

ACT ONE

The setting is a clearing in a forest, just outside 19th century Manila. SIMOUN, a jeweller in a black coat and blue glasses, and KUWAGO, a former school teacher and chemist, meet in this clearing. Simoun is looking around.

SIMOUN

Are you sure you weren't followed?

KUWAGO

As far as I can tell. It'd be hard in all this. There is enough chaos to get lost in.

(Simoun stops pacing.)

SIMOUN

Have you heard anything about the bomb?

KUWAGO

There are many possible thieves...

SIMOUN

You didn't...

KUWAGO

I never told a soul...

SIMOUN

Are you sure?

KUWAGO

Well, except those who were supposed to know the plan...

SIMOUN

Did you swear them to silence?

KUWAGO

I thought it was understood.

SIMOUN

Idiot! Now it could be anybody!

KUWAGO

Be that as it may, the fact stands that the bomb did not go off. Too many people are now hunting us.

SIMOUN

Nobody will find us in all this mess. Where is Basilio?

KUWAGO

Last I saw him, he agreed to meet us here. We should still get a head start. The Civil Guard...

(The sound of a rifle shot rings out, and Kuwago drops dead. Simoun draws one of two revolvers strapped to his waist. CABESANG TALES enters with PLACIDO PENITENTE. Tales has his weapon drawn.)

SIMOUN

Come no closer!

TALES

I don't think you're in any position to be making any demands, jeweller.

(To Placido.)

Get rid of the body.

PLACIDO

Yes, *Matanglawin*.

(Placido drags Kuwago offstage.)

TALES

Don't bother trying to run. My father has you in his sights. One wrong breath and he will put a hole in your heart. If you still have one, that is.

SIMOUN

Look, I can shoot you, then your father can shoot me, but where does that get any of us? None of what we have achieved is remotely useful in the afterlife!

TALES

What have we achieved, Simoun? Two failed attempts at revolution and banditry in the outskirts.

SIMOUN

We struck fear into the hearts of our enemies. And now they're in a panic...

TALES

With our forces reduced to plundering farms and convents.

SIMOUN

If you had just kept them in line...

TALES

In line? They've been waiting through two false starts! No way they won't be restless!

SIMOUN

We can try again! The enemy is reeling...

TALES

Who stole the bomb?

SIMOUN

What? Why are you asking me?

TALES

The bomb was supposed to go off at 9. Where were you then?

SIMOUN

I was trying to put the army to order in order to launch the Captain-General's "coup". That was the plan, if you'll recall.

TALES

Then, where was the army?

SIMOUN

Still in their barracks! We didn't get the signal, too.

TALES

So you sat in your barracks, protected by all those soldiers! How convenient.

SIMOUN

What are you saying?

TALES

That there are many thieves for hire on the road to Escolta.

SIMOUN

Let's not get carried away now...

TALES

I think now is the perfect time to be carried away. You've always been a viper Simoun. And you do know what hawks do to vipers, don't you?

SIMOUN

I planned my vengeance for months. Why would I sabotage it?

TALES

You keep going on and on about vengeance and justice! You are a rich man! What do you know of the justice of the unfortunates?

SIMOUN

I am one of you, to the very fibers of my being!

TALES

Says the gem peddler who amassed a fortune on the greed and vanity of matrons and debutantes!

SIMOUN

All the money in the world will not bring back what I have lost...

TALES

Get over yourself! I've lost land. I've lost loved ones...

SIMOUN

You lost your wife and daughter to the harshness of the field. Your other daughter had the luxury of suicide. Your son, Tano, is even in the Civil Guard! Shall we count your debts along with your blessings?

(Pause.)

My father was murdered and the love of my life was... Keep no score, you old hawk, and don't think that we are the same. We are not playing cards with our sufferings.

TALES

And yet you play yours constantly...

SIMOUN

I have nothing left but this. I have no reason to disrupt it.

(SILENCE.)

TALES

Did you even have those soldiers prepared to mutiny?

SIMOUN

Of course.

TALES

Then, you must have had their cannons under your command?

SIMOUN

Where are you going with this?

TALES

You could have used those cannons to signal us! That was the original plan, wasn't it?

SIMOUN

And bring the enemy down on our heads when the bomb didn't go off?

TALES

The enemy would not have withstood our sustained assault!

SIMOUN

But they would have survived.

TALES

How is that significant? They would still be beaten.

SIMOUN

The bomb was supposed to solve all of our problems. Cut off the dragon's head, and the body withers.

TALES

Is that it? A mere strategic decision? We could have just taken them in and executed them one by one.

