

ALEXANDER BLACKBURN

In the Country of the Blind

JUST SHY OF MY FIFTEENTH BIRTHDAY THAT FALL OF 1904, I hadn't kissed a girl or killed anybody yet. I was grown up enough, though, to be Kill Devil Dare's buddy a mile underground in the St. Mabyn's coal mine near Los Tristes, Colorado. Also, being a devotee of history and literature — hence I had had few friends among girls or boys when I was in school in Colorado Springs — I was not your stereotypical western rube. If I do say so. Just a smart aleck. Take the name, Los Tristes. It is derived from *la puerta de los tristes*, meaning “The Door of the Sad People”. Once upon a time in the 1540s a Spanish conquistador gave this name to the whole region because, finding plenty of human folly but no gold in it, he was sad as a gray-eyed woman. Or take Kill Devil's name. The real name was Kyle Deville Dare. Because he had played football in college in the 1890s, his teammates changed Kyle Deville to Kill Devil. It was the custom in those days to tag footballers with hero-sounding names. After all, who would remember Iron Lung McClung or Pudge Hefflefinger of Yale by other names? Although he didn't go by the nickname, once I broke the habit of calling him Captain Dare or Mr. Dare I named him—to myself, though seldom to his face—Kill Devil. He never bragged about his football exploits, and he hoped no one would think he was a hero or a Hellfire Methodist. As for me, Rountree Penhallow, Junior, my name stuck out like a horse turd in a pan of milk. I go by Tree.

When I first met Kill Devil in late summer of 1903, I was thirteen and he about thirty-five, recently discharged as an officer in the U.S. Army. If he had been a

coalminer all his life, which he hadn't been, he might have seemed much older, given the fact that a miner in those days would start out as a breaker boy aged about ten and end up unable to walk or breathe by the age of forty. Anyway, in 1904 the physical labor involved in mining was doing him good. He had come back from the Philippines War looking a bit peaky from effects of malaria. Now, a year later, you would think he belonged to the pits. His body had been molded by low tunnels and by pick-and-sledge undercutting work at the face of a drift. His shoulders and arms had thickened with overlapping muscles. Of course he still retained a natural air of command, like a king's. When we were paired in a room underground, nobody dared bunch in our corral or tried to prevent us from keeping an even turn. Amazingly, checkweighmen, notorious for cheating miners in order to increase corporation profits at the scales, exhibited deference to Kill Devil. A ton of coal from one of our cars got weighed-in at exactly a ton instead of a measly 1800 pounds. As a result we each of us made three dollars or more a day at a time when two dollars alone felt like you had \$2000 in your pocket.

We met, then, in late summer of 1903. We were introduced by Murdersome Honeyhumper, Dr. Rountree Penhallow, himself, Daddy. The brief introduction took place at the front door of our two-story clapboard house in Colorado Springs, elevation about 6,000 feet at the base of Pikes Peak, elevation about 14,000 feet. The city's reputation was also elevated because patients with or only suspected of having phthisis, or tuberculosis, or TB, came there to be treated at the Sun Palace Sanatorium, for which Daddy was Director. In my opinion, he knew as much about curing the disease as he did about branding mosquitoes. While Kill Devil of Los Tristes, south of Colorado Springs, was in the Philippines, his wife, Pia Immaculada, was being treated for TB in both places by Daddy. Sometimes, upstairs in my bedroom, Daddy's clinic being on the floor below, when Pia was being treated there — and Mum was out shopping — I overheard jubilant screams and moans which did not seem to be caused by the customary prick.

The Springs in those days was known as Little London. I guess it was because English capitalists had invested in its future as a resort and also invested in the gold mines of nearby Cripple Creek. When I was growing up, anyone of English birth with an English demeanor however frosty and an English accent however fruity was regarded by the local rustics as cut from cloth of superior rank, class, wit, and education. The lowest scoundrel in London was in Little London a gentleman, one too far up in the clouds for ordinary folk to have truck with. Of this ilk was Murdersome Honeyhumper. Upon Kill Devil's return from war to his ranch in Los Tristes, Daddy suddenly pronounced Pia cured of TB, whereupon

Kill Devil with Pia took the train north, stopped at our house, and expressed his gratitude in person. I was curious to see what a cuckold looked like. I be dog, he was handsome. So I happened to be at the front door as the Dares were bidding Daddy farewell. And he said with his royal hand on my head, "This is my only begotten son, Rountree, and Rountree, this is Captain Dare, one of our brave fighting boys back from the Philippines. I'll wager, sir, you taught the little devils a thing or two! Cheerio!" Clenching my teeth, I shook Kill Devil's hand. I murmured, "I go by Tree." He squeezed my hand man-to-man like and sent me a penetrating look to show that he felt what I felt, horrible embarrassment from having such a stupid father. He adopted my pain as his own. Right smart, my fealty was to Kill Devil. In case I haven't made myself clear, Dr. Rountree Penhallow of London and Little London didn't have enough common sense to pour piss out of a pot.

Just before I met Kill Devil the second time, there were forces down on me and him. Now I'm in the fall of 1903. First, dropped testicles had a go at me. With a bad case of puberty, at first I believed it must be rheumatism. I consulted one of Daddy's books, not realizing it was about folk medicine. I applied a boiled mixture of camphor and lard to my affected body-part. Then figuring I had the galloping itch, I applied to said body-part a cocktail of mustard, sheep manure, and skunk oil and had a hard-on that refused to go down for an hour. Finally, after beheading a baby rattlesnake with a garden hoe and putting it in a jar of Daddy's Scotch whiskey, I figured third-time lucky. I drank the whiskey and had, miraculously, a wet dream. This shot on the solid, however, produced dead work of lonesomeness. Nature, so swoonderful one second and so dragglepooped the next, was down on me. Second, Daddy had my Mum locked up in the Sun Palace. For years he'd been trying to convince her to die of TB. When she didn't do it because she didn't *have* TB, he put her in a place where the bacilli were sure to bump her off. Then Lieutenant Fredson Shiflit of the Colorado National Guard almost got me bumped off, too. I had gone to Cripple Creek to observe the militia as it trampled the rights of hard-rock miners on strike there, whereupon Shiflit arrested me, tortured me with a mock-execution by firing squad, and had me kidnapped by Pinkerton finks who pistol-whipped me and threw me out of a moving freight train in the middle of the Great American Desert. I was left to be easy meat for coyotes and mountain lions. I be dog, along comes Kill Devil to the rescue. One of the first things he said to me was a Spanish proverb, "In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king." He was alluding to a one-eyed miner, a rebel who in spite of being kangarooed and deported in his struggle against government-supported corporations, personified humanity. Kill Devil took me to his ranch in Los Tristes, expecting to have Pia,

there, nurse me back to health. Instead, we were met by Pia, Daddy, Shiftit and armed milish. For the first time Kill Devil, poor guy, realized he was wearing horns. Not only that, but Pia evicted him from his own ranch, threatening to have him jailed as a homosexual. Well, any appearances to the contrary, Kill Devil wasn't a pansy, and I wasn't a pansy, and anybody who thought or said otherwise was full of bull feathers. As for me, Daddy had come from the Springs prepared with absurd allegations, one that I wasn't his legitimate son, two, that I had raped Scampy, the daughter of a New York millionaire who owned Sun Palace Sanitorium. True, Scampy and I *had* held hands. Daddy banished me from home and forbade me to visit Mum. If I tried to visit Mum—or get any of her money—Shiftit would have me kangarooed, or worse. But this story is about me and Kill Dare.

