



Fray Aniceto's Dilemma

This true story from mission records of the town of Santa Teresa is blended skillfully with the town's patroness, Santa Teresa of Avila de la Frontera. . . . By PERCY A. HILL.



"In Catholic Christendom," says Franz Blei, in his volume on *Fascinating Women*, "two women have played outstanding rôles." He mentions these women, Catherine, the little Tuscan nun who drove the antipope from Rome and brought the true pope, Gregory XI, back from Avignon to St. Peter's see, and Santa Teresa of Avila, who reformed monastic and nunnish life in Spain in the golden 16th century when it was a difficult task indeed "to restore the ivory tower as the refuge of Christian purity." Besides that, Santa Teresa, born of the *limpieza* of rugged Avila, neither Moor nor Jew in her ancestry, had, for 20 years of her cloistered career, a hard battle with worldly temptations on her own account; as she herself honestly, though cautiously, tells us in her *Conversations*.

She was high-born and nobly reared. Her father kept the women of his family locked up in the house, a good custom of the period, but he stepped far ahead of custom in having them taught to read religious books and write religious tracts. It was the girl's mother who surreptitiously widened the curriculum to embrace secular literature—devastating romantic tales and ballads—so that Teresa grew up quite a normal girl and became a woman of great good sense and intellectual powers that made her will invincible. She did many saintly acts during her life of 76 years. Blei mentions these blessed works of hers, but overlooks the fact, important in the Philippines, that her name adorns a town in the Ilokos region of northwestern Luzon that is quite as unchanging as Avila itself, her hallowed birthplace—Avila, *nothing but saints and stones*.

Santa Teresa, which you will whisk through in your motor without further notice than an exclamation over its beautiful church, is inhabited by simple folk won to the Cross perhaps in Salcedo's time. There is the plaza, a common, a grimy Main Street with Chinese general merchants preëmpting its best business corners, and back from all this the topsy-turvy blocks of thatch cottages. There is also the unkempt *playa*, the seashore, where there are always some fishing boats drawn up on the beach. Fields stretch from the shore back across the narrow plain and in terraces up the mountains a little way—fields of rice—and the people of the town divide their time between farming, fishing, idling and cock-fighting, and religious festivals and obligations.

Life is languid in Santa Teresa, that would be some exertion to keep cut down grow over the plaza; paths through them lead to the church. Domestic animals, goats, carabaos and scavenger

swine, wander about or seek their ease in the shade of the scattered mango and acacia trees. Children make playgrounds of the shady places, and the elders of the town have their gathering places along Main Street where they look with grave concern upon the wayward young folk who have learned letters out of books and gained knowledge of far-off places—Hawaii, Puget Sound, California—where magnificent adventures are met with and enormous wages in gold are paid for a man's day's work.

Maidens of Santa Teresa give god-speed to brothers and lovers bouncing out of town on traffic trucks with their emigrant bundles and their high hopes and promises of coming back home after a few years with money saved to pay for a wedding and a little paddy land. Dreams. . . dreams of youth. The sun goes down, the boom of the tide is heard, just as always; and the throb of pestles in hewn mortars in every doorway, where peasant girls and little boys are hulling rice for supper. Often there are fish, for *ulam*, and indifferent vegetables are boiled for the *gulay*. The place used to have an indigo industry, thanks to the friars, but a far-country called *Alemania*, that predatory Germany you have heard of, killed the indigo business with coal-tar dyes.

Where the ebb tide at Santa Teresa leaves expanses of muddy flats, old women, their skirts kilted between their legs trouser-fashion, pounce upon fish unwarily caught in the pools and eke their gleanings out with crabs and mollusks. They, too, these faded peasant women, have lively, happy countenances and are able to banter and jest as if sorrow were never near their hearts; whereas it can never be very far away from their hearts, what with the fevers that carry off little children at dreadful rates, what with the crowded parish from which their sons, when young men ready to marry, must go so far to earn some savings and stay so long absent from home.

No wonder the folk of Santa Teresa pray a great deal, they have need of much divine mercy. But a great wonder is their contentment: they accept their lot in Santa Teresa as if God had willed it upon them; they are none of your skeptical modern individualists spoiled by the foolish philosophy of education, exertion and success: what God-wills will come to pass.