SIMOUN

No! They all deserve to die! No, not a slow death to the sounds of pious *pater nosters*! Not a glorious martyrdom with last words and hagiographies from Spain! Death from the hand of an avenger! They took everything from me! They killed my family! They crushed my dreams! They must be destroyed!

TALES

So? By that point, they have no hope of resistance! The city would still be ours! You will have your blood orgy!

SIMOUN

Will I? Guards can be bribed. Ferrymen can be bought. Passage can be "arranged"...

(SILENCE.)

TALES

So, it all boils down to the fact that you never trusted us.

SIMOUN

You head an army of bandits...

TALES

So that means we would succumb to the nearest bribe?

SIMOUN

Have you seen the disaster your "army" has become? They're not just bribable, they are downright incompetent! In one day, they've turned from an army to a mindless mob!

(Tales reacts to the insult by reaching for his gun. Simoun does the same. But before either can draw, Placido interrupts, dragging BASILIO with him.)

PLACIDO

This man shot at one of our cadres while attempting to flee. I would have just executed him, but he claims to know you.

BASILIO

Your men shot first!

(Placido slaps Basilio down.)

SIMOUN

Basilio!

PLACIDO

You know this man?

SIMOUN

Release him. He's one of my men...

TALES

Your man shoots at mine? What further evidence do we need that you are a traitor!

SIMOUN

Because your thugs shoot before asking questions!

(SILENCE.)

TALES

Fine.

(Tales nods at Placido. Placido releases Basilio.)

BASILIO

My revolver...

(Placido looks at Tales. Tales nods again. Placido reluctantly hands over Basilio's pistol.)

TALES

Go back to your post, Placido.

PLACIDO

I will not leave you alone with the two turncoats...

TALES

Don't worry. Father is watching over me.

PLACIDO

Fine...

(Placido exits.)

TALES

What were you doing when my men found you?

BASILIO

Leaving the city. When the bomb failed, there was no reason to remain. I was hoping to go back to San Diego.

SIMOUN

What happened to the volunteers you were supposed to gather?

BASILIO

Quiroga won't release your guns without the signal. He believed that the authorities had it all figured out. Without the guns, any volunteer is just asking to be shot.

TALES

So the southern bridges are left open for the enemy...

SIMOUN

Quiroga betrayed us, not Basilio.

BASILIO

I wouldn't blame Quiroga either. With no signal, and no guarantee of battle from this end, he would be risking his neck for nothing.

TALES

Quiroga? That Chinaman is a coward. A street dog knows only to save its own skin. And what are you?

(Points to Basilio.)

Another poor unfortunate soul, another stone on the pavement to be stepped on...

(Tales steps menacingly towards
Simoun.)

TALES

These people are too small to be of any consequence, and the betrayals of such men are of no consequence in turn. No, the cruelest cut of all is that which comes from the largest knife...

SIMOUN

Would such words have come from a sharper one.

TALES

It is funny how all it took to throw my men into disarray was one missed signal on a clear night. Every one of our plans seem to hinge on one of your whims. It's always your signal, your say-so...

SIMOUN

It's because I do most of the planning.

TALES

And why is that? Why do we all turn on your command?

SIMOUN

I didn't hear you offering any plans the last time...

TALES

(Ignoring Simoun's last
comment.)

This was supposed to be our second stab at revolution. What happened
the first time?

SIMOUN

I was ill. Is a man not allowed to be ill.

TALES

What are you, a little school boy? You postpone the revolution
because of a headache?

BASILIO

That's not fair. This man has done more for *indios* like me than
you will ever know...

SIMOUN

You try leading a group of hardened men with years of battle
experience while your head is hazy and your eyes see things. Fever
almost robbed Octavius Caesar of the Battle of Philippi...

TALES

See, I think it's different...

SIMOUN

(Laughs.)

Wow. This ought to be interesting.

TALES

That was the night of that fancy music show, where all the big-shots
were.

SIMOUN

A night at the opera, yes.

TALES

Since all these people, including your good friend the Captain
General, were at the show, you cannot just launch this ill-fated
revolution. After all, your friends will be entirely unprepared.

SIMOUN

Unprepared for what?

TALES

For us! We would have taken the city and put them to the sword soon enough. But if they had been ready, me and my men would have been one more notch on your illustrious belt, and bound you in even tighter with the Captain General...

SIMOUN

Oh, so this is your grand theory? That I postponed our revolution to ingratiate myself to a man already in my pocket?

BASILIO

That's ridiculous!

TALES

You always brag about turning the heads of all those powerful people. What's to stop you from turning our heads and turning us in?

