

# With What Measure Ye Mete

By Sargent Kayme

“The story of the tax collector of Siargao reminds me of an official of that rank whom I once knew,” said a fellow naturalist whom I once met at a club in Manila, and with whom I had been exchanging experiences. “It was when I was gathering specimens in Negros. They were a bad lot, those collectors, a set of money-grabbers of the worst kind, but, bad as they were, they had a hard time, too.

“If they did not make their pile, out of the poor natives, and go back to Manila or to Spain, rich, in three or four years, it was pretty likely to be because they had fallen victims to the hate of the natives or to the distrust of the officials at headquarters.

“When I first went to Negros, and had occasion to go to the tribunal, as the government house was called, I noticed some objects in one of the rooms so odd and so different from anything I had seen anywhere else that I asked their use. I was told that they were used for catching men who had not paid their taxes.

“Among the various thorn-bearing plants which the swamps of the Philippine Islands produce is one called the ‘bejuco,’ or ‘jungle rope.’ This is a vine of no great size, but of tremendous strength, which, near the end, divides into several slender but very tough branches. Each of these branches is surrounded by many rings of long, wicked, recurved thorns, as sharp and strong as steel fish-hooks, and nearly as difficult to dislodge. The hunter who encounters a thicket of ‘bejuco’ goes around it, or turns back, for it is hopeless to try to go through. While he frees himself from the grasp of one thorn, a dozen more have caught him somewhere else.

“The objects which I had seen in the tribunal guard room were made of long bamboo poles, across one end of which two short pieces had been fastened. To these cross pieces were bound a great number of the ‘bejuco’ vines, so arranged that the innumerable hooks which they bore could be easily swung about in the air.

“The ‘Gobernadorcillo’ who was in office at the time was a man who had no mercy on his people. Negros, with the other islands of the group commonly known as Visayan, forms a province which is under the supervision of a governor who has his headquarters in the island of Cebu, where also the bishop who is the head of the see resides.

“Negros is near enough to Cebu so that the authority of the government could be maintained better there than it could in the more distant islands. When I was there the village of Dumaguete, the chief town and seaport of Negros, contained a stone fort, the most imposing probably of any outside the capital; while the garrison formed of half-breed soldiers who were on duty there, sent down from Cebu with the ‘Gobernadorcillo,’ kept the people in a degree of subjection which in many places would have been impossible.

“The men whom the Governor employed to round up his delinquent subjects were called ‘cuadrilleros.’ Sunday was the day he devoted to the sport, for such I think he really regarded it. The ‘cuadrilleros’ would start out in the morning with a list of the men who were wanted. A house would be surrounded, and unless the man had been given some warning of their coming, and had fled, he would be driven out. Then, if he tried to escape, or refused to come with them, one of the ‘bejuco’ ‘man-catchers’ was swung with a practiced hand in his direction, and, caught in a hundred places by its cruel, thorny

hooks, he was led to town, the journey in itself being a torture such as few men would think they could endure. The whipping came later.

“It was not until Pedro fell into trouble that I came to know really the worst of all this. Of course I knew in a way. I had seen the ‘bejuco’ poles, and the rattans, and the whipping bench, and sometimes, of a Sunday, when I was in the village and could not go away, I had heard cries from the tribunal such as white men do not often hear—such as I hope no one will ever hear again, even from those places.

“Pedro was my Visayan servant, a good worker and a likable fellow in every way. He came to me one Sunday morning in great distress. His twin brother had been dragged into the tribunal that morning by the ‘cuadrilleros,’ and was at that very moment being flogged. Could I not help him? Would I not go to the Governor and tell him that Pedro would pay his brother’s tribute as soon as he could earn the money?

“If course I would. I would gladly do more than that I would pay the money myself and let Pedro earn it afterwards. The man’s last wages, I knew, had gone to pay his old father’s taxes and his own. His family lived some little distance inland.

“We lost no time in getting to the tribunal. Pedro told me on the way, and I think he told me the truth, that his brother’s tax was not rightly due then, else he would have been ready with the money.

“I have always been glad I had Pedro wait outside the door of the government house.

“His brother was bound upon the whipping bench, his body bare to the waist. A row of stripes which ran diagonally across his bare back from hip to shoulder showed where each blow of the rattan had cut through skin and flesh so that the blood flowed back to mark its course.

“‘Stop!’ I cried, rushing forward to where the Governor was standing. ‘Stop! I will pay this man’s tax. How much is it? Let him up! I’ll pay for him.’

“The Governor looked at me a moment, and, excited as I was, I noticed that his face was set in an angry scowl.

“‘You can’t pay for him, now,’ he said. ‘No one can pay for him now.’

“‘I’ll teach them,’ he added, a moment later. ‘See that!’ holding up his left arm, about the wrist of which I saw a handkerchief was bound, fresh stained with blood.

“‘Go on!’ he cried, to the man with the rod.

“At first I could not find out what had happened. Then a soldier told me.

