

By the Many Strange Things
That Happen, We Are Forced to Ask:

Is THIS Our COUNTRY?

By J. M. H.

THIS is still the PHILIPPINES. But is it our country still? Is it still the land of swaying palms and bamboo groves, the mystic isles of the southern seas, the garden spot of the Pacific, the Pearl of the Orient, and the home of innumerable heroes? Or has this land, more beautiful than a lover's madrigal, suffered a sea-change in the last three years and made into an empty crust echoing hollowly the sordid tale of broken hearts? Is this our country, the one and only being deeply cherished with a passion born of blood and fire and nurtured in the bosom of our fecund valleys through all the singing years of our chronicled annals?

The land is there but the face and the heart, it seems, have been transformed. The face is a rigid mask with sharp, deep lines etched as if in adamant. The heart is a mailed fist for it has ceased to throb. It is a bloodless piece of rock.

This was a land of ineffable beauty. Moonrise on lilting, rippling rills; fleet-footed maidens dancing on the many-colored grass; nondescript crowds bringing in the harvest and singing to the sun; low, squat, thatch-roofed villages asleep beneath the stars; and far below the wind—white lights and blue and red blinking with the beat and thrum of the gay city... This indeed, without a loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and—you, beside me singing in the wilderness—was Paradise enough.

Today this is a ruined Eden. All about the stranger on our soil are heaps of disintegrating rubble, broken pillars pitted uglily by modern shells and gutted into grey and black debris by uncontrollable

conflagrations that had wandered through the length and breadth of the land like maddened beasts of prey, skeletal remains of historic mansions that had long resounded with the songs of our forebears; black, leafless, slender trees writhing as if in agony and despair. Gone is the graceful sweep of shore where once the breakers crept timidly like tired little children to their beds, gone is the trim, white-walled, tile-roofed, low cottage by the wide avenue bordered with spreading flame trees. Gone are the architectonic wonders of the West planted as landmarks on Oriental soil. Gone is the perennial radiance of the orchid and the rose in fragrant gardens blowing in the sun. Only the ghosts remain. Frail, ghastly, spectral shadows where once the *mayas* sang.

Truly the face of the land has been cruelly mutilated.

This was a haven of peace and tranquility. This was the home of peace-loving citizens who were bound to their hearth, race, and soil with hoops of steel. They were

a quiet, submissive, hospitable, kind race sensitive only to an insult to their own kith and kin. They could not let a slur on their country's honor and their nation's integrity go by unchallenged and unassailed. This was the harbor of quiet dreams. Here, tired wayfarers from the distant West, fleeing from the tumult and the shouting of men obsessed with territorial lust and conquest, stretched themselves upon the greensward and listened to the music of dark-eyed *dalagas* chanting of the halcyon years.

Now, it appears, that the War has "put rancours in the vessel of our peace" and has "filed our minds", metamorphosing this country from a sanctuary to a madhouse. This is no longer a home but a market place resonant with discord and the thunder of voices raised in recrimination and abuse. Here, men flushed with triumph seek to castigate with mordant sarcasm and innuendo their already sorrow-stricken brothers frustrated by long suffering and persecution. This is bedlam. There is pandemonium in the land. Instead of canticles of thanksgiving trilled in unison for the benison of liberty restored, all we hear is the deafening roar of raucous voices in violent dissension and insult. By the strangest irony of all, we have a War to prosecute to the last ditch that this country might never again fall beneath the awful shadow of heartless oppression and cumulative infamy and we fritter away precious time and energy by warring among ourselves. Where is our sense of national pride, our feeling for unison? Where is that spirit of kindness for a fallen



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brother? Where is that gallantry, where that generosity which kept us together in the darkest days of our history from Mactan to Bataan? Are we still a kindly race or have we been transfigured into angry beasts astray on a wasted countryside?

Hate and disaffection, pride and insuperable arrogance have blott-

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ed out the light of reason. Peace has been destroyed at last.

The Philippines has been known in ancient as well as contemporary history as a land of selfless martyrs and noble heroes. Memories of William Tell are evoked by Lapulapu, of Paul Revere and Washington by Diego Silang and Rizal, of Lincoln by Bonifacio, of Leonidas at Thermopylae by Del Pilar at Tirad Pass. And the defense of Bataan recalls the loyal three hundred Spartans; the rear-guard action of the 26th Cavalry of the Philippine Scouts calls back the charge of the light brigade at Balaklava; and the defense of Corregidor reminds one of Malta.

Yet in the mysterious alchemy of war and its aftermath we have become a nation of traitors. Only a few honorable men, hand-picked perhaps by the inscrutable wand of Destiny, are the spirits dedicated to the pantheon of heroism. They are the only patriots. They are the only lovers of this once beautiful, peaceful country. And they are honorable men. We cannot dispute their words of pontifical wisdom. We must not question their motive or their speech. They are honorable men. We should not come to bury them but to praise them. Their word is law. For they are honorable men. While these men now maligned as traitors were suffering under the boot-heel of the Eastern monster, the great patriots were in the hills watching with eagle eyes when the myrmidons of Hirohito would come up and chase them out of their lair. Or they might have been ten thousand miles away, in the land of the free and the home of the brave fighting the Nipponese invader of these shores by just being Filipinos. And they reaped rewards for that—material and otherwise. They came back to this scared soil, enshrined heroes. They are the only patriots. They are honorable men.

This is still the PHILIPPINES. Is it ours still, or does it belong only to the patriots from the hills or the Filipino heroes from overseas?

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