

■ This is the story of the sacrifices of a Filipino woman who risked her life and possessions to help the revolution against Spanish rule in the Philippines.

## THE KATIPUNAN AND TANDANG SORA

By 1896 the Katipunan counted a membership of some thirty thousand men from various parts of the Tagalog region. Up to the outbreak of the struggle, the Spanish colonial authorities were still unaware of the formidable number of recruits to the Katipunan. They were of the belief that if an uprising of any sort were to break out, it could easily and immediately be quelled, as was done so many times in the past.

Bonifacio had taken the greatest precaution to admit into the Katipunan only the men whose courage and loyalty to the cause of independence had been put to a rigorous test. The Revolutionary Society followed a rigid pattern in its recruitment procedure in order to safeguard itself from untimely discovery by the Spaniards.

Recruits had to submit themselves to a series of ordeals before they could become privy to the platform of the Katipunan. Their background, such as family ties, political ideology and educational orientation were scrutinized. They were given stern warning that death was the punishment meted out to traitors. After undergoing the rigid screening, they were put to several tests of valor.

Blindfolded, a recruit was led inside a dimly lighted room, eerie in atmosphere. The cover over his eyes removed, he was made to read aloud the warning inscribed in big, bold letters on the walls of the room:

"If you possess strength and bravery, you may proceed.

"If curiosity has brought you here, depart!

"If you have no control over your bad inclinations, be gone! The doors of the Most Exalted and Most Honorable Katipunan of the Sons of the Country are forever closed to you."

The recruit then had to take a piece of paper lying on top of a table on which were also found a skull, a revolver and a bolo. He had to read aloud the following questions.

"What was the state of affairs in our country prior to the arrival of the Spanish *conquistadores*?"

"What is its present state of affairs?"

"What will be its future state of affairs?"

Previously coached by his Katipunero sponsor, the recruit had to answer the above questions in the following manner, as otherwise he would be rejected from membership:

To the first, he had to answer that prior to the arrival of the Spaniards, the inhabitants of the country were living in peace and prosperity, carrying on trade relations with neighboring Asian countries.

To the second, he had to reply that the present state of affairs was most deplorable since the Spaniards oppressed and exploited the natives, whom they called "indios," for their selfish interests.

And to the third, he had to say that such a lamentable condition existing in his country could be remedied only by means of an armed rebellion because all pleas for reforms have been rejected by Spain.

If the recruit had satisfactorily passed through these preliminary tests, he was further subjected to other ordeals in order to test his moral and physical endurance, as for instance, blindfolded, his face would be heated before a lighted fire. If he showed the least trace of cowardice, he was rejected outright.

In mid-August of 1896 the Katipunan which was in its fourth year of existence had its first traitor in the person of Teodoro Patiño, a Katipunero of some four months. Hoping perhaps to receive a fat reward from the colonial authorities, Patiño revealed to the Spanish curate of Ton-

do that there were around 1,500 armed "indios" in San Mateo poised to attack the Spanish garrison and that the proof of the existence of a revolutionary association could be found in the printing shop of the "Diario de Manila" where some Katipunan documents were kept. On that same night of August 19, a brief search inside the printing establishment led to the discovery by the Tondo curate of the "proof" mentioned by the traitor Patiño.

Thenceforth the arm of Spanish law moved with relentless fury. Heavily armed Spanish guards knocked on doors of houses, barged in and arrested anyone whom they suspected of being either an affiliate or a sympathizer of the Katipunan. In the midst of terror and chaos Bonifacio and his men transferred the revolutionary headquarters to Caloocan. Katipunero Juan Ramos had offered to Bonifacio the refuge of his mother's habitation in that town some time before.

Melchora Aquino was the eighty-four-year-old widow of the one-time *cabeza de baran-*

*gay* Fulgencio Ramos. She owned a sizeable tract of land in Caloocan where her tenants cultivated rice and sugarcane and where she kept herself busy at times by looking after her large poultry and dairy ranch. Melchora was a well-beloved person in her neighborhood. She was slow to anger, quick to sympathize with the less fortunate of her countrymen and unselfishly gave financial aid to poor people who approached her.

The old lady knew that she was imperiling her own life by giving shelter to Bonifacio and the Katipuneros, but her patriotism enabled her to rise above all fear. She extended to the revolutionists every possible assistance within her command, placing at their disposal the rooms in the house and the numerous barns in her plantation. She supplied them with foodstuffs, unmindful of the great trouble and expenses incurred.

