

THE CROCODILES OF TUBIGAN

BY GEORGE BALLARD BOWERS

TRIBAL hatreds in the Philippines frequently culminate in feuds with arson and murders, as it happened in Samar ten years ago while I commanded the local garrisons there. The incident concerns Tubigan, that ancient village of a hundred souls, perched high on the bluff overlooking the Sulat river where it empties into the Pacific.

Ten years before a party of Tagalog fisher-folk had found the waters of the Samar coast such an excellent fishing ground that then, and there, they decided to locate permanently, selecting for their future home the flat across the river from Tubigan. The natives resented the presence of the newcomers for two reasons, their tribe and occupation; the Samar people were Visayans and farmers, the new arrivals, Tagalogs and fishermen, whose thrift created jealousy.

But there arose a more serious cause of trouble—the crocodiles: the Tagalogs had hardly established their homes before the river fairly swarmed with them. The fisher folk accustomed to dangerous water creatures, built fences and barricades in the river where they bathed, or filled their water jars, in safety. No Tagalog ever fell prey to the huge reptiles always waiting for fish culls from the catch, or to act as scavengers along the river.

Sometimes the weather kept the fishing boats in for weeks, then hunger drove the crocodiles to the nearest food supply, the pigs, goats and dogs of the Visayan farmers, that came down to the river to drink, that supply failing, the women and children carelessly bathing or washing on the bamboo rafts.

Each year, during the period of coastal storms, numerous pigs, goats and dogs, and several Visayans, fell prey to the crocodiles, a condition said not to have existed prior to the arrival of the Tagalogs; the crocodiles, in the meantime, had become accustomed to

feeding at Tubigan instead of hunting far up the river in the holes abounding in fish.

When I went to Samar I found a report from the garrison nearest Tubigan giving the details of two recent raids, and of a third brewing. The Visayan farmers had killed three Tagalogs and burned a number of their houses, while the Tagalogs had retaliated with an equal number of assassinations, and only awaited an opportunity to even up the arson score. Soon after, as if to aggravate the situation, a crocodile caught and devoured the small son of the Visayan headman.

The destruction of the crocodiles, the real cause of the trouble, would appear to be the most simple solution. While that method might be acceptable to the average American mind, it is not so reasonable to the peasant Filipino, that was made plain to me when I failed to prevent a third raid after I had personally intervened to forestall it. To avoid another was the problem for me to solve.

I notified Lieutenant Bruner, commanding the garrison nearest Tubigan, to arrange for a joint conference with the warring factions that we might put an end to the feud that had kept that part of the coast in a turmoil for years. The conference did not prove successful in any particular, only one faction appeared, the Visayan farmers. Their spokesman stated their viewpoint briefly:

"Senor, mi commandante," he began, addressing me in his sonorous dialect, "before the hated fisher folk came we rarely saw a crocodile near our village. While many lived far upstream, they never molested us as do those now living at the foot of the bluff."

"Why should these be more ferocious than those upstream?" The man hesitated before answering my question.

"Because those of which I spoke came with the Tagalogs, they harbor the souls of their ancestors, evil spirits, hating Visayans." His tone betrayed a note of surprise, surprised that I had displayed ignorance of that which he considered a fact of common knowledge.

"Kill them," I suggested.

"Kill them? Kill them?" he appeared horrified. "Surely, thou knowest that man can not war upon the spirits, be they good or evil, that against the spirits men have no defense? Spirits can not be killed."

"What, then, dost thou suggest?"

"Mi commandante, we ask that the Tagalogs be moved away from here, with them will go their ancestral spirits that inhabit the crocodiles."

"But I shall have the crocodiles killed; I shall set my soldiers to destroy them." I was becoming exasperated. The speeches appeared to be silly.

"No, no, that must not be. My people will, in the end, be made to pay. Please do not carry out your plan." Then, as reminding me of some fact admitted, he went on, "The spirits know all. They would know that thou hadst ordered the slaying for us. You would only compel the spirits to transfer to new bodies, that would anger them the more."

His speech was amazing, it left no opening for a reply.

Lieutenant Bruner smiled, self-satisfied:

"Now, sir, you see what I have been up against. The man is sincere and believed every word he uttered."

"Let's kill the crocodiles notwithstanding."

"No, sir, I doubt the wisdom of that. You might provoke an uprising. We must find some other way out."

"Why not see the Tagalogs?"

"I fear that would be a waste of time, sir. I sounded them out sometime ago. Yes, after second consideration, I think it would be better to see them, after that, I shall offer a plan."

The conference with the Tagalog headman brought us no nearer a solution than before. To every question I put to him he had the same reply, a shrug and *Quien sabe?* Who knows?

"Lieutenant Bruner, I'm through. What's the plan?"

"I left my plan under guard near the beach, sir. It's to be a surprise."

I did not urge him to reveal his secret. It was after four o'clock, so we took a boroto a mile down the river where we had left our camp luggage. While a servant prepared supper the lieutenant went back to the villages. He returned to camp after an hour, his face bore a broad smile. I felt that he wanted me to inquire the cause of his good humor. I did.

"I went back there to tell those people that you had ordered me to arrest every man who had ever participated in a raid, that tonight would be the big night."

"Did they believe you?"

"Certainly."

"Anyway there will not be a person in either village tonight. They've gone before now."

"That's just why I told 'em." He was laughing heartily.

I resented both his manner and the air of secrecy. I felt that

he was trying to "rub it in." I had failed, I knew. I didn't know Bruner very well so I decided to feign a little interest, a trifle more than matter of fact, enough to be polite.

Finally, Bruner announced that it was time to start. The night was as dark as a dungeon. During our wait for nightfall, he had procured a large canoe which he had manned with four soldiers. In the bottom of the canoe I saw a box covered with an old rice sack. I wondered what it contained, the soldiers appeared to handle it so gingerly.

We reached the Tagalog village, not a soul could be found. As no sound came from the bluff, Bruner suggested that the Visayans, too, had decamped.

"Just as I had hoped," he muttered. "We're going to do business now. "He ordered the men to row to a bayou just beyond the fisher village. The bayou was the home of the crocodiles. We were able to determine its location by the bordering trees.

At the end of the bayou the lieutenant uncovered the box in the center of the craft, exposing a dozen two-quart coffee cans. This done he instructed the men to row back toward camp. We had gone but a few feet when he applied his cigarette to a fuse protruding from the coffee can and tossed the can into the muddy water behind us. There was a blurb and a column of water shot ten feet into the air, this was repeated five times in the bayou, the six cans left were dropped into the main stream at the foot of the bluff. We returned to camp to await the outgoing tide that, like a millrace, would soon hurry back to sea. By ebb-tide the moon had made the night as light as day, so clear that one could distinguish from the river bank, any floating object no larger than a hand.

Within an hour after the tide had started to ebb, the crocodiles of the bayou and river were going to sea, they floated out, their yellow bellies glinting in the moonlight, the depth-bombs had done their deadly work. The cause of the feud of Tubigan had been removed forever.