

The Fifteenth Wife

By Sargent Kayme

Mateo, my Filipino servant, was helping me sort over specimens one day under the thatched roof of a shed which I had hired to use for such work while I was on the island of Culion, when I was startled to see him suddenly drop the bird skin he had been working on, and fall upon his knees, bending his body forward, his face turned toward the road, until his forehead touched the floor.

At first I thought he must be having some new kind of a fit, peculiar to the Philippine Islands, until I happened to glance up the road toward the town, from which my house was a little distance removed, and saw coming toward us a most remarkable procession.

Four native soldiers walked in front, two carrying long spears, and two carrying antiquated seven-foot muskets, relics of a former era in fire arms. After the soldiers came four Visayan slaves, bearing on their shoulders a sort of platform covered with rugs and cushions, on which a woman reclined. On one side of the litter walked another slave, holding a huge umbrella so as to keep the sun's rays off the woman's face. Two more soldiers walked behind.

Mateo might have been a statue, or a dead man, for all the attention he paid to my questions until after the procession had passed the house. Then, resuming a perpendicular position once more, he said, "That was the Sultana Ahmeya, the Sultana."

Then he went on to explain that there were thirteen other sultanas, of assorted colors, who helped make home happy for the Sultan of Culion, who after all, well supplied as he might at first seem to be, was only a sort of fourth-class sovereign, so far as sultanas are concerned, since his fellow monarch on a neighboring larger island, the Sultan of Sulu, is said to have four hundred wives.

Ahmeya, though, Mateo went on to inform me, was the only one of the fourteen who really counted. She was neither the oldest nor the youngest of the wives of the reigning ruler, but she had developed a mind of her own which had made her supreme in the palace, and besides, she was the only one of his wives who had borne a son to the monarch. For her own talents, and as the mother the heir, the people did her willing homage.

When I saw the royal cavalcade go past my door I had no idea I would ever have a chance to become more intimately acquainted with Her Majesty, but only a little while after that circumstances made it possible for me to see more of the royal family than had probably been the privilege of any other white man. How little thought I had, when the acquaintance began, of the strange experiences it would eventually lead to!

At that time, in the course of collecting natural history specimens, most of my time for three years was spent in the island of Culion. Having a large stock of drugs, for use in my work, and quite a lot of medicines, I had doctored Mateo and two or three other fellows who had worked for me, when they had been ill, with the result that I found I had come to have a reputation for medical skill which sometimes was inconvenient. I had no idea how widely my fame had spread, though, until one morning Mateo came into my room and woke me, and with a face which expressed a good deal of anxiety, informed me that I was sent for to come to the palace.

I confess I felt some concern myself, and should have felt more if I had had as much experience then as I had later, for one never knows what those three-quarters savage potentates may take it into their heads to do.

When I found that I was sent for because the Sultan was ill,—ill unto death, the messenger had made Mateo believe,—and I was expected to doctor him, I did not feel much more comfortable, for I much doubted if my knowledge of diseases, and my assortment of medicines, were equal to coping with a serious case. If the Sultan died I would probably be beheaded, either for not keeping him alive, or for killing him.

It was a great relief, then, when I reached the palace, and just before I entered the room where the sick monarch was, to hear him swearing vigorously, in a combination of the native and Spanish languages which was as picturesque as it was expressive.

I found the man suffering from an acute attack of neuralgia, although he did not know what was the matter with him. He had not been able to sleep for three days and nights, and the pain, all the way up and down one side of his face had been so intense that he thought he was going to die, and almost hoped that he was. His head was tied up in a lot of cloths, not over clean, in which a dozen native doctor's charms had been folded, until the bundle was as big as four heads ought to be.

As soon as I found out what was the matter I felt relieved, for I reckoned I could manage an attack of swelled head all right. I had doctored the natives enough, already, to find out that they had no respect for remedies which they could not feel, and so, going back to the house, I brought from there some extra strong liniment, some tincture of red pepper and a few powerful morphine pills.

