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A Christmas Gift of the Greeks

By PERCY A. HILL

In the year of the Redemption 1647 there lived in the town of Santa Ana de Sapa—a town by the way much older than Tondo or its tributary barangay of Manila—a stocky native to whose surname of Lacantangan was prefixed the Christian one of Tomas. Now Tomas Lacantangan, although a scion of the old family of that name, the raja of which was once lord of Sapa, Singalong and Pasay, was singularly unambitious. The owner of extensive rice fields, opulent fisheries, bamboo groves and mango orchards, life passed for him rather happily. Sent at an early age to serve in the convents of Manila for what passed as an education in those days, he possessed a remarkably thick head and was more given to games of chance and inopportune siestas than either churchly or clerky ability.

Returning to Santa Ana after a year's futile apprenticeship, he suddenly married a portly dalaga of that town, who soon endowed him with a family of daughters as portly and buxon as herself. As for Tomas, he was content to receive his annual rents in kind, scrupulously attend the masses and fiestas of the Church, gamble intermittently on his fighting cocks, and eat the good things prepared for him by his wife and family.

In a word, he was content with what the Lord had given him. Fame, glory and ambition he left to others, being content himself to bloom unseen and unsung—to others an existence strangely monotonous, but to Tomas the real thing for a *cabeza de barangay* in 1647.

This trait of self-effacement was not shared, however, by his wife Kikay, who, as was the custom, looked after the collecting of rents and supervised her kitchen, and had little to do with the spending of the family funds, this being the peculiar prerogative of Tomas himself. With a large family of budding daughters, it was Kikay's natural ambition to see them married off, if not happily, at least to those who possessed happiness in the form of worldly goods, a normal viewpoint of those who have passed the flush of youth. The speechless *bagontaos* of Mandaluyon and Pasig were to be encouraged to pay their suit, an open house was necessary to this, and as an open house costs money Tomas was for the moment against it as a prime attraction.

Their dwelling place was a rambling structure on posts, with nipa roof and woven bamboo walls. Around and about it clustered similar smaller replicas, the homes of their retainers and tenants as per patriarchal custom, over which waved

clumps of graceful bamboo and the umbrageous canopy of the huge mango. All this was set close to the *calle real* of the day—the river Pasig. As time passed, Tomas became wealthy, not in actual hoards of *tostons* and *pesos* which would have proved a dangerous lure, but in increasing herds of carabao and livestock, bountiful rice crops and prolific fisheries—the surplus from those going, as is the time-honored custom, to acquire more lands, fisheries and orchards.

In spite of his increasing wealth, Tomas refused to change his style of living, his house or his customs. There was no urge to do so beyond the vague longings of his better-half. As an *Indio* in good standing, he rode his fiery pony into Manila at stated intervals to view the fiestas and processions of the metropolis, paid his tribute, and, as a good Christian, added his parish dues to the coffers of Fray Francisco, the cura of the church at Santa Ana, dedicated to *Nuestra Señora de los Desamparados*—Our Lady of the Unfortunate,—to whose shrine a governor general once presented his cane of office. On these occasions Tomas always wore his silver-mounted *salacot*, as became a *cabeza de barangay*, even as his Malay forefathers had done.

