

Pearls of Sulu

By Sargent Kayme

Now and then people comment upon the odd style of a charm which I wear upon my watch chain. The charm is a plain, gold sphere, and is, I acknowledge, a trifle too large to be in good taste.

If those who ask me about the charm are people whom I care to trust, I sometimes open the globe—it has a secret spring—and show them hidden away inside, a single pearl, so large and perfect that no one who has ever seen it has failed to marvel at its beauty. If they ask me why I wear so regal a gem, and where I got it, I tell them that I am not quite sure that the jewel is mine, and that if I ever find the person who seems to have a better right to it than I, I shall give it up. Meanwhile I like to wear the locket where I can sometimes look at the pearl, since it is a reminder of what I think was the strangest adventure I ever had in the Philippine Islands. And I had many queer experiences there during the years I have journeyed up and down the archipelago in one capacity and another.

One summer when I was collecting specimens for a great European museum, I was living on the southeastern shore of the island of Palawan. Or rather I was living above, or beside the shore of the island; I don't know which word would best describe the location of my house, which, however, one could hardly say was on the island.

The Moros who live on that side of the island which is washed by the Sulu Sea, and who ostensibly depend upon pearl fishing for a living, and really lived by their high-handed deeds of piracy against their neighbors and mankind in general, inhabit odd houses which are built on stout posts driven into the sand at the edge of the sea. The walls of the houses are woven of bamboo, and the roofs are thatched, like those of nearly all the native habitations, but the location is unique. When the tide is high, the surface of the water—fortunately the village is built over a sheltered bay—comes to within two feet beneath the floors of the houses, and the inhabitants go ashore in cockle-shell boats. When the tide is low the foundation posts rise out of the mud and sand, and the people go inland on foot, dodging piles of seaweed and similar debris, left by the receding waves.

It was one of these houses that I hired, and in it set up my household belongings while I was at work in that part of Palawan.

The location had many advantages, for at that time I was principally engaged in collecting corals, sponges, shell fish and similar salt-water specimens. The natives brought me boat loads of such material, for once in their lives, at least, working for honest wages. I sorted over the stuff they brought, on a platform built out in front of my house, and disposed of the mass of refuse in the easiest way imaginable, merely by shoving it off the edge of the platform into the water, where the tide washed it out to sea.

Then, too, this keeping house over the water brought a blessed relief from the invasion of one's home by snakes, rats, ants and all the vermin of that kind which makes Philippine housekeeping on the land a burden to the flesh, while I did not foresee at first that the very water which protected me from these dangers might make possible the secret incursions of larger creatures. The disadvantage of this semi-marine style of architecture, as I looked at it, was that some night a big tidal wave might come along,

chasing a frolicsome earthquake, and bearing my house and myself along with it, leave us hanging high and dry in the tops of some clump of palm trees half a dozen miles inland.

So far as the Moros were concerned, I got along all right with them. They knew, in the first place, that I had the authority of the Spanish government to do about what I chose in Palawan, and although they cared not one ripple of the Sulu Sea for the authority of Spain when it could not be enforced by force of arms, they did respect my arsenal of weapons and the skill with which I one day shot down a crazy "tulisane" of their tribe who had started to run amuck, and by the shot saved the lives of no one knew how many of them. This, and my doctoring back to health two of their number who were ill, made us very good friends, and I could not have asked for more willing helpers, or more able, especially Poljensio.

It was not for many weeks after I had left Palawan for good, that I came to understand that Poljensio may have had a double reason for his willingness, which at the time I little suspected.

I remember very well the first time I saw the fellow. It was the day of the "macasla" festival. Up to that time I had found no Moro who would work steadily as my helper. Whatever men I hired, although satisfactory while they worked, would eventually have something else to do, either pearl fishing, or hunting, or long trips seaward in their proas, they said for fishing, but I thought, and found later I had thought rightly, for robbery. Even Poljensio used to claim time, now and then, when he said the conditions of the water and weather were favorable for finding pearl oysters, to go and dive for those lottery-ticket-like bivalves.

To tell the truth I did not blame the men so very much for turning pirates, after I came really to understand the conditions connected with the pearl fisheries.

