

The Spirit of Mt. Apo

By Sargent Kayme

From the deck of any vessel passing up the southeast coast of Mindanao, the voyager can see the gold-crowned summit of Apo, rising like a gilded cone high above the dense vegetation of the island at its base.

Next to Luzon, on which the city of Manila is situated, Mindanao is the largest of all the islands of the Philippine archipelago. Lying as it does far to the southeast, and near the Sum Islands, the Mores, as the venturesome Sulus are called, invaded Mindanao more than two hundred years ago, and gradually crept farther and farther along the coasts and up the river valleys, waging intermittent warfare against the Visayans who had come from the west to settle on the island, and against the natives that lived inland, and keeping up constant relentless war upon the Spaniards who claimed the sovereignty of the island. There are few islands of its size in the world where so many different kinds of people live, and perhaps no other where so many wild deeds have been done. Until within the last two years, a man's will there has been likely to be his only law.

Nature has done much for the island. The soil is of incalculable richness. Fruits and grains grow luxuriantly where the ground is turned over, and as if to make the natives laugh at the need of such labour the forests yield fruits and nuts with lavish generosity. Deer and buffalo run wild, and numberless varieties of pigeons live in the trees.

Mount Ape, in the extreme southeastern part of the island, and almost upon the coast, is the loftiest mountain in the archipelago. Its height is usually estimated to be not far from ten thousand feet. A spiral of steam drifting up from the sulphur-crowned summit of the mountain shows that fires still linger in its bosom, but for many years it has been quiet, and at no time does history show that it has broken forth in fury to wreak the awful destruction that is written down against some of the volcanoes of these islands.

My work as a naturalist had several times brought me where I could see Ape, and each time I had been more and more fascinated by it, and more desirous of climbing to its top.

When I began to talk of making the ascent, though, I found it would be no easy matter. Not only were the sides of the mountain said to be steep, and the forests which clothed them impassable, but there were mysterious dangers to be encountered. Men who had gone with me anywhere else I had asked them, had affairs of their own to attend to when I spoke of climbing Apo, or else flatly refused to go.

I was told that no man that started up the mountain had ever come back. Enormous pythons drew their green bodies over its sides. Man-apes lived in its upper forests whose strength no human being could meet. Devils and goblins lurked in the crevasses below the summit, and above all and most terrible of all, there was a spirit of the mountain whose face to see was death.

My questions as to how they knew all these things if no man had lived to come back from the mountain had no effect. This was not a case for logic; it was one of those where instinct ruled.

There is a queer little animal, something like a sable, which is peculiar to Mindanao. The natives call it "gate del monte," which means "mountain cat." I wanted to get some specimens of this animal and also of a variety of pigeon which they call "the stabbed

dove," because it has a tuft of bright red feathers like a splash of blood upon its otherwise snow-white breast.

To get these I settled myself in a native village a few miles inland from the town of Dinagao, on the west shore of the Gulf of Davao. Mount Apo towered just above this place, and I meant to climb its sides before I left the valley.

After the Bagabos in whose village I was living found that all their tales of the terrible dangers on Apo did not dissuade me from tempting them, three of the men agreed to pilot me as far up the mountain side as they ever went, and to carry there for me a sufficient supply of food to last me, as they evidently believed, as long as I should need food. One of them, the best guide and carrier I had found on the whole island, had screwed his courage up to where he had promised to go farther with me; but the morning of our start a "qu ago" bird flew across our path and hooted; and that settled the matter. Such an ominous portent as that no intelligent Bagabo could be expected to disregard. The men hardly could be got to carry my luggage as far as they had agreed, and as soon as they had put the things down, they bade me a hasty farewell and scuttled down the mountain as fast as their legs could carry them.

I slept that night where the men had left me, and set out early the next morning, hopping to get to the top of the mountain and back to the same place before night overtook me. The climb was more than hard for the first mile—harder than I had even feared. The forest grew so dense as to be practically impassable, and I finally took to the bed of a rocky stream, up which the travelling, although dangerous, was not so hard.

In time, though, by scrambling up this water course, I passed beyond the tree line, and then, where there was only shrubbery, it was fairly easy to get along. I could see above the vegetation, now, and the view even from here would have repaid me for all my effort. The side of the mountain swept down in a majestic curve from my feet to the sea. At its base was Dinagao, and farther up the coast, Davao. Beyond them lay the blue waters of the Gulf of Davao, and far across this, showing only as a line of deeper blue upon the water, the mountain ranges of the eastern peninsula.