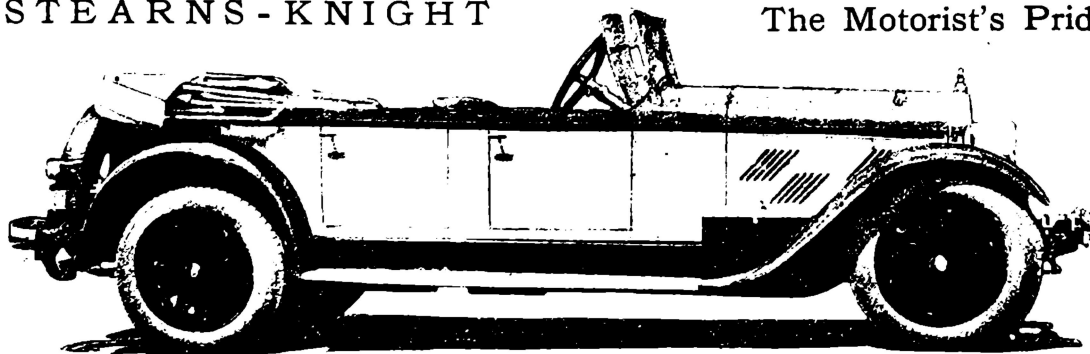
If he wanted a feast, he had everything to hand, meat, wine, fish, rice and fruit from his own stores, clothes of *sinamay* and *piña* cloth from the Laguna traders. Music was supplied by his retainers, and for guests he had his neighbors from Pasig, Quiapo and Mandaluyon. Now the year 1647 was an especially abundant one, bumper harvests, immense catches of fish and piles of fruit to be had for the picking, much of which he was forced to sell in Manila, a town always hungry and in need of such essentials. Behind the house of Tomas was, of course, a garden, and in it grew the largest squashes, or *calabasas*, the worthy people of Santa Ana de Sapa had ever seen. Never had such monstrous squashes been viewed before as those of Tomas in the year 1647. They became famous for size, color and flavor. As the owner had not sought fame, it came of itself to him. The good friar of the parish came, saw and admired, a cart-load was sent to the convent, and the *calabasas* were the envy of all of Tomas's less lucky neighbors.

The most gigantic of the squashes remained on its vine, the grandfather of all the *opos*, as the Tagalogs call them. Over four feet long, of a dark smooth green striped with lighter emerald shades, it was really too good to mix with the daily stews; and Tomas, removing his *salacot*, scratched his bullet-head. Then he had an idea! Such a magnificent *calabasa* was worthy to be presented to the governor general as a sample of what the Isles of Philip could produce. And he made up his mind to send this as a *regalo*, a Christmas gift, to those in the seats of the mighty, little imagining, poor man, that this was to be his undoing.

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Fajardo y Chacon, a gloomy misanthrope of stern demeanor who held the office in name but who kept himself shut up in his palace on the Plaza de Armas, leaving the entire administration in the hands of his favorite valet, Don Eustaquio Venegas, as governor in fact. This worthy, holding power without responsibility, ruled Manila with a grip of iron for seven long years, under which the city suffered a tyranny of blood and tears, to quote the old historians.

It was whispered that the valet practiced the black art on his master. His chief desire was to amass wealth in every form, by all means, fair or foul; he was one of those acquisitive individuals whose idea of enough is always a little more than they have got. With a subsidized military, the courts of justice obeying his orders, and the venal support of the under-world, Venegas affected the style of a Nero, sentencing to death, imprisoning and banishing all those who did not subscribe to his plans of aggrandizement.

Manila in 1647 was at its lowest ebb. Two years before, the great earthquake had crumbled the city into dust and ashes, and the mute ruins told of the indifference to build anew under a tyranny. Its *caballeros* had sunk to fearful sycophants. The *royal erario*, or treasury, had locks, it is true, but Venegas held the keys. In consequence, the citizens of Manila were reduced to the second grade of natives, *timauas*, literally masterless and homeless men, ground between the millstones of fear and exactions. In the suburbs, the labyrinths of tortuous *calles* and blind alleys abounded with the outcast and the mendicant. Plazas became depositories for refuse, ownerless dogs, haggard cats, and ragged vagrants who preyed on all alike, and indifferently prowled or slept between the pillars of ruined palaces and sacred edifices. Stores and shops were closed on account of the unrest. Those who had wealth hid it, and those who had not, hastened to find out the hiding places. A quasi-famine was in evidence and one witty rascal argued that they all become vegetarians and eat grass like the celebrated king Nabucod,



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or Nebuchadnezzar, who cropped the herbage on all fours, according to Holy Writ.