We're talking 1904 now, the day in the St. Mabyn's mine. Even though I was only a fourteen-year-old pariah of the boondocks, now and then I could grab a-hold of intelligent speech. I even had most of the cusswords down pat, though I seldom used them except when I was talking to myself or describing the human race. Or Daddy.

In thick blackness our pit-lamps burned with brilliant white light. By the time we had put in the first six of our twelve hours picking and mucking, we were hungry and thirsty. Up at the workface Kill Devil had finished the hard, skilled job, lying on his side and swinging his pick forty times a minute to undercut the seam. Me, I had the easy jobs. Growth stalled temporarily at five-foot-two, I could stand up under the roof of rock. With my No. 2 banjo mucker, I had loaded yesterday's blasted-out coal on to the cars, filling middles with slack, chunking up along the car-walls with large lumps. While Kill Devil got ready for a shot in the afternoon, I did some of the dead work, collecting timbers and wedges and preparing bottom for brushing so as to lower tracks for Cuddy, the mule. In fact, just before lunch Cuddy came into our room, dragging his chain and whickering with joy at sight of me. His driver, Andy, a boy younger than I, got the cars connected while Cuddy butted me with his muzzle and munched the apple I gave him. Where he rubbed roof on his way through miles of tunnels to the cage, he had leather pads to protect the hide, but these were wearing out. I wanted to give Andy "what-fer" for neglecting to repair the pads. As Andy drove Cuddy out of our room on the long journey to the cage, to the checkweighman, to the tipple and to the train that would take our coal to the benighted cities of the world, Andy's flickering light was sucked into utter darkness. All that could be seen by the light of our pit-lamps was a cloud of coppery-smelling dust, an installment on any coalminer's death-plan: black lung. Kill Devil in his canvas pit pants, blackened face with white-encircled eyes like a

raccoon's, sweat steaming from his naked torso, looked , as usual, like he could use a bath. I must have looked the same to him. We went and fetched the water buckets we had hung on props and the lunch pails which were where rats couldn't get to them, then crawled to a pillar-room where roof was twenty-foot high. I drank my water slowly, relishing each swallow. It was fresh and ice-cold and tasted so much like happiness that I wished I could run the mile out of the room to the cage and up the cage and into the sunlight and roll on warm earth like a puppy. We dug black hands into our lunch pails. As usual, our boarding lady Doña Luz had packed each of them with two meat sandwiches, a slice of fruit pie, and an apple (this last being what I would save for Cuddy the next day). We ate and were quiet for a while.

We began to hear rats scurrying in the gob to feast on spilled oats and refuse. We also began to hear what the old-timers call "working" of the roof. It made a constant rippling sound like that of mountain water over pebbles; the romantic noise graduated to a crackling and rolling like thunder. If the roof were going to collapse, the rats would already have abandoned their gourmet dinner of dung, would already have skedaddled from their manger accommodations, out of the mine and maybe hell-and-gone out of the Door of the Sad People. It was good to know our rats were as happy as bedbugs in Bethlehem. Our roof had not yet decided to crush us into hamburger. The thing we had to fear was silence. In a mine it induces panic.

Maybe that's why Kill Devil stood up, stretched his limbs, and began to tell me the story of his adventures in Cuba and on the island of Samar in the Philippines—and to give me the portrait of Lieutenant Fredson Shiflit as if I didn't already know that Shiflit had an unhealed, unstitched, raw gunshot wound on his cheek and a perverse look in his eyes. Having encountered Shiflit twice, once in Cripple Creek and once in Los Tristes, I knew that any soul who met him in a dark alley would be terrified and that anyone foolish enough to mess with him was sticking his nose in the wrong pie. What I didn't know was that Shiflit had a purchase, albeit an itty-bitty one, on being a hail-fellow and God-fearing Christian. To accelerate the end of the world, Teddy Roosevelt might could summon him to Washington to preside over the Department of Good and Evil.

American soldiers had been massacred in the village of Bagapundan on the island of Samar. In retaliation for this defeat, soldiers under Kill Devil's command had been sent to Bagapundan. Lieutenant Shiflit, second in command and pretending to act on orders from Kill Devil, had eighteen natives executed by firing squad. When American newspapers learned of the atrocity, Kill Devil, in Manila, was

blamed for it by Shiftit. Kill Devil faced the prospect of a court-martial. Had he been found guilty, he could have been executed, possibly by a firing squad—a real one. That in summary was the story. It was not, however, the whole story, all blacks and whites as in a coalmine, nor is it the only story, for Kill Devil, one, was trying to find his way back to humanity, and, two, a tentative and painfully shy relationship was becoming realized between us: the son and father bit.

From their years together during the Cuban revolution, Kill Devil had come to rely upon Shiftit as a fearless warrior and trustworthy subordinate. He was stunned when Shiftit usurped his command, had eighteen innocent boys executed, and then testified at the pre-trial inquiry that he had reluctantly acted upon Kill Devil's orders. Because the atrocity had come to the attention of "anti-imperialist" newspapers in the States—Kill Devil portrayed in them as THE BUTCHER OF BAGAPUNDAN—officers at the inquiry were more concerned about a scandal than they were about the facts. For, as a matter of fact, Kill Devil had been for several days prior to the attack on Bagapundan quite incapable of exercising his authority in any form whatsoever. He was deathly sick and practically unconscious from the effects of malaria and pneumonia. The officers seemed to discount this inconvenient fact as a hindrance to the necessity of making him a scapegoat. According to Kill Devil's narrative, as told to me in the mine, "My commanders were ill-educated veterans of the Indian wars, their own hands not unbloodied at massacres of innocents and their minds so inhospitable to reason that they could easily have been persuaded to believe that babies are found in hollow stumps, laid by a buzzard, and hatched by the sun."

Although he was a rebel by nature, he still was loyal and obedient to authority as long as it didn't offend those on whose behalf he rebelled. Even though officers of the committee of inquiry had already decided that he was twisted as a plug of tobacco, he expected them to acquit him of all charges. Shiftit had usurped his military authority, and not for the first time, so Shiftit was the one who should have been under investigation.

"My first mistake," Kill Devil said, "was to use the word *usurped*. Anyone who has ever read Shakespeare understands the word and the evil which can be unleashed upon the world when the authority of a properly constituted monarch is taken over by a blindly envious or blindly ambitious subordinate. I mentioned this Shakespearean idea of order to the committee. There was, unfortunately, a member of it whose head had been permanently lodged up his tail since the Civil War. This elderly gentleman from the South thought that Shake Spear was a Lakota war chief. He interrupted my testimony to ask, 'Would the Cap'n, suh, kindly explain what

you syrup'd has got to do with a hill of beans? Is you sayin' that Loo-tenant Shitless done been in charge of *mo*-lasses? Yo argyment gets wusser and wusser.' Well, the old boy was right: I made my argument worse than it was when I mentioned the black butterfly.'

