

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 2 | Issue 2

Article 3

1932

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Recommended Citation

Garcia Villa, Jose. "Kamya: Story of Old-Time Philippines." *New Mexico Quarterly* 2, 2 (1932). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol2/iss2/3>

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Kamyá
A Story of Old-Time Philippines
By JOSÉ GARCIA VILLA

.... For a woman knows best the trueness of love, its wisdom, its song. Only a woman can find sweetness in the tyranny of love—only a woman understandeth love that is too great.

This I know, because I have seen it in the light of their eyes, in the little sweeps of lashes soft even in desire. Men catch not this little light—for it is too tender, too elusive, for their grasp—but failing to catch it, is it not more beautiful so?

Even as a white flower turneth to a darksome hue as it withers, even as a tame dove may still bite with its beak—so, also, man must hurt. For it is in the hurt, in the magnitude of the wound—as in the color it brings to the cheeks, in the ecstasy it releases—that love's true greatness is measured.

And this is the story I have to tell you:

* * *

None in the whole tribe of Rajah Soliman was there more beautiful than Kamyá—none so fair, none so loved. The waters of the Pasig bathed no fairer form—the winds of evening caressed no lovelier being. Broad of brow was she, and narrow of waist, her lips a soft cool red, humid, as if always ready for a kiss. A nest of starless nights she had in her hair, and in her eyes the glory of many sunsets. Full were her breasts, and slender her arms, and soft the lilt of her gait, like a dream of flowers.

Of her the young men said: "For her the snakes of my arms—for her the flames of my lips!"

"The crook of my arm against her neck—and her little hands be birds to peck upon the iron of my breasts!"

"The touch of our lips for the envy of your eyes—and for you also, O Scum of Lovers, the dust of our feet!"

These to one another they said, these youths, full of young vigor and conceit, eloquent with love—that each should know who wanted who.

But of all those who dreamt of Kamya, two there were who loved her most. And their names were Mabi and Isagani.

Young were both, and handsome and strong—but like the bee was one, and the other like a faraway, lonely star. Like a bee was Mabi, untiring, buzzing, sweet of mouth and sweet of arms. A warrior he, bold and brave, gaudy of clothes and gaudy of love.—And Isagani like a faraway, lonely star—silent, earnest and reserved. Locked were his lips, bare of words; and when he spoke, he spoke short—no music went with his words.

If to Kamya Mabi said, “Why so dark thine eyes, O Sweetness, why so dark? Open them, O Delight, to the sunshine of my love!”—Isagani only said, “I love you.” And he went no further than that.

And the eyes of Mabi had desire, the light that is cruel and yet which a woman loves. The eyes of Mabi looked at her with a demanding glow—said to her, “Why don’t you suffer yourself to me, O Kamya? I will be a man to the woman of you—because I love you!”

But the eyes of Isagani—sad and faraway, seeing things one could not see—said nothing, demanded nothing—were a blank—made a woman wonder why they were eyes at all. Isagani, when he looked at her, looked *beyond* her, did not stop at her—but went *on*. A woman, when a man looks at her, wants him to look *at* her, not through her; wants his gaze to *stop* at the beauty of her.

And every night, whether the moon was low and red, or high and golden, and even if there was not any moon at all—for light is not necessary to lovers—Mabi was with Kamya. And he had many things to tell her, and he told them to her softly, with the cadence of music in his words:

“And the bloodspilled flower is not redder than thy lips, O Petal of the Moon—nor yet the night darker than

thy eyes—nor yet the young wind softer than the silk of thy voice. . . .”

And Kamyá listened enthralled, swept by the magic of his words, by the graceful rhythm of his tongue, and learned to respond to the fire in his eyes, to the cruelty of his arms—to respond as a woman should.

While not far away, near the cool waters of the river, in a crude little hut, Isagani, tired of the day's labour, lay on his bed of bamboo, ready for sleep.

For during the day a bender of metals, a master of fire, a maker of blades was he. Fine blades he made, of various designs—some massive, some light—for the hard shell of nuts, for the soft flesh of fruits—for hunt, for sport—for passion and for love.

An artist was he with hammer and fire, soft his fingers in the fashioning of warm metal into blades, finished and glittering—daggers and knives and scimitars, and anything with a blade to it—of steel and brass and silver.

Steel and brass and silver—yet none of gold. And this was his dream: some day to have gold enough to fashion of it the slenderest, beautifullest knife hands ever shaped. And to lay it before her feet—Kamyá's—to show to her how much he loved her. Like unto gold his love—rich and beautiful and worthy of her.

And there came a day when he had gold aplenty to begin his knife. Many long days he stood beside his fire, beating carefully the gorgeous metal with a fondness borne of dreams. And when the blade was finished, nothing was there ever like it, nothing ever so beautiful, nothing ever so exquisitely wrought. He himself was amazed at the glorious magnificence of it, and great pride filled his heart.

But when his neighbors heard of it they were not amazed but felt amused. They had never heard before of a knife of gold, and surely one who made it, a useless thing, was a fool. They flocked to his home and asked that they be shown the knife, and when Isagani, who was proud of it, showed it to them, one of them asked:

"A knife of gold, O Blacksmith—what for? It breaks easily—gold is too soft."

"Only I," said Isagani, "may understand a knife of gold."

"Gold for bracelets, and rings, and cups—but not for knives, O Silent Blade!"

"Gold is—beautiful."

"Must a knife be beautiful?"

"Some knives—must be beautiful."

"As—?"

"The knife of the poet."