Suffice it to say that the coffers of Venegas were overflowing amid all this misery. He affected the state of a grandee, with coaches and out-riders, and he even used the governor's guard of halberdiers. With his ill-gotten wealth he constructed the finest palace ever seen in Manila, a palace later confiscated by the King, which afterward served as the official residence of all the governors from 1651 to 1863. The stone foundations facing the *Ayuntamiento* on Plaza McKinley are seen even today. Under this régime no man of wealth was safe from

Venegas's machinations, no woman from his desire, no property owner was brave enough to refuse him. Strange to say, the clergy for some unknown reason were utterly cowed, unable to represent to Governor Fajardo the true state of things, and Manila groaned under this atrocious tyranny—sudden death or mutilation being the answer to any disobedience of the remorseless decrees.

His Majesty's representative was, of course, utterly ignorant of what was passing. Guarded carefully, reports to him were garbled and signatures obtained to the most cruel exactions. In 1651, however, the brave prior of the Augustines

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tinians, Fray Gerónimo, taking his fate in his hands, obtained admittance to Fajardo and in no gentle terms related the sufferings of the city, provinces and people. Once convinced, Fajardo had Venegas immediately arrested and put to the torture. He suffered this without a word, being under the influence of narcotics smuggled in to him by the Chinese. But he was nevertheless sentenced to death on sixty-one counts. Awaiting the action of the king, abandoned by his so-called friends, he departed this life for another world. History is silent as to which of the two worlds he was sent to, but his body was buried from a bamboo litter carried by four *cañeros* and interred in unconsecrated ground.

But in 1647 Don Eustaquio was at the height of his power, a fact that Tomas only knew from hearsay. Being the governor *de facto* if not *de jure*, very naturally the immense *calabasa* was due him as the most important personage in the islands. Tomas cut down the gigantic squash, and making a triangular opening at the top, drew out the pulp, and substituted in its place the newest of Mexican silver pesos. Fitting in the piece again and carefully wrapping it in a costly piece of China silk, he prepared to send it to the tyrant. In its present shape it was by far the most costly *calabasa* ever produced in the Philippines.

Calling in his most intelligent tenant, named Crispulo, Tomas gave him the most explicit orders as to what he should do, and with three companion retainers dispatched this ambassador to make the presentation in the triple guise of an *aguinaldo*, a token of his esteem and a sample of what his land could produce in the way of squashes. On the eve of *Navidad*, or Christmas, 1647, Mang Crispulo and his companions duly arrived in Manila with the *calabasa* and sought the palace of Venegas. They came to the building pointed out to them by furtive directions of a terrified populace, a wide entrance whose folding doors were studded with star pointed bolts, and whose rounded archways of tufa stone were surmounted by a small statue of *Santa Genoveva*.

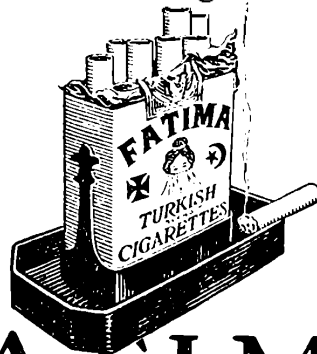
The *entresuelo* and *patio* were crowded with the usual array of sycophants, rowdies and swash-

bucklers who acted as the spies and myrmidons of the tyrant. Guards in half-armor, merchants requesting a respite, heads of families with excuses, venal officials and traders swarmed on the staircases and in the salas. Masticating liberal chews of *buyo*, Crispulo and his men awaited their turn at court—scoffed at by the rabble, and uneasy under their adroit questionings. Presently they were ushered into the room of the tyrant, Venegas, a thin scrawny man with a saturnine countenance. He sat in a dark alcove surrounded by his court, above which a glimmering light was set before Our Lady of Sorrows. The walls held votive shields and studiously arrayed panoplies. On a long table were

set the gifts of the day: pieces of gold, squat sacks of money, caskets of jewels wrung from their owners, and chests of raiment and silks, taken as guarantees. There were goggle-eyed Chinese monsters with mouths awry and twisted limbs, the invention of a people grown weary of the monotony of the human form, who found pleasure and relief in grotesque design and bizarre ugliness. These curious carved objects in ivory, jade, and tortoise-shell were general additions to the holiday loot.