"It was like this. Three days before our company reached Bagapundan, I watched a black butterfly alight on my left hand. Delirious, I decided the best way to rid myself of this sign of bad luck was to shoot it — and my hand — off. I restrained myself in the nick. And suddenly I seemed to hear from out of the jungle the terrifyingly primal, spine-tingling bugling of conch shells. In reality, this sound often announces an enemy's attack. I felt as certain that I had heard it as if I were to inform you, right now in this pit, that I can see the moon rising. In other words, I had gone bugs. The officers didn't believe me. I can't say that I blame them. The insanity plea usually falls on deaf ears."

Early in 1902 a company of officers and men arrived in Bagapundan from Manila, a journey of 500 miles by boat, having been lured there by *insurrectos*, Filipinos hostile to the American occupation. That company was bushwhacked and slaughtered, only a handful of survivors left to tell the story. The newspapers in the States, comparing this defeat to that of Little Big Horn, demanded payback. Because Kill Devil's company of fifty infantrymen was bivouacked in a village just thirty miles up the coast from Bagapundan, he was sent orders to re-take Bagapundan, orders in the form of a telegram from his CO in Manila.

Kill Devil, though feverish with malaria, prepared for the assault. Fair-complexioned prostitutes were placed off-limits. The sergeants were sobered up. In need of supply-carriers, Kill Devil hired eighteen young native boys for the job and paid their families ten dollars in advance as warranty for their safety. These boys were no sooner in camp than Shiflit and others began to call them "Goo-goos," a term used by Americans throughout the Philippines to refer to native peoples. Kill Devil addressed this matter by gathering the company together on parade and warning of the consequences of showing disrespect. But this effort on behalf of humanity in warfare was, as he knew it would be, doomed to failure. On the eve of departure for the assault he sent a telegram to his CO requesting that a Navy vessel steam for Bagapundan to relieve the company after the attack.

He personally doubted its success. For one thing, the *insurrectos* in Bagapundan probably outnumbered his men by a large margin. For another thing, the *insurrectos* would have captured arms and ammunition from the massacred soldiers of the garrison. The usual American superiority whereby .30 caliber bolt-action Krag-Jorgensens were pitted against spears and the long knives called *bolos*

would in that event be lost. Shiflit, for example, had already been shot in the face by a Krag in an earlier engagement. Kill Devil sat down with Shiflit to devise a strategy for the attack. In his opinion, the company would have to spring a surprise in order to overcome slim odds. He favored a five-day forced march through thick jungle. Shiflit favored a simple route along the seacoast. To Kill Devil, that plan was reckless. Natives offshore in the outriggers called *bancas* would spot the company on the beaches and warn the insurrectos in Bagapundan of the imminent attack.

Having ruled against Shiflit's plan, Kill Devil began to study a map. Happening to glance up from it, he saw contempt and loathing in Shiflit's gaze, enough to make him wonder whether the real subhuman goo-goo lurked, masked, in every soul, including his own.

He became very ill on the first day of the march. Matters were slipping beyond his control. Food supplies, for instance, were mysteriously disappearing. What was left of them would not last for another four days. That night he had the supplies stored in his tent. According to his inventory at dawn, some of these supplies had also been pilfered.

The second day of the march was that of the black butterfly. The company had been snaking along beneath enormous ferns and towering dipterocarp trees, fording swollen rivers, being relentlessly tormented by mosquitoes and leeches, the latter lying in wait on leaves in order to latch on to soldiers and suck their blood. Kill Devil called halts. During the first halt he ordered his sergeants to put salt in all canteens of water as a precaution against heat exhaustion. He called another halt just to empty his pockets and take inventory of quinine tablets, a snotrag, the CO's telegram and a watch, this a gift from Dr. Darwin Dare, his father who had been a physician in France before raising cattle and a motherless son in Los Tristes. Watch in hand, he lifted burning gaze to the sky and saw fluttering down "from a patch of clear blue sky barely big enough to make a Dutchman a pair of pants" a black butterfly. It settled on the watch. Studying the butterfly in hypnotic horror, he slipped from its holster his Colt .45 caliber double-action revolver, aimed it unsteadily at the butterfly, and proceeded to squeeze the trigger. Sweating profusely and somehow managing to relax his trigger finger, he returned the revolver to the holster and rationalized his inaction on the basis that the stump of his hand would have been almost instantly covered with flies and leeches.

"The watch, itself," Kill Devil said, "must have been the restraining influence. It had come to me from a father whom I adored. I know, I know, I'm no Tacitus, the

one who eulogized the virtues of his father-in-law Agricola, but for all my dark encounters I don't have a blind antipathy to virtue."

Angered by Dr. Dare's sudden death, Kill Devil had swerved from the promise of a college education and the inheritance of a prospering ranch in order to prove that honor could be passed from one generation to the next. He wanted to put himself on trial. He wanted to interrogate himself before the possibly foul tribunal of his soul. He became a soldier.

He had lifted the watch toward his lips and gently blown the black butterfly away. He thought he heard the bugling of conch shells.

Kill Devil gestured to the roof of the mine as if to mock himself. "If you believe you are in the vanguard of progressive evolution, you would do well to listen to the sound of conch shells from time to time. It resonates within and conspires against your presumption of humanness. . . The sound which I thought I was hearing ceased abruptly as if slashed by an invisible bolo. I was on the verge of forming my men into skirmish lines against an enemy attack—which was not forthcoming because I was imagining things. I had none the less become acquainted with the sound of the conch shells on a recent occasion. We were attacking the rebel leader's stronghold in the mountains of Samar. . . ."

Kill Devil's voice trailed off. He bit into his apple, threw the core to the floor where it raised coal dust. Strange, until that moment I had not realized how distressed he felt, how impelled he was in telling his story. It seemed to be coming to him in pieces, time sequences mixed, some details overlapping as he quarried out memories which had been lurking heretofore beneath the surface of consciousness.

He cleared throat. "After we captured the rebel leader's stronghold, Shiflit ordered the execution of some old folks and little brown children. Should I have had him arrested on the spot? My orders were to take no prisoners. He had usurped my authority for the first time, but how could I hold him responsible for doing his duty?"

At the hearing before the committee of officers who were deciding whether to have him court-martialed, Kill Devil admitted to feeling no great fondness for the natives. Still, because they had been enslaved for centuries under Spanish rule, he not only sympathized with their rebellion but also considered them allies rather than insurrectionists. We were, after all, occupying their country. But he had no sympathy for the perpetrators of the Bagapundan massacre. Its participants, if judged to be inimical to American interests in a criminal manner, must, he believed, be brought to justice. For those guilty of pilfering rations, as he suspected the supply-carriers of being, some form of punishment would have to

be applied, perhaps docking of wages, once the mission to Bagapundan had been accomplished. Shiftit's execution of the carriers on suspicion of pilfering could not in any circumstances be justified.