The pearl oysters live at the bottom of such deep water, and are so hard to get, that I have often seen a man come up from his search for them with blood running from his ears and nose, the result of staying down so long. Of course such things as divers' suits, and air pumps, were unknown there. The men stripped their slim, brown bodies naked, and went over the side of the boat with no apparatus except their two hands and a sharp knife to use against the sharks. Sometimes the men never came back, and then we knew the knife had not been quick enough. Poljensio had a row of scars on one leg, where a shark had bitten him, years before, which made the leg look as if it had been between the bars of a giant's broiling iron.

Then, after the forces of nature had been overcome, as if they alone were not bad enough, the representatives of the government, the "Gobernadorcillo," had to be reckoned with; and he was worse than all the rest.

The pearl fisheries of Palawan were the property of the Sultan of Sulu. At least up to that time that monarch had been able to maintain an ownership in them which allowed him to claim all of the pearls above a certain size. All that the divers got for their risk and labor were the small pearls and the shells. Fortunately for them most of the shells had a market value for cutting into cameos, and for inlay work, and the Chinese dealers who came to Palawan bought them, as well as the pearls.

It was the business of the "Gobernadorcillo" to watch the divers, and take from them all the pearls large enough to become the perquisite of the Sultan. The men were allowed to go out to the water over the oyster beds only on certain days, and then the Sultan's representative went with them, and sat in his boat to keep watch that no shells were

opened there. After the boats had returned to the land every oyster shell was opened under his watchful eye, and every large pearl was claimed. Of course it was only rarely that an oyster held a pearl, more rarely still that the gem was a large one. When they did find a big one it always made me feel sorry to see the poor fellow, who had worked so hard for it, have to give the prize up to go, no doubt, to deck some one of the four hundred wives of the ruler who lived across the Sum Sea.

Poljensio was one of the best of the divers. It was at the "macasla" festival, as I have said, that I first noticed him. For a month the natives, had talked about "macasla," and this, with what I had heard about it before, made me anxious to see the performance. So far as I knew I was the first American who had ever had the opportunity. It is only rarely that the festival can be kept, because its success depends upon the possession by the natives of the berries of a certain shrub, which must be in just such a stage of ripeness to have the requisite power. The plant on which the berries grow is not at all common. In this case it was necessary to send a long way into a distant part of the island to get the berries.

The "macasla" festival is really a great fishing expedition, in which every man, woman and child who lives near the village where it is held takes part. The berries are the essential element in a great mass, composed of various ingredients mixed together; just the same as a bit of yeast put into a pan of bread leavens the whole lot. One very old man was said to be the only person near there who understood just how to make the mixture. A large log which had been hollowed out and used at one time for a canoe, was utilized as a trough to make the mixture in. The mass was mixed up in the afternoon and left to ferment overnight. When he had it ready the old man covered the canoe with banana leaves and forbade any one to go near it until the next morning. I saw several different kinds of vegetable substances crushed up, to be put into the canoe, besides the berries; and at last a quantity of wood ashes were added.

The next morning every one was out early, as it was necessary to begin operations when the tide was at its very lowest point. Every one about the village was on hand, each person bringing a loosely woven wicker basket, into which was put a small quantity of the mixture from the old log canoe. When all had been provided with this they walked out as far as they could go, to where the tide was just turning. Then, waiting until the incoming water had passed them on its way inland, the natives, formed in a long line parallel with the shore, dropped their baskets into the water and shook them to and fro until all of the "macasla" had been washed out through the loose wicker work.

In about ten minutes the effect of the mixture began to be seen. The smaller fish were affected first, and began to come to the top of the water, as if for air. Very soon they were followed by the larger ones, and soon the water seemed filled with them. They would come to the top of the water, turn on one side, flop about a little as if intoxicated, and then sink helplessly to the bottom, where, the water being nowhere very deep, it was easy to see them and capture them. The natives secured basket after basket full, getting some so large that they could not carry them in their baskets. These they would disable with a "machete" and then tow ashore. The fish did not eat the "macasla." It seemed simply to have impregnated the water, making a solution too powerful for them to withstand. They were not killed by its effects, but acted as if they were drunk. Those which the natives did not capture soon recovered and swam away as briskly as ever. Before they were able to

do this though, the natives had secured more than enough food to last them as long as it would remain eatable.