Crispulo advanced timidly and repeated the message of his master, interpreted by a swarthy Spaniard. After kissing the foot of the tyrant he withdrew the covering and deposited the gift

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in front of Venegas. The blood mounted to the cheek of the latter in violent rage at the sight of the plebeian gift. What! Was a mere squash to be sent him whose tribute was the wealth of the city? He gave a harsh order to a whiskered captain to remove both gift and giver, the first was to be thrown into the *patio*, and the second to receive ten lashes for his presumption. The tone demanded a strict compliance, and the captain did exactly as he was commanded to do. Crispulo and his companions were thrown face down in the *patio* and the required number of lashes administered correctly by a burly Pampangan. The giant *calabasa* was thrown with a vast heave onto the stones of the *patio* and a shining stream of Mexican silver gushed out before the avaricious eyes of the crowd. These were sternly allowed to feast their eyes, but not their hands, by the armed guards.

The glittering treasure nearly filled a sack, and was borne by the captain into the presence of Venegas, to whom he related the circumstance, the punishment and the discovery that it was no ordinary squash. At his story the saturnine features of the tyrant relaxed. As a recompense to Crispulo he was given ten of the pesos he had so faithfully conveyed, and to the donor an *aguinaldo* was made in the form of an elegant suit of Spanish clothes, looted from a convenient chest, but none the less gaudy and valuable for all that. This was sent to Tomas with the assurance of the gracious favor of the tyrant himself, and an inward vow that no *Indio* was supposed to possess money, and if so he was a legitimate source to be levied upon.

Dismissed with smarting limbs, Crispulo and his retainers made all haste with their gifts to their banca. Paddling up the muddy Pasig, they arrived at Santa Ana that same evening. Their misadventures were forgotten, once the *aguinaldo* of Venegas was displayed in all its elegance. First came a pair of shorts of maroon satin, slashed so as to show the orange insertions beneath, a pair of hose of a bottle green, and a sort of *jupon* with a hanging cloak of purple decorated with broad *galón*. A pair

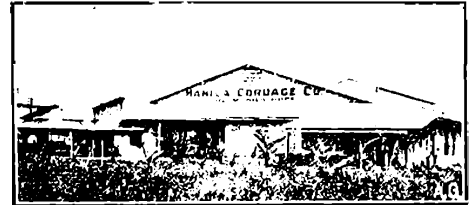
of half-boots of Cordovan leather and a heavy felt hat with a sweeping feather of black and yellow completed the ensemble—truly a most magnificent *aguinaldo* to the eyes of Tomas and the assembled rustics.

Amid the excited cries of his family and retainers, Tomas at last consented to array himself, if not in borrowed plumes, at least plumes that had been borrowed for him; but of this circumstance Tomas, of course, knew nothing except that the highest personage in the land had seen fit to send him a fine Christmas gift with orders to wear it. This was a command, reasoned Kikay, and it was possible that Don Eustaquio might turn up any day to see if her spouse was wearing his gift. Besides, all obeyed the commands of Venegas without question, even the clergy.

Viewing himself in the mirror bought in the Chinese *Parian*, the only luxury allowed the house of Lacantangan, Tomas was pleased with the favorable comment. He began to believe himself another personage. It is the same with actors and those thrust into high places, they unconsciously assume the character in conformity with the habiliments. Tomas himself was not immune to this trait of human nature. The seeds of self-esteem began to sprout, the germs of ambition began to grow. The more he thought of it, the more he desired to outshine his neighbors. Even Fray Francisco was pleased with his action, though he did not say anything about the wearing of the elegant costume. The fact that no common *Indio* ever wore such a costume in those days of caste did not enter the mind of Tomas, for had he not been commanded to wear it by the tyrant himself? At this statement nobody cared to register dissent, not even the gatherers of the tribute.

