

“Our Lady of Pilar”

By Sargent Kayme

“How very singular! What do you suppose they are doing?”

“I’m sure I don’t know. The American mind is unequal to grappling with the problem of what the natives are doing out here, most of the time. They seem to be praying. Or are they having a thanksgiving?”

“I don’t know. All women, too!”

The young American woman and the officer who was her escort halted their horses to watch better the group of people of whom they had been speaking. The officer was a lieutenant of the American forces stationed in Zamboanga, the oldest and most important city in Mindanao, the headquarters of the United States military district in the Philippines known as the Department of Mindanao and Job. The young woman was the daughter of one of the older officers of the department, just come to Zamboanga the day before, and in this morning’s ride having her first chance to see the strange old city to which her father had been transferred from Manila a few weeks before.

In the course of this ride the young people had reached Fort Pilar, at one end of the town, a weather-beaten old fortification built years and years before by the Spaniards as a protection against their implacable foes, the Moros, who waged continual warfare against them from the southern islands of the archipelago. Circling the stone walls of the fort the riders had come upon a group of as many as fifty Visayan women kneeling on the ground, their faces turned devoutly toward a stone tablet let into the walls.

An American soldier was doing sentry duty not far away. “Wait here, Miss Allenthorne,” Lieutenant Chickering said, “and I’ll find out from that man over there what they are doing. He’s been here long enough so that probably he knows by this time.” The officer cantered his pony over to the sentry’s station. The American girl, left to herself, slipped down from her pony, and hooking the bridle rein into her elbow, walked a little nearer to the women. They did not seem to mind her in the least, and one of them—a handsome young woman near her—when she looked up and saw that the stranger was an American, smiled, and said something in a language which Miss Allenthorne did not understand; but from the expression on her face the American felt sure that what the woman said was meant as a welcome.

Something which this Visayan woman did a moment later excited Miss Allenthorne’s enriosity to a still higher pitch. The native woman drew a small photograph from the folds of her “camisa,” and kissed it. Then she put it down on the ground between herself and the wall, and turned to the tablet above it a face lighted with a radiance which any woman seeing would have known could have come from love alone. When she had finished, and had risen to her feet, she saw that the young American “senorita” was still watching her.

The two woman had been born with the earth between them, and with centuries of difference in traditions and training. Neither could understand the words which the other spoke, but when their eyes met there went from the heart of each to the heart of the other a message which did not require words to make itself understood.

With a beautiful grace of manner and expression, the Visayan went to the other woman, and again speaking as if she thought her words could be understood, held out the picture which she had kissed, for the stranger to look at.

The photograph was that of a young American officer, in a lieutenant's uniform.

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Grace Allenthorne and her mother had lived in Manila for several months. As the daughter of one of the oldest and most highly respected officers in the service, and as a beautiful and attractive young woman, she had naturally been popular in the life of the military element of Manila's society. If she had herself been asked to describe the situation in Manila, Grace would have said that she liked no one officer better than another. They had all been "so nice to her. With the exception of two of their number, however, the officers with whom she had ridden and talked and (lanced, would have said, if they had expressed their opinion of the matter, that they were all out of it except Lieutenant Chickering and Lieutenant Day; and some of them, among themselves, possibly may have made quiet bets as to which one of these two men would win in the end.

Then there came one of those official wavings of red tape in the air, which army officers' families learn to dread as signals of approaching trouble, and Colonel Allenthorne was transferred from Luzon to Mindanao; and among the troops sent with him were the companies of the rival lieutenants.

When the General sent back word that Zamboanga was a quiet city, with a fair climate and comfortable quarters, his wife and daughter followed him. If either of the young officers flattered himself that Grace Was coming on his account, and that he was going to be made aware of her preference for himself on her arrival in Mindanao, he was disappointed.

Lieutenant Chickering was on duty when Miss Allenthorne arrived, and she devoted two hours that evening to hearing Lieutenant Day describe the city as he had found it. The next morning Lieutenant Day was on duty, and she went to ride with Lieutenant Chickering, possibly to learn if the information she had been favoured with the night before had been correct.

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Lieutenant Chickering cantered back from the sentry's post. Finding his companion dismounted, he jumped down from his own pony and came to join her. The native woman had gone her way toward the city before he returned, smiling a good-bye to Miss Allenthorne when she found that her words were not understood, and hiding the photograph in her bosom as she turned to go.

"I've found out all about it, Miss Allenthorne," the Lieutenant exclaimed.

"There is a story which it seems the natives believe, that years ago there was once, where we now stand, a river which ran down past the fort and emptied into the sea. To give access to this river there was then a gate in the wall of the fort, directly opposite where we are now. Over the gate was a marble statue of a saint, who was called 'Our Lady of Pilar.'

“One night a soldier who was on sentry duty at the gate saw a white figure pass out before him. He challenged it, and when he got no answer challenged again and again. When the third summons brought no response, he aimed his gun at the figure and fired.

“In the morning this sentry was found at his post, stone dead, and the statue of the saint was gone. What was still more strange, the river which had always flowed past the gate had dried up in the night, and has never been seen since. After a time they built up the gate into a solid part of the wall, as you see it now; because as there was then no river here, there was no need of the gate. This had hardly been done when the tablet which we see there now made its appearance miraculously. All these strange manifestations attracted so much attention to the place that this shrine was set up here, and now for years it has been a favourite place for devout worshippers—especially women—to come to pray and to give thanks for blessings which they have received.

“It’s interesting, isn’t it?”

