

A Story for These Times

Manuel E. Arguilla

When advancing Japanese troops entered the town of A—, just Christmas last year, Judge Pelagio Palileo was there to meet them. All the inhabitants of the town had fled, except Judge Palileo, who had remained behind with his family of six—his wife, a 17-year-old boy, a young daughter, the seven-year-old twins, both boys; and the youngest, a baby, one year and three months old.

His wife whose name was Consolacion, Cion for short, had nervously urged him to flee like all the other inhabitants of the town. She had become quite hysterical and screamed at him that they would all be killed. But Pelagio had grabbed her arm and given her a good shaking until she stopped screaming and only once in a while made a low, whimpering sound. Judge Palileo spoke to her, thrusting his face close to hers, and his mustache with its sprinkling of gray hair trembled as he spoke: “Be quiet, Cion; I know what I am doing. Be quiet. I tell you, or you’ll get something you’ll regret.” And Cion, his wife, had become quiet.

But when guns were fired at the outskirts of the town late in the afternoon and it was certain that the Japanese troops were near, Cion went to the bedroom and lay there wringing her hands, praying and wailing alternately, and promising her saints all kinds of promises if she and her children and her husband would only be spared. Once she pulled herself up and sat on the edge of the bed, her hair loose on her shoulders, strands of it falling down her face, so that she looked like a madwoman, and she struck the bed with her hand and declared that the first Japanese soldier she would see, she would brain with the wooden mallet that their maid used for beating clothes when she washed. This

maid had fled with the other inhabitants of the town, having refused to stay with Judge Palileo's family.

Having made her threat, Cion flung herself back in bed and buried her face in the pillow and made herself rigid, and strangling sounds escaped her throat. The 17-year-old son, whose name was Lucas, went in and sat by his mother and held her hand and tried to comfort her. Lucila, the young daughter, was with the twins and the baby in another room. Judge Palileo had commanded her not to close the door of the room and it was standing open. From the sala she could be seen with the children around her in the corner farthest from the door.

As for Judge Palileo, he went out of the house and stood by the gate under the bougainvillea vine. It was growing dark rapidly and as the Judge stood there, he made a dim blur that merged easily with the shadows by the gate. The house stood by the main highway that passed through the middle of the town; it was partly screened from the road by fruit trees and several betel-nut palms planted more for decorative purposes than otherwise.

The heavy tramp of marching men came to the Judge's ears. He looked back toward the house and saw that a light burned in the sala; it was probably the only light in all the houses of the town on that evening. The Judge did not remain by the gate; he left his post and returned to the house before the Japanese soldiers arrived. He knew the light in the house would attract their attention. So he waited for them in the sala. There was complete silence now in the house.

The gate creaked open; boots grated up the path to the front door. A strange, high-pitched voice called out sharply. Judge Palileo now approached the door and he held in his right hand a small Japanese flag. There was a word that he had prepared to say on this occasion and it was on the tip of his tongue to say it. He bowed and the word came out of his mouth: "Tomodati*," he said.

Heels clicked; a rapid flow of Japanese words that ended with a stiff, military bow came front the slight figure on the lowest door-step, wearing the olive-coloured uniform of an officer. Judge Palileo saw dimly the faces of soldiers behind the officer; the light from the sala glinted on the naked steel of their bayonets. Then the young officer was coming up the steps with a word over his shoulder to his men who saluted and stayed where they were.

The judge led him to the sala and offered him a seat but the young officer smiled—he had a very good-natured and charming smile, the Judge noted; and remained standing. He spoke in Japanese and the Judge had to shake his head

* *tomodachi* in modern Romanized spelling

and confess that he did not know the language; he spoke English and said that he knew a few Japanese words like *tomodati*; *sayonara*; and *mizu*. The young officer looked at him in some perplexity for he himself did not understand English; then he smiled his ready, good-natured smile and went to the door and shouted something into the darkness where the soldiers were, and by and by a Japanese in civilian clothes, with a dark, bristly mustache, came up into the sala. He bowed to the young officer who returned his bow and then spoke to him rapidly in Japanese, smiling and gesturing toward Judge Palileo.

Now and then the Japanese civilian sucked in his breath and said “Azuska” and nodded his head and Judge Palileo stood there with the Japanese flag in his hand. The interpreter told him that the officer meant no harm; he and his men were tired and hungry but they were going on through the town. They would like to stop for a short while to eat and get a drink of water. They had their own food with them but they needed water.

The interpreter spoke in English and many times stopped while he hunted in his mind for the word he needed to express what he wanted to say. He said, “Ver’ preased;” and “Ver’ thankfur,” but Judge Palileo had no trouble understanding him.

And so it was that in a little while the whole Palileo household was busy preparing dinner, for the Judge had insisted on having the young officer and his staff for guests while the men had their meal on the roadside and around the house; the garden faucet was placed at their disposal.

Lucas, the 17-year-old son of the Judge, left his mother’s side and was presented to the officer; he went out to the garden and a soldier stopped him and passed his hands over the boy’s packets to see if he had any weapons. Finding none, he grunted and brought out a package of cigarettes, took one for himself, then offered another to the boy. They lighted their cigarettes from the same match which the soldier struck.

As for the Judge’s wife, she went about the task of preparing dinner with the help of Lucila, the young daughter, in silent, nervous haste. Once a soldier stuck his head through the kitchen door and at the sight of the grinning, bearded face, the poor woman made a little frightened shriek, but she controlled herself and went on with what she was doing and very soon, the soldier withdrew.

