

## THE WISE LOCUSTS

BY GEORGE BALLARD BOWERS

LOCUSTS had swarmed into Bulao and other Gandara River villages of Samar in 1913 but, because of superstitions, the Filipinos refused to take any measures to protect their fields that would require killing the pests. This created a problem for the authorities to solve with tact rather than force. If the locusts were left unmolested, crops would be destroyed, the peasants without food would resort to brigandage and revolt. The simple folk had to be induced to destroy the newly-hatched locusts but without any appearance of coercion. This was the situation confronting young Davenport, a lieutenant of Constabulary.

Lieutenant Davenport had marched all night, he had been warned by his commanding officer that a few hours might mean success or failure. It was nine o'clock when he sighted Bulao, a cluster of palm-thatched huts on the Gandara. In the rice fields near the village, Davenport came upon a crowd of men, women and children arrayed in holiday attire but no one of them took any notice of him or his soldiers. Some of the villagers sang while others drew weird strains from bamboo flutes or beat gently drums of raw deer-hide. All were careful not to step on any one of the wingless, crawling millions of young locusts clearing the field of green as they advanced.

Davenport was amazed, he could hardly restrain his anger. He longed to disperse the peasants with the heavy cane he carried. His Filipino soldiers grinned significantly; they knew the customs of their people as well as the heart of their white leader.

[Editor's Note.—George Ballard Bowers was for fifteen years an officer of the Philippine Constabulary. He knows the customs and dialects of the Philippines. The incidents of the following story are out of his experience while in command of native troops in Samar.]

"*Tcniente, adi, cayo,*" brought the Filipino leader to take notice of Davenport who immediately continued in melodious Malay. "Why dost thou permit a holiday while thy fields teem with locusts? Look! At thy feet the ground is brown with crawling insects; soon they will take wing, the sky will be dark and thy fields as bare as after the harvest burning. Return to the village. Call all thy people that they may help to save the young plants not already devoured. Tomorrow it will be too late. Thy fields will have been stripped of their green and famine will lurk near."

"Does the young American mean we must kill these?" the Filipino pointed to the ground while a look of horror overspread his face.

"Yes, so the government orders."

There was dismay on the faces of the attentive listeners, their hands instinctively went to the long blades habitually carried.

"My people would never obey that order," he went on with an air of finality, his companions shouted an approving "*Oo, po.*"

Davenport did not fly into a rage but smiling blandly, listened while the old man spoke.

"My people would never obey that order. They would flee to the hills rather than kill intentionally a single locust.

"O American, it was but five years ago that the locusts came in such numbers as now. With them came a white man with soldiers as now. He ordered us to destroy. We obeyed only because of fear and respect for the wisdom of his blood. *Aghic-c! Aghic!* I would forget that year. *Aghic—c! Aghic!*" He pressed his lips and closed his eyes as if in intense pain. "We destroyed swarm after swarm, not enough were left to feed a swift. We were happy. Our fields promised an abundant harvest. Our young men praised the wisdom of the white man but the old men were fearful. The years had taught them that offended spirits find it hard to forgive. Those who believed in the white men did not long rejoice.

"Only a few days after the American and his soldiers had gone, there appeared a cloud in the sky, moving as swiftly as the wind. We watched with fear and trembling, hoping that the storm god might pass us over. The sound was not that of the wind but the hum of myriads of wings beating the air. Although high in the heavens, the sun could not penetrate the cloud. We saw his face not again until the next day.

"For a time we thought the cloud would pass over but to our dismay, it dropped to earth covering all as does the night. When the morning sun had returned our light, the locusts had gone. They had left our fields as if swept by fire. Our houses were mere skeletons, the thatch had been eaten, even the thatch grass of the nearby plain had been devoured. The locusts had avenged their brothers the white man had commanded us to kill. My people had to relearn the wisdom of our ancestors. We cannot risk the vengeance of the myriads that would follow these.

"American, we can not obey. Should you force us, we shall burn our dwellings and flee to the hills; it is better to risk the bullets of the white man than the wrath of the ancestral gods."

"I agree with thee," began Davenport slowly and gravely. "Thy people ought not to incite the anger of the ancestral spirits. But we should be able to devise some plan whereby thy harvest might be saved and famine averted." After a tense silence, Davenport continued. "Now, under the circumstance, I shall not ask thy people to slay the locusts eating thy fields. I shall ask only that thy people dig the pits and lay the traps. My soldiers who are paid by the state and own no property in thy community will slay the locusts."

The Filipino headman explained this last speech to his people. The old men unanimously agreed that the reasoning of the American was flawless. There appeared to be no reason for further argument or delay.

The crowd disbursed, the men to return with picks, shovels and long strips of 12-inch sheetiron. Davenport marked out the pits well in front of the sheet of crawling insects. The drive began, as fast as the pits were finished, each was filled by turning into it the stream of crawling insects by means of the sheetiron placed so as to form a V-shaped obstruction with its apex open to the pit. All locusts beyond the wings of the trap were gently swept back with a broom of shrubs. As soon as a pit was filled with live squirming locusts, it was covered with earth and tamped by the soldiers so as to relieve the peasants of the curse they feared.