

The Cave in the Side of Coron

By Sargent Kayme

A “barong” is a Moro native’s favourite weapon. With one deft whirl, and then a downward slash of the keen steel blade he can cleave the skull of an opponent from crown to teeth, or cut an arm clean from the shoulder socket.

When I was sent with a squad of brave men from my company to reconnoitre from Mt. Halcon, in the Island of Mindoro, and the force was ambushed, the way I saw the men meet death will always make me hate a Moro. Why I was spared, then, and bound, instead of being killed like the men, I could not imagine. Later I knew.

The Moros had no business to be on Mindoro, anyway. Their home was in Mindanao, far to the south, but three hundred years of Spanish attempt to rule them had left them still an untamed people, and the war between the two races had been endless. Each year when the southwest monsoons had blown, the Moro war-proas had gone northward carrying murder and pillage wherever they had appeared. When the Spanish were not too much occupied elsewhere they fitted out retaliatory expeditions which left effects of little permanence. That year the Moros had found not Spaniards but a small force of American troops, sent south from Manila, and from them had cut off my little scouting squad. It made no difference to them that we were of another nation. They cared nothing for a change in rulers. We were white, and Christians; that was enough. We were to be slain.

The leader of the Moros was a tall old man with glittering eyes set in a gloomy face. I watched him as I lay bound on the deck of one of the war-proas; for, fearing attack I suppose, soon after my capture the sails had been spread and the fleet of boats turned to the south.

“Feed him” the chief had said, when night came on, and pointed to me with his foot. I thought then I had been saved from death for slavery, and deemed that the worst fate possible. I did not know the Moro nature.

On the afternoon of the fifth day out, we passed Busuanga and approached a small rocky island which I afterwards learned was Coron. So far as could be seen no human habitation was near, and far to the south stretched the unbroken waters of the Sulu Sea. The chief gave an order in the Moro tongue, and a black and yellow flag was run up to the mast head. In response to the signal all the proas of the fleet joined us in a little bay at the end of the island, and dropped anchor. At one side of the bay it would be possible to land and climb from there to the top of the island, from which, everywhere else, as far as I could see, a sheer cliff came down three hundred feet to where the waves beat against the jagged rocks at its base.

The smaller boats which had been towed behind the larger craft were castoff and brought alongside the chief’s proa. I was lifted into one and rowed to a place where we could land. My feet had been untied, but my hands were still fastened behind my back. Two Moros grasped me by the arms and guided me between them. They would not let me turn my head, but I could hear the voices of men following us. The chief led the way. He did not speak or pause until we had reached the level summit of the island. When he did speak it was in Spanish, which he had learned that I understood. We were halted on the very edge of the precipice. Far down below the little fleet of war-proas floated lightly on

the water, the black and yellow signal still fluttering from the flag ship. I could see now that the men that had come up the path behind me had brought a quantity of ropes. Perhaps there were thirty men in all. I wondered what they were going to do with me, but had decided that any fate was better than to be a Moro slave.

“Men of Mindanao,” said the chief, “you know our errand. You know how often men of our band have been captured by the white men of the north to lie in prisons there, where death comes so slowly that a ‘barong’ blow would be paradise. The few that have crept back to us, weak, hollow-eyed and trembling, have only come to show us what it meant to starve, and then have died. The sky is just, and gives us once and again a white man to whom we may show that the prophet’s words ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ are just. Give the white dog his due.”

Two men grasped me and wound a stout rope, coil after coil, about me from my neck to my feet, until I was as helpless as a swathed Egyptian mummy. One end of another rope was fastened in a slip-noose about my body, and a dozen of the men, sitting well back from the edge of the cliff and bracing themselves one against another, paid out the rope.

The chief himself, touching me with his foot as he would have touched some unclean thing, rolled me over the brink of the precipice. The sharp rocks cut my face until the blood came, but that meant little to a man who expected to be dropped upon rocks just as sharp three hundred feet beneath him.

Slowly I was lowered down the face of the cliff until, perhaps twenty feet down, I found to my surprise that my descent had ceased, and that I was dangling before the mouth of a cave of considerable size. While I swung there, wondering what would happen next, the end of a rope ladder flung down from above dropped across the opening in the side of the cliff, and a moment later two agile Moros climbed down the ladder and from it entered the cave. From where they stood it was easy for them to reach out and haul me in after them, as a bale of merchandise swinging from a hoisting pulley is hauled in through a window.

Loosening the slip-knot they fastened into it the rope which had been coiled about my body, and giving it a jerk as a signal the whole was drawn up out of sight. Then, binding my feet again, they laid me on the hard rock near the mouth of the cave, and climbed nimbly back as they had come. The rope ladder was drawn up, and I was left alone.

