

**Firewalkers  
in Our Garden**

Upon our return in the fall of 1914 from a six-month trip to the United States, we stopped at the splendid new Manila Hotel, while I began house hunting. Frank had told me to go ahead with the search; he promised to be pleased with my choice.

I immediately called Nell Gilman, wife of Dr. Philip Gilman, the distinguished surgeon of the Philippine General Hospital, to inquire if she knew of an available house on Pasay Beach. "Yes, indeed," said she. The lovely modern home next door to them on the beach, south of the Polo Club, had just been vacated by Stephen Bonsal, who it was rumored, was about to sever his connection with the Harrison administration. His wife, a sister of the writer Gouverneur Morris, had already left for Europe, where he would soon join her. Mrs. Gilman urged me to go at once to the office in the Manila Hotel and talk to the manager, Mr. Branagan, who, it happened, was also the agent for this house. Fortunately I reached Mr. Branagan in time to secure the place.

Just before leaving for the States, I had been entertained at

luncheon in this delightful villa on the shore of Manila Bay, by Mrs. Parsons, wife of Billy Parsons, who had been Government Architect under Cameron Forbes. Mr. and Mrs. Parsons had really put their hearts into this, their first home. Billy had brought the beautiful young Myra to the Islands as a bride in 1911, and they had spent almost two years formulating plans and collecting choice native hardwoods for the construction of their dream house. The result was charming, and now, happily available to us. Billy Parsons had not waited to be dismissed by Harrison. He and Myra had left the Islands, never to return as residents.

We purchased the Parsons place, and spent the next twenty-six years in that glamorous spot, until we too sailed away, never to return.

From time to time we added rooms, baths, and terraces. How we loved our garden home! Let me give you a description of the gardens which we developed and named "The Pandans."

To give a word picture of our garden on Pasay Beach, I should first state that it was about 6,000 square meters in size and oblong in shape, with a 150-foot frontage on the beach. The house, which was located in the middle of the property, was approached from the land side. The long hibiscus- and croton-bordered driveway leading to the house lay about sixteen feet from a high stone boundary wall, over which clambered a luxuriant henna-colored bougainvillea. In the strip between drive and wall were a group of papaya trees, an avocado tree, a jacaranda tree bearing purplish-blue flowers, a pink crepe myrtle, and a frangipani tree which bore fragrant, long, tubular, ivory-colored flowers. Midway in this strip was a long bed of cannas and back of them, a parallel bed of poinsettias and gardenia bushes. At one end of the strip was a trellis over which climbed the small, twisting stalks and stems of the Singapore bamboo ground orchid, a profuse bloomer from which through many months of the year, especially during winter and spring, could be cut clusters of pinkish-lavender blossoms.



To the left of the drive and its hibiscus and croton hedge was a large, oblong lawn, sunk a little below the level of surrounding flower beds. It was used for croquet and badminton.

To the far side of the lawn were pandan trees. These tropical trees grow near the sea; their soft fibrous wood grows rapidly. New shoots heading for the ground are continually starting out from the trunk; this is probably an effort the tree makes to grow its own props as a protection against wind storms. The young shoots are a 100 per cent specific for kidney stones. I never knew it to fail when properly prepared and taken as directed. The natives and old Spanish residents of the Islands have long known the worth of pandan tea. The young shoots are cut into small pieces, washed, covered with water, and boiled fifteen minutes. The resulting, almost tasteless liquid is strained, bottled, and placed in the icebox. The patient must drink at least three quarts of it every twenty-four hours during a three-day period, taking no other liquid during that time. Pandan tea must be made fresh every day because it ferments rapidly.

