

FILIPINO COCK FIGHTING

WITH THREE ILLUSTRATIONS

By LEON L. GARDNER

Wherever one goes in the Philippine Islands he will see the bare-footed and ragged Filipino with his pet cock (fig. 88) under his arm or squatted by the roadside or by his miserable nipe shack, training it in the essentials of fighting. This cock is his most beloved possession, the hope of his financial prosperity, the object of his unflinching devotion. Cock fighting is the national sport around which is centered the life of the community, while the cock pit is the communal gathering place. The performance of the cock in the terrifying commotion of the pit, his undaunted courage, and his response to training are so remarkable that they warrant a brief comment in these pages.



Fig. 88. THE LIGHT OF HIS LIFE.

The fighting cocks are ordinarily the pick of the native breeds although in some localities there is a strain of the Saigon chicken which is a pea combed fighter that is very game. The Red Pyle Game from the United States is much prized but is extremely susceptible to the endemic diseases of this region. The best known and most desired game cocks in these Islands are the "Banaba", a black-breasted red cock with black beak, shanks, and toes, that originates from southern Luzon. Good fighters, those that have won a number of contests, sell for remarkably high prices, considering the impoverishment of the average Filipino.

The selected cock is separated from the brood and carefully nurtured. He is fed daily once only, and then on unhusked rice. At the age of four months and thereafter he is kept in confinement, tethered by a peg and cord or in the arms of his devoted owner and trainer. At this same age the training commences; but the cock is not entered in any contests until it is at least a year old. It is taught by handling, stroking, and carrying to trust its trainer so that, no matter how be-

wildering the noise and confusion, it will stand perfectly still and allow itself to be caught and picked up. It is a common sight to see such cocks being carried by the owner while the bird lies contentedly on the palm of the hand, legs dangling and head erect and defiant, absolutely fearless and trusting.

To develop the thigh muscles so that a swift leap and powerful blow will be possible the legs are massaged frequently. The abdomen and pectoral muscles are also rubbed so that the skin of these parts becomes a bright red—hence the term "the pink of condition". The cock is also made to dance by being teetered up and down on the ground, which strengthens the toes. Another thigh developing exercise is to press the cock strongly to the ground from which position it is allowed to scramble to freedom. Finally, twice a week or even daily the rooster is given a cold sponge and massage. The comb is usually cut off so as to allow no hold for the adversary.

Combativeness and skill are developed by means of trial bouts. Two cocks are brought face to face but held securely by their tails. As they rush at each other they are tugged back by the trainers and so this goes on, the cocks straining to engage in combat and the trainers pulling them back by their tails. Occasionally a trial go is permitted and at such times careful watch is kept of the tactics employed by the cock. The best fighters are those that leap quickly and strike out viciously with the legs. Some cocks are shrewd and wait until the opponent has expended his leap after which they will close in and kill him. They are often expert at dodging and skulking under and away from the opponent and then suddenly turning and leaping upon him. An expert fighter wins many bouts and can be counted upon to kill his opponent unless the latter has equal ability. Many cocks will leap only at the moment of conflict and fail to strike with the legs, others are slow moving, and still others are witless and fail to take advantage of breaks. These are, of course, all undesirable traits; and the cock is apt to go into a pot pie before he enters a contest and is sure to anyway at the termination of his first battle which he never survives.

The cock pit is usually a raised platform, perhaps thirty feet in diameter, about the height of a man's shoulders from the ground. The common crowd gathers around this. Over their heads tiers of seats are constructed above the pit in the form of an amphitheater to which special admission is charged.

It is well worth while to visit one of these pits. The bouts are fought on every Sunday and holiday. During the day all traffic is headed in the direction of the pit so that no one need ever inquire the direction. Women in bright colored dresses with huge baskets filled with produce balanced on their heads, children carrying filthy fly-blown pork on dirty cords, the young bucks of the town with gaudy shirts the tails of which always hang outside the trousers, two-wheeled carts drawn by diminutive sweating ponies and loaded with mobs of people, pigs, sugar cane, and produce, the cock trainers with the lights of their lives tucked carefully under their arms, the men of the town, many in bright red jeans with a few pesos burning holes in their pockets, all are headed for the day at the pitside.

