

# “The Dancing Carabao”

By W. Patrick Lang

*“Oh, the monkeys have no tails in Zamboanga,*

*Oh, the monkeys have no tails in Zamboanga,*

*Oh, the monkeys have no tails,*

*They were bitten off by whales,*

*Oh, the monkeys have no tails in Zamboanga.”*

27<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment (Wolfhounds) Marching Song

The date was October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1924. The place was the city of Zamboanga, on Mindanao Island in the Department of the Philippines. Zamboanga was then a city of one hundred thousand souls. Colonial Spanish architecture predominated. There was a “Plaza Mayor” in which the Inquisition had burned relapsed *Conversos* from Islam. There was a cathedral on one side of this square. It was built in a style popular in Spain in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Dominican friars, now mostly of Filipino descent, were still seen in the streets in their black and white habits.

In the city’s three hundred year old Presidio, Spanish troops had been replaced by Americans as a result of victory in the war against Spain some twenty five years before. Now the garrison was an 800 man Philippine Scouts battalion of regular US troops, once again of mainly Filipino descent.

Outside the town, the countryside was policed by the mounted gendarmerie of the Philippine Constabulary. This rural police force was led by US Army sergeants seconded and

promoted to officers' commissioned ranks. Some US commissioned officers served as well in the senior positions. The constables were all Filipinos and representative of the local population in whatever district they served. They fought a lot against *ladrones*, non-Filipino tribals of such interesting groups as; Ifugaos, Igorots, Negritos, and the occasional Moro "sultan" wrapped in the emotional comfort of the idea of "jihad." These were the most worrisome of the Constabulary's usual foes. Itinerant mosque preachers spread notions from India and Arabia of the duty of Muslims to fight for the 'Umma in Mindanao and the islands that stretched away southwest to Borneo.

There was a tavern in the city, just next to the big, blue domed mosque paid for by the Turkish sultan in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It was called "The Dancing Carabao." A garishly painted sign hung over the old, metal studded Spanish door. It depicted the ubiquitous Southeast Asia domesticated water buffalo standing placidly in a muddy wallow. The stone walls of the inn were covered in tan stucco. They were thick and easily carried the weight of the mahogany door that hung on wide strap hinges. The bar was owned by a retired US Navy chief petty officer and his Chinese wife. She was from Shanghai. He was Chicago born. He had served in the "Yangtze River Patrol" in USS Palos, a gunboat built in Manila and then in the cruiser flagship of the Navy's Asiatic Squadron. This ship usually was on station at Shanghai so that it could command the river patrol gunboats and other fleet units in the China Sea. He had been a ship's cook and at the end was chef of the admiral's mess on board the cruiser. His wife had been a waitress in Shanghai. The "Carabao" was a favorite "retreat" for constabulary officers, sergeants from the army garrison and those Filipino soldiers who had developed a taste for American food and company. US Army officers and their wives were not seen there. They

preferred their clubs and mutual entertainments. This was understandable. The upper floors housed the owners and a thriving bordello. The Chief's wife had imported girls from China. They were popular with the soldiers and constabulary. She was a splendid hostess, and known for her "mothering" of injured soldiers. Many a man with injured hands or arms had enjoyed the experience of having her feed him his dinner with chopsticks.

The mosque looked like the "Suleimaniyah" in Istanbul. A great many Muslims worshipped there weekly. The town was nearly equally divided in faith between the followers of Islam and Catholics. The Americans, of course, were mainly Protestants, if anything.

Four Constabulary officers assembled there the evening of the 11<sup>th</sup>. It was their custom to spend the night there monthly, taking refuge from isolation and loneliness within the tavern's walls, feasting on the cook's American dishes, and sampling the girls on the third floor.

They were friends.

Two of them, Walt Laine and Jim Davis, were from the upper Midwest. They were from Minnesota and North Dakota respectively. They had served in the 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment in Mexico in the Punitive Expedition of 1917.

Another, Douglas Burns, had been a Canadian soldier but came south into the United States to escape prosecution for a disciplinary offense involving another man's wife. He transferred to tanks in 1918 to serve with the "First US Tank Brigade" in France. He would have stayed with tanks after the war but the US Army got rid of them all, hoping to save money when facing the reality of peace time budgets.