I gave my patient one of the pills the first thing, administering it in a glass of water with enough of the cayenne added to it so that the mixture brought tears to his eyes, and then removing the layers of cloth from his head, and gathering in as I did so, for my collection of curiosities, the various charms which I uncovered, I gave his head a vigorous shampooing with the liniment, taking pains to see that the liquor occasionally ran down into the Sultan's eyes. He squirmed a good deal, but I kept on until I thought it must be about time for the morphine to begin to take effect. I kept him on morphine and red pepper for three days, but when I let up on him he was cured, and my reputation was made.

It would have been too great a nuisance to have been endured, had it not been that so high a degree of royal favor enabled me to pursue my work with a degree of success which otherwise I could never have hoped for.

After that I used to see a good deal of the palace life. Although nominally Mohammedans in religion, the inhabitants of these more distant islands have little more than the name of the faith, and follow out few of its injunctions. As a result I was accorded a freedom about the palace which would have been impossible in such an establishment in almost any other country.

One day the Sultan had invited me to dine with him. After the meal, while we were smoking, reclining in some cocoanut fibre hammocks swung in the shade of the palace court yard, I saw a man servant lead a dog through the square, and down a narrow passage way through the rear of the palace.

“Would you like to see the ‘Green Devil’ eat?” my host asked.

I have translated the native words he used by the term “green devil,” because that represents the idea of the original better than any other words I know of. I had not the slightest

conception as to who or what the individual referred to might be; but I said at once that I would be very glad indeed to see him eat.

My host swung out of the hammock,—he was a superbly strong and vigorous man, now that he was in health again,—and led the way through the passage. Following him I found myself in another court yard, larger than the first, and with more trees in it. Beneath one of these trees, in a stout cage of bamboo, was the biggest python I ever saw. He must have been fully twenty-five feet long. The cage was large enough to give the snake a chance to move about in it, and when we came in sight he was rolling from one end to the other with head erect, eyes glistening, and the light shimmering on his glossy scales in a way which made it easy to see why he had been given his name. I learned later that he had not been fed for a month, and that he would not be fed again until another month had passed. Like all of his kind he would touch none but live food.

The wretched dog, who seemed to guess the fate in store for him, hung back in the rope tied about his neck, and crouched flat to the ground, too frightened even to whine.

The servant unlocked a door in the side of the cage and thrust the poor beast in. I am not ashamed to say that I turned my head away. It was only a dog, but it might have been a human being, so far as the reptile, or the half-savage man at my side, would have cared.

When I looked again, the dog was only a crushed mass of bones and flesh, about which the snake was still winding and tightening coil after coil.

“We need not wait,” the Sultan said. “It will be an hour before he will swallow the food. You can come out again.”

I did as he suggested. It was a wonder to me, as it is to every one, how a snake’s throat can be distended enough to swallow whole an object so large as this dog, but in some way the reptile had accomplished the feat. The meal over, the huge creature had coiled down as still almost as if dead. He would lie in that way, now, they told me, for days.

It was while I stood watching the snake that Ahmeya came through the square, leading her boy by the hand. The apartments of the royal wives were built around this inner yard. This was the first time I had seen the heir to the throne. He was a handsome boy, and looked like his mother. Ahmeya was tall, for a native woman, and carried herself with a dignity which showed that she felt the honor of her position. Mateo had told me that she had a decided will of her own, and, so the palace gossips said, ruled the establishment, and her associate sultanas, with an unbending hand.

It was not very long after I had seen the green devil eat that Mateo told me there had been another wedding at the palace. Mateo was an indefatigable news-gatherer, and an incorrigible gossip. As the society papers would have expressed it, this wedding had been “a very quiet affair.” The Sultan had happened to see a Visayan girl of uncommon beauty, on one of the smaller islands, one day, had bought her of her father for two water buffalos, and had installed her at the palace as wife number fifteen.

For the time being the new-comer was said to be the royal favorite, a condition of affairs which caused the other fourteen wives as little concern as their objections, if they had expressed any, would probably have caused their royal husband. So far as Ahmeya was concerned, she never minded a little thing like that, but included the last arrival in the same indifferent toleration which she had extended to her predecessors.

I saw the new wife only once.—I mean,—yes I mean that.—I saw her as the king’s wife only once. She was a handsome woman, with a certain insolent disdain of those

about her which indicated that she knew her own charms, and perhaps counted too much on their being permanent.