Tomas had become an important personage and the consequent flattery had gone to his head.

Of course, now he was so handsomely dressed and the center of a court of his curious neighbors, it was out of the question for him to sit on a wooden bench or eat at the lowly *dulang*. Nor



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was his barracks of a house a fit place for so much magnificence, nor could he mount his pony with one bare toe firmly clutched around the stirrup, for his half-boots prevented this effectually. To make a fitting atmosphere for his sumptuous Christmas gift, he had to change his whole style of living, much to Kikay's pleasure.

He set to work to construct a larger and more commodious house, partly built of tufa blocks from San Pedro Macati and partly from the fine woods in the mountains near San Mateo. His wife and daughters had also to be dressed finely so as to keep him in countenance. Tailors and dressmakers came with the Chinese *mercaderes* of the Parian. Fearing to soil his magnificent clothes, the horses were discarded for a coach made in Manila, slung on broad leather straps, the springs of that springless age. Coachmen and stables had to be provided, and his retainers clad in some sort of a livery. No longer could he mingle familiarly with his *nakikisama* in the fields, but a foreman was engaged, who made it his business to see that Tomas got as much as a third of his usual rents. Application was made and granted him to use the prefix *don* in front of his name, for which a handsome price was extorted. Thus the whole order of the world in which Don Tomas had previously lived was entirely transformed by his Christmas gift—a gift that had to be lived up to in those far-off days.

The house grew in size. It was the most pretentious building in Santa Ana, if we except the church and convent of Fray Francisco. Furniture, paintings and conveniences were rafted up the Pasig, and Chinese carpenters and craftsmen took the place of his old-time workers. And all this luxury cost money. No longer were his crops sufficient to provide this amount of overhead. Don Tomas became a debtor instead of a creditor, a borrower instead of a lender, and his properties gradually became encumbered with liens and mortgages which at the usual rates were scandalous in the way they increased his self-imposed burden. To keep in style he kept open house and life became a continuous fiesta over which Don Tomas presided in all his Castilian finery.

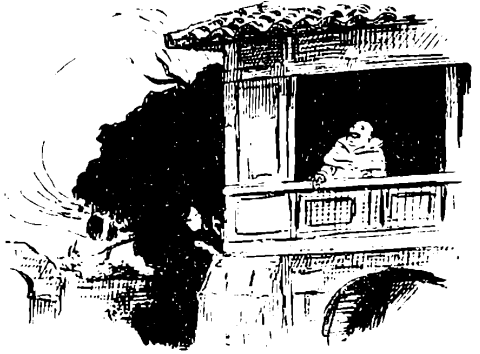
Then there were cooks to be hired for the kitchen, coachmen for his equipages which rocked over the rutty roads to the capital, and gardeners, even horticulturists who despised such plebeian things as the *calabasa*, the cause of all this revolution in régime. No longer did Kikay bother about the kitchen, she and her flock were more interested in the fine things brought by the Chinese; and a hired teacher, the town sacristan, laboriously taught them the mysteries of the alphabet. Venegas sent at stated intervals his agents for a loan, which had to be forthcoming, and these forced contributions to favor soon lowered Don Tomas's fortune to its lowest ebb. Once on the ladder of ambition, keeping up style, he could never retrograde; he had to keep on climbing, no matter where it led to. Came the day when he was stripped completely. All he had left was the name of being a landowner, his styles in clothes and a forgetfulness of results. Came the day also, when the tyrant Venegas was hurled down from his high place to the dungeons of the *Audiencia*. To the *Indio* this was a reversal of all that should be, a general injustice in which he himself was a sufferer, from choice.

