

A Tale of the Yule Tide

By WILL M. MAUPIN

CHRISTMAS IN THE JUNGLE

"Tis mighty little Oi love th' work," growled Private O'Brien as he savagely jabbed his knife into the can of embalmed beef with one hand and reached for his canteen with the other.

"O, g'wan with your everlasting' growlin', Terry," grunted Private Wilkins. "Did you think you were comin' on a Sunday school picnic?"

"I guess Oi knew phwat was comin' t' me when Oi enlisted," replied O'Brien, wiping the perspiration from his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt. "But little did Oi t'ink thot we'd be hikin' t'rough these blessed jungles at Chris'mas toime. Divle fly away wid th' little brown fellys thot keep pesterin' us so. Av it wasn't for them it's home we'd be this minnit, an' tomorrow th' blessed Chris'mus day."

Lieutenant Gilder, in charge of a squad of "hikers" in pursuit of some recalcitrant members of our assimilated brethren, was writing up his report while his men were hastily getting supper, and ever and anon he would stop and look away toward the east with a far-away look in his eyes. Hé, too, was thinking of home and Christmas joys, and he caught the conversation of his little command as it came floating towards him on the fever-laden air.

"Christmas eve and home ten thousand miles away," he muttered. "And the thermometer 100 in the shade when it isn't raining—and 150 then. Well, we're in for it, I guess."

The sun was rapidly nearing the western horizon, and Lieutenant Gilder hastily finished his report and prepared to take the usual precautions for the night. The supper was quickly finished, the guards posted, and in an instant almost the sun disappeared and the tropical night fell like a pall.

No fires were allowed, so the soldiers unrolled their blankets and lolled around upon the ground, talking in low tones and sending the clouds of pungent smoke curling upwards towards the stars that fairly seemed to shoot into sight as the sun dropped behind the horizon.

"Oi'm wonderin' if Santa could find me stockin' if Oi hung it on thot thorn beyant," remarked O'Brien with a grin, pointing lazily with his toe towards a nearby thornbush.

"He could that, if he isn't sufferin' from catarrah," retorted Billy Borden, the wag of the squad.

"If it wasn't ag'in th' rules Oi'd punch yer head for thot," said O'Brien. "Tis cruel of ye t' poke fun at th' fate that has carried me so many moiles in th' effort t' make peaceful citizens of me brown brothers."

"Not so loud boys," cautioned the lieutenant. "No telling where we are, or what may happen."

"Tis cruel hard t' be kept so excited on Christmas eve," whispered the irrepressible O'Brien. "Wid all th' rest of th' world at pace it seems a murtherin' shame we hev t' be itchin' t' shoot our felly min'."

"I'll bet the kids at home are just about hikin' out of bed to look in their stockin's," said Burkett, the bugler.

"O, study your geography," growled a comrade. "You've got your time on backwards."

"Well, I'm thinkin' of stockin's and hangin' them up, just the same," retorted Burkett.

"Oi'm not goin' t' snub Santa Claus, onyhow," said O'Brien, sitting up suddenly. "If so be he happens t' come t'rough this God-forsaken part of th' world he's goin' t' find Terence O'Brien makin' familiar wig-wag."

"What are you goin' t' do, Terry?" queried Riley, he of the corporal's stripes.

"Oi'm goin' t' hang me stockin' on thot same thorn, Oi am, an' I'll lick th' man thot laughs at it."

"Go ahead, Terry," said the lieutenant. "We'll all hang up our stockings. It will seem like home to do it, and maybe we can sleep better."

The whimsicality of the thing appealed to the lonesome and tired soldiers, and with subdued chucklings they dug down into the packs and brought out clean army socks. They hung them on thornbush and bramble, then after a few more pipefuls of tobacco they lay down quiet, dozing off into the first stages of tired sleep where visions of days gone by pass in review. It is not difficult to imagine what those soldier boys were dreaming about as they lay beneath the tropic sky ten thousand miles from home on a Christmas eve, with unknown dangers lurking all about. But at last their restless movings ceased, and the only sounds heard were those

of the sentries moving about and the call of the night birds in the jungle.

Private Calkins was just beginning to wonder when relief would come when he heard a rustling noise in the brake. He stopped instantly, brought his rifle forward and peered into the darkness.

"Hist!"

"What'n thunder's that?" ejaculated the startled sentry.

"Hist! I'm amigo," came a voice from the darkness.

"Then come out into the open, hands up," commanded Calkins, cocking his rifle and throwing the butt to his shoulder.

In response to his command a lithe figure walked out, hands up.

The figure stopped, just close enough for Calkins to see that it was a Filipino clad in a suit of soiled linen, hands aloft and a smile upon his face.

"What's your business, eh?" growled Calkins.

"I'm Captain Enrique Analdo," said the Filipino, speaking in purest English. "I would like to speak to the officer in command."

Calkins was puzzled. He didn't know exactly what to do—whether to arouse the camp, or whether to quiz his visitor a little further.

"I'm in command of the band that your band is pursuing," said Analdo. "But I want to arrange a truce for twenty-four hours. Take me to your commander."

"What's up, Calkins," queried the voice of Lieutenant Gilder.

"Please come here, lieutenant," replied Calkins. "Here's a little dago who says he's an officer in the Filipino army, and he wants to arrange a truce."

Lieutenant Gilder stepped forward and peered into the face of the stranger.

"Well, what is it?" he asked.

