

George Ade's Comic Opera

The Sultan of Sulu - 1902

As the United States entered the twentieth century, one of the most popular men in America was a Midwesterner, thirty-six-year-old George Ade, an author, humorist, and playwright. Ade made Americans of all political persuasions laugh by wickedly poking fun at its citizens' foibles and pretensions to greatness. A native of Indiana and a graduate of Purdue University, he became a reporter for Chicago's *Morning News* (later renamed the *Record*) in 1890. He quickly won a following for his exceptional wit and ability to make an entertaining story out of rather ordinary people and events, such as shop girls, stray dogs, and cable-car conductors. He had applied for the job on the advice of a college friend, also a young man of exceptional talent, the illustrator John T. McCutcheon (who later witnessed Dewey's victory on Manila Bay and was present at the signing of the Bates Agreement). When the World's Columbian Exposition opened in Chicago in 1893, Ade was permitted to develop a column entitled, "All Roads Lead to the World's Fair." It was so successful that the newspaper collected and sold the stories in paperback form, illustrated by McCutcheon.

Ade developed a column of what he perceived to be modern-day "fables," humorous but moralistic stories in the vernacular of everyday Midwesterners, drawn from his real life experiences in Indiana and Chicago. In 1899, the collected columns were turned into a book, *Ade's Fables in Slang*, followed the next year by *More Fables in Slang*, and subsequent editions every year for the next three years. He literally changed the American English of the day by introducing the literate and educated to the rich vernacular of urban and rural slang. While enormously popular with ordinary people, his work was greatly admired by such major contemporary literary figures as Mark Twain, H. L. Mencken, W. D. Howells, and Theodore Dreiser. The success of Ade's *Fables* made him both famous and wealthy at a young age.¹

The outbreak of the Philippine–American War dismayed and fascinated Ade. He had a direct source through regular correspondence with his long-time friend and colleague, McCutcheon, who had stayed on to cover the war from Manila. According to one prominent biographer, Ade thought "just the idea of Americans trying to transform the Filipinos into Asiatic carbon copies of American democrats was almost too absurd for words."² However he never joined the Anti-Imperialist League or the many prominent arts and literary figures openly protesting the country's involvement. Although sympathetic to the anti-imperialist position, he apparently saw the same overweening self-righteousness and pomposity in their rhetoric as on the annexationist side. Instead, he saw the situation in the Philippines as an opportunity for what he did best, skewering the self-important and the overly serious through the time-honored plot of the country bumpkin outwitting the city slicker, and in June of 1899, Ade ran a series of columns once a week in the *Chicago Record*, collectively known as "Ade's Stories of Benevolent Assimilation."

In 1900, Ade decided to take a break from the columns and, on a whim, took a steamer to Manila, where he stayed for a few months with his friend McCutcheon and a rowdy group of other young journalists covering the war. Ade heard many tales, but the story that stuck in his memory was that of the Sultan of Sulu and the strangest and newest subjects of the Republic, the Moros. Ade saw an irresistible irony in the fact that, as he put it, "the Americans were trying to 'assimilate' him [the Sultan] without incurring his opposition and it was a real problem because Sulu was committed to polygamy and slavery and these two institutions were known in the United States as the

¹ A.L. Lazarus, *The Best of George Ade*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), Preface and Introduction.

² George Ade, edited by Perry E. Gianakos, *George Ade's Stories of Benevolent Assimilation*, (Quezon City, RP: New Day Publishers, 1985), 1.

‘twin relics of barbarism.’”³ To Ade the American intervention in Moroland had all the irony and necessary elements for a comic opera.

Ade returned to the U.S., as did McCutcheon to recuperate from a tropical ailment. During the convalescence, McCutcheon and Ade decided to collaborate in creating a new comic opera on Sulu along the lines of Gilbert & Sullivan’s *Pirates of Penzance*. The two had acted and sung together in similar productions while at Purdue. Ade wrote the dialogue and words for the songs, while McCutcheon designed the sets and costumes. McCutcheon’s costumes were rather odd and had little relation to the dress found in Sulu, but he would later remark that he had avoided following the Sulu styles too closely, “preferring not to shock the ladies.”⁴ Before he traveled to the Philippines, Ade had met a nineteen-year-old musician and aspiring composer, Alfred G. Wathall, who had urged Ade adapt some of his fables into light opera so that he could write tunes for them. Wathall eagerly agreed to do the musical score.