On the eve of the launching of the Revolution, Bonifacio expressed his fears for her safety. "Grandmother," he told Melchora, "if the *Guardia Civil* finds out how

you have helped us, you would surely be arrested and —." Bonifacio stopped abruptly. He could not go on and say that he feared she might be physically tortured by the *Guardia Civil* — and killed. They were words too painful to pronounce. But the old woman must have divined his thoughts.

"Son," answered the brave and noble lady, "I have but a short while to live and I wish to spend it in the service of my oppressed country."

Her answer touched Bonifacio. Between these two grew a genuine affection, born of rebellion and bound by common cause and common peril.

A few days after the Katipunun had passed through the dark night of betrayal, Bonifacio called an emergency meeting of all Katipuneros in and around Caloocan at the estate of Melchora Aquino. More than one thousand Katipuneros arrived at the place. Bonifacio, rising to heights of eloquence, delivered an impassioned speech announcing that the hour had struck when

history clamored for a complete severance of ties between their oppressed country and Imperial Spain.

*"I have the unshakable faith that this Revolution shall bring about the liberation of our beloved Motherland from the oppressive rule of Spain. But at the same time I also realize that we, who are all gathered here, men and women alike, will not live to see the emancipation of our unfortunate country. For in launching the Revolution, we also sacrifice our own lives in the field of battle. We are therefore sowing the seeds of freedom not so much for our own selves as for our children and their descendants, so that one day they may reap the harvest. On to battle then! On to victory! God shall not forsake our country!"*

Before the huge assembly, Bonifacio and Emilio Jacinto brought out their *cedulas*, symbol of Philippine vassalage to the Spanish crown, and tore these to pieces. The rest did likewise and cried out: "Long live the independence of our Motherland!"\*

In the midst of the clamor that arose, Bonifacio sought out Melchora Aquino whom he found to be in the company of her daughter. Tears fell from the eyes of the old woman. At that very moment she was the symbol of the unhappy Philippines. Bonifacio clasped her hand. It was a moment of meaningful silence. Steeped in emotion neither could speak a word. But how much there was to tell each other!

Jacinto's arrival broke up the scene. "Don Andres!" said the youth excitedly. "Our vigilance committee has confirmed reports that the Spanish sentries have located our whereabouts!"

Bonifacio instinctively looked at Melchora. He held both her hands tightly, as if that were the last time he would ever see her. "Grandmother," he addressed the old woman slowly and painfully, "you are no longer safe here. At any hour now the Spaniards may open fire at this place. I shall have my men find out if the roads leading to Novaliches are still clear. If so, you must

escape to that place with your family. My men shall accompany you. Travel in disguise. The rest of us shall remain to defend this place.

Melchora, her family and their rebel escorts disguised themselves as peddlers on their way to Novaliches. But on the 29th of August, the *Guardia Civil* caught up with them at Pasong Putik in the barrio of Santa Monica. They were detained in the house of the local *cabeza de barangay* and the next day Melchora and her Katipunero companions were imprisoned in the Bilibid compound of Manila.

News of Melchora's capture reached Bonifacio in the battlefield of San Juan del Monte. Bleeding from a wound inflicted by a bullet on his left thigh, Bonifacio felt a sudden spasm of grief. The old defenseless woman captured! Held prisoner at the mercy of merciless civil guards! But at the moment there was no time for prolonged foreboding as enemy bullets whistled through the air.

After three days in prison, Melchora was deported along

with other Katipuneros to the island of Guam by decree of Governor-General Ramon Blanco. How swiftly the arm of Spanish law moved!

Many were seized with pity when they saw the frail figure of an eighty-four-year-old woman board the vessel that was to take her far away from her native soil, torn away from her loved ones in the declining years of her life.

Melchora accepted her fate as calmly as was humanly possible. The emotions with-

in her were too profound for tears. She had no regrets, however. She remembered the day that she told Bonifacio "I have but a short while to live and I wish to spend it in the service of my oppressed country."

The children, relatives and sympathizers of the old woman could do nothing by way of rescuing her. Imperial Spain was, as ever, the victor. — *By Carmencita H. Acosta, from Woman and Home, July 4, 1965.*

## CHECKS

*Rich Uncle:* "I'm sorry you don't like your birthday gift, but I asked you if you preferred large or small checks."

*Poor Nephew:* "Yeh, but how was I to know you were talking about neckties?" — *The Cooperator.*