"The knife for a man like Mabi? His lips are soft, his words are songs—"

"Not his kind of a poet," said Isagani.

Then they laughed because they thought he was jealous of Mabi.

* * *

The next day, as Kamyā passed in front of Isagani's hut, on her way to the river to bathe, he called to her, and she stopped on the road. He walked up to her, a quiet longing in his eyes, and invited her to come in. They walked together to his hut.

And Kamyā liked the wistfulness of his eyes, and when she saw a stray lock of hair on his forehead she wanted suddenly to touch it, to caress it and push it back. Even if Isagani was not sweet of tongue and his arms were not bold, even if he was undemonstrative and but seldom came to see her, still—once—he had told her he loved her—she was loved by him . . .

"I made for you—something," he told her proudly.

"For me?" she asked, a glitter in her eyes.

"For you."

And he fetched the knife of gold from where he kept it, and fondled it in his hands.

And Kamyā gazed at the wondrous beauty of it, and she was glad to know that Isagani had made it for her. She

also was proud of it—was proud of him. She lifted her eyes to him.

But his eyes stayed on the knife. On his face there was nothing but pure adoration. He did not take his eyes off the blade. There was not even a little look for her.

And Kamyá's hands, held out to receive his gift, fell slowly to her sides. So that was how he loved her. The knife was more precious to him than she. That was not the way a woman wanted to be loved. Loved like chattel—loved less than chattel—than a mere blade.

And she had thought he really loved her, even if he was silent, even if he saw her so seldom. Love—what did he know of love, beyond saying, "I love you?" Why did he say words he did not understand? What worth was there in a man who had eyes for a blade—but not for a woman? What if it was a blade of *gold*? *Gold or not, what did a woman care?* A woman cared for what a man gave of *himself*, not for that which was not *him*.

"Will you not take it?" he asked her now.

"No," and she laughed, "no, O Lover of Blades. I care not for knives, O Blacksmith—not even for a knife of gold!"

And she ran away, hating him.

* * *

That night, when Mabi once again held her in his arms, he was cruel with her. His arms were strong—strong as Isagani's—but stronger still, for they knew how to curl round a woman. His face was handsome—even as Isagani's—but handsomer still, for it was close to a woman's And Kamyá knew that Mabi truly loved her.

* * *

When some days had passed, as Kamyá stood one sundown near the riverbank, under a clump of dense bamboos, she heard a rustling of leaves behind her and turned to look.

It was Isagani.

She was silent for a long while, and only gazed at him blankly. His eyes lowered.

"What do you want, O Sad of Face?" she asked at last.

"I love you," he whispered, and his eyes were soft.

A slow cruel smile curved her lips.

"How could you love me," she taunted, "O Colder than a River Pebble?"

"I know I love you—I want to marry you," he said.

"You have never shown me you love me, O Virgin of Lips."

"How can I show it to you?" he asked her simply.

"Then you know not how to love, O Unloverly Lover."

"Maybe I know not—and yet I love you, O Kamyā."

"A man," Kamyā said, searching deep into his eyes, "a man—*must know how to love.*"

"Will you not marry me then?"

"No, I will not marry you. You do not love me—enough."

* * *

So it was that Kamyā promised herself to Mabi—to Mabi, the bold of war and the bold of love, whose voice was song, whose words were tales, whose arms were snakes and were not shy to hold a woman.

And the whole tribe rejoiced over the news and prepared gayly for the event. New songs were taught, new games invented. And the old women began their work of counsel, advising young daughters on the art of womanhood, that they should practice it on the great awaited day—when the young men were about in their best attire, their eyes keen and sharp, searching for the girl with the right shine to her eyes, the right note to her laughter, the right lift to her step. And the young men exercised hard their muscles that they should appear strong and comely, and so win the girls of their hearts' choosing.

Yet while all prepared and were happy, one there was who was silent and hurt, and went away into the woods. He was young, this one, and handsome and strong, and his name was Isagani.

In the woods, to the birds, to the cool soft winds, her name he cried, of the girl he loved—softly, tenderly—for great was his love for her—infinite—inarticulate and unproved.

He called, “Kamyá—Kamyá,” and there was no answer to the immensity of his grief. He went on repeating her name, because her name was beautiful, even as she herself, even as the hopelessness of his love.

And on the day for her wedding he came back. Weak were his steps, dead the lustre of his eyes. And he heard the new songs sung, and saw the young women and the young men merry—he saw the new house of palm leaves and bamboo, built for the pair to be wedded—and the agony in his heart became like unto merciless fire, searing, scorching, burning the whole of his being. And in this moment of despair he ran to his hut and thence to her home.

He knocked at her door, and she came out to him, lovely and cold.

He told her no words but took her swiftly into his arms, and kissed her once, the first time, and cried her name, “Kamyá! Kamyá!”—and then she was limp in his embrace, and fell to his feet, gorgeous with blood. On her young full breast glimmered in passionate glory his knife of gold, and its point was in her heart.

At first there was a twitch of great pain on her beautiful face, and her eyes closed painfully, but when she opened them again their gaze fell on his weapon of love, and now her gaze lifted, to meet that of his eyes—to show to him the dawn greater than any of God’s dawns, in the wetness of her eyes—in the softness there—in the understanding there.

And she called his name, and called it again, and her voice was new to his ears, and he wept for what he had done.

“I’m not sorry, Isagani. For me—you chose—your^o beautifullest knife. Of steel—and brass—and silver—have you—but for *Kamyá—the knife of gold You love me.*”