The result was *The Sultan of Sulu*, which Ade would subtitle *An Original Satire in Two Acts*. A note by the author in the program stated, “it was not an attempt to show what subsequently happened but merely what might have happened.” Neither Ade, McCutcheon, nor Wathall had ever intended the musical to be anything more than a lark, a production strictly aimed for amateur theatricals. But then a prominent theatrical producer saw the amateur performance and begged for permission to place it with a professional company. The commercial debut was made March 11, 1902, at the Studebaker Theatre in Chicago and was an instant, smash hit with the audience. This was during the time Captain John J. Pershing was returning from his first visit to Lake Lanao and Colonel Frank Baldwin and the 27th Infantry had just arrived in Mindanao, prior to the Battle of Bayan.

After becoming the toast of the Chicago theater circuit, *The Sultan of Sulu* opened in Boston December 1, 1902, and then on New York’s Broadway, at Wallack’s Theatre, December 20, 1902. By that time both the Battle of Bayan and the first of Pershing’s lake campaigns had been in the news. *The Sultan of Sulu* made 192 standing-room-only performances on Broadway alone, and for the next three years toured the stages of the America’s largest cities by traveling ensembles. An unprecedented success at a time when the theater enjoyed massive popularity as a form of entertainment and information, it made stars of its principal actors, and its author became even more rich and famous. Every major political figure and celebrity of the time saw it and, regardless of ideological persuasion, laughed aloud at its humor, including William H. Taft and the entire large Roosevelt family. It effectively launched George Ade on a new, ten-year career in what is now known as musical comedy. He wrote nine more productions, at least seven becoming hits. But only one exceeded the draw of *The Sultan of Sulu*. Ade’s popularity went into steep decline after World War I. He died in 1944 and is almost forgotten today. Wathall went on to a successful career of his own as a composer of religious songs.

Of course, *The Sultan of Sulu* was not really about Sulu or the Moros at all. Ade was merely mocking the newly-imperialist America and its militant and acquisitive foreign policy. But in doing so he made Moroland and the American presence *au courant* and the buzz of front parlor and dinner conversations, and caused the American public to pay attention to this remote part of the world, where to the surprise of many, America had become deeply involved.

Fortunately this important piece of Americana was revived in 2009 by the Canton Comic Opera Company of Canton, Ohio, its first return following a seventy year absence from the American stage (for more information visit www.cantoncomicoperaco.com). What follows is a synopsis of the dialogue and photos from the original cast production.