“Very,” assented Miss Allenthorne, when the officer had finished; and then she added, almost immediately, “Don’t you think it’s getting very warm? Wouldn’t we better ride back now?”

“Just as you say,” the officer answered. Then he helped her to mount, mounted his own horse, and they rode home.

That evening Miss Allenthorne was invisible. When Lieutenant Day called, her mother explained that the young woman had a headache, possibly from riding too far in the sun that morning.

Alone in her room the young woman heard the officer’s inquiry and her mother’s excuses, for the bamboo walls of a Philippine house let conversation be heard from one end of the house to the other. Crushing in both hands the handkerchief which she had been dipping into iced water to bind about her forehead, she flung it impatiently from her, thinking bitterly to herself as she did so how foolish it was to bind up one’s head when it was really one’s heart that was aching.

For alone in her darkened room that afternoon, the young woman had acknowledged to herself—what perhaps up to that time had been almost as much of a problem to her as to other people—which one of the young officers she really cared for. She knew now that the love of Lieutenant Day meant everything to her, and the love of the other man nothing.

And it was Lieutenant Day’s picture which she had seen the Visayan woman kiss.

One day General Allenthorne sat on the verandah of his house with an American acquaintance, the agent of a business firm, who had been sent to the Philippine Islands to see what opportunities there might be for trade there.

Some women walked along the street below the house, carrying heavy water jars poised on their heads.

“Queer country, isn’t it?” said the visitor.

“Yes,” said the General. “A body never knows what may happen to him. Probably those women we see down there are slaves. Seeing them made me think of a funny thing I heard of today, which happened to one of my men a little while ago.

“A young officer hired a native man for a servant. One day the fellow came to the Lieutenant in a great state of mind, begging the officer to help him. It seemed he had a sweetheart who was a Visayan slave girl owned by a Moro. The man who owned the girl was going to leave the city and take all his property, including this slave girl, with him.

Pedro—that was the officer's boy—wanted 'the great American Senor' to say she should not go. Some of the natives seem to have the most wonderful confidence in the power of the Americans to do anything and everything.

"The officer told his boy he had no power to prevent the man's moving and taking his property with him; but he happened to ask how much the girl was worth. How much do you think the fellow said? Fifteen dollars! And he went on to explain that this was an unusually high price, he knew, but that this girl was young and handsome and clever at work. Of course he thought so, for he was in love with her.

"Well, I suppose the Lieutenant was flush, or felt generous, or perhaps something had happened to put him in an unusually serene frame of mind. He handed over fifteen dollars, and told Pedro to go and buy the girl and marry her; which he did, and has been the happiest man alive ever since. He is really grateful, too, and there isn't another officer in the service that is waited on as Lieutenant Day is. The funniest part of it all is, though, that he just found out a day or two ago, that in his gratitude Pedro had stolen one of his master's photographs to give to the Visayan girl he had married, so that she could see what their benefactor looked like, and she has been going out with it every day to an altar, or shrine, or something of that sort in the wall of an old fort here, where the native women go to worship, to pray to the saint there to shower all kinds of blessings on the American Senor who brought all this happiness to her and her husband.

"The boys have geyed Day so much about it, since they found it out, that he swears he will discharge the man, and have him hauled up for stealing the picture into the bargain. If he does, the woman will be likely to think that there is something the matter with the saint, I reckon, or that her prayers haven't found favour."

For once the wicker walls of a bamboo house had a merit all their own. At least that was what a certain young woman thought, when she could not help hearing this conversation in the room in which she had shut herself for the afternoon.

That night at dinner Miss Grace Allenthorne, was so radiant that even her father noticed it.

"What have you been doing, Grace?" he said. "What's the reason you feel so well, tonight? I haven't seen you look so fine for a month."

"Oh, nothing, father," said the girl. "I don't know of any special reason. I think that you just imagine it."

Which was, of course, a very wrong thing for her to say; for she knew perfectly well what the reason was.

While they were still at table a messenger came post haste for General Allenthorne, with word that he was wanted at once at headquarters. He was absent nearly all night.

In the morning it was known that an outpost in the northern part of the island had been surprised and almost captured. The enemy was still in force about the place and threatening it. A loyal native had crept through the lines to bring word and ask for help. A relief force had been made up and sent at once. Lieutenant Day was among those who volunteered to go, and had gone.

Ten days of horrible anxiety followed. Then word came that the relief party had reached the post in time. The forces surrounding the place had been scattered, and the post was safe. There had been a sharp fight, though, and among those who had been badly wounded was Lieutenant Day.

Of course he got well. No man could help it, with four such nurses as Mrs. Allenthorne and Mrs. Allenthorne's daughter Grace, and Pedro and Pedro's Visayan wife Anita.

Just what Grace told her mother, which led that worthy person to become responsible for the young officer's recovery, no one ever knew except the two women themselves, but in addition to being a motherly-hearted woman, Mrs. Allenthorne was a soldier's daughter as well as a soldier's wife, so perhaps it was not necessary to explain so many things to her as it would have been to some people.

Nobody ever knew—or at least never told—what explanation the young woman made to the Lieutenant, when he came back to consciousness and found her helping to care for him. Perhaps she did not explain. Possibly the explanations made themselves, or else none were needed.

At any rate, the young man got well, and since then he has been known to say—although this was in the strictest confidence to a, very particular person—that he should always regard the Visayan woman's prayers before "Our Lady of Pilar" with the profoundest gratitude, because the greatest blessing of his whole life had come to him through this woman's praying for him outside the walls of the old fort.