"My guess was this: the officers of the committee thought it was pretty bully to exterminate Goo-goos. . . We are the good guys. The evil we might do to the bad guys is divinely sanctioned. Evil, therefore, is good. . . I've seen my men yelling and firing and charging at 'Goo-goos' as if they were jack rabbits. So what if we *were* occupying their homeland? Why weren't the dirty little buggers settled on reservations?"

Kill Devil came and squatted on his haunches beside me. "Listen," he said in quiet voice. "Your father has rejected and banished you, his legitimate son, for something, as he well knows, you didn't do and wouldn't dream of doing. Our situations are to some extent similar. But I have nightmares about what I have actually done in the line of duty and about what was done by Shiftit in my name, though I never gave him authorization. I allowed myself to come under his spell."

"He *was* a hero. Our men detested him but believed him to be a kind of instrument of God's wrath. For instance. . . during one engagement a giant aboriginal caught Shiftit off-guard, disarmed him and was about to decapitate him when Shiftit picked up a bolo which lay next to a dead insurrecto and plunged it into the giant's stomach to come out the back. This is the 'hero' who had the supply-carriers murdered. This is the 'hero' who had old folks and little brown children murdered. This is the 'hero' who tortured natives with what is called the 'water cure' whereby a victim is filled with water until his stomach is about to burst. . . Did I pretend to myself that his behavior was not my problem? Did I chalk it all up to the crutch goddess — human law, necessity, expedience, fate, destiny, whatever you choose to call her when you're trying to put your nightmares to rest and redeem your honor?"

Kill Devil fell silent again. I already knew about some of his nightmares. Invisibly inscribed on black walls they passed before my eyes in a matter of seconds... *swarming bands of insurrectos howling and brandishing bolos as they leap out of concealment in the jungle. . . Krags put to work. . . Bodies piling up like puddles of suddenly melting snowmen. . . The half-Chinese, half-Tagalog mestizos are clothed for combat in white pajama-like shirts, white cotton pants. . . Aborigines have long matted hair made glossy with animal fat. Aborigines wear antings antings, amulets of pottery shards and boar's teeth, in order to become invincible. . . Mestizos and aborigines have eyes as wild and glittering as those of dogs when the moon breaks through clouds. . . Kill Devil empties his revolver again and again. . . Bodies melt again and again, bolos clattering around them. . .*

“Fredson Shiftit,” Kill Devil resumed, “had you tortured and kidnapped, Tree, on impulse but also because, in addition to his duties with the Colorado National Guard as a strikebreaker in Cripple Creek, he draws extra pay from the corporations as a spy—a ‘suck’, they call it—and serves your father as a security guard. . . In Cuba he hurled himself into every fray. He had horses shot out from under him. Later, in California, he sought me out as an old friend, had himself assigned to my command. He was. . . valorous. And unfit to be flea-catcher in a prairie dog town. He thought he perceived in me a person who secretly shared his idolization of brute instinct. Accordingly, he expected me to recommend him up through channels of command for medals, promotions, political office. . . whatever. . . but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. For that, he loathes my guts. Am I giving myself credit for consciousness? Perhaps. Perhaps I never lost it completely. . .”

“Our so-called enemies wore pajamas, loincloths, sarongs. We wore floppy campaign hats, khaki trousers tucked into canvas leggings, heavy blue wool shirts. When in the 110-degree tropics, we Americans dress for the Arctic. . . We carried ditty bags, blanket rolls, Krag, double web belts with 200 rifle shells. We ate hardtack, bully beef, canned bacon and black coffee. Our enemies traveled light. They ate a rough rice, *palay*, a sweet potato, *camote*, and any fish, chicken, goat, pig or carabao they could come across. . . They are short of stature, tend to lose teeth, suffer from chronic malaria and gamble an entire livelihood on cockfights, while we have advantages of science, soil, and climate. . . and yet isn’t it odd how much alike we are? Filipinos love their lands and families as we do. There is, however, a profound difference between us: to the myths we live by we are blind, and we go into the depths of darkness without real pit-lamps. . . as if God is made in our image, sort of pasty-faced with a smirk. . . as if we are commanded to multiply and subdue until there’s nothing left to subdue. . . We blame the poor and the hopeless for lack of virtue. By this measure the only virtuous Americans must display white picket fences and marble-topped tables and Jenny Lind beds and rosewood dressers with swinging mirrors and large square pianos and bathtubs with clawed feet and a ton of Bibles, seldom read, rarely understood. We go to war for the sake of what our leaders call ‘Anglo-Saxon progress and decency’—meaning what?”

“You asking me, Mr. Dare?” I suspected his ranting was bull feathers.

“I’m asking you, Mr. Rountree Penhallow, Junior.”

“No fair,” I said.

“Bathtubs.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“I shit you not.” Kill Devil was half-laughing. “Anglo-Saxon progress and decency, the phrase, means imperial conquest and subsequent sales to the vanquished. . . of our bathtubs.”

He had no family except for Pia Immaculada. Me, I had living parents but was homeless. We lived with several other miners as boarders in the house of Doña Luz outside Los Tristes and close to the St. Mabyñ’s. For some reason, complete strangers would take one look at me and get the itch to talk stories, not realizing I have a low tolerance for bores, bullies, do-gooders and people who know all the answers. Kill Devil, who was none of these, was for me good people. He hadn’t rushed to talk his story. Being a bookworm, I could usually cotton on to what he was saying. If he said something which had me stumped, I’d break a trail to the new Carnegie Library in Los Tristes and swat up the necessary in dictionaries and encyclopedias. What it was, was love. I loved Kill Devil.

“I put my father’s watch in my pocket,” Kill Devil said, rising and pacing again in the mine, picking up the story where he had left it on the trail to Bagapundan. “I studied my men. They were scattered behind me on the trail. Some smoked or chewed tobacco. One soldier was playing his harmonica. The sweet fool was expressing his desire to be back home in the land of cotton where old times are not forgotten. It seemed the most heart-breaking sound I’d ever heard. . . At the end of the column was Private Riccatone, a young immigrant from Italy who had joined the Army in New York in order to send money to his folks in the old country. And now, it seemed, he had nothing to go to market with except time. He’d gone bugs. I had him lashed to a bamboo travois with two supply-carriers detailed to drag him along with us. I was going to send him to a hospital in Manila once our mission had been completed. . .”

Private Riccatone, one night in the coastal village, had been on guard duty. Suddenly he let out a scream, fired shots in the air, and plunged into the jungle. He didn’t go far. Shiftit tracked him down and had him rolled up in a canvas tent and hauled, shouting obscenities in broken English, before Kill Devil, who called for witnesses. According to their testimony, Private Riccatone had been observing a young woman as she emerged from her nipa hut with a torch and began to thresh a supply of rice. Her shoulders and breasts were bare. She wore a brightly colored sarong of thin cotton cloth, the dress split up the side to expose almost the full length of smooth brown leg. The sight of this woman had driven Private Riccatone mad.