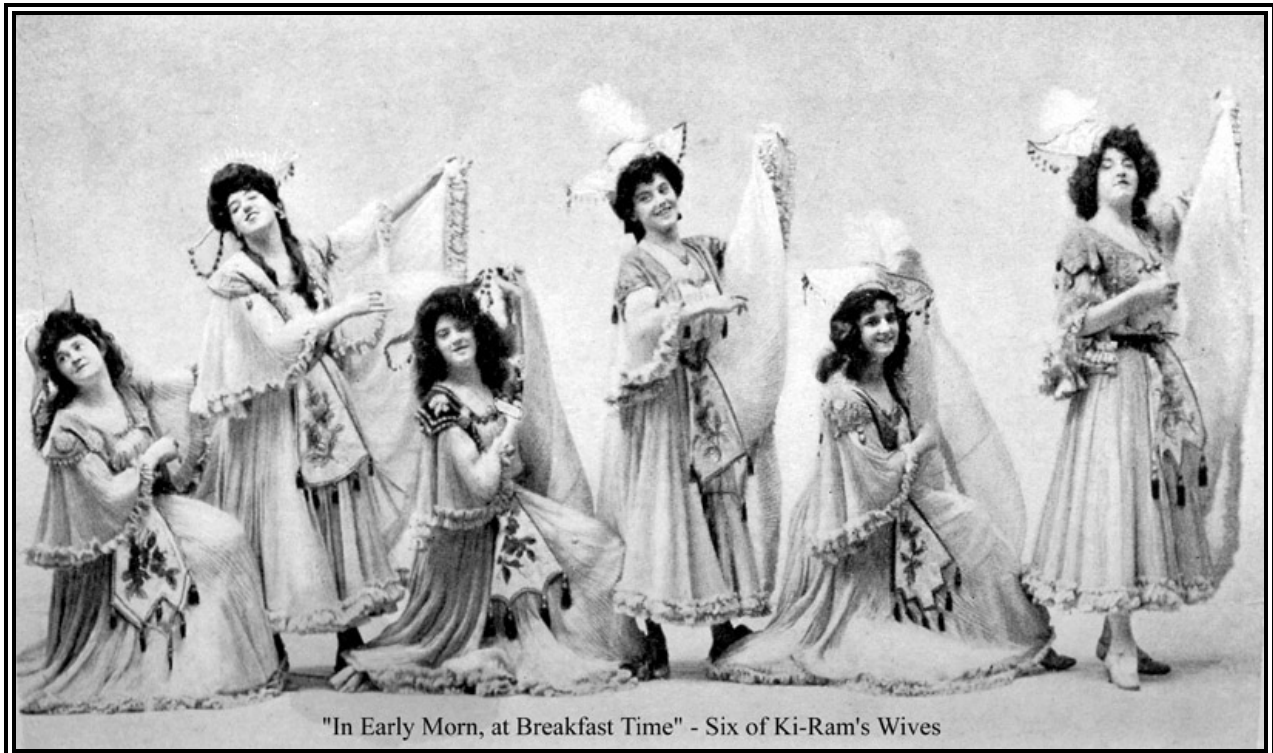
³ Kelly, Fred C., ed., *The Permanent Ade; the Living Writings of George Ade*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1947), 278.

⁴ McCutcheon, John T., *Drawn From Memory*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1950), 147.



An Original Poster is in Library of Congress

The Sultan of Sulu opens with the Sultan's Secretary, "Hadji" and six of his eight wives (Mauricia, Selina, Natividad, Natalia, and Ramona – rather Hispanic names Rather than Moro, but Ade never promised accuracy), with Hadji looking for a seventh wife, the wisecracking "Pepita", "the Gibson girl of the Philippine Islands." The Sultan had just completed one of his frequent wholesale change-outs of wives and the six had been recently captured from their uncle, "Datu Mandi of Parang". Furious, he had just encamped his army outside the city walls intending to recapture his treasures.



Suddenly, to everyone's complete surprise, a large white ship enters the harbor, crowded with soldiers and flying a strange flag, "one of red, white, blue, spangled with stars". To the strains of "There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Time Tonight" (which, among the soldiers, was the unofficial theme of both the Spanish-American and Philippine War), rifle shots and wild yells, "Lt. William Hardy", a Regular officer leading a squad of U.S. Volunteers dressed in khaki storms into center stage, sword drawn. Then they then break into song. Following the song, Hardy demands to see the Sultan and announces that they are from the United States of America, and "Perhaps you don't know it, but we are the owners of this island. We paid twenty million dollars for you (all whistle appreciatively)." When he notices that Chiquita has lit a cigarette and is nonchalantly puffing away, the dialogue goes:

Hardy: You don't mean to say you smoke?

Chiquita: Don't the ladies of your country smoke?

Hardy: The ladies do – the women don't.

Then a party of Americans appear as the soldiers form a line, draw to attention, and present arms. The party consists of "Colonel of Volunteers Jefferson Budd", his daughter Henrietta Budd, "Pamela Francis Jackson", Budd's fiancée and a lawyer who is to be the "Adjutant General" for Sulu, a slick-looking young dandy named "Wakeful M. Jones" (who has tagged along to sell insurance to the unsuspecting natives) and four young, demure women. Amid more songs and many topical one-liners, Wakeful Jones, slips past the guards to the Sultan's quarters and emerges a little later announcing he has just sold his highness a 50,000 peso life insurance policy after convincing him the Americans are here in all likelihood to kill him.