Of course I found the miscellaneous harvest of sea animals which the "macasla" brought in most interesting, and secured a good many valuable specimens. Inasmuch as I had contributed very materially to the feast which was to take place that night, and which lasted all night long, the people let me wade about among the strangely helpless creatures and have a first pick of such as I wanted. I had noticed Poljensio running about, as one of the strongest and most agile of all the men in the water, and when he came near me once, when my basket was heavy, I offered to hire him to help me, although I had little idea that any one would work for wages at such a time. Quite to my surprise he seemed willing, and joined me in what I was doing. I learned afterwards that having no family to provide for he was not so much in need of profiting by the fish harvest as most of the men were. He had worked in the water all his life, and knew more about the habits of some of the creatures we caught than I did. When we came to go to my house, and he saw the specimens I had preserved there, he seemed to take a more intelligent interest in them than any other man I had ever had, and I was glad to be able to hire him to work for me all of the time, barring the few days he reserved for pearl fishing.

The season which followed proved to be an unusually successful one for the divers. The crop of oysters was large, and many pearls were found. The gems which were to go to the Sultan were superb, and there would be enough of them to make a truly royal necklace.

One night about six months after the "macasla" festival I woke suddenly from a sound sleep, with that strange feeling which sometimes comes to one at night, that I was not alone. While I lay listening and peering into the darkness of the room in which I slept, I heard a soft splash in the water beneath me, such as a big fish might have made if he had come to the surface, and diving back had struck the water with his tail. It had been high tide soon after midnight, and the water was not more than three or four feet beneath me. I listened a long time, but could hear nothing more, and finally went to sleep again, deciding that the splash I had heard had been made by a shark, and that some noise which he had made before that had been what had roused me.

Any further thought of my disturbance which I might have had was driven from my mind in the morning, when I came out and found the community in a state of violent commotion.

The "gobierno," the house in which the "Gobernadorcillo" lived, had been robbed in the night, and a bag containing about half the Sultan's pearls was gone. The government official, along with several other residents, lived on shore. The houses which, like mine, were built over the water, were generally inhabited by the divers and their families.

The voice of the "Gobernadorcillo" was not the only one raised in lamentation that morning, by any means, for he had very promptly begun a search for the missing jewels by beating his servants and every one connected with the official residence, within an inch of their lives. When this did not produce the pearls he extended the process to such other unfortunate residents of the town as fell under his suspicion. I really think the only thing which kept him from killing a few of the wretches was the fear that he might by some chance include the thief in the number, and thus destroy all hope of getting back the stolen gems.

No man, woman or child was allowed to leave the village, and so thorough was the system by which one of those deputy tax collectors kept track of his people, that he knew every one by name, and knew just where each one should be found. His superiors required a certain sum of money from each tax collector. They did not care in the smallest degree where or how he got the money, but a certain amount he must turn in at stated times, or else be put in prison and have other unpleasant things done to him. So it stood the “Gobernadorcillo” in good stead to know who his people were, and where they were, and how much each person could be made to pay.

As soon as his arm was rested from the beating he had given the suspected natives the official began a personal search of each house in the village. ‘The native houses are so simple, and their stock of furniture so small, that it was no great task to make a thorough inspection of the entire place. What little furniture each house had was outside of it when the examination of that house was completed. It was fortunate for the people who lived in the houses built over the water that their homes were visited at low tide, for in the state of the examiner’s temper when he visited them I think their effects would have gone out into the sea just as quickly as they went out on to the sand.

Even my house came under the terms of the universal edict, although my things were not used so harshly as were those of the natives, which was fortunate for me, for I had hundreds of specimens packed, and many more ready to pack, which I should have been very sorry indeed to have had dumped out of doors.

My relations with the Governor had always been pleasant. He really was quite as good a man as any one in his place could be expected to be. We had gotten along very well together, and I was glad now that this was so. When he came to my house he contented himself with looking through the part of the building where the native servant who cooked for me worked and lived. Poljensio slept at home, and spent only the daytime at my house. The search of that part of the establishment over, the worried official sat down in my work room to rest for a few minutes, cool himself off, and bewail the fate which had brought him such ill luck. Poljensio, who was washing sponges on the platform outside, and had for this reason not been at his brother’s house, where he slept, when that domicile was searched, was called in, and while his official master rested, was made to strip himself stark naked, and turn his few slight garments—the clothing of a Moro is always an uncertain quantity—inside out to show that nothing was hidden therein.

