

Manila's Man of Mystery—"Mayor" Brown

"Mayor" W. W. Brown of Manila—who was the man who under this title which he never held officially and under this name which was not that of his childhood and his early manhood in New York, reputed city of his birth, was for thirty years the most widely known of Americans in Manila—a charter-member of the Manila lodge of Elks, a member of the Army and Navy club of Manila and other prominent organizations—an active member, for example, of the American Chamber of Commerce of the Philippine Islands—a man whose life was lived as open as a Bible on a rostrum, yet remained a mystery to the very end, even to intimate friends?

Brown died in St. Paul's, walled city, Manila, October 16, after undergoing a major operation. Maybe he was fifty years old, maybe fifty-five; maybe less, or more. No one knows. After services at the Synagogue, his body was interred in Cementerio del Norte. Memorial services were held, a eulogy delivered, and in due time auctions of Brown's effects were announced to take place at his home on calles San Luis and Mabini, one auction for men only, one for women only!

The mystery of the man's open-book life thus persisted after death: there was no tangible reason why women should not have been at the first auction, or men at the second. Brown had left no will; he had stipulated nothing, about auctions, burial, or anything else. Yet there were the announcements—"For men only," and "For women only."

His spirit would have applauded this! Something different, garbed in the theatrical. Maybe he attended, in spirit, both auctions. In the east they say the spirit is all there is to men, it's the only thing that counts, and that death only liberates it. (In the west they say likewise, but are western and—they don't believe!) If Brown's spirit really was at the one auction, then it was at the other too; he wouldn't have slighted the ladies, nor have avoided the men.

In this same house, Brown, the one civilian

who arrived in the Philippines with Commodore Dewey's squadron May 1, 1898,—hurrying from Japan, boarding a German gunboat at Hongkong



"Mayor" Brown in 1903

and transferring to an American vessel as the squadron crossed the China sea,—had taken up his abode on the day the American forces in-

vested Manila, August 13, 1898—Occupation Day. The house had been abandoned by the owners, the Perez family; it was months before Brown could find a landlord and pay his rent. He had come to Manila from Cavite with the detachment of the 2nd Oregon U. S. Volunteer Infantry transported on the old *Hoiching* and landed opposite Fort Santiago, where they took possession, hauled down the royal ensign of Spain, and raised the flag which Lieutenant Brumley, Dewey's flag lieutenant, brought from the *Olympic*, Dewey's flagship.

So began thirty years of history-making by a man who always physically stood in the spotlight, his aura ever behind the wings. He came to Manila as the fiscal agent of R. Isaacs and Sons, a New York house having business with the navy. That is what the hurrying down from Nagasaki was for.

But soon he was the proprietor of *The Alhambra*, a soldiers-sailors resort on the Escolta where the Schlitz beer for which Brown was agent could be guzzled to the music and the hoofing of a cheap but gaudy vaudeville stage.


Tradition is that Brown followed the advent of the American fleet in the islands with two full tramp-steamer cargoes of "the beer that made Milwaukee famous."

Those were the unregenerate days when the slogan was coined. Such notorious tales reached the homeland of the cutting-up the boys enlisted by Uncle Sam for a colonial conquest were doing in Manila, that busy-body minorities became active enough to get the army and navy canteens abolished. In this way came about the popularity of places like *The Alhambra*.

But Brown was soon out of the business; he organized himself as the American Commercial Company and did a general import trade.

Later Brown became associated with the Mitsui Bussan Kaisha, Ltd., as their outside man in the considerable coal business they have with the army and navy and other big consumers of coal in the islands. This connection, similar to that he had with other commercial houses, he kept to the end.

It is said that he left a considerable credit

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Ateneo Students Staging Passion Play at Grand Opera House

The most ambitious theatrical plans undertaken in Manila in many moons will come to fruition Sunday, November 24 and 25, and December 1 and 2, when the Ateneo of Manila will stage the Passion Play at the Grand Opera House. The boys have spared no pains in preparing themselves for their difficult rôles, and the college has spared no expense. Letter

and costume perfect, the caste will be aided by sets of the most accurately designed and costly scenery. Devotion being the motive, Father O'Brien's school has left nothing undone that might add to the solemn grandeur of the theme, and its meticulous unfolding on the stage.

