Charms of the Sulu Islands

Uncle Sam's irritating tussle with the pugnacious Tagals does not wholly darken the view of the Philippines. There are several bright spots in the picture, and the brightest at the present moment is the Sulu group, where his excellency the sultan preserves the peace and draws $250 (Mexican money) a month from the United States. Correspondent McCutcheon of the Chicago Record, who accompanied General Bates to the Sulus, draws this picture of a locality "where every prospect pleases and only man is vile:"

The steamer Churruca left Manila July 12 and reached the harbor of Iloilo in thirty hours. Twenty hours more of steaming and we reach that great unexplored, mysterious island of Mindanao, which is said by everybody out here to be the richest island in the world.

Then comes ten hours among the most exquisite islands I've ever seen—the Sulu archipelago. Many of them are uninhabited and we sit with our feet on the rail and look out across the glassy sea, whose surface is broken only by the skipping flight of hundreds of flying fish, and pick out islands on which we can establish a government and be a king. The water is clear and we can see the white coral sand far down below. Dozens of little islands are scattered over the bosom of that peaceful summer sea and the rich green of their hillsides and the broad, white, gleaming beaches and the brilliant sails of native "pintas" make a picture that is ideal.

Some of the islands rise like castles from the sea; others are mountains which nature has heaved up in single peaks during some mighty subterranean explosion, while the prettiest and most enchanting of all are those dainty little patches of tropical gorgeousness that seem to float on the blue water, with a white pedestal of sand that makes the island look like a china dish filled with beautiful, green plants.

Then we come to the island of Sulu, which is the largest of all in the group, although it is only thirty-five miles long and twelve wide. There is a charm about the name of Sulu. It seems so remote and far away. We prepare ourselves for the town our fancy has constructed—a patch of white houses half buried in waving palm trees rising from a low, white stretch of coral beach.

What a strange looking island it is! Quite unlike any we've seen before, for here is a towering purple peak, with its crest in a mantilla of lacy clouds, and then come, ranged in soldierly precision by its side, three flat-topped hills, all the same shape and size, and on beyond these another towering, stately mountain. The middle one of the square-topped hills is bare of trees and its smooth sides, green as a field of young wheat, look from the sea like the broad lawns of an English park. On the very topmost point of this hill is a small cluster of trees, which spring up as unexpectedly and with apparently as little purpose as the topknot of a Japanese baby. The Spanish captain of the ship tells us that the hill is called the sacred hill, because the tombs of some ancient hadjis are sheltered by the little bunch of trees, and we wonder whether Americans would be safe in ascending it.

Over on the beach to our left is a Moro village, which we learn is Patikola, where the most powerful of native princes, or datos, has his home. As we steam farther down the islands there are many native sailboats seen, all with gorgeously colored sails, which seem more brilliant than even the sails of Italy. Imagine a sail made of the American flag and you may have some idea of the splendor of these Moro sails.

The steamer now swings in a long curve around a jutting point and away over on the other side of the harbor lies the town of Jolo. It looks like a fashionable seaside resort—all white and green, and the long stone pier extending far out in the harbor waters is ornamented with gay lampposts and a bright, octagonal lighthouse tower. Swarms of soldiers are streaming down to watch the ship come in, for it brings letters and mail and news from the outside world, which has been totally lacking since the last ship came in three weeks before. There is no cable to Jolo, and only a ship every two or three weeks. The nearest point which connects them with civilization is the little town of Sandakau, Borneo, 150 miles to the west. You may imagine how remote and isolated a place must be when its nearest port is a place in the remotest part of the remote island of Borneo.

A few native sampans come out to the Churruca as she drops her anchor and some soldiers paddle out in native dugouts. In an hour we are landed on the pier, and then we begin to have a complete idea of the exquisite beauty of Jolo, the prettiest place in the Philippines. A huge castellated gateway stands at the end of the pier, and through this you pass into the main avenue, Calle Marina, of Jolo. You at once feel that you've been dropped down in a park or a venerable college campus. The street is lined with immense trees that make a tunnel, even though the street is forty yards wide. On one side is the fine residence of Captain Tiana, the Captain Chinaman of the Sulus, and his house, both in situation and extent, is the best one in the town. On the other side is a short row of shops, all uniform in size and design, and painted with delicate shades of coloring. Then there comes a little park with a fountain playing deep in the waving tropical verdure that fills it. Then more shops, all alike in coloring, and a few spreading awnings, beneath which are tables and chairs like a Parisian boulevard cafe.

The streets are as clean as brooms can make them, for there are no vehicles in Jolo and horses are allowed in only by special permission. All the architecture is ornate and gayly colored, and everything is on such a tiny scale that you imagine yourself looking at some fancy stage setting. All the streets are alike—lined with great arching trees, and flanked here and there with carefully kept gardens.

A wall about ten feet high surrounds the town, and scattered along on its top are little sentry towers, while at the corners and gates are fancy blockhouses.

