

THE LOST SOULS OF LOBOC

BY GEORGE BALLARD BOWERS

SPANISH Catholic monks began to teach their religion in the Philippines in 1565, not long after their discovery by Magellan. American Protestant missionaries followed our army in 1898, when Spanish sovereignty ended in the archipelago. These facts are necessary to explain an incident of 1908, Papa Isio's downfall in the Island of Negros and the unhappy fate of his followers, the Lost Souls of Lobo.

Papa Isio, a self-appointed pope, was the last spiritual and temporal head of the island Babalyanes, worshippers of an ancient Malayan god. Isio, a native of peculiar cunning, had taken his title from the Catholic church where he had been altar-boy. At the beginning of the American occupation a condition similar to that in Negros existed in every island of importance of the archipelago.

In 1908 Papa Isio completely dominated the populous island of Negros. He had overthrown its ill-fated republic and would have made himself an absolute monarch had it not been for the timely arrival of the Americans to garrison the principal island cities, a great blow to Isio's power and prestige. He withdrew with his followers to the mountains from which he made periodic raids to burn and kill in the lowlands.

Papa Isio's last raid occurred in 1908, ten years after the American occupation. How well I know the details! At that time I happened to have been a captain in command of our Negros forces. Papa Isio burned two coast towns and massacred one of my garrisons; this, a considerable blow to my prestige as an officer. Quickly I inaugurated a vigorous campaign of six months which ended with the capture of Isio and the surrender of his followers. Through desertion and death the Babalyanes had dwindled to less than five hundred souls, knowing no other authority than mine. Those simple souls looked to me for spiritual as well as temporal guidance, for in me they saw the reincarnation of their ancient deity.

There was at my disposal ample public funds to feed and shelter my charges. I built a model village, each home with a garden, rice field and trees.

Although I am of a liberal faith, I found it distasteful to serve as god, pope and teacher of that pagan settlement. I set out to shift my responsibility to the missionaries, Catholic and Protestant, which ever I could induce to relieve me. As a preliminary I built a church, using public funds. What if it was illegal? Was I not serving a noble cause?

The Protestant missionaries had, from the beginning, encountered many obstacles. The Catholics had already gathered into their fold a majority of the worthwhile souls, in the archipelago, they really did not need my Babalyanes. Protestant missionaries as a class were hostile to their fellow countrymen, especially the military. They seldom overlooked an opportunity to explain to the Filipinos how bad officers and others were—they may have changed by now. The Catholic priests pursued an opposite practice, they never failed to praise the army and navy. Although inclined to favor the priests, I decided to place the spiritual guidance of the people of Lobo into the hands of the Protestants who despised me.

Confident that I was doing a Christian act, I rang the preacher's doorbell at Bacolod. I saw his wife peep from behind the blinds. After a wait of five minutes, the preacher came to the door where I explained my mission of mercy, that I had five hundred souls prepared to accept Protestantism. I showed him a picture of the handsome bamboo church I had built.

Finally, he began, his vinagery countenance never changing:

"If you are so interested in saving the souls of a lot of pagan cut-throats, bring 'em in here. I wouldn't risk my life going out there in the mountains to them. Good-day, sir."

I was stunned. He had closed the door. I had turned the other cheek once too often.

A week later I had mustered up courage to approach the Spanish priest of a parish near Lobo. He was a good fellow and a loyal friend.

I had no sooner been comfortably seated I began:

"Padre Juan, how would you like a nice, new church," I hesitated, fearing the worst, "with five hundred Babalyanes ready to be baptized?"

He looked at me quizzically, then smiled.

"Have a drink on that, mi Capitan."

Gingerly, I poured myself a glass of sacramental wine, a servant had put before me. Padre Juan took a gin.

"You mean Lobo?"

I nodded.

"Fine. Bring them here to live near your garrison and my church."

"But, Padre Juan, I built a nice church in Lobo. It is only five miles from here."

"Amigo Capitan, I go to Lobo? Not for your sweet life. I wouldn't trust those cutthroats. You will dine with me today? I would have you enjoy with me some rare delicacies received from Spain only this morning."

This second disappointment distressed me. I was about to leave Negros for a vacation in the States, the real reason of my desire to hand my wards over to one of the churches. Finally, I had to go.

Three years later I returned to Negros. My first thought was of Lobo. I found that in my absence smallpox, cholera and malaria had wiped out its population, not a pagan soul remained, not one had turned Christian.