“The man had been brought in like a snared animal, held by the jungle ropes, each thorn of which was agony. When he had cried out that he was unjustly tortured, the Governor himself had dragged the clinging hooks from out his flesh, and had called him a name which to the Visayan means deathly insult if it be not resented.

“At which Pedro’s brother, snatching a knife which was hidden inside his clothing, struck at the Governor and wounded him in the arm, before he could be caught by the soldiers, disarmed, and bound down on the bench.

“And all the time I had been learning this, the blows of the flog-man had been falling, laid on with an artistic cruelty across the other welts.

“I could not bear it. At the risk of destroying my chances to be allowed to finish my work in the island, perhaps even at the risk of putting my own life in danger, I tried once more.

“‘Unless you stop,’ I cried, ‘I will report you to your government.’

“The ‘Gobernadorcillo’ looked at me a moment, and almost smiled—a smile which showed his teeth at the sides of his mouth.

“‘Please yourself,’ he said. ‘But unless you like what I am doing I would suggest that you step out.’

“The man died that night, in the prison beneath the tribunal.

“I kept my word, and wrote a full account of the whole affair to the Governor-general at Manila. It was weeks before I received a curt note in reply, saying that the general government made it a rule not to interfere with the local jurisdiction of its subordinates.

“Pedro never spoke to me of his brother’s death but once. There was in his nature much of the same grim courage which had enabled his brother to bear the awful pain of that day upon the whipping bench without a cry.

“ ‘Senor,’ Pedro said one day, quite suddenly, ‘I would not have you think me a coward, that I do not avenge my brother’s death. I would have killed the Governor at once, or now, or any day, openly, glad to have him know how and why, and glad to die for the deed, only that now there is no one but me left to care for my old father. It is not that I am a coward, but that I wait.’

“I expect that I should have felt myself in duty bound to expostulate with him, upon harbouring such a state of mind as that, regardless of what my own private opinion in the matter may have been, had it not been that before I could decide just what I wanted to say, a man had come to my house to tell me that the mail steamer from Manila, which came to the island only once in two months was come in sight.

“The coming of that particular steamer was of special interest to me, as it was to bring me a stock of supplies; and Pedro and I went down to the dock at once.

“I remember that invoice in particular, because it brought me a supply of chloroform, a drug, which I had been out of, and for which I was anxiously waiting. Two months before, a native from far back in the forest had brought me a fine live ape. I could not keep him alive,—that is not after I left the island,—and I wanted his skin and skeleton for the museum, but I hated to mar the beauty of the specimen by a wound. That night with Pedro’s help I put him quietly out of the way, with the help of the chloroform.

“Afterwards the thought came back to me that as we took away the cone and cotton, when I was sure the animal was dead, Pedro said, ‘Senor, how like a man he looks.’

“Several weeks later the residents of Dumaguete were thrown into intense if subdued excitement by the news that the Gobernadorcillo was dead. Apparently well as usual the night before, he had been found dead in his bed in the morning, in the room in the ‘gobierno’ in which he slept. If he had been killed on the street, or found stabbed, or shot, in his room, the commotion would not have been so great. Such things as that had happened in Negros more than once, to other officials. But this man was simply dead.

“The ‘teniente primero,’ who, as next in authority, took charge of affairs upon the death of his superior, sent a man during the day to ask me if I would come to the tribunal. He was a very decent man, or would have been, I think, under a different executive. Naturally he was anxious, under the circumstances, as to his own standing with the authorities at Cebu, and he asked for my evidence, if necessary, as that of one of the few foreigners in the place.

“In company with him I visited the late governor’s room in the ‘gobierno.’ It was a large room, like all of those in the palace, as the executive mansion was sometimes called, built upon the ground floor, and having several lattice windows. A soldier was on

duty in the room. As we were coming out, this man came to us, and saluting the 'teniente,' handed him a small tin can, saying, 'A servant cleaning the room, found this.'

"The 'teniente' looked at the can curiously, and then, handing it to me, asked me if I knew what it was.

"It is a can in which a kind of strong liquor sometimes comes,' I said. Then I unscrewed the top. The can was empty, but I showed him that there was still a strong and pungent odor which lingered in it. The explanation satisfied him. The late governor had been known to be a man who had more than a passing liking for strong liquors.

"I did not feel called upon to explain that the can was a chloroform can, and that no one in the place but myself had any like it.

"When I went home, though, and counted my stock, I found, as I had expected, that it was one can short; and that the cone and cotton which I had used for giving the drug had been replaced by one freshly made.

"I did not think it necessary, either, to impart the result of my investigations to the authorities, or to suggest to them any suspicions which might have been roused in my own mind.

"Even if there had not been very decided personal reasons why I would better not, unless I was obliged to, I had in mind that letter of a few months before, when these same authorities had informed me of their policy of non-interference in local affairs.

"Moreover, I could not but remember what I had seen that day, when the man now dead had said to me, 'I'll teach them.' If his teachings had been effectual, had I any reason to criticise?"