doubtfully when I insisted that I had made a former trip. As I was about to go on, he fell on his knees imploring me to give up my plan that the wrath of the gods might not be visited upon us and his people, guardians of Hurao. His pleas were pathetic. I pitied the poor wretch already miserable and doomed to a living death.

Ten o'clock found us within fifty feet of our goal with further progress blocked. The recent rains had dissolved the earth incline over which we had ascended on our former visit. The four sides were now equally bare and perpendicular. All my attempts to scale the walls were futile, the jutting rocks were covered with a slimy moss that made climbing impossible.

I had to pass the outcast settlement on my return. The loathesome chief was waiting, grinning he began, "O wise white man, didst I not warn thee that only fools and children defy the gods?"