I was to be left there to starve. That was what the chief’s “eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” had meant.

From where they had left me I could see the proas at anchor, and see the rocky point on which we had landed. That night they built a fire on the rocks where I could see it, and feasted there with songs and dancing. Whenever the wind freshened, the smell of the broiling fish came up to where I was, and I understood then why it was that I had not been fed that day as usual on the deck of the war-proa. I began to realise something of the depths of cruelty of the Moro nature. “Began,” I say, for I found out later that even then I did not measure it all.

In the morning the proas were still at anchor, and during the day and night there was more feasting. Sometime that day I freed my hands. I found that the thongs had been nearly cut. Evidently the men who left me had meant that I should free myself. It was easy then to untie the rope which bound my ankles, but weak as I was from hunger, and cramped from being so long bound, it was some time before I could bear my weight upon my feet. When I could it was the morning of the second day of my imprisonment and the

third that I had been without food. The men below were sleeping after their carouse, stretched out on the decks of the proas. A sentinel on the rocky point poked the smouldering embers of the fire and raking out some overdone fragments of fish made a breakfast from them and pitched the bones into the sea. Only those who have lived three days without food can understand how delicious even those cast-off fish bones looked to me. I walked away from the mouth of the cave to be where I could not see the man eat. The daylight enabled me to explore the interior of the cave more thoroughly than I had been able to do before. From a crevice, far within, a tiny thread of water trickled down the rock. It was too thin to be called a stream, and was dried up entirely by the air before it reached the mouth of the cave, but I found that I could press my hand against the rock and after a long time gather water enough to moisten my lips and throat. For even that I was thankful. At least I should not die of thirst.

Still farther in the cave I found a pile of something lying on the floor. I could not see in the dark there what it was, but brought a double handful out to the light. It was a fragment of a military uniform wrapped loosely around some human bones. Dangling from the cloth was a corroded button on which I could still discern the insignia of Spain. I flung the horrid relics as far out from the cave as my weak strength would let me, and sank down, wondering how long it would be until the bones and uniform of a soldier of the United States would lie rotting there beside those of a soldier of Spain.

A shout from below aroused me. A Moro had seen the fragments of cloth fluttering down and had greeted them. The men had landed on the rocky point again, and a party of them were coming up the path. Slung on a pole carried over the shoulders of two of them was a piece of fish net, through the meshes of which I could see a dozen cocoa-nuts.

There was food; delicious food! And they were bringing it to me! I understood it all now. They had not meant to starve me, but only to torture me before they took me on to slavery. How good that was. Slavery did not seem hard to me now. Slavery was better than starvation. Oh I would work gladly enough, no matter how hard the task, if I could only have food.

The men had passed out of sight, now, climbing upward, and by and by I heard them talking above me. I leaned as far out from the mouth of the cave as in my weakness I dared, and looked up. Yes, I was right. The bag of coconuts was being lowered to me. I could see the black face of the Moro who was directing the operation, peering over the edge of the cliff. I sank down, too weak to stand. I thought I must save what little strength I had to break a nut against the rock, when they reached me.

I could see the bottom of the fish net bag. Now it was even with the cave. I could reach it if it was only a little nearer. Why did not those foolish Moros swing it nearer? I leaned out from the cave again to try and signal to them.

What was this I saw? Not one, but twenty black faces grinning down at me with devilish cruelty. And the bag of food that I had waited for, hung by a rope from the end of the pole pushed out from the rock above, swung lazily around and around just beyond my reach. I made a frantic effort to grasp it, and barely saved myself from falling headlong. The fiendish laughter of the men above was answered by a chorus of shouts from below. I looked down. From the decks of the proas and from about the fire on shore, where another feast was beginning, the Moro men were watching me.

Then I understood for the first time the depths of Moro cruelty. I was to be baited there until, crazed by hunger, I flung myself to an awful death upon the rocks below. I

wondered how many men, perhaps braver soldiers than I, had gone down there before me.

I would not. If die I must, I would at least cheat those gibbering fiends of their show. I would die as that other man had done, far in the cave and out of sight. I dragged myself in, drank from the little stream of water, and lay down. I must have slept, or lain in a stupor for several hours, since, when I recovered myself again, it was late afternoon.

From where I lay I could see the bag of coconuts swing in the breeze. Perhaps it had blown nearer and I could reach it. I dragged myself out to the mouth of the cave again. It was just as far away as ever, and I too weak now to try to reach it. After a time I began to realise that there was no noise from the revelers below. I looked down. The bay was empty. The proas had gone, the men gone with them, and not a breath of smoke rising from the ashes showed where their fires had been. They must have put out their fires. Dimly I wondered why. Anyway I had cheated them of their game. They had become discouraged, waiting to see me die, and had gone.