“Them I-ties,” a sergeant said with a sigh and a knowing headshake.

“Shoot the sumbitch,” Shiflit said, half smiling.

Kill Devil tried to speak with Private Riccatone out of the hearing of others in the company. He formed the impression that, mentally, the young soldier, for whatever reason, was no longer “present” on the island of Samar. He seemed, instead, to be back in New York, seated at the window of a tenement building, watching snow falling on the street on a perpetual Christmas morning.

“He was as pleased with the world as a Christmas carol,” Kill Devil was saying as he paced. “There was obviously more to the matter than the sly glances of a half-naked girl. . . I thought of Melville, the *Typee* book, girls mere children of nature, ‘breathing from infancy an atmosphere of perpetual summer’, but, to the best of my recollection, no one goes nuts over nipples in Nukuheva. . . The more I thought about Private Riccatone’s snapping, the more convinced I became that it had its cause in an incident of extraordinary and brutal humiliation. . .”

When Kill Devil’s company first landed in Samar, the massacre at Bagapundan had just recently taken place. Orders for the counterattack had not arrived. Kill Devil’s assignment was to track down Luc, the leader of the insurrectos and the one who had planned the massacre. He with his band had disappeared somewhere into the mountains. From time to time they raided villages to spread terror, and one such village was Quinapundan. Suspecting that the police chief in the village of Quinapundan was spying for the Americans, Luc had him bound to a stake in the plaza, his head wrapped in a kerosene-soaked American flag, the flag set on fire. As it happened, Shiflit with a patrol was just then approaching Quinapundan, having been sent by Kill Devil to gather intelligence about Luc’s whereabouts. Upon entering the plaza, he found natives with hands over their ears to muffle the screams of the police chief whose head was burning off. No one seemed willing to talk. Shiflit arrested the mayor, *el presidente*, and had him tied to a board. He was given the “water cure,” a form of torture reputed to have been used by the Spanish Inquisition. He talked.

Luc had constructed a redoubt where mountains rose to more than 6,000 feet. From the coast it could only be reached through a jungle of screw pine, large-leaved rhododendron, climbing rattan, bamboo, palms and ferns, a jungle once believed to be so impenetrable that Magellan in the early sixteenth century decided to sail around Samar.

After a forced march through this jungle Kill Devil’s company came within sight of Luc’s redoubt. It had been timbered to create a parapet, this reached from below only by means of bamboo ladders. The parapet was protected still further by bamboo cages dangling from ropes made of a vine called *behuco*, the cages holding

tons of rock which could be poured down upon anyone attempting to climb up the ladders.

“The sky was clear and blue, for me an augury of death,” Kill Devil was saying. “From the parapet Luc’s insurrectos spotted us little ants below them and began to sound those conch shells. . .’

“Now, in Cuba I had sometimes fired Gatling and other machine guns, and with me in Samar I had a Colt automatic gun. After assembling it and adjusting it for trajectory, I opened fire on the *behucos* and shredded them so that the cages with the rocks tumbled harmlessly down into the jungle surrounding us. The *clap-da-dap clap-da-dap* firing of a Krag, obviously one seized at Bagapundan, had us pinned down. When a bullet split open Shiftit’s cheek, he furiously led a charge up the ladders, reached the parapet, scrambled over it, and disappeared from sight. To my amazement, the insurrectos were offering no resistance, no more rifle fire, no spears and arrows, no more bugling of conch shells, no bloodcurdling screams.’

“All was eerily quiet while I broke down the Colt and prepared to lug it up a ladder. I heard bursts of Krag fire. When I finally climbed a ladder and heaved myself over the parapet, I found my men casually standing around in a semicircle. In the middle stood Lieutenant Shiftit bleeding profusely, Private Riccatone, his Krag at port arms, and, on the ground, the corpses of two old men, two old women, and three little brown children.’

“What I hadn’t known was this: Luc and his band had fled, and a search of the area’s huts had turned up those seven natives, plus three pigs, a dozen chickens, and a West Point ring. Infuriated by discovery of the ring, Shiftit had ordered Private Riccatone to execute the men, women, and children.’

“ ‘Prisoners expended while attempting to escape, sir,’ Shiftit said. ‘West Point ring belonging to the commander at Bagapundan recovered, sir.’ Shiftit’s whine came to me as if from an enormous distance. I wasn’t looking at him or at the corpses—but at Private Riccatone. There was such horror inscribed on his face that I knew, *knew* as certainty, that I could never again bear to see anybody humiliated if I could possibly prevent such situations.’

“That night on the mountain, after the bodies had been burned in a hut, we roasted the pigs and chickens and feasted, vampire bats swirling in angry gyres above the smoke. At one point Shiftit, who was raised in a small religious community in a remote mountain valley in Utah, rose and preached. ‘The Almighty,’ he declared, ‘destroyed Sodom notwithstanding the fact that there may have been a few just people in that community.’ The flickering light of the bonfire gave to the black blood on his cheek, next to the black mustache, a peculiar prominence which, put

together with his catarrhal accent and hornswoggling righteousness, gave me the sensation of being present at some congress of devotees of a mad religion. . .”

Kill Devil paused, went on. “I took Private Riccatone aside and explained to him as best I could that he was not to hold himself personally accountable for the executions, that our orders were to take no prisoners. He wept. I hugged him as if he were my son. The stubble of his blond beard was like a cornfield in spring. His countenance was so angelic he could have posed for Leonardo.’

“Luc’s band ambushed us in the jungle on our way back to the coastal village. I’ve told you about that encounter before. We killed scores and suffered not a single casualty, ourselves—except for my nightmares.’

“Upon our return to the village I relaxed discipline. Soon, though, I received the telegram from my CO in Manila, ordering the attack on Bagapundan and repeating previous orders. *Kill anything that moves*, it read. *I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn. The more you kill and burn the better you will please me.’*

“We are pausing on the trail to Bagapundan. I contemplate Private Riccatone strapped to the travois. I envy him his bliss. I yearn for home. Because he had been humiliated beyond endurance, I sense a vocation and swear an oath: I must take my stand with the humiliated. Another oath: I must take my stand against the violent of the world. . . I remember Homer’s Achilles, the bitter wisdom of the greatest of warriors once he has fallen and become a ghost in Hades. O how he wishes he had been some poor country farm hand endowed with capital-L Life instead of a nobleman so deluded by the idea of honor and glory he had gone to war! At that moment I felt so disenchanting with the war I abandoned my plan for a surprise attack. I would follow Shiflit’s proposal for a march along the seacoast, native spies in *bancas* be damned! I had to breathe cool, salty air, cleanse myself in surf, and indulge the sad strains of *Dixie*. . .”