This is followed by the appearance of the Sultan, one "Ki-Ram" to great ceremony and more songs. (Ki-Ram's make-up and costuming looks more out of the set of the light opera *The Mikado* than that of a Moro potentate) To forestall the problem just created

by Wakeful Jones, Col. Budd effusively makes fervent assurances that he is not here to make Ki-Ram die.

Budd: We are your friends. We have come to take possession of the island and teach your benighted people the advantages of free government. We hold that all government derives its just powers from the consent of the governed.

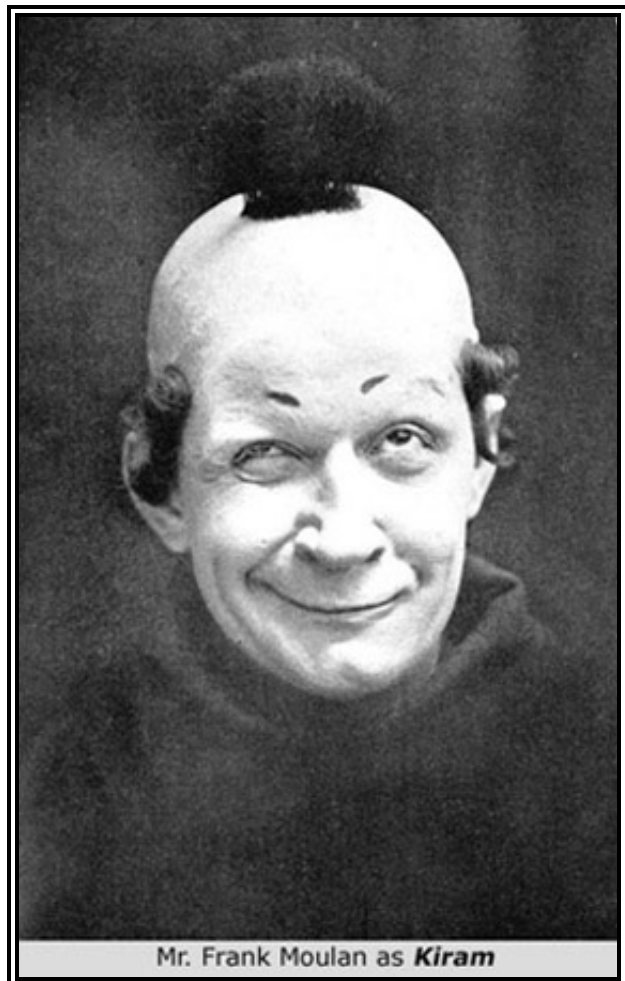
All: Hear! Hear!

Budd: Now the question is do you consent to this benevolent plan? (at that point the soldiers come to a menacing stance with their rifles and bayonets)

Ki-Ram: Are all the guns loaded?

Budd: They are.

Ki-Ram: (Pause) I consent.



Throughout this dialogue, Ki-Ram has been mugging and wisecracking like Groucho Marx, but without the cigar and mustache. Budd points in the direction of the four young ladies and states, “Good! The education of your neglected race will begin at once under the direction of these young ladies.” The four turn out to be “school-ma’ams” fresh from New England (a parody of the “Thomasites” whom were then being recruited in large numbers to open schools in the Christian provinces of the Philippines). Of course the audience, unlike the blissful Budd, becomes immediately aware from the leering Ki-Ram that he is appraising them as additions to his harem. In fact, noticing

that Budd is much taken with Chiquita and she is flirting back, he implies a “trade” might be arranged. The flustered Budd then announces he has proposed to Miss Jackson (who is quick to correct that she only “has it under advisement”). Ki-Ram’s retort is along the lines of “why not take two”. Budd hastily changes the subject by announcing he plans to appoint Ki-Ram as Sulu’s first official “Governor”.



