

Three Musketeers with Springfields

• *H. L. Heath, Percy Hill, Thomas Leonard*

Percy A. Hill's life in the Philippines illustrated the callowness of the young soldiers who settled down here after the soldiering ended. Not knowing their worth, and how the challenge of experience would bring it out, they made casual associations during their early years, often at lonely places in the provinces, that they soon grew out of—soon became too big for, and soon found it burdensome to tolerate. Hill came to the Islands a cavalry soldier, enlisted from New York. Thirty years ago, after a few years as a lieutenant of constabulary, he took up about 150 hectares of public land in the village of Bantug, jurisdiction of the town of Muñoz, Nueva Ecija, in the broad central valley of Luzon. Employing tenants and introducing no innovations save ununsurprising charges on the advances tenants always need between one crop and another, Hill developed this place into an irrigated rice plantation worth about ₱80,000.

From this place he gained his living, while he gave his personal time to the avocation of a philatelist. At sundown Friday, July 23, he was foully, cold-bloodedly and bru-

tally murdered in his home as he sat at table reading the morning paper and waiting to be served supper. The gang of men who did this seem to have numbered eight



PERCY HILL

at least. Captain Severo Cruz in command of constabulary at Cabanatuan, the provincial capital, together with the new State Police and the town police of Muñoz was

at once on the job and soon made many arrests that have since been followed by confessions. It is astounding that some of the killers seem to have been Hill's neighbors. One or two well-known men of Nueva Ecija may have been leaders of the plot to do Hill to death—subsequent robbery of his strong-box cloaking the sanguinary motive of private vengeance.

It certainly may be said to Hill's bereaved friends throughout the world, his correspondents as philatelists and merchants in stamps, and to all who knew him through his books and the rice-review column he wrote for this magazine from its beginning even including July, that the authorities seem to be doing all possible efforts to apprehend the men truly guilty of murdering him, and to effect their conviction.

The funeral was held at the Catholic Cathedral on Plaza McKinley in the Walled City Wednesday afternoon, July 28, Father Kelley officiating. The body rests in the Catholic cemetery, La Loma. Hill was nearly sixty-one years old, but looked to be only in his forties because his life was

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very regular and he had never known illness of any sort.

Hill's was a very assertive character; he had enemies, and rejoiced in having them, but they were thought to be men who disagreed with him in provincial affairs, mainly political matters. He had been a founder of his community, a leader in procuring the rights and building its communal irrigation system. He had helped many young men homestead in the vicinity, and was not known to have had differences over the field-water supply since the Central Luzon Agricultural School at Muñoz had gone over to the public irrigation system put in by the government some decades ago. Hill and his neighbors kept the old system in which their rights were established, a system they owned. Why such a man was murdered as he was is still to come out.

But let us speak of his life.

Since the farm took none of his time, but required his presence and at least the bit of bookkeeping necessary to a knowledge

of costs and a clear understanding with the tenants, Hill gave his time to hobbies. Over these he stayed up very late, often till early morning, and would sleep late during the forenoon. Stamps were the hobby he made a trade of; he bought, sold, and collected, and it is said by friends who should know about such things that the collection he left is worth at least as much as the farm, that is, ₱80,000 or more.

Working nightly with this stamps and the writing they entailed, under the light of oil lamps, impaired his sight during the past year—the only infirmity he had. Regularly, to the most distant addresses, Hill's stamp correspondence spread over the world. In these letters he dispensed freehand opinions, receiving back the like from philatelists high and low. He was also always active in the fraternity's behalf in Manila, his contentions sometimes jarring with those of the postal authorities. To a man so individualistic as Hill, there was never but one right way to do anything—his own. But if put down, he grinned. Joviality

was his very soul; he sought the humorous or dramatic side of every experience, and never failed of finding it. His own exit from this earthy stage, could he have beheld it, would have been an episode for his nimble pen; and the story would have said the obvious truth, that the victim of the dastardly was the least frightened of any man in the house.

Hill lived and died without a sense of fear. This shows in the way he built his house, a task effected twenty-five years ago—the only visible improvement on the farm beyond the dikes about the fields and the irrigation ditches. The house is spacious enough, and the desks, cupboards, bookcases and strong Socony Rayo lights about identify themselves as conveniences of its master. But there is no protection, either of life or property. The house is low, rising in the midst of rice fields and not a meter above their muddy level. The shrubbery about, probably for a windbreak rather than ornamentation, is perfect cover for anyone approaching the house stealthily from any direction; and it is instant cover for him who assaults an open window and sneaks away across the paddies.

In addition, the low wide windows are not safely secured—a boy ten years old could probably force the best of them, all mere clapboard affairs; and at night, as long as Hill sat reading, or busy with his stamps and letters, doors both front and back were habitually open. This had been quite all right when the house was new, twenty-five years ago. With the influx of a ruffian element into Nueva Ecija, and the restive belligerence of the sedentary tenant element, it had become wholly unsafe. It is reported that the men alleged to have murdered Hill say they surrounded him, guns ready, cocked, some coming in the front way, some the back, and he only knew they were there when they tapped him on the shoulder. Then he leaped up, tiger-like and fearless. But they shot him down at once, always aiming for the heart because they had come on an errand of deliberate homicide.

(To be concluded next month)

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