There on the trail to Bagapundan he had removed his campaign hat and waved it in the manner of a cowboy at roundup. Soldiers and supply-carriers struggled to their feet. Sergeants bellowed orders. Soon the company was following its stumbling captain down steep ravines and around narrow ledges where any slip of footing could send an unlucky fool falling and shrieking into the rainroar of a black abyss. The company arrived at the coast before dusk. The Stars and Stripes fluttered in seabreeze. Tents were erected around a central bonfire. Sentries guarded stacks of rifles, crates of ammo, rations, the Colt automatic gun. Too ill to swim, himself, Kill Devil watched his beefy, sunburned men, many of whom were volunteers from the Rocky Mountains with little experience of oceans, whooping as they flung themselves naked into surfboomings beneath screeching seagulls. The sun sank

like an enormous orange balloon into sea-dirge. Cicadas summoned the moon. The supply-carriers prepared food over fires and piled everyone's mess kit high.

Kill Devil retired to his tent, teeth chattering like a runaway telegraph transmitter. With trembling hands he lit a candle. He stretched himself out on his cot. Why hadn't he ordered quarter rations? Why hadn't he ordered supplies to be stacked in his tent? What if the company arrived half-starved in Bagapundan, found it deserted and the Navy vessel nowhere in sight?

"Captain, sir?"

Shiflit's tone of voice, as usual, seemed to communicate obsequiousness and patronizing contempt simultaneously. Kill Devil turned on his side. Candlelight revealed Shiflit's sauntering into the tent.

"Quarter rations from now on," Kill Devil said. "I'm afraid, Fredson, the carriers may have been pilfering."

Shiflit rolled eyes and said, "Bullets are the only things the Goo-goos understand... Sir."

"How in God's name can the natives ever respect us or respect themselves if we continually refer to them as subhuman?"

"I'll post a sentry over supplies, sir," said Shiflit. "Native personnel looking for trouble will be shot. Sir. Shall I blow out the candle? Sir?"

"I think, Lieutenant," Kill Devil muttered angrily, fever rising, "I am quite capable of blowing out my own damn candle."

Shiflit's eyes blazed with fury as he sauntered out of the tent.

White light from our pit-lamps reflected off glistening minewalls and illuminated Kill Devil's blackened face, white rings around eyes. *In the country of the blind, I was thinking. In the country of the blind, surfaces usurp authority until the king beneath the skin appears.*

He came and squatted down beside me again. "It's amazing, son," he said, "how many hurdles a man will put in his own path. I had just graduated from college when my father suffered a stroke and died—under a clear blue sky. We had an old Indian from Taos, Dawn Antelope, managing the ranch, so I was in no rush to take over. Always, when I had been out there on the field running and tackling, the crowd noises, the roars, the tumult seemed a long way off, but now I felt curious about people, wondering who they were and what I could do to build a bridge to them. If there was dirty work to be done in this world, I didn't think it fair to leave others to do it for me. I went down in the local mines for a spell. After a while, still curious, I decided to leave the Door of the Sad People and light out for

New York, figuring to corral me a job as a war reporter in Cuba, turn one for the *vaqueros*. . . Nothing doing in that line, but I drifted into the company of some Cuban recruiters, those fellows with felt sombreros and cigars. *Amigo*, they say, you comprehend the artillery and machine gun, we feex you up big, my captain, *verdad*, no bulla-sheet, most damn fun you ever have with your pants on. . . I memorized manuals, everything from belt action to Kentucky windage and received a telegram, unsigned, instructing me to appear at the Cordlandt Street ferry at such-and-such a day and time. Did that. Met Shiflit, a cocky hellraiser never finished school, said he got a girl pregnant in Utah, but God told him what to do, which was take her to an abortionist and ride the rails east.’

“We crossed the river to Jersey City. From there we took a train to Charleston. Some more idiots joined us there. In order to avoid Pinkerton detectives working for the Spanish government, we took a slow train to Woodbine in Georgia where we boarded a tugboat for Cuba. I received a commission all right: captain in artillery. For a year I helped blow the crap out of forts. Spanish troops captured me one night in a cantina when I wasn’t in uniform. I pretended I was a tourist, treated the boys to rum and rounds with the percentage girls, slipped away to Havana, came home, got married on the spur.”

While Kill Devil was taking a deep breath, I figured what was coming: more self-abasement, more accepting of the whole responsibility in ambiguous situations. He slumped and said, “I don’t blame Pia for trucking out on me. I hardly knew her. Her daddy, a pit boss in one of the mines I worked in, had abused her as a little girl. I tired of marriage, of raising cattle. General Funston was calling for volunteers to join him in San Francisco and go fight in the Philippines. I deserted her.”

I said nothing though I wanted to say, “Pia is no Penelope.” He straightened up on a sigh and gave me a tight smile, saying, “You’re going to be all right, Tree. . . When I was younger than you, my mother died in St. Aignan, the French village where my father, who was American and well-off, was assisting local physicians as a free service, not only because my mother was French but also because he believed foreign culture to be *comme il faut* for an American lad. Once she died he realized he couldn’t stand it over there any longer, too little freedom, too much confinement in tradition and space. The competence I gained in Latin and European languages would stand me in good stead and has: it’s one reason I’m back in Los Tristes where immigrant coalminers speak more than twenty languages. . . In case you didn’t know it, Tree, and I’m risking my life by confiding in you, I’m here organizing for the union. . . So. . . My father brought me to his ranch, Homesteader’s Ranch. Let me tell you: the sizeable scale of the West invited me to feel an expansion of self

such that I sometimes yielded to a conviction of unbridled freedom. I loved the joke about the young couple who went out to milk the cows, and their children came home with the milk. At the same time, due to my upbringing, I could see that the West was starting to build all the cities it could handle and that social cooperation had to be in the cards.'

"Here's the catch: unbridled freedom makes you insensitive to the suffering of others. After a while, you don't recoil from the uses of power. You may be a hero. You may be a man of iron. You may think you're the fastest gun in Cloud-Cuckoo-Land. And all of a sudden you turn into Fredson Shiftit. He has a kind of apocalyptic hatred of people of all stripes. He has about as much humanity in him as an abandoned cemetery.'

"Emergence and convergence: that's the future. We emerge out of self-centered selves and converge in an in-the-same-boat spirit with others."

There was silence.

Bull feathers, I was thinking. I had a short fuse when it came to preachiness. I loved the idea of unbridled freedom but had not experienced it. As for social cooperation, I figured to get married right smart as soon as I could earn a grubstake, go to college, and become a tycoon. The more I reflected on what Kill Devil had just said, however, the more I realized he was showing his care for me and trusting me in that in-the-same-boat spirit. I might not like it, but, hully gee, he might actually be wise. The funny thing was, when I considered how I had childishly been a leaner on adults, he was now the one who seemed to need me, need my support.

"Tell me again about the massacre," I said.