The branches of the pandan tree are about the size of a man's arm. Being soft and fibrous, they bend, twist, and curve in response to the wind and sun. From the ends of the branches hang three- or four-foot-long leaves, dark green, and sawtooth-edged. The tree also bears a fruit which strongly resembles a pineapple in shape, size, and color. Rats and birds nibble it, but I never heard of humans eating it. When ripe, the fruit breaks into segments and falls to the ground where, if allowed to lie for a few days, it ferments and gives off an odor like that of rotting apples. The leaves, when dry, turn straw color and drop to the ground, where they are a fire hazard, since they are oil-bearing and highly inflammable. To add to the over-all effect of these trees where they grew close to the side terrace, we planted several night-blooming cactus, which clambered through the pandan branches.

Nature puts on no more dramatic show than that offered by the slow unfolding of the large waxy white flower of the cactus plant. The opening of this heavenly flower, the night-blooming cereus, begins in the early evening and reaches completion about eleven o'clock that same night. By ten the next morning, it is a yellow, drooping thing, completely shorn of its all too brief glory—a Cinderella among flowers.

In addition to the pandans on the far side of the lawn was a flame tree, or Caballero, as the natives call it, because it is so grand when it becomes a canopy of gorgeous flame-colored blossoms in May.

Also in this area was a mango tree, a Golden Shower, a



*The Ingersolls in the garden of their new home on Pasay Beach, Manila Bay, 1914.*

couple of small Baguio pines and a few Australian pines. The feathery, olive green foliage of the latter lent a pleasing contrast to the more vivid greens of the rest of the garden.

Along the property line fences grew shades of lantana and four shades of the fine-leafed vine known in the Philippines



as *Cadena de Amor*, or Chain of Love, a favorite for table decoration. Clusters of the tiny flowers almost cover the trailing vines, which resemble smilax. The flower may be a deep pink, white, or mestizo, that is to say, mixed pink and white.

At the rear of the lawn and running from side to side was a long arbor, over which bougainvillea clambered in gay profusion, mingling their red blossoms with the bright yellow, bell-shaped flower of the climbing allamanda bushes.

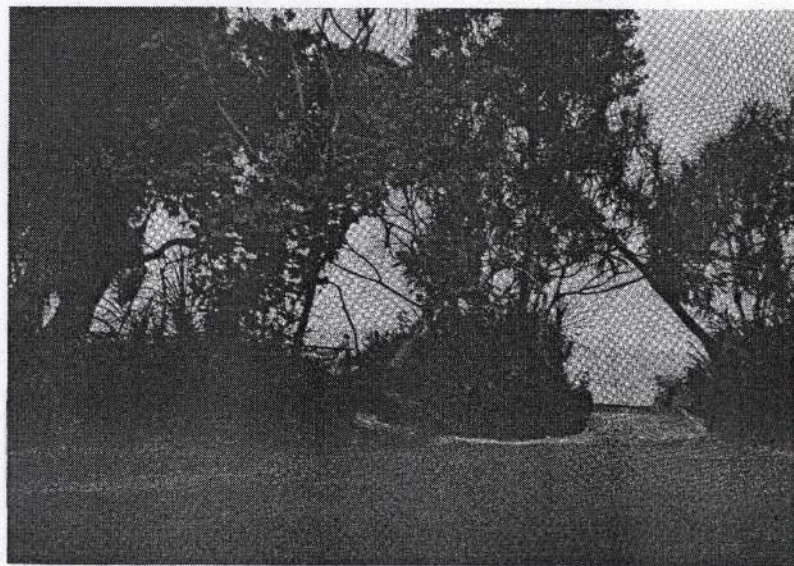
Nearing the house, the drive curved to the left around a large mango tree, to whose trunk clung several orchid plants and from whose branches hung a wide-leafed elkhorn and other types of broad-leafed air-plants. Sheltered by this tree were two three-tiered pyramids of rock, separated by a long, narrow rock garden on which grew several of the thorny, pliable-stemmed plants known to Filipinos as *Corona de Jesús*, or Crown of Jesus. They believe this was the plant used to make the crown of thorns on Calvary. The plant has small leaves and a tiny red flower. The pyramids afforded a setting for about one hundred pots of ground orchids, ranging in color from deep purple to white. Clusters of small flowers on a tall stem are sheltered by twelve- to fourteen-inch-high green leaves. These orchids may be forced to bloom almost the year around. Blended with maidenhair fern, they made a charming table decoration.