Many prominent folk of Manila are among the patrons. When Father O'Brien did a

similar thing in Massachusetts, it was done under the special patronage of the local chamber of commerce. This has not been arranged here, but the *Journal* invites attention to the pleasure the piece promises in both its speaking parts and its music, and the further fact that the Ateneo is now staffed by an American faculty and has become therefore the leading American boys' academy and college in the orient.



Scenes from Ateneo
Passion Play



balance with the Japanese company, but this is hearsay—more of the conjectured but unknown so persistent in all Brown's affairs.

He may have died rich, well-to-do, or stony broke. He did die, and what he may have left behind in worldly goods and values makes not the slightest difference.

It was while he was living that Brown preferred to use his money; and always, aside from the decent living he consistently enjoyed, he used his money in behalf of others. His aid was liberal, not stinted; in a list of thirteen friends whom another friend recalled as having been destined for harsh discipline, wanting Brown's generous help, one alone had been given \$7,500. Such gifts were in cash. Brown never mentioned them; if his deeds of this kind became known, it was that the grateful beneficiaries who told.

Whatever his fortune was when he died, he certainly had given a handsome one away. Sometimes chits were signed, sometimes not. And what the difference? The debts couldn't be paid, they never were paid. Now, names quite renowned are on some of those chits. The bearers, however, need not worry; the chits were to Brown mementos of friendships, as evidences of financial obligations they will never come to light. This is of a piece with the fact that during thirty years, all the time he was in Manila, he kept open house night and day for his friends. While these friends, particularly during the past twenty years, were chiefly army and navy officers and their families, genial civilians were by no means barred.

The latch-string was out for all.

"He is a noted host," declares the Manila *Sunday Sun* of July 4, 1903. "His home in Ermita is the rendezvous for numberless congenial spirits who make his house their own. His cuisine is noted afar, and the Sunday tiffins of the Never Sleep club are Bohemian affairs which cannot be excelled. . . . When the time comes that his tour of duty in these islands is completed, it will be with heavy hearts that his host of friends will see him off."

Edward F. O'Brien, then editor of the Manila *Sunday Sun*, now of *The Times of Cuba*, is rhetorical; he spoke of Brown's ending "his

tour of duty in the islands" and of hosts of "friends with heavy hearts". As to the first of these eulocations, Brown had no tour of duty in the islands; he never had any military or civil-

ings are dead in Versailles, men hail another king. Moreover, Brown would not wish it otherwise; perhaps he himself never mourned a friend's demise, but brushed aside the thought of death and remembered one and all as they had lived and he had known them.

His sentiment lay hidden under ribaldry. He probably believed in nothing—noting but anankind;—not even in Jehovah, the God of his own race. The head of his fourposter was presided over by a death's-head, most gruesome of a whole committee of them circling his sala-bedroom. In all these dismantled habitations of men's souls, electric bulbs lit up the vacant sockets. Of an evening, with the cocktails going round, Brown would switch off all other lights, leaving the room in the weird half-light from the skulls.

All the women were supposed to be good fellows.

This was the show-man in the host. In sepulchral bass he would accentuate the dreary shadows with tales, all imaginative, of how the skulls became deserted. The chairman-skull, that over the bed, was that of a second-story artist shot down as he leaped from the window; another was that of a famous insurrecto. And so on, round the grinning circle of them all! And all just show-off, desperado display in Bohemia. Harmless, but quikening to the pulse—Brownesque!

Naturally, there was not such another salon as this sala-bedroom, with its nightly seances, in Manila; it was probably unique in the world. Brown had his show, and it was a good one—much to his satisfaction for being good.