SIMOUN

See, this is why you are not being paid to think. I have known that the opera was coming. If I were planning as you say, why would I deliberately schedule the revolution on a night wherein everybody would be caught off-guard?

TALES

An oversight.

SIMOUN

(Laughing.)

An oversight indeed! Listen to yourself...

TALES

(Flustered.)

Well, you're a fool as well if you think a schoolboy's excuse will satisfy curiosities.

SIMOUN

Twice, you have stained my honour with accusations, and twice you blunder your accusations like an ill-educated peasant.

(Tales draws his pistol and aims it at Simoun.)

TALES

Ilustrado pig!

(Simoun and Basilio both draw
revolvers and aim at Tales.)

SIMOUN

You barbarians of the soil think blunt threats make the world!

TALES

At least I have the courage to take the final steps. You plan
and you scheme, and yet the best that can be said of your inaction
is cowardice!

BASILIO

You call this chaos courage? Shall we make heroes of the looters
and rapists you've unleashed on the suburbs?

TALES

This is revolution!

BASILIO

No, this is a rebellion, like every pissant uprising the Spanish
have been turning back for centuries!

SIMOUN

The difference between rebellion and revolution, my ignorant
friend, is cause and organization. Your rabble have neither.

TALES

I have a cause. It is ignored because I cannot say it in Spanish!
You prattle about vengeance in every language except one; that
of action!

SIMOUN

I don't expect you to understand...

BASILIO

Maria Clara died that night...

TALES

What?

SIMOUN

Basilio!

BASILIO

I will not let this slander stand, sir!

TALES

What has this to do with revolution?

BASILIO

The first start never came because Simoun lost the love of his life.

TALES

So it was not disease, but a woman?

BASILIO

Not just any woman...

SIMOUN

Would you have started this war on the eve of the death of your wife? Of your daughter?

(SILENCE.)

TALES

No. I would not.

(Tales lowers his weapon. The others do the same.)

BASILIO

We have to escape...

SIMOUN

We move soon. But we still have the matter of the bomb. We have to know who betrayed us.

BASILIO

Is that really important? It's over.

SIMOUN

No. We must know.

TALES

Where did she die?

SIMOUN

What?

TALES

Your woman...

BASILIO

She died in a convent.

TALES

A convent? She was a nun?

BASILIO

Why is that important?

(Tales points his gun at Simoun again.
Simoun and Basilio return the favor.)

SIMOUN

Can't we have a conversation without hiding behind our guns?

TALES

Oh, no, viper...

SIMOUN

What's the problem this time?

TALES

You are in bed with the enemy!

SIMOUN

I knew her before she was a nun! And she was never a tool of the friars!

TALES

Of course you'd say that. But we've had plans for two revolutions from you, both ending the poorer for all of us.

BASILIO

You don't know her.

TALES

But I do know that this woman aborted one revolution. What's to stop her lover from stopping the other?

SIMOUN

You have no right...

(SILENCE. Both sides wait for the other
to break first.)

BASILIO

Maria Clara was a good woman.

TALES

I have the testimony of two failed uprisings to back my contention. All you have are words and sentiments.

(SILENCE.)

BASILIO

No. Maria Clara's memory had nothing to do with this failure.

(Basilio lowers his weapon.)

SIMOUN

You know something, Basilio?

(SILENCE.)

BASILIO

You know how we're supposed to be fighting for a better future? How we were supposed to make things better for those who have been oppressed?

TALES

What are you going on about?

BASILIO

I ran into Isagani near the mined house.

TALES

Who?

SIMOUN

Isagani? The outspoken student reformer?

BASILIO

And a good man. He was one of our brightest. One of the hopes for our future...

SIMOUN

What has he to do with this?

BASILIO

Paulita Gomez, the bride...

SIMOUN

Yes...

BASILIO

Isagani loved her. He was there to see her one last time. But I didn't want him to get caught in the fires. I didn't want us to lose one of our best...

TALES

So...

SIMOUN

No...

BASILIO

I told him the plan. I told him the place was going up in flames. I tried to get him away, but he broke from me and ran to the house...

TALES

He's our thief?

BASILIO

I didn't stay long enough to see it, but...

(Simoun's face hardens.)

SIMOUN

No...

BASILIO

I'm sorry, Simoun. I didn't mean to...

(Simoun draws his second revolver and shoots Basilio. Basilio, badly but not fatally wounded, falls and tries to crawl away.)

SIMOUN

You idiot!

BASILIO

Why?

SIMOUN

You spoiled everything! That was my vengeance! I even revealed my true name! They now know who I am!