A curve in the driveway cut off the big lawn, to leave a small round lawn in front of the porte-cochere, whose supporting concrete pillars were connected by a box filled with extra-long maidenhair ferns. Outside the pillars in triangular beds grew thick bushes of *Dama de Noche*, or Lady of the Night, whose star-shaped white flowers give off an almost overpowering fragrance at night.

Two steps led up to a wide ornamental wrought-iron door and an entrance hall. Standing in that entrance door, one had a view through the orchid-bedecked, round windows of the room beyond—of lawn and gardens—extending down to the shoreline of Manila Bay.

On that body of water were daily reflected the varying moods of tropical weather, an ever changing picture, sometimes the dark, angry, crashing waves of a storm, or on a late afternoon in April the beauty of a calm and many-colored sunset.

Just outside our breakfast terrace, our gardener built a pond similar to the lovely fish pond we had seen in Japan. Little islands, on which stood stunted pine trees, were linked by bridges. To these were cemented, in marching order, sev-



*The Ingersolls' garden running down to the water's edge of Manila Bay, 1914.*

eral ancient Chinese roof figurines (relics from a ruined Chinese temple) and a stone pagoda from Japan. In the waters of the pool grew reed grasses, pink and white water lilies, and yellow water orchids. In this shaded and protected pool golden fan-tails enjoyed a happy playful life. They had been the gift of a Chinese friend, who claimed they were a very choice breed of goldfish.



Breakfasting on the terrace, as we were accustomed to do from about the first of January to the first of July, when the rains and typhoons usually began, we enjoyed the scent of orchids coming to us from a screened orchid house adjacent to the fish pond. It was necessary to protect our choice orchids from a small white fly.

The lawn in front of this terrace was shaded on one side by a large rain tree, so called because its leaves close up in retreat before falling rain. Actually, it belongs to the acacia family. On its trunk climbed two types of philodendron—the green-leafed variety grown here in California as a house plant, and the more decorative green and white striped variety. In the Philippines these vines are known as *bajuca*. Behind the rain tree stood an African tulip tree, the bearer of large, red, tulip-shaped flowers. In full bloom this tree is a spectacular sight. Beyond these trees was a grove of tall feathery bamboo, and beyond them, near the sea wall, a volunteer group of pandans. From their midst rose another volunteer, a large, spreading, prickly trunked Dap Dap tree. No doubt it had chosen that spot, counting on the protection of the sturdy pandans in stormy weather, for the Dap Dap tree has soft, brittle wood, easily broken by wind. In spring this tree resembles a parasol of bright red flowers, whose petals make a lovely red carpet when they drop to the ground.

On the other side of the path to the beach stood another group of pandans, from the center of which grew a tall, heavy-trunked Yang Yang tree. This tree produces a large, ragged, pinkish-brown flower, which sheds a sharp-cornered, hard-shelled seed pod. Both the Dap Dap and the Yang Yang trees, like their friends the pandans, are found only near the sea.

From the terrace, looking across the lawn through a frame of trees, could be seen the radio towers of old Cavite, the island of Corregidor, and Mariveles Mountain on Bataan peninsula across Manila Bay.

Though I lived in this setting for twenty-six years, I never tired of watching the constantly changing aspect of Manila Bay. I think the most beautiful effects occurred during

the dry season, the period lasting from Christmastime to about July first.

In the tropics one starts the day at sunrise. At this hour, it was delightful to watch the fishermen paddling by in their canoes, laying their nets, or sometimes drawing them in according to the tides and the run of the fish. The waters on such a spring morning would appear opalescent, reflecting the first rays of the rising sun in the east, and the pale glory of the fading moon across the Bay.

