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**THAT
WE
MIGHT
LIVE**

By

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Chapter Fourteen

BROKEN PROMISE, THE STORY OF PAT RYEN

(1941 - 1945)



Everyone in our prison camp knew Pat Ryen*, from the hungry children who tagged behind his two-wheeled cart that was loaded with vegetables for the Mess kitchen to the burly Japanese guards stationed at their outposts just beyond the camp gardens where Pat worked many hours a day under the tropical sun. But few of us knew the whole story about him, or the significance of his actions in those last months of imprisonment.

Gathering fragments from many sources, I have pieced together the story of Pat Ryen, American mining engineer and fellow prisoner.

J. Patrick Ryen came out to the Islands as a mining engineer the year before Pearl Harbor, hoping his bride of four months could join him later.

When he arrived at his location in the Philippines, he found much more to do than superintend the mine. He established a health clinic for the children of his laborers and a recreation center for their use. He improved their living conditions and showed the Filipinos how to make the acid soil yield more crops, and he instructed them in self-government.

Then the Japs came, "like *anay* — white ants that eat from within, leaving an empty shell behind them." Pat hid out in the hills until a messenger came bearing a letter from the Japanese general.

*Real names have not been used in this chapter.

The letter promised him repatriation within a few months if he would surrender. It would give him a chance to get back to the States, to Opal. Then he could enlist and get in on the battle, he thought. He surrendered.

The repatriation ship, S.S. Gripsholm, left Manila in October, 1943. But Pat was not on the passenger list. He was in the Los Banos Prison Camp.

Among the first eight hundred men who were shipped out in box cars from Santo Tomas camp to start this new camp in the foothills of the Makiling Mountains south of Manila, Pat found life rugged, but there was more land here. The soil could be put to use.

When he suggested planting crops, most of the men laughed. "What the devil, Pat, our troops will be here before any harvest. Why waste your energy?"

He knew it would take time to recapture these islands, but he said nothing. Enlisting the help of several men on two-hour shifts, he went ahead with the planting. This was in May, 1943. By January, 1945, the fourth year of imprisonment begun, these gardens had been harvested and replanted twice. There were over two thousand to be fed, including women and children. Starvation was acute. For many of them this next harvest might mean the difference between life and death. For one person, Elaine Gramercy, it *would* mean the difference. The child she was carrying would never be born unless she could have food.

Then for the second time since the beginning of this camp, the enemy took over the harvest! The anger rose in Pat's throat as he worked against time, loading the cart with greens and what unripe vegetables he could pick before six o'clock, the hour when the Japanese would be claiming it.

As he worked, his iron-black eyes ignited with defiance and hate. What would become of Elaine and the child? In his mind he recounted the times he had asked for extra food for women and children, always refused by the Japs. In desperation he had taken the greens from his own small plot to give Elaine nourishment. She was swollen with Beri-Beri. He had counted on this harvest — and now — He ripped off the young eggplants, too small to give but a taste for two thousand people!

He raised up, wiping the sweat from his ragged sandy beard, as he moved the cart to the end row. A patch of loosened grass caught his eye. He paused a second, then went on loading the cart. But the sight of that loose sod seemed to relieve the twisted anger he had felt. He was remembering the night he had gone out of camp for coconuts and bananas, very successfully, too — even if Elaine hadn't appreciated his efforts. Always her thankless answer was the same: "I don't want this damn baby."

Pat had befriended many so-called eccentrics in camp. But Elaine was different. Her promiscuity and light-fingered touch had caused the entire camp extra hardships. Internees hated her. Even the man involved with her had escaped camp earlier. She had no one to turn to. But an unborn child, starved to death? They could do it to men, but not to an unborn child!

Pat pushed the half-filled cart to the Mess kitchen and dumped the few vegetables into the bin. "I'll be damned if they can do this!" he muttered, going on to his barracks.

He picked the last handful of greens from his own plot and started for Elaine's cubicle. Subconsciously he nodded his head, approving the two decisions he had just made . . . Now, if he could talk to Elaine.

* * * * *

After roll call, Pat went to Henk Johnson's quarters. Henk was the only man he confided in. Henk followed Pat outside, where they could talk.

"I'm going out tonight. I wanted you to know, Henk."

Henk grabbed his arm. "No! For God's sake, NO! They've doubled the guard!"

"She has to have some food, and that baby *is going* to be born!"

"You mean Elaine? You'd risk your life for that pregnant prostitute? You can't do it, Pat! I won't let you!"

