

Told at the Club

By Sargent Kayme

“Speaking of ‘anting-anting,’ ” said a man at the Club House on the bank of the Pasig river, in Manila, one evening, “I have had an experience in that line myself which was rather striking.”

An American officer at the club that evening had just been telling us about a native prisoner captured by his command sometime before in one of the smaller islands, who, when searched, had been found to be wearing next his skin a sort of undershirt on which was roughly painted a crude map of certain of the islands of the archipelago.

This shirt, it seemed, the officer went on to explain, the man regarded as a powerful “anting-anting,” which would be able to protect him from injury in any of the islands represented on it. That he had been taken alive, of having been killed in the fight in instead which he was captured, the man firmly believed to be due to the fact that he was wearing the shirt at the time. A native servant in the employ of one of the officers of the company had explained later that such an “anting-anting” as this was highly prized, and that it increased in value with its age. Only certain “wise men” had the right to add a new island to the number of those painted on the garment, and before this could be done the wearer of the shirt must have performed some great deed of valour in that particular island. The magic garment was worn only in time of war, or when danger was known to threaten, and was bequeathed from father to son, or, sometimes, changed ownership in a less peaceful way.

“What was the experience which you have referred to?” I finally asked the man who had spoken, when he did not seem inclined to go on of his own accord.

The man hesitated a moment before he replied to my question, and something in his manner then, or perhaps when he did speak, made me feel as if he was sorry that he had spoken at all.

“It is a story I do not like to tell,” he said, and then added hastily a little later, as if in explanation, “I mean I do not like to tell it because I cannot help feeling, when I do tell it, that people do not believe me to be telling the truth.”

“Some years ago,” he continued, “I went down to the island of Mindoro to hunt ‘timarau,’ one of the few large wild animals of the islands—a queer beast, half way between a wild hog and a buffalo.

“I hired as a guide and tracker, a wiry old Mangyan native who seemed to have an instinct for finding a ‘timarau’ trail and following it where my less skillful eyes could see nothing but undisturbed forest, and who also seemed to have absolutely no fear, a thing which was even more remarkable than his skill, since the natives as a general thing are notably timid about getting in the way of an angry ‘timarau.’ As a matter of fact I did not blame them so very much for this, after I had had one experience myself in trying to dodge the wild charge of one of these animals infuriated by a bullet which I had sent into his body.

“Perico, though,—that was the old man’s name,—never seemed to have the least fear.

“I was surprised, then, one morning when the weather and forest were both in prime condition for a hunt, to have my guide flatly refuse to leave our camp. Nothing which .1

could say or do had the least influence upon him. I reasoned, and threatened, and coaxed, and swore, but all to no effect.

“When I asked him why he would not go,—what was the matter,—was he ill? he did not seem to be inclined to answer at first, except to say that he was not ill; but finally, later in the day, he explained to me that he had had a ‘warning’ that it would not be safe for him to go hunting that day; that his life would be in danger if he did go.

“Perico had been about the islands much more than most of the men of his tribe. He had even been to Manila once or twice, and so not only knew much more about the world than most Mangyans did, but had also picked up enough of the Spanish language so that he could speak it fairly well. In this way he was able to tell me, finally, how the ‘warning’ had come to him, and why he put so much confidence in it. He also told me this was why he had been so brave about the hunting before. He knew that he was not in any danger so long as he was not forewarned. When he had been warned he avoided the danger by staying quietly in camp, or in some place of safety.

“Even after he had told me as much as this, Perico would not explain to me just how the ‘warning’ had come, until, at last, he said that ‘the stone’ had told him.

“This stone, he said, was a wonderful ‘anting-anting’ which had been in his family for many years. His father had given it to him, and his grandfather had given it to his father.

“Once, many, many years before, there had been an ancestor of his who had been famous through all the tribe for his goodness and wisdom. This man, when very old, had one day taken shelter under a tree from a furious storm. While he was there fire from the sky had come down upon the tree, and when the storm was over the man was found dead. Grasped tightly in one of the dead man’s hands was found a small flat stone, smooth cut and polished, which no one of his family had ever seen him have before. Naturally the stone was looked upon as a precious ‘anting-anting,’ sent down from the sky, and was religiously watched until its mysterious properties were understood, and it was learned that it had the power to forewarn its owner against impending evil. When danger threatened its owner, Perico said, the stone glowed at night with a strange light which he believed was due to its celestial origin. At all other times it was a plain dull stone.

“The night before, for the first time in months, the stone had flashed forth its strange light; and as a result its owner would do nothing which would place him in any danger which he could avoid.

“I thought of all the strange stories I had read and heard of meteors falling from the sky, and of phosphoric rocks, and of little known chemical elements which were mysteriously sensitive to certain atmospheric conditions, and wondered if Perico’s stone could be any of these. All my requests to be allowed to see the wonderful stone, however, proved fruitless. Perico was obdurate. There was a tradition that it must not be looked at by daylight, he said, and that the eyes of no one but its owner should gaze upon it.