A few centavos gain admission through the fence that surrounds the whole enclosure. Vendors are squatted on the ground on every side displaying all kinds of wares from spectacles and diamond rings (imitation) to cloth and rotten fish. The air reeks with unimaginable odors. Fighting stallions, squealing pigs, barking dogs, howling children, chattering women, yelling betters, and crowing cocks set up a bedlam of ear splitting sound. There is a fascination about all of this activity

and it is little wonder that to those whose meager lives consist of endless days in the paddy fields and three bowls of rice each day this should represent the acme of life's pleasures.

Ahead is the cock pit. Here the trainers are pairing their cocks for the fights. The feathers of the thighs are plucked out to make the cock look thinner than he really is; but not to be fooled by this each man tries the weight of the opposing cock and if there is any great disparity endeavors to gain an advantage by an agreement to shift the gaff to the right leg of the larger rooster. The left leg is the one with which the main blow is struck, so that the gaff is always on this leg unless the rooster is handicapped. Another little maneuver that insures success to the challenger, if he is fortunate enough to consummate it, is to feed a grain of corn filled with opium to the opposition!

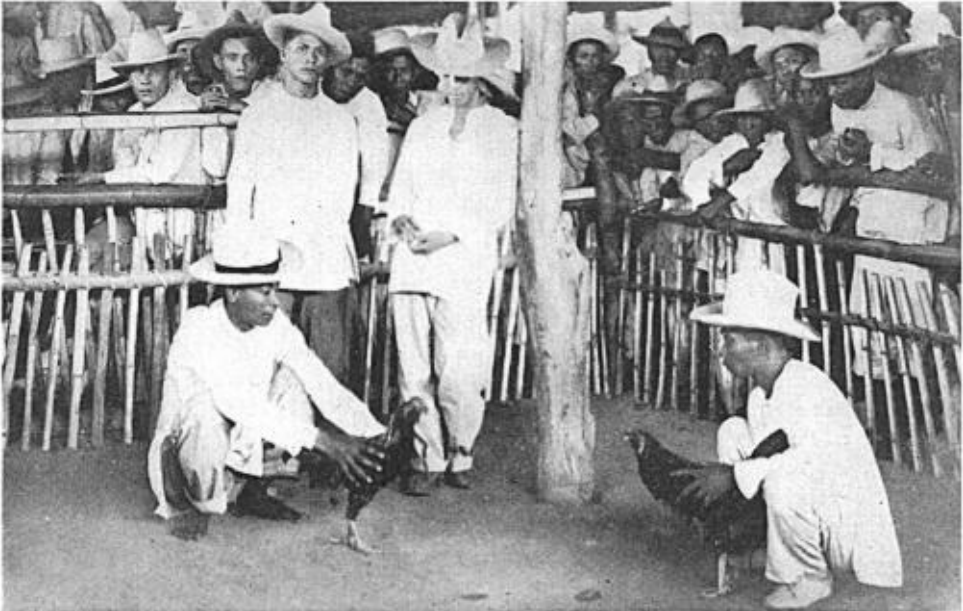


Fig. 89. THE NATIONAL PASTIME.

Courtesy of Denniston's Inc., Manila.

One peso admits to the amphitheater where a milling, sweating, jostling crowd gazes down on the contests. Two cocks are brought in, the gaffs on their left legs sheathed in leather scabbards. These gaffs are about two and one-half to three inches long, slightly curved with the concavity upward, razor-sharp on the upper surface, and needle pointed. They are capable of inflicting severe wounds so that there is always a wild scramble to avoid the fighting cocks when they are engaged in conflict. They are adjusted at an angle as is the normal spur. The cocks strut about proudly, crowing and indifferent to each other's presence. Pandemonium breaks loose, such mad yelling and howling, voices shrill with blood lust, wild with avarice and hope as bets are hurled about the amphitheater. One cock picks at his gaff and steps around with jerky gait. The gaff irritates him and both cocks are withdrawn while the ferocious yelling dies down to a muttering undertone.