That summer my work took me away from the island. I went to Manila, and eventually to America. When I finally returned to Culion a year had passed.

I had engaged Mateo, before I left, to look out for such property as I left behind, and had retained my old house. I found him waiting for me, and with everything in good order. That is one good thing to be said about the natives. An imagined wrong or insult may rankle in their minds for months, until they have a chance to stab you in the back. They will lie to you at times with the most unblushing nerve, often when the truth would have served their ends so much better that it seems as if they must have been doing mendacious gymnastics simply to keep themselves in practice; but they will hardly ever steal. If they do, it will be sometime when you are looking squarely at them, carrying a thing off from under your very nose with a cleverness which they seem to think, and you can hardly help feel yourself, makes them deserve praise instead of blame. I have repeatedly left much valuable property with them, as I did in this case with Mateo, and have come back to find every article just as I had left it.

Mateo was glad to see me. "Oh Senor," he began, before my clothes were fairly changed, and while he was settling my things in my bed room, "there is so much to tell you."

I knew he would be bursting with news of what had happened during my absence. "Such goings on," he continued, folding my travelling clothes into a tin trunk, where the white ants could not get at them. "You never heard the likes of it"

I am translating very freely, for I have noticed that the thoughts expressed by the Philippine gossip are very similar to those of his fellow in America, or Europe, or anywhere else, no matter how much the words may differ.

"The new Sultana, the handsome Visayan girl, has given birth to a son, and has so bewitched the Sultan by her good looks and craftiness that he has decreed her son, and not Ahmeya's, to be the heir to the throne. She rules the palace now, and when her servants bear her through the streets the people bow down to her." He added, with a look behind him to see that no one overheard, "Because they dare not do otherwise. In their hearts they love Ahmeya, and hate this vain woman."

"How does Ahmeya take it?" I asked.

"Hardly, people think, although she makes no cry. She goes not through the streets of the town, now, but stays shut in her own rooms, with her women and the boy."

A furious beating against the bamboo walls of my sleeping room, and wild cries from some one on the ground outside, awoke me one morning when I had been back in Culion less than a week. The house in which I slept, like most of the native houses in the Philippines, was built on posts, several feet above the ground, for the sake of coolness and as a protection against snakes and such vermin.

It was very early, not yet sunrise. A servant of the Sultan's, gray with fright, was pounding on the walls of the house with a long spear to wake me, begging me, when I opened the lattice, to come to the palace at once.

I thought the monarch must have had some terrible attack, and wondered what it could be, but while we were hurrying up the street the messenger managed to make me understand that the Sultan was not at the palace at all, but gone the day before on board the royal proa for a state visit to a neighboring island from which he exacted yearly tribute.

Later I learned that he had tried to have the Visayan woman go with him, but that she had wilfully refused to go. What was the matter at the palace the ruler being gone, I could not make out. When I asked this of the man who had come for me, he fell into such a palsy of fear that he could say nothing. When I came to know, later, that he was the night guard at the palace, and remembered what he must have seen, I did not wonder.

At the palace no one was astir. The man had come straight for me, stopping to rouse no one else. I had saved the Sultan's life. At least he thought so. Might I not do even more?

My guide took me straight through the first court yard, and down the narrow passage into the inner yard, around which were built the apartments of the woman. Ahmeya, I knew, lived in the rooms at one end of the square. The man led me towards the opposite end of the enclosure. Beside an open door he stood aside for me to enter, saying, as he did so, "Senor, help us."

The sun had risen, now, and shining full upon a lattice in the upper wall, flooded the room with a soft clear light.

The body of the Visayan woman, or rather what had been a body, lay on the floor in the center of the room, a shapeless mass of crushed bones and flesh. An enormous python lay coiled in one corner. His mottled skin glistened in the morning light, but he did not move, and his eyes were tight shut, as were those of the "green devil" after I had seen him feed.

I looked backward, across the court yard. The door of the big bamboo cage beneath the trees was open. I turned to the room again and looked once more. I knew now why the night guard's face was ash-colored, and why he could not speak.

For the child of the Visayan woman I could not see.