

THE MIRACLE OF THE FLOOD OF PENA BLANCA

BY GEORGE BALLARD BOWERS

THE Filipino congregation had gathered on the bank of the Pena Blanca, above the bend around the hill crowned by the ancient Catholic church. The over-zealous American had induced the new Protestants to bring for destruction their home-altar images, crude wood-carvings and several costly works of art brought from Spain centuries before.

The missionary had planned to burn the images but whispered opposition had caused him to suggest casting into the depths of the rushing river. After an hour of argument the elders accepted his compromise. With his assistance and direction, the altar-pieces were bundled, weighted, and laid ready to be pushed into the stream. After prayer and at the missionary's command, the bundles were pushed over the bank to sink into the slimy bottom.

The American assured the people that they had done right, yet they lingered as if reluctant to leave the spot. Their faces bore a look of anxiety like when awaiting an approaching typhoon. Their eyes followed the current, secretly hoping some supernatural agency might save their beloved treasures.

He urged the people to follow him to their little bamboo church where with song they would soon forget. All had started when someone turning for a final look, shouted, "Balic! Balic Balic!" As one, the crowd obeyed the summons, running back to the river's edge, the missionary following in the wake. Women shrieked and fainted. Children cried. Men shouted orders. The images cast into the water but a few moments before were floating in the whirlpool under the hill, bobbing up and down with tiny hands upstretched as if pleading for help. Before the astonished American could find his tongue, boatmen had returned the dripping figures to their respective owners. The unsuccessful effort to destroy them

was proof that the saints so grotesquely represented had interceded. The weak point of the argument did not escape the missionary, again calm and collected. He foresaw the futility of any attempt to explain how the rocky bottom had cut the bundle-bindings and the action of the current and the whirlpool under the hill. Lacking neither patience nor tact, he made no protest against the belief of the crowd but suggested a trial by fire. After a second long conference of elders, the proposal was accepted. The Filipino leader announced that inasmuch as the saints had saved the images from destruction by water, they could as easily preserve them from the flames.

The wet and bedraggled household-gods were settled upon a pile of driftwood. A blaze was started, it flickered and died. A second was kindled to be put out by dripping water. An aged woman came forward to claim her image, but an elder thrust her back. Fearing that he was about to be thwarted a second time, the missionary brought straw from a nearby stack to tuck under the pyre. The fire was rekindled. The onlookers watched with abated breath. In ten minutes there was left only a sheet of fluffy white ashes.

The old priest on the hill had heard his former flock singing while he chanted a mass to vacant benches. For thirty years he had ministered to the parish. He had supplanted the Spanish friar who had won the simple people from Saking, a priest of animism, the religion of the primitive Malay.

Protesting against Christianity, Saking fled with a few of his followers to live outlawed in the mountains. Although those he left behind were thereafter considered Christians, they frequently sought the witch-doctor's advice and assistance to appease the angry ancestral gods who appeared unable to understand that they had accepted the religion of the conqueror only because of the fear of the Spanish Guardia Civil.

When Saking heard that the American missionary taught a new religion unmolested and that the new conquerors were of many creeds, he moved his slender following nearer Pena Blanca, high on the slope overlooking the fertile valley where he had once been so prosperous.

The annual rainy season had gone to give way to summer heat. The missionary's wife had fallen ill and hurried away to Manila. The tobacco fields were yellowing while the people rested in the shade to await the harvest order.

In the early morning of the fifth from the harvest-time, Saking came down to the village. He no longer feared the priest on the

hill and the American was away. People idling in the street gathered quickly. Saking mounted the platform in front of the Chinese bakery.

"My children," he began, "thy fathers were faithful to me. Forgetting ingratitude, I come to warn of an impending danger. The Christians teach that their God once sent a flood even as once did our god Lumicao. I have come to warn that lest ye turn from the gods of the white man, the gods of our ancestors will send again a flood to destroy all who have forsaken him. Do not feel secure because the season of rain is past. Lumicao can send rain out of a clear sky. Follow me. The flood will come."

Saking had ended his tirade abruptly. Although he did not fear Father Felipe of the parish house on the hill, he deemed it wise to avoid a meeting. By the time the old priest had reached the street, the crowd had dispersed and Saking was well on his way home.

In their home, in whispers, the peasants talked of the prophesy. After the Chinaman had repeated Saking's warning, Father Felipe spat in disgust, saying, "Ca! What a fool!" then inquired the price set by the Chinese for the new tobacco crop.

The morning of the first day of harvest was cool and cloudless. The villagers had planned an early start. Someone shouted, "Silence! Listen!" The noisy crowd obeyed. From far up the valley came a roaring like a flight of locusts, then a rumbling like an approaching storm. So intent was their listening that no one had noticed the rising water of the river. The rumbling became a crackle the avalanche of water was upon them, the narrow valley had become a raging torrent destroying all in its path.

Father Felipe watched helplessly from his window while Saking looked on from the peak of Pena Blanca whose white crags had given the village and river its name.

Before sunset of that fateful May day of 1910, the Pena Blanca had returned to its banks. The fertile valley had been left as bare as if swept by fire. The tobacco fields were a sea of mud. The village was gone. The missionary's little church was gone. Nothing remained to mark the site of the once prosperous community except the big stone church and the tumble-down parish house on the hill. More than two-thirds of the village, four hundred souls, had gone to face the Supreme Being who fathers all, be they of whatever faith. As the Supreme Father gathered the lost so the whitehaired priest sheltered the living; although they had betrayed him, he shared his meager fare.