These thoughts were passing weakly through my mind, when suddenly I saw something which made me stand up, weak as I was. Far out across the Strait of Mindoro a streamer of black smoke showed against the sky. My eyes followed it to where a gray hull rested on the water. It was one of our gunboats bound from Ilo Ilo back to Manila. I shouted, faintly, forgetting that miles of space lay between her and myself. I knew when I stopped to think that she was going from me. Even if she had come near Coron she had passed while I lay asleep.

That was why the proas had gone. They had seen the streak of smoke, and slipping behind the island of Coron had gone around Culion, and so on, home.

I must have slept for some time after that, for when I was next conscious of anything it was the forenoon of another day, and the cave was flooded with the bright light of noon. I did not suffer anything now. That seemed to have passed. I lay quite easy, and wondered what it was that had aroused me. After a while I could tell. It was the ceaseless twittering of a flock of birds which were flying in and out of the cave. They had not been there before, nor had I seen them about. They must have come during the night. I thought if I could catch one I would eat it, but I decided it was useless to try to catch them, they darted about so swiftly. By and by I felt sure that this was so, for I could see that the birds were swallows, and there came into my mind a vivid picture of the high beams of my father's barn, away in Vermont, when I was a boy, and the barn swallows flashing like arrows through the star-shaped openings far up in the gable ends.

Two of the birds had lighted on the wall opposite me, clinging to the rock. I wondered what they were doing there. Perhaps I could catch them. I would try. I found that I could rise, and that I was much stronger than I had thought. Even a hope of food seemed to give me strength. I crept towards the birds and put out my hand. The birds flew, and dodging me swept out into the sunlight. I was near enough the side of the cave now to see what they had been doing. Fastened to the rock was the beginning of what was to be a nest.

Once, years before that, I had been the guest of honor at a ten course Chinese dinner. After the tiny China cups of fiery liquor, which was the first course, had been drunk, the servant brought on what looked to me like fine white sponges boiled in chicken broth. My host told me that this was birds' nest soup, the most famous dish of China, made of material worth its weight in gold. It came back to me now that he had added that the best

nests were gathered in the Philippine Islands. Little did I imagine then what that scrap of table conversation might one day mean to me.

I pulled the nest down and ate it. It looked like white glue, and tasted like beef jelly. I looked for another, and found it and ate it. There were no more. I drank my fill of water, when I could get it, which took some time, and then I lay down and went to sleep. I felt as if I had eaten a full meal. When I woke I could almost have danced, I felt so strong and well again. In my new strength I even tried to reach the bag of cocoanuts, but they hung just as far off as ever, and that was so far no breeze quite swung them within my reach. No matter! While I had slept, the birds had been at work, and half a dozen half-formed nests were glued to the rocks in easy reach. They grew like mushrooms in the night. I pulled down two and ate them. For dinner I had two more, and one for supper.

After that I had no cause to suffer, so far as food and water were concerned. When the birds built faster than my immediate wants required, I tore the completed nests down before the builders could spoil them, and stored them away. The birds twittered and scolded, but began to build again.

How long this would have lasted I do not know, but one morning when I woke and came to the mouth of the cave to look out, I saw that in the night a Chinese junk, with broad latteen sails, had dropped anchor in the bay below.

The shout of joy I gave came near being my ruin, for when the Chinese sailors heard it, and looked up to see a white faced figure gesticulating wildly in a hole in the front of the cliff, so far above them they thought, quite reasonably enough, that they had discovered the door to the home of the evil one himself, and that one of his ministers was trying to entice them to enter. Fortunately they could not flee until the anchor was raised and the sails unfurled, and before this was done their curiosity and common sense combined had conquered their fear. The leader of the expedition, I learned later, had been to Coron before, and now, lighting a few joss sticks as a precaution, in case I did prove to be an evil spirit, he climbed to the top of the cliff where he could talk with me. He had seen Moro fish nets and proa masts before, and he knew the Moro nature, so it did not take long to make him understand my story, nor much longer for him to effect my release, for these Chinese nest-hunting expeditions go fitted with all manner of rock scaling machinery in the way of rope ladders, slings and baskets.

I was very kindly treated on board the junk through all the month the party stayed there gathering nests, but when the men came to know my story, and learned how for two Weeks I had lived on nothing but swallows' nests, worth their weight in gold, remember, they used to look at me, some of them, in a way which made me almost wonder if sometime when I was asleep they might not kill me, as the farmer's wife killed the goose that laid the golden egg.