After more numbers and a dance, a scene ensues in which it is revealed that Lt. Hardy has been relentlessly pursuing Henrietta Budd, but that her father “objects” to him. Henrietta explains her father’s objections to Hardy, repeating his strong advice, “My child, never marry a Regular. There are no heroes except in the Volunteer service. The Volunteer goes home and is elected to Congress. The Regular keeps right ahead, a plain fighting man.” After all, she explains, the reason her father is here in the first place is not necessarily to serve his country so much as to become a “hero” and use that to get elected to Congress (a not too subtle thrust at Theodore Roosevelt). Despite this parental obstacle, the couple dreamily peer into each other’s eyes and croon a love song, before slowly waltzing off the stage in each other’s arms.

Watching them dance, Ki-Ram asks Pamela Jackson, to teach him this strange dance. In the production notes Miss Pamela Jackson is described as a “modern woman”, and appears to be modeled after a few of well-known “Suffragettes” and leading figures in the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (a favorite target for Ade’s satire). As Pamela leads him through the steps of the waltz, Ki-Ram cannot resist making romantic overtures. Being somewhat of a stern spinster type and not used to such attentions, she becomes both flattered, flustered, and visibly interested. But during the course of the waltz and through the nearness of his face, it becomes suddenly apparent to Pamela that, despite being a Moslem, Ki-Ram is somewhat

drunk. When she demands an explanation, Ki-Ram informs her that “When the Colonel took me aside in there he said he was going to make me acquainted with one of the first blessings of civilization. He told me that the constitution and the cocktail follow the flag.” (A satirical reference to a major debate that had recently gone on in the U.S. as to whether the guarantees of the Constitution applied in the Philippines as well as the U.S. – the Supreme Court ruled it did not, that “the Constitution did not follow the flag” - an oft-repeated and quoted line in the play.)

Ki-Ram's notably old and unattractive first wife, Galula, enters the room and tugs at Ki-Ram's robe. Ki-Ram introduces her to Pamela, but then admonishes Galula that "it is not good form for a wife to hang around when her husband is proposing marriage to another lady." Pamela becomes ballistic when Ki-Ram casually mentions that he not only is married but has eight wives in total. Pamela loudly calls for the Colonel, points at Kiram and shouts, "the law shall deal with this miscreant."



The next day, a vengeful Pamela convenes the eight wives and informs them that under American law a man is allowed but one wife, which is Galula, and therefore legally Ki-Ram can no longer remain the husband of the other seven. She claims he is guilty of "octagamy" and will have to consent to divorces for the seven or go to prison. At first the seven are greatly upset, but this mood quickly changes when Pamela explains the concept of alimony. She informs them that, after the divorce, each of the seven individually will be entitled to receive one-half of Ki-Ram's property and income. She then promptly turns around and announces to his two slaves that, since slavery is against the U.S. Constitution, they are now free men, and Ki-Ram is no longer their "master", but their "employer." So they should now demand Ki-Ram pay them "union wages".

Meanwhile in another part of the palace, Ki-Ram is attempting to court and embrace all four of the reluctant school-ma'ams at the same time, imploring them that, "Young ladies, I have only eight [wives]. I need some blondes to help out the color scheme." As the first act draws to a close, a spurned and frustrated Ki-Ram begins sipping one cocktail after another, awaiting his inauguration as Governor and blissfully unaware of the damage wrought by Pamela with his harem.

The next morning, nursing a Sultan-sized hangover, Ki-Ram tells Wakeful Jones, "civilization may be all right, but I took too large a dose right at the start." To Ki-Ram's amazement Jones, an all-purpose businessman as well as insurance salesman, presents him with a stack of invoices for new elaborate uniforms for the Volunteers, whom Budd had appointed as the Governor's "Imperial Guards", and for purchases run up by all of his wives for everything from evening gowns to automobiles to diamonds. Then Col Budd, Lt. Hardy, and the Volunteers, resplendent in their new white uniforms, appear for their first review and break into song. Following the number, Pamela Jackson, dressed in her judges robes, appears and smugly announces to Kiram that she has just granted divorces to seven of his wives.

Kiram: (After a long, stunned pause) Oh, very well!

Pamela: The court holds that you may keep one.

Kiram: One! Oh, say, Judge, let me keep two; now don't be stingy. Let me keep two little ones instead of one big one.