It opened every afternoon at second cocktail hour. It closed when guests cared to leave; and if the levitation and the levity put any of them off their pins, they were accommodated for the night. Sometimes forty gullets were cocktail customers during an evening, and very often as many as thirty were. Brown, since the earlier period in Manila, was bone-dry himself, but for others the flowing bowl a silver pitcher, kept flowing. If anyone cared to prove himself a bouncer he had the chance to do it; so he would show himself up. Taking pity, Brown would

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Manila, P. I.,
Nov. 3, 1928.

Mr. Walter Robb,
American Chamber of Commerce
Journal,
Manila, P. I.

My dear Mr. Robb:

I have read with great appreciation your deserving tribute to the late "Mayor" W. Walton Brown of Manila. It was my pleasure to be very closely associated with the "Mayor" for about two and one half years previous to his death, becoming intimately familiar with his daily life and most interesting philosophy. You seem to have caught somehow the necessary material for an excellent word-portrait of a most remarkable individual.

E. D. SYKES,
Captain, M. A. C.,
U. S. Army.

government job here. As to the second, "men have died and worms have eaten them, but not for love," and the plain fact is that Brown, king though he was of a gay coterie in Manila, is dead and will already have been half-forgotten before the sward is bedded on his grave. When kings are dead in Bohemia, as when Bourbon

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have him put to bed: after all, not every chap can be born a true Bohemian.

Gossip swears none of the affairs were orgies, and—gossip doesn't know. Gossip only enviously surmises.

The main things, in fact, really known about Brown are that he always wore blue-serge suits and drove a big car. If another person occupied the seat with him, the car was overcrowded; and it took extra yardage for the suits. His bulk was huge, and—the last fact known about him—"his heart was as big as his body." Someone paid this tribute, and it is the best eulogy that could be uttered, as it is the briefest. With the highest or with . . . those not so high! Brown never cared who saw him. He went where he pleased, saw and did what he pleased, and let the world think as it pleased.

He affected showy neckties and big diamonds. Lately he had taken to white washable ties—painstakingly arranged. He was immaculate in dress. The diamond was discarded for a fine Sulu pearl; always there was a fresh orchid in the coat lapel.

Omar opined that if he had the making of "this sorry scheme of things entire" he'd surely make it to the heart's desire. Brown, without rhapsodizing, did better; he did, for himself and his friends, make the world to suit him. He did this very largely by not caring a rap for the world's good opinion. Neither did he care for its evaluations; he set his own values, and valued fellowship more than gold; grains of chivalry more than lumps of wickedness; sparks of gallantry more than flames of error.

Repent he valued most of all; yet nepenthe—by which things are forgotten.

To know this, attend the auctions of his effects, "for men only," "for women only."

Trophies line the walls; they are gifts, flags, tapestries, coats-of-arms of warships, spears, shields, bolos—all perishable stuff. Not a care was taken to preserve them; they would, despite moths, cockroaches and rust, last as long as their owner; and that, closing the brief chapter of the friendships that gave them, would be long enough. At the auction, therefore, as it is advanced decay: brocades gnawed bare, flags in dusty tatters, tapestries denuded of their gold and silver sheen, blades coated thick with rust.

Yes—the very trophies are death's-heads in crumbling, disintegrating metaphor. There are forty spears, trophies of the Boxer campaigns, and for all the rest, well—they are not worth a penny even to the rag man.

There are autographed pictures, many of distinguished personages—others of actors, actresses and humble folk. Without distinction they repose amid the dust and grime and cobwebs of a leather trunk with broken hinges and a lethal jacket of verdigris; and there they will smother out their existence. Almost without distinction, for a few are framed and hung on the walls. Among these are Major General John C. Bates and staff—the Bates of the treaty with the Sultan of Sulu! But the picture is dim. What matter? Most of the men in it are dead.