Knowing the place so well as I did, and the means at the command of the “Gobernadorcillo,” I could not for the life of me see how any one who had stolen the pearls could keep them, or hide them, for that matter, unless they had been thrown back into the sea again. So far as the governor himself was concerned he would not suffer from the loss. The yearly crop of pearls was not like the money tax, a stated sum, nor could the Sultan enforce his claims as did the Spanish government. His title to the fisheries was too slight for it to be policy for him to make trouble. Besides that, Sulu was so far away that its ruler might never hear that this year’s crop had been larger than usual. Not all the gems had been taken. The governor could turn over what had been left him, and it was not at all likely that any questions would be asked. In fact, if it had not been for his evident concern, which I did not believe him clever enough to have simulated, I would almost have believed he had stolen the pearls himself. He certainly was indefatigable in his attempts to find the missing property. Not a native left the village for any purpose that his clothing and his boat, if he was going out upon the water, were not inspected.

My own stay in Palawan was nearly ended at the time, and it was not long after that before I had completed my collections, packed my specimens, and was ready to go. Poljensio had agreed to go with me as far as Manila, to handle my freight and baggage, and to help me there about repacking and shipping my specimens. On my going to Europe he was to return to Palawan.

When I was ready to go, and had my luggage in shape to be sent on board the sail boat which was to take me to a port visited by the monthly steamer to Manila, I wondered if the "Gobernadorcillo" would let me go. He proved very obliging, however, shook hands, and hoped I would have a pleasant voyage. Poljensio, though, had to submit to the usual ordeal of having his clothing searched. Luggage he had none, so he was not troubled in that respect.

I had planned to stop in Hong Kong a month on my way to Europe. On the morning of the day that I was to leave there I was surprised to receive a package by one of the local English expresses of the city, and more surprised to find that the package contained a small box of specimens which had been missing when I had repacked my property at Manila. The specimens in this box were particularly choice ones, and their loss had been as annoying as it had been unaccountable. The pleasure which I felt in getting them back, though, was nothing compared to my amazement when I found along with the package another small one containing a letter from Poljensio.

The letter, if I had chosen to put it among my specimens, would have ranked, I am sure, among the greatest curiosities of the whole collection. Poljensio was not a scholar. His accomplishments lay in the line of diving and swimming; in gathering pearls, and such things as that. He never would have wasted his time in struggling with pen and paper, now, if the nature of the correspondence had not been such that he could not safely entrust it to any one else; and the full comprehension of the remarkable document, written in the mingled native and Spanish languages, with which he had favored me, was not vouchsafed to me at the first reading, or the second.

Translated, and made as nearly coherent as possible, it ran about like this:

"I stole the pearls. I only took half, so not too much" (scrimmage, fuss, row, trouble,—the native word he used meant no one of these exactly, and yet included them all) "would be made. I was tired of working so hard, and the sharks, and not getting anything for it but shells. I made up my mind I would do it soon after I went to work for you. I went diving after that only that I be not suspected. I knew all of us native people would be searched, but I thought he would pass you by. So that night, after I had got the pearls, I swam out to your house, climbed up through the floor, and hid the bag in a place where I would know. Then, one day, when I packed a fine big shell, I hid the bag in it, and marked the box. When we got to Manila I stole the box. I sorrow to make you this bad time, but have no other way. I take good care of box, though, after I take pearls out, to bring it here with me, and now I send it back. I sell all the pearls here but one, to China merchant, for money enough to make me always a rich man. I don't think I go back to Palawan. One pearl I save back, and send you with this letter, to remember by it Poljensio."

That was what was in the package with the letter. The pearl he had saved; this one which I wear.

As I said in the first place, I am ready to give it up when I can find a man who has a better claim to it than I have. My right of ownership in the gem is not, I confess, very substantial; but whose is it?

It was not the "Gobernadorcillo's," for he was only an agent; and besides that he left Palawan not long after I did, as I have found out by inquiry, and I cannot learn where he now is.

The Sultan of Sulu who reigned then is dead, and if the gem belonged to him it did not belong to his successor; for the friends of the first ruler declared that the man who gained the throne after him was a false claimant. Should I send it to the dead man's heirs? He had no son, and one can hardly divide one pearl among four hundred widows.

Only Poljensio is left, and his claim, even if I could find him, I fear would be counted hardly legal. Quite likely he would not take it back, even if I found him; and sometimes, when I reflect upon what would probably have happened to me if the bag of stolen pearls had been found by any chance in my house, I am not sure that I should feel like offering the gem to him.