He shot me a look of pain but relaxed as he spoke. "I've been circling subjects too long, haven't I? . . . It was like this. . . Bagapundan had no military value, not even a harbor. The village consisted of a church, a convent, and a town hall, mildewed masonry courtesy of Spain. About a hundred huts surrounded a plaza. Our commanders in Manila had originally no intention to establish a garrison there. Moreover, they didn't know what Luc had done, how he had had all the friars and the nuns and the police chief murdered and had installed as mayor a little fellow who always wore a white cotton suit and a black top hat. This mayor, this bizarre mimic of Abraham Lincoln, paid no attention to the accumulation of garbage, dead animals, and excrement but sent an envoy to Manila begging our commanders for troops to protect the village from what he called 'pirates.' Our commanders, thinking the mayor was on our side and secretly giving us a signal

that the war was coming to an end, sent to Bagapundan a company of seventy-four officers and men under command of a West Pointer, Captain Priggs.’

“Captain Priggs and company were set ashore from dories, which then returned to our Navy vessel. In one of the dories were crates of English textbooks and boxes of ladies’ petticoats and brassieres. As you may know from reading in newspapers, the late President McKinley coated the pill of Empire with a policy of ‘benevolent assimilation.’ Accordingly, Captain Priggs believed that a distribution of female underwear and *McGuffey’s Eclectic Readers* would bring the evolution-disadvantaged natives up to date, benevolence-wise. . . . He had the Stars and Stripes run up from the church belfry. He converted the town hall into barracks for the men and the convent into officers’ quarters. A large mess tent was erected in the plaza. A regular schedule of meals and drills, all announced by the bugler, was instituted. Thus prepared for friendly negotiations, Captain Priggs invited the mayor over to the convent and addressed him as follows: ‘See here, Mister *Señor Presidente*, unless your sweet-assed little gals cover up their shame with these-here *regalos*, my men are going to tricky-tricky-boom-boom them, savvy?’ With a sweep of hand he pointed to the boxes of petticoats and brassieres. Doffing hat, the mayor bowed to those treasures and promised to have them given to the topless ladies of Bagapundan. Next, Captain Priggs held his nose and pointed out a window toward the garbage, the dead animals, and the excrement, whereupon the mayor, after genuflecting and heart-patting, promised to round up laborers *mui pronto* for the great clean-up. . . as soon as the cholera epidemic, then devastating the countryside, had been brought under control.’

“Weeks passed. Hut windows suddenly had curtains made out of petticoats. Brassieres on *cette île triste et noire* proved to be very useful for the gathering of coconuts.’

“One evening the sentries reported to the captain that large numbers of women bearing coffins were entering the church. Inside a coffin, the only one opened for inspection, lay the body of a dead child. There were copious cries of lamentation: ‘*La calentura! El cholera!*’ Had Captain Priggs thought to have all coffins opened, they would have been found to contain not bodies but bolos. Had he thought to have the mourners’ veils parted, they would have been found to disguise the faces not of women but of men.’

“At 6 A.M. next morning, just as the bugler sounded call for chow, the mayor showed up in the plaza with *obreros*, he in white suit and black hat, they with shovels and pitchforks. Our boys, sleepy and unarmed, moseyed over to the mess tent and sat down to chow. Twenty minutes past the hour the First Sergeant, who

had finished his breakfast, went to wash his mess kit in the barrel kept full of steaming hot water by a native woodchopper who tended the fire under the barrel. The woodchopper was standing next to the First Sergeant.’

“Church bells suddenly ring out—*clang-bong-da-ping-ling, clang-bong-a-bong-rung*. The woodchopper splits the First Sergeant’s skull with an axe and pitches the body head first into the barrel. Bolomen burst from church door. Under a clear blue sky they chop sentries to pieces and run to the barracks to finish off the noncoms. The laborers from the countryside cut the mess-tent ropes and, using bolos, shovels, and pitchforks, hack at the struggling mass of bodies underneath the collapsed canvas. Back in the town hall a few of the boys are able to put up a fight with Krags and baseball bats. They kill the mayor. At the convent the captain jumps out of a window but is overtaken in the plaza and beheaded. An insurrecto, to get at the captain’s West Point ring, chops off a finger.’

“Survivors, most of them badly wounded, stagger to the shore and scramble into *bancas*. One Private Wingo notices that the Stars and Stripes still fly from the belfry. Though injured himself, he takes three volunteers with him to rescue the colors. He and one volunteer return to the shore with the flag in their possession. After several days at sea, during which period seven more men die, Private Wingo among them, five *bancas* reach safety at Basey. At the infirmary there, another eight men succumb to wounds, leaving a total of twenty survivors out of the original company of seventy-four officers and men. . .”

As I listened to the chilling tale in its unvarnished detail, I could at last well understand why there had been a demand in the United States for a payback. “Tell me about the payback,” I said. “It haunts you.”

Kill Devil stood up. His pit-lamp was like an eye from which a beam of light penetrated darkness. “Early on the morning of the third day,” he said, folding his arms and shaking as if in remembrance of his malarial chill, “Shiflit found me virtually unconscious on the cot in my tent. I was nevertheless able to insist that we continue with the mission. If we returned to the coastal village where we had been bivouacked, we would have found there no medical assistance, whereas, all being well, a Navy vessel would be awaiting our arrival in Bagapundan, complete with sick bay and all that. Lest our supply-carriers come into harm’s way during the attack on Bagapundan, I decided to forgive their pilfering. I specifically instructed Shiflit to have them paid off for their services and discharged from further duty so that they could return home. I made one further request: I was to be strapped to my cot, as Private Riccatone was lashed to his travois, two carriers assigned to carry or drag me along the coast.’

“I remember little of the march. Once in a while I seemed to hear gentle voices speaking in, I suppose, Tagalog. My throat would be moistened with canteen water. My carriers cooled my brow with icy seaweed. Did I drink some Chinese herbal remedies? Later, the Navy surgeon claimed that I did—that I could easily have died without them, without, in other words, the kindness of the Filipinos.’

“Days. Nights. I have little recollection of them in my brain-fog. When I finally opened my eyes and regained consciousness, I was being dipped—baptized, as it were—in an icy, soughing surf, my limp body carried in the arms of a young man with the beginnings of a blond beard. It was Private Riccatone. He shone his countenance upon me. At one point I thought I heard rifle fire followed by machine-gun fire but didn’t learn until later that we were in Bagapundan, Shiflit and the company in the village, Private Riccatone and I on the shore. Indeed, later, when I was aboard the Navy vessel, it became clear what had happened: the carriers assigned to us had released us from our bonds, had attempted to flee into the jungle, had been captured by Shiflit and eventually, with the other fourteen carriers, tied to stakes, blindfolded, and murdered.”

“Riccatone?” I interrupted in surprise. “You said humiliation had driven him insane. For you, it was a turning point. You could never again bear to see anyone humiliated. That is why you’re working for the union.”