At midday and through the early afternoon, a light breeze would rough the Bay into an expanse of sparkling diamonds. Later in the day, the breeze would die down and the sun, a great red ball retiring slowly behind Mariveles Mountain, would paint the sky with constantly changing hues, all mirrored, softened, and blended on the placid surface of the Bay.

At night Venus would appear directly in front of our beach entrance, quickly surrounded by millions of twinkling stars. At high tide, the fishermen, carrying flares, would pass close to our sea wall beating the sides of their bancas with sticks to drive the fish into the nets spread earlier in the day. And then, the low hanging moon would move slowly over the tops of the trees toward Mariveles. At high moonlight, the garden would be bathed in a white silvery light, which glorified each tree and flower.

Is it possible to achieve a garden of comparable charm in the temperate zone?

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One evening at a dinner party, my husband happened to mention to Mrs. Paul McNutt (wife of the U.S. High Commissioner to the Philippines) that he had once seen the Fire Walkers dancing on red-hot coals. Mrs. McNutt expressed an eager wish to see that unusual performance. Frank said he would like to see this act again before leaving the Islands, which we were planning to do in the near future. On the way home that night, he asked if I would care to give a supper





*Judge Frank B. Ingersoll, 1914.*

*Firewalkers in Our Garden*

party for the McNutts. We had been traveling in Europe most of the time since their arrival in Manila, and had not yet entertained for them. Frank said if I agreed to his plan, he would have the Fire Walkers brought in from their province, to put on their show as entertainment for the evening. The idea appealed to me, and the wheels were set in motion. That little group of natives lived in the hills south of Cavite.



*Mrs. Ingersoll in her home on Pasay Beach, 1915.*

It was not easy to get in touch with them or to persuade them to come into Manila, but a Filipino friend of my husband succeeded in doing so.

Late in the afternoon of the day before the party, I was wakened from a siesta by the houseboy, who came to tell me that a truckload of strange natives had just arrived. They were going about the garden on the bay side of the house, selecting sites on which to set up their equipment. From the



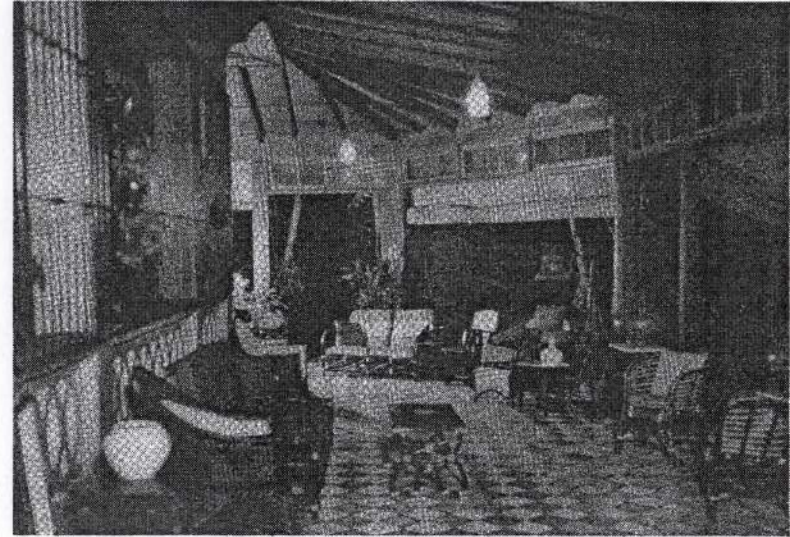
windows of my room I watched their arrangements, which were, from the artistic point of view, perfect. I decided to remain upstairs and let them go ahead without attempting to make suggestions. In any case such an effort would probably have been fruitless, since they spoke no language or dialect that either I or our servants could understand.