The bushes through which I waded were bent down with the ripe berries which grew on them. A herd of small, dark brown deer feeding among the bushes hardly moved out of my way. I wondered at their tameness, but thought it must be because no man had ever come within their sight before.

Above the bushes there was a zone of rock, broken in places into huge boulders, and then between this and the cone was the sulphur field, glowing, now that I was near enough to see it, with a richness of colouring such as no painter's palette could reproduce. From darkest green to deepest blue, through all the tints and shades of yellow, the colour scheme went, with here and there a touch of rose.

I had stopped a moment to get breath and to gaze at the wonderful scene before me. when there came into it and stood still between two great rocks, as a living picture might have stepped up into its frame, a woman, the strangest to look at that I have ever seen.

She was young and slender She was dressed in a simple, dark-brown, hemp-cloth garment which fell from neck to feet, and her round young arms were bare to the shoulder.

It took me a full minute, before I could realize what it was which made her look so strange to me.

Then I knew. It had been so long since I had seen a white woman that I did not know one when I saw her.

This woman's face and arms were as white as mine—much whiter, indeed, for I was tanned by months of Asiatic sun—and the hair which fell about her shoulders and down below her waist, was white;—not light, or golden, but white.

For once in my life, I am willing to confess, my nerves went back on me; and I could think of nothing but what the natives in the village at the foot of the mountain had told me. Pythons and man-apes and devils I had seen no trace of, but here, beyond question, was the "Spirit of the Mountain."

A stout, pointed staff of iron-wood, which I had been carrying to help me in my scramble up the mountain, slipped from my hand and fell clattering to the rocks. The woman turned her head toward the spot from which the sound had come, as if she heard the noise of the stick upon the stones, but although we were only a little way from each other, there was no expression in her face to indicate that she saw me.

Then she spoke.

"Madre!"

There was no answer, and she called again, clearer and louder.

"Ma-dre!"

There was a sound of swift steps on the stones, and a moment later another woman—an older woman—came from behind one of the rocks.

As if in answer to some question in the girl's face, the woman looked down and saw me.

In an instant she had sprung before the younger woman, as if to hide her from me.

There are some women in the world whose very manner carries with it an impression of power. Such was the woman whom I saw before me now. Not young; dark of skin, clad only in the simplest possible hemp-cloth garment, there was in her face a dignity which could not but win instant recognition.

"Who are you?" she asked in Spanish. "And why do you come here?"

I told her as simply and as plainly as I could, who I was, and why I had come up the mountain. She kept her place in front of the girl, screening her from sight during all the time that we were talking.

When I had finished she stood silent for a moment, as if thinking what to do.

"Since you have come here," she said at last, "where I had thought no one would ever come, and have learned what I had hoped no one would ever know, you will not, I feel sure, deny me an opportunity to tell you enough of the reason why two women live in this wild place, so that I hope you will help them to keep their secret. May I ask you to go with us to the place which we call home?"

I said I would be glad to go, without having the slightest idea where we were going. I should have said it just the same, I think, if I had known she was going to lead me straight down into the crater of the volcano.

"Elena," the older woman said, speaking to the girl. Then she said something else, in a native dialect which I did not understand.

The girl came out from the place where she had been hidden, and passed behind the rocks. When I saw her face, now, I saw what I had not perceived before. She was blind.

When the girl had been gone a little time the woman said: "Will you follow me?"

She waited until I had climbed up to where she stood, and then led the way around the rock behind which the girl had disappeared. A well defined path led from that place down into the dwarfed vegetation, and then, through that to the forest beyond. The girl was already some distance down this path, walking rather slowly, as blind people walk, but steadily, and with fingers outstretched here and there to touch the bushes on each side.

We followed. Where the trees began to be tall enough to furnish shelter, my guide stopped, pushed aside the branches of what appeared to be an impenetrable thicket, and motioned me to follow her through. The girl had disappeared again. The opening through which we went was so thoroughly hidden that I might have gone past it fifty times and never suspected it was there, or thought that the path down which we had come was anything but a deer track.

Another short path led us to a cleared space in the forest in which a long, low house of bamboo and thatch had been built. A herd of deer was feeding near the house. Those directly in our path moved lazily out of the way. The others did not stir. I knew then why the deer that I had seen as I had come up the mountain were so tame.