Two more cocks are brought in and the shouting swells to its former fury. The referee takes the hat from one owner's head signifying that he has not the money

to meet the full bet of the challenger and inviting backing from the crowd. This is forthcoming, usually at odds. Money is hurled into the pit where it lies or is picked up and carried to the bookmaker's table. Men shriek the odds across the pit, waving their arms and fingers as they lay side bets. At important fights such as inter-provincial contests as much as 50,000 pesos (\$25,000) are wagered, a truly staggering sum in this land of poverty where men will stake their all on one leap of a fighting cock.

The noise dies down as the bets are laid. The referee, whose duty it is to give the signal for the combat and who is "going to make for the cocks a sentence" (adjudge the winner in case of doubt) orders the scabbards removed. Both cocks are picked up and make no protest in spite of the terrific confusion. After the knives are bared each cock is allowed to peck the other three times on the side of the head which stimulates their fighting instincts and incidentally gives a chance for a little

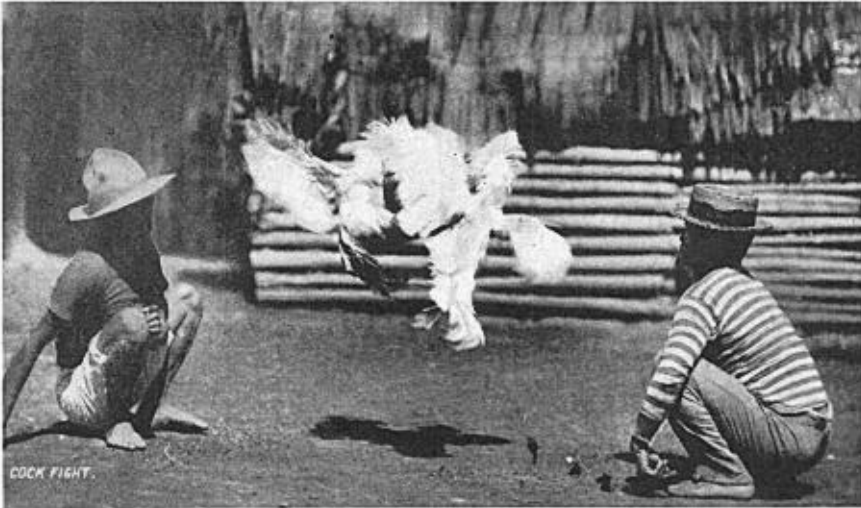


Fig. 90. THE GAFFS SINK HOME.

Courtesy of Denniston's Inc., Manila.

foul play by smearing poison on the area that is to be pecked. The owners now withdraw a few paces, each knowing the characteristics of his cock and seeking to give it the advantage (fig. 89). Perhaps one cock does best when released at a distance, from which point it will hurl itself like a thunderbolt at its enemy. The second cock, on the other hand, may be a low fighter which seeks to feint until the other is off its guard and then slash it with the gaff. In any event, when the referee gives the signal both cocks are released. For a moment they ignore each other, stepping warily about. Then they come face to face, the neck feathers spread out fanwise and their heads bob up and down. The crowd is yelling furiously while the cocks maneuver for an opening. Suddenly they leap high into the air and meet in a flurry of feathers (fig. 90) as the gaffs sink home and a shrill yell of triumph breaks from the crowd. One cock has already received his death blow and jets of crimson blood spurt out and stain the earthen floor. They may leap again a number

¹ My informant is my Filipino mess sergeant who owns a cock pit and has trained cocks for years.

of times, one cock lagging in energy as his life flickers out. Game to the end, he faces his foe struggling to keep his feet until death whirls him out.

The winning cock is the one that kills his opponent, except in such cases when one or the other runs away, an uncommon occurrence. In that case the aggressor is the winner even though mortally wounded and even though he sinks in death as the other turns to run.

Camp John Hay, Mountain Province, P. I., January 30, 1930.