Yet they superhumanly sacrifice that their children may get book learning in the public schools. Is there no corner of the world where this pernicious *rise of the modern spirit* has not penetrated? But you must remember

that Santa Teresa—very pretty of a moonlit night, by the way—has more excuse than most towns to absorb itself in the business of book learning: its patroness was such a reader of books; and a writer of them, too—at the mere age of childhood, just 14, getting a boy cousin into sin with her in helping her write and secretly circulate in Avila a very diverting romantic story, the work of her erring imagination and the love she had for her collaborator.

Santa Teresa once thought seriously of the duty of marrying and becoming a frowsy, frumpy Avilan mother. But she soon thought better of it. Of course all girls in the town of Santa Teresa marry if they can, being Filipinos and so devoted to ancestral teachings and Christian instruction.

It was this instinct to mate at mating time that brought scandal upon the village during the decade after the British occupation. Heretics always bring mischief in their wake. For 10 years, from 1762 to 1772, Santa Teresa had no pastor to sanctify its weddings; couples lived together, perforce, in what Fray Aniceto called married sin, when he came to occupy the parish in 1772.

Fray Aniceto was dumfounded by the situation confronting him. He was beyond mature years, and suffered from a tropical liver; the acerbities provoked by his stubborn digestion, he visited upon his flock from the pulpit. Besides his fiery sermons, he had the town crier take his bell and announce through the streets that all who were living in *married sin* should repair to the convent at once and have their unions solemnized by canon law. Excommunication was to be visited upon those who refused. Inadvertently, Fray Aniceto's zeal introduced an orgy of easy divorce; some couples reluctantly went to the convent to be decorously married, more repaired there eagerly with complaints against their spouses, to have their wicked unions nullified. But the majority, to Fray Aniceto's dismay, remained away altogether.

It was now that Fray Aniceto took matters more firmly in his own hands. He proposed to marry his people effectively, if not happily; he took the names of the men and paired them with names of the women, and according to this arbitrary and haphazard arrangement he called upon the people for obedience.

The older couples to whom sentiment was a memory obeyed loyally enough, but most of the younger couples held out still; they privately condemned the friar to be smitten of the lightning

(Please turn to page 18)

Fray Aniceto's. . .

(Continued from page 11)

and eaten of the crocodile, so foolish did they think him. But at last even many of the younger couples yielded, terrified by the curse of excommunication, and the minority stood to be read out of the church and deprived of paradise.

It was here that fate intervened. Fray Aniceto, his parish clerk letting him go blindly on, announced that Rosa Gatdula would marry Timoteo Agtual. Rosa was the village belle, a rose indeed in youth and beauty; she was the daughter of a rich farmer, and might have had her choice of the most presentable swains in the parish—they had all volunteered to her father to serve their time for her. But Rosa had been willful and had kept her heart free for a suitor from far away whom she dreamed would one day come to woo her. Rosa had heard romantic stories such as Santa Teresa was given to writing when she was an unsaintly girl of Rosa's age. Men and women in the congregation could not keep back their smiles when Fray Aniceto frowningly announced whom Rosa was to wed, for Timoteo was an ugly harelip, a *buñgi*, the village called him.

Rosa was terrified but defiant. She kept hoping, too, for the handsome stranger to come and rescue her. And lo, he did. He was a sturdy young merchant with a fair skin and a cunning dark mustache. He came trudging into town with his packs, saw Rosa and made love to her. She waited for no parental consent, but plighted a tryst, met her lover at the edge of town by night, and ran away with him. What an awakening Santa Teresa and Fray Aniceto and poor Timoteo had next morning! But it was Timoteo who proved that he, the most despised and degraded person in the community, the butt of everyone's jests, the target of children wherever they clapped eyes on him, could rise heroically above this worst discomfiture of all. Timoteo did not think of himself, but of Rosa. It was beyond questioning that any stranger was a villain, all strangers are villains in communities such as Santa Teresa: you do not know if they are even Christians—they may be Protestants! Where had this stranger taken Rosa? Not by the road, for they would have been observed and overtaken. Nor by the sea, for his boat was left high and dry on the beach and no boats of the fishermen were missing.

Timoteo deducted, rightly, that the mad stranger had dared to take Rosa into the mountains. It was certain that the two would meet death there, at the hostile hands of the Igorots. No Santa Teresans ever traversed the mountains, where the pagans' spears, or their poisoned arrows, or their deadly blow guns, brought death. But now

Timoteo dared the mountains. If humanly possible he would find Rosa and save her; whether she would then care to be his wife was not in his mind. Sometimes you think such sacrificial heroism isn't discoverable in the untutored masses, but incidents arise to confound you. Strapping his *pasiking*, his grubsack, to his shoulders, Timoteo, with sharpened bolo, set out. He dragged himself up the ridge of the mountains by means of roots and creepers, there was no trail. At the summit he rested for the night. No campfire was visible, no habitation of any sort.

