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Caloocan: The War-Prayer Answered

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Although Mark Twain appears as a character in two of my historical novels, he is absent from the third, *Havana Heat*, which is set mostly in Cuba in 1911. At least I thought Twain was absent. After re-reading “The War-Prayer,” I’m beginning to wonder.

The novel’s protagonist is Luther “Dummy” Taylor, a fictionalized version of a deaf baseball pitcher who starred, a century ago, for John McGraw’s champion New York Giants. Luther Taylor lacked a “voice” in any standard sense; nonetheless he narrates this tale of barnstorming baseballers in Cuba shortly after the end of its formal U.S. military occupation.

During the Spanish-American conflict, Taylor’s older brother Simpson served in the Philippines with the Twentieth Kansas regiment. The Taylors had grown up in the small Kansas town of Baldwin. This is how I have Luther portray his brother’s homecoming:

In November '99 they'd returned to a heroes' welcome in Topeka, where thousands turned out. I'd gone and seen the whole grand works: a military parade with dozens of brass bands, the massed blue-clad soldiers swelled by units of National Guard and G.A.R., and led by General Funston himself, a tiny bemedaled man sitting with his wife

in a carriage drawn by splendid black horses flanked by Filipinos in native costume. Six of the returnees were Baldwin boys, and the orange hats and sweaters of Baldwin University students made a bold swash in the throng. That night fireworks shot into the sky and cannons shook the ground.

[War-Prayer: then home from the war, bronzed heroes welcomed, adored, submerged in golden seas of glory!]

I admired Sim tremendously. I'd known ballplaying heroics, but he'd gone into the world and risked his life for freedom's cause. What I didn't know was that the fighting in the Philippines had been a far cry from his old romantic dreams, or from the Cuban campaigns described so raptly in all the papers. A year or so after his return, we got drunk one night and he poured it all out. Nightmares had been plaguing him and he needed to talk to somebody. What happened was that Aguinaldo's rebels, opposed to us replacing the Spaniards over them—one tyrant for another, they figured—resorted to increasingly bloody tactics, men and boys calling the Americans "amigo" in daylight and murdering them at night. Retaliation was swift and vicious. Both sides used torture, and few prisoners survived. The worst came when the Twentieth Kansas stormed the shipping center of Caloocan, gunning down Filipinos of all ages and torching the city; few of its 17,000 inhabitants lived to see the next day.

[War-Prayer: help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire...]

The army put clamps on the press, of course, but a few soldiers wrote home about it, and the Anti-Imperialist League printed their letters. That was about the time Sim told me of the massacre. He never brought it up again, and, except for saying once that it'd be something to see the new canal being dug through Panama, he showed no further interest in foreign travel. Baldwin became his world.

I have no idea how Simpson Taylor actually viewed his combat experience—he and those who knew him well are dead many years now—but it seems at least plausible that he might have been troubled by the carnage his regiment wreaked. In any case, it is informative to take a closer look at that homecoming celebration, as described in a Douglas County, Kansas newspaper, datelined November 10, 1899.

Arriving in Topeka, returning soldiers leaped from the trains "and fell into the arms of friends, who grasped them and hugged them and slapped them on the back and passed them on to the waiting mothers, sisters and sweethearts, who kissed and embraced them and wept for very joy."

At the state house school children sang “America.” The battle-worn standards carried by the Kansas regiment was ceremoniously returned, and in his speech the Kansas governor said, “Across land and sea, from Bunker Hill to Caloocan, [the U.S. flag] has been the glorious emblem of liberty.” We can safely assume he did not add that “liberty” in Caloocan resulted from the slaughter of thousands of Filipino civilians.

That evening a banquet was spread for over a thousand people. The newspaper gushed: “The boys of the Twentieth and their friends disposed of tons of eatables prepared by the ladies of Topeka,” and added a splendid note of communal *noblesse oblige*: “Enough was left to feed 2,000 more. It was given to the poor.”

During the festivities, General Frederick Funston, commander of U.S. forces in the Philippines, was presented with a sword valued at \$1,000. He would carry it as “a precious memento” when he returned to his military duties, he promised, and added modestly, “I have received more than my share of the glory of the Achievements of the Twentieth Kansas.”

Funston, as it happens, was the focus of some of Twain’s most excoriating prose. The man, he wrote, was born “liking cruelty and other moral slag, and therefore cannot help practicing them” (“In Defence of General Funston” 1902). “Funston says it is ridiculous to regard the Filipinos as sufficiently civilized for self-government,” Twain wrote acidly. “If he had any sagacity he would keep these innocent sarcasms to himself, not bray them out in public” (“Notes on Patriotism,” 1902). Later, when Funston was transferred to Colorado, Twain even blamed him for the removal of *Huckleberry Finn* from Denver’s public library.

A member of the Anti-Imperialist League, the organization which eventually “leaked” revelations of Cuban concentration camps, use of torture by Americans (does this sound familiar?), as well as the Caloocan massacre, Twain opposed the extension of a war to “liberate” Cubans into a grab of the Philippines, saying “we have taken possession of a wide-spreading archipelago as if it were our property.” He added bitterly, “we have pacified some thousands of the islanders and buried them” (“The Philippine Incident” 1901).

And what was the reaction to outcries by Twain and other anti-imperialists? As historian G.J.A. O’Toole says, in *The Spanish War*:

The New York Times declared that the league should ‘send rifles. Maxim guns, and stores of ammunition to the Filipinos, a policy [that would be] ‘more openly and frankly treasonable.’ The expansionists charged the peace movement with prolonging the war by lending encouragement to Aguinaldo and the insurgents. Antiwar agitation, they said, amounted to stabbing the American fighting man in the back.

Treason. . .encouraging insurgents. . . undermining our troops. . . .

Again, aren't those phrases all too familiar?

[War-Prayer: the half dozen rash spirits that ventured to disapprove of the war and cast a doubt upon its righteousness straightway got such a stern and angry warning that for their personal safety's sake they quickly shrank out of sight. . .]

Iraq appears to be yet one more bloody manifestation of what Twain delineates so vividly: the same righteous prayers, the same accommodating god. It would be satisfying to think that those who stand in opposition to exploitative wars, now and in the future, will not shrink out of sight.