It is not necessary to relate in detail the events of that evening. Dinner was served; the young officer insisted on everybody in the family sitting with him at table. He ate heartily, paying close attention to his eating, only once in a while lifting his head to send a glance at his host and to smile his charming and good-natured smile. Then the dinner was over; all stood up, the young

officer bowed, spoke a few words which the interpreter put into English, and Judge Palileo answered him warmly and the interpreter took up the Judge's words and translated them into Japanese, and the young officer nodded and smiled and extended his hand and Judge Palileo took it and they shook hands. The Judge pointed to himself with his free hand and said, "Tomodati—friend."

Before the officer left the house of the Judge, he wrote on a piece of paper some words in Japanese which he stamped with his personal stamp in red ink. The interpreter said that the paper would serve as protection from any molestation by Japanese soldiers. And so it did. Many troops passed through the town of A—, and Judge Palileo and his family were not once molested by them. Like a talisman, the piece of paper with the vertical rows of Japanese characters on it and on one corner in red ink the young officer's stamped signature inside a red circle,—this piece of paper afforded the Palileo family complete protection.

The fighting passed on to places farther inland and the town of A— was left pretty much to itself. Later a platoon of Japanese soldiers came to garrison the place; they stayed in the town presidencia. Slowly the people were coming back from the hills and returning to their homes. The town mayor, however, refused to come back to town; he and his family were reported hiding in a remote barrio far in the hills. He was said to have made the promise that so long as the war continued, so long as America had not given up the fight, he would never surrender to the Japanese military authorities. People spoke of him as young and lacking in practical wisdom; he was formerly a lawyer, having graduated from the state university with honors.

Judge Palileo was heard as saying, "Villanueva (for that was the mayor's name) is young and hot-headed; he is idealistic and not realistic. It is people like him who make trouble for others."

The townsfolk listened to the Judge; they observed that Japanese officers were often seen in his house. Brown-coloured automobiles were often parked on the road before the gate of Judge Palileo's dwelling. It was no surprise to the town when it was announced that the Judge had been appointed acting mayor, in the absence of the elected mayor.

As mayor, Judge Palileo also acted in his capacity as Justice of the Peace. One of the very first things that he did after assuming office was to sentence the leader of a gang of carabao thieves to be tied in the marketplace, exposed to the sun and to public ridicule for three whole days.

People came to town at daytime, but in the afternoon, before sunset, they stole back to the hills where they had built themselves shacks and lean-tos,

The Japanese Military authorities endeavored to persuade the people to return to their homes in the town and to resume their normal activities. A unit of the Japanese Propaganda Corps stayed in the town for two days, distributed candy to the children and cigarettes to the men. A movie was shown in the town theatre to which the public was invited and Tagalog speakers explained the benevolent aims of the Japanese. Imperial Forces urged the people to cooperate in promoting the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere plan. Judge Palileo entertained the members of the Propaganda Unit at his house and spoke of his meeting the Japanese soldiers and their officer when they entered the town in December.

One result of the Propaganda Unit's stay in the town was that soon afterward, the garrison of Japanese soldiers was removed. In consequence, more people came down from their hiding places in the hills and returned to their homes in the town. Judge Palileo was congratulating himself that conditions in the town of A— were fast becoming normal.

But he reckoned without the former town mayor, the one named Villanueva, who when last heard from was hiding in a remote barrio among the hills. This person gathered around himself former soldiers in the Usaffe who were scattered by the advancing Japanese troops in December, and formed a guerilla band. Many rumors about this band filtered into town among the people, causing no end of speculation, excitement and uncertainty. It was even said that members of the band freely entered the town at daytime, dressed as ordinary civilians.

Judge Palileo scouted these rumors and redoubled his efforts to encourage the people to take up the normal pursuits and restore peace and order. The police force was reorganized; the brother-in-law of Judge Palileo became the chief of police and the provincial commander of the Japanese Military Forces gave him permission to carry a revolver. Judge Palileo was also given the privilege to carry a revolver, but unaccustomed to handling arms of any sort, the Judge often left the weapon in his house. Consolacion, his wife, having gotten over her fears of the Japanese, was now in daily fear of the guerilleros and she constantly nagged the Judge about carrying his revolver all the time that he was out of the house.

But the Judge continued to do as he pleased. "I don't feel comfortable with the thing around my hips," he told his wife. "Besides, I don't know enough about revolvers to be able to use one in self-defense. And then I don't want to give the impression that I am in any sort of danger. Don't you see I am trying to win the confidence of the people? If I don't show confidence myself, how can I inspire confidence in others?"

To which his wife answered, "All I know is that I have heard that there are some people who have bad intentions toward you. No one is sage these days. We never know from what side danger will appear."

Judge Palileo laughed at her fears, although he couldn't hide from himself the fact that he felt a little tremor of apprehension as a result of his wife's words. But he told himself that he was perfectly safe; and so he walked through the streets of the town with his inseparable cane, but rarely with his gun. And one noon, as he was returning home from the town presidencia, a man on a bicycle rode up from behind the Judge and slashed at him with a bolo. The Judge fell in a heap on the roadside. His wound was serious but not mortal; he was immediately rushed to the provincial hospital where he was given the best medical attention available, and soon afterward he was quite well again, but he never went around any more without his gun.

As for the man on the bicycle, he was recognized as the leader of the gang of carabao thieves whom the Judge had punished. Three days after his attack on Judge Palileo, he was caught by Japanese soldiers and constabulary men and put to death.

And this was how Judge Pelagio Palileo, after all the fine things that he had done, almost met his death at the hands of a misguided assailant. What a sad thing to happen!

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