A broad porch was built against one side of the house, and under this were hung fibre hammocks. The woman pointed me to one of these hammocks, and leaving me there went into the house. When she came back she brought two gourds filled with some kind of home-made wine, and two wooden cups. The girl, coming just behind her, brought a basket of fruit which the woman took from her and placed upon a bamboo stand beside my hammock. Then, filling one of the cups from a gourd, she drank half its contents and set the cup down, fixing her eyes on mine as she did so.

I knew enough of native customs by this time to understand what this meant. If I took the cup which she had drunk from, and drank, I was a guest of the house, and bound in honor to do it no harm. If I poured wine from the other gourd into another cup and drank, I was under obligations as a guest only while I was under the roof.

I took the cup from the table and drank the half portion of wine which she had left in it.

“Thank you,” the woman said. “I will trust you.”

Then, sitting on a bamboo stool near my hammock, she began to talk. Only, at times, as she told me her story, she would rise and walk up and down the porch, as if she could tell some things easier walking than when sitting still.

Much of what she told me I shall not write down here; but enough for an understanding of the strange things which followed.

“My home was once in—,” she said, naming one of the most important towns in the island. My father was a Spanish officer, rich, proud and powerful. My mother was a Visayan woman. When I was little more than a girl, my parents married me to a Spanish officer much older than myself. So far as I knew then what love was, I thought I loved him. Afterward, I came to know.

“Among the prisoners brought into my husband’s care there came one day a Moro, whose life, for some reason, had been spared longer than was the lot of most prisoners. I told myself, the first time I saw this man, that he was the noblest looking man I had ever seen, and since that time I have never seen his equal. Chance made it possible for us to meet and speak, and then, in a little while, I came to know what love really is.

“One day I learned that the Moro prisoner was to be beheaded the next day. Word had come that a Spanish prisoner whom the Moros had captured some time before, and with the hope of whose ransom this man had been held, had been killed.

“That night”—the woman was walking the floor of the porch now—“I killed my husband while he was asleep, set the man I loved free, and we fled the city. By day we hid in the forests, and walked by night, until we came to a part of the island where the Mores lived. Nicomedis brought me to the town which had been his home, and we were married and lived there.

“Elena is our child. You have seen her.”

I realized now the truth about the girl;— her strange appearance, the color of her skin and eyes and hair. In my travels through the islands I had once or twice seen other albino children.

The woman had sat down again.

“Our life in the Moro town was never wholly comfortable. My husband’s people distrusted me. I was of a different faith, and from a hostile race. They would rather he would have chosen a wife of his own people. When the child was born things grew worse. Some said the tribe would never win in war while the child lived;—it was a curse. Then came a year when the plague raged among the Moros as it had never been known to do, terrible as some of its visits before that time had been.

“One day a slave, whose life Nicomedis once had saved when his master would have beaten the man to death, came to our house and told us that the people of the town were coming to kill us all, that the curse might be removed and the plague stayed. My husband would have stood up to fight them all until he himself was killed, but for the sake of the child, and because I begged him not to leave us alone, he did not. Again we fled into the forest; and because the trees and the beasts and the birds were kinder to us than any men, we said we would come up here— where we knew no man dare come—and would live our lives here.

“Eight years ago my husband died.” The woman was walking the porch again, and sometimes she waited a long time between the sentences of her story. “We buried him out there,” pointing to where the forest came up to one side of the enclosure. “It is easy for us to live here. We have everything we need. We have never been disturbed before. Only once, years ago, did any of the natives come as far up the mountain as this, and it was easy for us to frighten them so that no one has dared to come since then. You are the only living person who knows our secret. Shall we know that it is to be safe with you?”

For answer I filled the wooden cup from the gourd again, drank half the contents, and handed the cup to her to drink the rest.

“I thank you,” she said. “My life has had enough of sin and suffering in it so that I have hoped it may not have more of either.

“I would not have you think that I am complaining,” she said hastily, a moment later, as if she was afraid I would get that impression. “I am not. I do not regret one day of my life. My hands are stained with what people call crime, and my heart knows all the weight which grief can lay upon a heart; but the joy of my life while my husband lived paid for it all. To have been loved by him as I was loved, was well worth crime and grief.”

“Why do you not go away from here?” I asked. “Why not leave this country entirely, and go to some new land where you would be free from danger? I will help you to get away.”

“We know nothing of other lands,” she said. “We should be helpless there. We are better here.” “Besides,” a moment later, “his grave,” pointing out toward the trees, “is here.”