In fifteen minutes you can walk through every street in the town, for Jolo is scarcely more than 500 yards long and 300 yards deep, and such a walk is sure to leave you in a state of astonishment and wonder at finding such a perfect gem of a town in such an out-of-the-way place. There are water works and excellent stone gutters, and the town, unlike most towns, has no poor quarter, but is everywhere uniformly clean and excellently built.

Under the Yellow Flag

It is next to impossible, says the Detroit Free Press, for the people of the north to realize the effect produced upon a southern city by the appearance therein of yellow fever. People rise in the morning joyous, careless, secure in the possession of health and well-being; during the day a rumor creeps about that such a man on such a street has yellow fever, that the authorities know it and are investigating it. People cease to laugh as they pass each other, and gather in knots on the corners to discuss the rumor. By night apprehension has taken the place of pleasant security. Many of the more timid do not wait for the result of the official investigation, but are passengers on the outgoing trains that evening. On the morrow comes the authentic announcement: it is the plague, and the nervous element is thrown into a panic such as one sees only on a burning ship where numbers of human beings are assembled, and whence the means of escape are limited. Fabulous prices are paid for cabs and carriages and baggage wagons; depots are blockaded with vehicles, and ticket offices are besieged with people who fight for place and preference with the fierceness of desperation. Every northern bound train is loaded with those who have the money to seek safety in the far, cool climes; and all day long the country roads are thronged with hacks and carts and wagons—in the latter of which men, women and children often sit on their household furniture—all fleeing into the country before the quarantine cuts them off. Even after the rules are established by the neighboring towns and hamlets, these people continue their exodus under cover of night and by lonely roads, renting unoccupied cabins or even tenting in the woods to escape the plague-filled atmosphere of the city.

Twenty-four hours after the first case is announced, hundreds and hundreds of homes throughout the city are left tenantless, and the erstwhile busy streets have a deserted look. Then, for those who have remained from duty or inability to get away, there follows a time too horrible for outsiders to conceive of. Fortunately, many of those who are left are the cool-headed, quiet citizens who take a philosophical view of things and refuse to give way to useless fears. But brave as they are it is a nerve-testing time. Business is dead; the quarantine cuts off from outside traffic, and home trade is limited to the absolute necessities of life, shops and warehouses are closed, and time hangs heavy on hands emptied of their accustomed tasks. The all-absorbing topic comes to be the fever, and speculation centers on the next victim. After all, this is the trying part of it; loss of business, interrupted commerce, enforced idleness of hands and capital are things hard to bear; but to read day after day that this or that acquaintance has been stricken, to watch the yellow flags—the plague's ensigns—blossom grimly from block to block, from door to door, and wonder when it will reach one's own lintel—that is what tries men's souls as war in its fiercest aspects never can. In war there is the exhilaration of action, the intense relief of hitting back; in a fever epidemic there is the helplessness of being struck in the dark by a foe whose blow may not be returned.

And so it is that it requires men of fine courage and large caliber to meet the exigencies of a plague visitation, to put self aside and devote every energy to the public welfare, to run commissary departments—for the large proportion of provisions are thus obtained—to maintain law and order, to look after sanitary regulations and to nurse the sick, and oftentimes to bury the dead for lack of a sexton. As the plague spreads the trouble grows. There is always more or less neglect and lawlessness from certain sources; and at last death walks the highways and byways unchallenged and leaves so many victims in his wake that coffins are stacked up in the potter's field awaiting their turn at the hands of the grave-diggers. Often night finds the tasks of this nature unfinished and the graveyard presents a gruesome sight, with the new graves and the unburied coffins illuminated by the disinfectant fires of pitch. Under such a mental strain it is not surprising that some fall and falter by the way; and so there go forth disheartening tales of drunken nurses, of faithless inspectors, of dishonest distributors of public provisions, and—worse still—of men and women hurried to their graves ere death had really claimed them. Stories such as these are many and harrowing during an epidemic, and many of them are true.

But there are deeds of heroism to offset them—accounts of patients sharing magnanimously the scanty medicine of sick-folk food provided for the suffering; of men and women, immune to nothing but selfishness and cowardice, going unfalteringly and fearlessly into the very hotbeds of pestilence to rescue friend and stranger alike from the destruction that neglect would surely bring them. It is not always the heroism that is blown about by trumpets that is greatest; not a hero of war time ever showed more courage or sublime self-abnegation than do these patient people who give themselves thus unostentatiously to the cause of humanity. The fierce assault, the gallant courage, the battle itself lasts an hour, a day; but those who fight the yellow plague stand face to face with danger and destruction; through long days and weeks and months, and know not rest nor respite. The simple legend upon a tombstone: "A Yellow Fever Nurse," speaks more eloquently to those who understand its meaning than do the many-syllabled epitaphs upon the sarcophagi of generals and statesmen.

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