“Wait,” Kill Devil said. “First, Bagapundan. . . It was abandoned, no insurrectos, no villagers, only a few emaciated dogs scavenging in the garbage. The First Sergeant who had been killed while washing his mess kit was still in the barrel. Soldiers killed under the mess tent were still clutching knives and forks. In the plaza the bugler had been buried up to his neck, evidently while still alive, his mouth propped open with the bugle; to his mouth, it appeared, a trail of sweet stuff had been sprinkled from the jungle, and armies of ants, following this trail, had played *Taps* very slowly upon him. Captain Priggs was found in the church, in two parts. The torso had been bundled up in petticoats and brassieres. The head had been placed on the altar so that it peered, as it were, at the body of the child who had died of cholera. This obscene and blasphemous parody of a father-and-son, God-and-man relationship was unmistakable in its intent: the captain’s eyes had been gouged out and stones stuck in the sockets, replicating some hideous Paleolithic god. . . The rest you know: the murders. But I didn’t tell you what Shiflit did before the Marines landed from the Navy vessel. Gathering my men around him, he told them that the Almighty has no use for people who would teach us Americans to imitate abominable things. He told them that Captain Dare would be punished for having authorized, in His holy name, the summary executions for pilfering

rations. After delivering this edifying sermon, he had the bodies strewn about the plaza, photographed, then lugged into huts and set on fire. Then he, personally, turned the Colt automatic gun on the masonry buildings. Why? Pockmarked with bullet holes the buildings would seem to bear mute witness, as did the bodies, to a fierce firefight waged during the capture of Bagapundan. These buildings he had photographed. As a final touch, he had the mayor's body, still with white suit and black top hat festooned with flies and leeches, strung up from the church belfry in the attitude of delivering a Gettysburg Address in Hell. He had this little Gothick scene photographed, too. . . Remember. When the folks back home believe that the Kingdom of God is a secular one that promises peace—peace without justice or freedom—there's room for a Shiflit at the top of a police-state."

Pacing back and forth, Kill Devil paused to look me in the eyes. "When I came out of my coma, we were all of us bound for Manila. My sergeants came to the sick bay and told me the story of Bagapundan and pledged, unasked, to keep their lips sealed about Shiflit's crimes. These, they obviously believed, had been authorized by me. I kept them in the dark. I decided to go straight to our commanders in Manila as soon as I could and tell the whole story about Shiflit, accepting responsibility for all that had happened under my command even though I had never authorized the tortures and the executions. As for Private Riccatone's antic disposition, I feared he would be charged with cowardice in battle, for which the penalty could be death. I had him examined by the Navy surgeon. Together we drew up a document to the effect that Private Riccatone's extreme fatigue, not a desire to shirk duty, had temporarily disabled him. His fealty, I judged, outweighed his folly. . . Nevertheless, Private Riccatone's good intentions soaped the stairs to a relatively mild comeuppance for misconduct. In Manila, he jumped ship and went straight to the authorities. Why on earth would he do that, Tree?"

"To go to the military authorities would have been suicidal," I said.

Kill Devil cracked a smile and said, "Close. . . The 'authorities' to which I refer were not, to his mind, military ones. They were newspapers. An immigrant in New York, he believed that American newspapers always tell the truth. He didn't reckon with newspapers bully for Empire. So he told his story to an American news agency that promptly went with it to the military commanders, one of whom, my CO, suggested to the general in charge of our operations in Samar that the private might be persuaded to retract his charges. Private Riccatone refused to do so. He was immediately given two years in the hoosegow for conniving at the publication of an article containing willful falsehoods. And there the story might have ended had Shiflit not overplayed his hand."

“One morning while I was recovering in hospital, I received a visit from a major in the judge advocate branch of the commanding general’s staff. I was, he advised me, going to be investigated by a committee of inquiry about the murder of eighteen boys in Bagapundan. The major showed me an American newspaper. Its headline read, THE BUTCHER OF BAGAPUNDAN—meaning me—and it ran a story in which Shiflit blamed me for having authorized, quote, ‘murders too unspeakable to be uttered by the pure of heart,’ end quote. I told the major what I’ve told you and did the same when, eventually, I came before the investigating committee.’

“When Shiflit testified against me and came under cross-examination, he changed the time for my alleged authorization for the murders. It had happened, he swore, back when I was in full possession of mental faculties, back at the beach. There, he swore, I had ordered the execution of the carriers for pilfering. Thereafter feeling, quote, ‘much troubled in heart,’ end quote, he had prayed until God told him what to do, namely, carry out my orders. Shiflit burst into tears and appealed to heaven. ‘I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned!’ He shed more tears than Niagara has falls.’

“Well,” Kill Devil went on, “I didn’t know about God, but somehow through all that tour of mine in Samar I had kept a waterproof bag in a pocket, a bag which contained my CO’s telegram, which read, *Kill anything that moves, I want no prisoners, I wish you to kill and burn, The more you kill and burn, the better you will please me.* I introduced into evidence this little hymn to benevolent assimilation. The officers looked at my CO, an old Indian fighter, then looked at one another, nodded in agreement and told me I was dismissed, all charges dropped for lack of evidence that the atrocity had ever happened. The news agency would be advised that the story of ‘The Butcher of Bagapundan’ had been enemy propaganda. Of course, as was suggested to me in private, I could resign my commission and go home, honorably discharged. I affected to be riled up at the suggestion. What, gentlemen? Questioning my honor? Well, okay. Throw me in the briar patch.’

“The thing was, Shiflit wanted to sell the photographs he had taken in Bagapundan, the ones illustrating his glorious victory there and presumably making him eligible for the White House. Unaware of what Private Riccatone had done, he went to the same news agency in Manila. He was immediately queried about the massacre and with great presence of mind confirmed it. Otherwise the ‘Butcher of Bagapundan’ phantasmagory would not have been leaked, and I could have revealed the true story to the military authorities from the word go. Whether they would have prosecuted Shiflit—together with his God and the crutch goddess of law and expediency—this deponent saith not.”

So saying, Kill Devil half-crawled back toward the workface. He began to sledge up a prop, sitting on heels and rocking on knees. He repeatedly swung the sledge against the prop until the cap piece slipped into place and the timber leaned toward the face at just the right angle to be driven more firmly once coal from his afternoon's shot had been blasted out. After a while he came back to our room where he had talked to me as never before, trusting me with his secret life of atonement. Wiping sweat out of his eyes, he pointed to a spot well back from the workface. "See that equipment there, son? I'll need the augur and the tamping bar, and bring me those squibs and the needle, would you, please? Leave that powder keg to me. . . Hold on."

He took from his cap and slowly lifted his pit-lamp, holding it high above his head and against the torturous water-cure trickling of the roof. Some fire-damp in the hollow of the rock burst into tongues of soft blue and yellow flame. I be dog, he sure gave a body comfort. With the one "eye" of his pit-lamp's penetrations of darkness, he forever fixed in my mind the fathering I could rely upon and at the same time brought his Spanish proverb to remembrance, the one he had quoted that day he saved me in the Great American Desert.

I cupped my mouth and declared with a grin, "Hey, Kill Devil! You're the one-eyed man! 'In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king!'"

He turned and stared at me for a moment. "*En casa del ciego, el tuerto es rey?*" A warmly playful, pleased smile of bright teeth spread across his face. "At ease," he said, "you prince of the sad people."



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