“And so, for eight beautiful days of magnificent hunting weather, that aggravating heathen stone kept us idle there in the midst of the Mindoro forest. I could not go alone, and Perico simply would not go so long as the stone glowed at night, as, he informed me each morning, it had done. It was in vain that I fretted, and offered him twice, and four times, and, finally—with a desire to see how much in earnest the man really was—ten times his regular wages if he would go with me for just one hunt. He simply would not stir out of the camp, until, on the morning of the ninth day, he met me with a cheerful face, and said, ‘Senor, we will hunt today. The stone is black once more.’

“And hunt we did,—that day, and many more—for the stone remained accommodat-
ingly dark after that—and we had good luck, too.

“When I came back to Manila I brought Perico with me. He had begun to have serious trouble with one of his eyes, which threatened to render him unable to follow the work of hunting of which he was so fond. I tried to make him believe that this was the danger of which he claimed he had been warned by the stone, but he would not agree to this, saying that his ‘anting-anting’ always foretold only a violent death, or some serious bodily injury. In Manila I had him see that Jose Rizal who afterwards became so prominent in the political troubles of the islands, and who had such a tragic later history. Senor Rizal, who had studied in Europe, was a skillful oculist, and an operation which he performed on Perico’s eye was entirely successful. I kept the old man with me until he was fully recovered, and then sent him back to his native island. Before he went, he thanked me over and over again for what I had done, and kept telling me that some time he would pay me for it all.

“I laughed at him, at first, not thinking what he meant, until, just before he was to go to the boat, he clasped my hand in both his, and said, ‘Senor, I have no children to leave the ‘anting anting’ of my family to. When I die, it shall be yours.’

“I would have laughed again, then, had it not been that the poor old fellow was so much in earnest that it would have been cruel. As it was, I thanked him, and told him I hoped he would live many years to be the guardian of the stone, and to be guarded by it himself.

“After Perico had gone, I forgot all about him. Imagine my surprise, then, when a little more than a year afterward, I received a small packet from a man whom I knew in Calupan, the seaport of Mindoro, and a letter, telling me that my old guide was dead, and that during the illness which had preceded his death he had arranged to have the packet which came with the letter sent to me.

“The package and letter reached me one morning. Of course I knew what Perico had sent me, and, foolish as it may seem, a bit of tenderness for the old man’s genuine faith in his talisman made me, mindful of his admonition that the stone must not be exposed to the light of day, restrain my curiosity to open the package until I was in my rooms that night. What I found, when at last I held the mysterious charm in my hands, was a smooth, dark, flint-like disc, about an inch and a half in diameter, and perhaps half an inch in thickness.

“Whatever the stone might have done for its former owners, or might do for me at some other time, it certainly had no errand to perform that night. It was just a plain, dark stone, and no matter how long I looked at it, or in what position, it did not change its appearance.

“Finally, half provoked with myself at my thoughts, I put the stone into a little cabinet in which were other curious souvenirs of my travels in the islands, and forgot it.

“Two years after that it became necessary for me to go to Europe. I had taken passage on one of the regular steamers from Manila to Hong Kong, and was to reship from there. As I expected to return in a few months, I did not give up my lodgings, but before I started I packed away much of my stuff for safe keeping. As I was busy at the office during the day, I did the most of this packing in the evenings. In the course of this work I came to the little cabinet of which I have spoken, and threw it open in order to stuff it with cotton, so that the contents would not rattle about when moved.”

The man who was telling the story stopped at this point so long that we who sat there in the smoking room of the Club listening to him were afraid he was not going to continue. At last he said:—

“This is the part of the story which I do not like to tell.

“On the black velvet lining of the cabinet, surrounded by the jumble of curios among which it had been tossed, lay old Perico’s stone,—not the plain, dark stone which I had put there, but a faintly glowing circle of lustrous light.

“I shut the lid of the cabinet down, locked the box, and put the key in my pocket. But I did no more packing that night. I came down here to the Club, and stayed as long as I could get anybody to stay with me, and talked of everything under the sun except the one thing which I was all the time thinking about.

“The next day I told myself I was a fool, and crazy into the bargain, and that my eyes had deceived me. And then, in spite of all this, when I went home at night I could hardly wait for dusk to come that I might open the cabinet.

“The stone lay on the velvet, just as the night before, as if it were a thing on fire!

“I said to myself that I would have some common sense, and would exercise my will power; and went on with my packing with furious energy. But I did not put the cabinet where I could not get at it.

“The boat for Hong Kong on which I had taken passage was to sail the next night. I finished my work, said good bye to my acquaintances, and went on board. Fifteen minutes before the steamer sailed I had my luggage tumbled from her deck back on to the wharf, and came ashore, swearing at myself for a fool, and knowing that I would be well laughed at and quizzed for my fickleness by every one who knew me.”

The man stopped again. After a little, one of the men who had been listening to him said, in a voice which sounded strangely softened:—

“I remember. That was the calling the name of a steamer which brought to us all the recollection of one of the most awful sea tragedies of those terrible tropic waters, where sometimes sea and wind seem to be in league to buffet and destroy.

“Yes,” said the man who had told the story. “No person who sailed on board of her that night was ever seen again; and only bits of wreckage on one of the northern reefs gave any hint of her fate.”