Unable to meet his creditors, they had him dispossessed and took over his fields, fisheries, orchards and the grand house built for the suit of clothes got in exchange for the *calabasa*. But his very wardrobe disappeared, together with his furniture, horses and equipages, until all he had left was a small parcel of land and a nipa house in Pasay. Thrown down from his high position, he was little better off than Venegas, except that he enjoyed liberty. Unable to come down the ladder of ambition, fate had pulled it from under him. With his saddened family he was in a bad plight indeed, for none desired daughters without a dowry. In Tagalog Don Tomas was *linusao*, cleaned out, and in the station of his lowest tenant of the time of his prosperity.

He was thus reduced to the meanest of circumstances, a fact that philosophers tell us is not without joy for others. And his neighbors were no exceptions to the rule, although they still clung to the mushroom *salacot* and the

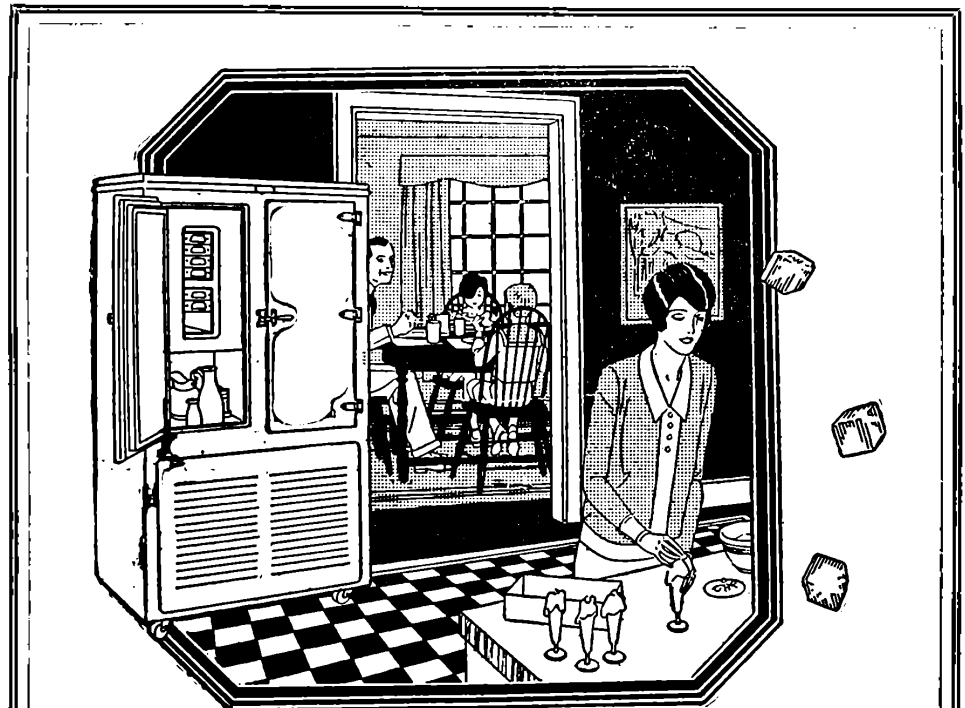
barong Tagalog, leaving Spanish finery severely alone. Crispulo, long emancipated from his tenant status, had now a small farm of his own. He did not forget how he had suffered the ten lashes vicariously for Don Tomas. He too had his trellis, over which grew *calabasas* in profusion, and he decided he would present the largest to his former patron as an *aguinaldo* that year. On the eve of *Navidad* he chose the finest and took it over to the humble dwelling of the once proud and now miserable Don Tomas.

After the usual greetings, he laid the apparently heavy squash on the bamboo floor. The light of anticipation came into the somber eyes of Tomas. He beckoned to Kikay and gave her some instructions. She returned with the famous suit of finery, now faded and be-draggled but retaining enough of its pristine elegance to make it a return for the gift of Crispulo. This he presented to the latter with a lordly gesture, who withdrew with it as a souvenir of the occasion. The family gathered round the *calabasa* expectantly. Did they hope it



Even Fray Francisco was pleased

was full of treasure? *Quien sabe?* Seizing a bolo, Don Tomas divided it neatly and effectively, but no silver stream followed the stroke. It was merely a large squash fit for the kitchen.



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