The fourth, Geraldo Martinez, was from California. He was a captain in the National Guard, there. He had served with honor in Europe in World War One. He asked to be brought

on active duty in 1922 and sent to the Constabulary when he could not find work suitable to a gentleman in California.. His family had been *hidalgos* in the *pueblo* of Los Angeles when the first *gringos* arrived, but that meant little to the horde of Texans and Oklahomans now flowing like the proverbial river into his homeland. To them, he was just another “beaner.” He knew the other three from a few months that he had served at Fort Mills. This post was Philippine Department Headquarters, on Corregidor Island in Manila Bay.

They ate, drank and played pinochle into the morning hours. After dawn, they awoke in their rooms on the third floor to screaming, shouting and shots in the streets. They dressed and left their Chinese women friends hiding under the beds.

It soon became clear that a mutiny of Moro soldiers of the Philippine Scouts raged in the streets of Zamboanga. The garrison battalion was mixed. Most of the troops were Filipino Christians but there was also an infantry company of Moro Scouts.

Some units of the Scouts were altogether Muslims from Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, but most included Moro companies within majority Christian battalions. These soldiers were fierce fighters but their feeling of allegiance to the uniform they wore was fragile and some cause or imagined cause always carried the potential for friction.

In this case, a newly assigned and recently commissioned American officer had made what seemed to him a trivial comment about local custom and after the “issue” brewed for a bit, the offended parties found the lieutenant involved walking down a street and stabbed him to death. Realizing that retribution was inevitable when the Army discovered this murder, the soldiers and the rest of their company broke into the arms room, took their rifles and ran amok in the streets looking for more Americans.

When the four Americans reached the ground floor, they found that three Military Policemen from the provost guard had taken shelter in the bar with their sergeant. They had broken the glass of the windows so that they could shoot up and down the street, especially at the open space in front of the mosque. They quite reasonably believed that trouble would likely come from that direction.

The innkeeper and his wife stood, or perhaps crouched, behind the bar. The Chinese lady shouted in rage that the “bastid MPs” had broken her windows. Who would pay for this, she demanded?

2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Laine walked to the swinging doors and started out into the street.

One of the MPs grabbed his arm and pulled him back into the barroom.

A bullet smacked into the door frame near his head. The report of the rifle arrived. The marksman was far off, perhaps in a tall structure like the cathedral’s bell tower.

The wiry little lieutenant staggered back into the room. “What the hell is going on?” he asked.

“Moros,” the MP sergeant replied. “They have gone *juramentado* and are killing people all over town. We came in here to get away from snipers in the buildings. The garrison commander is organizing a counter-attack to clear the streets, but, it will take a while....”

The four officers looked at each other, and then at the lady owner.

“Any chow, Mai?” Davis asked. “Mighty hungry...”

“And hung over,” Burns added.

“You good custommahs, don’t break nussing, don’ beat up girls. I send Henry to kitchen. Bacon, egg, good?” Henry Brown, her husband, left for the kitchen to see what there was in the iceboxes.

“Yer a good woman, Mai, “Davis said in a low voice. “If it wasn’t fer Henry...”

“Hmmpfh!” she sniffed, looking at him with a slight smile.

“Now you go back, and see to it that Henry doesn’t spit in our eggs,” Laine told her.

“And bring some for the MPs!”

She waved as she went through the kitchen doors.

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About the time they finished breakfast, the shooting seemed to die down a little in the street.

A couple of the Chinese girls came down the stairs and could not be “shooed” back upstairs.

The four men decided to take shelter under a table where they could continue their gaming and conversation. They had changed into uniform; khaki shirts with red and gold shoulder straps, riding britches, cavalry boots with short, blunt, Army spurs. Their broad brimmed campaign hats lay on the table.

The two girls were joined by two more. They all sat with their backs pressed to “their men” and chattered in Chinese amongst themselves.

“Henry! Bring us a bucket of suds! San Miguel, not that British swill from Singapore... Eight glasses, *por favor*, and keep it coming, right, Mai?” Davis had his way and the beer flowed freely in an endless supply of pails. “Thanks, Mai, you’re a sweetie,” he said. He was always her favorite among the four.

She kept looking at him as he sat under the table with a pretty girl.

Mai’s husband was rooted behind the bar. He looked thoroughly afraid. “What if they...?”