At the far end of the lawn a little path between large hibiscus trees led to a small garden bed, and circling that bed, passed between large trees and clumps of bamboo out to the wide concrete terrace, which surmounted the sea wall and which I called my Riviera. Just inside that little path in plain view of the house, the Fire Walkers set up a small altar on which they placed their sacred receptacles. With the completion of the first altar or shrine, they moved a few yards to the right under a clump of bamboo to the spot where Son's little nipa shack had once stood, and there they erected still another shrine, a somewhat larger one. All their activity was accomplished quietly save for a continuous low-voiced chanting. Having completed the shrines, they next selected the spot on which they would build the charcoal fire for their dance the following evening. The site they chose was a small knoll on the other side of the lawn. It was framed by a large rubber tree and twisting pandan trees, which formed a perfect stage for their show.

With their arrangements completed, they spent the whole of that night and the next day fasting and chanting their mysterious prayers before the shrines. The observance of these rites, it was said, enabled them to surmount pain and to walk on live coals. Many times during the night I looked down on that little band of mystics praying before their candle-lit altars. I can vouch for the way they spent those preparatory twenty-four hours. They neither ate nor slept during that time. Came the hour for our guests, and our gardeners had placed six-foot bamboo torches at frequent intervals throughout the garden all the way to the sea wall. The torches, altar, and table candles, and charcoal fire which

burned brightly during supper, which was served on the garden terrace, furnished the only light save that of the stars.

By the time we had finished supper the fire had burned down to the desired condition of red-hot glowing coals. Our fifty guests were asked to take their seats on the benches and



*This addition, circling two sides of the Ingersolls' Pasay Beach home, was a wide, garden-level, roofed terrace with folding storm walls and a black and white marble tiled floor. On this terrace the Ingersolls sometimes entertained one hundred or more guests.*

chairs which had been placed in a semi-circle facing the knoll where the coals glowed. Once we were quietly seated and waiting, we suddenly heard eerie, plaintive music approaching behind us. Presently six natives clad in red cotton shorts and loose *sinamay* shirts appeared. Playing on crude bamboo instruments, they marched through the trees and took positions behind the knoll. They were followed by the five men who would do the fire walking. These men lined up between



the musicians and the fire, and stood quietly—and it seemed prayerfully—for a few seconds looking down at the fire. Then an old man, evidently the star of the group, stepped onto the live coals, and to the accompaniment of a slow tune played by the musicians and the chanting of his fire-walking brethren, he quite literally danced on those red-hot coals barefoot. One by one the others joined him, and the music and dance quickened in tempo. Presently the old man picked up one of the live coals with his bare hands. He ran it over his cheeks and then placed it in his mouth.

Needless to say, we were amazed at this exhibition. Sitting as we were, within a few feet of the dancers, we could see that it was impossible for there to be any fake about the stunt.

Probably I should not mention the aftermath of this excursion to the heights of spiritual attainment. I had instructed our cook to provide a bountiful feast for the Fire Walkers following their demonstration. It was served on a long table outside the kitchen. The dancers would certainly be famished after their twenty-four hour fast, I felt, but I did not foresee that they would also have a mighty thirst for beer and any other liquor on which they could lay their hands. They consumed a whole case of beer and two bottles of whiskey. The sounds arising from the garden that night were bacchanalian, a far cry from the sacred chanting of the preceding night. The next day they spent in sleeping and wandering over the gardens as freely as though they were out in their native wilds. Yesterday's pets had become today's pests. To the cook's dismay, they visited the kitchen frequently, demanding more food and drink, until the whole household had become demoralized. At length, unable to cope with the situation, I frantically telephoned my husband: "Darling, for heaven's sake, get in touch with that man who sent these people here, and tell him to come at once and get them started for the hills whence they came." It was late in the afternoon before their truck finally rattled out of the drive. Only then, with quiet restored, was I able to realize

the humor of the whole affair and to philosophize, that perhaps I had witnessed a striking example of the extreme difficulty which mere mortals experience in clinging to the upper rungs of the ladder of spiritual attainment.