Next morning he plunged into the valley and followed the course of a mountain torrent. Orchids made the air drowsy with perfume, butterflies with 8-inch wings fluttered around him; a deer drank at a pool in the stream, his dappled hide camouflaged in the sunlight through the overhanging foliage.

At dawn of the second day he reached a settlement of pagans in the midst of a small clearing—a handful of flimsy huts. He prostrated himself Malay-fashion, signifying his peaceful errand, and used signs to make his inquiries for Rosa. Gifts he had with him, a mirror, a tiny bell and some gala Ilokano cloth, intrigued the mountaineers and bade them befriend him. He made headquarters with them, and promised them all his wealth, mainly the trinkets he had brought along, if they found Rosa alive for him. They began scouting the whole divide, at last, after five anxious days, reporting back that Rosa and the stranger were in a wickiup on the slope of the divide looking toward Santa Teresa; and Timoteo the *buñgi* gave them the treasures in his *pasiking* and set out toward Rosa's and the stranger's camp with guides to make his course more sure.

He came upon the place at last, but the stranger had fled from it. Rosa's low moans, as if she were wounded or deathly ill, came to him; and he ran and broke into the shelter and called her name, saying to her, "It is I, Rosa; I, old ugly Timoteo the *buñgi*—I who have come for you, beautiful one!" Rosa was suffering with smallpox, which had made the guilty stranger abandon her. But Timoteo the *buñgi* feared not at all; he knew something about smallpox and he nursed her diligently back to life.

Santa Teresa, though a *limpieza*, contemned distinction upon any such accidental and doubtful ground and counted only the worth she beheld in people; and when she was elderly, and therefore more saintly, she denounced ecstasies and mysticism and held very sensibly that it was idle to quarrel over "what kind of earth would make the best bricks." She looked deep beneath the surface, for character—she would have liked Timoteo and made him a trusted gardener at one of her Carmelite communities. She once redeemed a cleric from the amours into which he had fallen. He was her confessor, and

he turned the tables and one day confessed to her. "I saw at once," she says generously, "that the unfortunate man was not as guilty as he thought." The woman who had tempted him had hung around his neck a copper charm—our Philippine anting-anting corresponds to it—in the shape of an idol. Teresa took it and tossed it into the river—"the priest awoke as if from a dream and became again a man of rigid virtue." Was it Teresa too that brought the plague of smallpox and threw away the bauble of Rosa's beauty, the charm that stood in the way of her becoming the virtuous spouse of Timoteo?

Perhaps it was.

At any rate, Rosa's beauty was no more; Timoteo was more than glad to forgive her adventure with the faithless stranger, and she was grateful for his slavish devotion; Fray Aniceto had them at the altar very soon, and the schism was ended with their marriage: the other obdurate young folks stood out no longer, for theirs was the victory—Fray Aniceto lifted the interdict and permitted them to mate as they chose so long as they came to the church for the ceremony.

You must know that the devil is always trying to destroy us, and the angels always trying to save us, in the simple faith the friars brought to the Philippines. And that the faith worked very well, for the devil and the cohorts of hell were readily recognized as none other than the evil ghosts among one's ancestors, and the angels were of course the benevolent ghosts. Timoteo thought nothing wrong, beginning his search for Rosa, in supplicating the saints and the good spirits, and defying Satan and working charms to ward off the evil ghosts. Just as today, in the rice fields of Santa Teresa, whirls are set on stakes with a cross at the top, to keep up a tattoo when the wind blows and scare away the evil ghosts who might otherwise visit drouth or locusts or any other dire calamity on the fields. As for the crosses, they put the saints on guard; among them, dear, indulgent Santa Teresa.

You know, of course, about Teresa's death? She was buried in the Carmelite convent at Alba, "behind walls of stone and iron," but devotion would not let her lie in peace. Two monks worked four nights to exhume her body, and members of it were taken away as holy relics. A nun sheared off her hair. "Cities, greedy for the pilgrim trade, quarreled over the rest of her body." But finally something was left, and it was reverently reinterred at Alba. Her blessing is upon the Ilokano town that bears her name, her image adorns the parish altar, and the day of her canonization as a saint is the day of the parish fiesta. When the people see her image, they know it admonishes them to unpretentious virtue. Such as Timoteo the *buñgi* had, and his wife Rosa—after the smallpox stole her beauty.