“Don’t worry, Chief,” Martinez laughed. “We’ll protect your home. Won’t we boys?” he asked the MPs.

They were happy with their breakfast and looked enviously at the beer and girls.

Martinez’ girl had come downstairs wearing a blue silk *cheongsam* with embroidered gold and silver flowers across the body and skirt. She looked a little older, or perhaps the right description would have been that she looked more mature, than the other three. Those were clearly adolescents.

“What’s her name?” Laine asked Martinez. He was both appreciative and envious.

“Lin. Why?” Geraldo Martinez was shuffling several packs of cards together and did not look up.

The girl who was being discussed looked at Laine, then at Martinez and then returned to her chat with the other girls.

“Walt, where were you last month?” Davis asked... “We missed you. Mai and Henry missed you. Those Igorots can’t be all that wonderful that you would forget your old friends?”

“No, they are a hard lot. My district has almost nothing in it but tribesmen except in a few towns in the valleys. My constables are all Filipinos. They can’t stand people smaller and darker than they are. And, now I have about a dozen “Old Maid” school teachers from New England in the towns. They are all Protestants and the Mullahs and Catholic priests hate them...”

“Aren’t you Catholic?” Martinez asked.

“That’s the rumor,” Laine replied. “I’m not much for that kind of thing... I was in Manila with my two Navy brothers. We don’t see each other much. Phil is on a submarine at Cavite, and the other one, Sean, is at Shanghai waiting for a new gunboat to come out of the yard there. We got a little tight, and Phil drove his car off a pier in *Intramuros* in the middle of the night. It was an open car so we swam to the pier but the car is somewhere on the bottom of the bay. Last I heard the two of them were still trying to ‘square’ this with the Manila police. I left as soon as I could to come home on the “dispatch boat.”

Davis looked at the tan colored wall beside his elbow. Motion had attracted his attention. He picked a tiny chameleon lizard called a *gecko* off the wall and dropped it in a dice cup they had under the table for the purpose of shooting “craps.” He put his hand over the open end of the cup, shook it a few times and then rolled the lizard out on the cloth on which they were dealing cards. “Snake eyes!” he laughed. The lizard lay on its back. Davis prodded it with a finger tip. “The engineers are building an iron bridge over the Sindagan River,” he said. “I am trying to keep the locals quiet enough to let them finish it in peace.”

The lizard staggered to its feet and wandered off toward the wall.

“What’ll that do? Burns asked.

"It'll open up the market towns in the interior of the island," was the response.

"And let us get troops into the mountains to keep the tribes quiet," Burns commented.

Under the table, the gambling continued as the sound of mayhem outside the inn waxed and waned throughout the morning.

"What do you think will happen here," Martinez asked.

"Oh, the garrison will bring enough force in to clear out the mutineers," said Laine.

"No, I mean in P.I. generally? Are they going to fight us again for independence?"

Burns recited:

*"Oh, he may be a little brown brother to big Bill Taft, but he ain't no brother of mine."*

Everyone laughed except Martinez. Even the Chinese women laughed.

Martinez asked if they thought the American administration of the islands was doing anything for the various peoples.

"I think they will be much the same when we are gone as they were when we arrived," said Burns.

"What do you mean "we?" You're Canadian," laughed Martinez.

"Not any longer. Ottawa took that when I joined the US Army. No, I am going to live in coastal California when I have enough time to retire."

"When will that be?" Laine enquired.

"1935, but I might stay on for thirty years. The retired pay is a lot better. That would be 1945."

"Little brown brother. You don't really mean that," Martinez protested.

They all just looked at him.

“Well, maybe not,” Davis said. He was looking at the Chinese whore in the beautiful blue silk dress.

At 11 o’clock, one of the MPs yelled. “Here they come! There’re a dozen of ‘em.”

Rifle fire rang through the room. Bullets came through the door and windows, striking the walls and wooden bar.

The owners cowered on the floor behind it.

A bayonet stab through a window wounded one MP in the back.

Laine picked his service automatic up from the floor and shot the mutineer in the face.

Three more of them broke down the door and charged into the room with rifles and bayonets. They were screaming “Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!” The MPs fought them around the door but a hail of .45 pistol bullets from the men under the table killed all three.

Laine and Davis got up, stretched and walked to the door where they and the MPs threw the bodies out into the street. They rejoined the others and called for another pail of San Miguel.