"I am Captain Analdo," said the visitor. "I command the detachment you are pursuing. I come with a flag of truce. Tomorrow is the Christ day, is it not? Why, then, should we be at war on the eve of that blessed day?"

"Why at all?" muttered the lieutenant to himself. Then aloud: "And you propose what?"

"Truce of twenty-four hours, commandant. See?"

The Filipino's fingers pointed, and following the direction Gilder could see the socks of his command waving against the starlit skyline.

"The blessed Christmas time," repeated the Filipino officer. "Let us observe it."

"But how?" asked Gilder.

"I will give a signal to one of my men who is near. He will join us. I will remain as a hostage in your camp while you go with him to my camp. There my men will give presents—fruit, tobacco, cigars, baskets, little things for Christmas. You come back and we put them in the stockings for your men. Tomorrow we eat together. At sunset we go. At midnight the truce ends. Then we fight if so it seems proper."

The little brown man's voice quivered with excitement.

"Well, this is a rum go," said Gilder. "But I guess I'll be safe if he remains here. If I don't get back in fifteen minutes, Calkins, arouse the camp. Captain Analdo, I accept your offer. But if anything happens to me what my men will do to you will be a plenty. Wait until I bring another man."

Calkins saluted, the Filipino officer sat down upon the ground and Gilder walked back and shook O'Brien by the shoulder.

"Wake up, O'Brien; but don't make a sound."

"Phwat's up," murmured the wide-awake soldier.

"Come and I'll show you."

O'Brien was quickly made familiar with the Filipino's proposition and with a grin remarked:

"Oi guess you don't take no chances, lieutenant. It wouldn't be healthy fr me little brown friend here t' let ony harm come t' yez."

"Your officer's life is safer now than it was an hour ago, sir," said Analdo, stiffly.

"Signal your man," said Gilder tersely.

The signal was given, and instantly another Filipino emerged from the brake, hands aloft.

"Jose, conduct the Americano to camp, and return with him in fifteen minutes. God be with you, sir." And Analdo gave a salute which the American officer returned.

"In fifteen minutes, Calkins," said Gilder. "If not—well, you know."

"Yes, sir."

"And God help me little friend here if it's more than fifteen," muttered O'Brien.

Gilder followed his guide into the brake, and it seemed only a rod or two ere he stepped into the midst of the Filipino camp. That it should be so near and yet remained undetected gave Gilder a wrench and he mentally swore at his stupidity. But he immediately saw that his visit was not unexpected. The brown soldiers stood at attention and saluted with precision as he strode into their midst. Scarcely a word was spoken, but in a few minutes Gilder and his guide were fairly loaded down with Christmas tokens. Then the two walked back until they met the sentry and the waiting O'Brien.

"Thank God, yez got back all roight," whispered the faithful Irishman. "Oi had me revolver at his head iv'ry minute of th' time yez was gone, sir."

The Filipino officer arose from the ground and in a low voice, said:

"Lieutenant Gilder, I wish you a merry Christmas. May I have the pleasure of dining with you tomorrow at 12?"

"If it can be arranged I shall be glad to have you, sir," said the astonished Gilder.

"Then, sir, at 12 I will meet you here. My men will follow me one at a time, depositing their arms on the edge of this clearing. We trust ourselves to you, sir. And we will bring our share of the Christmas dinner."

"Very well, sir. And a merry Christmas to you, Captain Analdo," said Lieutenant Gilder.

With a swift salute Analdo and his guide disappeared in the darkness. But Gilder redoubled sentries before he composed himself to sleep.

"It looks all straight, but it's almighty queer," he muttered.

"Let's fill th' socks before we sleep," whispered O'Brien.

And no sooner said that done.

"Hi, there, boys!" shouted Burkett about dawn. "Blast my eyes if old Santa didn't find his way into this bloomin' jungle!"

Instantly the camp was in an uproar. Caution was thrown to the winds and the men dived down into those army socks and brought out the little tokens with gasps of astonishment.

But all their queries were for naught. The three men who could have explained professed ignorance with the rest. And so the Christmas morning lengthened away towards noon. Gilder looked at his watch every little bit, and finally he heard Sentry Bowles shout:

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"A friend under a flag of truce," was the reply.

Lieutenant Gilder hastened to the sentry post, and there, clad in a suit of immaculate duck, stood Captain Analdo.

"A merry Christmas, Lieutenant Gilder."

"The same to you, Captain Analdo."

The arrangements were soon completed. Captain Analdo walked into camp, arm in arm with Lieutenant Gilder. And one at a time Analdo's men came forward, deposited his rifle and bolo in the growing heap at the foot of a tree, but carrying his little contribution to the dinner into the camp.

The Filipinos outnumbered the Americans almost two to one, but the latter posted a guard over the Filipino arms and were not afraid.

A half-hour later the queerest Christmas dinner in many a year was well under way.

"Your health, Lieutenant Gilder," said Captain Analdo, holding aloft a calabash full of strong coffee.

"The same to you, Captain Analdo," said Gilder, quaffing from his own calabash.

As the evening shadows lengthened Captain Analdo arose and said:

"It is time to go. The blessed Christmas is closing. Until midnight tonight, Lieutenant Gilder."

"Until midnight, Captain Analdo—and would to God it were forever."

"As God wills," whispered Analdo.

And with military salutes and with warm handclaps, the little brown men bade farewell to the stalwart American soldier boys and disappeared into the jungle from whence they came.

As the last figure disappeared from sight Private O'Brien spat upon the ground and exclaimed:

"Well, Oi be blowed!"