Ki-Ram then notices that his former wives are flirting with the soldiers, and exclaims petulantly to them, "Leave your keys at the office as you pass out." But, taking notice of the pretty young Henrietta, he saunters over, lays on the charm, and breaks into a love song. However, Hardy quickly appears to claim Henrietta, who quickly abandons the amorous Ki-Ram. The pair leave quickly, all the while gazing longingly into one another's eyes. To add to this string of dejection and humiliation, Pamela parades in Galula, announces she is Ki-Rams lawful, and only wife, and that he now must pay alimony to the other seven by 5 o'clock or go to the jail. Ki-Ram sobbingly tells Hadji that he now wishes he completely regretted ever having taken any of the seven nieces of Datu Mandi in the first place. But at this remark the clever Hadji whispers, "Your Excellency, that is the solution of the whole problem", let Mandi recapture all of them and take them away.

Hadji leaves to Ki-Ram the job of tricking Col. Budd into leading his Volunteers, the "Palace Guard", out to one side of the city while Hadji gets word to Datu Mandi that he can enter the other side and recapture his nieces. Of course the entire scheme goes entirely awry and backfires after a long and convoluted episode, with Hadji being caught and both he and Ki-Ram thrown into jail by Budd. In jail, Ki-Ram loudly laments that, "I loved not wisely, but too often", and, "I'm a little discouraged about my future, more or less ashamed of my past, and not exactly delighted with my present." But there is a silver lining to being in jail. They find an Arkansas law book in the prison library and discover that "when a divorced woman becomes desperate and remarries, then the first victim doesn't have to pay any more alimony." Still in prison garb, they are allowed out on limited parole, but with their legs attached to ball and chains.