BASILIO

I'm sorry.

(Basilio stares up at Simoun, waiting for a finishing shot. Simoun looks at him for a few seconds, but cannot bring himself to finish him off.)

SIMOUN

I don't want to see you again.

(Basilio crawls offstage. A gunshot is heard.)

SIMOUN

Hey!

TALES

You have no guts. My father took care of one traitor...

SIMOUN

One traitor?

TALES

I will take care of another...

SIMOUN

You're mad...

(Tales steps forward, gun cocked.)

SIMOUN

Fool... You think you can lead this revolution yourself?

TALES

I have been leading this revolution all along...

SIMOUN

What are you, some sort of mushroom? Popping out full grown from the ruddy soil!

TALES

I earned my name!

SIMOUN

Idiot! I bought that name and hung it around your veiny neck like a golden chain! You think any of these poor unfortunate souls would have taken a farmer and priest-killer carrying a stolen revolver as their leader?

(Simoun laughs.)

You couldn't even operate two miles out of your own backyard! Terror of Tiani? Any petty crook from a neighboring town could walk over and shoot that fat judge. And yet your name is now known from Cagayan to Albay! I tell you, its not for the head of a fat judge and the cowing of a tiny little nothing town!

TALES

And what about you? Slithering like a viper, changing skins and manipulating people. You would turn even our heads!

SIMOUN

And how was I supposed to get the guns your people use? Even that gun your father holds had to get past customs! And the silver pesos your men use to buy that ratty food you? All smuggled past people whose heads I've had to turn! Your revolution needs its viper far more than it needs its paper hawk! I am the metal that prevents you claypots from shattering yourselves on Spanish iron!

(SILENCE.)

TALES

The time for snakes has passed. You have outlived your usefulness.

SIMOUN

Oh, and I suppose you can grow your own money now?

TALES

No. I intend to ransom you back to your government friends. Or, I could torture you into revealing where you've hidden that massive treasure of yours.

SIMOUN

And what of justice? What of the cause? You think it will survive your barbarism?

TALES

(Laughing.)

If there is one thing you've taught me, Simoun, it is that life is meaningless. Justice mocks you and spits in your face. In this world, there is only force... and I wouldn't want to live in such a cruel world that makes monsters out of decent men. You know, forget the cause. I'd rather expend all that cruelty into one last defiant cry and be done with it. Blood will flow, and it will cease to matter if that blood is Spanish or *Indio*. One last feast of blood before the apocalypse...

(Tales is interrupted by the sound of guns firing and voices shouting.)

SIMOUN

We have company.

TALES

We are being attacked! I knew it! You brought the Civil Guard!

SIMOUN

They are after me as much as they are after you!

TALES

That may be true. But my version is all the men will hear.

(Tales moves to shoot, but Simoun draws faster and shoots Tales first. Tales drops to his knee.)

SIMOUN

Tell them whatever you want. It is all lost anyway.

(Simoun turns to run. Before he does, Tales shoots him in the back, but the shot only wounds him. Simoun stumbles, but manages to get offstage.)

TALES

Simoun! God take you, soulless snake!

(Tales clutches his side. Placido enters, his face covered in blood.)

PLACIDO

Matanglawin! We have to leave!

TALES

How many are they?

PLACIDO

A company out on escort. They accidentally stumbled upon our forces and started shooting...

TALES

An accident? More grave omens...

PLACIDO

It gets worse, *Matanglawin*.

TALES

How?

PLACIDO

Your father was shot.

(Tales stands and lets out a loud groan.)

TALES

A curse on us all! Father... father... unhappy day!

PLACIDO

I watched, hidden, as they finished him off with the bayonet. The one who shot him seemed to recognize him. Like they were really familiar.

TALES

Familiar?

(Pause.)

Tano? It cannot be. But there is only one of whom he would know in the Guard... My son! My son has shot my father... and here I am to bury both, one in the ground and one in my heart.

(Tales collapses. The sounds of enemy guns and shouts draw closer.)

PLACIDO

They are coming. We must head out!

(Placido pulls Tales up.)

TALES

What for? Let us meet our glory here. Let me face my son one last time.

PLACIDO

No, *Matanglawin*. We cannot give them your head as a trophy. If we must die, let us die standing, with guns in our hands, than crawling on our bellies. It is all we have left.

TALES

But, to do so is not vengeance. It is not even justice.

PLACIDO

It is all we have left.

(SILENCE.)

TALES

So be it. Let us leave death til we plan to die. I just hope it is very soon.

(Placido helps Tales as they exit
offstage.)

END.