In the same manner the appetite of time is surfacing upon more delicate morsels, more intimate mementos of merry occasions—stockings actresses have stripped off in making up for an impromptu rôle during the whiling of an evening away—dancing pumps strayed from their mates—autographed cravats—other nothings of days (and nights) that are no more. All are just a heap of rubbish at the auction; their one value was sentiment, and the dead heart feels no sentiment. They shall help raise the level of a new-made city lot above the malarial line: recurring generations of mosquitoes will then cease breeding in the silken slipper heels.

The fourposter is worth something, though. Somebody buys it—and leaves the grinning skull behind. Somebody else buys the enameled pieces in the other bedroom. One after another, the things go under the hammer and are taken away by new owners. Soon the place is cleaned out, only the dust and debris are left—

littering the once-glistening hardwood floors. On a set of antlers at the stair-head hangs an accumulated assortment of chapeaux—hats, uniform caps, campaign hats, civilian Stetsons, and those plain straw sailors that Manilans so commonly prefer. They are too dingy to touch. Brown never touched them, just kept them—kept them waiting, either for returning claimants or for . . . repenthe!

The hour is late. Indeed, the false dawn already faintly paints the east. Guests are departing, guests who all night long have been living in a world made to their own liking—a world of feast and revel, a world such as the inhibited prophets described heaven to be!

"Hey, wait a minute, Captain! You're forgetting your cap!"

"What? Oh, let it go—I'll get it when I come back!"

Where is this captain? Where are all these wastrel wanderers? They haven't come back. And now it is too late. For Brown, "Mayor" William Walton Brown of Manila, is dead. They have taken his body out and buried it, and closed forever the most hospitable door in a famously hospitable land.

Of course Brown, being Brown, would be eccentric and show-manish even in choosing his pets. So he was.

In pets his taste ran to the big apes, the fiercest of which was an orangutang. But he died, of old age, about a year ago. He had been growling and nursing a constant distemper for months. At last he succumbed at his post, the little stoop near the kitchen, where there was a back entrance off which the room with the enamel furnishings was accessible. That was the real beginning of the breaking up of the household, the death of the big pet ape. No more his nettled grimace, his reaching for a club, his snarl, and the rasping of his chain on the newel post. All these had been alarms, warning that within that house were the precincts of life apart from life; the bourns of a life precious alone to the liver of it, and to him only so long as he might continue living it.

After that, . . . repenthe. After that a receding into the mystery that refuses to disclose who this man was whose sala-bedroom was daily a reception room and a gay salon for thirty well-lived years—its wall-wide windows open to two of the main thoroughfares of the crowded capital which gave him the fictitious title of "Mayor," appreciated his many civic services, and accepted as his credentials his many fine attributes, of which his literally boundless charity was the finest of all. From the smallest of the prongs of the antlers, below the chapeaux which captains, generals, admirals, and mayhap governors are going to get when they come back, hangs a motto dating from the days of *The Alhambra's* glory. It speaks, in better reason than good rhyme, of the virtues of "Roca" water in highbals and the nobler virtue in men's hearts of seeking and praising what is good in one's fellowmen and forgetting what isn't.

His repenthe. The operation at St. Paul's was for appendicitis. Only local anesthetics could be dared, because of a heart condition. They set up a screen, and cut through the deep fat and flesh and worked at the job with scalpel and forceps and swabs and bandages more than an hour; and all the time Brown, smoking cigarettes and chatting with a friend, seemed never to notice. When they were about through, however, he told the friend to bend near so that he could speak privately. "Bob," he said, real exultation in his voice, "look in Doc Smith's glasses. They thought they'd fixed it, with that screen. But I've seen the whole damn thing through Doc's glasses!"

The friend got his vision into the angle of Brown's. It was true! Showman to the last, Brown had made one more unreality into a reality to help him through an unpleasant crisis; the lenses of the surgeon's glasses had been his orchestra-circus tent. During the climax of the drama of his own life. Then he said he was

all right, just wanted to take a long sleep. At ten after three of the clock the next afternoon he was . . . asleep. Who was he—who seemingly lived his life so futilely, yet so charitably, hence so well? It matters not. Like a great actor, he is best remembered in his master rôle, "Mayor" Brown of Manila.

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