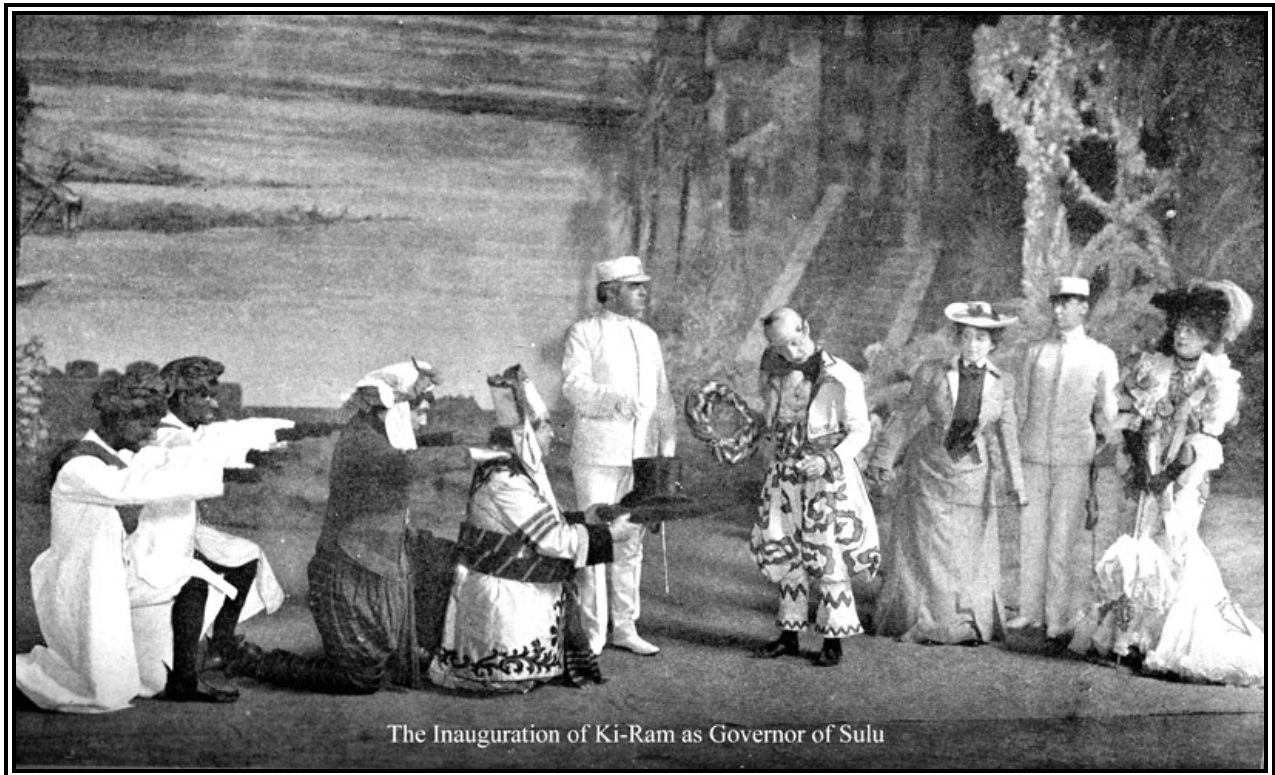


Meanwhile, Chiquita has been pursuing her own designs on the Colonel. She becomes puzzled and a little suspicious when Ki-Ram, her former husband, begins dropping encouraging remarks and hints to the effect that, “An American husband is a very convenient thing to have around the house. He is a permanent meal ticket and can be taught to eat from the hand.” He and Hadji even set themselves up as “matrimonial agents” and offer to arrange matches for all the ladies with the soldiers. The new scheme seems to be succeeding when Budd announces he has proposed to Chiquita. Chiquita uses her hold over Budd to convince him to grant permission for Henrietta to marry Hardy, who reciprocates by voicing approval of his mother-in-law to be, “Only to think—yesterday morning an untamed creature of the jungle, and now, thanks to our new policy, a genuine American girl.”

For a second time, defeat is snatched from the jaws of victory as it turns out Pamela Jackson, under the new American regime, is the only person who can legally officiate over a marriage. When summoned and informed who the nuptials are for, she becomes outraged when realizing she has just been jilted by Col. Budd. Her venom is once again directed at the scheming Ki-Ram, and she issues a court order that divorced wives cannot marry within one year.



Six of Ki-Ram's Wives After Being "Assimilated"



The Inauguration of Ki-Ram as Governor of Sulu

But suddenly, in the midst of all this, Hardy arrives, having just captured the fearsome warrior Datu Mandi (strangely, still armed with a long sword). Furious, Datu Mandi menaces Ki-Ram with his sword, but Ki-Ram is saved by Wakeful Jones who doesn't want to be forced to pay out his 50,000 peso insurance policy and knocks

Mandi's weapon from his hand. Then, to add further to the bedlam, the two former slaves arrive at the palace with "The Sulu Democratic Marching Club" and the "The Sulu Republican Marching Club" who have united to urge Budd to replace Ki-Ram as Governor.

As this madcap scene reaches a climax, a dispatch arrives by boat for Colonel Budd. It congratulates the Colonel for the capture of the "desperate and bloodthirsty Mandi" and promotes him to Brigadier General of Volunteers – his sure ticket to Congress. Budd exclaims, "A hero at last!", to which Ki-Ram confides to the audience, "A hero! Now he'll have to be investigated." (a less-than subtle reference to the circumstances of more than one Volunteer General flowing the recent war). But the really important news is that the Supreme Court had finally decided that "the constitution follows the flag on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays only." Since apparently the invasion of Sulu did not take place on any of these three days, "you are instructed to preserve order in Sulu, but not to interfere with any of the local laws or customs" (a dig at the Bates Agreement.) A triumphant and gleeful Ki-Ram is restored as the "mighty" Sultan of Sulu and in his first acts revokes the alimonies and orders his nemesis, Judge Pamela Jackson, back to Boston. In the Finale, Ki-Ram sings:

Ki-Ram

"And this is why, you'll understand,
I love my own, my native land,
My little isle of Sulu!
Smiling isle of Sulu!
I wasn't ready to say good-bye,
And I'm glad that I didn't have to die."

Chorus to Audience

Since we first met you,
Since we first met you,
The open sky above us seems a deeper blue;
Golden, rippling sunshine warms us through and through
Each flower has a new perfume,
Since we met you!

CURTAIN

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