"No two-bit guards can stop me, Henk. I'm going. Besides, Opal and I are going to adopt that baby, Henk. Elaine has agreed."

Hunger can do strange things to people. It twists one's reasoning, leading to actions that are unbelievable to a normal

person. It eats away the soul, while it feeds and enlarges hatreds and emotions to fanatical proportions. A small thing becomes an obsession, and to Pat, who had been steady and level-headed before, this unwanted child had suddenly become a symbol of atonement for an enemy's broken promise. His own hunger made no difference now. There was a child that must be born.

Pat's eyes were half-crazed as he argued with Henk. There was no reasoning with him, his thoughts were warped. He would go, regardless.

"All right, Pat," Henk said in a defeated whisper, "if you're determined to do it, I'll try to help you get back in. Tomorrow afternoon I'll go to the balcony overlooking the ravine — at the Infirmary. That's the only place you can get back in to camp during daylight. If the guards are too thick, I'll warn you with our whistle. You know the signal. But for God's sake, be careful."

Pat crawled under his mosquito net to await the right time for his departure. Getting out of camp wouldn't be too hard. . . No moon until three o'clock. He was exempt from morning roll call because of his garden work. All he had to do was get back before the next night's count as he had done before.

He waited until his twenty-some barracks mates had heaved themselves down for the night, then feigning a trip to the outside latrine, he crept out from his net. With a knapsack folded under his belt, he went from one barracks to another, through the latrines that separated them.

Reaching the last barracks on his route to the garden, he paused, listened for the sound of a guard's boots, then crept stealthily outside.

Feeling his way to the rows of eggplant vines, he crouched, waiting a few seconds to reassure himself, then padded noiselessly in his tough bare feet down between the rows to the spot he knew so well. He pried away the loosened sod and made his way to the outside world.

At 3:30 the next afternoon, Henk started for the Infirmary. He knew that the jungle growth of vines and trees in the ravine where Pat would be coming back to camp offered protection to those who could match their movements with the foliage. But one wrong move and a person might be spotted by the guards in the

sentry box on the opposite side of the hill. Now, with the number of guards being doubled, getting back into camp would be close to impossible.

Henk wanted plenty of time to warn Pat in case guards were patrolling the area. In order not to call attention to his position on the balcony, he paused a moment, then went inside. He had seen no evidence of a patrol in the ravine.

Just before four o'clock, crouching low, Henk moved out on the balcony to a spot where he could see without being seen. Watching for any sign of movement, he waited. Pat would be coming any time now, he thought, shifting his cramped position. The silence in the ravine grew heavy — the birds weren't singing. Somewhere a twig snapped, then he saw the soldier, camouflaged, moving through the jungle below. Henk gave a low whistle of warning. If Pat heard, he thought, he would lie low until the soldier returned to his sentry box.

Henk was still crouched on the balcony when rifle shots split the air! "God," he whispered, "let him live! Let him!"

Internees quickly gathered in front of the infirmary. Guards were shouting for them to disperse.

Henk was standing beside the doctor when a soldier came up to them. "Follow me," he ordered.

He led them down into the ravine where, face down in the leaves, lay Pat's lifeless body. He had been shot in the back. The knapsack beside him was filled with coconuts and bananas.

As they carried the body into the infirmary, frightened prisoners pressed toward them, tense and waiting. The guard raised his bayonet to clear the path. They backed away, stunned and silent as they saw the body of Pat Ryen, their fellow prisoner.

From the hungry children who had tagged behind his two-wheeled cart to the guards stationed at their outposts just beyond the camp gardens, everyone knew Pat. It was his labor that gave the two thousand prisoners fresh vegetables, a small supplement to the spoonful of rice gruel each day. It was his labor that had nurtured this harvest, the second harvest being taken over by the enemy.

Suddenly there was a stirring among the internees standing there. Someone was pushing through the crowd. Elaine, clumsy

and staggering, forced her way up the steps of the Infirmary. "Pat! They killed him!" she cried. "Why did he take such a crazy chance?"

Henk stared at her. "Don't *you* know, Elaine?"

She gasped, then, turning quickly, stalked away.

The Japs changed the hour of Pat's burial three times and ordered that there would be no demonstration. Unannounced, at sunrise the next morning, a few prisoners lowered the crude coffin into the earth. They laid fresh flowers by the grave, flowers they had picked along the way: *red cannias, white phlox, and blue cornflowers*, a humble tribute to a great American.

Note: Elaine's baby was born after Liberation and adopted by another internee.