It had grown dark as we talked; the thick, dead darkness of a Philippine forest night. The deer on the ground outside the porch had lain down and curled their heads around beside them and gone to sleep. Enormous bats flew past the house. We could not see them, but we felt the air which their huge wings set in motion. The woman lighted a little torch of "viao" nuts. Elena came out of the house, walked across the porch and disappeared in the darkness, going toward the forest.

"Ought she to go?" I asked. "Will she not lost, or hurt?"

"Did you not understand it all?" the girl's mother said. "She is blind only in the day time. At night she sees as readily as you and I do by day."

In a few minutes the girl came back with her hands filled with fresh picked fruit. She gave me this, and her mother brought out from the house such simple food as she could provide.

"You will sleep here, tonight," she said, and left me.

The next day I went to the top of the mountain and after that, by making two trips to camp, brought up all the articles which been left there, including some blankets, a gun and ammunition, some food and some medicines. These I asked "the woman of the mountain," as I called her to myself, to let me to her. She took them, and thanked me.

I stayed there that night, and the next day said good by to the two strange women, and went down the mountain.

When I reached my house in the village I found my neighbors getting ready to divide my property among themselves, since they were satisfied I would never return to claim it. They did not think it strange that I came back empty-handed. That I had come back at all was a wonder. For the sake of the security of the two women I let it be known that I had seen strange sights on the volcano's top, and that it was a perilous journey to climb its sides.

I planned to stay in the village some weeks longer. My house, like most of the native habitations, was built of bamboo, and was set upon posts several feet above the ground. I lived alone. One night about a month after my return, I woke from a sound sleep, choking.

Some one's hand was pressed tightly over my mouth, and another hand on my breast held me down motionless upon my sleeping mat.

"Don't speak!" some one whispered into ear. "Don't make a sound! Lie perfectly quiet until you understand all that I am saying!"

"The natives have banded themselves together to kill you tonight. They believe the village has been cursed ever since you came down from Mount Apo, and that you are the cause of it."

I could see now that there had been a growing coldness toward me on the part of the people ever since I had come back. And there had been evil luck, too. The chief's best horse had cast himself and had to be killed. Two men out hunting had fallen into the hands of a hostile tribe and been "bolobed." Game had been unusually scarce, and a "quago" bird had hooted three nights in succession.

"They are coming here tonight to burn your house," the same voice ,whispered, "and kill you with their spears if you try to escape the flames. No matter how I knew, or how we came. There is no time to lose. You cannot stop to bring anything with you. Come outside the house at once, as noiselessly as possible, and Elena will lead us to where you can escape."

The hands were taken from my mouth and body, and I felt that I was alone.

A few moments later, outside the house, when I stepped from the ladder to the ground, a hand—a woman's hand—grasped mine firmly.

"Do not be afraid to follow," the same voice whispered. "Elena will lead the way, and will tell us of anything in the path."

The hand gave a tug at mine, and I followed. We were in absolute darkness. Sometimes the frond of a giant fern brushed against my cheek, or the sharp-pointed leaf of a palm stung my face, but that was all. The girl led us steadily onward through the forest.

"Stop!" she said, once, "and look back."

I turned my face in the direction from which we had come. A ray of light shone in the darkness, and quickly became a blaze. It was my house on fire. With the light of the fire came the sound of savage cries, the shouts of the men watching with poised spears about the burning house. In the dim light which the fire cast where we stood, I could make out the forms of my two companions. A black cloth bound around the girl's head hid her white hair. In the dark, her eyes, so blank in the day light, glowed like two stars. She held her mother by the hand, and the older woman's other hand grasped mine. I looked at the girl, and thought of Nydia, leading the fugitives from out Pompeii to safety.

Before the light of the fire had died, we were on our way again. It seemed to me as if we walked in the darkness of the forest for hours; but after a little we were following a beaten track. At times the girl told us to step over a tree fallen across the path, or warned us that we were to cross a stream. At last we came out on the hard sand of the ocean beach, and reached the water's edge. Freed from the forest's shade the darkness was less dense. I could make out the surface of the water, and out on it a little way some dark object. The girl spoke to her mother in their native tongue.

"There is a 'banca,'" the woman said, pointing out over the water to the boat. "No matter whose it is. Swim out to it, pull up the anchor, and before day comes you can be safe."

I tried to thank her.

"I am glad we could do it," she said, simply. "I am glad if we could do good."

Then they left me; and went back up the beach into the darkness.