“Good pistol, the .45 Colt,” Burns said. “Good pistol.”

There were still pools of liquid blood on the floor.

“Yes, a good pistol,” said Davis. “Did you hear that Sergeant Major Keene retired from department headquarters?”

“Who’s that,” Laine asked.

“You’re joking,” said Davis.

“No, who is he?”

“He was a corporal in the Wolfhounds in 1912. They were fighting some sultan on Jolo in the Sulu Islands. They reached the sultan’s ‘capital’ on a mountain top. It had a six foot wooden stockade around it. It was a little place, maybe a thousand people; maybe, they couldn’t get close enough to break down the wall with rams. There was no artillery, just rifles and pistols. The Moros made a couple of charges out the gate with those little nets tied around their nuts and twisted until they went mad with the pain. They were yelling and screaming as usual and swinging those wavy swords. They were driven back every time but it looked like a stand-off.”

“So, what happened” Laine pressed.

“Some genius came up with the idea of throwing a man over the wall to open the gate from the inside...”

“Jesus wept...”

“Probably. The officers asked for volunteers. You know how that goes, ‘well, men, for the regiment...’”

“Keene volunteered?”

“Yup, he weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet back then. So they gave him four .45s. They were new guns. Two in his fists and two tied to his belt. His pockets were full of magazines. Then, the six biggest men in the regiment picked him up, ran forward under covering fire and hurled him over the fence...”

“And he was killed...”

“No. There was a tremendous noise of firing inside, along with a lot of “Allahu Akbar” as well and then silence. After a moment, the gate slowly swung open. Keefe staggered out and

collapsed. Inside the gate were a dozen *Moro juramentados* on the ground. The regiment charged through the gate and the whole thing was over in a few minutes. “

“Medal of Honor?” asked Laine.

“Oh, yes, and a nice job in headquarters, he’s been there ever since, a kind of museum exhibit.” Martinez laughed at his own joke.

“Lin” looked at him over her shoulder and smiled.

“Here come the troops!” yelled the MP sergeant.

The Constabulary officers went to the door in time to see a skirmish line of Filipino Scouts sweep by with fixed bayonets. Their sergeants and officers strolled along behind the line. Some had not even drawn their pistols.

Another line could be seen converging on the mosque.

It was suddenly all over, finished.

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“Next month boys?”

Laine asked the question as an abstraction as they paid their bills to Mai at one end of the now bullet scarred bar.

“Lin” stood next to Martinez looking up at him. There was something wistful in her pretty face. She looked gorgeous in the slim Chinese dress. The high collar and the slit along the outside of a thigh were marvelous to behold.

Captain Martinez tried not to look at her, but it was impossible, just impossible.

“She tell you her name Lin?” Mai asked. She had been watching the scene between the captain and this girl. “Her name Mary, not Lin anymore. She Christian from Shanghai. Her father big man in *Kuomintang*. He killed by communists. That why she whore. She speak English real good.”

Martinez waited.

“Yes, my name is Mary,” the young woman began. “My father was a Nationalist officer. He made the revolution against the emperor. I went to school with nuns until my family was gone... Please take me with you, please, please.”

“You never told me, all night...”

Mary looked at the floor.

Martinez looked at Mai enquiringly.

She held out a hand, palm up. “You pay her bill to me, then take her. She too fancy for my house. I want her gone.” She looked sideways at her husband in a way that carried meaning.

Henry seemed fascinated by a spot near the bathroom door.

“My credit good?” Martinez asked.

“All time,” Mai answered. “You take her.”

“I command a police district in the mountains,” Geraldo told Mary. “I have fifty mounted constables and two hundred square miles of territory to police. I have a small set of quarters and two servants. You would not be a servant.”

Mary put her arm through his. She looked almost shy.

In front of the "Carabao," they all saw that the sign had bullet holes in it and had been knocked off one hinge.

Mai waved her arms in anger and went back in the bar.

His friends lifted Mary up and put her on the horse behind Captain Martinez.

She clung to his back as they rode away, returning to his post.

## The End

*"Damn, damn, damn the Filipinos.*

*Cross eyed kakiak ladrones.*

*Underneath the starry flag,*

*Civilize'em with a Krag,*

*And return us to our own beloved homes."*

*Unknown*