It was not until after the dead had been found, blessed, and buried that the old priest mentioned the calamity. After a mass and before dismissing his slender flock, he urged that they be not disheartened, and reminded them that God never punishes without just cause. He made no reference to his rival and the burned images; Saking, too, was beneath his notice.

The worshippers filed out, the women and children to the temporary shelters, and the men to their work. The priest watched the workers disappear in the jungle, then he walked slowly to his little home to a simple breakfast of rice and dried fish. But the men did not stop to cut bamboo, they hurried to Tugugerao the provincial capital to kill the missionary who had caused an offended God to send a flood to destroy them. Not finding their victim, the angry men returned home to find that the excitement and exposure of the flood had been too much for their beloved Father Felipe. The slender cord of life had broken, he was sleeping his last sleep.

No sooner had Father Felipe been laid to rest under the altar before which he had baptized, blessed and married so many of Pena Blanca, Saking appeared upon the scene. He reminded the remnant of the village that he had warned all of the catastrophe. He told them that he had interceded in their behalf with Lumicao but without avail. Now that the ancestral gods had wiped out the village founded by the white man, Saking proposed that they follow him to a new site beyond the mountain range where they might live and worship as did their forefathers. There being no other to give wiser counsel, the remnant of that once prosperous community followed Saking to the promised land.

A year later, the American, undaunted by the reports of the flood and the exodus of the people, returned to Pena Blanca to find that all he had read was true. After the flood a storm had blown down the little parish house and unroofed the church. Images and ornaments had been carried away or destroyed by vandals. The tropic sun had started wild flowers in the cracks around the crumbling altar.

During his enforced stay in Manila he had learned much of Oriental psychology and the folly of intolerance. He felt it his duty to go to his former followers at whatever cost. He would go to Saking as a healer and teacher rather than as a bearer of a new creed.

But, first, he must solve the mystery of the Miracle of the Flood of Pena Blanca.

Saking's village was located in a long valley running parallel to the great Cagayan of Luzon. Some prehistoric upheaval had broken the dividing range so that the valley beyond might drain through the Pena Blanca into the giant Cagayan.

The missionary decided to press eastward over the range and trust to his knowledge of Malay to save him from the wrath of Saking should he consider him an intruder.

The trail was wide and easy to the mouth of the canyon through which flowed the scanty water of the Pena Blanca. The path over the mountain looked torturous. The American decided to camp. While filling his canteen for the day, he noticed that the canyon floor was nearly level with long stretches of sand and appeared to be no more than five miles long. If a passage through were possible, a long tiresome climb might be avoided. After two hours of walking, wading, and climbing, he was through the canyon, in sight of Saking's village. The pleasure of his discovery made him forget fatigue, the Miracle of the Flood of the Pena Blanca was no longer an enigma. Before cutting into the broad trail leading into the village, he had decided not to mention his trip through the canyon.

In the trail he met some of his former converts. He judged from their greeting that they bore him no illwill. He had never opposed Saking, in fact, he had never known of him or his religion.

Saking received the visitor cordially and gave him the best hut of the village. The American found much malaria and other diseases that responded to his simple remedies. In a month his medicine supply was exhausted, he proposed that Saking furnish men to bring up more from Togugerao. On the morning of their departure, Saking warned his men to avoid the canyon from which no man had ever returned.

When the party had reached the point in the trail where the missionary had found it a month before, he ordered a halt to suggest the short cut. There was a unanimous protest, not one would risk offending the ancestral gods who guarded the canyon depths. The American explained that he had come that way, pointing to his old tracks as evidence of the truth of his assertion. As a compromise, all agreed to follow his old track, though none believed it lead through the canyon. Once within the sheer walls, all forgot their fears. Midway there was a rest after a climb over huge boulders, trees, and other debris.

One of the party called attention to the gigantic scar of the mountain side and inquired of the American where the earth and rock had gone.

"Into the river," he answered.

"But it would have filled the river," persisted the questioner.

"It did."

"When?"

"Before the flood of Pena Blanca. Yes, you see when that slice of the mountain slipped into this narrow canyon it made a dam that caused a big lake. Don't you see the dead weeds and grass in the tress high above your heads? Below there are no weeds and brush in the trees. Well, the water was that high above the dam. There," he pointed, "are parts of the dam still standing. It must have been over one hundred feet high. When it rained in the mountains, more and more water came down. In your new home the water was at least twenty feet deep. You can see that yourselves if you will look for the driftwood in the trees."

The astonished men looked at each other. All had seen the marks but no one had ever connected them with the flood. It was all clear now. They did not consider a mountain slide of the rainy season an act of a god.

"When the dry season came on in the lowland and the rains of the mountains continued, the dam grew weaker and weaker until it broke, he explained.

He had said enough. Saking's brother had suddenly grown ill and was given permission to return home. For the rest of the day the entire conversation was of the erroneous explanations of the disaster that had cost so many lives.

Malays grieve little of the past. They bore Saking no ill will. Had he not warned them? That fact alone was enough to heal any resentment.

Two weeks later when the missionary returned, he found a contrite Saking. After receiving his appointment as mayor of his community, sent by the provincial governor, Saking announced that he was ready to become a Christian and proposed that a church be built with a pulpit to be filled by their American medicine-man.